Knowing Me, Knowing You.

by f_imaginings

Summary

“MY TIME HAS COME TO BURN// We're not the first two idiots to be tricked by Bill, boy.”

Traversing Dimensions, Stanford Pines is well past trying to understand why Bill Cipher tricked him. He has a destiny to fulfil as The Man Who Saved The World, and nothing, not nostalgia, not guilt, fondness or any other false sentiment can sway him off his course. Ad Astra Per Aspera had served him well before, but now he must travel through the stars, not towards his dreams, but through hardship directly into Nightmares. This is how the world ends.

A canon divergent sci-fi rom-com inspired by ABBA.
I'd heard about you before. I wanted to know some more.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For two years Stanford Filbrick Pines had been blessed by the enlightenment of the fickle and capricious muse who called himself Bill Cipher. Two exciting, captivating, intriguing, years of devotion to research, of study and adventure. Of his ceaseless hunt to understand and explain the secrets of the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness, helped along by the odd vision, prediction, and sly voice spouting divine and otherworldly insight in his ear of a night.

Two years of obsessing over this being, this font of knowledge, who chose him specifically to grace with his wisdom. Knowing Bill singled him out like this made Stanford feel special, unique – but in a good way, not like he had been singled out for his unusual sixth finger, or his alienating intellect.

While others had mocked his talent, scorned his intelligence, played it down or ridiculed him for it – Bill had a way of praising Stanford that built him back up after being pulled down. Every compliment, kind word, and acknowledgement only further incensed and fuelled the fire that was Stanford’s appreciation for this strange being from beyond the stars who would sit with him in the late hours of the night, talking philosophy and quantum physics together over chess and tea.

Bill’s regard sent a thrill of happiness through Ford. He was always eager, excited, and keen when Bill chose to pour his mystical knowledge Ford’s way. He was the most willing and eager receptacle, constantly craving the information Bill doled out.

After those two years of forest naps, and cosmic daydreams, Stanford began craving not just the drops of enlightenment Bill would choose to share with him, though his curiosity was always a driving factor. What Stanford was craving was not just the tidbits of knowledge gifted his way by Bill.

It was the companionship and company he offered too.

Stanford wasn’t used to people who recognised his talents, who understood him, who praised him so readily, and encouraged him regularly.

Living all alone in the small shack in the middle of the forest in sleepy Gravity Falls left Ford feeling isolated, secluded, but the thought that he was sacrificing things like company and conversation with peers for the greater good of the universe gave him a noble purpose. That noble purpose only sustained him so long though, until Bill came along.

Suddenly he wasn’t alone, seeing Bill was only a dream away, or, in certain cases, a summoning away.

Stanford had summoned Bill before, for help or advice with things that would further his research. He knew the ritual.

It was through Stanford’s initial summoning ritual that he discovered more rituals. Bill had mentioned caves in the mountainside filled with whole libraries of books on the arcane, in that offhand fashion of his, dropping the location into conversation one late night as a treat or prize for Stanford. Bill was rewarding him, always rewarding him, molding him to discover greatness and
Stanford was honoured to be the receptacle for such wondrous knowledge.

Though the journey was dangerous, and guarded by a gruesome monster (which Bill conveniently forgot to inform Stanford of – he laughed for a solid hour when Stanford confronted him about it in his dream, claiming that it was “comedy gold” and “too good to pass up”) when Stanford discovered the caves, he was blown away by the sheer mass of paranatural and paranormal knowledge that library held.

For the next two weeks Stanford practically lived in those caves, pouring over the ancient tomes within, hardly pausing to eat or sleep, and when he did Bill appeared in his dreams, reminding him that humans need food, humans need sleep, besides if he didn’t sleep when would Bill get to mess with him? Stanford took Bill’s taunting for concern, and packed camping gear and food for his next expedition to the caves, spending a month up there reading everything he could decipher.

It was in that month that Bill sent Stanford the longest vision he had yet to receive. It was then that Bill enlightened Stanford, detailing to him the dimensional leak that pulled weirdness to hotspots like Gravity Falls, inspiring anomalies and unnatural occurrences. Surrounded by the books in the cave and dozens of pages of his own notebooks strewn about the stone floor, blueprints scribbled over every surface in some kind of technological puzzle to assemble, it was then that Stanford’s muse revealed the greatest enlightenment he had to date to the young researcher.

When Stanford woke up and walked to the mouth of the cave to overlook the valleys and trees, to see the sunrise peeking over the top of the mountains, spreading light and wonderment onto the forest below, it was then that Stanford knew what he must do.

His muse had spoken.

He had a new purpose now. To build the portal detailed in Bill’s notes and explore the dimensional tear that leaked the weirdness of other dimensions into his dimension. This was the greatest discovery in human history. If Stanford accomplished this, he would be legendary, the scientist who discovered the grand unified theory of weirdness and proved it to the world, by accessing the dimensions of other worlds. By traversing space, time, and the multiverse. It was a phenomenal undertaking. It was huge.

Too huge, perhaps, for one man to do alone. Bill’s blueprints were very exacting.

Some of the materials he could scrounge from Crash Site Omega, some of the engineering he could manage on his own, certainly. He was inwardly cursing himself however when his embarrassingly limited mechanical knowledge hit a wall. He should have never treated himself to that second semester of Applied Quantum Phase Theory, he was an idiot, of course Hyper Advanced Engineering and Fifth-Dimensional Calculus would be more useful for real world applications. Idiot!

It was humbling to admit that Ford needed help. He had a few options. He could contact his old classmate Fiddleford for assistance, though admitting he needed help from him wounded Ford’s pride. He shouldn’t need help. He should be the one to do this, it was his theory.

It was then that Ford had an idea.

There already was someone helping him. Someone who had been helping him all along. Who wouldn’t shame him for needing the assistance, who would know far better than he how to assemble and shape the materials needed to create the portal, who knew every facet of the portal right down to the blueprints of the circuitry.
It was almost too easy. He could ask Bill to help him!

Summoning Bill to his dreams that night, Ford beseeched him.

“You could help me Bill! Think about it. No one knows what this machine needs better than you, we could do it together.”

Bill cackled and kicked his legs back in his chair, mirthful mocking laughter filling the air, before Bill fixed him in his single eyed gaze.

“A fun idea Sixer, but there is literally no way I could possibly help you tinker out the kinks in the portal. I’m a creature of the mindscape, champ. I don’t have a body, therefore, you’ve got no BODY to help you! Get it?”

“But what if you could have a body? I could make one. Design one for you, summon you, we could – “

“STOP right there Fordsy.” Bill’s voice echoed menacingly through the mindscape. “As appealing as taking physical form would be, there’s no way I’m hopping dimensions just so we can sit side by side and play buddy buddy portal builders together. I’ve already laid out the blueprints for you, now you want me to hold your hand all the way through the process?”

“But wouldn’t you like to experience this world? You’ve often said humans are fascinating.”

“Fascinating to watch maybe. Listen here Sixer, I experience plenty. If I ever wanted a body I could go down and grab a puppet of my own. Just call your engineering friend and work out the kinks with him.”

“So are you saying you don’t want a body, or -?”

“I want lots of things. What I want most for you right now is to get you on track to finish the portal. So call McGucket and wake up already. Put that big brain to work somewhere else. No use wasting time improving on perfection.” Bill said, rubbing his knuckles on his bricks, turning his hand over to examine his fingers, narcissistic in the way only Bill could be.

It was a shame Stanford found his narcissism so endearing.

Also a shame he took those words as a challenge.

If anyone could improve upon perfection it was Stanford. Bill often said he had the mind of a century. That he was smart. Smart enough to do anything he put his mind to.

And now he had a mind to create the perfect vessel for this whimsical spirit of knowledge. He could create the perfect body for the embodiment of cosmic wisdom to abide in. It would be flattering, beautiful, strong. The most ideal form to house bringer of enlightenment, Bill Cipher.

It played on Stanford’s mind, how he could build this form, how it could be everything he wanted for Bill, a permanent body, something to keep him around, to prolong his exposure to Bill’s wisdom, his knowledge, his company.

It was a sort of selfish hubris to think he could make this body to tie down the flighty, unpredictable, fickle creature he dreamed about. Bringing cosmic creatures down from the sky to have them sit on your couch and tell you about the universe was an arrogant daydream, a fantasy that all men had in some way. To grab the stars from the sky and have them stay by your side.
But Stanford was obsessed with Bill’s knowledge. He wanted him to be available, to not disappear whenever Stanford needed him, to not withhold information just because it amused him, to *make* him stay and help him. Above all Stanford wanted this to be something they did together.

He knew he could do it. He just had to make sure Bill didn’t suspect what he was doing.

Intended as a surprise, mostly fuelled by stubbornness, Stanford began sketching out his designs. Vitruvian men inked on paper like blueprints, a conceptualisation of all the things Stanford thought would suit Bill in a body. Sly catlike eyes with long gorgeous lashes, a shock of golden silky hair, smooth night black ebony skin, golden tattoos circling up his arms, binding circles on his back, runes and rituals on his wrists and ankles in that cursed gold ink designed to cut Bill off from his more deadly magics, a safeguard in case he didn’t like his new body. Stanford hoped he would.

He couldn’t see who wouldn’t, as every day with every detail he added, he fell more and more in love with the design fit to house the creature plaguing his dreams. Slim nimble fingers, slender legs, a muscular back and shoulders, a smooth broad chest, rounded buttocks, a prominent adams apple, a strong jaw, pouty full lips, a straight, pointy nose, an expressive face.

Ford could picture it, Bill inhabiting this body, leading him by the hand towards mysteries greater than he could possibly imagine, smiling cheekily back at him, sunlight hitting the rich golden colour of his hair and tattoos, making him shine. Ford’s hypothetical Bill was beautiful, exotic, tangible. A mystical being made real. A beautiful, fitting form, that would be a glorious tribute to the creature, much like the murals and statues he had erected in his study.

Finally, in the books found in the cave, Ford found the ritual that would make his dream vessel for Bill a reality, and so he began preparing. He didn’t sleep, avoided it like nothing else, to keep this secret from Bill, this present, this gift, this labour of love.

Together they would create the portal, save the world, and share the secrets of the universe. Stanford would flatter Bill beyond all doubt with this perfect body.

Or so he thought.

Filtering power from the parts for the core of the portal he had already salvaged, Stanford had finally finished creating the body Bill would inhabit. Who knew that ancient alchemy would be factual enough to be useful in creating a body. The books called it creating a homunculus, however this body would not house an artificial intelligence, but a very real one, summoned from another dimension and bound to the body that lay in the middle of the summoning circle, perfect and ready to be the receptacle for Bill.

Stanford stepped closer to the body, checking it over once more.

The eyes were closed, long lashes fanning out across its cheeks, strong eyebrows perfectly sculpted. Smooth, gorgeous dark skin covering the muscles, sinews, bones all deliberately placed. The shine of the gold ink, binding tattoos like gold leaf decorating the body, was captivating. Dressed in only black boxers, the body was there, ready for Bill to enter it and wake up.

Stanford bent down, smoothed his thumb over the thick lips of the body, feeling the breathing, the inhale and exhale of this empty shell waiting for an immortal soul to be housed inside.

Certainly, Stanford found the body attractive. It was supposed to be flattering, to be a representation of the beautiful muse housed inside it. It was meant to be like a temple to the god
who resided within it, a temple Ford would gladly worship at.

He shelved those thoughts for now. What mattered more was that Bill would be there to share his insights with Ford more now. They could talk of a daytime without Ford falling asleep, entering the mindscape. They could uncover the mysteries of the world together.

It was ambitious of him. Humans were ambitious. It was like the story of Icarus, determined to fly, to ascend to the cosmos. If only he had pushed farther, achieved the greatness he sought, he would never have fallen. That was the moral Ford drew from the story. Icarus was a failure. He didn’t flap hard enough. Let it never be said that Ford didn’t do all he could to obtain universal knowledge of all the secrets the limitless dimensions out there held. He didn’t think that was too lofty a goal.

Yes. This was a good idea. The epiphanies that would come with sustained contact with the phenomenon that was Bill Cipher would be worth all the alchemy in the world and more. This was a way of unlocking the secrets of the universe. Of capturing this flighty muse who knew so much, and pinning him down long enough to eek enlightenment from him.

It was time.

He begun the summoning ritual.

The familiar cosmic tug of an ‘I need help’ phone call from Sixer was almost too frequent at this point. Bill really needed to put some distance between himself and the moronically cloying human. Him and his big ideas and his endless need for flattery. How stupid and easy to manipulate. It had got to the point where Sixer was probably so desperate to see him, it was kind of funny! Humans sure became dependant awfully quickly. It would be appealing to play with that desperation, push it along, until it became a burning desire. A controllable mindless need to please Bill, when he deigned to show up to scatter cosmic miscellany at Stanford until the human felt sufficiently enlightened. Bill had been toying with that dependency, but perhaps a little too much, he came to realise, when Stanford last suggested he build Bill a body.

Sure, having tangible form in that realm would further Bill’s plans along by quite a bit, but without the portal working, why for all of Saturn’s rings would Bill want to bum around on earth alone for a second longer than he had to? Earth was crawling with idiot meatsacs like Sixer, harbouring delusions of grandeur about their own insignificance as no more than a speck in the wider machinations of the universe.

See, the only real appeal of going to earth in tangible form would be when he rolled his party into town, the greatest weirdest party the multiverse had ever seen. Now that would be a hoot. Heck, maybe if Sixer was still tugging at his coattails by then he could come along too. It could be a golden opportunity to wreak some havoc.

Bill hadn’t let Sixer in on his plans for the funpocalypse. He knew a square like that wouldn’t understand, but at least with Sixer as dependant as he was now, he was malleable. It was easy to lie to him in order to get him to build the portal. He was thrilled by the idea of it. A doorway in and out of the dimension set up, and Bill didn’t have to do jack shit to make it happen. Just prod the stupid scientist in the right direction a couple of times and he was dancing on Bill’s strings, eager to do more for the demon.

So Bill supposed he could humour Stanford one more time, and answer the summons. Just pop in
and out and give him a few more breadcrumbs to get him pulling resources in the right direction to make more progress on the portal. Bill chose Stanford for a reason, and it wasn’t just his ingenuity and insecurity that motivated his choice.

Whether or not Stanford knew it, he had contacts, and if Bill could manipulate Fordsy into bringing his old university buddy in on this project, the portal would be the finest piece of engineering available this side of Time Baby’s tyrannical reign.

Reaching into mortals minds was tiring, and though it was hilarious to see them struggle and fight back it was SO much EFFORT! If Bill could get old Fordsy to pull the strings for him, using the power of friendship of all things, it could really get the ball rolling for him.

With a sigh, Bill stepped away from his friends, more like his gang, of interdimensional terrors.

They were doing the cosmic equivalent of smoking up behind a seven eleven, having just kidnapped and set fire to the ambassadors of a quaint little world looking to garner a peace agreement with their spacial neighbours in their galaxy’s quadrant. They were holding the still smoking, charred remains of that world’s version of a pope like it was a cigarette, laughing together, revelling in the chaos of the kill and inhaling the sweet sweet smoky scent of dead holyman, when Bill felt it.

“Aw man. Get a load of this boring.” Bill complained as his bowtie vibrated, the summons calling him.

Demons had a choice, regardless of what the legends would say. Summoning a demon didn’t always guarantee you they’d come, it was a call, and they had to answer the call to be summoned to a place. Otherwise it was just plain inconvenient, being pulled from one dimension to another, zapped around until you found the place and person you needed to meet and/or destroy for inconveniencing you.

“A summons?” 8-Ball asked, his great googly eyes looking every which way as he turned to Bill, taking the burnt pope from Pyronica beside him, inhaling deeply.

“Sixer probably needs me to wipe his ass for him again. Doesn’t he realise I’m an interdimensional being of awesome cosmic power who has better things to do than pat him on the back for screwing in a light bulb?” Bill kicked the charred remains of the other ambassadors of that planet, knocking the skull off a nobel peace prize winner sulkily.

“What’s a light bulb?” Pyronica giggled, and caught the rolling skull with her pointy boot, playing hacky sac with it.

“A good idea at the time.” Bill joked, joining her in the game of hackey sac, kicking the skull back and forth while he complained. “It’s just so boring. How long, feasibly, am I supposed to put on the caring enlightened Muse act? So much sucking up to that snivelling coward. Ooooooh Fordsy, you’re sooooooo smart. Ooooh Sixer, I never would have thought of that!” Bill feigned a flattering falsetto.

“But, you think of everything Boss.” 8-Ball remarked dully.

“Of course I do!” Bill snapped back. “You think I don’t know that? But he shouldn’t be bothering me! What if I were doing important cosmic muse stuff, huh? What then?”

“We’ve been kicking heads around for the past hour.” 8-Ball noted, it wasn’t exactly important stuff.
“So?” Bill shot back, kicking the skull a little viciously at 8-Ball, and it bumped against his jaw sharply, though the gigantic monster didn’t seem to notice.

“You could ignore him?” Pyronica suggested.

Bill considered it, and his bowtie vibrated again, ringing. “Ugh, kid’s persistent. I’ll take care of this. Open up, 8-Ball!” Bill crowed, and his friend, the great ungainly monster, opened his mouth, as Bill kicked the last remaining head into the gaping maw like a goal scored, and he danced victorious when it landed right in there for 8-Ball to chomp on, feeding the behemoth and having fun in the process. “Woohoo! Take that spacepope~!”

High fiving Pyronica, Bill rolled his eye as the bowtie just kept ringing.

“Alright guys, you clean up this mess. Feed it to 8-Ball, geez buddy, I swear you’re like a Roomba for corpses.” Bill cracked his fingers, stretching out idly, before he tipped his hat to his assembled gang. “This won’t take long. I’m off to go play saviour of the waking world. See you on the flipside!”

“Bye Boss!” The gang chorused back at Bill, waving.

With flourish, Bill pressed his bowtie and looked down into his chest to answer. “Yellow?”

The moment he pressed his bowtie to answer the call however, a vortex began whirling, a black hole sprouting in the middle of Bill’s chest, sucking him through to another dimension. This was different from a normal summoning. This was forceful. Something was dragging him to the call, anchoring him down when he answered.

His friends were watching him, fear and surprise on their faces, and Bill was sure the confusion and shock was evident in his own eye, seconds before it was sucked away, into the vortex that emanated from his own bowtie.

Panic, that strange foreign emotion, whirled with him in the vortex, and with a surprised yelp Bill felt his cosmic manifestation, the essence of all that he is, stripped from the spacial equidistant location he chose to be in, dragged through time and space to a different place.

A more solid place.

A fleshy place.

A dark place.

With a thump Bill felt his consciousness land somewhere, and that somewhere was dark and stifling, and painful. An ache resonated behind his eye and he groaned quietly, raising a hand to rub above his eye but his hands felt wrong. They were too thick, too heavy. They felt different.

Rubbing his eye Bill groaned a little bit louder, his synapses connecting from ethereal places to physical places, anchoring him down. He felt electricity crackle over his body – his body???

He had a body????!!

His eye (eyes?????) flew open in shock, and adjusted poorly, squinting at the light from the ceiling. The hand (Bill’s hand) shielded his eyes from the glare, and the pain settled into simply sensation, connecting his consciousness to the wider functionality of this new body he found himself forced in.
“Bill?” A nervous voice called out, hope waverling in the tone. Of course, it was Sixer, and the voice was suddenly closer to him. Bill felt a hand on his shoulder, helping him sit up. “Here, let me help.”

“Sixer.” Bill’s voice didn’t come out right, it sounded like him, but scratchy. This body’s voicebox had barely been used, and the sound was grating, painful, and Bill started coughing.

“It’s okay. It’s okay Bill. There’s a lot to adjust to. I’ve got you.”

“What-“ Bill managed to get over his coughing fit, anger simmering in his tone, anger and shock. “What have you done?”

“I –“ Stanford sounded unsure of himself for a second, before he regained that confidence to declare more proudly. “I made you a body. It’s a gift. For you!”

“Sixer.” Ah, there we go, Bill finally managed to get a grip on this whole voice box gig, and warped his voice to sound out every bit of demonic rage he was currently feeling. Bill’s hands gripped on Stanford’s stupid turtleneck, clawing at his throat, and Bill looked at Sixer properly for the first time since opening his eyes. Both eyes were glowing yellow, slitted pupils glaring daggers up at the idiot scientist, as fury coloured his gaze. “What DID YOU DO??”

Sixer seemed surprised, and his hands came up to grab Bill’s wrists. He looked like he was worried for Bill. No. He should be fearing him.

“I made you a body. It’s a good thing.”

“I’LL KILL YOU!” Bill screamed, struggling to gouge Sixer’s eyes out, not having much luck as Sixer kept a firm hold of his wrists, leaving Bill to just struggle and kick out uselessly.

“Bill! Bill stop! It’s okay.” Stanford wrestled Bill’s clawing hands down away from his face, huffing with exertion to overpower the frantic spirit’s body.

No matter how much he tried to comfort Bill, it didn’t seem he was listening. The expressive face he designed was twisted with rage and violence, Bill really seemed discombobulated by the change, but Stanford was certain that once he explained things Bill would calm down.

Forcing Bill’s hands down so he couldn’t scratch his face, Stanford tried to appeal to Bill’s wisdom, surely a spirit of knowledge would respond to reason. “You needn’t be frightened, I know it’s a big change for you, but this way you can explore humanity, you can help me with the portal!”

“It was supposed to be YOU building the portal, not me! I TOLD you what to do. You didn’t listen!” Bill fumed, still struggling against Ford’s grasp.

Dammit, this body wasn’t as strong as Stanford’s, a fact that infuriated Bill, that he had the gall to design Bill weak like this.

“You’ve really fucked things up for me Sixer! THIS wasn’t in the plan!”

“But, you said I needed help to build the portal. An assistant.” Stanford frowned, keeping firm hold of Bill’s wrists until he stilled, looking up at Stanford with that beautifully crafted face, his yellow eyes narrowed, sinister and unimpressed.

“No me!” Bill seemed insulted that Stanford had even assumed he would take that role. He was nobodies assistant. “You were supposed to go ask your college friend. The engineer. I practically gift wrapped him for you as an opportunity.”
“Well, I saw a better opportunity.” Ford replied stubbornly, releasing Bill’s wrists and standing up.

Bill drew his wrists into his chest defensively, before blinking, and holding his arms out again, looking at the gold filigree of tattoos encircling his arms. There were protection runes there, the brick motif circling Bill’s forearms, and some sort of dampener on his powers, not to mention the –

“A binding circle???? Seriously?” Bill scowled, and tried to scratch the marks off, but they didn’t budge. All he succeeded in doing was scratching angry bleeding marks in his own skin, sending pain sparking delightfully along his nerve endings. It had been a while since he experienced sensation, and pain was among one of Bill’s favourites, so he started laughing when the blood began to well up.

“What are –” Ford seemed disturbed before he lunged back down, grabbing Bill’s hands again, stopping him from hurting himself. “Don’t do that, you’ll hurt yourself.”

“Afraid I’ll damage your handiwork?” Bill asked mockingly, his mouth curving into a sly smile. “So what’s it gonna be Sixer? Tell me how you’re gonna unlock me from this flesh prison you’ve made and tell me now.”

“It’s not a prison. It’s a – a temple. It was supposed to be a gift.”

“Well, I don’t want it!” Bill sneered. “So take it back.”

“I can’t take it back.” Ford knelt back down next to Bill, and watched him move and blink and breathe just like Ford had imagined. “The ritual doesn’t have a way to reverse it. I made you an immortal body for an immortal soul, and there’s no going back from this.”

Bill made a strangled sort of noise, hissing like a spitting cat, then cursing like a sailor in a multitude of different languages, throwing a colossal tantrum right before Stanford’s eyes.

Bill always seemed so civilised when Stanford met with him in dreams, so composed, so genteel. To see him unravel like this – to be so indescribably other – it made Stanford realise this is a being he only slightly comprehended. What he knew about Bill seemed to be the iceberg’s topmost sliver, he was beginning to realise seeing the violent, spiteful, childish tantrum unfold before him that Bill was more enigma and anomaly than Ford could have ever imagined.

He hardly knew a thing about Bill, about his kind, about how beings like him operated, and suddenly he had the opportunity of a lifetime, not just having a research assistant and partner, but a whole new subject to study, to understand.

It was amazing.

Bill tugged his hands away from Stanford and flicked him on the nose, pushing him away. Ford didn’t expect him to flick his nose, like a misbehaving dog.

Bill leaned away from Stanford, and then seemed to be wriggling his limbs, testing them all out, shooting the scientist burning looks every so often as he learned how to move his new body. He wriggled his toes, he bent his legs, he flapped his arms, he scrunched his eyebrows together and tried wiggling his nose.

It was oddly charming. Stanford was itching for a notebook to write down his observations. *How Immortal Muses Adapt to Physical Form.* Well, maybe not muses plural, as he only has one subject to observe, but this was enough.
Bill was testing his legs now, trying to crouch down, then stand, his legs weak and trembling, like a baby deer first learning to walk. Stanford moved forward, offering help, but Bill swiped their hand at Stanford, fingers clawed, and hissed at the scientist, refusing to accept his help, nearly toppling himself in the process.

*Muses were proud.* Stanford noted to himself. *Refusing to accept help.*

Bill figured out standing finally, and teetered tall on those thin shapely legs Ford made for him. Bill looked down at his body, and smiled, teeth sharp, seemingly impressed for the first time since he’d been placed in this new body, and he tossed his head back laughing.

“This isn’t so hard. Your human babies are idiots – this is easy.” Bill claimed triumphantly, and began confidently putting one foot in the air after the other, doing an odd sort of march on the spot.

As incensed as Bill initially seemed to be about getting a body, he seemed to be enjoying discovering it, his face stretched into a giddy grin as he successfully raised and lowered his feet, marching in place, then jumping on the spot, waving his arms around as he did so.

Stanford was watching the usually dignified muse cackle at his own movements. The smile that stretched across his face was reassuring, so Stanford asked again.

“Do you like the body?”

“Of course not, I hate it.” Bill replied, still grinning sharply, leaning backwards and forwards on the balls of his heels, checking his balance. “It’s awful and I hate you, but I gotta admit, you really outdid yourself. Talk about luxury models. And *two* eyes? What’ll they think of next?”

“So you do like the body.” Ford surmised, watching Bill run his hands over his own arms, feeling every inch of it.

“How long did it take you to build it? I haven’t been ignoring you for *that* long have I?”

That at least confirmed Stanford’s suspicions that he’d been avoiding him, his muse was fickle and capricious as predicted. Ah well, at least he couldn’t avoid him now.

“About a week to build, the designs took longer though.”

“Huh.” Was all Bill said, before he walked, one foot firmly in front of the other, like some robot walking, all stiff movements, over to the shiny scrap metal Stanford had stolen from crash site omega, looking down at his reflection in the metal.

Stanford watched Bill hook a finger under his lips, pulling them back to look at his teeth in the reflection like some sort of demented dentist. Bill blinked, one eye at a time, at his reflection, and rubbed his chin, considering.

“You know, as a temporary deal, this isn’t so bad.” Bill said, still rubbing his chin. “Sure *you* couldn’t figure out a loophole to get me out of this corpse, but I won’t have the same limitations. Besides, I’m sure there are upsides to being this tangible and good looking on the mortal plane.”

“Excellent!” Ford clapped his hands together, ecstatic that Bill was warming up to the idea. “You can stay in the shack.” If Bill stayed in the shack the chances of him being too bored *not* to help build the portal increased exponentially. “I can show you how humans live, you’ll have food, shelter, safety.”

“You’re going to cook for me?” Bill turned around, and looked at Stanford, assessing him. “You
know, that’s only the tip of the iceberg really Sixer. You dare to lock an immortal muse in this shitty temple and you’re only going to break a few eggs, make a few omelettes? I’m gonna need a lot more worship and servitude to make this schtick worth my while. I’m talking full time slavery here!”

Ford had the audacity, *the audacity*, to roll his eyes and smile at Bill.

Bill was furious.

“Oh? Oh, you think I’m joking do you?” Bill gave a cruel sort of laugh, and then paced sharply over to Ford, pointing at him with his index finger. “You won’t be the man who changed the world without me, Fordsy. You won’t even be the man who changed a lightbulb if you don’t give me what I want. I’ll fry every last brain cell occupying your thick skull. I’ll rip away everything that ever brought solace to your sad pathetic life. Your descent into madness will be one for the history books. I’ll have you make Pythagoras look relatively sane!”

Ford blinked, confused. “But Pythagoras was a famous mathematician and scientist.”

“Yeah but he also founded a religion forbidding people to eat beans, and the guy was obsessed with triangles.” Bill straightened his shoulders proudly. “With good reason.”

“So then you …” Ford began piecing things together.

“What, you think you’re the only meatsac on this godforsaken planet who I’ve gifted my divine knowledge to. Don’t think you’re special. In fact, you’re the opposite of special.” Bill said loudly, throwing his hands in the air dramatically. “Unworthy of the secrets of the cosmos. What kind of idiot meets a god who can grant them their wildest wishes and does *this* to them?”

Ford sighed, and looked seriously at Bill. “Look, I’m sorry I foisted this on you. I should have asked. I’m sure in time you’ll come to see the benefits.”

Bill scrunched up his nose, and scowled at Ford.

Though the body that Bill inhabited was utterly beautiful, and intentionally so, it was beginning to disturb Ford how disparate the vessel and the spirit inhabiting it was. Ford thought he knew what Bill was, what he was about. A spirit of enlightenment, calm, wisdom, whimsy, blessing the worthy with science, technology and advancement of the species.

The cruel things that had been spilling from Bill’s perfect lips since he inhabited this body led Ford to believe that that wasn’t the Bill he thought he knew at all. Certainly, it was the same spirit, but it became clear to Ford that Bill had only been showing Ford a sliver of his personality, and beyond granting enlightenment at a whim, Bill was, on a whole, disdainful of humanity. The crumbs of knowledge he bestowed must have been so inconsequential, if he was favouring ancient scientists like Pythagoras with advanced mathematical knowledge while calling humanity meatsacs and idiots in the same breath.

On a whole it came off as rather patronising really, but Ford supposed that was to be expected in some ways, when a being of immense understanding had to spoon feed information to a race that differed completely from the being in question.

Still, Bill’s tendency to threaten violence was something Ford was keeping an eye on. After tackling the dangerous and mysterious beings of Gravity Falls for two years, Ford wasn’t afraid of a little violence, of fighting back against the monsters that lived here, but he never thought for a moment that Bill would be one of those monsters. He was probably just in shock, settling into his
new body. He likely didn’t mean what he was saying.

In fact, the only thing that he said that legitimately struck fear into Ford’s heart was when he threatened to withdraw his help with Ford’s destiny. He knew he was to be the man who saved the world, with his inventions, his studies, his calculations. He knew he could save millions of lives by perfecting the interdimensional portal to travel between universes and advance their scientific know how exponentially. Now he had the portal blueprints, but no idea how to decipher them, and a million questions that he needed to rely on Bill for.

No matter how strange and alien Bill seemed now, he was Ford’s only hope to staying on course with his destiny and delivering the knowledge Ford so desperately seeked.

Ford drew the line at ‘slavery’ but he had no problems with buttering the muse up a little to get what he needed. That was what motivated most of the renovations in the shack, the icons and alters he made to Bill. Heck, level two in the basement was temple enough already to Bill, but Ford just had to go the extra mile. Ford was a proud man, too proud to stoop to agreeing to anything like enslaving himself for this, but he was sure he could make Bill’s stay in the human realm as comfortable as possible.

“Here.” Ford extended a hand, an olive branch, to Bill, who was still scowling, now crossing his arms. “I can get you some clothes to wear and show you around the shack if you like.”

“Fine.” Bill said, but did not take Stanford’s hand, instead stepping mechanically past him to the elevator, mashing his whole hand against the call buttons on the lift. “But don’t think an apology is gonna make up for the torment that is you forcing me into this disgusting physical plane. Two thousand years of slavery barely makes up for it. No. Four thousand. Eight thousand!”

Ford watched the lift come down to meet them and he resolutely refused to acknowledge Bill’s talk of slavery. No. This would just be two, enlightened individuals, sharing living space, and possibly the secrets of the universe.

This would be fine.

When the lift doors opened they both stepped inside the doors. Bill peered at the buttons on the inside of the door, then looked at Stanford and smiled wide, his pearly teeth standing out brilliantly against his smooth dark skin.

The expression was stunning, and had someone so incredibly attractive smiled at Stanford that way in the street he would have probably tripped over while walking or something equally as embarrassing.

However, because this was Bill, the smile, however gorgeous, was chaotic, and looking Stanford directly in the eye Bill pressed every single button in the lift, lighting all the stops up red.

“One of these goes up, right?” Bill said cheekily, and began whistling as the lift stopped and started on all the basement levels in a disjointed manner before levelling out up top in the shack.

When they finally got to the top floor, Bill seemed to enjoy taunting Stanford by pressing the door close and door open buttons over and over, infuriating Stanford. Judging from the way Bill was still smiling, he knew exactly what he was doing.

“Stop that.” Stanford complained, and snatched Bill’s hand away from the button.

“Got a problem, roomie?” Bill’s eyes were lit up with mischief. “You can always send me back from this horrendous physical plane if you don’t want me touching your stuff, but I could have
sworn you just said I could live here! How does the saying go again? What’s yours is mine?”

“It’s ‘what’s mine is yours’.” Stanford corrected, already irritated.

“Exactly!” Bill replied, chipper. “Now just remember that Sixer and we won’t have aaaaaaany
problems now, will we?”

Clapping Stanford on the back, Bill stepped out of the lift easily and began walking up the stairs, not needing Stanford’s tour apparently. He made a beeline straight for Ford’s bedroom, and as soon as he was there he slammed the door behind him and locked it.

Stanford followed, and called out from the other side of the door, trying the handle. “Bill, I was giving you a tour of the shack!”

“Don’t need it. Remember what I said Sixer. I’m always watching!”

“I set up a room for you, you have your own room, you don’t need to stay in my room Bill.”

“Too bad, I’m taking your room. What’s yours is mine remember!”

“No, that isn’t-“ Ford bit out, frustrated.

He was tired, he hadn’t slept in about a week, trying to hide this from Bill, and now he was locked out of his room? What was he supposed to do, sleep on the couch? The futon in Bill’s room just wasn’t the same, and Ford had been craving a decent night’s sleep in his own bed the moment he started this project. Now he was locked out of his own room on a cruel whim. It wasn’t fair.

Ford could hear Bill moving about in his room, his footsteps loud. The muse seemed to be poking around Stanford’s room, and he listened to Bill’s off key discordant voice talking to himself, but loud enough it was clear he was talking for Ford’s benefit.

“This looks nice and breakable.” There was a crash and a shattering sound, as Bill was apparently throwing Ford’s stuff around, continuing his tantrum. “Aww, is that a precious memory? In the bin! Wow these research notes sure make some lovely ripping sounds. Hahaha, paper tastes terrible!”

Rubbing his temples and groaning, Ford nursed his steadily growing headache, thinking he had bit off more than he could chew.

No no, Bill was just settling. This would be fine, this was fine.

Stanford heard more noises, the sound of paper ripping, and loud chewing. It sounded like Bill was talking with his mouth full of paper.

“What an adorable sad little handwritten book. I bet this is his journal. Hey Sixer, your journal tastes like tears, failure, and cheap ink. Sure is tasty though.”

This was not fine.
In every chapter of this fic, for every chapter heading, I am going to quote a line from a different Abba song to inject icelandic pop music subconsciously into the readers mindset until it slowly drives them insane. You're welcome.
And somebody told me how to talk, how to walk, how to fall.

Stanford kept more than one journal in the house, in fact in every room there were stacks of paper and pens in case inspiration or genius struck, so he didn’t have to resign himself to standing outside his bedroom door gnashing his teeth for very long.

It was actually a good decision for his health to put some space between him and Bill for a while. Knowing Stanford was out there listening in, Bill took special delight in loudly defacing everything in Stanford’s room, which caused the scientist to develop a ticking vein in his forehead. Whether it was due to sleep deprivation or sheer frustration, it was too early to tell. Either way, Stanford retreated to the reclining couch downstairs and grabbed a spare notebook to unload the observations that were dancing around his brain, so he could jot them all down before he lost anything to the sweet embrace of sleep.

Luckily the notebook he grabbed only had a shopping list hastily jotted in the first page, so Ford ripped it out and began a new heading.

Deciphering My Muse; Observations on Muses in Physical Form.

Again, given the singular test subject, Stanford really shouldn’t write Muses as plural, but the sentence flowed better and sounded more scholarly that way.

Subheading: Bill Cipher. Stanford tapped his pen to his chin, considering what to write first. Often he found that when inspiration didn’t tickle his vernacular immediately, it was best to sketch out a first impression until the words began to flow.

Slowly sketching on the page with a ballpoint pen, Ford drew two figures on opposite sides of the page. The first figure was Bill’s form as Ford had imagined him, serene, spouting wisdom, smiling beatifically. For the sake of clarity Ford also drew rather childish angels wings and a halo on the figure, to further illustrate the contrast between the figure in the first drawing and the second drawing.

The second drawing was also of Bill, though the expression he wore was visceral and dangerous, his teeth bared like they had been down in the lab, his eyes wide, yellow, slitted and glowing, his beautiful face distorted by anger. To keep with the theme of the drawings Stanford doodled pointy devil horns and a forked tail on the picture, because it was satisfying to do so at the time.

In the middle of the page, between the two drawings, Stanford drew Bill’s metaphysical form that he met in the mindscape, the one eyed triangle with the bowtie and top hat, absurd little arms and legs dangling from his figure.

In capital letters at the top of the page Stanford wrote; WHO IS THE REAL BILL CIPHER.

Benevolent being, or deadly terror? It appears my initial assumptions of Bill’s character were clouded by flattery and hero-worship. While I’m certain there are still facets to Bill that are genuine that I know of, it’s swiftly becoming clear to me that I haven’t comprehended the ramifications of capsuling a cosmic being into a human body. What was intended as a gift seems to have been taken as a curse, or deliberate act to wish harm upon Bill, which is not the case. I simply wish to work with him more closely and discover his secrets. His initial reaction to the body may have been fuelled by the shock of becoming corporeal but his immediate default to violence is questionable, as well as his repeated insistence on committing me to slavery as penance for this ‘misdeed’. While I may have previously taken Bill for a spirit of wisdom, his chaotic nature gives
me cause to worry that I have not summoned what I thought I had. I will need to go back to the caves to study the cave paintings I found that initially clued me into Bill’s existence and how to summon him. What I assumed were murals of Bill bestowing knowledge to the people, like a cosmic Prometheus, may have simply been depictions of him setting the town on fire.

I shall need to check again.

It may have been sleep deprivation allowing Ford to jump to such drastic conclusions, but it was difficult to remain impartial when that little devil was upstairs destroying his research notes and prized possessions very very loudly. He supposed he should give Bill the benefit of the doubt, considering Ford just essentially ripped him away from everything he knew and treasured.

Well there was a sombre thought.

The potential ramifications of my actions summoning Bill here against his will are beginning to catch up with me. I should have been more measured, and empathetic of his situation before pulling him to this dimension and shackling him into the quite frankly astonishing body of my own devising. He adapted to the new body remarkably quickly, picking up speech, movement, walking – all fairly easily. His movements can sometimes seem unnatural but it’s clear he’s had experience moving in a human body before (previously mentioned puppets? Thought he was joking, but may appear to be a more literal instance of possession) though am not sure how sporadic bodily possession will translate into long term habitation within a body. Perhaps when he tires from throwing his little tantrums he will begin to settle into the biorhythms of living as a human.

Ford was beginning to nod off while writing the last of his notes down on the page. Finalising his notes, he closed the notebook and, deciding to keep his observations secret from Bill to engender a more authentic way of observing his natural responses, Ford hid the notebook under the couch. It sat there next to the dust bunnies and old magazines that fell down there over the course of the two years Ford had been living in the shack, the small unobtrusive notebook, with the research within safely tucked away.

Curling up on the recliner grabbing the knitted blanket Shermy’s daughter sent him last Christmas as a gift, Ford settled down to sleep. The recliner was actually very comfortable, and sleep found Ford swiftly.

I shall have to see if Bill is responsive to assisting me with building the portal tomorrow. Perhaps with some prodding, and a decent breakfast as a bribe, he might see fit to drop a few hints about how to assemble the cosmic particle accelerator as I’ve hit a wall. I haven’t yet seen Bill smile in a way that is non-threatening, but perhaps the age old recipe for ‘Stan-cakes’ like I used to make with mom and my brother back in the day can garner a genuine smile.

Here’s hoping it does. Fingers crossed. All six of them.

After Bill decimated everything that seemed even slightly valuable in Ford’s bedroom, looking over the floor was a victory. A victory of crushed hopes and ambitions, and also a lot of other crushed things.

Actually Bill had really backed himself into a corner so to speak, as there wasn’t a spot of the floor now that wasn’t covered in shattered glass or the debris of various junked machines. His chest
heaving from exertion (Bill hated this body and all its various necessary functions, like breathing, and resting) Bill sat down to rest on Ford’s neglected bed.

Bill still hadn’t figured out where to find the skin sheaths, so clothes and also shoes hadn’t been discovered yet, and after cutting his foot accidentally trying to walk back through a pile of glass, Bill discovered that pain wasn’t as funny when the body experiencing it couldn’t just be discarded after the initial pleasing spike of injury. He didn’t like how his mastery of the art of walking took a sudden dive, reducing him to a hobble as the glass digging into his foot made walking difficult. It hurt!

Bleeding all over Ford’s bedsheets, Bill sat on the bed and twisted his legs up like a pretzel trying to see the glass embedded in his foot. It looked delightfully gory, but currently it was damaging him, since this disgustingly shapely body was apparently his body now. He liked seeing other creatures gored, but it was insulting, seeing himself injured like so.

Prodding the glass with his finger, Bill accidentally managed to drive the glass further into his heel, and cut his fingertip too. He yelped loudly.

“Dammit, get out of my meaty human walkers you glorified piece of sand.” Bill seethed, trying to touch the glass without driving it further in. Touching it hurt, pulling it out hurt more, but after a small struggle with his reflexes (which apparently didn’t like pain) and his better judgement, Bill finally managed to prise the offending shard of glass from his heel, and he chucked it across the room, bouncing it off Ford’s locked door.

Right. The door was locked.

Bill locked it.

How the fuck was Sixer supposed to come in and make his foot better if he couldn’t get in the damn door?

“Shit.” Bill muttered to himself, glaring at the obstacle his own destruction wrought, cursing himself for not thinking this through properly. He was just so angry, just so mad at Sixer for doing this to him. He was mad at Sixer for forcing him here, for making him like this, he was mad at this body, at how weak it was, how it wasn’t stronger than Sixer’s body. He was mad at the binding marks and runes on his arms and legs, and he was mad about the cursed ink, the lines of gold that were impossible for Bill to remove himself, stuck in his skin now, limiting him.

He was mad that this body fit him so well too, if the body hadn’t been a good fit, the universe would have ejected him from it by now. Whatever Sixer made it from, he did a damn good job. The molecules of this body hummed, welcoming him happily. Everything from the brick detailing of the tattoos to the unnatural gold of his hair to the wide eyes and long lashes flattered him, it was like the vessel was crooning to him, magical resonance singing a welcome out to his soul. Even now while he was bleeding from his foot and fingertips, the scratches on his arm from earlier having scabbed over, the body still hummed a warm content melody for having captured Bill’s soul within it’s container.

Bill wondered if Sixer was still waiting there outside the door, or if he was ignoring him now! Talk about unfair manifestations of karma. It was fine when Bill ignored Sixer but it was not okay the other way around.

“Hey Sixer. Heeyyy. Sixer. You can come in now. Sixer?” Bill called out, trying not to let himself acknowledge just how pathetic he sounded.
Did he just leave Bill? Leave him up here like this? Helpless?

No, not helpless. He was very much not helpless. He was an all powerful dream demon, a being of destruction and fire. He was very much NOT helpless. He just levelled all the possessions in Ford’s room, bringing retribution and ruin down on their pitiful existences.

Bill laughed out loud for a few minutes just to emphasise that he was the one in power here, he very much was not helpless, and he just ruined all of the little trinkets that lived here before. This was Bill’s home now. Bill’s domain.

Bill’s laughter abruptly stopped, and he scowled, looking over the room with the floor he couldn’t cross. This was his home now? He missed the mindscape already.

Groaning and falling back to lay on Ford’s bed, Bill closed his new eyes and rubbed his forehead, nursing a killer headache that may not have been due to any actual ache. Just the compounding realisation that he was well and truly fucked right now.

He had no interdimensional gang to back him up, no powers, no magic, no mindscape. No bowtie. No TOPHAT!!!!!!

Human life and living was cruel. A cruel cruel fate. How could Ford ever do this to him. No one deserved this.

Bill’s foot was still bleeding, dyeing Ford’s sheets red in various patches, and his body was throbbing dully, trying to notify Bill of the pain that he was already well aware of thank you very much, yes, I heard you the first time you piece of shit nervous system.

Raising his new arms in the air, he looked at them, looked at the gold patterns that bound him here. The tattoos were very aesthetically pleasing, but Bill could already see the layers of binding laid onto the skin like bricks laid into his flesh, trapping his magic one circle at a time. This sort of binding magic could be reversed slowly, but only by the caster, to Bill’s knowledge – so he was stuck with that fool Stanford until he could release the bindings.

Which meant –

“URGH!!!!!!!!!” Bill’s arms flexed and his fingers curved into claws again, wanting to strangle that bespectacled idiot!!!! He grabbed the pillow from Stanford’s bed and screamed into it, his fingertips leaving bloody marks in the white pillowcase.

Then, realising that he didn’t need to keep it down, he moved the pillow and screamed out loud into the night, making the sound as blood curdling as possible.

The scream was high and shrill and it echoed in the house, into the forest around them, only startling a few birds from the trees nearby, barely disturbing the crickets that chirped in the grass below.

Silence.

A shiver ran down Bill’s spine (he had a spine now) at the thought that he was all alone in the forest with Sixer, all alone in this shack with him. There was no one in the area, Bill knew, he watched Ford build this shack to be deliberately out of the way of the town, far from the crowds. Ford had no neighbours. Bill had no neighbours. He had no one but Sixer to entertain him, or sustain him, or look after him, or to fix his foot, or clean up his messes, or feed this measly human vessel, or clothe him, or unbind him (eventually) but until then Bill had NO ONE to rely on apart from that detestable man. The man who saved the world, Bill thought mockingly. More like the
Bill sat up, looked around, peeked out the window from his perch on the bed.

No one came. No one answered his scream. Screams were hilarious. People usually came running when someone screamed. They were entertainment, like the sound of the theme song for humanity’s favourite show. So why wasn’t anyone watching Bill’s show???? Bill clutched the pillow to his chest anxiously. Why wasn’t anyone paying attention?

Why wasn’t Sixer paying attention?

Wasn’t he Bill’s caretaker now? Didn’t he say he’d look after Bill? Food, shelter, safety? Bill could have been killed in the night, for all the help Sixer was right now.

It began to dawn on Bill how truly dependant he was on Sixer’s help, and that thought was fucking terrifying.

“It’s okay. It’s okay Bill. There’s a lot to adjust to. I’ve got you.”

Bill let out another blood curdling scream. He screamed again. He just kept screaming.

He screamed even as Stanford raced up the stairs, half asleep and panicked, rattling on the door handle to his room, terrified something bad was happening to Bill.

Bill could hear he was there, but the door was locked, and Bill was still completely horrified by his situation, so he kept screaming.

There was a thump at the door. Stanford was throwing his shoulder against the door, repetitively, over and over again, trying to break the door down.

Bill screamed until his voice cracked and his throat was raw and bloody. He kept screaming, the screams becoming more and more anguished as they continued, becoming painful, on top of humiliating.

With a crash the door came tumbling down, wood chips bursting wildly across the room as the lock broke right out of the doorway. The door fell on top of the debris on the floor of the room, creating a sort of ramp across the floor that was safe to walk on, though Stanford was wearing his boots, having fallen asleep on the recliner before he could take his boots off.

All Stanford could see was Bill surrounded by bloodied sheets, clutching his pillow to his chest, more blood on the pillow, screaming bloody murder at the ceiling.

“Bill! Bill, it’s okay.” Stanford said, trying to be heard over the horrendous screams. He crossed the door like a bridge, hearing his own possessions crunch beneath his feet, and walked those last few paces across the floor, the rubber soles of his boots protecting him from the scattered debris, until he reached the bed and crouched next to Bill, grabbing him gently by the shoulders trying to shake him out of this state.

“Bill, it’s okay. You’re safe. You can stop screaming, its okay.”

Bill could barely breathe, this human chest of his heaving to suck in the sustenance his lungs needed, while his head told him to keep screaming because everything was terrible and his existence was a cruel joke. This human body couldn’t sustain Bill’s continuous screaming, and so his breathing interrupted his scream, sucking in air rapidly, so quickly Bill was hyperventilating, human liquids running down his cheeks, while he yelled himself hoarse with every breath of air he
“Bill, it’s okay. You’re safe.” Ford wrapped his arms around Bill, holding him, rocking him back and forth intending to comfort him, while the spirit continued to wail.

“I’m sorry. I’m sorry.” Ford murmured, trying to snap Bill out of this state, smoothing his hands down Bill’s arms, feeling how rigid he was holding himself, how he was clinging desperately to the pillow, bleeding over the furnishings. “It’s okay. You’re safe, I promise.”

Finally working words through his existential dread, Bill managed to speak, his words unfortunately coming out as sobs in between hyperventilating breaths.

“You did – you did this to me – you did this to me – you did this to me-!”

“I’m sorry. It’ll be okay Bill. It’s okay.”

He was sorry? He was sorry???? How dare he even utter such–

Actually. Bill could use this.

Abruptly the screaming stopped, and Bill focused on letting this futile human body catch up with its basic functions, breathing until the breathing stopped becoming this hiccup-ridden hassle and started to become one of those unobtrusive background programs that humanity didn’t overanalyse too much.

Sixer continued to rub Bill’s back soothingly, making shooshing noises, repeating insidious things like “I’m here” and “It’s okay” like he’d never heard of an existential meltdown before. It was beyond patronising, but maybe Bill was just feeling a little raw after confronting his new mortality and corporal existence in this godforsaken universe.

“It’ll all be okay in the morning, Bill. I promise.”

Yep. Definitely patronising. The puerile limitations and effects of the earth rotating round the sun effectively did jack shit for Bill’s situation.

“How can you say that?” Bill’s voice was wrecked. So much for a deluxe model, it had only been one short day of screaming and already the voice box was totalled. “You’re wrong. Nothing can fix this.”

Of course, Stanford took this as a challenge, as Bill had hoped he would.

“I can fix this.” Stanford murmured, possibly to Bill, possibly to himself, resting his chin atop of Bill’s head, tucking Bill’s body into the scientists arms to hug him tightly, intending to reassure.

Tucked into Sixer’s chest, hidden from view, Bill smiled deviously.

“I can fix this.” Stanford muttered again, cuddling Bill tighter, missing the contented glow of Bill’s yellow eyes.

You better Sixer. Bill thought. You better.
Guess I'm kind of flattered but I'm scared as well.

After a long and difficult night of patching Bill’s injuries (how did he manage to hurt himself so much in such a short time) washing him, bandaging him up, and clothing him in Stanford’s most comfortable clothes, the morning saw Bill sitting downstairs on the recliner Stanford was previously sleeping on, wrapped up in blankets and bandages, wearing a comfortable pair of Stanford’s sweatpants with a matching sweater Ford got back in his university days.

Seeing the all powerful Muse dressed in a faded orange sweatshirt with ‘Backupsmore University’ written on it along with Stanford’s graduation year, rugged up in blankets, with bandaids on his fingertips had Stanford question how much credit he gave his muse previously drawing him in the notebook looking far too sinister with those devils horns and tail. Right now, far from looking like a sinister being hellbent on wreaking havoc, Bill just looked like a pouting upset kitten, poking at his own injuries with a morbid fascination.

“If you poke them like that they won’t heal right.” Stanford commented, having just trudged down the stairs, garbage bags full of his own destroyed possessions in each hand. He had been cleaning the mess that was his room after Bill’s tantrum, and instructed the Muse to stay put while Stanford had to throw out his bloodstained sheets, his pillow, and all of his trashed inventions.

“Yes they will.” Bill replied, still poking his fingertips together, causing the bandaids to stain burgundy with Bill’s blood. “The human body can heal from a lot more than this. It’s just regrowing limbs you guys suck at. Or am I thinking of lizards? You reptiles all look alike to me.”

Stanford rolled his eyes, certain Bill was being this aggravating on purpose.

Bill had been talking sparingly since screaming themselves silly earlier, mostly frowning and staring at Stanford to the point where a more self-conscious person would be unnerved. Stanford assumed Bill was staring because he was trying to reconcile being in a body that required care, and he was processing the extent to which he was dependant on Ford to exist in this new dimension.

Bill was actually pretending Stanford was vomiting spiders whenever he opened his mouth to say something patronising and useless. If this were the mindscape there would be spider puke everywhere by now. Arachnids for days.

Once retrieving him from Stanford’s room, carrying Bill bridal style across the floor he couldn’t cross, he set Bill down in the bathtub and began carefully removing the smaller bits of glass from Bill’s feet with tweezers, before washing his injuries down, disinfecting them, and bandaging them up.

Ford thought Bill was a proud creature, likely to struggle at the thought of being looked after so intently, but Bill just froze up, like a startled cat, when Stanford picked him up. His arms and legs held stiff as Ford carried him from room to room. He was surprisingly obliging when Ford was treating his injuries too, letting Ford pick up his ankle, his wrists, letting Ford examine the cuts only wincing and hissing when he applied the antiseptic. He seemed to be in a daze, wide eyed, curious only when watching Ford fix his injuries, sitting still for his treatment, even turning his face this way and that as Ford wiped his cheeks with a wet cloth to remove the sticky tear trails from his face. Bill just watched him the whole time, expectant and curious, or watched the wall, sullen in silence.

His compliance, Ford came to realise, was born of laziness. Bill expected Ford to fix his injuries, to carry him from room to room, to bathe him, to clothe him. When Ford returned to the bathroom
with the warm tracksuit for Bill to wear, Bill made no efforts to move, to dress himself, instead he kept staring at Ford until the scientist felt guilty, and finished the job.

He wouldn’t even try to walk on his own.

“You destroyed my feet Sixer. I’m not hobbling everywhere for your amusement.” However Ford was expected to carry Bill everywhere for his amusement. If Ford hadn’t felt so terribly guilty, he would have left Bill in the bathtub until he adjusted to other human things, like politeness, and manners.

However he couldn’t even consider that, not when the image of Bill screaming and bleeding kept flashing up in his mind, the true extent to which Ford had damaged the astral being made real by seeing his grief.

Even when Bill opened his mouth to say something scathing, his voice came out scratchy and sore, and Ford felt more guilty than before.

“That’s the last of the bags.” Ford said, sounding tired, instead of lecturing Bill on the difference between lizards and humans. “After this is done I can get you settled properly, and then get some shut eye.”

Bill was watching Ford, not blinking, the whole time, as he walked out to the bins out the front of the shack, watching him walk back in, watching him wipe the sweat off his brow and sigh, walking back into the living room and collapsing on the couch next to the recliner.

Bill just stared.

His stomach growled audibly.

Ford managed to blink his eyes open, and turned to look at Bill, who was still staring back.

“Are you hungry?”

“So that’s what it is.” Bill said back, his voice ringing with forced cheer. “Here I thought it was a new and inventive chronic pain inbuilt into the old flesh cage that I’d just have to live with forever.”

“You haven’t eaten, and you’ve lost blood. You must be hungry. Possibly dehydrated.” Ford yawned, before forcing himself to sit up, rubbing his eyes. Looks like he couldn’t sleep yet. “I’ll get you something to eat.”

“What, paper isn’t nutritious enough?” Bill joked, but then brought his bandaged hand down to rest on his belly, which was still growling, and quite painful. “Hurts so good.”

“The paper is probably making your stomach feel worse.” Ford rubbed his forehead, before pushing himself up off the couch. “I’ll see if I can find you something better.”

Trudging into the kitchen, Ford felt Bill’s eyes on his back. If the muse was always watching him before, he certainly was now. Ford felt more exhausted than ever.

What did he have in his fridge? He had eggs – possibly out of date. Some leftovers from the takeaway shop downtown. Ford hadn’t exactly been grocery shopping on the regular, the routine of a genius inventor tending towards the eccentric when it came to basic things, like buying food, and sometimes laundry. That’ll have to change now that I have a roommate, Ford thought, I haven’t had a roommate since college. Never had one so dependant either. It was a lot of responsibility,
like adopting a child, or a pet.

Ford continued to search through his kitchen for something that would pass as a healthy first meal for the Muse. There was some bread, a can of soup.

That’ll do.

Ford poured the contents of the soup can into a bowl and put in the microwave while he toasted some of the bread, spreading butter on it when it was ready. He also made tea with honey in it, for Bill’s sore throat, and set it aside to cool. He found a straw in the draw Bill could use, popping it into the tea. Ford also made himself a cup of chamomile, vainly optimistic perhaps, hoping he could go back to resting once Bill was settled.

Bringing the food out to Bill on a tray, the Muse was still watching him. Ford set it up on the pull-out coffee table he kept by the wall, and tugged the table close to Bill.

“There’s tomato soup, some toast with butter, and this tea should help your throat. It has honey in it.” Ford set the spoon in the bowl, and then plopped back down on the couch, tired.

Bill was still watching him.

“Well, aren’t you going to eat?” Ford asked, tired.

“And pick it up how? I’m injured, remember.” Bill said cuttingly, waving his bandaged fingers at Ford.

Ford sighed. So he was.

It took more and more effort to hoist himself up off the very comfortable couch to sit up enough to sort out some sort of eating arrangement for Bill. Sleep was so tempting after four or five days going without it, and it felt like tiny hands were dragging him back into the couch cushions every time he stood up.

“Here.” Ford pressed the spoon in Bill’s palm, indicating for him to grip it. “If you hold it like this you won’t hurt your fingers.”

Bill attempted to hold the spoon, but fumbled with it, and dropped the cutlery on the carpeted floor. “Woops.” Whether or not Bill did it on purpose, Stanford didn’t know.

Another long suffering sigh sounded out, as Ford bent to pick the spoon back up, returning it to Bill’s hand.

“You know in restaurants when the spoon falls on the floor the waiter takes it out back and cleans it in his underwear.” Bill said matter of factly. “I saw it happen.”

“That’s disgusting. What restaurants have you been to?”

“It doesn’t matter where I’ve been to. It happens everywhere.” Bill replied ominously.

“Well it shouldn’t.” Ford huffed. “That’s unhygienic, they should go out the back and get you a new one.”

“What do you think breeds more bacteria, the floor, or the human body?” Bill continued musing.

“So you’re taking your chances with the floor, is that it?” Ford retrieved the spoon from Bill’s hand, inspecting it for dust.
“If you give me salmonella on the first day of keeping me in this body, I will welcome my early ironic death.” Bill said solemnly.

“You’re not dying. It’s fine.” Ford rubbed the spoon with the sleeve of his shirt until it was shining, and plonked it in the soup.

Bill just stared at the spoon, then stared at Ford. Ford stared blearily back.

“Hands!” Bill waved his own around for emphasis.

“Well, what do you want me to do Bill?” Ford huffed, his exhaustion making his patience short.

“Feed me.” Bill said imperiously, and crossed his arms, waiting.

“Seriously?” Ford blinked, both at Bill’s body language, and at the body itself, his brain for some reason getting flustered at the thought of spooning the soup out to Bill, waking up at the thought of passing the spoon through those plush lips over and over.

“What do you expect me to do until my digits are healed? Starve?” Bill raised his chin stubbornly in the air. “You know, if you hadn’t sealed my magics away I could have healed already. So well done there, this is on you.”

Stanford opened his mouth to argue, but then shut it. Bill actually had a good point. This was Stanford’s fault. It was his idea, so these were his consequences. Resigning himself to it, Ford spooned up some of the soup and held it out for Bill.

Bill leaned forward and opened his mouth around the spoon, slurping it away.

The slurping was irritating, not to mention terrible manners, but Stanford was too tired to correct Bill, and when the first spoon of soup was all gone, he dipped it back into the liquid and spooned out the next bit.

Bill seemed to delight in making noises. Both ‘ahhh’ noises when he opened his mouth like a child at the dentist and satisfied moans when he ingested the soup, clearly enjoying it. For a little variety, Stanford broke some of the buttered toast off and dipped it into the soup, passing it to Bill, who chomped the toast out from Stanford’s fingers, grazing his knuckles with teeth as he took it.

“Mmmm. I like this better than paper. This is the cordon bleu of paper edibles.”

“Probably because this is not paper.” Ford broke off another bit of toast, chuckled, and dunked it into the soup. “If you like this, I have a recipe for stan-cakes that will blow your mind.”

“Woah, woah. Easy on the foreplay Sixer.” Bill laughed. “Don’t think you can blow my mind just yet. This doesn’t count as buying me dinner first.”

“I’m not – this isn’t –” Ford stuttered out, flustered for a second.

Bill took advantage of Ford’s distraction by leaning forward and biting the second piece of toast out of Ford’s hand, his tongue licking up the butter on Ford’s fingers as he commandeered the toast.

Because Bill was so focussed on the delicious buttery goodness, he missed how the blood rushed to Ford’s cheeks, embarrassment and arousal throwing the scientist a loop, freezing him up like a glitching computer as his brain replayed the event over and over with oddly sexual undertones
emphasised in the replaying. He wished he hadn’t become so obsessed with the thought of his Muse occupying this body, maybe then he wouldn’t be so damn attracted to it.

Chewing happily with his eyes closed, Bill finished his mouthful of toast, before sighing contentedly and opening his eyes.

“Mmm. I can’t believe I’m tasting butter. Unless it’s not butter and is just another cruel and cosmic lie delivered by an uncaring universe. In which case, I can’t believe it’s not butter! Tastebuds are hysterical.”

Ford blamed the sleep deprivation for his own embarrassed reaction, and, attempting to shake off his sudden blush, he cleared his throat, and wiped his hand on his trousers.

“W-would you like some more?”

“Would I?” Bill turned to Ford with a beaming smile, before he opened his mouth wide and made another one of his ‘aahh’ noises, bearing his teeth for all to see, or just Ford to see.

Gingerly Ford held out the other piece of toast, dipped in tomato soup, the soup ran a little down his index finger as he held it aloft for Bill.

Bill wrapped his mouth around the bread and Ford’s fingers all the way up to his knuckle, and licked away the drip of tomato soup ravenously, sucking it off Ford’s finger with a wet pop.

Ford felt sweat begin to bead on his forehead.

How long would it take for Bill’s hands to heal? A week, two weeks? Would he want Ford to feed him like this the whole time? Ford couldn’t keep doing this, he couldn’t do this for that long. Already with just the first meal, Ford found himself hand feeding this beautiful creature, and sweating like a sinner in church doing so, feeling this odd mixture of guilt, shame, and arousal that made him feel like an awkward teenager with a crush.

Part of him wasn’t sure what would be worse, feeding Bill by hand like this for the whole two weeks while he healed, or not being able to.

It was awful.

“You’d be able to heal yourself quicker, you say?” Ford asked, aiming for casual, sounding a little more desperate than he would have liked ideally.

Bill’s eyes snapped to Ford’s face, watching him intent like a tiger now, surprised that Ford caved so quickly. Bill wasn’t even doing anything, at least nothing he had planned to do that would speed up his eventual unbinding, but here Sixer was, taking initiative.

“If you removed the binding.” Bill replied, already watching how Sixer seemed to backtrack, recoiling from the idea. “Not all of it. You only need to remove a little.”

Ford paused, listening.

“Let’s say you remove a brick at a time.” Bill suggested, trying to make the idea sound more palatable. “Just unlock a little, bit by bit. You’re the one conducting the ritual, so you can set the pace. Just lift enough so I’m not so helpless here, give me back a bit of my agency and I’ll help you in turn. You can trust me Sixer, I’m your friend.”

“I help you.” Ford began, speaking slowly. “And you’ll help me?”
Bill smiled and nodded, trying to make his smile look innocent and non-threatening.

“With the portal?” Ford continued, and the smile dropped from Bill’s face quick sharp.

“I told you to call your college friend.” Bill scowled. “I’m not telling you these things just to listen to myself speak, you know. We need him.”

“It’s my destiny though.” Ford replied stubborn. “You said it was my –“

“It IS Sixer, but you don’t do it alone.”

“Which is why I have you –“

“I will not do a damn thing for you if you don’t release my bindings!” Bill shouted, perhaps too loudly than the conversation warranted, and his throat hurt again. He brought his hand up to cradle his throat, while still scowling at Ford, who seemed startled.

Ford considered it. “One brick, you say?” Perhaps it was the sleep deprivation, or just a reality of the dynamic he forced upon them, haggling for the Muse’s input. Bill used to be so forthcoming with his wisdom, and now he was withholding it, out of anger and spite. With good reason, too.

“For now.” Bill replied, reluctantly playing Sixer’s game.

“And you’ll help me with the particle accelerator?”

“I will tell you exactly what you need to do.” Bill said, agreeing to no actual physical labour that way.

Ford considered it some more, before nodding. He moved to spoon the rest of the soup to Bill now, not fixating on the eroticism of it anymore, more fixated on the prospect of completing the accelerator, his brain already ticking over with ideas.

Bill ate from the proffered spoon and watched Ford quietly until the soup was all gone, practically seeing the cogs moving in that big brain of his.

It was in Bill’s best interests for Sixer to agree to this, to speed the ritual along until he had at least SOME of his magic unbound. He loathed being this helpless, so dependent on the six-fingered man and whatever scraps of regard he tossed Bill’s way. So far Stanford was a shitty caretaker, delicious soup notwithstanding.

“Alright. Later, once I’ve slept, I will see about releasing one brick from the binding.”

“Not later. Today.” Bill countered. “It’s morning, you can sleep for a few hours now, and unbind me today when you’re done. You’re only tired because you’ve been avoiding me, which, if you hadn’t, we could have avoided this whole mess in the first place – but you didn’t, so here we are, and this –“ Bill held up his bandaged hands again for emphasis. “Is your fault.”

Ford had the decency to look vaguely ashamed.

“I’m not having you dangle this unbinding over my head for any longer than necessary, not when this body you’ve trapped me in keeps bleeding and aching and scabbing over and yelling at me for eating paper like it’s so great. So today, once you’ve slept, you’re going to unbind me and I’ll show you where you went wrong with the particle accelerator. Do we have a deal?”

Bill held his hand out to Sixer, as is customary when making deals in Bill’s world.
“One brick?” Stanford clarified, not yet taking Bill’s hand.

“Fine, yes, one brick. Unless you want to spoon-feed me for the foreseeable future of your sad existence.”

Ford tried not to blush at that thought, shying away from the notion, holding his hand out to shake with Bill’s.

“Deal.”

As their hands met a zing of magical current ran up Bill’s arm.

_Huh._

It was good to know that he wasn’t completely cut off from the essentials of his metaphysical form. It made Bill wonder what other facets of his old form and powers he retained, even bound like this.

Whether Ford felt the magical contract solidify was another thing, but Bill decided he either didn’t notice, or didn’t care. Sixer looked dead on his feet, ready to crash at a moment’s notice.

Bill squeezed Ford’s hand briefly, the motion making his hand flare a little with pain. “Hey Sixer. I’m done with the red stuff. You look like you’re about to crash.”

“I am.” Ford chuckled to himself blearily. He stood up, groaning, and moved the plate of soup off the fold out table and onto the more solid coffee table in the centre of the room, so it wouldn’t fall over in the night. Remembering Bill’s tea, he plumped the straw into the liquid and put the teacup on the fold out table, angling the straw towards Bill. Ford’s own cup of chamomile sat ignored.

“For your throat. It should help.”

“I can take it from here IQ.” Bill replied, leaning down to take a test sip of the tea, finding it a workable arrangement. “See, easy peasy. You should really lay down. Humans need sleep you know.”

“Oh, I know.” Ford replied, cracking a smile, before a huge yawn overtook him. Stretching his arms over his head, Ford yawned again, and Bill watched him yawn, staring motionless.

“I guess I’ll see you in the morning.” Ford mumbled, as he settled himself down on the couch, nestling in amongst the pillows. “It’s already morning. I guess I’ll see you in the afternoon then.”

“Time is just a meaningless construct assigned to temper the inevitable entropy of the universe. Don’t worry about it kid.” Bill said, his tone aiming for comforting, his words less so.

“I’m sure that’ll help me sleep better.” Ford muttered sleepily to himself as he curled around a throw cushion, tucking his cheek against it.

Accustomed to watching humans sleep for millennia, Bill knew the exact moment Ford tipped over into a consistent REM cycle, and he chose that moment to get up off the recliner, hobbling over to Sixer’s makeshift bed, leaning over him, bending down closely, until he was inches away from Sixer’s face.
Let’s see if this still works. Bill thought, before reaching out to put his hand on Sixer’s forehead.

It took a while to spark up, but eventually Bill was able to get a vague read on Sixer’s dreams, his palm tingling with the contact, the same as it had when he shook on the deal he just made. Bill closed his eyes and read the images he could pick up from the connection. It was weaker than before, reading these images, but Bill could still make out their vague shapes, enough to read the general feel of Ford’s dreams.

Dreams about making a sandwich machine that nearly won the Nobel Prize, but finding toffee peanuts in the engine right before the grand reveal.

Superficial stuff.

Bill concentrated and nudged the dreams along a little, hoping it would still impact Sixer even though Bill was weaker in this form. Seeding the desperation of the dream, toffee peanuts turning into nightmares of failure, unfulfilled destiny, potential snatched away from the promising intellectual – that was simple enough. Soon Bill had lit a nice fire of frustrated fears in the back of Ford’s mind.

Rooting around in Sixer’s subconscious as the nightmare played out, Bill found other thoughts circling like stagnant water in the forefront of Sixer’s subconscious. Thoughts that managed to tie themselves into the slew of nightmares Bill was plaguing him with, enriching the nightmares naturally, Sixer’s own subconscious throwing curveballs into the game that intrigued Bill’s curiosity.

Bill’s eyebrows raised, as he kept his eyes closed, pressing his palm flat against Sixer’s forehead to get a better read of these new images.

Images of Bill’s new body, screaming in agony, guilt layering the dream heavily. Bill encouraged that guilt to percolate, seeding it deeper through the nightmare.

Ford’s brain flashed bright colours of emotion, reds and purples simmering in the mix as abruptly Ford’s dream changed.

The subject of this particular dream seemed to scare Ford more than his previous dreams had, the guilt thickening, taking on new layers, shame, excitement, arousal.

Now this was interesting. Emotions like this were always easier to manipulate. Bill took a closer look at this particular thicket of thoughts, wanting to know what had Ford feeling so sickened with himself.

It seemed like dreams about Bill’s new body, fixations on Bill opening his mouth for the spoon, opening his mouth in general, his mouth, teeth sharp and white, lips full and thick, tongue pink, licking his lips. There was Bill moaning at the flavour of the food, licking Ford’s fingers. Bill moaning in a different way, gripping Ford’s bedsheets, sweat beading on his dark skin, making him glisten as faint light played off damp skin and gold tattoos as he was rocked against the bed, moving rhythmically. Bill’s chest, bare. Bill’s legs pulled back. Bill’s fingers tracing across Ford’s skin. Bill’s eyes glowing lustfully up at Ford in the dark.

Eyes opening, Bill pulled his hand back away from Sixer’s forehead like he’d been burnt.

“What was that?” He muttered to himself, not sure exactly what to think about it.

Sure, humans had these sorts of sweaty fornication dreams all the time. About each other. Never about Bill, and he liked it that way. Humans were gross, and their bodily functions were
disgusting, as was their sickening infatuation with each other, deluding them into believing things like ‘the capacity to love’ were what ‘made them human’ as opposed to the molecular structure of their genus and how damn disposable they were.

And having that kind of relationship with Bill?

Sixer was kidding himself.

Bill would have written the dream off altogether if there wasn’t that undercurrent of fear and guilt and disgust intensifying, tying the dream together into a messy knot of easily manipulatable emotion.

As much as Bill hated to admit it, he could use that.

Were Bill possessing some poor puppet he wouldn’t hesitate to put the body he was inhabiting to work, since the violation and indignity of it all would just rebound back on the person who’s body he stole. Like all things with a puppet body, the effects were temporary, and Bill liked playing with the strange sensations that came with ruining another person’s body, in assorted ways. If this body weren’t tied to his soul, singing out to him, he would have had no qualms about using it to seduce whatever he wanted out of the idiotic scientist snoozing before him until he had him wrapped around his fingers.

But this was Bill’s body.

Bill already was developing a sense of ownership over it. He wasn’t about to just go and let someone else get their grubby hands all over it. This body was Bill’s to touch, Bill’s to own, and Bill’s to surrender if he so chose.

And right now he didn’t choose. He didn’t want to.

“You’re gross, IQ.” Bill murmured, glaring at the sleeping scientist. “Keep your freakish dream hands off dream me. You can’t even handle all of these angles.”

Ford snored.

“Figures.” Bill huffed, crossing his arms. “You’re so obsessed with me it’s disgusting. I could ruin you for this you know? I could destroy you.”

Ford kept snoring.

Bill felt his eyebrows tic, frustrated by the lack of response.

Impulsively Bill slapped Ford on the cheek.

Ford snorted and raised his eyebrows, and Bill sprung away from Ford’s sleeping body, alarmed by the human’s sudden movement.

Bill watched Ford, his heart pounding, adrenaline pumping through his new body, having fallen back onto the floor springing away from Ford, startled.

Why did he slap Ford? Ford’s body was stronger than Bill’s. If he woke up he might slap Bill right back, or put hands on Bill’s body for other reasons, like in the dream. Bill knew humans did stuff like that all the time. For the power and pleasure of causing other creatures pain, of taking something from them.
For some reason the hormones racing through this body, and the tangible knowledge of how fragile he was right now, how powerless he was, had Bill scared like a woodland creature, adapting to a new set of instincts that he barely recognised. He wasn’t used to feeling this sort of fear. This sort of helplessness. He was used to commanding a room, of striking fear into the hearts of others.

What the hell was wrong with him?

Heart still fluttering a heavy staccato, making Bill’s throat feel tight for some reason, he watched Stanford, his body all frozen up, waiting for the human’s reaction to the slap. Would he wake up? Fly at Bill in a rage? Destroy Bill’s new body until it bled red again?

Stanford wrinkled his nose but kept his eyes shut, nuzzling deeper into the throw pillow near his face. Eventually his breathing evened out into consistent snores again.

That was close.

Picking himself off the ground and hobbling back to the recliner, Bill grabbed one of the comfortable knitted blankets and draped it around his shoulders, also taking the teacup with the straw away too. Deciding sitting in the room with Sixer, watching him sleep seemed grossly unappetising, Bill went to go sit on the porch outside to watch the sun come up.

Ford had insisted things would all look better in the morning. Bill watched the sun’s rays poke over the trees, scattering light across the forest, waking up the various animals who lived there, hearing them frolic, chatter and chirp idyllically as the sunlight bounced off the dew in the grass.

Bill couldn’t see how any of this was looking better than it had before.

If this were what all mornings were like, Bill decided, mornings were the worst.
I thought I would no more manage to hit the ceiling. Still, strange as it seems to me, you brought it back to me. That old feeling.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Ford woke up about nine hours later, around 2 in the afternoon. Despite how fitful his dreams had been, his body needed the rest, and very little could disturb him as he caught up on a week’s worth of sleep.

Yawning, rubbing drool off his face onto the pillow, then stretching out, Ford cracked his back and blinked his eyes open, looking blearily about the living room. Sunlight was pouring in through the window, and birds were singing in the trees outside. It was the sort of idyllic day that made living in backwater Gravity Falls worthwhile. The closeness to nature was an addictive experience after a while, and the peaceful solitude was something Ford enjoyed.

Speaking of solitude, Ford looked over to the recliner, expecting to see his new interdimensional roommate sitting right where Ford left him.

But Bill was gone.

Bill was gone?

Dammit.

Detective skills activating, Stanford looked about the living room, seeing the tray left on the coffee table, all the food gone, his cup of chamomile emptied, Bill’s teacup and straw missing. The recliner was still piled with blankets, but the soft hand knitted one from Shermy’s daughter was gone.

And Bill was gone.

With his foot injured he couldn’t have gone far. Just this morning he could barely walk, Ford remembered, anxiety brewing in his chest. It hadn’t even been twenty-four hours and already he had lost his Muse? That had to be breaking some sort of record.

Getting to his feet, Ford began to search the house, going from room to room, deducing from the clues left where Bill could have gone.

He wasn’t in the kitchen, but one of the pantry doors hadn’t been closed properly, so he had been in here, and a box of fruit-loops was missing, as well as a bottle of maple syrup and several bits of cutlery from the drawer. A few wine glasses were missing as well. Ford continued searching.

He wasn’t in Ford’s room, and nothing seemed disturbed in there, the door was gone, but Ford had put that downstairs outside earlier, as well as the trash bags filled with Ford’s possessions.

He wasn’t in the lab, though several prototypes Ford had been working on were missing. One of the laser guns Ford had been tinkering with was gone, as were several of his tools. The tarp from Ford’s camping supplies was gone, and several of his notebooks were also missing, both ones Ford had written and some of the academic texts he compiled throughout the years.

He still couldn’t find Bill.
Bill wasn’t in the bathroom, he wasn’t in the attic, he wasn’t in the laundry room, he wasn’t in the boiler room, he wasn’t in the spare bedroom that Ford had set up for Bill, the futon was undisturbed.

It was beginning to unnerve Ford how difficult it was to find Bill. Had he left the shack completely?

His searching becoming more frantic, Ford ran out the front door, prepared to go looking for Bill, when he saw the muse outside, having created the most peculiar set up on the front lawn.

“Somebody woke up on the wrong side of the couch. Why the long face Poindexter, you looked like someone killed your goldfish.” Bill laughed loudly. “Haha! Can you imagine? I’m guessing the one I found wasn’t yours. You don’t have a goldfish do you?”

“Bill. What are you doing?” Ford managed to ask, bewildered.

“I’m glad you asked!” Bill cheered, sitting on the grass on top of Shermy’s daughter’s blanket, cross legged. He raised a wine glass filled with maple syrup, swilling the thick syrup around before taking a sip, smacking his lips at the taste, exhaling happily after he drank the syrup down. “While you were masticating your pillow for hours on end, I had to entertain myself, so I took the liberty of setting up this little experiment to kill a few hours.”

Ford ran a hand over his face, looking across his front yard and seeing the havoc Bill had wrought. He was still trying to get over Bill drinking maple syrup from his best wine glasses like it was a fine vintage. “Experiment? What? You - Start from the beginning.”

“A very good place to start!” Bill sang, wiggling his shoulders. “Story time Sixer!” Bill patted the blanket next to him invitingly, smiling wide. Hesitantly Ford knelt down on the blanket beside Bill, watching him talk in his animated fashion.

“So despite my disgustingly weakened state, not only did I find this –“ Bill brandished a walking stick stolen from the umbrella stand in the foyer, nearly hitting Ford in the head with it. “In your hall pot, rendering me handi-capable – see, it turns out if I don’t put pressure on my fingertips and my heels I can cut a rug well enough on my own! You might want to get a new rug by the way. Point being, I got tired of watching you snore and decided to explore instead. I figured out mobility! Sustenance! Style!”

“How much sugar have you had?” Ford had to ask.

“IRRELEVANT!” Bill shouted, raising a bandaged finger in the air triumphantly. “Hobbling around your peculiar little shack was an experience, let me tell you. And we are unbinding my magic tonight because I’m fairly sure I’ve made my injuries worse, I think I stepped on a lot of things in the process of discovering – THIS!”

Bill began brandishing Ford’s laser gun in the air, and Ford ducked his head, waving his hands at Bill placatingly.

“Don’t just swing that around! It’s a prototype, it’s not finished and it’s still dangerous!”

“Correction – it WAS a prototype. Consider this your laser gun 2.0 Fordsy.” Bill spun the laser gun around his thumb like a cowboy in a spaghetti western, before blowing on the barrel. “So I got the idea sitting out here, minding my own business, eating those fruity loops and drinking my superior beverage, watching worms writhe in the dirt and other such popular pastimes. Suddenly these interloping arthropods began clambering up onto your porch, drawn by the sweet sweet syrup I
may or may not have spilled there.”

Ford felt resigned already to cleaning up yet another one of Bill’s messes. “Interloping arthropods?”

“The ants, silly!” Bill pointed to the line of ants that traipsed across the white tarp, which seemed to be held in place by several forks driven into the plastic, digging into the ground below. The ants marched towards a deliberate spillage of syrup. “I was defending my territory. I couldn’t just let them steal from me, and since I was bored and uniquely inspired, I got another wine glass from the cupboard and angled it juuuuust right until things started heating up.”

Ford was dumbly struck by the low-key sadism Bill was expressing so casually, how of all the ways Bill chose to pass the time, he spent it burning ants in Ford’s front yard with a makeshift magnifying glass because he had nothing better to do.

Still, Ford had to wonder how Bill got from that to laying out his white tarp on the grass outside, a line of ants heading across it, their black bodies clearly visible marching towards a syrup spill in the middle of the tarp, topped with a garnish of crumbled fruit-loops. He still hadn’t figured out how the laser gun featured into it.

“You could have set the porch on fire doing that.” Ford chastised Bill.

“But I didn’t! I almost did, but the sun’s fire is so weak.” Bill examined his bandaged fingers while he talked, it reminded Ford of when Bill would examine his nails right after a particularly boastful statement.

“I moved my experiment to the lawn to kick things up a notch. You see, ants are pragmatic little creatures. There’s no wasting time agonising over the death of their fellows, not when they present a perfectly viable alternative food source. When the syrup spill was gone they resorted to cannibalism! Now that’s a niche market! See, I could create both the supply and demand, because the more ants roasted – the more ants who would come take their crispy little bodies back home to eat them. It’s the purest form of communism!” Bill nodded sagely. “So I watched the little guys climb over each other to devour their brethren, but that got old after the first two hours. Something good can never last, goes the old phrase. So I went back inside and I found your laser gun next to the tarp!”

A likely coincidence. Ford raised a bushy eyebrow at the Muse, who tried to look innocent for all of two seconds before shifting their expression to superiority. Bill’s eyes seemed to lid pleasantly whenever he was showing off how skilled he was, like a cartoon cat with a canary in its sights.

“You built this thing for precision, but the focus on the laser isn’t compact enough for the kind of detail work you made it for. You wanted to use this to cut out space junk to use in your own machinery, right? But instead of cutting clean through the metal the beam is too wide and you end up blowing a hole through whatever you’re trying to cut.” Bill stroked the laser gun with his hand, and tsked, shaking his head at Ford.

It was amazing how succinctly Bill could describe the thing that had been giving Ford such trouble for months now, and make it sound so easy to fix. Ford assumed it was fixed anyway. He didn’t know why Bill would wax poetic about the damn thing if he hadn’t improved it in some way, Ford knew there was a point to make here.

“Go on.” Ford waved his hand, encouraging Bill to hurry up with his story telling. His listening in general just seemed to encourage Bill, who was either on a roll due to sheer omnipotent genius at work, or an unbelievable sugar high.
Bill picked up his wine glass and wiggled it around. “You didn’t have the right lens as a focus Sixer. You see where I’m going here. Burn a few ants, char a few bodies, tweak the lens on your laser gun. Conveniently I had plenty of willing bodies crawling around here stealing my human food for target practise.”

Ford held out his hand for the laser gun. “Let me see? Did you replace the lens with a convex design or –“

Bill held the laser gun far away from Ford’s hand, like a kid playing keep-backsies.

“Uh uh! Back! At least see the demonstration first Sixer. Pick an ant! Any ant!” Bill gestured at the ants crawling on the sticky tarp like the announcer at a sideshow carnival game.

“You’re not going to shoot it are you?” Ford asked, suddenly squeamish about being complicit in Bill’s orchestrated ant murder, feeling sorry for the ants who had been stuck entertaining Bill for however many hours.

Bill rolled his eyes at Ford’s meaningless empathy, that it chose to rear its head now of all times. Someone as thick headed as Stanford chose the worst times to develop attachments to irrelevant creatures. Ford was ruining this for him. Bill huffed out a frustrated breath.

“You wanted precision, right Sixer? So pick an ant and pay attention.”

Ford debated with his own moral compass for a few seconds, his brow furrowed in discomfort, before he gave in and pointed to an ant on the far corner of the tarp. “Fine. That one.”

Bill levelled the gun and fiddled with the machine, before aiming it at the ant. “Watch closely Sixer, I’m doing you a favour. Are you watching?”

“Just get it over with Bill.” Ford grumbled, crossing his arms. He was watching, the scientific curiosity that compelled him to do lots of bizarre and borderline illegal things was standing at attention. Ford knew that Bill could compel him into doing all sorts of things to sate that scientific curiosity, but he also knew that if he didn’t put his foot down early on living with the Muse his sadistic behaviours could run rampant if unchecked. It started with burning ants and could escalate to all sorts of activities that deviated from Ford’s moral compass.

He wondered if his muse even had a moral compass, or if things for Muses were all rather morally grey due to cosmic perspective. After all, what was one ant in the scheme of things, and what was one life in the grand design of the universe.

Thinking like that almost justified Bill’s actions, and Ford knew he couldn’t start with that. He had no idea where that would finish, or if he would even know himself at the end of it. No, if Bill didn’t have a moral compass, he would be sticking to Ford’s standards. Standards which were flexible right now for the sake of science.

The lights on the side of the laser gun turned on as the gun gave a quiet humming sound, powering up. Bill stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth as he squinted along the gun’s sights, lining up the shot, his finger on the trigger. Firing off one clean shot, the gun made a ‘pew’ noise straight out of science fiction films, and the singular ant that Ford had been watching was now a smoking pile of ash on the white tarp. The blast radius wasn’t much bigger than the ant had been, which was impressive. Ford expected at least an inch around the area to have been charred by the blast, but somehow Bill had concentrated it marvellously.

He was impressed.
“That – that was incredible! How did you get the beam so concentrated? This has so many practical applications. I can do so much with this – that was –”

Bill was smirking at Ford’s rambling, until he seemed to realise just how much he was gushing over the improvements to the device and stopped.

“That was a freebie Sixer.” Bill quirked his chin up, his eyes sparkling. “A show of good will since you’ll be unbinding me soon. And that’s not all it does.”

Ford leaned forward, curious, as Bill fiddled with a dial on the side of the gun that hadn’t been on the prototype.

“You can adjust it from one ant-“ Bill turned the gun to one of the trees at the edge of Ford’s lawn and fired off a shot. The beam of the laser was much larger now and more impacting, shooting a hole right through the middle of the tree about the size of a basketball, leaving the tree steaming, but still standing upright. “To one ENT! Free of charge, that one there.”

Bill switched off the laser gun and chucked it idly over to Ford, who scrambled to grab it and began looking it over, absolutely awestruck.

Ford turned the gun over in his hands, examining the clever alterations Bill made to his design. The alterations were elegant, precise, perfect engineering that spoke of a higher intelligence, and this – this was exactly the sort of gain Ford expected from bringing Bill down to earth with him. It seemed the Muse just couldn’t help furthering genius, couldn’t help improving Ford’s designs, seeing them reach their fullest potential.

All of this sprung from leaving Bill alone with nothing to do for nine hours. Though Ford supposed he should count himself lucky Bill chose to do something so productive instead of destroying more of his prized possessions. He knew Bill could still be doing his utmost to make Ford’s life miserable if he so chose, and that this peace offering was entirely motivated by self-interest.

Speaking of that self-interest.

Stanford sighed, looking down at the gun in his hands, considering what Bill made it in payment for. “About the unbinding…” He began.

“What about it?” Bill’s tone turned sharp, immediately snapping at Ford. “We shook on it. A deal’s a deal. It’s happening tonight Sixer.”

“I’m just not sure it’s safe to – “Ford continued, voicing his concerns.

“You’re telling me about safety?” Bill scoffed. “You’re not the one whose feet got butchered.”

“That’s not what I –“

“Well, what did you mean?” Bill cut him off. “You’re not having second thoughts now are you? Or are you telling me you want me to suffer like this? What sort of sick selfish justification are you cooking up this time?”

“Listen, I know you’re mad at me!” Ford raised his voice, frustrated. “I know you are. I get it, Bill. I just want to know I’m not kicking myself in the teeth here by unbinding your magic. How do I know you won’t –“

“Are you some kind of idiot, IQ? Did you do your research at all before cobbling together this flesh trap?” Bill scowled at Ford, before rolling up the sleeves of the orange sweatshirt he wore, pointing
at the runes that ran around his wrists. “What does this translate to? Here. Here and here too. On my wrists, on my ankles, and since you clearly believe in overkill do I have to point out the runes on my back and my chest too? Don’t think I didn’t notice.”

Ford didn’t seem to be following what Bill was implying, so with a dramatic sigh, Bill explained.

“Even if you dismantle the binding brick by brick, these runes will still be here, and you know what they mean? It translates to ‘forbids the intent to harm’ essentially. So if you did your research on those alchemy books you’ve been plagiarising for a week, you’d know that alchemists are a paranoid bunch. Terrified of rebounds, terrified of summoning something beyond their finite capacity for control. These runes are there to cover the caster’s ass basically. Do you get it now?”

Ford met Bill’s eyes now, understanding, though the hesitance was still written across his face.

“Still – I don’t – I know you’re angry with me.”

“Yes, I am.” Bill admitted candidly. “But even if I wanted to click my fingers and have you strangled by your own entrails, I couldn’t, because these handy dandy runes you graffiti-ed on me catch onto my intent and prevent me from acting on anything that is intended to cause you harm. So all of this catastrophising ‘oh what’ll happen when I unbind Bill’s magic woe is me’ crap is redundant Sixer. The worst I can do to you is heal myself without your shitty bandages. That’s what removing the one brick you promised would do. It’s hardly cosmic annihilation.”

Ford was silent now, mulling it over, and somehow feeling guilty for ever doubting Bill, for considering holding this over his head. He was really being unfair to the Muse. It wasn’t right.

“Plus, you got a laser gun out of it.” Bill pointed out to Ford. “Reward for doing nothing already. Did I hear a ‘thanks Bill’? A ‘I’m sorry for stranding you here against your will, but gee the gun sure is nice Bill’. Any sort of gratitude?”

“I – I’m sorry – you’re right Bill. I haven’t been fair to you.” Ford put his hand on Bill’s shoulder, missing how his Muse flinched back, their eyes becoming wary suddenly at the touch. “I’ll set up the lab for the unbinding and we’ll get this all sorted out.”

“You do that.” Bill replied, still watching the human warily, not sure whether to move with Stanford’s six fingered hand sitting heavy on his shoulder, too close for comfort.

Stanford gave Bill’s shoulder a squeeze in a way that was supposed to be comforting but caused Bill’s stomach to turn with anxiety, and moved to stand up and head back into the house.

He stopped to pick up the laser gun, and felt its weight sit pleasantly in his hand. It was well made.

“And thanks, for the laser gun.” Stanford added appreciatively.

Bill said nothing, still watching Ford warily as he walked back into the shack.

About an hour later, Bill, leaning heavily on his newly appropriated walking stick, ambled down to the lab.

Sixer hadn’t come to get him, and Bill knew that it took barely ten minutes to set up the unbinding ritual, so he had to assume that once again Ford was trying to avoid him.
He didn’t know whether to be happy about that or not. On one hand, Sixer avoiding him was what got him into this whole mess. Letting the ambitious scientist go off on his own to put into action whatever frenzied ideas his unusually gifted little mind was brewing could be disastrous without Bill’s hand guiding the direction of Ford’s inventions. It was something that Bill was aware of the moment he initially visited the human in the forest. Sixer’s IQ was off the charts, his potential was going to shape his destiny one way or another. Bill just needed to shape that potential in a way that would benefit his plans. Leaving Sixer to his own devices, letting him ignore Bill like this was something that could weaken his grasp on Ford’s destiny.

And Bill couldn’t have that. He needed Sixer malleable. If he were in the mindscape still he would have no trouble wrapping Sixer around his little fingers, holding the knowledge Sixer craved hostage, feeding it to the human bit by bit until the human was addicted, would do anything for Bill. He would have been the perfect puppet.

He hadn’t expected Sixer to turn the tables on him like this.

Being dragged out of the mindscape like this, forced into this pretty little flesh cage – now dancing around on Sixer’s strings! It was humiliating. It was disastrous. It was one hell of a spanner thrown into the works of something that had taken Bill centuries to set up.

Bill knew there were ways he could make the best of this, to keep his plan in motion, to continue to direct Sixer’s inventions in a way that would benefit Bill in the long run.

He could still deliver knowledge to Sixer, spoon feed it to him, make some sort of reward system to keep the human dependant on Bill.

The difficult thing was that Bill couldn’t just split himself off into different spacial locations to vent. It used to be so frustrating appearing to manipulate Sixer, because it required some smack bang acting skills. At least when he was visiting in the mindscape, Bill could play his part perfectly, then disappear to another part of the mindscape and wreak havoc, set fires, laugh at carnage with his pals and be himself for a while.

There was literally no way Bill could pretend to be Sixer’s perfect muse 24/7. So it seemed Sixer was discovering a few new sides and angles to Bill that he hadn’t seen before. That was fine, Bill could work with that. It wasn’t like the Bill Sixer saw in the mindscape was all that different from Bill as he was now.

It just meant that now when Bill destroyed all of Sixer’s toys, or set up a hilarious experiment in the front yard to pass the time – SOMEHOW Sixer took these actions to be indicative of a potential for violence that deviated from Sixer’s limited moral compass and was less likely to trust Bill.

Which was ridiculous.

So what if a few ants sizzled up, so what if Bill ate two out of Ford’s twelve PHD certificates? That was no reason to hold a grudge.

Where was the trust?

It would be insulting, really, if Bill didn’t harbour his own fierce distrust for the scientist.

Putting scientists together with creatures of infinite magic and wisdom was all well and good when the power balanced in favour of the magical being, but by shoving him into this body Sixer ripped so much of what empowered Bill away from him. Bill didn’t want to become Sixer’s latest subject of study. Scientists if given power over the mystical arts, would rip, tear down, dissect, pull apart,
and study every bit of magic in the universe if they could – Bill has seen it happen in so many
dimensions. It was hilarious when it happened to other beings, but not when it happened to Bill.

Bill was so keenly aware of the limitations of this body and how unprotected he was against a
plethora of potential harm befalling him now. Heck, already he experienced debilitating injury, the
indignity of requiring care, of depending on Sixer. It was supposed to be the other way around.
Sixer was supposed to depend on him!

Bill was scrambling to find ways to ensure that at the end of the day he was the one holding the
power in this dangerous tango for two, and so far all he had come up with was designing a better
laser for Sixer and handing it over to the scientist first before he could demand Bill’s genius to
assist him.

If Bill was the one who chose whether to give or withhold his knowledge then he still held the
power technically. If Bill was only helping Sixer because he chose to do so, then it was still Bill’s
decision.

Bill was so very aware of how Sixer could hurt Bill, do all manner of things to just up and take
what Bill had to offer, without letting Bill choose, and while he didn’t think Sixer’s moral compass
would allow that just yet, Bill knew what humans were capable of, and he was scared.

It hurt to admit it, but it was the truth. Bill was scared of Sixer.

Which is why part of him didn’t mind that Sixer was avoiding him. He wanted to avoid the
scientist too.

But if he ever wanted his magic unbound he had to swallow that swirling fear and stick to his guns.

The laser gun was a nice touch in repairing the damage to his relationship with Sixer from the
night before, setting up a fractional bit of normalcy between them once again. It was the best kind
of olive branch, the kind that could shoot things.

Bill still felt Sixer’s freakish hand squeezing his shoulder from time to time, remembering how
incredibly fragile and receptive this body was to touch, to harm, to breaking.

Sixer probably wasn’t trying to break Bill, he was probably trying to be comforting, or friendly, or
one of those human things that Bill laughed at a lot. Stuck in a human body now, Bill realised that
it was possible he would start to feel some of those weird human things too over time, and he was
already horrified at the prospect.

Getting his magic unbound would be taking one small step towards reuniting Bill with who he
was, with what he was. Anything that formed a wedge between Bill and his own tenuous humanity
was something to be cherished.

Which was why Bill leaned heavily on his walking stick as the elevator slowly brought him down
to the sublevel of the lab. The elevator door sprung open with a ‘ding’ and Bill saw Ford over by
the far end of the lab, cutting into machinery he had stolen from Crash Site Omega with the laser
gun. He had his back to Bill, but at least he had done his legwork, and in the middle of the lab there
was a circle of salt, several markings drawn in the centre of the circle in – if done correctly, Sixer’s
own blood.

Ford looked up from his welding at the sound of Bill’s walking stick tapping on the floor, and
turned around, to see the Muse hobbling over to the circle’s edge, looking rather small in Ford’s
large orange tracksuit.
Tapping the edge of the circle with his walking stick, Bill commented. “The salt is a nice touch, but it’s not actually necessary for this ritual.”

“The books said better safe than sorry.” Ford stood, carrying the book on alchemy he had been referencing and looking at the page. “Though it mostly seems to detail rituals involving the summoning of demons. I suppose I should have factored in that different rules would apply with Muses.”

Bill leaned on his cane a little more and pursed his lips, saying nothing, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end. If Sixer found out what he really was it’d be salt circles for days. Best to keep that particular truth buried for now.

“I thought you’d have come to get me by now.” Bill said instead. “I take it you’ve been enjoying the laser gun.”

“Yes, it’s truly spectacular.” Ford said, gratitude softening his voice. “It’s revolutionised the way I can work on my inventions now, and it’s sped up the process of grafting alien technology by years. I couldn’t have done it without your help.”

Bill smiled at that, and it wasn’t one of his mocking smiles, or devious ones. He seemed genuinely pleased that Ford was thanking him.

Ford supposed that the Muse appreciated the appreciation, and that might have been the first thing since Ford brought him here that Bill had genuinely smiled at.

It was nice.

“You have my thanks.” Ford reiterated, just to see Bill’s smile continue.

“And you’ll have mine once you get rid of these bricks.” Bill replied, and rolled up his sleeve, stepping into the circle, and beckoning Ford over. If Ford didn’t see how Bill’s cane dragged through the salt, breaking the circle, it wouldn’t be a bad thing. “Not that I mind the décor, it’s just from a functional perspective I’d really like some of my old juice back.”

“I figure we’d start with one for now. Just to see how it goes.” Ford stepped into the circle, putting the book in his pocket.

“One’s all we shook on, but I’m sure in time you’ll want to do this again. Face it Sixer, you’ll be missing the old me.” Bill winked, and extended his arm, baring the brick motif clearly. “Do you remember the incantation?”

“I memorised it earlier.” Ford replied, and put both hands on Bill’s arm, wrapping his fingers around until he touched thumb to fingertips.

His hands were warm. Bill tried not to let it bother him.

“Well then IQ, it’s show-time.”

Taking a deep breath, Ford began chanting the incantation. He could feel when the energy of the ritual began to kick in, it was right about when his arm hair stood on end, static electricity climbing along his skin.

“Aurum filum. Exaudi orationem meam.
Restituatur habentis maleficia, quae ibi erat.
Da magicae retro.
The air crackled and the blood runes below their feet lit up with red light. An unnatural breeze filled the lab, but Bill didn’t seem concerned, so Ford assumed it was just part of the ritual.

Ford looked at Bill for a moment, uncertain if he was doing the right thing, but Bill met his eyes. The Muse smiled and nodded encouragingly at Stanford, and he steeled his resolve and continued reciting.

"Tollite lapidem. Aurum et nigri. Reduc ad eum."

The gold lines of Bill’s tattoos lit up, and Stanford could see the lines that formed the first brick on Bill’s right arm physically lift from Bill’s skin, like gold thread hovering in the air. It unwound from Bill’s skin, like the tattoo was unravelling, and drifted in the air. The line where the gold had previously been turned black like ink.

The ritual was almost complete. Ford recited the last few lines of the incantation, feeling the magic settle.

"Da magicae retro. Aurum et nigri. Da magicae retro. Aurum et nigri."

At last the unnatural wind in the lab died down, and the red light at their feet dimmed. Bill was watching the gold thread lift from his skin with a keen eye, and as the ritual ended the thread disappeared from the air in front of them, fading out of existence. The red light at their feet guttered out, and Stanford watched as Bill closed his eyes and smiled.

“Did it work?” Ford asked curiously.

“Let’s see.” Said Bill, though it sounded like he already knew. He waggled his fingers at Stanford. “Do you want to rip the bandaid off or should I?”

“Here, let me.” Ford replied, and gently peeled the bandages off Bill’s fingers, to spare the spirit from experiencing the pain of ripping off his own bandages. He was surprised to see the cuts were still there. Frowning, examining Bill’s slender fingers with care, Ford seemed disappointed. “It didn’t work.”

“Didn’t it?” Bill replied cheekily, before his eyes glowed yellow. Ford watched awestruck as the damaged skin knitted itself together right before his eyes, red cuts sealing over, the skin knitting itself back together perfectly. Ford gawked at Bill’s now healed hand, amazed at the difference, though it was exactly what he expected.

“If you think that’s cool, watch this.” Bill said, grin wide, as he held his hand right up in front of Stanford’s face and magically broke his cuts open again, peeling the skin back wide to show bloody wounds, before healing them up again, reversing the damage and then inflicting it at a faster pace, over and over.

“Urgh.” Ford winced and looked away, squeamish. “Don’t do that Bill, you’ll hurt yourself again.”

“I think you mean I’ll heal myself again.” Bill pointed to his chest with his thumb, before laughing and bending over. “At least I can get these dumb wraps off my feet now. I feel like a posthumous
Pharaoh.”

Ford bent down at the same time. “Let me get that for you.”

Bumping heads with his Muse in his haste to get to the bandages first, he winced, and suddenly he was practically nose to nose with Bill, his hand resting on Bill’s bandaged feet.

Bill seemed shocked by Ford’s closeness, and backed away sharply, falling over in the process and landing on his rear outside of the ruined salt circle.

“Woah. Hahaha. You really startled me there.” Bill laughed nervously, though his heart was racing a mile a minute.

“Are you okay?” Ford asked hesitantly.

“Pccht. I’m fine Sixer.” Bill gave another one of his nervous laughs, and got to his feet, picking up his walking stick. “Better than ever. Thanks for the brick back.”

“You’re welcome?” Ford replied, intrigued by his Muse’s peculiar behaviour.

Bill stood across from Ford awkwardly, his fingers drumming along the curve of his walking stick, an anxious movement. He seemed frozen to the spot while Ford was watching him, a million thoughts running through his head. Soon it was clear from his body language that he was itching towards the elevator, wanting to leave.

“Well, it’s been fun, but I’ve got human things to go do.” Bill began backing up, quickly walking towards the elevator, facing Sixer the whole time. “So I guess I’ll see you round.”

“Wait, you’re going?” Ford questioned, confused. Was that it? Bill got a square of his magic back and suddenly he was leaving.

Bill was already in the lift and was pressing the up button repeatedly, looking between it and Ford rapidly, hoping the door would close before the scientist decided to follow him.

“I’ve got things to do, people to be. You know how it is. Close dammit.”

“Bill, wait!” Ford called out, finally cottoning on to the fact that Bill was trying to make his escape. He got to his feet and raced across to the elevator just as it was closing. “Bill!”

Ford watched the elevator ascend, berating himself for not seeing this coming. He just gave Bill what he needed to not be so powerless, of course the moment he got his magic back he’d just up and leave Stanford here. He was so stupid for not seeing it before.

The lift was the only way out of the shack, so Ford had to wait, furiously pressing the call button over and over.

By the time the lift made the trip up and back down, Ford was working himself up into a state, calling himself all sorts of names for not seeing this coming.

“An idiot, Stanford. He was never going to help build the portal. Who were you kidding?”

By the time the lift hit topside, Ford was ready, springing out of the elevator and seeing the front door left wide open. He raced out the door, and looked around.

There, in the distance, he could see Bill in that awful orange tracksuit, running like a madman down the dirt road that lead from the shack to the town. He was barefoot, and still carried Ford’s
walking stick, sprinting as fast as his human legs could carry him.

“Bill!” Ford called out after him. “Get back here!”

“You’ll never take me alive Sixer!” Bill yelled back, his feet pounding the ground, cutting open on the rocks and sticks along the way, his magic continuously healing the cut skin over and over again.

Ford threw off his turtleneck, stripping down to his t-shirt, before he began running after the escapee Muse.

Stanford knew he had three advantages.

The full and healthy meal he had eaten just an hour before.

An impeccable fitness regimen from hiking through Gravity Falls day after day hunting monsters.

And shoes. Shoes helped.

As he ran after Bill, his shoes crunching through the dirt, he saw the flecks of blood Bill’s feet were leaving, and he felt terrible for the Muse. Bill must be in so much pain.

Up ahead, Bill was suffering.

This human body was SO AWFUL! His feet hurt from running, his legs didn’t stretch nearly far enough, his chest was heaving from that awful cardio-vascular system of his, his lungs pulling in heavy panting breaths. This whole exercise thing brought tears to his eyes, but he wouldn’t stop running for all the gold in El Dorado.

Looking behind him he saw Sixer was hot on his trail, and Bill panicked, his heart pumping faster than it ever had, terrified of Sixer catching up to him.

Bill kept running.

Every now and again Bill could hear Sixer calling out after him.

“Bill stop!”

“Where are you going?”

“Stop running. I just want to talk.”

“You’re hurting yourself.”

Bill didn’t have the energy to spare to yell back. He was frantic. He ran and ran and ran, panting, pouring every bit of his limited magic into healing his own body as he broke it down against the dirt road, and then the asphalt, as he legged it through the road that led out of the town, running like his life depended on it, wanting to get as far away from Sixer and Gravity Falls as he could.

His chest was pounding, and his whole body hurt, and his eyes were watering again, leaking human fluids as he ran for half an hour, Sixer slowing a little behind him, but still following.

He hated this and he hated this existence and he hated Sixer right now more than anything. Why couldn’t he just let him leave?

There, up ahead. A sign post on the roadside.
If he could just get this far maybe Sixer would give up and go home. If he could just get out of this godforsaken town he could be free, or free enough anyway to pursue other means of liberating himself from this flesh sack, away from Sixer’s watchful eye.

His feet were aching, but he was so close.

He kept running, feet tearing on the pavement again and again until.

**BANG.**

Bill ran headfirst into some kind of invisible barrier.

He shook his head, thrown by the impact, before running into it again. And again.

Bill threw his shoulder into the force field so hard he felt his shoulder break, pulling the healing of his magic to fix it before he even knew what was wrong.

He banged his fists on the barrier, this infinitesimal human form barely making a dent in the strange magical barrier that was halting his way.

“No. No, no, no, no, no, NO!” Bill uttered to himself frantically, beating on the barrier with his palms.

Behind him he could hear the crunch of shoes on pavement as Ford chased after him, the sound of feet slowing down as Stanford stopped, staring at Bill throwing his fists at thin air.

“LET ME OUT!” Bill screamed, pounding on the barrier his own magic sparking against the invisible wall, lighting it up for a moment. The barrier seemed to arch all the way up, like a dome, covering the whole of Gravity Falls.

“Bill?” Ford’s voice called out, a little out of breath, worried for the Muse.

Bill spun around, blood dripping from his fists, wet tear trails still dripping down his face as he pointed his finger accusingly at the scientist.

“Did you do this??? Did you trap me here?”

“I swear, I don’t know anything about this. What’s -?” Sixer seemed just as confused as Bill was, staring at the magic sparking up the force field, astonished.

“The force field! Did you put this up?” Bill’s eyes were looking manic now as he turned and marched over to Sixer, pointing at him the entire time. “Dragging me here wasn’t good enough for you, you had to seal up the whole damn town too? Well, Stanford Filbrick Pines? ANSWER ME!”

“Bill, I swear. I don’t know what this is. I had no idea –“

Bill screamed again, frustrated, throwing his hands in the air, before pointing at the force field again.

“If you didn’t do this then why is it here?”

“I –“ Ford began, looking for answers. “I guess it could have something to do with the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness I’ve been working on. Something about this town. I don’t know just
yet, but I can find out.”

Bill panted, catching his breath, his chest rising and falling rapidly, both from exertion and rage. Turning around and yelling angrily, Bill hurled the walking stick at the barrier, and it sailed right across it, landing on the other side.

“You’d take my stick too?” Bill yelled, seemingly at the barrier, running up to it and pressing his palms against it, looking at the walking stick that lay innocuously just out of reach.

Stanford walked up to the edge of the barrier, and looked at how Bill’s hands seemed to be pressed flush against the air in front of him, unable to pass through. Ford stepped around Bill, inspecting.

It seemed the barrier didn’t hold Stanford inside. Just Bill, whose frustration seemed compounded when he saw Ford step easily past the town borders. He looked at Ford, his eyes desperate and angry, betrayed almost by the very existence of this border.

“Why can’t I leave?” He asked, looking at Ford.

“I don’t know.” Ford replied, and bent down to pick up Bill’s walking stick. “But – do you really have to?”

His voice was soft and he looked into Bill’s eyes imploringly. “I know you never wanted to be here in the first place, but you don’t have to leave. We may have got this whole body thing off to a poor start, but there are good things about being here. Reasons to like being here. I know I haven’t been a very good host yet, but there are things I can show you that might make living here worthwhile.”

Bill didn’t look convinced, but he did look every bit as exhausted as the half hour manic sprint he just made would have left him. Drained, physically, emotionally, and magically Bill scowled at Sixer who stood just beyond the barrier, just past what he could reach, and was trying to reason with him.

“If you’d just give it a chance, I’m sure I could change your mind about this place Bill.”

“You couldn’t change my mind about this place Sixer if you razed it to the ground for me.”

“I’ll find a way to fix this, to reverse the barrier. It’s not fair that you should be stuck here in this town when there’s a whole world of wonderful things to discover. I get it, Bill, I do.” Ford implored, being so damn kind and reasonable it was making Bill sick.

“No you don’t. You don’t get it!” Bill snarled. “You ripped me away from my home, from my friends, from my powers, from my world, and now you expect me to sit here and make the best of things while I’m trapped in this po-dunk useless town. While I’m trapped here with you!”

Ford winced, and looked down at the walking stick in his hands solemnly. “I never meant to make you feel trapped Bill. I’m sorry. I’m sorry that you feel that way.”

“Sorry never broke down a geo-gravitational force field, and sorry never did a damn thing for me.” Bill spat out, his chest still heaving with exertion as he pressed his palms against the force field, staring Sixer down. “So what are you gonna do about this?”

“Give me time. I’m sure I can decipher why this is happening. You know I can Bill. Just give it time.” Ford said, so calmly, so soothingly.

Dammit all if it didn’t help some at calming Bill down, just a bit. Either that or Bill’s exhaustion
was just catching up to him.

“In the meantime, you can relax a little. Take it easy. Discover the wonders of living as a human for a while, experience the good things, like jellybeans and sunsets and the smell of WD40 greasing a motors turbine on a new invention right before it takes off.”

“I feel sick.” Bill replied, Ford’s empowering feel good speech not hitting quite the right mark.

“It won’t hurt to give it a go Bill. You might even learn to like human things and experiences and – uh oh.” Ford jolted forward, his arms out ready to catch Bill as his Muse collapsed suddenly, falling towards the ground in a dead faint.

“Bill? Bill?” Ford caught Bill just before he hit the floor, and gave his shoulders a little shake, trying to prop Bill up into a sitting position.

Bill blearily opened his eyes a crack, his forehead clammy with sweat. There was Sixer’s big nose staring down at him, fading in and out of view, concern pinching his brow.

“You donnnn’t know what you’rrrre talking about.” Bill slurred groggily, barely able to keep his eyes open.

“Just stay with me Bill, you’re going to be okay.” Sixer replied, his voice sounding very far away.

“Stay with you?” Bill mumbled. “Hah. I bet you’dddd like that wouldn’t you Sssssixer.”

As Bill felt his last tenuous grip on consciousness slip away, he registered Sixer lifting him up, his neck feeling floppy, his limbs hanging like dead weight.

Sixer’s arms were warm and his body smelled like sweat and aftershave.

“What a joke.” Bill slurred, before everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

The english translation for the latin of the unbinding ritual is:

Gold wire. Hear my prayer.
Restore the witchcraft which was there.
Give magic back.
Gold and black.

Take away the stone.
Gold and black.
Back to him.

Give magic back.
Gold and black.
Give magic back.
Gold and black.

Thanks google translate for incredibly warped translations over and over again until I found this which was simple enough to work.
And after fights and words of violence, we make up with each other.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Carrying Bill back to the shack took more than half an hour. For one, Ford wasn’t sprinting this leg of the journey, and two, Bill was heavy. Carrying his Muse bridal style along the asphalt road that led back to the Shack was quite the work out. Not as much as legging it all the way to the town limits had been, but Ford arrived back at the Shack sweating profusely nonetheless, his muscles sore from the exertion.

Bill had been out like a light since fainting near the edge of the barrier. That barrier was a peculiar thing. To think Ford had never encountered it before. It was certainly something. Something that was worth looking into, for Bill’s sake at least. It didn’t seem as though the border obstructed Ford any.

Approaching the shack at last, Ford adjusted his grip on Bill, settling him so his head was resting on Ford’s shoulder instead of flopping around with every step.

His Muse did look sick, sweat beading on his brow, his skin looking clammy. Not pale, but Bill’s skin was quite dark, looking pale would be a stretch for him.

Ford supposed it was an amalgam of things. Only eating soup, bread, and maple syrup was one of the reasons Bill could have gotten sick. Reopening the cuts on his hands and feet could be another. Blood loss. Running at full sprint for half an hour without any understanding of the limitations of his new body. Magical exertion, though that wasn’t something Ford usually had to consider when diagnosing a patient.

*Bill was a bit of a disaster,* Ford found himself thinking fondly. Somehow the thought of Bill, his Muse and now his own human disaster, was simultaneously impressive and endearing.

If Ford were thinking rightly he’d find it a terrible inconvenience how within the first twenty four hours of summoning his Muse so far he’d already managed to destroy all of Ford’s prized possessions, raid his pantry of all sugar, kill all the ants and possibly ents, if they were a real thing, in Ford’s front yard, coerce an unbinding ritual out of Ford, then run all the way to the city limits barefoot trying to escape. Bill certainly didn’t do things by half measures.

Then there was the laser gun too.

It was incredible how the Muse had managed to streamline and pinpoint the exact fix for the invention in only nine hours. Not only did he fix the laser gun, he made it better, and all as a gesture of goodwill apparently. Sure, that goodwill was motivated by self-interest, but it made Ford think that it was possible he underestimated how serious it was to have bound Bill’s powers like that. If Bill couldn’t function without his magic, who was Stanford to take it from him.

No wonder Bill ran from him.

*“You’ll never take me alive Sixer!”* Was what Bill called out to him, running like a prisoner hopping the fence.

Ford didn’t mean to make Bill a prisoner.

He just wanted Bill to be a friend.
He let his own tiredness, his own cranky attitude and lack of patience influence how he treated Bill. He didn’t extend patience or understanding for Bill’s situation. He didn’t empathise with him. He didn’t give him time or space to adjust.

In hindsight, Ford did a lot wrong here.

He was unfair to his Muse, and it was no wonder Bill tried to escape his company the first chance he got. Ford wasn’t really making himself a favourable prospect.

Carrying Bill’s unconscious body home, each heavy step reimagined into an act of penance, Ford chastised himself for being so callous.

He couldn’t expect Bill to be above it all, above the wild changes he’d been through, above the adaptations he was experiencing, above the hurt and betrayal this summoning probably was to him. Just because he was an otherworldly Muse, it didn’t mean he couldn’t feel hurt, or betrayal, or confusion, or fear.

Ford had scared Bill, scared him enough that his Muse had ran away, and the guilt was eating Ford up inside.

Carrying Bill over the threshold to the shack, he walked the Muse upstairs and placed him on the futon he had set out for Bill.

The room he set aside for Bill hadn’t been disturbed. The bed was still made, the room was lovely and clean, if a little bit bare. Laying Bill down on the bed, Ford made sure he was comfortable, before he tracked out to the bathroom, grabbing a warm wet cloth.

Bill’s feet were completely healed over. Magic. It was incredible. But his skin was still covered in dirt and dried blood, so Stanford wiped it away, the warm cloth soothing the skin there.

He did the same for Bill’s hands. There were no injuries there, but there was dried blood on his knuckles. He must have been hitting the barrier hard. Ford didn’t realise how frantic Bill had been at the thought of being trapped in Gravity Falls. He supposed as a being who once had access to the entire universe, being confined to the small limitations of a backwater town in Oregon was quite the step down.

Bill’s tracksuit was also stained with blood, the faded orange fabric looking far more grisly than it ever had. Ford supposed he’d have to throw it out and get Bill some more suitable clothing. Maybe he could see if he could find Bill something more fitting in town. He had to pick up groceries regardless if he wanted to make a better first impression, well, second impression.

Ford could have left Bill to sleep in the tracksuit, but it was bloody and dirty, and covered in sweat, and couldn’t be all that comfortable, so he tugged it off, leaving Bill in his boxers, wiping off the dirt and sweat from his body with the moist towel.

Bill didn’t stir at all, despite being moved around, being wiped down, and maneuvered under the covers. He seemed to be somewhere deeper than just sleep. Ford didn’t question it too much, assuming it was just the exhaustion of the day catching up with him, and once Bill was settled, Ford left him be.

Closing the bedroom door just to, Ford went and hopped in the shower to wash down quickly, before dressing and hopping in the car.

He had a few things to pick up in town. He swore to himself that when Bill woke up again he would have the welcome to humanity he deserved earlier. Ford would show him living here wasn’t
a bad thing.
He’d even come to like it.
Ford hoped.

Bill woke up on something soft and fluffy, and it was a definite improvement on any other sensation he had experienced since being slam dunked into this human skin. It was incredibly comfortable. Sweet cryptid it was soft. With his eyes still closed Bill nuzzled into the soft fabric cocoon he was wrapped in and hummed happily.

So this was waking up?

The humans Bill had watched in the past often tended to wake up screaming and flailing their limbs in horror, so this was a pleasant surprise for Bill. Sleep was amazing.

Being able to experience sleep was refreshing, comfortable and rejuvenating, but what was even better about experiencing human sleep was dreaming.

More specifically, the mindscape.

It was AMAZING being back! Bill could just sleep forever if it meant re-establishing the connection he had with his domain. He was lord again! He was master of the mind! He never felt more triangular!

It was a beautiful reality. Bill was smiling ear from ear, cuddled up against his pillow, blankets bunched around his legs, cocooning him.

Not only did he get his mindscape back, he also seemed to heal and recover the energy from his body while he slept. It was a win-win. He felt fantastic, cosy, comfortable, warm, clean, and completely healed, his magic thrumming happily through his flesh vessel.

And – even better – he had his plans on track again.

He used the mindscape to seek out his friends, who had been looking for him, not quite frantically enough for Bill’s liking. Sure he’d only been gone 24 hours, but time was an illusion, and these knuckleheads were already slacking off like he was never coming back.

“Boss, what happened? The human called you and then you just disappeared!” Teeth had asked.

“Are you okay Bill?” Pyronica asked him immediately after, looking over his triangular body like he was an invalid.

Fire flaring up his body, Bill glared at his assembled lackeys, surrounding them all in a ring of bright burning blue flames. “Do I look okay to you? Stupid question, I look amazing, and you know it. Don’t tell me you suckers thought I was gone for good.”

They shifted awkwardly, fidgeting or looking away, the ones that had eyes.

Hectorgon made the mistake of speaking up first. “That six-fingered human is tricky though, we thought he destroyed you or something.”
“Pccht.” Bill scoffed. “As if old Sixer could lay a single scratch on me. What part of indestructible dream demon have you not been paying attention to? For that idiotic lapse in judgement that’s six years in the dimension of eternal screams for you Hectorgon.”

Bill snapped his fingers and Hectorgon burst in flames before the assembled monsters, screaming in agony until his existence burned away into nothing but ash.

“I mean seriously, I call you henchmaniacs and you can’t even go a day without me?”

Apologies and grovelling followed, each of his henchmaniacs pledging their loyalty to Bill all over again. When Bill was satisfied with their penitence he let up on the fire that covered him, and swirled his cane around.

“I’m onto something big here, so I might be out of range for a while.” Bill said, acting as if his sudden departure into the human realm was all a part of the plan.

“In the meantime I need you to stay on task with the program. Get the word out, weed out the weak, rustle up those RSVPs for the biggest party in the multi-verse. I’ll keep Sixer on track with building the door, if you build the hype behind the scenes. I want this to be big.”

“Yes boss.” They all assented, nodding and bowing their heads reverently.

“I’ll want no interference while I’m away on business. Keep to your own jobs and let me worry about the mortals. With any luck I can speed this portal business up by about a decade, give or take.” Bill inspected the back of his hand, boasting.

He did a damn good job of making it seem like everything was fine. He knew he couldn’t show weakness in front of his henchmaniacs, despite how eager they were to assist him. He knew a few of them wouldn’t hesitate to throw a coup if they saw Bill weakened like he had been, especially Kryptos, or that stubborn Paci-Fire, though that bull-headed asshole didn’t have the brainpower to engineer something as impressive as what Bill was cooking up.

Figures. Can’t trust henchmaniacs further than you can throw them these days, and since Bill was mostly throwing them screaming into a pit of eternal agony and hellfire he was getting quite the arm for it.

Having touched base with his lackeys, Bill took his time to explore the mindscape to see if things had changed much since he was so rudely dragged away from it. So far so good.

Bill also enjoyed testing out the scope of his powers. Thankfully they seemed to be relatively unchanged in the mindscape. It was just in the real world his powers were bound it seemed. That was good. It gave him plenty to work with to keep his pals in line and his plans on track.

The lie he fed them about deliberately choosing this human body to keep Sixer on track with building the portal was at least somewhat true. Sure, Bill could keep a closer eye on Sixer’s progress this way, but Bill wasn’t that task oriented. He wasn’t working on a plan now, he was mostly just making it up as he went along, throwing hissy fits about being shoved into this human body and reacting to everything dramatically.

Sure, in time he’d get back on track with his plans, but right now he was just trying his best not to be overwhelmed by everything. Human bodies were so responsive with their nervous systems and their hormones and the sensations they experienced!

Oddly enough he felt it was easier to let his boundaries down, to drop the act of cool, calm, collected, I have everything under control, Bill Cipher around Stanford than it was around his self-
proclaimed friends. Stanford didn’t seem to mind Bill being vulnerable around him. If anything it made the human exude more effort to do more for Bill, so really it could only benefit Bill to be himself unabashedly around Ford. The six-fingered man would get used to it eventually.

When his first stint sleeping reached its end, Bill felt better than he had in a long while, revelling in the fact that sleep helped him recover both his physical and metaphysical powers. That and beds were comfortable. Bill just found his new favourite human thing to do, alongside eating and shooting things.

He snuggled against the blankets and pillows for a while longer, not wanting to get up.

The house was quiet, but there was the faint sound of the tinny little radio playing downstairs in the kitchen, and if Bill concentrated he could hear Ford moving around down there, the wood floor creaking as he walked around, and the rumble of the human’s voice.

Ford didn’t seem to be coming up to get him, to wake Bill up.

So Bill would just have to go to him. Getting up out of bed and stretching out his limbs for a while, Bill enjoyed the feeling of the rested muscles easing comfortably.

Ford must have undressed him earlier, as Bill woke up in just his boxers, but he didn’t dwell on that too much, assuming it was just one of those normal human things, like pyjamas, or the fallacy of organised religion. He couldn’t see the orange tracksuit he was wearing the day before, but he did see, folded neatly on the chair beside Bill’s bed, some fresh clothes, brand new, left there for him from Sixer.

These clothes fit him much better than the tracksuit had. Ford hadn’t taken the tags off, so neither did Bill, assuming they were supposed to be there. He pulled the shirt on over his head. It was long sleeved and cotton, all black. Very comfortable. It covered Bill’s tattoos nicely, and was slim enough to accentuate Bill’s frame without being too tight. Ford had also procured some grey cargo pants for Bill with an adjustable waistband and lots of pockets.

Bill liked the pockets. He could put all sorts of things in there.

There were socks too, and after trying them on his hands, Bill tried them again on his feet, and they fit snugly. Humans were so strange, how they had to sheathe their feet like this. There were shoes there for Bill too. They looked like loafers, and Bill slipped them on easily.

Though it hadn’t occurred to Bill, of course Stanford must know his sizes for everything, given how he designed the body he was currently residing in. Stanford probably knew every inch of this vessel intimately.

At least now he was providing for it properly.

Fitting clothes were nice, if a bit bland. They weren’t what Bill would have chosen for himself, it looked like Ford picked the clothes for blending in, not standing out. If Bill were choosing for himself he would have a lot more yellow and bright colours involved. Also a top hat, and a bowtie. He felt naked without them. The top hat and bowtie were essential branding, which Sixer just didn’t seem to recognise.

At least the walking stick was still here. Sixer must have brought it back from the barrier. It was funny to picture Sixer carrying Bill and the walking stick all the way back to the shack, but it was also better to not picture that, as imagining Bill in such a helpless position wasn’t a good thing.

If Sixer hadn’t been there, what would Bill have done. Run until he reached the city limits and
passed out in the middle of the road, unable to cross the barrier. Dragged off into the forest by wolves, or werewolves, or werewolf mailmen?

That made the indignity of Sixer carrying his limp body back to the Shack a little more bearable. There were worse alternatives.

Finally dressed, well rested, and content in the knowledge that he was still the ruler of the mindscape, Bill ventured downstairs into the kitchen to see what all the noise was about.

When he got there, he leant against the doorway, amused, and watched as Ford pottered around the kitchen, cooking, and singing along to a song on the radio.

“It’s poetry in motion. She turned her tender eyes to me. As deep as any ocean. As sweet as any harmony.”

Ford’s shoulders were shrugging about like he was dancing to the song, but it was clear he had very little rhythm to speak of. His voice was deep and gruff but he sounded happy. He wasn’t singing loudly, just to himself as he cracked eggs in the frying pan.

Bill couldn’t help but smile, watching Ford dance around the kitchen like an old man. He was so daggy. Somehow Bill wasn’t surprised that he sang along to songs like this.

“Mm, but she blinded me with science. She blinded me with science!” Ford sang along as he flipped the egg over in the pan, emphasising the lyrics the same as the singer on the radio had, in an incredibly hammy way. It was almost endearing really, and very quintessentially Ford.

“And failed me in biology!”

“Oh come on now, you, fail biology? Say it isn’t so Sixer.”

The way Ford flailed as he turned around, spatula in hand, embarrassment colouring his face, was priceless.

Sixer sure was entertaining.

Bill kept leaning against the doorway casually with his arms crossed, smiling indulgently at the scientist.

“Bill! You’re awake.” Ford managed to say as the song played on the radio, now without his own daft accompaniment. “Did – did you sleep well?”

“I did.” Bill replied, still watching Ford. “You brought me home did you? And my stick. I suppose I should be thanking you.”

“No. Don’t.” Ford said, looking guilty. “Don’t thank me. I was hoping we could all just move on from this.”

Bill raised his eyebrows. He didn’t expect that reaction from the scientist. Inclining his head, agreeing to let it slide, Bill kicked away from the doorway and wandered into the kitchen, peering around Sixer’s shoulder to the eggs that were cooking on the stove, curious.

The egg flopped and sizzled in the pan, oil popping and crackling the edges of the egg as it fried nicely. Bill had never bothered to look properly at how humans cooked things before, and it was fascinating.
“What did old yellow there ever do to you?” Bill had to ask.

“Not much, really.” Sixer replied, taking Bill’s idle question seriously. “Apart from having the misfortune of being created delicious. This one’s for you. A proper breakfast this time. A bit better than subsisting on maple syrup on its own.”

Bill extended his finger, ready to dip it in the sizzling pan to taste this delicious misfortune, but just before he pressed it in the pan, Sixer snatched his hand out of the way.

“Watch out! It’s hot, you’ll burn your skin right off.”

Bill seemed vaguely put out. Whether it was the prospect of burning his own skin off or the fact that Sixer wouldn’t let him touch the pan, he hadn’t really decided yet. Pouting, he huffed out a sigh.

“You can sit down over there if you like.” Ford told him, letting go of his hand, and gesturing to the kitchen table. “Your food’s almost ready. I’ve made you bacon, eggs, sausages, pancakes – my family’s secret recipe, as well as hash browns, mushrooms, boiled spinach with lots of butter, fried tomatoes.”

Ford just seemed to be listing things that were irrelevant to Bill at this point, so he moved to sit at the table, and let the scientist continue rambling and cooking his food. He’d find out what a boiled spinach was eventually.

Playing with the cutlery Ford had set out for him, Bill laid his hand flat on the table and spread out his fingers, twirling the butter knife Ford had set out for him in his other hand.

“So how long have you been up, slaving over the skin burner?”

“I popped downtown to the store while you were asleep and got some things ready. You were out for a while. About fourteen hours, by my count. I bought a couple of things for dinner but you were still sleeping, so breakfast it is. I got up a few hours ago to start on it.” Ford explained, using the spatula to shimmy the egg he just cooked onto Bill’s plate.

It was already stacked with food, pancakes piled into a tower on one plate, savouries dished up onto another. The spinach and other vegetables were in smaller serving plates. Ford wasn’t sure if Bill would like everything here, so he made quite the variety. He made more savoury foods than sweet foods, hoping he could tempt Bill away from that sweet tooth he seemed to be developing.

What Bill didn’t eat Ford would, so it worked out, and that way there was quite the feast on offer between them.

As Ford turned around to bring the plates to the table he saw Bill sitting with his tongue sticking out of the edge of his mouth, expression twisted in concentration as he played pinfinger with the butterknife, stabbing the space between his fingers to pass the time.

Ford had seen enough of Bill now to not be completely shocked by this. In a way it made perfect sense that Bill, who couldn’t be left unentertained for a second, would be playing pinfinger with a butterknife the moment Ford turned his back.

Rolling his eyes, Ford placed the plates on the table in front of Bill. Bill stopped stabbing at the table and instead began twirling the knife around in his fingers, looking at the food curiously.

Once it was all laid out, Ford pulled out a chair sitting opposite Bill, and pointed to each food item. “That’s the bacon, the eggs, sausages. Those are pancakes, what you’re actually supposed to eat...”
with maple syrup, or butter if you like both. You pour it on the top, not drink it straight out of the bottle.”

Bill raised his eyebrows sceptically at Ford like he didn’t believe him. Ford met his scepticism with a flat look, and continued to describe the items on the table.

“Then we have more savoury foods. Those are hash browns, mushrooms, boiled spinach soaked in butter, fried tomatoes. I have salt and pepper here for seasoning, and different sauces for the sausages and bacon. Tomato sauce, barbeque sauce, tabasco sauce, tapatio, sriracha, though that may be a little hot for you.”

Bill didn’t appreciate being underestimated so he reached out to grab the sriracha bottle, but Ford’s hand shot out, landing on the top of the hotsauce bottle, while Bill grabbed the base of it, intending to stop Bill.

“Maybe you could trust me? Don’t drink the hot sauce.” Ford pleaded. “At least not before you try the rest. You’ll ruin your appetite.”

Pfft, trust Ford. Yeah right. Bill narrowed his eyes but let go of the hot sauce.

“Try the pancakes first. You’ll like them, they’re sweet. An old family recipe there.”

Still eyeing off Ford suspiciously, Bill stabbed his fork in the stack of pancakes, and managed to skewer three of them at once.

“No, just start with one.” Ford couldn’t help but correct the muse, reaching over the table to separate the pancakes, before cutting a triangle out of the pancake, dipping it in maple syrup and holding it out to Bill on his fork.

His back stiffening stubbornly, Bill leaned back away from the table.

“Geez Sixer, didn’t you get your sick jollies off enough feeding me before? I have hands now. Functional hands. I can do this.”

“What happened to ‘feed me Sixer’?” Ford asked, his tone a little mocking. He wasn’t bitter or anything. “I’m just trying to help.”

“I can help myself!” Bill practically screeched, and snatched the fork out of Sixer’s hand, before jamming the slice of pancake into his mouth and chewing furiously.

Glaring at Sixer while chewing the pancake was a difficult expression to maintain, as the instant the food hit Bill’s tastebuds, his eyes rolled up into his head and he moaned with a mouthful of food.

“This is shuuuh ghuud.” Bill sounded out, his shoulders slumping as he relished the sweet syrupy taste paired with the soft fluffy pancakes.

“I thought you’d like it.” Ford said with a triumphant grin, already slicing up one of the sausages and forking it with Bill’s discarded fork. “Here, try the sausage next.” He passed the fork over to Bill, who grabbed it, like he had with the last fork, stuffing the sliced sausage into his mouth, chewing thoughtfully.

It seemed Ford had set up a system of swapping forks with Bill, so that way the Muse could still feed himself, but Ford could pass the best bits of the meal to him to try. So far it was working, as Bill still felt independent enough to eat his own meal, and Ford managed to manage what Bill ate
and in what quantities. He could see the Muse shoving a whole pancake into his mouth if left unsupervised.

“Whose flesh is this?” Bill asked, chewing the sausage appreciatively.

“It’s pork sausage from the Gravity Falls farmers market.”

“Mmmm, I can taste the uranium.” Bill said, swallowing contentedly, oblivious to Ford’s raised eyebrows.

“Well that’s the last time I’m buying those.” Ford muttered to himself, readying the next fork with a square of hash brown dipped in tomato sauce. “Here, try this.”

Bill snatched the fork again, and stuffed the crispy potato in his mouth before making an obscene sound.

“What IS this stuff?” He asked, his talking with his mouth open, bits of potato stuck to his teeth. “Geez, you humans have been living it up, all this time you’ve had this to stuff your faces with. What is wrong with your economy?”

“Potatoes have always been in high demand. In Ireland the potato famine was a serious issue, though they’re easy enough to procure now.” Ford thought that bit of trivia would interest Bill, who seemed intent on replacing humanity’s current economy with a potato based one. History had shown how that wasn’t the best idea before. “Now they’re everywhere though. Potato chips, fries, gems, hash browns, mashed potato, baked potato. Try the mushrooms, I want to see what you think of it.”

Bill, eager to experience what could possibly top hash browns on the list of delicious human foods, grabbed the fork off Ford and put the mushrooms in his mouth before immediately spitting them out.

“Uck! What? It’s so slimy.”

“I knew there’d have to be a few things you didn’t like. I’ll cross mushrooms off the list then.” Ford said, piling the remaining mushrooms onto his own plate to finish them off.

“How many other dummy dishes did you put in here just to test me, huh?” Bill gestured at Ford with the fork.

“I quite like mushrooms.” Ford replied. “Everyone’s tastebuds are different. I like everything here, but I wasn’t sure if you would too. It’s fine, this way you get to try everything and figure out for yourself what your favourites are.”

That was surprisingly thoughtful for Ford. Bill was impressed. Vaguely.

“What’s next?”

And so they continued, Ford passing food to Bill to sample, Bill having fun examining the flavours and textures of each dish.

By the end of it, it was decided that Bill didn’t like mushrooms, was ambivalent about spinach, only liked the yolk from eggs, especially when it was runny. He liked bacon, sausage, fried tomato with lots of pepper on it. He loooooved hash browns, and the pancakes were his favourite.

When Ford wasn’t looking, eating the foods Bill turned down, Bill grabbed the sriracha sauce off
the table and glugged it down straight out of the bottle.

Ford tried to reach across the table to grab it, but Bill slid out of his chair and backed away, still drinking the red hot sauce from the bottle, his eyes watering and his throat burning.

By the time he drained the bottle, Ford watching, dumbstruck, he wiped the tears out of his eyes, and crowed.

“WOO! Now that’s some good burning! I’m gonna need ten more of these. It really packs a punch, and by punch, I mean a sensation the equivalent of swallowing several live venomous snakes that are on fire. YEAH!”

“I –” Ford began, hardly believing his eyes, before he resigned himself to his Muse’s peculiar tastes, and sighed, smiling. “I’ll put it on the shopping list.”

Bill did a little victory dance at that, tapdancing around the kitchen, and Ford just smiled.

Maybe it would be okay, living with his Muse like this.

Bill seemed to be rested, and healthy, and finally happy, following the events of yesterday. He certainly seemed cheerful enough, having eaten a full meal, sharing the occasion with Ford comfortably, without threatening to strangle him, or shoot up his garden.

Ford rested his chin on his hand as he watched Bill dangle the sriracha bottle over his tongue, shaking the last drops of it out into his mouth, again making those exaggerated ‘ahh’ noises like a bad child at the dentist.

Unbinding Bill’s magic seemed to loosen him up a bit. He no longer seemed to be as fearful of Ford, or as openly distrusting of him. They could make this work.

Ford had a plan.

First, get Bill happy and comfortable with his new human body.

Second, rebuild his friendship with the Muse, restoring the trust that was broken when Ford summoned him here without his permission. That would come in time, and the more time and effort he put into making Bill happy and keeping him entertained in Gravity Falls, the better-off Bill would be there.

Thirdly, Ford would need to research that unusual barrier that held Bill within the town. It was bizarre that Ford hadn’t discovered it before, it could be crucial to his understanding of the Grand Unified Theory of Weird he was working on, and if he could crack it, perhaps he could show Bill a little more of what humanity has to offer.

In the meantime, Ford could continue to research the other anomalies Gravity Falls presented, and that would help keep Bill entertained too, as Ford hadn’t yet uncovered the mystery of what was under a gnome’s hat. Bill would probably enjoy being his research assistant, coming along with him on hikes through the forest, uncovering all the weird and wonderful things that lay hidden from the world. It was one way to keep an eye on the Muse too, and keep Bill out of trouble.

Lastly, Ford planned to work more on the portal, and see if he could squeeze out some of Bill’s cosmic input to make it easier to smooth out the bumps he had encountered in the engineering process. Bill made short work of that laser gun, Ford didn’t doubt he could speed up the portal building process. It could happen. Bill was curious, he would eventually come down to see what Ford was doing, and if he had a few hints and tips to give along the way, Ford wasn’t complaining.
The plan was perfect, if a bit domestic. Make Bill happy, work on the portal, win the acclaim and profit expected of the scientific genius of our time, die successful and happy, a scientific legend – the Man who Saved the World.

Ford had been living alone in this shack for too long. Companionship was something he probably needed all along, though science also sustained him and his purpose here.

Still, it was nice having someone else along for the ride, despite having forced Bill to be here in the first place, Ford felt Bill could adjust to this, adjust to happiness, and really benefit from staying here with Ford and helping him work on the portal.

It was just like Ford envisioned. Him and his Muse, working on the portal together, making history.

Ford had to snap out of his daydreaming and projections of success, as Bill was currently unscrewing the lid off the pepper grinder, attempting to pour the crushed peppercorns down his own throat.

Well, living with his muse was certainly interesting.

Ford liked interesting.

This could work out.

Chapter End Notes

The song Ford is singing is Thomas Dolby's 'She Blinded Me with Science' which you can listen to here. https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nMWGXt979yg
Waterloo couldn't escape if I wanted to.

It had been a month since Ford first summoned his Muse, Bill Cipher, to inhabit the human form Ford designed for him, and life had certainly been interesting.

Interesting was a word for it. Maybe not a good word, but the best word Ford had for things currently.

Bill made every day something that Ford couldn’t really anticipate, so as much as he tried to stick to the routines that he had set in place since living alone in the shack in the middle of the forest for some two years now - since Bill joined him things became so chaotic often that after the first two weeks, Ford had to do away with his routines all together.

There was no regular breakfast, lunch, and dinner times now, as he never knew when Bill would demand Ford cook for him, or to take Bill for a drive in the car, or when they’d end up lost in the forest for hours, late into the night, Bill deliberately leading them in the wrong direction just to frustrate Ford. Ford’s usual exercise regimen was interrupted by Bill’s commentary, or explosions from the other side of the house, and soon Ford couldn’t even complete his daily push ups without Bill going so far as to sit on his back just to make things harder for him.

Bill seemed to live to frustrate the scientist, or at least it was what he took the most twisted pleasure from.

He'd been joining Ford on his research expeditions, just like Ford had predicted, mostly because Bill despised the boredom of being left alone.

When Bill was left be he either stubbornly slept, shutting out the world, or he could do one of two things. He could either be incredibly productive in creating something scientifically interesting or weird out of the things he found in Ford’s house, or he could deliberately find the messiest most destructive pastime possible, and when Ford came home to encounter the mess, Bill would just stare at Ford, his arms crossed, blaming Ford for leaving him alone in the first place.

Leaving Bill had about a fifty-fifty chance of some disaster befalling Ford’s home, so he had to bring Bill with him on his expeditions.

However when Bill didn’t want to go along with whatever Ford had planned for the day, he would complain loudly and dramatically, throwing things, and threatening to break more things, until Ford caved and asked Bill what he wanted to do.

It was like dealing with a particularly awful child, but Ford couldn’t exactly do much when it came to standing his ground against Bill’s tantrums, because the moment he raised his voice, or his hand, in any sort of angry gesture, Bill would flinch away from Ford and that guilt that had been plaguing him would creep back in and turn Ford’s stomach.

He didn’t want Bill to be afraid of him. He wanted them to be friends again.

Bill seemed to want that too, since he would get right back to irritating Ford like nothing had ever happened after incidents like that. So Ford assumed Bill also wanted that friendship renewed.

It became easier to just roll with what Bill wanted. Bill didn’t change their agenda that often, mostly he seemed content to go along with what Ford wanted to research, but when Ford wanted to
go investigate the mysterious mailbox in the woods, or track down and trial those truth telling teeth he heard about, Bill threw a fit.

It hadn’t occurred to Ford at all that the two things Bill threw the biggest most manipulative tantrums over were two magical items that could have provided Ford with unadulterated truthful answers to any and all questions he wished to ask. If Ford had been a little less oblivious, he might have had the common sense to begin to wonder exactly what Bill was trying to hide from him. Since Ford was certainly incredibly intelligent but not always the most observant fellow, that evident manipulation went unnoticed.

Bill usually provided excellent distractions after one of his pinpointed tantrums anyway, dangling the metaphorically juicier carrot in front of Ford of some new discovery that was better than truth telling teeth or an all knowing mailbox.

Like what was under a gnome’s hat for example. Ford really wanted to know that.

Ford was still chronicling the strange new species he encountered in the enchanted forest, and Bill usually came along, being incredibly distracting.

Crouched down, detailing a sketch of the aptly named ‘Barf Fairies’ in the enchanted forest, his plastic poncho crinkling every time he moved his arm, Ford found it very hard to concentrate when Bill was standing behind him, leaning on him, both arms crossed over Ford’s head, like he was a very convenient arm rest.

“You know what would be really interesting?” Bill drawled.

“Do I really want to know?” Ford replied sourly, knowing what that tone of Bill’s voice usually meant. Not good things.

“Is the barf flammable?” Bill continued, ignoring Ford’s sass.

“Why would you want to know that? You’re not setting them on fire.” Ford said crossly, continuing to sketch the fairies wings in the journal.

“What kind of scientist are you Sixer? Imagine using the barf as an all natural type of engine fuel. It could be the next kerosene.” Bill said, trying to pique Ford’s interest.

“The next ker – you know that’s just not true.”

“But you don’t know. That’s the thing. And wouldn’t you like to? You could revolutionise the petrol industry. End oil disputes in the Middle East. Permanently retire fossil fuels and pioneer a new form of clean energy.” Bill was really tempting Ford now, pushing the scientist.

“You’re just saying that.”

“But you won’t know will you? Until you test it.” He couldn’t see Bill’s expression but he could tell the Muse was grinning that awful grin of his.

Ford had to admit, he was considering it. It wasn’t a good thing, or a moral thing, but just through prolonged exposure to Bill, who seemed to encourage that pure science whenever he could, Ford was considering it.

“Well… well, I’m not going to do it.” Ford harrumphed.

“Oh, allow me!” Bill said, his voice gratingly cheerful as he snapped his fingers and blue fire
appeared in the puddle of fairy puke on the log before them. It flickered, a stagnant flame for a while, before magic enhanced the flame and it flared along the log, then shot up to the little branch where the fairies had been sitting, puking, and suddenly the little creatures were alight, screaming.

Ford just blinked, shocked, staring.

“Will you look at that? It IS flammable.” Bill lied, examining his fingernails idly.

Within the four weeks of Bill living with Ford he had managed to convince the young scientist to unbind two more of the bricks that circled up Bill’s arms, playing on the guilt Stanford felt. After the third brick was unbound, and Bill, having rediscovered his ability to conjure fire, nearly set the couch in the living room ablaze, Ford decided – no more bricks.

Bill didn’t like that decree, but it was the one thing Ford managed to hold his ground on. He wasn’t unbinding a single brick more for Bill until the Muse could prove he wouldn’t abuse his powers.

So far Bill could heal himself, conjure small amounts of his blue fire, and summon small things from room to room, though apparently summoning items taxed Bill some energy. He complained how with his powers unbound, this sort of thing was a snap, how Sixer was short changing him, but Ford wouldn’t budge. Not until the Muse gave a little more respect for Ford, for his possessions, and for his house.

However, respecting Ford ‘didn’t come easy for Bill’. Not that that was any excuse. In fact, that Bill even gave that as an excuse was insulting in the first place.

If Bill was living in Ford’s house, then dammit he would respect him some, and no amount of tantrums or sulking or cold Muse shoulders would change that.

Getting Bill to behave, or at least try to respect Ford, was an exercise in futility sometimes.

When Ford was studying the Plaidypus, Bill stole the plaidypus eggs and when Ford said he wouldn’t cook them for Bill (they hardly looked edible), Bill threw the eggs at Sixer’s car.

When Ford began writing the pages in his journal on the various species of unusual fowl in the Gravity Falls forest, Bill joined him, and wreaked havoc.

Bill laughed for a solid hour, falling over himself pointing at the Stomach Faced Duck and stole Ford’s duck whistle leading the unfortunate creature around the forest like some sort of pied piper for mutated ducks.

He didn’t give the duck whistle back until two days later when Ford had to tackle his Muse and wrestle the whistle out of his hands, because Bill found it hilarious to blow the whistle loudly in Ford’s ear whenever he settled down to sleep. For TWO DAYS!

That unnerving duck followed them home because of it, and every time Ford went outside to take the bins out, it was there, staring at Ford, it’s eyes bigger than its stomach, waiting to scavenge from the bins. It’s eyes were also literally in its stomach, and Ford wasn’t keen to stay and watch it eat. Yeeech.

When Ford was studying the Question Quail, Bill joined him on a lazy stroll that day, and proceeded to change Ford’s nickname from ‘Sixer’ to ‘Quailsy’ for the next week, frequently conducting impersonations of Ford scratching his chin hooting “where” “when” and “whys” that weren’t as funny as Bill thought they were.

When Ford was making notes on the Cowl, trying to sneak up on the animal with a disposable
camera, Bill sprung out at the unfortunate animal before Ford could land a shot of it, startling it so bad it flew away squirting milk from its teats at the scientist with a parting “M-HOO”. It never came back. Ford left covered in owl milk with an incomplete journal entry, and a cackling Muse.

At that point, Ford decided to just spend the week at home, since taking Bill out with him was such an unequivocal disaster. He retreated downstairs to his lab, and hoped that Bill would join him in building the portal, but he never did.

Ford would come upstairs, covered in grease and ash, obviously frustrated that he wasn’t making the progress he would have liked on the portal, and Bill would be sitting there on the couch in the living room, eating popcorn covered in tapatio sauce with sticky fingers, watching static fuzz on the television screen like he was riveted.

“I’m really having trouble on these semi-conductors.” Ford would say, and be ignored.

“If I could just figure out how to re-reroute the power to the containment field better.” He would say again, louder this time, looking at Bill.

Bill would continue to stare at the screen, white noise and black and white static captivating his attention as he brought the dripping red popcorn up to his mouth, transfixed.

“If only there were some way I could streamline the particle exhausts.” Ford would shout loudly, moving to stand in front of the television.

“Do you mind Sixer? Keep it down. I’m watching something on the idiot box.”

Ford huffed, frustrated, staring down at Bill, dripping sweat and grease, a wrench still in his hand.

“Just scooch to the side. That’d be great.”

“Bill, you’re watching static on a channel we don’t even get here.” Ford grumbled, not moving yet, still staring at his recalcitrant Muse.

“I know. It’s so good.” Bill enthused, kicking his legs in excitement.

“I’m having a lot of trouble on the portal, and I’d appreciate a little help, you know?” Ford sighed, having to spell it out for Bill.

“Gee, that sure sounds like a pain Sixer. You know who you should call? That old roommate of yours!”

“I kind of wanted you to help me Bill.” Ford replied, still stubborn about calling in someone else on this project. He wanted to be the one to crack this, to be the Man who Saved the World. If Bill helped him, well, Bill’s help didn’t count. He’d been helping Ford all along, and technically in the eyes of society, Bill didn’t exist as a scientific peer, so he couldn’t steal the acclaim away from Ford.

“I kind of want a lot of things too Sixer.” Bill replied, finally looking up to meet Ford’s gaze, talking with a mouthful of spicy popcorn. “My magic unbound. My old body back. My old life back. The decapitated heads of my enemies impaled on spikes in our front yard, like a delightful picket fence straight out of that musical. The one with the talking plant.”

“You mean Little Shop of Horrors?” He didn’t think Bill had been paying attention. Ford was barely paying attention, having had the television on that night to provide some background noise while he consolidated his notes, the two of them taking dinner in the living room on the fold out
tray table.

“Yeah. That. Now if you’re just gonna stand there, why don’t you make yourself useful and bring me some of those icy biscuit things from the freezer box.”

“I said no more ice cream sandwiches for you Bill, you’ve already had four today.”

“You can just bring me the box, I’ll finish them off now.” Bill waved his hand dismissively at Ford, going back to ignoring him again.

“If you want them so badly, you can just summon them yourself.” Ford huffed dramatically, frowning at Bill and crossing his arms. “I don’t see why I should get them when you can get them yourself.”

“I can’t get them, I’m watching something. If you’d just move out of the way I could get back to it, and you’re going past the kitchen anyway. Besides, summoning makes me tired, and with my magic bound like this I’m just sooooo weak. I think I’m dying Sixer.” Bill was hamming it up, throwing his hand over his forehead, flopping his tongue out like he was dying, his sharp yellow eyes staring up cheekily at Ford the whole while.

Those cheeky yellow eyes still flustered Ford sometimes. Ford was working hard on managing it so he wasn’t always visibly flustered. He was getting better at that. Not all the time, but sometimes, and this was not one of those times. Ford fidgeted, shifting from foot to foot, his hand grasping tightly on the wrench he was holding, colour rising to his cheeks under all the dirt and grease.

“Feed me Seymour.” Bill grinned, sharp teeth gleaming beautifully.

When Ford huffed and stormed out of the living room, stomping back to the lab, knowing he was being teased, he could hear Bill’s raucous cackles fill the house.

Ford found the empty box of ice cream sandwiches placed on his pillow when he went upstairs to bed that night, and he knew, somewhere in the house, Bill was laughing at him.

The tension in the house got to be too much on days like that, days when Ford had no end of trouble working on the portal, which coincided with the days where Bill was deliberately unhelpful and seemed to enjoy pushing Ford’s buttons.

Ford had half a mind to just leave Bill at home again and go out into the town for a drink, though the only decent place to imbibe in Gravity Falls was at the Skull Fracture, and the lack of intelligent company or conversation there was pretty much assured before even stepping foot in the door. If anyone could drive a person to drink it was Bill, but Ford had a little more restraint than that.

Ford took to taking long drives instead, giving himself time away from Bill to think. Though after a while, Ford ended up feeling guilty.

Bill loved joining Ford in the car, looking out the window and fiddling with the radio whenever Ford took him along for a drive.

Bill also loved joining Ford on hikes, or expeditions to the forest, and Ford was becoming accustomed to the company Bill provided.

It didn’t help that whenever Ford came home after one of his abrupt drives Bill always seemed to be upset with him for leaving him behind. Bill would sulk, and try his hand at ignoring Ford too, though he couldn’t just leave like Ford did, he had to find ways to ignore Ford obviously while
being in the same room as the scientist so Ford wouldn’t sneak out on him.

They were both keeping an eye on each other still. Though the way they both managed to grate on each other sometimes meant that the surveillance dissolved into banter, dissolved into a new activity, because neither of them were very good at doing nothing for too long.

All of these little quirky ways Bill had of capturing Ford’s attention became staples in his life. Things Ford was coming to appreciate just as much as he hated them sometimes. When he went for his long drives to get away from it all, he felt the guilt crawl back in when he was unable to keep from imagining Bill in the car seat next to him, irritating him just right.

It was awful.

Before, when Ford had this grandiose idea about how Bill would be in human form, how he would be smooth, sophisticated, genteel, witty, encouraging, sometimes even flirtatious – he had thought nothing else could measure up to this idea he had of how the Muse would be. He had thought nothing else could complete him like his (fictitious) Muse had.

Now that Bill was here, and Ford was getting to know him properly with no masks or illusions, he discovered that Bill was rude, loud, brash, coarse, purposefully irritating, inventive, exasperating, funny, cruel, lazy, childish, spiteful, whimsical, and more interesting like this than he ever could have been as the fictitious Muse Stanford had dreamed up.

It was strange, Ford definitely wouldn’t say his Muse completed him – they were far too different for that, but Ford was slowly starting to realise that imagining a world without Bill here, being his annoying self, teasing and provoking and beguiling Stanford with that peculiar cosmic brain of his – that world devoid of everything that bright spark called Bill Cipher was, it was so dull comparatively.

Ford liked having Bill here.

And that terrified him.

That spark of attraction he felt with the Muse never really went away, and at first Ford was relying on the fact that it seemed he didn’t know this new Bill. He was relying on that disappointment that Bill was so different than Ford imagined, hoping it would fester that initial spark of attraction away, but it only intensified the more he got to know Bill. Bill was wild and interesting and chaotic and all the things Ford wasn’t, and somehow that just made the air crackle between them.

A fondness was growing.

Ford could watch Bill drink hot sauce for hours, he loved cooking new things for his Muse, coaxing those delicious moans out of him when Ford discovered a new favourite food. He came to quietly enjoy the way Bill would obnoxiously lean on his head when Ford was sitting down, or swat his arm or leg when he had something he wanted to show Ford. He thought it was charming, how much more agreeable Bill was after a good sleep, having walked in on the Muse waking up one morning, chasing those last few dreams with a smile on his face, nuzzling into the sheets. He cherished the way Bill would invent strange new things that seemed irrelevant to the portal but always managed to help Ford with a breakthrough one way or another.

He loved the way he could hear Bill laugh from any part of the house, even when he hated it sometimes.

The fact that he was becoming so fond of Bill was suffocating.
Bill was awful, absolutely awful, and dammit if Ford wasn’t coming to like that about him.

The dreams about the Muse hadn’t stopped. If anything they intensified, becoming more personalised, more intricate.

Ford was a master of denial, especially the denial of complicated emotions, and so he managed to keep things relatively casual and friendly between himself and the Muse, staving off flustered reactions and physical responses – treating Bill like a particularly frustrating friend.

He wanted to be Bill’s friend after all. They could be friends.

Ford liked Bill.

He just needed time away from him sometimes.

Some peace and solitude. Some quiet. Getting back to nature, to the basics of Ford’s work. To researching, and exploring, and feeling the breeze on his skin and the sunlight on his face.

To Ford rediscovering himself, and who he was without the Muse around him. At times he felt like he lost himself a bit around Bill, and it was essential he rediscovered who he was, if he was to be the Man who Saved the World.

The Lake at Gravity Falls reminded Ford of his home back on Glass Shard Beach. Of fishing trips with his dad and his brothers Shermy and Stanley, before everything had gone south.

At about five in the morning Ford found himself sneaking fishing equipment into the boot of his car, intending a private trip for himself to the lake.

Ford had also heard local legends about a sea monster living in the depths of the lake, and he hadn’t had a good old fashioned monster hunt for a while, so he packed a few monster hunting essentials too. A deep sea radar, a reinforced net, a harpoon. Tiptoeing through the house with a harpoon gun was one for the books, Ford nearly knocked over the hall lamp.

When he last checked, peering into Bill’s bedroom, the Muse was still asleep, curled up in the blankets happily. Bill loved his sleep, and didn’t enjoy waking up prematurely, usually sleeping until ten or eleven. Ford was confident he would be able to sneak out in the early hours of the morning and return around midday with Bill none the wiser.

Making a couple of sandwiches and packing some trail mix and water into a rucksack, Ford made his final tiptoe through the house to the car, sliding into the front seat and closing the car door as quietly as he possibly could. He turned the keys and winced at the sound of the engine turning on - though so far no one was screaming, nothing had caught on fire, and no one was chasing after him.

Success.

Ford drove the car out down the dirt road from the shack to the main road. He turned onto the highway, the Shack no longer looming in his rear view mirror. Ford exhaled a sigh of relief.

He turned the radio on, finally relaxing, and smiled, looking out at the road in front of him.

“So where are we going?”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” Ford screamed, and the car swerved, Ford scrambling for the wheel.
Behind him in the back seat, Bill put his hands in the air.

“Hahaha, I love your driving Sixer. This is fun!”

“Bill, what are you doing here? I thought you were asleep.”

“Thought you could give me the slip, eh. You’ll have to try harder than that. You brought a harpoon, Sixer. A harpoon. Possibly the most interesting thing I’ve seen you do, and you don’t even invite me along. For shame.”

“Maybe I didn’t invite you because I wanted some time alone without you.” Ford replied, gripping the steering wheel grumpily. “Is that too much to ask?”

“That really hurts my feelings Sixer, here I thought we were friends.” Bill said mockingly.

“Are we friends? I don’t know.” Ford questioned. “Friends don’t push friends into large piles of Gremgoblin dung for the heck of it.”

“Aw, don’t tell me you’re still sore about that.” Bill leaned forward now, bracing his elbows against the back of Ford’s headrest. “That was hilarious! Besides, you were the one who said you wanted to study the diet of the mysterious Gremgoblin. Ooooh, what do they eat, how do they sustain their mass, how do they increase it? Such mysteries.”

“I don’t sound like that.” Ford sniped. “And I meant through further study, not through that.”

“Hey, why waste days staking out that ugly half-baked walking nightmare when you could just analyse it straight from the source? Scientific inquiry solved. You’re welcome.” Bill poked the back of Ford’s head through the gap in the headrest. “You could have just asked me, anyway.”

“You weren’t exactly being helpful.”

“Hey, I’m plenty helpful. Maybe you just don’t deserve my benevolent wisdom. Huh, you ever think about that?”

“I don’t have to think about that, you tell me. All the time.”

“I do do that, don’t I?” Bill said proudly, then hung his arms over the top of Ford’s seat, resting his forearms on Ford’s shoulders. “Let me drive.”

“Hah.” Ford laughed, before shrugging Bill’s arms off his shoulders, keeping his grip steady on the wheel. “Not on your life Bill.”

“Come on.” Bill flopped his arms back onto Ford’s shoulders and made grabby motions for the wheel with his hands. “It’s not like there’s a lot to learn. Just swap seats with me. I could drive you up the wall LITERALLY!”

“No, no and no.” Ford said flatly. “You can’t just flout the laws of gravity, you’ll probably kill us. This car is remaining horizontal, and you are not driving, not in a million years.”

“Yeah, but after that.”

“Not even then.” Ford said, rolling his eyes. He made a turn, and Bill’s arms slid off his shoulders as the Muse slipped across the back seat.

“Are you wearing a seatbelt?”
“Mmmmmaaaaayyyyybeeeeeeее.” Bill said from the other side of the car, having slid right across the back seat when Ford made the turn, now pressed against the car window on the other side.

“Put your seatbelt on. I told you there are rules for being in the car. A seatbelt is non-negotiable.”

Bill grumbled under his breath, things about Ford being a buzzkill and a square and where was his sense of adrenaline, but he climbed back over to the other side of the car, taking the seat behind Ford, and put his seatbelt on.

“Where are we going anyway?” Bill asked, after clicking his seatbelt in.

“I was going to go fishing on Lake Gravity Falls, and possibly investigate the local legend of the Gobblewonker. You are still on field trip probation after that last stunt you pulled, so unless you promise you’ll behave I’ll turn this car around and drive you back home.” Ford nodded, staying firm on this.

“Behave is such an open ended word.” Bill reached forward again, his seat right behind Ford. It was the best seat in the car, apart from the front passengers seat (which was called a shotgun apparently, that really tickled Bill’s fancy) because he could annoy Ford better from here. He poked the back of Ford’s head a couple more times, dragging his finger through the scratchy short hair there.

He was trying to be annoying, but the motion sent delightful shivers down Ford’s spine that were really not productive when the aim of this trip was to push the thoughts of Bill out of his head somewhat. Gritting his teeth, attempting to shake off the shivers, Ford adjusted his grip on the steering wheel.

“Only to you it is. Can’t I have just one day where you don’t cause some sort of disaster? Is that too much to ask? Just one day?”

“Cool your boots Sixer, yeesh, why are you always so high strung all the time? Don’t you ever wanna stop stressing and just let go once in a while? Relax.”

“I do want to relax, which is why I planned this fishing trip.”

“Great. Well that’s sorted then.” Bill stopped playing with the back of Sixer’s neck and leaned back in his seat, crossing his arms behind his head. “Time to relax, just you, me and the sea monster.”

“I planned this fishing trip for myself. I wanted to go alone Bill.”

“Pchht, face it, you wouldn’t last ten minutes out here without me. You’re telling me you really want to take on a sea monster alone with no backup? I thought you were supposed to be the smart one IQ.”

Ah yes, backup. Ford wasn’t used to having backup on his expeditions fighting monsters, but from his past experience meeting the dangerous creatures of Gravity Falls, Ford could count on maybe not both hands, but at least one of his six fingered hands the times he could have used a little backup to stay safe.

Maybe having Bill along wouldn’t be such a bad idea.

“So how do you use this thing anyway?” Bill was twisting in his seat trying to reach into the boot to grab the harpoon. “Is it just point and shoot? THAR SHE BLOWS!”
“Put it down Ishmael. Not in the car.”

“Hey, nicknames are MY thing.”

Resigning himself to Bill’s company, Ford continued the drive to the lake, cyclically convincing himself that it wouldn’t be so bad while listing all the reasons why it would indeed be a terrible idea.

The list of pro’s and con’s continued to mount as Ford drove. It was only when he pulled into the parking lot near the Lake that he realised what was possibly the biggest con of all.

Other people.

In his haste to get out of the house, Ford hadn’t noticed it was the first day of the fishing season in Lake Gravity Falls, but the banner hanging proudly over the pier declared what Ford forgot. And as was custom in Gravity Falls, practically the whole town came out for Fishing Season’s Opening Day.

Lumberjacks and farmers and small minded small towners. Ford wasn’t sure what would be worse, exposing them to Bill or exposing Bill to them.

Ford had deliberately kept Bill away from the town, choosing to do the grocery shopping alone, the clothes shopping alone, having Bill stay home rather than run the risk of something bad happening by mixing Bill with others.

Part of Ford kept Bill hidden for selfish reasons, thinking if no one knew Bill existed, he would still be able to maintain sole credit for building the portal. Ford had also convinced himself it was for Bill’s protection, since the Muse seemed so fearful of Ford at first. Ford didn’t want to frighten him by placing him in a situation that was out of his control. Or frighten the townsfolk by placing Bill in their midst, knowing how he relished chaos just generally.

Since unbinding those three bricks, Ford knew he was spending his time with a creature that was not human, despite how authentic the vessel was. If Ford couldn’t trust Bill not to set fire to the couch on a whim, how was he supposed to trust Bill now?

The car was parked, but Ford sat in the front seat, making no move to unlock the vehicle or get out. He wanted to be here, but he wasn’t sure if it was too soon to be bringing Bill into the public eye.

Chancing a look into the back, he was surprised to see Bill sitting hunched down in his seat, barely peeking over the lip of the window. He almost looked shy, hiding away from the townspeople for a second. Curious, but shy, which was strange for the Muse.

Bill turned and looked to Ford, and their eyes met for a moment with startling clarity.

This was the breakthrough moment for Ford. This was what tipped the scales.

Bill looked uncertain, looked hesitant, and was looking to Ford for clarity and comfort. He trusted Ford to make a decision here, to protect him from the people Bill hadn’t met yet, who had him so hesitant.

Ford saw this as a certain triumph, that Bill was turning to Ford for guidance this time. He saw it as a form of trust. It was a heartening feeling. It was also somewhat rewarding to see the Muse unbalanced like this. Though that wasn’t as noble a reaction as the other one.

Ford unlocked the car and stepped out of the driver’s side, before walking around to open Bill’s
car door. Bill was still hunched low in the seat, looking uncertain about going out among the
townspeople.

Ford held his hand out to Bill.

“You wanted to come with me today, yes?”

Bill narrowed his eyes suspiciously at Ford, before reaching out and placing his hand in Ford’s six-
fingered grasp.

“Yes.” Bill replied, that uncertainty translating to more suspicion at why the scientist would
suddenly change his tune about Bill tagging along.

“Come on then.” Ford tugged Bill out of the car, his Muse following stiffly. “We need to rent out a
boat before we can take our supplies over.”

Ford tugged Bill along, delving into the crowd of townsfolk, hoping Bill’s suspicion would
translate into good behaviour for a while. Bill didn’t let go of Ford’s hand. Ford could even feel
Bill holding on tighter when they passed by a particularly burly crowd of plaid wearing
lumberjacks, clinging to Ford for safety.

“How much for a boat for the day?” Ford asked at the counter of the boat rentals shack casually,
bringing out his wallet.

“Hunnid and ten for the day on our motor boats. Unless you wanted a rower for two?” The
fisherman behind the counter replied, eyeing off the way Bill and Ford were holding hands.

“The motor boat is fine.” Ford handed over the money, and the fisherman passed Ford keys.

“Over by pier five. Anchored and ready for you. Y’all have a nice day now.”

“Hey Sixer.” Bill said quietly as they walked away to the pier. “Those rubes are fleecing you. It
said on the sign behind him it was only eighty five for the motor boats.”

“Let them have their fun.” Ford replied. “It’s all grant money anyway. Not like I use it for much
else.”

Ford trekked over to the boat and checked it’s condition. It seemed fine, functional, sturdy, if a
little old. Leading Bill with him back to the car Ford passed fishing and monster hunting gear for
Bill to hold, which he did, wrinkling his nose at being caddy for the equipment, and grabbed his
own armfuls of gear, walking it back to the boat.

Having only been at the lake a short while, Ford and Bill had already drawn a crowd of gawkers.
People from the town didn’t see Ford often, only knowing him as the genius inventor that lived in
the secluded shack just out of town. They were always curious about him, trying to get him to talk
about his inventions, what he was doing out here. Ford kept his work close to his chest for now, he
never knew which polite inquiry was just curiosity or who was after his patents, aiming to steal
them and get the credit. Ford didn’t really socialise with the townfolk, so they were always
curious about him, as small town folk generally were about any type of outsider.

Bill was drawing a lot of stares too. Not only was he an outsider, a completely new person living in
the town, but his dark skin and gold hair were a peculiar combination, not to mention the fact that
he looked like some kind of male model. Ford had gotten so used to having Bill around that the
novelty of that wore off some, but he could suddenly hear women cooing and gossiping and
pointing at Bill in a way they never had with Ford before. Or if they had ever looked at Ford that
Ford, who was feeling protective, could hear acutely the way some women were chittering about how unusual and attractive Bill was, how they’d never seen him before. Other, more close minded folk were talking about the colour of Bill’s skin. Bill was wearing one of the long sleeved shirts Ford bought for him, so thankfully his gold tattoos were hidden, but Ford had the feeling that had those tattoos been showing the town would have even more reason to gossip and stare. Some louder, more uncouth folk were discussing crudely how Ford had been holding Bill’s hand, making assumptions in a mocking tone.

Ford was beginning to think the fisherman didn’t just overcharge him because he lived out of town, he was beginning to think that he was ‘fleeced’ for another reason.

Huh.

Bill dumped the deep sea radar unceremoniously in the boat and dusted off his hands. Ford put the last of the fishing gear in the boat and moved over to tug the rope free from the pole at the pier. When he looked up, Bill was staring over Ford’s shoulder at the crowd that were looking at him.

“Do they normally do that?” Bill asked Ford, clearly still wary of the crowd of humans.

Bill had seen too many lynching’s, too many witch-hunts, too many atrocities wrought by mindless crowds of humans to feel comfortable being the focus of attention while in this fragile human body with his powers mostly still bound.

If he were in the mindscape he would relish the attention, put on a show, and then destroy the idiot crowd because he held all the power there, but ever since realising that in this body he was weak, weaker than Sixer, he couldn’t feel at ease around humans when he knew what things they were capable of. The things they were capable of were hilarious when directed at anyone but him, but this was Bill’s body on the line here.

He didn’t trust the humans further than he could throw them, and since he didn’t have the arm for throwing souls into a pit of torment like he used to, he didn’t have a lot of trust to extend.

“It’s just because you’re new here, that’s all. Not a lot happens in a town like this, so you’re what passes for news right now.” Ford replied, remembering the time the amateur town reporter interviewed him with a turkey baster.

Bill raised his hand to wave jerkily at the humans who were staring at him, and the women turned away, tittering to their friends shyly. One or two of them waved back. A group of burly lumberjacks hooted with laughter, and waved in a camp manner, blowing kisses to Bill.

Bill narrowed his eyes at this and promptly put his middle finger up at the lumberjacks, scowling, before stepping into the boat with Ford, sitting down and crossing his arms.

“These humans are stupid. Are you gonna drive this thing or what?”

The lumberjacks were ‘oooooh’-ing at Bill’s defiant gesture, causing the Muse’s eyebrow to twitch, and Ford revved the motor of the boat, keen to get Bill out onto the water, away from the mocking of the potentially flammable crowd.

Ford had learned that Bill had a talent for making most things flammable, and he didn’t want to tempt fate. Bill clearly seemed uncomfortable with the negative attention. Ford pulled the engine cord again, and steered them out into the lake, until the heckling faded away.
Huffing, Bill internally seethed.

How was it that the first humans he’d had the chance to meet in this meat suit made Stanford seem relatively tolerable?

If he were in any body but this one, he wouldn’t have given two shits about walking right up to those idiots, a smile on his face, to tell them they’ve won a lifetime supply of fire, before incinerating them! Hilarious!! But of all the times to grow a sense of self preservation, it had to be now that Bill stepped down, let it slide.

Well, sort of. He was remembering those faces, the loutish lumberjacks. He’d be plaguing their nightmares soon in one way or another.

It was outrageous really. First they short-changed Sixer – though if anyone looked like a mark for a good scam it was the bespectacled scientist, he could be so gullible, Bill should know, he was scamming Ford already. Which really meant that Bill had this market covered and they should all TAKE A HIKE off the edge of a cliff into a pit of fire ants, because Bill didn’t appreciate these two-bit organisms stepping on his turf.

THEN they made their hooting noises at Bill! Bill appreciated heckling as much as the next interdimensional criminal, but not aimed at him. He wasn’t even entirely sure why they were hooting at him so much. He didn’t even do anything that funny. Bill knew what was funny and what wasn’t. He was a MASTER of comedy.

Sure, the female humans made some funny noises at him too, but Bill knew, being an interdimensional suave fellow, that those were noises of appreciation, and there was a lot to appreciate. Bill was still fucking majestic, despite his departure from his traditional angular good looks. Sure, he wasn’t a perfect equilateral anymore, but he wasn’t half bad for a human.

And apparently this did it for humans.

It certainly did it for Ford, which Bill knew from checking in on Sixer’s dreams every now and again. Sixer’s dreams hadn’t quit fixating on Bill, though now the dreams were a little more nuanced.

Bill kept poking in expecting to see more obscene smut like that first time, but the dreams seemed to have diversified. Ford had one dream where he just cooked for Bill, meal after meal while dream Bill laughed. He had another where he lost Bill in a forest and went looking for him, only catching glimpses of the Muse up ahead through the trees. He had another dream where it was just him and Bill, sitting high up in the mountains while the sun was setting, and Sixer spent the entire dream just watching Bill from behind, peacefully taking in the details of him.

Bill didn’t really know what to make of it. He was oddly flattered by the strange mental fixation Ford persisted with. Part of him was warming to the concepts in Sixer’s dreams, no longer so fearful of being hurt or destroyed in this new body, now he was reconnected with some of his magic.

He was growing oddly curious, invested in the dreams Ford cooked up about him, enough so that sitting through one of the more racy dreams wasn’t such a slap in the face anymore. Enough that he didn’t mind when Ford’s freakish fingers touched his skin to soothe his aches or clean him when he forgot to, or when Sixer held his hand to show him something.

Given the frequency of the more salacious dreams starring Bill, it was almost surprising how little Ford acted on those thoughts. Bill knew the very same scientist that acted exasperated by Bill...
drinking mustard from the bottle also had filthy dreams about the ‘aaah’ sounds Bill made when opening his mouth for his favourite foods.

It was frankly insulting how Sixer pretended it didn’t affect him, which is why Bill exaggerated the noises as much as possible when he ate to try to prompt some sort of reaction from the scientist.

Still, nothing.

It was oddly vexing. Almost as vexing as the hollering of the townsfolk.

Bill looked across the boat to see Sixer fiddling with the settings on the radar machine, deliberately looking away from Bill, giving him his space to be angry. Bill also noted how Sixer took them out into the middle of the lake immediately, thinking being on the open water would temper the fire in Bill’s eyes. The fire was still there, but simmering now. Bill could put it aside now to watch Sixer fiddle with the dials of the radar, acting sheepish, ignoring Bill.

Sixer had been ignoring Bill more and more lately. Bill didn’t like it.

Bill was tired of Sixer insulting him like this. He wanted a reaction from the scientist dammit. Anything was better than this awful waiting, and being shut out. He was supposed to be entertaining Bill.

Leaning over the edge of the boat to trail his hand along the surface of the water, Bill aimed for a casual tone, wanting to draw Sixer’s attention back to him.

“So how are you planning on catching this thing? Live bait?”

Ford looked up at that, looking relieved that Bill seemed less angry initially, but that expression of relief soon twisted into exasperation.

“No.”

Bill raised his eyebrows. This was usually the part where Ford flew into a spirited explanation of his plan, but he was being oddly silent. Maybe he just needed more provoking.

“Because I could suggest a few volunteers if you need some.”

“I’m not using live bait.” Sixer replied grumpily.

“Yeesh, what crawled into your boat and died?” Bill griped, before slumping in his seat in the boat, now dangling both hands over the edge to drag his fingertips through the water.

This was boring. Sneaking out to startle Sixer on one of his ‘let’s ditch Bill’ drives was supposed to be fun, but so far it had been decidedly unfun. He wasn’t even reacting to Bill’s provocation right.

Bill pouted and flicked the surface of the water irritably.

Fiddling with his radar device, Ford was hyperaware of Bill’s displeasure. It was actually aggravating him, how attuned he seemed to be to Bill, how he felt that niggling need to entertain him now that he was here with Ford. Ford knew Bill abhorred boredom.

Really, there was nothing more boring than fishing, a fact Stanford knew objectively to be true. Sure, he enjoyed being out on the lake, and nostalgia and sentimentality for the fishing trips he took with his family when he was younger fuelled that somewhat, but there was only so much nostalgia could do when faced with the reality that was sitting out in the middle of a lake on a boat
with very little to do.

You really could only engage one another, entertain one another, but as Ford was in the middle of a crisis of conscience, or attraction, or whatever the right word was, he didn’t much feel like engaging Bill with anything. Not when denying those desires was a much more pressing matter.

He had to break away from thoughts of Bill to get back to the man he used to be, resolute, dignified, devoted to science and nothing else.

Ford scanned the surface of the lake, looking for any disturbances or shadows that indicated a submerged sea monster lurking within. So far he didn’t see any disturbances apart from Bill flicking his fingers on the water near the edge of the boat petulantly.

“Stop that.”

“This is boring! I’m bored. Hey, do you want a giant tooth? I bet you I could find one out here, it’d make a great coffee table.”

“No.” Ford pulled out his binoculars and set back to surveying the horizon of the lake.

“What do you mean ‘no’. No, you don’t want the tooth, or no you don’t think I could find one. I could find a whole gaping maw of giant teeth in this very lake, below this very boat.”

Ford sighed, and went back to studiously trying to ignore Bill, to focus on science.

“Hey Poindexter, you didn’t answer my question.”

Ignoring him. Ford was ignoring him.

“You know what? You’ve got a real attitude problem. I go out of my way to join you on this stupid adventure and this is how you treat me? With sulking and silence and stupidity?”

Ignoring Bill’s tantrums was the way to go. Ignoring Bill was effective. If only Ford could continue to ignore Bill, regain a little of himself. Yes. That’d be perfect.

“Fine, don’t answer my question. I’ll just sit here and suffer.”

More silence. Ford could do this. He was doing well so far.

“Hahah, speaking of suffering, look, there are bubbles near that one island. I think it’s getting closer actually. Are you steering this thing, or are those trees getting closer?”

Ford finally tore his gaze away from his binoculars, frustrated that Bill disturbed him. “What are you talking about? What island?”

“That one right there.” Bill said, pointing to an arrangement of pine trees on a mound of floating rock that hadn’t been there before.

Well that was interesting.

It seemed the island was moving, bubbles frothing around the edge of the shore as it cut through the water towards the motor boat. Ford had taken them far out enough onto the lake that they couldn’t see the shoreline clearly anymore, which meant the people at the shore couldn’t see them too.

Which also meant that no one else seemed to see when the island’s bubbling intensified and the
island began to lift from the water about twenty yards away from the boat.

Water sloughed off the island as it broke the surface, rising higher and higher into the air, an ominous groaning noise sounding out.

“EKAL YM NOPU SSAPSERT SERAD OHW?”

Glowing eyes rose above the surface of the water, staring intently down, as a ghastly enormous head rose up from the lake and hovered above the boat. A mouthful of giant teeth sat in the creatures mouth as it talked unintelligibly at Ford and Bill, and roots and dirt hung from below its jaw, bones tangled up in the roots, half of a skeleton clearly visible hanging from the viny tangle.

“Hey, look! Teeth! Giant teeth! I told you I could find the teeth!” Bill crowed triumphantly, jumping up and punching the air, rocking the boat with his enthusiasm.

“YNITSED RUOY SI TI. HTUOM YM RETNE. RENNID YM HTIW ESIMED RUOY DEDICNIOC EVAH SLOOF UOY.”

The creatures jaw opened and shut threateningly as it spoke, baring the giant teeth Bill mentioned, looming over the boat and drawing closer.

The thing was huge.

“That’s not our sea-monster.” Ford said, that protective spark he felt earlier intensifying. He was worried for Bill, worried that the muse was about to be eaten, along with the boat, along with Ford, by a giant island headed monster. This was not how he planned the lake trip. Scrambling for the controls of the boat, Ford revved the motor up again.

“So? We found something better. Sixer, wait. I want a coffee table.” Bill stepped toward Ford, intending to stop him, but stumbled as the boat moved.

“It’s going to eat us if we don’t move!” Ford exclaimed, not letting up on the engine, backing the boat away from the monster who seemed to be chasing the boat, still mumbling its backwards language. “Now is not the time to shop around Bill. If you wanted a coffee table so badly we can go to IKEA, stop moving, sit down. I can’t steer this boat with you falling all over the place.”

“I would go to IKEA, whatever that is, if you ever let me leave the house. Or brought me anywhere with you. Anywhere public.” Bill complained loudly, still teetering all over the boat, trying to walk over to Ford on bendy sea legs. “This is the first time I’ve gone out with you to a public place and I had to lay in the back seat for forty minutes to sneak in the car unnoticed. You don’t think that’s a problem?”

“What I think is a problem is the giant head currently trying to eat us!”

“STOOR YM HSIRUON YAM SENOB RUOY OS HTUOM YM RETNE. THOUM YM RETNE OT SI YNITSED EURT RUOY. EREHWON UOY STEG GNINNUR.”

“Yeah, but you’re not focusing on the real issues here. Sure, we could drown, but ignoring me hurts both of us Sixer. I know what you’re doing.”

“No you don’t. Sit down. Bill, stop trying to stand, you’ll fall right out of the boat.”

Bill stumbled from one side of the boat to the other on his long legs, arms waving around for balance.
“No I won’t. You’re avoiding the issue. Ignoring me is not okay. I know you’re all caught up in whatever phase of denial you’re going through.”

“What – I’m not – I’m not denying anything!” Ford spluttered, outraged that Bill would even bring it up. So much for getting away from his problems today.

“Sounds an awful lot like denial to me. It’s not just a river in Egypt you know.” Bill finally stumbled his zig-zagged path across the boat to land next to the motor, trying to lean on the rudder and steer them back to the floating head monster.

Ford pushed Bill’s hands away from the rudder, trying to correct their course, but Bill was being stubborn and pushy, fighting back, one hand gripping the rudder in a death grip, the other pushing Ford’s face away.

“Well you stop steering us back there? Bill!” Ford was pushing back, trying to wrest control of the rudder despite Bill smooshing his face, tangling his wiry legs with Ford’s, stepping on his feet, doing everything in his power to turn them off course.

Bill was practically chest to chest with Ford now, his elbow under Ford’s chin, trying to maintain his hold on the rudder.

“Well you stop – being a stubborn – stupid – human?” The boat was zig zagging across the water now, the floating head monster watching the pattern, still following, somewhat confused now. “Do I have to do something drastic every time you get lost in your next terrible great idea? You’ve been ignoring me and you won’t admit why!”

“If I’ve been ignoring you it’s because you’ve been infuriating and you deserve it!” Ford grunted, pulling the rudder one way as Bill pulled it the other. “You won’t help me with the portal. You won’t lift a finger to do anything around the house. You do things to irritate me on purpose, I swear you do, and you won’t stop.”

“Hah.” Bill laughed and tried to mash his palm against Sixer’s mouth. “You don’t want me to stop. Admit it. You’re just irritating ME on purpose now, and that’s not how this whole shindig works Sixer.”

“EMIT DAB A SIHT SI?”

“Well, why should it work like that? Maybe I just want some space away from you Bill, maybe I just need my old life back?”

“Your old life was pitiful and useless without me in it. You know it, I know it, the whole world knows it. You wouldn’t be where you are today without me.” Bill hissed into Sixer’s face, losing his grip on the rudder briefly.

“I would be fishing peacefully without you today. I would be not doubting my sanity without you. I wouldn’t be on the run from a giant floating head.” Ford threw his arm out, gesturing at the head.

“Oh, you can’t put that all on me. At least half of that is large and whiney’s fault over there.” Bill sneered, making a grab for the rudder again.

“Bill, just, let go of the rudder. Stop it!” Ford slapped Bill’s hands away from the rudder, and Bill gripped Stanford by the front of his sweater instead, twisting the fabric in his fist.

“No. Not until you admit why you’ve been ignoring me Sixer. Come on, spit it out.”
“Bill!” Stanford spluttered, Bill suddenly too close, up in his face. Ford could feel Bill’s breath on his chin. He leaned back, trying to put some space between him and the Muse, but he was unable to tear his eyes away from Bill’s lips. “You don’t – there’s a monster, you don’t –“

“I don’t what?” Bill’s eyes narrowed dangerously, and he pulled Ford closer to him, not liking the way he leaned away.

“I don’t want to be –“ Ford’s eyes were flicking between Bill’s lips and his eyes now, appallingly enticed by his Muse, struggling with the temptation to just close the distance between them.

“Well maybe it’s not about what you want.” Bill’s eyes lit up, jubilant that he was finally coaxing the sort of reaction he was missing out of Stanford. He liked it when Stanford reacted to him, when the struggle was written all over his face. It was far better than Sixer blocking him out.

Cheeks red, heart beating loud in his chest, Ford felt his glasses fogging up. “Well –“ Ford began, his voice tight with the exertion it took to reign himself back. “What do you want then?”

A sly look crossed over Bill’s face and Stanford was surprised when instead of pulling away, Bill raised himself up on his tip toes, his mouth curving into a grin, the fist in Ford’s shirt relaxing as Bill splayed his fingers across Ford’s broad chest. They were nose to nose now, and Bill’s yellow eyes gleamed again with mischief.

“What do I want?” He said, walking his fingertips up Ford’s chest, delighting at the way it caused Ford’s blush to intensify.

“EMIT SI TI. GNITIAW HGUONE.”

The floating monster head was above their boat now, hovering menacingly. It descended upon the motor boat, it’s teeth closing around the bow of the boat. As it began to bite down it jostled the boat, knocking Bill and Ford apart.

Ford yelled out, falling back in his seat in the boat, scrambling to pull the motor again, revving it up to back the boat away from the jaws of the beast.

“Dammit.” Ford grunted, the engine whirring away, ineffectively. The beast’s mouth had lifted the tiny boat out of the water.

Bill had fallen on his ass landing on the floor of the boat. He growled, glaring up at the beast who was chewing on the front end of the boat.

“Hey stoneface!” Bill bared his teeth, patting the bottom of the boat, searching for something. “Time and place means nothing to you? Do you even know who you’re dealing with?”

The monster didn’t reply, instead it stopped grinding it’s teeth on the stern of the boat and bit down properly, splintering the wood.

“Bill, can you swim?” Ford asked redundantly. Of course he couldn’t swim, he’d only had the body for four weeks. Ford could probably tow Bill through the water like he had done in college lifesaving classes, but he wouldn’t get them far. He certainly wasn’t fast enough to outrun a floating Lovecraftian horror.

“We’re not bailing now. I want my coffee table.” Bill snarled, and hefted the harpoon gun up from the bottom of the boat, aiming it at the monster. “Elohssa, atsiv al atsah.”
Bill pulled the trigger.

The barbed spear flew straight at the monster and plunged into the creature’s gums, blood bubbling up from the mouth. The monster reared back from the ship, roaring in pain, the harpoon stuck deep in its gums.

The boat fell back down and landed roughly on the water, the top half of the bow of the boat ripped off by the monster’s teeth.

Ford staggered forward and put his hands on Bill’s shoulders. “You did it. You saved us.” He said, awed.

“I’m not done yet.” Bill replied, and began to crank the mechanism on the harpoon gun, reeling the spear back in, pulling the barbs painfully through the creature’s mouth, ripping it’s gums. “I want that coffee table.”

The monster wailed in agony, the pitch of it’s screams resonating vibrations that rippled the water. Ford shouldn’t have been surprised by Bill’s bloody retribution here, and in a way he wasn’t. Hands tightening on Bill’s shoulders, Ford found he was holding tight to Bill to steady him, not to pull him back. To support him as he reeled in the harpoon, straining as the monster reeled about, yanking it out of the monster’s mouth.

Cranking the mechanism one last time, the spear pulled out of the monster’s jaw and dislodged a tooth on the way, splattering them both with blood.

The tooth fell into the water with a splash and the monster careened away, fleeing from them, screaming, before sinking back into the water.

The boat rocked when the tooth splashed in the water, and heaved again when the island headed monster sunk back into the lake, sending a large wave over.

Bill and Ford sat in the boat that was miraculously still seaworthy, and felt the wave upset the boat’s equilibrium, before the water settled, calm once more.

Ford was still holding Bill’s shoulders steady, shocked by how that situation escalated. Bill turned around to look at Sixer, and gestured over the side of the boat.

“You can go and get that, right?”

That startled a laugh out of Ford. He realised Bill was still talking about the tooth-come-coffee table.

He laughed again, clapping Bill on the back, sitting back on the bottom of the boat, wiping a tear from the corner of his eye.

Bill was watching him, smiling back at him. He seemed to be pleased with Ford’s laughter.

Ford realised as he watched the sunlight catch in Bill’s hair, picking out threads of gold stained red with blood in the light, rich bright colour matching the shining gold of Bill’s smiling eyes – that he wasn’t conflicted about spending time with Bill anymore. You couldn’t fight off a giant floating monster with someone and not realise a few key things about your relationship with that person. As much as Ford wanted to bluster and hold back and hold onto the belief that Bill was a terrible awful person to be attracted to, they worked well somehow. Bill kept things interesting. And Ford liked that.
Or maybe he just liked Bill.

The thought was still terrifying for Ford, but he didn’t recoil from it so much now. Not when Bill was laughing here with him, and didn’t seem to be recoiling so much from Ford now too.

Not while the sunlight framed him so nicely, and his teeth were shining as he grinned that wide grin of his, blood splatter freckling his skin.

Out of context, it was probably terrible to behold. But in the moment, well, this wasn’t so terrible.

“No, I’m serious. Go and get it.”

The only terrible thing here was Bill.

They didn’t catch sight of the Gobblewonker that day, but they found something better.
'Cause he's the man in the middle, never second fiddle. Just like a spider in a cobweb.

Bill was in the bathroom with Sixer, brushing his teeth in the mirror next to the scientist.

“You know, you don’t have to be that vigorous about it.” Ford commented on the enthusiastic way Bill was brushing his teeth.

“Didn’t you see that movie?” Bill replied around a mouth full of toothpaste foam. “Dentistry is a brutal art. I will arm myself with apples, good dental hygiene, and whatever weapons this feeble human body can carry to keep those white coat bastards away.”

Ford chuckled indulgently and watched Bill rinse out his mouth. Bill spat into the sink and then looked up at Sixer.

“You don’t hear me questioning you when you rake a razor across your face every morning.”

“When I shave?” Ford rubbed the stubble on his chin and looked into the mirror considering it. “You think I should grow it out?”

“Eurgh, no.” Bill scoffed, and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, catching the last bits of toothpaste. “I just mean it takes forever. What a time waster. You should be using that time to make me more pancakes.”

“Well how do you suggest I speed things up, oh impatient one?” Ford replied sarcastically, still rubbing his stubbly chin.

Bill snapped his fingers and a brief burst of blue fire flashed across Ford’s face, startling him. Ford’s hands flung out immediately defensive, but the fire was gone as soon as it came, along with Ford’s stubble.

Patting his face down incredulously Ford was surprised with the results.

“Well I’ll be damned.”

“Setting fire to your face is MUCH faster. Another nugget of interdimensional wisdom you can thank me for.” Bill patted Stanford on the shoulder while the scientist bent over to peer into the mirror, turning his face this way and that to examine the clean way Bill removed his stubble, rubbing his jaw with his fingers like he was fascinated.

“I wonder. The practical applications for that is marvel-“ Ford mumbled to himself barely paying attention to Bill, lost in the novelty of this new discovery.

“Or you can thank me later.” Bill rolled his eyes, before padding out of the bathroom, down the hall to his room. “Yeesh.”

“Goodnight Bill!” Sixer called out, realising Bill was heading off to his room.

“Yeah yeah.” Bill waved over his shoulder, not looking back. “I want those pancakes tomorrow morning.”

Ford made some vague noise of assent that meant he may or may not have heard Bill. It didn’t matter. Either way tomorrow Bill was getting pancakes, if he had his way, and he generally always
did.

The pyjamas Ford found for Bill were big, and unless Bill got Ford to roll the hems up they dragged along the floor when he walked, and flopped over his wrists when he didn’t push the fabric back, but the pyjamas were warm and soft, comfortable flannel.

Walking to his bedroom, the pyjamas dragging on the floor, Bill ambled into bed. He had stolen all the softest blankets in the house, from the living room, from the linen closet, from Ford’s bedroom, and piled them up into a fabric nest on his bed, so he could have the most comfortable resting place while he dreamt in the Mindscape.

As Bill snuggled down into the blanket pile, rubbing his cheek against the pillows he had also stolen from various rooms in the house, he felt oddly content. More rested than he had for centuries. As awful as it was to have been dragged here, stuffed into a meat suit, and to have his grand plans abruptly derailed, Bill was actually enjoying his time in this human body more and more as the weeks went on.

He wasn’t used to being pampered like this.

Sure he had cults and followers and various worshippers and likeminded suckers over the years who devoted themselves to Bill as an idea, a concept, or a god in the back of their minds, but never had Bill allowed himself to receive the physical devotion and pampering he was receiving from Ford now.

As wrong as Sixer got it sometimes, he was really getting this whole pampering business right. Bill was comfortable, provided for, entertained, and he felt more rested than he had for a long long time.

It was great!

Being an interdimensional criminal and masterminding Armageddon’s got exhausting after a while.

As any party planner can tell you, organising a bash like the one Bill had planned took SO MUCH WORK. You had to finetune the guest list, weed out the traitors, draw in those who had potential, enlist. Settle disputes between the guests, make sure all the monsters and freaks you pushed together would be dancing to your tune and not ripping each others throats out. Or eyes out. Some of them didn’t have eyes, so it wasn’t a perfect metaphor.

You had to sort out the venue, and that was still a work in progress.

You had to streamline the party, get the cops off your back, or in this case, the Time Police, who were the biggest party poopers this side of the cosmos. He had teams running point on distracting the big baby and his poop crew while the whole shindig was being fine tuned.

Bill had been working on all of these factors non stop for a long time, organising the chaos that would be the biggest hit in the multiverse.

There was so much to do, and Bill didn’t expect to be dragged into a human body by Sixer.

As someone with a lot of balls in the air, lots of variables to juggle, he didn’t appreciate the genius inventor having thrown a wrench in when Bill was trying to juggle. Luckily Bill was always a quick thinker, and he could grow extra hands should the occasion require it. The ball hadn’t dropped, because Bill hadn’t dropped it. He bounced right back with a way to keep the party on track, and to keep an eye on the people who needed watching.
Sure his time in the mindscape was split now, but having physical form was great, if a bit limiting initially.

Bill could feel his power growing. Not just when Ford removed the bricks in his skin. Human belief and worship had power, everyone knew that. Bill’s own power increased in every effigy made of him, every one-eyed triangle drawn across every surface in the universe.

He had underestimated how much Ford having made this body for Bill was something that empowered him. Something that became an act of worship with every inhale and exhale this body made. The fact that it fit Bill so well was an added bonus. And because he grew stronger, healed, solidified his power every time he slept, Bill had been feeling fan-fucking-tastic.

Not only was he growing stronger, amassing more power on a cosmic level, he was also better rested, less stressed, and more content than he had been for a long while.

It was like he was taking a fleshy vacation.

The pillows were soft and warm, just like the pyjamas, and the full meal of spaghetti bolognaise Ford cooked for Bill was sitting comfortably in his stomach (what a novelty!) and soon, nestled in the finest blankets in the house, Bill felt himself drift off to sleep.

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**Stars.**

Looking up, that’s what Bill could see.

Sixter’s mindscape started a little lower than this. It used to be just books, row after row of handwritten books, enough to fill the library of Alexandria, and then some. Bill should know, he was there, back in the day.

Bill floated along the bookshelves, passing blackboards scrawled with equations. Apart from the bookshelves Ford’s mindscape had hardly any distinguishing features. It wasn’t the wildest mindscape Bill had been in, but it was definitely very Stanford.

A large abacus clicked up and down of its own volition, counting dreams, ideas, regrets. Next to the abacus was a glass jar with a ship inside. Next to the glass jar was a packet of toffee peanuts in another jar, beside that a packet of jelly beans. If Bill went further into Ford’s mental library he could find, hidden behind one of the stacks, a broken swing set.

Ford’s mindscape, this grandiose library he housed in his head, used to have a roof with ornate murals of scientific discovery painted onto it. His inspiration. Since he met Bill some two years ago Ford’s mindscape had changed.

Now there was no roof. Ford had a different source of inspiration.

Bill floated up, the bookshelves stacked into stairs that led up up up into a spiral to the stars above. Things were different up here.

The blackboards sprawled with equations were now transparent blue screens with code and blueprints scribbled onto them. After floating above the last bookshelf Bill could see among the stars two plush chairs, studded and leather, crowding a floating chess board – another ode to Bill imprinted on the very fabric of Ford’s mindscape.
The moment Bill sat down in the chair, a tray table of tea and cakes appeared magically hosting for the triangle. Bill crossed his legs, grabbed a teacup, and relaxed.

Sixer wasn’t here, he was dreaming. If he were to lucid dream, maybe he’d show up, wondering his own mindscape, but for now this was Bill’s space. It was peaceful and it was quiet and above all, it was safe.

“Alright.” Bill said to himself, clicking his fingers. A transparent screen floated over to Bill, and the equations and algorithms on it wiggled out of the way, like worms. “Show me something good Cineplex.”

The screen glowed bright for a moment, lighting up like a television, before filling with fuzz. Ford was still awake it seemed. Bill had gotten to sleep before him, and until Ford was sleeping, Bill couldn’t see what dreams the scientist was having.

“Ugh. Way to short change a guy.” Bill grumbled. Resigning himself to waiting, he floated more sugar cubes into his tea and clicked again, summoning one of the books from Ford’s library up to join Bill in the stars.

Flicking through it, like a bored woman might flick through a magazine while waiting to get her hair done, Bill whiled away his time, waiting, going through the book of Sixer’s memories while he waited.

“Your college years were sooo boring Sixer. Yeesh. You never heard of beer pong? No wonder you wore elbow patches so young, I’ve never seen anyone apply themselves to study with that much elbow grease.” Bill mused aloud, flicking through the pages.

Now he was thinking of Sixer’s elbows. They had some good angles, those elbows. A little rounded, but pointy in all the ways that counted.

Bill felt his bowtie buzz, and put down the book with an exasperated huff. “What now? I only just sat down for a second, this better be important.”

Rather than answering the call in person, Bill just pulled a few bricks back to reveal a screen of his own below his eye. Looking down, Bill scowled.

“What?”

“You look comfortable boss.”

Ugh. Kryptos.

“What do you want Kryptos?” Bill tried to keep the distaste out of his voice.

“Just wanted to see how you’re doing with the portal boss.” Kryptos said. The buck toothed, one eyed compass had been more of an enemy than an ally at times, but for now Bill wanted him on his side. Or at least under his thumb. “You mentioned last time things were really speeding up, and you’ve been gone for a long time.”

“Yeah, well I also mentioned last time I was doing something big, and not to interrupt me. Somehow everyone else managed to get that memo. So why am I not surprised that you’re the one calling me first.”

Kryptos had the audacity to shrug. “Word gets around. You’re not the only one who maintains a steady presence on earth. I gotta check in every now and again too. I wanna know when to start
Bill did mental calculations quickly, reading-through his mass of worldly knowledge rapidly to check whether Gravity Falls housed any members of the masonic lodge. As far as Bill was aware, there were no freemasons or masonic temples in the quiet Oregon town.

So it was safe to assume Kryptos wasn’t spying on him. Yet.

“You’ve got plenty of time. I told you decades, didn’t I?” Bill replied.

“You said you’d speed things up by decades Boss, not how many decades, or how soon it’d be.”

“You wanna get off my fucking case Kryptos? You’re starting to sound like one of Time Baby’s lackeys. I’ll give you the heads up when it nears completion. I’ve already said that.”

“I’m just saying. Keeping a steady supply of human worshippers is in everyone’s interests here, if we’re talking currency.” Kryptos continued, the slimy bastard, thinking he could talk to Bill about currency. Bill was ON currency! “You’re planning the equivalent of a cosmic financial meltdown. Some of us wanna get our assets covered, walk away with enough to build on, before we bring the house down.”

“So what are you saying here? You want more or less time before this portal goes interdimensional. I’m getting mixed messages buddy, and now is not the time to test me.” Bill let some of his irritation seep into his voice now, finding it difficult to keep his own frustrations with the sanctimonious compass at bay.

“I just wanted to check in boss. To see how you’re going. If you need help –“

“Ya know, there’s a nice spot in the dimension of eternal screams left. Hectorgon’s already there, you keep pushing me and I can reserve you a spot, just like I did for him.” Bill glowed red for a moment, letting his rage bubble over. His voice echoed. “Don’t assume I need your help for a second. I didn’t ask for it.”

“We’re just worried, that’s all. That six-fingered human –“

“You let me worry about Sixer.” Bill cut Kryptos off sharply. Sixer wasn’t a threat. He didn’t appreciate how fixated his henchmaniacs were on his human. Or that they were apparently conspiring together about him, that wasn’t good. “And what is all this ‘we’ talk, huh? Who are you talking to?”

“No one, boss.” Kryptos replied quickly.

“If I hear you’ve been spreading your filth again Kryptos you’ll find yourself back on a very short leash, do you hear me?” Bill grew, extending his hypotenuse, towering over the chess board until it was tiny, and could fit in his fist. “Don’t forget by who’s providence you even got your little cult in the first place.”

“Yours, Bill.”

“Bill?”

“Boss. Yours, boss. I meant no disrespect.” Kryptos cowered sufficiently, shrinking back from the screen, away from the call.

“That’s better.” Bill glowered at Kryptos for a while longer, watching as the compass’s little arms
and legs quivered. Once he seemed sufficiently scared, Bill changed his tune, his voice cheerful again. “Now don’t make me repeat myself. You know your orders. And one of them was not to interrupt me!”

“I’m sorry boss. I won’t do it again.”

“See to it that you don’t. You’ll have bigger concerns soon anyway. I’m putting you on time baiting duty. Front lines.” Bill watched Kryptos’ expression sink.

“But boss, I’m not – Pyronica is much better than me at –”

“Well then, you better be real nice to her because she’ll be the one pulling your ass out of the firing range.” Bill examined the back of his hand, gloating again. “Besides. I’m thinking maybe you’ve got too much free time on your hands, since you have the gall to call me up and micromanage ME. Assuming I don’t have control over MY human, MY situation, and MY plan. And you know what they say about free time. In Time Baby’s economy? YOU’RE JOKING!”

“Please boss, anything but that.” Kryptos begged. “I can be useful in other ways. Planning. Strategy, you know that’s what I’m good at. I’m not like Pyronica. She’s so -”

“Pyronica is a flaming hot comet of chaos is what you’d better be saying right now. Word gets around, Kryptos. Of course, you’d know all about that. If she hears you talking shit about her, she’d sooner leave you for dead then keep you out of the infenitentiary and you know it.” Bill put his hands on his sides, like a disappointed mother. “So play nice.”

“I –“ Kryptos stuttered, looking lost, before sighing, dejectedly. “Yes boss.”

“And I’ll let you know when you can gather your followers before the portal is open. So don’t say I never did nothing for ya.”

“Thank you boss.” Kryptos said sullenly.

“Cheer up Kryptos. You and Pyronica will have a blast!” Bill was smiling. Sure they’d have a blast, several, knowing the time police and their weaponry. At least Pyronica was up to the task, combat was her specialty. Kryptos, not so much.

“Yes boss.” Kryptos replied.

“Anything else?” Bill asked, eager to hang up on the masonic idiot.

“No boss.”

“If that’s all, I have important business to get back to, and now so do you!” Bill replied, and reached down to his bowtie, ready to cancel the call. “See you always Kryptos. Don’t think I won’t be watching!”

Kryptos flinched a little at that, which was just the icing on the cake, and with a satisfied expression, Bill pressed his bowtie and hung up the call.

Shrinking back down to his usual size, he threw back the cup of tea like a shot, pouring it into his eye, and sat back in his armchair with a frustrated huff. Holding the cup out for a refill, the teapot floating to attend to Bill, he glared at the stars in Ford’s mindscape for a while, processing the insubordination he just had to put down.

“Honestly. Asking if I need help. From a glorified rhombus poking his angles into my business!”
The nerve of some henchmaniacs.”

It was a little concerning how willing his henchmaniacs were to believe that Sixer could be causing Bill trouble. Didn’t they know it was the other way around. Ford practically lived to serve Bill. Sure, the whole binding Bill in a human body thing was a bit of a spanner thrown in the works, but that didn’t make Ford a threat. And it wasn’t like the henchmaniacs knew what Ford did. Bill had been playing it off as all part of the plan, like the body was some sort of essential upgrade for speeding up the portal. As far as the henchmaniacs were to be concerned, everything was and had been under Bill’s control from day one. So why were they so intent to believe that somehow Ford was undermining him?

It was ridiculous.

“Hey big screen. Come on.” Bill snapped his fingers again, impatiently, urging the floating screen before him to turn on, key into Ford’s dreams.

The equations on the board wriggled away again, and the screen lit up. The picture was blurry, Ford was just settling down into sleep it seemed. Early sleepers seemed to think about the last thing they encountered before going to bed, and so Ford was thinking about the pillow under his cheek. On the screen Ford was nuzzling into the pillow, smiling, and images sparked along the side of the screen, the thoughts that Ford was thinking of.

Cucumber in sandwiches. Having successfully grafted two parts of alien technology together earlier today. Mowing the lawn in the back yard, turning around to see one of the forest gnomes stealing jellybeans from the packet Ford had on the porch. Bill in his too big pyjamas brushing his teeth. What’s under a gnome’s hat? How to set up some sort of fire extinguisher in the bathroom for the next time Ford tried to get rid of his stubble. Bill patting Ford on the back before leaving the bathroom.

Some of his earlier irritation filtering away, Bill leaned back in the armchair now, getting comfortable. The dreamscape provided whatever Bill required, and so a bowl of popcorn covered in tapatio sauce materialised next to him, one of Bill’s new favourite human treats. Watching the screen, intermittently chucking popcorn into his eye, eating the delicious snack food, Bill got comfortable.

Bill liked the parts of Ford’s dreams when he was there. It appealed to his narcissism and curiosity, just to see how Ford sees him, what parts of Bill Ford fixates over.

It also helped to see how observant Ford was about the things Bill was hiding. So far Ford still believed that Bill was a Muse sent to help him achieve greatness, and that Bill’s initial tempestuousness was because Ford had taken him away from his home. Ford believed that restoring the equilibrium of his friendship with Bill had gone a long way to temper that tempestuousness, not noticing how Bill became happier once he reconnected with the mindscape.

Ford wasn’t even aware Bill could now access the mindscape. He seemed to think that he had dragged Bill fully into the physical realm, forgetting that anyone who could dream could enter the mindscape if they knew how.

Up on the screen Ford was thinking about hiking to Crash Site Omega to collect more parts. At least he was still focused on building the portal. Bill hardly had to prod him at all to keep him on task. The only prodding Bill had to do was to get Ford to call in his college roommate and he was still being stubborn there.

Watching Ford plan out his week on the screen was getting boring. Throwing tapatio covered
popcorn at the screen Bill booed.

“Get to the good stuff!”

Being a master of the mind, Bill could influence the direction of Ford’s dreams, and his impatience kick-started Ford’s dreaming along, narrowing the focus of his dreams to how Bill appeared in Ford’s subconscious.

Ford might question later how his dreams have been fixated more and more on Bill. He was privately questioning the extent of his own obsession when he could, as worshiping a triangular entity that only appeared at night was somewhat different to worshipping another man.

Bill didn’t see what the big deal was there, he wasn’t that different. The difference seemed to matter to Ford though.

Bill’s too large pyjamas dragging across the floor. An image of Ford kneeling down to roll up the hems. Looking up at Bill, meeting those curious yellow eyes. Watching Bill watch static on the TV, wondering what had him so riveted. Sitting on the couch with Bill, Bill’s socked feet pressing up against Ford’s leg. Bill kicking Ford when he wanted his attention. Ford grabbing Bill’s foot in his six fingered hand.

All of this was rather domestic. It was like watching a highlight reel of the little insignificant details that had happened throughout the day. Dreams were how the brain sorted information, so it made sense to lay it all out like this for organising.

Bill liked to see what Ford remembered, what he took in about Bill, but he’d seen this all before.

“Come on Sixer, get inventive.” Bill murmured to himself.

The best parts of the dreams were when Sixer used his imagination. Sure, he could fixate on Bill as much as he wanted, but Bill liked seeing things he hadn’t seen before, and with a brain as big as Ford’s Bill expected a broader scope of things to see.

Giving that small nudge to Sixer’s imagination influenced the dream, and sparked the parts of Sixer’s brain that indulged what ifs, and daydreams.

Bill’s socked feet pressing up against Ford’s leg. Bill kicking Ford when he wanted his attention. Ford grabbing Bill’s foot in his six fingered hand...

Bill paused, tense, watching Ford as the scientist slowly started rubbing Bill’s feet, massaging his soles with firm movements that Bill could feel. Bill started to untense, relax, his sharp yellow eyes lidding. Ford was doing a good job. Bill stretched his leg out, resting his foot on Ford’s lap as the scientist continued to rub Bill’s feet. Ford was staring at the foot on his lap now, focused. Bill’s toes were wriggling, moving under the tip of the sock. Ford rubbed his thumb down firm along Bill’s instep. Bill moaned, a small sound, and when Ford looked up at him again he had his eyes closed, leaning his head back against the arm of the couch, a content expression fixed on his features. Ford did that.

Humans dreamt about the strangest things. Bill could feel from the dream proud emotions resonating on a deeper level within Sixer’s brain. The scenario he dreamed up hadn’t even happened and he was already patting himself on the back for it hypothetically. Ridiculous.

Bill wondered what would actually happen if they acted out that part of the dream. Would it feel as good as it looked in Sixer’s brain, or would it be one of those things that were okay in theory but in practise not so much.
On a whim, Bill decided, what the heck, let’s try it. He mentally tacked it on his list of things to do to provoke Sixer, seeing if he would react the same as he did in his dreams.

On that list already was to make more funny noises when eating Sixer’s food, to sit in the front seat of the car more, since Sixer seemed to like it when Bill fiddled with the radio, to sit on the desks in Sixer’s lab, and to reach up for things in the highest cupboards physically, rather than just snapping his fingers to summon things.

In his dreams doing those things provoked Sixer’s subconscious to imagine ways to further those scenarios, but in real life, when Bill tried them, Sixer’s reactions were sadly lacking. The chump had more self-control than Bill gave him credit for.

In his dreams though, he had no trouble taking the initiative.

Bill had only looked away from the screen for a few seconds, off in his own head thinking, and already by the time he returned his focus to the screen Ford had turned around on the couch, facing Bill now, his legs entwined with Bill’s. He pulled off Bill’s sock, still massaging the foot, but his own socked foot had found its way between Bill’s legs and was rubbing against Bill’s crotch, making dream Bill squirm and make more funny noises. The emotions that resonated from the dream now were more of that undeserved pride, smugness, hunger and arousal, all tied up with guilt for even imagining it in the first place.

Bill leaned forward in the chair, watching the screen intently.

What was it that had Ford’s dreams always cycle back to this, to this sort of lewd mistreatment of Bill’s human vessel? Though in the dream, dream Bill didn’t look like he was complaining, he seemed to be liking it, a LOT. It still confused Bill, though as he watched these dreams more and more he was noticing a pattern.

When demons or other powerful creatures can harness the power of worship to sustain them, their power increases incrementally in direct correlation with the intensity of the worship they receive. So when Ford built triangles all over his house, Bill felt his power boost. When they put him on the dollar bill, his powers boosted. Whenever his image was scrawled on a wall, or in the margin of a notebook, or slipped into some sort of mass produced branding, he felt that slight increase in how powerful he was. He could accumulate more power like that, either to keep it as fuel for something big, or burn it slowly over the centuries.

Ford was obsessed with Bill, and that was a form of worship, in a way.

When Ford had his dreams about chasing Bill in the forest, or having tea with the demon, or sharing a packet of jelly beans with him, Bill felt the slightest increase in his powers from that small act of worship, the carving of space for Bill within Ford’s subconscious mind.

When Ford had the sort of dreams he was having now, the ones that got real racy real quick, Bill felt the power he got from Ford’s worship spike right up, like he could absorb four times the juice from the one dream, and that was something that made sitting through Ford’s smut worthwhile.

Though the thought of what peons like Kryptos would think if they saw him sitting here watching Ford’s x rated dreams like this was infuriating.

“You look comfortable boss.”

Ugh.

“Suck the joy outta everything.” Bill muttered and looked around for the book he was reading just
before. It had fallen to hover in space just below Bill’s armchair and he extended his arms into long little noodles to pick the book back up.

COLLEGE MEMORIES was written on the front, and Bill flipped through it again, no longer dwelling on the funny memories of Ford and his elbow patches this read through, remembering the reason he picked the book up in the first place.

“Textbook fees, finals, free food, Frisbee, fractions – aha! F. Gotcha.”

Sixer’s memories were all handwritten entries like those journals he was compiling, which made them all very organised in Ford’s mind, but not as user friendly as being able to pull memories out of the page like Bill would prefer. Watching and inhabiting memories was far better than just reading through them. In this mindscape only Stanford could inhabit the memories fully, Bill always had to read up on them and then reconstruct them if he ever wanted to bring a memory into a dream on purpose. It was good to have safeguards in the mind, just not from Bill.

Resigning himself to reading through the journal for the juicy details, Bill pressed on.

Backupsmore University has been alright so far, despite it not being what I’d hoped for. Mom and Dad helped drive my stuff up to the campus, and the dormitories aren’t as prestigious as the ones in West Coast Tech would have been, so not the accommodations I would have hoped for. Not that I’m bitter.

There is one bright side to moving here though. My new roommate!

Fiddleford H McGucket! The H stands for Hadron like the theoretical particle accelerator in that European paper I read back in high school, though I asked him if his parents knew of his namesake, and he said Hadron was the name of one of the hogs on the farm he grew up on. He’s a rather brilliant young mechanic and he and I seem to be taking quite a few of the same subjects this semester. At first I was a little leery of having a roommate who housed among his possessions a banjo and a spitting pot for chewing tobacco, but I saw as he was unpacking his belongings a 38 sided die. Can it be?

“With pen and paper, shield and sword –” I ventured and he tentatively replied!

“-Our quest shall be our sweet reward.”

HUZZAH! Another Dungeons, Dungeons and more Dungeons player! We quickly launched into a game of our own and stayed up all night playing and getting to know one another over a board game and a bowl of fruit mom had left. He has dreams of designing his own range of personal computers, and has a fair bit of skill in robotics and engineering.

He told me while biting into an apple if he ever made it big after graduating here, I’d see his name everywhere when he established ‘Fiddleford Computermajigs’! I told him perhaps he should work on the name, as it was quite the mouthful.

“You know what’s a mouthful, this ol’ fruit here. But no company’s gonna hit bigtime if you just call it banana, or orange, or apple – ‘s ridiculous!”

Well, when you put it like that, I guess he had a point.

“HAH!” Bill kicked his legs, laughing at Ford’s journal. “Tell that to Steve Jobs.”

Stanford’s journal carried on, and Bill found he rather enjoyed reading Sixer’s naïve young dialogue.
Given that our names are so similar - Fiddleford and Stanford - I suggested I be Ford, and he can be F. He asked me why did he have to be F, why couldn’t I be a letter and he be Fiddleford, and I told him he was missing the point. We left it at that, though I don’t think F liked the decision all too much.

In our first shared lecture on Advanced Particle Physics we were paired with a group of young ladies for our first ever group assignment. F was uncharacteristically silent, perhaps he was feeling a little frazzled talking to so many lovely ladies at once. I myself get a little foolishly elated when talking to girls, but let it not be said that I, Stanford Pines, can’t keep my cool around particle physics and gorgeous women. We negotiated the terms of the group assignment, and swapped phone numbers.

Poor F was stuttering something fierce, and I told him if he didn’t man up and get over it he’d never talk to any girls our age and end up old and alone with a – a racoon wife! Or something ridiculous like that. That snapped him out of it well enough, and he relaxed a little, coming out of his shell more. He hit it off with Patricia, one of the students who came up to Backupsmore from Palo Alto in California. While they chatted, I sorted out the itinerary of the group assignment with Jessica, who seemed less impressed with my meticulous organisational skills than Patricia was with F’s ability to hambone the alphabet. Women. A mystery even science cannot solve.

Bill rolled his eyes. He’d read enough. It was clear from the journal entry that Ford hadn’t really kept contact with his college roommate but there was enough here to go on to track him down properly.

Chucking the book of memories behind him, Bill floated up off the armchair and cracked his knuckles loudly.

“I guess it’s time to prod this thing along a little.”

To the side, the screen displaying Stanford’s dreams had continued playing, the dream going down its own path now Bill wasn’t focusing it’s direction emphatically.

Now in the dream Ford and Bill were sitting together under the blanket on the couch, Bill’s hair a little ruffled. Ford was holding a cup of tea, and had his arm around Bill’s shoulder while Bill cuddled into Ford’s chest. Some inconsequential movie was playing on the TV that the two of them were half-watching. Bill kept stealing Ford’s mug to take sips of the tea, and Ford let him. The emotions resonating from the dream were ones of comfort, happiness and domestic tranquillity.

*What a sap.* Bill thought, before swiping the screen aside, floating away further into the mindscape.

He had a little digging to do.
Ford woke up with a flinch, having slept in too late. He planned to have an earlier start to hike out to Crash Site Omega today, but it was getting closer to 10.30 now. The hike was long, and if he didn’t get there soon it would be dark before he could take any of the parts back to his car.

He had puzzling dreams again, dreams that Ford wanted to ignore given how they made obvious his growing feelings for his muse that were intensifying day by day. Denial was how he coped with a lot of things, and his burgeoning feelings for the irascible Bill Cipher were too compromising to embrace wholeheartedly, so denial it was.

Bill and he were just good friends. That was all.

Friends watched movies together on the couch, and sure, maybe after a long day one friend might give another friend a foot-rub. Ford was staunchly ignoring the other parts of his dream, shaking it off, like he’d been shaking off a lot of things since that fishing trip to Lake Gravity Falls. The more he thought back on that day the more convinced he was that he had imagined the way Bill had tiptoed his fingers up Ford’s chest teasingly, flirtatiously.

Bill wasn’t flirting with Ford, it just wasn’t possible, so Ford repressed it, ignored it, and his subconscious ran rampant because of it.

Of course, ignoring Bill Cipher never went down as well as Ford planned, and that was another reason he wanted to get up earlier than this.

“STANFORD! WHERE ARE MY PANCAKES?”

Ugh. Brilliant.

Ford didn’t really have time to slave over the stove this morning, not if he wanted to get those spaceship parts collected by nightfall, but Bill wasn’t really one to compromise. Ford remembered the singed couch incident.

Perhaps there was a way around it. A middle ground that could be reached.

Bill had already been out on the town once, and the only disaster there was the sea-monster that tried to eat them. Maybe it was time for Bill’s second foray into the general populace.

Climbing out of bed and pulling on his clothes for the day, Ford called out downstairs. This could work. Maybe.

“I’m coming Bill!”

Tapping his fingers on the car door, the window rolled down, Bill wore a sour expression as they pulled up into the parking lot at Greasy’s Diner.

When he said he wanted pancakes, he didn’t mean he wanted this, but nooоooооооооо, Stanford was too busy to cook for Bill today. Compromise, he said. It’ll be fine, he said.
Now Bill was stewing in his own deep dislike of other humans, scowling at the ramshackle establishment made out of a run down train, the slogan ‘Greasy’s – we have food’ blinking in neon noxiously in the middle of the day.

“They do a very good big breakfast here, and we got here just before they switch over to the lunch menu. You haven’t had blueberry pancakes before, you might like them if you try them.” Ford was trying, oh how he was trying.

He knew Bill was upset with him, the uncharacteristic silence and pissed off tapping was a dead giveaway. Ford wasn’t sure if it was because Bill didn’t want to go out among other humans, or just because Bill didn’t get his way, and it was with mounting frustration that Ford was beginning to suspect the latter.

Opening the car door, Ford stepped out and stretched. If they had breakfast now, they had about an hour before they needed to be at the crash site. That was plenty of time to eat, get in the car, drive over there, do the hike to the site, climb down into the ship with the magnet guns, cannibalise the ship’s machinery and carry it out and hike back to the car before sundown.

He closed the car door and paced around to the other side. Bill made no move to get out of the car, still seething in the front seat, glaring at the sign for Greasy’s Diner.

Ford cleared his throat.

Bill ignored him, still scowling in a way that unfortunately due to his features was still attractive. But Ford wasn’t focusing on that today. No sir. He did not consider Bill to be attractive, certainly not now he was being such a selfish pain in the ass.

Ford cleared his throat again, expecting Bill to get out of the car.

Bill’s eyebrow twitched, so it was clear he heard Ford. He just continued ignoring him.

Well if Bill didn’t like it when Ford ignored him, he was about to find out it was a two way street.

“For the love of –“ Ford heaved a sigh, before yanking the car door open, Bill nearly falling out the side. Now Bill was glaring at Ford. Eye contact. That was progress at least. “You’re the one who wanted pancakes so badly. Don’t just sit there, get inside. I want us to make it to the crash site by midday and you’re just – just sitting there!”

“Here’s the deal Sixer –“ Bill began, pointing at Ford, trying to regain the upper hand, looking sinisterly up at the scientist. “You want to half ass things, fine, be my guest, but if I do this for you you’ve gotta do something for me.”

“You –“ Ford spluttered, outraged. “What do you think I’ve been doing for the past month and a half?? I’ve been doing everything for you!”

“You want me to go into that rusty locomotor and play nice with those monkeys?!” Bill pointed at the diner now like Ford was asking him to go into a burning building instead of an innocuous small town restaurant.

“Bill, it’s just pancakes!” Ford gestured with his hands here, making neat little boxes with them. “You go in there, you sit down, and they bring you pancakes to eat. You’re not even the one paying!”

“Uh, wrong Sixer! What if they poison me? I’d be paying with my life!” Bill stressed, patting his own chest to emphasise.
“Oh, don’t be so dramatic. You’re acting like a big baby.”

Bill reared back, a scandalised shocked gasp sounding as he put his hand over his heart like he was deeply offended.

Ford tutted and rolled his eyes. “It’s not even that bad.”

“Not that bad? Not that bad??!! I’ve never been more – well yes I have but that’s beside the point – never more insulted IN MY LIFE!!! In this human body is the span I’m talking about here specifically, in this specific body, but still. IN MY LIFE!!!”

“Well, you are acting dramatically.” Ford shrugged, justifying the comment he hardly thought was as big a deal as Bill was making it out to be.

“IN MY LIFE! And you want me to go in there and just-“ Bill seemed to be working himself up for a tirade, but Ford was having none of it today.

He just didn’t have the patience for it. He was tired of Bill treating him like a slave, ordering him about, making him cook for him, care for him, expecting Ford to complete the portal but being such a hindrance when it came to getting the raw parts they needed. Bill was exasperating, and Ford was exasperated, and things were coming to a head.

“Look, do you want pancakes or not?” Ford said, raising his voice over Bill’s complaints.

“I want YOU to make them for me.” Bill replied.

“Well I’m not going to drive all the way back home, just to make you pancakes, and waste the entire day when – if you don’t quite recall – I actually have important work to be doing, building YOUR portal for YOU, which you’ve given me absolutely NO help on.” Ford fumed, looming over Bill who was still sitting in the car.

“I made you a laser gun.” Bill hissed, like it mattered.

“One laser gun!” Ford conceded, but went on with his rant, holding up a hand to count off on his fingers his comparative feats. “Meanwhile I’ve been scavenging the machinery, rewiring the circuit boards, decoding the blueprints, grafting the parts together, struggling day after day with that particle accelerator, barely managing to assemble scaffolding for the portal that won’t break down it’s composite parts when the gravitational pull of the whole thing kicks off – and what have you been doing?? Sitting on the couch, watching the television, eating me out of house and home!”

“Okay, I did NOT eat your home!” Bill jabbed his finger at Ford, objecting. “But I’m seriously considering it after the sass you just pulled on me.”

“You’ve been no help, you’ve been disrespectful, you set fire to my couch, and I have bent over backwards to make you happy and comfortable – but - but nothing I ever do is good enough for you, is it?” Ford scowled down at Bill, his frustration showing in his eyes and how very close he was to the edge of doing something reckless, something that would leave Bill up shit creek without a paddle. Like kicking him out, or leaving him trapped in the bubble of this town with no food, no resources, and no way out. Or withdrawing his help.

“You’ve been doing fine Sixer.” Bill held up his hands, eyes wide, backtracking, aware that this was a moment he had to tread delicately around the scientists ego. “Fantastic even. Really… good.”

Bill was practically wincing around the words, he hadn’t really lavished praise on Ford at all since
being pulled into this human form, his temper and spite becoming an odd priority. He forgot how obdurate the scientist could get without enough of it. He had to keep Ford buttered up before, a LOT, but he’d been coasting on the guilt that apparently was all used up at this point. Now he actually had to put some effort into keeping Ford on side.

So far Ford didn’t look too impressed with Bill’s sincerity.

“All that stuff you did on the portal – phew – that was … more than I expected. I’m not saying that wasn’t exceptional. First rate stuff. It was. Really. But I’m not helping you with it because it’s not my job, you see? I’m trying to help you. Call your old roommate, call Fiddleford.”

“But I don’t want to call F, I wanted to build the portal with you.” Ford replied stubbornly, leaning one arm on the roof of the car now, looking down at Bill with a frown.

“Compromise.” Bill put his hands together delicately like he was explaining something to a two year old. “I’ve been helping with what I can, but I can’t step in for Fiddleford here. That’s not how it works in the grand scheme of things. So I can help in other ways, different ways, if you call McGucket.”

“Compromise.” Ford said, like he was swilling the word around in his mouth, finding it sour.

“Compromise.” Bill replied, saying it again like he was talking to an infant.

“So if I call McGucket and compromise, then you’ll stop sitting in this car, arguing with me, expecting me to cook for you every day, and compromise and just eat the pancakes in the diner like I suggested? That sort of compromise?” Ford’s expression looked more smug now than anything, which was so damn grating. Looking down at Bill over his stupid glasses with that stupid smug smirk.

Bill glared at Sixer and his dumb smug face.

He was doing this on purpose.

“I hate you.”

“I’m sure you do.” Ford said flippantly, like he believed exactly the opposite was true. He turned and began walking over to the entrance to the diner, calling over his shoulder like he was enticing Bill. “I’ll buy you the blueberry pancakes and the chocolate chip. If you don’t like the blueberry I’ll eat them for you, they’re my favourite kind.”

“They’re my favourite kind.” Bill mocked Ford, his voice high pitched and his expression sour.

Resigning himself to this he stepped out of the car and slammed the car door behind him, walking to follow Sixer into the diner, muttering.

“Unworthy of the secrets of the cosmos. Doing this on purpose. Hey unworthy one! I’m not going in there alone, slow down. I can’t believe this bullshit, you’re a real piece of work you know that Sixer?”

“Said the pot to the kettle.” Ford said in reply, beguilingly vague.

“What did you just call me?”
The bell above the diner door rang when they entered, Bill following closely behind Stanford, holding onto the back of Ford’s coat for security.

Not waiting for service, Ford strode right over to one of the booths by the window, Bill looking suspiciously at the other occupants of the diner before sliding into the plush booth chair opposite Ford.

Ford pulled the menu’s out from the rack at the end of the table and passed one to Bill, still wearing that smug smile, enjoying watching Bill struggle slightly with being in the diner, so suspicious of everything.

Bill snatched the menu from Ford and folded it open, burying his nose in it, partially to hide from the rest of the diner. When they entered there was a decided uptick in gossipy whispers which made Bill uneasy. Bill was holding his menu up like a wall between him and the rest of the world, but when he peeked over the top he could see Sixer smirking at him, amused. He also saw a curvy young lady walking over to them with a pot of some sort of scalding liquid.

“Well look who it is. Stan Pines. We haven’t seen you here for a while.” The lady was young, possibly in her twenties. She had her brunette hair tied up in a pony tail, wore vibrant peachy lipstick, thick mascara, and a dowdy pink dress and white apron with a badge pinned to her chest reading ‘Stacey’. She also seemed to be chewing gum. “Suzie’s gonna be kicking herself she’s not here – you know how she grills you about all your scientific whatsits. She likes a Mr Mystery. Who’s your friend?”

“Hullo Stacey.” Ford looked up at her and smiled. “I’m not much of a mystery today. Just here for some pancakes. This is Bill.”

Bill glared at Stanford for dragging him into the conversation, but managed to nod cordially at Stacey, eyeing off the pot of hot black liquid steaming in her hand.

“You want some coffee shy guy?” Stacey asked, seeing the way Bill was eyeing off the coffee pot. Stanford sucked in a cautious breath, having deliberately kept Bill away from caffeine for a reason, and Bill, seeing Stanford’s hesitation, immediately slid the white mug that was near the menu rack over to Stacey’s side of the table, just to spite Ford.

Stacey smiled and poured the coffee into Bill’s cup, and then poured a cup for Stanford. “Another Mr Mystery here. Well Bill, it was a pleasure to meet you. I’ll give you all some time to decide on your order.”

As Stacey walked away, Bill turned to Ford with his own smug smile now, having successfully procured the illicit coffee AND survived the encounter with the human woman leaving her thinking he was a mystery. Of course he was a mystery. He was suave in sixty billion dimensions, or at least he’d tell you that.

Ford sighed, and reached for the sugar packets from the rack, tearing them open and pouring them into his coffee. Bill, mimicking Ford, took two of the little paper packets from the rack as well and poured them into his own coffee, feeling adept.

“You just put pepper in your coffee Bill.” Ford pointed out.

“Maybe I meant to do that.” Bill sneered in reply.

Ford rolled his eyes – knowing the Muse’s love of all things spicy he’d probably enjoy it – and reached over to tap Bill’s menu. “Look through there and pick your order.”
“I thought it was those two you were ordering. The *favourite kind.*” Bill mocked, crossing his arms.

“Well, I can order for you, but I figured, since you’re willing to compromise with me, you may as well choose for yourself what you like.” Ford shrugged, pouring two packets of creamer into his coffee and stirring.

Bill was momentarily stumped by Ford’s fairness here. Part of him was a little wary of Ford, since the whole argument they just had in the car. He didn’t think Ford would be treating him this fairly even after their little tiff. He suspected an agenda at work.

“You’re being awfully nice.”

“If you put aside your suspicion for two seconds you’ll find that most people here generally are.” Ford replied, taking a sip of his coffee.

Bill considered that, still watching Ford suspiciously, and took a sip of his own coffee, blanching at the taste.

“Uuuuuughhh.” Bill made a funny sound, and looked down at his coffee dubiously. “How can you drink this?”

“By not putting pepper in it, for a start.” Ford said, amused. “It’s much better with cream and sugar.”

“Swap with me. I want your one.” Bill made grabby hands at Ford’s cup of coffee, pushing his own across the table at the scientist.

“No, you don’t just – ugh.” Ford’s protestations faded as Bill just swiped his coffee away from him regardless. “Fine. I prefer tea anyway.”

Bill looked smugly across at Ford over the rim of his stolen coffee cup, inhaling the scent. “See, it works out better this way. You get your alphabet drink, and I relieve you of this, which you clearly didn’t want in the first place.”

Ford watched sourly while Bill sipped the coffee making one of his delighted murmurs at the taste. His Muse could twist anything to suit his logic, which was one of those things Stanford was coming to annoyingly admire.

“Just pick the damn pancakes Bill.”

“Oooooh, feisty Sixer. You should compromise with me more often.”

Ford raised his eyebrows at that, but didn’t give Bill the satisfaction of a response.

Perusing his own menu, Ford debated whether he should get the big breakfast or just pancakes with a side of scrambled eggs and bacon. Mentally chastising himself for his justification (*If I buy the Big Breakfast there’s more for Bill to try to see what he likes.*) he decided to stubbornly order the smaller dish, telling himself he was done bending over backwards for Bill’s absent gratitude.

Rather than watch Bill smugly peer at his own menu, Ford looked around the diner, seeing who was in today.

It was just before the lunchtime rush, the truckers and lumberjacks were still out working their shifts. Once they clock out they’d all be coming in to the diner though, it was part of the ritual of
Gravity Falls, the way certain cycles repeated themselves.

Over behind the counter Mrs Wentworth worked the kitchens, tapping the order up bell intermittently. Her daughters Suzie and Stacey worked at the diner in shifts, supporting the family business, and Mr Wentworth occasionally did repairs in the diner, though less and less now due to his bad back. Ford could see him sitting at the end of the counter, his toolbox on the seat beside him, sipping on an orange juice while Mrs Wentworth bustled along behind the counter, checking on him and the other customers. Mrs Wentworth was a portly, cheerful woman with greying hair, and her husband was reedy and thin by comparison, with a hunched back and yellowed teeth. Too much diner coffee.

Stacey was friendly enough. She was studying accounting at the community college one town over, and she did the books for her family’s business. She always knew the town’s latest gossip and didn’t mind sharing it, which Ford sometimes found useful.

Suzie was something else. A year younger than her sister, though they looked nearly identical, Susan Wentworth was an entirely different creature. At first Ford thought she was being paid to spy on him and steal his patents, given how interested she seemed to be in what he got up to out at the shack, his suspicion intensified when she sat across from him in his booth one day, twirling a lock of curly brown hair around her finger telling Stanford she would “pay to see what goes on in that Shack. Wink.” While winking deliberately at him. Ford became rather cold towards her after that, not wanting to invite someone who literally tried to bribe him into his life where she could potentially steal his brilliant inventions. She continued to greet him whenever she saw him in town though, obnoxiously loudly with that grating accent of hers.

Thankfully Suzie wasn’t at the diner today, but her friend Willow was, sitting by the counter, chatting away to Stacey. Willow always had her long red hair meticulously styled into a rockabilly beehive that was about twenty years too late, by Ford’s guesstimate, and it didn’t matter how early or late in the day Ford ran into her, she never had a hair out of place.

He once saw her at 5am in the morning while he was jogging through a forest trail. She was carrying a heavy stack of firewood back to her house, her hair done up in that intricate up-do. She stopped, shifting the mammoth pile of firewood to one arm, uncannily strong, to wave at Stanford and ask him why the hell was he jogging wearing a turtleneck. “You look like a cooked tortoise.” She yelled out at him. Willow wasn’t the politest young lady, she was certainly outspoken, but she had always seemed decent to Ford. She liked gossip just as much as Stacey did, though she was never mean spirited about it.

In the middle of the counter sat Deputy Daryl Blubs, in uniform, shovelling pancakes into his mouth, getting syrup in his handlebar moustache. He almost perpetually wore sunglasses, aviators right out of a good cop-bad cop straight to video movie. The uniform, sunglasses, moustache and budding afro made Deputy Blubs quite the sight. Ford’s interactions with the man found Blubs to be mostly harmless, though not nearly observant enough to be a police officer. Ford had run into him several times, driving a car piled up with sparking bits of alien machinery, and Blubs only pulled him over once, asking what all the appliances were for. Ford told him it was so he could fix his refrigerator, sweating bullets, having never lied to the police before, but Blubs simply accepted his excuse and sent him on his way, wishing him luck with fixing the refrigerator before summer sets in.

Usually Deputy Blubs worked with the Sheriff, but the Sheriff had been away on holiday for the past few weeks, taking his yearly leave in the Bahamas with his wife and family. It wasn’t a comforting thought that the town was left in the hands of Deputy Blubs and the other Cadets, who hardly seemed capable of dealing with the chaotic and dangerous forces that acted in Gravity Falls,
but so far there hadn’t been any major disasters. Ford assumed. He hadn’t really been paying attention, since he’d been rather distracted by Bill ever since he arrived on this earthly plane.

Speaking of Bill, he seemed to be staring rather intently at Ford, to the point where, despite his concerted efforts to ignore Bill, Ford felt the hair on the back of his neck stand from all the attention.

“Are you ready to order?” Ford asked Bill, unable to contend with that prickling feeling.

“When are you going to call McGucket?” Bill said instead, staring intently into Ford’s eyes now that he was acknowledging him.

“Eventually. Not now.” Ford replied, irritated by the direction of Bill’s prying.

“Do you even have his number?”

“It’s somewhere back at the shack. I think. It doesn’t matter anyway. I’m sure I can look it up.”

“Fiddleford Computermajigs has a listing in Palo Alto.” Bill said, fiddling with his napkin.

“How do you know that?” Ford asked Bill stubbornly.

“All knowing. All powerful. Incredibly good looking.” Bill said, about himself, looking at Stanford like he was a few apples short of an orchard. “You’d think that after two years you’d stop asking me that question and just trust me.”

“Fine. I’ll look him up.” Ford didn’t comment on the ‘trust me’ he wasn’t too sure he wanted to trust Bill in the mood he was in right now.

“When?” Bill pressed.

“When we get home. Later.” Ford said with finality. “Now tell me your order so we can get on with this.”

“So touchy today.” Bill couldn’t resist commenting. “I’ll have the Golden Pancakes, the big stack, with a side of this chilli that’s supposedly world famous. I’ve never heard of it before, I guess they were shooting for famous and wound up infamous instead, and I like those odds.”

“Every diner calls their chilli ‘world famous’. It’s a tired marketing ploy, overused and redundant.” Ford shucked his jacket and rolled up the sleeves of his sweater, settling down in the warm diner finally.

“You tell ‘em tiger. Seriously. Stacey with an E-Y is coming back and I don’t want to talk to her.”

“You’ll have to talk to other humans sometime.” Ford said, tired amusement sneaking into his voice.

Bill stuck his tongue out at Ford immaturely, and ducked back down behind his own menu.

“You boys ready to order?” Stacey asked. She looked to Bill first, but Bill turned his head to Stanford, stubbornly refusing to order first. He just didn’t want to talk to other humans, and he wasn’t about to let Sixer boss him around.

Ford sighed, and resigned himself to the fact that Bill wouldn’t socialise if he didn’t want to. Muses were peculiar beings. Bill often spoke about how he didn’t appear to just anyone, granting his wisdom willy nilly. Perhaps Bill’s fussiness with who he associated with was part of his Muse
“An excellent choice.” Stacey said, oblivious to Ford mentally berating himself for being a pushover. “How would you like your eggs?”

“Sunny side up, if you could.”

“Coming right up.” Stacey dotted the page with a flourish, before turning on her heel back to the kitchens.

Ford noticed when Stacey went back to the counter, Willow leaned over to whisper to the waitress, throwing conspiratorial looks back over to their table. Willow was smirking, which made Ford somewhat nervous, but he decided to ignore that anxious prickle. He reasoned he was too old to get nervous about girls gossiping about him. He wasn’t in high school anymore.

He jumped slightly when he felt something brush against his leg under the table, but it was just Bill, nudging him with his foot to get his attention.

“So what’s got your panties in a twist today?”

“I – didn’t sleep well.” Ford replied cagily.

“Oh?” Bill didn’t seem to believe him. “Interesting dreams?”

“Bad dreams.” Ford grumbled, shifting in his seat.

Pfft, yeah right. Bill thought. Out loud he said. “Gee Sixer, that’s too bad. Maybe I could help you out with that.”

“What can you do?” Ford asked, suspicious. “I thought you couldn’t visit my dreams the way you used to like this.”

“This form has changed things for me.” Bill said, cleverly choosing to keep his words at half-truths rather than outright lies. “But if you unbind another brick, maybe I can be a bit more helpful. It can’t hurt to try.”

“I told you no more bricks until you started behaving yourself.” Ford said, sticking to his guns on principle.

“Hey, I’ve been SO good lately. I haven’t burnt anything you wanted to keep, I’ve been helping you with your research – I saved you from a Lovecraftian horror, remember that? That’s practically a life-debt there you owe me.”

“You were saving your own skin too.” Ford bristled at the implication of owing a life-debt to Bill. If he ever admitted to it Bill would hold it over his head forever, never letting it go.

Bill shrugged, and began laying out sugar packets in triangles on the table. “You know what power I miss? Levitation. Walking everywhere is so pedestrian.”
“Mmhmm.” Ford raised and eyebrow at the pun, that fond amusement creeping back into his features.

“I’m sure you’ll be missing giving gravity the middle finger – fingers for you I guess, when you’re carrying all that heavy equipment back up from the spaceship.” Bill continued, making more triangles with the sugar packets now, a line of triangles spreading across the table.

“The magnet gun can handle it.” Ford replied.

“Ah but you’ll have to handle the magnet gun.” Bill pointed out. “I’m only looking out for you. You’re not supposed to develop back problems until you’re 62 you know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ford scratched the side of his neck, grazing stubble.

“You’ll change your tune.” Bill sat back, admiring his handiwork, the row of sugar triangles looking back up at him. “You can’t keep me stifled forever.”

“I’m not trying to stifle you.” Ford sighed, and rubbed his chin, feeling the stubble creeping back in.

“You’re not trying not to either.” Bill said, unimpressed.

That stumped Ford, he hadn’t considered it that way, but Bill was very good at showing Ford things he hadn’t considered. Rubbing his chin, pondering whether he was stifling the Muse (considering he’d been a cosmic entity with unlimited scope before, the answer was - definitely) Stanford considered the fairness of the way he was treating Bill. Bill always managed to guilt Ford into effectively going back on his definite decisions when they impacted the Muse unduly. Once again Stanford assumed he wasn’t fully understanding the consequences of stripping so much power from Bill, and how that would translate to difficulty adjusting to living happily here.

“You’re not happy like this, are you?” Ford couldn’t help but ask.

Bill opened his mouth to reply, but said nothing, and then shut his mouth sharply. He fiddled with his sugar triangles.

Ford seemed to be sighing a lot today.

“Alright. We’ll try another brick I guess.” Ford ran a hand through his hair, massaging his temples as he went, hoping this decision wasn’t going to develop into an enormous headache in the future.

Looking over at Bill, seeing that bright excited smile creep back over his features, Ford realised it had been a while since he saw Bill smile like that.

“Today?”

“Why not.” Ford said, giving in.

Sure, he was a pushover for Bill sometimes. Sometimes he deserved it. He was the one who trapped Bill here in the first place, selfishly. He hadn’t really stopped guilting himself for that, not that Bill really let him.

Bill drummed his fingertips on the table and smiled down at his sugar triangles happily. He liked this new tune Sixer turned to, and so quickly too. It was almost too good.

“We’ll compromise.” Ford continued, causing Bill to look up. Again with the C word. “I’ll unbind
one brick if you help me carry the parts back up from the spaceship.”

“So this is how it’s gonna be now. A deal for a deal.” Bill mused. “You wouldn’t just do it out of the goodness of your heart now would you?”

“Would you?” Ford asked Bill back, smiling slightly.

“Touché.”

They sat across from one another, oddly content from the simple understanding of one another that they seemed to have developed over the weeks.

It was comforting for Bill, not having to front or keep up appearances around Sixer. Some things Ford could never know about Bill, but those things hadn’t really come up. So it was comfortable, to be himself around him. There was no posturing, no grandstanding power ploys. It was that vacation feeling from before. It was relaxing, and oddly endearing that Ford knew him more, accepted him as he was. It was nice, being known. Bill liked it. When Ford asked Bill if he was happy, he didn’t know what to say. Was this happiness? Bill thought he knew what happy looked like, and it didn’t look like this normally, but he was feeling light enough lately that it could be happiness, and that was something quite frankly boggling.

Ford seemed to enjoy the comfortable understanding they’d developed too, mostly because of the fact that he was enjoying getting to know who his Muse really was. The differences between what Ford expected from Bill and what Bill was actually like never ceased to intrigue him. He found Bill to be endearing, the more he came to know about him, all his odd eccentricities and traits. Sure, Bill was selfish, self-serving, aggravating, and egotistical – but he was also charming in his own way. And he did try to help Ford, sometimes.

Maybe when it boiled down to it, Ford just enjoyed Bill’s company. He had enjoyed it before, when Bill visited his dreams. He was enjoying it even more now that he had Bill around 24/7.

Maybe in his own way, Bill was slightly enjoying Ford’s company also.

That was something that was understood too. An unspoken understanding. That comradery.

Sometime while Bill and Ford were talking, the lumberjacks came in for their lunchbreak, pouring into the other booths in the diner and along the counter, ordering steak sandwiches and other hearty meals. The diner was louder and more packed now that they were all here, but somehow Ford and Bill were in their own little bubble, entertaining each other.

Stacey returned with their meals and placed them down on the table. Ford’s big breakfast looked sumptuous. Looking down at his plate, he saw that his bacon, eggs, and sausage links had been arranged into a gauche sort of smiley face.

He heard giggling from over by the counter and looked up to see Willow laughing with Suzie, who looked out of breath, like she’d run to the diner. She waved over at him, and Ford pretended he didn’t see her there.

Bill seemed amused. “Now that’s a dilemma for your conscience. Are you really going to eat its face?”

Stacey seemed surprised that Bill was talking, his voice not exactly what she expected.

Ford snorted a laugh. “Somehow I’ll live with the guilt.”
“Aww, but it’s smiling at you Sixer. It looks so happy.” Now that was what happiness looked like, egg yolk eyes and a sausage link grimace. Textbook happy face right there.

“Can I get you boys anything else?” Stacey asked, interrupting.

Ford was about to open his mouth to reply, when Bill spoke up, turning to Stacey with one of his wide grins.

“I don’t know? Can you?” His smile was a little too wide for the next three seconds, intense and unnerving, before he laughed. “Hahah, just kidding, that’s all for now. If that changes you’ll be the third to know.”

“Well, alrighty then.” Stacey replied, backing away from the table, somehow feeling vaguely perturbed by the full force of Bill’s wide grin. “Enjoy!”

Ford made an impressed expression at Bill that was only a little insincere. “Good to see you making friends.”

“No. Not making friends. No friends being made there.” Bill crossed his arms and shook his head firmly.

“It’d be good if you made more friends in this town Bill.”

“What do I need more for? I already have you.” Bill said dismissively, but somehow Ford was oddly touched by his throwaway comment.

Ford began tucking into his big breakfast, finding himself rather hungry, and across from him Bill cut his pancakes into perfect triangles, before dousing the little equilaterals in syrup. If Ford slid his hash browns onto Bill’s plate, no one had to know.

Ford was midway through devouring his bacon when he heard it. Normally hearing it was one of the little delights of his day that he internalised, and then repressed along with the warm feeling in his stomach it caused, and went on with his life.

But hearing it in public…

“MMMMMMMM!”

Ford felt his cheeks heat up. He looked down at his plate, his eggs smiling back up at him, as the noises continued.

“Ahhhh mmmmmmm. Shoo ghood.”

Other people in the diner were looking over at them, turning around in their booths.

Having demolished his meal at light speed, Bill was licking syrup off his fingers now, making smacking noises with his lips.

Ford was beginning to sweat under his turtleneck.

“Bill, can you keep it down?” Ford asked awkwardly. “People are watching.”

Bill paused, looking at Ford with surprise, his pinky finger still in his mouth. The pancakes were all gone, he ate them that quickly. He pulled the finger from his mouth with a wet pop.

“What? Don’t worry Fordsy, I still like yours better.” Bill wagged his wet index finger at Ford
chiding him.

“It’s not a–” Ford cleared his throat, before lowering his voice, leaning conspiratorially across the table. “We are in a public place.”

“Did you hear that lads? Twenty bucks, I called it!” Guffawed one of the lumberjacks in a booth just along from Bill and Ford, slapping his hand down onto the table.

Bill looked up, a small frown scrunching the space between his eyebrows.

“What did they call?” Bill asked, curious, though Ford could see his eyes sharpening like daggers.

“Leave it Bill, it’s not important.” Ford ushered Bill to sit back down, to leave it, but Bill barely listened to Ford on a good day.

“They placed bets. On what? I wanna know.”

“It’s nothing. It’s not important. Some nonsense that has nothing to do with us. You haven’t touched your chilli.”

“I tried it. It doesn’t taste famous enough.” Bill said, trying to peer around Ford to eye off the lumberjacks sitting in the booth behind him, already glaring at them, or he would be glaring at them if Ford didn’t keep moving to block his view.

“So you’re done now? Great. Let’s get moving.” Ford careened his neck this way and that to stop Bill from picking a fight with the lumberjacks. There must have been about twenty of them in the diner, they all knew each other, and if Bill picked a fight with one of them Ford had no doubt he’d be picking a fight with all of them.

“Already? We just got here.” Bill said suspiciously. Stanford was already getting up, scooching out along his seat to leave. Bill stubbornly sat in his seat, not wanting to be moved before he got to challenge his would be mockers.

Ford put his coat on and walked over to Bill’s side of the booth, putting his arm on the back of Bill’s chair. He leaned close to Bill and whispered to him. “The sooner we leave the sooner I can unbind that brick for you.”

Bill stared stubbornly up at Ford for a while, debating whether his desire to stay and intimidate yokels was greater than his desire to have his magic unbound.

“Fine.” Bill said, reaching a decision. “Fine.” He grabbed as many sugar packets as he could, swiping them out of their triangular arrangements, to shove them into his pockets, standing up to leave. “But I’m holding you to that.”

Ford rolled his eyes and straightened his coat, before walking over to the counter to pay, Bill following close behind.

Stacey was busy bussing trays to the tables, so Suzie rung up the sale for them, despite it being her day off. Her friend Willow was hanging around the register too, leaning on the counter staring at Bill and Ford, blowing bubblegum, the pink bubble expanding and popping before she dragged it back in her mouth to chew it again.

“Didja like your meal? I made the smiley face just for yooooo!” Suzie said cheerily as she checked the meal slip and worked out the cost on the chunky calculator by the till.
“Yes. It was – lovely.” Ford said, barely meaning it. “How much do I owe you?”

“That’ll be $38 with tax but because you’re such a cutie, today it’s only $35. Wink.” Suzie winked in that exaggerated manner of hers.

Ford fished around in his coat for his wallet, mentally calculating what tip he should give. Bill was looking behind Ford at the table with the lumberjacks, glaring at them for good measure.

While Ford was busy searching through his pockets, Willow elbowed her friend, and Suzie blushed and shook her head. Willow rolled her eyes, and popped another bubble, before speaking up.

“You know, that drive in movie theatre opened up downtown. They just set up a projector, some speakers and a sheet in the middle of the field and you drive on in and see what’s on. You two should go sometime.”

“Us?” Ford looked up, wallet in hand, blinking behind his big glasses, thinking Willow was talking about him and Bill.

“You and Suzie.” Willow clarified, and blew another bubble. “You two’d enjoy it, it’d be a scream.”

Ford blanched, finally noticing how Suzie was looking at him, blushing, her eyes shining with unspoken pleas. He looked at Willow, his own eyes a little desperate and shocked, not sure how to get out of this situation.

Bill was watching Ford now too, curious about this new development. For personal reasons.

“Oh, I don’t know. I’ve been so busy, and I can’t just leave Bill alone. He’s new in town, he doesn’t know anyone.” Ford said, hoping that excuse would cut it.

“He can come too.” Suzie blurted out, trying to douse Ford’s excuses. “We can all go. Right Willow? Double up?”

Willow popped another bubble, giving Suzie an unimpressed look before extending that unimpressed look to Bill, who met her gaze and seemed similarly dissatisfied with what he saw.

“Sure.” Willow said dourly, her voice deadpan. “We can all go. It’s next Thursday night, you in?”

Ford looked backed into a corner here, the peer pressure was something he wasn’t used to. He looked trapped, like he couldn’t figure out a way to say no politely, and his indecision was taking too long for Bill’s liking, so he stepped on Stanford’s foot, trying to dissuade him from signing them both up to some arduous outing with other humans.

“Ow - oh, I’m not –“ Ford began, before a loud voice called out from over by the counter.

“Don’t hold your breath girls. He won’t go. He ain’t the type.” A broad chested ginger man sporting a stubbly beard sneered at them both, his tone mocking and dismissive.

“Dan, who the hell asked you?” Willow snapped at the lumberjack, cross at him for ruining Suzie’s shot at finally asking Stan Pines out. Along the counter Deputy Blubs slowed his rapid pancake eating to watch this altercation, frowning.

“I’m just saying.” Dan shrugged, several of his lumberjack friends patting him on the back, elbowing each other. “You’re wasting your time. You oughta ask out a real man, and not two pansies.”
Stanford’s eyebrows furrowed. He seemed to be grinding his teeth and his chin was jutting out stubbornly.

Bill recognised that look. That wasn’t a good sign.

Before Bill could step on Ford’s foot again, Ford straightened up tall, and, looking directly at Dan while he spoke, he replied.

“Next Thursday is it? I guess we’ll see you there.” Ford handed Suzie a $50 note, making her tip much more substantial than it would have been. “Keep the change.”

Suzie took the fifty with stars in her eyes, looking over the moon that Stan Pines had finally said yes to a date with her. Fumbling, she put the money in the register, then scribbled her phone number down on one of the spare notebooks kept behind the counter for taking orders down, ripped the page off, and pressed it into Ford’s hand.

“Call me!”

Stuffing the crumpled paper into his coat pocket, Ford nodded goodbye to them all then walked out of the diner, the bell ringing loudly as the door slammed behind him as he left.

The bell jangled again as Bill marched out of the diner seconds later, his shoulders squared with irritability.

“What was that?”

“Hmm?” Ford looked up at Bill, having already made his way over to the car, opening the driver’s side door.

“You just left me in there.” Bill complained, stomping over to the passenger’s side, wrenching the door open. They both slid into their respective seats and closed the car doors behind them.

“Sorry. I was making a dramatic exit.” Ford replied absently, still riding on the glory of that moment, the moment of sticking it to the man, or in this case, Manly Dan, who had been blatantly rude.

“And you say I’m the dramatic one.” Bill rolled his eyes and buckled his seatbelt.

Ford snapped out of his absent musing when he looked at his watch. Was that the time already?

“We’ve got to get moving if we want to make it to the crash site and back before it gets dark.”

And with that Ford began to drive.

“Ah, I knew I should have grabbed some salt from the diner.”

“It’s fine. I told you, you don’t need it. It’s unnecessary paranoia.”

“Still, I don’t like deviating from the ritual. Something could go wrong.”

Bill put his hands on his hips, tapping his foot on the metal floor.

“Stanford Pines, I am an all knowing cosmic entity, and I’ve seen a lot more rituals than you ever have. Would it kill you to trust me a little? Nothing’s going to go wrong. You have everything you
Ford paused, considering. They were deep within the belly of the spaceship, having abseiled down with the magnet guns and walked through to the wide open anti-chamber below.

“Fine.” Ford conceded, before pulling a knife out of his pocket. “I should have at least brought the original paper along with me, I don’t want to do the circle wrong.”

“I’ll be checking your work all the way. Don’t you worry. I know what it’s supposed to look like.” Bill assured him, stepping closer.

Ford pressed the knife to his fingertip and blood bubbled up, beginning to ooze out of the cut. Bill watched, fascinated, as Sixer squeezed the cut to get the blood flowing before kneeling down, etching out the basic structure of the circle on the floor with his own blood.

“You need an intersecting semi-circle there.” Bill commented, and Ford adjusted his design.

“That rune needs to slant for Eye, not Ah.”

“Put a triangle on that left brick. No, sixty degrees, sixty.”

This went on for a while, until the circle was done.

Ford noticed some differences between Bill’s directed design and the design he had done on the past circles several weeks ago. It seemed more personalised now, there were more triangles, an eye in the centre of the circle, some sacred geometry.

“The sacred geometry’s an interesting touch.” Ford remarked, looking down at the completed circle.

“Who do you think invented it?” Bill scoffed, boasting.

“Alright. I suppose we should get to it then. Are you sure we won’t be needing the salt?” Ford questioned, feeling like he was missing an essential precaution.

“Positive.” Bill replied, stepping into the circle.

He held out his arm, but before Ford could hold it, Bill grabbed Ford’s hand. A wisp of blue fire flared over the cut on Ford’s finger, and the cut sealed, healing like it was never there.

“There. Can’t have you dripping for no reason.”

Ford hadn’t expected Bill to heal his cut, and was pleasantly surprised. He’d never seen Bill use his healing magic on anyone but himself before.

Again, he felt special.

“Thank you Bill.”

“See, I’m totally helpful.” Bill said in reply, still holding onto Sixer’s hand.

“Well then, I suppose we should start.” Ford said, when Bill didn’t let go of his hand. He had to shimmy his hand out and around so he could hold onto Bill’s arm, rolling up the sleeve and concentrating on the brick he was going to unbind.

“Aurum filum. Exaudi orationem meam.”
Bill felt the air shift in the anti-chamber, the musty too-still air suddenly windswept as the runes glowed red at their feet. He watched, while Sixer chanted, as the gold lines of his tattoo lifted in the air like thread, unravelling the one brick, and hovered there, the ritual turning the skin where the gold had been black.

“Tollite lapidem.
Aurum et nigri.
Reduc ad eum.”

Ford looked good like this, ominous red light glinting off his glasses, the wind sweeping his long coat around like some futuristic revolutionary. He looked powerful. Bill found himself oddly impressed. Power was a good look for Sixer. Especially power used in the service of Bill.

“Da magicae retro.
Aurum et nigri.
Da magicae retro.
Aurum et nigri.”

The light faded out, and the golden string disintegrated in the air. Ford took his hand off Bill’s arm and looked at the black line that replaced the brick. That was four bricks unbound now. There were still plenty more to go, on his left arm and his right arm, but for now, his left arm was a third unbound.

“Try levitating that backpack.” Ford pointed at the backpack he set down by a column.

Bill looked at the backpack for a while. He seemed to be concentrating very hard. Nothing was happening. He frowned.

“Do I just -?” Bill clicked and nothing happened. He focused harder, and raised his hand, and finally, the backpack began to hover a few feet off the ground.

“It’s working!” Ford cheered.

“Yeah, but I used to be able to do this without moving at all. Ugh, effort.” Bill complained, though now he realised his levitation worked with hand gestures he was quickly getting the hang of it, moving the backpack up and down in the air, wiggling it around in funny formations.

Dropping the backpack, Bill tried to focus on himself, willing himself off the ground, making sweeping movements with his hands that looked like he was trying to jump off the floor. He looked like he was swimming a very peculiar type of breaststroke. The concentration and frustration twisted Bill’s face and he looked angrier as the seconds dragged on.

“ARGH! I wanted to float again dammit!”

“Oh, so that’s what you were trying to do.” Ford said, snickering.

“Are you laughing at me?” Bill turned on Ford, who was trying to hide his smile behind his hand now, his eyes betraying his amusement.

“At you? Never.” Ford said sarcastically, still smirking, even when Bill stepped right up into his personal space, pointing a stubborn finger at Ford’s chest.
“You’re lucky you’re so important Sixer. That’s all I’m saying.”

“Oh, you think I’m important. That’s nice.” Ford was no longer hiding his smile, looking impossibly smug.

Bill fumed, looking up at Sixer’s smug smirk, hating the scientist for being so damn superior.

He curled the finger that was jabbing into Sixer’s chest into a ball, and rested his fist flat over Sixer’s heart, feeling it pumping away.

“You are important.” Bill said, focusing on the beating of Sixer’s heart, hammering away under his clothes and skin, feeling his heart rate increase when Bill said that, and begin to jackhammer when Bill looked up at his face again, leaning forward. Sixer was reacting to him, even if he didn’t realise, and that comforted Bill, reminded him who still held the power here.

Ford seemed stunned, frozen to the spot with Bill’s hand over his heart, the Muse right up in his space, head tilted up to meet Ford’s eyes. He was struck again by those butterflies he tried to swallow around Bill, swarming up his throat, making it hard for him to speak. He could only watch Bill’s vibrant yellow eyes stare right through him, colour creeping up Ford’s ears.

“And you’ve already got a big enough head.” Bill said, bringing his hand up to flick Ford on the nose, backing away sharply. “So don’t get used to hearing it.”

Pacing away Bill felt the treachery that was his own human body. He had felt it. His own heart, picking up the pace.

What on earth was happening?

Walking over to the backpack, slinging it over his shoulder, Bill tried to regain control over the situation by making it look like he knew where he was going.

“Come on, you can scrap some molybdenum from the tables in the cafeteria.”

“Cafeteria?” Ford questioned, regaining his decorum, following Bill through the spaceship.

“Hey, everyone’s gotta eat. Even the navigationally challenged pan-dimensional beings of Trilazzx Beta.”

“So you know these creatures?” Ford’s voice echoed as they walked together through one of the spaceship’s narrow corridors.

“All knowing. Keep up kid, do I have to keep reminding you?”

As the sound of their footsteps clattering on the metal drifted farther and farther away from the anti-chamber, a peculiar rattling sounded, a soft tap tap tapping noise from behind one of the panels in the column of the anti-chamber.

Stowed away inside the column of the spacecraft, behind the panel, a large blue egg began rocking from side to side.

The tiny tap tap tapping sound continued.

The sound of the creature inside of it waking up.
Yep, that's Dan Corduroy. Don't worry, he's getting some character development soon. Also ten points for whoever spots Wendy's mom. We all know what happened to her in the end.
Ring, ring, why don't you give me a call?

Welding helmet shielding his face, Ford stared intently at the metal he had scrapped from the crash site, sparks from the welding gun flying every which way, the loud grating noise of the metal screeching drowning out all other sounds.

“-Anford?”

Ford couldn’t hear anything. It was just him and his welding. Welding was nice and loud, intentionally so. He felt his hands warm under his improved safety gloves (adding the extra finger to the gloves was a health and safety necessity) and continued to weld.

“-Tanford Pines. Are you listening to me?”

No, he couldn’t hear anything. Nothing at all.

“You better not be ignoring me. Hey!”

Ford didn’t bother to turn around, but he didn’t have to. Because the next second a pillar of blue flames erupted on the metal Ford had been welding, causing him to rear back and drop his welding gun.

Ford backed away with a shout, his hands pinwheeling as he fell down on his rear on the floor of the lab. The flames disappeared as quickly as they came, and Ford became aware of a familiar pair of trousers standing just to the side of him. He recognised those trousers because he bought them himself for Bill. Ford pulled the welding helmet up off his face and craned his neck back to look up at Bill.

“Finally.” Bill put his hands on his hips and looked down at Ford impatiently.

“Bill! I said no fire in the house!” Ford blustered, trying to hide his shock.

“We’re not in the house, we’re in the lab.” Bill replied, shrugging.

“The lab is IN the house.” Ford said, stressing the point.

“Eh, semantics.” Bill waved his hand dismissively. “So anyway, about this phone number.”

Ford groaned and instead of moving to stand up he just lay back fully to recline on the ground, and slammed his welding helmet shut, shielding his face from Bill’s incessant nagging.

“Uh uh. Nope. You’re not avoiding me this time.” Bill said testily.

“Go away Bill.” Ford groaned, his voice sounding tinny and childish from behind the welding visor. “Can’t you see I’m busy.”

“Busy avoiding me. Busy making no progress on the portal by the way. Don’t think I didn’t notice. You’ve been welding that same square of metal for an hour now.” Bill knew, he had been watching. He even sat on Sixer’s desk to see if he’d react the way he did in his dreams, laid down on it even, posing dramatically, but Sixer just ignored Bill. It was infuriating.

“I’ve been working.” Ford protested weakly, his voice echoing from behind the helmet.

“Yeah, and I’ve been running around naked breaking the space time continuum.” Bill said
sarcastically, unable to see behind the welding helmet how Ford’s cheeks reddened at the sentence. “Newsflash Poindexter. In case you didn’t hear me the first thirty two times, you need Fiddleford to finish the portal. As important as that big brain of yours is to me, this is not something you do on your own. Capiche?”

“How would you know? If I just keep working maybe-“

“How would I know? How would I, a cosmic being, sent here to nag you apparently until you put your ego aside for two seconds, how would I know what your destiny is? Gee, I wonder.” Bill said in a cheerful tone, before his tone quickly soured. “Call Fiddleford.”

“No. I know I can do this.” Ford complained, though it sounded more like a stubborn child whinging, especially because he was still laying on the floor with his welding visor hiding his face.

Bill stepped around Ford and planted his feet on either side of Ford’s hips. He crouched down over Sixer, and flipped up his visor.

“Sixer.” Bill said, aiming to sound reasonable, missing how Ford seemed visibly flustered by Bill practically squatting over his hips, crouched on top of him. “Just make the phone call. It’s one phone call.”

“One phone call to convince him to completely abandon his life to join me. To pull him away from his family, his business.” Ford aggrandised, listing the things Fiddleford would lose if he came down here, like that was Ford’s main consideration apart from his pride.

“Oh, boo hoo. Don’t tell me you’re suddenly all broken up about this. You know what kind of opportunity you’d offer him if he came down here, how exalted he’d be for taking part in this world changing event. Be honest Sixer, you don’t care about McGucket’s sad old life in Palo Alto, you just don’t want to share.”

Bill acted like he saw right through Ford, and he knew which buttons to press. Ford was already feeling shame pool in his belly, Bill calling him out on the most selfish part of his motivations and making it seem like that was all Ford meant here.

“That’s not why I don’t want to call him.” Ford growled, propping himself up onto his elbows to look at Bill. “Stop that. I just have my reasons, that’s all.”

“Oh yeah? And what are they?” Bill tilted his head, before rapping his knuckles on the edge of the welding visor propped up on Ford’s forehead. “Because – knock knock -I’m coming up with nothing but how scared you are of being irrelevant. Of being outshone. Tell me Sixer, do you not think you’re bright enough?”

Bill’s words cut to Stanford’s core, like he was tapdancing on an open wound, and what made it worse was the fact that it was Bill saying this, and looking at him not with mockery or the gloating that Ford would expect, but with a small frown playing about his eyes, squinting at him, like he was legitimately trying to figure Ford out.

There were upsides and downsides to someone knowing you that well, Ford was realising. While it was comforting to know that someone else understood you, it was less comforting to realise they knew where all your vulnerabilities lay, and how to get to them.

Ford’s lack of a reply, the way his expression dropped, how he drew inward, was all the answer Bill needed.

“Hey. Listen. Fiddleford Hadron McGucket is an idiot compared to you. He’s weak. Weak minded.
Weak in ways you’ve always been strong, and you have the potential for greatness he can’t even dream of achieving. He doesn’t have the imagination you do.” This was familiar, these words Bill used to build Ford up. Ford felt a little guilty that he was getting this praise at the cost of F being torn down like that, and he felt guilty that he felt so good about that.

“Then why-“

“Because he knows more about constructing advanced machinery than you do.” Bill replied, matter of factly. “And you’d be wasting time being stubborn learning it all by yourself. You’d be an old man before you ever saw a lick of recognition for your genius. There’s nothing wrong with outsourcing here. Use him. Use his talents. They won’t outshine your own.”

“You don’t know th-“ Ford began, a token protest perhaps. Perhaps he just wanted Bill to continue saying nice things about him.

“I do know. All knowing, remember? I don’t just keep saying that for my own benefit.” Bill huffed, flicking at the top of Ford’s welding visor.

“You didn’t know how to use a toaster.” Ford couldn’t help point out, remembering how it had Bill struggle a little to understand it. How he jumped, surprised when the toast popped up one morning, and how he shook the toaster for about ten minutes trying to rattle out any other pieces of toast that were hiding away, waiting to pounce out at him.

“I know the important stuff, okay.” Bill hissed, before slamming the welding helmet shut to land on Ford’s face. He stood up and paced away from Ford, grumbling. “I don’t know why I bother. Ungrateful.”

Ford sat up and pulled the helmet off his head, rubbing his forehead. “Where are you going?”

“If you want something done right you’ve got to do it yourself.” Bill called out cheerily, stepping into the lift, knowing that his words would incise Ford to panic. “The telephone’s upstairs, right?”

Ford’s eyes widened and he scrambled to his feet, shoes slipping on the lab floor, visor discarded with a clang as he rushed to meet the elevator, the doors closing right before he could get there, Bill smiling and waving jauntily at him.

“Wait, Bill – no!” Ford slammed his fist against the elevator doors, but it was too late, the lift was already going up. He really needed a set of stairs down here or something. Punching the lift call button, Ford stressed, waiting for the lift to come back down, worried what Bill might be saying.

When the lift returned to the lab, Ford jumped in it, and pushed the ground floor button rapidly, each second he was stuck in the lift was a second too slow.

When he finally got out onto the ground floor he raced to the living room, but Bill was already there, sprawled out on the couch with the phone book on the coffee table in front of him, twirling the phone cord around his finger.

“Yeeellow.” Bill twirled the cord around, nodding. “Uhuh, an infant, I see. Disgusting. Goo goo ga ga to you too. How’s object permeance working out for you?”

“Bill!” Ford stressed, taking a step closer to Bill, about to wrest the phone out of his hands before Bill raised his arm, levitating Ford in the air.

He knew he shouldn’t have unbound that brick.
He hovered near enough that he could hear both ends of the phone call, but far enough away that he couldn’t swipe it out of Bill’s hands. He couldn’t do much else but wriggle in the air, fuming.

“Bill, put me down and give me that phone.”

“Oh yeah kiddo?” Bill said, ignoring Ford. Ford could hear a baby screaming loudly on the other end of the phone. “Yeah, growing teeth will do that to you. So how many rows do you have?”

Ford could hear a woman’s voice, she had a Californian accent, coming closer to the phone.

“Tate. Tate, give mommy the phone now. Tate, don’t chew on the phone.” There were a few clacking sounds like the phone was being dropped on the floor and being picked up again, the baby, Tate, was now wailing loudly. He was close enough to the phone that Ford and Bill could both hear it, so Ford assumed the woman was holding the baby on her hip and the phone in her hand.

“Hello, who is it?”

“Patricia!” Bill said like a gameshow host announcing a prize. He dropped Ford from the air, no longer levitating him, and he fell to the ground. “Would you like the opportunity to ditch your husband for a year or so? How does being a single mom sound?”

“Excuse me?” Patricia sounded confused, then offended. “Who is this?”

“Don’t worry, you’ll get him back eventually. But will you want him back is the real question.”

Ford picked himself up off the floor, crawled over the coffee table, climbed onto the couch and wrestled the phone out of Bill’s hand. “No – give me that, give me the phone.”

“Sixer I’m talking – hey!”

Bill put up a token fight, smooshing Ford’s face and kicking his legs out, but he smirked as the phone was relinquished to Ford, the victor of their little tussle. Ford had practically crawled on top of Bill, pinning his wrists to the couch to get the phone away from him, and now he was sitting on Bill’s torso, holding the phone close to his ear and both of Bill’s wrists in his other hand.

“Hello? Who is this?” Patricia’s voice sounded annoyed, like she was losing patience.

“Hello Patri – Pat, it’s me.” Ford was surprised how much he found he wanted to talk to Fiddleford now that he was finally on the phone, he even missed Patricia’s company, remembering how they’d all worked together in college. “Stanford Pines. We went to Backupsmore together, do you remember?”

“Stan Pines.” Patricia seemed to recognise his voice. “How’s that grant working out for you, didn’t they give you a big one?”

Tate was wailing loudly, still miffed about being denied the phone, and Patricia made absent shooshing sounds, no doubt bouncing Tate on her hip to calm him.

“They - they did, and it’s been working out great.” Ford said, squeezing the phone between his neck and his ear, using his free hand to push Bill’s knee away from where it was digging into his back, probably on purpose. Focused on the phone call he didn’t consciously notice how Bill squirmed underneath him, hands pinned down, and his nudging knee pushed away, an odd expression on his face, but Ford’s subconscious was saving that for later. “I actually had something I wanted to talk to F about.”
“Asking advice? That doesn’t sound like you.” Patricia asked, her voice a little muffled, it seemed she’d switched her own phone to the crook of her shoulder too, needing both hands to soothe the baby Tate.

“I – it’s something like that.” Ford admitted, his pride taking a blow. “Is he there? Can I speak to him?”

Bill was smirking smugly up at Ford, cheeks a little pink, content in his own victory, even while Ford was sitting on him like he was a motorbike. Maybe he was content about that too. He wasn’t sure. Physical forms were weird, especially ones with such advanced nervous systems and so many sensitive bits.

“Sure, I’ll call him.” Patricia replied, sounding exhausted, before she yelled, the sound coming out painfully loud as she hadn’t moved the phone out from her neck yet. “FIDSY, FIDDLES, THE PHONE’S FOR YOU.”

Ford winced at the volume. Patricia was loud at the best of times, her yelling was cataclysmic. He could hear F’s voice, as he yelled back.

“WHO IS IT?”

“STAN PINES FROM UNI. HE SAYS HE HAS TO TALK WITH YOU ABOUT SOMETHING?”

“ABOUT WHAT?”

Tate started crying, louder now. Patricia made more shooshing sounds, before yelling again.

“HE DIDN’T SAY. CAN YOU PLEASE JUST COME TAKE THE PHONE ALREADY? TATE IS THROWING A FIT!”

“I’M COMING I’m coming.” Fiddleford replied.

There were shuffling sounds as the phone was passed from person to person. While the phone was being passed, Stanford waited, looking down at Bill to realise he was smiling up at him, looking inordinately pleased with himself, despite his current position. Ford seemed to realise then he was sitting on Bill and pinning his hands up over his head and he let go of Bill and climbed off him, sitting on the other side of the couch, still holding onto the phone.

He missed the small pout Bill made when Ford climbed away.

Bill sat up on the couch next to Ford, who still held tight to the phone, like he was worried Bill would snatch it away at any second. Bill didn’t need to, Sixer was doing exactly what he wanted now. Bill made himself comfortable reclining up against the arm of the couch, facing Ford, watching him. He stretched his legs out and rested his socked feet against Ford’s leg comfortably, that little bit of contact serving to remind Ford of his presence. Bill still needed to supervise after all. Ford wasn’t getting out of this part of the deal, he had to make Fiddleford join them with this conversation, and Bill didn’t think it was below Ford to make the collaboration sound deliberately unappealing just so he could hog all the glory.

“What’s wrong baby, are you hungry? Do I need to change your diaper? Why are you still crying?” In the background Patricia was talking to Tate, as the phone was passed to Fiddleford.

“Hello?”
“F, it’s me.” Ford was happy to hear F’s voice, farm grown accent and all, which surprised him considering how much he’d been dreading this phone call. “How are you? How have you been?”

“Stanford?” Fiddleford sounded just as surprised. “I’m good, I’m doing okay. Just, you know, me and Pat and we had little Tate about a year ago. I sent you some photos to your old mailing address, but I guess you moved on. I didn’t get a forward mailing address they just came back to me. You – how is that research grant going? Haven’t heard from you since you moved out. Oregon wasn’t it? Somewhere in Oregon.”

“Yes, Oregon. Gravity Falls actually.” Ford explained. “It’s a small little town but it’s one of those hotspots I was telling you about. I’ve been here for about two years now, and I’m so close to proving my theory. You remember the one I was telling you about?”

“The Big Unified Theory of Weirdness wasn’t it?” Fiddleford guessed.

“Close enough.” Ford replied, leaning back on the couch, absently resting a hand on Bill’s foot while he talked, not even aware he was doing it. “So how’s the personal computer business going? We actually found your number through the listing in the phonebook. You didn’t end up changing the name after all.”

“If it ain’t broke, don’t fix it.” Fiddleford chuckled. “Business is good, we’re just getting off the ground now, Pat’s been a great help, she did that semester in the marketing course remember. Don’t know where I’d be without her. I’ve submitted some patents already. Got one running for a portable hard drive, and another little thing I call a Utility Software Briefcase, or USB for short. Since getting the patents approved takes time I’ve mostly been working as a mechanic locally, you know, just to support Pat and the baby. I’ve been missing working from home though, Pat’s up to her eyeballs as it is, but you know – gotta pull in that money somehow.”

Bill nudged Ford with his foot and whispered. “Offer him a wage.”

Ford turned and squinted at Bill, mouthing “what” at the Muse.

“You can afford it. Offer him a wage. Make it better than what he’s getting currently.”

“How should I –“ Ford mouthed back at Bill, before returning his attention to Fiddleford on the call.

“And then I’ve got this new thing in the works, which is going to be like an automated navigator, it’s going to pull in a database of maps from across America and let you know what street you’re on when you’re driving. Processing the mapping information’s the easy part, the hard bit’s going to be tracking where your car is so we can do the whole directions thing in realtime. If only there was some sort of global positioning system, a GPS if you will, to match the two together.”

“That sounds – promising actually.” Ford said. “It really sounds like you’re making a lot of devices that will really improve everyday lives.”

“Well, that’s the goal.” Fiddleford chuckled. “Helpin’ people.”

Ford fiddled with the phone’s spiral cord, seeing his opening. Clearly Bill saw it too, because he kept nudging Ford with his foot, and Ford patted Bill’s foot absently, acknowledging his prompting. “That’s actually kind of what I’m doing now.”

“What? Making a navigator?”

“No. Something else. Something that could help a lot of people, and advance our current
understanding of science, technology, medicine, engineering by hundreds of years. Thousands maybe.” Ford truly believed that, and in another universe that may have come to pass, but Bill knew what the portal was really for.

“You found that in Gravity Falls? Wow.” Fiddleford whistled, sounding impressed. “I guess what they say about small towns ain’t true then. Sounds pretty ground-breaking.”

“It is.” Ford replied. “Well, it should be. I’m not finished it yet, and I actually called because— well—”

Ford almost couldn’t get the words out, his pride too big of a barrier. He turned to look to Bill for reassurance, and Bill curled his toes, squeezing his thigh with them, smiling and looking directly at Ford. The encouragement helped dim the anxious lump in his throat, and he got the words out.

“I need your help.”

“My help?” Fiddleford’s voice seemed surprised. “With what?”

“I’ve run into a bit of a wall with the engineering side of things. I have the blueprints and the basic information about how it all comes together, I’m just struggling with the putting it together part.”

“If I remember right you did just fine in our basic engineering class.”

“This isn’t basic.” Ford admitted. “This is advanced.”

“How advanced are you talking here?”

“Really advanced.”

There was a long pause. When Fiddleford spoke, he sounded giddy.

“Well if that doesn’t just strum my banjo nothing will. If you say it’s that advanced, and it’s you saying it, then it’s gotta be something else. Something out of this world. What exactly are you working on?”

“Definitely something out of this world.” Ford said with a wry grin. “Can you keep it a secret? Whether or not you come down to help me, I need to know you won’t tell anyone about this, not before it’s ready.”

Bill watched Ford approvingly. Ford’s paranoia comes in handy sometimes, and having him swear his friend into secrecy would help protect Bill’s portal from well-meant world saving sabotage. Bill didn’t even have to tell Ford to keep it a secret, the scientist did it all himself. Bill smiled indulgently at Sixer, pleased with how he danced on Bill’s strings, even the ones he hadn’t laced up yet.

“I won’t tell a soul.” Fiddleford promised. “You have my word.”

“I’m making a transdimensional portal.” Ford said excited to finally talk about his project with someone, dropping the bomb. “I discovered that the weirdness that has been infecting this town is likely due to a leak between this dimension and other dimensions. Dimensions where this weirdness is the norm. And millions of other infinite dimensions, dimensions with advanced technology, medicine, infrastructure. The portal will stabilise the weirdness leak, and enable me to access other worlds, other dimensions, to learn the secrets of the galaxies. Imagine, being able to traverse the multi-verse, exploring places no one on earth has ever seen before, bringing back technology that vastly outstrips our current limitations.”
“It sounds… it sounds almost too good to be true Stanford.” Fiddleford admitted hesitantly. “Are you sure you can make this work? And where would you even get the blueprints for a thing like this? There’s no precedent.”

Ford looked over to Bill, not sure what to say. Whether he should tell Fiddleford about Bill. Bill met Ford’s eyes and shrugged, before saying softly.

“Sometimes all genius needs is a little help from a friend.”

Bill said this to Ford before, when he first showed Ford the blueprints for the portal in his dreams. It bolstered him then just as much as it did now.

“We’ll set the precedent. You can come and look over the schematics yourself if you’re unsure. It’s scientifically sound, the theory, everything. I just need your help to make it sound in practise too. Help me build the machine F. I can’t do this without your engineering talent. This is big, bigger than anything you’ve ever worked on before. This will change the world - save it. Will you help me?”

There was another long pause. When Fiddleford spoke again, it was clear he was tempted, but torn.

“I don’t know Stanford, I can’t just leave everything here. I’ve got a job here, gotta work while the personal computer business is still slow. I have to support Pat and Tate. I can’t just leave them. We’re barely getting by as it is.”

Bill nudged Ford with his foot again, prompting him.

“I can pay you a salary.” Ford said, catching on to Bill’s prompting. “From the grant money. I can pay you double –“ Bill shook his head, and held up three fingers. “No, triple what you’re currently earning.”

“70 thousand? You’d pay me 70 thousand to come work on this with you? Seriously?” Fiddleford sounded astounded.

Ford looked at Bill, that was most of his grant gone there. He mouthed at Bill. “Where am I supposed to get 70 thousand from? We can’t afford that much.”

“Trust me. We can afford it.” Bill replied, looking at his cuticles.

“How?” Ford mouthed back at Bill, incredulous.

“Let’s just say you’re going to come into a lot of gold, very soon.” Bill explained idly, before nudging Ford with his foot again. “Come on, McGucket’s waiting.”

Ford seemed suspicious of this, but he knew Bill well enough to know that the Muse generally knew what he was doing when it came to predicting things. Turning back to the phone call, he continued.

“Yes, 70 thousand. To come be the engineer for this project. It’s advanced, very advanced – so - so it’s only fair to match the skill level to the pay grade. One lump sum of 70 thousand for your assistance building the portal.”

“Well - well gee.” Fiddleford laughed, somewhat hysterically. “That’s – that’s really – yep – holy hornswagglng humdinger, that’s – are you serious?”

Ford laughed fondly, Fiddleford’s peculiar euphemisms making him nostalgic for their college
days. “Completely serious. If you can come to Gravity Falls to help me with this you’ll have your salary, lodging, I’ve got spare rooms in the shack. You could help me with the portal, in the lab, or even with my other research if you wanted to. How does that sound?”

“It sounds – it sounds incredible. When do you want me down there?”

Again Ford looked at Bill, who tapped his wrist pretending he was tapping a watch, to indicate the hurry they were in, according to Bill’s schedule.

“As soon as possible?” Ford guessed, Bill nodding approvingly.

“I’ll have to tell Pat. We’ve gotta talk it over. Can I get back to you? What’s your number?”

Ford gave Fiddleford the phone number for the shack as well as the address should he decide to pack up and come down to join him. Fiddleford thanked him for the call and the opportunity and hung up the phone. Ford could hear him yell out “Patricia” just before he hung up the phone. He sounded excited.

Putting the phone back on the base, letting it click back into place, Ford sighed happily.

“See.” Bill said, nudging Ford with his foot again. “That wasn’t so hard.”

“I didn’t expect him to be so – excited.” Ford admitted.

“Who wouldn’t be?” Bill shrugged. “I told you I picked you out for something special. Anyone would be excited to be in your shoes. In a fifth of your shoes even.”

“Still, I didn’t realise – he has a family.” Ford looked up to the ceiling, leaning back against the couch. “I mean, I knew he had Pat, I was invited to the wedding. But they have a baby now.”

Bill looked at Ford, and seemed mildly irritated. He had thought Ford’s concern for McGucket’s family was just a scapegoat, a buffer for Ford’s own pride. He didn’t mean for Sixer to take it to heart.

“Sure, they have an infant. Big deal. Sounds like he’s working so hard in that mechanics job he barely sees the kid anyway, and who even wants to see a baby when all they do is scream, poop, and ruin your dreams and aspirations.” Bill may have sounded a little too bitter there.

Ford looked at Bill quizzically, and Bill tried to look innocent, like what he said was no big deal.

“You really don’t like children?” Ford had to ask, and Bill made a face.

“I like them just fine when they’re far away from me. Bad experiences you could say.” Bill explained, which had Ford turn curiously to press Bill for more information – and that would derail their conversation into a pan dimensional train-wreck they couldn’t afford, so Bill nudged the conversation back on course.

“But ANYWAY, I’m just saying that with that salary you’re giving him you’re going to make all of their lives easier. Even the kid’s.”

“Speaking of the salary, do you want to clarify how exactly we’re going to be able to afford paying him 70 thousand dollars?” Ford asked somewhat testily.

“I told you to trust me.” Bill said simply in reply, and kicked both of his feet up onto Ford’s lap.

“And I’m trying to.” Ford said, his patience sounding strained. He put his hand on Bill’s socked
foot again, absent minded in the gesture. “But that’s a lot of money.”

“This little town still has some secrets to show you.” Bill said slyly, looking Ford in the eye. “Before your friend comes down here we are going on a treasure hunt. Just the two of us.”

“We are, are we?” Ford said, amused at how definitive Bill was, planning this little activity for them.

“Yep. A genuine bonafide treasure hunt. You wouldn’t believe how many shmucks still bury their gold.”

“So we’re going to steal it, are we?” Ford said, disapproval creeping into his tone.

“Not steal it. God Sixer, you want to hop off my case for a bit? This gold has just been sitting there for ages. Like – AGES. It’s no good to anyone down there. But if we sell it, we can afford three times what McGucket’s salary will be, and then some.” Bill said, matter of factly.

“And you know about this hidden treasure how?” Ford questioned, sounding amused again.

“I’m on the dollar bill. On the goddamn dollar bill, and you’re seriously asking me that question?” Bill seethed a little, Sixer getting under his skin with that smug questioning face of his. “All seeing eye of providence not good enough for you now, is it?”

Ford chuckled, and pat Bill’s foot, smiling at him. “Calm down, I’m not saying anything like that. I’m just curious, that’s all.”

Bill puffed his cheeks out and crossed his arms, pouting. “Yeah, well, I don’t like how often you go around questioning me Sixer. Clearly, I know what’s best for you.”

“I know you’re just trying to help.” Ford admitted. “And I appreciate that.”

“You could stand to show your appreciation a little more.” Bill commented, watching Sixer idly rub his thumb on the top of Bill’s socked foot.

“And how should I do that to meet your exacting standards, oh all seeing eye.” Ford said sarcastically, silently enjoying his banter with Bill. He loved seeing Bill get uppity like this.

Bill was silent for a moment, certainly uppity, seething that Sixer was mocking him again, even if it was friendly and light. It wasn’t fair that Sixer kept doubting him, and it wasn’t fair that Sixer thought it was so funny to. Initially Bill thought Sixer was too serious to have a mischievous side, but boy was he wrong.

Contemplating exactly what he should ask of Sixer, rubbing his chin, Bill frowned, and looked around the room, first thinking food, then thinking physical labour, then thinking humiliation of some kind, before looking back to Ford, still rubbing his thumb in little circles on the top of Bill’s foot, like he didn’t even know he was doing it. That gave Bill an idea.

“I want –” Bill began imperiously, making his demands known to Sixer, mostly wanting to see how he’d react. “I want a foot-rub.”

“A what now?” Sixer didn’t disappoint, looking flabbergasted, before looking down to the hand resting on Bill’s foot, yanking it off like it was burning, then looking nervously back up to Bill.

Bill felt an unfamiliar heat rise to his cheeks, before he lied. “I saw it on the television, and it looked really good. I’ve never tried things like that in this body and I want to … see … what it’s
Ford seemed stunned. He was almost frozen, staring at Bill like he’d grown an extra head.

Bill found himself feeling flustered of all things, his cheeks kept prickling with heat and Sixer was just staring at him like that, so he crossed his arms, turning his chin up.

“Well, fine, if you don’t appreciate me enough, then fine –“

“No, no, I didn’t say that.” Ford waved his hands at Bill, his voice intending to calm or soothe Bill.

He brought his hand back down onto Bill’s foot and now Bill froze, uncertain as to why he was reacting like this. It was this stupid body with its stupid hormones and stupid instinctual reactions to things. His foot felt all tingly where Sixer’s hand was touching him.

He was looking at Ford now almost like he was frightened of him again, which wasn’t right. He was more powerful now, he could float Sixer in the air like a ragdoll if he did something Bill didn’t like. He was fine.

Slowly, Ford ran his palm over the top of Bill’s socked foot, testing the waters. “Like this, yes? Is this alright?”

Bill was still tensed up, holding his breath, not exactly relaxing straight away like he had in the dream. Maybe this was one of those things where it was more effectual in the mind than in real life. So far it didn’t hurt though. It felt nice, but bizarre, like Sixer was petting the top of his foot like it was a fluffy little animal.

“This is fine.” Bill said, though he didn’t sound so certain. Slowly, he tried to untense, and relax into the soft petting. He didn’t have a problem with it before when Sixer was doing this. Why was his chest beating so much now?

Ford was watching Bill intently, not wanting to scare the Muse away. This was the first time Ford had seen Bill interested in the sort of physical sensation this body could experience, so far he kept his gratification solely in the realm of tastes and food. This was something new, and Ford’s subconscious was fervently thanking whatever TV channel Bill had seen this on, not knowing the ‘channel’ was his own dream.

Ford kept to smooth broad strokes, not wanting to startle Bill. When Bill untensed enough that he was beginning to look mildly relaxed, or at least not terrified, Ford ran his thumb down along Bill’s instep, the motion firm, and Bill audibly let out the breath he was holding in, a small moan sounding. Ford did it again, and Bill’s shoulders relaxed. Bill bit his lip. It was starting to feel good.

Ford had the advantage of an extra finger on each hand, and that made him exceptionally good at giving massages, so he applied himself now to kneading out the stress from Bill by rubbing his feet with dedication.

Occasionally Bill’s legs would shake, and Ford would check that the Muse was alright, to find Bill staring intently at Ford’s hands, biting his lip slightly, as though uncertain how he should be feeling about this.

“Well,” Ford urged him. Bill’s eyes flickered up to Ford’s face, clearly conflicted, before he nodded, and looked back to Ford’s hands working over his foot. He was watching Ford’s motions like a hawk, like he was searching for some trick to it all.
“Maybe close your eyes.” Ford suggested, seeing how Bill was preoccupied with watching him. Bill looked a little hesitant, before he nodded again and squeezed his eyes shut, allowing Ford to massage his feet. He begun to relax now, frowning less, letting out another soft exhale that turned into a moan, leaning back into the couch rather than gripping it like he was scared he was going to fall off.

Ford kept massaging Bill’s feet through his socks, watching the Muse wind down bit by bit with his eyes closed, leaning back into the armrest of the couch, his mouth slightly open now, exhaling contentedly with every satisfying movement Ford’s fingers made.

It surprised Bill, how good it felt. He was so convinced that this would just be nonsense, Ford’s imagination gone wild, but he was surprised by how good it felt trying it. Just like it had been in Ford’s dream, this was relaxing, it was comforting, it was somehow making Bill less stressed, god knows he’d been carrying enough stress around living with Sixer, not to mention planning the apocalypse.

Something he hadn’t anticipated was how much this body craved physical contact. This was twice as satisfying just because it was touch, someone (Sixer, it was Sixer) was touching him with care, and that wasn’t something he’d ever experienced in this human shell before.

Then there was the worship Ford was pouring into it.

It was twice as potent as the dream had been, even without it’s racy ending, because it was a lived act of worship that Ford was determined to get right. He wanted this to feel good for Bill, and the act of wanting coupled with the act of doing meant Bill could feel the worshipping energy coming off Ford amassing in the power lines in his arms. His body hummed with the sensation, and with the power, and it felt good. So good. Twice as good as it would have done if it was just the massage.

With his eyes closed he could feel it, that thrum of power building, and without stifling himself to hide how enjoyable this was, Bill let out a loud shaky moan, overwhelmed with the sensation.

Ford paused in the massage, his face going red, as it generally did when he heard Bill moan like that.

“Are you alright?” Ford had to ask, wanting to check that this was okay.

This was crossing a new line of tension that he hadn’t crossed before. Oddly enough it reminded him of when they were out on the lake, Bill almost flirting with him, or back in the space ship when they had been chest to chest. That same tension hung in the air, and Ford knew there was a line they were both stepping closer to here, Ford wanted to know if that line should be crossed.

Bill’s eyes blinked open, his cheeks were tinted red, his yellow slitted eyes were glowing slightly and he licked his lips, before saying. “Fine. I’m fine.”

“Do you want me to keep going?” Ford asked, not wanting to push it, despite how delectable Bill looked right now, flushed and flustered.

Bill’s thoughts were racing. Keep going? Would that be like how Ford kept going in the dream? Was he going to do that? Put his hands on more of Bill? Rub him someplace else? Worship him? Would it be like it had been in the dream? Would it make Bill powerful? Would he like it?

When Bill’s answer wasn’t forthcoming, Ford began to withdraw his hands, knowing not to press while Bill was still uncertain. “I can stop.”
“No. Wait.” Bill lurched forward on the couch, flinging his hand out to grab Sixer’s arm. Now he was leaning forward on the couch next to Ford, holding onto the human’s elbow, his feet still resting on Sixer’s lap, not wanting this worship to end. “I want –“

Ford’s own heart was beating rather rapidly now, finding it difficult to look away from Bill, seeing how the Muse’s slitted pupils were blown wide, how his lips looked puffy from biting them in his uncertainty, how the barest hint of pink coloured his dark cheeks. Ford knew his own ears must be red now, with how hot they felt, and his mouth was practically dry, responding to Bill’s state.

“What do you want?” Ford asked. He had to ask.

Bill opened his mouth, looking at Sixer, stunned that he would even get to this point, that he would be looking at Sixer, his designated pawn, and seeing something more, wanting more.

This was the wrong time for an epiphany.

He found himself looking at Sixer without disgust. He treated Sixer differently than he did other humans.

Sixer had bound him here in this awful body, had nearly uprooted all of his well laid plans, and somehow now Bill was wanting things from him that he could only ever want from an equal. Not a slave. An equal.

Somehow when Sixer had bound Bill here, he’d displayed how powerful he was in his own way. Bill couldn’t have ever imagined that a human could be a match for Bill. Bill was a cosmic maniac, he was his own disaster, nothing could hold him back or pin him down.

Nothing but this human here apparently.

Sixer was intelligent, far more intelligent than most humans. He was unique too, he was weird enough with his extra fingers and toes that he stood out. He was an anomaly, a freak, and Bill liked freaks.

He liked Sixer’s big brain, and how he teased Bill like an equal. Bill didn’t want to strike him down when he questioned him, he couldn’t, he needed him after all, but he also was finding he didn’t want to.

He spent this whole time forced into a human body bossing Sixer around, and somehow Sixer still had a backbone. But the real puzzling thing was, Sixer still respected Bill.

He showed Bill respect all the time. Like an equal. He understood Bill, let Bill set the pace, asked Bill what he wanted. And by the way Bill’s heart was dancing about in there, and how his skin seemed hot like fire, and how his breath was coming out short right now, Bill wanted Sixer just as much as Sixer wanted Bill.

In his dreams at least. He never acted upon it in real life, but here they were, on the cusp of something, and Sixer was putting the decision in Bill’s hands, in a true act of worship.

Now Bill knew why Sixer’s dreams had been so powerful. This wasn’t just ordinary worship from a cult or a follower. From a subordinate. This was worship from an equal. Bill was shocked he even considered Ford as his equal, but now he realised it, it was staring him in the face, waiting for him to speak.

“I –“ Bill started, suddenly lost for words, and that NEVER happened to him. He was feeling emotions, this body was creating chemicals, dopamine, serotonin, his heart was thumping and his
stomach hosted butterflies of some type, rattling around in there, making him feel light.

This was one hell of a revelation.

Ford saw Bill not saying anything, lost for words, and while it was an incredibly fetching look on Bill, Ford knew he had to be responsible here. No use overwhelming Bill, when he could barely string a sentence together. That wasn’t consent.

“We’ll stop.” Ford said calmly, standing up off the couch, pushing Bill’s feet off his lap. Bill was looking up at him, blinking, like he was still processing something. “This is overwhelming you. No use pushing yourself. We can always try again later.”

“Nnngh.” Bill made a strangled noise, looking mildly frustrated. “You –“

“I can make you dinner, if you like.” Ford continued, looking at the clock on the wall, registering what time it was. “I’m sure appreciation via a nice steak is just as valid. You’ll need the energy before our treasure hunt.”

“You-“ Bill struggled with himself, still uncertain, though now about his own reaction more than anything else. With a resigned sigh his shoulders sank, and he looked away from Ford, finally. “Fine. You start on that, I’m going upstairs for a while.”

Ford’s brow pinched with concern. “Are you alright?” He didn’t want to break Bill with that foot-rub.

“I’m fine.” Bill snapped, becoming more of his recalcitrant snippy self again, slapping Ford’s hand away from him when he tentatively reached out. “Why don’t you mind your own business for a change.”

Ford withdrew his hand, his concern dried up in an instant. “Maybe I will.”

“Maybe you should.” Bill hissed at Ford, standing up and marching stiffly over to the stairwell. He paused at the base of the stair, just as Sixer walked over to the kitchen. He paused when he saw Bill pausing, and they both stood in the corridor for a moment, waiting.

Remembering to praise Ford for doing as he’s supposed to, Bill murmured. “Good job with the phone call, by the way.”

“I supposed I wouldn’t have done it without you.” Ford admitted reluctantly.

Bill heard this, but didn’t turn around to face Ford, nodding once, before climbing up the stairs, making a beeline for his room, sealing the door shut behind him before collapsing on the pile of blankets that made up his bed.

He felt his face, it was still hot. He almost felt shivery.

He could hear Sixer clattering about downstairs getting ready to cook dinner, and he agonised over how hyper aware he was of the human’s presence.

Why was he feeling this way? It was awful. It was excellent. It was overwhelming.

Seeking answers in the mindscape, Bill focused on sleep, faceplanting down in the blankets, and he shut his eyes.

He was still out cold when Sixer came up to find him later.
“Bill. Dinner’s ready.” Ford called out from the door, the light from the corridor slanting into Bill’s room. The light glinted on the gold tattoos on Bill’s arm, which was odd. It almost seemed like they were glowing. Curious, Ford walked further into the room to look in.

It seemed Bill was asleep. He was sprawled haphazardly on top of the blankets like he had just collapsed there. His face was smooshed into the pillows, and he slept like a corpse.

Ford usually left Bill be when he slept. It was one of those things that were ‘none of his business’ how Bill slept, and to counter his own growing obsession with the Muse, he never allowed himself to stay and check.

But now that he was in here, something didn’t seem right.

“Bill?” He called again, watching the Muse sleep. There was no acknowledgement of the noise Ford was making, he didn’t even twitch. His breathing was barely noticeable. He looked limp, like a ragdoll, not curled up in the blankets, not cuddling a pillow, nothing. It looked like he had come upstairs and simply passed out on top of the bed.

Ford leaned over the bed, placing his hand on the Muse’s shoulder. “Bill, are you okay?”

Bill didn’t react. His breathing was so slow Stanford could barely see his chest rise and fall, and he began to worry that something was wrong with Bill.

Gently, he shook Bill’s shoulder, hoping to prompt some sort of reaction from the Muse. There was nothing. He rolled Bill over so he wasn’t faceplanted on the bed now, aghast at how limply he rolled.

Ford pressed a hand to Bill’s forehead, and found the Muse was hot, almost like he was burning up.

Shaking him harder now, hands on both shoulders, lifting him, trying to wake him up, all Ford succeeded in doing was to watch Bill’s head roll around, his neck floppy, his whole body lax.

“Bill, are you alright? Wake up!”

Still nothing. Leaning down to press his ear to Bill’s chest, Ford listened for a heartbeat. It was there, but very slow, the thump thump much slower than it should have been. Bill was breathing, but very slow barely there breaths, his chest only faintly rising and falling.

Panicking that his Muse was suddenly somehow comatose, or dying, irrationally worrying that he really did break Bill with a foot-rub, Ford cupped the back of Bill’s head and looked at the Muse. His expression was blank, not happy, not sad, absent.

Checking for pupillary response, Ford lifted up Bill’s right eyelid and was momentarily blinded by a bright gold light pouring out of Bill’s eye.

He blinked, startled.

That was not what he expected.

Checking the other eyelid, Ford shielded his own eyes as he lifted the left eyelid and more gold light poured out. He shut that eyelid too.
Ford rested Bill gently back down on the bed and stood up, pacing a little, exhaling a big breath to try to look at this rationally.

Something was happening to Bill while he slept. Something clearly magical. Ford hadn’t seen how Bill was when he was sleeping generally so he didn’t know if this was a usual thing for Bill, or if it was a horrific outlier. The disturbing thing wasn’t just how dead Bill looked, immovable and unresponsive, it was how that golden light completely covered and blocked out any of the distinguishing features of Bill’s eyes. Ford could see no iris, no pupils, no whites. Just that strong gold light beaming up out of Bill. It was faintly there in his tattoos too, glowing gold through the lines on his skin.

Maybe that was why Bill was so hot? The gold light was burning him up from the inside out?

Bill was always saying he was an all powerful cosmic entity. Was that him? His true form, lighting him up from within? Was that Bill’s soul?

It was beautiful, and disturbing if it was. Ford remembered how Bill appeared in the mindscape, that golden floating triangle, complete with cheesy bowtie and tophat, and then looked back at Bill’s prone form, that strong golden light just waiting hidden behind his eyelids.

What was going on?

He had to wake Bill up.

Could Bill even be woken from this state?

Putting his hand on Bill’s shoulder, Ford tried again, shaking Bill’s shoulder.

For a while nothing happened, until Ford saw Bill’s shoulder twitch, and then suddenly Bill was jumping into wakefulness, flailing his hands around, kicking, grabbing onto Ford’s arm, his eyes flying open as Bill woke screaming.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

“AAAAAH!” Ford yelled back, startled. “Bill! Bill, it’s me!”

Panting heavily, obviously shocked, Bill blinked at Ford, his eyes back to normal, while his chest heaved, still gripping onto Ford’s arm.

“Sixer?”

“You wouldn’t wake up.” Ford explained. “I thought you were dead.”

“You-” Bill looked at Sixer, astounded, before exclaiming. “You scared the crap out of me! What the hell were you doing?”

“I came up to tell you dinner was ready, but it looked like you’d passed out. I checked your vitals. Your eyes were glowing.”

“You –“ Bill blinked at Ford, before making a long frustrated noise. “Uuuuuuurghhhh! I was doing something!”

“You mind telling me what that something was?” Ford said, crossing his arms. “Last you told me, you couldn’t access the mindscape.”

“I did mention that unbinding that last brick might do something for me there.” Bill pointed out,
looking for a scapegoat.

“You told me it would give you levitation back, and it did that.” Ford pointed out, suddenly incredibly suspicious of that foot-rub Bill asked for, and how it related to the dreams Ford had had about it previously.

“I also mentioned it might let me help you out with those bad dreams you were having, and I was… just testing it out now.” Bill countered, fabricating an excuse, sitting upright in the bed now, crossing his arms defensively at Ford’s prying.

“Is that what those alterations on the circle were for? So you could do that?”

“Hey, I did what I needed to do.” Bill said stubbornly, crossing his arms.

“How long could you do that for? Answer me honestly. How long have you been able to have power in dreams like that? In the mindscape?” Ford needed to know. He needed to know whether his dreamed obsession was real or cultivated by Bill. He needed to know whether his mind had been safe, or played, like a piano by the Muse.

“Just since the last brick, I swear.” Bill lied convincingly, waving his hands placatingly at Ford. “I go in there to think. That’s all.”

“You said you were doing something.” Ford pressed suspiciously.

“Yes! Thinking! Away from you!” Bill clutched his head and ran a hand through his hair. “Being around you all the time drives me crazy. I needed some space.”

“You could have just asked for space.” Ford said, suddenly hurt by Bill’s harsh words.

“No – I – you don’t understand.” Bill glared at Ford, frustrated.

“You want to be away from me. I understand that just fine.” Ford replied defensively, crossing his own arms.

“No, you idiot.” Bill gnashed his teeth now. “I needed space. As in space. The cosmos, the stars. That sort of space.”

Ford felt a little bit like the idiot Bill called him just now. He unfolded his arms, and stared at Bill. “Oh.”

“I am a lot bigger than this tiny little body you’ve made for me.” Bill said, explaining. “And at the same time I can be any size at all. I’m a lot of power, compressed into a little space. Don’t you think that the moment I could get back to the mindscape, I would, just to have that space back?”

“You miss your old home.” Ford said, putting it together.

“Yeah, something like that.” Bill rubbed the back of his head, his half-truths leading Ford away from what had really been going on. Better to have Ford’s sympathy than his suspicion.

Mentally, Ford was berating himself for being so self-centred. Of course Bill had better things to do than to mess about in his mind, he had a whole cosmos out there to see.

“I’m sorry, for suspecting you.” Ford apologised. “I was a bit startled seeing you like that. I thought you weren’t waking up.”

“I’ve never been woken up like that before.” Bill replied, referring to the shaking and flailing and
screaming. He’d seen a lot of other people wake up like that after a particularly impacting nightmare, but it had never happened to him.

“You were burning up. Your forehead was hot. I thought you were sick.”

“No sick.” Bill assured Ford, and pressed a hand to his own forehead, testing. He really was burning up. “Just ... overheating. I’ll be fine once I let off a little steam.”

“I was just worried.”

“I know.”

They were both silent for a moment, considering each other. Bill ran his hand through his hair again, sighing, the adrenaline from being woken up so abruptly wearing off.

“Dinner is ready.” Ford said, watching Bill, sympathy written all over his face.

“I’ll be down in a bit. Just give me a minute.” Bill replied.

Nodding, Ford stood up and left, closing the door just to behind him.

Sitting in the blanket nest that was his bed, Bill exhaled slowly, trying to calm down. He’d been in Sixer’s mindscape, tearing through the books in there, trying to find something to explain why the human was suddenly like a super charged battery for Bill’s power. Nothing he read made sense, Sixer was just an ordinary human, excepting his extra digits and the extra digits on his IQ. He wasn’t so special. The only thing that made him special was that Bill had picked him out, targeted him for this mission. To build the portal.

Bill scoured the great library in Ford’s head, trying to find the books that showed Bill through Ford’s eyes, trying to understand if the power boost that worshipping Bill was providing was intentional, or if Sixer even saw it as worshipping Bill.

Did Sixer see Bill as the equal, was that how it started? When did Sixer stop seeing Bill as a god to him? When did he begin to see the Muse in a different light?

Probably around the same time he locked Bill in this human body and started to see who he was without the pretence he put on. That was even more unnerving to Bill. Letting his guard down, dropping the act, and being himself around Sixer made him stop seeing him as a god?

No, but that wasn’t right. Sixer still worshipped him, and that worship was stronger and more potent than it had ever been. The effigies and the murals he had painted for Bill in the second basement level of the shack hadn’t given Bill nearly as much power as Ford had just then through the tentative foot massage. Bill had so much power he was practically leaking, if what Sixer said was true. Gold light glowing from his eyes. His temperature rising. He was definitely leaking if that was the case.

Bill was astounded. Sure he’d always been powerful, but he’d never been THIS powerful. It was astonishing. It was overwhelming. Definitely overwhelming, considering how his body reacted to it all. From a simple foot-rub he became an overstimulated, moaning mess. It was great, it was terrible, it was going to give Sixer a bloated ego, that was for sure.

If he was right here, Sixer may be the most powerful tool he’d ever come across. With Sixer’s worship, he’d be unstoppable. A natural battery like that, self-sustaining, limitless. Not even Time Baby would be able to compete with his power. If he kept this up, he could see himself becoming addicted to the power boost Sixer’s bizarre regard for him would bring. It was addicting.
Intoxicating. Unfairly packaged serendipity, given how infuriatingly smug Sixer was when he managed to fluster Bill. It was awful how that same smugness in a ‘job well done’ was such a powerful battery to Bill.

Now that he knew this, he just had to decide what to do with this new information. Did he further explore this new technique? Ask for more foot-rubs? Ask for other things? Demand them?

He didn’t know. He was conflicted, he didn’t know how to feel about these things, given they were so intimately physical. He wasn’t used to physical. He’d never had a physical form before, and certainly not one so receptive to affection and touch. No one touched him. No one got close to him. He was Bill Cipher, dream demon, dangerous, untouchable, all powerful.

Sixer could make him more powerful.

This was all so confusing. So inherently frustrating. Bill knew how it would look if he let some human, no matter how special, put his paws over Bill’s form, no matter the form, the indignity of it - but suddenly that seemed to be the key to becoming more powerful, and the worst thing was, Bill liked it.

He liked it when Sixer touched him.

Maybe, he just liked Sixer.

The revelation stunned him. Liking Sixer meant respecting Sixer, something Bill had stubbornly tried not to do since being dragged down into this body, but somehow here they were, working together, living together like equals.

Bill had let Sixer touch him. He couldn’t stay out of Sixer’s dreams. He spent all his time in the mindscape hiding out in Sixer’s head, and pouring over his memories and ambitions.

Bill had thought Sixer was obsessed with him. Maybe in turn he was becoming obsessed with Sixer.

But that was absurd. Bill was an all powerful cosmic entity. He didn’t get obsessed over some insignificant human, and he certainly didn’t develop attachments to them.

But Sixer was different.

Bill realised with a small ‘oh’. Maybe Sixer was different, because he belonged to Bill. Maybe Sixer was different because he was Bill’s human.

He belonged to Bill, didn’t he? That was why the worship was so potent, why the regard he gave Bill was so intent. At first he’d merely been Bill’s puppet, but now he could just be Bill’s.

It wasn’t a perfect resolution, but it was a start. Something Bill could live with. He wasn’t obsessed with Sixer, he just owned Sixer. That made much more sense. His perfect battery.

Shaking off the remnants of his confusion, Bill pushed it all away in a healthy pile of ‘deal with that shit later’ in the back of his mind and got to his feet. To burn off steam he brought forth blue flames to his hands, let them burn out for a while, just enough to lower his body’s temperature so Sixer wouldn’t worry.

Pacing out of his room, downstairs to the kitchen, Bill put it all behind him.

He was hungry, and Sixer had made him steak.
What a way to appreciate a guy.
I work all night, I work all day, to pay the bills I have to pay. Ain't it sad.

“Are you sure you want to leave the shovel in the car? Robbing graves is always a good look for you Fordsy.” Bill teased, stepping around tombstones as he strolled through the Gravity Falls Cemetery.

“Sure, let’s bring a shovel to a grave yard. That’s not suspicious at all.” Ford grumbled, shoving his hands in his pockets, following behind Bill. “Get the whole town thinking I’m some kind of necrophilic monster.”

“They should be used to it by now, right?” Bill turned and began walking backwards just so he could finger gun and wink at Ford. “Victor Frankenstein. Where else did you get the body parts for all of this?” He gestured to his own body like a salesperson on the shopping channel. He’d been enjoying the shopping channel lately.

“I didn’t rob graves to make your body.” Ford huffed, mildly offended at the thought. “I compiled the composite chemicals that go into making a human body and those alchemy books did the rest. For an imprecise science, it was extraordinarily effective.”

“Ah well, at least I’m home grown then. Organic. Imagine if you second hand-ed me. Or third handed me. Actually, six hands. Six hands seems much more practical.” Bill gestured with his hands as he talked, still walking backwards through the graveyard. It was a miracle he hadn’t yet fallen into an open grave.

“You’re enough of a handful already.” Ford couldn’t help but joke, his grin crooked as he watched Bill delicately step backwards over a bouquet of flowers left in front of a gravestone.

“Offended!” Bill scoffed dramatically, putting a hand on his chest. “You just didn’t want anyone stealing your nickname. I’d have been an excellent Sixer.”

“Ah, the wonderful thing about Sixer’s is that I’m the only one.” Ford said like he was reciting something from a children’s show. He grew up watching Winnie the Pooh with Stanley and Shermy, he couldn’t help but become attached to Tigger.

“Says the guy with an identical twin.” Bill prodded. He saw Ford pull a disgruntled face for a moment, resenting the reminder of his twin even now, so Bill changed the subject. “Nice to see you embracing your nickname finally.”

“I can hardly not. I think you prefer nicknames to the hassle of remembering everyone’s real name. What was it you called Suzie again?”

“Wink eye.” Bill replied matter of factly.

“And Stacey?”

“Stink eye.” Bill nodded sagely. “I don’t like the way she was looking at me.”

“And Willow?” Ford prompted, amused by Bill’s impromptu nicknames for the people he’d met so far.

“Stick.” Bill said, then defended his choice when Ford raised an eyebrow at him. “Come on, her name is practically Tree Tree McTree, Willow Oakwood is a stupid name. May as well call her Stick.”
“Don’t let her hear you call her that.” Ford laughed. “She’d snap you like a twig.”

“Euuurgh.” Bill shuddered. “What a way to go. Death by super-hick. Fine, she can be Red then. That’s not going to rustle anyone’s feathers. Snap ME like a twig.”

“So where are we going exactly?” Ford asked, curious at this point, considering they’d just been strolling through the graveyard for the past five minutes.

“Well, since YOU vetoed my other brilliant plans –“

“Blackmail and selling parts from the spaceship.” Ford had to point out.

“You don’t need all the parts of that hunk of junk.” Bill complained.

“I don’t want this place becoming some sort of alien pilgrimage site before I get to confirm my theory. Have you seen what it’s like when a group of scientists flock to a place like this? It’s a goddamn free for all.” Ford clenched his fist and narrowed his eyes at the thought of other scientists stepping in on his turf here in Gravity Falls.

Bill scoffed at Ford’s vehemence. “This comes back to how you don’t share. Not that I’m judging you, it’s an admirable trait really. Many great dictators and leaders don’t like to share, tonnes of autocrats, interdimensional tyrants, warlords.”

“Such a flattering comparison.” Ford said sarcastically.

“Hey, I’m on your side. Sharing the limelight’s for suckers.” Bill put his hands up in a surrendering pose, though he was still smirking at Sixer. “I just want to see you be the best you you can be. Out of interest, would you destroy your opponents in a reign of fire, yay or nay?”

“What kind of a question is that?” Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, but again he couldn’t help but be amused. Conversation with Bill was never dull.

“The kind you should consider.” Bill tented his fingers and pointed at Ford, grinning. “You never know.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.” Ford rolled his eyes, still smiling. Bill took that as a good sign.

“You know, you can change your mind about that blackmail opportunity at any time.” He grinned winsomely at Ford, hoping to sway him. “I’ve been wanting to take what’s mine from Preston Northwest for a century at least.”

“As much as I dislike the man, I can’t just agree to you blackmailing whoever you like here. And what do you mean ‘take what’s mine’ what does he have of yours?” Ford couldn’t help but ask, curious despite his principles.

“I don’t know, I think he at least owes me his firstborn. Maybe two firstborns.” Bill rubbed his chin, considering. “What’s the going rate for firstborns these days? 100? 200 thousand maybe?”

“Dollars?” Ford had to ask.

“Years of unconditional servitude actually. Though through servitude comes dollars. The plan is genius!” Bill cackled maniacally, still walking backwards, and finally tripped over the edge of a grave marker, falling onto his rear. “ACK!”

Ford laughed, winning the bet he had going with himself of how long Bill could go walking
backwards before he tripped into something. Bill frowned up at Sixer as he extended his hand to help Bill up. Rubbing his rear with one hand, he accepted Ford’s hand with his other, and let the scientist yank him to his feet.

“That wasn’t that funny.” Bill pouted.

“It kind of was.” Ford countered. “Should teach you something about walking backwards where you’re not familiar.”

“If I could float right now, I’d be the one laughing.” Bill pointed out. “Laughing at Gravity.”

“I’m sure.” Ford’s crooked smile was infuriating and gratifying at the same time, and Bill wanted to smack it off his face. Instead he just simmered, his hand still held by Ford. Bill could have snatched it away, but he didn’t.

“So where is this mysterious treasure spot exactly?” Ford asked, his expression amiable.

Bill blinked, distracted by Sixer’s smug smirk for a second there. He looked around for a moment, letting go of Sixer’s hand to lick his finger and hold it in the air as though testing the direction of the wind, before nodding.

“It’s right… here.”

They were standing under an elaborate gravestone with a marble angel standing over it, her finger pointing out towards the horizon. Ford bent down to inspect the faded writing on the marble plaque below the statue and found that the plaque was extraordinarily worn down. He could barely make out the words.

“Embley? Wembley? I can’t make it out.”

“Don’t bother.” Bill waved his hand at Ford dismissively. “The guy down here has a lot of people riding on the fact that he’s gonna stay buried for a long long time, along with his secrets.”

“Won’t his family mind that we’re – you know – ransacking his tomb.” Ford said, still not entirely on board with the plan.

“This sucker doesn’t have a family. I think he married a woodpecker. Legalised it too. Probably for the best he didn’t procreate. The gene pool of this town is deficient enough.” Bill sat himself down cross legged on the grass, leaning up against the base of the stone angel statue. “What he did have was a fair amount of gold, which he buried with him. Crazy people like to bury their gold. The ancient Pharaohs did it all the time, in case they ever woke up again and needed to be filthy rich in the afterlife. Those suckers sure were gullible.”

Ford joined Bill, sitting cross legged opposite him, curious now. “Am I to take it the pyramids weren’t a coincidence then?”

“What do you think Sixer?” Bill said, aiming for a mysterious smile, but he mostly just looked giddy, barely containing his desire to gloat. “Hoo boy. I loved the pyramids. Now that was decadence. I was a God to them. When I said ‘jump’ they said ‘how high’ and I said ‘about as high as the monument you’re about to build for me, so I’d say four hundred and fifty five foot tall by my estimate’. It was going to be higher, but they skimped out on the labourers when they buried them all along with the pharaoh. Talk about wasting your resources.”

Ford seemed incredulous at first. “You’re joking, right?” Bill’s enthusiasm in the face of this question was unwavering, his nostalgic beaming grin not breaking. When that reality broke
through, Ford became excited that he was talking to a being who was older than the pyramids, who was instrumental in making them. “You’re not joking. Unbelievable. What were the pharaohs like?”

“Egotistical and incredibly malleable.” Bill answered honestly. “They honestly thought burying gold and servants was for their benefit. Believed in immortality as a legacy. So they thought they’d be up and partying with their worldly possessions in the afterlife, instead of leaving their goods to the true immortal here. The only good reason to bury your gold is so later on down the track, I can use it. You’re just lucky I’m so well listened to, you could say I started a trend.”

“A trend of buried treasure.” Ford commented, trailing his finger along the grass while listening to Bill speak. He swivelled his pointer finger in the dirt for a bit, digging a small hole while he was fidgeting. “So how exactly are we going to dig up Wembley’s treasure without shovels then?”

“You tell me, you’re the one who left the shovel in the car.” Bill poked his tongue out at Ford.

Ford jutted his chin out stubbornly and crossed his arms. “So after all that I’m just going to have to go back and get it? Honestly Bill, you’re such a hassle sometimes.”

“Relax Sixer.” Bill waved his hand at Ford again, before he snagged Ford’s sweater sleeve, stopping Ford from getting back up to go fetch the shovels from the car. “We won’t have to dig. There are other ways into this tomb, if you like secret levers and booby traps. Or if you prefer not to wear tranq darts like a fashion statement, I can just summon it.”

Ford blinked, and sat back down. “Isn’t summoning hard for you? You complained for four hours when you had to summon that box of cheese—it’s from the kitchen last week.”

Bill let out a long suffering sigh.

“That was different. You unbound another brick since then. Besides, I was mostly complaining then because I wanted you to get them for me.”

“I knew it!” Ford pointed accusingly at Bill. “I knew you were putting it on. You made me carry you up and down the stairs you were so tired.”

“I was tired.” Bill defended himself absently, picking his teeth. “Tired of you griping at me.”

“I can’t believe this. See if I ever carry you anywhere again.” Ford fumed, crossing his arms over his chest.

“Hey, do you wanna find 70 thousand dollars on your own? Sass me again and you’re gonna have to.” Bill pointed threateningly at Ford.

Ford glared at Bill, and Bill glared right back, the two of them staring each other down defiantly for a good two minutes.

“You could have got the cheese—it’s yourself all along.” Ford said pettily, his eyes narrowed at Bill.

“I could, but that’s what I have you for.” Bill sneered in reply.

Ford struggled to hold his ground here, finding Bill’s reply oddly endearing. Raising his chin higher, Ford parroted Bill’s words back at him. “You could stand to appreciate me more for it.”

Bill looked stunned for a second there, leaning back, incredulous that he was even hearing that, before he burst out laughing. Doubling over, holding his belly, he laughed and wiped a tear out of
the corner of his eye. “Sure Sixer. Sure.”

Ford cracked another crooked grin, amused to see Bill so happy. He noted that Bill hadn’t said no as well, which was better than nothing. That was at least some appreciation.

Bill clapped his hands together and rubbed them. “Alright, grave robbing. Let’s do this.”

Rearranging to sit up straighter, uncrossing his legs and placing his feet pressed together, Bill organised so that his hands were tented, forming an upside down triangle, taking a traditional meditative position. He grinned at Ford, before pulling himself together, concentrating and shutting his eyes.

Ford watched Bill inhale deeply, his tattoos glowing slightly just under the sleeve of his shirt. Bill took another deep breath before a chunk of an amber coloured substance materialised in the air before him with a loud pop.

Bill opened one eye, and looked at what he had summoned, before wincing. “Ew, that’s going back.”

“What is that?” Ford asked, leaning forward, curious. He swiped a finger along the surface of the amber substance, and his finger came back sticky.

“Peanut Brittle.” Bill replied. “I shot a little too far to the left. I know there’s a treasure chest full of jewels, a golden bell, and a gold telescope somewhere in there. There’s also another treasure chest full of useless papers, so it’s hit and miss.”

Ford stuck his finger in his mouth, tasting the peanut brittle, before inclining his head. “Huh. I wouldn’t mind a gold telescope.”

“You wouldn’t sell it though.” Bill countered. He closed his eye, and concentrated on banishing the peanut brittle away, and it disappeared with a pop. “We need to sell it to pay McGucket.”

Ford shrugged in acknowledgement and watched Bill, waiting for him to summon the gold.

Bill let out another breath, and sucked one back in, concentrating fiercely with his eyes closed. He pulled another deep breath in, and his tattoos glowed again as the air vibrated and something materialised in front of Bill with another loud pop.

Bill opened one eye again, and dropped his meditative pose to throw a hand out at the papers he had summoned incredulously.

“Oh come on!”

Ford curiously bent over the papers to read what Bill had summoned, and Bill swatted his hand before he could grab them.

“Don’t touch that. I have to put it back right, there’s a whole government cover up riding on no one reading those.”

Ford raised his eyebrow at that, before committing what he had managed to read to memory. There was a line or two about Nathaniel Northwest and the true town founder of Gravity Falls that piqued Ford’s interest.

Bill took another deep breath, frowning, before screwing his eyes shut and banishing the papers back to the tomb. He broke his meditation pose once the papers were banished and slumped over,
puffing out his cheeks before flopping down, resting his forearms on the grass.

“Uuuuuugh. Why isn’t this working?”

“It worked just fine with the cheese-it’s.” Ford said, and Bill glared at him.

“There are times when shutting up is wise, IQ.”

Ford smirked instead, smug in the face of Bill’s struggle. Bill’s scowl deepened. He pulled himself upright again into his meditation pose, and jammed his eyes shut, his whole face screwed up with concentration.

“Hrrrrrrrrrrrrrrnnnnnnnnnnnggggggh.”

Pop.

Bill blinked his eyes open expectantly, to see floating in the air before him… yet more peanut brittle.

Bill grabbed the peanut brittle in his hand and flung it away out across the cemetery in a vicious overhand swing.

“UGH!”

Ford ducked as the peanut brittle sailed away. He watched where it landed, on some poor deceased person’s gravestone, knocking a vase of flowers to the side. Bill’s throw may have shattered the vase actually, if that tinkling sound was accurate. Ford turned back to look at Bill glaring at his own hand, looking enraged.

“Argh, now I’m all sticky.”

“What’s wrong?” Ford asked, concerned. “Why do you think you can’t do it?”

“I can do it!” Bill insisted. “I’m just worn out from those first three attempts. I can do it.”

Ford frowned, almost regretting how much he was ribbing Bill before for summoning the cheese-it’s. He really couldn’t tell how much energy summoning took out of Bill, and while the Muse was likely to overstate it to get what he wanted, something about how Bill seemed so frustrated convinced Ford that maybe all of the Muse’s bluster was for a reason.

“Maybe we should leave it for today. Go home, and try again tomorrow.” Ford suggested kindly, giving his Muse an out.

Bill looked at Ford, his brow furrowed, confused by Ford’s offer. Didn’t Sixer want to afford to pay McGucket? Why was he backing out? Did he think Bill couldn’t do it?

Sure, Bill was surprised at how drained he felt flubbing those first three attempts. Normally the most he had summoned in one day was one object, and he had the relief of Sixer fussing over him after when he made a big deal out of it. Thanks to the cheese-it’s fiasco Sixer hadn’t been so forthcoming with the pampering when Bill tried his hand at summoning, but this was different. They had a common goal. Why was he backing out now?

“You don’t think I can do it?” Bill had to ask, though he sounded somewhat hurt when asking the question.

“No, I do. I do.” Ford hurried to reassure Bill. “It’s just – I can see it’s taking a lot out of you.
Maybe we can get you some food or something, and then you can try again.”

Bill did look tired. His eyes didn’t seem as bright as they usually did, and his tattoos were dull at his wrists. However, that ‘or something’ Sixer said had Bill’s brain working for solutions.

Looking at Sixer, his brain firing off possibilities, Bill’s eyes darted from Sixer’s hands to his shoulders to his eyebrows to his stubbly chin, trying to figure out exactly how he could get a little extra juice from the human. Enough so he could summon successfully.

But how to breach the topic of receiving worship from Sixer without scaring him off. Bill frowned, thinking, before an idea came to him.

Bringing his hand up to hold it in front of Sixer’s face, Bill proposed his solution.

“Lick it!”

“What???” Ford recoiled, thrown aback by the forwardness of Bill’s demand.

“You like peanut brittle, I don’t like my hand being sticky. Kill two birds, one stone, BOOM, summoning made easy.”

“How exactly is me licking your hand related to you summoning gold?”

“It’s a golden opportunity?” Bill ventured, shrugging with the pun, before growing impatient. “Come on Sixer, help me work a little magic here.”

“I’m still stuck on the correlation.” Ford shook his head, looking hesitant and embarrassed. His cheeks were flushing pink.

Bill puffed his cheeks out, not wanting to go through with a truthful explanation here, in case it scared Ford off. “Can’t you just trust me?”

“I do trust you. Trusting you not to screw with me because it’s funny for you is stretching it a little far here.”

“Just lick my hand Sixer!!” Bill screeched, fed up with the scientist’s protestations.

“Why?”

“I know how magic works far better than you do. Why are you questioning me?”

“Because I’ve never heard of any magic that involves hand licking!”

“It’s a power exchange, okay?” Bill admitted, giving a half truth there. “I’m low on power, you’d be helping me get some of it back.”

Ford still seemed stunned. “… by licking your hand?”

“Fine, if you don’t want to do that we could do another foot-rub or something. You decide.” Bill suggested, pulling his hand back, still unsatisfied with how sticky his palm felt.

“Foot-rub?” Ford uttered, looking down at the ground before piecing it together. Bill’s bizarre reaction to the foot-rub, his sudden disappearance upstairs, the gold light pouring out of his eyes, how overheated he got. It wasn’t a coincidence. “So that’s what happened. You only asked for one because – because you wanted to take power from me? How does that even work? That’s -”
“Stop!” Bill put his hands up. “Stop. You’re making this into something it’s not.”

“I just don’t understand.” Ford continued, not looking at Bill, wrapped up in his own sense of stunned bafflement and slight betrayal. “I thought you – but it was all you using me –“

“It was not!” Bill protested, sounding tired and strained now. “I’m not using you, it was just a side effect. Sixer, listen to me, not to yourself.”

“What do you mean side effect? You want me to believe you didn’t plan to – what – take power from me, without me knowing?”

“I didn’t take anything from you!” Bill stressed, sounding upset now. “Sixer, stop.”

“Were you ever going to tell me about this ‘power exchange’?” Ford continued, outraged, barely listening to Bill, who was looking more and more ill as Ford continued talking, ignoring him. “Would you have, ever? Would you have just convinced me again and again to let you take power from me without knowing it?”

“Sixer, stop, please.” Bill felt exhausted, like his well of energy was drying up before him. If Sixer didn’t believe in him, turned away from him like that, there went Bill’s chance of ever regaining his strength, his power. And stuck in this body, bound like he was, Bill was unfortunately pretty damn dependant on Sixer’s belief and worship.

“You were using me.” Ford exclaimed, halfway to convincing himself, looking at Bill for the first time since he’d gone on his tirade.

His ire dried up when he looked at his Muse, surprised to see how utterly haggard and upset Bill looked.

“I was using you for foot-rub magic, well done Sixer. I’m such a monster. I don’t know how you put up with me.” Bill said sarcastically, looking downright unwell.

“What?” Ford asked, puzzled, mostly by how miserable Bill looked in such a short span of time. He never looked this genuinely unwell when he was whining about how hard summoning a box of cheese-it’s was, he always looked chipper enough that Ford found himself in a self indulgent mood, enough to pamper him despite believing the Muse was faking it.

Bill didn’t look like he was faking it now.


“You’re a muse.” Ford replied, now not so sure.

“Closer to a god in your language.” Bill corrected. “Now while I’m certainly powerful enough on my own, unbound, not limited by this human form, one thing that all God’s benefit from is worship.”

Ford was stunned, reeling from hearing this so soon after his unfair kneejerk reaction to Bill earlier. He had jumped to conclusions, the wrong conclusions. Incredibly wrong conclusions. He hadn’t just wrangled a Muse down from the cosmos, he had bound a god.

“Funny thing about worship is, it has to be willingly given, or it doesn’t work. You can’t force worship. If you’re doing what you don’t want to do you’re not worshiping something.”
Worshipping something.

Then Bill knew, Bill knew how Ford felt. Ford had been worshipping Bill from day one in his own way, and apparently it wasn’t the well kept secret Ford had hoped for. Ford felt his cheeks heat up, around about the same time he felt shame pool in his stomach for snapping at Bill like that, for thinking so little of him. He was too quick to suspect Bill.

He had thought Bill was mocking him, deriding him for how much he was willing to give Bill, but it seemed Bill knew the gravity of Ford’s actions all along.

“All this time you’ve been helping me, making a body for me, cooking for me, making sure I’m clothed, fed, kept safe – that’s all been a willing display of devotion. In other words – worship.” Bill looked exhausted, explaining to Sixer what he hadn’t wanted to discuss.

He was so sure Sixer would recoil from it, the reality of the situation, that he didn’t want to even risk it. But then through his own careless words it all blew up in his face. Good job Bill.

“If I wasn’t so intricately bound in this body, I could float around and subsist off things like inscriptions, murals or tributes, rumours and secret societies. I just found out recently that the reason I’ve been feeling so good here is because all the nice things you do for me are your way of worshipping me, and before you yell ‘Bill’s using me’ at me again - real nice by the way - I only figured it out last night, after the foot-rub, so there.”

Ford was quiet for a while, watching Bill, piecing together the facts in his head.

Eventually, he spoke.

“So… why did you want me to lick your hand?”

Bill huffed, frustrated. “Because you like peanut brittle, and you licked your own finger before, and I didn’t want my hand to be sticky, and I thought you’d like to clean it off. That was logic, okay!? Nothing else.”

Bill folded his arms over his chest and looked away from Sixer’s big stupid face, certain he was going to be discarded now Sixer thought he was just using Bill.

Sure, he was, in a way (in several ways) but Bill had always known that if Sixer didn’t feel special enough he’d leave, and now through the virtue of foot in mouth disease, Bill had gone and made the ultimate misstep.

Sixer didn’t say anything, and the longer Bill looked away, towards the marble block the angel stood on, stubbornly avoiding Sixer’s gaze, the more agitated he got, his cheeks heating up, his posture becoming tenser, more fidgety. His head hurt and his eyes were close to leaking – half baked crummy body, leaking all over the place.

He was going to be homeless, thrown out, without a single worshipper, stuck in this heinous town. Bill knew it. Goodbye food and water, goodbye comfy blankets and pillows, goodbye sleep nest, goodbye loafers and breathable cotton shirts. Goodbye ice-cream sandwiches and static TV. Goodbye –

Sixer grabbed Bill by the sticky hand and pulled it over towards him. Bill turned, and blinked at him, shocked. Ford met Bill’s eyes steadily, a wry smile hinting at his lips, before he looked down at Bill’s hand, trying to smother his smile unsuccessfully.

“You could have just asked.” Ford said.
“I did ask.”

“You said ‘lick this’. That wasn’t asking, that was demanding.” Ford corrected him.

“My mistake.” Bill drawled disingenuously. “I should have said ‘Please Stanford, will you lick my ha – AAAAAAHhh!”

Impulsive, and stubborn, Ford slid his tongue over the palm of Bill’s hand, holding onto his Muse’s wrist even as Bill screeched like a sheltered darling exposed to scandal, his whole body tensing up.

Bill made a high pitched squeaking noise at the sensation, suddenly hyperaware of the sensation of Ford’s thick warm tongue licking peanut brittle off his hand, before recognition of Ford’s gloating smirk kicked in.

An outrage. That human was too smug by far. It was one of life’s cruel sanity shattering ironies that smugness suited Sixer so well.

Bill’s face was the reddest it had ever been, and he looked completely flustered and borderline apoplexic. He also seemed a lot less tired.

Ford licked up along Bill’s index finger, swiping away the sugar on the digit, and he noticed through lidded eyes that Bill’s wrists were glowing gold again.

That was quick.

Bill’s hand twitched, almost like he was trying to pull away, but rethought it. He barely swallowed another funny noise, not wanting to give Sixer the satisfaction of a reaction, given how smug he looked right now.

“This really affects you, doesn’t it.”

“NO IT DOESN’T!” Bill denied, shouting a little too loud.

Ford chuckled, now more convinced than ever that this wasn’t some grandiose plot from Bill to use him. Accepting this sort of worship had Bill jumpier than a jackrabbit, and Bill wasn’t in the habit of making himself vulnerable, no matter the payoff.

Ford decided to have pity on Bill, who looked like steam was about to come out of his ears. He sucked Bill’s middle finger clean, coming off the digit with a wet pop, and then leaned back, letting go of Bill’s hand and crossing his arms.

“There. Done.” Ford smirked as Bill snatched his hand back and held it close to his chest, looking scandalised. Bill wiped his hand against his pants leg, still staring at Ford like he had grown another head. So by Bill’s standards, like Ford was suddenly a whole lot more interesting than he ever had been. “Now how are you feeling?”

“I can’t believe you just did that.” Bill said instead, voicing his surprise. “Do you even know what it is you’re doing for me?”

“If what you told me is correct, I was worshipping you.” Ford said, unashamed, still a little smug at how his words made Bill twitch.

“And you don’t mind?” Bill had to clarify.
“If I minded, I wouldn’t have done it in the first place.” Ford countered, throwing his meaning as far back as when he first summoned Bill, hoping the Muse, no, God, would cotton on to his meaning. “Again, you could have just told me.”

“Yeah right, if I had said ‘worship me’ to you, you’d have laughed in my face.” Bill scoffed, crossing his arms. “I know you Sixer.”

He didn’t know how many sordid fantasies sprung up in Ford’s head at the thought of Bill telling Stanford to worship him, in a variety of colourful ways. No, Ford wouldn’t tell Bill how wrong he was, not if he wanted to maintain the upper ground. Bill would be insufferable if he found out that the thought of worshipping Bill’s body sent shivers straight down Ford’s spine. Well, more insufferable.

“I laugh in your face anyway.” Ford said, grinning. He leaned forward, amused at how Bill reared back initially, still jumpy from before, and placed his hand on Bill’s forehead, checking his temperature. “You’re burning up again. Was that enough of a boost? Do you think you can summon gold now?”

Bill’s face felt overheated enough, and then Sixer had to go and put his freakish hand on him again - Bill nearly combusted on the spot.

Needing to vent before he found himself disastrously overwhelmed, he thought briefly about the chest full of gold and treasure in the tomb below. Without assuming his meditative pose, without concentrating at all, the air popped around them, magic jumping to his beck and call, and a heavy wooden chest appeared, teetering over to spill jewels and riches on the cemetery ground.

Ford jumped back with a surprised laugh, no longer touching Bill’s forehead, instead looking at the very real, very tangible stockpile of gold and riches spilling out over the grass.

“This is incredible!” Ford laughed, lifting up a heavy golden necklace, watching it glint in the light. He picked up a fat ruby from the pile in his other hand, and turned it this way and that, watching it sparkle in the sunlight. “This is a genuine ruby isn’t it? This alone must be worth an absolute fortune.”

Bill sat there, watching Ford smile and play with the treasure, unable to tear his eyes away from the human.

When Ford licked Bill’s hand, the very air felt supercharged between them, and the amount of energy that Bill felt shock through his system in that moment was beyond anything he’d ever experienced before. He’d never felt so much power, and this feeble human body was barely equipped to deal with it.

Even after summoning the heavy chest, something that would normally have drained him at least to the point of wanting a solid half day of Sixer’s pampering – he still felt his skin buzz with the rawness of the power. There was something a million times more potent about this energy transfer – it was powerful. More powerful than it had been last time. Bill thought the foot-rub was intense, it was nothing compared to this.

The worship was probably more potent because this time Sixer knew exactly what it was, knew exactly what he was giving, and gave it anyway. It didn’t seem like much to Ford, but to Bill, Sixer had basically given him an equivalent boon to the exorbitant pile of gold that Bill had summoned up for him. Just from licking clean Bill’s hand.

Sixer was still poking through the treasure giddily. He had found a gem-studded tiara and put it on
his own head, turning to Bill, resting his chin on his hand.

“Well, how do I look? Does it suit me?”

Bill raised his index finger, poised for rebuttal, but again, words defied him. “You – it –“

“Hmmm?” Ford pressed, wearing a shit eating grin and a tiara, loving how flustered he had made the God.

Of course, Ford’s gloating only made Bill more flustered, and he got to his feet, his hands fists at his side, pacing away from Ford with a frustrated screech. As Bill paced blue fire ran up his arms, and while he threw an odd tantrum of sorts, stomping about the graveyard, that fire would puff out, venting – as Bill let off some steam.

Ford watched Bill stomp around making huffy little noises, grumbling under his breath, and was astounded by the knowledge that Bill really was closer to a God than a simple Muse, as Ford once thought.

Seeing fire billow effortlessly up his arms really drove the point home that Bill was an otherworldly creature, that he was essentially inhuman, and Ford had never been more fascinated with his Muse. Even when Bill was breathing fire from his nostrils he somehow managed to be endearing.

“Don’t be mad. There’s one for you here too.” Ford called out, laughing, while Bill huffed and puffed pyrotechnics.

“Give me that.” Bill stomped back over to Stanford, the fires extinguished now, thankfully, and snatched the tiara off Ford’s head, before jamming the crown onto his own head childishly.

Ford laughed at Bill’s surly pout, seeing the corner of Bill’s mouth twitch, like he was fighting a smile of his own. Rising to his knees, Ford began sweeping the treasure back into the chest, closing the chest as best as he could. “We’d better get this back to the car before someone sees us.”

And because the universe was cruel and delighted in cosmic irony.

“Beautiful day isn’t it!” A friendly voice called out from across the cemetery.

Ford’s shoulders stiffened, and he hunched down over the treasure chest, jamming it shut, before turning around to look at him. Bill looked outright indignant that they were being intruded on, snatching the tiara off his head and holding it behind his back, silently hoping whoever was approaching hadn’t seen his little fireworks display just before. Fireworks was a good excuse. If they asked he’d say fireworks. Magician was a bit dated as far as plausible excuses went.

“Oh, a picnic. Greg, they brought a picnic. Isn’t that romantic? That’s just what we used to do.”

“Never gets old, does it Janice?” Greg Valentino chuckled, looking over to his wife Janice, who had her arm looped with his.

“Hello there.” Ford called out back to them, turning to half sit on the treasure chest, hoping they wouldn’t look too closely at it. “Greg and… Janice, was it?”

“We’re the Valentino’s.” Greg said warmly, extending his hand for Ford to shake. Ford shook his hand and smiled back, though it was more of an awkward grimace, seeing how strained the circumstances were. “Been running this old crypt for generations. So nice to see some new faces
“You must be Stan Pines.” Janice presumed, smiling at Ford in a friendly wholesome manner, squeezing her husband’s arm with her right hand and covering her baby bump with her left. She was about two months pregnant, but had been walking around with her hand on her stomach ever since she saw the result on her pregnancy test. She was so eager to be a mum. “The whole town’s talking about you. You and your friend.”

Bill tried to look innocent, now that the ginger woman was turning her friendly scrutiny his way. He managed a smile back, moving to wave at the undertakers before aborting the movement – realising there was a gem studded tiara in that hand.

“This is Bill. We were just – enjoying the scenery.” Ford explained awkwardly, still sitting on the chest full of gold. Enjoying the scenery was hardly the most believable cover for grave robbing, but it’d have to do.

“Oh don’t worry. There is no judgement here.” Janice shook her head solemnly, before holding her hand up, adamant in her sincerity. “The way I see it is we all end up the same way at the end of the day, so there ain’t no sense in holding differences against one another. Seeing people act like that over a small difference, well, it just breaks my heart. Hardly a difference anyway, you choose who you choose.”

“Now Janice, no need to embarrass the boys.” Greg patted her elbow. “We were all young once.”

Bill’s brow furrowed, confused, not following the implications of this conversation at all, but Ford wasn’t as uneducated, feeling the full brunt of embarrassment for the both of them.

“Right, well, we were just finishing up here. Packing up the – uh – picnic, and heading back to the car.” Ford threw his coat over the top of the treasure chest and bent to pick it up. Bill simply stood there, still holding the tiara behind his back, debating whether to keep it (it was quite fetching) or chuck it.

“Do you boys need help?” Greg offered congenially.

“No, we’re fine.” Ford grunted, straining to pick up the heavy chest on his own. Bill just stood, watching him, offering no help.

“Are you sure?” Greg had to question, watching Ford strain and struggle to lift the heavy picnic basket up off the ground.

“Oh, absolutely.” Ford huffed out a breath, waving his hand like it was no big deal, while sweat beaded on his brow from the effort he had expended.

Bill was grinning at this point, inwardly laughing at Sixer’s attempt to play it cool.

“Need a hand Sixer?” Bill chuckled, stepping forward.

“That would be nice.” Ford wheezed, feeling like he just pulled a muscle trying to heft the huge box up off the ground.

Bill bent down to put his hand on one side of the treasure chest and suddenly it was lighter than air, the muse levitating the gold laden chest so it weighed nothing at all.

Ford looked over the top of the chest at Bill, surprise written all over his face, before he narrowed his eyes at Bill, who’s shoulders were shaking with laughter at how he had managed to make
Ford’s previous efforts to lift the weighty chest look pitiful. Ford gave Bill a flat look, and Bill just looked straight up gleeful.

“Well, I see you boys have it all taken care of.” Greg said, eyeing up the treasure chest and Bill’s reedy arms, apparently capable of feats of enormous strength. Or maybe Stan Pines was just shit at lifting things. “Don’t be a stranger now! You’re always welcome to pop in and say hi, we don’t get many living guests in this neck of the woods. Hah hah hah.”

“Er.” Ford was vaguely unnerved, before he realised that, as undertakers, the Valentino’s presumably had a very morbid sense of humour. He was ninety percent sure they were joking anyway. “Oh, right. Well, we’ll be sure to do that. Hope you both … enjoy the sunshine. It was lovely meeting you.”

Janice and Greg watched Bill and Ford carry the picnic basket all the way through the cemetery and back to their car.

“Picnicking in the cemetery. Ain’t that just the cutest thing?”

“Reminds me of a certain memorable date of our own.” Greg turned to smile at his wife, missing how Ford’s car bounced up off its front wheels when the chest was dumped in the truck. “Just two people, potato salad, a bottle of wine, a few conveniently placed statues.”

“And you fell into an open grave, tumbling around with me.” Janice giggled. “I had to pull you out of there myself.”

“It was a miracle you managed. I thought I’d be there the rest of my life.”

Over by the parking bay, Ford and Bill were sliding into the front of the car, slamming the car doors behind them, bickering while reaching for their seatbelts.

“How do you regret it?” Janice asked Greg in a whisper.

“Not for a second. Not only did it give us a good story to tell, it made another little miracle happen too.” Greg put his hand on the top of Janice’s belly, glowing with pride. Parenthood was all they’d ever hoped for, and now they finally had a future for their family, growing slowly inside Janice’s belly.

“I’m thinking baby names. How do you like Stacey for a girl?”

The motor rumbled as Bill and Ford drove away.

“Stacey’s fine. I was thinking Robert for a boy, like your father, but if it ends up a girl we can just whack the name in there anyway. Like a middle name.”

“Stacey Robert?” Janice laughed. “I can see that making her popular at school.”

“Or he could be Robert Stacey.” Greg proposed.

“Robbie.” Janice said, rolling the name around in her mouth. “I like it.”

“I like it too.” Greg said, pressing a kiss to Janice’s nose.

Walking away from the angel statue hand in hand, the Valentino’s didn’t notice the glint of a discarded gem encrusted tiara poking out of the grass.
Ford was walking through the refrigerated section of the Dusk 2 Dawn convenience store in a pair of pants he hoped no one would recognise as pyjama pants and a navy blue turtleneck, half asleep. It was about 6am in the morning, just past dawn, and Ford was doing an emergency grocery run to appease the demanding little god he was housing in his home.

Bill had woken Ford up, uncannily early, bursting into his room yelling something about how it was a travesty he’d never tried a waffle before, and how he had a friend who had a face like a waffle, and wouldn’t it be hilarious to take a photo of Bill eating the waffle and show it to his waffle-faced friend, and watch them shit their pants at the macabre sight of it all. Bill’s excited yelling and bouncing on the bed proved to be too much for Stanford, who was selectively a morning person. By selectively, he meant ‘not today’ but unfortunately Bill was quite insistent on his whims being appeased.

So here Ford was, realising his loafers were in fact slippers, rubbing a hand over his eyes staring at the toaster waffles, trying to decide whether Bill would want the blueberry waffles, the chocolate chip, or the original. Ford was deliberating between the chocolate chip, because Bill had a sweet tooth, and the original just because the packet called them ‘golden waffles’ and Bill was inordinately fond of anything gold, regardless of its economic worth, when someone approached him from behind.

“Hey.”

Ford was barely conscious honestly, how he managed to drive here without killing a pedestrian was a miracle, but if the pedestrian was up at this ungodly hour, they probably deserved it. He blinked, almost not registering that the person who said ‘hey’ was talking to him. He moved to open the refrigerator door to grab the golden waffles, when a strong freckled arm reached out and slammed the door shut.

“I said hey. Earth to Stanford.” A somewhat irritated Willow Oakwood was staring Ford down. Her hair was perfectly coiffed again. Ford suspected it must be some sort of wig, because he never saw it look awful, no matter how early it was. “Are you listening to me? I said you better remember to be there tonight.”

“Hwuh – what?” Ford managed, trying to shake off the sleepiness to engage her properly.

“Tonight? The drive in movies? You promised Suzie you’d go with her.” Willow intoned, deadpan and unimpressed. She leaned against the refrigerator door when Ford tried to reach forward again to get the waffles. “You are not flaking on us this time.”

“I’m not flaking.” Ford replied, before pushing his glasses up his nose. “Wasn’t that on Thursday?”

“Today is Thursday.” Willow stressed, rolling her eyes. “See, this is exactly why I needed to remind you. You would have stood her up otherwise.”

“She’s not – uh –“ Ford looked guilty, and scratched his stubble idly. “Under the impression that this is some sort of romantic thing, is she?”

“What do you think lothario?” Willow levelled an unimpressed look at Ford, as though she
couldn’t fathom someone so goddamn oblivious.

“Oh.” Ford said, blinking widely. “Um.”

“Look, just try it. Do her the courtesy of one night out. I know you, like most men, have the observational skills of a rock, but Suzie’s liked you for a long time. She always makes you her smiling breakfasts. She doesn’t do that for just anyone.” Willow said, looking at her cuticles as she spoke.

“It’s not that I don’t think Suzie is a lovely girl –“ Ford started, nearly flinching at the threatening look Willow gave him at this initial sentence, as though daring him to say a damning word against her friend. “She is. I just – I’m not sure where she got her impression of me from, I mean, she doesn’t really know me, so I don’t get –“

“She wants to get to know you. It’s not that difficult.” Willow said, still examining her nails. “Besides, if I have to go, you have to go.”

Ford gave a long suffering, tired sigh. “What movie is it again?”

“Grease.” Willow said. “Some kinda musical. Suzie loves that stuff.”

“Wasn’t there a zombie movie marathon on that one time?” Ford questioned, remembering vaguely. “I swear I saw an advertisement for it in the paper.”

“They’re doing two screenings. Zombies one side of the field, singing high schoolers on the other. I know which movie I’d rather see, but since we’re doubling that ain’t gonna happen.” Willow said, making air quotes around ‘doubling’ as she spoke. Clearly she wasn’t too pleased with the idea.

“I thought you and Dan were –“ Ford began.

“Don’t talk to me about Dan.” Willow cut him off. “I am literally so mad at him right now. He can go sit on a spike for all I care.”

‘Still, don’t you think going to the pictures with Bill would –“

“Make things worse? Hah! Don’t even. I can make my own decisions here. Dan can just deal with it. Besides, he doesn’t know pretty boys aren’t my thing.” Willow said coolly, examining her manicure, admitting to using this double date to make her boyfriend jealous. She looked up at Ford and smirked. “Don’t worry, I’m not here to make moves on your new roommate. And if things don’t work out with Suzie, who am I to judge. I just want you to give her an honest try. I’m her friend. You agreed to this, you’re not allowed to jerk her around for your reputation or whatever.”

“I’m not –“ Ford began to protest.

“You’re gonna be there.” Willow prodded Ford’s chest with her index finger, aiming to intimidate. “Or we’re gonna have problems.”

“Alright, alright!” Ford put his hands up in surrender, not wanting to make an enemy out of the intimidating redhead. He’d seen how much she could lift, she was inordinately strong. “No problems. No problems. I guess I’ll convince Bill to come with me somehow – he isn’t the most social –“

“Whatever you gotta do to get your nerd friend to come along.” Willow poked Ford’s chest again. “You do it. If I have to go to this, he does too.”
“Still, he can be pretty stubborn.” Ford said again, hoping he might be able to fall back on Bill’s antisocial personality to avoid going on the unwanted date. “He doesn’t really like people so –”

“So that makes two of us.” Willow grumbled, and leaned back against the refrigerator door again. “He’s your friend isn’t he? He’ll do it for you if you ask him. That’s what friends do.”

Ford sighed again, not really banking on the ‘that’s what friends do’ card following through with Bill. He stared past Willow to the golden waffles in the freezer, so close, yet so far, feeling more exhausted than ever.

“Can you please move so I can buy these waffles Willow?”

“Are you wearing bunny slippers to the store, Stanford? Seriously?”

Ford turned his tired flat expression towards Willow, who looked like she was about to laugh, before she put her hands up, and stepped away from the freezer door.

“Thank you.” Ford managed, before reaching in and grabbing the waffles.

“Why do you look like shit today?” Willow couldn’t help but ask, her words abrasive but her tone friendly.

Walking like a zombie to the register, Ford grunted. “Didn’t sleep well.”

“Man, you’re going to need more than just some waffles to make it better. You look half dead. Just saying.”

Wiping his hand down his face, starting at his eyelids, rubbing them down, all six fingers raking through the bristly stubble along his cheeks, dragging right down to his chin, Ford blinked blearily at the ‘pay here’ sign just down the aisle. He leaned heavy on the sarcasm when he replied.

“Wrong. Waffles will make it all better.”

The most fun a guy could have with his pyjamas on. That was what Bill was doing right now. Technically they were Sixer’s pyjamas but NOT ANYMORE. That was the beauty of having a full time worshipper.

Bill was having a blast, frolicking about in Stanford’s mindscape, poking at his dreams. He’d never felt more powerful. The worship was coming on thick and fast, like whipped cream on pancakes, like heavy maple syrup. It was AMAZING.

Bill went to bed that night hyped up on power, hitting the mindscape with a splash, feeling the ripples of his power extend out past the walls of Stanford’s mind. Soaring past the open ceiling of the library, into the cosmos, Bill laughed himself silly, giddy on the knowledge that Sixer was intentionally worshipping him now – and it felt GREAT!

He prodded Ford’s dreams again, leading their direction back to the worshipful dreams, recounting the events of the day and embellishing on them. He set up camp in front of the screen in Sixer’s head, tapatio popcorn at the ready, watching the dreams and getting stronger. Bill still had the residual energy from Ford licking his hand rolling about in his constrained human form, and he was like a glutton for it.
Power. Oh the power.

Bill woke up at five thirty in the morning still thrumming with it, not knowing what to do with all this excess energy. He bounded into Stanford’s room, giddy and demanding. He made his demands, knowing now that if he asked Stanford to do something for him, the scientist would do it because he wanted to worship Bill. He wanted to!

Even half asleep, dead on his feet, Ford ended up trudging out of the house to appease Bill’s whim.

“Why waffles?” Sixer had asked him blearily.

“Because I want them.” Bill had replied, and beamed at Sixer.

It took Sixer a little while to comply but he did in the end. He did so willingly – and after a little loud whining. Still, he did it, and Bill was over the moon with the outcome of this whole situation.

He had so much power now. He didn’t know what to do with it all.

Until he did.

Waving Stanford off as he drove away in the car, nearly hitting their mailbox and driving up the sidewalk (he’d be fine) - the idea occurred to Bill. A way to further his own goals without losing anything at all, all while appearing generous and powerful. It was excellent.

He ran back upstairs once Sixer drove away and dove into his bed, curling up in the blankets and jamming his eyes shut, jettisoning himself into the mindscape.

While his power was bound, he couldn’t really store or regulate the energy he was receiving from Stanford very well. It boiled under his skin, needing to vent out explosively, or be siphoned into feats of magic. But the supply was never ending, and the demand was not all that extensive right now, so Bill had more energy than he needed.

More than enough to spare.

Blipping through space-time, teleporting through the cosmos, Bill found himself in the ruins of a timeless city, hiding out in a crumbling building, smoke billowing across the debris.

Where there was smoke, there was fire.

Pink fire.

Pyronica, the horned cyclops woman, and Bill’s strongest henchmaniac, jumped, sensing Bill’s sudden presence, and turned, towering over him, her hands raised into claws, pink fire dancing in her palms. She made quite the menacing picture for a few seconds, before she blinked her long eyelashes at Bill and slumped out of her defensive pose, standing down.

“Bill? Don’t sneak up on me like that! Shit, I nearly barbequed you.”

“I’m sure someone somewhere is disappointed you didn’t. How are you Py, ol’ Pink Eye, how’s my favourite hell on legs?” Bill’s voice echoed, chipper and cheerful, his triangular body glowing a healthy gold.

He could have, if he wanted to, stretched his shape to be taller than the cyclops, but he found no need to posture around Pyronica. They went way back. But just the knowledge that Bill could be taller than her if her wanted to soothed him.
“Not bad now that you’re here. Ugh, I’d be better if you hadn’t saddled me with the most annoying compass in history.” Pyronica rolled her eye, puffing her thick lips out in a pout. “Kryptos is such a drag. He’d be a great shield, if he didn’t keep running from all the action.”

“Sounds like he’s really applying himself.” Bill tutted, floating up next to Pyronica so he was closer to her face. He didn’t like how she bent down to look at him, exaggerating their size difference. She did it all the time too. Purposefully.

“I know it’s like an arrow to the back, pairing you up with the most square rhombus in the meta-verse. He was stepping on my toes, so I had to cut him off at the knee, so to speak.”

“So that’s why he’s been trying to get a foot up in our raids.” Pyronica punned and winked, though it could have been blinking technically. “Always acts like he’s planning everything, when he doesn’t know shit about Time Police. Takes credit for everything too, despite cowering behind me the ENTIRE raid!” Pyronica huffed and put her hand on her hip. “I just wanna eat him and be done with it. He looks crunchy.”

“About what I expected. Unfortunately you can’t eat him, I still need him.” Bill mused, then knocked on the left sloping side of his form twice. “Knock on wood, I’m about to make all his bullshit worth your while.”

“It’s worth my while anyway.” Pyronica commented, smiling at Bill, her sharp teeth bared. “I’ve been having a blast out here. Pew pew.” She made finger guns, gesturing to the burning wreckage around her.

“Any closer to dragging the dummy spitter out into the open?” Bill enquired.

“Just his toys. Little foot soldiers with laser guns and boring faces.” Py stretched her arms back over her head and yawned, relaxing. “Though if I break a few more of his toys maybe.”

“Not that he cares about his toys.” Bill remarked, floating over to a discarded time police standard issue laser gun laying atop a pile of smoking rubble. He poked the gun with his foot and it slid down from the rubble.

“They just keep coming.” Pyronica nudged the gun with her stilettoed foot. “Not that I’m complaining. Since I can’t eat Kryptos, these grunts have been my bread and butter.”

“I’ve tried bread and butter recently.” Bill stated. “Not as good as pancakes.”

“What are pancakes?” Pyronica tilted her head, blinking her big lashed eye at Bill.

Bill felt a moment of disconnect then. His life had drastically changed as of late, and before, as a cosmic being, things like the enjoyment over the taste of pancakes wouldn’t even be on his radar, so he wasn’t exactly sure how he should begin to explain.

Sixer had opened up a range of new delights for him, but how would his friends react to those delights? Considering his previous delights had been destruction and chaos, would they think he’d gone soft, just because he was embracing the creature comforts offered to him. Looking at Pyronica making herself at home in the flame filled wasteland, Bill didn’t think he’d even begin to be able to bring up creature comforts to her.

“Irrelevant. Pancakes are irrelevant.” Bill said finally, snapping his fingers, bringing flame to his hand. “I came here to bring you something.”

“Oooh. A present?” Pyronica smiled, and leaned down to beam at Bill. “What is it?”
“An all expenses paid makeover.” Bill winked at her, though again it could have been blinking. “Tickle your fancy any?”

“Are you saying you don’t like my outfit Bill?” Pyronica put her hands on her hips and pouted, feigning hurt. “Is the cape too much?”

“Too much? More like not enough. Where’s your razzle dazzle?”

“The cape IS the razzle dazzle. Or am I not dazzling enough for you?” She grinned playfully, then wiggled her flame covered hands like jazz hands, closing her eye. “Razzle dazzle me then. I want to see how this pans out.”

Bill straightened his bowtie indulgently, extending his hand to his glowing pink friend, before holding it back, stating the terms of this little makeover. She cracked her eye open to watch him.

“Your makeover! A little extra firepower for your continued acceptance of our mutual side-thorn. As a thank you for keeping him occupied and off my back. And for not eating him. You can eat Hectorgon instead. Maybe. Maybe later. Deal or no deal?”

“Extra firepower? Now I’m curious.” Pyronica extended her hand playfully, and Bill clasped her fiery claw with his little black hand, blue and pink flame melding. “And a free maybe meal down the road. I reckon he’ll be crunchy. Deal.”

Bill smiled gleefully, happy to be bringing some sort of creature comfort to his friend. It wasn’t pancakes but it certainly brought a measure of security her way. He inhaled and pushed deep from his core, expelling the surplus energy Sixer had been fuelling him with up out of his arm and down into Pyronica’s hand.

Her magic reacted, the pink flames billowing out from her hands to fan all across her body, much to her surprise.

“Oh god. This is - this is a lot of power.” She began laughing, the thrill of the power running through her veins delighting her, as Bill kept pushing it out towards her.

The ground beneath her feet began to crackle and blister from the heat, and soon it was blackened and scorching.

Finally, Bill let go of her hand.

When the flames settled she looked different. The white hot fire that had previously lit up Pyronica’s hands and feet had extended, creeping higher up her arms and legs, sustaining their heat. It really did look like a makeover. Her cape fluttered dramatically behind her, and her flames stretched higher, resembling thigh high boots and shoulder length gloves now.

“I look so fucking classy.” Pyronica grinned at Bill, swishing her cape around, looking at her flame gloves with delight. “Fuckin’ classy bitch.”

“That makes two of us.” Bill preened, tipping his top hat at her, pleased with her reaction.

“This is incredible. Are you sure you can just give this shit away? Cipher, this is golden.” She exclaimed, looking at the supercharged flames licking up from her elbow like opera gloves.

“I found myself with more than enough to spare, and couldn’t think of anyone more deserving for a little extra kindling for the fire.” Bill stated generously.
“Will you be okay though?” Pyronica asked, her flames dimming with concern.

That was one of the things Bill liked about Pyronica, she wasn’t one of the fake followers who joined Bill to satisfy their own agendas. Bill and Pyronica hit it off escaping the infenitentiary together, and had been close friends ever since. She cared, in her own way, and Bill always tried to help her when it came to gaining power and obliterating enemies. This wasn’t the first time he loaned her some of his fire. Bill didn’t often give ‘freebies’ to his henchmaniacs, but he gave plenty to Pyronica. Somehow she always deserved it.

Bill waved his hand at her dismissively. “Don’t worry about me. There’s more where that came from. A limitless supply. I’m onto something big, and the plan is going perfectly. I’m fast tracking this party, and I wanted to do a little something to bring the party to you.”

“I like it.” Pyronica said appreciatively, grinning. “You must have some stories to tell, coming across a power-boost like this. How’d you level up you pointy bastard?”

Bill rubbed under his eye, squinting into the distance, considering. Did he tell Py how Sixer licked his hand, or did he make it sound more impressive than that?

“Well, you see I –“

“Did you get this from SIX FINGERS?” The words exploded from Pyronica’s big mouth. She was grinning wider than she had all day.

“How could you –” Bill spluttered.

“OH MY GOD! What did you even DO for this?” Pyronica squatted right down so she could look Bill in the eye, still grinning giddily. “This smells like worship juice. Potent worship juice. Does little old Six Fingers fancy you Bill?”

“I –“ Bill puffed up defensively, trying to regain some dignity in the face of Pyronica’s unabashed glee. “I’m just getting the most out of a good situation. He’s an untapped battery to me, that’s all.”

“So how long have you been tapping this battery?” Pyronica wiggled her shoulders, lidding her eye, fluttering her lashes suggestively. “Come ON, you can tell me. Did he kiss you?”

“UGH! Py, no!” Bill’s yellow form took on more of a peach tint, flustered by her questioning. “It’s nothing like that. I’m just – just eating his dreams - only dreams. Using him, not kissing him!”

“I don’t know.” Py said, teasingly, bringing her long tongue out to lick the flames on her hand. “This tastes physical to me. I know what physical worship tastes like. I’ve got a sad little human of my own you know, saw me in a ‘vision’ he thinks, hahah. Obsessed with me! Draws me every day on that deviant website.”

“That’s drawings. Just inscriptions.” Bill dismissed her, more than a little nervous now that she’d cotton onto what had been happening.

“It’s what he does with the inscriptions that’s the fun part. Pathetic but hilarious.” Pyronica cackled, slapping her knee. “You don’t know a power boost until you know what it feels like to have a human press their meaty lips to your image. I can feel it every time, anywhere in the universe. Keeps the flame burning hot.”

Bill glared at her, saying nothing. If he admitted to anything here she’d laugh until she fell over, however what she said did pique Bill’s interest. If the power was this potent from just a foot-rub and Sixer licking peanut brittle off his hand, Bill could barely imagine what the devotion of that
heinous lip press would be like. That lip pressing ritual held more relevance for humans, which somehow bestowed it with more power. Bill wouldn’t know. He normally didn’t have lips.

“That didn’t happen.” Bill crossed his arms. Pyronica was still smiling, and she reached out to poke at Bill’s bricks a little.

“Do you want it to happen?”

“This is Sixer we’re talking about here.” Bill stressed, swatting her hand away. “He’s an awful, boring, self-righteous human. Talks too much, complains too much, thinks too much. He gets ahead of himself. Reaches beyond his means. Tries too hard for things he shouldn’t want. He thinks he’s going to change the world. Hah! He thinks he’s so great – he’s practically nothing without me.”

“You know, you sure talk about him a lot for someone who’s just a battery to you.” Pyronica nudged Bill again, wink/blinking at him. “You’ve got him wrapped around your little finger, tell me that isn’t just brilliant for you.”

“It is brilliant.” Bill admitted. “Sixer’s been challenging at times, but he’s followed through building the portal, and I’ll admit, he’s interesting enough to stick around for.”

“And he doesn’t look bad, for a human.” Pyronica added, smiling dreamily. “He’s built well, for his kind.”

“Pfft.” Bill scoffed, crossing his arms again, looking away from her. “All humans look the same. If it wasn’t for those freakish digits of his, he’d be just another meatbag.”

“I’ve seen meatbags. They don’t all have that strong jaw, or those shoulders. Mmmm. You got a deluxe model, trust me.” Pyronica assured Bill.

Bill kicked his feet against the rubble, sending a rock flying across the ground. He wanted to say he had never thought about Sixer’s looks before. Sixer’s looks didn’t matter, it was the brain his big head was housing that made him interesting. But now that Pyronica mentioned it, dammit, Bill was thinking about Sixer’s appearance. He pushed those thoughts to the side for now, though he was sure to dwell on them later.

“See, I wish my human was that interesting.” Pyronica sat on the floor next to Bill. “This one barely leaves his room. Just sits there in the dark making funny noises and sweats a lot.”

“A pinnacle of his species then.” Bill joked.

Pyronica shrugged. “Beggars can’t be choosers. Until your party pulls through, I can’t exactly go down to earth to pick out better followers. Worshipers, solid worshippers are few and far between. Hard to reach from this dimension.”

Bill patted Pyronica on her flaming knee. “When this portal comes online, you’ll have a whole cult full of worshippers, all to yourself.”

“I’m holding you to that.” Pyronica nudged her knee back against Bill’s hand. “I want tasty ones. Ones with the crunchy little bones.”

“They’re all crunchy if you burn them enough.” Bill said sagely. “Crispy too.”

“You’re such a good friend Bill.” Pyronica patted Bill on his sloping side.
“Make sure to show off your fancy new boots to Kryptos.” Bill floated up into the air, getting ready to leave. God knows he had enough to think about. “Let him know where they came from, and who’s watching.”

“You’re watching.” Pyronica replied, getting up off the ground to see him off.

“That’s right.” Bill said cheerfully, his voice echoing as he warped space time around him to jettison off elsewhere into the void. “I’m always watching!”

Dissolving back through the dimensions, and out of the mindscape, Bill found himself waking up in bed. The clock on the wall said it was 11 o’clock and the sunlight was beaming in through Bill’s window, warming the room. He could faintly hear Sixer downstairs talking on the phone.

Pyronica wanted better worshippers, but honestly Bill couldn’t see himself finding any better than Sixer. Sixer was resourceful, intelligent, creative, determined. He wasn’t the grovelling mindless type, and that made him more captivating for Bill. He managed to hold Bill’s interest. Bill enjoyed his attention.

And maybe Sixer was handsome too. Not that it mattered. He was still infuriating.

Wiggling out of the blankets, Bill set off to go downstairs. Sixer should have brought those waffles by now.

When Ford came home from the convenience store, he put the frozen waffles in the fridge and puttered around downstairs, looking for Bill, expecting to see him. Considering Bill woke him up at this ungodly hour, Ford at least thought Bill could have the decency to be awake, but when Ford finally found Bill the muse was curled up in bed, sleeping in while Ford was out fetching his waffles.

Ford stood next to the bed for a while, hands on his hips, struggling with the urge to wake Bill up. It was a petty urge. If Ford had to be awake at 5 or 6 in the morning thanks to Bill’s nonsense, Bill had to be up too. The only thing that held back Ford’s petty urge to shake the Muse awake was watching the expressions Bill was making in his sleep.

Instead of the blank corpse like expression Bill had when Ford had unintentionally wandered into his room before, Ford was surprised by how expressive Bill was being in his sleep.

He wasn’t glowing, or exuding any strange yellow lights. He looked human almost, though Ford knew the truth. It was just as endearing to see Bill acting human as it was to see him with flames coming out of his nostrils. Ford found himself transfixed by the expressive twitches Bill made now.

Bill smiled in his sleep. He seemed beyond content that he was sleeping in, and Ford had to wonder if the muse could dream. After seething over how content Bill looked, Ford actually began to pay attention.

Bill started off seeming smug and superior, even clinging to his pillow. He smiled, and seemed content, until the edge of his mouth twitched, and he suddenly started squirming.

Bill looked embarrassed in his sleep, and Ford realised, utterly bemused, that he had never seen Bill look that compromised.

Well, maybe once, back at the graveyard.
Leaving the room with a fond chuckle, Ford decided to leave Bill to his sleep in.

Trudging back downstairs, Ford made himself a cup of tea and a few slices of toast with marmalade, and took his breakfast out onto the porch.

Being up this early in the morning was tolerable once you got used to it. Ford wasn’t really looking forward to what was going to be a long day. He couldn’t back out of that movie marathon.

If it didn’t go well perhaps he could leave early. Ford had a sinking feeling that with Willow chaperoning or rather masterminding her friend’s date Ford wouldn’t be able to leave until after the movie finished.

How on earth did he wind up on a date with Suzie Wentworth?

Normally Ford would have been chuffed at the thought. A date with a girl. The last date he’d been on was a study date at university, and there were no movies or insipid musicals involved. The girl in question had a wonderful brain for calculus and statistics, but she hadn’t winked at Ford or made goo goo eyes at him.

He wasn’t really looking forward to the date, and he wondered if that had something to do with Bill being here. Ford’s wildly repressed fantasy dreams hadn’t eased up any. Especially now that he had so much more to work off. Dreams about setting Bill aflame with the simplest actions gave Stanford’s dreams a smug satisfied feel that carried over to real life. It would make him feel confident, if he wasn’t so conflicted about it.

Ford decided to channel his thoughts onto paper, and went into his bedroom to retrieve one of his journals. On the way back downstairs, Ford paused by the living room, remembering the spiral bound notebook he had jammed under the couch several weeks ago.

He’d been writing in the little spiral notebook whenever Bill wasn’t hovering over his shoulder. He didn’t think the muse would take well to being studied.

What he had intended as a field guide of observations on his muse never really took off the ground. There were a few entries here and there. Ford had observed plenty, but he hadn’t the opportunity to put it all down on paper the strange things Bill did. He felt, as a scientist, he had failed there somewhat. Observing something was all well and good, but it wasn’t science if you didn’t write it down.

Ford considered grabbing the notebook, writing his observations of Bill down, what had happened over the past few days. With Bill sleeping upstairs, the prospect was tempting, but Ford didn’t know when Bill would wake up, and he didn’t want Bill finding out about the notebook.

Ford left the spiral notebook in it’s hiding place under the couch and proceeded out to the porch with his own journal. Sure, he had plenty to write about Bill, but Ford wanted to write about other things too. He had a lot of conflicted feelings about the upcoming few days, and his journal was the perfect place to vent about them.

Settling down with his marmalade toast and tea, Ford sat down on the chair out on the porch and relaxed with a sigh. It was quite a nice morning, the sun was shining. It was getting warmer, July weather heating up, and the nights were balmy and pleasant. It would be good weather for the movies tonight. Hardly sweater weather, but that didn’t stop Ford.

He sipped his tea and sighed at the taste. So refreshing.

After taking several seconds to appreciate the tranquillity of the morning, collecting his thoughts,
Ford flicked through his journal to find his last entry.

“Oh, not again.” Ford grumbled, the calm and tranquillity he felt just a second ago dissolving into a familiar frustration.

A journal was supposed to be a private thing. While Ford did use his journals to record the majority of his research, he also wrote his private thoughts and feelings into them, and ideally with *his* journals, *he* would be the sole author.

Bill apparently didn’t get the memo on privacy, and seemed to find time to go behind Ford’s back, and make his own additions to Ford’s work.

Whole sentences of Ford’s writing were crossed out with thick black lines. Passages of code in Bill’s own heavy handed scrawl were plastered across the pages, sloping up the margins, in the empty space on the page. He’d drawn triangles, eyes, and hands in every available space, leaving messages in runes and alien languages. Sometimes he’d write in Latin, sometimes in English, mostly in that strange alien code all throughout the journal.

It was frustrating to Ford, not just because it was disrespectful, but because it gave him another mystery to solve, another code to crack, another riddle to puzzle over – Ford couldn’t just walk away from the coded messages. He couldn’t just leave it uncracked.

He once stayed up for 38 hours straight to crack one of Bill’s coded messages, and it ended up being a request for Ford to buy one of those fancy blenders from the shopping channel. Bill wanted to put snails from the garden in it to make an elixir that would apparently knock out a gnome long enough for Stanford to see what was under its hat. Unfortunately half the ‘snails’ Bill had picked were rocks. Somehow Bill couldn’t tell the difference, he thought snails turned to stone when they slept.

That was one nutri-blender and 38 hours of Ford’s life wasted.

It was even more frustrating to Ford when he went to all that trouble to crack one of the coded messages and the message was just some nonsense, a joke or a wisecrack Bill had graffitied in his book, just to taunt him. After the blender incident, Ford was sceptical of Bill’s codes. He still itched to decode them, he just paced himself better now.

Ford grumbled and narrowed his eyes at the latest addition to his field notes. At the bottom of the page on Spells Ford had headed up – the section hadn’t many entries just yet, just the unbinding ritual and a spell that was supposed to get rid of vengeful ghosts – Bill had written six words.

*Corpus levitas*
*Diablo Dominium*
*Mondo Vicium*

It looked like Latin, some sort of spell. The truly aggravating thing was that Bill hadn’t written any sort of explanation for the spell. That was not only aggravating but also incredibly dangerous. Ford wasn’t just going to recite some random spell he found – the consequences could be catastrophic. He’d have to press Bill for an explanation when he woke up.

“Rude.” Ford grumbled, and flicked through to his latest entry, leaving Bill’s unexplained graffiti for now, though his curiosity had been piqued.

Clicking his ballpoint pen, Ford began heading up his latest entry.
Before Ford could detail his thoughts any further, the telephone rang out from the other room, disturbing the tranquil quiet of the morning.

“Oh, what is it now?” Ford huffed, before closing his journal and setting it down on the table, getting to his feet to trudge in to get the phone.

The phone continued to ring, and Ford sounded a little unfriendly when he finally answered it.

“Hello? Who’s calling?” Ford’s voice sounded rough and gravelly, impatient at being interrupted.

“Oh, darn it Patricia, I knew it was too early.” Fiddleford’s nervous voice sounded out across the line.

“You’re up, the baby’s up, it’s fine.” Patricia’s voice sounded in the background.

Ford blinked, and the frustrated tension he felt before faded away. “Fiddleford?”

“Hi Stanford. Sorry, didn’t mean to wake you.”

“No, no, it’s fine.” Ford assured his friend. “I was already up. Early morning groceries.”

“I don’t remember you being too much of a morning person back in Backupsmore.” Fiddleford chuckled, reminiscing.

“I’m hardly one now.” Ford laughed, his mood picking up upon hearing his old friend’s voice. “I’ve been trying to sit down for breakfast, but things keep coming up.”

“Oh, I don’t want to keep you now.” Fiddleford backed down.

“No, no, you’re not keeping me from anything important. How are you? How’s Patricia? And the baby?” Ford asked politely.

“They’re both good. Tate woke us up early, don’t need no rooster like back on the farm, every morning like clockwork he… he wakes us up actually. Pat and I don’t have many late nights anymore. I suppose that’s parenthood for you though.”

“Being woken up so early is – is tough, I guess.” Ford said, like he hadn’t personally experienced the joys of being woken up at an ungodly hour by a petty little god.

“Oh, I’m not complaining!” Fiddleford rushed to clarify. “Tate’s the best little miracle to ever happen to me. I love being a dad, ain’t no thing better.”

There was a smacking noise, like Patricia pressing a kiss to Fiddleford’s cheek.

Ford didn’t really have any reference for the joys of fatherhood. His own father hadn’t been much of one. His mother was what held the family together. Again, he felt guilt well up in his stomach. It was clear Fiddleford loved his family, Ford had asked him to part with them for the sake of this project.

“Have you … have you thought any more on what we spoke about last, F?” Ford asked hesitantly, almost expecting Fiddleford to have reconsidered.

“I was just about to bring that up actually. Didn’t know how to start, hah.” Fiddleford sounded nervous again. “I don’t want to be sounding ungrateful for the opportunity, I just have to ask a few
questions – uh –“

Ford sat down on the couch and fiddled with the phone cord, just as nervous. Part of him still wanted to finish the portal on his own, but ever since hearing his friend’s voice on the phone he’d been somewhat hoping that F would join him, just for the company of an old friend. Bill’s company was great in helping Ford feel not so isolated here in the woods, but sometimes it was clear Bill didn’t want to be here, and Ford didn’t know how to handle that.

He also didn’t know how to deal with the tension that had been building between himself and Bill, and he selfishly hoped Fiddleford would come down just to dissolve the tension a little. To act as a buffer between Ford and Bill, and the feelings he was beginning to foster towards Bill that he’d rather not acknowledge.

“I’ll do my best to answer them.” Ford said, his tone reassuring, not wanting to scare F off.

Fiddleford sounded more relieved when he spoke next. “Well, Pat and I have talked it over, and uh, it sounds like a really fantastic opportunity – but Pat’s a little worried, not that I think you would but – she’s a little concerned about how this would work in terms of the, uh, the pay.”

Of course. Ford nodded to himself. “Go on.”

“Well, Pat’s concerned about when the pay is going to come through – I mean, it’s a lot of money. I’ve just got to figure out before I accept if it’s going to be something that’s sustainable. Not that I think you would, but if this is one of those – pay at the end of the project – deals –“

Ford wasn’t one for offering financial assurances, or making deals sound appealing. That was more Bill’s forte. Ford had a moment of ‘what would Bill do’ that felt astoundingly domestic, as it seemed even without Bill being present, Ford was relying on him. It worked though. Imagining what Bill’s response would be helped Ford decide on his own.

“I can offer you an advancement.”

Fiddleford paused in his rambling, interested. “What sort of percentage would –?”

“Half and half.” Ford guessed. “Half at the start of the project, and the other half at its completion? Would that be sustainable?”

“$35,000 right off the bat?” Fiddleford sounded as sceptical as he sounded hopeful.

“Would that be enough to look after your family?” Ford asked, genuinely caring about the answer, hoping the sum would assuage some of his guilt over taking Fiddleford away from them.

“Gee, hahah, that’s a college fund for Tate right there. That’s - Stanford, I don’t mean to pry, but how exactly did you come into this kind of money? How did you get enough like this to give away? You’re not caught in anything… shady are you?”

Ford thought about his answer. Grave robbing was certainly shady, maybe not as shady as shackling a god down to earth to make the machine. Fiddleford didn’t need to know that. Ford replied and it was a half truth, but not technically a lie. “The project has a … benefactor. You could say.”

“It’s been signed up with a contractor?” Fiddleford assumed. “So it’s like a group project then?”

“No, no. It’ll just be you and me.”
“And your benefactor?”

“He’s more of a friend.” Ford wasn’t sure if he should mention Bill, and to what extent. Fiddleford had always been superstitious, Ford couldn’t exactly imagine him taking well to the idea of sharing a house with some sort of interdimensional hot-sauce loving god in human form. Ford had gotten used to how inhuman Bill could be at times, but Fiddleford had not, and most likely wouldn’t if he was still how Ford remembered him.

Best to keep it simple.

“A special friend.”

There we go.

“He’ll be overseeing the project for us. His insight is astonishing. One of the brightest minds I’ve ever had the pleasure to meet.”

“Oh.” Fiddleford said sounding surprised. “Will this special friend of yours be working with us? Will I meet him?”

“I don’t know how much actual work Bill will do.” Ford griped. He could hear footsteps upstairs, Bill must be awake, up and moving around. Ford adjusted on the couch so he was facing the staircase for when Bill ambled down. “He gave me the blueprints, but he can be quite flighty with the actual assembly of the machine. You should meet him, he’ll be living with us in the shack.”

“Uh huh.” Fiddleford queried, curious. “What will the living arrangements be exactly?”

“Oh, there’s plenty of room in the shack. You’ll have your own room, I can put you up in the attic actually, it’s very spacious, and there’s space for your own study. I have a lab downstairs, a few studies, places to test out inventions, all in the house.”

“You’re building the portal in your lab? In your house? Don’t you think having a separate location would be better? You’ll be dealing with what’s essentially a wormhole, there’ll be gravitational anomalies, space-time rifts potentially. All kinds of bizarre.” Fiddleford listed excitedly. “You could make a separate bunker for experimentation. Away from the house.”

“You know, that’s actually quite a good idea. Especially when it comes to studying specimens in the long run.” Stanford replied with equal enthusiasm, rubbing his chin. He barely noticed the bump bump bump of someone walking down the stairs.

Bill trudged down the staircase, yawning when he reached the door to the living room. Ford waved at Bill, and pointed to the phone, letting him know he was talking to Fiddleford.

Bill nodded at Ford and mouthed. “Where are my waffles?”

“In the fridge.” Ford replied in hushed tones.

“What?” Bill asked a little louder.

“In the fridge.” Ford reiterated with a sigh, raising his voice above the polite whisper.

“Cold waffles?” Bill replied loudly, sounding indignant.

“I’m sorry Fiddleford, I’ll just be a minute.” Ford said into the phone, before resting the phone against his chest. “They’re toaster waffles, you put them in the toaster.”
“I’m not going near that metal death trap.” Bill gestured to the kitchen. “Not after last time.”

“Part of me wants to see you try again, especially after last time.” Ford grinned, remembering how Bill had jumped in the air when the toaster went off.

“Yeah, yeah, you’d like that wouldn’t you.” Bill said sourly, and rolled his eyes, leaning against the doorframe to the living room comfortably.

“Would I like you to make your own waffles? Yes, yes I would.” Ford said amiably, lifting the phone back up to his ear.

“You can do it. Chop chop! The toaster awaits!” Bill clapped his hands at Stanford imperiously.

“I’m actually on the phone Bill.” Ford said, wiggling the phone in his hand. On the other end of the line Fiddleford was listening, hanging onto every word.

“You’re no fun Sixer. Since when did you become no fun?”

“Five AM Bill, five AM.” Ford replied deliberately sounding put upon, like his early morning was the most arduous thing possible.

“Your point?” Bill’s lips twitched, like he was fighting amusement.

Ford raised his eyebrows at this, obviously Bill was in a mood this morning, if his teasing was any indicator. Ford liked it when they shared that friendly teasing banter, hoping it would stay on the friendly side of teasing, and he smothered amusement of his own as he very deliberately put the phone back to his ear.

“So, anyway Fiddleford —“

“I’ll just wait in the kitchen then. I’ll be there.” Bill sidestepped away into the other room, poking his head back around the door to emphasise. “Waiting.”

Ford waved him away, trying not to chuckle at Bill’s antics.

“Still waiting!” Bill called out from the other room.

“Hello?” Fiddleford said on the other side of the line.

“Sorry.” Ford replied. “For the distraction.”

“That’s your benefactor?” Fiddleford asked.

“In a way.” Ford could hear Bill very loudly pulling his chair out in the kitchen, letting the chair legs drag across the floor.

“It’s good to know that you’re not alone out there.” Fiddleford said genuinely. “You sound happy.”

That pulled Ford up for a moment there. He hadn’t considered it that way before, but Bill did make him happy. He was challenging and interesting and often incredibly fun, just through the virtue of being himself. Since Bill came to this physical realm, Stanford had felt less isolated, more energetic. He supposed he did seem happier.

Shaking off that pleasant thought, Ford went back to the topic at hand.

“So what are you thinking? Is the advance acceptable? How soon are you thinking of coming
“Well.” Fiddleford began. “I’ll still have to talk things over with Pat again. Though I think she’ll be more than happy with the arrangement. I just have a few obligations to sort out here, gotta tender the resignation in to the mechanics place, pack and gas up the car for the trip. Figure out how Pat and Tate will do things, maybe take Tate to her mother’s.”

Ford nodded, listening, though of course Fiddleford couldn’t see him nodding.

“It’ll be a long stay. So I’ll need to hitch all my stuff to the roof. Pack up all my gizmo’s I’m workin’ on. Something to do in my downtime. Let’s see - it’s about a days drive with stops, so if I leave in about a week all things sorted, I can be there –say, the 29th?”

“So you’re coming!” Ford said, excited. He felt a little overcome with emotion at the thought of his old friend coming all the way out here to help change the world with him. It was exciting stuff. “Excellent! I’d be so delighted to have you here!”

“I look forward to changing the world with my old university buddy.” Fiddleford chuckled. “It’s quite the prospect. Never thought I’d end up in the world changing business but I couldn’t be happier to.”

In the other room Bill was eavesdropping, and he rolled his eyes. Humans were all the same. Delusions of grandeur all over the place.

“Are you sure you’re okay with the move?” Ford couldn’t help but fret. “You’ll be a long way away from your family.”

“I know.” Fiddleford replied, sounding a tad sad. “But it’s just a days drive to go see them. I can go see them occasionally right?”

“Of course!” Ford agreed immediately, even while Bill poked his head around the kitchen doorframe, leaning back on his chair, frowning. “We won’t be working all the time. I’m sure a weekend here or there will be alright, if you want to make the trip. I know there’s a greyhound bus that runs from here to California. Do you celebrate Christmas? You can take some time off at Christmas too. And thanksgiving.”

Bill tilted back on his chair again to frown and shrug his shoulders at Ford, trying to ask him exactly what the heck he was doing. Ford glanced at Bill for maybe a second, raising his eyebrow, but didn’t take back what he said.

Bill frowned at the stubborn human. Sixer was supposed to listen to him, and do what he said in an ideal world. Too bad this wasn’t an ideal world. That would change in time.

What did Ford think he was doing just handing away chunks of time off to their new worker? Did he think the portal was going to build itself? Bill certainly wasn’t going to build it.

“That’s really generous Stanford. Truly. Thank you so much.” Fiddleford said.

“No need to thank me. It’s only fair. I don’t want to keep you away from your family. I understand you’re doing a big thing to come up all this way to help me.” Ford said into the phone, ignoring Bill, who kept tilting his chair back trying to catch Ford’s eye.

“You’re paying him, remember?” Bill mouthed at Ford, teetering back on his chair to look through the doorway. Ford saw him, and then deliberately ignored him, making Bill seethe.
“I suppose I’ll see you on the twenty-ninth then?” Ford asked pleasantly.

“Darn tootin’ you will!” Fiddleford replied, sounding far less nervous now than he did at the start of the phone call, successfully reassured.

“I’m looking forward to it.” Ford said genuinely, warmth infusing his voice. “Feel free to call if you need anything else while you’re packing.”

In the background on the call baby Tate started crying again, and Bill, teetering back on his chair to look in on the conversation, couldn’t help but roll his eyes and slap his own forehead, utterly loathing the baby noises emanating from the phone.

Unfortunately slapping one’s own forehead while leaning onto the back legs of one’s chair isn’t the wisest combination of movements, and Bill teetered off balance, the chair falling back onto the ground, landing with a clutter.

“OW! Excuse me???” Bill yelled loudly, having been so rudely toppled over onto the floor.

Ford actually snorted, before clapping his hand over his mouth to stop himself from laughing.

“What was that?” Fiddleford enquired over the phone.

“Oh, um…” Ford looked up at Bill, tempted to spill details to Fiddleford, but, seeing the evil expression on Bill’s face, Ford reconsidered. “Nothing. Just a, uh, chair fell. Fiddleford, I’ll see you on the 29th yes? Speak to you soon!”

“Oh, uh, bye then Stanford. I guess.”

Ford quickly put the phone back on the hook and scrambled to his feet to pick Bill up off the floor. Not that the muse couldn’t help himself up, but Ford was sensing some simmering flames building the longer Bill sat on the floor, looking indignantly at the table.

Ford stepped into the kitchen and looped his arms under Bill’s armpits. “You know, there’s a lesson there about not leaning back on your chair.”

“You can can your lesson and stick it right up your –“

“Or not.” Ford interrupted Bill’s colourful sentence. His muse was in a mood. Once Bill was back on his feet, Ford dusted Bill’s shoulders down unnecessarily. “I thought you were waiting patiently.”

“I was waiting, but that got old real quick. What were you doing? Giving him holiday time before he even gets here? He’s here to work.” Bill huffed, and swatted Ford’s hand away from his shoulder. “I know you’re excited to have your new best friend up here to play junior science kit with, but don’t forget what you’re here to accomplish.”

“There will be plenty of time to work on the portal.” Ford assured Bill, noting privately Bill’s burgeoning jealousy, and feeling oddly pleased about it. “Look at us, we haven’t been working on it 24/7 and it’s still getting done just fine. We can build the portal, continue my research, and still have time to let Fiddleford see his family. We’re not holding him hostage.”

Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford’s scandalised tone, and looked unimpressed by it. “We’re not holding him hostage.” Bill mimicked. “Sure, it’s not like you expended any effort getting the 70 thousand dollars to pay his salary. Why not give him annual leave, and a pay-rise while you’re at it?”
Ford was also unimpressed by Bill’s back-talk. “Annual leave seems more than fair. I won’t extort the labour out of F, he’s my friend.”

“You’re paying him 70 thousand dollars to put up with your company!” Bill threw his hands in the air dramatically. “Where’s MY pay-rise, huh? Where’s my annual leave?”

“Bill, put your hands down. You’re being ridiculous.” Ford said gruffly, rolling his eyes and turning around to pull the waffles out of the fridge, already knowing where this is going. He wasn’t in the mood for a browbeating today.

“Excuse me? I don’t get paid to be here. Mainly because I never asked to be here. You dragged me here. Speaking of hostages.” Bill pressed, arguing for the sake of arguing now.

It had been a while since he’d guilted Ford appropriately, and since he woke up so confused this morning, he was itching to push the scientist. To push at the world until something broke.

Ford hunched his shoulders stiff, trying to block Bill’s words out as he stuffed the waffles in the toaster.

“And I don’t get annual leave because I CAN’T leave, because YOU stranded me here in this hideous bubble of a town. YOU took me away from my domain and thought ‘here’s an idea, I’m too stubborn and proud to ask my dear old college friend for help so why don’t I pull Bill down from the cosmos and force him in this neat little flesh cage for some good old fashioned unpaid labour’ – some genius level thinking there IQ.” Bill followed Ford through the kitchen, standing behind him, griping at him from just behind Ford’s shoulder. His voice had that same forced cheerfulness but the edge was real and bitter.

“And now you’ve finally got your act together and called him in and suddenly you’re bending over backwards to make sure he’s comfortable. He gets pay and leave and his own fancy attic space. You sure know how to treat a guy Sixer. It’s really great to see from where I’m sitting.”

“You say that like I haven’t bent over backwards for you this entire time.” Ford countered, still facing the toaster, his back to Bill, frowning, not in the mood for this. “Like I haven’t given up so much of my life now to make you happy. I’m sorry that you don’t like me treating F fairly but if you’ll recall, paying him was your idea.”

“Oh, sure, you treat your friend fairly. I see how it is.” Bill scoffed and crossed his arms. “Nice to know we’re such good friends too. I’m waiting to see the part when you tie McGucket down into an existence he never wanted and strip him of all his power. Will that be before or after he takes his little holiday?”

“I’m not –“ Ford groaned, frustrated, looking for the right words. He turned around and faced Bill, looking into the Muse’s eyes, but seeing Bill glare irritably up at him wasn’t helping. “Is it really so terrible being here that you can’t move past it? How long are you going to hold this over my head Bill?”

“How long?” Bill blinked at Ford, brought up suddenly by his question. He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and pointed to the gold lines of his tattoo. “I could say how long is the piece of string sewn into my flesh if you really want an answer that won’t just assuage your own guilt.”

“How long?” Bill blinked at Ford, brought up suddenly by his question. He rolled up the sleeve of his shirt and pointed to the gold lines of his tattoo. “I could say how long is the piece of string sewn into my flesh if you really want an answer that won’t just assuage your own guilt.”

“Then there’s nothing I can do to make it any better.” Ford replied, crossing his arms and looking at Bill’s angry little face. “If you’ll never let it go. I know I did you a wrong, and I’ve apologised for it a dozen times already. I’m trying to fix my friendship with you, but if this is the one hurdle that can’t be crossed –“
“I’m not saying it can’t be crossed, I’m just saying that I’m never letting it go, that’s all.” Bill replied simply, watching Ford shrewdly. The sudden change in his expression startled Ford. “There’s a difference.”

Bill noted Ford’s confused expression and shrugged. “Betrayal’s a healthy foundation to all the best relationships. Besides, if I didn’t have this to hold over your head, then I’d have to find something else.”

Ford squinted, confused and feeling vaguely insulted. He wasn’t sure if Bill had forgiven him, or not. Sometimes it seemed Bill guiled him just because he could. He didn’t really seem all that upset about being here sometimes, so when he went off at Ford like this it confused him.

On top of that Bill was suddenly being remarkably calm. Ford thought he was going off at him about Fiddleford because he was legitimately upset, but it seemed Bill was berating him simply to stir the pot.

“You don’t squirm if I don’t poke you.” Bill admitted, stuffing his hands into the pockets of his trousers. “I’ll be honest with you Sixer, I find myself minding less and less about being corporeal. I still hate being stuck here in this ridiculous tourist trap of a town, and you’ve gotta unbind a few more bricks before you win any prizes for being a gracious host. However, as promised, you pointed out the fun parts of being here that I’ve grown to like. And one of those things I’ve grown to like is getting a reaction out of you.”

Ford’s eyebrows had been raised for the first part of Bill’s ‘honest confession’ but they came back down into a straight line, his expression flat again, when Bill admitted that instead of growing to like jellybeans or the smell of WD40 greasing an engine’s turbines, he had grown to like irritating Ford until he snapped.

“I’m so pleased my frustration is entertaining for you.” Ford said sarcastically. “Never mind the fact that I legitimately care. Here I am thinking I’m upsetting you all the time, doing everything wrong, but you just like to criticise.”

“You do some things right.” Bill poked Ford’s nose, grinning at him now. “Like that face you made before. Your ‘the guilt is eating me alive’ face. Very cute. I approve. You should get eaten alive more often.”

Ford blinked and rubbed his nose. Did Bill just call him cute?

Bill grinned wider, and reached up to ruffle Ford’s hair. “Now make with the waffles. We have a lot to do today.”

“Ugh.” Ford groaned, and flattened down his hair. “About that…”

“What – AH – oh they’re ready.” Bill flinched as the waffles popped up from the toaster. He reached for the maple syrup from the pantry while Stanford set out plates. “What about that? I thought we were pawning the gold for your alphabet buddy’s wage. I was thinking after that there are these crystals in the forest you might like to see. I could show you, a little treat, or a big surprise. Or both!”

Ford passed Bill a plate, the toasted waffle sitting on top. Bill took the plate and looked between the toasted waffle and the picture on the box on the counter. He looked back and forth between them for a while, and Ford watched, bemused.

“Golden waffles.” Bill said finally, sounding satisfied.
“I thought you’d like them.” Ford commented. By all rights he should have whiplash from how quickly he went from finding Bill frustrating to finding him endearing again. It was an unusual balance.

“Mmm.” Bill hummed, and nodded approvingly. He flipped the cap on the maple syrup and poured about a teaspoon of it into his mouth, before biting into the waffle.

Ford watched Bill chew the waffle happily, wincing at how much sugar Bill was imbibing this way. While Bill’s mouth was full, Ford figured now was as good a time as any to bring up their change in plans.

“We might not have time after pawning the gold. Do you remember when we got pancakes last week at the diner?”

“Mmrgh?” Bill stopped chewing and squinted at Ford.

“And I promised we’d go to the drive in movies with Willow and Suzie.” Ford said the words in a rush like maybe if he said it fast enough Bill wouldn’t take issue with it.

“Mrou promised!” Bill accused Ford, pointing at him, before bringing his hand up to cover his mouth while he chewed his mouthful as fast as he could so he could berate Stanford’s stupidity.

“I can’t take it back now because Willow saw me this morning while buying the waffles, and if we aren’t there by seven she said we’d have problems, whatever that means. We have to go, at least for an hour. If it doesn’t go well, maybe we can leave early.” Ford rushed, trying to make the movies sound more palatable, and less like his arm was being twisted here.

“What’s all this we business huh?” Bill said after swallowing the massive chunk of waffle and syrup down. His throat sounded scratchy. “I’m not the idiot who agreed to this.”

“They expect you to be there. To come with me. We’re doubling.” Ford said, making air quotes around the word. He even tried the manipulative angle, knowing it wouldn’t work. “Willow said you’d do this for me because you’re my friend.”

“This is pushing friendship, even for you Sixer.” Bill gestured with the bottle of maple syrup in his hand. “Forcing me to interact with the muppets of this town is going to cost you. Making me go to the movies. What movie?”

“Some kind of musical unfortunately.” Ford admitted, his shoulders sagging.

“Golden Age or some modern Hollywood monstrosity?” Bill inquired sharply.

“Moder- you like musicals?” Ford asked midway through his answer, curious.

Bill sniffed defensively and turned away from Ford, taking his plate to the table, before picking up his chair from the floor and sitting on it, turning his chin up superciliously. “I like the costumes, and the razzle dazzle.”

Ford didn’t know why it made him so happy to know that even cosmic beings from different dimensions liked silly little things like cinema classics. It shed new light on how Bill had been watching Little Shop of Horrors that day, and how Ford would often find him glued to the TV when coming up from working on the portal.

“Hmm.” Ford hummed happily, amused by Bill’s admission. “The razzle dazzle.”
“Shut up Sixer.” Bill huffed, glaring at Ford. “This is going to cost you a brick. TWO bricks.”

“Two bricks?” Ford settled down with his own waffle on the chair opposite Bill’s, passing Bill cutlery, which he was so far ignoring. “Why two? One isn’t enough for putting up with strangers?”

“You’re the one who said we’re doubling today.” Bill said, picking up his waffle in his fingers and waving it around imperiously. “One brick for accompanying you, two for playing nice. You don’t want to see what happens with just one brick up your sleeve.”

Ford sighed, and dragged his hand down his chin again, exhausted already at the prospect of reigning Bill in for the duration of the film. He knew first hand how turbulent Bill could be when he was really trying. “Fine. You’ve extorted another brick out of me. I expect maximum niceness.”

“Seventy percent niceness.” Bill crunched another bite out of his waffle.

“Are you haggling niceness?” Ford asked, barely believing it, oddly amused.

“Sixty five. See, you lost your edge for questioning me there.” Bill pointed out, reaching for the syrup. “Gotta keep up Sixer. You’re losing the upper hand.”

“I’m not sure I ever had it.” Ford mumbled to himself, cutting a square out of his waffle and forking it into his mouth.

“Are you kidding? You’re ALL hand. I mean look at them, you’ve got a full finger up on the competition.” Bill poured syrup into his mouth again, and took another chunk out of the waffle, chewing it, before swallowing and clearing his throat. “Technically I’m at a disadvantage here.”

“Oh, I’m sure you are.” Ford said, disbelieving.

They spent the morning sharing banter with one another, and the entire box of toaster waffles. Ford’s marmalade on toast was forgotten out on the porch, and finally stolen by one of the more adventurous forest gnomes.

By the time they set out to take the chest full of gold to the pawn shop, the toast was gone, but Ford remembered to stop and grab his journal, shoving it in his satchel, putting it in the backseat of the car. He’d finish his journal entry later.

He had a busy day ahead of him. He was running on optimism and a promise of sixty six percent niceness from the Muse, and he had no idea just how disastrous this double date would be.

About 34%.

Chapter End Notes

Pyronica's human is in a different spot of time than Ford and Bill are in right now. The rebellion against linear time is one of the reasons Bill's crew are so strongly opposed to Time Baby, but that's going into spoilers there. Pyronica's human is a modern day basement dweller posting pictures of his waifu onto deviantart it's canon.
Thank you for the Music, the songs I'm singing.

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up this chapter contains the parroting of some heteronormative world-views. Also in passing, two slurs against homosexuality, though this is also parroting. As I don’t enjoy those words overmuch I figured folks would appreciate a warning.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Ford unbound the two bricks for Bill as promised after pawning a portion of gold at the Gravity Falls pawn shop. The shop owner had to get in contact with the bank to pay Ford off properly, and the rest of the money would be paid to Ford tomorrow, as the store didn’t keep that much cash on hand. A specialist from California would be coming down to appraise the value of the rubies and gemstone’s Bill found, but for now Ford had 8 thousand dollars burning a hole in his pocket, and the rest of the money would come through later in the week.

Bill took care of most of the haggling in the pawn shop, which left Stanford time to finish his journal entry, and after they left the shop, Bill took Ford to a clearing in the woods to do the unbinding ritual.

The ritual took a little out of Ford this time, leaving him somewhat sleepy, compounding on his early morning and general lack of rest. Bill explained that pulling two bricks out at once probably was too much for Ford, that and the blood loss.

Bill healed up Ford’s finger again with that little dash of fire, but the circle for unbinding two bricks was wider, and took more blood from Ford.

After the unbinding, Bill set to figuring out what powers the ritual had unlocked for him, experimenting and amusing Ford all at once.

Clicking repeatedly, Bill pulled a frustrated expression.

“What exactly are you trying to do?” Ford asked, yawning, sitting on a boulder in the forest clearing.

“You know, if I told you everything, I’d probably have to kill you. Maybe not kill you. At least disfigure you a bit.” Bill said lightly, still focusing on the tree just in his line of sight. He clicked one more time, and then sighed irritably, giving up. “Hasn’t changed colour. Looks like I’m not quite there yet.”

“What colour am I supposed to be seeing?” Ford enquired politely.

“Well, you’d know if you could see it, but you can’t, and neither can I.” Bill huffed, and rolled his shoulders, trying something else.

“So far you can heal yourself.” Ford began listing. “Set fire to unfortunate pieces of furniture –“

“And other things!” Bill corrected Ford pompously. “Don’t tempt me.”

“Levitate items. Summon items, though that seems to take a little more effort there.” Ford
continued listing. “You can visit the mindscape when you’re sleeping I believe.”

“You can visit the mindscape when you’re sleeping I believe.”

Bill made little finger gun motions at flowers in the clearing, frowning when nothing happened. He shook his hand out and tried again.

“Is there something else that I’m missing? You mentioned floating.” Ford pondered, shaking his head at Bill’s hand gestures.

“Floating!!” Bill said excitedly, and began concentrating. He again made those sweeping motions he made before in the spaceship, flapping his arms about, trying to scoop himself into the air.

Unfortunately he didn’t begin to levitate, he just looked rather stupid.

“Ughhhhhhhhh.”

When Ford’s muffled chuckle sounded out, Bill growled in frustration. He finger gunned at the flowers again in a fit of temper, but this time they just set alight, burning brightly.

Ford presumed this wasn’t what Bill had intended to happen before, burning the flowers took hardly any concentration at all.

“I’m fairly certain you could singe things before.”

“You think this is funny? You can’t begin to imagine the powers I had at my disposal before.” Bill said testily. This just piqued Ford’s curiosity further.

“What sort of things could you do?”

“Lots of things.” Bill replied ambiguously. “For starters, if you hadn’t bound my powers our money troubles wouldn’t be an issue.”

“Since you summoned the treasure it’s hardly been an issue anyway.” Ford remarked.

“But we had to go to all that effort.” Bill bemoaned. “Before I could have just pointed at the couch. Poof. Gold couch. Solid gold. Easy.”

“Why always the couch?” Ford loved that couch.

“Summoning things is more complicated. First you gotta know where things are, then you’ve got to know where you are, then there’s warping space-time.” Bill complained, listing all the inconvenient factors, ticking them off on his fingers.

“Do you think it will still be so hard for you now with these bricks unbound?” Ford hypothesised. “Maybe rather than granting an extra power, this last brick just enabled you to use your existing powers better?”

“Well that’s boring.” Bill’s shoulders slumped, unimpressed with the possibility. “I can’t float, I can’t disintegrate an organism’s molecules, I can’t change their natural essence. Do I get to fuck with reality at all?”

“You might want to put out that fire before it spreads.” Ford pointed at the burning flowers, now singeing the ground in the clearing, creeping along the grass.

Bill walked over to the flowers and stomped on the embers on the ground, twisting his heel on them. “Still have to use these stupid meaty walkers for everything. Talk about short-changed. This
isn’t even worth fifty two percent niceness.”

Stanford panicked at that, hoping Bill wouldn’t retract his promise to behave over this. He shuddered to think what fifty two percent niceness would bring.

“I’m sure there’s something new you can do now. We just aren’t thinking hard enough. There has to be something.”

“You’re kidding yourself Sixer. Even worse, you’re trying to kid me.” Bill’s shoulders slumped in a sigh. “Life on earth just sucks, I have no illusions about that. This planet is a miserable excuse for a reality.”

Ford slid down off the boulder and walked over to Bill, hoping to comfort him. “It’s not all bad, I’m sure – ”

“WAIT!” Bill’s arm flew out, and his face broke into a wide grin. “That’s it!”

Bill put his palms together, and concentrated, before bringing his palms out bit by bit.

At first Ford had no idea what Bill was doing, what he was hoping to accomplish, but then he saw it, smaller than a gumball expanding between Bill’s hands.

“What is that?” Ford bent down to peer at the little pink bubble that was slowly expanding.

Bill’s voice was somewhat strained, it seemed that whatever he was doing took far more effort than anything else he’d previously attempted. “A self-contained illusion if I’m doing it right. I used to be able to make these babies in a snap. Now I just have to concentrate.”

“A self-contained illusion?” Ford queried, reaching out to poke at the little bubble. “How does that work exactly? Is the sphere the illusion, or what’s inside the sphere?”

When Ford poked the little pink bubble, it popped, and Bill snarled, his yellow eyes flashing red briefly in irritation, his magic surging.

“Geez, don’t go bursting my bubble Sixer. That took effort.”

“You’re glowing again Bill.” Ford pointed out. “I don’t recall you glowing this much before.”

“Maybe you were distracted by my glowing personality.” Bill couldn’t resist smugly smirking at Sixer, who pulled a peculiar face, like there was a bug on his nose or something similar.

That frustrated Bill. Why did Sixer keep pretending that he didn’t agree with Bill? Bill had seen inside his head, he knew what Sixer was thinking deep down, he just didn’t understand why the scientist was so doggedly pretending that he didn’t find Bill utterly delightful.

“Colour changing irises may be too much of a distraction to the locals.” Ford scratched the stubble on his chin idly.

“I’m sure a shiny object on the ground would be a phenomenal distraction for them.” Bill muttered resentfully. “How do you live with these mouthbreathers?”

“They’re not all that bad.” Ford defended them half heartedly. “Sure, some of them may not be the most educated…”

“Fire is scary, science is bad, Thomas Edison is a witch, hurr durr.” Bill mocked them, opening and shutting his hands like they were talking. “What passes for human enlightenment hasn’t
changed much in a few centuries.”

“Put those down.” Ford grabbed Bill’s hand idly, pinching together the Muse’s thumb and forefinger so the mockery would stop. “We’re supposed to be convincing them you’re human too, remember. So you don’t have to stay in the shack all the time. So you can venture out on your own. Maybe make a few friends.”

Ford was hoping Bill would make friends tonight.

He was hoping for a lot of things.

Perversely to his own desires, he was hoping he could shunt off his obsession with Bill a little this evening, redirect it down a different track, and see if it helped stop Ford’s feelings from getting any stronger. It was difficult, when Bill was just about the most interesting thing Ford had ever encountered, magic, personality, fire, brimstone and all.

Two months in living with Bill, and already Ford felt himself falling in too deep. He hoped it was just a by-product of being so isolated, Bill’s company being preferable because it was the only company he had.

He didn’t want to acknowledge the alternative – that he found Bill’s company so intoxicating because he was attracted to the Muse, to the God. That it wasn’t just Bill’s looks that had Ford invested, it was his personality too, and given that his personality was absolutely awful, Ford was hoping it wasn’t so.

He doubted that Susan Wentworth’s company would be more preferable, but it was clear he was hoping for some kind of miracle really.

“Boring. I don’t see what associating with those Cro-Magnons will do for my social life. Or yours for that matter. You’re hard pressed to find intelligent conversation anywhere else besides here with me, you should just resign yourself to that fact.”

Bill didn’t really want to make ‘other friends’ not when maintaining this friendship with Sixer took enough work as it is. He’d rather not waste his energy on the idiots that lived in Gravity Falls, and devote that energy to furthering his plans.

He also wasn’t so keen on the idea of Ford finding solace or companionship elsewhere. Not now that Bill had finally found out how interesting the scientist could be.

Since he woke up this morning, Bill had been watching Ford carefully, his eyes roving the scientist’s physique, trying to understand whether as a human Ford’s shape was attractive, or if Pyronica was just ribbing him. He spent the car ride staring at Ford’s shoulders, finding them broad enough, filling the trench coat well. He spent his time in the pawn shop sneaking glances at Ford’s face, stuck in that journal of his, deciding that he rather liked Ford’s eyebrows, fuzzy caterpillars that they were. Drawing the circle in the clearing Bill decided he liked the hue of Ford’s blood, and the way his adam’s apple moved when he yawned.

He was still debating Pyronica’s comment on Ford’s jawline. Mostly Ford had been jutting his chin out at Bill stubbornly, and Bill took issue with that, mainly because Ford’s stubbornness was a precursor to him doing something incredibly stupid more often than not.

“The only thing I’m resigned to is one hour and fifty minutes of pretending to give a damn about singing high schoolers.” Ford rolled his eyes.

He was still holding onto Bill’s hand, pinching his fingers together. He began to pull away, when
Ford’s hand was larger than Bill’s, not including the extra finger, his skin was paler, his fingers calloused, and his palm was warm, almost sweaty. Bill could feel Ford attempting to pull away, and he held onto Ford’s wrist tighter, tired of Sixer running away from him.

Bill tapped Ford’s extra finger with his pinky, fixing Ford’s reluctantly flustered face in the crosshairs of his sharp yellow eyed stare.

“Why are you pretending?” Bill tapped Ford’s sixth finger again, drawing the scientist’s attention to it. “Pretending to be like them? You’re not, and that’s better. Preferable by far. I wouldn’t have picked you if you were like everyone else.”

“Everyone else doesn’t think that.” Ford admitted, looking at their palms pressed together, before looking up at Bill, trying not to let his increased heartrate show on his face. In doing so he just ended up looking rather depressed.


Ford looked uncertain, but hopeful, before he seemed to loop his thoughts around back to pessimistic disbelief again. It was infuriating to watch these emotions flicker round on Ford’s face.

Bill had gotten very good at reading him, and he seemed off all day today. Resisting Bill.

Bill didn’t like it.

“We’ll see.” Ford finally murmured, and wriggled his hand away from Bill’s grasp. Bill watched Sixer and frowned, this uncertainty confusing him.

“Well at least you got something new out of the unbinding.” Ford shrugged. He checked his watch, it was almost time to go to the drive in movies. “So does this mean you’re still at sixty six percent niceness for this evening?”

Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, who was smiling as winsomely as he possibly could, hoping to endear Bill to the prospect of good behaviour. He even batted his eyelashes coyly. His expression was adorable and sickening. Typical.

“We’ll see.” Bill replied ominously, before turning on his heel walking back over to the car parked in the clearing.

The drive in movie theatre was set up in one of the fields alongside the Northwest Mud Flaps factory, in old farmer Sprott’s grazing fields. The livestock had all been penned away and on each side of the field a screen had been set up, sewn together sheets tossed over a wooden stand to make the small town’s movie magic. The town’s residents drove along the old dirt road to the farm, parking facing either screen depending on what film they wanted to see.

Ford drove past the south side of the field, staring longingly at the screen set up to show the latest pulp horror film. He continued over to the north side of the field making sad puppy eyes as he drove past the science fiction zone, into the saccharine musical side of the enclosure. It was with sadness that he parked facing the screen set up to show Grease instead of Night of the Living Dead.
Turning the engine off, Ford sighed, and turned to look to Bill.

“Now we just have to find Suzie and Willow and get set up.”

“Well, hush.” Bill said, not paying attention to Ford, instead concentrating on the cosmic bubble he was holding between his hands.

Bill was concentrating on developing the illusion inside this particular bubble, moulding it’s contents artfully. Sixer had told him “No fire in the car” and “No magic” at the movies. Bill had complained that magic at the movies was practically a prerequisite, but Sixer didn’t see the irony of that particular statement. He was being no fun tonight. No fun at all.

“We’re here now Bill. You’ll have to put that away.” Ford said, putting away his own journal, chucking it into his rucksack in the back seat, before looking over to Bill in the passenger’s seat, still fixated on forming his bubble.

“I’m not done with it yet.” Bill complained, barely looking up from his current task.

“We have to convince Willow and Suzie you’re human.” Ford insisted. “And you playing with a magical bubble of your own devising isn’t exactly the most human pastime.”

“And what exactly is a human pastime? Golf? Mob lynching? Witch hunts? Macramé?” Bill shot back, still barely glancing up from his bubble. “Humans do that all the time.”

“I was thinking more social interaction? You’re here to watch a movie, no one’s going to get violent.” Ford frowned, picking up on Bill’s subtle cues. He was still uneasy around humans, especially going out amidst large groups of them.

Tonight Ford was really pushing Bill out of his comfort zone, and he was aware of it. He was attempting to be as comforting and reassuring as he could so the Muse wouldn’t be uneasy, but instead Bill just retreated, keeping to himself the whole drive there. It was just like Bill to focus on something he was on top of, rather than to acknowledge the situation he was for the most part helpless in.

Bill was sitting down low in the car seat, slunk down so his head barely reached the lip of the car window. He was focussed on the bubble between his hands, but his shoulders were bunched up, and his entire body language seemed closed off. Ford felt a twinge of guilt.

Ford put his hand on Bill’s shoulder. “It’s time, come on. I can see Willow waiting by the food stand.”

“Let her wait.” Bill replied, not yet shaking Ford’s hand off his shoulder.

“Bill… I know you’re scared of other humans, I know you don’t like spending time around them.”

Bill’s eyebrow twitched at ‘scared’ like it irritated him that Ford would even suggest he was afraid. If Ford were one of his henchmaniacs he’d be incinerated for saying that on the spot. Since this was Sixer speaking, and Bill needed him, he attempted to ignore the scientist’s blunt attempt to comfort him, still staring at the bubble.

“But this isn’t something to fear.” Ford continued, his voice soothing and just a tad patronising. “This is just like watching a movie at home. You just have to play nice, make some small talk, eat popcorn, and endure two hours of song riddled high school drama.” Ford began casually massaging Bill’s shoulder now to unwind some of the tension Bill was stubbornly holding onto. “It’s not so bad.”
“I’m not scared Sixer. Besides, you say that now. You hate this vapid socialisation as much as I do. Don’t lie. You don’t even want to be here.” Bill finally looked up from the bubble, giving Sixer a measuring glance.

Ford’s eyes slid to the side, and he shrugged. It didn’t matter that Bill was right, at this point he was arguing for the sake of it. Ford had his own reasons for being here this evening. “Sometimes we have to do things we might not necessarily ask for, but end up being good for us.”

Not that Ford thought a date with Suzie would be good for him. He hoped it might at least help with shaking the obsession he had with Bill, if that was the one good thing to come out of the date with Suzie, it would be good enough for Ford. At least agreeing to one date with Suzie would get the town’s rumour mill off his back. He was already loathe to be ‘Mr Mystery’, it sounded like such a gimmick. He didn’t want to add any romantic perversions to the ‘scientific eccentric who lives out of town’ reputation he seemed to have garnered.

Speaking of romantic perversions, Ford realised he was still massaging Bill’s shoulder, and he stopped, patting Bill on the shoulder awkwardly. “You’ll see.”

“Well” Bill seemed unconvinced, but popped his illusion bubble anyway, and dusted off his hands. “Let’s get this ordeal over with.”

Ford got out of the car and walked around to open the door for Bill, who climbed out on long thin legs, straightening up to square his shoulders and glare like a cartoon villain at the assembled townsfolk and movie goers. They weren’t glaring back, most of them too busy talking amongst themselves about the movies to pay too much attention to Bill. Bill blinked and looked around, his defensive guard dropping. Venturing out among the humans in this squishy vulnerable body, being so obviously inhuman (in Bill’s opinion) was something that Bill expected would incite panic, witch hunts, rollicking violence and debauchery. He didn’t expect to be ignored. He wasn’t sure if that was better or worse than the dramatic or violent reception he envisaged.

“We can get popcorn over there.” Ford pointed out. “I even brought along your tapatio sauce.” Popcorn and tapatio sauce was Bill’s favourite. Ford was really trying to appeal to Bill to keep him holding his promise of sixty six percent niceness.

Bill began to unwind to the idea of the movies a little, looking over to the popcorn stand, seeking out his comfort food, when he saw Red standing near said popcorn stand, looking bored. She seemed younger than Bill had expected, from what Sixer told him. Or maybe not, human ages were difficult to guess. There was infant, and then there was everything else to Bill. It was interesting. She looked up just as Ford pointed, and she waved them both over.

No escaping now.

Ford led the way, striding over to the popcorn stand. Bill followed reluctantly, hands in his pants pockets, sulking behind him.

“Hullo Willow.” Ford greeted the redhead.

“Look who actually showed up.” Willow replied, raising her eyebrow. “You made it sound like this was a total write off for you.”

Bill looked sharply at Ford, glaring at him. Ford had made it sound to Bill like this was obligatory. If there was a way he could have written it off he should have. Where was Sixer’s spine???

Probably where he left it, but that was no excuse for such a terminal lack of backbone.
“After speaking to you this morning I couldn’t disappoint.” Ford said coolly, ignoring Bill’s glare. “Though it’s not too late to change which film we see.”

“Yeah, good luck with that. Suzie’s got her heart set.” Willow rolled her eyes.

“Where is Suzie?” Ford asked politely, not seeing her anywhere.

“She’s on her way. Last I heard she was still getting dressed. She’s got her pink jacket ready and everything.”

“Pink jacket?” Ford blinked, not grasping the significance.

“You’ll see.” Willow waved Ford’s query off.

“And is Dan here?” Ford pressed, pushing Willow’s buttons.

“He’s here.” Willow crossed her arms, unimpressed with Ford’s pushing. “Skulking about somewhere. I don’t want to talk about him.”

Changing the subject, Willow turned to fix Bill in her sights, assessing her ‘date’ for the evening. “So you - tall, dark, silent and sulky. What’s your deal? Are you one of Stanford’s nerd friends?”

Bill seemed almost affronted at first that she was addressing him so casually, but after squinting at her for a few seconds more, he realised that antagonising someone who could ‘snap him like a twig’ wasn’t the best idea, so he instead decided to play it cool, to turn on the charm.

“You’re telling me he has more than one?” Bill put his hand on his chest, feigning shock. “Gee, Sixer, who would have guessed!”

Yes clearly Bill was the epitome of charm.

Ford shot an irritated look at Bill, but was interrupted by Willow watching Bill wryly.

“That’s a surprise. I thought for sure the reason Stanford’s here describing you as anti-social is because you’re one of those holed up in the basement science types.”

“I was practically born in that basement.” Bill said solemnly, enjoying the way Ford’s eye twitched at that. At least he was getting SOME kind of reaction from him.

“Figures.” Willow grunted. “See, that’s what I don’t get. Why hole up in the basement when you’ve got all this beautiful fresh air and outdoors? Swim in the lake. Go for a hike! That’s about all there is to do in this town. You shut in’s make no sense to me.”

“Yeah, but you should see the size of his basement.” Bill countered, breaking out a rakish grin that stopped Ford’s ire short, if only due to how startlingly pretty the grin was. Ford found himself oddly struck by that observation. He was supposed to be spending this date disavowing his attraction to Bill, but it just kept slapping him in the face.

“No that size really matters, if we’re talking arbitrary abstractions of spacial dimensions.” Bill noticed Ford staring and winked at him. Ford almost double took, the wink and the pseudo-innuendo throwing him. Bill wasn’t flirting with him, he probably didn’t even know what he was saying. Ford mentally berated himself. He certainly wasn’t saying that to appeal to you.

“Called it. You totally are a big nerd.” Willow smirked at Bill, drawing his attention back to her, giving Stanford a few moments to catch up with his heartbeat.
Bill clicked his tongue at her. “What gave it away?”

“The totally pretentious way you use bigger words than you need to.” Willow scoffed, and tossed her hair back over her shoulder. “Like, dude, who are you trying to impress?”

Bill raised his eyebrows at that, and glanced briefly at Sixer (was Bill trying to impress me? Ford’s thoughts presumed) before he put his foot in his mouth quite inelegantly. “Not you, that’s for sure. I can see you’re not the brightest bulb in the box. Maybe the whole factory.”

“Excuse me?” Willow narrowed her eyes at Bill dangerously.

“So Suzie will be here when, did you say?” Ford interrupted, trying to pacify the sudden spark of hostility that flared between them. He came across as somewhat impatient to see her, which Willow saw as a good sign.

“Any minute now. You – oh, there she is.” Willow was distracted by a very pink, very dolled up Suzie Wentworth running across the field to them wearing a pink jacket and poodle skirt, her hair curled and her eye makeup heavy and purple. “Hey Suzie.”

“Hiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!” Suzie yelled out from across the field. She kept running until she reached the group and bent over, a little out of breath from the run, before standing up straight and flipping her hair back, batting her eyelashes at Ford. “Hi. Have you all been waiting long?”

“Oh.” Ford seemed somewhat baffled by the way Suzie was blinking at him, so focused on him, and not the others. He supposed that was what was supposed to happen. This was a date, technically. “No, we just got here now.”

Suzie giggled a high nervous laugh, and then uttered. “Tell me about it, stud.”

Ford blinked at her, questioning his life choices, and behind him Willow facepalmed.

“So anyway.” Willow said, trying to steer them back on track. “Are we going to get popcorn? You two get in line, just in the front there. I’m sure you’ve got lots to talk about.”

She pushed Ford and Suzie together in front of her in the line for popcorn a little roughly, clearly intent on matchmaking this date to it’s fullest potential.

Ford looked over his shoulder, a little worried about leaving Bill unsupervised with Willow. Suzie clutched onto his arm, and smiled up at him, and began talking about the movie. Ford was only half paying attention, focussed on eavesdropping on Willow and Bill, worried that Bill was going to get himself punched, but when Suzie squeezed his arm, Ford remembered he wasn’t supposed to be worried about Bill. He was supposed to be forgetting his obsession with Bill, and so he turned back to Suzie, smiling blandly at her, pushing his anxiety to the back of his mind.

Behind Suzie and Ford, Bill and Willow stood in the queue, barely saying a word to one another. Willow was watching Ford and Suzie’s interactions like a hawk, and Bill was a little lost in his own head, bored of this outing already, bored of Sixer ignoring him.

It was frustrating him slightly, watching Wink Eye clinging vapidly to Ford’s arm like that, like he was the hook and she was the worm. He wanted to feed her to the fishes, preferably piranhas, with their sharp teeth and sharper appetites.

It solidified for Bill that at least Sixer was passing attractive to other humans by their meagre standards, though that hardly helped Bill make his mind up. It mostly just confused and frustrated him, and so he gazed off into the distance, moving on to mentally composing the contents of his
They moved forward in the queue and Bill slowly realised that Willow had turned her hawklike gaze onto him, and he tipped his chin up, meeting her stare like a challenge.

“What?”

“I’m trying to figure you out.” Willow said, still watching Bill shrewdly.

“Good luck with that headache.” Bill replied flippantly, before looking away from her dismissively.

“How long did you say you’ve been in Gravity Falls?” Willow pressed, not satisfied with Bill’s dismissal.

“I didn’t.” Bill replied, keeping his answers clipped.

“Uhuh.” Willow surveyed Bill, not put off by his closed demeanour. “And you know Stanford how exactly?”

“You’ve had maybe two years of being caustically distanced neighbours with Sixer.” Bill snapped at Willow, his temper flaring. “Yet you act like you’ve known him from day one? You sure are nosy Red. What makes you think you can poke your business into his life and presume to know anything about him?”

“Look, I may not have known him for as long as you have or whatever, but I’m his friend.” Willow defended herself, crossing her arms. “And I wasn’t asking about him, I was asking about you.”

“Ask how I know him? How well do you know him?” Bill’s words were snide, aiming to poke at Willow’s conscience. If he was reacting a little harsher than usual, acting a little defensive over his bond with Sixer, that was, in Bill’s contextual opinion, highly understandable. Sixer was being a total jerk, ignoring him like this. “If you really knew him at all you wouldn’t have forced him to come to this. He won’t have a good time.”

As timing would have it, Sixer chose that exact moment to murmur something to Suzie that had her bark out a surprised laugh, putting a rather pleased expression on Ford’s face.

Willow looked between Ford’s happy face, and Bill’s developing eye tick and smirked at him smugly. “You don’t know that.”

Bill’s hands curled into fists at his side, remembering his deal with Sixer not to antagonise the locals tonight. Already two minutes in and Bill was ready to go back on his plan. He struggled to remain calm. What was it Sixer said? Eat popcorn, play nice, make small talk and endure?

As they came closer to the popcorn stand, Bill reached forward to poke Ford’s elbow, maybe more viciously than he would have done normally. “Hey Sixer, I want the buttery kind. A big one.”

“Why don’t you pay for your own popcorn?” Willow said critically, not happy that Bill was intruding on the forced ‘getting to know you’ time she instigated.

“I gave my money to Sixer.” Another half truth. This one sounded socially acceptable.

“Why do you keep calling him that?” Willow questioned again, her tone offended.

“Well I don’t know if you’ve ever shook hands with the guy-” Bill began, his tone intensely
“Stop making fun of him.” Willow asserted. “It’s not nice. Just because he’s not normal –”

“Who gives a crap about normal. I just want my damn popcorn.” Bill exclaimed, frustrated that this abrasive little human was trying to tell him how to act around HIS Sixer.

This was exactly what he expected from the townsfolk. Who gave two shits about whether Sixer’s hand was normal or not? Couldn’t they all just disappear or self-immolate or do something useful for Bill, far far away from him?

Willow huffed, and crossed her arms, turning to look away from Bill. At the front of the queue, Ford purchased the popcorn for himself, Suzie, and Bill, and passed the box of popcorn back to Bill.

“Is everything alright there?” Ford couldn’t help but enquire, noting the tension between Willow and Bill, remembering that 66% niceness wasn’t a lot of niceness.

“Just small talk.” Bill replied sullenly, realising he’d have to endure a lot more than singing movie stars tonight. Endure may be the buzzword of the evening.

“Oh, small talk is it?” Willow questioned, her voice acidic. Clearly already she didn’t approve of Bill.

“I don’t see you making any.” Bill shot back, his eyes glowing yellow, magic responding to her hostility. “How’s your lumber-headed boyfriend? Or don’t you feel like invasive questions about your personal life?”

“You want small talk? Fine. Your eyes are weird, let’s talk about that!” Willow turned on Bill, her hands on her hips.

Bill blinked, and made a conscious effort to cool down, his eyes dimming back to a suitably human level of luminescence.

Suzie frowned at her friend. “Willow, you can’t just say that about someone’s eyes. It’s rude.”

“You are a collective mess of recessive genes. You seem awfully obsessed with what’s normal for someone who isn’t.” Bill pointed out, crossing his arms, willing his magic to simmer down.

It was harder to keep control after those last two bricks were unbound earlier today, he could feel the magic building, reacting to his temper. He had hoped unbinding these extra bricks would help him control his magic better, but so far it seemed the opposite was true.

“Bill.” Ford said, his tone warning the Muse.

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Willow scowled, Bill’s ‘long words’ irritating her just as much as the perceived insult did.

“Willow, you probably just touched on a nerve.” Ford interjected, lying to smooth things over. “Bill was born with a rare optical condition, deviated pupils. As someone who was born with a genetic abnormality I can assure you it doesn’t make for the smoothest sailing growing up.”

Bill raised his eyebrow at Sixer’s smooth lie, mildly impressed. Willow was sufficiently cowed by
Ford’s guilt inducing tug at her conscience, enough to back down as they walked to the car.

Bill couldn’t help but grin with satisfaction. It was always satisfying having Sixer lie for him.

The group got back to Ford’s car. Suzie and Bill headed for the front passengers seat at the same time, their hands meeting at the door handle, before they both paused to look at each other, Suzie surprised, Bill daring her to sit there.

“Bill, maybe let Suzie sit in the front seat this time?” Ford suggested, still aiming to placate the tensions within the group. And further his own agenda.

“It’s my shotgun.” Bill replied, the novelty of the term ‘shotgun’ hadn’t yet worn off.

“What are you, an infant?” Willow couldn’t resist prodding Bill. “Just let her sit in the front seat.”

“And sit in the back seat with you?” Bill glared at Willow. “I’d rather sit on the roof.”

“Actually, that’s not a bad idea.” Willow’s surprise overrode her distaste for agreeing with Bill. “We can see the movies on both sides of the field that way.”

Bill was still suspicious of Willow’s sudden agreement, but he relinquished the front seat to Suzie gracefully, before opening the backseat door, stepping on the leather upholstery to get a foot up, climbing up onto the roof of the car to sit there cross-legged.

“Bill, what are you –” Ford griped, not really keen to encourage Bill climbing all over his car. When Willow joined him up there a second later, the metal of the car roof creaked. “Can you both – just – be careful up there.”

Bill knocked on the tin roof rhythmically with his knuckles and laughed, half acknowledging Ford, half teasing him.

Ford sighed. It was about what he expected, bringing Bill out tonight. Honestly, a date designed to help Ford get over Bill would have gone down a lot better without the Muse right there, being twice as infuriating as he usually was. Ford was almost certain Bill was picking fights with Willow intentionally, acting up while Ford’s attention was otherwise diverted. Perhaps to get a rise out of Ford, if he noticed.

Part of Ford wished that he could be up on the roof of the car too, maybe not watching a insipid movie, but perhaps stargazing in the forest with Bill. Maybe if he wasn’t so stubborn about going out with Willow and Suzie tonight, he could have been venturing out in the forest with the Muse, seeing these mysterious crystals, and walking home through the trees under moonlight in the pleasant summer air.

Ford loved the smell of the forest, all pine trees and dirt and fresh air. Taking his seat in the car with Suzie, all he could smell was an overbearing perfume, and bacon grease.

“Have you ever seen this movie before?” Suzie asked Ford, smiling at him.

“I can’t say I have.” Ford replied honestly, trying to be engaged in discussion with Suzie, but so thoroughly distracted imagining what could be going on up on the car roof.

“You remind me a bit of Sandy, one of the main characters.” Suzie reached for a stick of bubble-gum from her purse. “Because you’re bookish and smart, and you’re not from around here. Well, you’re not from Australia but still.”
“Oh.” Ford said politely, the comparison going right over his head for the time being. “I see.”

“And she goes through this huge transformation in the end, gets all sexy, though she’s still from Australia hah hah.” Suzie’s laugh was loud, maybe too loud. Being this close to her in the car, her loud grating voice hurt Ford’s ears a bit. He could feel a headache coming on.

“That’s… nice.”

“Oh! The movie’s starting!” Suzie gushed, leaning across the front seat to grab Ford’s arm, holding onto his elbow, her eyes turned to the big screen as the opening credits started to roll.

While she wasn’t staring energetically at him, Ford took a moment to really assess Susan Wentworth, to look at her properly. She wasn’t an unpleasant person to look at, a little bland. She was shapely enough, her curvy figure settled across the car seat generously. She was very obviously feminine, her low cut top emphasised her cleavage. It was clear she put in effort for this evening, her hair styled into a sort of beehive up top, loose curls hanging low on her shoulders. She had thick purple eyeshadow on, and her lashes were like clumpy spiders, heavy mascara layered on to the point of intensity. She had pale skin and blue eyes, and a mole on her cheek.

Ford was trying to find things to like about Suzie, to like about this date, but he just kept comparing her to Bill. Comparing their eyelashes, their skin tone, their expressions, their intellect. He found her remarkably average. It was an uphill battle, finding something to like about Suzie, to give this date a proper try, like Willow had asked him to.

The film opened to a montage of a young man and woman frolicking on the beach to saccharine music, and Ford felt the physical ache of keeping a pleasant expression pasted on his face. This was agonisingly awful.

“I’ve just had the best summer of my life and now I have to go away. It isn’t fair.” Said Olivia Newton John on the big screen, before being kissed by her co-star.

Ford was lamenting the genre of film he was sentenced to, when he heard Bill’s running commentary sound from up on the roof of the car, followed by the crunch of popcorn.

“Life isn’t fair sweetheart. Looks like she missed that crucial memo. Hah!”

“Oh my god, shut up.” Willow grumbled at Bill’s vocal viewing of the movie, but Ford couldn’t help but smile, this smile genuine, not a fake pleasantry pasted on to socialise.

“Danny, is this the end?” Olivia Newton John asked after being thoroughly kissed on screen.

“We can only hope.” Bill drawled, voicing what Ford was thinking.

“Oh course not.” John Travolta replied. “This is only the beginning.”

Ford rested his cheek against his palm, resigning himself to the rest of this film, while Bill ‘boo’ed and snickered when Willow threw popcorn at him in retaliation. Suzie turned to smile at Ford as the opening credits rolled, and Ford smiled half-heartedly back, letting Suzie loop arms with him amiably.

“I’m really glad you came this evening.” Suzie simpered at Ford.

“Mmm.” Ford hummed out a non-committal noise.

Suzie smiled at Ford, brainlessly happy, and turned to the screen, shoving popcorn in her mouth
and clinging onto Ford’s arm.

Up on the roof Bill and Willow were sitting almost back to back, facing different directions to catch the differing movies.

“Ugh. I can’t hear anything this far from the other screen.” Willow complained, squinting trying to watch the zombie film playing in the distance.

“I’ll summarize.” Bill offered, not turning around, eyes still glued to the screen playing the musical. “Idiot people visit their idiot relative’s redundant tombstone, and get eaten by slightly more mentally impaired undead creatures, seeking brains obviously due to their own terminal lack thereof.”

“Shut up dude, I haven’t seen it yet. You’re gonna spoil it for me.” Willow elbowed Bill, causing Bill to turn around, rubbing his elbow, to glare at her.

“What’s there to spoil? It’s a zombie movie. It’s about what it says on the tin. Everyone dies in the end anyway.”

“Have you seen it before or are you just bullshitting me?” Willow asked demandingly.

“I see everything.” Bill replied mysteriously, before turning back to face Sandy’s first day at Rydell High on the screen. “Besides, you see one undead invasion, you’ve seen them all.”

“I love zombie movies.” Willow admitted. “I could watch them over and over.”

“And you say I’m not normal.” Bill couldn’t resist the subtle jab. “You’re right, but still. You’re a black kettle.” Bill remembered when Sixer called him that, he presumed it was an insult.

“You’re a bla-“ Willow shot back, turning to look at Bill before stopping her sentence short. Bill raised his eyebrow at Willow, watching her look shiftily over to the cop car parked next to them, eyeing off Deputy Blubbs, before looking guiltily back at Bill. “I didn’t mean it like that.”

It took Bill a moment to realise that she was referring to the colour of his skin. Bill hadn’t really paid much mind to it, but other people seemed to. Bill found the colour flattering, which was probably why Sixer designed him that way, but other humans found the silliest reasons to discriminate against one another. Willow seemed almost guilty, verging on apologetic now, and Bill took advantage of her guilt to question her.

“How old are you?” Bill asked Willow finally, after watching her squirm.

“19.” Willow replied, a little confused by the question.

“And how old is your friend down there?”

“20.” Willow answered. “There’s not too many folks in this town, no girls our age really.”

“Or guys?” Bill presumed. “I’m assuming that’s why your friend is chasing IQ, even though he’s ten years older than her. It’s that or Dan Corduroy, am I right?”

“I don’t want to talk about Dan.” Willow scowled, and turned away from Bill, pretending to face the screen with the black and white zombie film showing.
“That explains a lot.” Bill continued, heedless of her attempt to shut down the topic of conversation. “Slim pickings in a town like this, and this is the sort of town you can’t get out of once you’re stuck here. Evidently.”

“How would you know?” Willow turned back to look at Bill, curious now that the Muse was empathising with her situation.

“Oh, I know.” Bill scowled into his popcorn.

“Where did you come from?” Willow pressed, asking Bill now that he seemed more talkative and less antagonistic. “You’re not from around here.”

“Do you want to ask that question a little louder? I’m sure the whole town wants to know.” Bill grinned at Willow, though there was no camaraderie in the smile. “Willow Oakwood, pressing the poor stranger from out of town where he’s from. Would you guess a different continent or further down south, where the lynching’s happen? Is it because I don’t look like you? For shame. Can’t say I’m not grateful though.”

“I didn’t mean it like that you don’t have to be an asshole about it.” Willow huffed. “I’m just curious. I’m just asking questions.”

“And you want answers too. Human nature apparently.” Bill snorted a laugh, before twisting his torso around to face Willow properly, while behind him on the screen the teenagers of Rydell High screamed ‘tell me more’ at one another.

“Tell you what, we can go question for question. And if I answer you have to answer. Deal?” Bill extended his hand out to Willow, his eyes glowing slightly. He never said his answers had to be truthful.

Willow, enticed by her own curiosity, decided that the glow in Bill’s eye’s was probably just the lights from the movie screen reflecting, and grasped Bill’s hand in her own, shaking it.

“Deal. I get to go first.”

Bill felt the spark of magic run up his arm, brightening the yellow glow of his eyes for a moment, before he reigned the feeling in. Making deals was another way of garnering power for Bill, and he almost missed the sensation of binding chumps to onerous deals. Judging from how much more intense and obvious this spark of magic was, Bill figured out what unbinding the second brick had done. His deals were more potent now, which was certainly a boon.

After clasping hands with Willow, he sat back on the roof, legs crossed, and watched her, waiting for her question.

“How long have you been in town for?” Willow started, a simple question.

“I’ve been living here for about two months, but I’ve been here before. Ages ago.” That was vague enough to pass as a truth, but still specific enough to satisfy. “My turn. Why did you decide you were suddenly friends with Stanford?”

“Can’t I just be friends with him? Like, what’s that supposed to mean?” Willow protested.

“He’s nearly a decade older than you and doesn’t care about chopping wood or screaming at woodpeckers or whatever it is you do around these parts.” Bill pointed out. “I call hijinks. So I’m asking what’s the appeal for you here? What’s the draw?”
“Well, why did you decide to be friends with Stan?” Willow turned it on Bill, defensive.

“Uh uh. You haven’t answered my question yet, you don’t get to ask another.”

“Ugh. Fine… I guess he seemed interesting? I don’t know. He’s kind of bookish, and he doesn’t really fit in, not really. My brother went to college two states away, and I don’t really see him much anymore, and Stanford’s so spacey sometimes, he kind of needs someone to look out for him.” Willow admitted.

“I see.” Bill tented his fingers. “I will say one thing. You’re wrong. Sixer doesn’t need looking out for. He’s alarmingly capable.” So you should just leave him ALONE, Bill continued internally, unimpressed with Willow’s sudden attachment to Ford.

“Okay.” Willow moved on to her next question. “If you only came here two months ago, why did you come back here? You said you’ve been here before.”

“A long long time ago.” Bill emphasised. “Why I came back? That’s IQ’s fault. I used to be everywhere at once.”

“Travelling?”

“You could say that.” Bill plucked a piece of popcorn out of the cardboard box and flicked it off the car roof. “Fordsy needed help on a project that I’d been providing advice for from a distance, and he basically decided I needed to be here in the flesh, and here I am, dragged back kicking and screaming because he needed an ‘assistant’.”

“Were you his assistant before?”

“I’m no one’s assistant.” Bill growled. “He was supposed to be assisting me. It’s my project.”

“What exactly are you working on?” Willow asked, chucking popcorn in her mouth.

“Nope. That’s three questions. You don’t know how this game goes, do you?” Bill wagged his finger at her, chidingly. “My go. Tell me why you’re avoiding Dan Corduroy.”

Willow coughed on the popcorn in her mouth, choking a little at the question. Hitting her chest and glaring at Bill, she asked him.

“Why is everybody so obsessed with asking me that? What makes other people think that my relationship is their business?”

“As someone who is deliberately match-making two people who couldn’t be more wrong for each other, I can’t imagine why people wouldn’t respect your boundaries like that.” Bill said sarcastically, pressing his own hand to his chest. “Shocking.”

“What makes you think they’re so wrong for each other, huh?” Willow fished around in her box of popcorn for a new piece. “Suzie’s been crushing on the dude for months. Ever since he first came to town.”

“Sixer isn’t interested.” Bill replied cuttingly. “If he was, he wouldn’t have taken months to give her so much as a hello. You’re deluding yourself.”

“Then why did he agree to a date now, huh?”

“I don’t know, because you strong-armed him into it?” Bill suggested. “Because he’s an idiot.
“You like him, don’t you.” Willow said, seeming to realise that Bill’s antagonism came from a place of jealousy. “I thought it was just Dan being a jerk to you two, but you really do.”

“Speaking of Dan, let’s go back to that. Tell me about your asshole boyfriend.” Bill deflected, clapping his hands together and pointing them at her, harbouring an intense dislike for Red’s prodding.

“No way – you totally do like him!” Willow sounded excited, almost victorious, at figuring it out.

“No, it’s your turn to speak. Tell me.” Bill gritted his teeth, disliking her tone immensely. He was itching to immolate the infuriating girl, but his deal from Sixer prevented him. Setting fire to people didn’t fall within the sixty six percent niceness bracket.

“That’s why you’re being such a bitter son of a bitch.” Willow crowed, feeling like she had got one up on Bill. “You’re jealous he’s on a date with someone else.”

“**It’s your turn to talk.**” Bill’s hands were curled into fists, and he allowed some of his magic to flow through his voice, making it echo, flowing through the deal they just made, forcing Willow to speak. “Why are you avoiding him? What’s your weak spot?”

Willow’s shoulders seized up, and she clutched her throat, horrified, as the word’s spilled out on their own, compelled by the magic.

“I’m pregnant, and I’m terrified of telling him. He’ll ask me to marry him, and then I’ll never leave this stupid town. He’s been hanging out with those lumberjacks who work for the Northwest’s and I don’t like how he’s been acting lately. How they’re influencing him. I can’t marry him, he’s acting like a boy, and I want him to be a man, and I’m terrified that I love him either way.”

Willow gasped and covered her mouth with her hands when the word’s finally stopped. She was horrified. She had no idea what came over her and suddenly she was spilling her darkest secrets, secrets she hadn’t even told her best friend, to the asshole sitting across from her, staring at her, horrendous and smug, with his glowing slitted yellow eyes.

“Pregnant even. Wow, that certainly is a weak spot.” Bill laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them, his smile like a knife in the dark. “I’m guessing he doesn’t know.”

“Don’t you dare tell him.” Willow brought her hands down from her mouth and balled them into fists. “I swear to god, if you do –”

“Maybe you should be watching this movie.” Bill gestured with his thumb to the screen behind him where Rizzo was blowing bubble-gum obnoxiously, looking at her partner Kenickie. “It seems much more fitting.”

Willow stared at Bill, her pulse racing, realising that Bill’s eyes were still glowing. *Rare optical condition my ass, Willow thought. That shit’s not natural.*

“What did you do to me?”

“We had a deal, remember?” Bill sat back, oozing smugness. “A question for a question. Besides, I won’t tell him if you won’t.”

Willow blinked, her brain taking a second to race up to her anger, piecing it together. She was frozen for a moment, staring at Bill, realising what he was proposing. It was a stalemate,
blackmail. It was manipulative and awful and she couldn’t say no.

Bill, satisfied that Willow was sufficiently under his thumb, turned his back on her to watch the movie unfold on the screen, some nonsense about going to the drive in movies playing out on the projector.

She stared at his back for a while, decidedly uncomfortable with what she just witnessed, before turning around to face her own screen, unable to shake the shiver from her spine.

This date was a terrible idea.

“I don’t look at it as dropping out, it’s more like a very strategic career move.” Frenchie uttered on screen, her voice high pitched and annoying. Or maybe just to Ford.

“I dropped out of high school too.” Suzie admitted, still clinging to Ford’s arm, resting her weight on it. It was starting to get sore. “So I could work in the shop with Ma.”

“You don’t think that your career prospects would have improved if you’d have pursued higher education?” Ford asked, his tone almost painfully polite.

“Nah. I was never one for booklearnin’.” Suzie stated with a laugh. “That was always more Stacey’s deal. She’s the smart one. I’m the other one.”

Speaking of painful, Stanford was reminded in that moment of how Stanley used to talk about himself. How he used to act regarding school, his education, putting it all on Ford to be the smart one. It wasn’t a pleasant reminder.

“At least you’re supportive of your sister’s education. There’s that.”

“Do you like smart girls?” Suzie looked away from the screen to glance wistfully up at Ford.

Ford met her gaze, and saw the bared hopefulness, and had to turn away, facing the screen again. He sighed.

“Honestly, I don’t know what I like. This has been the first date I’ve been on in a while.”

Suzie squeezed his arm in a friendly way. “It’s going alright so far.”

Ford managed a smile, though he felt it was more like a grimace, and he turned back to the screen.

“Miss Goodie Two Shoes makes me wanna barf.” Rizzo fixed the blonde wig onto her head, before bursting into a deliberately mocking song.

He was trying to keep his attention on the girl sitting next to him, trying desperately not to focus on the being sitting on his roof. He’d been doing his best to ignore Bill, but his presence was like an itch on the edge of Ford’s consciousness. It took all of Ford’s discipline not to eavesdrop on Bill and Willow’s conversation, to remain present in the time he was supposed to spend with Suzie.

It was hard. Even the singing high schoolers were reminding Ford of Bill. Not that he was really paying attention to the movie. It was difficult to completely ignore it though, everyone’s voices were so shrill. The greasers reminded him of his high school bullies back in New Jersey, and the
pink ladies were obnoxious and catty. He was aghast that Suzie’s observation was right, he was relating to this Sandra Dee character, and he couldn’t think of anything more awful.

“What do you like then?” Suzie asked after a few more minutes of watching the film. “Romantically I mean. What type of girl?”

Ford looked up to the ceiling of the car, lamenting this conversation, before sighing again. “I’m not sure.”

“Funny girls? Tall girls? Skinny girls?”

Ford said nothing, his eyebrows furrowed, searching for the right answer. He used to love talking to girls, when did things become so difficult.

Suzie looked over to Ford, noting the pained expression on his face, and asked in a quiet voice. “Guys?”

Ford blinked and looked over at Suzie, surprised.

“I don’t mean nothing by it. It’s just what they’re saying in town, that’s all.” Suzie looked embarrassed to be bringing it up. “It’s okay if you are, you know. If it was okay with Daryl it’s okay with you. I really wanted to go on this date with you, and you’re really nice for having gone along with it as long as you have.”

“No, no. Suzie, that’s not –“ Ford turned to her, holding his hand up to stop her.

Before Ford could defend himself or his sexuality, there was a sharp rapping of knuckles against the tin roof of the car. Ford and Suzie both jumped at the sound, looking out the driver’s side window, where Bill’s hand was hanging.

“Hey Sixer, I want that hot sauce.” Bill called out from above.

Ford huffed, flustered at the interruption, but fished the small bottle of tapatio sauce out of his coat pocket and passed it out the window. Bill’s hand was waiting expectantly, and when Sixer passed it to him he snatched it up.

Now that Bill’s intrusion was over, the awkwardness crept back in to the inside of the car.

“You keep hot sauce for him in your pocket?” Suzie commented, raising her eyebrow at Ford.

“Bill can be… demanding.” Ford said tactfully, hoping that that would suffice as an answer. “I like to pre-empt that.”

“Huh.” Suzie said simply. She unlooped her arm from Ford’s, pulling back slightly to sit in a more contained manner, resting her hand on her thigh now.

The movie played on. Main character Sandy was on the back porch, singing a new song. Ford could feel the awkwardness in the hairs standing on the back of his neck.

He was right, the rumour mill had spread already. Suzie Wentworth believed Ford was homosexual, even while on a date with him. He didn’t know how he felt about that.

He had gotten slurs hurled at him from the bullies he faced in high school, deciding ‘freak’ wasn’t derogatory enough, they threw ‘queer’ and ‘faggot’ at him as well. Those words hadn’t meant much to Ford while he hid in the school toilets, eating his lunch there to avoid them, mainly
because Ford didn’t think those words applied to him. Apart from the embarrassing crush he had on Cathy Crenshaw in high school, Ford hadn’t really felt that strong attraction to anyone, preferring to dedicate himself to his books and learning. He had assumed his orientation was the ‘default’ one, that he just hadn’t found the right girl, as his mother was fond of insisting.

Ford had been perfectly happy to be devoted to science, eschewing other more complicated romantic attachments. It was easier that way.

Sitting in the car with Susan now, Ford longed for that easy eschewing of such things. Part of him, perhaps the part who had run from the bullies who chased him, believed he had something to prove, sitting in the car next to Susan Wentworth. Something to do with masculinity, or red-bloodedness, which was redundant as blood differed in colour depending on how heavily oxygenated it was.

On the screen Olivia Newton John sang.

“You know I’m just a fool who’s willing, to sit around and wait for you. But baby can’t you see there’s nothing else for me to do. I’m hopelessly devoted to you.”

Another part of Ford, the part of his brain that wouldn’t stop with the niggling awareness of Bill sitting on the roof, pushed him too. Pushed against him. The alarming attraction he harboured for Bill was something that Ford was rebelling against. He was rebelling against it now, sitting in the car with Suzie. It was something he couldn’t ignore, despite how hard he tried to. He felt like a caricature of himself, how hyper aware he was of Bill, how obsessed he was with Bill, like some lovesick fool.

Ford hated it.

“But now there’s no way to hide. Since you pushed my love aside. I’m outta my head hopelessly devoted to you.”

Ford hated it perhaps because it was so clear to him that despite the camaraderie he shared with Bill, despite how Bill’s antics could brighten his day, the fact was that the Muse had been trapped here by Ford against his will, and there was absolutely no way Bill would ever return Ford’s feelings.

He wanted to disavow himself of them before he fell in too deep, but it was so very difficult to ignore Bill, even when he tried. To ignore the way Bill excited him, perplexed him, engaged him so effortlessly, how he tantalised him without really trying. It was the dreams that were the kicker. Ford couldn’t stop dreaming about him.

Ford had never considered himself attracted to the human body until he sat to work designing one for Bill, hoping that the traits he found flattering, a fitting tribute, would appeal to the God the body would house. Ford didn’t realise when he had crossed the line of what he thought Bill would find flattering, and what Ford found flattering himself.

The whole town was assuming that Ford was attracted to men, but really it was just Bill.

And that was the problem.

And that was what Ford didn’t want to acknowledge. He was too smart not to, but he felt stupid admitting it to himself, which was why he had forced himself to come here, to watch this asinine movie with Susan Wentworth, to give the restorative powers of a typical heterosexual relationship one last shot.
They stared at the film for a while in silence again. The wind blew, somewhat cold, which was odd for the middle of summer. The air was humid and soon raindrops began falling lightly on the front window. They rapped against the glass, soft taps.

“It’s raining.” Suzie commented. “Do you think they’ll cancel the movie?”

“As long as the projector stays dry I’m sure it’s fine.” Ford replied.

There was a thump from the roof, and both Bill and Willow slid down. Willow opened the backseat door first, poking her head into the car.

“It’s raining outside, is it okay if I sit in here?”

“What she said.” Bill was already climbing in the backseat, not asking or waiting for permission.

Ford inclined his head, and sighed again, waving Willow into the car. She climbed in, sitting behind Suzie, while Bill settled in behind Ford’s seat, closing the car door loudly and cramping up into the small space, kicking his feet up into the back of Sixer’s chair.

Willow moved Ford’s rucksack into the middle seat to make space for her, she put it between herself and Bill, still not trusting him one bit.

Ford had almost given up on this whole date fiasco, certain that it would be a thorough dead end now that Willow and Bill were in the backseat, and Suzie seemed convinced of his sexuality.

He was surprised when, while the song continued playing, Suzie reached out and put her hand on Ford’s knee, rubbing his knee with her thumb. She was smiling at him again, like she had before.

Ford had been almost relieved to believe the date was over, but now with Suzie smiling at him like that again, the anxiety crept back in, and he felt the pressure to do something build.

Ford’s hand crept down to meet Suzie’s on his knee, but before their hands could meet, Ford felt the jarring jolt of Bill kicking his seat from behind.

“Hey, I can’t see the screen. This is boring.”

“Then find something to do maybe.” Ford gritted out, lacking patience for Bill’s antics right now.

Bill pouted at Ford’s dismissal, and he crossed his arms sulkily.

Tapping a discordant melody with his fingers on his upper arm, Bill began twitching with impatient energy. Sixer was being deliberately unentertaining, and Red had been cold and wary of him since he strongarmed her side of the deal out of her. This outing had been consistently awful, and the movie wasn’t even that good. Sure the dancing wasn’t bad, but what kind of a nickname was Cha Cha?

Looking around the car’s interior, Bill searched for something interesting to do. Willow had put Ford’s backpack like a barrier in between them, and Bill relished taking that barrier away, grabbing the backpack and rifling through it’s contents like it was no big deal.

Bill could feel Willow’s wary gaze on him, and he decided to have fun with that suspicion.

He pulled the magnet gun out of the backpack, pretended to check the dials on the side of the weapon, then put it back in the bag. He looked like some interdimensional hitman. He didn’t need to be looking to check that Willow was watching, her mouth hanging open.
Looking for something else scandalous to do, Bill grabbed one of the thick wads of cash they’d traded the gold for at the pawn shop earlier in the day. Bill flicked through the money with his thumb, before smelling the cash, and fanning himself with it, looking over at Willow with a shit eating grin.

She had her eyes narrowed. She shrugged and pointed at Bill, while mouthing ‘what the fuck’ at him.

Bill shrugged, and rubbed the money down the side of his cheek absently. Wanting to escalate her disbelief, Bill pulled one of the 100 dollar bills out from the wad, and placed it delicately in his mouth, like it was a crisp lettuce leaf. He turned to face her properly and tore the bill in half with his teeth, chewing, watching Willow’s aghast expression smugly.

“What the fu-” Willow muttered aloud now, no longer able to keep silent.

Ford and Suzie turned to look over their shoulder into the back seat, and Bill put the wad of cash back in the bag, chewing innocently.

“Everything alright back there?” Ford asked, looking at Willow with concern. She looked intrinsically disturbed.

Bill smiled at her, close lipped, hiding the hundred dollar bill in his mouth.

“Fine.” Willow choked out, her voice cracked with the strain of feigning normalcy.

Ford gave Bill a warning look that the muse ignored, and resigned himself to facing forward again, still debating what he should do with Suzie’s hand on his knee. It was a serious decision.

Now that Sixer turned away, Bill only had Willow’s attention to play with. The redhead had her arms crossed now, deliberately looking away from Bill, like she wasn’t going to play Bill’s game.

That’s what she thought.

Bill then proceeded to pull Sixer’s pretentious leather bound journal out from his bag, and flipped through the pages. Willow was studiously looking forward, ignoring Bill’s attempt to intrigue or disturb her.

Bill frowned. How dare she ignore him. He was probably the most interesting thing she’d ever experience in the entirety of her miserable life. She couldn’t kid herself that the movie was more entertaining, they’d been singing about romance for an hour and fifteen minutes now.

Bill hunched over the journal, not enjoying being ignored yet again. He flipped through the pages to read Ford’s most recent entry, not respecting the privacy owning a journal entailed. Bill had a sort of callous disregard for Sixer’s possessions anyway, the privacy of a personal journal meant nothing to him.

Bill scoured through the entry for July 20th, running his finger along the page as he read.

That was another thing Bill didn’t like. Sixer hardly wrote about him at all in his stupid book, at least not since Bill had become corporeal. It wasn’t like Sixer not to document EVERYTHING, and it was quite frankly insulting to Bill that he got barely two sentences in Ford’s melodramatic field notes. He wrote about everything else, about forest creatures and the portal and Fiddleford of all things.

Why didn’t Sixer write about Bill? He had to be doing it. He was barely anywhere in this book.
All this ignoring and rudeness and shunting Bill to the side, all the times Bill had seen Ford deliberately hold himself back, curtail his own reactions, withhold his attention from Bill out of some stubborn sense of rebellion.

It was beginning to weigh on Bill. Perhaps now that he had come to the realisation that he actually wanted Sixer’s attention. His worship. His regard.

He didn’t like this feeling. It was almost like feeling invisible, and that was all well and good when you were an intangible creature of the mind, but Bill was RIGHT HERE and he was an inescapable presence in Sixer’s life now, he had made sure of that when he summoned Bill here into this flesh prison. Sixer was the one who brought him here, now Bill was just supposed to believe from Sixer’s actions (his thoughts were so wildly different in the mindscape, it confused Bill) that he didn’t want Bill around. He never wrote about Bill, he ignored him all the time, and now he was out, socialising with these humans who didn’t know him, didn’t understand him, and could barely hold conversation with him. How could he pick them over him?

Bill hated it.

Moreover, he hated this thick feeling coalescing in his chest. He wasn’t used to having a chest, or a human body, with all it’s chemically induced moods and feelings and sensations, but he was pretty sure that this sensation wasn’t an everyday human experience. If it were there would be much less progress as a species, because how on earth could they go about holding this feeling in their chest all the time. He felt sick, and upset, and agitated, and anxious even, all because Sixer was ignoring him.

Bill swallowed, hoping to dispel the thick feeling, to shake it off.

Flipping to the page on the Undead in the journal, hoping it would at least hold Red’s attention for more than a few seconds, squeeze a different reaction out of her than disdain, Bill turned to her again and held the book open on the correct page.

Willow wasn’t watching.

She was looking forward into the front seat and smiling at something.

Bill put the book on the middle seat, the pages on the Undead facing upward, as he peered forward into the front seat, curious to catch what Willow was staring at. He followed her line of sight, and then he saw it.

Wink Eye was holding hands with Sixer, her pudgy manicured fingers threaded with Sixer’s well endowed hand. She rubbed her thumb across the back of Sixer’s hand and he squeezed her hand in reply, not in a painful crushing way like he should, but in a friendly reciprocal way.

There was something wrong with this human body. Bill felt sick again. The thick feeling had crawled up from his chest, and was now bursting upward along his throat, clogging it with an invisible blockage that had the air Bill breathed feel suddenly thin, not substantial enough.

The warbling sound of the song on the movie echoing out across the field was jarring, barely registering through Bill’s uncomfortable sensation. He felt frozen, watching this, struggling with the thick feeling in his throat.

“There are worse things I could do, than go with a boy or two. Even though the neighbourhood,
thinks I’m trashy and no good,
I suppose it could be true.”

Suzie tugged at Sixer’s hand to grab his attention, and it made Bill furious that it was that easy for her. Sixer turned to face her, and Wink Eye leaned her face close to his, invading Sixer’s personal space in a way that if Bill ever did that to Sixer he would lean away, but he didn’t. The light from the movie reflected off Sixer’s square glasses as he leaned forward, not back, accepting her advance.

“I could stay home every night,
wait around for Mr. Right.
Take cold showers everyday,
and throw my life away,
On a dream that won’t come true.”

Slowly they both leaned in, painfully slowly, agonisingly slowly.

Bill felt like throwing up watching this, his skin felt hot and clammy, his stomach was roiling and his damn throat felt clogged with that awful tension. Having a body was awful, because it forced him to physically feel all of these feelings. It was terrible.

When their lips met in the middle, Bill had his hand on the car door.

When Sixer closed his eyes and kissed her back, Bill flung the car door open and ran out into the night.

“That’s the worst thing I could do.”

Running haphazard out into the rain wasn’t one of Bill’s better plans. If this was what operating on instinct was like, that instinct sucked, because if Bill were thinking clearly the only rational solution to this problem was to incinerate the perpetrators. Send Wink Eye mushroom clouding up into a fiery amalgam of her own hairspray. Immolate the woman. Burn the witch.

Gotta love those human instincts.

The rain was coming down lightly, humidifying the air. Bill’s feet seemed to be taking him into the forest of their own accord, seeking shelter from the rain, as every raindrop that fell on his skin sizzled up instantly. Bill was burning up, his magic going haywire, as he went charging off away into the forest, away from that car, from those humans, from horrible disloyal Sixer.

Pyronica had said kissing was excellent. Kept the flame burning hot. Bill knew it carried relevance and meaning to humans, mashing their mouths together, he knew it was a worshipful thing to do with someone – and Bill didn’t even have a mouth.

So if he knew it and he didn’t have a fucking mouth (not counting the recent acquisition of this new form) then Sixer sure as fuck would have known the connotations it carried, and he did it with some dumb human instead of Bill.

He was supposed to worship ME! Bill screeched internally. He couldn’t get the sound out otherwise. His throat was still tight, blocked, causing Bill’s breath to hiccups out short and shallow.
Pushing wet foliage out of the way, Bill barely knew where he was in the forest now, the trees all looked the same to him in the dark. His face was hot and sticky, those raindrops falling on him even now he was sheltered by the leaves. It was fucking raindrops on his horrible leaking face. It was just raindrops.

Wiping his face with his palm, leaning against the nearest birch tree, Bill dragged in several deep breaths, trying to calm himself while his hand burnt embers into the wood.

There was no sound except for the pitter patter of rain, the sizzle of Bill’s hand on the bark, and in the distance, the warbling sound of the speakers playing yet another song from that awful movie.

Then suddenly.

**THUMP.**

**THUMP.**

Bill hastily wiped his face down with his sleeve and looked around the forest, searching for the source of the sound.

He followed the noise – **THUMP THUMP** – to a clearing of redwoods, and peered out from behind one of the trees.

Standing in the rain, clothes soaked, Dan Corduroy was punching one of the redwoods, bloodying his knuckles. There was an axe resting on the ground, probably far more efficient for teaching the tree a thing or two, but he was pounding at the wood with his bare hands viciously.


Bill watched the bark split under Dan’s knuckles, considering the blood dripping down the lumberjack’s fingers, falling onto the forest floor below.

“Willow.” Dan uttered, his voice a pained growl, as he pulled back to punch the tree again, though the punch didn’t follow through, and Dan rested his fist softly against the tree trunk.

Huh.

That explains the anger issues. Bill wasn’t surprised, really. If not for Red’s scheming his eyes would never have been accosted with the horrendous sight of Sixer mashing mouths with someone else. And all this while out on a double ‘date’ with someone else. No wonder her boyfriend was getting punch drunk with the tree trunks.

In no mood to stand around and watch Lumberhead leak and blubber all over the woodwork, Bill moved to back away, only for his foot to land on a twig, snapping it in half with a very audible **crack**.

This is why Bill needed his levitation back. This is why. Walking on feet is for chumps. And apparently Bill was a chump right now.

“Who’s there?” Dan called out into the clearing. He began peering in Bill’s direction, and if not for the way Bill’s eyes were glowing in the dark, he might not have seen him. He really needed to get a hold of his powers, they were going haywire today.

“Oh, it’s you.” Dan observed, pacing across the clearing towards Bill.
Bill, realising he was who Red was supposedly on a date with, began backing away sharpish, but Dan reached him too soon to put any real distance between them.

“Don’t be scared none.” Dan called out, his tone reassuring. “I was just… punchin’ out my feelings. I ain’t got no beef with you. I know you ain’t her type. She’s actin’ out at me, not you.”

Bill couldn’t help it. He wasn’t used to having a mouth he could put his foot in all the time. “Your girlfriend’s a real piece of work, you know that.”

Surprise flitted over Dan’s ginger bearded face, before he looked at Bill, really looked at him, and took in his puffy eyes and dour expression.

“You didn’t think it were a real date, did you?” Dan squinted at Bill, trying to suss out why he looked like he’d been crying.

“Urgh. No. Gods no.” Bill wrinkled his nose in distaste. “I wouldn’t touch that with a ten foot pole.” A spiked one maybe, to run her through.

Dan looked uncertain, his hand curling into a fist again, before Bill hurried to clarify.

“No offence to your impeccable taste. She’s just – not my type.” Bill ended lamely, finding the phrase thoroughly lacking.

“Oh. Uh…” Dan looked at Bill, trying to piece things together. “An’ your type is –”

Bill glared at Dan sharply. The lumberjack put his hands up placatingly.

“I didn’t mean nothing by it. I’ve been wantin’ to apologise to you for what I said to y’all at the diner. It weren’t right of me. I was – I was being a boy when I should’a been act’in like a man.”

“And who’s words are those exactly?” Bill had a vague idea.

“Willow’s.”

“And did she take issue with the insult you made, or the insinuation?”

“Uh…” Dan knew at least one of those words. “She – she don’t like bullies?”

“Forget it.” Bill scoffed, and tried not to look at the splinters in Dan’s knuckles, though they were morbidly fascinating.

“So.” Bill broke the silence. “What did ol’ deciduous ever do to you?”

Seconds ticked by in awkward silence, Dan struggling with the word ‘deciduous’ probably, until the Muse could hear the faint sound of a voice calling out through the forest.

“-ill. Bill. Bill!”

Oh great.

“Bill!” Ford called out into the forest, searching for his fleeing muse.

This was all his fault.
It was his fault for agreeing to this date in the first place, for being so blind. He was so stupid for not seeing it before and now he may have ruined everything.

He had kissed Suzie to experiment. There was nothing between them but something to prove, and Ford certainly proved it to himself alright.

He was going through the motions, holding her hand like he didn’t expect her to recoil from his genetically abnormal digits, smiling when she looked his way, letting her lean on his arm. All the things that were supposed to happen. When she tugged him over to kiss him, Ford was off in another world in his head, weighing up the pros and cons far past the moment when Suzie’s sticky lipgloss touched his lips.

Ford was doing this to move on from Bill. He could move on.

So far off in his own head, his eyes screwed shut, he didn’t expect the loud slamming sound as Bill fled the car, flinging the door shut behind him.

Ford broke away from Suzie with a start.

“What the de-“

“Shit.” Willow uttered, looking out into the rain, seeing Bill’s shocking yellow hair disappear into the dark.

“Did he just dash off into the night, is that it?” Ford turned around in his seat, peering over the headrest looking at the empty space where Bill was. “It’s raining, I don’t see why he couldn’t just stay in the car, the movie’s not that awful.”

“Dude, he didn’t run away because he doesn’t like the movie.” Willow stressed to Ford, looking at him like he was seven shades of stupid.

“Dan was right. I’m so sorry Stanford.” Suzie uttered, holding her hand over her mouth. “I was just so excited to go on this date with you.”

“What do you mean ‘Dan was right’?” Ford asked, finding the time to be offended while his brain began to panic for some reason.

“You don’t have to pretend. I’m not going to judge you for your feelings. Sure, some of the other girls in town might, but since Daryl came out, I suppose you can too.”

“Why does everyone keep assuming that I’m gay?” Ford complained, thumping the steering wheel with his palm.

“You had your eyes screwed shut so hard I thought you’d never open them.” Willow commented dryly.

“Excuse me?”

“The kiss dummy. You didn’t enjoy it, and your friend practically ran off Hollywood style into the forest when it happened.”

“Bill’s just being dramatic —“ Ford blustered, not deigning to think what Bill’s disappearance might actually mean.

“He likes you.” Willow spelled it out for Ford. “It was my fault, thinking you’d be going on a date
like this for anything other than proving a point. I just wanted you to give it a fair go. I didn’t think there would be people’s feelings involved.”

“I’m sorry – what?” Ford gaped at her, his brain jarring on the first part of her sentence, barely registering the last.

“I just wanted to give Suzie a chance you know, but I should have known, you’d just been called a pair of pansies, of course you’d make a stand. Wrong stand to have made at the time though. I figured, maybe if you’d give it a shot you could see if you two were compatible, I mean, who knows – maybe –”

“Bill doesn’t like me.” Ford said loudly, disbelieving, cutting Willow’s long-winded justification off short.

Willow facepalmed. “Do you like him?”

“Well that’s, that isn’t – he doesn’t –“

“It’s a yes or no question Stanford!” Willow yelled, impatient with Ford’s rambling.

“Maybe.” Ford answered tentatively. “But that’s irrelevant. He doesn’t –“

“Running off dramatically into the forest when you kiss someone else kinda tells me he does. Sorry Suzie.” Willow said aside to her friend.

“It’s okay.” Suzie said in a quiet voice.

Ford turned to Suzie, picking up on her distress. He felt a prickle of guilt peek out from his panicked thoughts. “Are you … okay?”

“Yeah.” Suzie said, with a watery smile. “I gave it a shot. You’ll always be my Mr Mystery, but I can see that we’ll just be friends.”

Ford blinked at her, astonished.

“It’s okay.” Suzie laughed, and wiped some of the makeup away from under her eye. She was tearing up. “I’ve had such bad luck with boys lately. Maybe I’ll get a cat.”

“Probably less maintenance than a boyfriend.” Ford considered, recalling how much damage Bill did to his house on a good day.

“I still want to see what’s in that shack.” Suzie wiped the rest of the makeup out from under her eye, sniffling. “You better let me come visit someday.”

Ford thought for a second about the giant interdimensional portal currently being constructed in the basement. “Maybe later.” Maybe never.

He shared a small smile with Suzie for a moment, and this one, unlike the smiles that passed between them previously, this one was genuine.

“Do you have an umbrella?” Willow asked him from the back seat.

“There should be one on the floor back there.” Ford answered absently, his mind still reeling at what all this meant. Bill liked him? That couldn’t be right. All of Ford’s agonising, his self-flagellation over imposing his feelings on his unwilling muse, it may have all been redundant. He couldn’t begin to imagine Bill liking him back, though his subconscious had envisaged it in great
Willow fished around on the floor of the vehicle and grabbed the long pointed umbrella, handing it to Ford. That shook him out of his musing somewhat. Ford took the umbrella, looking puzzled.

“Well?” Willow looked at him, demandingly. “Aren’t you gonna go after him?”

“And do what exactly?” Ford recoiled from the idea, and the umbrella. “I hardly think he’d want to see me right now.”

“Chase him! Follow him! Tell him how you feel!” Willow urged passionately.

“What, nauseous?” Ford’s anxiety bubbled back up again, his conflicted feelings welling up in his chest again.

“What do you even like about him? I’m not just asking because I think he’s weird as fuck. What do you like about him?” Willow prompted emphatically before holding her hand out, silencing Ford. “Don’t tell me, I don’t wanna hear it. Tell him.”

Ford considered it. His logical mind listed all the reasons not to like Bill. That he was awful, that he wasn’t human, that he could be spiteful, vindictive, dangerous, powerful, petty. That he didn’t think like Ford, yet somehow understood him intrinsically.

He shouldn’t like Bill.

But still…

“Why are you pretending to be like them? You’re not, and that’s better. Preferable by far.”

“I wouldn’t have picked you if you were like everyone else.”

“You’re lucky you’re so important Sixer. That’s all I’m saying.”

“You could stand to show your appreciation a little more.”

“I could, but that’s what I have you for.”

“Do you even know what it is you’re doing for me?”

“You are important.”

A seed of hope grew in the turmoil of anxiety stewing in Ford’s chest.

And the thought that Bill might like him back?

Ford thought back to those moments when he felt that spark between them, overanalysing once more whether what he was picking up from the Muse was real or not.

Possibly the only moment when he had come close to asking Bill outright what he wanted was on the boat, on Lake Gravity Falls, with a Lovecraftian horror floating over their heads.

“Well – What do you want then?”

Ford had asked him, and Bill, with that sly grin of his twisting his lips, eyes lidded and seductive, he had tiptoed his fingers up Ford’s chest to splay them over his heart.
“What do I want?”

It was a stretch of the imagination to think that Bill might like him back in that way, but Ford had always had a talented imagination.

“What will you both be alright staying in the car?” Ford asked Willow and Suzie, determination written across his face.

Willow and Suzie looked at each other, before Willow smirked at Ford.

“I’m sure we can find some way to entertain ourselves.”

Stanford nodded, and gripped the umbrella.

“Well. Ladies.”

“Go get him.” Suzie’s eyes looked like a racoon’s but she was smiling and cheering Stanford on.

“Yeah, go get your freakish dude, man.”

Taking their encouragement on board, Stanford opened the car door and set out into the rain, looking for his wayward Muse.

As the door shut, both men lost to the rain and awkward romance, Suzie fished a tissue out from her purse.

“How’s my makeup? Is it okay?”

“It’s smudged a bit but it looks fine.” Willow reached into the front seat, snagging Suzie’s tissue and touching up the makeup under Suzie’s eye for her. “Here, let me.”

“I should have known my luck with guys was rotten. After that date with Toby you think I’d have learned.”

“Yeah, but Toby looks like a werewolf with those whiskers of his.” Willow folded the tissue in half and licked it, before going back in to dab the dark circles away from under Suzie’s eyes. “I thought Mr Mystery would have been a step up.”

“I didn’t even make it past the first date with him.” Suzie held still for Willow’s tissue skills, letting the redhead finish, before sighing. “I really wanted to find out what was in that shack. All kinds of science-y stuff. I never get to see that kind of stuff.”

“He said he might let you visit.” Willow leaned back, shuffling across the backseat so she could sit in the middle now, to talk to her friend face to face.

“Maybe. Like that’s ever going to happen. I guess he’ll always be my Mr Mystery.” Suzie laughed half-heartedly, and brushed her hair back behind her ear.

As Willow shifted over in the back seat, her hand brushed against the paper of Stan’s journal, the sharp edge of the parchment slicing her finger.

“Ow.” Willow hissed, and put her bleeding finger in her mouth, sucking the injury.
“What’s wrong?” Suzie enquired.

“Nothing. Just a papercut on this stupid book.” Willow said absently, glaring at the book before registering what was written on its pages. “Hey.”

“Hey, what?” Suzie asked, curious. She watched her friend grab the leather-bound journal, holding the pages open, reading the contents excitedly.

“Hey! Oh my god. This is amazing.” Willow enthused.

“What? What?” Suzie turned around, holding onto the seat’s headrest, trying to peer at the book.

“This must be what he’s researching. Some Mr Mystery, this thing reads like a science fiction novel.”

“Let me seeeeeee,” Suzie wedged herself into the space above the gearshift, trying to clamber into the backseat to read Stanford’s secret journal.

“Known for their pale skin and bad attitudes.” Willow read aloud. “These creatures are often mistaken for teenagers. Beware Gravity Falls’ nefarious zombies!”

“Oh gross!” Suzie wrinkled her nose, jammed in the space between the two front seats. She tried to pull her torso back through the gap, but her shoulders were stuck. “Willow, this is just like those scary movies of yours.”

“Listen to this. Zombie mailmen. Zombie boy scouts. Zombie lumberjacks! This is intense. *I will watch my back at night and keep a shovel handy.* Damn Stanford, who knew you had it in you!”

“That can’t be real. He’s probably just writing a story.” Suzie tried to shimmy back to the front seat, having difficulty wriggling back through that gap. “I can see him being some famous Author.”

“Oooh, look. Spells. Hey Suzie, reckon there’s a love spell in here for you?”

“Oh my god Willow, shut up. Don’t play with that. You know I’m superstitious.”

“Here’s one. This one’s totally a love spell.” Willow grinned at her friend over the book.

“No, don’t!” Suzie giggled, and tried to reach across to cover the book with her hands, to no avail. Willow began to read aloud.

*“Corpus levitas, Diablo Dominium, Mondo Vicium!”*

She waggled her fingers at Suzie and cackled. “Wooooooooooooo, OOOOOooooooooOOOOoohhh! Hah hah! You should see your face!”

There was a rumble as the ground began to shake, like an earthquake. Lightning cracked in the sky above, lighting up the night for a moment. The rain fell harder, whipped up into a frenzy that was uncanny for what should have been a balmy July evening.

Willow and Suzie looked at each other, momentarily spooked by the lightning, before they both laughed nervously.

“That was probably nothing.” Willow joked.

On the far side of the field next to the Northwest Mud Flaps, through the trees, into the forest, the
ground split open, oozing green smoke over the grass. A rotting hand shot out of the split in the ground, groping around the surface of the topsoil, pulling a decaying corpse of a body out of the ground with it. The flesh was falling off the zombie's face in greying strips, and maggots were chewing on the creature's eye, writhing around in its socket.

The creature groaned, hungry for brains.

Another bolt of lightning hit the earth nearby, the storm intensifying.

John Travolta bobbed his head enthusiastically on the screen as the creature hauled itself out of the chasm and lurched forward across the field.

“I got chills, they're multiplying
And I'm losing control
'Cause the power, you're supplying
It's electrifying!”

“Bill! Bill!”

At the sound of Sixer’s voice, Bill’s earlier frustration came rushing back to him.

How dare Sixer come running after him, calling out to him like he was a lost puppy, like a pet he could pick up and put down when it suited him. How dare he come chasing after him now like a repentant sinner when HE had been disloyal in the first place.

By… mashing lips with another human.

It wasn’t like Bill wanted Sixer to mash lips with him.

He just didn’t like sharing, that’s all.

Besides, Sixer was supposed to be worshipping him!

He’d better grovel like the slaves of old if he hoped to get back on Bill’s good side. On his knees for an indeterminate period of time to suit Bill’s whims. GROVELLING. Begging for forgiveness.

“Bill!”

Well, maybe not forgiveness. How long could Bill hold this over Ford’s head, he wondered? Would he make the guilty face like he had this morning? The guilty face was a good one. How many ‘I’m sorry’ favours could Bill pull from this disobedience? What did ‘I’m sorry’ pancakes taste like, and would they be salted with tears? Asking the real questions here.

“Er, I think he’s lookin’ for you.” Dan pointed out, disturbing Bill’s careful plotting.

“Tchh.” Bill tsked, crossing his arms. “Let him look. He can get lost in here for all I care.”

But then Bill would have to walk home, it would be much better to have Sixer drive him. And how could he cash in ‘I’m sorry’ pancakes when Sixer was stumbling about aimlessly like a hermit in the forest, probably growing a beard.

Bill looked at Dan, assessing his wiry beard with mild disgust. Alright, maybe that wasn’t the best course of action.
“Bill!” Sixer called out, his voice sounding nearer than before.

“A little to the left.” Bill couldn’t help but call back, hoping Sixer walked into a tree.

Unfortunately his human had better athletic coordination than that.

Sixer trudged into the clearing, holding an umbrella over his head, peering owlishly out at Bill from behind those thick square glasses of his, a worried crease between his brows.

“Bill. I thought I’d lost you, I – oh, hullo Dan.” Sixer switched from heartfelt guilt to wholesome neighbour with skilful rapidity.

“Stanford.” Dan grunted, inclining his head.

Sixer squelched over into the clearing, the rain making the ground muddy, no doubt ruining the suede of Ford’s loafers. And Bill’s loafers for that matter. He hadn’t noticed while he was running through the wilderness.

Bill watched Stanford’s eyes dart between the axe laying on the ground, to Dan’s bloody knuckles, to take in Bill’s closed off posture.

“Is everything alright here?” Stanford asked.

“Just peachy.” Bill bit back, looking direly unimpressed with Sixer.

That brought the crease back to Sixer’s brow, though he looked confused this time, and a little affronted.

Reading the situation, Dan backed away, and bent to pick his axe up from the ground. “I should probably leave, give you two space to talk –”

“No, no – stay.” Bill said, his word’s amiable, but his tone bitter. “You and the axe.”

“There’s no need for that.” Sixer responded, his tone chidingly patronising.

“Isn’t there?” Bill narrowed his eyes at Sixer, his expression cold for someone who burnt so hot.

Ford met Bill’s gaze, a challenge in his eyes. Bill was surprised he wasn’t backing down. “You tell me.”

Dan scratched his elbow and ran a hand through his hair, slicking the wet ginger strands back off his face, as he shuffled awkwardly from foot to foot.

“Look, you guys, I’m gonna go – this isn’t –”

Suddenly the ground shook with a mighty rumble and thunder growled above. Bill stumbled, and Ford grabbed his arm to steady him.

When Sixer touched him, the fire that Bill had somehow managed to subdue surged through him again, like Ford had suddenly added gasoline to the mix, the unadulterated, unconflicted worship that poured off the human igniting Bill’s inner flame brighter than it had ever been.

He looked up at Ford with glowing eyes.

“What was th-?” Dan exclaimed, leaning up against a tree in the clearing behind them.
“Did you leave your book in the car?” Bill asked Ford quietly.

“In the back seat.” Ford admitted. “But I –“

“How confident are you that Red and Wink Eye wouldn’t read it?”

“No. But they –“

“Damn. Must have been some kinda earthquake.” Dan guessed, pushing off from the tree. “Don’t get too many of those this far into Oregon. Usually more of a coastline thing.”

Green smoke seeped into the clearing from between the trees, and odd groaning noises filled the air. Ford doubted it was the earth groaning, this sounded much more ominous.

“Does this have anything to do with your sneaky graffititng of my journal by any chance?” Ford grumbled his displeasure, still keeping his voice low, giving Bill the most unimpressed look he ever had.

Bill blinked innocently, and straightened up, putting a hand over his chest earnestly. “I would never.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAARRRRRRGGGGGHHHHHHH!”

Dan screamed, pointing to the rotting half corpse dragging itself towards them across the forest floor with one arm. It was severed in half from the torso down, but still managed to drag its decrepit body across the foliage, gnashing it’s teeth dementedly.

“Braaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinssssss.” The ghoulish creature croaked through decaying vocal chords.

“Braaaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiins.”

“Oh, this is just ridiculous.” Ford grumbled to himself, rolling his eyes.

“What is that thing?” Dan yelled, stumbling away from the zombie, pointing at it in fear.

“Hit it! Kill it with your axe!” Bill swung his fist in the air like he was watching a boxing match.

“Braaaaaaaaaaaaaiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiinss.”

“AUUUUUGGH!” Dan bellowed, as he swung his axe through the air, embedding it in the zombie’s head with a dull thud.

The axe wedged in the zombie’s skull, slowing it for a moment, but then the creature began clawing towards them again.

“Their skulls are nearly unbreakable, that isn’t going to work!” Ford called out to Dan, who planted his foot on the zombie’s skull, trying to tug his axe out of the bone.

“Knock it’s block off!” Bill cheered, elated by the chaos.

“RrrrrrrrrAAAAUGGGGGGH!”

Yanking the axe out of the bone finally, Dan swung it like a golf club, in a wide arc, and ripped the skull off the vertebrae, sending it sailing through the air to land on a pile of leaves on the other side of the clearing.

The zombie’s torso shuddered for a while, spasming, before falling limp to the ground, finally still.
“FORE!” Bill cackled, clapping energetically at the action that just unfolded. “Well done!”

“What the hell was that?” Dan yelled in disbelief. “Where the hell did it come from? What the hell is going on???”

“That would be a zombie.” Stanford explained, closing his umbrella and rolling up his sleeves. “A corpse, reanimated. The undead.”

“And it looks like it came from that way.” Bill pointed out gleefully. “Isn’t that where they’re showing the movie?”

“Willow!” Dan gasped, frightful in his realisation. Hoisting his axe over his shoulder, Dan sprinted across the clearing back towards the field. “I’M COMING WILLOW!”

The crunch of Dan’s booted feet against the undergrowth faded the further away he ran from the clearing. His swift departure left Bill and Ford alone together.

“Zombies?” Ford questioned Bill, not at all happy with the situation.

“You had no spells in your spells section.” Bill pointed out. “What’s a spells page without spells.”

“You didn’t want to include a translation or a description or some kind of warning at all?” Ford yelled, his voice loud with frustration.

“It’s your book!” Bill pointed out, trying to guilt Stanford. “What were you doing writing that sort of dangerous stuff down? Anyone could have read it!”

“You wrote it down!” Ford turned to face Bill front on, his hands curling into fists.

“For you to see! If you don’t want others to read it, use invisible ink!” Bill threw his hands in the air dramatically.

“Use invisible -???” Ford spluttered indignantly, before pausing to consider the merit of the suggestion. “Actually, that’s not a bad idea.”

“See.” Bill said smugly.

“Zombies though???” Ford questioned angrily. “What exactly did that spell do?”

“It’s just a simple conjuration spell.” Bill explained. “Conjures hoards of the undead for about, ehhhh, twenty-four hours. I thought it would spice up your week a little.”

“Were you going to tell me about this at all?” Ford pressed, still irritated.

“I know you like to figure things out. I was giving you something to do.” Bill said thoughtfully, as though it was his idea of a nice surprise for Stanford.

“That’s not –“ Ford scratched the back of his head and groaned in frustration. “Alright, how do we reverse it?”

“Reverse it?” Bill blinked at Ford, like he didn’t quite understand why he’d want to.

“How do we reverse the spell? There has to be some way.”

“You can’t reverse it.” Bill shrugged. “It’s a unique sort of spell. Definitive. It’s both a blessing and a curse... actually, it’s just a curse. I thought you’d like it. You like a challenge. Besides, you
can handle a few zombies.”

Ford swung his hand out to gesture to the townsfolk, still sitting in their cars in the field, ignorant of the horror that was creeping towards them. “But they can’t!!!”

“So what? It’s like natural selection.” Bill laughed, unaware of the shuffling shambling corpse staggering up behind him. “Natural selection using zombies. Doesn’t actually work because while they don’t procreate this way, they pass on the virus anyway, making more zombies. I really didn’t think this through.”

“Look out!” Ford called out, as the rotting corpse grabbed Bill with it’s thin, impossibly strong fingers, dragging Bill back.

Bill’s eyes widened in shock. He thought a zombie summoning spell would be interesting, or at the very least fun to watch, but he hadn’t considered being stuck in the middle of the zombie battleground. He kept forgetting his body was tangible, human, and full of tasty delicious brains.

He froze for a moment, shocked in the realisation that he was vulnerable, when Sixer grunted and swung his umbrella at the zombie, swiping through the creature like he was hitting a home run, jumbling the creature’s bones causing it to fall to a pile on the floor.

Bill exhaled a sigh of relief. He looked over at Sixer, with his sleeves rolled up, baring his muscular forearms, holding the umbrella like it was a baseball bat or a sword even, the rain coming down on his face, running off his cheekbones and clinging to his glasses, his long coat whipping about him in the wind dramatically.

What a big damn hero.

“You have something on your shoulder there.” Ford eyed off Bill’s shoulder. There was a rotting hand gripping his shoulder set in rigor mortis.

The muse barely looked away from Ford’s face, absently brushing the hand off, letting it fall to the ground.

“Who’s idea was the umbrella sword?” Bill asked, still staring at his human, faint awe tinging his expression.

“Willow’s.” Ford replied, staring at the hand that fell twitching into the mud.

“Urgh.” Bill wrinkled his nose in distaste.

“Why did you run off like that?” Ford asked, looking up from the ground, fixing Bill with a penetrating look, determined and desperate to hear the answer.

“Why?” Bill gaped at Ford in disbelief. He wasn’t going to make Bill spell it out for him was he?

“Why?” Ford nodded, still determined. It looked like he was going to make Bill spell it out.

“Is this really the time Sixer? There are undead all over the damn place.” Bill spluttered, not wanting to admit that he ran away because he was jealous. That wasn’t a good look, immortal beings didn’t get jealous.

“So there are. So it’s really now or never, isn’t it?” Ford said stubbornly, and stood still, holding his umbrella loose down by his side.
“There’s a zombie right there. Right behind you.” Bill pointed out, trying to derail Ford’s stubbornness.

He just stood there, crossing his arms, like he didn’t believe him, still staring at Bill stubborn as ever.

“It’s coming right for you.” Bill raised his voice a little histrionically.

Ford raised his chin and stared straight at Bill, unflinching.

“It’s going to eat you!” Bill warned, curling his hands into fists.

This was flustering him. It really was. The way Ford just stood there like a statue, with no regard for his own safety, how he maintained eye-contact, how he became the immovable object to Bill’s unstoppable force of diversion and disassembling. Still he stood there.

“Dammit Sixer, you have too many brains to just stand there like a buffet!” Bill screeched, storming over to the scientist.

There was in fact a zombie approaching Ford, its slow dragging steps coming in from behind him. It rattled a hungry groan from it’s perforated lungs and shambled onwards.

Ford just stood there, staring at Bill, who was getting more and more worked up by Ford’s stoic stillness.

“Why did you run away?” Ford repeated, watching Bill, his expression stern, though wonder and hope brewed behind his glasses.

Bill stood in front of Ford, so close now they were chest to chest, the smaller muse looking up at Ford with angry yellow eyes. He jabbed his finger into Ford’s chest, glowing yellow and burning up with frustration.

“Because … you’re just –” Bill huffed, and licked his lips absently, before glaring at Ford again. “You’re just hopeless!”

Ford couldn’t keep the stoic act up for long, not with this tension violent between them like electricity, sparking up his veins with excitement and anticipation. The muse’s finger was just resting on his chest, prodding him. Bill didn’t draw his hand away, letting it stay there. Ford could feel Bill’s breath on his chin, they were so close, and he searched Bill’s yellow slitted eyes to find the same conflict and confusion that was no doubt in his own.

Ford unfolded his arms and brought his hand up, hesitantly, to hover along the side of Bill’s face, freezing them both for a moment with the uncertainty of actually making contact, of acting on this wordless thing between them.

Ford could feel that Bill was holding his breath, hanging on edge, waiting for Ford to touch his face, to bring him closer. The scientist could see that Bill’s slitted pupils were blowing wider in that instant, like a cat’s eye. Ford was reminded that he was almost holding a creature from another world in his hand, a god, and making that god tremble by barely doing anything. It was intoxicating.

Bill leaned in closer, coming up on his tiptoes, his breath a shaky shudder in the dark. Ford could feel more than see Bill swallow nervously, he was so close to Ford’s face.

Ford brushed his thumb along Bill’s cheekbone, just grazing the left side of his face lightly, and he
could feel Bill’s skin heating up like a supernova, overheating, practically giving off steam.

He supposed there was worship in this. He’d certainly do more than worship Bill if he let him,
that’s for sure.

“Nnngh.” Bill made a frustrated sound, like he couldn’t find his words. “You –“

Suddenly, gnashing it’s teeth together, the zombie that had snuck up behind Ford lunched forward,
roaring, springing up onto Ford’s shoulder to strike.

“RRRAAAAARGH.”

“AAAAHHH!” Ford flinched, yelling out

“AAAAAAAAAAH!” Bill yelled also, out of shock, reacting on instinct. He leaned back away
from the corpse as it suddenly spontaneously combusted, lit with an intense blue fire, blistering it’s
eyes from its socket’s.

Ford hissed in a startled breath as the creature was suddenly an inferno of heat, clinging onto his
jacket. He elbowed it away, recoiling from the flaming mass. Ford stumbled back from the blazing
corpse, pulling Bill to stand behind him, protecting him.

“AHHhhhh.” Bill’s yell petered off and he cleared his throat with a nervous cough. “Ahem. That
was embarrassing.”

“I’d quite forgotten about those.” Ford grumbled, steeling himself, seeing that it wasn’t just one
zombie that had crept up on him in the clearing, there was a whole hoard of them, a solid two
dozen zombies, leering at them with missing eyes and broken jaws, hungry for their vital organs.

The zombie Bill had lit on fire was crumbling, fire blackening it’s bones, consuming it’s flesh – it
didn’t lurch forward, but still the zombie stood, its skull not yet breaking, still undead, if not alive.
The other zombies froze for a moment, shielding their eyes (or what was left of them) from the
bright light of the fire.

Ford gripped on his umbrella, holding it out like a sword in front of him, eyeing off the zombies as
they shook off their stunned reaction to the light, creeping ever closer.

“There’s too many of them. I won’t be able to hold them off for long.”

Bill put his hand on Ford’s shoulder, catching his eye. “You won’t have to. Maybe I can’t kill it
with fire, but I can cut a path through them, enough so we can make a run for it.”

“And then what? The bright lights can only slow them down for so long. They have no discernible
weaknesses. Unless we go lopping their heads off one by one they’ll overrun us.”

Bill smiled, and Ford could see that Bill’s pupils, blown wide and dark before, were now thin slits
of excitement. Bill’s teeth were bright in the dark. He looked inhuman, and livid with excitement.

“Trust me.”

Ford struggled for a moment. Sure he liked the Muse, the events of the evening had pretty much
forced Stanford to concede to that point, but he wasn’t sure how far he trusted Bill. Still, in a
situation like this, so clearly paranormal, he supposed Bill had more experience, being a
supernatural being himself.
“There’s so many of them. Are you sure you’ll have enough firepower?”

Bill laughed, the sound ringing through the air. “Trust me Sixer. Right now, that won’t be a problem. Now step aside, and get ready to run when I say run.”

Ford stepped aside, and watched as his muse stepped in front of him, blue flames sprouting up from his hands like they had in the cemetery, running along his arms, casting shadows in the trees.

“Now this is a hot date.” Bill quipped, before cackling, and raising his arms, blue fire surging out from around him, backing the zombies up a few steps.

Bill pointed ahead into the trees and a line of fire flared up, making a path between the zombies, through the forest. The zombies reared away, and Bill parted the sea of flames enough to make a singed but safe path for Ford to run down.

“You go first, I’ll just enjoy this.”

Ford gripped his umbrella and, barely hesitating, he stepped forward through the flames, walking on crisp black grass, crunching embers underfoot. He strode through, scarcely flinching at the heat of the flames, and Bill followed behind him.

While Ford looked like the hero out of one of his D&D comics, striding through the path of flame gallantly, Bill was ambling cockily behind him, laughing intermittently, making finger guns at the zombies they passed, incinerating their heads with every casual point. When Bill started whistling showtunes from the movie, gunning zombies in the head, Ford’s dramatic expression faltered as he smothered a smile.

“What are you doing?”

“Having fun with it. What are you doing? Acting out your heroic fantasies?” Bill snickered at Ford. “If you want to walk through fire, I can always do this to the hallway at home for you.”

“I’ll pass.” Ford chuckled. But seriously, that would not be good for the hallway. Or the rest of the very flammable wooden shack.

Although burning, the reanimated corpses still shambled towards Bill and Ford, relentless in their hunt for human brains to eat. They followed them through the forest to the edge of the field.

“Now you’ve brought them here? Is this part of your big plan?” Ford asked, horrified, looking out over the parked cars with fear, anticipating disaster befalling on the ignorant citizens sitting comfortably in their vehicles. “They’ll all be slaughtered!”

“No they won’t. Trust me.” Bill extinguished the fire around them, patting down the sleeves of his shirt, before pointing to the speakers set up near the projector. “We need to get to that boombox. Turn up the volume.”

“Bill, is it really the time to –“

“Just do it!” Bill pulled Ford along to the speaker system, grabbing his wrist. “Trust me.”

With the zombies hot on their heels, Ford had no choice, dragged along with Bill to the speakers set up near the projector. He knelt down to fiddle with the controls, looking up at Bill, still hesitant to believe that this could really help anything.

The zombies were shuffling ever closer. The people in their cars had no idea. They were all going
to die. They were going to die watching idiot teenagers dancing around, singing nonsense words.

“When we go out at night
And stars are shinin’ bright
Up in the skies above.”

“Now.” Bill kicked Sixer lightly, urging him to act, watching the zombies groan and shamble across the field.

“Oh at the high school dance
Where you can find romance
Maybe it might be lo-o-oo-o-ove!”

Stanford turned the knob that controlled the sound up higher, raising the volume in increments. The zombies seemed to pause, listening, as the volume went up.

“Rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong
Shoo-bop sha wadda wadda yippity boom de boom
Chang chang changitty chang sha-bop
Dip da-dip da-dip doo-wop da doo-bee doo
Boogedy boogedy boogedy boogedy
Shoo-be doo-wop she-bop!”

The zombies flinched as the volume raised higher, shielding their ears. Some of them fell to the ground, pawing the dirt, ripping the last remaining hairs from their head, groaning.

Bill turned to grin at Stanford, and gestured to the zombies, nodding.

“IT’S WORKING.” Ford yelled over the volume, astonished, looking up at Bill.

“TRY IT LOUDER!” Bill yelled at Stanford, waving his hand in the air, indicating to turn it up.

Ford nodded, and turned the volume all the way up.

“Sha-na-na-na-na-na-na yippity dip de doom
Rama lama lama ka dinga da dinga dong
Shoo-bop sha wadda wadda yippity boom de boom
Chang chang changitty chang sha-bop
Dip da-dip da-dip doo-wop da doo-bee doo
Boogedy boogedy boogedy boogedy
Shoo-be doo-wop she-bop.”

Screaming in agony now, clutching their heads, the zombies fell to their knees, overwhelmed by the loud singing. One by one, Ford saw the zombies, their skulls practically unbreakable, or so he thought, clutching their foreheads before their skulls burst open from the inside out, gushing chunks of decaying brain matter and green sludge, bone fragments flying out everywhere.

One after the other the zombies skulls burst like popcorn kernels, splattering viscera and dark green goo over the forest floor. The undead creatures were helpless to the music’s power, some even clawing back into the ground to escape it’s obnoxious melody. Soon there was barely a zombie left standing, all of their heads exploding, neutralising them, killing them effectively.

“Sha-na-na-na-na-na-na yippity dip de doom
Wop ba-ba lu-mop and wop bam boom!”
The last zombie’s skull shattered, and Ford and Bill cheered, throwing their hands in the air. Ford grinned up at Bill, still kneeling by the speaker box, and Bill bent down to bring them both face to face. His eyes playful, exuding approval at their joint success in averting the zombie apocalypse, Bill booped Ford on the nose with his pointer finger, laughing.

“And you said no magic at the movies.”

“It pains me to admit it, but it seems the real magic was the power of song all along.” Ford supposed, half sarcastic.

“Pfft.” Bill ruffled Ford’s hair affectionately, before he stood up and looked at his cuticles smugly. “Such is the magic of a three part harmony. Face it, you love it deep down.”

“I love w-who deep down?” Ford yelled, startled and stammering, having misheard.

“I SAID IT – oh forget it.” Bill scoffed, before gesturing with his hands. “You can turn it down now!”

“Oh.” Ford realised, and turned the music down to a more acceptable level. “Right.”

“Sha-na-na-na-na-na-na-na yippity dip de doom
Chang chang chanitty chang sha-bop
We’ll always be together ~
Wha oooh, yeah!”

Ford stood up, and leaned back against the boom-boxes, resting his hip against it. He looked up. The rain had stopped, and the sky was beginning to clear, ominous clouds rolling back to reveal stars lighting the heavens.

Bill took a step closer to Ford and joined him, leaning on the boom-boxes, perching next to him, their arms touching. Ford was wearing his coat but he could still feel the warmth of the arm pressed against his.

Bill looked up to the sky too, then snuck a glance to the side, watching Sixer.

Ford was watching Bill right back, and the muse jumped a little, caught staring, before he relaxed and looked back out to the cosmos.

“You looked good tonight.” Bill commented, aiming for casual, though this may be the first genuine compliment he’d given Sixer about his appearance. “Fighting zombies is a good look for you. Though next time I’d stick with the shovel. It suits you better.”

“I’ll take that on board next time I’m assaulted by hoards of the undead.” Ford replied dryly, ignoring how his stomach flipped, elated, at the peculiar compliment. “Goodness knows I can’t tackle a ghoulish invasion right without looking my best.”

“Priorities.” Bill laughed briefly. “Though I don’t know when you’ll next be assaulted by hoards of the undead. Maybe we should plan it out. It could be like a monthly thing. I could pencil it in.”

“No. No. Definitely not.” Ford shook his head and chuckled. “One Night of the Living Dead was enough for me thank you very much.”

On the screen Olivia Newton John and John Travolta jetted off in a souped up magical flying car.

“Now that’s style.” Bill commented, nudging Sixer with his elbow.
“I’m sure.” Ford said dryly.

“Aren’t you glad you didn’t see the other movie now?” Bill niggled, joking.

“Maybe.” Stanford shrugged, then he sighed, his shoulders slumping. “This evening has been a disaster.”

“You’re telling me.” Bill scoffed. “I’m not the one who thought this was a good idea.”

“I know.” Ford admitted, fiddling with his umbrella.

“So did it work out for you?” Bill asked.

“What?” Ford looked up.

“You said - sometimes we have to do things we might not necessarily ask for, but end up being good for us. So I’m asking, did it work for you? Did it end up being a good thing?”

Bill was asking to rub in the fact that he was right about the evening, but Ford thought for a moment, actually considering it.

He considered all the things that had happened this evening, from the zombie invasion, to the droll kiss with Suzie in the car, to the electrifying almost kiss with Bill in the forest, right around to the dramatic showdown with showtunes exploding the skulls of an alarming number of corpses.

He considered all these things, and the full gamut of feelings and emotions he had experienced all in the one day, and he looked up at the constellations above.

Sitting here in the balmy evening, with Bill by his side, their arms pressing together, staring at the stars, possibly maybe on the same page this time, confusion notwithstanding, Ford wondered if fate had a hand in the outcome of the evening. Maybe this was all meant to happen.

Although the words weren’t said out loud, and Ford had very little to go on, he had the feeling that maybe possibly Bill was beginning to like him back, and considering that, things were working out to be good for Stanford in the end after all.

“I think so.”

A shooting star raced across the sky.

Ford made a wish.

It would come true, but later Ford would wish that it hadn’t.

Chapter End Notes

This was a long ass chapter, but it needed to be written. Other chapters probably won’t be as long as this bc in my drafts it was a whopping 60 pages long and I questioned my life choices, but soldiered on anyway!

I would like to dedicate this long ass chapter to BlueCanary, and I feel I should state just how much the comments you leave bolster and inspire me, and make writing this
worthwhile. This goes to everyone who comments, but especially BlueCanary who has been there from the start and made me laugh a good deal re-reading them. Take this long ass chapter friend, and my thanks.

I would also like to dedicate the not-kiss to the wonderful 'just kiss already' comments I got. MWAHAAHAHAHA HOW DO YOU LIKE THAT SLOW BURN!!! ALL THE SLOW BURN OF A DYING STAR!!!!!!!!!!
Bill was beginning to develop a tic under his eye. He reached into the pantry to retrieve the dusty cup noodle packet from the bottom shelf, intent on his quest to taste every edible substance in the house, simply for lack of anything better to do. It was crammed right at the back of the pantry, like the adult in Sixer was ashamed to be hoarding the cup noodles there as a relic from his slobby college days. Bill wanted to eat the illicit cup noodles, especially if Sixer was ashamed of them, but he really crammed them far back there.

Even crouched down with his head stuck inside the pantry door, it took effort to reach in and grasp the cup noodle packet. He had to twist his arm in physically impossible contortions that would have been a snap for Bill before in his old body. Maintaining a physical form fettered by the constraints of reality sucked.

Grasping the cup noodle package in his hand, retrieving them from the cupboard with tetris like movements, Bill withdrew his prize triumphantly. He fumbled to peel the paper lid off the noodles, his concentration marred by the loud sound of the vacuum whirring upstairs.

“Come on, flimsy paper.” Bill mumbled to himself, struggling to open the packaging. He was getting more and more frustrated, his frustration amplified by the loud whirring noise, his efforts getting him nowhere, when suddenly the loud sound from upstairs stopped, and Bill looked up in surprise, banging his head against the pantry shelf.

“Ow.” He blinked, one eye at a time, so more like concurrent winking, processing the pain. He licked his lips, as though assessing the flavour of bumping his head against the shelf, before he shrugged and stood up.

Trudging up the stairs, cup noodles in hand, Bill went looking for Sixer, hoping that the sudden silence meant he had finished his crusade to turn the house upside down in order to appease his desire for cleanliness. It wasn’t next to godliness, Bill knew this for a fact.

He found Ford in the attic, shifting a large wooden bedframe across from one side of the room to the other. Bill watched Ford drag the bedframe across the floor, meticulous with his positioning.

The scientist was wearing a thin singlet and slacks, and it was obvious he was sweating, engaging in intensive physical labour in the middle of July. It was a very hot day.

Bill stood in the doorway for a while, watching the muscles in Ford’s back bunch and shift as he pulled the bedframe over. Sweat glistened on his broad shoulders, and his skin was flushed red from exertion.

Bill realised he was staring a little too hard at those crucial details when Sixer straightened up and wiped the sweat from the back of his neck, rubbing the sweat off on his trousers before putting his hands on his hips, surveying his handiwork.
He’d been watching Sixer VERY closely lately, which wasn’t unusual for Bill, he was ALWAYS watching after all. It was more the details he was observing were different, they elicited different reactions from the Muse than he was used to. They stirred a tension in Bill that set him off balance, he wasn’t sure if he liked or hated the feeling just yet.

While Bill was mulling his strange new feelings over, clutching absently onto the cup noodle packet, Sixer moved back over to grab the vacuum cleaner again.

Blinking out of his stupor, Bill remembered what he came up here to ask him.

“Are you done yet?”

VRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMMM.

Sixer turned the vacuum cleaner back on and began vacuuming the spot where the bedframe had been, and Bill squeezed the polystyrene noodle cup until the plastic bent and crackled.

“Hey! You’ve been doing this for hours!!” Bill raised his voice to be heard against the whirr of the vacuum. “Are you going to stop? Sixer I’m bored. Hey!”

Ford paused, vaguely hearing Bill’s voice over the vacuum, and he bent down to turn the vacuum off, looking over his shoulder at the Muse.

“Bill. Did you need something?”

“For you to stop with all of this—” Bill waved his hand at Ford and the vacuum. “Maybe? You’ve been doing this all day, who gives a crap about dust on the floor.”

“I’m just trying to make the house presentable for when Fiddleford gets here.” Ford straightened up and pulled up the bottom of his singlet to dab away the sweat gathering on his chest. If he noticed the way Bill’s eyes shot to his bared stomach, then back up to his face again, he diplomatically chose not to mention it. “I’ve done the living room, the bathroom, the hallways, the kitchen, now the attic and then I just have to go over the labs.”

“Why bother? They’re fine as they are.” Bill crossed his arms and leant against the doorframe. “You didn’t clean this much for me when I arrived.”

“When you arrived I was running on 120 hours of sleep deprivation, forgive me if I didn’t think to vacuum before you were summoned.” Ford wiped down the last of the sweat, and let his singlet fall back down. “Besides, you’ve seen this house already, you saw it being built. You saw everything as you’re so fond of telling me. Though from what I can tell, you don’t always pay attention.”

“Excuse me?” Bill questioned, offended.

“You didn’t know what a toaster was.” Ford listed, amused at the way Bill huffed indignantly. “This morning when I turned the vacuum on you almost set it on fire. You’ve banned me from using the hair-dryer. You watch static on the television, but don’t pay attention to the weather when it’s on, and we end up three hours later in the middle of the woods, drenched.”

“Your point?” Bill replied testily.

Ford maintained eye contact with Bill dryly as he leant down and pressed the on button on the vacuum again, watching the way Bill flinched reactively at the noise, before he went right back to vacuuming the dust away from the wall.
Bill groaned dramatically, and banged his head against the doorframe several times to properly convey the agony of his boredom. Ford finished the last bit of vacuuming before taking pity on Bill, turning the vacuum off, unplugging it, and winding the cord up, before picking the machine up to carry it back to the linen closet.

On his way out the door, he snagged Bill by the sleeve, as he was still banging his forehead on the door jamb like a drama queen, twirling him around to follow. Bill’s expression went from morose drama to bright glee, and he bounced along behind Stanford, eager to be doing anything else. He had a lot more energy lately than he used to, it was like dealing with a particularly hyperactive child. Ford put the vacuum away in the linen closet, and Bill shook the cup of noodles like a maraca, full of that poorly utilised energy.

“So what are we doing? Do you want to go for a drive? Hiking? I could introduce you to Steve in the forest! Not the most social guy, but there’s nothing quite like poking the bear. OH speaking of bears -!” Bill rambled, excited to be getting out of the house, feeling cooped up already.

“We’re not leaving yet. There’s still so much I have to do here.” Ford interrupted, trying not to let Bill’s enthusiasm for an adventure override his responsibilities. “I promised F his own study, I still need to clear out that space for him.”

“He doesn’t need his own study.” Bill stopped shaking the cup noodle maraca, his shoulders slumping. “You can read a book anywhere. What difference does it make?”

“He’ll have paperwork, prototypes, blueprints. I said he could bring his laptops along to tinker with them. Sometimes he might just want space to be by himself, to think by himself.”

“The forest isn’t good enough for him?” Bill flung his hand out, gesturing towards the forest. “What’s wrong with the great outdoors?”

“The forest is quite dangerous to the uninitiated.” Ford corrected, before making his way through the house, down to the elevator. “Perhaps I should warn him about that actually. I can see F being carried off by some enterprising monster on his first day here.”

“If he gets dragged off into the forest on his first day, I’d say he deserved it.” Bill scoffed, stepping into the elevator with Ford, deciding that annoying Ford while he was cleaning was much better than trying to entertain himself and waiting for him to finish.

“Didn’t you run off into the wilderness on your first day?” Ford couldn’t help but smugly remind the muse.

“Second day. Technicalities, please.” Bill rolled his eyes, not watching Ford press the button for the elevator. He assumed they were going to the lab. “And it wasn’t some monster spiriting me away. That was ALL me.”

“And I bet you’re proud of yourself too.” Ford replied wryly.

Bill scratched his chin, and looked away to the side as the lift descended. “It wasn’t one of my proudest moments.”

Ford watched Bill avoid eye contact, and was surprised to note that his muse may have even been ashamed of his behaviour in those first few days. That was new, Bill didn’t seem the type to admit shame or regret for anything. Though on the list of behaviours Bill seemed unlikely to admit to, fainting, crying and running away were at the top of that list. Ford eyed Bill off as he shuffled awkwardly, and surprised himself at how much he savoured seeing Bill humbled like this, even
slightly. It was a rare pleasure.

The elevator doors dinged open and Ford strode out into the study purposefully, surveying the space. If he moved the rug to the left, and shifted the table he could set up a perfectly functional space for Fiddleford to –

“Here?” Bill exclaimed loudly, still standing in the lift. “You can’t give him this room.”

Ford turned around, surprised by Bill’s distraught tone. He sounded genuinely upset.

Ford stood in the middle of the room, on top of the ornate patterned rug bearing images of Bill’s true form, prisms set up around the room refracting light, tapestries hanging behind him depicting the god wreathed by fire, a gold statue of the Muse with six arms holding skulls, swords, treasure, snakes and scrolls of unearthly knowledge as well as some sort of arcane amulet. Endless drawings of Bill littered the walls, some on paper, some drawn into the wallpaper, drawings of both Bill’s true form and this new one Ford had constructed, the blueprints if you will for Bill’s new design.

Ford stood in the middle of this room devoted to worshipping the God and couldn’t understand why Bill would sound so upset with him.

“This is MY room.” Bill said, appearing distressed.

“It’s my private study.” Ford countered. “I do nearly all my work in the lab now though, so I don’t really need it anymore.”

“You’re not giving it to him!” Bill cried, walking out of the lift to snatch one of the drawings off the walls, shoving it in Ford’s face. “This is mine! You made it for me!”

Ford took the paper drawing out of Bill’s hand and stared at it, the cheerful looking triangle wearing a top hat and bow tie staring back up at him. Ford looked between the drawing, and the man standing before him, and had a moment of disconnect. Sometimes he forgot that the good looking dark skinned man standing in front of him hasn’t always been that way, he was already so used to having Bill around.

Looking between the strange happy little creature in the picture, and the incredibly expressive look of anguish on the face of the man with yellow eyes, Ford was struck again with the realisation that they were almost two separate beings. He barely knew Bill back then.

The Bill he knew before was almost two-dimensional. Literally. He was congenial and cheerful and always encouraging, and when Ford sucked him through to his dimension in the flesh, he began to see more sides to the cosmic being. Other than the standard three.

Right now he was seeing just how expressive Bill was, and how strongly he felt emotions. Ford had thought Bill was beyond such things, emotions seemed much more earthly, something the Muse always seemed to be able to shrug off with a joke, but Ford had seen Bill angry, ecstatic, stubborn, and now morose.

“You are NOT getting rid of this. You are NOT handing it over to Fiddleford McGucket of all people. This space is mine. These statues are mine. These tapestries are mine.” Bill jabbed his finger at the picture in Ford’s hand. “This is me! Me! What makes you think it’s suddenly okay to get rid of all this?”

“I wasn’t going to get rid of it.” Ford hastily backtracked. “I just thought I’d move it, a little.”

Bill looked furious, about two seconds away from hitting Ford, or some other act of enraged
violence.

Ford knew he had to act fast to recover this situation. He had an idea, and he didn’t know how well it would work, or if it would blow up in his face. Comforted by the knowledge that the runes on Bill’s body forbid the muse from acting on the intent to harm Ford, and bolstered by the fact that he’d been noticing Bill watching him all day, he summoned the courage to act.

Ford brought his hands down on Bill’s shoulders and began massaging them, rubbing along Bill’s exposed neck with his thumbs.

“I didn’t realise it would upset you so much. I thought you wouldn’t mind.” Ford explained calmly, watching Bill’s reaction.

It didn’t disappoint.

Bill spluttered, obviously still fuming but thrown off by Sixer’s hands gently rubbing circles on his skin. The skin to skin contact was what threw Bill, that and the fact that there was obvious worship in the gesture, sparking along Bill’s skin to short circuit his protestations. He’d never imagined Ford would learn how to use worship to his own advantage so quickly. If that even was what he was doing. Bill wasn’t sure. His cheeks flushed darker, and his eyes widened, and Ford could feel the muse’s skin heating up swiftly.

“In what – what - in what way would I not mind that you’d file away my objects of worship to make a book den for your old college buddy?” Bill managed to spit the words out, his shoulders tensing up. “How would I be fine with you taking that away from me?”

“I hadn’t considered it like that.” Ford replied, his voice deliberately calm.

The more he considered what he was about to do, the more he became flustered, red creeping into his cheeks. Proposing this, acting on this plan, was putting himself out there. Ford took courage in the fact that Willow was certain that Bill liked him. At the very least he liked this, this worship.

Ford mustered his nerve, continuing to graze his thumbs along the sides of Bill’s neck. “I assumed you’d be fine because, well… you can … get your worship a different way now. If you like.”

Bill made an odd aborted noise, and seemed to freeze at that, his brain almost glitching, refusing to process what Ford said for a few seconds.

Ford assumed this was a good thing, as Bill was no longer glaring at him like he wanted to bite his head off. However, the longer the moment stretched on, the more Ford became concerned that he had said the wrong thing, been too bold, or suggested this too soon.

Bill hadn’t blinked, he seemed to be staring at a point past Ford’s shoulder, drifting off in his own thoughts. He seemed off in another dimension mentally, still processing exactly what it meant, what Ford was offering him. The only indication that Ford’s words had affected him was the temperature of his skin, which continued to climb.

“Bill?”

Bill’s thoughts were racing.

Ford seemed to have no idea what he was proposing. Offering unbridled acts of worship to Bill whenever he needed it was like offering his life up in the service of the God. Worship was a currency, and Ford had basically just told him that Bill didn’t need the chump change of inscriptions or statues or other assorted trophies, as he had a willing supplicant in the scientist,
whenever he wanted it. Bill was itching to take him up on the offer, itching to make the scientist shake on it, pledge himself to Bill immediately, making it permanent and binding.

“Bill?”

However, there was the principle of the matter. If receiving Sixer’s worship meant compromising and letting him throw all the relics he collected for Bill away just so he could make a cubby house for his college friend, that was a deal-breaker right there. And it was just like Sixer to set this up as one of his compromises.

Bill was already wary of Sixer becoming closer to Fiddleford than him. If he placed all his trust in Fiddleford it would make him harder to manipulate, and in the end Bill needed Ford on his side over Fiddleford’s, more loyal to him, so that when the portal ran its course, Bill could dispose of the other scientist as he saw fit.

He originally planned to dispose of both scientists, but if Sixer agreed to be his, that would change things. His pawns he could sacrifice, but his prizes wouldn’t get thrown away, they were Bill’s to own forever.

Owning Sixer’s worship was a tempting prospect, but Bill was reluctant to let Sixer throw his icons away to make room for his friend. His friend was the one who had to respect that Bill was here first. And Sixer had to respect that too.

His skin was growing hotter as he processed the worship given while Sixer rested his thumbs against his neck, and Bill, deep in thought, lost track of his own temperature, barely regulating the power flowing through him, until he was snapped out of his pondering when Sixer hissed, and his hands flinched away from Bill’s neck.

“You burnt me.” Ford said, startled, and he put his singed thumb in his mouth, recoiling back defensively.

“What?” Bill blinked, before coming back to himself.

“I said, you burned me.” Ford repeated, taking his thumb out of his mouth, scowling at the pain. “I thought you couldn’t cause me harm magically.”

“I didn’t mean it.” Bill looked offended. “The runes block the intent to harm. I didn’t know I was hurting you.”

Ford looked deeply unimpressed with that loophole, and paced away from Bill to sit at the chair by his desk, examining the red mark on both of his thumbs, his shoulders hunched over, his body language closed off from Bill.

“Sixer.”

Ford ignored Bill, swivelling the chair around, turning his back to the muse.

“Sixer, come on. I didn’t mean it.” Bill whined, frustrated by the total 180 Sixer just pulled on him.

Ford was examining his burnt thumbs. They were blistered just from touching Bill. Rather than responding to the muse, Ford was despairing over the fact that it seemed that he couldn’t touch Bill without overheating him to the point where he was untouchable. Ford knew Bill was hot (he designed his body for goodness sake) but he was appalled by the irony of the situation. How was he supposed to worship Bill now in all the ways he had imagined? He barely managed this first instance of intentional worship. And burnt thumbs? This was not a part of his plan. He thought the
runes would protect him from things like this.

“Sixer.” Bill approached Ford, reaching out for his shoulder to swivel him around to face him. “Just let me –“

Ford shrunk back away from Bill’s hand, flinching before he had even touched him, swivelling the chair around and holding his hands out defensively to block Bill from coming any closer.

Bill held his hands up placatingly. He didn’t mean to startle Sixer. Humans were so sensitive. Like startling a baby deer, once you scared them it was hard to win their trust back. They bolted. He couldn’t have Sixer see him as a threat, not now. He wanted Sixer to worship him, not fear him.

“I’m not going to hurt you.” Bill said like he was talking to a frightened animal, his voice calm and deliberate. “It was an accident. Show me your hands and I can fix it for you.”

Ford seemed to reconsider his reaction, defensive instincts acting before he got a chance to think them through. Bill still had his hands up, attempting to be as non-threatening as possible, his eyes wide and sincere, waiting for Ford to give him the go ahead, but Ford’s thumbs were throbbing and he still had concerns.

“How do I know you won’t just burn me again? Your skin was hot, boiling point hot. How did that happen?”

Bill sighed, then took a step back to reassure Sixer, and sat down on the floor, crossing his legs. He reached out for the paper Ford had dropped, intending to fiddle with it, but when he went to pinch it between his fingers red embers incinerated the paper. Bill let go of the paper immediately, but the embers crept along the page, spreading out and blackening the paper, causing it to curl up, before crumbling into a pile of grey ash.

Bill and Ford both stared at the ash for a while.

This was a problem.

“Alright. So.” Bill started. “I’ve been having trouble controlling my magic since you unbound those last two bricks.”

“I can see that.” Ford said, still looking at the small pile of ash on the floor.

Bill chewed on his bottom lip, trying to figure out how to proceed. There had to be a way to turn this to his advantage, a way not to scare Sixer away.

He hadn’t run away yet. He was still sitting there, watching Bill warily.

“I also want to –“ Bill licked his lips absently, looking for the right words. “Try. What you suggested. But I’ve found that I’m more… sensitive, now than I was before.”

Ford was watching Bill closely, scarcely believing what he was hearing.

Willow was right! Somehow, somehow, Bill had been tempted into returning Ford’s feelings. Or at least taking Ford up on his offer to experience more physical sensations. Ford had thought that if Bill had ever reciprocated it wouldn’t be in the way he imagined, merely because Bill was never a tangible creature, he existed solely in the mind. Part of Ford believed Bill wouldn’t be interested in anything physical with him, simply for lack of desire for physical pursuits.

However Bill’s reaction to food had piqued Ford’s interest, as he didn’t simply seem to pursue
food, he very emphatically enjoyed it, seeking out new tastes and favouring certain flavours. Bill’s loud reaction to foods he enjoyed was so overtly exaggerated that Ford realised Bill did indeed have the capacity for experiencing physical pleasure, though he was surprised that Bill was open to experiencing it with him. Ford had, on some level, assumed that things like that would somehow be beneath Bill, or unappealing to him, so it surprised him to hear that he had been thinking of engaging with Ford’s offer to worship him physically.

His only exposure to the kind of physical worship Ford had offered had been a foot rub, having Ford lick peanut brittle off his hand, small shoulder massages, and Ford grazing his thumb along Bill’s cheekbone. That was it. Not exactly the full extent of the human experience. But the fact that Bill was open to try, to try more, had Ford elated, sending butterflies flying through his stomach.

If only there was a way to touch Bill without being horribly burnt.

“So, what does that mean?” Ford clarified.

“It means I get overwhelmed. You give me more than I can handle in this form, and unless I find an outlet, or a better way of storing the energy, I have trouble … controlling it.” Bill confessed and flipped his hands over to rest them, palms up, on his knees. Blue flames burst forth to dance in Bill’s palms again like they had in the cemetery, and Bill let the flames burn off some of the excess energy his form was holding. “My body wants to burn it off, which is why, when I got distracted, you got hurt.”

“Then we need to find you an outlet.” Ford suggested. “A way to burn away the energy.”

“Short term that could work, but personally I find that wasteful.” Bill closed his fists and the flames snuffed out. “There are ways of storing energy effectively. Until I find and claim one of those methods for myself, whatever we try has to be done very carefully so I don’t burn you again.”

“So you’re saying we’d have to move slow.” Ford summarised.

“Very slow. Excessively slow. We wanna make glaciers look like elite athletes of the natural world slow.” Bill explained, before gesturing at Ford. “Toss me another one of those papers.”

Ford snagged a paper from the wall, with yet another drawing of Bill’s triangular form on it. This time he was tipping his hat in the sketch. It was quite adorable. Ford passed the paper to Bill, and Bill pinched it between his thumb and forefinger, and observed.

The paper didn’t singe. His temperature was back to normal, if not damaging, levels of hot.

“There.” Bill showed Sixer the paper. “Safe, see?”

“I barely touched you before.” Ford realised. “How slow are we to go if things like this are bound to happen again?”

“I wasn’t paying attention before.” Bill admitted, confirming Ford’s theory. “I’ll be able to tell if it’s getting too much for me now, AND if you don’t distract me, I can warn you before you start smelling like barbeque sauce.”

Ford chuckled. He leaned forward on the chair, resting his forearms against his knees to peer down at Bill, and asked.

“So when you say sensitive, just how sensitive are we talking?”
Bill scowled at Ford’s winning grin, and crossed his arms. “Don’t get too cocky now Sixer. You’re not as cute as you think.”

Ford laughed to himself, his smile dancing around his eyes. Bill couldn’t help but be somewhat relieved. This whole situation could have gone two ways, and one of those ways was horribly wrong, so he was glad that at least Sixer wasn’t fleeing from him, terrified.

“Give me your hands.” Bill reached over to Sixer impatiently.

Ford obediently stretched his hands out to Bill, though he hesitated a little, feeling to see that the air around Bill’s hand wasn’t too hot. It wasn’t. Bill looked much more sure now too, Ford assumed he had things back under control.

Bill grabbed Ford’s right hand and brought it up close to his face, examining it. The tips of his fingers were red, and his thumb, which had been resting directly on Bill’s skin was blistered, the skin peeling back already, painfully singed.

Bill pressed his hand against Sixer’s and aligned their fingers before blue fire covered them both. This fire was cold, not hot, and knitted the skin on Ford’s hand back together, good as new. Satisfied with the first hand, Bill moved onto the second, and Ford marvelled at how flawlessly his skin had healed, flexing his fingers.

“Given the fact that you could just heal me if you burn me again, we don’t have to match pace with glaciers.” Ford said without thinking, looking at his hand. It was only after the words tumbled out of his mouth that he realised how forward they were.

Bill was healing his left hand, and looked up at Ford, raising an eyebrow at him. “Someone likes playing with fire.”

Ford blushed, and scratched the back of his neck awkwardly with his free hand. “Well, I –”

“Save your skin Sixer.” Bill smirked, letting go of Ford’s left hand, the flames disappearing. “As hilarious as the thought is of you getting burned over and over again just to get your hands on me, I’m almost 90% certain that it’d get old real quick.”

“You have a strange sense of humour.” Ford mumbled, shooting Bill a petulant look.

“It’s not my fault I’m too hot to handle.” Bill laughed, and batted his eyelashes at Sixer.

“Indeed.” Ford rubbed his chin thoughtfully. “What an unexpected design flaw.”

“Flaw????” Bill questioned indignantly.

“I meant with the binding.” Ford explained. “It seems by sectioning your powers off into individual bricks of binding I’ve also staggered your ability to control yourself.”

“Again, not my fault.” Bill crossed his arms testily.

“But still. That something so little as this –“ Ford reached his hand out impulsively to cup Bill’s cheek. The muse didn’t expect it, eyes widening at Sixer’s boldness, his breath catching.

It hadn’t even been two minutes since his burns were healed, and already Ford was reaching out to touch Bill again, reckless and overconfident, wanting to test this. Sure enough, Ford began to feel Bill’s skin heating up, though not to the extreme levels it had before. “- Can affect you so much.”
Bill could feel himself blushing, the blood prickling his cheeks already. He struggled to remain unaffected by the gesture, determined not to prove Ford’s point.

“No it doesn’t.”

Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, and proceeded to stroke his thumb along Bill’s cheek, determined to elicit a reaction from the stubborn muse.

Bill’s lip twitched, and he narrowed his eyes at Ford, maintaining eye contact, desperate not to lose this battle of wills.

Ford took the challenge for what it was, and leaned further forward, scooching his chair closer to Bill. He let his fingers trail down the side of Bill’s neck, feeling his pulse jumping under his fingertips.

Ford brought his left hand to Bill’s face as well, cupping his other cheek, watching the muse twitch with the effort it took not to react, though Ford could see Bill’s slitted pupils were dilating responsively.

Ford took this opportunity to not just challenge Bill, but to experiment. It was intoxicating to think that he could have so much of an effect on another person, just by touching them, and while Bill wasn’t strictly a person, the thought of mapping out the ways he could make the muse tick, finding his most sensitive spots and prodding them, that sort of causality appealed to Ford’s scientific mind.

Ford let his right hand drift down Bill’s neck to trace along his collarbone, slipping under the neck of Bill’s t-shirt to follow the dip of the bone along. He noticed Bill took a shaky breath at that, but his lips were still pressed into a determined line, his face giving nothing away. The touches to Bill’s collarbone were feather light, the sort that gave goosebumps.

Ford let his left hand rub circles on Bill’s high cheekbone, before his fingers drifted off to trace the sensitive shell of Bill’s ear, kneading the muse’s earlobes experimentally, before dragging his fingertips through the short clipped hair at the back of Bill’s neck.

Bill’s eyelashes fluttered a little at that, and it seemed like he was holding his breath in, his bottom lip trembling slightly with the effort to remain unaffected.

So Ford did it again, raking his fingers through Bill’s hair, this time pressing down a little harder with his fingertips, grazing the back of Bill’s head with his nails.

Bill closed his eyes and bit his lip to smother a groan, loving the feeling of Sixer’s nails on his skin. He had to stay composed though, he had to remain unaffected, unmoving, though part of him was forgetting why he had to do that, getting distracted.

He looked up through lidded eyes at the scientist, and saw how utterly smug Sixer’s face looked. He seemed far too triumphant, delighting in overwhelming Bill, a pleased grin on his annoying face.

Him and his stupid broad jaw, his strong eyebrows, his two eyes glinting behind those glasses of his (so technically it was four eyes), his sweaty everything, that stupid thin singlet, those stupid strong arms, and his stupid freakish hands.

Bill was fuming, glaring at the scientist before Ford raked his nails from the dome of Bill’s skull all the way down to the back of his neck, making Bill’s eyes roll up into his head. A shiver ran down his spine, a muffled groan slipped out before he could catch it. That felt amazing.
He felt hypersensitized. This was it, the moment when his control would snap, and he was loathe to admit that he’d reached that threshold so soon. His skin was buzzing with the weight of restrained magic, and he felt twitchy and raw already, this human meat suit barely able to tolerate the amount of cosmic energy it was containing.

Bill was about to snap at the scientist, having been pushed far enough, when Ford’s exploration had his calloused thumb rub along Bill’s bottom lip, surprising him into wide eyed silence.

They stared at each other for a while, the two of them frozen, the tension between them building as they both seemed to stagger in the moment, caught in each other’s gaze, taken aback by the boldness of the action.

Bill knew they had to stop, he knew he was a hot second away from burning Sixer again, from losing control of the magic, hardly able to regulate it anymore.

But the feeling of Sixer’s thumb on his lip was so tempting. He thought back to Pyronica’s description of a kiss, of what it could do, and he wanted so badly to try it, more than anything he wanted to see what would happen if Sixer bridged the gap between them and pressed something else against Bill’s lips.

Ford also seemed taken aback by his own boldness, triumph making him cocky, his fingers roaming more freely, until he gave in to what he had wanted to do since he had first made Bill this body. To feel how soft Bill’s lips were. It was only when he touched them again, when Bill’s eyes shot to his, startled and surprised, slitted pupil’s blown out huge, all black, barely a sliver of iris to be seen – that Ford realised that this wasn’t just an experiment. He actually liked Bill, as inhuman as he was, and suddenly the butterflies were back, the cockiness he felt seemingly evaporated as he existed, suspended on the brink of doing something that would put his feelings on the line, visible for all to see.

This is just how he felt in high school when he first tried talking to girls. Giddy and nauseous with anticipation all at once. Though unlike the girls in his high school, Ford was 92% sure that Bill liked him back, and if they kissed now it would change everything.

Breaking the stalemate first, Bill moved his hand behind his back, hiding it out of sight, letting blue flames dance in his palm to vent away some of the excess magic building.

Ford could hear the crackle of the flames, and he let go of Bill’s face to peer around behind the muse, curious to see what was happening.

“Are you cheating?” Ford had to ask, amusement and wonder tingling his voice.

“Don’t look!” Bill demanded, angling his torso to hide the flames from Sixer. “Keep going.”

“This means I was right, you know.” Ford couldn’t help but point out smugly. “You are easily affected.”

“Sixer.” Bill groaned, gesturing at the scientist angrily, holding up two fingers. “If you don’t shut up in about two seconds…”

The hand Bill was gesturing with was also on fire.

Ford pointed wordlessly at the flames dancing along Bill’s hand, trying to smother the smile that was creeping onto his face, knowing that it would only infuriate the muse.

Bill looked from Sixer, to his hand, noticing the flames, before he threw both of his hands in the air.
frustrated, groaning dramatically.

“ARGH!” Bill clambered off the floor, stomping around the study irately, the flames billowing up both of his arms now. “I HATE this stupid body!”

Leaning back in his chair comfortably, watching Bill throw his tantrum, Ford relaxed a little. He called out, teasing Bill.

“Oh come now, it’s not \textit{that} bad. I thought I made it rather well.”

“I hate it, and I hate \textit{you} especially.” Bill pointed a flaming finger at Ford.

“I’m sure.” Ford replied, smug disbelief written all over his face. He knew Bill didn’t hate him. Not if he reacted like \textit{that} to the barest of touches.

Bill glared at Ford, letting the energy burn out, not caring about being wasteful now when the scientist had pushed him so far. His skin was crawling with sensation and magic and Ford was just sitting there, leaning back casually in the chair, in that stupid singlet, his legs seated wide, so \textit{comfortable} in his human body. Bill wanted to do... SOMETHING to the smug scientist, but he didn’t quite know what.

Clenching and unclenching his fists, Bill decided if he couldn’t \textit{something} Sixer, then he could at least put his foot down about Fiddleford.

“Go back to hating sharing! This room is yours and mine. Fiddleford can study in the lab.”

“But I don’t want too much paperwork down there.” Ford protested, though at this point he was too amused to truly care. “It’s a fire hazard. And not the only one apparently.”

“Fine. You can keep the paperwork up here.” Bill reluctantly compromised. “But all of this is staying exactly how it is. The statues, the illustrations, everything! I was here first! This is \textit{my} room!”

“And my room.” Ford added. “I notice you didn’t have a problem sharing it with me.”

“I don’t care if you study in here or whatever.” Bill waved his hand dismissively at Ford’s books and journals piled up in the room. “Just not him.”

“If I’m studying the portal I’ll be studying with F.” Ford watched as Bill shook off the last of the blue flames, calming down enough to appear normal again. “Generally we’d have to study together to make progress.”

“Urgggggh.” Bill scratched his head, pacing. “Can’t you both study somewhere else? You have better things to be studying in here.”

“Better things, such as?”

Bill stopped pacing, struck by an idea, realising how he could swing this in his favour. He’d seen this in the mindscape, and on TV, it was an excellent idea. He wouldn’t allow himself to be the only one affected by this new development, and he knew Sixer had a few weak spots of his own Bill could manipulate.

Bill was going to flirt.

Throwing on all the bravado he could muster, Bill sauntered up to Ford, and slammed his hands on
the arms of his chair, leaning over Ford so their faces were inches apart. Bill met Ford’s surprised wide eyes for a few seconds, mischief sparkling in Bill’s, the yellow glow reflecting off Ford’s glasses. Bill smirked, and made sure to lean into Sixer’s space, just like he had in countless dreams, until his lips were barely a centimetre away from Ford’s own.

“Such as - me.” Bill murmured in his closest approximation of a seductive tone, fluttering his eyelashes at the stunned scientist.

Ford seemed to colour red from his neck, to his cheeks, all the way up to the tips of his ears. He squirmed, leaning back in the chair, an awkwardly aroused expression on his face, his eyes darting between Bill’s lips back up to his unflinching eye contact.

The tension hung in the moment, intensifying for Ford, and maybe for Bill as well, but this whole seduction thing, well -

It was too funny.

Bill loved it when Sixer got all squirmy. He couldn’t help it, after watching Sixer wriggle uncomfortably for several seconds more, Bill couldn’t keep a straight face, and his seductive expression broke down as a loud burst of laughter sprung from Bill.

“HAH! Hahahahahahahahahahah! You should have seen your face!”

He then pulled back, laughing hysterically, wiping the corner of his eye, as Sixer puffed up indignantly like a very sweaty lothario, crossing his arms and pouting.

“That wasn’t funny.” Sixer huffed, glaring at Bill.

Bill’s hoots of laughter intensified, and he doubled over, clutching his stomach in comedic agony.

“He says – hahahaha – he says it wasn’t funny! Ohoho hoh – are you hearing yourself?” Bill clapped his hands together like a swooning maid. “Oohh study me Sixer.”

Rousing his stubbornness, Ford pushed his glasses up his nose and pointed at Bill. “You know, I just might.” He faux threatened.

“HAH! I’d like to see you try.”

“Maybe I’d like that too.” Ford added, like it was a competition, like he was still trying to get one up on Bill.

“Maybe you would.” Bill parroted back, like a schoolyard taunt.

“Maybe I will.” Ford bit back.

“Maybe you shou-“ Bill went to yell back childishly, before realising what that would open up for himself. “Actually, scratch that. I don’t want you poking at me with your science sticks.”

Ford raised his eyebrows, wondering if Bill was aware of the innuendo there. He also managed a sly grin. Seeing Bill back track meant he’d found another one of those sensitive spots. And Ford was discovering the longer he spent with Bill, the more mischievous his sense of fun was becoming, when it reared it’s head on the rare occasion.

“Science sticks are essential to the whole studying discipline.” Ford feigned seriousness and rubbed his chin in a considering manner. “There would be probing.”
“No!” Bill gasped, and recoiled, taking three staggered steps back before dramatically throwing his hand over his forehead. “Anything but that!”

“Experimentation will be due.” Ford got out of the chair, picking up one of his pens from the desk, tapping it against his chin as he walked closer to Bill, eying him over. “Investigation, testing. What makes Bill Cipher tick?”

“You keep that clock away from me.” Bill took two more steps back and wagged his finger at Ford. “Really, Sixer. The nerve. I’m only two months old you know. You’re sick. Disgusting.”

“Just last week you were telling me you were older than the pyramids.” Ford commented dryly, stepping into Bill’s space.

“What isn’t, am I right?” Bill nudged Sixer with his elbow and winked.

“Well, I’m not, so you’ve no right to talk to me about age.”

“Well if you’re not older than the pyramids then what right do you have to study me?” Bill scoffed, and crossed his arms. “Underqualified and overconfident, you are.”

“Is that right?” Ford watched Bill posture, bemused.

“And cocky. Self-important.” Bill listed, still pacing backwards, Sixer stepping into his space, until his back hit the wall near the elevator, though that didn’t stop Bill’s tirade. “Opinionated. Conceited. Hopelessly naïve.”

“Uhuh.” Ford nodded, like he was taking it all in, but he continued to step into Bill’s space, backing him up to the wall, standing toe to toe with Bill, his height offering the slight advantage that meant that the muse had to at least look up to Ford while insulting him.

“Not to mention sensitive – oooooooooohAAAAAAAAH!”

Ford poked Bill in the stomach with the end of his pen, and Bill jumped like an incredibly ticklish person would. Another weakness Ford made note of.

“Who’s sensitive now?”

“You poked me!” Bill covered his stomach with his hands defensively, glaring up at Sixer. “That’s not even a science stick.”

“Oh, but it has plenty of practical applications.” Ford said lightly, and poked Bill again, on the other side this time, and judging from the way he spasmed, Ford was right on the money with his ‘Bill is ticklish’ theory.

“Ack! Stop that! What, are you trying to kill me now?”

“The pen is mightier than the sword.” Ford said, lacing a little Shakespearean drama into his own words before he jabbed the pen along Bill’s side again.

“OooohWAHAAAAAaah!” Bill shouted, and snatched the pen out of Ford’s hand, poking the scientist on the nose with it. “You’re not funny Sixer.”

Claiming his revenge, Ford sprang to tickle Bill’s sides with his fingers. Having six fingers meant an increase in tickling capacity by two tickling units, and thus Ford was very proficient at it. He had lots of practise growing up. Shermie called him a tickling expert.
Bill shrieked with laughter, his hands coming up to push Sixer away, but Ford was relentless. He persisted until Bill was reduced to a twitching mess of hysterical laughter.

“Ssss-stop hahah AHAH AHahahahahah you’re hahahaha still hahahahohohohaaah not – not funny AAAAAH stop! I’ll set you on fire! I’ll kill us both!”

“No you won’t.” Ford said, but he backed away regardless, leaving Bill panting, leaning up against the wall trying to catch his breath, grinning wildly.

“You – you are – what are you doing?”

Ford walked back to the desk and sat down, snatching another pen and some paper, scribbling onto the page. “It’s not science if you don’t write it down. See here. Bill Cipher – sensitive AND ticklish.”

His face flushed with exertion, Bill stomped over to the desk, and snatched the paper from Ford, examining it. He held it up imperiously, and let flames eat up the paper, holding the burning page in front of Sixer’s face. “Stricken from the record.”

“You know, I came down here to finish cleaning. Thanks to you I’ve done zero cleaning.” Ford pointed out.

“You’re welcome.” Bill said smugly.

Ford shooed Bill away, laughing. “Go do terrible things to your cup noodles, or whatever you were doing before. I’m busy here. You’re distracting me.”

“You’d succumb to the inevitable nihilism of existence if it weren’t for my sterling distractions.” Bill said proudly. “But fine. I know when I’m not wanted.”

“What do you want for dinner later?” Ford asked before Bill walked away, already scribbling something new down on the papers on his desk.

“Surprise me.” Bill called over his shoulder as he walked back to the lift. “Surprise me specifically with that curry.”

Ford inclined his head, chuckling, and finished writing, dotting the end of his sentence.

Bill pressed the button for the elevator, stepping in once the doors opened, before turning around, leaning his hand on the high part of the elevator door, striking a pose, cup noodles in hand.

“And don’t change anything. This room stays exactly how it is. I’ll be watching.”

Ford waved his hand in agreement, and Bill rolled his eyes, conceding that was the closest to agreement he was going to get from the human, and he pressed the lift button to take him to the ground floor. The elevator doors closed and conveyed Bill back up to the main house.

Ford shook his head, grinning to himself, pinning the square of paper up onto the wall, before pushing up out of the chair to resume his cleaning.

On the paper was one of the drawings of Bill as a triangle, one of the many sketches that littered the room. Ford had written next to a conveniently placed arrow ‘aim for his sides – tickling is a weakness’.

The paper sat on the wall alongside the hundreds of other icons penned to honour the god. And
true to his word, the paper would stay there, as would all the others, for another 30 years.

Chapter End Notes

A rather light hearted chapter here. Bill better find a way to store all the heat Sixer's giving off, or he might just explode with unresolved sexual tension.
He's never bothered by his conscience.

Stanford’s fretful last minute tidying was about as amusing as you’d expect.

“I’ve got the lab sorted, laid out the blueprints – check. Put new sheets on the bed, coffee table magazines – on the coffee table – check.” He muttered to himself, pacing around the kitchen.

“You don’t put magazines in the living room.” Bill critiqued, sitting down at the kitchen table, waiting for Ford to lay out breakfast for him. “Everyone knows National Geographic magazines go in the bathroom, where the real thinkers engage.”

“True.” Ford paused, bringing Bill’s cup of over-sugared tea to the table, setting it before him. “Maybe I should move it.”

Bill took a sip from his cup of tea, happy with the flavour. Ford knew how he liked his tea by now. He’d trained his human well. “Maybe you could move it, and actually finish making breakfast for me. Just an idea.”

“Right, right.” Ford muttered absently and went back to preparing this morning’s toast, buttering the bread. “I’ve tidied the study, so that’s all set. Moved certain blueprints.”

“I thought you said you didn’t touch anything in the study.” Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford.

“I said I wouldn’t get rid of anything.” Ford replied, sliding the plate of toast onto the table. “I didn’t say I wouldn’t move things. I can’t exactly leave your blueprints laying around.”

“You know Da Vinci?” Ford asked, curious, putting the butterknife on the table.

“No, your blueprints.” Ford answered, absently itching his forehead with the butterknife still in his hand, smearing butter across his brow. “I can’t exactly convince F you’re just a regular human when I’ve got diagrams on how to formulate your anatomy strewn about everywhere, can I?”

“I happen to like those diagrams.” Bill replied contrarily, raising his hand to beckon the mango chutney out from the pantry. It levitated across the room, coming towards Bill’s breakfast on the table. “Very inspired. Leonardo Da Vinci’s got nothing on you. Trust me, I knew the guy.”

“You knew Da Vinci?” Ford asked, curious, putting the butterknife on the table.

“Sure. I had a hand in shaping all the great mathematicians and minds of human history. Why do you think he was ahead of his time? Because he was naturally gifted?” Bill made air quotes derisively, the chutney bobbing in the air as he motioned.

“Fascinating. You’ll have to tell me about his ornithopter some time.” Ford turned to reach into the fridge for the marmalade for his own toast, before double taking at the jam jar of chutney floating across the kitchen. “No! No, no. None of that. No floating.” He pulled the chutney away from Bill, just as the muse went to reach for it across the table. “We’ve been over this. F is very superstitious. I don’t want to scare him away from this project before it’s even begun.”

“If flying chutney’s gonna send him running, what hope does he have exploring the paranormal phenomena of a limitless multi-verse of dimensional anomalies?” Bill scowled, making grabby hands for his chutney. He wouldn’t eat normal jams on his toast like a normal person, of course not.
“I’m just saying we should… warm him up to the idea of working with the paranormal.” Ford explained, twisting the lid off the jar of chutney before passing it to Bill. “Slowly. Build his tolerance, if you will.”

“If you toss someone in a river they’ll sink or swim soon enough.” Bill waved his own butterknife around, gesturing as he spoke, before he dug it into the chutney and smeared the orange spicy substance over his toast. “Unless of course you’re on trial for witchcraft, in which case you float and terrify the small-minded ingrates who threw you in the river in the first place.”

“Well, I’d like to avoid a witch hunt.” Ford said tactfully, grabbing his marmalade and sliding into his seat at the table opposite Bill. “Not that I think there would be one, F isn’t the type to discriminate like some would.”

“Then there’s no problem then, is there?” Bill said, munching on a mouthful of toast.

“Just—“ Ford sighed, looking up at the muse who was chewing with his mouth open. Delightful. “Try not to frighten him. He’s not used to all this.”

“Rherr rhou rightehn – ahem.” Bill swallowed his mouthful of food, before asking again. “Were you frightened?”

“Of you?” Ford blinked, looking up from spreading the marmalade on his toast.

“Of all of this.” Bill waved his hand in an encompassing gesture, a gesture which just so happened to levitate the salt and pepper shakers in a circle above the table. He took another bite of his toast and waited for Ford’s answer.

“Hmm.” Ford considered the question, before returning to slicing his toast into triangles. “Not at first. I was mostly just excited about everything that opened up for me, the chance to study it all. To be in the thick of it. Though I suppose now, further down the track I’ve come to realise that there are things out there that can be quite frightening. Maybe not by their innate nature, but by their moral perspective on right and wrong, and how they act on that.”

Bill watched Ford intently, listening, chewing on his toast a little slower now, feeling terribly conspicuous.

“It’s a wide universe.” Ford continued. “I would be foolish to believe that humanity has a superior moral compass to other species, but some things there’s just no getting past.”

Bill swallowed his mouthful of toast, and felt something stick in the back of his throat. It wasn’t food. Maybe it was guilt. The salt and pepper shakers demurely touched back down onto the tabletop, no longer hovering jauntily. Bill cleared his throat, and looked at his plate, unable to meet Ford’s gaze. “Like what?”

Ford picked up a slice of his marmalade toast and chewed on it for a moment, before responding. “In those books in the cave in the mountains you showed me, the ones I found the ritual to make your body in, there were all sorts of spells and enchantments. Some of them were useful, plenty with practical applications – but there were some spells in those books that, honestly, I can’t imagine any scenario where a practical application of them would be ethically warranted. Turning someone’s skin inside out while they were still conscious of it. Melting their eyeballs into jelly. Shuffling the functions of every orifice in a person’s face. There was one spell designed to trap a person’s consciousness in a never-ending echo chamber of agony. Some of the spells were just cruel. There’s no reason to inflict spells like that on another conscious being, no matter the context. So I know that evil exists, and whoever wrote that spell-book probably knows it too. Or embodies
Bill continued to stare at his plate, his toast left sitting there, feeling the weight of what Sixer was saying plummet down through his stomach. He thought the spells in that book were all rather funny, interesting ideas for dealing with insurrection and other annoyances. Fun aberrations of reality for a day when his actions were above consequence. He didn’t write the book, but he didn’t condemn it like Sixer seemed to. Bill didn’t quite know why, if it were anyone else waxing ethical about the spell-book’s contents he would have laughed in their face and questioned their funny bone, but he cared about what Sixer thought here. Maybe not enough to change his behaviour at all, but enough to not want to admit to it.

“I’m lucky that I haven’t encountered anything like that just yet.” Ford said dismissively. “But I know that it’s out there. I wouldn’t say I’m frightened though. Not with you here by my side. What’s the matter? I haven’t put you off your food, have I?”

Bill blinked down at his plate. His stomach still felt heavy, hollow almost. He didn’t know why. Shaking himself out of his spontaneous sour mood, he looked up from his plate to Sixer, feigning humour with a reassuring smile. “Maybe the eyeball jelly one was not the best accompaniment with this particular breakfast food.” He prodded a finger into his chutney on toast, overacting an expression of disgust, poking his tongue out. “Eurgh, eyeballs on toast.”

Ford laughed at Bill’s exaggerated expression, and reached across the table to poke Bill’s tongue back in his mouth. “Back in there. We’ve only got an hour or so ‘til F gets here.” He crunched down on another slice of toast, and gestured for Bill to do the same.

Bill complied, and for a while there they ate in companionable silence. Eventually, given Ford’s prompting, the two of them launched into a discussion about Leonardo Da Vinci, and the scientific revolution of the 1500’s, chatting away about notable historical figures, inventions that were lost to history, and how to make Damascus steel. Ford lost track of time, grilling Bill for information about Da Vinci’s ornithopter, keen to try his hand at making one of his own. Bill seemed more keen to discuss Da Vinci’s personal life, and his many social blunders with high ranking members of the scientific and religious community.

Before Ford realised, it was 11am and the sound of a car with a particularly loud motor rolling into the dirt driveway drew him out of his conversation with a start.

“Oh goodness, is that F? Is he early? It can’t be eleven already.” Ford fussed, getting up from his seat, flying around the kitchen like a whirlwind, dumping plates in the sink.

“Time really is an irrelevant social construct when you’re having fun, eh Sixer.” Bill quipped, snatching his mug of lukewarm tea before Ford could whisk it away off the table, warming the tea back up with his hands. Once all the breakfast paraphernalia was tossed in the sink, Ford looked around the kitchen, snagging a tea towel to cover the mess in the sink.

“There.” Ford looked around the mostly sparkling kitchen, satisfied. “Good enough. Am I missing anything?”

Bill stood up, and pushed his chair back in, walking around the kitchen with his cup of tea in hand. He paused before Ford, looking over him, and reached his hand up to hover above Ford’s forehead.

“You’ve got butter on your head.” He explained, and Ford rolled his eyes, inclining his head, giving Bill permission to wipe it off. Bill grazed his thumb over Ford’s brow, scooping the dab of butter off the scientist’s head, and then brought his hand down to pop his thumb in his mouth, sucking the butter away.
Ford seemed to blink, looking down at Bill, overwhelmed in the moment with just how endearing his muse was sometimes. With just how domestic they’d become, and how comfortable they were in one another’s presence. He got lost for a while, meeting Bill’s constant eye contact, the air prickling with warmth between them. They seemed to both be leaning in to one another’s space, as they often did when their eyes met for these spontaneous staring contests that had been happening more and more frequently. It was like some inexorable pull that had them both swaying closer, barely aware of it, their eyes glued to each other, until –

**HONK HONK!**

Ford jumped, and Bill flinched away at the loud noise, accidentally spilling some of his tea on the floor with the sudden movement.

“Stanford, are you in there?” Fiddleford called from out in the yard, stepping out of his car. “Gosh I hope I found the right place. Yoo hoo!”

Ford froze, looking between the front door, and the splatter of tea on the kitchen floor, Bill already putting his cup on the table and reaching for the paper towels he’d seen Ford use to clean up spills before.

Bill could see Ford’s indecision all over his face. He waved him off. “You go. I’ll deal with this. Go play buddy buddy.”

Ford nodded, and raced to the door, finding himself eager and filled with excitement at the prospect of seeing his friend. He flung the front door open and saw F struggling to haul a suitcase up the steps to the porch. Ford sprang forward and took the other side of the suitcase, lifting it up those last few steps.

“Here. Let me get that for you.”

“Thank you-“

F looked up from his suitcase about the same time as Ford looked up, carrying it up the stairs, and their eyes met for a moment, before a fond smile crossed Stanford’s face, crinkling his eyes.

Setting the suitcase down on the porch, Ford clapped his arm on F’s back and pulled him into an affectionate hug.

“It’s good to see you old friend.”

“Sweet sarsaparilla, Ford, you’ve sprung up like a beansprout!” Fiddleford exclaimed, patting Ford on the back. “I don’t remember you bein’ this tall back on campus.”

“The fresh air’s been good for me.” Ford said, dismissive of the intensive workout regimen he’d implemented since arriving in Gravity Falls. “You look well yourself. You’ve lost weight. Married life has been good for you.”

“You could say that again.” Fiddleford chuckled, and bent down to pick up the suitcase, shifting it along the porch towards the door. “Though I can’t say I’m not looking forward to getting a full night’s sleep while I’m here. It’s different when you’re raisin’ a baby. Me and Pat are up most nights, lil’ Tate’s got a good set of lungs on him. Like his momma.”

“I remember that. Yodelling championships wasn’t it. I think we were all surprised by her range.” Ford grinned, remembering being dragged along to Patricia’s performance.

“I sure was. Nearly proposed to her right then and there. Never seen anything so incredible in my
life.” F laughed, and continued lugging the luggage along. Ford could see F was struggling with it, and intervened again, picking up the heavy case like it was nothing.

“Here, let me. I insist. How was the drive up here?”

F scratched the back of his head, and looked around Ford’s front yard. “It wasn’t too bad. Nice view gettin’ here. Lots of rural country, I didn’t think it’d be this far out in the boondocks – doesn’t seem like your scene from what I remember.”

“It wasn’t at first.” Ford admitted, opening the front door and backing through, holding the suitcase in one hand and the door open for F with the other. “Though it grows on you rather quickly. Sometimes I still feel like an outsider when I head into town, but this area is a marvel to study. Full of inspiring anomalies and abnormalities. A true wealth of possibility here.”

“You certainly seem to have settled into it well.” Fiddleford said, stepping over the threshold, looking down the hallway. It was very clean, lovely pine flooring and walls, decorated with red patterned rugs. There was an umbrella stand and coat rack by the door, with a curved black walking stick hanging from one of the rungs of the coat rack.

“Yes, yes. It’s very homey here. Quite quaint. I’ve made it my own, but I hope you find it comfortable for your stay here. I’ve set you up one of my most spacious rooms, up in the attic. Lovely view, stained glass windows.” Ford led F down the hallway, walking past the living room, turning into the staircase, carrying F’s luggage up the stairs towards the attic. “I want you to feel at home here, as comfortable as possible.”

“It’s a lovely place you got here.” Fiddleford commented, his eyes following all the details as they walked through the house. He noted the bathroom and two bedrooms on the second floor as they passed it, heading further up to the attic. “What’s on the second floor?”

“I’ll give you a full tour once you’re all settled.” Ford replied, bringing them up to the top of the stairs, opening the door to the attic. “This is your room.”

Ford set the suitcase at the side of F’s bed, while his colleague looked around the bedroom. There was plenty of natural light seeping in through a triangular stained glass window, facing out to the back porch. Below was a plush red window seat set up next to a mahogany coffee table. To the far side of the room was a double bed with a basic wooden bedframe and floral quilt purchased from one of the town flea markets earlier in the week. There was a nightstand beside the bed with a vase of blue forget-me-nots picked from the forest, sitting in the water. On the opposite side of the room was a roomy work-desk, Ford’s idea of a compromise, giving F plenty of space to study and relax in his room, having the private study downstairs as a backup, hoping to appease them both this way.

Fiddleford looked around the room, impressed and silent, appraising it all, taking it in.

Ford straightened up, and watched F look about. “Well, do you like it?” Ford asked, and almost sounded nervous, hoping his friend would appreciate his efforts. “It’s not much, and if you don’t like anything we can change it –”

“No, no. It’s perfect. Really fancy actually.” Fiddleford laughed and scratched his chin. “I was expecting much smaller, just research accommodations. This is like my own Ritz here upstairs.”

“So you do like it.” Ford clapped, pleased. “Wonderful. I wanted to give you plenty of space of your own, I know it can sometimes get cramped in this house.”
“This is bigger than our old room in college.” Fiddleford remarked, walking over to sit on the bed, testing the springs. “Now that was cramped.”

“With the cracks in the walls.” Ford reminisced. “I think there was a family of rats living in the crack on my side of the room. Baby rats.”

“Didn’t you bring them food? I remember you sneaking cheese into the walls right before we graduated.” Fiddleford wagged his finger at Ford chidingly.

“I named those baby rats. Remember Larry?”

“Tell me there aren’t rats in these walls.” Fiddleford said flatly.

“Oh of course not.” Ford waved his hand. “And for the record, I didn’t feed them all the time.”

“I don’t know, that chunk of cheese was pretty large. Irradiated too, from what I remember.”

“Well, after all our complaints about the hygiene issues in the dorm, I figured I’d leave it as a present for our DA.” Ford recalled with a smug smile. “Something for Larry and his family, so he could go out into the world and prove my point about proper dorm hygiene to the DA. Mutated super-rats seemed like the perfect gift at the time.”

“You’re an odd one, Stanford Pines.” Fiddleford slapped his knee, and laughed. “Mad scientist in the making way back when.”

Ford puffed his chest out proudly, taking the joke as praise. “Made it out alright, if you ask me. I wonder where our DA is now?”

“Last I heard he was a mail clerk for Microsoft.” Fiddleford rubbed his chin, pondering.

“Just think, when this portal is finished, he’ll be in that mail room wishing he’d done better by us, while we write history.” Ford proclaimed idealistically.

Fiddleford drummed his fingertips on his knee. “About that writin’ history, I was wonderin’ when I’d get the chance to sit down and have a look at these blueprints of yours, run a few equations, just to see how far you’ve gotten with it already.”

“I assumed I’d help you settle in first, before we got down to business.” Ford replied, picking up on Fiddleford’s nervous gesture. “You haven’t even unpacked your banjo yet.”

“I just want a – a basic idea of what I’m gettin’ myself into here.” Fiddleford replied, looking at his knees instead of Stanford.

Fiddleford looked antsy, uncomfortable.

Pacing over to stand in front of Fiddleford, Ford crouched down onto his knees to look F in the eye, sincerity strong in his gaze, as he spoke plainly. “I know you’re nervous. I promise you, no mad science. You’ve nothing to fear, being here, lending your help with this. I’ve actually been looking forward to working on this with you. I recognise that you’re giving so very much up to take me up on my offer, and I am glad you’re here. I can walk you through everything if you want, all the information I have. Complete transparency. I recognise how important it is to be sure about this, considering what you’ve left behind.”

“I’d almost forgotten how honest you were.” Fiddleford admitted candidly. “In Palo Alto, working on patents, competing with designs – everything is cut throat. Nothing is what it seems. Even
working from my garage, I couldn’t have a decent discussion with a peer without having to encrypt my work all over again. It was a darn shame, made me feel like I could trust no one. Part of the reason why I took the deal was that I knew I could always trust you.”

“You were the first person I thought to call.” Ford said, aiming to bolster F’s security about the project. “I’d been making progress on my own of course, but I can’t do it all by myself.”

“Calling in the cavalry I see.” F joked.

“Well,” Ford began, rolling the words around in his mouth, testing to see if this reassurance felt real, borrowing someone else’s words. “Sometimes all genius needs is a little help from a friend.”

“How about genius helps me bring up the rest of the stuff from my car.” Fiddleford cracked a grin, feeling comfortable instantly. “My laptops and brickabrack are a mite heavier than this ol’ thing. You handled that suitcase like it was no problem. Must be something in the water here.”

“Oh, there are several things in the water here. I’ll bring you out to the lake sometime.” Ford snorted with amusement, and pushed himself up off the ground, stretching his legs.

“How’s the fishin’ out here?” F got up off the bed. “Any biters?”

“Oh, there’s biters.” Ford replied, remembering the floating head monster that chewed on his boat. “I’ll bring my harpoon, just to be on the safe side.”

F laughed loudly. “Only you would bring a harpoon on a fishing trip.”

Downstairs in the kitchen, Bill could hear the chummy laughter ringing throughout the house.

Just two long lost chums, reunited to chum about, pal around, rubbing elbows and other synovial hinge joints together, reminiscing about the good old days of post-puberty disappointment and the looming prospect of academic failure.

“Hah hah hah.” Bill mocked, putting on a feigned light airy voice as he tore off individual sheets of paper towel and dropped the paper towel on the tea spill on the ground. “You’re so funny Stanford. Let’s reminisce about our underwhelming academic experience together. So funny.”

As each paper towel fell, Bill watched the absorbent paper suck up the spilled sugary goodness off the floor. He dropped another paper towel and it floated to the floor to land next to the first towel, greedily sucking up the tea.

Another burst of laughter rang out from the attic, and Bill rolled his eyes. He ripped off the next square of towel a little forcefully, and dropped it on the diminishing puddle.

“Spare me.” He muttered, putting the towel down on the tabletop, considering his work done. The sodden paper towels still lay on the floor, but since the liquid had been absorbed, Bill had technically mopped up the spill. He sat down at the table and drummed his fingers along the side of his teacup, torn between drinking the rest and spilling it on the floor again just for want of something to do.

He hadn’t wanted to spill his tea, now he was a little turned off drinking the rest of it. He’d been distracted, caught in Sixer’s godawful orbit again. The waves of worship that man put off were more potent than the radiation of a million solar storms. It was getting ridiculous really.
Bill could hardly vouch for the longevity of this body if it took so little to overwhelm it. Prolonged time around Sixer was sure to run the vessel into the ground unless there was some way to ensure that the energy that flowed through the body didn’t fester and waste, burning Bill up from the inside out. Maybe it wouldn’t kill Bill, but it sure would overwhelm him, and laying on the ground, inoperable essentially, forced to endure the sheer raw energy that was amassing for an unending period of time was one fine way to go completely bonkers.

Bill had seen many beings who were completely bonkers in his time. He didn’t recoil from the thought of insanity, but he preferred to approach it on his terms. Being rendered incomprehensible due to energy overdose was not an outcome that was favourable or flattering.

Even in his old form, while he was a being of pure energy then, there were limits to what he could absorb. Energy cannot be created or destroyed, but it is transformative, and in his old form Bill would have been able to process and transform the energy into something new, but he wouldn’t have been able to keep it. It would move on, existing as something else in the universe.

*Call me greedy,* Bill thought, *but I’m not letting this go.*

So he needed to find a way to store the energy. It felt like investing, making the decision to capitalise on what Sixer was putting out, saving it for later like that. Bill was usually more of an instant gratification type of cosmic entity, but if he could figure out how to store this energy for later it would be the ultimate coup d'état.

Bill could hear Ford’s laughter mix in with the sounds upstairs, the clomping of footsteps coming down from the attic now. Amidst the laughter, Bill could hear Ford announce.

“And now. The grand tour!”

Bill decided to abandon his tea for now, and paced along the hall, towards the elevators.

He was playing the long game lately. Both with the matter of storing the energy and building the portal. It was a calculated move, but Bill never had any problems with calculations. He was practically made of them.

While he waited for the lift to ascend, Ford and Fiddleford clambered down the stairs, still chattering away loudly.

“I haven’t seen Pamela since that awful graduation dinner party. I wonder if she ended up committing to marine biology.”

“I saw her in Monterey just a year ago actually, when Pat and I took Tate to the aquarium. I think she was running tours there. I tried paying attention but she was wearing these neon things on her legs.”

“Leg warmers! Oh, don’t get me started.”

The problem with playing the long game though, was that you had to endure. A lot.

Bill pressed the lift call button a few more times, hoping he could sneak away unseen before he got roped into some asinine conversation.

No luck, unfortunately.

As they were coming down the stairs Fiddleford spotted Bill, his eyes widening as he took in Bill’s appearance. Apparently he wasn’t what the young mechanic expected, for whatever reason.
“Hello there!” Fiddleford waved, looking between Stanford and Bill for a moment.

“Oh, this is Bill.” Ford gestured towards Bill, then clapped Fiddleford on the back and walked him over to Bill. “Time for introductions.”

It was suddenly very crowded by the elevator.

Bill assessed Fiddleford with a cool look, his boredom and disinterest making him look somewhat aloof.

“Bill, this is Fiddleford. Fiddleford, Bill.” Ford smiled widely, happy to be bringing his two dearest friends together. “Bill’s been consulting on the project since day one.”

Consulting. Bill scoffed internally. There wouldn’t be a project without me.

“He’s been providing assistance with building the portal thus far.”

“So, you’re Stanford’s assistant?” Fiddleford blithely questioned.

“Assistant? I think not.” Bill couldn’t help his cutting reply, pointing at F imperiously. “You’re the assistant here. I’m just along for the ride.”

“Oh. Well, uh. What’s your area of study? What do you specialise in?” Fiddleford pressed.

“Answering irrelevant questions. Can I help you with anything else?” Bill asked with a jaunty forced smile, already over this whole ‘introductions’ shebang.

“Oh. Uh –“ Fiddleford flustered.

“Bill’s not the best at first impressions.” Ford said, raising his eyebrow at Bill’s sudden lack of friendliness.

“Says you.” Bill bit back childishly.

“Give it time though, and I’m sure you’ll both get along just fine.” Ford continued, his words more definitive and presumptuous than Bill would have liked.

Fiddleford gave Bill a nervous smile, and held his hand out for Bill to shake.

Reluctantly Bill took his hand, shaking with none of his usual zeal, and drawled, looking between F’s hopeful expression to Ford’s expectant approval. “I’m sure. Like a house on fire.”

Ford’s eyebrows drew down into a disapproving line on his forehead, though the double meaning of the words went right over F’s head.

“Don’t let me interrupt the grand tour.” Bill said, fake politeness forced out for the sake of good impressions. “I’m sure you two still have objects to move, agonising memories to reminisce over, décor to falsely compliment and rooms to invade. I’ll let you get back to that.”

Fiddleford blinked, puzzled by Bill’s choice of words, not yet used to how the Muse perceived things.

The elevator door chimed, and the doors opened. Before Bill could step in, Ford put his hand on Bill’s shoulder.

“You don’t want to join us later? We’ll be going over the blueprints.”
“You don’t need me for that.” Bill replied coolly. “Besides, I have something I need to look into.”

“Oh?” Ford asked curiously.

“Yes ‘oh’.” Bill turned and booped Stanford on the nose casually. “Get your arm out of the elevator. Don’t you have technology to lift?”

“Alright, alright.” Ford rubbed his nose and chuckled, stepping back so he wasn’t blocking the lift. “I’ll make lunch in about an hour or so.”

“I’m skipping lunch.” Bill replied.

“I’m making beef brisket sandwiches.”

“I’m not skipping lunch. Put one on the side for me.”

“You sure you don’t want to eat with us?” Ford pressed, trying to rope Bill into socialising.

Bill casually pressed the door close button, looking at his bare wrist as the elevator doors began to close. “Wow, is that the time already, can’t talk, I’ve got bigger fish to fry. Good BYE!”

Bill’s yelled farewell timed perfectly with the elevator doors closing on Stanford’s sceptical face.

Fiddleford looked between the closed door and the strangely amused and exasperated expression Ford wore.

“I’m guessing English isn’t his first language?” Fiddleford guessed hesitantly.

“You don’t want to know how many languages he speaks.” Ford replied, smiling wryly. “His genius is as unfathomable as he is sometimes. Ah well, let’s go unpack your car.”

Down in Ford’s private study, Bill had set up a circle of candles and prisms, relying on ritual to augment his latest trip into the mindscape. He sat with his legs crossed, assuming the meditative pose he had in the cemetery, with his fingers arranged into an upside-down triangle. He needed to concentrate for what he was about to do, if he was to successfully make his presence in the mindscape more tangible and effective.

Bill took a deep breath.

He closed his eyes.

Opening his eye once more, Bill materialised refreshed and whole in his original form, floating comfortably within the roiling infrastructure of the nightmare realm. Patting himself down, feeling his bricks and edges again, straightening his bowtie and fingering the brim of his hat, Bill felt put together enough to extend his energy out past himself, searching for the person he was looking for.

There.

Dematerialising, Bill teleported into the middle of a warzone in a particularly underdeveloped aquatic quadrant of the multi-verse, looking through a cityscape on the waterfront, razed with pink flames.
“NO ONE SNEAKS UP ON – oh Bill, it’s just you.” Pyronica released the ball of flames she had been ready to fling at her would be assailant, dropping her aggressive pose immediately.

“It’s just you? I go to all this trouble just to visit –“

“Yeah yeah, you could have picked a better time? It’s a massacre here right now.” Pyronica gestured to the dying citizens of the quadrant, their scaly bodies crisping under Pyronica’s heat.

“Well aren’t you glad the cavalry’s here?” Bill gestured to himself with his thumb, closing his eye.

“Seriously?” Pyronica blinked at Bill for a moment, before she began to dance excitedly on the spot. “SERIOUSLY? It’s been FOREVER!”

“It hasn’t been THAT long.” Bill waved his hand dismissively, though deep down he oozed approval. It was always nice to know when you’ve been missed.

“Yes it has! You and me, side by side, kicking ass and taking names!” Pyronica squealed with glee. “Oh, and Kryptos.”

“What?” Bill narrowed his eye, though really he shouldn’t be surprised Kryptos was where he assigned him to be.


As though summoned by the mere mention of his name, Kryptos emerged from behind one of the overturned boats on the shore.

“Oh, hey guys. I didn’t know we were all hanging out – killing time, that sort of thing.” The compass laughed nervously, aiming to act casual. “So what are we doing?”

From the waves, a merperson; humanoid in appearance, covered in iridescent scales, frilled gills framing their face, three eyes staring boldly forward; mustered enough poorly timed courage to stand against his enemies while they were distracted, springing from the ocean, spear in hand, crying out.

“FOR THE GREAT AXOLOTL!”

Before he could even throw his spear, Bill finger-gunned at the unfortunate merman, and a gaping hole was blown through him, tearing his jaw right off, severing the top of his head from his body until it rolled down, a thin strap of flesh all that connected it to his neck. The merperson fell back into the water with a heavy splash.

Bill blew the smoke from the tip of his finger. “Harvesting.” He said in answer to Kryptos’ question.

“Today we are harvesting parts, specifically the eye! Rip out as many eyes as you can, right from the sockets. I don’t want them squished, like jam, I want the eye whole. And I want a whole lot of them.”

“Why do you want eyes?” Pyronica asked, clueless for the most part.

“What are you asking for?” Kryptos asked, slightly more savvy to the ways of the multi-verse.

Bill fixed Kryptos with an irritated look, but proceeded to answer Pyronica’s question anyway. “The eyes, my dear Pinky, are to pay for information from the most disgustingly covetous creature
I know, and that information, Kryptos, will lead us to the location of the most exclusive black market ever to dubiously exist this side of the inevitable entropy of the universe. If you work hard, or play hard depending on your perspective here, I may even let you tag along.”

Bill floated over to the merperson’s corpse and extended his arm long, reaching down to scoop the merperson’s eye out with an audible squelching noise. The first eye hovered in the air as Bill lazily scooped out the second, and then the third. He then turned to face Kryptos and Pyronica, the three eyeballs hovering in the air next to him.

“See, it’s not so hard. Why are you making that face buddy?” Bill watched Kryptos pull a sickened expression.

“Did you have to reach in like that? Couldn’t you just click and summon the eyes without touching them?”

“I could, but that would be cheating.” Bill shrugged. “And our greedy friend doesn’t accept eyes that you didn’t harvest with your own two hands.” Two more pairs of hands grew out from Bill’s sides, and he waved them cheekily. “Or four hands, but he doesn’t know that! What’s the matter Kryptos, you have two hands don’t you?”

“Well, yes, but –“

“Kryptos doesn’t like to get his hands dirty.” Pyronica rolled her eye, having had to put up with the compasses squeamishness for a while now.

“Is that so?” Bill narrowed his eye at Kryptos, who was now hastily back-tracking.

“She’s making me look bad, I’ve done nothing but get my hands dirty since setting foot on this wretched planet.” Kryptos huffed and crossed his arms. “I must have killed a dozen of these sad little water people already.”

“A solid dozen.” Bill slow clapped sarcastically. “Wow. Well, you know what they say about putting all your eggs in one basket. How’s your body count looking Pyronica?”

“I hit 250 corpses about an hour ago, and that’s just from today.” She replied smugly, preening when Bill bestowed genuine applause to her with his four hands.

“I just don’t understand why we’re doing this.” Kryptos interrupted the applause, looking quite distressed. “The raids on the time police, I understand, but these people have done nothing of consequence. They’re insignificant.”

“Wrong.” Bill’s triangular body buzzed, like a game show alarm, before returning to normal. “You think the Big Frilly doesn’t notice when his worshippers start dropping like flies? Do you know what that does, losing your followers like that? How deeply it can weaken you?”

“But the Axolotl doesn’t –“ Kryptos began.

“DON’T –“ Bill shouted thunderously, turning red, before calming down rapidly, softening his tone. “Don’t speak his name, Kryptos. Do you really want old Gills to come looking over here?”

“But you said he’d notice –“

“I said he’d notice losing worshippers, not us. And I’d like to keep it that way. At least for now.” Bill rubbed under his eye, surveying the desolation on the beach. “This planet is just one of the millions of planets filled with simple minded sentient beings devoted to Gills. Wiping out one
The tour of the house was infinitely enjoyable, interspersed with banter and catching up on each other’s lives since graduation. Ford respectfully decided to skip Bill’s room in the tour, taking his throwaway comment about invading private spaces to heart, though he had no such compunctions about showing off his own bedroom, and all of his academic trophies.

“I had more of them when I first arrived, but there was an … accident of sorts, and I had to throw a few out.” Ford explained, recalling Bill’s initial destructive rampage.

“Even as is, this is really impressive.” Fiddleford observed. “The fact that you threw some out as well, it puts my trophy wall to shame.”

“Oh, I doubt that. Didn’t you win the excellence in engineering award three years in a row?”

“I did.” F shrugged. “But I had to sell a few things when Pat found out we had Tate on the way. I didn’t need the trophies anyway, Pat said they were just taking up space.”

Ford thought that sort of statement was everything that was wrong with the institution of marriage. He remembered his own bitter disappointment having to throw out his precious awards. There were bite marks on his PHD certificates. He didn’t think he would ever forgive Bill for that, but somehow the Muse found his way back into Stanford’s good graces again and again.

The tour continued through the house, showing Fiddleford all the amenities, settling his
possessions in all the right places. By the time they were finally ready to talk business, Ford took Fiddleford down in the elevator to the basement laboratory.

“And this is where we make history.” Ford explained, ushering F through the elevator door first, showing him the set up for the lab.

The lab was split into two sections, an intermediary room where recording equipment relayed information onto a slow running computer set up on the desk, and the main room where the actual portal construction was underway.

Fiddleford made a beeline straight for the computer, looking over it all, peering under the desk to look at the hard drive.

“Not with this technology. This is a humdinger of a setup, it looks like an old TX-0 almost.”

“It is, I think.” Ford scratched his chin, trying to recall the model name. “A Tixo.”

“Transistorised computers are as obsolete as crackling in a pig farm.” Fiddleford chuckled. “Nobody uses transistors this large anymore. Everything’s microchipped now, getting smaller and smaller.”

“I thought they had a Tixo like this at MIT?” Ford questioned, frowning. That was how the salesman pitched it to him. Get a Tixo, like the ones they use at MIT.

“In 1956 maybe.” Fiddleford crawled out from under the desk and slapped the wood. “Your setup is seriously out of date. If this project is getting anywhere it’s long overdue for a total rehaul.”

“Hmm.” Ford nodded, looking over the old computer with fresh eyes. “Very well, let’s scrap it and start from the beginning again. You point me in the right direction, and we’ll go from there.”

“Are you sure? New tech will be expensive, if you want a processor large enough to power equations on the scale that you’d need, it would cost a lot.” Fiddleford had to clarify, well aware of how much even his own computers cost, let alone a set up on this sort of scale.

“Don’t worry about the cost.” Ford waved off his friend’s concerns, looking about the rest of the lab. “Tell me, what else would you change.”

Together Ford and Fiddleford poured over the lab, reassessing every inch of it, making a list on what should be modernised and how. Once a proper list of necessary updates was compiled, Ford arranged his preliminary notes on the initial blueprints out for F to read over.

While Fiddleford was reading, Ford headed upstairs to make lunch, stopping to clean the paper towels up off the floor (thank you Bill), putting together two sandwiches for himself and Fiddleford on one plate, and the beef brisket sandwich for Bill on another. Before heading back to the lab, he searched the house looking for Bill, not finding him in his room or any other part of the shack. His tea was still in the kitchen, cold now.

Assuming he was downstairs, clearly not in the lab, presumably in Ford’s private study, he took the plates of sandwiches into the elevator, pressing the button for level two while balancing the plates on his arm. Ford felt a little like a waiter in his own home, delivering room service to his very particular house guest. He was readying himself to make some sort of quip along those lines when the elevator doors opened into the study.

Expecting to see Bill reading, or defacing his journals, or playing with the globe, or drawing more pictures of himself, like Ford normally saw him doing when he spent time in the study with him –
Ford felt his words dry up in his mouth when he looked upon Bill’s current occupation.

His muse was sitting, cross legged, in the middle of the room, surrounded by a circle of candles and prisms, the items levitating in the air around him. His eyes were closed and his sleeves were rolled up, showing tattoos that were glowing gold. He had his fingers pointed into an upside down triangle, and he wore a look of vague, sleepy concentration.

Ford stood still, shocked, staring – long enough that the elevator doors began to close on him before he reached out and stopped them.

Pacing curiously into the study, Ford set the plate of sandwiches on top of a pile of books and stepped closer to Bill, examining him.

Bill’s breathing was even, he looked like he was sleeping peacefully, if not for his posture. His lashes were long and dark against his cheeks and his mouth was slightly open, breathing in and out.

Ford ducked under the floating circle of paraphernalia, careful not to knock the candles, not wanting to spill wax over the carpet. He crouched down in front of Bill, waving his hand in front of the muse’s face to see if he was awake enough to notice.

Bill didn’t move a muscle.

“Fascinating.” Ford murmured to himself, his eyes casting over every detail of his muses face, intrigued and amused by the bizarreness of it all.

He reached out and traced lightly over the glowing surface of Bill’s tattoos, watching his face to see if he would react.

Nothing. His muse seemed to be in a deep deep trance, barely registering anything.

Humming, considering, Ford traced over the lines of the tattoos again, focusing on how interesting he found them, how curious he was to know more about them, how flattering they looked on Bill, wanting to see if the Muse would respond to his worshipful thoughts like he had before.

A shiver ran down Bill’s back, all the way down his arms, but he kept his eyes closed, twitching like one would in their sleep.

Gratified by the fact that he could still pull a reaction like that out of Bill, Ford did it again, deliberately trying to pull a similar reaction out of his muse once more, wanting to see what it would take to draw Bill out of his trancelike state.

Bill’s arms twitched yet again, the shiver rolling over him once more.

Feeling bold, Ford reached higher now, bringing his hand up to Bill’s face, wanting to run his finger along the crest of Bill’s high cheekbone, brushing against his long long lashes.

His attraction and appreciation for his muse was oozing out of him, signalling his intent louder on a different spectrum than any noise or action would. Before he even touched Bill’s cheek, without opening his eyes, his muse spoke.

“Sixer, not now.”

“What are you doing?” Ford murmured, enthralled that he had managed to draw Bill at least partially from his trance.
“Important stuff.”

“Mmhmm.” Ford continued to watch his muse, wondering what it would take to get him to open his eyes. “I brought your lunch for you.”

“That’s great.” Bill said dismissively, breathing, trying to focus again.

When Ford didn’t move, still crouched in front of Bill, watching the muse meditating, Bill felt the need to add to that.

“Sixer. It takes a lot of effort to split my concentration like this, so if you don’t mind – amscray.”

“You’re telling me to amscray?” Ford chuckled, still watching his muse, enjoying the way his eyebrow twitched with the effort to keep his eyes closed.

“Now.” Bill emphasised.

Alright, alright.” Ford shrugged, and ducked back under the floating candlesticks to the other side of the circle. He reached down for the plate with his and F’s sandwiches on it, leaving Bill’s plate on the pile of books. “Food’s there.”

“Mmm.” Bill barely replied, already settling back into his trance again.

“Eat it before it gets cold.” Ford added, pressing the button for the elevator.

“Sixer, leave.” Bill huffed, his eyes still closed.

“I’m going, I’m going.” Ford laughed, and stepped into the elevator. The doors closed, and Ford wore a small amused smile on his face all the way down to the lab.

When he came out into the lab, F was sitting on the floor, still going over the paperwork. Ford paced over to sit down next to him, putting the plate of sandwiches between them.

Looking up from the notes, F took one of the sandwiches, thanking Ford, and the two of them ate in silence for a while, enjoying the beef brisket filling.

After finishing his sandwich, Fiddleford asked Ford a question. “Stanford?”

“Mmm?” Ford replied with a mouthful of food.

“The plans in these blueprints are complex. Unbelievably complex. Everything, from the chemistry, to the engineering, even to the computational coding, all of it is so advanced.” Fiddleford said, sounding slightly awed. “I’ve never seen anything like this before, but theoretically it’s all entirely sound. This is revolutionary. It brings new meaning to ‘ahead of its time’ really. It’s astonishing.”

“Mmrank rou?” Ford replied, chewing on his sandwich a little slower.

“What I’m fixin’ to know though, is, I know this is your project, related to your research and all. The handwritin’s yours, the working’s yours, everything. But I’m curious - did anyone else help you come up with this idea?” F asked tentatively, looking towards the ceiling, to where Bill presumably was, before looking back down at Ford.

Ford finished chewing and swallowed his food, pausing before answering. He debated whether he should tell F the full extent to which Bill had been helping him, how Bill had been his muse, his divine otherworldly inspiration through all of this, gifting him the knowledge from beyond the
stars, enabling him to achieve the greatness he was always capable of.

He wondered if F would even understand that, if he would assume then the whole idea was Bill’s, writing off Ford’s substantial involvement in formulating the plans, crediting the leaps of genius to Bill rather than crediting Ford for the project. He wondered also if that would lead to F questioning Bill more, looking to Bill to lead the project rather than Stanford, prioritising Bill’s opinion over his own when it came to how to proceed with things.

Part of Ford was still intending to hide Bill’s involvement, write it off as less than it was, since he couldn’t really claim credit for his achievement if it became public knowledge that he essentially summoned Bill from another dimension to help him finish it. History would write him off as a Faustian phoney, dabbling with things beyond mankind’s ken. Bill assured him he was to be the Man Who Changed the World, but with every action Ford questioned whether he was still on that path, worried every blip in the scheme would threaten that destiny, would take it away from him, like every other opportunity had been taken from him in his life.

If he managed to tell F about Bill’s help, he doubted he’d be able to express the truth without making it sound like he was wrapped up in some kind of dubious black magic, or that the years of seclusion had driven Ford insane. Bill would probably agree with F, just for a laugh, if that were the case.

If he told F that Bill had a hand in the plans, F might begin looking more closely at Bill, noticing his little quirks that were definitely inhuman. Ford knew F was a superstitious fellow, he didn’t want to make him paranoid, or scared of Bill. Not if he needed his help.

Settling on his answer, Ford dabbed at the corner of his mouth with a napkin. “No. All mine. Bill sometimes helps me check my equations, but other than that, everything you see is just an inspired stroke of genius.”

Fiddleford took a moment to process that, taking it in, before smiling and clapping Ford on the back. “You’ve come a long way since university, Ford. I always knew you had it in you. This work is incredible.”

Preening at the praise, Ford smiled contentedly. “Well, with hard work, anything is possible.”

Ford slid another stack of papers over to Fiddleford for him to quintuple check, privately counting the secrets he was beginning to amass, hiding things from his friend.

He thought to Bill upstairs, pondering over what the ‘important stuff’ was, and if Bill would ever tell him.

It seemed everyone was keeping secrets.

Ford still hadn’t told F about his relationship with Bill, whatever that was exactly. He barely even knew. He just knew that it was something more than the friendship it had started as, that it was something electric, dangerously addictive, and difficult to explain. A secret, at least for now.

Some secrets, however, are best kept that way.
It had been about one and a half months since Fiddleford moved into the shack to collaborate on the portal, and nearly four months since Bill had first been summoned into corporeal form.

The time had been passing quickly.

Within the first week living here, Ford took Fiddleford downtown to the local post office to place the orders for the new equipment to update the lab. While Ford was placing the order, Fiddleford was standing to the side watching his university buddy pull out his chequebook signing off on an exorbitant amount of money to pay for the technology and the labour to ship it here.

“I don’t get how Ford can throw this much money around.” F questioned, still boggled by his own offered salary on some level, never having been used to this sort of retainer. “Where is the money coming from?”

Bill stood next to Fiddleford, cracking open a tin of assorted holiday chocolates, the type grannies send as last minute presents when they shop at the post office. Ripping the plastic off the tin, and reaching in to unwrap the shiny paper from the individual chocolates, Bill stuffed a caramel into his mouth before looking up, realising that Fiddleford seemed to be speaking to him.

“Where is the money coming from?” Bill repeated the question, still chewing on his caramel, dropping the wrapper on the ground.

“He says he has a benefactor, but even then, this is an insane amount of money we’re talkin’ about. I just don’t get it.” Fiddleford puzzled. He still didn’t quite believe Bill was the mysterious benefactor, given how often he made Stanford pay for his food.

“Would you believe I’m a Nigerian prince?” Bill quipped with a chocolatey grin, remembering the online scam fondly. “And out of all the letters I sent out, only good old Sixer was brave enough to answer.”

Fiddleford gave Bill a dubious look, like he didn’t quite believe him but wasn’t entirely sure. “No you’re not.”

“It’s true.” Bill nodded convincingly, before calling out across the post office. “Hey Sixer, you believe I’m royal don’t you?”

“A royal pain in the ass.” Ford chuckled to himself, amused.

“See.” Bill looked back to Fiddleford, as though that just there had proved his point. If anything he only confused Fiddleford more, which Bill took as a private victory.

Over by the counter, Ford turned back over to clarify matters for F, but he was distracted after seeing Bill had grabbed one of the chocolate tins from the shelf, already opening it.

“Bill, you can’t just open that, it needs to be paid for.” Ford frowned at the Muse’s poor manners.

“You pay for it.” Bill scoffed, and continued unwrapping the little chocolates, dropping the wrappers on the floor carelessly.
“I’m sorry ma’am.” Ford turned back around to the unimpressed woman at the counter, pulling his wallet out again. “How much were the chocolates?”

Next week when the equipment arrived, Fiddleford spent the day installing the new setup downstairs in the lab, tweaking the machinery with some of his own designs, while Stanford inputted the data from his notes onto the new laptop F had given him, making digital copies of his work. They had moved the first desk across the room to make way for the new, sturdier metal desk that Ford had ordered to support the new machinery.

For all that Bill had been avoiding conversation with Fiddleford, he seemed inexorably drawn to spending time in the same room as Stanford, even if that meant enduring more of the legwarmer discourse.

While F worked to install the motherboard for the computer under the desk, Ford sat on the floor, resting his back against the old desk in the corner, typing away at the new laptop. Bill lounged on top of the old desk, reading through one of Ford’s journals, reclining in just the right spot that he could peer over Ford’s shoulder to see what he was typing.

“These extra keys make typing much easier Fiddleford.” Ford praised the keyboard’s design, impressed. “I never had much luck with computers. I preferred handwriting everything instead. Most keyboards aren’t built for the six-fingered man on the go. I really appreciate the way you’ve adapted this personal computer’s design to fit me.”

“Well what good’s a personal computer if it ain’t good for the person using it?” Fiddleford replied good naturedly from under the desk, still tweaking the circuit board. “I wanted Fiddleford Computermajigs to cater to all technology users. Six fingers, no fingers. I had a braille keyboard in one design, another stick shift sorta design for people with disabilities. I want to make technology accessible, so one day even my Pa can use one.”

“I don’t think I ever met your Pa.” Ford said absently while continuing to type.

“He fought back in WWII, was deployed in France for a while. Lost his right arm and became partially deaf from a grenade blast. I don’t think he approves all that much of me pursuing technology instead of enlisting.” Fiddleford explained, welding one last piece onto the circuit board. “Thinks I’m one of those Vietnam loving hippies for going to university instead of being conscripted like my brother.”

“You were approached for a government grant in third year, weren’t you?” Ford recalled, looking over to Fiddleford. “When the military were contracting on campus.”

“Would’a been a lot of money if I’d taken it.” Fiddleford agreed, coming out from under the desk, wiping the sweat off his brow. “Call me an idealist though, but I don’t much think designing weapons for the military counts as helping people.”

“I think you’ll find the definition of ‘helping people’ changes a lot depending on who you ask, and what they want from you.” Ford looked up from his computer, raising his eyebrow. “Most people just want to help themselves. I’m not surprised you turned them down though. You have a big heart.”

“Didn’t they approach you too? They would have.” F asked.

“I wouldn’t speak to them on principle.” Ford replied, turning his chin up. “Science should only be
turned to noble purposes. No matter how much nonsense schtick they talk about the good of the nation, no military contractor has ever truly cared about the advancement of our species.”

“That’s what I tried telling Pa.” Fiddleford grabbed a rag and wiped the oil from his hands from touching the machinery. “He’s always been a stickler for doing your duty to your nation. Very patriotic. A diehard confederate, even now.”

Wiping the last bit of oil from his wrist, he paused, looking up nervously to where Bill was lounging, feeling the need to clarify. “Not that I am. I know I got some habits from growing up on the hog farm, but that ain’t one I want to keep. Not ever.”

Ford followed Fiddleford’s line of sight up to Bill, who didn’t seem to notice their topic of conversation, still engrossed in his reading. It was when Ford looked at him that Bill broke away from his book, having a sixth sense almost for the scientist’s regard.

He turned his head, looking down to meet Ford’s gaze.

“What are we talking about?”

“He wasn’t even listening.” Ford explained to F, who seemed mildly distressed Ford’s partner would think him a racist.

“Yes I was.” Bill lied. “Whatever you’re doing, you’re doing it wrong.”

“Uuhh.” Ford reached up to pat Bill absently on the shoulder, happy to see that he was engaging socially, even if it was just to stir the pot. “Whatever you say.”

Considering the matter sorted, Ford looked down to continue his transcribing. Fiddleford watched the casual way his friend reached up to touch the other man, and tried not to imagine what his father would think about this whole arrangement. He wasn’t entirely sure what was going on between Ford and his strange special friend, but he was hoping he could show his support in little ways, so Ford didn’t have to tell him anything if he didn’t want to.

That’s what Pat told him to do, and what she did when her brother came out of the closet. Remembering how obstinate and unaccepting his father had been often gave Fiddleford motivation to be better.

Fiddleford had zoned out there for a moment, lost in thought, but when he came to, he realised Bill was still staring at him.

Fiddleford squirmed under the assessing look Bill was giving him. Those yellow eyes of his could sometimes be quite unnerving. Before Fiddleford could open his mouth again to make conversation or apologise, Bill spoke sharply.

“Don’t you have more work to do?”

Jumping to it, somewhat nervous around the other man, F ducked back under the desk to continue installing the new system. He tried not to look up from his task too much after that, finding Bill’s surveillance unsettling, though when he did glance up from his work a couple of times, he saw Bill reaching down from the table, his hands draped down to rest on Ford’s shoulders, whispering alterations to the coding in Stanford’s ear.
Bill sat at the table in the kitchen, drumming his fingers restlessly on the wood. Stanford was cleaning up after dinner, and Fiddleford was in the living room, talking to Patricia on the telephone.

“You have to admit, the new computers are going to speed completion time up by a substantial amount.” Ford spoke, washing a glass in the warm soapy water in the sink.

“These computers are still agonisingly slow comparative to what they could be.” Bill rested his chin on his palm, watching Ford’s back. “Talk to me when your internet speed runs at 1010 KBs per second.”

Ford turned around, frustrated with his muse’s impatient demeanour. “If you know a better way to do this, why aren’t you saying so? You had no issues sharing your blueprints with me.”

“It’s not my issue.” Bill rolled his eyes. “There’s only so much advanced technology I can sneak past the radar before things start getting serious.”

“Well, what does that mean?” Ford leaned back against the sink, putting the glass on the draining board.

“It means, I’m only prepared to get serious for you.” Bill went back to drumming his nails against the surface of the table. “McGucket’s got enough know-how of his own to make something workable for us. I’m not prepared to pull him out of the fire if he gets his hands on too much information putting him ahead of his time. I don’t like serious.”

Ford watched Bill make hyperactive beats against the wood with his fingers, ever curious about the world his muse inhabited sometimes, trying to figure him out. He found it absolutely fascinating.

“So that’s what you do, I assume. Granting knowledge to one bright mind once every century or so. Only one. Are the rules really so rigid?”


“But you won’t enlighten Fiddleford like you do with me.” Ford presumed. “Yet you seem to be behind every scholar in human history who ever reached academic conclusions that were ‘ahead of their time’.”

“Tell me Sixer.” Bill crossed his arms on the tabletop. “Do you think obeying a linear timeline is fair?”

“I didn’t think there was another option, honestly.” Ford replied, dunking another plate in soapy water, sponging the leftover food off it.

“Think of all the lives that could have been saved.” Bill said, appealing to Sixer’s morality. “The wars that could have been averted. The advances in medicine that could have prevented epidemics, influenzas. Ignorance. All of the things that could have been known sooner, if you didn’t have to wait for it. Knowing how things were, and how things are now, can you really justify just letting things be?”

“You’re proposing that time doesn’t have to be linear.” Ford surmised.

“It doesn’t. Who says it does? Who decides how anything is supposed to be, for that matter? And why should we listen to them?” Bill continued. “Time, space, reality, existence. If you learned that it wasn’t just how things are, but that someone was calling the shots there – would you think that order would be fair?”
“No, I suppose not.” Ford said, putting the clean plate on the drainer. “So then, following what you’re saying, then there is someone calling the shots when it comes to maintaining a linear timeline, and you don’t want to draw their attention.”

“You want to know the best way to avoid drawing attention to yourself Sixer?” Bill grabbed the salt shaker from the table, showing it to Ford, before closing his right hand around it. He then clicked with his left hand, and when he opened his right hand again, the salt shaker was gone. “Draw their attention elsewhere. Get them looking the other way.”

“You just used your magic to banish the salt.” Ford pointed out churlishly.

“But you didn’t see me do it, did you?” Bill got up from the table and walked over to the sink, until he stood in front of Ford. He put his hands on Ford’s chest, to show him that he wasn’t holding the salt (or perhaps he simply wished to feel Ford’s chest) and then reached up behind Ford’s ear and clicked, the salt shaker materialising back into Bill’s hand.

Ford seemed somewhat stunned, not by the magic, he was used to that by now, but by Bill’s bold contact, feeling those slender hands on his chest, warming him.

“It’s basic sleight of hand.” Bill explained, vanishing the salt shaker again, sending it back to the table. “You see what I want you to see.”

“Interesting.” Ford commented, leaning into Bill’s space subconsciously. “And the reason I can see these futuristic designs but Fiddleford can’t?”

“Maybe you’re just special.” Bill grinned and smoothed out the fabric of Ford’s shirt.

“Hmmm.” Ford hummed, mollified by that response. He wiped his wet hands with a tea towel, and, feeling bold, brought his hands up to rest on Bill’s waist, pulling him closer. “It seems counter-productive, but I find I rather like that.”

Bill made a pleased noise and stood, content to bask in Sixer’s fond expression, resting his hands on the scientist’s chest possessively. He could feel the power building in the scant space between them, prickling heat in Bill’s face and sparking a warmth in his belly that was beginning to build. The point where the heat would have been uncomfortable for Bill before passed, and Bill had taken to almost relishing these moments of over sensitised agony, feeding on the power Ford was supplying. When Ford began to rub circles with his thumb on Bill’s hipbone, however, the heat became excessive.

Sucking in a sharp breath, Bill lifted his hands from Ford’s chest and leaned back. “Too much.”

“And so soon.” Ford reluctantly removed his hands from Bill’s waist, allowing the muse to step back. “Do you think unbinding another brick will help?”

“If you’re offering, I’ll take it.” Bill replied instantly. “But will it help? That’s debatable.”

He peered out the kitchen door to ensure Fiddleford was still on the phone to his wife, looking the other way, before he lit blue flames in his hand, and held the fire behind his back again.

“You can’t exactly feel out your powers with F around.” Ford considered, and leaned back against the sink, resting his hands on the edge of the counter to keep them there.

It was too tempting to reach out to Bill again, especially seeing that he had driven his muse to burning off steam once more, something that delighted and tested Ford immensely. It tested his patience and his restraint. He wanted to touch his muse so badly. Sometimes he almost thought it
would be worth the blistered fingers to rile Bill up like that, but it would be too difficult to explain his injuries to F. No doubt Bill would heal him if that were the case, but being repeatedly burnt somewhat snuffed Ford’s ardour.

“I’m working on a solution.” Bill replied succinctly, flexing his hand and killing the flames.

“And that is?” Ford pressed, curious if this had anything to do with the ‘important stuff’ Bill had been pursuing when he wasn’t overseeing the work on the portal.

“Bye bye Patricia. Bye bye Tate. Daddy loves you.” Fiddleford’s voice rang out from the other room, ending his phone call with his family.

Bill looked between the doorway, and his human, who stood, leaning back against the sink, his sleeves rolled up, showing his shapely elbows, washing up water splashed on his shirt, his chest broad and oddly appealing. He considered Ford’s chin again, and the shape of his face, and how much he wanted to run his hand through Ford’s brown hair without frying the hair follicles into ash.

“You’ll see.” Bill said, short and sweet, hoping his plans would bear fruit sooner rather than later.

“Oh god it’s hot.” Ford complained, wiping the sweat from his brow.

He sat in the living room in front of the electric fan, though apparently it’s stalwart efforts weren’t enough to assuage the heat, as Ford was also fanning himself with a handful of research papers, sweating up a storm.

Fiddleford was also sweating, wearing a rustic looking pair of overalls and a singlet, resting his laptop on top of a makeshift ice box, trying to keep the computer from overheating.

“Hotter than a hog’s breath in May.” He concurred. “It got hot like this in California sometimes, but this is just awful.”

“It’s almost Halloween, shouldn’t it be fall by now?” Ford continued to complain, grousing at the weather. “Fall weather, chilly evenings, pumpkins, sweaters?”

Bill rounded the corner, walking into the living room, eating ice cream from the tub. “What’s this about Halloween now?”

“Quick, give me that.” Ford reached for the tub of ice cream. Bill stepped back, curling protectively around the tub. Ford rolled his eyes. “I’m not going to eat it.”

Spooning out a large chunk of the ice cream first, melting the frozen dairy in his mouth, he passed the open tub of ice cream over to Ford and the young scientist pressed the plastic to his cheek, rubbing the tub of ice cream over his forehead.

“So much better.” Ford groaned, feeling the cool plastic against his skin.

“You’re gross IQ. Gross and sweaty.” Bill observed, watching his human rest his forehead against the tub. It was cute, in a weird thermo-regulatory way. After about a minute of indulging his Ford watching hobby, he sat down on the coffee table behind Ford and scooped another spoonful of ice cream out of the tub, not removing it from Ford’s forehead.
“You know, from here it looks like you’re eating his brains.” Fiddleford joked lightly. Bill looked at Ford, just as the scientist tilted his head up, catching his eye. Both were recalling their ill-fated night at the drive-in movies, perhaps more fondly than they should have been. Ford smiled a little self-indulgently.

“You didn’t pencil any brain eating in the itinerary for the day, did you?”

“Must have slipped my mind.” Bill replied casually, licking the back of his spoon. “It’s not too late though, if you change your mind.”

“I’ll pass.” Ford chuckled, and turned to press the ice cream tub against his cheek.

Fiddleford observed how comfortable the two men were around each other. At times it seemed as though Ford and Bill were speaking their own language, so much of what they discussed went over Fiddleford’s head when they deigned to share it with him. Though Bill had (apparently) only been staying in the shack two months longer than Fiddleford had, he already seemed more at home here than one would think possible.

“What’s this about Halloween?” Bill repeated, nudging Ford with his knee.

“The people in this town are so crazy about it, they do it twice, you know. They have Halloween proper in October, and they throw some sort of homage to it in the middle of summer.” Ford explained.

“Oh. Summerween.” Bill said, tapping the top edge of the ice cream tub with his spoon, as though he knew what the occasion was all along.

“What’s Summerween?” Fiddleford asked, wiping sweat from the back of his head. “They don’t have that down in California though you’d think they would’ve. Summer’s like a Californian national holiday sometimes.”

“It’s mostly for children.” Ford turned around, resting his elbow on Bill’s leg as he spoke to Fiddleford. “Though the adults all seem to get involved. It’s basically a summer themed Halloween knock off. Children carve jackolanterns out of watermelons, and wear costumes, collecting candy. It’s a Halloween variant with none of the cultural or mystical significance.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure about that.” Bill added, scooping more ice cream out of the tub resting on Ford’s cheek. “An event doesn’t have to have historical significance to give it cultural significance and potency. That sort of potency can awaken all sorts of things. Mass celebration creates tradition which creates mythologies, which opens doorways to all sorts of enacted creations, roaming about in the streets.”

“Anthropology!” Fiddleford exclaimed, having been trying to guess Bill’s preferred area of study for the past week or so, having had minimal luck so far. “It’s got to be anthropology.”

“Sure, why not.” Bill said noncommittally, shrugging his shoulders.

“It’s not anthropology is it?” Fiddleford’s excitement dimmed, now certain he guessed wrong.

“I’ve studied lots of things, humans included.” Bill conceded, staying vague enough not to give anything away. Looking down at Sixer, he yanked the tub away from the other man. “Are you done yet? You’re going to melt it all before I get to.”

“It’s going to melt anyway.” Ford protested, but let Bill take the tub back. Cool enough to think
clearly now, Ford rubbed his chin, considering. “I’m curious about these Summerween mythologies. Perhaps if we head into town, do some fieldwork, maybe we can see one of these creations in action. Could be a new anomaly to study.”

“This is the kind of fieldwork you’ve been off doing in that journal of yours, isn’t it?” Fiddleford questioned, having flicked through the journal once or twice. “Honestly, I almost didn’t believe half of the things in that book. You really think you could spot an anomaly just downtown. In suburbia, not even the forest.”

“What have we got to lose either way?” Ford said decisively. “Anything’s better than melting in this heat. We can head downtown, do some investigating on the local lore, make some notes, and return when night falls to see if anything emerges.”

“Sure, why not make notes on Fright Night 2.0?” Bill scoffed, sounding direly unimpressed with what passes for a ‘fright night’ these days.

“Tarnation, this isn’t gonna be like one of those spooky movies, is it?” Fiddleford laughed nervously.

“If we’re lucky.” Ford grinned in reply, and got up off the floor. “Let’s clean up and head downtown. Canvasing the local legends can help us kill a little time.”

Ford looked so hopeful and excited, suddenly roused from his heat induced stupor at the prospect of something new to study. Transcribing notes he had already written was dull work, especially when Ford’s routine had gotten used to regular hikes into the forest to catalogue something new with Bill every other day. It was clear he was antsy, having spent too much time in the house.

He looked down to Bill, still sitting on the coffee table, stirring the remnants of the melted ice cream. “Did you want to join us?”

“Asking idiots idiot questions is your hobby, not mine.” Bill raised his eyebrow, noting how Ford’s enthusiasm drooped a little at his dismissal. “But, if you tackle the boring bits, come back when it gets dark to pick me up. I wouldn’t mind going tricking with you.”

“It’s called trick or treating.” Ford clarified.

“I know that.” Bill looked back down to the gluggy remnants of ice cream in the tub, considering the conversation over.

“Well, excellent!” Ford cheered, happy to have his muse joining him, despite semantics. He waved his friend up off the ground. “Let’s go Fiddleford.”

Fiddleford peeled himself off the floor, sweat sticking to him. “I’ll shower this off and get changed first, if that’s alright.”

“Oh, of course. You take the first shower.” Ford said, following Fiddleford out the room and up the stairs.

Bill tipped the ice cream tub on its side and guzzled the melted contents, before walking back to the kitchen and dropping the empty tub in the bin. Sixer had words with him about things going in bins.

Listening to the thud of footsteps upstairs, Bill considered what he would do with the next few hours of relative peace and solitude. He could read a book, watch TV, enjoy the incessant sunshine, practise his illusions, set some illegal fires, or maybe make the creatures of the forest to
fear him as they should.

All good ideas for another day, but not this one.

Walking upstairs, closing himself off in his room this time, Bill clicked and summoned the prisms and candles from the study up to his room, levitating them into place in a circle around his bed. With another click he closed the door and dragged a chair under the door handle to keep it locked.

Climbing on top of his pile of blankets, settling in - Bill got comfortable, closing his eyes while the candles in the circle lit one by one.

He fell asleep with his fingers tented into the inverse triangle, with purpose.

He had important stuff to do.

Kryptos swallowed anxiously, second guessing his desire to take Bill up on his offer to tag along. Drifting through the obsidian caves deep in the labyrinth of caverns dug into the black moon drifting around an absent sun, far in the dimension of eternal night; the only thing lighting their path was the flames that licked up Pyronica’s legs, and Kryptos was trying politely not to look at her legs.

“When you said ‘tag along’ I thought you meant to the market, not here.” The compass sulked, not liking the way his reflection warped in the shiny black stone walls of this particular tunnel. It was incredibly eerie seeing himself stretched out like that, but the worst thing was that no matter which tunnel he walked through, and how the light hit it, in every mirrored surface his reflection was missing his eye. A hollow socket stared back at him. It made looking at Pyronica’s legs far preferable.

“You won a prize, Kryptos. Not a shortcut. Besides, what value does one trip to the markets have when the market’s location changes every 38 hours?” Bill shot back, holding his own handful of flames out like a torch. “If you’d prefer to con yourself out of your prize, by all means, go ahead. I just figured someone as ambitious as you would want to see the cow the milk you’re drinking comes from.”

“The cow?” Kryptos squinted, trying to decipher whether this figure of speech was a clue or just another abstract metaphor.

“Actually, maybe don’t mention cows around this guy. It’s a bit of a sore spot for him.” Bill added reluctantly. It would have been funnier to leave Kryptos ignorant, but he still needed the compass intact, physically and mentally. “Also maybe don’t mention peacocks. Or look him in the eye.”

Kryptos looked at his own eyeless reflection again and shuddered. “Anything else?”

“Maybe just don’t talk at all.” Bill spun around to watch Kryptos looking into the black glass. “Let me do the talking.”

“You got it boss.” Kryptos mumbled, looking away from the wall, not really enjoying his prize so far.

A seismic rumbling sounded from the end of the tunnel, shaking the walls, as the groan of the tunnel’s occupant echoed out.
Kryptos cowered behind Pyronica, and even the flaming cyclops cowered a little behind Bill, which was comical to see considering he was far smaller than she was.

“Bill, what was that?” Pyronica asked with a cautious quaver in her voice.

“Oh good, he’s awake.” Bill said cheerfully.

The creature at the end of the tunnel roared, the sound rattling stones from the cave walls, vibrations from the sound shaking Kryptos’ core molecules with a frightening intensity. He felt like he was about to disintegrate.

Bill was holding on to the edge of his hat, having been blown back a little by the sheer force of the creature’s growl. Once the air settled, he tapped against the obsidian wall with his cane, a crisp chime ringing out once.

There was silence, before a cacophony of shrieking, chittering noises sounded out, eye-bats flying out of the tunnel in a frantic flurry of wings. Whatever the eye-bats were fleeing from was coming this way, and it wasn’t long until the tunnel’s occupant stood, towering over the three cosmic visitors, snarling low in the back of his throat.

“Cipher.” The primordial giant stood, presumably scowling down at them. It was hard to tell exact facial expressions, as every inch of the creature’s body was absolutely covered in eyeballs of all shapes and sizes, and every eyeball was staring, unblinking at the intruders. “I thought I made clear you weren’t welcome here.”

“Whoa ho.” Bill chuckled, ignoring the giant. He snaked out his arm, stretching it long, to give one of the hovering eye-bats a friendly scratch behind it’s wing. “I’ve missed these little fellas. You know if you ever want a pet sitter, I’d be happy to take the little guys off your hands for you.”

“Oh joy, a social visit. And after all these millennia.” The colossal giant rolled a vast majority of his many eyes, and knelt down to recline lazily against the wall of the cave until his face was closer to his guests. Kryptos presumed it was his face anyway. So much for not looking him in the eye. Bill’s idea of a joke, probably.

“It’s like a puppy! Can I keep him? Just one? Please?” Bill wheedled, bringing one of the eye-bats close, cuddling it lovingly.

“No. Get your hands off my eye-bats. I thought I chased you out of here before Bill Cipher. Always fleeing from what you do not want to hear. Now you’re back.” The giant propped himself up on his elbows, watching them. “And slumming it on Earth, no less. Typical.”

“Someone’s grumpy today. Were you napping? How many eyes did I wake up this time?” Bill ribbed the giant in a sing song voice, wagging his finger, treating the colossus like a geriatric old man.

Obviously these visits were once a regular occurrence, given how the two talked to one another. There was a familiarity there, but it was brittle, broken by the passage of time. Regardless Bill and the giant seemed to fall back into those familiar rhythms.

“All of them, with your blatant clamouring.” The giant rumbled, unimpressed. “I should hope that you being here means you’ve at least brought me a fitting tribute.”

The largest of the giant’s eyes were focussed on Pyronica and Kryptos now, looking beyond Bill. “Though if you’ve only brought me two eyes, the information you’ll receive will be the exact date and time of your death, which would be imminent if I discover you’ve woken me for nothing.”
“What kind of cheapskate do you think I am?” Bill shot back. “Actually, don’t answer that.”

“Three eyes then?” The giant’s face parted, a long purple tongue slithering up from the gash in its face where his mouth was, presumably. Leaning closer, the giant’s tongue ran over his face, licking his own eyeballs hungrily. “I’ve long been wanting to add your eye to my collection.”

“Hilarious.” Bill barked out a laugh, before narrowing his eye at the greedy god. “Keep dreaming. Or don’t, I guess. How’s that insomnia working out for you?”

“Just two eyes, is it? I must say, I like the size of hers.” The giant nodded at Pyronica, and she frowned, stepping a little closer to Bill.

“They’re both off the menu, Argos.” Bill said sternly, increasing his size slightly to put across his point.

“So friends then, are they?” Argos, the giant’s voice became saccharinely mocking. “How unlike you.”

Bill’s patience for feigning pleasantry seemed to have dried up rather quickly. He clicked, and the thousand and one eyeballs collected in the past month materialised, summoned from one location to another, to hover overhead. “Enough chit chat. I want the location of the Cryptix-Noire Warping Black Market for the next 38 hours. I came to barter, and depending on how helpful you are, Argos Panoptes, you can have the lot.”

Argos was salivating, spit dripping from his dangling tongue, a portion of his eyes trained on the floating mass of eyeballs, enraptured. “Making demands. Such arrogance. I will have them now.”

“Uh uh uh.” Bill wagged his finger and put up a force field around the eyeballs. When Argos reached out to grab them, he was repelled by the force field, the eyes on his hand all blinking painfully. “That’s not how this whole barter system works, buddy.”

“You want information?” Argos cradled his hand, scowling down at the floating triangle. “Perhaps your friends do too. Stories of a dimension that no longer exists, and a being who was the lowest of the low, his value comparative filth to his kin.”

“You’re losing out pal.” Bill said, though his voice was a shade strained now, unwilling to have these stories told in front of his peers. “My offer of 1001 eyes will only last for so long.”

“His ambition led to the destruction of all he knew, and he had the gall to then turn to the universe, to learn more.” Argos continued, his voice gravelly, rumbling, shaking the room. “And so he stumbled upon my cave.”

“For an all-knowing entity, you have an astonishing lack of self-preservation.” Bill commented dryly.

He was regretting his decision to bring Kryptos along, to give him this little prize. He knew he could trust Pyronica with this sort of information, but he couldn’t be sure Kryptos wouldn’t turn this against him. Every other creature in the multi-verse who had any knowledge of who Bill had been before he broke free from his old dimension had been meticulously ended one by one. He made sure of it. And right now he was itching to make some eyeball marmalade out of the old giant.

“Ahh.” Argos sighed, and the air gusted about the cavern like a gale, buffeting the eye-bats left and right. “Can you blame an old fool like me for his fond nostalgia? It’s not every day my agonisingly irritating protégé returns to darken my doorway.”
“Protégé?” Kryptos murmured to himself, astonished, piecing it together.

“Yes, little freemason.” Argos scratched the back of his head with an eye covered finger, and rolled his shoulders. “You think omniscience is a given, to anyone with an eye for it? No. You have to know where to look if you truly wish to see.”

“Blah, blah, blah.” Bill interrupted, impatient. “Can it, old man. I’m here for the market’s location, not for you.”

“The day you ‘come for me’ will be a dismal day indeed, not that it will ever happen.” Argos scoffed.

“Last I checked you were a watcher, not an oracle.” Bill squinted up at Argos. “Or do you think nobody will kill you?”

“Another Odysseus joke. Hilarious.” Argos pursed his eye covered lips sourly. “You know I knew Polyphemus personally, he was an old friend.”

“And how about Goliath? You know I’m rather partial to that story.” Bill feigned examining his nails in a bored way, bandying threats about so casually with his old tutor.

“Oh, put your slingshot down.” Argos waved his hand dismissively at Bill. “I thought this was a social visit.”

“It is.” Bill turned back to look at Kryptos, who still looked shit scared by the giant, though more curious than terrified now. “Half of these eyeballs were collected by Kryptos here. I figured, since he came all this way, that’s payment enough for him to ask you a question.”

Kryptos’ eye widened in surprise. He was astonished. He didn’t expect Bill to extend this gift to him, especially not when the gift of asking an all knowing entity a single question could be used to expose Bill’s vulnerabilities. Though asking the weaknesses of the triangular god while standing right next to him was a faux-pas that would get him incinerated in the dimension of eternal screams faster than you could say ‘bad move’. Regardless it was a generous offer. Kryptos realised that this was Bill trying to extend some sort of trust between them, that the real prize was allowing him to accompany him, to ask the question freely. He was impressed.

Argos Panoptes turned some of his eyes to face Kryptos, and considered the compass closely.

“Very well, I will humour you a question, little freemason.”

Pondering his question for a few moments, Kryptos was silent, bringing a hand to his mouth, weighing the gain of every outcome. Finally he spoke.

“How may I best increase my power?”

Some of Argos’ eyes flickered to Bill for a moment, before answering. “You continue your current course.”

Mollified, Kryptos nodded, and smiled up at the colossal being.

Argos’ face split again, revealing a rotten purple mouth lined with serrated steel teeth, eyeballs poking out of the gaps in his gums, smiling back.

Kryptos soon stopped smiling.

“And you, little Cyclops. Did you collect a portion of these eyes too?” Argos turned to Pyronica,
licking his eyeballs again.

“For Bill.” Pyronica admitted, mustering her courage to look Argos in his largest eye defiantly. “My question is his.”

“So loyal.” Argos crooned. “And such a pretty eye. A shame that it’s wasted on my ex-pupil.”

Pyronica glared at the eye-covered behemoth, and stood more solidly behind Bill.

“How ‘bout you cut the crap.” Bill materialised his cane and twirled it around, before pointing it at the floating eyeballs in the forcefield above. “And tell me now where the market will be in the next 38 hours, and maybe your little tribute here won’t go up in smoke.”

“You wouldn’t dare. I get at least half of those precious little morsels for humouring the compass. We had a deal.” Argos growled, baring his steel teeth at the prospect of losing his new collectors’ items.

“I didn’t shake on it.” Bill shrugged, and a swath of blue flames raced along the edge of the forcefield. “So the choice is yours, all or nothing. Fancy the odds! Where will the market be held?”

“Impudent upstart. I should have killed you when I had the chance.” Argos snarled, his anger shaking the walls of the obsidian labyrinth, startling the eye-bats. They began shrieking fearfully in response to his ire.

“Gee, if I had a nickel for every time I heard that one.” Bill said sarcastically, remaining relatively unfazed by the giant’s tantrum. “Tick tock. If you don’t want the eyeballs, fine. I’ll just -”

Bill let the force field waver, flames licking up the edge of it, just to see the giant lurch forward, greedy for the eyeballs.

“No.” He said hoarsely, his hand just falling short of the flames. “I want them. Your market will be parallax deep within the Coma cluster, on the rim of the supermassive black hole for the next 38 hours. It only arrived there 20 minutes ago, you have 2260 minutes left to access it before it’s next warp.”

Bill considered Argos’ sincerity for a moment, before falling back on the old god’s teachings, searching in his mind’s eye for the Coma cluster himself. It was there. Good.

Clicking, Bill extinguished the flames, leaving the forcefield intact.

“You could have searched for the market yourself.” The old god grumbled sourly.

“And look through every blip in the multi-verse for it? No thank you. That’s WAY too much effort.” Bill rolled his eye. “Unlike some people, I have more important things to do than just sit in a cave and stare at boring all day.”

“I’m aware of what you’re currently trying to do.” Argos replied somewhat sassily.

Ignoring the implication there, Bill carried on. “I just needed you to point me in the right direction, and you did that, so you can have these eyes as a gesture of goodwill, despite everything.”

“I’ll take them.” Argos held his hand out impatiently.

“Then our business here is concluded.” Bill said definitively, ushering Kryptos and Pyronica closer to him, looping his arms around them. “But someday I’m coming back for the puppy.”
“They’re not puppies.” Argos growled.

The forcefield around the eyeballs disintegrated, and the giant lumbered over to catch the eyeballs as they rained down, shoving handfuls of them into his mouth.

Holding onto Pyronica and Kryptos, Bill teleported them both away before they could watch the giant truly begin to feast.

Materialising back to the safety of the Nightmare Realm’s roiling landscape, Bill let go of Pyronica and Kryptos and straightened his hat.

“Well that was eye-opening.” Bill said, his humour dry.

“At least we know where the market will be.” Pyronica replied, optimistically looking for the bright side of that traumatizing encounter.

“There is that. Gather the whole gang. In 10 hours we’re all going shopping in the Coma cluster. I want Teeth, Pacifire, Eight-Ball, Xanthar, Keyhole, heck invite Amorphous Shape even. Maybe not Hectorgon.” Bill listed. “I think he’s banned from the Coma cluster for indecent exposure.”

“Yay!” Pyronica cheered, clapping her hands together. “Shopping!”

“I’ve gotta ask –“ Kryptos started.

“Do you?” Bill looked upwards, sighing.

“Were you really Argos Panoptes’ protégé? The guy invented the title ‘all-seeing’, the panopticon! He taught you?” Kryptos enthused.

“He taught me, yes.” Bill admitted reluctantly. “He also tried to rip my eye out and kill me, so you can see why we parted ways.”

“Even so, that’s amazing. Argos Panoptes’ pupil!”

“Ex pupil.” Bill clarified, and began to float away, already over this whole unpleasant interlude. “He never liked me. Not that I care. He’s got a new pupil now anyhow.”

Bill began to dematerialise himself, readying his mind to wake up again in the human body Sixer made for him back on earth. His eye narrowed, recalling exactly who had replaced him at the giant’s side all those years ago, and his blood boiled a little with rage.

“And she’s got a lot more eyes than I ever had.”

Bill felt the rise and fall of his human chest; respiratory system still chugging away, even while he slept. He wriggled around a little, rubbing his shoulders into the blankets, before he was made aware of a presence. The hairs on his arms were prickling.

Someone was in the room with him.

He cracked an eye open, and there was Ford, sitting on the chair by Bill’s bedside, poking at one of the candles floating in a circle around the bed.
Ford looked down from the candle, realising Bill had his eyes open, and smiled, peeling candle wax off his fingertip. “I told Fiddleford you were sleeping, so he won’t be coming in here.”

“Why are you here?” Bill groaned, and sat up, reluctant to leave the comfort of the blankets, feeling unexpectedly drained from his encounter with his old tutor.

“You didn’t look like you were sleeping.” Ford said simply, scrubbing the last of the wax off onto his jeans. He leaned back in the chair and watched Bill patiently. “More important stuff?”

“In a way.” Bill admitted reluctantly. He rubbed the back of his neck, having woke up with a stiff ache there, and slowly the floating prisms touched back down on the ground.

“You want to clue me in on it at all?” Ford prompted, his voice gentle.

Bill rubbed the sore spot in his neck, and looked down at the blankets.

He didn’t know why, but part of him wanted to confide in Sixer. Maybe not the whole eye-stealing, murdering, interdimensional espionage, threatening a giant part of it. He knew Sixer wouldn’t approve of that.

But Bill kind of wanted to talk about how shit he felt, how shit his old tutor always made him feel. He thought that maybe Sixer would understand. That he would understand what it felt like to have someone treat him like a freak, like he wasn’t good enough.

Maybe he would.

But there was no way Bill could even broach that topic without opening up a whole other can of worms. How could he even begin to explain this? Admit that he wasn’t always all knowing, that he wasn’t the faultless god he presumed Stanford thought he was.

Bill looked up at Ford, expecting to see impatience or disappointment or straight up dismissal.

Instead Ford’s eyebrows raised, before he frowned, his eyes compassionate and understanding, surprising Bill.

“I’ve never seen you look like that before. I recognise the expression though.” His voice was sad, and spoke of the sort of understanding that you had to live through yourself to ever accurately bestow.

“I keep forgetting I have a face.” Bill said, reaching up to touch his cheek. “I’m not guarded enough like this.”

“You don’t have to be guarded around me.” Ford uttered, leaning forward in his chair to catch Bill’s hand in his own, cupping it against Bill’s face.

Bill looked at Stanford for a while, his yellow eyes glowing at the dark, wistful in that moment, wishing that what Ford said could be true.

Sighing, Bill closed his eyes, and leaned into Stanford’s hand, holding it to his face for a moment, soaking up the contact.

About a minute passed.

“You don’t have to tell me.” Stanford said quietly, watching his muse with concern. This was the saddest he’d ever seen him, not counting his bawling reaction to becoming corporeal. This was
different.

Bill was quiet.

“I want to.” Bill said, surprising himself. “It’s… complicated.”

“I can handle complicated.” Ford joked, referring to everything that had happened since he first met Bill.

Squeezing Ford’s hand lightly, Bill opened his eyes and forced a small smile that was more of a grimace. “You’re handling it now.”

“Well, it’s nice to meet you complicated.” Ford smiled with his eyes, trying to make a joke to draw his muse from his melancholy. “I’m Stanford.”

“Ha ha.” Bill laughed dryly, but smiled at the scientist’s joke regardless.

It was strange, how within just a few minutes, Bill felt comforted more by his human’s presence than he had on his own. Even without talking about it, the heaviness in Bill’s soul was lightening slightly. Just from looking at Sixer’s stupid mug.

Tugging on Sixer’s arm, Bill impulsively pulled Ford towards him, onto the bed. “Come here.”

Obediently, Ford followed, his knees hitting the bed, crawling across the blankets as Bill pulled him along. When Bill tugged Ford’s arms around him, Ford hugged the muse gently, awed when Bill nuzzled into him, holding him tight.

Ford knew he should be jumping for joy. Bill was initiating, reaching out to him, starting something physical between them on a bed. It was one of those dreams he staunchly denied made real.

Instead of rejoicing, Ford worried when he felt Bill press his forehead against the side of his neck, clutching his back with rigid fingers, making no noise but the slow paced in and out of breaths barely containing unspoken emotion.

Bill was quiet.

Ford’s heart ached for his muse.

Stroking soothing patterns down Bill’s back, Ford murmured, his lips grazing Bill’s forehead. “Tell me if this gets too much.”

Bill nodded fractionally, and continued to breathe through it, his breaths a little shaky. Still he held onto Ford’s shoulders, hiding his face in Sixer’s broad chest, letting the emotions flow freely where no one could see them, expressive as they were on this new face of his. He tried to focus on the gentle stroke of Ford’s fingers along his spine, working on curtailing the burning that kindled between them with this sort of closeness.

He breathed in.

And out.

In.

Ford stroked soothingly, up and down, and back up Bill’s back, feeling the bumps of his vertebrae beneath his fingertips. He saw the light in the room brightening and then dimming, and looked up
a fraction to see the candles still floating around them, the flames at the wick expanding, rising tall and burning bright, before dimming back down with Bill’s exhalations.

They stayed like that for a while, until Ford could see the flames stretching taller, so much so that they nearly reached the roof.

“Bill.” Ford warned, watching the flames creep closer to the wooden ceiling.

“I’m not done yet.” Bill whined, his voice muffled by Sixer’s chest.

Pulling back reluctantly, having to be the responsible one, Ford sighed and put some space between them. “Yes, you are.”

Huffing, frustrated, Bill sat back and extinguished the candles, letting them fall to the floor. Once they were no longer fire hazards, he called the flames to dance in his hands, held above the blankets, burning out the excess energy in his palms.

“These limitations ruin everything.” He grumbled, unhappy his interlude of seeking the wonders of physical comfort was cut so short so quickly.

“Quite.” Ford commented, watching how fiercely the fires were burning in Bill’s palm, feeling the air heat up around him.

_That was a lot of energy_, Ford presumed.

“Just have to wait ten hours and this will all be over.” Bill muttered, mostly to himself.

“Ten hours?” Ford caught the mumbled words. “What’s in ten hours?”

Bill paused. He hadn’t meant to let that slip. He was faced with a dilemma. Did he clue Sixer into his plans to acquire a sufficient battery? Would that be giving too much away?

“What’s in ten hours?”

Ford was watching him, his brows furrowed together, clearly jumping to conclusions. Bill had to say something.

Perhaps he could turn this into an opportunity.

“The solution to our problem.” Bill snuck a glance at Ford, seeing the confusion still written all over his face.

Ford pursed his lips, the word ‘what’ hovering unsaid.

Bill closed his fist, letting the flames dissipate. “You know what problem.”

“What are you going to do?” Ford frowned, still not reassured.

“I mentioned another outlet, or a better way of storing the energy.” Bill licked his lips, and rose up onto his knees on the bed, shifting closer to Ford. “I’ve found the better way.”

Ford sat still on the bed, frozen, watching Bill inch closer to him on his knees, his mind processing exactly what that meant.

He was relieved. He had been frantically worrying in the back of his mind that Bill had found some way to undo everything that Ford had put into place, to unravel the fabric of the body Ford made
for him, to disappear back into the Mindscape, leaving him. He thought that was the solution.

He wouldn’t have guessed that Bill had been searching for a way to store the energy that his body couldn’t deal with, and he absolutely wouldn’t have imagined that his muse would choose to go to such lengths to be close to him. No one tried that hard to be close to Stanford. Ever. No one who mattered anyway.

“What better way?” Ford questioned, his mouth dashing ahead of his brain, which was currently running dizzying circles around itself, stuck on the possibility that Bill must really want to touch him.

“You’ll find out.” Bill said, now close enough to Stanford that their knees were almost pressing, almost ready to climb into the scientist’s lap. Bill raised his hand, to have it hover just shy of Sixer’s cheek, captivating his attention, trying to drag Ford out of his own head without touching him. He leaned in closer, closer, closer, until his lips were barely a millimetre away from Ford’s, and he whispered. “In ten hours.”

Ford swallowed, his adam’s apple bobbing nervously as he wracked his body with the sheer effort required to stay still, to not move, to not bridge the gap between them and kiss Bill like he desperately wanted to. It was a challenge, but Ford liked a challenge.

“Well.” Ford began, his voice hoarse. He could feel Bill’s breath on his mouth, and the air was hot, like his muse could breathe fire. Ford hardly doubted it. He mustered his boldness, and asked coyly. “Whatever will we do until then?”

Bill’s eyes glowed bright gold, the light reflecting off Ford’s glasses. His muse licked his lips before answering, and as the cosmic being spoke, his tongue brushed ever so slightly against Ford’s bottom lip, and it felt like brushing against the hot ceramic of a fresh mug of tea for that slight second.

Ford swallowed again, his ability to remain restrained tested in that moment.

In that moment, he wanted nothing more than to devour a god.

“You mentioned trick or treating?” Bill murmured the words against Ford’s lips, not backing down despite how heated things were getting.

Ford blinked, and nodded, trying to lean back, caught in the gravitational pull Bill seemed to hold over him. “Trick or treating and science.” He clarified, his voice still stuck in a husky whisper.

“Well, I have my tricks, and you have your science.” Bill purred, his face still hardly a centimetre away from Ford’s. “And who knows, maybe the night will treat us?”

“In ten hours it will.” Ford’s voice was a low rumble of unspoken promises.

Bill lidded his eyes, inordinately pleased with how that low note in Sixer’s voice made his body shiver, more like an involuntary spasm of pleasure. “Well, aren’t you cute?”

The air dwelled electric between them in their strange impasse, neither one wanting to pull away, despite both knowing that they should. Instead they just stared, taking shallow breaths that caught on one another, wanting.

McGucket called out timidly from the hallway, behind the closed door to Bill’s bedroom, interrupting the moment.
“Uh, Stanford? Are we ready to go?”

“Just a minute.” Ford croaked out, his will weak, while at the same time Bill turned his head, breaking away to call out.

“We’re ready.”

He stepped away from Stanford, standing up on the bed, shaking out his hands, looking down at the scientist. Bill took a deep breath and let out an exhale littered with embers, their staring match having riled up some flames evidently.

Ford, kneeling down on the bed, looked up at this godlike being, living in the skin he crafted for him, breathing fire and wanting Stanford despite the fact that he probably shouldn’t – and he thanked the universe privately for how incredibly lucky he was. So goddamn lucky.

Chuckling to himself, shaking his head, Ford clapped his hand on his knee briefly, before pulling himself up, standing nearby, offering his hand to Bill to help him off the bed.

“Better not.” Bill said and wiggled his fingers with a cheeky smile.

Ford held his hands up, shrugging, and instead opened the door, holding it ajar for Bill. “Too much tempting fate already.”

“It’s what I do best.” Bill bounced off the bed and strolled out the door with a spring in his step, grinning.

Fiddleford was standing awkwardly in the hall, looking the other way, and seemed surprised by Bill’s cheerful demeanour. He was even more startled when the other man clapped him on the shoulder as he walked by, heading down the stairs.

“Don’t you just love Summerween?” Bill asked cheerily, before continuing downstairs to grab the tin of chocolates Ford purchased from the post office for him, as sweets were customary for the occasion.

Fiddleford watched Ford step into the hallway, following Bill, with a bemused and sheepish smile on his face.

“Someone’s in a good mood.” Fiddleford remarked. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen him so happy.”

“Good spirits are a prerequisite for this sort of outing.” Ford claimed, trying to pin Bill’s enthusiasm to something less incriminating.

Together, the three men climbed into the car and drove downtown to participate in the Summerween festivities.

Little did Ford know, good spirits weren’t the only spirits to come out on Summerween in Gravity Falls.

Chapter End Notes
I stole Argos Panoptes from Greek Mythology. In my head he's voiced by a very angry Sir Ian McKellan. If I got some details wrong or changed some things about him for the sake of this story, I'm claiming artistic liberties. Greek Mythology has always been my Achilles elbow. Also I'm introducing more plot, right before we get to the sexy bits, because what's porn without plot?

We are so close to the kiss I can feel it. Let me know how you liked this chapter. Next chapter is misshapen jelly beans and hijinks at a market on the edge of the largest black hole in existence.
We're all summoned by a tune. We're following the piper. And we dance beneath the moon.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Children ran screaming down the street, laughter spilling from their lips. Houses had jack-o-melons lit in their front yards, and candy in bowls by the doorstep. Families sat on their front porches, watching the festivities, while some walked down the street with their children, collecting sugared goods for their screaming infants.

The costumes were adorable for the most part, but the truly vexing thing Stanford found was that his new lab partner seemed unable to differentiate between a child in a costume, and a true anomaly.

“Oooh look, what a scary werewolf.” Fiddleford cooed over one of the kids strolling down the street in a homemade werewolf costume. “You reckon you should draw a picture Ford? I bet he’d like to be in your journal.”

“That’s not a real werewolf Fiddleford.” Stanford said through gritted teeth, already having been looking through the crowd for any sort of smattering of true occult phenomenon, finding nothing so far.

The child in question walked up to Ford and F, recognising them as adults out of costume, and held up his bag of candy expectantly, growling.

Fiddleford chuckled and brought a chocolate bar out of his pocket, passing it to the costumed child. “Looks plenty real to me. Why I’ve never seen a scarier wolf-boy in all my days.”

The kid looked pleased, and gave a little growl again, before waving goodbye to Fiddleford and continuing down the street to meet up with his friends.

“Cute lil fella.” Fiddleford watched the boy wander back down the street, and smiled, sticking his hands in his pockets contentedly.

“You’re enjoying this, aren’t you?” Ford asked F, watching how relaxed the other man was.

“I love his little costume. Pat likes to dress up Tate in little costumes for Halloween and Christmas to show his nanna. I bet he’d love this. Summerween.” Fiddleford smiled, and looked up at the moon, full and round in the balmy sky above. It was a pleasant night, warm from the sweltering day earlier, but cool enough that he didn’t feel so sticky anymore.

“It does seem a holiday aimed at the younger generations.” Ford concurred, watching a pair of twins walk hand in hand up a neighbour’s lawn, shouting ‘trick or treat’ in unison at the homeowner. The twins were dressed as salt and pepper shakers. The sight of them gave Ford that ache of nostalgia he often felt, the nostalgia painful because of his fractured relationship with Stanley now.

He looked away, back down to his notepad with the local legends jotted down on it.

“We don’t really have much to go on here. Mostly old wives tales about carving jack-o-melons, blatant Sleepy Hollow plagiarism, something about sugar gnomes stealing sweets.”
“Gee, that’s original.” Bill said, strolling over to Fiddleford and Stanford, holding a sack filled with candy that he hadn’t had before.

“Where did you get that?” Ford asked, looking at the bag. It was pink and had fairy wings on it, and was filled to the brim with chocolates, taffies and sweets. “What happened to the tin of chocolates I got you?”

“All gone.” Bill shrugged nonchalantly. “The whole point of this holiday is to gorge yourself on candy, so I when I ran out I commandeered this.”

“Commandeered?”

“Yeah, and let me tell you, that idiom was way off. Stealing candy from kids is hard.”

“Bill.” Ford looked at the sky, despairing of his muse and the fact that he knew Bill wasn’t joking, despite hoping he was, before turning back to face him. “You’re supposed to collect the candy yourself.”

“Me and what costume? Or do you want me knocking on doors, telling people I’m wearing a human suit and that they should give me food or die?” Bill drawled, plucking a liquorice allsort from the bag, tasting it, before wrinkling his nose and throwing it over his shoulder.

“Trick or treat.” Ford recited, hoping to emphasise the difference to his muse. “At no point was there a death threat involved in that sentence.”

“Well, it’s vague enough that there could be.” Bill snorted, and rummaged through his bag looking for the good stuff. He pulled out a thin mint victoriously and bit into it, humming at the taste.

Ford watched his muse make the happy face he generally made when discovering new flavours he enjoyed, his eyes lidding, smiling with his mouth full, and sighed, unable to stay adequately disapproving of Bill’s antics when he looked so adorable.

Looking back down to his notepad, he gestured to his notes with the pen he was holding. “I don’t know what on here counts as a true anomaly. Even the sugar gnomes are probably just regular gnomes.”

Fiddleford seemed amused, having not yet encountered the gnomes Ford seemed so fond of blathering on about. He expected the evening would just be a pleasant stroll through town, Ford’s insistence that there would be some sort of supernatural anomaly to study was his own crusade to bear.

“Are you sure you don’t want to sketch the kids? That one there looks –” Fiddleford began cheekily, finding Ford’s frustration that there were no monsters in town entertaining.

“No.” Ford cut Fiddleford off. “Just no.”

“Hey Sixer, you could draw me.” Bill grinned, a smear of chocolate on the side of his mouth, looking devious. “Dessinez-moi comme une de tes filles françaises.”

Fiddleford raised his eyebrows in confusion at the sudden flawless language change, but Ford, who studied contemporary French in high school, flushed an embarrassed pink.

“Stop that. No to you too. You’ve got chocolate on your face by the way. And give that candy back, you’ve probably ruined some poor child’s evening.” He crossed his arms and turned away from Bill, stubborn.
“You’re no fun.” Bill scoffed, licking the corners of his mouth, and continued to rummage through the bag of sweets, before he pulled out a handful of lollies, examining them. “I’ve got jelly beans.”

Ford couldn’t help but peek over his shoulder at the sweets then. Bill was using his favourite candy against him, making it hard to maintain the moral high ground.

“This one looks like Abraham Lincoln.” Bill picked up the specific deformed bean, wriggling it at Ford temptingly.

Ford squinted at the bean, adjusting his glasses, curious despite himself. It did look rather presidential.

“Look at that hat. Who wouldn’t want a hat like that.” Bill continued, smug, knowing his antics were drawing Ford in. “You get two seconds to save his life before I John Wilkes Booth him. One.”

“Give me that.” Ford snatched the jellybean out of Bill’s hand, and cradled the deformed bean in his hand. “He really does look like Lincoln.” He observed, mumbling over the bean.

Bill chucked one of the other jellybeans into his mouth, chewing on it. “Yeah, but this one looks like Lincoln after he got shot. Ahhhh.” Bill opened his mouth, showing off the chewed-up mess of a jellybean within.

“That’s disgusting. Stop chewing with your mouth open, I’ve told you before.”

Fiddleford watched Bill and Ford’s bickering, amazed at how different they acted around each other. Or how different Bill acted rather. With Ford Bill seemed playful, offered more socially speaking, wasn’t so closed off. He made jokes that included Ford, and he seemed to genuinely enjoy Ford’s reactions, his endgame usually to make the other man smile. He was indulgent. He acted almost childish really, all about games and less about business.

Fiddleford only really saw the business oriented side to Bill, since the only words he really spoke to F were instructions on how to do his job better, and criticisms that he wasn’t working fast or hard enough. The difference was startling.

Fiddleford was jarred from his musings when someone tapped him on the back lightly, causing him to turn around and come face to face with a hideously decaying zombie.

“AAAAARGH!” Fiddleford yelled in shock.

Ford and Bill both turned around when F yelled, and Ford’s eyes widened.

Skin grey and rotting, dark circles under his eyes, blood splattered over his clothing, Dan Corduroy lumbered towards them with all the awkward grace of the undead.

Ford stumbled back, grabbing Fiddleford by the back of his coat, pulling him to stand behind him, his other hand reaching out for Bill. He was operating on instinct but in his mind, he was panicking. He thought he had ensured that everyone from the drive-in movies was safe from the zombies, he’d run checks, he thought he had everyone accounted for, a fresh batch of formaldehyde elixir dished out within ten hours to everyone who looked a little green around the gills.

He couldn’t remember if he saw Dan since he’d run off into the woods after Willow. He was wracking his brain but he couldn’t remember.
Dan held his hand out, stepping closer to them, a look of apologetic realisation on his face, when a loud laugh sounded out from behind him.

“HAH. You should have seen your faces.” Willow Oakwood stepped out from behind Dan, her hand on his shoulder, doubled over laughing. “Oh, I told you this was the right costume babe. Nailed it.”

“Costume?” Ford repeated, looking over Dan with fresh eyes, analysing the details. The grey skin was face paint, the dark circles were eyeshadow, and the blood splatter was paint, evidently. Even Willow was wearing some sort of flouncy white dress and veil, sporting the same grey makeup. The awkward swagger was chalked up to the cup of cider Dan was holding in his hand, likely intoxicated already.

“It’s Summerween doofus.” Willow snorted, and straightened up. “Of course it’s a costume.”

Dan looked suitably contrite still. “I’m sorry if I scared y’all.”

“He’s an undead lumberjack! Isn’t it awesome.” Willow gushed, linking arms with Dan affectionately. “So lifelike for the undead! I did his makeup myself.”

Dan smiled at Willow’s enthusiasm, but looked up to make awkward knowing eye contact with Ford, since they both knew that zombies were less than awesome when encountered in the flesh.

“Willow’s idea.” Dan admitted, blushing a little under the grey face-paint.

“We scared you good. Look at you, holding hands.” Willow said, her eyes zoned in on Ford and Bill triumphantly. Ford’s instinctual reaction to protect had him grab his friends and run, and while he held onto Fiddleford’s jacket, he had grabbed Bill’s hand without even thinking.

Ford looked down at their hands, then over to Bill, who was watching Ford coolly, still chewing on his candy, seemingly unfazed by the threat of a potential zombie, and the threat of hand holding. Bill quirked his eyebrow at Ford, and Ford dropped his hand, dusting his coat jacket off unnecessarily.

“I wouldn’t say scared, more startled.” Ford cleared his throat.

“Sure, sure.” Willow flipped back her hair, and the white veil that hung over her face. “So what’s your costume? Let me guess, I see a notepad, pens, I’m guessing a pocket protector, and some huge specs. Classic nerd costume.”

“I wear this every day.” Ford raised his eyebrow at Willow’s ribbing.

“Who’s your friend? Good set of pipes on you, man.” Willow grinned at Fiddleford. “I’m Willow, and this is Dan.”

“Fiddleford McGucket.” Fiddleford extended his hand out to Willow, and shook her hand, and then Dan’s hand with a smile. “Can’t say I was expectin’ somethin’ so spooky. I thought this Summerween thing was just for the kids.”

“Adults can have fun too.” Willow replied. “Dressing up and scaring people is all part of the fun.”

“Hmm.” Ford harrumphed dismissively, acting as though he found the whole thing childish, when really he was just sour about being startled.

Willow turned to look at Bill, raising her eyebrow at his stolen bag of candy, smirking. “Though
trick or treating is more for the kids. Nice bag of candy. You put the fairy wings on it yourself?"

Bill narrowed his eyes at Willow, aware that he was being insulted (though he wasn’t sure why the appearance of the bag mattered) before pasting the most saccharine fake smile he possibly could on his face. “Artistic liberties.” He replied, looking Willow’s costume up and down, before staring at her dead in the eye. “What a fitting costume. Virgin Mary, is it?”

Willow’s expression hardened. She gritted her teeth, glaring at Bill. “It’s Bride of Frankenstein, actually.”

“Uhuh. Sure confused me. Must be the veil.” Bill’s smile stretched wider, smug, and he tossed another jellybean in his mouth casually, watching Willow’s eyebrow tic. He enjoyed goading her, dangling her secret out, right in front of her boyfriend. He hadn’t forgiven her for setting Sixer up on that disastrous date.

“And what have you come as?” Willow sneered, crossing her arms defiantly.

“Your worst nightmare.” Bill said smoothly, just as Ford began speaking over the top of their potential argument, hoping to diffuse it before it began.

“Bill and I aren’t wearing costumes. We just came to look around for a while.”

“There’s apple bobbing and cider down on main street.” Dan suggested. “Dancin’ and drinkin’ – stuff for the adults. You guys are welcome to come along.”

“That isn’t really why we came –“ Ford began, reluctant to abandon his monster hunt for what sounded like a party. Ford didn’t really fit in to the parties he’d been to in the past. He wouldn’t call himself a ‘party person’.

“Your friend can come too.” Willow said, smiling at Fiddleford. “How long are you in town for? We can introduce you to folks if you want.”

Ford hesitantly looked to Fiddleford and saw the hopeful expression on Fiddleford’s face. Unable to deprive Fiddleford of the chance to socialise and make friends with the townsfolk, Ford sighed quietly, before nodding his assent.

“Gee, that sure is nice of y’all.” Fiddleford grinned, and began walking their way. “So what do you folk do around here?”

While Fiddleford fell easily into conversation with Willow and Dan, walking up front with them, Ford walked behind, Bill reluctantly falling into step with him. Neither of them wanted to go ‘party’ with the townsfolk.

“Do you think Willow knows about the zombies, or is the costume just in poor taste?” Ford questioned, pocketing his notebook sullenly.

“It’s ironic, really, since she called them up from the ground, but judging from the look on Punchy’s face he didn’t tell her.” Bill replied, their low conversation quiet enough that it remained private.

“How could she not know? And why wouldn’t he tell her? He ran through the forest to warn her, didn’t he?” Ford puzzled.

“Maybe he got lost.” Bill shrugged, and unwrapped a sherbet lemon, popping it in his mouth and talking with the sweet in his cheek. “Maybe he got to the field and the zombies were already gone.
Maybe we worked faster than him.”

“Why would he agree to the costume then?” Ford asked. “He saw the zombies, he knows it’s not just an outfit.”

“He can’t say no to Red.” Bill pointed out. “It’s as simple as that. You see the way she’s climbing all over him.”

“She’s holding his arm.” Ford corrected, raising his eyebrow at Bill.

“Okay so maybe she hasn’t reached the jungle gym stage yet, but it’s there.” Bill asserted sourly. “A big turnaround from before, right?”

Ford nodded, considering Bill’s observation. “She did seem rather peeved with him before. Do you think they’ve made up?”

“Sure, but she’s still not telling him everything yet.” Bill said mysteriously, before crunching the sherbet lemon between his teeth.

“What else is there to tell?” Ford asked, looking at the way Willow and Dan were looping arms now, chattering away.

Bill looked between Ford’s curious expression, and the group ahead of them smiling and talking freely together, and uttered one word in answer.

“Secrets.”

About two hours of carousing and socialisation later, Ford broke away from the crowd to go find Bill.

He’d been coerced into introducing Fiddleford to the townsfolk, having to stay for the small talk, and getting roped into the supposedly ‘traditional’ Summerween festivities of apple bobbing, maypole dancing, which Ford suspected was just a prank to make him look foolish, and disco dancing to more modern music around a bonfire. This was definitely a party.

How it took Ford this long to find a way to bow out was a mystery. He’d never been very socially gifted, but the peer pressure Willow exuded got Ford involved in more social activities than he’d have liked to have partaken in. She seemed intent on dragging him out of his shell.

Fiddleford had no such problems socialising, he hit it off with most folk through a spontaneous banjo performance that had him accepted right into the fold and soon he was doing song requests in exchange for free drinks.

Bill had somehow managed to stay out of things for the most part, and Willow didn’t seem to fight as hard to keep Bill around as she did to drag Ford into the merriment of the evening. Sure, he had some enjoyable conversations, and Susan and her sister Stacey had a pleasant if not awkward chat with him. They were both dressed as superheroes of sorts, Stacey wearing a shiny purple bodysuit with a yellow cape, and Susan wearing a black catsuit. When Ford asked what she was dressed as she said “CATWOMAN” loudly over the banjo music, but that still didn’t explain the whip.
After his fourth round of apple bobbing, which Ford was terrible at, he bowed out, his shirt soaked through, and stumbled away from the crowd to go find Bill.

He found his muse sitting on a haybale nursing a drink.

“I certainly hope that’s not alcohol.” Ford commented, walking over to Bill, wringing water out from the bottom of his shirt.

“Relax Sixer. Don’t act the mother hen, it doesn’t suit you.” Bill gestured to Ford, comfortably leaning back on the haybale. “This may surprise you, but this is not the first drink I’ve ever had.”

“I had hoped not to expose you to alcohol in this new body.” Ford admitted, flicking water off his hand absently, watching Bill take a sip while meeting his gaze. “How do you like it?”

“Well, it’s no Cosmopolitan.” Bill licked his lips. “But you don’t see me complaining.”

“True.” Ford stood in front of Bill now, blocking the light from the bonfire. It had gotten dark, despite the full moon’s valiant efforts.

Bill reached his hand out to graze his fingers along the sodden edges of Ford’s white shirt, tickling just below Ford’s bellybutton with the tender movement.

“You’re all wet.” Bill remarked, his eyes glowing a little in the dark, though it could have just been the light from the bonfire.

“Apple bobbing.” Ford replied, the muscles of his stomach tensing under Bill’s fingers. Bill continued to trace along the creases of Ford’s shirt, and it took some considerable effort to keep his tone casual. “I’m terrible at it.”

“Looked pretty good from where I was sitting.” Bill’s eyes were definitely glowing now. He was smirking, now splaying his hand possessively on Ford’s stomach, feeling his abdominal muscles casually.

“How many of those drinks have you had?” Ford had to ask, his hand coming down to gently circle Bill’s wrist, not yet moving his hand away.

“Don’t worry. Your human intoxicants are weak beyond belief. This is nothing compared to a shot of extragalactic spectral liqueur.” Bill boasted, not removing his hand from Ford’s stomach. He wasn’t done feeling it yet. “Now that’s an intoxicant. Made from the residue of imploding stars and distilled for about eighty million years. Give’s it it’s shimmery purple hue. Very nice.”

“I’m sure.” Ford murmured, and looked over his shoulder, checking to see no one was watching them. It wouldn’t do to set the rumour mill whirling again. Contented that everyone else seemed to be distracted with their own inconsequential merrymaking and wouldn’t be eavesdropping on Bill’s out of this world admittances, Ford captured Bill’s hand and paced another step closer to the muse, so their feet were now aligned, the toe of Ford’s shoe resting against the bottom of the haybale. “I thought you were waiting ten hours.”

“I got impatient.” Bill replied, pulling Ford in a little closer.

“You’re going to overheat again.” Ford said, allowing himself to lean down into his muses space, if only to indulge himself.

“I’ve been feeding energy into the bonfire.” Bill replied, still leaning back on the haybale, content to pull Ford all the way towards him. “No one will notice.”
“You’ve been overheating already?” Ford blinked, surprised. “But I haven’t even touched you.”

“No.” Bill took another sip from his drink, holding onto Ford’s wrist now, not letting him go. “But you’ve been looking over at me all night. I know that you’re thinking of me. When you’re dancing, whenever someone passes you a drink, whenever you win that ridiculous apple retrieval game.”

Ford’s cheeks flushed red in the dark, called out like that. He had forgotten how sensitive Bill was to Ford’s regard. Bill called it worship, but Ford wouldn’t call it that. He just wanted to see where his muse was, if Bill was watching him, if he laughed.

“What happened to glaciers?” Ford had to ask, trying not to get overwhelmed by the way his muse seemed determined to feel up the muscles in his arm as he pulled him down on top of him, crowding him into the haybale.

Leaning up into Ford’s space now, eyes lidded and glowing, Bill was nose to nose with the scientist as he uttered. “Fuck glaciers.”

Ford felt Bill’s warm breath on his lip, incredibly close, and began leaning forward, when he heard a startled scream over by the bonfire. Pulling away to look, Ford saw the bonfire flare up, embers spitting dangerously from the blaze, startling the party-goers.

He turned back to Bill, reluctantly pulling his hand away. He saw Bill’s eyebrow twitch, his expression obviously frustrated, like he wouldn’t have cared if he’d burnt down the whole street as long as he’d gotten what he wanted.

Irritated now, Bill huffed, and threw back his drink, draining the beverage, before hurling the cup away towards the fire.

“Whatever. I hate waiting.”

Making sure he wasn’t touching Bill at all, Ford moved to sit next to his muse on the haybale, lacing his fingers together to remove temptation. Taking a deep breath to clear his thoughts, Ford sighed, then leaned back to look up at the sky.

“What I don’t get is the lack of paranormal activity tonight.” Ford said, changing the topic to give them both a chance to cool down. “Conditions like these practically breed supernatural interference, so what I want to know is why is nothing happening?”

“Nothing happens all the time.” Bill griped, tucking his legs up onto the hay, curling in on himself. “What makes tonight so special?”

“Well, we have costumes, revelry, a full moon.” Ford listed, rolling his wet sleeves halfway up his arm. The weather was warm enough that his clothing was already beginning to dry slightly. “An acknowledgement of the occult, at least through this frivolous dress up scheme. Candy is being collected, cider is being drunk, it’s almost bacchic at this point.”

“Please.” Bill scoffed. “This is not even close to bacchic. Now that guy knew how to throw a party.”

“Well, we have costumes, revelry, a full moon.” Ford listed, rolling his wet sleeves halfway up his arm. The weather was warm enough that his clothing was already beginning to dry slightly. “An acknowledgement of the occult, at least through this frivolous dress up scheme. Candy is being collected, cider is being drunk, it’s almost bacchic at this point.”

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“Maybe it’s a lack of local lore.” Ford continued to muse, rubbing his chin, considering factors. “You’d think a town like this would have plenty of stories.”

“No offence Sixer, but the people here are dumb.” Bill said bluntly. “They’re all experts at looking the other way. There are no stories because they don’t notice all the supernatural things that happen around them every day. So there’s nothing to tell.”
Ford frowned. Bill made a valid point. He thought it strange when no one seemed to notice the
giant floating island head monster out on the lake in the middle of the day. No one asked how they
were after they arrived back at the docks, no one even questioned the sizable bite mark at the prow
of their boat. It was the same with the zombie resurgence at the drive-in movies, no one noticed
much apart from the ground shaking for those few moments. The gurgling noises of the undead as
their skulls shattered at the edge of the field were chalked up to acoustics from the Night of the
Living Dead movie playing too loud. Everyone had been too focused on their own movies playing
to notice anything. It was like the whole thing had never happened.

“They notice nothing.” Bill emphasised, nodding at the drinks table, proving his point. “Watch.”

Before Ford could stop him, Bill raised his hand and clicked, summoning the cup of cider from
Tyler Cutebiker’s hand. It vanished just as Tyler went to take a sip, and reappeared in Bill’s hand.
Tyler blinked, looked down at his hand, mimed lifting his cup again, frowning, before he shrugged
happily, and turned around to the refreshments table to get a fresh cup of cider.

Bill lifted the cup to his lips and took a drink, smirking at Ford, smug and superior. “See.”

Ford saw Bill’s point, begrudgingly amused by the whole demonstration. The table of full cups of
apple cider was right there, Bill could have easily summoned a drink that wasn’t someone else’s.
But that clearly wasn’t Bill’s style.

Watching Bill sip innocently at his stolen drink, Ford couldn’t help the wry twist to his lips,
amused by Bill’s antics despite himself.

“So then why do I notice all these paranormal incidences and they don’t?” Ford asked.

“Because they –” Bill snapped his fingers again, summoning a second cup of cider, again, right
from Tyler Cutebiker’s hands, before passing it over to Ford. “Are stupid. And you are smart.”

Ford accepted the glass of cider, puffing his chest out a little at the praise. Again, he shouldn’t have
felt good about receiving accolades at the expense of others, but somehow Bill saying these things
just played into Ford’s ego, making him feel special and superior.

He took a long sip from the cider, looking over the dancing and revelry with a quiet sort of
contentedness that came from being praised for his intellect. Tyler Cutebiker resigned himself to
fetching yet another drink, mentally chastising himself for becoming inebriated already, enough so
that he forgot his drink at the table twice, or so he thought. Meanwhile, Ford drained his own
drink, happy and somewhat buzzed.

“You got any more of those jelly beans left?” Ford asked Bill, looking over to the bag of candy
sitting beside his muse, fairy wings glistening in the firelight.

“Nope.” Bill said, passing the bag over to Ford. “I don’t like all of these ones, they don’t taste as
good. You’re welcome to pick through if you like diving through the dregs.”

“How many of these have you licked and put back?”

“Adds flavour.” Bill winked, grinning at Ford.

Ford rummaged through the bag, reaching an obvious conclusion quickly. “Ah. This is all the loser
candy.”

“What’s the prize for the winners?” Bill asked cheekily, knowing the answer, finding it
delightfully macabre.
“It’s a phrase the children use. They don’t like these more traditional sweets. Candy corn and liquorice wheels and boiled candy aren’t as enticing to the kids as caramel cremes and pixie stixs and satellite wafers.” Ford explained, still poking through Bill’s bag of discarded candy. “You didn’t have any satellite wafers by any chance, did you?”

“What ones are they?” Bill asked, sipping on his drink.

“They look like tiny spaceships, like the one in the valley.”

“What, underground?” Bill replied unhelpfully.

“No, it’s the shape of them. They’re little spaceship shapes with sherbet on the inside.” Ford mimed the shape of the wafers with his fingers while he spoke.

“Spaceships come in all sorts of different shapes you know.” Bill pointed out.

“Well, I’ve only seen one so far.” Ford griped.

Bill blinked at Ford for a moment, considering something damning, before he spoke, intending his comment to sound offhand. “You’ll see more. I could show you.” He took a long sip from his cup, hoping to appear nonchalant.

Ford’s head shot up, looking at Bill with surprise and excitement in his eyes. “Really?”

Bill tried to continue to appear nonchalant and casual, humming his assent, but he found it difficult to do, as when Ford had turned to him with that eager expression he accidentally snorted his drink, and wound up with cider in his nose.

Coughing, Bill wiped his nose with the back of his hand, his flushed cheeks hidden in the dark. He had given too much of himself away there. Bill looked up to the moon in the sky, at the haybales beside him, at the table with the ciders on it, looking anywhere but at Ford, who seemed overjoyed at the prospect of seeing spaceships with his own eyes. Bill hoped he hadn’t caught the damning part of his sentence.

When Bill finally risked sliding his eyes back over to Sixer, the human was still staring intently back at him, with a twinkle in his eye.

“Stop looking at me like it’s such a big deal.” Bill huffed, finding it difficult to suppress his indulgent feelings around his human. “You’re building an interdimensional portal, what did you think would happen?”

“You said you would show me.” Ford emphasised, catching on to what Bill hoped he hadn’t. “Does that mean you’re coming with me? What else will you show me? Does this mean you mean to-”

“I take it all back. You see nothing.” Bill said, embarrassed, quickly rescinding his offer.

“But you just said-” Ford started, disappointment edging into his voice.

“I know what I said.” Bill sniffed, getting the last of the cider out of his nose. “Don’t you think I’ve more important things to do than be your interdimensional tour guide?”

“Do you?” Ford asked boldly.

“Yes!” Bill exclaimed, raising his voice, but already Ford was laughing at him.
“Your face.” He chuckled, bending over on himself while he laughed, sitting next to Bill.

“What about my face?” Bill brought his hand up to his cheek, feeling the warm skin in a paranoid fashion.

“You really are expressive like this. I must have seen a full range of emotions play out just then in less than a second.” Ford commented, amused by how Bill seemed to blanch in that instant where he revealed a little too much of his feelings. His muse liked to act like feelings were beneath him, but Ford had never met someone whose emotions swung so wildly between extremes.

“You’re not funny.” Bill felt compelled to tell Stanford, while his human continued to double over laughing at him.

Bill tolerated about another minute of laughing at his expense before he pushed Stanford off the haybale. Ford fell onto the ground with an ‘oof’, his drink thankfully empty, barely spilling, before he looked up to see Bill looking over the edge of the haybale at him, his eyes glowing like a cat’s in the dark, his pupils wide and a smirk playing across his lips. Ford smiled back, though he was certain he and his muse were smiling about different things, and he pulled himself to sit up.

“It really is a shame about the total lack of supernatural anomalies associated with tonight though.” He said, resuming his previous train of thought, having been derailed by Bill’s hijinks. He was talking about a lack of paranormal activity like one would talk about rain interfering with a game of golf. “You’d think some sort of monster would inhabit these festivities.”

“Monsters don’t just inhabit festivities.” Bill corrected Stanford. “Either the creatures were always there, long before the festivals, and the festivals built up around them, or something would coax them into being. Anomalous creatures don’t just spring into existence for your entertainment, they’ve gotta have a reason for being on this tired earthly plane. Something has to call to them, something like a purpose, or a grudge, or a hunger - a bloodlust!”

“Maybe we’re best passing on the last one.” Ford joked. “Though a town like this at least deserves one local legend that gets noticed and remembered.”

“You can’t just build-your-own monster through sheer force of will unfortunately.” Bill shrugged. “Certain criteria have to be met. You’ve got most of them here though, you’re right. Costumes, carousing, auspicious lunar activity. All that’s missing is an abundance of supernatural energy to spare, and sufficient motive.”

“Hypothetically, not saying I would, or that it’s ever on the table, but hypothetically if all of those criteria were met, is there anything else one needs to do to call a holiday specific creature into being?” Ford asked, his curiosity a powerful thing.

Science as a motivator enabled Ford to ask casually about bringing a monstrous being into existence, enabled him to talk about the potential devastation of such a creature like it was inclement weather on a bad day. It also enabled him to bring up such extreme hypotheticals when he was talking to a god who could very clearly make Ford’s curiosity a reality, if he were inclined to.

“You summon it.” Bill said simply, before sliding off the haybale to sit on the floor next to Ford. “Here.” Bill grabbed Ford’s hands and the flames from the bonfire crept higher.

“Careful.” Ford warned Bill, pulling his hands back slightly.

“It’s fine.” Bill said dismissively, reaching for Sixer’s hands, spreading his fingers out wide. “So
following your hypothetical you just spread out your hands and ask – repeat after me here – ask the universe – is there a voice unheard in the dark?”

Ford repeated Bill’s sentence sceptically. “Is there a voice unheard in the dark?”

“Well, there might be.” Bill shrugged, still holding onto Stanford’s hands. “Lots of voices. You just can’t hear them yet. Because they’re unheard, hah. No brainer there. Then you say – if I give you existence will you make your voice heard?”

“And what does that do?” Ford asked.

“Nothing, if you don’t repeat after me.” Bill squeezed Stanford’s fingers quickly. “The point though is that you’re giving form to something that has its own agenda, which most practitioners forget, because once you’ve summoned something like this so open ended, it’s not gonna stick around and do what you want it to.”

“I gave you existence.” Ford observed, looking down at the way Bill’s hand contrasted beautifully with his own.

“I existed before you, but go on.” Bill corrected Ford, rubbing Ford’s palm with his thumb a little, like Ford so often did to him.

“I wonder what it would take for you to stick around.” Ford murmured, almost to himself at this point. It was hard to hear over the disco dancing and laughter by the bonfire, but Bill heard it all the same.

“Maybe if nothing was holding me here, I wouldn’t want to leave.” Bill replied, his voice low, matching Stanford’s.

Ford turned Bill’s hand over, tracing the edge of the binding tattoos with his fingertips gently. “What have you to stay for though? There’s so much more out there. Spaceships and galaxies and billions of beings and entities and possibilities to explore.”

“When you’ve lived as long as I have.” Bill started, trying to find the right words without giving himself away too much here. He was always balancing on that line of what he should say, what he was willing to say, and what he wanted to say but couldn’t. It was a tricky balance. “It’s not the big things that surprise you, it’s the little things keeping life interesting.”

“You’re so –” Ford began, frustrated, also searching for the right words, overwhelmed a little by strong emotion. “I don’t understand you. I want to.”

“I’m difficult to comprehend on the best of days.” Bill shrugged, and smiled slightly at Ford. “You’re not doing so bad comparatively though. You’re doing better than most people.”

“I want to know you.” Ford confessed earnestly.

Bill paused, holding onto Sixer’s hands. His human had always been presumptuous, but this went past that.

What Sixer wanted was dangerous.

What was more dangerous was how much Bill liked the thought of letting Sixer know him. He had always liked dangerous things.

He maintained many walls, facets, angles and personas to protect himself. There was not one
person in the universe who knew everything that Bill was, mostly everyone who knew who he was in the past were dead now, and the people that knew him now didn’t know the whole story. He preferred to maintain that mystery, those secrets, but there was something about it that tickled Bill, the thought that someone could hold all his secrets, could look at him and know him all, and not look away. It was a tempting fantasy. A bewitching and impossible dream.

But it could never be.

Bill removed his hands from Ford’s, and pushed himself up off the ground, grabbing his drink and standing. “I’m getting tired. Do we have to stay much longer, or can you drag McGucket away from his adoring fans?”

“I can go get him.” Ford said with a resigned sigh, heaving himself up off the floor to stand, putting his hand on Bill’s elbow, checking in on him. “Are you alright to wait here?”

“I can do you one better and wait in the car.” Bill replied, pouring his drink abruptly on the floor, before handing the plastic cup to Ford and walking away. “I’ll see you there.”

Ford looked down at the puddle of discarded cider with a frown, the liquid wasted, seeping into the grass, creeping towards the hay bale. That felt a whole lot like rejection just now.

Ford shook his head, and checked to see Bill hadn’t left anything. Ford’s coat was on the hay bale, under the satchel of candy, and he reached for it, toppling the candy bag to the ground accidentally.

“Woops.” Ford murmured to himself, bending down to pick it up, before stopping himself, deciding to leave it instead. It’s not like anyone was going to eat it. Eventually someone would scoop it up and take it to the tip.

It was a shame that nothing supernatural happened tonight. _There was always next year though_, Ford thought idly.

He grabbed his coat and walked through the crowd to find Fiddleford, who was no longer playing his banjo, enraptured in conversation with one of the lumberjacks about construction engineering.

The cider trickled down until it met the overturned bag of candy, the liquid spilled as a libation giving power to the voices of the evening left unheard. Even though the spell wasn’t completed, the energy in this particular area was so potent thanks to the worship waves Bill had been giving off all night, an incomplete spell was all that was needed to spark into being a being who craved its own voice to speak with.

The bag of discarded loser candy crinkled. The wind blew the balmy air gently through the trees, whistling softly.

The bonfire crackled.

And the moon was full.

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Once Ford sent a tipsy Fiddleford McGucket safely upstairs to his room with an advil and a glass of water for his hangover in the morning, he returned to the kitchen to make himself a late-night sandwich, having only eaten candy and cider for the evening’s duration.
Buttering some toast, and pulling the deli-meat out from the refrigerator, Ford became aware of someone else in the kitchen.

Facing the counter, without turning around, Ford continued to prepare his sandwich. He could feel Bill’s eyes on his back.

“I know you’re there.” Ford murmured quietly, almost as though he were talking to himself.

“Hmm.” Bill hummed, kicking off from the kitchen door frame, uncrossing his arms, before he walked over to the table and pulled out a chair, sitting down.

“Did you want one?” Ford asked, gesturing to the sandwich, all without turning around. Part of him was too nervous to face Bill, and the nerves crept up on him as the evening drew to a close, spurred on by that subtle rejection.

“Sure.” Bill said slowly.

Nodding, still not looking up at his muse, Ford busied himself with putting more toast in the toaster, and laying sliced turkey breast on top of the first plate of toast.

The room was quiet, the sound of the butterknife scraping over the toast was the loudest thing to be heard. Ford was practically holding his breath, feeling the tension build, and Bill wasn’t being forthcoming with his words either.

The hourly deadline was creeping up on them. It weighed on Ford’s mind. What would happen when the ten hours were over, finished, and what it would mean for them both. He’d been bold about it before, cavalier even, but now the nerves were creeping in. Ford wanted it, oh how he wanted it, but now he wasn’t sure.

What was being intimated was generally a dynamic changer for most people, and Ford was partly worried that if they moved forward, cemented this change, he would lose his easy relationship with his muse. For as complicated as it was, somehow interacting with Bill was always uncomplicated in a way, it was easy, comfortable. Ford was used to it.

He wasn’t used to this.

He had those awful butterflies in his stomach, the same kind he got in high school when he mustered up the courage to talk to girls. The butterfly influx was most likely due to performance anxiety, and the fear of rejection, which is what motivated all of his past butterflies he’d accumulated in his stomach. He didn’t like it, and quite frankly it was putting him off his sandwich.

He didn’t want to run through the list of reasons he mentally compiled for why Bill would be interested in doing something like this with him. He’d gone over it endless times. The list had everything from selfish reasons, to manipulative reasons, to reasons of desperation, of leverage, of feeling like there was no other choice for the muse. It was a long long list and it had many many disheartening points on it that all ranked before the last and final point that was that maybe possibly Bill just liked Stanford.

Ford had ranked each point on the list with correlative probability, and so far the probability that Bill wanted Ford because he liked him was sitting at 0.8% of a likelihood. Maybe a little personal bias was feeding into the accuracy of that number, but Ford couldn’t help it.

Ford built Bill’s body – that was part of the problem. He made Bill this hopelessly perfect, it was his own fault really that he now felt inferior in comparison. He knew what Bill would look like,
should they do what he assumed they would do, and clothing would be shed. He knew how Bill would look, how unfortunately gorgeous he would be, his dark skin covered in shimmering golden tattoos that lit up with the energy that had so far overwhelmed Bill.

So far that energy accumulation had been keeping them apart. It had kept their play light and inconsequential, flirtation for the sake thereof, because they both knew it couldn’t lead anywhere. Now maybe it could. Ford still couldn’t get over the fact that he overwhelmed a cosmic being on the daily, Bill’s flustered reactions were incredibly gratifying. But lately Bill had been pushing back, flirting in ways with Ford that threw him.

And this evening Bill had definitely been flirting.

Ford wanted to believe it was genuine, but there was this doubt at the corner of his mind niggling him, taunting him with old insecurities and inadequacies that felt so much more mundane than sleeping with a god was.

Already Ford was half talking himself out of it, stewing on his own anxieties like this, so when Bill spoke up, Ford had partly convinced himself that he’d imagined the whole thing.

“Not that I don’t appreciate your dedication to buttering bread, but I think maybe five minutes on a slice might be pushing it a bit.” Bill critiqued, hoping to draw Sixer out of his head. “Do I get to see your Magnum Opus there?”

“What?” Ford asked, looking up finally, a little dazed, jarred out of his melancholy slightly.

“Bring me my sandwich.” Bill ordered. “Get over here. Sit down. Talk. What’s going on?”

“Nothing’s going on.” Ford denied, jerking himself out of his stupor, bringing the plates to the table. He took the seat opposite Bill, and bit into his sandwich, not looking him in the eye.

“You’re a wonderful liar. Really.” Bill rolled his eyes. “It’s like watching a puppy riding a bicycle. Adorable and irritating all in the same measure.”

“Irritating?” Ford questioned, somewhat disgruntled at the obscure comparison.

“But you don’t deny the adorable part.” Bill laced his fingers together and rested his chin on them.

“Wh – of course I –” Ford began to bluster, setting down his sandwich, when suddenly Bill stretched out his index finger and pressed it to Sixer’s lips.

“Sssssshhhhh.” Bill smirked, watching Ford’s expressions chase flabbergasted through to indignant before settling on frowning resolutely at the tabletop.

When Bill lifted his finger from Sixer’s lips, Ford blurted out.

“Did you flirt like this with Da Vinci?”

“What?” Bill blinked, leaning back, his eyebrows raised.

“I –” Ford was tempted to apologise, before the classic Pines stubbornness set in. “You heard me.”

Bill was stunned for several moments, trying to puzzle out where on earth that question came from, his brow furrowing, looking more and more confused by the second.

“I don’t – why would I – the beard?? Sixer, where is this coming from?”
“You said you choose one brilliant mind a century, so I just wanted to know. Maybe you’ve done this before. Maybe this is nothing special for you – I don’t –“

Bill cut Ford’s rambling off, gesturing sharply with his hand. “What makes you think I’d expend this much effort every century for every self-important asshole who thinks they’re the world’s gift to science? What part of that sentence – any part of it – sounds appealing? Huh? I’d rather stab myself in the eye.”

“I just thought –“ Ford backed up, looking for those mental justifications he was wracking up, and finding them missing in the face of Bill’s ire.

“You thought I seduced all my scientists that I’ve worked with. That they didn’t jump at the chance of learning something new all on their own. Like you did building the portal. Dragging me here to help you build the portal. Or maybe you thought I planned to have this with you. That all of this was deliberate, getting trapped here, being put in this sub-par flesh cage, having my magic bound, being burnt from the inside out every time you so much as touch me.” Bill narrowed his eyes, scowling at Ford now venomously. “Gee, what a great diabolical plan. It’s worked out just swell for me so far.”

“I’m sorry.” Ford exclaimed, motivated by insecurity. “I just – I don’t understand – why me? I don’t –“

“I’m asking myself that same question too you know.” Bill glared at Ford from across the table. “Why you? What saddled me here with you, feeling like this? Who did I piss off this time?”

“And that’s such a compliment.” Ford sneered, unimpressed.

“Hey, don’t take it personally. I piss off a lot of people.” Bill scoffed, sitting back in his chair, folding his arms.

Ford stared at Bill long and hard for a few seconds, trying to decide whether he felt comforted, confused or pissed off by Bill’s venomous admittance of his feelings. It was what Ford wanted, in a way. He had that confirmation now. He just didn’t know what to do with it.

“How am I supposed to go through with this.” Ford began. “Knowing you don’t want any of it.”

“Who says I don’t want it?” Bill shot back instantly. “What part of me pushing myself, overheating constantly, going out of my way to find a solution to this, tells you that I don’t want it to happen?”

“Well, you shouldn’t.” Ford said stubbornly. “For all of those reasons. You shouldn’t.”

“Don’t you tell me what I should and shouldn’t do. I didn’t ask for your advice. Nobody gets to tell me what to do.” Bill jutted his chin out challengingly, pointing at Ford sharply.

“I don’t understand you.” Ford admitted, feeling foolish and hopeful all at once. Bill was being argumentative for the sake of reassuring him, in his own backwards way, and Ford still didn’t feel he was worth it. He still didn’t believe it, his confidence shaken by one small gesture. “Why do you even want this? Me?”

“I –“ Bill’s temper flared back down and his shoulder’s slumped with the realisation that rather than arguing with Ford he’d get better results with honesty. It wasn’t his first go to option. It wasn’t even his third, but it was what Sixer needed. “I don’t know. It’s fun and interesting and you’re interesting - and challenging.”

Ford grew more reassured with every word. It was working. Perhaps too well, as Ford seemed
borderline smug now, his bravado creeping back seeing Bill admit his feelings for him.

“Interesting.” Ford repeated, smugly.


“Three times now.” Ford relaxed a little, reaching for another bite of his sandwich.

“Well, it bears repeating.” Bill joked, reaching for his own sandwich, finally taking a bite. “This is good. Buttered to perfection.”

“Thank you.” Ford said sarcastically. “I do try.”

“Is that what you were freaking out about?” Bill asked through a mouthful of toast. “You’d gone all quiet on me. I thought I’d have to break in.”

“Please don’t.” Ford said quickly, picking up on Bill’s intention. He had no desire to have his mind broken into.

Bill pursed his lips, shut down by Ford’s insistence. He swallowed his toast and cleared his throat. “Well, if you’d talk to me, I wouldn’t have to.”

“We’re talking now.” Ford pointed out quietly.

“So we are.” Bill watched Ford cautiously, aware that he was pressing on a delicate point with the scientist. Standing up from the table, grabbing his plate, Bill made to leave, his own deadline approaching.

Ford reached out to Bill and grabbed his wrist before he got too far. “You’re leaving?”

“To sleep.” Bill replied simply. “I’ll come back with our solution. If you still want it.”

Ford swallowed the anxiety in his throat, his mouth suddenly dry. “I do.”

“Alright then.”

Bill felt suspended in the moment, not wanting to leave, but knowing he had to. Sixer was holding onto his wrist and while they had talked, things still didn’t feel right between them. It was irritating, this feeling, like there was something missing, or still left unsatisfied. Bill didn’t do unsatisfied.

He drummed his fingers on the edge of his plate, deliberating his next move, before he set the plate back down. He leaned across the kitchen table, placing his hands on the wood, bringing his face close to Sixer’s, knowing there was still a point to prove to the doubting scientist.

Ford looked up at Bill, trying to keep his expression neutral, while his brain was running in circles, trying to figure out what all of this meant.

“Sixer.” Bill began, flexing his hands against the edge of the table. “How fond are you of your furniture?”

“Furniture? What?” Ford managed, distracted by his muse leaning closer and closer, their faces aligned, barely a centimetre apart.

There was a sharp sizzling noise, and the smell of smoke and burnt wood. The edge of the table
blackened beneath Bill’s hands, leaving two perfect handprints charred into the tabletop.

Because Bill had leaned down, closed the gap between them, and kissed Ford.

His lips pressed briefly just along the side of Ford’s mouth, feeling impossibly hot, already overheating, barely brushing against his skin before pulling away so as not to burn Sixer, leaving Ford staring up at Bill, utterly dazed.

Bill exhaled, his eyes glowing gold, and embers flew out of his mouth, dancing in the air for the moment. He watched Ford, who was staring up at him with awe shining in his eyes, his mouth hanging open, dumbfounded, and he felt that missing piece click back in just right.

Bill panted out another incendiary breath, suddenly feeling elated and flustered all at once, straightening his back up tall. His whole body was tingling with the sudden onslaught of worship flowing through him from that one simple gesture. It felt incredible. If it wouldn’t cause horrifying burns, he should kiss Sixer more often.

He prised his hands away from the tabletop, the wood groaning as the charred surface bowed a little before righting.

“I’ll see you in the morning. And then we’ll do that again.” Bill said succinctly, departing on a victory, as he retreated out of the kitchen, back upstairs to his room, a jaunty spring in his step once more.

Ford raised a hand up to touch his face, feeling the phantom heat of Bill’s mouth on the edge of his lips again, watching his muse retreat before looking down to the burn marks on the tabletop that were still smoking.

Well now.

“Wow.” Ford mumbled to himself, his spirit soaring.

He stared at the tabletop for another few minutes, his mind replaying events over and over, convincing himself that what just happened was real. Of course it was real.

He slid his fingertips over the burn marks in the wood, exhaling a held breath himself. His insides turned into a kaleidoscope of butterflies.

“Wow.” He repeated.

Just… wow.

Chapter End Notes

Bill stole Tyler Cutebiker's drink so he’d have to get another one. Get it? GET IT!
^^ my best joke yet.

Also I decided to split this chapter here, so the market is going to be in the next chapter because a lot happens, BUT YOU STILL HAVE JELLYBEANS! The space showdowns will happen next chapter.

Also also, Bill is a flirty drunk.
In my dreams I have a plan. If I got me a wealthy man, I wouldn't have to work at all, I'd fool around and have a ball.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Bill closed the door to his bedroom, prisms and candles still circling the floor around his bed, and grinned giddily in the dark.

He could feel it even now, the waves of astounded worship pouring off Sixer, feeding Bill with more power than this flimsy form could contain.

It was intoxicating.

And Sixer would be thinking about him all night with that stunt he just pulled.

Sure, if he were to believe any other god, the worshipper is supposed to be the one to make that first move with the whole lip pressing deal, but Bill liked taking the offensive. He liked going off book, defying expectations, and he was sure once his solution was put into place that Sixer could take initiative with bestowing kisses as much as he wanted, which, judging from his illicit dreams, he wanted to do that a lot.

Flames eeked out of the tips of Bill’s fingers without him realising, and he looked down, before shaking the flames away sharply.

“Phew.” Bill mumbled to himself. “Was that a kiss or kerosene?”

His fingertips lit up again, and Bill shook the flames away, laughing low to himself alone in his room. Rolling his shoulders and stretching his arms out in front of him, swinging them back, he jumped onto the cushioned nest that was his bed, bouncing on the mattress.

Jumping once or twice just for the fun of it, then twirling around to face the end of his bed, he flung his arms out in front of him and the candles lit in unison, levitating along with the prisms to form a circle around the bed.

“It’s showtime!”

He bounced to land cross legged on the bed, closing his eyes, his fingers tented into the upside down triangle, and waited.

And waited.

Bill cracked a glowing golden eye open.

Now was the time that sleep was supposed to happen. It was usually as instantaneous as he wished it to be. He wasn’t sure why it wasn’t happening now.

He held his hand out in front of him, burning some of the power off in an intense blue flame in his palm, hoping that that’d cool him down enough to sleep.

While he was focusing on the flame, he catalogued the other reactions this body was experiencing.

More heart palpitations, increased blood flow, an urgent sort of misplaced sense of haste, like he
was rushing, like fight or flight, like – ah. That’s what was happening.

Adrenaline.

It was an adrenaline rush. All from brushing lips with Sixer. Adrenaline was meant to signal danger, to protect the body from threats. Sixer’s touch was hardly a threat.

Bill frowned at the flames in his hand, frustrated that this body’s physical reaction to Sixer was interfering with his plans. He needed to be asleep by now.

He’d never imagined Sixer would be able to affect him like this. He was supposed to be the one affecting Sixer, tying up his devotion, supervising the portal more immediately and securing Ford’s worship, or at least cooperation for the duration of the project.

Things had changed somehow from when Bill had first appeared to Sixer to now. The scientist wasn’t just another delusional chump with a brain Bill could manipulate for his own gains. Suddenly he was a contender, an equal.

Interesting.

If Bill had to pinpoint the moment when Ford ceased to be an insignificant annoyance and started to become important and interesting in his own right, it was probably when he cooked up his harebrained summoning scheme.

All of the other scientists he commandeered accepted the limitations and boundaries that Bill had set for them, had accepted that they’d only see Bill in their dreams, only get what they were given. Sixer was interesting because he chose not to accept those limitations, making his own rules of play, setting his own terms of engagement.

He broke the rules.

It was unfortunate really that Bill found that so endearing. Sixer reminded him of himself, so ambitious and tenacious. Intelligent enough to create change, stubborn enough to affect it. The fact that he was supposed to be insignificant too was part of why Bill was so impressed with Sixer. To rise above insignificance to achieve your ambitions. It made Bill a little nostalgic honestly.

It was easy to dismiss the actions or words of someone you deemed insignificant or unambitious, uninteresting. It was only when presented with a challenge that Bill began paying attention, and god Sixer was challenging.

Challenge was good, especially if it made you stronger. Challenge coming from an equal could shape a cosmic being like Bill into something tougher, more powerful, more dynamic, better.

Already he felt more powerful, blue flames eating up the oxygen in the air around Bill’s hand ravenously.

But did that mean he wanted to let Sixer affect him and the plans he had put in place? Not fucking likely.

Focusing on calm breathing, of all the inane techniques to ground a body, being bound in this body left Bill with little choice. He took a breath in, cursing Sixer’s allure, and took a breath out, cursing Sixer’s unfortunately attractive jawline. He took a breath in, and cursed Sixer’s broad shoulders, and he took a breath out, and cursed Sixer’s solid hands and chapped lips. He kept breathing and thinking about his unintentional paramour, the flame burning incessantly until he was calmer.

Bill closed his eyes and smiled, his expression zen-like finally, as he imagined putting his hand
over Sixer’s big mouth, pushing him back into the couch in the living room, climbing onto his lap and –

The flame in Bill’s hand crackled as it jettisoned higher stubbornly.

Bill opened his eye and scowled at the turret of flames, obviously still flustered. He closed his fist and the flames died, focusing on boring things.

Paint drying, stars dying, Kryptos nagging him.

And just like that Bill drifted into sleep, ready to encounter Kryptos’ nagging face to face, or more accurately eye to eye.

It was showtime.

Lost for something to do, sleep evading him, Stanford sat at the desk in his bedroom and tried to think.

Think. Not panic.

He definitely wasn’t thinking of his failed kiss with Cathy Crenshaw on prom night. He most certainly wasn’t thinking of the awful kiss he shared with Susan Wentworth at the movies, and he most definitely wasn’t thinking about that one time his great auntie Eliza went to kiss him on the cheek but missed because of her cataracts.

Was he even any good at kissing?

This was that performance anxiety again, ridiculing Ford’s natural ability by causing him to overanalyse everything until the idea of kissing became so utterly foreign to him he could barely recognise it.

He just needed to step back, not panic, and rationalise this.

He reached for his spiral notebook, which he had moved from underneath the couch, to underneath his favourite national geographic magazines in his desk drawer, and flipped it open to the growing annotations he had compiled about his muse.

*Deciphering My Muse; Observations on Muses in Physical Form.*

Ford tapped the word ‘physical’ with the end of his ballpoint pen, trying not to become daunted or deterred. This anxiety was a problem, and problems had logical scientific solutions. All Ford needed to do was find a solution to his anxiety about kissing Bill in the morning. He needed to break the situation down.

Sketching out a diagram on a fresh page, Ford drew yet another picture of Bill in his makeshift field notes journal. Once the picture was done, just a basic sketch of Bill, Ford stared at it for a while.

Even in the picture, Bill managed to look incessantly smug. Ford had drawn Bill as he had been in the kitchen, leaning against the door frame casually, his arms crossed, watching Ford from the page with a smirk.
Raising an eyebrow at the page, Ford scoffed. It was reassuring he could still find Bill annoying even on paper, reassuring that he could recognise that without being clouded by the impending revelation that was finally getting the chance to kiss his muse like he’d always wanted to.

And he had always wanted to do it, hadn’t he? He’d imagined this before? Daydreamed, night dreamed, wet – well. He’d had thoughts like any normal young man would have.

So really, he had a game plan.

He just had to find out the best way to implement it.

Next to the drawing of Bill, Ford jotted down some key facts.

**Weaknesses:**

- Ticklish sides.
- Sensitive to “worshipful” energy.
- Sensitive in general.
- Apple cider (makes flirtatious).
- Spicy foods (makes excited).
- Sugary foods (makes complacent).
- Me.

Ford almost crossed out that last point, but then thought the better of it. He had to assume it was true. Bill didn’t act so responsive to anyone else he’d encountered so far. Frankly he seemed to harbour distaste for nearly everyone else, so by process of elimination, and judging from how consistently Bill favoured Ford over everyone else, he did have a bit of a weak spot for Ford.

Ford couldn’t even imagine his muse getting all shivery and flustered because of Fiddleford, or Dan Corduroy, or even Willow if he was assuming Bill wasn’t drawn to Ford by a preference to his gender.

It stood to reason that maybe Bill found Ford attractive.

But what did a cosmic being deem attractive? Surely the standards were different.

Ford made another list.

**Dislikes:**

- Everyone (but me).
- Beards apparently.
- The chilli at Greasy’s diner.
- Preston Northwest.
- Helplessness.
- Stupidity.
- Expending unnecessary effort.
- The binding tattoos.
- Barf fairies and other pseudo flammable creatures.
- Rules.
- Being tickled.

That list was less productive, but Ford felt his mind calm simply by writing it down. It was gratifying to have a small record of the things Ford knew about Bill, even if the list was woefully incomplete. He meant what he said by the bonfire, he did want to know his muse. Bill just made it
incredibly difficult, like he made most things.

Well if Bill could make things difficult, so could Stanford.

Melting points:

- Back massages.
- Hands on his hips.
- Touching his face.
- Foot rubs.
- Hand on back of his neck.
- Running hands through hair.
- Running nails through hair.
- Touching his lip.
- Lick hand.

All of those things had already been done to Bill so far, with gratifying results. And Ford had barely done anything to engender those results. Mostly he’d flustered his muse completely unintentionally, but now that he was intending to overwhelm Bill he was beginning to pick out patterns he could work with.

He made a new list.

Predicted boiling points:

- Kissing lips.
- Kissing neck.
- Kissing wrists.
- Pulling hair.
- Biting earlobe.
- Touching.
- Intimate touching...

Ford had to stop making these lists.

Picture Bill was smirking knowingly up at Ford, damning him with his eyes. Certainly flustering Bill was the point of all of this, but that didn’t mean Ford couldn’t get flustered too. At the moment his list-making imagination was unfairly aroused, and he felt further from sleep than he had before his list making endeavours began.

Flipping the spiral notebook shut, hiding it back in his desk drawer, slotted in between nat geo back-issues, Ford closed the desk drawer and stood.

Clearly he would find no rest until he dealt with his… distraction.

Despite it being past midnight, Ford decided to have a shower, to unwind a little.

Walking out into the corridor in his pyjamas, Ford headed towards the bathroom but paused, temptation drawing him to Bill’s bedroom door.

It was closed.

Ford could open it. He could look in, see if Bill was still awake, but that may be pushing it given his current rustled state.
There was gold light pouring out from under the door. Just a sliver.

Ford knew what that meant.

Bill was searching for their solution.

Deciding not to disturb him, Ford continued along to the bathroom, turning on the taps for the shower and undressing. He placed his glasses on the side of the sink, and examined his own reflection before the mirror misted up too much.

He didn’t look terrible. His near daily hikes through the forest, and his consistent workout regimen had ensured that much. He was built broad, his back, shoulders, and arms much thicker than they had been in high school. He had a full head of hair, hair on his chest, arms, legs etcetera. He was tall, or at least taller than Bill by about an inch. He had a bit of weight on his belly, certainly not a six pack, but his core muscles were strong, and he didn’t feel wholly unappealing.

He rubbed his jaw, staring down his reflection as the hot water misted the edge of the mirror. He observed his six fingers on each hand, and looked down to observe the same six toes on each foot. When he was growing up, he had been convinced by his peers that his genetic abnormality was freakish and unappealing. He was called Sixer as an insult, as a joke. Now he was called Sixer as an endearment, one of Bill’s nicknames. He was special. That made it easier to look at his extraneous digits and feel worthwhile.

Whatever he was looking at, Bill clearly liked it, if his flirting by the bonfire was any indicator. If that kiss was any indicator.

The mist crept over the mirror as the shower heated the room. Ford wiped his hand over the glass, striking a gap through the condensation, causing the water to trickle down the mirror’s surface. Now the mirror was fogged up, except for a hand swipe across it that revealed the reflection of Stanford’s eyes. They were determined, and now, somewhat confident as well.

He could do this.

Planning exactly how, he stepped into the shower, and got somewhat steamy himself.

The Cryptix-Noire Warping Black Market was a bit of a legend among the interdimensional law enforcement community.

Everyone knew it existed, but thanks to the warp core built into the centre of the market’s sustainable forcefield, it changed location every 38 hours, making it incredibly difficult to track down. To add to the flagrant flaunting of the laws of spacial organisation, the market also had an emergency warp button hidden in a private office belonging to the manager of the market, Raha Diñeiro, suspended on the floating viewing deck above the market’s stalls.

The market was a dome, like a death star, but with less death and more shopping. Illegal shopping. There were informal rules within the market itself to preserve the momentum of free trade, unlawful, but free trade nonetheless. Killing someone inside the market was against the rules, it was poor for business and generally left a bad taste in the customers mouths. You were welcome to kill people outside the market and sell their body for parts. That was fine. Just no killing inside the dome.
Interdimensional law enforcement knew that all manner of illegal, unsanctioned, unlawful and prohibited trade occurred inside Cryptix Noire, but not once had a swat team managed to infiltrate the markets to shut it down. Not only would the market warp to a new location instantly when confronted with a perceived intergalactic threat or raid, but the bouncers at the door were rumoured to be able to smell out a narc, or any kind of law enforcement.

That sort of olfactory screening was hard to evade.

Having teleported himself and his crew to the Coma cluster (sans Hectorgon of course, Bill didn’t want to tempt him into a repeat of his indecent exposure conviction, no use drawing that kind of attention) Bill stood waiting at the elevators at the top of the dome that led down into the market, his henchmaniacs lined up behind him, ready to be screened by the bouncers.

“You’re clear.” The bouncers ushered the spectre who seemed more trench coat than substance in front of Bill’s group through to the elevator. “Next.”

Bill sidled forward, looping his elongated noodle arm with Pyronica, and waved cheerily at the bouncers with his free hand, oozing familiarity. “Duvall! Randall! So good to – yeesh.”

The bouncers, Duvall and Randall were unusual beings. They were purple skinned, humanoid in stature, bulky in build, wearing rather classy suit jackets, manning the door. But rather than sporting traditional facial features, both Randall and Duvall’s faces were devoid of eyes, mouths, ears, or any other sensory accoutrements, their faces instead covered from hairline to chin with hundreds of nostrils. How they spoke was anyone’s guess. Bill hadn’t asked, it seemed terribly rude.

Randall was dripping green snot from nearly all of his nostrils, and it was leaking down onto the white pressed collar of his suit.

“Dello Misder Cipher.” Randall sniffled loudly, speaking with a bung voice, his nose clearly blocked.

Duvall shucked his thumb at his co-worker, scoffing. “Guess who used up all his sick leave. This idiot.”

Randall fished for a wet looking handkerchief from his jacket pocket, and wiped it over his entire face vigorously. “You dhuck a sickie one tibe.”

“Let me guess, not enough Randall time.” Bill closed his eye nodding sagely. He clicked his fingers, opening his eye shrewdly. “That or Diñeiro didn’t approve your holiday leave.”

“The man’s a miser.” Duvall said, looking shiftily towards the surveillance camera in the corner of the foyer. “But that ain’t nothin’ new.”

“By wife wanteb to go to Space Bahamas wid me an the kids.” Randall explained, folding up his sodden handkerchief and putting it back in his pocket. “Bou know I coulb’n say no.”

“And how is Nadine?” Bill asked congenially, making conversation with the bouncers while his crew watched, Kryptos leering at Randall’s snotty demeanour.

“She’s goob.” Randall nodded. “God thad promotion at work. New job now. Differend location.”

“Tell her I said congratulations.” Bill offered.

Pyronica nodded knowingly at Randall. “She was always too good for that place.”
“Ch’yeah, you’re tellin’ him.” Duvall nodded. “Not like he didn’t hear it up and down every fuckin’ day fer the past ten months. Now what can I do for you fine folks.”

“We’re here to - how do they say it in the vernacular? The people’s tongue?” Bill turned to look at Pyronica, who put a finger to her chin, pondering.

“Bum around the mall?” She answered, feigning a ditzy voice.

“That’s the one!” Bill clicked his fingers, smiling with his eye.

“Uhuh.” Duvall levelled a look (Bill presumed it was a look) at him. “Got any specific business here?”

“Just shopping.” Bill said cheerily, choosing not to disclose. Only he could be so chipper about ‘just’ shopping in the multi-verse’s most covert shadow market.

“Okay, well, you know I gotta sniff you down.” Duvall leaned forward. “All of yous. You don’t usually bring such a crowd.”

“I just brought them to carry my bags.” Bill shrugged, subjecting himself to Duvall’s sniffing. Duvall snorted at Bill, and waved him through.

“I ain’t never smelled nothin’ lawful on you ever. You’re good to go through.”

Bill floated through to wait by the elevator, picking a next warp card out of the basket there, watching Duvall sniff the rest of his crew, Randall snuffling ineffectively off to the side.

Duvall sniffed down and waved through Pyronica, Teeth, Paci-fire, Eight-Ball, Amorphous Shape, and Keyhole. Xanther stayed home, finding the market too cramped for his size.

Duvall held his hand out to stop Kryptos though, giving him another good sniff.

“I ain’t smellin’ no law enforcement on this guy, so he ain’t a pig, but he sure smells like a snitch.”

“Once a snitch, always a snitch.” Bill drawled, eyeing off the sweating compass. “Isn’t that right Kryptos?”

“Boss, you said I could come with you.” Kryptos frowned, his buck teeth sticking out.

“I did say that didn’t I?” Bill replied vaguely, strongly tempted to ditch Kryptos just to save himself the compasses company. He let Kryptos sweat it out for a few seconds, examining his nails idly, before he rolled his eye. “It’s his first time at the markets. Doesn’t get out much. I figured this time he could come along, but of course the final yay or nay goes to you two. He won’t be talking about what goes on inside to anyone, that’s for sure. I’ll keep him on a tight leash.”

“Hmmph.” Duvall sniffed Kryptos again, before shrugging. “Whatever you say. I’d keep an eye on him though if I were you.”

“I keep an eye on everyone.” Bill replied ominously for a second there, before pressing the elevator door button, the doors dinging as they opened. Floating into the elevator along with the rest of his crew, Bill waved at the two bouncers as the doors closed. “Tell Nadine I said hi!”

“Bi will! Dank you!” Randall sniffled, as he and Duvall waved goodbye to Bill before moving onto the next people in the queue.
The elevator was the only way in and out of the market’s forcefield, unless you were still wandering around cardless by the time next warp hits.

When the market warped, all the vendors with a next warp keycard, and all the patrons who had one would traverse along with the market to the next destination. If you didn’t have a keycard, you were stranded in the market’s old location when the warp took it somewhere else.

The elevator was roomy. It could fit 40 beings at maximum capacity, but it was still small enough that Eight Ball had to bend down so his head wasn’t hitting the ceiling. Bill liked that as a feature, he found it humbling. For Eight Ball anyway.

The elevator had platinum doors and machinery, but the back side of the lift was all clear glass, sapphire crystal. You could look down on the market as the lift descended, and the main thing everyone took away from their elevator ride was that the market was huge.

It was like its own city. There were tents and stalls set up everywhere, patrons and customers bustling about, shop owners haggling over prices. There were auction stages, storage space, chattel, goods and services available. This market housed everything illegal in the entire multi-verse, so suffice to say, there were a lot of things for sale.

“Alright kids, everyone’s got their pocket money ready?” Bill asked sarcastically, adjusting his bowtie as he looked out over the market’s sprawl.

The henchmaniacs sniggered, and made noises of assent.

“Good. Just like we discussed, remember. Wait for my signal.” Bill ordered, tweaking his bowtie to sit just so, pleased with his own reflection in the glass.

“How long do you reckon until it’s go time boss?” Eight Ball asked, grunting.

“You’ll have time to get whatever knickknacks you came for, don’t worry.” Bill assured them. “Don’t waste too much time haggling though. We want to grab what we came for, and ditch the warp cards sharpish.”

“Got it.” Eight Ball nodded, bumping his head on the ceiling of the lift in the process.

“I’m gonna buy all the good stuff.” Keyhole said to Amorphous Shape, excited. “I hear you can buy anything at this place. Asbestos cookies, the original scripts for the final episode of Lost, blood diamonds from Jupiter.”

“I think you’ll find that’s a solid scam, my friend.” Amorphous Shape replied, blinking his eyes at Keyhole. “It literally rains diamonds on Jupiter, no blood gets spilled retrieving them regardless. Anyone with the skill can summon the goods from the planet’s atmosphere.”

“There are plenty of scams at the market, so don’t be a sucker.” Bill cautioned his crew. “One born every second, which is why markets like these run such good trade. They’re banking on idiots buying their product. Now I know most of you can’t help yourselves ninety nine percent of the time, but I gave you that pocket money and if I see you coming home with softcore triffid porn, or more Berenstain Bears merchandise you’ll lose your invite to the next big heist.”

“It’s Berenstain.” Keyhole corrected Bill, somewhat disheartened. He was a huge Berenstain Bears
“Not in this universe it isn’t.” Bill laughed. “I want you pairing with Amorphous Shape, Keyhole. You’ll be able to keep Keyhole’s impulse purchases in line, won’t you AM?”

“I cannot guarantee I won’t let some things slip.” Amorphous Shape winked one of his eyes, sounding pleased. “But I shall do my best.”

“Paci-fire, you stick with Teeth. Eight Ball, buddy, you’re good to go it alone. I’ll split with Pyronica, aka madam firecracker.” Bill split the group up, winking at Pyronica, who giggled. Bill seemed to be in a good mood lately, and his good moods were generally contagious. “Maybe we should have code names.”

“Who am I going with?” Kryptos interjected, feeling a little left out. “You’re not leaving me by myself are you?”

“No, Stick in the Mud.” Bill rolled his eye and pointed at Kryptos. “I’m supposedly keeping an eye on you, so you’re coming with us. Is Stick in the Mud a good code name? I don’t know, it feels a bit clunky to me.”

“What about Mudstick?” Pyronica suggested.

“Mudstick.” Bill rubbed under his eye. “I like that.”

“I don’t.” Kryptos grumbled sullenly.

“So Team Overbite, you take the east side.” Bill pointed at Paci-fire and Teeth. “Team Impulse Purchase, you take the middle. Bank Shot you get the traders booths. Wait for my signal.”

“What’s your team name?” Keyhole had to ask, eagerly amused by Bill’s antics.

Bill considered it for a moment, before pleasing himself with his own idea. He thought about the reason he came here, and how his human was probably squirming with anticipation back home, dutifully awaiting his return. Sixer would probably wet himself just imagining all the advanced illegal technology sold at this market. Maybe Bill would bring him back a souvenir.

Growing an extra finger on his hand, he wiggled it at Keyhole.

“We’re Team Six Fingered Discount. Now this is an important mission, so I want everyone at their best. This has to go smoothly.”

“Yes Boss!” The Henchmaniaacs all replied in unison.

“Good.” Bill vanished the sixth finger, cracking his knuckles and looking out over the market as the elevator descended.

“Now, let’s go shopping.”

“UNOBTANIUM! GET YOUR UNOBTAINIUM HERE!”

“Genuine Delorean DCM-12 carburettor, one of a kind. DCM-12 compatible spark plugs.
Speedometer customisation. Every purchase over 8000 QUID comes with a free cache of Cosmic Sand!

“Loaded die for Lottocron 9! Guaranteed to get you past the sensors!”

“You’ve heard of Red Matter, you’ve heard of Dark Matter! Well we’ve done you one better folks – say hello to Vantablack Matter! Smuggled right out from under Anish Kapoor’s generous nose! Get it while it’s hot!”

The shouts of hawkers plugging their wares added to the clamour of the markets. Bill floated along, arm still looped with Pyronica, watching his flaming friend pause to ogle at a pair of Killer Heels™ equipped with laser shooters at the buckle.

“Do you have these in pink?” Pyronica asked the sales clerk, picking up the stiletto, batting her huge eyelashes at the Kzinti behind the counter.

She stroked her whiskers before licking her paw and smoothing the fur on her cheek. “I can get you in rrrrred?”

“No pink?” Pyronica pressed, disappointed.

The Kzinti sales clerk shrugged.

Bill patted Pyronica on the shoulder consolingly. “We can get you fancy shoes anywhere.”

Pyronica pouted and put the shoes down. “Bye bye laser shoes.”

“Why are we floating round the fashion district?” Kryptos complained. “Teeth and Paci-fire get to go look at the Doomsday devices, why can’t I?”

“Kryptos what are you even going to use a Doomsday device for? They’re like impotency props for assisted annihilation.” Bill scoffed, giving Kryptos the side eye.

“They look cool though.” Kryptos mumbled.

“Do they? Really?” Bill questioned sarcastically. “Because you know what I see when I look at someone with a store bought Doomsday device?”

“They say if you don’t have homemade store bought is fine.” Kryptos sulked, repeating the sales pitch word for word.

“Of course they say that! They’re the ones selling it.” Bill rolled his eye.

“I think they’ve got cursed amulets up ahead.” Pyronica continued, nonplussed by Bill and Kryptos’ bickering. “That’d look nice as a clasp for my cape, don’t you think?”

“Just make sure you get the ones that curse outward, not inward.” Bill instructed idly, content to float along beside Pyronica while she got her shopping done.

As they passed by the booths, one of the spruikers called out to them, trying to catch their attention.

“You there! How about some shapewear! A few semi-circles can round out those sharp angles for you nicely. Only 24 QUID.”

Bill paused, and his eye twitched, realising he was being spoken to. As if he’d even want to be
circle. Outrageous. There was nothing wrong with being a triangle. His shape was fine as it was, just who did the sales clerk think he was speaking to?

It had been centuries since he’d been spoken to like that, and it still boiled his blood.

Spinning around, pasting a winsome smiling expression on, he floated over to the booth.

Kryptos could tell from Bill’s tone of voice, how painfully cheery it was, how disarmingly friendly, that the spruiker just delivered his own death sentence.

“What kind of deal?” He asked curiously. “The prices are fixed, I’m afraid. I can’t go lower than 24 QUID.”

“You’re not afraid, actually.” Bill countered, floating over until he placed his hands on the counter, his size shifting larger until he was the same height as the Allasomorphian, glowing gold in a show of power. “But that’s because you’re stupid, it isn’t your fault. These guys know what you did.”

Bill gestured to the sales clerks in the booth to the left, who were quietly packing up their goods. With Bill’s attention turned on them, both of the clerks dropped down to their knees, disappearing behind the counter of their booth, bowing at Bill.

“What kind of deal?” One of the clerks mumbled. “We are not associated with him.”

“You see that?” Bill jerked his thumb at the bowing associates. “Grovelling. You should take note buddy. So how about coughing up that apology you owe me.”

The sales clerk looked confused and a little scared now, looking over to his boss for direction. His boss gritted his teeth, bowing as well, and hissed at his associate.

“That’s Bill Cipher you just offered a semi-circle to, you idiot.”

Recognition of the name at least flickered across the sales clerk’s face before horrified realisation took its place.

“I’m sorry!” The clerk blurted out. “I didn’t mean – it’s free of charge!”

“I don’t want it. Here’s the deal. I give you a semi-circle, and we forget this whole mishap ever happened. That sounds fair, right kid? After all, you didn’t know.” Bill crooned, lidding his eye,
extending his hand at the now quaking sales clerk. “I can make this whole thing go away, you just gotta shake on it, and you’re forgiven. What do you say?”

The young Allasomorphian shakily held out his hand even while his manager facepalmed behind him. The kid really was stupid. Bill shook the kid’s hand cheerily and everyone held their breath, watching, the horror building.

Bill let go of the kid’s hand and leaned back, dusting his hands off. “Easy. Forgiven. Now that wasn’t so hard, kid, was it?”

The sales clerk exhaled a relieved sigh, feeling like he’d got off easy with just an apology from one of the most feared nightmares in the galaxy. He smiled at Bill, repeating himself.

“I really am sorry.”

“I bet.” Bill replied, floating back over to Pyronica, surprising the crowd with his mercy. “Come on Kryptos. Let’s get going.”

Kryptos floated over to Bill, still hesitant. He knew Bill had been in an astonishingly excellent mood lately, but he’d never seen Bill allow an insult like that to just slide. It wasn’t like Bill to leave it at that.

The kid at the shapewear booth called out after Bill, sealing his fate. “Hey, uh Mister. What about my semi-circle?”

Bill paused. Acting forgetful, which he wasn’t, he clapped the bricks above his eye with his palm. “Of course. How could I forget?”

Bill clicked his fingers. “Here you go kid.”

The sales associate began screaming as his skin began peeling off in perfect semicircles all up and down his arms, ripping the dermis open, bleeding red muscle displayed, blood swelling to the surface. The salesperson sobbed, shocked and horrified as the skin kept falling off onto the floor and regrowing rapidly, leaving them in continual agony as semi-circles sprung up and healed in different places all over their body.

“Enjoy your semi’s.” Bill commented dryly, not turning around to look at the carnage he left.

Pyronica tsked, clinging onto Bill’s arm again as they walked away. “Some people are SO rude.”

Kryptos cast a wary glance at the sale clerk, now fallen to his knees, trying to scoop up his discarded skin in vain, wailing in pain, and remembered why it was better to be on all three of Bill’s good sides, rather than provoke annihilation.

“Can you do that? Like, are we allowed to do that sort of thing at the markets? Wouldn’t everyone just end up killing everyone?” Kryptos asked Bill quietly.

“I can do anything I want, in case you hadn’t noticed Kryptos.” Bill said flippantly, and looked across at the compass. “But in answer to your question, maiming shopkeepers is generally frowned on. It breaks the informal amnesty these markets provide.”

“Oh.” Kryptos puzzled. “Then why -?”

“We now have Raha’s attention, that’s why.” Bill answered quietly, casting a glance upwards at the floating viewing deck at the top of the dome. “Now Diñeiro knows I’m here.”
Kryptos cast a curious look up towards the skybox, and Bill slapped him on the top of his eye.

“Stop that. Let’s keep moving. We’ll find him at the auction block. If you’re good, maybe I’ll even let you bid.” Bill considered the thought of Kryptos placing a bid on anything important, and laughed quietly to himself. Talk about hilarious things that would never happen.

Kryptos seemed excited. The rhombus was so easy to lead by the nose, and he didn’t even have a nose. Already Kryptos was hovering over to the auction block, following the sound of the auctioneer’s voice over the megaphone, enthusiastic for the chance to place a bid on a black-market item and finally step up to the big boy table of interdimensional crime.

Bless his cosmic socks.

Meanwhile, over by the markets east side, Teeth and Paci-fire were haggling with a dealer who sold counterfeit and stolen spaceship engine parts.

“I ain’t budging, you want kinetic energy cubes, I got em nice and cheap for ya, but I didn’t strip down a Federation Vessel, at great personal risk might I add, so some bullheaded pig and his mouthy friend could offer me 150 QUID for a potential energy cube.”

“You should watch your tone, insolent dealer.” Paci-fire scowled, tapping one hoof on the merchant’s counter.

“Look, we ain’t tryin’ to con ya.” Teeth grinned. “I’m just sayin’ I ain’t prepared to buy yer cubes if they ain’t the real deal. I can tell they’re counterfeit. It’s obvious.”

“These ain’t counterfeit!” The furry merchant screeched, and ducked under the counter to bring all twenty of his potential energy storage cubes out onto the tabletop, thunking them down on the metal surface with his heavy clawed paws. “I harvested these myself. With my bear hands.”

“I dunno.” Teeth deliberated, and picked up one of the cubes, turning it over in his hands. “This one’s got a scratch on it. I hear Federation cubes don’t scratch.”

“I too have heard that.” Paci-fire added pompously. “These aren’t real Federation cubes.”

The dealer growled, baring his teeth. “I say they are.”

“Prove it.” Teeth insisted.

“Fine.” The dealer ducked back down under the counter, rifling around for the Federation seals he took from the same ship. “I can show you the assembling parts I took with it. All of them Federation sealed, they got the stamp on it an’ everything.”

While the dealer was huddled down underneath the counter, Teeth and Paci-fire swept the potential energy cubes off the counter into their pockets.

Pockets wouldn’t be the correct term. Paci-fire smuggled his half of the cubes into his second mouth, swallowing them, before putting his pacifier back in place, and Teeth chucked his portion of the cubes back into his mouth where they warped instantly into the dimension where all the devoured substances Teeth ate lived in an odd sort of floating limbo, accessible for him to chew on
later.

Cackling, Teeth and Paci-fire ran off on their short little legs, making a break for it with the cubes. Teeth’s hooting laughter could be heard rounding the corner, scooting out of the east side of the market.

The growling trader emerged from underneath his stall counter, holding the Federation assembling parts, brandishing their logo to empty air.

“There, see, I –“

He blinked, his customers were gone, along with his most expensive merchandise. He raised his hackles, and howled his frustration out, drawing noise complaints from the other traders.

Amorphous Shape was floating alongside Keyhole, who was lingering by his favourite booth housing all of the paradoxical merchandise his odd little heart desired.

“It’s called Berenstain and he knows it.” Keyhole muttered, looking over one of the first edition children’s books, running his hand over the book’s cover.

“Bill will also tell you Schrodinger never had a cat, but what can you do.” Amorphous Shape chortled, flicking his blue tipped tail over the different paradoxes for sale. “Ah, this one’s my favourite. Why is the night sky dark if there is an infinity of stars, covering every part of the celestial sphere?”

“Olber’s paradox.” Keyhole stated, smiling at Amorphous Shape. “How about this one. The length of time that it takes for a protein chain to find its folded state is many orders of magnitude shorter than it would be if it freely searched all possible configurations.”

“A folding chain, now you’re flattering me.” Amorphous Shape folded up several of his cubes, pleased, before unfolding them in a different configuration. “That’s the Levinthal paradox. Do you know what Eight Ball’s favourite paradox is?”

“That’s gotta be Polchinski’s paradox. Throw a billiard ball into a wormhole and it redirects itself so it’d never fall into the wormhole in the first place.” Keyhole replied, putting the Berenstain Bears book back on the shelf.

“It’s actually Moore’s paradox. ‘It’s raining, but I don’t believe it is.’” Amorphous Shape corrected Keyhole pleasantly. “Eight Ball detests small talk. Ask him about the weather, and without fail he’ll come back with Moore’s.”

“Classic Eight Ball.” Keyhole chuckled fondly.

A rather disgruntled sales associate came up behind them, having been watching them browse through his shop of paradoxes for an hour now. “You wanna know the real paradox? How long are you two gonna keep browsin’ before you buy anything? It’s been doing my head in.”

“Well that was certainly rude.” Amorphous Shape declared. “I think you’ll find we’ll buy nothing now.”
Keyhole eyed off the Berenstain Bear books longingly, desperately wanting to buy them and add them to his collection, before sighing, knowing Bill wouldn’t be pleased if he did. “Come on AM, we’ll take our business elsewhere.”

Snootily hovering away, Amorphous Shape led Keyhole out of the shop, much to the shop assistant’s frustration.

“Perhaps now would be a good time to stick to the plan.” Amorphous Shape suggested calmly. “Shall we meet our tall friend by the traders booths or dispossess our desired possessions elsewhere?”

“I think I see a battery booth up here. We can take a few cells, or the converter if they have it, and meet up with Eight Ball after.” Keyhole decided.

“I see it.” Amorphous Shape said calmly, blinking one of his eyes at the battery booth in question. Folding his squares out of existence, unfolding them elsewhere, Amorphous Shape disappeared, his pleasant voice lingering. “I believe Teeth and Paci-fire have the cells taken care of. The converter is ours. You take point, I shall follow your lead.”

“Gotcha.” Keyhole nodded as the last square of Amorphous Shape disappeared.

Striding up to the battery booth, Keyhole’s head barely reached the countertop, and he rapped on the metal bench with his knuckles.

“Hey, can I get some service down here?”

The scaly engineer who manned the booth peered over the edge of the counter, looking down at Keyhole.

“Can I get you a ladder, or a stepping stool or something buddy?” The merchant hissed. “In our culture we’ve just got a thing about being on the same level as our customers.”

“Well, see, I’ve got – ah – a cursed relic.” Keyhole bluffed, making this up on the spot. “That’s been giving off some serious waves, and I was thinking maybe this doesn’t have to be a bad thing, you know? So I was hoping, something to store those waves in maybe? Like an energy converter?”

“Sure thing. We have those.” The reptile said, nodding. “What kind of waves are we talking here?”

“Ah, you know, just, waves.” Keyhole blustered. “Powerful waves. Really very powerful. So maybe, your strongest converter?”

“I’ve got just the thing!” The lizard man said triumphantly, and brought a medium sized energy converter over to the counter, showing it off. “The N-T 17. It’s got quite the threshold before the
circuit breaker kicks in. You won’t find a better converter on the market.”

“I’m looking for one preferably without a circuit breaker.” Keyhole posited. “Maybe something off the market? I’m talking a lot of energy here, like beyond cosmic.”

“Hrmmm. Short of regulators at powerplants I’m not sure we have what you’re looking for.” The lizard man looked reluctant, wanting to help Keyhole, but not sure how far he should go. “There is one thing, but I’m not even supposed to say we have it, let alone sell it. Even inside Cryptix Noire some space laws can come around and bite you on the ass.”

“You don’t have to show me.” Keyhole pressed, playing the part of the perfect customer, the one so polite it was hard to say no to them. “You could just tell me about it? I don’t want to get you in trouble.”

“It’s not that I’d get in trouble. It’s – you know what. It doesn’t matter. I can tell you.” The reptilian caved, resting his elbows on the countertop, clearly excited about the product. “There’s a converter we keep out the back in a premium lock box, just in case some big-wig ever puts in the request for it. No circuit breaker. Unadulterated conversion of power. Any power. We’re talking kinetic, potential, divine, chemical, superfluous, whatever. The real deal. It is beyond illegal to have a converter without a standard regulatory circuit breaker though, and I mean beyond illegal. It’s one of the laws that get upheld even here in Cryptix Noire.”

Keyhole nodded, listening intently, while Amorphous Shape unfolded into existence behind the reptilian shopkeeper, winking once at Keyhole before folding again, reappearing out the back, finding the lock box. Amorphous Shape considered the security on the lock box, before unfolding out of space again, refolding much smaller inside the lock box, looking the machinery over. This was the one.

“What makes this law so special?” Keyhole questioned, curious.

“Well, pure conversion of energy has the potential to be abused. Especially if you can convert literally anything into anything. This baby can cut through the bluster of a dying star and convert it into clean customisable energy. It’s amazing. But super illegal. Because it doesn’t matter how big and bad you are, if something out there can convert all this energy you’ve amassed and store it into a little ol’ battery, then you’re screwed. Having circuit breakers installed gives the machine limitations. It will stop before draining something dry. Makes it safer. Does mean though that they can’t convert so much energy in one go.”

Amorphous Shape wrapped his form around the machine stored in the lock box and dissolved it back into himself, condemning it to temporarily existing within one of his squares. The colour of the square blinked on and off, before shielding the converter inside seamlessly, the square now blinking a placid pink. He unfolded and reappeared behind the salesperson, winking at Keyhole again with a different eye this time, signalling the plan was successful.

“Gee. I never thought of that before.” Keyhole said simply, nodding contemplatively before climbing down from the ladder. Amorphous Shape unfolded away disappearing into the space between molecules once more.

“Where are you going?” The reptilian asked. “Don’t you want a converter for your relic?”

“Yeah, but hearing the explanation made me realise. That sounds super unsafe.” Keyhole shook his head, tsking. He then lied. “I respect the law. My relic isn’t worth that much hassle. I’m just gonna gift it to my in-laws.”
“Well, if you’re sure.” The reptilian shrugged its shoulders understanding. “You know where we are if you change your mind. I’ve always wanted to see this baby in action on a curse.”

“Do you have a card?” Keyhole enquired, passing the ladder back across the counter to the reptile.

“Sure do.” The reptilian nodded, passing his business card down to Keyhole, his tongue flicking out to taste the air. “You ever need a converter, our number is right there, on the bottom.”

“Thanks.” Keyhole smiled at the card, then back up at his server. “You’ve been really helpful.”

“That’s what I’m here for,” The reptile said cheerily, before cupping the side of his mouth, whispering. “Just don’t tell my boss. Ha hah!”

Keyhole mimed zipping his lips shut, locking it, and locking his forehead as well cheekily, throwing away the key. The server chuckled, before waving Keyhole goodbye.

The henchmaniac continued down the alley and turned the corner, still smiling when Amorphous Shape reappeared beside him.

“You have a real talent for that.”

“I’m a people person,” Keyhole admitted sheepishly, quietly proud. “Folks see me and can’t help spilling their secrets. I must look like a good listener or something.”

“They think you keep their secrets under lock and key.” Amorphous Shape joked, hovering alongside Keyhole.

“Yeah, well the joke’s on them, cause there ain’t no lock on this Keyhole.” Keyhole thumbed his chest, laughing.

There was a surprised shout a few tents back from the battery booth. The server must have discovered the empty safe. Keyhole and Amorphous Shape looked back at the tent, and then looked at each other, entertained.

“You reckon we should go find Eight Ball?” Keyhole asked.

“Lets.” Amorphous Shape concurred, sounding amused, and concealed them both between the molecules, warping them to the traders booths to go find Eight Ball.

Eight Ball loomed over one of the traders booths, a clawed finger at the edge of his mouth, staring at the stock intently, his billiard eyes glowing yellow at the pupils.

“C-can I help you?” The sales associate questioned, looking up at Eight Ball’s lumbering, muscled figure.

Eight Ball growled, a low unintelligible sound, before he pointed to the merchandise.

“That.” Eight Ball grunted.

“The… jewellery, sir?” The associate asked timidly.
“Uhn.” Eight Ball nodded, pointing to the platinum chains curiously, poking the metal listening to the chain clink melodiously. “Looks good. How much?”

“T-this one?” The mousy looking clerk clarified, looking Eight Ball up and down, confused as to why Eight Ball would want to buy more chains when his right wrist and ankle already bore gunmetal grey cuffs, dangling chains ripped from the very walls of the Infenitentiary. “It’s 70 QUID sir. Highest quality platinum.”

“Pretty.” Eight Ball grunted, poking the chains again to hear them chime. “Pretty music.”

The clerk smiled softly at Eight Ball, finding the lumbering creature almost endearing now that she knew he liked the pretty music. She reached out to poke the chains, rattling them for Eight Ball, so he could listen to its music, and he closed his eyes to listen, when suddenly Amorphous Shape unfolded next to Eight Ball, dropping Keyhole to the ground beside him.

“We got it!” Keyhole dusted himself off, and grinned enthusiastically, holding two thumbs up at Eight Ball, who blinked his eyes open at his fellow henchmaniac. “So do Teeth and Paci. The signal should come any minute now. Are you ready? Let’s go!”

“Go?” Eight Ball huffed out a loud sigh, and looked back at the platinum chains again, poking them with a claw. Keyhole noticed, and could feel a miniature violin solo coming on. Eight Ball was pulling out the puppy-dog eyes.

“What’s wrong buddy?” Keyhole asked, looking at the jewellery Eight Ball was pointing to. “You wanna buy something?”

“Need five more.” Eight Ball groaned, slowly drawing his hand away from the chains to bring his money out, slowly counting through it in front of the girl.

“How much are the chains?” Amorphous Shape asked the mousy server politely.

“70 QUID sirs.” The clerk replied, feeling sorry for Eight Ball, who sounded so sad.

“70?” Keyhole asked indignantly.

“They’re platinum.” She replied in her squeaky voice.

“I spent all my money at the food stalls.” Keyhole frowned, patting down his sides. “You got any left AM?”

“I’m afraid not, though if you’re open to trading in a different denomination, I have many pearls of wisdom to offer.” Amorphous Shape hummed.

“My boss only lets me accept Quasi Universal Intergalactic Denomination, sorry.” The young lady shrugged, sounding truly apologetic.

“You can’t do it for any cheaper? The poor guy really loves ‘em, looks like.” Keyhole pleaded, casting a sad glance up at Eight Ball, who was sniffling, looking like he was about to cry. He tried shoving his money across the counter at the girl, making small noises, even throwing his warp card into the mix.

“I’m sorry sir. My boss won’t let me haggle on prices.” The clerk squeaked softly. “I’m really sorry.”

“It’s okay buddy.” Keyhole reached up, patting Eight Ball’s leg. “We’ll get you them some other
“Pretty.” Eight Ball uttered sadly, his face the very expression of misery. In the back of Keyhole’s head, that tiny violin solo intensified.

The mousy server’s bottom lip wobbled, she was clearly sympathetic. Eight Ball picked up his money slowly, ready to turn away from the stall, and she reached out a paw to stop him.

“Here. I’ll chip in 5 from my own money. You deserve something good today, sir.”

Eight Ball’s eyebrows rose, and he looked down at the mousy server in surprise.

“Gee, that’s nice. Ain’t that nice buddy?” Keyhole commented, nudging Eight Ball’s leg.

Before Eight Ball could reach down and grab the platinum chains, a yellow light flashed bright from his eyes, the same time the light flashed on Amorphous Shape’s squares, turning each one a bright gold colour.

“That’s the signal.” Amorphous Shape commented. “It’s time.”

The gold light spread down from Eight Ball’s eyeballs, Bill’s will infusing Eight Ball’s body with magic, giving the colossal monster an extra boost to incite his rampage.

He looked down at the now terrified sales clerk, and grabbed the chains, along with his money, pocketing them both with a low strained “thank …you” before letting Bill’s magic increase his size, making him taller and stronger. Giving out an ear piercing roar that rattled all the jewellery in the shop, Eight Ball marched out into the marketplace, to enact Bill’s will. The mousy associate cowered behind her desk, five QUID short and fearful of her life.

Eight Ball’s warp card stayed on the counter of the jewellery store, forgotten.

The auction block was where the majority of high priced purchases were placed. While the rest of the market dealt in somewhat basic untradeable goods, the really expensive items were held to auction, pulling in far more money on stage than they would through simple in stall haggling. A single item sold on the auction block could fetch more than the entirety of the market purchases would for the entire 38 hour trade loop.

All traders had to pay a quarter percentage cut of their stock sales to Raha Diñeiro, who ran the markets, and while a simple arms dealer might toss up 14,000 QUID for Diñeiro’s stipend, those who dealt at the auction stood to make a lot more money, and by that logic, so did Diñeiro.

Bill, Kryptos and Pyronica stepped into the auction block. Attendants at the door seated them and passed numbered bidding fans over to them, so they could enter the bidding. The auctioneer was leading the previous bidding lot off the stage, the winning bid having gone to a Kree Dignitary, doing some shopping on the sly at the Cryptix Noire.

“And the winning bid of ten thousand QUID, for this charming decorative Adamantium Skeleton goes to the gentleman in the mask at the back.”

A polite round of applause sounded out as the adamantium skeleton in question was wheeled off
the stage, replaced with the next bidding lot.

Kryptos eyed off the Kree Dignitary with awe, possibly impressed by the amount of money the gentleman bid.

Bill leaned across to Kryptos and whispered. “A lot of fuss for a fancy paperweight.”

Kryptos seemed surprised, then notably reconsidered his impression of the Kree bidder, sneering imperiously at them.

Bill sat back, amused at Kryptos’ odd expressions of loyalty. The compass may be one of Bill’s most infuriating henchmeniacs, but the rhombus believed up and down that Bill’s insight was the ultimate authority. He put a lot of faith in Bill’s all seeing ability, as Kryptos was one of the few cosmic beings in the nightmare realm who realised that knowledge was power. He trusted Bill to know the relative value of the things sold up on stage.

The auctioneer announced the newest bid, while the handlers dragged the next item for bidding up onstage.

“Next we have a collection of worshippers, harvested from Bajor. The unspoken backbone of any potential God’s retinue, these worshippers are delivered primed for subservience, and can greatly boost a being’s power. Shall we start the bidding at 50,000 QUID?”

The five scared, shivering, chained Bajorans were herded onto the stage, obviously trafficked, bound and ready to be sold to the highest bidder. Bajorans had a reputation for being a deeply spiritual people, worshipping the Prophets on their home-world. They were a humanoid species with rather characteristic creases along the bridge of their noses, and wide expressive eyes. On stage were three males, all young adults, their clothing tattered and dirty, and an adult female Bajoran holding onto a younger female by the shoulders. The younger female was already crying, and the adult Bajoran woman was comforting her, maintaining a brave face while petting the child’s shoulders soothingly.

All around the auction block, hands raised, eager to jump in on the bidding. Kryptos saw this, and raised his own hand, not wanting to miss out.

Bill slapped Kryptos’ hand down sharply. “Don’t bother bidding on something like this. It’s a waste of time and more importantly, effort. Sheesh.”

“But I thought garnering more worshippers was a good thing?” Kryptos questioned, watching the other bidders compete with each other, the price already climbing slowly.

“Worship has to be willingly given, or it doesn’t work.” Bill educated Kryptos, not bothering to lower his voice. Some of the nearby bidders lowered their fans, listening in. “It’s something that can’t be forced. Buying those Bajorans is a huge rip off, because you’re not buying worshippers, you’re buying slaves, and slaves are a steal. No one’s going to pay 50,000 QUID for a single slave.”

Slaves were a dime a dozen. Forcing someone else to perform menial labour for you was a universal constant unfortunately, and even the slaves who got paid, still lost their autonomy in so many ways. The slave trade was regrettably just as lucrative on an interdimensional scale now as it had always been anywhere, and even the interdimensional Federation’s attempt to regulate the slave trade to reduce abuses backfired horribly. These days anyone with a functional space ship could go down to a planet not advanced enough to protect itself and beam up slaves for all sorts of things. Slaves literally were a steal.
Kryptos’ mouth formed a small ‘o’ of understanding.

“Chances are even if you buy them, they’ll still be worshipping their old god, and praying like mad that you’ll die spontaneously for oppressing them in the first place, or better yet, they’ll act on that wish. Now, if you want them as slaves, they’ll do the trick, but if you buy them for the express purpose of them worshipping you, you’re shit out of luck.” Bill continued, his voice ringing out across the room. He’d seen slavery in Egypt, and was familiar with the concept. The Pharaohs devoted their own slaves to Bill’s service, building the pyramids as tribute to him. He liked the pyramids. But the slaves never worshipped him, so they didn’t matter.

“You know the old saying it’s better to be loved than feared? 100% applies to the relationship between a God and their worshippers. There’s dignity in worship, there’s no dignity in buying your worshippers at a market like chattel.”

Kryptos noticed that Bill’s monologing was drawing a crowd, and saw even the higher rolling bidders beginning to withdraw their bids.

Bill was deliberately turning the crowd.

Cottoning on, Kryptos asked Bill a little louder. “Then why would anyone sell them as worshippers in the first place?”

“It’s a gimmick Kryptos.” Bill explained, smirking at the compass who was playing along so well. “There’s only one way to turn a profit on power when it comes to a slave purchase like this, and that’s to lift them out of slavery and give them the tools to reclaim their dignity. To offer them their salvation. They’ll rely on you, and worship you, because you can better them. That’s why gullible people like them look to a God in the first place. To better themselves. But that’s so much effort. And since anyone who would bid on a worshipper in the first place is undoubtedly both lazy and impotent, a sad-sack sorry excuse for a God, I highly doubt any one of these bidders would go to the effort that it takes to actually squeeze a single drop of authentic power out of these 50,000 dollar freebies.”

The slave dealers on the stage were glaring at Bill now, their hands clenched into fists. The auctioneer was vainly trying to regain his previous bids, but no one was buying. Bill had both educated and enraged the audience, insulting half of them in his loud cheerful voice.

The Bajorans on the stage were looking at Bill in confusion mostly, except the adult woman, who was holding the girl in front of her and glaring daggers at the triangle, furious. No doubt she had hoped to spare her child the rigours of slavery by allowing them to be sold as a worshipper, as bought and sold worshippers generally had a cushier run of things, though the run was usually short lived, given most bidders noticed the lack of profit garnered from their investment soon enough and lashed out at their charges.

The security guards at the side of the auction stage were whispering into their earpieces and the skybox floating above the market’s dome began to descend, closing in on the auction block. Bill noticed, and sat back in his chair, fanning himself with the bidding fan idly, imagining what the security guards could be saying. Something along the lines of: Bill Cipher’s here sir, and he’s ruining your auction. That was satisfying.

“That being said, I’d outbid EVERYONE here for the express purpose of showing them up.” Bill continued loudly, addressing the angry bidders. “Because a real God doesn’t need to buy worshippers to prove that they’re worthy. If that’s something they’ve got to prove, they’ve already failed in the first place. And if they have to bid on worshippers to be worshipped, then its already something they can’t afford.”
Bill was oozing smugness, and every other bidder in the room was now outright glaring at him, beyond insulted. Bill anticipated they would be, as only the lowest sort of compensatory beings would actually bid on enslaved sentient beings and intend them as worshippers. It was a joke made all the more hilarious by the fact that Raha Diñeiro was on his way down to summon Bill to his sky box this very second for threatening to turn his market like that.

Leaving the bidding on a high note, Bill raised his bidding fan, and called out. “80,000 QUID.”

Suddenly the room was in an uproar, every cosmic being shouting out their bid over the crowd, wanting to be the God who outbid Bill Cipher. The auctioneer was frantically trying to keep track of the bidding, pointing left and right with his seven arms catching the bids.

The Bajorans on stage still looked dazed by the bidding war, but the woman noticed what Bill had done, and looked at him appraisingly. Whether or not he meant to, Bill had just earned himself another worshipper, and he felt the ping of her regard sizzle through him. She was smart, that one. Bill was impressed. He always liked the smart ones. With luck she’d go to a good home, and she’d cost enough that her life wouldn’t be wasted.

One of the suited security guards cut through the back of the crowd to lean down over Bill’s chair, whispering to him. “Mister Diñeiro would like to see you in his office.”

Turning to Kryptos and Pyronica, Bill passed his bidding fan to them and winked with his one eye. Pyronica blinked back conspiratorially, catching the signal loud and clear.

“You can take care of this for me, can’t you?” Bill purred, his voice low and smug.

“Sure thing Boss.” Pyronica smirked back, taking the fan obediently.

“I’ll be right back.” Bill floated out of his seat covertly, watching the bidding war continue violently as one bidder launched himself over his table to snatch the bidding fan out of his opponent’s hand, starting a fist fight.

The security guard led Bill around the back of the auction block and out a side door, bringing him to a set of stairs that extended down from Diñeiro’s floating sky box office.

As he ascended the stairs, floating comfortably above them, he glowed a brighter yellow for a second, sending the signal out to his henchmaniacs, lending them his power. So far the plan was going swimmingly.

The automatic door to Diñeiro’s office slid open, and following the security guard, Bill floated in, the door hissing closed behind him.

Raha Diñeiro wasn’t a God. Money was his God.

He worshipped money, building his markets from the ground up, amassing connections, doing dirty deals, smuggling, stealing, making it safe for others to smuggle and steal. He made trillions every day with the Cryptix Noire, and hoarded centillions cultivated from his own illegal economy. He amassed funds, influence, workers and paid them all a pittance of what he should have.
His name meant money. Money was his everything.

Raha Diñeiro wasn’t a God, but he had enough money that it didn’t matter. Money was the only universal language that translated the other universal language of greed perfectly, and Raha was fluent in both.

Taking a long drag from an Andolean cigar, wreathed in black smoke, Raha sat on a plush lounge in the viewing deck wearing a smart tailored velvet suit jacket. Whoever tailored the suit jacket had to be incredibly smart, because Raha Diñeiro was a mass of limbs. He had nine of them, arms sprouting out of every part of his torso. In his prime this agility made Raha a formidable criminal, but now he was getting older, his limbs protruded over a rather paunchy belly, having developed much more of a sedentary lifestyle since presiding over Cryptix Noire.

That was fine though.

He didn’t need to be physically fit to have a finger in every pie.

His voice husky through the cloud of smoke, Diñeiro spoke out.

“Cipher.”

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t old Raha Diñeiro!” Bill replied cheerily.

“Who else would it be up here?” Diñeiro snorted. “And I’m not that old. I see you razzing my auction.”

“Your auction was boring anyway.” Bill replied candidly, floating over to Raha, waving the smoke cloud away. “Who’s great idea was it to sell Bajorans as worship-for-hire?”

“Bajorans have an excellent reputation as a devoted, spiritual people.” Raha wheezed, chewing on the end of his cigar with an enlarged underbite. “I figured someone would buy into that crap. Coulda made me a pretty penny.”

“Well, there’s one born every minute, that’s for sure.” Bill remarked, redirecting the lingering smoke to the other side of the viewing deck, clearing the air around himself by rearranging the molecules in the air, and settling down in one of the lounge chairs around the deck. The smoke now settled continuously over by the motherboard, the panel by the window that controlled all of the settings inside the dome, including the emergency warp. “If we’re talking about disposable species.”

“You didn’t come to my markets to lecture me about Bajoran rights.” Diñeiro coughed, and stubbed his cigar in a crystal ashtray on a coffee table in front of the couch. “But so far you have. And you’ve skinned one of my tradesmen alive, not that they didn’t have it coming. I know you didn’t come here to trade.”

“Au contraire!” Bill exclaimed. “But I have. And the first one’s a freebie. You want trade? BOOM!”

Bill flung his hands out dramatically, and suddenly corpses began to rain from the ceiling, summoned, thudding to the floor of the viewing deck with heavy wet sounds.

“Gahh.” Diñeiro flinched, disgusted, peering closer to look at one of the corpses that landed near the couch. He nudged the corpse over with his shoe, and recognised the amphibious three eyed humanoids to be Amaphabon’s from the aquatic quadrant in The Great Axolotl’s sphere of planets.

“What the shit?”
“A donation! Specifically, organ donations! What’s a black market without scurrilous illegal organ trade? You’re welcome!” Bill bowed theatrically, but no one was applauding. Diñeiro’s security team all looked appalled, like they were about to be sick, the smell of rotting fish quickly filling the room.

“Where are their eyes you sick fuck?” Diñeiro questioned, kicking the Amaphabon’s corpse away from him.

“I needed them as currency elsewhere.” Bill explained, levitating the bodies into a tidy pile to minimise the evident disgust on Diñeiro’s face. “Besides, this ought to be enough to butter you up. Let’s get to the good stuff.”

“Ugh.” Diñeiro grunted, holding a hand over his nose, waving the air around him with two other arms, a fourth waving over one of his security team. “Toney, can you clean up these cadavers? Stinkin’ up the place.”

Bill clicked, and the scent disappeared from the air, despite the bodies still being there. Reluctantly Toney and his co-worker began tugging the bodies away, out of the office.

“Did you like my gift?” Bill asked, watching Diñeiro reach for a fresh Andolean cigar, lighting it with a flick of his fingers before Raha could reach for his lighter.

Pausing to look at the cigar, before shrugging, putting his lighter back on the table, Raha reclined in his lounge chair, puffing on his cigar for a moment, thinking, before responding. “A gift, eh? Scared the crap outta me, but I can use this. Thank you.”

Bill waved his hand at Diñeiro, like it was nothing.

“Now getting to this good stuff.” Diñeiro shifted in his seat, facing Bill properly. “What do you want?”

“Lots of things.” Bill replied, as was his habit, before he leaned forward a little in his own chair. “But today, specifically, a piece of technology that I know you have, that you shouldn’t have.”

“I got a lot of things that I shouldn’t have. It’s called a black market sweetheart.” Raha took a long drag of his cigar. “You wanna be more specific?”

“I’m talking about a certain banned apparatus.” Bill said, waving his hand in circles as he spoke. “That came to light about fifteen years ago, from the orbiting cluster that was Antelias’ domain.”

Raha’s eyes widened before he shook his head, waving some of his hands, gesturing ‘no’. “I ain’t doing no business with that apparatus. You ain’t the first person who asked me and I ain’t about to get my name dragged through the mud through whatever revenge war you got going on with another God. That shit’s above my pay grade and I know it’ll come back to me. I ain’t buyin.”

“You’re not buying, you’re selling, and trust me, nothing’s coming back to you. I want the apparatus for personal use.” Bill confessed, trying to smooth things over.

“Bullshit.” Diñeiro spat, leaning back on his couch. “Ain’t nobody got a need for Antelias’ tagger that ain’t to tag their foe and watch them go down. You can suck the life outta a God with that thing.”

“But do you want to hear a story?” Bill began, leaning forward in his chair, ready to tell it anyway. “So here goes. Fifteen years ago, a young and devoted worshipper of the generous God Antelias was faced with an energy crisis. His city was dying, and he had no sustainable way to produce the
energy the city needed to power the infrastructure required to sustain life. So this hopeful young ingénue prays to his God Antelias for a solution. And since Antelias was such a generous god, he inspired his worshipper with the designs for an apparatus.”

“But Antelias is dead, and you could just be makin’ all this up for all I know.” Diñeiro pointed out, gesturing with his cigar.

“You wanna give the all-seeing eye a little credit here?” Bill ts ked, and then went right back to telling the story. “So anyway, skip ahead a year and here we have this apparatus, laced through with so much spellwork and advanced technology it’d make a God cry. The ingénue proposes a trade. Antelias wears the apparatus, and it sucks the energy from the God to power the city, and in return Antelias gets worshipped regularly by the citizens, restoring his power. It was the perfect solution to their sustainable energy situation.”

“Until the people stopped worshipping Antelias, got ideas above their station, built a super weapon, and trapped Antelias there to get sucked dry by his own machine. I’ve heard the story.” Diñeiro scoffed. “Don’t go paintin’ it like it was all sunshine and roses.”

“The point I’m making is that the situation failed because the God wasn’t in control of the apparatus. He handed that over to his people, trusting that they wouldn’t betray him. And what kind of chump trusts anyone these days?”

“Yeah, well I don’t trust that you’re content to just use this thing for personal stuff.” Diñeiro puffed on his cigar, eyeing Bill dubiously. “I know you got your own weird vendetta goin’ on with Time Baby’s goons, which benefits us from time to time, but I hear you’ve been raiding on Big Gill’s turf, and that shit don’t fly.”

Bill watched Diñeiro, his congenial expression shifting. “I never took you for one of his faithful.”

“I ain’t.” Diñeiro replied. “But you’re playin’ with fire, not like it’s a new thing for you to do. I’m watchin’ this go down, an’ I don’t wanna get burnt.”

“If you didn’t want to get burned, why get your hands on the apparatus in the first place?” Bill narrowed his eye at Diñeiro suspiciously.

“Because I knew someday some chump’s gonna come at me and offer a pretty penny for it. And I know that chump ain’t you, because you got no money.” Diñeiro grinned toothily around his cigar, watching Bill’s eye widen innocently.

“That’s an outlandish claim. Me? The Eye of Providence? Devoid of treasures? You don’t even wanna know how many riches I have devoted to my service, because I’m telling you buddy, you’ll cry yourself to sleep each night.” Bill boasted, crossing his arms.

“Boast all you like, that ain’t changin’ the fact that you got no assets you can liquidate. Ain’t nobody throughout the Federation that’ll trade with you or take your currency, and nobody on this side of the Federation is dumb enough to do that either.” Diñeiro chuckled. “You work in deals, and I respect that, but ain’t no deal put on the table is gonna bring you in the QUID I want for this cursed damn apparatus.”

“Since when – when did QUID become better currency than a deal???” Bill spluttered, outraged. “What did a deal ever do to you?”

“Not to me.” Diñeiro shifted in his chair, sitting up more. “But it shaved the skin off some poor kid in the market just now, and he was doing me good business.”
“So you want a deal with no side effects, huh?” Bill questioned. “Let’s say that’s on the table. I want to see the apparatus, and we can discuss terms.”

“Shit, you’re serious.” Diñeiro rubbed two of his hands together greedily, taking a long drag of his cigar in his other hand. “You must really want this thing. Why?”

“Do you want to become an accomplice?” Bill probed casually.

“Fuck no.” Diñeiro replied. “And whatever you do with this shit, it better not come back to me.”

“Then show me the apparatus, and then we’ll talk.”

“Bring it up here Toney.” Diñeiro called out, waving to one of his men.

Toney left to fetch the apparatus, and while he was retrieving it, Diñeiro watched Bill, sucking on his cigar.

“So I’ll bite.” Diñeiro spoke. “Personal use for what? Trying to trim the fat, not skim it, are you?”

Bill raised his brow, smirking at Raha. “Other Gods skim the fat. I’m burning it off like it’s going out of style. Still, waste not, want not. And I want.”

“You always do.” Diñeiro chortled, coughing a little. He wheezed a troubled breath, and fixed Bill with a curious look. “So what’s your secret? This got anything to do with those raids?”

“No, actually.” Bill replied, lacing his fingers together and resting them on his knee. “And I wouldn’t tell you my secret, regardless.”

“Oh sure you would.” Diñeiro scoffed. “You’ve pointed me in the direction of a find or two before.”

“Not this time. This one’s all mine.” Bill said smugly, thinking of Sixer fondly.

“Huh.” Raha shrugged, and puffed on his cigar, content to leave it at that.

The automatic doors to the office opened, and Toney and one of the other men entered carrying both sides of a high tech shielded lock box. They placed it on the coffee table and backed away.

“Open it.” Bill ordered, scrutinising the technology guarding the apparatus.

“Hold yer henchmen. First we gotta talk deals.”

Bill tsked. “What’s there to talk about? You have access to the best medical treatment money can buy, and you’re still wheezing up lungs in your spare time. But you don’t wanna stop smoking your Andolean cigars, or you’d have done it by now. You’re dying, and it’s not a good look for you.”

“Dying, eh? I hate you all knowing types sometimes.” Diñeiro wheezed, coughing and waving the smoke cloud around him away with his hands. “But health ain’t gonna cut it. I need something more to sweeten the deal.”

“Breathing freely isn’t sweet enough for you?” Bill narrowed his eye at Raha, strongly tempted to suck the oxygen out of this pokey little office space just to see Diñeiro splutter.

“I know you got some assets.” Diñeiro pressed. “So pour the sugar. You’re gettin’ state of the art technology here, and clearly you want it bad, or you wouldn’t have come here.”
Bill stewed for a moment, feeling his irritation for the space mobster creep higher, fanning the flames. Bill twiddled his thumbs, deliberating.

“Muscle.” He shot out, tempting Raha.

“Got it.” Raha countered.

“Firepower.” Bill parried.

“Also got it.” Diñeiro grinned. “Next.”

“Strategists.” Bill suggested, keen to pawn off Kryptos for a while.

“Pass.” Diñeiro scoffed.

“Retaliation.” Bill scowled, proverbially gritting his teeth.

“Of what kind?” Diñeiro inched forward in his chair, interested.

Bill considered what he was willing to sacrifice.

Haggling with Diñeiro was like the most irritating game of interdimensional chess ever, and the pieces were all precious to Bill. He didn’t like to share. Especially not with this uppity over armed alien. He wasn’t even a God. He was just a rich, arrogant eyesore.

“You can borrow Eight Ball.” Bill suggested, sliding his metaphorical knight across the board, one step above a pawn since he didn’t want to insult Raha straight off the bat. Though since he’d already dismissed Kryptos as an offer, that may have already happened.

“Sweeter.” Diñeiro insisted greedily.

“Fine. Xanthar. For a week!” Bill raised the stakes, offering his rook.

“I want the dame.” Diñeiro grinned toothily and put his cigar between his teeth triumphantly.

“Pyronica?” Bill couldn’t believe he was hearing this. He wasn’t about to sacrifice his queen to this asshole. He crossed his arms. “No way. Off the table.”

“I want the dame.” Diñeiro repeated. “For two weeks. That’s the kind of sugar I want.”

“No. Pyronica isn’t available. And even if she were, you can’t have her.” Bill said definitively, shaking his yellow body side to side dismissively. “What else?”

“What else you gots that interests me?” Raha leaned back in his chair, chewing on his cigar, unimpressed with Bill’s hard line.

Bill rubbed the bricks under his eye, considering. He usually offered the basics to chumps, riches, fame, power. But Raha was no chump. Plus, he knew Bill was technically broke, at least in terms of Quasi Universal Intergalactic Denomination, and the Federation didn’t accept golden monoliths as collateral anymore. Not that Bill would ever take out a loan from the Federation of all people. At least not after that flashfire at the space bank last time.

He had to think outside of the box, to open the box on the table. He just needed it opened.

Bill leaned forward, tenting his fingers. “Real estate.” He said slowly, catching Raha’s interest.
“What kind?”

“Prime. The Mayfair you’ve always wanted.” Bill proposed, knowing he had Raha now.

“You ain’t talkin -?”

“Third dimension.” Bill said succinctly, oozing smugness. “Earth.”

“No.” Raha said, astonished.

“Yes.” Bill countered, grinning.

“How’d you cinch that? That’s big news. Surely I would’a heard of it by now.” Raha rubbed his own chin with one of his hands, impressed.

“Let’s just say I have my foot in the door.” Bill said smugly, referring to the portal.

“Yer foot in the door?” Diñeiro repeated, sounding drastically unimpressed.

Bill stared at Diñeiro, hardly compelled to repeat what he just said, when Diñeiro started laughing derisively, waving over to his associates.

“You hear that? This bastard’s gonna sell us what he ain’t even got yet. How fuckin’ hilarious!” His loud husky laughter rang out, and even a few of his associates, who were feeling bold enough, managed to get a few snickers in.

Bill sat still in his chair, watching Diñeiro laugh at him, laugh in his face, and decided then and there that plan A – the straight and narrow – was a no go.

It was time for plan B. Burn it down.

“Mayfair. Fuckin’ Mayfair. Hilarious!”

Raha was still hooting, doubling over in his chair, holding his stomach, his eyes watering with laughter, and Bill just sat there, waiting it out.

“If you think I’m gonna deal with your chump change, you picked the wrong chump, buddy.” Diñeiro wiped the corner of his eye, his shoulders still shaking with laughter a little. “So – so here’s my terms. You restore me to the pith of health, no side effects, AND I get your hotsy totsy lady friend for three weeks, and you get your apparatus.”

“Fine.” Bill lied, clenching his fist, pretending to cave. “But I get to see the goods first. You could be trading me sweet nothing for all I know. Open the box, show me the goods, and then we have a deal.”

“Deal.” Diñeiro nodded, and bypassed the security measures on the box, flipping the lid open and swivelling the box around on the table to show Bill.

Bill floated closer to the box, and elongated his arms, picking up the rune encrusted silver cuffs that sat nestled on rich velveteen, turning them over in the light, inspecting them.

“I can’t wait to get my hands on that sweet dame of yours.” Diñeiro leered, fondling the air imaginatively. “Ever since I saw those fiery pins o’ hers.”

Bill felt through the box, making sure there was nothing missing. It was just the cuffs, and a crystal that conducted the flow of energy. Bill held the cuffs in his hands, and grew another hand out of
his back to hold up the crystal too, inspecting it closely.

“There, are you satisfied. They’re the genuine article.” Diñeiro gestured to the box on the table. “Ripped straight outta Antelias’ crusty corpse. All yours. You wanna make with the health first, or your lady friend?”

Bill blinked up at Diñeiro casually. “Oh, neither.”

“Whadda ya mean, neither?” Diñeiro bit down on his cigar, clearly reigning back his temper. He scowled, his expression quickly becoming sinister. “We had a deal.”

“I didn’t shake on it.” Bill shrugged innocently, then vanished the objects in his hands, wiggling his fingers like a magician. “Woops!”

“Why I oughta –” Diñeiro growling, making to lunge out of his chair before something heavy hit the side of his floating skybox, denting the metal wall, knocking the skybox off kilter, sending Diñeiro and his men sliding across the floor of the office to thud against the wall near the automatic doors. Some of the men weren’t so lucky, and landed bang in the middle of the doors, tripping the sensor to open them, sending them hurtling out from the sky box, falling down to the markets below.

Bill cackled, and split his form into six different images, using five of them to gloat, and the sixth to creep over to the smoke cloud by the motherboard.

“You said so yourself Raha, I didn’t come here to trade.” Bill’s voice echoed, split between his forms.

“Sir, some goliath of a creature is destroying the market.” A panicked static sounding voice blared out over the office’s emergency radio. “He’s fifty foot tall, no eighty! And his eyes!! He’s destroying everything!”


Flicking his warp card at Diñeiro, the plastic square landing squarely on the mobster’s lap, Bill laughed wildly at Raha, his laughter echoing obnoxiously.

“Nobody steals from Raha Diñeiro!” Raha shouted, sending spittle flying, going red in the face, beyond furious. “Nobody!!”

“I think you’ll find, I just did.” Bill countered, smug, floating over the mobsters, oozing superiority.

One of the mobsters managed to reach for their laser gun, firing the weapon at one of Bill’s images. The shot zapped straight through the image, dissolving it into nothingness in the air.

“Shoot him again!” Raha ordered, elbowing one of the mobsters to his left, rifling through the guard’s jacket to yank his weapon off him, aiming the gun at another one of Bill’s images.

“Well, it’s been fun.” Bill commented idly, before Raha shot his laser through that image of Bill, dissolving it.

“A blast even.” One of Bill’s other images continued, hardly fazed by the destruction of his doppelganger. That image was also immediately shot.

“Let’s do this again sometime!” Bill said congenially, watching his fourth image dissipate into the
air, before taking a laser to the brick, sizzling away his fifth image.

“Where did he go?” Toney yelled, searching around the deck, aiming his gun as he scanned for potential hiding places.

“He’s in here somewhere. There’s only one way in and out of Cryptix Noire, and that’s by my say so.” Diñeiro insisted.

Outside of the skybox, a deafening roar rattled the windows, making the mobsters wince and cover their ears. People were screaming, and parts of the market were on fire, burning pink flames.

Bill’s final form was visible now, over by the motherboard, the cloud of smoke around him dissipating. He had flipped up the safety casing on the emergency warp button, his finger resting on top of the button.

“But wait!” Bill gasped, his hand other on the side of his eye, like he was holding his cheek. “What does this button do?”

“No, no – no, no - NO!” Diñeiro shouted, holding his hand out in front of him, reaching vainly for Bill to stop him.

“What is it you’d say Raha? Bada-bing, bada-BOOM!” Bill crowed cheerfully, pressing down on the button, activating the emergency warp.

The room stretched, particles jumping ahead, dragging instantly through gravity, time, space, and the continuum at large, ripping the molecules of the market from one place to another, hurtling them through the immeasurable distance.

It only took a second for the warp to complete, and by the time it stopped, the skybox righted, becoming horizontal once more. The mobsters slid down from the wall, and landed their feet on the floor finally.

Bill Cipher was nowhere to be seen.

Toney paced over to the window, gun in hand, and the giant monster was nowhere to be seen either. Just the trail of devastation he left in his wake.

Clutching onto the plastic warp card, Raha Diñeiro’s hands shook with rage, all nine of them, as he looked out upon his ruined marketplace. Cryptix Noire was his baby. His brainchild. And now that insufferable triangle had to come along and burn it all up without spending a single penny doing so. Bill stole from him.

Raha growled, a low building sound. He tore the plastic card in half he was so furious.

Gritting his teeth, he gave into his temper, and howled out, his voice echoing in the skybox.

“CIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIIPHHHHHHHHHHHHERRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRRR!”

As the market warped away, Bill, Pyronica, Kryptos, Keyhole, Amorphous Shape, Teeth, Paci-fire and Eight Ball, along with a few cardless stragglers were ejected out into the Coma Cluster. When the protection of Cryptix Noire’s artificial gravitational field was revoked, the precarious
positioning of the market’s location on the rim of a supermassive black hole showed it’s tactical worth.

Winding his arms out long, Bill wrapped those thin black noodles of his around every member of his crew, securing them tight in loops, already feeling the pull of the black hole sucking away at their matter.

A few stranded shoppers reached out desperately to Bill for help, but he brushed them away, only here for his own.

“Time to bust this popsicle stand.” Bill gritted out, fighting the pull of the black hole for a second longer, before teleporting himself and his crew away.

When they materialised back in the Nightmare Realm, safe inside the roiling atmosphere they called home, Bill unwinded his arms, pulling them back to their normal size.

“Everyone in one piece?”

“Is that a rhetorical question?” Amorphous Shape asked amiably, unfolding several of his squares, detaching them and reforming them again cheekily.

“Well, at least we can all now rest in pieces.” Bill quipped, before turning to face his crew, who were all righting themselves. Kryptos was patting himself down, frantic that he’d lost a few key molecules, having never been so close to a black hole like that before.

“Did we get the stuff, is my next redundant question?” Bill asked, looking at his two teams expectantly.

Teeth reached into the back of his mouth and pulled out the potential energy cubes triumphantly. Paci-fire pulled the dummy out of his second mouth and spat out his share of the cubes, the batteries falling to hover in front of him, slightly wet with his saliva.

“Excellent!” Bill commended them. He turned to Amorphous Shape and Keyhole. “And you?”

Amorphous Shape’s squares shimmered before unfolding the converter into existence.

“What is that? An N-T 17?” Bill queried, tilting to look the converter over.

“Well, they said that’s all they had.” Keyhole grinned. “But AM looked out back, and turns out they had something better.”

“They always keep the good stuff out back.” Bill chuckled, rubbing his hands together. “So what does it do?”

“Same as a N-T 17, but with no cap on it.” Keyhole explained. “Apparently making it this way is unsafe and illegal, blah blah blah.”

“It’s just the right one.” Bill clapped, pleased.

“Keyhole was quite the smooth talker.” Amorphous Shape volunteered, sounding proud.

“Yeah, the guy even gave me his card. Look!” Keyhole pulled the card out of his metaphysical pocket, brandishing it to show Bill.

“Hmmm.” Bill floated closer, examining the card.
It was pretty standard for interdimensional engineering practitioners, with a tap activated hologram and map to their workshop location. Bill tapped it and watched the hologram swivel about atop the card, and realised this was the perfect souvenir to take for Sixer. A harmless gimmick, but just interesting enough to keep him entertained.

“Can I keep this?” Bill asked Keyhole.

“Sure Boss.” Keyhole conceded the card immediately. “You’re going to go back for more business?”

“Oh, I don’t think we’ll be welcome back there for a long time.” Bill snorted, and pocketed the card. “At least not until management changes hands. I hope everyone got the knickknacks they wanted. What about you buddy?” Bill turned to Eight Ball. “Did you get anything?”

“Uhn.” Eight Ball grunted, pulling the titanium chains out.

“More chains? Don’t you have enough already?”

“He didn’t have to pay a dime for them.” Keyhole boasted his friend’s achievements. “Swindled five bucks outta the sales girl. She was gonna buy ‘em for him.”

“Someone’s got an admirer.” Bill oohed, batting his eyelashes at Eight Ball.

“Uhn. I’m irresistible.” Eight Ball grunted in his charming monotone.

“Well, it’s been a good heist.” Bill glowed, still exuberant from their exhilarating departure. “This is where I leave you, unfortunately.”

“Did you get what you wanted from Diñeiro?” Pyronica asked Bill.

“Yes.” Bill said simply, choosing not to disclose more than that. He sectioned the information for this heist off very carefully so as to keep the finished product a secret.

“How much did it cost you?” Pyronica questioned curiously.

“Diddly squat.” Bill replied cheerfully. “He wanted his health back, and you for three weeks. He called you ‘the dame’. I decided he gets nothing.”

“The dame?” Pyronica scoffed. “He couldn’t have said that to my face?”

“You would have devoured him immediately.” Paci-fire pointed out. “As you do with all your other suitors.”

“Exactly. I’d been wanting a snack.” Pyronica laughed, rubbing her tummy.

“Well I’d say Operation Six Fingered Discount was a roaring success, a-thank-you Eight Ball. You guys take those cells to the Quadrangle.” Bill pinched one of the cells before waving the rest over to his henchmaniacs. He waved his hand and took the converter as well, banishing it back to his room on earth. “I’ll catch up with you on the flipside. I’ve got some stuff to do.”

“Yes Boss!” The crew chorused.

Kryptos, now content in the knowledge that he hadn’t lost any of his molecules to the ravenous black hole, looked up to Bill and asked slyly. “What kind of stuff?”

Bill smirked, thinking of Sixer waiting for him. He rolled his shoulders, stretching out his cosmic
Fiddleford McGucket woke up the next morning with the kind of headache that only four hours of
banjo music and hard apple cider could deliver. Reaching for his glasses from the bedside table, he
knocked his knuckles against a tall glass of water, fumbling to catch it before it toppled over and
spilled.

Holding the glass just before it toppled, Fiddleford looked at it in surprise. Alongside the water,
which hadn’t been there when he hit the hay last night, was a plate with two pills on it, and a
handwritten note folded up.

Fiddleford unfolded the note and read it.

*I hope you enjoyed Summerween. You were quite the hit with the locals.*
*Two Advil for your hangover.*
*Sleep well.*

It was Stanford’s handwriting.

That was considerate.

Fiddleford chucked back the pills and swallowed them down with the water, his skull throbbing
dully. Hopefully the pills would work fast.

Setting his feet on the floor, sitting until the world stopped spinning, F felt his equilibrium
beginning to right and decided he should probably go thank Stanford for the pills, and maybe see if
he was up for making one of his amazing big breakfasts, since his friend just so happened to be a
startlingly good cook.

Yawning and tugging on his bathrobe, adjusting his glasses, Fiddleford stepped into his slippers
and trudged out of the delightful attic bedroom Ford had set up for him. He tiptoed down the attic
stairs, wincing as the stairs creaked, not wanting to wake anyone up. It was still quite early.

He paced down the corridor on the second floor, walking past the bathroom, raising his hand to
knock on Ford’s bedroom door, when suddenly from across the hall, the door to Bill’s room swung
open, Ford’s odd benefactor having kicked the door open, holding a strange looking engine of sorts
under one arm, balancing a glowing cube and some bracelets on top of the engine.

Fiddleford jumped in surprise, and froze, rigid, meeting Bill’s wide eyes. It seemed neither one of
them expected to see the other there.

Bill looked between the engine he was holding, to Fiddleford’s face, to his raised hand, about to
knock on Ford’s door.

Blinking blearily at Bill, Fiddleford didn’t know what to think. He adjusted his glasses.

“Um…”
“You saw nothing!” Bill declared, then held out his hand to stop Fiddleford. “No, don’t knock.”

“Oh, uh, I was just—”

“You were just leaving.” Bill decided, raising his eyebrow at the scientist.

“What?” Fiddleford gaped at Bill, baffled.

“You’ve got things to do downtown today.” Bill told Fiddleford. “Remember? An urgent list of things to do for the project. And if you don’t complete them all by sundown, you’re sacked. Off the job. Cut without pay.”

“What?” Fiddleford baulked, flabbergasted. No one told him about this list? He only just woke up, or did he forget something essential last night? He had no idea. “I—I don’t remember a list. What list?”

“You must have left it downtown when we went trick or treating.” Bill clicked his tongue chidingly. “We went over this last night. You’d better find it, quick. It’s very important, and confidential too! It’s essential that you find it and retrieve the items on the list by sundown today, before anyone reads it, or you may as well not bother coming back here. Hurry.”

“I—you’re sure I—oh darn—okay.” Fiddleford gulped, and pulled his bathrobe around him tighter, torn between wanting to wake Stanford up to clarify, and worrying that if he did, he’d admit losing the list, and he’d get the sack regardless. “Can I go and get changed first?”

“No time.” Bill urged Fiddleford, waving his hand at him. “Go! Go now! You don’t want to know what happens if Stanford finds out about this.”

“You won’t tell him?” Fiddleford fretted, worried he’d be letting down his friend only two months into the project, kicking himself for letting something so important slip.

“Not if you leave now.” Bill assured F. “But if you’re not back with that list by sundown I won’t be able to help it if he finds out.”

“It’s downtown you said?” Fiddleford tripled checked, ready to go racing out to his car in his pyjamas.

“Check by the bonfire. That’s where we were last.” Bill added helpfully. “It’s early enough that there’s a chance they haven’t cleaned up yet. It could still be there.”

“Okay.” Fiddleford panicked, mumbling to himself. “Okay. I can do this.”

Bill looked at his wrist meaningfully. “Time is of the essence.”

“Okay. Yes.” Fiddleford nodded, getting ready to race downstairs to the car. He stopped before he got to the stairs, and turned around to look over his shoulder at Bill. “Thank you!”

“You’re welcome.” Bill smiled, amused for a few seconds, before he waved Fiddleford off again. “Now go!”

“I’m going!”

Bill listened to the sound of Fiddleford racing down the stairs, his feet crunching across the grass, the car door opening and slamming shut, before the engine roared to life, and Fiddleford drove out down the gravelly driveway.
Bill exhaled a sigh of relief, and leaned back against the doorframe, releasing the converter from under his arm and letting it hover in the air beside him.

“Phew.” Bill laughed quietly to himself, looking out the window at the end of the hall, into the now empty yard. “Well, that’s that taken care of.”

Shoving his hands into his pants pockets, Bill pursed his lips and began to whistle a jaunty tune as he continued down the stairs, heading towards the lab, the converter, cells, and apparatus hovering obediently behind him.

Laying in bed, half asleep, Stanford rolled over, his face mashed into his pillow, and cracked open his eye a fraction.

Did he just hear something? Like a car door slamming? Like music?

Probably not.

Deciding it was nothing, Stanford nuzzled back into his pillow and closed his eyes, savouring the last few moments of pleasant dreaming.

He must have imagined the music, because someone was whistling in his dreams, and whoever they were, they sounded very happy.

Chapter End Notes

Since this is the multi-verse, I snuck in some Star Trek races, and Marvel references. Also, if Argos sounds like an angry Sir Ian McKellen, Raha sounds like an angry Robert DiNiro.
I also googled 'space currency' and that's how we ended up with QUID, apparently it's a real thing, and scientists also have really good senses of humour.
I hope you enjoyed the space-mobsters chapter hahaha. You all know what's coming next.
Leaning over me, he was trying to explain the laws of geometry. And I couldn't help it, I just had to kiss the teacher.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stanford had re-read his lists from last night eight times before he mustered the courage to leave his room and go look for Bill. He had a game plan. He had to stick to it. Melting points. Boiling points. No beards.

He was almost looking forward to it at this point, having run right around from nervous panic through to the other side. He had dreams last night that were curiously devoid of that unwavering focus on Bill, like his other dreams have had before. His dreams were peaceful and reaffirming, but he woke up missing Bill’s imagined presence regardless.

Boldly stepping forth from his room, clean shaven and daring, Ford poked his head into Bill’s bedroom, looking for him, but his muse wasn’t there. Normally Bill liked to sleep in, this seemed far too early for him. The prisms and unlit candles were sprawled about his bedroom carelessly like he’d let them fall in the night, and there were slight singe marks on the wood floor, like the candles had fallen while they were still lit.

Strange.

Kneeling down to look at the singe marks on the floor, Ford rubbed the ash between his thumb and forefinger, feeling a lot like a detective. It actually reminded him of the first day Bill had been here, flung into physical form. Stanford had played detective to find him then, he could do the same now.

He wasn’t in the bathroom, but there was the imprint of a smiley face drawn onto the mirror while it was misted. The smiley face wasn’t there last night, so Ford assumed Bill had already had a shower this morning.

Pacing downstairs, Ford discovered that Bill wasn’t in the lounge room, but in the hallway there was a single slipper discarded. Ford grabbed the slipper and walked out to the front door, opening it to check the yard for some sort of Cinderella gambit. Bill hadn’t set up some kind of profane experiment there like he had on that first day, but there were tire tracks indicating a car must have sped out of the drive way. Fiddleford’s car was missing so Ford had to presume that the slipper was Fiddleford’s. Ford had only ever seen Bill wear things he’d stolen from Ford’s own room, and Ford didn’t wear this type of slippers.

Bill wouldn’t willingly go out for a drive with Fiddleford. From what Ford could pick up on, Bill deliberately avoided one on one interaction with McGucket, feeling safer with Ford acting as the middleman there. Or perhaps it wasn’t a question of safety, merely preference. Ford did seem to be Bill’s favourite human.

Walking through to the kitchen, bolstered by that thought, Ford noticed the bottle of tapatio sauce he bought for Bill last week from the grocery store was empty, and there was a missing packet of beef jerky in the pantry, clearly Bill was concocting his own breakfast for champions. Ford didn’t approve.

The pantry door was left open, a string bag of raw potatoes was spilled everywhere across the pantry floor. Fiddleford would have cleaned up after making a mess like this, so this was definitely
Bill’s doing. Grumbling, picking up after Bill, Ford put all the potatoes back in the string bag in the pantry.

“I’m going to kiss a slob.” Ford huffed to himself, shaking his head and laughing, before closing the pantry door.

Bill wasn’t in the back yard. He wasn’t around the house at all, so he must be inside.

Ford looked to the elevators.

He had to be downstairs.

Pressing the call button for the lift, Ford pondered whether he’d find Bill in the study, or the lab. He doubted the lab, the only thing to do in the lab was work on the portal, and this was Bill he was talking about. He could hardly get Bill to pass him a wrench on a good day, there was no way he’d be down there tinkering with the portal of his own behest.

Pressing the button for level three, riding on the slight outlier of a possibility that he’d find Bill in the lab (or maybe he was just stalling) Ford’s curiosity helped abate the butterflies running rampant in his stomach again. He wondered if he’d find a reason for the potato spillage, or if he was giving Bill too much credit and the muse had started eating them raw, since he seemed to love them so much. Would he even peel them first? They still had dirt on them. And Ford was going to be kissing that mouth.

The elevator door opened to an empty lab, but there was jazz music echoing down through from the study.

When Ford and Fiddleford made renovations to the lab, Ford had insisted on building a spiral staircase leading up from the laboratory into his private study, but decided it was too risky continuing the stairs all the way up to the top of the shack. The elevator, with it’s alchemically coded buttons, preserved the secrecy of the lab and his study, and he didn’t want just anyone to be able to come and go as they pleased, but he was getting rather tired of the elevator door being shut in his face when Bill was in a mood.

Curious, Ford paced through the lab, over to the spiral staircase, putting his hand on the railing and looking up. The lights were on in his study, and his gramophone must have been switched on, judging from the sound quality. Glenn Miller was playing on one of his vinyls, the sound of big band jazz music livening the room, nice and loud. The sound echoed tinnily throughout the wide empty space of the lab.

Smiling and shaking his head, Ford began to climb the spiral staircase, looking forward to what he would discover in the room above.

When his head finally crested floor level of his study, he saw Bill bopping about, dancing idly to the music, while he appeared to be welding something to what looked like a giant futuristic engine on top of Ford’s writing desk. He was whistling along to the music while he worked, which was charming, but what was less charming was Bill welding this machinery haphazardly on top of Ford’s expensive mahogany writing desk. Welding was supposed to happen in the lab. Ford had seen enough burn marks already this morning.

Sprinting up the last few steps, Ford raced over to Bill, grabbing his shoulder.

“What are you doing?”

Bill looked up at Ford, not wearing a welding visor, and not holding a welding gun. Instead he was
maintaining a small concentrated flame at the tip of his index finger.

“Oh, Sixer!” Bill sounded surprised, raising his voice to be heard over the music, shaking the flame away from his fingertip. “You’re up early.”

“I should be saying that to you, you’re never up this early.” Ford said, running his hand along the smooth wood of his desk, thankfully seeing no burn marks.

“I like to be spontaneous.” Bill replied, grinning, clicking along to the music. “Keeps you on your toes.”

“What is all this?” Ford asked, bringing his hand up now to touch the cold metal of the machinery, running his fingertips over the steel.

“Well, I may have done a little shopping last night, and brought back our solution. Don’t touch.” Bill swatted Ford’s hand away, slapping his fingers. “You don’t know how this thing works. And unless you want to be boring old five-fingers like everyone else, you’ll keep your hands away from my converter.”

“Converter?” Ford questioned curiously, his hand hovering curiously over the machine, eyeing off the smooth engineering. “A converter for what? Where did you get this thing? Not from Gravity Falls. This is advanced.”

“I said don’t touch!” Bill went to swat at Ford’s hand again, but Ford deliberately continued to hover his hand just above the metal, pointing with his index finger.

“Ah. I’m not touching it, see.”


“Souvenir?” Ford questioned curiously, stepping closer to Bill, but Bill turned his chin up at Ford, trying to act like he was ignoring him, but unable to help the sly grin that softened his features. “What souvenir?”

“I said no souvenir for you.” Bill repeated, chiding Stanford, lighting the flame at the tip of his finger again and going back to welding. He seemed to be implanting some sort of crystal into the metal pad on top of the strange machine. “I was going to give you a dazzling gift from the cosmos, a present for being somewhat less irritating lately, but the present is redacted. No present for you.”

“Aww, you got me a present?” Ford cooed sarcastically, picking up on the kind gesture beneath all of Bill’s bluster and poking at it. He walked around behind Bill and put his hands on Bill’s shoulders. “That’s so sweet of you.”

“I said no present! You’ve ruined it now! Present eternally redacted.” Bill hissed, getting his back up at Ford’s patronising tone.

“Someone woke up in a good mood.” Ford said sarcastically, and began to rub Bill’s shoulders, testing his muse in a way. Seeing Bill as his usual uppity self helped take some of the pressure of Ford, it made him less intimidating to woo, having spent time last night aggrandising what wooing a God might mean. This wasn’t so intimidating, it was just Bill. Slowly, experimenting, Stanford continued to massage Bill’s neck and shoulders, aiming for casual but knowing that this was one of Bill’s melting points, wanting to see what it did to him.

“I’m always in a good mood.” Bill murmured as he rolled his shoulders and seemed to
unconsciously lean into the massage for a moment, enjoying it. The flame at his fingertip he was welding with flared out hotter for a second, and Bill noticed, shaking the flame out hurriedly, before turning around and pointing at Ford accusingly.

“Stop that. Stop distracting me. I’m doing important work here. You can distract me later.”

Ford held his hands up, shrugging his shoulders and backing away, feeling decidedly smug. It was gratifying seeing his affect on Bill. It made him feel more confident, and it was even more gratifying to see how easily he could sway the little God, making the flame splutter from his fingertips.

Bill really was too easy.

Ford backed into one of the chairs around the study, and looked over Bill’s work space. The packet of beef jerky was torn open, nearly all gone, sitting on top of one of Ford’s piles of books, and Ford picked up the packet and grabbed the last strip of jerky, taking a bite out of it, getting comfortable.

Bill continued to weld, pretending to ignore Ford once more, listening to the music and nodding his head as he welded.

In the middle of the floor in the study, resting on top of a sheet of plastic Bill must have put down to protect the patterned rug sewn with pictures of his image (not that he cared about the rest of the room, which was splattered with bits of potato, only the parts of it depicting him apparently), the potatoes that were missing from downstairs were set up, spaced out roughly a foot away from each other. Each of the potatoes had numbers written on the plastic next to them, like they were test subjects. Potatoes one through seven were all in various states of disrepair, potato one having exploded outward violently, potato three having shrunk, like all the moisture had been pulled out of it, and potato four was charred and burnt, crispy on the outside.

Potato six was currently wearing what looked like a decorative silver crown on top of it, two enchanted looking silver bangles, covered in runes, balanced precariously on the spud.

“What exactly have you been doing to these poor potatoes?” Ford asked, chewing on the beef jerky. “What did they ever do to you?”

“Well, numbers one through five all failed me miserably, but number six looks promising.” Bill replied, finalising his welding, blowing out the flame on his finger like some sort of space cowboy.

“Does this have anything to do with your mystery converter? What exactly are you converting anyway?”

“Hold all questions til after the demonstration!” Bill held his hand out imperiously, halting Ford’s questions.

Ford sat back in his chair, bemused, and watched Bill rub his hands together, blowing on each palm, waiting for the music to reach it’s crescendo, before switching on the converter and concentrating. He tented his fingers into that upside down triangle configuration again, and seemed to be focusing his energy on potato number six, which Ford had mentally dubbed ‘Patsy’.

The convertor whirred to life, making a futuristic humming noise over the gramophone as it began to function. The crystal welded on the top of the device began glowing a low teal colour, throbbing a deeper blue on and off like a gentle heartbeat. The bracelets glowed blue for a moment as well, before the metal shrunk its size to fit snug around the potato.

Bill seemed pleased with this development, watching the blue glow fade from the bracelets. Patsy
the potato looked well enough for a few seconds, styling the silver bracelets fashionably, as the converter continued to whirr. A blue cube slotted into the left side of the converter, furthest away from Bill, slowly lit up as well, a very pale light emanating from it.

Bill looked over to Ford, grinning triumphantly, and Ford raised his eyebrows and nodded supportively, having no idea what Bill was supposed to have accomplished.

It was cute, Stanford thought, how excited Bill got over his little experiments. Even the ones that made absolutely no sense, Ford thought, looking at how fancy Patsy looked, wondering if that was the desired end result. Considering Bill had lived far longer than Ford could even conceptualise, the fact that his muse found joy in the strangest things, like this, made Ford smile. It really was endearing.

A crackling noise drew Ford’s attention away from appreciating Bill’s giddy smile, and he looked over to Patsy the potato, who was now crisping slightly around the rim of the bracelet, giving off an odd smelling smoke.

“Uh oh.” Bill’s smile fell, and he hastily dropped his meditative pose, fingers flying to tap the crystal on top of the machine. He tapped it once and nothing happened, Patsy still smoking and blackening around the silver bracelet, then Bill impatiently hammered his finger on the crystal repeatedly, looking between the machine and the potato frantically.

Ford made to stand up, cautious, when finally Bill’s button mashing had the desired effect and the bracelets reverted to their usual size, popping off the charred potato and clattering on the floor next to it.

“Phew.” Bill’s shoulders slumped, relieved, and he wiped his forehead, before laughing. “Well that’s a definite improvement on potato number five.”

“Was that supposed to happen?” Ford asked, looking at poor Patsy the potato who looked decidedly overcooked around the middle.

“The important thing is that the apparatus ejected like it should. Took a couple of tries to get that working like it should have. The first three potatoes didn’t get to tap out. Now I’ve just gotta make sure the converter knows how to pace itself, and then it should be good to wear.”

“Wear?” Ford looked between the silver bracelets on the floor, poor chargrilled Patsy, and Bill, before standing up from his chair, enraged, his pleasant mood going up in smoke. “You’re going to wear this?”

“It’s our solution.” Bill blinked innocently at Ford, clearly not seeing the problem here. “Don’t make that face, I went to a lot of effort to get this.”

“You are not wearing that.” Ford slashed his hand through the air definitively. He raised his voice, stepping forward. “No! I don’t want to be a part of some harebrained solution that gets you killed. This is dangerous.”

“Sixer, please.” Bill scoffed, waving his hand dismissively. “Like some puny little converter is going to juice me. It’ll be fine.”

“It’ll be –“ Ford spluttered, indignat and outraged. He flung his hand out, gesturing to the tarp. “Look at those potatoes! Do you want to end up like them?”

“Do I want to be a potato?” Bill raised his eyebrow, being deliberately obtuse.
“You can’t wait ten – well I suppose you can, but still – this???” Ford paced around the study, obviously agitated, running his hand through his hair and gesturing to the potatoes on the plastic sheet. “I can’t believe – well of course you would – but I won’t be a part of – this is reckless – the potato – this!!!”

Bill watched Ford pace, impassioned, for a moment amused by his human’s vehemence, before he clicked to get Ford’s attention.

“Sixer. Sixer hey. Sixer look at me. Look.”

Ford turned to face Bill, still running his hand through his hair, stressed at the thought that he had driven his muse to enact harm upon himself just to be able to touch him, scolding himself for being so irresistible while feeling just the tiniest bit validated by the situation.

He knew now, at least, that Bill wanted this as much as he did, and that realisation elated him, but he felt guilty, conflicted that he’d pause to consider this dangerous move a good thing. His conscience couldn’t bear his feelings being reciprocated like this if it meant Bill was going to get hurt. It wasn’t an acceptable compromise, though he hadn’t exactly been entirely against being burnt just to get his hands on Bill.

It wasn’t the same thing.

Finally looking, really looking at Bill, Ford’s eyes bugged out, every protective instinct flaring up within him upon seeing Bill holding a palmful of flames to the skin of his left arm, the flames licking along the vulnerable inner side of Bill’s smooth skin.

Ford made an aborted movement over to Bill, to yank his hand away, or stop him, or something, when he realised the point Bill was trying to make.

The flames were hot, Ford could feel their heat from here, he could hear their crackle, could see them eating along Bill’s arm, but Bill’s skin was unharmed.

He was fireproof.

“Tickles.” Bill wiggled his fingers, then closed his palm, snuffing the flame.

“Still, your own flame is different –“ Ford blustered, still not convinced that this was safe for Bill to do.

“It’s not.” Bill replied, levitating the bracelets up off the floor, and into his hands. “Sixer, my flames are stronger. Don’t you trust me?”

“Do I trust you not to do something reckless? No, I –“ Ford began, looking back down to the potatoes, feeling sick in his stomach as Bill slid the bracelets over his wrist. “Don’t.”

“Trust me!” Bill urged Ford, stepping over the tarp on the floor, closer to Ford, reaching his hand out to rest it on Ford’s shoulder, the hand with the bracelet on it. “Trust me. Do you think I’d do something that would deliberately put my life at risk? For you? Of course I wouldn’t, I like myself too much to do that, and as I keep telling you, you’re important, but you’re not that important.”

“Are you trying to reassure me here, or -?” Ford asked, unable to help but be a little relieved, trusting Bill’s self-interest if nothing else. Still, looking at the bracelet sitting innocuously on Bill’s wrist made him uneasy, and he reached up to hold Bill’s wrist gently, trying to slide it off.

“No!” Bill shimmied his wrist away from Ford, and clapped his hands onto Ford’s cheeks, like a
double slap, directing him to look Bill in the eye, stepping closer into his space. “Stop. Don’t you want this?”

“How much do you want this?” Ford asked, baffled, his cheeks stinging.

“I don’t want this I want you.” Bill said obstinately, pulling Ford’s face closer. “A concept you don’t seem to get.”

Ford swallowed nervously, his brain latching on to the first part of the sentence, fretting over his muse’s consent. “You don’t want this?”

Bill groaned loudly and rolled his eyes. “God! You’re so stupid!”

Ford pulled his head back, watching Bill incredulously. His muse was glaring at him now, the exasperation real in his eyes, before he took a deep breath, huffing out an impatient sigh, staring at Ford.

Ford couldn’t see why Bill was so frustrated. If anything he should be frustrated, given that he was just supposed to let Bill wear the cuffs that destroyed Patsys one through six effortlessly, given that Bill was impatient for Ford to be okay with that. It was typical Bill, and that realisation didn’t deter Ford from the thought of kissing him. It just made him angry about it.

It was amazing how in the span of a few short minutes Bill could provoke Ford through such a wide range of emotions; amusement, shock, fear, frustration, relief, anger. Here his muse was, an obstinate little thing, insulting him to make him feel better, and Ford felt like laughing. By all rights he should have whiplash at how quickly his mood turned just now.

“I didn’t mean that. Look, Sixer, you’re a smart guy.” Bill squished Ford’s face with his hands, looking him dead in the eye before saying. “Okay, and if this were your machine you’d probably know what you were doing. But this is my experiment, and my choice, and guess what?”

Ford watched Bill intently, his mind racing. Was he going to spell it out for him? Ford wasn’t sure he was ready for that. It seemed too soon. Bill would never say it, but his dedication to making this work was astounding, and it didn’t go unnoticed. Part of Ford still couldn’t believe that someone else could want him so much.

“I’m smarter than you.” Bill said, his finishing statement, smirking up at Ford for a few seconds, still holding his face in his hands.

Ford stared at Bill, Bill’s challenging statement staggering his brain indignantly. Another moment passed, a moment of Ford despairing of and rejoicing his muse’s bizarre behaviour, his bizarre ways, just how absolutely bizarre Bill was, and dammit if it was too soon, he loved it, arrogance and all.

Ford stared at Bill’s smug smirking face until he couldn’t take it anymore and surged forwards, grabbing Bill’s head with his hands, mashing their mouths together, kissing him.

He felt Bill’s lips, hot and soft, felt the vibrations of the shocked noise Bill made when Ford finally kissed him. He’d stunned his muse for a moment. Bill tensed up, frozen, eyes wide open staring at Ford in shock. It was only when Ford began to pull away, not wanting to push himself onto his unresponsive muse, when Bill began to thaw.

Once Ford pulled away, they both stood, staring at one another, panting, Bill’s tattoos glowing like mad.
Ford almost apologised for his advance, for being so bold, when he remembered Bill’s words, the ‘I’m smarter than you’ lingering in the air between them, begging to be proved wrong, and Ford licked his lips and lifted his chin defiantly, staring down his stunned muse.

Bill gawked at Ford, at his defiance. He was thrown aback, his cosmic mind looping around itself like a glitch. He was seething with power, his flame burning bright. Pyronica was right. This was unbelievable, this power, just from the one kiss. Sixer did this, he made the move.

It was incredible. It made Bill insatiable. He wanted more.

Flinging himself forward, landing bodily against his human, looping his arms around Ford’s neck, Bill pressed his lips to Ford’s again hungrily, clumsily, kissing him again, demanding more.

Bill didn’t know what it was about this whole kissing deal, but he’d never burnt brighter. He felt not just his cosmic form, but this paltry physical form of his heating up, tingling with desire. He pulled Ford closer, kissing him insistently.

Three things were true about Bill Cipher. He was greedy, he loved power and he loved sensation, and this was the powerful sort of sensation he could get a taste for.

Sixer’s hands flew to Bill’s waist, steadying him, before he ended up tugging Bill nearer, pressing their hips together, shutting his eyes, kissing back like it was a battle.

It was a battle.

Sixer was a force to be reckoned with. He seemed to know ‘how-to kiss’. His hand was an insistent press on the small of Bill’s back, his other hand snaked up to rake through the back of Bill’s hair, nails scratching along the scalp as he went.

Bill moaned, his eyes rolling back, before falling shut, kissing Ford single-mindedly, passionate despite his lack of prowess, pulling at him, hooking his leg around the back of Ford’s knee, kissing him again, always wanting more, more.

Ford gasped his mouth open, he could smell something burning, but Bill’s lips were an insistent press against the side of his mouth, distracting him, the heat between them building.

He’d never felt this strongly about anyone, or about kissing, despite how much he’d thought about it as of late, but it was like a flip was switched in his brain, and the echo of wanting more resonated, driving him to hold his muse tighter and kiss him harder.

And judging from Bill’s reactions, Ford was pretty good at it, kissing that is. Ford had anguished over whether he’d be a successful kisser, but Bill had even less experience than he had, he’d only had a mouth that wasn’t his eyeball for a few scant months.

“You’re – ‘ Ford met Bill’s lips, kissing him again, finding it hard to pull away despite how clumsy they both were. “Heating – up –“

“Shut up – shut -“ Bill gasped, and kept his mouth open and shivered. Sixer’s tongue probing into his mouth, hesitantly, like a question awaiting an answer. Bill trembled eagerly with the intrusion, only too happy to reply. Tongues were such bizarre body parts, but somehow pressing them together felt so good, and when Sixer licked into his mouth, Bill felt flames sizzle just beneath his skin, all over, making him shudder.

Sixer tasted like worship and it was delicious.
Bill moaned into Ford’s mouth and kissed him back, quickly picking up this whole kissing thing, pitting his tongue against Ford’s in a battle for dominance that Bill felt like losing, just for the beat down. Not that he didn’t give as good as he got, but it was something about this whole kissing thing, something exhilarating, perhaps it was the new body? But regardless of whether or not this was a battle, Bill didn’t want to triumph. He wanted Sixer to wreck him.

He couldn’t do this with anyone else, he couldn’t do this before at all. Sixer made this happen. Sixer, his Sixer, his human, his choice. All his. God this was incredible.

Bill’s hands scrabbled over Ford’s back, gripping on the fabric of Ford’s sweater, raking it up, scrunching it under his hands, just wanting him closer. Bill didn’t want to breathe if he wasn’t breathing into Sixer’s mouth, he was pretty sure that was artificially respirating the scientist at this point given how often Sixer’s little gestures caused Bill to gasp and moan. He wanted so much, the sensation lighting up all different parts of his body that he hadn’t been too aware of before. He just wanted.

Ford threaded his fingers through the back of Bill’s hair and pulled experimentally, needing to breathe on his own, holding his muse back an inch, drawing a loud breathy moan from the muse that turned into laughter.

Getting the chance to look at Bill properly, Ford wasn’t disappointed. Eyes appraising his muse’s blown pupils, puffy swollen lips, mussed yellow hair and heaving chest, something proud and preening warmed in Stanford’s chest. He did that. Bill’s eyes were glowing the strongest gold Ford had ever seen on him, and he looked debauched already, struggling to lean back into Ford, to keep kissing.

“Smoke. Something’s smoking –” Ford had to mutter, so tempted to dive back in, to ravage Bill some more, though the rational part of his brain, which seemed to be taking a backseat to a more pressing feeling against the friction of Bill’s thigh, reminded Ford that he couldn’t do this again if he burnt to a crisp, along with his life’s work in the study.

“Forgot to turn this stupid thing on.” Bill laughed, pulling Ford by his sweater and stumbled backwards, tripping over various potatoes, towards the machine, dragging Ford, pressing intermittent kisses on the scientist’s lips as he went.

Ford followed, vaguely noticing the smell of singed wool, and backed Bill up into the writing desk, running his hand along Bill’s thigh and hitching it up around Ford’s waist. It felt right there.

“I still don’t like you using that thing.” Ford murmured, ducking down to press a kiss against Bill’s neck that had him squirming. “It’s not safe.”

“Nnnghn. You’re – not safe –“ Bill shot back weakly, panting, his left hand gripping onto Ford’s sweater, his right hand patting sporadic places on the converter, looking for the on button without really looking.

“Don’t burn my table.” Ford murmured, dragging his teeth lightly against the skin of Bill’s neck, coaxing a spluttered moan from his muse’s lips.

“You can – “ Bill laughed breathlessly, craning his neck to give Stanford more space to do that again. “You can just buff that out.”

Ford’s hand slid along Bill’s thigh and lifted him up, depositing his muse so he was now sitting on Ford’s desk, Bill’s legs instantly coming up to wrap around Ford’s waist. This had been one of Stanford’s fantasies for a long time. It was playing out just like in his dreams, but with a lot more
laughter on Bill’s part.

Ford nipped Bill’s neck and said tauntingly, his voice low and rough with arousal.

“Do you want me to stop? Don’t burn my table.”

“If I could just—press the button—I could turn this damn thing on—Sixerrrrrrrrrrr—ahhhnn, don’t stop.”

“You’re burning my sweater right now, aren’t you?”

“I’m doing you a favour.” Bill quipped, but let go of Ford’s sweater, patting the embers away swiftly, hoping Ford wouldn’t notice. Bill was still feeling his way across the surface of the converter, looking for the crystal to press, and just as he was about to, Ford caught him by the wrist and held him back, looking Bill in the eye seriously.

“Are you sure you want to try this?”

“Are you going to try and stop me?” Bill paused to ask, poised, ready to press the crystal.

“No. I—“ Ford’s words stunned them both. “I trust you. Despite my better judgement.”

“You trust me?” Bill smiled, his smile stretching the widest it ever had.

“Don’t ruin it.” Ford said, immediately suspicious of Bill’s Cheshire grin.

“I wouldn’t dream of it.” Bill said serenely, still smiling like he’d been handed the universe’s greatest present.

“I want you to tap out straight away if it hurts. Stop immediately, okay?”

“Maybe I want it to hurt.”

“What?” Ford blinked, shocked.

“What?” Bill repeated quickly, laughing off the concern on Sixer’s face. “I’m joking. Hah hah! Or am I?”

“I’m serious.” Ford said vehemently. “I trust you, I don’t trust this machine. Tell me immediately if it hurts you. If something goes wrong.”

“Yeah, yeah.” Bill strained his hand, trying to reach down to press the crystal. “Thanks for the safety briefing, can we get back to it now? I’m starting to like this whole physical form shindig.”

“Well, I did say I’d convince you.” Ford said smugly, letting go of Bill’s wrist.

“I think I need more convincing.” Bill ran his left hand up Ford’s chest covetously. “Ready?”

“Yes, you?” Ford shot back, watching as Bill gamely pressed the crystal in response to that, the converter whirring to life, the crystal glowing like a calm steady pulse once more.

Bill sucked in a sharp breath when the bracelets shrunk to fit snug against his skin, looking at his wrists while the blue glow faded, the cuffs innocuously silver once more. Bill flexed his wrists, testing the fit, looking over the converter curiously, peeking at the pale blue cube lighting up on the other side. The battery was reacting, so the machine must be converting the energy through the apparatus successfully. Bill didn’t feel any different, he didn’t feel drained at all, the energy from
Ford’s kiss still seething through him, but as he watched the crystal on top of the machine throb, he began to feel it, like an ebbing of heat, gradually dissipating through the cuffs into the converter.

“It’s working.” Bill declared, looking up at Ford, pleased.

“Are you sure?” Ford had to question, almost not believing that this solution would work. As much as he wanted it to work, really wanted it right now, he was wary of their luck. It couldn’t be that good, something bad had to happen.

“It’s working.” Bill repeated, excited, before holding his hand out at Stanford. “Here, lick my hand.”

Ford scoffed and rolled his eyes, before reaching past Bill’s hand to cup the back of his head, pulling him in for another kiss.

Bill closed his eyes, humming, enjoying the kiss, feeling the heat of the worship simmer up inside him, just as strong, before drawing away into the apparatus. Antelias’ worshipper really knew what he was doing when he made the thing, Bill had expected it to chafe, or feel unpleasant, or pull rudely at his power, but instead it was just a gentle flow attuned to the God’s energy. No wonder it didn’t work on the potatoes, the potatoes weren’t equipped to handle so much cosmic energy, it was Bill burning them out, not the apparatus.

This was easy, Bill thought as he kissed Sixer, liking this new feeling very much. He didn’t feel like he was being overwhelmed anymore, which meant he could actually focus on feeling the sensations Ford was offering him, without his power sizzling his nerve endings relentlessly.

Kissing was nice. This was nice.

“You’ve slowed down a bit.” Ford murmured against Bill’s lips, pressing their foreheads together. “Are you alright?”

“I can actually feel things without being overwhelmed.” Bill explained, his eyes no longer glowing, but still bright, looking up at Stanford. “I like that too, but this…it feels different.”

“Do you like it?” Ford asked curiously, running his hand along Bill’s thigh, testing.

Bill nodded, his own hand feeling across Ford’s muscular chest, exploring. “Is this what you feel?”

“I don’t know what you feel, so I can’t really say.” Ford continued to feel along Bill’s thighs, his palms running over the tops of them now, pressing his thumb a little harder along Bill’s inner thigh to watch him squirm, spreading his legs further apart.

“Nnnngn.” Bill wriggled on the tabletop, feeling a shiver of arousal spike down his spine, human hormones reacting without being overwhelmed by the godly sizzle of power. “I still feel hot.”

“You’re not burning up.” Ford noticed, pressing his lips gently to Bill’s forehead, testing his temperature. Bill still ran hotter than Ford, but not overtly like before. It felt more like kissing another human than kissing a God, but, Ford thought fondly, watching Bill poke a hole through the singed fabric of his sweater, Bill most decidedly wasn’t human.

“Are you going to lose this?” Bill asked, referring to Ford’s sweater.

Obediently Ford pulled his sweater up over his head and discarded it, dropping it on the floor. He was wearing a white t-shirt underneath, and it clung fetchingly to his torso, only slightly stained with ash.
Bill had a moment to appreciate the sight, before Ford leaned in to steal another kiss from Bill, capturing his lips. Privately congratulating himself on correctly anticipating his muse’s melting points, Ford mentally reviewed his list of boiling points. He knew there were benefits to Bill no longer being so overwhelmed, but Ford still wanted to push Bill to boiling over, just to know that he still could.

It was time to experiment.

While kissing Bill, Ford snaked his fingers into Bill’s hair, his thumb rubbing soft circles on Bill’s cheekbone while he ventured. Ford sucked on Bill’s bottom lip a little, before tracing along it with his tongue, opening Bill’s mouth up for a deeper kiss.

Bill made a small pleased noise at the back of his throat, and wriggled closer to the edge of the desk to press up against Sixer. He could feel his power cresting then ebbing away unobtrusively and it was interesting how the littlest things could encourage a spike in energy before he felt the apparatus begin to pull away at that energy.

When Sixer got lost in kissing him, their motions becoming instinctual and unthinking, the energy was a pleasant low burn, but when Ford paused deliberately, pulling back to look at Bill with awe in his eyes, or to run his thumb across Bill’s lip, watching him, when he grabbed Bill’s wrist and pressed a worshipful kiss to the vulnerable pulse point there just above the bracelet, when he tipped Bill’s neck back and pressed his lips to Bill’s jugular, sliding his six fingered hand up under Bill’s shirt, feeling the muscles jump on his stomach, gaining access to all the soft vulnerable parts of Bill’s body that could be slashed or ripped out or torn apart leaving him to bleed out and suffer, Ford worshipped him instead. And when Ford worshipped him like this Bill was practically vibrating with energy, clinging to Ford desperately, his tattoos glowing bright, swear words in eight billion languages spilling from his lips.

Laying Bill back across the books and notepads that tumbled across Ford’s desk, Ford kissed his muse silly, muffling Bill’s backwards speech with his lips, before pinning Bill’s wrists to the desk, pulling back to look at him.

Bill wriggled and strained, trying to reach back up to Ford, his back arching to be closer to him.

“Elohssa uoy pots tnod. Побрзај. Come on! Sixer!”

“I just want to look at you.” Ford replied, oozing smugness, looking Bill right in the eye despite his desire to take in the muse’s image.

Bill was normally the one who watched others, so he couldn’t have predicted the way that made his human stomach flip, spiking his arousal. It surprised him, and he took a moment just to watch Sixer in shock, taken aback by how much this human seemed to hit on his favourite things without even trying. Part of Bill would always want to be seen, really seen like this. His human was playing him like a fiddle. Damn Sixer for being so perceptive.

Ford began raking his eyes down Bill’s form now, and it made Bill squirm.

Unbeknownst to both of them, the crystal welded to the converter was flashing, no longer like a gentle heartbeat, more like a hummingbird going into cardiac arrest.

“You’re beautiful.” Ford uttered, watching Bill squirm on the tabletop before him, just like in his fantasies, but somehow different and better. This was everything he had wanted.

“You made me like this.” Bill pointed out.
“I did.” Ford replied simply, eyeing off his work.

“But I was beautiful before too of course.” Bill added, watching Sixer shrewdly. “An angular work of art.”

“I liked your bowtie.” Ford smiled, leaning down to kiss Bill’s neck, pressing their hips together as he did so.

Ford’s arousal rubbed against Bill’s hip, impatient, and he was surprised to note that he couldn’t feel Bill’s own arousal pressing back. His muse was obviously aroused though. Ford wanted to check he was doing this right, but he didn’t think he could just start groping Bill down there, they hadn’t quite reached that point yet.

“Am I your God?” Bill asked Ford, the gold glowing bright along his tattoos.

Ford was tempted not to answer, knowing the answer would give Bill a big head, not wanting to engender that now that he finally had Bill unbalanced for once. But watching Bill inhabiting the body he had made for him, looking so perfect in it, responding to him, reaching out to him, and choosing him again, Ford could only be honest.

“Yes.” Ford confessed, leaning down to bracket Bill’s torso with his elbows, moving in to kiss his muse again.

As his breath coasted over Bill’s lips, Bill spoke again, demanding. “Say it. Say it to me.”

“You are my God.” Ford complied hastily, more reluctant to admit it here than he had been in his dreams, the words running out like breath, impatient to put his lips to Bill again.

The converter was running as normal, but the pale blue cube attached to it was now burning a bright white, sparking a bit at the edges.

“Do you worship me?” Bill asked again, pulling back slightly, withholding the kiss until he got his answer, indulgent beyond belief.

Ford looked at the smug little God on the table and thought the answer was obvious, knowing Bill was trying to wring it out of him for the sake of his ego being satisfied.

“What do you think?” Ford replied, and pressed his lips to Bill’s again, pouring his worship into the kiss.

Bill’s tattoos glowed a vibrant gold, and the air around him began to glow gold too, like an aura building. He shimmied a hand free from Ford’s grasp to cling onto the back of Ford’s head, burying his fingers in Ford’s fluffy soft hair, kissing Stanford smugly like he owned him, knowing that he did. Ford could feel Bill smiling into the kiss.

There was a loud shriek to the right of them both, followed by a blaring alarm tone, as the cube at the side of the machine cracked and sizzled.

Ford stood up to look around.

“What was that?”

Bill reached up to snag Stanford by the shirt front, pulling him back down, mashing their lips together.
“Don’t stop now.”

“No, I really think something’s on fire this time.” Ford mumbled against Bill’s lips, resisting, his head looking around the study expectantly.

“I don’t care if the world’s on fire.” Bill said demandingly. “Keep going.”

“Bill, you—” Ford tried to stand, Bill’s arms looped around his neck, trying to pull him down. Ford resisted and managed to pull up again, Bill hanging down from his neck now, additional heavy weight to lift. Ford looked around the room, only to see his bookcase, filled with priceless books and past journals of his study was crackling with flames like it had been hit by lightning.

“My bookcase is on fire!” Ford panicked and sprung away from Bill, prying his hands away from Ford’s neck, leaving Bill to fall back on the desk with a thump. Ford picked up his burnt sweater from the floor and raced over to the bookcase, trying to muffle the flames.

Bill propped himself up on his elbows and watched sulkily as Ford frantically tried to smother the flames, making no move to help him. The alarm continued to blare from the machine, louder than the big band music from the gramophone.

“Bill, help! There are first editions in there.” Ford looked over his shoulder to his muse’s lazy recline on his mahogany study desk.

Bill began to examine his nails idly, displeased with their interruption. He didn’t seem to care how frantic Ford was.

“My original copy of Charles Darwin’s The Origin of the Species is in here.” Ford said, as though that was meant to motivate Bill somehow.

“So, just buy another one. I’ve given you enough money, haven’t I?” Bill flopped back to lay down on the desk, lazy, spreading his arms out wide. He could still feel the ebb and flow of the apparatus pulling at him, but it still didn’t hurt, so Bill assumed nothing was wrong. He felt comfortable still, like he didn’t want to move.

“It’s a first edition!!!” Ford stressed, risking burns to pat down the flames encroaching on his book collection.

Bill yawned, and blinked up at the ceiling. “I’m tired.” He announced, his eyes starting to lid shut. The alarm siren blared emergency tones in a loop, and Bill wiggled his shoulders, getting comfortable on the desk.

Ford managed to smother the last of the flames, only receiving minor burns, when he turned to look at the cube attached to the converter, seeing it sparking dangerously again.

The cube was radiating a strong white light, and seemed to be cracking at the corners, leaking unstable energy. Looking around the room for some kind of tool to remove the cube with, Ford first tried to lift the cube from the machine with his bunched up sweater, and the sweater’s molecules disintegrated instantaneously, practically burning off the first layer of skin on Ford’s fingertips.

Ford hissed and examined his red fingertips, lamenting the loss of any discernible fingerprint, before looking over to Bill. He nudged Bill’s leg with the back of his hand.

“Bill, help me. It’s too hot for me, I can’t touch it.”
Bill smacked his lips and curled onto his side, nuzzling into the desk, mumbling. “Sreenigne nealognA morf yub ekaf I emit tsal eht, gnirutcafunam ydohs.”

“Bill!!” Ford shook his muse more persistently, watching the yellow aura around him fade slowly, dulling Bill’s colours. His eyes shot to the bracelets around Bill’s wrists, back to the machine where the blue crystal was blinking like an epileptic lightshow.

His mind racing back to the potato experiment, Ford slammed his burnt finger on the blue crystal on the top of the machine, pressing down on it like a button, until it beeped gently and the cuffs sprung off Bill’s wrists, now hanging loosely rather than grafted tight to the skin. Ford yanked the cuffs of Bill’s wrists and threw them across the study, lifting Bill’s floppy body up from the table, despite the pain in his fingertips, shaking Bill’s shoulders, trying to rouse his muse into wakefulness.

“Bill? Bill!? Wake up. Bill!!?” Ford ducked down to press his ear to Bill’s chest, listening for a heartbeat, but hearing only a staccato arrhythmic beat that hardly resembled a heartbeat. It sounded more like a muffled clicking noise than a heartbeat, and whoever was doing the clicking had no sense of pace or tempo. Had it always been like that? Ford hadn’t really listened to Bill’s heartbeat much before.

Bill mumbled something unintelligible, followed by a contented sounding sigh as he snuggled into Ford’s arms. “Elbatrofmoc os er’uoy. Dinner and a show.”

Blinking at Bill, a creeping outrage encroaching on his relief, Ford dropped his muse on the floor, sufficiently convinced Bill was no worse for the wear, unlike he was, bearing burns on his fingers.

“Ow! Hey!!!!” Bill complained, blinking into wakefulness upon being so rudely dumped on the floor next to the potatoes.

“I should never have trusted you!” Ford fumed, outraged.

“What?” Bill blinked up at Ford, baffled.

“You almost died! You could have got us both killed!” Ford seethed indignantly, lashing out. “You wouldn’t have cared if this whole room burnt up around us.”

“Sixer, we’ve been over this, I’m fireproof remember?” Bill groaned and sat himself up slowly, rubbing his wrists.

“You may be fireproof, but I’m not.” Ford scowled and showed Bill the burns on his hands, unimpressed with the lack of empathy Bill was showing him, looking at the burns like they were a mild inconvenience and not a painful disaster. “Trusting your judgement is what led to this, but I should have known you’d be impatient and reckless and so stupid.”

“Excuse me??” Bill exclaimed, hardly believing what he was hearing.

“I’m burnt because of you!”

“You knew you were playing with fire the moment you summoned me here. That’s right, you summoned me. Not the other way around. You wanted me, and congratulations, you got me, here I am.” Bill shouted back at Ford. “I didn’t even burn you this time, it was the machine, but NO this is Bill’s fault.”

“This is your fault!” Ford gestured to the machine sitting on his desk, no longer wailing in alarm, though the cube still looked unfathomably bright. “All of this is your fault. This isn’t a solution,
“Well pardon me Joan of Arc. You’re the one who cares more about your precious books than you do about me. If you don’t like it, why haven’t you come up with a better idea? If you’re so smart.” Bill sneered up at Ford, strongly tempted to hurl potato number seven at his head.

“Well, maybe I will!” Ford yelled back stubbornly.

“Maybe you –“ Bill started to yell back, before he paused, an idea dawning on him. “You could try, actually. It doesn’t hurt to have two minds working on this.”

“It doesn’t hurt?” Ford blustered, showing Bill his blistered hands once more.

“Relax Sixer. Oh stop whining. I can make your skin grow back.” Bill said dismissively, his mind already running through the possibilities.

“Make it happen now then!” Ford insisted, his fingers throbbing painfully.

“Oh, I don’t know. Maybe I should make you wait a day or two, like you did with me before unbinding my magic.” Bill replied pettily. “See how you like it.”

“I don’t like it.” Ford said, sounding tired, his burnt hands draining him. “And I’m sorry I ever put you through that in the first place.”

Bill looked at Ford, scanning him for sincerity, before he sighed, and picked himself up off the floor.

“Here.” Bill clicked his fingers and healing blue flames sparked across Ford’s hands, knitting the skin back together. “Though sometimes having no discernible fingerprints is a good thing.”

“I’m sure.” Ford smiled wryly, rubbing his fingertips together, the skin having healed flawlessly. “So explain your machine. Why did it break? Maybe I can fix it.”

“It didn’t break, from what I can tell.” Bill looked over the machine, examining it. “The battery reached capacity faster than anticipated, and that’s what caused the leak. I have 20 more batteries, so as long as they get switched over before reaching capacity, it should work.”

“This isn’t a sustainable solution.” Ford pointed out. “If one battery can reach capacity in just twenty minutes, you’ll run out of battery space and we’ll be right back to square one again before we get the chance to truly experiment.”

“Experiment?” Bill shot Ford a questing look.

“You know what I mean.” Ford blushed, scratching his chin.

“Do I?” Bill continued slyly, pressing to watch the red creep up the scientist’s cheeks.

Looking away from Bill’s sly smile, flustered, Ford looked over at the machine again. “We can’t continue to use this device, it isn’t safe.”

“Sure it is.” Bill put his hand on his hip, striding over to Sixer. “We put another battery in it and it’ll be fine.”

“You were passed out Bill. You fell asleep right there on the table.” Ford pointed out, sounding worried.
“Well you mustn’t have been very good then.” Bill smirked, joking. Ford scowled at him and Bill ruffled Sixer’s hair cheekily.

“You’re not funny.” Ford felt compelled to tell his smirking muse.

“Yes I am.” Bill grinned, enjoying Sixer’s pout.

“I’m serious. I don’t want you using that thing.” Ford insisted, grabbing Bill’s hand and holding it in both of his six fingered hands, looking Bill in the eye. “Promise me you won’t. I don’t want to see you hurt like that again. For a moment I thought you wouldn’t wake up.”

“Hmmm. Not wearing it will be difficult.” Bill considered, not wanting to give up his hard earned solution but remembering how he had barely felt his energy sapping. He didn’t want to admit to Sixer that the device was dangerous, but seeing it in action, experiencing it, led Bill to understand how it could have drained Antelias so easily. He thought Antelias was just weak. Sixer was still holding onto Bill’s hand, his sincerity already replenishing Bill’s energy reserves slightly, his eyes glowing healthily again. “You don’t know what you do to me.”

“I have a –” Ford let out a breathy laugh, running the backs of his knuckles down Bill’s cheek. “Faint idea.”

“See, now you’re not funny.” Bill raised his eyebrow at Ford’s sly pun, secretly impressed.

“Yes I am.” Ford parroted Bill’s words back, grinning to himself. A little more serious now, Ford pointed to the machine. “Get rid of it.”

“Fine.” Bill banished the converter with a flick of his wrist, the machine and the battery disappearing, sent into storage in the Nightmare Realm.

“Thank you.” Ford sighed, relieved.

“Don’t blame me if you immediately regret this decision though.” Bill felt compelled to add.

“Well I would –“ Ford began, and was cut off by Bill boldly planting his lips on Ford’s, grabbing Ford’s face, kissing him passionately for a moment before breaking away, sighing out a mouthful of embers again.

“That’s why.” Bill huffed, the corners of his mouth smoking, the energy already burning him up inside. “Now we’re back to square one.”

Ford licked his lips, his pulse racing as he stared at his muse breathing fire over him once more. It was an intoxicating sight. “Let me work on my solution. We can experiment.”

“More experimenting?” Bill laughed, quirking his eyebrow.

“More experimenting.” Ford nodded, excitement hinting in his eyes. “You’ll like this experimenting, I promise.”

“Hmmph. As long as you do your experimenting with nothing flammable around, nothing that you’d miss. So I guess that means kicking your assistant out more often.”

“Assista – where is Fiddleford? I didn’t see him today.” Ford questioned his muse, who blinked at him innocently.

“I sent him on a few errands.” Bill shrugged. “He’ll be back before sundown.”
“Is that so –“ Ford began, but suddenly the elevator door pinged open, a somewhat frantic Fiddleford rushing out into the study in his dressing gown, his hair messy, like he’d been running his hands through it, stressed.

“I know it’s here somewhere –“ Fiddleford muttered to himself before looking up to see Stanford and Bill springing apart from each other, trying to act casual. “Oh, ah, Stanford, I didn’t –“

“Fiddleford.” Ford coughed, smoothing his own hair down suspiciously, before really taking in his friend’s expression. “Is everything alright?”

“I – shucks, I’m sorry. I’ve been looking for the list everywhere and I haven’t found it, I thought maybe I left it down here or somethin’ – please don’t fire me.” Fiddleford fretted, beseeching Ford.

“What list?” Ford asked, blinking, baffled at the last part of the sentence. “Fire you? What?”

“What – but he said –“ Fiddleford baulked, and pointed to Bill, and Bill started laughing loudly, a cheerful forced sound.

“Ha ha ha, wouldn’t you know, I found it already!” Bill walked cheerfully up to Fiddleford and clapped him on the shoulder a little roughly. “So your help was really not necessary.”

“But I thought –“ Fiddleford began, realisation that he’d been given the run around slowly dawning on his face.

“Wow, is that the time? Have fun cleaning this up on your own Sixer. Gotta run!”

“Bill.” Ford growled, piecing Bill’s little prank together quickly enough, more than a little displeased that he’d been regulated to clean up the warzone of char marks and potatoes he had left in his private study.

Bill stepped past Fiddleford into the lift, pressing the door close button swiftly and saluting a jaunty farewell to Ford as the doors closed. He could hear Ford questioning Fiddleford as the metal doors shut.

“What’s this about a list?”

“I don’t know – he said –“

Bill leaned against the back wall of the elevator with a sigh, narrowly avoiding that argument. He brought his fingers up to feel his puffy lips, remembering Sixer’s kiss, and in his other hand he summoned the silver bracelets from the corner of the study, knowing Ford wouldn’t see them going missing now that he was adequately distracted.

Levitating the cuffs above his hand, Bill watched them float, an idea formulating in his mind.

He could let Sixer believe he promised he wouldn’t use the apparatus again, but it wasn’t a done deal. He didn’t shake on it.

He had a taste of physical worship, and he wanted more, and neither Sixer’s misplaced nobility, or technical difficulties could stop him from getting what he wanted.

And he wanted Sixer.
25 pages of kissing was harder to write than I thought hahaha.
Bill is saying 'hurry up' in Macedonian at one point. The Glenn Miller song they're listening to is In the Mood.
I know this may seem like a bit of a reacharound in terms of progress regarding the slow burn, but many more things are going to be set on fire, don't you worry.
More plot next chapter.
I used to think that was sensible. It makes the truth even more incomprehensible.

After Bill’s little prank, sending Fiddleford on a wild goose chase for a mystery list that may or may not have existed in the first place, Bill had taken to leaving mystery lists and messages in papers around the shack.

Ford hadn’t been impressed with Bill’s little powerplay. Threatening to sack Fiddleford from the project wasn’t the sort of joke Ford found funny.

Considering Fiddleford had sprinted around town in his pyjamas, humiliating himself in front of the townsfolk searching for the list that did not exist, returning to the shack to explain to Ford near tears that he didn’t want to lose his job, the fact that Ford kept finding these mystery lists littered about the shack seemed less like the continuation of a funny joke and more like a cruel sort of torture.

“You know, you could make a scrap book.” Bill commented idly one day, having walked into the kitchen seeing Ford snatch one of the mystery lists off the fridge. “Since you seem to be the only one collecting these.”

“You’re leaving them out here to upset F.” Ford scowled at Bill, and pulled another note out of the cutlery drawer, narrowing his eyes at the coded text. “I’m not leaving them around for him to read. It’s bad enough he thought his job was on the line over this.”

“Maybe it was.” Bill shrugged, and picked an apple up from the fruit bowl on the table, crunching into it nonchalantly.

“After all the hassle you gave me trying to rope Fiddleford in on this project, I wouldn’t think you’d be so keen to send him running.” Ford noticed another note wrapped around the vegetable peeler, and unwrapped it, adding it to the stack of notes he’d found already. “If you fire him, we’d be short an engineer for the project. Then you’d be left with no choice but to do some actual work around here.”

“That’s what I have you for.” Bill replied, talking with his mouth full.

“To clean up your messes.” Ford grumbled under his breath, setting the stack of notes on the kitchen counter, opening the fridge door and looking in. “What – how many – Bill, there are notes everywhere!”

“There are seventeen in the fridge. I bet you can’t find them all.” Bill grinned and took another crunchy bite of his apple.

“Seventeen. You have a real knack for making my life miserable, you know that. Who hides seventeen – I can’t believe you –“ Ford complained, bending over to ferret out the hidden notes in the refrigerator.

“I give your life colour, charm, and purpose.” Bill drawled, and sat down on a chair, kicking his feet up to rest on the kitchen table. “You’d be lost without me.”
“That’s debatable.” Ford rolled his eyes, and continued to pull notes out from the refrigerator, finding them hidden in the tub of butter, scrunched around the milk bottles, threaded into the leaves of the iceberg lettuce Ford bought for the side salad they were having for dinner this evening.

Bill tilted his head, watching Ford search. He had a lovely view of the scientist from the rear, his head stuck in the refrigerator like that, red sweatshirt riding up exposing the white shirt beneath tucked into Stanford’s trousers. His slacks were a lovely cut, very flattering.

“What have you found them all?”

Ford huffed out a sigh, counting the notes in his hand. “I’ve found sixteen.”

“I knew you’d miss one.” Bill said gleefully, smiling into his apple.

“Look, I’m sure this must be very funny for you, but Fiddleford will come down here for breakfast any minute, and I don’t want to leave these notes lying around. This is going too far for a prank Bill.” Ford stood, turning around to wave the papers at Bill chidingly.

“You’re right.” Bill nodded solemnly, before smiling wickedly. “This is very funny for me.”

“Don’t you have anything better to do with your time?” Ford asked, exasperated by his muse.

“Well, I did have something better to do.” Bill replied peevishly. “But he said ‘no Bill, let’s not use the apparatus you busted your binomials to get, I’ll find you a better solution’ and here I am, still waiting.”

“I’m working on it.” Ford growled, clenching his fist around the papers. “I’d have more time to work on it if you’d stop leaving these papers everywhere for me to pick up.”

“I like watching you play fetch.” Bill half hid his grin with the apple, his teeth flashing white behind the red fruit.

Ford’s jaw clenched, annoyed by Bill’s flirting, and simultaneously flustered by it.

“I’m not the one with the issue here.” Ford gritted out. “So if you ever want to do that again, you’ll stop wasting both of our time. Leave Fiddleford alone.”

“I haven’t done a thing to him.” Bill held his hands up innocently. “It’s not my fault he can’t take a joke.”

“I know what these notes say Bill.” Ford scowled, walking over to Bill, knocking his feet off the tabletop and brandishing one of the notes in front of his face. Each one of the notes had the same message written on it in Bill’s alien language, some of them had confusing sketches and endless triangles drawn on the page, some had mathematical equations deliberately put there to confuse and puzzle the reader, most of the equations were unsolvable.

“He doesn’t.” Bill shrugged, nonplussed.

“I know when you’re not wanted?” Ford read out, quoting the message on the page with disdain.

“What exactly are you trying to say to him?”

“That three’s a crowd maybe? He’s always around!” Bill complained, throwing his hands in the air dramatically.

“He lives here!” Ford countered, gesturing to the staircase as he spoke. “You invited him here.”
“You like him better than me.” Bill scowled up at Stanford, his yellow eyes glowing jealously.

“That’s ludicrous. Fiddleford is my friend.” Ford scoffed, crossing his arms, looking at his prickly muse.

“I’m your friend.” Bill insisted, thumping his chest with the hand holding the apple. “You’re supposed to pay attention to me. You’re always working with him on the portal. You should be working on our solution.”

“The portal is still our primary goal.” Ford said, disbelief colouring his tone. “What are you – punishing him? Punishing me? For not –“

“This isn’t a punishment. This is a prank.” Bill crossed his arms, turning his chin up at Ford. “You’ll know when I’m punishing you.”

“You’re acting so petty, just because you aren’t getting what you want. I’m right aren’t I?” Ford accused, standing in front of Bill’s chair, watching Bill look to the side, not meeting Ford’s eye.

“I don’t know what you’re talking about.” Bill lied, refusing to look at Ford.

Ford stared at his muse for a moment, cycling through disbelief and self-indulgent smugness, having hit the nail on the head. Bill was too easy.

Putting the papers down on the kitchen table, Ford put one hand on the back of Bill’s chair, and grabbed his bratty muse by the chin with the other hand, looming over him, turning his face to bring them eye to eye.

Bill watched Ford, holding his breath, his temperature already rising noticeably the longer Ford looked at him.

Ford held Bill’s gaze for a few seconds more, letting the tension climb, before he pressed his lips to Bill’s, kissing him firmly, making Bill’s blood boil.

He pulled away and Bill instinctively leaned forward, chasing after him, his breathing laboured, his skin flushed dark. Ford held himself back, watching the miniscule tells Bill showed of his arousal. How he squirmed in his seat now, looking at Stanford like he had something Bill wanted. Badly.

“Where’s the last note?” Ford asked firmly, knowing he’d get an answer now.

“Check the eggs.” Bill croaked out, licking his lips, trying to lean back in his seat with dignity, very sorely tempted by the human in front of him.

Ford opened the fridge again and pulled out the eggs, opening the carton, looking under each egg, finding nothing. “It isn’t there.”

Bill stood up and looked over Ford’s shoulder, pointing at one of the eggs. “That one.”

Ford took the egg out of the carton and looked at it, before cracking it open over the sink. No yolk spilled out, the egg seemed to be hollow, instead there was a small folded note, much like the other ones, hidden inside the egg shell.

Ford pulled it out, unable to help but wonder how Bill had got it in there in the first place. “Are there any more?”

Bill shook his head, and reached out for Stanford, his slender fingers tracing along the scientist’s
side. Ford caught Bill’s fingers and held them.

“Not now.”

Bill’s face fell, his irritation rising to the surface again.

“Later. Tonight.” Ford pressed a small kiss to one of Bill’s fingertips, before letting his hand go. “I told you I’ve been working on a solution of my own. We will need to experiment. Run tests.”

“So far you’re just testing my patience.” Bill huffed, already exuding heat from those small worshipful touches.

“Well, this is very funny for me.” Ford parroted Bill’s earlier words, smiling roguishly.

Bill raised his hands and the papers Ford had painstakingly collected all levitated into the air, before scattering all about the kitchen floor as Bill dropped his arms down.

“Woops!” Bill grinned somewhat maniacally at Ford, before turning heel and walking out of the kitchen. “I’ll see you tonight Sixer.”

“Ugh, Bill!” Ford groaned, and knelt down on the kitchen floor, scooping up the papers hastily.

“Mornin’ Stanford.” Fiddleford greeted him several minutes later, walking into the spotless note free kitchen to see Ford rubbing his temples, staring down into his cup of tea.

“Got a headache?”

Ford rubbed his temples and considered Bill’s bratty escapades. “Yes I do.”

Ford and Fiddleford went over the equations for the portal together throughout the day, Ford transcribing his notes to the new laptop F had made for him, and Fiddleford triple checking the initial blueprints, trying to fill in the missing pieces.

They’d been hard at it since Summerween, working on the blueprints every day, until Fiddleford had a complete understanding of them. They worked in companionable silence for the most part, breaking to chat about college memories or certain applications of equations, or the comparative benefits of legwarmers from time to time.

There was a lot to go over, and Fiddleford wanted to make sure he was entirely up to speed before he began composing the machinery required to get the portal up and running. As thorough as Ford’s blueprints were, there were huge gaps in the designs, like parts of the blueprints had been deliberately left out, though when asked, Ford said he didn’t have the other information just yet.

That seemed odd to Fiddleford, since Ford had told him that the blueprints for the portal were his brainchild. F suspected Ford had outside help, while his friend kept denying it.

His suspicions were pointing to Ford’s strange assistant Bill Cipher having more input than Ford indicated regarding the portal’s designs. When F had tried to ask Bill subtly if he had a larger part in putting these designs together than Stanford had implied, Bill chose not to answer, and instead pointed out three errors in Fiddleford’s equations that he hadn’t noticed when double checking his work, leading him to quintuple check his equations from that point after.
Fiddleford had tried asking Bill again if he had a greater hand in compiling the blueprints, but Bill had been incredibly evasive.

“I know you’re not just Ford’s assistant like he says. You’re not just here to check the equations, you’re smarter than that.” Fiddleford had said, flattering Bill in the hope that he would trust him enough to be honest with him.

Bill seemed to find F’s flattery patronising rather than endearing.

“I’m not the assistant, you are.” Bill sneered. “And you should remember that you’re being paid to be here, not to ask stupid questions.”

Bill seemed to be the only one keen to remind Fiddleford that his tenure here was a paid position. Ford often acted like their reunion was just a happy collaboration between friends, it was Bill who threw Fiddleford’s technical employment back in his face frequently.

When Fiddleford had questioned Ford about it after the list incident, fearful that he’d lose his job, Ford had insisted that the termination of F’s contract wasn’t up to Bill.

“I’m the leader of this project.” Ford insisted. “No matter what Bill says. This is my endeavour and I chose to have you here working on this portal with me. He doesn’t get to say whether you’re hired or fired, that’s up to me, and I specifically called you because I knew there was no better person up to the task.”

“Well, that’s mighty reassurin’ Stanford, but isn’t he your benefactor? What if he pulls funding?” F asked, helping Ford sweep up potato splatters, concerned for the project.

“He won’t pull funding.” Ford said, absolutely assured, buffing char marks from his desktop. “Bill’s here because he wants to give us everything we need to make this portal successful. He’d never say it, but he wants you to be successful too. Don’t let his little mind games fool you Fiddleford, Bill wants you here just as much as I do.”

Fiddleford felt calmed by Ford’s words, not knowing the double meaning lingering in the background there. He took Ford at face value, smiled, pulled his dressing gown tighter around him, and helped Ford finish cleaning the study.

F had tried to talk to Bill after that, hoping to clear the air between them. While he certainly had been humiliated by Bill’s prank, with half the town considering him some frantic kook, peering under park benches muttering about a mysterious list, he was determined not to let it affect the working relationship he was trying to foster between himself and Ford’s assistant.

Wanting to show that there were no hard feelings, Fiddleford decided that he would put in his utmost effort to become friends with Bill. Fiddleford believed that if there was contention or bad blood between him and Bill, it wouldn’t be due to a lack of trying on his part, which is why he was determined to win Bill over with his friendly demeanour.

“Morning Bill!” Fiddleford would chime, always greeting the strange man with a smile or a wave.

Very rarely would he get a response. Sometimes Bill would reply, but he’d deliberately speak in another language to Fiddleford. F had tried everything. One morning he recognised Bill speaking in French to him, so he’d gone down to the rather limited library at Gravity Falls for a French to English dictionary, wanting to be prepared for conversation the next time Bill spoke to him.

The next morning Fiddleford greeted Ford’s assistant with a cheerful. “Salut Bill.”
Bill raised his eyebrow at F, not exactly impressed, more vaguely amused. “Jūs turite pabandyti sunkiau, nei kad įspūdį man.”

F’s shoulders slumped and he resigned himself to yet another trip to the library.

Their verbal communication seemed incredibly hit and miss, but their non verbal communication was coming along nicely. Fiddleford always smiled at Bill, or waved. Once Bill waved back at Fiddleford, but F began to suspect his response was entirely facetious, given that he’d seen Ford elbow Bill in the side following the wave, chastising him.

Ford and Bill seemed to have no issues communicating. Indeed, sometimes it felt like they spoke a language all of their own through the subtle ways they’d read each other.

Ford knew when to pass foods or the remote or other items to Bill before he’d even have to ask for them. Bill could point out the conclusions to Ford’s hypothesis’ before he finished his sentences. Ford would sometimes not even finish his sentences at all, knowing he and Bill were already on the same page. F had once seen Bill and Ford conduct a conversation consisting entirely of smug eyebrow raises and indignant nose wrinkling, the conversation ending with Bill flicking a jellybean at Stanford’s nose and storming out of the room. F had asked Ford what the Sam Hill had happened there, and Ford just chuckled the projectile jellybean in his mouth and shrugged, looking very pleased with himself but refusing to divulge why.

Compiling his own notes on the blueprints in front of him, having quintuple checked the equations on this page, scratching his chin with his pen lid, trying to figure out what the missing link in the equation could be, Fiddleford looked over to Stanford, who was copying his own research from those peculiar red journals of his into the new computer F had made for him.

“Stanford?” Fiddleford asked.

“Yes, Fiddleford?” Ford replied without looking up from his screen, still typing away.

“I’ve been over this one page a fresh dozen times it seems, and I was wondering if you could help me with it.” Fiddleford began, holding out the page in question and passing it to Stanford.

Ford took the page and looked it over.

“It’s this bit here in the blueprint. It seems like there’s more to the design, but it tapers on off the page like that, and I can’t seem to find where it continues anywhere in these notes. Is there a page missing or somethin’?”

Ford studied the page. “Well, yes, I – it does seem that there’s a component missing here. I just have to – where is Bill?”

Fiddleford blinked, looking around the empty lab. Sometimes Bill would join them down in the lab, if only to spend time sitting near Stanford, mostly prodding the other scientist until he was sufficiently distracted from his work, sometimes offering assistance, but mostly monopolising Ford’s attention, making the process of copying his research onto the laptop a much longer one than it needed to be. It was slightly obnoxious, but whenever Fiddleford brought it up, Ford waved it away as ‘just Bill being Bill’.

“I haven’t seen him since this mornin’.” Fiddleford answered. This morning he’d given Swahili a go, and Bill had once again perplexed him, choosing to reply in Portuguese.

“He probably has the – the missing page.” Ford muttered evasively. “I’ll be right back.”
As Ford moved to get out of his chair, the elevator door dinged open, and Bill strode out into the lab, holding a pile of papers.

“So sorry to interrupt gentlemen. I figured you’d be needing these.” Bill announced, brandishing the papers.

Ford turned his chair around and reached out to take them. “Thank you Bill, that would be very helpful.”

Bill ignored Ford’s outstretched hand and made a beeline for Fiddleford’s desk, depositing the stack of notes on top of what Fiddleford was currently writing.

“Oh, you know me.” Bill simpered sarcastically, batting his eyelashes at Ford, laying it on thick. “I’m just here to assist.”

“Yes, well, that’s very helpful of you, as I said.” Ford replied, sounding somewhat perturbed, leaning over the desk to look at the papers Bill had dropped in front of Fiddleford.

Bill was leaning his hip against the desk, his arms crossed, watching Fiddleford lift the first paper from the top of the pile with an expectant sort of smile that made Ford nervous.

“So the blueprints were incomplete.” Fiddleford surmised. “Were these just filed wrong, or -? Stanford said he wasn’t sure.”

“Oh, Stanford said that, did he?” Bill raised an eyebrow at the scientist, before shooting Ford a dirty look. “He must think so little of me, and my filing prowess. What kind of an assistant am I?”

Fiddleford baulked, not wanting to cause drama between Ford and his strange assistant. With Bill leaning on his desk, and Stanford sitting to the right of him, he had no choice but to be caught in the middle.

“I didn’t mean nothin’ by-“ Fiddleford began his hasty apology at the same time Stanford spoke up, his voice tentatively confident.

“The lovely kind?”

Bill stared at Ford for a moment, the room deathly silent, before he barked out a laugh.

“Oh Sixer.” Bill laughed, holding his stomach and wiping the corner of his eye. “Hilarious. Never change. But let’s not forget who’s really the assistant here.”

“Are you done?” Ford asked Bill, frowning slightly at the last part of Bill’s sentence, knowing who it was aimed at.

Bill raised his hands in mock surrender before kicking off the desk and walking back to the elevator doors.

Ford watched Bill’s peaceful retreat suspiciously, finding Bill’s timing odd, but not nearly as odd as the fact that he was being so helpful to Fiddleford.

As the elevator doors closed behind Bill, Ford turned his eyes back to the pile of papers, watching Fiddleford lift yet another page, uncovering a piece of paper covered in triangles and bizarre mathematical symbols. Quickly Ford lunged across the table to snatch the page from the pile and crumpled it swiftly in his hands.
Fiddleford watched his friend’s actions with wide eyes, a little suspicious himself.

“Oh, uh. That page was… not meant to be there.” Ford explained poorly. “Actually, perhaps I should look through those papers first, just to make sure he hasn’t forgotten anything.”

Fiddleford shrugged, allowing Ford to take the papers from him, but couldn’t help but worry that Ford was somehow taking advantage of his assistant’s genius. That didn’t sound like the Stanford he knew, but a lot could change in a few years.

Ford rifled through the pages, occasionally discarding a page or two, crumpling the papers up and throwing them in the wastebasket. Eventually he passed the stack of papers back to Fiddleford, but F couldn’t help thinking his friend was keeping something from him.

After dinner that night, Fiddleford took the new stack of papers up to his room with him to continue to work on deciphering the new equations in the blueprints. He was hoping he could fully understand the completed blueprints by the end of the week, so they could start work actually engineering the components they’d need for the project.

Bill had joined them for dinner, eating the food Stanford cooked for them ravenously. He was either incredibly hungry, or incredibly impatient judging from how quickly he demolished the lasagne.

It was delicious, Stanford was an excellent cook. Fiddleford couldn’t remember him being so avid a culinary master back in college, their college diets consisted of two minute noodles and endless boxes of take out.

Sometime in between graduation and now Ford must have taken an interest in preparing wholesome meals. Fiddleford wondered if his exploits in the art of cuisine coincided with Bill moving in with him. F found he cooked more since living with Patricia, and he was particularly proud of his recipe for mushy peas. At least Tate seemed to like them.

And Ford definitely had an appreciative audience in Bill.

“Mmmmmmmm. Adding the chili flakes was a good move.” Bill moaned around a mouthful of food.

Ford looked mollified. “Well, diverting from the recipe slightly seemed doable.”

“Next time you should just do a whole layer of chili flakes, an entire layer of it. All over.” Bill enthused, forking up another bite of the lasagne, moaning orgasmically at the taste.

“Next time I should just hand you the bottle.” Ford said, amused, watching Bill’s eyes roll up into his head as his muse chewed appreciatively.

Bill pointed to Ford with his knife, unable to speak with his mouth full (though he had tried before) clapping his hands, applauding Ford’s idea.

“When did you start cooking such spicy food?” Fiddleford asked Ford, his eyes watering slightly.

“Well –” Ford began.
“When did you stop living???” Bill exclaimed. “This is the spice of life! Or is that variety?”

“Bill likes spicy food.” Ford said, like that explained everything.

“Why bother growing new tastebuds every two weeks if you don’t give them a run for their money? Huh? Why should they get an easy life?” Bill spoke, gesticulating with his fork while sectioning himself off another slice of lasagne.

“I guess I should be expanding my diet somewhat.” Fiddleford said, looking at his plate, resigning himself to yet more extreme spices in his immediate future.

“If you don’t like it too spicy, I can always make something else for you F.” Ford offered kindly.

Bill glared at Fiddleford, daring him to take Ford up on that offer. Bill didn’t like the idea of Fiddleford getting a special meal prepared just for him. In Bill’s eyes, the point of these meals was still to worship him, and he didn’t want to split Stanford’s effort and have to share it with another person.

“I appreciate that Stanford.” Fiddleford smiled. “This is really good though.”

Ford preened.

They continued eating until the food was all gone, thoroughly appreciated. Fiddleford got up from the table and put his plate away, helping Stanford with the washing up, while Bill sat at the kitchen table, rolling an orange between his hands like a cat playing with a ball.

“I’m probably gonna work on those blueprints some more before I go to bed. Didja care to join me, or are you headin’ straight to bed?” Fiddleford asked, drying the plates with a tea towel and putting them back in the pantry.

Ford cast a glance over to Bill, who had stopped rolling the orange, staring at Stanford, communicating something unspoken between them.

Turning back to Fiddleford, Stanford answered. “I think it’ll be an early night for me.”

“What about you Bill?” Fiddleford asked, trying to be inclusive in the hopes that he could form a bond with the prickly assistant. “Do you fancy sittin’ up with me?”

“I have a much more pressing appointment to practise laying down, horizontally. I’ll have to decline.” Bill smirked, and went right back to batting the orange between his hands.

“Hmm.” Fiddleford hummed, stumped by that one. “Guess I’ll take it up to my room then.”

Once the kitchen was clean, Fiddleford set up the stairs with his stack of notes, wondering why Bill and Ford didn’t make their way up as well if they were both so tired. Shrugging it off F continued up to his room, very appreciative of the lovely study space Ford had set up for him in the spacious attic.

Bill followed Ford down to the lab a few minutes after the scientist set off down there, giving Ford time to prepare. He was curious what this new solution might be, and the waiting was agonising on Bill’s patience.
As the elevator door dinged open on level three, Bill stepped out into the lab, surveying the set up.

Another unbinding circle was drawn out on the floor in Sixer’s blood, this circle much more traditional than the last one Bill had instructed him in. He kept little touches though, like the equilateral intersectors and the sacred geometry. That was flattering.

Ford had also cleared all of the equipment off one of the metal work benches towards the back of the lab, and set out a metal tray with medical equipment on it, along with a journal and pen. Ford was wearing a stethoscope around his shoulders when Bill walked in.

“Hellooo nurse.” Bill crooned flirtatiously.

“Technically with 12 PHDs I would be a doctor, having completed my doctorate.” Ford corrected Bill pedantically, watching his muse skip around the edge of the salt circle to walk over to him towards the back of the lab.

“Well, hello doctor then.” Bill grinned, and poked at the stethoscope around Ford’s neck. “Doesn’t have the same sort of ring to it though. Is this some kind of elaborate roleplay fantasy?”

“Please.” Ford scoffed. “When it comes to elaborate roleplay this doesn’t even come close to a good game of D & D & more D.”

“You’re such a nerd Sixer.” Bill laughed, trailing his finger along the stethoscope cord before flicking Stanford on the nose. “Too bad I like nerds.”

“Nerds plural, is that?” Ford rubbed his nose, quirking his brow to question Bill.

“I have quite the collection. I’ll stick with the one for now, unless somehow you develop the ability to make copies of yourself. Then it’s anyone’s game.” Bill winked at Ford cheekily.

“Up.” Ford patted the metal tabletop expectantly. “On the table. I’m going to examine you.”

Bill gave a cautious glance to the tray of medical apparatus. “How about you get on the table, and I sit over here?”

“Scared?” Ford had to question, smug in the face of his muse’s discomfort. Bill had been a pain all day, turnabout was only fair play.

“Oh sure. Come up to the lab and see what’s on the slab.” Bill quoted airily. “That just reeks comfort and safety. Tell me why your solution is better than mine again?”

“I believe we had a little discussion about trust before.” Ford said smoothly, rolling up his sleeves. “You’ll just have to trust me.”

“Or, I could walk out of here right now, before the autopsy begins.” Bill took a hesitant step back from the table.

“I said I’m going to examine you, not cut you open.”

“It’s a slippery slope between the two.” Bill insisted, and took another wary step back. “One minute you’re checking pupillary response, next minute someone loses an eye. I know how these things go.”

“Just sit on the table, please.” Ford sighed, amused despite himself. It was enjoyable watching Bill squirm like this, and he hadn’t even begun his experiment.
Bill’s shoulders were tense, he glared at Stanford, clearly uncomfortable, but too curious to back down from this despite his reservations.

“Fine.” Bill approached the table and pulled himself up to sit on the metal tabletop. “But just know that I can and will incinerate you if you touch me.”

“The whole point of this is to touch you.” Ford rolled his eyes. “Without incinerating me.”

“Yeah, I’m just saying.” Bill crossed his arms defensively. “Don’t push your luck.”

Ford gave Bill a teasing look, and pulled on a pair of disposable latex gloves, snapping the elastic at the wrist.

“That’s it, I’m leaving.” Bill said, and made to jump off the table, before Sixer laughed, and held his hands out.

“I’m joking.” Ford pushed Bill back onto the table gently, sitting him down once more, rubbing small comforting circles into Bill’s shoulders. “I promise, I’m just going to examine you. Nothing bad will happen. I want to make note of your reactions now before we unbind another brick for you, to test to see if unbinding bricks makes it better or worse for you to handle. I’m not going to hurt you Bill, the whole point of this is to find another way to touch you without it being dangerous – for us both.”

“Shake on it.” Bill demanded, still looking slightly perturbed by the whole ordeal. “Shake on it or no dice.”

“If it makes you feel better.” Ford consented, entertained. He held out his hand, and Bill grasped it immediately. “I promise that this experiment will cause you no harm. Happy now?”

“Is that a deal?” Bill asked, not letting go of Ford’s hand.

Ford chuckled. “Yes, it’s a deal. Now will you stop being so paranoid?”

Bill let go of Ford’s hand, feeling the magic run along his arm, before he exhaled heavily. “Paranoia is an agent of survival. It pays to be paranoid when your life is on the line.”

“I’m not trying to kill you.” Ford pursed his lips at Bill, assessing him. “It’s like you’ve never been to the doctors before.”

“I’m not very patient.” Bill said, punning deadpan.

“Clearly.” Ford reached for the metal tray, and picked up a glass thermometer, holding it out for Bill. “Here. Put this in your mouth.”

Bill opened his mouth to make a quip about where Stanford could stick his thermometer, but before he could Ford popped the slender rod between Bill’s lips, quick as can be.

“This is demeaning.” Bill muttered around the glass thermometer, glaring at Ford.

“I’m going to measure your base temperature, and see how it climbs as the experiment progresses.” Ford explained, scribbling down a note in his journal.

“100 degrees celsius? That’s not gonna cut it.” Bill looked down at the thermometer sticking out of his mouth.

“Which is why I also have a candy thermometer to use should you max out the limits of the first
one. Let’s try to keep you under boiling point for now though.” Ford reached onto the tray, and clicked on a small optical penlight, pointing it at Bill’s left eye while he was distracted.

“AHH!” Bill shrunk back away from the light, spitting out the thermometer, scowling at Sixer. “What’s the big idea? Blinding me?”

“I’m trying to check for pupillary response. Put that back in.” Ford chided Bill, picking up the thermometer and slotting it back between Bill’s lips. “Your pupils expand to phenomenal proportions when you’re overwhelmed, I just want to check how they respond to stimuli.”

“By blinding me???” Bill spluttered, spitting out the thermometer again.

Ford sighed and picked up the rejected thermometer, holding it back up for Bill impatiently. “I wasn’t blinding you, this amount of light won’t damage your eyes at all, I merely took you by surprise and you overreacted. I’d like to try again. Will you keep this in, or will I have to make you?”

Bill glared at Ford, pouting at the indignities his human was making him endure, before he opened his mouth for the thermometer, exaggerating the sound. “Ahhh.”

“Thank you.” Ford said, popping the thermometer back in Bill’s mouth. “Now, look straight ahead for me.”

Bill huffed out a frustrated sigh, before complying. Sixer shone the light in his eye, and Bill winced, but continued looking at Sixer’s eyebrow while the scientist conducted the test. Ford clicked the pen light off, before switching hands.

“Now the other eye.”

Privately Bill lamented having two eyes in this form, finding it not such a luxury when it meant he had to undergo this depravity of a test twice.

When Ford finished the test, clicking the pen light off and putting it back on the tray, Bill shuddered melodramatically.

“Ugh. That was awful.”

“I find it rather interesting how your pupils respond to stimuli.” Ford spoke while scribbling his findings in the journal. “I researched slitted pupils, assuming yours would be similar to a cat’s, or possibly a reptiles, and it seems I was correct, they are decidedly feline, right down to the way they reflect light.”

“I hate you.”

“Let’s see how your temperature’s doing.” Ford continued blithely, paying no mind to Bill’s sulking. He pulled the thermometer out of Bill’s mouth and checked the reading. “40 degrees, about what I thought. If you were a normal human you’d have hyperpyrexia by now.”

“Do you have any other irritating invasive tests to run, or can we skip ahead to the good parts yet?” Bill questioned, already over this whole experimentation gig.

Ford paused to write down his findings, before answering Bill. “I just have heartrate to monitor, and then we can go right ahead.”

“Oh, come on!” Bill complained, hating waiting.
“Calm down.” Ford hushed Bill’s dramatics, unwinding the stethoscope from around his neck, putting the ear-tips in. “I need a resting heart rate. Can you hold your shirt up for me?”

Bill rolled up the hem of his shirt, exposing his bare torso to Ford.

Ford took a moment to marvel at his muses perfect physique, lost for a minute, staring at Bill’s dark pert nipples, before he cleared his throat.

Bill raised his eyebrow at Ford, feeling his worshipful gaze upon him. “Like what you see?”

“Heartrate.” Ford said, and cleared his throat again. “I’m going to listen.”

“Suit yourself.” Bill shrugged, and continued to hold up his shirt, watching the colour rise to Ford’s cheeks with a satisfied smirk.

Ford raised the chest-piece to Bill’s torso and placed the metal diaphragm over where Bill’s heart should be.

Bill hissed and recoiled. “Cold!”

“Sorry.” Ford pulled the stethoscope back and rubbed it against his stomach, warming the chest-piece against the fabric of his sweater, before he put it against Bill’s skin once more. “Better?”

“Mmm.”

Ford listened through the stethoscope, once again hearing those strange arrhythmic clicking sounds he’d heard before.

“How strange. A clicking noise.” Ford leaned his head closer to Bill’s chest, concentrating on listening, moving the stethoscope slightly to the left. “I think I can make out a pattern.”

Ford concentrated, listening intently to the clicks coming from Bill’s chest. While there had been no discernible rhythm before, one was emerging, and it sounded awfully familiar.

“It sounds like –” But no, it couldn’t be. The clicks were hitting different tones almost, coming at a rapid tempo, and it was only when Ford stopped focusing on the individual clicks and focused on the sound as a whole that he recognised it.

Ford looked up at Bill’s gleeful expression, his muse holding his shirt up, biting his lip to smother a smile.

The clicks were playing to the tune of la cucaracha.

“Very funny Bill.”

“You know, I don’t normally take requests, but for you I’ll make an exception.” Bill laughed, watching Ford pull the stethoscope from his ears.

“Has no discernible heartbeat.” Ford quoted, writing his observation down, the pen pressing harder on the page than it needed to. “How does your circulatory system operate then I wonder? Perhaps we could –”

“Oh no!” Bill dropped his shirt down stubbornly covering himself. “You said you wouldn’t cut me open.”

“I’m just curious! Maybe we could –”
“No!” Bill shook his head sharply. “No thank you. Next test.”

“Fine.” Ford conceded. “Let me just write this down.”

Bill watched Ford write his notes, and swung his legs under the table idly.

“Well, since heartrate is out of the question, I guess we’ll have to just go by temperature and pupillary responses.” Ford dotted his last point, and looked up to Bill, feeling the butterflies rise in his stomach.

He had somewhat selfish motivations for this next bit of the experiment, and he was trying to keep his pursuit of science noble and above board. However, this next part was always going to be the tempting part.

“Now.” Ford swallowed, his mouth dry thinking about what he was about to do. “Hold still.”

Bill watched Ford warily as the scientist reached up to brush his thumb across Bill’s cheekbone, the latex gloves dragging along his skin. Bill didn’t move, his yellow eyes still watching Stanford waiting for the uncomfortable part of this experiment, waiting for the other shoe to drop.

Ford brushed his fingertips past Bill’s cheek and rubbed Bill’s earlobe slowly, rolling it gently with his fingers. Ford’s eyes flickered, rapt, over Bill’s face, taking in the small changes to his expression.

“Why are you fondling my earlobe?” Bill had to ask, unnerved by this part of the experiment.

“I’m testing your responses.” Ford continued to tug gently at Bill’s earlobe.

“This feels weird. I feel like you’re about to cut my earlobes off and serve them with a side salad and a nice chianti.”

“Well, I’m not.” Ford assured Bill, before moving his hand across to rest against Bill’s chin, rubbing his thumb along Bill’s bottom lip. “I don’t like chianti.”

Bill huffed out a slightly hysterical laugh, but allowed Ford to continue rubbing Bill’s bottom lip slowly. When Ford brought his gloved hands down to brush along Bill’s neck, tracing the line of his collarbone, Bill rolled his shoulders uncomfortably.

“I don’t like your gloves. Take them off. I feel like a specimen.”

“The gloves are actually part of the experiment.” Ford uttered, fascinated by the little details of Bill, already feeling his muses skin heat up under his hands. “I want to see if skin to skin contact has an impact on your energy levels. Here, I need to take your temperature again.”

Bill pouted as Stanford poked the thermometer between his lips again, flicking it with his tongue to make the glass rod bounce with his impatience.

Ford jotted notes down in his journal for a moment, watching Bill fidget uncomfortably from the corner of his eye, and then pulled the thermometer out of Bill’s mouth, looking at the reading.

“44. For you that would be a slow increase in temperature. Slight, but it has an impact.” Ford set the thermometer down and pulled his gloves off, balling them up and putting them on the tray to the side. “I’m going to try without gloves on now. Try to stay still.”

Bill’s knee was bouncing impatiently, and Ford had to hold it down briefly to remind Bill what still
was. Bill’s skin was already flushing slightly darker, and his eyes were glowing, watching Ford with a mixture of suspicion and anticipation.

“Stay still.” Ford uttered quietly, raising his hand to repeat his movements, brushing his thumb across Bill’s high cheekbones, feeling his skin warm quickly from that small movement alone. Bill sucked in a steadying breath, and tried to stay still, watching Ford constantly.

Ford trailed his fingers over to Bill’s earlobe and rolled it between his fingers, giving it a gentle squeeze. Bill shivered slightly, and looked away from Ford, staring at the metal table, struggling to maintain his composure.

Ford watched his muse shiver, satisfaction and wonder mixing in his eyes, and he gently tilted Bill’s chin, so he was looking back at him, rubbing his thumb across Bill’s puffy bottom lip.

His muse was squirming in his seat. His cheeks were hot, getting hotter when Stanford turned his face back to look him in the eye. Sixer wanted him to look at him. It was unfairly arousing, and Bill turned his eyes up to look at an unfixed point above Ford’s head now, perversely unable to look Stanford in the eye as he played with Bill’s bottom lip, his thumb making it tingle with want.

It was so hard to maintain his composure. Asking Bill to stay still throughout this was just cruel.

Ford let his fingertips trail along Bill’s sensitive neck, watching him shiver, before he finished, tracing over Bill’s collarbone once more. Bill wasn’t looking him in the eye, but from touch alone Ford could tell Bill’s temperature was hotter.

“I’ll just take your temperature again.” Ford said, taking his hands off Bill, his voice low like a whisper, somewhat affected himself by this little experiment.

Bill opened his mouth for the thermometer almost obediently this time, refusing to meet Stanford’s eye.

The seconds ticked by in a charged sort of silence, and Ford removed the thermometer from Bill’s lips, accidentally brushing his fingertip against Bill’s skin once more as he went.

“53.” Ford read, surprised. He looked up at Bill, who was still stubbornly avoiding his gaze. “That’s quite the jump. Maybe the gloves do make a difference.”

“If you end up donning a biohazard suit every time you try to touch me I’m disowning you and finding a new genius to patronise.”

“But you have such fun patronising me.” Ford commented, his voice light with amusement.

“You’ve noticed, have you?” Bill smirked, meeting Ford’s gaze again with a wicked grin.

“How could I not?” Ford snorted, amused. “Though I imagine compared to the knowledge that you have at your disposal, this scientific inquiry of mine must seem quite quaint.”

“It’s cute.” Bill replied, looking at Ford and meaning ‘you’re cute’. Sixer really was, with his big geeky glasses and his little tests. As aggravating as the tests were, Bill was, on some level, enjoying the game they were playing. “So what’s next doc? Is that it?”

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of his shirt. “Only you could concoct an experiment that requires me to flash you constantly to achieve results.”

“You put it like that, you make me sound like some dirty old man.” Ford scoffed, though he was blushing behind his glasses.

He certainly felt like one, at least now, and he was mentally chastising himself for flattering his muse quite so much with the form Stanford made for him. Bill was youthful and attractive, built to be in his prime. Putting his own self-consciousness aside, Ford couldn’t help but think of the people who would kill to be in his place, punching above their weight, touching such a beautiful person, and being allowed to do so.

Of course, Bill wasn’t a person, he was a God.

“Please tell me you aren’t developing a complex about your age already.” Bill raised his eyebrow. “Your existence is still just a spec, merely a blip to your projected lifespan. You’re not old, you’ve barely lived at all.”

“Well that’s comforting.” Ford shook his head fondly, appreciating Bill’s cosmic attempt to cheer him up. “Remind me to come to you when I get my first grey hair. Or wrinkles. I think I’m already getting wrinkles.”

“They’re just laugh lines.” Bill waved his hand dismissively. “They make you look distinguished. I take full responsibility for those by the way.”

“Lift up your shirt.” Ford reminded Bill. “Come on.”

Hoisting his shirt up to his neck, Bill felt somewhat more comfortable with this whole experiment. Joking with Sixer helped put him at ease, and the thought of his human, geriatric and still turning to him for guidance, tickled his fancy.

Making light of things also helped Bill deal with the complex twist of emotions engendered by consenting to this little experiment. Letting Sixer take the reigns here made Bill vulnerable, and he never let circumstances make him vulnerable. He hadn’t, not for several millennia. But somehow submitting himself to Sixer’s lovingly crafted tests, designed to rouse his fire, to make him react - it felt unfairly good. He knew he was vulnerable letting Sixer pull down his walls like this, but that vulnerability didn’t feel misplaced. It was almost like he could trust Sixer, at least with this. This physicality. He hadn’t had something like this before. Bill didn’t know what to make of it, so he fell back on deflection and humour.

Ford bumped his fingers against Bill’s belly, the latex snagging on the soft hairs on Bill’s skin, and he dragged his fingers up Bill’s abdomen, feeling him up. He tested Bill’s physical form. He watched Bill’s stomach jump when he pressed certain spots. His muse was ticklish, and his sides were especially sensitive. Ford was tempted to tickle Bill now, just as a little payback for his muse’s behaviour today, but he knew Bill would leave the experiment if he did, and he didn’t want that.

As his hands quested higher he could feel Bill’s temperature climb. Ford’s hand lingered just below Bill’s pectoral, and hesitantly Ford brushed against Bill’s nipple, watching it pebble instinctively. He could feel Bill hold his breath, the rise and fall of his chest stopping abruptly.

Withdrawing his hand, like he’d been caught with it in the cookie jar, Ford looked down to his journal and cleared his throat.
“Ahem. We need a temperature read again.”

“I’m hot, you can say it.” Bill quipped, exhaling his breath in a sigh. Sixer’s teasing wasn’t fair.

“I’ll have to confirm that before saying anything.” Ford held the thermometer in the air expectantly, trying to pull himself up before he got carried away. Touching Bill was definitely intoxicating, and if he let himself linger too long he’d ruin the integrity of the experiment.

Bill accepted the thermometer between his lips and swung his legs under the table again, still holding his shirt up.

“What does it say?” Bill asked, his voice slightly muffled by the glass rod.

“72. We might have to switch to the candy thermometer soon.” Ford pulled the thermometer out once more.

“You know, I’m all candied out after that Summerween fiasco.” Bill muttered.

“Is that why I saw you take those taffies from Fiddleford’s room?” Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, nothing getting past his keen observation skills.

“They didn’t have his name on it.” Bill argued for the sake of it, quite smug to have stolen from Fiddleford. “Do you think he wants them back?”

“Have you eaten them already?”

“Yes.”

“You’re impossible.” Ford shook his head fondly, chuckling. He felt his own temperature rise as he finished noting down the changes and moved to pull his gloves off, feeling the latex stick and snap as it was removed.

Now for the more hands on part of the experiment.

“Are you going to do that again?” Bill asked, his voice low and curious, watching Ford lay his gloves back down on the tray, taking more time than he needed to. Seeing Sixer’s well-endowed hands uncovered had Bill warm with anticipation. If this part was anything like before, then this was worth the ordeal of the entire experiment. He wanted Sixer’s hands on him.

Ford paused, looking down at the gloves he had not just balled up, but meticulously folded this time and laid on the tray, stalling.

Slowly, he asked, without looking up. “Do you want me to?”

It was Bill’s turn to stall. He watched Sixer, sitting still for once, caught in the question. Answering honestly would give too much of himself away here, but if he lied and said no, Sixer would stop his experiment and leave him be. Sixer was certainly respectful enough, but Bill wanted to be wrecked again like last time, wanting to be overwhelmed. He wanted to feel that power flowing through him.

Rather than responding verbally, Bill reached his hand out delicately to capture Ford’s six-fingered hand, pulling it towards him. Ford was watching him closely, Bill could feel his eyes upon him, heating him up, and he boldly dragged Ford’s hand until he was holding it against his stomach, keeping Sixer’s broad hand there.
His stomach felt tingly, flames flickering gently inside, under the skin where Sixer was touching him.

Bill met Ford’s gaze and urged him on, pulling Sixer’s hand up so his bare fingertips grazed along Bill’s abdominals.

Ford’s hand flexed.

Bill stared at him some more, and took a shaky breath, his thoughts disappearing behind a solid wall of want the longer he looked at Sixer.

Sixer was good to look at, his skin pale enough that the blush in his cheeks was obvious. His expression was one of eagerness, curiosity and desire, barely restrained. It was a good look for the scientist. Or maybe Sixer just looked good generally.

Ford skimmed his hand over Bill’s toned stomach, feeling the muscle and soft skin with his bare hand. Bill’s temperature was warm, and Ford adored feeling Bill’s breathing push his stomach in and out with each exhalation. His fingers mapped out the details of Bill’s abs, feeling the ridges of the muscle with awe. He let his hands trace warm arcs further up Bill’s torso, towards his pectorals, feeling Bill’s breath catch.

Ford looked up at Bill, and watched his muse’s eyes lid, saw the way Bill was chewing on his bottom lip, obviously flustered by the heavy petting.

Ford grazed his thumb across Bill’s left nipple, and heard Bill gasp.

“Doing it again,” Bill uttered, breathing out the word, as Sixer rubbed his thumb across his nipple once more, sending a shock of sensation all the way down Bill’s spine. He didn’t realise he was so sensitive there.

“You’re sensitive.” Ford murmured, his voice lower than usual. Arousal pitched it low, and Ford felt his mouth start to water watching Bill squirm. It was what he’d always wanted, to make his muse shudder like this.

He rubbed his calloused thumb over Bill’s left nipple, rolling it between his fingers, playing with it, watching his muse wriggle about, biting his bottom lip.

“Sixer – ah!” Bill gasped loudly as Ford pinched his nipple gamely. Sixer was too good at this.

Ford continued to smooth his left hand over Bill’s sides, pinching and tugging on Bill’s nipple with his right. He could feel Bill begin to shake with the effort it took to hold still through this, and that haze of triumph, of satisfaction that he could make a God quake glazed over Ford’s focus.

This wasn’t about the experiment anymore, this was about him breaking down Bill with the barest of touches, wanting his muse to moan into his mouth once more. God he wanted it.

Ford brought his left hand up to smooth over Bill’s other nipple soft and gentle while he pinched Bill hard with his other hand, the contrasting sensations coaxing a moan to slip out from Bill’s lips. Bill was panting now, struggling to sit still and hold his shirt up, and when Ford flicked his thumb over his right nipple now, Bill cried out and his hand flew out to grasp onto Ford’s arm, overwhelmed.
Bill looked at him, and his unusual yellow irises were eaten up by black, his pupils blown impossibly wide.

“Six-“ Bill pleaded, his voice breathy and desperate.

Listening to the uncensored want in his muse’s voice, Ford threw aside whatever small part of him still clung to the noble pursuit of science to pull Bill closer to him across the table, owning the space between Bill’s legs and lowered his head to press his mouth against Bill’s nipple, feeling his muse’s heated skin with his mouth.

Bill moaned loudly. He cried out, his hands reaching out to grasp onto Ford, twisting into the fabric of Ford’s sweater, his head tilting back, his eyelashes fluttering as Ford pressed warm wet kisses to his nipple, fanning the flames of worship higher.

Ford laved his tongue against the sensitive nub, swirling around it, feeling Bill’s back arch as he needily tugged Ford closer to him, making desperate half choked noises with every decisive swipe of Ford’s tongue.


Ford had no intention of stopping, one hand at the small of Bill’s back, pulling him closer while he pressed sloppy biting kisses to Bill’s chest. When he dragged his teeth across Bill’s nipple his muse shouted loudly in a bizarre unintelligible language and clawed his hands across Sixer’s back desperately.

Ford could feel Bill pulling his sweater up his back, it was bunching up under his armpits, but he didn’t want to stop touching Bill to take it off, crowding his muse’s body, both pulling him closer and pushing him back onto the table with the force of his ardent worship.

Bill had wrapped his legs around Ford’s back again, and Ford felt Bill’s hot lips brush against his forehead, his muse obviously trying to kiss him back but unable to, his body spasmodically shaking when Ford twisted Bill’s nipple just right, when he raked lightly down Bill’s side with his nails.

Bill wasn’t holding his shirt up for Ford anymore, it kept falling down over Ford’s head, and so Ford managed to pull away from Bill’s close orbit for a moment to wrestle Bill’s shirt up over his head.

Bill wriggled out of his long-sleeved shirt as quickly as he could, now leaning back against the metal tabletop on his elbows, before he reached up and grabbed the back of Ford’s neck, pulling him in for a frantic kiss.

Kissing his muse was something that felt effortless, yet was still such a novelty for Ford. It felt so electric, giving into this shared passion, and knowing how much Bill wanted it, wanted him. It was intoxicating.

They both wanted more, it was so evident. They were both so hungry for it, for each other – that Ford didn’t know in that moment what was stopping them from devouring each other’s bodies ravenously in a fit of passion.

**BEEP BEEP BEEP BEEP.**

The smoke detectors Ford had installed the other day blared their alarm throughout the lab just as the safety sprinklers turned on, raining water down on them from above, dousing the small fires that had caught throughout the lab.
“UGH! SIXER! You made it rain on me?” Bill yelled angrily at the alarm, making a rude gesture at the ceiling as Ford pulled back and raised his hand to feel the sprinklers raining down on him, pulling away.

“Aghhh! I hate this!” Bill fumed, his temper boiling as the ceiling drenched his and Ford’s fire effectively, water dripping down onto his face. “I hate this!”

“Well at least the sprinklers work.” Ford commented, brushing his wet hair back off his forehead, laughing at the scenario.

Bill’s yellow hair fell damply across his forehead, and where the water touched Bill’s skin his muse was giving off steam. He was pouting indignantlly, obviously beyond peeved, and Ford couldn’t help but laugh again.

“Ha ha ha ha ha ha!”

“It’s not funny!” Bill scowled at Ford.

“Yes it is.” Ford countered, bending over, his hand on his thigh, laughing at the ridiculousness of it all.

“Your fire alarm is too sensitive. That wasn’t even a little fire.”

Ford looked at the several singed looking areas of the lab with amusement. Bill had successfully managed to keep his fire from harming Ford this time, but he had sent it creeping along the walls of the lab instead, sizzling burn marks into random areas of the lab, the fire creeping across the floor, scorching the salt circle from the ground.

“A little fire, was it?” Ford couldn’t help but smirk smugly as his muse seemed to get more embarrassed by his own ardour.

“You shut up too.” Bill pointed at Ford, then crossed his arms defensively. “And turn that thing off. Your solution isn’t working.”

“I haven’t even tried my solution yet, this was just the preliminary experiment.” Ford pulled out the stepladder and turned off the sprinklers on the ceiling, shutting off the alarm, then walked back to his muse and held his hand out to help Bill to sit up, and scoot off the table.

Bill leaned heavily into Stanford once his feet were on the ground, still feeling a bit shaky, and he ran his hand covetously across Sixer’s chest. “Well let’s get to round two then.”

“First.” Ford held up the candy thermometer in his hand, and Bill smacked Sixer’s chest instead.

“You’re awful! The worst human being I could have possibly chosen. Abhorrent, disgusting, awful.”

“Say ahh.” Ford held out the thermometer smugly, watching Bill’s tantrum.

“Hideous!” Bill poked Ford in the chest, but then seemed to reconsider, and smoothed out the wet fabric there. “Well, maybe not entirely hideous. Arrogant for sure.”

“The sooner we finish this part of the experiment the sooner I can unbind that brick for you.” Ford insisted. “If the sprinklers didn’t wash the circle away completely.”
“I hate you.” Bill glared up at Stanford’s smug face. Ford held out the candy thermometer until Bill reluctantly closed his mouth around the rod. Once Bill was effectively silenced by the thermometer Ford chanced a question.

“Not entirely hideous, am I?”

Bill flushed and he smacked Ford in the chest one more time, mumbling around the thermometer.

“Don’t get a big head about it.”

“Oh, that was a compliment then, was it?” Ford raised his eyebrow, unable to help the lopsided grin that was creeping across his features.

“You human flesh-bags all look alike to me. Don’t think you’re special just because you’re not as hideous as the rest of your kind.”

Now that the fires were doused, Ford rested his hands on Bill’s hips, pulling him closer, chancing his luck with touching his muse once more.

“What’s appealing to you about me then? Physically, what is it you find attractive about me?” Ford had to ask, he wanted to know.

Bill huffed, and crossed his arms, pursing his lips around the thermometer, very aware of Sixer’s hands on his hips and the warmth that provided. He looked away from Ford, reluctant to provide an honest answer.

“Tell me.” Ford beseeched, rubbing his thumbs against the bare skin of Bill’s hips, making him tingle.

“I don’t know.” Bill evaded Sixer’s gaze, feeling hot already. “Aren’t you insufferable enough as it is? Do you really want me to stroke your ego?”

Ford swallowed. That phrasing was unfairly arousing.

“Maybe.” Ford croaked out, and cleared his throat.

Bill cast his mind back, trying to remember what Pyronica said, hoping that her observations were what passed as acceptable markers of human attraction.

He couldn’t exactly tell Sixer what he really thought, he’d look like an idiot if he told Sixer he liked the degree his elbows made when he rested his hands on his hips, or how his eyebrows resembled caterpillars, or how his eyes were especially earnest and always gave him away. He couldn’t exactly rattle off how Sixer’s innocence and honesty were attractive features, you couldn’t kiss an honesty, he didn’t think that was the sort of attractive feature Sixer was looking for.

But the longer he thought about Pyronica’s observations the more embarrassed he became at the thought of spouting those out too as reasons why Bill would find Sixer attractive. A strong jawbone meant nothing to him in the grand scheme of things, and to Bill’s understanding every human had a mandible of their own, that didn’t make Sixer special. And Sixer’s shoulders were okay, but Bill was still sour that Sixer had built Bill smaller than he was, so Ford’s broad shoulders were more of a slight to Bill than a point of endearment.

He didn’t know what he was supposed to say, and his temperature kept climbing as Ford subconsciously continued to rub those tantalizing circles with his thumb on Bill’s hip. It made it hard to think.

Ford raised his eyebrows at Bill, surprised.

“I don’t know! What do you want from me Sixer?” Bill spluttered, embarrassed regardless. “I don’t know how this whole physical attraction thing works, okay. Can’t I just like your mind and be done with it?”

Ford laughed despite himself. “Caterpillar eyebrows?”

“I hate you.” Bill mumbled, mortified he’d even said anything. He looked over to the puddles of water around the room that were gradually dissipating into steam the longer Bill stood in Sixer’s arms, letting the scientist rub the small of his back fondly, before Ford broke away, noticing the rising steam.

“Come on. Let’s unbind that brick for you.”

“Aren’t you going to take your stick back?” Bill mumbled around the thermometer.

Ford popped the thermometer from between Bill’s lips and read his muse’s temperature. “175.”

That Bill’s internal temperature could be so astoundingly high, yet Ford could still touch his skin, said volumes about how adaptable Bill seemed to be to all of this. From burning Ford unintentionally, to controlling his internal and external temperatures simultaneously, all while verging on being overwhelmed, the progress was astonishing. Bill was an incredibly capable creature.

“It sounds more impressive in Kelvin.” Bill commented flippantly. “Celsius is such a cop out.”

“You’re impressive enough as is.” Ford couldn’t help but admire his muse’s tenacity.

Leading Bill by the hand to the unbinding circle on the floor, Ford checked the line-work, the sprinklers having drizzled onto the blood somewhat. The lines hadn’t been disrupted, but the salt circle Ford had drawn out for protection was broken, the salt having burnt up in yellow flames when Bill’s magic went out of control.

“I wonder if this is passable?” Ford pondered, looking at the detail work. “I can always get more salt from upstairs.”

“Leave it, it’s fine.” Bill insisted. “As long as your lines aren’t too crooked it won’t make a difference in the casting. I keep telling you, you don’t need the salt circle.”

“But the book insists –“

“This is me insisting. Who do you think knows more? Your book or me?” Bill looked at Ford expectantly, tapping his foot now. “You want to waste more time?”

“So impatient.” Ford commented wryly, pulling Bill into the circle with him, holding his muse’s hands sweetly, before he moved to place his hand over Bill’s arm, looking at the golden tattoo he planned to unravel.

Six of the bricks that ran around Bill’s arm were black already, the line of the tattoo still there on his skin, but the golden binding removed. Ford personally preferred how the golden thread glinted, contrasting beautifully with Bill’s dark skin. The black lines of the unbound bricks seemed to fade into Bill’s melanin rich complexion, looking remarkably mundane despite how their absence
enabled Bill to access powers beyond mundane comprehension.

This would be the seventh brick that Ford would be unbinding. He had no idea what power the ritual would unlock. Ford didn’t have a full understanding of all that Bill was capable of before he summoned him here into this body. He was starting to get a feel for how powerful his muse truly was, but Ford suspected what had been unlocked so far was barely scratching the surface of all that Bill could do. He truly had summoned a God.

Ford dragged his gaze from Bill’s arm, to study his muse more fully, taking in the shapely form, the smooth dark skin, the runes and sigils that glinted gold on Bill’s bare chest, all the way up to Bill’s yellow gold eyes, slitted and glowing slightly, staring back at him.

“Go ahead. Recite it.” Bill urged Ford. “I know you have it memorised.”

While he still seemed to be figuring his muse out, Bill seemed to know Stanford better than anyone had ever known him in his entire life. Bill had this confidence in Stanford’s actions that only came from a deep understanding of his motivations, his character. It didn’t feel like the by-product of some detached sense of omniscience, it felt far more personal to Stanford, like Bill had taken a personal interest in getting to know him amidst his cosmic duties. Since being brought down to earth to live with him, Bill only seemed to understand Ford more, and that cultured a warm feeling in Ford’s chest. He felt noticed, recognised, understood. He felt valued for what he was, and expected to be no more or less than that.

It felt nice.

“Aurum filum. Exaudi orationem meam.
Restituatur habentis maleficia, quae ibi erat.
Da magicae retro.”

Ford began reciting the spell, and the blood runes on the floor lit up with that eerie red light, as the air in the lab began to swirl around them.

“Aurum et nigri.
Tollite lapidem.
Aurum et nigri.
Reduc ad eum.”

The gold line of the brick Ford was unbinding lifted off Bill’s skin like a ribbon and hovered in the air, undulating gently. The red light of the runes played flatteringly off Bill’s bare torso, and the wind whipped Bill’s golden hair around in front of his eyes.

Those slitted glowing eyes of Bill’s would seem intimidating beyond belief if Ford saw them staring out at him from any other face. All things considered, Bill’s features were quite imposing given how Godlike they were deliberately crafted, beauty and strength conveyed subtly in his build. A being to be worshipped and feared.

But this was Bill, and Ford wasn’t afraid of Bill.

Proving Ford’s point, Bill broke his intense eye contact with Ford to puff a breath of air up from the side of his mouth, blowing the hair out of his eyes and wrinkling his nose as the strands of hair tickled him, falling over his face.

Ford almost laughed, but restrained himself, needing to finish the incantation.

“Da magicae retro.”
The gold line of the tattoo’s brick crumbled into nothingness in the air, its particles floating out of existence into the ether as the red light from the floor guttered out and died.

Ford ran his hand over Bill’s arm, smoothing his palm over the now black brick etched into his muse’s skin.

“How does that feel?” Ford asked, looking up at Bill to see his muse lift an eyebrow back at him responsively.

“Less stifling.” Bill replied candidly, and tilted his head at Ford, remembering how his human had insisted he never meant to stifle Bill. It was moments like this that Bill almost believed him.

“Better.”

Ford smiled at Bill, relieved to hear that, and for a moment Bill was thrown by how utterly sincere the smile was.

While Bill didn’t doubt that Ford would hasten to help lessen any creatures discomfort, it threw him how much genuine care was conveyed just then, in that small gesture. Maybe he hadn’t meant to stifle him. Maybe Ford never wanted to see Bill stifled by these magics.

Sixer really cared about him, and that realisation was something that Bill didn’t know how to handle. Sixer adored him.

Was that one of the things Bill liked about Sixer? Was this really all about being adored? Genuinely adored, not just worshipped? It was starting to feel like that was the case, and the slight difference made something delicate inside Bill fracture slightly.

“Do you want to get back to the experiment?” Ford asked Bill, sliding his hand down Bill’s arm to thread their fingers together. “Someone mentioned a round two?”

Bill gave an odd sort of half smile, then extricated his fingers from Stanford’s, shrugging awkwardly. “Mmm – ah – later, maybe.”

Bill pulled away from Ford and stepped out of the circle. Ford watched Bill rub his hand down his arm almost nervous in his movements, before he reached for his shirt from over by the workbench, pulling it over his head, redressing almost self-consciously.

“Are you okay?” Ford asked, concerned by his muse’s sudden withdrawal.

“M’fine.” Bill said, his words clipped, his back a little tense. He made to walk across the lab, towards the door, when Stanford called out after him.

“Did I –“ Ford voiced his concern, hesitant and guilty suddenly. “Do something wrong?”

Bill paused and looked up to the ceiling, searching for the words he could say that would reassure his human through Bill’s own minor crisis of emotion. His chest felt tangled and tight, struggling with the feeling of being cared for. It had been some time since he had felt cared for. It always threw him, how he’d wanted it for so long, and gone without. He’d gone so long without needing it. He never thought he’d ever hold that feeling in his hand.

Bill looked down at the puddle of water by his feet, remnants from the sprinklers that doused his
fire as effectively as Ford’s caring smile had.

He couldn’t pretend that this was an unlikely outcome. He wanted Sixer to worship him after all, he should have expected this. He just didn’t expect how hard it would hit him, how familiar the ache would be, despite how many millennia had passed. Sixer had been caring for him all this time, feeding and clothing his body, providing for him. That was different from knowing Sixer cared, genuinely. That was duty, obligation. This was…

“You did nothing wrong Sixer.” Bill managed to say. “I just can’t play any more tonight.”

“That – you –” Ford’s words faltered, and he paced across the lab, reaching for Bill.

“I’ll see you in the morning.” Bill claimed the lift, opening the door and pressing the button for the ground floor, intending to strand Ford in the lab so he could ride the elevator alone.

“Bill!”

The damn elevator didn’t close fast enough though, and Ford shot through between the doors. He crowded Bill into the back of the elevator, bringing his hands up to cup Bill’s face, his eyes scouring Bill’s evasive expression with obvious concern.

“Bill.” Sixer’s hand was hot on Bill’s cheek, and he caressed Bill’s face with such care that the tangles in his chest pulled tighter, hurting more. “What’s wrong? I can tell you’re upset, it’s written all over your face.”

“Dammit.” Bill muttered, and brought a hand up to cover his woefully expressive face, cursing it’s openness.

He never had so much trouble guarding his thoughts as a triangle, though Pyronica always did say how expressive his eye could be. Actually, scratch that, he was incredibly expressive as a triangle, because then he had the ability to change his shape, distort and warp it to reflect his moods. Here in this body he was limited to the basic functioning of this human face, and all of the expressions available to convey his more complicated moods were just downright humiliating. He loathed how open this new body of his was, how he couldn’t hide what he really wanted to.

“What’s wrong? What did I do?” Ford questioned in a whisper, insistent on an answer, his brow creased as he watched Bill’s expression crumble into a deep sadness that his muse was clearly trying to hide.

Bill leaned back against the wall of the elevator, trying to hide his face, looking away from Ford – hating how his emotions hurt like this - just looking at that naked concern on Sixer’s stupid beautiful face. He was pressing his lips together, trying to stem the building verbal refuge that would leak out should he open them. He didn’t want to talk about his feelings. Those feelings of sadness that would sweep over him in a wave so suddenly, devastating the part of him that could believe in the front he put up all the time. It wasn’t fair.

Feeling Ford stroke his palm down the side of Bill’s arm, feeling his big hand against Bill’s cheek, rubbing his thumb across his cheekbone delicately, catching the wet leakage that tumbled from Bill’s eye, Bill felt overwhelmed in an entirely different way.

“Bill.” Ford’s voice was so sad, empathetic creature that he was. “Bill – I –“

“You did nothing wrong okay!” Bill blurted out. “You’re just being your stupid dumb self and I should have expected that.”
“I – whatever I did to upset you – I didn’t mean it.” Ford hastened to assure Bill, though his words startled a strangled laugh from Bill.

As if Sixer didn’t mean to care about him. What a joke.

“You’re too much.”

“I don’t – I’m sorry – I don’t –“

Bill cut Ford’s stammering off by grabbing him by the front of his sweater and tugging him sharply forward to plant his lips firmly on Sixer’s, kissing him hard, pouring all the emotion he struggled with into the kiss until it became unbearable.

Ford handled it well. He let Bill pour whatever he needed to into the kiss, and kissed back so tenderly that it made Bill melt a little, crumbling his defences like the golden ribbon had crumbled into the air.

When they finally broke apart, there were two wet salty lines trailing down Bill’s cheeks, but his eyes were bright again. The mood had passed, he had sailed through it successfully with Sixer by his side. Bill licked his lips, and blinked his wet lashes up at Sixer, feeling less conflicted now.

“Now, what –“ Ford began, wanting to know what had upset his muse so much.

“Just – stay the way you are.” Bill had said, holding Ford’s shoulders tightly. “You’re doing fine.”

“But you –“

“I’m an infinite millennium of complicated Sixer, sometimes it catches up to me. You’re doing just fine. Trust me.”

Ford stared at Bill for a moment, before he said. “Alright.”

Bill exhaled, and relaxed some, the tension from earlier bleeding away. Ford reached out gently to smear the wetness away from Bill’s cheeks, and Bill allowed Stanford to do one cheek, before he wiped the other cheek with the sleeve of his shirt, rubbing it against his cheek roughly.

“See. All better.” Bill insisted. “Everything’s good. That never happened.”

“If you insist.” Ford conceded, and the elevator doors dinged open on the ground floor. “Do you want to take a break still?”

“You can prod me with your science sticks tomorrow.” Bill managed a smile, and shrugged. “I’ve had enough being overwhelmed for one night. Though I liked your PHD doctor look. The stethoscope suits you.”

“I should wear it more often then.” Ford joked, and squeezed Bill’s shoulder briefly before letting him go to step through to the ground level. “You get some rest, I’ll clean up downstairs.”

“I expect that round two tomorrow.” Bill pointed at Stanford, joking, regaining his equilibrium.

“Oh, you’ll get it, don’t worry.” Ford assured him. “This just gives me more time to plan.”

Bill laughed quietly and began walking away. The elevator doors began closing, and Bill paused, saying one last thing before climbing the staircase to go to bed.

“Oh, and Sixer.”
“Mmm?”
“Thanks.”

When Stanford came downstairs to prepare breakfast the next morning, endeavouring to make his muse’s favourite pancakes to cheer him up, he found Fiddleford in the kitchen, his knee bouncing, a stack of papers next to him and a steaming cup of coffee on the table beside him.

“Oh. Good morning.”

“Stanford. Hi.” Fiddleford’s knee was jiggling still, at an alarming rate of knee bounces per second, and Ford wondered how much coffee his friend had consumed. There were bags under his eyes and he looked incredibly high strung for so early in the day.

“How did you sleep?” Ford questioned tentatively, watching the way his friend’s hand shook, concerned.

“Well I was fixin’ to sleep – but I - I couldn’t.” F explained, drumming his fingers on the pile of papers on the table beside him. “I’d been going over these papers your assistant passed on over yesterday.”

Ford mentally reviewed the circumstances of passing F the papers. He was sure he checked through them to remove all of Bill’s little notes, he was half convinced he had missed one though, as he couldn’t think of anything else that would keep Fiddleford up late into the night puzzling over it. Had he decoded Bill’s bizarre alien language? Was he taking Bill’s message to heart, was this F’s resignation?

“Oh?” Ford managed, hoping F would explain exactly what had him so sleep deprived and serious at this hour.

“Yeah. I – well, the new blueprints were a real humdinger. I quintuple checked my facts, I actually quintuple checked them and then went back to quintuple check them again. I know my math is right, I just don’t want to – ah – how do I put this?”

Fiddleford twiddled his fingers together. He looked at Ford, and Ford was surprised to note the hint of pity in F’s expression. Ford was uncertain what revelation F could possibly spit out that would cause him to pity Ford, and quite frankly, Ford didn’t take too well to being pitied, but he shelved his irritation, waiting to hear F out.

“Well. Your portal isn’t going to work.” Fiddleford said, the words falling bluntly from his lips.

Ford raised his eyebrows at this, and crossed his arms. “And how do you figure that?”

“Well, I’ve been over the blueprints – powering this portal of yours would require what’s known as a Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive, it’s specifically called for in the blueprints – that exact hypothetical device.” Fiddleford pointed at the pile of papers emphatically.

“Hypothetical device?” Ford leaned his back against the door jam, arms still crossed, watching Fiddleford explain himself. He could hear the stairs creak, Bill seemed to be coming downstairs to join them for breakfast.
“Stanford, I’ve done the math. This device doesn’t exist. And the blueprints don’t mention how to assemble one, it just says ‘collect Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive’ – collect?? Collect from where? I – there’s science and then there’s science fiction, and I know how closely related the two are, but really – this machine –” Fiddleford’s knee was reaching KBPS maximum velocity now, and Ford was almost amused at how agitated his friend was becoming while explaining himself. “According to my calculations humanity won’t be able to invent one of these doohickey’s for another ten thousand years! Ten thousand! I – why are you laughing?”

Ford chortled, leaning back on the doorframe, knowing that Fiddleford’s reaction to the concept of the Hyperdrive would pale in comparison to his reaction to knowing that such a device actually existed. And where.

Ford’s laughing fit was interrupted by a loud thump.

He turned and looked around to see his muse clutching his forehead, having just walked into the doorframe.

“Ugh.” Bill rubbed his hand down his face, and clutched onto the doorframe, looking absolutely shattered. He had bags under his eyes, he looked exhausted, dead on his feet, and apparently so out of sorts he couldn’t see where he was walking, having just faceplanted into the doorway. He stood there swaying, his eyes lidded and sleepy.

Ford sprung up to catch Bill’s shoulder, supporting him, looking over his muse with concern. “Are you alright?”

“Hwuah?” Bill blinked blearily at Stanford, one eye at a time.

Fiddleford leaned sideways on his chair, having never seen Ford’s assistant lacking his composure like this. Judging from Stanford’s reactions, he hadn’t either.

“Here, sit down.” Ford ushered Bill into the kitchen, pulling out a chair opposite Fiddleford at the table for him, plonking Bill in the chair. Bill flopped his head forward, thunking it down onto the wood surface with another unpleasant sounding thump. He then groaned and lifted his head, trying again, pillowing his head on his arms.

Ford hovered his hands just over Bill’s shoulders, uncertain, wanting to help. He smoothed his hand over Bill’s shoulder, giving it a little rub, injecting as much worship as he could into the gesture, wanting to bring some of Bill’s spark back if he could.

“Are you okay Bill?” Ford asked again, hesitantly.

Bill kept his head down, but raised one hand, giving a weary thumbs up to Stanford to reassure him.

Unbeknownst to Stanford, after Bill had retired to bed for the evening, leaving Ford to clean up the lab, rather than simply sleep, Bill had organised with a select few of his henchmaniacs another test with the apparatus and converter.

Teeth hadn’t known exactly what he was supposed to be looking for, but Bill had given him very specific instructions to press the top of the crystal when signalled to, and to ensure that the battery cube didn’t overheat and combust.

It was difficult to split his focus between his physical form and the mindscape, especially while the apparatus was draining the excess power from him, siphoning off the worship juice and storing it away for later mayhem. Bill had sat meditating in his room, wearing the silver bracelets on his
human body, popping in and out of the mindscape to check on Teeth’s focus. He only caught the
dental disaster slacking off once, chatting to Keyhole, who was in charge of monitoring the battery
cube, but thankfully Bill caught their little chit chat session in time, chastising them, before the
apparatus did some real damage.

Part of Bill had pushed too far with his little experiment, filling two cubes with juice, wanting to
wrest some control back after being thoroughly overwhelmed, both physically and emotionally all
night. So he pushed too far. He definitely had something to prove.

While Teeth did manage to stop the machine in time, pressing the crystal when Bill told him to,
Bill still felt incredibly drained when he woke up this morning. He was used to waking up feeling
refreshed, so this exhaustion was a new phenomenon for him.

Trudging downstairs Bill made a sort of wonky beeline for Sixer which failed miserably, however
Sixer’s cautious petting of Bill’s shoulder was somewhat rejuvenating, though not as expedient as
his initial plan which involved pinning Sixer to the wall and suctioning himself to the scientist like
a lamprey.

Instead, he just sat there, feeling Sixer rub attentive little circles on his shoulders, regaining his
energy much slower than he’d have liked to.

Ford looked at Fiddleford, and Fiddleford shrugged, both of them perplexed by Bill’s behaviour.
Deciding to continue their conversation, Fiddleford pressed.

“So what is it? Are you going to tell me my math’s wrong? I can show you my working.”

“I don’t doubt your mathematical ability Fiddleford. It’s much simpler than that.” Ford replied,
resting his elbow on the table while he continued to rub Bill’s back with his other hand.

“What, are you going to tell me the blueprints were wrong? They’re your blueprints!” Fiddleford
gave a sideways glance to Bill’s elaborate display of lethargy. “Or are you going to tell me that’s
wrong too?”

“No, that’s not wrong.” Ford said, and continued to rub Bill’s back. He wasn’t sure if his muse was
paying attention now, or keeping his head down on purpose. “By all accounts it may well be ten
thousand years until humanity discovers how to build a Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive.”

“Then what -?” Fiddleford squinted at Ford, feeling like he was missing something crucial.

“The blueprints said to collect the Temporal Displacement Hyperdrive. And I know precisely
where we can collect such a device.” Ford oozed smugness, excited to finally be able to divulge
this revelation to F.

Fiddleford looked stunned for several seconds, his knee finally stilling as he reeled, taking in the
implications. “So you’re saying…”

“I realise you’re already sitting down, but this really is the sort of conversation that warrants a
thorough sit. What I’m about to tell you will break down your understanding of our world
infinitely. Deconstruct your cognisance of everything. Your entire life will change, knowing what I
know. You’ll never look at our scientific understanding the same way again.” Ford grandstanded,
spreading his hands wide, childish excitement creeping across his features as he built the hype for
his revelation.

Casting a sideways glance at Bill’s somewhat wilted form though, Ford decided he could postpone
the revelation until after he got some food in his weary little muse.
“So after breakfast, perhaps we should adjourn to the living room. You can sit on the couch and I’d be happy to tell you then.”

Ford stood up, pacing over to pull ingredients out of the pantry. Grabbing his apron from the drawer and tying it around his waist, Ford dusted his hands off, oblivious for the most part to Fiddleford’s dumbfounded expression, being forced to wait on a cliff-hanger to discover this supposed life changing epiphany of thought.

“But first – who wants pancakes?”

Bill managed a weary sounding “Yaaaaay!” without lifting his head from the tabletop and Fiddleford resigned himself to postponing the discovery of a lifetime.

Yay.

“ALIENS?????????”

“The owners of this particular craft are the pan-dimensional beings of Tri –“

“ALIENS????????!!”

“Yes Fiddleford. Aliens.” Ford resigned himself to staggering his explanation, watching his college friend pull his own hair out anxiously, tugging on the strands looking stunned.


“Well, Martian is actually a misnomer, I’m fairly sure there aren’t actually any sentient species currently habiting on Mars –“

“ALIENS????????????!!!!!!?????”

“Good god somebody slip Mulder here a Xanax. All this fevered screaming is hurting my ear drums.” Bill complained, grabbing one of the throw pillows from the couch and squashing it against his head, trying to block out this conversation.

“I’m sorry – I just – Aliens???” Fiddleford boggled, sitting on the armchair across from Bill, calming down somewhat now.

“Aliens.” Ford said simply, sitting next to Bill on the couch, folding his hands in his lap.

He gave Fiddleford time to work through this revelation, though he worried looking at the clumps of hair Fiddleford had pulled out of his own head upon discovering we are not alone in the universe.

Fiddleford’s inclination towards anxiety was concerning. Perhaps Ford could recommend some advanced meditation techniques to him afterwards. He didn’t think the news would hit him so hard.

“I just – I didn’t think – my cousin Thistlebert said – but I didn’t believe. I want to believe – I just –“

“What did your cousin say?” Ford asked curiously.
“Well, Thistlebert kept tellin’ everyone Grandma got abducted by them saucer people, but we all thought he was just raving, or had too much to drink. He didn’t much like Grandma. I mean, I was certainly interested in that sort of thing when he brought it up. Logically, given how big the universe is, it makes sense that we ain’t alone out there. I just never thought contact would have been made – not for another hundred years!”

“It seems to have been made a long time ago. You know the valley, past the mountains?” Ford posited, and made a motion with his hand to indicate a giant spacecraft flying down, crashing into the mountains, and landing in the valley. He also made the sound effects, for accuracy, whistling and creating explosion noises for posterity.

“Wow.” Fiddleford sat back in his chair, grabbing one of the throw pillows nearby and hugging it to his chest.

“It’s truly impressive. Their technology – it’s, well, out of this world, really.” Ford joked, leaning back on the couch, resting his hand absently on Bill’s foot.

“How long have you been waiting to say that?” Fiddleford asked Ford with a grin.

“You’ve been the first person I’ve got the chance to say it to honestly.” Ford replied with a matching grin.

“Then he doesn’t –?” Fiddleford looked at Bill curiously, wondering why Ford’s assistant wasn’t freaking out about this revelation the same as he was.

“Oh Bill’s known about it longer than me.” Ford patted Bill’s foot as he spoke. “He let me find out about it on my own though.”

“Then… he isn’t –?” Fiddleford’s eyes were wide as he eyed off the mysterious man currently squashing a pillow over his head.

Bill seemed to realise belatedly that he was being stared at and hugged the pillow down his chest, glaring back at Fiddleford.

“He isn’t what?”

Fiddleford looked over Bill’s peculiar yellow eyes and golden hair, and mouthed in an awed whisper. “Are you an alien?”

Bill gave Fiddleford an incredulous look, before casting a sideways glance to Stanford, who was biting his bottom lip, his shoulders shaking with stifled laughter, obviously amused and clearly no help here. Damn Sixer for developing a sense of humour, though if Bill were being honest with himself, this was the sort of thing he’d find funny generally.

This also put the onus on Bill to maintain their cover. Something he’d been reluctant to do, as it was much more comedic to fuck with people than pretend he was just a boring human.

“An illegal alien.” Bill lied, scoffing at Fiddleford’s question. “Such an insensitive question McGucket. Do you want to see my papers too? My visa? My green card maybe?”

“No, no – I didn’t mean it like that!” Fiddleford hastened to correct himself, holding his hand out, not meaning to offend Bill.

“You want to see my birth certificate too! Unbelievable!” Bill raised his voice, dramatically objecting to put Fiddleford off the track. “I’ve never been so insulted in my – well actually –“
Ford was laughing outright now, his hand on his stomach, shoulders shaking. Bill kicked Ford with his socked foot irritably.

“This one thinks it’s funny. That should tell you all you need to know.” Bill said, tactfully answering Fiddleford’s question without actually answering his question.

“I’m sorry, I just got excited for a second there.” Fiddleford apologised, sitting back in the armchair, curling his shoulders forward self-consciously. “I didn’t mean to upset you – I just – well… aliens!”

“There’s much more than just aliens out there.” Ford said, coming out of his laughing fit. He brought his hand back down to rest on Bill’s socked foot and absently gave his muse another foot-rub, filling Fiddleford in. “Everything that you’ve read in my journals – they exist. I can show you if you’d like. On the way to visit the crash site. We can make a trip of it!”

“A trip?” Fiddleford questioned tentatively.

“Like an expedition!” Ford said cheerily, having spent too long in the house for his liking. “We could hike all the way to the crash site! Go camping, explore the forest, study the anomalies we encounter along the way and bring the Hyperdrive back home with us! What do you think?”

“I haven’t been camping in forever. Not since before university, back on the farm.” Fiddleford pondered, rubbing his chin, before looking up at Ford, excitement colouring his features. “You’re really going to take me to explore a spaceship? Like an actual spaceship??”

“Definitely, and yes, it is an actual spaceship.” Ford grinned, happy to share with his friend just how awesome it was to be privy to this information. “If we hike there it might take a few days, but we can bring food, essential supplies, scientific devices, you’re going to love the magnet guns!”

“I’m gonna explore an actual spaceship.” Fiddleford said, his voice full of wonder.

“We can go tomorrow! I’ll head downtown today to sort out our supplies and pack what we’ll need, and we can set out in the morning, bright and early!” Ford enthused.

“Let’s do it!” Fiddleford cheered, jumping up off the armchair, pumping his arms in the air. “You and me!”

“Yes!” Ford jumped up from the couch too, Fiddleford’s enthusiasm was contagious. “Our first expedition! This will be fantastic.”

Down on the couch, Bill cleared his throat loudly.

“Ahem.”

Ford looked down at his suddenly surly muse, raising his eyebrows at Bill. “Oh, I’m sorry, did you want to come?”

“Was I invited?” Bill asked testily.

“I didn’t think you’d enjoy a three day hike. You always complain about having to walk. And I doubt you’d enjoy the lack of home cooking and sleeping rough.” Ford said bluntly. “Besides, you’ve seen the spacecraft before.”

“So you were just going to leave me here for three days?” Bill seethed, scowling up at Ford.
“Not leave you. There would be food in the house.” Ford backpedalled, watching Bill’s grip on the pillow he was holding tighten, his muse clawing the pillowcase.

“So I’m not invited?” Bill glared incredulously at his thoughtless human.

“I didn’t say that.” Ford held his hands up, trying to soothe Bill’s obvious temper. “I just asked you if you wanted to come.”

“Do you want me to come?” Bill asked Ford sharply.

“I just asked you –“

Fiddleford slowly backed out of the room, not wanting to be caught in the middle of what seemed like yet another lovers spat between Ford and his assistant.

“I’ll just… take these notes to the lab.” F said weakly as he slunk out of the door, Ford barely glancing up at him to nod assent to his departure.

Fiddleford hastened out of the room quick sharp, leaving Bill and Ford alone to glare at each other in peace.

“Do you want me to come?” Bill repeated obstinately. “Or are you afraid I’ll ruin your buddy buddy science trip through the woods with your dear old pal?”

“I didn’t say anything like that.” Ford insisted. “But somehow you’ve got it in your head that I would even think that.”

“Don’t lie. You didn’t want to bring me along. Me. You’d choose him over me.” Bill narrowed his eyes at Stanford, his jealousy simmering away.

“Bill.” Ford sat down on the couch alongside Bill, moving his muse’s legs to sit down. “I just asked you if you wanted to come. You’re making this into something it’s not.”

“Answer the question Stanford. Tell me the truth.” Bill demanded imperiously, rising up onto his knees on the couch to tower slightly over Ford, who gave a long suffering sigh.

“I want you to come.” Ford admitted. “But truthfully, if you can’t find a way to get along with Fiddleford, then this isn’t going to work.”

“Me get along?! He’s the one who –“

“Fiddleford has done nothing but try his damnedest to be nice to you. He wants to be your friend Bill. Why are you pushing him away like this?” Ford questioned, exasperated.

“I already have a friend.” Bill said firmly. “You’re supposed to be my friend.”

“I am your friend Bill.” Ford sighed and took his glasses off, pinching the bridge of his nose. “What will it take to make you try? At least try to be nice? Will you do it for me?”

Bill sat back down on the couch, no longer towering over Stanford, instead bouncing on his knees, testing the couches springs. He swivelled his finger in the air, indicating Ford should rewind. “Go back to the ‘what will it take’ part.”

“Bill.” Ford gave a long suffering sigh.

“Sixer.” Bill said back, crawling into the scientist’s space now. “I’m serious. There better be
something real good in it for me, or I won’t play along.”

“You can stay home then.” Ford crossed his arms, stubborn.

“Sixer.” Bill wheedled, pushing Ford back onto the couch now, sinuously sidling up to him, crawling ever closer until he was in a position to swing his leg over Sixer’s knee and sit in his lap. Winding his arms around Sixer’s neck now he tried his luck again. “Sixerrrr.”

He could tell from the way the colour crept up Ford’s ears that this was affecting him. Despite himself, Ford settled his hands on Bill’s hips to steady him, trying hard to maintain his frown, and failing miserably.

“What do you want?” Ford managed to croak out, before he cleared his throat, embarrassed by the way his voice dipped low.

Bill shifted forward on Ford’s lap, getting comfortable, and he ran his fingers through Ford’s hair, watching the scientist with sly eyes.

“What do I want?” Bill purred, his lips twisting up deviously.

Ford’s pulse quickened, and he swallowed, trying to maintain his composure despite Bill’s overt flirtation.

“Fiddleford could be back any moment now. Bill.” Ford warned, wanting to follow his muse’s cues but not wanting to be caught in an embarrassing position by his lab partner.

Bill leaned into Ford’s space and brought his lips to Ford’s ear, his breath hot, the flame creeping back into his demeanour the longer he teased his pet human like this.

“You know you want to take me along.” Bill whispered, low and sultry into Ford’s ear. “You don’t want to leave me here.”

“I don’t.” Ford swallowed, heat stealing into his cheeks. He began rubbing those small circles on Bill’s hips subconsciously, his hand creeping lower.

“I’ll want a favour.” Bill said, his lips grazing against Sixer’s sideburns, tickling him. “For joining you. For playing along.”

“Another brick?” Ford guessed, his hands feeling clammy as he shakily brought them lower, coming so close to copping a feel of Bill’s perfect buttocks for the first time.

“That’s an idea.” Bill crooned, and wriggled his hips, settling down further on Ford’s lap. “I was thinking something more hands on.”

Bill felt his drained power returning to him, and it was intoxicating once more. He felt powerful again, and letting his whimsy drive him, he dragged his tongue up Sixer’s cheek, licking him possessively.

Ford shuddered, the sensation of Bill’s hot tongue against his skin plaguing him with dirty thoughts. When Bill pulled back to look at Stanford, he saw the want clear in Ford’s eyes, and Bill smirked.

“I’m sure you’ll think of something.”

Ford’s voice was low and intense as he looked up at his muse, his hands too timid now to grope
lower, instead resting them on the small of Bill’s back again.

“I will.” He promised.

Smiling cheerfully now, Bill patted Ford on the shoulder before springing off the couch, his energy restored. “They don’t call you IQ for nothing! You go pack for our little camping trip Brainiac. I’m sure you’ve got plenty to do.”

“And Fiddleford?” Ford pressed, questioning his muse.

Bill smiled innocently, his hands clasped behind his back, changing his tune quickly enough as he backed out of the room.

“I’m sure we’ll be the best of friends.”

What Ford couldn’t see was that behind Bill’s back, his fingers were crossed.

Chapter End Notes

Bill is saying to Fiddleford "You have to try harder than that to impress me" in Lithuanian, and later in the chapter he is saying "feels good" in caesar cipher 13, lets pretend Bill can speak like it's a language.
Also, lets not be surprised that Bill knows about the X Files despite it coming out several years after this story is set, given how much TV he's been watching. It isn't all static. Who knows what Bill is really watching on that TV, being able to crusade against space-time like he does. I had a lot of fun looking through X Files memes for this chapter's inspiration.

\Aliens.\n
As a side note, there was some drama recently regarding false allegations of plagiarism of this work. The allegations were thoroughly debunked, and I'd love an apology from the people who bombarded me with them. I'd be happy to delete the comments and debunking post if an apology is received. Less drama for everyone that way.

Next chapter is the EXPEDITION! Lots of fun there.
In the firelight Fernando you were humming to yourself and softly strumming your guitar

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, at the end of this chapter there is a NSFW sex scene! The sexy warning has been bestowed.

The sun was shining down on a pleasant morning in Gravity Falls. Animals were frolicking in the uncharted forest and Ford, Fiddleford, and Bill were hiking along a meandering trail towards the granite pass that lead to the lake. There was nothing quite like inhaling lungful after lungful of fresh Oregon air to set one’s spirit’s skyward.

The plants were green and overgrown following the downpour of rain after that humid Summerween. Felled logs crisscrossed the trails, moss growing heavy on their trunks, and greenery hugged along the dirt path, palm fronds reaching out to caress the hikers passing by. Light scattered, dappled through the leaves of the canopy, the fragmented shade keeping the temperature cool and pleasant down on the forest floor, where the two scientists hiked with Bill Cipher in tow.

Tapping the glass of the compass, Ford held the device out to Fiddleford to show him the spinning needle.

“See this. The pioneers used to believe Gravity Falls was haunted because the instant you step into the valley, the needle on this thing goes haywire.” Ford explained, passing the compass to Fiddleford.

F cradled the compass in his hands and watched the needle spin wildly, pointing every which way, before straining towards a point westwards.

“Fascinating. It doesn’t work.”

“Every compass in a hundred mile radius points to the crash site. Once it spins wildly, you’ve reached the epicentre.” Ford tapped on the compass again, and smiled happily, continuing down the forest trail.

“Magnetic deviation of such magnitude is unprecedented for this far into the Pacific Northwest.” Fiddleford gushed, walking alongside Stanford. “I wonder what other effects the landin’ of the spacecraft had on the local environment. The disruption to the natural order must have been particularly turbulent.”

“What natural order?” Bill scoffed, following behind the two scientists, lacing his hands behind his head as he strolled through the forest path. “If you think there’s any such thing you’re kidding yourself.”

“A compass that doesn’t point north is a compass that don’t work.” Fiddleford argued.

“Who says a compass needs to point north to work? What’s so good about north anyway?” Bill questioned slyly, watching Fiddleford become slowly exasperated with him.
He’d been conversing with Fiddleford more freely now, having even said ‘good morning’ to him in English, and he was happy to note that the other scientist was coming to regret his desire to talk to Bill. Not that Bill made it easy on him.

Bill was more forthcoming with conversation since this morning, interjecting his two cents into whatever topic Ford and Fiddleford discussed, even going so far as to say that legwarmers were evidence of parallel dimensions. What Bill saw as playful banter came across to Fiddleford as wild adherence to conspiracy theories that held no academic merit in the field of modern science, and he was steadily becoming more and more frustrated whenever Bill decided to chip in his ‘two cents’ to drastically alter Fiddleford’s worldview. Ford had said Bill was a genius, but he seemed to have been sorely misled.

“It’s not about what’s good about it, that’s how things are. Compasses point north. A compass magnet is drawn to align with Earth’s natural magnetic field, it aligns with the north pole. Compasses point north.” Fiddleford pointed out, still walking along the dirt trail, gesturing to the compass in his hand.

“But why?” Bill asked, still strolling along, enjoying the tranquillity of the forest, and the crunch of dirt beneath his feet. And the facial tic Fiddleford seemed to have adopted, Bill enjoyed that too.

“Well? I just explained –“ Fiddleford looked at Bill, uncertain if he truly wanted an answer. When Bill just watched him expectantly with a blank unnerving expression, Fiddleford capitulated.

“Because the magnet in the point of a compass interacts with the magnetic field localised in the planet’s core, which points north, due to the polarity. A compass points north because all magnets have two poles, a north pole and a south pole, and the north pole of one magnet is attracted to the south pole of another magnet. Earth's magnetic North Pole attracts the ‘north’ ends of other magnets, it’s technically the ‘South Pole’ of our planet's magnetic field. Which is why a magnet is supposed to point north.”

Bill stared at Fiddleford for a moment, before he opened his mouth to blithely say again. “But why?”


“Why does it have to point north?” Bill drawled.

“I – because of the polarity. I just told you.”

“You condescended to tell me how magnets work, which any six year old with a competent teacher could do. I want to know why it’s the natural order of things.” Bill said simply, enjoying the way the early morning sunlight dappled through the leaves of the trees to play across Fiddleford’s increasingly stumped expression.

“I – because it is. That’s how the earth’s magnetism works.” Fiddleford expressed, dumbfounded that it was even in question.

“But why?” Bill looked directly at Fiddleford, and could have sworn he saw the human’s blood pressure increase in that very moment.

“I –“ Fiddleford looked desperately to his friend, seeking help dealing with Bill’s persistent questioning. “Stanford!”

“Bill’s just exploring hypotheticals.” Ford defended his muse, enjoying a little scientific banter to go along with his invigorating early morning hike. He felt refreshed, clear headed, alive. “When
you’re exploring anomalous occurrences it doesn’t hurt to question assumed presumptions.”

Bill shot a smug look in Fiddleford’s direction, following Ford further down the trail. Stanford tended to take the lead, being much physically fitter than both of his colleagues.

Fiddleford laughed the conversation off nervously. “Oh, so you were just testing hypotheticals.”

“No.” Bill countered, not willing to let this topic rest. “That was a legitimate question.”

“A legitimate – “ Fiddleford huffed, and shook his head, looking away from Bill’s unerring eye contact to eye up the trail ahead of him. “It’s like talkin’ to them flat earthers.”

“You know how you make the earth flat?” Bill asked, grinning as he walked. “Hit it with a mallet.”

“Hit the earth. With a mallet.” Fiddleford repeated flatly.

“A big mallet.” Bill nodded sagely, like he was spouting wisdoms.

“Land sakes.” Fiddleford muttered to himself and adjusted the heavy backpack on his shoulders. “May as well be talkin’ to myself.”

“Are you two doing alright back there?” Ford called from further up the trail, scaling the hill’s gradually increasing incline easily. He paused, adjusting the straps of his own heavily laden backpack, waiting for them to catch up.

“Just peachy.” Bill called out to Stanford, strolling up the hill without a care in the world. Bill had emphatically declined to carry a backpack of his own, so the various miscellany Bill had insisted on bringing along on this little camping trip was split between the bulging backpacks Ford and Fiddleford were wearing. Ford was certainly equipped to carry the extra weight, but, thin limbed and far smaller than his friend, Fiddleford was not.

“Do you mind slowin’ down a little bit?” Fiddleford called up ahead, pausing to tighten the straps on his backpack, hoping to redistribute the weight so it was less arduous to carry. “This here bag you got me saddled with is hurtin’ my back.”

Ford stopped, waiting for Fiddleford to catch up. “If it’s too heavy for you I can rearrange our gear. I think the magnet guns in there might be weighing you down.”

Fiddleford scaled the hill and set his pack down on the ground beside Stanford, who put his own pack down and began redistributing the weight.

“I don’t see why he couldn’t carry his own gear.” Fiddleford muttered quietly to Ford as they both bent to swap the gear between their bags.

Ford hesitated before replying. He could hardly tell Fiddleford the truth, that Bill had insisted the only way he’d carry a bag of his own is if he got to levitate it all the way to the crash site.

“You have your ways, and I have mine.” Bill insisted. “I’m accustomed to making things float on their own instead of breaking my back carrying them everywhere. I’m not saying I won’t help carry my weight, but if I’m going to carry anything, it’s going to float the way luggage was intended to.”

“You can’t levitate your luggage all the way to the valley.” Ford sighed, exasperated. “We just convinced Fiddleford you weren’t an alien.”

“I’m not an alien. There are no words in your primitive language to begin even comprehending
what I am.” Bill said simply before poking Ford fondly on the nose. “It’s cute that you even try.”

“Yes, well right now I’m trying to figure out how I’m supposed to fit a walking stick, a cursed crossbow, nearly every pillow from your room – really Bill, we’re going camping, you won’t need that many pillows.”

“You don’t know that.”

“I have a sleeping bag for you, it’s very comfortable.” Ford tried to convince Bill, holding one of the sleeping rolls up, nodding.

“I’m not sleeping in your larval cocoons. I’m surprised you even have those. They’re filthy.” Bill eyed off the sleeping rolls with scorn.

“They’re sleeping bags.” Ford said, putting the sleeping bag down on the table. “And I assure you, they’re clean. I just washed them.”

“You don’t know where larval cocoons come from, do you?” Bill narrowed his eyes at the sleeping bags, and leaned away from them, vaguely disgusted.

Suffice to say, Ford didn’t make Bill carry a backpack.

Despite Bill’s claims that he would carry his weight through levitation he couldn’t take the risk of scaring away Fiddleford. Visiting an alien crash site to scavenge parts was one thing, but letting Fiddleford know he was cohabiting with a cosmic being of untold power was a whole other kettle of fish.

Bill was somewhat leery of letting Fiddleford in on his secret after having listened to McGucket’s plans over dinner that night to create a containment facility in a bunker for the anomalous creatures they encounter creating the portal. He had plans to build a bunker before, having suggested it in his first phone call with Stanford, but now that the prospect of alien life forms was real, and Stanford was insisting the creatures in his journal were real too, F was making contingency plans. He was good at that. Very thorough.

Judging from the many disapproving looks Bill was giving Stanford over dinner, and how Bill reacted to Ford’s own little experiment at first, Ford could guess that Bill was somewhat afraid of being put in a position where he might end up in one of those containment units, poked and prodded at like a specimen. Ford personally didn’t think that Fiddleford would do something like that to another human being, but as Bill tacitly pointed out, he wasn’t a human being. Ford let the point drop.

“Bill… has a bad back.” Ford lied, putting the heavier items in his own pack, and swapping Bill’s many pillows into Fiddleford’s pack. “I don’t want him injuring himself over this. There. That should be lighter.”

Fiddleford put on his new pack, and found it considerably lighter, far easier to carry, and he smiled at Stanford and continued along the trail.

Ford hefted his own pack back onto his shoulders and found the additional weight considerable. He puffed out a breath and squared his shoulders, preparing himself for the added physical strain of lugging the majority of their camping gear halfway across the valley, but suddenly the weight dissipated, and his pack felt lighter than air.

Bill stepped up next to Ford, letting Fiddleford trek ahead of them.
“You doing okay there Sixer?”

Ford huffed out a laugh, realising what Bill had done for him. “You couldn’t have done that sooner.”

“You were managing it fine before, it seemed like a decent work out for you.” Bill shrugged. “This isn’t manageable though. I don’t want to break you. Not over a backpack.”

“Thank you.” Ford smiled at Bill, vaguely impressed with his muse’s consideration.

“Now you can’t say I wasn’t carrying my weight. And yours apparently.” Bill’s eyes twinkled as Ford felt himself lift a centimetre up from the ground, suddenly weightless. “Woops.”

“Bill.” Ford chastised, looking ahead to Fiddleford’s back, blazing ahead on the trail.

“He isn’t looking.” Bill countered, but let Ford touch back down to earth.

“For someone who doesn’t want their powers to be discovered, you’re certainly cavalier about it.” Ford commented, raising an eyebrow at Bill.

“If I’m playing along, it’s for you and your friend’s sake.” Bill said, walking backwards in front of Ford, so he could see his human’s face. “I can deal with people coming after me for what I am. I’m not sure you’d want me to do that to your friend.”

That thought sobered Ford some. After unbinding those seven bricks, Bill had ample means to defend himself, and Fiddleford wasn’t protected by any of the runes. Just Ford. He hadn’t considered it that way. “Point taken.” He walked a few more paces up the trail, adjusting to the lightness of his pack, and then looked up at Bill. “Has that happened to you before? Have people come for you because of what you are?”

“People have tried, and they’ll continue to try.” Bill shrugged, sharing the truth with Sixer. “I’m still here.”

“I’m glad you are.” Ford confessed.

Bill looked at Sixer, then looked at the beautiful forest they were walking through, feeling the sunlight on his skin, then back to his human, who was smiling that soft smile of his at him.

“Me too.” Bill said simply, and continued to walk.

Around midday Ford found himself sitting down in a clearing in the forest, pulling sandwiches out of his bag.

Fiddleford was winded already, and it had only been one morning of rigorous hiking. He insisted on a breather, took his pack off, and flopped down on the ground, exhausted, rubbing his legs.

“I don’t know how you do it Stanford.” Fiddleford said, trying to stretch out his aching calf muscles.

“I’ve been keeping up with a rigorous daily physical regimen. You remember when I joined the track team in college?” Ford passed a turkey sandwich over to Fiddleford, and a bottle of water.
“And you’ve stuck with it ever since?” Fiddleford twisted open the bottle of water, impressed.

“And improved upon it.” Ford nodded and twisted open the cap of his own bottle of water, taking a sip and wiping his mouth. “I love Tesla, but if I look as emaciated as him by the time I’m seventy, just shoot me with a death ray.”

Bill laughed at that cynical statement, and patted Ford on the shoulder. “Never change Sixer. Where’s my sandwich?”

“Oh, here.” Ford bent down to collect Bill’s beef and tomato, mustard covered sandwich, and passed it to his muse. Rather than cracking open his own plastic wrapped sandwich, he proceeded to stretch out his shoulders, twisting his torso this way and that, before stretching out his legs.

Watching Sixer appreciatively, Bill sat on a logged tree stump, and bit into his sandwich, enjoying his dinner and show. Ford continued stretching, but when he noticed Bill watching him, he stopped, feeling oddly self-conscious. He watched Bill’s smile stretch wide across his face, and his muse raised an eyebrow at him, picking up on the blush that was starting to diffuse across Ford’s cheeks. Bill had a dollop of mustard above his lip and Ford’s eyes drew to it, trying to focus on the innocuous to temper his own flushed arousal creeping in, but Bill licked the mustard off his lip, noticing Ford’s staring, and managed to make the gesture more sensual than it had any right to be. Ford cleared his throat and reached for his own sandwich, rummaging through his pack, looking away from Bill’s unerring amused eye contact.

“See, what I should do is fix myself up a pair of good old fashioned robo-legs.” Fiddleford grumbled to himself, having grabbed a long stick to hike with, sketching with the stick in the dirt, Bill and Ford’s flirtatious interlude having gone right over his head. “They’d do the walkin’ for me. All this hikin’ ain’t good for a man like me.”

“It actually is good for you.” Ford pointed out, retrieving his sandwich and taking a bite.

“Stanford, since you aren’t even breakin’ a sweat over this hike, you don’t get to talk to me about my fitness. Ever.” Fiddleford pointed his stick in Ford’s direction. “I’m still half convinced there’s somethin’ in the water here. You were never this much of a fitness nut in college.”

“Well, there’s not that much else to do out here other than ‘enjoy the great outdoors’.” Ford quoted Willow’s words here, shrugging. Personally, he found plenty of things to do in Gravity Falls, exploring the unusual creatures and anomalies that flocked to the area. Since summoning Bill, he hadn’t wanted for entertainment at all.

“Let me guess, you’re a fitness nut too?” Fiddleford asked Bill, raising an eyebrow at Bill’s lithe physique.

“Are you impugning my sanity?” Bill put his hand on his chest, feigning misunderstanding and offence.

Fiddleford seemed to presume that Bill didn’t wholly understand what he was saying when he spoke, perhaps subconsciously assuming that since English wasn’t his ‘mother tongue’ that he wasn’t fully aware of the connotations of his words. Bill enjoyed playing with this notion to infuriate Fiddleford, putting the scientist on the proverbial back foot every time Bill manufactured a ‘misunderstanding’.

“No – I – a fitness nut means –“ Fiddleford began explaining, before Bill laughed in his face.

“HAH! Another redundant exposition. You sure have fun with those don’t you?” Bill shook his
head fondly, and continued to eat his sandwich, heedless of Fiddleford’s resigned sigh.

Fiddleford looked over to Ford in askance, hoping his friend would say something, since Bill seemed to be deliberately teasing him, but this didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary for Ford, as he simply shrugged when F looked his way.

Ford could understand why Bill was playing these games with Fiddleford. For whatever reason, F seemed to think he needed to explain everything to Bill, thinking him foreign after all that talk about illegal aliens, and Ford knew how patronising Bill would find that, given his muse knew far more about the machinations of the universe than anyone. Ford was used to Bill’s cutting banter, and he took it as a challenge to be better, but Fiddleford seemed to find it off-putting.

Ford could tell that Bill was trying. He was actually talking to McGucket, something he only deigned to do if he was aiming to be sociable. Ford was reminded of the first time he took Bill to Greasy’s Diner, how he wouldn’t say a word to any other human, how he wouldn’t even interact with them. Bill was interacting with Fiddleford, he was making an effort. He was trying to treat McGucket exactly how he would treat anyone else, anyone else he would talk to at least. And while Bill didn’t treat Fiddleford like he treated Stanford (a fact Ford was privately thankful for – he didn’t think he could deal if his muse suddenly started flirting with another scientist) he spoke to him like he would normally speak to anyone.

It just so happened that Bill was generally abrasive to most people, so Stanford didn’t see it as anything out of the ordinary.

Fiddleford however seemed to see Bill’s behaviour as a concerted attack on him. He felt like Bill’s banter was bullying, and Fiddleford didn’t like bullies.

He turned back to continue scratching his design out into the dirt with his hiking stick, pouting at how unhelpful Ford could be.

“You’re not very observant, are you? You might want to zip up your pack, or we’ll lose out on that weird crunchy trail mix.” Bill pointed to Fiddleford’s backpack, which was laying on the ground, and twitching oddly.

Fiddleford looked over to his pack, and saw it moving, and he sprang to his feet, poking the bag with the stick.

“Oh geez. Somethin’s in there. I’m gonna grab it.”

“Don’t!” Ford warned. “Tip the bag upside down. It might be dangerous to just reach in.”

“Probably just a squirrel or somethin’.” Fiddleford theorised, but heeded the warning in Ford’s tone and lifted the pack up from the bottom, lightly shaking its contents loose.

Several pillows fell out, as well as Fiddleford’s Cubic’s cube, and some notebooks. Finally, flopping out onto the dirt, a most peculiar creature with a protruding bill and a plaid-weave complexion sat, dazed from falling out of the bag, blinking in the light with its bulbous eyes.

“Eek! What the fresh hell is that thing?” Fiddleford shrieked and sprung back, dropping the bag, pointing at the creature with his stick, warding it away from him. The creature blinked placidly up at him, then continued to ferret about in the abandoned bag, sniffing as it searched.

“Oh.” Ford peered over at the creature, who was sniffing out the rest of the snacks in Fiddleford’s bag. “It’s a Plaidypus.”
“A what now?” Fiddleford gawked at the creature, taking in its peculiar tail and vibrant colouring. Bill was snickering at Fiddleford’s fearful reaction.

“It’s a local species.” Ford explained and paced over to Fiddleford’s bag, crouching down to get a closer look at the creature. “Its pelt is highly prized for making mosquito proof clothing and winterwear for the lumberjacks in the area, though they’re very rare. Highly sought after too. The Plaidypus achieved a sort of cult status. They’re a staple of Gravity Falls folklore, like the Croc-Argyle or the One Clean Truck Stop Bathroom. Most people think they’re just a myth.”

“It’s like if a duck, a beaver, and a punk band got their wires crossed.” Fiddleford examined the creature sceptically, hardly believing it wasn’t a myth, despite it being right in front of him.

“That’s a fair description.” Ford smiled at the creature, and held out his sandwich for the little Plaidypus, watching it raise its head to sniffle over towards him. “This one’s just a baby, you can tell. Plaidypus start with horizontal stripes and only get their vertical stripes when they reach maturity.”

“Is it dangerous?” Fiddleford asked cautiously, watching his friend beckon the creature over to him with his sandwich.

“If it’s anything like a platypus it’s likely the spurs on its hind legs are poisonous, but it doesn’t seem to be aggressive.” Ford continued beckoning the Plaidypus over, watching it tentatively waddle closer, sniffing the air with the small nostrils at the front of its long bill. Ford broke off a piece of his sandwich and held his hand out flat, offering the food to the creature. “It’s probably just hungry. Come here little Plaidypus, have some of my sandwich.”

“You don’t want it?” Bill called out from over by the tree stump, having just finished his mustardy sandwich. “Give it here. Hey! You really want to be feeding the endangered wildlife?”

“He likes it.” Ford insisted, watching the Plaidypus nibble on his sandwich. Tentatively he stretched out his hand to pat the Plaidypus’ fur. The Plaidypus froze up, and regarded Ford hesitantly for a moment, before it relaxed, allowing the petting. Its fur was soft, and quite thick, and somehow smelled like maple syrup and bacon.

“Sure is a weird little critter.” Fiddleford murmured, rubbing his elbow, leaning on his stick, watching the Plaidypus nuzzle into Ford’s hand.

“Weird and unusual.” Ford nodded, agreeing. “And undeniably special.”

Bill watched Sixer bond with the waddling Plaidypus and pursed his lips, considering that.

Sixer was like him in a lot of ways, drawn to the strange and unusual. He didn’t shy away from the anomalous. He embraced it, made efforts to understand it, and it was one of the many qualities that Sixer conveyed to the world that made Bill grow fonder of him. His curiosity and acceptance of the strange was incredibly attractive.

Bill had been dwelling on Sixer’s attractive qualities more and more lately. Apparently his affection for Ford’s pointy elbows and caterpillar eyebrows were not exactly normative features to be drawn to, so Bill had been looking more closely, trying to find more things to like about Sixer’s puny human form.

Really, he should be praised for finding Sixer attractive at all, humans were undeniably disgusting creatures, they wore their largest organ on the outside, their bodily functions served essentially as ineffective food recycling systems, as they barely kept what they ate. All of the features humans
generally catalogued as attractive features were all geared towards reproduction, proliferating the species like a plague of locusts spreading across their dying planet.

It took some imaginative empathy for Bill to recognise Ford’s appealing features from a ‘human’ perspective. Adopting their customs and ways of thinking was a snap when Bill intended to manipulate humans, but putting himself in a human mindset when it came to recognising Ford’s attractive features involved a lot of second guessing himself. He couldn’t just appraise the lines that made Sixer’s form, he had to appreciate the functions, the details. Since Sixer showed him how horrendously responsive his own body was, now Bill was curious. He wanted to know why humans found certain features attractive, or more specifically, what a human might find attractive about Sixer past his beautiful big brain. It wasn’t hard to find things that were presumably attractive about Sixer, as he noted when he watched the scientist stretch, showcasing the virility of his body, it was just hard to reconcile himself with feeling that attraction personally. Perhaps he’d been in this human body for too long. Perhaps that was the point.

Despite his newfound appreciation for the physical aspects of Sixer’s appeal, seeing him like this, embracing the peculiar with open arms, Bill couldn’t help but reflect on how enjoyable Sixer’s company was becoming. From practically loathing the scientist’s self-important arrogance, to adoring his curiosity and open mind, Bill felt himself undergo a revelation of perspective.

The Plaidypus nibbled the bread Sixer offered him, and nuzzled Ford’s hand, putting a small smile on the scientist’s face.

Privately Bill wondered how Sixer would react if he showed him the shrieking galehounds of Quaxar, would he find them adorable, or would he need earplugs to reach that conclusion? Bill wondered if he would wear that expression of generous wonder the first time he watched a star being born, sitting alongside Bill at the top of his favourite nebula.

Bill had to cut off that train of thought, it was too precarious. He couldn’t afford to daydream about things like that. It was too close to making plans in Bill’s mind, and he wasn’t sure yet whether he should even be considering making plans to include Sixer in his life outside of this miniscule patch of land, if he even could welcome Sixer into the wider cosmos he called home. As far as daydreams went, it was tempting. More and more, as Bill observed Sixer up close and personal, he was finding reasons to value Sixer as more than just a pawn.

Maybe Sixer was moving up the board.

Looking for a distraction from the warm feeling brewing in Bill’s chest the longer he watched Sixer pet that bizarre anomaly, Bill looked at the spilled contents of Fiddleford’s bag, and reached over to grab a colourful looking cube.

Turning it over in his hands, Bill puzzled over its purpose. “What’s this?”

Fiddleford looked up, and saw Bill frowning at the cube. “It’s my cubic’s cube. I – haven’t you seen it before?”

“No.” Bill shrugged, and tried pressing each of the small colourful cubes, trying to unlock how it operated. “How does it work?”

“I – it – you twist it, it starts out all scrambled, and it’s like a puzzle. You make order from the chaos. Unscrambling it helps me relax – I - you seriously mean to tell me you haven’t seen it before?” Fiddleford asked Bill suspiciously, squinting at him.

“If I’d seen it I wouldn’t be asking.” Bill raised his eyebrow at Fiddleford, twisting the cube now,
curious. The way the coloured squares swapped places reminded him of Amorphous Shape’s flickering cubes, and it appealed to him to rend any sense of order from the device, casting it back into chaos. “Why?”

“I – you just – I thought –“ Fiddleford blustered, and seemed to be working something out. “Every time I put the darn thing down, someone keeps scrambling it. I thought that you –”

Ford was silent, looking away from Fiddleford, patting the Plaidypus, trying to look innocent. The Plaidypus made a disjointed honking sound, having finished the piece of sandwich Ford broke off for him, wanting another.

“Hey, I didn’t touch the thing.” Bill put his hands up, and then paused, coming to the realisation sooner than F, his eyes lighting up mirthfully, turning to look at Ford.

“Then who?” Fiddleford puzzled, looking vaguely perturbed as the grin stretched wider and wider over Bill’s face until he barked out a laugh and pointed at Ford.

“HAH! Hahahahahahah! Ahahahah! Sixer, I didn’t know you had it in you. You rascal! That’s HILARIOUS!”

“Stanford???” Fiddleford looked to his friend, affronted by the thought that the person who had been scrambling his cubic’s cube had been his trusted friend all along.

Bill was falling over himself laughing raucously, so loud that he deterred the Plaidypus from attempting to muscle another bite of sandwich out of Ford, sending it scampering away into the undergrowth, honking as it went. Bill was holding onto the side of the tree stump he sat on, one hand clutching his face as he laughed and laughed, tears welling in the corner of his eye, while Stanford looked more and more sheepish.

“Were you the one who -?” Fiddleford whirled, pointing to Ford, who was wrapping up the leftovers of his sandwich, awkwardly looking away from F’s gaze.

“I plead the fifth.” Ford said shiftily, trying not to look too pleased with himself.

“Well – I cannot believe –“ Fiddleford scoffed, unable to help the little huff of laughter that slipped from his lips. Bill’s humour was contagious. “The nerve!”

“That’s beautiful – I can’t – hahahahahahahah!“

“Well then Bill, I apologise for suspecting you.” Fiddleford began, but was interrupted by Bill’s hooting laughter.

“Apologise? Hah! I WISH I was the culprit, but Sixer got there first. I’m so proud.” Bill really was. Another point for Sixer’s growing appeal tallied just then, and Bill wiped a tear from his eye, tossing the cubic’s cube at Ford, who caught it just in time.

Twisting the cubic’s cube slightly as he spoke, fiddling with the thing, scrambling it further, Ford tried hard not to let Bill’s casual praise get to him. Of all the things to be proud of, Ford’s mischievous meddling with Fiddleford’s puzzle cube was the first thing to draw genuine praise, and even pride from Bill. Once again, Ford wondered how his muse’s mind worked, trying not to let his pleased blush show.

“You looked like you wanted a challenge.”

“A challenge?” Fiddleford crossed his arms, amused, but trying to at least look stern.
“You looked bored without something to fix.” Ford added, and passed the cubic’s cube back to F. “I won’t touch it again.”

“I will!” Bill grinned, and cackled like a supervillain.

“Well, I’ll be hidin’ it from now on I guess. You two are as bad as each other.” Fiddleford harrumphed and began putting the spilled knickknacks back into his bag, hiding a smile of his own. “Oh, now I gotta work on fixin’ it.”

“You can fiddle with it while we walk. We still have a lot of ground to cover.” Ford suggested, reaching for his own pack, hefting it up, struggling with it suddenly. Bill’s levitation had waned when they sat for a break, and now the backpack was subject to the laws of gravity once more.

“Did you want to swap packs maybe?” Fiddleford suggested. “I feel bad that you’ve had to lug that thing all the way up the hills here.”

“Oh, no, it’s quite alright.” Ford held his hand up, shaking his head. “That is just so sweet of you to offer.” Bill clasped his hands together in front of him, smiling at Fiddleford. “The very spirit of generosity. You two should swap packs!”

“No, I assure you, it’s quite alright – I –” Ford gave Bill a scolding look, knowing what his muse was trying to do. While he might agree to levitate the bag for Ford, Ford was under no illusions that his muse would do the same for his associate. He was sure this was all very entertaining for Bill.

“Let me give it the old college try at least.” Fiddleford insisted, and reached for Ford’s pack trying to lift it off the ground, his thin arms straining to hoist it up. “Oof. Hahaha, that’s – that sure is a heavy one.” Fiddleford’s arms shook with the strain as he attempted to lift it up onto his back, struggling somewhat.

“Fordsy had no trouble lifting it.” Bill pointed out, grinning. “I’m guessing college was a long time ago for you.”

“No, it’s fine – I can – hrmmmph – I can do this!” Fiddleford insisted, hoisting the pack onto his back while Bill sat on the tree stump watching, making no effort to help ease the weight of the pack.

Bill rested his chin on his hand. “Can you now?”

“Here, F, just let me –” Ford held his hand out to help, but Fiddleford waved his hand at him. “I don’t know how you carried this all that way. I can do it, I swear – I just need – a little – oof!”

Fiddleford toppled onto the ground from the weight of the pack evidently getting the better of him. Bill watched F fall and began applauding slowly.

“Magnificent. Truly.”

Ford helped Fiddleford up off the ground, taking the pack from his shoulders, while Bill continued to clap.

“I feel like that could be a metaphor for the folly of man. For the limits of the human endeavour.”

“Maybe you could carry your own pack.” Fiddleford bristled, again feeling Bill’s idle commentary was more of a personal attack. “Then we wouldn’t have this problem.”
“Didn’t you hear?” Bill waved his hand, trying to remember what excuse Ford gave before. “I have a bad spleen – spine – back!”

“Which is it?” Fiddleford put his hands on his hips, unimpressed with Bill’s deflection.

“All of the above!” Bill declared triumphantly. “I’m in constant pain. I was very poorly made.”

“No you weren’t.” Ford grumbled, hoisting the heavy pack onto his own shoulders, picking up on Bill’s subtle dig at his designs.

“What can you do?” Bill shrugged, and got up off the tree stump, dusting himself down. “We deal with the hand we’ve been dealt.”

“You don’t look like you’re in pain.” Fiddleford scrutinised Bill, not convinced.

“I have an excellent poker face.” Bill replied smoothly, causing Ford to snort quietly, laughing at the irony of that statement. Bill was too expressive to maintain any sort of physical deception, Ford thought, though he thought wrong in this instance.

“We still have about another hour to go before we reach the lake. We should get going.” Ford suggested, hoping to derail Fiddleford’s scrutiny.

“You sure you’ll be alright with that pack?” Fiddleford had to ask, concerned for his friend.

Ford adjusted the heavy bag, and considered its weight for a moment, before he felt the backpack subtly defy the laws of gravity, floating a millimetre or two higher on his back. Once again the backpack was weightless, and Ford shot an appreciative glance to Bill, which Bill ignored, examining his nails like he had done nothing to assist.

“I’ll be fine.” Ford nodded at F, smiling, before gesturing to the path they had to take next. “This way for another few miles.”

Settling his own pack on his shoulders, F let Ford lead the way, fiddling with his cubic’s cube as he walked, trying to restore order to the pattern.

Behind them Bill meandered, paced back somewhat from the scientists, lost in thought, considering some pertinent issues. And the view of Sixer from behind, Bill considered that too.

Food for thought.

The dirt was laced with sand this close to the lake, crunching underfoot, past floods distributing crushed shells and sedimentary rock throughout the forest. The wind was crisper, a hint of chill coming off the lake now that September was creeping in. It was brisk.

The sun still shone overhead, though it’s light was not so vibrant now, hiding behind a greying cloud. The weather was turning.

“And then Patricia said to Gertrude, I know how dilated I am, I’m the one having the darn baby, get that ruler out of there --“

Ford was listening politely, a slightly strained smile on his face as he winced at Fiddleford’s
incredibly graphic descriptions of his wife giving birth to Tate. Privately he was a little thankful that procreation wasn’t anywhere on his priority list at the moment, the whole ordeal sounded horrifying.

“And she took that ruler, red in the face she was, and snapped it clean in two. All them birthin’ hormones give a gal super strength apparently. Though I’d say Pat’s plenty super all on her own.” Fiddleford continued rambling, walking alongside Ford, gesturing with his hands as he spoke. His cubic’s cube was reorganised, and sat nestled deep in the side pocket of his bag, having been put firmly there after Bill’s fourth pickpocketing attempt. “After that all the midwives gave her a wide berth. I remember she screamed at them – I’ve got two degrees in bio-engineering, don’t you go tellin’ me how to have my baby! Nevermind that these women are professional baby deliverers, but when that one nurse suggested Pat squat in some sort of pool to have her baby, well, she just wasn’t havin’ it.”

Ford had no idea how to respond to that, so he attempted an understanding nod to show F he was listening.

“So I sat with Pat all the while she was givin’ birth, and the nurses were scared of her, but I still remember it bein’ the best day of my life. She pushed and she pushed like no tomorrow, and then finally we heard little Tate testin’ his lungs out in the world, crying. Heck, I was cryin’ too. And that’s the story of how I broke two of my fingers!” F concluded cheerily, holding his left hand out for Ford to examine.

“That’s –” Ford didn’t really know what to say, and looked at Fiddleford’s slightly crooked pinky finger with an awed sort of horror. “Thank you for sharing – I – that’s a rather personal story – two fingers?”

“Yes!” Fiddleford pointed to each one. “They healed up fine though, except this one broke again when I was fixin’ up some furniture for the house and I hadn’t had a single hour’s sleep in three days. That’s parenthood for you.”

“I see.” Ford considered the information he was just given. Ford honestly had no idea what to do with it. Fiddleford tended to overshare.

“That’s the miracle of childbirth.” Fiddleford declared proudly, and while Ford was able to reign in his reaction, Bill wasn’t as polite.

“Urgh!” Bill shuddered, and wrinkled his nose. “That’s disgusting!”

“Well it ain’t too pretty, but gettin’ little Tate out of the whole thing was worth it. For me and for Pat. Best day of our lives.” Fiddleford continued, unrattled by Bill’s disgust, still shining with pride.

“You went through all of that, and ended up with a baby –” Bill gestured with his hands as he spoke, seeming unimpressed with the reward for the act. “A selfish, single minded poop machine, completely lacking any sort of object permeance, and still you think it’s a win. Unbelievable.”

“I know havin’ a kid ain’t for everyone, but once you do have one, gosh, it changes your life.” Fiddleford gushed, exiting the trail out onto the beach that arced along the lakeside, his shoes sinking into the sand as he walked. The water was choppy, and the wind coming off the lake was cold and biting, but the view was still beautiful, despite the grey seeding the clouds. “What about you, Ford? You ever want to settle down? Have kids? Have a family?”

Ford looked out across the lake, taking in the view, reminded viscerally both through this line of
questioning, and from that salty taste on the wind, of his own childhood growing up in New Jersey. He set his pack down by a pile of driftwood. Shoving his hands in his pockets and hunching his shoulders against the breeze, Ford furrowed his brow and looked out over the lake.

“I don’t know.” He started. “I can’t even begin to imagine myself as a father. My own father, he wasn’t – my mother was much more – he wasn’t like you.”

Bill was watching Ford explain, curious to see if Ford would say anything new that he hadn’t already seen scouring through his mindscape library. Fiddleford looked at Ford with concern.

“What do you mean?”

Ford paced over to the edge of the water, the sand crunching under his shoes, and watched the waves brush up upon the shore, dragging away and leaving foam in its wake. “You genuinely seem to cherish your child, unconditionally. That’s the way it should be. I just know that Tate is going to grow up cared for, and probably spoilt rotten if you get the chance to. You and Pat both were always going to be wonderful parents.”

“I appreciate you sayin’ that.” Fiddleford set his pack down on the sand beside Ford’s, putting his hands in his own pockets, watching Ford bend down to pick a shell up from the shoreline.

“I think the lake here at Gravity Falls has to be one of my favourite places to visit. Just to walk and think. It reminds me so much of Glass Shard Beach where I grew up back home. I had more happy memories there than I had at the house. There was just something about the place that seemed so… uncomplicated. It reminds me of a different time.”

Fiddleford watched his friend’s back as he looked out onto the lake, awash with nostalgia. Bill stepped up alongside Ford, tiptoeing up to the shoreline, keeping his feet out of the salty water.

“I preferred the beach to home.” Ford continued. “Stanley and I would go out there and make these elaborate plans, these wild daydreams about sailing the world together. Encountering adventure, mystery, mermaids even. There was a swing-set out there, and this little upturned boat we found in a cave that we took apart and put back together. We’d take Shermy out there too, when he was old enough, though we were much older then. Set him on a little blanket and he’d watch us play.”

“That sounds peaceful.” Fiddleford remarked softly.

“It was for a while. Then we grew up, I guess.” Ford shrugged, and turned the shell he found over in his hands. “Stanley and I used to be inseparable. We were twins, there was a time that people thought we were the same person. It’s only now I realise that we couldn’t be more different.”

“I know you’ve got a difficult relationship with your brother –” Fiddleford began, intending to placate this twisted train of thought.

“He’s a shyster. A charlatan.” Ford’s voice dipped bitter. “A year ago I got a call from mother to come back to Jersey. For his funeral. I was so ready to return, to forgive him everything, I put my research on hold, so full of regret, grieving with her. I found him later at the reception, sneaking booze from behind the bar. He’d orchestrated the whole thing, faked his death to dodge a debt owed, and he didn’t even have the decency to tell us. He’s a liar.”

Fiddleford didn’t know what to say to that. He twiddled his fingers anxiously, and looked at his shoes. Bill bent down to touch the water, listening intently to the venom in Sixer’s voice, watching the waves break.

“I remember how relieved mother was. I was furious. How could he put us through that? He tricked
us.” Ford clenched his hand around the shell, gripping it a little too tight. “My old boxing instincts took over. One thing I have to thank Father for at least. I punched him, broke his nose, and left. I haven’t spoken to him since.”

“Where is he now?” Fiddleford asked tentatively.

“I wouldn’t know.” Ford said, his voice as cold as the wind. “He could be alive, or dead, and I wouldn’t know. I don’t think it matters now anyway. I’m moving on with my life, without him in it.”

Fiddleford bit his lip, stifling his instinct to urge Ford towards forgiveness. Fiddleford believed blood was thicker than water, that you always had your family to fall back on, despite the hard times. He’d grown up with a big, tight knit family in Tennessee, where, despite the many eccentricities of his relatives, there was always a place for reconciliation. He knew his friend didn’t want to hear it. A family was a terrible thing to forsake though.

“Thinking back on Glass Shard Beach used to fill me with happiness. Good memories. It was home to me.” Ford considered the shell in his hand, then flung it out into the lake, it skipped across the surface before sinking. “Now it’s tainted with bitterness, and it’s all his fault.”

“You ever go back to visit?” Fiddleford questioned, hopefully. “It could still be home, if you wanted it to.”

“No. I’ve burned that bridge.” Ford declared. “It’s not my home anymore. I’m not sure I even truly have one.”

Ford’s words, and the bitterness that he spoke them with, resonated with Bill, and he looked up at Ford for a moment, before reaching a decision. He grabbed a large colourful shell from the ground and passed it to Sixer.

“Here. A present.” Bill closed Ford’s hand around the shell, and Ford watched Bill, confused, before he yelped and jumped, opening his hands to peer at the feisty hermit crab Bill had commandeered. It had pinched Ford on the meaty palm of his hand, and the skin there was pink and painful now.

“Ow! Bill!”

Bill pointed with his left hand at the little crab, waving it’s claws about fiercely. He cupped his other hand under Ford’s. “Look at this little guy. I bet you anything it outgrew its old home, and moved onto the next one. Bigger and better. It doesn’t matter that it’s old home was destroyed, he made himself a new one.”

Ford looked between the somewhat aggressive hermit crab scuttling around in his palm, and Bill’s expressive face. His muse seemed to be beseeching him somewhat here, or maybe beseeching himself. His tone was light and cheerful, but his expression was so sincere.

“You might be nostalgic for what you had, but when you carry your home with you like that, and it fits you, and you make it for yourself, then who cares what’s left behind. Carrying your old home around with you when you’ve outgrown it is uncomfortable, and limiting, and heavy – a burden - but making a new one is so much better. This little guy doesn’t seem to mind.”

The crab was dancing, trying to grab Bill’s dangling finger with it’s pincers, but Ford could only look at Bill now, thrown by the emotion in Bill’s eyes.

“He certainly seems happier.” Ford agreed, the tight bitterness that sat heavy on his chest, lifting.
He gave his muse an assessing glance, and smiled.

“Hmmm. He might be.” Bill met Ford’s fond gaze briefly, before looking away, back down at the crab.

“In answer to your question Fiddleford.” Ford turned, his back no longer to F. “I’m not sure I’ll ever have a family like yours. Shermy’s had a daughter, and I’m sure there will be nephews and nieces I can visit and teach about science. My own family is so broken, so I guess, that’s enough for me.”

“You don’t think you’ll ever find a la- a partner? Settle down?” Fiddleford asked, trying to keep his language inclusive, looking at Bill who was still holding Ford’s hand with his own, taunting the crab with his finger.

Ford raised his eyebrows at the way Fiddleford’s eyes raked over Bill, before he blushed, realising the implication. He tilted the crab back onto Bill’s palm, and pulled his hand away from his muse, rubbing the back of his neck, laughing nervously.

“It’s too soon for that, surely. I have a portal to complete, a whole multi-verse to explore.”

“You could go to dimension 96 and see the race of highly sentient warrior crustaceans.” Bill suggested, his suggestion sounding like a flippant joke to F when it was entirely factual. The hermit crab pinched Bill’s thumb, and he dropped it on the ground, rubbing his sore digit as it healed. “I’m beginning to think this one’s an import from there.”

Fiddleford laughed awkwardly, assuming Bill was joking, but Ford raised his eyebrow, curious. This was the first time Bill was actually forthcoming about what specifically Ford could find on the other side of the portal, should their dimension hopping design bear fruit.

“Really?”

Bill shrugged. “Weirder things have been drawn to this town. I wouldn’t be surprised.”

“Hrmrm.” Ford rubbed his chin, then bent back down to look at the crab again, trying to catch its eye as it scuttled across the sand. “How sentient exactly?”

“Highly sentient.” Bill replied, smirking. “Ask it for a game of interdimensional chess.”

“Pardon me.” Ford began, speaking to the crab, and Fiddleford spluttered with laughter.

“Ford, it can’t talk, much less play chess. It’s a crab.”

The crab clacked its pincers together at Ford warily, scuttling back and forth. “Maybe he’s more of a checkers fan.” Ford said wryly, watching the crab scuttle away back into the cold choppy water.

“Or backgammon.” Bill held his hand out for Ford to help the scientist up, and he took it laughing, standing beside him.

“It’s been a while since I’ve played. I have a few old board games at home, in the attic. Maybe we should pull them out when we get back. I’ll play you in chess.”

“You’re on.” Bill smiled, his eyes glinting appreciatively. He always creamed Stanford in interdimensional chess. It was an easy win.

“That sounds fun.” Fiddleford smiled, and watched Ford walk back over to hoist his pack up,
reluctantly reaching for his own. “Maybe a game of D&D & More D too if you have it?”

“Of course I have it.” Ford boasted. “I have the latest edition. And the last thirteen editions as well.”

“Well, you’ve certainly rolled for initiative.” Fiddleford joked, settling his own pack on his shoulders.

“With pen and paper, shield and sword!” Ford crowed the game’s tagline.

“Our quest shall be our sweet reward!” Fiddleford finished, jousting his walking stick in the air.

“Oh god, you’re both impossible nerds. I’m stuck with you two for another how many miles?” Bill groaned, and rolled his eyes.

“I know a shortcut.” Ford declared, pointing their direction. “There’s a hidden tunnel just behind Trembley Falls. If we hike through there, we can get to the mountains before nightfall to set up camp at Gravity Peak. The view there is incredible. Then tomorrow we can head on down through the valley.”

“Sounds good. Lead the way, oh DM of destiny.” Fiddleford grinned, using Ford’s old DM name from back in college.

“It was a grey, murky path our heroes took, making the dangerous trek through the enchanted forest to the mystical mountaintop–” Ford began narrating to F as he walked, both scientists gleefully playing their own unofficial game as they walked.

Bill massaged his temples, looking up to the sky, exasperated already with the elaborate world building Ford and McGucket indulged in as they walked. Bill knew this would continue practically up the entire mountain trail. What exactly did Bill find attractive about Sixer again?

Ford turned and waved over his shoulder to Bill, laughing. “Come on. We have another ten miles to go before we set up camp. You have to keep pace.”

Already soured by the prospect of walking so damn far, Bill groaned, and trudged along behind Sixer, pettily revoking his levitation on the backpack for a second, just to see Sixer stumble, before reinstating the zero-gravity on the pack.

They could have their own fun, Bill would have his.

It was dark in the caves. The entrance was wide and spacious, but now that they continued deeper, the path was much narrower, and rocky. It took delicate footwork to scale the narrow path without injury, the walls were tight, curving low around the scientists. The sound of the waterfall crashing down echoed through the first few tunnels. The further in they walked the more distant the crashing sound became. The air in the tunnels was still and dusty.

“I don’t think the townsfolk even know about this place.” Ford presumed, holding his lantern high as he walked. The civil-war era oil lamp was an antique, and it’s flame flickered, shedding sparse light ahead through the tunnels. “If they did, I imagine a lot more teenagers would sneak out here. Putting graffiti on the walls.”
“These paintin’s ain’t graffiti then?” Fiddleford scrutinized the primitive drawings that dotted the walls.

“From the looks of it, these cave paintings are genuine. Etched here by the native populace of Gravity Falls, before recorded history. I haven’t found anything about the people who used to live here before the pioneers discovered the area, it’s like they just suddenly disappeared.” Ford ran his hand along the cave paintings curving overhead, feeling the cool rock beneath his fingers. “These caves are the only record we have of the previous occupants. I haven’t got around to carbon dating them yet.”

“They seem familiar.” Bill muttered to himself, looking upwards, giving the paintings a casual glance. It was hard to see the details in the dark, the paintings were mostly stick figures. Lacanian depictions of early humans, vague enough to represent them, obscure enough to confuse historians. Small depictions of man throwing sticks at things were a dime a dozen, Bill didn’t see what was so special about these cave paintings.

“You haven’t been here before?” Ford asked Bill curiously, wondering why the all seeing eye hadn’t seen this.

Bill quickly flashed through his information on hand about these cave networks, running a blank. He hadn’t been here before, it had been beneath his notice, though the last time he’d been to Gravity Falls, the natives were still primitive enough to indulge in this sort of finger painting abstractionism. The natives weren’t exactly Sixer’s calibre of smart, but their Shaman sure gave Bill more than enough trouble. Bill’s first attempt at outsourcing the labour to build his portal failed miserably, the thing was made out of sticks and reeds. Bill’s tantrum at their ineptitude was grandiose, and back then it was a good way to let off some steam. Remembering exactly how the native populace met their grisly end, Bill decided that feigning ignorance was the best course of action. Sixer wouldn’t approve.

“Nope.” Bill shrugged. “Must have slipped my attention.”

“Hmmm.” Ford nodded to himself, holding his lantern higher, shining light on the cave paintings that sprawled across the rocky ceiling. “You get to see them for the first time then. Aren’t they spectacular?”

Bill cast his eyes up to look at the paintings, grimacing at the burgeoning details of citizens on fire, hoping Sixer wouldn’t piece things together and turn on him.

“They sure are somethin’.” Fiddleford murmured in answer, clutching onto his hiking stick for balance, watching the firelight reveal more details of the murals in awe.

“I’d like to come down here when I have more time and transcribe these for historical accuracy.” Ford continued, pausing to look closer at one of the drawings, stick figure men throwing spears at a pterodactyl. “I’ve been meaning to. Once I’m able to properly carbon date the paint, I can discern if the historical anachronisms are inaccuracies or merely part of Gravity Falls’ weirdness factor, allowing creatures from the Jurassic period to intersect with early man.”

“You have the portal to finish before that.” Bill pointed out, hoping to redirect Sixer’s passion away from anything incriminating.

“True. I can certainly juggle a few side projects every now and again, but you’re right. The Hyperdrive should remain our focus.” Ford nodded, and led the way through the next precarious climb, stone stairways crumbling into more natural formations the further they got into the cave. “It gets quite steep up this next part, and you’ll have to watch your footing. We should be getting close
Bill exhaled, and looked up the crumbling staircase, sorely missing his old powers of levitation. His legs felt like limp noodles, despite how his magic had been continuously healing him for the entire ten mile hike, and he was exhausted. How Sixer found the energy to be this chipper while hiking endless lengths through the wilderness astounded Bill. Humans were more durable than he gave them credit for. This was hard.

Bill pouted, and leaned against the cave wall for a moment, dreading more of this fancy footwork, scaling up the craggy path. He’d fallen over thirteen times through this entire hike, and each time he’d managed to brush off Fiddleford’s concern with gritted teeth as his injuries knitted back together. After regenerating the tendons in his legs the umpteenth time, he was getting kind of over the whole experience, and that crumbling rock staircase looked like at least ten sprained ankles in the making.

“Can’t we take another break? Fiddleford looks like he could use another break.” Bill called out weakly, as Fiddleford, who for once didn’t look run down by the physical exertion of the climb, looked back at Bill in confusion.

“No, I’m fine. I could keep going.” Fiddleford said blithely, clambering up the narrow path, his pack light and his feet spritely. Bill’s expression soured dejectedly.

Ford shot a concerned look down at Bill and paused, then passed the lantern to Fiddleford. “Here, you scout on up ahead for a while. I’m just going to take a moment.” Ford gave Bill a wry smile. “I’m tired. Just going to sit for a while.”

“Are you sure? It’ll be dark.” Fiddleford clarified.

“You know, I think I have a second lamp in my pack somewhere.” Ford lied casually, knowing Bill had more than enough firepower to light the way for both of them. “We’ll be alright for a short while. You should go up ahead, let me know if you see any more of these cave paintings, or any sign of the ancient cave dweller’s primitive technology.”

Looking between Bill and Ford for a moment, taking in Bill’s subtle lethargy, Fiddleford shrugged, then nodded. “Well, if you’re sure. I won’t be far.”

The light from the lantern faded up into the caves with every passing step Fiddleford took away from the pair, until the clearing in the cave was pitch black.

Ford peered through the darkness, looking for the subtle glow of Bill’s eyes, and finally saw them, very faintly lit, staring up at the ceiling of the cave, not meeting his gaze.

Ford paced a few steps closer to Bill, treading carefully in the dark. He had to squint to see Bill, surprised by how dim the light from his eyes was. Lately Bill had been brimming with energy, his eyes glowing of a daytime. Now he seemed so lethargic there was barely any glow. It concerned Ford.

“Do you want to sit down?” Ford asked in a quiet voice.

“You’re the one who’s tired. You tell me.” Bill shot back slyly, glancing in the direction of Ford’s voice.

“The floor seems clean enough. Or you could just stand around in the dark.” Stanford shrugged, smiling slightly.
“A winning prospect.” Bill rolled his eyes. Stanford could see his slitted pupils move in the blackness. He heard Bill maintain stubborn silence for a while, before his muse sighed.

Unfolding his hand Bill called a weak flame into his palm, it flickered faintly, weaker due to his exhaustion. He checked the floor for dirt before sitting down and crossing his legs. He set the ball of flame to the side, dusting down his trousers, and the light sustained itself, hovering there. Watching him for a moment, Ford considered Bill’s evident lethargy, before he crouched down beside him.

“Do you wish you’d stayed at home?” Ford couldn’t help but ask, a smidgen of smugness creeping into his tone.

“I hate you.”

Inching closer to Bill, until their knees touched, Ford smirked and patted Bill patronisingly on the shoulder. “Someone’s tired.”

“I’m cataloguing your redeeming features and right now you have zero.” Bill hissed at Ford, irritable and grumpy from the long hike.

Ford chuckled, and his teasing shoulder pat became a more solid massage. He settled down, kneeling on the ground next to Bill, and rubbed his muse’s shoulders, watching his reactions. Bill held himself stiff stubbornly at first, but then rolled his shoulders into the massage and shot Ford a considering look.

“What are you doing?”

“I’m giving you some of your energy back.” Ford replied, watching the way the flame beside Bill flickered when he kneaded a particularly tense spot in Bill’s back. “This is what helps you, isn’t it?”

Bill raised an eyebrow at Ford, and huffed out a laugh. “Is that what you’re doing?”

“I can tell I’m having an impact.” Ford noted proudly. “The flame gets stronger the harder I press.”

“Nice correlation Genius.” Bill remarked, shuffling around until he was facing Stanford. “You know what would really light my fire?”

Ford swallowed, catching the implication, his pulse picking up as he watched Bill’s eyes glow brighter. He glanced over to the stone steps where Fiddleford had departed, checking to see his friend wouldn’t come traipsing back.

Bill tiptoed his fingertips along Stanford’s knee, leaning into his space. Whispering, Bill lidded his eyes, watching Sixer fluster in the flickering light. “He won’t come back just yet. You can experiment if you want to. Kick things up a notch.” Bill’s hands slid up Stanford’s thighs now, bringing his face close to Ford’s. “Worship me.”

Licking his lips tentatively, Ford attempted a smidgeon of resistance, still baulking at letting Bill call what they did ‘worship’. “Are you sure you want someone with zero redeeming features doing that?”

“You want me to stroke your ego again?” Bill purred, quirking his lips up at how the phrase made Ford squirm.

“You could.” Ford said gamely, his eyes daring Bill to. Bill liked a challenge, and he had no
trouble being daring when prompted.

Ford watched as his muse crawled slowly over him, draping his arms across Ford’s shoulders and settling comfortably into his lap.

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Bill murmured, his breath warming, fanning across Ford’s chin, their faces were so close. Ford’s hands settled on Bill’s hips again, and he rubbed those damning small circles against the thin fabric of Bill’s shirt.

Bill felt himself regain that spark of energy back the longer Ford stared at him with blatant awe colouring his features. The fact that Ford held back, just watched him for a moment was something that prickled heat in Bill’s cheeks too, unfairly flushing the longer Ford stared at him, just watching. Bill was beginning to find he was developing a thing for being watched by the scientist. He was looking but barely touching, and it drove Bill’s impatience through the roof of the cave metaphorically.

While this slow burn was nice, Bill had been so impatient, noting all of the potential attractive features of Sixer all day, rationalising and justifying in his head all of the reasons why indulging this little infatuation, this growing dalliance, was a good thing and not a colossal error. It was difficult to think over his own selfish desires, seeing Sixer teeter on that edge of want and responsibility in his own right, wanting to break through the various reservations that held them both back so Bill could feel that fire in his veins again until he was overflowing with power and pleasure.

Sixer had been a perfect gentleman, not pushing or initiating things in front of his friend, but Bill had seen that brief glimpse of Sixer’s deviousness, and felt his nails rake down his chest and his mouth hot against Bill’s skin, and he found he didn’t want the perfect gentleman anymore. He wanted to see Sixer’s wild side. Bill liked indulging other monsters, and there was a monster of his own in the back of his mind that wanted to push Sixer past the breaking point of his dignified reserve.

Reaching for his wrist, Bill grabbed Sixer’s hand and slid it up under the back of his shirt, watching the scientist to see if he was amenable to this. Worship wasn’t worship if it wasn’t freely given, and as much as Bill wanted Ford all over him, he also knew how to wait and let Sixer decide how far he wanted to go.

From the way that Ford’s eyes darkened pleasantly, he seemed pleased, and stroked his broad hand up Bill’s side and back down soothingly. Bill reached out with his other hand to rake his fingers through Ford’s fluffy hair, delighting in it’s softness and the way the gentle gesture made that adoring expression of his deepen. Bill leant forward again, lidding his eyes, and pressed his lips firmly to Sixer’s, the kiss fanning the flame within him, sending sparks spiralling through him, rejuvenating him.

Just like that the magic he had expended throughout the day, healing himself and constantly levitating Ford’s bag, had restored itself admirably, bringing Bill back to the pith of godly health. With just one kiss.

He could have left it at that, pulled away from Sixer, his strength redeemed, but he didn’t.

He didn’t want to.

Ford kissed him back, pulling Bill closer to him, one six fingered hand slinking up to hold the back of Bill’s neck. He kissed him gentle at first, and then more demandingly, probing his muse’s lips with his tongue, deepening the kiss. Bill opened to the kiss, his tongue sliding along Sixer’s, his
temperature a few degrees higher than Ford already. Sixer coaxed a small contented moan from Bill that echoed in the cave, enough to pull Ford out of his focus enough to look around, worrying Fiddleford would track back to check on them.

Bill tsked and waved his hand impatiently at the ball of flame hovering beside them, snuffing out the light to ensure they wouldn’t be seen.

thrown into darkness, Ford could barely see Bill’s skin lit by the glow of his eyes, reflecting onto him. The darkness was what Ford needed to release his inhibitions. It forced him to explore with his hands and not just his eyes, something he had been longing to do for quite some time.

Protected by the darkness, Ford leaned back into the kiss, closing his eyes and pressing his lips firm to Bill, holding his face securely as he kissed him. When Ford opened his eyes slightly, he could see the faint yellow light of Bill’s glowing eyes peeping through his long lashes, cascading down his high cheekbones and smooth dark skin, making his muse look like a sunlit beacon in the dark.

“I like this. This is good.” Bill murmured between kisses, trying to keep his voice down for Stanford’s peace of mind.

“Is that so?” Ford whispered huskily back with a low laugh. “Good?”

His hands were roaming more freely in the dark, slipped under Bill’s shirt like this, touching his skin. He coasted one hand along Bill’s back, his other hand groping along Bill’s thigh, keeping him balanced on his lap, pulling him closer. The hand on Bill’s thigh crept higher, moving down, and Ford’s fingertips brushed against the swell of Bill’s buttocks, pressing possessively against the soft flesh through his trousers, finally groping Bill like he had wanted to, but hadn’t had the courage to in daylight. Bill wriggled with the touch, his intake of breath sounding particularly loud in the still air of the cave.

Ford could see just under the cuffs of Bill’s shirt the way his tattoos were lighting up now, power restoring to him with the attention.

He noted that Bill’s lethargy had waned, but his muse wasn’t pulling away, still greedy for his regard, and that led Ford to believe that his muse hadn’t been lying when he said he was cataloguing his redeeming features.

That was something that had been playing on Ford’s mind since the lab, whether there was more to all of this than just the power rush for Bill. Judging from the way he kept pressing his lips to Ford’s persistently, moving to press them against Ford’s cheek and chin demandingly when Ford ignored his kisses, lost in consideration of his muses demeanour, Bill seemed to want more than just a simple power boost. Ford could only conclude it was him that his muse wanted, and that sent a flush of heat through the cold dark cavern that Ford was certain was not due to Bill’s magic at all.

“Yes. Good. Come on.” Bill urged Ford, impatient that the scientist was being so gentle and obliging. “No one’s watching. Do what you want. I know you want to.”

Stanford hummed another considering and amused sigh, before he pulled Bill closer to him again, running both of his hands up under Bill’s shirt along his back. “Is that so?” He repeated, smugness and bravado unfolding in the dark.

“Is that so?” Bill mimicked Ford in a mocking tone, unable to help himself in his impatience. “I know it’s so, but you’re so damn concerned about making a fool of yourself in the dark that you won’t even trRRRRYYYYYYYYYYY! AH!”
Ford had boldly raked his nails down the length of Bill’s back, causing his muse to arch dramatically, his hands flying up to grasp onto Stanford’s shoulders, yellow slitted eyes widening and watching him with surprise, appraising Ford’s smug features barely lit in the dark.

Bill blinked at Ford for a moment, embarrassed by his own loud reaction to the sudden pleasurable pain. That was incredibly forward of Ford, and not the gentle sweet exploration Bill had expected of him, but then again, Ford had a streak of deviousness that Bill was beginning to appreciate more thoroughly the more he saw it rise to the surface.

“You were saying?” Ford quipped, smirking.

Laughing breathily, Bill rolled his shoulders before shimmying down onto Ford’s lap gamely, his glowing eyes now lit with mirth. “You’re doing that again.”

“You liked that too, did you?” Ford hummed, stroking his hands gently over the scratches on Bill’s back. He could feel the skin change, from momentarily inflamed bumpy lines scoring down Bill’s back, to smoothing out evenly as the skin healed. Ford hadn’t scraped that hard, not hard enough to break the skin, but Bill seemed to be incredibly sensitive, enough to have raised bumps along the scratch lines before his magic took care of it.

“Don’t get a big head.” Bill muttered, feeling the smugness Ford was exuding like a pressure in the air. He couldn’t just admit he enjoyed that, not when Ford was so prone to ego stroking, assisted or otherwise.

“Oh?” Ford pricked his nails briefly into Bill’s sensitive sides, enough to make the muse jump, yelping, squeezing Stanford’s shoulders reactively. “I’ll make note of that. Incredibly sensitive.”

“Are you guys alright back there?” Fiddleford’s voice echoed out from further down the cavern.

Bill made an aborted movement to jump off Ford’s lap, feeling like he would be incriminating his own arousal by prolonging this, not wanting to be caught in this moment of weakness by Fiddleford, but Ford’s hands were clamped down on Bill’s sides, holding him firm, making his jumpy escape impossible.

Without meaning to, cursing this body and it’s bizarre responses to stimulus, it’s myriad of weaknesses, Bill felt his neck and cheeks heat up drastically, blood pooling under the skin, tingling the longer Ford held him there, grateful for the dark for concealing the flustered grief that was no doubt evident on Bill’s own expressive face.

He felt so vulnerable, these strong reactions, emotions and sensations pulled out of him without warning. It wasn’t fair. Sixer wasn’t supposed to turn the tables on him this much. He was the one who was supposed to affect the scientist, not the other way around.

It wasn’t like Bill was magically overwhelmed now like he’d been in the lab the other day, but he certainly felt some kind of overwhelmed, an odd lightness flipping his stomach around the more aware he became of Sixer’s pointed stare.

Holding Bill’s flustered gaze, Ford called back up to Fiddleford. “We’re fine. We’ll catch up with you now. Just be a second.”

Easing up on his grip on Bill’s sides, Ford watched his muse’s flighty reaction, amused by how stiff Bill was holding himself. It was obvious he had hit onto one of Bill’s sweet spots, given how loud his reaction was. It was nice to be able to have something to hold over Bill, given how easily his muse managed to incite his own ardour. Ford should have felt guilty for how much it pleased
him to see his muse off balance, but it was far too enjoyable.

“Now who’s a fool in the dark?” Ford couldn’t help his quip, releasing Bill and watching his muse spring up.

“Still you.” Bill sneered, dusting his hands off. “Try finding your way back to your friend with that Schrödinger’s lantern of yours. I’m not lighting the way for you.”

“Yes you are.” Ford chuckled, pointing at the golden glow emanating from Bill’s tattoos and eyes. Standing up, Ford stepped into Bill’s space and decided to try his hand at flustering his muse again. He caught Bill by the waist and pulled him in close, pressing his lips to Bill’s ear before whispering. “You’re bright enough for me.”

Bill seemed to hold his breath for a moment, Sixer’s breath tickling his ear. He would have bristled at Ford’s gall if not for the worshipful tone underlying in his voice.

It threw him off, how sincere Ford’s flirtation was. The scientist had held back for so long, having him instigate flirtations like this was quite endearing. It wasn’t often a being tried to woo Bill. Right now he certainly felt wooed.

Considering the deliberation Bill had endured all day, cataloguing the benefits of indulging this relationship with the scientist, Bill took a deep breath before he replied, forgoing a sarcastic response for a sincere one.

“I could say the same for you.”

Ford drew back to look at Bill, intrigued by the lack of snark in his answer and inclined his head. “Well then.”

“Y’all need my lantern?” Fiddleford’s voice echoed out from up ahead in the cavern.

Bill raised his eyebrow at Ford and held up his pointer finger, a blue flame dancing at the tip.

“Schrödinger’s lantern.”

“We’re fine.” Ford called out to F. “Coming up now.”

Lowering his voice, he mouthed a whispered ‘thank you’ to Bill that had the muse slightly mollified. Reaching for Bill’s hand, Ford led him up to the crumbling stone staircase, showing Bill where to place his footing to avoid a sprained ankle or two.

Bill felt much better with that little unprompted boost of energy. He couldn’t help but continue to appraise Stanford, the scientist having proven his value on multiple levels just now.

Sixer was entertaining, resourceful, helpful, intelligent, bold, devious enough to be interesting. He was becoming more tolerable than most humans had any right to be, and that was something that Bill never thought he could admit to himself.

With a little work and some careful moulding Sixer might even cut it in the interdimensional community, despite his despicable human origins.

That gave Bill an idea.

“How well can you see in the dark, out of interest?”

“Hmm?” Ford answered without looking back, still watching the rocky climb, navigating where to
put his feet as he climbed up the steep steps. “Well enough with my glasses on and you around. Hold that flame a little higher?”

The flame levitated above Ford’s head, giving him better light for the narrowest part of the climb. Ford held Bill’s hand and helped him up that last unstable step.

“Do you want to own better eyes?” Bill asked curiously, his tone so benign it caused Ford to turn around and give him a measuring look.

“Somehow you saying that sounds less like an idle question and more like you know of some sort of interdimensional eye shop out there.” Ford squinted at Bill’s innocent expression, not trusting it for a second.

“Eye shop. Haha! That’s a good one.” Bill laughed Ford’s suspicion off. He had to laugh, he never paid for the eyes he stole, not once in his life. Why pay for what you could steal? Eye shop, that was hilarious. “Not saying there is one, but if there were, how about the ‘Co-Optometrist’ for a name? Am I right, or am I right?”

Ford sighed and rolled his eyes, chalking Bill’s question off as idle chit chat. Helping Bill up the final rocky step, he looked around for Fiddleford, seeing the faint light of his lantern up ahead.

Towing Bill over to Fiddleford, he waved at Bill to extinguish the flame.

Smiling, Bill obediently blew out the flame on his fingertip. Further ahead in the cavern Fiddleford gave a confused shout, the light in his own lantern stuttering out.

“Oops.” Bill laughed, missing the way Ford gave him an irritated glare before tugging him forward through the cavern towards the sound of Fiddleford’s shout.

“Are you alright there F?” Ford called out.

“I’m fine. The lantern just went and snuffed out.” Fiddleford called back, his voice sounding closer the further Ford walked. “Did you have to bring oil lanterns for this? Don’t you have a flashlight at all?”

Sounding irritated, Ford replied. “No, I just brought the lanterns. I thought they’d add to the mood.”

“Do you have any matches then?” Fiddleford asked.

“I –“ Ford reached out ahead of him, grasping onto F’s shoulder, finding him in the dark. “Ah, there you are. No I – I’m not sure if I packed them.”

“You packed Civil War era lanterns, but you forgot to pack a box of matches?” Fiddleford asked incredulously.

“I don’t see you packing any.” Ford bristled.

“You packed magnet guns but no matches.” Fiddleford emphasised, sounding unimpressed.

“The magnet guns are important.”

Fiddleford stared in the direction of Ford’s voice for a moment.

“… but no matches.”
“Fiddleford, please –“

“You didn’t pack a flashlight?” Fiddleford asked hopefully.

“I think you’ll find I didn’t have room for a flashlight alongside the magnet guns.” Ford shot back testily. “And everything else.”

“Well that’s perfect, now we’re stuck in the middle of a mountain, in the dark, with no matches.” F complained.

“You say that like it’s my fault.”

Bill grinned, amused, listening to the two scientists argue with each other. He looked around the cavern and noticed a pair of glowing purple eyes near the ground of the cave, staring up at them.

“I don’t see how we’re going to get out of here without matches.” Fiddleford continued. “It’s pitch black in here, I can barely see my foot from my elbow.”

“Maybe Bill has matches.” Ford suggested in a loud voice, hoping he’d be able to subtly hint for Bill to use his powers in a way that wouldn’t arouse F’s suspicion. “Bill?”

“Look at those little purple eyes.” Bill said, pulling Ford’s hand over to point them out. He crouched down and beckoned them over. “Adorable. Come here little creature, come to Bill, come on.”

Ford seemed to double take, finally noticing the faint glow in the corner of the cave that seemed to be coming closer. He tugged on the fabric of F’s shirt, alerting him of the creature’s presence.

The creature chirped, a high pitched curious noise, before ambling forward, it’s footsteps marked by a crystalline sounding chink. Clinking over, Ford was able to pick out the creature’s shape from its glow. It looked like a living amethyst geode, crystal protrusions poking out from its crusty skin, the gash in the geode serving as its mouth, two little glowing eyes peering out from above the opening.

Bill wiggled his fingers at it, trying to beckon the creature over. “Come here, that’s right.”

“Amazing.” Ford breathed, watching the little sphere clamber over towards Bill, curiously huffing his hand. Bill began running his fingertip along the creature’s crystal spines, petting it.

“What is it?” Fiddleford asked, sounding slightly more cautious than Ford.

“It doesn’t look like an ordinary life form, like some sort of cave rat or possum. It looks like some sort of rock.” Ford observed.

“Feels like a rock too. This little thing isn’t breathing.” Bill noted, patting the geode fondly. He cooed at the rock. “Who’s not breathing? You aren’t! You aren’t!”

“Incredible.” Ford said, sounding awed. “This could be an entirely new classification of organism.”

Bending down, Ford decisively picked up the little geode, plucking it into the air away from Bill’s indulgent petting.

“Hey!” Bill complained, having had his temporary pet stolen.

Lifted from the ground, the creature chirped in alarm, and began to sing a high pitched little song,
attracting its fellows from the cavern. The song was almost babyish, like a rather saccharine
sounding lullaby. Ford found it astounding, but Fiddleford found it unnerving, the hairs on the back
of his neck standing on end.

Ford turned the geode this way and that, examining it, while the creature squeaked in a distressed
manner.

“Fascinating. It’s unlike anything else in the animal kingdom, it truly appears to be living rock.
Uncanny.” Ford poked at the creature’s crystalline spines and the geode squeaked indignantly. “Its
crystals are even sensitive, how astounding.”

“Uh, Stanford?” Fiddleford uttered nervously, hearing the chinking of many small pairs of
crystalline legs coming their way, the glow of the cavern intensifying as more of the little creatures
came crawling over like inorganic cave spiders.

“I wonder, it seems to be a social animal. Perhaps this chirping is a language?”

“It’s chirping because you interrupted us. I saw it first.” Bill griped, calling dibs on the bizarre little
creature. “My rock thing.”

“Is that amethyst or quartz, I wonder?” Ford continued pondering, holding the tiny geode firmly,
holding it upside down now. “Perhaps I could take a sample.”

“Stanford!” Fiddleford said more urgently, suddenly surrounded by a good dozen of the little
glowing geodes. The creatures all chirped in that high pitched infantile voice of theirs, waddling
back and forth around the scientists in a circle, drawn by the cries of its brethren.

Ford looked down at the herd of geode creatures, gasping happily at the sight of them.
“Phenomenal! There are more of them! A naturally occurring species. It is a language. How
extraordinary. I wonder what they’re saying.”

“It don’t matter what they’re saying, they’ve got us surrounded and that singing they’re doing is
eerie enough. I don’t like it one bit.” Fiddleford lifted his leg, shaking off one of the creatures that
was pawing at his boot.

“They’re saying ‘your blood smells tasty, it’s time to paint the walls’!” Bill grinned at Fiddleford,
watching the aghast expression deepen on the mechanic’s face.

“Stop spookin’ me. You don’t know what they’re sayin’.”

“We could be the first scientists to find this species. These little geode creatures.” Ford continued
to watch the rocks amble back and forth in a circle, doing a little dance to the song they were
chirping, while the geode in Ford’s hands kept squeaking concertedly to its peers. “We could name
their genus. Geodites. Or Geodians? No, Geodites, that sounds better. I just wish I had more light,
I’d love to draw them for my journal.”

“Speakin’ of light, we need to get that lantern back up and runnin’ so we can get out of here.”
Fiddleford urged Ford, shuffling closer to him while the Geodites ran in little circles around his
ankles, singing eerily. “You can come back here on your own time to sing in the dark and study the
little spikey guys. In your own time. Did you say you had some matches?”

“I said Bill might have matches.” Ford replied, his tone distracted as he continued to watch the
Geodite’s dance, enraptured, memorising their mannerisms.

“Do you have matches Bill?” Fiddleford asked.
“Nope.” Bill replied honestly, popping the ‘p’ as he spoke, enjoying how frantic Fiddleford was becoming. He stuck his hands in his pockets and grinned as Fiddleford pulled a little of his hair out anxiously, frustrated.

“Does no one have matches??!”

“The Geodites glow. Perhaps we could pile them up into a makeshift flashlight. Their naturally occurring luminescence could provide light enough to lead us out of the dark.” Ford suggested, oddly charmed by the little creatures the longer they danced around him, their chiming footfalls and chirping song oddly hypnotic.

“The ‘Geodites’ are creepin’ me out.” Fiddleford countered, stressing the word. “I really think we should get out of here. I didn’t sign up for dying in a cave being eaten by little rock monsters.”

“I wonder what their diet consists of.” Ford continued speculating, ignoring F’s increasing hysteria. “Geologically the things that nourish rock are the conditions, but to sustain motion and life it can’t be the same, can it?”

“Blood. They eat blood. Iron, clearly enough to sustain their little feet when they dance.” Bill deadpanned, watching the way Fiddleford tensed at that. “Come on little guy, keep dancing! I want one as a pet. Can I have one? Carry it home for me.”

“Taking it out of its natural conditions could damage it.” Ford considered the little Geodite in his hand, still squeaking emphatically at him. “I am intrigued though, it certainly warrants further study.”

“Study it later! I want to go, now!” Fiddleford waved the lantern about in his hand, impatient with Ford’s scientific indulgence. He was a mechanic, not a biologist, or geologist, or whatever those things were.

“We can’t go without light to lead the way. No matches, remember.” Ford said somewhat pettily, intent on staying to be the first to study the new organism in his hand.

“Ugh!” Fiddleford groaned, frustrated, and at the end of his rope here. He didn’t want to stay in this cavern one minute longer. He could swear he felt one of the Geodites nibbling on his shoelaces.

Looking for a solution, F spotted two particularly flinty looking Geodites, and snatched them from the circle, interrupting their creepy little dance to smash the two rocks together, sparking light from their scored flints.

All the Geodites in the circle screeched, a high pitched alarmed little noise in response.

“Aha!” F cried out triumphantly, and held the lantern out, sparking the flinty Geodites against each other again, lighting the oil lamp from the spark.

As the warm yellow light of the oil lamp filled the cavern the Geodites shrieked shrilly and scampered away back into the darkness like rats, running as fast as their little crystalline legs could carry them.

The Geodite Ford was holding wriggled vainly, squeaking, trying to escape Ford’s grasp, before it bit Ford sharply on the hand, causing him to drop the creature, cradling his injury.

“Ow! It drew blood, the little rascal.”
Squeaking, the amethyst Geodite scampered away with its fellows back into the dark, the chink of its legs on the rocky floor fading the further it ran, and with all the little rock monsters banished, Fiddleford set the lantern on the floor and dusted his hands off.

“That takes care of that.” Putting his hands on his hips, F turned to look decisively at Ford and Bill, taking command of the situation. “Now you’re the one who said we’ve got to get through this mountain before nightfall. I ain’t gettin’ stuck in here a moment longer. I want to set up camp. I’m tired, I’m hungry, all that squeakin’ made my head hurt, and I’m gettin’ out of here, hook or by crook. So which way’s out?”

Ford blinked at his friend, dumbstruck by F’s sudden demonstration of a backbone, and pointed to one of the tunnels, leading to the exit out of here.

“Right.” F nodded, and then picked up the lantern and marched down the tunnel filled with determination. Left with no choice but to follow, Ford paced on after his friend, slightly bemused by F’s wave of assertiveness.

He reached out for Bill’s hand, still intent on leading him through the caverns, and felt a flush of heat press against his skin, a blue flame licking along his fingertips, healing the Geodite bite stealthily. Bill grasped Stanford’s hand comfortably, and smiled at him.

Ford smiled back.

It was good to be friends with a God.

Together they continued on out of the mountainside, the paintings in the tunnels not spoken of, despite their numerous depictions of a very familiar triangle.

Gravity Falls Peak was objectively very beautiful, but even more so at sunset. Fiddleford’s haste to leave the network of tunnels within the mountain had them make excellent time reaching the peak, and when they ventured out of the mouth of the cave the sky was a vibrant orange, the sun just setting. Since it was summer, the light lingered late, and it was around 8.30pm.

The grey clouds had deposited their downpour while the scientists were exploring the caves, and now the weather had cleared, the ground glistening with faint puddles following the rain. It made the view twice as beautiful, the orange sunlight catching off the water droplets in the trees, making everything shimmer in the dying light.

“Gorgeous.” Fiddleford breathed, astonished by the view.

“Isn’t it?” Ford concurred, holding a hand up to shield his eyes from the glare of the sunset, surveying the valley. “We made good time. There’s just enough light left to set up camp, and from there we can light a fire.”

“With no matches.” Fiddleford felt compelled to add, ribbing Ford for the sake of it.

Ignoring F, Ford chose to set his pack down instead and start pulling out the things needed to assemble the tent. “Here, you help me set up the tent and we’ll worry about that later.”

Assenting, Fiddleford put his own pack down and started rummaging through the equipment there
to find the tent pegs while Ford laid down the ground sheet.

Bill leant casually against the cave wall, crossing his arms, watching the two scientists fiddle around with the camping gear, setting up the structure that was supposedly fit to shelter them for the night. He picked the dirt out from under his nails and looked on as Ford and F hoisted the tent pole only for it to fall, then they hoisted it again and wrestled with the ropes. One of the tent poles sagged again. It was very entertaining, if you enjoyed exercises in futility.

Bill had gone rather quiet for the tail end of the trek through the tunnels. Once the lantern was back up and running, the group had ample light with which to traverse the caves, inching across perilous ledges, scaling stalagmites, tiptoeing across crumbling archways and bridges.

There was another wide clearing closer to the exit of the caves with murals painted on the walls. This time it was unmistakable, the tall finger-painting of the ungodly triangle etched onto the wall, leering over the cavern, summoning circle, incantation and all.

There was even a rather sketchy prophecy scrawled beside it, though Bill didn’t place too much stock in prophecy. It was an imprecise art, rather pretentious, or maybe Bill only thought the art of foretelling was a pretentious because every single oracle he had met had been the highest calibre of asshat.

He sensed a correlation there.

Looking wistfully at the ancient paintings of his true form, it made it difficult to meet Sixer’s eye, seeing the reminder of who he was in all his former glory looking back at him, holding vengeful fire in both hands.

Bill missed the convenience of his old form, all his perfect lines and edges, the untapped raw power at his fingertips. Looking down at the binding circles on his arms, now all Bill had was this clunky mess of a body, trapped by physical necessities like breathing, eating, and finding irascible scientists attractive apparently.

It was Sixer’s hubris that had cast him into this body. Despite finding reasons to like being here, and reasons why his attraction to Sixer was justifiable, Bill wasn’t the sort of creature to ever forget a slight like that. He couldn’t, it just wasn’t done. He’d incinerated creatures for far less than what Ford had done – for looking at him wrong, for invoking his name with a less than respectful tone, for disobeying his orders and buying softcore triffid porn (it was a good thing Keyhole was so hardy). Bill had a reputation to uphold as a being who shouldn’t be crossed.

Sixer had the gall to not only lasso him down from the cosmos and whammy him into this (admittedly quite pretty) meat sack, but to bind him irrevocably to the vessel and demand Bill’s assistance with the portal as either an equal or an inferior. Sixer hadn’t meant to insult Bill so thoroughly by it, he was sure, but that just boiled down to Sixer’s character. He could be rather thoughtless of his impact on others most days, of what he was asking of them. His ambition was a driving factor, a consistent motivator that allowed him to sweep other things like socialisation, respect, politeness and manners under the proverbial carpet.

Despite understanding that that carelessness was just how Sixer could be, Bill also understood that if that quality was left to fester, Sixer could become an incredibly selfish being, eschewing all else to the side if it meant achieving his dreams. It would be hypocritical for Bill to scorn him for that, because he was much the same, but if Sixer was to be his pet, human, or what have you, Bill didn’t care if Sixer treated everyone else like that, he couldn’t treat him like that. It wasn’t allowed.

Yet Sixer had done it, by throwing him into this body, and he’d done it again and again, whilst
trying to accommodate and be mindful of Bill’s needs. He was selfish, there was no denying it, but he was also holding his selfish wants back, which had Bill conflicted. Should he encourage Sixer’s selfishness? Bill didn’t know.

If this were any other monster, Bill would have no qualms about encouraging that manipulatable self-interest to perpetuate itself, but there was something about Sixer’s odd morality that was rather quaint and enjoyable. Sixer had this spark of goodness that was almost childish, and while Bill was enjoying Ford’s deviousness, and his cleverness, that innocent desire to do right by others was just as charming, if not sometimes inconvenient. He didn’t want to snuff it out.

Bill didn’t know what to think.

In spite of himself, he was charmed. Sixer was charming.

He was affecting Bill.

He hardly ever thought of incinerating Sixer for his crimes against him, he rather perversely wanted to keep Sixer around, forgiving his misdeeds in a way that he would forgive no other creature in the galaxy.

Perhaps it was an indulgence cultivated by his circumstances. Sixer was smart. If Bill had his powers untapped, he would have destroyed Ford the moment he first summoned him for his slight against him, but having his powers staggered like this, restricted, prevented him from taking revenge on Sixer. That and those protective runes. He couldn’t harm Sixer, despite how he might like to sometimes.

He could have done more to make Sixer’s life miserable, but he didn’t. Partly because he still needed him, keeping Ford on track finishing the portal was still a priority. Bill found that it required less acting now than when he was intangible. He always thought it was an ordeal to appear, congenial and ‘muselike’ to Ford before, playing nice and laying on the flattery so thick it soured in his thoughts. When he was deposited in this flesh and blood prison, he discarded any pretence of ‘playing nice’ and somehow Sixer wasn’t deterred. He was fascinated. He wanted to know Bill, discovering that he’d only tapped the surface of what his ‘muse’ was, and he wanted to know more.

He was being his true self (or as true as was possible in this restricted form) and Sixer wasn’t deterred, he was drawn to it more. All of the false flattery and statues and tributes they plied one another with to manipulate each other to achieve their own respective gains fell away into insignificance compared to the genuine enjoyment they both received from one another’s company now.

It wasn’t often someone fell for the real Bill Cipher, and not the false one they had been led to believe was on their side.

Sixer had seen Bill petty, jealous, unhelpful, angry, vengeful, spiteful, callous, cruel even, and still he hadn’t turned away.

Bill watched the two scientists finish putting the tent up, unpacking the various necessities for setting up camp, and was struck with a wave of déjà vu watching Sixer from the mouth of the cave.

The scientist was standing at the cliffs edge, the orange light of the setting sun filtering through his fluffy brown hair, playing off his skin and his clothing. He stood with one hand on his hip, the other held up at his eyes, overlooking the valley’s beauty, and Bill was watching Sixer from behind, taking in the details of him on the mountaintop as the sun set, feeling oddly at peace with
everything. With everything that Sixer had done to him, with everything he wanted Sixer to do to him, even with his convoluted existence in this flesh cage.

It felt less like an ordeal and more like the fleshy vacation he first imagined this situation as when he was trying to make himself feel better about it, and he realised that it truly was like a vacation. Like a respite from the cosmic parts of himself that he didn’t want to look at anymore, the parts he couldn’t ignore. Here he could ignore all those unsightly reminders, and just focus on a different perspective. Sixer’s perspective. He wasn’t sure exactly how the scientist perceived him, but he had a pretty good idea, and the scientist looked at Bill with wonder and appreciation in his eyes, liking what he saw. It went further than worship, it was some deeper appreciation of Bill’s innate essence, and he’d never felt so cherished for what he was before.

So it made sense how thoroughly he was coming to appreciate Sixer for all his respective assets.

Sixer looked at Bill and liked what he saw, and Bill could say the same.

It was nice.

Bill watched the sunlight cup the different lines of Sixer’s form, curving into his figure, highlighting the dips and shadows of the human’s back, and he realised why this felt so familiar.

Sixer had a dream like this once. In the dream he was the one watching Bill on the mountaintop, sitting beside him, his eyes taking in the details of Bill from behind him, memorising the way the light fell across Bill’s cheekbones, feeling oddly content with the world.

It was funny how these things came around full circle.

Very amusing.

When Ford turned around to look to his muse, Bill was bathed in fading sunlight at the edge of the cave, the orange light shimmering on his black skin, catching in his gold eyes, framing his muse like a vision of warm and dark autumnal colours. He was utterly beautiful. Ford noticed Bill was wearing a faint smile that seemed so out of place on his face. Ford had seen Bill’s manic, teasing, zealous grins before, but never this soft smile.

It took his breath away.

Ford tried to remember what he had turned to say, but the words vanished from his mind. He just stared at Bill, who blinked back at Ford, shaking himself out of whatever soft focus he had before, waiting expectantly for Ford to deliver whatever he had turned around to say.

Ford had no idea what he was saying. He just stared at Bill, his mouth hanging open, while his muse stared back, seeming to realise what had just happened, that soft smile curving smug at the edges of Bill’s mouth, his eyes crinkling fondly.

“I –“ Ford began, still looking for the words he had lost when he looked at his muse’s smile.

“Well that’s the tent done. Are you just standin’ around Bill, or are you gonna help with settin’ up at all? Contribute?” Fiddleford asked, dusting off his sleeping bag, shaking it out in the air.

“You’re doing just fine with that on your own.” Bill replied, uncrossing his arms and kicking off from the cave wall. “Besides, I have a –“

“A bad back.” Fiddleford finished for him, sounding unimpressed. “Right.”
Bill pursed his lips, before he stuck his hands in his pockets, pacing forward. “Tell you what. You finish setting up camp here, and I’ll go get us some firewood. To contribute. Does that sound fair to you?”

“Suit yourself.” Fiddleford shook his sleeping bag one more time, before he crawled into the tent, laying it down flat. “Ford, can you help me with this in here?”

“I –” Ford watched Bill walk off into the trees, conflicted, wanting to follow him, before he conceded to help Fiddleford. “What do you need?”

Trudging off into the forest, Bill shook his head, chuckling to himself. Sixer was so transparent sometimes. Even if Bill couldn’t feel the waves of worship coming off the man, it was written all over his face.

Pacing further into the shelter of the trees, Bill snapped his fingers and summoned a pile of firewood in an instant, so he would look productive should one of the scientists venture in to find him.

Leaning against a slightly damp redwood, Bill settled his shoulders against the bark and closed his eyes, getting comfortable. Once he was propped up sufficiently against the tree, he focussed on getting into the mindscape, intending to pop in there briefly to take care of a little bit of business.

While he didn’t put much stock in silly things like prophecies, he knew it couldn’t hurt to investigate. He hadn’t the inclination to go poking after vague sketches drawn in the dirt himself, but he knew someone who rather enjoyed that sort of thing.

It was time to pull Kryptos off time baiting duty.

With the camp set up, pillows lining Bill’s side of the tent, and the tarp put up in case of more rain through the night, Ford and F were finally content with their campsite. Fiddleford was getting comfortable, his banjo sitting beside him on the ground. Pulling out a can of his favourite Baron Num Nums High Flying Beans, trying to open the tin with a confusingly complicated swiss army knife and struggling, F looked up at Ford as he crawled out of the tent, the last of the pillows laid just so.

“Looks good Ford. How d’you reckon your assistant’s going with that firewood? Not sure if you fancy cold beans for dinner.”

“He has been gone a while.” Ford fretted, looking to the forest. “I hope he hasn’t gotten lost.”

“I can tell camping isn’t his thing.” Fiddleford remarked, flicking the can opener up from the swiss army knife finally. “I’m honestly surprised he wanted to come along on this expedition. Livin’ off the land doesn’t seem to be his can of beans. He seems the type to put his feet up more than get them wet.”

“Camping may not be his ‘thing’ per se, ah… well, he doesn’t like being left behind. I didn’t think he’d want to come along as well, but he was quite adamant.”

“I get not wanting to stay home and watch the paint dry, but coming along on an expedition like this means you’ve got to put a little effort in.” Fiddleford reasoned, twisting the swiss army knife
along the edge of the tin before sighing and stating simply. “He’s not the most helpful.”

“While he does enjoy putting his feet up, Bill can participate when he wants to.” Ford defended his muse. “He helps. A lot of the designs on the machinery I use to graft parts together for the portal are thanks to his tweaking of the initial prototypes. He knows how to bring necessary advancements when he’s inclined to - how to get ‘stuck in’ if you will. He just does it on his own time.”

“Like gettin’ that firewood.” Fiddleford groused, jamming the can opener into the tin, cranking it open. “Does that in his own time, when he wants to.”

Ford sighed and looked down at Fiddleford sitting by the fire. His friend finally opened the tin of beans and sat it down, turning the swiss army knife over in his hands for a moment, before looking down to the ground.

“I know.” Fiddleford relented. “Don’t pay me no mind. I’m just a bit irritable I guess. Tired, hungry, cranky, a mix of the three. You see his good side more than anyone, I think you’re the only one he shows it to. Must be nice.”

“He’s not – I’ve asked him to try harder.” Ford felt bad giving excuses for Bill’s behaviour to his friend, Fiddleford hadn’t done anything to invite Bill’s standard poor behaviour. How was Ford supposed to tell F that Bill’s disregard wasn’t personal, that he was like that with everyone? He was standing before F as a walking exception to that statement, it wouldn’t be very convincing. “He’s not the friendliest to strangers.”

“How did you meet him anyway?” Fiddleford asked. “If’n he don’t like strangers. How did you push past that point?”

“I guess I sought him out, or he sought me out, or something along those lines.” Ford scratched his chin, considering.

Truthfully he was the one to first summon Bill with the incantation, but he hadn’t showed up until days later, taking his sweet time to get back to Ford. For a cosmic muse, granting inspiration to a single bright spark once a century, he certainly took his time deciding whether Stanford was worth it. He must have spent that time watching him, deliberating.

“He must have seen something he liked, or something that impressed him I guess. He doesn’t latch onto people very often. Still, it took some time for him to be comfortable around me. A month or two of sustained physical interaction. We, ah, corresponded before.”

“Corresponded eh?” Fiddleford wiped the sauce from the beans off the side of the swiss army knife with his thumb. “Makes sense. I was tryin’ to figure out how you two would’ve met. Seems to me like y’all run in different circles. He’s not what I expected when you said you had a friend up here, but it makes a bit more sense now.”

“In what way?” Ford asked curiously.

“The correspondence. Y’all’d’ve talked plenty before meetin’. Made that mental connection. Otherwise I get the gist that you two might not have crossed paths at all.” Fiddleford answered. “You’re both two very different people.”

“That’s true I suppose.” Ford replied with a wry smile. Bill was definitely a very different person, considering he technically was not a person at all. Personality wise, Bill’s loud, somewhat snide, joking demeanour was something Ford would generally avoid were Bill just another human at, say,
university. It was interesting how despite everything their disparate personalities had clicked together so comfortably. It was funny how that worked.

“He’s quite brilliant when he opens up to you. His insights are surprising, the scope of his knowledge is vast. He understands the advanced concepts I’m working with and improves upon them. He might be petty, and stubborn, and rather rude sometimes, but living with him has been the most enjoyable period of my life.” Ford concluded fondly. “He makes me laugh.”

Fiddleford looked up at Ford, scrutinising his friend’s face. He seemed sincere, and his tone was so appreciative. Stanford could be rather serious when focused on a task, and given the scope of his current work, F could see the potential for Ford to clam up and stop enjoying the things that made him laugh. If Bill managed to draw Stanford out of that dourness and bring enjoyment to his expression and laugh lines to his eyes, F supposed the assistant wasn’t so bad.

“I’ll see it eventually. It’ll just take time I guess.” F sighed, and put the swiss army knife away. “Ah, well. He’ll warm up to me when he wants to. I’m not goin’ anywhere.”

“You’re being very patient with him. I appreciate it.” Ford said, thanking his friend. “You’re a good person Fiddleford.”

Fiddleford smiled at the ground for a moment hearing Ford’s words, before he slapped his thigh. “What I am is a hungry person. You go find our firewood finder, and I’ll just sit here with my banjo. Play us a few tunes while we eat.”

“I should have known you’d break out the banjo.” Ford smiled and shook his head at F, resting his hands on his hips. “You can take the hillbilly out of the country but you can’t take the country out of the hillbilly.”

“There you go callin’ me a hillbilly again.” Fiddleford scoffed and pulled his banjo onto his lap, twanging the strings to tune them. “You just got no appreciation of my musical talent.”

“I’m sorry, I wasn’t aware the banjo was a musical instrument.” Ford raised his eyebrow teasingly, ribbing his friend.

Fiddleford looked up at Stanford for a moment, serious as anything, before a rather comical expression crept over his face and he played the classic refrain from the duelling banjo’s scene in the movie Deliverance.

Ford barked out a laugh. “You’re ridiculous.”

“C’mon now, that’s Tate’s favourite song.” Fiddleford protested jokingly.

“Please tell me it isn’t.”

“You’re right, it isn’t. Tate’s more of a Beatles fan, like his momma.” F conceded, plucking the first few strings to Here Comes the Sun, before splaying his hand flat on the strings. “You wanna hear his favourite song?”

“I’m sure you’ll play it for me anyway.” Ford chuckled, watching F smile fondly down at his banjo.

“I really miss them, y’know.” F said placidly, looking out over the valley as night crept in. “I reckon they’d love to see this.”

Ford looked out over the valley too, watching the deep blue seep into the sky, stars beginning to
make themselves known as the sun went down.

There was a peaceful moment between the two scientists then, a moment to appreciate nature, and all its majesty.

F began plucking the tune to yet another Beatles song, the melody of Blackbird ringing out over the forest pleasantly. Ford paused to listen for a few more seconds, enjoying the melody’s resonance, before noting just how dark it was beginning to get.

“I’ll be back. I’m just going to find Bill.”

Fiddleford nodded and continued playing, looking up to the canopy of the heavens as Ford picked up the lantern and paced off into the forest, trying to find his wayward muse, the sound of banjo strings plucking out a pleasant tune signalling the way back to camp.

To his surprise, his muse hadn’t gotten far. Just a short way along the trail into the forest Ford found him, however what did surprise him was that his muse seemed to have hiked into the forest just to have fallen asleep against a rather broad redwood. There was a pile of firewood by his feet, suggesting at least some of Bill’s little sojourn into the forest had been productive, but Ford had never seen Bill sleep anywhere other than his room, preferring the security of his blanket covered sanctum.

Pacing closer, Ford noticed that his muse was sleeping standing up, his head lolling back to rest against the tree bark, eyes closed. It didn’t look particularly comfortable, but judging from the even rise and fall of his chest, it hadn’t impacted his muse’s ability to get a decent stretch of shut eye.

Ford took a moment to appreciate the candidness of watching Bill’s sleeping face, unguarded and devoid of his usual cunning demeanour. His long lashes just crested the tops of his cheekbones, and his dark skin looked like the fast approaching midnight. Ford was reminded of the first time he had allowed himself to truly pause and take in Bill’s sleeping expressions, on that fateful day he had called Fiddleford to join them, and how solidly his muse had slept, like a dead person with an outrageous temperature.

Bill looked unconscious to a similar degree now, sleeping unguarded out in the woods like this. It didn’t seem wise to be so unwary out in the elements, and so Ford reached forward to rouse Bill, his hand moving towards his shoulder, when a barrier of blue flames sprung up to halt his movement.

Ford jumped back, surprised, having snatched his hand away before he got burnt by the shock of flames. He paused, considering his muse. Of course Bill was too paranoid to sleep vulnerably out in the woods, but given how instantaneous his defences were, how unusual his resting spot was, and how soundly he seemed to be out, Ford was certain that Bill was up to something.

He stood and watched his muse’s eyebrows furrow, eyes closed, before Bill mumbled something quietly that sounded oddly like he was talking to a friend.

“I’ll be just a second.”

Bill’s face twitched, eyelids fluttering for a moment, before he cracked open one golden eye, fixing Ford in his gaze.
“Oh, it’s you.” Bill huffed, and closed his eye again.

Dismissed with a glance by the God, Ford crossed his arms, taking issue with Bill’s attitude. He began teasing Bill, to test if he was listening.

“If you can sleep like this outside, perhaps you didn’t need all those pillows in the tent after all.”

Bill kept his eyes shut, though from his loud exhale at that statement, it was clear he heard Ford.

“Perhaps I should just leave you here, in the forest.” Ford continued, raising his eyebrow at the way Bill was attempting to ignore him. “With the redwoods.”

“Testing my patience.” Bill mumbled, his brows furrowing slightly again.

“Well, if that’s how you see it.” Ford shrugged, and made to walk away.

“Not you Sixer.” Bill’s hand reached out, swinging in Ford’s direction, making grabbing motions while his eyes remained closed.

“Then who?” Ford asked curiously, pausing.

“It’s none of your business who I’m talking to.” Bill grumbled sharply, rolling his shoulders against the bark, though again he didn’t seem to be directing his statement to Ford. “V’z unaqvvat vg. Walk the tightrope.”

Ford watched Bill’s conversation continue, bemused by the way he slipped in and out of that unusual language he spoke. It was clear Bill wasn’t talking to him at this point, but whoever he was talking to, he didn’t seem to be too thrilled with.

“Dhrfgvba zr ntnva naq V’z chggvat lbh onpx gurer. I’m doing you a favour here.”

Bill seemed to pause, inhaling before exhaling a loud sigh.

“Fine. Do this then get back to her. Tell her I said hi.”

Rolling his shoulders again, Bill seemed to be coming out of his unusual power nap. Shaking off the sleepiness before opening his eyes, Bill muttered.

“If ingrate had a middle name. Vapbzcrgrag.”

Yawning as he woke, stretching his arms up over his head, Bill blinked at Ford, the scientist watching him shrewdly.

“What was that all about?” Ford questioned.

Continuing to stretch out his back, twisting his torso this way and that, Bill looked innocently back at Ford. “Nothing.”

Ford raised an eyebrow sceptically at Bill.

“Just a dream.” Bill continued, pushing the innocent tone a little too far to be plausible.

“In the mindscape.” Ford concluded.

Bill tried the innocent blink a few more times.
“Who were you talking to?” Ford pushed.

“Do I detect a hint of jealousy in your tone?” Bill questioned sweetly, trying to deflect Ford’s questioning.

“I detect a hint of very obvious deflection in yours.”

Bill tried a scandalised gasp, putting his hand to his chest. When Ford’s unimpressed sceptical expression didn’t wane, Bill made the same dramatic gasp again, seeing no change on Sixer’s face, before his shoulders relaxed and he waved at Ford like he was dismissing a waiter.

“Pfft. You’re no fun.” Kicking off from the tree, beckoning the pile of firewood to levitate behind him with one finger, Bill began pacing back in the direction of camp.

Ford followed Bill, keeping pace with the muse who seemed hellbent on acting like nothing had just happened.

“I just find it suspicious, that’s all, that the moment you break away from the group, I find you asleep in the forest, surrounded by a barricade of fire, conducting some sort of dubious business.”

“What makes you think my business is so dubious?” Bill asked, not looking over at Ford.

“Just a hunch.” Ford smirked, still watching Bill, assessing what he let slip. He had indirect confirmation that Bill had been talking to someone in the mindscape, and had been conducting some sort of business arrangement, though to what end, Ford didn’t know. He picked up more from the things Bill didn’t say, than from what he did.

“So, what were you talking about?”

“Your eyebrows developing sentience, crawling off your face to go live in the forest.” Bill replied flippantly, turning to grin at Ford.

“I’m not going to get a straight answer from you, am I?”

“Somebody catches on quick.” Bill looked at Ford indulgently, and kept pacing along the trail.

“I can keep asking.” Ford insisted.

“You can also waste your breath, but that would be a terrible shame.” Bill countered sweetly.

“Does this mysterious business transaction of yours have anything to do with the apparatus?” Ford questioned, hoping to eek answers out of Bill’s minute facial reactions at least.

Bill raised his eyebrows at that, but said nothing.

“No? The portal?” Bill looked away, to the trail winding ahead of them. “My destiny? The space time continuum?”

Bill continued to say nothing, knowing that Sixer was watching his all too expressive face closely, looking for tells.

“Those paintings in the caves?”

Bill couldn’t help but shoot a look at Ford then, surprised the scientist had caught on to that.

From the way Ford had said nothing when they passed the depictions of Bill on the walls, he had
assumed that they weren’t of interest to the scientist, or that he thought they were old news, having explored these caves already.

Ford realised with that look that his guess was spot on, and he stuck his hands in his pockets, smug now, strolling alongside his muse.

“I first read the incantation to summon you in those caves.”

“And look how that worked out for you.” Bill couldn’t help but wryly reply.

“I’d say it couldn’t have worked out better.”

“Of course you’d say that.” Bill rolled his eyes.

“Well, I do enjoy having you around.” Ford confessed, watching the way Bill’s demeanour seemed to soften at that.

Taking Bill’s softened expression as an indicator of a weak point to prod at, Ford continued his interrogation. “So what part of the cave paintings is your business? Hmm?”

“You are very persistent.” Bill shook his head, and looked up to the sky, despairing of his curious little human.

“You told me you hadn’t seen them before. Did you even know they were there?” Ford pried, hoping his muse would finally engage in conversation beyond his flippant deflections.

Sighing, knowing that Ford was too dogged in his curiosity to be thrown off without an answer, Bill replied curtly. “I haven’t seen them before.”

“I thought you were all seeing?”

“Maybe I got distracted.” Bill gritted out, disliking the aspersions cast against his omniscience. “Maybe they slipped my notice. It’s a wide multi-verse out there. Lots to look at.”

“Did you know your summoning spell was there?” Ford questioned.

“I had a hunch.” Bill shot Ford a look. “Considering you drew my interest from that point onward, I knew the incantation had to be somewhere in this area.”

“What does the incantation do exactly? It didn’t summon you instantaneously.” Ford pressed, strolling alongside Bill. Camp wasn’t that far away, he could hear Fiddleford’s banjo playing now, and he stopped, not willing to leave this conversation be when it was so intriguing.

“Funnily enough, I usually have better things to do than race around after whoever whistles for me. What do you want me to do, come when called? Like a dog?” Bill sneered, and crossed his arms, letting the stack of firewood drop on the ground. He leant up against a tree. “Humans can be so insulting. Arrogant.”

“Is that why you took a week to come see me?” Ford set his lantern on the ground and leaned against the tree beside Bill, his curiosity compelling him, despite how disgruntled his muse seemed with this specific line of questioning. “I thought you spent that time watching me, to decide whether I was worthy.”

“I was watching you.” Bill admitted, relinquishing just enough information to pacify the scientist. “You weren’t my only concern. All the summoning spell does is tell me where I should cast my
attention. I make the choice whether to follow it or not. It’s like a signal put out into the universe, telling me where to look. Until I follow it, or pick up the call, I’m under no obligation to answer.”

“So you could have chosen to ignore the call when I summoned you into this form then?” Ford reasoned, looking over Bill’s human form, realising that this might not have happened at all hypothetically. He might never have had the opportunity to get to know Bill like this if he declined the call. Ford couldn’t imagine his life if that had happened, he was so used to having Bill around.

“Could have, would have, should have.” Bill uncrossed his arms and swung them at his side, an agitated movement. “What do you want from me Sixer? I’m not going to act like I didn’t have other balls in the air when you dragged me here, and you can’t expect me to just leave everything - my plans, my friends, my world - behind in the proverbial dust in favour of building this portal with you. Now do you wanna get off my case about this?”

“I was just asking questions.” Ford bristled. “There’s no need to get so defensive about it.”

“Questions are currency, and it’s a give and take.” Bill tilted his head at Ford. “I’ve given a lot today, and you’re all out of money. What are you going to do for me?”

“Walk you back to camp and leave you be if this is how you’re going to act.” Ford stood up from the tree crossly and made to start back towards camp.

“Sixer, wait.” Bill called out after him, an apologetic tone to his voice. Ford paused to hear him out for that reason only. “You caught me in a bad mood. Not your fault.”

“Who were you talking to then?” Ford pressed.

“Alright, maybe it’s somewhat your fault, for asking too many questions.” Bill griped, shooting Ford a chastising look. “And making me walk 5,000 miles –“

“It was about seventeen miles, actually.”

“And making me walk 5,000 more to get home after this. I think I died twice getting here.”

“At what point did you die?” Ford questioned sceptically.

“On the inside. I died on the inside. Unnecessary exercise will do that to you.” Bill examined his nails, polishing them on the front of his shirt, before waving at the stack of firewood, willing it airborne again. “My point being, despite the near death experiences, I’ve actually had fun today, and I didn’t expect to.”

“What raised the bar?” Ford turned and looked at Bill, who shrugged, and waved at the firewood, the logs rearranging in the air to form a question mark.

“I couldn’t tell you. Maybe it was your sparkling wit? You’re not bad company when you shut up with the questions.”

“Can I ask one more?” Ford chanced.

“You’re pushing your luck. You know you are.” Bill said, the firewood hovering back into a manageable stack. “Just one?”

“Just one.” Stanford promised, trying his best to look earnest. He could never only ask one question, but he could at least be fair and drop this particular topic after squeezing one more truth out of the muse.
“Fine.” Bill crossed his arms and watched Ford expectantly.

“You said ‘tell her I said hi’. Her who? Who is she?”

Bill ran his tongue along his teeth inside of his mouth, debating whether or not to answer truthfully. Deciding it couldn’t hurt, he indulged Sixer.

“She’s my best friend. A real bright spark.”

“What’s her name?” Ford asked, pushing his ‘just one’ question to two.

Bill noticed that Ford was stretching out his permitted question, but he didn’t seem to mind as much.

It couldn’t hurt to give Sixer a name.

Pyronica wasn’t recorded in any lore on earth at this particular bracket in time, and Bill liked talking about his friend. He only had fond words to say about her, and somehow she always deserved it.

Letting Sixer in on Bill’s network beyond him was a risk, but from all of his deliberation today, weighing up the pros and cons of keeping Sixer long term, he was reaching the conclusion that maybe he could start letting Sixer in on his world a little. If he was to be a part of it eventually, he’d find out at some point in time.

Besides, talking about her was much better than talking about Kryptos.

“Py.” Bill answered simply, looking Sixer in the eye.

“Like the equation?” Ford’s eyebrow raised quizzically.

“Hah!” Bill laughed. “Hell no! Her name’s Pyronica, and she’s a flaming hot comet of chaos.”

Ford seemed impressed with Bill’s openness, and smiled at him, though privately he was questioning whether to be more concerned that Bill’s best friend was either a comet, or incredibly chaotic. It made sense, knowing the God.

“Well, pass on my hellos to her too, or is that not appropriate?”

“Oh no, she likes you.” Bill laughed indulgently. “Maybe you’ll meet her someday.” Definitely, if the portal came through. Then all of Bill’s friends would pour in from their crumbling dimension and claim Earth as their own. Sixer could make the rounds.

Ford’s expression brightened. There it was again, Bill implying he could show him things on the other side of the portal. For all Bill acted like he would just as soon abandon Ford once the construction was complete, more and more he seemed to be coming around to the idea of leading Ford through the mysteries of the universe, and that was an encouraging thought. It was everything he hoped for when he first summoned Bill into this body, and it almost seemed too good to be true that he was getting that, and more.

“Well, I hear a banjo being strangled. Shall we?” Bill levitated the firewood into his arms, so it looked like he’d been carrying it the whole time. He stood, waiting for Stanford, and again the scientist had another moment where he simply took in the details of Bill, appreciated the beauty of his muse for all that he was.
Bill returned with the firewood, letting Ford arrange the pieces, kneeling down beside him and lighting the tinder with a flame from his fingertip. They were underway.

“How’d you do that?” Fiddleford asked from over by the tent, Bill’s subtle magic hidden from his view.

“Wouldn’t you know it, I had matches right here, all along.” Bill lied with a beaming grin, infuriating the mechanic. Fiddleford had pulled out some of his own hair and stomped around to vent his frustration, it was very amusing. The highlight of the evening in Bill’s opinion.

After a hearty campfire meal of sausages and baked beans, followed by obligatory smores, a gastronomic phenomenon that delighted Bill endlessly, the trio sat back, sharing sips of aged Tennessee whiskey from F’s flask.

“It’s so clear out here in the country.” Fiddleford said, passing the flask to Ford, leaning back on his elbows to gaze up at the stars. “No light pollution. You can see everything.”

“You didn’t go stargazing in California?” Ford took the flask, holding it down by his knee, sitting cross legged by the fire. Bill sat on his left, and reached across Ford’s lap for the whisky, pouting when Ford pulled it just out of reach, denying him.

“You could get some pretty good stargazin’ in out in the nature reserves. Stargazin’ in Yosemite, that’s pretty amazin’. I took Pat there once for a music festival.” Fiddleford picked the shell of a baked bean out from between his teeth while he spoke. “In the city you can’t see too much though. I used to go stargazin’ with my cousin, back on the farm. He could always point out the Big Dipper, right up there in the sky. I reckon he made up the rest of the constellations though. Didn’t have too much book learnin’. You don’t get too many astronomers out in Tennessee.”

“I liked astronomy as a child.” Ford commented, taking a sip of whisky, the liquid burning his throat nicely on the way down. “I used to have a small telescope in my room. It was quite enjoyable, charting the heavens. I think I had it for about four years, until Stanley broke it playing baseball indoors.”

“Ah, accidents happen.” Fiddleford shrugged. “You can see some out tonight without a telescope, just goin’ by eye.”

Grunting as he shifted, Ford extended his hand out to point. “There’s Orion, if you look just there. You can see a few more constellations – Sagittarius there, between those stars just up there. Look.”

Ford took another sip of the whisky and traced the pattern of the constellation with his pointer finger, Bill leaning into his side, curious to see where Ford would point. “Just there.”

Fiddleford looked up at the constellation then looked over to his friend, watching how Ford leaned into Bill’s space to point out the constellation again to his assistant. Bill watched Sixer trace meaningless patterns across the sky, and for a moment Fiddleford caught Bill staring more at
Stanford’s face than at the stars he was pointing to.

It was the little moments like these Fiddleford was catching more and more. The small moments of tenderness between Ford and Bill that made the assistant seem not wholly awful as a person, simply for the regard with which he seemed to favour Stanford with. While F might not like Bill, it was clear Ford did, just by how he indulged the other man time and time again.

“That’s Ursa Major beside it, you can see.” Ford pointed out indulgently, his body angled towards Bill even if he was talking to everyone. His assistant was scooched up close to Stanford’s side, lounging against his arm, eating marshmallows from the bag. “The bear.”

“What’s your star sign?” Fiddleford asked Ford curiously, as his colleague took one more sip of whisky and passed the flask back to him.

“I don’t believe in that sort of horoscope nonsense.” Ford shook his head and wiped his mouth on the back of his hand. “They put it in the paper here every day, in the Gossiper. Vague universal statement after vague universal statement. It’s rubbish.”

“Oh, come now. They’re just havin’ fun with it.” Fiddleford laughed.

“Something good will happen to you today. You will find yourself faced with a decision. You will have an important conversation with a loved one. You will inhale oxygen and exhale CO2.” Ford said sarcastically, mimicking the articles. “None of its personally relevant. It could be applicable to anyone and that’s the point.”

“I’m good at horoscopes.” Bill piped up, grinning. “Go ahead, ask me for one.”

“Seriously?” Ford scoffed, and shook his head. “No thank you.”

“I want one. Do me.” Fiddleford smiled gamely, taking a swig from the flask.

“Alrighty, your horoscope for tomorrow is…” Bill paused dramatically for effect, before closing his eyes.

Fiddleford didn’t notice, thinking it was just the firelight playing off Bill’s face, but Ford noticed how Bill’s eyes glowed gold just before he shut his eyelids. Keeping his eyes shut, smiling, Bill recounted Fiddleford’s horoscope, the slight echo playing in his voice written off by Fiddleford as an acoustic trick of the mountainside.

“Open the eyes of the mind, but shut them fast. Fear makes a home in the caution that caused your gradual decline. You cannot un-see what has been seen. A warning; shut your eyes.”

Fiddleford’s smile slid from his face, and he was looking at Bill aghast, unsure if this was just Bill’s odd sense of humour, or if he was doing this on purpose to unnerv e him. It wasn’t a nice horoscope.

Shaking his head and blinking his eyes open, Bill let out a long whistle. “Woo! That was more of a horror scope, am I right?”

“Bill.” Ford scowled, chiding his muse for scaring F unnecessarily.

“What? He asked for one.”

“They’re all nonsense though, right?” F laughed nervously, assuming this was just one of Bill’s jokes. “Just a bit of fun?”
“Of course they are.” Ford rushed to assure F, though personally he wasn’t sure. With the horoscopes in the Gossiper, he knew they were nonsense. Toby Determined wrote them, and Ford had seen the man tie his own shoelaces together once. Given that Bill had delivered this particular horoscope though, Ford was concerned that this was a more accurate prediction, though he couldn’t be sure. Bill did enjoy messing with F, he could just be trying to scare him.

“Do you want one?” Bill turned to ask Ford, still smiling smugly.

“Again, no thank you.” Ford gave Bill an unimpressed look.

Bill shrugged. “Suit yourself. I don’t put much stock in prophecies anyway. The more you buy into them the more susceptible you are. It’s called self-fulfilling prophecy for a reason.”

“Huh.” F nodded, curious.

“So just ignore that, and you’re fine.” Bill smiled wide at F, baring all his teeth, the subtle malice in his grin falling just short of comforting.

“Right.” Fiddleford nodded warily, before taking another deep sip from his flask. Shaking off his nervousness, Fiddleford exhaled a loud sigh, and looked back up to the stars. “I never would have reckoned back in college I’d be seeing an alien spaceship with my own eyes. Not in my time.”

“You’ll love it.” Ford looked over to F and smiled. “It’s a truly phenomenal sight. The technology’s advancement. The architecture. The detailing. It’s fantastic.”

“Did you ever imagine anything like that back when you were in college Ford? Doing something like this?” F asked, passing the flask back over to his friend.

“I did have a very vivid imagination.” Ford joked. “I always knew I wanted to change the world with my discoveries. I had a great deal of ambition for my future. I still do. How about yourself though? Are you going to go down the family route, or further your inventions?”

“I don’t see why I can’t do both.” Fiddleford grabbed a stick from the ground and prodded the fire with it, sending embers dancing up into the sky. “I reckon after this I’ll go back to Palo Alto. Start up Fiddleford Computermajigs again. With the money from workin’ on this project I can get Tate into a good school, use the funds to kickstart my business. No more workin’ out of my garage. I can keep patenting my robotics, see if I can build things that’ll really help people. I’d like to be makin’ money from my own inventions, I’m gonna try and keep most of the money from here in a trust fund for Tate when he grows older, so he can look after a family of his own someday. And maybe once my inventions get us off the ground, I can get a nice house for Pat, with a screen door that ain’t broken.”

Ford nodded, listening.

“I grew up dirt poor, and I mean dirt poor, back in Tennessee. You learn to appreciate what you got when what you got’s hogs and each other. I had a big family, lots of mouths to feed. Ma and Pa and everyone scraped together everything they had to get me to university. I hope to pay them back for their kindness someday.”

“That’s very admirable.” Ford remarked, and took a considering sip from the flask, before capping the lid and setting it on the ground beside his knee. “I can relate. If not for my scholarship offers, I wouldn’t have been able to afford higher education. It’s not something my father would have shelled out for if not for my school principal’s urging. He would have had me working at the shop indefinitely, if he could have.”
“A waste of your talents.” Bill commented, his hand snaking around Ford’s knee to grab the flask. Ford either had drunk enough whisky to not notice, or not care about Bill’s sudden theft. He was lost in thought, considering his own ambitions.

“I truly hope being here, crafting this portal, I hope it will all pay off. Once I prove my theory, I’ll be able to leave Gravity Falls. Go home. Publish my findings to the world. I’ll be able to prove to everyone who said I couldn’t do it, that I, Stanford Pines, discovered the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness. I did it first. Me. I’d be the toast of the scientific community. If only the Dean of West Coast Tech could see me then, rubbing elbows with prize winners and presidents. Debating politics with Reagan and – oh, I don’t know. Discussing turtleneck fashion tips with Carl Sagan.” Ford joked, before looking wistfully into the fire. “Imagine how proud my family would be, finally. How proud everyone would be. That the local ‘freak’ became history’s next Einstein. They’d all see me then.”

The campfire crackled and the night was silent for a moment, Ford caught in a swath of wistfulness for his long sought after dreams. He hoped they’d become a reality. He wanted them to so much. He was sitting next to two of the people best equipped to help him make that dream a reality, and the hopeful feeling built in his chest until it sat heavy at his throat, making it tighten with emotion at the thought that he was so close.

So close.

“They’d all see me.” Ford repeated with more conviction, wanting that more than anything. To be seen for the genius he was. To be seen as truly special, gifted. Not a freak. To be singled out on his merit for once.

For twice, he conceded, casting a glance to Bill beside him, who was sniffing the flask of whisky dubiously, wrinkling his nose at it. Bill had seen him, singled him out for his gifts. He would be a lucky man to get that recognition twice, but he wanted it regardless. He wanted it all.

“There’s somethin’ I don’t get though.” Fiddleford spoke up, sounding confused. “Is that ‘Grand Theory’ even necessary? I mean, you’ve already discovered so many amazing things and recorded them in your journals. You’d get all the acclaim you want with that, there are things in that book the world has never seen - would pay to see. Why not publish now? Settle down? Start a family, start a life for yourself?”

“I have a life for myself.” Ford replied, almost offended by the question, though he knew F didn’t mean any harm by it. “My life is far more exciting, interesting, and engaging than settling down would be. I get to research creatures that defy logic and comprehension, I get to explore a whole multiverse of dimensional possibilities, I get to pioneer the sort of advancements in technology that would revolutionise the way we live our day to day lives. Settling down, well - that’s your dream, not mine. No offence F.”

“None taken.” F said dryly. “I think it just comes down to different things sustainin’ us differently. Chasin’ your dream sustains you, and bringin’ up my family and working on my inventions sustains me. Different things for different people.”

“Besides, if I published now without finalising the Definitive Theory of Weird, this town would become a free for all! A land grab of scientific possibility. It would create a ‘Weirdness Rush’, scientists flocking from all over to get their grubby little paws on a piece of the glory.” Ford grandstanded dismissively, gesturing as he spoke. “I have to be the one to discover the theory first. Otherwise one of the other circling vultures would discover it, and my name would be lost to the history books, as The Man Who Published Too Soon.”
“That’s not the catchiest epithet.” Bill commented dryly, putting the cap back on the flask and setting it back on the ground near Sixer’s leg.

“I can think of better.” Ford gave Bill a wry glance, recalling the epithet Bill promised him. The Man who Changed the World.

“You got a tough road ahead of you then.” Fiddleford said, poking the fire again with his stick.

“True.” Ford conceded. “But I prefer the road less travelled anyway. And it’s certainly easier travelling with friends.”

Fiddleford smiled at Ford, and nodded. “Ain’t that the truth. I don’t know about you, but after all that hikin’ today I’m just about done in. I might catch some shut eye, since we’ll be up in the mornin’ and all. You comin’?”

Ford looked between the fire, the stars, and Bill sitting beside him, and felt the night wasn’t quite done with him yet. “I’ll sit up a bit longer I think. If you’re tired you should go rest up though. You’ve had a long day.”

“Alrighty.” F stood up and stretched his arms up over his head, yawning, and cracking his back. “Y’want me to leave the flask out for ya?”

“I’ll have a bit more.” Ford said. The whisky warmed him nicely in the brisk air, and he was just beginning to feel a bit of a buzz from the alcohol.

“Suit yourself.” F picked up his banjo and headed back to the tent, calling out over his shoulder. “G’night Ford, g’night Bill. See you in the mornin’.”

“Goodnight Fiddleford.” Ford called back in reply, watching F walk away, closing the tent flap behind him.

Apart from a few crickets in the forest chirping, the night was incredibly still, and the stars were bright and vibrant, shining like pinpricks in the endless black sky. Between the crackling of the fire and the warmth of the whisky, Ford felt quite pleasant, enjoying the ambiance of the evening.

“So.” Bill started, giving Ford a sideways glance. “You’re going to leave Gravity Falls are you? Must be nice.”

“I haven’t forgotten about you.” Ford gave Bill a measured glance. “I’m going to figure out the situation with the barrier before I leave. At the end of it all, after all that you’ve done for me, it’s the least I could do.”

“If you were in the habit of doing ‘the least’ I wouldn’t have chosen you.” Bill reached forward, dancing his fingertips through the top of the fire, letting the tip of the flames just caress him. “So, going to your hometown, eh? I thought there was nothing left for you there.”

“A point to prove maybe. That’s it.” Ford scratched his forehead and sat back, sighing. “It’s not like I have anywhere else to go.”

“ Hmm.” Bill looked over his shoulder at Ford, considering something, before finally making his mind up. “I never did give you that souvenir, did I?”

“What souvenir?” Ford questioned, reclining back on his elbows now, kicking his legs out comfortably so he could see the stars better.
“I got you a souvenir from the cosmos, but then you started giving me some serious sass, and sassy Sixers don’t get presents.” Bill wagged his finger at Ford, chidingly, though he was smiling.

“Oh, that souvenir.” Ford remembered, and raised an eyebrow at Bill. “The eternally redacted souvenir.”

“You really don’t want the present, do you?”

“I want it.” Ford sat up a little, curious now. “What is it?”

Bill stared at Ford for a second longer, weighing him up, then looked back to the tent, making sure Fiddleford couldn’t see. Satisfied, he summoned the present with a flick of his fingers, the thin business card appearing between Bill’s middle and pointer finger.

He held the card out to Sixer, and Ford took it, turning it over in his hands.

“It’s a … business card.” Ford was more insulted than disappointed really. That was like going mini-golfing and bringing back a score card as a gift for someone. A zero-effort gift. An afterthought. “You got me a business card.”

“I’m not that boring.” Bill griped, and reached over to hover his finger over the card. “You tap it.”

Tapping it once with his finger, Bill leaned back, content to watch the awe ripple across Sixer’s face as a holographic intergalactic map sprung up from the surface of the card, hovering. A glowing blue three-dimensional map charting the electronic chop shop’s destination between galaxies.

Bill felt the warmth of satisfaction ooze across his chest hearing Sixer’s shocked and delighted gasp, seeing the projected stars reflect on the lens of Sixer’s glasses. His human reached out into the glowing galaxy, the map interacting with his hand rather than blurring on it, turning on a slow spin like it had been pushed.

“Wow.” Ford breathed, astonished.

Taking to the new technology quickly, Sixer turned the map this way and that, spinning it around on its axis, zooming in and out on certain details with his fingers, interacting intuitively with the tech. Bill would have been impressed, his human was a natural at this, but he just couldn’t get past that expression of wonder on Sixer’s face, lit up by the yellow firelight and blue glow from the map. It was adorable, really adorable. How did Bill end up with such a cute human?

“You say you have nowhere else to go, but you haven’t even scratched the surface yet.”

“Is this where you live?” Ford asked naively.

“Pfft, no.” Bill laughed, and reached forward to navigate the map for Ford, zooming in closer on the orbiting establishment. “This is a chop shop in the Antiquita Galaxy, its where I got the converter from. All things considered their parts aren’t terrible, Angolean scrappers and engineers mostly, not a bad sort if you like lizards. They have some of the most advanced technology in the quadrant.”

Ford seemed fascinated. Bill was being so forthcoming with this information, it was almost like he wanted to show Ford the world behind the portal now. He’d been so resistant before. Ford wondered what changed his mind.

“You’d be like a kid in a candy store there. Alien hardware as far as the eye can see. It’s not much,
just something little, but I figured you’d get a kick out of it.”

“Thank you.” Ford said belatedly, still playing with the hologram, turning it this way and that, exploring its details. “It’s incredible.”

“It is just a business card, but you’ve gotta admit, it’s a pretty cool business card.” Bill reclined back on the ground beside Ford now, pillowing his hands behind his head, getting comfortable. “That one’s all yours.”

Ford played with it for a moment longer, tapping the hologram on and off for a while, figuring out it’s functionality, before he tapped it to turn it off and put it away in his pocket.

“Thank you.” He repeated, looking down at his muse, meaning it. Despite how off hand it seemed, it really was a thoughtful gift. And it made Ford feel a lot better about things for sure. It was a well-timed reminder that the universe was wide enough that there might be a place for him out there after all.

Somewhere Ford could call home.

“Here, do you wanna see my favourite constellation?” Bill asked Ford with a smile, patting the ground beside him.

Giving Bill an indulgent grin, Ford reclined on the ground beside him. Feeling even more indulgent, he stretched his arm out behind Bill’s shoulder, and with a pleased hum Bill shifted to nuzzle into Ford, so he was laying cuddled up to Ford’s chest.

“Will I need my telescope for this one?” Ford asked, enjoying the warmth of the lithe body tucked up beside him.

“This one you can see with your naked eyes, you indecent creature you.” Bill extended his hand out this time, pointing up at the stars.

Ford leaned in to follow the line of Bill’s finger with his eyes, his face close to Bill’s. He couldn’t help but sneak a glance at his muse’s face and was surprised to note how happy and relaxed Bill looked. This may have been the most relaxed Ford had ever seen him.

“It’s that bright little guy there. Then just down and to the left, another little shiner, and horizontally across, there’s the third star, then right back up.” Bill pointed out indulgently.

Ford looked back down at Bill. “That’s a triangle.”

“Yeah, but look in the middle, that cluster of stars there. You go one, two, three, four, and doesn’t that look like a rather dashing bowtie to you?” Bill grinned, and Ford wasn’t sure whether to be exasperated or endeared.

“The only thing missing is the top hat.” Ford commented idly, humouring Bill.

“I know. I’m working on that. But there’s a constellation I bet you didn’t know about. I call that one the William.”


“Just to make it sound fancy. Full names sound fancier.” Bill said, and shimmied closer to Ford, enjoying the way the scientist had his arm around him.
“And is William your full name?” Ford asked curiously.

“Hell no.” Bill laughed. “I just like the sound of that. My full name is so utterly unintelligible that if you heard it you’d lose your mind, and I like it where it is.”

“Why call yourself Bill Cipher then?” Ford looked over to his muse, watching the firelight flicker, making Bill’s face even more striking than it was usually.

“Because I like it. It’s like a permanent nickname. Like Sixer is for you.”

“That is not my permanent nickname.” Ford intoned bluntly, hardly resigning himself to an eternity being called out for what made him a freak. It was an insult in his childhood, a joke from Stanley, and it only became a term of endearment out of Bill’s mouth. He couldn’t imagine going only by that name, like it defined him.

“It’s not a bad thing, you know. It makes you special.” Bill reminded Ford, tactfully at first, then not so tactfully. “Freaks, outcasts, outsiders. Those who live on the edge. We’re more special than anyone, and there will be a place for us to embrace it, and do what we want without fear of retribution someday.”

Ford looked at Bill closely, noting the way his muse had said ‘we’ and ‘us’. He hadn’t considered that Bill might empathise with his situation personally, and he didn’t know whether Bill’s size and scope was the norm for Gods or whether he too felt like an outsider. He was learning more about his Muse every day, and found himself endlessly surprised with each new discovery. He really had only seen the tip of the iceberg when it came to Bill Cipher, but he felt that his muse was beginning to thaw out to him.

“It sounds like you’ve thought about this a lot.” Ford said softly.

“We all have dreams Sixer.” Bill replied, his expression giving away his wistfulness for a second. He looked up at the stars, and Ford tugged Bill a little closer, wordlessly showing support for his muse.

Together they cuddled, watching the stars for a while, as the fireplace crackled.

It was quite late, and Ford begrudgingly remembered the early start they had tomorrow, and groaned, shifting away from Bill to sit up.

“We should sleep. We’ve a long way to go tomorrow.”

Watching Ford stand and extend his hand to him, Bill, who had been thinking a lot today, took his human’s hand and stood with him, letting him lead them back to the tent.

Fiddleford was sound asleep in the left hand corner of the tent, and squeezed in to the right of him were two sleeping bags, and the many pillows Bill had insisted on bringing on the expedition.

Crawling into the tent, taking care to be quiet so as not to wake F up, Ford sat on his sleeping bag in the middle of the tent and began pulling his shoes and coat off, tugging off his sweater and putting it in a pile at the foot of his sleeping bag. Bill sat cross legged on the pile of pillows, and watched Stanford undress until he sat in a t-shirt and his boxers, showcasing his thick, muscular, hairy legs. Since it had been the theme of the day, Bill took the time to appreciate Stanford’s form, deciding he liked what he saw.

“It won’t be very comfortable to sleep in your boots.” Ford whispered to Bill, who promptly stuck his leg out, indicating Stanford should undo his shoelaces.
Sighing, Ford complied, and unlaced and pulled off Bill’s shoes, focusing on his task. When he looked up, Bill had taken his shirt off, and sat watching him, bare chested, covered in those striking gold tattoos.

Maybe it was the whisky making Ford bold – it was a very tempting sight to see Bill like this – or the whisky making him stupid, but he leaned forward to cup Bill’s jaw and press a soft kiss on his muse’s lips.

Bill made a small murmur of appreciation, and leaned into the kiss, his warm fingers coming forward to rest on Ford’s bare knee. When Bill’s hands slid up Ford’s thighs in one smooth motion, Ford seemed to realise where they were, and pulled back.

“We can’t do this.” He whispered, looking guiltily over at his sleeping friend. “Fiddleford’s sleeping right next to us.”

“So, just don’t wake him up. What’s the big deal?” Bill huffed, impatient with having to tip toe around the other scientist.

“I – he could wake up any moment. It wouldn’t feel right to do that to him.” Ford’s guilty expression stood out in the low light of the tent, and Bill rolled his eyes.

Tutting, Bill put his hands together, and seemed to be concentrating, though he grumbled a little. “Have to do everything myself. Typical. But if it makes you feel better, here.”

Bill pulled his hands apart to reveal one of the pink bubbles he could create, housing some sort of illusion as Ford understood it. Bill had never let Ford in on his name for the illusions – madness bubbles. He thought they were a bit of fun, but Ford probably wouldn’t see it the same way.

“What –“

“This will keep him asleep. See, easy peasy, problem solved.” Bill leaned over with the bubble in his hand, eager to press it to Fiddleford’s head so they could get on with it, but Ford caught his hand by the wrist.

“You can’t just – what is that?”

“They’re –“ Bill quickly reached for a little rebranding. “Dream bubbles. Just to put him to sleep. He won’t even notice.”

“It won’t hurt him will it?” Ford asked, wrestling with his conscience here. Enacting magic on F without his permission rankled at Ford, it seemed like a gross intrusion on F’s autonomy and rights, however the whisky made him eager to continue kissing Bill. His muse was captivating, if entirely morally dubious. He was torn between what he wanted, and what he knew was wrong, if not morally grey at the least.

“He won’t feel a thing. Trust me.” Bill said, mentally altering the contents of the bubble so it contained more ‘pleasant’ dreams. He personally felt that with all the sass Fiddleford had given him today, a dream where his teeth turned into termites and crawled out of his mouth was warranted, but he knew Ford, being the goody two shoes that he was, would be checking.

Reluctantly conceding that trust, Ford let go of Bill’s wrist, and the muse pressed forward, his hand sinking the madness bubble straight into Fiddleford’s forehead, implanting it directly into his brain.

Fiddleford twitched in his sleep, mumbled something nonsensical into his pillow, but then made a
happy sigh and rolled over, pulled in by the dream.

Ford watched him with a concerned expression for a few moments, before he seemed satisfied that Bill’s magic bubble did what he said it did.

“So, where were we?” Bill turned to Stanford, and sunk his fingers into Sixer’s leg hair once again, leaning up into his space.

“Doing something I’ll potentially regret in the morning.” Ford answered honestly, but allowed himself to rake his fingers through the hair on the back of Bill’s head, grabbing a handful and pulling him forward, kissing him soundly.

Bill hummed a happy sound into the kiss and rose up onto his knees, shuffling closer to Stanford, before sharply raking his nails down the top of Stanford’s thighs.

Ford flinched, surprised, and gasped into the kiss, feeling Bill’s lips curve up in a sadistic smile.

“That was payback.” Bill murmured.

“But you liked it, there’s the difference.” Ford grumbled, half lying there. He was surprised, thrown off, shocked by the sensation, certainly, but it woke him up well enough.

“You’re telling me you don’t like – this?” Bill punctuated his question by grazing his nails up Stanford’s stomach, leaving red marks behind.

Groaning, Stanford pushed Bill back, flipping him so the muse was laying down on the pile of pillows and Ford was positioned on top of him.

“That was payback.” Bill murmured.

“You stop me.” Bill lidded his now glowing golden eyes, and slid his hands up under Ford’s shirt, getting ready to rake his nails along Ford’s pectorals, before Ford swiftly grabbed both of Bill’s wrists and pinned them onto the soft pillowed ground.

“Uh. Sixer.” Bill wriggled, flexing his hands, finding Ford’s hold quite secure. “Not bad.”

“I think –” Ford huffed out a breath, before he repositioned himself, nudging Bill’s legs apart with his knee, lowering himself down almost like he was doing a push up. “That I’m starting to figure you out.”

He pressed down and planted a slow, deliberately teasing kiss to Bill’s neck.

“Oh?” Bill asked breathily, squirming at the kiss.

“You like this.” Ford murmured, between dotting those suctioning kisses along Bill’s long neck. “Because you shouldn’t like this.”

That made Bill freeze up, pausing. “Oh?” He repeated, more seriously this time.

“You’re a God. An all-powerful being, all seeing, indestructible, intangible.” Moving those heavy hot kisses along Bill’s jaw, up to his ear, Ford bit Bill’s earlobe and continued. “But you want nothing more than this.”

Bill swallowed nervously, his body affected wildly by what Sixer was saying, even if he was quite mentally wary right now. He flexed his hands again, trying to twist out of Ford’s grip on his wrist, squirming. He could feel Ford’s knee up between his legs now, and the most curious warmth


blossomed in his stomach, something different from the magical rush that came from absorbing this much energy. It was almost like his stomach flipped and his brain had taken a vacation, only recognising Ford’s hot breath in his ear, the wet press of kisses along his jaw, hanging on the words that Ford was saying desperately.

“To be held down.” Ford flexed his grip on Bill’s wrists, it was almost painfully tight, but that made Bill want it all the more. Ford pressed another kiss to his neck that was more teeth than lips, and Bill stifled a groan of his own, his eyes closing, brows knitting together. “To be made to feel. Physically feel. Sensation, even if it’s hurt. You want it.”

Bill made a choked off sort of noise in the back of his throat, Sixer’s words hitting some sort of chiming resonance deep down in his core.

That was so unfair.

Without thinking about it, instinctually, he bucked his hips up into Sixer’s leg, this body hungry for the sensations as a cosmic being he was denied.

“You want to feel everything.” Ford concluded, his voice low and husky, that smug satisfaction oozing from him, having hit the nail on the head. He could tell from how flustered his muse was, from the expression on his face, that he was doing this right.

Bill made another hungry noise in the back of his throat, before the words flew out of him. “Then just do it already!”

“No what?” Ford asked, ready to comply, to worship his muse in the way that he wanted.

His face heating and his pulse racing wildly, madly hoping that no one in the universe could see him right now, Bill looked up at Sixer, his slitted pupils blown wide and glowing gold.

“Everything.” Bill urged.

Needing no further prompting, that was exactly what Ford did.

Pressing himself up against Bill’s body, letting go of one wrist so he could grasp Bill’s thigh, hoist it up around his hips, Ford kissed Bill breathless until his muse was panting into his mouth. Bill was kissing back frantically, his back arching up into Sixer, his free hand cupping Ford’s head, his cheek, holding onto his back, wanting to be everywhere at once, clawing the scientist down into him.

It was everything, but it wasn’t enough, Bill just wanted more, more, more.

Outside the tent the campfire was raging, a steadily climbing pillar of flame, burning like a blowtorch with fierce concentration.

Inside the tent Bill was marvelling at the way his ardour climbed whenever Sixer’s hips mashed against his own, the friction creating a new sensation in his body that he’d never experienced, an unbelievable plateau of pleasure, like a rising heat. When he thought he couldn’t get any higher, Sixer raked his nails down the side of Bill’s thigh, causing Bill to gasp and arch up into him, loving how the pain mingled in with the pleasure. Sixer still grasped that one wrist in his hand, pinning Bill to the ground, and that feeling of being pinioned had Bill’s nature warring with itself, struggling against the thought of being subdued, but arching up into the feeling.

Muttering in millions of languages, Bill became privately glad he knocked McGucket out. He wouldn’t want anyone else to have heard this, how undone Sixer made him, how strung out and
nonsensical.

Appellations of ‘more’, ‘Sixer’, ‘you’, ‘yes’, and even the damning ‘please’ poured from Bill’s lips in a plethora of languages as Sixer kissed him hard while rocking his hips against him, increasing the friction burning between them.

Sixer’s hands were busy, scoring nail marks across Bill’s sides, pinching his nipples, grabbing his hips demandingly, even bringing his fingers up to caress Bill’s face, sliding his thumb into Bill’s mouth.

Bill let him do it, his tongue licking along the salty digit, even closing his puffy lips around it, sucking on it, pulling off with a wet pop.

He could feel a firmness within Sixer’s boxers jabbing him with every forward thrust. Bill hadn’t taken his own trousers off, but whenever Sixer’s thrusting motions grazed along the bare skin of his belly, he felt a burgeoning wetness that felt peculiar and out of place in the act, though Bill had never done this ‘act’ before so he didn’t know.

What he did know was that he liked Sixer’s frantic hip movements, and the throaty moans he made when he did them, so Bill coasted down with his free hand and grabbed Ford’s hips from the rear, getting a handful of buttock for his pleasure, squeezing it possessively, urging his thrusting hips onward.

“Bill – are you – I can’t –” Ford panted out into Bill’s mouth, kissing him, holding his thigh tighter and tighter as each second dragged on.

“Don’t stop.” Bill whined, not knowing what Sixer couldn’t do, hardly accepting it. He wasn’t allowed to stop, this cresting pleasure was the centre of Bill’s world right now, he just wanted.

Ford moaned, his glasses falling down his nose, and he took Bill’s urging as assent, letting himself take his pleasure rubbing against Bill’s body, feeling the muse’s leg hook around him, his hand scrabbling at his face, pulling his hair, pulling him closer.

Ford was close, and he belatedly realised that Bill might not know what that meant for humans. Either way, Ford was sure it would be an education, and Bill was curious enough that he might take well to learning that lesson.

Bill was pressing hot frantic kisses against Stanford’s face, missing his lips occasionally but still trying, pressing those clumsy kisses all over Ford. Ford gripped onto Bill tightly, feeling his own pleasure cresting, and moaned, a low husky sound, as his hips jerked spasmodically, his orgasm ripping through him, taking him by surprise.

He panted, and his hips slowed, ejaculate splattered all over the inside of Ford’s boxers, the wetness soaking through them. Bill continued to try to pull Ford closer to him, his sloppy kisses no less frantic, before Bill paused, his nose wrinkling.

The faint wetness bumping against his stomach was a lot more wetness now, seeping through onto his trousers, smelling like salt of the earth, or some similar metaphor.

“What -?” Bill breathed, confused by the feeling, and why Stanford was stopping, his movement’s slow, like he was tender, or oversensitive, or had uncomfortable wet boxers. He felt a huge rush of power when Stanford made that funny noise, an enormous one. The campfire outside straining into the sky, about ten stories tall, but Bill still didn’t understand it.

Hoisting himself up off Bill, letting his muse go, Ford fell back against his sleeping bag and tried to
catch his breath back, his orgasm much stronger than he anticipated, taking him by surprise. He hadn’t shared an orgasm with someone like that before, he’d never sustained an interest in a person long enough to make it that far. Now he just had, and the person wasn’t even a person.

Looking over, Ford seemed to realise that Fiddleford had been sleeping there next to him the whole time, and he felt a moment of revulsion at the thought, before he turned his thoughts to Bill, who was sitting up, peering at Ford curiously.

“What was that?”

Ford sighed deeply, rather wrung out, not feeling up to detailing the basics of human reproduction at this point in time. It was something of a mood killer. “Bird’s. Bee’s. Etcetera.”

Bill looked even more confused. That told him nothing at all.

Deciding to investigate for himself, Bill rather bluntly began lifting the waistband of Sixer’s boxers, wanting to see what had halted their progress.

He didn’t get very far, before Stanford slapped his hand away.

“What are you doing?” Ford choked out indignantly, shielding his boxers with his hands now.

“I wanna see why you stopped. What went wrong.” Bill explained, his hand hovering expectantly over the boxers, waiting for permission to go back to looking.

“Nothing went wrong. That’s what’s supposed to happen.” Ford bristled, still covering himself.

“That?” Bill sounded unimpressed, looking dubiously at Ford’s boxers.

Resigning himself to explaining, Ford awkwardly shrugged his shoulders, gesturing to his lap. “It’s called an orgasm. It’s when you … that.”

“That what?” Bill asked, still not getting it.

“You’re –“ Ford struggled for words, not knowing how to explain this to Bill, not while he sounded so patently unimpressed. “You’re all seeing. Are you telling me you’ve never seen this before?”

“What do you think I am? Some kind of Peeping Tom?” Bill looked up at the roof of the tent and shook his head. “Ugh, no thank you. That guy’s got issues.”

“So, you’ve never seen an orgasm before?” Ford repeated, astounded.

Bill shook his head slowly, looking at Sixer like he was a few screws short of an IKEA kit.

“I – it’s a reproductive process.” Ford began, choosing the scientific definition first. He was interrupted by Bill’s loud reaction.

“EW, GROSS!” He drew his hand away from Ford’s boxers and wiped it on the sleeping bag. “That’s disgusting. I’m not reproducing with you, go make your own gross human babies.”

“It doesn’t always have to be for reproduction.” Ford said, having to talk loudly to speak over Bill’s immediate disgust. “It’s a response to an influx of physical pleasure, or arousal. It’s like the plateau of stimulation of certain erogenous zones. It’s actually quite pleasurable, and it’s perfectly natural.”

“It doesn’t look pleasurable, it looks damp and sticky.” Bill noted, still somewhat disgusted at the
thought of anything related to reproduction.

“Well, that’s just the aftermath.” Ford explained. “The actual event is the pleasurable part.”

Bill watched Stanford with narrowed suspicious eyes, like he wasn’t quite buying what he was selling.

Ford sighed, exasperated, before he smiled deviously. “I’ll just have to show you sometime.”

Bill still looked suspicious, but seemed to be calming down from his instinctual reaction, perhaps taking Ford at his word.

“Fine, but no babies.”

“Two men can’t produce babies anyway.” Ford chuckled, before sitting up, wincing at the wetness in his boxers. Moving to stand, Ford hobbled out of the tent, grabbing a fresh pair of boxers from his pack. “I’m just going to clean up, I’ll be back.”

Bill nodded and rearranged the pillows in the tent like a nest, so he’d be comfortable.

Ford walked outside, intending to strip down and wash with some water from his canteen, but stopped short upon seeing the towering pillar of flame stretching up into the sky.

It must have been twenty stories tall, thick and sustained white-hot flame, shooting skyward, looking like some sort of apocalyptic harbinger of doom and destruction. It was astonishing and terrifying. It was what his muse could do after the rejuvenating power of a few kisses and a bit of a tumble.

Ford wasn’t sure whether he should be amazed or horrified. The flame was sustained, it wasn’t dimming. This was what happened when his muse burnt off the steam that was garnered during their little physical interludes. It was disturbing. No wonder Bill was burning up all the time, if this is what his form could contain.

Feeling like he was performing some sort of sacrilege, stripping out of his boxers and washing himself with a napkin, before pulling his fresh boxers on, Ford stared at the flame’s consistent peak, and pondered the gravitas of his actions.

Returning back to the tent,balling his soiled boxers up and shoving them in the bottom of his bag, he saw Bill already curled up in the pile of pillows, looking sleepy and innocent. The incongruity of the sight was staggering, knowing that that monolith of flame outside was Bill’s doing. His muse was truly the most powerful being he knew of.

Having just had his hands all over his muse, he suddenly felt a moment of estrangement, looking at this man and seeing just how utterly alien he was in essence. It was hard to reconcile the sight with the person he had come to adore. Tip of the iceberg indeed.

“You can be my eleventh pillow.” Bill murmured, beckoning Ford over. “Come here.”

Swallowing that lump of nervous actualisation in his throat, Ford complied, crawling over towards Bill, who had opened up Ford’s sleeping bag and scooched it closer to him while he was out. Slipping into the sleeping bag, Ford stared up at the ceiling of the tent while Bill nuzzled up to him, holding his arm like it was another cushion, pressing his cheek to Ford’s bicep.

Patting Ford’s arm sleepily before drifting off, Bill murmured. “Not bad Sixer, not bad.”
Ford stared up at the roof of the tent and wondered if he really knew what that word even meant.

He didn’t know any more.

Chapter End Notes

This was a fun chapter to write, lots going on. Can you tell I love sassy Fiddleford, bc I do.
Lots happening in the next chapter too, aliens and weird space milk.
I hope you all enjoyed this chapter, sorry for the wait!
You want me to leave it there, afraid of a love affair. But I think you know, that I can't let go

Waking groggily from the strangest dreams he’d ever had, Fiddleford McGucket yawned and rubbed his eyes.

It could have been the whisky (though good Tennasee whisky had never done him a wrong before) but Fiddleford’s dreams hovered on this bizarre edge of light heartedness and terror.

The images he saw were by rights, entirely traumatising – beyond horrific. Hands bending backwards when he reached for his banjo, his bones turning to jelly, his limbs disobeying him when he went to reach for his son, solidifying long enough for him to pick Tate up and throw him in the air the way he liked, but turning slack and useless when his baby came back down.

A dream like this would have horrified Fiddleford, disturbed him beyond belief, but the peculiar thing about the dream was the overlaying general mood of it. There was an elated sort of giddiness prevalent through the whole thing. Fiddleford felt this superimposed sense of happiness the entire way through. He felt like his heart would burst from happiness when his limbs turned slack, he had giddy butterflies in his stomach when he reached for his son with those useless arms, he felt laughter bubble inside of him when he threw Tate in the air, and he felt his expression form this forced rictus grin of absolute euphoria when he saw his son tumbling back down to earth, Fiddleford utterly helpless to catch his precious child.

It was only when he woke up that the dream disturbed him, and that creeping feeling in the back of his brain, that feeling of horror and doubt, made itself known. Though the nature of doubt leads to second guessing, so when Fiddleford woke up, he had no idea why he’d be disturbed when the fading essence of the dream he just endured could only be described as a happy one. When second guessing such a disturbing influence, humanity’s best defence to fall back on was to shrug it off and pretend the whole disturbing occurrence never happened.

So Fiddleford did, in that split second between waking and rubbing his eyes.

He chose to forget.

Casting his gaze around the tent, F looked over to see if Stanford was up yet, and was met with another incongruously disturbing sight that caused him to double take.

Rugged up in an odd sort of nest of pillows and sleeping bags, Stanford was fast asleep, entwined with his assistant, who had draped his limbs all over Ford like a squid. They both appeared to be quite content, cuddling up with each other, one of Ford’s arms curled up over Bill’s head, while the darker man had his cheek squashed up against Stanford’s pectoral, drooling slightly in his sleep, his arms wrapped possessively around Ford’s torso.

The sleeping bags were crumpled into odd positions, one of Stanford’s legs sticking out the side of his sleeping bag. Both men seemed to be in various states of undress. Stanford was in his boxers with his shirt rucked up under his armpits, showcasing peeks through the blanket of vivid red scratch marks trailing down his torso and along his thighs.

That would have been disturbing enough for Fiddleford, the very obvious sight of his friend
rumpled by the remnants of some very hardcore affection – bringing to light something that no roommate wanted to be tacitly aware of – your best friend’s sex life.

Not that Fiddleford had any problem with homosexuals, or homosexuality. He just hadn’t seen such obvious evidence of the sexual aspect of it before, and he was trying not to judge. Ford looked like he had a garden of flourishing hickeys blooming on his neck.

What was even more peculiar than the fact that Stanford Pines was sexually active, was the sight of his assistant with no shirt on.

Bill’s physique was damnably perfect, that wasn’t the issue here. The issue was the elaborate network of strange golden tattoos spanning across Bill’s entire body.

Bill had always worn a long sleeved shirt around Fiddleford, and now he knew why. Looping up both of Bill’s arms were rows of what looked like bricks inked onto his dark skin with some kind of golden ink that Fiddleford had never encountered before.

There were plenty of folks with tattoos in Palo Alto, it was California after all, but he’d never seen any sort of skin pigmentary this vibrant shade of gold. It was almost iridescent, the metallic lines standing out starkly against Bill’s melanin rich skin. The brickwork design wasn’t all of it either. Etched onto Bill’s back was a circle of peculiar symbols and glyphs, triangles tessellating and intersecting in the centre of the circle. Runes like the ones in Stanford’s notebooks stood out, one on each of Bill’s wrists and another at the base of his spine. Fiddleford couldn’t see Bill’s front, given how he was pressed up snug against Stanford, but the designs seemed to continue there too.

Fiddleford hadn’t taken Bill for a tattoo man, as tattoos meant enduring a great deal of pain, and Bill could barely endure commercial breaks on the television. The fact that the unbelievably fussy man had full body inkwork was strange indeed. The designs looked like the kind of mystical malarkey that Stanford enjoyed studying, so Fiddleford supposed he found yet another link as to why the two men would be drawn to each other.

If Bill hadn’t denied that he was some kind of alien, these tattoos would cause F to question Bill’s relative humanity, seeing these bizarre golden crop circles on his skin.

It sure was weird.

No wonder Bill always wore long sleeved shirts. If anything would draw suspicion or negative attention from the locals of a small town it would be those intricate golden tattoos. F knew small town folk were often small minded, and he was trying not to be small minded about this.

But Bill was shirtless and draped all over F’s best friend. It was hard to keep an open mind about that sort of business so early in the morning.

He rather preferred the thought of Stanford as the standoffish nerd he’d been throughout college, preferring learning to romantic encounters with the girls in their class. Maybe the girls were the factor, Fiddleford thought, considering Ford’s behaviour, but no – Ford made no sorts of romantic overtures to any other men – at least not that Fiddleford had seen. Perhaps the learning was the factor, he did say he thought Bill was very bright. But that couldn’t be it either. Ford loved studying Tesla, but F had never seen him look at the framed picture he kept on his desk the way he looked at Bill. Thank goodness for that.

Mulling over the potential explanations for Ford’s bizarre attraction to his assistant was giving F a throbbing headache. Considering how he was supposed to act around Ford after this only intensified the headache. Should he say anything? Should he say nothing? Should he pretend he
didn’t know? If only Patricia were here, she’d know what to say.

Should he say anything to Bill, as Stanford’s friend? Should he ask the other man about his intentions with his friend? Have a few stern words with him about respecting Stanford’s feelings? Ask if they were using protection? Give him the talk?

No, that was crossing a line Fiddleford didn’t want to cross.

Scratching his stubble and attempting to tear his eyes away from his two sleeping colleagues, Fiddleford decided he’d venture outside camp to shave in the stream down by the trail. Anything was better than staying in this tent and mulling over when exactly Ford and Bill would have had the chance to do the sort of fornication those marks implied. Fiddleford never thought of himself as a heavy sleeper, but he must have been last night, to have missed that sort of salacious business.

Ugh, what a thought. He wished he hadn’t seen those marks. He wished he hadn’t seen anything.

Shuddering, and shaking the feeling of bystander violation off, Fiddleford grabbed his shaving mirror from his pack crawled out of the tent, leaving the two men to sleep in.

The birds were chirping and sunlight was creeping up over the horizon.

It was too nice a day to dwell on what he’d seen.

Pushing it out of his mind, F grabbed a few essentials and meandered on down to the stream.

Birdsong signalled the morning with all the unwelcome pitch and intensity of shattering glass, and Ford’s head felt incredibly fuzzy as he blinked into awareness slowly. Fiddleford’s favourite Tennessee whisky, while fun to imbibe at the time, should probably have been paired with water, as Ford woke up feeling overheated and groggy.

Turning over in his sleeping bag, Ford realised the reason he felt overheated was because he was conveniently wrapped in the arms of the fiery little God who slept beside him. Bill was like an incredibly affectionate limpet in his sleep, clinging onto Stanford, his hold tightening whenever Ford attempted to pull away.

Even in his sleep Bill was stubborn.

Ford tried to sit up, wanting to go get some water for his parched throat, attempting to gently prise himself away from Bill without waking him, but every time he tried to pull Bill’s arms back, the muse only tightened his hold.

Ford tried wriggling out of Bill’s grasp. He tried to substitute his mass with a pillow, but that didn’t work. He tried to push Bill’s face away, but Bill began nibbling Ford’s hand in his sleep.

Despairing of his muse, Ford started to wonder if Bill was even still asleep, or if he was just messing with him at this point, but Bill’s eyes wouldn’t open. Stubbornly he slept on, his breathing even and contented, leaving Ford with no choice but to wait until Bill woke, since escape didn’t seem to be an option.

Looking around the tent, Ford noticed Fiddleford was gone. That was an awkward encounter Ford
was glad to have avoided. He still wasn’t sure how he was going to look F in the eye after last night. Whether or not F slept through it was irrelevant, Ford still felt uneasy about how they’d been intimate in the same space as Fiddleford while he slept. Perhaps F wouldn’t have noticed?

He was also feeling uneasy about how he’d allowed Bill to tamper with F’s mind. Thinking back on the sight of Bill shoving one of his mysterious bubbles into F’s forehead, the pink sphere sinking through his skin, only compounded Ford’s guilt about it all.

He’d allowed that. He hadn’t said no. All because he wanted to continue kissing his muse.

Well… they did more than just kiss.

A blush cresting Ford’s cheeks, he hazarded another glance down at his sleeping muse.

A lot more than just kissing.

Ford had wanted to do that, or something along those lines, with Bill for a long, long time. He’d been dreaming about it relentlessly, and he was still coming to terms with the fact that after so much longing, it had finally happened. Even if it didn’t go exactly as Ford had envisioned.

Bill had very emphatically enjoyed their conduct last night, if the sight of that campfire was anything to go by, but still Stanford puzzled over Bill’s physical reactions. It was impossible to predict how Bill would react to actions that would garner a somewhat predictable reaction from anyone else. Anyone else with a functioning sex organ.

Stanford knew he made Bill with one, sculpting his form to be quite a flattering representation of masculinity, but Bill didn’t seem to prioritise sexual gratification in their little interludes. He enjoyed pleasure and sensation, that much was clear, but it was possible Bill just didn’t know what the culmination of that sexual pleasure meant, or how to do it.

He did say he’d never spectated a human’s orgasm before, taking an almost prudish issue with the thought of such an act of voyeurism. Bill had been a creature of the mind, an intangible being of pure energy. Ford supposed Bill never had any sort of sexual motivator driving him before.

Ford didn’t know how he’d describe to Bill how to ‘do it’ as an orgasm was a rather organic and instinctual reaction. Perhaps that was the issue - instinct. Bill wasn’t human, therefore basic human instincts didn’t apply to him.

Ford almost wrote off Bill’s ability to reach that peak of physical pleasure, but second guessed himself. Bill was certainly cerebral, but he wasn’t without his own organic responses. He’d reacted instinctively enough when he bucked his hips up into Ford’s knee, grinding on him, meeting Ford’s thrusts with several of his own.

Perhaps Bill’s responses were more reliant on a cerebral trigger than a physical one? The moment he reacted to Ford was when he listened to Ford’s murmured words, intended to incite and insightfully pin Bill down with his regard. Maybe literally pinning him down did something for the muse as well. As a cosmic sentience unfettered by the limitations of the flesh, being physically subdued like that would be somewhat of a novelty.

Bill certainly seemed to like that.

Ford’s categorical list of Bill’s melting points and boiling points was expanding, and after seeing the towering pillar of flame burning like rocket fuel on take-off, Ford pondered an addendum to the list.
Incineration.

Unless Ford wanted to resign himself of a future of romantic interludes in the middle of the forest, far away from habitable areas and flammable items, he really needed to work on finding another solution for Bill’s energy problem. He had thought that unbinding that last brick would have done something there, but Bill seemed more sensitive to Ford’s affection now, if that was even possible given how sensitive he was to it before. Bill was able to tell when Stanford was simply thinking about him and his eyes would glow with power. Ford noticed how instantaneously his affection reinvigorated Bill now. It didn’t take much.

Ford took a moment to ponder on Bill’s self-control. Perhaps unbinding the bricks did have an impact, at least on Bill’s ability to control himself and his temperature. Ford had his hands all over Bill and hadn’t been burnt last night. Granted, Bill had an outlet for his surplus of power, but still, Ford hadn’t felt the consequences of a single moment of distraction. Either the last brick unbound some of his muse’s magical restraint, or Bill’s mind was naturally gifted at some advanced multitasking.

And wasn’t that an appealing thought. His muse never ceased to amaze him.

The more Ford stared at Bill’s sleeping face, pondering over the constitution and pleasure of the first person he’d shown consistent enough interest in to be physically intimate with, the more his mind began ticking away, figuring out potential solutions that would enable him to experience more of Bill’s reactions and his body.

If he did this would Bill grind against him like that. If he tried this would Bill spit out his overwhelmed pleasure in that peculiar alien language of his like that. If he did this would Bill deliver his frantic kisses all over Stanford’s neck, biting down when pleasure spiked through him like that.

Speculation led Ford’s thoughts down the rather amorous track of what would it take to bring Bill to orgasm, to wring that reaction out of him?

Dragging his eyes up and down Bill’s body, charting out a potential method to follow for his latest and most enticing experiment, Ford finally saw Bill begin to wake, blinking open those catlike eyes of his and staring directly at him.

“You think too loud.”

“You can hear what I’m thinking?” Ford hoped not.

“No, but I don’t need to. It’s written all over your face,” Bill stretched, finally releasing Ford from his Kraken-like grip, arching his back, before relaxing back onto the pillows. “It’s a real page turner.”

“I’m sure.” Ford sat up, and watched Bill some more.

He had just spent the night sharing his body with this being, something he had no experience with before, and he wondered how other people did it. It was a dynamic changer for most people. A different set of rules applied afterwards. Ford supposed he’d have to be more romantic, to show Bill he was serious in his affections, so he leant down intending to kiss him.

“Good morning.” Ford murmured as he leaned forward, only to get a hand slapping into the front of his face for his trouble.

“Ugh. Stop. What are you trying to do, kill me?” Bill complained, and pushed Stanford’s face
away. “As if I wasn’t burning up before, thanks to your early morning introspection. Spontaneous combustion died out in the 1900’s, you know. No thank you.”

“And a good morning to you too.” Ford mumbled, his voice muffled by Bill’s hand.

“Oh, where are my manners?” Bill rolled his eyes, oozing sarcasm. “A convivial spin of the axis of this dull planet right back at you. Are you going to make bedroom eyes at me all day, or are you going to make me breakfast anytime soon? Breakfast eyes! That’s what I wanna see.”

“Well didn’t you just wake up delightful?” Ford grumbled, sitting up, swatting Bill’s hand away from his face, less than impressed.

“I’m always delightful.” Bill said promptly, shutting his eyes and crossing his arms.

Ford huffed out a long suffering sigh, mostly for appearances (he did find Bill’s eccentric behaviour delightful) before he turned and rummaged through his pack, looking for the food he’d prepared for day two of their hike.

Blinking one eye open, Bill regarded Sixer’s back, watching him dig through the pack for food obediently, providing for Bill.

Bill knew last night was a significant moment for the scientist. While he didn’t exactly poke into that sort of thing on the regular, he knew there was a more significant ritual of commitment than the lip pressing ritual for humans, (though it didn’t always hold such meaning) and judging from the power boost Sixer delivered when he made that wet mess in his boxers, the ritual had happened last night, and had meant a lot to Ford.

He didn’t know what to think about it.

He was on the fence, so to speak. Humanity’s inane in-built drive to reproduce through fornication was one of the more disgusting things about their species, but Bill hadn’t expected to get so much pleasure from partaking in their little tumble.

He spent the night’s rest seeking out Pyronica, asking her question after question about the power boost she got from her human, and if he ever gave her any of this wet boxer nonsense that Sixer was providing.

“Oh yeah, all the time.” Pyronica nodded, before she began listing on her fingers. “Always of a night time, or when his grandma is out of the house, always when he’s in the shower, when he’s sitting in his computer chair, when he’s hiding under the blankets in his bed.”

“Doesn’t he have anything better to do? A social life? Hobbies? Crosswords???” Bill spluttered, wary at the prospect of Sixer having a similar human libido. With his bricks still bound like this, Bill was certain he’d combust. He couldn’t deal with that much energy.

“Nope.” Pyronica said bluntly, popping the ‘p’ emphatically. “He just pulls my picture up like a shrine and plays out his little fantasies.”

“Unbelievable.” Bill said, aghast at the thought of such rigorous overstimulation. “Wouldn’t you burn up? Isn’t that too much?”

“No such as too much.” She grinned at Bill. “If I couldn’t stand the heat I wouldn’t be in the kitchen. And the bathroom. And the laundry room. Sometimes he does it in his grandma’s knitting room.”
“Disgusting. Humans are disgusting.” Bill said, mortified but vaguely impressed and curious despite himself.

“So I take it this means Sixer’s –” Pyronica began, fixing Bill with a sly smile.

“No! This means nothing!” Bill squawked indignantly, his bricks turning peachier by the second.

“Ooooooooooooooooooooh!” Pyronica did a little dance on the spot, grinning wide. “I knew, I knew, I knew that he –!”

“No!”

“And that you –?”

“NO!”

“So then did you –?”

“NO!!!!” Bill cut Pyronica’s gleeful questioning off, stretching his size out tall, fire burning in his hands, booming his voice out with finality. The intimidating effect of it all was lost to the fact that Bill’s bricks were still glowing a vibrant rosy tone.

Pyronica cackled.

“But I told you, didn’t I? Keeps the flame burning hot. You’re molten lava right now, and it suits yoxxxxxxxxxou.”

Bill shrunk his size back down, considering Pyronica’s cooed flattery suspiciously. “Molten lava? Really?”

“I can practically feel the power coming off you, it’s like being irradiated. Sixer must have been pretty good to have you glowing like that.” Py grinned cheekily. “You don’t have to be shy about this around me. I know what it’s like. Besides, Sixer’s not too bad to look at. You must be cheering. With power like that.”

“I –“ Bill considered that, and extinguished the flames dancing in his hands, beginning to come around to the fact that what happened wasn’t entirely shameful if Pyronica could appreciate it. “I’m not complaining, if that’s what you mean.”

“You’re lucky that you’re tangible too.” Py nodded. “In terms of potency, the fact that there’s physical contact in your cute little fling with Sixer means that you’ll burn brighter for longerrrrrrrr.”

“Hrmnn.” Bill rubbed under his eye, considering the benefits now that Py had laid them out so neatly. He did feel alarmingly powerful.

Pyronica was inching closer to him, wiggling her shoulders with barely repressed excitement. When she bumped her elbow with Bill’s hypotenuse, she batted her long lashes at him and asked.

“Soxxxxxxxxx… how was it?”

Bill glared at her for a second, almost insulted by her excitable prying. But then again, this was Pyronica, and if he couldn’t talk about this to her, he couldn’t talk about this to anyone. He definitely couldn’t talk about this to anyone. Not if he wanted to preserve his reputation. But even so, he kind of really wanted to tell someone, just to sort out the whole situation in his head. Also maybe to brag.
“It was… good. Strange. Very fleshy, kind of hot, a bit sticky. Kind of a blur, actually.”

Pyronica whistled, an impressed note of indulgence.

“And how did it feel, being physical? Physical sensation and all that?”

“Again, hot, fleshy.” Bill tapped his bricks idly, recalling the act. “A bit overwhelming. I thought Sixer had grown more hands than he was built with. Skin pressed against skin, friction occurred, there were lots of kisses, some pleasant conversation. On the whole it wasn’t a terrible way to kill time.”

Bill conveniently forgot to mention to Py the moment when Ford held him down. Something still felt seditious about that, admitting that Sixer had the gall to do it, and worse, that Bill had liked it. That he allowed the insubordination inherent in that. He’d take one hell of a hit to his rep if that got out. Not that he thought Pyronica would spill any of the details, that was more Kryptos’ speed.

Pyronica wriggled her shoulders again. “Mmmm. And how did it happen?”

“What do you mean?” Bill asked.

“Like, what set him off? What did you do to him? Did he scream?”

“Uhhhh.” Bill tapped under his eye again, his voice pitching high for a moment, not sure whether he should continue this incriminating line of questioning.

Sixer wasn’t the noisy one, Bill was, warbling his pleasure in a cacophony of languages. Sixer mostly just gasped, or grunted, occasionally moaning quietly. It was his expressions that gave away his pleasure, and the way his eyes burned into Bill, worshipping him intently, fogging up his glasses.

“Well, you see… um-“

Pyronica blinked her big eye at Bill, eager for details.

“There may have been some noises. I mean, it all happened so fast.”

“Yeah, it can be fast. At least with my human hahah. So, was it good?” Py smiled wider, keen to know. “I don’t mean the power, I mean the sensation. Was it good?”

“Ahhhh…” Bill had to think about that one.

It always felt good when Sixer put his hands on him, but Bill couldn’t really separate the feeling of the sensation from the feeling of surging with power incandescently. The only time he’d managed was when he used the apparatus to drain away that surging power, and it felt good at the time. His interlude in the tent with Ford felt pretty heated, but that had become the norm whenever his kisses with the scientist became more physical. He’d liked it, a lot, he just was second guessing himself now.

Bill liked sensation and pleasure, though the moment he found out he’d participated in a reproductive process, he felt mildly disgusted with himself. Still, Ford said it wasn’t always used for reproduction, and apparently there was no threat of infants falling from wombs or the sky or stork’s jagged mouths. It was something new to learn, and Bill hadn’t quite learned all there was to know about it yet.

“I guess???” Bill answered, still on the fence about it as an experience. He loved the power rush,
but didn’t like the sticky wetness. It wasn’t unbearable, but it wasn’t perfect either.

“Okay, okay. I can tell you’re uncomfortable with this whole thing. I won’t press. Can I just ask one more question? One more, and then I’m done.” Py promised, beseeching Bill with her big pink eye.

“Fine.” Bill conceded.

Pyronica bit her lip, excitement bubbling up in her, before she leant forward and whispered.

“Was it big?”

Bill squinted at Py for a solid minute, confusion colouring his features, until Pyronica fell over, her legs kicking in the air as she laughed herself silly.

Huffing and crossing his little arms, Bill finally had enough of being laughed at and teleported away, back to the safety of Sixer’s mindscape.

Some help she’d been.

Watching Sixer pull granola bars and rice-krispie squares out of his backpack, Bill assessed the evidence left on Ford’s body of their interlude last night.

Sixer was marked, blotchy bruises flourishing under his thin human skin, the displaced blood making Sixer’s neck and shoulder purple in small mouth sized patches. He had nail marks scored along his thighs and chest, damaging his skin, but looking quite fetching for all the carnage. It wasn’t any sort of traditional mark a God might bestow his followers with, but it wasn’t a bad look. The more his eyes raked over the red marks dotted along Ford’s form, the more satisfied a possessive coiling little part of Bill’s psyche became.

There were upsides to being physical. Bill was cataloguing them now, trying to compile a dossier of justifications to continue with this. Up top on the list was how satisfying it was to mark Sixer as his.

“Have you considered the downsides to hiking in a turtleneck?” Bill asked Ford, still raking his eyes along the hickeys marking Ford’s neck.

“Well, it is getting chilly, and I don’t see why everyone’s so opposed to …” Ford began, but trailed his words off mid-sentence when he noticed where Bill was looking. Was there something on his neck?

Ford’s hand flew up to cover it, and he frowned, before digging through his pack for his shaving mirror, pulling it out to examine the marks along his neck and shoulders with a scandalised gasp.

“Bill!” He gawked at the colourful hickeys sprawling down his neck and shoulders. Turning his head this way and that to see the extent of the damage properly in his little mirror, he blanched. There was no way of covering up what they’d done now. “When did – what if someone sees?? I –”

Ford began frantically digging through his pack to find his turtleneck now, keen to disguise the evidence of their late-night coupling. The instant he had it in his hand, pulling it out of his pack, it vanished, and he looked up to see Bill holding it in his hand.

“I think it’s a good look for you, if you like burst blood vessels and thin skin.” Holding the sweater just out of reach, as Ford attempted to lunge for it, Bill continued smugly. “The weather could be much more temperate today, you probably won’t need it.”
“Give it back Bill!” Ford clambered on top of his muse, trying to wrestle his sweater back from him, while Bill just kept holding it higher, trying to keep it away from Ford, before eventually levitating it to the top of the tent. “Stop!”

“I’m just giving some friendly advice Sixer.” Bill insisted, and Ford stood up, easily reaching the top of the tent. “You don’t have to be such a spoil sport.”

“I’m not –“ Ford reached to grab the sweater, before it vanished again, now no longer in the tent at all. He put his hands on his hips and looked down at Bill crossly, still standing in his boxers and sleep shirt. “I’m not walking around like this. What will McGucket think? It has… connotations, bruises like this.”

“Tell him you got them walking around in the dark.” Bill shrugged, and wiggled his fingers like a magician. “Mystery bruises.”

“You don’t get mystery bruises like this walking around in the dark. What did I do, repeatedly walk into a feral vacuum cleaner?” Ford crossed his arms. “In the forest?”

“Gravity Falls most reclusive species of forest vacuum.” Bill smiled and tented his fingers, gesturing to the tent flap. “I bet you five bucks he’ll fall for it.”

“Give me my sweater, Bill.” Ford said impatiently, raising his eyebrow at his muse.

Bill stared stubbornly at Ford for several seconds, looking at the obstinate expression the scientist wore, finding it rather fetching.

“What’ll you do for me?” Bill asked, trying his luck.

“Wouldn’t you like to know.” Ford said flatly.

Bill tapped his two pointer fingers together, considering. He looked at Ford’s stubborn expression and bit his lip, trying to look coyly appealing enough to sway the scientist.

Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill and still waited, now extending his hand out for the sweater expectantly.

Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford.

“For the love of – “ Ford sighed, frustrated, and looked away at the roof of the tent, away from those coy yellow eyes. “Why are you doing this?”

“I like the bruises.” Bill admitted bluntly.

“Of course you do.” Ford huffed, trying not to let that admission affect him. Already his neck was prickling with a creeping pink blush. “Well, I don’t. And I can’t just walk around like this willy-nilly.”

“You look good wearing my marks though.” Bill insisted, smiling sweetly, trying to endear Ford to the fact.

“I look like some tawdry rough and tumble turnout. It’s not - I don’t – it’s not professional to –“ Ford began his protests, trying to explain to Bill why walking around broadcasting your hickeys was not a good look. “I have bruises everywhere!”

“And that’s your issue?” Bill scoffed. “You didn’t have an issue last night.”
The blush on Ford’s neck intensified. He thought they’d successfully avoided speaking of last night. It certainly seemed like Bill wasn’t going to bring it up, like nothing had changed, but apparently that change couldn’t be avoided.


“It doesn’t have to be a bruise.” Bill suggested slyly, still poking his pointer fingers together like a demure schoolgirl. “Just wear my mark, somewhere on you.”

Ford stared at Bill, trying to understand what had Bill so adamant about this. Was this some sort of interdimensional equivalent of going steady? Maybe this was the change to be expected. Like wearing a class ring, or one of the other ridiculous rituals they did back in high school to prove the veracity of a romantic relationship.

Or maybe it was like the marking of chattel, branding slaves. He did hope he’d get Bill off his enforced slavery tract, but you could never tell with the muse. Ford wasn’t sure what to think about it, but he definitely didn’t want to walk around wearing hickeys like a fashion statement.

“I don’t want to walk around with hickeys all over me.” Ford reproached Bill.

“I can heal those. What about a tattoo?” Bill asked, thinking a tattoo would suit Ford nicely. “You’ve given me plenty of tattoos.”

“A tattoo is more permanent than a bruise.” Ford gave Bill a sideways look.

“Are you saying that this isn’t permanent?” Bill asked Ford sharply, now glaring up at him with those slitted yellow eyes.

“I–” Ford was surprised by how sharply Bill’s expression changed, his muse looking potentially devastating in an instant, a warning of wrath colouring his features. A switch had been flipped, it seemed.

Ford had never encountered it personally himself before, but Stanley was always full of stories about the girls in his high school holding out on the sort of conduct Bill and Ford had dabbled with last night, seeking some sort of commitment before making the plunge. Stanley saw it as an inconvenience or a scam, entering such a permanent commitment, like marriage or some sort of equivalent just to take a girl down behind the boardwalk for a few weeks of fun.

Ford was the one who had woken up this morning, feeling the impetus to prove his commitment to a romantic relationship by proceeding with the sort of overtures he’d seen on television. Morning kisses and the like. He had summoned Bill into this body in the first place intending to have the muse by his side for a long time, ideally the span of his natural life, eeking out enlightenment from the muse every step of the way. A romantic relationship would have been nice, it was part of Ford’s initial idea, but it wasn’t everything, or entirely necessary in the first place for Ford’s plan to become the Man Who Saved the World.

From how flippant Bill acted this morning, Ford assumed that sort of commitment following more intimate conduct was explicitly a human thing, but apparently not. He wasn’t sure for how long Bill had expected that kind of permanent devotion from him, but with his muse looking so tempestuous, like he was two seconds away from setting fire to the tent in a fit of rage, Ford wasn’t about to tell him no.

“Well, my intentions are – let’s just say I didn’t do this lightly.” Ford said, gesturing between the two of them. “I’ve thought about this for quite some time.”
“And?” Bill pressed, still glaring up at Ford.

Wasn’t it too early in the morning to make confessions like this? Ford felt put on the spot, fumbling with his words. He almost felt like it was a little too soon to put words to what they were becoming but he seemed to have limited time to make his mind up before Bill began his incendiary rage.

“And, well, I’m certainly co-“

“If I find out you did that on me, and plan to just discard me now I will gut out these protection runes, string you up by your entrails, and go find another scientist to bother so help me Stanford Filbrick Pines.” Bill spat out venomously through gritted teeth, his hands clenching furiously at the thought that Ford’s flopping about on top of him last night meant nothing.

It was supposed to mean everything to humans, or at least humans like Ford, which is why the disgusting ritual was somewhat passable. It was commitment and loyalty and proof of dedication to one another ideally, and Bill would not be taken for granted like that, he would not allow himself to be used and then discarded EVER. He felt awash with white hot betrayal at the very thought that Sixer would double cross him like that, and already he was shaking with the intensity of this sudden emotion.

“Bill, no – I –“ Ford stumbled over his words, somewhat taken aback at his muse’s sudden fury. What he had hoped would have been a more thought out confession now became a hasty declaration to mitigate Bill’s rage. He crouched down again, and put his hands on Bill’s shoulders, rubbing his arms, watching the way his muse flinched away from his hands, knowing he had very little time to repair the part of Bill that was already breaking away from him.

“I’m serious! About us. I’m committed. I didn’t do that lightly – I –“

Bill stopped shaking at least, and was now looking at Ford like he was shocked, or surprised. Almost like he didn’t expect Ford to admit his dedication to their relationship, or like he’d never heard this before.

“I lo-“

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

A startled scream rent through the forest, jarring birds from their perch in the trees. It sounded like Fiddleford screaming.

Both men looked to the tent flap, then back at each other.

“We’ll talk about this later.” Bill decided, and snapped his fingers, cold flames sparking up Sixer’s body and disappearing as quickly as they came, healing the bruises with it.

Nodding, Ford darted out of the tent, racing towards the direction of the scream in his boxers, sleep shirt and socks, Bill following a few paces after him curiously, having paused to put a shirt and shoes on at least before venturing out into the wilderness.

Sprinting down to the stream like some sort of scantily clad action hero, Ford ran into the clearing only to see Fiddleford standing warily, holding his banjo up like a weapon.

“What is it?” Ford rushed to ask, looking around the forest for the cause of alarm.

“I was shavin’ in the creek, and I saw somethin’. Standing behind me! Behind my reflection!”
Fiddleford still held his banjo high like a bat, clearly still jittery from the whole ordeal.

“What did it look like?” Ford questioned, scouring the clearing with his eyes, looking for a trace of the creature that frightened Fiddleford so soundly.

“Tall, like a shadow.” Fiddleford detailed, looking warily into the trees himself. “When I turned around to hit it with my banjo it was gone!”

“It must move quickly.” Ford began to pace around the edge of the clearing, peering through the trees. “A shadow creature you say? That sounds familiar, I just don’t quite recall –”

Ford felt a hard tapping on the back of his neck, and his shoulders seized up, before he had the thought that this might be a prank.

“Bill that isn’t funny.”

“What isn’t funny?” Bill asked, walking out from the trail on the other side of the clearing, having lagged behind Ford’s swift pace.

The hairs on the back of Ford’s neck stood on end and his eyes widened in shock as he felt the phantom brush of a finger tracing over the knobbles of his spine. He whipped around in a panic to look for the creature responsible, but when he turned his gaze towards the forest behind him, nothing was there.

“But, I felt …”

An eerie gust of wind blew through the clearing, leaves tumbling off the trees. Ford followed their movement with his eyes, the leaves directing him to an ancient, moss covered wooden sign, carved with a strange inscription.

IN THE CORNER OF YER EYE, A MAN APPEARS TO LEAN.
BUT WHEN YOU TURN TO MEET HIS STARE, HE’S NOWHERE TO BE SEEN.
HIDE YER LUMBER, CLUTCH YOUR AX, AND TURN YOUR LANTERNS OUT.
BEST TO WATCH YOUR BACK, MY FRIENDS, THE HIDE-BEHIND’S ABOUT.

Ford considered the sign for a moment longer, rubbing the back of his neck.

“What? What is it?” Fiddleford asked nervously.

“Well, I’ve come across a creature like this before. Absolutely rampant in local lumberjack lore. A sort of spectral being with an impeccable ability to hide in a split second.” Ford turned back to face Fiddleford, explaining. “It’s called the Hide-Behind.”

“The Hide –“ Fiddleford began, finally able to put a name to the creature that gave him such a hair raising morning, before he looked at Ford and had to double take. “Stanford, did you run on out here in your pyjamas?”

“You screamed. I thought you were in danger.” Ford protested.

Fiddleford was eyeing Ford up, perturbed by something. His eyes seemed to linger around Stanford’s thighs and neck, as if searching for something, but Ford was certain Bill’s magic had healed his skin like nothing had ever been there. Still, he self consciously rubbed the side of his neck, and stared stubbornly back at Fiddleford, daring him to say anything.

“Is there something wrong?”
“You – uh – no, no there’s nothin’ wrong.” Fiddleford blustered.

He’d had a morning of strange sights, hardly believing what he’d seen, but he would have sworn up and down that this morning he saw Stanford’s neck covered in hickeys. He didn’t know what was more concerning, the fact that the hickeys had disappeared or that he’d imagined the sight of his best friend covered in them in some sort of early morning daze. He didn’t think he was the sort of fellow to impose homosexual fantasies on his fellow man. He was married, and he didn’t consider himself prejudiced at all, but he couldn’t think of any other reason why he would make up that sort of thing, or assume it of his friend.

He cast a nervous look between Stanford, clad in his boxers, over to Bill, who was watching the dark space in the trees behind Stanford, glaring into the forest.

“I can still feel it watching us.” Ford expressed with a shudder. “Like some sort of ghost. A living shadow. A peripheral phantom.”

“Or a malnourished Peeping Tom with a fear of eye contact more like.” Bill asserted, still glaring into the forest. “Just who does it think it is, creeping up on us, playing games?”

Bill marched over to Stanford and brushed his hand over the back of Ford’s neck, smoothing his hand over the point where the Hide-Behind touched Ford.

“Is it still watching?” Ford questioned, looking into the forest where Bill was glaring.

“It’s lurking.” Bill announced, and Fiddleford clutched his banjo tighter. At least he was validated in this issue, regarding the fright he had just now. He’d deal with the fact that he seemed to be imagining things later. Hallucinating, it seemed.

“Do you still have your shaving mirror?” Ford asked F, watching his friend nod and hold the mirror out.

“We’ll walk backwards out of camp. Hold it out to check behind you.” Ford said, slowly backing up, heading back towards the trail.

CHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCHCH.

Fiddleford jumped and hurried to stand beside Ford, huddling beside him.

“We’ll just walk backwards.” Ford said quietly. “Slowly. Back to camp.”

Bill was still glaring at the dark spaces between the trees, occasionally making threatening gestures to the wilderness, but he backed up, along with Stanford and F. A piercing howl that rang out, startling birds from the trees again, and the trio walked a little faster.

Together the three of them slowly retreated, walking backwards all the way to camp. They got dressed, packed away the tent, and set off down the hidden pass quickly, walking until the hairs on the back of Ford’s neck finally laid back down.

Ford couldn’t shake the feeling that they were being watched, though all things considered, he should have been used to that by now.
The walk out of the forest was mostly silent compared to the chatter filled hike they’d shared the other day. This leg of the hike was very quiet, idle superficial chatter cropping up here and there at Fiddleford’s behest.

At least Bill had stopped harassing F with flyaway unscientific comments, Fiddleford had thought. F almost missed the wild declarations. Though now he didn’t seem to have many flyaway comments at all.

Not even to Ford.

Every time the two of them opened their mouths to speak to one another the words seemed to die on their tongues.

It was harder to tell on Bill’s dark skin, but F could have sworn he saw twin blushes creep across both Ford and Bill’s cheeks on those stilted conversational occasions.

Maybe he had imagined the hiccups and bruises dotted along Ford’s neck, but he was certain he wasn’t imagining the tension brewing between those two. That tension hadn’t been there the day before, so something must have happened overnight to change their dynamic, and Fiddleford was half hoping that what he imagined was real, just to be able to justify this strange behaviour. Also to validate his own heterosexuality, because he’d have to ask himself some long hard questions if that was the sort of thing he was dreaming up. He also wished that what he had seen in the morning was simply a stagnant daydream, because knowing that his best friend had been making romantic overtures with his assistant in the same tent as him while he was sleeping wasn’t a pleasant thought.

Rather than dwell on either possibility, F tried to spring up conversation yet again.

“Got much further to go?”

Ford stared at the compass in his hand, watching the point oscillate wildly. He’d been staring at the compass for the past half hour. He didn’t want to look up.

He didn’t need to to know that Bill’s gaze was boring holes in the back of his head. He thought it was bad being watched before in the forest, this was ten times worse.

Internally Ford vacillated between berating himself for almost hastily confessing his feelings for Bill back there in the tent, and berating himself for not saying anything, potentially missing his chance. He didn’t know if his words reassured Bill at all that their tryst in the tent held meaning for him, or if his muse was still stewing on the thought that Stanford had used him, that he thought so little of him.

He didn’t. Ford’s opinion of Bill couldn’t be higher, and he had no intentions of leaving Bill now, of ‘discarding him’ as Bill put it. Not now that he had finally broached the prospect of further physical intimacy with him. Ford didn’t consider that kind of thing to be dirty or scandalous, as he was sure others would, knowing how the people in this town gossiped.

Two people, sharing their bodies with one another, knowing pleasure and intimacy together – there was nothing shameful about that. It was perfectly natural. Ford may not have experienced anything like it before, but it was still perfectly natural.

Ford wasn’t bothered by the fact they were both men either, he thought it made it easier. Easier knowing what tools he was working with, than trying to figure out the mysteries of the female sex. He knew exactly what he had built Bill with, and how to use it from personal experience with his
Ford’s forehead crinkled with frustration. All of this Byronesque planning was all well and good hypothetically, but Ford didn’t even know if Bill would let him touch him again, let alone go looking through his toolbox.

Had he screwed this up eternally? Did he really put his foot in this so badly? It had barely even been twelve hours since they did it and through the virtue of his own stumbling tongue he may have driven his muse away for good.

Bill was hardly talking to him anymore. Whenever Ford looked up, Bill hastily looked away from him, but Ford could tell the muse had been watching him, drilling holes into the back of his head with those focused yellow eyes.

He wanted to broach conversation with Bill, to talk about what they were saying before they were interrupted by the sound of screaming (which was more common in Gravity Falls than you’d think) he just didn’t know how to start.

There was also the fact that Fiddleford was hiking with him, and was right within earshot. Ford still felt guilty about putting F to sleep so he could be intimate with Bill, but so far his friend hadn’t brought it up at all. Ford noticed how F’s eyes had boggled down by the creek, looking at Ford’s neck like that. That confirmed for Ford that F had noticed the hickeys and marks earlier in the tent, and that he’d noticed that they’d vanished mysteriously. Ford didn’t know what was worse, telling F about what had happened, or letting F believe that he was just imagining things, allowing him to labour under the illusion that nothing had happened last night.

Staying silent was certainly easier. Ford had already messed up one crucial conversation, he wasn’t ready for a hat trick, though knowing him and how he tended to blunder though social delicacies, that was exactly how the day would turn out.

Stupid.

“Ah, Stanford?” Fiddleford was watching Ford, waiting for him to reply while he’d been caught up in his own head.

Ford blinked up at F, trying to remember what he’d asked him. “How far? Ah, not that long to go now. The compass is spinning quite substantially, and we’re nearing the fields beside the entry site. Shouldn’t be too long.”

F looked between Ford and Bill, watching how they were both stubbornly looking away from one another, though F had noticed how Bill’s head seemed to turn when Stanford spoke up. This awkwardness between them was excruciating. Fiddleford never thought of himself as much of a matchmaker, but diffusing this tension was for the good of everyone. If he had to walk another silent mile, he’d scream.

“Have you been here before Bill? To the crash site?” Fiddleford asked, trying to prompt conversation again.

Bill looked up, seeming a little distant himself, before he glanced sideways at Ford, and answered ambiguously. “Wouldn’t you like to know.”

“Generally, askin’ questions means about that much.” Fiddleford joked, though his humour was met with Bill’s flat stare. “What’s it like on the inside?”
“You’ll find out yourself soon enough.” Bill responded, sending another measuring glance Stanford’s way, though the scientist had yet to look up from his compass, keeping his head ducked down, hiding the colour flushing his neck as he walked. “Shouldn’t be too long.”

“But you’ve been here before. What was your impression?” F pressed, wanting to drag some conversation out of the assistant. “What was the vibe you got from the place? What kind of feel did you get for it?”

“Not much of a feel if I’m being honest.” Bill replied, though he wasn’t talking about the spaceship. “I wouldn’t mind another one.”

“Another trip to the spaceship?” Fiddleford clarified, confused.

“Sure, why not.” Bill answered, somehow sounding insincere.

“You didn’t seem to think much of it last time.” Ford spoke up finally, not looking back, refusing to give into his desire to watch Bill’s expressive features tell him what was being left unsaid.

“You don’t know what I think.” Bill said cryptically. “I’d never seen one before, what was I supposed to think?”

Now Ford knew Bill definitely wasn’t talking about the spaceship, but Fiddleford didn’t know that.

“And what do you think now?” Ford asked. He had to ask, and if this cryptic coded conversation was the only way he’d get to open the topic with Bill in front of Fiddleford, he’d take it.

“It’s not so bad.” Bill replied, subtly responding to Ford. “Cute even. If a little overwhelming. I’m open minded enough that I can give it a second chance.”

“Hmm.” Ford hummed, his heart suddenly feeling a lot lighter. “That’s appreciated. Your open mindedness.” Ford realised he needed to keep the façade up for Fiddleford, so he continued. “In seeing the spaceship.”

“Mmmhmm.” Bill looked up towards the sky awkwardly, almost embarrassed by his own confession.

Fiddleford blinked, looking between them. Well that told him a fat load of nothing, though both Ford and his assistant seemed to be vaguely pleased once more, looking in opposite directions to hide burgeoning smiles. Bill stole a bottle of water from the side of Fiddleford’s pack and took a long swig, like he was parched.


Viscerally reminded of Pyronica’s earlier question, Bill spluttered drinking the water, spewing it out in the air in front of him. He ended up inhaling some of the liquid, hacking up his lungs coughing. He stopped on the trail and leant against one of the trees, trying to clear his throat.

Stanford instinctively leaned forward to help Bill before he held himself back, looking into the trees on the other side of the trail, unable to look at his assistant, that tell-tale red tinge creeping up his neck once more. If Fiddleford didn’t catch the innuendo, you could be assured Ford did.

“Sorry. I didn’t –“ Fiddleford began, looking apologetically at Bill who was wiping his mouth, looking quite frazzled.
“Surprised me.” Bill managed to say once he was done drinking water wrong. “I’m fine.”

“You’re sure?” F had to clarify.

“Fine. Keep walking.” Bill waved F ahead, still leaning against the tree, catching his breath back.

“Go.”

Hesitantly continuing on, F walked ahead up the trail, Ford at his side until they crested over the top of the hill, coming out of the forest into the fields. Ford turned back and couldn’t see Bill following them, so he stopped on the hilltop, deliberating whether he was feeling brave enough to go back there. Bill’s words before had bolstered him, made him think there was a chance this could work. Things were all rather up in the air right now. Ford had never had a ‘morning after’ moment before, and judging from Bill’s wildly vacillating reactions, he hadn’t either.

They were muddying through this together.

“I’m just going to see if he’s alright. You can continue on if you like, it’s just over that next hill, where that grazing herd is.” Ford pointed out. F seemed to consider his friend for a moment, before gazing back to the forest where Bill was waiting, then back at his friend, piecing something together in his head, his eyes widening, before he shrugged.

“Alright. Well, yell if you need me.” F insisted, pausing before meandering on over to the grazing cows. “Or don’t yell if you need me. Too loud. I’ll just .... I’ll just be over here.”

Ford gave his friend a confused look as he backed away from him wearing a strained supportive smile. Very strange.

Ford shook his head and doubled back over the hill, walking over to where Bill was, still leaning against the tree at the edge of the forest. Ford slowed his pace as he approached Bill, watching him with concern.

“Ugh.” Bill groaned, holding the water bottle up to his chest, looking rather flustered.

“Are you alri-“

“Stop looking at me like that!” Bill interrupted Ford, interrupting him sharply.

“Like what?” Ford’s reply came swiftly, boggled by Bill’s curt reply. His muse almost looked unwell, his skin seemed as flushed as Ford’s had been.

“You know what you’re doing.” Bill insisted suspiciously, narrowing his eyes at Ford.

“I can assure you, I don’t.” Ford insisted, holding his hands out in front of him, his voice tired. “I really don’t.”

Bill continued to squint at Stanford, clutching the water bottle like a wealthy woman might clutch her pearls nervously.

“You haven’t done that before then?” Bill questioned intently.

“Looked at you?” Ford blinked, confused.

“No, that.”

“Oh.”
Ford felt almost embarrassed for a second. This was the kind of thing Stanley would tease him about, his relative inexperience, but he didn’t think lying to Bill about something like this would play out well.

“No.” Ford answered honestly.

The answer seemed to reassure Bill some, and he let go of the breath he’d been holding, waiting for a response.

“Neither have I.” Bill said with a sigh.

“Da Vinci didn’t tickle your fancy then?” Ford joked, stepping closer to Bill.

“We’ve been over the point about the beards.” Bill quipped lightly and leant against the tree behind him.

Ford watched him, noticed how Bill’s shoulders began to relax. His muse seemed to be feeling more comfortable now that he was alone with Ford, and Ford was feeling much the same. The stress of keeping their conversation covert in Fiddleford’s presence had dissipated, allowing Ford to feel bold enough to ask outright.

“Am I the first?” The words tumbled out of Ford’s mouth before he realised how inappropriate they seemed. Like asking a God if they were a virgin was ever acceptable. “Human, to tickle your fancy I mean.”

“Is that what they’re calling it these days?” Bill jested, his eyes twinkling teasingly at Stanford. “Humans don’t often impress me.”

“I think you’ve made that plenty clear.” Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, amused.

“You might be.” Bill answered Ford’s question belatedly. “A first.”

“Oh.” Ford said simply, trying not to look too pleased about that little admission.

“Loathe as I am to admit it, I think you might be special.” Bill said softly, his eyes flicking to meet Stanford’s, incredibly warm and full of fondness for a second, before he looked away. “An outlier, or some sort of statistical error.”

“Is this the part where you tell me I’m not like other humans?” Ford asked teasingly, playing up the cliché.

“Let’s be real here, would you even want to be?” Bill wrinkled his nose. “Look at them, ugh, there’s not much to choose from if you’re talking personality or redeeming qualities. No offence.”

“Oh, none taken.” Ford said lightly, sarcasm creeping into his tone. “I suppose this is one of the upsides to being a ‘freak’.”

“Someday you’ll realise.” Bill tilted his head, watching Ford somewhat seriously now. “You’re better this way.”

Ford met Bill’s gaze, the struggle written in the creases in his brow. On some level it was still hard for Stanford to accept that what marked him out as a freak made him unique and special. His mother had always told him he was special, but it was one thing hearing it from your mother, another thing believing it. Ford supposed if he still didn’t believe it when a God told him, he may just be a lost cause.
“You should listen to me.” Bill insisted, before he tilted his chin up imperiously. “Clearly I know what’s best for you.”

Ford managed a crooked smile, his muse’s antics cheering him up somewhat. “So you’ve said. Many times, actually.”

“It bears repeating.” Bill sniffed, and tipped his water bottle to Ford like he was making a toast. “To me being always right!”

“I’m not toasting to that.” Ford chuckled, and put his hand on his hips as his muse tipped back the bottle and took a hearty swig. Bill wiped his mouth with his hand and exhaled happily, the water turning to steam as it hit the back of his throat, wafting out of his mouth like he was a living humidifier.

“I’ve toasted enough for both of us.”

“You’re burning up again.” Ford nodded to the steam coming out of Bill’s mouth, concern creasing his brow now. “More so than before.”

“Well, what did you expect?” Bill scoffed. “You’re the one upping the ante.”

“I thought unbinding that last brick before we set out would help sort this out, at least a little.” Ford rubbed his chin, trying to pinpoint why this wasn’t working. “I seem to have made matters worse.”

“I’m hoping this is one of those ‘things getting worse before they get better’ scenarios.” Bill replied candidly. “I love those scenarios. Just think what one more brick could do. Then I’d have a full arm free!”

“It could make you more unstable.” Ford cautioned. “We should be careful not to push too much too fast. We still don’t know what those last two bricks unlocked for you.”

“Well, since I carried your pack for you all this way without flapping my arms about like a chicken, I’d hazard a guess that that was the improvement. That counts as partially improved control, at least in this meaty flesh prison.” Bill shrugged. “As for the other brick, I don’t know yet. It’s hard to practise while playing human for your friend back there.”

“I appreciate that. Fiddleford is… delicate. He’s always been superstitious, I just don’t want to startle him.”

“Hmm.” Bill grunted, not as keen as Ford was to pander to the other scientist’s comfort levels, agreeing out of necessity. “So about this other brick –“

“I don’t think we should be unbinding any more bricks until we figure out how it’s affecting you.” Ford said resolutely. “Your forehead is sweating. I’ve never seen you sweat.”

“Maybe I do all my sweating when you’re not around.” Bill said blithely, before both he and Stanford paused, considering that mental image. Bill shook his head, mildly disgusted. “Never mind.”

The two men stood in silence for a moment, finding an odd sort of peace in this private moment together, just talking. It had a different quality than trying to have a conversation with Fiddleford around. Ford felt like a bad friend, but he almost preferred it like this, just him and Bill. It was easier.

“We didn’t finish our conversation from earlier.” Bill pointed out, and Stanford’s face turned beet
red. Suddenly it was much, much harder. Why did Bill have to bring that up? Ford felt uncannily shy. Feelings talk was always so wretched.

“Oh?” Stammering slightly, Ford felt his face heat up uncomfortably. “From earlier? No, no we didn’t.”

“No we didn’t.” Bill repeated, looking at Ford intently, his lips curving slightly when he noticed how flustered Ford looked. “I’d like to finish it.”

Bill made to step forward into Ford’s space, reaching out for Sixer, stretching up on his tip toes to bring his face close to Ford’s, then paused, pulling back.

“We have to stop.”

Stanford watched Bill closely, his heart beating fast, not knowing what was about to happen, or why Bill would pull away. It almost broke his heart, hearing those words. Bill was looking at him, almost beseeching him again, but there was a tension to Bill’s jaw. Stanford worried. Was he about to be rejected? What did they have to stop? Had he gone too far?

Bill stepped back and stretched his hand out, planting it on a thin spruce tree beside him, watching Sixer. He breathed in, then out, centring himself, before looking back up at Ford, exhaling loudly.

The bark beneath his hand blistered immediately, black char marks spreading all over the surface of the tree, from the roots all the way up to its highest branch. Bill closed his eyes while the tree hissed as the God’s condensed heat incinerated the tree from top to bottom, ashen blackness crackling throughout the wood, spitting out chunks of bark and embers. Bill drew his hand away from the tree and it stood still for a moment, swaying slightly, before it collapsed into a small pile of ash.

His muse sighed with relief, opening his eyes, before glancing up at Stanford looking decidedly healthier, and far less sweaty. “Alright, now continue.”

“What??” Ford croaked and stared at the former spruce tree, not sure whether Bill intended that display as a threat of some kind, or just a way to burn off steam. “What the devil was that?”

“That’s what you’ve been doing to me since this morning.” Bill explained, brushing ash off his hands, shaking a little off his boot. “Overthinking everything. You’ve been making me itchy. This isn’t so complicated.”

Ford swallowed a lump of anxiety that had been brewing in his throat and stared at the pile of ashes on the ground, somewhat nervous again. Since last night he’d been consecutively confronted with what loving a God would mean, and Ford didn’t seem to have as much of a problem with it before, as he did now that he knew Fiddleford was living with him. He couldn’t explain away the char marks in his furniture forever.

“Don’t act like you’ve never seen that before. It’s what you do to me. It’s quite simple really. I don’t suppose I owe you an explanation there, but I –” Bill summoned bravado from the ether, taking charge of this whole awkward situation. He was still clutching the water bottle, less like a safety blanket and more like some conduit for summoning courage. He was about to talk feelings. His words came out about as stilted as could be expected.

“You - you’re not bad … for a human. You have nice human bits. Apart from your brain. Which is also nice too. And you’re smart enough. You know what you’re getting into. Or at least you should. You’re useful, and clever. So if you do want to make this permanent, I figure we could …
“You –“ Ford stared at Bill, almost not believing what he was hearing. *Not bad for a human.* Such high praise. *Nice human bits?* It was almost sickening how Ford had conditioned himself to come to recognise that sentiment as Bill’s pseudo-romantic way of trying. It was better than caterpillar eyebrows. Rather than nervous he found himself becoming vaguely amused. “A deal?”

“You handle things your way and I have mine, okay?” Bill hissed in reply. “And I have some terms I want set before I even consider a repeat performance, capiche?”

“A repeat performance.” Ford repeated, somewhat flatly, vague enjoyment creeping in at how his muse was dealing with this. The prospect of sustained physical intimacy of a meaningful variety was all showtunes and razzle dazzle to Bill. It was almost quite cute. It had him off balance, and Ford always did enjoy seeing his muse wavering.

“What are you, a parrot? I said what I’m saying. You … dumb, stupid, arrogant -”

Bill half glared at Ford, listing insults to cushion this whole heartfelt confession thing. His face felt unfairly flushed again, another human side effect he didn’t enjoy. He hadn’t had much practise being vulnerable with his emotions, Sixer couldn’t judge him for that.

“I don’t – “ Ford chuckled and shook his head, laughing to himself, before he stepped forward into Bill’s space, bringing his arm around him. “I don’t understand you – but at the same time you’re being crystal clear.”

“You haven’t even heard out my demands yet.” Bill asserted, looking up at Sixer, almost sulkily. The scientist was laughing at him. He felt embarrassed, and he hadn’t even begun detailing the sum of it, his conclusion from the past several day’s arduous considering of Sixer’s merits.

“Are you going to tell me how you feel?” Ford interrupted him, moving his hands down to rest on Bill’s hips, pulling him close.

“Uhh…” Sixer’s face was incredibly close, and Bill had just incinerated a tree, but he felt that creeping heat return to him. Sixer was looking at him with a degree of worship Bill hadn’t encountered before, and it was overwhelming. “No.”

“Are you going to tell me to get a tattoo?” Ford asked, leaning closer, angling his head down towards Bill.

“Well, I’m getting to th –”

Sixer cut him off, sealing his lips with a kiss that had been hoped for since this morning. Bill tensed, then melted, Ford’s hands coming to wrap around his waist as Bill draped his own arms around Sixer’s neck. His human was unfairly good at this – kissing. Bill was starting to develop a bit of an appetite for it.

Moulding his form snug against Sixer’s chest, Bill closed his eyes and kissed back, feeling the
worship being breathed into him as Sixer’s lips firmly pressed against his. Bill made to sigh against Sixer’s lips, but he could feel the heat burning in his chest, rising higher than he would have thought possible after that last little outlet before.

Bill felt the worshipful pressure build and his mind detached from the kiss abruptly, panicking like a background process while Sixer dipped him back, holding him firm with his muscular arms. He could feel the fire rising in his throat. He was going to burn Sixer, he just knew it. Sparks were building in his mouth and Sixer was such a pansy with pain the moment he felt his flesh sizzle that adoring expression would disappear from his features and Bill would never see it again, and right now he felt like his world hinged on seeing Sixer smiling at him like this. It was addictive. It was overwhelming.

“Tree! Tree! I need another tree!” Bill veered his neck back, wrenching himself away from his human, feeling the heat build in his fingers. This was too much. Sixer was too much.

Ford blinked, surprised, but released his muse, letting Bill fall to the forest floor with a thump. Bill stumbled to his feet and drunkenly weaved back into the forest to put both hands on two trees, tall pine trees, and instantly they incinerated, down to every last pine needle.

Bill exhaled another mouthful of embers, a relieved sigh, and Ford looked at the ash that began to cover the forest floor.

“That was just one kiss.” He uttered, flabbergasted. “Bill!”

“That was just one kiss.” Bill repeated, looking a little horrified himself. He was torn between wanting to fling himself back at Ford for another of those tantalising kisses, and wanting to burn the whole forest down to stop this pathetic body from overheating. The prospect that continuing with this romantic business could result in more overwhelming sensitisation filled Bill with a hopeful sort of dread.

He knew that a creature could go nuts trapped in a body like this, forced to endure a surplus of sensation that the body physically could not handle, and he was suddenly terrified that that would happen to him whether he welcomed it or not, and it was all Sixer’s fault.

“I’m going to die.” Bill whispered, shocked at the very thought.

“You’re getting stronger.” Ford noted, though that observation was practically redundant after last night. Redundant observations were about all Ford could do right now.

“I’m going to sizzle up and die in this body. I’m going to die.” Bill bemoaned dramatically, looking down at the bricks on his arm. “I’m too young to die. I’m not even bleventy billion. I’m dying! You really are going to kill me.”

“We just need a better solution.” Ford asserted, picking up on the problem. He wasn’t sure what had changed between last night and now. Maybe it was Bill’s lack of an outlet. There was no roaring fire to incite, but he hadn’t laid his hands on Bill all day. Strange things seemed to overwhelm him. Ford had hardly done anything, it was just one kiss. Ford thought it was quite a nice kiss. It was very romantic, he’d even dipped Bill slightly. You couldn’t get more romantic than that.

“You’re not going to die. I’m sure I can think of something.”

Bill looked hopefully up at Ford, who raised his finger in the air triumphantly.

“I still have my experiments to finish.”
Ford looked mildly disgruntled for a moment at Bill’s lack of faith in his experiments, before he held his hands out to shoosh Bill’s histrionics. “Will you be quiet? Fiddleford might hear you!”

Bill barely heard Ford, he was mentally cataloguing the reasons why he was so over-sensitised right now, on the verge of hyperventilating as he considered his potential doomed fate. He was an immortal being, it wasn’t often he had to consider being doomed.

He hadn’t been this sensitive after Ford’s little experiment in the lab, but he’d gone straight into the mindscape to hook himself up to the apparatus, taking the edge off that night. Perhaps he was still running hot from last night’s massive power boost, or ‘orgasm’ as Ford called it. He hadn’t done anything to take the edge off from that, apart from blow a hole in the ozone layer by feeding heat into the campfire. It wasn’t enough, it couldn’t be enough, and Sixer kept wafting that new flavour of worship over at him all day too. That one kiss had been the straw that broke the camel’s back, which, considering how lopsided camel backs were just generally, was either no mean feat, or a grand stretch of the imagination. Bill didn’t understand human phrases sometimes, he just enjoyed them for what they were.

He needed the apparatus back. It was the only way.

Snapping his fingers, Bill summoned the bracelets for the apparatus and started squeezing them onto his wrists.

Ford seemed taken aback by their sudden presence for a moment, before his indignation kicked into gear and he sprang forward, trying to tear the bracelets off Bill’s wrists.

“You kept those? I thought you threw them away!”

“Let go Sixer! I need these!”

“You told me you got rid of them!” Ford said, affronted, grabbing Bill’s left wrist, trying to tug the bracelet off it. “You promised me you wouldn’t use them!”

“I promised nothing!” Bill declared, twisting his arms frantically trying to squirrel out of Sixer’s grasp.

“They aren’t safe. Bill, please!” Ford implored Bill, catching a sharp jab from Bill’s elbow in his stomach for his trouble. “Oof. You - you’re going to hurt yourself.”

“The issue, Sixer, was that I needed someone less flammable to switch the batteries, and I just need to make one quick phone call and I’ll stop setting fire to the foliage. Mass destruction averted! Everyone’s happy! Now if you’ll excuse me.” Bill stopped trying to twist away from Ford’s grasp, instead relying on it to hold him up as he shut his eyes and slumped into the mindscape.

Ford startled. His muse was suddenly unconscious, hanging limp in his arms. “Bill?” Ford struggled to hold Bill upright, adjusting his hold on him, shaking him by the shoulders slightly. “Bill??”

Bill was unresponsive, his eyes moving behind his eyelids in what seemed to be a rather sudden burst of REM sleep. Ford checked Bill over hesitantly, looking at the bracelets, remembering how they had drained Bill so effectively before. They hadn’t yet shrunk to fit his wrists, and they weren’t glowing, so Ford assumed Bill had fainted for a different reason.

This was swiftly becoming one of the most complicated days Ford had ever encountered. His Ma
was right, relationships changed everything.

*Stick with yer books Stanford. His Ma always said. Men are just complicated.*

She had been talking about his father specifically, but Ford could see the wisdom in her words. Bill was more complication than he had initially signed up for, but he should really have expected that, summoning him from strange inscriptions on the wall of a cave in the first place.

If Ma insisted men were complicated, and Stanley insisted women were complicated, then Stanford could only imagine what Gods were comparatively. Off the scale, if there was a scale for that sort of thing. If there wasn’t, Stanford could invent one, and that would be another feather in his cap for being the most ridiculously ambitious scientist in the world.

He looked towards the hill, over his shoulder, half hoping Fiddleford would come and help him with this, and half hoping that he wouldn’t, as he could only imagine how bad this would look from an outside perspective. Ford wondered if he could blame Bill’s sudden lack of consciousness on his ‘bad back’ or perhaps that excuse was getting old. Fiddleford didn’t seem to be running over the hilltop to come assist. Perhaps he had meant it when he said ‘don’t yell if you need me’, perhaps he didn’t want to be involved in whatever nefarious business Ford might get up to with Bill privately. That was an alarming thought. Just what did Fiddleford think they’d be getting up to.

Ford looked down at Bill’s unconscious face, and had to correct his own internal monologue. Whatever Fiddleford thought they’d be getting up to, surely this was far worse.

Ford frowned down at Bill’s sleeping face for a moment, quietly cross that Bill had made him complicit in this dangerous business. It was incredibly unfair that Ford had come to love this creature, incredibly unfair. Bill seemed to like proving to Ford that he was very difficult to love.

His eye twitching, Bill seemed to wink in his sleep, then blinked awake, a grin stretching over his face. “Okay, we –“

Bill sucked in a sharp intake of breath as the bracelets glowed and shrunk to fit his wrists snugly. Ford’s frown deepened, and he watched with concern as the bracelets set to work, drawing the power away from his muse.

“Fine. I’m fine. It’s just a bit snug that’s all.”

“I don’t like this.” Ford said resolutely.

“I like this a lot better than setting you on fire.” Bill replied, standing up on his own speed now, supporting himself. “Though that option is coming in at a close second, considering how much sass you’ve been giving me.”

“It isn’t sass. You’re risking your life.” Ford insisted, crossing his arms now that Bill didn’t need help to stand. If he was going to go ahead with this dangerous behaviour he could stand on his own.

“I’m not risking my life, I’m immortal.” Bill insisted.

“You were saying you were going to die just seconds ago.”

“It was a figure of speech.” Bill said flippantly, tugging the sleeves of his shirt down to cover the bracelets on his wrists. “Look, I feel fine Sixer. Stop worrying.”

“I just don’t like it.” Ford frowned at Bill’s clothed wrists again, pursing his lips.
“Listen.” Bill began, putting both of his hands on Ford’s arms, rubbing them and maybe only slightly copping a feel of Ford’s musculature. “I feel fine, but if I start to feel faint, or you think I’m looking peaky or dizzy, or just generally in need of a refresher, you know what to do.”

“I don’t think – mmmph!” Ford began, before Bill interrupted him with a kiss this time. Ford’s protests were swiftly muffled, and his arguments fizzled away, seeming to matter less as the kiss dragged on.

Bill pulled away, licking his lips, his yellow eyes peering cheekily up at Ford, the glow still present. He didn’t seem immediately drained like before, the glow was, Stanford had come to realise, healthy for Bill.

“I’ve got this going on a low cycle.” Bill tapped one of his wrists for emphasis. “You’re not the only smart guy here. And since you feel like I cheated you out of one, here’s another promise. If it gets too much, or I feel like I’ve had enough, I promise I’ll tap out. Okay?”

Ford seemed to wrestle with his principles for a moment here, not sure whether he should take Bill at his word or stand by what he said before. This was still dangerous. He frowned at Bill’s wrist some more before looking up to scour Bill’s eyes for sincerity. “You promise?”

“I promise.” Bill said solemnly, holding his hand up in a scout’s salute. Scout’s honour. Of course, he didn’t shake on it, so effectively it meant nothing, but this was a promise that was for his benefit too. It wouldn’t hurt to hold to it.

“You’re good at making this whole thing very difficult, you know that, don’t you?” Ford gave Bill a reproachful look, but reached out to hold his hand regardless, ready to walk with him back up the hill.

“I could say the same for you Poindexter.” Bill snarked back, but took Ford’s hand, giving it a squeeze. “And that’s a compliment.”

Ford couldn’t help but feel slightly mollified by that, and looked away from Bill so he wouldn’t see his burgeoning smile.

Ford found Fiddleford in the field near the crash site, standing stock still staring down a cow, his eyes locked with the bovine.

“Fiddleford?”

“How hypnotic.” Fiddleford murmured. “It’s like I can’t look away.”

Bill looked mildly perturbed, giving Fiddleford a critical glance. Some humans were predisposed to being weak minded, but being drawn in by cattle seemed a little far-fetched.

“Maybe you should look away.” Ford cautioned, putting his hand on F’s back sturdily.

“I am gettin’ a bit dizzy.” Fiddleford relented and tore his eyes away from the cow, before he looked up at Stanford, his eyes watering just a little. “Why don’t you put these fellers in your journal Stanford? I ain’t never seen cows like these before, not on all my years on the farm.”
“It’s true, they are… peculiar.” Ford gave the cows a curious glance, taking in the intergalactic spot patterns decorating the cows pelt. It looked like an alien language, from what Ford knew of them from Bill’s notes in his journal and the business card/souvenir in his pocket. “Perhaps I could make a quick journal entry.”

Bill stood to the side and watched Stanford indulge his friend, digging through his pack for one of his leather-bound journals.

Since putting the bracelets back on, he’d been keeping his reactions in check, so as not to worry Sixer.

Bill was an adept multitasker, and while he hadn’t told Sixer about the apparatus, it was one of those balls in the air that Bill never quite stopped juggling. He’d been tinkering with the apparatus in his own time in the mindscape, and while he hadn’t worked out ALL the kinks yet, he had it functional enough that it could run without killing him, if Teeth and Keyhole were attentive and watched for his signal.

Another thing that the previous brick seemed to have granted him, since the night of the experiment. Bill’s ability to monitor two places at once had improved. He could stretch his consciousness in two different directions while awake in this body, when before he would have had to have slept to access the mindscape. This meant he could be here when required, and be in the mindscape when required too. Since Keyhole was so talkative, the ability to pop in and give him a good kick to keep him on task was a useful one.

He was still searching his self-awareness for the power that last brick had unlocked. The seventh was greater control, but the eighth brick, the one Stanford had unbound for him before setting out on this trip, was still a mystery. He was eight bricks unbound now, and he still felt off balance, but he had a feeling that the key to unlocking more bricks was tied in with this new direction he seemed to be going with Sixer. He could benefit from this, in more ways than one. Now that the prospect of physical contact with Sixer wasn’t such an unwelcome thought, Bill intended to explore it to its fullest extent. In his own time. Bit by bit. Like a glacier maybe.

Who could blame him for not rushing in to this when the potential consequence for hastiness here was burnt palms and unnecessary sweating?

He knew he was treading a dangerous line relying on the apparatus that had sucked Antelias dry, but Bill was determined to at least turn some small profit from feeling this strung out. He couldn’t keep burning off all this excess energy, he had to be smarter than that. It was coming to a point where the power he was receiving was far too substantial to waste, and he wanted to be in control again. He didn’t enjoy being made a fool of by his own reactions, and being constantly overwhelmed all the time made Sixer far too smug.

Sixer’s smugness could have been part of why the worship tasted different now. Perhaps he perceived Bill more as an equal now that he’d indulged in this earthy physical business of pleasure with him. That might be it.

Bill couldn’t think of any other reason why Sixer would suddenly pour more into this. He hadn’t done much to warrant this change, Bill hadn’t been acting any different. Maybe a tad more indulgent. Giving Sixer his souvenir was definitely indulgent. He really seemed to like that though. Bill had thought he would. And a little star gazing never hurt anyone. Sixer had laughed.

Just thinking of the way the scientist’s face had lit up with wonder, interacting with the interface of his souvenir, made Bill feel the warmth in his chest intensify, though it wasn’t worship. The apparatus would have drawn it away if it were. This was all Bill. Sixer seemed to keep his flame
strong without even trying. Another thing to like about the scientist.

Bill felt a little woozy on his feet for a second, the apparatus tugging a little too hard on his magic, and he reached out to rest his hand on Sixer’s back, the physical contact rejuvenating him.

Ford looked up over his shoulder at Bill, concern furrowing his brow.

“I’m just helping you look, don’t mind me.” Bill insisted, pointing out where Sixer’s journal was, nestled between two of his pillows. He didn’t know why he was reassuring Sixer. When the scientist was worried for him the worship came in waves anyway, rejuvenating Bill sufficiently.

Maybe Bill just wanted to touch him.

He’d been wanting that more and more.

Ford withdrew his journal and sat on the grass beside one of the cows, pulling out a pen, beginning to sketch the creatures down.

Bill wasn’t one for being overtly physical in front of Fiddleford, given he still didn’t know what to think about the assistant, but he sat on the grass alongside Stanford, pressing their thighs together subtly. Sitting next to each other hardly screamed ‘we are now romantic companions’. This was perfectly inconspicuous.

This would be enough.

Bill peered over Ford’s shoulder, watching him note down his observations.

*Eyes unusually dilated, as if from staring at an intensely bright light. Does this mean what I think it means?*

Bill snorted, amused by Ford’s quaint little observations. They were pretty cute. He got so excited over oddities like the cows, and the geodites.

*Is this a code?* Ford wrote beside a sketch of one of the cows. *A language? Or some kind of intergalactic teenager’s idea of a prank?*

“It’s definitely a prank.” Bill asserted, speaking low just for Stanford. “I bet you if you lined them all up it’d spell ‘try and ground me now mom and dad’.”

“Ha ha.” Ford replied sarcastically, still noting down his observations about the cows.

Bill watched Ford write, smiling indulgently at the scientist. Ford didn’t need to know the cow circles were really an advertisement for an interdimensional pancake house, besides, Bill thought Sixer would like this fiction much better.

Ford looked up briefly to catalogue one of the patterns on the cow hide closest to him, and paused, looking around for his assistant. “Fiddleford?”

“Just over here!” F called out from behind a particularly large bovine. The cow mooed and trotted forward, revealing a metal milking bucket on the ground by Fiddleford’s feet, full to the brim with bubbling milk. “These cows sure are friendly.”

“Were you *milking* them?” Ford asked incredulously, adjusting his glasses, blinking at Fiddleford.

“I found this ol’ bucket lyin’ around. I reckon the big one there hadn’t been milked in a while. Besides, some refreshing freshly squeezed milk would just about hit the spot right now.”
Ford and Bill wore identical expressions of revulsion for a second there, eyeing off the bucket Fiddleford was holding.

The milk was bubbling, comparable to toxic waste, and seemed to be emitting a low hum, like it was irradiated.

“You’re not going to _drink_ that?” Bill asked, both disgusted and delighted by the prospect.

“I figure why not. No use wastin’ it.” Fiddleford shrugged.

“Do NOT drink that F. You don’t know where it’s been.” Ford warned, scowling suspiciously at the bucket of milk. “It’s humming for goodness sake. You don’t know what’s in it.”

“What, y’all city slickers think milk comes born in a bottle.” Fiddleford scoffed, and shook his head at Bill and Ford. “Nothin’ wrong with this. It’s natural.”

One of the cows trotted closer to Ford, chewing the grass beside his foot in a dazed sort of manner. Ford craned his neck, trying to look around the cow to point at Fiddleford.

“This has nothing to do with me coming from the city, and everything to do with _you_ coming from a farm. I have water for you if you’re thirsty. Do _not_ drink the mysterious cow circle milk.”

“Cow circle? Is that what you’re callin’ it?” Fiddleford laughed, holding the bucket by the handle, swinging it as he walked over to Ford. “You’re gonna run out of kooky names for that book of yours, I swear. I don’t have much more water in my bottle, so unless you’ve got plenty to spare in yours, I’m not gonna waste our resources.”

“I have water right –” Ford patted down the side of his pack, and couldn’t find his water bottle. “Where’s our water?”

“Oops.” Bill passed the water bottle back to Ford, having summoned it behind his back from the clearing of ashes where he dropped it. He dusted a little of the ash off and passed it back over to Ford. He’d used up all the water pouring it down his throat, trying to extinguish his own fire. It hadn’t worked.

Ford took the water bottle and held it upside down, the last drop dripping out of it, before he capped it and put it aside. “Well, there should still be some in yours.”

“But I’m not gonna waste it.” F insisted. “What if I need it later?”

“So you’ll drink a mysterious liquid that’s _humming_ to ration your own water. You’re acting like such a hillbilly. I swear.”

“What’d I say about callin’ me a hillbilly?” Fiddleford paused, giving Stanford a look, before raising the pitcher of milk up to his lips.

“Fiddleford.” Ford protested, as his co-worker took an audible gulp from the bucket of milk, the liquid running down his chin as he drank. “That’s – just – no!” Ford flinched, just watching him. “That’s really unsanitary.”

Fiddleford paused to swallow, before commenting. “Taste’s just fine to me.” Then taking another gulp, swallowing more space milk.

“This is painful to watch.” Ford winced as F continued to drink milk just to spite him.
The cow grazing closest to Ford mooed and began chewing on the edge of his journal. Ford huffed an indignant breath, and tried to tug his journal out of the cow’s clutches, struggling slightly. The cow had quite a strong jaw.

“You – give me back my research you – you brazen cow.”

Bill couldn’t help but laugh a little at that, hiding his smile behind his hand. Sixer yanked the book back from the cow then fussed over the ruined page. The top right corner of his journal entry was covered in cow spit that soon began sizzling on the page.

“Cow spit on everything.” Ford grumbled, and tried to wipe it off with the sleeve of his coat.

“Looks like it’s acidic.” Bill observed gleefully, as the cow spit ate away at the fabric of Ford’s coat for a moment, before stabilising.

Ford shook his arm, aiming to get the spit off, and scowled up at Fiddleford. “You hear that Fiddleford. You’re drinking acidic milk! You – I don’t know why I bother.”

“I’m not listening.” Fiddleford glugged, as he stubbornly drank more tainted milk.

Ford picked up his pen and rather emphatically wrote ‘SPIT’ in capital letters on the page, pointing to the offending saliva marks. Bill laughed again, and Ford closed his journal, shoving it back in his pack, before pushing off the ground, pacing across the field.

“Fine, you’re welcome to stay up here and drink all the irradiated space milk you like. I, however, am going to our crash site.”

Fiddleford looked up from his bucket of milk curiously, his cheeks full of the substance, as Ford pushed through the cows and crouched down near a boulder on the ground. Shifting the boulder to the left, Ford revealed a metal panel with alien language detailing the surface.

Prising back the panel, Ford exposed the indefinite exhaust port below, the ladder he constructed still there from his last visit. The drop down into the dark was steep and ominous, but very exciting. It was clear that this craft was not from this world.

Looking back up to Fiddleford, leaning on a little dramatic flair in his reveal, Ford stretched his hand out, showcasing the entry tunnel.

“Behold, our alien craft, or what I like to call, Crash Site Omega!”

Fiddleford spat out his mouthful of space milk.

Once they descended into the depths of the craft, Fiddleford traipsed ahead of the group, holding the lantern out in front of him, rushing over to inspect this wall, or that column, marvelling over the advanced technology.

“Look at these circuit boards!” Fiddleford’s excited voice echoed through the cavernous space ship. “I ain’t never seen a hard drive so small! Is this touch sensitive?! Sweet sarsaparilla!”

Ford set his pack down and leaned against one of the columns, watching his friend gape at the tech on display. “I think we’ve lost him for a good hour or so.”
“At least he’s having fun.” Bill shrugged, and propped himself up next to Stanford, shimmying in until he rested his arm against Ford’s arm. “What he lacks in intergalactic understanding he makes up for in enthusiasm.”

“Oh, I’m sure he’ll catch up in terms of understanding soon enough.” Ford nodded over to F, who already had his screwdriver out, ducking underneath one of the control panels, prising the guard off it. “He’s a brilliant mechanic. I’ve never seen him encounter a piece of technology he couldn’t deconstruct and put back together better than before. He has a mind for robotics that will make him a very rich man someday.”

“He’s a very rich man already.” Bill raised his eyebrow. “We’re the ones paying his salary.”

“He’s told me he’s put nearly all of it into a trust fund for Tate, for when he goes to college.” Ford told Bill. “He’s taken a little out to make sure Patricia has enough support, a good home for raising Tate, enough money so she doesn’t have to work while he’s away. It’s quite selfless really.”

“He’s tying up nearly all of his money in trust accounts designed to be untouchable until a specific point in the future.” Bill gestured to Fiddleford, who was pulling components out from the control panel. “What happens if something goes wrong now? Why isn’t he taking the low road, living like a king while he can?”

“Your priorities change when you’re a parent, I imagine.” Ford mused, rubbing his chin. “He’s quite humble. Said all he wants is a house with a screen door that isn’t broken.”

“Hmmph.” Bill crossed his arms and scoffed. “Well, not everyone can say they’ve been blessed with ambition and brains.”

Ford raised an eyebrow at Bill’s blatant criticism of Fiddleford’s family first attitude, but said nothing. He glanced sideways at Bill, noticing how every so often the muse would snuggle up against his arm, rubbing shoulders with Stanford like he was cold.

“How are you doing?” He asked.

“Fine.” Bill said shortly, rubbing his shoulder against Ford again, an unconscious gesture.

“You look cold.” Ford noted. “Perhaps it’s time to take them off?”

“Of course you’d say that.” Bill rolled his eyes. “I’m doing fine. It’s manageable. I haven’t passed out or died yet, or set anything on fire, so I’d say it’s been a successful experiment.”

“I don’t enjoy the parameters of what you define ‘success’ in this experiment to be.” Ford said, disapproving. “Do you even need to wear them still? I’m not doing anything to rock the boat. Surely you can take them off.”

Bill pursed his lips and considered Ford. “Maybe I want you to rock the boat?”

“I thought I rocked your boat too much.” Ford replied, continuing the metaphor unnecessarily. “Or, you know what I’m saying. I thought you –“

“I want to try it again.” Bill interrupted Ford, looking up at him intently.

“It?” Ford questioned, a little taken aback by Bill’s sudden enthusiasm.

“More boat rocking.” Bill elaborated bluntly. “I’m not sure how seaworthy this vessel is, but I’m not one to be content with just a teaspoon measure when there’s a whole ocean out there. I’d say ‘if
you get my drift’ but I think we’ve driven this metaphor into the ground.”

“Capsized it, have we?” Ford asked, smirking.

“Oh, it’s twenty thousand leagues under the sea right now.”

“Jules Verne.” Ford noted, impressed. “You’ve been reading my novels.”

“Well, your diaries got old. No offence.” Bill shrugged.

“I’ve noticed you’ve been reading my journals. I can tell from the way you keep graffitiing them.” Ford scoffed, but stretched his arm out to rest it across Bill’s shoulders, rubbing his other arm to keep him warm. “Defacing them.”

“Why am I not in your journals anymore, huh?” Bill turned to ask Stanford, sounding mildly offended. “What, am I not interesting enough for you?”

Ford paused, blinking down at Bill. Thank God his muse didn’t know about the separate notebook he was keeping, recording his observations about him. He adjusted his glasses. “You want to be in my journal? I’ve written about you there, haven’t I?”

“Sure, before.” Bill pouted, crossing his arms. “Before I was tangible. But now it’s like I don’t exist. Where’s Bill, I ask you? Where are the pages, chapters, novellas, silly little sketches dedicated to me?”

Ford chewed the inside of his cheek, debating whether he should tell Bill about his secret notebook, whether he could risk the integrity of the experiment, risking his untainted observations like that. If he showed Bill the notebook he’d surely deface it the same way he had Stanford’s journals. He’d lose all impartiality if Bill got his hands on the research notes.

“You have a whole room covered in sketches, in the study.”

“Yeah, but what have you done for me lately?” Bill raised his eyebrow imperiously at Stanford.

“Rocked your boat, apparently.”

“Shut up.”

They watched Fiddleford pull out more machinery from beneath the circuit board. Every so often F would pull out a device and wave it at Stanford.

“This interfaces with brainwaves via frequency!”

“This here’s a coolant gel. We could insulate the whole mainframe with this!”

“Stanford look! Spark plugs! But alien spark plugs!”

Ford smiled indulgently at his friend, and watched him pile pieces from the spacecraft into his carry pack, contented by F’s enthusiasm. It was about what he expected.

“Should we take him to find the Hyperdrive?” Bill suggested.

“Not yet.” Stanford replied, looking over at F excitedly examining a holographic screen, dismantling it from the desktop. “Let him enjoy this a while longer. He’ll never experience something like this for the first time ever again. Never see the world the same way.”
“Humanity is overdue for that kind of radical perspective shift.” Bill nodded, before he kicked off from the column and swung his hands by his side. “Well, you two can play Roswell for as long as you like. I’ll find where the Hyperdrive is located and I’ll double back to find you when I do.”

“Are you sure you want to go alone?” Ford asked, not wanting Bill to go off by himself wearing those bracelets, though he didn’t think leaving F by himself was any better.

“I’ll be fine.” Bill waved Ford’s concern off blithely. “Besides, one of us has to be productive.”

Ford huffed a laugh, and shook his head, taking the jibe in stride.

“Alright. Well, yell if you need me. Everything echoes in here, I’ll come find you.”

Bill was already pacing away down one of the dark metal corridors heading into the belly of the spaceship. As he strode off he called over his shoulder.

“Echo, echo, echo!”

“Very funny.” Ford called back, his voice bouncing off the walls in rejoinder.

Bill’s laugh echoed back, before his muse disappeared into the darkness.

Ford watched the black space where Bill had been and shook his head fondly.

“Ford, have you seen this suspension system?” F called out from across the room.

Taking an interest in his colleague’s findings, Ford paced over to him, bending down to look.

“Show me how it works.”

Kicking a piece of scrap metal along the floor of the corridor, Bill explored further and further into the depths of Crash Site Omega.

He’d never taken much interest in the pan-dimensional beings of Trilazzx Beta, he had enough information about them to ace the foreign politics section of any interdimensional pub trivia night, but apart from that he really had no intention of busying himself with the facts about a species who couldn’t navigate their ass from their elbow. He was sure their geographically challenged abilities had SOME sort of use, even if it was just to crash their spaceships in convenient locations, but they didn’t rank high on the scale of species Bill actually gave a crap about.

There were lots of interesting creatures out there. Plenty of weird and wonderful ones. If the weirdest thing about you was that you didn’t know your lefts and rights on the interdimensional highway of life, then you didn’t have much to worry about at all.

Must be such a hard life. Bill thought sarcastically.

Bill kicked the scrap metal along the corridor and it bounced off the metal panelling on both sides of the hallway like a makeshift pinball machine. When the metal skidded to a stop, Bill skipped forward a few more steps and gave the scrap metal a hearty kick again, enjoying the sound of metal clanging against metal as it hit back and forth between the walls.
Sure there were some creatures out in the universe who had never known suffering, and bully for
them, how happy they must be. When their biggest problem was not installing a sat-nav. Sure they
ended up stranded, crash landed on a foreign planet, and left to die in the hull of their own
spacecraft, but Bill couldn’t scrounge any sympathy for these creatures.

He only had sympathy for the categorically weird.

The outsiders within their own communities, the outcasts, the freaks. Bill would collect them,
would embrace them all with open arms if he could. He’d throw the biggest party the universe had
ever seen to make all of his freaks and outcasts feel at home.

He’d make a new world for them all soon enough.

The Nightmare Realm wasn’t sustainable, he knew it, his henchmaniacs knew it, the whole multi-
verse practically knew it. It wasn’t malleable, it was a roiling multi-coloured untenable nightmare
of misshapen energy. It was crumbling due to its own entropic nature. Bill liked the Nightmare
Realm, but like any aspiring individual, he wanted to move up in the world, and on to bigger and
better pastures green.

Earth had plenty of green.

He’d reshape this planet into a home.

He was already enjoying his little slice of home, in that little shack built in his honour. Sure, he
liked it more before Fiddleford moved in, but the shack was nice. Partly because it was his. It was,
thanks to all the renovations Sixer had installed, made for him. It was a tribute first, and a home
second.

Sixer did plenty to make him feel welcome.

Every day felt like a vacation. All expenses paid food, shelter, sometimes back rubs. All while the
interdimensional portal Bill needed was being built in the basement. It wasn’t a bad gig.

Sixer’s roommate was a problem, but Bill could find a method to get the southern scientist to look
the other way when need be. He’d have to get real creative if he wanted to get enough private time
with Ford to start this whole boat rocking business. That wasn’t the sort of thing that went well
with an audience.

Bill had to remind himself that building the portal was the priority here, not indulging his own
whims, but it was incredibly hard to stay disciplined when this new avenue to explore with Sixer
was so enticing.

He had to stay on task.

Finding the Hyperdrive was his priority, not daydreaming about what he could do to Sixer. Or
what Sixer could do to him. Or what Sixer had already done, or what Sixer dreamed about doing,
or how he could get Fiddleford out of the house long enough to get the chance to drag his nails
down Sixer’s back and try his hand at making him scream just like Pyronica had said, and then –

THUNK.

Bill blinked down at the floor. The scrap metal he was kicking about ricocheted off one of the
metal panels, jarring it open, and with a wet squelch, a creature rolled out onto the floor.

“Cheeeeeeeeeeeeeeii.” The creature chirped.
It seemed freshly hatched, the remnants of a blue shell littered inside the panelling, along with a sticky sort of mucus that covered the creatures whole body.

Bill peered into the gap in the panelling and saw one more blue egg, unhatched, sitting in the crawl space.

“So you must be the early bird.” Bill pondered aloud, tilting his head at the little translucent grub-thing squirming around on the floor. “A little stowaway.”

“Cheeeeeeeyeeiii.” The creature shrieked and clicked its mandibles at Bill.

“Well. What are you?” Bill asked the creature, tilting his head again, taking the little grub in. “Apart from shrill and obnoxious?”

The creature clicked its mandibles again, it’s bulging black eyes looking up at Bill nervously.

“Go on. Impress me.” Bill said, rotating his wrist, flexing it. He tugged his sleeve down and considered the silver cuffs, before giving the grub a scrutinising glance. Giving a quick word to Keyhole and Teeth in the back of his mind, he shut the apparatus off, and the cuffs popped off Bill’s wrists. Banishing them with a wave, Bill watched the little grub-thing continue to cower before him.

It was an underwhelming reaction.

Bill laced his fingers together and cracked his knuckles, stretching his arms out, before he looked down at the little creature again.

“I’m not impressed yet.”

“Cheeei.” The grub chirruped.

“Maybe you need a little incentive.” Bill narrowed his eyes at the creature before spreading his hands out, his power unhindered now. Searching his being for the power that the eighth brick unlocked, wanting to test himself, Bill focused on making something – anything - happen.

The grub squeaked in fear as the power built in the air, and tried to scurry away from Bill, scuttling down the corridor, only to find itself trapped in a glowing blue cage, a pyramid with tessellating bars made of plasma.

“Huh.” Bill nodded, running his tongue over his teeth. So this was the power the ritual unlocked. It sure was a lucky dip getting the right one functioning. “So that’s what that does.”

The grub began squeaking more frantically, pawing at the bars of the cage with its little cursorial limbs. The echoing tap of Bill’s feet against the metal floor sounded out, walking over to the glowing triangular cage.

Bill’s hiking shoes stopped before the glowing pyramid for a second. The grub trembled inside the cage.

Bill squatted down for a closer look at the creature, his yellow slitted eyes radiating gold light down on the being.

“Go on. Do something. Show me what you’ve got.”

Quivering, the grub clicked its mandibles together, before it’s translucent skin warped and shifted.
Its skin stretched and the translucent dermis changed colour like the skin of an octopus until the grub was no longer a grub, but an identical copy of Bill’s boot. A trembling boot, but a boot nonetheless.

Clapping his hands, Bill’s applause echoed through the metal corridor, frightening the shapeshifter back into its original form.

“A shapeshifter! Aren’t you a dime a dozen? They don’t have many of you here.”

Shapeshifters could be wonderfully devious, but Bill still hadn’t got the taste of the Allasomorphian shapeshifter who insulted him out of his mouth. The shapeshifters who were fearful, who shifted to fit in didn’t impress Bill at all.

The only thing worse than someone who wanted to be normal was someone with the ability to be.

Bill considered the frightened little thing for a moment longer, already deciding its fate mostly, the whim of the moment lending to a little needless cruelty. Now that the apparatus was off, Bill felt his power returning to him, and he had a new power unlocked and ready to utilise. His disregard for shapeshifters had nearly made his mind up, but he paused for a moment, his narcissism lending a sliver of mercy to him.

The cage shrunk down on the shapeshifter, causing the grub to shriek shrilly, before piping down, as Bill stretched the cage back out, giving the creature a little space to roam, though not that much.

“Tell you what. I’ll let you live if you can do me. I want to see what I look like to a curious little creature like you, so if you give it your best shot, and if I like what I see, you can go on squeaking and scurrying through the walls. How does that sound?”

“Crreeeeeeeii?” The shifter blinked at Bill, and looked him up and down, before its flesh began to wobble.

The translucent skin bulged and shook like jelly, trying to match forms with Bill.

Rather than assuming the shape Sixer fashioned for him, this flattering humanoid body, the shifter’s skin warped, tone hitting that dark hue that Sixer fashioned for him for just an instant, before souring into a moulding mustardy colour. The shifter’s shape bubbled up and spasmed, like a rotting thing, eyes opening all over its skin, long lashes blinking, slitted pupils spinning around wildly. Thin noodley arms shot out from the oozing pile of flesh, grasping outwards, desperately searching for something to hold. As the creature attempted to climb out of its own deteriorating pile of flesh, Bill saw a black shape, like a bowtie, form just under the biggest eye, which was leaking fluid, fat watery tears falling liberally down from its eye.

Bill recoiled, horrified, wincing squeamishly away from the creature that was supposed to represent him. He’d never seen a more desperate, pathetic creature in his entire life, and he couldn’t fathom how an insignificant creature like the shifter, freshly hatched and new to the world, could look at him with those infant eyes and see something so disgusting instead of seeing the beautiful shell Sixer crafted for him.

Was this some sort of a joke?

“Ugh.” Bill wrinkled his nose, and clenched his fist, imploding the plasma cage, squeezing the life out of the ugly little thing. The shifter exploded with a wet pop, and Bill burnt the remains for good measure. “Disgusting.”

The smell of burning flesh flared, and Bill let the fire intensify, wanting to be rid of the creature’s
very molecules in the quickest span of time possible. When the only scent left was that of ash and oxidized metal, Bill let the fire die down, though his revulsion hadn’t.

Why did the shifter depict him like that? Why couldn’t everyone see him the way Sixer did?

Shaking ash off his boots, Bill straightened up and paused to look back into the gap in the wall, torn between incinerating the other shifter egg, and seeing it’s potential.

Thinking Sixer might like to study it, Bill reached into the crawl space and grabbed the other blue egg, bringing it out and holding it in his hand.

“Well.” Bill raised his eyebrow at the innocuous blue egg. “Let’s hope you impress me more than your brother did.”

With a flick of his wrist, Bill banished the egg to the Quadrangle. He’d summon it later to show Sixer. It might just be the distraction he’d need to get some business of his own underway.

Shoving his hands into his pockets, Bill stepped over the pile of ash on the ground and set off to find the Hyperdrive, whistling a merry tune.

It was time to set things in motion.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to william-256 on tumblr who drew me two beautiful pictures of Bill as fanart for this fic and made my week PHENOMENALLY better. They may have made my week full stop. I love seeing fanart, and it makes me so grateful to see other people enjoying my story. I reread every comment I get here when I need inspiration, and now I have two beautiful drawings to inspire me too. Thank you very much to them, and also to every person who comments on this fic. You all sustain me. Their drawings are linked below! Go show them some love!

https://william-256.tumblr.com/post/161884251969/f-imaginings-i-promise-this-will-be-the-last

I hope folks enjoyed this chapter. I sure did! Hide-Behind and Shapeshifters and Fiddleford chugging the weird space milk like a champion.

Next chapter is the tail end of the expedition, action packed and packed with actions.
Finally out above ground, taking the shorter route back home through the mountains, the scientists were thrilled with their haul from the expedition, chatting cheerily about the practical applications for the various scrapped alien devices they’d co-opted.

“We can start compiling the mainframe for the energy system when we get back home. Now we have the hyperdrive, the rest of the actual construction should go fairly quickly.”

“I can rewire the mainframe and we can integrate the hyperdrive into the engine. Connecting it through a sufficient power source might be a bit tricky though.” Fiddleford replied, walking alongside Ford through the sunlit mountain trail.

“I’ve several ideas about how we can test it out with various different power sources. That can come later though, once the bulk of the structure is assembled.” Ford said decisively.

“About that. The structure is quite uh, peculiar.” Fiddleford started. “I know the design is rationalised by the equations but suspending that triangle upside down just don’t seem secure, is all.”

“Well, it’s essential to the design.” Bill said snippily, not willing to let Fiddleford take artistic liberties with the design of his interdimensional party door. How were cosmic beings supposed to know whose party this was if Bill’s name wasn’t on the door. It just wasn’t right.

“Well, in that case, we can do it. It’s just a lot of the labour that might be a bit intensive.” Fiddleford added, hefting his slightly heavier pack now as they followed the mountain trail. “I know you might be up to some of the heavy lifting Stanford, but I’m thinking we should get help in for the –“

“No.” Ford stopped in his tracks, cutting Fiddleford off sharply. “This project has to stay secret until it’s completion. We can’t risk leaking this technology before it’s ready, and patented. I won’t have this device stolen from me.”

Bill watched Ford approvingly. The scientist’s possessive paranoia over his work was one of Ford’s greatest assets, by Bill’s estimation.

“Oh.” Fiddleford said shortly. He adjusted his pack again, nervously this time. “You don’t think we’ll struggle with some of the larger construction work? I mean, this itinerary you’ve compiled is very precise.”

“Between the three of us it should get done on schedule.” Ford replied optimistically. “I’ve run equations to justify how quickly things should take us when all three of us get stuck in. You don’t have to worry too much about the heavy lifting aspect of things, I’m sure between me and Bill –“

“You can lift your own machinery.” Bill interrupted Stanford bluntly, catching onto his meaning.

“I beg your pardon?” Ford said, sounding offended. If Bill wouldn’t help with this part it would throw his entire equation off.

“You heard me.” Bill said snippily, crossing his arms.
“You can’t expect him to do heavy lifting with his bad back. It’s not unreasonable to hire labourers for this Stanford.” Fiddleford chimed in, aiming for a reasonable tone. He wasn’t too keen on ‘getting stuck in’ by Ford’s excessively high standards. Fiddleford had seen the equations used in Ford’s itinerary, and they assumed F was a lot fitter than he was.

“Exactly. Bad back. Can’t do it.” Bill shrugged off Ford’s piercing look casually, continuing the climb up the mountainside while Ford stood still staring at Bill.

“Bill, you approved my itinerary. You said so yourself it was possible.” Ford had been banking on Bill’s help with the project. Fiddleford didn’t need to know that Ford had factored in Bill’s levitation with the construction plans, but since Ford gave the itinerary to Bill to read over he assumed Bill was complicit with those plans, merging science with magic at least for the physical labour side of the project.

“I also mentioned when you dragged me up here that I wouldn’t do your donkey work.” Bill called over his shoulder, now taking the lead in the climb. “I told you I’d tell you exactly what you needed to do. That was our agreement.”

Ford scoffed, disbelieving, then he scoffed again for emphasis, before hoisting his own pack and charging forwards up the slope, his shoulders tense with attitude. “Well, I wouldn’t have accelerated my equation if I’d known you’d be sitting around, doing - nothing. You approved my timeline.”

“It would be fantastic if you met that timeline, don’t get me wrong.” Bill noticed Ford was stomping up beside him and suddenly he felt spritely enough to powerwalk up the next part of the trail, just dancing beyond Stanford’s indignant reach. “I heartily approve you getting everything done by then.”

“But you won’t help me.” This was a continual sore spot for Stanford. He had hoped that since his muse was becoming a closer companion that he’d change his tune and offer more assistance with the portal. He’d hoped that since he first summoned Bill, wanting to complete the portal with him, working together. Bill seemed to have changed his mind about the together part of the proposition, but not about the working.

“You have Fiddleford to help you now.”

“Guys, you’re walkin’ a little fast. You don’t wanna slow up –“ Fiddleford called out, falling behind quite substantially as the two men raced on ahead, passive aggressively trying to outpace one another.

Finally meeting pace with Bill, Ford grabbed Bill’s upper arm and pulled him in close, lowering his voice to whisper. “How exactly am I supposed to get this portal up and running for you without your help here?”

Bill paused to give Stanford an unimpressed look before responding. “You tell me, you’re the genius.”

“Bill.” Ford gritted out between his teeth. “I thought you –“

Bill lidded his eyes imperiously at Ford and smiled, picking up on Sixer’s frustration. “Sixer, I’m here to consult, not do the work for you. I know you’ll figure it out.”

Ford frowned at Bill for a moment, dismayed at how unhelpful his muse was being, though really what did he expect. Bill had been unhelpful with the construction of the portal since day one.
Sitting back, doing his utmost to avoid any of the labour, putting his feet up like he was on a vacation. Ford thought things would be different now though, now that Bill was being more obliging, now that they were closer. He was levitating his pack for him, how was levitating the materials for the portal when push came to shove any different?

“So you’re saying I can’t rely on you at all?” Ford probed sadly, hopeful that his muse would offer something.

“You’ve got to make a deal for that kind of follow through.” Bill pursed his lips. “Worry about that later though, for now just do what you can. I’m keeping an eye on the project. When the time comes, you’ll have what you need. Besides, your itinerary was flawed.”

“Flawed?” Ford narrowed his eyes, prepared to be offended. He worked hard on that itinerary.

Bill’s smile stretched wider, and he leaned into Ford’s space, surprising him by licking his nose. Ford blinked, a blush sneaking up on him, despite how unsexy it was to now have a damp spot on the end of his nose.

“All work and no play.” Bill ran his tongue over his teeth, before leaning away, tapping the hand Ford had wrapped around Bill’s upper arm sharply, indicating Ford should release him. “Your assistant’s coming.”

Ford let go of Bill’s arm quickly, stepping away from his muse, hoping to look inconspicuous as Fiddleford trudged up the hill.

“Sure is – sure is steep.” Fiddleford panted, catching up with them, staring down at his shoes. Looking up to see both men standing at the top of the hill, Fiddleford’s eyes widened and he sprang back with a gasp, staring at the slab of granite behind them, crumbling stone exposing a cross section of the mountainside, complete with the skeleton of a rather imposing creature. “Sweet Jesus Christ on a cracker! What the hell is that?”

Bill and Stanford looked between each other, puzzled, before looking back at the gigantic pterosaur skeleton displayed in the rocks behind them.

“Oh.” Ford had travelled this part of the trail before, he’d researched the skeleton when he first found it. “It seems to be some sort of pterosaur, undocumented as far as I could find.”

“It’s enormous!” F pointed at the skeleton with a quivering finger, stuttering as he spoke, his eyes glued to the tooth lined beak of the flying dinosaur. “It’s g-gigantic. It’s HUGE!”

“Well, it is rather on the large side.” Ford noted calmly.

“On the large side? On the LARGE SIDE??” Fiddleford flipped, his disbelief mounting in the face of Stanford’s calm.

“Well, typical pterosaur skeletons are generally smaller than this. The largest pterosaur was from the Late Cretaceous period. It was only found recently in North America, they called it the Quetzalcoatlus Northropi, though I reckon the specimen here has its wingspan beat by about five foot.” Ford recounted, putting his hands on his hips and looking up at the pterosaur skeleton. “Palaeontology was never really my field, more of a side subject of interest, but I’m fairly certain that a specimen this size hasn’t cropped up in any academic journals of note.”

“Well, why don’t you report it, and get someone to dig it out of there?” Fiddleford asked Ford in an exasperated tone.
“Oh, I wouldn’t report it until I procured sufficient accreditation for myself so I can be credited properly for the discovery.” Ford said, closing his eyes and rubbing his chin. “A degree in Palaeontology isn’t an immediate priority but it could happen in time. Until then our Quetzalcoatlus Pinesorial can stay in the mountainside, safe and sound.”

“You don’t want to report it?” Fiddleford turned to Ford, a confused expression on his face.

“I don’t want palaeontologists crawling all over this town, sticking their chisels into every bit of rock they see.” Ford scoffed, crossing his arms. “It’s obnoxious.”

Fiddleford gave Ford a flat look, which the other scientist refused to acknowledge. “This about this whole ‘weirdness rush’ again?”

“It will happen!” Ford said defensively. “Don’t pretend it wouldn’t. We still have history to make here first, before we let every Tom, Dick, and Harry with a PHD come muscling into our town.”

Fiddleford turned to Bill and gave him a questioning look. “You don’t think he should report this? He could be famous, with a discovery like this one.”

“He’ll be famous anyway.” Bill shrugged. “With or without that pointy bag of bones.”

“The fascinating thing about this specimen is that the bones don’t appear to have gone through the proper process of fossilisation. In fact, they don’t appear to be fossilised at all.” Ford pondered, giving the pterosaur skeleton a measuring look, before he shrugged. “The rock surrounding it seems to have been compacted from a landslide. Ah well, a mystery for another day. Come now, once we cross this ridge we’re a straight shot for home.”

Ford set off along the trail, and Bill fell into step behind him, but Fiddleford stood still for a while, staring up at the enormous jaws of the pterosaur, struck with a sliver of fear that this creature could have been alive, terrorising the town not too long ago, given the state of its remains.

How Ford could just shrug this off was beyond him. This wasn’t the sort of thing to be researched, poked and prodded at like some fascinating anomaly. This was a creature to run from. Fiddleford was looking at the remains of what could only be a monster, and he was terrified. He didn’t want to think of a world where creatures like this could roam free, flying through the skies snatching up prey as it pleased. Ford just shrugged it off, but F couldn’t help but quake at the thought of a world where monsters could exist right alongside his son.

That was what scared him.

“Come on F, not too long now.” Ford called back, and F jolted out of his stupor, stumbling after his friend.

Not long to go now.

F was keen to be back home, safe and sound.
Though F was keeping pace with them, he was oddly quiet, and didn’t join in too often.

“I’m talking logistics though.”

“Logistics of what?” Ford questioned, sounding that peculiar mix of exasperated and amused that only Bill could engender.

“Say the human body walks 28 miles in the span of two days. That’s 17 hours and 21 minutes walking, not including breaks. Hypothetically the energy expended from that duration of exercise translates into seventeen cordon bleu standard dinners. At once.”

“What equation are you using to measure this?” Ford laughed.

“The equation of give me my dinners Stanford. You want me to justify this with numbers?”

“Yes, I wouldn’t mind an equation proving your seventeen dinners theory.” Ford replied lightly.

“Fine.” Bill shot back. “Let N > 1 be a fixed integer and consider polynomials f1-

“You’re just spinning a Jacobian conjecture at me.” Ford cut Bill’s reciting off with a smug look, confident that he’d correctly interpreted the direction his muse was going. “I’m quite certain that an infamously unsolvable algebraic geometry equation has nothing to do with the human body or dinners.”

“It’s only unsolvable to you, stupid.” Bill turned his chin up at Ford, then tapped his chin with his finger. “You and everybody else I guess.”

“Everybody but you, am I to believe?” Ford guessed, raising his eyebrow at Bill.

“Hey, you give me a pen, about ten stacks of paper, and something stronger than what passes for alcohol around here, and I’ll show you a good time.” Bill boasted. “Those conjectures are child’s play. Primitive.”

“Well I don’t know about the alcohol, but I’ve got plenty of paper. I’ll even lend you my pen.” Ford offered amiably.

“No, I need the alcohol for that party trick. It’s not the sort of thing you sit through sober.” Bill insisted with a dramatic shudder. “Ugh. Never again.”

“There’s some aged scotch in my lock box in the study.” Ford confessed, his voice lilting high with promise.

“Why would you hide that from me?” Bill questioned, mildly offended, holding his hand to his chest.

“Why wouldn’t I? You’re enough trouble sober, honestly.”

“You’re enough trouble sober.”

Privately Fiddleford wondered if Stanford and Bill were an item, was this how they flirted? It made perfect sense, and at the same time it was the most obnoxious thing Fiddleford had ever seen.

Again he wondered what the appeal would be, since they both just seemed to be stroking their own egos in tandem. And with that mental choice of words leading around back to a mobius loop of Fiddleford questioning his long-standing heterosexuality, he decided to stop pondering the various merits of what the two men saw in each other.
Hickeys or no hickeys, he was fairly certain that they were flirting though. Flirting through maths.

“So about my food –“

“I thought you were showing me how to solve unsolvable equations on a stomach full of scotch. Go back to that.” Ford insisted, laughing and lightly elbowing Bill as they walked.

“You could at least buy me dinner first, yeesh.”

“I thought I was making these seventeen dinners, and every other dinner you’ve had.” Ford said shrewdly. “You can’t expect us to eat these meals in a restaurant, you hate going out to eat.”

“You can buy the ingredients, and cook for me at home. There. Semantics assuaged.” Bill managed to somehow still hike the downward slope, and bop Stanford on the nose mid stride. “Hah! Take that semantics, you no-good -”

“Who are you talking to?” Stanford looked at Bill with amusement shining in his eyes.

“Semantics.” Bill answered simply.

“You don’t just –“

The sound of a loud snore interrupted their casual banter, and Ford stopped mid-sentence to look around.

“Do you hear that? That’s strange, I wonder –“

“It’s just early autumn, hibernation season wouldn’t have started yet, would it?” Fiddleford questioned, speaking up. “You reckon it’s a traveller, or someone camping?”

The snore continued but it had a rumbling guttural quality that didn’t sound like your run of the mill snoring camper. Ford, ever curious, headed in the direction of the sound, not stopping even when the snoring petered off into a feral sounding growl, followed by snorting, snuffling noises.

“Stanford.” Fiddleford hissed, catching Ford’s sleeve, grabbing it, whispering now. “I don’t think that’s a camper. What are you doing walking over there it could be a bear!”

“Bears don’t snore. Not like that anyway.” Ford said absently, shaking Fiddleford’s hand off his sleeve, creeping through the bushes to get closer to whatever creature was making that sound.

Fiddleford fidgeted fearfully, his feet dancing on the spot he stood, torn between staying back here where it was safe and following Stanford into the bushes just to drag him back to safety himself.

When Bill strolled casually through the bushes behind Stanford, casting a smug fearless glance in F’s direction, F was left all alone on the trail, staring after the two idiotic scientists who traipsed off after an unusual potentially dangerous noise.

Stupid.

“They’re gonna get themselves killed.” F muttered to himself, unable to stop his nervous fidgeting.

He could wait out here. Ford could go traipsing off headlong into danger all he liked, but F could stay here, on the trail, where it was safe.

He could hear more of that monstrous snoring, and the crinkle of the bushes swaying as Ford and Bill made their way through them, towards the monster. Fiddleford fretted, staring after them,
debating whether he even needed to go after them. They’d be fine, right? They were tough, capable adventurers, more than able to hold their own against a mysterious growling creature of unknown origin.

Fiddleford was struck with a visceral memory of Ford running out through the forest after him this morning, without pausing to grab clothes, weaponry, or anything he could use to defend himself, standing between F and the elusive shadow of the Hide-Behind wearing only his boxers, sleep shirt, and socks – stupidly vulnerable.

Stupid.

Standing on the trail, F made a decision that he would definitely regret.

He went after them.

Catching up with Ford and Bill, Fiddleford crept through the bushes until he was crouched down behind the duo, who were in turn crouching down behind a tree, peering around the trunk at the snoring creature.

“What – what are you guys thinkin’, dartin’ off into the bushes like that? This could be dangerous, what are you –“

Ford held his hand up to silence F, still peering around the tree trunk. “I can’t believe how lucky we are. He was just sleeping right off the trail, it’s so rare to find one so close. F, come have a look at this.”

“Stanford, you –“ Fiddleford protested lightly, as Ford tugged F forward by his elbow, pulling him closer so he could get a good look at the creature from around the side of the tree trunk.

“Look.” Ford urged F, hushed awe seeding his voice, and pointed to the most hideous creature F had ever laid eyes on.

Fiddleford let out a sharp gasp, before he immediately slapped his hand over his mouth, wary of making a single sound in case it woke the creature.

Sleeping on the disrupted soil, an enormous monster was curled up, it’s mammoth claws digging into the earth like it were a pillow. Fiddleford took in the giant teeth, huge fangy protrusions, like a sabre-toothed lion’s tusks, jutting out from its jaw, with more sharp pointy teeth lining its mouth as it snored, and felt his instincts remind him that fight or flight favoured the fearful and fleet of foot.

“We gotta get out of here, Stanford!” F whispered cautiously, his heart beating fast, eyes locked on the sleeping beast, seeing claws, teeth, bulk and brawn.

“I just want to make a quick sketch.” Ford insisted, pulling his journal out from his pack eagerly, inching closer to the beast. “I’ve never had the chance to detail an adult Gremloblin up close before. Look, fungal growths! Liver spots! And body hair! I thought it was all spines!”

“Stanford, what I’m seein’ is teeth! And lots of them! You can’t just sit here and draw it, what if it wakes up!” F stressed, trying to keep his protestations below a whisper, twitching nervously every time the Gremloblin grunted in its sleep.

“Oh, don’t worry. Gremloblin’s are notoriously heavy sleepers.” Ford waved away F’s concerns airily, inching closer through the bushes to the creature for a better view. “How fascinating. Half Gremlin, half Goblin. I’m not sure I want to know how they came to interbreed, but the result is astounding. Unbelievable, it’s even uglier up close.”
“You didn’t get enough of a close up last time?” Bill asked Ford snidely, grinning, as Ford turned around to wrinkle his nose at Bill.

“You’re not funny.”

“Yes I am.”

Fiddleford quivered behind the tree, clutching onto the bark now that Ford was edging closer to the creature, heedless of his own personal safety.

While Bill and Ford seemed perfectly at ease with this scenario, having done similar countless times, exploring the creatures of the forest together, Fiddleford was not, and he wasn’t prepared to tread any closer to the beast, no matter how deep it’s sleep was. Ford might have no sense of self-preservation, but F did, and his instincts were screaming at him that this was a bad idea.

Fiddleford could feel his arm hair stand on end, and his knees were shaky, his anxiety mounting the longer they lingered here. This was dangerous, F knew it. Ford seemed just so reckless with his own safety that he couldn’t see it, see the danger. Too buried in his research.

“F, could you pass me the canteen. I’m a bit thirsty.” Ford held his hand out to Fiddleford, his journal on his knee and a pen in his other hand, ready to settle down for a thorough examination of the creature.

“You don’t just –” Fiddleford spluttered, nervously glancing between the creature and Stanford’s outstretched hand. Ford waved at F again, beckoning he bring the water, ignoring Fiddleford’s protests.

“Don’t worry, he won’t even know we’re here. I just want to get a few brief drawings in. Those claws are fascinating. Venemous too, I hear. Some kind of neurotoxin.” Ford swiped the canteen from F, and took a sip, capping it. “I wonder if we could get a sample, the potential medical applications could be promising. Gremloblin toxins could have hypothetical merit in neuroscience, given the proper study.”

“Imagine the research papers.” Bill settled down cross legged on the floor next to Stanford, peering over at his journal, getting comfortable. “Gremloblin Genome in Geriatric Genealogy. Gratifying Results in Gremloblin Lesion Lobotomy. Lob Loblin discovers Gremloblin Globs.”

“Stop it.” Ford grinned and reached out to smack Bill lightly on the upper arm. “I’ll laugh too loud and wake him up.”

“I thought you said they were heavy sleepers?” F hissed at Ford from his sanctuary behind the tree.

“How fast can you say it?” Bill asked Ford, pushing the inane conversation mostly just to irritate Fiddleford.

“Gremloblin.” Ford said swiftly, trying to act serious, making a note beside a sketch of the creature’s wing.

“But can you say it three times fast?” Bill pressed, grinning.

“Can you?” Ford murmured, adding crosshatching to his Gremloblin claw sketch.

“Gremloblin, Gremloblin, Gremboblin – bluh - this tongue doesn’t work right.” Bill stuck his tongue out at Stanford cheekily. “I need an upgrade. Upgrade me.”
“You need to get better at tongue twisters.” Ford said smugly, jotting down his observations beside the sketches.

“Well *that’s* vulgar.” Bill raised his eyebrow at Stanford, who snorted, and shook his head, amused.

“You guys!” F beseeched them in a whisper, hardly believing that five feet away from an enormous sleeping monster, Ford and Bill were flirting, barely lowering their voices. “You can’t do that a little quieter? I’m real uneasy about this whole situation.”

“I’m almost done.” Ford insisted, obliviously coasting over what ‘doing that’ could mean to Fiddleford. “I just want to add a scale to his wingspan for reference. Would you say it’s about five foot or ten? It’s hard to tell all folded up like that.”

“It’s no foot and all wing.” Bill replied unhelpfully, leaning back onto his elbows, reclining in the bushes, picking rice krispie remnants from his teeth.

“Does it matter?” F stressed, his nerves playing havoc with him. “Can we just move along now? Please? Ford, I don’t like bein’ this close to it.”

“You’re a full yard further back than we are. What’s your point?” Bill scoffed, unimpressed with Fiddleford’s knee knocking.

“This is stressin’ me out. Stanford, please!” Fiddleford’s voice wavered now, becoming more and more distressed the longer Ford ignored him. “I want to get out of here.”

“Can’t you just wait a little while longer?” Ford questioned, without looking back at F, still intent on his drawings. “I want to sketch those tusks.”

“Stanford, *please!*” F urged desperately. His patience was drawn thin, and he wasn’t content to stand here, tempting fate. “I’ve said please three times now and you just aren’t listening. I want to go! I want to move along!”

“Just one more minute!” Ford insisted, his pen scribbling notes down swiftly.

“Stanford!” F begged, at the end of his rope now. “I’m scared.”

At that Ford looked up from his work, putting his pen down. The genuine vulnerability in Fiddleford’s voice broke through Stanford’s focus, and he realised he was letting his friend down.

Closing his book in his hand, Ford turned around to look at F, noting the anxious tremble in the man’s shoulders and the nervous way his eyes widened, darting between the creature and Stanford. Ford felt a swell of pity for his assistant, seeing how obviously scared he was, noting that he came in through the bushes after him anyway, and his expression softened into a more comforting, calm one. He held his hands out, speaking in soothing tones to F.

“You don’t have to worry Fiddleford. You’ve got absolutely nothing to fear. We’ll be just two minutes more, I’ll finish my sketches, and we’ll walk away from here, back to the trail, with our Gremloblin friend none the wiser. He’s sleeping F, it takes a lot of noise to wake a sleeping Gremloblin. We’ll be fine.”

“Are you sure he won’t wake up?” F questioned, somewhat soothed by Ford’s confidence, but still wary of the beast.

“Absolutely.” Ford assured F, before turning around to open his journal back up, eager to continue
his sketches.

Fiddleford seemed to take in Ford’s words, and exhaled, some of the tension slipping off his shoulders.

Taking Ford at his word, F relaxed, and leaned his pack against the tree trunk, starting to unwind.

When his backpack pressed against the bark of the tree trunk, it jostled the contents of the bag, triggering the sensitive alarm system of the Hyperdrive, causing it to blink twice with a red warning light, before letting out a piercing wail.

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Bill sat upright in the bushes and watched with wide eyes, startled by the sudden escalation, as the Gremloblin hoisted Fiddleford up like this was some sort of half-baked King Kong re-enactment. This would have been very entertaining if Bill didn’t need that scientist, and the Hyperdrive stashed in his backpack.

“Uh oh.”

Ford looked down at Bill, beseeching him with desperate eyes.

“Isn’t there something you can do?”

“Uh…” Bill looked between Ford’s imploring eye contact, and the Gremloblin, who seemed quite intent to turn Fiddleford into a human maraca. He wasn’t sure if he should intervene magically when he was in plain view of the other scientist, and Bill didn’t want to become test subject to two scientists. One was bad enough. “Do? I –”

The Gremloblin roared again, and this time Fiddleford turned around to face it, making terrified eye contact with the creature, whose eyes began to glow yellow.

“WAHHH!” Fiddleford yelled, startled by his sudden closeness to the creature’s face. The Gremloblin pulled F right into its immediate field of vision, boring into his eyes with its own glowing oculars, it’s growl petering off into a rumble of contentment.

“Uh oh. Nightmare vision.” Bill muttered. Not good. As entertaining as it might be, watching Fiddleford stare down a Gremloblin, doing nothing about it was a sure-fire way to lose his lead mechanic. Bill yelled out to Fiddleford. “Quick! Shut your eyes!”

Fiddleford would have, but he couldn’t tear his gaze away from the glowing orbs before him, boring into his soul. His entire body was frozen with fear, and he felt his muscles tense, like they were paralysed, terror seeding through him.

Fiddleford faintly experienced an echo of recollection, that distant sense of déjà vu telling him that he had heard something like that before.

A warning; shut your eyes.

Fiddleford tried, but he couldn’t, the strange golden glow transferring over to his own eyes now, keeping them peeled.

His body began to shake, terrified tremors taking over as his pupils widened, nearly covering the whole iris. He felt his awareness of the entire world shrink and expand down to the singular point of entry, where light, glowing gold light, filtered in through his pupils, projecting images to the back of his brain like shadows in Plato’s cave, dancing in the firelight, informing his reality, and he saw it.

His worst nightmare.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBBB
getting ready to throw. “Let – him – GO!”

The canteen bounced off the Gremloblin’s head, the cap falling off, splashing water all over the creature’s spiny body. The Gremloblin paused, and blinked water out of its face, momentarily freeing Fiddleford from the hypnosis of its stare, before it began to mutate before Ford’s eyes.

“Oh oh.”

The creature grew to three times its size, tusks lengthening, sharp spikes jutting out of its spine, venomous quills standing on end all over its body. A pair of huge leathery wings unfolded from the Gremloblin’s back, and it flapped them once, huffing a steamy breath from its nostrils, disgruntled by the splash.

“I think that might have just made things worse.” Ford said, mostly to himself, taking in the hulking second form of the Gremloblin. If his assistant weren’t in grave danger, he’d be itching to sketch this all down. These mutations were incredible.

“You think?” Bill shot back snidely, unimpressed with this sudden turn of events.

The Gremloblin flapped its wings again, more firmly this time, and the motion swept the creature off the ground, propelling its bulk into the air.

It was flying.

It was flying away.

“Stanfooooooord!!” Fiddleford yelped, clutching desperately to the creature’s hand as the ground became further and further away. “HEEEEEEEEEEEELP MEeeeeeeeeeeeeeeeee!”

“I’m coming F!” Ford called out, tearing away his coat and backpack, throwing them on the ground beside Bill.

“What are you doing?” Bill questioned critically.

“I’m going after him.” Ford replied resolutely, pulling one of the magnet guns from the bag and holstering it on his hip. “I’ll get him back safe and sound, no matter what. Mind my stuff.”

“You can’t just –“ Bill looked down at the bags he was now supposedly minding. He didn’t sign up for this.

He heard the crunch of boots, and when he looked up, Stanford was gone, sprinting off down the cliffside after the monster. “Sixer!!!”

Ford huffed, racing through the undergrowth, chasing after the Gremloblin. Branches and brambles tore against his clothing as he ran, littering his arms and legs with little scratches that he ignored, focusing only on his feet pounding along, covering ground, and his breathing, trying to keep it steady. He wasn’t exactly pacing himself. Thank god for track and field practise back at college, Ford had developed a certain stamina for running, towards or away from monsters.

He could vaguely hear Bill calling after him, but he ignored it, focused only on his goal.

Rescuing his friend.

He looked up and could see the creature soaring just above tree level. It was close, perhaps if he tried a flying leap over the cliffside he could land on its back, throw it off, but that was too risky.
He could hear Fiddleford’s frightened wailing signal his position through the trees, and Ford changed his direction, following the sound.

Back in the clearing, Bill sat in shock, trying to figure out how all of this had happened.

He’d gone from humouring Sixer’s research, like he always had, to potentially losing both of his scientists in one day! He wasn’t sure who McGucket had pissed off in a past life, but that scientist had astoundingly bad luck - terrible luck!

Who would be unlucky enough to wake a sleeping Gremloblin AND set off the Hyperdrive’s alarm, all in one fell swoop? Fiddleford McGucket apparently.

The Gremloblin was carrying McGucket away now, most likely to stash him in its den where the creature would ravenously feed off McGucket’s nightmares forever. And Bill couldn’t spare McGucket forever, he needed him to build his portal now!

“Of all the inconvenient—“ Bill muttered, picking himself off the floor.

To top it all off, Sixer had gone charging away like some poorly scripted action hero, throwing his belongings down at Bill’s feet to tidy, before flinging himself into the forest, gung-ho. Sixer’s childlike love of heroism and its accompanying theatrics was appealing when he was fighting zombies with Bill, or walking through the fire, playing a game that he could win. It was less endearing when he invested those theatrics into some harebrained rescue mission that left Bill to clean up after him.

He looked over the various items spilling out of Stanford’s pack, his journals, leftover food, and materials scrapped from the alien space ship. His crossbow was here, for goodness sake, and the laser gun! How could Sixer grab a magnet gun, and leave behind the lovely cursed crossbow Bill had urged him to bring. How could anyone be that stupid? Sixer was lucky he was good looking.

Bill levitated the spilled items now, considering them before he readied to banish them back to the shack.

Why would Ford leave the crossbow and grab the magnet gun instead? What was he going to do with a magnet gun against a beast like the Gremloblin? Pull out it’s hip replacement? He could have done more damage with the laser gun? Did he pick up the magnet gun by accident? No, he couldn’t have, their designs were completely different. He’d know which weapon he was taking.

Bill banished the pack and Ford’s belongings with a wave of his hand, before he was struck with a thought, freezing in place, the cinematic image playing through his head of a particularly damning potential circumstance. Bill’s stomach flipped uncomfortably, just imagining it, and he wondered if this was what humans felt like when they were deathly ill. He felt sick just thinking of it.

Bill imagined Stanford, using the magnet gun to jettison himself up onto the Gremloblin’s back, pulled to the metal of the Hyperdrive. Stanford landing on the monster’s spines, his big beautiful brain instantly ruined by the neurotoxic venom in the creature’s quills, cortisol and adrenaline pumped through his system in near deadly doses.

Stanford falling fifty feet from the sky, landing, bones shattered, frail human body torn and destroyed, now just a messy pile of viscera on the rocks of the mountainside below.

Stanford Pines, dead, his brains dashed upon the ground, his life prematurely ended due to his friend’s bad luck and his own heroic stupidity.

Bill looked up, his eyes following the direction his human had ran off. Magic simmered through
his veins with a fury he’d never felt before, burning up that sick feeling and replacing it with a
determined anger.

Bill Cipher, lose his human? Not today.

Darting off through the forest in the direction Stanford headed, Bill struggled to keep the pace
required to catch up with his idiotic pet human, shrubbery and roots tripping him up, holding him
back.

Bill could hear the distant wailing of Ford’s assistant peter off, the Gremloblin was flying further
and further away from Bill, which meant every moment he spent held back by the bushes was
another moment wherein Stanford could do something incredibly stupid for the sake of his friend.

This wasn’t acceptable.

Fiddleford wasn’t watching him now, so there was no need for secrecy. Bill was sure the scientist
had other things to be worrying about, more pressing matters to pay attention to.

Fire flaring out across his body, instantly incinerating the forest flora that held his progress back,
Bill began racing through the trees, unleashing his power, burning his way through the woods.
Pursuing Sixer, Bill left blackened ashes and curling embers sizzling in his wake. As Bill ran the
flames licked up his arms, responding to his fury, sustained by his determination. He was moving
quickly, as quick as these feeble human legs could carry him.

Bill was trying, covering ground fast, but Sixer was faster.

By the time Bill had reached the edge of the trees, he saw Sixer, down on the cliffs edge, aiming
his magnet gun skyward.

“SIXER!” Bill yelled out, desperately hoping Stanford would hear him in time. That he would
obey. “NO!”

Ford glanced over his shoulder at the sound of Bill’s voice, seeing his muse standing on the ledge
above him, fire covering his entire body, looking like the sun.

But by the time he looked, he had already pulled the trigger.

The magnet gun locked onto the Hyperdrive in Fiddleford’s backpack and pulled, the force of
magnetic attraction yanking Ford up off the ground, nearly dislocating his wrist with the sudden
motion. The gun’s magnetic ray lifted Ford, jerking him abruptly through the air with a velocity
that whirled the wind around his face, compressing the flesh of his cheeks as he flew. The gun’s
focus was unerring, and before Ford had the chance to prepare himself, he was fast approaching the
Gremloblin.

Ford had a brief moment of conceptualised regret, seeing the venomous spines of the monster
sticking out, a jagged welcome for when he landed on the creature’s back. He thought to close his
eyes, not wanting to see the moment when he found himself skewered through by the Gremloblin’s
many spines, but the wind resistance was too bracing, keeping his eyes open just long enough for
Ford to see a flash of intense fire. The fire sizzled the quills on the Gremloblin’s back into ash,
causing the creature to cry out in agony, disrupting its flight pattern long enough for Ford to land
comfortably on the Gremloblin’s now bare back, thanking his lucky stars.

The magnet gun pulled the Hyperdrive from Fiddleford’s backpack, ripping the fabric of the pack,
causing the items within to slide downwards, falling from the sky.
Ford released the magnet gun’s trigger, and the Hyperdrive fell down from the nozzle of the gun as well, plummeting to the earth below. Ford watched the Hyperdrive fall for a moment, fumbling to catch it, but missing, aghast that all this effort would be for nothing.

Clenching his jaw, looking away from the Hyperdrive’s descent, Ford glanced over to his friend, reminding himself that his rescue was the real reason for taking this risk.

Ford crawled across the Gremloblin’s scorched spine, gripping on tight with his ankles and knees as the Gremloblin tried to unseat Ford by jerking its shoulders back. Unmoved, Ford reached down and placed his hand on Fiddleford’s shoulder, shaking his friend lightly.

“F, are you alright F?” Ford asked, but was met with an unresponsive wide-eyed expression, Fiddleford staring off into space, twitching uncontrollably, muttering frightened gibberish under his breath.

Ford frowned. This wasn’t good. The Nightmare Visions had a hold of him.

The Gremloblin continued to flap its wings gallantly, still intent on taking Fiddleford off to feast on him in its den, despite the straggler clinging onto its burnt back.

Ford’s jaw jutted forward stubbornly, glaring down at the Gremloblin, illogically angry at the creature for so callously mistreating his friend. It was in the Gremloblin’s nature to abduct prey, it was simply a matter of instinct, but for some reason the audacity it had to turn Fiddleford into such a nervous wreck, right after Ford had assured F that he would be perfectly safe, made Stanford indignantly outraged. The Gremloblin had made his reassurances redundant. It had made Ford a liar.

Raising his hand, Ford methodically focused on analysing the Gremloblin’s cranium for weaknesses, identifying precisely where a blow would deliver the most damage, and promptly brought the magnet gun down on that particular spot, cracking the Gremloblin over the back of the head.

Ford could vaguely hear a frustrated sort of scream echo across the forest, but he had more pressing things to worry about, such as the fact that now without the Gremloblin’s wings stabilising their flight, Ford and Fiddleford were careening through the sky, the unconscious Gremloblin’s weight plunging them down faster than an ordinary descent would be.

Though Ford paused to wonder exactly how circumstances would avail to provide an ordinary descent for comparison’s sake, and he also paused to wonder if his final thoughts before meeting his impending doom were to be personal musings on how Newton’s Law of Gravity seemed drastically uncalled for now that he was plunging to his death on the back of a Gremloblin.

He also thought - as he noticed the ground approaching, the shape of a quaint little farm emerging, complete with a grain silo, and spacious red barn - that it was perfectly ironic to meet his death plummeting from a great height in a town called Gravity Falls.

Despairing of the inevitable newspaper headlines surrounding his death, Ford squeezed his eyes shut, and prayed for mercy.

They crashed through the roof of the barn, the Gremloblin’s weight taking the brunt of the fall. Fiddleford was thrown from the Gremloblin’s wilted grasp, skidding across the top of the hayloft in the barn, bouncing off the stack of hay, sliding to slam against the wall, vaguely cushioned by the straw. The Gremloblin’s weight broke right through the edge of the hayloft, and the creature fell to land down on the barn floor below, startling the horses.
Stanford waited, his eyes still screwed shut, listening to the panicked whinny of the horses, waiting for his own impact, but it never came.

Ford blinked his eyes open, and found himself levitating just above the hayloft, suspended by the familiar tingle of Bill’s magic, keeping him safe.

Looking around for his muse, Ford puzzled, not seeing him in the barn at first, but then he smelled fire and followed his nose.

Down by the barn door, raging with heat, looking rather furious, Bill dismounted from what seemed to be a slab of metal stolen from the lab, summoned to act as a hoverboard for Bill. He still couldn’t float on his own behest, but he could levitate items just fine, and Bill had summoned a suitable structure to ride when he deduced that there was no way he’d catch up to Stanford on these paltry human legs of his.

The fire still blazed around him, blue flames reacting to his mood and urgency, and Stanford had to swallow a lump of dread in his throat just looking at his muse, seeing the fire dance around the creature he had come to love. He knew he had messed up, done something incredibly stupid, but stubbornly Stanford didn’t regret it, and braced himself for what was to come.

Bill levelled a pissed off glance up at Sixer, his yellow eyes flashing red for an instant, before he raised his hand, directing his power to levitate Ford down from the hayloft, until he was floating in the air in front of Bill, helpless before Bill’s fury.

“I told you no.” Bill fumed.

“I’d already pulled the trigger.” Ford said meekly, knowing it was a poor defence.

“You could have died.” Bill glared at Ford, holding him personally responsible for his own near-death experience.

“I—“ Ford hadn’t expected Bill’s first priority to be concern for his welfare, despite all they’d shared together, and that realisation added new gravitas to his actions that he hadn’t considered before. “Yes. It was dangerous. I know.”

“But you still did it.” Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, flames idly burning the hay beneath his feet.

“I had no choice.” Ford replied, trying to move his arms to gesture, finding them bound by the magic that allowed Bill to lift him, struggling slightly, before giving up on grand gestures. “I couldn’t leave him.”

Bill sucked in a deep breath, swallowing the part of him that wanted to scream ‘IDIOT’ endlessly at Ford until the human reached premature deafness. He tried to reign in his temper, exhaling that deep breath, trying to will down the flames crawling up his arms, encouraging the heat to simmer down a little, until Bill at least resembled what could be considered ‘calm’.

He looked at the litany of scratches and cuts that covered Ford’s arms and face, and decided he was not calm, despite wanting to be.

Ford flinched as Bill clicked sharply, a brief burst of flame racing across the surface of his skin, cold fire chasing the injuries off him, leaving healed dermis in its wake.

Bill stepped in close, and pointed up at Ford’s chest, prodding him and singeing a hole into the fabric of Ford’s shirt.
“I can fix this. What I can’t fix are your brains splattered all over the forest floor! I can’t fix your mind when your body is flooded with neurotoxins, skewered through with hundreds of venomous quills! I can’t turn back time! If you died on me Stanford Pines – so help me if you died –“

“Bill! Bill –“ Ford held his hands up, noting how the magic holding him had relaxed slightly as Bill’s rant continued, watching his muse’s bottom lip wobble. “I know, and I’m sorry.”

“You’re sorry??” Bill screeched, hardly impressed with that response, squeezing Ford tighter with that oppressive instinctual magic.

“Breathe! I can’t breathe!” Ford panted, his chest tightening as the magic flowed around him.

“I’m not sure you want to, with that stunt you just pulled.” Bill sneered at Ford, jabbing him again with his pointer finger. “You didn’t think about your future, your future respiration, you didn’t think about the portal you still have to finish, you didn’t think about ME and how you dying would strand ME here in this sack of human viscera you so obligingly crafted! I’m beginning to believe you didn’t think at all! And if you can’t think then what are you good for?”

“Air!” Ford gasped, the magic squeezing him far too tight.

Stepping back, Bill released Ford, the scientist falling to his knees gasping for air, rubbing his chest. He could feel the smallest burn mark in the centre of his sternum, where Bill’s finger had jabbed him.

“What did you think of?” Bill asked Ford imperiously, scowling down at his human. “What was going through that stupid head of yours when you decided to fling yourself at the back of an airborne Gremloblin with a magnet gun?!”

“Saving Fiddleford!” Ford gestured back to the hayloft with his hand. “Or is that not a priority for you?”

“You know what my priority is.” Bill crossed his arms, watching as Ford rose up to his knees, about to stand, clearly firing himself up to make Bill the bad guy here. Bill could sense it in the way Stanford jutted his jaw out stubbornly, in the way his brow furrowed, and his eyes glinted in that dangerous way of his.

Deciding to cut off Ford’s self-righteous protestations, so clearly rooted in that misplaced friendship of his, showing plainly where Ford’s priorities were, Bill decided to remind him of where they should have been.

Ford made to stand but was halted by Bill’s hands on his shoulder, on both of his shoulders. He looked up for a moment at Bill, who seemed to be considering something, how to play this out, or perhaps holding something back, like genuine concern, before his muse sank down to his knees, holding onto Stanford’s shoulders, looking intently into his eyes.

“How dare you nearly die on me.” Bill glowered at Ford for a moment longer, before pulling Ford forward into a passionate kiss.

Ford could taste embers on Bill’s breath, but kissed him anyway, his hands coming up to embrace his muse, tugging him tighter to him, wanting to reassure him that he was here, that he was safe, and realising that he was alive thanks to Bill’s constant intervention. He would have died if not for his muse, if not for the fire destroying those venomous spines, if not for the levitation breaking his fall. He would have died.

Ford broke away from the kiss for an instant to mumble. “Thank you.”
Bill tugged him back, immediately kissing Sixer again, pressing those angry, relieved, possessive kisses all over Stanford as he kept trying to speak.

“You –“ *kiss* “-saved-“ *kiss* “-my life Bill, I –“

“Shut up Sixer, and don’t you dare nearly die on me again.” Bill growled, fingers grabbing the back of Ford’s neck, weaving through his hair.

As Bill sealed an angry, claiming kiss over Ford’s lips, Ford idly thought he should nearly die more often, before ridding himself of that notion sharply. Kissing Bill back he realised what Bill had intended to remind Ford of – that he had people in his life who cared for him, who would mourn his absence. He took a needless risk (that at the time seemed very necessary) that nearly cost him his life, and his risk-taking behaviour affected more than just himself.

Thinking on the first person Ford’s risk-taking had affected, Stanford pulled away from the kiss, holding Bill by the shoulders.

“Fiddleford. We need to check on Fiddleford. I don’t know if he’s – “

“Up there, in the hayloft. I can hear him twitching.” Bill looked up, the flames around him extinguishing, suitably calmed by Sixer’s worshipful kisses and ardent thank-you’s.

Ford looked over to the ladder leading up from the barn, and began climbing, Bill following him. As he climbed up into the hayloft, he held out his hand to Bill, helping him up the last few rungs deferentially. Bill seemed to appreciate the gesture, and clambered up into the loft, dusting ash off his trousers.

Ford rushed over to Fiddleford’s side, and turned him over, checking his vitals.

“Fiddleford, can you hear me? F, say something?” Ford asked him, pressing his fingers to Fiddleford’s neck, feeling his pulse race dangerously.

Fiddleford looked up, though his eyes didn’t seem to be registering Stanford at all, drifting off into middle distance, his pupils still hopelessly dilated. He was mumbling nonsense syllables under his breath, twitching every few seconds, flinching away from whatever unceasing nightmare he was still seeing.

Leaning in to listen, Ford could make out words, repeated in loops. Words like ‘Tate’, ‘no’, ‘don’t’, ‘go’ and ‘help’ interspersed between blubbering gibberish.

“He can’t hear you. He’s lost in la-la land.” Bill said, hands in his pockets, looking down at Fiddleford.

“Is there anything we can do for him?” Ford asked Bill, putting his hand on F’s forehead, feeling the other man sweating bullets, his skin feverish.

“Hmmmm.” Bill rubbed his chin. “Sure got him good.” Squatting down beside Stanford, Bill poked at Fiddleford’s arm, which was covered with sharp quills needling into his skin. “The neurotoxin is already in his system, quite substantially it looks like. You could yank all these little needles out, but the poison still has to work through him, and come out naturally. It’s like a fever, or an overdose. Or both.”

“So he has to sweat it out, basically?” Ford assumed, frowning down at Fiddleford’s frenzied state. He began plucking the quills out of F’s skin, pocketing a few for later research. He winced in sympathy every time F cried out when a quill was removed. “Is there anything we can do to help it
go through him quicker? To help him work it off?"

“Make him really sick?” Bill shrugged. “That’s the drawback of a physical form, things seep into you. He’s got chemicals in his bloodstream going wild now, hormones spitting out of his brain telling him he’s in danger still. That much adrenaline can trigger heart attacks, and all sorts of fun maladies. He’s surprisingly sturdy.”

“I feel so bad.” Ford confessed, brushing a lock of sweaty hair off Fiddleford’s forehead. “If I had just listened to him and moved on when he asked me to, this wouldn’t have happened to him.”

“How could you have known?” Bill turned to Stanford, having his own motivations for cutting this guilt cycle off at the quick. Stanford’s guilt was only useful to Bill when it was directed at him.

“Gremloblin’s are incredibly heavy sleepers. You could have a heated debate on theoretical physics around one of them and it still wouldn’t wake them up. Might make them sleepier to be honest. It took a literal shrieking alarm to wake the damn thing up, and your assistant must have set it off leaning on something. It was his fault, not yours. He tripped the Hyperdrive.”

“The Hyperdrive!” Ford gasped, his hand flying up to his head, running through his hair anxiously. “I dropped it. Oh no, it’s probably long gone now. That’s the entire expedition wasted, and I didn’t…”

“Relax Sixer.” Bill held his hand out and summoned the Hyperdrive, levitating it as proof for Ford, who visibly relaxed. “I’ve got you.”

“Thank God.” Ford’s shoulders slumped, so relieved.

“You can thank me later.” Bill winked, and banished the Hyperdrive with a wave. “Right now, we’ve got more pressing matters.”

Ford looked back down at Fiddleford and sighed, deep remorse colouring his features. “This should never have happened.”

“Not much you can do about it now.” Bill shrugged flippantly. “We should probably move him, before the owners of this barn come running. We made quite the entrance.”

Ford tried to shimmy his arms under F’s body, readying to lift him up off the ground, but when his arm slid under Fiddleford’s torso it shifted F’s arm, causing him to suck in a sharp breath and give out a pained moan.

Ford stopped, and examined F’s arm, noticing how swollen and red it looked. Ford prodded F’s wrist, and F gave another pained shaky moan.

“That’s definitely a break, or at least a serious fracture. There’s a lot of fluid there.”

“Maybe not so sturdy.” Bill remarked, standing up.

“Can you heal it?” Ford looked up at Bill hopefully.

Bill looked reluctant, and wrinkled his nose, leaning away from Fiddleford. “I’ve already picked my human to back, Sixer. I’m not a medic. Don’t you bounce back from injuries like that all the time?”

“You healed my injuries.” Ford said.
“Exactly.” Bill crossed his arms again. “So don’t you think I’ve done enough today?”

“Bill.” Ford frowned, disapproving.

“What?” Bill blinked, looking obstinately back at Ford’s frown.

“He’s seriously hurt!” Ford stressed. “He’s gone through a terrible ordeal, been kidnapped by a monster, stuck through with venomous quills, looked his worst nightmares in the eye, crash landed through a building and broken his arm! Don’t you think he deserves a bit of your sympathy?”

“Nobody deserves sympathy, and when you’ve lived as long as me that’s something you learn the hard way.” Bill turned his nose up at the prospect of lending his magic to smooth away Fiddleford’s suffering. Or at least he tried to, but Sixer kept staring beseechingly up at him with those earnest owlish eyes of his.

Bill’s resolute expression wavered.

Ford intensified his pleading look.

Bill made a frustrated noise, before unfolding his arms. “Ugh. Fine. I won’t heal him, but I’ll help you carry him back home. A free ride. You can’t ask for better than that. He can do his own healing. Deal?”

Smiling, knowing that that was the best he could get out of the flighty muse, Ford stood. “Thank you. Really.”

“Uuh.” Bill looked down at Fiddleford’s twitching body, unimpressed that he had to carry the convulsing man all the way home.

Stepping closer to his muse, Ford pressed a warm kiss to Bill’s cheek, expressing his gratitude, murmuring. “Thank you.”

Bill scoffed and rolled his eyes, ignoring the light blush that coloured his cheeks. He levitated Fiddleford’s body in the air, raising his hand. “Let’s go. If I have to endure another minute of this deplorable excuse for an expedition I’ll pull my own eyes out. How much further do we have to go until we reach home?”

Ford was already climbing back down the ladder to the hayloft, looking around to get his bearings. “From the looks of things, this might be Farmer Sprott’s barn, so if we stick to the eastern trail we should be back home in about an hour.”

“An hour?” Bill followed Stanford down the ladder, levitating Fiddleford’s body beside him. “That’s like, two dinners!”

Ford laughed and shook his head, but then looked over to Fiddleford, watching his friend quiver away from whatever monsters were plaguing his thoughts. He’d never seen another person left so frankly vulnerable, and the guilt swelled up in Stanford’s chest once more, reminding him of the cost of his carelessness.

Watching Fiddleford, Ford felt that this wasn’t quite the time for laughter.

Not until F was back home, safe and sound.
Back at the Shack, Bill paced out from the bathroom, dressed in Stanford’s fluffy pyjamas with a bath towel wrapped around his head. Steam fogged up the mirror behind him, and condensation dripped from the walls, the plumbing unused to the degree to which Bill enjoyed hot showers.

Tiptoeing downstairs, Stanford’s slippers muffling his tread, Bill poked his head into the kitchen, hoping to see Sixer. Bill could tell he’d been in here, the casserole dish containing the leftover lasagne was out, and the kettle was on the stovetop, so Sixer had presumably had tea.

Grabbing a fork and the casserole dish, Bill ran his hand over the lasagne and heated it up briefly, before picking up the ceramic dish, holding it in his arms like a baby, smiling down at it before stabbing it with the fork.

That was one dinner.

Walking room from room, Bill began searching for Sixer, eating out of the casserole dish as he went.

Sixer wasn’t downstairs, he wasn’t in the lab, he wasn’t in his room, or Bill’s room, or any other room really, so that left the attic.

Fiddleford’s room.

Bill looked up the stairs, reluctant to go up there, not knowing what he’d find. Fiddleford’s mishap with the monster, while entertaining, did put a spanner in the works of Bill’s whole carefree vacation plan.

Bill didn’t particularly care for Fiddleford, or for the man’s predicament, but he knew that having his chief engineer waylaid by a rather serious case of PTSD would negatively impact productivity on the portal, and Bill couldn’t have that.

Not that he minded a slight delay. He was the one who eschewed Sixer’s meticulous schedule in favour of some fun and games. Taking time off to mess around was Bill’s idea though, having to pause construction to humour McGucket’s recovery was less of a planned delay and more of an inconvenience. There was quite a bit of interdimensional pressure on Bill to arrange this portal’s construction without the hiccups his previous attempts had garnered, and he didn’t want to admit that this was a setback.

He didn’t know if Fiddleford would still have a mind to work with, when the neurotoxins were flushed out of his system. Gremloblin nightmares, while distasteful and lacking finesse, were effective in driving prey completely bonkers, and Bill didn’t have time for bonkers. He didn’t have time for indulging anyone else’s insanity.

Very few victims could come out of a Gremloblin attack with anything resembling a backbone afterwards, mentally shaped into a lifetime of cowering feebly. Scientists in particular responded differently from your run of the mill human to life shattering events. Bill had noticed scientists either became overwhelmed by morbid existentialism, becoming self destructive, or found an uncanny drive to push forward and overcome their mental obstacles to the point of becoming dangerous. Bill presumed Fiddleford was too much of a coward to become truly dangerous, but now that the Gremloblin had tweaked his mind, McGucket was a wild card, and Bill liked to count his cards carefully when playing interdimensional poker.
He didn’t like to lose.

Walking up the stairs to the attic, Bill pushed the door open and peered into the room.

It was dark inside, the curtains were drawn, and the lamp at Fiddleford’s bedside table lit the room. Sixer sat on the edge of Fiddleford’s bed, propping the other scientist into a sitting position with his arm, holding a cup of steaming liquid to his lips.

“There you are. Just one more sip.” Ford’s voice was soft, aiming for comforting reassurance. It was like he was talking to a baby, and he may as well have been. Fiddleford was still sweating profusely, battling through a delirious fever as the neurotoxins worked through his system, twitching intermittently.

Bill creaked the door open further, and Fiddleford flinched, his eyes flying to the door, not quite seeing Bill, hallucinations overlaying into his reality. His sudden motion knocked the mug, jostling warm liquid onto Ford’s hand.

Hissing, putting the mug on the countertop, Ford reached for a tissue to mop up the spill.

“How’s he doing?” Bill asked.

“Not good.” Ford replied with a sigh. “I’m trying to get him to eat something, but I don’t think he knows who I am, or where he is. He’s wary of everything, even saltine crackers.”

“He’s working through the toxins, that’s why.” Bill noted, moving further into the room, setting the casserole dish down on the mahogany study desk Ford had set up for F.

“He had a temperature to rival one of yours a while ago.” Ford commented, balling up the sodden tissue and throwing it into the waste paper basket across the room. “I’ve been doing my best to keep it down. I’ve been dunking a cloth in ice water every few minutes just to keep his forehead cool.”

“He’s sweating it out. Burning it off. That’s a good sign.” Bill said, licking the last of the lasagne off the fork.

“Temperatures like yours aren’t a good sign for normal humans.” Ford corrected Bill, reaching down into the bucket of ice water he kept on the floor, soaking the cloth again, and wringing it out, dabbing the sweat from Fiddleford’s forehead with it. “I’m worried if this fever continues that he might suffer brain damage. He’s such a brilliant mind, I can’t stand the thought of the world losing his genius.”

“Well, with your tender care, I’m sure he’ll be fine.” Bill said, only half lying. “Have you eaten?”

“I had leftovers.” Ford said, brushing off Bill’s concern, focusing on soothing his jittery friend.

“And will you sleep?” Bill pressed, watching Ford critically.

“Not tonight.” Stanford replied, setting the cloth down and reaching for the mug again. “I need to stay up with him. Someone needs to watch him.”

“Hmm.” Bill considered Ford, licking the last of the lasagne off his teeth. “This fever shouldn’t continue for more than twenty-four hours. I won’t have you going a week without sleep again. Not that I’m here to babysit you.”

“I’ll be fine.” Ford countered idly, focused on gently coaxing Fiddleford to take a sip. “It’s
Fiddleford I’m worried about.”

Bill made a small noise of acquiescence, and put the fork down in the dish. He looked around the desktop and picked up McGucket’s Cubic’s Cube, perfectly arranged from before on their hike. Twisting it in his hands, shifting the squares out of order, Bill watched as Ford coaxed Fiddleford into finally taking a few hesitant sips of the liquid.

“There you go. Just a bit more. Excellent.” Ford murmured encouragingly to F, wiping the bits that dribbled down his chin with another tissue. “Don’t want you to get dehydrated, not while you’re trying to recover.”

“He can’t understand anything you’re saying.” Bill felt compelled to point out.

“But he can understand the tone.” Ford said, still maintaining that soft comforting vocal range. “I’m trying to be comforting.”

“You sound like you’re talking to an infant.”

“And this tone comforts infants.” Ford shot back sweetly. “So perhaps stop criticising.”

Bill pursed his lips, but said nothing. Playing with the Cubic’s Cube for a while, the room was mostly quiet, until Bill spoke up again.

“If he asks, we both helped carry him back through the woods.”

“You don’t think he’ll remember -?” Ford began questioning, looking over at Bill.

“No.” Bill said succinctly. “He was too far gone to notice anything, and he wouldn’t believe it wasn’t just another dream or hallucination, floating through the forest.”

Ford nodded, accepting that, and made Fiddleford take another sip of the liquid, tilting the cup back.

“What is that?” Bill asked curiously.

“It’s soup. Just a broth. He needs the salts as much as he could use the hydration, and he kept batting away my saltine crackers.”

“So that’s why they’re all over the floor.”

“I’ll get them later.” Ford said dismissively, helping F drain the cup. Once it was all swallowed, Ford set the cup aside, and wiped over F’s face with the cool cloth once more.

Bill watched Ford care for Fiddleford for a while longer, twisting the Cubic’s Cube in his hands while lingering on the details. The careful way Sixer spoke to Fiddleford, talking him through the motions, knowing he couldn’t understand him. The gentle way he brushed Fiddleford’s hair back, wiping him down with that ice cold cloth every so often. The way he had bunched all the pillows up nice and soft around Fiddleford, so he couldn’t hurt himself with any of his sudden skittish movements. The plaster cast Ford had put on Fiddleford’s arm, setting the broken bone, was sitting tight in a sling, and Ford had put his friend into his pyjamas, so he looked less like he’d been dragged backwards through the forest by an enormous monster, and more like he was on his way to recovery.

Good.
“You’d give Florence Nightingale a run for her money, you know.” Bill commented approvingly. “Have you ever thought of wearing a bonnet?”

“You have a fixation with headwear that I’ll never understand.”

Bill shrugged, and tossed the Cubic’s cube in the air, juggling it for his amusement.

Fiddleford watched the cube being tossed with a nervous sort of focus, his eyes following its movement more consistently than previously. He no longer looked like he was staring out into middle distance now, tracking the movement of the cube from across the room.

“He’s getting better.” Bill pointed out.

“His temperature is down.” Ford observed, feeling F’s head with the back of his hand.

“He might actually pull through this.” Bill noted, surprised and gratified by the thought that McGucket might not be such a time waster after all.

“I hope so.” Ford said fervently, looking at his friend with hope burning in his eyes.

Putting the Cubic’s Cube back on the desk, Bill pushed off, and stretched his arms up over his head, yawning. “I guess I’ll leave you to it then. He’ll be safe in your capable six fingered hands.”

“Are you going to bed?” Ford looked up at Bill, taking in how the muse looked in his too big pyjamas with his towel wrapped around his head like a turban.

“I’m tired.” Bill replied, shuffling over to the door in Ford’s slippers now. “It’s been a long day.”

Ford watched Bill pace over to the attic door, and a thought struck him. Calling out to Bill just as he set his hand on the door handle, Ford spoke.

“Bill, that horoscope you gave him. Did you know what would happen to him today? Did you know that would happen?”

Bill paused, and looked over his shoulder at Ford, noting the little frown creasing the corner of Ford’s eyes.

“I didn’t know.” Bill replied honestly. “That’s the funny thing with prophecies, they can surprise you.”

“But they don’t have to come true, right?” Ford questioned. “The rest of the horoscope, it won’t all happen, will it? A gradual decline?”

“I don’t know.” Bill tilted his head, and shrugged. “It’s not my area. I don’t make a habit of doling out predictions. Most prophecies are cryptic enough that at the end of the day the psychic who wove the damn thing can point to whatever happens and justify it as their work. It’s an imprecise craft. I don’t put much stock in it.”

“But you told him to shut his eyes.” Ford maintained. “That couldn’t have just been coincidence.”

“It’s not like you to be superstitious.” Bill pointed out.

“I’m not, but a coincidence like that can’t be dismissed.”

“Dismiss it anyway.” Bill said flippantly. “It’s an incidence, not a coincidence. Prophecies are only as real as you let them be. Let it go Sixer.”
Ford seemed to dwell on that, looking down into his lap, before inclining his head at Bill. Bill watched Sixer, taking in his reaction, before opening the attic door.

“Good luck taking care of twitchy.” Bill said in an amiable tone. “Goodnight Sixer.”

“Goodnight Bill.” Ford replied, and watched Bill close the door behind him, thinking on horoscopes and nightmares.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Fiddleford. Is it bad for me to say that this was fun to write. For the past week I've had "I'm the singin' salmon spendin' all day jammin'" stuck in my head. Our Gremloblin star is actually the father of the Gremloblin Dipper captured in Boss Mabel. Also the Gremloblin tongue twisters were inspired by Bob Loblaw's Law Blog.
Kisses of fire, sweet devotions. Caught in a land-slide of emotions.

Stanford set the kettle boiling, exhaustion evident around his eyes. It was about six in the morning, Fiddleford had finally worked off the worst of the fever and was now sleeping soundly.

Listening to the bubbling sound of water roiling about in the stovetop kettle, Ford yawned and rubbed his eyes. It had been a long night.

He heard a creak from the doorway behind him and turned to see Bill watching him from the hallway.

“Oh Bill. You’re awake. It’s not like you to be up this early.” Ford said, rounding off his yawn. “Weren’t you sleeping?”

“I slept a little. You weren’t sleeping.” Bill pointed out, having missed Stanford’s entertaining dreams for the night. “I checked.”

“I’ve been up all night with F. I only just got him to wind down enough to sleep.” Ford sighed, and rubbed his forehead. “It’s wearing off though, he recognised me a few hours ago. Felt safe enough to sleep a little, though he had me promise up and down that I’d watch over him.”

“You’re doing a great job of that from down here.” Bill stepped into the kitchen, still dressed warm and cosy in Ford’s pyjamas, having stolen his dressing gown too.

“I just needed a coffee or something to keep me going.” Ford ran his hand down his face now, his eyes red at the rims. “I don’t know why, but watching Fiddleford like this is more exhausting than a full week without sleep. It’s doing my head in.”

Bill watched Ford, critically taking in the dark circles forming under Sixer’s eyes, and walked over to him, reaching up to rub at the tired bags.

“You look awful. Like a nerdy corpse.”

“That’s a real confidence booster.” Ford said sarcastically, leaning into Bill’s hand.

“Well, you’re not bad for a corpse.” Bill joked lightly, smoothing his thumb down Ford’s cheek. “Maybe you should eat something. Have something a little more nutritious than just coffee. Again, I’m not here to babysit you, but the occasional prod away from caffeinated grit might do you good.”

“I have to get back upstairs.” Ford replied, tired. “I shouldn’t leave him for too long. What if he wakes up and I’m not there? All the trust I built up with him would be gone in an instant.”

“He won’t notice.” Bill ran his hands along Ford’s shoulders now, not quite offering the quality of massage Sixer usually gave, but making an attempt. “The next two days are basically a write off for him, mentally speaking. I’ve never known someone to work off Gremloblin venom quicker than that. It’d be quite the feat.”

Ford wavered. “Maybe I can spend a little time on myself then. At least while he’s sleeping.”
“You should.” Bill encouraged him, wrapping his arms around Ford’s torso, hugging the scientist. “Eat something substantial, maybe take a shower. While you’re in the kitchen you may as well cook something.”

“I could.” Ford murmured, resting his chin against Bill’s hair, draping his arm around the muse, enjoying the embrace. It had been tense upstairs, every second of it, trapped in a room with his own guilt, and Fiddleford’s nightmares. Ford sighed, and pressed his cheek against Bill’s hair, closing his eyes, finally relaxing. “I could.”

Bill stood cuddled against Sixer for a while longer, running his hands along Ford’s back gently, humouring the tired scientist. Maybe humouring his own desire to be close to Sixer too, though nobody had to know that. Bill nuzzled his face into Ford’s neck and blew warm breath onto Ford’s collarbone, before looking up at Sixer with innocent yellow eyes.

“You could cook pancakes.”

Ford blinked down at Bill’s innocent look, and his brows formed a flat line, eyes lidded down at Bill, suspicious.

“You know, to treat yourself.” Bill smiled encouragingly.

Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill. “To treat myself, is it?”

“Do you want blueberry or chocolate chip?” Bill asked, and reached his hand up to poke Stanford winsomely on the cheek. “Your favourite kiiiiind.”

So that’s why Bill was awake. Ford rolled his eyes and huffed out a resigned breath. Shaking his head, he looked back down to Bill, putting his hands on the muse’s hips indulgently, pursing his lips before speaking. “And if I said I wanted the blueberry?”

“There are no blueberries in the house.” Bill said swiftly.

“Yes, there are, I bought a packet at the start of the week.”

“I hid them all.” Bill confessed, still looking up at Sixer with hopeful eyes that wanted pancakes. “And I bet you’ll never guess where.”

“Bill.” Ford said, trying to sound disapproving, but unable to help the way his lips quirked up at the edges, amused despite himself.

“Sixer.”

They stared at each other for a while, both of them attempting to keep a straight face, not wanting to be the one to break first.

Eventually the kettle began whistling, and Ford reluctantly broke away from their light hearted little staring competition to turn the stovetop off, pouring himself some coffee, Bill’s arms still wrapped around his torso. Leaning over the counter, reaching for the flour from the cupboard, Ford began bringing the ingredients for pancakes down and laying them out neatly, and Bill hugged him from behind, not letting him go while he whisked the pancake mix and prepared the frying pan.

In a way, this was nice, this sustained affectionate contact with someone. Ford couldn’t say he’d ever had anything like this before. Nor had he considered that once they’d broken down that initial physical barrier Bill would be so clingy. While unexpected, it wasn’t wholly unwanted, and Ford’s back felt warm where Bill was pressed up against him, his muse was like a little furnace. Bill’s
hands looped around Ford’s middle like a seatbelt, grounding him after the turbulent night he’d just had. Without meaning to, Bill’s affection proved to be just as rejuvenating for the scientist as it was for the godly being. Ford felt less weighed down by a night’s worth of guilt now than he had in the kitchen all by himself.

Pouring chocolate chips into the batter, he felt Bill stand up on his tip toes behind him, and press a kiss to the side of his neck.

“Good compromise.” Bill murmured, and Ford looked over his shoulder to Bill, unable to smother the soft appreciative smile that spread across his features.

“I suppose having my second favourite pancakes will be just as nutritional.” Ford said, faking a long-suffering sigh.

Bill squeezed his arms around Ford’s tummy for a moment. “Sure, nutritional, you just keep telling yourself that.”

“I can stop.” Ford threatened cheekily, pausing his movement to pour the batter in the pan.

“No, don’t stop!” Bill said quickly, watching the single drop of batter that fell into the pan sizzle with wide eyes, slitted pupils tracking the mixture’s movements from over Ford’s shoulder.

Ford chuckled, a fond warm sound, and he reached down with his free hand to squeeze Bill’s wrist reassuringly, placing his hand over the muse’s. He began pouring the mixture properly into cute pikelet sized discs on the pan, letting the pancakes sizzle for a while, rubbing sweet circles over Bill’s wrist with his free hand.

Flipping the pancakes over, Ford broke the comfortable silence.

“This is nice.”

“Chocolate chip is the better flavour.” Bill said agreeably.

“No, I mean this.” Ford squeezed Bill’s hand again for emphasis. “This closeness. I never thought you’d be interested in something like this.”

“Things change.” Bill shrugged, resting his chin on Ford’s shoulder. “Maybe you’re not as boring as I first thought you were.”

“You thought I was boring?” Ford questioned, mildly offended.

“First impressions Sixer. You wore a pocket protector, what was I supposed to think.”

“Well, I’m not sure what a top-hat and bowtie are supposed to make me think.” Ford replied haughtily, nudging the pancakes around with his spatula.

“That I’m classy and distinguished.” Bill crooned and pressed another brief kiss to Sixer’s neck. “That I’m a respectable gentleman. A dapper being of ceaseless wisdom and intergalactic hijinks.”

“That you watch too many old musicals.” Ford joked, ribbing Bill lightly.

“You can’t criticise my fashion sense, Pocket Protector. What would you know about being a snappy dresser?”

“You’re wearing my clothes right now Bill.” Ford pointed out. “I’d been wondering where that robe went.”
“Finders keepers.” Bill waggled his eyebrows at Sixer and grinned. “I like this fluffy one more than that red one you have. Talk about gaudy.”

“If we’re to continue like this, I’m pre-emptively forbidding any sort of makeover moment from you.” Ford wagged the spatula in the air at Bill, cutting off the most common homosexual stereotype he’d heard of at the quick. He’d seen too many fashionable men with handlebar moustaches in those magazines he tried not to look at when passing through various truck stops. Thank god for Bill’s aversion to facial hair, Ford would loathe growing a moustache like his father’s. He took his fashion inspiration from the greats of science, the turtlenecks of Carl Sagan. Ford thought he was plenty fashionable, dressing like his idol, dressing practical, dressing functional. He drew the line at becoming someone else’s idea of fashionable. “I happen to like what I wear, and I won’t be changing it.”

“Who says I’ll be changing it.” Bill dug his chin into Ford’s shoulder, making chewing movements just to dig his jaw in rhythmically. “On the whole, you’re fine. There’s just a few little things I would tweak.”

“I draw the line at being tweaked.” Ford said resolutely, removing the pancakes from the pan and piling them on a plate. Turning the stovetop off, having made more than enough pancakes for three people, he moved over to the table, Bill’s arms still looped around his waist, following his steps closely behind him, legs rigid like a toy soldier. At least he seemed to be amusing himself.

Setting the plates down on the table, Ford’s curiosity caused him to look back at Bill, intrigued despite himself by his muse’s statement. “What would you tweak, out of interest?”

Unwinding his arms from Ford’s waist finally, settling down at the table and dragging the plate of pancakes across to him, Bill took a bite out of the biggest one, before speaking with his mouthful. “Small improvements. Make you more durable. Humans are so breakable. You can’t even breathe in a vacuum.” Bill chewed while he spoke, shoving the whole pancake in his mouth, before moving to grab the next one, waving it around. “Improve your reflexes, your senses – I know you wouldn’t go for any extra limbs, but you should consider it.”

Ford’s eyes boggled at the muse as he took the seat opposite him at the table. “I thought you meant something like tweaking what kind of shoes I wore. I didn’t think genetic modification was on the table.”

“Do you want it to be on the table?” Bill looked up at Ford, suddenly interested.

“I - maybe not the extra limbs.” Ford slid down a little in his chair, his tired mind somewhat reflexively blanching at the possibility that his body could be physically changed by his muse on a whim. He was grateful Bill seemed to be attentive to Ford’s consent with the whole thing. His weary brain was instinctually recoiling at the thought of suddenly sprouting additional limbs, but the prospect of perfecting his natural physical vulnerabilities was an enticing thought to his scientific mind. He’d always wanted bionic eyes. He didn’t quite understand why the genetic remodelling was being offered though.

“Why would you even want to do that?”

“For when the portal opens. Don’t you want to breathe in space?” Bill blinked up at Ford, his cheek still full of pancake.

Ford looked down at the tabletop, shocked by Bill’s casual proposition.
Despite the business card gifted to him on the expedition, Ford still almost didn’t believe that Bill actually intended to come through the portal with him, to share his cosmic knowledge personally, guiding him through the multiverse. On multiple occasions Bill had asserted that he wouldn’t ‘play tour guide’ to Ford, barely indicating that he’d be accompanying him at all. Ford expected a sort of ‘you’re on your own now’ attitude once he’d completed his destiny. He didn’t expect his muse joining him with his adventures past that point, thinking Bill wouldn’t stay with him a moment longer than he had to, but now Ford supposed things had changed.

Maybe he’d proven himself captivating enough on his own merit, not so boring now. Perhaps interesting enough to garner himself a god for the long run, past the point where he had to pin Bill down to keep him around.

Ford almost didn’t believe it, doubting his own appeal, but when he looked up he saw Bill tilting his head, watching him with those curious yellow eyes.

“It was just an idea, no need to go all quiet on me.”

“You’re something else entirely.” Ford said, wonder lacing through his voice. Bill blanched, hoping this wasn’t the turning point that would alienate Sixer from him.

“What do you mean?” Bill tensed, swallowing a mouthful of his pancake nervously.

“You’d go through so much effort, just for me.” Ford continued, sounding hopeful yet disbelieving at once.

Bill exhaled, relaxing. This was just Sixer’s insecurities at play, nothing so daunting as a cosmic epiphany.

“Well.” Bill said, rolling his tongue along the inside of his mouth, scooping up the last bits of pancake and swallowing. “You make a mean plate of pancakes.”

That startled a laugh out of Ford, and the tension was broken, thankfully. Sliding the plate over to Sixer, having had his fill, Bill indicated for Ford to eat, and, smiling up at Bill shaking his head, Ford grabbed a pancake and bit into it.

“Should have really grabbed cutlery.” Ford murmured with his mouthful.

“You’ve just returned from two days in the wilderness, living off the land. Who cares if you eat with your hands.” Bill shrugged, then waggled his fingers at Sixer. “Like the savage you are.”

Ford snorted a laugh. “Well that’s nice.”

“I can be when motivated properly.”

Bill’s reply was cut off by a loud yelp and a crash sounding from upstairs. Both men looked up at the ceiling briefly, before Ford scrambled out of his chair, throwing his food down, racing up the stairs to the attic.

Bill followed curiously, wanting to check in on McGucket anyway.

Ford burst through the attic door and found Fiddleford huddled up in the corner of the room, having fallen from his bed, clutching onto his banjo like a weapon with his one good arm.

“It was there! In the corner! I s-seen it, I mean I saw it, I mean it’s there!” Fiddleford stuttered, pointing to the corner of his room with a shaky finger.
Ford turned to look at the corner in question and saw nothing fearful, only Fiddleford’s suitcase, propped against the wall.

“There’s nothing there F. It’s just your suitcase.”

“No! I saw it! Glowing eyes, like nightmares! Like bursting lightbulbs! Like a thousand needles!” F maintained, pressing his cast against his banjo, pulling discordant sounds out of the strings.

“F, just calm down. It’s alright. There’s nothing there.” Ford hurried to reassure his assistant, holding his hands out soothingly.

“He’s talking coherently much sooner than I expected.” Bill observed, looking in from the doorway.

Fiddleford’s eyes darted over to Bill, desperately fearful. “I saw it. It’s there. You’ve gotta believe me.”

“I believe you believe you’re seeing something.” Bill said diplomatically, watching Fiddleford with interest.

Fiddleford nodded, seeming more reassured by Bill’s belief than by Ford’s dismissals. “That’s right. I’m seein’ – I’m seein’ things. Crawlin’ all over the walls, watchin’ me.”

“Tell me what they look like to you.” Bill asked patiently, walking into the room sitting cross legged on the floor about a yard away from Fiddleford, giving him his space.

Ford watched as Fiddleford seemed to pull out of his frightened intensity a little, turning to Bill, driven by a focus now on detailing his hallucinations.

Ford hadn’t thought to ask him that, not wanting to encourage the delusions F was harbouring, denying them to console him, but somehow Bill asking genuinely about what F was seeing validated him instead. Ford was impressed.

“L-like little men, but backwards. Their bodies are backwards. They’re crawlin’ watchin me. Every so often one of them w-will burst. I – glowing eyes. They’re all pointin’ my way. I don’t know –”

“Won’t talking about these things just disturb him?” Ford questioned Bill, unsettled by the things F described.

“He’s already disturbed. This is progress. Let him talk.” Bill insisted, still watching F with interest. People’s nightmares always interested Bill, and these ones sounded terribly inspiring. They might affect Sixer though, and Bill didn’t need two scientists with broken minds. “You don’t need to hear this if you don’t want to. You probably shouldn’t. I’ll sit with him, you go get him food, and we’ll see if he can keep it down.”

“I – I’m tryin’ to keep it down. I didn’t mean to scream.” Fiddleford said anxiously, curling around his banjo like it was a teddy bear. “When I scream they move faster, and I can’t –”

“It’s alright.” Bill said calmly, sounding each one of his words out precisely. “We’ll just talk like this, and you tell me if they do something that you don’t like. Stanford is going to go get you something to eat, and we’ll just sit here, okay?”

“O-okay.” Fiddleford nodded, and swallowed anxiously, looking at Bill like he was his best friend, and not Stanford, who just stood to the side awkwardly, watching his assistant shiver like a hypothermia patient.
Bill glanced up at Sixer and jerked his chin towards the door, indicating Stanford should leave the room and come back with food. Ford bit his lip, looking between Fiddleford’s shivering form and Bill’s cool assertive gaze, before he slowly backed out of the attic.

As the door creaked closed Ford could hear Bill talking with Fiddleford. He paused outside the doorway, peering in, listening.

“What’s happening right now?”

“I, they’re backin’ off but the one on the left is needles now. Needles all over. It was sittin’ on my chest last night, it wants my eyes, I just know it – “

“That’s a good one. What else can you see?”

“I – it’s hard, the walls were meltin’ before but now they seem fine. I’m not sure what’s real anymore. I - can I move my arm? I can’t move my arm.”

“It’s in a cast, so you can’t move it. You can move the other arm.”

“I couldn’t move at all last night. My whole body was paralysed, I was frozen like a popsicle, I could feel my skin fallin’ off like cabbage leaves. I don’t know where it done planted, but I feel fine now, so maybe it grew back? I found Tate in the cabbages, and I wanted to pull him out of that dirty place and get him clean but my fingers don’t work right when I need them to. Is that normal? It isn’t normal.”

“Do they work now?”

“I – I think so. How will I know if they stop?”

“Here’s your cube thing, play with it while you talk, that way you’ll know.”

Ford looked through the crack in the door, watching Bill pass the Cubic’s Cube from the desk over to Fiddleford. Fiddleford began twisting the cube nervously, but the colours didn’t seem to align in any particular order. Usually it took F barely four minutes to get the cube set back to rights.

“What else did you see last night?” Bill asked F curiously.

“More burstin’ – things burstin’ all over. On the walls, it did. Needles came burstin’ outta my skin, then diggin’ back in. Monsters watchin’ me, teeth, always the teeth. Should never have gone after him. I know. I seen - ”

Ford slumped against the back of the door, closing it with a click, the guilt overwhelming him at that last part. Bill had told him he didn’t need to listen, that he shouldn’t listen, but Ford couldn’t help himself.

Fiddleford was right, he never should have gone after Ford.

Then maybe all of this would have never happened.
A week passed, and the neurotoxins worked themselves fully out of Fiddleford’s system, though it was a turbulent withdrawal period.

Ford thought that providing F with the stalwart distraction of work would help him feel like his old self again, bringing out the portal blueprints down in the lab. Work on installing the hyperdrive into the mainframe was underway. Ford wanted to test that the integration would work properly, and so he set up beside Fiddleford on the workbench, lining up the pieces he was preparing to put together.

“So as soon as I get these parts aligned we can begin assembly.” Ford spoke as he worked, lining up all the little pieces precisely, wearing his modified six-fingered safety gloves. “Is there a particular way you’d like me to put these together? Welding them?”

Fiddleford was staring down at the parts aligned neatly on the tabletop, his knee bouncing under the desk nervously.

“Fiddleford?” Ford prompted, hoping F was paying attention.

“Y-yes?” Fiddleford replied, jerking out of his little stupor.

“The parts. Do you want me to weld them?” Ford repeated gently.

“The parts?” Fiddleford blinked, before looking down at the metal pieces lining the table. “Oh, the parts. Uh, I wouldn’t weld them all until the end, most of these pieces can be arranged with a soldering iron and relay wiring. It’s only the big bits we want to weld.”

“You’ll have to direct me. With your cast you won’t be able t-”

“I know, I know.” Fiddleford waved Ford’s concerns off with his good arm, rolling his shoulders. His broken arm still sat in a sling, and the painkillers Ford had procured for him were strong enough that he didn’t often notice the pain. One of the benefits of having a mysteriously rich college pal was access to state of the art expensive medical supplies, apparently. “Thread the wire through here, triple loops. You want to make a clean circuit.”

Nodding, Ford began following F’s instructions, his tongue sticking slightly out of the side of his mouth as he leant down and focused on expertly threading the wire through the assembled parts, making a clean circuit. He had to pause to adjust his glasses several times, the detail work of the circuitry was unbelievably miniscule, but a hallmark of Fiddleford’s engineering. He wouldn’t accept a larger circuit, he found it lacked efficiency.

“It’s bent, it’s bending. You can’t let it bend.” Fiddleford pointed out, supervising Ford’s wiring work.

“I didn’t let it bend, it just bent. I’m trying –” Ford murmured somewhat irritably, the pressure of performing to Fiddleford’s exacting mechanical standards throwing him off slightly.

“You have to thread it gently. But fast. Gently, but fast.”

“Fast, or gently.” Ford muttered. “You don’t get both.”

“It needs both. Just let me –” Fiddleford tried elbowing Ford out of the way, and in doing so Ford knocked his copper wire on his wrist, bending a kink in the metal.

“Fiddleford!”
“I can do this quicker. Just let me –” F insisted, reaching over for the wire.

“Your arm is broken Fiddleford. You just tell me how to do it and I’ll –” Ford protested gallantly, not wanting his friend to take on more than he could handle.

“You don’t have the skill for this Stanford. Just let –“

“No!”

The two scientists squabbled for a while, until the ding from the elevator signalled Bill’s entry. Walking into the lab, chewing on a mini cheesecake Sixer had brought him from the store, Bill’s eyes narrowed, watching his two scientists go sheepishly quiet.

“What’s going on?” Bill asked suspiciously.

“Nothing –” Ford began, insistent on handling the situation himself. Fiddleford however had no compunctions tattling on Ford’s pushy behaviour.

“Stanford’s doin’ the wiring wrong and he won’t let me help him.”

Bill gasped dramatically, holding a hand over his mouth, before giving Stanford a sly look. “Sixer, not playing nice with the other kids? Such scandal!”

“That is not what happened.” Ford said hotly, crossing his arms. “F’s in no condition to assemble the –“

“I am if I use my left hand!” Fiddleford insisted. “You just gotta let me –“

“This requires two hands Fiddleford, you can’t just –“

“Children, children!” Bill raised his voice, holding his hand up like a teacher. “Calm down. Now switch seats.”

“What?” Ford looked at Bill with confusion, feeling vaguely patronised.

“You heard me. Switch seats.” Bill explained, gesturing with the hand that held the mini cheesecake. “Sixer, you sit on that side, and Specs can sit on the other side, that way he can do the delicate work with his good arm, and you can help him with your right. Problem solved!”

Grumbling slightly, but seeing the logic in the suggestion, Ford swapped seats with Fiddleford, unable to keep one last protest at bay.

“He still shouldn’t be doing this. He’s supposed to be resting.”

“I’m not sittin’ upstairs holed up doin’ nothing all day.” Fiddleford replied, settling down into the other chair. “Ain’t no way to pass the time. I’m injured, not an invalid.”

“How’s the construction going?” Bill interrupted another spat by taking the seat beside Fiddleford, looking down at the parts laid out neatly.

“Once we put all the pieces together and fire up the engine we should be ready to run a test of the hyperdrive by the end of the week.” Ford reported, leaning over to hold down the piece of machinery needed so F could do the threading work.

“Nice to hear we’re back on track.” Bill said, pleased that the incident with the Gremloblin didn’t wholly derail their construction timeline.
Leaning his elbow on the table, taking another bite out of the mini cheesecake, Bill watched closely as Fiddleford began threading the wire deftly through the circuitry, making perfect loops with his left hand, despite it not being his dominant hand.

The lab was silent for a while, the two scientists working together to wire up the circuitry, Bill supervising, watching the assembly intently with his astute yellow eyes.

About five minutes of work passed, and the wires were threaded through. Fiddleford held his hand out for the needle-headed soldering tool to press down the hot tip point in the correct spots, and Ford passed it to him swiftly, watching F’s progress.

As Fiddleford held the tool, beginning to press it down on the select points on the circuit, his hand began shaking slightly. He pulled the tool back, trying to calm himself with several deep breaths, before leaning forward again.

Every time he tried to press the needlepoint to the circuit board his hand would start shaking, shaking more violently the closer the point came to impacting the board. He couldn’t pierce it, no matter how many times he tried, and it was clear his lack of progress was frustrating him.

“Fiddleford –“

Fiddleford let out a loud frustrated exhale and slammed the soldering iron on the table, backing his chair away.

“Just don’t talk to me Stanford, okay? You’re throwin’ me off, I swear –“

“I’m not – you don’t have to rush, I’m not rushing you. Take your time!” Ford protested, gesturing to the parts on the table as Fiddleford walked away, pacing around the lab.

Bill watched, posture frozen in his chair, his eyes the only thing moving, following Fiddleford’s frustrated pacing around the lab.

“I don’t – I know I can do it – I know! This is what I do!”

“Fiddleford, I know!” Ford rushed to reassure him, holding his hand out. “I know.”

“I can do this – I just – I can’t –“ Fiddleford raised his good arm and ran his hand through his hair, looking at the floor.

“You can! Give yourself some time!” Ford insisted, raising his voice, turning around on his chair.

“I can’t!” Fiddleford stressed, throwing his hand around. “I keep tryin’! My hands keep shakin’! I can’t!”

“You can. Fiddleford, it’s been a week!” Ford clapped his hands on his knees, scooting his chair forward to face him. “It’s not even been a week. You shouldn’t be –“

“I shouldn’t be feeling like this. I shouldn’t be – I shouldn’t be –“ Fiddleford struggled with his words, looking down at his left hand that was still shaking. He clenched his fist, watching the tremors continue, and bit back the wetness welling at the corners of his eyes, sucking in another steadying breath.

Ford moved to stand up from his chair to console Fiddleford, but Bill’s hand shot out to the side, halting him.
Ford looked over to Bill, confused, and saw his muse directing an unblinking stare at Fiddleford, watching the assistant suck in deep breath after deep breath, trying to control his emotions.

Bill enforced the silence Fiddleford needed to bring himself back in check.

Several minutes passed, Bill not blinking once, watching Fiddleford wind down.

With one last shaky exhale, Fiddleford’s hand unclenched slowly, and he smoothed his fingers out in the air, watching the tremors fade.

As Fiddleford’s hand completely steadied, Bill spoke up, his voice casual as anything.

“You know, I hate when people tell me what I should and shouldn’t do.”

Fiddleford looked over to Bill, surprised by his sudden sharing of a personal anecdote. Bill shared those with Stanford, he didn’t share them with Fiddleford.

“Law of the land, law of nature, laws set by the powerful and all that sort of bullshit.” Bill shrugged, and took a bite out of the edge of the mini-cheesecake. “You can do this, you shouldn’t do that, you’re not capable of this. After so long of the same thing, you just – get – angry.”

Fiddleford looked at Bill, blinking at the man, taking in his dark skin and thinking he knew why Stanford’s assistant was sharing this particular story. Fiddleford’s eyebrows crinkled with misplaced pity and second-hand guilt on behalf of his ancestors.

Ford just looked at Bill, astounded, and then looked between his muse and his college friend, watching the way Bill’s story seemed to pull Fiddleford out of his tense mood.

“So, what did you do?” Fiddleford asked Bill, curious despite his guilt.

“The most powerful, exhilarating thing you can do.” Bill said, wiping a smudge of cheesecake off the corner of his mouth with his thumb, staring down Fiddleford. “Be angry. But not at yourself. Focus that anger, where it’s deserved. Channel it.”

“Into what?” Fiddleford questioned, oddly inspired by Bill’s words.

Bill gestured to the table full of parts behind him, and shrugged his shoulders.

“The most powerful thing you can do. What you’ve told yourself you couldn’t.”

Fiddleford looked back at the table, considering, before he clenched his fist again, and looked away.

“I can’t do it though.”

“Why?” Bill asked bluntly.

“The needle –” Fiddleford close to whispered, ashamed to admit it to himself.

“It’s all in your head Fiddleford.” Ford interjected, trying to dismiss F’s nightmares.

“So’s everything.” Bill laughed, and swiped the top off his cheesecake with his finger, popping the digit in his mouth and sucking off the sweet topping. “And that’s the punchline. Point is, should and shouldn’t don’t exist. There’s only what is. Now, you’re a scientist. How can you work with what is, to achieve what needs to be?”
Fiddleford stood silent for a moment, considering Bill’s words and how they rattled through his shame, his weakness, for the time being, to challenge him to think logically.

Walking back over to the table, Fiddleford picked up the soldering iron again, then set it down.

Taking a deep breath, Fiddleford extended his hand to Stanford. “Can I have the tweezers for this?”

“Are you sure you don’t want me to –” Ford started cautiously.

“Sixer.” Bill chided Ford’s protectiveness, glaring at him briefly.

“Tweezers, Stanford.” Fiddleford said more firmly.

Passing Fiddleford the tweezers with a dumbstruck expression, Ford watched Fiddleford pinch the tweezers in his fingers using his right hand, the hand that was in the cast. He struggled with it for a while, before finally finding a grip that could still work given his impairment. Picking up the soldering iron in his other hand, Fiddleford sat down on his chair and hunched over the circuit board, concentrating, as he attempted to solder the circuitry in place on his own.

His hand only shook a little, and he managed to pierce the metal with the soldering iron successfully, pulling back to dab the tip of the soldering iron on a moist sponge, wiping away the excess metal.

Without looking up, Fiddleford spoke flatly. “I can do this on my own now. You can go Stanford.”

“Are you sure you don’t need a –“

“You can go.” Fiddleford said more firmly, some of the residual anger leaking into his voice. He adjusted some wiring with his tweezers and lifted the soldering iron again, moving to finish his work. “I don’t need an assistant. This is what I do.”

Ford looked mildly hurt by Fiddleford’s sudden cool demeanour towards him, and opened his mouth to speak. Bill chose that moment to hop out of the chair he was sitting in, grabbing Sixer by the shirt front with one hand, jamming the last bit of cheesecake into Sixer’s open mouth with his other hand.

“I’ll keep Sixer out of your hair for you. Be sure to scream if you need anything.” Bill said sweetly as he yanked Ford out of his chair and dragged him out of the lab, his protests muffled by the mouthful of cheesecake foisted onto him.

Apart from twitching slightly at Bill’s use of the word scream, Fiddleford gave no indication that he heard him, already intent on his work, thoroughly immersed in ‘the zone’ of what Fiddleford McGucket did best.

If he were paying attention he would have been able to hear the ding of the elevator as it closed on Ford and Bill, Stanford swallowing the mouthful of cheesecake and asking Bill in a low muffled voice.

“Is he mad at me? I don’t unders-“

Before the elevator door closed.

If Fiddleford were paying attention, he would have chosen to ignore hearing that.
“Is he mad at me? I don’t unders-”

“Shhhh.” Bill pressed his finger against Sixer’s lips, silencing him, just as the elevator door closed behind them. “There are many things you don’t understand, O ignorant and fairly good looking human.”

“Why do you want him to be angry with me?” Ford questioned, highly offended, moving Bill’s finger away from his mouth. “Why? You – fairly good looking?”

“I didn’t tell him to be angry at you, I told him not to be angry with himself. There’s a difference, although really, when you think of it, that anger has to go somewhere. Kind of unfortunate about that, but what can you do?” Bill reasoned casually, gesturing with his hands. “It’s productive to channel it elsewhere, and he’s productive again.”

“Does that mean he’s better?” Ford asked hopefully.

“I didn’t say he was better, I said he was productive.” Bill corrected Ford. “He needs a project to throw himself into so he can ignore his own problems. Occasional repression like that is good - healthy even.”

“Healthy?” Ford furrowed his brow disapprovingly. “It’s not healthy, he isn’t – his arm is broken, he isn’t fully recovered, he isn’t in a position to be pushing himself –“

“But he doesn’t want to rest.” Bill countered, leaning his hands down on the railing in the elevator, watching the numbers go up to the ground floor. “You heard him say it himself. He can’t rest.”

“Well he should!” Ford insisted stubbornly, crossing his arms, looking across the elevator at Bill. “He should be resting, he can’t –“

“He can’t do anything with you clucking around him like a mother hen. I told you no.” Bill puffed out an unimpressed breath, looking Stanford up and down. “Not a good look for you.”

“But this isn’t about me.” Ford stressed, uncrossing his arms and flapping them emphatically at Bill to express his point. “It’s –“

“You’re right. It isn’t about you!” Bill exclaimed, tossing his hand roughly in Sixer’s direction as the elevator door opened, striding out of it swiftly. “It’s about him, and what he needs to believe he’s doing okay. And even if he isn’t – who are you to remind him of that? Maybe he wants to believe it?”

“His belief.” Ford spelled out, walking out of the elevator to keep pace beside Bill. “Isn’t grounded in reality.”

“Well, what is?” Bill whirled about, confronting Stanford. “What is Sixer? In this town? In this universe? After all that you’ve seen? What is?”

“That isn’t the point.” Ford asserted. “The point is –“

“The point is –“ Bill said loudly, speaking over Ford. “That I just robbed you of the one thing you were doing that mitigated your guilt over what happened to him, and he was the one to tell you himself that he doesn’t need it! He doesn’t need you Sixer! Or your help!”
Ford reeled back, staring at Bill with hurt, betrayed eyes, the sudden drop of those words on him staggering him and his self-righteousness.

Bill, realising that he’d burned Ford carelessly with his bluntness, immediately softened his tone, hoping to salvage Sixer’s fickle regard.

“Not now. He needs space. And he’ll come around to being just as buddy buddy with you as you like in time.” Bill stepped up to Ford, and reached his hand out to consolingly rub Sixer’s shoulder. “You can’t fix him. You can only be his friend.”

“I’m trying to.” Ford admitted sadly, reluctantly coming to the realisation that Bill was spot on about the guilt. It overwhelmed him, and that was a hard truth to reconcile with. “I really am trying, but now he’s mad at me —”

“It’ll pass.” Bill assured Ford, now looping both of his arms around Sixer’s neck, trying to captivate his attention, tilting his head to look him in the eye. “Specs doesn’t have the temperament to sustain a proper grudge. He’ll forgive you, you’ll hug it out, and I’ll be throwing up in the other room, utterly disgusted by it all.”

“You bleeding heart.” Ford couldn’t help but comment sarcastically, finding himself comforted despite all odds by Bill’s assurances.

Still in the same romantic tone, looking up at Sixer coyly, Bill replied. “You know, I think I had one of those in a jar once.”

Scoffing in an amused disbelieving way, Ford wound his arms around Bill’s waist, pulling him in a close embrace. “You’re impossible.”


“Speaking of descriptors.” Ford started, raising his eyebrow at Bill. “Specs?”

“He didn’t have a nickname.” Bill’s voice went high defensively. “I couldn’t keep calling him twitchy, I’m trying to encourage the opposite of that.”

“Mmmhmm.” Ford hummed, entertained.

“It’s all part of me fixing it.” Bill said simply, nodding to emphasise.

“I thought you said you can’t fix him.” Ford had to point out.

“I said that you can’t fix him. Totally different.” Bill looked up at Ford with a determined sparkle to his eye. “I am all about fixing things.”

“Since when?” Ford had to scoff, as Bill tended to break more than he replaced.

“Are you doubting my fixing ability?” Bill questioned dangerously, narrowing his eyes.

“Oh no, not at all.” Ford insisted, laying heavy on the sarcasm. “Just that if you’re all about fixing things now, I wouldn’t mind my old PHD certificates back as they were, or my old trophies, or my prototype inventions that you smashed.”

“They smashed themselves in an act of wilful defiance, and for that sass, you don’t get the remarkable distraction I had all set up for you to amuse your bored little mind now that you’ve got
no job to do.” Bill said with a petty shrug of his shoulders, extricating himself from Ford’s arms to meander lightly down the hallway, beginning to climb up the stairs. “Your loss.”

“What distraction?” Ford asked, curious, walking down the corridor, tempted by the treat Bill dangled before him.

“What distraction?” Bill parroted back at Sixer, spinning around halfway up the staircase to shrug comically at his intrigued human.

“No, really. What distraction?” Ford questioned stubbornly, standing with his hand on the banister at the bottom of the stairs, looking up at Bill.

“And now you’ll never know. A pity.” Bill tilted his chin up facetiously at Ford, being deliberately obtuse.

“You didn’t have a distraction.” Ford said gamely, jutting his chin out, stubborn as he watched his muse play this teasing and unfair game with him.

“Oh, but you know me Sixer.” Bill grinned and held his left hand up, his right reaching to tug the hem of his long sleeve down just enough to show a hint of metallic silver glinting unnaturally in the low light of the stairwell. “I always have something up my sleeve.”

Ford stared at that glint of metal, his mind taking a few seconds to process what that meant.

Internally his quick brain went through realisation, to concern over the fact that Bill was wearing the silver cuffs for the apparatus again, to wavering consideration that they didn’t affect Bill too badly the last time he wore them, to the jolt of understanding that Bill was wearing them for a reason, to the awestruck thought that he was wearing them because he wanted to be intimate with Stanford, to the dreamy remembrance of the last time he was intimate with Bill, to his prior determination to find out what made Bill tick, to his bold actualisation of the fact that he had an opportunity to actually go through with it now, to the pleasurable thought that his muse had been planning this, wanting Stanford’s hands on his body, maybe even thinking about this all day, to the wry consideration that this was the perfect opportunity to give Bill a little payback for being such a tease, and right back around to the mental agreement that Bill was right; this was absolutely the perfect distraction Ford needed.

All of this mental processing happening within the span of two seconds of course.

Ford’s eyes shot up to Bill’s in an instant, a plainly expressed hunger in his gaze making clear to Bill that Ford was taking him up on that distraction, and Bill couldn’t take it back.

A thrill of excitement shot through Bill’s being with that look, adrenaline setting his peculiar heartbeat racing, heat flushing his form in an instant. He sucked in an exhilarated breath, and Sixer placed one foot on the stair, making towards him.

Bill backed up two steps quickly.

Sixer placed his other foot on the stair above, his eyes not leaving Bill’s, and Bill couldn’t help the giddy grin that stretched across his features, before he bolted all the way up the stairs, Sixer chasing behind him.

Bill flew up onto the second floor, careening down the corridor, his socks skidding on the floorboards, his hands fumbling with the doorknob to Sixer’s room, hearing Ford’s feet thudding on the landing, hot on his heels. Bill was torn between flinging the door open for them both, or locking himself inside Sixer’s room again, just to make him wait, just to tease. He wondered if
Sixer would break the door down again, and smirked wickedly.

Ford was closing in on him, and Bill twisted the door handle, flinging the door open wide, before finding himself spun around, pressed up against the back of the door by Sixer’s broad body, pinning him to the wood.

Bill was panting from the rush of the chase, staring up at Sixer with wide blown slitted pupils, that excited grin splitting his face.

Ford’s large hands were encircling Bill’s wrists and pressing them against the wood of the door, the scientist looming over Bill, a similar joy and excitement colouring his face with patches of pink, emboldened by his forwardness.

“Can I distract you?” Ford asked, his voice low, his face close to Bill’s, looking down into those bright yellow eyes.

“Yes.” Bill breathed, leaning up into Ford’s space. “Yes.”

Kissing him, their lips meeting together, Ford melted forwards into Bill, their bodies pressing against one another, moulding into each other. Bill strained up into the kiss, flexing his wrists impatiently until Sixer let go of one, allowing Bill to weave his arm possessively around Sixer’s neck, pulling him closer, running wiry fingers through Ford’s fluffy hair.

They kissed, barely breaking to breathe, so caught up in one another, exhilarated, and Ford curled his free hand around Bill’s back, smoothing his broad palm along the dip in Bill’s spine, before hoisting him up, hand hooking just under Bill’s thigh, Bill’s legs already winding to lock around Sixer’s back.


“What do you want?” Ford asked huskily, his voice a low murmur, the intensity boring right through him, arousal strengthening his focus into a keen awareness of the heat between them, and Bill’s body pressed firm against his.

Planting a heated kiss on Ford’s mouth, Bill poured himself into the moment, drinking in the intimacy, before pulling back to look Ford in the eye, his hot breath fogging up Ford’s glasses.

“Everything.”

When the fog from his glasses cleared, Bill could see a fire in Ford’s eyes that he thought no human could accomplish. It looked as scorching as Bill’s fire, and just as devastating. Sixer smiled, a smug quirk at the side of his lips, that fire burning brightly, and murmured.

“That, I can do.”

Lifting Bill up, jolting a giddy laugh out of the muse, Ford carried Bill, one hand under his thigh, the other supporting his back, across the room, and dumped Bill on the middle of his mattress, throwing himself right down after him, sucking kisses onto his muse’s neck.

This was an excellent distraction.
The glow from the cuffs dimmed as they popped off Bill’s wrists.

The smell of singed fabric permeated the room and Ford flopped down on the mattress next to his muse, looking up to the ceiling, panting.

“Too much?” Ford asked, looking over to Bill, who was staring at the ceiling too, looking rather dumbstruck.

Ford watched Bill stare blankly forward for several more seconds, and brought his hands up to lace them together on top of his bare chest, twiddling his thumbs. Bill kept staring upwards, his brows knotting together now, like he was having a conversation in his head.

Ford whistled casually to himself, and clapped his hand on top of his fist awkwardly. “Too much.”

“I keep burning through those damn batteries.” Bill muttered, beating his fist against the mattress, frustrated.

“Too much.” Ford confirmed, nodding to himself.

Bill rolled over on the bed and sat upright, running a hand through his hair before resting his palm facing upwards on his knee. A blue flame danced in his palm, burning off the excess steam, while his mind raced.

Ford propped himself up on his elbows, his eyes tracing down the filigree tattoo lines that ran along Bill’s back.

They had gotten so far as to remove one another’s shirts, in between the kissing and groping, Ford’s residual worship peaking the moment when he reached to unzip Bill’s trousers. Stanford’s chronic overthinking caused Bill’s cuffs to spark dangerously, and Bill’s determination to proceed anyway, grinding against Sixer’s hip, set the curtains of Ford’s room on fire.

“Too much is not enough.” Bill scowled at the flame burning in his palm. “It shouldn’t be too much. It doesn’t –”

“Can you get more batteries?” Ford suggested, watching Bill’s shoulders move, light reflecting off the gold lines fluidly with the motion of his breathing.

“I had twenty-one. Twenty-one kinetic energy cubes. You can harness supernovas with a fifth of one of these things. And they don’t come cheap.” Bill explained, still somewhat dumbstruck over the fact that since he began this whole kissing business with Sixer he’d burned through all twenty-one of these like they were nothing.

Ford suddenly became intently curious about these batteries, sitting up fully on the bed beside Bill. His muse had managed to exhaust the storage space of twenty-one of these mysterious cubes, which went some way to explaining just how much power his muse put out. The raw energy stored within must be beyond substantial, and Ford’s mind was ticking over at the clean energy conversion potential these cubes could have.

“How much did they cost you?”

“Cost me? You think I actually paid for them? Gosh, you’re precious Sixer.”

“You stole them?” Ford exclaimed, crossing his legs underneath him, getting comfortable on the
bed. Bill’s hands wandered more than Stanford’s had, and Ford was stripped down to his boxers, despite wanting to put the romantic spotlight on Bill this time. Evidently it was too much for his muse to handle.

Bill looked over to Ford at that, giving him a sharp, measuring look, as though testing what his reaction would be.

“What’s it to you?”

“Should I be impressed?” Ford asked, unable to mask the fact that he vaguely was.

“Preferably.” Bill smiled hopefully over at Sixer, noting that his expression wasn’t quite as chastising as he anticipated. “Unless you want to go goody-goody on me about something that enabled me to squeeze that funny little noise out of you before.”

“It wasn’t that funny.” Ford huffed, mildly embarrassed.

“Are you kidding? It was hilarious!” Bill cheered, slapping his knee with mirth, before turning around on the bed, bringing his feet up from the floor to sit cross legged opposite his blushing human.

“I don’t think you can talk about funny noises, comparatively speaking.” Ford pointed out, smugness returning to his face.

“Well, let’s talk about that never, and agree to change the subject.” Bill said firmly, pointing at Stanford with a burning finger.

“Did you really steal them?” Ford questioned again, pressing the point. “I’m not judging, I just want to know the circumstances.”

“Really?” Bill asked sceptically, raising an eyebrow at Ford.

“Was it a heist? Who did you steal from? Circumstances.” Ford made a grabbing motion with his hand, keen for details.

“The circumstances were, only chumps pay for what they can be clever enough to take for free.” Bill regaled Ford gleefully, now that he didn’t feel he had to be on guard against Sixer’s moral censure. “The circumstances were also HILARIOUS, I almost wish you were there to see it. Operation Six Fingered Discount!”

“You did not call it that.” Ford laughed, astonished.

“To my friends I did, hah.” Bill grinned fondly, relaxed and elated by the rush of telling Sixer this.

It was a rush, particularly because Bill knew he shouldn’t be doing it, telling Sixer anything about him or his business at this point in time, but the prospect of letting Sixer in was becoming more and more tempting. Bill liked his company, he liked telling Sixer his stories, and he liked the human’s reactions to his more memorable, impressive moments.

Ford was looking at him with eager receptive eyes, sitting cross legged on the bed, and Bill had an opportunity to boast, so naturally he couldn’t help himself.

“Okay. Just one quick story.” Bill rubbed his hands together, dousing the flames, and scooching closer across the bed, nudging knees with Sixer. “So wherever there’s a legal economy, there’s an illegal black market. One of the laws of the universe. Legal trade, illegal trade.”
“And these batteries are illegal trade then?” Ford prompted, curious.

“Technically they’re a non-tradable good. Strictly controlled by intergalactic Federations, aka Wet-Blankets-R-Us if you want to use the technical term. However, when it comes to non-tradable goods you’ll always get a subset of junkers out there who rally behind the manifesto of ‘you don’t tell ME what to do’ and the galaxy is a better place for them. Truly. However, you can’t buy directly from the junkers, you’ve got to go through the dealers, and they hop up their prices so exorbitantly because their sale has to go through bigger guys with their fingers in pies, which means that if any sale is going down anywhere it’s at the biggest pie shop in the multi-verse. The Cryptix Noire.”

“And the Cryptix Noire is a pie shop?” Ford clarified doubtfully.

“It’s the blue ribbon pie shop of black markets. Cryptix Noire has such a chokehold on illegal trade that now it’s nearly the ONLY place you can go to purchase your illicit goods, which means that it’s a great place to go looking for illegal kinetic energy cubes, and anything else you might need.” Bill explained cheerily. “The guy with his thumb in the pie is Raha Diñeiro, the most well-armed chump you’ll meet. He literally screamed at me ‘Nobody steals from Raha Diñeiro’ right after I stole from him – you should have seen his face! Oh, the irony. The sweet, delicious irony.”

“So you stole from him?” Ford asked blankly, before leaning back, taking in his muse’s delighted expression that told him that – yes, Bill certainly did steal from this fellow. “And that went well for you?”

“Well in the sense that I barely got shot at, and a lifetime ban probably only applies to his lifetime, AND I got you that cute little souvenir.” Bill pointed at Ford’s knee, poking him with the tip of his finger sweetly.

“He shot at you?” Ford exclaimed, his protective urges kicking into gear, leaning over to run his hands over Bill’s arms, as though checking for injuries.

“Down tiger.” Bill said, intending to reassure Stanford, but not intending to push him away, despite his current lack of apparatus. He liked Sixer touching him too much. “He missed, clearly, but you’ve just seen me override twenty-one cosmic energy cubes, Sixer. Like he could even put a scratch on me.”

“Speaking of those cubes, if you stole them before, and you’re banned now, how exactly do you plan on getting more of them?” Ford posited, still running his hand along Bill’s forearm. Ford also liked touching Bill too much.

“I’ll have to put people on it. Call in a few favours.” Bill considered, his own hand splaying over Sixer’s knee now, fingers coasting through Stanford’s leg hair without thinking about it. “There are ways around a lifetime ban, and if that doesn’t work I can just go straight to the junkers and see where that gets me, though they have this pesky code that’s hard to waiver away.”

“If you’re willing to listen.” Ford began, bringing his roaming hand up along Bill’s shoulders, tangling his own six fingers in the hair at the back of Bill’s neck, stroking the spot there gently with his fingernails, knowing how it melted Bill’s defences. “I may have an alternative solution.”

“Mmmmmmm.” Bill’s eyes began lidding, closing at the sensation of nails scraping along his scalp. “What solution?”

“Well.” Ford started, leaning in closer to Bill, drawn in by his muse’s pleasure, planting a heated kiss to Bill’s cheek, murmuring his idea into Bill’s skin, hoping to entice him into considering it,
tempting him with the prospect of further physical contact. “We could recycle the batteries you’ve already overloaded –“ Ford kissed Bill again, now at the edge of his mouth, watching his muse shut his eyes blissfully. “-freeing up their space again for you, by using them to power my portal.”

Bill froze as Ford pressed another soft kiss to the corner of Bill’s mouth, Ford’s proposal jarring Bill out of his pleasant daze, before he pulled away to open his bright yellow eyes, glaring reproachfully at Ford.

“You want to what now?”

“Well, I’ve been looking for a viable power source that won’t short circuit the town. Harnessing the clean energy from those cubes could be –“

“No!” Bill said emphatically, putting his hands on Ford’s shoulders and pushing away from Sixer.

“Bill, this could be pivotal to improving the portal. Making it better.” Ford held his hand to his chest, the self-righteousness coming back strong. “At least half of that energy overload is due to me anyway, couldn’t you just –“

“You don’t give a gift, and then ask to take it back.” Bill said, sounding beyond insulted, emphasising every word. “No, Sixer. That energy is mine. I made it. It’s for me.”

“But if you dedicated it to the portal, I could replenish that energy for you right away, and we could do this –“ Ford reached out again, placing his hand on Bill’s knee.

With a sharp slap, Bill batted Ford’s hand away. “No Sixer.”

“But don’t you want to -?” Ford questioned, trying to tempt Bill into changing his mind earnestly. That was the problem with Ford, even when he was being manipulative he was still being earnest about it.

“Not if it means giving up my power! Find another way.” Bill crossed his arms, speaking definitively.

“But you won’t even consider this way –“ Ford protested, Bill speaking over him.

“This way is insulting and degrading, and I won’t be doing ‘this’ at all with someone who deliberately treats me like this.” Bill turned up his chin, looking away from Stanford, his expression disgusted.

“I’m not mistreating you.” Ford scoffed, getting up on his knees on the bed, trying to catch Bill’s eye. “This is a solution that benefits both of us.”

“No, it doesn’t.” Bill said stubbornly, not even looking at Stanford.

“You just said a fifth of one of those cubes can contain the power of a supernova, clearly you have more than enough to share if you –“ Ford raised his voice argumentatively, sweeping his hands out as he spoke.

“Sixer, you better not continue to spout a single word of what you are saying because I know for a fact you left your communism back in college where it belonged, and this is just pure selfishness.” Bill spat, pointing angrily at Sixer as he spoke.

“I’m selfish? You’re the one who won’t compromise–“
“My compromise is finding a better solution!” Bill threw his hands in the air. “Thinking outside the box! You just want your grubby little hands on my cubes!”

“For the good of the portal!” Ford insisted, gesturing emphatically.

“I know what’s for the good of the portal!” Bill countered.

Their argument becoming more heated now, Bill and Ford both spoke next, speaking over each other at the same time, though their sentences ended up completely identical.

“It’s my –“

“It’s MY –“

“Portal!”

The two men stared at each other, riled from the argument, panting, both stunned into silence.

As Ford’s brows began to furrow, taking in Bill’s admittance, Bill sinuously rose from the bed, picking up his shirt from the floor, pulling it over his head, clothing himself.

“I’m leaving.” Bill said in a resolute, calm voice, not even pausing to look back at Stanford. “I can’t be around you right now. I know exactly how to successfully power this portal, and I know exactly what we need to do to do it, and if you can’t accept that, I’ll find another scientist to build it with.”

“You can’t leave.” Ford responded, still angry from the argument. “You can’t set foot out of this town, and you’re not going to find a better scientist than me to help you with this. It’s my destiny.”

“I control your destiny, and I decide whether or not you get to take it. It doesn’t matter how smart you are, if you’re dumb enough to piss me off right now then you deserve nothing!” Bill hissed venomously at Ford, clenching his fists. “And I can drag a new mechanic to this town with a click of my fingers, so don’t think you’re special just because this happened. Happened past tense.”

“Bill –“ Ford started, his anger shaken by the thought of losing everything, his muse along with it, all in one day. “I didn’t –“

“You didn’t what?” Bill sneered at Ford, who sat in his boxers on the middle of the bed, suddenly looking lost. “You didn’t think? You’ve been doing that a lot lately.”

“Please, don’t leave.” Ford begged, remorse finding it’s appropriate place on his features. “I didn’t mean to –“

“You didn’t mean to what?” Bill asked sharply.

“I –“ Ford struggled, not quite finding the words for an apology just yet. He was still too convinced that his plan was best, still swept up in a wave of self-righteousness.

“Figure yourself out then come see me with a proper apology.” Bill cut Ford off, walking over to the door, opening it, pausing with his hand on the handle. “I’m going for a walk. I’ll be back for dinner. Whether or not I stay after that is up to you.”

“Bill -!”

Ford watched, struck with a spiralling sense of helplessness as Bill marched out of his room and slammed the door behind him, the hinges rattling with the force exuded.
He could hear the stomp of Bill’s feet all the way down the stairs, and the slam of the back door behind the muse as he stormed off into the forest.

Alone in his room, Ford gave himself recourse to swear, utterly frustrated by his own stupidity and whirling emotions.

“Damn it.”

This was the first serious argument he’d had with his muse since they’d become romantically involved, and Ford didn’t expect it to hurt as badly as it did. Bill threatened to leave? To leave him? Beating himself up about it was an understatement, Ford wanted to go toe to toe with his past self in the ring, no holds barred. He felt like such a cad.

“Losing your destiny and your muse all in one day. Stupid.” Ford chastised himself, slamming his fist angrily into his mattress, the poor bed taking quite the beating today. “Stupid Stanford.”

Ford didn’t know who he’d go to if he wanted to talk about this. He’d never had a friend who could deliver romantic advice – heck, he’d never had a romantic relationship to seek advice for in the first place.

His mind defaulting to Fiddleford, Ford considered asking his help with crafting an appropriate apology, but then realised that Fiddleford was angry with him too.

“Now two people are mad at me.” Ford groaned, and slapped his own forehead, humiliated by his own social ineptness.

Why was he like this? He just put his foot in everything. He didn’t even think he’d done anything that terrible. He’d just tried to look after Fiddleford, and tried to find a solution for Bill.

The wrong solution apparently.

Ford thought it was perfectly logical to recycle the batteries, but Bill didn’t see it that way. Maybe this was one of those interdimensional faux pas Ford assumed he’d come up against, dating a cosmic multi-dimensional being.

If Ford squinted he supposed he could see where Bill was coming from. Revoking worship for the sake of recycling did seem a tad insulting given how highly Bill seemed to value it. Ford could still remember the awe on Bill’s face when he had first willingly given him his worshipful energy, back in the graveyard.

*Do you even know what it is you’re doing for me?*

Maybe Ford didn’t. He thought he knew, but clearly he had no idea about what it meant to love a God.

He cringed at the thought that that love might be one-sided now, after potentially losing the majesty that was Bill returning his feelings. Ford really thought he had something special going with his muse, that Bill had looked at him, considered him, and chosen him worthy of more than just his knowledge. He thought he knew what it meant, sharing himself with Bill, and the muse sharing right back in turn.

Clearly that sharing didn’t include the energy stored in those batteries. Bill wouldn’t share that. He had asked too much.

Really, now that Ford came to think on it properly, he had essentially reduced his regard for Bill
down to utilitarian purposes. He’d made his feelings for Bill into the battery, into a combustible fuel, and called Bill selfish for not passing the match to burn it all away.

He really was stupid, for a genius.

Scrubbing his face with his hands, Ford tried to shake himself out of his melancholy, slapping himself on the cheeks to wake his brain up.

“Think.” Ford muttered to himself, trying to jog his mind into coming up with a solution to this that wouldn’t leave him short the most important person in his life.

His pride seemed to be running through the list of possible solutions that didn’t involve apologising, but he knew he’d have to swallow that pride soundly if he ever wanted to repair his bond with Bill.

“Think Stanford. You have until dinner to fix this.”

Food had been the key to unlocking Bill’s favour in the past, maybe now he could use it to earn back Bill’s forgiveness. Ford once heard Bill say ‘the way to a man’s heart is through his stomach’ and while his muse had followed that statement with ‘and then up through the ribcage’ (Ford assumed he was joking) the fact remained that it was a decent tactic. With the right meal he could butter Bill up enough to have him accept his apology, mending the rift between them, returning their relationship to the point where it once was. There was a chance he wouldn’t even have to verbalise his apology, the meal would say it for him. That could work.

Deciding not to sit around and mope in his underpants, Ford stood up, forming a plan to win his muse back with the best damn apology dinner he’d ever had. He’d go down to the shops, bring back groceries, hole up in the kitchen, and prepare the most decadent ‘I’m sorry’ spread Bill had ever seen.

*Putting on clothes would be a good start.* Ford thought to himself, and began to dress to go out.

He’d won his muse over once before, Stanford planned to do it again.

Now where were his trousers?

“That smug, self-serving, piece of shit Sixer. And he had the nerve to –“

“Bill, Bill, slow down. Go back to the first bit again.” Pyronica was rubbing her forehead just below her horns, nursing a drink while listening to Bill’s sudden tirade which came out of nowhere.

There she was, peacefully blowing up civilians in the field, when Bill appeared, tugging her back to the Quadrangle, locking them both up in the penthouse with a bottle of spectral liqueur and an overwrought screeching triangle.

“Sixer had the nerve to –“ Bill started again, the fire in the fireplace sparking with the fluctuations in his tone of voice. “To insult *me* by –“

“That’s been him this whole time though. You picked up a stubborn, ballsy human, who’s got more
nerve than sense – and you’re – what, surprised that he’s like that?” Pyronica sounded beyond exasperated, leaning back on the plush leather couch of dubious origin, watching Bill float around the room, his version of pacing.

“He makes me so angry though!” Bill spun around, holding his drink with a third arm, his first two squeezing the air in front of him. “I just want to strangle him sometimes.”


“I want to, but I don’t want to.” Bill explained poorly, waving his hand in circles while he spoke. “I want to, but I don’t want to. I mean, I want to – “

“Uhuh.” Pyronica lidded her eye at Bill, unimpressed. She took a long slow slurping sip of her drink, staring blankly at Bill the whole time.

“Don’t you look at me like that. You have no idea the kind of pressure I’m under right now Missy. I can’t afford any screw ups this late in the game.” Bill stressed, pulling at his lower eyelid, groaning.

“So, Six Fingers is ballsy, that’s not a screw up.” Pyronica tilted her head, not understanding.

“I mean screw ups from me.” Bill admitted reluctantly, slapping himself lightly above his eye. “First, I nearly lost my mechanic, his brain is broken and it’s not even my fault. Second, I’ve had to pause work on the portal. And third, Sixer’s a problem. Or I’m the problem. I told him I was leaving. I can’t leave. Half of my portal is sitting there in his basement, and even if I wanted to start from scratch – he’s right! I’m never going to get as good an opportunity as this.”

“Well two scientists and half a portal is a good opportunity.” Pyronica reasoned.

“Two scientists and half a portal is chump change compared to two scientists, one of whom worships the ground I walk on, pours on the adoration like kerosene on fire, AND is building me the door I need.” Bill shot back his drink into his eye, wiping his eyelid with his arm, before clicking and pouring himself another drink. “Not to mention the fact that sometimes his company isn’t entirely abhorrent. I don’t want to go. If I go now, Sixer will stay mad at me, and we’ve barely even scratched the surface of this whole physical thing –“

“Aha! So there is a physical thing between you two!” Pyronica shouted, bouncing on the couch and pointing at Bill triumphantly. “I knew it!”

“Barely!” Bill complained, throwing his hands in the air. “Every time we try something new, I burn a hole through the furniture and Sixer gets all stuffy. Oh no, not the upholstery, not my favourite mahogany desk, not my remaining PHD certificates.”

Pyronica giggled behind her hand, then guffawed louder, moving her hand away. “Oh my God. That is hilarious.”

“Hilariously frustrating!” Bill scoffed, and took another long sip of his drink. “I need more of those batteries and I need them yesterday.”

“I know I can get Nadine to squeeze a few of them out of the markets for me. I’ve already sent Keyhole to ask her.” Pyronica examined the flames licking up her arms nonchalantly. “And AM has their contact in the Federation who can look the other way while he lifts a few.”

“Good.” Bill nodded, looking down into his sparkling drink. “Good.”
“What are you gonna use them for?” Pyronica asked, crossing her flaming legs. “I mean, you’ve got twenty-one of them all lined up in the uncrackable safe. Maybe sparing a few for your fancy door won’t hurt none.”

“It will hurt my pride.” Bill insisted dramatically. “What’s the point of having scientists if they can’t solve your problems for you?”

“Aren’t you doing most of the work down there? I mean, really, you’re solving their problems for them.” Pyronica took another sip of the liqueur and smacked her big puffy lips. “They should be grateful.”

“I know!” Bill swilled his drink theatrically. “They should be down on their knees thanking me.”

“So that’s what got interrupted.” Pyronica smirked at Bill indulgently.

When Bill didn’t seem to pick up on her meaning, squinting at her, she laughed so honestly that she jostled her drink, spilling a little onto her leg where the liquid immediately incinerated, fizzling up in a small mushroom cloud of dying stars.

Wiping the corner of her eye with her pinky finger, Pyronica regained her composure a little. “Listen Bill, you don’t have to worry about Six Fingers. Humans are a soft touch, and you two still haven’t got to the touching part. The real touching part. If you think he’s wrapped around your finger now, just you wait. You can drag a human anywhere if you lead them by the –“

“Boss?” Kryptos teleported into the penthouse rudely, looking around.

“-Nose.” Pyronica finished delicately, and set her drink down.

“Kryptos, it’s considered good manners to knock.” Bill said, a slight strain steeling his voice as his hand tightened around the stem of his cocktail glass.

“There - there isn’t a door up here, Boss.” Kryptos baulked, stammering slightly.

“Then you wait outside.” Bill’s polite tone was a dangerous give-away to his current state. “Now what is it? This had better be important.”

“I – it is. I - Pyronica, weren’t you supposed to be in the field?” Kryptos turned to the pink cyclops, suspicious that she was up here, drinking in the penthouse with the Boss. To Kryptos, an invitation like that seemed like a power move, and he wanted to know where that left him on the chess board.

“We’re celebrating.” Bill clapped his hands together, making an excuse, holding his glass up. “Pyronica’s recent successes on my behalf. How many kills was it Py?”

Blinking at Bill, before running with his bluff, Pyronica raised her glass in a toast. “Bleventy thousand within the last month.”

“Bleventy thousand!” Bill applauded, holding his glass in his third hand. “And how many kills have you had Kryptos?”

“I – “ Kryptos wavered, before puffing out his chest. “I have some important news for you, Boss. I was chasing down that request you asked of me.”

“I’ll take that as a zero!” Bill elongated his arm to chink his glass to Pyronica. “Bleventy thousand to zero, what are the odds.”
“Those are some odds.” Pyronica cheered with Bill, giving a snide look to Kryptos. She really didn’t care for the snivelling compass.

“Boss, I –“

Bill held his hand up to silence Kryptos, taking a long sip from his drink before speaking. “Alright, now I’m inebriated enough to deal with this. What have you got for me Kryptos?”

“I’ve got bad news Boss.” Kryptos admitted, lacing his hands together nervously.

“Give me the good news first.” Bill insisted.

“I – what?” Kryptos stammered, thrown off. “There isn’t –“

“I want good news, bad news, good news, like a sandwich. Think you can do that for me Kryptos?” Bill demanded, examining his nails, not looking up at Kryptos’ panicked expression.

“Uh… good news. Um.” Kryptos twiddled his thumbs together before gesturing at Pyronica. “Congratulations Pyronica, on making bleventy thousand kills. That’s some good news.”

“That is good news.” Bill looked over to Pyronica slyly, and Pyronica hid a snort of laughter behind her hand. “What’s next?”

“I chased up the origin of those cave paintings for you. Both the zodiac and the prophecy. They – they’re the real deal.” Kryptos hurriedly confessed.

“Who?” Bill questioned sharply. “Not Gills?”

“No boss. From what I can tell, they’re from her. The –“

“That heinous bitch.” Bill fumed, the fire in the fireplace burning a vivid blue to match Bill’s ire. He squeezed the stem of his glass so hard it snapped, spilling spectral liqueur onto the floor. “No wonder that Shaman was such a piece of work, if she had her claws in him. She just doesn’t know when to quit.”

Bill’s temper flared for a while, flames leaping out of the fireplace to crawl up the walls, melting the lavish décor of the penthouse, red running down the walls like blood dripping from an open wound. He glared into the fireplace for a while, images flickering across his eye as he recalled the paintings on the cave wall, the way the natives had turned tail and ran so soon into Bill’s reign, turning traitorous overnight, considering the blight who caused that insubordination, rankling with the knowledge that Bill had once called her a friend.

Kryptos hovered in the corner of the penthouse, watching the walls melt, vaguely panicked. Bill seemed deep in thought, holding a hand up under his eye, the images continuing to flicker there as he searched through the universe, cataloguing potential threats, reasoning through exactly how screwed he was by this prophecy.

Pyronica watched the images flickering across Bill’s eyeball, recognising several secrets that Kryptos shouldn’t be privy to. She stood up, and reached out to tap Bill on the side, drawing him out of his contemplation.

“Bill.”

Bill blinked out of his internal review, realising that Kryptos was still here, cowering in the corner. “Now good news. Finish the sandwich.”
“Oh, um.” Kryptos scratched the back of his flat form. “Keyhole and Amorphous Shape are back with more energy cubes. They managed to get five, so far.”

Bill narrowed his eyes. “Five cubes. Not a bad start. We still need more. Get AM and Keyhole back out there, Eight-Ball and Paci-fire too. Heck, send Xanthar. Pull in all the cubes you can.”

“I’m not so sure we should send our best fighters away from home base right now, Boss.” Kryptos advised. “Teeth was patrolling the asteroid belt and found a group of what we first assumed were intergalactic refugees. You know how Teeth likes to play his games with them.”

Bill nodded, waving his hand for Kryptos to continue his story.

“Well, turns out they weren’t just refugees, or asteroid miners lost in the wrong dimension, they were armed to the – well, to the teeth, I guess.” Kryptos explained. “Teeth nearly lost a tooth. It was lucky Xanthar was there, they looked militant. Not Federation though, and they all wore this symbol stitched in pink thread on their sleeves, it looked like an axol-“

“I know who they are.” Bill said, cutting Kryptos off from invoking Big Gilly’s name. He scowled into his drink. “Zealots. And if they’re organised like this, you can bet that she sent them. That’s quite the offensive, she’s stepping things up, sending her pawns into my domain. Just who does she think she is?”

“What should we do with them, Boss? You want Eight-Ball to dispose of them?” Kryptos asked.

“Are they still alive?” Bill questioned.

“Well, Xanthar sat on them, so they’re alive, just broken, mostly.” Kryptos explained.

“Hmmm.” Bill tented his fingers together, plotting.

“I know you wanted a sandwich sir, but I can’t think of anything else that counts as good news.” Kryptos poked his pointer fingers together fretfully. “Uh, your hat looks good? I got nothing.”

“It always looks good.” Bill said, looking up, ideas racing through his mind. “This could be good news actually. We could use them, to send a message, or to barter. How well armed were they?”

“Quantum cannons, lasers, tactical gear.” Kryptos listed.

“Last I heard, she didn’t have the resources to throw that kind of weight around. So either this is the first wave, or her best soldiers. How much do you think she’ll want them back?” Bill asked.

“You’re giving her back her soldiers? Are you cr- no offense Boss, but that’s a bad move. If she’s sending zealots after you then you may have passed the point where she can be reasoned with.” Kryptos strategized, trying to keep his tone respectful.

“Keep them alive. But barely.” Bill ordered. “And work them over for information. I’ll have to pay them a visit. When they’re nice and desperate.”

“Yes boss.” Kryptos sighed, looking down at his feet.

“Eight-Ball and Xanthar stay on patrol then. Ask Paci-fire where he thinks he’ll be the most useful – here, or tracking down more cubes for me. I don’t want him to spit the dummy when I’ve already got my hands full.” Bill rubbed over his eye, a headache starting to build. Suddenly Sixer was the least of his concerns.
“What do you want me to do Boss?” Kryptos asked.

“You run relay between everyone. Keep me informed on the situation, and make sure everyone is in their proper places.” Bill told Kryptos, ticking off on his fingers the various factors he had to keep track of. He needed to grow more fingers.

“Where do you want Teeth?” Kryptos queried.

“How injured is he?”

“Just a cavity. He wasn’t badly hurt.”

“Good. I have a special job for him.” Bill turned around to Pyronica, and levitated her drink. “A shame we couldn’t celebrate properly. I’ll save your drink for later.”

“You better.” Pyronica stretched, then stood up from the couch. “And you’re telling me how everything goes, when all this mess is over. Every last juicy detail.”

“You wish.” Bill scoffed, and vanished Pyronica’s drink with a wave of his hand. “I need you back in the field Py. We can’t let anyone know this has rattled our operations, so it’s business as usual for you, fanning the flames. Twice the firepower, do you think you can manage that?”

“I’ll draw their fire.” Pyronica nodded, and grinned. “Call me when you need me though.”

“I will.” Bill assured her, clicking to set the room back to rights, the red that ran down the walls sucked back up into the furnishings, tidy once more.

“What’ll you do Boss?” Kryptos asked curiously.

“I have a few fires of my own to put out.” Bill answered mysteriously, before his bricks turned black then gold, preparing to teleport away. “Good luck running relay Kryptos, I’ll be watching.”

Bill vanished into a pinprick of blinding light, leaving Pyronica and the compass standing alone in the penthouse.

“So, uh.” Kryptos turned to Pyronica. “Where’s the door?”

When Fiddleford finally came upstairs from the lab the scent of food was wafting through the house, delighting his senses. At first, F wasn’t sure if the smell was real, it was so mouth-watering, or just another trick his mind was playing on him, but sure enough when he stepped through the elevator doors the smell whammed his senses yet again, tempting him towards the kitchen.

Peering around the doorframe, Fiddleford watched Ford stirring three pots at once, having taped several wooden spoons together to expedite his efficiency, flicking through one of his recipe books with his free hand, scrutinising the page.

Fiddleford wasn’t sure if he was still angry with Ford, but seeing him potter about the kitchen so frantically was a curious enough sight that Fiddleford’s inquisitiveness got the better of him.
Not only was Stanford cooking three dishes at once, there were seven other completed meals piled up on the kitchen table, served on the good china that Stanford’s mother sent him, which had been untouched since Fiddleford moved in here, possibly since when Ford moved in here.

About three of those completed dishes were desserts, and one of the dishes just seemed to be hash browns, arranged in a circle around a plate of sweet chilli sauce, garnished with chilli flakes and icing sugar. There were pancakes, and lasagne, and what looked like that vindaloo curry Stanford made three weeks ago that burned off half of F’s tastebuds.

Even more peculiar than the elaborate meal was the fact that Stanford was dressed to the nines, clean shaven, wearing a white pressed button up shirt, his best black dress slacks, shiny shoes that hadn’t been seen since Ford’s graduation, and a pale blue tie to top it all off. He had his sleeves rolled up to his elbows, and wore a long black apron emblazoned with a mathematical pun about \( \pi \) on the front, protecting him from accidental splashes. It even looked like Ford had combed his hair.

Fiddleford boggled at the sight from the doorway for a while, half wondering if this was just another hallucination.

Ford turned around to pluck the paprika bottle from the spice rack in the pantry, and spotted Fiddleford from out of the corner of his eye, whirling around to face him.

“Fiddleford!” Stanford stopped stirring the pots. He looked so out of sorts, staring at his friend but not knowing what to say to him, it was kind of pitiful.

“What are you cookin’?” Fiddleford had to ask, his desire to know outweighing his ability to hold any sort of grudge.

He was struck with the urge to laugh at his friend, to rib him like he used to, as he could tell from Ford’s embarrassed expression that Fiddleford had caught him doing something Ford considered to be compromising. But F didn’t feel comfortable making jokes without knowing Stanford knew he meant no harm by it. It had barely been a day, and already Fiddleford missed his friend. He missed Stanford more than he was angry at him for everything that had happened, and he realised then that while Stanford might be one heck of an annoying caretaker, and while his carelessness traipsing after monsters led to F’s injury, Stanford also didn’t mean any harm by it.

It wasn’t in his nature.

“It looks good, whatever it is.” Fiddleford added, and gave Ford a tired smile, forgiveness oozing into his expression, plain as anything to see.

Ford’s shoulders seemed to sag with relief, seeing Fiddleford’s friendly smile again, and Ford beamed back at his friend gratefully.

“It’s a bit of everything, honestly. I’m trying to cover all the bases.”

“With pancakes?” Fiddleford questioned, crossing his arm over his cast casually and leaning comfortably against the doorframe, less like he was snooping now and more like he belonged here. “And chilli sauce?”

“Is it too much?” Ford looked over at the table, suddenly nervous that it was clear he was trying too hard.

“To feed a small army? I’m sure it’s just the right amount of food.” Fiddleford chuckled, and walked further into the kitchen, pulling a chair out. “It’s like Thanksgivin’ dinner with my extended
family, but for just three people. Are we havin’ company over?”

“Not exactly.” Ford admitted. “This is –”

Stanford paused, the remainder of his sentence suddenly far less important than setting things to rights with his friend.

Turning the heat down on the three pots, letting the multi-functional stirrer rest on the countertop, Ford wiped his hands on his apron, and turned to look Fiddleford in the eye.

Ford’s expression was radiating sincerity and remorse, and Fiddleford had a feeling he already knew what Ford was intending to say, even before he opened his mouth.

“Fiddleford, I want to apologise to you. About before.”

“Stanford, you don’t –”

“No, no. I was – overbearing, and I didn’t listen to you or give you the space you needed. I was … patronising, I took the opportunity away from you to do things for yourself that you wanted. I was a lot of things, a bad friend most of all.” Ford admitted, the guilt playing keenly across his face.

“I’m sorry about the way I acted, and… and I’m sorry I ever led you into danger in the first place. I –”

“Stanford, no.” Fiddleford protested, seeing how this apology was eating Ford up. “You don’t have to do –”

“It was my fault.” Ford continued heedlessly, the words sticking, thick in his throat. “If I had listened to you back on the trail this wouldn’t – “

“Stanford- “

“I was a fool.”

“Stanford!” Fiddleford raised his voice sharply, his abruptness the only thing that could derail Stanford’s emotional confession. “Apology accepted, okay. You don’t have to do this. I know I got snappy at you in the lab, but you’re my friend, and you’ll always be my friend. Even if you have the most patronising bedside manner ever. It’s a good thing you didn’t go into medicine.”

That surprised a chuckle out of Ford, abating that guilty expression some.

“It’s thanks to you, I’m still here.” Fiddleford continued, raising his good hand to stagger Ford’s protests at that. “So, let’s call it quits, okay? I want to get back to ribbing you for wearing dress slacks in the kitchen. What, is the president comin’ for dinner?”

“Fiddleford, you –“ Ford looked at his college pal, struggling to find the right words, the ones that would express properly the high esteem Ford held his friend in, settling for. “You’re a good man.”

Fiddleford could only shrug at that, neither accepting nor denying the compliment, simply feeling warm and contented with the fact that he’d reconciled with his friend. Bill’s advice was all well and good, and getting angry did help F conquer his mental block when it came to finishing the soldering, but staying angry wasn’t for him.

It wasn’t in his nature.

“So what’s all this for?” Fiddleford sat down at the table and pulled one of the dishes over towards
him, sniffing the colourful soup and wrinkling his nose. “Sweet mercy Ford, why’d you have to go dumpin’ chillies in everything again.”

“I have a few milder dishes you might enjoy. This is... uh.” Ford scratched his chin, trying to figure out how to explain this to Fiddleford. “An apology dinner?”

Fiddleford blinked down at the spicy dishes lining the table, and raised his eyebrow at Ford. “Well, I know this ain’t an apology to me, or there’d be food I could actually eat on this here table.”

“Ah, but there’s a fresh bottle of your favourite whisky sitting upstairs on your desk, and some of that disgusting spitting tobacco you favour.” Ford pointed out with a grin.

“It’s called chewin’ tobacco, not spittin’ tobacco.” Fiddleford asserted. “And I want to know what you did what warrants an apology dinner this big. This is huge.”

“Well.” Ford began, but the words failed him. He didn’t know how to begin explaining what he’d done without spilling all of Bill’s secrets, and he couldn’t do that.

“This is for Bill, obviously.” Fiddleford prompted.

“Well, yes.” Ford answered, though he still wasn’t prepared to be forthcoming with the details. He knew how this must look, cooking a lavish meal for Bill after a fight, it was hopelessly domestic.

Fiddleford watched Ford continue to fidget, and decided with a sigh to let him off the hook this time. He’d joke about it later, but not now that Ford seemed so anxious and stressed.

“Well, if there’s trouble in paradise, I’m sure this’ll fix it.” Fiddleford leant back in his chair, getting comfortable, and gestured to one of the dishes. “Did you caramelise a bell pepper? Seriously?”

“That’s an experimental dish.” Ford gushed, more than happy to talk now that he wasn’t in a position to incriminate himself or his muse. “They sold caramel apples back on Glass Shard Beach in New Jersey. I figured the bell peppers would add the zest and flavour, and well, the caramel is self-explanatory.”

“Mnhmm.” Fiddleford chuckled a little, before reaching for an empty plate. “Well, I’ll try anything once. Just maybe not the real spicy ones.”

Sweeping forward graciously, Ford took the plate from F and began piling his plate up, serving him a little of everything his tastebuds could manage. Despite apologising for being an overbearing caretaker, Ford still made sure Fiddleford didn’t lift a finger to serve himself, doling out hearty portions of everything for his friend.

After a while the scientists were smiling and laughing, making jokes about the food, Ford delighting in Fiddleford’s hilarious reactions to the flavours. F was intent on being polite, waiting for Bill to return to eat his fancy apology dinner, but that didn’t mean he couldn’t taste the dishes. Both scientists were thoroughly made up by the time Bill returned from his sojourn into the forest.

The muse came in from the back yard, through the door that led directly into the kitchen from the back porch, and Ford could tell from the way Bill stomped all the way in from the yard that he was still in a mood.

Slamming the door open as he entered, his mind elsewhere, unravelling the many problems of the universe that were weighing on the cosmic being’s back, Bill almost didn’t notice the decadent set up in the kitchen, staring down at his feet as he walked in.
The delightful smell and sudden silence caused Bill to pause, tensing, before he slowly looked up from the floorboards, taking stock of the scene waiting for him.

His eyes darted about, his expression blank, taking in Fiddleford, smiling congenially at Ford, looking happy and hale, far more so than he’d looked for a full week. That was one problem ticked off Bill’s list – fix the assistant. Tick.

Bill’s eyes roved over the feast laid out on the table, a selection of all his favourite foods lovingly crafted, waiting for him to devour. His stomach was growling ravenously at him while he walked back home through the forest. Disappearing into the woods for half a day with no food or warning did Bill’s appetite no favours. That solved problem number two – Bill’s incredibly bad mood. Tick.

Looking towards Stanford’s well-groomed figure, eyes tracing up from his shiny shoes, noting his neatly pressed dress slacks, his tacky ‘π a la mode’ apron with the picture of the ice cream cone on it, the fact that he wore a tie, and had combed his hair, and was watching Bill with the most nervous and repentant expression Bill had ever seen grace those endearing features of his, well, if that didn’t solve problem number three with panache, Bill didn’t know what else would.

Stanford seemed to have taken the initiative while Bill was in the woods to solve all three of his worldly complications, well, that changed things. Scientists really did solve all your problems. Despite Bill’s initial plan to leverage Sixer’s guilt from their argument, rendering him compliant by holding the threat of leaving him over his head until he was thoroughly disavowed of the notion of taking any of Bill’s cubes, suddenly Bill couldn’t think of anything less appealing. He didn’t want to leave, he didn’t even want to pretend he did. He had never felt more welcomed, more at home, and it was all due to his devoted little human who so desperately wanted him to stay. He’d gone to such lengths.

Sixer was too cute for his own good. Bill wanted to tick him off his list, and then keep ticking.

Still staring nervously at Bill, hanging on tenterhooks over whether his muse would accept his apology feast with grace, Stanford felt his stomach flip when finally, after about a minute of silent contemplation, the softest, most genuine smile Ford had ever seen grace his muse’s perfect face crept across his features. It started slow at first, just the corners of his lips twitching, before the smile spread, warm, like a fire, lighting up his muse’s entire demeanour, like he was glowing from the inside out.

He was radiant.

“Are – are you hungry?” Ford managed to ask, his heart thumping in his throat, his spirit soaring.

“Did you cook all of this?” Bill queried curiously, delighted by the thought of how much worship would be packed into every single bite of this delicious looking banquet. He couldn’t wait to taste it. “For me?”

“Yes.” Ford nodded, and swallowed the joy that was near bursting from his gullet, seeing his muse so pleased. “Do you like it?”

Bill’s eyes clicked to meet Ford’s, and that exuberant grin widened. Bill tilted his head, pacing closer to Ford, stopping about a foot away from him, responding with sincerity ringing in his voice. “I love it.”

Fiddleford silently watched the sparks fly between the two men, seeing how delighted Bill was, and how happy Ford seemed, and he realised reluctantly that they were probably, in their own weird way, perfect for each other. The six-fingered scientist, and the man with yellow eyes.
Fiddleford didn’t exactly understand it, but he could see how happy they made each other, just staring into each other’s eyes, smiling idiotically at one another with a whole table of food waiting for them, getting cold.

Fiddleford cleared his throat.

“Y’all going to eat, or am I startin’ without you?”

Jumping out of their collective stupor, Ford rubbing the back of his neck sheepishly, red dancing on his cheeks, he approached the table. “Right. Sorry about that.”

Bill reached to pull out his chair, but Ford stopped him, then pulled his chair out for him, like a gentleman. Bill watched him mirthfully, before sliding into the proffered chair, letting Sixer push him in, unable to stop smiling.

Taking the seat beside him, Ford opened the bottle of red wine he’d set out for the occasion, unscrewing the cap before pouring a glass for everyone. He lifted his wine glass and tapped it with a fork.

“A toast.”

Bill picked up his own wine glass with a smirk, shooting Ford a look. Alcoholic beverages – he’d really gone all out. So much for censoring what inebriating liquids Bill imbibed in this body. This almost felt like respect from the patronising son of a bitch, and Bill was impressed.

Ford looked around the table, and then, realising that more emphasis was needed, he stood up, holding his glass up high. He pondered on the words he’d need to put his sentiment into speech for a moment, looking at the ripple of the wine shifting in the glass, before he spoke.

“It’s hard to believe that it’s been six years since I began researching the strange and wondrous secrets of Gravity Falls. I moved to Oregon, hoping to find answers to some of the greatest questions of our age. To discover the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness and all it entailed. I feel like perhaps I have found along the way, something greater.” Ford paused to look around the table meaningfully.

Bill was beyond tickled at this little toast, wiggling his shoulders happily. While Ford included Fiddleford in the toast, nodding to his friend, who assumed Ford was talking about the friendships he forged, or perhaps something more, Bill’s ego demanded that this entire toast, no, this entire evening, was all about him, and that it was a black (or blue) tie occasion. He was beaming.

“I’m so grateful that I’ve had the two of you throughout this, to help make this all possible. My inspiration.” Ford raised his glass at Bill. “And my support.” He nodded his head at Fiddleford, who smiled good-naturedly. “Thanks to you both, we are now closer than ever to discovering what lies beyond our world, to discovering the secrets of the universe. There’s still some work ahead of us, and I imagine every week we can say we’re closer than ever to our goal, technically speaking. Just know this - there is no one else I’d rather have by my side when we achieve the greatness we’ve been seeking. And I am very grateful.”

“Aw hush.” Fiddleford waved his hand at Ford bashfully, but clinked his glass with Ford’s nonetheless, appreciating the toast.

Ford clinked his glass with Bill as well, his muse watching him with sparkling eyes.

“You sap.” Bill accused, grinning at Ford. “Someone likes the sound of his own voice.”
“Well, I don’t give a lot of speeches.” Ford said, shrugging, before taking his seat, as his colleagues sipped their wine. “Probably with good reason.”

“I thought it was a lovely speech, Stanford.” Fiddleford said politely.

“Thank you Fiddleford.” Ford said pointedly, the sass creeping back into his tone.

“You have other talents.” Bill watched Ford slyly from over the rim of his glass as he took a sip, the grin having not left his face for a second.

Ford scoffed and took a sip of his own wine, shaking his head at Bill, laughing.

“Can we eat now already?” Fiddleford urged. “I don’t know about you two, but I’m starvin’ here. Are the speeches over?”

“They’re over. One hundred percent over. Definitely over.” Ford assured Fiddleford, reaching forward to spoon out food onto his own plate, passing dishes to Bill as he served out.

The evening was a pleasant one, with lots of food, laughter, wine, and stories told. Despite his promise, as the bottle of wine dwindled, and a new one was opened, Stanford made two more speeches.

To new beginnings.

To beginning something great.

He didn’t know that this was really the beginning of the end.

Chapter End Notes

Fiddleford isn’t in the clear just yet, and things are only just beginning for Ford. A storm is brewing.
I won’t tell you who she is. You can guess, but it’s more fun for everyone if we keep it a secret.
I enjoyed weaving the first ever journal entry into Stanford’s little speech, it was a fun nod, and there was another fun nod to something incredibly indulgent from back of the day too. I’m going to get neck strain with all these nods.
Next chapter is a test run of the Hyperdrive, stealing toxic waste from a government site, and the promised D&D&more D game.
ALSO KennTheRat drew this gorgeous picture of Bill and it’s linked in the comments, pls go appreciate it, its marvelous! This chapter is dedicated to them.
I have a dream, a fantasy. To help me through reality. And my destination makes it worth the while.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fiddleford was making his finishing touches to the base structure of one of the generators for the portal. The test for the Hyperdrive integration was tonight, and rather than attempt to fire up the main doorway of the portal (which was still a work in progress, the construction was far more strenuous and required more delicate work than the base engines did) the set of four balancing containment generators were this evening’s focus, specifically the bottom left generator.

The containment generators were part of what stabilised the portal’s eye when the machine was turned on. In theory, all of the power from the portal would run through the generators first, balancing out, reaching the perfect frequency and resonance to engender the tear in space-time to open and close at will. The eye was the main focus of the portal, but without the generators, the machine was useless. The Hyperdrive was a device that enabled the portal’s eye to essentially break earth’s generally accepted laws of physics in order to oscillate at the speeds required to break through the fabric between dimensions. It was like a force field enforcer, creating a space to allow the anomalies necessary to open the portal.

The Hyperdrive was essential to even turning the machine ON, because without it, the physical limitations this dimension was bound to would dictate the success of a portal like this. The entry wheel for the portal wouldn’t spin fast enough, the electricity would short circuit the machine rather than flowing through the cables, and the tear in space-time would become so unstable it would rip the fabric of the universe apart.

The pan-dimensional beings of Trilazzx Beta circumvented the drawbacks to traversing to other dimensions with different applicable laws of physics to theirs by creating the Hyperdrive, allowing their technology to adapt to the different universal laws and override the limitations enforced by the dimension they travelled through via the stasis of the forcefield the Hyperdrive maintains. The Hyperdrive acts like a cheat code to the laws of physics, keeping the technology running smoothly, despite what the terminal velocity was for any particular dimension. While the pan-dimensional beings of Trilazzx Beta were astounding engineers, they were shit navigators, which is why their technology was buried twenty feet below ground in backwater Gravity Falls.

“You know, I can’t help but wonder. Who is truly the more advanced species?” Ford questioned, his arms crossed casually, leaning up against the dividing wall that separated the portal space in the lab from the diagnostic equipment on the other side, watching Fiddleford apply the finishing touches to the generator with a handheld blow torch. “The one who works 1,000 years to invent technology like the Hyperdrive, or the one who simply waits for the other to crash and then collects it for free?”

“See, now you’re thinking like an entrepreneur.” Bill replied, standing with his arm hanging on the door frame, watching the scientists finalise the generator for the test lazily. “Problem is, if you make that a hat trick, you’ll be waiting for a hell of a long time.”

“Perhaps I’m simply superbly lucky. What were the chances the Hyperdrive would be right where we needed it, hmm?” Ford countered cockily, looking over at his muse. “More luck than coincidence.”

“You think it’s a coincidence.” Bill laughed. “Gosh you’re cute. What’s not a coincidence was
what drew you to this town.”

“Destiny?” Ford raised an eyebrow, sarcasm leeching into his tone.

“What would you call it?” Bill asked, smirking back at the scientist.

“Geographical correlation.” Ford remarked. “Statistically, anomalous occurrences happen more here than they do anywhere else in the world.”

“And why do you think that is?” Bill questioned, enjoying Sixer’s cocky responses.

“Once I complete the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness, I’ll be able to tell you definitively. What’s more, I’ll be able to prove it.” Ford raised his index finger, gesturing as he spoke. “Then, I’ll have an answer for you.”

“Well, aren’t you resourceful.” Bill commented, his eyes sparkling with fondness as he took in his human indulgently.

Ford cast Bill a glance, before turning his gaze back towards Fiddleford. He watched the sparks fly from the welding process for a while, before he felt the familiar tingle of eyes on him, and looked back, his muse still watching him with that indulgent smirk.

“What?” Ford felt almost self-conscious, possibly just flustered by his muse’s regard.

Bill just smiled that mysterious smile at him for a while, before he looked coyly up at Ford through his long lashes, and repeated indulgently. “You’re cute.”

Ford’s cheeks flushed, and he turned his gaze back to the lab, trying not to show how much he enjoyed the compliment. He shouldn’t like it that much, cute wasn’t a very manly descriptor, it was almost patronising really, but it still brought heat to his cheeks.

“You’re wearing a tie again.” Bill continued to murmur, his tone pleased. “Did you wear that just for me?”

Ford brushed a hand absently down the front of his sweater vest, his fingers drumming against the tie that lay under the vest. He wore a tie today with his button up under the sweater vest because he thought it looked professional, and this was a professional occasion.

It certainly had nothing to do with the way Bill twirled the tie around his long wiry fingers the night of the dinner, nor the way that tie was gripped when Bill yanked Ford into a burning kiss later that evening. Due to the shortage of batteries for the apparatus, they couldn’t take their intimate conduct too far, but that didn’t stop Bill from climbing onto Ford’s lap on the wooden chair in the kitchen, making out with him fervently until the floor was covered in cinders and the chair was missing it’s back.

Absolutely no correlation between that and this though, absolutely not.

“You know, I think I’ll go see how Fiddleford is doing with the generator.” Ford blustered, kicking off the wall walking over to his friend, his cheeks pinking in a revealing manner.

“You do that.” Bill grinned, watching, amused, as Ford paced briskly away, his stiff steps telling Bill all he needed to know. Messing with Sixer was far too fun, especially now Bill had all these new buttons to press.

This evening, there was only one button that needed pressing, and that was the ON switch. If this
test run went smoothly, it would confirm that they were capable of opening the door with the current technology available, and the rest of the portal’s construction would fly by. Bill could just kick his heels up and let the good times roll in.

If the technology held up to its purpose, if it could survive its application on this dull planet, then there were no more obstacles in Bill’s way to packing up shop and sliding smoothly into this dimension like a hand into a glove. And all the naysayers who presumed he never could achieve this glorious goal would feel the words turn to ash in their mouths as he incinerated them where they stood.

Good times.

However, counting one’s eggs before they hatched led to a very misleading breakfast, and Bill had developed a newfound appreciation for a good breakfast, so he could wait. He was confident though. With a successful trial run, it would be no time at all until the portal was up and running, nine months tops, and then the lovechild of his investment with Sixer would open endless doors for Bill. In the past doors had been slammed in Bill’s face, too many, but everything would change when this portal came through.

When Sixer came through for Bill.

Bill watched him squatting down beside Fiddleford, checking over the work with a detail oriented eye, inspecting the wiring that led from the generator to the wall, running through to the diagnostic machinery on the other side of the lab.

While the human had a certain arrogance problem, Sixer had always followed through for Bill when he needed him to, he was resourceful and reliable. Bill was beginning to feel he could rely on Sixer, in a way he hadn’t relied on anyone before. Bill smiled, looking down at the floor now.

Sure, he could rely on Kryptos to be Kryptos, and Pyronica to be Pyronica. Bill always knew there was stability in knowing your henchmen, knowing exactly what they were and knowing exactly what they’d do, and expecting no more than that. Sixer had a way of surprising Bill pleasantly though, every time he thought he knew what Sixer was capable of, the scientist went and did Bill one better.

“Alright, I think we’re ready.” Ford called out, and Bill raised his head, stepping out of the doorway, pacing over to look at the generator.

The main components of the generator were hooked up and functional, though it wasn’t the polished final product, this prototype would tell them all they needed to know about the feasibility of the portal as a whole.

“Looks good.” Bill nodded, impressed. It didn’t look fancy, but it was all accurate, and it was the first step towards success.

“We’ll want to stand back for the initial testing and trigger it remotely for the time being. When we know what it’s capable of we can be less cautious, but for now – safety first!” Ford raised his finger giddily, and pulled dark lensed safety goggles from his coat pocket, passing a pair to Fiddleford, who donned the glasses, and another pair to Bill, who held his hand up, rejecting the safety lenses.

“Are you sure?” Ford questioned. “It’s likely the light could be near blinding. The lenses will protect you –“
“I don’t need protection.” Bill replied with certainty.

Fiddleford looked over to Ford, watching his friend’s brow pinch with concern, shrugging up at him when Ford looked to him in askance.

If Bill didn’t want to listen to Stanford, there was no chance he’d listen to Fiddleford.

“Are you not going to look?” Ford asked, confused.

“Oh, I’ll look.” Bill said smirking. “I won’t look away.”

Ford seemed puzzled, and Bill continued, his words almost ominously eager.

“I want to see this with my own eye.”

Fiddleford squinted behind the dark lenses, but shrugged off Bill’s unusual wording, having become accustomed to plenty of odd behaviour from the other man. Standing and grabbing the small ignition box he’d programmed, Fiddleford plugged in the long cord to the ignition box and began walking away with the cord looped around his cast, laying it down on the ground, pacing ten yards back to the safety perimeter set as a precaution. Fiddleford was confident that the generator was mathematically sound, and that all the work was accurate – it was his own work after all, and he’d quadruple checked it and then some. He’d worked tirelessly on making this perfect – literally, he hadn’t slept.

“I’ve routed the power through the mains, which should sustain it for the test run, but I’ve rigged backup relays to the powerlines outside if we need to drag a little more juice in to get the test goin’ perfect.” Fiddleford explained, checking everyone was standing behind the safety line. “Shouldn’t happen, but if it does, we’re covered. So long as the generator doesn’t short out or blow up, then we’re peaches and molasses.”

Ford pulled his own safety goggles on and stood grinning with his hands on his hips behind the safety line, surveying the first step to actualising his destiny. “This is it.”

Fiddleford passed the ignition box to Stanford and flipped up the glass safety casing. “Would you like to do the honours?”

Ford took the ignition box and cradled it in one six fingered hand gently, holding his finger over the ignition button, pausing to smile broadly at both of his colleagues.

Fiddleford smiled, an encouraging close-lipped smile back at his friend, but he didn’t miss the way Stanford’s manic grin was mirrored back by Bill, and then some. If his friend was excited, Stanford’s assistant was crossing over the other side of elation and bringing back souvenirs. F had never seen a grin stretch so wide.

“Interdimensional portal generator test alpha one, online in three –” Ford looked back across the lab, raising his finger for emphasis.

“Two –” He brought his finger down over the button and Fiddleford noticed Bill hadn’t yet put his safety goggles on, and was staring expectantly at the generator, still wearing that maniacal grin of his, eyes wide with anticipation.

“One.”

The ignition button depressed, and the signal flew down along the cord, sparking lights on the interface, those lights flickering briefly. The generator whirred for a moment, building up power,
the hum of electricity intensifying to the point of audible symphony.

The centre of the generator sparked silver blue lightning for a split second, when soon after a giant concentrated ray of pure energy blasted upwards, the constant pillar of interdimensional electricity harnessed to beam skyward into the ceiling of the lab, rattling dirt from the roof.

A triumphant bark of laughter was startled from Ford, watching the beam shoot high, a solid column of power projected exactly as the blueprints had suggested, rattling the foundations of the lab.

Fiddleford joined in on the laughter, jubilant, whooping. He looked over to his friend and saw Stanford’s hopeful expression, bleeding wonder and joy seeing his ambition finally actualised. F was happy for him, this was exactly what he’d wanted, and this was – F realised – the reason why he came. They were making history.

Fiddleford looked past Stanford to Bill, wanting to see if Ford’s assistant felt that same joy that spread through the team. F was surprised, and possibly a little disturbed to see Bill staring, fixated on the tall beam of blueish silver light, his yellow eyes peeled wide open, taking in every inch of the column. Those unusual slitted eyes of his were drawn thin like excited pinpricks, pupils shrinking due to exposure to the vibrant light, wet teardrops leaking from the edge of Bill’s eye. He was staring at the light despite it being painfully bright, and he wasn’t looking away, as promised.

Fiddleford saw the light reflect in the wetness that drew a line down Bill’s cheek, dark skin contrasting against the lightning refracted in the single teardrop that leaked down. The line bent around the creases of Bill’s face, the tear’s path compensating for the fact that Bill’s hideously stretched grin hadn’t stopped for a second.

It was a little unnerving.

*Goes to show how passionate he really is about the project.* Fiddleford reasoned, having had his doubts about why Bill was really here from the beginning.

The generator staggered the beam for a second, shorting out the mains, drawing power from the powerline now to sustain the light. The supporting lights in the lab spluttered out, and the frequency of the beam keened anew, power from the town rushing in to breathe life into the generator.

“Should we turn it off?” Fiddleford called out over the loud resonance of the electricity.

“Thirty seconds, that was the goal.” Ford yelled back. “If we can hold out just a bit more –“

The generator’s noise intensified as it poured every bit of power that flowed through it into the concentrated cosmic ray, singeing the ceiling without a corresponding generator to reflect the power back through. The hum heightened into a screech and the floor began to shake as the power charged through the device, giving a last hoorah of energy before suddenly –

The device shut off, beam stuttering and shorting out, having run through all the electricity there was to offer. The hum of the machine lilted down until there was only silence.

The lab was pitch black, all the lights having shorted out as the machine fed on the power ravenously.

Blinking in the dark, removing his safety goggles, Fiddleford looked at Stanford.

“Did it work?”
“I –“ Ford started to reply, but was cut off by a loud clap.

He looked around to where Bill’s shape was in the dark, and Ford (because he knew where to look) noticed the glow of the tattoos lit up by Bill’s wrists, just poking out from under his shirt sleeves. His muse was clapping, applauding in the dark, and that was all Ford needed to tell that the machine had worked perfectly.

“It worked.” Ford enthused.

“Well done.” Bill’s voice oozed warmth and appreciation as his applause rounded off. “Well done.”

“It worked!” Fiddleford cheered, similarly enthused, jumping for joy where he stood, crowing his excitement out.

The scientists cheered and whooped in the dark for a while, stunned by the success of their experiment, jubilant over what they’d just done. Patting one another on the back, Fiddleford and Ford shared congratulations before Fiddleford stated the obvious.

“Uh, the lights are still out.”

“Maybe we tripped the fuse box.” Stanford reasoned. “I can go check.”

Bending down to rummage through the toolbox F kept behind the safety line, he stood up to flick on a flashlight, holding it aloft triumphantly, before passing it to Ford.

“No matches this time! Flashlights!”

“Excellent thinking Fiddleford.” Ford took the flashlight graciously, shining the light across the lab, looking at the generator which seemed intact after the test run, which was the goal.

“Got one for me too.” F retrieved the second flashlight from the toolbox, flicking it on. “No oil lamps for us.”

The flashlight Fiddleford held shone across his colleagues, not the lab, and F noticed Bill was still staring at the spot where the column of light had been, the light bouncing off the tear tracks down his cheeks. He’d stopped smiling.

Fiddleford cleared his throat, and realised that perhaps Stanford was better equipped to deal with this emotional display than he was.

“I’ll go check.” F insisted, clearing his throat. “Can probably sort it out quicker ‘n you anyway. I’ll be right back.”

Shuffling out of the lab, giving the two men some alone time, Fiddleford climbed up the stairs to Ford’s study. There was always emergency power for the elevator, but he didn’t want to stand there waiting for the lift while Ford did whatever it was that he did to comfort his assistant. It wasn’t right.

Left alone in the lab, Ford turned his giddy enthusiasm onto Bill, keen to continue his excited babble about the experiment’s success to whoever would listen. Finally, turning the flashlight onto the muse, Ford’s grin fell from his face abruptly as he saw the tear tracks scoring down Bill’s cheeks, the muse staring silently at the generator with a blank sort of expression, the manic grin having faded in the dark. At first Ford supposed the tears were due to Bill staring unblinkingly at the light from the portal, but the light had stopped now and the tears kept flowing.
“Bill?” Ford asked tentatively, stepping towards the other man, raising his hand in an aborted gesture of comfort, not knowing where to touch him just yet. “Are you -?”

“It went great Sixer.” Bill croaked out, his voice sounding somewhat distant as he continued to stare at the generator. “It went exactly how it was supposed to. You did it.”

Examining his muse’s distant features, Ford decided where to put his hands, and brought one up to cup Bill’s cheek, rubbing away the tear tracks with his thumb.

“You don’t sound pleased.” Ford noted, wiping the tears away from Bill’s other cheek too, holding his face with care.

“I am.” Bill replied, and swallowed the lump in his throat, finally looking away from the generator, closing his eyes. “I am pleased. You did well.”

“Why are you crying?” Ford whispered, leaning his forehead down to crowd Bill’s face, his forehead creasing with concern.

“It’s really happening.” Bill said, awe lacing through his tone. He looked up at Sixer, blinking those wide yellow eyes of his, lashes damp. “It’s really happening.”

“It is.” Ford answered, still hesitantly unsure whether Bill was alright. He smoothed his thumb down Bill’s cheek once more, before pulling him in tight to an embrace, hugging his muse to his chest hoping that he could anchor Bill through whatever emotion was washing over him.

Ford could understand. He was surprised he wasn’t crying too, witnessing the greatness they’ve accomplished.

Bill clung to Sixer, winding his arms behind Sixer’s back, grasping the back of his coat, balling his hands into fists of fabric as he felt Ford press gentle kisses to his forehead. His eyes were leaking, this strange human body’s bizarre reaction to most elevated emotions, but he was practically vibrating inside, his thoughts a loud clamour of what this meant, what this would mean, what this set in motion. He realised, amidst the mental cacophony, that this obliquely meant that his time with Sixer was now on a deadline, in a way, and that the blissful carefree days of this fleshy vacation were now numbered.

Eventually, Sixer would find out what Bill was, and what his plans were, and when the portal opened fully, Ford would finally know Bill for what he truly was. Bill didn’t know why he cared so much, because he already knew what Sixer would think, and he doubted the scientist would surprise him.

Despite hoping otherwise, he knew. When the time came. He knew. These happy days were numbered.

That made him cling to Sixer just a bit tighter. He was already nostalgic for this. He didn’t want to let go.

“Are you okay?” Ford whispered against Bill’s temple, rubbing his arms gently to warm him, pulling away to duck down, to look at Bill’s expression.

“You did it Sixer.” Bill managed a smile, trying to reassure the scientist while he still could. “Congratulations.”

“I couldn’t have done it without you.” Ford said earnestly, giving Bill’s shoulders a squeeze. “Truly. My inspiration, you made this possible.”
“I did.” Bill admitted, feeling his stomach twist with an odd combination of triumph and regret. Physically feeling emotions was such a hardship.

“I mean, this was just a test run, but it worked.” Ford gushed, the enthusiasm creeping back into his voice. “We still need to work out a viable power source with more substance than simply tapping into the mains, and obviously there’s still the other generators to perfect. Getting them suspended to relay the power back will be interesting, but once we do – I feel we’re so close. So close to changing the world.”

“We’ve still got time.” Bill countered, somewhat selfishly, now that he realised exactly what he’d be missing when time caught up with them. “Months.”

“I know, I’m counting my eggs before they’ve hatched here.” Ford said with a dismissive laugh. “I’m just excited. Call me silly.”

“You are. Silly.” Bill blinked up at Sixer, swallowing back that illogical emotion clawing up his throat, trying to convince himself that he had plenty of time, that he should just enjoy this.

“Well, maybe I didn’t mean that literally –“ Ford rolled his eyes, amused by his muse.

Bill grabbed Ford’s face and yanked him down for a kiss, sealing his lips over the scientist’s and pouring his all into the smooch before pulling away, his eyes burning bright up at Sixer with renewed passion. “Silly is not a bad thing.”

Ford’s glasses were askew from the kiss, and he straightened them, before smiling indulgently at his muse. “I’ll keep that in mind.”

Bill’s smile seemed slightly more genuine, and he leaned up on his tiptoes to kiss Sixer again, fingers slipping under the top of Ford’s vest to play with his tie. Ford closed his eyes and leaned into the kiss again, enjoying it more and more by the second.

“Uh, Stanford?” Fiddleford’s voice echoed down from the stairwell, the mechanic yelling down from the study.

Ford reluctantly pulled away from Bill, who was staring hungrily up at him now, long fingers wrapped delectably around Sixer’s tie. “Yes?”

“It’s not the fuse box.” Fiddleford shouted back down. “The whole town’s blacked out.”

Oh.

“Have you got any candles?”
“Well, Dawn and myself were workin’ the night shift when it happened.” Mr Duskerton chatted away while ringing up Stanford’s groceries. “Stripped the power from the whole store it did. We were cleanin’ out the refrigerators for at least an hour til the lights came back on. Strangest thing.”

“Well.” Stanford replied shiftily, passing a loaf of bread across the counter, unable to look Mr Duskerton in the eye. “Sometimes these things just happen.”

“Well next time can it happen on a Wednesday? Darn near ruined our week, thought we’d have to replace all our frozen goods. Thank goodness for the backup generator, I’ll tell you what.”

Ford cleared his throat. “Hmm. Yes.”

“That’ll be $48.60, young man.” Mr Duskerton looked at Stanford expectantly, and the scientist fumbled with his wallet, pulling out the correct notes. Handing the money over to Mr Duskerton, hurrying to grab his bags and get out of there (lying was such hard work – Ford wasn’t cut out for it) Ford nearly bumped into someone coming into the store, his shoulder flying into the other person.

“Sorry.” Ford apologised without looking up, already keen to get his groceries back to the car, not wanting to have to lie to anyone else. He wasn’t very good at this whole lying by omission business, and he was already keeping more secrets than he cared to, but letting the townsfolk know about what he was getting up to back in the shack was simply impossible. Ford couldn’t risk the project like that, and he knew that more than anyone, but that didn’t mean he liked it. He moved to go, but a broad hand reached out to catch Ford’s shoulder.

“Stan Pines?” The gruff voice of Dan Corduroy jolted Ford out of his sheepish thoughts, adjusting his glasses to look at Dan.

“Dan.”

“How are you? Man, Willow’s been lookin’ fer you. My girl hasn’t seen you in a while, she’s been wondering how you been.” Dan clapped Ford affectionately on the back, and took stock of him, looking him up and down in a friendly way, though a hint of desperation was creeping into his eyes. “How are things up in that ol’ shack? The timber still treatin’ you right?”

“Oh, yes, no, everything’s marvellous.” Ford replied, juggling his shopping bags between his hands, trying to find his car keys in his pocket. “Very good. Nice to hear you two have made up.”

“Since Summerween, just a bit before then.” Dan admitted. “I’m tryin’ to change her mind about me. Listen, I want to talk to you, about what happened at the drive in.”

“Well, I can’t actually stay to chat – I’ve got – I’m quite busy.”

“It’ll only take a second, I promise.” Dan pleaded, changing his own direction, following Ford out through the parking lot to his car. “I just got a few questions about – I mean – I can’t have been the only one who seen it, right?”

“That depends on what you mean by ‘it’. There were two movies playing, certainly, though I tried my best not to see ‘it’ either.” Fumbling his keys into the car door, Ford unlocked the front seat and dumped the groceries on the passenger’s side, before sliding into the car, moving to close the door.

Dan’s hand shot out and he grabbed the top of the door before Ford could close it, holding it open. “Do I just not talk about it? Like, what do I do? Every time I bring it up with someone, they look at
Ford sighed, and looked at his dashboard for a moment, trying to figure out what to say to Dan. Certainly, he’d seen quite the sight, battling through zombies to rescue his beloved, but Bill had described the supernatural as a slippery slope to the uninitiated. Ford remembered the pep talk Bill had given him.

“Most humans aren’t cut out to understand the paranormal. Obviously freaks like you are the exception – don’t make that face at me – it’s true. But everyone else has a teaspoon sized quota of unexplainable phenomena they can stomach before they cave inwards in a sensational existential implosion. There’s only so much they can take before they break, and you don’t want to break them, do you?”

Ford looked up at Dan’s confused and pleading expression and considered explaining the zombie uprising to him, but then remembered how Bill had ended that particular pep talk.

“It’s a miracle your friend Fiddleford isn’t broken already.”

“Sorry Dan, I can’t talk today.” Ford put his keys in the ignition and turned the car on, the engine rumbling impatiently as Ford put his seatbelt on. “Perhaps some other time.”

“But – but what do I tell Willow? She don’t know. How am I supposed to talk to her about it? What do I say?” Dan floundered, looking to the scientist who seemed so capable in the forest wielding his umbrella like a sword. Now that same scientist just looked tired and evasive, and moved to shut the car door, Dan yanking his hand away just before it slammed shut.

Rolling the window down, Ford thought he was doing Dan a kindness by giving him a single sliver of advice, thinking he was protecting him.

“Nothing. In fact, it’s best you forget it ever happened.”

“And by ‘it’ you mean -?” Dan probed, hoping to eek some admission from Ford that he wasn’t the only one to have seen the corpses crawl across the ground that night.

Ford paused, before channelling Bill’s expert deflection skills, reversing the car away. “One of two movies. Goodbye Dan!”

Dan stood in the parking lot and watched Ford go, the car disappearing over the hill, leaving the lumberjack with nothing but his swirling thoughts and the suspicion that Stan was hiding something from him, treating him like he was stupid.

Frustrated, lacking any sort of confirmation from the one person who would possibly know what to do here, Dan did what he always did when frustration consumed him.

He punched a tree.

Playing chess in the living room with Bill, a period costume teledrama blaring background noise on the television behind them, Ford moved his bishop across the board, taking one of Bill’s pawns.
“Sometimes I feel the only time he’s at peace is when he’s down in the lab. I’ve been trying to get him to come hiking with me again, but he won’t do it.”

“I’d put hiking in the ‘too soon, not funny’ category for the time being.” Bill replied, watching Stanford take his black pawn, setting aside.

“That was insensitive of me, wasn’t it?” Ford questioned himself, taking a sip from the glass of scotch on ice set aside for him on the coffee table.

“You? Insensitive? Never. You probably thought the fresh air would do him good. Nothing wrong with that. You have his best interests in mind.” Bill moved a new pawn forward, only half committed to his sarcasm, reclining comfortably on the couch. “Not everyone appreciates a stirring cocktail of burning chemicals and oxidized metal. Elevates the senses.”

“I thought he was better, he’s doing so much better. I don’t want to see him take two steps forward and one step back. I feel like we need to give his progress greater momentum, and he’ll be back to normal in no time.” Ford hoped optimistically.

“Ah, but you must step back before you can walk the line.” Bill said, swilling his cup, putting on an air of wisdom that didn’t suit him, despite all he knew. It was like he was spouting Confuciusisms, almost.

“I don’t think you know how walking works.” Ford quipped, moving his rook to intercept another of Bill’s pawns, claiming it for himself.

Bill scoffed, and sipped from his own beverage, having spruced up Stanford’s bitter scotch with apple juice, grenadine syrup, and anything else sweet he could find in the house. He called it a Cipher Sunrise.

“He’s back to working, his arm isn’t paining him anymore, though that could be the painkillers – he’s looking a little run down, working himself too hard, but with a bit of rest I’m sure he’ll feel better.” Ford continued blithely, counting his captured pieces.

“Well he’s doing better on a week without sleep than you ever did.” Bill commented idly, leaning over the chess board to pick out his next move.

“What?” Ford looked up at Bill, thrown. He didn’t even watch Bill move the chess piece. A week without sleep? “What do you mean - a week without sleep? He hasn’t been sleeping?”

“I thought you noticed.” Bill blinked at Ford. “Then again, you sleep like an unrepentant log sometimes, so I’m really not surprised.”

“He hasn’t been sleeping?” Ford repeated, disbelieving.

“The one night he actually got some shut eye – well, you heard him. He’s a very loud screamer.” Bill remarked, gesturing with his pinky finger dismissively as he picked up his drink, taking a sip. “He probably thinks he’s doing you a favour.”

“This is – this is ridiculous.” Ford shunted forward his rook one square and stood up from his couch, pacing the room, bringing his hands up to his forehead, rubbing his temples. “He can’t just not sleep, he has to sleep. I don’t – does he need help? Does he need sedatives? Yoga? Meditation? What’s holding him back? The portal? I – he has to sleep.”

“Tell that to his night terrors.” Bill looked up at Ford, and took another sip from his fruity drink, his eyes following Ford around the room.
“That – is that why?” Ford looked at Bill in askance, and his muse just shrugged. “They’re just dreams. He has to sleep sometime.”

Stanford had the luxury of saying that because all of his dreams had been cultivated by Bill’s careful hand, leading him to discovery and wonder instead of trauma and terror. He had no experience yet of the devastating power of night terrors, sheltered by Bill’s deliberate interference. In Ford’s dreams, he saw every frightening happenstance as just another adventure, lucidity leading him to believe he had nothing to lose, colouring his glasses mauve with optimism.

He didn’t yet know how compelling dreams could be when turned against you.

“Then you go talk to him.” Bill moved another one of his pawns on the board, waiting for Stanford’s move. “You’ll have better luck reasoning with him than he will with his nightmares.”

Ford sat back down on the couch opposite Bill and stared across the board, rubbing his chin, before moving his knight to take Bill’s pawn. Puting it to his side of the board, with the pile of Bill’s black pawns he was steadily amassing, Ford had an idea.

“Did you say that you had access to the dreamscape now?”

Bill moved his bishop one space, and raised his eyebrow at Ford, unimpressed.

“I’m just asking. There’s got to be something you can do about his nightmares – I mean, it is your domain.” Ford turned his tone to flattery, trying to twist Bill’s arm.

“You’re giving me more work than I asked for here.” Bill scowled at Ford, displeased at his suggestion.

“But you can do it.” Ford surmised. “The mindscape is your playground, your kingdom, yes?”

“You weren’t so keen on me reaching into your friend’s head before.” Bill pointed out, narrowing his eyes at Sixer. “What makes this any different?”

“I’m trying to find a solution.” Ford insisted, sitting up a little straighter.

“You’re asking me to make you a solution. What exactly do I get out of this situation, hmm?” Bill pursed his lips, unimpressed. “This is divine intervention you’re asking for, anyone else would make a deal for help like that.”

“But you can do it.” Ford repeated stubbornly, hoping he could coerce his muse into doing this out of goodwill.

From the way that Bill stuck his jaw out, matching stubborn for stubborn, Ford could tell trading on goodwill wasn’t the sort of deal Bill was prepared to make for Fiddleford.

“No Sixer!” Bill crossed his arms and pointed to Ford firmly. “I can’t keep giving you freebies, and you can’t keep asking. Do you know how much I’m giving you already?”

“But this isn’t for me, it’s for him.” Ford tried.

“But this isn’t for me, it’s for him.” Ford tried.

“Even less reason for me to extend myself!”
“Alright, then it is for me.” Ford attempted gamely.

“Lying to my face.” Bill raised his eyebrows at Ford, wagging his finger at him. “You’re getting good at this.”

“I don’t know how I feel about you encouraging that.” Ford remarked and moved his knight across the board to intercept the path of Bill’s bishop.

“Sixer, you haven’t even tried talking to him about it.” Bill leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees as he surveyed the board. “The solution you’re looking for is a shortcut so you don’t have to face McGucket’s trauma firsthand. It doesn’t matter if it makes you feel guilty, talk to him. I know that you’re terrible at this, but you have to try.”

“I am not terrible at –“ Ford began, mildly offended.

“You are. You’re an insensitive asshole sometimes.” Bill said bluntly, and held up his hand to halt Ford’s outrage. “The part before where I said you weren’t insensitive – blatant lie. Don’t worry, I’ve come to accept it as part of your charm, but it’s the truth. You are incredibly emotionally stunted.”

Ford pouted, disgruntled by that apt descriptor, and couldn’t help but slide in one sulky jibe. “Says the man who threw a tantrum over what brand of maple syrup we buy.”

“You can taste the difference between generic and brand, okay? You just can.” Bill asserted, swilling his Cipher Sunrise.

“It’s not a fine wine.” Ford chided.

“It may as well be, since I drink it from a wine glass.” Bill shot back snidely, sipping at his ludicrously sweetened drink for emphasis.

“You’re not supposed to drink maple syrup.” Ford insisted.

“I’ll drink whatever I want, thank you very much!” Bill raised his voice definitively, and moved yet another pawn within reach of Sixer’s knight, slamming it down deliberately. “Your move.”

Ford huffed out a frustrated breath, and took the bait, his knight moving to capture Bill’s pawn, setting it aside. “You’re terribly careless with your pawns.”

“I know what they’re for.” Bill replied, smoothly sliding his queen all the way past Ford’s scrambled defence line of pieces, bringing the queen to stand bold right before Ford’s king. “Checkmate.”

“What?” Ford boggled, staring at the chessboard in shock, having lost soundly to the muse yet again. He thought he was on a winning streak, but when he moved his knight to capture Bill’s pawn he left a path straight to his king. “How -?”

“This is the salt shaker, Sixer. Pay attention.” Bill clicked his fingers and summoned the salt shaker from the kitchen, reiterating his point with a flourish of his left hand, while he hid the shaker in the right. “Where do you look?”

“Where you want me to, I guess.” Ford answered Bill dutifully and sighed, leaning back in his chair, beaten. “I should go talk to him. Get him to bed. It’s late.”

“Try offering the sleeping pills. He’ll be reluctant at first, but make sure he takes them.” Bill
suggested, draining the rest of his drink and getting up out of his chair.

“I’ll see what he says.” Ford replied, tired suddenly, sinking into the cushy armchair a little. He really didn’t want to have to force Fiddleford to sleep, but as his friend he couldn’t in good conscience allow him to go without sleeping when he really should be resting. It just wasn’t responsible, despite how hypocritical insisting on it made Ford feel.

Bill stepped around the coffee table to Ford, draping his arm over Ford’s shoulder indulgently, pressing a kiss to his human’s temple. “You’re doing good Sixer. Don’t worry. You have his best interests in mind.”

“Mmm. I hope he sees it that way.” Ford groaned, stretching his back out, twisting his torso, before leaning up to capture Bill’s lips in another brief somewhat domestic kiss. “Did you want to sleep i-“

“Not tonight.” Bill answered Ford’s question before it was even finished, pulling away. “I’m running too hot already. Sleeping next to you is fun, but we need to save our cubes for special occasions, and I can tell that you’re tired.”

“I like having you in my bed.” Ford murmured, and pressed another indulgent kiss to the corner of Bill’s mouth. “You keep me warm.”

Bill almost wavered for a moment, torn between the indignity of being a bed warmer, and the uncanny sweetness that was hearing it from Sixer, before he whispered back against Ford’s lips. “So do third degree burns. Goodnight Sixer.”

Smiling wryly, watching Bill walk away from him, Ford replied.

“Goodnight Bill.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Since insisting Fiddleford attempt to regain a proper sleep schedule, every night, without fail, the man’s night terrors would have him screaming in his sleep.

Sixer’s reactions were entertaining. He reacted with panic at first, springing out of bed every night to race upstairs and check on his friend. However, two weeks had passed now and it became a fact of being that Fiddleford was unable to help screaming bloody murder in his sleep.

Every time Ford raced up to help his friend, Fiddleford lay there, eyes shut, sleeping soundly, screaming himself hoarse without realising it. Or perhaps he did realise, as he woke up each day with a rather hoarse speaking voice, but he never gave any indication that he wanted to talk about these nightmares, or acknowledge that they’d even happened. Bill would follow Sixer up the stairs and watch him shake McGucket’s shoulder, trying vainly to wake him, smothering a laugh the one time McGucket’s reflexes got the better of him and he woke, socking a solid punch into Sixer’s jaw that left him stumbling.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH
Bill didn’t really mind the sound of screaming all that much, he’d heard more than his fair share in his infinite lifetime, and he told himself that it didn’t bother him, but he could tell it bothered Sixer more and more as the sleepless nights stretched on. The guilt was eating Sixer up, and not in a fun way.

The night time interruptions didn’t faze Bill, but they were beginning to become rather inconvenient on the nights when Bill felt like sneaking into Sixer’s room without McGucket knowing, spending cubes quicker than he could get them, enjoying the slow burn that was sharing a bed with the scientist, and all the creature comforts that came with it.

Little things, more kissing, and sharing space together, pressing skin to skin in the dark. They had to keep things relatively PG due to the lack of flame retardance in their immediate vicinity, but Bill enjoyed laying there with his shirt off, pressed to Sixer’s bare chest, while his human traced the golden lines of his tattoos with those wonderful freakish digits of his. It was entertaining, and enjoyable, and one of those comforts Bill knew had a time limit, so he appreciated it all the more.

When Fiddleford screamed, Sixer didn’t feel like entertaining Bill. In fact, he didn’t do much of anything. He just lay there, and let the guilt consume him.

“One night.” Ford said, dumbfounded. “I just want one night where he doesn’t –“

“Ugh.” Bill raised his head up from Ford’s chest, having spent the night with his favourite pillow, indulgently spending one cube in the process. “You’d think he could scream quietly for a change.”

“I don’t understand.” Ford muttered, his arm wrapped around Bill’s shoulder, the heat of his muse’s body like a furnace, saving Ford the hassle of rugging up with extra blankets now that the weather was turning cold. “They’re just nightmares. I feel like these are worse, there’s something making them worse than – shouldn’t these have finished now.”

“Trauma isn’t convenient Sixer.” Bill’s eyes glowed gold in the dark as he looked up to the ceiling, the symphony of screaming continuing. “Though I do agree, this is a bit excessive for Gremloblin poisoning.”

“Could anything be exacerbating the dreams?” Ford wondered aloud, desperately hoping for an easy solution. “Is there something we can do, a preventative measure, or a countermeasure or something?”

“There isn’t –“ Bill started, then paused, struck with a thought.

He looked down at Sixer’s guilty face, striving for something that could fix this, deploiling of his intellect over the fact that he hadn’t invented something to bridge the chasm between Fiddleford now, and who he used to be. Sixer wanted a fix so desperately.

It was a little sad. Bill didn’t much feel like telling Sixer that some things had no easy fix, and he remembered how much he hated hearing those exact same words when he was looking for an easy fix himself.

He fell silent, looking down at Ford’s chest hairs, his brain churning through thoughts until he had an idea.

Maybe Sixer was right, there could be something exacerbating the night terrors. And if that was the case, perhaps an easy fix was within sight. It’s a wonder Bill hadn’t thought of it before.

He never actually removed the madness bubble from McGucket’s brain.
“Bill?” Ford questioned, noticing his muse’s sudden thoughtful silence.

“I’m going to get a glass of water.” Bill said evasively, pulling himself out of bed, reaching for Sixer’s dressing gown.

“Oh.”

“You go back to sleep. Stay warm.” Bill snapped his fingers and summoned fluffy ear muffs from the coatrack downstairs, passing them to Ford.

“We have smaller ear plugs.” Ford commented, reaching out for the ear muffs regardless.

“These ones look silly, Silly. They suit you better.”

“Are you coming back to bed after?” Ford pulled the covers up to retain the heat Bill’s warmth left, sliding the ear muffs around his neck obligingly.

“Sure.” Bill replied, thinking on the third capacity left in the cube he was currently pouring energy into.

He watched as Ford pulled the fluffy ear muffs over his ears and smiled at how funny he looked. It was really endearing.

Another ear-splitting shriek cut through Bill’s appreciative contemplation. Ford groaned and pulled the ear muffs tighter over his head.

“I’ll be right back.”

Tiptoeing out into the hall, Bill looked up the stairs to the attic.

He didn’t really need to interfere here. McGucket’s obsession with working on the portal in order to avoid sleep only really benefitted Bill, and keeping an eye on things here didn’t mean solving every single problem the scientists encountered. They were here to give Bill an easy ride, not the other way around.

But Bill seemed to be developing somewhat of a phenomenal weak spot when it came to Sixer, which he hadn’t anticipated developing. It was too hard to hold the scientist at arms distance when it was so nice being held close to his chest, and Bill hadn’t had this sort of romantic relationship before, despite how devastatingly handsome he was in the interdimensional community. There was something about being known to be an insane psychopathic interdimensional chaotic madman that turned prospective partners off Bill, and the only beings who approached him were clearly making a grab for power. Not to be trusted.

None of this sincere adoration business. That had never happened before.

It had been a long time since Bill had felt loved.

Sixer was proving to be a better investment than Bill had previously anticipated. Sure, Sixer ran point on the portal, and was keeping Bill flush with power in more ways than one, but he was also respectful where it mattered. He clearly wanted to enact more physical intimacy between them, but he waited and listened to Bill, he backed off when Bill flared too hot, he was agonisingly gentlemanly towards Bill, and patient, so much so that it made Bill want to tear him apart, and put him back together. He wanted to disassemble and reassemble Sixer, pour through every molecule of the human, elevate him and eviscerate him all at once. He didn’t know how to reciprocate this affection, and he didn’t know if he was doing it right.
He shouldn’t want to reciprocate sweetness to a worshipper, but he found himself wanting to regardless. Sixer was special like that.

So Bill looked up the stairs, resigning himself to journeying up into the attic, deciding to do Sixer a favour for free.

He really needed to stop doing that.

The stairs creaked a little, but with the earmuffs on Sixer wouldn’t have heard, so Bill crept up towards the attic, pushing the door open.

McGucket lay there, twisting the blankets up between his legs, fingers twitching, his eyes screwed shut as he mumbled unintelligibly in his sleep.

Bill crossed the room and stood over McGucket’s bed for a moment, watching him.

Nightmares affected every human differently, and Bill had caused some phenomenal ones in his time. Gremloblin nightmares had no finesse though. Where Bill’s nightmares were a discordant symphony that stayed in the mind, played on every instrument imaginable, the melody haunting you like your favourite song playing faintly from another room, Gremloblin nightmares were to the synapses as a Gremloblin let loose on a drumkit was to musical theory. A blunt instrument playing a blunt instrument.

Bill could tell from the way Fiddleford twitched in terror every few seconds that the nightmare was hitting on the same core horrors inelegantly.

WHAM losing your loved ones to horrifying and graphic harm, WHAM that same horrifying and graphic harm befalling all the people around you, WHAM looking down and seeing your own body, crippled and broken, harmed beyond all repair. WHAM repeating the process all over again.

It was a repetitious cycle of fears, reasonable fears that most humans could justifiably say they recoiled from instinctually. Tiny monsters crawling up the walls, shapes twisting suspiciously out of the corner of your eye, common fears like needles, or spiders, or needle spiders converging on the psyche, forming monsters in the mind.

Fiddleford’s brain was taking a clandestine road trip down through the uncanny valley, and while Bill could admit it was nice there, he wasn’t impressed with Fiddleford’s lack of appreciation for the place.

Fear of the unknown was so close minded. You’d think nightmares like that would culture you some.

Staring reluctantly down at McGucket’s creased brow, sweat beading on his forehead, Bill sighed, his bottom lip jutting out, pouting childishly.

Was this really worth the hassle?

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Examining McGucket’s head, Bill tried to calculate exactly where the madness bubble would be right now, and at what angle he would have to reach in to pull the bubble out, or whether bursting it would cause any permanent damage.

He’d never had to remove a madness bubble before, he usually built them bigger than the person, trapping the victim within them. Inserting a bubble into a human’s head was a fun idea in theory, and Bill hadn’t bothered to consider the consequences of it.

Bill rubbed his chin, pondering whether in this flesh cage he even could reach into McGucket’s head, as his body didn’t have the same capacity to become intangible that it had in the mindscape.

Flexing his fingers, Bill reached over, and stuck his tongue out of the side of his mouth, concentrating as he tried to push his fingers through the side of Fiddleford’s temple.

Tried was the imperative word. Pushing, gently at first, and then more insistently, Bill discovered that in this body he unfortunately wasn’t able to turn intangible, and for all his efforts, he only seemed to be managing some sort of ineffective head massage, unable to reach the bubble at all.

Bill huffed out a frustrated breath, and rested his hand against the side of Fiddleford’s head, defeated by his physical constraints, trying to consider another way he could remove the bubble and stop Fiddleford’s incessant screaming.

Well, he wasn’t screaming now.

Bill blinked down at McGucket, and saw the assistant staring up at Bill, clutching his bedcovers nervously, his eyes open, alert, watching Bill with cognisance.

“Um.” McGucket started.

Bill blinked down at Fiddleford blankly, his hand still resting on the side of McGucket’s face, faintly registering the way the assistant’s eyes shot to the side, then back up to Bill’s face, reprehensive in a rather polite way, which was strange.

“Um.” McGucket tried again. “Do you – do you have the wrong room maybe?”

Bill blinked one more time. “Wrong room?”

“Stanford’s downstairs.” Fiddleford pointed out, leaning his head away from Bill’s hand slightly. His voice broke nervously as he spoke. “You - ? Uh, I have a wife.”

Bill stared blankly down at Fiddleford, not quite understanding why he was telling him that. He knew. McGucket didn’t really shut up about the wife, he was always on the phone with her, or babbling about her and the damn baby. Bill didn’t quite get his point.

Leaning even further away from Bill’s hand, Fiddleford continued awkwardly. “Uh, I’m married, so – it’s not that I’m not flattered – but –“

“Oh.” The implications of sneaking into another man’s bedroom suddenly dawned on Bill, and he snatched his hand away. “I wasn’t –“

Fiddleford made to sit up, his expression pointedly polite and somewhat remorseful. “It’s nothing personal, I just don’t –“

“That’s not what I –“
“Not that I’m discriminatin’, it’s just – it’s not for me, you know?”

“No, I didn’t –” Bill leaned away from McGucket, holding his hand to his chest like he’d been burned, embarrassment searing through this receptive human body he was stuck in.

“I mean, maybe if we talked more, but I’m just not attracted to – it’s not you, it’s –”

Bill’s gold eyes darted around the room, looking desperately for a way out of this embarrassment. He was about to be told ‘it’s not you it’s me’ by Fiddleford McGucket. The indignity would be too much to bear. The muse struck upon the first excuse he could find, regardless of how believable it was, blurting it out.

“Sleep walking! I’m sleep walking. Walking in my sleep.”

“You’re –“ Fiddleford gave Bill the most disbelieving look possible for several seconds, before he spoke in a tone that sounded like he was allowing Bill to save face. “Sleep walking, is it?”

“Wow, is that the sleep time.” Bill looked at his bare wrist unnecessarily before standing up and backing quickly out of the room. “I’ve got to go! Let’s forget this ever happened!”

Fiddleford watched incredulously as Bill walked backwards out of his room and slammed his door shut loudly, before hearing footfalls as Ford’s strange assistant ran all the way back down the stairs.

Hearing Bill’s bedroom door slam shut, Fiddleford sat in bed for a while, letting what just happened sink in.

“Gotta be the wrong room.” Fiddleford muttered to himself shaking his head.

Suffice to say, Bill didn’t try to remove the bubble from McGucket’s brain again after that mortifying experience. Fiddleford just had to deal with it, and the thought that potentially, Ford’s assistant was harbouring a crush on him, and all the ramifications that came along with believing that thought.

“Gotta be the wrong room.”

Ford was sizzling bacon in the pan, bringing breakfast together on a steadily growing sleep deficit that had him so lethargic he didn’t notice Bill entering the kitchen until the muse was right behind him, leaning over his shoulder to peer at the food cooking on the stovetop.

“Is that for me?”

Ford jumped, startled by the sudden voice in his ear, so much so that he accidentally flipped a piece of bacon into the air, the greasy rasher flying upwards, hitting the exhaust fan, and flopping back down, landing on the edge of the counter, then falling to hit the floor.

“Not that bit.”

“Don’t sneak up on me like that. I almost had a heart attack.” Ford protested, trying to level his
“Relax, you’re not due for one of those for another half a century.” Bill assured Ford, looping his arms around Ford’s middle, nuzzling his nose up against Ford’s neck. “And I did not sneak up on you, you were just too stupid to pay attention.”

“Yes, well I didn’t exactly get much sleep last night.” Ford complained, prodding the bacon with his spatula.

“Well you need to chug back the coffee like it’s going out of style! We have plans today.” Bill chimed cheerily, unwinding his arms from Ford.

“Plans?” Ford questioned wryly. “I wasn’t aware we had plans. Or you had plans.”

“I always have plans.” Bill patted Ford on the back jovially and strolled over to the pantry, pulling out the jar of instant coffee for Ford and the jar of maple syrup for himself. “Today my plans for you specifically involve solving our energy problem.”

“For the portal?” Ford clarified, turning to watch Bill pour half a cup of instant coffee granules into a mug for Ford, his muse already reaching for the kettle, which had just boiled. Ford extended his arm to stop Bill, who was intent on pouring hot water into the mug, making coffee like he’d seen Ford do countless times.

“No, no – that’s too much, it’s just a spoonful, you don’t need to use half a cup.”

“Well, be less tired and I won’t have to.” Bill crossed his arms stubbornly as Sixer removed the kettle from his grasp, pouring the excess coffee granules back into the jar. Tugging on Ford’s sleeve, granules spilling all over the counter, Bill whined. “Come on, aren’t you excited?”

“Excited for day plans I know nothing about.” Ford deadpanned, looking at the mess of bacon and coffee granules spilled everywhere thanks to his muse’s intervention.

“Yes! Don’t you find it thrilling? Walking blindfolded towards destiny – no – running! That’s much more dynamic.” Bill enthused, painting a vivid picture.

“It sounds hazardous.” Ford continued, being deliberately sarcastic about the whole affair.

“Running blindfolded towards destiny.” Bill repeated, satisfied, nodding to himself. “After this little field trip, you’ll have a new form of energy to harness, and the portal will be finished like that!”

Bill snapped his fingers, and the spilled coffee flew back into the mug, filling it a third of the way with excess coffee Ford didn’t need to drink. The kettle levitated up from the stovetop, and before Stanford could intervene, hot water poured into the mug, filling it to the brim.

Bill slid the beverage over towards Sixer, and looked at him expectantly.

Ford looked back, casting a dubious glance between the mug of dark liquid and Bill’s beaming grin. He frowned.

Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford.

Ford sighed, and reluctantly picked up the cup, taking a sip under Bill’s optimistic scrutiny. His nose wrinkled, it was terribly bitter, and far too hot.
Ford set the mug back down on the counter. “There, are you happy now?”

“You haven’t even asked me about my plan yet. God, Sixer, how much caffeine does it take to make you interesting today?”

“Well, if that’s how you’re acting I’ll just go back to bed then.” Ford turned away from Bill’s pout, turning the stovetop off, sliding his bacon onto a plate. “I’ll just take my bacon and leave.”

“You’ll do no such thing.” Bill stood in Sixer’s way with his arms crossed, blocking Ford’s path.

Stanford stood, plate of bacon in hand, and stared at Bill flatly, waiting for him to move.

Bill didn’t budge. Instead he reached up and took a piece of bacon from Ford’s plate.

Chewing on it, Bill conceded. “This is good. Crispy.”

“Where are we going then?” Ford asked, resigning himself to their day plans, the excitement catching up with him slightly.

“Have you heard of Area 51?” Bill asked, taking another piece of bacon from Ford’s plate, sitting down at the table, levitating his maple syrup across. “Well, we’re not going there!”

“Helpful.” Ford remarked, and slid into the chair opposite Bill, picking up his own rasher of bacon, taking a bite out of it before Bill could polish off his breakfast for him. “I’m guessing something to do with aliens, or government conspiracies then.”

“You’ve got the government part right.” Bill nodded. “And anything’s a conspiracy if you try hard enough to hide it. No, we are going to a government facility juuuuuust on the edge of town, to hijack some essential materials.”

“So we’re stealing from the government now.” Ford raised his eyebrow incredulously at Bill, who nodded with that same pleased grin. “And how many felonies will you have me commit by the end of the day, I wonder?”

“Well, if that’s your attitude, I can think of a few good ones.” Bill levitated the coffee cup from the counter over to the table, pushing it at Stanford. “Drink more coffee, you’re getting more interesting by the second.”

“I am not stealing from the government. Bill, I’d have a criminal record if I got caught doing that.” Ford stressed, patently ignoring the cup of too strong coffee.

“So, don’t get caught. Simple.” Bill shrugged.

“Just because you steal from every Tom, Dick and Harry – “ Ford began griping.

“I tell you one hilarious story and you use it against me.” Bill huffed, and crossed his arms.

“It doesn’t mean I am willing to steal to get this portal finished!” Ford insisted.

“You stole parts from the spaceship.” Bill pointed out.

“That’s different. They’re not coming back for it, and taking those parts won’t get me arrested by the government.” Ford argued.

“I wouldn’t let them arrest you.” Bill scoffed.
“This just sounds like a bad idea.” Ford picked up another piece of bacon, frowning. He could just picture Bill setting fire to a building, or something equally disastrous happening on this little field trip.

“It is a brilliant idea, and you’ll agree with me when you see what we’re stealing.” Bill said emphatically. “We’d be practically doing this town a public service.”

“What are we stealing?” Ford asked, unintentionally agreeing to the crime just by asking.

“Uranium dioxide.” Bill said proudly, and picked up another piece of bacon, pouring maple syrup on it and shoving it in his mouth, chewing happily.

“We’re stealing uranium from the government?” Ford questioned, surprised. “But wait, there isn’t an EPA certified waste landfill in Gravity Falls. Surely they’d have to record a landfill location and disclose it, especially in such a prominent farming town. You can’t just dump toxic waste in an agricultural community.”

“That’s what they want you to think.” Bill countered, still chewing the bacon, speaking with his mouth full. “They took the yellowcake from that Trojan plant up in Rainer and hid the barrels where they thought no one would find it. Who would look for toxic waste in Gravity Falls, the rubes and hicks who live here? Not a chance. If the water tastes funny they just shrug and move on with their sad pathetic lives, irradiated and richer for the experience.”

“This actually explains quite a lot.” Ford rubbed his chin, considering the implications. “The mutations on the livestock, for one. I knew that three headed goat was suspicious.”

“That’s not the only –”

“What’s suspicious?” Fiddleford questioned from the doorway, having descended the stairs, a folio of portal notes held under his good arm, stopping to look into the kitchen on his way down to the lab. Thankfully nothing was levitating across the kitchen, but straight away Fiddleford picked up on the feeling that Ford and Bill were hiding something.

“Oh, Fiddleford.” Ford leaned back his seat and smiled at his friend. “Good morning. Did you, ah, sleep well last night?”

F cast a peculiar look at Bill, who didn’t turn around to meet his eye, drumming his fingers on the tabletop skittishly, and replied to Stanford.


“Fine.” Ford said swiftly, though the bags under his eyes and the pitch black cup of coffee sitting in front of him told Fiddleford otherwise.

“Right.” F said, doubtfully, picking up on the little details astutely. “So what are y’all doing?”

“Discussing day plans.” Ford answered, censoring the compromising details of said plans. He didn’t need to involve Fiddleford in a potential felony, so Ford thought it better if Fiddleford didn’t know. Plausible deniability meant he wouldn’t be an accomplice if he got caught. Internally Ford realised that this meant that he was going to go along with Bill’s hazardous day plans, and that it had barely taken much effort at all on Bill’s behalf, just a few well-placed words. “We’ll be going out to run some errands, sourcing a few parts for the portal. It shouldn’t take too long.”

Fiddleford noticed that there wasn’t an invitation extended for him to join them on the trip to source these parts, and couldn’t help but think that it was Stanford’s attempt to protect him from
events similar to the last expedition they made. He wasn’t sure how he felt about that. On one hand, he didn’t like being thought of as weak, like he couldn’t handle sourcing new parts for the portal, but on the other hand, F hadn’t really enjoyed going outside much since the incident, preferring safe enclosed spaces that he knew were protected from the monsters that lurked in the forest.

Drumming his fingers on the edge of his folio, Fiddleford rocked back on his heels for a moment, taking that in, before he replied in a rather defeated, resigned tone. “Right, well, you two have a good time then. I’ll be down in the lab, workin’ on the portal infrastructure.”

“You were down there all day yesterday.” Ford frowned, concern creasing his brow. “I appreciate your hard work, but you don’t have to push yourself so much. You’ve done nothing but work in the lab near non-stop for the past week.”

“Yes. And I’ve been gettin’ stuff done, so –“ Fiddleford countered stubbornly.

“I’m just saying, you don’t have to hole up in there all day. Take a break if you can. Do something you’d like to do. I never hear you play your banjo anymore, and you haven’t called Patricia in a while.” Ford tried, urging F back to the passions and pursuits that once made him happy. “Maybe take the day off.”

“Take the day off?” Fiddleford repeated flatly, sounding unimpressed. Though it wasn’t the case he felt like Ford was trying to muscle him out of the project, treating him like an invalid again, and it was grating on his nerves. “You want me to take the day off? While you go out sourcin’ parts for the portal. Take the day off? And do what, exactly?”

Ford floundered, picking up on the slight irritation in F’s tone, and backtracked rapidly. “Or not. It’s up to you. I’m just trying to give you options F.”

“Right.” Fiddleford tucked his folio under his cast, crossing his arms, trying to reign back his temper. His jaw felt tight. He kept his words rather clipped, knowing that Ford didn’t deserve his irritability, he was just trying to look out for him. F shouldn’t be so harsh to Ford, and in the back of his mind Fiddleford appreciated that Ford was trying in his own way. Way back, behind the monsters that lived there.

“Maybe when we get back, we could play a game of D & D and more D together, like we used to.” Ford suggested, before hurrying to clarify. “Not that you have to. It’s just an idea. I don’t want to –“

“No.” Fiddleford interrupted Ford, a forgiving smile softening his expression. “I’ll play. It has been a while.”

“You will?” Ford’s expression brightened, a smile lighting his face up.

Fiddleford felt guilty, the emotion flickering through him. His moods had clearly put his friend on edge, and though they didn’t talk about it, Fiddleford knew he was screaming in his sleep. He knew he was screaming the whole house down every night he took those sleeping pills, the images dancing behind his eyelids coming for him anyway whether he wanted them to or not. It became a thing he had to endure, for Stanford’s peace of mind, endure those hours of unconsciousness, the nightmares coming for him. Sure, his temper may have been a tad short because of it, flaring up at Stanford more than the other scientist’s behaviour warranted. Fiddleford was trying to convince himself that he didn’t resent Stanford for it, but sometimes he didn’t believe that.

He looked at his friend’s hopeful smile, and wanted to believe he didn’t resent him for his care.
Ford was just trying to look out for him, and he didn’t deserve this.

“Sure. I’ll play.” Fiddleford conceded. “You got enough graph paper?”

“I should do in the study. If not, I can always pick up more from the store, but I’m quite certain I still have a sheaf.”

“Alright then. Well, I’ll get to fixin’ some wirin’ down in the lab, and when you two get back we can bust out the board games.” Fiddleford gave Ford another tired smile, trying his best to act normal. From Ford’s relieved expression, agreeing to a game went a fair way towards soothing his friend’s worries.

“Sounds great.” Ford agreed, pleased that Fiddleford was indulging in one of his old favourite pastimes, possibly putting this whole Gremloblin thing behind him.

“Great.” Fiddleford parroted back, rocking on his heels for a moment, before drumming his fingers awkwardly on his folio once more.

Bill hadn’t once spoken up throughout the conversation, or even turned around to look at F. Maybe Fiddleford’s midnight rejection had hit him harder than he thought, or maybe, if Bill’s sleepwalking excuse was to be believed, it had been a misunderstanding all along. Ford seemed run down by the lack of sleep, Fiddleford’s screaming keeping him up, it was possible Bill was similarly affected, enough to mistake Fiddleford’s room for Ford’s, or his own potentially. Either way Fiddleford was keen to put the embarrassing interlude behind them. Best to pretend it had never happened.

“Well, I’ll be in the lab if you need me.” Fiddleford pointed to the elevators. “I’m just gonna go.”

“See you this afternoon.” Ford waved cheerily, Bill still not turning to acknowledge F.

“Bye.” Fiddleford didn’t hold out for a response, just turning to go, seeking the solace of the lab. He walked into the other room and descended in the elevator.

“Well that’s promising.” Ford picked the last bit of bacon up from his plate and popped it in his mouth.

“Mmh.” Bill hummed, watching Ford eat.

“You’re not sour about me offering him the day off, are you?” Ford cast Bill a scolding look. “He’s more than earned an afternoon off to play board games, he’s been putting extra hours into the lab, more than anyone could expect.”

“I don’t have a problem with it.” Bill shrugged. “Fun and games are great distractions.”

“Good.” Ford stood and took his plate over to the sink. “Did you want anything else for breakfast?”

“We can get something on the way.” Bill pushed his chair back and got up. “Go change your clothes, we’re wearing all black today. And a tie, this is a black-tie occasion. It’s not every day you get to rob the government.”

Ford sighed, but followed Bill through the house nonetheless, resigning himself to committing a minor infraction for the sake of the portal.

*It would be fine, Ford convinced himself, as long as we don’t get caught.*
However, if we do get caught, I’m going to jail.

Great.

Bill tugged at the neck of the black turtleneck he commandeered from Ford’s wardrobe, sitting in the passenger seat of the car as they drove towards the government site.

“Why do you get to wear the suit, why don’t I get a suit that fits?”

“Because.” Ford said, hands on the wheel, turning into the back alley a block away from the government building. “I get the feeling if I bought you a suit of your own, you’d never get out of it.”

“I’d want a tux.” Bill insisted. “A fancy tux.”

“Fancy tuxedos cost money.” Ford turned the ignition off.

“I’m sorry, was the treasure chest full of priceless gems not enough for you?”

“I don’t think there’s a price high enough for me to deal with you wearing a bowtie around the house 24/7.”

“I thought you liked the bowtie.”

Ford pulled his keys out and pocketed them, before turning around in his seat, cupping Bill’s cheek and pressing a small sweet kiss to Bill’s lips. “I do like the bowtie. Too much. Which is why you’re not having one.”

Bill pouted. “No fun. You’re no fun.”

Ford stroked Bill’s cheek with his thumb, considering his muse dressed in his sharpest black turtleneck and dress slacks, polished and svelte, ready to con his way into a government building. Ford too, was ready to con his way into a government building, wearing a suit jacket he hadn’t worn since the false funeral he attended for Stanley years ago, and a veil of confidence that was becoming flimsier by the second.

“I’m doing this aren’t I? I’m some fun.”

“You’re nervous.” Bill noted, seeing right through Ford’s wrinkling confidence.

“No, I –” Ford protested, Bill’s astute yellow eyes seeing through him. “You’re right, I am nervous. This is breaking the law.”

Bill puffed out a frustrated breath and rolled his eyes. “Sixer –“

“Impersonating a government official, stealing government property – Bill, I could get arrested for this.” Ford panicked, gesturing with his hands.

“I told you, I’m not letting you get arrested.”
“I’m not that good a liar!” Ford stressed. “How am I supposed to go in there and lie to their faces, and just expect them to let me walk out of there with barrels of toxic uranium?”

“You let me –” Bill reached out to straighten Ford’s tie for him, brushing down the lapels of his suit. “Do the talking. That’s how. Now don’t be nervous, and keep your mouth shut. Your job is to stand here, look pretty, and do all the heavy lifting for me, alright Sixer?”

Ford gave Bill a distrustful look, hardly soothed by the muse’s assurances. “You’ve done this before.”

“Countless times.” Bill buttoned up Ford’s suit jacket. “I’d do it myself if this wasn’t a two-man operation, but without a suit of my own I lose all credibility.”

“You’re just saying that because you want me to buy you a suit.” Ford guessed correctly.

Bill stared at Ford for several seconds, and then shrugged flippancly.

“It was worth a shot.” Bill patted Ford’s chest one last time, before opening the passenger side door, rapping his knuckles against the car roof. “Come on. Time’s a wasting.”

Ford groaned and stepped out of the car, slamming his own door shut, running his hands through his hair. “I’m really going to do this. I’m going to break the law.”

“Rules were made to be broken Sixer. Especially the self-serving laws of the US government. On a scale from one to hypocrite, they’re an eleven, and you know this, which is why you’re going along with my plan and bending that law. If not now, then when?” Bill said smoothly, clicking his fingers, plucking two official looking ID cards out of thin air, and several official documents, passing an ID card and the documents to Sixer. “Here.”

“You say that like it’s some kind of slippery slope, or inevitability.” Ford remarked, tucking the papers into his breast pocket.

“When you’ve lived as long as I have Sixer, rules become a cage, become shackles. The people who make these laws are shallow, fickle, weak creatures, no better than you or I.” Bill didn’t much feel like explaining this in depth, but gave Sixer the benefit of the doubt. Clearly listening to Bill speak was calming Ford down some, and Bill needed him confident, or at least calm if they were going to pull this off. “When you’ve looked the rule makers in the face and asked them why, and they have sweet fuck all to say in their defence, you realise the fallacy of it all. The indignity of playing their make-believe game, of living an illusion not of your own making. Why not revel in the chaos? Live a little.”

“Sometimes I’m not entirely sure what I summoned when I called you down.” Ford remarked, giving Bill a considering look that had the muse inwardly nervous that he’d given too much away. “Your perspective is unlike anything I’ve ever encountered.”

“Does it make you want to liberate some yellowcake with me?” Bill tried, smiling winsomely, hoping the sheer force of his charisma would help Sixer look past his chaotic slip.

Ford considered that for a second, shelving away the nugget of insight about his muse to dwell on later, before shrugging off his reservations. “Sure why not. But if I get arrested –”

“You will not get arrested.” Bill crossed around the back of the car and snagged Sixer by the elbow, pulling him out of the alleyway. “Geez Sixer, this isn’t my first rodeo. Now come on.”
Agent’s Smith and Wesson were quite young for US government recruits, sent to run surveillance in a quiet rural outpost in Oregon, of all places. They didn’t have the skillset a more experienced Agent might have, which is why they were sent here. There wasn’t much to do in Gravity Falls except wait for orders to come down the line, and pass the time until then, so Agent’s Smith and Wesson were playing card games in the conference room of the minuscule government instalment when the two gentleman dressed in black came barging in through the conference room door.

“Who’s in charge here?” The man in the black turtleneck asked, his voice ringing with authority, peering around the room from behind his black sunglasses. “Point me to the man in charge, because I sure as shit didn’t come all the way down from Washington to see two mooks sitting at a table playing poker.”

Fumbling to slide the pack of cards off the table, sending most of them spilling onto the floor, Agent Smith straightened his back up, standing tall, firing off a salute at the official looking man, while Agent Wesson ducked under the table to retrieve the spilled cards.

“Agent Smith, sir. At your service. What may I do for –?”

“You do realise that this facility is in breach of the Solid Waste Disposal Act, PL 89-272, Agent Smith?” Bill barked at the man, his tone of voice startling Agent Wesson, who bumped his head on the conference table, standing up to join his co-worker’s salute, not knowing how high up the chain the man before him was.

“Sir, I – “

“The fact that this information leaked so high up the chain, while the EPA is riding our asses – quite frankly gentlemen, it’s laughable that I was even called in here.” Bill crossed his arms, his words flowing fast and abrupt. “Hilarious. A comedy routine of the highest calibre.”

“Sir – I – I’m not sure what -?” Smith fumbled, not used to taking such a brow beating.

“The barrels, the yellowcake – genius.” Bill said, raising his hand sharply. “We can’t afford another Maxey Flat, not that we’re letting that get out - and our lawyers get wind of the fact that out in bo-dunk Hicksville there are seventy-nine barrels of uranium dioxide sitting pretty in the middle of hundreds of acres of farmland. We’re up to our necks in litigation, depositions, lawsuits left and right. This is a code red, people, and lucky for you my associate and I are here to help you clean out before the mud sticks, capiche?”

When the man in the turtleneck mentioned his associate, that drew Smith’s attention to the suited gentleman in the glasses, who looked slightly less assured than his colleague was, enough to draw a sliver of suspicion.

“Do you mind showing a little identification, you and your friend here. We didn’t get any communication from Washington that they were sending Agents down, that’s all.” Smith said delicately, watching the man in the glasses pointedly look away, scratching his chin, his expression not nearly serious enough for a government agent.

“This is a matter of urgency. I’ve got Ruckelshaus out there, scenting for blood. This is a cover up, not a tea party.” Bill scoffed impatiently, before elbowing Sixer brusquely. “Show him the documents, we don’t have time to dance around.”
Startled by the elbow to the gut, Ford reached into his breast pocket and withdrew the documentation Bill had preorganised, passing it over to Agent Wesson, who held his hand out for it.

Without waiting for the Agents to read it, Bill clicked his fingers and walked brusquely out of the room, waving for the Agents to follow in step. “Now I need coordinates to the dumping grounds, stat. We don’t have much time here. If this keeps climbing up the ladder, all of our jobs are on the line.”

Agent Wesson barely had time to look over the paperwork, already scrambling, along with Agent Smith, out of the conference room, digging through files in the filing room to find the coordinates in question. While Wesson sprang straight to it, Smith gave Stanford a squinting glance as he passed by, still not entirely convinced of the man’s credentials.

Bill stood there, arms crossed, next to Sixer, his sunglasses shielding his slitted yellow eyes, his mouth a stern line that looked out of place on his usually grinning face. Ford watched Bill command the Agents effortlessly, and couldn’t help but be a little impressed by it all. Even if Bill did sound like a detective cliché from the old film noir movie playing on television last night.

Leaning down to whisper in Bill’s ear, Ford remarked. “You are quite the actor.”

The corner of Bill’s lips twitched, and it was clear it took effort not to smile at that. “You like my performance?”

“You have them running.” Ford looked down at Bill, his eyes twinkling with amusement behind his glasses.

“They’re government agents, they take all their direction from a higher power.” Bill murmured back to Ford. “It’s like herding sheep. I could do this with my eyes closed.”

“And they’ll never know.” Ford said, referring to the dark sunglasses Bill was wearing.

Bill’s lips twitched upwards again, and he nudged Ford with his elbow. “Stop making me laugh, you’ll blow our cover. This is serious face time.”


Bill took the coordinates from Agent Wesson and read through them, staring at them for a while in silence.

“Three things, gentlemen.” Bill said, looking up at the Agents, counting on his finger. “I’ll need resources; shovels, a truck if you have one, and hazmat suits. Bring three, you’re both coming with me.”

“Sir, yes sir!” Both Agents saluted Bill and ran off to retrieve the items for him.

When the Agents vacated the room, Ford frowned, and looked down at Bill, whispering frantically. “You’re bringing them with us? That wasn’t part of the plan Bill. What are you thinking?”

“I’m thinking that I thought these coordinates would be different than they are.” Bill passed the documents to Ford, pointing at the numbers there. “The edge of town is still in town, give or take a little wiggle room, but this says the barrels are buried ten yards outside of Gravity Falls county lines. So, unless you feel like exhuming and hauling several metric tonnes of hazardous waste back and forth all on your own, we’re going to have to improvise.”
Ford’s frown deepened, looking at the coordinates on the page. “You can’t cross the town borders.”

“No, I can’t, and if we just leave with the coordinates and go to the site later, they might know that something’s up, organise before we get there, and we could lose the whole pot.” Bill reasoned, looking up at Stanford, ducking his sunglasses down so he could make eye contact with the nervous scientist. “I know you’re a bad liar, and I know you don’t like this, but you just have to hold out a bit longer until we cinch this.”

“I don’t know if I can, that Agent with the moustache, he suspects me.”

“Don’t let it show.” Bill insisted. “You keep your mouth shut, and your back straight, and if anyone asks you anything, you say ‘it’s classified’ and that way you don’t have to talk to them, alright Sixer? We can do this, you just have to trust me.”

“Alright.” Ford swallowed, mustering up his confidence in order to continue this charade. “Alright.”

“The van is ready out front Sir.” Agent Wesson approached Bill, firing off a salute.

Bill cracked his knuckles.

“Well, let’s get this show on the road.”

Regarding the cooler weather, Ford was sweating underneath the hazmat suit, digging barrels of uranium out of the ground.

“Keep it moving! Come on, heave! Double time people!”

Despite what Bill had said, it still felt like Ford was doing all the work here, having spent an hour already digging barrels of uranium out of the earth alongside the two agents, Smith and Wesson, while Bill reclined against the hood of the van, parked just within the boundaries of Gravity Falls, fanning himself with the forged documents.

Every so often Ford would look up, unable to wipe the sweat from his brow without taking the hazmat suit off, to see Bill sunbathing happily, wearing those dark glasses, looking like a tourist on holiday in the Bahamas, contriving circumstances so he didn’t have to lift a finger to help. At some point in the hour through which Ford had been laboriously moving the barrels to the back of the van, Bill had somehow managed to summon a bottle of tomato juice, complete with floating olives, like a virgin Bloody Mary, which he sipped on now, with his paper fan and his dark sunglasses. The sight of Bill’s languorous recline made Ford want to slap the juice out of Bill’s hand.

“We don’t have all day. Put your back into it.” Bill called out, gesturing with the hand that held the tomato juice, before going back to fanning himself with the papers.

“Your boss is a bit of a slave driver.” Agent Wesson commented to Ford, helping him heave one of the uranium barrels out of the ground. “What was he? Military? Drill sergeant?”
Ford paused, tempted to roll his eyes, rankling at the assumption that Bill was his boss, but couldn’t voice his frustration for fear of blowing their cover. Instead he gritted his teeth and responded. “That’s classified.”

“He’s just standing there. He isn’t going to help?” Wesson grumbled, and Ford couldn’t help but privately agree.

“He’s supervising, Wesson, pull your head in.” Agent Smith chided his colleague. “You wouldn’t expect Agent Powers to haul ass on a basic cover up mission like this.”

“Again with Agent Powers. Agent Powers this, Agent Powers that.” Wesson mocked his friend, assuming Stanford was a sympathetic ear.

“You shut up.” Smith shot back at his friend, lugging a barrel towards the van.

“Take a look at that moustache. You know who else has a moustache like that?” Wesson continued, ribbing his co-worker. “Agent Powers.”

“I met him at induction at the Bureau. The man is a rock, an icon.” Agent Smith took a moment to gush. “The funniest comedian in the world could tell a joke and he wouldn’t – move - a muscle.”

“He tells this story every time, watch.” Wesson nodded at his colleague as together the three men lifted the barrel into the back of the van, sliding it along to sit with the other barrels.

“I go up to him and say ‘Sir, I aspire to be just like you someday’ and he looks me in the eye.” Smith dusted his hands off and pointed to the visor of the hazmat suit. “And says to me ‘Son, that’s all very well, but this is a private conference’ and just like that, boom, I’m taken away. Efficiency.”

“Efficiency, he says.” Wesson rolled his eyes.

“Tell me that’s not efficient.” Smith protested.

A thump sounded from the side of the van, and the agents looked up to see Bill rapping his knuckles against the van doors, before peering around to look inside.

“Look at those illicit beauties. Excellent. That’ll be enough for today. Agents, you two dig cover for the rest of the barrels, make it look inconspicuous, so nobody finds them. My associate and I will take these babies back to Washington.” Bill rested his hand against the rim of one of the barrels, enjoying the emphasis it gave his words. Never mind the fact that he was touching a toxic waste cylinder bare handed.

“Yes sir!” Agent Smith fumbled to salute, knocking his gloved hand against the bulky head of the hazmat suit.

Agent Wesson followed his colleague with a more reluctant salute, watching as Bill poked his head in the back of the van, counting the barrels, before closing the van doors, smooth as can be.

Bill walked around to the passengers seat and climbed in, waiting for Sixer, who made a move to leave as well.

“One thing I don’t get.” Wesson spoke up, catching Ford by the arm of his hazmat suit as he made to leave. “The rest of us are wearing hazmat suits for this, protection against radiation, but why isn’t your boss wearing one? Sure, he didn’t do any of the heavy lifting, but isn’t that still a hazard? Why didn’t he wear one too?”
Ford gave Wesson a sympathetic look, and adjusted the head of his hazmat suit, shrugging, before giving the only answer he could give.

“I’m afraid that’s classified.”

“When you said ‘let me do the talking and you do all the heavy lifting’ I’m hoping you had some sort of compensatory plan for the muscle strain you’ve inflicted upon me.” Ford grumbled, having put the last of the uranium away, hiding the barrels just out behind the shack, several yards into the forest.

“Muscle strain?” Bill scoffed, walking alongside Sixer back to the shack. “Pfft. That was a workout, Sixer, to keep you from getting flabby. Feel the burn, embrace the burn.”

“I’d much sooner decontaminate myself, thank you. I’m not in the market for that kind of burn.” Ford dusted his hands off, paranoia telling him that the prickling of his arm hair was the feeling of slowly being irradiated from the day’s activities. It could have just been the sweat drying. “And since when am I flabby? I’m not flabby.”

“No, you are not.” Bill grinned, his eyes lighting up and down Sixer’s physique. “However, if you want to be prepared for the rigors of space exploration and all that that entails, you should probably sign up for a few intensive workout sessions with me, just to keep you on your toes. I could train you up.”

“I can only imagine what you’d be like as a fitness instructor, and already I don’t like it.” Ford rolled his eyes, though he was unable to hide how his interest piqued at the thought of receiving training to prepare him for extra-terrestrial exploration. “What kind of workouts are we talking about here?”

“Oh, the usual.” Bill grinned, and began listing regimens off on his fingers. “Marksman practise, getting your sprinting speed up to scratch, teaching you how to dodge flaming projectiles, teaching you how to barter with chumps – a lot of that when you go dimension hopping.”

“It all sounds fascinating.” Ford admitted. “But I’m not sure how I feel about you and flaming projectiles coexisting in the same sentence.”

“It’s a common linguistic abstraction.” Bill laughed.

Ford stopped, just halting out by the back porch, turning to catch Bill around the waist, drawing him close to him.

Bill looked up at Sixer, expectantly, those yellow eyes open and curious. He rested his hands on Sixer’s chest, feeling his pectoral muscles through his shirt, enjoying the closeness.

“You really want to teach me how to survive in space, don’t you? Hopping dimensions, traversing on space ships, all the things you’re used to. You’re really letting me in to your world.” Ford wondered, watching his muse with awe, wrapping his head around the idea.

“I’m coming around to the thought of keeping you.” Bill confessed with a pleased smile, spreading
his hands smoothly across Sixer’s torso, fingers playing with the buttons on Ford’s shirt.

Ford raised an eyebrow at the words ‘keeping you’ but decided to write that off as Bill’s abstract way of being romantic, and leaned down to capture his muse’s lips in a firm, thankful kiss.

Bill kissed back enthusiastically, before pulling away, licking his lips, staring up at Stanford with glowing eyes.

“Mmmm. I can taste the uranium on your skin.”

“And that tells me I am long overdue for a shower.” Ford shivered with revulsion at the thought of being so thoroughly irradiated. “I can’t wait to wash this off me.”

“A little radiation never hurt anyone.” Bill called out after him teasingly, but allowed Sixer to untwine from him and hurry into the house, racing up the stairs to decontaminate himself.

Bill followed Sixer curiously through the house, making his own way to the bedroom Sixer set up for him, pausing outside the bathroom door to hear the taps being turned on. The bathroom door was slightly ajar, as though Ford had forgotten to close it in his hurry. His shirt was laying in the doorjamb, clearly he’d flung it off in his haste to get clean.

Looking both ways down the hall, Bill felt somewhat perverse as he nudged the bathroom door open a sliver more, peering in through the steam gathering in the bathroom to see Sixer’s broad naked back turn pink as the hot water sluiced down over his skin.

The water pelted down on the scientist, wetting his fluffy brown hair flat, droplets trailing along the broad curve of his back. Bill followed the line that ran between Ford’s shoulders with his eyes, down to the dimples just at his waist, watching water spill over the curve of Ford’s rear, feeling his own face flush with heat.

He wanted to mark that body, to press up against it, to rake his nails down Sixer’s back, clinging to his shoulders as they writhed pleasantly together. The thought clashed vividly with his consciousness, that carnal desire to possess Ford. He didn’t know when he began developing an appetite for the thought of such things, when the dreams Sixer had once disgusted Bill. The pleasures of the flesh were convincing, perhaps. Or maybe Sixer just posed an enticing argument for such things, through virtue of who he was to Bill.

Bill’s curiosity was a strong motivator, warring with how flustered watching Ford bathe was making him. Half of him was itching to go, to leave, before Sixer caught him, and the other half of him wanted to hold out until Sixer turned around, so he could see his human completely. So he could see what all the fuss was about.

Bill bit his lip, lingering in the doorway, watching Sixer’s broad shoulders shift as he ran his hands through wet hair, wiping water off his forehead, out of his eyes, pinching his nose as he continued to shower.

*Turn around, turn around, turn around.* Bill silently willed, half hoping Sixer could hear him somehow.

Miraculously, Ford’s shoulders began to shift, turning to reach for the soap, which was when Bill realised that if Sixer turned around, he’d see Bill watching him, and he wasn’t intangible anymore, meaning he couldn’t get away with doing this.

Bill’s heart was beating staccato, heat flushing right through him as he panicked, eyes drawing up to meet Sixer’s just as he turned to face him.
Ford’s eyes widened in recognition, aware he was being watched by the muse, who seemed to
tense up, shoulders raising, still biting his lip, his gold eyes darting between the mist coalescing
around Sixer’s hips, and his eyes, becoming more flustered by the second.

“You –“ Ford started, watching Bill’s cheeks flush dark, his brain stuck on the thought that his
muse was here, and he was naked. He was naked, and his muse was watching him bathe. Before he
could even find the right words to express his astonishment at this entire situation, Bill slammed
the bathroom door shut.

“I – I’M GOING TO BED. DON’T WAKE ME UP.”

Ford stood still, the water pouring down on him, pausing to listen to his muse run down the
corridor to his own room, slamming his bedroom door shut behind him dramatically.

Ford let out the breath he’d been holding, wiping the water off his forehead as he wrapped his head
around what just happened. Bill had definitely been watching him bathe, and that stirred a heat in
Ford’s belly that he didn’t know how to justify. He never considered himself as much of an
exhibitionist, but there was something about knowing his muse had his eyes upon him that just…

Ford sighed, and laughed to himself, shaking his head, before turning back around to rub the soap
under his armpits.

Bill was certainly full of enlightening surprises.

Looking for Fiddleford, Ford paced through the house, surprised to find his friend wasn’t in the
lab. It had become his usual haunt, there was something about the stark architecture and the
comforting hum of machines that soothed the engineer. He was in there so often Ford almost forgot
he’d given F his own study space in the attic.

Ford knocked on the door, turning the handle, stepping into the attic. “May I come in?”

Fiddleford jumped, somewhat startled out of his reverie, having spent goodness knows how long
staring at the piece of alien machinery he’d been fiddling with on his desk, lost in thought.

“Oh, it’s just you.” Fiddleford sighed, holding a hand to his chest, ashamed of the way his pulse
had jumped at the sudden intrusion.

“You were expecting someone else?” Ford questioned, walking into the room.

“I’m just jumpy, don’t mind me.” Fiddleford waved off Ford’s concern pre-emptively, though it
didn’t do him much good.

Standing over F’s desk, Ford looked at what his friend had been working on. There were some
notes on the alien device he was looking at, something about frequency and brain waves, and some
ideas jotted down about a brainwave interface enabling communication with comatose individuals
as a potential humanitarian use for the machine. The notes on the first page seemed very neat and
orderly, but Fiddleford’s handwriting seemed to splay disjointed across the page towards the end of
the paper, as though he had been distracted by something, doodling words without being cognisant
of what he was writing.

Ford spotted the words ‘HELP ME’ written over and over again at the bottom of the page in slanted looping cursive, and frowned.

“Are you sure you’re okay?” Ford pressed, worried for his friend. “You haven’t been yourself since …”

“I don’t wanna talk about that, alright. I’m doin’ the best I can, just –” Fiddleford insisted, working himself up.

“I know, and you’re doing an admirable job.” Ford assured Fiddleford, holding his hands up in front of him. “I just want to be sure I’m doing all I can to help you. Maybe we haven’t exhausted all our options yet. There must be some technique we can use.”

“Stanford, I’m –“ Fiddleford massaged his temple, becoming agitated by Ford’s ‘help’.

“We could try meditation. Or breathing exercises! I actually happen to know a marvellous technique for slowing one’s pulse rate down to mitigate fear, as well as a few physical stretches to improve health and wellbeing and –“

“If you’re tellin’ me I just need to do yoga and breathe through it, I’m throwin’ my cube at your head. There’s your warning.” Fiddleford cautioned caustically.

Ford fell quiet, his suggestions cutting off. It was obvious F wasn’t in the mood for them.

Ford cast his gaze towards the aforementioned Cubic’s Cube and noticed the puzzle was still scrambled, still unsolved. Judging from the placement of the squares, it had been twisted around since the last time Ford was up here, played with nervously, but it worried Ford that Fiddleford hadn’t solved it. Solving Cubic’s Cubes was what Fiddleford did, it just seemed wrong that somehow the cube was still scrambled.

Things were more serious than Ford had thought.

“I don’t mean to offend you.” Ford said solemnly. “I just wanted – well, I hoped that you’d try it. Just – give it a try, for my peace of mind.”

“I’m doin’ plenty already for your peace of mind, and I ain’t gettin’ none of my own.” Fiddleford grumbled somewhat resentfully.

“What do you -?” Ford questioned obliviously.

“It’s nothing.” Fiddleford closed off, trying not to lash out at Ford over this. He was just trying to help.

“No, Fiddleford.” Ford sighed, then crouched to kneel beside F’s chair, looking up at him, trying to catch his gaze to express his sincerity. “I want to help you, but I won’t know what I’m doing wrong if you won’t tell me. I’ve never had – I mean, I’ve faced plenty of monsters before in my time – but I’ve never had an experience like yours, so I don’t know –“

“You don’t know.” Fiddleford snapped, his words coming out harsher than intended. “You don’t know what you’re puttin’ me through every night, making me sleep through those dreams over ‘n over again, like they’re just dreams. It’s all I see when I shut my eyes, and it’s –“

“I’m sorry.” Ford apologised, feeling terrible. “I’m sorry.”
“I know you’re sorry, that’s just the thing. I know you are.” Fiddleford sighed, frustrated with himself. “And I ain’t doin’ right by you, but I just can’t – this ain’t about your guilt, I just can’t –“

“I’m sorry.” Ford repeated, not knowing what else to say. “I didn’t mean to burden you, I just –“

“You don’t know what it’s like.” Fiddleford clenched his fist, looking away from Ford. “Every night, losing your friends, losing your family, your wife, your child, losing yourself and thinkin’ it’s real, you don’t – you don’t have the people to lose like I do.”

Ford digested that, silent, feeling the words roll through him hurtfully. Part of him felt that he deserved this, and the other part of him just felt empty.

“You’re right.” Ford said quietly. “I don’t.”

“I don’t – I didn’t mean it like that.” Fiddleford hastened to clarify regretfully. “You got people, you got – you got Bill.”

Ford registered that, feeling the pit in his stomach lessen for a moment, before realising that the only person he had to lose was a cosmic being who never wanted to be here in the first place. And Bill was all he had.

“You got family.” Fiddleford continued, trying to make things better. “You got Stanley, you got –“

“No, I don’t.” Ford cut Fiddleford off, recoiling sharply from the thought that Stanley was someone he had to lose. You couldn’t lose who you’d already lost to burning betrayal. “I don’t, and that’s fine, because I don’t understand what you’re going through, but that doesn’t mean I don’t want to help.”

“I get that. I do.” Fiddleford ran his hand over his face, rubbing his tired eyes, suddenly exhausted by the emotional labour of this conversation, consoling Stanford when he needed consoling. “I shouldn’t’ve snapped at you. I’m not – this isn’t my day. Let’s start over.”

“What will you try the meditation exercises with me?” Ford pressed stubbornly.

“If it’s what it’ll take for you to get off my back about it, I guess.” Fiddleford shrugged, and rubbed his cheek sleepily. “Can that happen after we play though? I’ve been lookin’ forward to that game of ours.”

“I’ve got it set up and ready for us downstairs. I came up here to get you.”

“Well, you got more ‘n you bargained for, that’s for sure.” Fiddleford shook his head, shaking off the exhaustion, trying to muster a more chipper attitude. He stood up from his chair, Ford standing too. “Sorry. Right. I think I’m ready to play some D&D& more D for a while.”

“Just a short campaign.” Ford promised. “It won’t take long.”

“You always say that.” Fiddleford laughed, and followed Ford out of the attic, closing the door behind him.

The scrambled Cubic’s Cube sat on Fiddleford’s desk as they left, a pointed reminder of what couldn’t be forgotten.
Pyronica was waiting for Bill, leaning casually on the sloped wall of the Quadrangle, outside of the nightmare dungeons, examining her flaming nails while Kryptos hovered in impatient circles beside her.

“I still think this is a bad idea. I mean, it’s not my idea, and I’m not saying I think it’s the best idea, but shouldn’t he be here by now?” Kryptos fretted anxiously.

“He’ll get here when he gets here. Stop circling. Just watching you is making me dizzy.” Pyronica huffed, and pulled out her nail file, Kryptos’ nerves grating on her own.

“I’m just thinking – I’m loyal, of course I’m loyal, but this doesn’t seem – it just seems reckless, I don’t –” Kryptos continued to circle, agonising over what they were about to do.

“Bill says it’ll be okay, so it’ll be okay.” Pyronica said definitively, filing her nails into a sharp point. “It’s that simple.”

“You like fighting more than I do, I just think if this backfires we’ll end up with an army of quantum toting canon blasting crazed cultists knocking down the door of our last safe haven. Our last safe haven.” Kryptos put his gloved hands on either side of his eye, stressing.

“It’ll be fine.” Pyronica huffed, glaring at Kryptos. “If you’re too nervous to be here then be somewhere else. Bill knows what he’s doing, and if it comes to a fight, your flimsy ass will be protected, that was part of the deal, so stop whining.”

“I just don’t trust her to –” Kryptos spun around, beseeching Pyronica. “I did my research. I know what she’s capable of - what she’ll do. She’s bad news, and Bill shouldn’t trust her.”

“Who says I trust her?” Bill asked, teleporting in behind Kryptos, scaring the shit out of the compass.

“Bill!” Kryptos shrieked, and held a hand over his middle, what passed for a cosmic pulse racing double-time.

“If you were shitting yourself any harder I’d be able to smell it.” Bill pulled his cane out of thin air and poked Kryptos in the belly. “What’s wrong this time Kryptos? And why should I care?”


“Well, good.” Bill rested his hands on his cane, turning away from Kryptos.

“It’s just that –” Kryptos continued, and Bill rolled his eye, groaning. “Well, I don’t think we should be doing business with her. I just don’t. She’s –”

“I know exactly what she is Kryptos.” Bill turned back to face the nervous compass. “I grew up with her.”

“I just want to make sure that you’re not letting your past with her colour your conduct with her in the present. If anything, you’re being too lenient with her, offering her back her soldiers.” Kryptos advised. “You don’t give back pawns to checkmate the king. It’s backwards logic.”

“I love backwards logic! I know how to twist her arm Kryptos. Do not make the mistake to presume that I’m letting her off lightly.” Bill floated over to the wall of the nightmare dungeon, pressing his cane against the bricks. “Now, you can either stand there wetting yourself, or come
inside and see how a real dealer swings things. Your choice.”

“I –“ Kryptos struggled with himself for a second, before sucking in a deep breath, puffing his chest out, holding his hands at his side, stiff. “I’m ready.”

“Ready to wet yourself.” Bill closed his eye and rubbed his eyelid, before waving at Kryptos. “Just stand out of the way somewhere, over there. Your blubbering is going to ruin my entrance. Can’t believe I’m letting you play the muscle for this.”

“Yes boss.”

Pressing the cane against the black brick of the nightmare dungeon, Bill warped the composition of the wall, phasing the bricks away into nothingness, creating a door through spacetime.

Lending to the effect, Pyronica sent her vivid pink flames chasing along the floor of the cramped dungeon, startling the eight chained prisoners who recoiled from the vibrant flames that licked at their feet. They hung from glowing manacles that sprung out from the walls, the chains careless of the injuries they cultured thanks to Xanthar’s girth baring down on them. They were mostly Taronjan men and women, members of a dwindling society who had lost their home planet, quite possibly on one of Paci-Fire’s moon raids. They seemed quite young, possibly second generation off world Taronjans, the citric tone of their skin and their wide black eyes indicating their race. Their condition was pitiful, but zealotry had fired up their spirits, sparking fervent hope where so many others would have broken by now.

“My henchmaniacs say you’re lost.” Bill’s voice boomed preternaturally loud through the dark dingy chamber. “Poor lost souls, wandering where they shouldn’t. Something tells me you pray to the wrong Sat Nav.”

Cosmic chains rattling with their movements, the prisoners looked around, trying to identify the direction of their tormentor’s echoing voice, the flames casting terrifying shadows on the walls.

“Usually when you show up uninvited on someone’s doorstep, most folks have the good manners to hightail it outta there. You’d save your own skins that way. Not you though, you set up camp.”

Bill’s voice came from everywhere, and nowhere, until he was right in front of them, shining gold, shrugging congenially.

“At least you brought presents.”

The less hardy zealots squealed in fright, worn down by unending nightmares, but the ringleader only flinched, his mouth a thin line of strained composure.

“I’ve always wanted my own quantum cannon!” Bill crowed cheerfully, hovering in front of the captured crew, Pyronica and Kryptos falling in step behind him. “And to think you came all this way to give it to me!”

“We came to end you, you screaming nightmare.” A young female spat venomously at Bill, shaking her wrists ineffectually, tears of fury trailing down her sunrise orange face. “To reign divine judgement down upon you, you unholy, vile –“

Bill clicked his fingers and the skin of young woman’s mouth drew in tight, the iron in her blood solidifying until instead of a functioning mouth, her lips were replaced with steel zipper teeth, the zip drawn shut.

“Zip it, short stack. That’s no way to talk to your betters.”
The girl’s screams were trapped inside her mouth, and she tugged on her chains, fingers vainly grasping towards her face, wanting to feel where her lips had been.

The other prisoners silenced their sobs as best as they could, glancing fearfully up at the glowing yellow triangle, who was examining his nails idly, resting one hand on his cane.

“Don’t forget you’re in my house. You wanna play games, you play by my rules. This isn’t the kiddie pool.” Bill gave the cowering zealots a cool look, before softening his tone, shrinking his form down to look less threatening. “In fact, I’d say you’ve just come from the kiddie pool, since you’re all so wet around the ears. What did she do, pass you a gun and pat you on the ass as she kicked you out the door. So ready to throw your lives away.”

“It was our choice.” The rather stoic looking ringleader spoke up, casting a level glance at Bill. He had dark black eyes, black to the sclera, and dusky yellow skin.

“Oh, I didn’t mean you.” Bill put his hand just under his bowtie sincerely. “I meant her. You think this was your choice. You’re all sorely mistaken. That’s not how she operates.”

“She told us you would fill our heads with lies. And nightmares.” The man swallowed, trying to maintain his strong demeanour.

“That sounds just like her.” Bill leaned his elbows on his cane. “You know how I know? Because I know her. I know truths about her that she can’t bear being known.”

“Is that a lie too?” The man blinked, the pain from his injuries making him wince, his dark eyes watering.

“She wishes it was, but we go way back.” Bill floated lower, trying to look more approachable in his own way, his tone sympathetic and friendly. “Tarnishes her perfect reputation to let that truth be known, so she sends children, her goons, to blot me off her record. Can’t say I blame her, I’d have done the same. We had the same teacher, you see, back in the day, and some lessons stick.”

“Have you come to kill us?” The man asked, resigned to the fact, expectation thickening the lump of dread in his throat.

“You’re dead right now. She sacrificed you.” Bill explained. “She painted the target on your back, sewed it to your sleeve, and tricked you into thinking that this crusade would bear fruit. You were never coming home, this was a suicide mission. Such a waste. Did you know you’d all be martyred? The last of your people?”

The man stared at Bill a moment longer, his eyes shining with unshed tears as the glimmer of hope he harboured, that fervour of belief, extinguished.

“No.” He croaked.

“Did she mention glory? Did she give you a purpose?” Bill pressed, his voice oozing understanding, buttering the prisoners up to confess.

“A reason to keep living.” The man admitted, sounding utterly crushed. “When all other reasons had fled.”

“A hallmark of her particular style.” Bill remarked, summoning a spectral cup of tea from thin air, crossing his legs, getting comfortable, taking a sip. He continued to divulge, as though talking about the weather, calm as anything. “She’ll pluck you out of danger when you’re at your lowest, build you back up in her image. Your purpose is her purpose, make no mistake.”
“She does not do this for herself.” The man insisted, speaking worshipfully. “She is merciful and kind. All she does she renders in service to the Great Axolot-”

“Shhhh.” Bill’s left arm lengthened until he pressed his finger over the defeated zealot’s mustard yellow lips, silencing him. “If she really represents Gills, where’s your salvation? Why isn’t he here, saving you, right now?”

“I –” He lost the words he was searching for, looking to the side at his shivering, broken comrades, feeling abandoned by his God. “What does it matter – if we are all dead anyway?”

“Because you’re getting a second chance at salvation.” Bill said smoothly, gently patting the side of the man’s cheek, retracting his arm back. He lifted his teacup from its saucer and raised it in a mock toast to the prisoners. “I’m here to make a deal.”

“We do not make deals with you.” One of the other chained zealots said, their words rote and practised, despite the waver in their voice. “Your deals are the devils.”

“Kid, who says I’m here to make a deal with you?” Bill laughed briefly, and pointed his finger at the being who spoke up. “Do you wanna end up like your friend here? No, you don’t, silver clashes horribly with orange. So, shut up and listen.”

“What is this deal?” The ringleader sceptically asked.

“Resurrection.” Bill waved his hands theatrically, conjuring sparkling stars for emphasis. “At the hands of your master, no less.”

“You are not our master.” The Taronjan ringleader rebuked.

“No.” Bill admitted, sipping from his teacup. “She is. Which is why this deal is for her. So she can decide if her followers live or die, since she’s so kind and merciful. I’m putting the decision in her hands.”

The Taronjans exchanged dubious glances, a variety of expressions chasing across their faces.

“How?” The ringleader asked, speaking for all of them.

“I’m giving her a choice. She can pay twenty potential energy cubes for each of your lives - a very reasonable price for a dead sacrifice – and you’ll all go free unharmed. Or, she can leave you all here to die.” Bill clapped his hands together, vanishing his cup of tea. “So, my question is, which one of you has enough faith in your master to go deliver my message to her? I’m letting one of you go play messenger. Raise your hand if you want to volunteer.”

Chained to the wall by the wrists, none of the zealots were able to raise their hands, straining their wrists against the manacles ineffectually.

“Anyone? Anyone at all? HAH, ahhh, I’m just messing with you.” Bill waved his hand flipantly at the struggling prisoners, straining to save their own skin. “Hilarious. Okay, seriously now, speak up, who wants to go free first?”

“Me!”

“Me.”

“Me!”
Desperate to leave the dungeon, seven of the eight zealots volunteered themselves, full of the naïve hope that they’d be safe once they returned to their leader.

“So eager! Alright, I pick - eenie, meenie, miney – you.” Bill pointed to the girl with the zip across her mouth, who had been straining forward in her shackles, trying to hold her hand the highest. “Congratulations Zip Lip, you get to play the middleman. Fair warning though, try to get your message out before she strikes you down. It’d be far easier to just kill you than let you live, knowing what she’s truly like. Can’t have any loose ends.”

The girl’s brow furrowed with confusion, a muffled question sounding from inside her zipped mouth.

“Don’t worry, you’ll find out soon enough.” Bill flapped his hand at her carelessly. “You have faith in your master, don’t you? Of course you do! But in case that faith is shaken at all, and because I feel like being kind and merciful, here’s a safeguard for you all, to give you a fighting chance.”

The ringleader looked at the zippered girl, concern creasing his brow, Bill’s words creeping in, forming a wedge between his devotion to the mission and his care for his remaining brethren.

“Tell her the deal is that I’ll turn you all over mostly unharmed in exchange for 140 potential energy cubes. Her deadline is one week, but for every week that goes by without an answer from her, I’ll either kill one of you, or send each of you off, one by one, to various gossip hotspots in the galaxy to spread word of how your merciful, kindly leader left you all to die. And I promise by the time I let you go, the only story you’ll have to tell about her benevolent leadership will be how she betrayed you all, one by one, showing her true colours finally.”

“She would never betray us.” One of the chained zealots insisted.

“Let’s see what you say in a week.” Bill shrugged. “You’ll change your tune. People can surprise you. Probably a lot of people have surprised you, since you seem to be quite gullible, but you are just a kid, in your defence. You’re all children, fighting her war.”

Bill pointed at the ringleader who seemed to be frowning at his feet, utterly dejected. “This one gets it. He gets to leave last. He’ll have the best story to tell.”

“Why are you doing this?” The buttery skinned ringleader questioned, his voice hoarse with frustration and desperation. “Being … merciful?”

“To prove a point.” Bill answered honestly. “But let’s hope it doesn’t come to that. I still see both outcomes as a win-win. And she will too, if she knows what’s good for her.”

“She wants to destroy you.” The zealot breathed, faith firing up his passion once more. “She will destroy you.”

“She’ll have to get in line and wait, like everybody else. She doesn’t get any special treatment.” Bill turned around and floated back towards his makeshift door, the glowing hole in the wall waiting for him. “Now, let’s get set this deal in motion. Kryptos, Pyronica.”

Clicking his fingers, the manacles dissolved off the zippered girl’s wrists, and she patted herself down for a moment, feeling her face, still blank with terror at her permanently altered lips, the zipper locked shut. Stepping forward, Pyronica and Kryptos seized her by the arms and dragged her out of the dungeons, her muffled protestations turning into screams, fading the further she went.

“You lot hang tight. Get it? You’ve got a long week ahead of you.” Bill waved over his shoulder at the other prisoners, floating out of the dungeon wall, the hole closing over behind him as he left.
The zealots hung chained in the dark, hoping their faith would help them hold onto the belief that their master would come for them.

They thought they knew who she was, though now they weren’t sure.

They just had to believe.

“You can’t do that.” Fiddleford gave Stanford an incredulous look, lamenting his decision to choose to DM their game.

“Where in the rule book does it say that I can’t?” Ford questioned smugly, grinning at Fiddleford from across the coffee table, sitting cross legged on the floor.

“You – it –” Fiddleford sighed, resigned to allow this ridiculousness to continue. “Fine. Roll for it.”

Gleefully, Ford rattled his 38 sided die in the cage of his fist and threw it across the board.

“YES!” Stanford cheered, throwing his hands in the air, elated that he rolled high enough for his move to proceed.

“You rolled a twenty! A twenty. That’s barely – just barely – legitimate.” Fiddleford protested, pointing at the board.

“Well then, just barely legitimise my move.” Ford oozed smugness, crossing his arms, watching Fiddleford knead his forehead.

“Fine.” Fiddleford sighed, and poked Ford’s piece across the board. “Your attempt to use logic on the Petrichor Pterodactyl just barely succeeds at convincing him to give you his egg, and you gain two charisma. HOWEVER you lose two intelligence, for trying to reason with a monster.”

“Oh, come on. That’s a legitimate move!” Ford argued, gesturing to the board.

“I’m sorry Stanford, but it’s a stupid move, you lose two intelligence.”

“I’m a druid, interacting with animals is part of my classpect.”

“You could have rolled to attack instead.” Fiddleford reasoned. “You have enough combat points.”

“But if I attack it I can’t study it, and I won’t be able to make the superior version of the rain spell that the village needs for its crops.” Ford explained.

“You don’t have enough persuasion to reason with a Pterodactyl.”

“I don’t need to persuade him if he’ll listen to reason.”

“What makes you think he speaks English? He doesn’t understand you!”

“I roll for a perception check to find out if the Pterodactyl speaks English.” Ford insisted, reaching
for the dice again.

“You can’t – ughhh!” Fiddleford scrubbed at his hair with his hands, getting frustrated. Eventually he waved his hand at the board, allowing it. “Fine, roll for perception.”

Ford picked up his dice and rolled again, the dice clattering across the board just as Bill came down the staircase, poking his head into the loungeroom to see what all the fuss was about.

“Eighteen.” Ford noted, looking at the dice, before glancing up at Fiddleford with pleading eyes. “Eighteen is pretty high, you can allow that.”

“As the DM I can choose not to allow it.” Fiddleford said contrarily.

“Come on!” Ford pointed at the dice, beseeching Fiddleford.

“Alright fine, just this one time. Perception check reveals that the Pterodactyl does not speak English, it only speaks Lithuanian, and you lose the two charisma from before because no matter how convincing you were, it doesn’t understand you.”

“What if my druid speaks Lithuanian?” Ford questioned.

“That’s not on your character sheet.” Fiddleford looked down at Ford’s sheet, getting agitated with his friend’s style of playing.

“It could be a hidden skill.” Ford attempted, picking up the dice again. “I roll to reveal hidden skill.”

“You are not that lucky.” Fiddleford complained, shaking his head as he watched Ford rattle the dice around. “You can’t roll high all the time.”

“I roll –“ Ford announced, watching the dice tumble across the board, teetering between a 2 and a 29 for a moment, wobbling on the precipice before landing soundly with the 29 facing upwards. “YES! 29! Hidden skill revealed.”

“Oh, come on!” Fiddleford exclaimed, burying his head in the rulebook, groaning. “This is cheatin’ I swear it is.”

“Deep breaths Fiddleford.” Ford teased his friend with a devious grin. “Remember the meditation we talked about?”

“I will throw this book at you, don’t be temptin’ me now.” Fiddleford warned, pointing at Ford with his good arm.

Ford laughed and held up his arm to shield his face, laughing loudly, before he noticed Bill standing curiously in the doorway.

“There you are! Do you want to join us? There’s room for one more in the party?”

“And play your nerd game?” Bill scoffed, but curiously stepped into the room, enjoying watching Sixer’s laugh lines.

“It’s really quite fun.” Ford insisted. “Here, I can draw you up a character sheet.”

Bill pulled a displeased face, reluctant to play Sixer’s math game on an empty stomach (or at all) but the expression Ford turned on him was so eager that it had Bill waver.
“I’m hungry though.”

“You can eat while you play.” Ford wheedled. “There’s some spicy olives in the fridge, and that cheese that you like. I’ll even pour you a drink if you play.”

“Will you make me popcorn?” Bill squinted at Ford, opportunistic.

“Absolutely!” Ford agreed quickly, keen to drag his lover into his favourite game.

“With the pepper on it?” Bill pressed, satisfying his physical craving with minimal effort thanks to Sixer.

“You put salt on popcorn.” Fiddleford insisted grumpily. “Salt and butter.”

“Listen, if you don’t like to share, I can make you a separate bowl.” Ford said aside to Fiddleford, before turning back to Bill. “Absolutely, whatever you like.”

“I will hold you to that.” Bill informed Stanford seriously. “That open ended statement.”

“That’s ominous.” Fiddleford murmured under his breath, flicking through the rule book.

Ford didn’t notice, already bent over a new stats sheet, scribbling down the markers for Bill’s character. “Just grab the olives from the fridge for now, I’ll set up your statistics.”

Bill rolled his eyes, amused at Sixer’s antics, and went to the kitchen to feed himself, since his human was otherwise occupied. At least Bill had that ‘whatever you like’ statement under his belt to use on Sixer later, he liked that phrase coming from Sixer’s mouth.

By the time Bill returned to the lounge room, Ford had written three pages of character notes for Bill, and was rolling for his last statistic.

Making note of the roll, Ford finished writing the last digit and passed the paper to Bill to look over as his muse grabbed a pillow from the couch and perched on it on the floor next to Ford on his side of the coffee table, resting his back against the couch.

“Here. Here’s your character sheet, you should be able to jump right into the game from here.”

Bill looked through the sheet and scowled, pointing to the paper. “Why is this score so low? Are you trying to insult me?”

“It’s not an insult, the scores are rolled for, it’s not up to me.” Ford explained. “Those are the scores you start with and you can improve them throughout the game.”

Bill threw the papers on the ground. “I should be a 38 for all of these scores, why am I a twelve in charisma, I’ve got loads more charisma than that.”

“You can always buy points, instead of rolling for them, though that’s more complicated.” Fiddleford explained, looking up from the rule book.

“Then I buy all of the points. Rack ‘em up.” Bill tapped his hand impatiently on the papers.

“It doesn’t work like that, you can’t have full points for all of them, you only get to use your points on some of them with a point buy.” Ford said gently sliding the paper away from Bill’s hand, knowing how likely the paper was to go up in flames if Bill didn’t get his way. “You can leverage points from your other abilities to make certain abilities higher. For example 19 is the standard ability score, you get no bonuses or penalties from it. 20 costs 1 point, 22 costs 2 points, 23 costs 3
points, but then 24 costs 5 points and so on.”

“Well, that’s stupid. Why is it called a point buy if you can’t pay a bribe to change the results? What sort of economy is this? Why does everyone get the same amount to work with, that’s no way to run a business. Money is fake anyway, and this is fake money. Faker than fake money, this is hypothetical money for an imaginary statistical construct. It’s not real, therefore I can have any amount of imaginary money I want, and I want to buy out my points.” Bill insisted, slamming his fist on the coffee table petulantly.

“Well you can’t – so… “ Fiddleford replied, raising his eyebrow at Bill’s tantrum.

“I hate this game. This is stupid.” Bill immediately sulked, resting his elbow on the coffee table and his hand on his cheek. “I want to play Necromiconopoly instead. That’s real fake money.”

“You cheated at Necromiconopoly last time we played.” Ford accused Bill, narrowing his eyes at the muse.

“But that’s how you play the game!” Bill exclaimed emphatically, to both Ford and Fiddleford’s disapproving gaze. “Ugh, god you’re both such squares.”

“Maybe explain the story to him a little.” Ford asked Fiddleford, hoping to draw in Bill’s interest somehow. “Our party’s story?”

“Your party is a band of adventurers heading to the Magician’s Summit in Capitol City, however you are waylaid in your quest to reach the Summit by a treasure hunt that you are required to complete before you can attend the Conference. You have to collect a gilded hammer, a pterodactyl egg, a lock of hair from a princess, and water from the lake in the enchanted forest before you can proceed onwards to the city.” Fiddleford read from the rulebook. “Right now Ford’s character is trying to speak Lithuanian to the pterodactyl in order to convince him to hand over his egg. Now you can either roll for initiative to help him, or pass your turn to see what he does.”

“I roll to set the pterodactyl on fire.” Bill muttered into his hand, lazily watching the board.

“Well, you can’t do that, because I’m talking to it in Lithuanian right now, and you don’t have enough points.” Ford snarked at Bill, somewhat defensive over his high rolled lucky ploy.

“Aš jus sudeginsiu per minutę.” Bill muttered, glaring at Ford, who turned to Fiddleford expectantly.

“Finish my turn at least, did I get the egg?” Ford asked Fiddleford.

Zoning out for the rest of the game, resigning himself to hating everything, Bill ate through the entire jar of spiced olives, gorging himself on delicious food. He ate to justify why he hadn’t left Sixer’s side while the scientist continued playing his nerdy board game. He could say he was staying for the food, not for Sixer’s company, but that excuse was as transparent as the invisible wizard.

The game dragged on for another hour, throughout which every one of Bill’s attempts to ‘roll to incinerate’ were rebuffed by the two scientists. Eventually Bill just gave up, quitting dramatically, balling up his character sheet and throwing it at Stanford’s head, storming out of the room, into the kitchen, where he very loudly ransacked the fridge for more snacks.

“It’s getting late.” Bill could hear Stanford say from the other room. “Maybe we should leave it here for the night and go to bed.”
“We can keep playing.” Fiddleford replied, his voice suddenly much more enthusiastic than his
tired, long suffering demeanour suggested before.

“I know you don’t like DM-ing my playing style. I’ve been watching that vein tick in your
forehead for fifteen minutes now.”

“Well, you push the rules too often.” Fiddleford griped.

“I play opportunistically.” Ford corrected his friend.

“You play to win, and you can’t win every encounter.” Fiddleford countered. “You’ve got to learn
that.”

“And staying up another hour playing will teach me?” Ford scoffed. “No, I think it’s time for bed.”

“I’m not tired.” Fiddleford insisted.

“F, you can barely keep your eyes open.” Ford observed with concern. “You don’t have to – is this
what we spoke about before? The nightmares?”

“Can you keep your voice down?” Fiddleford hissed at Stanford, his attempt at secrecy pricking
Bill’s ears. He listened curiously, hanging onto the whispered words of the scientists in the other
room.

“You can’t just avoid sleep. It’s not healthy for you.” Ford whispered back adamantly. “You’ll get
worse, and you’re still healing. You need sleep, or you’ll only become more anxious and worked
up.”

“I’m anxious already, and sleepin’ is what makes it worse.” Fiddleford maintained. “I can’t help it
Stanford, and I don’t want to keep screamin’ the house down every night. I don’t –”

“Maybe practise those techniques we talked about? Slowing the pulse down, regulating your
breathing, regulating your fears.”

“These aren’t regular fears.” Fiddleford asserted. “I can’t beat them back, I can’t push them down. I
can’t win this, Stanford, it doesn’t –“

“There has to be some sort of fix.” Ford hoped, holding onto that hope that kept him going these
past weeks.

“I want a fix too. Fixin’ things is what I do, but I’ve been to work fixin’ every other thing in this
damn shack, and I still can’t get my head to –“

Bill leaned backwards, trying to peer around the kitchen door to see what was going on.
Eavesdropping on Fiddleford’s desperate confession gave Bill a little insight into the current state
of his engineer, and that state was still not good. This persistent trauma was beginning to become
more of a hurdle than Bill had anticipated in terms of streamlining the project. As productive as
Fiddleford was, he was still a liability.

Bill peered an inch around the kitchen door and saw Ford put his hands on Fiddleford’s shoulders,
staring at his friend with an earnest expression.

“Fiddleford Hadron McGucket, you are a scientist. An amazing scientist. You’re an engineer, a
problem solver, a fixer – you fix things. You’re incredibly talented, and I don’t want you losing
faith in yourself. Not over a few nightmares.”
“Well it’s more ‘n a few nightmares —” Fiddleford muttered under his breath.

“Scientists —” Ford stressed, pressing on with his pep talk. “Can solve any problem through persistence and scientific method. Using our creativity, we can solve any problem we face — even our fears. Even our fears. I believe you can do it, Fiddleford. You know how I know?”

Fiddleford was quiet, contemplative for a moment, before speaking up in a small voice. “How?”

“Because I haven’t met a greater mechanical genius in all my days. Because you have a brilliant brain, and if anyone can elevate the mind to overcome their fears, it’s you.” Ford pressed down on Fiddleford’s shoulders, his voice oozing with conviction. “Think of it like a Cubic’s Cube, have you allowed all the possible permutations to play out? Is there a different way you can approach this? Play to your strengths, and I’m certain you can solve this puzzle. If anyone can, it’s you.”

Fiddleford considered that for a moment, absorbing the encouraging words his friend delivered, measuring himself up against his friend’s esteem for him, looking for a solution. Maybe instead of approaching this through repression and forcing sleep, playing healthy, there was a different solution waiting to reveal itself.

If only F would play to his strengths.

Perhaps then he could win at this game.

He nodded, a spark of determination dancing in his eyes as he looked back up at Stanford.

“I think I needed to hear that.”

“Well, good.” Ford clapped F on the shoulder and smiled. “Now, you go and get some rest, and we can approach this again in the morning.”

“Right.” Fiddleford nodded, already racing through possibilities in his mind. Waving to Ford, F decided to climb the stairs, retiring to the attic for the evening. “I’ll see you in the mornin’.”

“Goodnight!” Ford called up the stairs, watching F go, feeling mildly accomplished. He hoped his words had made a difference.

Turning around to walk back to the kitchen, Ford caught Bill ducking back behind the kitchen doorframe, feigning innocence pretending he hadn’t been watching.

“So, you heard that, did you?” Ford asked Bill, pacing into the kitchen, leaning his elbow against the doorframe, watching Bill poke his head up from behind the fridge door, blinking innocuously at Ford.

“Heard what?”

Ford shook his head, exhaling an amused sigh.

“Your poker face needs work. You’re too expressive still.”

Bill pouted, and pulled the jar of pickled cocktail onions out of the fridge, closing it. “Well, I didn’t ask for this face.”

“I’m quite glad you have it.” Ford watched Bill struggle to open the lid of the jar, walking over to him, taking the jar off him, popping the lid open for the muse. “I rather like your face.”

“You made it.” Bill summoned a toothpick and stabbed it into one of the cocktail onions, taking a
bite out of it. “I guess this is how you see me now.”

“I think I see you pretty well.” Ford remarked, his eyes tracing his muse’s features, fondness creeping into his tone. “I learn more about you every day, I’m getting a pretty clear view for who Bill Cipher is.”

“Oh?” Bill questioned, deliberately keeping his expression blank, ignoring the way this physical form he was shackled too made his stomach flip at the thought that Sixer was about to see right through him. He couldn’t, Bill thought, panicked. He wasn’t that smart.

“Yes, oh.” Ford stepped in closer, crowing Bill’s space.

Bill blinked up innocently at Ford and bit the rest of the cocktail onion off the toothpick, chewing on it.

Sixer wasn’t angry with him, and he wasn’t recoiling from him, he was looking down at Bill with that overwhelming fondness crinkling his eyes, softening his expression, adoration pouring off the human in waves.

Bill swallowed the cocktail onion and stared back up at Ford, searching his face for a hint that the scientist suspected him at all, that Ford secretly couldn’t stand him.

But no, all he saw in Sixer’s expression was an immutable adoration that heated Bill from the inside out.

Taking a chance, leaning up on his tip toes, Bill raised himself until he was able to press a sweet, indulgent kiss to Sixer’s lips, which the scientist happily returned.

Looping his arms around Sixer’s neck, Bill sighed his relief into the kiss, deepening it, until he felt like melting in the scientist’s arms.

Ford’s hands steadied around Bill’s waist and he pulled the muse against his chest, pouring worship into his kisses, pulling fractured moans from the God. It was incredibly satisfying to know he could affect Bill like this, his mental catalogue of Bill’s melting points and boiling points making him far more confident than he ever thought he would be in a romantic relationship. The fact that he was the reason Bill melted like this, that he knew it wasn’t just the affection or the physical sensation of it all, that it was because he was the one doing it, making his muse gasp up into his mouth - it warmed Ford like the fire crawling up Bill’s throat.

Breaking away from the kiss, Bill exhaled steam that fogged up Ford’s glasses. On that same exhale his muse murmured, pressing his fingers covetously against Ford’s cheeks.

“Did you know there’s such a thing as an Infinity Sided Die.” Bill breathed, swallowing the embers back down so he could press a kiss to the side of Sixer’s mouth, craving the human like burning.

“There’s only two in existence and they’re banned in nine thousand dimensions because anything can happen when they’re rolled. Anything. They’re kept in a quantum case on Lottocron 9, and the only way you can get one is by winning it in a game of cards.”

Ford’s eyes lit up, and he pulled Bill in tighter, wonder dancing across his features. “You –“

Bill licked his lips. “I thought you’d like that.”

“Can we go there?” Ford asked eagerly. “How do you win it? What card game?”

“An unwinnable game of poker, and the only way to win is by counting cards, which is illegal on
“Lottocron 9.” Bill purred, roving his hands up and down Ford’s shoulders and neck, stroking his fingers through Sixer’s hair. “Trust me, I know. That’s another dimension I’m banned from, but if I could get in there, that die would be yours.”

“I’d like to have a die like that someday.” Ford pondered, delighted at the thought of the dice, despite hearing how illegal it was to procure it. Bill seemed more than happy to break the law to get it for him, and they’d already done enough lawbreaking for one day, but Ford couldn’t help but be touched by the gesture.

“I know you would.” Bill smirked, pushing Ford’s glasses back up his nose delicately. “I’ve got a pretty clear view for who Stanford Pines is.”

“And who am I to you?” Ford questioned, feeling bold with his muse in his arms, wanting him.

Bill’s pupils dilated as he stared at Ford’s face, considering his answer, before leaning up on his toes again and claiming Ford’s lips, breathing his answer into the kiss.

“Mine.”

They kissed for a while longer, Bill exuding heat like a furnace, trying to keep from burning Sixer with his affection. Eventually they broke from the kiss to breathe.

“Shall we go upstairs?” Ford suggested, extending the invitation to further this horizontally, giving his muse the option. He always gave Bill the option, following his cues to judge how far they could go, always being mindful of his limits.

He watched his muse perform some mental calculations, no doubt running through the inventory of how many potential energy cubes he had left to mediate an encounter like this, so he wouldn’t burn Ford’s curtains again.

“Mmm.” Bill seemed to hesitate for a moment, obviously running low on cubes, before shrugging, throwing caution to the wind. “Why not? You owe me whatever I want anyway.”

“Let’s hope Fiddleford is asleep.” Ford grinned, taking Bill by the hand and leading him upstairs. “You’re quite noisy when you get what you want, and we wouldn’t want to wake him.”

“Turnabout’s fair play.” Bill shrugged, following Sixer into his room, summoning the apparatus cuffs into his hand as Ford closed the bedroom door.

“He’s probably asleep now anyway.” Ford reasoned, pulling off his shirt, throwing it to the ground as his muse flung himself on top of him, toppling them both back onto the mattress, their playful laughter sounding out through the house’s wooden walls.

Upstairs in the attic, Fiddleford wasn’t asleep.

Ford’s words had struck a chord with him, and he was ready to strum that banjo until it sang like a songbird.

Ford’s pep talk downstairs had F tearing through papers, jotting down formulas, testing potential outcomes, tinkering with the alien machinery sitting on his desk, fuelled by his friend’s encouraging good intentions.

It was the small things, like a kind word from a friend, that sparked genius, creativity, inventions. Chain reactions.
Disclaimer here, I've never played a game of D&D in my life hahah but I asked my D&D friend to check through and let me know if the differences were acceptable since there's an extra D involved making it a whole new Ballway game.

Bill is saying "I'll burn you in a minute" in Lithuanian.

I hope you enjoyed the chapter, it was a long one. Leave your nicest comments pls I have a lot of writing to do for the next chapter in which we see .... we see... I forgot. What were we seeing?
Bill was sleeping curled against Ford’s chest, exuding a steady heat that was just shy of unbearable. Ford had discarded the bedsheets, letting them twist up between his feet as he drifted in and out of sleep, unconsciously trying to regulate his temperature, kicking away the blankets despite how cold it was outside.

Autumn was ending, the leaves wrinkling away from the deciduous trees in the woods, composting on the forest floor. The nights were brisker, and the days justified Ford’s turtleneck habit.

His features twitching, Ford dreamt about crossing an endless desert, the sandy dunes stretching ever onward, the sun beating down overhead. The heat of the desert landscape was becoming more unbearable by the minute, creasing Ford’s forehead in his sleep.

As though responding to his irritation, he felt a cool breeze blow through his mind, a small adjustment made, renewing Ford’s compelling sense of adventure, overriding his discomfort.

The desert swelled and moved beneath his feet until suddenly he was standing before a colossal imposing pyramid, the brick structure solid, providing him shade from the heat. Ford collapsed in the shadow beside the pyramid’s base, grateful for its shade, reaching for the water skin at his side, drinking heartily and feeling refreshed.

The brick of the pyramid parted midway up, the stone rolling back with a grating sound, revealing a large yellow eye. The eye watched Ford calmly, blinking once, then closed contentedly, the stone rolling back up to cover the breach.

Ford dreamed on.

Nestled beside him, Bill entertained some dreams of his own, though his dreams were more like business, inhabiting the mindscape.

“Your hat looks nice today boss.” Kryptos approached Bill while he was floating through the Quadrangle, having just returned from the uncrackable safe room, counting his cubes. He had about ten unspent cubes left, and nearly 30 loaded ones.

Bill lidded his eye suspiciously at the compass, stopping in his tracks. “Kryptos. You have bad news for me, do you?”
“Can’t I just give a compliment where compliments are due?” Kryptos tried, his disingenuous expression giving away the truth.

“I’m not buying this sandwich you’re selling me.” Bill narrowed his eye further, watching Kryptos sweat. Eventually Bill shrugged, deciding he had better things to do than wait out the compasses nerves, and the triangle continued to float along the Escher-esque corridors of the Quadrangle, leaving Kryptos behind.

Scrambling to keep up with his boss, Kryptos floated along behind Bill.

“I just thought you’d be more receptive to hear what I have to say if I caught you in a good mood, that’s all.” Kryptos explained.

Bill rolled his eye. “The fact that you’re making me a compliment sandwich automatically means that what you’ll tell me is going to derail whatever good mood I’m currently in, so you may as well spit it out, and let me get on with my business Kryptos.”

“Right, right.” Kryptos pressed his two pointer fingers together nervously, looking for the right way to deliver his news. “So the Taronjan we set free reached her location and delivered the message.”

“And?”

“And we have confirmation that She’s collected the cubes to make the trade.” Kryptos revealed.

“Well, that’s good news.” Bill sounded pleased, floating down the inverse staircase.

“I – it’s just – I’m still not sure we should be doing this. This feels wrong.” Kryptos fretted.

“Giving her the hostages back allows her too much leverage.”

“We have all the leverage Kryptos.” Bill insisted.

“I just think this is going too smoothly. She’s up to something.” Kryptos insisted.

“I’d be surprised if she wasn’t up to something.” Bill replied candidly. “In fact, I’d be thoroughly shocked by such an impossible break from character, if she went along with this trade peacefully without making some kind of power play.”

“But then –“

“I told you, I know her Kryptos.” Bill emphasised, waving his hand flippantly as the compass chased after him. “Like the back of my hand. Anything she tries to pull on us I can twist into a positive outcome. You don’t need to worry, I’m not doing anything that goes back on our deal.”

“I just – “ Kryptos worried regardless of Bill’s assurances. “I don’t want to jeopardize what we have going here for the sake of a few cubes. Don’t you have enough already? Why are you even collecting them still?”

Bill paused in his tracks again, spinning around to give Kryptos an incredulous look.

Kryptos baulked for a second, before regaining his confidence, staring stubbornly back. “I know you’ve got more than 30 of them tucked away in the safe room. I’m not stupid, I know you’ve been collecting them, injecting them with power. What are you using them for? How do they fit into the plan? Is there even a reason for it?”
“Are you really asking me that question when you so clearly know it’s none of your business? Am I hearing this right?” Bill blinked at Kryptos, dubious humour colouring his tone.

“I just want to be sure that this doesn’t have anything to do with –“ Kryptos’ voice trailed off pathetically, recognising that the humour in Bill’s voice was a warning sign, remembering what happened to Hectorgon when he dared to mention the proverbial elephant in the room. “– the …. Six …”

“Hmm?” Bill puffed up his size, leaning diagonally into Kryptos’ space, slanting over him, holding a hand up by his side like he was cupping his ear to listen. “Speak up Kryptos, no one can hear you!”

Mumbling, pressing those index fingers together nervously, Kryptos spilled the words out properly, so quietly he almost hoped they hadn’t been heard. “…The six-fingered human.”

Bill gave Kryptos a flat look that had the compass shrinking back submissively, despairing of his big mouth.

Kryptos opened his mouth to apologise, but the words didn’t come out right, so he shut his mouth again.

“You’re worried I don’t know how to handle Sixer. Is that it?” Bill asked Kryptos impatiently, crossing his arms.

“Not that.” Kryptos continued meekly. “It’s just – if you’re doing this for him, does that mean – are you promoting him? I thought he –“

Bill watched Kryptos reveal his professionally motivated jealousy and realised that the compass was acting exactly as Bill expected him to. What a surprise.

Kryptos wasn’t cluey about Bill’s relationship with Sixer, he just didn’t want to lose status if Sixer was promoted, moving up from hapless pawn to potential henchmaniac. There was a hierarchy, and Kryptos was all about climbing the ladder, which made him woefully predictable when it came to approaching perceived threats.

But Sixer wasn’t a threat.

“Kryptos, allow me to clarify.” Bill held up his hand, cutting the compass off. “Gathering these cubes. It has nothing to do with Sixer, completely superfluous to his situation. If anything, I’m taking advantage of the situation. I’m not doing this for him, I’m doing this for me. I have my reasons, which you should expect. You’ve been here, how long? And you still don’t get that if I do anything I’ll always have more than one reason, and more than one way to turn a profit on that action. I know it wasn’t in our deal, but a little trust wouldn’t hurt from you. Quid pro quo, Kryptos. You’ve seen what I can do.”

“I know boss.” Kryptos confessed, thinking on how he’d seen Bill’s devastating power turned to wreaking havoc and revenge on those who slighted him. Bill had done other impressive things too, but the gruesome revenges were what stuck in the forefront of Kryptos’ mind when thinking on Bill’s power.

He was an intimidating boss, for someone who wore a perpetual bowtie.

“The cubes are part of something big, and that’s all you need to know for now. You let me focus on Sixer.” Bill shrunk back down to a less intimidating size and brushed his knuckles on his chest. “Did you happen to find out whether she’s sticking to the deadline?”
“She’ll be here with the cubes today boss. All 140 of them.” Kryptos reported.

“Good.” Bill preened happily. “We’ll give her a warm welcome when she gets here.”

“Yes boss.” Kryptos bowed his head and begun floating away, his business finished with Bill as far as this matter was concerned.

Before he got far, a long thin black arm reached out and tapped him on the shoulder.

“Where do you think you’re going?” Bill questioned, watching Kryptos expectantly. “You’ve still got a compliment sandwich to finish.”

Kryptos blinked disbelievingly for a moment, staring back at his boss, who seemed suddenly much more chipper than he had any right to be, given the news he just got. Realising Bill was waiting, and it wasn’t good to keep Bill Cipher waiting, Kryptos hurried to find a fitting compliment.

“Uh, you’re looking well today sir? V-very confident. P-practically glowing. Literally.”

“That’s right, and don’t you forget it.” Bill clicked and finger-gunned at Kryptos cheerily, before winking out of existence, leaving a very confused compass alone with his thoughts.

Ford heard the chirping wakeup call from the birds outside his window and squinted at the ceiling, waking slowly from his slumber.

Bright sunlight was shining through the window that Ford had left open last night to let the cool air in, and one of the more daring birds from the forest had perched right on the windowsill, singing a high-pitched melody that grated on the ears.

Ford squinted his eyes further, still too entrenched in the warmth of sleep to fully appreciate nature’s ‘welcome to the day’ symphony. He would be a morning person when there was something in it for him, some sort of benefit, but on a day like today, with nothing specific planned, he savoured his sleep ins, spurning the idyllic birdsong that dragged him from his pleasant dreams.

Ruffling his hair, dragging his hand down his face, Ford resigned himself to being awake, and blinked a couple of times, the drowsiness falling off him as the seconds ticked by. He paused to glare at the bird who was still singing discordantly, looking smug on the sill.

Looking down, he noticed Bill was in bed with him, sprawled against his chest, his slender limbs clinging to Ford as he slept.

Waking up with Bill was a recent novelty that Ford had begun to cherish. There was something very intimate about sharing space with someone while unconscious and vulnerable, and while it was all very domestic, Ford knew that sharing that space wasn’t a certainty.

Often when Bill chose to sleep next to Ford, the scientist would wake up to an empty bed, the muse having snuck off at some time in the night, abandoning Ford.

Bill’s excuse was that he left Ford to preserve the human’s wellbeing, as he tended to overheat
while he slept, his ability to regulate his temperature somewhat staggered while unconscious.

Stanford was sure that wasn’t all it was, as often he’d notice changes around the lab once he woke, or books that hadn’t been there before piling up in his study. Also, occasionally char marks on various walls.

Bill didn’t leave to sleep in his own room, like he assured Ford he did. He was experimenting, and hiding his secret agenda from Ford, presuming he wouldn’t notice.

Ford had asked him, when he first noticed the absences, why he wouldn’t stay, hoping to get a halfway truthful answer from the muse. Bill chose not to explain and instead sung the words ‘how can we sleep when our beds are burning’ from a song Ford didn’t recognise.

“You’re before it’s time.” Bill pointed out ambiguously.

Knowing he wouldn’t be getting a straight answer from the muse, Ford had taken to making notes again, filling his spiral notebook with observations on Bill’s night-time activities. Some of the books he retrieved seemed to be for Ford, others seemed hardly relevant, ancient ritualistic texts in languages Ford had no reference to decode. Ford assumed this was all part of Bill’s plan to train him in intergalactic affairs, and so kept silent about the books, reading through them privately, enthused about every detail.

Presumably Bill didn’t mind him reading them. He’d walked in on Ford guiltily shutting one of the tomes before, only raising one eyebrow at him, leaving him to read at his leisure. Ford took that as permission granted, and poured over every intergalactic detail, committing the books to memory.

It had been several days since the D&D& more D game, and Fiddleford had taken Ford up on the offer of a day or two off, preferring to spend his time up in his room, tinkering with his inventions. Ford had taken this as a positive sign that F was ready to move on, no longer obsessing over the portal or his nightmares. When Ford had come to check in on F, on several occasions he’d walked up the creaky attic stairs to notice F asleep under the blankets, his projects abandoned, having left his soldering iron on in his haste to get some rest. Ford turned the iron off and left F to sleep, thankful that his friend was finally enjoying restful, silent, slumber.

Ford had devoted his newfound free time to reading through the books Bill left for him, and when he wasn’t doing that he was enjoying the private moments he was able to share with the muse, who had been slowly warming up to the idea of a more hands on physical relationship.

Bill was certainly more affectionate with Ford, freely offering the scientist embraces, kisses, and conversation whenever they shared space alone together, but they were still hovering on the demure side of the threshold they’d crossed that fateful night on the mountain.

Ford couldn’t risk overwhelming Bill with sensation anymore, not while the result of such conduct could have disastrously flammable consequences, so they toed the line, keeping things rather sweet and gentle.

Bill had taken to wearing the apparatus cuffs when sleeping beside Ford as a safeguard on the nights that he deigned to share a bed with the human, clearly wanting closeness regardless of the fact that that closeness could lead to overheating.

His muse was stubborn, as stubborn as Stanford could be, and Bill’s reckless desire to push his own limits with Ford was matched evenly by Ford’s gentlemanly desire to ensure his house didn’t burn to a crisp.
They were well met.

“Mmmm.” Bill stirred, rubbing his cheek against Ford’s pectoral. “I can hear you squinting at that bird.”

“You can’t hear squinting.” Ford corrected Bill out of habit, just to be pedantic.

“You don’t know half of what I can do.” Bill corrected Ford, just to be equally stubborn and mysterious, arching his back, stretching out. When he was comfortable, he wriggled back down against Ford’s chest, draping his arm across the scientist.

“You didn’t leave last night.” Ford pointed out, watching his muse slide his yellow eyes away from him, like he was sheepish, or embarrassed.

“Neither did you.”

“Well, this is my bed.”

“Point made.” Bill conceded, rolling until he was propped up on his elbows, bracketing Sixer’s body, looking down at the human. “Perhaps I stayed for a reason.”

“The reason being?” Ford quirked an eyebrow at Bill, watching his muse cast his best estimation of a sultry look at him up from under those long eyelashes of his.

Bill trailed his pointer finger directionlessly across Ford’s chest, tangling the digit in his chest hair.

“You know why.”

Ford’s cheeks flushed, flustered at the insinuation he was picking up, even as his common sense overrides whatever amorous impulses were arising.

“I thought we went over this, the ‘no fire in the house’ stipulation.”

“I’m wearing the cuffs.” Bill argued, the silver metal shining on his wrist.

“I was under the impression that those cubes you have were a finite resource.” Ford eased himself up onto his elbows, trying to inch away from Bill, who stubbornly planted his chin on Ford’s chest, looking up into his eyes demandingly.

“Let’s say I’m due for a windfall of infinite potential. Infinite potential energy cubes.”

Ford raised his eyebrows sceptically.

“Don’t give me that look, it could happen.”

Ford lowered his eyebrows, still looking substantially dubious.

“You act like you don’t want to do this.” Bill pointed out, frowning at Ford, sitting up now, giving the scientist space. “You’re supposed to be ruled by your physical desires, why don’t you want this?”

“Ruled by – well, that’s a bit much. I’m not saying I don’t want it.” Ford reached out, grabbing Bill’s wrist gently before he pulled away from him completely. “I’m just trying to be reasonable, be smart about this, so you don’t end up regretting it later. I’ve been enjoying what we’ve done so far, it’s been nice, but taking that step isn’t something to be done lightly. Especially if you’ve never done it before.”
“You want your first time to be special?” Bill reasoned, mimicking the rhetoric he’d picked up from television, wrinkling his nose. “What’s more special than touching a God? We have special covered, let’s move on with it already.”

“I meant your first time. I wasn’t aware you were so impatient about everything.” Ford muttered, giving Bill a considering look. “I was following your pace.”

Bill puffed his cheeks out, oozing frustration, before exclaiming. “My pace is fast paced. I’m faster than cosmic entropy goddamnit!”

“Is that -?” Ford questioned flatly.

“It’s fast, it’s fast okay!” Bill insisted, pointing emphatically at Ford as he rapidly delivered his assurances. “Really fast. Not so fast at first, but it gets there.”

“I just wasn’t su-“

“It’s faster than you’d expect. Now come on!” Bill whined petulantly, reaching for Ford’s hands. “Do something!”

“You really want me to?” Ford began asking, and Bill yanked his hands over, placing them on Bill’s body, glaring at him and blushing. “Well, I guess you do. Are you sure you want -?”

“What do you want me to do, beg?” Bill scoffed, colour darkening his cheeks, throwing his leg over Sixer’s waist, straddling him impatiently. “Come on.”

“What do you want me to do?” Ford pushed it, clarifying, blinking away his tiredness, sitting up more fully. While it was far too early in the morning to maintain the same sort of energy Bill mustered, Ford was feeling the familiar creeping heat of arousal beginning to flood his body.

They’d been playing it safe for the past few weeks, ever since Fiddleford’s accident. Somehow despite the kisses shared, and the more frequent moments alone they had, Ford had been so stressed worrying about Fiddleford’s condition that he hadn’t really felt like pushing boundaries with Bill. Now that Fiddleford seemed to be feeling better, that stress was lessening somewhat.

His muse was being well behaved in the sense that he never pressed Ford for physical attention while his mind was elsewhere, worried or frustrated with his friend’s condition. Stanford had assumed that as a metaphysical creature, Bill didn’t feel the need to press, not driven by any sort of human libido. He’d been entirely pragmatic, keeping an eye on Ford, making sure he was eating enough, sleeping right, and conducting the regular human upkeep that Ford departed from in moments of stress or mental strain.

Being there for him.

Despite Bill’s somewhat selfish nature, he knew when to distract Ford with logic, when to let him be, when to remind him to take care of a basic need, or stop worrying about his friend, but he never made himself the centre of attention in this fragile, tenuous period.

He must have determined that Ford was in a position where indulging a little wouldn’t trip up his human’s inflated sense of guilt, picking the time when Ford just woke, when his mind dwelled on leisure and physical comforts, straying into the salacious territory of stimulating his muse.

That or Bill’s impatience to explore physical delights with Stanford had reached its breaking point. Ford did see him spying on him in the shower that one time. And raking his eyes across Ford ravenously more often than he had any right to when staring at a fully clothed man. Bill’s eyes
practically simmered with heat whenever Ford wore a tie around the house.

Ford was coming to the dawning realisation, watching Bill subtly grind his hips down onto Ford’s lap, holding Ford’s hands up underneath Bill’s sleep shirt, that his muse had been incredibly restrained over these past few weeks. Bill hadn’t been uninterested, he’d been holding back, and the realisation floored Ford.

Face flushed, too embarrassed to dignify Ford’s question with a response, Bill chose to lean in and capture Ford’s jaw in his hands, pressing a needy kiss to his lips, surging forward.

Ford realised that his muse was not, in fact, above it all, when it came to physical pursuits. In fact, it was more likely, highly likely even, that instead of being indifferent to sexual impulses, Bill was actually gagging for it.

“Kiss me.” Bill whined against Stanford’s lips, trying to pull a reaction from the baffled human who was muddling through a romantic epiphany.

Stirring into action, Ford obliged, bringing his own broad hand around to cup Bill’s face, deepening their kiss, his free hand sliding up under Bill’s shirt, feeling his way across the muse’s bare skin to slide his thumb over Bill’s nipple.

It pebbled instantly, Bill’s moan muffled into the kiss.

Stanford smirked, epiphany revealed.

Bill really was gagging for it.

For him.

“Stop stopping.” Bill demanded, pressing impatient kisses to the side of Ford’s mouth, dotting them across Stanford’s face. “You –“

Moving swiftly, Ford flipped Bill over, onto his back, pressing his muse down onto the mattress.

Leaning over him, Ford lingered to press a teasing kiss to the base of Bill’s neck, scraping teeth over Bill’s jumping pulse, feeling the staccato of Bill’s heartbeat with his teeth.

Ford felt the shiver run down his muse’s torso, and rose up to look at Bill, smug etched all over his face, gloating over the knowledge he’d just procured.

He could see his muse’s Addams apple roll as the cosmic being swallowed nervously, yellow eyes glued to Stanford’s face.

He thought about cosmic entropy, how Bill had taken his time to engage with physicality, but now wanted to go faster, and Ford knew how entropy ended. It was a thermonuclear process that ended with the universe being thoroughly burnt out, and while Bill wanted to burn, Ford didn’t want to overwhelm him to cinders just yet.

Maybe just a little bit.

“I’ll take my time.” Ford declared, his eyes committing Bill’s impressed and embarrassed expression to memory. It would sit in Ford’s mental vault of all the other times he’d thrown his muse off balance, delighting in the sight of it.

Bill sucked in a breath, readying himself to retort to his arrogant human, but Ford pressed his
thumb against Bill’s bottom lip, silencing him.

“I’ll take my time with you.” Ford repeated, gloating some more, watching how his words made Bill squirm impatiently on the mattress.

The rise and fall of Bill’s chest, unsettled with uneven, shaky breaths, was delectable, and the way the muse’s legs subconsciously parted, shifting to make space for Stanford, was even more arousing.

Ford had never (to his knowledge) had anyone respond to him so instinctually in his entire life, and Bill didn’t even have normal human instincts. Knowing that the creature he had flustered so was a God, well, that was just the icing on the cake dedicated to Ford’s rapidly climbing ego.

He felt the tip of Bill’s tongue nudge against Ford’s thumb, and he chose to withdraw, trailing his fingers down Bill’s cheek now, lower, along the flushed line of Bill’s neck, tracing his collarbones.

Ford grazed his fingernails slowly across Bill’s chest, the muse trembling beneath his fingers, and he’d barely even done anything.

Ford did it again, raking his nails across Bill’s stomach, harder now, and the muse couldn’t help the groan that let slip from his lips, bucking his hips up, tossing his head to the side, his chest arching with the sharp breath he sucked in, trying to hold back his reactions.

His hand trailing lower, Ford toyed with the thought of crossing that threshold of experimentation. Of ‘playing with Bill’s tool’ as his subconscious so smoothly put it. Would that garner the same sort of reaction from the muse?

Ford’s fingers drifted along the dip of Bill’s hips, light, barely there touches. Indecisive, deliberating. Was he really going to do this?

Bill was glaring at him, biting that puffy bottom lip, holding back the curses that were no doubt dancing on his tongue, disliking this drawn out tease.

Meeting Bill’s fervid stare, Ford paused briefly, before making his decision, ducking his head down, pressing a wet, searing kiss to Bill’s hipbone, feeling the muse squirm underneath him.

“Nnnnnnghhhh.” Bill’s hands flew from the sheets, fingers curling possessively into Ford’s hair, scraping at his scalp, tangling himself with the scientist, half hoping that if Ford kept his head down, he wouldn’t look at him, sparing Bill this burning embarrassment. It continued regardless, a seeping heat that started at his cheeks and burned all through his body. It wasn’t his magic, that was being drawn away by the cuffs, so why was Sixer making him feel like this?

Gasping when Ford bit down lightly on the jut of Bill’s hip, Bill brought one hand up to cover his mouth, those damning, implicating sounds sneaking out of him regardless of his efforts. He hoped that this sordid conduct could go about unseen in the universe, because Bill was loathe to be caught in such a compromising position, but he also didn’t want to stop. He could only muffle his cries and hope for the best.

He felt Ford’s questing fingers hook around the elastic waistband of his pyjamas, tugging the fabric down, exposing more skin, and Bill felt like combusting. This was so lewd.
“I’ve never done this before.” Ford murmured, his breath fanning hot against Bill’s skin, right on his hip.

Bill screwed his eyes shut, hardly believing he was even considering engaging in this sort of base human conduct, his damnably sensitive body strung out, receptive to every touch, every puff of breath, every instant Ford grazed that early morning stubble of his against Bill’s lower belly.

Ford tugged the fabric of Bill’s pyjamas lower, bunching the material around Bill’s thighs until the cool air from the window touched his skin. Bill felt Ford’s hands trail lower, looping his thumb and fingers around his useless human reproductive organ, holding him gently, hot air from Sixer’s mouth fanning across the sensitive skin.

Bill blinked his eyes open to an upside-down view of Sixer’s trophy wall, and chewed on his index finger, desperately trying to smother the screech of anticipation that was building in his throat.

Chancing a glance, he looked back down to see Ford, his hair tangled up in Bill’s hand, lowering his open mouth to the tip of Bill’s length, his tongue pressing against Bill briefly, as though tasting him.

Bill blinked, yellow slitted eyes oddly riveted, as Ford mulled over the flavour, licking his lips absently, before he pressed another heated open-mouthed kiss to the tip of Bill’s shaft, determined, sucking lightly, closing his eyes.

If the worship from that gesture didn’t send Bill reeling, the sensation would do the trick just fine. A loud moan snuck past Bill’s hand, the nerve endings that Sixer had crafted all dancing to his tune marvellously. The sensation was overwhelming, like a concentrated wave of sensitized tingling that pulled at Bill’s body and brain simultaneously.

Ford bobbed his head, taking more of Bill’s length into his mouth, pressing his tongue to the underside as he continued the suction he assumed would stimulate nicely. He wasn’t sure how he’d feel placing his mouth on another man like this, but it wasn’t altogether awful, if a little unusual. After a few attempts he even found himself enjoying this, garnering a sense of satisfaction from the noises his technique drew from the god. He felt himself harden, and reddened at the thought of getting off doing this, of pleasing another man.

Or at least he thought he was pleasing him.

Ford pulled his warm mouth off Bill’s organ with a wet pop, and considered Bill’s reproductive extremity with a slight frown.

“Is this doing nothing for you?” Ford asked, his voice a gravelly murmur.

“Don’t stop.” Bill wailed, tugging at Ford’s hair demandingly. So overwhelmed by his own arousal, he didn’t see why Sixer had stopped. What was the hold up?

“It’s supposed to be –” Ford began, surveying the still flaccid, saliva coated penis in his hand. “Am I not doing this right?”

“Stopping is not doing it right.” Bill insisted, despite having no knowledge of the usual practise, or what was supposed to happen. “Sixer.”

“So you’re enjoying -?”

“YES! Yes.” Bill admitted, his tone perhaps a little too loud.
“But you’re not –“

“Not what?” Bill asked impatiently, unable to help but buck his hips up persistently into Ford’s hand. The feeling of the scientist holding him was intoxicating, but not quite the same flavour of overwhelming as when Sixer suctioned his mouth over him. He wanted more.

Ford blinked up at Bill, then looked down to the muse’s penis, frowning at it like he would stare at a particularly difficult or stubborn equation. Bill squirmed under Ford’s scrutiny, embarrassment creeping back in.

“Whatever you’re trying to do, just do it.” Bill blurted out, impatient for the scientist to do something, rather than simply stare at him like that.

Ford squeezed his hand around Bill’s length, tugging up and down in light, easy strokes, looking between Bill’s face, the muse still holding a hand against his mouth to smother his noises, and the soft penis in his hand, wondering why Bill wasn’t getting hard.

Squeezing tighter, Ford stroked Bill’s length harder, trying to coax some sort of physical reaction from the muse, still getting nothing but a sensitive squirming god pressing his own fist to his mouth, managing to make noise regardless.

Ford paused, trying to approach this from a different angle, looking to solve the situation like an equation. Basic physical pleasure had wrung basic pleasurable reactions from Bill, but Bill wasn’t a basic creature, and he didn’t react the way Stanford expected from certain stimuli.

He liked surprising Ford.

An idea arising, Ford closed his mouth over Bill’s length again, lips moving up and down, licking and sucking, while Ford’s free hand ventured up to Bill’s hipbone, pausing there for a moment. Ford watched Bill’s reactions, considering something, and then suddenly raked his nails in one sharp movement diagonally across Bill’s torso.

The muse yelped loudly, his hands flying out to grab Ford’s shoulder as he doubled over as the pain shot through him, bucking up into Ford’s mouth.

That’s when Ford felt it.

The twitch.

“Kcuf, dog ho, Rexis, Sixer, you –“

Ford did it again, digging his nails into Bill’s inner thigh, scratching the skin there sharply, drawing another frantic noise from Bill as he felt the god’s member stiffen slightly in his mouth.

“V pna’g oryvrir lbh – aaaaaahhhhh ahhhah ah Sixer!”

Ford’s eyes flicked up to take in Bill’s blissed out, conflicted expression, the muse grasping desperately onto Ford’s shoulder with one hand, sitting up to curl over the human, his legs shaking as his skin healed over, tingling from the remnant of the pain.

Guessing that it was contributive to his muse’s arousal, Ford roughly pushed Bill down to lay back flat on the mattress, the hand on his chest firm, holding him there, as Ford hollowed his cheeks out sucking on Bill’s gradually stiffening member, feeling the god’s legs jerk and shudder beside his head.
Bill whined and wriggled, trying to reach for Ford, to pull the scientist closer, or to tangle his hands in Sixer’s hair, but when he tried, Ford grabbed his wrist and pinned it to the mattress, controlling Bill’s pleasure that way. When Bill whined and tried arching his hips up to push further into Ford’s mouth, Ford pressed his thumb harshly against Bill’s slender wrist, just above the apparatus cuffs, squeezing his wrists painfully, while with his other hand he slapped Bill’s outer thigh, pinking the skin there.

Bill brought his free hand back up to attempt to restrict his increasingly shameless noises, pressing his palm flat against his mouth, smothering the building scream that was clawing its way up his throat.

Sixer sucked harder, feeling Bill’s erection straining finally, emboldened by the curious mix of pleasure/pain that seemed to work for his muse. He laid several more tart slaps against Bill’s outer thigh, coaxing those smothered shouts from the muse, making him buck upwards into Ford’s mouth.

Pulling off from Bill’s dick, stroking it with his hand, the saliva making it slick, Ford moved up Bill’s body, pulling the muse’s hand away from his mouth, freeing the incoherent breathless sounds that Bill was stifling. Leaning over Bill, his own arousal bearing down against the muse’s shaking leg, Ford watched the god’s eyes water, looking away, to the side, too embarrassed and aroused to meet Ford’s gaze.

Ford felt contentment rumble in his chest, an oblique sort of possessiveness, satisfaction that he’d done this, he’d driven his muse to such insensate highs, that he was owning Bill’s pleasure.

“Xzzztrr, Si- Si- Xtrxzzzzzzr.” It didn’t even seem like Bill was forming words anymore, in earth languages, or any of his own interdimensional languages. The words all just seemed to run together, spluttering overwhelmed noises out at Ford, his face and body heating up despite the cuffs steadily drawing power away from him.

Ford could see sweat beading on Bill’s ebony skin, and it made the gold lines of his tattoos shine and glimmer with every fractured breath the muse sucked in, unused to this sort of physical stimuli.

He could hear Bill’s voice break as he whispered so softly that it almost didn’t happen. But Ford heard it.

“Oh… please –“

Satisfaction rolled through Ford. He’d driven his muse to pleading, made a god beg.

Leaning down to press a hot kiss to Bill’s arching neck, Ford continued stroking, faster now, hearing Bill whimper and feeling him shiver all over.

Recalling the solution to this unsolvable equation, Ford opened his mouth and closed his teeth, hard, down on the side of Bill’s neck, biting firmly, hearing Bill shout out, his hands scrabbling for purchase on the back of Ford’s shirt, clinging desperately to him.

A wet tear fell down from the corner of Bill’s watering eyes as he screwed them shut, sobbing his pleasure out as Sixer bit down on his neck possessively, marking him with his teeth. His hips bucked wildly for those last few seconds, spasming, legs shaking, as he pumped up into Ford’s hand, spilling hot viscous liquid into the scientist’s six fingered grip.

Ford pressed a softer kiss to Bill’s neck, licking the bruised skin there, guiding the muse through his first ever orgasm, rubbing Bill’s chest with his free hand gently as he shuddered in the
aftermath.

When Bill was reduced to a boneless pile of limbs on the bed, his eyes closed, panting hard, Ford moved to wipe his hand on the blankets.

He glanced down briefly and double took, puzzled at the sight of what looked more like gold paint than semen, decorating Ford’s hand, dripping metallic like mercury. It felt hot, hotter than Ford’s hand, but not hot enough to burn.

Ford almost brought his hand up to taste the liquid, curious, but the belated thought that mercury was poisonous, and you couldn’t just go sticking cosmic substances in your mouth (not that it stopped Ford before) had him pause, realising that he should probably analyse the fluid before ingesting any. He wondered if Bill would let him take a sample.

Shrugging, wiping his hand on the sheets (he’d be washing them anyway) Ford brought his clean hand up to cup Bill’s face, wiping the corner of his eye with his thumb.

“Was that good?”

“Hzzzffffffahhhhhhhhhhh.” Bill exhaled, making no sense whatsoever.

“I’m assuming that means it was good.”

“Blggffllhhhhhhhhhhh.” Bill’s tongue felt heavy in his mouth, like this meatsack Sixer fashioned for him was shutting down. He was trapped in a faulty vessel, floating on clouds on unending bliss. His mind was swimming concentric circles around his common sense, echoing back at him exactly how taboo what he’d just done was. Letting a human play him like that.

“I’ll give you a minute.” Ford patted Bill condescendingly on the knee.

Bill reeled in the aftermath of experiencing such an extreme physical reaction. He didn’t know this body was even capable of something like that, and like the determined sonovabitch he was, Sixer had pulled that reaction out of him, just like he’d pulled him down from the cosmos into this body. His legs were still shaking, his pulse galloping wildly, feeling like he’d just experienced a heart attack, and liking it. It was so good. It was awful.

“You … are -“ Bill finally managed, after several minutes of stunned silence, his words coming slowly to him, turning to look at Stanford’s disgustingly smug expression.

“Mmm?” Ford hummed, a sickening smirk stretching his lips, lidding his eyes as he looked down at his muse, having finally rendered Bill speechless for once. Ford was expecting adulation, or awestruck praise from the muse, thoroughly convinced he’d just delivered Bill an in-body out-of-body experience.

“…Are…” Bill curled his lip, staring up at Ford’s smug face, the words spilling out of him abruptly. “An asshole!”

“Excuse me?” Ford blinked, not entirely sure if he was hearing Bill right.

“Just who do you think you are?!” Bill scowled at Sixer, shakily propping himself up onto his elbows.

“You asked me for this.” Ford pointed out, offended.

“But you don’t have to be so smug about it!” Bill scoffed, reaching out to weakly swat at Ford’s
cheek, his fingers landing softly, brushing down Ford’s stubble. “God, I just want to smack that look right off your face.”

“You’re seriously angry at me because I made you orgasm?” Ford asked, mildly baffled.

“Don’t say that!” Bill huffed, pushing Ford’s face away with his fingertips.

Ford caught Bill’s hand in his own, squeezing his fingers. “But it’s true.”

Bill tried to pull his hand away, but Sixer didn’t let go, his brows furrowing together now, concern flitting across his face.

“You don’t regret it -?”

“No.” Bill cut off that guilt laden train of thought, stopping Ford out of pragmatism, regret not an emotion he chose to identify with generally.

“Then you’re mad that you liked it?” Ford squinted, trying to reason out his muse’s bizarre behaviour.

Bill spluttered, defensive at that accusation. “Wha – I – you didn’t react like that when you did it!”

“I’ve had 30 years in my body to get used to normal human physical reactions.” Ford explained condescendingly. “You are not a normal human.”

“You made me like this. This is your fault!” Bill crossed his arms stubbornly.

“Are you embarrassed?” Ford asked incredulously, bemused by the very thought.

“NO!” Bill yelled indignantly, his eyes and tattoos glowing bright yellow.

Ford burst out laughing. Wiping his eyes, he held his hand up over his mouth, trying to stifle his chuckling out of politeness.

“Sorry I – I shouldn’t be laughing –” Ford managed to say before he wiped his eyes mirthfully again, laughing behind his hand.

“I will burn your entire house down.” Bill threatened, pointing at Ford, looking extraordinarily ruffled, his pyjamas unbuttoned and his pyjama pants bunched around his knees, his hair mussed haphazardly. “I will burn your lab, I will burn your gnomes, I will burn your goat.”

Ford took one look at Bill’s petulant pointer finger and he doubled over laughing, leaning down to press his forehead to the bed, so amused.

Bill huffed indignantly, then he huffed again, and began pulling his pants up, righting his clothing, readying to march out on Ford.

“Wait.” Ford reached out to rest his hand on Bill’s calf. “I’m sorry, I shouldn’t be laughing. It was your first time.”

“You did this on purpose.” Bill accused Ford, narrowing his eyes suspiciously even as the scientist sat up and leaned in to cup Bill’s cheek adoringly.

“I can assure you, I had no input in how –” Ford pressed a sweet kiss to Bill’s lips before continuing. “Adorably sensitive you are.”
“You are one smug bastard, you know that.” Bill accepted the scientist’s kiss, though he was still glaring at Ford.

“I think I have reason to be.” Ford smirked, rubbing his thumb across Bill’s cheekbone, taking in every detail of his flushed, flustered muse. Bill’s skin was heating up again and his tattoos were glowing more prominently. “How are you feeling?”

Bill squinted his eyes suspiciously at Stanford, expecting this to be another trick question, but the scientist seemed sincere in his inquiry.

“I’m not going to laugh anymore.” Ford assured him, trying to coax the suspicious god to relax, not wanting to cause Bill to feel ashamed by what had just happened. “I’m just curious.”

“You’re always curious.” Bill said succinctly, his defensive edge lessening now, looking at Stanford appraisingly.

Sixer’s curiosity was a blessing really, his analytical mind made the leap between Bill’s reactions to physical sensation, and his projected responses to stimuli, making his first time a heck of a lot more interesting than the mindless rutting that did it for most humans.

Judging from the tent in Ford’s pyjama pants, arousing Bill ‘did’ something for him too.

His eyes flicking down Sixer’s body, looking between his pyjama pants and his face, Bill pursed his lips, deliberating.

“Maybe I’m curious too.”

Rising up onto his knees, Bill leaned across, claiming Ford’s mouth with a probing kiss, his tongue sliding against Ford’s smoothly, rewarding the scientist in a way.

Bill couldn’t exactly admit to it (it wasn’t the done thing, to let your worshippers inflict pain on you – generally that was seen as an insult to gods) but Sixer had impressed him, and Bill didn’t anticipate how much he’d enjoy carnal sensation. That balance of pleasure and pain was like a warm fire to Bill’s soul, the sort of fire you’d want to stick your hand into just to see what would happen.

Pulling back from the kiss, slitted pupils locked with Ford’s, Bill maintained eye contact as he grabbed Ford’s six fingered hand and opened his mouth, slowly licking Ford’s fingers one by one.

Every time Bill lavished attention on Sixer’s freakish hands it flustered the vulnerable side of the scientist – something Bill was more than happy to take advantage of. It appealed to Bill how easily Sixer blushed, even though he tried to remain composed. The blood pooling under his skin gave him away every time, and it was gratifying to acknowledge the affect he could have on the scientist, after Sixer had so thoroughly turned the tables on him.

Bill smirked slyly at Ford, tilting his head to look down at the scientist’s tented pyjama pants. “I’m feeling just peachy, and I believe it’s my turn to experiment.”

“Oh-oh?” Ford cleared his throat and tried to sound confident, even though that dangerous curiosity of Bill’s had him expecting the tables he had turned to be thoroughly flipped in an instant. For all his bragging about composure, his muse could be unpredictable, and enjoyed dragging bizarre reactions out of Ford.

Ford was somewhat wary, because Bill’s idea of experimenting usually involved guilting Ford unnecessarily, or scratching him, or causing him pain, and Ford wasn’t exactly keen on inviting
that into a sexual setting. He knew Bill liked it, but that didn’t mean he had to.

“Yeah, oh.” Bill scooched over on the bed, sitting closer to Stanford, his yellow eyes glowing deviously. “I’ve still got a few cubes to burn. Besides –“

Stanford gulped as Bill boldly slid his hands down Ford’s chest, tucking his fingertip into the waistband of Ford’s boxers, looking far too curious for his own good.

Bill tugged the fabric of the boxers back a little, leaning forward, looking down. “I want to see –“

Bill peeled Ford’s boxers back just a fraction more, prolonging the moment, when suddenly a loud shout was heard from upstairs.

“WHOOOOOOO HOOOOOOOOOOO! HOT DOG I DID IT!”

Ford and Bill looked up at the ceiling, Ford quirking his brow, curious, Bill pouting at the interruption.

“I DID IT, IT WORKED!!!!! SWEET SASPARILLA!!!! FORD! STANFORD!!!! YOU GOTTA SEE THIS!”

“Ugh.” Bill scowled, glaring at the ceiling, the sound of Fiddleford’s footfalls signalling the end to Bill’s investigation. “Seriously???”

“Is he coming down here?” Ford questioned, looking anxiously at his door, then across at Bill, who still had his finger hooked into Stanford’s pants.

“Can he not??” Bill huffed, mortally offended by Fiddleford’s timing. “I was kind of in the middle of something.”

“Bill, hide!” Ford pushed Bill’s hand away and began looking around the room frantically, looking for hiding places. He jumped out of bed and rushed over to hold his closet door open, ushering Bill inside. “Quick.”

“I’m not hiding. Hide? Why do I have to hide? Why can’t you hide?” Bill crossed his arms stubbornly, still sitting on Stanford’s bed, looking thoroughly put out.

“Because this is my room.” Ford stressed, looking more red in the face than he had any right to be, struggling with his words. “And I can’t just have – another man – in my –“

Bill blinked at Ford, not quite getting what the scientist was saying.

“I mean, I’m sure he’s an accepting fellow, but I just – I’m not sure if I’m ready to – well, identify with – publicly -“ Ford fumbled with his words, feeling like an absolute fool for insisting upon this secrecy.

He assumed Fiddleford wouldn’t treat him any differently, but the boys who bullied him growing up took an uncanny pleasure in throwing insulting words and other heavier things at him, presuming he was homosexual for his disregard for anything that wasn’t a book while he was a teenager.

Ford had struggled with the thought of liking Bill for long enough, the residual shame that lingered in his life from his adolescence had him recoiling from coming to terms with his homosexuality, at least in this instance. He hadn’t been particularly bothered by anyone, romantically or sexually, before Bill came into the picture, and so was able to shrug off the insults. Now that they were less
baseless insults and more apt descriptors, Stanford still was coming to terms with the fact that his attraction to Bill, and all that came with it, proved those bullies right.

While his muse happened to be man-made, it was no coincidence that Stanford had made him a man. It took him long enough to come to terms with his own attraction, that didn’t mean he was ready to out himself to the world.

“I have absolutely no idea what you’re saying.” Bill admitted bluntly, staring at Ford like he was an idiot.

“He’s going to think I’m gay.” Ford blurted out, instantly feeling ashamed of himself. “If he sees you in here with me. He’s going to … know.”

“This is the thing you humans have where you value procreation so highly you discriminate against anything that doesn’t further the disgusting plaguelike propagation of your species.” Bill surmised, looking unimpressed. “I don’t get what the big deal is, personally. My dimension has 14 billion different genders and the main component for whether or not you click with someone is their personality.”

Ford looked conflicted, the shame causing him to look down at his feet guiltily.

“I think I know what this is.” Bill pursed his lips, considering Ford for a moment, tapping his chin. “This has nothing to do with you, and what you want, and everything to do with the echoes of those ignorant kids in your past, am I right?”

“How did you -?” Ford looked up at Bill, stunned and defensive simultaneously.

“I know things, Sixer.” Bill shrugged unrepentantly, trying to look worldly and mysterious when in reality he just spent far too much time poking around in Sixer’s head. The interest he took in Sixer’s memories was verging on obsession at this point. “Don’t look so shocked. It’s my job to know things. I wouldn’t think you’d let something like that – something that doesn’t matter – bog you down. You’re bigger than that small-minded sentiment.”

Ford looked conflicted, still standing by the closet door, shame and guilt tangoing tightly together in his chest. He knew Bill was right, it was just shaking off the feeling that had been cultured by years of inflicted prejudice that was proving a difficult paradigm shift to process.

Bill sighed, and climbed off Ford’s bed, walking over to the closet, resting his hand against Sixer’s face. “Clearly you need time, and loathe as I am to be interrupted, I actually have things that need doing today, so I’ll hide in your closet for now.”

Bill patted Ford patronisingly on the cheek. “You’ll smarten up IQ. Now answer the door for Specs and lead him somewhere else. I’m not lingering with your linen one second longer than I have to.”

“I’m sorry.” Ford apologised, hearing Fiddleford’s footfalls coming down the hall.

“Don’t be sorry, be smart.” Bill told Ford and climbed into the closet, closing the door behind him, his gold eyes glowing through the slats in the wood. “You owe me bigtime for this.”

Ford tried not to acknowledge that statement, knowing that Bill could take a perceived debt quite far, but he knew deep down that it was true. He owed Bill better than this, and he’d make it up to him someday. Now that he knew what made Bill tick, he had plenty of ideas on how exactly he could make it up to the muse, and none of the ideas were heterosexual.

Ford’s shoulders stiffened, covering the closet door with his body, as Fiddleford barged into the
“STANFORD YOU – ah, oh, did I wake you up?” Fiddleford dialled down his enthusiasm a bit, noticing Ford standing awkwardly in his pyjamas by his closet looking sheepish and perturbed.

Ford cleared his throat, trying not to make it look like he’d just been jostled out of bed with a lingering erection. He was lucky his back was to Fiddleford. “Hrmm, ahem. I was just – just getting dressed.”

“I’m sorry to disturb you, I just got somethin’ real excitin’ to show you!” Fiddleford enthused.

Ford tried to act natural and pretended to reach into the closet to pull out some clothing, shielding the tent in his trousers by keeping his back turned to F. He reached in and fumbled to grasp various hangers, not knowing what he was reaching for.

“Well, I’ll just … get dressed, and you can show me.” Ford said, turning his head slightly to watch Fiddleford, hoping his colleague wouldn’t think anything was up. “I’ll just grab some clothes.”

Snickering faintly from within the closet, Bill passed Stanford an empty coat-hanger, the scientist drawing it out without noticing. Blanching and shoving the hanger back in when he realised it was empty, Ford hissed under his breath at Bill.

“Clothes, I said clothes.”

“Is somethin’ wrong Stanford?” Fiddleford enquired, still standing by the door, watching his friend expectantly.

Bill slipped a tie on the coat-hanger and blinked innocently up at Sixer.

Ford’s pained expression was delightful.

“Could you just give me a minute?” Ford asked Fiddleford in a strained voice. “I’ll meet you down in the lab, yes?”

“I’ll give you two minutes. Meet me in the attic.” Fiddleford corrected, still bouncing with energy. “You’re gonna love this!”

Ford managed a polite nod and Fiddleford bounded out of Ford’s room, closing the door behind him, his giddy footsteps sounding out all the way up to the attic.

Ford exhaled loudly, looking up to the ceiling in askance as his muse’s muffled cackles sounded out from inside of the closet.

“That was not funny.”

“That was very funny.” Bill corrected Sixer, pushing open the closet door and strolling out, passing the coat-hanger with the tie on it to Stanford as he made to leave. “And a good look for you, you should consider it.”

“Where are you going?”

“I told you, I have things to do today.” Bill rolled his eyes and smirked. “You go nerd out with your bff up there. I’ll be in the forest.”

“Why are you going to the forest?” Ford questioned, absently putting the coat-hanger back.
“So I don’t have to stay in this shack. Don’t worry, I’ll be back.” Bill said flippantly, turning to leave. “You might want to put some clothes on, your two minute deadline is ticking away.”

Ford huffed, Bill’s teasing frustrating him slightly. He turned back to reach into the closet, grabbing a turtleneck and a pair of slacks.

Bill paused by the door, watching Ford gather his clothes for the day.

“Oh, and Sixer. Don’t forget that favour you owe me.” Bill grinned flirtatiously at Ford, who was pulling his sweater on over his head. “At the end of the day I’ll be coming to collect.”

Ford’s words were muffled by the sweater he was pulling over his head but Bill thought he heard “I won’t forget” mumbled promisingly through the fabric.

“Good.”

Walking up the staircase to the attic, Ford was somewhat resigned to bear his friend’s enthusiasm. It was still too early in the morning for such pluck, despite Stanford’s admittedly excellent start to the day. Still, he was curious to see what had Fiddleford so energetic.

He pushed open the attic door and peered in, taking in the relative disarray of Fiddleford’s room.

What had been a tidy and ordered study before was now a whirlwind of blueprints taped to every available space on the wall, machinery and wiring littered on Fiddleford’s desk, crumpled papers overflowing from the waste basket, pages of notes stacked up on the floor. All were signs of a budding breakthrough, but the blueprints didn’t seem to be for the portal. A box of candle globe light bulbs had spilled sideways, lightbulbs rolling out onto the floor, scattered glass lingering beside the waste bin where several of them seemed to have shattered.

“What’s –?” Ford began, staring at the veritable mess that had accumulated. “It’s quite messy in here.”

“Stanford! You’re here! I know, I’ll clean up, but first you’ve got to look at this.” Fiddleford beamed, standing up from his seat at the desk, holding a peculiar looking invention out for his friend’s inspection. It looked like a mix between a handgun and a hairdryer, and Stanford had never seen anything like it before.

“What have you made this time?” Ford questioned fondly, walking over to look at the device.

Fiddleford’s inventions were always endearing, designed to improve lives in one way or another. His inventions generally ranged from robot-legs for the handicapped to moonshine-style potions that altered vocal range to humorous effect. He’d initially invented the voice potion to help Patricia get her voice back after a yodelling competition, and the way he told the story, she spoke like The Fonz from Happy Days for a week.

“Well, ever since that night we played triple D - you could say I’ve been inspired!” Fiddleford gushed, turning the strange hairdryer over in his hands. “I’ve been takin’ matters into my own hands. You told me to play to my strengths, to approach the issue from a different angle, and I
“What fix?” Ford looked up at Fiddleford, now somewhat dubious. He didn’t think this would be about Fiddleford’s nightmares again, he thought that the meditation route had solved that issue. He didn’t see how Fiddleford could impact his nightmares with a hairdryer though.

“When you said I was approachin’ it wrong, you really got me thinkin’,” Fiddleford explained giddily. “The problem wasn’t how I was processin’ the memories, it was that the memories had happened at all!”

“I know, and I’ve apologised for that.” Ford began, not sure where Fiddleford was going with this, or if he just brought the incident up to guilt him again.

Fiddleford ignored Ford’s apology and barged on with his exposition. “I don’t mean that. Hush up and listen. See, when a computer is processin’ somethin’, and it’s lagging or going slow, usually it’s a problem with the memory space bein’ backed up too much. And what do you do when your computer’s lagging? You go through and delete the unnecessary files or programs, freeing up the memory space, so your computer can run faster. Better. It was never a problem with my brain at all, I was copin’ with what I’d seen as well as anyone could. The nightmares weren’t because I couldn’t handle it, or I was weak, it was just because that memory was takin’ up all the space in my mind. I couldn’t look past it!”

“I get the analogy but I’m not sure how this relates.” Ford said sceptically, looking down at the hairdryer device Fiddleford was smoothing his hand over tenderly.

“I made this device to tap into brainwave frequency. From the parts we took from the ship. I can hack into my own brainwaves and delete the files that are causin’ me grief. It’s perfect!” Fiddleford declared, holding the gun out proudly as he spoke.

Ford stared dumbly at the device for a second, processing the implications of Fiddleford’s revelation slowly. “It’s – hang on, wind back a bit, are you saying this device deletes memories?”

Pacing eagerly to Stanford’s side, leaning over to show him the device, Fiddleford demonstrated. “Yep! See, this here’s the specifier, you turn the dial to input the file you’re deletin’, you gotta be specific, down here’s the output jack, and then you’ve got the blast shield here to deflect any excess radio-waves, the bulb concentrates the power, and it’s as simple as pullin’ the trigger – then one, two, three – the file is deleted! The bad memory is gone!”

Ford blinked at the device, staggered by Fiddleford’s swift explanation, his friend talking a mile a minute.

“Erasing memories?” Ford uttered, disbelieving.

He brought a hand up to push his hair back from his forehead, and his stomach flipped with guilt. He looked between the device and Fiddleford’s bright eyed expression, felt that push of guilt rattle through him, telling him that it was his fault that Fiddleford even made this machine. It was his fault. That he felt he had to go to such lengths.

“This is - this is all hypothetical, isn’t it? Just a thought experiment, an exercise in potentia, yes? You wouldn’t actually use such a device on anyone?” Ford questioned hopefully, his brain still recoiling indignantly at the thought of having one’s memories removed, altered, deleted. For someone like Stanford who valued knowledge to such an extent, the idea of purposefully removing a memory was just wrong. It was like crippling yourself. He was still hovering on this plateau of disbelief and revulsion, coming to slowly comprehend the ramifications of such a machine.
“Well, I thought about it, yes, but Stanford – I made it to be used.” Fiddleford said bluntly, looking at his friend now, his brow creasing with contention. “This is my fix.”

“But this is dangerous!” Ford spluttered, gesturing at the device. “Deleting memories, interfacing with brainwaves – I – what if it’s permanent?”

“It’s designed to be permanent. This ain’t a ‘let’s fiddle around with your bad memories’ ray, it’s a ‘lets delete those nightmares once and for all’ gun.” Fiddleford explained stubbornly. “It works, it really works.”

“Deleting memories at all is an unsavoury thought. How could you justify this? You could delete something important!” Ford listed compulsively, pacing, his paranoia vaulting the hypothetical outcomes to extremes. “Like learning how to walk, or a language, or how to breathe! I – you can’t just – what if you make a typo???”

“I ain’t stupid.” Fiddleford frowned, curling his hands around the gun protectively, casting a reproachful look at his friend. “Nobody’s gonna make a typo, I’m not – this isn’t somethin’ I’m treatin’ lightly Stanford.”

“Please tell me you aren’t going to use this on yourself Fiddleford.” Ford pleaded, turning to face Fiddleford. “It’s foolhardy, and dangerous, and reckless to tamper with your own mind like that. Deleting memories, you could – you’d be inflictiong dementia on yourself. That’s what it is, voluntary dementia.”

Fiddleford recoiled further from Ford, holding the memory gun close to his chest. “I’m not using it dangerously, I’m using it medicinally. It’s not dangerous.”

“How could you know that?” Ford argued, his tone frustrated.

“I used it just last night is how - and I’m fine! Look, no side effects, no nightmares!” Fiddleford held his arms out as though demonstrating his mental health and holistic virility.

“You used it on yourself??!!” Ford raised his voice, despairing of the situation.

“And I’m fine!” Fiddleford emphasised. “Fit as a fiddle! I slept the whole night through with no night-terrors and I have this invention to thank for it! Sure, it stings a mite at first, but .”

“I cannot believe you!” Ford brought both of his hands up to cup his head, raking his hands through his hair, stressed by his colleague’s dangerous actions. “To think you would do something so stupid!”

“I thought you’d be happy for me.” Fiddleford raised his own voice, confronting Ford’s dramatic reaction. “That I’m sleepin’ right. That I beat this. I beat my fears.”

“By deleting them!” Ford swung his hands out, gesturing emphatically. “Deleting your memories. That’s not overcoming your fears, that’s blotting them out of existence. That’s erasing them, that’s cheating.”

Fiddleford’s eyes widened and he scoffed, insulted by Ford’s assertion. “Oh, so it’s cheating when I actually do something to help myself, when I solve what’s been keepin’ me up all night every night, but when you suggest yoga or breathing exercises its fine –”

“Because those things don’t delete your mind!”

“I ain’t deletin’ my mind.” Fiddleford argued. “I’m gettin’ rid of my nightmares!”
“Oh, sure, you say potato I say potato –” Ford waved his hand about mockingly, his rejoinder coming out somewhat childishly.

“You’ve never said potato before.” Fiddleford pointed out.

“Well how would you know, if you’re deleting your own memories?” Ford finished churlishly, crossing his arms.

“You aren’t actin’ rational about this.” Fiddleford realised, looking at Ford with disappointment.

“This device isn’t rational. It’s dangerous. It’s – F, I don’t – what will it take to explain this to you?” Ford stressed, running his hand down his face, rubbing his stubble. He looked over to F, beseeching now. “You could do some serious damage, you could erase something important. You can’t rely on this technology. We’ll have to find another way.”

“Well, I don’t want another way.” Fiddleford said stubbornly, before his voice softened, the hurt seeping into his tone. “I figured this out on my own, why isn’t it good enough for you?”

“It’s not that, it’s just – F – I can’t – I can’t bear the thought of you using this on yourself, you’ve got such a brilliant mind.” Ford explained, his brow creasing with concern. “I don’t want you to damage it.”

“It’s already gone and got damaged, following you on your magical mystery trails.” Fiddleford said, somewhat bitingly, obviously not quite as forgiving about the incident as he seemed to be. “You’re the reason I can’t sleep, and you ain’t gonna take my solution away from me just ‘cause you don’t agree with it.”

Ford leaned back as if he’d been slapped, Fiddleford throwing the incident back in his face so abruptly. Ford’s eyes narrowed, and his mouth hung open for a moment, searching for the words to speak in a way that would get through to Fiddleford, finding it hard to cushion his demeanour when Fiddleford wasn’t softening his proverbial punches.

“It’s not a matter of a difference of opinion, it’s – how it’s used. It’s unethical.” Ford pinched the bridge of his nose. “Even on a case by case level, the lack of awareness for the consequences of its use, the potential after effects or ramifications on the brain – even if it was used willingly there’s still an implicit lack of consent involved in turning a weapon like this on yourself. A lack of information, of informed consent. You’re the operator, goddamnit, what if you forget if you’ve used it once you’ve pulled the trigger and end up blasting your brain with radiowaves until there’s nothing left!?”

“Well, you don’t lose the memories because they get recorded in this videotape up here in the canister. See, electrical tape.” Fiddleford explained tersely, tapping the canister. “That way even what you erase can be recovered in case of emergencies. You’re so keen to poke holes in this invention but you haven’t even considered that I’ve thought of all of this already.”

“So, you’re – what – removing your memories and keeping a hardcopy on file, but deleting the soft copy.” Ford crossed his arms, still stubbornly looking for reasons to oppose the device. “What if something happens to this tape, what if you lose it, lose that memory forever?”

“What if, what if, what if.” Fiddleford mimicked, clearly quite irritated. “You think I haven’t thought of all this already?”

“I’m just still not understanding how you’d be willing to proceed with this if you’ve considered all the downsides to it. Fiddleford, this device is a bad idea.” Ford expressed, sounding tired, tired of
explaining this.

“It’s my idea.” Fiddleford replied defensively.

“And I’m telling you, it’s a bad one.” Ford reiterated, crossing his arms and frowning at his friend, coming off as rather patronising.

“Of course you’d say that. It isn’t yours.” Fiddleford crossed his arms stubbornly, mimicking Ford’s body language. “God, you’re so patronising. You haven’t even considered the positive things this device can do. This machine could revolutionise therapy, completely wipe out negative symptoms in trauma victims, enable a better quality of life for folks who don’t want to remember the things they’ve gone through. Heck, just in this town alone I bet there are plenty of folks who seen more than they care to, if half the things in that journal of yours are real. Those creatures are terrifyin’, and we’ve got tonnes of terrified townsfolk who need help. It’s got untold widespread potential benefits and applications.”

“You say benefits, but I’m just hearing an excuse for wilful ignorance of what’s out there.” Ford said dismissively, not enjoying the thought of simply erasing the unnatural and bizarre from the minds of the townsfolk. It almost sounded like Fiddleford’s rhetoric was on par with Bill’s theory that there was only so much supernatural happenstance that everyday humans could stomach, that people recoiled from the weird – would rather not see it. As Ford himself was categorised as ‘weird’ by some, due to his birth deformity, the idea of erasing memories of the weirdness of Gravity Falls felt like removing all the charm and mysticism that made this town so appealing. That made Ford so unique. He didn’t like it. “People should know what’s out there. Not forget. They should learn from their experiences, adapt with them.”

“Well what if they can’t adapt, huh?” Fiddleford pressed. “Some things you can’t come back from. Some things you can’t adapt with. Imagine what happens if a whole crowd of people got looked at by that Gremloblin thing? If that was inflicted on them, those nightmare visions. Would you let them all suffer, just so they could adapt?”

“I’m not insisting anyone suffer, I just can’t ethically back a device like this. It’s not right to unleash something with such disastrous potential on the world.” Ford persisted, gesturing with his hands as he spoke.

“I’m not like you Stanford. To me the pros outweigh the cons and I planned for every outcome. I’ve thought this through six ways to Sunday. You can’t deter me. I planned for individual case by case use, and widespread use, to help the people of this town.” Fiddleford explained, scooping up thin air to represent the townsfolk. “We just need to gather them all in one place, input the cable into the output jack and all their nightmares could be gone in an instant, all at once, just like that – no more suffering.”

“You’d use this on multiple people?” Ford gawped at his colleague, the horror seeping into his tone. Fiddleford could use this device to wipe the memories from not just himself, but a whole crowd of people with that output jack of his. It was atrocious. “That’s just – wrong. That – the potential for abuse is staggering. Fiddleford, we have a responsibility as scientists to stand guard against this kind of offensive technology.”

“It ain’t offensive, it works!” Fiddleford insisted, his chin jutting out stubbornly.

“We have to destroy it.” Ford made towards Fiddleford, reaching out for the weapon expectantly, assuming his friend’s compliance.

Fiddleford however, did not comply.
“NO!” F yelled and sprang back away from Ford, cradling the device to his chest protectively.

“Fiddleford –” Ford started forward, holding his hand out to his friend.

“You aren’t takin’ this away from me Stanford. It’s the first thing that’s made the nightmares stop in forever, you can’t take this away from me.” Fiddleford pleaded, angrily and desperately, backing away from Ford to the other side of the room.

“We’ll find another way, this is too dangerous. We have to –“ Ford continued, walking towards Fiddleford with his hand out, waiting for his friend to pass over the device.

“No! No we don’t. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with this device, it’s for helpin’ people, not harming them. You don’t have to –“ Fiddleford shook his head, clutching the weapon to his chest, not passing it over, gritting his teeth with every step Ford took towards him.

“We have to destroy it.” Ford said with determination. “Imagine it falling into the wrong hands. Imagine if it was turned on a person unwillingly. It’s a violation.”

“It’s the only thing I got that’s making me better.” Fiddleford replied, somewhat desperately, inching away from Ford now, backed into a corner, his eyes darting about frantically. “I ain’t going back to the way I was.”

“Fiddleford, just give it to me –“ Ford insisted, his voice gentle but firm, trying to coax his friend to hand it over.

“NO!” Fiddleford was pointing the gun at Ford, aiming it directly at his head with trembling hands.

Ford blinked at Fiddleford, astonished.

Fiddleford didn’t lower the gun, still holding it out, his eyes frantic and desperate, chewing on his bottom lip anxiously.

Ford held his hands up, slowly, to assure F he wasn’t a threat. He spoke quietly, his voice a little strained. “Fiddleford. Please.”

“I don’t want to do this Ford, but you just won’t let it be.” Fiddleford said, his voice wavering.

Ford kept his hands held up in surrender, but took a small step closer to his colleague. “I’m stopping. I’ve stopped. I’ve let it be. Now just put the gun down.”

Fiddleford was twisting the specifier, his eyes darting between Ford and the readout on the side of the gun. “You just don’t see how much this will help me. Help us all.”

“I see how you think it’ll help you, but you have to consider this weapon could do more harm than good.” Ford persisted, still keeping his voice quiet and calm, as calm as one could possibly be with a gun pointed at you. He was approaching F like one would approach a frightened animal. “I’m trying to help you Fiddleford.”

“I’m helpin’ myself. You’re tryin’ to take that from me.” Fiddleford insisted, his hands shaking as he inputted criteria for the memory wipe. “I can’t let you do that.”

“Please, F. I’m your friend.” Ford intoned softly, taking another subtle step closer to F, his hands still held up. “You don’t want to turn that weapon on me. Please. Think of our friendship. Think of
Fiddleford’s lower lip trembled as he stared down the sights at Ford, who took another calm step towards him, his voice gentle and beseeching.

“Think of Patricia. Of Tate. You wouldn’t want to forget them. You wouldn’t want that. Please, just –“ Ford took another careful step towards F, maintaining eye contact with the engineer. “Think this through. Be rational about this.”

“You – you’re –“ Fiddleford stuttered, Ford’s words hitting on his weak spot there, playing on his feelings for his family. Fiddleford noticed Ford’s slow approach, step by step, and he was keeping that in mind, but Ford’s words threw him off.

“You don’t know how this will affect you. What if you forget Tate’s first steps? His first words? What if you forget the first time you met Patricia?” Ford urged, inching ever closer, his eyes glued to the memory gun. “You passed her a pencil.”

“In our lecture hall. I remember.” Fiddleford breathed, the memory fresh in his mind as if it were yesterday. “And the lead broke, soon as she put it to paper.”

“And you two laughed about it. That was a good memory, right? You wouldn’t want to delete it?” Ford pressed, now about an arms width away from F, who seemed to be considering his words. “Please, put the gun down. If you won’t put the gun down for me, please, do it for your family.”

“I –“ Fiddleford looked between the gun and the floor, guilt welling in his chest at the thought of forgetting those precious moments. He was so consumed in nostalgia for his family that he almost didn’t notice the way Ford’s hand twitched. “I –“

In that moment of hesitation Stanford sprung forward with a yell, launching himself at the memory gun, his six fingered hands tugging at F’s wrists, trying to pull it away from him.

“No!” Fiddleford cried, tugging the gun away from Ford.

Ford grunted, intent on tackling the device out of his friend’s hands. “F! Just – let – go! It needs to be destroyed.”

“No! I’m not destroyin’ it! It’s my work, it’s my invention! Mine!” Fiddleford said shrilly, bringing a leg up to try and kick Ford away from him. F was astutely aware of his friend’s more powerful physique and stature, and his only hope at overpowering Ford was using leverage, leaning against the wall to kick out persistently at Stanford. “Let go!”

“You said you’d do this –“ Ford gritted out, struggling to pull the gun from F’s wiry limbs. “For your family.”

Fiddleford held down the trigger, the memory gun whirring as the ray powered up and with one sharp kick to Ford’s ankle, followed by another kick to his stomach, he broke free from Stanford, sending his friend spilling onto the floor of the attic.

“I am doin’ this for my family!” Fiddleford panted, aiming at Ford. “I won’t go back to them a broken man!”

F levelled the gun at Stanford, the ray powering up, the device humming in his hands.

“Fiddleford, please –“ Ford begged, reaching out, imploring his friend one last time, fear and hopeful disbelief widening his eyes.
F saw his friend sprawled there on his bedroom floor and tried to look past his pounding pulse and frenzied state, to see past his frantic survival instincts, the instincts that identified Ford as a threat. He tried to see past that fear to recognise the person he believed was his friend, someone who he believed would never threaten him, but in threatening this device, Ford had threatened F’s future. Threatened his ingenious new coping mechanism, his miracle fix. He tried to take it away from him, to destroy it.

And he couldn’t let that happen.

“I’m sorry Stanford.”

F pulled the trigger taut.

The memory ray shot out, bright white light beaming forward, the blast of the ray scrambling through Stanford’s memories.

Ford cried out, the ray’s impact stinging painfully as his memories were ripped from him forcibly, his body convulsing while the frequency charged through his brainwaves, tweaking his neural network.

Fiddleford held down on the trigger longer than he had to, out of fright, and adrenaline, and when he finally released it, he looked down at Ford’s slumped body, panting to catch his breath, somewhat distraught.

“I’m sorry.” Fiddleford croaked, staring down at his friend, who seemed to have passed out from the impact of the ray, falling flat back against the floorboards. Ford was breathing slowly, like he was unconscious, and his eyes were closed.

F fell to his knees beside Ford and dropped the gun to the floor, his hands flying over Ford quickly to check his vitals, before recoiling back, the gravity of what he just did hitting him, bowling him over.

“I’m – oh gosh, Stanford. I – I’m sorry.”

Fiddleford’s voice broke with emotion, his apology unheard by his unconscious friend, his only reply the rise and fall of his chest as he breathed.

F choked on a sob and brought his hand up to cover his mouth. He sobbed into his hand, spluttering dejectedly, mourning for the bridge that had been burnt the second he turned his device on his friend, knowing all that Ford had said, about it being a violation, about it being wrong. He had done it anyway, and while he didn’t regret it entirely, he felt incredibly guilty to have hurt his friend so.

“I’m sorry.” F cried, wiping his cheek with his sleeve, his nose running from crying. “I’m so so sorry. I didn’t mean – I thought you’d understand. I -”

Ford just lay there, out cold, his forehead expressionless, slack, his mouth slightly open.

“You didn’t give me a choice – I -“ Fiddleford fretted, staring down at Ford’s slow inhales and exhales, feeling a little foolish, explaining himself when Ford couldn’t hear him.

Ford snored, the noise making Fiddleford jerk back sharply in fear, before his shoulder’s relaxed, realising what had happened.

“I may have overdone it a bit.” F speculated, listening to Ford snore heavily. “I gotta move you
outta here. Ain’t no use apologisin’ to you now. You – can’t have you wakin’ up on the floor, or you’ll think somethin’s definitely not right. Gotta -”

Quickly putting his memory gun away, hiding it in the wooden box that housed the Tennessee whiskey Ford had bought him as a gift, Fiddleford returned to Ford’s side and looped his arms under Ford’s armpits, heaving, trying to lift him up off the ground.

“Hhhhhhhff.” Fiddleford puffed, his efforts not getting him far. “You’re a lot heavier than you look.”

Settling for dragging Ford, rather than lifting him, Fiddleford pulled Ford across the floor of his room, tugging him over to the door, his clothes getting dusty from the floorboards.

Opening the door, F looked down the staircase, and despaired, not quite sure how he’d get Stanford down the stairs without bumping him on each step along the way.

Dragging his friend’s body around, he felt a lot like he was committing some sort of crime.

“I’m gonna – hhff – get a work out luggin’ you around. You - Come on. Up.” F tried to lift Stanford up, attempting to prop his friend up onto his shoulders to carry him down the stairs. “Up!”

F fumbled his grip, the cast on his arm limiting his movement, and slipped. Ford fell out of his arms in the most disastrous way possible.

Stanford’s body slid down the staircase like a limp ragdoll, bumping along each step audibly, causing F to wince in sympathy. Fiddleford could only watch and flinch at each bump as his friend descended the stairs. Ford landed in an uncomfortable puddle of limbs at the bottom of the staircase, and F chewed on his fingernails anxiously, worrying that he’d killed his friend.

“Oh, you’ve really tarred it up now Fiddleford.” F muttered to himself, swallowing nervously. He peered down at Ford’s body a moment longer, until his friend gave out a loud and incredibly reassuring snore.

“Oh thank god.” F sighed in relief and picked his way down the stairs. He crouched over Ford’s body when he reached the bottom and turned Ford over, checking him for injuries. He seemed fine. Might have a few mystery bruises though.

Dragging him across the hallway into the lounge room, Fiddleford propped Ford up on the couch, settling his limbs into natural positions, laying a blanket over Ford for good measure.

Ford snored. Fiddleford adjusted the blanket. Ford slept on.

Fiddleford sat on the coffee table for a while longer, watching Ford snore, feeling guilty, that guilt thickening into a rich molasses in his belly the longer he watched him.

Ford turned over in his sleep, and winced with the movement, groaning, his eyes cracking open slightly.

“Stanford, are you okay?” Fiddleford rushed to ask, anxious, peering at his friend with concern.

“F – I – where am I?” Ford inquired sleepily, sounding confused, like he was nursing a whopper of a headache.

“You’re downstairs, restin’ on the couch.” F explained, wringing his hands together. “Are you – what do you remember?”
“I – I’m not – my head aches, aurgh. What happened?” Ford questioned, blearily blinking his eyes at F.

“I –“ Fiddleford wavered, the anxiety building, his mind at war with itself, until he settled on an explanation he could give his friend. A half-truth. “I invited you upstairs to show you what I invented, but you said it was a bad idea.”

“Mmm.” Ford grunted, like he could vaguely recollect the events described.

“So we went down to the lab to pull it apart, and we got rid of it.” Fiddleford swallowed the lump in his throat, the lie grating on his morals. “And you… you hit your head on the doorjamb and passed out.”


“I – I carried you upstairs and put you on the couch. You should rest.” F smoothed his hand over the blanket soothingly, feeling immensely guilty threading his lie. “Go back to sleep.”

“Mmm, I might. Were these lights always so bright? This headache is awful, I feel like I’ve been thrown off a horse. And I’ve never been on a horse. Nngh.” Ford rubbed his forehead, his eyes throbbing dully. “I’m not concussed, am I?”

“God, I hope not.” Fiddleford muttered to himself.

“I - where am I?” Ford repeated, looking around the room like he’d never seen it before.

“You – you’re on the couch.” Fiddleford reiterated, worried he’d damaged Stanford’s short-term memory. “In the lounge room. You’re on the couch downstairs.”

“Right, right.” Ford nodded and rubbed his eyes, squinting up at F again. “Why does my head hurt? What happened?”

F bit his lip, wringing his hands again, plagued with guilt.

“You fell. It was an accident. Go back to sleep.” Fiddleford prompted hopefully.

“I am rather tired.” Ford admitted, shifting his shoulders into the couch, grasping for the blanket. “You won’t mind if I nap for a while, would you?”

“Not at all. Get some sleep.” Fiddleford repeated.

“I’m sleepy.” Ford mumbled, nuzzling his face into one of the throw pillows on the couch. “Where …”

“Sleep.” Fiddleford emphasised, watching his friend’s eyes slowly shut, lethargy taking over him.

“Fell down the … sleep … head hurts.” Ford mumbled disjointedly as he faded in and out of consciousness. “Accident… have to talk to …”

Mumbling incoherently into his pillow, Ford’s words petered off. Fiddleford let out a relieved sigh when his friend was finally out cold once more.

Standing up, Fiddleford tiptoed out of the room not wanting to wake Ford. He’d committed to this lie and now he had to follow through, and that meant getting rid of the evidence of his crime. Tearing down all his blueprints, the scrapped prototypes, cleaning up the burst light bulbs, making
it look like none of this had ever happened.

And maybe, after all that, turning the gun on himself so he could forget the churning guilt that stewed in his belly, and someday look Stanford in the eye again.

One could hope.

Hurting Ford was something Fiddleford could stand to forget.

“What do you mean I can’t come to the handover? Everyone else gets to go.”

Bill rolled his eye and spun around to glance at the impertinent compass who followed him through the mazelike corridors of the Quadrangle.

“It isn’t a social event Kryptos. You think this is some red carpet occasion where you can rub elbows with overpowered chumps like you’re some kind of cricket on cosmic cocaine? Huh?”

“I helped you with the hostages, you’re seriously telling me I don’t get to see this part?” Kryptos asked incredulously. “I even said you look nice today, glowing even!”

“What a genuine compliment that turned out to be. Kryptos, your help consisted of me allowing you to stand there and look tough, an obvious fabrication evident to anyone with eyes.” Bill blinked at Kryptos, and pointed to himself. “Eye.”

“I still helped.” Kryptos wheedled.

“You wanna help, here’s what you can do.” Bill elongated his arms, reached out, and brushed some invisible lint off Kryptos’ shoulder, tidying the compass up indulgently. “You wait by the safe room, and when my cubes come in, you pack them away for me in neat little lines, and lock them up for me. M’kay?”

“Xanthar gets to go.” Kryptos pouted.

“Xanthar doesn’t have a mouth, and a reputation for snitching.” Bill said sweetly, flicking more invisible lint off Kryptos’ shoulder. “You do. I need Xanthar for backup, and Pyronica I know I can trust. You’re a two-bit snitch with a snaggletooth who only sticks around because you know I’m your best bet to make something of yourself, and the only thing standing in the way of all the fine folk out there who want to kill you. You’re only loyal to save your skin, and even barely then, so you’re not going.”

“I – you can’t say that - I – I’m loyal. I –” Kryptos gaped, spluttering on his words. He almost opened his mouth to say something in his defence, but Bill’s hand fell heavily onto his shoulder, and Kryptos realised exactly who he was lying to, who he was dealing with.

Kryptos swallowed whatever dignity he had left, and looked down at his feet.

“So.” Bill continued, dusting off Kryptos’ shoulders. “What are you gonna do?”

“Wait at the safe room … for your cubes … boss.”
“That’s right.” Bill lidded his eye at Kryptos and clapped him on the shoulder, shooing him away. “Off you go.”

Kryptos floated away down the corridor and Bill watched him go, until the compass’s back turned out of sight along the Escher like labyrinth of the Quadrangle. Kryptos cast one last longing glance over his shoulder, and Bill raised his brow, shooing him one last time. He was acting like a kicked puppy.

Pyronica’s heels clacked along the corridor as she walked past Kryptos on his way out. Pacing up over to Bill, she jerked her thumb down the corridor.

“What’s up with him?”

“He’s just moping.” Bill scoffed and examined his nails. “Doesn’t seem to get that this is one of those ‘if I told you I’d have to kill you’ scenarios, and that would void the terms of his deal. Can’t blame him for trying though. He wants to sit at the big boy table so bad.”

“You’d kill him?” Pyronica questioned, blinking at Bill. “Just for coming to the handover?”

“I’ve killed people for knowing less about me, and our guest has a big mouth, metaphorically speaking. You pull it off, she doesn’t.” Bill assured Pyronica, before continuing, waving his hand about as he spoke. “You don’t air your dirty laundry around someone who’ll just make a mess of things. You want people who can clean up, should that ever happen. And Kryptos is not that capable.”

Pyronica walked beside Bill, keeping his pace, as he expertly navigated the corridors of the Quadrangle, heading out through the side entrance, floating out through the roiling landscape of the colourful gas clouds in the gardens, noxious fumes planted like delicate roses.

She batted her lashes at Bill and adopted a babyish whisper. “You aren’t gonna kill me though?”

“Let’s play it by ear.” Bill grinned at Pyronica, teasing her. “You still have your uses.”

“Who else would paint your nails and drink miasma mimosas with you on a Thursday night?” Pyronica giggled.

“Well, there’s that.” Bill conceded jokingly, elbowing her congenially, before linking arms with her as they walked onward, out through the edge of the gardens, to the boundary of Bill’s realm.

“Did you really grow up with her?” Pyronica questioned, watching Bill with a balanced curiosity. “That’s what’s been going around. I thought there wasn’t anyone left like you?”

“There isn’t.” Bill sighed and floated onwards. “I didn’t grow up with her so much as had the misfortune to know her when I was still young, relatively speaking. You’ve met our teacher, the ocular miser. You’re about to meet the teacher’s pet. She’s nauseatingly boring. A total swot.”


“She isn’t. Fun. Not unless you poke her.” Bill clarified, but caught onto Pyronica’s enthusiasm now they were reaching the edge of the Nightmare Realm, their chosen meeting place.

Xanthar was waiting for them, a solid silent bulk, steadfast against the starlit sky.

“But we’ll make it fun. She thinks she’s coming here to prove a point for the sake of her self-
righteousness, but she won’t get that chance. We make the points here. All three of them.”

“Damn right we do! Wooo!” Pyronica cheered. “Take that bookworm!”

Floating up to perch neatly on top of Xanthar, Bill tented his fingers and looked out over the asteroid field that signalled the edge of his domain, his eye flickering with static, watching the horizon for his expected guests. Bill noticed a small incursion of travellers trespassing into his realm, ripping open a small interdimensional portal just within the asteroid belt, and he knew they were here.

Smirking at Pyronica, Bill blinked the static out of his eye, watching the travellers come closer. She came first, resplendent in ceremonial garb, her train held by a quartet of acolytes, the zip lipped Taronjan trailing along behind her. She had her chin held high.

“Oh, she’s going to get schooled.”

“Bill Cipher.” The seven-eyed woman called out in a commanding voice.

She stood steady, standing twelve-foot-tall, taller than all of her acolytes, her chin held high on a long neck. Her purple lips pursed into a thin line of disgust, puckering her lavender skin, disdain dripping from her features.

She wore deep blue robes with flowing sleeves, a hood covering her bald head, with gold sashes tied to glittering crystals that hung in fat loops from her waist. The crystals were in various shades of amethyst and amber, matching the irises of her many eyes, a bright sapphire standing out from the line of cut gems, the same shade as her seventh eye that sat in the middle of her face. She looked elegant and determined, with a serious mien that seemed out of place in Bill’s realm of chaos and hilarity.

Her voice firm, she demanded more than asked Bill. “Where are my people?”

“Jhessy, Jhessy, Jhessy.” Bill cooed indulgently, sitting on top of Xanthar like his henchmaniac was a very tall and intimidating throne, swinging his little legs. “Well look at you! Have you gotten taller? Love what you’ve done to your hair. It’s been a while.”

“Spare me your pleasantries.” Jheselbraum said cooly, unimpressed with the hair comment.

“You don’t have a kind word to spare for your old school bud?” Bill asked, laying on the sarcasm thick in that jovial tone of his. “A shame, and here I’ve been reminiscing with your sycophants about all the fun times we had together.”

“You will poison them with your lies not a second longer.” Jheselbraum lidded her eyes imperiously at Bill, crossing her arms resolutely.

“Who says I’m lying to them?” Bill said cheerfully, still jiggling his feet. “Lie until you’re not lying anymore, that’s the old adage. Something tells me you haven’t crossed over just yet.”

“Where are any of us really?” Bill replied with a philosophical air about him that made Jheselbraum’s eye twitch with frustration. He leaned back, getting comfortable on top of Xanthar, and stargazed facetiously, laying on an exaggerated sense of whimsy, taking great pleasure in testing Jheselbraum’s patience. “In the universe. Oh look, a shooting star!”

“You have lured me here under false pretences.” Jheselbraum was quick to declare, swinging her hands down to her side, scowling at Bill. “You have killed them already, and mock me for it.”

“Relaaaaaaaaaaax.” Bill drawled, rolling his eye at her. “I’ve got them right here, unharmed, as promised.”

Bill waved his arm and the Taronjan hostages were summoned, appearing just within the boundary line of Bill’s realm, still adorned in their glowing chains. They gasped at the sudden transportation, and gasped again, in awe, at the sight of their Mistress, come for them. Several began crying, tears of relief wetting their dark eyes, while their ringleader stood as stoic as always, his mouth a terse line of hardened scepticism, disenfranchised long before seeing his Mistress had crossed the distance.

“So hasty. Not even a hello, how are you. Let’s catch up. It’s been a while.” Bill mocked, from atop his Xanthar throne, sounding congenial, his eye tracing over Jheselbraum and her cohort. “Nothing. Nada. Zilch.”

Bill counted over the small congregation of followers Jheselbraum had brought with her, four rather disposable looking acolytes, and the Taronjan messenger he’d sent to her, who drew the brunt of Bill’s cheery gaze.

“Zip.”

“Return them to me, if you are not but meaningless words.” Jheselbraum scoffed at Bill, putting on a show of being confrontational and bold before him. She spoke regally, every sentence delivered with cool emphasis, and to Bill it came across as remarkably staged.

“No pre-game chit chat?” Bill queried, sounding miffed, playing up his own flippancy, knowing it rankled her. “I’m disappointed.”

“I have nothing to say to you. And this is not a game.” Jheselbraum narrowed her eyes at Bill.

“No.” Bill crossed his legs and leaned forward to look down at The Oracle, drumming his fingertips on the top of Xanther’s head. “That’s a shame. But you’re right, in a way. It’s not entirely a game, it’s a business transaction. A deal. You want them, you pay for them, you play along, like a good little girl.”

Jheselbraum curled her lip, glaring up at Bill, who was using Xanther’s stature to his advantage. Jheselbraum’s height irked Bill as much as Pyronica’s stature did, the giant woman taking after her old teacher in many ways. With Pyronica Bill didn’t have to stoop to such petty gestures like riding on the back of his twenty foot tall henchmaniac just to prove a point, but he reserved the right to pull out all the petty stops when it came to his old school pal. Bill just enjoyed watching Jheselbraum crane her neck back to look him in the eye. It was far preferable to her looking down her metaphorical nose at him.

She gritted her teeth and said nothing, stubborn as ever.

Bill blinked at her, and spread his hand out, gesturing to the Taronjans who were watching their master, clinging to their last shred of hope for salvation. The ringleader seemed bitterly
disappointed, already looking at Jheselbraum like she had betrayed them, Bill’s every word driving yet another nail in the coffin of the regard with which he held his Mistress.

“You came all this way. Surely, you’re here to spare their lives. That’s what they’ve been waiting for. Holding out hope for - poor deluded schmucks that they are. They’re not disposable to you, are they?” Bill asked facetiously, watching her cold demeanour intensify.

“Of course not.” Jheselbraum said emphatically, before turning her gaze to the shivering frightened hostages, bending down and spreading her arms wide, comforting them. “My children, I have come for you to free you from your bondage. No more shall you fall victim to this terrible place.”

Immediately the bulk of her followers became comforted by the softness in her tone, responding with hopeful inspired glances, and near pavlovian fervour. A blue light lit the back of their eyes, as worshipful words sprang to their lips.

“We knew you would come to rescue us.”

“Save us, oh Oracle.”

“Your Unswerving Majesty, please, deliver us.”

The ringleader kept his mouth shut, a thin line of disapproval, already seeing through Jheselbraum’s compassionate act.

“I am here, my children.” Jheselbraum insisted, her blue eye glowing, wafting waves of calm across her flock, reassuring them preternaturally. Her voice echoed with compelling power as she spoke. “I am here to deliver you from lies, and restore you to safety.”

“Yes, still lying.” Bill’s obnoxiously cheerful voice rang out, interrupting the worshipful exchange. “A lot of talk for someone who hasn’t paid to pick up yet. I believe you mentioned meaningless words?”

Shooting Bill an irritated glance, Jheselbraum ignored him and continued to speak to her followers. “What has that creature of deception told you my children? What lies has he been poisoning your minds with?”

“I’d be sparing with the details if I were you.” Bill advised the hostages, reclining on his side now, casual and relaxed. “That sounds like a trick question. A ‘which one of you do I pick off first’ question.”

“Who do you trust?” Jheselbraum turned her question to the hostages, pressing her hand to her chest, standing up taller now. “The monster who imprisoned you, or your rescuer. Your redeemer.”

“He – he told us –” One of the Taronjan girls, draped in chains and untreated injuries from Xanther’s initial attack, spoke up cautiously. “That you went to school together.”

“What else did he tell you?” Jheselbraum narrowed her amber eyes at the girl.

“Next person who spills gets the same treatment as Zipper over there.” Bill warned the hostages, his tone suddenly sharp. “Stop undermining my investment and pay up. You know the deal.”

“Undermining your investment? You’re a kidnapper.” Jheselbraum accused indignantly.

“If I recall, you’re the one who sent them here. Stop fishing for information. You want to know if they’re more hassle alive or dead, I’m saying you’ve got to pay up first before you make that
decision.” Bill raised his voice, clicking impatiently. “Cough up the cubes. Chop chop!”

“You won’t even let me speak with them.” Jheselbraum closed her eyes, before glaring up at Bill, tears pricking in each of her seven tear ducts. “My own faithful.”

Bill watched The Oracle’s emotional display for several seconds, looking thoroughly unimpressed by it. Bill closed his eye, and blinked open his eye-mouth, yawning theatrically, patting his mouth, before looking at his wrist.

“Time’s ticking.”

“Fine.” Jheselbraum gritted her teeth and reached into the sleeve of her robe, removing a small square object the size of a sugar cube, and a multi-purpose dimensional remote. She flung the small white cube forward, across the barrier and then pressed the button on the remote, expanding the cubes to their original size. They hovered, suspended in a force field within the nightmare realm at the point of the remote’s beam, and Bill floated curiously down from Xanthar’s back to examine the cubes, counting them instantly.

“All one hundred and forty of your energy cubes.” Jheselbraum declared disdainfully. “Though I think you’ll find them empty, like your promises. You were never going to give my faithful back.”

Bill shot Pyronica a mirthful look as the Cyclops stepped out from behind Xanthar’s girth, strutting over to the hostages, cocking her hip and leaning her elbow on one of the Taronjan’s head. The orange hostage’s hair began to singe slightly.

“You’re right, she is dramatic.” Pyronica giggled, batting her lashes slyly at Bill.

“And so self-righteous.” Bill replied, amused, swiping his hand over the cubes, separating them all from the forcefield of the remote and regenerating them stacked into neat little lines behind him. With a wave of his hand, he banished the cubes away to where Kryptos was waiting for them, in the safe room, to recount and store them for Bill. “I think she thinks she’s making a point.”

Jheselbraum blinked four of her eyes at Bill in confusion, perturbed that the triangle wasn’t reacting to her slight against him. She looked warily between Bill and the pink cyclops woman, who was pursing her lips smugly at Jheselbraum like a catty cliché.

“I wanted empty cubes, sweet-cheeks.” Bill explained in a patronising tone. “And I think you’ll find I just ruined your perfect metaphor.”

“They are useless without power.” Jheselbraum puzzled with no small amount of consternation. “Worthless. You couldn’t pre-empt –“

“I think you’re forgetting that I know you, Jheselbraum.” Bill pointed out, wagging his finger at her chidingly. “And you were always, pardon my Space-French, absolute shit at precognition.”

“I have paid your price.” Jheselbraum stomped her foot irately, getting tired of Bill’s games now. “You will give me back my people.”

“Oh, I’ll give them back, but first, let’s tell a few more stories - about an aspiring Oracle with too many eyes and a huge stick up her butt.” Bill said congenially, elongating his left arm to wrap it around the collective Taronjan hostages, floating beside them. He waved his right hand like a shopping channel hostess, and began painting a picture. “A long long time ago, your Mistress was Jheselbraum the bad driver, oops, I meant Unswerving, and she decided she wasn’t content with her humdrum mediocre existence.”
“You will stop this. You will stop this right now.” Jheselbraum ordered, marching up to the boundary line between Bill’s nightmare realm and the asteroid belt, her gaze steely.

“Too big for her britches, she climbed into an obsidian cave in the Dimension of Eternal Night, to intrude upon the self-imposed hermitage of a crotchety old giant, in order to make herself feel superior to everyone around her.” Bill detailed. “And, she killed six hundred innocent creatures to do so, scooping their eyes from their sockets with her bare hands – your kind and merciful leader.”

The Taronjan nearest to Bill gave him a sceptical glance, but that look then turned to the tall purple woman standing on the other side of the barrier, her hands fisting with barely concealed rage.

“Hands still wet with blood, she clasped them together and begged the old man to teach her how to see like he did, power hungry and desperate for recognition and approval. Please teach me, I’m so bad at this, she begged.” Bill put on a squeaky voice, deliberately hamming it up, trying to tease her.

“That is not how it happened and you know it.” The Oracle huffed indignantly, and crossed her arms.

“There was probably more crying involved.” Bill conceded, before whispering conspiratorially to the Taronjan closest to him. “Fat crocodile tears. Pathetic, really.”

“I can play at this game too.” Jheselbraum asserted competitively. “Telling stories that were meant to be forgotten.”

“When the giant who lived in the caves agreed to teach her, she couldn’t keep up, failing lesson after lesson. Disappointing everyone.” Bill spoke over her, loudly, continuing his tale. “Despite having seven eyes, she was blind as a bat, metaphorically speaking. I mean, she could still see. What did she call you, Tangerine?”

The Taronjan gave Bill an affronted look that was interrupted by a guttural screech that her followers had never heard from their Mistress before, tearing their attention towards her. Her calm, unswerving demeanour was being thoroughly derailed simply through proximity to Bill, and his flippant, callous behaviour.

“Those stories are not yours to tell, you wretch. You putrid, vile, evil little monster. You –“

“Poor old Jhessy was constantly outshone by her classmate, a rather bright fellow who put her talents to shame.” Bill boasted, straightening his bowtie as he spoke, enjoying Jheselbraum’s slowly deteriorating demeanour. “She was second best, predisposed to mediocrity! But power hungry, she powered on. And when it came to her final test, a test you can only take once, the rite through which cognisant powers are granted, she burned out.”

“YOU are the one who burned me – YOU -!” Jheselbraum fumed, frothing with rage, turning into a creature her followers didn’t recognise as each one of her irises turned black, her pupil’s shifting into fiery pinpricks of ire.

“Cool it sister.” Pyronica warned, leaning forward into a defensive pose, the flames dancing white hot along her arms.

Bill held out his hand to allay Pyronica, and the cyclops stepped back, falling silent, watching Bill obediently.

Reciting in a calm, ringing voice, Bill spoke, his words echoing in the vastness of space.
“A wise old owl lived in an oak, the more he saw the less he spoke, the less he spoke the more he heard. Why can’t we all be like that wise old bird?”

“You ruined my vow of silence!” Jheselbraum accused, pointing at Bill, her arm shaking from the effort to reign in her temper. “My final sacred rite! You sabotaged me, destroyed my chance of ever seeing truly. You did it because you’re an evil monster, and you were bored, and you were petty, and it was a game to you, and you – you did it on purpose.”

“Let it all out. Come on.” Bill waved his hand at Jheselbraum impatiently. “These are billable therapy hours, pun intended. Throw your tantrum. Maybe then we can go on with our lives.”

“You joke about -?” Jheselbraum reeled back like she’d been smacked, her jaw clenching as she realised what Bill was doing.

Pressing her buttons.

Having her spill all her secrets in front of her acolytes. Shaming her reputation, the one she’d worked so hard to uphold. She had worked so hard to be good, to be saintly, to be precise and dutiful and revered for what she was. She had worked so hard to build herself up from what she was. She had earned the followers he was so casually turning against her.

He was airing her dirty laundry, and revelling in it.

“You think this is a game?” Jheselbraum questioned, a nasty edge creeping into her voice. “You think you’re the only one who can stain a reputation?”

“You did that all on your own.” Bill gestured to the Taronjans, patting the hostage furthest away from him on the shoulder. “When you sent these infants after me with pea shooters.”

“I was not the first loathsome desperate creature to crawl into my teacher’s cave.” Jheselbraum put her hand over her chest, spitefully divulging. “He has a soft spot for hopeless cases. The way he tells it you were a broken, insignificant spec – with no home, no family, nothing but endless ruination all of your own making, doomed to destruction and helpless to stop it.”

“I thought you were the little gnat in his ear.” Bill narrowed his eye at The Oracle, her words confirming the connection she had cultivated with Argos Panoptes. “And this proves it.”

“You would fracture between periods of inscrutable numbness and this act, this jolly façade of yours, until the lie became your truth – but I know what you really are, deep down inside.” Jheselbraum raised her chin, looking down at Bill now, her fists clenched, smug superiority etched all over her features. “A pathetic wreck. A cockroach.”

“You want your people back, don’t you?” Bill threatened, tugging his arm more tightly around the hostages, possessively.

“My master is too generous to you. Some creatures don’t deserve redemption.” Jheselbraum sneered. “You deserve to die.”

“Well you just go run and tell Gills, and try your luck.” Bill yelled back at Jheselbraum, reacting a little now himself, throwing his arms out as if inviting the universe to have at him. “You could make it a hat trick, whispering into bigger ears than yours. Maybe the big ol’ space amphibian himself will come here and rip my eye out for old time’s sake!”

“Don’t act like you didn’t deserve it, you were there with me on that mountain – you were the one who –”
“Well somebody knows how to hold a grudge.” Bill rolled his eye impetuously.

“You sat there beside me, while we were supposed to be meditating, fulfilling our rite, and you set a fire beneath my skirts and burned me alive to keep yourself entertained!” Jheselbraum shouted at Bill, the hurt echoing in her voice like she was still burning now. “I stayed silent for as long as I could while my skin was blistering off me, and you watched me with your horrible evil eye, giddy and cruel, just watching - until I couldn’t hold the screams back any longer.”

“I didn’t make you scream. That was all you.” Bill insisted sadistically, unwinding his arms from the hostages to put a hand to his chest with mock sincerity. “You know what they say. If you can’t stand the heat, stay out of the kitchen.”

“URGH!” Jheselbraum screamed so loud her attendants broke down, cowering beside her, covering their ears with their hands, whimpering. She stormed forward, nearly toeing the line of Bill’s domain, pointing at him in challenge. “I will end you! I will ensure the fates scratch your name out of the universe. I will make it my goal - my mission - to destroy you until you are nothing but ash and dust.”

“I haven’t killed you out of courtesy, but you’re really pushing it Jheselbraum.” Bill squinted at her, watching her tantrum unfold. “I want you to push it somewhere else, I actually have business to attend to, and you’re getting too close to getting in my way.”

“You want me to step aside? Is that the real reason for this little barter?” Jheselbraum laughed scornfully. “I’ve been looking for you, looking for your business, and it’s been deplorably scarce. I sent my soldiers looking for you because you’ve been too quiet.”

“And their lives mean nothing to you.” Bill added, being sure to emphasise it to the hostages, who were all having a radical perception change about their leader.

“Their deaths are a sacrifice that will fuel my power. A blood dedication to me, like they did to the gods of old.” Jheselbraum admitted, shocking the hostages, and her attendants. “In the years since we parted I have grown and learned much. I studied the old ways, and I am stronger than you know.”

“Hilarious. Thank you for the confirmation Jhessy. Well, she’s bought your lives back now, so who wants to go with her?” Bill asked the hostages, the chains around them dissolving into nothingness. He waved his arm, encouraging the hostages to cross the boundary line and return to their old Mistress. “Go on, you’ve been rescued. Isn’t that what you wanted?”

“Do not toy with them.” Jheselbraum scoffed coldly.

She levelled her remote at the followers who dithered on the other side of Bill’s boundary line, fearful of her now, and clicked a button that enabled a multi-pronged laser to shoot out, instantly burning a two-inch hole clean through the seven Taronjan hostages, right between the eyes. They didn’t even have time to look betrayed by her actions, their deaths coming so swiftly, so suddenly. Their bodies crumpled to the floor, bleeding yellow blood out into the atmosphere, the last of the Taronjans slaughtered by their redeeming Mistress.

She looked at Bill, not the bodies, having not once broken eye contact with him while she killed her people, finishing her sentence disdainfully.

“You sadist.”

The attendants who had been holding Jheselbraum’s train cried out in shock, reeling away from
their master, and she turned her cool gaze onto them, pressing her remote once more, the laser bursting out in four different directions, killing her faithful acolytes in one fell swoop.

“I dedicate your sacrifice to the Mighty and Merciful Axolotl, may he redeem us all.” Jheselbraum intoned, her controlled demeanour returning now that her secrets weren’t being spilled to her worshippers.

Bill watched Jheselbraum’s violent and sudden destruction of her faithful, and recognised how unhinged the woman could be, finding it both concerning and delightful, given how incongruous the violence was when contrasted with the merciful, motherly demeanour she projected to her faithful. It was almost sad, how suddenly she killed them all. Bill didn’t even get to see the Taronjan leader stand up to her on behalf of his people – that was what Bill was waiting to see, that was the popcorn moment. Instead the ringleader just bled out on the floor with a gaping hole burnt between his eyes. Bill was somewhat miffed that he missed it.

While Bill held her attention, behind his back he clicked his fingers, teleporting Ziplip away from The Oracle before she could make the girl another casualty, hiding her behind Pyronica.

“You say I’m the sadist. Is that what you’re riding Gills’ coattails for? Redemption?” Bill laughed, wiping a fake tear from his eye. “Hah! You just get more gullible by the second.”

“He has the power to destroy you, even if I cannot.” Jheselbraum assured Bill, standing tall. “I will convince him you do not deserve this life, and I will thread fate as such in a way that someone will take you down, if not I. I will take everything from you, that I promise.”

“I’ve had about enough of your shitty prophecies, back when we were still school chums.” Bill jeered at The Oracle. “You could stand to spare the universe your hackneyed predictions. It’s bad enough you went and whispered them in Modoc’s ear, playing with my toys – “

“You found my zodiac?” Jheselbraum laughed, surprised and elated all at once. “Oh, you transparent little creature. That’s why you called me here.”

“Impotent scribbles on a wall mean noth-“ Bill argued, but Jheselbraum spoke over him, gloating.

“The instant you believed enough to consider it a threat is the instant you gave power to my prophecy. Now there’s no escaping it.” Jheselbraum smiled at Bill victoriously. “It is self-fulfilling. Your shaman believed, and now so do you.”

“I believe you’re a fraud with no talent.” Bill insisted stubbornly.

“What brings you back to Gravity Falls I wonder?” Jheselbraum mused, smugly self-satisfied now she’d managed to affirm her own prediction. Bill having found her zodiac didn’t just set the prophecy into motion, it pinned down his location in her mind, after so long searching elsewhere. “I’ve been looking for a triangle all this time, perhaps I’ve been looking in the wrong places.”

“How far will this revenge ploy of yours go until you’re satisfied? I’m just curious.” Bill questioned flippantly, acting like her smug confirmation didn’t affect him. “Holding onto squabbles from when we were kids.”

“You were old enough to know better, and you haven’t changed now.” Jheselbraum asserted, scowling at Bill. “Immature and cruel as always.”

“Neither have you, stabbing your own followers in the back to protect your reputation.” Bill pointed out.
“Well now it’s your word against mine.” Jheselbraum stated haughtily, smirking at Bill. “Whoever will the galaxy believe?”

“Well, since you don’t know how to count, I’m guessing they’ll believe little Zippy over here.” Bill jerked his thumb over to the zip lipped Taronjan hiding behind Pyronica, the cyclops standing defensively in front of them. “For someone with seven eyes, you’re real bad at leaving witnesses. I’d say that’s one of your blind spots.”

Jheselbraum blanched, the colour draining from her face, as all seven of her eyes fell to look at the orange girl staring up at her with consternation, her zipped lips frowning confrontationally at the woman who just killed all of her squadron, the last of her people, for the sake of her reputation.

“Give her back to me. That was the deal, I paid for the soldiers.” Jheselbraum held her hand out, insistent.

“The deal was twenty cubes for every hostage, and you paid 140. You didn’t pay for this little one, and I don’t much feel like handing her over. Wouldn’t want the galaxy to remain ignorant of the truth about you, now would I? Unless you’d rather keep lying.” Bill said smugly, examining his nails as he spoke, certain he had her backed into a corner finally.

“Ignorance is bliss.” Jheselbraum whispered, her eyes still glued to the Taronjan, itching to cut away that last loose end.

“But bliss is boring.” Bill flapped his hand at The Oracle, dismissing her assertion. “And I’d like some leverage on you before this whole revenge fantasy of yours goes to your head. You won’t lay a finger on the kid, she’s under my protection now.”

“You – you wouldn’t – go with him.” Jheselbraum spluttered, trying to sway the last remaining Taronjan now. “He mutilated you, mutilated your face.”

“I’d say that’s better than killing off all of her remaining kin right in front of her. Talk about overkill. She’s the last of her people now, and you made her that way.” Bill floated over to stand beside Pyronica, looking down at the Taronjan girl, watching her carefully. “Kid, unlike her I’m giving you a choice. You can either accept my protection in exchange for your testimony, or take your chances out there in the universe without it, and see how long you’ll last. It’s up to you. Column A or column B, what’ll it be?”

“Do not shake his hand, he offers only lies.” Jheselbraum warned, trying desperately to deter the orange skinned soldier from taking Bill’s deal. “His deals are the devils.”

The girl furrowed her brow, recognising her rhetoric, frowning at Jheselbraum, before turning to Bill and extending her hand, deliberately defying her old Mistress, much to her dismay.

“No!”

“We have a deal. My protection in exchange for your testimony. Gotta say Zippy, you’re smarter than you look.” Blue flames ensconced Bill’s hand as he grasped Ziplip’s and shook on it, sealing the deal.

“Rrrrgghhh.” Growling with indignation, Jheselbraum pressed the button on her remote, activating the laser once more, aiming it directly for the Taronjan girl.

Pyronica stepped in front of the shot, the flames on her arms flaring out into a shield, deflecting the laser.
Bill gave The Oracle an unimpressed look, and Pyronica smirked cattily at Jheselbraum, curling her arm protectively around the girl, like she was part of the club now. The Taronjan, though startled, looked bolstered by the support, and stared down Jheselbraum’s frustrated expression, avenging her brethren in this bold act of defiance.

“This isn’t over.” Jheselbraum promised as she pressed a different button on her remote, opening a teleportation portal to the side of her, storming through it, leaving the bodies of her faithful strewn behind.

Bill waved childishly at her as she left. “Byyyyyeeeee! Hope the door doesn’t hit you on the way out!”

The portal zipped closed behind her, winking out of existence, leaving only empty space and drifting corpses as proof of her presence.

Dusting his hands off, Bill looked between Xanthar’s quiet hulking presence, and Pyronica’s expectant gaze. “That went about as well as expected.”

“Do you think we need to worry?” Pyronica asked Bill. “About the whole ‘this isn’t over’ business?”

“Hardly.” Bill assured Pyronica, floating up to her eye height. “She’s all talk, and even if she wanted to, there’s no way she could stop us now. Prophecy or not, she’s got more hot air in her than a zeppelin. We’ll be fine.”

“That was intense.” Pyronica looked down at the bodies that were slowly leaking yellow fluids. She nudged one of the corpses with the toe of her boot.

The sound of a zipper being tugged drew her attention away from corpse kicking, and Pyronica blinked down at the Taronjan girl, who had unzipped her lips, speaking to Bill with an evident lisp.

“Do you wishh for any scherviccsh, my new maschchter?”

Bill blinked at her, as though he’d almost forgotten she was there. “Kid, stop scraping. That false adulation bullshit is just insulting when you look at it. Eurgh.”

“But –“ She blinked up at Bill, disconcerted by his dismissal.

“I got you your life back, now go live it somewhere out of my sight.” Bill sighed, pinching the bricks just above his eye like he had a headache. “I’ll need you as leverage to testify when the time comes, but for now I couldn’t care less what you do. Go drink some orange juice, or eat a carrot, or whatever.”

“But you schhaved me. I commend my life to your scherviccsh.” She seemed puzzled that he would deny her, offering herself up again in the way that she was conditioned to. “I can sschoot, I can fight, I can –“

“Shake off the indoctrination and think for yourself, would be a start.” Bill countered, running low on patience for this. “Look, Kid, you’ve got my protection, that’s a done deal. Now I’ve got cubes to count, and Sixers to see, and if you’re waiting for me to tell you what to do now, you’ll be waiting til you’re dead because I really don’t care.”

“But, where can I go? No one will accchept me now I look like thissh. I –“

“So what, you’re a freak-show. Join the club, or take it on the road, or go back to the dungeons if
you’re really so despondent about it.” Bill turned and began hovering away back into the Nightmare Realm, Xanthar lumbering behind him. “If you’re looking for a place to be a freak, this is the destination to be, but you won’t find anyone holding your hand over you suddenly being special. Come on Xanthar, you’ve gotta show off to Kryptos that you got to come along, act all superior, I want to see his face. Hah!”

As Bill and Xanthar departed, the Taronjan girl watched them leave, standing next to the bodies of her brethren, looking lost.

Pyronica stopped beside her and crouched down, dimming the flames on her hands to reach out and touch the girl on the shoulder.

“Hey. You’ll be okay, Zippy. Don’t be sad.”

Confronted by Pyronica’s unexpected comfort, the girl began to snuffle, tears springing to her eyes as she stared at the bodies of her friends, their yellow blood flooding out now, staining her shoes. Her sobs whistled through the metal teeth of the zipper, as her shoulders began to shake.

Pyronica patted her shoulder awkwardly, not knowing how to deal with the tears that were falling now.

“D-do you want to bury them? Burn them? What do you want to do honey?” Pyronica asked, thinking the girl was upset about the bodies.

The Taronjan blinked wetly up at Pyronica, obviously distraught. She looked like she didn’t know.

“On – on our home planet, we would cleanschhe our dead, and keep their assches to remember them.”

“Let’s do that then, okay Zippy? Here, I’ll help.”

Standing upright, Pyronica sent her pink fire out to settle on top of the bodies, burning them steadily as the stars winked gently around them.

The Taronjan girl let herself mourn, watching the pink flames dance prettily against the backdrop of the cosmos. She ripped the embroidery from her sleeve, clutching the pink stitched axolotl in her fist, sobbing for her brethren and her lost faith before tossing the fabric into the flames. Pyronica stood with her, resting her hand on the girl’s shoulder comfortingly, waiting out the tears until the tears stopped coming.

When she finally stood, silent, her face dry and salty from the path of the tears that no longer fell, she watched the dying embers of the fire with a bitter resignation, a weariness that settled on her shoulders too young. She was the last of her kind now, and her life had been spared, but staring at the glimmering embers of her people’s corpses, she couldn’t relate to any reason why she should be the one to keep on living. She couldn’t make sense of it, and so just stared at the fire until it dwindled away to nothing.

Eventually the girl gathered up handfuls of ash, stuffing her pockets with her fallen brethren as the only keepsake she had, in the tradition of her people.

“So you can shoot good, huh?” Pyronica asked quietly, once all the ashes were gathered, spilling clumsily out of the girl’s pockets.

Leading her away, back to the Quadrangle, the pink cyclops’ kindly conversation soothed the hurt that would likely never fully heal in the girl’s heart, after what had happened today.
“I can shoot good too. Maybe we could go a few rounds together sometime, just you and me. Does that sound nice?”

The girl zipped her lips shut again, but walked alongside Pyronica, choosing to move forward, one step at a time.

“Yeah, that sounds nice.”

Waking in the forest, it was just about sundown, and the fading light through the trees revealed scorch marks on the forest floor, fanning out around Bill’s body, charring the clearing.

So maybe he’d lost his temper a little. He still had the situation under control, and he didn’t think Jheselbraum noticed anything Bill didn’t want her to.

Her turning her focus onto Gravity Falls was concerning though, and while Bill didn’t consider her much of a threat, he still didn’t appreciate her promise to sabotage him. She could be a very persistent rock in his boot if he gave her opportunity to be, and while the rest of the handover had gone exactly as planned, Bill hadn’t anticipated her prophecy being activated, actualised.

He told himself he didn’t believe in the zodiac, but evidently his denial was enough to spark it into being. That’s what he hated about prophecies. One could go their whole life happily being ignorant of a prophecy and it would have no effect on you, but the moment you became aware of it, suddenly it all came crashing down on your head, every unrelated happenstance or coincidence was 100% the prophecies fault.

Bill hated it.

Jheselbraum ticked him off in ways he couldn’t even begin to describe. Her prophecies were one thing, but the dogged way she attempted to drag him down, to belittle him, irked on Bill’s every acute angle. Time had only strengthened her pompous attitude, but Bill remembered it well, even when they were students, how Jheselbraum would try to tear down Bill’s accomplishments to make herself feel tall, as if she wasn’t tall enough already.

Everyone had their own ways of coping with life, and for Jheselbraum that was simply how she rolled, striving desperately to make up for her own inadequate sense of self-worth by standing on the backs of others. She didn’t know half of what happened to Bill before he sought out Panoptes for help, but the fact that she had gone back and whispered in their teacher’s ear, questing for details just to twist the knife in deeper when they next met made Bill’s blood boil.

She knew nothing.

And yet she knew too much. Bill didn’t know why he hadn’t destroyed her yet, but perhaps it was something like nostalgia for the past, for those old friendships he thought he could rely on, but then again, Bill wasn’t really sure he could call it a friendship when it was her fault Argos tried to rip out his eye. The saying was an eye for an eye, and he had burnt her back then, but really it wasn’t an equivalent act. She had seven eyes, Bill only had one, and he didn’t even do anything to her eyes, just her legs. And who needs legs anyway!
Shaking off his frustration, Bill sat up and stretched out his body, looking around the clearing at all the scorch marks on the trees.

It was a good thing he left the shack to do this. For one, he was sure Sixer wouldn’t appreciate his rather flammable disposition unleashed on his house, and in addition to that, leaving the shack gave Bill a little distance from which to work the deal. Not that he expected it would go south in any way, but if it had, Bill didn’t want to lead Jheselbraum’s forces back here to Gravity Falls, not when this was his holiday home of sorts. He was having a good time here, and she was such a quintessential party pooper, she could only ruin what he had going on.

Speaking of, Bill was reminded of the jolly outcome that was the 140 empty potential energy cubes awaiting his use, all lined up neatly in his safe room.

Kryptos had assumed that Bill was collecting them for Sixer, but that was only one of the splinter benefits of collecting and amassing that much power. With an interdimensional takeover within his sights, Bill never knew when he’d need to unleash the collective might of 170 dying stars on a planet, and it certainly didn’t hurt to have that up his sleeve as a back-up of sorts. Sixer helped him fuel those batteries, and sure, experimenting with Sixer in order to amass that sort of power was fun, but Bill never did anything for just the one reason.

However, he was feeling rather single minded now that he was back in his body, thinking on Sixer, and the windfall of cubes he’d just amassed. Having just discovered the physical epiphany that was an ‘orgasm’ Bill’s appetite had been whetted by this morning’s discovery, and now he was thirsty.

He must have spent eight hours out in the woods, and now the light was dimming in the sky. He began to make his way back through the forest path to the shack, thinking on Sixer, and the unfinished business they had put on hold when McGucket interrupted them.

This body of his was hungry, his stomach growling conversationally, and he had no doubt he’d find Sixer waiting for him with a good meal, and a curious attitude, maybe pouring through those books Bill had left him.

Any lingering irritation Bill harboured for the result of the handover was slipping off his shoulders the more he pictured Sixer in his mind, walking along the trail back to the shack.

Maybe his human would be in the study, surrounded by drawings of Bill, translating Altatian with the cipher key Bill had inconspicuously left as a bookmark between the pages on interdimensional travel destinations, and what to wear to the Space Opera on Theatricor-7. Maybe he’d be down in the lab, incorporating the Behenian star sigils into the portal’s framework design, the individual sigils acting as navigational starting points for the portal’s network of doors. Maybe Sixer would be in the kitchen, making that curry Bill liked after a long day of nerding out with McGucket, maybe playing more of that graph paper game, the one where Ford’s character had the pointy ears (a design feature that Bill didn’t mind, honestly, the look could work for Sixer should he ever consider undergoing a little remodelling).

Walking up the steps to the back porch, opening the door to the shack and walking in through the kitchen, Bill imagined a wide variety of wholesome Sixer activities he could walk in on his human doing, but what he didn’t imagine was this.

“Sixer! I’ve come to collect that favour you owe me! You –“ Bill crooned the moment he walked in the door, but blinked, started, when he saw Sixer’s current predicament.
Sixer was sitting in the lounge room, looking rather rattled, a blanket settled over his shoulders as he frowned down at his journal on the coffee table, detailing something that seemed to be giving him a fair bit of grief. He didn’t even look up when Bill walked in, far too engrossed in zoning out, resting the end of his pen to his lips, his brow furrowed as he stared at the sketch he was attempting to detail on the page.

It was almost like he didn’t hear Bill, or was ignoring him, which couldn’t be right.

He began chewing on the end of his pen, scowling down at the book on the coffee table, ink staining his lips, his gaze still drifting and unfocused.

Bill walked up to Sixer and looked over his shoulder at the sketch on the page, some kind of bizarre hairdryer design emerging, with scattered notes in pencil on the page around it. *What is it?* Was one note, and the scribbles repeated all around the page as Ford tried desperately to jog his own memory.

“What are you doing Sixer?” Bill asked, his voice closer now, sounding from just beside the couch. Ford jumped and looked up at Bill, startled, like he hadn’t seen him come in.

“Bill! I didn’t see you there, I didn’t – how long have you been standing there?”

“Relax Sixer, I only just came in.” Bill sat on the arm of the couch and looked Ford over, disliking the paranoid way the scientist looked around the room, appearing rattled and insecure in a way that was only cute when Bill caused it. “You were too busy staring at your book to notice. Don’t I get a hello?”

“No, you do – I – hello.” Ford obliged, looking up at Bill briefly before scratching the side of his head. “Something’s not – I’ve been having this headache all day and I’m getting the feeling that something doesn’t feel right. I don’t –”

Blinking at Ford, Bill took the pen out of his human’s hand, placing it down on the coffee table, before he slid down from the arm of the couch, settling on Sixer’s lap, trying to monopolise his attention.

“Someone’s spacey. What happened to you?” Bill pushed Ford’s glasses up his nose, and brushed the hair off the scientist’s forehead gently, trying to get Ford to look him in the eye, curious what had his human so scattered like this. “You didn’t forget about this morning’s favour, did you? Don’t pretend just so you can get out of it.”

Ford looked at Bill’s shirt without really seeing it, wracking his mind for an answer, drawing up a blank. “That’s just – I’m not – that’s just the thing. I don’t – I can’t remember. I feel like this whole day has just been a complete blank. I woke up downstairs on the couch and I have no idea how I got here. This isn’t – this can’t be normal, right?”

“Are you saying you blacked out?” Bill queried, ducking his head down to try and catch Sixer’s eye, resting his hands against Ford’s cheeks. “Hey, look at me. Show me your eyes. You didn’t –“

Bill forced Ford’s face upward, frantically looking into Ford’s eyes, looking for that tell-tale blue backlit spark that indicated Jheselbraum’s work. She couldn’t have moved this fast, she didn’t know. Bill thought he led her away from the shack, he covered his tracks, she couldn’t –

Ford blinked up at Bill, looking confused, but there was no blue glow lingering in the back of his eye. Bill sighed, relieved that there was no sign of The Oracle’s tampering, but Ford still looked perturbed.
“What, what is it?”

“What, I just thought –” Bill trailed off, not really wanting to divulge Jheselbraum’s input to Sixer, knowing it would lead his curiosity down damning paths. “I was just checking for magical influence, but you’re fine. This is probably just a regular … human malady or something.”

“You think I’m sick?” Ford pressed, looking aghast at the thought. “You don’t think I have a tumour, do you? All that radiation.”

“There’s nothing wrong with your brain. Trust me, I’d know.” Bill assured Sixer. With the amount of time Bill spent in Sixer’s head he knew every inch of it, and he’d definitely notice if a tumour was growing.

“But – what – what if –” Ford stuttered in a way that was rather unlike him, and that realisation had Bill feel the churning emergence of concern, a feeling he often tried to avoid, despite being unable to help but experience these feelings in this responsive body.

“Sixer, you’re fine.” Bill insisted, settling down more comfortably on Sixer’s lap, patting down the front of his shirt, adjusting the lapels of his collar.

“Bill, I can’t remember anything from this morning. Any of it.” Ford stressed, looking at his muse, desperation colouring his gaze. “I barely remember waking up with you, I feel like I’ve just lost an entire chunk out of the day. Last thing I remember I was walking upstairs to talk to Fiddleford, and then I wake up here and I’m covered with bruises, and my head hurts, and I can’t – “

“Bruises?” Bill’s eyes widened, and he looked over Sixer clinically now, his possessiveness flaring up at the thought that Sixer was bearing someone else’s marks. He unbuttoned Sixer’s shirt roughly and immediately began peeling it off him, searching for the offending marks with a sense of urgency. “Where? Who did –“

Ford’s hands fell to grasp Bill’s wrists, trying to slow the hasty way his muse tore at his clothing, not wanting the fabric to rip. He stilled when Bill’s impatient fingers revealed Ford’s torso, a yellowing bruise blossoming out about a hands width wide across his ribs, another bruise forming on his hip, the marks indicating a heavy impact in several places, possibly internal bleeding, like Ford had been hit by a car, or fallen down the stairs, or something similar. Ford knew his chest had been sore, aching all day, but he hadn’t left the couch to go look, instead focused on his journal, trying desperately to jog his memory. He’d only noticed the bruises on his arms, his left bicep taking the brunt of the pain.

Bill stilled, his eyes glued to the bruises, and a rage began burning deep in his belly.

“What happened? Who did this to you?” Bill asked, his tone abrupt and rather quiet, a dangerous sign. Bill often sounded cheerful when he was hazardous, capable of violence, but very rarely did he cross over the other side of cheerful to this disassociation, this numb anger. That was when he was more dangerous than anything, when he went quiet.

“I don’t know what happened, I can’t remember.” Ford emphasised, sounding rather distraught. “I didn’t know the bruising was so extensive, but I could certainly feel it, I didn’t – oh god. I should go to the hospital.”

“You went up to see Fiddleford? And then what?” Bill pressed, his pupils slitting thinner by the second, his gaze boring into the bruises, red creeping into his irises as his temper boiled.

“I told you, I can’t remember. I’ve been wracking my mind all day, trying to piece it together, but I
can’t remember. It’s like my mind is drawing a blank.”

Bill’s eyes flicked up from the bruising on Ford’s chest to meet his human’s gaze, an idea occurring to him.

“Let me look.” Bill twisted his wrists out of Ford’s grip and immediately began reaching up for Ford’s forehead, intending to dip into Ford’s brain to have a look around.

Ford, realising what Bill meant to do, struggled to recapture Bill’s wrists, pulling them down away from his face.

“Bill, no.”

“Let me look. I can figure out what happened to you, just let me in and I can –“

“I don’t want anyone tampering with my brain, Bill, no!”

“Sixer, let go. I need to –“ Bill fumed, twisting and wriggling, bringing his hands up to Ford’s forehead with a dogged persistence.

“Don’t. I don’t want –“ Ford protested, the idea of anyone meddling with his mind making him feel physically nauseous today for some reason. He tried to prise Bill’s hands off his forehead, but his muse’s power tingled around his hands, levitating his wrists away. “Bill!”

“I need to see what –“ Bill met Ford’s aghast expression and felt a flicker of guilt that his temper quickly banished, pressing both hands to Ford’s forehead and leaning in, resting his forehead against Ford’s.

Breaking into Sixer’s brain while conscious was a lot less seamless than it was sneaking in while Ford was asleep. Bill felt the resistance push back against him as Ford recoiled from the intrusion, but Bill pushed forward anyway, scouring his brain for a sign of what happened to him.

The memory seemed hidden for a moment, Bill digging through every book in Ford’s mental library, looking for what he’d forgotten. He looked through the books from today’s cerebral bookshelf, tossing them aside once he determined that particular book didn’t hold the answers.

Bill read through books on Bill’s reactions from this morning’s fornication, Ford’s mental debate about his internalised homophobia, his irritation at Fiddleford melting away into a fondness for humouring his friend as he traipsed up the staircase to the attic, curious to discover what he’d find.

Bill looked for the next book on the shelf, but when he went to pick it up it buzzed like static, and Bill couldn’t grasp his hand around it. He tried again, going to pick up the book, but his hand went right through it. Frustrated, Bill swiped at it, again and again, until he forced a little power into Ford’s mind, concentrating on making the memory tangible, causing it to harden sharply until the book sat like a granite block, weighing down the bookshelf.

Bill grabbed it, and prised the cover open, the crusty edge of the book crumbling painfully into Ford’s subconscious as Bill wedged the pages open, freeeing the memory from within. It burst forth, the images springing off the page.

Ford arguing with Fiddleford, the device, the memory ray, Fiddleford backing into a corner, stubborn, refusing to destroy it. Fiddleford was pointing the gun at Stanford now, and he inched closer, reaching for it, trying to tackle the device out of Fiddleford’s grip, his convictions stronger than his sense of self preservation. Ford experienced the memory of pain, striking out at him again, as Fiddleford kicked at his ankles, knocking him back, sending him sprawling on the floor, before
pointing the gun at him, his finger on the trigger whirring the gun’s ray to life.

“I’m sorry Stanford.”

“I’m sorry Stanford.”

“I’m sorry –“

“I’m sorry – sorry – sorry – sorry – sorry –”

Fiddleford held the trigger down, and the beam shot out, scouring the memories from Ford’s mind.

“I’m sorry Stanford.”

Bill pulled away from Ford’s forehead, resurfacing from his mind with a gasp, his eyes wide, sucking in lungful’s of air, the memories he’d dredged up reverberating around his own brain the same as they clattered around Ford’s, their uncovered resonance smashing painfully against the walls of the mind, causing both men to panic, an instinctual response to uncovering such a violation.

“You – Bill, you –“ Ford gasped, reaching out for his muse, trying to pull the God back down towards him, Bill already standing up on shaking legs, glaring up at the ceiling.

“He dared. He dared to –“ Bill fumed, his irises turning bright red, anger resonating all through this human body, making it shake with rage.

“Don’t – you – Bill!” Ford pleaded, holding his own head, the headache intensifying as the memories were being unleashed, reliving the physical agony of falling down the staircase, each stair bumping into him, the bruises aching in corresponding patterns to each hit, throbbing in remembrance.

Amidst all the pain, Ford panicked, thinking of Fiddleford, poor misguided Fiddleford, who was unprepared for his muse’s wrath, having gone through so much already. It was Ford’s fault. “He’s my friend. He’s -”

“He crossed a line.” Bill pushed away from Sixer, getting up off the couch, fire creeping up his throat with every word, making his voice demonic and guttural, embers dancing on his tongue as this possessive anger burned through him.

Ford cradled his head, the memories causing him unfathomable pain as they were restored to him, Bill’s callous tearing through his mind having agonising repercussions. He tried to stand, to stop Bill, but he could barely look up, the lights hurting his eyes as his mind cried out in horror against the crimes that had been committed against it.

“Bill –“ Ford croaked out, extending his hand out shakily towards the muse, knowing he had to stop him.

Bill clicked his fingers and healing flames raced over Sixer, eradicating the bruises from his body swiftly, the fire running a little too hot, compared to the gentle cold flames Bill usually turned on Ford. The headache remained, Ford’s mind rebelling against its violation, but Ford clutched his chest, feeling the bruising disappear.

“Stay here Sixer. I’ll take care of this.”
“You can’t –“ Ford tried, moving to stand up now, but his muse pressed his pointer finger against his forehead, stilling him.

“Sleep.” Bill commanded, magic infusing his tone, and Ford fell back, immediately unconscious, sprawled against the sofa behind him in an untidy heap.

Turning his head stiffly Bill glared up at the attic, that possessive rage burning fiercely in his chest, livid that someone had dared lay a finger on Ford’s beautiful brain.

Now to make the culprit pay.

Fiddleford was tinkering happily upstairs in the attic, having tidied up the mess of blueprints, concealing everything he’d written about the memory ray in the whisky crate beside his bed.

Having successfully covered his tracks, Fiddleford had set to work on finalising the blueprints for the emergency bunker he’d proposed to Stanford for housing the test subjects he’d be studying, hoping that in presenting these finished blueprints to Ford it would go some way to making it up to him, the unfortunate steps Fiddleford had needed to take against Ford to protect his invention.

Maybe when Ford saw the plans for the bunker, he’d be enticed into a whole new line of prospective work, and any confusion or consternation about whether or not Fiddleford had destroyed the memory gun would dissipate in favour of putting plans into place to construct the experimentation bunker in the forest.

Fiddleford just added the finishing touches to his final page of blueprints, when the door to his bedroom flung open loudly, slamming against the attic wall.

“What in Sam Hill  -?” Fiddleford questioned, turning around in his chair to frown at whoever deemed it necessary to slam the door, when he was confronted with Stanford’s assistant, looking apoplectic with rage.

“You crossed a line.” Stanford’s assistant growled at Fiddleford, pointing at him sharply with his index finger.

“I don’t know what you’re –“ Fiddleford attempted, moving to stand up to face Bill.

Bill’s finger jabbed Fiddleford in the chest, knocking him back down in his chair forcefully, and Fiddleford gaped up at Ford’s assistant, rubbing his chest.

He looked down at the fabric of his shirt and noticed a hole had been burnt through the shirt’s front pocket, like he’d been burned with a cigarette, and he looked up at the dark-skinned man in askance, confused and shocked.

“You know what you did.” Bill glared at Fiddleford, and it was only then that Fiddleford noticed the other man’s eyes. Bill’s strange yellow eyes weren’t yellow now, they were red, a vivid, burning red, and his pupils were black slits, burning down into Fiddleford.

They were unnatural. They were unholy.
They were inhuman.

“You crossed a line the moment you pointed that thing at Sixer’s head, and you know it.”

“You – your eyes!” Fiddleford spluttered, pointing at Bill shakily.

“Don’t tell me you forgot?” Bill smiled at Fiddleford, his teeth looking sharper than they had any right to be, tilting his head at F. Somehow the movement reminded F of a mountain lion, cornering its prey. A frission of fear spiked up F’s spine and Fiddleford shrunk back in his chair, bringing his hands up to rub at his temples. The eyes, they weren’t real, nobody had red eyes, he was seeing things.

“It’s just another nightmare Fiddleford, it’s not real.” F muttered to himself, rocking back and forth slightly.

“I’m not just any nightmare.” Bill leaned forward sharply, placing his hand on the back of Fiddleford’s chair, bracketing him in there. “But I’ll be your own personal nightmare for what you did to Sixer, and that’s a promise. Is it coming back to you now, what you did, or do you need a little reminder?”

“I – I know I used the memory ray on Stanford.” Fiddleford admitted, looking guiltily to his knees. “I didn’t erase the memory of that, I just erased the guilt I had for doin’ it. And I know it was wrong, but I just couldn’t let him –“

“So let me get this straight, you erase one of Sixer’s precious memories, feel bad about it, and then shoot yourself in the head so you don’t feel guilty? Oh no, you’re not dodging consequences that easily. You don’t get that option.”

F looked up at Bill fearfully, and only then realised that the heat he was feeling in Bill’s presence wasn’t him flushing with guilt or any other emotion, Ford’s assistant was literally breathing fire, flames dancing in the back of his throat, blowing out embers with every word he spoke. Fiddleford could smell burning, and he looked back to see the wood of the chair he sat on crackling and splintering under the heat of Bill’s hand, scorching the wood.

Fiddleford yelped, and flung himself out of the chair, scrambling across the floor of his room over to the memory gun, hoping he could use it to defend himself against Stanford’s assistant, who obviously wasn’t human.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you.” Bill’s voice rung out in the room, echoing unnaturally throughout the attic. “You haven’t learnt your lesson yet.”

“What are you – you’re –“ Fiddleford cried out, horrified as he reached for the whiskey crate beside his bed only for the box to levitate out of his reach, along with several other objects in his room. He screamed and turned around to look at them, seeing his possessions floating with an unnatural blue glow surrounding them, this encounter playing out like one of F’s nightmares, the kind he worked hard to forget.

“You’re not human.” Fiddleford whispered, his eyes wide, staring up at Bill who stood over him, his eyes glowing red, blue flames springing to life along the assistant’s arms, flaring out around his fists.

“What gave it away, genius?” Bill grinned at F, straightening up, standing tall, so he could better loom over the quivering scientist.

“You – you’re not human – you – s-stay away from me –“ Fiddleford pleaded, scrambling away
from Bill until his back hit the wall. “S-stay back!”

“Let me make one thing clear for you here, Specs. I tolerate you, because you’re useful, and you have the skills I need to get this portal up and running.” Bill explained, crossing his arms and looking down at Fiddleford. “However, the instant you outlive your usefulness, you’re gone. Like that.”

Bill snapped his fingers, and a fireball sizzled in the air above his hand for effect, fizzling out into the atmosphere.

“Don’t think for a second you’re indispensable, because you’re not. The only reason I haven’t slipped inside of you to wear you around like a puppet is because I’ve got better things to be doing, and you’re below my notice.”

Fiddleford baulked at the terminology Bill used, looking at Ford’s assistant with new eyes, trembling in the revelation that Bill wasn’t just a peculiar and rather annoying assistant, but was instead an inhuman monster.

He wasn’t just a monster, he was going to kill F. He was evil.

“However, if you ever touch Sixer again, if you ever turn that memory ray on him for a second, if you ever throw him down the stairs again and leave your marks on his body, I don’t care how good of an engineer you are – I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you and laugh.” Bill promised, grinning wickedly at McGucket.

“P-please. I’ve got a family.” Fiddleford pleaded, shrinking away from Bill, horrified that this was the creature who had captured Stanford’s attention all these months.

“And I’ll kill your family too, just to make things clear to you.” Bill added, still grinning maniacally at Fiddleford. “Sixer is mine. You do not touch him.”

Stepping forward, until he was toe to toe with Fiddleford, towering over him, Bill’s voice warped and distorted as he spoke, fire crowning his head like a hat.

“The only one who gets to mess with Sixer’s mind is me. Got that?”

Fiddleford swallowed, his shoulders trembling, as he looked up at the horrific being who had laid claim to his old friend.

“You’re a monster.” Fiddleford whispered, voicing the realisation that had slowly dawned on him.

“I’m a lot of things. What’s it to you?” Bill scoffed, putting his hands on his hips. The whiskey crate was levitating over towards Bill, the memory ray lifting out from within the box.

“Does Ford know what you are?” Fiddleford asked, his concern for his friend making him bold enough to question it.

“He knows enough.” Bill answered shortly, narrowing his eyes at the engineer. He plucked the memory ray out of the air and turned it over in his hands, examining it.

“Does he know that you’re evil?” Fiddleford croaked, the words coming out despite how afraid he was to say them.

Bill shot Fiddleford an inscrutable look, then turned his back on the human, pacing across the room to fiddle with the dials on the specifier. His shoulders hunched, Bill took a moment, before he
responded in a more subdued tone.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

Fiddleford considered that, and sucked in a breath, moving to stand up, finally brave enough to do so.

Bill turned around and blinked at F, wondering where this sudden courage was coming from. Bill held the memory ray closer to his chest reflexively, shielding it from Fiddleford, who stepped closer, like he was about to reach for it.

“What are you going to do with my ray gun?” Fiddleford asked, jutting his chin out stubbornly in an attempt to stop it wobbling.

“Give me one good reason why I shouldn’t destroy it, then move onto you.” Bill retorted, glaring at F.

Fiddleford sucked in another steadying breath, before he spoke, holding his back straight in an attempt to stop his shoulders shaking.

“We can use it for the portal. It’s obviously important to you, and Stanford won’t let me hire labourers to finish the construction. We can use it for the portal construction, and for the bunker, and that way we cover our tracks, and if anyone finds out about what you are —” Fiddleford paused to give Bill a reproachful look, as though chastising him for being an evident monster. “Then you can use it on them too.”

Bill looked down at the gun, then back up at Fiddleford, obviously considering the merits.

“I can make the gun better, more precise, so it won’t hurt so much when it gets done what needs doin’ – and in exchange for that I want you to promise you’ll leave me ‘n my family alone. You d-don’t touch them.”

Bill looked vaguely amused, smirking at Fiddleford. “You think you’re in a position to barter?”

“I got nothin’ to lose tryin’.” Fiddleford admitted, shrugging his shoulders.

Bill laughed, a short bark of laughter at first, before the laughter continued, trailing off giddily, incredibly amused. When Bill was done laughing, he raised his eyebrows at Fiddleford, impressed despite himself.

“Oh Specs, you’re a lot more interesting than I first imagined, I’ll give you that. Fine, you want to make a deal. Let’s make a deal.” Bill extended his hand and fire danced in his palm, magic ready and waiting to seal whatever barter Fiddleford felt game enough to chance. “I’ll let you live, and I won’t touch your family, and in exchange you use this memory ray to protect my secrets, and keep the portal on track. You’ve gotta fast track it, you hear? I want it done twice as fast, and operational by next year.”

“What are you usin’ the portal for anyhow?” Fiddleford asked, glancing cautiously at the flames dancing in Bill’s hand.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Bill grinned, raising his eyebrow gamely. “And won’t that be funny, when you do.”

“Are you usin’ it for evil?” Fiddleford had to ask, frightened of the answer.
Bill’s grin fell slightly, and he pursed his lips, before answering somewhat more sedately than expected. “If finding a home for my friends is evil, you can call it whatever you want.”

“Who’re your friends?” Fiddleford questioned, almost scraping up a sliver of pity for the uncertainty in Bill’s tone.

That sliver of pity evaporated fast enough when Bill’s grin brightened, his eyes lighting up yellow again, glowing in that unnerving way they did. “The biggest freak-show in the galaxy, and when we roll into town this dimension’s gonna bear witness to the greatest, weirdest party this multi-verse has ever seen.”

Fiddleford gulped, and rubbed his arm, still uncertain about taking Bill’s hand, taking his deal.

“And where does Stanford fit into all of this?”

“I’m working that out, don’t you worry.” Bill assured Fiddleford, gesturing with the memory ray held in his other hand. “Call it a work in progress. So, what do you say? Do we have a deal?”

Fiddleford stared cautiously at Bill’s outstretched flaming hand, feeling his sins weighing heavy on his soul. Thinking of his family’s safety, feeling the immense guilt that brewed over the fact that he was prioritising them over his friend who was obviously in too deep with some sort of demon, Fiddleford swallowed, and plunged his hand into the flames, shaking Bill’s hand.

“Deal.”

“Smart move, Specs.” Bill’s hand grasped Fiddleford’s firmly, shaking once, before letting go, the flames dying softly all around him, the levitating items touching down in their proper places in the room, the memory gun still held in Bill’s left hand.

Fiddleford shook his hand out, surprised that the flames he thought would burn him were cool to the touch. As all the items touched down back where they had been in F’s room, he looked around, then back to Bill, noting that Ford’s assistant looked just as he always did, innocuous and human enough, but F knew the truth.

“So—” Fiddleford started, staring at the gun Bill still held, nervous that his device was going to be destroyed. “Are you gonna give me back my memory gun?”

“Yep!” Bill nodded congenially, before swinging the gun up to level it at Fiddleford’s head, his finger pressing down on the trigger, whirring the gun’s ray to full power. “But first!”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHRGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH

Somewhere out in the universe, in the time and space between time and space, the Great Axolotl stirred, his gills flaring out as he cast his gaze into the abyss of the vast cosmos.

He blinked, taking in events, all events, in an instant, before he closed his eyes once more, returning to a state of hibernation in the cocoon of stars that surrounded him.

Now was not the time.
So he slept on.

Chapter End Notes

THIS WAS SUCH A BIG CHAPTER! So much going on! I hope folks enjoyed this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it. Unfortunately Stanford was born in the late 40s - 50s so I had to address the issue of internalised homophobia, not something I enjoy writing, and I can assure you this isn't falling into the 'gay for you' trope. I'm gay myself, and early on in my self discovery I had my own internalised homophobia to deal with and get over, and Ford's a little slower than most emotionally speaking. KennTheRat, you guessed right! It was Jheselbraum! She has her reasons for being the way she is, and for opposing Bill so strongly, but she's not a faultless character, that would be no fun. Bill's pretty awful too, all things considered, this fanfic should just be called 'unfortunate people and their interdimensional hijinks'. I hope you enjoyed this chapter, let me know how you like it now that things are heating up.
Next chapter - Stanford arm wrestles a Unicorn! And other exciting things!
Stanford was sitting on the front porch in the sunshine, soaking in the heat to compensate for the briskness of the weather.

Fiddleford had driven off in his truck about an hour ago, heading back to Palo Alto to visit Patricia and Tate for Thanksgiving. Ford was sad to see him go, but he presumed the trip back to see his family would be good for Fiddleford, would help reiterate his perspective now that he’d scrapped the prototype he made of that startling memory erasure gun.

At least Ford thought he had scrapped it. He wasn’t entirely sure, but F had told him to his face that he had destroyed it, and he didn’t think F was the type to lie to him. It wasn’t in his nature.

Ford had clapped Fiddleford on the back congenially when he declared his decision to go back to Palo Alto for Thanksgiving, hoping that the trip would help him sort his head out, help him reconnect with his priorities.

Resting his hand on F’s shoulder, Ford smiled at his friend with a genuine happiness.

“I’m proud of you, F.”

Fiddleford had winced up at Stanford and nervously laughed off Ford’s rather sappy sentiment, shrugging his friend’s hand off his shoulder.

“I’ll – I’ll send Pat and Tate your love.” Fiddleford assured Ford, packing the last bit of clothing into his suitcase, clicking it shut.

“Send them mine too. My fondest regards. Especially to that little ankle biter of yours.” Bill said in a too-sweet tone, leaning against the attic doorframe, having been surprisingly persistent about not leaving Ford and Fiddleford alone in a room together. Ford would almost assume Bill were jealous, but he’d never been this persistently present before.

He’d been spending more time with the scientists, insisting he was supervising, though Ford wasn’t exactly sure what needed supervising, considering the Hyperdrive tests were a success. They were on track with the rest of the portal completion, having had relatively smooth sailing since the Hyperdrive integration was a fruitful endeavour.

Fiddleford had given Bill a peculiar look at that, like he was puzzled, or perturbed, and merely nodded, picking up his suitcase and bringing it down the stairs.

Ford was a little confused too, as he was under the impression that Bill didn’t like children, so he wasn’t sure what engendered this particular interest in Fiddleford’s son. It seemed well intentioned enough, and it couldn’t hurt Bill to take more of an interest in being nice to people, so Ford shrugged it off, helping Fiddleford pack his truck up.

“I’ll be back before you know it.” Fiddleford had assured Ford, his hand on the car door as he set off, eager to get back to his family.

And so, Ford was left alone in the shack with Bill for a week, doing his utmost to try and relax himself, the time away from Fiddleford becoming somewhat of an insistent holiday enforced for
both of the scientists working on the project.

It was difficult for Ford to stop working, always having one project or another going to occupy his time, but he’d promised Fiddleford for the week he’d pause construction on the portal, as F had insisted they do it together.

“Just relax and enjoy your Thanksgivin’ Ford. I’m sure you’ve got plenty to be thankful for.” Fiddleford had told him kindly, trying to do Ford a favour, to make sure he got a holiday too.

Ford was never much one for Thanksgiving. Historically it was a disgustingly colonial holiday that celebrated the theft of land from the Native Americans and their subsequent slaughter. Hardly worth celebrating from an academic and moral standpoint. His family had never made too much of a fuss over the occasion, not really setting up too much pomp and circumstance around family dinners and the like.

It was, in Stanford’s opinion, a non-event, co-opted by commercialism, bracketed immediately by ‘Black-Friday’ another bizarre American holiday wherein citizens fought each other over heavily discounted goods. An elderly woman once threw a toaster at Ford’s head while he was waiting in line to purchase a new fax machine during the Black-Friday sales.

Ford shuddered, just thinking on it. Never again.

Kicking his feet up on a footstool, watching the gnomes scurry across the edge of the forest line, Ford shook out his newspaper and caught up with what Gravity Falls considered ‘current events’.

Small town newspapers didn’t get much in terms of global events or phenomena. The occasional political article would trickle down, regurgitating the popular propaganda of the day, but mostly the Gravity Falls Gossiper devoted its columns to agricultural trends and superfluous community details and events. Bake sales and PTA meetings and the like.

And of course, there was the laughable horoscope section.

Vaguely amused, Ford flicked the page over, briefly glancing at his own horoscope for the sake of baseless entertainment.

*Gemini: May 21-June 21*

*Gemini’s this month will find themselves lacking the hindsight necessary to tell when they’re in too deep. A word of the wise to Gemini’s – don’t believe his lies. Trust no one.*

Ford blinked at the page, a little taken aback by the ominous horoscope. It certainly wasn’t the usual fluff filled admonitions the paper churned out.

Ford was almost disappointed there would be no dark handsome stranger intruding on his monotonous daily routine. He was certain all the other Gemini’s sitting at home, bored housewives mostly, would be lamenting the same thing.

Shrugging, and turning the page to read the sports section, Stanford ignored the foreboding prophecy, humming contentedly to himself as he scoured the last page of the paper, getting his morning reading in.

Speaking of dark handsome strangers, Bill seemed to be causing a ruckus, though the muse could hardly be considered a stranger any more, though he was certainly strange.

He heard a loud clatter sound out from indoors, and looked up from his paper, turning his head to call into the house cautiously.
“Bill?”

“Stupid, big head – doesn’t even –” He could hear his muse’s abstracted muttering from the living room, and since Ford figured the newspaper wasn’t really holding his attention, he folded it and set it down by the couch on the front porch, heading inside to investigate what had his muse so incised.

Walking in through the front hallway, Ford rested his arm on the door jamb of the living room, watching his muse in amusement.

“What are you doing, exactly?”

Bill was on his hands and knees picking through the papers and other scattered miscellany that had drifted under the couches, the furniture levitating up towards the ceiling, along with the fossilised tyrannosaurus skull Stanford bought at a bargain from an aspiring archaeologist in his university one year during his doctorate studies.

“What do you keep your mercury?” Bill asked impatiently, looking up from the pile of rubbish he was searching through.

“Mercury?” Ford repeated, baffled by the question. “Do you mean the element mercury, or am I missing something here?”

“No, I mean Mercury the God of finance and fancy shoes.” Bill said sarcastically, scratching the back of his head, looking around the room, before shooting Ford a sharp glance. “Of course, I mean the element. Do you have like a jar of it somewhere, or do you just keep it loose, floating about? It’s not in the water cooler, I’ve checked there already.”

“Generally mercury isn’t kept as a household staple.” Ford shook his head, watching Bill pout. “And I wouldn’t put it in the water cooler unless I wanted to poison myself, I think you’ll find I’m rather too busy to do that. What do you even need it for anyway?”

“Reasons.” Bill said obliquely, shuffling through the magazines he found under the couch for a moment, before looking up, changing the subject. “What about moonstones, where do you keep your moonstones?”

The entertained look Ford gave Bill was all the answer he needed and he flung the magazines he was holding away in frustration.

“Rrrgh. Don’t you have anything in this house?”

“How about you tell me what you need it for?” Ford began, his tone gently patronising as he walked further into the lounge room. “And if it’s really so crucial we can place an order to have some shipped here to the post office.”

“That takes so long though.” Bill complained. “I want those things now, no, I wanted them yesterday!”

“Well you didn’t say anything yesterday.” Ford pointed out, raising his eyebrow at Bill’s little tantrum.

“Yesterday your dear old pal McGucket was still in the house, and he’s superstitious enough as it is without me dragging you along on a quest to find magical items for a magical spell.” Bill grumbled, clambering up off the floor, leaning against the coffee table as he stood. “Wouldn’t want to spook the guy. Can’t levitate anything, can’t do magic, can’t make hilarious jokes about
interdimensional television personalities, can’t do anything fun.”

“What’s got you in such a huff?” Ford observed, tilting his head to watch the muse grumble and dust off his trousers. “You’ve been acting snippy like this since last week.”

Bill sighed, shrugging his shoulders and stuffing his hands in his trouser pockets, shuffling the papers on the floor around with his foot. “I’m just a little frustrated, you could say.”

“Is that so?” Ford leaned more heavily against the doorframe, crossing his arms, watching Bill push papers around with his toe like he didn’t know how to phrase something.

Bill gave another loud sigh, chanced a glance up at Stanford briefly, then sighed again.

Ford would have been sympathetic to Bill’s frustration if he hadn’t recognised Bill’s body language. He was copying the exact same pose he’d seen Shirley Temple do in one of the old black and white movies that had been on the television last night, the movie where the child actress only had to bat her eyelashes and ask sweetly to get what she wanted. Adding that correlation to the fact that Bill had sighed dramatically three times now in the space of a minute, well, it was obvious to Ford that the muse was up to something.

Ford waited expectantly, incredibly amused by the obvious mimicry the muse was employing, curious to see what Bill wanted.

“It’s just that – I’ve been so good lately, not using magic in front of Fiddleford, hiding my abilities, hiding my chutney, hiding in closets.” Bill gave Ford a very pointed look there. “But it’s so stifling, being restricted like this. I figured, now that McGucket is gone, we could …”

“Mmm?” Ford hummed, tilting his chin up, waiting for Bill to spell out whatever he was angling for.

“Well, I figured we could … make the most of the time we have here now without him, and maybe –” Here Ford got the full Shirley Temple phenomenon, Bill deliberately batting his eyelashes at Ford, something that made Stanford want to roll his eyes from the very sight of it. Despite how terribly hammy Bill’s performance was, how agonisingly unsubtle, Ford couldn’t help but find it endearing. “Unbind a few more bricks while he’s gone?”

“And you need moonstones to do that?” Ford queried, unimpressed by Bill’s attempt at asking sweetly.

“The moonstones are for a different thing.” Bill waved his hand dismissively. “I’m talking about you, me, a magic circle, and something that you definitely owe me!”

“Oh, I owe you now, do I?” Ford asked, his voice light and somewhat patronising, teasing Bill because he could.

“For the closet fiasco.” Bill pointed out, stepping around the coffee table to stand in front of Ford.

Ford didn’t appear to be impressed, levelling a flat look at Bill. The muse huffed out a scornful breath and pointed as he spoke.

“Hey, don’t you give me that look. Technically the list of things that you owe me for is longer than an ouroboros anaconda, but I’m letting you off easy because I happen to like your smarts.”

“And you want me to unbind a brick? You didn’t want to trade in anything else, for maybe a different favour?” Ford hinted gamely, bringing his hands down to rest on Bill’s waist, pulling the
muse in closer. “Perhaps a little experimentation?”

Bill’s mouth wriggled strangely, like he wasn’t sure which expression to settle on, before he pursed his lips, resting his hands against Ford’s shoulders. “So we’re going tit for tat now, are we?”

“I’m just reminding you there are less flammable options to explore rather than unbinding another brick and facing the consequences.” Ford pointed out.

He had ulterior motives for suggesting a more physical compensation for whatever he supposedly ‘owed’ Bill, though that was to be blamed entirely on his own overactive imagination, and the fantasies he had been maintaining since the last time he and Bill had experimented. As Bill had been keeping an eye on both Ford and Fiddleford, Ford hadn’t had a lot of alone time with the muse.

“Consequences for you maybe. Giving me another slice of my magic back can only be beneficial for me.” Bill retorted, before fixing Ford with an accusatory glance. “You don’t seem to get that I’m only a third of what I was, like this. You’ve diminished me. I don’t appreciate you holding me back.”

Ford lifted his gaze to the ceiling, sucking in a breath before he exhaled uncomfortably, the guilt catching up to him. It warred with his common sense, that guilt, rationalising that limiting a cosmic creature was as inhumane as housing an alligator in a fish tank, realising that the cosmic creature he was limiting so just happened to be in a romantic relationship with him.

He knew Bill was dangerous, in theory, he’d known the moment he first summoned him, hence the binding runes, but he had been behaving well, a rather benevolent cosmic being by all accounts, who seemed more interested in amusing himself throwing popcorn at the television than torturing small furry animals or other disturbing pastimes of that ilk.

Bill just had a lot of personality, and Ford, like a fool, found that personality charming. Charming enough for him to entangle himself romantically with the muse. Ford hadn’t been in a romantic relationship before, so he wasn’t sure if he was doing it right, but he was certain that one of the key tenants of a healthy reciprocal relationship was that one partner didn’t cripple the abilities of the other for the sake of their peace of mind.

Bill had only really enabled Ford, scientifically, giving Ford knowledge and wisdom from beyond the stars, even letting him read those mysterious tomes of his, teaching him all there was to know about life beyond this dimension, and it became painfully apparent to Ford that the only one limiting the other at this point in time was him, limiting Bill.

Sensing that Ford was still on the fence about it, Bill pushed on with his argument, squeezing Ford’s upper arm gently. “How am I supposed to protect this household if all I can do is set a few fires and levitate the furniture? Those are parlour tricks, not powers.”

“Why would you need powers to protect this household? Who says it needs protecting?” Ford questioned shrewdly, suddenly suspicious at Bill’s wording. “Does it?”

Bill’s eyes slid to the side, deliberately avoiding Ford’s eye contact despite how close they were standing. Ford noticed it immediately, and narrowed his eyes.

“Bill?” Ford’s tone was cautious, chastising, and Bill reacted defensively, crossing his arms. “Is there something you’re not telling me? Protect it? Protect it from who? What’s going on?”
“Nothing. Nothing!” Bill hysterically deflected. “You know, I try to do one nice thing for this old shack and look what it gets me. Suspicion and squinty eyes. Un-squint your eyes right now Mister, I don’t like your tone.”

“My tone isn’t the issue.” Ford asserted, maintaining his grip on Bill’s hips as the muse tried to pull away, deflecting Stanford’s concerns. “The issue is this house apparently needing protection. Protection from who?”

“Sixer.” Bill complained, not wanting to divulge.

“It’s my house, I think I deserve to know.”

“Maybe I’m just trying to do something nice for you.” Bill insisted, though his attempts to deny Ford legitimate answers were pretty transparent. “Maybe this means I’m finally taking an interest in this shack of yours, huh? It’s long overdue for some renovations anyway, I’m seeing a decided lack of triangles in the décor upstairs. Have you considered adding a mosaic or something in the bathroom perhaps?”

“I’ll consider it once you tell me what we need moonstones and mercury for.” Ford frowned at the muse, who tried to look away again, pouting, stubbornly silent.

Having had enough of Bill’s evasive tactics, Ford swiftly backed Bill into the hallway wall, and lifted Bill’s chin with his pointer finger until the muse had no choice but to meet Ford’s eyes. “You need them for a spell, you said. What spell? What are you trying to do Bill?”

Bill’s back hit the wall and he seemed flustered by Ford’s sudden forwardness. His mouth did that funny wiggle once more like he didn’t quite know how to take Sixer’s domineering gesture, both impressed and embarrassed by it, before he blurted out.

“God, you’re jus- so pushy Sixer! Is it so bad that I want to protect this place? To protect what’s mine?”

“I’m sure it’s a noble gesture, but my main concern is what it needs protecting from.” Ford said sternly, though he couldn’t help but brush his thumb gently along the line of Bill’s jaw. He could feel his muse’s skin heating up beneath his fingertips and he marvelled at how receptive Bill could be to a little show of force. He wondered if it had something to do with Bill’s cosmic origins.

He wasn’t entirely sure how it sat with him to fall under the category of what Bill considered his, but for now he was willing to give the muse the benefit of the doubt that it was simply a romantic sentiment. Another one of those peculiarities that came with pseudo-dating a cosmic being, if this could be considered dating.

He felt Bill’s jaw clench, his muse warring with his desire to hide the truth, or tell Ford, before finally reaching a verdict.

“From… prying eyes, okay?” Bill admitted. “There’s a lot more out there that can see than just me, and not every being out there is as charming and handsome and gratuitously benevolent as I am. I just don’t want us being seen by them, now that we’re…”

“You don’t want to be seen with me?” Ford clarified, half-joking, almost offended to have to ask that question. Unfortunately it wouldn’t be the first time someone hid their association with Stanford, being not only the class know-it-all but a freak with poor social skills and a high IQ. He wasn’t the most popular kid growing up. He didn’t have many friends.

“Not like that.” Bill pulled a face, obviously imagining being seen in a different context here. “Is a
“You’re the all-seeing eye, you tell me.” Ford scoffed, amused now. Bill certainly had never cared about privacy before, at least not invading Ford’s privacy.

It was an amusing sort of hypocrisy to witness. The all-seeing eye not wanting to be seen. Bill was a peculiar sort of creature. The muse could be so fussy about certain things. He flustered easily at times, especially when dwelling on his own physical reactions in this new form. Ford found it all rather amusing, considering how often Bill’s reactions threw the muse off balance. Ford liked that, seeing Bill off balance.

Bill huffed, frustrated once more, caught between the wall behind him and Sixer’s own dogged curiosity. He blurted out an answer that was more of a deal than a truth, falling back on negotiation as a tactic before he could even consider it fully.

“Look, a protection spell benefits the both of us, so there’s no use fighting me on this. You’re going to get me moonstones, mercury, and unicorn hair, and if you play your part and help me, I’ll even show you how to cast it, how does that sound?”

Bill certainly knew his mark. Offering knowledge and mystery to the scientist had him in the bag, so to speak. Ford’s curiosity was piqued, and his expression brightened in excitement.

“You’ll teach me how to cast a protection spell? That sounds useful, actually. I can imagine the practical applications. Moonstone, mercury, and – should I be writing this down?”

Bill smirked at Ford, smug seeing that Sixer had taken his bait. IQ couldn’t help but jump on whatever shred of knowledge Bill dangled before him, just like back when Bill was still just a creature of the mindscape. It amused Bill now with more fondness than before, how eager Sixer was to learn from him.

“Ah ah –” Bill held up his hand, seeing an opportunity here, glancing shrewdly up at Ford. “I’ll teach you if you unbind a brick for me today.”

“You really think that’s a good idea?”

“I know it’s a good idea.” Bill retorted. “So what’ll it be Sixer, are you going to unbind a brick for me? Discover the mysteries of the universe? Make the world a better place?”

Ford made a face of his own, disliking how his muse liked to strongarm him into unbinding those bricks, but, with his conscience reminding him of his previous mental metaphor about animal cruelty, he conceded the point, and the brick, to Bill.

“Fine. One brick.”

“One brick today.” Bill corrected him, standing on his tiptoes to press an appreciative peck to Ford’s chin. “There are four more days until McGucket gets back, I figure there’s time for one brick every evening, and another just after breakfast, so by the time he gets back that’ll be eight down, four to go!”

“I said one brick.” Ford called after Bill as his muse pushed away from the wall, bouncing giddily down the corridor out to the front yard. Unbinding two bricks every day would likely bleed Ford dry, despite how forthcoming his muse could be when healing Ford’s injuries. He wasn’t looking forward to the blood loss.

Ford felt his chin absently, fingers drifting over the spot his muse had kissed, and watched the little
god bop away out the door. He glanced into the living room, where the couch and tyrannosaurus skull were still levitating, bouncing along with Bill’s euphoric mood.

“You’ll change your tune!” Bill’s voice called out from the front lawn, making Ford curious about where his muse was going now.

“You know the couch is much harder to sit on when it’s on the ceiling.” Ford yelled after Bill, grabbing his coat and a scarf from the coatrack in the hall, following after his muse.

“It looks better up there!”

Shaking his head and smiling to himself, Ford felt a fond nostalgia wash over him for the months he shared with the muse before Fiddleford moved in, where every day was a different adventure. It seemed like he’d be going on another adventure today, which seemed like a fun way to occupy his time since he promised he’d pause work on the portal for Fiddleford.

He couldn’t go on an adventure like this with Fiddleford here though, and Ford almost felt bad in that instant for feeling happy that Fiddleford was gone, just so he could have this back, this time with Bill. Some things simply couldn’t be shared with Fiddleford, and these magical adventures with Bill were one of those things, considering how the last magical adventure F went on turned out.

Ah well, Ford thought to himself. He spends his holiday his way with his family, and I spend my holiday my way.

Laughing to himself at Bill’s antics Ford wrapped the scarf around his neck and shrugged on his coat, feeling the pockets to make sure he carried a journal and pen, hurrying out the front door to chase his muse through the forest to whatever exciting discovery was waiting to be uncovered.

As he raced down the front porch he knocked the newspaper off the arm of the couch, and it fell to the wooden boards of the porch, forgotten, the wind jostling the papers in the breeze. The discarded newspaper blew open to the page on horoscopes, the ominous warning staring out, unheeded and forgotten.

A word of the wise to Gemini’s – don’t believe his lies.

“So what’ll it be first?” Bill plotted, strolling down the road with a spring in his step, speaking cheerily. “Placing our mercury order? Stealing some moonstones? Hunting down some premium A-Grade rainbow locks?”

“Hold on, hold on.” Ford stumbled after Bill, chasing along after him. “Slow down. Do I need to grab anything? I only have one journal, what if I need to take more notes? Do I need anything for the spell? What about snacks?”

Bill paused at that and cast a longing look back at the shack, before taking a deep breath, swinging his leg back around to walk down the gravel road.

“We leave the snacks behind. It’s march or die here Sixer.”
Ford squinted at Bill’s back and paused, before quickly walking ahead of Bill only to stand in front of him, blocking his path. Ford put his hands on Bill’s shoulders, wanting to look him in the eye.

“You don’t want to stay in the shack. This is really serious, isn’t it?”

Bill tried his best to blink innocently at Ford, hoping to throw him off the scent.

“Does this have anything to do with the portal?” Ford guessed. “You mentioned there were ramifications for advancing technology past the temporal status quo. We don’t have to worry about any sort of – oh I don’t know – time police or something silly like that, do we?”

“Hah, silly. You got that right.” Bill laughed nervously, tugging on the collar of his shirt and looking anywhere but Sixer’s face.

Ford gave Bill a flat look.

“Time police.”

“Wh - don’t give me that look, I didn’t name them that!” Bill blustered.

“But there is such a thing as –” Ford pinched the bridge of his nose in consternation before he pushed his hands out, brushing the idea away from him. “You know, I thought it was a joke, but clearly it’s not, so I’ll just pretend we aren’t hiding our house with a magic spell from the time police.”

“Pccht.” Bill waved his hand at Ford, dismissing his human’s dramatics. “They’re not such a big deal. You got it right the first time Sixer, they really are a joke. I could handle those buzz-cut bozos with my eye closed. You’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“Then why are we hiding our house from them?” Ford questioned relentlessly, not wanting to remain both ignorant and in danger a moment longer.

Bill hesitated here. He had two options, he could either let Sixer believe that the time police were the real enemy here rather than a poorly executed nuisance – the law enforcement equivalent of a sitcom caricature – or he could spill the beans about Jheselbraum and open that can of worms. Bill didn’t really want to mention Jheselbraum to Ford, he was hoping he could ignore the whole prophecy business for as long as he could, so that sickening feeling wouldn’t swoop through this human stomach of his every time he thought too long on what Sixer’s symbol was doing on the zodiac wheel. That six-fingered hand print was the same design as the gold leaf on Sixer’s journals, the same design that resided in his DNA, cultivating his polydactylism.

It had to be a coincidence, Bill desperately hoped. There were probably more six-fingered anomalies out there than Sixer presumed existed. Possibly an entire race of six-fingered creatures who could potentially be involved in Jheselbraum’s prophecy given how frequently she collected disenfranchised creatures throughout the multi-verse for her little cult.

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Bill didn’t have to worry about his downfall coming from Sixer – the man worshipped the ground Bill walked on. He was besotted with him, Bill knew that much from the way the human looked at him, from the constant outpouring of worship Sixer emanated every time Bill did something charming, or said something funny, or met Ford’s gaze. It was obvious Sixer cared too much about him to ever turn on him like that.

Thinking quick on his feet, Bill settled with a plausible answer that Sixer would buy, that would keep him happy - a half-truth, pinning Bill’s paranoia on the time police, a threat Sixer could
identify and guard against.

“Not the house. The portal.”

Ford seemed to think on that for a second, before his mouth opened into a little rounded ‘o’ of delayed understanding.

“No one in the house needs protecting, per se. The spell is just a safeguard. A way to protect our investment.” Bill explained.

“Because if we’re caught with technology that’s ahead of its time.” Ford reasoned, following the logic. “Then there’s a chance we’ll lose the portal and the opportunity it provides to progress science into a new era.”

“So you can see why it’s important that we wrap this whole thing up as quickly as possible.” Bill concluded cheerily, patting Ford soundly on the back, trying to steer him back into action down the driveway. “For the future of modern science!”

“And these time police are somehow adverse to our current understanding of science advancing beyond a certain point. Why is that?” Ford asked, curious and a little bit indignant that his life’s work was being cordoned by an unseen force that had the unfortunate campiness to be called the ‘time police’. It would be laughable if it wasn’t a serious threat to his project.

Bill huffed, his own distaste for Time Baby’s regime creeping into his tone, as he walked ahead of Ford down the driveway, not wanting to stand around the shack and talk politics.

“Because they’re run by an infantile little dictator who throws a tantrum that could rattle the cosmos if one tiny temporal consequence gets thrown off track. They’re a bunch of paradox hating, fun sucking, joy-killing, tape-dispensing, dummy-spitting – arghhh! It’s all ‘destined events this’ and ‘no do-overs’ that, and their ham-fisted reach applies to nearly all dimensions except for the do-over dimension. Those guys somehow get a free pass – the jerks.”

“So, they don’t allow do-overs. Very rigid to the concept of events playing out in the one defined way. I see.” Ford followed his muse down the road, watching the irate way Bill stomped along, sensing it was somewhat of a sensitive topic for the muse. Gently Ford probed further, asking despite knowing it was probably a sore spot for Bill. “I’m guessing you’ve had a run in with these time police. Why? Is there something you wish you could do over?”

Bill kept his back to Ford, hiding his too expressive face, Sixer’s poking finally hitting a tender part of Bill’s psyche, something he wasn’t keen to admit to.

“What’s the point? Nobody gets a time wish without fighting Globnar to get it, and it’s rigged either way. You have to cheat to beat the system, and if they catch you cheating you lose by default. Unless you’ve got the power to back up your demands, and your competitor is a moron, you’re looking at a long stretch in a cold cell in the Infinitentiary for your trouble.”

Ford blinked, stunned by the information he was taking in through Bill’s little rant. The thing that stuck out to him though was that Bill had obliquely admitted that he must have tried to redo time, and was arrested consequently.

“They put you in jail? For losing? They arrested you?”

“So, I’ve done time.” Bill crossed his arms, casting a defensive look at Sixer. “Don’t give me that look. It’s not my fault the temporal justice system’s broken.”
“Well I never.” Ford mused, astonished at the thought that his muse, who he initially imagined was so faultless and untouchable, had not only been convicted of some kind of time-fraud, but spent time in jail for it.

It wasn’t all that surprising given what Ford knew about the muse now, but he remembered back when he’d worshipped the idea of Bill as this perfect muse. It was almost laughable looking back on how naïve he was. Ford should have been a bit more sympathetic regarding Bill’s confession of incarceration, but in the moment, he found the idea of his muse in striped prison pyjamas vaguely comical.

“What’s it like on the inside?”

Bill gave Stanford a withering look.

“I’m just asking.” Ford shrugged, trying to keep the amusement out of his voice.

Bill grabbed Ford’s wrist and yanked him along, continuing to march up the driveway towards the path that veered into the forest.

“You’re giving me two bricks for that.” Bill grumbled. “Come on, let’s get moving. We can’t stand around and ask each other invasive questions forever.”

“Are you saying we don’t have the time to –” Ford punned, still inwardly laughing at the thought of Bill as a little triangle wearing a black and white prison cap instead of his dapper top hat of choice.

“Sixer.” Bill growled dangerously.

“Alright, alright, I’ll stop.”

They trekked a little further into the forest, Bill still clearly fuming over his displeasure about the time police.

The leaves crushed beneath Bill’s feet, and Ford followed patiently behind, his sense of humour still bubbling at the thought of triangle jail for triangles, of time prison for time travellers, of Bill ticking tallies on the wall and playing the harmonica. While Ford thought it was funny, Bill clearly didn’t and Ford couldn’t help but try to clear the air a little, only half sincere in his attempt.

“Should I redo this conversation maybe?”

“Sixer!”

“Time to change the subject?“

“Sixer!!”

“Sorry.”

Bill gave Ford a critical look, narrowing his eyes at the human before tugging on his wrist harshly, leading him into the depths of the forest.

“You’re not sorry.”
After using one of the roadside payphones to place their mercury order with the post office, Bill and Ford had ventured further into the forest.

Bill had coerced Ford into unbinding two of the bricks on his arm, the two men lingering in a small clearing beside the river, Ford sitting on the grass just outside the magic circle drawn in his own blood, feeling woozy and lethargic.

“Maybe we should have brought snacks after all.” Ford realised belatedly, assuming this fatigue he felt was merely due to low blood sugar, running his hand over the smooth skin where the cut in his palm was before Bill healed it.

His muse wasn’t paying attention to him or his distress, already playing around with the new powers he had unlocked, bending over one of the last few flowering plants that bloomed this late in the season.

“Two leaves. No leaves.” Bill had his hands resting on his knees as he peered down at the yellow flowering plant by the water’s edge. It was a weed, a yellow dandelion. Leaning over it, Bill watched eagerly as the plant’s physical structure warped and morphed in accordance with his wishes. The plant was mutating at rapid rates, leaves bulging out of its stem before dragging themselves back in, the petals of the flower wilting due to the stress the plant was being put through, adhering to these rapid changes. “Eight leaves, thorns, no thorns, thorns again. Thorns instead of petals.”

“Bill.” Ford called out to the muse, feeling a little faint. “Can’t you summon something from the shack? A muesli bar, or a bottle of water, or something?”

“Your species are hunter gatherers, aren’t they?” Bill replied absently, calling out over his shoulder. “Forage some berries or something. Live off the land.”

“It’s nearly winter Bill. There are no berries.” Ford complained.

“Then what do you call….” Bill fiddled with the poor plant, torturing its DNA beyond recognition until finally he plucked several fat looking strawberries from the stem, passing them to Stanford. “These! Ta da!”

“I don’t think they’re supposed to be purple.” Ford accepted the berries, frowning curiously down at the mutated fruit. “These look poisonous.”

“Poisonous schmoizenous. You wanted berries, you’ve got them!” Bill gave a theatrical bow, then proceeded to cultivate his own applause. “Thank you, thank you, you’re welcome.”

Ford gave Bill a dubious look, which he then turned on the berries, before he shrugged off his reservations, bringing the berries to his mouth to nibble delicately on them. He tilted his head, assessing the flavour.

“They taste a little too sweet for strawberries.”

“They’re new and improved!” Bill declared, snapping his fingers, lit up with an idea. “Billberries! Now to grow these babies by the punnet and overcharge them as a delicacy. Maybe they won’t catch on so fast here at first, but there’s a market for them. In Japan. Or Echelon Xerox maybe, hah, those guys are gullible.”
“How much sugar is in these?” Ford pondered, the sweetness almost sour in his mouth. These berries tasted like a one-way track to contracting diabetes.

“What, you want to run it past the FDA first? You’re hungry, so eat.” Bill strode over to where Stanford was sitting and ruffled his fingers through Ford’s hair indulgently, like he was a cherished pet. “Eat. Humans need food. Then we can get this show on the road.”

“Are you –” Ford puzzled over the gesture for a moment, before the indignation crept into his tone. “Are you petting me?”


“You –” Ford narrowed his eyes at Bill’s smug features before he reached up and grabbed Bill’s wrist, yanking him down. The muse yelped and fell into Stanford’s lap, Ford’s stronger physique easily overpowering Bill despite how cosmically gifted he was. Since Ford was being playful though, Bill allowed it. “You’re human too, I’ll have you know.”

Settling in Ford’s lap, stealing a Billberry off him, Bill scoffed and rolled his eyes, popping the sugary fruit in his mouth, talking with his mouth full. “Pfft. Barely.” Bill swallowed the fruit, reaching out to prod Ford’s nose indulgently, grinning, bits of purple berry stuck in his teeth. “I’m a God, you know. I’m your God.”

“So you keep reminding me.” Ford conceded, finding his irritation quelled somewhat now he had a lapful of his muse, wrapping his arms around Bill.

“So, you can allow me my indulgences.” Bill retorted, and reached up to run his fingers through Ford’s fluffy locks.

Ford sighed and permitted Bill’s stroking for a while, the feeling of the muse’s fingernails against his scalp relaxing him substantially, despite how initially demeaning the gesture was.

He and Bill were partners now, romantic partners, and a little physical affection was expected, though Ford drew the line at being treated like a pet.

He nibbled on one of the too sweet Billberries for a while before the patting began to grate on his sensibilities.

“Are you quite done?” Ford had to ask, impatient to regain his dignity back.

“It’s so fluffy.” Bill gushed, awe saturating his voice. “You’re a lot softer than you look you know.”

“And what is that supposed to mean?” Ford scoffed.

“You’re like a marshmallow. On the inside.” Bill replied simply, still sprucing his fingers through Ford’s hair, ruffling it. “Gooey, presumably.”

“I’m not sure how I feel about being called a marshmallow.” Ford grumbled, his masculinity insulted circuitously.

“Only on the inside. On the outside you’re all Sixery.” Bill added, nodding to himself.

“That’s very descriptive. You have a talent for expressing yourself.” Ford stated sarcastically.
“I do, don’t I.” Bill said boastfully, choosing to ignore Sixer’s sarcasm. He continued to fluff up Ford’s hair, clearly enjoying himself, until Ford reached up and grabbed Bill’s wrists, pulling them down.

“That’s enough.” Ford scolded him, his cheeks pinker than he’d like ideally. He could tolerate Bill playing with his hair, but not while the muse was treating him like a pet human. It was embarrassing. It wasn’t dignified.

Bill pouted. “You’re no fun Sixer.”

Today seemed to be a study for Ford in how different his muse was to anyone else he’d ever encountered, his cosmic origins playing in substantially to that difference. Ford supposed that humans, with their expressive features and fluffy hair, must seem rather cute to a geometric being of pure energy, the same way dogs and cats were cute to humans. The comparison may not be flattering, but it went some way to explaining some of Bill’s behavioural quirks around humans. Bill didn’t seem to like the majority of humans on principle, preferring Ford above all else, but that could be like how dog people disliked cats on principle sometimes, but could make an exception for that special feline. Still a degrading comparison, but it obliquely made sense.

Ford, reluctantly realising that his muse was just expressing his affection in the peculiar ways he seemed drawn to, leaned in and kissed Bill briefly in forgiveness. Bill’s pout melted away as he kissed Sixer back, his lips turning up, smiling into the kiss, the warmth of worship filling his chest comfortably.

This was nice.

Bill hummed and looped his arms around Sixer’s neck, adjusting his position in the human’s lap, seeking leverage enough to push Ford back onto the fading grass.

With little prompting, Ford fell back, twigs cracking beneath his coat, and held Bill’s hips, steadying the muse’s overt affection, before smoothing his hands over Bill’s back, welcoming it. It was rather cold out in the forest, the weather brisk and chilly, but Bill was warm and he emanated heat, melting on top of Ford, kissing him soundly.

This was very nice.

Ford’s hands were warmed by Bill’s cosmic temperature, and he let them roam over the muse’s back, sliding his palms down lower to cup Bill’s rear, indulging a little himself. Bill wriggled back into Ford’s touch, and delivered kisses to Ford’s chapped lips, moaning appreciatively.

Bill kissed Ford, sliding his tongue alongside Sixer’s and grazed his teeth across Ford’s bottom lip, feeling more than a little amorous now that his powers were returning to him.

Cupping Ford’s cheeks, Bill pressed languorous kisses to his human’s face, savouring the tingling feeling that sparked inside of this damnably receptive human body of his as the kissing continued. Ford poured worship into every kiss and it spurred Bill on, that uncensored worship, drinking it straight from Sixer’s lips, incising him delightfully.

Licking inside of Ford’s mouth, Bill almost tasted marshmallow, tart sweetness dancing on his tastebuds, but realised as he nipped at Ford’s bottom lip again that it was probably just the human’s blood. To Bill it tasted like marshmallows, and victory, and he simmered with contentment, being somewhat rougher with Ford in his ardour than the human was accustomed to.

“Oh.” Ford murmured, tasting copper in his own mouth.
Bill lapped up the red leaking from Ford’s bottom lip and exhaled flames into the human’s mouth, acting reactively, soothing Sixer’s hurt.

The sudden burst of flame breathed into his mouth startled Ford. He felt the heat flicker, flames licking his tongue, and his lip healed over as if it had never been split.

While the healing was seamless, Ford’s reaction wasn’t, and he pulled away, spluttering out blue flames, shocked that he’d nearly inhaled Bill’s fire.

He coughed and spluttered, leaning away from Bill, covering his mouth.

“Did you just -?”

“What?” Bill retorted, puzzled by Sixer’s aghast reaction. “I fixed it, didn’t I?”

Ford coughed a little more, his system still panicking at the thought of swallowing flames. He could taste burning in the back of his throat, like the smell of a lit match made tangible, though nothing was singed. “A little – a little warning next time!”

“Oh please, it’s not like you got burnt.” Bill scoffed, leaning over Ford, his arms bracketing the human’s chest, burning the leaves on the forest floor beneath his palms. He sunk back down, wanting to kiss Sixer again, angling his head down to capture the human’s lips, his eyes lidded and sly. “You’re fine. Walk it off.”

Ford gave Bill a reproachful look, pushing Bill away from him, and moved to sit up, feeling the need to broach a certain discussion with the muse.

“Listen Bill, I know you seem to enjoy this sort of thing, but I feel I should put this out here now before you get the wrong idea –“

“What idea?” Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, not liking where this was going.

“I don’t enjoy …” Ford began, trying to find the words that wouldn’t be tactless, finding tactless the only way to proceed. “This ‘pain thing’ may do it for you but it’s not for me – it’s not what I want from this – I don’t –“

“Who says it does anything for me?” Bill lied defensively, embarrassed by Sixer’s claim, squinting his eyes disdainfully. “Who says – ACK!”

Ford dug his nails into Bill’s side to emphasise the point, bringing colour to the muse’s cheeks as the pain pricked through him.

Ford raised his eyebrow at the look on Bill’s face, those expressive features giving away exactly how much the muse liked it, despite his claims to the contrary.

“That isn’t fair.” Bill scowled, brushing Ford’s hands away from his hips. “You’re telling me you can dish it out, but you can’t take it.”

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Ford began, insulted by the assertion.

“You’re telling me that a tiny scratch here or there is too much for you. That you have special rules about what you get back from this. That you get to be as aggressive as you want to, but when it comes to me –“

“That’s not what I’m saying.” Ford insisted, growling his reply out slightly, peeved that Bill
seemed to be making this a competitive thing.

“I heal you anyway, so what’s the problem? It’s only temporary. It’s just a little pain, you can be as cruel as you like but when I –“

“I’m doing this for you.” Ford asserted, frustrated, not appreciating being called cruel by the muse. He wasn’t cruel, he was generous. He only hurt Bill because the muse liked it so much, it had nothing to do with how much Ford enjoyed seeing Bill off balance. At least that was how Ford saw it.

Sitting upright fully, Ford grabbed Bill’s hands and squeezed them tightly so Bill would listen. “Because nothing else would work. I’m doing this for you.”

“So.” Bill lidded his eyes, trying to turn this to his advantage. He leaned back into Ford’s space and traced his fingertip along Ford’s bottom lip. “Do a little more for me. Try -”

“I don’t enjoy –“ Ford began, trying to firmly reiterate the point he was trying to make.

“You haven’t even tried!” Bill whined, frustrated that Sixer was blocking him here. “You don’t even –“

“I don’t like it Bill.” Ford insisted, pushing Bill’s hand away from his mouth.

“I could make you like it.” Bill said petulantly, without thinking about it, so keen to play with Sixer without restrictions. He knew as soon as the words left his mouth that they were the wrong ones to say. Sixer was still subconsciously defensive against mental manipulation, even if he didn’t remember it.

“Don’t.” Ford said, feeling sick to his stomach at the thought of it. “Don’t.”

Pushing away from Bill, getting up to walk to the other side of the clearing, Ford felt sickened by what Bill was suggesting, unable to be physically close to the muse for even suggesting it, suggesting tampering with Ford’s mind. He felt repulsed by the very thought of it.

“Sixer.” Bill called out, getting up off the ground, pacing over to his recalcitrant human.

“No Bill. I have to draw the line right here, right now. No tampering with my mind. If I’m ever going to trust you, you have to promise me not to.” Ford said resolutely, glaring at Bill pre-emptively.

“Fine, I won’t.” Bill shrugged, trying to get closer to Sixer.

Ford’s shoulders were boxed, rigid, he seemed almost on the verge of shutting Bill out.

“I won’t.” Bill insisted. “I’m just trying to even the playing field here. To treat you like an equal player. It isn’t fair to cap what I can do for you without even suspending your apprehension long enough to see where I’m coming from.”

“Is that what you’re trying to do, treat me like an equal?” Ford scoffed, half disbelieving, half hoping that maybe that was how Bill saw it. He didn’t want to let that mean he would let Bill off the hook for that statement about influencing his thoughts, but he was willing to assume Bill could be honest about his own reactions, or at least allow him a chance to explain himself.

“You’re a challenge Sixer.” Bill elucidated, staying a small distance away from the human to give him his space, holding his hands up to show he meant no harm. “And I don’t let just anyone
challenge me. But this goes both ways.”

“If challenging you means letting you hurt me, I don’t –“

“I don’t want to hurt you.” Bill said loudly, interrupting Ford.

Ford looked at Bill, his shoulders still tense, though he wanted to believe Bill.

“I was just treating you like I’d treat any creature I’d let get that close to me. I was just playing.” Bill said gently, still holding his hands up like he was afraid of scaring Sixer away. “But if you’d prefer I didn’t treat you equally, we can go back to that one-way street. You can just be a worshipper.”

“What are you saying? Does that mean - ? Are you saying I’m more than that now?” Ford questioned, pressing, suddenly needing the answer.

Until this moment he didn’t know how much hinged upon Bill’s response, and how closely the thought of being seen as an equal to Bill linked to Ford’s steadily growing self-esteem. In that moment, he realised that he didn’t think he could go back to being thought of as ‘just’ a worshipper, he wanted to be more than that, with every fibre of his being. An equal to the godly being that slept in his bed on the nights when he felt like it. An equal to his partner, recognised for the challenge that he was.

It may have been enough for him at the start of this, to simply worship Bill, but after knowing Bill more for who he is now, it wouldn’t content Ford to be anything less than an apparent equal at this stage in the relationship. To not be looked down upon. To be not just a worshipper, someone special.

He knew he could be more than that.

He stared at Bill, waiting for the muse’s answer, his expression stubborn and apprehensive, wanting to hear the right response, not knowing how he should feel if he didn’t get it.

Bill pursed his lips, considering.

It was a huge thing, conceding equality to a human. Humans didn’t have a very good reputation in the interdimensional community, they were either slaves, worshippers, or puppets for the most part, no matter how smart they were. It would be breaking a million different unspoken social codes and flaunting a billion different societal rules to acknowledge Stanford as an equal, but there was something about the human that made Bill want to indulge in the taboo. Stanford was special, at least to Bill, god knows how he wormed his way into Bill’s affection like that considering how at first Bill couldn’t stand him. Sixer was supposed to be just another pawn on the board, but he’d been working his way up, rising in status simply by virtue of how he challenged Bill, excited Bill, and brought him a resonant joy that he hadn’t felt in quite a while.

Allowing Sixer to climb the ladder like that, defying taboo was indulgent of Bill, but Bill liked the way Sixer indulged him. He liked it too much. Bill struggled a little with how this would impact his reputation, thinking it couldn’t hurt to let Sixer believe what he had to, but eventually conceded to how he felt.

“I’m saying you could be.”

Ford thought on that, mulling Bill’s words over, trying to figure out if he was willing to compromise his boundaries to be culturally sensitive to Bill’s standards of play. He had hoped he could be the muse’s equal, at least in terms of partnership, though he never thought Bill would be
able to get past his own cosmic origins, not enough to treat Ford like an equal.

That would mean treating Ford like a god.

Ford wasn’t a god, and it was startling to think that Bill would give him that potential. That the muse could consider Ford an equal, and not a pet or some sort of novelty.

Ford wondered when Bill decided this, when he developed this perspective, and marvelled quietly at the presumption that the muse really had come around to seeing Ford as a peer and not just the nuisance who pulled him down from the cosmos and forced him to inhabit this body.

Ford was astonished that Bill truly held him in such genuine regard. It made him feel special. That maybe Bill thought he was special.

Ford wanted to believe that. But he also knew that Bill’s admittance felt a tad manipulative, and in order to accept this newfound regard from his muse, Ford had to put aside his personal preferences and try something new for the muse’s sake.

To be more open minded to the idea, to accept these painful sensations into play, when Ford knew that enabling that sort of conduct could be a slippery slope into genuine danger. Bill wasn’t human, he was an entirely different creature with different limits and expectations. While he wanted to be Bill’s equal, he couldn’t take the sort of damage Bill could, and while the muse promised to heal him, Ford would much rather not need healing in the first place.

“What are you thinking?” Bill asked, curious, not as patient as he wanted to be, waiting for Ford’s answer, having put himself out there.

“I’m thinking that I’m seeing where you’re coming from, but I’m not sure if I’m willing to compromise like that straight away.” Ford replied cautiously.

Bill sighed, and tore his expectant gaze away from Ford, frustrated with himself for scaring Sixer off so abruptly. He fell back on letting Sixer hear what he needed to, angry at himself for baring too much of his nature to the scientist. “Look, I wasn’t trying to cut your lip, I just got carried away. I didn’t mean to hurt you Sixer, it’s – I –”

“It’s okay.” Ford held his hand up, his shoulders relaxing slightly now. “It’s alright. It was an accident, and these things happen.”

“It was an accident, and I didn’t think you’d get so uppity about it.” Bill complained, sulking somewhat, feeling like Sixer had rejected his offer by denying him.

Bill was almost ready to cross his arms and turn away when Ford stepped into his space, pulling him close with a hand on the small of his back. He kissed Bill firmly, one hand holding onto Bill’s neck, keeping him in place.

Bill froze, the sudden press of Ford’s lips soft against his shocking him, watching the human with wide eyes. Ford kissed Bill again, his lips pressing smooth, insistently against Bill’s, but the muse was still frozen, like a statue, hardly daring to move.

For once, here was something Bill couldn’t afford to screw up. He didn’t want to.

Ford deliberately sucked Bill’s lower lip into his mouth and bit it, blood welling up on his lip, making the muse gasp.

Bill watched Ford tentatively as he drew away, his skin knitting together, healing immediately. Bill
absently pressed his lips together, licking the blood off them, watching Ford, uncertain, wondering what this meant. His eyes lingered on his human’s bottom lip, where a sliver of red lingered, evidence that Ford’s advance hadn’t just been fabricated by an eager imagination.

Ford met Bill’s baffled gaze, and leaned in again to capture Bill’s lips, kissing him slowly, languidly, feeling the muse shiver with the effort of restraining himself. It was too much, the kiss, the worship, and the pain, the taste of his own blood in his mouth, but still Bill didn’t know what this meant.

Ford drew back once more to fix Bill with an inscrutable look, inclining his head slightly as he met Bill’s eyes, indicating something that Bill hadn’t quite figured out, before leaning in to kiss Bill again.

Slowly, almost clumsily, Bill began to thaw out and kiss Ford back, gentle at first, incredibly hesitant, not sure if the human had just given him permission, or if this was some sort of test.

Ford kissed him, his tongue tracing along Bill’s teeth, emphasising his intent, before he flicked his tongue up against Bill’s canine tooth deliberately, cutting his tongue slightly with the motion.

Tasting Sixer’s blood in his mouth again, Bill hurried to breathe that same healing flame past Sixer’s lips once more, worrying that Ford would blame him for the cut, but Ford simply pulled back once the flames did their work and exhaled soundly.

“I suppose I’ll have to get used to that.” Ford said, watching Bill blink back at him, slow to get the point.

He could tell the moment Bill cottoned on, the muse’s expression shifting from concern and confusion to dawning elation, until Bill was staring at Ford like he’d just given him the greatest gift in all the galaxy.

Sixer had met his challenge. He kissed him back. He was approaching Bill under his terms, meeting Bill’s standards, and stepping up in a way that many interdimensional beings rarely did, despite being only a human. They had swapped blood, and he hadn’t backed down like Bill expected him to.

Sixer was such a delight. A freak among humans, and a stand out among gods. This was incredible. Bill couldn’t wait to tell Pyronica.

Bill was smiling slightly now, fast approaching giddy, almost as if he couldn’t believe it, and Ford shook his head, laughing quietly.

“You’re so strange.”

Bill just hummed, high pitched, like a kettle squealing, staring at Ford, thrilled by this new development.

Ford didn’t quite know how to take that, so he simply turned around, gently grabbing Bill’s hand, setting out in the direction they’d been walking before, intending to resume their explorative activities in the forest.

Bill held Ford’s hand giddily, and then clasped his other hand around Ford’s six fingered palm, cosying up against Ford’s arm, practically bouncing with every step he took. Together they strolled along the river’s path, it was almost a romantic cliché really.

Ford gave Bill a peculiar look, having never seen the muse act so besotted before.
“You know, where I come from, accepting my challenge like that is the very height of romantic.” Bill confessed, cuddling up to Ford’s arm, his yellow eyes shining with joy, staring at Sixer like he was the sun and Bill was severely deficient in vitamin D.

“Where you come from must be as strange as you are.” Ford commented, almost perturbed by how affectionate Bill was being.

Bill laughed raucously, and clung to Sixer’s arm, beaming up at the scientist. “Well, you’re not wrong.”

Ford gave Bill another assessing look, noting the way the muse was glowing, jubilant and euphoric. Clearly what Ford had just done had far more significance to the muse than any other human romantic sentiment could have possibly achieved.

It was one of those moments where Ford was struck once again with the understanding that his muse wasn’t from this world, could never be from this world, and operated on a whole different and unique set of social rules and guidelines. This is more than Bill not knowing how the toaster worked, or eating jalapeños like they were candy, this was Bill responding to social cues and romance from an entirely different point of reference. Ford supposed he should be wary of that, that vast chasm of difference between them, but honestly Ford just found it fascinating.

“You are uncannily happy for someone who’s got blood on their lip, may I just say.” Ford commented, still a little perturbed by the bizarre way that Bill seemed to be over the moon about having a split lip.

Bill paused, and put his hand against Ford’s cheek, his eyes darting across every detail of Ford’s face. “May I just say, I don’t think I’ve ever been more attracted to you Sixer.”

Ford looked mildly offended, and opened his mouth to defend all the other times Bill was clearly attracted to him, for the sake of his ego, but was interrupted by Bill tapping him on the nose, whispering teasingly just to drive the point home.

“Ever!”

“Oh puh-lease. Why don’t cha, WHY DON’T CHA GET A ROOM? HUH?”

Bill and Ford blinked, looking around the clearing, seeing very little, until they dropped their gaze down from eye height, looking at two very intoxicated, very little men hiding behind a bush near the riverbed.

Bill rolled his eyes, lamenting the interruption just as Stanford adjusted his glasses and leaned down, resting his hands on his knees, peering at the intruders.

“Gnomes!” Ford exclaimed with joy, examining the little men. “Forest gnomes!”

“Walkin’ around like yer own the place. This is worse than February all over again.” One of the gnomes slurred in a gravelly voice, leaning on the other, holding an empty acorn cup in his hand. “Cupid’sssss – cupid’s marrow.”

“I think they’re drunk.” Bill commented, tilting his head at the gnomes.

“YOU’RE DRUNK!” The gnome yelled, pointing his tiny hand up at Bill vindictively, before falling over with the momentum.

“Oh, I wish.” Bill muttered to himself, watching the second gnome try to pull his brethren up off
the ground, his stalwart attempt causing them both to fall over and giggle themselves senseless, until they began to sob hysterically.

“What funny little creatures.” Ford observed, inching closer to the gnomes, pulling his journal and pen out from his coat pocket. “Say, what are your names?”

“Well I’m Gnorman, and this here is Gnevival.” Gnorman the gnome offered helpfully, in between sniffles.

“Why are you talking to them?” Gneville elbowed his friend in the chest callously. “They don’t know our pain. Just look at them! Swanning about like a couple of peas in a pod.” Shaking his fist, Gneville ominously reiterated. “A love pod!”

Bill recoiled at Gneville’s wording, his lip curling, disgusted by the insinuation, however Stanford was somewhat more empathetic.

“What pain? What’s wrong?” He questioned, crouching down beside the gnomes, curious.

“What’s wrong, he asks. Like the whole darn forest doesn’t know already.” Gnevival scowled, clutching onto his acorn cup like a lifeline.

“We just lost our Queen!” Gnorman confessed, his tone mournful and sombre.

“OUR QUEEN!” Gneville sobbed dramatically, falling to his knees.

“For 200 years we’ve had her guiding us, watching over the forest.” Gnorman continued.

“She was so beautiful.” Gneville sniffled on every word, an unfortunate dribble of snot trailing from his nose.

“And now she’s gone.” Gnorman took off his pointed red hat, only to reveal another hat underneath, holding the first hat in his hands woefully. “Cruelly taken from us, before her time.”

Ford was only half listening, pointing to the second hat under the first hat and looking at Bill, an excited grin on his face. Who knew that under a gnome’s hat was another hat? And what was beneath that hat, Ford wondered. The mysteries would never cease.

Bill smothered a laugh and cleared his throat awkwardly, amused by Ford’s enthusiastic reaction. Ford seemed to realise his giddy revelation wasn’t appropriate for the conversation at hand, and sobered up, polite concern returning to his voice.

“Oh, uh, what took her, if I may ask?”

“A fox probably.” Gnorman admitted in a matter of fact tone. “Or a boy scout, I’m guessing. One of the fat ones.”

“Our vendetta against the boy scouts will be a glorious recompense for their transgressions.” Gnevival shook his fist again, rage filling his tiny body.

“We found what was left of her by the babbling brook, in the enchanted part of the forest.” Gnorman put his hat back on his head, now wearing two hats once more. “Can’t say I’ve ever been much of a royalist, but with a tragedy like this, well. May her majestic soul finally rest in peace.”

“The enchanted part of the forest.” Bill rubbed his chin, then placed his left fist soundly in his right palm like an idea had occurred to him. “Say, either of you wouldn’t be able to take us there, would
you?"

Ford shot Bill a curious look, guessing what the muse was up to.

“To the enchanted forest? What business do you have there?” Gneville asked cautiously.

“Why, to pay our respects to the Queen of course!” Bill said brightly, dragging Sixer to stand up, hoping he’d play along. “And to raise a glass in commiseration.”

“We’re very sorry for your loss.” Ford offered his condolences, playing along with Bill’s plan. “Really, very sorry.”

Bill nodded emphatically, hoping the gnomes would buy this act he had Sixer sell so well. His desire to fall back on the gnome’s guidance was born of laziness, truthfully. He could have searched the forest for the unicorn’s hidden domain himself, using his sight to uncover their whereabouts but he honestly couldn’t be bothered, not now that he had a perfectly good patsy to lead the way.

“Well, we’re holding a wake at Gnasty’s Tavern.” Gnorman considered. “Nearly all of the creatures in the forest will be there.”

“What kinda creatures didja say you were again?” Gneville peered suspiciously up at the two men, gnomes not taking too kindly to humans.

“Well, we’re –” Ford began, explaining honestly before he was interrupted by Bill’s hand over his mouth.

“Wizards! We’re wizards.” Bill blurted out, flinging his arm around Sixer’s shoulder congenially, keeping his other hand plastered on Ford’s mouth. “Just passing through on our way to a … wizard convention. We’re not from around here, but we figured paying our respects to the gnome queen of the forest would be the least we could do.”

“I don’t believe yer wizards.” Gneville squinted up at Bill, taking in his yellow eyes and casual attire. They looked a lot like humans, two humans, or maybe four humans? Gneville had been hitting the honeysuckle hard today. “You look like humans.”

“Pccht.” Bill flapped his free hand at the gnomes dismissively, before bringing blue fire to dance in his palm. “Can a human do this?”

Gnorman and Gneville gave one another a conspiring glance, before they huddled together in whispered conversation, teaming up to reach a consensus.

Ford licked Bill’s hand, not liking being censored for the sake of a lie, and then bit the muse’s finger lightly, watching the way the muse blanched at that, colour soon chasing its way into Bill’s flustered expression. Bill removed his hand from Ford’s mouth, wiping it on Stanford’s coat with feigned disgust, sticking his tongue out dramatically, but Ford knew that he’d affected his muse yet again, despite the childish way Bill rebuffed him.

Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, not quite sure why he had to lie to the gnomes, why he was being roped into this, and Bill only tapped the side of his nose mysteriously in reply. Pointing to the gnomes, Bill indicated that they eavesdrop on the whispered conversation.

“Can a human do that?” Gneville asked his peer. “I ain’t been around the human part of the forest in a while.”
“You’re asking me? How am I supposed to know?”

“They look like humans, but I ain’t never seen a wizard before either.”

“Don’t wizards have pointy hats?” Gnorman asked, slyly watching Bill and Stanford, noting their hatless heads.

“It’s laundry day in the wizard dimension.” Bill said flatly, very aware that he was dealing with a pair of particularly idiotic gnomes. “All our hats are in the wash.”

The gnomes nodded and grumbled assent amongst themselves, muttered words like “laundry day” and “that makes sense” faintly audible.

Bill gave a very strained polite smile that didn’t reach his eyes, and Ford knew him well enough to tell that Bill found the gnomes entirely repugnant in their idiocy.

Ford smothered a laugh.

“Are you sure you’re wizards?” Gneville asked Bill suspiciously.

“Sure! You can ask anyone, heck, ask the invisible wizard! He’ll tell you!” Bill suggested with a grin.

Ford tried not to laugh, keeping his expression polite, nodding in tandem with Bill.

“Alright, we’ll take you to the tavern.” Gnorman decided, looking up to the two men and nodding.

“Excellent.” Bill’s polite grin continued, it almost looked painful.

“Best be off then. Got about a half an hour’s walk to get there, no use lollygagging.” Gneville slurred, gesturing with the acorn cup in his hand for the men to follow. “The funeral is waiting.”

Ford shared an amused look with Bill, watching the muse roll his eyes.

“Wizards?” Ford mouthed, finding Bill’s lie somewhat humorous now that it had settled.

“You don’t want to know how they treat humans this far into the forest. Trust me Sixer, it’s better that they don’t know.”

Ford shot Bill a considering look, before snorting laughter to himself, shaking his head.

“Wizards.”

Despite the wintery chill that gripped the rest of the forest, the further Ford went, following the gnomes guiding him in, the more temperate the woods seemed to be regardless of seasonal weather patterns.

Purple flowers poked out from behind every rock or bushel, languorous willow trees draped their hanging vines down elegantly left and right, creeping ivy that should have been stifling the other
plant life entwined sinuously around every tree trunk. Fluttering butterflies spent their three day lifespan decadently buffeting about on the balmy breeze that seemed incredibly out of place this far into November.

It was a drastic change from the rest of the forest. Ford would have asked why the temperature seemed so disjointed from the natural order of things, but Bill disliked hearing Ford talk about the natural order of anything, even in conjecture, and the gnomes were already suspicious of Ford.

They clearly didn’t like humans, if the vicious muttering was anything to go by.

Midway through the walk to the enchanted forest the gnomes led Ford and Bill past a group of humans; lumberjacks and laborers, who were excavating below ground in a particular part of the woods.

It was strange, Ford had never seen laborers in the forest on any business other than lumber, but these construction workers seemed to be digging out the earth underneath a particularly rigid redwood, tractors and diggers manoeuvring metal panes and scaffolding down there, creating some sort of subterranean structure.

“That’s what I’m talkin’ bout. Disrespectful humans ripping up the land with their metal monsters, doin’ whatever they please regardless of the consequences.” Gneville muttered venomously. “Need somethin’ to teach them a lesson.”

“Steve’s on holiday, or else he’d do it.” Gnorman nodded, glaring at the tractors.

“Who’s Steve?” Ford had to ask, curious.

“He lurks.” Gneville grunted in reply. “He guards the forest, and strikes his hand out against those who defy him.”

“Big leafy man.” Bill mouthed at Ford, explaining. “I was going to introduce you, but you were too busy vacuuming.”

“Oh.” Ford replied, somewhat miffed now that he’d missed the opportunity to meet this elusive forest guardian.

“He might come back from Alaska after the solstice.” Gnorman shrugged. “You never know how long his holidays take though. Took him forever to come back after his trip to Honolulu.”

“Tell him I said aloha.” Bill nodded, grinning.

“Gesundheit.” Gnorman commented, and continued walking.

Ford dawdled, trying to peer through the trees at the construction. “I wonder what they’re working on.”

Bill pursed his lips and eyed off the workers silently, saying nothing, before shrugging dismissively. “Probably nothing important.”

They walked on, but Ford couldn’t help but crane his neck to watch as the construction workers used a crane to lower a spiral staircase into the ground, bracketing the tree trunk.

A mystery for another day, perhaps.
The soundscape of the forest was less crunching decomposing leaves underfoot and more idyllic birdcall and chiming laughter after a while. Apparently, the laughter was courtesy of the babbling brook, a little hysterical on this specific occasion of mourning. Grief affects all things in different ways. A few of the more intoxicated gnomes had already begun picking fights with the river over the perceived slight against their dead queen.

Gnorman and Gneville led Bill and Ford to a mossy clearing, pointing to the tree trunk that housed Gnasty’s Tavern.

“So here’s the wake. If you wanted to pay your respects. Come in for a drink. That sort of thing.” Gnorman gestured towards the tavern door, the tavern proper set within the rather broad tree trunk.

There were creatures of every variety loitering around this part of the forest, sharing drinks and condolences.

Ford’s fingers were itching for his pen, eager to jot down sketches of everything and everyone present, wanting to interview the creatures for his studies. As they were mourning it seemed to be in somewhat poor taste though, so Ford restrained himself, barely.

There were fairies and gnomes, squirrels and scampfires, river monsters dripping wet trails of mud across the forest floor, ents bending down to raise a glass, a creature that seemed to be composed of many bears conversing with a humanoid mothman hiding in the shadows. Ford saw giant elks grazing beside intimidatingly large wolves, who were howling their grief out to the daytime sky, spider-like beings who blinked with many eyes, clinking glasses of suspiciously thick wine with cape wearing vampires.

Creatures of every kind, a supernatural feast for the eyes.

Stanford felt privately blessed that he was able to be here, the sole human amidst a crowd of magical others, attending this conglomerate of weird through virtue of being in the right place at the right time.

Through virtue of following Bill here.

To think, if Bill hadn’t suggested this outing he’d be stuck back home, testing out his electro-static rug prototype. Ford never felt more grateful for bringing his muse down to earth than he did at this moment, surrounded with peculiar specimens to observe.

Ford’s attention trailed off, away from Bill and the gnomes, unable to help himself, his curiosity pulling at him like a magnet, walking over to peer at a small group of mer-people at the edge of the river, sharing condolences with the stickmen.

Bill whistled, sounding impressed. “Gee, looks like everyone’s here. Or nearly everyone. Where are your obnoxious land narwhales?”

“The unicorns?” Gneville snorted. “Prissy stuck up whinniers. Like they give a damn about the queen of the forest. They’re too busy sticking their horns in the air, fawning over their own reflections. Too busy to be a part of this community.”

“So, they’re not here.” Bill concluded sourly. “Figures.”
“They can take a long walk off a short toadstool for all I care.” Gneville threw his empty acorn cup at the grass. “Good for nothing asshats.”

Crouching down to squat at Gneville’s level, Bill picked up the discarded acorn cup and passed it back to the gnome, snapping his fingers and refilling the cup with a peculiar sparkling liquid.

Speaking softly, so as not to draw Sixer’s attention away from the mer-folk, Bill asked.

“Say, you wouldn’t know where I could find them, would you? The unicorns. So I can drag them out by their ears to pay their respects to the queen.”

Gneville sniffed the liquid filling his cup suspiciously, before taking a sip, smacking his lips.

“Fairy wine. This is good.”

Gnorman looked between Bill and Gneville, concern flickering over his small face. “You aren’t going to start trouble with the unicorns, are you? I mean, sure they’re assholes, but only the pure of heart can cross into their realm, and if you go there to pick a fight with them –“

“Then I’ll be doing the forest a favour, honestly.” Bill countered, conjuring another acorn cup of fairy wine, passing it to Gnorman. “You just have to point out the way and I’ll take care of the rest. They insulted your queen by not being here. Are you really telling me you’re willing to let that slide?”

“No…” Gneville grunted and chucked back his acorn cup of fairy wine, drinking the lot, not wanting to let an insult against his queen slide.

“This isn’t the day for it buddy.” Gnorman spoke up, staring uncertainly at his own proffered cup of fairy wine. “Sure, by all means, teach the unicorns a lesson, but not to—“

“What’s a funeral without unnecessary violence?” Bill cajoled, grinning wickedly at the gnomes. “It’ll be great for morale. A fitting tribute!”

“Are you sure you’re a wizard?” Gnorman questioned, seeming to properly take in Bill’s more inhuman features now that he had the opportunity to look. Bill’s yellow slitted eyes and venomous grin reminded the gnome of a particularly dangerous snake in the grass, or other nightmare of the forest, and suddenly he was having reservations about bringing him into the heart of the enchanted glade.

“Drink your fairy wine.” Bill prodded the acorn cup up to Gnorman’s lips with his index finger, spilling the beverage on him callously. “Don’t ask questions you don’t want answers to. Either you or your friend here take me to the unicorns, or this funeral is about to have a whole lot more unnecessary violence, all because you couldn’t show a poor wayward traveller around. You wouldn’t want that, now would you?”

“You aren’t here to pay your respects to the queen at all.” Gnorman spluttered, wiping wine off his cheeks. Putting his little fists up, Gnorman snarled at Bill. “You tricked us.”

“I could peel your skin off and turn you inside out before you can say untimely death, so you just put your little hands down and do what I say.” Bill smiled sweetly at the frightened gnome, and Gnorman wiped the fairy wine off his chin, fear infecting his demeanour now.

He’d brought this strange malicious creature into the forest, and the gravity of his actions were beginning to dawn on him.

“Bill, Bill, you won’t believe what I heard the mer-folk saying. There’s a monarchy in the ocean
and –“Ford divulged excitedly, making his way back to the muse, eager to show Bill all the exciting things he discovered.

His eyes took in the two gnomes, one staring down at his empty cup of fairy wine with a grim expression, the other wringing alcohol from his beard, frowning. Realising that he seemed to have interrupted somewhat of a tense moment, he paused, blinking, thinking he’d walked in on a private instance of mourning for the gnomes, that Bill was empathising with their plight, crouched down like that, talking with them.

“Is everything alright?” Ford asked, concerned.

“Everything’s peachy Sixer.” Bill grinned up at his human and clapped Gnorman on the back congenially, tugging the gnome close to his side. “Gnomo here was just about to show us the domain of the unicorns. Want to tag along?”

“Unicorns!” Ford enthused, and beamed at Bill, impressed that the muse had already managed to figure out a way to locate the materials they’d need for the protection spell, more than a little giddy that he’d get the opportunity to study these creatures. He felt like a kid at a candy store. He patted down his coat, searching for his journal, overjoyed by the opportunity. Within two seconds he already had a pen in his hand, grinning from ear to ear.

“I’ll take that as a yes.” Bill’s lips were twisted into a bemused smile, his eyes lit up with mirth at Ford’s eagerness. It was rather adorable.

Gnorman held himself rather rigid, but watched Bill grin up at the other man, sensing a weakness there. While the yellow eyed wizard was certainly sinister, the other wizard seemed more naïve and open hearted, and the way that the yellow eyed wizard smiled up at his friend told Gnorman that the evil wizard had a blind spot for the brown-haired man a mile long.

Gnorman watched Bill stand up and reach to entwine his hands around Sixer’s scarf possessively, winding the scarf around his wrists to pull the brown haired man in closer to whisper in his ear.

From the way the brown haired man nodded and smiled at the evil wizard, pushing his glasses up his nose, it was clear that regardless of how open hearted or pure the man was, he was on the evil wizard’s side, so Gnorman had no choice but to lead them through the forest.

Though if they were looking to meet with the unicorns, they had another thing coming.

One hell of a headache.

In the clearing amidst a topple of ritual structures, Ford eagerly scribbled sketches into his journal. He sat atop one of the mossy stones inscribed with strange spiralling patterns while Bill questioned the gnomes, adding cross-hatching to his drawing of the stone-henge-esque circle of rock they were adjacent to.

“What do you mean this is it? Where are the unicorns?” Bill stood with his hands on his hips, scowling down at the two gnomes.
“This is the domain of the unicorns.” Gnorman pointed out. “Not just anyone gets to see them. They don’t show that door of theirs to every passing mushroom salesman.”

“I don’t care about mushroom salesmen. I want in.” Bill’s chin jutted out stubbornly and he bent down, lowering his voice to an intimidating whisper. “Show me how to get my foot in the door, and maybe I won’t kill you painfully for wasting my time.”

“The door will only open for the quest of one who is pure of heart!” Gnorman said loudly, throwing his voice so Stanford could hear him. Smirking up at Bill, Gnorman stroked his beard. “So fat chance getting in on your own.”

“A quest did you say?” Sixer called out from over by the rock, his curiosity piqued.

Bill huffed out a frustrated sigh, and shot Gnorman a look. “This isn’t over.” Bill hissed at the gnome, pointing menacingly, before hearing the approaching crunch of Sixer’s shoes on the grass, pasting a pleasant expression on, turning around to face the scientist.

“Bill, we’re on a quest.” Ford said brightly, feeling like he was living out a D&D & more D game right this very second. “To gather ingredients for the protection spell. The quest to protect our shack. They’ve got to let us in.”

Bill put his hands together and grimaced. “But you see, the parameters for ‘pure of heart’ are so narrow – completely arbitrary honestly. The chances of either one of us fitting into such a pre-defined relative set of moral scruples, I mean with respectability politics being what they are these days there’s literally no way we could appease these –“

“But we have to try Bill.” Ford urged the muse, gripping his pen, optimism and enthusiasm for a quest of his own making him impassioned in the moment. Turning to the gnomes, Ford asked. “How do we summon this door?”

Bill face-palmed, Sixer’s naïveté both adorable and potentially damaging. Then again, if Bill couldn’t get through the door, that wasn’t to say Sixer couldn’t finish the job for him. The question is, would Sixer be ruthless enough to be able to do what it takes.

“To summon the door to the unicorn’s domain, one must utter an ancient chant, sung by the druids of old.” Gnorman recited with a smug smile. “Only the richest baritone can pierce through the veil between dimensions.”

“What’s the chant?” Ford questioned, determination in his tone, walking over to the gnomes.

“Sixer, it’s too deep for you.” Bill cautioned.

“My voice is deep.” Ford insisted, partially offended.

“It’s not that deep.” Bill countered realistically.

“It’s deep enough.” Ford said defensively, clearing his throat, before repeating himself in a lower tenor. “It’s deep enough.”

“Still not deep enough.” Gneville grunted out, scratching his fuzzy beard.

“How deep is it supposed to be?” Ford asked indignantly.

“When it sounds like you swallow rocks for breakfast, you’re getting there.” Gnorman explained gleefully.
“Damn.” Ford frowned, not willing to change his diet so drastically for results. He much preferred eating toast. “Bill, you do the chant.”

“Sixer, I’m stuck singing soprano and you know it.” Bill held his hand on his chest delicately. “Until the day I can rip out these vocal chords you made me and build them anew I’m not winning any awards for druid karaoke.”

“Then how are we supposed to summon the door?” Ford lamented, his enchanted quest being cut short before it even started.

“Unless our pointy hatted friends can help us, there’s nothing we can do.” Bill smiled expectantly at the gnomes, turning to face them.

Ford turned around as well, and crouched down beside the gnomes to beseech them earnestly for their help. While he did that, Bill stood behind Ford and ran a finger across his throat, gesturing menacingly to the little men.

“Please, is there anything you can do to help us? We need to speak with the unicorns and ask for some of their hair to protect something very important. Any help you can give us would be greatly appreciated.”

Staring up at Bill’s threatening gesture, Gnorman gulped and elbowed Gneville sharply.

“Gneville can do the chant. He eats rocks for breakfast! His voice is deep enough.”


“Well let’s get this road on the show then. We haven’t got all day.” Bill crossed his arms impatiently, while Ford shook Gnorman and Gneville’s little hands gratefully.

“Thank you.” Ford shook the gnomes hand one last time before standing up, grabbing his journal, ready to transcribe the chant down.

Gneville cleared his throat, hoiking back phlegm, then spat on the ground, heaving his little trousers up before he began to chant.

The druidic chant was low and resonant, a guttural sound from the back of Gneville’s throat, and as the chant continued, Ford jotting down every syllable of it, the ground began to quake.

The earth rumbled, rising up around the pillars of the stone henge, lifting out of the dirt to form walls.

Ford could see it now.

The stone-henge was the scaffolding for the walls of the unicorn’s domain, purple moss and flowers growing over the rising dirt to complete the aesthetic. A giant golden door stood blatant in the middle of it all, studded with gaudy pink gems, dainty vines curling around the stone pillars, sunlight filtering through the meadow, offsetting the sparkling glitter that seemed to rain down in the immediate vicinity.

Blinking glitter out of his eyes, wiping his glasses on his scarf, Ford stared at the enormous door, a gateway into a different dimension if Gnorman’s throwaway comment was to be believed. He gaped at the doorway for several seconds longer before scrambling for his pen, sketching out the basic structure.
Bill set his hands on his hips, surveying the gateway. “Great, so now we just stroll in, yank out a handful each, and be on our way.”

“You don’t want to ask them first, before you start ripping out hair from a mythical creature’s head?” Ford chided Bill, frowning at him over the top of his journal. “Just taking the hair makes this less of a quest and more of a theft Bill.”

“Same difference.” Bill shrugged, then gestured to the door. “If you want to reason with them, be my guest, but I’ll have you know that whole mystical benevolence bullshit is just an act. This isn’t like your fanciful board game.”

“You’re just saying that.” Ford waved his hand at Bill dismissively, too engaged in his ‘real life quest’. He set off towards the door.

“It’s true you know! Unicorns are unbearably pretentious. They’ll only mess with you Sixer. You’ve got to be firm and decisive.” Bill insisted, following Ford.

“Fine, then I will very firmly and decisively ask them for a lock of hair.” Ford maintained, reaching his hand out for the door. “Not snatch first and ask questions later. It doesn’t hurt to be polite Bill.”

Bill clutched at his temples and raked his fingers through his hair in frustration. “Rrgghh. Fine, try it your way, but don’t come crying to me when I’m right and you’re wrong.”

The gnomes stood beside a purple toadstool, settling in to watch this play out. Gnorman crossed his arms and elbowed Gneville, snickering, though the alcohol seemed to be catching up with Gneville, making the other gnome drowsy. Ford pushed the heavy gilt door open, and butterflies leaked out through the gap, briefly obscuring the scientist’s first glimpse into the domain of the unicorns.

The glitter seemed to intensify if that was even possible, the swarm of butterflies buffeting the sparkling substance around, refracting light in a rather blinding manner.

The revealed enchanted domain was idyllic, dotted with magic mushrooms and pink and purple toadstools, a clear sparkling river cutting through the charming landscape, sprinkled with lily pads. Inscribed stone monuments lined the walls, archways continuing through the middle of the realm like an aqueduct. A waterfall flowed down the side of one of these stone structures, sending scientifically improbable rainbows bouncing off every surface.

In the middle of the clearing, perched on a rock, sat one of the unicorns, resting with its eyes closed. The unicorn was a pale purple hue, with lavish rainbow hair cascading down from its mane. It seemed to have patterns tattooed onto it’s flank, flowers and stars detailed on the creature’s well-groomed coat. The unicorn seemed to be sleeping, a faun sitting nearby it, playing a lullaby for the creature on the pan pipes.

Ford stepped through the gateway, eyes wide, taking everything in. This seemed a great deal like the illustrations he’d seen on the special edition box set of Dungeons, Dungeons and More Dungeons: the Mini-Novella series, and he marvelled at the accuracy of the illustrators. Had they glimpsed into this mysterious land before?

Noting the sleeping unicorn right in plain sight, Ford waved his hand at Bill, urging the muse follow him in, given their objective was right in front of them. Ford was almost tempted to see if he could remove a small sample of the unicorn’s hair now to study, if the creature wouldn’t allow him a sample while awake.
Bill was usually right about these things, but Ford didn’t want to believe that the unicorns were simply pretentious time wasters. He’d played enough D&D & more D to know that if his quest was honourable the unicorns would surely assist him. He may have been indulging in fantasy somewhat today, but he couldn’t help it, the day had just been so awe inspiring already, seeing all the creatures of the forest gathered together like that.

He was in anomalous researcher heaven.

“Bill, come on.” Ford whispered, turning back to look at his muse, who stood just outside the door wearing a reserved expression. “It’s right there.”

“So? Snatch and run Sixer, we don’t have all day.”

“You’re not coming?” Ford gave Bill a confused look, noting the way the muse was pursing his lips, toeing the line of the gateway hesitantly.

When Bill said nothing, Ford seemed to realise that the ‘pure of heart’ stipulation could have been what was holding the muse at bay.

Bill had mentioned earlier today that he’d spent time in prison in the past due to a broken justice system, and that sort of criminal branding was sure to inflict some substantial self-esteem issues. It was clear the muse thought that the unicorn’s judgement would reflect poorly on him and somehow change Ford’s opinion of him, but Ford knew that Bill’s heart was in the right place, even if his moral scruples were somewhat grey from a human’s perspective.

Bill had always done right by Ford, despite sometimes making things more difficult than they needed to be, and Ford was coming to trust Bill, begrudgingly. The opinion of a fancy horned horse wasn’t likely to change that any time soon.

“Come on.” Ford reached out for Bill’s arm and pulled him through the gateway impatiently, hoping to reassure Bill with his actions rather than admit something far too sentimental.

Yanked through the doorway, stumbling slightly, the moment Bill’s foot landed in the unicorn’s realm the pink gems studding the stone monument began flashing red like an ambulance siren. The faun playing the pan pipes responded accordingly to Bill’s intrusion and blared out a loud staccato alarm, blowing his pipe with his cheeks puffed out, striving to waking the unicorns.

Bill winced, and tried to back out of the door again, Sixer’s hand on his arm stopping his retreat. Ford seemed just as astonished by the blaring sirens as Bill was, startled by the loud noises and bright lights. It all seemed rather unnecessary.

Waking sharply from its slumber, the unicorn stood, pointing its long pearlescent horn at Bill, stamping the ground indignantly.

“You do not belong here!” The unicorn whinnied, speaking without moving its mouth. Its horn glowed in time with its words, its tone stern. “You are not welcome in our realm. We want you gone! Now! Leave!”

Looking up at the flashing gems, somewhat disgruntled, Bill muttered. “Yeesh, talk about overkill.”

“Please, wait.” Ford held his arm out, standing in front of Bill. “We came here looking for help. A favour.”

“We do no favours for his kind.” The unicorn snorted out an angry breath, still pawing at the
“So what if I walk on the grass, like you’re any better!” Bill yelled back at the unicorns stubbornly, trying to point at them from behind Sixer.

Ford turned around and placed his hand on Bill’s shoulder. “Bill, maybe it’s best if I take care of this. Picking a fight with them will do nothing, and it’s obvious they have their prejudices.”

Bill squinted at Ford, before his eyes widened in comprehension. Momentarily stunned to realise it, it seemed the scientist was on his side.

Ford assumed the unicorns had their own personal prejudices against him, rather than simply being able to sense a complete lack of inbuilt moral compass, and it was unusually gratifying to think that Ford could think so highly of Bill, enough to defend him and believe in him, to assume these allegations of impurity were unfounded, rather than be suspicious by default.

The rest of the multi-verse never saw fit to give Bill the benefit of the doubt there, purity was a moot concept for Bill, having only been called the lowest of the low by his sanctimonious enemies. It was almost overwhelming to think that Sixer would side with Bill on principle due to the affection he held for him, and Bill was touched. That was a valuable trait.

It rankled Bill though, to have to march right back out of the gateway as soon as he walked in, and he was sure those smug gnomes would be waiting. He thought of gnome barbeques and other impure thoughts, before conceding to his human’s wishes.

“Fine. But don’t let them trick you Sixer, or try to tell you that you don’t deserve their precious hair. It’s their word against yours, when it comes to morality plays. They can’t tell you that you’re unworthy of what you need when all they do is sit around and pose all day. We’re doing this to protect the portal.” Bill looked up at Ford with more vehemence than necessary, something Ford mistook for romantic sentiment. “And for what it’s worth, you are far more deserving than they are.”

Touched by Bill’s statement, unfettered by concern for who would see them, given the only witnesses to his affection were unicorns and gnomes, Ford leaned forward and pressed a tender kiss to Bill’s forehead.

“Wait for me. I’ll make sure I get that hair for us.”

Heat tickled Bill’s insides with that fond affectionate gesture, the underlying worship implicit drenching Bill in magical energy. Watching Sixer with an enthralled expression, finding his human’s confidence fascinating, Bill nodded briefly before backing out the doorway, across the dimensional threshold until he was back in the clearing.

The alarms stopped abruptly, and the peaceful panpipe music resumed.

Ford waved amiably to Bill for a moment, seeking to reassure the muse. Bill managed a brief smile and a wave back before the heavy golden door slammed shut in Bill’s face.

Ford could hear Bill squawk indignantly from beyond the wall.

“Now tell us, human.” The unicorn spoke up. “Why should we assist you when you keep such foul company? When you fraternize with such a dark impure creature?”

“That’s not – hrm.” Pursing his lips at the insult to his muse, Ford took a deep breath, clenching his fist, before letting that breath out, hoping to remain calm. Polite, even if the unicorns couldn’t
be. Clearing his throat, Ford tried to appeal to the unicorns. “Because … I’m on… a quest to retrieve your hair for a protection spell.”

The unicorn levelled an unimpressed look at Ford, and so Stanford decided to dramatically raise the stakes in order to win the creature over.

“The fate of the world depends on completing this protection spell. The fate of many worlds in fact. You’d only need to share a little hair. It looks like you have more than enough to spare.”

“Just because we unicorns have the most beautiful and bounteous hair, that doesn’t mean just anyone can have a strand. We have standards you know.” The purple unicorn shook its mane out, turning its long nose up at Ford. “And after coming in here with that thing there’s very little you could do to convince us that you are deserving.”

“What will it take then? To change your mind. It really is crucial you grant me a lock of your hair. I won’t be taking no for an answer.” Ford said resolutely, optimistically.

“Presumptuous.” The unicorn snorted, before glancing down at the faun, sharing a mocking look with the little creature, then looking back up to Ford, eyeing him up and down dismissively. “We only give hair to the worthy. Unless you can prove your worth, then you will take no for an answer, and walk away empty handed.”

Ford thought on that for a while, rubbing his chin, considering a viable alternative. “Maybe I can prove my worth. If we remove morality or morality by association from the equation, you’ll find that I have other talents and virtues that make me worthy of your hair.” Ford began listing his virtues like he was writing a resume. “I can invent something I’m sure you’ll find use for. Or fix something, or find a smoother way to do things around here. Find solutions! I’m quite qualified, I actually have 12 PHDs. I’m quite intellectually gifted. There must be something I can do for you to persuade you to see things my way.”

“Oh, an intellectual, are you?” The unicorn tittered, and trotted back to sit upon the stone by the river. “Haven’t heard that one before. Of course, anyone who thinks highly of themselves could call themselves an intellectual these days.”

“Well, that’s debatable.” Ford countered, pushing his glasses up his nose. “But I can’t speak for everyone you’ve come across. In terms of IQ however, you’ll find –”

“NEIGH!” The unicorn huffed and turned its nose up, pointing a hoof at Ford imperiously. “You have relied upon your brain your entire life, smarty-pants, and to prove your worthiness you must be challenged not in terms of brain, but brawn!”

“Excuse me?” Ford questioned, hardly believing he’d just been neighed at by a unicorn for recounting his IQ score, called ‘smarty-pants’ for it. He hadn’t heard that one since grade school.

“A challenge!!! I decree a challenge!!!” The unicorn whinnied, its histrionics calling other unicorns to come out from the edge of the trees, snorting at Ford, stamping their hooves in unison.

“A challenge! A challenge!” The other unicorns chanted, and Ford felt his baffled disbelief rise to suit the occasion. “Challenge the smarty-pants! A challenge!”

“Um…” Ford raised his finger, intending to object.

“The challenge is thus, if you choose to accept it!” The purple unicorn decreed, pointing it’s horn at Ford. “You may have a lock of my hair, IF and only if, you win a test of strength against one of our kind. Against our champion!”
Ford looked around at the gathering circle of unicorns, still mentally stuck on the fact that he’d been challenged to some sort of show of force by these creatures all because they didn’t want to meet him intellectually. Brawn, not brains? Primary school insults? What dimension was this?

Ford supposed that unicorns, judging from their appearances in mythology and classical literature, mostly dealt with knights, not scholars, and reconsidered his previous disbelief, though being circled by a herd of unicorns, the majority of which were still chanting ‘challenge the smarty-pants’ at him, brought his disbelief right back full circle.

“Um.” Ford tried again. “Are you sure we can’t settle this over a game of chess?”

“NEEEEEEEIIIIGGGGGGGGGGGGGHHHHHHHHHHHHHHH!” The purple unicorn declared dramatically, waving its head back and forth for emphasis.

“Oh, well, alright then, I guess.” Ford frowned at the unicorn, the allure of supposedly inhabiting a D&D & More D game wearing off somewhat now that he came to realise that Bill was right about the unicorns, they were extravagantly frustrating to reason with. Thanks to his boxing history and regular workout regimen he figured he was in good stead to at least attempt meeting this challenge of brawn over brains, but he didn’t have to like it. “What test of strength?”

“Hrmmm.” The unicorn paused, before holding it’s hoof up. “I must confer with my brethren. Wait here, smarty-pants, for our final verdict.”

“My name is Stanford.” Ford felt he had to offer, growing rather tired of being called ‘Smarty-pants’. He was wearing jeans, this was ridiculous. “By the way.”

The unicorns ignored him and formed a circle, all whispering and snickering to one another, occasionally glancing over at him before the giggling would start anew.

This was far more humiliating than Ford had anticipated. This was supposed to be a gallant quest, it was turning out more like some sort of ironic farce.

While the unicorns conferred, Ford wondered how Bill was doing on the other side of the wall.

“He’s been in there for hours already!” Bill moaned, lying face down on the forest floor, making cinders of the grass in his frustration. Waiting patiently didn’t suit him, and he’d thrown an epic tantrum on and off throughout the past several hours sitting outside the golden doors. He’d practically gone through the entire Kübler-Ross model, denial, anger, bargaining, depression, more bargaining with a non-sentient door. Acceptance wasn’t quite due just yet, it wasn’t Bill’s style.

“Time passes differently in the realm of the unicorns.” Gnorman offered helpfully, unable to do much else but listen to Bill’s little tantrum, having been hurled hat first into the nearest pine tree like a dart, left dangling five foot up the tree trunk.

“You think I don’t know that? Of course I know that.” Bill snapped, sitting up, his face covered in ashes. Pointing at Gnorman threateningly, Bill huffed. “Don’t think I won’t use you for target practise, Gnorma, because I am sorely tempted.”
Gnorman shrugged, and rolled his eyes, crossing his little arms. The gnome could only watch horizontally as Bill began chewing his nails, observing the unmoving door to the realm of the unicorns, hating being this helpless.

“What are they doing in there?”

“Look, stressing over this isn’t helping you. Why don’t you go back to the tavern? Have a drink? Try not to kill anything.” Gnorman tried again, bending over, placing his feet on the bark of the tree, trying to heave his hat out of the wood. He struggled for a while, the point of his hat dug in deep by Bill’s throw. “If the spider-people can get along peacefully in the forest, I’m sure whatever sort of evil thing you are can too, and besides, we’re missing the wake.”

“I don’t care about your stupid wake, I want to know what’s going on in there.” Bill insisted, dusting the ash off his face. “Besides, Sixer could come out any second now.”

Bill stared at the door hopefully, waiting.

“Aaaaany second now.”

The door didn’t move. A butterfly leisurely flapped its way across the clearing, taunting Bill with its agonisingly slow pace.

“Any second.”

Bill glared at the door, waiting for Sixer to come out, but nothing happened.

“If I may just say, a watched pot never boils so – UWAAAAAAAAH!”

Bill yanked Gnorman out of the tree with his telekinesis and hurled him across the clearing to land smack bang on the golden door. The door rattled, but stayed closed, Gnorman sliding down the metal slowly.

“This is taking too long!” Bill seethed, his hands curled into fists at his side, shaking with impatience and rage.

“My gnose is broken.” Gnorman wheezed, falling flat onto his back in the grass.

Marching over to the door, Bill picked up Gnorman by his beard, gripping the coarse hair in his fist, pointing at said broken (g)nose. “I want to know what’s happening in there and I want to know now.”

“So, you go in there, and set off every alarm they have. That’ll serve you right.” Gnorman spat at Bill rebelliously.

“Or you go in there and find out for me.” Bill countered, glaring at the impetuous gnome. “I could toss you over the top of the gate.”

“If you toss me in there I ain’t coming back.” Gnorman countered. “You couldn’t pay me enough toadstools for that.”

Bill dropped the gnome in disgust, frustrated.

The god was exceptionally talented at making enemies when left alone for too long, and as his mood began to sour his outbursts intensified. If he weren’t bound by the runes on this body, he’d be able to teach that gnome exactly who he was dealing with, but with his powers stifled like so he
was forced to play along. To make nice. He paced for a while, angry at himself, knowing he’d alienated the only miserable life form here who could assist him, before turning back to point at the gnome who was slowly picking himself up from the ground, wincing in pain.

“You don’t have the option to be sassy with me right now. I could end you gnome!” Bill glared at Gnorman, resorting to threats. Making nice also wasn’t his style.

“You know what, my queen is gone, Gneville’s run off somewhere, drunk as a skunk, and I think my gnose is broken. What else do I have to lose? Just do it already!” Gnorman held his arms out, indicating for Bill to have at him.

Bill scowled at the gnome and curled his finger back into a fist, pouting. This gnome was too stupid to understand the concept of self-preservation apparently. Definitely too stupid to be genuinely nihilistic.

“But you won’t do it, will you. Because you need help, and you’re stuck out here with nothing to do but wait for your wizard buddy to come out and save the day or die trying.” Gnorman sneered at Bill contemptuously.

“Sixer isn’t going to die.” Bill countered defensively, crossing his arms.

“You never know. Trampled by unicorns is one hell of an obituary statement.”

“Oh, what do you know, your queen was eaten by boy scouts!” Bill snapped at the gnome, and brought his hand to his mouth again, chewing on his nails once more, staring at the gold door.

Gnorman watched Bill fret for a while longer, shaking his head at the strange sight of it all. An evil thing fretting over a pure hearted soul. It was ludicrous.

Gnorman dusted himself off and made to leave, hobbling over towards the forest’s edge. He made it about three feet away before he felt himself lifted by a strange tingling magic, spun around again to face the strange wizard.

“Where do you think you’re going? We still have to figure out a way to get in there.”

Gnorman sighed. “I told you, I ain’t doing nothing for you. Get yourself in there.”

“I can’t, I’ll set off the stupid morality alarms.” Bill huffed, and crossed his arms, rubbing his chin, trying to think of a way around this. “Could you get in there?”

“I told you, if I’m going in there, I’m not coming back. Not if you’re sitting here waiting.” Gnorman crossed his arms, turning his chin up at Bill.

“But you could get in there.” Bill mused, an idea formulating.

Sixer had unbound two bricks for him back in the clearing, and he’d discovered one of his newfound powers. It may be wishful thinking, but if the second brick unbound the power he needed here, he could be on his way to a solution.

Closing his eyes, trying something, Bill attempted to project his consciousness into the floating gnome’s body, intending to push his way into the little creature’s brain long enough to convey a message at least.

Gnorman snorted and writhed, kicking his little legs ineffectually in the air, twitching like he was undergoing some sort of seizure, and Bill’s tattoos glowed bright yellow with the effort it took to
pull this off.

Focusing his entire being into the act, Bill stood stock still, forcing his consciousness into the tiny space inside the gnome’s head, fighting with Gnorman’s agency until he was able to completely overpower it and open his new puppet’s eyes, blinking golden slitted pupils out into the world.

Looking up at himself from this perspective was bizarre.

He could control both the vessel Sixer made for him, and the little gnome puppet he currently inhabited, staring at himself from inside both heads. The power unbound with that last brick was golden. The best power in Bill’s entire retinue.

Possession.

“Huh.”

Bill dropped the gnome puppet on the ground, and felt himself land on the grass, small bones rickety and throbbing with a dull pain.

That’d be from being hurled across the clearing for kicks, Bill reasoned, hardly regretting his tempered outbursts.

The pain was pleasant, actually. It cleared his head, and it wasn’t such a violation to experience debilitating pain in a body that wasn’t his own.

Shaking out his little legs, bending them at the knee and feeling the muscle strain delightfully, Bill reached up to feel the bent structure of his pointed hat, patting out the creases.

“Huh.” Bill said again, looking down at himself staring back up from the gnome’s eyes. Bill watched the gnome puppet’s hands run all over the new body he possessed, checking every detail, before resting uncomfortably on the brown bushy beard the gnome possessed.

“Ugh.” Bill recoiled, narrowing his eyes, and he watched as the little gnome seemed to reel squeamishly away from itself, wiping tiny hands against the strange unfashionable sort of overall garb the gnome wore. “Disgusting.”

Reaching down to pick up the puppet body, Bill lifted himself off the ground, marvelling at the bizarre sensation of it all. Apart from the beard this was the kind of mind bending weirdness that Bill loved.

The unicorn’s domain didn’t allow any creature that wasn’t pure of heart to enter their realm (and honestly it took a hell of a lot to render something impure of heart – most of those unicorns were assholes and they still got to live there) but Bill reasoned if he went in as a different creature, he wouldn’t trip the sensors. Technically it’d still be Gnorman’s heart passing through the doors, Bill would just be hitching a ride in the back of his head.

Smiling at himself, the expression coming off as rather forced on the gnome (Gnorman’s squashed consciousness was screaming relentlessly in the back of his mind) Bill nodded at the puppet body.

“Well, see you on the other side, me!” Bill said cheerily, before cranking his arm back and hurling the puppet body over the top of the doorway, his split consciousness careening, wind whipped, through the air, the body’s little gnome cheeks flapping in the g-force.

Standing in front of the golden door Bill heard and felt the thud of the gnome puppet landing in the enchanted realm, and was pleased to note that this little reach around didn’t trip the morality
sensors the unicorns employed.

Excellent.

Bill sat down cross legged on the grass and closed his eyes, choosing to channel his focus into the puppet body for the time being.

He needed to check in on Sixer.

The rhythmic chanting and stomping of hooves felt like some sort of arcane ritual at first, but the longer it went on the more Ford felt like he was stuck seated in the middle of some sort of incredibly rowdy football game, with a crowd that jeered louder than most sports fans.

The ear-piercing whinnies were incredibly distracting, as were the nickering sounds the magical horses let out when they wanted to be particularly annoying.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

All in all, it made it rather hard to concentrate on the task at hand. Or rather at hoof.

Arm wrestling.

“Lizabethabrawn is gonna put you in the dirt human!”

“Just give in already smarty pants!”

Ford’s brow twitched at the asinine nickname, but remained steadfast, grasping Lizabethabrawn’s hoof, flexing his bicep as he struggled to overpower the unicorn.

This was proving a more taxing challenge than Ford anticipated. But he was determined to succeed. He would not lose to that disturbingly muscular pink unicorn. He would not.

He had to win. It wasn’t just about the shack. It was a matter of honour now. It was about dignity, respect, about beating these mulish beasts who thought smarty-pants was an insult.

“Hey.” A small voice sounded out from beside the tree trunk where Ford and Lizabethabrawn were currently arm-wrestling, and Ford briefly looked down to see one of the gnomes from earlier staring up at him.

“I’m afraid I’m quite busy at the moment Gnorman.” Ford said through gritted teeth, straining to maintain pressure against the unicorn’s hoof.

“Hey Sixer, it’s me.” Gnorman waved at him, trying to draw his attention.

Ford almost ignored the gnome, but there was something odd about his wording that urged the scientist to glance down again to look properly at the little man.

“Sixer.”
Ford recognised the cocky way the gnome put his hands on his hips, and when Ford noticed those yellow slitted eyes he realised the incongruity at work, gaping at the gnome.

His grip slipped a little, and Lizabethabrawn took the opportunity to bear down on Ford’s hand, trying to smash it into the tree stump.

Ford heaved a breath and flexed, forcing his hand back up, not willing to be overpowered by the stubborn mule, but kept glancing sideways at the gnome he was now 75% convinced may actually be his partner.

“Bill?” Ford whispered incredulously once he’d pushed his arm back so he was on par with the unicorn once more, meeting Lizabethabrawn’s force in the middle. “What are – you’re a gnome? What? How??”

“Shh.” Bill held a tiny finger up to his lips, glancing around conspicuously. “It’s a new look, don’t get used to it. We’ll talk about it later. More importantly, what the hell are you doing Sixer? This isn’t snatch and grab.”

“I’m proving my worth.” Ford grunted, flexing against the unicorn’s hoof, gaining an inch briefly. “A challenge, apparently, as part of this quest. If I win this arm wrestling match against their champion, I get the hair.”

“Challenge! Challenge!” The unicorn’s jeered, taking up the chant once more. “Ole ole, ole ole, ole ole, ole ole.”

“You don’t have to prove anything to these obnoxious donkeys.” Bill gestured to the crowd of unicorns, his tiny frame making the agitated movement far more comical than intended. “Seriously! How much longer is this going to take?”

“Well it’s only been forty-five minutes.” Ford replied, glancing at his watch.

“It’s been ten hours!” Gnome-Bill bemoaned.

“What? No it hasn’t.” Ford contended, double checking his watch for accuracy.

“Yes it has! Time moves differently in here. While you’ve been matching strength with Mister Ed here I’ve been dying out there, there’s nothing to do!” Bill complained. “Nothing to eat, no one to talk to. I’ve just been sitting there watching the grass grow. And shrinking it back. And watching it grow. And – you get the idea.”

Ford was reminded of the first few weeks where it had just been him and Bill in the shack, while his muse was still settling into life on earth. Back then boredom had been Bill’s utmost enemy, and often resulted in household damage and other minor disasters. Ford had assumed Bill had mellowed out since then, that or he had simply found something more interesting to do. Or someone more interesting to do.

“Go back to the shack then. You don’t have to wait here if you don’t want to.” Ford suggested.

“I don’t want to go back to the shack.” Bill said stubbornly, shoving his hands into the pockets of Gnorman’s overalls.

“Well, maybe you can go back to the gnome tavern.” Ford said, with a grin hinting at his lips. “You might fit through the door this time.”

“You know what, I came in here to help you, but I’m just going to leave you to it if you can’t be
serious about this.” Bill held his little hands up like he was backing away from the situation, shutting his eyes. “I’m just going to walk away.”

“Fine.” Ford shrugged, and continued to focus on his arm-wrestling match. He flexed some more and won another few millimetres on Lizabethabrawn.

He glanced down again curiously, and noted that Bill-Gnome (or Borman, possibly Gnill, Ford hadn’t decided on the correct descriptor yet) was still standing there, glaring impatiently up at him.

“You know, for a smart guy, you sure are stupid, picking an arm-wrestling fight with a unicorn. You really want to compete with all that raw unbridled horsepower?”

“Well I suggested –“ Ford huffed out a breath, putting his back into pushing Lizabethabrawn’s hoof further down. “A game of chess instead, but clearly that didn’t happen.”

“Only you would suggest a game of chess with a unicorn.”

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!” Said unicorns continued chanting, cheering on their champion.

“This is taking too long. Arm-wrestling’s no fun. Where’s the capacity to cheat, huh?” Bill crossed his little arms.

“I’m not going to cheat.” Ford asserted nobly. “I have to win this hair, fair and square.”

“Square is right. Square as in BORING. If you really want to waste your time pandering to these pastel Lipizzaner’s suit yourself. I’ll be out doing something useful, like finding our moonstones.” Bill said snidely, crossing his arms.

“Is that what you came in here to tell me?” Ford asked, exasperated, a little miffed that it seemed Bill just popped in to tell him off and belittle him.

“I came here to check on you.” Bill corrected Ford. “I haven’t seen you for ten hours, here I am thinking you’re in an early, excessively glitter glued grave, but instead you’re butting egos with a pink horse. Must be a real boon for your masculinity.”

“Well it’s refreshing to know I have your support.” Ford replied sarcastically, focusing on the arm-wrestling match. “So nice of you to pop in and cheer me on.”

“You’re welcome.” Bill said with a wry sort of grin that looked out of place on Gnorman’s little face. Raising up to his tip-toes, Bill slid a handful of Billberries across the tree stump for Sixer. “Here. To keep your strength up.”

Ford glanced down at the berries, and felt a rush of affection. It seemed Bill really did care. He went to smile fondly at the muse, but his expression seemed somewhat out of place considering he was smiling at a bearded gnome with yellow eyes instead of the charming vessel he’d crafted for the god. It was a little incongruous to feel this fondness for a garden gnome.

Ford realised this and cleared his throat, looking back up to the unicorns. He caught from the corner of his eye the sight of the little gnome cackling and blowing a kiss Ford’s way. Ford’s cheeks pined, and he tried to ignore that, afraid he’d keep that mental image with him far longer than he cared to.

“I’ll check in on you later.” Bill remarked. “Tell me if you change your mind about cheating. I know a powder that can knock out all of these prancing assholes in an instant, just so you know.”
“I’m not cheating.” Ford replied tersely.

“Don’t think of it as cheating then. Think of it as finding a loophole in the rules. Or making one. You’ll change your mind.” Bill said with assurance, backing out of the circle of unicorns, carefully weaving through the many hooved legs surrounding Ford.

“No, I won’t.” Ford said, mostly to himself, trying to stay true to his principles. The unicorn he was arm wrestling snorted a hot breath out from its wide nostrils, blowing rank air into Ford’s face to try and throw him off.

Ford’s eyebrow twitched again.

He could do this.

Discarding Gnorman’s form the moment he got out of the doorway, Bill’s split consciousness snapped back into his human vessel, the sudden shift in perspective intensely jarring.

“Woah.” Bill put his hand up to his head, feeling the world reel beneath his feet. The consequent head spins were powerful, and it made Bill giddy. “That was fun.”

“Fun? Fun!?” Gnorman complained, leaning his hand up against a rock, gasping, returned to his body. “That was horrible.”

“Oh boo hoo. It’s not that bad.” Bill countered, picking himself up off the ground, stretching his legs out. He felt fine back in his human vessel, but he was quite certain Gnorman would be reeling from when Bill intentionally let himself be trampled just to leave a little vengeful hoofprint on the uncooperative gnome’s back. “Walk it off.”

“What did you do to my legs?” Gnorman groaned, massaging his calves.

“I put them through their paces. Are you going to gripe at me all day or point me back to that wake of yours.” Bill massaged his neck, and straightened up, watching the gnome impatiently.

“You want to go back? Why?” Gnorman moaned, squinting at Bill.

“Half an hour ago you were begging me to go there. What does it matter to you if I changed my mind?”

“Well there’s the tacit threat of unspeakable violence you brandished about before that springs to mind.” Gnorman glared at Bill, still hobbled over, clutching his knee. “Can’t say I’d like to bring you back to the heart of the forest after that. More like lead you into the bottomless pit.”

“You know what, you’re spunkier than I thought Gnornand. How about in exchange for taking me back to your gnome tavern I heal your little legs, and we let bygones be bygones.” Bill clicked his fingers and healing blue flame chased away Gnorman’s injuries, terrifying the gnome in the process.

“You set me on fire and we’re supposed to make amends, just like that?” Gnorman asked incredulously.
“I didn’t set you on fire. Trust me, you’ll know when I set you on fire.” Bill brushed his hair back off his face and sighed. “I’ve got to kill some time until Sixer gets out of there, and after dealing with those unicorns I need a drink.”

Gnorman considered this briefly, before shrugging. “Well you’re not the only one who needs a drink after today. Alright fine. I’ll take you back, the bar’s probably still open. But you’re buying me a drink!”

“Fine. Lead the way Gnorelle.”

“It’s Gnorman.”

“Whatever your name is.”

Ford had now been arm wrestling Lizabethabrawn for an hour. A solid hour. Arm wrestling a unicorn.

“How are you this strong?” Ford asked in disbelief, Lizabethabrawn’s muscles rippling.

“We don’t all prance around under rainbows.” Lizabethabrawn replied, her pink horn glowing vibrantly. “Some of us go to the gym.”

“What gym?” Ford boggled, doing his best to maintain his grip against the pink unicorn.

“Fight! Fight! Fight! Fight!”

Lizabethabrawn flared her nostrils at Ford and put more pressure on his arm, trying to knock his hand onto the tree stump.

“Ugh, never mind.” Ford gritted his teeth, and put all he had into getting level again.

This was the worst hour of his life.

“What have you got that’s strong?” Bill asked the gnome bartender, his long legs bent over double trying to sit on the gnome sized bar stool, his elbows taking up space awkwardly.

“Daintiest honeysuckle.” The gnome bartender grunted.

Bill looked skyward for an instant, lamenting his circumstances, before he nodded down at the bartender, passing some constructed toadstools across the bar in payment. They used to be dandelions, but Bill had been practising his new technique, forcing the genetic structure of the plant to change.
“Make it a double.”

“So this magic thing, it’s like free money, right?” Gnorman sat beside Bill at the bar, nursing his own honeysuckle acorn. “Toadstools outta anything.”

The bartender slid Bill’s honeysuckle across the counter to him and Bill picked up the tiny acorn cup between his thumb and forefinger, examining it, before throwing it back like a shot.

“What’s it to you?”

“You could do all sorts of things in an economy like this with a talent like that.” Gnorman suggested slyly, swilling his honeysuckle around in the cup.

“You think I don’t have better things to do than counterfeit gnome currency to inflate your pathetic little economy? Go launder your own fake money.” Bill scoffed, and set his acorn cup down.

“Get my friend here another double.” Gnorman passed several toadstools across the bar to the bartender and shifted in his seat, trying to pitch his idea to Bill. “Toadstool farming isn’t an industry just anyone can get into, and by the time you grow a crop you’ve got the GPD on your ass. Ask anyone. You grew those stools faster than anything I’ve ever seen.”

Running his tongue across his teeth, Bill watched the bartender refill his drink. The honeysuckle was quite sweet, and rather pleasant, but it was no spectral liqueur. Picking up the second drink, Bill chucked it back and let the liquid swill around his mouth, enjoying the flavour, before he set the acorn back on the counter.

“You wanna get me more of these?” Bill pointed down at the empty acorn cup, tilting the acorn around with the tip of his finger. “Because I sure as shit won’t be talking business with a gnome sober.”

“Can we get another four of those doubles?” Gnorman asked the bartender in a lowered tone. The bartender shot him an incredulous look, eying up the tall dark-skinned stranger sitting next to Gnorman with suspicion and distrust, before lining up the drinks for him, muttering to himself.

“My friend Gneville, we used to be in the toadstool farming industry, but they tightened up the rules, and we were left high and dry.” Gnorman explained, sliding the first acorn cup over to Bill.

“Well there’s a power vacuum now that your old queen’s dead.” Bill noted, picking up the proffered drink, tilting it back down his throat. “So, if anything were to slip through the cracks, now would be the time, since everyone’s looking the other way.”

“My thoughts exactly.” Gnorman nodded keenly.

“Well, you were all cut up about your dear ex-queen this morning.” Bill scoffed and picked up his third drink, hardly pacing himself. Honeysuckle hardly seemed the sort of drink that could affect gods. “If that was an act, you’re a better actor than I anticipated.”

“It was no act. I loved our old queen, may her soul rest in peace.” Gnorman raised his cup in respect for the dead. “But the GPD I don’t love. Those bastards have been on me and Gneville’s back ever since they caught us trafficking those glittery butterflies from one part of the forest to another.”

“Seems like a wasted effort, butterfly trafficking, considering they die so quickly.” Bill hummed, sipping on the honeysuckle. “I’m guessing they’re a luxury good then, since they’re beautiful and
ephemeral, like the meaning of life, art and other cliched aesthetic nonsense rich people use to justify wanting rare shiny things.”

“Rich gnomes. Anyone will buy anything, if the price is right.” Gnorman took a sip of his honeysuckle, watching Bill carefully.

“Speaking of price, I want moonstones.” Bill nodded to Gnorman. “I thought you were just a patsy, but you’re a gnome who can get things for people. Clearly, I underestimated you. I want moonstones, and I want them yesterday.”

“Moonstones you say.” Gnorman stroked his little beard. “I might know a certain river nymph who has a couple to spare. How many do you need?”

“Three. No, four. I want one to put on the mantelpiece, next to that ugly clock Sixer’s aunt gave him.” Bill swallowed the last of the honeysuckle in his cup and wiped his hand across his mouth. “God, I hate that clock. I just want to smash it and regenerate it and smash it all over again.”

“You don’t say.” Gnorman drummed his fingers on the wooden bar, not really knowing what to say to that, before sliding the rest of the acorn cups of honeysuckle over to Bill, subtly urging the muse to drink up.

“Sixer likes the clock. I don’t know why; his aunt was a piece of work. Most of his family is to be honest. Heck, most of humanity.” Bill rambled, picking up the next two acorn cups and shotting them back one after the other. “Every miserable creature on this miserable rock actually. Headaches, the lot of them. Except Sixer, he’s exempt. He’s the fun sort of headache.”

“You seem to really like this… Sixer guy.” Gnorman remarked, noting how the honeysuckle had loosened Bill’s tongue substantially. “He seems like a very different sort of wizard to you. Do you both come from the same dimension?”

“We come from different worlds, Gnormo.” Bill sighed wistfully, and picked up the last acorn cup of honeysuckle, chucking it back with a morose expression. “Different worlds.”

“Right.” Gnorman said slowly, watching the tall dark wizard slump his elbows lazily on the bar. “So... about those toadstools --”

“I like this drink thingy. It’s not bad.” Bill poked the empty acorn cup in front of him. “I want another one.” Prodding the acorn cup insistently, Bill knocked the cup over, and it clattered on the counter.

“Can I get another double for my friend here?” Gnorman asked the bartender with a resigned sigh.

“He’s had enough. I’m going to have to cut him off.” The bartender told Gnorman, watching Bill rest his chin on the counter, tapping the acorn cups and mutating each one of them, the thin wood warping into an expression of abject human terror, like horror themed shot glasses made of pine.

“Give me the bottle. I’ll serve myself.” Bill made to reach across the bar, standing up, his head bumping against the chandelier on the ceiling. “OW.”

“Sir, I’m afraid you’re going to have to leave.” The bartender told Bill, as two burly looking gnomes stepped up from over by the door, the bar’s bouncers.

Snapping his fingers summoning the bottle of honeysuckle out from behind the bar, Bill raised the fancy decanter to his lips and took a long sip of the potent gnome alcohol, sticking his middle finger up at the gnome bouncers in contempt.
“I’ll leave when I want to leave. And you two garden statues sure as shit can’t make me do anything.”

Gnorman put his head in his hands, shaking his head.

“This was a bad idea.”

“That’s right Better Homes and Gardens, back away while you still can.” Bill cackled gleefully, conjuring fire into his free hand as the gnome bouncers approached.

“This was such a bad idea.” Gnorman repeated to himself morosely as the situation escalated.

He just wanted to make a business deal. He was an entrepreneur who saw an opportunity.

The bouncers attacked, and fire lit up the bar.

Turns out, distilled honeysuckle was incredibly flammable.

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By the time Bill had made his way back through the forest to the vague approximation of where he remembered the unicorn’s realm was, several hours had passed. Still holding the fancy decanter of distilled honeysuckle in his hand, Bill paced through the trees, seeing the golden door up ahead.

As he approached the door, he saw a familiar shape sitting on the ground, back pressed to the gold metal.

Was that?

“Sixer?”

Bill blinked down at the scientist, who had been sitting curled in on himself, outside the unicorn’s realm, scribbling angrily in his journal, waiting for Bill.

Ford set his book down and put his pen back in his pocket.

“I didn’t win.” Ford admitted, without looking up at the muse. “Lizabethabrawn beat me. They all laughed me out of there. Told me I wasn’t worthy.”

Bill scoffed. He glared at the golden door and then scoffed again.

“Not worthy? That’s just –“

“I failed, Bill.” Ford looked up at the muse, and his expression was sadder than it had any right to be. “I wasted who knows how many hours of my life competing with a unicorn with a superiority complex and I’ve got nothing to show for it. No unicorn hair, nothing but a bruised ego and a sore elbow.”

Bill frowned, taking in the human’s self-deprecating expression, and sat down next to Ford, resting his back against the door. He silently passed the decanter of honeysuckle to Sixer, and inched closer until their shoulders pressed together.
“It’s been a night. Here.”

Ford sighed, and glanced down at the fancy decanter, taking it off Bill, sniffing the liquid suspiciously. “Where did you get this?”

“It’s honeysuckle.” Bill replied ambiguously. “It’s stronger than it looks. Some gnome-shyster tried to butter me up with booze to get me to counterfeit toadstools for him and his buddy.”

Ford couldn’t help the bubble of laughter that sprung up at that, imagining that scenario. Shaking his head in amusement, Ford tilted the decanter, noting it was half empty now. “And he gave you this to bribe you?”

“No, I stole that from the bar.” Bill admitted, a little sheepishly. “I may or may not now have a lifetime ban from Gnasty’s Tavern.”

“Did you get kicked out of the gnome bar?” Ford asked incredulously, beyond amused.

“They didn’t kick me out. I left.” Bill lied.

“I leave you alone for one hour.” Ford chuckled.

“It was longer than that, okay?” Bill nudged Ford’s shoulder with his own. “And I had to amuse myself while you were throwing down with your pony pals. I got a lot done, I’ll have you know.”

“Mmmhhmm?” Ford hummed, and raised the decanter to his lips, taking a long sip of the mysterious liqueur. It tasted sweet, barely like alcohol, but judging from the way Bill leant against him it could be quite inebriating.

Though after the defeat he’d just suffered, Ford could use a good drink.

“I negotiated with a water nymph to get our moonstones, I cultivated an illegal tree full of mutated toadstools, probably made that gnome a gnome millionaire by the way.” Bill listed, counting on his fingers. “I had a run in with the gnome police. I got invited to a maenad after-party.”

“You’ve been busy.” Ford smirked, and passed the decanter back to Bill, watching the muse take a hearty swig.

“You have no idea.” Bill replied emphatically, and sighed, handing the bottle back over to Ford, shifting until he could rest his head comfortably on Sixer’s shoulder.

They sat in comfortable silence together for a while, the midnight stars twinkling in the sky up above them.

“You were right, you know.” Ford remarked, looking up at the stars. “I think the moment I let those unicorns interpret my worth was the moment I set myself up for failure. The whole thing was just humiliating.”

“Not like your board games, huh?” Bill supposed.

Ford took another sip from the bottle. “Not even slightly.”

Ford sighed, and looked down from the heavens, watching the way his knee knocked gently against Bill’s. It was a soothing sort of comfort, this casual closeness.

“If it helps, I think you’re worthy Sixer.” Bill said sweetly, nuzzling his cheek against Ford’s shoulder. The sentiment slipped right out of him, his inebriation loosening his tongue. Bill had a lot
of things he wouldn’t say on a normal day, but after who knows how much honeysuckle, this wasn’t a normal day.

Ford looked down at the muse, raising his eyebrows in surprise.

“What happened to ‘unworthy of the secrets of the cosmos’ and all that bluster?”

“I meant worthy of a few mangy handfuls of unicorn hair.” Bill corrected Ford, patting his knee in a fond way. “No need to get ahead of yourself.”

Considering the way the moonlight bounced off the glass decanter, the surprisingly strong gnome liqueur making him bold, Ford asked in a low voice.

“What about worthy of you?”

Bill paused with his hand on Ford’s knee, and then smoothed his hand over Ford’s leg, speaking softly.

“I’m here, aren’t I?”

“Because I brought you here. Because I made you.” Ford uttered, sounding guilty once more.

Bill picked his head up off Ford’s shoulder and looked at the scientist, noting Ford’s bitter expression, idly thinking Sixer seemed to be a rather melancholy drunk. It was a good look on him, that melancholy expression, like most things, and Bill shifted up onto his knees, leaning into Ford’s space.

Resting his hands against Sixer’s cheeks, pressing his thumb to Ford’s bottom lip, Bill’s bright yellow eyes danced across Sixer’s face, taking him in for a moment, before he whispered, his lips an inch away from Ford’s.

“Maybe that’s why you’re worthy.”

“Then you –“ Ford murmured, his blue eyes meeting Bill’s, watching the moonlight play on the muse’s dark skin.

“I told you I like a challenge.” Bill’s eyes lidded, and he leaned into Sixer’s space, pressing his lips against Ford’s firmly.

Ford kissed Bill back, bringing his hand up to rest at the back of Bill’s neck, pulling that beautiful, incomprehensible, exotic, cosmic creature closer to him, feeling him melt into the kiss.

Ford’s torso twisted to face Bill, and he could feel his muse swinging his leg over to straddle Stanford’s hips, enraptured with kissing him.

Under the moonlight the two of them made-out like high-schoolers behind the bleachers from that godawful musical back in Farmer Sprott’s field. They had almost kissed that night, back when they were tentative and unsure, and now it felt like they couldn’t stop kissing, both besotted with the unlikely romance that sprung up between them.

Bill was beginning to unbutton Sixer’s shirt, fingers sliding under Ford’s scarf, keen to press biting kisses all the way down his human’s neck just to hear him gasp, but Ford brought his hand up to cover Bill’s questing fingers.

“The unicorns.”
“What about them?” Bill huffed, impatient in his ardour.

“No, I mean, we still haven’t got the hair. We can’t go back to the shack without it.” Ford explained.

“What’s the rush? This was just getting fun.” Bill pouted, and traced along Ford’s collarbone with his fingernail, lightly scraping the skin there.

“You wanted a challenge.” Ford pointed out, smoothing his hands along Bill’s back indulgently. “When we get back to the shack I can challenge you properly.”

Ford kissed Bill deeply, emphasising without words just how challenging he could be, before biting Bill’s bottom lip, dragging it between his teeth as he pulled back. “In private.”

Bill seemed to be considering that for a moment, his eyes lighting up, stilling his hands on Sixer’s shoulders, his imagination running promising loops around itself, reading into the meaning in Sixer’s tone, the meaning in his actions.

Licking his lips, Bill watched Ford carefully, trying not to show how much Sixer’s promise affected him. “Well, we’d better get that hair then.”

“How do you propose we go about it?” Ford questioned, smiling fondly up at his muse, tipsy and besotted in the moonlight, the worship pouring off him in waves. Bill climbed out of Ford’s lap and stood up, extending a hand to help Ford off the ground. Stretching out his back, Bill rolled his shoulders, gleefully grinning now Ford had succumbed to temptation, finally coming around to indulging in a little devious cheating.

“We tried things your way.” The muse held his hand out to summon the battery powered clippers from the bathroom back in the shack. Flicking the clippers on, the little machine whirred to life with promising vigour. “Now we do things my way.”

Ford set the decanter of honeysuckle down on the grass and picked up his journal, stuffing it into his coat pocket. He pushed the golden door open, ushering the muse through with a wave of his hand. “After you then.”

“This is going to get loud.” Bill grinned, white teeth illuminated by the moonlight, his skin like the surrounding midnight. His eyes glowed that vibrant yellow at Ford, warming him with Bill’s contagious excitement. “Are you ready?”

“Let’s do this.” Ford nodded.

The placid quiet of the enchanted forest was not so placid that night, a cacophony of supernatural alarms echoing out into the woods, interspersed with whoops of laughter, loud neighs, and the unerring whir of the electronic clippers.

Willow Oakwood wasn’t the sort of person to let idle pains waylay her from what needed to be done.
Pausing on her early morning trek through the forest, collecting firewood for her family’s log cabin to sustain them throughout the approaching winter, she allowed herself a moment to rub her sore back, resting one hand on her belly, feeling her body cry rebellion at her for her zealous attempt to lift as much wood as she used to be able to.

A few months ago she could carry twice this much firewood, stacked taller than she was, but pregnancy was just as limiting as Willow had anticipated.

Setting the pile of firewood down on the trail, she allowed herself a moment to rest, rubbing her back roughly, glaring down at her belly in consternation.

It was five am and the forest was still, quiet.

At least there was no one else in the woods to see her in this moment of weakness, no one to observe her body taking its toll on her.

It wasn’t anything to be ashamed of, but Willow had been attempting to go on with life like nothing had changed, telling no one of her current biological predicament, and it irked her when she was reminded of the very real change that was currently gestating in her belly.

Puffing out a long breath of air, Willow gritted her teeth against the back pain.

“It’s fine. You’re fine Willow.” She said to herself, smoothing her hand over her stomach tentatively. “Just wait til it starts kicking, then you can start feeling sorry for yourself.”

Almost to spite her, her stomach growled, hungry for some sort of nutritional validation.

“I know, I know.”

Sighing, Willow bent down to pick up the firewood again, conceding that this would be as much as she could carry, needing to get back to her family’s cabin so she could eat breakfast finally.

She paused, crouched down close to the ground over the wood, when she heard something. Something that sounded like two people drunkenly carousing, meandering through the forest.

Looking over towards the trees, Willow stood up and peered at whoever was making such noise so early in the morning.

She recognised them, they were unmistakable.

Stanford in his ridiculous trench coat and his weirdo assistant with the dark skin and eerie gold eyes, traipsing through the forest together, arms draped over one another’s shoulders, laughing and stumbling over the leaves, a near empty bottle of some sort of alcohol hanging in a loose grip in Stanford’s hand.

Two drunk idiots stumbling through the forest was a common enough sight. Willow was almost tempted to walk over there and give them a hard time for it, but what held her back was seeing objects floating in the air around them, levitating in a faint blue light, bouncing along in time with their steps.

Three rocks, it looked like, and a sack filled with brightly coloured glittering hair. There was glitter on Stanford too, dusting over his hair and shoulders, some of the sparkly residue caught on Bill’s dark skin. They looked like they’d been to one hell of a party, but the thing Willow couldn’t get past was the floating objects following them, and the fact that that didn’t seem like the two men were bothered by that.
“What the hell?” Willow muttered, narrowing her eyes, trying to see what was really going on there.

Stanford’s spooky assistant lurched forward and spun around, holding his finger up in the air like an orchestral conductor, the floating stones bouncing along with the movement. Stanford laughed and reached forward to nudge his assistant, pushing him lightly, when suddenly that light blue glow enveloped Stanford and he was lifted bodily into the air.

Willow gasped, and held her hand over her mouth.

“Oh hell no.”

Ford seemed shocked as well, struggling in the air for a moment, his hands and legs pinwheeling about, before he mumbled something to the other man, Bill replying quietly. Ford laughed, a loud vibrant sound.

Stanford’s assistant strolled right up to him and smiled indulgently, hopping up on the trunk of a felled tree to stand level with Ford, crooking his index finger at the scientist, who floated closer with the gesture.

Leaning up on his tiptoes, Bill kissed the other man leisurely, looping his arms around Stanford’s neck. Ford didn’t seem to mind, bringing his own hands down to bracket Bill’s waist, the two of them melting into one another until Ford’s feet touched down on the log, the blue glow dissipating.

Willow had never seen two men kiss before. Never like this anyway. She knew Daryl was gay, and she had thought that Stanford was too, after that disastrous date with Suzie, but knowing it and seeing it were two very different things. She felt rather awkward just staring, but she couldn’t look away.

She would have been happy for Stanford.

However, kissing a man, and kissing some sort of supernatural thing were two very different scenarios.

Willow hadn’t forgotten how Bill had twisted her words, forced them up from her throat, stolen the truth from her against her will.

Willow remembered the stories that her Grammie told her when she was little, about the Fair Folk with wicked eyes and wicked smiles who would lure travellers into the woods, never to be seen again. It had seemed like old fashioned Irish mysticism until now, just bedtime stories told to scare children.

She knew something was odd about Bill, his skin was darker than all of the folks she’d seen in Oregon, and while Bill had rebuffed her observations as discriminatory before, she felt oddly validated now to know that her suspicions were correct. His eyes glowed, evil yellow slits, and she could have sworn he had hexed her. Forced her to spill her secrets with magic. He wasn’t human.

All that bullshit about being an assistant, working on a project together, it was all just a front. Bill was bewitching Stanford, clearly, and remembering how Ford’s wacky journal read like a science-fiction novel, Willow believed Ford would be stupid enough, gullible enough, to do something dangerous, like invite one of the Fair Folk into his house just to see what would happen.

Maybe that was why Stanford never invited anyone to his shack. Because he was hiding one of the Fair Folk in there. Or one of the Fair Folk had taken it over, stole Ford’s domain from him, the same way he’d stolen words from Willow’s lips.
There was only one explanation. Stanford had been hoodwinked.

Still, something about that theory didn’t sit right. Willow was very good at reading people, and she didn’t get the feeling that Stanford was a total fool. He was smart enough to know better, and he had a pretty savvy head on his shoulders when it came to everything other than romance.

Something wasn’t adding up. Willow wracked her brain for details. What had Bill said in that truth swapping game they’d played?

_Fordsy needed help on a project that I’d been providing advice for from a distance, and he basically decided I needed to be here in the flesh, and here I am, dragged back kicking and screaming because he needed an ‘assistant’._

Perhaps Willow was underestimating Stanford.

Perhaps the bewitching was going both ways.

Watching as Ford pushed Bill off the log, the strange inhuman creature squawking indignantly, landing on the grass, the scientist began running along the trail, laughing, shouting something about breakfast over his shoulder as his magical paramour ran chasing after him.

Once the two men had run out of sight, far from earshot, Willow sighed, and bent back down to pick up the logs she’d been collecting, hefting them onto her hip.

Her back still ached.

She sighed.

While this might just be the weirdest thing she’d seen in Gravity Falls, she was torn between being a good friend to Stanford, and being suspicious of Bill’s motives. They seemed to be enjoying themselves, having fun, meeting on equal footing, and in a way, they were both just as weird as each other. A perfect match.

That didn’t mean Willow had to like it.

She’d be keeping a very close eye on Bill Cipher from now on.

A very close eye.

_“I’m so hungry!” Bill complained, barging in through the back porch into the kitchen, walking straight to the pantry._

_“It doesn’t feel like thirty hours have passed.” Ford remarked, following Bill through the door. “But thirty hours without proper food does take its toll.”_

Grabbing a packet of rice crackers from the pantry, loading several other snacks high in his arms, kicking open the fridge with his foot, Bill levitated two capsicums from the bottom of the fridge, biting into one ravenously.
“You’re telling me.” Bill spoke with his mouth full.

“How about you don’t tell me, and keep your mouth closed while you eat.” Ford shook his head at the muse, dusting the superfluous glitter he’d collected off his coat, setting the empty decanter on the kitchen table.

Bill stuck his tongue out at Ford, chewed capsicum bared to the world.

Ford rolled his eyes at Bill and waved the rebellious display off. Looking through the bag of unicorn hair, checking over the moonstones, Ford spoke. “I guess we’ll take some time to eat, and then get to work on that protection spell.”

“Can’t.” Bill said, his cheeks stuffed with the spicy vegetable. “Still need the mercury.”

“Well I only placed the order this morning, I guess –” Ford began, but was interrupted by the doorbell sounding out.

Ford looked over to Bill, and the muse shrugged unhelpfully, still digging into the enormous pile of snacks he’d amassed.

“It couldn’t have arrived already.” Ford pondered aloud.

“Thirty hours have passed IQ.” Bill swallowed his mouthful of peppers, blinking moisture from his eyes at the burn. “I’d wager that’s the mailman right now.”

“I wonder which mailman.” Ford mumbled, mostly to himself, as he began walking through the house, down the hall to the front door.

Curious, Bill left his snacks in the kitchen, still holding his capsicum, following Sixer down the hall.

Ford looked through the peephole, and opened the door to the shack, only opening it a sliver, staring down at the inordinately hairy mailman. Ford had suspicions that this particular mailman was infected with lycanthropy, so he wasn’t keen to invite trouble from the fellow.

“Hello.” Ford greeted the mailman awkwardly.

The mailman gave Ford an equally suspicious look, noting the glitter in Ford’s hair and the way he wedged the door open just barely, blocking him from seeing inside the shack.

“There’s a package for a Mister Stanford Pines.” The mailman read out, checking over the box.

“Yes, that’s me.” Ford confirmed, looking down at the box.

Traipsing down the hall, Bill squeezed in next to Ford, peering over his shoulder, before pushing the door wide open, beaming at the mailman.

“Wow, gee, that was fast, is that our mercury order?”

The mailman gave Bill an incredulous look, seeing the strange man also covered in glitter chewing on a capsicum.

“I’m gonna need a signature.” The mailman said gruffly, bringing out a clipboard, handing it to Stanford.

Hesitantly Ford reached out and snatched the clipboard from the prospective werewolf mailman.
Ford scribbled his signature on the page, and glared cautiously back at the man, reluctant to return the page to the possibly rabid man.

Bill chewed on his capsicum, watching Sixer’s guarded behaviour with amusement.

Just as Ford went to hand back the clipboard, Bill elbowed Sixer in the ribs, shouting gleefully with a mouthful of capsicum.

“Just give it back to him Sixer, geez, he’s not going to bite.”

Bill swiped the clipboard out of Ford’s hands and passed it back to the mailman, winking theatrically at the man.

Ford winced, and clapped his hand to his forehead.

The mailman gave Bill a flat disbelieving look. He took the clipboard back, and passed over the parcel, before tipping his hat at the two men, maintaining suspicious eye contact the entire time.

“Y’all have a good day.”

The mailman walked away, down the porch, and hopped on his moped, driving off without a backwards glance.

Ford watched the hairy mailman go, holding the package in his hands, frozen in the doorway, social mortification setting in.

“Are you gonna say it, or should I?” Bill questioned idly, chewing with his mouth open.

“Don’t say anything ever again.”

With all the ingredients compiled, Bill showed Stanford how to lace the protection spell into the shack. Unicorn hair was glued around the perimeter of the house, mercury was used to draw specific sigils around each of the moonstone locations, and as Ford placed the final moonstone down in the heart of the lab, Bill drew the final sigil on the wall with the mercury.

“What does that last one say, it’s different from the others.” Ford questioned, digging the moonstone into the ground, looking up from the floor at the conglomeration of shapes that Bill sketched down in silver liquid.

Bill had been explaining each part of the ritual to Sixer, as promised. A deal was a deal, and he did say in exchange for Ford’s help he’d teach him the ins and outs of the protection spell.

“The last sigil is supposed to be a name, or a representation of what you’re trying to block out.” Bill explained, drawing six crescents with his pinky finger, the seventh oval shape was open, with a circle inside it, representing an eye.

“And that says time police?” Ford asked curiously.

“Names are funny things Sixer.” Bill replied ambiguously. “They don’t always mean what you’d
think, or look the way you’d expect. Is that moonstone in place?”

Ford angled the moonstone, and then covered it with dirt, patting it down. “Yes.”

Using the mercury to close a circle around the grouped sigils, Bill finished the cosmic finger-painting, and a glowing circle expanded out from the point of Bill’s fingertip to cover the entire shack in a dome of protection, lighting up with the inscribed etchings for an instant, before fading away.

“Then that’s us done.” Bill reached for a rag from McGucket’s work bench in the lab and wiped the mercury off his hands with it, throwing the rag back on the desk. “Nice work Sixer.”

Dusting the soil off his hands, Ford smiled up at Bill, then pushed up from the floor. He had dirt on his jeans, more soil on his hands, and his arms faintly ached from arm wrestling that obnoxious and now bald unicorn all day.

“I might go upstairs and wash up a little.”

Bill nodded at Ford and leaned back comfortably against the work bench, surveying the lab with a contented sort of expression. He was looking at the portal scaffolding, and seemed lost in thought.

Feeling bold, Ford cleared his throat, and shifted his weight, trying to look confident. “If you’d like you’re welcome to join me.”

“I’ll wait here until you’re done.” Bill replied absently, still staring up at the central wheel, basic triangular framework set up around the eye of the portal.

Ford felt rather awkward, and swayed on his heels, stuffing his hands in his pockets, the innuendo having gone right over his muse’s head.

“Well, alright then.”

When Bill finally caught onto his meaning, turning around with his finger raised in response, the elevator doors had already closed behind Ford.

Ford came back down from the elevator with a towel wrapped around his shoulders, his hair still damp from the shower, about ten minutes later. He walked in to find Bill had climbed up the scaffolding for the portal’s framework and was reclining in the circular eye of the device.

Ford paced over and stood beside the portal, watching his muse.

Bill was laying with his hands resting on his stomach and his eyes closed. He looked like he was sleeping.

“That doesn’t look comfortable.” Ford murmured, stepping up onto the portal’s platform.

“Oh, it’s the place to be Sixer.” Bill replied, his eyes still closed. He raised his eyebrows, and pointed upwards, his hands resting on his stomach. “It’s right in the middle of everything. Algorab, Spica, Arcturus, Alphecca. I’m a personal fan of Deneb Algedi.”
Ford glanced at the symbols installed on each point of the circular frame. “I thought it was curious you included Behenian fixed stars in the initial blueprints. I assume they hold personal significance.”

Bill opened his eyes and looked at Ford. “Have you figured it out yet?”

“I wasn’t aware occult astrology had any particular influence on our scientific goal here, unless of course Cornelius Agrippa was another of your pocket geniuses.” Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, a slight hint of jealousy creeping into his tone.

Bill smirked, and shut his eyes again. “Please. If I had any influence on Agrippa’s life it was in passing. I’m pretty sure that guy summoned every cosmic creature he could get his hands on. Before he recanted everything in favour of the church that is. How boring. Some things stuck though. You don’t work magic like that and expect to just walk away from everything unscathed.”

“So you did know him?” Ford probed, curious despite himself. Bill’s influence throughout history was fascinating, from what Ford had traced of it so far. It was a novelty to be able to simply ask Bill, instead of pouring over every suspicious mathematician on record.

“Word got around. I didn’t deal with him though.” Bill shrugged, and wiggled his shoulders back into the frame of the portal, getting comfortable. “Everyone knows that dog of his who jumped in the river was contracted to him, but he sure lucked out on the vessel. At least until he hit the water. Poor Fido.”

Ford huffed out a bemused laugh and stepped closer to Bill, resting his hand on the portal’s frame, beside Bill’s ankle. “You have the most interesting stories. So, these sigils have nothing to do with Agrippa then?”

“Technically they were first used by the Sumerians, way back in ancient Mesopotamia, but that’s not where they come from.” Bill looked over at Sixer and nudged him with his leg. “Have you figured it out yet?”

Resting his six-fingered hand on Bill’s shin, Ford gave Bill’s leg a squeeze. “Enlighten me.”

Bill reached up and tapped on the sigil behind his head, then tapped the one above it. “Sirius, Procyon – they both fall under what you humans call the constellation Cancer, though their associated planets couldn’t be further apart. Venus, Mercury, Mars. Agrippa made the mistake of assuming these sigils related to the planets and their relation to the stars, not the space between.”

“Are you saying these are coordinates?” Ford followed Bill’s logic, looking up at the other symbols inscribed on the wheel. “Coordinates to what?”

“If you want to make an interdimensional portal from your world to others, you’ve got to know the weak spots where this dimension folds. Your exits and entrances so to speak. You can spin the wheel and pick a doorway and it fast tracks your travel through the dimensional highway of choice.” Bill pointed to a sigil on the other side of the wheel. “Say I want to take the Alphecca exit to Lottocron 9, I plug it in, and boom, fast tracked travel to the dimension of gambling and good times.”

“What do you know where all of these go?” Ford looked over at Bill, impressed, sliding his hand further up Bill’s leg to rest on his knee now.

“If I told you, where would the fun be in that?” Bill quirked an eyebrow at Ford. “I know you like to explore.”
Ford surveyed Bill closely for a moment, his eyes raking over the muse, taking in every inch of him with a sense of bone deep wonderment.

“You really are a treasure of the universe.”

Bill’s lips quirked upwards, tickled by Ford’s flattery, by the worshipful way he murmured that, like it was both a surprise and a revelation.

“To think that you made all this possible, that you gave me this chance – the knowledge, the technology, the opportunity.” Ford stepped closer to Bill, bringing his hand up to rest on Bill’s chest, above his heart. “You did all this for me.”

Bill stayed silent, hardly willing to ruin the moment by admitting to Sixer that he had his own stake in the matter. He could let Sixer believe the world revolved around him if it was what he needed in the moment, but Bill knew the truth. He didn’t do this for Sixer.

“I’m not one for this holiday, personally, but I can’t help but feel thankful to whatever force it was out there in the universe that delivered you to me.” Ford uttered, feeling Bill’s wonky heartbeat pulse beneath his hand. He could feel his muse’s chest rise and fall with his breathing, and felt Bill suck in a breath before speaking softly back.

“You should thank me more often then.”

Ford’s hand came up to rest on Bill’s cheek, brushing his thumb against the muse’s cheekbone.

“I suppose I should.”

Bill sat up, and swung his legs around to dangle down from the lip of the portal’s eye. Ford moved with him, and stepped into the space between his legs, reaching up to cup the back of Bill’s neck, leaning forward to kiss him.

Bill exhaled steam into the kiss, the weighted impact of Sixer’s worship building kindling in his stomach, the kiss setting off sparks.

Pulling back slightly, Ford watched as smoke wafted from the corners of Bill’s mouth, the muse’s pupils expanding, watching Ford expectantly.

Yanking Bill forward off the portal’s wheel, Ford wrapped Bill’s legs around him, supporting him with a hand on his rear and back, Bill instinctually clinging to Ford, not wanting to fall.

Bill yelped, but then laughed, as Sixer hoisted him up, carrying him like he was giving him a front facing piggy-back, and began walking him over to the lift.

“What are you doing?” Bill grinned into Ford’s forehead, his arms wrapped around Sixer’s neck, knocking the terrycloth towel off Ford’s shoulders onto the floor.

Ford adjusted so he could press the lift call button, and leaned back a little so he could look Bill gamely in the face. “Taking you upstairs, so I can thank you properly.”

Bill made a pleased noise that sounded like a muffled laugh, before he bit his lip, watching Sixer cheekily.

“Are you sure you don’t want to take the stairs?”

Ford gave Bill an amused look before he took advantage of his current position to dig his fingers
into Bill’s sides, tickling him mercilessly.

Bill shrieked with laughter, kicking his legs, clinging to Ford’s neck so he wouldn’t fall down. The mirthful shrieks echoed throughout the empty lab, and the elevator door dinged open.

Ford backed Bill into the elevator, and pushed him up against the back wall of the lift, propping him up against the rail, pressing pleased kisses against Bill’s neck, his smile breaking through persistently, twisting his lips with joy.

“What am I going to do with you?” Ford murmured against Bill’s neck, feeling the god’s skin heating up, inspiring him to more than a few ideas.

“Thank me apparently.” Bill grinned, and stroked his hands through Ford’s wet hair. “Thank me all night long.”

“I’ll get right on that.” Ford replied.

The elevator doors closed.

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High up in the inner sanctum of the mountaintop temple in Dimension 52 Jheselbraum the Unswerving sat on a giant orange fainting couch, her eyes closed as she sought out the vision she was seeking.

She saw a glimpse of him before, knowing he was somewhere in Gravity Falls, but hadn’t managed to set eyes on hide nor hair of her reclusive triangular nemesis. She thought she sensed his presence in the forest, but the signal cut in and out, like he was traversing between dimensional realms, and when she’d finally got a clear signal, her vision cut out.

Opening her eyes, cursing in frustration, Jheselbraum massaged her forehead, scowling at the pink stitched tapestries that adorned the temple room.

“Is all well, Mistress?” One of her attendants queried, kneeling down beside the fainting lounge, barely coming up to the bottom of the lounge’s clawed wooden feet.

Jheselbraum was a giant to her subjects, a monolith, a god.

Jheselbraum waved away her attendant’s concern, the ceremonial jewels she was draped in clinking as her arm moved. “He’s cut me out. That vile devil’s found a way to block my sight.”

“Is there any way around it, Mistress?” The attendant asked optimistically.

“Possibly.” Jheselbraum reached down to retrieve a large chalice from the tray her attendants held, taking a sip of the refreshing liquid within. “I’ve pinpointed the where, I just can’t see within. But no matter.”

Jheselbraum put the chalice back down on the tray, weighing the attendant’s down with the heavy cup. She sat up and laced her fingers over her knee, looking out into the universe.

“He can hide within whatever bubble he likes. I can wait.”
Her central eye glowed a vibrant blue, extending her influence out past this dimension, burning with determination.

“He has to come out sometime.”

Chapter End Notes

Unicorns, gnomes, and werewolf mailmen - this chapter was stupid and silly and a fun homage to the humor in the show. If you can't forgive me for my horse puns, then my gnome jokes stand gno chance.

With the realm of the unicorns, the first test is getting through the door. Mabel's 'pure of heart test' really was redundant bc just stepping through the door proves your worth. It takes a hell of a lot to make one 'impure' enough to trip off the sensors, but what can I say, Bill likes to walk on the grass.

I hope you enjoyed this chapter! Let me know how you liked it, I always love comments and I've turned anonymous comments back on bc I trust you all, and I like feedback.

Next chapter, our scientists visit Mama Misfortune's Traveling Freakshow and Ford get's his palm read by the Hand Witch.
Pity Cassandra that no one believed you. But then again you were lost from the start.

Chapter Notes

Warning: this chapter contains homophobic slurs and the threat of violence on a basis of prejudice, as well as the threat of violence against a pregnant woman.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

It was raining outside, the water pelting down on the roof of the shack, drumming on the slates persistently.

Fiddleford and Bill were huddled into the kitchen, watching Stanford fix a leak in the roof.

Ford was standing on a chair, trying to patch up the leak that sprung just to the left of the light fixture.

Bill and Fiddleford were sitting on the remaining chairs by the kitchen table, Bill resting his hand on his cheek, watching Ford idly, Fiddleford sitting opposite him, twisting his Cubic’s cube into order.

It wasn’t F’s style to sit back and do nothing. He would have helped, but for Ford’s stubbornness.

“It’s my house, I’m not just putting a bucket there. You sit, and I’ll fix it.”

“You’re not the mechanic here, Stanford. You could at least let me take a look at it.” Fiddleford insisted, standing beside Ford’s chair, holding it steady.

“I don’t see what fixing computers has to do with household maintenance.” Ford had grumbled, a little offensively. “Unless that’s what your doctorate was for. Accredited roofer? I hear they go for that in California.”

“Well don’t let me stop you from putting your twelve PHDs to use then.” Fiddleford had given Ford an unimpressed look and left him to his roofing struggle. Clearly, he didn’t want F’s help anyway.

Bill wasn’t inclined to lift a finger to assist either, enjoying the sight of Stanford teetering on the chair far too much, straining to reach the ceiling, the fabric of his sweater riding up, exposing his belly and back, a tantalising sliver of skin. The view was good from here, and Bill especially enjoyed the way Sixer would grit his teeth or make a concerted noise every time the chair tipped hazardously.

Ford balanced on the chair precariously, trying to step up onto the back of the chair to reach the ceiling.

“That don’t seem too safe Ford.” Fiddleford warned, without looking up from his Cubic’s cube.

“I’ve got it.” Ford continued to insist, his fingers almost pressing the strip of duct tape up against the ceiling leak.
Deviously, Bill pushed the chair ever so slightly with his telekinesis just to watch Ford’s arms flail, before steadying it again.

“Are you sure you got it?” Fiddleford probed, watching Ford’s arms spin like a windmill.

Ford, who caught the slight blue glow by the leg of his chair, growled in frustration and shot a look at Bill.

Bill met Ford’s gaze and smirked back at the human, clearly amused.

“I’m fine.” Ford huffed. “Both of you, stop helping.”

Fiddleford glanced at Bill, wondering what Ford meant by that. Bill just shrugged innocently at Fiddleford, and sat with his legs crossed, his foot bouncing, still watching Stanford’s attempt to fix the roof like it was the most entertaining thing he’d seen all week.

Jumping up a little to smear the duct tape over the leak, Ford slapped it on and landed back on the chair triumphantly. “There!”

“Are you sure you’re not an accredited roofer?” Fiddleford teased.

“Oh, shut up F.” Ford retorted, and climbed down off the chair, feet on the floor once more.

Fiddleford chuckled, and put his finished Cubic’s Cube down on the tabletop, the puzzle solved once more.

Immediately Bill snatched it up and began twisting it into chaos.

F looked at Bill, and sighed, resigned, before reaching for something else to do while Stanford’s assistant ruined his perfectly solved puzzle.

“You see what he’s doin’ to my cube Stanford?” Fiddleford looked to his friend in askance, who was sliding the chair back under the table.

“It’s nice to see you fixing your cube.” Ford replied, meaning it. It was heartening to see F with his old spark back. That trip to see Patricia and Tate really seemed to have done wonders for his friend’s wellbeing.

“Don’t mean he have to wreck it all the time.” Fiddleford grumbled, watching Bill unrepentantly mangle the colour coordinated design with gleeful gusto.

“I’m making it better.” Bill poked his tongue out at Fiddleford childishly. Fiddleford could only sigh and look away, assured no help from Stanford.

“I don’t know how you two did it, stuck in the house all thanksgivin’ like this, with the weather kickin’ up a fuss outside.” Fiddleford rubbed his arms, chilly, watching the raindrops splatter violently against the windowpane. “Surprised you didn’t drive each other up the wall.”

Bill and Ford shared a conspiratorial look, remembering exactly what they’d done up against the wall.

And on the table. On the desk in the study. In the lab. In the lounge room. In nearly every room.

Colour pricked at Ford’s cheeks, just remembering.

He couldn’t look at most of the shack in the same way again, to be honest. He still laughed every
time he stepped into the shower, remembering how Bill’s temperature had reacted dramatically with the shower’s spray, filling the whole room with dense steam within a minute.

Meeting Bill’s amused yellow eyes, Ford wetted his lips and looked away, before replying to Fiddleford.

“Somehow we managed.”

“We found other things to do.” Bill added, hardly as subtle as Sixer was, given the way he was still staring at Stanford lasciviously.

“Don’t see what you could do in here besides work on the portal.” Fiddleford commented, reaching for the newspaper that was rolled up behind the fruit bowl. He grabbed the newspaper and pointed it at both Bill and Ford, scolding them. “Which you two shouldn’t have been doin’ without me, by and by.”

“I didn’t touch the portal.” Ford protested, sitting down at the table, reaching for a satsuma to peel. “I promised not to work on it and I kept that promise.”

“And I napped on the portal, which is the technical opposite of working on it, so there.” Bill added, holding his hand out for a segment of Ford’s satsuma impatiently. Ford refused to pass a segment over, and instead popped one in his mouth, hardly even looking at Bill.

“Well, I didn’t expect you to work on it.” Fiddleford countered, flipping open the newspaper to read through it.

“Rude.” Bill scoffed, and banged Fiddleford’s Cubic’s Cube on the table like it was a gavel in a court of law. “Stricken from the record.”

Fiddleford gave Bill an exasperated look, and Bill banged the cube down on the table again for emphasis, before Stanford snatched it out of his hand.

Bill huffed and crossed his arms, leaning back in his chair to look out the window as the rain continued its downpour.

“I’m already fixin’ to go stir crazy, and I’ve only been back a week.” Fiddleford muttered, shaking the page out.

“Well, I have some raincoats and warm clothes. If you don’t mind a little inclement weather, we could always go out into the forest and stretch our legs some.” Ford suggested, absently twisting Fiddleford’s Cubic’s Cube into further disarray.

Fiddleford blanched behind the newspaper, making a funny expression, before clearing his throat, folding the paper up and tucking it under his arm.

“Just because I’m cooped up in here, don’t mean I’m ready to go trudge through the mud to look at nonsense birds, or funny rocks, or whatever else you’ll have me lookin’ at. Just have to wait out the rain, that’s all.” Unwilling to divulge his real reasons for keeping Ford out of the forest, F stood up and jerked his thumb towards the living room, making a hasty retreat. “I’ll be in the other room, seein’ if I can’t fix the TV’s signal.”

“I’ll call you when lunch is ready?” Ford questioned, tossing F’s cube over to him.

Fiddleford caught the cube in his left hand. His right hand no longer needed to be in a sling. The cast was staying on for a little while longer, until after Christmas, just to reinforce the bone. He’d
gotten quite skilfully ambidextrous since the incident forced him to develop his left hand as sufficiently as his right. That was the bright side, as far as Fiddleford saw it.

“Yes-siroo.”

F turned on his heel and retired to the lounge room, finding something about sharing the kitchen with the two other men unnerving, as the space between them was laced with this untold tension in the air. He didn’t know what was going on, but they’d both been acting different since he got back, and he didn’t really want to know why.

“Funny.” Ford mumbled to himself, setting his hands flat on the table, resting for a moment. “You’d think a little rain wouldn’t upset him.”

Ford shrugged, and moved to stand up, having lunch to prepare for, but Bill stopped him, leaning across the table suddenly to smack his hands down on top of Ford’s. It was the most aggressive handholding Ford had ever seen.

“I could make the rain stop, if you wanted.” Bill boasted in a low voice, so Fiddleford wouldn’t hear.

“You could make the rain stop?” Ford asked Bill, the back of his hand stinging a little.

“I could freeze it up in the sky, I could make it flow backwards, I could burn it up before it hit the ground.” Bill watched Ford, giving him a rather intense look. “I could do lots of things. Just unbind another brick for me and find out.”

“But then whatever would I do for redundant small talk?” Ford asked sarcastically and prised his hands out from under Bill’s, standing up and turning around to look in the pantry.

“Sixer.” Bill scowled, gritting his teeth.

“Do you want sandwiches, or soup for lunch? Something hot, I’m thinking.” Ford pondered, ignoring Bill, searching through the pantry shelves for ingredients.

Bill scowled, and crossed his arms, before pouting, looking back out the window.

“I’m not talking to you.”

“I’ll enjoy the silence then. It’s a rare commodity.” Ford commented, laying out the ingredients for soup on the counter.

Said silence only lasted for about four seconds, before Bill was unable to help himself, standing up, pushing his chair back, the wood screeching across the floor. Bill paced over to hover impatiently around Ford’s shoulder, speaking in a low voice.

“Are you telling me that it isn’t killing you, pretending that everything’s all smiles and daisies and platonic, mundane, monotony?”

“This is mundane monotony.” Ford replied, pouring a tin of pumpkin soup into a saucepan, turning the burner on. “It’s a part of life.”

“Um. Excuse me?” Bill spluttered, staring at Sixer like he’d spat on his mother’s grave. “You are living with a god. This isn’t mundane.”

“This is about Fiddleford returning, isn’t it? You knew what would have to happen, to keep your
“I want him gone again!” Bill hissed. “I want him anywhere but here.”

“He’s back here to work on your portal, if you remember correctly.” Ford gave a reluctant sigh, guessing Bill’s frustration accurately.

“Which is why he’s sitting in the living room, reading the newspaper.” Bill scoffed spitefully, before clinging onto Ford’s arm, interrupting his cooking. “Sixer, how would you feel if after experiencing complete unrestricted freedom for four wonderful days, you have to hide everything there is that makes you special all to appease one close-minded hick mechanic?”

“You can’t call Fiddleford a hick. It’s only funny when I say it.” Ford corrected Bill, shaking out the last dregs of soup from the can, into the saucepan. “And he isn’t close-minded.”

“Then why is it that whenever I do this –” Bill leaned in close to Ford, standing up on his tiptoes to kiss the scientist. Ford instinctively reared back, looking over his shoulder to check that Fiddleford wasn’t looking.

Bill tsked. “You’re such an asshole Sixer. Of all the things to pick as your dirty little secret, why pick the most dull, uninteresting thing to hide from the world.”

“I’m just protecting your secret.” Ford retorted, reaching here. “It wouldn’t do for Fiddleford to become suspicious about your origins.”

“This has jack shit to do with my origins, and everything to do with you stumbling over your hang ups about being seen with another man.” Bill scowled at Sixer. “I can’t imagine what those childhood bullies of yours did to justify this excess of secrecy. Did they bring out the thumbscrews? Flaming hot pokers? What? Tell me.”

“What do you want me to say?” Ford blustered, not really willing to get into this with F just in the other room.

“Do you feel like you’ve crossed some kind of line now, is that it? Have you had enough of me? Are you ashamed of me? Do you not want me anymore?” Bill pressed, getting steadily angrier at each concept, red creeping into his irises. Bill raised his finger, ready to jab it in Ford’s arm, a threat hovering on the edge of his lips, feeling a very real urge to hurt Sixer, hurt him this time. It was a shame the runes forbid it. “I told you what would happen if you think you can just discard me after –”

“No, no, no that isn’t it.” Ford held his hands up, placating Bill, his tone gentle and beseeching. Ford looked over his shoulder again, before grabbing Bill’s hands, leading him into the laundry. “That isn’t it at all. Shhhh.”

Backed into the cramped laundry, his back pressed against the washing machine, Ford boxing him into the little room, Bill stared at Sixer, confusion evident in his expression, still teetering on the edge of that wave of promised retribution.

“Shhhh.” Ford shooshed Bill again, patting the muse’s hand like he was soothing an old lady on her deathbed. “Shhh. Calm down now.”

“Are you shooshing me?” Bill squinted dangerously at Ford, feeling decidedly patronised.

“Calm down.” Ford insisted, putting his hands on Bill’s shoulders. “Calm down.”
“Stop saying that.” Bill hissed, swatting Ford’s hand off his shoulder.

“I’ll stop saying it when you calm down and listen.” Ford said sternly, watching the way his muse seemed to fizzle on the edge of lashing out, his temper much like a forest fire, quick to escalate.

Bill fidgeted indigently, still glaring at Ford, before he huffed out a reluctant sigh and crossed his arms. “What?”

Ford put his hands back on Bill’s shoulder and regarded the muse for a moment, deciding something, before he leaned in and pressed a firm kiss to Bill’s lips.

Pulling back, Ford noted his muse looked just as confused before, but now his eyes were no longer red, fading back to a more placid gold.

“Now, first of all, you aren’t something I’d ever discard, so just put that thought right out of your mind.” Ford began, almost chiding Bill for thinking it. His muse opened his mouth to retort, but Ford cut him off. “And of course I want you. You’re everything I’ve ever wanted, I made you this form because I wanted you with me, so don’t presume that I’d be ashamed, I’m not ashamed, I’m just –“

Bill closed his mouth and watched Sixer try to spell out his feelings. It almost looked like Ford was struggling to be genuine, but then he put his foot in it.

“Being polite. It’s not proper to overtly display affection in front of your peers, regardless of gender –“

“That is complete and total bullshit Sixer.” Bill snapped, finally jabbing Ford in the chest with his pointer finger like he wanted to. “At least have the decency to tell me outright that you don’t want to be seen with me. Admit it. Admit you’re embarrassed.”

“I’m not embarrassed, why would I be embarrassed?” Ford protested, a little louder than warranted.

“If you’re not embarrassed then you won’t mind showing your friend McGucket that we’re together. Or anyone else, for that matter.” Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, crossing his arms. “Other humans.”

“Why does it even matter to you?” Ford stressed, frustrated with Bill’s pushing.

“Because you’re mine!” Bill hissed, gripping onto Ford’s shirtfront almost aggressively. “You agreed to be more than just a worshipper, and you think that means doing less for me? No, you’re mine, and you don’t get to hide that convenient little fact to the world just because you’re worried your old college buddy will look at you funny, or treat you any differently.”

“Alright, I respect that.” Ford started, trying to restore calm once more. “Assuming it goes both ways.”

Bill wrinkled his nose at Ford, unimpressed with the reciprocity intended.

Bill had been increasingly vocal while Fiddleford was away, voicing more and more possessive sentiments for Stanford every day. The first several statements Ford could dismiss as being wrought of passion, but the persistence and insistence with which Bill repeated those statements led Ford to believe that there had been far more significance in meeting Bill’s challenge in the forest than he’d initially assumed.
Muses were possessive creatures, Ford mentally added to his private notebook, the collection of miscellaneous knowledge about the muse. He would jot down these thoughts later when he had a moment alone. Claiming those they bond to with a ferocious intensity. Pride is a significant factor, though there’s some hypocrisy inherent in these possessive sentiments. Bill is eager to display our bond to other humans, but recoils from any sort of interdimensional reveal. Potentially a power play. This seems to be about staking a claim.

“I will make an attempt –“ Ford gritted his teeth. “To be more open about us, if you make an attempt to do the same with your cosmic acquaintances.”

“I am open about us!” Bill exclaimed indignantly. “How am I not open?”

“Well, whenever we leave the protection of the shack, you make it apparent that you don’t want to be seen with me.” Ford added haughtily, remembering how Bill had all but pushed Ford into the forest away from him when they’d gone grocery shopping earlier in the week, Bill squinting suspiciously at the old lady with the blue eyes who had given the two of them a funny look. Ford didn’t find it all that funny, considering his trousers were ruined. Being pushed into the mud and brambles will do that to a good pair of trousers.

“That was different.” Bill said defensively. “I’ve told Pyronica all about you, and you still haven’t told your best friend about us.”

“Well, again I’m not entirely sure how I feel about that.” Ford grumbled.

“Oh, so it’s about your feelings now, is it? Well, I see how it is.”

“That’s not – it isn’t.” Ford sighed, exasperated. “Will it make you happy if I try?”

“Oh, sure, you can try.” Bill began sarcastically. “But that doesn’t mean that you’ll – mmmph!”

Ford yanked Bill forward by his shoulders and pressed a silencing kiss to his muse’s lips that the god slowly but surely melted into, the tense irritable set of his shoulders slipping away, yellow eyes closing. Bill’s rough grip on Ford’s shirt softened, becoming gentler, more indulgent.

From the other room, Fiddleford smelled the soup on the stovetop burning, hearing the fire alarm beeping quietly, the food abandoned by Stanford. He rushed into the kitchen to turn the burner off, looking around for wherever his colleague went.

Fiddleford put on an oven mitt and picked up the saucepan of burnt soup, searching the kitchen for Stanford as the fire alarm kept beeping. He walked past the laundry door, stopping dead in his tracks to see Stanford and his assistant kissing passionately up against the dryer.

Fiddleford cleared his throat. “Um, guys.”

Bill and Ford both sprang away from one another, startled, Ford patting his clothes down, looking up fearfully at his friend. Stanford’s assistant managed to look a little sheepish, standing up straighter, wiping his mouth with the back of his hand.

“The soup’s burnin’.” Fiddleford explained, nonplussed by the discovery of what he’d suspected from day one.

“I –“ Ford stammered, and cleared his throat, his voice cracking just a little. “I guess I’ll make sandwiches then.”

Fiddleford looked awkwardly between his friend and Stanford’s assistant, before gesturing with the
saucepan. “I’ll just go put this down.”

“Thanks.” Ford wheezed out, his voice pitching high from nerves.

Fiddleford walked away, putting the soup back on the stovetop, and gave another concerned glance to his colleague, who looked like he was holding his breath in unnecessarily, before he walked back into the lounge room to give Stanford space to breathe.

Ford doubled over, leaning on the washing machine, exhaling like he was winded by that entire encounter.

“Now was that as bad as you thought it would be?” Bill asked, hopping up to sit on the dryer, watching Ford.

Stanford raised his finger, indicating Bill give him a minute, and just breathed through processing what had just happened.

“You know, I think he already knew.” Bill considered, remembering that ‘wrong room’ comment.

“He knew?” Ford gasped, looking sharply up at Bill.

“Well, either that, or he’s calmer than he looks. Don’t look at me like that. I didn’t tell him.”

Ford’s mind was racing, trying to look through every past interaction with Fiddleford in an instant, to try and find out when his friend first suspected he was – well.

Stanford was an expert at overanalysing things, and now he was suspicious of every conversation he’d ever had with his college friend, seeking out any instance where Fiddleford could have potentially treated him differently because of this.

Bill watched Ford agonise over this new development. It was fun for a while to see that tortured expression, that incredibly critical mien reflect inwards. Sixer’s expressions were always a treat, but eventually the whole self-castigating act got boring and Bill looked away, kicking his legs against the dryer, feeling the machine jiggle as the laundry whirled around inside it.

“It’s possible – since the first phone call – but that couldn’t be, special could mean anything.” Ford muttered to himself, bringing his hand up to his mouth to fret about the details.

Bill continued kicking his legs against the dryer, reaching down to turn the dial for the speed of the dryer up to high, enjoying the way the vibrations would rock through his whole body.

After several minutes of fretting, Ford looked up.

“Do you think he’s been treating me differently?” Ford finally asked, withdrawing from his introverted musing finally to look over at Bill.

His muse was riding the dryer which was bouncing around the laundry, the clothing inside knocking heavily against the walls of the machine, inching it across the floor.

“W-w-w-ha-a-a-t do yo-u-u-u think, Ge-e-e-nerius?”

Ford gave Bill an exasperated look, and facepalmed.

And now the world knew he was dating that.
Fiddleford sat in the living room, on Ford’s big armchair, twisting his Cubic’s Cube in his hand fretfully.

He saw the expression on Stanford’s face. It was everything he dreaded.

He’d tried to be a good friend to Stanford, to show him in small ways that he was there for him, that he wouldn’t judge him, that he didn’t think any less of him.

But from the way Ford had looked at him, it looked like his whole world was ending.

It twisted F’s guilt up something fierce, because it wasn’t the first time he’d seen that horror-struck expression on Ford’s face.

I’m stopping. I’ve stopped. I’ve let it be. Now just put the gun down.

Please, F. I’m your friend.

Fiddleford, please –

F set the rearranged cube on the table, took his glasses off and pinched the bridge of his nose, rubbing his eyelids.

It was bad enough he remembered that expression, he could erase the guilt, but he didn’t think his conscience could allow him to forget the memory entirely. Or at least his conscience hadn’t allowed him to pull the trigger on that particular memory just yet.

He felt like a bad friend.

He’d learnt so much from Patricia’s brother, he’d thought he’d handled this the right way.

Judging from Ford’s expression earlier, maybe he hadn’t.

F heard a knock on the living room door, and he looked up.

Ford was standing hesitantly in the doorway, watching F cautiously.

“Do you mind if I sit?”

Fiddleford put his glasses back on and waved Ford in, not wanting to seem standoffish, despite the guilt headache he was nursing.

Ford walked around the coffee table and sat down on the lounge, looking across to F in the armchair. He wrung his hands anxiously, before picking up the cube from the table, twisting it.

“F, I wanted to apologise –”

“Don’t be apologisin’. If anyone should apologise it’s me for bargin’ in on you.” Fiddleford spoke over Ford, holding his hand out. “It’s a small shack, it was bound to happen sometime, I’m just sorry I couldn’t give you two your privacy.”

“How -?” Ford marvelled, speaking in a soft voice, looking at F like he was an unsolvable
equation. “How long have you known?”

“How about your special friend?” Fiddleford snorted, and shook his head. “There’s no accountin’ for your taste, but I had a feelin’.”

“When?” Ford pressed, like it was of the utmost importance.

“Does it matter? I ain’t seein’ you no different, Ford.” Fiddleford said sincerely. “You’re still one of my best friends. It don’t make no difference to me.”

Ford twisted the Cubic’s cube, looking down at his hands, before he stopped twisting it. “I don’t know why I thought it would.”

“Small town like this, you gotta get some folk who aren’t so accepting.” Fiddleford reasoned gently. “I know what that’s like, I grew up in Tennessee. You’d think science was a sin, the way most folks reacted when I left the farm. My pa was a piece of work, I’ll tell you that.”

Ford took a deep breath and exhaled. “I don’t even want to imagine what my father would think.”

Fiddleford watched Stanford carefully, getting a better idea of why Ford hadn’t told him, was hesitant to tell him.

“Are you okay with me knowin’?” Fiddleford asked tentatively.

Ford gave Fiddleford an assessing look and exhaled again, somewhat more relieved. “I think so.”

“Is Bill okay with me knowin’?” Fiddleford pressed.

“Oh, he doesn’t care.” Ford scoffed, waving his hand dismissively. “He’s probably happier than me about all this. Though he doesn’t have the same hang ups as most people.”

“There’s gotta be a good story there.” Fiddleford leaned forward in the armchair, wanting to coax a smile from his colleague. “You and Bill. It’s gotta be some story, since you two are about as different as chalk and cheese.”

“Oh, it’s nothing really.” Ford started, trying to dissuade Fiddleford from prying down this line of inquiry, not knowing how he’d be able to protect Bill’s secret without lying.

“Oh, come on. You know how Pat and I met.” Fiddleford urged.

“Because I was there, I didn’t have to pry the details out of you.”

“I ain’t meanin’ to pry none, I’m just curious.” Fiddleford insisted with a friendly smile. “When did it happen? How did it -?”

“I – I think I hear him calling from the other room actually.” Ford lied, desperate for a way out of this discussion. Raising his voice, Ford called out. “Bill, did you need anything?”

The muse’s voice echoed out enthusiastically from the laundry, along with the thumping sound of the very violent dryer. “My molecules are vi-b-b-b-rating!”

“Well, that’s –“ Ford said rather awkwardly, not knowing what he could really do with that. It wasn’t an out from this conversation. Damn.

“What’s he doin’?” Fiddleford asked politely, craning his neck to look into the other room.
“He’s discovered the highest setting on the washer-dryer.” Ford explained reluctantly. “I think he
finds it entertaining.”

“Never a dull moment there, that’s for sure.” Fiddleford chuckled, and looked up at Ford, his eyes
sparkling behind his glasses. “I wouldn’t think he’d be a good fit for you at first, but I haven’t seen
you laugh so much as you have now since - I don’t know when. It’s a good look for you.”

Ford smiled wryly down at his hands, and set the Cubic’s cube back down on the coffee table,
reflecting on that.

“So he tells me.”

Fiddleford watched Ford’s soft smile, and relented, figuring that’s as much as he’d get out of Ford
for now. He’d tell him more when he was ready.

“Well, at least this should help to clear the air some between everyone, so it won’t feel so cooped
in here.” Fiddleford said optimistically, listening to the rain continue to hammer down on the roof.
“Though if I’m bein’ honest with you, the second this weather stops, I want out.”

“It shouldn’t last too long.” Ford remarked, sitting back on the couch more comfortably, feeling
like a burden had been lifted off his shoulders. “The weatherman said it should dry up in a day or
so.”

“That’ll be good.” Fiddleford said. He reached forward and swiped the newspaper up off the coffee
table. “Well when it does we’ll be wantin’ an activity, somethin’ to get us out of the house – and I
know just the thing.”

“An activity you say? We still have work to do on the portal.” Ford reminded F, responsibly.

“We’re gettin’ plenty done. One day won’t hurt.” Fiddleford insisted, opening the paper to a
specific page, folding it back down to showcase the ad he was looking for. Passing it back to Ford,
Fiddleford pointed to the page. “See here.”

Ford adjusted his glasses and read out the small square of ad space on the ‘What’s On’ page in the
Gossiper.

“Mama Misfortune’s … travelling carnival and … freak show.”

“The carnival Ford!” Fiddleford enthused. “Oh, the whole town would get in on it when one rolled
through Tennessee. There’ll be pig races, and kettle corn. Rides and games! I ain’t been to one of
these since I was a kid!”

“Oh, these things are nothing but money-grubbing side shows. Falsified entertainment designed to
swindle people out of their money. If I wanted to be financially frisked I’d just go back to the
Boardwalk in Jersey.” Ford gestured to the paper, tapping it with his hand.

“Oh, come on Ford!” Fiddleford leaned forward in his chair, reaching over to point at the
newspaper. “It’s got all sorts of weird unnatural creatures what how you like, I know you like your
mystical miscellany, and it’s got fun things for me too. Rides, engineering, pig racin’.”

“You’re really trying to sell me on this with pig racing?” Ford raised his eyebrow at F, vaguely
amused.

“And kettle corn.” Fiddleford nodded determinately.
Ford sighed, unable to compete with the eager earnest expression on Fiddleford’s face.

It was good to see F getting over his trauma, in all honesty, and this enthusiasm was an appreciated break from the tension that had flooded the house since the incident. If F was feeling better, well enough to want to seek out at least some partial adventure, who was Ford to stop him.

“Still, sideshows like this, especially self-professing ‘freak shows’ are usually just a massive scam, designed to cash in on humanity’s obscure obsession with othering the unnatural. I mean, honestly.” Ford passed the newspaper back to Fiddleford, and flexed his hands. “Shows like this profit off showcasing genetic deformities like these, hyping perfectly normal physical abstractions into some kind of monstrosity. They’re just hands. I could tell you myself, they’re not that entertaining.”

“Hah! I beg to differ.” Bill’s voice called out smugly. Ford and Fiddleford looked up, to see Stanford’s assistant leaning against the doorway, holding a mug full of eggnog.

Ford gave Bill an exasperated look, unimpressed by the innuendo, and Bill just shrugged, pacing across the room to sit on the couch beside Ford, sipping on his eggnog.

“Your dryer’s broken by the way. What are we looking at?”

Fiddleford passed the paper over to Bill. The muse looked at it, but didn’t take it from F, still sipping his eggnog.

“Ahh, a good old fashioned small-town freak-show. There’s nothing quite like firing up the locals with a hearty dose of controlled fear of the unknown by putting your monsters in cages and charging for admission. Gets me every time.”

Fiddleford seemed to realise obliquely from the bitter yet cheerful tone of Bill’s voice that suggesting a trip to the travelling freak-show to his two colleagues with peculiar birth defects (polydactylism and those peculiar yellow slitted eyes of Bill’s) might not have been the most tactful suggestion.

“Well we don’t have to go if it’d upset you two. I didn’t mean it like that.”

“At you kidding? I love freak-shows!” Bill enthused, grinning widely.

“I can assure you, shows like this never house any legitimate anomalies. It’s a celebration of the bizarre, without any real bizarre.” Ford lambasted. “A complete waste of time, from a research standpoint.”

“Oh, you don’t know that for sure Sixer.” Bill cosied into the couch, crossing his legs, getting comfortable. “Sometimes they mix something real in amongst the fake freaks. It’s like a pot luck like that. A lucky dip!”

“Hmm, well I suppose if there’s even a slight chance we’ll find something truly anomalous there, it could be worth studying.” Ford considered, rubbing his chin. “Maybe it is worth a visit.”

“Besides, knowing you, you’d have just as much fun debunking a fake freak-show as you would investigating a real one.” Bill stretched his legs out to rest across Sixer’s lap, kneading his socked feet into Stanford’s thigh. “You could grow a funny moustache and have your own TV show. Myth BUSTED!”

Ford and Fiddleford gave Bill a confused look, not quite getting the reference. As the TV show Bill was referencing was produced several decades ahead of them both, that’d be why.
“I thought you didn’t like facial hair.” Ford raised his eyebrows at Bill.

“I don’t, so don’t get any ideas.” Bill exhaled, and muttered into his mug of eggnog. “Forget I said anything.”

Ford shrugged off Bill’s statement, knowing he couldn’t pry into it in front of Fiddleford. Patting Bill’s ankle idly, Ford looked out the window, watching the rain hammer down, thrashing the trees about.

“Well, I guess until this rain stops, we’ll have to put the carnival on hold.”

Fiddleford sighed, and looked down at the paper in his hands. “Yeah, I suppose so.”

Bill kicked Ford’s thigh and gave him a hinting look, which Ford took on board. Glancing between Fiddleford’s morose expression and his muse’s demanding eyes, Ford reluctantly reached his conclusion.

“Perhaps it’ll dry up sooner than we think.”

“That’d be the dream.” Fiddleford folded the newspaper up and set it back down on the table, face down, so he couldn’t see the advertisement taunting him.

“Hey, engineer. Do you think you could look at the dryer for a second? May as well fix it up rather than stare out the window like a kicked puppy.” Bill suggested, watching McGucket steadily.

“Didja really have to break it?” McGucket frowned at Bill. “My shirts were in there.”

“You looked like you needed something to do.” Bill said flatly.

“Well ain’t that just generous of you.” Fiddleford griped, but clapped his hands on his thighs and stood up, rolling up his sleeves. “I guess I can take a look at it.”

“You do that.” Bill smiled smugly.

F walked over to the door, and paused in the doorway. “Did you want to come poke around at it with me, Stanford?”

Ford looked between Fiddleford, waiting for a reply, and Bill, who was curling his toes into Ford’s thigh, looking determined.

“Ah, I actually have something to do down in the lab. Sorry about that F.”

“Suit yourself.” Fiddleford shrugged, and left the room, giving the two of them some space.

Bill must have joined Stanford in the lab, as F didn’t see the two of them come back upstairs for at least another two hours.

The storm intensified, lightning flaring up, striking through the forest dramatically, thunder loudly asserting itself throughout the sky.

Sitting on the laundry floor, taking apart the dryer and putting it back together again, Fiddleford leaned his head out the laundry door to look out onto the back porch, the storm outside getting risible, water splattering down harder than it had for a good long while.

Fiddleford shook his head and ducked back in to finish tweaking the dryer’s engine.
The thunder groaned suddenly, loud like a scream that stretched on, like the sky was in pain. The rain thudded harder than ever, slamming down buckets on the ground outside.

Fiddleford stopped what he was doing and ran to the back porch to watch the sky wretch down rain, like it was squeezing every drop down from the heavens, wringing out the clouds like an old lady wringing out a washcloth.

Then suddenly the rain stopped, and the sky was still.

Fiddleford stood, flabbergasted, watching the way it had seemed like all of a sudden the last bit of water in the sky got pushed out of it, slapping down onto the grass outside like god had chucked a wash tub out the window.

Fiddleford tentatively stepped beyond the shelter of the porch, holding his hand out to check the rain had stopped. The ground was sodden, puddles of water making Stanford’s back yard look like a rice paddy. Fiddleford would need to throw on his gum-boots just to get across to the letter box.

He heard the ding of the elevator, and turned around to see Stanford being led into the kitchen, his arm looped around Bill’s shoulder, like his assistant was supporting him. He seemed rather woozy, and Bill plonked him down in a chair.

Ford was looking paler than usual, propping his hand against his forehead.

As Bill spun around to rummage through the fridge, Fiddleford watched Stanford rub his forehead tenderly.

“You alright there Stanford?” Fiddleford asked from the back porch.

Bill set deli-meats and cheeses in front of Stanford, and the scientist reached forward to shove sliced cheese squares into his mouth ravenously.

“Fine, fine.” Ford replied with his mouthful, holding a hand over his mouth.

Bill poured a glass of orange juice for Stanford and set it on the table beside the other man, watching him eat with a satisfied expression on his face.

“The rain’s stopped.” Fiddleford commented, watching the hasty way Ford put that food away, seeing the colour return to his face.

Stanford paused at that, looking out the window to notice the sodden ground and clear skies, before looking back at his assistant, raising his eyebrows.

“Well how about that.” Bill replied, somewhat smugly, and ruffled his fingers through Stanford’s hair affectionately, before sitting down on the chair next to him, helping himself to the food Ford didn’t eat.

“It stopped just all of a sudden, like all the water done got squeezed out of the sky. It was bizarre, I’m tellin’ you.” Fiddleford extrapolated, turning to look back out into the yard. “Got us flooded in about fifteen seconds. I ain’t never seen nothin’ like it.”

“Mmmm.” Ford hummed politely, trying to sound surprised by Fiddleford’s explanation, his cheeks full of shaved ham.

“It must’a been an act of God.” Fiddleford said in a hushed voice, awe creeping into his tone.
Stanford seemed to choke for a moment on his mouthful of food, spluttering, while Bill patted Ford on the back indulgently. When Ford finally swallowed the food that had gone down the wrong way, he cleared his throat, and looked cautiously over at Fiddleford.

F was still staring out at the yard. His tone perked up some, approaching optimistic.

“Well, at least this means now we can get goin’ to that carnival before it goes ’n rolls right outta town. How’s that for a silver linin’?”

“How indeed.” Ford agreed, looking over at his muse, who sat staring at him, those slitted golden eyes watching Ford eat in a pleased, satisfied way, tattoos glowing slightly beneath the fabric of his sleeves.

Silver lining. Ford snorted to himself, and reached for another piece of cheese, indicating Bill could take the last one.

As he watched his muse eat, Ford marvelled how at the price of a little blood, and a magic ritual, the being sitting beside him could wring the heavens dry, all because Ford had asked him to. It was truly magical how Bill could make the rain stop, and put a smile back on Fiddleford’s face for Ford’s sake of mind.

Ford looked at the lines of Bill’s tattoos glinting under his sleeve as the muse reached across to take a cheeky sip of Ford’s orange juice.

Silver lining wasn’t right. This was all gold, and it was all because of Bill.

The crowds bustled through under the banner that announced, ‘Mama Misfortune’s Travelling Carnival and Freak-show’, tinny circus music playing through rented speakers set up around the field.

While it was still somewhat wet in Gravity Falls, it was the first day without rain, so the entire town seemed to flock to the carnival for entertainment and merriment. The weather was still bitterly cold, but the townsfolk were rugged up, toting midday cups of carnival wine, and other alcoholic beverages sold to the adults while the children of Gravity Falls ran around, eagerly peering in at the exhibits and clambering onto the rides.

Dressed warm, wearing several layers under his heavy trench coat, red scarf wrapped around his neck, a woollen hat warming his head, Stanford Pines rubbed his hands together and blew on them, trying to warm his freezing digits.

“I should have brought gloves.” Ford fretted, feeling the cold creep into his fingertips.

“That’s what you have me for.” Bill reached up to cover Ford’s hands with his own, but Stanford leaned away, looking over his shoulder, not wanting to be seen engaging in such public affection.

Bill huffed, glaring at Ford. “Why do you do that?”

“Do what?” Ford tried to blink innocently at Bill the way his muse often did. It just looked owlish
from behind Ford’s glasses, his bushy eyebrows adding to the look. Apparently, it wasn’t an expression Ford could pull off, at least not as well as the God could.

“Your best friend already knows. It’s not like there’s anyone else’s opinion here who matters. I promised I’d be more open in public, that means you have to too. Unless you want to lose a finger to frostbite.” Bill scoffed, letting his hands fall to his side angrily. “Or more than one. Or all of your fingertips. You’d just be six stubs. Stubby. Stubby Sixer.”

Ford blew warm air into his fingers again and looked through the crowd, over to Fiddleford, who had raced ahead in his enthusiasm over to the Ferris Wheel, pointing up at it and waving back to Ford, excitement evident in his expression.

Townsmen jostled through the small field, the carnival’s arena packed for want of anything better to do in Gravity Falls before Christmas. The smell of deep fried carnival food and corn on the cob filled the crisp winter air, and circus songs played on a loop over the speaker system while carnies hawked their wares.

“I hate this music.” Bill glared at the speakers dotted around the field. “It wasn’t a good song in the 1800s, and it’s not a good song now.”

“It’s circus music.” Ford walked alongside Bill, catching up to Fiddleford at a more steady pace, enjoying the walk. “It’s not meant to wow.”

“It’s a chromatic scale, repeated ad infinitum, repurposed into some tawdry sideshow theme song. This used to be about gladiators. I see no gladiators.” Bill pouted and crossed his arms, not enjoying the carnival so far.

Ford rolled his eyes, and bumped his shoulder into Bill’s casually. “It’s not so bad. I thought you wanted to come here today.”

“Yeah, well maybe rubbing elbows with these moronic people, pointing and gaping at moronic things, and listening to moronic music is losing its appeal.” Bill scowled into the crowd, the cold weather making him sour.

Or perhaps he was more offended by Stanford’s lack of public affection than previously anticipated.

Maybe this wasn’t just about Bill staking a claim, Ford pondered, maybe being seen with me really would make him happy. Or holding my hand. Perhaps these little insignificant things really aren’t so insignificant to him in the grand scheme of things.

Shoving his hands in his coat pockets, Ford walked alongside Bill, looking around at the hawkers and their wares, listening to the clamour of the carnival.

“Guess the weight of the pig. Guess this porker’s weight for five dollars. Five dollars for your chance to win a pig!”

“Step right up and buy Mama Misfortune’s mystical jewellery, the likes of which you’ve never seen!”

“Do you dare enter the haunted Hall of Mirrors? Admission is ten dollars. Who knows what you’ll see inside.”

The circus music continued to loop on and on, and Ford could see from the way Bill’s shoulders got tenser with every passing second that he was beginning to regret being here. He didn’t even have anything scathing to say about the spruikers, he seemed so agitated by the funfair.

Ford looked around them, checking the crowd for any potential bullies, before he realised that Bill was right. He shouldn’t care about anyone else’s opinion. He was an adult, and he made his own choices, bullies be damned. He could take care of bullies now, he was a grown man, and far more capable than he had been in high school.

Ford realised, and it was a refreshing realisation, that he didn’t care, and it wasn’t like anyone’s censure would stop Ford from liking Bill and enjoying his company.

Besides, he didn’t like to see his muse upset. Certainly not because of something he did.

Bill was beginning to culture a tic under his eye, glaring at everything and everyone at the funfair, his mood turning in on itself. He was drawn out of his self-imposed funnel of anger when he felt Ford step up beside him and gently entwine their fingers together.

Bill blinked down at their hands, then looked up at Sixer’s face, surprised.

Ford just squeezed Bill’s hand reassuringly, then pointed to Fiddleford, who was standing waiting for them over by a food stall. “Maybe unhealthy carnival food will change your mind. It looks like F’s already got some.”

Bill’s sour expression seemed to lighten all at once, and he looked ahead to where F was standing, waving at them, his arms full of snack foods.

“They’ve got deep fried corn dogs! Biscuits and gravy! They’ve got sweet cornbread!”

Stepping up beside his colleague, Ford peered at the greasy food Fiddleford was holding, curling his lip at the way the paper bag the food sat in was already becoming transparent.

“So they do. I must say, it doesn’t exactly look appetising.”

“Pshaw.” Fiddleford waved his hand at Ford. “You don’t know what you’re missing. Here, try some.”

Ford leaned away from the food skewered on the stick F was holding, wrinkling his nose at it.

“What is it?” Bill asked curiously, seeming much more content now his hand was pressed against Sixer’s.

“It’s a corn dog.” F held the stick food out to Bill, indicating he could have some. “It’s got a little mustard on it. Here, have a bite.”

Bill took the stick from F and examined it. “Strange dog.” He delicately took a small bite, and chewed the food, mulling the taste over in his mouth, before shrugging and taking another bite.

“Are you gonna give it back?” Fiddleford asked, watching Stanford’s assistant chomp through the rest of his corn dog. “I said you could have a bite.”

“I’m having several.” Bill replied with his mouth full of food.

Ford looked around the fair, seeing signs for each attraction amidst the hustle and bustle of human bodies. Looking over to F, who was taking sullen bites from his gravy dipped biscuits, Ford
questioned good naturedly.

“So what’ll it be first. Did you have something specific you wanted to see?”

“Well the pig racin’ don’t start til 3, so we’ve got time for a bit of an amble.” Fiddleford said, sucking gravy off his thumb. “There’s some stalls sellin’ goodies, and some games and the like. Then you’ll want to see your attractions, sideshows and exhibits and all. I’m pretty sure I saw a sign for a haunted freak house, if that tickles your fancy any.”

“Hmm, that could be promising.” Ford considered, scratching his stubble idly. He looked through the crowd, trying to plan out their direction, when he locked eyes with a familiar face.

“Stanford! Hiiiiiiiiii!”

“Oh dear.” Ford muttered, before he tucked both his and Bill’s entwined hands into his jacket pocket, waving politely back at Susan Wentworth, who began pushing through the crowd to come see him.

Bill gave Ford a disappointed look, and resigned himself to eating his stolen corn dog with small furious bites.

“Hello Susan.” Ford said in a polite tone, once Suzie cleared the crowds, pulling along her best friend in tow.

Dragging Willow by the hand, Suzie’s enthusiasm managed to carry not only Willow, but Dan Corduroy as well, who’s arm was looped with Willow’s, across the field and through the throng of people to stand steadfast in front of Stanford.

Adjusting her scarf, her breath coming out in pants to mist the air in front of her, Suzie smiled wide at Ford, and waved again sweetly at him. “Hiya Stanford. What are you doing here?”

Bill turned, as did Fiddleford, to watch Ford’s friends approach, Bill picking his teeth with the corn dog’s skewer. He gave an unimpressed glance to Susan, disliking the woman on principle for her continual fawning over Sixer, and jabbed Ford’s palm roughly with his fingernail, noticing the way Ford had stuffed their hands out of sight immediately. So much for being open.

“Mmm.” Ford grimaced, and squeezed Bill’s fingers in retaliation, before he smiled politely at Suzie, Willow, and Dan. “Fiddleford wanted to come see the carnival before it rolled out of town, and since the weather cleared, it was the perfect opportunity.”

“Oh, that weather was somethin’ else wasn’t it?” Suzie gushed. “It was about all you could hear in the diner, it just came crashing down all of a sudden. Drowned out my favourite song on the radio. All the lumberjacks came in soaked to the bone!”

“We were out workin’ when it happened.” Dan extrapolated. “Craziest thing. Branches snapped off the trees, lightning struck about an inch away from Stewart, he nearly damn died. It just came outta nowhere.”

“Sure was strange.” Suzie nodded.

“Those two were down in the lab, they missed seein’ it happen.” Fiddleford chimed in. “I was out fixin’ the dryer, it was bizarre. Our backyard’s good fer swimmin’ in now, I tell you what.”

Bill seemed more than a little smug now, listening to the conversation.
Willow, who had been staring intently at Bill, spoke up finally, her tone as suspicious as she was. “It was an incredibly destructive thunderstorm. I have a vegetable garden out back by my cabin, and it looked like all the pumpkins and vegetables and other fruits had been trampled. If I hadn’t seen the rain come down myself I wouldn’t have believed it wasn’t some kind of animal, ruining my garden.”

“Oh.” Ford frowned seeming somewhat taken aback. “I wasn’t aware the storm had such consequences.”

“On the plus side, at least it got all the rain over with before the funfair left. I wouldn’t want to miss out on pig racin’.” Fiddleford added, enthusiastically. “I ain’t been to a pig race in forever.”

“They have pig racin’ here?” Susan cooed. “I had a pet pig growin’ up, with his little curly tail. Mr Oinker’s, I called him. Pigs are messy though, cats are much better.”

“I ain’t seen you around much lately.” Dan said, fixing Stanford with a piercing stare. “You haven’t been in town?”


“I’ve seen you.” Willow said, still glaring at Bill. “In the forest.”

“Oh? You did?” Ford asked, looking almost anxious, as the last time he was in the forest he was covered head to toe in unicorn glitter and uproariously drunk.

When Willow merely stared at Ford, Ford cleared his throat and hurried to present an explanation. “That was an expedition, just a little field study in the forest. There are marvellous things in there, you know. Plenty to study.”

“Oh, I bet.” Willow said bluntly, still regarding both Ford and Bill with suspicion.

Ford cleared his throat again, and tried to change the subject. “So, uh, what brings you to the carnival today?”

“What else is there to do around here?” Willow huffed and crossed her arms, tucking her gloved hands under her armpits for warmth. Dan put his arm around her shoulders, rubbing her sleeve.

“Don’t see many shows like this these days. There used to be more, my Ma tells me. Said it was the American pastime, going to freak-shows and funfairs when they hit town.” Dan shrugged, his eyes trailing over to the food stand behind F, reading the menu. “Mostly I just come for the food. The strength testers aren’t bad, if you’re bored. I ain’t never met a strong man at one of these who made for bad company. Beats going to the Skull Fracture for a drink.”

“I got one of the programs from the man in the funny hat, back there.” Suzie said, pulling the program out of her purse, unfolding it and pointing to the various listings. “They’ve got all sorts of curio’s you can buy, and these weird animals on exhibit from across the seas. It says here they’ve found the missing link between humans and angels, golly. That’s exciting.”

“Oh please. The missing link?” Ford interjected, unable to help himself.

“Ford’s pretty sceptical about all this.” Fiddleford explained. “Freak-show hooey.”

“It’s the same philandering nonsense they’ve been touting since the 18th century. Parading disfigurement and anomalies and different cultures and races as the ‘missing link’ between human and angel.”
humanity the way they see it, and the way it just so happens to be for the rest of the world. It’s nonsense.” Ford scoffed, tucking his scarf around his neck as he spoke. “Absolute slander designed to prey on those too stupid to recognise it.”

“I thought them little animals were funny.” Suzie said in a quiet voice, a little hurt by Ford’s vehemence.

“Well of course you would.” Bill commented, sending a catty glare Suzie’s way. “Clearly you’re the victim here.”

“Hey, what’s that supposed to mean? You back off her, you hear?” Willow snapped at Bill, confrontation dancing in her eyes.

Ford raised both of his hands in the air, attempting to diffuse the situation. “I’m sure he didn’t mean anything by it, everyone calm down.”

Ford’s attempt to mitigate the situation was derailed, as when he pulled his hand out of his pocket to soothe the tensions between his friends, Bill didn’t let go of his hand, stubbornly holding on.

Ford seemed to realise several beats after the fact that everyone was staring at his right hand, Bill’s arm dangling casually, their fingers still laced together. So much for keeping things quiet.

“Oh.” Suzie said, blinking at the gesture of affection.

Hastily Ford stuffed both his and Bill’s hand back in his pocket, but the damage had been done.

“I didn’t realise –“ Suzie started.

“Don’t be – there isn’t anything to talk about. What else did you want to see at the funfair?” Ford asked, trying desperately to change the subject while under the unbending scrutiny of Willow and Dan.

He struggled to keep his expression sincere, as Bill was squeezing his fingers in a punishing grip, clearly not impressed about being brushed aside as nothing.

“Oh, well, uh –“ Suzie seemed to stumble over her words for a moment, stuttering, trying to find something to say that would smooth this whole embarrassing ordeal over. There was nothing worse than accidentally butting heads with the partner of the guy you’ve had a crush on forever. That wasn’t Suzie’s intention. She was a sweet girl who truly just wanted to get along with everyone. “There’s, uh, a fortune teller that might –“

“Dan’s hanging out with the queers now, boys.” A loud voice interrupted as a group of lumberjacks who worked down on the Northwest’s property, rugged up in their flannel with cups of beer in their hands, strode towards the group, bearing the sort of swagger that signalled trouble. “Guess we know who your new friends are, Corduroy. Is there something you’re not telling us?”

Fiddleford blanched, and looked across to Ford, who seemed frozen to the spot, the taunts of the bullying lumberjacks shocking him tense. Distantly Ford realised that these lumberjacks didn’t seem to be lashing out at him, more at Dan for some reason, but he still reeled, his brain disassociating in the moment, shocked that it only took a moment’s openness to be branded what his high school bullies had thrown at him on the regular.

Dan clenched his jaw, and flexed his arms, his hands closing into fists at the insult, stepping forward only for Willow to squeeze his arm, looking up at him intently.
Dan exhaled and unwound a little with Willow’s help, before sticking his chin up, being the bigger person. “I ain’t got nothin’ to say to you Dawson Peters. Just walk away.”

“Aww, walk away?” Dawson, the ringleader, laughed and elbowed his friends. “Not like you to turn down a fight Dan. Unless you’ve really got it twisted now. You and your bum buddies don’t go toe to toe like a real man, do you?”

Bill noticed the way this Cro-Magnon’s taunts seemed to draw Sixer more and more into himself, his shoulders curling over.

Despite being a grown man, with the ability to defend himself sufficiently, the courage to battle monsters, and the recklessness required to fling himself skywards in order to knock a raging Gremloblin out of the air with a single blow, Ford seemed to shrink inwards, and revert to the insecure kid he was back in high school where he’d heard this whole song and dance before.

The difference was back in high school he could convince himself that these taunts didn’t apply to him, but now that he’d succumbed to his desires, and was standing beside the man he’d chosen to pursue, he felt every flyaway insult hit its mark cruelly.

“You wanna leave right now, before I do something you’ll regret, in front of my lady.” Dan growled, stepping up into Dawson’s space, cracking his knuckles menacingly.

“That’s right, you’re whipped by Red now. Isn’t that right?” Dawson leaned around Dan to peer at Willow, flicking his fingers at her, waving. “How’s it goin’ sweet cheeks? You ever get tired of bossing Dan here around, you just give me a call doll.”

“Drop dead Dawson.” Willow gritted her teeth and glared at Dawson, still pulling on Dan’s arm, trying to drag him away from this confrontation. Suzie stood behind her, fretting over this hostility, looking between Dawson, Dan, and Ford, who still seemed shell-shocked about the whole scenario.

“Fiery redhead. Sounds about right, from what I’ve heard about you, and I’ve heard stories.” Dawson guffawed, but staggered back as Dan pushed him, roughly shoving his chest. “Woah, woah, woah. I thought we were all playing nice here. You know, like buddies.”

“I am not your buddy.” Dan growled.

“Dan, stop!” Willow urged him, tugging on his arm again. “He isn’t worth it.”

Dan seemed to struggle for a moment, reigning in his temper, before he agreed with Willow. “You’re right, he ain’t.” Dan turned his back on Dawson and his crew, making to walk away.

Dawson seemed to wrestle with the insult there, not getting the reaction he wanted out of Dan. Curling his fists tight, he yelled out, still trying to provoke him.

“Fine, walk away. You’d rather waste your time licking your girl’s boots, hanging out with these namby losers. Too good for us now your lady’s spent busting your balls. I see how it is. Now here you are hanging out with faggots and freaks. Guess the freak-show was in town all along.” Dawson gestured to Ford and Bill for emphasis. “And Corduroy’s along for the ride.”

Bill could see the outrage slowly creep into Sixer’s expression. This idiot seemed to be hitting all of Sixer’s sensitive spots, all in a misguided attempt to get back at his friend, and while Bill could see the merit in some good old fashioned escalation, sorely tempted to take a pound of flesh for himself here, he could tell that wasn’t what Sixer needed right now, so instead he aimed for brevity, and elbowed Sixer lightly.
“Looks like the missing link between man and pig here got out of his cage.”

Everyone seemed to freeze for an instant, Bill’s voice a little too loud for a secretive aside.

Startled out of his outrage by the comment, looking at Bill in surprise, a laugh snuck out past Ford’s lips, before he stopped himself, noticing that Dawson’s crew were all now looking at them, whereas before they could have been part of the scenery, simply something to insult as a side note to stir Dan’s ire.

The colour drained from the boorish man’s face. Clearly Dawson didn’t expect them to speak up, least of all to laugh at him.

“What did you say to me?”

Bill squeezed Ford’s hand in reassurance this time, before he smiled at Dawson, one of his wide, giddy, dangerous smiles.

“Oh, I was just saying that if I wanted to see evolution go backwards I’d go to a museum, but since seeing you, why bother?”

Fiddleford’s jaw dropped, watching Bill with something akin to awe. Backupsmore University wasn’t well funded enough to allow much scientific superiority on campus, so seeing someone tear down this jock archetype with scathing scientific insults was like watching Carl Sagan suplex Muhammed Ali.

“The hell did you just say to me?” Dawson narrowed his eyes and stepped towards Bill slowly, like he was sizing him up.

“You’re like a walking talking exhibit on why not to eat lead paint, I swear. It’s hilarious. I’m guessing cognitive impairment’s at play too, since you’ve asked me the same question twice now. Did your mother just hate you, or is there some other reason you were dropped on the floor repeatedly as a child. What, was she joining the basketball team?”

“What the hell did you just say to me, you little fruit?” Dawson strode up to Bill, getting right up in his space, trying to loom menacingly over the other man, perturbed by the fact that Bill just kept on smiling.

“Maybe I’m not speaking plainly enough for you.” Bill held his hand up beside his face like he was whispering a secret to Dawson, though he didn’t lower his voice at all. “The exhibit for World’s Most Pathetic Man is that way, and I can only assume you’re on the clock. Newsflash buddy. Your coffee break is over. The crowds are waiting.”

“That’s it.” Dawson pressed his lips together in a thin line, and raised his fist, hefting it back like he was readying a punch. “That’s it, you –”

Before he could finish his sentence with whatever ignorant epithet he was looking for, Ford’s fist came flying out, socking Dawson right in the jaw with a left hook so flawless it would make his father proud.

Dawson fell down, smack, onto the still wet ground, mud tarnishing his clothing. He brought his hand up to cradle his jaw gingerly, and spat out blood onto the grass.

His cronies hovered impotently around him, looking to Dawson for direction, not knowing what to do when someone, someone like Stanford, refused to be bullied.
They seemed to be reassessing his form and stature, noticing the confident way he threw that punch, and the broad set of his shoulders. Despite the glasses and the intellect, Stanford was no longer a gangly geek. His physique was imposing in its own way, he could clearly hold his own in a fight. In short, he was nothing to sneeze at.

“He madthe me bit my thongue.” He announced somewhat redundantly, his newly acquired speech impediment saying everything.

Bill looked gleefully between Dawson laid out in the mud, and Sixer who was shaking his wrist, flexing his fingers out, gradually looking more assured of himself, eventually grinning briefly at Bill.

Bill beamed back.

Dan leaned forward to give Ford a friendly punch in the arm. “Nice one, mate.”

“I can’t believe you just did that.” Willow said, impressed.

“That was amazing!” Suzie gushed.

“Where was that at university, huh?” Fiddleford joked, and clapped Ford on the back, the group of them beginning to turn away from Dawson and his cronies, moving on to enjoy the fair, leaving Dawson behind in the mud.

As Ford modestly accepted the accolades of his friends, he felt a warm sort of acceptance that he hadn’t felt in a long time. Like he was truly a part of things here, like he was welcomed, that he was being himself and that was okay. He felt Bill’s hand, still warm in his pocket, fingers laced steadfast with his own six digits, and he felt so grateful and happy with everything that had led him to this point, that led him to be here with the people around him.

With Bill.

He squeezed Bill’s hand and smiled at him, before bringing his hand out of his pocket to proudly hold Bill’s hand, not caring who saw. Bill was right, no one else’s opinion mattered, the people he cared about didn’t have any issue with Ford’s sexuality.

Dawson’s friends were helping pick their ringleader up, out of the mud, and holding his jaw, Dawson shouted out after them.

“Thisth isn’t over!”

Dawson’s lisping retorts were lost to the crowd, Ford and the rest of the group ignoring him, walking away, chatting happily without a backward glance.

“Behold, ladies and gentlemen! A freak of the natural world! The Crabbit!”

The crowd oooh-ed, enthralled, milling around the display, pressed elbow to elbow eager to spectate the mysterious Crabbit.
Ford was towards the back of the crowd, holding his journal and pen out, craning his neck to try to see past the throng of onlookers, wanting to see the Crabbit for himself.

“Behold, it’s claws!”

“I can’t see it from here.” Ford complained, leaning this way and that, trying to see the creature on display.

“It’s really quite cute.” Fiddleford remarked, his height allowing him to peer through a lady’s elbow, looking at the creature.

“Swap places with me.” Ford demanded, trying to edge Fiddleford out of the way. “I can’t see anything from where I’m standing.”

“I’m still lookin’, you can draw somethin’ else while you wait.” F shoved kettle corn in his mouth, enjoying the way waiting made Ford’s nose wrinkle. “Maybe draw that lady, her hat sure is somethin’ special.”

“I’m not here to draw hats, Fiddleford.” Ford replied somewhat testily, still struggling for a decent vantage point.

“Behold! It’s little ears.”

The crowd let out a collective ‘d’awww’ and some polite applause, which only served to further incise Ford.

“I think the hat lady is looking at you.” Bill smirked, chomping through his own paper bag full of kettle corn, seasoned with the little bottle of sriracha Sixer kept in his coat pocket for Bill’s hot sauce related emergencies. Like Fiddleford, Bill also liked the way Ford’s eyebrow twitched indignantly at the thought of drawing something he didn’t intend to study.

Ford tsked and elbowed Fiddleford out of the way, bending down to try to look at the Crabbit.

“Move.”

“It’s so cuuuuuute. Look at its little nose twitch.” Suzie cooed, smiling at the oddity.

Finally catching a glimpse at the Crabbit, Ford found himself woefully disappointed.

“Yes that it?”

“What exactly were you expectin’ Stanford?” Fiddleford asked, amused with his colleague.

“It’s not an anomaly. Someone’s gone and duct taped a crab to a rabbit, that’s not a new animal.” Ford said incredulously, gesturing with his pen. “Look, you can see the duct tape. Look!”

“I think it’s a sweet little thing.” Suzie smiled at the Crabbit, finding it too endearing to be sceptical.

“It’s not a thing at all! It’s two things. Two things taped together!” Ford pointed out, exasperated.

“If you like the Crabbit, folks, you can pop your money in the hat right here.”

The crowd bustled forward, murmuring delightfully as they put their donations in the hat up front, before letting the showman lead them on to the next exhibit.

“And if you’ll follow me through this curtain, you’ll see the missing link between humans and
angels, the Gorr-Icken!”

Filing along with the crowd, walking past the young carny who stood holding the hat which was stuffed to the brim with notes and coins, Ford scoffed, scribbling a brief sketch of the Crabbit into his journal before moving on without leaving a tip.

“This is ridiculous. It’s clearly a fake. I can’t believe how gullible the people here can be.”

“It’s only a bit of harmless fun.” Willow said, defending Suzie, who seemed to be enjoying the show.

“Harmless would be presenting the show as is, monetising these exhibits is the real crime.” Ford grumbled, gesturing to the overflowing hat held out. “Someone with no ethics could make money hand-over-fist in Gravity Falls.”

“The people are morons.” Bill commented, chewing on his spicy kettle corn.

“They’re good natured.” Willow corrected Bill tersely. “And there ain’t no shame in being like that.”

“I just don’t like to see people being swindled by a lie.” Ford frowned, moving on through the curtain to the next exhibit. “It’s not right, to trick them all.”

“If they were stupid enough to believe the lie in the first place, maybe they deserve to be tricked.” Bill countered, following Ford through the curtain.

“Ignorance isn’t a sin.” Ford countered, finishing annotating his drawing. “Just wilful ignorance.”

“Behold, the mysterious Gorr-Icken! The missing link between humans and the angels above. With the body of a gorilla and the wings of an eagle!”

“Oooooooooooooooohhhhhhhhhhh!” The crowd awed as the curtain was whipped off the cage housing the Gorr-Icken, revealing a rather sedentary looking silverback gorilla staring morosely through the crowd. The gorilla had a chicken very obviously duct taped to its back, and wore an inexplicable wizard’s hat. It scratched its rear, and exhaled, it’s wide nostrils flaring in an unimpressed sort of way.

Polite applause sounded out from the crowd, and Bill jerked his thumb at the display. “That isn’t wilfully ignorant?”

Ford raised his journal up and hid his face in the pages, knocking the book against his forehead several times to try and vent his frustration at witnessing such stupidity.

Fiddleford snickered at Ford’s reaction, then looked down at his wrist, his digital watch beeping a small alarm.

“Well, guess I’ll leave you with your newest discovery. Gotta go now if I want to make it to that pig race on time. Will I meet you back here?”

“Oh, god no. I won’t be staying in here for much longer. If the deplorable conditions these animals are kept in wasn’t depressing enough, the fact that everyone here seems to believe they’re the genuine article is even more disheartening.”

F looked at the rather sad looking gorilla and nodded, before parting the curtain to sneak out of there. “Let’s get out of here.”
Quickly Ford, Fiddleford, Bill and Willow snuck out of the tent. Dan and Suzie were still in there, chatting away and pointing at the exhibits, clearly they didn’t find the freak-show as brain-numbing as the others seemed to.

“I don’t know why I found that so disappointing. It certainly wasn’t what I expected.” Ford murmured, tucking his journal into his coat pocket. “This entire carnival was a waste of time.”

“You haven’t seen everythin’ here yet. Don’t give up.” Fiddleford urged Ford, walking alongside him, glad to be out of the stuffy tent.

“I’ve heard the fortune teller is actually pretty good.” Willow commented, pointing out the tent that housed the woman in question. “Suzie’s been hyped about her for days. She does palm reading and tarot cards. She’s supposed to be pretty accurate.”

“Hah. An accurate soothsayer. That’s a joke.” Bill laughed derisively, eyeing off the tent with disdain. “Now, a good fortune teller just tells you what you want to hear. They lie prettily. At least the good ones do. Note how I said good and not real.”

“You don’t think there are real fortune tellers?” Willow asked, incredulous on Suzie’s behalf at least.

“Real fortune tellers. Let’s just consider the oxymoron inherent in that statement. Put your dukes down Red, I didn’t mean you.” Bill quipped, insulting Willow’s intelligence while pretending he didn’t. Willow jutted her chin out defensively, but said nothing, listening to Bill’s rant continue, the diatribe dotted with sarcastic air quotes around key phrases.

“Anyone who wants to be told their future is kidding themselves. There’s no real fortune in your future. The future isn’t there to deliver fortune and benevolence to you. It’s the punch line of time. Its there to crush all your hopes and dreams and leave you rotting in the ground. It’s as inevitable as entropy. So yes, ‘fortune tellers’ lie, and if you’re a real prophet, you keep your head down, and remember what happened to Cassandra.”

“Well, this carnival’s been a catastrophe of mediocrity so far. What are the chances this fortune teller will be any better?” Ford concurred, crossing his arms and staring at the obnoxiously long line queued up outside the fortune teller’s tent. “Just look at that line. People will believe anything. Be hoodwinked by anything.”

Willow gave Ford an assessing look, feeling an abstract sort of relief at Ford’s scepticism. If Ford claimed to be on guard against being hoodwinked by pretty lies, then perhaps he wasn’t being spellbound by Bill, who still seemed odd by Willow’s estimation.

Watching him chew popcorn with his mouth open, and snicker at the exhibits, and hold Ford’s hand like he was just a regular guy almost had her second guessing what she’d seen that morning in the forest, seeing Bill conduct the floating items through the air, seeing Bill levitate Stanford with magic. Willow almost wasn’t sure, but sometimes her suspicion would get the better of her, and she’d be on guard around him all over again.

He wasn’t acting any differently to her, still just as flippant and snide as ever. If he noticed her edgy behaviour he wasn’t saying anything about it.

“Well, if you’ve got five dollars to spare, you could go in and get your palm read. See what all the fuss is about.” Fiddleford suggested.

“Hah!” Ford scoffed, and held out his six fingered hand. “That’d be a laugh. I can’t imagine the old
charlatan has ever seen a hand like mine before. She’d probably fall off her seat.”

“I knew you’d find something fun to do here. Exposing a fraudulent finger fondler at the freak-show makes for a good time by anyone’s standards.” Bill cheered, and nudged Ford with his elbow. “Try saying that six times fast.”

“I’ll pass.” Ford rolled his eyes and gave Bill a fond look.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.” Fiddleford said, checking his watch again. “I’m gonna go win a fortune of my own at the pig races. Given my background knowledge from the farm and some good old probability metrics, I reckon I could bet on some winners here.”

“You fiend, using your mathematical prowess for profit.” Ford teased his friend.

“Says the man buildin’ a –” Fiddleford started, but was interrupted by Ford clearing his throat, giving him a stern look. “Never mind.”

Walking away with a wave, F headed off to the pig races, leaving Bill, Willow and Stanford waiting near the fortune teller’s tent.

Willow gave Ford a suspicious look. “What exactly are you building?”

Saving Ford the hassle of having to answer that (he was a terrible liar) Bill responded for him, his tone cheerful and mocking. “He’s building a none-of-your-business discombobulator! The first of its kind. But you didn’t hear it from me.”

“Ha, ha.” Willow said dryly, raising her eyebrow at Ford, before conceding that she wouldn’t be getting an answer from Stanford in front of his inhuman companion. Changing the subject for now, she asked Ford. “So, are you going to get your palm read?”

“And waste five dollars and goodness knows how many precious minutes of my life? I don’t think so.” Ford scoffed, and crossed his arms.

“What if the one thing you don’t see at this carnival ends up being the real deal? What will you do then, oh clever scientist?” Willow tilted her head at Ford, teasing him a little.

“She isn’t the real deal. There’s no such thing as fortune tellers.” Ford insisted, but now he was looking at the tent more closely, unable to tear his eyes away, tempted by the thought of finding a true anomaly at the show.

“I thought you wanted to prove that, not just stand there with your arms crossed and stare at the tent.” Willow ribbed him, smirking. “How would you feel walking away from this carnival if Suzie met a real fortune teller and you didn’t?”

“Well that’s –” Ford frowned, and looked between Willow and the tent, clearing his throat again, obviously tempted.

Pulling his wallet out from his pocket, Ford relented. “Alright, fine. Are you coming with me?”

“Not a chance.” Bill sneered at the tent disdainfully, his aversion to prophecy as strong as ever. He pointed to the sign above the tent, a one-eyed triangle below a wooden hand. “Tasteful décor aside, I wouldn’t touch a soothsayer with a ten-foot pole, much less go near one voluntarily. If I wanted to be lied to I’d watch the shopping channel.”

“Willow?” Ford looked at Willow expectantly, not really wanting to go alone to see the soothsayer.
That removed the entire appeal of exposing their fraudulence if there was no one to expose them to.

“I’m pretty sure they only let you in one at a time.” Willow shrugged. “At least that’s what Suzie said.”

“Fine, I suppose I’ll just queue up by myself then.” Ford replied, somewhat deflated, taking his place at the back of the queue. “Will you wait for me here?”

Bill gave Ford a considering look, obviously curious to see Ford humiliate this soothsayer, before his attention was diverted by one of the spruikers.

“Come see the world’s hottest chili!”

Ford could practically see Bill’s ears pricking up.

“You’ve heard of the Ghost Pepper, you’ve heard of the Trinidad Scorpion, but you ain’t never seen the likes of this. One bite of the Carolina Reaper and your tastebuds will burn clean off! Whoever eats one of these mean peppers whole gets a prize, so step right up folks, and see if you can beat the heat.”

Ford could see Bill’s expression shift from consideration, to distraction, to mouth-watering desire, turning his head to stare down the spruiker, looking hungrily over to the chili jar on the stand. It was certainly amusing, Ford hadn’t seen Bill’s pupils dilate so quickly since, well, he couldn’t even think of the specific comparative event without his cheeks pinking. Thankfully it was cold enough that Willow wouldn’t notice a little extra red on Ford’s face.

“You’re not going to wait are you.” Ford assumed, watching the way Bill was practically vibrating now with anticipation, his entire body keyed up by the prospect of devouring the world’s hottest chili.

“Hold that thought Sixer.” Bill replied, without looking at Ford, or even listening, pointing to the chili vendor. “I’ve got a – I’ve got to –“

Just go.” Ford shook his head, laughing to himself.

Needing no further prompting, a giddy grin on his face, Bill raced over to the chili vendor, sticking his hand in the air, volunteering himself with gusto.

“He’s going to eat one of those?” Willow seemed perturbed. “That can’t be good for a person.”

Someone queued up behind Stanford for the fortune teller, and he resigned himself to staying in the queue, though he would have dearly loved to watch Bill eat the world’s hottest chili. He was almost a little concerned that Bill would breathe fire, literally, and frighten the crowd, he was so keyed up.

“Bill is… something else.” Ford admitted, smiling as Bill got up on the small stage beside the spruiker, already making grabby hands at the pepper.

Willow gave Ford a suspicious look here, hearing what she assumed was a round-about admittance that Bill certainly wasn’t human. She’d take whatever confirmation she could at this point.

The queue moved forward and Stanford moved with it, waving at Willow. “I’ll see you after, yes?”

“Sure.” Willow replied, her curiosity getting the better of her, itching to follow Bill now that she had validation of his otherness.
Willow broke off from Ford, to pursue her own interests he presumed, and Ford contented himself to waiting in the queue, moving forward as the fortune teller worked her way through the supplicants drawn to her. He handed his money to the carny taking payments along the line, handing out tickets like he was waiting for service at the grocer, and not waiting to have his future told.

Ford waited impatiently for the person in front of him to go through, the queue speeding along far more rapidly now than he had seen the queue move before. It was almost like the fortune teller was hurrying through her clients, customers leaving the tent muttering about how brief and abrupt she was.

*More proof of her inauthenticity.* Ford thought to himself, pursing his lips, inclined towards disappointment.

As the carny by the tent door poked his head into the tent, holding the flaps open for the previous client to leave, he turned and jerked his chin at Stanford, ushering him through.

“She’s ready to see you now. In you go. The, uh, mysteries of your future await.”

“I’m on the edge of my proverbial seat.” Ford replied sarcastically, underwhelmed by the carny’s rote enthusiasm.

Ford walked under the tent flap and the smell of musty incense filled the small space, causing him to wrinkle his nose. The tent was dark, dimly lit, most likely for effect and atmosphere. The sort of gimmick designed to wow the small minded, but not likely to trick Ford. No sir.

Sticking his chin out stubbornly Ford walked forward into the tent, ready to debunk his destiny.

Deep within the temple’s inner sanctum on the holy mountaintop within Dimension 52, Jheselbraum the Unswerving held a scrying mirror out in her left hand, sitting comfortably on another one of her giant plush lounges, holding her palm out flat for one of her informants to stand on, lifting them high enough so that they may speak to her face to face.

“There hasn’t been much talk, but one of the henchmaniacs let a name slip. Sixer they said.”

“And do you know the significance of this ‘Sixer’ fellow?” Jheselbraum asked her informant calmly, the silver surface of the mirror warping and rippling, like a stone dropped in mercury.

“Not sure. It’s all very hush hush, as far as I’m aware. What I did hear was that it’s a human, and for some reason it’s being treated with importance. The compass was muttering about it. Something about being ousted by a pet.”

“Hmmm. Very well.” Jheselbraum lowered the informant back down to the floor, tipping them gently off her palm, before waving them away. “You may go.”

“Thank you Mistress.” The informant bowed, and left the room.

Standing, pacing across the room to place the mirror on a dais beside the window, looking out unto
the cosmos, Jheselbraum let the mirror rest, the silver surface still warping and whirring like disturbed water.

She walked over to a cabinet, set high into the frame of the temple, higher than any of her attendants may reach. She unlocked the cabinet and opened it, withdrawing a small black ring from within, pinching it between her thumb and forefinger. It shrunk down to size between her digits, until it was but a small speck, not suitable for her hand, but perhaps for a humans…

Jheselbraum’s lips quirked slightly, her stoic estimation of a smile, and she raised the ring up to her lips, blowing on it gently.

The black stone set into the ring was suffused with an electric blue light, The Oracle breathing her influence into the gem. It glowed for a moment, before muting to a duller blue shade.

“I haven’t used you for centuries.” Jheselbraum murmured to the ring. “Perhaps you can serve me still.”

Jheselbraum pressed the ring to the surface of the mirror, and it sank through, displacing itself through the cosmos to reach its desired destination. Once the ring had passed through the mirror completely, the surface of the mirror smoothed out again, reflecting a familiar tent into view.

Jheselbraum clapped her hands together and closed her eyes, praying to her master.

“Oh Grand and Mighty Axolotl. Grant me the power to intervene in events, to guide the hand of fate. Allow me your faithful to further my sacred purpose. This I ask of you as your devoted servant.”

She bowed her head, pausing to listen to the absent permissions the great Axolotl supposedly granted. Feeling justified in the silence, she looked up, confident in her actions.

“I’ll take that as a yes.”

Stepping up onto the dais, Jheselbraum placed her hands on the edge of the mirror, and closed her seven eyes in tandem, taking a deep breath.

She opened her central eye, and it was glowing a vibrant, powerful blue.

“I’d like to see this pet of yours with my own eyes, Cipher. What are you hiding from me?”

The tent was warm and stuffy, the strength of the incense making Ford dizzy the longer he breathed it in. The entrance to the tent was longer than it looked, Ford felt like he’d pushed back countless heavy woven curtains, making his way into the fortune teller’s den, ready to confront the fraud.

Ford couldn’t help but notice the symbols woven onto the curtains. The symbology was certainly authentic, depicting an interlocking pattern of hands, presumably the Hamsa, predominant in Middle Eastern theology. The Hamsa was traditionally a symbol of protection, believed to guard against the evil eye – but Ford suspected it was merely a way to further the gimmick of palmistry
touted here at the carnival. These sort of travelling sideshows often borrowed and appropriated symbology from other cultures without regard for its origins, ramping up the ‘exotic’ factor to try to convince small town Americans of the authenticity of their acts.

The endless curtains were thinning now, Ford walking into the central dome of the tent. Looking around the room there were strange ornaments and objects displayed, low tealights burning in red cups, creating that dim light that obscured the vision. There was a fish tank on the table to the side of the tent, housing a great many ferns and no discernible fish. Ford was trying to get a better look at the ornaments, some of them displayed in cages, looking an awful lot like severed hands splayed out in a spindly fashion, clinging to the bars.

He walked over to one of the cages, and brought his hand out to gently tap at one of the hands clinging to the bars, but before he made contact he heard a sharp sound, like hands impacting a desk, and turned around sheepishly to see an old crone of a woman leaning over a circular table further into the tent, watching him with a wicked gleam in her piercing blue eyes.

She had gnarled features, and a long bulbous nose, warts dotting her chin. She was wearing what looked like a burgundy mu-mu with two hands emblazoned on the front. She looked the very image of a storybook witch, no doubt designed to fool people into believing she was authentic.

Ford squinted at her in suspicion, assessing her potential to be more than just a hoax, wondering if she was wearing a fake nose, or fake warts, and what else about her was fake. What with the smoky incense and the dim lighting, and the creepy cages, Ford already felt like he was looking at a performer at a low budget Halloween theme park, finding everything about her lacking, predisposed to discredit her before even hearing her out.

She gestured to the seat on the opposite side of the table in silence, staring at Ford with that unnerving eye contact. Her blue eyes almost seemed to glow in the dark room, though Ford suspected it was simply the lighting in here. Ford removed his scarf and coat and pulled the chair back, sitting down.

Just as Ford was about to open his mouth, feeling he should tell the old woman he wasn’t exactly impressed with her theatrics, the crone reached across the table with alarming rapidity, snatching Ford’s wrists, pulling him closer to her.

“What took you so long, Sixer?” She hissed, and Ford felt a chill run down his spine.

How could she know that nickname? In Ford’s entire life, only two people ever called him Sixer – Bill, and his brother Stanley. As Ford hadn’t seen Stanley in years, he could only assume the witch had been following him and Bill, and immediately his paranoia was set on edge. He tugged his hands out of the palm reader’s grasp, massaging his wrists and watching her distrustfully.

She smirked, and laughed a little to herself, before she began pulling out a pack of tarot cards, shuffling them before lining them up on the table.

“How could she know that nickname? In Ford’s entire life, only two people ever called him Sixer – Bill, and his brother Stanley. As Ford hadn’t seen Stanley in years, he could only assume the witch had been following him and Bill, and immediately his paranoia was set on edge. He tugged his hands out of the palm reader’s grasp, massaging his wrists and watching her distrustfully.

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“Come to learn your future, have you?” She asked, separating the cards into three piles, indicating Ford should point to the pile he felt drawn to.

Reluctantly, Ford pointed to the pile on the left, and frowned at the crone. “No, actually. Honestly, I don’t really think much of your craft.”

“But you’re here, aren’t you?” She shrugged, and moved the two other piles of cards to the side, shuffling the pile on the left. Ford couldn’t help but notice her fingers were unnaturally long, and paired with her conduct so far, and the general atmosphere of the tent, Ford instantly found her
rather sinister to behold.

Ford said nothing, stubbornness and caution combining, and instead just set his jaw, watching her with a frown.

She shuffled the cards, and laid them out on the table before him. For an instant, the cards seemed to shift, showing something that itched at the back of Ford’s mind and left him feeling like he’d missed something crucial while blinking.

One of the cards almost looked like a pig for one second, two other cards depicting young girls, the fourth card depicting a boy holding a candle, but as the dim light in the tent flickered, those images disappeared, leaving only the plain glossy artwork expected on tarot cards.

Ford briefly recognised the four cards, the sun, the moon, and death. There was also an unusual card – time and space. Not a typical addition to a traditional tarot deck, if Ford’s mystical trivia was up to scratch, but the moment the witch saw the cards laid out she shrieked loudly, pointing at the deck, looking hastily up at Ford.

Her loud screech startled Ford, and he jumped despite himself. He expected to see more theatrics on the woman’s face, since she seemed to enjoy playing into the drama of this whole situation, but instead her expression was twisted with a great and pained sympathy that looked very real.

She looked like she felt explicitly sorry for Ford and his circumstances, like she pitied him, felt sadness for him, and for what was to come. It was a very maternal expression that made Ford feel uncomfortable. He squirmed a little in his seat.

Ford swallowed his apprehension and decided she must be a very good actress. She must do this for all of her clients.

“Oh, you poor thing.”

“What?” Ford asked flatly, unimpressed with this feigned pity.

“Someone very close to you is deceiving you.” She said, her voice taking on almost a different, more solemn tone, watching him with those bright blue eyes of hers.

“The cards say that, do they?” Ford questioned sceptically.

“You have chosen the wrong allies.” She nodded, speaking in the same tone, and reached across the table to take Ford’s hand.

Ford recoiled, not willing to accept her false comfort, pulling his hand away and she sighed, continuing her spiel.

“You will live two lives, and both of them too short … unless you change now.”

Her eyes seemed to glow that intense shade of blue, before she reached across the table again and pressed a strange blue ring into Ford’s palm, closing his left hand around it.

“Take this. It will help you.”

“Are you charging me for this too?” Ford opened his hand flat, examining the ring with politely veiled disdain. It looked like a rather old ring, bronze possibly, with a bright blue gemstone in the centre, held in place with small dainty hands made from the same metal. The witch clung to Ford’s wrist, trying to close his hand around the ring again, urging him to keep it.
“When this is blue, you may pull through. When this is black, you can’t turn back.”

Her ominous poem made Ford just as uncomfortable as her continued, persistent hand holding, and wrenching his hands away from her grasp once more, Ford kept the ring closed in his fist and held it against his chest.

“Yes, you’re quite the poet laureate. Though if you’d do me a favour, perhaps skip the rhymes and get to the palm reading.” Ford knew he was being rather sharp with the woman, it wasn’t exactly polite of him, but he’d had enough of her creepy showmanship, and he was eager to get out of there.

The heavy incense was giving him a headache, possibly why he was so cranky, snapping at the woman.

She sighed, watching Ford with what seemed to be disappointment, before muttering to herself.

“Just what I expected.”

Holding her hand out flat on the table, she waved impatiently for Ford’s palm, watching him grumpily, her blue eyes looking much less blue now, though that may just be the candlelight again, playing tricks.

Alright, let’s get on with it. Show me your hand. Right hand, right hand.”

Ford extended his right hand, laying it flat on the table for the palm reader to study, noticing that the lofty tone had all but fled her voice now. Perhaps she’d decided to depart from pretence, knowing she couldn’t hoodwink Ford with all the misplaced theatricality.

“I doubt you’ve ever seen a hand like mine before.” Ford assumed, watching her peer at his palm.

“Ehh, a hand is a hand. Though yours is certainly a collector’s piece, for sure. Let’s see, ah, look at those calluses. Tch, a trigger finger, plain as day.”

“That is generally what the index finger is used for.” Ford frowned at her, wondering where she was going with this.

“You need to think before you shoot, is what I’m saying, hot shot, though I doubt you came here for advice. What else have you got here? I expect you’ll want to hear about your love life?”

Ford winced, and felt ashamed in that moment for even walking into the tent, feeling just like all those bored housewives who sat reading the horoscope column, looking for their tall dark and handsome. “Frankly, no.”

“Oh, thank god!” The palm reader’s shoulders sagged in relief, and she cackled breathily. “You won’t believe how often folks come in here, badgering me about their love lives. Romance this, marriage that, how many babies, when will I find my Mr Mystery?”

Ford had a sneaking suspicion this woman had already seen Suzie and read her palm. Perhaps several times already, given the frustration in her tone.

“You’d think after so many goes, you’d just accept what you’d heard, give up on men, and start investing in cat furniture, but nooooo.” The palm reader exhaled dramatically, and pointed at Ford’s love line. “At least you don’t have to worry about that, you’ve got a short love line – short relationships. No one wants to hold a rose with too many thorns.”
More poetry, Ford thought, wondering how exactly that applied to him. If he was a rose with too many thorns, then in theory he shouldn’t be in a relationship currently, but as Bill seemed to be somewhat of a masochist perhaps he was exempt from the ominous declaration. Either way, Ford thought the witch’s reading was nonsense.

“Oh, here’s one you’d like, since I can tell you think big of yourself. This is your wisdom line.” She pointed out a long line running all the way horizontally across the centre of Ford’s palm. “It’s uncannily long, longest I’ve ever seen.”

“Oh, well that’s –“ Ford murmured, sounding very pleased with himself.

“It means you’re too smart for your own good.” The witch insisted gruffly, pointing at Ford. “And that’s not a compliment.”

Regardless, Ford took it as a compliment. One had to take their genetic victories where they could. His shoulder’s wiggled slightly, pride setting in.

Tsking, the witch pointed to a line that forked right in the middle of Ford’s palm, looking seriously up at Ford.

“That’s a crossroads there. You have a choice to make, and you’ll make that choice very soon, from what I can tell. It’ll be an important choice, and if you make a mistake, if you chose the wrong path, you’ll never be yourself again. Ever. Choose wisely.”

Ford raised his eyebrow incredulously at the woman, thinking that this was all very well and good, perfectly sane, taking life advice from a lady who lives in a travelling wagon full of severed hands.

“Do you have specifics, or am I to guess when this important choice eventuates?”

“You’ll know when you know. I’m not spelling it out for you.” The hand witch snorted a laugh, and gestured to Ford’s hand, her own pun delighting her. “I thought you didn’t want me to hold your hand, HAH hah, hooo.”

“Right, well you’ve been very helpful, I’ll just –“ Ford made to stand up, having had enough of the witch’s uncomfortable jokes.

“I’m not finished with you yet, sit back down.” The witch pointed imperiously at the tabletop, waving her hand for Ford’s palm again. “Let me see your life line.”

Reluctantly Ford sat back down, and extended his palm again.

“Hrmm. Now this is strange.” She craned her neck to press her face close to Ford’s palm, inspecting it closely. “It almost looks like your lifeline here seems to end abruptly and then start again sometime later down the track.”

“And what does that mean?” Ford asked impatiently, perhaps a little disappointed he wasn’t getting the long life he expected he’d have. Bill had said he would live til he was 92, in passing. This crone’s predictions weren’t lining up with his muses and already Ford felt he was catching her out on a lie.

The witch scratched her chin, and shrugged, like she was stumped. “Don’t know what that means.”

“What do you mean you don’t know?” Ford pressed, frowning.

“It means, I don’t know. It is what it is. You’ve got a broken lifeline, and a crossroads.” The witch
answered. “So you may as well make the most of your life now while you can, because very soon it’ll all change for you, and if you choose the right path it might not matter at all, but from what I’ve seen of you, that’s not very likely.”

Feeling like he was repeating himself here, and probably being insulted to boot, Ford rolled his eyes and pressed. “What do you mean, that’s not very likely?”

“It means you’re attracted to the strange, and unknown, to the mysterious, to the bizarre – to the dangerous - and while you might be smart, you sure aren’t wise – because a wise man knows to let these things alone rather than bring them into your life.”

Ford scoffed, being insulted outright now. He didn’t take too well to being called stupid by a woman who kept severed hands in cages, and told fictions about people’s lives all day to turn a profit. “And - and I’m supposed to just accept what you’re saying because you live in a tent with too many curtains, with - with garish hand ornaments, and an empty fish tank and enough incense to smother an asthmatic? Is that it?”

“My fish tank’s not empty!” The crone replied, slamming her hands on the table confrontationally. She pointed to the fish tank, her voice becoming cutesy as she gestured to the creature inside. “I’ve got a little critter in there. Say hello to Pinky!”

“Pinky?” Ford squinted, looking at the fish tank, and finally noticed it’s inhabitant floating placidly beside one of the ferns, paddling happily with its little arms, frills flaring out around it’s smiling face. “Is that an axolotl? They’re an endangered species, why do you have an axolotl in a fish tank?”

“I call him Snaxalotl because he eats so much.” The witch cackled, and cooed at the amphibian in the tank. “He just floats there all day, watching. How’s it hanging in there, Pinky? See? He just floats and smiles. Float on, little fella.”

“You don’t get out much, do you?” Ford presumed.

“Why? Are you doing anything later?” The witch looked Ford up and down, like she was scoping him out and liked what she saw. “You know, that extra finger of yours actually does make you pretty special. How would you like to get a drink with me, my shift finishes in a couple of hours?”

Was she – she was flirting with him??!!

Standing up abruptly, grabbing his coat and scarf with rigid movements, Stanford made for a hasty departure. “No thank you. Goodbye now.”

Pushing through the endless curtains, trying to find the exit, Ford could hear the witch cackling back in her little incense saturated room, hollering out behind him.

“That’s them thorns for you, hoo hoo! Don’t forget my warnings, smart guy. You’ve got a time bomb sitting in your basement! The crossroads are coming. Be careful who you trust!”

If Ford hadn’t felt paranoid before, that parting comment certainly cemented the distrust in his mind. A time bomb in his basement? She couldn’t mean the portal? How did she know. Now Ford definitely felt like he’d been watched, for how could this old crone know what he was working on. It had been safeguarded with the utmost of secrecy.

Suddenly Ford didn’t know who to trust. He certainly didn’t trust her, she seemed like a madwoman. Clearly breathing incense for fifty years had damaged her brain.
Not only was she serving up an inexact science as fact, packaging it as crucial advice, she seemed to enjoy backing her clients into a corner with ominous mysticism and threats, before propositioning them. Or perhaps she’d only propositioned Ford.

Either prospect was unnerving, and Ford fought a shudder of revulsion as he pushed his way out of the heavy curtained tent, into the sunlight, gasping in the crisp air, grateful to be out of there.

Rubbing his arms down, pulling his coat on, Ford looked around for Bill and Fiddleford, eager to leave the carnival after that uncomfortable experience.

To think, he paid five dollars for that.

After watching Stanford’s weirdo boyfriend eat an entire one of those dangerously spicy peppers, grinning the entire time even as his eyes watered and tear tracks ran down his cheeks, before turning to the chili vendor and demanding more, Willow had discarded and resumed her ‘Bill isn’t human’ theory so many times it looped right around to believable scepticism again.

Watching Bill haggle with the vendor, and eventually walk away with a full jar of Carolina Reapers, Willow found herself in a state of suspended disbelief. Bill’s humanity became an improbable theory to her, Schrodinger’s humanity, because whenever Willow wasn’t looking too closely Bill seemed just like a normal guy, doing stupid things, eating foods that were bad for him, and laughing at stupid things at the funfair like anyone else would, but the moment Willow paid proper attention, she noticed bizarre oddities, like the way Bill’s strange slitted pupils expanded when he chewed on that death chili, black filling nearly his whole iris, or the way the chili vendor, who at first was altogether reluctant to give his chili jar to Bill, quickly changed his tune the moment they shook hands, waving him off like an old friend.

Willow couldn’t help but suspect Bill, given the way he’d forced her to admit her deepest secrets to him. There had been a handshake involved there too. Willow wasn’t the best lip-reader but she could have sworn she saw Bill say something like ‘Give me your chilis instead of first prize and I’ll get off your stage, deal?’ and just like that, the moment they shook hands, the spruiker had a change of heart and passed Bill the jar of chili’s, waving him off like an old friend.

In between spying on Bill and muttering furiously to herself, stirring herself up to look like some sort of conspiracy nut, Willow was thoroughly lost in her head, getting worked up. By the time she looked up again, becoming aware of her surroundings, she had lost Bill in the crowd.

She was supposed to be keeping a close eye on him.

“Damn.” Willow muttered to herself, and turned around, looking every which way for the strange man. He should have been easy to spot, there weren’t that many people in Gravity Falls with yellow hair, certainly not any black people with that hair colour.

It was disturbingly easy to lose him in the crowds. The tour group had just left the tented ‘freak show’ exhibit and were heading over to the next display, guided by the show’s ringleader.

The wind blew Willow’s vibrant red hair around her, and she tucked her hands under her armpits again, trying to stay warm. A cold chill was moving in from the north, and the weather began
turning bitter.

She could vaguely see Dan and Suzie leaving the exhibit, and ducked behind a rather portly gentleman buying corn dogs at one of the stalls so her partner and best friend wouldn’t see her. As far as she was concerned, spying on Bill was her mission. She didn’t want to get either of them involved, at least not until she had proof.

Willow narrowed her eyes and looked around for Bill, moving through the crowd, until she spotted him sneaking into the tent that housed the freak show exhibit, still chewing on those chilis.

“Found you.” Willow murmured to herself, and tried to pick her way through the crowd.

The wind whipped up into a gale, and blew a scarf right off one of the civilians at the show, the scarf blowing onto Willow’s face. She struggled with it for a moment, trying to swipe it off and set her hair back to rights, before she passed the scarf back to the old lady it belonged to, and tried to make her way to the tent.

The thoroughfare was bustling, all the show’s patrons being led to the next exhibit, and Willow had to duck back behind the portly corn dog man again to hide from Suzie and Dan. The corn dog man gave her a peculiar look, and she winced, giving him an awkward nod.

“Want some?” The man passed one of his mustard dripping dogs to her generously.

Willow wrinkled her nose, looking at the grease and yellow sauce ooze from the corn dog. “No thank you.”

When the crowd had finally moved on, Willow darted across the field, and snuck between the flaps of the tent.

Without the ringleader’s pomp and circumstance, and the bright lights, the freak show exhibit just looked sad, cages and pens housing the animals left to sit there in the dark.

Willow walked up to one of the pens, and looked down at the Crabbit, sitting there chewing on a carrot. Fair-goers had thrown popcorn and candy wrappers in the pen with the animal, and the poor creature just sat there, ignoring the rubbish in its enclosure, just chewing repetitiously on the carrot.

“Tch. Poor thing.” Willow muttered, and began to reach into the pen, picking out the candy wrappers and throwing them away. She extended her hand in to move the popcorn away from the creature, thinking it can’t be a regular part of a rabbit’s diet, when the crab taped to the rabbit’s back clacked it’s pincers at her aggressively, pinching the side of her hand.

“OW!” Willow swore, and pulled her hand back, cradling it, dancing on the spot. “Ow.” She whispered, rubbing the red mark, frowning down at the crab. The crab waved its little claws at Willow, and its beady eyes looked pleadingly up at her, compassion overriding her pain as she watched the poor animal flail.

“This isn’t right.” Willow said quietly to herself, and tried to bend over the pen, to pull the tape off the animals. The moment Willow tugged the tape, it pulled at the rabbit’s fur, and the rabbit kicked away from Willow, hopping over to the far side of the pen, cowering away from her.

“I’m sorry.” Willow whispered, frowning at the rabbit. She just wanted to help.

She tried to walk around the other side of the pen, but the rabbit hopped away, scared of her now, and her shoulders slumped. She hated not being able to help, hated leaving the little animals like that.
Willow heard a voice murmuring elsewhere in the tent, behind the curtain to the side, and remembered what she came in here for.

Creeping over to the curtain, Willow peeled it back, and saw Bill standing in front of the cage that housed the Gorr-Icken, chomping on one of those peppers, swallowing it, before talking to the creature.

“It’s nothing personal, bucko. Sixer wanted to see something real at this tourist trap of a side show, and he sure as shit won’t get that with the fortune teller. I’m doing you a favour, you’ll be famous after this.”

While Bill spoke, the duct tape on the gorilla seemed to bubble and warp, like it was burning, and the gorilla hollered out, beating his fists against the floor of his cage, writhing in agony. The chicken taped to its back screeched too, and flapped its wings like it was trying vainly to escape.

“Well, more famous. Maybe you’ll get like a hat upgrade, or a better cage.” Bill mused idly, while the gorilla screamed, and clutched its stomach, evidently in pain. “A better cage, what a joke.”

Unable to stand back and just watch, Willow ran into the tent and grabbed Bill’s shoulder, crying out. “Stop, you’re hurting it!”

Bill spun around to look at Willow with surprised, wide eyes, and the gorilla groaned, and stopped shaking.

Bill blinked at her, then blinked at the gorilla, and tried his best to look innocent, hoping he could back track over blowing his cover. He opened his mouth to spin a lie, holding his finger up, ready to explain, but Willow simply glared at him with distrustful eyes.

“I know what you’re doing.”

Bill closed his mouth, and lowered his finger, watching Red cautiously now.

“I know you’re not human. I saw you in the forest, floating.”

Bill considered Willow for a moment, taking that in, before raising his finger again. “Now, I know that can’t have been me you saw, because I can’t float.”

“You were floating Stanford.” Willow insisted. “And things in the air behind you. You waved your hand and they were floating.”

Bill ran his tongue across his teeth, and made an unimpressed sound, before he departed from all pretence and raised an eyebrow at Red. “So? What’s it to you?”

“So? You – you’re not human!” Willow exclaimed, pointing at him. “I knew you weren’t and you admitted it. I knew it, I knew it, I knew it!”

“Woopee. What a day this must be for you.” Bill said flatly, looking back over at the Gorr-Icken picking itself up off the floor of its cage, rolling its shoulders.

“What are you? And what were you doing to it? What did it ever do to you?” Willow turned her barrage of questions on Bill, getting angry in defence of the animals.

“Nothing. I was making it better.” Bill shrugged, and pointed to the Gorr-Icken, the tape having bubbled away into nothing, the skin of the gorilla seamlessly melting into the chicken, conjoining the two animals. “Now there’s a genuine freak at this freak show.”
Willow observed the animal in horror, watching the helpless way the chicken kicked its little feet, its flesh melded into the gorilla’s back, now never able to touch the ground or be a chicken again. It clucked pitifully and bobbed it’s head, trying to reach the seed on the ground, unable to.

“That’s permanent? God, that’s cruel.” Willow whispered, obviously disgusted by this perversion of nature.

“Hey, cruel would be if I didn’t integrate their respective digestive systems. I can’t imagine Pecky here could support both of their body mass.” Bill drummed his fingers on the side of his jar of chilis, looking between the Gorr-Icken and Willow’s aghast expression, smiling sweetly. “It just means King Kong here is eating for two, and he isn’t the only one. How’s your oven bun?”

Willow recoiled from Bill, putting her hands protectively over her stomach. “Wha -? You - none of your business! You – what are you?”

“None of your business.” Bill parroted back, and screwed the lid back on his chili jar.

The Gorr-Icken snorted, rapidly acclimatised to its new biological functioning, and reached for a banana from the pile in the corner of its cage, sitting on its rear, peeling the banana slowly, just as morose looking as it had been before. The chicken cooed as the gorilla ate the banana, suddenly feeling more full and satisfied than it ever had, the food quickly filling the small creature’s stomach.

Willow watched the Gorr-Icken acclimate, it didn’t seem to be in pain anymore, and so she shelved her outrage, watching Bill somewhat more calmly now.

“What are you? Are you sídhe? Fair folk? A sprite?”


“You’re not going to tell me?” Willow frowned, bringing her hands down to her side now, approaching Bill more curiously.

“Can you keep a secret?” Bill quirked a brow at Willow, smirking. Human curiosity was such a wonderful virtue, it could draw humans into making all sorts of bargains to sate their curiosity, and clearly, having followed him in here, Willow was craving answers.

Willow bit her lip, struggling with herself there for a minute, before conceding partially. “I won’t be keeping secrets for you unless you tell me what you’re doing with Stanford. Are you tricking him? Do you plan to hurt him? What?”

“Why should I?” Bill shrugged, before he inclined his head, smiling at Red now. “You’ve got loyalty, Red. That’s decent. You’re a good friend to him, and I’m sure he appreciates that.”

“I’m sure he does.” Willow replied tersely. “Now did you mean why should you tell me, or why should you hurt him? Because if you hurt him –“

“I’m not going to hurt him. Regrettably, I actually like the guy. Put your dukes down Red, geez.” Bill rolled his eyes and walked over to the bench inside the tent, sitting down on it and stretching his legs out. Bill exhaled, like he was tired, and set the chili jar beside him on the bench. “Can’t a guy just get by doing his own thing? Does every day have to be a freak show? You’ll be putting me in one of those cages next, throwing popcorn through the bars.”

Willow scowled, disgruntled at the insinuation that she would be that cruel. Bill’s words were
cleverly chosen, designed to manipulate Willow’s guilt and integrity, her disdain for these sort of novelty attractions and protective streak playing into Bill’s plan.

“I would never do a thing like that.”

“Then sit down, and stop staring at me with your little hands clenched.” Bill stretched his hands over his head, and wiggled his back, settling down comfortably on the bench. “You’re going to give yourself a stress headache, squinting at me like that.”

Willow looked down at herself, and intentionally relaxed her posture, before tentatively stepping over to the bench, sitting beside Bill. Since he wasn’t being confrontational, or dangerous, and she knew he could be, she was willing to give him the benefit of the doubt, at least long enough to explain himself, but that didn’t mean she had dropped her guard entirely.

Brushing her skirt down neatly, Willow looked over at Bill, and tucked a stray strand of hair behind her ear, watching him curiously.

Bill watched her right back, with those peculiar yellow eyes of his, before he laughed quietly, and looked up at the roof of the tent.

“You remind me of my best friend. She’s a regular fire cracker too. Fierce and protective, loyal like anything.”

“What’s her name?” Willow asked gently.

“Pyronica.” Bill divulged, and span his story. “And I haven’t been able to see her since Sixer dragged me here.”

Bill rolled up his sleeve, and exposed the gold binding tattoos, the black bricks unbound looking like regular ink, but the gold lines shining, as Bill was brimming with power these days.

“I’m not from around here, you were right before. This isn’t even my own body.” Bill watched the way Willow’s eyes widened, and how she almost reached out, curious, wanting to touch the glowing lines. Bill rolled his sleeve back down, not wanting to be fondled to culture her pity. Sure, he was spinning a sob story, but that didn’t mean he wanted to buy into it himself, accepting the pity. “Sixer made this for me and dragged me down here, locked me in this body, so I could help him with his work. I haven’t been back to my own home in months.”

Bill could tell from the sympathetic crease between Willow’s eyebrows that his sap story was hitting the right tone.

“Where do you come from?” Willow asked.

Bill pointed to the yellow and red striped roof of the tent, then shrugged. “Well, not the tent. Beyond that.”

“What are you?” Willow pressed, her tone less accusatory and more awed now.

Bill searched for a response that he liked, and settled on his old favourite. It held a certain fondness for him now, knowing how Stanford viewed him.

“I’m Sixer’s muse.” Bill said simply, smiling as gently as he knew how at Willow, hoping to entice her to trust him with this little fairy tale.

Willow nodded, taking that in like it made sense, and Bill knew he had her, hook line and sinker.
“So you, what, help him with his inventions?” Willow rationalised, trying to understand.

“He wishes!” Bill laughed, and clapped his knee. “Ahh, I did help him with his designs, I inspired him, I taught him things he didn’t already know, I invested in him – but the moment he threw me down here into this body, into this fancy cage, I said no thank you. No more helping. Sixer’s smart enough to figure out how to trap me here, then he’s smart enough to figure everything else out, on his own.”

“Then you’re a prisoner.” Willow reasoned, confusion creeping into her tone. “But, I don’t understand. How - how could he do this to you? He likes you! If Stanford brought you down here, forced you to be here - why are you with him?”

“Come again?” Bill blinked at Willow, not sure how long he could sustain this pitiable farce.

“Why are you with him? If you like him, and hold his hand, and I mean, clearly you’ve liked him since the movies, maybe even before then – I want to know why?” Willow looked up at Bill, stubbornness dancing in her eyes. “Why would you like someone who keeps you trapped here? Who manipulated you?”

“Uhhhh…..” Bill looked around the tent for an easy answer, finding nothing. He fidgeted in his seat, not really keen on being open and honest about his feelings in order to convince this girl. He couldn’t exactly admit that he was manipulating Stanford as well, not to this little firecracker. He could tell that pity she was pouring on thick would dry up quick smart if she found that out, and then he’d end up at the mercy of her fists. There were some indignities he shouldn’t have to face. “Um… he’s got – nice… elbows?”

Willow gave Bill an unimpressed look, and Bill flustered, crossing his arms indignantly. “Wha – you, don’t ask me! What do you want, and affidavit? A shitty romantic poem? What?”

“Why do you like him?” Willow repeated, before rolling up her sleeves. “If he’s keeping you trapped here, and you don’t want to be here, I’ll go and I’ll have words with him, and I’ll keep talking to him until he fixes the situation and puts you back where you came from, because trapping your partner with you isn’t okay.”

Looking for a way to deflect this back onto Willow, not wanting to be forced into a confession of feelings, or other compromising information, Bill spluttered. “Woah, projecting much Red? Just because you feel trapped here with Punchy doesn’t mean –”

“I’m not projecting, I’m being serious!”

“You are totally projecting. I bet you haven’t even told him about sourdough in there, have you?” Bill pointed to Willow’s stomach, turning around in his seat to face her. “Huh? You haven’t have you?”

“It’s not a loaf of bread. Don’t poke me!” Willow swatted Bill gruffly, and he almost fell off the bench, clambering back onto it gingerly. “I’ll tell him. I – soon. I just, I still don’t know if I’m ready.”
“In a couple of months you’ll be ready.” Bill said snidely, indignant about being pushed. “Your little toaster oven will ding, and then you’ll be the talk of the town. I hear they like unwed mothers.”

“Shut up.” Willow raised her hand like she was readying to punch Bill again, but thought better of it, pillowing her fist in her hand, looking down into her lap. “I’m not gonna walk down the aisle with a shotgun to my back. And I don’t think Dan would – he’s really trying, I can tell he’s trying. He’s doing everything he can to convince me that he’ll change, I just – I don’t know. He’s doing all the right things, and he’s proving he isn’t like those friends he had.”

“What’s the deal with that?” Bill asked Willow. “Because if those bozos from before were chummy with Punchy, I could see why you’d want to make sure you don’t end up with a little screamer who’s just like his father.”

“Dan isn’t like that.” Willow repeated stubbornly. “Those guys, Dawson, and the others. They work for Preston Northwest, for his lumber company, and they’re all like that. All conceited, full of themselves, all assholes.”

Bill narrowed his eyes, and realised that those Neanderthals were under Preston Northwest’s jurisdiction, considering their bad behaviour and the way they’d bullied Sixer to be Preston’s responsibility now, filing that information away for later.

“Dan quit there last month. He’s been working for Drewberry Lumber now, just a little way out of town. He did it because I asked him to, and he’s really been trying, I just – how can I love someone when I know, I just know, that if I tell him, if I say yes and agree to spend my life with him, I’m never going to leave this town, even if I want to. I’ll never be able to leave.”

“Why not?” Bill pressed.

“Dan’s mother is sick, that’s why he’s been working so much. He wouldn’t be able to leave, even if I wanted to. He’d stay to look after her. He’s trying to compromise for me, I just don’t know – “ Willow looked up to the roof of the tent, despairing. “I just don’t know if it will be enough. Am I selfish, for wanting this, for wanting this freedom?”

“You’ve got your own dreams and aspirations.” Bill reasoned, pursing his lips and looking at a murky spot on the tent curtain opposite him. “Which shouldn’t have to compete with how much you like that he’s trying. You want the best of both worlds.”

“Is that so bad?” Willow shrugged, looking to Bill of all people for reassurance. It was difficult when the only person who knew your secret wasn’t even a person at all, but Willow had to put aside that superstition to get the validation she needed.

“Who doesn’t want the best of both worlds?” Bill shrugged, staring at that spot on the curtain, but not really staring at it at all. “If the world says you can’t have it both ways, then the problems with the world, not with you.”

Willow sighed, and looked at the crushed popcorn and grass on the ground, kicking it a little with her boots.

“If you could go back to wherever you’re from, would you want to bring Stanford with you?”

Bill stared at that patch in the curtain for a while longer, lost in thought, before the word slipped out of his mouth despite himself. “Maybe.”

Willow looked at Bill in surprise, almost not expecting that answer.
“He’s trying too.” Bill said, thinking, his eyes stuck on that spot on the curtain, zoning out.

Willow considered that, and sat back on the bench, resting her hands on her thighs, nodding.

They sat in companionable silence for a while, Willow feeling far less confrontational, trusting Bill a little more now that she knew what he was, and why he was here. Now she knew that they weren’t so different, both of them struggling with nearly the same problem.

The Gorr-Icken cooed, before chirping, sounding out a grunt in alarm, as the curtain to the tent pulled open, and Dawson Peters and his cronies ambled through the tent flap.

“Well, fancy that. Don’t have your boyfriend to back you up now, ladies.” Peters jeered, holding a cold drink up against his jaw, a bruise already starting to form.

Willow elbowed Bill, jolting him out of his reverie, and the muse looked over the bullies with an unimpressed expression. Not really in the mood to pander to idiots, Bill looked away, back to that musty spot on the curtain, trying to process his thoughts peacefully.

Willow frowned, watching Bill, and looked over to Dawson and the other boys, her guard coming right back up.

“What do you want Dawson?”

“Well, I came here to teach that smart mouthed little cock-sucker a lesson about minding his manners, but it looks like it’s my lucky day, because not only do I find you –“ Dawson cracked his knuckles and pointed at Bill, who was still doing his best to ignore the idiots, though his eyebrow did twitch at that vulgar slur. “All by yourself, but I find the little tramp who convinced my buddy Dan I’m scum of the earth, just sitting pretty back here, where no one can see.”

Dawson and his two cronies closed in on Bill and Willow, looming over the bench on all sides. Willow stood up, her hands clenched into fists, ready to defend herself.

“What have you got to say for yourself?” Dawson asked Bill, trying to catch his eye, not enjoying being ignored while he was trying to be menacing. “Now you don’t have Pines here to throw the punches for you?”

“Don’t think I won’t slap the shit out of you myself Dawson Peters.” Willow raised her fists and opened her palm, getting ready to unleash a little hell on these thugs. “Because I will.”

“Oakwood, if anyone could entice me to hit a woman, it’d be you.” Dawson replied flirtatiously, and flicked his fingers at his two buddies, indicating they should grab her. “Boys.”

The two thugs approached Willow, their hands out, ready to grab her wrists, but Bill tsked, and grabbed Willow’s arm, tugging her to sit back down.

“Not while you’re making bread, Red.” Bill said, though he was watching Peters now, his yellow eyes slitted dangerously thin. “Sit down, this joker isn’t worth your time.”

“I don’t think you’re in a position to ignore me, wise guy.” Dawson stuck his jaw out, holding his cold drink to his bruise, scowling at Bill. That was twice today he’d been told he was worthless, and he didn’t like it.

Willow felt Bill’s hand on her arm begin to heat up, hotter than any hand had a right to be, and she looked at him, shocked somehow by the reminder that Bill obviously wasn’t human, that he was dangerous, and that Dawson Peters was picking a fight with the wrong being.
“I won’t deal with you, or your mentally challenged associates. I’ll speak with your boss, Northwest, if you’re making this an issue.” Bill said dismissively, not even looking at Dawson, knowing that his indifference was antagonising him.

“What, you’re gonna tell on me, tell my boss about me?” Dawson scoffed, but it was clear that Bill’s response threw him. “You can’t go toe to toe with me, so you’re going to tattle? Dob me in?”

“You have no idea who you’re talking to, do you?” Bill raised his eyebrow, finally looking at Peters, his yellow slitted eyes glowing dangerously. A more observant or intelligent person might have noticed this, and took it for the warning it was. Unfortunately, Peters and his crew were all substantially numbed by carnival beer.

“You aren’t telling my boss shit.” Peters sneered, and passed his drink his buddy on the left, cracking his knuckles again. “I know you’re some out of towner darky queer who thinks big of himself, and needs to get the shit kicked out of him. That’s what I know. Your kind ain’t welcome here.”

Dawson reeled his fist back, readying a right hook that would more than avenge his bruised jaw and ego, Bill just sitting there, those dangerous yellow eyes promising twice the violence Peters intended to inflict upon him with a silent surety.

Willow was getting ready to defend them both, regardless of Bill’s reminder, when she saw out of the corner of her eye light from the tent’s curtain being pulled open.

“Put your hands in the air. Now!” Deputy Daryl Blubs shouted, his hand resting on his holster, stepping into the tent fully. “Dawson Peters, don’t you make me arrest you again, your mama ain’t wantin’ her son with no more priors.”

Dawson stepped back and immediately put his hands behind his head, turning to face Deputy Blubs, his two friends stepping sheepishly back, away from Bill and Willow, scuffing their feet on the floor, their hands going in the air too.

“What seems to be the problem officer, we were just having a friendly chat, weren’t we boys?” Dawson lied wearing a winsome smile while his two cronies nodded emphatically.

“Don’t be playin’ me like a fool, Peters. I heard what you just said.” Deputy Blubs jerked his chin towards the tent curtain. “Now either you get gone, sharpish, and don’t let me catch you hassling these folk no more, or all three of you gonna have to take a trip downtown, and disappoint your mamas. You understand?”

Peters glared at Bill and Willow, stewing on his rage, thwarted his revenge by the local law enforcement. He said nothing, chewing on the inside of his cheek stubbornly.

“I said, do you understand?”

“Yes officer.” Dawson spat out, incredibly reluctantly.

“That’s right.” Deputy Blubs nodded firmly, and took his hand off his holster, holding the tent flap open for the lumberjacks. “Now go on. Get. Before I change my mind.”

Casting one last petulant glance back at Bill, who was smirking now, Dawson Peters and his crew shuffled out of the tent, their proverbial tail hanging between their legs, acting like chastised dogs.

Once they had left, Blubs looked over to Willow and Bill. “You two alright?”
Surprised by his concern (Bill had never had a promising relationship with law enforcement) Bill nodded silently.

“Thank you Daryl.” Willow said earnestly, exhaling her relief.

“I ain’t tolerating that kind of talk in my town. Peters and Thompson and Jack Dean sure as hell better toe that line, unless they want to spend the night downtown again.” Daryl harrumphed, and flipped the leather flap back down over his holster, clicking the button in place. “Just because the Sheriff’s away, don’t mean you can go around bein’ an asshole left and right.”

“Yeah, you’re telling me.” Willow laughed, and got up from the bench, dusting herself off.

Her hands were shaking now, all the tension from before leaking out all at once.

It hit her after the fact, Bill’s comment about making bread. She had another life growing inside of her, she couldn’t be reckless like that. She had to protect more than just herself now, and that revelation shook her. Until now she hadn’t really considered this baby to be more than an inconvenience, a secret to keep – it was a person, and it was a person she made.

She could take her knocks, and go toe to toe with an asshole like Peters, but the baby couldn’t, and she realised in that moment that she couldn’t risk losing it. She needed to be more careful. She tucked her hands under her armpits again, to hide the shaking.

“You’re stayin’ at the Pines shack, right?” Daryl turned to Bill, who was getting up off the bench as well, grabbing his jar of chilis, substantially less rattled than Red was. “With the scientist. What’s your name?”

“Bill.” Bill replied simply, not inclined to buddy up to any form of law enforcement, despite this particular officer seeming to be on his side.

“Well, Bill. Don’t you listen to them none. Ain’t nothin’ wrong with loving who you love.”

Bill wrinkled his nose at the sappy language, hardly resonating with that “L word” humans liked throwing around so much. Clearly Deputy Blubs was a romantic. He managed a forced polite smile though, knowing better than to antagonise law enforcement, at least not when he had something to hide.

“They ever give you any trouble again, you just give me a call.” Deputy Blubs insisted, holding the tent flap open for Bill and Willow to exit through. Finger gunning at Bill as he walked through the flap, Daryl added. “Just remember, a brother’s got your back.”

The significance of that going over Bill’s head, he merely nodded, and continued on out the tent.

“Y’all enjoy the fair now.” Deputy Blubs waved at Bill and Willow as they left, putting his hands on his hips, smiling fondly at the thought of a job well done. He wasn’t doing too bad standing in for the Sheriff while he was away on holidays with his wife. Breaking up fights, keeping the peace, protecting people.

_I got this_, Daryl Blubs thought to himself.

“Maybe I _could_ be Sheriff one day.” He murmured and straightened his back a little taller.

Sheriff Blubs. He liked the sound of that.
“Oh no, my manager is going to kill me.”

Fiddleford couldn’t help but overhear the young carny’s lamentation as he was walking past, his choice of prize from the pig race tucked under his arm, and a present for Ford in a paper bag hanging from his other wrist. He paused, and doubled back to look at the tattooed young man bent over the engine of the Ferris wheel, fumbling with the gears for the machine, dropping them on the ground.

“You alright there?” Fiddleford queried.

The carny looked up at Fiddleford, and his expression was one Fiddleford recognised. The young man’s hands were trembling, and he was struggling to pick up several gears that fell out of the machine into the mud, wiping the dirt off them.

“I – I’m sorry sir, the Ferris wheel is – it’s out of order.” He stuttered. He had an accent, possibly British, and seemed to be almost frightened of Fiddleford’s censure.

Fiddleford looked at the young man, reading his name tag. Ivan Wexler.

Putting his prize and Ford’s present on the metal platform beside the Ferris wheel, F crouched down beside Ivan and helped him pick the gears up off the floor.

“Hey, it’s okay. Ivan, is it?”

The young carny nodded.

“I’m Fiddleford. I’m an engineer. Maybe I can help you fix all this up, and your manager don’t need to know a thing.” F said in a gentle voice, wiping the mud off the gears and putting them up on the metal platform so they’d be safe.

“Th-thank you Mister Fiddleford.” The carny said, his hands still trembling.

“Are you okay?” Fiddleford asked him, concern gracing his expression. Ivan didn’t look okay. “Do you want to sit?”

“No. I can, I can help. I just – my hands.” Ivan looked down at his shaking hands, balling them into fists. “I can’t stop shaking. I’ve been an anxious wreck lately, and I keep making mistakes. The engine failure – it was my fault. I was trying to tighten a valve, when my hand slipped. I knocked a piece out of the system. I – I haven’t had a lot of sleep lately.”

Fiddleford frowned, and settled down in front of the Ferris wheel’s engine panel, borrowing tools from Ivan’s toolbox to fix the machine.

“Just the carnival movin’ around, or too much coffee, or what?” Fiddleford probed.

Ivan sat down on the metal platform and pillowed his face in his hands, rubbing his head. His head was shaved, but for a small ponytail at the back of his head, and he had intricate tattoos covering his cranium, the tattoos an ode to the dated field of phrenology, a pseudo-medicine localising behaviours and concepts to certain parts of the brain and skull.

For having such extensive tattoos, Ivan seemed quite young, a teenager, far too young to have such
a weight on his shoulders.

“I’ve been having nightmares, hideous nightmares, ever since –” Ivan exhaled a loud sigh, and looked up at Fiddleford, not too sure about spilling his anxieties out to a stranger.

F gave Ivan a kindly empathetic look, feeling paternal and protective, conveying that in his eyes, and Ivan’s uncertainty dissolved instantly.

“The other carnies all make fun of me. For how I look, and how I talk. I came here on a student visa, to study history, but I couldn’t afford tuition and got this job with the carnival. I love the carnival, all I’ve ever wanted was to be a part of the great American sideshow tradition.”

Ivan pointed to his head. “I got these tattoos because I wanted to be a part of something, a part of something bigger than myself, but apparently the other boys who work here think my dedication is silly, or stupid.” Ivan gripped on the wrench he was holding, and wrung his hands around it.

“They’re bullies. To them this is just a part time job, not their life.”

Ivan rubbed his hand across his bald head, stress impacting him in the retelling. “They locked me in the haunted freak house for an entire night. An entire night in the most horrible exhibit in the carnival. I’ve been plagued by nightmares. It’s not just an act! The freak show is actually haunted!”

“Haunted how?” Fiddleford asked, his brows furrowed with concern.

“You don’t believe me. I knew it.” Ivan said defensively, crossing his arms.

“No, no, I believe you.” Fiddleford assured him. “I can tell just by lookin’ at you, you’ve been through something awful.”

F put the gears back into place in the engine, and tested the springs, before closing up the panel for the Ferris wheel, everything back in order.

“I been through something similar myself. Thought I’d never sleep again.” F confessed, as he screwed the panel back in place and wiped his hands down with a rag.

“I haven’t slept properly in weeks. I was terrified. I still am terrified.” Ivan admitted. “My hands just haven’t stopped shaking. I wish I could just forget the whole thing, move on, but I can’t. Every time I close my eyes I’m back in there.”

Fiddleford frowned, and looked at his bags up on the platform. At Ford’s present.

Ever since he did what he did to Stanford, he hadn’t been able to justify using his memory ray. It sat, untouched, hidden under his bed in the whiskey crate, collecting dust while F’s conscience forbid him from bringing it out, no matter how much good the scientist felt he could do with it. Every time he was tempted to use it, he just saw Ford backing away from him, like he was some kind of monster.

However, listening to the young man tell his tale had the gears turning in Fiddleford’s brain, churning away, logic combatting his conscience. This was exactly what he was telling Stanford about, this kind of trauma affecting other people, the people in this town. Who’d seen too much, who wanted to forget.

If there was ever a reason to bring out the memory gun it would be to help people, like this young man. That was the gun’s intended purpose. Fiddleford could erase his trauma so he had an opportunity to move on with his life, unburdened by the nightmares that plagued him. F reasoned that if he refused to help this young man, he was effectively throwing his life away, leaving it
forever tarnished by the trauma of what had happened to him.

Fiddleford’s memories of Stanford’s disgust for the invention warred with his compassion for this young man, with his desire to use his invention to do good, rather than letting it gather dust, hidden from the world.

Passing the toolbox back to young Ivan, Fiddleford bit his lip, before speaking up.

“I think I know a way to help you. With your nightmares. A way to get rid of them.”

“You do?” Ivan’s expression immediately brightened. “Really? I’ll do anything to stop these nightmares, to stop my hands from always shaking. You really have a way to help me?”

Fiddleford’s uncertainty crumbled in the face of Ivan’s enthusiasm. Clearly using the memory ray would change this young man’s life for the better. F couldn’t justify keeping this technology locked up in a box anymore, not when there was someone staring him in the face right now who needed the relief of a memory wipe just as much as he had.

“I think I do.” Fiddleford drummed his fingers together, still uncertain about committing to this. He couldn’t, in good conscience, do nothing while this man was suffering though, no matter how guilty he felt about using the ray on Stanford. “I did something to get rid of my own nightmares, and I’ve been feelin’ better than ever since. Sleeping like a baby.”

“Please, tell me what you did. I don’t have much money, but I can pay you. I can –“

Waving his hand and wrinkling his nose, Fiddleford shook his head. “No, I ain’t takin’ money from you. That ain’t right. I – look, Ivan, I can help you, but – but it’s gotta stay a secret, okay?”

Ivan was nodding before Fiddleford had even finished his sentence, looking at Fiddleford with impassioned zeal. “You’re a good man, Mister Fiddleford. Too good a man, to help me. I promise I’ll keep it a secret, absolutely.”

Fiddleford reached into his jacket pocket for his notepad, hesitating, before bringing out a pen. Rather than writing his name down, or an address, or anything that could tie Fiddleford to this technology, afraid news of him using it would get back to Stanford, Fiddleford considered how he should broach the topic of memory erasure with this young man.

Doodling while his thoughts ran, F drew an eye.

The image was something that F associated with the last time he had used the memory gun. Every time he thought about using the gun, that image was there, staring at him from somewhere deep in his subconscious.

An eye, a wide, open, slitted eye. Burning into him.

“Fiddleford! There you are!”

F heard Ford’s voice calling out to him from across the field, and quickly crossed the eye out, ripping the page out of the notebook and passing it to the carny.

“Meet me tomorrow night at the Gravity Falls Natural History Museum.” Fiddleford whispered hurriedly. “We can’t talk now. But we can talk more there.”

Ivan nodded soberly, and tucked the paper into his pocket. Saluting to F with the wrench, Ivan
picked up his toolbox, and went along on his way.

“What was that about?” Ford asked F, jogging over to stand beside him. “Made a new friend, have you?”

“He needed a hand fixin’ the Ferris wheel.” Fiddleford explained, tucking his notepad back into his coat pocket, feeling a little guilty for agreeing to use the ray again. He looked over at Stanford, who was watching the carny leave.

“Unusual tattoos.” Ford murmured to himself.

“How was the palm readin’?” Fiddleford asked, keen to change the subject.

“Ghastly.” Ford shook his head and huffed out an agitated breath. “She was the most unnerving woman – spouting some of the biggest nonsense I’ve ever heard. I think she even tried to proposition me towards the end there. I couldn’t get out of that tent fast enough, I’m telling you.”

Fiddleford snorted, and went to pick up his paper bags, shaking his head. “Only you, Stanford, could get asked out in a tent, getting your hand read.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” Ford asked F, baffled and mildly offended by the comment.

“Well, it happens all the time for you, don’t it? At the carnival, at the grocery store, at the library.” Fiddleford listed. “Remember that time on that astro-physics field trip where the tour guide kept askin’ about your favourite restaurant?”

“I thought she just wanted recommendations.” Ford admitted, obliviously.

“I’m sure she did too.” Fiddleford remarked, smirking at Ford.

“Oh, don’t give me that look.” Ford nudged F with his elbow. “It wasn’t like that.”

“So how long did you get your hand held for this time?” Fiddleford joked, waggling his eyebrows at Ford.

“Longer than I cared for.” Ford said with a huff, and crossed his arms. “Do you know where Bill went? I think I’ve had about enough Misfortune for one day.”

“Can’t say I’ve seen him.” Fiddleford looked around the fair briefly.

“I’m sure we’ll find him soon enough.” Ford sighed, and reached over to help F carry his bags. “How was the pig racing?”

“First class.” Fiddleford admitted, and swapped the bags around so Ford wasn’t carrying the one with first prize in it. “I won every bet I placed, and got to pick my prize outta whatever they were sellin’ at the fair.”

“And what did you choose?” Ford questioned amiably.

Fiddleford pulled the box from his bag to show Ford. It seemed to be a puzzle, much like the Cubic’s cube, only more advanced. The box read ‘The What-The-Heck-A-Hedron, from the makers of the Stressaract and Annoyangle’.

“Got me a fancy assembly puzzle. Since you and Bill keep hijackin’ my Cubic’s cube, I figure I gotta find somethin’ new to fiddle with, and this doo-hickey actually looks like it might pose a decent challenge.”
“What-The-Heck-A-Hedron.” Ford read, and raised his eyebrows. “Well it’s certainly gimmicky enough. Good to know that at least someone got something out of this farcical funfair.”

“Aw, don’t be like that. I got a present for you too.” Fiddleford grinned and gestured to the bag Ford was holding.

Surprised, Ford peered into the paper bag, and then pulled out what looked like the most anthropomorphic vegetable in existence. Ford held the gourd aloft, studying it with abstract fascination and horror. It was quite the sight.

“Picked him up outta a pile of reject gourds they had sellin’ in the agricultural stalls. Somethin’ about him reminded me of you, I reckon.” Fiddleford pointed at the bulbous growth sprouting from the front of the gourd. “Must be the nose.”

“How…” Ford reigned himself in and forced out a polite response. “How kind of you. That’s very –”

“Smiley little feller ain’t he. I thought, now that’s a gift with character!”

“Yes, well. Yes.” Ford could only nod, the gourd seemed to be watching him, the growths on its surface resembling a rather expressive face with an incredibly large nose. Ford turned the gourd this way and that, and the plant’s ‘eyes’ seemed to be watching him, no matter what way it was turned.

Putting the rather disturbing gourd back in the paper bag, Ford remembered his manners. “Thank you Fiddleford.”

“Did you pick up anything from the fair?” F asked inquisitively.

Ford was ready to answer no, when he felt the curious weight of the palm reader’s ring sitting deep in his coat pocket. He felt through his pocket, and put his fingers around the shape of the ring, nestled in beside his pen. He didn’t remember putting it in there, but he must have done, for there it was, innocuous and disturbing as ever.

You have chosen the wrong allies.

Someone very close to you is deceiving you.

Ford’s paranoia flared up again, and he looked over to Fiddleford cautiously.

He didn’t think Fiddleford would deceive him, it wasn’t in his nature, but something about today just set Ford on edge. He felt like his portal was at risk, that he’d been followed today, watched, and he couldn’t help but be suspicious of everyone, Fiddleford included, considering the other scientist was the only person who could have potentially spilled information about the portal in his basement.

Stanford felt a split second of disconnect, like he had when he looked down at the tarot cards, seeing something that wasn’t there, and for a moment he thought he saw Fiddleford’s expression shift into something darker, more desperate, aiming a weapon at Ford’s head with determination.

Ford blinked, and that ghost of an image was gone, F’s open expression looking patiently at Ford, waiting for his answer.

Ford left the ring in his pocket, and smoothed his coat down, choosing not to mention it to his friend.
“No. Nothing.”

Ford couldn’t quite shake the feeling that his portal was in jeopardy somehow, and that feeling lingered as they searched through the crowd, looking for Bill. When they finally found him, his bright yellow hair like a beacon through the throng, Bill’s yellow eyes sought Ford out immediately.

Ford felt that moment of paranoia flicker, before he felt Bill’s hand clasp warm around his own.

*Be careful who you trust.*

Ford’s paranoia lessened some as he felt the familiar warmth of Bill’s company light him from within.

It soothed his stress like a balm, knowing that the god who held his hand and stood beside him would protect his portal, protect his secrets, and moreover, protect Stanford, with every power available to him, even if it meant wringing the clouds dry from the sky just to see Ford smile.

Ford knew, he could trust Bill.

He could trust Bill.

Chapter End Notes

I hope you enjoyed the chapter! Next chapter, the Society of the Blind Eye is founded, and Fiddleford has a surprise for Stanford. I’d love to hear what you thought, lots of things at play now, and everything happens for a reason. Also Dan is becoming one of my favourites, and so is Suzie. That never bodes well for a character.
And everyday the hold is getting tighter and it troubles me so. You know that I'm nobody's fool.

Chapter Notes

Just a heads up, there is a NSFW sex scene at the end of this chapter.

“Here’s another obscure fact. Listen to this. Did you know that when interacting with Molodovian’s, its customary to spit on the ground and nod twice before asking a favour?”

Turning the heavy gold statue of his true form several degrees to the left to better catch the light, Bill rolled his eyes and replied to Sixer.

“Of course, I know. Who do you think got you those books Sixer? The book fairy?”

“There’s a book fairy?” Ford looked up curiously.

Bill turned around and stared at Sixer, who was sitting at his mahogany writing desk, pouring over one of the cosmic encyclopedias Bill had brought him.

Bill held his sceptical glance, and Sixer met his dubious expression for a good two minutes, before waggling his eyebrows cheekily, having been teasing Bill all along.

“That’s it. I can’t with you anymore.” Bill slapped his palm to his forehead and tried very hard to look resigned and not amused. For all his faults, Sixer was funny when he wanted to be.

“So that’s a no on the book fairy then.”

“I’ll confiscate those books if you can’t take them seriously.” Bill threatened.

“You’re telling me to take this seriously? Is there a chance we’re in a parallel dimension this very second?” Ford joked.

“Since when did you have a sense of humour?” Bill ribbed Ford, walking across the study to lean his hip against Sixer’s desk, crossing his arms and looking down at the scientist.

“You must be rubbing off on me.” Ford reached over, snagging Bill by the hip, tugging him over to pull his muse down onto his lap, smiling smugly up at Bill all the while.

“Now you’re just being dirty.” Bill scoffed, but allowed himself to be pulled onto Sixer’s lap, getting comfortable.

“I could be.” Ford murmured, and grazed a kiss against Bill’s jawbone, making the muse squirm, flustering him quickly with the intensity of his worshipful thoughts.

“At least let me grab the cuffs to siphon off all this energy, before you douse me in it.” Bill wriggled, pushing Ford back by the shoulders. “What happened to the Sixer who looked both ways before getting grabby?”
“Well, after you attempted to thoroughly dissuade me from that behaviour, I guess you could say I’ve learned. Grown. Changed for the better.” Ford hummed, and ran his hands along Bill’s back, tugging him closer the more the muse tried to pull away.

“Liar.” Bill huffed a laugh. “You’re just getting handsy because you know McGucket won’t be bothering us, and study makes you excited, you big nerd.”

“I never thought I’d be singing the praises of the What-The-Heck-A-Hedron but here we are.” Ford laughed, and pressed another kiss to his squirmy muse’s neck, enjoying flustering the other man. “Besides, while I’m enjoying discovering information on the multi-verse through these books you’ve kindly brought me, I can’t help but feel I hold a greater understanding of the secrets of the universe right here.”

Ford gave Bill an emphatic squeeze, and stared up at his muse, delighting in the way the god laughed breathily and dug his fingers into Ford’s shoulders reactively.

“What answers do you think I’ll give you that will be more forthcoming than what’s printed on paper, huh IQ? Playing textbook isn’t my idea of fun.”

“I’m sure I can persuade you to part with a few secrets of the cosmos.” Ford claimed cockily, sliding his hand up under Bill’s shirt, dipping down to play with Bill’s belt buckle.

Bill reached around to grab Ford’s questing hand, stopping its persistent progress. “Finish your readings first, Poindexter.”

Ford pouted, disliking being denied, he wasn’t sure why Bill was demurring.

“I wouldn’t put it past me to regurgitate all the ‘secrets’ from chapter 28, just to prove a point about listening to me when you had the chance.” Bill said, and gently pushed himself up off Ford’s lap, sitting on Ford’s desktop instead, so he was still close to the scientist, but more able to supervise, and less likely to fall prey to mutual distraction. “You won’t always be able to rely on my ceaseless wisdom, so you may as well study now while you can. The multi-verse is a big scary place to the uninitiated.”

Sighing, Ford let Bill go, enjoying the sight of his muse sitting on his desk, swinging his legs, far too tempting a distraction to prioritise study.

Yet study he must.

Ford turned the next page, trying to focus, skimming through the paragraphs. The writing was rather dense, quite droll for a book detailing the ins and outs of the multi-verse.

He got through several chapters in relative silence, before looking up to see Bill watching him with a surprisingly tranquil expression. He seemed intent on watching Ford, on making sure he absorbed all the information in the cosmic books, and Ford couldn’t recall ever having seen Bill seem so calm and determined. The ceaseless childish energy Bill exuded had been paused for the sake of Ford’s studies, and he found himself somewhat taken aback almost.

He’d never seen Bill so task-oriented before.

“If you don’t mind me asking, is there a reason why this study needs to happen now?”

“Oh, I’m sorry, should we get back to our regularly scheduled depravity? Is that what you want?” Bill replied flippantly, raising an eyebrow at Ford.
“I don’t mean it like that. I’m just curious. What’s your rush here?” Ford asked gently, putting his hand on Bill’s knee.

“My rush is your rush, Sixer.” Bill replied, and crossed his legs, still bouncing Ford’s hand on his knee. “That portal downstairs is getting closer to completion every day, and when it’s ready, you should be ready.”

“Ready to spit on the ground in front of Molodovians?”

“Don’t be adorably coy with me, Sixer. Forewarned is forearmed, and you’ve only got two, so already you’re at a disadvantage. Knowing your space etiquette could be the difference between life and death, between friends and enemies, between paying full price for things, and getting stuff at an uproarious discount.” Bill examined his nails and pushed back his cuticles. “You’ve read at least half of the almanacks I’ve been bringing you already, surely you’ve noticed a pattern.”

“The only pattern I’m seeing is that the majority of these interdimensional races are incredibly easily offended, and using the incorrect etiquette can result in either social exile or graphic violence.” Ford gestured to the page in front of him. “This has to be the fortieth time I’ve read ‘do this upon pain of death’ – it’s all a bit extreme, isn’t it?”

“Cosmic beings aren’t exactly known for their temperance.” Bill admitted, shrugging.

He certainly wasn’t known for his temperance, and the almanack that he featured in, one that he hadn’t brought for Ford to study, detailed in precise terms that he was not to be approached, that he was highly dangerous, fickle, cruel, spontaneous, reckless, not to be trifled with, not to be offended upon pain of worse than death.

Of course, Bill found that description to be offensive, because the author forgot to include that he was also great fun at parties, and he killed the scholar who wrote these encyclopedias over a drawn-out period of seventy years, but he felt that his reaction was quite moderate for the slight against him, all things considered. He was known for exacting swift whimsical vengeance in response to the barest slight against him, so really, with all his little gibes and jokes at Bill’s expense, Sixer was getting away with a lot.

“How am I supposed to traverse these dimensions without offending anyone? It’s like tiptoeing through broken glass, from what I can tell. At least half of these races would be offended by the number of eyes I have, by how many limbs I have, I mean honestly.” Ford rubbed his forehead, and ran his hand through his hair. “What’s the alternative to spitting and turning around six times and bowing profusely every time I exhale? Is there an alternative?”

“There is.” Bill shrugged, and picked up one of the papers from Ford’s desk, turning it over. The paper clearly didn’t have enough triangles on it, so Bill grabbed a pen and doodled one on. “I just didn’t think you’d want to use it.”

“What is it?” Ford looked to Bill, more curious than ever.

Bill pinned the little doodle to the wall, repositioning it neatly. Straightening up, he swept his hand through the air and summoned the laser gun from downstairs in the lab, turning the dial at the side to high intensity, passing it to Ford.

“That’s your alternative.”

Ford took the gun from Bill, holding it carefully, and it felt far heavier in his hand than it ever had as a simple engineering tool.
If he was picking up Bill’s insinuation correctly, he had two choices. Study these almanacks religiously, and hope his cultural sensitivity saw him through his travels diplomatically, or use force, possibly deadly force.

“There isn’t a non-lethal version of this I could carry instead?” Ford asked hopefully.

“Sure, if you wanted to set phasers to stupid.” Bill scoffed, and resumed drawing his little doodles on the pages scattered about Ford’s desk. “Nine times out of ten, whatever you’re firing at is impervious to standard grade stun weaponry, and in the precious few seconds between finding out with one shot whether your adversary can be stunned, and losing your head the next, you’ll be wishing you had a more final option in your hand.”

Ford looked solemnly down at the laser gun in his hand. He turned it over, examining it, before holding it more securely in his right hand, resting his index finger alongside the trigger.

“I’ve never fired a gun like this before. At least not outside of an engineering scenario.”

“You need practise.” Bill surmised, nodding and scratching his chin with the end of his pen. “I can train you up if you want. With your reflexes and intellect, I reckon you could be a halfway decent shot.”

“Will it really be necessary?” Ford had to ask, for the sake of his morality, though his love of science fiction was swiftly overtaking his reservations here.

“You’ve read the almanacks, you tell me.” Bill poked Ford in the shoulder with the pen, and smirked.

“Alright.” Ford nodded, holding the laser gun more firmly now. “Alright, I suppose I’ll give it a try. Marksman practise then, is it?”

“Marksman practise, agility, some advanced physics so you know how to go about physically moving around in the weightless expanse of the universe.” Bill listed on his fingers, before nudging Ford with his foot again, grinning. “Let’s not forget the flaming projectiiiiiiles.”

“You’d think the runes would forbid that sort of thing.” Ford grumbled under his breath, turning around to face the table, turning the laser gun off and putting it in a drawer.

“I’m not intending to harm you, my motivation is the polar opposite.” Bill grinned and went back to drawing top hats and bowties on all of his triangles. “Training you properly will make you stronger. Which is why I won’t be going easy on you.”

“And this is the part where I thank you for tossing flaming projectiles at me, is it?” Ford questioned with a resigned sigh.

“That would be nice.” Bill smiled coyly and nudged Ford with his foot again, grinning wider the longer he stared at Ford’s disbelieving expression.

“You’re impossible.” Ford grumbled, before snagging Bill’s foot and pulling him roughly off the desktop, back into Ford’s lap.

“Hey, hey, what happened to study?” Bill laughed, tumbling onto the scientist, getting comfortable.

“Well, if you’re going to be putting me through my paces, flaming debris and all, I may as well offend at least one of these poor bastards.” Ford reasoned, clearly looking for an out from more interdimensional studies.
The books Bill brought him were an incredibly dry read, and Ford’s focus wasn’t all there. Sliding his hands up under Bill’s shirt again, wanting to be all over the god in front of him, Ford pursued more interesting avenues.

Bill laughed again, loud and surprised, before looping his arms around Sixer’s neck, watching him fondly. “Oh, they’re gonna love you.”

“Mmmm.” Ford leaned forward and captured Bill’s lips, kissing him soundly, the two of them getting a little lost in each other for a while, study forgotten for the time being.

During Fiddleford’s brief leave of absence, Bill and Stanford had fallen into a sort of sensual routine whenever the mood struck. It would play along quite similarly, the two of them both wanting to explore this newly uncovered avenue of worship until they’d covered it from every angle.

Ford would attempt to remove Bill’s clothes, while the muse would endeavour to divest Ford of his sweater and other vestments in creative ways. Biting kisses would be exchanged, hands roving covetously over one another, pinching and scratching, probing reactions where they blossomed.

Stanford might, if the initiative struck, put his mouth on Bill, lavishing worship on the god’s cock until that peculiar gold elixir spewed forth or, seeking something a little more reciprocal, Ford would align his own member with Bill’s and encircle them both with his six fingered hands, squeezing a little satisfaction out between them.

That wasn’t always the goal though, just enjoying the closeness spent with one another always sufficed.

When they attempted the more sexual latter, Bill wasn’t allowed to put his hand on Stanford, as despite the apparatus doing its best, Bill had a tendency to overheat during this sort of play, and there was only so long that that heat remained pleasurable. Ford had to insist on that as a precautionary measure, he didn’t much fancy having to ask for healing down there. Working on regulating Bill’s temperature was still an inexact art, even with the cuffs taking the edge off.

Bill had burnt a hole in Stanford’s sweater and was pulling on the woollen thread, slowly unravelling the garment from bottom to top. Ford had resigned himself to buying sweaters in bulk the next time he hit the shops, trying to pull Bill’s belt off, when the thought struck him.

Pulling back, the belt wrapped around his wrist, Ford adjusted his glasses so they sat less skewed, and blinked up at Bill.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?”

“What?” Bill asked absently, his tongue sticking out of the edge of his mouth as he unravelled Ford’s sweater gleefully, throwing woollen thread over his shoulder.

“The cuffs. You’re not wearing them.” Ford pointed out, reaching forward to feel Bill’s wrists, stilling his manic attempt to unravel the entirety of Ford’s sweater, slowly enforcing partial nudity on the man.

Ford’s belly button felt decidedly drafty, but he was still clothed from mid torso, up.

Bill looked down at Ford’s hands encircling his wrists, and tried to wriggle out of Sixer’s grasp, intent on his little game. “Huh, well would you look at that.”

“You’re not burning me either. Does this mean you’re in control of your temperature now?” Ford
questioned eagerly, refusing to let go of Bill’s wrists. Being disrobed via sweater malfunction wasn’t exactly dignified.

“I just forgot I was supposed to be wearing them. I’ll put them on if it makes you happy, now can you ix-nay on the death grip? I’m performing a public service here.”

“No, but don’t you see?” Ford’s expression lit up. “This is an improvement. This is exciting. You’re able to control yourself better. This is discipline.”

“If you’re going to give me grief for it, I’ll make with the hot hands. Stop interrupting this inevitable strip tease Sixer.” Bill pouted, wanting to continue comically disrobing Ford.

“Well, if you’re quite done mutilating my sweater, perhaps you can engage long enough to realise what this means.” Ford gave Bill a flat look, letting go of his wrists finally.

Bill drummed his fingers on his thigh briefly, trying to look engaged, but the temptation to keep unravelling was too strong. “Can I just keep going until I get to the armpit?”

Ford seemed unimpressed.

“To the nipple! Just the nipple!” Bill bargained, before waving his hand, allowing his levitation to continuously tug the thread instead, before lacing his hands together neatly, watching Stanford with an attentive expression. “Okay, I’m listening now.”

Ford sighed, and resigned himself to the gentle tickling feeling of his sweater slowly unravelling. “This is undignified.”

“So’s existence. Your point being?”

“My point was, if you’re able to control your external temperature to some extent now, even without making use of the cuffs, then your capacity to contain the energy from this sort of conduct is improving!” Ford explained, pushing his glasses up his nose. “Which means …”

Bill’s attentive expression only lasted a few words into Ford’s sentence, and now the scientist could clearly see the muse’s slitted pupils following the line of Ford’s sweater as it slowly unravelled bit by bit.

“Which means…” Ford said again, a little more strained now, trying to draw Bill into the conversation, rather than be ogled like a piece of meat.

Bill was just smiling, his eyes still following the disappearing thread like it was the world’s most exciting race. Bill liked unravelling things, and much like unravelling the fabric of the universe, Bill found this very entertaining.

Ford coughed, and cleared his throat for emphasis, trying to draw Bill’s gaze upwards.

“Did you need something Sixer?” Bill asked absently, not looking away from the thread.

“I’ll just wait until you’re done, shall I?” Ford asked flatly.

Bill struggled to look convincingly sheepish until he discarded pretence all together, and yanked the last bit of wool off Sixer’s torso, unravelling the thread all the way up to the top of Ford’s sweater, leaving only the sleeves intact.

“YES! Amazing! Perfect! The best thing I’ve ever seen.” Bill crowed, throwing the thread over his
shoulder into the large pile of unravelled wool on the floor, applauding his own feat.

Ford couldn’t help but blush slightly at the praise delivered, but he had a point to make, and cold nipples, and he cleared his throat again.

“I was going to congratulate you for having the discipline to control your external temperature without using that apparatus of yours, but it’s clear to me that discipline isn’t the sort of word that could ever apply to you.”

“Say that again, but cross your arms.” Bill critiqued with a smile, enjoying the sight of Ford left in simply sweater sleeves.

Sighing, Ford crossed his arms and looked at Bill, woefully unimpressed, and his muse nearly fell off Ford’s lap cackling at the sight.

“You know, a little discipline wouldn’t hurt you.” Ford grumbled, trying to glare properly at Bill, having a difficult time maintaining that expression. Bill’s laughter was incredibly endearing. “All things considered, I’d say you’ve been thoroughly spoilt, so far, and perhaps I’ve missed a crucial lesson with you.”

“You teach me a lesson? Hah, I’d like to see that. What lesson? How to be boring? Incredible.” Bill smirked, quirking his eyebrow, before leaning in, looping his arms around Ford’s neck leisurely, pressing a kiss to the scientist’s cheek. “Don’t worry Sixer, you’ve got that lesson covered.”

“Boring, am I?” Ford huffed, unable to help but laugh a little. “Why is there no page in this almanack about not offending me?”

“You aren’t that famous yet, Sixer. Give it time.” Bill pressed his forehead to Sixer’s, watching his human’s expressions with a fond fixation. “You’ll get there.”

“Why are you not in here?” Ford questioned, bringing his hands up to smooth them down Bill’s back, pulling his muse in closer, as if they weren’t already pressed chest to chest. “Surely you’d have at least a chapter somewhere in these almanacks.”

Bill scoffed, deflecting. “Like I’d even want to be in this shitty almanack. If you want to know something about me Sixer, I’m right here.”

He wasn’t keen on exposing Ford to the various written lore about him, a lot of it wasn’t very flattering.

Bill gestured between the two of them, running his hands across Ford’s chest covetously. “You probably know more about me than any single sentient creature in the multi-verse at this point. You could write your own book about me. Your information would be more accurate than whatever hack wrote this.”

“You’d like that, wouldn’t you?” Ford ran his nails down Bill’s back, like a cat at a scratching post, and his muse wiggled his shoulders, humming happily. “If I wrote about you. Another journal for you to deface.”

“Mmmm.” Bill nodded. “To improve.”

“To deface.” Ford clarified again, jabbing his nails into Bill’s lower back, the muse squirming, pressing happy wet kisses to Ford’s temples.
“Is that a no on the Bill book?” Bill questioned slyly, raking his hands through Ford’s fluffy hair.

Ford thought of the spiral bound notebook he kept hidden in his bedroom, his notes on the muse so far untampered with, and decided to keep it a secret. It was his last vestige for his personal thoughts and observations on the muse. He preferred to keep that as his own private outlet, sharing it with Bill would skew how he wrote in it, knowing the notebook had an audience.

“No.” Ford said, and pressed a biting kiss to Bill’s neck.

“Is that a no, to the no. Is that a round about yes?” Bill tried, his eyelashes fluttering as Sixer sucked a brief bruise into his neck.

“It’s a no, I’m not writing an ode to your narcissism, Bill.” Ford murmured against Bill’s neck.

Bill pressed his cheek to Ford’s forehead, and whined indulgently, mumbling. “I like how you see me though.”

Ford paused, listening to the pout in Bill’s tone, and felt like he understood a little of how the muse felt, like Bill had just given more away than he’d meant to.

Bill liked how Ford saw him.

That may have been the first genuine admission Bill had made about why he liked Ford. Far from being challenging, and frustrating, Bill seemed to savour the way Ford saw him, perceived him, a cosmic being. Perhaps he simply found the vessel Ford had crafted him as flattering as it had been intended, perhaps this went deeper, into how they interacted, into how Ford treated Bill.

He didn’t know.

Ford supposed even cosmic beings had their fair share of esteem issues, and a little boost via kind word or indulgence could make quite the impact. Though judging from the drawings dotted around the study, tributes to Bill’s true form, the god had a rather sizable ego that needed appeasing.

“I like when you let me see you.” Ford confessed, just as quietly, trying to catch Bill’s eye.

Bill inclined his head, obviously listening, but chose not to reply. Instead he simply wound his arms around Sixer’s torso more tightly, clinging to him with a silent possessive desperation.

Ford rubbed Bill’s back gently, and pressed a kiss to the muse’s chest, before pulling back to look Bill in the eye.

Bill was surprisingly recalcitrant, looking down at Ford’s chest hair, swirling his fingers through it idly.

“Bill?”

Bill splayed his hand over Ford’s heart, feeling it’s steady rhythmic beating, and for a fleeting second, Ford thought he looked sad.

Either Bill was becoming more accustomed to his new face, or Ford had imagined it, because when he blinked, the morose expression was gone, replaced with Bill’s typical demanding expectancy.

“You go check on Specs, and see if he’s still fondling that polygon. It looks like you’ve given up on etiquette.”

“Well, you’re distracting me.” Ford protested, feeling a lot like he’d just been dismissed.
“That’s your own fault for sitting here shirtless.” Bill said bluntly, twirling his finger through Ford’s chest hair, tugging slightly.

“You destroyed my shirt.”

Bill blinked.

“That’s your own fault for sitting there with a shirt on.”

Ford harrumphed and shrugged the knitted sleeves down off his arms.

“It’s like there’s no winning with you.”

“I’ll stop.” Bill slid off Ford’s lap and stood up, straightening his clothing out. He looked at the clock on the wall and gathered his belt, re-dressing, stepping away from Ford. “I should leave you to it, I’ve got something to check on anyway. I’m going to go lay down.”

“Oh.” Ford brought his arms up to cover his bare torso, feeling the cold now Bill had left. “Can I come surprise you later?”

“It had better be surprising is all I’m saying.” Bill quipped. “Wouldn’t want to offend you by calling it like it is again.”

“I’m not boring.” Ford grumbled, as the muse walked away, waving dismissively over his shoulder.

“You just keep telling yourself that IQ.”

“I’m not boring!” Ford called out after Bill.

The muse didn’t reply, and Ford’s insistence fell on deaf ears, as Bill walked into the elevator and closed the doors behind him with barely a backwards glance.

Left alone in the empty study, Ford looked down at the pile of wool that had once been his sweater, and felt rather silly, knowing he’d have to trek through the chilly house half naked to get new clothing. He shouldn’t have let Bill destroy his clothing like that. He should have thought this through.

“I don’t think I’m boring.” Ford said to the scraggly pile of wool, trying to believe it.

The pile of wool didn’t reply.

Having retrieved respectable clothing, Ford puttered about downstairs, looking around for Fiddleford, a shovel slung over his shoulder.

Ford found him in the lounge room, sitting in front of the fire, still twisting that peculiar contraption into various configurations, chewing on some taffy while he worked.

“How’s the Heck-A-Hedron going?” Ford asked, briefly poking his head into the living room.
“Well, I’m havin’ a heck of a time with it, that’s for sure.” Fiddleford quipped in reply, poking one side of the sphere while twisting the other side. “It’s just as tricky as advertised. Reminds me of one of those Russian puzzle boxes.”

“Maybe it’s too tricky for you.” Ford teased.

“Come over here, solve it, and then say that to my face.” Fiddleford lifted the polygon gamely.

“You just want someone else to figure it out for you.” Stanford joked, and then held his hands up when Fiddleford got up off the couch, aiming to pass the puzzle over to him. “No, no. I didn’t say I wanted to.”

“What did you want to do Stanford, other than stand there criticisin’?”

Ford gestured with the shovel in his hand. “I was just going to go out and clear out the driveway. The snow came down out of nowhere overnight. I imagine we’ll be snowed in pretty soon if this continues.”

“I’ll be wantin’ to go out in the evening. Shovelin’ out the drive is a pretty good idea.”

“Where are you going?” Ford asked curiously.

“Well, ah – there’s a – a thing on.” Fiddleford replied awkwardly, twiddling his thumbs around the What-The-Heck-A-Hedron. “At the natural history museum.”

“A thing?”

“A rancher’s exhibit.” Fiddleford lied unconvincingly. “All about life on Tennessee ranches, and cattle ranglin’ and so on.”

“You don’t need to go to an exhibit for that surely.” Ford presumed. “You’ve seen it all before, back home on the farm.”

“I know, I know. But I ain’t found a – a Christmas present yet. For my Ma and Pa.” Fiddleford nodded, having settled on a plausible answer. “They always get me somethin’ nice for the holidays and mail it out, and I ain’t got a thing for them yet. It don’t matter where I’m stayin’, they always deliver a little somethin’ for Christmas even though they’ve got a big ol’ family to buy for, they never forget.”

Ford inclined his head, not really able to relate to that sort of family experience, listening nonetheless.

“So I’m just goin’ to pop down there and grab them a souvenir or somethin’. I figure - What kind of son would I be if I didn’t put the effort in?” Fiddleford continued rambling.

“Hmm.” Ford hummed, a short sound, obviously uninterested in this familial present trade.

His own family weren’t likely to be that devoted when it came to trading gifts. Ford remembered how one year he received the same set of industrial scales he’d seen in his father’s bathroom for a birthday present, his re-gifted gift falling flat upon receiving it.

Fiddleford’s strong bond with his family was to be admired, but part of Ford couldn’t help but feel jealous deep down, that they all seemed to care so much for one another. It didn’t seem right. It seemed to be what Fiddleford’s family did, and what every other family did, but it wasn’t, in Ford’s experience, what families do.
Pushing those bitter thoughts aside, Ford rolled his shoulder. “Well, I might pass on accompanying you, if that’s alright. I’m not the best assistant shopper.”

“Oh, hahah.” Fiddleford laughed anxiously, trying not to sound too pleased about that. Stanford inviting himself along might be a significant hurdle. “It’s alright. I’m sure I’ll find somethin’.”

“I’ll be out front, if you need me.” Ford said, heading to the front door, a lawn full of snow and some cold thoughts waiting for him.

Fiddleford sprung to his feet quickly, holding his hand out to halt Ford’s exit. “Wait. I – there’s been somethin’ I’ve been meanin’ to ask you. I’m not too sure if you celebrate Christmas, or Hanukkah like your family – I mean, I didn’t take you as religious in college, but you’ve got those creepy statues in your basement, so I guess anything could have changed.”

Ford raised his eyebrows at Fiddleford, surprised that said ‘creepy statues’ were evidence of Ford somehow developing a religious nature.

As he was technically worshiping the god those statues depicted, Ford supposed he had fallen into the trap of religion that most men of science avoided, but since the altar he worshipped at was decidedly male, Ford was willing to put all thoughts of his ‘worship’ outside of the realm of religious attribution.

It was probably more political, given the current outlook on such things, but honestly Ford just considered it foolish at this point in time.

He could definitely admit he was a fool for worshipping Bill – most men awash with these sort of feelings, falling hard for these sort of relationships with anyone, regardless of gender, were fools undoubtedly, or so says the song.

“Did you have a point you were making?” Ford clarified.

“I’m gettin’ there.” Fiddleford held his hand up. “I wanted to know if it’d be alright to get you a present. Like, a seasonal present, if I can’t get it in any other way.”

“Why do I feel like you asking means you’ve already got me something?” Ford asked, bemused despite himself. “I haven’t got you anything. You can’t just spring this on me.”

“Well, I’m tryin’ to.” Fiddleford grinned, and put his hands in his pocket sheepishly. “Now I’m just fixin’ to get away with it.”

“But I don’t know what to get you. You’ve already got your Heck-A-Hedron, I can’t think of a more perfect gift than that.”

“Aww, shucks. You don’t have to get me anything.” Fiddleford waved dismissively, and began pushing Ford out the front door to tackle the snow. “I’m taking that as a green light by the way. You’re getting a non-denominational present.”

“Can I re-gift the gourd? You want a disturbingly expressive vegetable, right?” Ford joked, grinning over his shoulder.

“How ‘bout you don’t do that.”

“He moans when the weather changes.” Ford added, trying to sell the gourd as a gift.

Pushing Ford out of the front door, Fiddleford shooed him out into the snowy yard. “You’re
keepin’ the gourd!”

“Do I have to?”

“Go shovel some snow or somethin’!” Fiddleford laughed, and Ford nodded, chuckling, tugging his gloves on and snagging a warm hat from the coat rack, setting out to clear a path through the yard.

Fiddleford muttered as he closed the front door, returning to the warmth of the living room and his currently unsolvable puzzle.

“Regiftin’ the gourd. The nerve of some folk. Stanford specifically.”

The Quadrangle was chaos.

It was chaos at the best of times, but today it was organised chaos, and not the fun kind. Creatures and beings from all across the galaxy, creatures of the underworld, of the underbelly, of the gravely misunderstood and misrepresented and whatever other epithets they chose to brandish, every interdimensional criminal with something to gain on Earth was there, placing a bid at Bill’s silent auction.

Word spreads, and not everyone is as dismissive as Raha was when it came to recognising Bill’s plan for the genius it is. With invites going out and deals being made, criminals were lining up along the front lawn of Bill’s kaleidoscopic domain wanting to place a bid on a foothold of their own for Earth.

Kryptos had been organising the bidding for Bill as per instructions, and while this was supposedly a silent auction, the hooting and clamouring was several decibels short of what it was supposed to be.

Up on the balcony overseeing the auction, Bill rubbed his sides like he was nursing a headache.

“Look at them, like animals down there.” Bill gestured to the crowd.

Pyronica was sitting on one of the couches Bill had set up on the balcony, looking like some sort of regal queen, stuffing fried Quixlpathians into her mouth like popcorn.

Speaking with her mouth full, deep fried legs falling out of the side of her mouth, she replied.

“No manners.”

“I know!” Bill nodded emphatically, though in the back of his mind he noted that Pyronica’s manners would be something Sixer would take issue with, adorably quaint human that he was.

“You wanna bid quieter?” Py yelled down from the balcony, food collected in her cheeks. “This is a silent auction!”

The beings down in the foyer jeered and laughed, carousing heedless of Py’s screamed direction. That was to be expected, one didn’t become an interdimensional criminal by doing what one was
told.

“You sure told them.” Bill snickered.

“You can’t say I didn’t try.” Pyronica nodded sagely, before sitting back comfortably on the couch, stuffing more fried Quixlpathians into her mouth. “I gotta say, I’m loving the catering you’ve got going for this thing.”

“The drinks service leaves something to be desired. Keyhole! Hey Keyhole!” Bill yelled, and his henchmaniac ran up the staircase, holding a platter with various cocktails heaped onto it.

“Yes Boss?” Keyhole panted, somewhat out of breath.

“Who do you want to be serving drinks to, me or the rabble down there?” Bill scoffed, and extended his arm long to snag one of the Cosmopolitans from Keyhole’s tray.

“I’m sorry Boss. The carapacians are really pushy, they weren’t taking no for an answer, and the Goo Mobsters are harder to handle when they’re not completely shattered. I don’t much like being a waiter. I want to swap jobs with someone else.” Keyhole complained, bending over to catch his breath back.

“Swap jobs with Kryptos.” Bill suggested, swirling his drink as he surveyed the chaos below.

“I don’t want to do that either.” Keyhole backed out, shaking his very large head. “I saw him down there trying to separate two of the bidders who started eating each other. Running the auction looks hazardous.”

“Why is he separating them?” Bill scoffed, looking down over the railing. “Let them eat each other. That’s fewer bids to give a damn about. Does he think I want to line up and shake hands with all these schmucks?”

“I feel like that might be the point of the auction, Sir.” Keyhole replied good naturedly.

“The point of the auction is to see who pledges the most loyalty to me, not to see who makes the biggest show out of staking their claim on earth. I want to see what they can do for me, not just what they can do to each other.” Bill sighed, and rubbed his sides again. “I’ve got a hall full of morons down there.”

The creatures down in the hall were bidding on a set of ten invitations to Bill’s party on earth, and with hundreds of contenders packed into the hall, it was set to be a bloodbath soon enough. Kryptos could barely be seen up the front by the bidding table, trying to placate the numerous bidders who wanted to get the edge up over their competitor.

A loud shout echoed out over the hall as the bidding table was overturned by a being that just seemed to be a mass of teeth and writhing fingers, and the assembled creatures began fighting one another for one of the envelopes placed on the tabletop.

“Boss! Boss!” Kryptos was yelling out, close to being trampled by the crowd, waving his little arms.

“Let’s see him talk his way out of this one.” Pyronica snorted, watching the compass plead for help.

“Help me Boss!”
“We can’t just do nothing, that would be cruel.” Bill said, and his two henchmeniacs on the balcony nodded to one another, then nodded to Bill.

Bill swirled his drink around and watched the carnage unfold.

“Boss! Help! Boss!”

Bill took a leisurely sip from his cocktail, and paused to raise the glass to Keyhole.

“This Cosmopolitan is a delight. Have you been practising Keyhole?”

“I have been actually.” Keyhole smiled widely. “The trick is to use freshly grated nebula dust, and just a pinch of spectral seasoning.”

“That’s surprising. I like the kick. Nicely spicy.” Bill sipped at his drink again, enjoying it.

“Booooooosssssssssss!”

“So, uh. Are you gonna rescue him?” Keyhole asked curiously.

“Give it a few more seconds.” Bill advised, watching the chaos unfold.

“UUAAAAAAH BOOOOOOOOSSSSSSS!”

“Okay, that’s enough.” Bill conceded, and with a snap of his fingers, he pulled Kryptos out of the fray and teleported him up onto the balcony, appraising him cheerily. “How ya doing there Kryptos? Enjoying the auction?”

“They were EATING EACH OTHER.” Kryptos panted, pulling his gloves up frantically.

“Ha hah. Yes they were. Yes they were Kryptos.” Bill laughed and took another sip of his cocktail, making exasperated eye-contact with Pyronica before chucking back the entire drink into his eye-mouth.

“I don’t think I can go back down there. I couldn’t keep them away from the envelopes. It’s anarchy down there. Pure anarchy.” Kryptos wheezed, leaning against the balcony railing, watching the carnage unfold with horror.

“Well, that’s what they get for coming in late and still expecting a seat at the table.” Bill reached over for another cocktail from Keyhole’s tray, returning his empty glass. “They think the most anticipated party of the galaxy was going to have an open guest list forever? If there was an IQ test as a prerequisite for getting an invitation, I’d have to make a lot less invitations, I’m just saying.”

“This is happening a lot faster than I anticipated Boss.” Kryptos panted, sliding down to sit on the floor, leaning his back against the railing. “The auction, the portal, party planning on this scale is – it’s exhausting.”

“Tell me about it.” Bill said blankly, looking over the widespread fisticuffs below, wishing he was back with Sixer instead of presiding over this nonsense. “But this is one of the necessary evils of portal party planning, I’m afraid. Last minute alliances cemented by deals are how we’re going to keep an intergalactic stranglehold over what’s ours. They don’t let just anyone take over the third dimension. I’m not the only one who’s tried.”

Kryptos sighed, and rested his edge against the railing. He cast a longing glance over at Keyhole, and waved his hand at the other henchmaniac.
“Hey, can I have one of those.”

“Not while you’re on the clock Kryptos.” Bill said, sipping from his second cocktail.

The compass wilted, and flopped down on the floor, bemoaning everything.

Pyronica gave Kryptos an unimpressed look, and continued chewing loudly on her snacks.

Bill summoned the list that rested on the table up from the melee and unfolded it, dusting it off. “Let’s see what they’ve promised me. Useless, useless, that one’s a dud, flattering, patronising, obscure enough to maybe work. Redundant.”

Keyhole stepped up beside Bill and peered at the list. Pointing at it, Keyhole commented. “Hey look boss, they’re offering you their worshippers.”

“Pass. I’ve got better ones.” Bill waved his hand dismissively, continuing to read through the list. Looking down at Kryptos, Bill allowed himself a small tangent. “Speaking of, Kryptos, have you made any progress on getting more of those almanacks?”

“Are the ones I got you not working, Boss?” Kryptos asked.

“He’s losing interest. Maybe get some with pictures.” Bill mused. “Or something with advanced permutations of physics. Something to keep him engaged, and distracted.”

“Are you sure it’s a good idea to feed the human information like that? I mean, it’s not like he’s going to be going anywhere once you take Earth.” Kryptos reasoned. “And a human, travelling interdimensionally, in this political climate? Unless he’s reaaaally something special, he’s going to get wiped out before he makes it to even half of these places. Even two of these places.”

“Yeah, you try telling him that.” Bill griped, and sipped on his drink, looking grimly out into the fray. “The kid’s got ‘Ad Astra Per Aspera’ doodled in all of his journals. He’s not going to let something like expectations, or physical limitations stop him from going where he wants to go. He wants to see the stars, so he sees the stars. If he’ll be hanging around I may as well indulge him.”

“You could stop him, Boss.” Kryptos suggested slyly. “I mean, technically keeping him past the portal’s completion is unnecessary. You could dispose of him like you will with the other scientist.”

“Keeping him is my prerogative, Kryptos.” Bill gave Kryptos a sharp look, scowling at the compass. “This is the fifth time you’ve questioned me like this.”

“I’m just concerned.” Kryptos insisted, putting his hands together. “Look down there. These people don’t respect humans, half of them would enslave them, the other half would eat them, I don’t think there’s a single creature who’d extend the level footing you’re doing for your pet. You’re certainly breaking convention by keeping him.”

“You’re standing in an optical illusion of a stronghold, teetering on the precipice of existing and not existing, talking to someone who managed to convince all the sorry sad sacks who wanted to kill you, who by rights, by convention, should have done when they had the chance – you’re telling me that breaking convention is unusual for me?” Bill raised his brow sceptically at the compass.

“Not unusual. Just… maybe, unwise.” Kryptos winced, and tried to smile politely.

“That’s the same thing people said when I cut a deal with you Kryptos.” Bill rolled his eye. “You want me to take your advice, break our deal, and undo every unwise thing I’ve ever done?”
“There were a lot of unwise things.” Keyhole nodded solemnly before putting his hand up excitedly. “Remember when we stole dark matter from the space cops, and wrote offensive statements on the wall of the space bank, and – and remember when we crashed that Federation party for those diplomats. And remember when –“

“Buddy, I didn’t ask you for a blow by blow.” Bill interrupted Keyhole’s excited rambling, and the henchmaniac laughed, and scratched the back of his head.

“Ha ha. Yeah.” Keyhole grinned, and scuffed the floor with his heel. “Good times.”

“My point being, let me handle Sixer, and keep your angles out of my business for a change.”

“I’m just looking out for you boss.” Kryptos insisted unwisely. “Humans aren’t looked kindly upon, and even if you bring your pet along, you’re going to have to discard that vessel of yours eventually. These people aren’t going to recognise you when the party starts if you’re still in a meatsuit. I’m just saying.”

“Say a little less, maybe.” Pyronica chomped on her Quixlpathians loudly, scowling down at Kryptos.

“I’m just saying.” Kryptos snarked back cattily, though he jumped when Bill brought forth fire in his hand, stroking under his eye thoughtfully, the fire lighting his eye brightly.

“The meatsuit is an issue.” Bill frowned, turning his back on the fighting, floating over to the couches to sit beside Pyronica. “Sure, it’s flattering, in a cute sort of ‘I made you this from space macaroni’ way, but it’s not sustainable. I’ll need to ditch it eventually, before we go live.”

Kryptos stuck his tongue out at Pyronica in a childish manner.

“Hrmmm.” Bill continued to stroke under his eye, before spinning around to watch Keyhole contemplatively. “Keyhole, have you heard much from your cousin lately?”

“Oh, Boss. I know where you’re going, and I gotta say, I don’t think he’ll be pleased to see you.” Keyhole held his hand up defensively, laughing a little. “He’s been up to his neck in it and you’re not helping. I don’t think he’d be happy to see you.”

“I’m not asking him to be happy, I’m just asking him to see me.” Bill said emphatically, his hand extending long to rest on Keyhole’s shoulder. “You can sneak me in, right Keyhole? He doesn’t need to know he’s seeing me. How long has it been since you’ve had a friendly chat with your cousin, huh? Wouldn’t he want to see you? Catch up on family business?”

“I don’t know. I can’t trick him again, he won’t like that.”

Tugging Keyhole closer with that conspiratorial hand on Keyhole’s shoulder, Bill schmoozed. “He doesn’t need to know he’s seeing me. For all he knows, you’ve got a pressing concern, he’d be helping his cousin out. Just arrange a meeting Keyhole. I’ll take care of the rest.”


“That’s all I ask buddy.” Bill patted Keyhole on the shoulder in a friendly way, relaxing back on the couch. “That’s all I ask.”
The Gravity Falls Museum of Natural History was just short of snowed in when Fiddleford pulled up in front of it, the snow chains on the tires of his truck cutting a path through the sudden inclement weather.

Fiddleford was almost surprised to see Ivan waiting out the front of the museum, rugged up in a puffy jacket. He almost thought the carny wouldn’t come. He hadn’t given the poor fellow a time to meet up, he’d just said ‘tomorrow night’. Fiddleford wondered how long the tattooed boy had been standing there outside the museum in the cold, waiting for a cure for his nightmares.

“Hello!” Fiddleford called out, waving as he opened the car door, parking in front of the building. “Sorry to keep you waitin’ long.”

“I’ve only been here for an hour.” Ivan replied, his teeth chattering. “It’s good to see you.”

“Oh gosh.” F jumped out of the truck, grabbing his whiskey crate under his arm, hurrying up the stairs of the museum. He grabbed Ivan by the arm and rubbed his sleeve a little for warmth. “Let’s get you inside. I didn’t mean to make you wait out in the cold like that.”

Following Fiddleford indoors, rubbing his sleeves, Ivan spoke up, his voice almost light hearted, with an edge of bitterness. “You know, for a moment there I almost thought you weren’t coming.”

Fiddleford frowned, and opened the doors to the museum for Ivan. “I wouldn’t do that. I was just late gettin’ here because my drive got snowed in and I needed help gettin’ the chains on the tires.”

“It wouldn’t have been the first time I’ve been tricked.” Ivan sighed, but walked in through the doors, walking over to the pamphlet rack inside, looking through the leaflets. “Not that I think you would, it’s just – a cure for nightmares? It almost sounds too good to be true.”

“It – it’s better than it seems.” Fiddleford replied, adjusting the crate under his arm.

“So, shall we get to it then?” Ivan asked F expectantly.

Fiddleford looked over to the bored looking receptionist sitting at the front desk, before shaking his head, waving Ivan through to the exhibits.

“Maybe not here.”

The two men walked through the museum. It was mostly empty, barring the receptionist and the janitor. It seemed on a freezing day such as this one, people weren’t lining up to spend an hour in the Natural History Museum. It was far more likely they were in their homes, like the rest of the locals here, trying to stay out of the snow.

Fiddleford looked at the exhibits curiously, but he kept casting glances over at Ivan, who seemed to be getting more anxious with every wax figure they passed.

Looking to the side into a seemingly innocuous room displaying some pottery and statues, Fiddleford pulled Ivan into the small room, and closed the door behind him.

“Maybe in here’d be good. I don’t think anyone’ll be fixin’ to bother us in here.”

“The eye room.” Ivan read the plaque on the door, before turning to look at the strange exhibits.
Jars full of eyes filled the displays, and strange pottery fragments lined the walls, all telling a different ocular themed story.

It seems Gravity Fall’s history was preoccupied by eyes, or a single eyed being if Fiddleford’s theory was correct. He assumed the statues Ford found in his study were from the region, that’d match the cave paintings they saw when they went on that ill-fated expedition.

Fiddleford set his whiskey crate down on the floor, and bent over it, opening it up and checking the contents.

Ivan walked around the room, his hand running over the various plaques and displays on the wall, before he pulled a crumpled note out of his pocket.

“All these eyes. They look like the drawing you gave me. Like the symbol. It’s all related, isn’t it?”

Fiddleford looked up, and blinked. “Oh, uh, I can see how you’d think that, but that’s just a doodle. I didn’t plan on us comin’ to this specific room, though now that you mention it, it does line up awful well.”

“Oh.” Ivan’s shoulders slumped, and he put the paper back in his pocket, turning around to watch Fiddleford. “What have you got there then?”

“Well, this is a device I invented to remove bad memories. Basically, it taps into the radio frequency that interfaces with brainwaves, isolates and sections off the memory that’s ailing you, and temporarily writes it onto this here electrical tape, so while you can’t remember the bad memory anymore, you’ve got somethin’ saved up for the future if you ever need to remember the deleted memory.” Fiddleford explained and pulled the memory ray out of the box, adjusting the settings and calibrating it. “It’s like a mental safeguard against traumatic memories, and a backup for important facts all at once. Once the memory is removed, its stored in this capsule up the top here, and you can label and archive it, and watch it like a home video whenever it tickles your fancy to.”

“I see.” Ivan rubbed his chin and nodded, most of the scientific jargon going over his head. Fiddleford had simplified it well enough though, enough for Ivan to have a basic understanding of what was going on. “And you say you’ve used this on yourself before? It removes bad memories completely?”

“Well, certain sights might trigger flashback memories, just residual stuff that the subconscious hangs onto to prevent danger and so on. The brain is pretty intuitive. I don’t think it’d let you forget anything really important, like instincts, or things you need to keep you safe. Or breathin’.” Fiddleford twiddled with the specifier on the side of the gun. “You just gotta be careful when you’re inputtin’ the data. You can specify what memories you want to remove here on the side of the gun, and when you’re happy with the specifics, you just point and shoot.”

“That is quite intuitive.” Ivan remarked, peering down at the device.

“So, I take it you’ll want me to remove the night you spent in the Haunted Freak Show, yes?” Fiddleford asked, looking up at Ivan, his hand on the specifier, ready to adjust the settings.

“For starters.” Ivan replied. “Depending on how well it works, I wouldn’t mind getting rid of a few more memories that have been causing me grief since I came to America.”

“Oh.” Fiddleford paused, looking down at the machine. “Well, I mean, repeated use is – you shouldn’t take it lightly, using this machine. It’s supposed to be just for emergencies. Traumatic
“I have traumatic memories.” Ivan admitted, holding his hand over his chest. “You don’t go through life with a head like mine and have a blissful time of things. I’ve dealt with bullies all my life, had things happen I’d sooner forget. I’m sure everyone’s had their fair share of memories like that.”

“Well…” Fiddleford wavered, Ivan repeating the exact same sentiments he’d first professed when using this machine. He would have agreed with Ivan, but there was a small voice in the back of his head that sounded suspiciously like Stanford that told him this wasn’t a good idea to indulge. “I mean, it’s not supposed to be used casually, I’m sure all things in moderation maybe, but if you go around using it all pell-mell you’d forget why you shouldn’t be usin’ it in the first place.”

“Why shouldn’t you use it?” Ivan asked bluntly.

“Well, I don’t want to disappoint – “ Fiddleford stopped, realising that taking Ford’s opinion into account was different when he was using the device on himself, compared to using it to help another person in need.

His regard for Ford couldn’t – shouldn’t trump his empathy for another soul in need of assistance. That just wasn’t right.

“I don’t know.” Fiddleford finished, speaking mostly to himself. “I know I had a good ten reasons why this was a bad idea cookin’ up in my noggin, but they aren’t my reasons, and they don’t seem relevant now. Not with you bein’ here, bein’ in need.”

“Why do you hesitate?” Ivan questioned, tilting his head.

“Well, I’ve got a friend who I know won’t approve. He don’t think much of the concept of fiddlin’ around with people’s memories. He’s very principled, I guess.” Fiddleford frowned. “And he can’t ever know about us doin’ this. He wouldn’t take it well at all.”

“So, we keep it a secret then.” Ivan deduced, before grinning wide. “Like a secret society. We could wear robes, and pass coded messages, and meet in secret.”

Fiddleford scratched the back of his head, standing up with the gun in his hand now. “I don’t have no robes. I got a bathrobe, maybe.”

“A bathrobe! Ha, ha. Brilliant!” Ivan clapped, and nodded. “You know, I really think that’s a good idea. That way we could keep this device a secret from your friend, and use it to help people in need. People who need to forget.”

Fiddleford smiled politely, before he looked back down to the specifier. “Let’s just focus on helpin’ you for now. So, we’ll try erasin’ the Freak Show memory?”

“For starters.” Ivan nodded, and stood across the room from Fiddleford. “Should I brace myself? Will it hurt?”

“Just a sting.” Fiddleford twisted the specifier, typing in ‘Haunted Freak Show’. “It’ll be over in a second and you won’t even remember the initial shock once it happens. You can just – just stand over there. I’ll do it quickly, then you can see how you feel.”

“Right, Right.” Ivan nodded, and braced himself against one of the desks in the room, resting his hands on the wood. He seemed remarkably eager to put all of his trust in this machine, in Fiddleford, but given how he seemed to throw himself wholeheartedly into whatever he did, be it
head tattoos, or joining the travelling carnival, it made sense. “I’m ready.”

Fiddleford brought the machine up to eye height, and held it out in front of him, priming the beam by holding down the trigger. He pointed it at Ivan, and once the device was humming, fully loaded, he released the trigger and fired the beam at Ivan’s tattooed head.

The bright light of the beam blinded Ivan momentarily, and he felt a sting at the back of his eyes, like the beginnings of a headache, before he blinked the brightness out of his eyes and it was over. Just like that.

Ivan rubbed his forehead, before looking over to Fiddleford. “I don’t feel any different.”

“Can you remember what you’ve been havin’ nightmares about?” Fiddleford asked curiously.

Ivan stood there, wracking his brain, before he laughed in shock. “I – I can’t. It’s like it isn’t there. Like it never happened. This is brilliant.”

Fiddleford smiled, feeling accomplished, before he began putting the gun back into the crate, tidying it away. “Give it a night and see how you’re feelin’ in the morning. I suppose I should give you my phone number so you can let me know if you’re havin’ any side effects, or if you need any more help. There shouldn’t be side effects, it’d be just in case.”

Ivan stepped forward, and held his hand out to F, his eyes bright with curiosity and wonder. “Do you mind if I hold it for a second? Before you put it away.”

Fiddleford paused, and weighed down the pro’s and con’s. Something in his subconscious was telling him that letting anyone else wield this device was a bad idea, but his common sense and trust overrode that impulse, and he passed the device to Ivan.

Pointing to the canister, he explained a little, as the young man turned the device over in his hands. “That there’s the canister that stores your memory, so if you’re ever needin’ it again, to look through or anything, it’ll be there for you to access. I’ll look after it for you, so you don’t need to dwell on it.”

“I must say, it truly is the most spectacular invention.” Ivan remarked, holding the gun in his left hand, and tossing it to his right. “To think, it can solve so many problems, just like that. You’re certainly quite the genius.”

“Well.” Fiddleford chuckled, and rubbed behind his neck sheepishly, his cheeks pinking at the praise.

He watched Ivan play with the gun, but the moment when the young man levelled it to point playfully at F, like some sort of James Bond caricature, F’s shoulders seized up, his body reacting defensively to the sight of his own memory gun being pointed at him.

For an instant, Fiddleford wasn’t seeing Ivan, bald, pale Ivan pointing the gun playfully at him. Instead he saw a dark figure, with burning gold eyes, and sharp white teeth grinning at him, pressing the bulb of the device against the skin of his forehead. For an instant, F could feel the bulb pressed against his skin, and he felt a wash of terror flood over him.

Snatching it out of Ivan’s hand, his pulse racing, Fiddleford hurriedly put the gun away.

“T-that’s enough of that now.”
“Sorry.” Ivan apologised, but his voice seemed far away.

It felt like Fiddleford was having a panic attack, his heartbeat thumping loudly in his ears, beating in his throat. As he packed the gun away in the box, he felt a tightness in his chest swell up, and an irrational fear for Pat and Tate’s wellbeing stir. His subconscious was screaming at him, trying to remind him of something crucial he forgot.

“Are you alright?” Ivan asked, coming into focus now, and F blinked, before exhaling, trying to calm himself.

“I’m f-fine.” Fiddleford replied, and tried to believe it, before he packed the device away more securely in the whiskey crate. Breathing out again, regaining some of his calm, he smiled apologetically up at Ivan. “Sorry for snappin’ at you.”

“It’s quite alright. It’s your device. I wouldn’t want to break anything by playing around with it.” Ivan assured F calmly.

Reaching into his pocket, Fiddleford patted himself down, finding a pen but no paper. “Let me just – gotta give you my phone number.”

“Do you not have any paper?” Ivan asked, before rummaging through his own pockets, passing F the crumpled page Fiddleford had passed him before, with the symbol drawn on the page. “Here.”

Fiddleford scribbled the phone number for the shack down on the back of the page and passed it over to Ivan, hefting the whiskey crate back under his arm and smiling. “There. Just let me know if you’re feelin’ any ill effects, or if you need help with anything else, and I’ll do my best to be there.”

“Thank you very much Mr McGucket.” Ivan replied respectfully, and rushed forward to hold open the door for Fiddleford, as he had his hands full with the crate.

F walked out of the museum, Ivan hovering at his side all the way until he slid the crate into the passenger seat of the truck, watching him with hero-worship dancing in his eyes.

“Do you need a ride back to the – the carnival I guess?” Fiddleford asked, not wanting to leave the young man out in the cold again.

“Oh, no. I’m staying in the motel just down the road. It’s quite alright.” Ivan demurred, but smiled jovially, waving at F as he walked away. “I’m sure I’ll sleep like a baby tonight!”

“Let me know.” Fiddleford waved back, and watched Ivan leave.

He stood there for a while, lost in thought before hopping into the front seat of the truck, putting his keys in the ignition. The engine warmed up, and Fiddleford turned the truck’s air conditioning up high, rubbing his hands together, holding them in front of the vents, trying to warm himself in the wintery cold air.

He sat in his truck for a while, warming up, mulling over the encounter with Ivan.

“Well.” Fiddleford said to himself, looking down at the whiskey crate on the passenger seat beside him. “That went better than I expected it to.”

Drumming his fingers on the steering wheel, Fiddleford looked away from the whiskey crate for a moment, looking over the white parking lot, the snow still falling down, making it a white Christmas in Oregon for sure.
Fiddleford cast another glance at the crate, and felt temptation creep up on him.

If he were being practical, he could technically use the device again this evening, and Stanford need never know.

Fiddleford drummed his fingers against the wheel again, before reaching over to scoot the crate closer to him.

“Maybe just one more stop.”

He revved the truck’s engine and reversed out of the parking lot, driving off into the night.

Knocking tentatively on Bill’s bedroom door, Stanford pushed the door open just a tad, peering into the room.

Bill was sleeping, his face squashed against one of the numerous pillows piled up around his bed, his eyebrows twitching in his sleep. Gold light exuded from his tattoos, and his shirt was riding up to reveal the tattoo crisscrossing binding runes across his back.

Ford felt a little shameful, just watching Bill sleep like this, but considering they were what passed for dating, Ford rationalised that there really was nothing creepy or unwarranted about this.

Bill was fascinating to watch.

Stanford had made him, made him this vessel. So rarely did he get the opportunity to examine it without Bill shooting knowing looks or snide comments at him.

Ford particularly enjoyed how expressive Bill’s face was. Pressed into the pillow, Ford could only see half of Bill’s high cheek-boned visage, but he enjoyed the way Bill seemed to scowl in his sleep. It looked like Bill was rolling his eyes quite a bit, Ford could see Bill’s eyelids moving.

Settling down on the edge of the bed, Ford just paused, watching Bill, quite content with this uninterrupted period of observation.

Bill was mumbling into his pillow, uncensored in his sleep. Ford listened, always curious about what could possibly go on in his mysterious muse’s head.

“Vqvbqf. Qb V unir gb qb rirelguvat zlfrys?”

Ah, that peculiar interstellar language again.

Ford had been trying to decrypt it, but he never quite got the syllables transcribed correctly. It was bizarre to hear it spoken, it seemed to have far too many consonants for a functional language, yet the cadence and flow suggested it was. Ford couldn’t assume much for grammar either, comparing Bill’s strange space language to any Earth language could very well be an exercise in redundancy.

He wondered what Bill was saying.

“Nggravba nffubyrf! Gur rairybcrf lbh ner orngvat bar nabgure jvgu ner va snpg qrpblf! Vs lbh
Bill finally smiled, smacking his lips in his sleep, turning to curl around Ford’s warm torso without opening his eyes.

Ford froze for a moment, convinced he’d been caught watching Bill while he slept, but the muse didn’t wake. Instead he gravitated to Ford, nuzzling up to the scientist’s body, arms clinging to him instinctively.

Well that was somewhat gratifying. Bill liked to waver between scornful derision of their relationship, and avowed clinginess, changing his mind often enough that it would give Ford trust issues if he hadn’t come to know that contrariness as just a part of the muse’s personality.

Not that Ford expected Bill would lie to him about it, but it was comforting to know that the subconscious couldn’t lie. Bill’s desire for closeness with him was as plain as day when the muse had his eyes closed. He almost seemed happy like this, cosying up to Ford’s warmth, draping his arms across Ford’s lap.

Amused, Ford gently stroked his hand through Bill’s bright yellow hair, gratified by the way the God leaned into his touch.

For someone so standoffish, Bill seemed to crave physical comfort, physical touch. Throw an intangible being into a tangible body, and suddenly the god was addicted to the stuff. But not from anyone else, just from Stanford. That was gratifying too.

“Are you waking up?” Ford murmured, still playing with Bill’s hair. He pushed the muse’s bangs off his forehead and peered at Bill’s face, his eyes still closed, and continued to stroke through Bill’s hair. “No. Still sleeping.”

Bill smacked his lips again, then began chewing slightly on Ford’s trousers. Gently Ford pushed Bill’s forehead, inching him away, assuming the muse was hungry.

Perhaps now was the time to wake him up.


“Hrrmpghsff.” Bill mumbled unintelligibly, though he didn’t appear to be talking. Just sleepy.

“Are you waking up? I have a surprise for you.” Ford tempted, wondering if Bill could hear him yet.

“Mmrrh?” That caught his attention, and Bill’s eyebrows creased, before he wedged one slitted yellow eye open, peering up at Ford. “You’re not my bed.”

“Or your dinner.” Ford added lightly, gesturing to the wet patch of drool on his trousers.

Groggily Bill began sitting up, rubbing his eyes with his fists. “How long have you been –“ Bill yawned loudly. “Been sitting there?”
“Not too long.” Ford replied, rubbing Bill’s shoulder. “You talk in your sleep, you know.”

Bill froze slightly, his shoulder’s tensing beneath Ford’s palm, and the muse watched him steadily. “Oh?”

“You’ll have to teach me that strange language of yours.” Ford continued rubbing Bill’s shoulder, oblivious to his tension. “It’s not in any of the books you’ve given me.”

Relaxing, Bill rolled his shoulders. “Learning languages is a redundant luxury. If you hate fashion and don’t mind looking stupid, you just wear a Dimensional Translator and it does all the work for you. You can get them in most interdimensional Seven-Blelevens, easy.”

“Is that how you speak so many languages?” Ford asked gamely.

“I speak so many languages because I’m the font of all knowledge, Smart Guy.” Bill smirked, and poked Stanford’s nose winsomely. “Omniscience never looked so good.”

“So says the man who didn’t know what a toaster w-“

“You could have just agreed with me.” Bill huffed, and crossed his arms. “It wasn’t so hard to do.”

“Your ego is bloated enough as it is.” Ford said, though his tone was fond.

“So, what, you wake me up, you sass me up and down, what’s next?” Bill watched Ford with those sharp yellow eyes of his. “Ritualistic dismemberment?”

“I was going to ask –“ Ford tried, sounding very much put upon. “If you wanted a massage.”

Bill blinked at Ford, lacking an answer.

“A proper one.” Ford added insistently, pointing to the bottle of massage oil he brought with him, sitting on the bedside table.

“What were all those other ones, if this is a proper one?” Bill asked suspiciously.

“Practise, not that I needed it.” Ford replied somewhat self-indulgently. “As I’m two digits up on everyone else, I’ve been told my massages are a step up from the standard.”

“Who told you that?” Bill squinted suspiciously. “Who else have you been massaging?”

“Well, no one’s actually told me that.” Ford admitted, wanting to halt Bill’s jealousy before it brewed. “But if they had, I imagine that’s what they’d say.”

“Huh.” Bill continued to squint suspiciously at Ford, leaning away from him slightly so he could more adeptly graze his gaze up and down Ford like he wasn’t impressed.

Tutting, Bill’s suspicion an amusing display of possessiveness, Ford stood up, and spread the towel he brought with him across Bill’s bed, tidying and arranging the pillows. Bill sat unhelpfully in the middle of the bed, and Ford had to yank him to his feet to spread the towel out.

“If you want to do something useful you can take your clothes off and wait there.”

“Someone’s forward.”

“Bill, I’ve seen you naked. I built your body.”
“I know, but you don’t have to rub it in.” Bill huffed and began stripping down, until he was standing in his boxers, his hands crossed over his chest like he was shy.

“Actually I do.” Ford joked, pointing to the bottle of oil cheekily.

“Why do I even bother?” Bill huffed, and shook his head at Ford’s obvious pun. It was kind of funny. Summoning the cuffs, Bill snapped them onto his wrists, guessing correctly that this would be the sort of worshipful activity that would raze his insides to ash if he let it.

“Now you just lay down. On your belly. You don’t need to keep those on, you know. This is supposed to be relaxing.”

Bill looked at the cuffs, then realised Sixer was referring to the boxers, and sheepishly he stepped out of them, throwing them aside and laying on the towel, casting suspicious glances over his shoulder the entire time.

“You’re too smug already. I don’t like this.”

“You will.” Ford assured him, before rolling up the sleeves of his shirt, then, second guessing himself, unbuttoning the shirt and discarding it. “Don’t want to get it dirty.”

“What’s the point of this again?” Bill asked, watching Ford remove his shirt. “Because I’m really not following.”

Flicking open the bottle of massage oil and rubbing it between his hands, Ford looked over Bill’s naked body with a satisfaction already burning in his chest. The muse was beautiful, and contrary, and just a little off balance, the way Ford liked him.

“The point is to relax.” Ford insisted, bringing his oiled hands down to smooth over Bill’s back. “And stop talking, if you can manage that. Just focus on sensation.”

“Stop talking – he says.” Bill mimicked mockingly. “You just like the sound of your own voice, you just want –“

“Clearly I’m not the only one.” Ford smoothed his hands across Bill’s back a little more firmly, the oil spreading across the muse’s ebony skin, making it glisten in the low light. “Just try to enjoy this a little. Enjoy being corporeal, inhabiting a body – touch. There’s nothing wrong with relaxing a little here. Fiddleford won’t be back until late, it’s just you and me tonight. Relax.”

Letting out a frustrated sigh, Bill attempted to relax, clutching onto the pillow underneath the towel, slow to warm up to this sort of conduct. When Ford hummed in a pleased sort of way, no longer talking, Bill sighed again, and let some of the tension seep out of him bit by bit.

“Your tattoos look beautiful.” Ford commented.

“You could stand to unbind a few more.” Bill mumbled into the pillow.

“You’re supposed to be relaxing.” Ford reminded him, conveniently ignoring Bill, continuing to rub oil into the muse’s sore muscles.

Grumbling slightly, Bill wiggled back into the pillows, letting Sixer rub away his stresses.

Bill had been feeling the pressure, with the portal’s completion date inching ever closer, with the silent auction playing out so raucously, with dealing with idiots, handling everything on his own, making sure every last variable was accounted for. It had all been mounting.
Somehow it was ironic that it always seemed to be Sixer who helped cut those pressures up into little pieces and scatter them to the wind. It was always Sixer who streamlined the portal’s process, barely needing any supervision with staying on track, and it was always Sixer who, after a stressful period in the mindscape, somehow always managed to pick up on that tension, despite being disastrously unobservant in other ways, and distracted Bill, or helped him look away from his troubles while they approached, screaming for attention.

Melting slowly into the pillows, feeling Sixer’s broad calloused hands smooth over his back, kneading the tense knots in his muscles away like putty, Bill sighed again, more contented this time, closing his eyes.

“This is like a holiday.” Bill murmured, relaxing more and more.

“In the middle of December.” Ford remarked. Kneading the knots out of Bill’s shoulders, he continued, trying to mimic the calm voice he assumed a masseuse would employ. “If it helps, you could close your eyes and picture a beach, or the like. A tropical … lovely – there would be sand.”

“Sixer, just shut up.” Bill advised, resting his forehead against the towel, feeling warmed from the inside out. Sixer’s regard was lovely, but his running commentary left something to be desired.

The only beach Bill could think of was the one where he genocidally dismembered the Amaphabons in an attempt to strike out at the Axolotl, and look what that got him. Not very much. Not even a reaction from Big Gills. Talk about unsatisfying.

This massage was marginally more satisfying. The massage oil smelled like coconut, like those cakes Bill liked, and Sixer’s dextrous hands were unerring at seeking out tense spots on Bill’s back, massaging them out until Bill only felt bliss.

“Mmm, ‘s good.” Bill mumbled, remembering to reassure Sixer with praise. Sixer liked praise.

Ford did indeed enjoy praise, and he was enjoying a lot of things about this massage experience.

Bill was practically melted down into a puddle of godly mush on the bed, his tattoos glowing persistently, lighting the oil as it was kneaded into the muse’s body, giving Ford an excuse to fondle every muscle he moulded into existence, to feel every inhale and satisfied exhale the muse exuded as Ford wrung the tension out of Bill like water from a rag.

He knew he was lucky, to be able to touch this gorgeous being, to have unrestricted access to Bill like this, but Ford couldn’t deny he had ulterior motives for suggesting this surprise, bringing his hands down lower to massage Bill’s shapely rear.

“Mmmmm.” Bill mumbled, clearly enjoying the massage, despite Ford’s wandering hands.

So far the muse’s temperature was under control, and while he ran hotter than a regular human, he managed to keep his temperature just shy of 42 degrees, not hot enough to burn Stanford.

As Ford continued to knead Bill’s oiled buttocks, rolling the supple flesh in his hands, he felt his face flush as his technical goal for this evening’s surprise came into view.

Ford wasn’t sure how he’d go about broaching the topic of a more traditional intercourse with Bill. The magazines he’d surreptitiously bought from that truck stop several counties over detailed explicitly the benefits of homosexual intercourse, the biological ins and outs of it all (though that may be a poor choice of wording) and while curiosity was in Ford’s nature, he was uncertain about Bill’s comparative biology. Uncertain enough to believe that this might not work.
This was a preliminary test of sorts. Another experiment. If Bill reacted like a normal human
would, biologically speaking, then Stanford felt like he could go ahead with this sort of devious
sexual conduct, but if the muse garnered no pleasure from it, Stanford couldn’t justify seeking his
own pleasure that way, despite what seedy truck stop magazines said about the satisfaction of the
act.

Pouring more oil on his hands, rubbing them together, Ford let the oil drizzle down across Bill’s
lower back, and slowly began spreading it along the cleft of Bill’s cheeks, keeping one hand on
Bill’s upper back, continuing the massage while he experimented.

Bill barely noticed Ford’s focus, melting pleasantly onto the bed, his brain scattering nicely due to
the intensity of the worship. Every exhale was laden with bliss, and Bill began developing a
thorough appreciation for tangibility, and having a vessel with so many happy little nerve endings
singing out to him.

Ford rubbed the oil down between Bill’s legs, and pressed his thumb firmly against the pucker,
rubbing gently, watching Bill’s reactions like a hawk to see if this was permissible.

Bill shuddered through the new sensation, and lifted his head curiously, cracking open his eye.

“Mmmrgh, Sixer?”

“I want to try something new.” Ford said hurriedly, explaining himself. “And it’s alright if you
don’t like it, we don’t have to – I figured since you’re regulating your temperature better now we
could – I don’t even know if your biology supports this, and internal and external temperatures are
two very different things – I – “

“What?” Bill croaked, still electrified by the shot of pure undiluted worship that jolted through him
when Sixer pressed his thumb against him. These human nerve endings sure were something. Bill
didn’t even know the half of it yet.

“If you can –“ Ford began hopefully. “Please, just try and regulate your internal temperature for
me. Just a bit. Just for a while.”

Ford ran his index finger across Bill’s entrance now, soaking the oil in there, lubricating his muse
sufficiently while he begged for the opportunity to try.

“I know it’s something new, and it might feel strange at first, but if this works, please, please, I
promise you, you’ll like it. You might –“

“Sixer.” Bill croaked again, continually rattled by the spike of sensation as Sixer teased his finger
across that spot, leaning heavily on the apparatus as the worship poured like kerosene, igniting him
helplessly. “Shut up, and just do it.”

Permission granted, Ford pressed ahead, sliding his lubricated index finger into Bill slowly, feeling
it out.

Bill was hot. Hotter on the inside than the outside. Just shy of excruciating really, but as Stanford
felt around that inner ring of muscle, he felt enough familiarity with Bill’s anatomy to think that
potentially this might work. He wasn’t being burned, just squeezed by an incredibly hot chasm.

Bill was tense again, his legs shaking a little, as he focused all he had on keeping his temperature
as low as possible, biting his bottom lip to let Sixer continue his worship drenched exploration.
How Bill was supposed to keep his temperature down while it felt like his entire body was on fire, he
didn’t know, but somehow he was managing it. Mentally he was cracking the whip double time
to get Teeth switching those batteries, as he was going through them incredibly quickly.

Pulling his finger out slightly, before pushing back in, Ford continued to probe his muse, watching him wriggle about like he was simmering from the sensation of it all.

“I can’t believe this is working.” Ford murmured, marvelling at the fact that he was experiencing this, that this was happening.

“Shut up. Shut up. Shut up shut up shut up.” Bill chanted, gripping onto the towel, his tattoos glowing intensely as he attempted to control himself.

“Try and relax.” Ford advised, thinking back on those magazines. He rubbed Bill’s back soothingly. “I’m going to try another one.”

“Relax? Sixer!!” Bill whined, already overwhelmed by just the one. Relaxing was the opposite of this, accommodating Ford’s exploratory finger, and trying not to incinerate it. This was like being strung out on the most incredibly potent worship there was. Sixer was delivering physical worship, pleasing himself with this exploration, marvelling at it right at the altar. Bill WAS the altar, and he was about to explode.

“Just relax.” Ford insisted, deciding Bill was lubricated and loose enough to try another finger, wedging it in with the first, slowly twisting them together.

Bill could barely manage to shudder through this, panting and whining, his breath shaky and short. It was pleasurable, vaguely, through the overwhelming fog of worship. The apparatus was trying vainly to draw it away as quickly as it came, but there was too much of it, and Bill felt oversaturated with sensation.

Ford wiggled his fingers deeper and began searching for something, crooking his fingers intermittently.

“Now if I could just find –“ Ford muttered, while exploring his strung out muse, watching his skin glisten with sweat and oil as he writhed, barely containing himself on the mattress.

“Sixer!” Bill moaned, recognising vaguely through the haze of worship that Sixer’s questing fingers felt weird but not unwelcome, wiggling inside of him like that. He wasn’t entirely sure what Sixer thought he’d find there though, until his happy little nerve endings all sang out strong, informing him.

“Ah! ahh-hhhhhhh.” Bill shouted out, his body jolting as Sixer’s fingers brushed against his prostate. It seems Sixer made this body the way human insides were intended to be, despite Bill’s own peculiar twist on inhabiting it.

Oozing triumph, Ford bumped his fingers against that spot again, wringing loud cries from his muse.

“Oh – ahh - Bu shpx, bu shpx – fu – ahh SIXER!”

Leaning forward, pressing his hand firmly down on the middle of Bill’s back, Ford felt himself straining in his trousers, the sight of Bill taking his fingers, and his noises, were so arousing.

Trying to build a rhythm of it, Ford started fucking Bill in earnest with his fingers, bumping against that spot as often as he could just to drive Bill inarticulate.

It was working.

Bill’s own member was straining, rubbing persistently against the soft terrycloth, dribbling a small amount of that strange gold fluid as Sixer fucked him soundly into the mattress with just two fingers.

Judging from the way Bill strained back up against Sixer’s hand, grasping for the human blindly with his left hand while his right twisted fistfuls of the blanket desperately, he didn’t hate him. It seemed quite the opposite, to Ford, proof, blatant evidence of how much his muse wanted him.

Deciding to flip him over, so Bill could spurt out his declarations of sweet emotion into Ford’s mouth, Ford continued to fuck Bill, maintaining the angle as best as he could while he plastered himself on top of Bill, pressing them close, chest to chest. Ford captured Bill’s mouth, pressing sloppy possessive kisses onto the muse that Bill could only pant through, clutching onto Ford’s shoulder, his nails digging in desperately.

Bill’s cock was straining upright now, leaking gold fluid, bouncing in rhythm with Sixer’s rapid wrist movements, rocking Bill’s whole body. The pleasure was so intense, tears trailed down Bill’s cheeks as the muse brainlessly panted Ford’s nickname like a prayer. The gold aura from their first experiment with the cuffs flooded Bill’s body now, lighting the room as he teetered on the brink of the most intense orgasm this body had ever experienced, Sixer plastering wet fervid kisses to his jaw while he shuddered and moaned, his consciousness shattering and coming back together in a way that nearly overloaded two batteries, one after the other.

Proof of Ford’s success spurted gold, splattering the warm substance across Ford’s chest, rubbing between them as Ford continued fucking Bill through his release until he was certain his muse was finished.

Over sensitised and wrung out, Bill faintly batted his hands against Sixer’s chest, weakly pushing him away as he mumbled half words.

“No more – no more – you broke me – Si –“

Conceding, Ford let his fingers slip out of Bill, his muse’s legs shaking. Ford wiped his fingers on the towel, and with his clean hand, he stroked the side of Bill’s sweaty face, pressing kisses to Bill’s jaw and murmuring praise.

“You did so well. That was – you’re amazing. You –“

“Stop. You’ve killed me. I’m dying Sixer.” Bill moaned, pushing Ford’s face away softly.

Sixer chuckled, and sat up, giving Bill a little space, patting his leg with a smile. “You’re not dying.”

“Ugh.”

Bill twitched through the aftershocks of that spectacular orgasm, slowly melting back onto the bed, exhausted. Receiving that much worship really took it out of a God, that was intense.

Ford watched Bill process the aftermath with a smirk, feeling smug and satisfied that his experiment was such a roaring success.

He hadn’t been burned, he’d thoroughly overwhelmed the God, and he may or may not need to change into a fresh pair of trousers.
As always, his ego became something sizable when he processed that he was here, making a God tremble, breaking down Bill’s barriers like this and wringing such genuine reactions out of him.

He felt beyond special, to have this opportunity.

Rather than simply stare fondly at Bill while the muse struggled to regain his equilibrium, Ford tugged the towel out from under him and wiped down both of their chests, cleaning them up sufficiently.

Laying down beside Bill, Ford pressed a self-satisfied kiss to Bill’s forehead, watching the muse moan pitifully.

“Thank you for that. Truly.”

“Just roll me outside. Just dump me in the snow. I’m burning up.” Bill continued complaining, laying next to Sixer, slowly regaining agency over his floppy limbs.

“You’re fine.” Ford laughed, and pressed his hand against Bill’s forehead, feeling his temperature fluctuate.

Looking down at the muse, taking in his fluttering eyelashes, his vibrant gold eyes, the way he seemed to glow from the inside out, laying there pressed elbow to elbow with Ford, smirking with every dramatic statement he delivered, Ford felt a certain declaration hover at the tip of his tongue. He wanted to say it, he did.

Deciding to hold it back, Ford demurred, and stood up with a grunt, brushing Bill’s hair off his forehead as he went.

“I’ll open a window.”

Looking out the window as he opened it up to the brisk snowy air, Ford noticed Fiddleford’s truck was still missing and vaguely wondered where he was.

Shrugging to himself, Ford turned back to tend to his dramatic complaining muse.

“Now Gentlemen, I’ve been wantin’ to thank you all for the hard work you’ve been doin’ on my project. Y’all got it done in record time, and I just wanted to give all y’all something to take home for Christmas, along with your bonuses, as a thank you, to you and your families.”

Fiddleford levelled the memory gun at the construction workers he’d gathered, and primed the device. It hummed to life, the beam building as Fiddleford held down the trigger.

“Now you won’t remember this, but this is some of the finest work you’ve done. So congratulations y’all.”

Fiddleford released the trigger and blasted the assembled construction workers with the memory ray, removing their memories swiftly from their minds.

“And Merry Christmas.”
White light filled the room, and all was forgotten.

Chapter End Notes

Bill's language is spoken caesar cipher which you can decrypt here https://www.xarg.org/tools/caesar-cipher/ if you like uncovering the sassy mysteries of everyone's favourite triangle.
Next chapter Fiddleford reveals his Christmas gift as we go Into The Bunker, and things start getting schwifty - I mean shifty.
I hope you all enjoyed! Feel free to leave a comment, I always love reading your comments.
This chapter is dedicated to katsucii who always leaves the loveliest comments and inspires me lots :D thank you bud
Deep inside, both of us can feel the autumn chill.

Stanford was making his way to the kitchen, rugged up in his dressing gown and fluffiest socks, for the express purpose of retrieving just-past-midnight snacks to share with the God upstairs, when the phone started ringing.

Ford squinted into the living room, wondering who the devil would be calling so late at night.

Balancing the box of eggnog, two glasses, and a packet of ginger cookies under his arm, Stanford shuffled into the lounge room and maneuvered the items he was carrying under one arm so he could reach to answer the phone.

“Hello?” Ford asked, rather crossly.

“It worked! It worked! The nightmare is over! It never happened. Thank you, you’re my saviour!” Came the tinny distortion of a rather out of breath British voice over the phone.

“Who is this?” Ford questioned, his tone quite gruff and confused.

“Oh, you’re –” The British voice paused briefly, before muttering. “You can’t know. It’s a secret.”

“I beg your pardon?” Ford pressed, his paranoia flaring up. Pressing the phone closer to his ear with his shoulder, Ford listened intently, trying to pick up clues from the sounds on the other end of the line. “Who are you?”

There was a crackle on the phone, and then a silence. For a moment Ford thought he’d been hung up on, like this was some sort of prank call, before the voice whispered.

“It has been unseen.”

Ford barely heard that whisper, but it set all the hairs on the back of his neck on edge.

“Hello?” Ford asked uncertainly, but was left with no answers, only a resolute dial tone, as the mysterious caller hung up.

“Hello?” Ford asked redundantly, feeling decidedly paranoid, not certain what he’d just heard.

Staring at the phone, Ford felt perturbed beyond belief, and slowly put the handset back on the stand, clicking it into place.

“Strange.” Ford muttered, walking over to the window to look outside.

He couldn’t see anyone out there, just the heavy snowfall blurring the yard with white. Closing the curtains tightly, and checking the locks on the door, Ford frowned, before adjusting the cups, nog, and biscuits under his arm, trudging back up the stairs.

“I just got the strangest phone call.” Ford reported, as he opened the door to Bill’s room, setting the glasses down on the bedside table.

“Where’s the nog? Aren’t you going to nog the nog?” Bill asked, reclining comfortably naked, in bed, reading one of Ford’s journals.
“This is the nog.” Ford gestured to the box of eggnog he’d brought from the grocery store in an attempt to be sufficiently seasonal.

“It’s not nog until you spice it up a little. Go back down there, and bring back the nog.”

“You mean the rum?” Ford clarified.

Bill raised his eyebrow at Ford, and pointed imperiously to the door. “I mean the nog.”

Sighing and rolling his eyes, Ford dutifully marched back downstairs to retrieve the alcohol, indulging his muse’s whims.

The phone call was forgotten until the morning.

Fiddleford was chatting away to Patricia and Tate on the telephone on the morning of the 25th, cooing Christmas greetings to his infant son and wife at a reasonable volume.

A reasonable volume sounded like a verbal assault, by the time Stanford made it downstairs, his muse following, wrapped warm in Sixer’s dressing gown, smothering a yawn.

“Where did I put the advil?” Ford muttered, wincing at every passing sound, his hangover torturing him mercilessly.

“THE WHAT?” Bill yelled directly into Ford’s ear, grinning gleefully as Stanford tried to swat at him, glaring at the muse.

“Are you professionally annoying, or is it just a hobby?” Ford growled, pushing Bill out of the way as he opened cupboards, looking for the painkillers.

“More of a lifestyle.” Bill replied smugly, before waving his hand, summoning the advil from the pantry. “Are you looking for these?”

Ford swiped for the painkillers, but Bill jumped back, and held the pill box over his head, playing keep-backsies.

“Say please.”

“Give them here Bill.” Ford lunged for the muse, grabbing him before he managed to dash away, and was trying to pull Bill’s arm down to wrestle the pills from him.

Ford managed to yank Bill’s hand down, but the pills weren’t there, instead they were hovering overhead, just out of Ford’s reach.

“Look, no hands!” Bill cheered, laughing all the while Ford shook him by the wrist.

“Fiddleford is just in the other room. Bring them down. Bill. Right now!”

Bill let the pills fall soundly onto Sixer’s forehead, and the human winced, rubbing his cranium, before bending to pick the pills off the floor.
“Ahh, you’re so entertaining when you’re hungover.” Bill beamed at Ford as the surly scientist popped two of the pills from the packet and chucked them back, pouring tap water in a glass to chase the pills down.

With water still swilling in his mouth, Ford pointed to Bill crankily. “You can make your own breakfast.”

Sitting in one of the chairs at the kitchen table, Bill crossed his legs and laced his fingers together, batting his eyelashes at Ford. “But Sixer, it’s Christmas!”

“Bah.” Ford waved his hand dismissively at Bill, and turned to root through the fridge, looking for something to eat.

Pulling a sausage of bologna out, Ford peeled back the plastic wrap covering it, and bit into the meat, holding the bottle of orange juice in his other hand, twisting the cap off and taking a swig straight from the bottle.

“You barbarian.” Bill remarked fondly, chiding Sixer’s manners.

Ford was about to flip Bill his six-fingered estimation of a very rude gesture, when Fiddleford walked into the kitchen, full of energy and vigour.

“Mornin’ gentlemen! It’s a beautiful white Christmas we got ourselves out there.” F walked into the room, flinging open the kitchen curtains, looking out into the yard with a satisfied nod. “The sun is shinin’, the snow’s stopped fallin’, it’s like a winter wonderland out there.”

Ford groaned, and raised his hand to shield his eyes against the glare of the sun reflecting off the snow. Bill cackled and swung his legs, enjoying Sixer’s pain.

“What’s wrong with Stanford?” Fiddleford asked, puzzled by his colleague’s behaviour.

“Sixer can’t handle his nog.” Bill explained with a grin.

“That’s slander. Uproarious slander.” Ford protested, glaring at Bill. “I want to trade you in for an assistant who doesn’t slander me.”

“The nog has made you bitter and jaded.” Bill surmised, nodding sagely.

“Do I want to know what the nog is?” Fiddleford questioned, not really sure he wanted an answer.

“He doesn’t even know what nog is.” Ford pointed accusingly at Bill, while the muse spoke over him, shaking his head.

“The world may never know.”

“Well, you two sure woke up festive.” Fiddleford remarked, watching the strange dynamic the two men displayed, their bickering almost flirtatious at this point. “Didja have a late night? I came in around ten thirty and I didn’t see you. I just went straight to bed.”

“It was an unwise late night.” Ford rubbed his stubble, leaning back against the kitchen counter. “And the last time I agree to play a drinking game with you.”

“He’s all nogged out, the poor little thing.” Bill grinned, watching Ford closely.

“We were up past midnight, and then some.” Ford explained, before remembering the peculiar phone call. “Speaking of late, sometime around one AM the phone rang. I felt like I was being
prank called, it was the most peculiar thing.”

“Oh?” Fiddleford questioned, a waver of hesitation in his voice. “Maybe they just got the wrong number.”

“No, they definitely knew who I was.” Ford insisted, taking another sip from the orange juice before wiping his mouth on the back of his hand. “It was really peculiar. They were talking about a secret, telling me I couldn’t know? I couldn’t know what? It was all rather dramatic, there was whispering, and I think they were putting on an accent. Calling at one in the morning!”

“Well that’s – that’s weird.” Fiddleford remarked awkwardly, trying to look convincingly ignorant about who could possibly be placing that sort of phone call. “You think it was a prank?”

“Well if it was genuine, then we’d all have reason to be concerned.” Ford decided, frowning. “Are you sure you didn’t just imagine it?” Fiddleford pressed. “I mean, if you were drinking, it could have just been a dream.”

“No, this was before the nog.” Ford maintained. “You don’t know anything about it, do you? Who else would have this phone number? I don’t just give it out to anyone.”

“I gave the number for this place out to my family, and a couple of relations. Not that I think they’d be hollerin’ at you for a joke, they barely know you.” Fiddleford was spinning a convincing cover, surprised at how easily lying about Ivan was becoming for him. “Prolly someone picked it out of the phone book, just lookin’ to give someone a hard time.”

“Hrmmm.” Ford frowned, still unconvinced.

“Not that I should have to, but I’ll remind you all now that this project requires absolute secrecy, complete non-disclosure.” Bill spoke up, and he made sure to look directly at Fiddleford.

He had explicitly told Fiddleford to bring laborers into the project on the condition that he’d wipe their memories after to protect Bill’s secrets. Fiddleford probably thought the idea was his own, considering how Bill had immediately wiped his memory, and prickled at the insinuation.

Bill knew that the secrecy for this project had to be at least nominally breached. That wasn’t why he was staring at Fiddleford.

He was staring because Stanford was paranoid, and he needed to know where to look if he were to begin to suspect someone. He couldn’t look at Bill, and the god had to start sewing the seeds of distrust at some point.

“I know that.” Fiddleford replied defensively. “You don’t need to be remindin’ me.”

“I should hope not.” Bill lifted his chin, still staring at Fiddleford sceptically.

He could sense Stanford reading his body language, and reassessing where his paranoia was due. Bill needed to waver Ford’s trust to align with him, and not his college roommate. If he could win Stanford’s trust, even if Stanford remained sceptical that he truly was all knowing, the scientist would believe anything he’d say regardless, even if it meant turning on his friend.

“That’s not –“ Fiddleford began, bristling at the implication, but was interrupted by the phone ringing from the other room. Pausing to listen, Fiddleford blanched, before he pointed to the door. “That’s probably Pat again. I’ll go get it.”
Watching McGucket scamper away to answer the phone, Bill’s gold eyes followed him all the way out the door.

Ford walked over and pulled out a chair at the table, watching Bill suspiciously, setting the orange juice down, and chewing on more bologna.

“You don’t think he’s told anyone about the project, do you?” Ford watched Bill closely, his headache clearing somewhat now. “He wouldn’t jeopardise what we’re working on like that.”

“We’ll see.” Bill said simply.

“Fiddleford wouldn’t do that. Ruin everything we’ve worked for.” Ford said, possibly trying to reassure himself. “He’s not that kind of person. I don’t think he’s even capable of such a betrayal.”

“Sixer, a little cosmic nugget of wisdom from me to you.” Bill leaned across the table, grabbing Ford’s wrist conspiratorially. “People are always capable. Of anything. Especially the ones you least suspect.”

Ford dwelt on that for a moment, absorbing Bill’s words with an abstract sort of shock that distracted him, thinking on the implications.

“Let that be a warning to you, or motivational if you like. You could take it both ways if you’re entrepreneurial enough.” Bill shrugged and released Ford’s wrist.

While Ford was distracted, Bill snatched the bologna out of his hands and took a bite.

“Hey.” Ford complained, jolting out of his reverie.

“Trust no one.” Bill insisted, waving the bologna at Ford to prove a point, speaking with his mouth full. He swallowed, then placed his hand earnestly on his chest.

“No one but me, that is.”

Ford grimaced, watching his breakfast being devoured, but seemed to have sobered some when he responded.

“I’ll remember that.”

Rugged up in warm clothes, piled into Fiddleford’s truck, the rickety old motor shambled down the road, snow chains keeping the tires travel worthy as they drove along the beaten track leading into the forest.

Ford sat in the front passengers seat beside Fiddleford, who was driving them to the undisclosed mystery location where Stanford’s present was, and Bill was squeezed into the very small backseat of the truck, feeling cramped and somewhat ignored.

For a supposed present giving holiday, Bill had a decided lack of presents. All the presents seemed to be going to Sixer. First the gourd and now this.
“I won’t say it’s all that conventional a present, but I think you’ll be keen on it either way.” Fiddleford said over the roar of the engine. His truck was quite cantankerous, despite Fiddleford’s superior engineering skills. He preferred to maintain the engine’s original condition rather than tweak it to advance the engine’s technology. He felt it had more character like this.

“How much farther is it?” Ford questioned, raising his voice to be heard.

“Not too far now, and then we got a short walk. Not long to go.”

“When did you decide to hide this gift all the way in the forest? That doesn’t seem like you.” Ford pondered, giving Fiddleford a sideways glance.

Fiddleford’s apparent recalcitrance with re-entering the woods was something that Ford chalked up to his lingering trauma, but apparently it was hardly a hurdle for the other scientist when it came to planting a gift in the woods.

“Well, I – uh. Couldn’t exactly hide it in the shack.” Fiddleford replied evasively and left it at that.

The forest became too dense for Fiddleford’s truck, and so he parked it on the edge of the trail and gestured for Ford and Bill to follow him through the trees.

Securing his scarf to protect him from the winter’s chill, Ford followed Fiddleford through the snow-covered path, curious about this treasure hunt of a gift. Before he got too far, he felt a tug on his arm, and looked back to see Bill frowning.

“When did McGucket get the time to organise this mysterious present, is what I want to know? We’ve been watching him since he got back, he was supposed to be working on the portal.”

“Well, he must have multi-tasked.” Ford replied, looking for justifications that would allow him to maintain his cheerful optimism. This present was for him after all. “He’s entitled to a few pursuits of his own, and this present seems to be all in good faith. Just a little something to show his appreciation.”

“But what is it?” Bill persisted, trying to cast aspersion subtly on Fiddleford. “For a man who was traumatized in the woods here, he sure seems eager to drag us back in.”

“Why are you so suspicious?” Ford frowned at Bill, and continued to walk along the trail, seeing the back of Fiddleford’s jacket up ahead. “He’s trying to do something nice, and if this means he’s overcoming his fear of the forest, we should be encouraging him, not assuming he’s up to no good.”

“Sure, you can suspend your disbelief because it’s your present.” Bill replied snidely, quietly enough that Fiddleford couldn’t hear him. “But you saw him this morning. He’s hiding something. I don’t trust this.”

Ford paused, watching Bill for a moment, assessing his muse’s distrust, before he clapped Bill congenially on the shoulder.

“I think you’re taking your paranoia a little too seriously.” Ford scoffed in reply, not willing to believe his friend was up to no good. Shrugging Bill’s suspicion off, Ford looked forward to where Fiddleford was standing, gesturing to a particularly tall pine tree.

“Ta-da!” Fiddleford waggled his fingers at the tree with flourish. “Merry Non-Denominational Present Day!”
“You don’t have to keep saying non-denominational like that.” Ford insisted, before curiously looking the tree up and down. “Though it was very thoughtful of you to get me a … tree?”

Fiddleford laughed, and pulled out a length of rope from his coat pocket. “Sure, Stanford. I got you a tree in the middle of the forest.”

“Well, judging from its size it’s been here for much longer than you have, so I doubt you planted it on my honour or anything, but the sentiment is still appreciated.” Ford grinned at his friend amiably.

Looping the rope into a lasso, Fiddleford swung the rope around for a bit, until he hurled it up to snag on one of the branches. “Oh, I planted it alright. Put it here very specifically. You wait until you see this, Stanford, it’s right up your alley.”

Ford looked up the tree trunk, wondering if something was at the top, if they’d have to climb. F tuged on the rope and the branch angled down like a lever.

There was a succession of mechanical sounding clanks, and the snow seemed to drop away in a circle around the tree trunk, as the floor surrounding the tree sunk into the ground.

The tree continued to sink, submerging until it locked into its base in the earth, clicking into place. Several wooden beams shot out from the walls of the sunken earth, reinforced with metal splints to create a subterranean staircase spiralling around the tree trunk. Each plank on the staircase slotted out into place, and finally the base of the tree trunk slid open, like an automatic door, revealing an entrance to an underground lair.

Ford boggled at the sight of it, his surprise turning swiftly into giddy enthusiasm.

Fiddleford reached over the stairwell’s gap and knocked his knuckles against the tree. It thudded, sounding like hollow metal. “Touch wood you’ll like it.”

“Oh my.” Ford gushed, walking closer, peering down into the stairwell below. “I love it already. This is - What is it?”

“Well, remember how I mentioned building a bunker, back in the day. A safe place for you to conduct your experimentation on the creatures you encounter. This is that bunker.” Fiddleford declared proudly.

Ford seemed delighted, and walked closer to the tree trunk, extending his arm out, feeling the metal, peering down the staircase, examining everything with enthusiasm.

Bill stood back, his arms crossed, surveying the staircase with apprehension. He gave Fiddleford an assessing glance, and found the other scientist staring back at him, watching him steadily before turning back to Stanford.

“I built it with every precaution in mind.” Fiddleford continued explaining to Stanford, who seemed thrilled, and was already climbing down the staircase gamely. “Against the creatures you discover, against the gravitational anomalies you might encounter, why you could survive just about anything down here.”

“Fascinating.” Ford’s voice echoed, already midway down the stairwell. “You’ll have to show me the functionality, the blueprints. It’s astounding.”

Bill watched Fiddleford cautiously, uncertain if the scientist recalled what he was, if that memory ray had held up to scratch.
Fiddleford inclined his head, maintaining eye contact with Bill, and gestured for him to follow Ford down the staircase.

"After you."

Somewhat unnerved, Bill sustained his suspicion, reluctantly following Ford down the staircase, looking over his shoulder at Fiddleford.

The other scientist gave nothing away, traipsing down the stairwell after Bill, following them both down into the tree trunk door, then pressing a button on the wall that sealed the entrance behind them, casting them all into momentary darkness.

Fiddleford flipped another switch on the wall, and hanging lamps from the ceiling lit with an electric sounding buzz. As the lights flickered on they revealed a room, very much a stereotypical bunker right down to the metal panel on the wall reading ‘Fallout Shelter’.

Whatever Fiddleford had designed this bunker to prepare for, clearly he felt that preparing for the worst was prudent.

“Well, this is certainly effective.” Ford looked around the room, taking in the metal bedframe, the shelving units stocked with supplies several years in advance, the metal storage lockers and gas masks and other nuclear Armageddon paraphernalia. “Though potentially needless, if our portal goes off without a hitch.”

“We’re dealing with a nuclear-powered dimension ripping portal Ford. It don’t hurt to be cautious.” Fiddleford countered, leaning comfortably against the wall while Stanford peered into all the cupboards and boxes curiously. “In the interests of preparing for every eventuality I’ve got us supplies racked up all the way to 2070. Though by then I imagine you’d be sick of dried meats, vacuum sealed meals and tinned peaches.”

Ford looked up at the buzzing overhead lamp, taking in the various machinery stationed around the room.

“What’s powering this?” Ford pointed up to the lamp. “Or anything down here for that matter. It all seems to rely on machinery to maintain secrecy here, how do you propose one could hide away in here for a hundred years without electricity?”

“Hydro-electricity.” Fiddleford answered, walking over to one of the metal pipes that ran across the roof of the bunker, ending out in a water spout. “There’s a reservoir of water nearby that flows directly from the waterfall. With a little fine tuning I got that water to flow through a turbine I got hooked up here, and now not only does it power the bunker sustainably, I used it to modulate the cooling systems, to work the hydraulics, and built in an emergency dam breaker, so if an experiment goes wrong we can flood the caverns as a precaution. Everythin’s powered by water.”

“That’s very… thorough.” Ford remarked, watching the way Bill’s shoulders were tense, the way the muse was squinting at everything.

While Ford was marvelling at Fiddleford’s ingenuity Bill seemed to be becoming progressively more upset by it. Clearly Bill didn’t like the bunker, proving himself skittish against anything that might eventuate into experimentation on his person. Bill had made explicitly clear that he only tolerated experimenting from Stanford, and only in particular circumstances.

Despite his muse’s discomfort, Stanford was still thrilled with the bunker. It appealed to the sci-fi nerd in him, and already he felt like he’d be spending a lot of time down here, just for the novelty
of it all. He thought it was remarkable, like having a secret science lair, and while he believed the apocalypse planning was all completely unnecessary, the gas masks and historical weaponry and antique radar systems really tickled his fancy.

Still, if it was just this one room, Ford had the feeling it could get a little cramped in here. The shack was small enough, Bill, Fiddleford and himself all sharing the limited space there, occasionally butting heads simply due to proximity. If all three of them were to spend time down here regularly there wouldn’t be much room for successful experimentation. There had to be more than just this. F wouldn’t make such a fuss for just one room.

Looking around for more to explore, hoping for his estimation of Fiddleford’s imagination to be realised, Ford saw a porthole on one of the walls, sealed tight.

“And this leads to where, I wonder?” Ford questioned, already twisting the wheel sealing the porthole, wanting to know what was behind it.

“This you’re gonna like.” Fiddleford grinned, walking over to the porthole. “It’s the way into the lab. I hope you don’t mind crawlin’ though. It’s pretty narrow.”

Ford laughed, and twisted the wheel one last time, unlocking the porthole and swinging it open to reveal a small tunnel, just about large enough for someone on their hands and knees to crawl through.

“This feels like one of those children’s playgrounds. With the fancy equipment. One would almost think I was too old for this, but I feel like a kid again.” Ford made to crawl into the tunnel, his voice echoing in the dark. “You’ve really outdone yourself Fiddleford.”

Fiddleford chuckled, watching Ford go with a fond smile. He made to crawl into the tunnel, but then paused, looking back to where Bill was sceptically examining the inside of the weapons locker, the disdain in his expression evident.

“Aren’t you gonna come in?” Fiddleford asked Bill curiously.

“Where did you even get all this stuff?” Bill questioned Fiddleford, almost sounding impressed by the scientist’s ingenuity even though it was an evident slap in the face to his plans.

That’s what it was essentially, an insult. If there was a part of Fiddleford’s subconscious that remembered Bill’s plans for inviting his friends through the portal to create a new world order, building a bunker as a safeguard against it was as good as rebelling against Bill’s reign in advance. Judging from the weaponry stacked up in the closet, rebellion was just one of the safeguards Fiddleford had in mind when building the place, and Bill wouldn’t tolerate rebellion from one of his pocket scientists. Best to nip it in the bud.

Bill was beginning to wonder if Fiddleford was more trouble than he was worth.

“It’s easy enough to get supplies like this. People went wild for buildin’ bomb shelters after the Manhattan project. Most of the stuff in here is antique. Some of its more recent. Custom made.” Fiddleford knocked on the metal porthole opening with his knuckles. “But it all works. It’s all viable, in case the portal don’t work right.”

“What makes you think it won’t work?” Bill asked swiftly, turning his piercing yellow eyes onto F now, frowning slightly.

F pursed his lips and twiddled his thumbs, before looking for a diplomatic answer. He exhaled a deep breath, before he began explaining slowly.
“I’m not too sure how each piece of that alien technology that we borrowed functions, and there
are gaps, huge gaps in the blueprints that just rely on faith that the Hyperdrive will work as it
should. Somethin’ that we don’t know for sure, but the blueprints say that’s just how it works. We
haven’t had a chance to test it for ourselves. I’m not sayin’ that I’m not confident in the project,
mathematically it’s all entirely feasible. And I signed up to deliver results for this, so I’ll be
stickin’ this out all the way to the end.”

Fiddleford rubbed his elbow reflexively, a gesture he made more frequently now since the incident.
“But I’m no stranger to things goin’ wrong when you least expect it. I’d rather be prepared for the
worst, than be let down when the best don’t be there. Gotta be forearmed for this sort of
eventuality when you’re workin’ with physics defying science.”

Bill closed the weapons closet, and crossed his arms, looking Fiddleford up and down, still
suspicious of the other scientist’s motives. He could tell from F’s tone that he was trying to be
chipper about his explanation, and he was being friendly enough, but Bill knew all too well that
friendly didn’t mean safe. Whether or not he remembered what Bill truly was was still up for
debate.

“Well between the two of you, I’m sure you’ll have enough arms. Or you can borrow a few from in
there.” Bill jerked his chin at the metal locker and scrutinised the scrawny scientist, sizing him up.
In an equally friendly tone (though Bill’s friendly certainly didn’t mean safe) he questioned.
“How’s your aim?”

“It’s gettin’ better.” Fiddleford replied ambiguously, watching Bill as the being paced across the
bunker, his shoes ringing on the metal flooring.

“Good to know.” Bill replied in a light tone, pacing closer until he was standing a foot from
Fiddleford, staring him down.

Fiddleford tried not to be unnerved by the eye contact, chalking it up to just one of Bill’s many
eccentricities, despite the way his subconscious recoiled from the sight, wanting to stay calm, level.
He gestured to the tunnel with his good arm, and watched Bill closely.

“After you.”

Bill glared at Fiddleford suspiciously for a while longer, scrutinising every part of the scientist’s
face, searching for the gall to act against him, finding only confusion in Fiddleford’s features. Bill
made the effort to smile curtly at the scientist, hoping to put him at ease. Despite the friendly grin,
there was malice in his tone.

“How courteous.”

Fiddleford said nothing, and only gestured again for Bill to climb into the tunnel, so reluctantly Bill
did just that, cramming his human meatsac into the tiny tunnel, feeling remarkably vulnerable and
on edge.

Fiddleford crawled into the tunnel behind him and swung the porthole shut.

Up ahead, Ford had reached the end of the tunnel, and felt a similar porthole in front of him,
gripping the wheel to open the latch blindly in the dark.

“Do I twist to open it Fiddleford?” Ford called back, his voice echoing in the tunnel.

“Just give it a twist!” Fiddleford called back, not too far behind Ford.
Ford felt a hand grope around in the dark, grasping onto his leg and feeling his way up, until two hands rested on Ford’s rear and stayed there.

“Is that you Bill?” Ford couldn’t help but ask, a little awkwardly.

“Oh Sixer. I thought that was you. I’d know your face anywhere.” Bill sarcastically declared in a flat tone, still fondling Ford’s buttocks.

“Very funny.” Ford griped. “I thought you were Fiddleford.”

“Were you expecting your lab buddy to do this?” Bill snarked, and squeezed Sixer’s buttocks cheekily, eking out some entertainment amidst the tension.

Ford looked over his shoulder and saw Bill’s golden eyes glowing in the dark.

“Stop that.” Ford complained, and tried to smother a grin as he grumbled. “I can’t take you anywhere, can I?”

“Not anywhere outside this town, but who’s complaining.” Bill said sarcastically, examining his nails in the dark, absolutely complaining.

“You need help with the latch Stanford?” Fiddleford called out, now aware of the proverbial traffic jam by the exit.

“Uh, no, I’ve got it.” Ford replied, swiftly turning the wheel to open the porthole with one hand, swatting Bill’s hand off his rear with his other.

He swung the porthole open and climbed out into what seemed like a cubed antechamber. Holding his hand out to help Bill out of the tunnel, he obliquely noticed his muse’s sour mood, it was written all over Bill’s face. Thinking that Bill was upset with him, Ford lowered his voice.

“We can talk about the barrier later.” Ford told Bill quietly, as Fiddleford clambered out of the tunnel behind him. “For now, can’t you just focus on the lab? Fiddleford put a lot of effort into this.”

Bill raised his eyebrows at Stanford, before scoffing and crossing his arms abruptly. Ford frowned at Bill’s snippy response, but his muse turned his chin up at him, already looking away.

Fiddleford climbed out of the tunnel and righted himself, before looking at his colleagues, noticing the way that they were both turned away from one another stubbornly.

“Everything alright here?” F questioned cautiously.

With a flat expression, Bill glowered at the walls, sarcasm infusing his voice. “Just peachy.”

Shaking off Bill’s dismissal, Ford looked eagerly to F, trying to encourage his friend. “Can you explain this room? What’s its purpose?”

“Well this room’s the best part, in my opinion.” Fiddleford spoke, clapping Ford on the back as he walked into the centre of the room. Bill continued to sulk by the porthole, watching the two scientists caustically.

“I took my inspiration for this room from the Russian puzzle game Soviet Blocks, from back in college. And of course I borrowed a few parts from the spaceship. I figured, for a lab like this you’ll be wantin’ your research to be secure, both for the sake of the integrity of the study, and for
protecting the townsfolk from a specimen escaping. I’ve made it so there’s no gettin’ in or out of this lab without knowing the security code.”

Ford was looking at the shiny metal, stolen from the spacecraft, also recognising the symbols on the walls, though he didn’t know their meaning. F must have scrapped these parts before Ford could translate it.

“That’s quite effective. So the symbols form a sequencing code? Should I be writing this down?”

“Just watch this time,” Fiddleford grinned and stepped left, depressing a square tile on the floor bearing an alien symbol. A hexagon housing a circle with a triangle in the middle. The ignition. “I’ll show you how it’s done.”

The porthole behind them swung shut, nearly swiping Bill in the process, automatically sealing them in as the room shook. A loud alarm blared offensively, the symbols on the walls all glowing an angry red as the shaking galvanised the security room’s features.

Ford stumbled, looking around, mildly concerned as the individual square panels on the walls and ceiling began descending, sliding out slowly and insidiously as the reality of the security room began to dawn on Ford.

He could see Bill over by the entry porthole, pulling on the wheel persistently, trying to escape the way they came in, but the cubes pressing out from the wall quickly forced him away, Bill backing into the centre of the room.

“If you don’t know the code, this security system prevents a trespasser from getting in or out.” Fiddleford shouted over the alarm.

As the squares on the floor began to unsettle, protruding upwards, some cubes extending alongside each other with barely an inch of space between them, coming unerringly out into the middle of the room, Ford realised that whoever intruded upon this laboratory was sure to meet a grisly end. An undignified end too, as a corpse should never, in Ford’s opinion, resemble mashed potato.

“Isn’t this a little extreme?” Ford yelled, sidestepping one of the squares, forced towards the centre of the room. Despite their tiff earlier, forced together like this, Bill grabbed frantically onto Stanford’s arm, crowding close to the scientist.

“Can’t put a price on security.” Fiddleford replied, content to watch the cubes slide and slot into place, like an inverse cubic’s cube.

While Ford was staring at the protruding walls, Bill clung to Stanford’s arm, glaring angrily at the descending cubes, holding onto hope that Fiddleford’s affection for Stanford would spare the scientist (and Bill in turn) from becoming a nasty stain on the walls. He was still peeved at Stanford, or he’d keep that act up if it got him what he wanted, but he was relying on the assumption that McGucket wouldn’t kill Ford’s partner right in front of him.

He didn’t know what he’d do if his proximity plan failed. He wasn’t sure what would happen if he was destroyed while in this vessel. Sure, he could heal, but from being squashed like a berry, Bill didn’t know.

He pressed up close to Stanford, glued to the scientist. The gullible scientist actually thought that meant Bill was scared, and wrapped his hand around Bill’s comfortingly, trying to soothe him. Bill wasn’t scared, McGucket wouldn’t kill Stanford, therefore he wouldn’t kill Bill like this.

Unless this was some kind of murder-suicide.
He didn’t think McGucket had it in him.

He watched Fiddleford with wild eyes, his pulse thudding arrhythmically, cosmic brain leaping to all kinds of conclusions.

Perhaps he underestimated the other scientist, or underestimated his recovery. This sort of overkill wasn’t the sort of thing a healthy man would do, it was what a damaged scientist would do. That Gremloblin encounter had changed Fiddleford, whether he remembered it or not.

It had made him ruthless, and Bill only liked ruthless when it was coming from him. Or directed away from him. He didn’t like being the target of ruthless.

Ford noticed the way his muse was holding onto him, obviously frightened considering his vicelike grip, and realised that Ford’s faith that Fiddleford would deliver the security code in a timely fashion didn’t extend to Bill.

“The code, Fiddleford?” Ford questioned, watching F’s calm expression as he watched the metal panels slide out with intense satisfaction.

“I’m gettin’ there.” Fiddleford replied, content to snicker at Bill’s frantic reaction for a while longer.

Bill felt the walls closing in on this feeble human form of his, not ready to have his plans derailed so suddenly. If he died in this room he’d have no scientists, no portal, and no vessel. Irony saw fit to visit Bill with the unpleasant mental reminder, an image of a similar cage of his own devising, closing in on the shapeshifter grub as it tried to replicate Bill’s form.

He didn’t want to end up like that shapeshifter, a grisly smear and forgotten footnote of the history he aimed to achieve. He wasn’t in the market for that sort of ironic demise. He didn’t know if this form could regenerate that completely, despite how adept he was at healing it, and he realised as the walls closed in on him, that he didn’t want to die.

“Fiddleford!” Ford persisted, Bill practically cutting off the blood flow in his arm, clinging so desperately to him.

“I’m not going to die in here.” Bill muttered frantically, his tattoos and eyes glowing as he mustered power. “I don’t want to die like this.”

Ford could tell that Bill was working himself up to do something drastic, he could feel it in the thrum of power, energy building in the air around them. He felt like he was seconds away from having to hold Bill back, fearing for F’s safety in the face of his muse’s panic.

Knowing that Fiddleford wouldn’t endanger their lives, he appealed to F, hoping to stop the encroaching walls before Bill gave away his secret.

“Fiddleford, that’s enough. Please. The code.”

Laughing, Fiddleford wiped a mirthful tear from the corner of his eye before patting Stanford on the back. “Aww, shucks. Spoilin’ the fun. Alright, you’ve had enough.”

Reaching deftly through the encroaching cubes, Fiddleford seemed to have waited just long enough for the four symbols to align just right, climbing across the cubes to press each one of them in succession. The symbols glowed blue one by one.

Tugging on Stanford’s arm, Fiddleford gestured to the door on the other side of the room.
Triggering the security code didn’t seem to stop the squares, it just unlocked the door leading to the lab. The door unlocked with three separate mechanisms and swung wide open.

“Hop to it now! This way.” Fiddleford pulled Ford along, ducking his head to avoid the lower hanging cubes.

He jogged lightly over to the door, but was elbowed aside as Bill raced ahead to freedom, self-preservation kicking in, nearly hyperventilating from the stress of being at the mercy of the mad scientist.

Fiddleford sprinted the rest of the way to the door, tugging Stanford along behind him. The cubes were closing in, the path to the doorway getting narrower and narrower.

Panting in the lab, Bill, once safe, seemed to belatedly remember that Sixer was still in there, and spun around to watch the cubes close in on Sixer in horror.

Fiddleford came out of the door, and was pulling Ford along behind him, but it didn’t look like the scientist would make it.

Gripping his hands into fists at his side, Bill’s telekinetic field surrounded Ford’s body and yanked him the rest of the way out through the door. Sixer stumbled into the room just as the last cube compressed the air behind him, snagging fabric from the back of his trench coat.

“Made it, just in time.” Fiddleford remarked, clapping Ford on the back in a congratulatory way. “Now wasn’t that fun?”

“Oh yes, loads of fun.” Bill snapped sharply, scowling at Fiddleford with venom. “I love almost dying in a room full of Trilazzxian death cubes!”

“It was perfectly safe.” Fiddleford retorted. “You wouldn’t have died.”

Marching over to Stanford to protectively check the scientist over, tugging the back of his trench coat out of the tangle of cubes with a little more force than necessary, Bill put his hands on Ford’s shoulders, perhaps simply for the comforting reassurance that was feeling Ford’s unharmed body.

“He could have died. He was conveniently the last one out. How much fun is it for you to put his life at risk? Or all our lives for that matter?” Bill asked scathingly, intent to drive more nails in the coffin of Ford’s regard for his friend while he still could. “Oh, it was all just a bit of fun for you, but you risked us all for the sake of showing off!”

“Bill.” Ford attempted, trying to calm his muse down. He didn’t think Bill would get so vehement about his safety, but he remembered how furious Bill was when he almost died falling from the back of the Gremloblin and he had an ill-timed moment of ego where he realised he must be remarkably important to the God, and that made Ford somewhat smug.

“No one was at risk.” Fiddleford insisted. He seemed to be trying to explain himself, but every time he opened his mouth, Bill’s venomous words cut him off.

“Because being squashed by metal cubes isn’t life threatening? Because you didn’t mean to compress us all into a fine paste? You nearly killed him! What exactly were you planning here? To do away with us both and claim the portal for yourself?”

“No!” Fiddleford retorted, offended by the presumption.

“Don’t lie. It would have been awfully convenient for you.” Bill continued, striding up into
Fiddleford’s space and jabbing him with his pointer finger. “One elbow in the wrong place and suddenly the competition’s gone, Fiddleford McGucket is the man who changed the world, the portal’s all yours, and all it cost you was your best friend, and a little elbow grease to scrub him off the walls. I’m onto you.”

“You’ve got it all wrong.” Fiddleford shook his head, bringing his hand up defensively. “I would never do that.”

“It was a pretty close call from never back in there.” Bill pointed to the door, and glared at McGucket. “Of course, this was fun for you, nearly killing your friend. I’m sure you had a grand old time. After all, there was no risk.”

“There WAS no risk.” Fiddleford insisted, and held his other hand up, the hand holding a remote. “I built a backup for the security key, this remote.”

Fiddleford pressed the remote and the cubes began to reverse back into the walls.

“There was never any danger, I just wanted to give y’all a rush from this. To rile you up a little. I wasn’t tryin’ to kill you, I just wanted to make this fun for y’all. For Stanford. It was a present.”

“You nearly kill him, and you have the gall to—“

Bill’s tirade was cut off by Ford putting his hand on Bill’s shoulder, pulling him out of his defensive rage.

“Bill, it’s alright. I’m safe, we’re all safe.”

Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, and gestured to Fiddleford impatiently. “That isn’t the point –“

“Shhh.” Ford tugged Bill in for a one armed hug, pressing a placating kiss to his forehead. “It’s okay.”

Bill boggled for a moment at how stupid this genius really could be, if what he was getting from this scenario wasn’t that an attempt had been made on his life, but that no harm was done in the long run. Sixer clearly had no sense of self-preservation if he thought a kiss on the forehead would mollify Bill. Bill was frozen in shock.

“Fiddleford...”

Ford looked solemnly at Fiddleford for a moment, taking him in slowly, before he quirked a smile.

“It was quite fun.”

“Right!” Fiddleford’s grin matched Ford’s in that moment, the two scientists smiling goofily at one another.

“Like the booby-trap from Raiders of the Lost Ark.” Ford enthused.

“Or the dungeon levels from the limited-edition Triple D board game.”

“I loved the companion novels for that particular arc. You’d never expect it was the dwarf who had the key all along.”

“That twist was epic! Why, I remember when we first played that campaign.” Fiddleford grinned, nerding out with Stanford over D&D& more D while Bill stood dumbfounded by their collective stupidity.
“And you had Patricia DM. She kept trying to hint the answers for you.”

“Of course, I was oblivious.” Fiddleford laughed. “I thought she had somethin’ in her eye, the way she kept wakin’ at me.”

“And then she broke out the charades.”

“Oh, that was a good night, just rememberin’ brings me back.”

Ford grinned, and shook his head fondly. “Good times.”

“Good times.” Fiddleford echoed the sentiment, sticking his hands in his pockets, rocking back on his heels.

Shoving away from Ford, crossing his arms and stalking away, Bill despaired of his chosen scientists.

“You’re idiots! Nerdy idiots! I hate you both.”

He didn’t find his brush with mortality nearly as entertaining as the two scientists seemed to. It was vexing to see that their bond was deeper than the suspicion a near death incident could cultivate, but that just meant Bill had to try harder. He’d succeed with time and patience, but patience wasn’t Bill’s strong suit, and right now he just found everything vexing.

“You sure were spooked.” Fiddleford ribbed Bill congenially, somewhat smug that he’d managed to wring such a panicked reaction out of the assistant.

“I thought he was going to squeeze my arm off.” Ford remarked jokingly.

“All but elbowed me out of the way when the door done opened.”

Ford chuckled in amusement with his colleague, but realised when Bill’s hand clenched tight, constricting Ford’s scarf telekinetically, that poking fun at the God may not be such a brilliant idea.

Choking slightly, disguising it as a coughing fit, Ford’s laughter petered off, a more reluctantly apologetic expression gracing his features.

“I’m sorry. That – that wasn’t funny.” Ford gasped, and the constriction around his neck petered off.

“You were really scared, weren’t you?” Fiddleford pressed curiously, watching Bill’s scowl deepen.

“Threatening my life was your idea of a prank, forgive me if I’m not applauding your sense of humour.” Bill sneered, rather hypocritically. If this sort of prank were being conducted by Bill, he would find it hilarious, but being the butt of this joke had Bill rather sour about it.

“I didn’t mean no harm.” Fiddleford rubbed his elbow, speaking sincerely.

“Because you’re just harmless, aren’t you?” Bill sneered, crossing his arms.

“Alright, enough.” Ford pulled his scarf loose and stepped in between Bill and Fiddleford, giving Bill a chastising look. “You’re in such a mood today. I won’t have you two fighting over something so silly. We’re all fine, and it was just a joke, so perhaps now we can move on. Show me the rest of the lab, F.”
Bill jutted his chin out stubbornly, but said nothing.

Fiddleford sighed and rubbed his forehead, before he put his hands on his hips and looked around the lab.

“Alright then. This here’s the observation room. It’s soundproof, so feel free to say rude things about the creatures you capture, they can’t hear you in here. You got your monitors, control panels, you’ve got the intercom too. Temperature controls, automated locking systems, decontamination set up, you’ve got a few programs that run equations for potential chemical permutations, that interfaces with the lab equipment there if you ever need to work out makin’ any sort of antidote for any venoms you encounter.”

“I still have some of the Gremloblin spines we can analyse.” Ford mused, looking over the analytical equipment, eyeing off the beakers and centrifuges and glass doored refrigerators.

“Well, I’m sure the world could benefit from an antidote for that.” Fiddleford said, rubbing his arm. The cast had recently been removed but the ghost of the injury still lingered.

Turning to flick on the monitors, F pointed out the equipment further into the lab. “From the observation room you can look into the storage room, I figured you could put your specimens in there. It’s about an acre of solid bedrock in there reinforced with steel, there’s no way any specimens you put in there will be escapin’ anytime soon.”

Moving over to another part on the control panel, F pointed to a set of buttons. “This here controls the cooling system. A lot of what we’ve got set up down here runs from water, hydroelectricity, hydraulics, that gave me the idea for a way to preserve our specimens. See there, we’ve got several cryogenic tubes all hooked up to a liquid nitrogen based cooling chamber.”

“That’s quite ingenious actually.” Ford walked closer to peer at the monitors, curious about the cryogenics. “How much nitrogen is required for the cryogenic stasis?”

“Well, each cooling chamber holds about twenty gallons of liquid nitrogen solution, and we got five or six of them set up down there. I had to dip into the retainer you gave me to fund some of this stuff, liquid nitrogen ain’t cheap, but the temperature control apparatus really is phenomenal. You can use it to freeze specimens within twenty-four hours, you can link it up to the air conditioning if it gets too hot down here. Heck, you can use it for anything up to cryogenically freezing yourself in the event of some sort of paranormal catastrophe. That way you can defrost and emerge when all the trouble has passed, years ahead when robots rule the world.” F declared proudly.

“That seems like a rather extreme use.” Ford remarked, raising an eyebrow at his colleague.

“Well, you could just use it to make popsicles.” F shrugged. “I can see myself pullin’ out mom’s old family recipe for molasses popsicles. Had ‘em every summer.”

“Molasses isn’t a flavour.” Ford wrinkled his nose. “Honestly, sometimes I can’t fathom how your family lives.”

“You were just spoilt for choice up on that boardwalk, salt water taffy left and right for you Stanford.” F joked. “Us country folk gotta make do.”

“Well, I’d rather you didn’t.”

Pointing over to a full length metal closet, Fiddleford rested his hip against the control panel.
“I might get the urge in me to push you into that decontamination chamber the next time you feel like casting judgement on folks from Tennessee.” F smirked. “See if that don’t cool you off.”

Ford laughed, but then glanced appraisingly at the metal closet. “A decontamination chamber is a good idea though. We have no idea what sort of toxins or chemicals we could encounter studying the specimens we collect, and maintaining a sterile quarantine zone could be beneficial should we examine any creatures from different dimensions, in the interest of preserving Earth’s current ecosystem.”

“That’s what I figured. Besides, it don’t hurt to be too cautious.” Kicking off the control panel, F gestured to the decontamination chamber. “It’s a bit brisk in there but it only takes a few seconds. Did you want to go first, or –“

“I want to leave.”

Bill’s voice came abruptly from the other side of the observation room.

Ford had assumed that Bill was still sulking, paying him no mind, assuming this mood of his would pass. Ford might have been somewhat more dismissive of the God today than he would be on most days, but a nog-induced hangover would do that to a man.

“Y-you don’t want to stay an see the lab?” Fiddleford questioned timidly.

“I want to leave.” Bill repeated stubbornly, his arms crossed, scowling at the room. “Now. I want you to take me out of this hole in the ground, override all your killer cubes, and get me out of here.”

“Bill, there’s nothing to worry about.” Ford began, somewhat exasperated. “It’s just a quick walk around the storage room, and a brief shower. That’s all.”

He wasn’t exactly being the most understanding as to why Bill wouldn’t want to receive the grand tour of the facilities where F and Ford would be locking up creatures like him for study. Ford didn’t have the patience or foresight for that today.

“That’s all it is for you. You’re still on cloud nine thinking this whole lab came with a bow and your name on it.” Bill retorted crossly, feeling more like this lab was a base affront to him. “I don’t like it. I don’t want to be here. This isn’t what I signed up for. I want to be out of here and above ground.”

“Bill, would you just –“ Ford sighed, frustrated.

“I don’t want to hear it Sixer.” Bill interrupted him shrilly. “I want to leave.”

“Well, I don’t want to leave, we just got here. Besides, we haven’t even seen the main part of the lab yet.” Ford complained pettily, gesturing to the decontamination chamber. “Fiddleford worked very hard on this, and I’m going to stay.”


Fiddleford seemed startled, staring at his shoes, trying to stay out of Ford and Bill’s bickering.

“Oh, uh, me?” F looked up reluctantly. Bill strode over to F and grabbed his upper arm, yanking him towards the door.
“He can stay here and play in the mud if he wants to, like the Neanderthal he is.” Ford waved off Bill’s snide criticism, still tinkering with the motherboard, and Bill graciously flipped Stanford off before pulling Fiddleford’s arm. “You take me upstairs. Now.”

“Oh. Okay, uh – ahh!” Fiddleford was dragged out of the observation room by Bill, barely having the chance to look over his shoulder at Stanford, who seemed more than happy to ignore his partner’s retreat in favour of playing with the chemical calibration unit on the control panel.

Bill dragged F out through the security room, the cubes now stacked neatly back into the walls. Taking care not to step on anything with a symbol on it, Bill tiptoed them across the security room, and let go of F’s arm, leaving him to unlock the porthole for him.

Twisting it open, F looked sideways at Bill, who seemed to be working himself up into a temper.

Swinging the porthole ajar, F gestured to the tunnel, keen to leave Bill to his poor mood. “Can you take it from here or …?”

“You first. You’re coming with me.” Bill all but shoved F into the tunnel, and crouching small along the pipes as best he could, F resigned himself to crawling through the tunnel, Bill hot on his heels.

Climbing out into the main room of the bunker, F swung his arms awkwardly as Bill climbed out, still obviously seething. Attempting to look anywhere but at Stanford’s assistant, Fiddleford’s avoidance was cut short when Bill stormed up to him, poking him in the chest.

“What’s the big idea here, huh?”

“Listen, I don’t want to get involved.” Fiddleford put his hands up defensively, speaking in earnest. “I know you’re having a spat with Stanford right now. I -whatever’s going on between the two of you is none of my business. I’m just here to do my job.”

“I’m not mad at Sixer, I’m mad at you. That! That’s what I’m referring to. Your job.” Bill loomed over Fiddleford and poked him in the chest again. “How is any of this, building a pokey little tree house out in the woods, playing soviet blocks with life and death, freezing popsicles with hundred-dollar technology, how is that contributing towards finishing the portal on time? THAT is your job.”

“I’ve been working on the portal!!” Fiddleford retorted, somewhat taken aback that Bill’s sour mood didn’t seem to be levelled at Stanford at all. Somehow he was the one taking the brunt of Bill’s ire.

“You’ve gone and built an epic distraction, is what you’ve done, and Sixer’s down there lapping it up!” Bill waved his arms wide as he spoke, making a spectacle of his displeasure. “We have a schedule to maintain, and your job was to streamline that schedule and get everything done ahead of time! That’s what we agreed upon!”

The circumstances of that agreement were all rather foggy for F, but he knew that completing the portal quickly was of the utmost importance.

“I – I know that, I’m workin’ on the –“ F stuttered, trying to stand up for himself.

Bill’s yellow eyes slitted thin like needles and he stepped further into McGucket’s space, aiming to intimidate. “We had a deal. I don’t take kindly to deal-breakers. It was your job to keep the portal on track, and now this metal sandbox will lead us all deliriously off track, and it’s all your fault.”
“I made this FOR the portal!” F finally blurted his words out, before gesturing to the porthole they’d both crawled out of. “Nothing’s off track, I made this bunker so we could complete this portal faster. This will work.”

Bill blinked at Fiddleford, pausing his sinister demeanour to consider F for a second. Waving his hand at Fiddleford, Bill tilted his head.

“Explain.”

“I don’t –” Fiddleford huffed out a frustrated breath, before lowering his voice, leaning in conspiratorially into Bill’s space. “Look, you can’t tell anyone about this, especially not Stanford. I – I’ve hired laborers to help with the project.”

“Oh?” Bill blinked innocently, trying his best to act like he hadn’t heard this before. He was working on his poker face, and it was getting good enough to fool McGucket.

“There’s just no way we can complete construction with just the three of us, and I know Stanford believes this portal needs to remain a secret, but no one knows what we’re workin’ on, they’re just doin’ what we tell them to.” Fiddleford explained vaguely. “I’ve made sure they won’t remember the project, that they won’t connect the dots, but we still need them to get all that heavy liftin’ done, and I needed somewhere for Stanford to go while I let the construction workers down into the shack!”

“Oooh.” Bill repeated, a little more impressed this time. This bunker was a distraction, just not the kind Bill expected.

“I had laborers help complete the bunker, they did all the construction down here for me and I set them up with the blueprints for this place. I had this bunker in the works ever since I first saw that spaceship down in the valley. I – sure I may have gone a bit overboard with the security features, but you know what I’m like when I start inventing, I just can’t stop.” Fiddleford chuckled nervously, rubbing his elbow. “I’m hoping Stanford is happy enough to play around in the lab for a while, I mean, without a specimen to study, I’m sure he’ll get bored of it eventually, but I was really hoping you could help me with keeping him out of the shack while I get the scaffolding for the portal up and running.”

“You need my help?” Bill questioned, cycling right back around to unimpressed. “You want me to hole up with Sixer in the metal death cage down there? Pass.” Signing up to time in close proximity with Stanford in a state of the art lab was sure to be a disaster. Bill already had a hard enough time convincing Sixer not to analyse the grotesque liquids this body excreted when stimulated.

“Just for a short while. The portal’s more complicated than the bunker was to set up. I’ve gotta supervise while they rig up the generators to make sure nothin’ goes wrong.” Fiddleford pleaded. “There’s nothin’ unsafe about the bunker. I built it with every precaution. It’s even got fire alarms built into every room, you’ve got nothing to worry about.”

“More fire alarms. Goody.” Bill crossed his arms, suspecting Fiddleford’s subconscious may have catered these safeguards to counter Bill’s powers, or at least what F had seen of them.

“It’s perfectly safe.” F continued to argue. “I know it’s a little … claustrophobic for you.”

“Claustrophobic?” Bill repeated sceptically, raising his eyebrows at Fiddleford.

“Well, I mean, I shouldn’t have spooked you with the security room. It wasn’t the best first
impression of the place.” F rambled, trying to back track. “It really was just a joke. And I didn’t mean to scare you like that.”

“I wasn’t scared.” Bill said flatly, glaring at F.

“Well, then if you aren’t scared, why don’t you wanna be down here?” F questioned curiously.

Bill paused, searching for an answer that wouldn’t give away his inherent revulsion at the idea of spending time down in this weirdness dissection lab. Puffing his cheeks out, exhaling loudly, Bill lied.

“Alright, maybe it is claustrophobic down there.”

“I had a feeling you were claustrophobic.” Fiddleford nodded, as though this confirmed his suspicions. “You’re always talking to Stanford about being stifled.”

“Mmhmm.” Bill ambivalently agreed, looking up to the ceiling.

“I don’t want you to feel uncomfortable, but it’d just be for a few visits. Just while I supervise the main parts of the construction. Then I can be down here with Stanford and you can stay at the shack if you prefer.” F reasoned. “I just need a way to get Stanford out of the house. I don’t want him to know that there are construction workers involved. I’d prefer if he just stayed out of the way, rather than having to deal with him knowing.”

Bill had a pretty good idea of how Fiddleford would ‘deal with’ Ford knowing about the construction in the lab, and as he abhorred the thought of anyone tinkering with Stanford’s mind (anyone but him that was) he reluctantly realised that he’d have to agree to Spec’s idea, even if this entire bunker was an insult to his schemes.

“Alright, fine. I can keep Sixer out of the house for a while.” Bill conceded. Already Fiddleford was grinning and nodding, relieved that Bill agreed so easily. “But I’m not staying down here. I’ll leave that to you two nerds, since you seem to like it so much.”

“So, how else are you gonna distract Stanford while I’m workin’ up at the house?” Fiddleford asked Bill curiously. With the sly smirk Bill gave him in response, Fiddleford realised too late that he’d rather not know.

“Oh, don’t worry. I know exactly how to distract him.”

Ford felt a bead of sweat run down the back of his neck as he looked over to meet Bill’s gold glowing eyes. They lidded seductively, and a slow smile spread over Bill’s face, boding ill for Stanford.

“Again!”

Springing into action, Ford hurled himself out of the way of a flaming ball of fire, rolling through the snow and landing in a crouch. The tree behind him had a hole burnt right through it, and it smouldered menacingly, an unfriendly reminder of what slow reflexes could deliver.
“Again!” Bill called out, sitting comfortably on a fallen log, sending flaming projectile after flaming projectile hurtling across the clearing towards Ford.

Three fireballs advanced in quick procession, forcing Ford to spring upwards quickly, dodging the hazardous projectiles one by one, employing all sorts of acrobatic movements to avoid being singed.

Having unbound two more bricks for the muse as a ‘Christmas Gift’ (*You got a gourd and a tree, and what did I get?*) Ford realised in a belated sense that it was his own fault his muse was so damn dangerous.

Crouched down behind a boulder, Ford panted, and clenched his hands, his body sweating from the strenuous training, but his fingers chilled from planting in the snow as he completed his evasive manoeuvres. Poking his head up from behind the boulder he called out to Bill.

“Is it time for a break yet? My fingers are freezing.”

“Maybe don’t dodge so well, and they’ll warm right up.” Bill said smoothly, examining his nails, before he waved his hand, summoning more fireballs into existence. “Again!”

Gritting his teeth, Ford flung himself out from behind the boulder as the fiery missiles careened towards his hiding place. Ford limbo-ed backwards to avoid the next missile, and rolled through the snow to avoid the last missile, it sizzled the snow into water about a foot away from him. Picking himself up off the ground, brushing snow from his chin, Ford began to walk over to Bill, already over this little training exercise.

“We can’t do this all day, besides, you’ve had your fun. No more fireballs.”

“What was that?” Bill held his hand up to his ear facetiously. “More fireballs?”

“I said no – oh forget it.” Ford grumbled as he was forced to dodge the incoming missiles again, leaping through the forest, ducking and weaving behind trees to evade the supernatural missiles.

While Sixer dodged, Bill laid back on the tree trunk and picked dirt out from under his nails, educating his human. “If you ask politely for a break in a real firefight, you get burned. The whole point of this exercise is to prepare you for anything, at any time. You need to have reflexes sharper than a diamond, you need to be faster than what’s coming for you, and always ten steps ahead of the game. This doesn’t end until you make it end. It’s like a metaphor for life really.”

Crunching snow beneath his boots, Ford wiped his hand against his trousers, brushing ice away for a moment before yet another incoming fireball forced him into action.

“Well, how do I make it end?” Ford called out gruffly, as he spiralled away from the fireballs, that were now zigzagging across the clearing unpredictably. Ford picked up a plank of wood left by the lumberjacks and held it up like a weapon, batting the fireballs away from him.

“You turn the tables. You set your own terms.” Bill replied, sounding almost bored, recounting this lesson like he was speaking to an idiot. “You identify what’s giving you grief and you neutralise it. You carry the bigger gun. It’s simple stuff Sixer.”

“Well excuse me if I can’t –” Ford grunted and narrowly avoided a zigzagging fireball, patting embers off the sleeve of his shirt. “Shoot fireballs from my hands.”

“You don’t need to if you’re the smartest guy in the room.” Bill turned his head towards Sixer and smirked. “Which you’re not. But because this is a training exercise I’m going easy on you. You’re
creative, aren’t you IQ? Don’t tell me the genius can’t think his way out of this.”

Ford paused for a moment, considering that, before he began striding towards Bill.

This had Bill sitting upright, curious at what Sixer would do. He sent several more fireballs towards the scientist, just to make things difficult for him.

Ford crouched, dodged, and swerved with enough talent to send two of the fireballs crashing into one another. He picked his way across the field unerringly, despite the more frequent projectiles Bill sent his way now that Ford was actually making progress.

He ducked and weaved and lunged across the clearing until he grabbed Bill’s wrists in both hands, bearing down on the muse, crowding into Bill’s space. Sweat ran down Ford’s nose, and he breathed against Bill’s skin.

“This stops now.”

Bill beamed at Ford, impressed with his human’s moxy. Tapping gently on Ford’s shoulder, Bill pointed above them, where several burning fireballs were hovering, waiting, pointing directly at Ford.

“Are you sure about that?”

Ford leaned in to press a firm kiss to Bill’s lips.

Bill closed his eyes idly letting it happen, but despaired of his human if he thought something like romantic sentimentality would save him in a situation like this.

As Ford pulled away from Bill, the muse opened his eyes and looked coyly up at Sixer.

“You can’t make out with all your enemies.” Bill insisted. “Especially considering how many species don’t have lips for smooching out there.”

“I know.” Ford said smugly.

“Then –” Bill began, but stopped as he felt the firm press of metal against his side.

He looked down, and saw that Sixer had used the kiss as a distraction to reach for the laser gun Bill had beside him on the log for the next exercise. Bill hadn’t expected Sixer to turn a gun on him so soon, and he couldn’t help the thrill of excitement he felt as Ford poked the gun into Bill’s stomach more firmly.

Bill looked back up and his yellow eyes gleamed, Ford staring back at Bill, feeling superior and accomplished.

“I’m impressed.” Bill purred, leaning into the gun, stroking his hands along Sixer’s sweaty face.

“So does this mean we can take a break?” Ford asked smoothly, catching his breath.

“Well, there is just one small thing you’ve forgotten.” Bill cooed, curling his fingers through Sixer’s damp hair, grinning like the Cheshire cat. “If I really wanted to eradicate you, I could just reign fire down on the both of us, since you’re not fireproof.”

“You could.” Ford reasoned, noting that the fireballs were still hovering above them both. “Or, we could go to lunch at Greasy’s together and you could not, because you can’t pay for lunchtime pancakes with no money, and you’d miss me.”
“I’d miss you?” Bill scoffed, still somewhat taken in by Sixer’s confidence.

“You’d miss me terribly.” Ford murmured against Bill’s lips, pressing another confident kiss to his muse.

Bill allowed the kiss, then pulled back, looking briefly up at the hovering flames, before looking back at Sixer, tilting his head.

“How.”

Realising what was happening in a split second, Ford tsked, and flung himself away from Bill, as the fire rained down on top of him, showering the muse with heat. He fell back into the snow and watched as Bill kicked his legs, laughing. The log coped the brunt of the flames, their heat simply sliding off Bill’s form.

“Hahahahahah! Ahh, you’re ballsy Sixer, I’ll give you that.”

“And flammable.” Ford growled, picking himself up off the ground, his palms scuffed from falling so many times. “But you knew that.”

“And cute when you’re angry.” Bill sighed, and scooted off the tree trunk, getting to his feet cheerfully. “Maybe I would miss you.”

Ford scoffed, and stood up, dusting the dirt and snow off his clothes, picking bits of bark out of his palm. “But I’m sure your aim will get better in time.”

“Priceless.” Bill clapped his hand on Ford’s shoulder, then patted Sixer’s jacket down, trying to smother the embers. Shaking the lingering flames from his body, Bill pressed a kiss to Ford’s cheek. “Smart and funny. No wonder I’m keeping you. Good job with that last manoeuvre by the way Sixer. I think you’ve earned a break.”

“You just want pancakes at Greasy’s.” Ford grumbled, but leaned into the peck on the cheek, soaking up the praise regardless.

Pressing another kiss to Ford’s cheek, Bill nodded.

“And chilli fries.”

Holed into a booth at the end of Greasy’s Diner, Ford watched his muse tuck into a large bowl of chilli fries.

The incongruity of seeing Bill look like a normal human, scarfing down potato chips with chilli on his cheek, struck Ford considering he’d seen the muse drenched in fire not too long ago, cackling maniacally. In a sense, while being completely incongruous, the two images weren’t all that different.

Stacey walked up to their booth and placed Ford’s steak sandwich on the table in front of him.

“You’ve got a little something on your chin there sugar.” Stacey pointed out, and Ford rubbed his
“Oh. Thank you.” Ford remarked belatedly as Stacey walked away.

“What, one waitress wasn’t enough, now you’re going back for seconds?” Bill commented, his mouth full of chilli, staring Stanford down.

“I’m not going back for anything. Stacey was just being polite.” Ford retorted, wetting a napkin with his tongue and wiping the rest of the soot off his chin. “Besides, I think you’ll find I have my hands full at the moment, with a very petty God. I don’t have time for waitresses.”

“Good.” Bill said, sounding pleased, before reaching over to Stanford’s plate to steal one of the tomato slices from it, grabbing the mustard from the condiment rack, slathering yellow sauce onto the tomato slice.

Taking a bite of his sandwich, Ford chewed for a moment, before swallowing, making the point he’d been mulling on since this morning. “What is the likelihood, I mean statistically, that on the other side of that portal someone would fancy throwing fireballs at me? Someone other than you that is.”

“You’d be surprised. There are all sorts of short tempered creatures out there who shoot first and ask questions later.” Bill remarked, licking mustard off his fingers. “And it doesn’t help matters that you’re a human.”

“What does that have to do with anything?” Ford puzzled, taking another bite of his sandwich.

“Well, you’re not exactly popular, interdimensionally speaking.” Bill divulged, taking another tomato slice from Stanford’s plate. “A lot of creatures look down on humanity. You’ve got a bad rep.”

“Well, what have we done to deserve that rep, apart from, well, I mean slavery for one.” Ford listed, ticking off on his fingers. “The widespread air pollution from the Victorian era, unleashing atomic weapons on Hiroshima, the devastation of the rainforests, the eradication of endangered species, countless wars against vulnerable nations, the genocides, B-List alien movies can’t have helped much, not to mention how people reacted to War of the Worlds on the radio.”

“Nobody cares about that.” Bill waved his hand dismissively.

“Then why –“

“It’s because you’re all gullible.” Bill revealed, picking up a particularly cheesy chilli fry, stretching the cheese strand long and dangling it into his mouth. “And stupid. Underdeveloped sentient beings. You’ve barely figured out your ass from your elbow, and you’re trying to make contact with the great unknown. The great unknown doesn’t want to trade pleasantries with humanity.”

“That’s –“ Ford blustered, somewhat taken aback by this explanation. “But how did they –“

“You sent a golden record out into space, and they didn’t like your taste in music. So what?” Bill slurped up the string of cheese, before continuing. “So the cosmos didn’t like your mixtape, so what if they sent it back? Don’t take it personally, move on with your incredibly short lives. Don’t let it define you.”

“So you’re saying that the Voyager space craft has already made contact with aliens, and they didn’t like our music?” Ford squinted at Bill, not following his logic.
“They didn’t like your music long before then. You’ve carbon dated the Trilazxxian craft, cosmic life has known about your planet for a long long time. They just thought that chicken scratch you sent them was funny, that’s all.” Bill shrugged, and helped himself to another tomato slice. “Funny looking.”

“Carl Sagan helped pick out the sounds they placed on the Voyager record.” Ford said weakly, his hero’s taste trashed by cosmic beings he’d never met. “And the etchings included on the Pioneer craft were purposefully simple. To make them easy to understand.”

“Well it came across as patronising. Not that you humans would know any better.” Bill remarked with a mouthful of sliced tomato. “You have no manners.”

Ford grimaced at the sight of mangled tomato and mustard in Bill’s mouth while the muse talked with his mouth full, seeing the irony of this being lecturing him on the manners of his species.

“Lucky for you, you’re a protected species, so you were never supposed to know that aliens didn’t like your mix tape.”

“A protected species? What does that even mean?” Ford boggled, learning far more than he cared to in this moment, feeling mildly insulted.

“It means that until you reach peak sentience and wise up enough to join the interdimensional community, the Federation has put you on the protected species list so no one comes in to meddle with your development as a species before the requisite time.” Bill explained, spreading his hands out. “This entire galaxy, a no-go zone. Protected by the Federation until you reach your zenith.”

“And who’s to say when that is?” Stanford scoffed.

“According to Federation, in about five hundred years.” Bill drummed his fingers on the tabletop. “That’s your timeline for interdimensional integration. You aren’t enlightened enough until then, according to the Federation.”

“Well, why do they get to decide that?” Stanford asked indignantly, not liking being infantilised by a faceless Federation of interdimensional beings.

“Why indeed.” Bill wagged his finger at Ford, before he pointed to the relish on Ford’s plate. “Are you gonna eat that?”

Ford shook his head and let Bill pick from his plate, while he pieced information together. “So then, the time police you mentioned before.”

“Federation dogs.” Bill said dismissively, taking all the carrot out of Stanford’s sauerkraut and sprinkling it with pepper. “Of course, their leader has a ranking chair on the Federation’s board, along with a bunch of other party-pooping do-gooders. They set a bunch of rules, then think they govern the universe. Insulting.”

“Hold on. You said this entire galaxy was a no-go zone. Then why are you here? Or the Trilazxxians, or all the other evidence we have of alien life making contact on Earth?”

“Because rules were made to be broken, Sixer.” Bill said as if it was self-explanatory. “And you’re right, I’m not the first interdimensional being to drop on by. Space crafts have been abducting humans since you first evolved.”

“But I thought you said we are a protected species.”
“You are. Which also makes you a non-tradable good. Which is why so many of you get abducted anyway.” Bill raised his eyebrow at Sixer. “It’s like buying a tiger to display in Las Vegas, or keeping an endangered tree frog as a pet, or hunting the last dodos to extinction. You’re very rare in the interdimensional community, and that makes you very valuable. Which is why I’d rather you know how to stand up for yourself, because they’re going to want to walk all over you for what you are.”

“I see.” Ford said bluntly, coming to the depressing realisation that humanity were on an interdimensional conservation list, and his species, the one that tried so hard to reach enlightenment, that strived for the stars, was seen as a novelty, an ignorant novelty, short of its intellectual peak for another five hundred years.

“Of course, if you stick with me, that’ll give you some measure of protection.” Bill continued generously. “But I’d rather not baby you. Besides, it’d be hilarious to see you, the human everyone thinks is categorically inept, show them all up at their own game.”

“Why do you do this?” Ford asked Bill intently, watching him with some of that early wonder for his muse rekindled. “Grant enlightenment like this? Break the rules to let this happen? The portal, the books you’ve shown me, everything? Why?”

“Well, I don’t just do this for everyone.” Bill started, tapping pepper all over his plate. “Let’s just say, I know what it’s like to be written off. And how satisfying it is to prove them all wrong. You’ll see.”

Ford stared at Bill a little while longer, the awe dancing in his eyes as he uncovered more about his muse, before he reached across the table and grabbed Bill’s hand, stilling him as he attempted to garnish his whole plate with too much pepper.

“Why do all this for me? Fight so hard for me? Teach me how to hold my own? Why?”

Ford looked at Bill with a dogged persistence, a determination to get a proper answer from Bill. He’d been highly evasive when it came to admitting his feelings for Ford, but Stanford could tell they were there. His vehement reaction in the bunker, and back at Farmer Sprott’s barn when Stanford had endangered his life. His subtler indicators that he’d be ‘keeping’ Stanford around, the business card, the books he’d brought him, the way he was teaching Stanford to fend for himself. The way Bill sighed contentment into Ford’s mouth every time they kissed, and the way that, whenever they slept together, Ford always woke up entwined thoroughly in Bill’s possessive grasp.

The proofs that Ford had through Bill’s actions weren’t enough. He needed the words to go along with it. He had to know.

Bill met Ford’s determined eye-contact for a while, before he looked away, drumming his fingers on the tabletop again.

“So you don’t embarrass me when this portal goes live. Why else?”

“I think that you know why else.” Ford said softly, squeezing Bill’s hand, trying to get Bill to look at him. “Why you keep me around.”

“Don’t flatter yourself. Just because you’re not hideous to look at –“ Bill began.

“You don’t have to hide it. Not from me.” Ford continued. “It wouldn’t kill you to say it.”

“That I don’t find you despicable?” Bill scoffed. “Sure, I’ll say that more often if it’ll inflate your ego.”
“Bill.” Ford squeezed Bill’s hand again, his tone serious, trying to draw his muse’s gaze up from the tabletop. Bill reluctantly looked up at Sixer through his long eyelashes, and seemed conflicted.

“Even if you can’t say it, I appreciate it. All that you do for me. And are continuing to do. It means more to me than you can imagine.” Ford said, staring earnestly at Bill, making the muse squirm in his seat. “And I’d like to know in your own words why you chose me, why you’re continuing to choose me, why you’re fighting so hard to keep me around.”

Bill bit his bottom lip, before he put his hand over Sixer’s gently and admitted. “Because you’re mine.”

Ford looked at Bill desperately, waiting for more, but when it didn’t come he sighed, realising this was the best he was going to get. With a reassuring smile, Ford echoed the sentiment.

“And you’re mine. My perfect muse.”

Ford sat back against the booth chair, withdrawing his hand with one last gentle squeeze, before he went back to finishing his steak sandwich.

Bill watched Sixer, scrutinising him as he poked the last bit of sandwich into his mouth, chewing it. Bill hadn’t acknowledged Ford’s ‘you’re mine’ statement. He didn’t need to. Sixer could think what he wanted. Bill knew how it really was, though he applauded Sixer’s loyalty.

This awestruck romanticism was endearing, if a little saccharine, but Bill knew it could only last for so long. The portal was racing ahead to completion, and Bill felt this carefree time he had with Sixer slipping him away, already preparing him for life after the portal hit big. He had plans to keep Sixer as his own personal… well, pet was the wrong word, though Kryptos had no problems bandying that word around. That would be how the rest of the interdimensional community saw it. Bill didn’t know what to call it.

Bill wanted to preserve this bubble of serenity for as long as he could, but he knew that his desire to enjoy this, whatever it was, and his obligation to complete the portal didn’t align. He knew which one he’d have to choose. Eventually.

For now he had Sixer. He was Bill’s, he admitted to that, and wanted to admit to a lot more if Bill’s hunch was right. He just wanted to enjoy this, and keep Sixer for as long as he could, consequences be damned.

“Do you want dessert?” Ford asked Bill, looking across the table at the muse, who seemed to be lost in thought.

Snapping out of his reverie, Bill clicked his fingers impatiently, brightening up at the thought of dessert.

“Where’s the dessert menu?”

From the counter if one was listening, one could hear the brief scuffle between the two men, as Stanford tried to grab Bill’s arm, whispered words like ‘don’t click at her’ being hissed across the table.

Of course, no one was listening because everyone was invested in the latest gossip, delivered by Susan Wentworth.

“And he went down on one knee in her favourite part of the forest, snow dustin’ all over the trees like a fairy-tale, and he said to her ‘Willow Oakwood, I feel I’ve wasted the first twenty years of
my life not knowing you, because I intend to love you for my entire life, because you’re the best thing that happened to me’ – oh look at me, tearing up.” Suzie wiped the corner of her eye, still gushing over the whole romantic ordeal.

“Gosh that’s beautiful.” Stacey leaned on the countertop, smiling wistfully. “I wish someone said that to me.”

“And then he said, and apparently his voice started breakin’ here. Dan’s voice, can you imagine? And he said ‘I know things won’t be easy, and you don’t have to decide right away. But you know I’ve been tryin’ for you, and I’m gonna keep trying all my life. If you’ll let me.’ And oh my gosh, so he pulls out his grandmother’s ring, down on one knee in the snow. Don’t know how any woman could say no to that. And he says ‘Willow Oakwood, will you marry me?’”

The girls at the counter all shrieked excitedly, flapping their hands at one another, overwhelmed by the good news.

“And what did she say?” Stacey asked, leaning forward.

Suzie put her hand over her mouth, as if smothering the answer, before it burst out of her in an excited squeal. “She said yes!”

The girls all squealed, jumping around excitedly, and some of the men at the bar, lumberjacks mostly, cheered, and applauded.

“Woo! Go Dan!”

“Isn’t it romantic?” Suzie cooed, practically melting over the countertop.

“When’s the wedding?” Mrs Wentworth asked curiously, wiping clean a glass.

“Soon.” Suzie replied. “A few months I reckon.”

Looking over from their booth, Greg and Janice Valentino joined in the conversation.

“A few months would do it. A woman can always tell.” Janice tapped the side of her nose.

“Tell what?” Suzie asked, leaning across the counter.

“Why, she’s pregnant of course. You start showing around this time.”

“No!” Suzie gasped, seeming scandalised. “She never told me!”

“Well, when you have a bundle of joy of your own, you’ll be able to see the signs.” Janice replied, patting her rotund belly.

“Do you think it’s Dan’s?” Stacey asked conspiratorially.

“Of course it’s Dan’s!” Suzie replied, standing up for her friend’s loyalty.

“Do you think he knows?” Stacey pressed, looking for the juicy gossip. “Is that why he popped the question?”

“If he asked her to marry him just because she’s pregnant, Willow would definitely say no. She isn’t like that.” Suzie defended her friend stubbornly. “They’re getting married because they love each other. End of story.”
“Well that makes for a pretty boring story.” Stacey rolled her eyes, twirling a strand of hair around her fingers. “Hold on, I think they want me in the end booth.”

“Is that Stanford?” Suzie looked up enthusiastically. “I’ll go.”

“He’s with his boyfriend.” Stacey gave Suzie a pitying glance. “You don’t want to deal with the guy, he’s a difficult customer. Leaves a mess in his booth every time, like he doesn’t know how to eat like a person.”

“I’ll go!” Suzie repeated, grabbing the menu off Stacey, walking along down to the end of the train cart. “Hiya Stanford. Can I help you?”

“Hullo Suzie. Can we have the –“

“Can we get the dessert menu in here?” Bill interrupted Stanford, pointing his index finger down onto the tabletop. “And about six desserts. Six desserts for starters. Maybe more.”

“We are not getting six desserts. Bill –“ Stanford sighed, before turning to Suzie apologetically. “Just ignore him. The dessert menu will be fine.”

“Here you go.” Suzie passed the menu over and Bill snatched it up, unfolding it already.

“And how many pecans are in this pecan pie?” Bill looked up from the menu, regarding Suzie expectantly. “I need to know for reasons.”

“Oh, uh. I’m not … sure.” Suzie awkwardly scratched the back of her head, not knowing the answer.

“You don’t have to answer that. It’s fine.” Stanford assured her gently.

“Well if she doesn’t know what goes in her food, then what good is she? This is her job.” Bill declared stubbornly.

“Look, are you asking because you want the pie?” Ford asked Bill exasperatedly.

“I want the trifle.” Bill said.

“Then we’ll have the trifle.” Ford looked up to Suzie, his expression rather resigned.

“Two trifles!” Bill held up two fingers impatiently, and Ford sighed, before nodding his assent to Suzie.

She scribbled their order down.

“Are you sure I can’t get you anything else?” She asked.

“Leave it with me, I’ll have four more orders ready for you in a minute.” Bill held a finger up to Suzie dismissively, looking over the menu.

“No.” Ford snatched the menu out of Bill’s grasp and passed it back over to Suzie. “He won’t. Thank you Suzie.”

Suzie was tempted to linger, to let Stanford in on the gossip about Dan’s proposal, but already the two men seemed engrossed in one another, bickering flirtatiously and ignoring Suzie in favour of their banter.
“Have I told you lately that you’re no fun Sixer?”
“I find myself adrift without your daily reminder.”
“You’d be lost without me, admit it.”
“Well, I wouldn’t go that far.”
“Wouldn’t you?”

Suzie stepped back, away from their flirtatious bickering, to the realisation that all around her people were coupling up, falling in love, getting married, having babies. Despite being happy for her friends, it made her feel quite alone. Almost unlovable.

Swallowing her feelings, Suzie spun on her heel, to deliver their order to the kitchen.

Sometimes, it was best not to think about silly things like falling in love.

Bill was laying back on his bed, resting his eyes, preparing to enter the mindscape. Fiddleford’s construction workers had been making good progress on the portal, but a muddy shoeprint left at the elevator’s entrance had Sixer asking a few too many questions.

It wasn’t Bill’s job to cover McGucket’s ass, so he left him to it, intending to get a little business done of his own, but apparently McGucket didn’t get the message a closed door was meant to convey.

Bill’s bedroom door slammed open, swiftly followed by a nervous rambling Fiddleford McGucket.

“I can’t keep this up. Stanford’s already askin’ questions. I don’t – I don’t know –“

Bill opened his eyes and glared at Fiddleford, frustrated. The scientist seemed to have barged in just to anxiously monologue.

“Do you have the wrong room?” Bill asked angrily.

“You’ve gotta help me.” Fiddleford looked at Bill expectantly and wrung his hands. “You said you’d keep Ford out of the house, but I can’t keep everything under wraps when he’s comin’ back here every night. It just isn’t possible. First the footprint, then the food missing from the fridge. He doesn’t believe I ate it, he don’t think I can eat that much.”

“Well, then put on some weight and maybe he’ll believe you.” Bill said dismissively and rolled over, turning his back to the scientist.

“That’s not –“ Fiddleford huffed, frustrated. “That’s not the point. You were supposed to be distracting him and you’re not doing a very good job.”

“Excuse me?” Bill’s eyes snapped open, and he glared at McGucket again.

“Just because you take him out of a daytime, that don’t mean that job ends when you get home.
You gotta … you gotta keep him distracted. Stick with him. Don’t let him look for evidence that someone else is up in here. Don’t be leavin’ him alone down there. Not for a second!” Fiddleford blustered.

“He wouldn’t be suspicious if you hadn’t been sloppy, and it’s not my job to babysit him, he’s a grown man. Don’t inflict me on him twenty four seven, you’re supposed to be pulling your weight too.”

“I’m tryin’.” Fiddleford bemoaned. “I’m tryin’, but he don’t believe me. He’s gettin’ suspicious, he don’t trust me like he trusts you. He’s askin’ too many questions, and I’m not that good at lyin’.”

Bill smothered a smirk at that. His plan was working.

“Well, if you gave him answers that weren’t absolutely transparent, maybe he’d believe you.” Bill raised his eyebrows smugly at McGucket, and gestured to the man. “But you’re a blithering stuttering wreck. Nothing about you seems trustworthy, hell, even I’d be suspicious.”

“I’ve got no other choice. He’s askin’ me too many questions.” Fiddleford paced fretfully, working himself up to his decision. “I’ve got to – I’ve got to – there’s no other choice, I’ve got to erase his memory of ever seein’ that footprint.”

“NO.” Bill sat up swiftly and pointed at McGucket, the threat alive in his eyes. “I’ve told you NO meddling with Sixer’s brain. Not at all. You keep your greasy hands out of what’s mine.”

“But he’s gettin’ too close to findin’ out. I don’t know what else to do – I don’t –" Bill pinched the bridge of his nose and rubbed his forehead before exhaling an exasperated sigh.

“Fine. I’ll find you a better distraction. But I’m not doing all the work this time! You have to pull your weight and put your trigger finger away. Leave Sixer’s mind alone, and I’ll make sure he’s got better things to do than stay in the shack and study footprints on the floor.”

“You will!” Fiddleford’s face lit up with relief. “Thank you, thank you.”

“Thinks he’s Sherlock Holmes all of a sudden.” Bill rubbed his hand down the rest of his face, tired, before he looked up at McGucket, his expression unimpressed. “Well, are you just going to stand around in my bedroom all night, or are you going to go do something useful? Away from me preferably. I was trying to catch a little shut eye.”

“Oh.” Fiddleford realised obliquely. “I’m sorry. I didn’t realise. I’ll just, uh, leave you be then.”

“You do that.” Bill reclined back against the pillows and closed his eyes, wincing one open to watch McGucket’s retreat. “And shut the door on your way out. Maybe study what a closed door generally means.”

“Sorry.” McGucket whispered, and closed the door softly, before turning around in the hallway to see Ford coming up the stairs.

Stanford paused, and gave Fiddleford a discerning look, seeing his hand on the doorknob to Bill’s room.

“What are you doing?” Ford asked shrewdly.

“Oh, uh.” Fiddleford sweated nervously, before he came up with a plausible lie. “I wanted to ask Bill if he knew anything about the missing food, but he was sleepin’ so I left him be.”
“Oh.” Ford walked along the corridor, and peered into Bill’s room, the door still slightly ajar.

Bill turned around crossly in his pillow laden bed and flipped Ford and Fiddleford a rude gesture.

“Maybe it’s best to let him rest.” Ford closed the door completely, clicking it shut. “It’s been a long day.”

“Sure has.” Fiddleford turned and walked over to the stairs, heading up to the attic. He paused to wave at Stanford. “Goodnight Stanford.”

“Goodnight Fiddleford.” Ford replied cautiously, before walking into his own bedroom, closing the door.

Crunching along the thawing trail to the bunker in the woods, Bill paused and pulled out a little something he’d been keeping for a special occasion from storage in the Quadrangle.

Pausing to hide it behind a bush, Bill stopped on the track and pointed to the large blue egg peering out of the foliage.

“Hey Sixer, come take a look at this.”

Ford and Fiddleford stopped their hike, and doubled back through the trail to ogle into the bush at the rather large egg.

Stanford gasped, and crouched down to examine the egg, pulling it out of the bushes.

“Does it look edible? I think it looks edible.” Bill remarked flippantly, knowing exactly what to say to cultivate Sixer’s protective urges.

“Stop that. You’ve just had lunch. It’s not a meal.” Ford held the egg close to his chest, before he pulled back to pour over its details, holding it up to the light. “I’ve never seen an egg like this before.”

“What do you think it is?” Fiddleford asked, giving Bill a suspicious glance.

Ford smiled triumphantly and held the egg aloft.

“I think … it’s a specimen!”

Chapter End Notes

I got all teary writing Dan’s proposal. I’m a sucker for romance. I was so excited too when I found out Carl Sagan picked the sounds included on the Voyager record, Ford's turtleneck hero.
I split the chapter in half so I can dedicate more time to Shifty. That's something fun to look forward to. After Shifty's chapter, things are winding up and the portal is almost ready. It's almost showtime.

This chapter I'm dedicating to VagabondDiesel who discovered this fic recently and has really inspired me with the comments they left. Thank you for reading and re-reading bud! I really appreciate it!

P.S recently I got several artworks commissioned from this fic from sovonight, dobermutt, durchinmultiverse, and ghost-chicky and they're all awesome.

If ppl want to see them check them out here http://f-imaginings.tumblr.com/tagged/keeping+me+knowing+you/

Also if any readers are artists and they'd like to draw something from this fic and take commissions, message me on tumblr, I'd love to support artists in the fandom, and I'm always inspired by art from this fic!

Thank you as always! Next chapter has some Shifty business involved, on many counts.
“Now now, don’t be sad. It’s just a tiny little prick, and then you can have some beans after! Some yummy beans. Wouldn’t you like that?”

“Stanford.” Fiddleford stood behind Stanford with his arms crossed, watching disapprovingly as Ford babied the unholy creature that was currently imitating a dog, wagging its tail at the scientist.

“Almost over. Almost.” Ford withdrew the syringe from the pet crate, and passed it back over to Fiddleford, who sighed and took the syringe, putting it on the counter top.

“Who’s a good Shifty? Who is? It’s you! Yes it’s you.”

The shapeshifter wagged its tail eagerly and barked twice at Ford, disguised as a happy little Pomeranian. Despite its adorable current form, Fiddleford was still suspicious of the creature, and he felt that Ford was being far too indulgent with it.

“Now who wants some beans?”

“Stanford, you’re babying it.” Fiddleford tutted as Ford reached for the can opener and spoon, doling out F’s favourite brand of beans to the alien creature, crouched beside the crate. “It’s not a pet, it’s a specimen. You’re here to study it.”

“I know.” Ford replied, spooning out the beans for the shifter, watching its form change, reverting to the translucent grub it’s DNA seemed to prefer. It’s pincer-like teeth clacked together, and the grub hoovered up the beans as quickly as they were doled out, ravenous for them. “But he was scared. No creature likes getting a shot. I’m just trying to make it less scary for him. More fun.”

“It’s here to be studied, not have fun.” F put his hands on his hips, curling his lip at the way the shapeshifter gobbled up the beans on the spoon and clacked its teeth on the metal.

“Well, I’m not going to traumatise the poor thing.” Stanford argued, spooning out more beans from the tin. “I’m rewarding him for good behaviour.”

“You’re spoilin’ it.”

“I don’t understand how you, a father with a son, could be so cruel to a creature like this.” Stanford said, half teasing Fiddleford, half serious. “It doesn’t hurt to treat him with kindness.”

“Firstly, don’t you go comparin’ my son Tate to that thing there. Bein’ a father is completely different from havin’ a pet alien. Secondly, you’ll have to forgive me for bein’ unsentimental about livestock. Growin’ up on a farm will do that to you.” F scoffed and paced away to put the syringe in the slot for the analytics machine, closing the flap and locking it in place.

Doling the last of the beans into the bottom of Shifty’s crate and patting the shifter sweetly on the head, Ford locked the crate and stood up, walking over to the decontamination chamber that led to the observation room. He pulled the fabric face mask off his face and pressed the button for the showers, following F through to the main part of the lab.

“Here I thought I could foist most of the caretaking duties off onto you, and your fatherly ways. I
can almost picture you feeding little Shifty, burping him, and singing him to sleep. One of your Southern lullabies.”

F glared at Ford while the showers blew hot air into their faces, drying them off, then allowing them to proceed into the observation room.

“Oh, you’d like that wouldn’t you. Nothin’s stopping me from bringing my banjo down here.”


“You made up that rule.” Fiddleford contested.

“Ah, but Bill co-signed it, which makes that a standard rule by majority voting.” Ford smugly replied, settling down on one of the chairs by the control panel, spinning around on it.

“What’s Bill doin’ co-signing off on lab rules. He’s never down here.” Fiddleford complained grumpily as he flicked the switches that turned on the DNA analysis program he’d set into the lab’s computers. “And he always sides with you anyway.”

“Yes, well maybe that’s because I’m always right.” Ford grinned cheekily, and reached for the output readings that printed while the syringe of Shifty’s DNA was analysed.

“That’s not why. He’s rubbing off on you.” Fiddleford wagged his finger at Stanford chidingly. “The Stanford I knew in college was never this annoying.”

“That’s not what you said at the Backupsmore D&D& more D championships.” Ford spun around on the chair again, feeling light hearted and carefree.

“Because you were unbearable during the whole campaign!” Fiddleford blustered and pointed to Ford. “You kept undermining my DM-ing in front of the whole campus board.”

“No I wasn’t, I was just playing competitively.” Ford countered, clapping his hands on his thighs. “We were in the finals.”

“God, that feels like such a long time ago.” Fiddleford sat in his own rolling chair, and looked up to the ceiling of the lab. “Look at us now.”

“Uncovering the secrets of shapeshifting DNA in an underground lab.” Ford said gleefully, tearing the paper off from the printer, reading through it.

“And buildin’ an interdimensional portal. We sure stepped up, didn’t we?” Fiddleford sighed, and looked at the monitors, watching Shifty rattle the bars of his crate, cantankerous as ever.

“I’d say.” Ford ran his finger over the page as he read the results of the DNA testing. “Look at this, this is fascinating. It seems Shifty can replicate another creature’s form right down to its DNA when he shapeshifts. At a molecular level, the change is there.”

“Huh.” Fiddleford rolled his chair over to look at the print out, rubbing his chin. “That’s – unnerving.”

“Incredible is more like it. Imagine showing Shifty a photo of an extinct species? Or an endangered one? That could be a fantastic way to replicate DNA samples or even possibly reverse engineer creatures humans have hunted to extinction and give them a second lease at life.”

Fiddleford nodded, and then frowned, drumming his fingers on his leg as his knee started to
bounce fretfully.

“Listen, Stanford, about the shapeshifter –“

“Shifty.” Ford corrected Fiddleford absently, still pouring through the information on the print out.

“You can’t be namin’ the thing. It’s not a pet Stanford, it’s a specimen, and we’re only keepin’ it around to use it to test out the cryo-tubes. You can’t get attached to it.”

“Well, I can’t very well go around calling him Experiment 210 all the time, it’s such a mouthful.” Ford replied, deliberately ignoring the point Fiddleford was trying to make. “I wonder if we can pinpoint the section of DNA that allows Shifty to change shape, or if that’s something innate in a more cosmic way. Scientifically there’s got to be a basis for it.”

Fiddleford groaned, and ran his hands through his hair, muttering. “Or just ignore me. Like I’m talkin’ to myself sometimes.”

In the corner of the lab, a device about the size of a cinderblock began ringing – Fiddleford’s preliminary template for a cellular phone.

“Who’s callin’? F spun his chair around, looking at the ringing device.

Springing up from his chair, Ford went to pick it up, eagerness written all over his face. “It’s probably Bill. I’ll get it.”

Whether Ford was excited by the novelty of using the cell-phone or if he was simply excited to hear from Bill, it wasn’t certain. The scientist seemed brighter and happier with a new specimen to study.

Picking up the cellular phone and pressing the answer button, Ford held the phone close to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Chhhr – Hello, I’m conducting a survey for Hands Illustrated, how many hands are you currently in possession of?”

“Bill?” Ford presumed, obliquely recognising his muse’s voice beneath the crackle of the reception and presumably Bill’s own hand distorting the sound through the receiver.

“Okay, but how many fingers?”

“Twelve.” Ford sighed, shaking his head with amusement. “Don’t tell me you’re calling because you’re bored again. These calls cost money, especially to the cellular.”

“Hands Illustrated makes plenty of money, we can afford it. How would you feel about modelling for the centrefold?”

“I’ll pass.” Ford chuckled, imagining the muse reclining on the couch in the living room, twirling the phone cord around his slender fingers. It was a tempting image. “You know, if you’re bored you can always come down here, there’s plenty to do in the lab.”

“I’ll pass.” Bill parroted back.

“You haven’t even met Shifty yet. He’s growing with remarkable rapidity, I feel like only last week he was still just an egg.”
“And the world liked him better that way.” There was a crunching sound that led Ford to believe Bill was eating while on call.

“What are you eating?” Ford asked, while Fiddleford glared at him, picking up the papers the printer was spitting out, having to go over them by himself while Stanford was making small-talk with his boyfriend.

“It’s either celery or a very green carrot.” There was another crunch and Bill continued talking. “There’s no food in the house, you should come back here and cook for me.”

“What happened to the casserole I left you in the fridge?”

“All gone.” Bill sang cheerfully.

“There should be some pasta in the Tupperware.”

“Gone.” Bill replied swiftly. It almost sounded like he was picking his teeth.

“What about the bread and butter pudding?”

“Gone, gone, gone.”

“You have the most insatiable appetite I’ve ever encountered. I swear.” Ford marvelled fondly.

“I turned on something called the Julia Childs cooking show, but so far I have yet to see her eat a single infant. Not one.” Bill sounded disappointed. “And now I’m hungry again.”

“Well, a decided lack of eating children will do that to you.” Ford joked, drawing a peculiar glance from Fiddleford.

“So what would you call finger number six, or would you have to rename both middle fingers since technically there’s no true middle finger. How do you index the index fingers?”

“I thought we were talking about your food situation.”

“Don’t change the topic Sixer, I’m conducting a survey.”

Ford chuckled and paced around, holding the oversized cellular phone to his ear. The lab was small and the phone’s speakers made it very clear what the person on the other side of the line was saying. Fiddleford rolled his eyes, stacking the papers in order while Bill and Stanford transparently flirted in their own strange way.

“Stanford, the papers.” Fiddleford reminded him, and Ford waved at him idly, acknowledging that he’d heard him.

“I’m declining to answer.” He said into the phone, obviously amused.

“Then you’re vetoing your right to name them. I’m naming them now.” Bill sounded gleeful on the other end of the line.

“No you’re not.” Ford cut Bill’s sinister plans short. “I don’t want to know what devious names you’d come up with.”

“I’m naming them all Bill 1 through 6. Left and right.” Bill paused, then clacked his tongue. “No, that’s not creative enough. Let me get back to you.”
“Stanford?” Fiddleford pressed, not keen to play the unwitting third wheel to this phone call.

“I might have to get back to you.” Ford sighed, and reluctantly looked over to the papers piling up on the counter. “We’ve got a fair bit to do here, we might not be back til late. Might even have to stay the night again.”

“No! Sixer!” Bill pouted, obviously disappointed. “Four nights in a row?”

“We need to observe Shifty’s development.” Ford argued.

“You’re robbing me of quality Sixer time. Over a grub that doesn’t even have the decency to embrace it’s disgusting true form.”

“We’re at a pivotal stage of Shifty’s development, we can’t just leave him to his own devices. Not now, he’d think we’d abandoned him.” Ford reasoned. “He’s just beginning to trust us.”

“What about me? You’re abandoning me!” Bill insisted, a little manipulatively.

“You can always come down here, there’s nothing stopping you.” Ford replied. “Not now, especially.”

“I’m not teleporting to your beck and call.” Bill said grumpily, and Stanford put his hand over the phone’s speaker, shielding Bill’s secret from F. Those last bricks unbound in the forest unlocked more cosmic powers for the muse, though Stanford had yet to see them all in practise considering his attention had been so diverted by the shifter.

“If anything, you should be coming to me.”

“Yes, well, I’m quite busy.” Ford said lightly.

“You get one more night.” Bill said definitively. “Then you’re coming home. Leave McGucket to mind the grub, or stick him in the cryotube, he’d never know you left.”

“The grub or Fiddleford?” Ford questioned wryly, as F was now nudging him with his foot, trying to get him to disengage from the phone call.

“Why Sixer, what a novel idea.” Bill’s Cheshire grin was audible. “Didn’t know you had it in you.”

“Stanford.” Fiddleford repeated, most unimpressed.

“I’m joking, I’m joking.” Ford assured him. Turning back to the call, Ford held the phone in his left hand and made some notes in his journal with his right. “I can see about wrapping things up here, and I’ll be back home tomorrow morning.”

“I’ll hold you to that.” Bill’s voice came from the other end of the line, clipped and determined.

“Or around lunchtime, perhaps, depending on how Shifty adjusts.” Ford made an adjustment to one of his notes on Shifty, before he heard Bill’s voice ring out sharp and cranky by his ear.

“No, tomorrow morning. No more evading me.”

“That’s not what I’m doing, but if it will make you happy, I’ll be there bright and early tomorrow morning.” Ford said in a pacifying tone, continuing to jot down notes in his journal. “I’ll even make you breakfast, how does that sound?”
“Better.” Bill said, sounding vaguely mollified.

Fiddleford was outright kicking Ford’s ankle now, and, shaking his ankle out, Ford continued.

“No, now I really do have to –”

“Hold on Sixer, I’ve got Hands Magazine on the other line. Can’t talk. Gotta go. BYE!”

Ford blinked and stared at the cellular phone as the dial tone beeped rudely back at him, Bill taking the initiative to hang up on Stanford before the scientist could brush him off.

Ford ogled the cell for a few seconds longer, offended, before he allowed his own private amusement to set in.

“Stanford.” Fiddleford repeated impatiently. “If you’d stop smilin’ at the phone, you really need to see this.”

F was pointing at the monitor, where Shifty’s cage was jostling around, sharp spikes of metal sticking out from the crate’s confines. It seemed Shifty had copied the form of the syringe, and was eager to get out.

“Oh dear.”

Putting down the phone, Stanford rushed back into the lab, Fiddleford following him with a spritzer bottle of ‘monster sedative’ in hand.

“Shifty! Shifty calm down!”

“Stanford look out!”

“Ack! Watch your fingers Fiddleford. How about some more beans? Who likes beans?”

Fiddleford despaired of his circumstances, as Shifty reverted back into the hungry grub he was, snapping his jaws and rocking the cage back and forth.

“God help us.”

Rolling around on the couch, a pillow held over his face to drown out the clamour of the builders downstairs, Bill attempted to sleep, visiting the mindscape.

The Quadrangle was busy. Those few applicants who proved their loyalty during the auction seemed to be moving into the incomprehensible escher-scape, preparing for the big day.

Doing his best to avoid the crowds, Bill shrunk his form down, navigating the packed corridors as a yellow speck, until he grew large enough to slink his hand out long, tapping Keyhole on the shoulder.

“Whossat? Oh, uh, Boss?” Keyhole squinted at Bill, who was about the size of a snowflake right now.
“Keyhole, meet me in the anti-anti-gravity chamber.” Bill whispered. “Don’t tell anyone you’re meeting with me. Be subtle.”

“Why are we whispering?” Keyhole stage whispered back at Bill.

“Just meet me in the chamber.” Bill smacked his forehead, despairing of Keyhole, before he teleported into subspace, reappearing on the landing that led to the anti-anti-gravity chamber.

Floating along the corridor, Bill heard the clack of heels before he looked up, a lack of immediate spacial awareness informing him that Pyronica was walking along, her flaming boots nearly squashing Bill’s minuscule form.

Winding his arm long like a snake, he twined it around Pyronica’s leg, halting her gait.

“Uh uh uh.” Bill tsked at her.

“Bill, is that you?” Pyronica asked loudly, her big mouth drawing the attention of nearly all the fresh applicants gathered downstairs.

“Bill?”

“Is Bill Cipher here?”

“Hey, I need to talk to him!”

Came the clamour from downstairs.

Looking down to where Bill was frantically waving his arms, holding his finger over his eye like he was shooshing her, Pyronica winced, and awkwardly looked down at the gathered monsters and mobsters.

“Oh, uh, no. I – I just say that when I stub my toe.” Pyronica giggled in a ditzy tone, hoping they’d believe the act. She flipped her hair back and batted her eyelashes at the crowd. “OW, hahah, oh Bill!”

The mobsters guffawed, and waved their hands at Pyronica.

“Aww, haha, the Dame got me.”

“Don’t let him hear you say that sweet cheeks.”

“Damn that’s cute.”

Pyronica smiled and waved, before looking down to where Bill was tugging on her leg, urging her into the anti-anti-gravity chamber.

Mouthing ‘sorry’ she followed Bill into the chamber, blowing one last kiss over her shoulder for the mobsters to relish.

Once they entered the room, the gravity kicked in, weighing heavily on their forms. Both Bill and Pyronica walked a little further into the middle of the room, then laid down on the floor, staring up at the ceiling, feeling the heavy press of gravity caress their bodies.

“You handled that well.” Bill remarked, stretching his arms out to lay two dimensional on the fuzzy multi-coloured carpet. “Ow Bill?”
“I didn’t know what else to say.” Pyronica replied, lacing her fingers together over her abdomen, looking up. “They bought it though.”

“Goo Mobsters.” Bill spat bitterly. “Some of the most ignorant muscle you’ll meet this side of the cosmos.”

“One of them called me Toots the other day.” Pyronica regaled. “I was so close, so close to eating him. You have no idea how much I’m holding back.”

“You and me both.” Bill scoffed, and blinked at the ceiling.

Pyronica stretched her hand out to see how far she could push it, before she let it smack down on her chest, letting it lay there. Puffing out a breath, she turned her head to see Bill’s flat yellow form.

“So, how’s things?”

“Ugh.” Bill replied, and copied Pyronica’s hand movement, only to smack himself in the bricks.

“That bad, huh?”

“The portal’s coming along fine, and things are all proceeding ahead of schedule. It’s just – boring. It’s boring and I’m bored, and Sixer’s always away.” Bill complained.

“Still studying the metamorph-grub?” Pyronica asked.

“Like I needed another disgusting squealing waste of space competing with me for his attention? Specs is bad enough. He has a break down every other day and then it’s ‘oh no looks like I gots to wipe some memories’. I mimic mockingly. ‘Ironic really, for my mechanic to break down so often. I think he’s faulty.’

“Trade him in.” Pyronica advised, turning around to lay on her side, facing Bill. “Or I could eat him for you, if you want.”

“The answer to all life’s problems.” Bill sighed, before pushing his form out into a pyramid shape so he could ‘lay on his side’ and face Pyronica. “Unfortunately, I can’t kill him, we made a deal. I’m supposed to let him live in exchange for his work fast tracking the portal.”

“Sounds like you don’t want him to fast track the portal. Sounds like you wish you had more time left.” Py murmured, watching Bill.

“Yeah, well, time likes to bite me in the eye.” Bill huffed, and looked at the carpet, stirring his finger through the fibres. “I’ve a list of things I’d rather be doing, a list of things I have to do, and a list of things I’m avoiding, and those last two tend to intersect.”

“Party planning is stressful.” Pyronica pouted. “Parties are supposed to be fun.”

“You’re preaching to the choir Py.” Bill sighed and laid back flat again.

There was a knock on the door to the anti-anti-gravity chamber, and Keyhole poked his head in.

“Boss?”

Bill fought the gravity to wave lazily at Keyhole. “Come on in Keyhole. Close the door behind you.”
Keyhole shimmied into the room and shut the door behind him, before limbo-ing over to Bill and Pyronica, laying down on the carpet beside them both.

“Did anyone follow you?” Bill asked Keyhole.

“No.” Keyhole shook his head, and looked at Bill. “Boss, why are you hiding in here laying on the floor?”

Bill tsked, and Pyronica answered for him.

“Sometimes you just gotta lay on the floor Keyhole. That’s just how it is.”

“Yes.” Keyhole nodded. “But it seems to me that there’s a long line of people out there waiting to shake your hand Boss, and they’ve all been looking for you.”

“Let them look.” Bill replied, waving his hand dismissively. “They’re like vultures down there, all queuing up waiting for me to promise them their wildest dreams. I’m not making deals with any of them until I’m good and ready to. I have priorities, Keyhole, and they all think they’re at the top of the list, but at the end of the day it’s my list.”

“I getcha Boss. And laying on the floor in the anti-anti-gravity chamber is at the top of the list.” Keyhole smacked his lips together and nodded to himself. “I like the way you roll.”

“Actually, meeting with your cousin is at the top of the list, so where are we coming along with that?” Bill looked over to Keyhole expectantly.

“Oh.” Keyhole poked his pointer fingers together sheepishly. “Well, uh, I figured, you know, he’s a busy guy. Maybe surprising him outta the blue isn’t the best way to go about this.”

“I didn’t ask about your reservations, I asked how we’re going to do this, so do you have answers for me or not?”

Keyhole sighed, and looked up at the ceiling. “I haven’t booked an appointment with him, but I did figure out his schedule. He’s backed up with clients for usually most of the rotation, but there’s always a couple of hours at the end of each day where he locks himself inside his office and catches up on paperwork. He won’t be expecting anyone then, much less you.”

“Or you.” Bill clicked his fingers and pointed at Keyhole. “You’re coming with me.”

“What?” Keyhole blinked, and looked over at Bill, flabbergasted. “But Boss, then he’s gonna know I helped you.”

“Don’t worry Keyhole.” Bill raised his hand, like he was making a scout’s oath. “I will make sure he doesn’t tell on you to mommy.”

Pyronica giggled, holding her hand up to her mouth.

Bill winked at Pyronica, before he clapped, reversing the anti-anti-gravity, floating upright. “We’ll
go pay your cousin a visit soon then. Maybe in a week or so. Pyronica, you can stay and hold the fort.”

“Oh goodie.” Pyronica rolled her eye.

“Are you gonna go talk to the mob now Bill?” Keyhole asked, sitting up. “You know, the ones who’ve been waiting all this time?”

“Nope!” Bill said cheerily, tipping his hat at Keyhole. “I’m gonna go do anything but that!”

Teleporting away in a haze of bright yellow light, Bill bid his henchmaniacs farewell.

“Remember, you didn’t see me, but I saw you! BYE!”

And with that he popped out of the mindscape, seeking refuge from his responsibilities back on Earth.

Having finally coerced the Shapeshifter into a larger cage to accommodate for Shifty’s rapid rate of growth, after a long day of conducting tests and studying results, both Ford and Fiddleford were exhausted, sharing the cramped cot in the bunker, sleeping back to back, trying to get some shut eye.

Fiddleford had a habit of hogging the blankets, and there was only one to share between them, so Ford slept in his trench coat, huddled up, curling his knees under the fabric as he slept.

This had been their sleeping arrangement for the past three nights, and while Ford might complain some in the morning, even the lack of proper bedrest didn’t dull his enthusiasm for science.

He’d been sleeping incredibly well, despite the uncomfortable positioning, waking up feeling preternaturally refreshed each day, which was surprising considering for the past three nights Ford had been plagued by bizarre cryptic dreams he couldn’t explain.

Tonight was no different.

His dreams started where they often did, in a colossal library, stacked with a multitude of books and secret pathways to the imaginations of genius.

Ford usually felt quite safe in this athenaeum of thought. He’d been blessed with nothing but pleasant dreams, enlightenment, challenges and successes in this grand dreamscape. While he often felt the heavy presence of his muse’s influence in his dreams, feeling his gaze acutely sometimes, a warm playful presence in the back of his mind, that feeling had been absent as of late.

Ford’s subconscious may have been diversifying, finding other things to fixate on, though Ford highly doubted that.

This brief separation from his muse in order to catalogue his findings about Shifty had him feeling fonder for his muse than ever. Absence was a stirring thing, and Ford found it far easier to mask his obsession with the God when the cosmic being was right there, sitting beside him on the couch, irritating him consistently. It was easier to banter, to save face in front of him.
Now that Bill was absent, Ford was just reminded of how much he missed him.

Ford wandered through the shelves, climbing one of the sliding ladders in the library to reach for one of the books in the ‘romance section’ – a naming choice Stanford hadn’t been able to shake, lucid dreamer or not.

Plucking one of the books from the shelf, Ford opened it up to pull out a memory of Bill, immersing himself in the pages.

“Are you sure you don’t want to come with us?” Ford was sitting on the couch downstairs with Bill in his lap, his arms around the muse, sharing an indulgent goodbye with the god while Fiddleford packed the truck with supplies.

He punctuated his sentence with a kiss, the muse leaning leisurely into Ford, his lidded eyes glowing a steady gold.

“Mmm. You know labs don’t agree with me. Labs and labwork.” Bill stroked his fingers through Ford’s fluffy hair, something he obviously enjoyed doing. Ford enjoyed it too; the pleasant tingle in his scalp when Bill’s fingernails scraped along the surface, warming him pleasurably with the sensation.

“Some would just say ‘work’ and leave it at that.” Ford added cheekily, rubbing his six-fingered hands along Bill’s thighs indulgently.

“I work.” Bill replied indignantly. “I do plenty of work. What about that laser gun I made you?”

“Yes, well, that was quite some time ago.” Ford teased, and looped his arms around Bill’s waist, tugging him closer. “Not that I don’t appreciate it. I’m just looking for a more recent example.”

“Ungrateful.” Bill scoffed, obviously offended by Ford’s wry arrogance, but he couldn’t seem to stop himself from threading his fingers through Ford’s hair. “I do plenty for you, or are you forgetting who stopped the rain for you just a few weeks ago?”

“I thought you did that for Fiddleford.” Ford said lightly, rubbing Bill’s back with one hand, snagging Bill’s wrist with his other, pressing his thumb in light circles on Bill’s palm.

“You know I don’t do things for Fiddleford.” Bill replied, grinning, pressing his forehead to Sixer’s, watching him with reciprocal fondness.

“What makes me so special, I wonder.” Ford pressed a kiss to Bill’s palm, then pressed another to the back of his knuckles, bringing a dark flush to the muse’s cheeks. “That a God would change the weather for me?”

Bill didn’t say anything, but his mouth twisted in a peculiar way that made Ford think that perhaps he was flustered.

The radio on the mantelpiece coughed out an odd static noise, turning on suddenly without anyone touching it, and a fragment of a song by seventies band The Real Thing started playing of its own volition.

“I would take the stars out of the sky for you.”

Ford looked over at the radio, then looked to Bill, who was getting progressively redder in the face, his eyes and tattoos glowing luminously.
“Did you -?” Ford wondered, awed that Bill’s powers seemed to extend to such lengths, to controlling the radio, or at least turning it onto the right channel at the right time. Judging from the embarrassment colouring Bill’s face, he hadn’t intended for this to happen, his magic leaking out revealing too much.

Bill spluttered, and turned around to wave his hand at the radio, knocking it off the shelf, silencing it, as the next line of the song rang out.

“Stop the rain from falling if you asked me tooooo-CRCHHK.”

The radio crashed onto the floor of the living room, springs and parts breaking off it, rolling across the wood panelled floor.

Ford watched the radio spark as springs and gears scrambled around the broken machine, and could barely smother an exultant, giddy grin, looking back to Bill with twinkling eyes.

“That was –“ Ford began, sounding amused.

“Nothing! That was nothing!” Bill spluttered, his gold eyes wide, looking delightfully off balance.

“A good song.” Ford finished, watching Bill with amusement. He cupped Bill’s face in his hands, feeling how hot the muse was becoming, and couldn’t resist pressing a kiss to Bill’s puffy lips.

The tension seemed to drain out of the muse, his unintentional romantic outburst forgiven. He kissed Stanford back, melting a little against him, until it was just the two of them pressed as close together as possible, kissing indulgently.

Fiddleford had a feeling their goodbye would be drawn out, so he was waiting in the car with a book.

Pulling away to press his forehead against Bill’s, feeling the god’s warmer temperature on his brow, Ford hummed the rest of the song, mumbling the words, his own cheeks feeling a little red.

“I’d do anything for you, your wish is my command.”

Bill sighed contentment against Ford’s lips, watching the human with conflicted endearment in his golden eyes.

“Oh Sixer, why are you like this?”

“Like what?” Ford asked, blinking up at Bill as he took his glasses off, the lenses fogged by Bill’s heated breath.

Ford wasn’t entirely sure why Bill looked so disappointed while still watching him like he was the most fascinating creature he’d ever encountered.

Ford couldn’t truly comprehend what had Bill so conflicted, as while he’d been pushing for some sort of acknowledgement of Bill’s feelings lately, he’d not gotten a straight answer. Granted, Ford hadn’t been forthright with his own feelings, but he presumed he was being overt enough for Bill to already know.

Bill sighed again, and traced along Ford’s cheekbone with his finger, trailing along down to Sixer’s chin.

“Special.” Bill said, sounding resigned to the fact, and woefully taken in by it.
The horn honked outside, Fiddleford evidently tired of waiting for Ford to say his goodbyes.

Looking to the door, Ford put his glasses back on and got up off the couch, depositing Bill comfortably there, before leaning down to press a parting kiss to his muse’s lips.

“I’ll be back soon. Call me on the cellular if you need anything. Will you have enough to do while I’m gone?”

“I’ll fix that.” Bill pointed to the broken radio. “Maybe tweak your photocopier too. So don’t say I never did nothing for you.”

Pulling on his trench coat, Ford paused to grin at Bill. “Now why would I do that?”

Bill snorted and waved Ford out the door. “Just go.”

“I’ll be back before you know it.” Ford assured Bill, and raced out the door to join Fiddleford in the truck.

That felt like so long ago, and it had only been a few days.

Ford missed the muse sorely. He missed his warmth, his grin, his enlightenment, his cleverness and wit. It was every bit as flattering as Ford had assumed it would be, having a partner who was just as fixated with you as you were with them, and adding to the flattery, the fact that his partner was a god.

Well, that was partly why Ford’s ego throbbed so joyfully every time he squeezed acknowledgement of his appeal from Bill. It truly made him feel special, beyond special, to be special to a God. Certainly, he’d been chosen by Bill initially, for his intellect, but to be chosen again for more than that – that just bubbled joy deep in Ford’s soul. He was elated by that.

He had a history of being chosen last, for sports, for friends, and his first choice school didn’t choose him thanks to Stanley’s intervention. Being chosen again and again by Bill was all Stanford ever wanted.

Reaching for another book from the shelf, sighing fond nostalgia into the empty library, Ford flipped the next book open to an incredibly comical sketch of Bill putting excessive amounts of pepper in Fiddleford’s soup while he was in the bathroom, grinning with Ford like they were in on the prank together.

Ford shook his head and chuckled at the page, recalling that dinner fondly, when he heard it.

“Lies

Lies

Lies.”

A thin voice, like a whisper on the wind, drifted airily along the stacks, sounding just out of reach, everywhere and nowhere at once.

“Who’s there?” Ford looked around, the hairs on the back of his neck standing on edge. He felt a breeze rustle through his mind, flipping the pages of the book he held.

The whisper came again, this time from down the corridor, and Ford closed the book in his hand,
putting it back on the shelf.

“Don’t believe –“

Ford slid down the ladder, and walked down the end of the corridor, between the stacks of books, following the voice.

“- his lies.”

Ford approached the end of the bookshelves with trepidation, his mind conjuring a weapon to protect himself, something he hadn’t needed in the sanctuary of his own mindscape before.

Holding the laser gun in his hand, Ford took a deep breath, recalling his marksmanship practise, before he spun around, pointing the gun at the empty space behind the bookshelf.

There was nothing there.

“Where are you?” Ford growled to himself, his paranoia kicking into gear.

The breeze picked up again, blowing in a different direction this time, and Ford heard the voice call out from behind the next row of books, wispy and faint.

“The truth –“

Ford fired off a shot from the magnet gun, blasting through two rows of journals, leaving a wide singed hole where Ford presumed the voice was coming from.

Ford approached the hole, peering through the gap in the bookshelf to see nothing again.

The elusive voice was tricking him.

The wind seemed to sigh around him, bitterly disappointed, before it spoke again, echoing from all around him.

“I have tried to tell you but you are not yet ready for the truth.”

“What truth?” Ford said through gritted teeth, holding the laser gun at the ready, eying off different places around the library where the voice’s recipient could possibly be hiding.

The wind rushed towards him, blowing him back through the bookshelves, pulling the mindscape around his still feet, transporting him against his will.

When the wind stopped, Ford found himself somewhere he’d never been before, somewhere he didn’t recognise in his own mind.

Just barely he might have been able to pick it – the barley field he got lost in once on a school field trip. No one came looking for him, he’d been lost for hours. It was only when Stanley and the rest of the students were on the bus that his brother started looking for him, and by then the sun was blocked out by grey clouds, sepia tones barely lighting Ford’s abandonment and solitude.

It was a memory Ford had tried hard to repress.

The wind rustled the barley around him, dancing behind him.

He turned, and saw a towering structure, half constructed, seeming both pristine and decaying all at
once.

It was the eye of the portal.

The voice blew into the hollow of the eye, whistling as it went through.

“He’s not what he seems.”

Ford jolted awake with a start, sitting up, gasping in the darkness of the bunker, his heart thudding adrenaline through his body senselessly.

He patted himself down, slowly realising he wasn’t still lost in the barley field, that he was in the bunker.

He looked down to Fiddleford, still sleeping curled up in the blankets, his back turned to Stanford.

Ford looked over to the clock on the wall, the digital readout telling him it was just past 3am.

Sighing, Ford put his hand on his chest, trying to bring his pulse rate down, chastising himself for even being startled in the first place. It was just a dream.

Probably his own insecurities running rampant through his subconscious. He told himself he’d barely remember the dream later anyway, and it hardly seemed consequential.

Laying back down on the cramped cot, Ford tried his best to shut his eyes and go back to sleep, not willing to be bested by an unnerving causeless nightmare.

He drifted off once more, his breathing even again, and tugged his trench coat around him like a blanket.

In the pocket of his trench coat, a blue ring glowed, unnoticed in the dark.

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Ford was almost expecting to return to a pile of rubble, remembering how leaving Bill alone in the shack used to have hazardous results early on in the muse’s tenure on earth.

He was relieved to find that not only was the shack left in pristine condition, but improvements had been made to both the technology littered about the house, and to the lab downstairs.

“You worked on the portal!” Ford exclaimed, looking at the colossal eye dangling from the ceiling, hung there with scaffolding surrounding it, half completed.

Bill shrugged in response, but smothered a smile as Ford picked him up and spun him around in his arms, pressing kisses to his face.

“Sixer!”

“You –” Ford squashed Bill’s cheek with the press of his lips, continuing to dot kisses all over Bill’s face. “Are so – helpful – and wonderful – and fantastic.”
Laughter bubbled out of Bill as the muse half-heartedly tried to push the scientist away, tickled by Sixer’s devout attention. He’d fake work more often if it got him this sort of response.

Fiddleford watched from the observation room in the lab, seeing his friend shower affection on his assistant and recognising it for the scapegoat that it was.

Though, how Ford was willing to believe Bill had done all that work on the construction when he hadn’t believed Fiddleford could have hung the generators from the roof by himself without help was a mystery to F. Still, he wasn’t looking a gift-horse in the mouth if it meant Ford wouldn’t be suspicious of his motives.

Feeling awkward standing there watching Ford press ticklish kisses on his assistant’s neck while Bill squealed with laughter, F cleared his throat, and pointed to the elevator.

“I’ll just go get our food out of the fridge for breakfast, shall I?”

“Oh, there’s no food in the fridge.” Bill replied, sounding somewhat out of breath.

“No food?” Fiddleford blinked, astounded.

“At all?” Ford questioned curiously, his arms still wrapped around his muse’s waist.

“Don’t give me that look. I got hungry.” Bill crossed his arms defensively.

“There was a full week’s worth of groceries in that fridge.” Ford revealed. “Not to mention all those meals I cooked you.”

“Gosh, and you’re so skinny.” Fiddleford looked at Bill’s svelte form in astonishment. “Your stomach must be a black hole.”

Ford blinked at Bill curiously, looking down at his stomach. Bill pulled a face, and flicked Ford on the nose, before side-stepping out of his grasp.

“It’s not my fault you didn’t leave enough for me. It’s a wonder I didn’t start eating paper.” Bill shot Ford a cool look over his shoulder, teasing the scientist. “Or PHDs.”

“Oh, I’m sure.” Ford raised his eyebrow at Bill, in on the joke.

“Well then what’re we gonna eat? I’m starvin’.” Fiddleford complained, having driven all the way back to the shack fantasising about the sumptuous meal Ford was set to cook.

“We’ll have to go downtown.” Ford paced over to the elevator, pressing the button to call it down. “If you’re really hungry, we can get something to eat at the diner, then pick up some groceries. I know we need more beans for Shifty. You’ll have to remind me which brand he likes.”

“You’re spoilin’ that thing Stanford.” F wagged his finger at Ford as the three men stepped into the elevator. “Just get him generic, he don’t need brand name.”

“Well, I’ve been told you can taste the difference.” Ford gave Bill an amused look and his muse rolled his eyes.

The elevator door closed, leaving the half-constructed portal alone in the lab behind them.
Over a table full of food, the ravenous trio of scientists were digging into their purchased meals, Stanford filling Bill in about his study of the shapeshifter down in the lab.

“Shifty is remarkable. In the past four days alone I’ve seen him assume multiple shapes. He can copy any photo you show him, right down to the DNA of the creature in the photo.” Ford gushed, waving a mozzarella stick around as he spoke. “And that’s not all, his initiative is incredible. He copied a pill bug he’d seen crawling in the dirt on the other side of the cave, he mimics every picture I show him, and he’s even taken to improvising, attempting to take on multiple forms at once. He even successfully mimicked the flame from our Bunsen burners, before the fire alarm detected flame that is. That’s one way to give him a bath.”

“Well, he’s got a ‘can do’ attitude, I’ll give him that.” Bill drawled, and stole a mozzarella stick from Sixer’s plate, dipping it into the tomato sauce, having already finished his meal.

“Oh, he’s got a lovely temperament.” Ford continued, swirling the mozzarella stick around in his bowl, swiping up the dregs of his potato and bacon soup with the snack. “He’s very expressive. He changes shapes to suit his mood I think. One second he’ll be a cheerful little puppy, the next a meek little mouse, depending on circumstance.”

“What about when he’s angry?” Bill asked curiously.

Ford looked at Fiddleford, and Fiddleford shuddered. “I’d rather not talk about that.”

“He was just attempting to experiment, to be expressive.” Ford defended Shifty.

“Turning into a little puffball of syringes isn’t expressive, it’s horrific.” Fiddleford retorted, biting into his chicken sandwich.

“We’d been taking DNA samples. I don’t think he likes the needle.” Ford explained.

“You know, I almost feel sorry for the thing, locked up in a lab with the two of you poking it all the time.” Bill rested his chin on his palm, watching Ford eat. “Experimenting on it.”

“Nonsense.” Ford said with a mouthful of deep fried cheese. “Shifty’s perfectly happy.”

“Uuhh.” Bill watched Ford dab his mouth with a napkin, and marvelled at how he could find this arrogant scientist attractive in any way. Yet here he was.

“He’s been treatin’ it like a pet.” Fiddleford told Bill, though it was already evident.

“I never had a pet growing up. We were never allowed.” Ford admitted. “We already caused enough of a mess in the house, Dad wouldn’t allow it.”

“So now, as an adult, you’re pickin’ your pets poorly, just because you never had one before.” Fiddleford surmised, crossing his arms. “See, it’d be fine if you picked something harmless, like a goat or a pig.”

“There’s no harm having a pet with moxy.” Bill watched Ford swipe his thumb around the rim of his soup bowl, popping his thumb in his mouth to suck the last of the soup away. “They’re more fun that way. Spunky.”
“You won’t think it’s so spunky when it does something dangerous.” Fiddleford warned Ford, wagging his finger at him.

A new wave of people entered the diner, the lunch crowd mostly, hanging their coats up and stepping into the warm rail-cart restaurant. With the group came young Ivan Wexler, who seemed to be looking for someone, his head twisting to peer into all the booths in the diner.

Spotting Fiddleford, he waved exuberantly at the scientist, and F noticed this and blanched, shrinking down in his seat.

Ivan began making his way across the restaurant to see F, heedless of the fact that it might be suspicious to join them when just the other week his ‘prank call’ had left Stanford more paranoid than ever. Ford would easily pick Ivan’s accent, Ivan couldn’t come here. Thinking on his feet, F slid out of his chair, putting his napkin down.

“I’m just goin’ to the bathroom quickly.” F told Ford.

Stanford barely looked up at Fiddleford, nodding while reaching for the napkins, still licking soup off his fingers. “Suit yourself.”

Fiddleford scrambled out of his chair and paced down along the diner, snagging Ivan by the front of his puffy hooded jacket, tugging him to follow him into the men’s bathrooms.

Bill turned around in his seat, his arm flung over the booth chair, and watched Fiddleford go, suspicious of McGucket’s sudden retreat. Frowning slightly, he watched F push a protesting Ivan into the men’s lavatory, shutting the door firmly behind them both.

Bill raised an eyebrow at that. Before he could open his mouth to draw Sixer’s attention to it, he found himself staring at Willow Oakwood, who seemed to be making her way down to see Stanford, her best friend Suzie by her side. Her vibrant red hair fell around her face, buffeted by the wind, and she seemed to be glowing with happiness.

Bouncing down to Ford’s booth, ignoring Bill’s suspicious stare, Willow planted herself into the booth where Fiddleford had just been sitting.

“Hi.” She said, as Ford blinked, looking up at her in surprise.

“Hiya Stanford.” Suzie chimed in with a smile, her arm looped around her friends, giggling brightly.

“Hullo.” Ford watched them both make themselves comfortable, and wiped his hands on his napkin. “You both seem cheerful.”

Bill was watching their cheery demeanour, squinting dubiously at both of them. He kept his arm draped over the back of Sixer’s chair, and refused to greet them himself, rudely eyeing them off like they were interlopers.

Fishing something out of her jacket pocket, Willow tossed an envelope across the table and it landed next to Stanford’s napkin.

“Hup.” Willow sat back comfortably in the booth once she’d thrown the envelope, ignoring Bill’s venomous glare. “That one’s for you.”

Picking the letter up curiously, Ford turned it over in his hands, before cutting the letter open with Bill’s clean butterknife. Pulling out the card inside, Ford adjusted his glasses and read.
“Save the date. You are cordially invited to Willow Oakwood and Daniel Corduroy’s Wedding Ceremony at Gravity Falls Redwood – oh! You’re getting married, are you?” Ford wondered, looking up from the letter.

“That’s what it says on the card, doesn’t it?” Willow smirked at Stanford, clearly elated.

“They’re getting married!” Suzie cooed, bursting with enthusiasm. “Isn’t that exciting!”

“Well, congratulations.” Ford nodded, smiling at Willow. “In the forest no less, I’m sure that’ll be a lovely ceremony.”

“It’s in April, so make sure you’re not doing anything. It was hard enough to pin you down just to hand this thing over.” Willow joked. “Man of mystery, you are. You’re never around.”

“I have been, uh, busy of late.” Ford said cryptically, looking down at the green and silver lettering curling across the page of the invite.

Bill snatched the envelope from Ford’s hand and peered at the letter, his arm coming down from the back of the chair to rest on Ford’s shoulder.

“All this fuss just to sign a legal document.” Bill scoffed. “If you wanted to bind yourself to someone for all eternity, a ball and chain is far more effective.”

“Someone’s a cynic.” Willow curled her lip, unimpressed but not surprised by Bill’s caustic response. “If you’re going to be bitter about it, then you don’t have to come.”

“I thought this was for Sixer.” Bill gestured with the envelope towards Ford.

“Plus ones are invited.” Willow crossed her arms over her belly and raised her eyebrow at Bill. “Regrettably. I’ll assume you’re going to be Stanford’s plus one.”

“If not, I haven’t found someone to go with yet.” Suzie piped up, smiling congenially. “We could go together.”

Bill’s hand came down more obviously on Stanford’s shoulder, and he leaned across the table, hissing possessively. “He’s coming with me.”

“Alright calm down.” Ford said placatingly, taking the invitation back, putting the envelope into his trench coat pocket. “We’d love to come Willow. Thank you for the invite.”

“You’re welcome.” Willow said simply, sitting back in the chair.

Bill gave Willow a discerning look and raised his eyebrow at her. She stuck her jaw out stubbornly and refused to look at him.

Suzie absently began stacking the finished dishes on the table out of habit, despite not working today. Bill noticed this, and patted Ford on the shoulder.

“Do you have room for dessert?”

“I’m sure you do.” Ford gave Bill a look, noticing how the muse still had his arm draped over his shoulder, vaguely amused at Bill’s possessive overtures.

“Can you go get us two sundaes?” Bill asked Suzie, startling her.

“It’s her day off, asshole.” Willow rebuked Bill.
“Oh, I don’t mind.” Suzie laughed, waving her hand, before she got up and collected the empty plates, bustling them to the counter.

Willow sat there scowling at Bill, and Ford was about to turn around to chide the muse as well, when Bill unwound his hand from Sixer’s shoulder.

“Specs has been in the bathroom for a while. He looked kind of pale and twitchy before. Maybe you should go check to see if he’s alright.” Bill urged Ford smoothly, shooing him out of the booth.

“Well, that’s –“ Ford seemed to realise that F had been gone a substantial amount of time, remembering the last time Fiddleford had been so pale and twitchy, when he was plagued by hallucinations and nightmares. Ford inclined his head, agreeing with Bill’s assessment, before sliding out of the booth to go find his colleague.

Bill watched him go, with a satisfied expression, keen to see the fallout of Sixer catching his old college buddy with the carny, hoping it would rile his suspicions just right.

Willow sat stubbornly in the opposite booth, glaring at Bill. “You’ve just got him dancing on your strings, don’t you?”

“I have a talent for puppetry, what can I say?” Bill shrugged, and turned to sit facing her.

“You’ve got me alone now. I’m guessing that’s why you shooed Stanford away. Whatever horrible thing you’re gonna say, just say it.” Willow insisted gruffly.

“Well, that’s –“ Willow jerked her chin at Bill, scowling. “You’re not telling him everything.”

“What makes you so sure?” Bill eyed Willow off shrewdly, lacing his fingers together and resting his chin on them.

“Because I went home and thought over that whole sob story you gave me, about Stanford trapping you here, and from what I know about Stanford I highly doubt that’s the case.”

“You know nothing about Stanford.” Bill corrected her curtly.

“I know enough, and I know enough about you.” Willow said, narrowing her eyes. “And I get the feeling that if you didn’t want to be here, you wouldn’t be here. Something else is going on.”

“Are you playing armchair detective to distract yourself from your own problems, or is this a habit you picked up after Punchy popped the question?” Bill asked slyly.

“This has nothing to do with Dan.” Willow said defensively.

“Mmhmm.” Bill nodded, disbelieving, before he leaned forward and grinned. “How’s that shotgun feel against your back? Comfortable?”

“There is no shotgun.” Willow said through gritted teeth. “I’m marrying Dan because I love him.”

“You keep telling yourself that.” Bill leaned back in his chair, watching her with disdain. “The fact that nearly half the town has been whispering about little sourdough didn’t factor into the equation at all?”
“What?” Willow asked, all the colour draining from her face.

“People think I don’t listen. I hear everything.” Bill said, sounding smug. “Last time I was here, there was a little gossip party about your brioche bun. I distinctly heard the phrase ‘a woman knows’. Do you think Dan knows?”

He spun a half lie, a misleading truth, conveniently leaving out the fact that all mention of pregnancy came after the initial gossip nugget about the proposal.

“I – he proposed before he knew. I mean, he still doesn’t know, but –“ Willow blustered, seeming shocked. Realising slowly that Bill had turned the conversation around on her, she pointed across the table at him. “But that’s not important! I’m onto you.”

“Why haven’t you told him Red? Afraid he isn’t ‘man’ enough to stick by you and the little hot cross bun?” Bill probed indulgently, content to keep pressing Willow’s weak spot rather than acknowledge she had anything on him.

“He’s a better man than – ugh. I should have known better than to talk to you.” Willow scowled, frustrated, and scooted along the booth chair, extricating herself. “You play tricks, you’re manipulative. I bet all that crap about your best friend was a lie too. You’re just manipulating me into doing what you want.”

“If that were working, you’d be gone by now.” Bill said, sounding bored. “But here you are. Why bother inviting Sixer specifically to your little matrimony, if you can’t stand talking to me? You’re the one who assumed we’d be coming together.”

“I invited Stanford because he’s my friend.” Willow said, getting out of the booth, standing at the edge of the table. “And you’re his consequence apparently. I don’t think you’re his muse.”

“It’s not about what you think.” Bill shot back at her sharply. “And I’ll thank you not to patronise Sixer with your so called ‘friendship’, he doesn’t need it. You don’t know him, don’t understand him, and your constant attempts to pretend that you do are shallower than your personality. He’s just humouring you, he doesn’t care about you. To him you’re nothing but an acquaintance, and a forgettable one at that.”

Suzie returned to the table bearing the two sundaes on a tray.

“Here’s your sundaes.” She said cheerily.

Willow snagged Suzie by the elbow, fury concealing the hurt in her expression, and she marched them both away. “C’mon Suzie, we’re going.”

Bill pulled the two sundaes over towards him and couldn’t resist yelling one last jibe out to Willow as she retreated.

“And don’t think just because you invited me to your party that you’re invited to mine!”

Willow didn’t stick around to be drawn into another back and forth with the yellow eyed man. The bell above the door rang as she stormed out.

Shrugging, Bill grabbed a spoon and began devouring both sundaes, not bothering to wait for Sixer to come back.
Fiddleford dragged the tattooed man into the cramped bathroom stall, and shut the door behind them.

“What -?” Ivan spluttered out.

“What on earth did you think you were doin’, approachin’ me in front of Stanford?” Fiddleford chastised Ivan in a hushed voice. “I told you this needs to stay a secret. At least from him.”

“I’m sorry, I thought he wouldn’t notice.” Ivan shrugged his shoulders. “That he’d just assume you were catching up with a friend.”

“The moment you open your mouth, he’d be askin’ me why I’m friends with the person who called us up, spouting cryptic messages at 1am in the morning, and he’d be more paranoid than ever.” Fiddleford scowled. “Helpin’ you was supposed to be simple, but by golly you’re makin’ it hard.”

“I’m sorry.” Ivan apologised. “I just really needed to see you.”

“Why?” Fiddleford asked sharply, before concern flitted across his face. “What’s wrong? Has something gone wrong?”

“Nothing’s gone wrong.” Ivan said quickly, holding his hands up. “It’s more like everything’s gone right. I’ve been sleeping the best I have in years, my hands don’t shake anymore. It’s like I’m not afraid of anything.”

“Is that what you came here to tell me?” Fiddleford asked, confused.

“No, no.” Ivan shook his head, before he looked at Fiddleford, impassioned. “I came here to convince you. We could be doing so much more!”

“No. That was a one time thing. We can’t just – “ Fiddleford fretted, thinking back to Stanford waiting for him out in the diner. “I can’t just go wipin’ memories left and right. I - I’ve done enough of it. It’s not ethical.”

“There are more people who need your help. I’ve found them. We could be helping them.” Ivan persisted.

“No.” Fiddleford said more firmly. “We can’t be using this technology like that, I – Stanford’s getting suspicious, and this could blow away all the trust that’s left between us. I appreciate what you’re doing Ivan, but you can’t just go around tellin’ people about this – this was only meant to be for emergencies - I – “

“But I’ve already promised them a solution.” Ivan said stubbornly. “I told them you could help them too.”

“Ivan! Now, why would you go and do that?” Fiddleford huffed, exasperated.

“I know you want to help them.” Ivan insisted. “Just like you helped me.”

“Helpin’ you was different. I didn’t –“

“You are a good person Mr McGucket.” Ivan said stubbornly. “That’s why you do this. You help erase trauma, and I’ve found traumatised people! You can’t just leave them to suffer.”
“I’m not –” F’s expression was acutely conflicted, reflected back at him in the cracked bathroom mirror, and he wrestled with his conscience and his loyalty to Stanford’s firm ethical principles, trying to recognise in that mirror someone who he could live with at the end of the day.

He’d crossed that line once, turning the memory gun on Stanford, and he felt his transgressions weighing on his soul, every time he pulled the trigger. When he used the gun on the construction workers, F justified it as being for the portal, and the workers were paid well for their trouble, but the justifications could hardly stretch far enough when F had to sit across from Ford every day in the lab and know how much of a violation that gun was to him. He just couldn’t do it.

Fiddleford struggled for a while longer, looking anywhere but at Ivan’s zealously impassioned face, when a knock sounded out on the bathroom door.

“F, are you alright in there?”

Fiddleford jumped, hearing Stanford’s voice through the door, and frantically held his finger up to his lips, shooshing Ivan and pushing him behind the bathroom door.

“F?” Ford repeated, hearing muffled shuffling from within the bathroom.

“I’ll be out in a second!” Fiddleford called out, before lowering his voice to whisper to Ivan.

“We’ll talk about this later, alright. He can’t know.”

“I know.” Ivan replied quietly, nodding.

Ford frowned outside of the door, hearing whispering, what sounded like two voices, though he could barely make out what they were saying. He put his ear to the door, and listened in as best he could.

“Don’t approach me in front of Stanford next time. And make sure you wait a couple of minutes before you follow me out. He can’t know I’ve been talkin’ to you.”

“He won’t know. I promise.” Ivan nodded solemnly, excited by the intrigue and secrecy. He flipped the hood of his jacket up, and tugged it over his forehead to shield his easily recognisable tattoos. “I will be unseen.”

Fiddleford gave Ivan a peculiar look, before he put his hand on the doorknob, opening the door a crack.

He wedged himself out of the door, shielding the bathroom with his body, and shut the door quickly behind him, waving his hand in front of his nose, smiling weakly at Stanford as he made his excuse.

“Phew. All that time eatin’ vacuum sealed food sure ain’t good for you.”

Ford almost chuckled, relieved to see that F was alright, and not in the throes of some garish hallucination, but his laughter caught in his throat as his eyes caught for the scantest second a sliver of someone else in the reflection in the bathroom mirror. Someone wearing a hood, with deep set eyes, hiding behind the door.

Ford stared, as F closed the door shut, barely believing what he had seen. It didn’t make sense, Ford almost felt paranoid, like he was the one seeing things, and not Fiddleford as he suspected. He frowned at the door in consternation.
Fiddleford noticed Ford’s perturbed expression, and tried his best to hide the anxiety he felt.

“You alright there, Stanford?”

Ford blinked, shaking off his unease, before he managed a brief smile for F.

“Fine.” He croaked.

Fiddleford walked back over to their booth, stopping to see Ford still staring at the bathroom door with that disturbed expression. Fiddleford waved at Ford, urging him to get a move on.

“Are we fixin’ to move? We’ve still got them groceries to get.”

“Right.” Ford nodded slowly, drawn away from the door. “Yes, let’s.”

Ford followed F to the table to collect his muse and pay the bill, but he couldn’t help the echoes of his dream that drifted in the back of his mind, distilling unease in his soul.

*He’s not what he seems.*

Back in the bunker, Fiddleford’s knee was bouncing away as he did his best to ignore the chirping from within the steel cage.

He was checking the readings from the cryo-tubes, making sure they were statistically up to par for their first test run. That would be if Stanford would ever give up his obsession with the unusual creature to commit it to the purpose these tubes were designed for. Fiddleford doubted Ford’s follow through.

Instead Stanford was sitting on a chair beside Shifty’s cage, writing in his journal, fabric face mask on for posterity.

Over the soft sound of the cryo-tubes beeping, and the thwacking of keys as Fiddleford inputted data, there was the scratch of Ford’s pen jotting notes down, and intermittently between that, Shifty spoke.

“Who am I?”

The shapeshifter twisted his shape, becoming a pigeon, before cooing and shifting again. The shifter was now a rather large hamster.

“Who am I?”

“Yes, that’s very good Shifty.” Stanford praised the creature without looking up from his journals, finding Shifty’s game of ‘who am I’ entertaining at first, but now mostly a distraction from his journaling.

Fiddleford found he liked the creature much better when it didn’t speak. Shifty’s talent for mimicry extended even to vocalisations, but what was truly unsettling to Fiddleford was that the creature didn’t content itself with merely parroting words back at you.
Shifty was thinking for himself, constructing his own sentences. He was clearly highly sentient, and most likely intelligent enough to be a little devious as well.

To think, this had all started with the word ‘beans’.

Ever since that day, Stanford had spent days encouraging Shifty’s vocabulary, studying the way the creature could learn to mimic language, finding it fascinating.

Fiddleford didn’t find it fascinating, he found it unnerving.

“Who am I?”

Stanford paused from his journaling to pass the cup of juice he’d been drinking between the bars of Shifty’s cage, giving him something to do.

“Here, have some orange juice.”

The creature swiped up the cup with a claw, falling upon the beverage ravenously, draining the cup dry, before banging it against the bars.

After Shifty first broke one of the ceramic mugs Fiddleford kept in the lab, he decided that switching to metal camping cups would be safer. Ford was absent minded enough that he probably wouldn’t notice passing Shifty a ceramic mug instead of one less breakable, so Fiddleford took matters into his own hands.

Shifty clanged the metal mug against the bars, rattling the cup along it back and forth, playing the bars of his cage like some kind of instrument. An instrument of defiance, if Fiddleford’s guess was right.

“Stanford.” Fiddleford said, looking up from the computers.

“He’s just bored.” Ford replied, barely looking up from his journal. “Let him have his fun.”

“His fun is very loud and distracting.” Fiddleford complained, already nursing a headache from the metal clanging. “Can he have fun a little quieter, maybe?”

“If you like, you can finish your work in the other room, if it’s bothering you.” Ford suggested, looking up from his journal finally. “I can sit with him for a while, I don’t mind.”

Gathering his laptop and cables, mumbling under his breath, Fiddleford stormed out of the storage lab, eager to get away from the creature.

“See how long it takes for you to get tired of his clanging too.”

Shifty threw his metal cup at Fiddleford as he walked away, flinging it out from between the bars, and it knocked against F’s foot. Fiddleford shot the shifter a scowl, and departed through the decontamination doors.

The doors shut behind F, and now it was just Stanford and Shifty in the storage room.

Stanford turned the page and began a new one, writing his observations down in his journal, sketching a few new forms Shifty had taken, content to continue his work.

Shifty shuffled around in the cage for a while, undecided about what shape he should assume, before he settled on shifting into a cat, the one with the round eyes and fluffy face that Stanford had shown him. The one that made the scientists coo fondly.
Pressing his paws against the bars, Shifty strained to reach Stanford, paw swiping through the air ineffectually. Still, it was enough to draw Ford’s attention.

“Can I see?”

Ford blinked, and looked over to Shifty, who was staring up at him with the wide black eyes of a very invested kitten.

“See?” Ford queried, before catching the way Shifty’s eyes slid down to his journal. “My journal?”

“Can I see?” Shifty repeated.

Ford considered it for a moment, looking down at the page he was writing on, before he drew the journal close to his chest protectively.

“I don’t think you should.” Ford replied, watching Shifty almost warily.

“I want to see.” Shifty cooed, in that high pitched tone of his.

“This journal isn’t for you Shifty. There are forms in here that you shouldn’t be taking.” Ford explained, trying to keep his tone kind, and sympathetic.

“Why?” Shifty asked, its wide cat eyes staring unerringly at the book, more intrigued than ever now.

“Because they’re dangerous. My research is very dangerous.” Ford said kindly. “And you shouldn’t concern yourself with it.”

Hardly deterred by this knowledge, Shifty tried swiping through the bars again, staring intently at the book.

“I want to see.” Shifty repeated.

Stanford frowned, and closed the book, tucking it into the pocket inside his trench coat. Picking himself up, he put his chair back by the wall, and began walking toward the exit, unimpressed with this new fixation Shifty seemed to be developing.

“I want to see.” Shifty insisted, his voice much deeper now, and almost sinister.

Stanford turned around to see Shifty standing, his translucent grub form much larger than he remembered, four spindly legs and two clawed arms sprouting from his corpulent mass, red eyes large, pincers sharp. Shifty clacked his mandibles together and seemed to snarl from within his cage, before repeating.

“I want to see.”

Stanford left the storage room swiftly, without a backwards glance, leaving Shifty alone and taking his journals with him.
Diving headfirst into the Mindscape and dragging Keyhole with him, Bill teleported just outside of Keyhole’s cousin’s office, on the outer ring of one of the satellite cities in Artisanal Logos, the business district of the galaxy.

After the economic boom on Central Logos, the businesses that were housed on the super-earth sized planet migrated to one of the various high-tech satellite societies that continually looped around Logos’ gravitational field.

The satellites orbited in rings around the planet, and the outer rings were in vogue now for the high society ballers who wanted a room with a view. The galactic skyscape of endless stars was much more pleasing than the blackened ruined carcass of a planet that once was Central Logos.

Keyhole’s cousin’s office was right on the outer ring, in a high-rise building that was neatly and tastefully furnished, solar-active north facing glass windows lighting the hallways with fluctuating colours from the borealis.

Housing in the suburban district of the outer ring could go for bleventy million plus QUID on a good day, so one could only imagine how much renting office space on Artisanal Logos would cost. It seemed Keyhole’s cousin was ‘in the money’ for someone who’s field wasn’t economics.

Keyhole looked both ways, and patted himself down to check he was in one piece. Bill’s teleportation wasn’t the most comfortable method of travel, it was rather abrupt by all means. The triangle hovered beside his henchmaniac, waiting for him to settle down.

Satisfied that he wasn’t missing any molecules, Keyhole gave Bill a double thumbs up.

“All right Keyhole. Just like we practised.” Bill put his hand on Keyhole’s shoulder, turning the henchmaniac around to face on the door they teleported in front of.

The door was a marble affair, with the placard ‘M LOOPHOLE, ESQ, JSD’ engraved upon it in serif font.

Keyhole raised his hand to knock, and then hesitated.

“It’s locked.” He said.

“Well, then it’s your time to shine.” Bill encouraged the henchmaniac.

Putting his hand over the lock, Keyhole stuck his tongue out, concentrating, before the door unlocked graciously. Keyhole grinned at Bill, and shook his hand out.

Knocking once, Keyhole pulled the door open, sticking his large head through.

“Knock, knock.”

Loophole looked up from the various legal files scattered about his desk, his bristly moustache twitching under his large and ineffable nose. His face wasn’t so much of a face as a set of eyes, eyebrows and a nose floating suspended within the structure of a blue loophole, set upon a portly hovering sphere that formed Loophole’s body, adorned in the finest of high end fashion, an expensive bespoke suit.

Wrinkling his nose, Loophole raised an eyebrow at Keyhole. “Cousin. Seeing yourself in as usual. That door was locked. I wasn’t expecting you to visit.”

“Oh, you know.” Keyhole sidestepped into the office, shielding Bill’s glowing form with his back.
“Just … thought I’d pop in to say hi.”

“Yes, well I’m a bit busy for social calls, so if you don’t mind.” Loophole shuffled his papers and looked back to them, plainly dismissing Keyhole with barely a glance.

Sliding out from behind Keyhole just as the henchmaniac shut the heavy marble door, Bill grew his form until he was the same size as Keyhole, standing nice and prominent, resting his hands on his cane.

“Don’t mind if I do.” Bill said cheerily, watching the lawyer expectantly.

Loophole’s reaction didn’t disappoint. The lawyer’s moustache bristled like a porcupine as he double took, spluttering and harrumphing thunderously.

“Wha- you – this is an outrage I say, an outrage! Get out of my office right this instant! Right this instant I say!”

“I say! Hip pip!” Bill said mockingly, swinging his arms around comically. Keyhole grinned at Bill and snickered, covering his mouth. “Jolly good show old chap! I say!”

“You come all this way to mock me?” Loophole blustered. “As if you don’t make a mockery of me enough already. A mockery of my craft? Of our esteemed family name, pulling my cousin into your tomfoolery.”

“Keyhole loves a bit of tomfoolery, isn’t that right Keyhole?” Bill retorted, looking over to Keyhole, who grinned sheepishly.

“Sure do Boss.”

“You –“ Loophole harrumphed and pointed at Bill accusingly. “Are a corrupting presence – a bad influence through and through. Keyhole had a promising future ahead of him before he got thrown in with your lot.”

“Thrown in.” Bill tapped his bricks contemplatively. “Let’s see, that’s not how I remember it happening. If I’m right, which I generally am, it was more like poor Keyhole here got thrown out by a family that cares more about their image than their nearest and dearest.”

Bill floated around Loophole’s lavish office, angling towards Loophole, nudging him with his elbow.

“But hey, that can’t be good for the family rep. Bad press. Am I right?”

Loophole shrunk away from Bill, while the triangle called out across the room to Keyhole, who was still standing by the door.

“How’s that extended vacation treating you, Keyhole? Or was it a religious sabbatical? A seclusion to study? A long absentee bout of charity work?”

“Ya know, I really like the soul-searching road trip excuse.” Keyhole quipped, and walked over to sit on one of the plush couches in Loophole’s office, making himself comfortable. “I can see myself going on one of those.”

“See, I’m not a bad influence.” Bill looped his arm around Loophole, who was trying to edge away from him, pulling him in close. “It’s all that soul-searching Keyhole’s been doing. Real corrupting, that introspection. Not that you’d know. How’s life in the high rise treating you?”
Shaking Bill’s hand off his shoulder, Loophole floated away from Bill, backing up into his bookcase, knocking several ornaments off the shelf.

“You – I want you to leave now, you miscreant, before I call the police.”

“You’d call the police on your own cousin? What happens when he gets arrested? What does that do for the family’s glowing reputation?” Bill loomed over Loophole, his voice ringing out in the cheerful manner he was known for that signalled imminent danger. “Or for your reputation, Mr Esquire. Associating with a known criminal. You’d better brush up on your defence law, but last I checked, that’s not your area of expertise, is it?”

Moustache flaring out like a puffball, Loophole quivered, glaring up at Bill’s imposing yellow form, before he stuck his nose out stubbornly.

“What do you want?”

Bill drummed his fingers on his cane, before he answered.

“To book an appointment.”

“To book a –“ Loophole squinted at Bill for a moment, rife with disbelief, before slumping back against the wall, staring at the triangle.

Bill twiddled with his cane for several more seconds, before clarifying. “For right now, if you could.”

Deciding to give Loophole a little breathing room to reorient himself, Bill floated around the office, waving his arms as he spoke.

“I know normally you have to book through your secretary, but there’s a two year waiting list. So I figured my choices were either to bump off your next appointment or meet you alone like this – waiting two years just isn’t an option, this is a time sensitive matter.”

Loophole staggered away from the wall and floated towards his desk, reaching to pull his chair out. He sank into his chair and massaged the outer rings of his loops, like he was nursing a headache.

“And you have a reputation for ensuring discretion, despite your exorbitant prices, along with being the best contracts lawyer in the business, so it stands to reason that I deserve the best. The legal system hasn’t always done right by me before, but money talks, and what lawyer doesn’t want a solid gold desk, am I right? So what do you say?”

Bill sat down in the chair beside Keyhole, where clients sit, facing Loophole’s desk, and he crossed his legs, letting his hands rest laced over his knee. He watched Loophole expectantly, his single eye wide, boring into the lawyer unblinkingly.

“You’re asking me… to…?” Loophole squinted at Bill, trying to discern where he was going with this.

Bill blinked at the lawyer, and answered simply. “To find me a loophole.”

“You want to get out of a deal?” Loophole questioned, raising his eyebrows incredulously. “You?”

“Well, not a deal per se-“ Bill started, but was interrupted by Loophole’s barking laughter.

“You – Bill Cipher – the scourge of deal-breakers throughout all dimensions, so infamously
vitriolic towards any attempt at circumvention, the slow and steady revenge – that we include a special clause in our interdimensional legislation that precludes me from clients who’ve made a deal with you. You, Bill Cipher, need my help to break a deal? You –“ Loophole chortled pompously, leaning back in his chair laughing.

“How long is he going to -?” Bill looked over at Keyhole, muttering under his breath.

“Just let him tire himself out.” Keyhole advised, while Loophole spluttered and guffawed.

“You – Bill Cipher – do you know how much business I’ve lost because of you? Clients who’ve gone back on their payments, gone back on their appointments, their bookings, all through fear of retribution. How many QUID you’ve cost me, on a grand scale, you specifically?”

Bill watched Loophole with a flat expression, unimpressed with his bluster.

“I imagine I’ve been an unsightly hole in your deep pockets.”

“Most unsightly!” Loophole nodded, and turned his big nose in Keyhole’s direction. “Not only have you taken from our family, but you’ve been a constant drain on my business. Oh, certainly, this business runs on wheeler dealers like yourself, tricksters and chaos gods conjure up the majority of demand for the legal expertise practitioners like myself supply. You, however, are worse than a simple trickster. You couldn’t content yourself with a bit of harmless, fun, oh no.”

Bill rolled his eye while Loophole continued to chastise him.

“You had to have an agenda. The only thing worse than a chaos god or trickster is one with an agenda. Chaos for the sake of chaos is fickle, amiable, profitable, but chaos with focus is an unerrring force of nature! An unstoppable act of destruction and desolation. A refund in the making!”

“You still get billable hours, don’t you?” Bill narrowed his eye at the lawyer dangerously.

“It hardly takes ten minutes to find out if a client’s done business with you and promptly escort them from the building. Tell me, how am I supposed to make a living like that? On ten minutes a session.”

“You seem to be doing alright, living it up in Artisanal Logos.” Bill eyed up the office space, noting the expensive furnishings and top dollar view from the wide solar-active windows.

“That’s beside the point. The point is –“

“The point is –“ Bill said loudly, speaking over Loophole. “That you’re the best in the business either way, and if you help me, then you get to name your price.”

“You want to make a deal with me?” Loophole scoffed, raising his bushy eyebrows.

“That’s the business.” Bill said flatly. “You know this. You know what the currency is.”

“Ones wildest dreams, if your reputation is correct.” Loophole shifted in his seat, leaning forward covetously.

“It is.”

Loophole considered this, obviously intrigued, but then paused, brows furrowing.

“And what of the catch.”
“No catch. A simple exchange for goods and services.” Bill said smoothly.

“I wouldn’t receive so many applicants coming to me, begging for a way out of their deals with you if they didn’t come with a catch.” Loophole tented his fingers, pointing at Bill.

“It sounds like you deal with some unscrupulous people, there’s no catch if you follow through on your end of the deal.” Bill leaned back, drumming his fingers on the arm of the chair. “It’s that simple.”

“And what is my end of the deal?” Loophole queried intently.

“You find me the loophole I need to get out of this.” Bill waved his hand, bringing a holographic image of the vessel Sixer made for him up to rotate slowly in the air.

Loophole leaned across the table, and spun the hologram around, interfacing with the image naturally, zooming in on the details of the runes, studying them.

While his cousin poured over the vessel, Keyhole eyed up the image of the floating body curiously, having never seen it before.

“What’s that Boss?” Keyhole asked.

“A secret, Keyhole. You know what that is, don’t you?” Bill said dryly, shooting his henchmaniac a look.

“Yes sir!” Keyhole saluted cheerfully, and sat back in his seat.

Loyalty was never an issue with Keyhole, unlike Kryptos, Keyhole was part of Bill’s gang because he wanted to be. The laid back henchmaniac was always keen to go along with whatever Bill suggested, and could keep secrets where it counted.

“Fascinating.” Loophole marvelled, turning the hologram this way and that. “If I’m reading these runes correctly, this is an artificially created binding vessel. Why, it’s almost built like a prison, dampening runes and protective runes and restrictive runes all laced together in a marvellous mesh. I haven’t seen work this fine outside of the maximum-security facilities in the Infinetentiary, despite the somewhat dated sigils. Where did you find this?”

“Where I found it doesn’t matter. What matters is how to get out of it.” Bill said sternly, trying to keep the lawyer focused.

“Well, so far as I can tell these bricks seem to come into play and –“ Loophole looked up with a gasp, looking far too delighted. “Bricks. This is for you.”

“No it isn’t.” Bill lied sharply, not liking the enthusiasm in the lawyer’s tone.

“Yes it is, every part of this structure was designed with you in mind, this is – this is a masterpiece of controlled design, this is – whoever made this vessel certainly enjoys putting you at a loss, I’ll say that for them.” Loophole’s moustache twitched happily. “This is a lovingly crafted ode to your imprisonment, a marvellously restrictive flesh cage. It’s flattering, but pragmatic in every sense. The detail is astonishingly nuanced. I’d love to meet the designer someday and congratulate them on their work, this is a living breathing contract, right here.”

Bill sighed heavily, crossing his arms. He came here for a solution, and here was Loophole, stroking Sixer’s ego from afar. It grated against Bill’s sensibilities, partly because he knew how bloated Sixer’s esteem would get from all this praise.
It was grating to note also, that the professional opinion on the vessel was that Sixer knew exactly what he was doing when he crafted it, sleep deprived genius that he was.

Sure, he decked it out fancy, flattering Bill with the colours and the gold, and the intricate beauty, but it really was a gilded cage, restricting the very essence of all Bill’s unhindered glory.

It was a very pretty insult from Sixer, and it certainly captured Bill’s attention, among other things.

“What did -?” Keyhole asked curiously, before realising the answer, his eyes widening. “Oh.”

Sitting back in his chair, keeping his mouth shut, Keyhole knew better than to bring up the Boss’s hot button issue. Hectorgon was still trapped in the dimension of eternal screams, and he didn’t want to pull a Kryptos and antagonise the Boss. That was tempting fate, for sure.

Keyhole had been working the apparatus for Bill whenever he needed it, storing the obvious worship the Six-Fingered human made for Bill in neat little cubes, but he wasn’t aware that that worship came alongside a devious opportunistic mind, one that may have bested Bill even.

It seemed old Six Fingers presented himself as both a gift and a challenge to Bill, and it was no wonder the Boss was so obsessed with the human.

Keyhole twiddled his fingers together and kept his opinions to himself, but privately he believed that they made sort of a cute couple. Manipulative geniuses, both of them.

“See, the trouble is, it may read like a contract, but it isn’t a contract.” Bill said, gesturing to the hologram. “I never shook on it. A contract requires agreement, consideration, capacity, intention, and certainty, and I didn’t get a chance to do any of those. He just dialled me up and yanked me in.”

“Ah, but the agreement was implicit in answering the call. The precedent had been set. He called, and you answered.” Loophole explained. “Being called to embody a form, and being called for a simple chat does blur the line of intention somewhat, and consideration for what is exchanged seemed absent as well, but the capacity, and certainty are evident.”

“But a contract isn’t legitimate, legally, without all five elements met. It’s not enforceable.” Bill argued.

“If you’re here, seeking help from me, then I’d argue that it’s already been enforced.” Loophole said rather smugly.

“So tell me how to get out of it.” Bill scowled impatiently.

“Oh no. You see, there’s still the matter of my price.” Loophole held his hand out, and stroked his moustache, his eyes twinkling. “You can’t expect me to just hand you the information for free now? Not when you’re already such a detriment to my business. There is still the matter of payment.”

Bill exhaled frustration, and sunk back into his armchair, exasperated. “Fine, what’s it gonna cost me?”

“Hrmmm.” Loophole stroked his moustache for a while longer, deliberating. “There is something you could give me, that would be a definite boon in my industry, an unprecedented gift.”

“What?” Bill asked irritably.
“I want a loophole from you.” Loophole announced, gesturing at Bill as he spoke. “I want a physical representation of a cosmic ‘get-out-of-deal-free’ card. I want one foolproof deal-breaking loophole, to distribute as I see fit, for a price I deem adequate. You wouldn’t believe how much some people would pay for a foolproof way to get out of a deal with the infamous Bill Cipher.”

“You want to make a deal to break a deal, is that what I’m hearing?” Bill asked incredulously. “You want me to facilitate some deal breaker getting out of their obligations scot free, by giving you some indiscriminate loophole to use against me as you see fit, is that what you’re saying?”

“I want a cosmic loophole, from you, a single use loophole, that will break a deal, any deal, automatically, without repercussions. One loophole.”

“Ugh.” Bill massaged the side of his bricks, nursing a headache already at the very thought. Facilitating deal breakers, providing the undoing for one of his own deals, without knowing exactly what deal he would be undoing, relinquishing control over one of his deals like this – everything about the concept was just awful. “One loophole, and in exchange you’ll tell me the loophole I need to get out of that body?”

“That’s my price.” Loophole sat back in his chair, satisfied with his decision. “And no last minute catches on my behalf. I want total immunity.”

“How much are you selling this loophole for? Will I be getting a cut?” Bill asked opportunistically.

“I get to keep the proceeds. That falls under immunity.” Loophole stated pompously.

“Does it now?” Bill narrowed his eyes, unimpressed with the wily lawyer.

Loophole nodded once more, and extended his hand towards Bill, sealing the deal with finality. “That is my price. Do we have a deal?”

Bill hesitated, disliking the thought of giving anyone a loophole to escape him, to escape a deal, to enable a deal breaker, but unfortunately he was on a time limit, and he couldn’t be stuck in this body when the party rolled into town. That would make him a total laughing stock.

“Fine.” Bill extended his arm long and grasped Loophole’s hand, blue flames embracing them both. “But you better make a hell of a lot of money from that loophole, Loophole. I’m handing you a goldmine.”

“I know it’s value.” Loophole chortled, and felt the cool flames cement their deal, before he released Bill’s hand and sat back comfortably in his high-backed chair.

Sighing, Bill materialised a small glowing blue loophole between his hands, infused with the power to unscrupulously release someone from their deal with him. He let the loophole float across the table to the lawyer, and Loophole plucked the loophole out of the air, putting it neatly in his desk drawer and locking it.

“A pleasure doing business with you.” Loophole said smugly.

“How do I ditch the body?” Bill asked, impatient to be gone, rather than expose himself to the lawyer’s gloating expression one second longer.

“The bricks are the key.” Loophole explained. “Once the last brick is unbound willingly, you may discard your earthly tether and unleash yourself upon those around you in whatever form you deem fit. Unbind the last brick, and all your powers are restored to you. The protective runes may still linger, so your revenge against the caster may have to wait until the body has decomposed, but you
will not be bound to it when that last brick is undone. You will be able to jump from the body, and physically manifest yourself without it’s aid, in theory. That is your loophole."

“I’ve been heading in that direction anyway, but it’s good to know.” Bill rolled his shoulders, and floated out of the cushy chair.

“How will you coerce the caster to remove the bindings?” Loophole asked, stroking his moustache. “Surely given the individual went to such lengths to keep you hindered so spectacularly he won’t simply oblige you. It won’t be easy, to change the mind of your jailer.”

“You’re talking to a master of the mind, kid.” Bill floated over to the door and extended his hand out to Keyhole, readying to teleport away. “Everything’s easy for me. Keyhole, are you coming?”

Keyhole got out of his chair and walked over to Loophole, holding his arms out for a hug from his cousin. “Until next time, cuz?”

Loophole made no move to reciprocate Keyhole’s familial affection, his moustache twitching snootily. “I shall be informing your mother about the company you keep, Keyhole.”

Keyhole’s shoulders slumped, the smile sliding off his face, replaced by a morose disappointment. He turned and shot Bill a pleading look.

Bill sighed, rolling his eye, before he finger gunned once in Loophole’s direction, blowing two laser focused fireballs between the loops on the lawyer’s head in an instant, leaving scorch marks in the bookcase behind him.

“HOLY AXO-“ Loophole swore, and jumped out of his chair, patting his loops down. “You – you nearly –“

“No tattling.” Bill told Loophole sternly. “I’ll know if you do. Come on Keyhole.”

Keyhole shrugged, grinning smugly at his cousin, before skipping jauntily around the office chairs, heading towards the marble door.

The Henchmaniac waved a friendly salute at his cousin, just as he rested his other hand on Bill’s arm.

“See ya later Loopy!”

With a lurch, Bill and Keyhole teleported away, disappearing in a beam of yellow light.

Loophole harrumphed, and surveyed his office, two holes burnt in his bookcase, ornaments scattered across the floor.

“Like making deals with the devil.” Loophole blustered, before leaning down to press the intercom button on his desk. “Maintenance. Get me a new bookcase. And send the cleaning crew up here.”

Loophole sat back in his chair, and swivelled it to face the window, watching the borealis shimmer pleasantly. He stroked his moustache, and mulled over the surprising visit.

Speaking to no one in particular, his voice sounding out in the empty room, Loophole scowled.

“And don’t call me Loopy. Bunch of degenerates.”
Standing in front of the metal tree in the forest, Bill pulled up his sleeve to look at the five unbound bricks left on his right arm.

His left arm was completely unbound, and those bricks Sixer freed as a Christmas present enabled Bill to teleport himself this far into the forest, though with his powers still stifled, that took its toll on Bill’s energy levels.

No matter, he’d be seeing Sixer soon, and with the help of a little worship, Bill’s power would be restored. The bricks were the key, Bill knew this now, and he had to set the wheels in motion to get them all unbound before the party started.

Even if it meant visiting the underground bunker.

Pulling his sleeve down, Bill sighed, before using his telekinesis to pull the branch lever, the metal tree sinking down into the ground as the entrance revealed itself.

The tap of his shoes echoed as he ventured further into the metal bunker, descending the stairs and following the dark corridors along to the small living space Sixer and Specs had been holed up in.

Looking around the empty room, Bill wrinkled his nose at the comparative comforts of the small cot, the industrial shelving, the unappetising looking food. Why would the two scientists would willingly spend time down here, devoid of the creature comforts they were used to, just to study some stupid metamorph? For science? What a joke.

Peering into the porthole that led to the security chamber, Bill blinked down the dark tunnel, seeing a light at the other end. Rolling his sleeves up over his palms, Bill grumbled to himself, before crawling along the cramped dusty pipe, making his way through to the other side.

Pausing at the end of the tunnel, looking out into the security room, Bill was reluctant to set foot on the floor, not wanting to trip the panels and potentially end up as a smear on the walls.

Sure, he could call out for help, but along with that being all kinds of undignified, Bill wasn’t sure McGucket would race to help him, if it was just him in the observation room. Bill didn’t trust the scientist further than he could throw him.

Feeling a little awkward, Bill stayed in the tunnel, clearing his throat before calling out.

“Sixer. Are you there? Hello.”

His voice echoed loudly enough, the pipe amplifying the noise. Bill just hoped one of the scientists on the other side could hear him.

“Hello? Sixer? Hellooooooo?”

The security room hummed ominously, the low key whirring of the mechanics that powered the cubes emanating constantly, promising it’s unerring consequences should Bill take his chances in crossing the room. He didn’t like it.

“Hey Sixer! Come and get me. Hello in there. I came all this way, are you really gonna make me wait like this?”
The security room hummed, the only response given, as far as Bill was concerned. As each second ticked by with no response, Bill felt his frustration and desperation build.

“Sixer?” Bill called out, looking across the security room. His voice pitched a little despondently. “Specs? Anyone?”

A clank sounded out from the metal door on the opposite side of the room, and the three locking mechanisms retracted before the door swung open, Fiddleford McGucket pushing his glasses up his nose to stare at Bill, who stared back at him, on his hands and knees in the tunnel opposite.

“Didja wanna come in?” Fiddleford asked Bill.

Bill hesitated, unsure whether he could trust the mechanic to lead him across the booby-trapped floor without attempting to end him.

“It’s perfectly safe.” Fiddleford added, noting Bill’s hesitation. “I’ve got it turned off. You can come in.”

Bill considered this, but couldn’t take Fiddleford at his word, knowing the scientist could easily slam the door on him while he attempted to cross the room.

Bill stuck his jaw out stubbornly, not willing to take that chance. “Can someone come and get me?”

“You just —” Fiddleford looked at Bill, disbelieving, before he huffed out a frustrated breath, not willing to put up with Bill’s hijinks, his patience having already been tested enough with Stanford lately. He held up a finger to Bill. “Give me a minute.”

McGucket turned and walked away from the door, closing it just to. Bill pouted, given no recourse but to wait.

“Stanford.” Fiddleford’s voice sounded out over the intercom. “You’ve got a visitor. Can you get in here?”

There was a long pause, followed by the sound of the decontamination booth door opening. Ford’s voice could be heard, quietly asking F about this visitor.

“What exactly are you talking about? What visitor?”

“You just —” Fiddleford looked at Bill, disbelieving, before he huffed out a frustrated breath, not willing to put up with Bill’s hijinks, his patience having already been tested enough with Stanford lately. He held up a finger to Bill. “Give me a minute.”

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“What exactly are you talking about? What visitor?”

“Just, go look for yourself.” Fiddleford said, sounding either resigned or amused, Bill couldn’t tell.

The metal door leading to the lab swung open again, and Ford stood there, staring out across the room in confusion. Upon seeing Bill, Ford let out a bark of laughter, and pulled his fabric face mask off, grinning at his surprise visitor.

“What are you doing all the way over there?”

“Come and get me.” Bill insisted sulkily. “I’m not crossing that death trap alone.”

Striding across the lab, Ford stuffed the face mask in his trench coat pocket, before pausing about a foot away from the porthole.

“You know, I’m half tempted to leave you there.” Ford joked cheekily.

“Do it, and that’ll be the last thing you ever do.” Bill threatened, as he waved Sixer closer to him, sliding his legs out over the edge of the porthole, still not willing to touch the floor.
Bemused, Ford stepped closer to Bill, holding his arm out for the muse to steady himself with as he was climbing out of the porthole. Ford certainly didn't expect Bill to use that arm to yank him closer, before piggy backing onto him, wrapping his legs around Ford's waist.

“Bill.” Ford gritted out, trying to balance himself with Bill’s newfound weight attached to him. “You can walk across the floor, Fiddleford’s turned the mechanism off, you’re in no danger.”

“I’ll believe that when I’m out of danger.” Bill clung to Sixer, his arms looped around his neck. “Carry me. Think of it as a work out.”

Adjusting the muse in his arms, Ford reluctantly complied, looping his arms under Bill’s backside, hefting him higher. Ford’s clothing was slightly damp from the decontamination chamber, and Bill clung tightly to him regardless.

“You’re heavier than you look.”

“Rude.”

Ford carried Bill across the security room, kicking the door to the lab open gently, manoeuvring them both over the threshold to safety, before dumping Bill on the metal countertop unceremoniously.

“There. Are you happy now?”

“No.” Rubbing his rear, Bill scowled at Ford sourly. “I come all this way just to visit you, and you bruise the goods and dump me on your science slab. Talk about ungrateful.”

“Yes, speaking of, why have you come down here to visit me? Not that I’m complaining, of course.” Ford added, resting his hand on Bill’s knee comfortably.

“That sounds like a complaint.”

“No it isn’t.”

Fiddleford rolled his eyes over by the computer monitors, and picked up his files, before making his way out to the security room, giving the two of them their privacy to flirt in that obnoxious way of theirs. Though oddly enough, F was sensing some tension between them, especially on Bill’s part. Best to extricate himself from the situation.

“I’ll give you two some space. I’m gettin’ somethin’ to eat.”

Ford nodded, waving his colleague off, and F departed, closing the door behind him.

Finally alone, Ford rested his other hand on Bill’s other knee, stepping into the space between Bill’s legs, smiling obliviously at the muse.

Bill scowled at Ford, still somewhat sour at him after receiving confirmation that Ford knew exactly what he was doing when he bound Bill in this body. He had no right to act cute, to presume Bill would find him endearing.

“How’s the bruising?” Ford slid his hands along Bill’s thighs, teasing the muse, but Bill slapped his hands away.

“Don’t be cute with me. How much longer are you going to be staying down here, wasting your time?” Bill glared at Ford, before he reached up to poke Ford in the chest. “Every second you’re
down here, playing scientist, I’m back at that shack *alone* sitting on your destiny. Have you just forgotten about the portal, is that it?”

The portal was, when Bill had left it earlier, structurally completed. There just needed to be a few last-minute adjustments made by the two scientists, work that was above the skill level the construction workers possessed. It would be up and running in no time, and that realisation filled Bill with a curious mixture of dread and anticipation.

“You’ve been working on the portal.” Ford pointed out, trying his luck again, resting his hands on Bill’s knees once more, rubbing them gently. “I know it’s in good hands.”

“I am not here to do your grunt work for you!” Bill slammed his palms down on the metal desktop for emphasis, a little genuine rage leaking out. “Dammit Sixer, stop insulting me.”

“Insulting you?” Ford blinked, taken aback by Bill’s ire. “I’m not –”

“What do you call these?” Bill pulled down his sleeve, revealing the glowing bricks left on his right arm. “If not an insult? What?”

“That’s not –” Ford began, putting his hands up placatingly.

“Or did you think I wouldn’t notice, that I’d let it slide? You’re crippling me, Sixer. Every day.” Bill’s yellow eyes bored into Ford’s, searching the scientist for the remorse he was looking for, playing on Sixer’s guilt complex. “You’re content to leave me at half of what I was, trapped in that shack, in this bubble of a town, while you have the time of your life down here, *ignoring me*. What, am I not interesting enough now you’ve got a new freak to study? You’d just forget about me? Leave me hindered? Pick me up and put me down whenever you want?”

“Now, listen.” Ford held his hand up, trying to calm Bill into silence. It almost seemed like Bill was jealous of the time he spent here with the shapeshifter. “I don’t know what’s stirred you up like this, but I can assure you, I –”

“You’re supposed to be mine! Special! Better! But it’s clear you don’t care about what *I* want. You just want me to be what *you* want me to be.” Bill accused bitterly, obviously working himself up into a state. “A muse to sit on your shoulder, or pat you on the back, to lift you up while you tread me down. You don’t care about what I was, or what I am, what I *really* am, just what you want me to be. Looking how you want me to look, doing what you want me to do. After all I’ve done for you, in the end you just don’t ca-”

“I do.” Ford grabbed Bill’s face in both his hands, capturing his attention and diverting his diatribe. Ford’s brows furrowed, and he spoke earnestly. “I do care. Don’t you dare say that I don’t.”

Bill frowned, his eyes flitting across Sixer’s face searchingly. “What were you expecting when you called me down here? An assistant? A slave? A plaything? What?”

“I – no! None of those things.” Ford exclaimed, horrified, putting his hands on Bill’s shoulders. “I was expecting a friend. Bill, what’s gotten into you?”

Bill frowned, his eyes flitting across Sixer’s face searchingly. “What were you expecting when you called me down here? An assistant? A slave? A plaything? What?”

“I – no! None of those things.” Ford exclaimed, horrified, putting his hands on Bill’s shoulders. “I was expecting a friend. Bill, what’s gotten into you?”

Bill huffed out a breath and gave Ford a reproachful look. “Give me a reason to believe you want the real Bill, and not the shell you’ve trapped me in. Give me a reason to believe you’re being genuine.”

“Is that what this is about?” Ford rubbed Bill’s shoulders, his tone still baffled. “Bill, I’m sorry I left you alone in the shack, I didn’t mean to upset you. I was just furthering my study, this is an unprecedented opportunity. Now, of course I want you, I summoned you here for that very reason.
I’ve wanted you here with me ever since you were just an angular dream. Right down to the ridiculous bowtie and top hat. You don’t need to react like this. It’s only been a couple of days, I’m not abandoning you.”

Ford was thrown by Bill’s sudden vehemence, he’d thought things had been going well between them, that things were steady, stable. They’d been progressing so smoothly in terms of physicality, in terms of affection, and trust. It seemed like a wild overreaction, that after a couple of days left to fend for himself, Bill already felt so insecure. Perhaps Ford had underestimated just how dependant the muse was on him still. He’d left him vulnerable, by leaving him alone.

Bill chewed on his bottom lip for a while, still watching Ford suspiciously. Ford cupped the side of Bill’s face and tried to impress upon him his sincerity, hoping that would soothe over Bill’s little tantrum, over his abandonment issues.

“How do you feel about me?”

Ford blinked, struck dumb, his mouth hanging open, surprised by the question.

“Oh…you-” Stanford felt heat creep up into his cheeks, and he cleared his throat. “Surely you already know.”

Bill continued to stare at Ford stubbornly, not making it easy on him.

“I –” Ford struggled to get the words out, his throat feeling tight, anxious butterflies creeping up his oesophagus.

There was something incredibly unnerving about putting yourself out there first, about splaying all your cards on the table verbally. Ford had been avoiding it, to be honest. He wasn’t sure he could deal if his feelings weren’t reciprocated by the god, if he could continue on like this with the muse. It would change everything.

“Do you even care?” Bill queried stubbornly, his chin jutting out, before he pointed to his arm again. “Because if you did, you wouldn’t be leaving me trapped like this.”

“Of course I care.” Ford said, exhaling his tension loudly. This was just about the bricks, and somehow that was a relief. “Of course I do. Listen, if that’s what you’re upset about, I can unbind another brick for you now, if you like.”

“Another five.” Bill said, showing Ford his arm. “There are five bricks.”

“Let’s just tackle this one at a time.” Ford insisted, putting his hand on Bill’s arm. “You didn’t have to come all the way down here just to ask for that. Surely it can wait a little while.”

Shifting on the tabletop, Bill looked up through his eyelashes at Ford. “Maybe I came to see you.”
“To yell at me.” Ford muttered, but looped his arms around the contrary muse’s waist, tugging him closer to the edge of the table affectionately.

“Well, who else can I yell at when you’re not around.” Bill joked wryly, and looped his arms around Sixer’s shoulders, capitulating on the affection Sixer promised, deviating from his plan to stay mad at the human until he complied. It was hard to stay mad at Sixer, despite his arrogance.

“You did miss me.” Ford murmured at the muse, leaning in close to Bill’s face. “I knew you would miss me.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.” Bill shrugged, not willing to admit to it, knowing how smug the scientist would be.

“I told you so.” Ford hummed, proving Bill right.

Really, what had he done to deserve Sixer, to have Sixer inflicted on him like this. Sure, he’d done some bad things before, but this was karmic overkill, really. The scientist truly was awful, the most arrogant, egotistical person Bill had ever met. He had the nerve to presume he had an effect on Bill, and what’s worse was that it was true.

Despite wanting to wring his infuriatingly smug form out like a towel for what he had done to Bill, forcing him down here, binding him to this body, Bill couldn’t help the oblique sort of attraction that was slowly becoming undeniable. He was obsessed with the human.

“You are infuriating.” Bill whispered, threading his fingers through Ford’s hair as he leant in to kiss him.

Ford hummed his response against Bill’s lips, kissing him soundly, managing to sound smug without words.

All Bill’s frustrated ire melted away from him, melted into the kiss. It was with reluctant gusto that he reciprocated, meaning to stay angry, but failing miserably. Sixer just managed to bring out the best in Bill somehow, even when he was being the worst.

Plastered close to Sixer’s chest, having slid right up to the edge of the table so he could wrap his legs around the human, Bill sighed bliss into the kiss, until finally Ford pulled away, a victorious glint in his eyes.

“And how do you feel about me?” He asked, opportunistic, still trying to get Bill to confess before he had to.

“I hate you.” Bill said, a smirk hinting at his lips.

“And yet, you came all this way just to visit me.” Ford teased, hugging Bill obnoxiously in his arms.

“Stop.” Bill whacked Ford’s arm, trying to wriggle out of his grasp, smiling despite himself. “You’re not funny. You smug, irascible, Sixer! Ack!”

In his enthusiasm, Ford squeezed Bill so tight he fell off the work bench, stumbling against the human.

“Sorry.” Ford chuckled, but reached out to hold Bill’s hand, before tugging him towards the decontamination room. “Since you’re here, you should come and meet Shifty. He’s been growing phenomenally.”
“If I go meet your grub, will you unbind a brick for me?” Bill asked, unimpressed with the thought of meeting Sixer’s pet metamorph.

“Absolutely.” Ford nodded, pulling Bill along with him eagerly, considering their argument resolved. “I can set up the ritual circle in one of the tunnels in the storage room.”

Following Ford through the decontamination doors, Bill flinched at the spray of water, steam rising from his form the instant the jets stopped, finding the whole process undignified.

Ford quickly put on his face mask, adjusting it, before he tugged Bill across the cavern, bringing him to stop in front of Shifty’s cage.

“Bill, this is Shifty. Shifty, Bill.” Ford said, smiling behind his mask.

“Hello.” Bill said flatly to the grub in the cage, who was blinking up at this new form with curiosity. Ignoring Shifty, Bill turned to Sixer demandingly. “We’ve met. Now go set up that circle.”

Patting Bill on the shoulder, Ford complied, heading off towards one of the tunnels to bleed out a ritual circle. “I’ll leave you two to chat.”

Bill watched Sixer go, shaking his head at the human, before turning back to sneer at the shapeshifter.

Shifty’s form was trembling with the strain of trying to morph into Bill’s form, a new form, somehow finding it difficult to replicate the DNA of the dark-skinned man standing in front of him.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you.” Bill raised an eyebrow at the ambitious shifter, watching its translucent skin turn a mustardy yellow. “It didn’t work out so well for your brother.”

Shifty paused and blinked up at Bill, tilting his head. He stopped his shapeshifting attempt, and watched Bill closely.

“Oh, you can understand me, can you?” Bill questioned slyly, before he bent down, resting his hands on his knees, talking down to the grub. “Sentience already. Gosh, they grow up so fast. It’s almost a shame you won’t make it past tomorrow.”

The shapeshifter rumbled a confused sounding noise, before clasping onto the bars of the cage with its pincer like claws. Shifty clacked his pincers demandingly, and spoke, it’s guttural voice chiming out.

“Why?”

“Language too. Good for you.” Bill cooed in a patronising tone, before he held his hand up to his mouth like he was imparting a secret. “Well, you didn’t hear it from me, but let’s just say the skinny scientist with the round glasses wants to freeze you like a test subject. He wants to lock you in stasis and throw away the key.”

Shifty made a low growling sound in the back of his throat, baring his teeth in fear. He tried to pull at the steel bars of his cage, attempting to wrench them open.

“I’d escape too, if I were you.” Bill nodded at the creature. “But you’ll have no luck getting out past the next room. Specs has a security system that would squash you like the bug you are.”

Shifty blinked his red eyes at Bill and growled again.
“Escape.” Shifty insisted, glaring up at Bill intently. He shifted forms in his agitation, turning into a pill bug, a porcupine, and Fiddleford briefly in turn.

Bill clicked his fingers and pointed to Shifty. “See, that right there is how you get out. You’ve gotta drive a wedge between Sixer and Specs. Breed distrust. That’s your ticket out of here.”

Shifty grinned at Bill, the sinister expression looking out of place on Fiddleford’s face.

“That’s your ticket out of here.” Shifty mimicked Bill’s tone seamlessly, nodding at him.

“You wanna pitch it different for Specs. More hillbilly nerd. Try –“ Bill cleared his throat and fell back on his experience possessing humans, throwing his voice. Mimicking F’s voice perfectly, Bill recited. “Gosh darn it, why, I can’t work in this confounded hellhole with you a minute longer. I quit the project!”

“I quit the project!” Shifty repeated, hitting the tone perfectly.

“That’s right.” Bill praised Shifty, smiling at the caged image of Fiddleford.

Shifty turned into a small Pomeranian, wagging his tail in response to the praise.

“Bill, the circle’s ready.” Stanford’s voice called out from one of the tunnels.

“I’m coming.” Bill called out to Ford, before turning back to face the metamorph. “Oh, and one last thing. I don’t care what you do to Specs to get out of here, but if you harm one hair on Sixer’s head, you won’t just end up frozen in a cryo-tube, I’ll burn you alive.”

Bill added emphasis to his words by letting blue flames creep up the edges of Shifty’s cage, the heat of the flames very real, raising the metal’s temperature, causing the shifter to yip in fear, burning his paws.

Shifty looked up at this terrifying being, awe and fear competing against each other, regarding Bill with wide eyes.

Framed in flames, Bill’s yellow eyes smiled down at the shifter, malice shining through, glowing clear as day.

“Sixer is mine. Got it?”

Shifty whined in fear, and nodded, rearing away from the encroaching flames.

Suddenly the fire disappeared, and Bill stood up, looking pleased with himself.

“Good. Let’s hope you’re not as disappointing as your brother was.”

With a wave, Bill jogged away, down the tunnel to meet Sixer and unbind that promised brick.

Shifty watched him leave, and quivered in his cage, first with fear, then with rage. He morphed back into his true form and gripped the bars with his pincers, his deep voice growling out into the empty cavern.

“I’ll burn you alive. Got it.” His teeth clacked together, and his form simmered, trying to replicate Bill’s terrifying majesty, failing dismally. His efforts only made him an oozing pile of yellow flesh, seeking hands, and wide weeping eyes.

Growling, Shifty morphed back into Fiddleford, and practised plan B.
“I’ll quit the project. Gosh darn it. I’ll quit the project! Hellhole. I quit the project.”

The tunnel glowed with red light, and things began unravelling.

With one more brick unbound, Bill was considerably happier, and left the bunker in a far better mood than when he’d arrived.

He’d even agreed with Fiddleford, insisting that Stanford freeze the shifter and return home the next day. Fiddleford seemed surprised by Bill’s agreement initially, since Bill hardly ever took his side, but after unintentionally eavesdropping on Bill and Stanford’s whispered farewell F had a pretty good idea of what motivated Bill to do so.

Let’s just say Bill missed Stanford. A lot.

Stanford was going over the information they’d compiled on Shifty so far, filing it neatly into folders for his own personal reference. So far the scientist had done everything from double checking his own findings, to cleaning the lab, just to procrastinate telling Shifty his goodbyes.

Fiddleford watched Stanford recount the pages in one folder for the fourth time and sighed, before pushing himself up out of his chair.

“I’m going to go check the nitrogen levels and look over everything one last time. Are you coming?”

“I’ll just –” Ford hesitated, looking up at the Fiddleford briefly before ducking his head back into the manila folder. “Be a few more minutes.”

If Stanford wanted to hide from his responsibilities, that was on him, but either way, today would be the day that horrible little creature would be sealed away. It was difficult to say goodbye to a pet, but this had to happen.

Fiddleford shrugged. “Suit yourself.”

He walked through the doors to the decontamination unit, the cleansing spray brisk but necessary, and closed the door behind him.

F paced out into the storage room and walked up onto the podium, checking the cryo-tube they’d be using today for the nth time. F flicked several switches off standby mode, getting them ready for immediate use, and, once he was satisfied everything was functional, he dusted his hands off.

“There.” F rested his hands on his hips and turned to survey Shifty’s cage. “Now we just need – “

The cage was empty.

Not just empty, it was destroyed. The steel bars looked like they’d been weakened then prised open from the inside out, curling away from the structure like petals on a flower.

Shifty was nowhere to be seen.
“Uh oh.” Fiddleford clicked his tongue, the horror abstractly playing at the back of his mind, outwardly remaining pragmatic. He sounded far too calm for someone trapped in a room with a feral shapeshifter. The reality of the situation hadn’t set in yet. “That’s a problem.”

Fiddleford climbed down the podium steps, but as he reached the bottom, the missing shifter in question appeared, having hid behind the cryotube, rounding the corner to face F.

Fiddleford’s abstract horror began to solidify slightly now that he was face to face with an uncaged version of himself, the shifter staring him down with a manic grin.

F took one step back, getting ready to run, not wanting a repeat of the Gremloblin incident, a trauma born from listening to Stanford, who seemed to believe that monsters weren’t dangerous, and not running away fast enough.

The shifter tilted his head, his eyelids blinking sideways, fake-Fiddleford’s eyes parting unnaturally, revealing terrifying red irises.

“That’s a problem.” The shifter said, mimicking F’s voice.

“Oh sweet tarnation.” Fiddleford croaked, before turning on his heel to run for it.

The shifter lunged. F felt the creature’s hands upon him, holding him down, clawing at him, striking him soundly.

He knew listening to Stanford was a bad idea.

Everything went black.

When F came to, he found himself tied up tightly. The rope he normally used to lasso the lever to the bunker down was biting into his wrists and ankles cruelly. He seemed to be shoved in one of the food storage cabinets, the metal doors hanging open.

F struggled, trying to wriggle out of his bindings, to no avail.

“Oh sweet tarnation.” The shifter loomed over Fiddleford, his voice a perfect mockery of F’s, before shifting his tone to mimic Stanford’s. “Someone’s awake. How are we doing today?”

“STANFORD! STANFORD HELP!” F yelled out, hoping Ford would hear him.

The shifter slammed a hand over F’s mouth with lightning fast reflexes, blinking those sideways eyelids at him, growling venomously.

“There’s no help for you.” Shifty spoke, his voice much lower than Fiddleford had ever remembered, those red eyes glinting dangerously. “You were going to lock me in this hellhole forever. Frozen in a cryo-tube. I want to escape.”

His words sounded disjointed, cobbled together from sentences Shifty had heard during his captivity. His tone shifted oddly, the cadence indicating he’d picked up certain words from different people at different times, and was only now just making sense of them.
Fiddleford’s muffled protests were silenced when Shifty’s hand – a perfect copy of Fiddleford’s hand – began to warp, sharp claws with needle like points grew out of the nail beds, slicing F’s cheek.

Fiddleford sucked in a terrified breath, and silenced his cries for help, watching the shifter warily, cooperating. Blood trickled down his cheek from a cut just below his eye, and F couldn’t help his shivering, adrenaline and fear seeping from him as he attempted to remain still.

“Tell me how to escape.” Shifty growled at F. “I want my ticket out of here.”

Shifty released F’s mouth and watched him suck in terrified breaths, regaining his equilibrium, eyeing Shifty warily.

When Fiddleford didn’t reply immediately, Shifty snarled, and raised his hand at F, jagged needle claws making the scientist flinch and stutter.

“I – you – you just walk on out the door. That’s all.” F lied, hoping Shifty would leave him be. “You just walk right on out.”

“Liar.” Shifty curled his hands on the cabinet doors, bending the metal in his frustration. “Your security system would squash me like a bug.”

“How did you –” F’s shoulders jumped, cowering away from Shifty as the creature slammed his hand against the cabinet door. “AHH!”

“Tell me how to escape.” Shifty bared his teeth at F, and they looked far sharper on the metamorph than they ever did in Fiddleford’s jaw.

“Th-th-the code!” F cried out, wincing away from the shifter’s teeth. “There’s a code.”

“Where?” Shifty pressed, gripping the cabinet door tighter, leaving indents in the metal.

“S-S-Stanford wrote it down. It’s in the journal.”

“The journal.” Shifty made a low sort of clicking noise, that sounded like some sort of reptilian purr, and his eyes blinked sideways again, looking covetously to the door of the lab.

F quivered dreadfully, guilt washing over him, fearing he’d just endangered his friend, endangered his life. Not that Stanford seemed to care about the multitude of ways he’d been endangering F, bringing him in on this project, making him study monsters and calling it science. Still, despite F’s terror, he still felt worry for his friend. It was in his nature to.

“You – you’re not gonna hurt him, are you?” F asked timidly, drawing the shifters attention back from the door.

“I won’t harm one hair on his head.” Shifty replied with a sickening smile, before he crouched down low, ripping Fiddleford’s shoe off his foot, yanking his sock off. “But you – if you lied – I’m coming back for you.”

Shifty stuffed Fiddleford’s musty sock in the scientist’s mouth, gagging him effectively with the foul-tasting fabric. F coughed and choked back a sob, trying to spit out the sock, but Shifty stroked his needle pointed fingers across F’s face, grazing his skin with the sharp metal threateningly.

F froze, staring fearfully up at the shapeshifter, the creature wearing his face.
“You will die down here.” Shifty cooed in Stanford’s voice, promising Fiddleford cruelly. He petted F’s frighten face again, slicing another thin cut along his cheekbone, blood welling to the surface.

Shifty’s tongue darted out, long and snakelike, and he licked the dribble of blood from F’s face. Tears began trickling down F’s cheeks as the fright set in fully, the desperation, the terror, making him quake harder than ever.

Retracting the needle claws, Shifty straightened up, making F’s image harmless and approachable once more. Shifty cleared his throat, and began practising F’s voice, hitting the mark perfectly.

“Hiya Stanford, mind if I see your journal? Can I take a look? Stanford quick, I need to see that journal. Is that your research, mind if I take a look? Hiya Sixer, help me out.”

F watched Shifty with wide eyes and wet cheeks, shivering at the thought that unless Stanford saw through Shifty’s manipulative act, he very well may die down here. Once again his life was on the line, and Stanford’s observational skills were his only hope for rescue. Oh dear.

Shifty put his hands on the cabinet doors and slowly closed them on F, shutting him in inescapable darkness.

“I’ll be coming back for you.”

Ford sighed, and reluctantly closed the last file on Shifty, sealing it up with tape and slotting it in the filing cabinet.

It was difficult, going over photos and anecdotes of Shifty’s growth and progression, reminiscing on the bond he formed with the strange alien, knowing that after today none of it would matter.

However close he’d become with the strange little creature, he had to seal him away. Fiddleford and Bill were right, the more Shifty learned and grew, in sentience and strength, the more dangerous he was. A liability. Not a pet.

Ford had to reluctantly agree with his two colleagues, after Shifty’s rather ominous attempt to seek out the dangerous forms contained in Ford’s journal. Shifty’s desire to look within the pages wasn’t something he could be trained out of, it wasn’t a matter of obedience.

At this point Shifty was thinking for himself and Ford could hardly justify continuing to treat this intelligent self-aware being like a puppy.

But he couldn’t unleash him on the world either.

Shifty’s powers, while a revolution in terms of scientific DNA modelling, were too dangerous to be turned on the unsuspecting citizens of Gravity Falls.

Ford had a responsibility to protect the people of this town, whether or not they knew it, and he couldn’t allow Shifty to infiltrate humanity, no matter how much he attempted to teach the shifter right from wrong.
Shifty had an appetite for the more affronting, terrifying creatures, it seemed. He couldn’t content himself with morphing into puppy dogs and kittens forever.

Ford slid the filing cabinet closed, the suspension folder detailing his experiments on Shifty rolling out of sight. He locked the cabinet, and felt a sort of empty finality in the action.

Clapping his hands on his knees, Ford pushed himself up out of his chair, when the decontamination chamber door flew open, Fiddleford coughing as he walked through the spray.

“S-Stanford.” Fiddleford coughed, holding his hand up over his mouth. “Oh, sweet tarnation. I’ve got the worst sore throat.”

F heaved and rattled out several more horse sounding coughs, and Ford’s brow furrowed with concern.

“That does sound quite bad. Maybe drink some water.”

“Say, is there any chance you’ve got a remedy for me in that journal of yours?” F croaked, watching Ford closely as he coughed again behind his hand.

“You don’t need a remedy. It’s just dusty in here, have a bit of water, see how you feel. You’ll be fine.” Ford said absently, tidying the pens on the countertop, putting them neatly in the tin he kept on the control panel.

“I don’t think water will do it. I really think I need a peek at that book of yours, see if you’ve got a fix for me.” Fiddleford insisted, coughing again for emphasis.

“Now Fiddleford, I don’t see what sort of ‘fix’ you’d be likely to find in one of my journals, but it probably won’t be the sort of fix you’re looking for.” Stanford scoffed, waving dismissively at F. “You’re more likely to find a solution in the first aid cabinet, just use a cough drop.”

“No.” Fiddleford’s voice sounded rather gruff for a moment there, and Ford paused, looking up in confusion. F cleared his throat and continued. “No, I really think I should check in your journal. Can you go and get it for me?”

“Now?” Ford frowned, and narrowed his eyes at F.

“Go and get it.” Fiddleford responded, sticking his jaw out stubbornly.

Ford scoffed, offended, before he gestured to the decontamination chamber. “I know what this is about. You don’t have to concoct some fanciful fake illness to make me go in there. I know I have to say my goodbyes to Shifty, and I’m getting around to it in my own time. I had hoped you wouldn’t rush me. I know you didn’t care for him at all, but its rather more difficult for me.”

Fiddleford seemed somewhat taken aback, staring at Stanford in surprise, his eyes wide.

“Look, I’m sorry for snapping at you.” Ford started, taking Fiddleford’s shocked expression as evidence that he’d been a little too harsh with his colleague. “But you have to understand that when you form a bond with something, a genuine bond, you can’t just throw that away on a whim. It doesn’t matter how dangerous he is. I still feel like I’m betraying him. He trusts me, and I’m supposed to go in there and tell him everything’s alright while we push him in a cryo-tube and throw away the key.”

Fiddleford stared at Ford with a conflicted expression, most likely empathising with him.
Ford pinched the bridge of his nose and sighed. “I know, I’m getting emotional. It’s not professional, and I apologise. You were right, you’ve been right from the beginning. I was foolish to form attachments with a test subject, and you’re right to be mad at me. I get it.”

Fiddleford’s brows furrowed, and he opened his mouth, before closing it, seeming deeply disappointed. Eventually he cleared his throat, repeating.

“The journal.”

Ford put his hands on his hips, and tsked, before gesturing to one of the metal stools in the lab. “Fine. I may as well bring it out while I’m in there. You sit. Wait there. I’ll go say my goodbyes and come back with the journal. Might as well rip the band-aid off.”

Fiddleford walked over to the metal stool indicated, gripping the bottom of the stool, sitting on it with awkward movements. He made a sound that could have been a smothered cough, it sounded quite morose.

“And I’ll get you a cough drop too.” Ford muttered grumpily, heading for the decontamination chamber. “Absolutely ridiculous.”

The decontamination chamber door locked closed, and Shifty waited.

Grumbling, Stanford crossed the storage room to one of the lockers, where he’d left his journal when he was last in here, writing notes on Shifty’s temperament.

As he was unlocking the door, he heard a strange noise that sounded out of place with the hum and whirr of the cryo-tube technology.

An arrhythmic thudding, and what sounded like muffled sobs and screams, emanating from one of the food storage cabinets.

Ford blinked, and put his journal in his trench coat pocket, before walking over to the food storage cabinet, observing it warily.

Another muffled scream sounded out, followed by sobs that sounded eerily familiar.

Ford hurried over, and swung the cabinet door open.

Inside the cabinet, bound with rope and gagged with his own sock, sat Fiddleford, crying out desperately for help. At first he flinched away from Ford, before squinting at him, inspecting him with red rimmed eyes.

“What the devil?” Ford exclaimed, and bent down, immediately reaching to pull the sock out of Fiddleford’s mouth, working on untying the ropes. “F, what happened to you? Are you – who did this?”

F coughed, and moved his tongue around, his mouth dry and musty from the sock-gag. Glaring at Ford, lamenting his genius colleague’s idiocy Fiddleford croaked out.
“Who d’you think Stanford? Your p-p-pet monster! He was gonna kill me!”

Rubbing his hand as Stanford untied his wrists, moving onto his feet, F wiped his cheeks, still shaking with fear, anger and adrenaline.

“I told you this was a bad idea. I told you. This is your fault.”

“Well, how was I to know he’d attack you and lock you in a closet.” Ford replied, tugging the ropes away from his assistant as quickly as he was able. “I just wanted to get some research in before I lost the opportunity to study the creature. If studying a creature who turns into a Pomeranian is point A it takes one hell of a leap to get to point B, being a homicidal rampage.”

“One hell of a leap?” Fiddleford countered incredulously. “He’s only been out of his cage for a few hours, and already he attacks me! You’re makin’ excuses for that monster?”

“I – no. You’re right.” Ford took in the bleeding cuts on F’s cheek, and felt his guilt compound in an instant. “I’m sorry, this should never have happened to you.”

“Darn tootin’ it shouldn’t have. I didn’t sign up on this project to be traumatised by monsters Stanford. I thought we were here to do good.”

“We are doing good.” Ford promised F passionately. “We are. Once the portal goes online we’ll be doing so much good, the world will change for the better because of it. I’m sorry that this happened to you Fiddleford, I’m sorry – you – it is my fault. I should have listened to you.”

Fiddleford’s breathing was still ragged, and he hiccupped on a sob, taking in Ford’s apology.

“Shifty tricked us.” Ford continued, disconcerted. “He’s there waiting in the lab, ready to steal my journal and leave us both down here to rot. We can’t let that happen.”

“We gotta freeze him. For good this time.” Fiddleford clambered out of the cabinet on shaky legs, and began stretching his back out.

“I know.” Ford helped F out, his arms ready to steady F, worried he would fall. “The question is, how do we get him in there. He won’t go willingly, and if he’s broken free from his cage, he’s likely stronger than we anticipated.”

“He wants the journal, right?” Fiddleford questioned.

“But we can’t just give it to him. The forms in here are far too dangerous, if he sees a single page he could easily kill us both.” Ford warned.

“So, we give him this.” Fiddleford reached into the cabinet he’d become intimately familiar with in the past hour, and pulled out a faded plumbing manual that had been digging into his back, bound in the same red leather as Ford’s journal.

“That’s close enough that it just might work.” Ford nodded triumphantly, grabbing the manual. “You’ve still got the spray paint we used to mark out the different tunnels from before, yes?”

“In the lockers on the other side.” F pointed out to the other storage lockers across the room. “You’ll have to go get it. The cameras got a blind spot in this here corner, but you’ll be right in plain sight over there. If he’s in the observation room like you say he is, he’ll be watchin’ us like a hawk.”

“True.” Ford nodded. He looked over to the cabinet, and picked up the rope, shoving it in there.
“Are you alright to stay in there? He won’t see you if you’re hidden.”

“I feel like I’ve been trapped in there long enough.” Fiddleford sniffed, and wiped his face again. “But if it’ll get us outta here quicker, I’ll do it.”

Fiddleford climbed back into the cabinet, and tried his best to get comfortable, pulling the doors closed so he could peek out. Through the sliver in the door he saw Stanford’s earnest expression, looking down at him.

“Just stay quiet, no matter what. I’ll be right back to get you out of here when it’s over.”

“Once you get him in there, press the red button.” Fiddleford whispered out to Ford. “I’ve already taken care of the rest. It should be all up and runnin’ ready to go.”

“Got it.” Ford nodded, and headed off to grab the spray paint. He walked out of F’s line of sight, and F waited, sitting in the dark with only a sliver of light letting him know what was going on outside.

He felt the dried blood on his face, and shuddered, remembering the needles.

He was dreading the nightmares he’d have tonight.

Ford returned to the observation room, drawing on every last reserve of deception he had to remain ‘calm’. He’d been told repeatedly (by Bill) that he had a terrible poker face, but as this was literally a matter of life and death, Ford hoped he could be convincingly casual enough to pull this off.

Striding through the doors, Ford noticed that ‘F’ was involuntarily shaking in his chair, his patience drawn thin. Ford could sense that Shifty was on edge, he had bent indents into the metal of the stool with his bare hands. He was stronger than Ford had anticipated.

F breezing through, Ford deposited the packet of cough drops on the countertop beside Shifty.

“There, this should help.”

Shifty curled his lip at the packet of lozenges, and turned to look at Stanford.

“Where’s the journal?”

Leaning casually against the counter, Ford tugged his shirt sleeves neatly out from under his trench coat, trying his best to look nonchalant.

“It seems in my carelessness I left my journal in the cryonics room. If it’s really so essential for you, you’re welcome to go and get it, but I think you’ll find those lozenges more effective than anything else.”

Barely waiting for Ford to finish speaking, Shifty darted off the stool, racing into the other room, hunting the journal.

Ford followed him, keeping pace behind the being, chasing him into the storage room.
He saw Shifty lunge into the cryo-tube, his movements too fast, unnatural on Fiddleford’s short legged body, and Stanford sprinted the last few yards between them, slamming his hand down on the red button on the side of the cryo-tube, sealing the door on Shifty, the liquid nitrogen solution filtering into the tube quickly.

Shifty spun around, still clutching the ‘journal’ to face Ford, an expression of utter betrayal gracing ‘Fiddleford’s’ face. He looked down at the flowing nitrogen, then flipped open the book, searching the pages for a form to take that would free him from his frozen fate.

Seeing nothing but plumbing instructions, realising he’d been duped, Shifty howled, screaming his rage out in the reinforced chamber.

His form twisted, becoming the large translucent skinned grub Ford had seen before, beating his pincer like fists against the glass, shifting again, into a horrifically mutated version of Fiddleford, with red eyes and vertical eyelids. He snarled at Ford, and shifted back into the large grublike creature, finally morphing into a form Stanford had never seen him take before.

The liquid nitrogen was taking hold, freezing Shifty where he stood, the ice forming blue crystals of containment around the creature.

The last form Stanford saw his beloved former pet take was an abstract pile of oozing yellow flesh, wiry black arms reaching from the morose pile of goo, scraping and scratching at the glass, whining desperately while several long lashed slitted eyes spun wildly around, tears freezing in place as they leaked water from the frantic final gaze of Ford’s pet.

Shifty’s concluding screech of pain petered off from his peculiar final form, that strange fleshy pile of limbs and eyes, and the glass fogged up with frost as the liquid nitrogen cryonically froze Shifty, obscuring Stanford’s view of the creature once and for all.

Ford panted from the exertion it took to make it across the room in time, and struggled to catch his breath, resting his hand against the glass, feeling a flicker of remorse wash over him.

Pressing his forehead against the glass, Ford managed to do what he’d been procrastinating all this time.

“Goodbye Shifty.” He murmured, before walking away.

As Fiddleford and Stanford collected their belongings from the lab, sealing off the security measures as they went, Fiddleford attempted to control the shaking he still suffered, having made it through yet another traumatic experience in Stanford’s employ.

“I think its best we put this all behind us.” Ford insisted, as he luged the boxes of their belongings up the staircase, depositing them out onto the forest floor. “We can return after the portal is completed, but for now, this whole ‘storage’ concept is just too dangerous.”

“Oh.” Fiddleford said, to exhausted for speech honestly.

After this terrifying encounter, the last thing he felt like doing was humouring Stanford, who seemed to think they’d be coming back down here someday. F wouldn’t return to the bunker unless
the sky was falling in.

“I can’t imagine what could have happened if Shifty managed to escape. The thought is just too horrifying to consider.” Ford wiped his forehead, and put the last box of research into the back of Fiddleford’s truck. “We’re lucky we made it out alright, between the two of us. That could have gone much worse.”

“Yep.” F said blankly, climbing into the driver’s seat of the truck, ready to hightail it out of here.

“I think Bill is right. It’s best we just focus on completing the portal, and we can worry about the rest later. The portal should be our sole priority. Nothing else.” Ford said, mostly to himself at this point, nodding as he climbed into the passenger’s seat beside F, putting on his seatbelt.

F turned the keys in the ignition, and set the truck rumbling off down the track, keen to get home and clean his cuts properly. He didn’t want to court infection, and who knew what was in Shifty’s saliva.

“I shudder to think what would happen if someone else was caught down there with him.” Ford continued, looking out the window as they drove off. “We barely got out alive, and you almost paid the price, all because I was too foolish to see the danger right in front of me.”

F wanted to agree, but he knew that if he did he’d be driving more nails into the coffin of Ford’s guilt complex than he cared to. Instead he made an ambivalent noise, staring out the windscreen as he turned the truck onto the road, driving back to the shack.

Ford rested his hand on his chin, and leaned against the car door, looking out the side window as the forest whipped by. He sighed, frowning, and spoke regretfully.

“Honestly, I just want to forget any of this happened.”

Fiddleford gripped the wheel a little tighter, and drove on home.

“Me too, Stanford. Me too.”

Bill and Stanford were in the kitchen, chatting as Stanford finished cooking dinner, the first home cooked meal they’d had in weeks, considering how long they’d been down there, studying the shifter.

Fiddleford could hear them from the living room, already laughing about the horrors they’d faced down in that bunker.

It was so easy for them. It wasn’t for everyone else.

Hunched over the telephone, Fiddleford held the handset close to his face and listened to the dial tone, his back turned to the kitchen, trying to remain inconspicuous.

The phone rang for several seconds, before the recipient picked up.

“Hello?”
“Listen Ivan, I’ve changed my mind. Gather those friends of yours at the Natural History Museum, in the room we met in before. Tomorrow night. And make sure no one sees you gettin’ there. This needs to remain a secret.”

“Absolutely Mr McGucket, absolutely.” Ivan enthused on the other end of the call. “I’ll arrange it right away.”

“Good.” Fiddleford replied, looking over his shoulder at Bill and Stanford in the kitchen, oblivious to his call. “I know it took me a while, but I thought about what you said, and you’re right. I’m done not helpin’ people for Stanford’s sake. It’s time I helped myself.”

“I knew you were a good person, Mr McGucket, I knew it.”

“So, we’re doin’ this. But if we’re goin’ to be doin’ this, we’re doin’ this right.” Fiddleford turned back to the phone call, turning his back on Stanford’s frivolous wishes.

“We’ve gotta be unseen.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter was INTENSE! So much happening. Shifty missed the taste of orange juice, and Loophole was a visual pun in the making for a long time. The perfect name for an interstellar contracts lawyer. Also that economic boom on Central Logos was devastating to the planet’s eco-system, and that's a three pun zinger.

This chapter is dedicated to tumblr user knittedstories, who made the most beautiful watercolour piece from the camping scene. I love it, thank you friend.

Let me know how you enjoyed this chapter, we've got maybe two more chapters to go until this portal goes live, who else is on the edge of their seat? Hahah, I know I am.
Love isn't easy but it sure is hard enough.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

All four generators were rigged up, the main construction for the infrastructure of the portal having been completed.

Bill’s assistance while Stanford and Fiddleford had been working in the bunker had been invaluable, Ford almost wished he could have been here to see it. He often wondered if his muse expended any effort at all, if he physically did the legwork, or just reclined in the lab, waving his hand while the pieces all fit together telekinetically. For all Stanford joked that Bill was incapable of working, he really came through right when he needed to.

Now that the heavy labour was taken care of, some final rewiring needed to be done, as well as several more tests involving utilising the radioactive power source. Ford and Fiddleford had been running themselves ragged keeping up with the various calculations and system checks required before the portal could go online. It seemed like in no time at all, the portal would be finished and functional, but Stanford still found the scant distance between now and his destiny frustrating.

“Test the generators. All four this time.” Ford said, adjusting his sunglasses, looking out across the lab.

Fiddleford knelt beside the fourth generator on the right side of the lab, checking one last bit of wiring, before backing up several paces, ready to flip the switch remotely.

Bill sat perched on one of the swivelling desk chairs from the observation room, spinning around on it and drinking a cocktail in the corner of the lab while Stanford directed the generator test. He’d elected to wear the proffered sunglasses this time, and sipped his cocktail through a silly straw he insisted Stanford pick up for him at the store, slurping the liquid loudly.

Fiddleford raised his hand, and began counting down on his fingers.

“Three, two, a-one. Test ignition.”

Flipping the switch, the radioactive fuel gauge began lighting up, and all four generators slowly sparked to life, that low electric hum filling the room and building gradually. The generators warmed up, gaining power steadily, until they ignited into a beam of pure energy, flowing consistently between all four generators. The energy would flow up into the generator suspended from the ceiling and rebound smoothly back down into the generator on the floor, sustaining a continual loop.

Blue light filled the lab, and the generators continued feeding into each other, efficiently gathering power. They’d disconnected them from the portal’s eye for this part of the test. They’d need to run a few more calculations before they were ready to test the machine out in its entirety.

Fiddleford turned to look at Ford, the blue light shining on the surface of his dark sunglasses, and he gave Ford a thumbs up, the electrical hum too loud to speak over.

Ford mirrored F’s gesture, smiling encouragingly, before looking over to Bill, who was watching the generators run coolly, sipping on his cocktail all the while. Ford made sure to include Bill, giving him the thumbs up too, and Bill raised his eyebrows, before clapping slowly, showing Ford his approval.
The hum of the generators increased in pitch, and suddenly Ford felt a weightless sensation begin in his belly, rising upwards. He looked over to the generators, then down at the ground, as he felt himself lifting from the surface of the earth, gravity reversing on him.

Ford floated, and first thought his sudden levitation was due to Bill, checking to see if the muse was playing a trick on him, but he wouldn’t do something like that in front of Fiddleford.

Fiddleford was floating too, lifted from the ground with a yelp, grasping onto the emergency switch box, fumbling to keep it in his hands.

Even Bill was lifted into the air, office chair and all, the liquid from his cocktail suspending in the air in front of him, a colourful bubble of three different types of liqueur and grenadine. He seemed utterly giddy to be floating, but Ford realised that wasn’t a clear indicator of whether or not this gravitational anomaly was to be expected, as Bill often complained about how the bricks bound his ability to float.

“Stanford?” Fiddleford called out to his colleague, the lack of gravity dangling him feet over head as he clung desperately to the switch box, the cord that ran from it being his only tether to the ground.

“Turn it off!” Ford yelled back, gesturing with his hands for F to cut the power.

F flipped open the safety casing and switched the power off. Slowly the electrical hum subsided, and the power flowing through the generator flickered off, the blue light blinking out abruptly.

Ford floated for a second or two after the switch was flipped, and then gravity suddenly came rushing up to meet him.

Landing on the ground, Ford was lucky enough to touch down feet first, stumbling a little. Fiddleford was deposited horizontally, falling face down into the dirt floor of the lab, spluttering. He pushed himself up off the ground, and wiped his mouth.

“What the sweet H-E-double-L was that?”

“Yay!” Bill clapped wildly, having fallen on his rear, his chair toppled to the side, but his drink miraculously having returned into his glass. “Again! Let’s do that again!”

“A gravitational anomaly.” Stanford answered F. “And a mild one, it seems.”

“Well, do we need to check the equations again? Is there a fault with the generators? I don’t –“

“That’s supposed to happen.” Bill called out cheerfully, picking himself up off the floor, and turning his chair upright, sitting on it and crossing his legs. “That’s supposed to happen, so don’t worry at all. That means it’s working.”

Fiddleford took off his sunglasses, looking between Bill and Stanford, confused. He blinked at Stanford in askance.

“I guess we’re on the right track then.” Ford shrugged, willing to take Bill at his word.

“You don’t know?” Fiddleford sounded exasperated, gesturing at Ford with frustration. “It’s your portal.”

“I know it’s my portal.” Ford said, feigning offence. “I said we’re on the right track, so we’re on the right track. Gravitational anomalies were expected, you knew this. It was in the paperwork.”
“Well, ain’t there some way of controllin’ it, or knowing when the anomalies are due to occur? You can’t just be lettin’ gravity go sideways whenever it wants, we’ve gotta be on top of this.”

“Float a little more, and you could be.” Bill pointed out cheerily, before sucking the last of his cocktail through his silly straw, rattling the ice cubes around at the bottom of the glass noisily.

“We’ll go back to the drawing board then. Maybe compile a sensor of sorts, or an anomaly predictor, so if we can’t control it we can at least be prepared for it.” Ford decided, rubbing his chin as he thought. “Though I’m not eager for any more delays.”

“Well, I ain’t eager to see this whole thing blow up in our faces. We have to take every precaution possible with this sort of technology, before unleashing it on the world.” F warned, walking up to the power cords for the generator and disconnecting them. “I don’t care how many delays it takes, I ain’t lettin’ this thing turn on without quadruple checking every equation at least another ten times. I wouldn’t want to be the man who was too busy to fact check a machine that runs on nuclear energy and can rip a hole between worlds.”

“You make a valid point.” Ford frowned. “That’s not the kind of mark I want to make on history.”

“Well.” Fiddleford wound the power cords away, packing them up and dusting his hands off. “Back to the drawing board then. I’m gonna go look over the printouts for the last readings.”

“I’ll be right there.” Ford sighed, setting his hands on his hips, looking over the lab again, mentally calculating how he could potentially monitor the anomalies. Possibilities and ideas bounced around his mind, until he succumbed to distraction, drawn to the sound of Bill sucking at the ice cubes in his glass with the straw.

Ford walked over to his muse’s seat, and stood in front of him, looking down at the god.

“How did we do?”

Bill sucked the last drop of liquid from his drink, watching the droplet whirl all the way up the silly straw until he tasted it on his lips, sighing happily at the taste. He looked up at Sixer, and put his finger on the arm of his sunglasses, waggling them up and down on his nose.

“How do you think you did, genius?”

“Well, judging from your enthusiasm, I’d say we did rather well.” Ford presumed, reaching down to slide the sunglasses off Bill’s face, folding them up and putting them in his trench coat pocket. “We’ll have to run a few more equations before we do it again though. I have some ideas for a gravitational sensor we could incorporate into my watch.”

“Smart watch for a smart guy.” Bill cheers-ed his empty drink at Ford, before banishing it to the kitchen with a wave of his hand.

“I just wish we didn’t have so many delays.” Ford looked down as the muse snagged his six fingered hands, pulling him closer by virtue of the wheeled chair. Oddly enough, Bill didn’t seem phased by the delays, unlike Ford, who found them quite limiting.

“We’re still on track.” Bill swung their conjoined hands idly, before pulling Stanford’s hand up to rest against his face. “What’s your hurry?”

“It’s just – with every delay that leads us off schedule I just feel like I’m disappointing you, disappointing myself.” Ford confessed his frustration, stroking Bill’s cheekbone with his thumb. “I feel like my destiny is so close, but still so far out of reach.”
“You put so much stock in destiny. Can’t you just enjoy this?” Bill questioned, nuzzling against Stanford’s hand. “Enjoy this time together?”

“I am enjoying this time together.” Ford replied. “I would continue to enjoy it much more once we take that next step, traversing the galaxy together. We’re on the threshold of exploration, adventure, and it’s not coming fast enough.”

“Time is cruel.” Bill stated, sounding somewhat bitter. “It’s never on your side. And before you know it, it’s all gone too soon, and you’re going to miss this.”

Ford blinked at Bill. “Miss testing the portal?”

Bill gave Stanford an unimpressed look, before spinning his chair around and scooting it away. “Nevermind.”

“Miss what?” Ford called after Bill, watching the muse’s comical retreat on the wheely chair.

“Forget it Sixer.” Bill yelled over his shoulder, ditching the wheely chair and walking over to the elevator, pressing the call button. “Go play with your smart watch.”

Ford followed Bill into the observation room just in time to see him ascend the escalator, doors closing behind the muse with finality. Ford stood, puzzled, in the room, staring at the elevator doors, as Fiddleford read through the print outs from the analytics machine.

“Miss what?” Ford repeated, sounding lost.

Fiddleford looked up at his friend, shrugging unhelpfully, before returning to his calculations.

Bill had been disoblighingly evasive.

Ford wouldn’t have minded having his muse linger in the lab while he tinkered with the sensors he implanted in his watch, providing insight here and there. Ford would have even taken Bill’s penchant for distracting him in stride, but the muse didn’t return downstairs, and Ford noticed Bill’s absence keenly.

At dinnertime, the muse had been uncharacteristically quiet, barely speaking to Stanford, eating his food in sullen silence. Ford had attempted to draw Bill into conversation multiple times throughout the meal, talking about the modifications he’d made to his watch, the various functionalities, how he’d even connected the watch with the various security protocols he’d installed throughout the house.

Every comment he made was met with a noncommittal hum from the muse, which left Stanford acutely frustrated.

Watching the way Bill’s yellow eyes slid away from him, looking out the window while he chewed his meal, resting his cheek on his hand, Stanford felt very rudely ignored, and he didn’t like that.

It was clear Bill had something on his mind, but Bill’s regard was a gift that Stanford had won, for
all these months the muse had been living here, Stanford felt he earned Bill’s regard. It should be his. For the muse to revoke it so suddenly, without any warning, well, let’s just say Stanford wasn’t going to put up with it.

But how to broach the subject.

Fiddleford sat awkwardly between Bill and Stanford at the end of the small kitchen table, eyes flitting between the two men, recognizing the tension building.

At one point, Ford had attempted to ‘ignore’ Bill, passive aggressively drawing Fiddleford into very loud conversation about what anomalous really meant, scientifically speaking, baiting Bill, but the muse remained uninterested and unfazed, looking out the window into the dark night outside.

Fiddleford was sensing some sort of lovers spat between them, and felt increasingly awkward, playing the buffer for Stanford’s sake. That wasn’t a role he enjoyed, and as far as Fiddleford was concerned, a third wheel only worked for tricycles. He wasn’t keen to stick around and be a crutch for Stanford’s socially awkward attempts to break the tension.

Clearing his throat, Fiddleford stood up, taking his empty plate away from the table. “I might head into town a little this evenin’.”

“Oh?” Ford questioned his friend, his eyes still stuck stubbornly, staring at Bill, who continued to ignore him. “What for?”

“I got signed up for a little community gathering.” Fiddleford answered, putting his plate in the sink, carefully constructing his lie. “Last time I went to the Natural History Museum. Like a book club, sort of. Figured it wouldn’t hurt to socialise a bit, rather than obsess over the portal twenty-four seven. I’ve been drinkin’ coffee like a fish drinks water, going through these equations. I could use a break.”

Ford squinted at Bill, expecting the muse to have something to say about Fiddleford’s lack of commitment at least, but Bill just blinked, and continued to gaze out into the forest.

“What book are you reading?” Ford finally tore his gaze away from his recalcitrant muse to look at Fiddleford.

“Oh, uh.” F scratched the back of his head awkwardly. “It’s the first meeting, so I’ll find out there I guess.”

“I can’t imagine it’ll be anything too enthralling.” Ford pondered, scratching his chin. “At least in terms of history, considering this town has nothing but mining and lumber in its historical record.”

“I’m willin’ to bet I’ll find it interesting.” Fiddleford replied obliquely. “Can’t be writin’ off what you haven’t read yet, after all.”

“I suppose that did sound rather callous of me.” Ford realised, then shrugged. “Oh, well. Have fun then. Let me know if you find anything interesting.”

“Will do.” Fiddleford said, sounding relieved that Stanford bought his alibi. Leaving his plate by the sink, he gestured to the door. “Will you be alright to finish the dishes? I gotta head on out.”

“That’s fine – I’ll –“ Stanford got up to bring his own plate over to the sink, but froze when Bill stood up out of his chair, the wood noisily dragging across the floorboards. The muse left his plate on the table, turning around swiftly and departed, his heavy footfalls sounding all the way up the stairs.
Ford watched his muse leave with a concerted expression twisting his brow.

Fiddleford patted his hands against his trousers absently, and gave a low whistle.

“Good luck with that.”

Ford sighed, and gave F a flat look.

“I’d almost ask if I could come with you, but I have a feeling I’ll need to deal with this, when he’s ready to talk.” Ford said, rolling his eyes, gesturing to the ceiling with his thumb.

“What got him so cranky?” Fiddleford questioned curiously, shoving his hands in his pockets.

“The silent treatment don’t seem like his style. When Pat did that to me once, it took weeks to get through to her. Unbearable stuff.”

“Unbearable.” Ford repeated, his shoulders slumping, hoping this avoidance wouldn’t last weeks. He couldn’t stand if it did.

“What did you do?” Fiddleford asked.

Ford looked up to the ceiling and despaired, answering his friend gloomily.

“I don’t know.”

When Stanford finished cleaning up after dinner, giving Bill a little time to cool down, he finally ventured up the stairs, knocking tentatively on the door to Bill’s room.

Bill didn’t answer.

Ford found himself almost obliquely insulted by the muse’s silence.

As far as he could tell - and he’d been wracking his brain, thinking in circles, trying to pinpoint whatever affront he made to the god this time – he hadn’t done anything particularly inflammatory or reprehensible. He’d certainly done nothing to warrant this degree of cold shoulder.

Huffing out a frustrated breath, Ford steeled himself, and turned the doorknob, opening the door to Bill’s room, letting himself in, invite or no.

“Bill, I –“ Ford looked into the room as the door swung open, and found it empty.

Just a messy chaotic space filled with cushions, blankets, candles and prisms. No Bill.

Ford exhaled his aggravation, his shoulders slumping.

Shaking his head, Ford closed the door to Bill’s room, and leant back against the wood, running his hands through his hair tersely.

Stanford was no expert at this relationship business, but he never thought he’d hit a wall like this so soon, not when everything had been going so well lately.
He just didn’t understand it, at first it had seemed like Bill had been going crazy missing him while he was down in the lab, calling him up every other day just to annoy him in that charming way of his. Now that he was home again, making progress on the portal, and doing everything that was expected of him, Bill had been flaring hot and cold towards him, snarking at him like he usually did one second, and avoiding him like the plague the next.

Ford couldn’t make sense of it. He didn’t know what he was doing wrong.

He just wanted to talk to the god.

For them to speak, and joke, and parry banter back and forth like they normally did. To share the affection they dabbled in, deepen it maybe, now that they seemed to be heading in that direction.

Ford just wanted to be with him, to connect, and not be shut out like this. Shut out with barely a word of explanation.

Stanford just wanted to know what he’d done wrong, if he could fix it?

Was that so much to ask?

Sighing, exasperated, Ford brushed his hair back from his face, then rubbed his eyes, feeling incredibly tired of it all. Tired of feeling like this.

Pushing away from the door, Ford crossed the corridor, deciding to retire to his own bedroom, since his venture in reconciliation had gone so poorly.

Bill could come to him if he had a problem with him, Stanford was over taking responsibility for Bill’s swinging moods.

He turned the handle, and opened the door, gawking dumbly at the very same creature he’d worked himself up so much looking for.

Bill was here.

He seemed to be pacing, waiting for Stanford in his bedroom, biting his fingernails fretfully.

Clearly Stanford wasn’t the only one feeling the pressure, overthinking things.

Bill swung around to face the scientist as he stepped through the door.

“What are you doing?” Ford asked, closing the door behind him.

“I –” Bill fumbled for his words for a moment there. He seemed to be rather stressed, biting his thumbnail as he looked for whatever it was he had been planning to say.

Ford waited over by the door, attempting to exude patience and restraint.

Really, he wanted to cross the room and be over there, with the muse, maybe shake him by the shoulders some. But considering Bill had been ignoring him cruelly all day, if an apology was coming, Ford felt he should at least make Bill work for it before forgiving him.

Bill put his hands together, looking over at Ford with a serious expression that seemed out of place on his typically cheerful face.

“Listen Sixer, we need to talk.”
Ford sucked in a breath, feeling oddly winded by those fatal four words. He swallowed the anxiety that was building in his throat, an anxiety he didn’t think he’d ever suffer from.

We need to talk was truly a terrible sentence.

Ford watched Bill warily, feeling quite ill.

He’d been wanting to talk to the muse, but something about Bill’s serious expression felt like the beginning of the end. He’d heard stories from Stanley about ‘we need to talk’, stories from his university colleagues who didn’t apply themselves solely to study like Ford had. He never thought he’d be facing those ominous words himself, he never thought he’d care enough about any romantic entanglement to let it affect him.

“I’m listening.” Ford managed. He still stood on the opposite side of the room from Bill, his body language guarded, waiting for the rhetorical blow Stanford could only assume was coming.

Bill tented his fingers, pressing his palms together, and let his fingertips rest in front of his mouth for a moment. He looked at the floor, worrying his bottom lip with his fingertips, before his yellow eyes shot to Stanford, pinning him to the spot.

“I want to know –” Bill started, eyes locked with the human. “If – if you’ve thought about what happens after we open the portal.”

“After we open the portal?” Ford repeated, not expecting the question. That feeling of dread hadn’t quite left him yet, he was still waiting for the floor to come out from under him, proverbially speaking.

“I know you must have plans, goals.” Bill said slowly, pointing at Stanford with his tented hands as he spoke. “Things you’ve been wanting to do. You seem to have a pretty firm idea about your destiny, what you think it is, and I just wanted to know –“

Ford felt a lump form in his throat, and swallowed, suddenly having a lot more saliva than he was used to.

“Yes?” He croaked, worried.

Bill seemed to hesitate on his question, before he clapped his hands together like an executive at a board meeting, pointing them at Stanford again. “Where do I fit in? As far as you see it?”

“Oh.” Stanford felt relief flip in his stomach, though he wasn’t out of dangerous social waters yet. He tentatively crossed the room, keeping his hands behind his back, wringing them together.

“Do you want to sit maybe?” Ford gestured to the bed.

With stiff movements, Bill backed up to sit on the bed, and Stanford sat beside him, facing him, about a foot of space between them. Bill was sitting up straight, his hands still laced together, looking professional and detached, businesslike. Stanford wished he’d warm up a little, this whole encounter still felt chilly and foreboding.

Reaching across, Ford placed his hand on Bill’s foot rather awkwardly, and attempted to answer.

“Where I see us? Ideally, I’d like to see us … together? It’s gotten to the point now where I can’t imagine traversing these new dimensions without you by my side. If you’d like to that is. We could … go on doing what we’ve been doing, and as we change the world, hopefully the world would look to us both for leadership and enlightenment. I’d like that.”
“So, you’d want me to be your assistant?” Bill questioned, raising his eyebrows at Ford.

“To be my partner.” Ford corrected. “Equal partners.”

“And you’d expect me to look like this?” Bill clarified, gesturing to himself.

At first Ford thought Bill was commenting on his pyjamas, but he gradually realised that Bill meant the body Ford had crafted for him.

“I –" Ford looked for the right words. “I feel it might be best to ease into things slowly, and there are benefits to maintaining this form, in a social sense. We’d be changing the world, very much in the limelight, and I feel like perhaps world leaders would take us more seriously… if you were to remain in this vessel.”

“Sixer, nobody is going to take me seriously in this vessel.” Bill said bluntly. “No offence to you, I’m sure you worked very hard on this, going behind my back, making this body and forcing me into it against my will. It’s very sweet for a slap in the face, but it’s not me.”

Ford opened his mouth to reply, but the words didn’t quite come out right, so he closed his mouth, and watched Bill.

The muse narrowed his eyes at Ford suspiciously. “Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten what I actually look like.”

“I haven’t forgotten.” Ford hurried to answer.

“Do you like me better like this? Because if so, I have to question your taste, I mean really Sixer –“

“I don’t –“ Ford held his hand up, halting that train of thought. “Look, obviously this has been on your mind for a while, and I can understand why. No one wants to be judged for their outward appearance, I can understand that.”

“Having more digits than the acceptable norm isn’t a universal empathy card, Sixer.” Bill crossed his arms, frowning. “You can’t even begin to fathom what’s on my mind right now.”

“You’re probably uncertain.” Ford powered on, trying to prove Bill wrong. “And insecure. About the future, about how you’re perceived, about … about how I feel about you.”

“That’s not –“ Bill winced, his expression conflicted now.

“You want to know what will happen after we finish the portal. You want to know – you’re probably wondering what will change. You might be wondering about our dynamic – if I’ll still need your advice when we no longer have a project to work on.” Ford swallowed the heaviness from his throat and forced himself to continue, straining himself to empathize with the muse, and really put himself out there. “You’re probably wondering if all this hard work will be worth it, if it will be worth it for you, sticking it out with me here. You’ll be wondering about your place in it all, if I’ll still need you once I realise my destiny.”

Bill hadn’t even considered that Sixer would be thinking like this, he hadn’t even conceptualised a future where Sixer wouldn’t need him in some shape or form, and he chewed on his bottom lip, suddenly concerned about that factor.

This was supposed to be a simple, businesslike discussion about discarding this vessel.

Bill hadn’t anticipated Sixer’s interest in him waning so suddenly.
“You – you’re probably wondering if I like you for you, if making this form for you tells more about how I want you to be than how I see you. You’re probably nervous.” Ford swallowed again, noticing the unblinking stare he was garnering right now, Bill’s intensity tangible in the air. Perhaps his theories weren’t so far off the mark, and that realisation saddened Ford, yet he forced himself to continue developing the hypothetical. “You might even resent me, for bringing you here. For becoming so close to you when you’re suspecting that – when all is said and done – I might be leaving soon to strike it out on my own, explore these new adventures. You’re worried that you’ll remain, trapped here, in a skin that’s not your own, discarded and lonely.”

“You wouldn’t.” Bill said, his voice low and thick with emotion, yellow eyes shining with more than just a glow now, a mixture of dread, hope, and venom, all but glaring at Ford for even suggesting leaving him.

Ford rubbed his thumb along Bill’s socked foot and met his gaze sincerely. “I wouldn’t.”

Bill swallowed the anxiety that bubbled insidiously in this ruthlessly sensitive form, emotions forcing hormonal responses through this body, rather than existing in the abstract, like they would were he not trapped in a human skin.

Sixer was jerking his responses around quite a bit today.

This conversation was meant to be about unbinding more bricks, about broaching topics of cosmic relevance to Sixer, and instead Sixer was playing this body’s emotional responses like a harmonica. Ford wasn’t supposed to affect him like this. He was supposed to remain just a pawn, a piece on the board Bill could manipulate at will. Bill wondered when, along the way, Sixer had developed this much power over him. He could checkmate the king with only words. It was a jarring realisation.

“I’ve been avoiding this.” Ford chuckled, and continued to rub Bill’s foot idly. “Though at this point I’m beginning to realise it’s necessary, putting myself out here in this way. Ambition isn’t something to be contested with, and I’m realising that when you want something, really want something, you have to be honest about it, most of all with yourself.”

This still sounded plenty foreboding to Bill, and he felt like he was swinging on the cusp of losing Sixer, the human having decided that exploring his own destiny was more important than being with Bill. Had Bill been lax in his attention lately, would this have played out differently if he’d dabbled in Sixer’s dreams more, been a more attentive partner, engaged physically more, reciprocated?

Bill felt like Sixer was water, and he was slipping through the god’s fingers by the second.

Bill wondered when he decided that losing Sixer was unacceptable.

He’d been toying with the idea of keeping the human for a while now, but with their deadline approaching, Bill had to consider the upcoming reality of the situation. He’d been deliberating if this was worth it, if Sixer was worth keeping, and if he could keep the human, time, space, and circumstance be damned.

He’d just about made his mind up this afternoon, so of course Sixer had to pull this shit on him now.

Bill wondered what the human had been avoiding, and hoped that it wasn’t some well-intentioned break up so Sixer could go off chasing his dreams, his ambition. He was supposed to realise that his dreams were right in front of him, all ambitions realised in the palm of Bill’s hand, and be
thankful for that, not string Bill along with his ambiguous speech about empathy and pursuing his goals. Ford was frustrating, awful, selfish and arrogant, and still Bill didn’t want to lose him.

Reaching forward, Bill grabbed onto Sixer’s arm, leaning into the scientist’s space, watching him with a serious gaze, a desperate longing for what he didn’t want to miss playing in its depths.

“Sixer.” Bill pleaded, hoping that it would be enough that he wouldn’t lose the scientist, that he could salvage this situation.

Ford rested his free hand over Bill’s, squeezing his hand gently. He inhaled a steadying breath, and succumbed to his emotions, making the leap of vulnerability that was required for such things. He’d been stubborn, and elusive, but that time was over.

“I want you.”

Bill blinked at Ford for a moment, before he exhaled a gust of relief, slumping forward to rest his forehead on Sixer’s arm, laughing quietly to himself.

“What?” Ford asked, tilting his head down to look at the muse, his lips brushing against Bill’s hair. “What’s so funny?”

“You’re the worst.” Bill looked up at Ford, and couldn’t help but smile at the scientist fondly. “The absolute worst. Drag it out, why don’t you.”

“I was trying to properly articulate the moment.” Ford chuckled, relieved to see his muse warming up to him again. “What did you think I was going to say?”

“Put the thumbscrews away Sixer, we’re talking about you.” Bill joked, and scooted across the bed, warming up somewhat, sitting closer to Ford now, trailing his fingertips along the creases in Ford’s shirt.

“I thought we were talking about you?” Ford countered, watching his muse poke at his shirt.

Bill pulled a face, seeming displeased, continuing to trace patterns on Ford’s chest through his shirt.

“Is there a reason you were so quiet today?” Ford pressed, watching his muse with a frown. “You didn’t seem like yourself.”

“There are more sides to me than you’d expect, pun intended.” Bill shrugged. “You haven’t seen them all.”

“So tell me more about this silent, reserved, Bill Cipher. I can’t imagine many people have seen him.” Ford murmured, angling his head closer to Bill, watching the expressions shift on his face.

“None who’ve lived to tell the tale.” Bill replied with a self-depreciating smirk, before shaking his head. “Don’t dwell on it, Sixer. It had nothing to do with you.”

“What did it have to do with?” Ford questioned, reaching up to brush Bill’s hair behind his ear gently.

“My beef with time, let’s just say.” Bill replied, sounding bitter for the moment. “Circumstances, and consequences, and other c words. Nothing you’d understand.”
“So help me understand.” Ford urged.

Bill wrinkled his nose, making another peculiar face, and said nothing, playing with Ford’s sleeve.

“I can imagine, having lived as long as you have, things like this seem quite ephemeral.” Ford hazarded a guess, and saw the way Bill’s brow furrowed at that, having hit the nail on the head.

It had never truly occurred to Ford before, but living with an immortal cosmic being suddenly made him acutely aware of his own mortality, and he wondered if this was what had Bill feeling so down. It was certainly a sobering thought, that Ford might live a lifetime benefitting from Bill’s presence, from his enlightenment, but his lifespan would be but a blip in the long run to Bill, barely a blink of an eye.

“You’re trying to savour things while they last.” Ford realised, and cupped Bill’s face with his six-fingered hand, rubbing his cheekbone with his thumb. “And I’ve been so preoccupied with completing the portal that I haven’t been doing the same.”

“This is the problem with developing attachments.” Bill muttered, staring at Ford’s face morosely, taking in every detail of the scientist. “Time never lets me have what I want.”

Ford pressed his forehead against Bill’s gently, and inhaled his presence, feeling reconnected with the god once more, after being bereft of that connection all day.

It felt like Ford could breathe easy again.

“Well, I want you. For as long as I can, for as long as you’ll have me. Time be damned.” Ford murmured, his glasses bumping against Bill’s nose, feeling the warmth of the muse’s skin against his. Bill’s lips twitched at ‘time be damned’, a small smile peeking through.

Ford stroked Bill’s cheek, asking. “And what do you want?”

Bill seemed to sigh as well, whatever struggle he’d been wrestling with falling away from him with their proximity. He stared at Sixer, his lips twisting with indecision, before throwing caution into the wind, so to speak, committing himself to his answer, meaning it.

He reached up to rest his hand against Ford’s cheek, and whispered against Ford’s lips.

“You.”

Kissing Bill was a relief.

It was the reconciliation that Ford had been itching for, not knowing how else to stem this irritation that came with being parted.

It wasn’t dependency, per se, but Ford was coming to realise that Bill’s presence was contributing to the spring in his step, these last several months. His muse was the balm his ailing ego required, the blood his hardened heart needed to pump freely again after a lifetime of slights and hurts.

Ford never thought he’d find someone interesting enough to want this closeness, but Bill had always held Ford’s interest, without even trying. He couldn’t imagine going for weeks without this intimacy, this comfort in simply existing alongside his muse, sharing the space. They fit too well together.

Judging from the way his muse kissed back, Ford had a feeling that Bill couldn’t imagine that distance either, and maybe, just maybe, Ford’s presence helped sooth Bill’s hurts too.
The kiss deepened, Ford grasping Bill’s neck, his waist, pulling him closer. Bill straddled Ford’s hips, and ground down, gripping the scientist’s hair with one hand, twisting Ford’s shirtfront in his other fist, drinking him in.

Ford gasped, breathing more into Bill’s mouth than anywhere else, his glasses skewing on the bridge of his nose as the kiss went on.

Bill was unrelenting. His tongue probed Sixer’s mouth, mapping every tooth and tastebud, his hands roved possessively over every inch of Ford he could reach, pulling them closer every instant. Ford assumed he was savouring the moment, as he seemed to want to map every inch of Ford with his hands.

Bill mashed his chest against Ford, pressing them closer together like he wanted to dive into Ford’s skin, like he wanted to meld the two of them together.

Ford was almost surprised by the extent of Bill’s passion, of his reciprocation. Often Ford found the muse was content to simply lay back and be pampered, but this kiss felt different, it felt far more desperate.

Bill was intent to own Stanford, and it was a possessive reality Ford felt in every movement.

The muse was scared to lose him.

Ford broke away from the kiss to gulp in a breath of air, but Bill barely let up, pressing kisses to Stanford’s face, gripping his jaw and dragging him back in. Ford moaned, and raked his nails up Bill’s back, savouring every shaky breath he inhaled from the other man.

Ford felt lightheaded, barely dragging in enough oxygen to continue. He tried to push away from Bill to reorient his breathing for a moment, but Bill didn’t let him, sealing his mouth over the scientist’s, sucking the air from his lungs.

Bill gripped Ford’s jaw with one hand, and reached up to pinch the scientist’s nose, blocking off his airways.

Ford blinked, almost disbelieving that Bill would do this, could do this.

Block his airways.

He spluttered for a moment, panicking, feeling something drag up his lungs, an oppressive foreign feeling. It was almost as if his lungs were deflating, like Bill was sucking the oxygen right out of him forcefully, and he felt his breathing thin dangerously.

He blinked his eyes open, dizzily taking in the determined expression on Bill’s face, the way he seemed to glow gold all over, his eyes closed, concentrating.

Ford felt his vision blur, asphyxiating fast, before he felt the tickling taste of ozone invade his throat, Bill’s fire pouring unpleasantly into his lungs, the muse exhaling. The fire felt cold, and hot all at once, an unearthly chill. He weakly attempted to push Bill away again, but his muse’s grip was uncannily strong, forcing more of that cosmic flame down his throat.

The heat was unbearable, coursing through Ford’s chest. It was painful, a physically painful sensation. Ford felt something twist in his lungs, and it was agony. It hurt, and he wanted it to stop.

Ford gathered his strength and pushed Bill’s shoulders, trying to swat his hands away from his face. Bill gripped harder, not willing to be budged.
Ford’s eyes watered, and he blinked them open, willing to do anything to evade this sudden pain.

His hand flew out, fisted instinctively, and he socked Bill in the jaw, jarring the muse away from him.

Ford coughed, spluttering residual fire from his throat, tasting burnt matches and licked batteries on his tongue. His face was red, and his eyes were bloodshot from the shock of it all. He gasped and heaved in breath after breath, holding a hand over his chest, blinking tears out of his eyes.

Bill held his hand over his bruising jaw, and watched Ford acclimate.

Panting, finally recovered enough to manage speech, Ford yelled harshly at the muse.

“What the hell did you do to me?”

“Breathe Sixer.” Bill said, watching Ford calmly, his jaw tingling as the bruise healed swiftly.

“Just breathe.”

“What – what –” Ford sucked in air, starved for it, just shy of hyperventilating. He watched Bill, noting that the muse was holding his jaw. “I punched you.”

“Got me good too.” Bill noted, smirking at Sixer.

“I’m sorry, I –“ Ford began apologising before he knew what he was doing. Stopping himself and glaring at Bill, Ford’s ire stirred up again promptly. “What did you do to me?”

“Just breathe.” Bill insisted, watching Ford’s emotions flit across his face.

Ford tried his best to level his breathing, and wiped his cheeks with the back of his hand, rubbing his chest, the pain gone now, the phantom shock of it all haunting Ford. His mouth hung open as he squinted at his muse, confusion setting in.

“Feel better?” Bill asked.

“What – “ Ford huffed, realising that whatever painful sensation overcame him in that instant, it had passed. The harm was done, or finished, at least. Ford just couldn’t comprehend the why. Why his muse would hurt him, or how he could, given the runes tattooed on his skin.


Bill continued to list gases, ticking them off on his fingers, and Ford gawked at the god, realisation setting in, bowling him over in an instant.

“Sulphurs and sulphuric atmospheres, you can gulp down Nickel Tetracarbonyl, Hydrogen Cyanide, Phosgene, Phosphine, Dichlorosilane, Bromomethane.”

Ford felt the air flow through his lungs, feeling a slight, but nearly unnoticeable difference, and patted his chest, astonished. He almost didn’t believe it was possible, that it had just happened, but knowing his muse, it was more than likely that he made the impossible possible for Ford.

“Tellurium Hexafluoride, Nitrogen Dioxide, Germane.”

“Do you mean I can breathe in space?” Ford blurted out abruptly, adjusting his glasses to sit right on his nose.
Bill’s eyes shone, and he smiled indulgently at Ford, simmering approval at the scientist.

“You’re welcome.”

An incredulous laugh slipped from Ford’s lips, and he rubbed his chest, looking down at himself, then back over to Bill.

“How did—” Ford puzzled. “Well, regardless, I’d be more inclined to thank you for the alteration if you’d thought to ask before inflicting it on me.”

“Did you ask before yanking me through the cosmos and inflicting this meat suit on me? No.” Bill said, his smile rigid, and his words curt. “But I figure now we’re even.”

“If we’re even, does that mean you’ll stop holding that over my head all the time?” Ford questioned, having been guilted for the summoning enough.

Bill shrugged, but was smiling at Ford, genuinely now. Like he was impressed.

Ford raised his eyebrows at that, but optimistically took Bill’s smile for an answer.

He stretched his arms up over his head, twisting his torso left and right, easing into the feeling of knowing that he’d been physically altered by Bill’s cosmic powers, getting used to that fact.

“Here I thought you weren’t able to harm me.”

“Oh, stop whining. It’s not hurting now, is it?” Bill scoffed, and sat upright, rubbing his jaw as the last of the bruising disappeared, missing the tingle. “Besides, I did this to help you, not harm you. Don’t be such a baby.”

“How generous of you.” Ford replied sarcastically, before looking the muse up and down, a glimmer of regret gracing his features. “And I repay you by throwing a punch.”

Bill laughed, and lidded his eyes amorously, crawling across the bed to Ford. “Those boxing lessons really paid off.”

“Please tell me you’re just saying that.” Ford said, leaning away from the muse as he clambered back onto Ford’s lap.

“I mean it.” Bill purred, looping his arms around Sixer’s neck. “A quality investment.”

“You know, I can’t tell if you’re being serious here.” Ford said, mystified by his muse. “I feel like I should be worried if you are, if not for you, then for my reputation at least.”

Bill laughed, and stroked the side of Ford’s face adoringly. “Feel like stepping into the ring, going another round?”

The muse was already leaning in, hungry for Sixer’s kisses, but Ford held his hand up between their mouths, halting him.

“How can I trust that you won’t do something like that to me again? I imagine I won’t enjoy kissing you if I have to worry constantly about you rearranging my internal organs.”

“But isn’t that romantic?” Bill thrilled, teasing Sixer.

“I’d say ‘on what planet’ but we both know that almanac is far too specific sometimes.” Ford said lightly, amused by his cosmic paramour. Bill continued to lean in for a kiss, but Ford felt the need
to firmly state his boundaries. “I mean it, I need to know you won’t do something like that again.”

“You think you’re getting a freebie like that all the time?” Bill scoffed, and ran his fingers through Ford’s hair, tempting him. “Please Sixer. You’re not that special.”

“Promise me.” Ford insisted. “Promise me you’ll ask first, at least. I need your word.”


“Good.” Ford nodded, and brought his hand away from his mouth, allowing the muse’s affection.

Bill nuzzled in to press a sweet kiss to Ford’s mouth, teasing him, before murmuring. “And if I don’t ask first, you can just punch me again.”

Ford broke the kiss and narrowed his eyes at Bill sceptically.

Bill’s eyes shone gleefully, and bounced once in Sixer’s lap, grinning.

“Why do I get the feeling you’d enjoy that?” Ford said slyly, watching Bill bat his eyelashes at him.

“Well, you’re giving me such a very specific incentive.” Bill purred, unbuttoning Ford’s shirt with quick clever fingers.

“How do I de-incentivise that?” Ford said wryly, letting the muse disrobe him, shrugging the shirt off his shoulders.

“You’ll have to get creative.” Bill replied flirtatiously, fingers now flicking open Ford’s belt buckle, pulling the leather strap from Ford’s trousers.

Ford grabbed Bill’s wrist, stopping him, before pulling the belt the rest of the way out himself, folding it in half. “I’ll have to give you a different incentive. For good behaviour.”

“Are you going to rearrange my internal organs?” Bill asked cheekily.

Ford gave Bill a flat look, before pushing him off his lap. “Take your clothes off. And turn around.”

Bill almost laughed at that, that Sixer had the gall to dish out orders so confidently, but something about the human’s expression promised something that Bill was 90 percent sure that he wanted. Instead he bit his bottom lip, and complied.

Naked and vulnerable, kneeling on the bed facing the wall, Bill turned to look over his shoulder briefly.

Ford turned Bill’s chin back around to face the wall. “No peeking. You surprised me with your little stunt earlier, I’m returning the favour.”

“Putting me in the naughty corner doesn’t feel like much of a favour. To me, anyway.” Bill remarked, staring impatiently at the wall.

Ford rubbed Bill’s shoulders soothingly, and pressed a kiss to the back of Bill’s neck, leaning in to whisper in the muse’s ear. “You might need those cuffs of yours.”

Bill blinked, hearing the promise in Ford’s tone, and sucked in an excited breath, summoning the
cuffs from the Quadrangle, fastening them onto his wrists and mentally yelling at Keyhole to man the apparatus.

The instant the cuffs glowed blue and shrunk to fit his wrists, Bill felt Ford’s hand in the middle of his back, pushing him against the wall. Bill’s hands shot out to steady himself, and Sixer rubbed his shoulder, repositioning him until he was braced against the wall, kneeling on the mattress.

The bed shifted as Ford stepped off the mattress, before returning, kneeling behind the muse once more. Bill tried to look over his shoulder again, but Sixer’s hand caught his chin and turned him back to face the corner.

“Oh.” Ford murmured, his breath tickling Bill’s earlobe. “And one last thing.”

A soft strip of fabric, one of Stanford’s scarves, dangled in front of Bill’s face, and with careful movements, Ford fastened the scarf around Bill’s eyes, blindfolding him.

Instantly the muse’s shoulders seized up, and he reached around for Sixer, patting the air for him frantically.

“Sixer.”

Ford tightened the blindfold again, tugging the fabric to check it, and rested his hands on Bill’s shoulders.

“So you aren’t tempted to peek.”

“When I said, get creative, I didn’t mean I’d let you blind me.” Bill said nervously, reaching up to take off the blindfold.

Ford caught his hand, and moved it away. “Uh uh uh. No touching the blindfold. This is about trust.”

Bill’s hands clenched and unclenched into fists, his shoulders shivering slightly. He seemed decidedly uncomfortable with this little ‘trust exercise’.

“Just relax.” Ford said, and pressed a kiss to Bill’s shoulder.

“Easy for you to say.” Bill trembled, struggling to resist the urge to rip the blindfold off then and there.

“Here.” Ford grabbed Bill’s wrists, pressing a kiss to the pulse point before bracing them against the wall once more. Stanford’s sweetness was endearing, and it was clear there was worship in the gesture, but Bill wasn’t in the habit of extending trust to anyone, and he wasn’t in control of this situation.

Bill fumed for a while, his fingers twitching against the wall, itching to rip the blindfold off.

Stanford watched the muse’s lips wriggle with various shades of distrust, derision and disgust at the thought of being wilfully blinded by the scientist. Bill’s shoulders were stiff and bunched up defensively, and he seemed on edge in a way that really tickled Ford’s fancy.

Smirking smugly, Ford reached forward and smoothed his fingers along the strong line of Bill’s jaw, watching his muse freeze, his pulse racing hot beneath Ford’s fingers. Ford kept his movements gentle, decisive, but regardless of his intentions, Bill seemed to be wracked with tension, waiting for something disastrous.
Ford traced down along Bill’s throat, feeling his Adams apple bob as the muse swallowed nervously, and let his hand rest above Bill’s heart, delighting in the way he was wreaking havoc on Bill’s heart rate.

“See, this isn’t so bad.”

Kneeling behind him, the fabric of Ford’s trousers brushing against Bill’s bare skin, Ford pressed several warm kisses to Bill’s neck, smooching along his shoulders.

Bill made a conflicted sound, and rolled his head back, arching his neck for Ford’s kisses.

Murmuring into Bill’s skin, Ford remarked, pressing his lips onto Bill’s vulnerable throat. “It’s nice to see you trusting me.”

Bill was almost grateful for the blindfold then, for shielding his expressions from the scientist. He was sure Sixer wouldn’t appreciate him rolling his eyes right now. Sure, trust, that’s what was getting Sixer off.

Ford trailed more kisses along Bill’s jaw, savouring his time with the muse. Cupping Bill’s face, turning him gently in his direction, Ford extended a little generosity.

“Now, we can do anything you like right now, but the blindfold is staying on.” He noted Bill’s little frown, surprised that the muse didn’t jump on Ford’s phrasing, running rampant with a free pass. Ford thought that wording would sweeten the deal, help Bill relax, but he still seemed tense. “So what will it be?”

“I don’t like waiting in the dark like this.” Bill complained. “We could be doing anything else right now.”

“What will it take for you to put aside your suspicion and just enjoy this? Make an attempt at least, to trust me.” Ford beseeched the blindfolded god, wanting his trust to be reciprocal. If Bill could surprise him, and alter his physical DNA, Ford needed to be able to level the playing field.

Bill’s unease warred with his well-developed opportunistic streak, and he chewed on his bottom lip, deliberating whether naming a price would be worth tolerating time spent in the dark, control wrested from him as his vision was impaired deliberately by the gutsy human.

His agenda for this conversation had been derailed before, by an impulse decision and Ford’s damnable empathy, but he could regain the ground he’d lost, the price being that small modicum of trust Ford was begging him for.

Bill had never been wilfully blinded in all his life.

“Two bricks.” Bill suggested, giving into Sixer’s little power move. “And I’ll play along. Deal?”

“Two bricks it is.” Ford agreed, pressing a kiss to Bill’s lips to seal the deal. “You won’t regret this.”

Resigned to the fact, Bill kissed back, deciding that he may as well make the most of whatever creative torture Sixer had planned for him.

As Ford positioned Bill to face the wall once more, his hands roving across the muse’s body, sensation lighting up Bill’s nerve endings like a flashlight, Bill conceded privately to himself, that no matter how reluctantly that sentiment was given, Bill did trust Ford, and that was a lot more than he could say for anyone else.
That was quite a feat, winning Bill’s trust like this. This changed things.

Life before Sixer had taught Bill Cipher to never trust again.

But somehow, Sixer was always the exception to the rule.

He was special like that.

“Now, about that incentive.”

Bill heard the light clink of metal, and then the loud snap of leather clapping together, and he sat up a little straighter.

It sounded like Sixer found a use for his belt, and he was getting creative.

“Why do I get the feeling I’ll enjoy this?” Bill murmured, his lips twisting into a grin.

He felt Sixer’s breath on his neck, and the human pressed another one of those scorching kisses on his skin, before the low vibrations of Ford’s voice box sent thrills down Bill’s spine.

“Don’t worry.” Ford promised, sounding smug. “You will.”

“Now that I have you all gathered together, I have an announcement to make. I’ve decided… I’m keeping Sixer.”

“You’re WHAT?”

Kryptos’ eye bugged out spectacularly, astonished by the boss’s private announcement. He’d gathered his entire inner circle of henchmaniacs up to the penthouse for this? To announce he was keeping the human? Of all the things that human pawn was meant to be, permanent wasn’t one of those things.

Pyronica narrowed her eye at Kryptos, and put her hands on her hips, glaring at him. Bill floated beside her, his hands laced together behind his back as he divulged his plan to his inner circle of friends and henchmen.

“You heard me. I’m keeping him.” Bill said, unfazed by Kryptos’ loud reaction. “He’s freakish enough to fit in here, between those extra fingers and that big brain of his. Make a few adjustments here or there, and he could make a bang-up henchman. One of the team!”

“One of the –“ Kryptos spluttered indignantly. “He’s not even – he’s a human! How are you gonna swing making a human, a fragile, breakable human, into a henchmaniac? We – we have a reputation you know?”

Xanthar guffawed, and Teeth clacked his dentures together, grinning.

“Yeah, a bad one.”

Whooping laugher followed, Bill’s inner circle as raucous as ever.
“Uh, question.” Keyhole put his hand up. “Is this just a general announcement, or are we putting it to a vote?”

“We voted in all the other initiates.” Amorphous Shape blinked, agreeing with Keyhole, looking to Bill curiously.

“Do we get to meet him?” Eight Ball asked, scratching his jaw.

“You’ll meet him soon enough.” Bill replied, materialising a cocktail from thin air, swirling it around.

“Does this mean we all get humans?” Teeth asked, raising his hand.

“I want my stipend of humanity too.” Paci-Fire put his hand up as well. “I believe we were promised a planet full of them.”

“I wanna eat some!” Teeth cackled, and clapped his hands together.

“Does this mean we don’t get to destroy the earth?” Keyhole queried, watching Bill expectantly.

Paci-Fire, Xanthar, Eight Ball and Teeth all booed Keyhole abruptly.

Bill waved his hands in the air. “People, please. You’ll still get your party on, I’m just picking one human from the fray and making him an ascended extra.”

“So, he isn’t a pet?” Paci-Fire frowned, confused.

“Shut up.” Teeth elbowed Paci-Fire in the stomach, and he spat out his dummy, scowling from both his mouths.

“You shut up, you gap toothed oaf!”

“Call me gap toothed one more time.”

Pyronica rolled her eyes, and leaned against the wall, crossing her arms. “Boys.”

“What do you mean ascended extra?” Kryptos asked, floating to the forefront of the group, raising his hand. “How ascended? Why does he get to ascend? What makes him so special?”

“You don’t need to know the why’s, just that he is.” Bill said, taking a sip from his drink. “And I expect you all to remember that.”

“Special how?” Paci-Fire grunted, putting his dummy back in his second mouth.

“Can he shoot lasers from his eyes?” Teeth chuckled, and waggled his fingers. “Or regrow his fingers back when you cut them off?”

“Is he special for a human, or special by our standards?” Eight Ball mumbled, rattling his chains as he continued to scratch his chin.

“Perhaps special refers to the diversity and cosmic relevance he brings to our group?” Amorphous Shape suggested calmly.

“How come he’s a diversity hire, but Keyhole’s sister isn’t?” Teeth elbowed Keyhole and snickered.
“Listen, she’s never gonna call you. She doesn’t like omnivorous mouths, you’re not her type.” Keyhole advised, pushing Teeth’s elbow away.

“I’m everyone’s type, bud.” Teeth ground his molars, scowling.

“I have questions!” Kryptos waved his hand in the air dramatically, before he began listing them off on his fingers. “First of all, I wanna know all of a sudden, the human building our portal is suddenly part of the team. I wanna know why he gets preferential treatment, when I had to wait a full century as an initiate before I got to join the team for a mission and he gets to join the team straight away. I wanna know how he’s gonna hold his own, or if we’re gonna have to – to hold his hand all the way through this apocalypse, and I wanna know if he knows that by siding with us, he’s turning his back on his entire race doing so. OH, and I wanna know how he’s going to SURVIVE an apocalypse, because last I checked, humans don’t live very long!”

“So, he’s gonna be a henchmen for a week.” Teeth smirked. “A blink of an eye.”

“I’m taking care of Sixer’s mortality.” Bill admitted, drumming his fingers on the side of his glass. “It won’t be an issue.”

“Can humans even breathe in space? What, are we just going to be staying on earth, babysitting him in an atmosphere he can stand?” Kryptos complained loudly, trying to rile up the other henchmaniacs.

“I said it won’t be an issue. I’ve already augmented his lungs, now he can go wherever we go.” Bill examined the back of his hand, aiming for nonchalance.

“What about atmospheric pressure?” Kryptos shot back, looking for a reason why Sixer couldn’t join them. A human couldn’t be a part of the team.

“That’s next on the to do list. He’ll get a full makeover. All the bells and whistles.” Bill boasted. “By the time he joins us properly, he’ll be stronger than you even, though really Kryptos, that’s not hard.”

“Wait, you mean it?” Teeth asked Bill, shocked. “You’re really making a human one of us, for real? For the long run?”

“Why should he be gifted such strength?” Paci-Fire said, sounding disgruntled. “Why should he receive such power?”

“I thought you were joking.” Teeth reeled in the realisation. “I thought it’d be funny, like a joke, to make one of them turn their back on the rest of their lousy lot, I didn’t think you were being serious.”

“Sixer has … proved his merit to me.” Bill said evasively, looking down at his drink, swilling it around. His bricks were glowing, becoming just a tad peachy as he spoke. “I’d say, when the world is mine, that he deserves his place at my side.”

“At your side??!!” Kryptos exclaimed angrily.

“This is a startling development.” Amorphous Shape thrilled, unfolding his squares curiously.

“Aw, now come on guys.” Keyhole looked at the shocked henchmaniacs, holding his hands up pacifyingly. “Don’t be like that.”

“Like a partner??!!” Kryptos spluttered, aghast to think he’d be facing a human ascended to be
Bill’s equal partner. The thought was as offensive as it was terrifying.

“I thought Pyronica was your partner.” Paci-Fire stated, giving the pink cyclops a peculiar look.

“Oh gross!” Pyronica pulled a face, before looking over at the triangle floating beside her. “No offence Bill.”

“Gee, none taken.” Bill rolled his eye, and shot back the rest of his drink, swallowing it down.

“This is most confusing.” Paci-Fire grumbled, and crossed his arms, sitting down.

“I actually think you two are kinda cute together.” Keyhole said good naturedly.

“Didn’t ask, Keyhole, but thanks anyway.” Bill banished his cocktail glass with a wave of his hand.

“Why did you tell us if you weren’t interested in our opinions?” Kryptos asked argumentatively.

“Because, Kryptos, I told you so you’d all know.” Bill put his hands on his sides. “My apocalypse is right around the corner, the big day. The one we’ve all been waiting for. And when that day comes, and I unleash you all on our new home, I just want to make one thing clear.”

Bill’s yellow form grew, looming over his henchmaniacs threateningly, filling the small penthouse room the group were all cramped in, towering over them.

“I’m keeping Sixer, and that means he’s mine. That means that none of you are to touch him, harm him, look his way for an instant without my permission, or I will DESTROY you.”

The gathered henchmaniacs all looked up at Bill with wide eyes, those of them who had eyes did anyway, and they nodded frantically, signalling their understanding and assent.

Kryptos trembled, but he crossed his arms, and just stared Bill down.

“Understood?” Bill questioned, watching the henchmaniacs all continue to nod. Satisfied, he glowed a bright yellow, and smiled cheerily. “Good!”

“That is so romantic.” Keyhole uttered, elbowing Amorphous Shape, who blinked his squares agreeably at Keyhole, his blue tasseled tail flicking, impressed.

Shrinking back down to his normal size, Bill rested his hand on his bricks, just below his bowtie. “Now since I’m feeling incredibly charitable, not only are drinks on me tonight, but Hectorgon gets a free pass from the dimension of eternal screams.”

Bill clicked his fingers, summoning Hectorgon, the moustached hexagon appearing in the centre of the room in a puff of flames, an anguished scream petering off abruptly as he took in the penthouse suite.

“AAAAAAAAAAAAARGGGGGHHHHHHHHHH oh hey guys.”

“Hectorgon’s back!” Teeth cheered, and Paci-Fire, Eight Ball, Xanthar and Keyhole joined them, applauding and clapping Hectorgon on the back merrily.

“How are ya doing buddy? Had a nice vacation?” Bill asked Hectorgon, glowing cheerfully.

“You brought me back early?” Hectorgon puzzled, having resigned himself to his stretch in the dimension of eternal screams as punishment. Bill never went back on his punishments.
“Let’s just say I’m in a good mood. The party’s right around the corner, the portal’s shaping up nicely, and everything’s coming up Bill.” Bill clicked, and nine cocktails were summoned, materialising in each henchmaniac’s hand. “Let’s celebrate!”

“Do we wanna invite the Goo Mobster’s downstairs?” Teeth asked solicitously.

“NO!” Bill shouted, his form stretching, before he calmed down some, shrinking back down to reiterate. “No. This party is just for us. For the original crew! The original crew plus one! If they ask, I wasn’t even here, okay?”

“Sure thing Boss.” Keyhole saluted Bill, before clinking his glass with Amorphous Shape. “To our newest henchmaniac!”

Paci-Fire and Kryptos grumbled, arms crossed, looking surly, but as everyone else raised their glasses obediently, they had no choice but to join in.

“To Sixer!” Bill toasted, summoning a glass for himself. “And the rest of you sorry lot.”

“To Six Fingers!” Pyronica raised her glass, clinking it with Bill’s. “He’s got a warm welcome to look forward to.”

“Yeah, him and the rest of his planet!” Teeth cackled, and chinked his glass with Keyhole.

The party raged on in the penthouse that night, but Kryptos couldn’t help but shake the feeling that this jubilant generous mood of Bill’s was somehow all that six-fingered human’s fault, which made him a threat already.

For now, Kryptos was content to ride this good mood of Bill’s while it lasted, but he had no intention of wholeheartedly welcoming the newest initiate into their ranks. Of welcoming the special human. The ascended extra.

Oh no, the notorious Sixer would be in for a nasty surprise when he stepped foot in the Quadrangle. If he thought he could just schmooze in here and join Bill on the throne, he had another thing coming.

Regicide.

Bill sat at the kitchen table, full of energy, two more bricks unbound, clad in Stanford’s fluffy blue dressing gown, humming along with the radio, conducting the song as he tapped all the condiments on the table, turning each one into a gold statue, then back again.

Ford was flipping pancakes on the stove, bopping along with the radio, cheerful as anything.

“How would you like a solid gold toaster?” Bill asked enthusiastically.

“I’m sure you’d miss toasted sandwiches.” Ford replied, smiling wryly as he shimmied a pancake out of the frying pan, onto Bill’s plate.

“Who needs toasted sandwiches? I could eat pancakes forever.”
“I admire your nutritional values.” Ford smirked, watching the muse tuck into the pancakes immediately.

With his cheeks full, Bill winked back at Ford. “That’s not all you admire.”

Ford laughed, before leaning down to press a kiss to Bill’s forehead. “Your constant ability to talk with your mouth full. Now that, I admire.”

Bill grinned, bits of pancake sticking to his teeth, and Ford rolled his eyes, ruffling Bill’s hair, before turning around to put the frying pan in the sink.

“You know it’s a wonder I haven’t caught a cold yet, considering you’re constantly stealing my clothes.” Ford wiped his hands on a tea towel, and looked over to the muse.

“I’d keep you warm.” Bill waggled his eyebrows, the fluffy lapels of Ford’s dressing gown tickling his chin.

“Well, I can’t argue with that.” Ford chuckled, and pulled out the chair beside Bill, tearing off a corner of the muse’s pancake to share.

“Don’t you have two dressing gowns?” Bill asked, swallowing his mouthful of pancakes.

“I haven’t been able to find my red one. I assumed you had it.”

“Nope.” Bill shook his head, watching Sixer share his food. “A mystery.”

“Hmm.” Ford shrugged the mystery of the missing dressing gown off, and picked up the salt shaker from the table, examining it.

Bill had alchemized the salt shaker into a solid gold statue, exuding an effortless Midas touch. Those last few bricks certainly improved Bill’s mood, though Ford could also argue that his mood improved after their romp in the bedroom. Ford held true to his word, overloading Bill with sensation and pleasure, and the muse didn’t regret the trust extended by accepting the blindfold.

It had certainly changed their dynamic for the better.

Bill was more enthusiastic now, less withheld, less conflicted. It was like accepting Ford’s request for mutual trust had solidified something for Bill, confirmed Ford’s reliability in a way. Or perhaps Bill’s answer made all the difference, his own decision to trust Stanford.

While there had still been no outright confession of feelings from the muse, Stanford was noticing the little ways Bill was choosing to treasure Ford, showing his feelings through his deeds, if not words. After their trust exercise, Bill seemed to be making more of an effort to show Ford he was cherished, and he seemed to be treating Ford more like a partner than a particularly frustrating friend.

“This is marvellous, this sort of remarkable alchemy.”

“Keep it.” Bill offered, taking another bite out of the pancake. “A present. It can replace one of those trophies of yours.”

“The ones I had to throw in the bin?” Ford clarified, remembering well how Bill’s early tantrum had affected his prized possessions.

“I’d say it’s an upgrade.” Bill countered. “Instead of vapid accolades from a university that didn’t
recognize your true value, you get a gift from a God.”

Stanford held the golden salt shaker and smiled at it fondly. “And what does my new trophy say? How have I earned it?”

“Oh, you’ve earned it. It and so much more.” Bill grinned at Sixer with equal fondness. “You’ve got a bright future ahead of you, with me by your side.”

Ford looked up from the shaker, over at his muse, his eyes widening with the realisation. “You mean –“

Bill shrugged nonchalantly, but his eyes were twinkling at Ford, the implication of his words holding true. “You’re the one who wanted us to tackle the future together, to lead and shape the world once you achieve your destiny. Maybe we want the same things.”

Ford was relieved. When his muse had asked for his intentions after the portal was built, Ford put himself out there, extending the possibility of continuing his research with the muse. Bill hadn’t responded definitively then, but it elated Stanford to hear his intentions now.

“You do?” His face lit up, eyes shining behind his glasses, jubilation oozing from him at the thought that his muse would join him as his destiny progressed. “Oh Bill. I can’t tell you how happy that makes me.”

Bill looked at Stanford’s joyful expression, contented by it, before he leaned forward, and cupped Ford’s face in his hands.

“You are the best choice I’ve made in a long time.” Bill’s slitted eyes simmered with intensity, tracking over every inch of Stanford’s face, seeing his potential as Bill’s right hand. “You’re going to be glorious.”

Ford preened, his muse’s accolades making him smug, stroking his ego. He beamed back at his muse, and pressed a kiss to Bill’s palm adoringly.

Bill smiled wryly at Sixer, and released his cheek, reaching to tear another piece of pancake off, gesturing with it as he spoke. “So, world leader. Why stop there?”

“What do you mean?” Stanford asked, watching the muse eat with his hands.

“I mean there’s a whole universe out there to explore. There’s no limit to what you can achieve anymore.”

Ford watched his muse, emotion brimming in his chest. “You really mean that, don’t you?”

Bill watched Ford, pleased by how much Bill’s regard meant to him. Sixer was adorable like this, worshipping Bill so earnestly, just through simple appreciation. Bill saw Ford’s potential, and that meant more to the human than any whispered words or sweet sentiments.

All Ford had ever wanted was to be seen, to be recognised, to be praised for all the things he was, all the things he excelled at, and Bill knew it. He found it difficult to begrudge the human a little recognition and encouragement, especially when Stanford took it so well.

Ford set the shaker on the table, watching the gold glint in the light, before he spoke, thoughtful once more.

“You know, I’ve been wondering. What life would have been like if I hadn’t summoned you here.
If you hadn’t been living with me all these months. How much I’d be missing out on.”

Ford sounded wistful, saddened by the prospect of these past few months without Bill. Bill stuffed the last piece of his pancake in his mouth, and chewed, watching Sixer closely.

“Your life certainly is richer with me here.” Bill gestured to the golden salt shaker. “Pun intended.”

“I know you weren’t too fond of the idea at first, me bringing you down here, but you know I’m grateful for it in a way.” Ford continued, turning the salt shaker around in his hands. “For the opportunity to get to know you better, and for you to get to know me. I hardly think you’d have reciprocated this sort of interest in me without the time we’ve had together.”

“You’ve grown on me, I’ll admit.” Bill conceded, watching Sixer’s reactions. “Before I found you arrogant, overreaching, pretentious, stubborn.”

Ford pulled a face, knowing the muse was insulting him on purpose.

“Honestly not much has changed.” Bill joked. “But suddenly I find those qualities far more attractive.”

“Perhaps because they remind you of you.” Ford shot back slyly.

Bill wiped his finger through the dregs of maple syrup left on his plate, sucking the syrup off his finger before pointing at Ford.

“Zesty Sixer. I like it.”

Ford smirked, and returned to fiddling with his golden salt shaker, tipping it upside down to see the individual specks of salt had also turned into gold, raining down onto the table top like confetti.

“Fiddleford’s been out of the house more and more.” Ford remarked, looking at the gold dust shimmer in the light. “It’s almost like he’s avoiding us. He probably thinks we’re still fighting.”


Ford looked back to the gold dust, picking up one of the golden salt granules and examining it, as Bill continued speaking.

“What is troubling though is his sudden departure right before the portal is ready for testing. I’m not so keen to have him gallivanting about right when we’re at the most crucial stage of development.”

Ford looked across at Bill, his brows furrowed with concern. “You think Fiddleford would betray us?”

“I think he has more to gain and nothing to lose if he did.” Bill replied diplomatically.

“He certainly does have something to lose if my friendship and trust mean anything to him at all. He wouldn’t.” Ford asserted crossly, frowning at the tabletop.

“Well let’s just say if he does I wouldn’t be surprised. He seems like the type to cut and run when it suits him.” Bill remarked disdainfully.

“Well I’m hoping he’ll follow through.” Ford said optimistically. “We’re so close.”
“We are.” Bill agreed.

“I almost regret the hours of productivity lost to sleep at this point in time. I feel like I could be doing so much more.” Ford said bitterly, lamenting his own human inadequacies.

“Sleep is a limiting necessity. You humans waste half your lives drooling into your pillows. It’s hilariously disappointing to watch.” Bill said, swirling his finger through the syrup on the plate.

Ford looked over to the muse, surveying his human form, taking in all the cosmic little details, the glow of his tattoos, the gold of his eyes, recognising them for what they were. Evidence of Bill’s true nature.

“You know I envy you. How you were before all of this. Unfettered by the limitations of the body, elevated into the purest existence of the cosmic mind. I often wonder what that’s like.”

“Hrmhmm.” Bill pursed his lips and looked up at Ford, considering. “I could show you, if you like.”

“What?” Ford questioned eagerly, curious.

“I could show you what it’s like.” Bill repeated, swiping patterns onto his plate with the maple syrup. Drawing a triangle. “Let you into my mindscape. I’ve been in yours before, it’s only fair.”

“I can’t imagine you offer this to just anyone in the interest of being fair.” Ford guessed correctly.

Bill grinned, looking down at his plate, before smiling up at Sixer. “No, but you’re not just anyone.”

“How would I -?” Ford leaned forward, into his muse’s space, resting his arm on the back of Bill’s chair.

“It’s like reverse possession.” Bill explained simply. “I could take you from your mindscape, into mine, and share a memory of the sensation with you. So you know exactly what I’m missing out on, trapped in this flesh suit.”

“You’d do this just to guilt me?” Ford asked bluntly.

“This is meant to be a treat for you Sixer.” Bill said, putting his hand on his chest, feigning offence. “But if you see it as an ordeal, clearly I’m not meant to share these things with you. I see how it is.”

“No. That’s not how it is.” Ford said hurriedly. “I want to see.”

“Hrmhmm.” Bill pursed his lips, deliberating, licking syrup off his finger.

Ford watched the muse drag his deliberation out, and a question sprung to mind.

“You’re showing this to me?” He asked, genuinely curious. He was hardly expecting a serious answer, yet miraculously, that was what Bill gave him.

“Because I’ve decided Sixer, you are special.” Bill said definitively, watching the human with cheeky slitted eyes. “You get the special treatment.”

Ford sat up a little straighter, ingratiated by the compliment.

“Come here.” Bill crooked his finger at the scientist, and Ford scooted his chair closer to Bill, leaning in.
Bill reached out, and pressed their foreheads together, before placing his hand over Sixer’s eyes.

“Are you ready?” Ford heard Bill asking.

“Ready to see through the eyes of a God?” Ford preened, sounding smug, like his whole life had been leading up to this point. “Absolutely.”

“Hmm.” Bill sounded amused by Ford’s gusto, and at that, he closed his eyes, and shoved his cosmic consciousness into Stanford’s head.

Ford felt his consciousness push away in a jarring rush, the void coming up to meet him, and he burst through the wave of nothingness, eye opening up into the richest colours he’d ever seen.

He felt like he was constantly twirling, folding and unfolding into himself endlessly every microsecond his eye was open, aware of everything, the pressure of the atmosphere, the vast expanse of space, the prisms of light that fractured across the back of his retina, and his own molecules vibrating, a violent staccato of existence, thudding like a hyperactive heartbeat.

He was pure energy, made tangible. He was a god.

He looked down, lifting his arm, and it was thin, long, unbound by the restrictions of musculature or traditional movement. He felt like at any second he could reform and reassemble himself into whatever suited him, whatever he felt like, and it was frightening to think that there was barely anything holding him together, nothing but force of will and imagination making him exist, making him perceptible.

He spread his fingers out, looking at the cartoonish digits, and they warped with the vibration of his molecules, jarring first into jagged claws, insect like legs, burnt bracken sticks, and finally back to the smooth caricature of a hand that Bill preferred. Ford felt like blinking, and when he did blink his hand had six fingers instead of four.

Looking up from his hand, Ford noticed that in the instant when his eyes were closed, he was somewhere else, somewhere completely different. The void of space shifted, and suddenly he was amidst bright colours, tall buildings, futuristic infrastructure, spaceships zipping about around him, big screens blinking as alien creatures strolled the streets, walking around him.

Ford could feel Bill in the back of his head, influencing this shared mindscape, and he blinked again, transporting them elsewhere. Ford was almost disappointed, wanting to take a closer look at the futuristic city, but it was gone, replaced by a towering monolith of nebula dust and gases, red, blue and white coalescing into what resembled a blue eye in the centre of it all. The Hourglass Nebula, if Ford’s astronomy was correct, but it was different than he expected. The blue eye in the centre of the nebula, that swirling cloud of gas and dust, solidified and blinked back at him, its gaze unnerving and sentient.

Bill blinked for them both again, and transported them to a garden of sorts, beside a gigantic black bricked structure. Ford couldn’t say what shape it was, its structure seemed to be constantly changing, warping and shifting to allow different rooms and passages to emerge. In the garden, elements were tethered with glowing blue thread, gases and sediment and metals twisting and shifting in and out of their natural essence. Ford thought they resembled flowers, some of them, layered gently into petals around a single shining blue knot, the centre of the thread.

Ford reached down to cup his hand around one of the ‘flowers’ and his hand passed right through the sculpted cloud of colourful gas. It was remarkable.
Ford could hear Bill’s voice in the back of his head, echoing faintly.

*Do you like it?*

*It’s astonishing,* Ford thought, not knowing how to speak in this form, but Bill heard him nonetheless. *I want to see more.*

Bill seemed to smile at that, smile without a mouth. Ford could feel the expression in the back of his head, feel the emotion of amusement without feeling his face shift, his lips curve, he felt the amusement in the abstract, as the world abstracted all around him.

Bill seemed to hand the reins over to Ford’s consciousness so to speak, and Ford blinked again, shifting his perspective.

The location changed, an empty beach covered in purple sand, overlooking a green ocean devoid of signs of life.

Ford blinked again, and he found himself in the centre of a roulette table, numbers spinning around him giddily, creatures of all shapes and sizes crowded around the table, cheering as the wheel spun, a ball ricocheting around the wheel, bouncing off different numbers.

Ford blinked again, and he found himself on the rim of a curved satellite city, his feet dangling from the edge of the highest building, looking down at a burnt grey planet. He tilted back, and looked up at a glowing green and blue borealis, stars shimmering beautifully in the haze.

Detached from his body, Ford marvelled at this cosmic consciousness, feeling what his muse felt, this thrumming of energy, this ecstatic liminal state of existence, slipping between worlds. Ford felt as small as a dust mite and as big as a hypergiant star at its peak, all at once.

He felt a prickling at the back of his mind, his body calling to him, shouting out at him as pain began building behind his eye, but he ignored it in favour of seeing what his muse could see, seeing all, all the majesty of the universe.

The scenery changed rapidly, as Ford blinked over and over, forcing himself to absorb all that there was to see while he had the chance to see it. The pain was building behind his eye, but he focused beyond the pain, on the sheer revelation of it all.

A bustling market, cultured by a wide variety of creatures spruiking gadgets, gizmos, and glorified garbage.

Blink.

A sweeping landscape, cratered and orange, orbited by a pale blue moon that seemed far too close for comfort, dominating the skyline.

Blink.

A mountaintop monastery, bubbles of pink and blue floating iridescent from the treetops, levitating up to the craggy peaks, gold and shimmering jewels gilding the extravagant temple.

Blink.

An enormous compound, built like a figure eight, looping infinitely on itself, hovering in a desolate void with a few scattered stars shining down on it from a distance.
A constant fire, so large, so untamed and uncontrollable it covered every expanse, every speck of space, eating away at everything there, despite all matter having been gone for billions of years. The fire just wouldn’t stop, it was ravenous, it was all consuming, it was imparting Ford with an uncomfortable tightness in his chest that he almost wasn’t aware of.

Obliquely in the back of his mind, Ford wondered if it was possible he was having a heart attack, and he felt Bill rouse in his mind then, taking the reins back from him.

Desperate for one last peek at the universe, Ford blinked again, and felt his breath catch at the stunning sight of a sleek black cave, cut wider than mount Everest, receding into a tunnel of pure obsidian, light warping and refracting in strange ways on the wall. Everything was dark here, yet somehow Ford still managed to see obscure shapes, glimmers of images he couldn’t comprehend playing on the shining obsidian walls. Something stirred in the back of the cave, a groan like a thunderclap sounding out as whatever lurked within began to move. He felt the uncomfortable prickle of paranoia scent through his mind, giving him the sense he was being watched.

Bill’s presence unseated Ford’s own, and with a discombobulating jolt he felt his consciousness eject back into his own body, abruptly removing him from Bill’s mind.

Ford blinked, and suddenly he was back in his own head, breathing heavily, nearly hyperventilating.

“Sixer. Sixer, how’s it going in there? Are you okay IQ?”

Ford pulled his glasses off and grasped his forehead with both hands, grounded in his body once more, with all the aches and pains that came along with it. He was nursing the most sudden migraine he’d ever experienced in his entire life, groaning.

“Tsk. Look at you, you pushed it too far and now you’re paying the price.” Bill’s voice sounded out, a concerned mutter, though to Ford he seemed decibels too loud. Ford felt Bill’s hands touch him lightly, checking him over, and he tried to level his breathing, knowing he was in no danger, he was back on Earth, as disappointing as that was.

When he figured out how to breathe properly again, sucking in oxygen and breathing out co² he resigned himself to his earthly tether, having experienced godhood for several scant glorious seconds. He felt Bill’s hand on his chin, and he looked up at the muse, blinking from his own eyes this time.

Blearily he saw Bill’s expression peer at him cautiously, before the muse hissed, rearing back.

“Yeesh. You really pushed it too far. Ouch, it hurts just looking at you.”

“What? What’s wrong?” Ford asked, concerned now, Bill’s reaction stirring him up.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Bill replied quickly. “You’re fine.”

He felt Bill’s thumb wipe at wetness under his eye, and he let the muse fuss over him, closing his eyes.

“You’d look like hell too if your body had to process what encompassing an interplanetary shift in perspective means in the wider scheme of things.” Ford muttered, feeling Bill pat his face down with a napkin, exhaustion catching up to him, feeling heavy in his own limbs. “Talk about a paradigm shift. A cosmic paradigm shift.”
“Mmhmm.” Bill hummed, wiping Ford’s face with the napkin, delicately cleaning Sixer up. Ford heard the muse snap, and then felt the press of a warm wet cloth against his skin, the muse pressing the cloth to his face. The wet cloth felt wonderful against his sore eyes, and Ford sighed, leaning into the fabric.

“I mean, really.” Ford mumbled, awestruck. “To think that your scope is so large, that you can see so much of the universe in simply a blink of an eye. The sheer mass of knowledge at your disposal, to be able to access it all. All the secrets of the universe.”

“I take it you’re impressed then.” Bill replied, patting the wet cloth against Ford’s face, pulling it back to assess the damage.

“Very impressed.” Ford confirmed. “Phenomenally impressed. I don’t think anyone could see through the eyes of a god and not be impressed. I can’t believe you shared that with me. A glimpse of the stars.”

“You’ll get a lot more than a glimpse when that portal’s done.” Bill said, looking at Sixer’s face, before nodding. Standing up, Bill gripped Ford’s bicep and helped him up out of his chair. “Come on Sixer, let’s get you to bed. You look dead on your feet. I should have realised this would be draining for you.”

“I don’t want to go to bed.” Ford complained childishly, his eyes still shut, too tired to open them properly. “You can’t expect me to see a glimpse of my potential just like that and then delay me from doing everything I can to reach it. There’s so much to do. I need to work on the portal, I have calculations to check, notes to compile, readings to analyse.”

Bill steered Ford out of the kitchen and along the corridor, helping him up the stairs. “It’ll all be waiting for you when you wake up. Terminal fatigue isn’t a good look for you Sixer, trust me on this, you need to sleep.”

“I’ll sleep when I’m dead.” Ford protested, though he trudged along to wherever Bill was leading him, obediently climbing the stairs, his muse’s hands guiding him along. “With Fiddleford out again I’m the only one able to finalise those calculations, and if we want that portal online we can’t wait another second. I can’t wait another second. It’s my destiny.”

Bill pushed open the door to Sixer’s room and lead the scientist over to his bed, urging him to sit on the cushy mattress, standing in front of him with his hands on his hips.

“Your destiny, right now, is to do what I tell you. Look at you, you’re so tired you can barely open your eyes.”

Squinting up at Bill rebelliously, Ford tried hard to prove him wrong, but he felt exhausted, every inch of him.

“How are you going to solve equations if you can’t even read the page. You’re not functioning properly. You’re tired, you’ll make mistakes.” Bill insisted.

“But I don’t want to wait.” Ford objected. “You’ve shown me such marvellous things, amazing things. You’ve inspired me. I – I want to be there already. To see it with my own eyes.”

Bill gently pushed Ford’s shoulders back, arranging him to lay horizontally on the mattress. Ford sunk back into the cushions, mentally prepared to further his work on the portal, but physically drained by his experience beyond the limitations of his body. The mind was willing, but the flesh was weak.
“You will.” Bill promised him. “Just sleep.”

“But the equations.” Ford mumbled, his eyes sliding shut, no matter how hard he tried to keep them open.

“I’ll take care of them. Just sleep Sixer.” Bill pulled the covers up over Ford, and stroked his hair gently, resting his hand on Ford’s forehead.

“Will you stay with me?” Ford murmured, his eyes closed now, fighting against his dwindling consciousness.

Bill smirked, and brushed Ford’s bangs back gently. “I will.”

Ford nodded, content in the knowledge that his muse would be there, and succumbed to the sweet embrace of slumber. Smacking his lips and nuzzling into the pillow, Ford spoke softly, almost childlike in his mid-sleep sincerity.

“Mmm. I love you.”

Bill stared at Ford, shocked by Sixer’s mumbled admittance.

“What?”

Ford hummed contentedly, and wiggled his shoulders, snuggling up under the blankets, squashing his cheek against his pillows.

Bill just stared at him, gobsmacked by Sixer’s half-asleep confession, thrown a loop by three words he never thought he’d hear directed at him.

Bill questioned reality, existence, his own hearing, everything, scarcely believing Sixer could say those three little words to him of his own volition, barely hoping that he meant it. Bill didn’t deserve what Ford so sleepily confessed to. He didn’t deserve love.

He ogled Sixer’s snoozing body, dumbstruck by the revelation of it all. He knew Sixer couldn’t reply, since he was counting sheep on white fluffy clouds by now, but his disbelief compelled him to ask again, his voice cracking.

“What?”

Sixer slept on.

When Stanford woke the next morning fully dressed, it was clear he’d been sleeping for a long while, his alarm clock reading 13:38 as it blinked on his bedside table. He rubbed his eyes, feeling crust crackle at the rims, and sat up slowly, well rested and warm, greeting the day – well, midday.

Looking around his room he didn’t see his muse, but there was evidence of the god’s presence shown in the papers scattered about the floor, Ford’s ballpoint pens shaken out of their box, garnishing the room.
Stepping into his slippers, Ford paced into the middle of the room, crouching down to examine the documents curiously. Ford saw several loose sheafs scattered around his notebook, which he flipped open. Inside the notebook, penned beautifully, was 6 hours of calculations and equations, the calculations Ford needed, completed meticulously by his muse while he slept, complete with revisionary notes on his old content, and summaries on each page of what the muse had completed.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Ford remarked, impressed.

His muse was true to his word, and Ford felt touched by the generosity in Bill’s gesture. His muse had been nothing but generous these past few days, bestowing favours and surprises on the scientist, favours that drastically improved Stanford’s progress, happiness, and standing when it came to achieving his destiny. He was so close, and the muse was helping him along, granting him everything he wished for.

Picking his notebook up, Ford grinned at the thought of Fiddleford’s expression when he saw him fully alert and smiling with a huge stack of calculations at his side. His assistant would be elated that the bulk of the busywork was done, and once he had finished quadruple checking Ford’s work, they would be able to set up for the portal’s very first test of all the equipment.

Stanford couldn’t wait.

Racing out of his bedroom, eager to show his friend the finished calculations, Stanford didn’t pause to check his reflection in the mirror as he brushed his teeth the bathroom, spitting toothpaste in the sink and running downstairs.

If he had, he would have noticed the bloodshot whites of his eyes, red crusting around his eyeline, and a smear of dried blood clotting just in the corner of his tear ducts.

His eyes may have bled, but he’d seen the future he wanted so desperately, and nothing was going to stop him from achieving it.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter wasn't as busy as some, staying in the shack, focusing a lot more on interpersonal relationships than action, but for those disappointed by that, just picture Fiddleford running around Gravity Falls in Stanford's red bathrobe, erasing the disturbing memories the townsfolk have of the spontaneous levitation they all suffered when the generators tested.
For those waiting for a confession IT HAS ARRIVED but in a lovely, deniable, confusing way, just to make things difficult for you all. I hope you enjoyed Stanford's peek into Bill's mindscape, Bill's continual acid trip of existence has been confirmed, no wonder he likes to party.
Next chapter is the midway point of this fic, the first portal test. I am so excited to write it, you have no idea. Things are heating up.
As always, let me know what you think, and this chapter is dedicated to moonwalkingdinosaur. Whenever I see your concerned Dipper picture, my heart is happy. Don't worry, we'll both cry when this is over.
Men are the toys in the game that you play. When you get tired, you throw ‘em away.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Fiddleford’s knee was jittering, approaching a KBPS level that Stanford hadn’t seen since the Gremloblin attack.

“It’s fine, the papers are fine.” Ford insisted.

“I wanna read it over one more time, two more times. I just wanna check –“

“You’ve checked that one page four times already Fiddleford. If you haven’t found a mistake by now, I’m not sure wishful thinking will do you any better.” Ford complained, sweeping papers off the desk, stacking them into a neat pile.

“I ain’t finished with them yet. Don’t rush me Stanford. Give them papers back.” F swiped for the pages, Stanford holding them pettily just out of reach.

“You are determined to poke holes in this when there aren’t any holes there.” Ford chided his colleague. “I can assure you, everything’s accurate. We’re ready.”

“There are holes. We’re poking a hole through the fabric of the universe. There’s got to be a hole.” Fiddleford said, sounding both determined and agitated. “Gimme them papers back. I need to check –“

“Fiddleford –“ Ford frowned, and held the papers higher, watching his assistant jump to try and grab the completed documents for more unnecessary re-reads.

“Stanford – don’t be – you stubborn – just git-“ F continued to jump, attempting to climb up Ford’s tall built frame, his own height working against him.

The elevator doors opened to the study, and Bill walked in, holding the crash test dummy they intended to use under his arm.

“So, I drew a face on our dummy for realism, and –“ Bill’s words stopped at the sight of McGucket climbing up Stanford, elbowing the other scientist’s chin, trying to grasp the paperwork Ford was holding precariously in the air above him. “What are you doing?”

Somewhat abashed, the two scientists sprung away from each other, realising how ludicrous they must have looked.

Bill gave a low whistle, and raised his eyebrows. “Well, don’t let me interrupt.”

“No interruption –“ Ford began.

“We weren’t doin’ anythin-“ Fiddleford spoke over Ford, aware of how compromising this must have seemed, clutching the papers he had managed to snatch behind his back.

“Uhuh.” Bill sounded sceptical, sitting on the edge of one of the desks in the study, propping the crash test dummy up beside him, turning its chin. “What do you think Dummy, should I be clutching my pearls right now?”
“Fiddleford won’t return the papers he’s already checked.” Ford tattled on his colleague to Bill, seeking his muse as backup. “We could be running tests by now, not going over the same equations in perpetuity.”

“I just want to check – it don’t hurt to be too cautious. I just need to check ‘em a few more times.” Fiddleford said in his defence, appealing to Bill who seemed to be the mediator in this scenario.

“Last I checked, the definition of madness is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results.” Bill said, putting his arm around the dummy congenially, pointing its arm at Fiddleford. “Our dear pal Albert Einstein said that, and he was familiar with the scientific method, which goes to show you that too much of a good thing is entirely relative. And that was when he came up with his famous theory of relativity.”

“No it wasn’t.” Fiddleford contested sullenly.

Ignoring Fiddleford’s protestations, Bill continued regaling the scientists with his insight. “That is irrelative and irrelevant. My point being is that this year is set to be your own _annus mirabilis_ and here you are wasting it, arguing about an assumptive equation that you both know is right. Now, I don’t know about you, but I’d like to see the portal finished before this time next year. I don’t have that many vacation hours, and neither do you, so Specs, if you don’t mind.”

Bill gestured for McGucket to pass the remaining papers back over to Stanford.

Reluctantly, incredibly reluctantly, Fiddleford handed the last of the papers over to Ford, who stacked them neatly, his expression infuriatingly smug.

“What happens if I miss somethin’ though, because I didn’t check thoroughly enough.” Fiddleford fretted. “I’m just getting this feelin’, this nigglng feelin’ in the back of my head that I’m missing something. Something important. With technology like this I just can’t shake the notion that if we make one mistake, all hell will break loose.”

Bill smirked, amused by the irony of that statement, before he waved the dummy’s hand at Fiddleford again, dismissively. “You’re being paranoid. Sixer, tell him he’s being paranoid.”

“Listen, F, I can understand your concerns.” Ford began, stacking the papers in a pile, turning to face him earnestly. “This is a massive undertaking we’re about to impart on, a huge responsibility. I don’t blame you for being cautious, but when you’re cautious to this excess – I just feel that it’s detrimental to us achieving our destiny. My destiny.”

“I ain’t tryin’ to set you back.” Fiddleford assured Ford.

Stanford put his hand on Fiddleford’s shoulder and looked him in the eye, desperation and fervour leaking out from his expression.

“I don’t think you understand. This portal is my life. My life’s work. It’s everything I’ve been leading up to, everything I’ve ever wanted. This portal will define how I make my mark on the scientific community. We are right on the threshold of achieving something remarkable, something limitless I see every time I close my eyes.”

Bill smiled at Sixer, watching him contemplatively. That peek through the universe really inspired the scientist to strive harder, push farther, to achieve what Bill wanted him to achieve. He was driven, zealous with passion now, and part of Bill wondered why he didn’t just show Sixer the universe through his eyes in the first place.

He hadn’t earned it then. He had now.
“We are on the very precipice of achieving that limitless potential, right at the edge. I understand you’re cautious, but that caution is holding us back. I don’t understand how you can do it, if I’m being honest. How you can second guess our achievement at this point. You’re so keen to go over the same facts, looking for holes in the parachute, looking for flaws in our design. I just want to fling myself over that edge and soar.”

“I know you do.” Fiddleford looked at Ford, sighing as he acknowledged his friend’s passion. “Which is exactly why I’m stayin’ grounded here. For the both of us. This test is exciting, yes, but it’s also potentially dangerous. This machine is potentially dangerous. I just want to be sure.”

Ford crossed his arms, harrumphing. “Well, if you’re intent to check over minutiae that you’ve already checked, then by all means, do so to your heart’s content. I’ll be down in the lab, setting up for the test, which will be happening tomorrow. I’ve humoured your paranoia Fiddleford, but at this point it’s just rude. You’re second guessing my work, all of our work.”

“I’m not –“ Fiddleford spoke up, holding his hands up to protest.

“You have until seven pm, Fiddleford.” Ford said definitively, leaving the stacked papers on the desk, gesturing that F could have at the papers if he so wished, as long as he could keep to Ford’s arbitrary deadline. “If you can’t find any major discrepancies in our work by then, I’m going to assume there aren’t any, and celebrate this achievement for what it is, rather than shoot it down before it takes off the ground.”

“I know you’re aimin’ for the sun here Ford, I know this means a lot to you, but you gotta be realistic here.” Fiddleford beseeched him. “I’m not even sure if we should be turning this portal on.”

“We’ve been working on it all year, are you seriously suggesting we abandon it now?” Ford asked crossly.

Bill looked between the two scientists, watching how this situation went down very carefully.

“I’m not suggesting we abandon it, just maybe postpone it. Aim for a later ignition date, so we have more time to assess the risks. I don’t think we’re ready.” Fiddleford insisted meekly, trying to talk Stanford down.

“We are ready. We’ve been ready. We could be ready now, but for your pedantic pessimism.” Ford huffed, frustrated, gesturing to the papers. “We’re almost at the finish line, and you want to pull the breaks on this project.”

“I’m just trying to caution you.” Fiddleford assured Ford.

“That’s all you know, isn’t it?” Ford questioned irritably. “Caution, and hesitation, and anchoring your expectations to a limited understanding of reality, of what’s realistic. You don’t even know what’s out there, what we could be exploring by now. You don’t want to know.”

“I’m tryin’ to look out for you! You gotta walk before you run, and here you are ready to fly.” Fiddleford cried out, exasperated. “You’re ambitious, and big headed, and reckless! Just - I’m trying to give you perspective. Remember what happened to Icarus?”

“He didn’t flap hard enough.” Ford growled, scowling at Fiddleford. Turning on his heel, Ford marched down the spiral staircase, his trench coat flaring out behind him, storming away. “I’ll be down in the lab. When you’re finished being stubborn, perhaps you could join me.”

Ford’s footfalls clanged angrily on each metal step, echoing through the study all the way down.
Fiddleford sighed, his shoulders slumping, as Ford left, looking down to the pile of papers on the desk, Stanford’s snappish regard draining him. Draining his good intentions. He wasn’t trying to upset his friend, but goshdarnit Ford found a way to upset himself. It wasn’t Fiddleford’s fault, but whenever Ford was mad at him, he felt like it was.

Fiddleford was half tempted to engineer some sort of error, just to slow the other scientist’s fervour down some, but he knew he couldn’t get away with that.

He was being watched.

Looking up at Bill, who still sat on one of the desks in the study, his arm around the dummy, Fiddleford felt unnerved by the smiley face Bill had drawn on the mannequin, two sets of eyes on him now.

“And I suppose you think I’m bein’ too cautious too.” Fiddleford presumed, rubbing his elbow.

Bill stared at McGucket in silence for a moment, then blinked at the scientist, his expression intent. “Why do you think something’s going to go wrong with the portal?”

“I – I don’t know. It’s just somethin’ I can’t shake, in the back of my head. This foreboding that somethin’ goin’ to go horribly wrong.” Fiddleford confessed to Bill nervously. “It’s like there’s somethin’ that I think I should know, that I know I should know, but every time I try to remember what it is, it’s gone.”

Bill raised an eyebrow at the engineer, his tone smooth. “Fancy that.”

“You’re the one who told me, you said - fear makes a home in the caution that caused your gradual decline. Am I bein’ too cautious? Do you know somethin’ I don’t?” F beseeched Bill, looking to the assistant for answers.

“I know lots of things you don’t.” Bill replied unhelpfully, giving Fiddleford a flat look.

“But you’re just an assistant.” Fiddleford frowned, genuinely frustrated by the thought that Bill would have greater insight with this portal than he would, considering how hard he’d been studying it, how he’d been assembling it with his own two hands, handling the engineering all by himself effectively. “If I can’t see what’s wrong with this thing, how can you? I’ve looked at it from every angle.”

“I’m not the assistant here. You are.” Bill corrected Fiddleford, and hopped off the desk, lugging the mannequin along with him. Walking up to the scientist, Bill pointed at him with the mannequin’s arm, poking him in the chest with it. “And if you haven’t seen it by now, you never will. This portal will run exactly how I want it to, and if you can’t bring yourself to man the test tomorrow, Stanford and I will do it without you.”

Fiddleford’s hurt expression delighted Bill. Sticking his chin out stubbornly, Fiddleford scowled. “I’ll be there. I’m part of this project too.”

“You were a part of this project, but dabble too much in this caution of yours, and you might not be. It’s no skin off my nose.” Bill shrugged, and jerked his thumb at the mannequin held under his arm. “I already have your replacement right here, and he’ll stand in for you just as well as you would have.”

Fiddleford squinted at Bill, looking at the other man like he didn’t recognise him, like he was a stranger. “You know, sometimes I have no idea what Stanford sees in you.”
“Well, let’s go ask Stanford then. You go down there, and tell him you despise his chosen partner, and see how long he lets you stay on the project then.” Bill smiled at Fiddleford, but it was more a bearing of teeth. “Me and Dummy will go with you, and Dummy can watch. I’m sure he’d like to see you get kicked out.”

“That ain’t –“ Fiddleford spluttered, unnerved by Bill’s sinister smile. “I ain’t leavin’, and I’m not giving up. I’m gonna go over those papers, and if there’s somethin’ even the slightest bit wrong with this portal, I’m gonna find it, and I’ll go to Stanford with it, don’t think I won’t, because I care about him, and this project. I’m his friend.”

“Have fun with that then.” Bill shrugged. He turned around, heading for the elevator, waving the mannequin’s arm as he left. “You must be good at chasing wild geese, all that time spent on the farm. You better find your answer before seven pm though, because if you don’t, we’re going ahead with this portal test, with or without you.”

Fiddleford clenched his hands into fists, watching the elevator doors close on Bill and the dummy, scowling at the ultimatum delivered by Ford’s assistant.

He really had an attitude problem. Just who did he think he was?

Huffing out his frustration, F looked at his watch, then the pile of papers on the desk, filled with determination. He’d find the answers he was seeking, he knew something was wrong with this portal, he just didn’t know where to look.

Wild goose chasing, that’s what it felt like.

The thought jarred Fiddleford, his eyes widening with realisation.

If Bill knew something he didn’t, it would make sense for the strange man to lead F on a wild goose chase, have him scouring through papers that didn’t hold answers, making him look the other way, while the real secret was hiding just out of reach. He wouldn’t find his answer if he kept approaching the papers the same way, fact checking what was already there.

He had to approach this from a different angle.

He had an idea.

Digging through the papers, Fiddleford flicked through until he found the original blueprints Ford presented him for the portal, pulling out the page detailing the collection of the Hyperdrive, and its implementation in the machine.

Holding the page aloft, F found his wild goose, pouring over the paper.

If he could pinpoint the flaw in the portal, the wax in its wings, he could intervene before Ford fell. Icarus didn’t fall because he didn’t flap hard enough, he fell because he couldn’t look beyond his own hubris to listen to reason, and Fiddleford wasn’t about to let Ford’s hubris derail the scientist from the destiny he held so dear.

He was an engineer, he could fix this.

Before it all came crashing down.
Checking in with Ford downstairs after that confrontation was wise, Bill thought to himself as he rode the elevator to the lab.

After an altercation like that it was crucial he shape Ford’s reaction, knowing the scientist tended to default to guilt. Bill didn’t want Ford feeling guilty, he wanted him feeling righteous, justified in his fury.

Fiddleford’s suspicion was grating on Bill’s nerves, and they were a few scant hours away from the portal turning on, from the engineer having outlived his usefulness. McGucket was too clever to be left a loose end, so Bill just had to figure out the best way to give Specs the flick without Sixer cottoning on.

Sixer was plenty focused right now, and he was passionate, which was good. Ideal even.

Bill rocked on the balls of his feet as he watched the lift signal its descent, lights blinking through an array of alchemical shapes and symbols.

Passion was a good look for Sixer. Passion in the service of Bill even more so.

Drumming his fingers on the arm of the mannequin, Bill tried hard not to think of where that passion could lead.

The lift clanked down to the basement level laboratory, and Bill readied himself to stroll out, to soothe Sixer’s concerns, when he felt an unpleasant ping in the back of his mind.

Boss! Boss, can you please get here?

Sucking in a frustrated breath, Bill’s eyebrow twitched, and he chose to ignore Kryptos’ frantic plea for his attention. The compass probably stubbed his toe, or something on a similar scale in terms of urgency. It was probably nothing major.

Bill shoved the compass out of his thoughts briskly.

Not now.

Not now that he was here, the elevator doors opening. Sixer was in the observation room in the lab, checking through the system’s protocols. He paused when the elevator door opened, looking up at Bill.

Bill tried to blink away that moment of hesitation, of distraction, making his movements smooth again. Strolling into the lab, Bill plonked the mannequin down on one of the wheeled office chairs, watching Ford with an open expression.

“Well that was enlightening.”

Ford shook his head, crossing his arms. He jerked his chin up to the study above, surly and indignant.

“I can’t believe he’d even bring up abandoning the portal at this stage in the game. You know, suspicion is one thing, but unless he has hard evidence that this isn’t going to work, the only thing he’s doing is limiting us, limiting us both.”
“You’re right.” Bill said, calmly watching Sixer’s reaction play out. He spun Dummy around on the chair casually, keeping an eye on Sixer, playing it cool. “He is limiting you.”

“I can’t believe he’d say we’re not ready. What have we been doing all this time, if not preparing ourselves for this very moment?” Ford scoffed, gesturing as he spoke, obviously still cross. “I think we’re ready. Do you think we’re ready?”

“We are.” Bill replied steadily, still spinning the mannequin around on the chair.

“Really, caution before an experiment I can understand, but threatening to call the whole thing off? That’s just – that’s just excessive.” Ford frowned at the ground, lost in his temper. “And another thing, if he had these concerns, why bring them up now, with no proof. If we hinged this project on F’s gut feeling we’d have to rework the entire operating system. The man jumps at shadows, for goodness sake, I’m supposed to trust that he’s right based on a hunch? An unsupported burst of paranoia?”

“He lacks your perspective.” Bill said, letting the chair spin on its own now, staring at Sixer intently. “He’s not as smart as you.”

“Just because he hasn’t seen what I’ve seen, that’s no reason for him to lose faith in the project. If he ever had any in the first place that is. How am I to know this isn’t just a job for him? How am I to know that he’s really invested, has been invested all this time?” Ford ranted. “He doesn’t truly share our vision. Sometimes I wonder why he even signed on to this project at all.”

Sixer was saying all the right things here, Bill barely had to give him a nudge in the right direction. He let the chair spin on, and sidestepped around it, taking a step towards Sixer.

“I don’t know. Maybe he’s right? I’m not being fair to him.” Ford sighed, and Bill’s eyes widened, and he crossed the gap between them rapidly, resting his hand on Ford’s arm as the scientist pinched the bridge of his nose.

“Or maybe you’re right, and he’s wrong.” Bill rubbed Sixer’s arm, trying to encourage the scientist down the right track. “Don’t second guess yourself, IQ. I’d hate to see his words, jealous, spiteful words, impact your confidence in yourself, in the project. You’re doing all the right things Sixer.”

“He’s just worried for me, for the project, and I was pretty harsh on him.” Ford conceded, the guilt seeping in. “I can’t blame him for being cautious, knowing everything that’s happened to him. I’m sure it’s his own way of trying to steer me clear of danger, since he’s faced more than his fair share of it here. I can tell it’s affected him, affected his perspective, but I just wish he could see beyond that. To stop jumping at shadows and see the good this portal can do.”

“I don’t think it’s the shadows he’s been jumping at.” Bill rolled his eyes, giving Sixer a flat look. “You’ve noticed how he’s been acting lately. He’s preoccupied, he’s secretive, he’s always out. He’s not halting the test because he’s concerned for you, he’s concerned for himself.”

Ford frowned at Bill, his brow crinkling with uncertainty.

“These behaviours he’s exhibiting, they’re the behaviours of someone who’s afraid they’ll get caught. He’s covering his own ass.” Bill urged Sixer, resting his hand on Ford’s arm as he spoke, trying to influence him. “Trust me, I know what that looks like.”

“To cover what exactly?” Ford asked sceptically.

“I’ve seen it happen before.” Bill’s slitted eyes locked onto Ford’s as the muse stroked his arm. “It’s happened for millennia. Genius is always envied. It pays to be smart, but to be quicker than
the other guy is always greater currency. You think the people you work with are above reproach? They never are.”

Bill stared up at Ford, and the scientist was drawn in by the intensity of Bill’s glowing gold eyes.

“Your intellect may be the most staggering thing I’ve encountered on this dingy planet.” Bill continued. “But even then, if you can’t see what’s happening right in front of you, you may as well let Dummy lead the project.”

“What do you mean?” Ford narrowed his eyes, piecing Bill’s words together.

“I can wait for you to have the lightbulb moment.” Bill watched Sixer expectantly, tapping his toe, before he squeezed Ford’s arm. “Heinrich Goebel’s patent was in Thomas Edison’s greedy little hands the moment he kicked the bucket, he even stole from your hero, Tesla. What makes you think this is any different?”

“You think Fiddleford would steal the designs for the portal from me?” Ford raised his eyebrows, disbelief colouring his expression. “Take credit for my invention? For our invention?”

Bill said nothing, but watched Stanford, keeping his expression sombre.

“But – he wouldn’t do that. That’s – absolutely not. Fiddleford is – he’s my friend. He wouldn’t.” Ford protested emphatically, though a hint of uncertainty was there, lurking beneath the surface. Bill could tell he was wavering from the way Ford was still watching him, as if to check if Bill would laugh it off, say he was just joking.

Bill kept his expression insistent, stubborn. Ford’s uncertainty grew the longer he took in Bill’s uncharacteristic seriousness.

“He wouldn’t.” Ford repeated, though his tone quirked off at the end there, sounding more like a question than a statement. He seemed deeply disturbed by the thought of such a betrayal from his close friend, the longer he thought about it.

“You don’t know who you can trust at the end of the day Sixer.” Bill smoothed his right hand against Ford’s chest, resting it there, appealing to his heart and his head all at once, hoping to sway his decision. “Your genius has been sabotaged too many times. I’m your friend too, and I want to see you achieve your destiny. Can you honestly say he does?”

“I don’t –” Ford frowned, and chewed the inside of his cheek, looking solemn, having difficulty even comprehending the thought of such a betrayal.

Bill cupped Sixer’s jaw, and stroked his thumb along Ford’s cheek, looking up at him intently with glowing gold eyes.

“You’re special Sixer. You could be so much more. You’re so close.”

Bill’s words were cutting Ford, striking at his vulnerabilities, his sore spots. He was tapping on Ford’s insecurities in quick succession, smoothing over the hurts with an encouraging flourish, playing Ford’s emotions like a xylophone.

The thought of his destiny being sabotaged by a close friend just brought back painful memories, memories Ford would sooner repress, and forget.

The scientist’s expression twisted, his brows furrowed, and he seemed to be trying very hard not to look disastrously sad, but he was failing. While this devastated expression was just as endearing on
the scientist as all of his other expressions, it was painful to watch.

Straining up onto his tiptoes, Bill sealed his mouth over Sixer’s, kissing away his frown adoringly.

Pulling back to cup Ford’s face in his hands, Bill’s eyes shone up at the human, glowing in the muted laboratory.

“You have so much potential. You really do.”

Ford’s jaw moved like he was trying not to cry, looking down into Bill’s wide yellow eyes, holding back his emotions.

Bill looked up at Sixer from beneath his long eyelashes, oozing sincerity, finding that this sincerity didn’t need to be faked at this point. It was an odd balance, parroting the false flattery that captured Ford’s interest in the first place, mimicking the same words he’d used insincerely in the past. It was strange to think that things were different now.

Bill really meant it.

“I believe in you.”

Ford’s bottom lip wavered, and he felt emotion choke up in his throat.

To be believed in by a god, that tipped Ford over.

Everything he’d been holding back, everything he’d been second guessing, about himself, about his capacity, his ambition, his insecurity nurtured by a lifetime of being shunted to the side, underestimated, it burst through the dam and Ford’s expression crumpled.

He clenched his fist, trying to reign it back in, but it was too late. He broke.

Rather than bare this repressed wound in his soul to the cosmic being in front of him, this bittersweet feeling of being believed in, Ford reached out and grabbed Bill, tucking the muse’s face into his shoulder, hugging him tightly as the emotions rattled through him.

Gratitude, and relief, and exhaustion. Pain and suffering, rejection and scorn all capitulating on itself, compounding on a sense of being underappreciated, unrecognised for his talents. To have someone support him like this, support his potential, to BE there for him so consistently.

Ford sobbed out his relief breathily, shuddering through the feeling of truly being seen, being believed in.

His vulnerabilities were bared here, in a way that they hadn’t been, that he hadn’t wanted them to be, but his guard dropped around Bill upon seeing the muse so sincerely laud his potential. He cried, relief and frustration mingling with the overwhelming validation of being seen, truly being seen. These hurts had been stewing, but on this, the eve of Ford’s reckoning, they rose to the surface, springing free.

His muse seemed frozen at first, surprised by Ford’s emotive response, but slowly Ford felt Bill move in his arms, looping his hands under Sixer’s armpits, patting him awkwardly on the back as he cried it all out.

Ford clutched onto Bill like he was the only thing anchoring him in place, and he let it all out. They stood there, grasping each other, until it passed, Ford sniffling and wiping his face with his sleeve, breathing evenly now.
“Thank you.” Ford laughed under his breath, comporting himself regularly again. “I’ll be saying that to you every day I imagine.”

“It couldn’t hurt to.” Bill leaned back, taking in Ford’s red face, spying a single teardrop lingering on the frame of Ford’s glasses.

Reaching up, curious, Bill swiped the tear away with his finger, and immediately put his finger in his mouth, tasting Ford’s salty sadness.

Before Ford could open his mouth to question that, Bill poked Ford’s mouth tenderly, pushing the edge up into an awkward grin, smiling at the scientist.

“Cheer up Sixer. You’re almost there.”

“I’m wasting time, being silly.” Ford admitted, smiling for Bill obligingly.

“Time is made to be wasted. Might as well be silly while doing it.” Bill shrugged, before grinning at the scientist. “Besides, you’re waiting til seven anyway, aren’t you? Plenty of time to be an emotional wreck before this all kicks off.”

“I suppose I should give Fiddleford a chance. If I suspect the worst, I’m no better than he is, leaping to conclusions without evidence.” Ford said, thinking Bill meant he should give F the benefit of the doubt.

“Uhuh. Sure.” Bill said, unimpressed with Sixer’s leap, but willing to let it slide. He laid the groundwork down, Sixer would be leaning his way when the winds of change blew through this cosy little team.

“I should finish the preparations.” Ford conceded, looking around the lab. “I’m pretty much done, at this point. Just a few last-minute system checks to go over, and laying down the safety line.”

Bill looked over at the portal, sitting at the ready in the lab, humming softly with power, constructed beautifully. Its triangular structure was polished and shining, lit up by the blue glowing sigils etched into the ring around the eye.

“It’s perfect.”

“I’m eager to celebrate our successes.” Ford said, reaching out to caress Bill’s shoulder, rubbing it dotingly. “We’ll go out for dinner tonight, and then after perhaps you and I could celebrate on our own.”

“Tempting.” Bill’s lips curved into a grin, turning into Sixer’s arms, when that irritating ping came from the back of his mind again, persistent.

Boss, I need you now. NOW. Help!

“Ugh.” Bill groaned, and reached up to rub at his forehead.

“What’s wrong?” Ford asked, concerned. “Do you have a headache?”

“You could say that.” Bill scowled, brushing his hair back with his hand.

 Seriously Boss, this is an emergency.

“Sit down. I’ll move the dummy.” Ford ushered Bill over to the office chair, making the move the mannequin. “I don’t think I’ve seen you get a headache before, not even when you decided
crunching ice cubes for a solid hour was a good idea. Do you think something’s wrong?”

“Everything’s fine. Don’t worry about it Sixer.” Bill said, trying to shake off Sixer’s concern.

“Well, I can’t help but worry. I don’t want anything going wrong, not now.” Ford said, midway through lifting the mannequin away.

“Let Dummy sit.” Bill held his hand up, halting Sixer’s attempts to coddle him. “He can keep you company while you run your tests. I might go upstairs and lay down, until this passes.”

“Are you sure?” Ford asked, his forehead creased with concern.

It was almost adorable, in a quaint way, how much Sixer cared, but Bill couldn’t dwell on that.

Not with Kryptos screaming bloody murder in his cerebellum.

**BOSS! I CAN’T HOLD THEM OFF FOREVER. NOW PLEASE!**

“I’ll see you later Sixer.” Bill said quickly, patting Ford on the shoulder, giving him a quick peck on the cheek, before teleporting upstairs in a blink of gold light that left the scientist baffled, and delighted all at once.

Left alone in the lab, staring at the space his muse had left, Ford blinked as the gold light departed when Bill did, rubbing his cheek absently. The machines in the lab hummed and beeped rhythmically, and Ford looked between the space where Bill had stood, and the mannequin on the chair, the rictus grin Bill etched on it’s face staring back at him.

“I’ll see you later then.”

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Bill teleported into his bedroom, and felt the exhaustion that came with brick-bound teleportation wash over his body. Physical exhaustion didn’t matter though, not when this was a matter of the mind. Taking one step forward, he faceplanted onto his cushiony bed, hitting the mindscape with a splash, letting his body rest.

“Kryptos, what was so important that it couldn’t wait five goddamn minutes?” Bill asked angrily, opening his eye, taking in the sight before him.

Goo Mobsters had broken into his off-limits private study, dozens of Goo Mobsters, all lined up, crowded around the panicking compass, holding a switchblade to Kryptos’ eye.

“HeY!” Bill yelled, affronted that these peons who he let into his home would have the absolute nerve to attack HIS henchmaniac.

Sure, Kryptos was no Pyronica, and Bill generally couldn’t care less if the compass got a little scuffed, but it was about the PRINCIPLE of the matter. Talk about disrespect.

Kryptos must have barricaded himself in here, but judging from the oozing goo blasts around the door, he hadn’t lasted long.
“I was wondering what I’d have to do to get your attention.” The largest Goo Mobster spoke up, a tall menacing fellow who wore a bowler hat and carried a cane, the cosmic equivalent of a very slimy droog, a la Kubrick, but gooier.

He stepped around Kryptos, the small compass’s legs dangling fretfully in the air as the mobsters had their arms around him, pinning him down, one particularly sinister pile of articulated goo holding the knifepoint just a centimetre away from Kryptos’ eye.

“Don Goo.” Bill watched the mobster with his eye narrowed. “I see you’ve let yourself in, helped yourself to my Kryptos. You’ll be taking all the tiny shampoos from the bathroom next. You’re a guest in my home, remember that. You’ll get my attention when I give it. Don’t outstay your welcome by touching my things.”

“I’ll touch what I gotta touch.” Don Goo said sinisterly, pacing around Kryptos. “I’ll break what I gotta break. You’re a hard triangle to locate. You only have the pleasure of me and mine because you pledged services, and those services still ain’t rendered. Now’s the time to deliver.”

“You’ll be getting your deal done in the fullness of time. Don’t worry.” Bill said smoothly, acting as though he hadn’t been avoiding the mobsters for the past several weeks. “I may have been busy, taking care of loose ends, preparing for the big day, but I haven’t forgotten about our deal, and considering what you’re getting, a little patience on your end doesn’t seem like such an unreasonable request.”

“Oh, you’ve been busy.” Don Goo said, raising his eyebrows. “See, my boys here were getting to thinking you’ve been avoiding us.”

Bill scoffed, before putting his hand to his bricks, his voice pitching high. “Now why would I do a thing like that?”

“You tell me.” Don Goo said flatly, disbelief colouring his goopy features. “And if you don’t tell me, we’ll just get your square here to tell me. I hear tell he’s a squealer.”

“Well, technically he’s a rhombus.” Bill said flippantly, unfazed by their threats against Kryptos.

“I’m a compass!” Kryptos cried out, offended.

“Talk rhombus.” One of the Goo Mobsters ordered threateningly, holding Kryptos’ arm. “Or my friend Tommy here will cut your eye out.”

Tommy the Goo Mobster leaned over Kryptos, twirling the blade between his fingers sinisterly. “Nice and easy. You don’t need both eyes to see.”

“Bill!” Kryptos begged, looking over to the triangle.

“Make good on the deal, or your compass gets it.” Don Goo threatened.
Bill blinked at the mobster, who was attempting to threaten him into acquiescence, and he was not impressed. Don Goo thought he had power over Bill by threatening his henchmen, but boy was he wrong.

“Suit yourself.” Bill shrugged, and materialised an armchair and a cup of tea with a snap of his fingers, waving at the mobsters to follow through on their threat.

Don Goo blinked, taken aback by Bill’s response. That wasn’t what he expected. That’s not how folks usually react when their friends are threatened by the Goo Mob.

“Well, go on then.” Bill gestured at the mobsters, kicking his little legs back and forth eagerly from the armchair. “You’ve got my attention, you may as well put on a show. Get creative. Show me your artistry.”

The mobsters paused, jarred by Bill’s casual reaction.

“You don’t want us to stop?” One of the mobsters asked.

“But you just started.” Bill watched them expectantly with his one wide eye. “Don’t tell me you’re backing out now.”

“I thought you said if we ganked the square he’d break?” Another mobster elbowed his colleague, looking confused by the sudden indifference Bill was displaying. “Ain’t he important?”

“Who told you Kryptos was important?” Bill laughed, and swilled his tea around.

The mobsters paused and looked around to the compass, who was shrinking away, holding his hands up, smiling awkwardly.

“I – I meant important in a – in an administrative way.” Kryptos was sweating, looking very nervous. “That’s what I meant.”

Don Goo looked cross, snarling at his henchmen, who were stupid enough to believe the compass’s boastful statements.

Bill began clapping, his teacup floating in the air.


“You’re the one wasting our time, Triangle.” Don Goo growled. “You said we had a deal. We made our pledge at the auction, and that was weeks ago! It’s time to pay up. With interest! A handshake for every one of us.”

“Well, I would.” Bill said, holding his teacup and saucer in his left and right hands. “But I’ve got no hands free at the moment.” Bill grew two more arms from his bricks just to shrug unhelpfully at the mobsters. “So, you’ll just have to wait.”

“Enough waiting.” Don Goo sliced his hand through the air emphatically. “You need us, it ain’t the other way around. We’ll pull out of this shindig of yours if you ain’t gonna follow through.”

“See, that’s funny, because I seem to recall an entire auction hall full of creatures who’d be more than happy to take your place.” Bill said, sipping on his tea. “So don’t presume you’re indispensable.”

“I ain’t stupid.”
“Could have fooled me.” Bill said wryly, watching the mobster pace over to him. He took a sip of his tea nonchalantly, as the mobster crowed his space.

Don Goo loomed over Bill, resting his oily hands on Bill’s floating armchair. “You picked us over those other jokers for one reason and one reason only, numbers. And if we pull out, it don’t matter who else is waiting in line, it’ll take you an age to build up that kind of support, and you don’t got that kinda time. Not since you’ve got your hands full already. I know what you’re tryin’ to do. What you and your freaks need us for.”

“You’re getting an invitation to the biggest party in the multiverse, and you’re getting a deal out of it. Don’t act like you’re the one losing out here.” Bill said sharply.

“I know what I’ll be losing out on, don’t you worry.” Don Goo leaned into Bill’s space, and whispered, keeping his voice down so his cronies couldn’t hear. “And I know every last one of their names too, so don’t test me, big guy. Not all of us treat our henchmen like garbage.”

“Why throw away their lives, when you can claim a price for them.” Bill retorted smoothly.

“Better than throwin’ them away for nothin’ at all.” Don Goo scowled at Bill judgementally.

Bill raised his eyebrow at that, but said nothing.

“So when are we getting our deal?”

“I need three more days.” Bill sighed, putting a cap on his frolicking, keeping his voice low. Kryptos was watching him, wriggling his little feet, still waiting on a rescue from his boss. “I have a few more things to take care of.”

“And then you’ll deliver?” Don Goo clarified tersely.

“That’s what I’ve been saying.” Bill glared at Don Goo stubbornly, disliking the disrespect with which the mobster was treating him. Unfortunately, the Don was right, Bill couldn’t afford to ditch them this late in the game.

“You better not be bullshitting me, or else we’re coming back for your compass.” Don Goo pointed at Bill, not quite prodding him in the bricks, but getting close enough to earn a venomous squint from the triangle.

Don Goo stood up straight, and signalled to Tommy with a gooey limb. “Let him go. The squealer ain’t gonna tell you anything.”

Tommy and the other Goo Mobsters dropped Kryptos, and he landed on the floor on his hands and knees, patting himself down.

“You better deliver Cipher.” Don Goo asserted, pointing to Bill as he and his men filed out of the study, oozing down the stairwell. “Three days.”

A scowl from Bill accompanied every last mobster out of the door, and when they left, Bill glared at the space where his door used to be, until black bricks rose up to cover the gap, sealing him and Kryptos inside.

“The nerve of some people.” Bill scoffed. “Goo Mobsters. I don’t take orders from inarticulate articulated slime.”

“Boss, you – you just –“ Kryptos stood up, touching around his eye, before he shouted at Bill.
“You were just going to let them butcher me!”

“You weren’t actually going to do anything.” Bill said dismissively, waving his hand to banish his teacup away in favour of something stronger. “They don’t have the spine to - literally.”

“They had a knife to my eye!”

“It’d grow back.” Bill regarded the margarita now in his hand, and swapped it over for something stronger.

“No it wouldn’t! I only have one eye!” Kryptos seethed, gesturing to himself.

“So do I, you don’t see me complaining.” Bill rolled his eye as his margarita morphed into a Long Island Iced Tea, stacked with various liqueurs and alcohols. “Don’t go pointing fingers at me over that, by the way. I’m not responsible for the lies you’ve been telling those assholes.”

“I haven’t – “ Kryptos spluttered, his protests silenced by Bill’s red eyed gaze.

“Important in an administrative way? Don’t kid me Kryptos. It’s fine to have ideas above your station, but when your little daydreams become a problem for me, that’s when you’ve crossed the line!”

“I didn’t cross the line, they did!” Kryptos pointed at the wall where the door once was. “Bursting in here, coming to look for you. Which they wouldn’t have had to do, if you’d just made good on your deal with them in the first place.”

“I told you Kryptos, I’ve been busy.” Bill rubbed the bricks beside his eye, that headache from earlier making itself apparent. “I have loose ends to chase up. I’ve been working.”

“Yes, working. Busy.” Bill replied snippily, taking a long sip from his Long Island.

“B-busy throwing secret parties, and giving your pet human a makeover!” Kryptos stuttered, though he kept his back straight, suddenly brave with his accusations. “Busy doing anything but tending to your responsibilities. Like the mobsters. You have been avoiding them, I know you’ve been avoiding them, you know you’ve been avoiding them. And now they know too. It was only a matter of time.”

“I’m beginning to think there’s a correlation between you knowing and their sudden epiphany.” Bill scowled at Kryptos. “We’ve been over what happens if that big mouth of yours gets you in trouble, I didn’t think I’d have to emphasise that when it gets me in trouble, you’re skating on very thin ice.”

“I don’t – that’s not - you – Bill, you’re avoiding your responsibilities.” Kryptos said, stubborn persistence etched on his features. “Your – your party is right around the corner, and you’re procrastinating getting this done.”

“The WHOLE POINT!” Bill suddenly tripled in size, towering over the compass in a red fit of rage, flames springing up around the walls of the study. “OF HAVING A PARTY IS TO AVOID RESPONSIBILITY. How DARE you lecture me on getting this done – who do you think has been setting this thing in motion from the start? I’ve been planning this for MILLENIUM and you have the nerve to think I’m procrastinating? Because I let you push some papers for me and suddenly you think you’re important?”
Kryptos cowered in the face of Bill’s sudden rage, trembling as Bill’s form warped, bricks turning red, teeth lining the mortar between them, snarling furiously at the compass as the walls began to melt, blue flames burning white hot around them.

“The ONLY thing protecting you right now Kryptos is your deal, and that thin ice you’re standing on melts a little more every time you talk back to me.” Bill growled, his eye black, red burning pupil tracking every tremble Kryptos made. “So why the insubordination? Where is it coming from? What’s made you brave, Kryptos the Cowardly?”

“I – I’m just trying –” Kryptos gulped, sweating, the heat in the room making him dizzy. “To be loyal, like you asked. I – I’m looking out for you. I’m on your side.”

“Huh. I’ll bet.” Bill huffed, a black tongue darting out from between his bricks, licking his teeth impatiently, before he deflated some, the red draining from his surfaces, shrinking back down to a more placid form. “When I want advice I don’t need, I’ll ask for it. Don’t remind me of my responsibilities. I’m well aware of how dirty I’ve got to get my hands to pull this off.”

The fire dimmed, petering off, and Kryptos watched as Bill floated around the study like he was pacing, picking up papers that had scattered off the desk and reading them briefly, only to toss them back down irritably.

“Goo Mobsters.” Bill spat, looking over another of the papers Kryptos had organised on the desk. “I can’t stand them.”

“Why – why do you hate them so much, Boss?” Kryptos queried cautiously, sensing Bill had calmed enough to ask.

“They’re entitled, and greedy.” Bill divulged, his distaste written all over his face. “Out of all the applicants at the auction their request was the most grandiose, and what do they give me in return? The pleasure of their ‘company’. They have this bloated collective ego, parading about like some sort of viscous mafia. They call each other famiglia, like it means anything to them.”

“Are they related?” Kryptos asked.

“They could all be related, for all I know. An incestuous conglomerate, the lot of them. That would explain the obvious brain defect that enables their circular logic.” Bill scoffed, flicking through the papers in the study, looking for a particular page. He took another sip of his cocktail, and selected a few pages from the pile. “You know, they think they’re better than us, because they’re a family rather than a hodgepodge collection of freaks and outcasts. They work with us, while looking down on us, any way they can.”

“Why invite them to the party then?” Kryptos seemed puzzled, trying to reconcile Bill’s obvious vehemence against the Goo Mobsters with his desire to work with them.

“Because the illustrious Don Goo is right.” Bill sighed, and spread out the papers onto the desktop. “We do need them. Their numbers. Their durability. We have a few fighters, but not enough. Pyronica can’t take on the galaxy alone, though I doubt that would stop her from trying. We need them for their muscle, for the ground they can cover, and the hits they can take. We can’t do this without them.”

“Claiming Earth?” Kryptos stepped closer to the desk, looking at Bill in askance. “I know the Third Dimension is protected by the Federation, but they’re not going to go to war over one little planet.”
“They’re not going to war.” Bill gave Kryptos a level glance, leaving his statement hanging in the air for the compass to fill in the blanks.

“But – I thought the party –” Kryptos blinked, baffled.

“Think of it like a housewarming party.” Bill drummed his fingers on the desk, watching the compass cotton on. “Let loose for a few eons, settle in to our new little homestead, but after that – after that we’re bringing the party to them. This is only the beginning.”

“They?” Kryptos asked, though he was almost too afraid of the answer he’d hear. He had a feeling he knew already.

“There are those in the universe who’ve done me wrong Kryptos.” Bill said, his eye blurring with far away static.

Kryptos could vaguely make out two shapes in the static, that of an infant, and a very recognisable frilled amphibian, the shape of the two most powerful beings in the universe flickering in Bill’s wide godly eye.

Bill blinked, and the static shapes were gone, replaced with a fire, burning bright in his eye.

“I intend to return the favour.”

In the driver’s seat of Fiddleford’s truck, Ford drummed his fingers on the wheel energetically, his excitement becoming a tangible thing the closer they got to the first test of the portal.

Bill had elected to opt out of their celebratory dinner at the diner, citing a lingering headache that had Ford concerned. Bill had insisted he’d feel better after laying down though, claiming he’d be able to deal with what ails him after a decent sleep. Pushing Ford out the door with a farewell kiss, Ford’s optimism about the project enabled him to put aside his disappointment and focus the evening on Fiddleford.

Arguing with Fiddleford earlier had Ford eager to mend their relationship, deciding that rather than an apology for his emotional outburst, he’d simply show his assistant his appreciation for all of his work so far with an enjoyable night out, one on one. Fiddleford was acting rather subdued, somewhat quiet, clutching onto his satchel nervously, and Ford suspected he was still a little upset from earlier, though he did concede to let Ford drive when Ford requested to.

Elbowing him as he turned the truck into the car park in front of the diner, Ford nudged his friend, gesturing to the well-lit train cart.

“It looks like the whole town is out celebrating. We picked a good night for it.”

“Sure did.” F said, though his tone wavered, like he was uncertain.

Ford shot Fiddleford a look, before driving into a parking spot, turning the keys in the ignition and parking the car. The truck’s engine spluttered into silence.

Stanford stared at Fiddleford, who seemed to find it difficult to meet Ford’s eye, fiddling with his
shoulder bag while the sounds of music, laughter, and carousing echoed out from the diner cart.

“There’s no need to look so nervous. We’ll have fun tonight.” Ford assured him, smiling earnestly at his friend. “Just push everything from before out of your mind. Tonight’s about us. A celebration of our achievements, what we’ve done so far. I couldn’t have done this without you.”

Fiddleford smiled back at Ford, though the expression looked somewhat strained.

Ford picked up on his tension and frowned. “You’re not still convinced this won’t work, are you? Put aside your scepticism for one night Fiddleford, just one night. That’s all I ask.”

“But Stanford, I really –“ Fiddleford protested meekly.

“Look, enough of this.” Ford interrupted him crossly. “If I didn’t want to hear it before, I certainly don’t want to hear it now. We are here to celebrate our successes, and have a good time, and I won’t have your paranoia souring this evening’s purpose.”

Ford opened the truck door and got out, pausing to peer back into the car where Fiddleford sat, looking anxious and rather ill. He threw the car keys back to Fiddleford, the smaller scientist fumbling to catch them. When he had the keys securely in his hand, Ford gave Fiddleford an exasperated look.

“Now are you coming or not?”

Fiddleford’s shoulders slumped, and he shook his head, sighing, before reluctantly reaching for the door handle.

“I’m coming, don’t git all antsy. I’m coming.”

Fiddleford followed Ford into the restaurant, but what Ford found odd was that Fiddleford didn’t leave his satchel in the car.

Inside the restaurant was bustling, music blaring loud from the jukebox, turned all the way up for frivolity’s sake, beer pouring thicker than pancake syrup. The diner was crowded with lumberjacks, and various townsfolk, all toasting and celebrating, the loudest of which was Manly Dan.

“For glory boys! We’re drinking for glory!”

“For he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fellow, for he’s a jolly good fe-e-llow! And so say all of us!” The lumberjacks chanted as they brandished their drinks, cheering to one another and chugging back liquor.

At the central booth Willow Oakwood sat, surrounded by presents, lumberjacks and local girls, all crowding around her, showering the redhead with attention. Dan was dancing around the diner he was so giddy with enthusiasm, enthusiasm and alcohol, and he kept throwing looks of ardent admiration Willow’s way at every chance he could get.

“The happiest day – it’s the happiest day of my life.” Dan exclaimed, holding his glass in the air,
toasting his fiancé. “Every day since I met you is the happiest day of my –“

The bell above the door chimed as Stanford and Fiddleford entered the diner, and the lumberjacks let out a loud cheer, welcoming new people in to the party.

“What on earth?” Fiddleford mumbled, taking it all in.

“Friends! Friends, welcome to the – welcome to the –” Dan slurried, extending his arm out to the men cordially. “The Corduroy-Oakwood baby shower. Did you hear the good news?”

Ford walked further into the bar, giving Willow a brief look, before sizing up Dan, the lumberjack enthusiastically drunk.

“No.” Ford replied, figuring the news out fairly quickly but humouring Dan nonetheless, taking Dan’s demeanour in with a smile.

“I’m gonna be –“ Dan began, and was interrupted by Willow calling out from over in the middle booth.

“Hi Stanford.” She waved, and Suzie, who was sitting beside her, waved more enthusiastically.

“Hiiiiii Stanford!”

Dan grasped Ford by the shoulders and looked at him seriously, his expression elated, and slightly teary.

“I’m gonna be a father. A dad.”

“Oh, well, that’s – congratulations.” Ford offered, somewhat baffled by Dan’s sudden emotional outpouring.

Dan clapped Ford on the shoulder, and then pulled him in for a hug, bawling his joy out emotionally.

“I’m gonna be a dad! I’m gonna be a Papa. This is the happiest day of my – the happiest day of my life.”

“Woah there, big guy.” Willow walked up to Dan, lifting him up off Ford’s bewildered shoulder, easing him away gently. “Take it easy.”

“I am so –“ Dan lampreyed onto Willow, holding her by the shoulders, transferring his loving gaze to her now. “So happy, you’ve given me the greatest gift, I just –“

Holding Willow gently, Dan turned around and roared to the entire crowd.

“DOES EVERYONE KNOW HOW MUCH I LOVE THIS WOMAN?”

The assorted lumberjacks cheered, responding to Dan’s loud exclamations, and Willow turned to Mrs Wentworth behind the counter, signalling to her.

“Can we – can we cut him off? He’s had enough.”

“I love youuuu.” Dan crooned into Willow’s hair, and she laughed, pushing him away slightly, patting him on the arm.

“I know, I know.” Willow said, and looked around Dan’s bulky chest to view Stanford raising his
eyebrows, smirking amusement at her, his assistant Fiddleford looking around with fascination. “So what brings you two down here? Sorry for not inviting you, this was kind of a spur of the moment thing.”

“A baby shower.” Ford nodded to Willow, noting the way her belly was protruding out slightly, realising that the bump had been hidden by her coat the last few times he’d seen her. “I’m sorry I didn’t bring a gift. Congratulations are in order.”

“Gee, thanks.” Willow smirked, enjoying the awkward way Stanford engaged with all of this. “We’re celebrating. What are you guys here for?”

“Some celebration of our own.” Stanford replied, watching the way Dan was pressing indulgent kisses to Willow’s hair now.

“Where’s your weirdo?” Willow asked, her perfect hair getting tangled in Dan’s scratchy beard.

“Oh, Bill wasn’t feeling well.” Ford explained, realising what she meant. “He’s resting at home. I’ll tell him you asked after him?”

“Don’t.” Willow pulled a face. “I don’t even want to imagine the kind of running commentary he’d bring to an event like this, much less what it would be like if he was here. You can keep that snarky asshole all to yourself.”

“I’ll tell him you said hello then.” Ford replied, laughing fondly to himself. “I must say, it’s very busy in here.”

“Well, drinks are on us, so, you know – if you feel like celebrating, now’s a good time to do it.” Willow shrugged.

Dan stirred on Willow’s shoulder and raised his glass, toasting the entire diner.

“DRINKS ARE ON US BOYS!”

“YEAH!” The lumberjacks cheered in unison, feeding into Dan’s excitement.

“I’m going to get him to eat something and sit down. I think the end booth is still free for you guys.” Willow gestured to the booth. “It’s good to see you.”

“You too.” Ford nodded politely, and inched his way through the crowds, leading Fiddleford to the end table, amused by the raucous celebration they were having.

Sliding into his chair, Ford looked out across the diner, his back to the wall, and smiled indulgently at the crowd. He wasn’t a big fan of crowds normally, but considering what this event was for, the wedding invitation Willow gave him suddenly made a lot more sense.

At least they seemed happy together though, Ford thought, as he watched Willow push Dan into one of the booth chairs and fall on top of him, laughing.

They were an unusually good fit for one another, with matching complexions and ginger hair. Ford had no doubt they’d have a family full of recessive genetics, coming to the fore, proliferating the rare features for another generation.

“It’s quite loud for a baby shower.” Ford remarked, seeming amused, watching the lumberjacks burst into another round of song, raising their glasses to the sky.
Fiddleford slid into the chair opposite Ford and looked over his shoulder. “I remember Pat’s baby shower was mostly her and her lady friends from her Tech College classes, having a lil picnic. This one’s much more … masculine.”

“Dan seems to be very excited to be a father.” Ford noted. “It’s refreshing, honestly. I remember my own father seemed to think having children was the precursor to one’s life falling apart.”

“Having kids is the best thing that happened to me.” Fiddleford confessed earnestly. “I don’t know where I’d be without Tate in my life. I know me and Pat didn’t really have it together when he came into the world, but there’s somethin’ about havin’ a family that makes things work.”

“Hmm. I imagine you’d just have to make do.” Ford mused, flipping over his menu, looking through it. “I never really considered parenthood for myself, perhaps I put more stock in what my father said than I anticipated. I imagine I’d make a decent uncle though. Teaching the kids science as they grow up, concocting fun experiments.”

“You could be a good dad if you wanted to be.” Fiddleford said, watching Ford curiously from behind his menu.

“No, I don’t think it’s for me.” Ford shook his head, and shrugged. “My own personal preferences aside, I just wouldn’t have the time or energy to dedicate to children. My life’s work takes priority over family, and I can’t imagine it would be all that safe, taking a child through an interdimensional portal to explore the universe together. It seems rather hazardous.”

“It does seem rather hazardous.” Fiddleford replied, watching Stanford optimistically, hoping this meant Stanford could see the danger in turning on the portal.

“Children are unpredictable.” Ford continued, missing Fiddleford’s point. “Besides, I should think a discovery like this would be left to men of science. People who can appreciate what traversing the galaxy would mean.”

“Right.” Fiddleford laid his menu back down on the table, disappointed.

The elderly Mrs Wentworth bustled over to their table, holding her notepad out.

“Can I take your order?”

“I’ll have the steak please. Medium well, with the pepper sauce.” Stanford ordered, looking over to Fiddleford.

“I’ll have the chicken, and some taters and gravy on the side.” Fiddleford passed their menus to the older lady.

“Any drinks for you?” Mrs Wentworth gestured to the baby shower group with her pen. “They’re on the house.”

“Hmm.” Ford poured over the drinks menu, before pointing at the wine list. “Is the house red alright?”

“Corduroy’s paying.” Mrs Wentworth shrugged.

“We’ll have a bottle of red then.” Ford decided.

“Red it is.” Mrs Wentworth picked up their menus and walked away. She returned quickly with their glasses, plonking the bottle of wine in the middle of the table, uncorking the wine for the men
before turning away again.

Ford watched her leave, and chuckled to himself.

“It’s almost a shame Bill is missing this. I can only imagine him taking advantage of free drinks. There’d be nothing behind the bar by the end of the night.”

“Why is he missing this?” Fiddleford questioned suspiciously.

“He said he was dealing with a headache.” Ford replied. “Perhaps the stress of the first test is getting to him too. We all have a lot riding on this.”

“Is that why you’re rushing it?” Fiddleford asked quietly, fiddling with his napkin.

“I’m not rushing anything.” Ford frowned in reply, pouring wine into both of their glasses. “We are ready, we’ve been ready. We’ve run every test possible, and now the only test left is to turn the damn thing on.”

“Uhuh.” Fiddleford fiddled with his napkin some more, unrolling it from his cutlery to lay it out flat on the table.

Ford slid Fiddleford’s glass over to him.

“Here. We’re supposed to be celebrating.” Ford lifted his own glass, toasting it at F. “Cheers.”

Fiddleford looked at his own glass, but didn’t pick it up, still playing with his napkin. He bit his lip, and looked up, not quite meeting Ford’s eye, before he looked back down at the table.

“I don’t think we should be celebratin’ just yet.” F admitted, sounding incredibly tired.

Ford’s eyebrows scrunched together, and he opened his mouth to protest, but Fiddleford held his hand up.

“Wait, just wait.” F pulled a pen out of his front pocket and uncapped the lid. “There’s somethin’ I gotta explain to you.”

Ford shut his mouth, and frowned, watching Fiddleford sketch out a graph on his napkin. He wrote ‘time’ along the vertical axis and ‘probability of failure’ along the horizontal axis before charting a curve, the line creeping up the graph.

Sliding the napkin across the table to Ford, F bit his lip nervously, and looked up at Ford.

“That’s what we’re lookin’ at right now. That’s our likelihood of success.”

“I don’t –” Ford began, irritated, but Fiddleford interrupted him.

“I know you don’t wanna hear it Stanford, but there are flaws in this machine. Deep flaws that could have disastrous consequences if we unleash it on the world. I’ve been runnin’ calculations on the Hyperdrive all day and it just ain’t sustainable.” Fiddleford tapped the napkin with the end of his pen. “There’s no tellin’ what this technology will do without testin’ it more thoroughly. It’s a device that can scramble and rearrange physics, rearrange time, velocity, all sorts of forces in it’s immediate vicinity, and that makes it incredibly unstable. There’s gotta be a better way to do this.”

“We won’t be able to craft technology like the Hyperdrive for another ten thousand years. Using the Hyperdrive now is our best shot of achieving interdimensional travel within our lifetime.” Ford replied earnestly. “I know it involves risk, to trust in this technology, but it’s our best shot.”
“It’s not just risky.” Fiddleford countered, frowning at Ford. “It’s reckless. It’s reckless endangerment, of our lives, of this entire town. The Hyperdrive’s unstable, the calculations back it up. Stanford, I know you trust this technology, but I don’t know why. What convinced you? Where did you get the idea to even use a thing like this? I just don’t understand.”

Ford was almost tempted in this moment to tell Fiddleford the truth, to tell him about Bill, about his cosmic origins, and his wider scope of knowledge. Bill trusted the Hyperdrive, he insisted on it personally, and Ford trusted Bill. Ford almost opened his mouth to tell F, to tell him the truth, but Fiddleford rubbed his forehead and spoke up.

“The thing is, I don’t need to understand. I just gotta look at the facts, and the facts are that this device is wildly unstable. We can’t turn on the portal, we can’t go ahead with it. Not in good conscience. You can’t risk these people.”

Ford closed his mouth, shocked by this revelation and sat back in his booth chair, deeply shaken. He felt blank, empty, hollow when he began to consider, really consider the prospect of abandoning his work now, abandoning everything he’d strived for. He looked past Fiddleford for a moment, drifting off, his eyes catching on a bright flash of red.

Willow’s hair, tossed back as she laughed, loud and hearty, at something Dan said. She smacked his arm before leaning in to kiss his forehead tenderly.

Ford stared, in a detached sort of way, at the people gathered in the diner, watching each one of them in turn, their joyful expressions, their jubilant laughter. They were so full of life, each of them fully realised individuals. The gravity of putting their lives at risk was beginning to dawn on Ford, and it rattled him to his core, the thought of harming them when he was trying to do good.

“It just can’t go ahead Stanford.” Fiddleford urged him, speaking gently, his words echoing through Stanford’s mental haze. “We can’t do it. We have to wait. Even if we gotta wait ten thousand years, we’ve gotta wait until we understand this technology. We can’t go ahead with this portal test.”

Ford listened to the music, and the laughter, and the cheerful banter of the townsfolk, all gathered around to celebrate new life, and he felt an abstract detachment from it all, his ambition speaking to him even now.

“But … my life’s work –“

F seemed to fiddle anxiously with the strap of his satchel for a moment, before he pulled out a stack of papers from his bag, stapled together neatly. With trembling fingers, he passed the document across the table to Ford, clearly very nervous.

“Your life’s work don’t have to be over.”

Ford examined the papers, reading the title page. It seemed to be a thesis paper, and Ford blankly read the title, still in shock at the thought of having to abandon his life’s work.

His brain quickly doubled back, and he read the title again, taking it in properly this time.

‘The Astonishing Anomalies of Gravity Falls’ read the title, and beneath it the research paper was credited to –

“By Dr Stanford Filbrick Pines?” Ford read the paper incredulously, his voice catching in indignation. “I didn’t write this.”
“I wrote it for you.” Fiddleford admitted, his knee bouncing anxiously beneath the table. “I spent the last three days workin’ on it without breaks. This paper, this thesis exhaustively chronicles your discoveries in this town, your greatest discoveries. You’re a researcher, a researcher of the paranormal. This is your paranormal research, this is your life’s work, not the portal.”

Ford blinked at the paper, that blank feeling in his chest fading now, being replaced slowly but surely with a bubbling anger that wasn’t fully realised just yet.

“Publish this.” Fiddleford urged him, pressing his shaky hands against the thesis paper as he spoke. “This is your research, I merely went through the trouble of cataloguing it for you. There are enough discoveries in here to make you a multimillionaire. With this, you’ll have everythin’ you ever wanted, and you won’t need to go through with this risky test!”

Ford looked up from the paper, and he was looking at Fiddleford with fresh eyes.

It was like he was looking at a stranger. A saboteur. He wasn’t looking at his friend, at the man he trusted. The man he trusted wouldn’t go behind his back like this and cut him off at the knees.

Stanford’s paranoia built, festering in the hollow empty space in his chest, cleared out by the thought of abandoning everything, casting aside everything because of Fiddleford’s ‘calculations’. What calculations? Maybe there weren’t any calculations, and Fiddleford was just making the whole thing up.

Don’t believe his lies.

Suspicion sparked in Ford’s mind, compounding on itself in a bizarre and jarring rush of epiphany.

Bill’s words from before came back to Stanford, his warnings echoing around Ford’s skull, fracturing everything he thought he knew about Fiddleford McGucket.

You think the people you work with are above reproach? They never are.

He’s not halting the test because he’s concerned for you, he’s concerned for himself.

Ford thought about the cryptic dreams he’d been having, the warnings within them. He thought about Bill’s vision, seeing the cosmos unfold in a blink of an eye, wondering what else the muse had seen, what he’d really been warning him about.

Your genius has been sabotaged too many times.

He thought about the mysterious phone calls, the suspicious way Fiddleford had been disappearing, going out more and more lately. He’d apparently been compiling this thesis for Ford for the past three days, but that didn’t explain all his absences, his sudden interest in local history, his strange communications with unnamed parties.

Stanford thought about that whispered conversation he’d overheard in the bathroom of this very diner, the glimpse of Fiddleford’s mysterious confidant he’d seen in the cracked bathroom mirror, second guessing whether he’d seen it at all. Now he knew that he had, he definitely had.

You think Fiddleford would betray us?

I think he has more to gain and nothing to lose if he did.

Bill had warned him, he’d tried to warn him, but Stanford didn’t listen, blindly believing his friend would want what’s best for him, what’s best for the portal, but now everything was made
startlingly clear. What Fiddleford really thought about him, about his destiny, what he thought about these findings.

Stanford didn’t want to become a multimillionaire, he wanted to be the next Nicholas Tesla, he wanted to be the next Einstein, the mind of a century. And here Fiddleford was, capping his research, compiling it into a neat palatable little pile of papers, urging him to sell out, short change himself.

Fiddleford had taken the liberty to compile everything here into one convenient document. It hardly took any effort at all to change the name on the front page, to claim the credit for Stanford’s findings, or worse.

Ford watched Fiddleford with wide eyes, wondering if his friend, the man he went to college with, the friend he thought he knew, was planning to leave him with scraps while Fiddleford went off to discover the Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness himself.

*Heinrich Goebel’s patent was in Thomas Edison’s greedy little hands the moment he kicked the bucket, he even stole from your hero, Tesla. What makes you think this is any different?*

He feared in this very instant that he was becoming the forgotten Tesla to Fiddleford’s backstabbing Edison.

McGucket wasn’t above suspicion, no matter how many times Stanford had convinced himself it wasn’t in Fiddleford’s nature to betray him like this, to betray anyone, he was discovering in this, his light bulb moment, that no one was above reproach. There really was no one he could trust.

No one but Bill.

He had warned him. He’d been on side with him from the very beginning, urging and enabling him towards his destiny every step of the way.

He believed in him.

*I want to see you achieve your destiny. Can you honestly say he does?*

Ford decided in that instant, and he decided irrevocably.

He would trust Bill over Fiddleford any day.


Fiddleford watched Ford with a gentle expression, patiently waiting for Ford’s reaction, his knee still bouncing under the table. The light caught on Stanford’s glasses, shielding his expression. Fiddleford waited optimistically, hoping his friend would see sense, would listen to reason.

Stanford pushed his glasses up his nose and revealed an expression of absolute rage, of scorn, of betrayal, turbulent emotions contributing to the stubborn set of his jaw.

He reached into his coat pocket and pulled a fifty out of his wallet, slamming it down on the table.

“For the check.” Ford said, sliding out of the booth, standing up, his hands balled into fists beside him.

“Ain’t you gonna read it at least?” Fiddleford frowned, looking up at Stanford in askance, not
expecting his friend to react with such vehement ire against him.

“I wouldn’t dignify it with a single glance. You clearly know nothing about me, about this portal, about what we’re doing here. This is the most insulting thing I’ve ever encountered in my life.” Ford scowled, looking down his nose at Fiddleford, who sat, looking rather small in the booth.

“I – I didn’t mean it as an insult. I – it was meant to –“

“To what? To patronise me? To diminish my work? To plagiarize it?” Ford said cuttingly, gesturing sharply as he spoke.

“No!” Fiddleford retorted, offended that Ford would even think he’d do a thing like that. “I meant it to – to –“

“I don’t care what you meant by it. I won’t have a bar of it.” Ford told Fiddleford, fuming with betrayal. “This portal is my life’s work, and I’m going ahead with it.”

Fiddleford’s hopeful expression crumpled, and he looked heartbroken by his friend’s decision.

“We will do the test tomorrow night at eight o’clock sharp.” Ford said, glaring at Fiddleford. “Be there or get left behind. The choice is yours.”

Ford scowled at Fiddleford’s distraught demeanour a moment longer, before he swiped the wine bottle off the table, storming out of the diner, leaving McGucket behind with the revelry and laughter.

Pacing out into the cold night, Ford decided he’d walk home, giving himself space to work off a little steam. He was still seething with betrayal, with the thought that Fiddleford would go behind his back like that, co-opt his research and lead him off track.

Taking an angry swig from the bottle of wine in his hand, Ford wiped his mouth on the back of his sleeve, swallowing the liquid down, before he charged out into the forest, cutting through the woods to get back to the shack.

Backstabbing assistant or not, Stanford would be the Man Who Changed the World, and tomorrow he’d realise his destiny.

With or without Fiddleford.

After his argument with Kryptos, Bill’s temper was still flaring, billowing below the surface like an untamed forest fire, spreading the longer he thought about it. About everything he had to do.

He couldn’t afford any screw ups this late in the game, and the Goo Mobster’s pulling out was a screw up that Bill couldn’t justify. He knew he had to follow through on his deal with them, but his reluctance grew from a place of spite, of caustic bitterness.

Why should he do favours for a creature who very clearly looked down on him, who thought less of him for being callous with Kryptos - Kryptos of all people. How dare Don Goo guilt him, try to play at his emotions, and then accuse him of being a bad leader, accuse him of treating his henchmaniacs like garbage.
Just because they weren’t a family.

That didn’t mean the Goo Mobsters were any better than Bill’s gang, heck it didn’t mean anything, shouldn’t mean anything, but my god did it rub Bill the wrong way.

Bill had needed a hell of a lot to drink after dealing with Kryptos’ insubordination and the Goo Mobster’s threats, and now he was feeling inebriated and nostalgic, a terrible mix, his temper a sinuous undercurrent to it all.

So what if Bill didn’t have a family? He made do. He was doing just fine without one. He was successful, he had loyal henchmen, power, control – he was about to conquer Earth, the Mayfair of the Galaxy.

That wasn’t the sort of conquest just anyone could make. No screw up could make it, and Bill was determined to prove he wasn’t a screw up.

He had friends, he had loyal henchmen, he had Sixer.

He didn’t need family.

He didn’t need them, but oh how the ache persisted. The near constant ache that hadn’t died down after bleventy billion years. It followed him wherever he went, a burning deep down inside of him that just didn’t go away.

He’d kept that fire burning low, managing it with a potent mixture of seasonal numbness and cavalier denial, throwing himself headfirst into parties, violence, chaos. If he stopped to think about it too long, that numbness crept back in, as it was the only tolerable alternative to the anguish Bill felt whenever he dwelled on that eternal ache, that constant pain deep within him.

When the pain overwhelmed him he felt helpless, and he didn’t like feeling helpless.

So he grasped back control any way he could, and tonight that meant imbibing copious amounts of cosmic alcohol and teleporting to the border limits of Dimension 52, holding fire in both of his hands, burning with misplaced drunken fury.

Letting the fire trail along the forest floor, climbing up the purple mossy trees that littered Jheselbraum’s fertile domain, Bill watched it burn, consumed in his own inner turmoil.

That fire he kept burning low, the one that hurt him when he stopped to think about it, had flared back up lately.

Around the same time Sixer said he loved him.

It was a hurt that burned painfully in Bill’s soul, wracking him cruelly with this awful spark of optimism for a world in which someone would love him again.

Bill hadn’t hoped for it. The last time he heard someone tell him they loved him, the last time someone meant it, was a very long time ago, back when he still had parents, had a family. Sixer saying it was a cruel reminder of all that Bill had, everything Bill had lost, and everything he hoped to regain, all in one fell blow.

What made it worse was that Sixer wasn’t even awake when he said it. Bill could tell Sixer wasn’t conscious, he wasn’t, because when he woke up he had acted like nothing had changed between them, and this was the sort of thing that changed EVERYTHING.
It had changed everything for Bill.

The part of him, deep inside of him, that burned painfully, hurting him, that part had risen, the fire razing him painfully within.

He knew what the fire was – what he hadn’t dared to acknowledge.

Hope.

This raw, painful, terrible hope that was eating Bill alive.

After all he’d lived through, after all he’d seen, all he’d caused, Bill hadn’t let himself hope that he’d ever do anything that would allow anyone to genuinely feel love for him – he didn’t deserve it.

Though he clawed and scratched his way to the surface of legitimacy with every moment of waking consciousness he encountered, it still wasn’t enough to warrant love, to warrant that level of forgiveness for his misdeeds, of understanding, of unconditional acceptance.

The last people to unconditionally accept Bill for what he was were his parents, and look where that got them.

He didn’t deserve to be loved, and just hearing those three little words scraped everything inside of Bill out until he was hollow again, left with nothing but the rawness of it all. He spent so long pretending, trying to convince the universe that he wasn’t a screw up, and when the universe didn’t buy what he was selling, he gave them what they wanted. He gave them the screw up.

And look where that had got him.

He was just trying to be better, to build a better world.

If that hope he hadn’t wanted to feel would finally give in and die, splutter out of existence, maybe he’d feel fine, but he didn’t. He just felt raw and angry and upset, misplaced energy leaking out of him as his fire bubbled over, pouring out of him viscously, until the entirety of the mossy purple forest in Jheselbraum’s realm was covered in voracious blue flames, crumbling the landscape to ash and dust.

“I know you can see me Jhessy.” Bill called out, watching the forest burn all around him, flames devouring the trees and the plants and the creatures that lived among them, unerring destruction making his mood tangible. “I can feel your eyes on me.”

“Not just meaningless words now, am I?” Bill yelled, fire oozing out of him, dripping into the ground, burning the soil. “I’m really doing this. I’m really going to do it this time.”

Bill could feel Jheselbraum’s central eye burning into him, that sapphire gaze tracking him all the way from her temple on the mountaintop. He had her full focus. He was sure he was quite the sight down here, making a scene, dousing half of Jheselbraum’s kingdom in flames.

*Why have you come here?* Jheselbraums words projected into the field around Bill, echoing at him imperiously.

Of course, Miss Fussy Foresight couldn’t step foot into the burning field herself. She was still so sensitive about that.

“I’ve come here to warn you.” Bill called out, looking around him at the fanning flames. “Stay out
of my way. I’m really going to do it this time, and if you try to stop me, I won’t let our past get in
the way again.”

Bill pointed up to the mountaintop, slurring his words.

“This is your warning. Butt out of it. And maybe when all this is over, you can live. Wouldn’t you
like that?"

*I would like for you to leave.* Jheselbraum’s voice came back, clipped and controlled, dignified and
as false as she was. *And take your grotesque fire with you.*

“I might leave it, as a present.” Bill blinked at the fire that had crept out around him, far further
than he intended. His control had slipped, and nearly the entire forest was lit. It was lucky Jhessy’s
people all lived up on the mountain. They’d learned their lesson from last time. “You know, for old
times sake.”

*Just get out.*

“Have I ever told you you’re not very hospitable?” Bill blinked up at the mountain again, squinting
at the temple in the distance.

*Get out.*

“Fine, I’m going.” Bill waved his hand dismissively at the temple. “But don’t say I didn’t warn
you. It’s going to work this time, and when it does, it won’t be your fish god saving the day – it’ll
be me. It’ll be me, do you hear?”

*Leave.* Jheselbraum seethed.

“Fine, I’m going. Where’s the door? This dimension’s just – ugh-“ Bill shook fire off his leg, and
pulled the air apart to the left of him, tearing a hole through the fabric of the cosmos and stumbling
through it, before doubling back to point at the mountaintop temple. “I’ll be back when all this is
over. I still have your carrot top so don’t try anything.”

*Leave Bill.*

“I’ll leave when I want to – what’s that?” Bill blinked into the rip in spacetime, and then waved
goodbye to Jheselbraum and her cohort. “That’s - goodbye Jhessy! Bye! Got things to do, people to
be.”

Jheselbraum watched Bill from behind one of the stained glass windows in her temple, her hand
resting on the glass, scowling down at the ruined forest as Bill closed the tear in spacetime behind
him, disappearing.

She never did enjoy his visits.

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Ford’s temper still hadn’t abated, those feelings of betrayal following him all the way down to the
lake.
He didn’t know what it was about the lake that drew him there. Nostalgia for bitter past memories maybe, or the uncanny ability red wine had to draw him to the things that hurt him.

The water was black, faint moonlight barely glancing down onto the waves, their acoustic ebb and flow decorating the silence of the night.

Ford’s wine bottle was nearly empty, only a few mouthfuls left, and he knew he’d be nursing a killer headache in the morning. It was probably for the best that he scheduled the portal test for eight, that would give him time to sleep in and rest off the headache he was developing.

He felt a wave of empathy for Bill, the cosmic being dealing with the first headache he’d ever encountered since being gifted physical form. The muse needed to lay down all evening because of it, missing their celebratory dinner.

Ford wished he’d missed the dinner.

He could have done without discovering that Fiddleford was a backstabbing leech of a friend.

He hadn’t wanted to believe it, but the signs were all there, the secrecy, his hesitation, his overcautious behaviour masking his true intentions.

That was the funny thing about betrayal, Ford thought, watching the waves crash upon the shore. Despite how much you might trust a person, trust their intentions, believe that they’d never act in a way that would cause you harm, cause you to lose your future opportunities, it just hurt that much more when you wanted to believe they were a good person and they weren’t. When you wanted to believe that they’d never do this to you.

Ford sniffed, and wiped his nose on his sleeve, moving to take a swig from the bottle he held, realising when he put it to his lips that it was empty.

He tipped the bottle upside down and watched the last few drops of red wine fall out onto the rocky beach, a libation poured for sabotaged dreams, and the trust that could never be earned back, no matter how much you wanted things to be the way they were.

You couldn’t go back from a betrayal like this.

Stanford knew.

He looked at the bottle in his hand, the label on the Cabernet Sauvignon decorated with a picture of a sailboat.

That little ship mocked him, the ship on a bottle. He didn’t need to be reminded of lost dreams, tonight, of all nights. Not when his dreams were right around the corner, and Fiddleford had nearly cost him them all.

Ford almost believed him too, he almost believed Fiddleford when he said they couldn’t proceed with the project. Stanford didn’t want to put anyone in danger, but that wasn’t what the portal was about, it wasn’t about harming people, it was about protecting people. Saving lives.

Stanford could change the world with the technology he discovered traversing that portal, he could do so much good, catapult the world into a new era of understanding, of technology. He could broaden their horizons, but betrayal lingered like a sailboat on the edge of his ideal horizon, cutting through the skyline, impairing Ford’s view of the sun rising.

He hated it.
Glaring down at the picture of the sailboat, Ford gripped the wine bottle tersely, before reeling his hand back, and chucking the bottle out into the lake with a frustrated yell.

The bottle flew across the lake and landed in the water with a splash. It bobbed on the surface of the lake, floating just like a sailboat would, before water glugged into the mouth of the bottle, filling it up, dragging it to sink down to the bottom of the lake floor.

Throwing the bottle felt gratifying, it went some way to abating Ford’s irascible temper. He patted through his trench coat pockets, looking for more things to throw. He wanted to feel better, better than this, than this swirling hatred.

He threw his pen first, followed by his mechanical pencil, followed by several spare gears Ford had collected from the portal that Fiddleford had left behind, sending them all plummeting over, into the water, each one making a satisfying resolute splash as they were cast away from him.

He felt through his pockets for something else to throw, really getting into the swing of things, when his fingers happened upon an unusual shape.

Pulling it out of his pocket, Ford examined it in the moonlight.

It was the ring the palm reader had given him at the carnival. The mysterious glowing blue ring that had somehow found it’s way into Stanford’s pocket. He didn’t remember putting it there, he thought he’d left it on the table, though it was possible he took it with him in his haste to leave the heavily perfumed tent and the amorous fraud it housed.

When this is blue, you may pull through.  
When this is black, you can’t turn back.

It was blue when she gave it to him, a glowing blue gem clasped in the four bronze hands that held the gem in place on the ring.

It certainly wasn’t blue now, the glow all but gone from the ring. It was completely dull, more like obsidian than any sapphire Ford knew of.

You can’t turn back.

Ford felt a fission of doubt form in the back of his mind for a moment, contemplating what it would mean if Fiddleford were right, and going ahead with the portal test really was dangerous, really could be as disastrous as Fiddleford was saying.

Don’t second guess yourself, IQ.

Ford thought of Bill, and the vast expanse of possibility they could accomplish together, and realised that letting Fiddleford’s superstition impact his decision here was limiting. Bill was right. Fiddleford was limiting him.

Throwing the ring out onto the lake, it sliced through the air, and landed in the water with a splash, sinking to the bottom of the lake.

Superstition is for the weak. Ford thought, setting his chin stubbornly, looking up at the moon. I’m a scientist.

Turning away from the lake, walking back through the forest, Ford returned to the shack, returned to his destiny.
And after tomorrow, I’ll be a great one.

Sitting amidst the silt and weeds growing at the base of the lake, the palm reader’s ring flickered, a faint blue light creeping into the gem, glowing beneath the water. The blue light filled the ring, pulling through Jheselbraum’s consciousness to the other side, but it was too late.

There was no turning back from this.

When Ford came home, around 3am in the morning, his hike went some way towards levelling his mood. He came through the door, substantially less inebriated than he was at the lake, and saw Fiddleford waiting for him on the couch in the living room.

It appeared he’d attempted to stay up, possibly worried for Ford, for his friend’s reckless jaunt out into the dangerous forest of a night time, or ready to make excuses, to act like he hadn’t lead Ford astray in the diner.

Despite his best efforts to be there for when Ford got back, in the time it took to wait for him sleep captured Fiddleford, and he was snoring, his head tipped back on the couch when Ford finally made it in.

Ford regarded his friend, or ex-friend rather, with a bitter look, before trudging upstairs without waking him. He didn’t want to talk to Fiddleford.

Not now. Everything he thought he knew about Fiddleford, everything he felt for their friendship, was now twisted up inside of him in a snarled mess of betrayal. It hurt just to look at him.

So Ford stumbled upstairs, and opened the door to his room, looking in at the empty bedroom, discontent pouring over him like a wave. He felt uncomfortable having Fiddleford in his house, having him under the same roof now, and he didn’t know how to reconcile these feelings of anger with the exhaustion that the day had brewed in him.

Ford paused, and looked across the hall.

Bill’s bedroom door was still closed, but he didn’t think the muse would mind if Stanford let himself in.

Tonight was a revelation in sabotage, in hurt feelings, and Ford really didn’t want to feel alone right now.

Toeing off his shoes and dropping his trench coat in his bedroom, he crossed the hall and slipped into Bill’s room.

The muse was still asleep, curled up around his pillows, wearing a concerted expression as he struggled through bad dreams, or possibly just the remnants of his earlier headache.

Ford removed his jumper, and undid his belt, shimmying out of his trousers, placing his glasses on the bedside table, before sliding into bed alongside Bill, wearing only his boxers and shirt.

Bill made an unintelligible noise as the bed dipped, squinting one eye open to take in Sixer’s
arrival.

Ford wriggled closer to Bill, and wrapped his arms around the muse, pressing a kiss to his shoulder.

“Go to sleep. It's just me.” Ford murmured.

Bill grunted in acknowledgement, and jammed his eyes shut again. He kept still for a second or two, before melting back into Ford’s arms, nuzzling into him comfortably.

Ford felt the turmoil in his chest ease a little, ease enough to sleep, and so he spooned up behind the little god he’d summoned so many months ago, ardently grateful for his presence.

Ford rested his chin on Bill’s shoulder, pressing his lips to the muse’s back, before the words slipped out of him.

“What a day.” Ford mumbled.

Bill didn’t reply, the slow even sound of his breathing telling Ford the muse was asleep.

Ford sighed, his breath fanning out across Bill’s neck, and he rested his head against one of the many pillows Bill had co-opted. His eyes felt wet, tears sliding down from the corner of his eye, dripping onto the pillow.

“I’m glad you’re here.” Ford continued, his throat feeling choked, too tight with emotion. His voice broke, and he squeezed Bill a little closer, the words croaking out of him. “I can’t do this without you.”

Bill didn’t reply. The room was silent, this unheard outpouring of emotion making Ford feel more alone than ever.

He wiped his cheek against the pillow under him, feeling stupid, when he felt it.

Bill’s hand, inching down, to rest over Ford’s arm, the arm resting on Bill’s belly. Bill laced their fingers together, and left them like that, holding onto Ford’s hand in solidarity.

It wasn’t much, but it was enough that Ford no longer felt so alone. The ache in his chest dissipatated, and he felt well enough to rest easy, knowing that no matter what tomorrow brought, they’d be facing it together.

In her mountaintop temple, Jheselbraum stood on the terrace, overlooking the embers that were left of her beautiful burgundy forest as the fire burnt itself out.

“Mistress.”

A crowd of cowed attendants and worshippers were grouping by the archways of the temple proper, dressed in fine silks and gems, whispering amongst one another, looking down on the ruination of their land in fear.
“He’s never come this close to the temple before.”

“Not in your lifetime, no.” Jheselbraum answered her servant, staring out onto the blackened horizon, lost in thought.

“Should we be scared?” One attendant questioned, clinging to her sister.

“What does this mean?” Another worshipper asked, hiding behind a pillar.

Jheselbraum did not answer.

One of her soldiers approached, stepping out onto the patio, saluting the Oracle, before standing at attention.

“Unswerving Majesty, what shall we do?”

Jheselbraum tilted her head to look down at her most loyal officer.

“Shall we respond to the threat?” The officer prompted.

“A warning.” The Oracle corrected her officer in absent tones.

“Threat or warning.” The officer stared stubbornly up at her leader. “It is still an affront. How long are we to tolerate this demon’s interference?”

“How long indeed?” Jheselbraum replied, lidding her eyes to consider the charred landscape.

“He wouldn’t come here unless we present the greater threat.” The officer surmised. “Now is the time, if any, to strike back. Send a message.”

Jheselbraum turned her chin to look at the officer properly now, her horizon coloured eyes gracing the soldier with her attention.

“Our last battalion never came back, but we could regroup. Send more soldiers. There has to be a way.” The officer continued.

“Tis a shame they never returned.” Jheselbraum remarked, hiding her own involvement coolly. “They fought so bravely.”

“Our soldiers could avenge them. A final assault. A full force.” The officer suggested passionately, trying to earn her Mistress’s sustained regard. “You said so yourself, their deaths were a consequence of his actions. We shall show the devil his actions have consequences!”

“Hmm.” Jheselbraum pondered, looking away from the soldier out to the smoking skyline.

Bravery and boldness seizing the soldier, she clenched her hands into fists, words blurring out in a fit of fervour. “I volunteer myself, to lead the charge.”

“No.” Jheselbraum said, her words slicing through the officer’s zeal, their shoulder’s slumping. “Not you.”

Jheselbraum turned around to face her worshippers, who crowded under the archways, seeking a glimpse of their Leader’s fury. “I will go. I will be there to deliver the truth into the mind of whatever creature clambers through that monster’s doorway, and let it be his own undoing.”

Her worshippers watched her in awe, astounded by her bravery, her selflessness. As Jheselbraum
strode past them, into the bowels of her temple, her long flowing skirts billowing out around her, strings of amethyst and amber hanging from her waist, her followers could only aspire to reach her levels of purity, of avenging wisdom, of scintillating light and deliverance.

Privately as she strode through the corridors of her domain, Jheselbraum was smirking to herself.

Bill came to tell her not to meddle, to warn her for the sake of their past friendship. He was about to discover that there was no forgiveness from someone so thoroughly burned, despite his drunken attempt at an olive branch.

They may have once been friends, but that was a long, long time ago, and she’d burnt her bridges just as he had.

She made a vow that she would take EVERYTHING from him, and tomorrow night she planned to do exactly that.

Stanford and Bill slept in past midday, nursing identical hangovers, preferring to nuzzle up to one another blearily than get up and face their turning point of destiny.

It was an odd sort of dread they both felt, knowing that one way or another when the portal turned on, they’d be getting what they’ve always wanted, what they worked so hard for. Knowing that, this reluctance would have seemed odd, but that was the funny thing about getting what you’ve always wanted, it wasn’t always the victory you’d hoped for.

At around 1:30pm both Stanford and Bill could no longer pretend to be asleep, having exhausted that option as a method of procrastination.

Giving up on trying to shut his eyes and roll over to another half hour of mindless sleep, Stanford opened his eyes and stared at his muse’s face contemplatively.

“Still have a headache?” Ford asked Bill quietly.

“What time is it?” Bill squinted his eyes at Sixer, groaning.

“1:32 now.” Ford answered, looking over at the clock.

“When are we testing the portal?”

“8pm.” Ford replied.

Bill ran his hand down his face and shut his eyes. “Ugh, wake me up at 7.45.”

“Bill.” Ford chided.

“What? You don’t want to be down there any more than I do, and this waiting is killing me slowly. Very slowly.” Bill scowled. “Can’t we just rip the band-aid off and be done with it?”

“I told Fiddleford we’d run the test at eight.”
“So, go down there and tell him we’re doing it now.” Bill countered, sounding grumpy.

Ford looked sheepish, his brows furrowing. “I don’t want to.”

“You –” Bill propped himself up on his elbow to look at Sixer more closely. “You don’t want to?”

Stanford looked down at the sheets, not meeting Bill’s eye.

“Why don’t you want to?” Bill probed, sensing something was odd about the scientist’s behaviour.

Ford was silent for a beat, finding the linen fascinating, before he finally mumbled his answer.

“You were right.”

Bill blinked at Ford expectantly, before clicking his tongue. “Yes, well I’m always right, so you’re going to have to be more specific here.”

“About Fiddleford.” Ford admitted. “You were right about Fiddleford.”

“Oh?” Bill said simply, watching Ford closely, waiting for the scientist to fill in the blanks.

“He tried to convince me to abandon the portal, to quit the project. He took the liberty of compiling a dossier of my research, telling me to publish and cut my losses. He was lying to me, trying to lead me astray.” Ford confessed sullenly, scowling. “Ready to snatch the portal out of my hands the moment I turned my back. All the signs were there, right in front of me. I should have seen it.”

“Oh.” Bill repeated, sounding mildly relieved. He’d laid the groundwork for this, but it was gratifying to know that when the chips fell, they fell in Bill’s favour.

“For a so-called genius I really am a Dummy for not believing my own friend could betray me like this.” Ford clenched his fist, his brow knotting up. “I’m an idiot. A trusting fool.”

“Hey.” Bill said gently, reaching out to cup Ford’s cheek, drawing him out of his sour mood.

“You’re my trusting fool, okay?”

Ford spluttered on a laugh, looking up at Bill finally.

“You couldn’t have known he would betray you.” Bill consoled Ford indulgently.

“Did you know?” Ford questioned. “You tried to tell me.”

“Me telling you wouldn’t have made a difference.” Bill said, settling on that as his plausible excuse. “You have to find these things out for yourself to really believe it, for it to sink in.”

“I could have done without that revelation honestly.” Ford admitted. “Now I don’t know who to trust.”

“You can trust me.” Bill assured Sixer. “That’s really all you need.”

“You think so?” Ford questioned wryly, propping a pillow behind him, sitting upright.

“I know so.” Bill countered resolutely.

“Well, I suppose I should take your word for it then.” Ford reached out to stroke Bill’s shoulder fondly, smiling at his muse.
“It would be foolish not to.” Bill replied smugly, smiling back at the scientist. He sat up a little more in bed beside Sixer, and prodded Ford with his finger. “So, if McGucket’s a write off, what’s stopping us from going down there and testing the portal by ourselves, just you and me?”

“I told him we’d test it at eight o’clock.” Ford replied, looking down at his hands with a sigh. “I may not want to talk to him, but after all the work he’s done on the project, I can’t just go switching the ignition time on him. I owe him the chance to be there. I at least owe him that much.”

Bill gave Sixer a scrutinising glance, assessing the scientist in silence, before he remarked. “You don’t owe anything to the people who hurt you.”

Ford considered that, but said nothing, sticking to his principles.

Part of him still hoped that at eight o’clock, Fiddleford would be there.

Ford tugged on his lab coat, fiddling with the lapel, while Bill spun around on the office chair, flicking the switches in sequence to ready the machine. The generators were humming, electrical static serving as white noise in the background of the lab, accompanying the rhythmic beeping of the diagnostic devices. All in all, it created a compelling sonata, an ode to scientific exploration, but Stanford was too stressed to be moved by the music of discovery tonight.

It was 7:55pm and Fiddleford still wasn’t here.

“So Sixer, shall I flip the final switch, or reserve that honour for you?” Bill asked, his finger hovering over the third fuel switch eagerly.

“Wait, just wait.” Ford held his hand out, staying Bill’s enthusiasm.

Bill pouted, his shoulders slumping, and rolled his eyes. “You know, there’s optimistic and there’s idiotic, and right now you’re straddling the line.”

“Just wait.” Ford insisted, checking his watch. They were clear of gravitational anomalies, and it was 7:57. “Three more minutes.”

“That’s like asking me to wait three hours.” Bill groaned, and kicked the wheely chair away from the diagnostics desk, spinning the chair around. “Just face it IQ, he isn’t coming. That coward’s probably halfway across the country by now, burying himself in mediocrity back in Palo Alto. We’re better off without him.”

“Just wait.” Ford repeated, holding out hope. “Until eight o’clock.”

“Fine, but if he’s not here in one hundred and forty-eight seconds exactly, I’m turning this on. Dummy’s getting impatient.” Bill griped, gesturing to the mannequin sitting on the other office chair.

“Oh, Dummy is, is he?” Ford quirked his eyebrow at Bill, finding time to be amused by his muse amidst the stress.
The seconds were counting down on Ford’s watch, and they were approaching the final minute before the point of no return, when the elevator door dinged open.

Ford spun around to look, and lo and behold, there was Fiddleford McGucket striding out into the lab, snagging his own lab coat from the coat rack by the door.

“Fiddleford!” Ford exclaimed, oddly relieved to see his college friend. “You came.”

“I’m here, but I’m not happy about it.” Fiddleford remarked, adjusting his glasses, taking in Bill’s disappointed slump.

He put his hands on his hips stubbornly pretending he wasn’t terrified of what was about to happen, and gestured to the machine one more time. “Are you sure you want to do this?”

“Absolutely.” Ford replied immediately, no hesitation whatsoever.

Fiddleford sighed, half hoping Ford would have seen reason by now, but shook his head, walking over to the door to the lab, pulling it open to see the portal’s generators turned on, the machine whirring with life already.

“You ain’t sent nothin’ in there yet?” F questioned.

“We’re about to.” Ford replied, lifting Dummy off the chair, threading a rope around the mannequin’s wrist. “Not a person obviously, but this is just an initial test.”

“Give me that.” F strode over to Ford and snatched Dummy out of his hands, winding the other side of the rope around his own wrist, frowning at Ford. “I ain’t standin’ off to the sidelines while you do all the work. I’m not off the project yet, so you’re stuck with me.”

Ford was oddly pleased. A conflicted feeling, considering he was still somewhat sour at F for his stunt with the thesis. Ford watched Fiddleford check over the mannequin tersely, his frown an evident feature, and, despite himself, Ford smiled.

“Well, shall we?”

Fiddleford’s frown deepened, and he looked like he was about to say something, yet another deterrent to stop Ford from proceeding, when he was interrupted by Bill, over by the consoles.

“Eight-oh-one! Time’s up. Let’s get this show on the road already.”

Bill flicked on the last switch for the fuel regulation, and the diagnostic lights began to blink on. The portal’s machinery beeped and hummed, and now all that was left was to crank the lever in the other room, and throw the mannequin in.

Ford nodded, and held the door open, ushering Fiddleford in through with the mannequin. He looked back over to Bill, who was sitting by the control panel, watching him leave.

“You’re not coming in?” Ford questioned.

“You two can handle the heavy lifting.” Bill replied, spinning around on his office chair, drumming his fingers on his thigh. “Someone needs to check the readings on this thing to make sure everything goes right. But don’t worry, I’ll be watching.”

Ford nodded, and walked through the door behind Fiddleford with a smile, convinced nothing would go wrong.
Lingering in a crevice in space time, Jheselbraum lurked, watching Bill’s little minions clear out the airfield outside the asteroid belt that led into his nightmarish realm of chaos and terrors.

They wouldn’t see her, not when she’d perfected the art of folding pockets in space, making temporal portals that kept her safe and hidden until the latest opportune moment. The only person she’d encountered who could see through these portals of hers was Bill, and he didn’t seem to be here, which was concerning.

*Getting his henchmen to do his dirty work for him.* Jheselbraum thought somewhat hypocritically, unimpressed. *Why am I not surprised?*

Once the block of space was cordoned off, the henchmen seemed to be retreating, back to the Quadrangle.

If this was to be Bill’s grand entrance, why did he not want his followers to be there, applauding his success? Unless this wasn’t the main event, but some sort of preliminary run through?

*All the more reason to be here.* Jheselbraum reasoned to herself. *So I can shoot his foolhardy venture down before it ever takes off the ground.*

If Bill’s intent was to make sure nothing incriminating would await his pet scientists should they look through to the other side, he had another thing coming.

The truth really was the sweetest sabotage of all.

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Stanford did the honours, he was the one to crank that final lever in the lab that set everything in motion.

A wind whipped through the underground laboratory as the wheel around the eye of the portal began to spin, the blue and white lights blurring together as the generators charged up the portal’s systems, electricity crackling in the air. When the power reached it’s required crescendo, the portal’s eye rang out loudly, yet subtly at the same time, the sort of sound that you can’t hear, but can feel in your eardrums, a sonic boom of energy that reverberated out, away past the lab, past the shack, throughout the town all at once.

A wave of energy, pure energy, striking outwards. The air felt different once that lever was pulled, charged with an odd pervading radiation.

With the lever pulled, the Hyperdrive kicked into gear, making the air seem lighter, dust particles floating off the ground in a minor, controllable gravitational anomaly.

Ford felt his tie begin to lift out from under his lab coat, and he absently patted it back down, eyes
fixed to the whirring wheel, Behenian sigils whipping past so quickly the speed obscured their recognisability.

The light fractured around the portal, the speed was so intense, the blue sigils blurring into white light, blurring into the entire electromagnetic spectrum. The portal was exuding all light, all colours and radiation, but as Stanford and Fiddleford could only perceive the visible spectrum, the portal’s wheel looked like it was exuding a perpetual rainbow around the edges.

It was somewhat cliché, but Ford took it as a fortuitous omen, that a rainbow was paving the way to a bright future of discovery and genius realised, after so many rainy days of hardship.

Stanford looked over to Fiddleford and nodded, stepping up to approach the safety line.

Fiddleford nodded back, and took a hesitant step forward, dragging the mannequin along with him.

“We’ll release him in three –“ Ford counted down, gesturing as he spoke to Fiddleford, counting down on his fingers.

“Two –“ Ford continued, and Fiddleford raised his hand to yawn, his exhaustion creeping up on him.

The Hyperdrive’s forcefield was strong, and with Fiddleford’s hand gesture raising the rope a few scant centimetres, that was enough rope for the gravitational forcefield to seize it, tugging forward persistently.

“One –“ Ford looked back to the portal, his eyes drawn in by the spinning rainbow, distracting him from the fact that Fiddleford’s foot was too far over the safety line.

The portal was ravenous for matter, exuding its own gravitational pull, lifting Dummy up decisively, levitating him across the safety line.

Tired from spending half the night staying up worried for Stanford, Fiddleford’s responses were somewhat slow, slow enough that it took him several seconds to realise that Dummy was levitating, and he hadn’t even let go of him yet.

He looked down, and noticed that he was levitating too, which was when he began to panic.

Checking the consistent readings from the diagnostic machines, Bill was content that this test was proceeding as expected. For once his plans were going off without a hitch it seemed. It had only taken him a couple of centuries of human development to pull this off properly, but here it was, performing as expected finally, his own interdimensional doorway.

Bill’s sharp yellow eyes were tracking the readings, ensuring everything was functioning correctly, when a sharp shout of alarm from the lab drew his attention.

He kicked the office chair back to wheel across the observation room, leaning to look out of the doorway into the lab, blinking in the sight unfolding before him.

Dummy was levitating, being dragged into the portal, but so was McGucket, drawn along behind the mannequin, his legs and arms pinwheeling ineffectively against gravity’s fickle pull.

Bill blinked, deciding in an instant that this was less of a complication to the test, and more a solution in the making. Talk about killing two birds with one stone.

Bill lidded his eyes, smirking comfortably, as he watched McGucket flail, trying to untie the rope
from his wrist, being sucked unerringly into the portal. Sixer hadn’t noticed yet, his eyes still glued to the whirring colours. Humans were so easy.

Specs looked up frantically, locking eyes with Bill from across the room, pleading wordlessly for help, some kind of help.

Bill just grinned, and waved at McGucket in a kindly way, like how neighbouring housewives in the 1920’s would wave at each other from behind white picket fences while harbouring unspoken grudges for one another. All congenial like.

The portal pulled harder, sucking McGucket and Dummy closer, and, recognising he’d get no assistance from Bill, Fiddleford yelled again, a wordless noise of pure panic.

“WOAH-HOAH-HAAAAAARRRGHHHHHHH!”

That drew Sixer’s attention, finally, the scientist looking over, startled.

“What?”

The portal’s grasp was unerring, dragging McGucket closer and closer.

Ford sprung up, aghast that something had gone wrong, that it was Fiddleford paying the price, proving his suspicions right. F was screaming, being sucked into the portal, until the screaming stopped, McGucket’s head being submerged in the surface of the portal’s eye, transported through spacetime to the other side.

“No!” Ford reached out, trying to bring his colleague back in vain.

He grasped onto whatever he could reach, six fingered hands fumbling to catch the end of the rope, cursing the world, cursing fate, cursing himself first and foremost, guilt already welling thick in his chest at the thought of causing F harm, of losing him in the portal while they were on such poor terms, of losing him at all.

The rope slid from McGucket’s wrist, but the strength of the wind in the lab whipped it around Fiddleford’s ankle, snagging it there, holding fast.

Ford held the other end firm, and planted his feet flat on the ground, heaving, trying to pull F back through the portal.

“I’ve got you buddy.” Ford muttered through gritted teeth.

Bill watched from the lab door, somewhat disappointed now. Of course, if anything were to ruin this neat dispatching of loose ends it would be Sixer’s heroic streak. Bill watched Sixer struggle with the rope, trying to tug McGucket back through the portal, already bored of the rescue, when he felt a peculiar energy that had him sitting up a little in his chair. It felt … familiar.

Bill blinked, doubting these sub-par human eyes of his for a second. Was it just him, or was the portal glowing a more vibrant blue than it should?

Uh oh.

Not good.

Bill sprung out of his chair, knocking it back as he ran through the door to the lab.

The chair fell on it’s side, the wheels at the bottom of the chair spinning aimlessly.
Ford looked over his shoulder briefly, hearing the clatter from behind him. He opened his mouth, the words ‘Bill, help’ on the tip of his tongue, when he felt it too. The pull of the portal, the gravitational anomaly lifting him off the ground.

Ford let out a startled shout of his own, and looked over to Bill, watching the muse bear his teeth in an odd sort of grimace, concern widening his bright yellow eyes.

“Bill! I can’t –“ Ford gritted his teeth, his legs swinging, trying to find purchase on the ground. The rope was slipping somewhat, burning his fingers with friction. He adjusted his grip, not willing to let Fiddleford go, and reached out with his left hand to his muse, reaching out for help.

His muse no longer seemed shocked and concerned, his expression had twisted.

He looked furious.

Lightning crackled from Bill’s hands, clenched into fists at his side. The God extended his hand forward, opening it, and Stanford felt the air around him lurch, jarred by the weight of Bill’s will, his power unleashed.

Bill clenched his hand into a fist, and Ford felt Bill’s magic tingle in the space around him, it was like being submerged in static. Every hair on his body was standing on end, surrounded by so much tangible power.

The air seemed to compress, feeling squeezed tight, packed in, though Ford was thankfully unharmed.

When Bill pulled his fist back, Stanford felt less like he had been yanked, and more like the space around him had bent, sparks flying as Bill’s will clashed with the gravitational force field of the portal. The light on the surface of the portal glowed a more vibrant blue, unwilling to let go of McGucket’s head.

The lightning crackled all around the lab, singing the dirt walls, before Bill’s will triumphed, jerking the two scientists out of the portal’s gravitational pull.

Ford gripped tightly to the rope as he hurtled through the air, flying to land on the other side of the safety line, skidding on the ground as he fell while blue bolts of electricity jettisoned around the lab, emanating from his muse’s body.

He fumbled for the rope, his right hand red with friction burns, looking over his shoulder to see Fiddleford and Dummy come sailing out of the portal behind him to land in the dirt, thankfully both in one piece.

Once Sixer was safe, back in the lab, Bill strode over to the emergency override button in the middle of the safety line, and slammed his palm down on the button, shutting the portal’s eye off.

The portal’s eye whirled to a halt, the rainbow dimming, blue light retreating, until it was just the white glow of the lit Behenian sigils adorning the lab.

Bill turned around, reeling in the energy pouring out of him into something more placid, less vengeful and inhuman, to look for Sixer, to check his reaction, but the scientist was already crawling over to kneel beside McGucket, who was twitching spasmodically on the floor, pupils massively dilated.

Ford placed his hands on Fiddleford’s shoulders and shook him gently, trying to snap him out of this trancelike state.
“What is it? Is it working?” Ford questioned, thinking to ask about the portal before all else. “What did you see?”

Fiddleford’s eye twitched, his brain processing what had been inflicted on it, before he regurgitated the information, speaking in gibberish, like his mind was glitching on the output.

“Votmzrig, Ivskrx Oory!” He spluttered unintelligibly, and Stanford frowned, leaning closer to listen, stumped by F’s garbled words.

It almost sounded like Bill’s strange language, the one he spoke in his sleep when he thought Ford wasn’t listening.

“Fiddleford?”

Bill paced over to stand behind Sixer, staring down at McGucket.

The hick scientist shouldn’t know how to say his name, let alone say it backwards in his own tongue.

He looked between Sixer’s confused expression, and McGucket’s dilated pupils, seeing the lingering spark of blue light within that told him everything he needed to know.

Ford shook F’s shoulder a little more avidly now, worried.

F shrugged him off and sat up on his own behest, his movements almost mechanical, pupils dark and fathomless, his gaze fixed on something far away, possibly not of this world.

He recited - words, ominous words that didn’t sound like his own, while his body shook, rattling his bones.

The words came pouring out of him.

“When gravity falls and Earth becomes sky – fear the best with just one eye!”

Bill glared at McGucket, recognising Jheselbraum’s hackneyed flare for the dramatic.

Another one of her ‘prophecies’. Oh joy.

“Fiddleford, get a hold of yourself.” Stanford urged his friend, his brow creased with concern.

“You’re not making any sense.”

McGucket blinked, his pupils receding as Jheselbraum’s influence ran its course.

Bill could tell from the way Specs’ eyes darted immediately to Bill, cognisance infusing with fear and understanding, that the scientist wasn’t just a mouthpiece.

He knew.

Clenching his fist subtly at his side, Bill squeezed the air around F’s throat, causing him to splutter.

F fell back, and flopped jerkily on the floor, his limbs pinioned by an invisible force, making him feel like a prisoner, trapped in his own head. Even his tongue wasn’t working right, weighed down by an unseen force, encouraging his mouth to produce frothing saliva. McGucket’s eyes were glued accusingly to Bill the entire time as he twitched and shuddered, helpless in his own head.

“Fiddleford?” Ford cried out, hands flailing ineffectually over his friend’s body, trying to help. 
“I think he’s having a seizure.” Bill said, sounding curious, and just concerned enough to cause Sixer to worry. “Hurry Sixer, go call an ambulance.”

“Right, an ambulance. Right.” Ford muttered to himself, picking himself up off the floor. “Is he -?”

“I’ll stay with him.” Bill reassured Ford, gently ushering him out of the lab with a wave of his hand. “Go. Hurry.”

“I’ll be right back.” Ford promised, and sprinted out of the lab, into the elevator, racing upstairs to the telephone.

As Ford left, the invisible power forcing F’s body to twitch and spasm stilled, though its grip hadn’t lessened.

Fiddleford watched - in abject terror, frozen in his own body – staring at the false creature crouched beside him, inhabiting a human form, watching his evil yellow slitted eyes stare at the elevator while the doors closed on Ford, knowing exactly what he was.

When the doors dinged shut, and Ford had gone, Fiddleford realised he was left alone in a room with this abhorrent, horrible creature, without any hope of rescue, entirely at his mercy.

Bill looked down at McGucket, coolly meeting his frightened knowing stare, and lidded his eyes at the scientist.

“Well Specs, you had a good run.”

Fiddleford’s vision warped, understanding overlaying with reality, superimposing the things he’d seen, the things he knew to be true, over what he was seeing now, yellow dancing monstrously in the back of his retinas.

“Y- Yroo –“ Fiddleford stuttered breathlessly, struggling to fight back against the force that was holding him down.

“But I think we both know you’ve seen too much.” Bill continued, reaching out to pat McGucket in a patronising manner.

“N-no!”

His fingers trailed up to rest at McGucket’s temple’s, peering into his mind. Fiddleford couldn’t even flinch away, he couldn’t move.

“Yikes. That’s incriminating.” Bill huffed an absent laugh, exposed to Jheselbraum’s colourful ‘the best of Bill Cipher’ reel she’d implanted in McGucket’s head. It was almost impressive, the kind of stuff Bill would break out the popcorn for, if it didn’t throw such a spanner in the works right now.

“You’ve definitely seen too much.” Bill confirmed, bringing his hand away from McGucket’s foreheard, examining his nails casually as bright blue flames sprung up in his palm, confirming everything Fiddleford had just seen. “Now, what to do with you?”

F broke out in a cold sweat, feeling it seep into the back of his shirt, his body pounding with adrenaline, glued to the spot.

“I know I can’t kill you. We had a deal.” Bill straightened McGucket’s tie for him as he spoke, patting away sporadic patches of blue flame that caught on the fabric. “But I hear madness is mostly painless, and very easy to maintain. You probably won’t even feel it after the initial jolt,
and even if you did, you wouldn’t have the words to describe it anyway. So it’s a win-win, am I right?”

“P-please –” Fiddleford shivered, panicking, watching Bill like one would watch a prowling lion or a tiger, a predator circling prey. “Please – I – I have a family – I –”

“And what would you do for that family?” Bill questioned slyly, watching McGucket shiver with fear. “To return to them in once piece?”


“You know what I am now. You know I can see anywhere, be anywhere, what I can send after your family if you cross me. You don’t want your kid’s first words to be his last, do you?” Bill asked sweetly, smiling at McGucket serenely, crouched beside him. “When you say anything, you better mean it, because I’ll hold you to it.”

“W-what do you want me to do?” Fiddleford asked cautiously, the feeling that he’d dug himself a hole here overlaying with thoughts of his wife, burnt alive, screaming, thoughts of his son turning to him, eyes yellow and slitted, reaching for the kitchen knife, sending horror home over and over again.

He wasn’t sure if these thoughts were his own, his imagination reaching for worst case scenarios, or if these thoughts were promises, sent by Bill, just scraping the surface of what depravities await his failure.

“You got me my portal, and for that I’m thankful, so I’ll be generous with your anything.” Bill crossed his arms, and watched McGucket’s self-preservation war with his common sense. “I’ll let you walk out of here yourself, go home to your family unharmed, forget all about this, with two conditions.”

Bill held up one finger, and a blue flame danced at the tip. “One: You quit the project. And you make it convincing. When Sixer comes back here, you’re going to tell him whatever he needs to hear to let you walk out and never darken his doorstep again. I don’t care if you make him hate you, I don’t care if you hate yourself for it, you convince him that you want nothing to do with him, and you do a damn good job of it. Capiche?”

Fiddleford felt the force around him ease enough for him to nod freely, which he did, in short jerky movements, self-preservation and fear outweighing his desire to do right by Stanford.

Stanford was the one who didn’t do right by him, bringing a demon in to work on the project, putting him through traumatic event after traumatic event, leaving him alone in the room to barter for his life with the monster crouched beside him.

The angry bitter part of him would have no problems pretending he was mad at Stanford, for putting him at risk, for putting his family at risk - and if what the visions he’d seen on the other side of the portal were right, for putting the entire world at risk, all for his pride.

He just had to muster the courage to bring that anger to the fore, when right now he could barely look past how utterly terrified he was.

Bill held up another finger, a second blue flame joining the first.

“And two, when you pack up your bags and take your little show on the road, the first thing you do when you get out of here, is you take your little memory gun, and you put it under your chin, and you forget EVERYTHING you’ve seen here. Every last thing.” Bill pointed at Fiddleford with one
burning finger, narrowing his eyes at the shaking scientist. “You leave nothing out, and you go home to your family safe and none the wiser. You get your life back and move on. Now how does that sound? Good?”

It sounded too good to be true, knowing what he knew about Bill, what he was capable of. Fiddleford’s heart was pounding, racing in his chest, and he swallowed his hesitation, choosing life, and he nodded again.

“An’ - and in exchange, you’ll leave me an’ my family alone, right? You w-won’t touch them?”

Bill held the two flaming fingers up again in a traditional salute. “Scout’s honour Specs. They’ll be safe from me and mine.”

“Y-you won’t hurt Stanford, will you?” Fiddleford thought to ask, his guilt catching up with him, aghast at the thought of leaving his friend behind to deal with Bill alone, wondering how he’d live with himself for prioritising himself and his family over Stanford’s fate.

He’d have a lot to forget, if he ever hoped to forget betraying his friend like this.

“You let me worry about Sixer.” Bill replied smoothly, before extending his hand out to Fiddleford, releasing his body from the enforced stasis he placed on him, blue flame dancing in his palm, waiting for McGucket to shake on it, sealing their agreement. “Now, do we have a deal?”

Fiddleford’s bottom lip trembled, and he swallowed, that thick heavy feeling in his throat undoubtedly guilt, undoubtedly the spot where his moral conscience was sticking, telling him not to do this.

Sitting up, with shaky, unsure movements, F extended his hand.

Thinking of his family, of Patricia, and Tate, waiting for him, waiting for their dad to come back home, F sucked in a deep breath, and plunged his hand into the fire, sealing the deal with a handshake.

Surprisingly the fire wasn’t hot, but cold and eerie. The chill from the fire spread from F’s hand, all the way up his arm, seeping into his spine, and he shivered.

“Deal.”

“Good.” Bill rocked back on his heels, and stood up in one swift movement, pulling McGucket along with him.

The scientist stood up, and swayed on his feet, his knees feeling weak, dread settling into the coldness that ran up his spine. He heard the ding from the elevator sound from the lab behind him, and raised his head, having had barely any time to prepare for this.

Bill placed his hands on F’s shoulders, and Fiddleford could feel the heat resonating from the monster’s palms, subtly threatening to burn him, all the while painting a concerned, gentle picture for Stanford to see when he walked in here.

“Showtime Specs.” Bill murmured, watching F’s expression shift anxiously, panic creeping up on him again at the thought that he’d have to lie to Stanford now, lie convincingly enough to save his own skin. “Your wife and kid are riding on this. Make it convincing.”

Fiddleford steeled himself, and took a deep breath, already regretting this, regretting hurting Ford.
But he had to. For his family.

“Fiddleford!” Stanford cried out, rushing into the lab when he saw F was standing upright, that he was okay.

Privately he was thankful he left F with Bill, knowing that if anyone had the power to see F through to safety it was his muse. Even so, the ambulance was on its way.

Bill had his hands resting on F’s shoulders, checking on him, and Ford jogged over to them both, putting his hand on F’s shoulder as well.

“Fiddleford – you –” Ford panted, looking at F with concern. “Are you –”

Fiddleford seemed to suck in a sharp breath, before turning around, glaring at Ford’s hand, his six-fingered hand, with venom, before brushing it off him, scowling at Stanford, knowing it would hurt him.

“Fiddleford?” Ford withdrew his hand, holding it close to his chest. He never thought he’d see Fiddleford recoil from him like this, from his anomalous digits.

F shook his head at Stanford, and stepped away from him, tugging his lab coat as he spoke.

“This – this machine is dangerous.” F said, progressively sounding firmer.

It was clear he was rattled by his experience in the portal, angry about what he’d gone through, but Stanford just wanted to know what he’d seen. How could he look through the portal, into another dimension, be blessed with the knowledge that Bill promised lay on the other side, and be upset about it?

It was an opportunity for enlightenment. Who would turn down enlightenment?

“You’ll bring about the end of the world with this.” F hissed at Stanford, his eyes beseeching Ford, trying to warn him. “Destroy it before it destroys us all!”

F could feel Bill’s eyes boring into the back of his head, could feel the threat of his power still tingling in the air, but he didn’t back down. Even if he was leaving, even if he had to leave, he still had to warn Stanford. Warn him about what he’d truly unleashed.

He was hoping Stanford would notice the way his eyes darted to the left when he said ‘it’, gesturing to Bill standing behind him, the true harbinger of this apocalypse. Instead, Stanford just blinked at him, offended and upset.

“I can’t destroy this. It’s my life’s work.” Ford gestured to the portal, single minded and ambitious as always. And it would be his undoing.

Fiddleford swallowed his disappointment, and shook his head, clenching his fist.

“I fear we’ve unleashed a grave danger on the world.” F could feel the air squeeze around his wrist, a warning and a threat conveyed all at once.

*Stick to the plan, make good on the deal.*

Fiddleford sighed, and looked away from Ford’s confused expression.

“One I would just as soon forget.”
He felt the pressure ease around his wrist now that he was following through on his promise.

If he couldn’t get through to Ford with those words, he had no idea what else would, and he didn’t have the time to stay and find out. Every second he delayed was a second his family were put in danger, he knew it.

Mustering his courage to follow through with this betrayal, F drew in a deep breath, puffing his chest out boldly, before he spat the words at Stanford.

“I quit!”

The words seemed to slap Ford in the face for a moment there, and he reeled back, stunned.

F didn’t give him time to process that statement, pushing past him, leaving the lab. He hoped that if he left quickly, he’d miss out on Ford’s reaction, having made good on his end of the deal, not wanting the guilt of Ford’s hurt feelings to weigh on his conscience. If he didn’t see Ford’s reaction, maybe he wouldn’t feel as guilty.

He stormed through to the observation room, and pressed the call button for the elevator, hoping the lift would arrive before he had to hear Ford process his betrayal.

Just as the doors dinged open, he heard it, Ford’s voice loud, shouting the words at Fiddleford’s back.

“Fine. I’LL DO IT WITHOUT YOU!”

F bit his lip, stepping into the elevator, his expression crumpling. He couldn’t turn around, he knew it.

“I don’t need you.” Ford’s words echoed around the lab, playing havoc on F’s forced calm. “I DON’T NEED ANYONE!”

The elevator doors closed behind F, and he let himself fall apart, knowing that he’d just delivered his friend right into Bill’s hands, having played his part in the monster’s game.

Now Ford had no one else to turn to.

And no one to save him from what was to come.

Ford panted, rage and disbelief competing with each other, as he watched the elevator doors seal shut behind Fiddleford, the finality of it all stumping Ford.

Just when he thought he’d got his friend back, back on board with the project, Fiddleford got a glimpse of what they’ve been working towards all this time, and he bailed.

Growling, his frustration overwhelming him, Ford kicked Dummy’s arm.

“Quit the project. I can’t believe – after everything we’ve done together. Now he gets cold feet. Now?” Ford ranted, betrayal compounding on itself twice in the space of two days.
He was furious.

“After being the first man to successfully enter a parallel dimension, he takes this gift and throws it away?” Ford gestured to the portal, looking at Bill in askance, his anger flowing through him. “Imagine if Neil Armstrong’s first words on the moon were ‘I quit’? Imagine if—”

“That’d be one way to fake the moon landing.” Bill replied, watching Sixer tire himself out, that righteous fury he’d been hoping for finally catching up with the human.

Ford laughed, a disbelieving bark of laughter interjecting into his outrage.

“I just— I just can’t understand. He had the opportunity, the remarkable opportunity, to confirm or deny our experiment, and he just storms out of here. Did he— did he tell you anything?”

Bill shrugged, and shook his head. “Nothing worthwhile. Just mumbling mostly, about his family, about being fed up with the project, about not wanting to be here in the first place.”

“Then why did he come? Why bother coming in the first place— I don’t—” Ford ran his hand through his hair, frustrated. “Was the money all that mattered to him? I don’t—”

Ford clenched his fist, and brought it up to his mouth, trying to smother the emotion that was choking his throat, the thought of being used for his money, of being discarded like this, overwhelming him.

“I thought he was my friend. I thought—”

“Hey.” Bill stepped closer to Ford, speaking gently. He grasped Ford’s fist in both of his hands, and smoothed his thumb over Sixer’s freakish hands. “Sixer, don’t let it get to you. Some people just aren’t cut out for greatness.”

Ford closed his eyes and shook his head, his brow furrowed, betrayal playing havoc with his emotions.

Why had he let himself hope, when Fiddleford returned, that things would be better? Things weren’t better, they were worse than ever.

“So what if he leaves? Let him go back to his family, you don’t need him.” Bill assured him, still encapsulating Ford’s fist in his warm, gentle hands.

“I just— to think he’d throw it all away?” Ford questioned, feeling lost.

He looked up at Bill, noting the sympathetic way his muse was regarding him, feeling pitied. He didn’t like feeling pitied, certainly not by his muse.

Clenching his fist until it hurt, Ford swiped his hand out in front of him, anger brimming to the fore once more.

“Well, good riddance! I don’t need him. You hear me?” Ford spun around and shook his fist at the ceiling, yelling, though Fiddleford couldn’t hear him. “F, you weak-willed hayseed! Go on! Go back to your doting family, and a life of fear and compromise. I’ll do this without you!”

Ford’s shoulder’s slumped, and his hands fell down to his side. He shook his head, that choked feeling coming back to his throat, the feeling of being alone.

“I just— he had a golden opportunity, and he threw it away. He just threw it all away.” Ford
sniffled, trying to stem his emotions from bubbling over. “To think I considered him a friend.”

“He left, he’s gone.” Ford sighed, the rage bubbling out of him, his anger spent. “And now I’m alone.”

“No you’re not.”
Ford felt his muse take his hand, unfold his fist. He turned back around, and watched his muse examine the red, blistered line where the rope had burned him, prodding it with delicate fingers, before smoothing that cool, healing blue flame across his skin, erasing the blisters, leaving clear healthy skin behind.

Ford watched, that painful optimism clawing back up his throat, acting as both a balm over his betrayal, and a reminder of how fleeting the feeling of having someone there for you could truly be.

The wound was gone, like it was never there.

“You’re not alone.” Bill reinforced, smoothing his palm over Sixer’s, holding his hand.

“I just feel like everything’s over.” Ford confessed despairingly, staring down at their joined hands, letting Bill lace his five fingers in the gaps between Ford’s six. “This test, it hasn’t gone at all the way I expected it to. F was the only one to get a glimpse of what lies beyond the portal, and he didn’t even stick around to tell us what it was like. How do we know we succeeded?”

“We did.” Bill assured Ford, giving his hand a squeeze. “You did it.”

Bill gestured to the portal, the lights dimmed, the eye lying dormant now the machine was switched off.

“You did this. You’re the Man Who Changed the World. And now it’s all yours to explore.”

Ford swallowed his melancholy, and stuck his chin out stubbornly, regarding the portal.

“You’re right.”

He pulled Bill in close, wrapping his arm around the muse, holding him against his chest, looking at the dormant portal, determination glinting behind his glasses once more.

“This is only the beginning.”

Pulling into the motel just on the edge of town, Fiddleford McGucket hadn’t stopped shaking. He shook when he was packing his belongings, he shook when he piled them all into his truck, driving along down the dirt road that led away from the shack, he shook when he paid for his room for the night, the notes and coins jangling out of his hand when he passed them to the clerk.

His hands were still shaking when he closed the door behind him, moving into his new abode, room number six at the Twin Bed Motel, jittery as he slid the chain into place, locking the door securely shut behind him.
It was only when he was alone that he let himself fall apart.

He cried. He wept, wept for his failed partnership, scuppered by the demon who was pulling the strings. He cried for Ford, and for his family, still shaking at the thought that he’d ever put them at risk, any of them.

He cried for himself, for what he’d agreed to, knowing that he still had his end of the deal to fulfil for his family to truly be safe.

Even if he did this, he forgot, how would he know, truly know, that his family would be safe because of it. Bill could go behind his back and harm them anyway, once Fiddleford erased his own memory, and F would be none the wiser.

There was an element of blind faith, of trust, in following through with this deal, and suddenly F didn’t want to do it.

He didn’t want to forget everything.

He looked over to the whiskey crate he brought with him, sitting innocuously in the corner of the room, hiding his memory ray within.

He walked over to the crate, and picked up the gun, turning it over in his hands. He walked back to sit on the bed, looking down at the gun, fiddling with the specifier.

He didn’t have to go through with this, did he? There had to be some other way, a way out of it.

If erasing his memory meant he left Ford in the clutches of that triangular monster, that was as good as throwing his friend to the wolves.

He tried to warn him, but was warning him enough? He had to help him. Help him stop Bill.

Turning his back on Gravity Falls didn’t just mean abandoning Ford, it meant abandoning humanity, leaving them all at the mercy of the end of the world.

Would it really mean anything to promise his wife and child safety from Bill if the world was going to end anyway?

His jaw jutting out stubbornly, F decided, speaking aloud to himself.

“No. I won’t do it.”

Fiddleford put the memory gun down on the bed beside him, and shook his head.

“I ain’t leavin’. I won’t let Ford face the end of the world on his own. I won’t do it. I won’t.”

F moved to leave the gun on the bed, to let go of it, but it was like it was stuck to his palm, F’s finger’s curved around the grip.

He tried to shake the gun out of his hand, but his fingers wouldn’t move, holding the gun tight.

“No.” F spluttered, horrified, when his limbs began moving of their own accord, defying his wishes. “No!”

His left hand rose, compelled by a strange yellow glow, forcing his fingers to rest on the dial, twisting the specifier left and right.
“No, no, no – no!” F fretted, watching the letter’s light up on the side of the gun.

**E – V – E**

“I don’t want this – I don’t – stop!” F begged, hoping someone would hear him in the empty room.

**R – Y – T – H**

“Stop! Please!” F sobbed, his shoulder’s shaking as his hands worked against him, regretting his decision in an instant. “Please, stop. I’ll do it. I’ll do it, just let me do it myself – I – oh god!”

**I – N -G**

“No. No please.” Fiddleford couldn’t stop shaking, his hands moving without his say so, positioning the bulb of the gun just under his chin, his finger resting on the trigger. “I’m sorry. I’ll do things your way! I’m sorry – please don’t do this. You said I could go back to my family – you don’t -”

The memory ray hummed, the device charging up as Fiddleford’s finger applied light pressure to the trigger, readying the blast.

The read-out on the side of the gun read **EVERYTHING** in glowing green letters at the base of the gun.

“Don’t do this to me.” Fiddleford pleaded, tears running down his cheeks. The point of the bulb felt hot against the skin of his neck, and he was crying desperately.

Bill was enforcing the deal, taking matters into Fiddleford’s own hands.

“Please. No.” Fiddleford hiccupped, and he could feel his finger lifting off the trigger, readying the shot. He closed his eyes, and thought of his family, his wife, his son.

“Tate.” Fiddleford whispered.

Everything burnt white.

Everything was gone.

Chapter End Notes

**EVERYONE** is losing **EVERYTHING** and the thematic repetition is **THROUGH THE ROOF**!

Things look bad. Don't worry, they get worse.

Little gems throughout this chapter include Ford subtly throwing shade on Rick and Morty, Jheselbraum being a total hypocrite, and Tommy the one eyed Goo Mobster taking his own advice.

Poor Fidds didn't deserve any of this, save Fiddleford 2k18 or 1k82 or whatever year they're in.

I hope you enjoyed reading this chapter as much as I enjoyed writing it, and as always, your comments are the highlight of my day, so let me know what you thought of it.

This chapter is dedicated to quantumseahorse, who is a delight, and drew some more
lovely art for the fic, and a very sassy Pyronica. Thank you friend.
Next chapter, shit starts getting real, and the chapter after that is a real doozy too.
Good luck.
Would you laugh at me, if I said I care for you? Could you feel the same way too? I wanna know, what's the name of the game?

Chapter Notes

Hello! Just a heads up, this chapter is mostly just sex scenes past a certain point. There are two sex scenes in this chapter, quite graphic, depicting some loving, consensual rough sex. This is just a warning in case that's not your cup of tea.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Stanford was in the kitchen downstairs, fixing something to eat for his muse, trying not to focus on the empty feeling he experienced whenever he looked at the third chair sitting around the kitchen table.

Where Fiddleford used to sit.

Ford knew he shouldn’t feel bad, that McGucket’s departure only showed the scientist’s true nature, that it wasn’t Ford’s fault that he wasn’t equipped to deal with the discovery this portal offered, with what lay on the other side.

But still, the betrayal gnawed at him, squeezing his chest with regret at inopportune moments.

Bill sat on the chair by the window, dressed in Ford’s fluffy dressing gown, and rested his chin on his hand, noting the way Sixer’s eyes lingered on the chair opposite.

“He’s not coming back.”

Ford jumped, blinking at Bill, before he sheepishly rubbed the back of his neck, caught staring at F’s old chair.

“Would you even want him to, after what he did?” Bill pressed, watching Sixer’s reaction keenly.

“I don’t know.” Ford admitted, sighing. “I shouldn’t. Part of me just feels guilty.”

“Why?” Bill asked.

“I don’t know. I just feel that maybe… maybe if he hadn’t been through so much, with the Gremloblin and then again with the Shapeshifter, he might have been in a better position to deal with what he’d seen. Maybe he wouldn’t have quit, left it all just like that.”

“You said it yourself.” Bill pointed out. “He was weak willed. That had nothing to do with you.”

“I know, but I still feel responsible.” Ford frowned, and poured hot water into the two mugs he had lined up on the counter, continuing to make tea for himself and his muse. “He really seemed unhinged this time. Not himself. And all that talk about an Apocalypse.”

“Do you know the root of the word ‘Apocalypse’?” Bill stretched out leisurely, and reached for the mug of tea when Sixer passed it to him. He smelled the fragrant beverage pleasantly, and took a sip, humming at the taste, before continuing. “Before it got misconstrued by that hackneyed holy book? It comes from the Latin *apocalypsis* which comes from the Greek *apokalyptein* which
means revelation, insight, discovery."

Ford took the seat beside Bill, and sipped on his own tea, strongly reminded of the days before he summoned Bill to earth, where they’d sit and chat just like this, over tea, bandying philosophy and scientific rhetoric and hypotheticals back and forth until the early hours of the morning. It still held the same appeal.

“Some people, like you, are equipped to handle revelations, and epiphanies. You’re open minded and curious enough to take most things in your stride. Like me, for example.”

“Like you?” Ford quirked a brow at Bill, sipping on his tea.

“Most people, scientist or not, would run away screaming at the thought of a cosmic triangle inhabiting their dreams, telling them about the universe. As a dream, sure, it’s a pleasant enough fiction, but as a reality, it’s that confirmation that you’re not alone in the universe, that humanity isn’t the centre of everything, the height of all knowledge. It’s existential crisis fodder.” Bill shrugged, running his tongue over his teeth, before giving Stanford a shrewd look. “Most humans don’t take it so well.”

“So, you’re saying I’m not most humans?” Ford clarified, smugness creeping into his expression.

“You just want me to tell you you’re special.” Bill smirked at Ford over the top of his mug of tea.

“Am I not?” Ford chuckled, nudging Bill’s thigh with his own socked foot.

“I’m saying, McGucket isn’t.” Bill finished, setting his mug down on the table. “And that’s why he’s not here. He can’t handle revelations like you can.”

Ford’s humour sobered, and he looked over to F’s empty chair once more, saddened.

Bill watched Ford frown at empty space for a while longer, before he decided that Ford had done enough frowning.

Nudging the scientist back with his leg, playing footsie, Bill smirked at Ford.

“And maybe you’re special.”

Ford looked back over to Bill and smiled fondly at the muse, feeling wearier than he should after sleeping so heavily.

“Maybe?”

“Maybe.” Bill confirmed, before leaning forward to plant a kiss to Ford’s cheek. “Maybe instead of sitting around, moping, you could finish making breakfast.”

“Maybe I could.” Ford conceded, before heaving himself up out of his chair with a sigh, getting back to it.

As he prepared the ingredients he needed, he heard a strange noise from out in the front porch.

“-ot, hot, hot!”

“What?” Ford looked up, over to the front door, curiosity overwhelming him.

Bill was examining his nailbeds, and didn’t look up as he spoke. “It’s probably nothing.”
“I’m going to go look.” Ford declared, leaving the ingredients on the counter, moving through the house.

Part of him vainly hoped it was Fiddleford, coming to beg for forgiveness, having come to his senses, but when Stanford opened the front door to peer outside, no one was there.

Just rolling snow, and silence.

The cold bit into Ford, as he was wearing just a black t-shirt and trousers, and he resigned himself to the fact that nothing was out there. Ford closed the front door and locked it, trudging back into the kitchen.

“Probably just a bird.” Ford muttered, and resumed cooking their breakfast.

“I told you.” Bill said unhelpfully, and continued to examine his hands, tracing the black lines of unbound bricks up his arm with his fingertip, eyeing off the last two golden bricks that remained. He looked between those two golden bricks, and Stanford.

Ford was poking the omelettes around in the pan, seasoning Bill’s with plenty of chilli, and Bill’s eyes traced over the broad expanse of Sixer’s back.

Bill had one more day until he had to follow through on his deal with the Goo Mobsters, and after that, things would spiral pretty quickly. Given that the first test, despite Jheselbraum’s interference, was a resounding success, Bill wouldn’t be able to put off the big day forever.

It was funny, how when it was finally in his grasp, what he’d been planning for millennia, he was putting it off so he could spend more time with Sixer. He didn’t know how much more he’d get of this, and he didn’t know what he’d do when he couldn’t have this anymore, these simple, quiet moments with Sixer in his kitchen, acting like the world wasn’t about to end.

Even so, he couldn’t procrastinate forever, and he needed to get these last two bricks unbound properly before the ball started rolling.

“Say, Sixer?” Bill asked, his tone curious and light as Stanford passed the two plates across to the table, sliding Bill’s omelette in front of him and passing him cutlery.

Bill pointed to the last two bricks on his right arm. “What are we doing with these?”

Ford paused in between shovelling eggs into his mouth, chewing, and made a noncommittal sound, before going back to forking more eggs off his plate.

“What, was that supposed to be a word?” Bill asked, direly unimpressed.

Ford gestured to Bill’s plate with his fork, refusing to meet his eyes, hunched over his own meal.

“Your food is getting cold. Eat your eggs.”

Bill scowled at Ford suspiciously, but scooped up some omelette onto his fork, chewing on it sullenly, watching Ford all the while, waiting for a real answer.

“You know, I was thinking we could go up to Fiddleford’s room after this. Pack up anything he might have forgot in a box to send back to Patricia.” Ford said casually, changing the subject.

“You haven’t answered my question.” Bill narrowed his eyes at Sixer, still chewing on his eggs.

“Is now really the time?” Ford countered. “Fiddleford just left. Just yesterday.”
“Exactly, so we don’t have to hide it anymore. You could fix up a circle in the kitchen if you wanted to, now that there’s no easily offended rube to spook. I could be floating right now.” Bill argued, waving his fork around as he spoke.

“I have things to do.” Ford replied evasively, before he gathered his plate and cutlery and brought it over to the sink. “Finish your eggs. If you need me I’ll be upstairs.”

“Sixer?” Bill huffed, gesturing to the bricks. “I need you to finish what you started. Sixer!”

Ford was already gone, trudging up the stairs to the attic without a backward glance.

By the time Bill inhaled the rest of his omelette and stomped up the stairs after the recalcitrant scientist, Ford was already accumulating a pile of F’s knick-knacks that he forgot to take with him in his haste to leave, piling them into a cardboard box.

“What’s the point? He didn’t even take his –” Ford mumbled, and when Bill stomped into the room, Ford continued his conversation with Bill like he hadn’t been ignoring the muse’s wishes, gesturing to the pile of belongings on the bed. “He didn’t even take his Heck-A-Hedron.”

“Am I supposed to be surprised?” Bill scoffed, leaning against the attic door, crossing his arms. “He abandoned you, he abandoned his puzzle polygon.”

“It’s like he didn’t even think this through.” Ford put his hands on his hips, looking at the mess left in F’s room, emanating frustration. “He leaves on a whim, he ransacks the place. It looks like we’ve been robbed. In more ways than one, I guess.”

“Don’t get all poetical on me now Sixer.” Bill shifted his weight, watching Ford. “I’m not that kind of muse, remember?”

“I know, I just – it still hasn’t sunk in for me, I guess. I just don’t know how he could do this, when we’ve come so far together.” Ford frowned at the messy room, the vase of blue forget-me-nots dried up on F’s bedside, neglected.

Bill watched Ford, already bored of Sixer’s nostalgia laden lamentations. Tapping his right arm, Bill tried to get Sixer back on topic.

“Speaking of people not finishing what they started, can we get back to me?”

“Look, there’s even rubbish under the bed. Broken glass? That’s just irresponsible.” Ford replied, ignoring Bill, dropping down to his hands and knees to clear out the rubbish piled up under F’s bed. “Treating this place like a pig-sty.”

Unable to resist taking a jab at McGucket, Bill muttered under his breath. “Probably reminds him of home. You can take the pig farmer out of the sty, but you can’t take the sty out of the pig farmer.”

“There’s so much – ugh, broken light bulbs everywhere. Why does he even need this many –” Ford grumbled as he pulled the refuse out from under the bed, piling it up beside him.
“Don’t ask me to fathom what goes on inside his tiny mind.” Bill rolled his eyes, looking down at a pile of papers, stacked neat amongst the chaos, addressed to Stanford. Bill nudged the pile of papers off McGucket’s desk, into the overflowing waste basket beside it. The papers seemed to be notes detailing the ins and outs of the hyperdrive. Sixer didn’t need to see those.

Sitting on the desk, swinging his legs, Bill watched as Sixer’s back suddenly tensed, freezing.

He slowly pulled himself out from under the bed, looking down at something he was holding in his hands, shocked.

Bill could pick up that much from body language. Sixer had found something interesting finally in this pile of garbage.

“What is it?” Bill asked curiously.

Ford slowly turned around, facing Bill but not looking at him, his eyes glued to the device he held in his hand.

It was a memory gun.

It must have been F’s earliest prototype. Ford recognised it. It was the self-same device that Ford’s subconscious half recollected, though he didn’t quite know why.

Ford thought F had destroyed it.

At least that’s what he told him.

“He kept it. All this time.” Ford uttered, stunned.

Bill watched Sixer closely, looking for signs of repressed memories jumping to the forefront.

Instead Ford just looked tired.

“I can’t believe he kept it.”

Trying his luck at playing dumb, Bill blinked at the device innocuously.

“Didn’t you draw this in your journal?”

“It’s a ray gun. A memory erasing ray gun. It’s entirely unethical. I told F not to use it, to destroy it.” Ford’s voice raised to match his anger. “He told me he had. I suppose that’s what I get for taking him at his word.”

“So he used this on you?” Bill said, leaping to a very particular conclusion, sounding shocked, knowing the answer.

“No, I don’t think he would –” Ford began, almost reflexively defending his ex-friend.

“If you don’t remember seeing him destroy it, but you somehow believe he did, isn’t that evidence enough that he turned this on you?” Bill reasoned, hopping off the desk and walking over to where Ford was kneeling.

“I – I suppose so.” Ford searched for his anger, his indignation, but it was obscured by his sadness. He was deeply saddened at the thought of yet more betrayal, more lies.

“He could have been doing this the entire time, for months.” Bill prompted, looking for a reaction
from Sixer, something he could twist. “He could have been stealing secrets. Jeopardising the project. Sabotaging your mind. How many times did he use this against you? How many times did he violate your trust like this?”

Ford just frowned down at the ray gun, listening to Bill’s words, but not wanting to believe they were true, not about his friend.

Yet logically it all made sense. There was a substantial gap in Ford’s memory after F first showed him the memory gun, and though he strained his brain to remember the event, all he remembered was the distinct feeling of being bruised, pain, and violation.

It must be true.

“You know, I wouldn’t be surprised if this was the real reason he left.” Bill surmised, standing beside Ford, watching his reactions. “He’d gotten sloppy, used the gun too much. He was afraid he was going to get caught, so he ran before you realised.”

“I don’t feel like there are any gaps in my memory.” Ford pondered. “Just the one.”

“But how would you know?” Bill pressed, leaning down to rest his hand on Sixer’s forehead. “How would you know there aren’t any gaps, if you can’t remember the gap being there in the first place? There’s no telling what’s missing, what you’ve forgotten. It’s a dangerous, heady thing, to mess with the mind, shape it to your will. You only know what he wants you to know.”

“How would you know?” Ford asked Bill, his stomach turning at the thought.

“How would you know that he didn’t?” Bill countered, watching the paranoia spark in Sixer’s eyes. “That’s probably why he left. He couldn’t stand looking at you every day, knowing what he did. Assuming he has a conscience, the guilt was probably eating him alive.”

“That could be why he was avoiding us, those last few weeks.” Ford conceded. “Why he spent so much time out of the house. I should have seen it coming. There were signs.”

Bill tsked, and brushed his fingers through Ford’s hair. “Poor Sixer. There’s still a lot you’ve got to learn about human nature. It’s not your fault you’re so naïve.”

Ford clenched his hands around the memory gun, gritting his teeth. He resented being called naïve by the muse, and he resented all the more the fact that his muse was right.

He had been naïve. Drastically so. A trusting fool.

“Everyone learns the hard way the first time.” Bill continued to stroke Sixer’s hair. He inclined his head, shrugging. “Ehh. The first couple of times. Eventually you wise up.”

“Thanks for the encouragement.” Ford rolled his eyes, and batted Bill’s hand away from his head.

“What? I’m trying to be helpful.” Bill scoffed, and crossed his arms. Sixer was prickly today, difficult to deal with.

Standing up, Ford shrugged away from his muse, and paced back over to the box of discarded possessions on Fiddleford’s bed.

He removed the canister of electrical tape from the memory gun as an afterthought and shoved it in his pocket, before throwing the gun on the bed, alongside the rest of Fiddleford’s forgotten belongings.
“I’m not sure why I thought this would make me feel better.” Ford grumbled. “I find not only did my friend betray me, quit the project, but he’d also been violating my mind for months, lying to me all this time. It’s despicable.”

Bill nodded, and began picking his teeth for remnants of chilli, speaking in a distracted manner. “Just when you think you know a guy.”

“I don’t even want to look at this room anymore.” Ford turned on his heel and stormed out of the attic, stomping down the stairs. “I can’t believe I ever trusted him.”

Bill followed, waving his arm at the scientist’s back.

“Hey, I know what you could do as a distraction. Fancy opening a vein. There’s a circle with our name on it. Hey, Sixer!”

“I’m going to go through the results for the portal test. I’ll be in the lab.” Ford issued tersely without turning around, hurrying faster down the stairs.

He paced all the way down to the elevator, closing the lift doors in his muse’s face, the indignant expression Bill wore going some way to improving Ford’s mood.

See how he likes it for a change.

“Fine. He wants space to deal with his feelings and mope. That’s fine.”

Pyronica was watching Bill pace, floating around the penthouse in the Quadrangle, waving his little black arms around dramatically as he spoke.

“So it’s fine.” Pyronica shrugged, and picked her space olive out of the nebula martini she was nursing.

“No! It’s not fine! I don’t have time to coddle Sixer’s feelings. Absolutely not fine!” Bill fumed, throwing his hands in the air.

“But you just said it was fine.” Pyronica lidded her eye at Bill, unimpressed with the triangle’s circular logic.

“Do you think I MEANT IT?” Bill scoffed.

“Well if you said it’s fine, but it’s not fine, and you don’t have time to pretend that it’s fine – why are you here?” Pyronica asked bluntly.

“Why?”

“Don’t you like – own him? Can’t you make him do what you say?” Pyronica bit the space olive from the skewer and gave Bill the sort of look she reserved for people when she thought they were being especially stupid.

“Look, it’s a little more complicated than that. I’d be an idiot if I presumed I could just swan
around on earth, demanding instant gratification, snapping my fingers and having Sixer jump to it. Right now, this situation requires finesse. The other bit comes later.” Bill said, fiddling with his bowtie. “Until I get out of this flesh-cage, I can’t expect the humans to treat me like a god. They have to comprehend the entire package to get with the program.”

“I thought Six Fingers already treated you like a god.” Pyronica pursed her lips, narrowing her eye at Bill. “That’s what worshippers are for after all. When you say ‘jump’ they say ‘how high’.”

“I think I’ve exhausted my ability to make demands, since he’s already built me an interdimensional portal in his basement, but sure, I’ll snap my fingers at him and see where it gets me.” Bill grumbled, and massaged the bricks beside his eye, like he was nursing a headache. “It’s been working so well so far.”

“You really are treating him like your equal.” Pyronica remarked, gesturing to Bill with the olive skewer. “If this was Kryptos, delaying you, you wouldn’t have a bar of it. He’d be sizzling at the edges by now, pleading for mercy.”

“Don’t compare Sixer to Kryptos Py. You’d be turning my stomach, if I had one.” Bill said, sounding disgusted.

Pyronica blinked her lashes at Bill, considering that, before she spoke, sounding mildly awed.

“You really like him, don’t you?”

“Who, Kryptos?” Bill scoffed, turning his back to her knowing expression. “I’d sell him for parts in a hot second if I could.”

“Not Kryptos.” Pyronica smirked, watching Bill’s bricks take on a peachy tint. “Six Fingers. It’s not just a way to pass the time anymore. I haven’t seen you like this once, in all the time that I’ve known you, and I’ve known you for a long time. You’re attached.”

Bill looked at the floor, not giving Pyronica the satisfaction of a reaction, though the smugness was coming off her in waves.

“You want to keep him, don’t you? Have you thought about why?” Pyronica pressed patiently.

“Not this again.” Bill rolled his eye, and crossed his arms, scowling at the pink cyclops. “I will cut you off from the open bar if you continue to give me romantic advice.”

“Fine, don’t humour me.” Pyronica sipped her nebula martini, keeping her eye on Bill. “But I’m pretty sure that when you bring the party to earth, he’s going to have a pretty good idea about the kind of special treatment he’s been receiving. Becoming a henchman, right off the bat. The cosmic makeover. Having a seat at the table. He’s looking forward to it, right?”

“Mmmmm.” Bill erred, his voice pitching high, prodding his two pointer fingers together sheepishly. “He might not know about the party. Per se.”

“What?” Pyronica spat her drink out, her eye wide with disbelief.

“He might still think he’s saving the world through the majesties of accelerated science once we open the portal. And hey, who am I to dissuade him? He can think what he wants.” Bill replied defensively, skirting responsibility.

Pyronica looked at Bill, disbelief etched across her pink features. “So, you haven’t told him.”
“I don’t know if he’ll see things my way.” The words rushed out, worried, before Bill could stop them.

“But he adores you.” Pyronica retorted, stumped that things could be any more complicated than that.

“Listen Py, he may like me.” Bill put his hands together, and spun around, spelling it out for Pyronica. “But he’s not the sort of person who can get behind such a radical takeover, not if people get hurt. It’s a necessity, but he won’t see it like that. He’s … a good person.”

Pyronica gasped, scandalised. She held her hand up to cover her large mouth, watching Bill with growing concern.

“But, I thought he was an arrogant asshole.”

“He is.” Bill conceded, sounding resigned. “But he’s also a good person, and against my better judgement – “

“Why would you pick a good person? Bill!” Pyronica gestured to the triangle, indignant. “If he’s not on board with this, this could screw things up for everyone! You especially. It’s always us versus them, and you go and pick a ‘them’? Why would you take that chance?”

Bill sighed, and shrugged, before floating over to look out the triangular stained-glass windows of the penthouse, resignation infecting his tone.

“Py, scumbags like me are a dime a dozen. The universe is full of terrible people, liars, cheaters - realists.”

Bill looked down at his hands, and felt his feelings catch up with him, better judgement accounting for jack shit when it came to this. When it came to keeping the first being in the cosmos who genuinely seemed to feel love for him.

“I know I’m a hypocrite. So sue me.” Bill shrugged again, and turned to face Pyronica. “But I like the dreamers.”

Pyronica’s shoulders slumped, frustration and concern meaning nothing in the face of knowing her friend, knowing that this rare sliver of emotional vulnerability was who the triangle was, or had been, when they first met. Before he became jaded, bitter, and savvy, perfecting the reckless indomitable façade he put on.

So few people had lived to see this side of him, and tell the tale. The reason she was one of the survivors of this sort of rare intimacy was because she didn’t take it for granted. She didn’t see a weakness to exploit, but a soft side to protect.

She knew what it was like to need protecting. She could empathise.

She sighed.

“You always have.”

Bill exhaled loudly, sighing his frustrations out in a childish huff.

“But clearly I’m the one who’s dreaming if I think I can pull this all off. I have one more day – one day, to get out of this flesh-cage before I have to seal the deal with Don Goo, and after that, everything happens. Knowing Goo, he’d expect the ball to start rolling immediately after he gets
what he wants, never-mind the fact that this is *my* party.” Bill threw his hands in the air again, back to complaining. “I’m almost more at ease on earth with Sixer, but I can’t prolong this forever.”

“You’re keeping him though, right?”

“I want to keep him. I don’t know if after all of this he’ll want to keep me.” Bill said, sounding morose. “Honestly, I don’t know what he wants.”

“Well, he’d be an idiot if he doesn’t want you.” Pyronica said, trying to bolster Bill’s confidence with her well-intentioned optimism. “Didn’t you say he was a genius?”

“Ehh.” Bill laid his hand out flat and wiggled it, not wanting to give Sixer too much credit.

“Hmm.” Pyronica pouted and tapped her bottom lip with the olive skewer, trying to come up with a solution to reassure her friend. Sixer was another issue, maybe if Bill just focused on the problem at hand.

“You just need out of the flesh-cage, right?” Pyronica tilted her head, thinking. “Tick one thing off at a time.”

“And then I have to deal with Sixer, and the party, and then I have to organise favours, and attendance, and so many things!” Bill stressed, clutching at the air.

“One thing at a time, geez.” Pyronica knocked back the rest of her martini, wiping her mouth. “It’s like you’re forgetting whose party this is. Parties are supposed to be fun Bill.”

“Sixer’s in a mood.” Bill huffed, rubbing the bricks beside his eye again. “I have to deal with his mood. His bad mood. Now I have a bad mood. It’s all his fault.”

“And who’s dealing with your bad mood?” Pyronica rolled her eye, and set the martini glass down on the side table, crossing her legs.

“Don’t get smart with me now.” Bill pointed warningly at the cyclops, his threat all but empty. “I’ve had enough smart from Sixer.”

“How are you approaching the situation?” Pyronica leaned forward, resting her arms on her knees, her tone reasonable. “What’s your strategy? Are you just waving your arms around, waiting for him to do what you say, or are you thinking about this? Thinking this through?”

Rather than admit that waving his hands around, expecting to be heard, was exactly what he’d been doing, Bill lidded his eye at Pyronica imperiously.

“What sort of strategy were you thinking of?”

“Well, I know I’m no Kryptos, but what about our old one? The fish angle one?” Pyronica suggested.

“You mean the anglerfish?” Bill rubbed below his eye considering it.

“The one where you dangle something tasty in front of your mark, and right when they get close enough – WHAM! Dinnertime.” She cackled, fondly reminiscing over the many times they’d used that strategy before, and how often it worked in her favour.

“Well, I might not eat him, but that’s not bad.” Bill conceded. “I just have to figure out what to dangle in front of him, what would motivate him.”
“Pfft.” Pyronica flapped her hand at Bill dismissively. “Humans are easy. Just remember what I said - lead him by the nose.”

Bill squinted at Pyronica, trying to figure out what she meant, while she tapped her face, just above her lips, a gesture that probably would have been more effective if she actually had a nose.

“By the nose.” Pyronica whispered for emphasis.

Bill privately questioned his choice in friends.

Climbing up the spiral staircase from the lab, Bill poked his head up into Sixer’s private study, looking around for the human, finding him sitting hunched over his desk, his hand scratching through his hair, staring at the readouts from the portal diagnostics machine.

His brows were furrowed, and his posture indicated that he was still in a mood, agitation emanating from his every slant and angle.

He didn’t look up when Bill’s footsteps sounded out, climbing up the last few steps into the lab, and he didn’t acknowledge Bill at all, even when he paused beside Sixer’s desk, peering over his shoulder at the print outs.

“That looks like a gripping read.” Bill chanced, trying to draw Sixer out of his mood.

Ford grunted noncommittally in response.

“Well, don’t oversell it.” Bill griped, and looked around for somewhere to sit.

Guessing accurately that sitting on the desk, impeding Ford’s work, wouldn’t exactly go over well, Bill settled himself cross legged on the floor by Sixer’s feet. There weren’t any other chairs available, and Sixer didn’t look like he’d be budging any time soon.

The feeling of being ignored purposefully while in the same room as your worshipper was grating, but something Bill had to endure. Sixer was as stubborn as he was smart, and he wouldn’t take well to being chastised for his behaviour.

Bill just had to wait it out.

Several minutes went past, silent minutes, the only noise the sound of papers rustling, and Ford adjusting his glasses.

He didn’t look Bill’s way once.

After seven minutes of mounting frustration, Bill decided he’d had enough of it.

He’d try things Pyronica’s way.

Ford read through the equations on the page before him, the readings coming out exactly as they should.
It was infuriating, having to parse through the lines of mathematical equations, trying to find what had Fiddleford so suspicious about the test’s success.

Barring the unfortunate incident that led to F falling into the portal, everything else about the test worked just as expected. There were no physical ramifications involved in phasing through the portal, and the trace radiation Ford found on the dummy was consistent with the radioactive materials used to power the machine. Nothing out of the ordinary or excessive. Certainly nothing suspicious to suggest that the machine might cause the end of the world.

Still, the fact that F would suggest that the portal was dangerous, despite his relative sanity or moral relativism, had Ford suspicious. Regardless of whether or not F’s claims were founded, or just a smokescreen to cover up his own nefarious deeds, Ford had a duty to follow them through, to examine them thoroughly. As tempting as it would be to dismiss them on principle, as a knee jerk reaction to uncovering his friend’s betrayal, F was right. He had a duty as a scientist to ensure his portal was above board.

The end of the world wasn’t exactly above board, in terms of maintaining safety regulations with this sort of experiment.

So Ford continued to scour the papers, looking for whatever trace element had convinced F that the portal was so disastrous. He was quadruple checking everything, just to test his memory, to test there was no gaps. He was searching for the indicator of mass catastrophe, the one element thrown in the mix that would bring about inevitable destruction.

He still hadn’t found it.

It could have been right in front of him, for all the good these re-reads were doing, and he still couldn’t see it!

He balled up the last paper he read through in frustration and threw it in the waste basket, reaching for the next page, when he felt it.

Bill’s hands resting on his trousers, just along his inner thigh.

Ford blinked, and adjusted his glasses, realising that in the time he’d spent ignoring the muse, he’d wiggled his way into the space under Ford’s desk, crawling in between his legs.

He leaned back, and saw Bill’s slitted yellow eyes staring up at him, glowing in the dark beneath the desk.

Bill reached up for Ford’s belt, and undid the buckle.

“What are you doing?” Ford asked.

Bill flustered, freezing, caught with his hand in the proverbial cookie jar, and replied before he could think his words through. “What are you doing?”

Ford blinked at the muse, the incongruity of his muse’s behaviour breaking through his frustrated demeanour, surprising him.

Amusement creeping in, Ford’s lips twitched upwards into a slight smirk, before he responded.

“I asked you first.”

“You asked first, I asked second.” Bill gestured between them from under the desk. “This almost
feels like a real conversation.”

“Funny, that.” Ford raised his eyebrow, taking in his muse’s blush. His eyes glowed fiercely in the dark, embarrassment setting in. Ford repeated himself indulgently. “What are you doing?”

“I’m giving you what you want, so you can get over yourself, and give me what I want.” Bill explained, and reached for Sixer’s belt again. “Everybody wins.”

Putting his hand over Bill’s, stilling him, Ford tilted his head at the muse. “I’m sorry, but in this instance, does ‘giving you what you want’ refer to what you asked for this morning? Because if so, I’m afraid I’ll be putting the breaks on this whole endearing initiative.”

“What?” Bill’s mouth dropped open, scowling that Sixer was already set to ruin his perfect plan. “Why?”

“I’m not going to let this –“ Ford gestured to his belt. “Happen if you’re not doing it because you want to do it. If you’re doing it just to manipulate me into making a trade – it’s not going to happen.”

“But don’t you want this?” Bill spluttered, gesturing to Ford’s crotch indignantly.

“I do.” Ford conceded, a little awkwardly given how emphatically Bill was pointing at his groin. “But not enough to barter bricks on it, and certainly not enough to see it proceed knowing you don’t wholeheartedly want to do it.”

“What makes you think I don’t want to do it?” Bill crossed his arms and squinted up at Sixer.

“You’re doing this because you want something.” Ford crossed his own arms, mirroring Bill’s body language stubbornly. “Not because you want me.”

“Maybe I want you to get over yourself, and engage with the fact that unbinding these two bricks for me costs you literally nothing, and would make my life a hell of a lot easier – something that you don’t seem to want for me.” Bill hissed up at Ford, smacking his calf for emphasis. “What is wrong with you? Why be so stingy this late in the game?”

“I’m not being stingy.” Ford retorted, offended.

“Yes you are! It’s just two bricks!” Bill grabbed Sixer’s left leg and shook it, frustrated. “Why are you holding back on me?”

“What’s your rush?” Ford countered, frowning down at the muse. “You’ve been pushing this since back in the bunker. What does it matter whether the bricks are unbound now or later?”

“It matters to me!” Bill patted his own chest emphatically. “It means that you’re stifling my true self, every second I wear these bricks on my arm. I’m not comfortable like this, I’m not happy. You’re holding me hostage without even having the decency to tell me why!”

“Look – I’m not trying to stifle you.” Ford began.

“But you are!” Bill interrupted. “You are, every second you force me to inhabit this inconvenient body. And I’m here thinking – there must be a reason. Sixer doesn’t do things without a reason. Does he like me better this way? Has he forgotten what I really am? Does he only worship me conditionally? Does he just not care? Is he just selfish?”

“No. Look, I – I’m not –“ Ford floundered, looking for an answer he could give his demanding
“Is he tormenting me on purpose?” Bill continued spitefully.

“I don’t—” Ford interjected loudly, holding his hand up, speaking over the muse, confessing finally. “I don’t want to lose you, Bill.”

“What?” Bill squinted up at Sixer, baffled by his incongruous answer.

“It’s just - sometimes I feel like the bricks are the only thing holding you here with me.” Ford admitted reluctantly, feeling selfish as he admitted his brewing motivations for keeping the muse bound. “And once they’re gone, there’s no reason for you to stay anymore. You’re a cosmic being. You can be anywhere, and see anywhere, in the blink of an eye. If there’s nothing else left holding you to me, you’ll – you’ll strike out on your own and seek out new and better scientists to hold your attention. I say better scientists in a very loose sense of the term, you’re not likely to find better than me, but you’ve made it more than clear to me in the past that I’m nothing special.”

“You just—” Bill fumbled through his words, exasperation setting in. “What about all the times I told you that you were special?”

“What about all the times you told me I’m not?” Ford countered bluntly, defensively.

“What, you want me to stroke your ego all the time? How is this any different?” Bill again gestured to Ford’s crotch.

Ford reached his hands down and grabbed Bill’s wrists, moving them away. “Look, could you stop doing that? This isn’t about – you’re missing the point.”

“No, you’re missing the point!” Bill countered. “Whether its motivated by insecurity or selfishness, the result’s still the same. You’re limiting me, and you know it. This is just an excuse.”

“It’s not an excuse!”

“It is!” Bill hissed.

“Then give me something!” Ford exclaimed, shaking Bill’s wrists as he spoke.

“Th – that’s what I’m trying to do!” Bill spluttered indignantly, again trying to gesture to the v between Ford’s legs.

“Not that.” Ford bemoaned, grabbing Bill’s hands, entwining them with his own mostly for the sake of keeping his muse from pointing at him again. “I need something – something tangible. Some sort of proof.”

“Of what?” Bill squinted up at Ford, feeling the scientist’s hands clasp gently around his own.

“Of – you know – how you … feel about me?” Ford managed awkwardly, feeling heat creep into his cheeks. He was making himself vulnerable just by asking, but after so many months it was something that had to be said. “Anything? You might occasionally say I’m special, but once you’re free, why wouldn’t you leave? What reason would you have to say? Am – am I a reason?”

Bill seemed to choke on his own regular verbosity, momentarily lost for words.

“Is it – is it ridiculous to hope that I might mean something to you? Enough that you wouldn’t – “ Ford struggled with his words, finding it difficult to explain the concept he hoped for. “I don’t even
know what appeal I’d have for you in the long run. It’s like having feelings for an ant, I presume. And I don’t – I know you didn’t want to be here. Why would you want to be here? And what reason would you have to be once you’re no longer –"

Bill’s vessel was sweating, he was so anxious.

These questions were hitting closer and closer to the mark, and his conversation with Pyronica just kept rattling around and around in his head. Should he tell Sixer, should he not tell Sixer? Should he just give Sixer what he wanted to hear? Bill didn’t know if he could, if a false admittance was even possible at this point in time. He didn’t know what he wanted to do.

“I just – need to know.” Ford begged Bill, holding his hands, swallowing his pride and just admitting it. “How you feel? If this is permanent? Whether you – l-lo-“

Bill made a funny noise like he was regurgitating what he knew of language all in one syllable.

Ford belatedly realised that the muse’s skin was heating up, his hands feeling like hot ceramic, the temperature just shy of painful. Saving his skin, Ford let go of Bill’s hands, and clenched them, resting them on top of his thighs.

He didn’t finish his sentence. He had a feeling the muse knew what he meant.

Ford jutted his chin out stubbornly and waited.

Collecting himself, Bill twiddled his index fingers together, and took a calming breath, before looking up at Ford, his yellow eyes intent.

“You want assurances.”

“That would be nice.” Ford said bluntly, still watching the muse.

“What you want me to say is a concept that only has relevance for you.” Bill said evasively. “You want me to speak your language, but hollow words have no real weight. I could just be telling you what you want to hear. You want real assurances.”

Ford inclined his head in agreement, though privately he thought that he wouldn’t have minded hearing the words. Those three little words were irrelevant in the grand scheme of things, but hearing them would have been nice.

“You want to know that unbinding these last two bricks won’t sever the ties between us. You want something permanent. You want a reassurance that you won’t be abandoned, like you have been by everyone else in your life.” Bill watched Ford shrewdly, trying to work him out, trying to figure out why he was asking. “McGucket’s left, you don’t want anyone else to leave when your dream is just within reach. Is that right?”

Ford swallowed, and nodded, his voice coming out croaky. “Yes.”

“You want to keep me.” Bill surmised, his eyes a little wider than before, the revelation of that sinking in, that mutual wanting that Bill could relate to.

Ford almost thought to challenge Bill’s obscure wording, but he noticed the way the muse’s features seemed to brighten, glowing a more intense gold as the realisation set in.

Instead he simply nodded, his throat still feeling choked, tense.
“I think I know what you want.” Bill smiled to himself, piecing it all together, before he crawled up out from under the desk, resting his elbows on Ford’s thighs, staring up at him from between his legs.

Bill’s smile stretched wider, more indulgently now, and he tilted his head at Ford.

“You want to make a deal.”

Ford blinked. “No, I don’t think I said that.”

“That’s what I heard. You want to make a deal. You want something that’s more permanent, more irrevocable, more binding than the bricks on my arm, to keep us together. You want assurances. Real assurances!” Bill enthused, his pupils expanding.

“What do you propose?” Ford asked, his muse’s enthusiasm lighting a spark of cautious anticipation in his stomach.

“Be mine.” Bill squeezed Sixer’s thighs, pulling himself further up the scientist. “Shake on it. Give yourself over to me, mind and body, from now until the end of time.”

Ford’s stomach flipped at the notion fearfully, but he was intrigued. Ford often found himself drawn to what scared him, be it monsters, the unknown, or commitment.

Bill’s solution was far more radical than the three simple words Ford proposed, but effective. Far more so than any empty words would be, and Ford realised for the first time since he began to culture feelings for his muse, that there was a chance those feelings weren’t just reciprocated, but maybe even surpassed.

“You’d want to keep me around for that long?”

“And you want it too.” Bill nodded fervently. “Think of what we could accomplish, side by side, us against the world. You’d never be abandoned, because I’d be everywhere at once, and always connected to you. You’d have protection, power, the entire universe at all twelve of your fingertips. Anything you could ever conceptualise would be possible. You wouldn’t need anything but me for the rest of your days, but you’d have everything at the same time. You’d belong to me. Think of the power! The freedom!”

Thinking logically about this was hard, especially when Ford wanted to be swept away by all of this, getting everything that he wanted, and the regard of the god in front of him from now until the end of time. It was an intoxicating thought, but Ford’s common sense implored him to think logically.

“I’d belong to you, but that’s no assurance that you’d stay. That you’d belong to me.”

“Yes it is. It means I’ll keep you.” Bill countered passionately. “That you’re mine. I look after what’s mine, and you’d be mine forever. This is the assurance you want. You wanted something more binding than the bricks, well here it is.”

Ford considered it, realising that this was far more serious a commitment than the three words he wanted to hear.

However, he thought about what Bill said about hollow words, about assurances, and he realised that this deal was a promise, a follow through, in actions, not just words. It was the language his muse spoke, and the highest accolade possible in that language.
A deal that seemed to benefit Ford entirely.

He’d get to keep his muse, and have access to all the power and knowledge he possessed, everything in the entirety of the cosmos, from now until the end of time, and all that was required of him was to give himself over to the muse.

He considered how much he’d already given over, and how little there was left to give. It’d barely be a change from how things were now, given how deep Ford’s feelings for the muse went. He was already Bill’s chef, his entertainment, his scientist, his lover, his companion. What else was there to give?

Bill wanted Ford to be his, Ford felt like he already was Bill’s, in all the ways that counted. This formality would just be cementing that.

It was like what Ford had expected of Bill, but was unwilling to give himself, those three little words. Now the demand had flipped back onto Ford, requiring him to make a similar commitment, without the pressure of admitting those three words himself.

“If you don’t want to take it, then fine.” Bill said, sounding sulky that it was taking Sixer so long to decide. “But this assurance is for both of us. I don’t see why I’d bother staying for someone who couldn’t swallow his pride and just admit that he’s mine. Why I’d bother staying at all for someone who seems more intent on binding my powers than binding us together. This is the solution you wanted, the assurance you need, and it’s a way we both get what we want.”

When Ford didn’t answer straight away, Bill blurted out a quick ultimatum. “And it’s a one-time deal, so if you don’t take it, you miss out.”

That put the pressure on Ford to commit, one way or another. His muse needed a commitment from him, just as much as he needed one from his muse, and this was an elegant solution for them both, or as elegant as Bill was able to make, given his own habitual abruptness.

To belong to a God, in mind and body.

Ford looked at the gold eyed creature before him, and questioned how deep his feelings truly ran. He almost pulled out, precaution getting the better of him, until he saw the slight downturn of Bill’s lips, saw the genuine hurt that was brewing in his eyes, the barely hidden hope that was scouring Bill alive, just as much as it was wreaking havoc on Ford’s stomach.

This was much better than to simply love and be loved.

This was to have companionship for all of eternity, to never be alone, to never be discarded or abandoned.

And looking down at the contrary creature in front of him, inhabiting the body Ford had built for him, Ford felt that he’d come to know the muse well enough to believe that he could see himself spending eternity with the little god. He could see much of himself in the muse, and see someone who could understand him implicitly. Even if he didn’t know all there was to know about the God, Ford could see himself wanting to spend the rest of his life learning, finding Bill fascinating, even now.

Bill was entertaining, challenging, rewarding and perplexing enough to hold Ford’s interest for all this time. Ford had little doubt Bill would manage to hold that interest from now until the end of time. He didn’t think he’d ever be able to get Bill off his mind, to uncover all the muse’s secrets, to fully comprehend all that he offered Ford, to wrap his mind around the myriad of understanding
available to him through the muse.

And beyond all of that, Ford could see in Bill, the same as he could see in himself, just how much teetered on his reply with all of this. How close to the edge Bill was hanging, putting himself out there. The thought that it could go either way was nerve wracking, as this was a crossroads that one could never go back from, yet Ford persisted. He didn’t want to make the wrong choice and miss out.

He felt like Bill held answers to the questions Ford hadn’t even asked yet, and he knew all this just by looking into the muse’s eyes, seeing that spark of hope wither like a spluttering flame amidst a raging inferno.

Bill had hope for him.

Ford would not extinguish that hope.

He had hope for them too.

Bill opened his mouth, his posture becoming defensive, withdrawn, ready to rescind the offer, when Ford spoke out.

“Then it’s a deal. From now, until the end of time.”

Bill blinked at Ford, the hope that he’d tried his utmost to swallow down as the seconds dragged on rising up to clog his throat with emotion, with possibility.

Maybe Sixer really meant what he had said that night when he was sleeping.

Maybe Bill had finally met someone who wanted to keep him too.

“Really?” Bill had to ask, disbelief nearly overwhelming him, just the same as relief did.

“Be yours, in mind and body?” Ford clarified, his voice rather thick for someone who was at least 90% sure of himself. “To keep you, and be kept for that long, as long as I live? I’ll take that deal.”

Bill boggled at Ford for a moment longer, the seconds dragging on, before clearing his throat, regaining his composure. He extended his hand out, blue flames dancing in his palm, then drew his hand back sharply.

“Are you sure? There’s no backing out of this. No buyer’s remorse. A deal is a deal.”

“This deal seems to benefit me far more than it does you.” Ford pointed out. “You do realise this means you have to deal with me for all eternity as well.”

“Well obviously.” Bill rolled his eyes, a smile creeping up on him. “That’s kind of the point.”

“Just making sure you know what you’re signing up for.” Ford said pompously, smirking at Bill. “I’ve been told I’m a terrible roommate, irritable, stubborn, arrogant and even called boring on the rare occasion.”

“Stop stalling and shake on it already, Poindexter.” Bill extended his flaming hand yet again. “The wait is what’s boring me. But you’re coming a close second.”

“Well, alright then. Wouldn’t want to bore you.” Ford extended his own six fingered hand, plunging it into the cool fire, and grasped Bill’s hand, shaking it firmly.
He felt the chill of the flame seep into him, coursing through his arm, all the way up, settling deep into his spine. He shivered as the feeling wore off, his body recognising how irrevocable this decision was faster than his mind.

It was almost underwhelming, the aftermath. Ford felt that the moment should have more emphasis, this great surrendering of himself to the muse in front of him, but barring the fading cold shivers, Ford felt drastically normal, his muse beaming up at him from between his legs.

“Is it done?”

“Yep.” Bill nodded, popping the p as he spoke.

“I imagined I’d feel different.” Ford looked down at himself. “Or look different, somehow. That a decision like this would leave some sort of impression, some lasting mark.”

“Well, if you want, we could always revisit that later. I still think you’d look good with tattoos, big inky me’s all over your body.” Bill said smugly, resting his elbows over Ford’s thighs now, sinking down comfortably between Ford’s legs like he belonged there.

“I’ll pass.” Ford rolled his eyes, abhorring the thought of feeding his muse’s ego any more than necessary.

“We could tesselate.” Bill said, waggling his eyebrows at Ford.

“Why do I get the feeling that means something dirty?” Ford said, raising his eyebrow at Bill.

The muse barked out a laugh, and ran his hands along Ford’s thighs, nails raking lightly along the sensitive inner thigh.

“You’ll never know.” Bill smirked mysteriously, then reached for Ford’s belt buckle again, undoing the buckle deftly. “The mystery will keep you up at night.”

“What are you doing?” Ford asked Bill, reaching down to pause with his hand over Bill’s wrist. “I told you, you don’t have to do that. I’ll unbind a brick for you tonight, no strings attached. You don’t need to trade.”

“Who says I’m trading?” Bill shrugged and batted Ford’s hand away, unzipping his fly and reaching into Ford’s boxers, wrapping his hand around Ford’s cock, stroking it indulgently. “This is mine now. It belongs to me, along with the rest of you. I can do what I like with it.”

Ford’s brain seemed to stutter at that, instinctual responses he never knew he had rising to the surface, making him flush red all over.

“You – “

Bill was watching Ford’s reaction smugly, his index finger teasing the tip of Ford’s hardening erection, enjoying the way the feeling of being owned was playing havoc on Sixer’s arousal.

Bill opened his mouth wide, and leaned forward, pressing his tongue to the side of Ford’s shaft with a completely unnecessary, loud, ‘ahhh’ noise.

Ford’s brain was still glitching, stuck in a loop of arousal and devout denial at the root of said arousal. He gripped the seat of his chair with both hands, his face turning a charming crimson.

Bill licked along Ford’s length, before pulling back, smacking his lips together and tilting his head,
assessing the taste.

“Not bad.”

“Are you?” Ford squinted at his muse, before bringing his right hand up to knead his forehead, covering his eyes. He groaned. “I am not seeing this. Did you just taste me? Legitimately?”


“Seasoning?” Ford gawked at his muse, his mind boggling.

“Well, I don’t know?” Bill huffed. “I’m making this up as I go along.”

Ford leaned back in his chair, tilting his head up to face the ceiling, rubbing at his eyes in exasperation. “I can’t believe this. This is absurd. I can’t believe that I’m –”

“Oh boo hoo. Stop complaining.” Bill snarked, wrapping his hand around the base of Ford’s cock. “The only noises I want to hear out of you are cries of adulation. I’m doing you a favour, got that?”

“Oh, sure. A favour.” Ford rolled his eyes, and continued to complain, somewhat hysterically, only to be cut off by a hot wet heat encapsulating him. “I’ll be sure to th- ahh!”

“Mmmm?” Bill mumbled around a mouthful of Sixer, having wrapped his mouth around as much of Ford as he could manage, yellow eyes looking up at the scientist from under thick lashes.

Bill slid his tongue along Sixer, tasting him properly, and his teeth grazed along the underside carelessly.

“Teeth. Teeth. No teeth.” Ford cautioned Bill, going back to grasping the seat of his chair, his whole body rigid and tense.

Bill pulled off from Ford’s length with a frustrated huff, wrapping his hand around Ford’s cock while he glared at him.

“What, you want me to yank them out?”

“Wh – no!” Ford protested, his brain melting a little at the edges from the way Bill’s hotter than average hand was stroking him indulgently.

“You have some sick tastes, Sixer.” Bill continued to stroke Ford leisurely, enjoying the way he squirmed. “Enterprising. What else is there, I wonder?”

He pushed Ford’s chair back and climbed up Ford’s torso, still stroking his dick, running his free hand across Sixer’s chest, smirking at him.

“What depravities have you been hiding from me? Go on, IQ, show me your dark side.”

“You –“ Ford huffed out a heavy breath, Bill’s hot hand working him over, before he reached out and grabbed the muse’s face. “I liked it better when you weren’t talking.”

“I see how it is. You want to shut me u - mmmph!”

Ford yanked Bill forward and mashed their mouths together, kissing him firmly. He muffled his moans in Bill’s mouth, reluctant to admit how much this was affecting him, censoring his reactions.
Bill pulled away, his lips puffy, panting, before he quirked a brow at Ford.

“Fine, I’ll shut up.” Bill slid back down in between Ford’s legs, and ran his tongue along the underside of Ford’s cock, looking up at the scientist. “But you better not hold out on me.”

Ford exhaled a hesitant breath, looking down at those devious yellow eyes, before he relaxed a little, settling comfortably in his chair. He didn’t seem to know where to put his hands, after being so confident with exploring Bill’s body before. Now the shoe was on the other foot, and Bill was exploring him, Ford’s surrender wasn’t as wholehearted as he’d promised.

Swallowing his nerves back down, Ford extended his hand shakily to rest it against the side of Bill’s face, not knowing what the etiquette for this sort of thing was.

Bill’s tongue pressed along Ford’s length for a while longer, tasting him, pressing full lipped kisses to his cock, before he mimicked Sixer’s technique from their last interlude, and sealed his mouth around the tip of Ford’s penis, hollowing his cheeks out sucking, being mindful of his teeth.

He watched Sixer’s reactions closely, feeling his hand twitch at the side of Bill’s face. He could feel the waves of worshipful energy pouring off Sixer, so obviously Bill was doing something right, but the scientist still seemed too tense.

Bill leaned his head into Sixer’s hand, nuzzling it slightly to indicate the scientist didn’t need to be so wary, before he attempted to bob his head up and down, taking more of Ford’s length into his mouth, trying to remember how Sixer did it.

He was doing alright so far, judging from the way Sixer’s free hand was smothering the sounds he was making, quiet moans and grunts. It was obvious Sixer was still restraining himself, barely bucking his hips up at all, his hand still gentle, twining with Bill’s hair delicately.

Gentle wasn’t good enough, and so Bill decided to turn up the heat.

Pulling some of the magical flame from within him up his windpipe, Bill let the fire fill his mouth, heat tickling Sixer’s sensitive member.

Immediately Ford tensed, hissing, his hand clenching in Bill’s hair, twisting painfully. He hunched over Bill, and gripped the muse’s shoulder firm enough to leave bruises.

Bill smirked up at Sixer, smiling around his mouthful.

“You –” Ford narrowed his eyes at Bill, recognising that this harshness, this roughness, was what the muse wanted. He was provoking Ford.

Too hot heat still dancing threateningly around his most sensitive part, Ford clenched his jaw, and decided that if the muse wanted a dark side, that’s what he’d get. Bill did just make a deal to have Ford’s complete surrender of mind and body, he’d get every bit of Ford he wanted.

Gripping Bill’s hair roughly, tangling his fingers in the golden mess, he pulled Bill slowly off his cock.

The muse complied, and when he opened his mouth, extending his tongue to press against Sixer til the very last second, curling flames exited his mouth, spiralling out into the air.

The light glinted off Ford’s glasses as he pondered the wicked, smug grin Bill wore, before he tensed his fist in Bill’s hair, guiding him back down.
“Let’s try that again.”

Bill seemed delighted by Ford’s forceful grip, his eyes lit up with excitement as Sixer guided him back down. He kept his mouth shut, wanting to see how far Ford would take it, though his lips twisted upwards, pressed together in a devilish smirk.

Ford could see Bill was testing him, making this a game of one-upmanship, and – knowing he wouldn’t scare the muse away, that he was stuck with him and chose to be, taking him for all that he was, Ford brought his right hand down and hooked his thumb in the side of Bill’s mouth, opening him up.

Bill’s breath felt hot against his skin, and Bill opened his mouth obligingly enough after Sixer’s little show of force. Ford decided to explore this opportunity, and pressed his thumb down on Bill’s tongue, lifting his chin up, before sliding his index finger in to press against Bill’s wet hot tongue.

Bill moaned, a contented ‘ahh’ sound, as he tangled his tongue along Sixer’s fingers, saliva slicking the digits. His eyes lidded amorously, and he moaned again, content to lavish attention to Sixer’s freakish fingers.

Seeing that for the invitation it was, Ford extended his fingers out, two more pressing inside of Bill’s warm mouth.

Bill licked Ford’s fingers lovingly, his tongue flicking over each digit, saliva coating them one by one.

Ford could feel his cock twitch, getting hard just from watching this ardent display.

It was novel, that Bill did not just accept, but actively cherished Ford’s anomalous fingers. After so long of having his fingers be a source of shame or scorn, now he seemed to be developing a fixation over them, offering them to Bill for him to appraise with his mouth. He just highlighted what made him a freak, and had Bill fellate it. Whether or not he intended to, he delivered this particular depravity of his to Bill on a silver platter.

Bill’s hands were heating up on Ford’s thighs, his peculiar temperature reacting, telling Ford all he needed to know about whether this was doing anything for the muse.

Clearly it was.

Ah well, Ford thought to himself, as Bill finished licking each one of his six fingers one at a time with that tricky tongue of his. In for a penny.

Tilting Bill’s chin up, Ford squeezed his fingers together, and slid them all into Bill’s mouth, filling him up.

Bill made a surprised gagging noise, his teeth scraping against Ford’s knuckles, but he allowed it to happen, watching Ford with curious glowing eyes, his mouth stretched wide.

Ford pressed his fingers further in, feeling Bill’s tongue dip and slide under him, until his fingertip tickled the flame at the back of Bill’s throat.

He held Bill’s neck in place with his free hand, and pushed his finger’s back farther, pricking tears at the corner of Bill’s eyes.

He made a muffled moan, discomfort and arousal twisting together, his eyes watering as he stared
up at Sixer, who so obligingly was showing Bill his dark side, surrendering it all.

Moving his hand slowly, pumping it in and out of Bill’s mouth, fucking his throat with his six-fingered hand, Ford watched Bill gag around his fingers, blinking tears from the corner of his eyes, persisting for several minutes, until he withdrew his fingers from Bill’s mouth.

They were drenched, trailing strings of saliva between them and Bill’s tongue. The muse panted, watching as Sixer brought his wet hand down to stroke himself, once, twice, three times, before his dry left hand gripped Bill’s chin, rubbing his thumb against Bill’s bottom lip, assessing him.

“Are you ready to try again?” He asked, his tone solicitous, cold.

Bill loved it, Sixer’s potential shining brighter than ever, and he swallowed, before nodding, ready for whatever Sixer suggested.

Ford guided Bill closer to him, pulling him til he was face to face with his hard erection, straining upwards.

Ford didn’t even need to tell Bill to open up, his mouth was already hanging open, saliva pooling reflexively. Sixer had worked him up, his rough handling stirring pavlovian responses in Bill’s new body, and Bill was enamoured.

Ford stroked his thumb across Bill’s bottom lip once more, before he guided the muse’s mouth to close around his dick, surrounded by that hot wet heat once more.

“No fire this time.” Ford warned Bill.

Bill’s eyes glinted, not making any promises, but when Sixer’s hand cupped the back of his neck, pushing his head down onto Ford’s cock, he obliged, bobbing his mouth along Ford’s length.

Sixer was more relaxed now, his hips moving naturally, no longer holding himself back.

He gripped the back of Bill’s head, and fucked up into his mouth hard, filling Bill with his girth instantly.

Bill moaned again, his eyes rolling back, as Sixer used this body, sliding his thick cock between Bill’s lips, in and out, relentlessly.

To think, Sixer having his wicked way with this body was something that Bill had feared initially. To think he abhorred the thought of this, when the pleasure pain was rattling so pleasantly about, his mind lauding the careful cruelty. It was like he forgot how much he enjoyed sensations like these, both pleasurable and painful sensations, and Sixer, perfect Sixer, was concocting a medley of them both for Bill, playing him like a fiddle.

Bill moaned louder, enjoying the way his jaw was beginning to ache, the way the back of his throat protested whenever Sixer’s length bumped against it. Those painful sensations were offset by the pure vibrant worship instilled in the gesture, razing Bill’s body with pleasant feelings. He was tingling with energy, so much so that the hurts didn’t hurt.

He rumbled his contentment, kneading his hands against Sixer’s thighs, as that six-fingered hand on the back of his head forced him to take more, to take Ford deeper into his mouth.

The body was reacting the way human bodies do to this sort of abuse, his eyes were leaking, and his throat was complaining, saliva dripping along Sixer’s length, down from Bill’s lips, a puddle of drool forming on the floor.
He wondered if that funny backflip his stomach was doing was arousal or what he assumed was a gag reflex. He didn’t know, and he didn’t care to know. He was enjoying this too much.

Ford’s hips were jerking desperately upwards, holding Bill’s head in place as he fucked the muse. Bill’s mouth was hot, wet, and extraordinarily willing, and Ford could feel his arousal crest, even as those involuntary flames of Bill’s began swirling around the muse’s mouth, spluttering out with every exhale he was granted.

He could feel Bill losing control, just as swiftly as he was losing control, and he found it very satisfying for them both to lose control together, inhibitions let loose in tandem.

Ford groaned, and held tight to Bill’s head, as he painted the back of Bill’s throat with jets of white fluid, reaching his climax.

When he was finished, he eased Bill off his cock, watching those awed yellow eyes stare up at him while seed and magical flame oozed out of the muse’s puffy lips.

Ford tucked his sensitive, spent member back into his boxers, and stroked alongside Bill’s cheek, his expression showcasing adoration, and just a hint of concern.

Bill’s eyes were glazed, and tear tracks traced down his cheeks. Watching the cum leak out of Bill’s lips, joining the puddle of drool on the floor, Ford worried he took it too far.

“Are you alright?” He asked, scooting his chair back so he could bend down, examine the muse properly.

Bill sat on the floor, the last of the drool falling from Bill’s lips in a sticky droplet, blinking up at Ford, dazed, before he realised he was being asked a question.

Bill straightened his back up, extending his index finger up in the air like he was about to speak, before that overdue gag reflex of his kicked in.

His stomach flipped, and he lurched forward, gripping onto Ford’s knee, as a deluge of blue fire came tumbling out of his lips, pouring out of him.

Ford sprang back in shock, knocking his chair over. He watched Bill spew fire from his mouth, aghast, the blue flames curling out across the floor. He was torn between rushing forward to comfort the muse, and hurling himself across the room to grab the fire extinguisher.

“Bill?” Ford called out from across the room, worried for the muse, worried he’d somehow broken him.

The fire kept flowing out of him, the god shuddering as the flames flooded the room, spreading out across the floor. The flames were creeping across the carpet, towards the bookcases and the walls, covering nearly the entire study with dancing blue heat.

Just as he was itching to turn the fire extinguisher on Bill, not keen to watch his study burn up, he noticed that the flames weren’t incinerating anything. They just flowed out of Bill, twirling colourful patterns around him on the floor, before dissipating into nothingness.

Magical fire.

He edged closer to Bill, testing that he wouldn’t be burned, putting a toe into the edge of the flames, recklessly.
The fire was cool. It vibrated through Ford’s toe with the sort of high impact energy that felt more like electricity than fire, but Ford decided it was safe enough to endure, striding through it to put his hands on Bill’s shoulder, rubbing his back.

“Bill, are you okay?” He fretted, holding the muse’s hair back as the fire came tumbling out of him.

Bill raised his hand again, intending to speak, but the fire didn’t stop coming, regurgitating freely. His body was shaking with the effort it took to safely expel the flames, and his hand fell to grip onto Ford, needing an anchor.

Ford could only hold onto Bill, his body sizzling with static whenever the flames passed through him, waiting with him to ride this out.

When Bill hiccupped the last few bursts of flame away, he panted, gripping onto Sixer’s arm as the final curlicues of magical fire spiralled out across the carpet.

“Are you alright?” Ford repeated, kneeling beside the muse, waiting for it to pass.

“Ugh.” Bill mumbled, his throat croaky, holding onto Ford, his hands spasmodically clenching against Ford’s bicep. He shook out the tremors that wracked him for a few seconds more, and coughed, clearing his throat, before remarking. “Yowch.”

“I hurt you. I’m so sorry.” Ford agonized, patting over Bill with frantic, soothing hands. “I’m so sorry I hurt you. I didn’t mean to. I thought you wanted me to. I’m –“

“I did want it.” Bill interjected, stopping Sixer’s frantic apologies. “I told you not to hold out on me, and you did exactly what I asked you to. You just overloaded me, that’s all.”

“Do – do you mean I pushed too far, or -?” Ford worried, still rubbing Bill’s back reflexively.

“Not wearing the cuffs.” Bill waved his wrist at Sixer. “I didn’t think to. There was a lot of worship involved just now, and this body can’t contain that much energy without expending it somehow.”

“Then you –“ Ford looked at Bill, watching the muse as he sat up finally, wiping the corners of his mouth with the back of his hand.

“You said no fire.” Bill responded, swallowing the scratchy swollen feeling in the back of his throat, letting his body heal itself. “I tried.”

“Oh, Bill.” Ford scoffed, before throwing his arms around the muse, pulling him into a hug. “You peculiar creature. There’s so much inside of you that I don’t understand.”

His cheek squashed against Sixer’s shoulder, Bill mumbled, slumping against the scientist. “I’m pre-emptively forbidding any talk of vivisections. I don’t care how kinky you are.”

“Stop it.” Ford scoffed, and hugged Bill tighter, stroking the muse’s back as he pressed indulgent kisses to Bill’s forehead. “I just meant that I’m beginning to understand why you resent this body so much. There’s so much of you that it just can’t hold.”

Bill let Ford smooth his hair back from his forehead, and kiss his check, watching him shrewdly.

“I could have told you that.”
“I didn’t listen.” Ford admitted, before he rolled his eyes. “And I’m sorry I didn’t listen –“

“Sure you are.” Bill squinted at him.

“But it’s rather difficult to believe all things considered. Then again, seeing this –“ Ford gestured to the carpet where the fire had been flooding just a few seconds ago. “That could have been …”

“A disaster.” Bill finished for him. “Gee, you think? Starting to reconsider why I need those bricks unbound now?”

Ford thought back on the limitless tower of flame he’d seen careening up from their campfire on the first night they’d been physically intimate like this, the word ‘disaster’ gleaning new weight. He looked down at the pouting muse he was hugging to his chest, and tried to reconcile the two images, that of his perfect, precocious muse, and the destructive powers, the limitless energy that lurked within him.

It was difficult to believe.

Ford pressed a decisive kiss to Bill’s forehead, choosing to recognise the muse’s effort to attempt to control himself, lauding that over Bill’s untapped potential for catastrophe.

Bill’s scratchy voiced earnestness when he looked up at Ford before, rasping ‘I tried’ at him, made more of an impact than Ford had thought.

Picking himself up off the floor, pulling his muse with him, Ford stood, his arm still wrapped around Bill’s shoulder.

“Come on, let’s get you upstairs.” Ford rubbed his thumb along Bill’s cheek, wiping the residue of spent tears from his skin dotingly. “We’ll get you cleaned up, in fresh clothes. Fix you something to eat. And I’ll see about unbinding that brick for you.”

Bill raised his eyebrows and blinked at Ford, before resigning himself to the pampering with a shrug.

“You’re being awfully obliging.” He narrowed his eyes at Ford, wondering if the scientist was being so obliging because he thought Bill was delicate, after what they’d just done.

“Yes, well I think I’m entitled to pamper you a little, after what just happened.” Ford remarked, supporting Bill’s weight as his knees trembled, still dealing with the aftershocks of that much energy being expelled from his body. Noticing the shivers, Ford ducked down, and picked Bill up, sweeping him off his feet literally.

Bill flailed and clutched onto Ford’s shoulders, before he slapped the scientist’s broad chest. “Woah now. This isn’t a fairy tale Sixer, put me down.”

“I’m sorry, I couldn’t hear you over the magical fire you just puked out all over my study.” Ford replied swiftly, stepping over the books that cluttered the room, pressing the lift call button with his elbow, refusing to put Bill down. “I can only suspend my disbelief for so long before I start giving into the clichés that abound.”

“Shut up Sixer.” Bill griped, and held onto Ford’s shoulder’s more securely. The scientist looked far too smug, and just as Bill was about to open his mouth to point that out, Ford kissed him, distracting him, pacifying him.

Bill’s mouth tasted like burnt matches, and metallic battery ends, but Ford kissed him anyway.
Bill melted a little into the kiss, silenced, and Ford pulled back when the lift dinged open, carrying Bill through the doors.

“You may as well resign yourself to at least a solid hour of fussing.” Ford informed the muse, elbowing the button for the ground floor deftly. “If not the whole day. I’m clearing my schedule.”

“But what about all the important work you were doing, rereading the same papers, ignoring me?” Bill asked sarcastically, getting used to being held in Sixer’s strong arms.

Ford looked at Bill, and chewed the inside of his cheek thoughtfully, considering, before he answered.

“If I haven’t found something wrong with the portal by now, I don’t think it’s likely I will today. We won’t be turning it on for another test right away, there’s time to look over the details. Today at least, I realise I should be focusing on what’s right in front of me.” Ford looked at Bill and smiled, pressing a kiss to Bill’s forehead. “And not some hypothetical future catastrophe that might not even be founded. You’re enough disaster for me.”

Bill said nothing, but smiled up at Sixer pleasantly, amused by his decision.

Ford didn’t know how right he was.

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“Tollite lapidem.
Aurum et nigri.
Reduc ad eum.”

Bill watched the second last brick lift from his skin, a glowing line of gold thread.

The gold thread drifted in the air, leaving a dark black line in its stead, and the thread slowly began to disintegrate, red light bouncing off Sixer’s glasses as he held Bill’s arm and chanted.

“Da magicae retro.
Aurum et nigri.”

The thread dissolved into small molecules of golden light, floating into nothingness, lighting Sixer’s bedroom artfully. His novel idea to draw up the unbinding circle on a plastic tarp he laid down on the floor went ways towards saving time spent on clean up. Sixer found inspiring ways to avoid scrubbing his own blood off the floor. It was admirable.

After the bath Sixer had prepared him, and the pampering Bill was subjected to, it made sense that Sixer wouldn’t want to get bogged down with more cleaning. Best to keep things simple.

Bill felt the magic begin to settle, felt a little more like himself, as the penultimate brick was removed, fading into dissipating matter, freeing Bill’s power a small segment more.

He watched the supernatural wind whip about Sixer’s fluffy hair, saw the scientist adjust his glasses as he continued to chant, and felt awash with the sort of gratitude a being as old as Bill should no longer feel for small devotions of generosity such as this. Bill was entitled to his magic
back, but knowing what a sacrifice this felt like for Sixer made the gesture more emphatic. Sixer withheld doing this for fear of being parted.

Now they’d never be parted again.

“Da magicae retro.
Aurum et nigri.”

Ford chanted the last line of the ritual, and the red light dimmed down, paranormal breeze blowing itself out in Ford’s closed bedroom.

The light sputtered out completely, and Ford looked over the black line on Bill’s arm where the golden brick had once been.

“Tolterable.” Bill conceded, kicking his legs back and forth on the edge of the bed. “And you obviously like it, so maybe it can stay in the back of the celestial closet or something. How about instead of getting your feelings hurt that your flesh prison isn’t permanent, you could start getting excited about exploring the possibilities past this static human form. Most scientists would be thrilled. You’ve got endless new erogenous zones to uncover.”
“Will I be massaging your mortar?” Ford joked, leaning down to box the muse in with his body.

“I will put you in the perpetual naughty corner. Don’t push your luck.” Bill threatened, his cheeks still flushed.

“I’d like to see you try.” Ford asserted confidently, sliding forward smoothly to press a kiss to Bill’s pouting lips. Bill tried to be stubborn, to press his lips together, but Sixer’s firm kiss coaxed the stubbornness out of him, melting Bill’s defences.

Ford paused, kneeling one knee on the bed in front of Bill, and drew back to look over the body Bill was currently inhabiting, looking so fetchingly flustered and receptive all at once.

“I’m going to miss seeing you like this though.” Ford admitted. “Having crafted this body for you myself, I’ve grown quite fond of it. You didn’t inhabit it in the way that I expected, but that’s made you more interesting, if anything. You certainly caught my attention, and surpassed my expectations.”

“Well, that’s your fault for having such low expectations in the first place.” Bill countered, raising an eyebrow at Sixer.

“That’s not what I meant.” Ford shook his head. “You know what I mean.”

“Do I?” Bill tilted his head at Ford teasingly.

“I just wish we had more time, to be like this.” Ford explained, running his hands along Bill’s calves, sighing emphatically. “Just the two of us, just like this.”

Bill silently agreed, but said nothing, watching Ford continue to rub his hands along the length of his body comfortably.

“I feel like it took us so long to reach this point of comfort and intimacy, and we’ve barely explored it at all.” Ford admitted. “Already things are changing.”

“We may as well savour it now then.” Bill shrugged, before looking up at Sixer, scooting back on the bed, gesturing to his body. “Come on, I’ll give you a free pass. Unrestricted access, a complete exploration of this vessel and all it’s ins and outs. What do you say?”

“A complete exploration?” Ford questioned curiously, ideas already springing to mind.

“Barring any extreme mutilations.” Bill stipulated. “I won’t have you cutting me open.”

“It’s like you have a fixation.” Ford tsked, crawling across the bed to get closer to the muse. “Why would I?”

“You’re a scientist. That’s what scientists do.” Bill said bluntly. “You take things apart to see how they work, then attempt to put them back together and say you understand them.”

“That’s not what – not all scientists would do that –” Ford blustered defensively, trying not to admit that he’d definitely taken apart all of the electrical devices in his house as a child just to reassemble them to understand them. He might do that to a device, but not to a person.

“Sure. ‘Not all scientists’.” Bill rolled his eyes, making air quotes with his fingers.

“I thought you chose to patronage scientists. With an attitude like that it seems almost counter intuitive.” Ford remarked, resting his hand on Bill’s thigh, sitting comfortably beside him.
“I only patronage a select few.” Bill corrected Ford, and smirked. “I patronise the rest.”

“I think you blur that line a little.” Ford laughed, squeezing Bill’s leg as he spoke.

“Maybe you’re just special.” Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford, grinning facetiously.

“Clearly.” Ford scoffed, before he looked down at his six-fingered hand, resting on Bill’s thigh. He considered what was on offer for a moment, before looking back to Bill’s face. “Unrestricted access, you say?”

“A one-time offer, since this vessel’s going out of business soon.” Bill said, trying to sound businesslike.

Ford considered, barring Bill’s pretence, how telling a gesture like this really was. How much of himself the muse seemed willing to surrender, how remarkably forward a gesture like this was considering how reserved and jumpy the muse generally was about this sort of conduct.

He must really trust Stanford, to let him do whatever he liked to him.

“Do we shake on this too?” Ford joked, grinning at Bill.

The muse shrugged, and laughed nervously, not willing to let his romantic gesture back him into a corner. “Handsy, aren’t you?”

“How long have you been waiting to make that joke?” Ford asked, his hands roaming over Bill’s torso now, tugging the sash that held his dressing gown together undone.

“How long have you had hands?” Bill countered, his response not making the most sense. So sue him, he was distracted.

Ford continued to undress him, peeling him out of the dressing gown, until he sat in the middle of the bed wearing only the boxers that Ford supplied for him, feeling remarkably underdressed next to the scientist, who still wore his t-shirt and trousers.

Ford’s eyes razed across Bill’s body, committing the details of it to memory. When he traced his gaze up, taking in Bill’s expression, the way he held his shoulders, he remarked.

“You look nervous.”

“You’re wearing more clothes than me.” Bill replied.

“Isn’t this vessel just a suit for you?” Ford questioned, herding Bill back until he was resting against the headboard, his fingers sliding along the waistband of Bill’s boxers, hooking them down slightly. “Isn’t that what you’ve said before?”

“I’m still bound to this body. So until I’m unbound, this is it for me.” Bill corrected Ford, watching the way Ford mulled over his words, still tugging his waistband down. “I may not be conditioned to feel shame the same way you are, but I know what goes on in your head. I know what you’re getting from this. What devious thoughts you’re thinking.”

“Hmm.” Ford considered that, and slid Bill’s boxers all the way down, baring him completely. “And what do you think I’m getting from this?”

Bill watched Sixer drag the boxers all the way down his legs, throwing them across the room callously, climbing into the space between Bill’s legs, running his warm palms under Bill’s thighs.
He watched the way Sixer seemed content to own the space between his legs, to own Bill’s reactions, his arousal, his discomfort, all of it, seeing it all in the smug set of Sixer’s jaw, and the way he lidded his eyes at Bill, staring at him, unrelenting.

Bill knew what he was getting from this.

“Satisfaction.”

Ford rumbled a low sound in the back of his throat in agreement, as he leaned forward to claim Bill’s pouty lips in a kiss, owning that too.

Bill let him, not holding back his reactions. He thought briefly to summon the cuffs, clasping them on his wrists as he continued to kiss Ford.

Stanford pulled back, to examine the cuffs shrinking down to fit Bill, and wrapped his hand around Bill’s left wrist to pull it closer to his face, examining the way the silver glinted with runes. He brought Bill’s wrist to his lips, kissing the sensitive pulse point just above the metal.

Bill could feel the cuffs activate with a jolt, already pulling away the energy that was burning through him, the worship Sixer was giving him in this surrender more potent than ever.

Sixer gathered Bill’s other wrist, and kissed the pulse point there as well, before bunching his wrists together, reaching for the sash of his dressing gown.

Bill watched Ford wrap the fabric sash around his wrists, and felt his stomach flip in anticipation.

“You do realise a flimsy strip of fabric isn’t likely to hold me for long.” Bill pointed out.

“Perhaps its symbolic.” Ford countered, tightening the sash, Bill’s wrists thoroughly tied now. “Of your surrender. A free pass.”

“How poetic.” Bill quipped, trying to ignore the way the symbolism of the gesture made his pulse race.

“I know you’re not that kind of muse.” Ford murmured, tugging the sash up over Bill’s head, tying his wrists to the headboard of Ford’s bed, fastening it tightly. “But let’s just say you inspired me.”

Bill tested the tie, wriggling his hands around. He could certainly burn his way free, but wriggling out of the restraints seemed rather fruitless. Sixer’s woodsman adventurer skills lent well to the knots that prevented Bill from Houdini-ing his way out of this.

Not that he’d want to.

“Now what?” Bill asked.

“Now.” Ford leaned down to capture Bill’s lips again, kissing him languorously while he reached beneath the pillow behind Bill, searching for something. When he pulled back from the kiss, he had the scarf he’d used last time he had Bill at his mercy in his left hand. “I want you to close your eyes.”

“Oh, come on!” Bill complained, disliking the return of the blindfold.

“You said I could do what I wanted.” Sixer tilted Bill’s head forward, securing the blindfold over the muse’s eyes while he was restrained and pliant. “This makes it easier.”

“For you.” Bill grumbled, the fabric covering his eyes, blinding him again for Sixer’s satisfaction.
“It won’t hurt for you to have your judgemental eyes closed for a short while.” Ford chided him as he made sure the blindfold sat comfortably, tugging the edges down so Bill couldn’t peek. He reached for a few other pertinent supplies from his bedside drawer while Bill was distracted. “It’s to make it better for both of us.”

“I hate you.” Bill grumbled, as Ford stroked his cheeks with his thumbs, regarding his pout with fondness.

Ford kissed Bill sweetly, hands roaming his body more freely now that the muse wouldn’t be watching him, criticising and cataloguing his every decision. Now Bill was forced to focus on himself, on the sensation this body provided, in Ford’s last ditch attempt to convince him to keep this vessel.

Ford knew it was a long shot, but he was certain the way to get through to Bill was sensation and satisfaction. It had worked with food, getting Bill to warm up to life in the vessel. Ford hoped pleasure, physical pleasure, would seal the deal.

Continuing to kiss his way down Bill’s neck, he pinched Bill’s nipple, watching it pebble, sensitized to Ford’s touch.

Bill was jumpy, almost flinching when he felt Ford’s hands on him, not knowing which direction Ford was coming from. The blindfold made him more vulnerable, laid out, having to trust the scientist. Trust was not something Bill was familiar with, but he was trying.

Ford trailed his hands down lower, mapping Bill’s torso as he went, feeling and memorizing every dip and crevice of his form, keeping his hands deliberately gentle to offset Bill’s startled jolts.

The muse wriggled beneath him, already responsive, his remaining tattoos glowing vibrantly.

Ford gripped Bill’s thighs and spread them, squeezing himself into the space between. He drizzled some of the lubricant from his bedside drawer over his fingers, coating them thoroughly, warming the slippery liquid, before wrapping his hand around Bill’s cock, pumping it swiftly.

Bill’s legs shifted on either side of Ford, and when Ford looked up, he could see Bill was biting his bottom lip, obviously affected by this.

Trailing his slippery fingers lower, Ford massaged the lubricant into Bill’s hole, watching his reaction as he probed the muse gently with the tip of his finger.

Bill wriggled some more, his legs clamping around Ford reflexively. His lips mashed together, like he wasn’t sure what expression he meant to convey, conflicted by the sensation.

Ford pressed his finger a little further in, pumping it in and out of the muse before working him open, adding a second.

Bill was making little noises now, muffled ‘mmm’ sounds, his lips pressed together to censor himself. He had no reason to, they were all alone out here in the shack, now that Fiddleford no longer housed with them. There was no one to hear him, should he respond a little louder.

Ford wiggled his fingers, trying to make more space.

Bill was squirming, and would involuntarily kick Stanford every so often.

When he slid a third finger in, along with additional lube, Bill thumped Ford’s hip with his foot sharply.
“Guvf srryf rkpehpngvat qnzzvg.”

“What was that?” Ford looked up, pausing, checking Bill’s reaction.

Bill chewed on his bottom lip, stewing on his response, before muttering sullenly. “Nothing.”

“Tell me if it gets too much, or if you need this to stop.” Ford said firmly, not willing to let his exploration come at the expense of his muse’s comfort.

“I’m not backing out of a deal.” Bill replied, frowning in the direction he assumed Sixer was.

Several inches to the left of Bill’s gaze, Ford frowned, and rubbed along Bill’s thigh soothingly. “This isn’t a deal. This is just us. You have to tell me if you don’t like this.”

Bill grumbled, reluctantly agreeing, and he nudged Ford with his foot again, rolling his hips further onto Ford’s fingers. “Stop stalling.”

Taking Bill’s prompting for what it was, Ford pumped the three fingers in and out of Bill again, angling them up, trying to make this more pleasurable for Bill.

He wrung a few more strained moans from the muse, Bill whining his pleasure out reluctantly as Ford managed to glance his fingertips against Bill’s sweet spot.

Ford leaned over Bill and began pressing warm kisses to his torso, dotting them over his chest, as he worked Bill open.

Bill was incredibly tight, and Ford didn’t want to hurt Bill at all, considering what he had intended for them to attempt next. Wiggling his fingers some more, he attempted to squeeze a forth one in there.

Bill made an odd sort of strangled noise, spluttering in his strange language.

“Lbh qrfvtarq guvf guvat jvgu purng pbqrfl.”

“What did you say?” Ford questioned curiously, pausing to kiss along Bill’s throat. He could feel Bill’s Adams apple bob as he swallowed, his legs shivering on either side of Ford, before he croaked out his reply.

“Nothing. I said nothing. Is that all six of them yet?”

“You want all six?” Ford asked, flabbergasted.

“Well, that’s what you’re doing, isn’t it?” Bill questioned naïvely, uncertain what else could be Sixer’s end goal.

“If you want to I can.” Ford reached for more lubricant. “It’s just, are you sure? You seem a little overwhelmed.”

Bill’s skin was beading sweat from exertion, flushing dark, that odd gold light seeping out of him despite the cuff’s best efforts. The glow intensified if anything, when Bill requested all six of Ford’s fingers inside him, the worship that powered the glow peaking just considering the concept.

“Wha – pfft – I’m – I’m fine.” Bill asserted, definitely overwhelmed, but putting up a front for the sake of keeping up appearances. It wouldn’t do to admit that Sixer was undoing him, just as scientists do, taking him apart with his ministrations, hopefully to piece him together afterwards. Panting, Bill squirmed, Sixer’s fingers a firm intrusion in this vessel, inflaming the nerve endings
they courted.

He had to ask. “How many is that?”

“Four.” Ford answered, sounding amused.

Bill blew out of the corner of his mouth, an exasperated exhale flicking his fringe up briefly, before blinking blindly behind the blindfold. “Okay fine. Keep going then.”

“Are you sure?” Ford double checked, drizzling more lube in between his fingers.

“Are you going to check point me every step of the way? Just do it!”

Ford complied, and took care to pump the four fingers that were already in Bill in and out gently, determined to work him open properly rather than rush this for the sake of the muse’s embarrassment.

“You’re very quick to tell me what to do. I thought this was about what I want?” Ford said teasingly.


Rubbing Bill’s hip gently with his free hand, Ford attempted to introduce his fifth finger, very slowly sliding it in. His fingers felt cramped, clamped together, and he felt his arousal build, his trousers becoming tight as he mentally compared how the sensation would feel around his cock.

Bill was right, he wanted this. To make his freakish fingers the source of pleasure, and praise. To have them accepted holistically by Bill, by his body, his mouth, his mind. To take what Ford had to give. The muse just miraculously seemed to be everything Ford wanted, wrapped in the package that Ford found most appealing, this vessel.

It wasn’t his conscious intent when he crafted this vessel, but he couldn’t deny that his subconscious fantasised about being able to bed Bill, just like this, and now all his dreams were coming true.

Bill’s dark skin was shining with sweat, his remaining tattoos glowing gold, an aura of yellow light exuding from his very being, as he gasped and moaned, blindfolded and restrained, writhing on Ford’s anomalous digits, wanting more.

“Chht - Fvkre, fgbc fgevatvat zr bhg yvyr guvf. V ungr lbh.” Bill whined, tugging his restraints, wrists bound at the headboard. “Stooop.”

“Stop?” Ford paused, blinking up at Bill, readying himself to pull his fingers out.

“Don’t stop!” Bill demanded, kicking his legs out in frustration. “Just stop teasing me. This is torture.”

“You said I can do what I like to this body.” Ford murmured, leaning down to slyly press a kiss to the muse’s jaw, definitely teasing Bill now. “I could tease you indefinitely if I like. For hours and hours.”

“Zzzz chh trzxx crhh zpitzzrr!!!!!!!” Bill ground his teeth in frustration, nonsense words, incomprehensible swears tumbling out. He kicked his legs in a sort of miniature tantrum, tugging at his restraints in aggravation, before hissing at Ford. “Sixer, behave! You’re mine, and I own you, so what makes you think you can be so - so devious?”
Ford shrugged, though the muse couldn’t see him, vaguely amused by Bill’s little hissy fit, and continued to twist his fingers around inside Bill. “Perhaps you’re rubbing off on me.”

Bill gasped, Sixer’s fingers shocking him with sensation as they brushed over his sweet spot, and he spluttered breathlessly. “You – you –“

Ford kissed Bill, smothering his complaints soundly.

If Bill knew what Ford wanted, Ford could hazard a good guess that he had a pretty good idea about what Bill wanted, and while the muse could wrestle with his dignity for as long as he liked, being overwhelmed by sensation like this, slowly broken down, left to dissolve into a puddle of pure pleasure, heat, and worship was exactly what Bill wanted, by Ford’s estimation.

The way Bill moaned, and pressed forward, straining against his restraints to kiss Ford back, confirmed it for him.

Continuing to kiss Bill, Ford slowly withdrew his fingers from Bill. He could feel the muse’s lips turn down, frowning slightly.

The stretch of Ford’s fingers intruding on this body had Bill’s cock erect and aroused, the body reacting to the physical sensations, while the muse within rattled with worshipful energy, the cuffs barely drawing it away fast enough.

Ford unbuttoned his trousers, pulling his dick out of his boxers, and wiped the remaining lube on his fingers along his cock, slicking himself up. He continued to kiss Bill, kiss him until he was distracted, no longer frowning.

When Ford pulled away from the kiss, Bill tried to follow him, and was becoming increasingly frustrated with the blindfold and restraints.

“Now, how do we do this?” Ford was mumbling to himself, sounding like he often did when solving an engineering problem or equation in the lab.

Yanking at the sash tied to the headboard, Bill voiced his complaints. “Untie me first! I stopped liking this at least ten minutes ago. It’s like you have some fetish for restricting me.”

Ford privately conceded that point as being most likely factual, before he examined the sash, reconsidering their position for this next bit.

“Actually, that might be beneficial. Just let me –“ Ford reached above Bill, and untied his hands from the headboard, still keeping his wrists bound together. Freeing Bill, at least partially, Ford picked Bill up, until he was sitting upright, and comfortably.

Leaning in to accent his gesture with a kiss, Ford’s hands untied the blindfold from around Bill’s eyes. When Ford pulled back, discarding the blindfold, Bill squinted, adjusting to the light, as he blinked his glowing golden eyes at the scientist.

Ford could see that Bill’s pupils were massively dilated, even after reacting to the light.

Bill looked Ford up and down, noting the way the scientist was still mostly dressed, his trousers undone, erection poking out of his boxers, t shirt tight around his broad chest, glasses off. Bill liked what he saw, but had to double his gaze back down, pausing to note that Ford’s cock was shining with lubricant, piecing things together.

“Oh.”
“Perhaps if we switch places, so I sit with my back against the headboard, you could control the pace, and how much you can take?” Ford suggested, already shifting to move. “That might be better.”

“You want me to –“ Bill looked down at Ford’s cock, remembering how it filled his mouth, how wide it was, and how it had the unsavoury habit of spewing genetic material from time to time. He felt his aversion to reproduction creeping back, as well as a mild concern for how uncomfortable this was likely to feel.

“Well, you could climb on my lap, and then –“ Ford’s explanation paused, picking up on the hesitation in Bill’s voice. “Why, do you not want to?”

“Do I not want to fornicate and partake in your reproductive processes, while you get all sticky? I –“

“It’s not reproduction. I’ll say it again. It’s not –“ Ford sighed, and rolled his eyes at the muse’s odd hang ups.

“I hate babies! There, I said it.” Bill blurted out, still eyeing off Ford’s cock warily.

“There won’t be any. This is supposed to be pleasurable. Bill, it’s purely for pleasure, not reproduction.” Ford assured the muse somewhat wearily. “People do it all the time. If you’re concerned, we can definitely use protection.”

“What protection?” Bill asked, narrowing his eyes, thinking Sixer was about to bust out the salt circles again.

Ford pulled a small foil packet out from his bedside drawer, and ripped it open, pulling what looked like a clear latex sock out of the packet. “People use it to guard against STDs and pregnancy. I assumed, since I made your body from scratch, and you’re the first person I’ve done this with, that we won’t have to worry about that, but I can understand taking precautions.”

“That sounds like a really good idea –“ Bill began, shifting over to place his hand on Ford’s wrist, halting his progress. “If you want that plastic permanently burned into your body.”

Ford paused, and made a face, disturbed, before he crumpled the condom up and threw it to the side. “Then what do we –?”

“We’ll do things your way.” Bill conceded, and rose up onto his knees, swinging a leg over Sixer’s hips, hovering just above Ford’s dick. Bill still looked at it hesitantly. “This body is equipped to deal with this, right?”

“Well, technically –“ Ford began, trying to provide a scientific answer, before he saw the panic shoot across Bill’s face. Aiming to soothe that panic, cut it off before it percolates, Ford smoothed his hands across Bill’s hips, gently rubbing his back. “It should be fine. I’ve prepared you, so it shouldn’t hurt, and from this position if it gets to be too much, or you find it painful, you can take it slow, or stop altogether. I’ll do my best to stay still, so you can feel this out for yourself.”

“Hmm.” Bill considered that, before he leaned forward to kiss Stanford, resting his bound hands against Ford’s chest. Ford kissed back, cupping the back of Bill’s head with one hand, smoothing the other along Bill’s side.

They kissed until things weren’t so tense, until what they were about to accomplish seemed less like a bizarre inconvenience and more like a natural causation. Ford kept his hand resting against Bill’s hip, but slid his left hand down Bill’s chest, reaching below to position himself.
“Are you rea-?” Ford began to ask, but Bill interrupted him, sealing his lips shut with yet another demanding kiss, while he clumsily lowered himself onto Ford.

Ford’s fingers earlier really had done the trick, as, while the initial stretch was uncomfortable, considering how much lube Ford had employed for the sake of overkill, Bill sank at least halfway down Ford’s length before he realised what had even happened.

Ford seemed shocked, his hand balled into a fist at Bill’s side, holding his breath in with the effort it took not to move, to stay still as promised.

Bill was exactly as tight and hot as Ford had anticipated, Ford had never done this before, despite fantasising, and Ford was having a hard time dealing with the sudden onslaught of sensation.

Bill attempted to roll his hips with this new intrusion, figuring out how to do this. He looked at the way Sixer’s face got redder and redder, realising that this sort of intercourse had its benefits.

It was clear who held the power here, and Bill could feel it flowing through him, worship nearly overwhelming him as Ford struggled through the feeling, the revelation, that was Bill giving him this.

Lifting himself up slightly, and sinking back down, Bill observed the way Ford spluttered and hissed with the effort it took to hold himself back, with the overwhelming heat all around him that was driving him crazy.

Bill smirked, and rolled his hips again, watching the way Ford was balling his hand up in the blankets now.

Bill leaned forward and kissed Sixer’s strong jaw indulgently, noting the way Sixer’s Adams apple bobbed, swallowing back his impulses.

“Your best is very good.” Bill murmured against Ford’s skin, delighted by every twitch and exhale that was Sixer fighting his own instinctual desires.

“I’m trying.” Ford gritted out. “Are you alright?”

“Oh, I’m fine.” Bill sounded smug, spreading his hands across Sixer’s chest as best as he could with them tied together, feeling the scientist’s pulse race.

“Are you –?” Ford began to shift his hips, sitting up more, thinking that he could further things now that Bill was adjusting.

Bill’s fingertips pressed a little harder on Ford’s chest, halting him, and Ford looked up, recognising the power drunk expression Bill wore, the way he was glowing gold at the edges, just how much he was loving this.

“Oh uh. You’re staying still through this, aren’t you Sixer?”

Ford had to pause, reassessing whether or not he meant it. Bill was grinning like the cat who ate the canary, intent on holding Ford to his word, clearly having no compunctions about torturing Ford back now he had the upper hand.

Ford narrowed his eyes.

Deliberately, he canted his hips up, thrusting into Bill, trying to offset that smug expression.
Bill jolted, suddenly more full than before, but it wasn’t painful. The stretch could even be considered quite pleasant, in a way that toed the line. It was Sixer’s smug expression that he found offensive.

Bill curled his fingers into Sixer’s t-shirt, digging his nails in, as he slowly lifted himself up, trying to drag this out for Ford. His jaw jutted out stubbornly, as he attempted to tease Ford as well as he’d been teasing Bill.

Ford’s hand gripped Bill’s hip, and he thrusted up again, jostling a surprised noise out of Bill.

Bill blinked at Stanford, gawping at him, feeling conflicted. This felt good, but Sixer was far too smug, rebelling against him when Bill finally had the upper hand.

Bill could tell from the challenging glint in Ford’s eye that the human wasn’t planning to behave.

“Sixer.” Bill said, warning him, trying to keep Ford in line.

“Bill?” Ford replied solicitously, before he pushed himself up, so he was no longer resting with his back on the headboard, unsettling Bill from his position on his lap. Still buried inside him, Ford toppled Bill backwards, so his back hit the mattress, his hips angled horizontally up to meet Ford’s.

Bill gasped, and gripped onto Ford’s t-shirt, tugging it forward as he fell. In that one swift movement, Ford had unseated him from his new throne of power, and now was looming over him, filling him soundly, his dick glancing against that sweet spot of nerve endings that enjoyed overwhelming this body’s nervous system.

“Who – who said you could move?” Bill spluttered up at him.

Ford rocked gently, back and forth, his movements teasing Bill, teasing the nerve endings that were singing out. He could see Bill’s eyelids flutter, his chest flushed, his breathing inconsistent, and he could tell he was overwhelming Bill already.

Good.

“Do you not want me to move?” Ford asked politely, leaning forward, judging from the look on Bill’s face that he was pressing right on Bill’s prostate.

Bill spluttered out nonsense syllables, his fingers twisting in the fabric of Ford’s shirt, before he thumped his head back against the mattress.

“Fine.” Bill groaned, and tugged on Ford’s shirt demandingly. “MOVE.”

“I thought you wanted me to stay still.” Ford asked lightly, being deliberately contrary.

“MOVE!” Bill yelled at Ford, yanking at Ford’s shirt until it ripped, the thread at the collar of the fabric splitting.

Ford looked down at his ruined shirt, then looked back at Bill.

That was one of his favourite shirts.

Fine. Bill wanted to play rough, well, Ford would give Bill exactly what he wanted.

A victorious grin crept across his face.

Abandoning all pretence of holding back, Ford moved, and fucked Bill as thoroughly as they both
clearly wanted.

The mattress springs were creaking, protesting squeakily as Ford fucked his muse into the mattress, thrusting insistently, relentlessly.

Moans and half formed words were coaxed out of the god, growing louder and louder. Sixer’s own quiet moans and grunts filled the air, mumbled appellations for the God he was bedding, pressed against Bill’s skin in between fervent kisses.

Bill gripped at Ford’s shirt, hands grasping to hold more of the scientist. His legs were wrapped around Ford, hooked around his back, pulling him closer, wanting more.

Impatience overrode his compliance, and he burnt the sash away from his wrists, fabric splitting in two, burning smoking embers into the bed.

Hands freed, Bill cupped Ford’s face in both hands, kissing him, furious biting kisses as Ford fucked into him. He grasped Ford’s hair and pulled it, twisting it, wrenching a gasp out of him that incised him to fuck Bill harder in retaliation. He raked his nails down Sixer’s back, scrabbling for purchase, and Ford lifted Bill’s hips, digging his own nails into the muse’s buttocks, scoring marks there.

Bill moaned, and panted, and bit angry hickies into Ford’s neck, bruising the scientist’s skin. It hurt, but Ford didn’t stop, taking his pain out on the god who seemed to love it, love the cruelty.

It wasn’t the sweet, gentle first time Ford had envisioned for himself, but considering who he was doing this with, he couldn’t see sweet and gentle aligning with Bill’s character. He might have had sweet and gentle with someone else, but right now, Ford didn’t want someone else.

He wanted Bill Cipher. And now he had him.

The muse was as fiery as Ford had come to expect of him, and Stanford was enjoying the burn.

“AH – XXTRX – AHH – shpx! Six –“

“Mmmnh, Bill.” Ford mouthed the muses name against his skin, dragging his lips over the lines of Bill’s glowing tattoos, tasting the power that lay barely restrained beneath.

Bill’s hands were too hot, dragging across Ford’s skin, clasping his face. Bill dragged Ford’s lips up to his to kiss him, words tumbling out of him as Ford continued to overwhelm him.


Kissing Bill, breathing in the ozone taste in his mouth of gathering power, Ford exhaled out his reply, barely able to drag himself away from kissing the muse, addicted.

“Yes.”

Ford’s admittance seemed to raze Bill with an unseen wave of power, and he shivered all over, before gripping onto Ford tighter, his eyes changing colour. Hyped with power, more power than the cuffs could drain, Bill’s sclera darked, turning black like the abyss, his pupil glowing gold now, slitted and enlivened.

Bill growled, a ravenous sound, and mashed his lips to Sixer’s, intent on owning every part of the human.
Ford felt him get more and more lost in the sensation, pumping his hips ruthlessly, Bill giving as good as he got here. He kissed Bill like a drunk man, lips sliding along every part of Bill he could reach, diving back for more again and again.

“More.” Bill urged, claiming as much of Ford as he could.

Bill’s hands were groping him persistently, sliding all over him, possessive gestures hitting on Ford’s recently uncovered kink for this sort of holistic ownership. Ford could feel the energy building, thrumming against his lips as he dove past the gold glowing aura to kiss Bill again and again.

He almost didn’t notice at first, so consumed with sensation and want, but eventually he came to notice there were more hands on his body than one would expect would be logically possible.

Ford’s eyes slid down to see the small, slim, shadowy black hands that were groping him, emanating from Bill’s body, sprouting up from his sides. The hands were very similar to the small black noodley limbs that Ford recalled Bill’s true form had, defying physics to spring to life. Ford tried not to look too hard at the point where the arms sprouted from Bill’s sides, his thrusts faltering slightly when he saw them.

Bill growled again, the rumble of the sound sparking adrenaline in Ford’s stomach, his body dealing with fight or flight responses just listening to it. Bringing his eyes back up to Bill’s face, Ford noticed the change to his muse’s eyes, and swallowed, floored by yet another reminder that he really was bedding a god.

“Sixer.” Bill whined, and grabbed Ford’s face, kissing the startled expression he wore away.

Gradually Ford fell back into the rhythm of things, but he was keenly aware of the myriad of shadowy hands springing into existence, grasping onto him. More seemed to grow by the second, doing anything they could to pull Ford closer, to touch more of him.

He could feel the static energy sizzle in the air, and he glanced sideways, to the cuffs at Bill’s wrist, seeing them glow blue, struggling to keep pace with the amount of power Bill was putting out. Bill’s power wasn’t being drawn away by the cuffs quickly enough, instead it was leaking.

Bill was pressing hungry kisses to Ford’s jaw, to his cheeks, and Ford was watching, astonished, as objects scattered about his room began to levitate, surrounded by the tell-tale blue glow of Bill’s magic.

Ford was awed, knowing that all of this power was leaking out of the god who was clinging to him, bucking his hips up into Ford, meeting him thrust for thrust. Ford was overwhelming Bill with power, simply by sharing his body with Bill, the worship working its way into a continuous feedback loop with every spark of pleasure.

“Fgbc tnjxvat. Keep going!” Bill demanded, trying to draw Ford’s attention back to himself. “Vg’f yvxr lbh’ir arire frra na bowrpg sybng orsber.”

Ford blinked his gaze away from the bizarre gravitational anomaly the muse seemed to be causing, focusing on Bill once again. He was struck by the realisation again, that Bill really was some sort of divine otherworldly creature, and as of their deal today, Bill was also thoroughly Ford’s, forever, until the end of time.

“You are my God.” Ford uttered, awed, meaning his words possessively.

“Mmmm.” Bill preened at the comment, seeing it as worship, given unprovoked. He seemed to
thrum with power, pouring his enthusiasm and energy into kissing Sixer, meeting the pace of his hips.

Strung out on pleasure, Ford’s restraint was hitting his peak. Honestly he was surprised he held out for as long as he had, but his orgasm was creeping up on him, warmth in the base of his spine threatening to creep up and overwhelm him.

Ford reached between them to grasp Bill’s cock, pumping it, almost as an afterthought, so lost in his comprehension of the god that he forgot to ensure Bill’s pleasure. He seemed like he was having a good time, clearly finding this pleasurable, but those magazines Ford had read in preparation mentioned doubling one’s pleasure like this.

Bill moaned, and looped his arms around Sixer’s neck, mouthing kisses into Ford’s collarbone when he wasn’t too overwhelmed to speak, unintelligible noises spilling out of him.

Ford thought it was just the static in the air, but when the pressure of the bed beneath his knees lessened, he realised that he was being levitated too, lifted into the air.

But he couldn’t feel Bill’s magic around him, like he had back in the barn.

He held onto the muse, his own pleasure peaking, close to completion, as he realised that he wasn’t the one floating.

Bill was.

“Bill, you – you’re –“ Ford panted, pumping his hips deeper into Bill right until the last second.


Bill’s words of praise pushed Ford over the edge, unable to hold himself back any more, and he thrust his hips forward once, burying himself to the hilt inside the muse as his orgasm overcame him.

With a loud groan, Ford came, spurting cum inside the muse, inside that insane heat.

Ford’s orgasm tipped Bill over the edge, the sheer mass of physical worship being delivered right at the altar competing with Sixer’s ardent gratitude for being able to do this, his outright awe that this was happening.

Bill glowed bright, blindingly bright, as the worship overloaded him, overloading the cuffs, this vessel twitching helplessly through the inundation of sensation, gold metallic fluid leaking from Bill’s own member.

Ford exhaled shakily as his orgasm rattled through him, his body slumping forward onto Bill, panting in the aftermath.

He absently gave Bill’s dick a squeeze, courting the strange gold material as it spurted out of Bill, spraying onto Ford’s ripped t-shirt, dripping down it.

Bill still had his arms wrapped around Ford’s neck, and had buried his face in Ford’s collarbone, his own orgasm ripping a guttural, unintelligible noise from him, leaving him shaking and spent, clinging onto his human like he never wanted to let him go.
Ford pressed an exhausted kiss into Bill’s hair, wrapping his arms around the god, holding him tightly.

They were still floating in the air.

“Uh, Bill?”

“Mmmrmgh.” Bill murmured, unwilling to lift his head from Sixer’s chest, still processing the way this intercourse with Sixer had nearly scoured every thought from his mind, razed his consciousness to ashes, reduced him to his basest elements, and made him feel so distinctly, in a way he hadn’t felt for nearly his entire life.

“You might … be more comfortable … on the bed.” Ford managed, ready to collapse with the muse after their tumultuous first time.

Bill blinked his eyes open at that, and looked down.

They were floating two feet above Sixer’s bed.

He let go of Ford’s neck, and they were still floating, Ford gripping onto Bill now, so he wouldn’t fall off.

“I’m floating!” Bill realised, ecstatic.

“So you are.” Ford admitted, with a wry grin, watching the delight dance in Bill’s eyes, now no longer black, back to their customary gold.

Bill smiled at that for a second, euphoric to have his favourite power unbound, before he noticed the way Sixer was putting his weight on him. Reluctantly obliging the scientist, Bill lowered them both down onto the mattress, and Ford slid out of Bill inelegantly.

Bill winced, but already this body was adjusting to the bizarreness that was the aftermath of such a fervent devoted fuck.

Groping around for the hand towel Ford had on his bedside table for this exact purpose, he sat up to wipe them both down, and paused, noticing the little hands that were still poking out of Bill’s sides.

Bill blinked down at them, and laughed awkwardly, before he poked each little arm back in with his fingertip, the limb disappearing back into Bill’s skin. “Got carried away.”

“How remarkable.” Ford observed Bill’s skin, perfectly smooth once again, like there had never been an eldritch adjustment in the first place.

Bill beamed at Ford’s reaction, overjoyed that the scientist still found him fascinating, rather than defaulting to the common mentality of treating his mutations like a freakish occurrence.

He continued to smile at Ford while the scientist gently wiped him down, ensuring Bill was clean and comfortable first, before wiping himself off, kicking off his trousers, and removing his shirt, content to recline in just his boxers.

When Ford chucked the hand towel off the bed, he noticed Bill’s persistent grin.

“What?” He asked, regarding Bill’s joy with amusement.

“Nothing.” Bill said, unable to keep the grin away to back his denial up satisfactorily.
“Come here.” Ford pulled the muse against him, cuddling Bill beside him, wrapping his arm around him, resting comfortably in bed. “Did you enjoy that?”

“Did I?” Bill scoffed, laughing, snuggling into Sixer’s side comfortably.

“I think you did.” Ford pointed out, vindicated by Bill’s vehemence.

“Did you?” Bill thought to ask.

“I most certainly did.” Ford answered honestly, and turned on his side so he could watch Bill, appreciating him with his eyes. “I never thought I’d be able to do that. With another person, let alone a god.”

“Guess I’m just all your dreams come true.” Bill grinned, and reached forward to rest his hand over Ford’s heart, enjoying the constant feel of Sixer’s heartbeat.

“It feels like that sometimes. Like this is all just too good to be true.” Ford said, Bill’s hand on his chest feeling like a comfort. Like Bill was soothing his heart after all the pain, rejection, abandonment and betrayal he’d suffered throughout his life. Here was Bill, to fix it all with his presence. “I’m glad you’re here. Everything – just – if I hadn’t met you –“

“You know, I never put much stock in that destiny crap. I know you love it, but something just never sat right for me with the notion that some things are meant to happen, that they’re unavoidable, that they have to happen, and every choice you make leads you to that inevitable future. I don’t like destiny, because it makes me feel like I don’t have a choice.” Bill mused, playing with Ford’s chest hair as he spoke, twirling his fingers through it idly. “But I don’t know. I’m starting to think that for all its faults – maybe I met you for a reason. Maybe we were always meant to meet.”

Ford watched Bill fondly, soaking up this unprompted sharing of the muse’s perspective, cherishing it, like he always cherished these little glimpses he got into who his muse really was, how his mind worked.

“This connection between us.” Bill gestured between them, and laid his hand back over Ford’s heart, looking earnestly up at the scientist, meeting his fond gaze. “I haven’t felt for millennia. You make me feel things.”


“Well, that too.” Bill snorted a laugh, before he pressed his hand more firmly over Ford’s heart. “I mean real things. Things that make me feel less – I don’t know. I don’t know what I’m saying.”

Ford brought his hand up to cover Bill’s, stroking the muse’s skin with his thumb, holding Bill’s hand against his heart.

“I feel the connection too.” Ford confessed, and squeezed Bill’s hand. “I like it.”

“I like it too.” Bill admitted, and smiled at Ford.

“Just think –“ Ford yawned, and stretched his arm out to drape around Bill, scooting down in the bed until he was comfortable. “We have from now until the end of time to explore that connection. That sounds like plenty of time, don’t you think?”

“Too much, and not enough.” Bill replied cryptically, watching Ford a little more wistfully now.
Ford yawned again, and nuzzled into the pillow below his head. “I’m rather tired now. Bedding a god is as exhausting as it sounds.”

“Pfft.” A laugh broke through Bill’s sudden onslaught of melancholy, and he stroked Sixer’s face with his other hand, brushing his hair back off his forehead. “Sleep then. I’m sure you’ll have sweet dreams.”

“With you nearby, I hardly doubt it.” Ford smiled, before closing his eyes, settling comfortably down in bed.

Bill watched Ford for a moment longer, that wistfulness twisting inside of him, yanking on all of those burgeoning feelings Sixer’s worship and surrender brought to the fore. His hand slid away from over Sixer’s heart, and a mark remained, a small black triangle with a single eye and a bowtie, etched over Sixer’s heart, into his flesh, permanent and irremovable, a testament to Bill’s unspoken feelings.

Sighing, Bill nuzzled up into Sixer, and closed his own eyes, envisioning a future where everything went his way, went smoothly, and didn’t blow up in his face or get snatched out of his hands by the cruel whims of circumstance or reality. He really longed for a world where that happened, where he’d get to keep what he wanted, but he knew that wasn’t likely, so he clung to Sixer that little bit tighter as the scientist drifted into sleep.

Life was never fair, but one could hope.

__________________________________________________________________________

They were praying to him in the temples, singing songs to him in the sea, painting pictures of him in the sky.

Still he slept.

Maybe he was dreaming of a better future. Optimism imbued into every molecule that drifted through his gills, filtering back out into the universe.

He seemed to exude it, this effervescent hope, embodying it.

The potential for a brighter existence.

The Axolotl slept, fed by the worshipful voices of limitless galaxies.

One would think such small circumstances were below his notice. The Great and Mighty Axolotl.

But if you believed the doctrine, he sees all.

And there’s hope, if you pray to him.

__________________________________________________________________________
Ford spent all night, entwined with the muse, swapping conversation and kisses and parts of his soul back and forth with the god who lay beside him.

He drifted, in and out of sleep, and whenever he woke, gazing blearily beside him, Bill always seemed to be watching him, awake, considering him.

“What?” Ford mumbled sleepily.

“Nothing.” Bill would reply, legs curled in to tangle with Ford’s.

Ford frowned, and reached up to smooth his thumb across Bill’s forehead.

“You look sad.”

“I’m not sad.” Bill denied it, but Ford could feel the crease between Bill’s brow, even if he couldn’t see it in the dark of the early morning.

“Can I - ?” Ford struggled, trying to fix Bill’s woes, childish in his strangled cognisance.

“This is enough.” Bill replied, brushing Ford’s hand away from his face, holding it between them on the mattress. “For now.”

“Tomorrow, that last brick.” Ford mumbled, watching the last remaining gold square glint, the only source of light in the room, off Bill’s features. “I won’t keep you waiting. Tomorrow, I’ll –“

“Tomorrow you can.” Bill conceded, still holding Ford’s hand. “But after breakfast. We’ll eat together, share the morning. A big breakfast, like that first morning. The first one you made for me.”

“I’ll have to pick up groceries.” Ford said practically, agreeing. He shifted in bed to look at his clock on the bedside table, the numbers glinting in the dark. It was four am. “The shops aren’t open yet.”

“There’s no rush.” Bill watched Sixer, his eyes glowing just as faintly as the clock did. “We can enjoy this. Relax. Sleep in even.”

“Mmm, sleep in.” Ford sighed, and pressed a sleepy kiss to Bill’s forehead, settling back in the bed comfortably.

“And then, in the evening.” Bill spoke, ducking his head low, nuzzled into the pillows, staring at Sixer’s chest, not meeting his eyes.

He spoke in a quiet voice, wistful even, his tone tinging with regret. If Ford were more awake, he might have even noticed it.

“In the evening, we’ll test the portal again.”

“Mmmgh.” Ford nosed into the pillow, already slipping out of consciousness, not listening.

Bill watched Ford’s chest rise and fall, his breathing deepening as he sunk further away from him, into the mindscape. When he was certain Ford was asleep, he simply stared at him for longer, committing every detail of Ford’s face to memory.

“You don’t know yet. I’ll tell you when the door is open.” Bill sighed, promising Sixer’s
unconscious self what he should have done before now. “Everything changes, but tomorrow, you’ll know.”

The snow continued to fall outside Ford’s bedroom window, whipping up into ominous flurries of white in the dark. The clock on the bedside table blinked 04:28, counting down the hours of restfulness before they’d have to wake up and face the music.

Bill looked up to the ceiling, his eyes glowing in the dark.

“They’ll all know.”

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Chapter End Notes

Thank you very much to the anon who reminded me of Dipper and Mabel time travelling just outside the shack! I managed to fit it in! Thank you!
Some of Bill's linguistic splutters in this chapter are caesar cipher, and some of them are just nonsense, so don't be phased if it doesn't all translate nicely. Language and other things glitch when overwhelmed to a certain extent.
Possibly the most indulgent chapter I've written. Had to work in 'then it's a deal, from now until the end of time' and apparently leaving it at a handshake wasn't what these two wanted to do. I hope you enjoyed the chapter as much as I did.
I went on a comment answering spree lately, so I apologise if folks are looking in their inbox like 'ffs who is this weirdo thanking me for a comment i left months ago' - I was inspired to reply to comments after reading something my favourite author wrote about it, instead of hoarding the comments to silently reread and privately swoon over whenever I needed inspiration.
The next chapter is the big one. I mean big one. It's going to be heartbreaking, and I'm ready for the pain. Bring it on.
Just to let you all know, I'll be going on holidays over december and january, so I'll still be writing, on planes and stuff, but because this next chapter is a long one, and because I'll be writing less and enjoying my holiday, the next chapter is likely to be delayed by a fair bit, not as frequent as my usual updates. I'll be tweaking it and making sure it's perfect so when it comes out it will be exactly how I want it to be, but I'll also be frolicking overseas, so I apologise for the wait. I'll still be working hard on it, and your comments will inspire and motivate me to write quicker, but there will be a delay. Maximum latest the new chapter will be done by will be end of January.
Thank you so much to everyone who's read this far and enjoyed this fic. This chapter is dedicated to you all. Not generic, heartfelt, I promise. Thank you so much.
Under attack, I'm being taken. About to crack, defenses breaking. Won't somebody see and save a heart? Come and rescue me now 'cause I'm falling apart.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

Ford left Bill to sleep in. He proved quite difficult to rouse when Ford got up to go fetch the groceries. He was going to ask if Bill wanted to join him, but the muse was in one of his uncannily deep slumbers, so after a few seconds of determined prodding, Ford gave up, and pressed a kiss to Bill’s forehead, throwing some clothes on and heading out the door.

It was reasonably quiet on the roads, considering it was 8 am. There was hardly any traffic at all as Ford made his way to the convenience store, compiling a mental list of groceries as he went.

He liked the idea of recreating that first breakfast he made for the God, and considering they were on far better terms now it would be a nice bookend on their turbulent beginnings, ushering in a new era of cooperation and peace between them.

While he was in town, Ford figured he could also stroll down to the bank to arrange the final cheque for Fiddleford’s participation with constructing the portal.

Quitter or no, Fiddleford had done what he’d signed on to do, and the portal was functional and fully constructed thanks to his input.

Sending him the other half of his payment was only fair, and while they departed on poor terms, Stanford wouldn’t deprive Fiddleford of the means he’d rightly earned to support his family.

While Ford was bitter about his friend’s betrayal, and part of him still rankled at the thought of giving him anything considering it was highly likely F had been erasing his memories, until he received confirmation of that violation, he couldn’t in good conscience deprive F of the other half of the cheque.

He’d wanted to wake Bill to confer with him about this decision, wanting the muse’s input and validation about whether or not he should pony up with the rest of F’s payment, but as Bill proved a stubborn sleeper, Ford just had to infer what Bill would have said.

The selfish part of Ford would imagine that Bill would urge him to be selfish, to keep the money, and put it towards his future, looking for some loophole out of the payment, but the rational part of Stanford knew that despite his slyness, and his determined ability to find solutions that benefitted him first and foremost, the one key moral the muse tended to fall back on was that a deal was a deal.

He’d made a deal to compensate Fiddleford for his labour, and the deal was that once the portal was complete he’d follow through on his payment. That was the expectation set, and Ford’s ‘what would Bill do’ tangent led him to that conclusion, if he were to think logically on it.

So he tacked a trip to the bank onto his to-do list for the day, and parked the car in the parking lot outside of Dusk 2 Dawn.

Ford shrugged his trench coat on, and locked the car, before walking into the convenience store, looking down to count on his fingers the ingredients he’d need.
As he walked through the door, distracted, he bumped into someone exiting the store, Ford’s shoulder jarring against theirs, knocking the man’s belongings out of his arms and onto the floor.

Jolted from his mental planning, Ford blinked, and immediately bent to pick up the fallen items, his expression apologetic.

“I’m so sor-“

Ford looked up, and paused, taking in the person who he’d bumped into.

It was Greg Valentino, the friendly fellow who ran the mortuary with his wife.

What shocked Ford was the man’s demeanour.

Usually brimming with good natured enthusiasm and pep, Greg looked utterly ruined, heavy bags hanging under his red rimmed eyes, a day’s worth of untamed stubble growing on his chin.

He looked distressed, as though he hadn’t washed, or changed his clothes for a day. The fabric of his shirt was rumpled, rather than neatly pressed as was his custom.

His expression was one that could only be described as inordinately weary, verging on distraught, as if he were wavering on that fine line between numbness and bursting into helpless tears at any given second.

He met Ford’s gaze briefly, registering the concern there, and looked sharply away.

“Excuse me.” Greg cleared his throat, his voice coming out croaky, and scooped up the last of his belongings from the ground, boxes of cigarettes apparently (though Ford didn’t take Greg for much of a smoker) snatching the last box from Ford’s hand before hurrying out of the shop.

The bell above the door rang as he left.

Ford straightened up and watched him leave, concerned by his peculiar behaviour.

That didn’t seem right.

Wandering through the aisles, Ford absently collected the ingredients he’d need for breakfast this morning and brought them to the counter, where Mrs Duskerton waited, watching the front door with a deliberately concerned expression.

Noticing Stanford, standing waiting, Mrs Duskerton shook herself from her reverie and began scanning Stanford’s items, looking somewhat more morose than the morning warranted.

She kept casting troubled glances out into the parking lot where Greg’s car was.

Ford felt awkward saying nothing. Usually he could rely on the cheerful shop owner to keep the conversation flowing, superficial and light. Today she just seemed sad, emphatically so, she kept sighing, and it seemed to have something to do with Greg Valentino.

Clearing his throat, interrupting her scanning, Ford followed his cue and asked.

“Is he alright?”

“You haven’t heard?” Dawn tutted, and shook her head, continuing to ring up his purchases. “Poor thing. The day before yesterday, right out of the blue, him and Janice.”
Ford watched Mrs Duskerton sigh again, pausing to put a hand over her chest. She said nothing for a moment, expecting Ford to know what she was implying.

When the scientist continued to stare blankly at her, waiting for her to fill him in, she leaned forward, cupping the side of her mouth, stage whispering the scandalous news.

“They lost the baby.”

“Oh.” Ford felt a wash of sympathy for the man, looking back over his shoulder at the door. He had no point of reference for how to react to a loss like that, but he could only assume, looking at Greg, that it was devastating. “Oh no. That’s –”

“Awful, is what it is.” Dawn Duskerton shook her head, and slowly rung up the rest of Ford’s purchases. “My friend Maude works as a midwife in the clinic downtown. There ain’t no hospital that’s not a three hour drive from here, and out of the blue, around about eight o clock, Janice gets these pains, poor dear. No one knew what to do. Pains out of nowhere for about half an hour, then they stopped. Perfectly healthy baby, gone in a blink.”

Ford frowned, pausing to take that in, before he rummaged through his coat pockets, looking for his wallet. “That’s very unfortunate.”

“I was the first to know.” Mrs Duskerton boasted, in the way that small town women often did, elated to be in on the town’s gossip, despite how distasteful it was. “Well, after Maude, and poor Janice of course. Poor dear. Must be devastated.”

Ford found his wallet at last and pulled it out, looking up at Mrs Duskerton expectantly, waiting for the total.

The older woman sighed theatrically, still holding her hand over her chest.

“How cruel a thing to happen. I ain’t never met two people keener to be parents. They say the Lord moves in mysterious ways, that he has a plan for everything, but on days like this, it really makes you think.”

Ford cleared his throat again, not keen to bandy religious rhetoric with the woman in the name of gossip. He inclined his head at the register.

Mrs Duskerton tutted, and pressed the cash register totals button.

“That’ll be fifty-nine ninety-five. With tax.”

Ford passed her a fifty and a twenty, and she returned his ten dollars and five cents in change. Ford crumpled the bill into his pocket, and deposited the five cents in the take-a-penny jar, the coins tinkling as they hit the glass.

Dawn Duskerton passed Stanford his bags, and gave him a brief farewell, dismissing him succinctly.

“Have a nice day now.”

The next customer approached the register.

Ford took his bags back to the car.

He could distinctly hear as he left the shop, over the ringing of the bell, Mrs Duskerton latching
onto a new listening ear.

“Oh, did you hear the news? It’s just terrible!”

Ford rolled his eyes and let the door close shut behind him.

It was about what he expected from some people, honestly, taking pleasure in the misfortune of others. This town was full of small minded, gossip mongering idiots.

While Ford couldn’t begin to comprehend how the Valentino’s were feeling, he couldn’t help but find the whole situation incredibly distasteful, how it had been only two days since this horrid thing had happened to the lovely couple, (if Stanford paused to think about it, the incident coincided with Fiddleford’s sudden departure, though he didn’t question further than that. It must have just been a bad day for everyone) and already the town was talking about it for their entertainment.

Gossips and chinwaggers, all of them.

It was times like this he could relate to Bill’s dislike of other humans.

They were, unequivocally, inevitably disappointing.

Even Fiddleford had disappointed him, and Ford had thought they were of similar mind. In the end, Fiddleford’s small-mindedness was his undoing, his inability to accept change the sour note at the end of their friendship. Marching out on the portal’s initial test run. Halting Ford’s progression, the universe’s progression.

It felt much like finding a packet of toffee peanuts beside his high school invention. Progression halted for the sake of small mindedness.

But still, Stanford had to mail out his final cheque.

A deal’s a deal.

Putting his groceries in the boot of his car, Stanford locked it, and decided to leave the car parked there for the time being.

He could walk through town, just to stretch his legs a little.

Crossing the car park to the pavement, Stanford strolled along the boulevard, watching the shops open for business, early morning trade rolling along.

Something seemed different about the town this morning. Something odd.

Stanford couldn’t put his finger on it, but there was just something amiss. About the way people were acting.

They didn’t seem to be acting particularly bizarre, just somewhat more subdued than normal.

There was something physically different about the town too, but Ford couldn’t put his finger on it until it was right in front of him, standing at the crossing.

There was a dent in the stop sign at the side of the road. A dent in the pole, like someone had punched it in a fit of rage.

Ford paused, blinking, and stopped to examine the dent, touching the bent metal. Running his
fingers over it, the grooves in the metal seemed to resemble the indent of knuckles - definitely a punch. Ford brought his hand away from the pole and rubbed his fingers together, examining the residue that came from the pole.

It wasn’t dirt, it was a more rusted colour.

Ford brought his fingers closer to his nose and sniffed.

Dried blood.

Definitely what one would expect, should one attempt to punch a road sign. In theory that would encourage, through the process of natural selection and causation, one not to do it again, but as Ford crossed the road, he saw yet another indent in a fire hydrant, like it had been kicked.

Following the clues, Stanford continued along the road, looking for abnormalities in the architecture, trying to uncover what exactly had unleashed itself through the main street.

Perhaps it was a creature? He wasn’t sure.

He wasn’t wholeheartedly committed to this search, knowing he was simply seeking distraction from his end goal, mailing out Fiddleford’s cheque. Sending the cheque had an element of finality about it, severing the last ties and obligations between himself and his old college friend, cutting the cord so to speak. Ford knew he had to do it, but for now, he’d allow himself a slight distraction, solving the mystery of the mysterious spree of property damage.

Continuing along the road, the trail of broken and bent public property stopped at the wall outside of The Skull Fracture, Gravity Fall’s local bar.

Ford crouched to examine the crushed bricks, another furious punch having jarred the sandstone from the wall, cracking several bricks with the impact.

There was a lot more blood here, staining the sandy brick wall a dark orange colour.

Whoever had punched their emotions out on the town had stopped here, their hand possibly too damaged to continue, and judging from the blood splatter trailing along the pavement, they entered the bar, or were led in, ending their journey there.

“Odd.” Ford mused, examining the trail of blood.

He must have looked quite peculiar, sleuthing his way down main street, crouched on the ground beside the entrance to the bar, scratching flecks of blood from the pavement.

If it was a creature, Ford would like to take a specimen.

If it wasn’t a creature, and merely an enraged alcoholic, then Ford’s procrastination would have solved that particular mystery and he could go back to mailing out Fiddleford’s cheque.

Procrastination. A true aid to scientific inquiry.

As Ford chipped away the blood, finding a spare specimen jar in the pockets of his trench coat, he attempted to scoop the blood sample into the jar, and was jostled by a fisherman entering the bar, the man bumping his tackle box into Ford’s shoulder.

The fisherman looked down at Ford, giving him a peculiar look, and Ford winced, realising how odd this looked.
“Sorry.” Ford apologised, though he wasn’t sure why he should be apologising. The fisherman knocked into him.

The fisherman shrugged, giving Ford one more peculiar look, before pushing open the door to the bar.

As he pushed past Ford, something fell out of the gentleman’s tackle box, something small and shiny that clanged on the ground.

Thinking it was a stray hook, or something similar, Ford reflexively went to pick it up, returning it to the gentleman.

“Excuse me. I think you dropped your –“

The fisherman hardly paused to look back at Ford, pressing on into the bar, and Ford was left alone on the sidewalk, staring at something that shouldn’t be there.

It wasn’t a hook.

It was the palm reader’s ring.

That didn’t make any sense, Ford threw the ring away. He distinctly remembered throwing it into the lake, inebriated and emotional, casting it out.

He saw it sink.

But here it was, returned to him through very peculiar providence.

And that wasn’t the only concerning thing.

Ford could recall that when he threw the ring away, it was black. He remembered the palm reader’s awful rhyme, when this is black, you can’t turn back, and threw away the black ring, casting the omen out, for all the good it did him.

It wasn’t black now.

It was glowing, blue, like a vibrant sapphire, more vibrant than Ford remembered.

Frowning, Ford examined the ring further, turning it over in his fingers.

It was definitely glowing. It wasn’t just catching the light. Sapphires didn’t glow like that.

That was strange.

Curiosity getting the better of him, Ford felt the ring with his fingertips, before deciding to put it on, since it was so bizarrely returned to him.

Sliding the ring on his finger, Ford instantly regretted his decision.

\[ \text{LIES!} \quad \text{LIES!} \quad \text{HE LIES!} \]
\[ \text{DON’T BELIEVE} \quad – \quad \text{NOT WHAT HE SEEMS!} \]
\[ \text{DOOMED TO FAIL} \quad – \quad \text{TOMORROW} \quad – \quad \text{LAST CHANCE} \]

\[ \text{WHEN GRAVITY FALLS AND EARTH BECOMES SKY, FEAR -} \]
Ford gasped, and wrenched the ring from his finger, holding it away from him.

Panting, he glared at the ring, shocked.

When he put it on, the voice, (it sounded like many voices, berating him in the echo chamber of his mind) the cryptic whispering voice from his dreams was all but screaming in his head, overwhelming him with this dread sense of urgency, this caustic warning.

A bad omen.

Ford inhaled, adrenaline racing through him as he struggled to regain his breath.

The ring twinkled innocently back at him, the blue glow seeming supernatural, ominous.

This was exhilarating.

A greater mystery than the source of the town’s property damage.

Shaking the blood sample out of the specimen jar, Ford very carefully dropped the ring in the small glass container, and sealed it shut.

He stood up and examined the jar in the light, that curious blue glow shining tellingly at him.

The ring’s message concerned Ford, echoing the obscure sentiments from his odd dreams back in the bunker, and that last line. *When Gravity Falls and Earth becomes sky.* Fiddleford had said that exact sentence when he was pulled out of the portal.

Ford thought he was spouting gibberish. Maybe not.

The diagnostics machinery in the bunker would be better equipped to deal with this, to provide Ford a thorough analysis of an obviously supernatural specimen such as this. They’d designed the lab down there for this exact purpose, examining and containing paranormal specimens.

Pocketing the specimen jar, Ford strode into the forest, away from the town.

He walked through the trees, passing Willow’s family cabin at the edge of the woods, absently noticing Suzie’s car parked there, along with several others.

Shrugging off his other responsibilities, Ford hiked further in, to the tree that housed the bunker’s secret entrance.

Fiddleford’s cheque could wait.

This was far more intriguing.

Kryptos dubbed this part of the Quadrangle the ‘firing range’ because it was a safe place for henchmaniacs to practise their marksmanship in their downtime, the room set up with moving dartboard cut-outs to facilitate target practice.
However Kryptos seemed to be the only henchman who needed to work on his marksmanship, and Pyronica renamed the room ‘the fiery rage’ and claimed it as her favourite spot in the ever changing compound that they called home.

She named it the ‘fiery rage’ just to irritate Kryptos, who was convinced she was saying it wrong, and he would painstakingly attempt to explain the accurate way of saying ‘firing range’ in a misguided attempt to correct her.

“It’s firing range.”

“Yeah, I know. Fiery rage.”

“No, firing range.”

“Yeah, fiery rage – duh.”

Since calling it the ‘fiery rage’ annoyed Kryptos so much, Pyronica’s nickname for the room caught on, and soon everyone was calling it that, much to Kryptos’ displeasure.

Finding Pyronica in the fiery rage, Bill floated up to the safety line, and simply watched her work for a while.

Pyronica was built for fighting, that much had always been true. She was born to a particularly vicious family of feared and renowned combat cyclops, great warriors with insatiable appetites for destruction who were all but exterminated in a Federation sanctioned attempt to bubble wrap the galaxy from dangerous creatures.

It seemed you were only of value to the Federation if you were vulnerable and compliant, and seeing Pyronica’s species exterminated one by one only reinforced that fact.

The sole reason Pyronica’s life was spared was because she was a child at the time of her family’s genocide, and considered vulnerable enough to be contained. Vulnerable and valuable, after all, one never knows when one will need a famed warrior cyclops on one’s side, or so the Federation thought.

They might have succeeded in their quest to mould Pyronica on side, into the perfect weapon, if they had more time.

Locking her in the Infinitentiary had that end in mind, an infinite period through which they could shape and reform the heartbroken cyclops child into the perfect enforcer for the galaxy’s agenda. Rehabilitation they called it. That was the prison’s go-to catch phrase for government sanctioned brainwashing. Her age conveniently wasn’t seen as a moral issue, imprisoning an orphaned child, as the prison was run by an intergalactic baby.

What the Federation hadn’t counted on was for Pyronica to find a friend. Heartbreak is like a magnet, and it didn’t take too long for happenstance to bring another heartbroken orphan through the Infinitentiary, sharing Pyronica’s cell.

Bill watched Pyronica lob flaming projectiles at the targets scattered around the room with relentless accuracy, incinerating the cut-outs as quickly as they reformed, moving about the room mechanically.

Pyronica didn’t fight from a distance, she always got right into the thick of it, swerving around the cosmic targets, breaking them apart with her hands, rending them in two with a precise kick from her pointed high heels, tearing them to shreds and biting them on particularly rough days.
Understandably, growing up in a prison, being moulded into the perfect killing machine - that can give a girl a hell of a lot of pent up aggression.

Possibly the Federation was counting on that, counting on that aggression to be used for their benefit, and not to their detriment.

Ever since Pyronica met Bill, she had been devoted to tearing it all down, the Federation, and every galaxy that housed it’s backwards moral reasoning, it’s devotion to the preservation of normality for the compliant and subdued.

She owed it to the little one-eyed girl who lost her parents to burn it all to the ground.

Pyronica sped through the training course, destroying every target that popped up to meet her ire, until she faced the last one, tearing it apart with her manicured claws, snarling viciously.

A low whistle sounded out from across the room, and Pyronica spun around to see Bill at the edge of the training room, applauding her.

“We’re going to need a new room, if you keep that up.”

Pyronica beamed at Bill, her mood brightening at once, and skipped across the charred remains of the targets, elated to see him.

“We’ll be moving dimensions soon. I want my new room to be pink.”

“How about a new continent instead?” Bill countered, floating over to Py with his hands behind his back. “I hear Australia is nice.”

Pyronica squealed with glee and clapped her hands, before looking down at Bill. “So we’re doing it?”

“What made you think we wouldn’t?” Bill scoffed.

“Tonight?”

“Tomorrow.” Bill corrected. “I’m spending one more day with Sixer, and we’ll test the portal again in the evening. I just have a few more things to put into place, and we’ll be ready.”

“Have you told him yet?” Pyronica asked Bill, frowning slightly. “I don’t want this blowing up on us.”

“I’m working my way up to that.” Bill replied sheepishly.

“If Six Fingers is going to be a problem –” Pyronica warned.

“He won’t be.” Bill assured her. “I may not have told him, but I have assurances.”

“What kind of assurances?” Pyronica asked curiously.

“A deal.” Bill explained, trying to sound nonchalant.

“What kind of deal?” Pyronica pressed.

“A private deal.” Bill replied, narrowing his eye at her. He crossed his arms, and stared up at her briskly. “You don’t need to know the nitty gritty details, but I have assurances that Sixer will continue to be an asset, so the chances of this being a ‘problem’ are negligible.”
“I’ll bet he’s an asset.” Pyronica waggled her brow at Bill suggestively, reaching down to elbow at him teasingly.

Just as Bill began swatting her arm away playfully, they were interrupted by an unwelcome guest, storming into the fiery rage.

“What a surprise.”

It was the Don. He did not look happy.

“I’ve been looking for you Cipher. And instead of coming good on your deal like you said you would, you’ve been messing around with your buddies – avoiding me and mine.” Don Goo oozed discontent, looking between Bill and Pyronica, who both paused their rough housing to stare at the oily mobster. “Thought I’d have to start carving up your freak-show to get your attention again. Should I start now?”

He pulled a knife from an inexplicable pocket of goo at his side.

“You want to go toe to toe with Pyronica, be my guest. That’s a good way to lose out on your deal before you get a single damn thing.” Bill said brightly, scowling at Don Goo, and extended his size to something more substantial and intimidating, posturing for the sake of good posture. “We haven’t shook on anything yet, and already you’re keen to shoot yourself in your no doubt porous foot.”

“I know what you need us for, Triangle.” Goo jabbed his knife in Bill’s direction, waving it in the air as he spoke. “Seems to me like you’ve been trying to piss me off, and congratulations, you’re succeeding. You want me to leave you high and dry? When are you going to give me what I want?”

“Can you count?” Bill’s voice rang out, his bricks flashing blindingly bright, his voice sing-song and cheerful.

Don Goo squinted at Bill. His mouth hung open, his knife still pointing at Bill. “Are you mocking me?”

“It’s a legitimate question.” Bill replied, keeping his tone solicitous despite his growing discontent. “Can you count?”

“Of course I can count, you geometry freak-show.” Don Goo snarled, feeling belittled.

“Because I believe I said I’d see to your deal in three days, and guess what day it is? If you’re into ordered abstractions of ‘time’, then this would be – you guessed it – your lucky day!” Bill waved his hands in front of him, summoning sparkling lights between his palms. Clapping his hands together, snuffing the sparkles out, Bill continued in his too cheery voice – a warning sign for those who knew him. “But luck can turn on a dime, so don’t test me.”

“You make good on the deal, and I ain’t your problem no more.” Goo reasoned, persistent.

“We could have done this amiably, but you made yourself my problem?” Bill shook his head at the mobster, tsking. “Very poor business sense. That may work when you threaten people, but threatening the people you work with is a slippery slope to bad deals.”

“I’m in the business of bad business. I get what I want.” Goo oozed over to Bill, getting up in his space. He continued to point his knife at Bill.
Bill didn’t like it.

He narrowed his eye, taking in the mobster, wrestling with his own desire to incinerate the obnoxious man. He was weighing up the pros and cons, tallying how well his universal takeover would fare without a front line to fall for him.

Forcing himself to smile politely at Don Goo, Bill inclined his surface. “Then let’s give you what you want. Stars know I wouldn’t want a problem.”

Pyronica looked down at Bill, noting how he was doing the triangular equivalent of gritting his teeth throughout this encounter. He could have snapped his fingers, banished Goo’s knife, and eviscerated him where he stood, but he didn’t. He was playing the long game.

Goo sized up Bill’s acquiescence, looking the triangle up and down, before he nodded. “Good. About time this deal was put in place.”

“So state your terms.” Bill extended his hand, the fire dancing in his palm. “And let’s get this over with.”

Goo narrowed his eyes at Bill’s hand, looking between it, and Bill’s eye, thinking. He extended his own slimy hand, before pulling it back.

“Not here. I don’t trust your type. I want follow through. Instant follow through.”

“The follow through doesn’t happen without sealing the deal.” Bill continued to hold his hand out, his eye lidded, unimpressed.

“You’re squirrelly. I’ve heard all about your loopholes, and your consequences – your side effects.” Goo sneered. “For what I’m trading I want to see this follow through, and I want everyone to see it.”

Bill blinked at Goo, unimpressed. “If what you want is still what we spoke about last, whether you see it happen, or you don’t, you’ll know the deal’s done either way, because it won’t be there.”

“I want to see it happen with my own eyes. That’s part of the deal.” Goo insisted. “I don’t want just me to see it, I want all my boys to see it, and all your looney’s too. To hold you to your word.”

Pyronica looked between Goo and Bill, unhappy with this turn of events. It seemed like Goo was setting Bill up to back him into a corner.

“A public deal?” Bill raised his eyebrow. “You really want all of them to know how you’re trading their lives for your own personal satisfaction? Writing off your Famiglia?”

“They’d die for me, and for the chance to get the revenge we’ve been craving. Whether on the streets, or in a deal, the end game’s the same.” Don Goo shrugged. “That’s the Famiglia, that’s how it works. Always more family where they came from. It don’t matter if I lose a few. They follow me, my leadership. And what the Don says goes. End of story.”

Bill still glared at Don Goo, displeased with the thought of a public deal with this slimy character, knowing Goo was likely to try to screw him over, and try and make a show of it.

“Hey, any publicity is good publicity.” Goo grinned at Bill, and shoved his hands into the goo on his sides, like he were shoving his hands into his pockets, sheathing his knife. “Ain’t that what they say. You deliver, we shake hands, and you get to show off how great and powerful you are. Ain’t that what they want? To see you conquer a planet before you conquer a planet.”
Bill continued to stare at Don Goo, unblinking, silent.

The silence stretched on, the tension unfolding between them.

Don Goo seemed to be rolling his tongue along the inside of his mouth, assessing Bill’s unresponsiveness, deliberating whether or not he could take it for weakness.

Bill’s consistent stare was unnerving on the best of days, and the way it just kept dragging on was starting to piss Goo off.

“Come on. It’s all benefits for you if you do… Or you don’t.” Goo shrugged his shoulders, sneering at Bill. “I see how it is. If y’aint got the stomach for it –“

“Where and when?” Bill asked abruptly.

“Messier 82, Cigar Galaxy – Lama Szlam.” Goo lifted his chin at Bill, like he was issuing a challenge. “One hour. Bring all your men. And the Dame too.”

Bill gave Pyronica a sideways glance, noting how his friend had her hands curled into fists, her bottom lip jutting out stubbornly.

“Fine.” Bill conceded, hoping to get this done as soon as possible.

“I’d better see you there.” Goo gave Bill one last scornful look, before he oozed out the door.

Pyronica waited until Goo left the fiery rage, and looked down at Bill, who stayed frozen, staring at the exit.

“He’s made himself a problem.” Bill remarked idly, still staring at Goo’s exit.

“Do you want me to take out the trash?” Pyronica asked helpfully.

“No. Let this play out a little longer. He won’t have an attitude problem for long.”

“He has an attitude problem now.” Pyronica rolled her eye. “I just want to bite him and be done with it.”

“No, you don’t. The guy’s like living putty. Too chewy, jaw strain in the making.”

Pyronica considered this and shuddered. A mouthful of goo. Gross.

Straightening her shoulders, Pyronica looked between Bill’s contemplative expression, and the door, antsy to be doing something.

“Do you want me to tell Teeth?” Pyronica offered.

Bill flexed his fingers, curling and uncurling his hands into fists, still staring at the trail of slime Don Goo left.

“Tell them all.”

Pyronica chewed on her bottom lip, and made to leave, but paused. “You know you don’t have to if you –“

Blue fire exploded, crackling against the walls of the fiery rage abruptly, crisping the fallen cut-outs behind them, Bill’s hand was balled up at his side.
“Tell them.” Bill let the room burn behind him, trying to retain his composure. “Let’s get this deal over with.”

The ring was suspended in a sealed chamber, undergoing quantitative chemical analysis while the machine did its work. Stanford could only watch the ring spin in stasis for so long, as the machine ran the mysterious jewellery over with lasers and various sensors.

Pulling a complete analytical reading from the machine would take time.

It had already been half an hour’s wait, and Ford had almost run out of procrastination techniques. He was exhausting his options for things to do while the machine pulled readings on the ring.

It was difficult to avoid watching the monitors that recorded the storage room, but Ford was doing his damnedest to find other things to do rather than watch the feed from the Cryo-tubes, where Shifty was still frozen, suspended in time for seeking his own freedom. He was an ice sculpture of regret in there.

It made Ford feel bad, being back here, being in the lab that F had built, in the place where Shifty had attacked Fiddleford, the place where his beloved pet shapeshifter had proved duplicitous enough to warrant an eternal punishment, kept in stasis indefinitely.

It tugged on Ford’s empathy, warring with himself, having to logically justify his decision to freeze Shifty. He had chosen to prioritise the safety of the townsfolk, of the rest of the world, over the rights and freedoms of his dear pet monster, and he’d do it again, yet that sort of philosophical reasoning, prioritising the needs of the community over the rights of the individual, was a slippery slope to all sorts of moral relativism that Ford struggled with himself to justify.

Or perhaps he was simply struggling with the moral relativism of it all because he had nothing better to do. He had too much time to think on it, mulling it over in his head again and again with every pass of the laser over the glowing blue ring.

Seeking refuge from his chronic overthinking Ford had rearranged the filing cabinet, cleaned and organised the various beakers and jars he kept in the lab, made a paperclip chain, and powered through a can of cold, unappetising beans while waiting for the final diagnostics on the ring to print out.

Rolling his office chair from one side of the lab to the other to hang the paperclip chain off the side of the motherboard, Ford briefly checked the countdown for the diagnostics machine, wondering how much time he had left to wait.

00:30

Ford watched the countdown.

00:29

He stared at the blinking numbers, willing them to move faster, trying to get his result quicker, curious what it could be. The possibilities were racing through his head, wanting to explore what
this strange ring could mean, whether it was sentient, how it was communicating with him, but until the machine could provide him with a conclusive reading that an artefact like this was safe, Ford couldn’t put the ring back on and find out more.

Tolkien had taught him that much.

He had to wait.

Ford looked at the countdown readout, expectant.

It still read 00:29.

“Ugh.” Ford pushed away from the diagnostics machine and span around in his chair, bored.

He could be finishing the grocery shopping by now, driving home to make breakfast for himself and his muse, he could be analysing the blood sample he’d found by the bar, uncovering what curious monster caused such carnage, he could be …

Mailing his cheque to Fiddleford.

Ford slumped in his seat, resigned to waiting impatiently in the underground lab.

He was putting off severing that final link between himself and his assistant, not out of spite for Fiddleford and his memory altering ways, but through sheer emotional ineptitude.

Stanford didn’t know how to handle the finality that came from cutting out the people in his life who he’d come to rely on. He handled it poorly with Stanley and now it was happening again with Fiddleford. He was delaying that final blow, the definitive ‘get out of my life’ that sending that cheque would convey.

He didn’t want to hurt Fiddleford.

No matter how much his actions had hurt him.

Bill had told him that he doesn’t owe a thing to the people who’ve hurt him, but Stanford felt he at least owed it to F to follow through on his promise, for his family’s sake, if not for F’s own sake.

Stanford believed that, if only he could follow through with it.

The betrayal still sat bitter in the back of his throat, the fact that F had accosted him with that memory ray, that he hadn’t destroyed it, that he could have been using it on Ford this entire time.

It frightened Ford, to think that his mind may have been altered, that someone had with the technology available to them, reached into his mind and made him believe things that weren’t true, to change the way Ford remembered details, to eradicate those details completely.

If not for the fact that he felt mostly unaffected, perhaps then Ford might have panicked more, acted out more, but the fact that he hardly felt different was perhaps more insidious. He had almost defended F, defended his friend to Bill. He had assumed that F would never do something like that to him, but perhaps he only believed that because all evidence to the contrary had been eradicated.

He didn’t know.

Patting through his pockets, looking for something to distract him from the sickened feeling brewing in his belly the more he stewed on thoughts of the memory ray, Stanford wrapped his fingers around something he’d almost forgotten.
Or perhaps it was exactly what he’d forgotten.

Ford removed the canister of electrical tape from his coat pocket, the canister he’d removed from F’s memory gun, and turned it over in his hands.

In theory, making assumptions from half remembered, scribbled drawings, and from the logical elements of design that Ford could infer from F’s work, this canister of electrical tape was like the inside of a VCR. The tape within would somehow, through F’s mechanical wizardry, or the ingenuity of the alien tech he’d meshed the device with, record the brainwaves that captured that specific memory in a way that could be played back, like a snapshot into the mind.

Following that logic, in theory, Ford could loop the tape through the VCR machine he kept in the lab to record Shifty’s development and the cryo-tubes, and play it back through the monitors.

He wasn’t sure if he wanted to remember the instances wherein F had turned his memory ray on him, not wanting to drive yet another nail into the coffin that was his friendship with the mechanic, but Ford reasoned that without proof, whether he chose to turn F away or reconnect with him, it would all be redundant. Accusations of memory wiping had no substance without proof, and here was proof, sitting in Ford’s six-fingered hands, ready for him to face.

He wasn’t sure, now that he had the canister in his hands, what was more unappealing – mailing off F’s cheque without proof of his wrongdoing, or viewing the tape now and having all evidence of said wrongdoing laid out in front of him.

It was unlikely that F hadn’t used the gun on him, given the apparent gap in his memories from that one autumn night, but Ford realised he also owed it to Fiddleford to watch the tape, to extend him the courtesy of seeing the proof with his own eyes on the scant possibility that F hadn’t turned the gun on him, and was innocent of his wrongdoing.

Ford was not naïve enough to hope for the best, but that was the best possible outcome of viewing the tape.

Sighing, looking between the diagnostic machine and the canister in his hand, Ford allowed himself the fifteen minutes left on the countdown to rig the electrical tape through the lab’s VCR system, and see these erased memories for himself.

He had nothing better to do, and it beat making chains out of paperclips.

With that in mind, Ford set to work.

“The problem wasn’t how I was processin’ the memories, it was that the memories had happened at all!”

Ford frowned at the tape.

Following Fiddleford’s twisted logic in retrograde was like twisting the knife in deeper, when it came to processing this betrayal. The confirmation of the tape, seeing the device in Fiddleford’s hands as he gushed about the ray, it all culminated into a painful feeling behind his ribs.
“But this is dangerous!” Ford watched himself pace around on the tapes, spluttering, gesturing at the device. “Deleting memories, interfacing with brainwaves – I – what if it’s permanent?”

“It’s designed to be permanent. This ain’t a ‘let’s fiddle around with your bad memories’ ray, it’s a ‘lets delete those nightmares once and for all’ gun. It works, it really works.”

Ford doubted that the ray was as permanent a solution as Fiddleford insisted. Already he had the creeping feeling of déjà vu bringing the wiped memories back to the fore of his brain, conjuring a headache of remembrance.

It seemed seeing evidence of the time in which the memories were removed triggered partial recall, and the tapes did the rest. Perhaps Fiddleford always intended for the tapes to be a backup. Like saving the information to a floppy disk before deleting it from the hard drive, if he were to follow Fiddleford’s metaphor.

“Deleting memories, you could – you’d be inflicting dementia on yourself. That’s what it is, voluntary dementia.”

“I’m not using it dangerously, I’m using it medicinally. It’s not dangerous.”

“How could you know that?”

“I used it just last night is how - and I’m fine! Look, no side effects, no nightmares!”

“You used it on yourself??!!”

“And I’m fine!”

A poor justification, as far as arbitrary justifications went. Success with a singular test subject was a false result. It could still be dangerous.

While a solution, when entered into voluntarily, may be fine for one person, it wouldn’t necessarily be fine for everyone. Knowing how emphatically against the concept he was, Stanford wrinkled his nose as Fiddleford continued laying out his justifications for building a weapon like this.

“I cannot believe you! To think you would do something so stupid!”

Ford nodded, watching the tapes, agreeing with his past self. It was stupid, and reckless of Fiddleford, to produce such a device.

“Oh, so it’s cheating when I actually do something to help myself, when I solve what’s been keepin’ me up all night every night, but when you suggest yoga or breathing exercises its fine –“

“Because those things don’t delete your mind!”

“I ain’t deletin’ my mind.” Past Fiddleford argued. “I’m gettin’ rid of my nightmares!”

Perhaps Fiddleford was stupid for having confided the designs for this device to Ford. If he really intended to use it medicinally, personally only, then he could have kept it to himself, benefited himself that way. Bringing the device to Ford’s attention, no matter how excited he was about it, was inviting criticism, and censure. It was like he sought Ford out as a second opinion without really wanting a second opinion.

If only F hadn’t been so ambitious with it, kept it a personal project, then perhaps he could have
still benefitted from the ray without turning it on others. It was a solution for him, not a solution for everyone.

“*I figured this out on my own, why isn’t it good enough for you?”*

“*It’s not that, it’s just – F – I can’t – I can’t bear the thought of you using this on yourself, you’ve got such a brilliant mind. I don’t want you to damage it.*

“*It’s already gone and got damaged, following you on your magical mystery trails.*” Fiddleford spat venenously, not so forgiving about the incident as he seemed to be. Ford knew that the trauma was a factor in his decline. It had to be. “You’re the reason I can’t sleep, and you ain’t gonna take my solution away from me just ‘cause you don’t agree with it.”

If it had remained a solution just for Fiddleford, perhaps Ford could have been lenient. It plucked on his guilt, knowing he was the reason for F’s many traumas, that F was right, but still, examining his reasoning further, Ford couldn’t justify letting a device like that exist, despite the personal traumas that fuelled F. One person’s pain did not justify the potential suffering of many, the violation of many. Ford would never have allowed a weapon like that to exist, at least not in the same house as him if he could help it.

“*It’s my idea.*” Memory Fiddleford replied defensively.

“*And I’m telling you, it’s a bad one.*” Memory Ford reiterated, crossing his arms and frowning at his friend.

Ford raised his eyebrow at himself. In this memory he certainly wasn’t mincing words. He assumed Fiddleford showed him the device to hear what Ford really thought about it, and he clearly delivered.

“*Of course you’d say that. It isn’t yours. God, you’re so patronising. You haven’t even considered the positive things this device can do. This machine could revolutionise therapy, completely wipe out negative symptoms in trauma victims, enable a better quality of life for folks who don’t want to remember the things they’ve gone through. Heck, just in this town alone I bet there are plenty of folks who seen more than they care to, if half the things in that journal of yours are real. Those creatures are terrifyin’, and we’ve got tonnes of terrified townsfolk who need help. It’s got untold widespread potential benefits and applications.*”

F really laid into him, he didn’t hold back, telling Ford exactly how he felt, not just about Ford’s reaction, but in a way, how he really felt about Ford.

It was probably essential that Ford forget this if he were to work side by side with F for the rest of the project, because some of the things F said were completely unexpected and wildly divisive.

Their friendship would have deteriorated far sooner if Ford knew that was how F really saw him. As patronising, selfish, self-important, uncaring of the needs of others.

“*People should know what’s out there. Not forget. They should learn from their experiences, adapt with them.*”

“*Well what if they can’t adapt, huh?*” Fiddleford pressed. “*Some things you can’t come back from. Some things you can’t adapt with. Imagine what happens if a whole crowd of people got looked at by that Gremloblin thing? If that was inflicted on them, those nightmare visions. Would you let them all suffer, just so they could adapt?*”

The Gremloblin incident seemed to be the turning point for F, morally. The event he couldn’t
come back from.

Ford still held by his beliefs that knowledge and awareness was far better than wilful ignorance, when it came to survival.

Having ignorance forced on him was unforgivable. He despised being kept in the dark, especially by his friend. Or ex friend.

He got the feeling that Bill would never side with F on this, that the muse, who valued enlightenment, doled it out for centuries, would never back a move like this, deleting memories.

In that instant, Ford wished he had waited until the muse was beside him to watch this tape, to see just how badly he’d been betrayed. He had the feeling the muse would be there to validate him, to comfort him, and reinforce his decision to cut F from the project.

Perhaps then the painful tightness between his ribs would be more manageable.

Ford rubbed his chest uncomfortably, and watched the tape unfold.

“I’m not like you Stanford. To me the pros outweigh the cons and I planned for every outcome. I’ve thought this through six ways to Sunday. You can’t deter me. I planned for individual case by case use, and widespread use, to help the people of this town.” Memory Fiddleford explained, scooping up thin air to represent the townsfolk. “We just need to gather them all in one place, input the cable into the output jack and all their nightmares could be gone in an instant, all at once, just like that – no more suffering.”

This was why Ford couldn’t let such a device exist. Fiddleford’s single-minded drive to end the suffering of a mind plagued by evidence of the unpleasant or paranormal was rife with unethical ramifications. Crimes against humanity. Against the unwilling. The thought that his friend could justify the mental manipulation of hundreds of people turned Ford’s stomach all over again. His headache was getting worse.

“We have to destroy it.”

Ford nodded again, murmuring wordlessly to himself, solemnly, agreeing with the decision he’d made.

Fiddleford’s intense reaction to Ford’s decision was where it all started breaking down.

“You aren’t takin’ this away from me Stanford. It’s the first thing that’s made the nightmares stop in forever, you can’t take this away from me.”

Ford winced. That wasn’t what he was trying to do.

“Ain’t nothin’ wrong with this device, it’s for helpin’ people, not harming them. You don’t have to —”

He’d believe that when he believed F wasn’t letting his emotions influence his logic here. He didn’t know how to approach this ethically, though Ethics in Engineering was always the one subject Ford knew F skipped. He attended the introductory lecture, but when the lecturer mentioned how unethical it would be to build giant dinosaur robots, F stormed out of the lecture hall.

“It’s the only thing I got that’s making me better. I ain’t going back to the way I was.”
Fiddleford’s desperation was as heartbreaking as it was disgusting to Stanford. He felt sick, physically sick, watching F back away from him, clinging to that demented device like it was his only lifeline. The only thing it tied him to was his own mental degradation, but that didn’t seem to bother him. He acted like he needed the device to survive, no matter who he turned it on.

In the video, he turned it on Ford.

“I don’t want to do this Ford, but you just won’t let it be.”

Ford watched the two of them pace around each other in the video, memory Ford holding his hands up, F’s arm shaking as he held his friend at gunpoint. Ford watched himself step closer, aiming to disarm F, to stop this madness from taking off.

His forehead ached persistently in remembered sympathy for the pain F was soon to inflict on him. Remembering was painful.

For a moment in the tape, it seemed like Ford had gotten through to F, reminding him of his family, of his priority. It made sense, his family was his priority since day one of coming here. Ford had assumed that was the way to get through to F, but he was still clinging to that device like it was his life’s work.

“No! I’m not destroyin’ it! It’s my work, it’s my invention! Mine! Let go!”

“You said you’d do this – “ Memory Ford gritted out, struggling to pull the gun from F’s wiry limbs. “For your family.”

Fiddleford held down the trigger, the memory gun whirring as the ray powered up and roughly kicked Ford’s ankle, following swiftly with another kick to his stomach, sending his friend spilling onto the floor of the attic.

“I am doin’ this for my family!” Fiddleford panted, aiming at Ford. “I won’t go back to them a broken man!”

The diagnostics machine beeped, as the final readings on the ring printed out from the side of the machine. Ford looked over to it, distracted, and watched the harrowing final moments of his deleted memories play out.

“Fiddleford, please –“

“I’m sorry Stanford.”

Ford paused it there, the tape capturing the exact moment after Fiddleford pulled the trigger, his expression twisting with determination and regret.

It was not a pleasant sight.

The tape stalled, skipping ahead in a fractured sort of way, before pausing on Fiddleford’s attic space yet again, another scene Ford didn’t remember. He’d have to look at it later.

Ford’s headache felt like blinding light at the back of his eyes. He felt clammy, and hot, simply from watching the tape, his memory returning to him, responding to the stimulus.

He pushed back away from the desk in his roller chair and fanned himself with a paper from his desktop, sweating.
Hopefully there was an aspirin somewhere down here. Uncovering erased memories like this was a painful process.

Wiping his brow, and shaking off the nausea, Ford rolled over to the diagnostic’s machine and read through the print outs, determined to put the disturbing tape out of his mind.

The first thing Ford noticed was that the readings on the ring were remarkably similar to the readings on the mannequin when Ford pulled it out of the portal. The radioactive signatures were nearly identical, which surprised Ford.

Rather than being a paranormal artefact that originated from earth, from the palm reader as Ford assumed, the ring seemed to originate from beyond the stars, somewhere on the other side of the portal.

That was surprising, the portal wasn’t operational when the palm reader delivered her ring to Ford. If it had slipped through the portal somehow, surely Ford would have noticed.

Perhaps there was another tear in dimensions somewhere. Ford couldn’t think of any other potential conveyance between worlds, but the science doesn’t lie. This ring had interdimensional origins.

It also seemed to be unresponsive, but still conveying sentience. It had no pain receptors, no unusual anatomy, nothing was alive about it, but the blue glow in the ring’s gem seemed to pulse like a heartbeat. Whatever sentience was encapsulated within, it was being projected from a different location.

There was the initial assumption that magic had been involved, like a curse or a spell bewitching the ring, but Ford generally didn’t put much stock in magic as a definitive answer. Even magic had rules, reasons behind how it worked.

Then again, Ford did live with a god, however the scientist within him couldn’t accept a force that operated without rules or structure.

These readings would help Ford unpack those rules, to garner a better understanding of the ring itself, it’s purpose.

So far, its purpose seemed to be perplexing Ford, sending him unscrupulous warnings about the end of the world. All very morbid.

The diagnostics were essential for finding out, above all things, whether the ring was safe. Whether it was possible to throw off the ring’s influence should one put it on their finger, to engage with it, to communicate.

The main reason for the testing was so Ford could ascertain that he wouldn’t put the ring on his finger and fall prey to its wiles – possession is never good for one’s constitution.

It seemed a temporary enough influence. The readings from the machine indicated that the glow that powered the ring could only extend itself briefly into the minds of others, and only through direct contact. It seemed active enough here, and, Ford realised, it must have projected those cryptic unusual dreams into Ford’s head through virtue of the ring sitting in his pocket.

It never impacted him when he was back in the shack with Bill, the only time those strange dreams affected Ford were when he was down in the bunker alone with Fiddleford. Very peculiar.

The ring seemed to follow basic rules though, it couldn’t compel you, it couldn’t reach beyond the
constraints of the glowing gem. It seemed it could only convince you, and only when worn, or kept close to the body. Its range didn’t extend too far, outside of close range its powers were useless.

In theory, if Ford wore the ring very briefly to communicate with the sentience within the ring, he could fling it away from him and sever any connection before it caused damage.

Nodding to himself, Stanford pulled on his six fingered safety gloves and reached into the diagnostics chamber, pulling the beaker out and tipping the ring onto his left palm.

Carefully tugging the safety glove off his right hand with his teeth, Ford wriggled his fingers, and shimmied the ring onto his finger.

For a moment nothing happened.

Then –

LIES!

LIES!!

DON’T BELIEVE HIS LIES!!

WHEN GRAVITY FALLS AND EARTH BECOMES SKY!

YOU’VE BEEN BETRAYED!

TOMORROW THE WORLD ENDS FOR YOU

FEAR THE BEAST –

Ford cleared his throat, and spoke up, hoping that he could communicate with the sentience in turn, and not just be yelled at.

“Hello. Yes, I know I’ve been betrayed. That’s rather old news by now.”

The sentience in the ring seemed to pull back, holding its breath, before it’s voice calmed substantially.

You know?

“I’ve just seen the tapes. Fiddleford’s been wiping my memories for who knows how long. Suffice to say, I feel a lot better about kicking him off the project.”

The voice inside the ring tsked, and Stanford felt a wave of disapproval ooze from the blue glow.

The human is not the one who betrayed you. You are a fool to hold on to such hurts, when the one who truly betrays you has been within your sight this entire time.

Ford paused and frowned, taking that in, before insisting. “No, no, I’m pretty sure erasing my memories without my consent is betraying me. Fiddleford definitely betrayed my trust.”

I do not speak about something as petty as your trust. I speak of the fate of the universe.

Some kind of apocalypse, is that right?” Ford asked, unconvinced.

Yessssss. The voice hissed victoriously. The end of all life as you know it.

“Right.” Ford twiddled with the ring on his finger, already debating whether he should just remove it and save himself a rather bizarre conversation. “Well. This chat has been very helpful, but ultimately nonsensical honestly, so I might just –”

NO! BILL CIPHER LIES! THE BEAST -
“Bill?” Ford frowned, before scoffing, disbelieving. “He might tell the odd fib on occasion, but that’s hardly –“

*HE HAS BETRAYED YOU MORE DEEPLY THAN ANYONE HAS, OR EVER WILL. I KNOW! HE LIES.*

For a moment, Ford felt a wave of insecurity wash over him, no doubt a follow on effect of learning of Fiddleford’s betrayal. While his paranoia was inclined to ramp up, to trust no one at this point in time, he thought back to his muse last night, promising him the world. Trying so hard for him.

They had a connection now, one that was indelible until the end of time itself.

Bill wouldn’t betray him.

And why should Ford believe a rather confrontational ring over his own muse, his personal god?

“Yes, well, I’m sure you think that, but I have assurances otherwise.” Ford said lightly, twisting the ring around on his finger.

*LIES.*

“See, you’re not very convincing. And quite repetitive. If that’s all you have to say, I might put you back in the specimen jar.”

*I have PROOFS. Your portal is a sham. A lie built between you two. A doomsday device.*

Ford blinked, then laughed, short and disbelieving. “I think I’d know if I built a doomsday device. It’s perfectly safe, we’ve run all the testing. The portal is designed to do good, to advance modern science along by decades, light years. It’s not dangerous, no more dangerous than knowledge is.”

*Knowledge is very dangerous. It can unravel his plans, if you open your eyes to the truth.*

Ford rolled his eyes, unimpressed. This ring was like a broken record.

*No doubt you have questions. Even now, questions, whirling in the back of your mind. Your muse... do you know what he’s doing now? Right this second?*

“Destroying the world, or bringing about the apocalypse if I’m to believe you.” Ford said dryly, still twisting the ring idly.

*You are a fool if you scorn my words. A doomed fool. You think yourself special? Tis a fabrication. He is using you. He made you feel chosen, another lie, like he has lied to all those other poor deluded scientists. He is the chess master, and you are the pawn. You think you’re the only one?*

Ford frowned at the ring. Had it been watching him? How could it know that Bill called him special, however reluctantly he said it?

Ford thought back on Bill’s earlier claims. How he’d had a hand in shaping all the great minds in human history. How there were other scientists.

Still, Ford clung to his belief in the muse. Bill hadn’t lied when he called him special, it was because he was special that Bill sought him out in the first place, and it was because he was special that he stayed, that he offered Ford a place at his side. He’d earned that epithet. It wasn’t a manipulation, it was a fact.
He wasn’t just another duped scientist. Ford had assurances. Bill hadn’t flirted like this with Da Vinci.

He was special.

*He has used scientists like you before.* The voice whispered. *Pythagoras, Da Vinci, he was the fire in the back of Plato’s cave. He has always been there, twisting fate to his whims, twisting people to suit his purposes.*

Ford started, shocked. The voice had responded to his thoughts, not just his words there. That was rather insidious, he didn’t want anyone inside his head, certainly not after Fiddleford’s interference.

He pulled the ring a centimetre up his finger, reluctant to let this sentient voice speak directly to his thoughts. He didn’t want this strange presence snooping around in his head.

*Bill is already in your head.* The voice hissed. *He has been all along. There are signs. Dreams. You can’t really be that naïve.*

Naïve. Ford had heard that before.

*“It’s not your fault you’re so naïve.”* Bill had told him. Cooed it at him lovingly. He’d been trying to comfort Ford, but now he was second guessing himself.

*You are naïve. You still think he’s on your side. He’s never been on anyone’s side but his own three.*

But they were connected. Ford adamantly believed they were connected. Bill promised Ford the universe, and he gave the impression that he didn’t do that for just anyone.

Ford seemed primarily hung up on the thought that Bill would betray him. He let that be the main hurdle in his mind, the thing he staunchly disbelieved. It was harder to conceptualise Bill betraying him than to conceptualise that Bill could possibly destroy the world.

He could barely imagine Bill betraying him, but if he dwelled on it, he had no doubt he could imagine Bill’s fire spreading. Bill had a talent for destruction like no other, he described himself as a disaster just the other night, and Ford believed it. His powers were intimidating, even bound as they were. Bill was a God, able to change the weather, to change matter, DNA. He was cantankerous, volatile, petty, cruel on the odd occasion. He hated most people.

But still, Ford couldn’t imagine that Bill could be bent on universal destruction, not when he showed such a different side to Stanford in private.

*Naïve scientist. Appeal to your reason. To logic. Use your head, not your heart. You know he’s capable.*

Ford twisted the ring again, not liking the way the voice seemed to be circling him, reverberating around his skull.

*Don’t you want to see proof?*

*“Proof?”* Ford spoke aloud, scoffing. What proof could this ring possibly provide?

*Do you know what he’s doing right now? The liar. The beast.*

Ford bit his lip, before stubbornly replying. *“Sleeping, where I left him.”*
Ah, but he never truly sleeps. He’s merely awake somewhere else.

Ford fiddled with the ring on his finger, more neurotic habit than purposeful gesture, doubt creeping up his spine.

Do you want to see?

“See?”

What he’s doing right now. You want proof, don’t you.

Ford frowned, and stared at the glowing blue ring, torn between flinging it off his finger, and giving in to his curiosity.

I can show you. He’s not what he seems.

Ford stared at the pulsing blue gem, fearful of what it was suggesting.

The voice was so insidious, so persistent and determined. What this sentence was suggesting appalled Ford, to think that Bill would betray him, to think he’d strike out against Ford’s destiny so graphically, to cast it aside. If anyone was invested in Ford’s destiny, it was Bill. He had been Ford’s most avid supporter from the very beginning. He picked Ford to achieve his destiny.

How did Ford know that this ring wasn’t the liar? How did Ford know he could believe a word it was saying, when he’d barely known this voice for a day?

He’d known Bill for months, nearly a year now, he felt like he understood who the muse was by this point. He wasn’t a betrayer, or a manipulator, he wasn’t working against him, he was Ford’s muse. He belonged to Ford, and visa versa. He’d been vulnerable with Ford, he had grown to trust Ford, and Ford trusted him. That wasn’t a manipulation.

He was perfect for Ford, his perfect muse inhabiting the perfect form Ford had built for him.

They’d built this portal together.

Bill wouldn’t betray him. Ford didn’t want to believe it.

Not so soon after Fiddleford. It just couldn’t be true.

The truth either is or it isn’t. I can show you proof. The voice in the ring whispered alluringly.

Ford couldn’t take it anymore. He wrenched the ring off his finger and dropped it in the specimen jar, rolling his chair far away from the bench the jar sat on.

He could hear the voice howl as Ford removed the ring from his finger, backing down from its influence.

He pushed his chair all the way back to the other side of the observation room.

Ford panted, and rubbed his hand anxiously, his headache from before making everything seem uncertain.

The ring seemed to pulse angrily in the specimen jar, but its protests were silenced.

Side-eying the ring, Ford opened one of the drawers, and grabbed the packet of Advil he kept for emergencies. Popping two pills out of the packet, he dry swallowed them, and felt them stick in his
throat.

He rubbed his forehead, kneading the bridge of his nose. His eyes hurt for some reason, and he rubbed his eyelids, closing his eyes.

His throat felt swollen with anxiety, with uncertainty. His heart was thumping in his chest, pounding painfully.

He tried to hold onto his belief in Bill, that he’d been chosen, that he wouldn’t be betrayed, that he’d finally found someone who saw just how special he was. Someone who Ford loved, though he’d yet to admit it yet, and who possibly loved him back.

Ford stared at the ring in the specimen jar like it was a venomous viper, offering him proofs.

He didn’t want to believe it. He wanted to deny it’s proofs.

What proof could it show him that would be more proof than these months with Bill had been? How could it compete with the proof that was the feeling in his chest that he could trust Bill? He’d been more open with his muse than he had been with anyone, he’d given more of himself to Bill than he had to anything. He pledged himself, mind and body, to the muse.

He was finally happy. So happy.

Bill made him happy.

They were connected.

Ford… Stanford loved him.

Surely that wasn’t the sort of thing to be taken lightly. Surely a pledge like that, an eternal promise, didn’t outweigh the proof in his heart that he was wanted by the muse, couldn’t outweigh the jealous whisperings of this so called ‘proof’ the ring spouted.

Ford couldn’t believe it. Wouldn’t believe it.

The ring was trying to turn him against Bill. It could be showing him anything, something fabricated. Something untrue.

It claimed these proofs would show Ford the truth. It claimed Bill wasn’t truly sleeping. It claimed it could show Ford what Bill was doing right this second.

Ford had given Fiddleford the benefit of the doubt that the memory canister could prove him wrong. It didn’t, it only justified Ford’s sense of betrayal, but he fervently hoped that whatever this ring had up it’s sleeve would only prove it wrong.

Ford scooted his wheeled chair closer to the bench, frowning intently at the ring in the specimen jar.

Proofs.

The proofs it offered should mean nothing, if Ford had faith in his muse. If he believed in him enough to trust him.

He wanted to trust him.

It was a shame really.
For someone who fell in love with a God, Ford was never much of a man of faith.

Sliding the ring out of the specimen jar onto his hand, Ford swallowed his uncertainty, and shimmied the ring onto his finger.

He would view these proofs, for the same reason he viewed the tapes. If the proof didn’t paint the picture the voice professed, it would assure Ford of Bill’s innocence. He owed it to Bill to suspend all judgement, until he saw what the muse was doing with his own eyes.

And if it wasn’t what Ford wanted to see… well… the pain in his chest that nearly choked him, just thinking of that outcome, hurt him deeply.

He was dreading anything but Bill’s innocence.

He didn’t want to be betrayed.

He wanted to be loved.

His heart ached.

“Show me.” Ford demanded.

The ring oozed approval, and a blue fog crept across Ford’s vision, clouding his mind, spiriting his consciousness across dimensions.

_Clever scientist._

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Lama Szlam was the ancestral celestial name for a planet that was located within the Cigar Galaxy. It wasn’t known as Lama Szlam now though, that was an old name. When the planet was re-colonised the name changed, along with the hierarchy, and in the Goo Mobster’s opinion, everything good about the place.

The atmosphere of the planet was thick, and dripping. The outer rim of the planet’s atmosphere was coated in a dense, mucus like membrane that worked to filter out harmful gasses and chemicals, keeping the many citizens who worked and resided under the law below safe and stable in their controlled environment.

The planet was an eco-friendly, balanced, contained civil state, and had been for the past two hundred years, but two hundred years was not a lot of time, in terms of eradicating predominant ideologies. The mass exodus of the ‘unlawful’ citizens of Lama Szlam when the Federation took over was hardly enough to quench the flames of resistance in the people. However, two hundred years was plenty of time to enforce a militant status quo.

Initially, the move to eject criminals from Lama Szlam, enforcing a utopia, was frowned upon. It ripped families apart, children from their mothers, porous relatives from porous relatives. It split the nation in two, those who rose up, and those who did nothing. It divided the porous people of Lama Szlam into the different and the indifferent, betayers and the betrayed, both sides believing it to be true in differing ways.
It was a division between families.

They called it the great Zchizm.

Teleporting through to the Cigar Galaxy, Bill Cipher and his crew of interdimensional madmen and criminals met with the gathered Goo Mob a few clicks above the membrane of the planet.

“About time.” Said the Don.

Bill said nothing. He watched the Don expectantly.

Spinning around to face his Famiglia, Don Goo began his speech.

“Mi Famiglia!”

The crowd of Goo Mobsters cheered, and Pyronica glanced down at Bill, who floated to the left of her, regarding Goo with a flat expression. He didn’t look back up at her, his eye fixed on Goo’s back.

Clearly he wanted to get this over with. It was nothing personal, just business.

Pyronica worried for him, but followed the line of his gaze, squinting at the mob leader.

“You stand before a once great planet. A once free planet. It had a name, not a number, a name, and we called it Lama Szlam!”

“Lama Szlama!” The Goo collective chanted, raising their oozing fists in the air.

“We once lived here! Breathed its air, watered its crops, ran its streets. It was a paradise. Our paradise. And then, what did the Feds do?” Goo paused, and leaned forward as though listening for a rhetorical answer. “They went and turned it into a bloody utopia!”

The crowd of Goo Mobster’s booed, and even Teeth let out a little boo for frivolity’s sake. He didn’t like utopias, or Orwellian mockeries of the concept. The ideal stuck in his teeth.

“They went and ripped from it everything that made it special, everything that made it good. They imposed law, and order, and rules, and regulations. They turned our beloved Lama Szlam into a nanny state, a pig pen, an outrage! It used to be we were a law unto ourselves. Now there’s laws about everything. No this, no that, no smoking! You can’t even light a bloody cigarette in the Cigar Galaxy!”

The jeering from the Goo Mobsters was loud, loud enough that you’d think it would draw some notice, so close to the outer membrane of the planet, but no one was listening, no one was watching yet.

This showboating was for the Mobsters and Bill’s crew alone. Don Goo was building the hype.

“Well, that’s all about to change. The people down there, living on our Lama Szlama left us all behind. They discarded us, so they could go on living in their utopia. Now today’s the day we leave them behind, and move forward into a new alliance.”

Goo gestured at Bill theatrically, but Bill still looked unimpressed. All this staging was fine if Bill was running the show, but business was business, and if he had to give Goo his time in the spotlight, he would, but he wouldn’t like it. Goo wanted to think he had the upper hand. They all did, all the onerous chumps who made deals with Bill for their own power and prestige. It was
Comically disgusting.

“Today’s the day we make a deal, a pledge, with Bill Cipher. We pledge ourselves, our muscle, our strength, our loyalty, in exchange for long desired revenge. Today’s the day we take back Lama Szlam from those betrayers down there, and show them what for! Today we prove that even utopia’s burn!”

The cheering came from both sides, the Goo Mobsters, and from the various henchmaniacs who loved a good bit of destruction, though it was accompanied with murmurs this time, a ripple of confusion from the Famiglia. Clearly Goo hadn’t been as forthcoming as he implied about his plans for the planet.

“And in return for our glorious revenge, we’ll get to see the great Bill Cipher rebirth Earth and take on the universe.” Goo added, trying to rebuild the hype, looking over his shoulder to smirk at Bill. “With a seat at the table, and an invite to his party no less. Now ain’t that just the cherry on top.”

His words came out smug, showing off what he presumed was the power slanting in his direction. He was goading Bill.

Bill sometimes got customers like this, chumps who subscribed to ‘The Customer is Always Right’ philosophy that permitted them to act as arrogant lords over their indentured servants when wheeling a deal. It was a ludicrous form of entitlement that seemed to bypass the fact that the Don sought Bill’s services because this was a job that he couldn’t do. He was outsourcing his revenge out of necessity, in a wild grab for power. See, capitalists always forget that when you stand on the shoulders of others to achieve your goal, your footing is precarious. You don’t insult the people holding you up, or you watch yourself fall to your own entitlement.

A life lesson Goo still had yet to learn.

“Let’s give a big hand to Cipher, Famiglia! To the many-faced God of Destruction. The triangular bringer of Desolation. Of Fire and Ferocity. Of Unreality itself.”

The Goo Mobsters obediently began clapping, but Bill wasn’t convinced. Don Goo was laying on the flattery too thick to be sincere.

He wasn’t praising Bill’s accolades, he was mocking him.

Goo confirmed it, when he turned to extend his hand out to Bill, grinning sinisterly, laying on the last dreaded epithet.

“Bill Cipher, The Dimension Killer.” Goo gave a false sort of bow, and Bill tried not to let his eye twitch upon hearing that hated nickname.

His henchmen all sucked in a sharp breath. They knew, they knew what happened to people who called Bill the Dimension Killer. Goo had just sealed his own fate.

Bill hated that name.

Unfortunately, he couldn’t show it. Not a single sign of vulnerability or weakness in front of these thugs.

He had to own his bad press so people didn’t turn it on him, didn’t poke at that tender spot and hurt him with it.

He had to be the monster people painted him as, so as not to let on how much it pained him to be
reminded of that one unfortunate incident. The beginning of all of this, this unending pain.

He couldn’t show any of that, he had to compartmentalise it away, put it behind brick walls of composure and convincing acting. Congeniality and chaos.

If they wanted the Dimension Killer, that’s what they’d get.

After Bill had his fun of course.

This little trip to Lama Szlam was about revenge after all.

“And now we seal our pact and get grand vengeance gifted.” Goo waved Bill forward, encouraging him to step up by his side.

There it was again, that confused mumbling from the crowd. Don Goo was getting his vengeance, but it seemed more of a personal vendetta than a representative one.

Pretending to roll up his sleeve, blue flames springing up in his palm, Bill floated forward, and kept his voice light and jovial, keeping things businesslike. “It’s not a gift actually. It’s an exchange. A deal you specifically sought out.”

“And you’ll get what’s yours once we get ours.” Don Goo said, his teeth gritted around the pleasant smile he maintained.

“Let’s state terms.” Bill blinked, maintaining his pleasant tone. “I’ll get rid of Lama Szlam for you, and all your long lost relatives, immolating them where they stand, razing it all to the ground and out of existence, and in exchange –“

“You’ll get the Goo Mobster’s allegiance for as long as you want it.”

Gasps and mutters broke out from the crowd, Bill’s graphic descriptions driving the point home to the Famiglia. Goo wasn’t looking to simply retake the planet, he wanted to burn it to the ground.

“Unconditional allegiance for as long as I want it is quite the bargaining chip. Aren’t you a big spender! I hope you know there’s no going back on this.”

“I hope you know how to follow through, freak.” Don Goo gritted out quietly as he extended his hand, meeting Bill’s thin fingers tersely. “I want to see it burn with my own eyes.”

“Oh, I’ll follow through.” Bill muttered in turn, squeezing Goo’s hand somewhat roughly, letting his blue flames burn just bright enough to sizzle some of Goo’s slime back vindictively.

Goo hissed, and tugged his hand back abruptly, but the deal was sealed. Shaking off the slight burning sensation, Goo shook his hand out and turned to face the assembled Famiglia, ramping up the theatrics yet again.

“Lama Szlam is ours! Ours to reclaim!”

There was a cheer from the Mobsters who were swept up in the glory of Don Goo’s oration.

“Ours to destroy!” Goo yelled, pumping his fist in the air. The cheer was less certain following this, but Goo didn’t pause in his fervour. “What do you think about that, Famiglia?”

The slimy crowd shifted, mumbling seditiously.

One rather round Mobster spoke up. “Me aunt still lives there.”
“Did she lift an arm when the Feds kicked us out of our home? Did she stand up for us, or lie down, belly up, when our rights were stripped of us? Did she betray us? Like they all did?” Goo growled, not liking being questioned.

“She wasn’t born then.” The round mobster replied, somewhat timidly.

“But she was born to betrayers, like you were born to the brave FAMIGLIA!” Goo rallied, trying to build a cheer once more from the group. He was only partly successful.

“I didn’t ask to be born Famiglia.” The round mobster in question replied, sounding disgruntled now.

The mobsters around him hissed in shock, what he was saying was seditious, but he didn’t stop. “And she didn’t ask to be born after the zchizm. Family’s family. That’s what you always say.”

“Famiglia’s family. There’s a difference.” Goo snarled back venomously.

“I don’t see a difference.” The brave mobster said simply, rousing a grunt of agreement from several of his peers.

Don Goo looked between his Famiglia and the planet below, scowling. He was losing his grip on them.

Bill floated beside him, silently smirking at the arrogant mobster. A public deal probably didn’t sound like such a good idea now, Bill was betting.

Goo slashed his arm out in front of him, pointing at the offending mobster. “Then you can go down there and burn with ‘em! This is the Zchizm, right here lads. It’s always been us versus them!”

One of the circling satellites on the outer rim of the planet seemed to take notice of them, beeping an alert out in warning. Bill’s henchmaniacs noticed it first, Teeth stepping forward to elbow Bill lightly, pointing at the satellite.

“I know.” Bill replied quietly. “Just watch.”

“Enough of this aimless fucking around!” Goo yelled, trying to regain his leadership. “Everyone who’s Famiglia – true family, stand by me now. Its join or be left behind.”

Several mobsters shuffled towards Don Goo, but there were a substantial number, at least a third of them, who held back.

“Well come on. It’s us versus them, you know that! You were born knowing that, knowing who’s side you’re on.” Goo urged the remaining stragglers, trying to sway the crowd.

Down on the planet below, the enforcers were gathering, Federation police, come to protect its utopia. A communications probe poked out of the top of the membrane and the speakers blared out a message.

“Criminals! You are not permitted within the Messier Galaxy as per the restrictions placed upon you for your unlawful conduct. Disarm and depart or face consequences.”

“Fuck them.” Don Goo spat, and looked over his shoulder to glare at Bill. “Clock’s ticking Cipher. A little follow through before the Feds come down on us would be nice.”

“Well, if you really want to rush this.” Bill looked past Goo at the assembled Famiglia, and
shrugged. “I thought I’d be generous and give you some time to think it over. It seems you’re a little divided.”

“Fuck divided. This is happening and it’s happening today. Get the fuck on with it.”

Bill sighed, checked his wrist for an imaginary wristwatch, and then deliberately glanced down at the planet. “Don’t you want to say your goodbyes? There are estranged aunts and uncles, and nieces and nephews, parents and siblings—“

Goo’s eye was developing a prominent twitch the more Bill strung out his time, listing family members.

“Godfathers, nonnas, brothers, annoying sisters, great aunties, and second cousins twice removed down there.”

“Shut the fuck up.”

“That’s a lot of family you’ll never get to see again.” Bill pointed out simply. “All of you.”

“Family ain’t no good to you – family means shit if they’ve betrayed you.” Goo snarled. “And they did betray us! And probably would again!”

“So, it’s a preventative measure, not just tit for tat?” Bill rolled his eye, and gestured to the membrane of the planet, watching the police gather on the planet’s surface, dragging this out. “Because it seems to me that, if they betray you by kicking you out of your beloved slimy planet, and you betray them by immolating them and destroying said slimy planet – betrayal begetting more betrayal – well, you know what they say about an eye for an eye. It only works with two eyed species. Anything else is just a massacre.”

“Since you’ve only got one, I’m sure you know what I mean when I say that I only need to act first to come out on top.” Goo sneered, and pulled a knife from his pocket, thinking Bill set him up, that he wasn’t going to follow through. Didn’t he know a deal was a deal?

“Cool your slimy little boots.” Bill held his right hand up at Don Goo, pacifying him. “Put your knife away, for all the good it will do you. Talk about overreacting.”

“There are Feds swarming all over!” Goo gestured to the membrane, watching the police line up, readying their weapons. “And you wanna waste our time with chit chat?”

“I’m just saying, if you want a back and forth of betrayal, killing them all sure makes things dull if you’re expecting retaliation. How else do you keep a feud like that alive? After two hundred years? A Zchizm like that needs spark to keep it going. Not everyone can drive a movement through charisma alone, you certainly can’t.” Bill drummed his fingers together idly, enjoying riling Don Goo up. “Killing them all defeats the purpose if you ask me. All those goo kiddies, born to traitorous ancestors.”

The crowd of mobsters, if they were a third divided before, seemed to waver into a more even split the longer Bill kept talking.

“Stop – stop yapping.” Goo rubbed his head, nursing a headache, speaking through gritted teeth.

“It seems like a waste, but hey, you wanted this. Most people do the Socratic method on their own before they shake on a deal. Especially if the deal is ‘for’ something, like your people, or a
purpose. This deal just seems to be for your own satisfaction. Talk about icy.”

“Can you just shut up?”

“Do they even know what it means to be traded like this? Their freedom traded for your tasty little dish of revenge, eradicating the rest of your kind? That’s some heavy stuff oh high and mighty Don.”

“SHUT UP FREAK!” Goo pulled both of his knives out now, spinning around to hold them aggressively out at Bill.

Bill clicked his fingers, and the knives melted in Goo’s hands, rendering him powerless.

“Yeesh, kid.” Bill floated around Goo, while he gaped at his former knives, now a puddle of metal floating in the space before him. “It’s almost like you haven’t thought this through. I’m not sure you should be making decisions on behalf of the group. Some Don you are.”

The mobsters began pulling their weapons out, readying defences as the police below the membrane were readying their canons.

Goo seemed to be running short on patience, his temper flaring wildly the more Bill continued his light chatter, like he was commenting on the weather. His shoulders were shaking, as he stared at his melted knives.

“We had a deal.” He uttered.

“So we do.” Bill agreed. “Are you sure you don’t have any gooey nannas down there you want to give your last regards to?”

“ATTENTION CRIMINALS! THIS IS YOUR LAST WARNING. THE FEDERATION HAS IDENTIFIED SEVERAL CLASS ZETA UNDESIRABLES AMONG YOUR COMPANY, AND WE HAVE LEGAL GROUNDS TO RETALIATE TO YOUR PRESENCE WITH IMMEDIATE FIRE. WILL YOU BACK DOWN?”


“No but I’m pretty sure that’s what your mother said.” Keyhole shot back.

Bill’s crew crowed, elated by Keyhole’s clapback.

“OHHH! Nice burn Keyhole!” Bill clapped, as Pyronica snorted beside him.

“Thanks boss.” Keyhole grinned.

“WE WILL FIRE IN THIRTY SECONDS! 29 – 28 – “

“46!” Teeth yelled out! “72! 87! 26!”

The voice from the speakers hesitated, like they lost their place, before repeating themselves. “Twenty – twenty -nine.”

Bill’s assembled crew began laughing, hooting laughter in the face of destruction, something that pushed Don Goo’s temper past boiling point.

“You – for Goo’s sake JUST DO YOUR DAMN JOB!” Goo yelled. “I’ve had enough of your jokes and your chit chat. We’re about to get blasted out of the sky and you’re just standing there –
laughing!"

“26 – 25 – 24 –“

“Who wouldn’t laugh?” Bill scoffed, amused. “They screwed up their own countdown. If they wanted to blast us out of the sky by now, they would have done it already.”

The communications probe seemed to hear this, and sped up their countdown. “10 – 9 – 8 –“

“We had the element of surprise, and you’ve just lost your freakin’ advantage! They all know we’re here now. Are you screwing up this deal for me? If we all get fucked by the feds your little invasion is shit out of luck Cipher. We’ll pull out, if you ain’t gonna follow through. Eight fucking seconds! What the fuck are you going to do, Triangle? What the fuck do you have to say?”

Bill lidded his eye at Don Goo, watching the mobster lose his cool spectacularly in front of his people, and raised his eyebrow.

He didn’t need to say a damn thing.

Bill considered his options before deciding it was probably just about time to divulge the reason he’d been collecting all those cubes.

Bill angled himself like he was clicking his neck, before he wiggled his fingers out in front of him, and stretched them out. Waving his hand, he summoned one of the energy cubes he’d filled with Sixer’s power, and considered it, before popping the top off it, and swilling it like it was a delicious beverage, instead of a roiling container of pure energy.

“I’ve always wanted to try one of these.” Bill said, holding the cube up under his eye like he was sniffing it. “Ah, such a potent flavour.”

“You’re having a drink? Are you fucking kidding me?” Goo shrieked.

“Just stand over there for me. A little to the left.” Bill extended his free hand, and poked Goo across, so he was standing just out of the way of the communications probe.

“What -?” Goo spluttered, nudged into position. He squinted at Bill, confused, when the triangle, swilled the energy cube around and took a sip from his eye mouth.

Bill’s shape glitched all over, like a shiver of excitement, and he kept his eye closed, his voice echoing. “Whoo, that packs a punch.”

Kryptos was watching Bill in awe, aghast that his boss would just drink the condensed energy of a supernova like it was nothing, even if he was just skimming a sip from the top. Bill Cipher was truly something else. A madman.

“AaAAaaaHHhh.” Bill sighed contentedly, his voice pitching up and down dissonantly, breaking on each note. “So refreshing.”

“The fuck are you doing Cipher?” Goo inquired angrily.

The countdown continued behind him.

“3 – 2 – 1.”

“This.” Bill replied, and opened his eye.
A beam of pure unbridled energy blasted out of Bill’s eye, eradicating everything in its path, including Lama Szlam, and the aligned Federation military down on the planet below. The energy blasted away everything down to its very molecules, sizzling it up in an instant.

Bill blinked, and looked at the hole he blew all the way through the planet, straight across to the other side. The planet now looked like a gelatinous donut, the membrane ripped and leaking where Bill’s energy had punched right through, and the edges of the hole began to crumble, caving in.

“Woops.”

Bill looked over to the startled Goo Mobsters, who were staring shell-shocked at the sizable hole in their planet, blasted through in a fraction of a second with a single blink of Bill’s eye.

“Hey, did you still want the rest of it?” Bill jerked his thumb at the planet behind him. “Or should I keep going? Don’t want to half ass my job.”

“Holy shit.” Don Goo muttered. “You really did it. One frickin’ blink.”

“Two blinks actually.” Bill replied swiftly, poking Don Goo to the right with an extension of his arm, herding him back in front of his line of sight. He gently lifted the bowler hat from Goo’s head, and kept it. “I’m not done yet. So you want me to keep going?”

The mobsters were silent, stunned. Goo turned his back to Bill, staring at the hole burnt through his planet, his vengeance made real, and laughed, a strained, elated sound.

“Fuckin’ – be my guest. Destroy it all! Burn it to the fuckin’ ground freak!”

Bill narrowed his eye at Goo’s back.

The mobsters noticed, and scurried away from Goo, standing as far away from him as they possibly could. Anyone could see how this would go down. How Goo would be punished for his hubris.

Bill could still feel the power flowing through him. Just one sip of the energy harvested from Sixer’s worship was like sticking your finger in the socket of the universe and letting your molecules rattle. It was incredible.

Bill felt like he was brimming with power, untenable, unstoppable power, and it was all thanks to Sixer.

Now to take care of some unfinished business.

“Then I’ve held up my end of the deal. You got to see Lama Szlam destroyed with your own two eyes.”

“Yeah, but you ain’t done yet.” Goo insisted, without turning around.

“No, but you are.” Bill replied smoothly.

He closed his eye, and before Goo could turn around, his slimy expression irate, Bill blinked again, his eye opening wide, wider than before.

The beam of energy that shot out was huge. It was bigger than the last blast, it was bigger than Don Goo, it was bigger than the entire planet. It shot out so far that several meteors behind the planet disintegrated into dust in the span of a blink, gone in an instant.
Bill’s eye mouth was smoking as he exhaled, and puffed away the heat. Blinking his eye open, he looked at the desolation before him and laughed.

He laughed abruptly at first, like he was surprised at the extent of this power, but then his laughter grew into something wild, chaotic, triumphant and uncontrollable.

Bill laughed and laughed. He laughed like a mad man, and perhaps he was.

Eventually, his henchmen joined in, jeering. Paci-fire chortled, slapping his thigh, Eight Ball grunted, Teeth yucked raucously, even Kryptos managed an elated giggle, shocked at the power his boss held, the power that one day he could hold if he stuck with his current course. He was elated. Bill demonstrated the sort of power that had never been seen before in the multiverse.

This was what Gods did, true Gods.

They reshaped existence.

Laughter echoed into empty space, and no one from the Federation existed to hear it. Only Bill’s gang of criminals, and the huddled Goo Mobsters, who still seemed in shock.

Eventually one of them spoke up, rattled.

“You – you killed the Don.”

Bill’s laughter cut off sharply, and he regarded the mobster who spoke up.

“Let’s just say I was done with him.” Bill quipped, materialising his walking stick, spinning it around, before growing in size, looming over the Goo Mobsters, his eye massive, watching them all.

His voice echoed in the vacuum of space frightfully. “What’s it to you?”

The mobsters all seemed to be too afraid to speak up, but Bill’s gang were on tenterhooks, giddy, leaning forward, eager to witness their boss laying down the law. The law of chaos.

It was always satisfying watching the Boss put someone in their place. Even Hectorgon was leaning forward, scenting for blood.

“Who will be our Don now?” A lost voice sounded from the crowd of Mobsters.

“Well, technically, you belong to me now.” Bill drummed his fingers against his brick, below his eye, contemplatively. “I own you all, but I’ve got better things to do than govern you, or push you around. Isn’t that what the old Don did?”

“The Don’s supposed to look after us. Look after the family. Lead the family.” A mobster spoke up. “He should be one of us.”

“Well, you’re on your own there. I’m one of a kind.” Bill said dismissively. “You can work for me, but I’m not babysitting you. Choose your own Don.”

“We – we can’t choose.” The mobsters conferred, volunteering information. “There are rituals. Rites. Back on – “ He looked down to where his planet once was, and the words died in his mouth.

Bill took pity on them, and drummed his fingers on his cane, before floating above them, picking through them.
“Tell you what. I’ll make it easy on you. I’ll pick your new Don, and then whatever he says goes. You all owe me your loyalty, but I don’t want in on your sticky family, that’s your business.”

“Thank you Mister Cipher.” The Goo Mob chanted in unison.

“Call him Boss.” Teeth nudged one of the Goo Mob with his elbow, and they hurriedly corrected their language.

“Thank you Boss.”

“Now let’s see.” Bill swung his cane around, eyes scouring the crowd, before reaching his decision, pointing at the candidate. “I choose, eenie, meanie, miney - you!”

The round mobster who spoke up before in defence of his planet blinked at the end of Bill’s cane.

“Me?”

“Yeah, you.” Bill shrunk down and floated above the Goo Mobster curiously. He dropped Don Goo’s bowler hat on top of the mobster’s head and adjusted the slant of the hat dotingly, before asking. “What’s your name kid?”

“Dadun Dun.” The mobster replied.

Bill considered it for a moment, let the name sink in. He stared at the kid for about fifteen seconds, processing this, before falling over himself laughing.

“Perfect! It’s perfect! Excellent. You are the new Don!”

The henchmaniacs snickered, even Pyronica giggled, but the Goo Mobsters were all looking at Dadun Dun with an expression akin to awe dancing on their goopy faces.

“Don Dadun Dun.” Bill declared happily, and waved his hand. “Alright, that was fun.”

He flipped the lid back down on his energy cube, and banished it away, throwing it over his shoulder for it to disappear back to the Quadrangle safe room. Clapping his hands to indicate he was over this little interlude, he pointed back to the teleportation zone, and lead the group over there.

“Let’s blow this popsicle stand.”

From the distance, just out of hearing range, but still within sight, Jheselbraum waited, ever the chess master, showing the truth through her eyes, on her terms, for her pawn.

As Bill teleported away, Jheselbraum closed her eyes, and released Ford’s consciousness back into his own body.

Ford gasped, and his hand flew up to cover his eye, pain beyond anything capturing him in a vice.

What he just saw, it couldn’t be real – it couldn’t be –
Oh but it is. The voice spoke.

Ford was close to hyperventilating, his body rejecting what he’d seen, his eye wet and painful.

That was very real. An entire planet gone. On a whim.

No, it couldn’t be.

Sure, Ford had seen it, but he still couldn’t –

OPEN YOUR EYES! You know it’s him! You saw what he used to do it. He is using you!

Ford clenched his eyes shut, and rubbed his face, his head pounding. He scrubbed his hands through his hair in frustration before he lurched up away from the desk to pace around the room.

His mind was spiralling with disbelief and burgeoning doubt, revelations obscuring his muse beyond recognition.

Ford didn’t want to believe it was him. It must have been some other psychotic triangle, who just so happened to look and sound exactly like Bill.

But the cube –

Piece together the details, scientist. You saw it.

“No. I must have seen something different. Someone else. Bill would never –“


“There must have been some reason, some other reason, there isn’t –“

I hope whatever justifications you seek for that genocide sound as petty in your mind as they are in reality.

Lives were lost. Millions of sentient beings.

Ford rubbed his forehead, grunting, before looking up to the ceiling, clinging to denial to save him from this torment.

“It can’t be.”

It is. He has done it before, and will do it again here. You saw him.

Ford staggered around the lab, pacing neurotically, wiping his eye, scrunching his hand up in his hair, clenching his jaw so as not to crumble.

He did see it.

He saw Bill use one of the potential energy cubes, laden with Ford’s worship, as canon fodder for evisceration.

The cubes that were apparently too important to Bill for Stanford to use on the portal, Bill had no problem using to level a planet, with just a sip from the top of the container. The cubes Stanford thought held meaning for Bill, because they were a tangible representation of how much Ford adored him, were used for destruction.
Something beautiful, twisted into something so … evil.

“It can’t be.”

*It is.* The voice hissed.

“No. I don’t believe your proofs.” Ford spun around, staring down at the ring. “You could have fabricated them, made them up to turn me against him. You’re the one with the agenda here, not Bill. He would never – he wouldn’t – he wouldn’t just … *discard* me like that.”

*He has used you, like he has used many others. He will toss you aside like he did the cube. You will come to accept it in time.*

“I don’t want to accept it.” Ford admitted, and scowled at the ring, preparing to twist it off his finger. “I don’t believe it. I don’t believe you. I’m going to go to Bill, and talk to him, and prove that he would never –“

*You’d really take his word for it? Allow him to twist your mind further? You stupid scientist, you don’t understand – it isn’t just you who is betrayed if Bill is not stopped. Your entire world –*

“Bullshit.” Ford swore. “The portal is fine. I checked it over myself. It isn’t a doomsday device, it’s a doorway to discovery.”

*Doors open both ways. Ignoring me invites your own destruction, and the destruction of all you know.*

“Well, I’m going to need b-better proofs than that before I believe – before I believe you –“ Ford felt light headed. Dizzy. The floor spun beneath him, whirling before his eyes, and he staggered into his chair, resting his hand against his forehead.

His cheek felt wet, something dripping down from his eye, but he knew he wasn’t crying. He knew if he started, he wouldn’t stop. So then what was this wetness.

Ford wiped it across his cheek absently, not thinking to look down at his fingers.

*You have your proofs right here, right in this room.* The voice urged Ford, and this time the words came with a wordless suggestion to look over to the VCR again, where the tape of Fiddleford’s misdeeds displayed.

Ford wiped at his eye again, and squinted, before rolling the chair over to the monitors.

Looking briefly between the monitor and the ring, Ford scowled, and asked in a low, broken voice.

“Why are you doing this?”

*It is time you knew the truth. Before it is too late to stop it.*

“Stop what?” Ford grumbled, and reluctantly looked over at the monitors, seeing the odd view of Fiddleford’s room it had paused on.

*Look, open your eyes, and find out.*

Ford hesitated for a moment, his eye hurting, not pleased with the prospect of more staring at a screen, but he was compelled with a need to know as strong as his denial had been. A thirst for the truth warred with his own sense of self preservation, his own denial, and the truth won out.
He pressed play.

The tape followed an odd angle, it was looking down at the blueprints on Fiddleford’s desk, before jolting upright as a door slammed open.

Ford could hear Fiddleford speak, and realised this tape was from Fiddleford’s perspective, from the way the ‘camera’ panned down to F’s lap, then over to the door, where Bill stood, emanating rage.

“What in Sam Hill –“

“You crossed a line.” Bill glared down at Fiddleford, his dangerous expression so different from the ones Stanford was privy to. This wasn’t the indulgent, playful, cheeky Bill Stanford knew, this was someone else entirely.

“I don’t know what you’re –“ Fiddleford’s words cut off with a gasp, as Bill jabbed him in the chest, looming over him. Fiddleford’s shirt was burnt, Bill’s finger singeing him all the way down to the skin.

“You know what you did.” Bill scowled at Fiddleford, and only then did Ford notice the burning red of Bill’s eyes. “You crossed a line the moment you pointed that thing at Sixer’s head, and you know it.”

That thing? So this must have been immediately after F had used the memory ray on him. Stanford didn’t remember Bill stepping in, he just had a blank patch between his encounter with Fiddleford, and sleeping on the couch.

When had Bill found out? Had he known F had the memory ray all along?

Was this him avenging Stanford’s mind?

“You – your eyes!”

“Don’t tell me you forgot?” Bill tilted his head, and bared his teeth in a mockery of a smile, looking more like a predator than a person.

This Bill looked more than capable of the violent acts the voice in the ring seemed to believe were his misdeeds.

This Bill didn’t look like a muse, like an avenging angel. He looked like some sort of hellish demon.

“It’s just another nightmare Fiddleford, it’s not real.” F muttered to himself, rocking back and forth slightly.

“I’m not just any nightmare.” Bill placed his hands on either side of Fiddleford’s chair, bracketing him in there. “But I’ll be your own personal nightmare for what you did to Sixer, and that’s a promise. Is it coming back to you now, what you did, or do you need a little reminder?”

“I – I know I used the memory ray on Stanford.” Fiddleford admitted, the camera angle panning guiltily to his knees. “I didn’t erase the memory of that, I just erased the guilt I had for doin’ it. And I know it was wrong, but I just couldn’t let him –“

“So let me get this straight, you erase one of Sixer’s precious memories, feel bad about it, and then shoot yourself in the head so you don’t feel guilty? Oh no, you’re not dodging consequences that
easily. You don’t get that option.”

Ford felt conflicted. Bill was obviously doing this for him, terrifying Fiddleford in response to the violation that he’d imparted on Ford’s mind. Bill clearly valued Ford’s mind, valued Ford’s safety, but this was just horrifying to watch. Stanford didn’t care for Bill’s vigilante intentions, his retaliation was against one of Ford’s closest friends, and while a selfish part of Ford felt vindicated that someone would defend him so strongly, he couldn’t justify the cruelty Bill was employing. Not just employing, relishing.

Fiddleford noticed the edges of his chair sizzling, burning under Bill’s hands and he yelped, and flung himself away. He scrambled across the floor of his room searching for the memory gun, and Bill’s voice rang out indulgently behind him.

“I wouldn’t try that if I were you.”

Bill seemed to be toying with F, like this were a game of cat and mouse. The playful tone of Bill’s voice indicated that he enjoyed seeing Fiddleford frantic, seeing him struggle, and that confirmed the sick feeling in the pit of Ford’s stomach.

“You haven’t learnt your lesson yet.”

This was definitely Bill. Stanford’s Bill. In the body Stanford built for him, revealing the true depths of the monster within. Ford was astonished how he couldn’t see it before, how he believed the lies and sweetness the muse fed him. It seems he was only kind to Ford, and kind to no one else. Only Stanford’s muse.

He was never a muse, he was a monster. The voice whispered in Ford’s head, and he swallowed reflexively, clenching his jaw, unwilling to relinquish his perception of Bill, but faced with little alternative.

“What are you – you’re –” Fiddleford screamed as the memory gun floated out of the crate in front of him, along with several of his other possessions, rimmed with the tell-tale blue glow that was Bill’s levitation. “You’re not human.”

Bill stuck his hands on his hips, items floating rimmed in blue around him, and grinned at Fiddleford, that too toothy grin. “What gave it away, genius?”

Genius. He’d called Ford genius, but never with that mocking tone, or maybe the tone had been there all along. Ford wasn’t sure.

“You – you’re not human – you – s-stay away from me –” Fiddleford pleaded, scrambling away from Bill until his back hit the wall. “S-stay back!”

“Let me make one thing clear for you here, Specs. I tolerate you, because you’re useful, and you have the skills I need to get this portal up and running.”

He tolerates F because he’s useful? How much had he been tolerating Ford for the same reason? Utilitarian, efficient, disposable.

“However, the instant you outlive your usefulness, you’re gone. Like that.”

Bill snapped his fingers, and a fireball sizzled in the air above his hand for effect, fizzling out into the atmosphere.

It reminded Ford of the planet, that green, glistening planet, destroyed in the blink of an eye.
Gone. Like that.

Bill leaned over Fiddleford, and looked just as smug as he would when he would beat Ford in chess. That same calculated precision. That smug callousness.

“Don’t think for a second you’re indispensable, because you’re not. The only reason I haven’t slipped inside of you to wear you around like a puppet is because I’ve got better things to be doing, and you’re below my notice.”


His muse was truly terrifying.

Could he even call him his muse anymore? Now that he knew the depths to which Bill would sink. How carelessly he’d use people? How he’d used Ford?

He was just another mark to him. Another puppet, a pawn.

Then why go to such lengths for him? Ford didn’t understand. Why would he do this for him? Why care about his mind?

“If you ever touch Sixer again, if you ever turn that memory ray on him for a second, if you ever throw him down the stairs again and leave your marks on his body—“

So that’s why he’d been bruised. Ford could see that playing out, see Bill being furious that Ford had been harmed, or maybe marked was more accurate. Ford was coming to see Bill’s protectiveness as possessiveness.

He thought he’d seen how low Bill would stoop, but apparently he still had further to sink into the depths of cruelty.

“I don’t care how good of an engineer you are – I’ll kill you. I’ll kill you and laugh.”

Bill grinned at McGucket, and Ford was viscerally reminded of the only thing he’d managed to hear in the void, from the vantage point the ring showed him.

Bill’s raucous, insane, echoing laughter.

He killed them, and laughed.

“P-please. I’ve got a family.” Fiddleford pleaded, shrinking away from Bill.

“And I’ll kill your family too, just to make things clear to you.” Bill was still grinning.

Sending threats home with a smile? Threatening Fiddleford’s family? Tate was just a baby.

Bill was… Bill was ruthless. And cruel. Vicious.

What did Ford ever do to deserve this creature in his life?

Why did this happen to him?

“Sixer is mine. You do not touch him.” Bill hissed, flames licking around him, wreathing him in vengeful fire, and Ford felt his stomach drop, twisting in knots.

He used to like when Bill would say that.
Now that memory was tainted, forever.

He signed his mind and body over to this creature. He shook on it. They made a deal. That had no doubt been Bill’s game all along, and Ford, like a lovestruck idiot, gave him everything he wanted.

Bill was right in saying that, Ford did belong to him now, and it made Ford feel ill with regret.

He felt like throwing up.

“The only one who gets to mess with Sixer’s mind is me. Got that?”

Ford reached up, and grabbed his forehead fearfully. The fuzzy patch in his memory that wasn’t going away, no matter how total the recall was after watching his memories play back on the VCR, that was Bill. Ford wondered what else had been manipulated, his thoughts, his dreams.

He thought back to the foot rub on the couch. He’d dreamed about that the night before. Had Bill implanted that idea into his head? Had he orchestrated this whole thing from the start? All those dreams he had about him, fanning the flames of Ford’s feelings from day one. Had that all been a lie?

His chest was fit to burst, heart beating haphazardly. His jaw was clenched painfully from the strain of keeping himself together. He was sweating, his eye hurt, and his head ached, and his heart felt like it was being crushed, exerting itself in one final last hoorah of enthusiasm, his heartbeat performing a fitful frenzied solo of revelation and adrenaline.

Ford pushed away from the monitor, feeling detached, sick, broken.

The monitor continued to play, the voices sounding faint and far away.

“You’re a monster.”

“I’m a lot of things. What’s it to you?”

“Does Ford know what you are?”

Ford’s eyes staggered back to the screen, yet more wetness pricking at the corners of his eyes, his entire being hovering on the cusp of something.

“He knows enough.” Bill answered shortly, narrowing his eyes at the engineer. He plucked the memory ray out of the air and turned it over in his hands, examining it.

“Does he know that you’re evil?” Fiddleford croaked, the words coming out despite how afraid he was to say them.

Ford’s face was screwed up with the exquisite sort of agony that comes with finding out such a thing. With discovering that not only was your beloved muse a creature of evil, but that he had hid it, lied to Ford about it to his face, in his every word and action, since day fucking one.

For a moment, Ford thought he caught a glimpse of the Bill he knew, the Bill who, apparently, only shone through for him. The Bill who he cherished. He saw a glimpse, there was something there, for one inscrutable moment, dancing across Bill’s face.

Something like vulnerability, or care.
Bill hunched his shoulders and replied in a low voice.

“What he doesn’t know won’t hurt him.”

Ford felt himself shatter, he felt himself break so thoroughly he didn’t know how he’d ever pick up the pieces.

Bill was wrong.

Ford’s focus drifted in and out throughout the rest of the conversation, struggling with processing any of this. He was stuck in a whirlwind of self-flagellation, guilt, anger, and heartbreak so powerful he wished he never had a heart to begin with.

It was his fault, opening his heart up to Bill in the first place.

He thought they had something special. And it was tearing him up inside.

*Focus.* The voice said, coming back to whisper in his ear. *Listen. See.*

Blankly, Ford turned his focus to the screen, clenching his jaw, trying to hold himself together long enough to see this through. The voice apparently hadn’t been lying, and if what it said was true, Stanford didn’t have time to mope around, he had to act. He couldn’t waste time being useless, being miserable. He had to engage, think.

(And if you can’t think then what are you good for?)

Ford jutted his jaw out stubbornly and looked back to the monitor.

“What are you usin’ the portal for anyhow?” Fiddleford asked, glancing cautiously at the flames dancing in Bill’s hand.

It was bold of him to ask. Ford was hanging on the answer.

“That’s for me to know and you to find out.” Bill grinned, raising his eyebrow gamely. “And won’t that be funny, when you do.”

“Are you usin’ it for evil?”

Ford swallowed, his throat feeling taut with the last bit of hope he sustained, wishing Bill would confess what he was really doing, that he wasn’t simply causing chaos for the sake of chaos. Ford wanted Bill to say something that would somehow justify all of this enough to make him forgive the god.

Bill’s grin fell slightly, and he pursed his lips, before answering somewhat more sedately than expected. “If finding a home for my friends is evil, you can call it whatever you want.”

Ford’s throat tightened on that hope, riding the wave of possibility that this could still be salvaged. That this wasn’t the end of his regard for Bill.

If he could just say something to prove there was a reason motivating this, then Ford could understand his muse, something he’d longed for from the moment he first summoned him.

“Who’re your friends?” Fiddleford questioned, his tone pitying.

The pity evaporated fast enough when Bill’s grin brightened, his eyes lighting up yellow again, glowing in that unnerving way they did.
“The biggest freak-show in the galaxy, and when we roll into town this dimension’s gonna bear witness to the greatest, weirdest party this multi-verse has ever seen.”

Dreaded confirmation.

Ford had hoped that he wouldn’t hear this, but there it was, from the muse’s own mouth. The portal was never about Ford’s destiny, it was always about Bill, and that realisation rubbed Ford raw.

He barely heard Fiddleford’s final question.

“And where does Stanford fit into all of this?”

“I’m working that out, don’t you worry.” Bill assured Fiddleford, gesturing with the memory ray held in his other hand. “Call it a work in progress.”

A work in progress. That’s what Ford had always been to Bill, a work in progress, a mark, a dupe. Someone to build his portal, someone to feed him and worship him. Someone to entertain him.

Someone to fill a use.

If Ford ever hoped Bill could feel something equal for Ford, that hope disintegrated as surely as the slime planet had. As surely as his own would, if he didn’t stop Bill.

There’s not much time. The voice urged him. You have to act now. Tomorrow will be too late.

Ford stared hollowly at the monitor for a while, before he reached out to press pause on Fiddleford’s memory, right as Bill turned the memory gun on him, erasing Fiddleford’s memory. Clearly, he didn’t have the same compunctions about Fiddleford’s brain sanctity as he did with Stanford’s. That didn’t change anything though.

The lab was silent, and Ford felt empty inside. He needed to feel empty.

He couldn’t feel what this was, this betrayal of his trust, of the small awkward part of him that cared to culture feelings. He couldn’t feel. It would halt his functioning, and he needed to be able to function.

You’re the Man Who Changed the World. Change it now. The voice whispered. Save it.

“How?” Ford asked with a dead voice that hardly sounded like his own.

You have the answer. The voice flashed the image of Ford’s alchemy books up in the scientist’s head, showing him the blueprints for Bill’s human body. You only need to implement it.

“What do I need?” Ford asked mechanically, wiping his face again.

Looking down at his hand he saw that it wasn’t tears he was wiping away, but blood. His own blood. His eye was bleeding.

He wiped his hand on his trousers, and made his way through the lab, not letting anything stop him, especially not his own discomfort. He was going through far worse than a bleeding eye, and if he could repress the rest in order to save the world, he could repress this.

You’ll need salt. The voice said, sounding satisfied, as Ford set out to follow its instructions. And lots of it.
The past two days inside of that log cabin had been hell for Willow Oakwood. Ever since she felt those pains at 8pm, she hadn’t been left alone for a second. She just needed space to be. Falling apart in front of people was exhausting. She just wanted to feel normal again, and she couldn’t, stuck in a room full of pitying glances.

“Stop fussing over me Suzie. I’m fine.” Willow ran her hands through her hair in frustration, grabbing her bag and stalking out of her cabin briskly, wanting to walk it all off until she could trick herself into thinking walking had always been this easy.

“You’re not fine. Willow, I’m worried. Why’d you just leave like that?” Suzie questioned, following her friend.

“I had to get out of there. It was too much. First Dan, and then his parents. I couldn’t –“ Willow paced and sighed, shaking her head.

“Everyone’s here to look after you.” Suzie offered timidly, frowning.

“Well I’m SICK OF IT!” Willow yelled, and bunched her hair in her fist.

Suzie stepped back, startled. Willow was the type to lash out on the odd occasion, but never at her. But Suzie could forgive her anything right now, knowing what she’d been through.

“I know.” Suzie said softly.

Willow looked haggard, her hair not done meticulously the way she preferred, no makeup on today. For someone grasping at normalcy she’d missed a few essential steps, but despite her usual war paint gone, she was doing her utmost to pull up her barriers regardless, keeping everything in. She’d had enough falling apart. She’d just had enough.

“I couldn’t breathe. I just need space.” Willow said, somewhat quieter, a soft apology to her friend without saying the words.

“What if everyone else leaves? I can ask them if they want to leave, and it can be just us, okay Willow?” Suzie suggested helpfully, looking back at the cabin and the cars parked out front of it. “I’m sure your family, and Dan’s Ma won’t mind. Dan’s not back yet, they could go look for him and give you some breathing room.”

“I don’t want breathing room, I want –“ Willow’s words trailed away into distraction.

Suzie looked back at Willow, who was squinting at something out in the woods.

“Is that -?” Willow paused, taking it in.

Suzie stepped up beside her and tried to see what had caught her attention.

“Stanford!” Willow called out, and began pacing towards the strange scientist. “Hey Stanford.”

Ford was marching through the forest, his movements stiff and mechanical, carrying two industrial sized bags of salt on his shoulder. He seemed off in his own head, and there was a rust coloured
patch on his cheek.

Willow chased over to him, her feet beating against the forest floor, running from the stifling influence of her circumstance and reaching out to Stanford, like if she just caught him, she’d get her old life back.

Suzie was left behind, in the clearing by the cabin.

Skidding to a halt beside him, Willow got a chance to properly look at Ford, and was shocked by what she saw. “What happened to you? Holy shit, is your eye bleeding?”

“Not now Willow.” Ford gritted out, and tried to walk around her, not even looking at her. “I need to –”

“Are you okay?” Willow asked, sincerely, and a muscle in Ford’s jaw moved, straining to hold himself together.

Ford swallowed, and then rallied himself to look Willow in the eye as he dismissed her, brows already furrowed crossly, but his words caught short upon looking at her properly.

Her hair was a mess, her eyes were rimmed with red, and her belly was flat.

Realisation dropped like a stone in his stomach.

“Oh no.”

Willow scowled, and pulled her jacket over her flat stomach, preparing to complain. “Not you too.”

“Oh no. Willow, I am so sorry.” Ford admitted, his voice guttural and shocked. “This is all my fault.”

“What?” Willow blinked at Stanford.

“It’s not a coincidence. It can’t be. The timing is – first Janice Valentino and now you – of course it’s –“ Ford made a frustrated noise and kneaded his forehead with his free hand. “Stupid.”

“What are you talking about?” Willow looked at Stanford, searching his face for some logic other than this compounding guilt he seemed to display.

“The portal test. The ramifications. I was too headstrong. I thought I’d checked everything. I – I didn’t think. I should have considered. The shockwave, it’s impacts – I – Willow, I’m so sorry.” Ford apologised solemnly, until it finally struck Willow exactly what he was apologising for. “It’s my fault you lost –“

Willow looked over her shoulder to where Suzie stood in the distance, watching them cautiously from over by the house.

She grabbed Stanford by the arm and leaned in close to him, looking up at his bleeding, frantic eye.

“What the hell do you mean?” Her voice was low and formidable. “You’d better fucking explain yourself. Your fault how?”

“The portal. I – Bill – he –“ Ford swallowed, and looked even more frantic and apologetic than he had before. “He’s going to destroy the world. Tomorrow. He thinks it’s a party, that’s why he built the portal. I - I only have today to – to stop him.”
Willow paused for a beat, taking this in, before her eyes widened with understanding, and suddenly Ford didn’t need to say anymore.

“And don’t think just because you invited me to your party that you’re invited to mine!”

“That inhuman son of a bitch.” Willow swore.

Ford looked up at her in shock. “You knew?”

“I don’t know what this portal thing is, but I saw you both in the forest, when he was levitating shit, and again at the carnival. He was torturing that poor gorilla. I should have known he was up to something. That bullshit he gave me about you dragging him there from wherever muses live was such total crap, I –” Willow muttered furiously.

“Wait, he – he told you?” Ford boggled, unable to wrap his mind around that at this particular moment.

“That he’s your muse? I didn’t believe it.” Willow scoffed, then seemed to reconsider when she saw how shell-shocked Stanford seemed to be upon learning this. “Are you shitting me? He’s your muse.”

“I –” Ford cleared his throat, and looked suspiciously over at Suzie, before lowering his voice. “He’s more like a God. And it’s my fault he’s here in the first place, but the fact is that he’s been… using me, manipulating me, and I – I have to stop – I have to stop him. Before –”

“Fuck.” Willow reeled, comprehending that the yellow eyed little shit she’d been so suspicious of was not only a God, but hellbent on destroying the world? It wasn’t such a stretch of the imagination, knowing what Willow knew about Bill, but it still seemed unreal.

The whole situation seemed unreal. If Willow hadn’t already asked herself if she was crazy, knowing what she knew about Bill, she’d probably be asking herself now. In a way, it was good she already got that crisis over with, now she knew magic was real, she could roll with it far better.

“I’m really sorry, and I promise, I’ll find some way to make it up to you. I –” Ford heaved the salt over his shoulder, and looked towards his car, still parked in the lot past the tree line, knowing he had a time limit. “I have to go.”

“Go? Go where?” Willow pressed, standing stubbornly in front of Stanford, halting his progress.

“Willow, are you okay?” Suzie called out from over by the cabin.

“I know how to stop him, I just need to – if I can force him out of his body then there’s still a chance to stop this – to stop him – I”

“Well, I’m coming with you.” Willow decided.

“No, you can’t. It’s too dangerous.” Ford replied immediately, fearing for Willow’s safety, especially knowing how much he’d indirectly hurt her already. Through his negligence, through trusting Bill. Through building the portal. It was his fault, her miscarriage, Janice Valentino’s – and who knew what other potential side effects he’d unleashed on the town.

Willow’s brows bunched up crossly.

“Don’t treat me like I’m made of glass. He’s screwed me over as much as anyone, I’m not about to let him screw over the world. I live here too you know. This can be how you make it up to me.”
Willow jutted her jaw out, glaring passionately up at Stanford’s confused face. “You can tell me about this portal business in the car, come on.”

“I still don’t –“

“You’re not seriously going after him with no back up?” Willow grabbed onto Stanford’s arm again, harder this time, almost desperately, getting into his space. She needed this, to come along. She needed it. “With the world at stake? This isn’t the time to play personal hero.”

Ford paused, her words resonating with him for all the wrong reasons.

(You’re telling me you really want to take on a sea monster alone with no backup? I thought you were supposed to be the smart one IQ.)

Bill’s counsel was a double-edged sword. Remembering his advice hurt Stanford, but he was forced to admit the sense in his words.

Bill was too formidable a monster to engage without backup.

And Willow already knew what he was on some level.

“Willow. I’m coming over there.” Suzie called out, picking her way across the forest to be with her friend.

“I can help you.” Willow urged Stanford quietly. “Let me. I need to do something. You have to give me this.”

Ford looked down at Willow, noting all that she had lost, noting how her desperation mirrored his own, and conceded.

“Alright. You can come. I may need your help, setting some things in place, but nothing too dangerous. I will not be putting you in any more danger.”

“What’s the worst that could happen that hasn’t happened already.” Willow’s laugh was self-deprecative and reckless.

Stanford could relate to that sort of drained, recklessness. It was laugh or cry, and Ford didn’t feel like succumbing to either.

“Let’s get this salt in the car then.” Ford nodded.

Willow hefted one of the bags of salt from Ford, and lugged it over her own shoulder, finally feeling useful again. “Got it.”

Suzie made her way across the forest, right as Willow and Stanford set off.

“Guys, what are you doing? Where are you going? Willow, you can’t just – you shouldn’t be carrying that. I - let me help.”

“No Suzie.” Willow stopped, and put her hand on Suzie’s shoulder. “Go home.”

“Where are you going?” Suzie pouted, and crossed her arms, tugging her cardigan across her chest. “You shouldn’t be –“

“I’m just going to Stanford’s place for a little while to help him out with something. You should go home, and stay there. I’ll be back to see you later, okay?” Willow nodded, and patted Suzie on the
shoulder, dismissing her, before continuing to Stanford’s car.

“I – you – alright I –“ Suzie watched them both walk away, loading the bags of salt into Stanford’s trunk, before getting in the car and driving off. “I guess so.”

Suzie stewed on their sudden departure, watching Ford’s car drive away, and she clenched her fists in the fabric of her cardigan as they left.

Why did Willow get to see what was in that Shack, and why did they both go and leave her behind? Willow shouldn’t be going anywhere, she needed to rest, after what had happened. She was grieving, making reckless decisions, and it wasn’t safe to let her go off alone.

Her best friend was being irresponsible, and Stanford didn’t look too level either. Suzie reasoned, she’d be a bad friend if she didn’t follow them. To make sure Willow was alright.

Sliding into her car, Suzie turned on the engine, and pulled out into the street, following Ford’s car through Gravity Falls, and down Gopher Road.

Towards the mysterious shack.

Pulling up out the front of the shack, Ford undid his seatbelt, before looking over to Willow. He’d filled her in on the details of the portal, of Bill’s plan, on the plan to stop him, during the drive. Now they just had to act.

“Alright, we need to be in and out. There are a few things I need to grab from the lab to set this up and make it convincing.”

“What can I do?” Willow asked.

Ford chewed on his bottom lip, considering all the variables, before he remembered the memory ray up in the attic, in the box with all of Fiddleford’s forgotten belongings.

Bill had proved that he wasn’t above using the memory ray to solve his problems, and Stanford knowing the truth about Bill was knowledge he couldn’t afford to give up.

If Bill turned the memory gun on Ford, it didn’t matter how well intentioned his plan to save the world was, if that happened it would all be over. Trapped forever in ignorance, putty in Bill’s hands.

The thought made his skin crawl, imagining what it would be like going back to the way things were, like nothing had happened, knowing what Bill had been hiding from him. What he would no doubt continue to hide, if he got his hands on that memory ray.

Ford looked over to Willow.

“In the attic, there’s a memory ray prototype that Fiddleford made. If Bill get’s his hands on it, we can say goodbye to our memories, and any chance we could possibly have of stopping this apocalypse. That would be the cleanest way he has to make all of this go away, and we can’t let
“Okay, so I’ll go up to the attic and get it.” Willow said, undoing her own seatbelt eagerly.

“I don’t – I don’t feel comfortable letting you go up there alone. Last I checked, Bill’s sleeping up there.” Ford wrung his hands anxiously.

“In the attic?” Willow questioned.

“No, in my room.” Ford shifted uneasily in his seat.

It was jarring to think of how pleasantly he’d left Bill this morning, that his muse would still be sleeping up there, waiting for him to come back and make him breakfast.

Their intimacy was so close, only hours away, but everything was different now.

Ford’s fondness for the muse couldn’t compete with the bone deep knowledge that he had to be stopped.

“So, I’ll go do your job then. What do I need to grab from the lab?” Willow looked expectantly at Ford.

“You wouldn’t know what to get, even if I explained it to you, and the lift has safety protocols that are coded. They’re too complex for you to decipher. We don’t have that much time.” Ford fretted, and bit his lip, before he reached into the back seat and dug through his backpack.

He passed to Willow, very delicately, the laser gun.

“If you’re quiet, you might be able to sneak there and back without needing this, but just in case –“ Ford pointed out the features of the gun to Willow. “This dial on the side adjusts the size and scope of the laser point, and you pull the trigger to fire. It’s a laser gun.”

“This is some science fiction shit right here.” Willow grinned, accepting the laser gun with awe.

“Where did you even get this?”

“Bill and I made it.” Ford admitted, looking at the laser gun, feeling terribly nostalgic for that first point of connection, when he could somewhat trust the muse. When they were building that trust together. This was their first olive branch, the first favour Bill did for Ford. The first among many.

He pushed it out of his mind, shaking his head. “When you’re upstairs, you’re looking for a device that looks similar to this in shape. It’s a ray gun, but it has a candle shaped lightbulb as the focal point, and a circular dial at the side like this gun, and a trigger. It should be in a cardboard box on top of the bed up there.”

“So I just go in, get the gun, then come back down to meet you in the forest?” Willow clarified.

“As quickly as possible. I’ll grab the things I’ll need from the lab, then I’ll be taking them into the clearing in the woods I mentioned, to set up the circle we need to unbind Bill from his body.” Ford looked at the laser gun, as Willow carefully put it in her side bag, and swallowed. “Once everything is set up and ready, I’ll go back into the house, and if he’s still asleep, I’ll – I’ll wake Bill, and tell him – tell him I’ve made a picnic for him, in the forest.”

Ford swallowed again, trying hard to suppress his feelings. He kept swallowing, but the thickness in his throat wouldn’t budge, and he felt regret for this plan well up inside him.
He knew it had to happen, for the sake of the world, but part of him was raging against stripping that look of returned adoration from Bill’s face, of rending his perfect muse from the perfect body he’d built as an expression of love before he knew it was love.

He knew it was selfish of him, but the part of this plan he was loathing the most was betraying Bill’s trust like this. He didn’t want to see that trust, the trust he’d earned from the God, die in Bill’s vibrant eyes.

Willow watched Ford clench his hand into a fist on his knee, swallowing back emotion.

She frowned, watching the bob of Ford’s Adams apple as he desperately tried to suppress the emotion clawing up his throat.

“This is really hard for you, isn’t it?” She asked softly, pitying Ford.

Ford licked his lips, and nodded, blinking away the wetness in his eyes, trying to ignore the tightness in his chest.

“But if we don’t do this, is the world really gonna end?” Willow pressed, worried.

Ford sucked in a harsh breath, and tried to compose himself once more.

Clearing his throat, he answered briskly. “Most likely. He will use the portal in the basement to tear a hole between dimensions, and he’ll invade this dimension and dominate it, that or destroy it, and laugh. We have to stop him.”

Willow nodded, wringing her hands on the strap of her bag. “Right. Let’s do this.”

“Right.” Ford nodded, and opened the car door. “The attic is all the way up the stairs. They’re loud stairs, the one third from the very top creaks, so be careful.”

“I will.” Willow nodded. Smiling encouragingly, she reached out to pat Ford on the arm. “See you soon, okay?”

Ford’s returning smile was more of a pained grimace, but he nodded, and sprung out of the car.

There was no going back now. This had to be done.

For the sake of the world.

Willow tiptoed through the house, looking at the scientific oddities scattered about Stanford’s domain.

She knew she wasn’t here to snoop, that snooping was just a distraction, like a lot about today was for her, but she couldn’t help it.

She could only imagine what Suzie would think of this place.

There were dinosaur skulls soaking in fish tanks, with electrodes relaying readings between the
skull and a peculiar beeping machine. There were books everywhere, bookshelves all over. There were strange creations, and gnomes in cages, and the odd smattering of homey touches that Willow found oddly charming.

There were two pairs of plaid slippers set up in front of the couch, two empty mugs, and a jam jar of chillies resting beside one of Stanford’s journals on the coffee table.

It was all too domestic, and in that moment, Willow had no issues imagining Bill and Stanford, curled up on that couch together in their slippers and pyjamas, Bill resting his head on Stanford’s shoulder while Ford wrote in his journal, popping chillies in his mouth and drinking tea as he watched Stanford work.

It was a treasonous image, just imagining it, knowing how evil and duplicitous Bill was, but she couldn’t help but warm to the thought of it.

Willow was struck with a sense of how painful this must be for Ford, doing this. Turning on his false ‘muse’. No matter how false he was, the memories they shared together were real, and that must cut Ford so deeply.

Sure, Dan could drink a little too much when he was out with his friends from the lumber yard, and that made Willow occasionally less inclined to forgive him and let him back into her cabin, but that couldn’t compare to total global annihilation, that grand scale of destruction and wilful manipulation, to knowing that this comfort and intimacy you’ve built with someone, this life you’ve built together, was all a lie.

Willow’s heart hurt for Stanford in that moment, not because of how serious what he was about to do was, dismantling his muse’s body, but because Willow couldn’t imagine how fucking hard it would be to find someone so perfect for you, and have this happen.

Creeping through the house, noting the triangle motifs everywhere, and the little touches that indicated that this house was a shared domain, bits of Bill and Stanford everywhere, Willow admitted to herself that Bill was good for Stanford, when they were together. Stanford laughed, and felt comfortable, and happy.

It was a shame that Bill was screwing him over this whole time. For a while there, Willow was rooting for them being together.

So much for that.

Willow crept up the stairs, taking care with every step, keeping her movements light and gentle. She gripped onto the strap of her bag nervously as she went, but she couldn’t help but look around when she reached the second-floor landing. There were two rooms and a bathroom, Ford’s room, and the room he set out for Bill. If Willow’s assumption was correct, they’d been sharing Ford’s room lately, the little monster was apparently asleep in there right now.

Scowling at the hallway, Willow continued on up the stairs, towards the attic door. The wooden door was so close, her goal behind it, and so Willow sped up, eager to get in and get out before shit went down.

In her rush to complete her mission, she forgot about the stair, third from the top.

It creaked loudly when she stepped on it.

Sucking in a breath, Willow hastily stepped off the stair. She climbed up to the stair above it, exhaling relief when she reached the landing.
Gently pushing the attic door open, Willow surveyed the room.

There, on the bed, was the cardboard box Ford mentioned.

She hurried over to it, and saw the memory ray sitting at the top of the box, in plain sight. She grabbed it, and stuffed it in her side bag, before making to leave.

She paused by the bed, drawn to the dried flowers left in the vase by the night stand.

Forget-me-nots, withered and crisping now.

Dan had asked her out with a bouquet of forget-me-nots in middle school, and at the time she rejected them. When she finally gave him another chance later on down the track she realised how dedicated Dan was to her, to making an impression. He gave her the same flowers when she agreed to another date, years later, beaming when he handed them to her.

“I told you you wouldn’t forget me.”

Willow reached out and brushed her fingertips along the petals of the dried flowers, thinking about Dan, how he’d been so frantic when the pains hit, so worried and helpless, unable to do anything to save the baby, to help Willow.

When it was all over, he didn’t want to cry in front of her, and he took to the streets, venting his emotions into the night. He left the night it had happened, and he hadn’t come back yet.

She hoped he was okay.

Bill nestled into the pillows of Stanford’s bed, breathing in the deep scent the other man left, finding it comforting.

Slowly rousing after concluding his business with the Don, or should he say with the hilariously named new Don, Bill almost felt tired, waking up, but then he remembered the promised pampering Sixer had in store for him.

A big breakfast, like when he’d first arrived. And then they’d have the whole day together. Their last day.

Bill was keen to savour every second of it.

He knew he didn’t have long with Sixer in this blissful state of ignorance, and Pyronica’s words were lingering in the back of his mind.

Sixer needed to know. Pyronica was right.

And if Sixer were to know, it would be best if Bill told him. Told him what this portal was really for.

Bill was a fan of the win-win scenario, and in his head, that’s what this was. Sixer wanted to change the world, Bill wanted to change the world. Sixer wanted to become famous, a genius on
the brink of epiphany, Bill would give him all of that and more. Adventure, exploration, the whole universe under Bill’s thumb, and in the palm of Sixer’s hand.

He thought it was quite romantic.

He just had to figure out if Sixer would see it that way.

Bill almost didn’t want to tell him. Not a lot of things scared Bill Cipher, and even fewer things Bill would *admit* scared him, but this was one of them.

Losing Sixer scared Bill.

He didn’t want to let him go.

Rolling in the still warm sheets, Bill bunched the duvet between his legs, and grabbed Sixer’s pillow, pulling a stray strand of short auburn hair from the pillowcase.

Bill examined the hair in the morning light, and decided he liked the colour and thickness of the strand. Sixer could do very little wrong. Even his hair was perfect.

Satisfied with that conclusion, Bill opened his mouth, and placed the hair on his tongue, swallowing it happily.

He owned Sixer, every bit of him. He could do what he liked with those bits, and Bill liked having Sixer inside of him.

The remnants of that one sip of Sixer’s worship juice was still swilling around Bill’s form, making him tingle from head to toe with unbridled power.

And last night, they’d tried Sixer’s version of being inside of someone.

It had a certain charm, and overwhelmed Bill enough that he’d be keen to try it again. Sixer had certainly liked it, and the way he looked at Bill throughout was just …

Bill sighed blissfully, and buried his face in Sixer’s pillow, rubbing his cheek against it, huffing in the scent.

He was ludicrously, blissfully happy.

Even Don Goo’s wanton disrespect earlier couldn’t dull this feeling of pure joy.

Bill was on the cusp of achieving his long sought for dream, and he had Sixer by his side.

Though he hadn’t heard it again since the night he showed Sixer the universe through his eyes, Bill clung possessively to that little half-conscious admittance on Sixer’s behalf, grasping onto those words like he’d never let them go.

He had Sixer’s love.

If any of his henchmaniacs saw him like this, mooning over the human, rolling around like an idiot, he’d never hear the end of it, and with that sobering thought in mind, Bill cleared his throat, and sat up in bed, looking around the room.

Sixer had left to get groceries, last Bill remembered. Time was a meaningless construct, especially while sleeping, so Bill wasn’t sure how many hours or minutes had passed since he felt Sixer’s fond regard brush against his forehead.
Sliding over to the edge of the bed, Bill grabbed his discarded pyjama pants, and decided that he’d much rather wear Sixer’s shirt today. It would be a nice surprise for the scientist when he got back, and if he had a problem with it, Bill would remind Ford that he now owned him, and that included his clothes.

Ever the nerd, the first shirt Bill found in the laundry hamper (he had a craving for Sixer’s scent today that detergent drenched clean clothes couldn’t satisfy) was a faded NASA print tee. It was too big for Bill dripping off his shoulders, and he took a moment to consider the things Sixer incorporated into this body’s design.

Did he design Bill smaller than him due to personal preference, or had he made an informed decision based on how Bill chose to present himself to the scientist before he was made tangible?

Bill always chose to appear to Stanford as a small, non-threatening, some would even say ‘cute’ triangle. He remembered Sixer being fascinated with him, in the mindscape, how Ford would marvel when he held Bill in the palm of his six-fingered hands, Bill’s black little arms wrapping around Ford’s fingers. He would sit on Ford’s shoulder to better whisper in his ear, or rest in his hair, closer to the brain, back when winning Sixer’s regard was purely for utilitarian purposes.

That was how it was in the beginning, but oh boy how things had changed.

Bill examined the body Sixer made for him in the mirror on the side of the wardrobe, and smiled at his reflection.

As much as he wanted to ditch this form, he could appreciate its nuances. Sixer gave Bill straight, white teeth, nice pink healthy gums, and lovely dark skin. His arms were almost as black as they were in the mindscape, and the yellow hair and eyes were a nice touch. A charming homage to who Bill was to Sixer.

Sixer made sure his own shoulders were broader than Bill’s, his own stature taller, but now Bill was finding he didn’t mind all that much. He liked Sixer’s broad shoulders, and how on his tip-toes he was the perfect height to press kisses to Sixer’s chin.

Bill heard a creak upstairs from the attic.

Maybe that was Sixer. Bill could sneak up there and surprise him, tip toe behind him and cover Ford’s glasses with his hands.

*Guess who?* Bill thought, and laughed to himself.

Who else would it be?

Walking out, barefoot, Bill climbed the stairs, smiling quietly.

He’d soon find out.

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Suzie pulled up in front of the shack, and peered up at the building. Here it was, the mysterious shack where Stanford conducted all of his zany scientific experiments. She was excited to go
inside, and the door was already ajar.

She could just push it open.

And there it was.

The inside of Mr Mystery’s house.

It was everything Suzie hoped for and more. She wanted to go and poke around all Stanford’s funny little humdinger inventions, his doo-dads, curios and gadgets. She knew coming in uninvited, snooping like this, wasn’t very polite, but being left behind wasn’t very polite either.

If Willow could come here to help Stanford, Suzie could too.

Stanford might not return Suzie’s affections, and Suzie had accepted that, accepted that the scientist was gay, was enamoured with his mean assistant, but that didn’t mean that she wouldn’t help him if she could. Feelings didn’t mean you only loved someone if they loved you back, that wasn’t how things worked. She wanted to help him.

Or help Willow. She’d do anything for her best friend.

Including follow her here, even if it wasn’t asked for.

Willow wasn’t in a position to dismiss help right now. She wasn’t thinking straight, hadn’t been thinking straight since the miscarriage. While Dan cried and raged at the universe, Willow didn’t raise her voice, didn’t break things, didn’t cry out at how unfair it was.

Instead she tried to hold it together, becoming more withdrawn and irritable, hold her pain together, until she couldn’t.

Suzie worried for her. That’s why she needed to be there for her. Willow needed her, needed support.

Even if that support came in the form of following her to Stanford’s kooky science shack to have a look around.

Suzie reached out to examine one of the odd little machines, some sort of radio with a buzzing antenna, a spark of electricity jumping from one end of the antenna to another. She wanted to touch it, see how it worked.

It was only when she heard Willow’s voice from upstairs that she remembered what she came for.

She withdrew her hand from the kooky little radio, and looked up at the ceiling, towards the sound of Willow speaking.

Following her friend’s voice, Suzie tip toed up to the attic.

The stair creaked as she climbed to the top.

Pausing, Suzie waited outside the attic door, wanting to get some sense of what was going on first, rather than just bursting in there. If she just burst in Willow would only send her home. Who knows, maybe they were talking it out, Willow’s feelings. If they were talking about something Suzie could follow, she might be able to help.

The door was ajar, just a little, and Suzie decided she could listen in for a while. No one would know.
Willow was talking in there, and Suzie wanted to find out what was going on.

She watched, and listened, though she hardly believed what she saw.

Willow heard the creak of the staircase, jolted out of her reverie, and spun around. She barely had any time to hide, so she just stood there, clutching onto the strap of her satchel, trying to look casual.

The door opened, and Bill poked his head through.

“Sixer?”

Willow stood stock still, and stared at Bill, and the world ending monster blinked back at her in confusion.

“You’re not Sixer. What are you doing here Red?”

Bill stepped into the room, wearing Stanford’s clothes and pyjamas, and his tone was almost friendly. It made this whole thing just that much more tragic.

Willow steeled her jaw, and said nothing, not knowing what to say.

“Indulging in a little early morning B&E?” Bill probed, stepping further into the room. “You’re snooping in the wrong place. Sixer keeps all the shiny stuff down in his study.”

The longer Willow went, stubbornly not answering him, the more suspicion crept into Bill’s tone.

“Or not. What are you doing here Red?” Bill asked bluntly, stepping closer into the room. What was she doing here, on the last day before the portal went live? And why would Sixer invite her here when they were supposed to be spending the day together? No one ordered a third wheel, last Bill checked.

Willow took a small step to the side, keeping as far away from Bill as possible while sneaking across the room, inching closer to the door.

“Stanford said I could come here.” Willow finally replied.

“Stanford did?” Bill repeated flatly, watching Willow curiously now, his glowing yellow eyes focused and sinister. “And where is Stanford now?”

“He’s downstairs.” Willow managed.

“Uuhh.” Bill stared at Willow, unblinking. “And what are you doing up here?”

“Stanford said I –“ Willow began, and Bill interrupted her sharply, his voice no longer friendly.

“Yes, you’ve said that. I want the real reason. What are you doing here Red?”

Willow froze, and stared at Bill, watching the demon stalk around the room, mirroring her steps.
When Willow didn’t answer, Bill tilted his head at her like some kind of vicious animal.

“I don’t spook you that much, do I? I thought I was invited to your white party. I thought we were friendly now. You seem awfully jumpy.”

Willow’s hand twitched, towards her bag, reaching for a weapon.

He was aiming for friendly, but he was just pissing her off, standing there in front of her, lying in his very essence, pretending to be something he wasn’t. Pretending to be a friend. Friends didn’t tear their friend’s world down for kicks.

“What’s wrong Red?” Bill asked, pacing closer to her, a wolf circling prey. “Not feeling well? Speak up.”

Willow narrowed her eyes, and her jaw jutted out confrontationally, her expression barely concealing her intent to stop Bill, to end him. “I’m fine.” She gritted out.

“Really?” Bill picked up on her aggressive behaviour, piecing things together. He dragged his eyes up and down her body, taking in every detail, before commenting vindictively. “You look kind of flat.”

Willow scowled, and thrust her hand into her bag. She pulled out the first gun shaped weapon she got her hands on, and aimed it at Bill angrily.

“No one asked you, you demon. Stay back.”

Bill blinked at the gun for a few seconds, then burst out laughing.

Willow had pulled the wrong gun on him, she was aiming Fiddleford’s memory gun in his direction, and if that just wasn’t the funniest thing he ever saw, well.

“Don’t laugh. I - I know how to shoot this thing. I – I know what you are!” Willow insisted, still pointing the gun at Bill, not yet registering it was the wrong gun. “Stanford told me everything.”

Bill stopped laughing abruptly, and narrowed his eyes at that. “Stanford did, did he? What did he tell you?”

Willow adjusted her grip on the gun, and shifted uneasily, still trying to edge for the door. “He told me that you’re a monster, and you’re trying to destroy the world.”

That threw Bill, hardly expecting that. He tried not to let it register in his expression, but it was clear that this information was disturbing to Bill. He never had the best poker face.

“Sixer told you that, did he?” Bill chewed on his bottom lip, before taking a deep breath, exhaling discontent. He clenched his fists at his sides, and swung them a little, before speaking again. “And how did he find that out?”

“We won’t let you. We’re going to stop you.” Willow gritted out, keeping the gun aimed at Bill.

“What’s all this ‘we’ Red?” Bill scoffed, and held out his hand.

His telekinesis pulled the memory ray straight out of Willow’s hand, the device zooming into Bill’s.

Willow gasped, and realised too late that she’d pulled the wrong gun. The memory gun was the one she was supposed to keep out of Bill’s hands, and now he had it!
“There is no ‘we’,” Bill said bluntly, fiddling with the dial at the side of the memory ray, while keeping Willow pinned with his gaze. “And there is no stopping this. After I wipe this whole unpleasant interlude from your thick head, maybe leave you a few brain cells worse for the ware, not that anyone would notice, I’m going straight to Sixer to sort this out with him, one on one. He’ll believe me.”

Bill finished fiddling with the gun’s dial, pursed his lips and sighed, frustrated, tapping the side of the ray. “And if that doesn’t work, I guess I’ll go with plan B. I’m not sure how this happened, but I guess I should be thanking you, Red. I didn’t plan ahead this far, but you went and sought out the answer for me. A neat little solution. How thoughtful.”

“I won’t let you do this.” Willow clenched her jaw, determined. Her hand sank into her bag, rummaging about. “It’s bad enough that you lied to Stanford, but to do this to the world - you truly are a monster.”

“Sticks and stones Red.” Bill shrugged, and levelled the gun in her direction, squinting through the scope. “Nicknames don’t phase me. I wonder what they’ll call you, after all this. I hear the Witless Wonder is trademarked.”

“Screw you.” Willow bit out, struggling to grab the proper gun. It was like her bag was suddenly deeper than she remembered, sweaty palms struggling to grab the right weapon.

She edged closer to the door, and heard a creak she assumed had to be her or Bill. She couldn’t look. She couldn’t afford to take her eyes off that monster, there’s no telling what he’d do.

“Oh well. Say goodbye to your braincells, Stick.” Bill shrugged, and placed his finger on the trigger, concentrating, charging the gun’s ray more than a simple wipe warranted. Clearly, he was aiming to make this shot sting.

It whirred to life, it’s hum a foreboding of fractured memories, and in that same moment the ray sparked to life, the attic door burst open, and out sprung Susan Wentworth.

Having been watching from the crack in the door, watching Stanford’s horrible assistant point a gun at Willow, she dove in front of her very best friend in the entire world. It seemed like the only thing to do, the only thing Suzie could do, to protect her.

“NO!”

Suzie stood firm in front of Willow, and the ray struck her squarely between the eyes, sizzling her brain.

She screamed sharply, and fainted, falling to the ground, her temples smoking. Her body convulsed as the ray scorched through her.

“SUZIE!” Willow cried, reaching forward to grab her friend as she slumped to the floor. Catching her before she hit her head on the ground, Willow’s eyes scoured Suzie’s face, looking for signs of responsiveness. “No!”

Willow put her fingers on the side of Suzie’s neck and noted her slowed heartbeat, the sedate shallow breaths she took. She was unconscious, but still alive, still breathing.

Suzie had jumped in, she’d taken the hit that was meant for Willow. She’d sacrificed herself for her very best friend.
Cupping her best friend’s face, her expression crumpled with anguish.

“Suzie, Suzie please. Wake up. Suze.” Willow shook her shoulder desperately, tears she’d been avoiding for days, springing in the corners of her eyes as she sobbed over her best friend’s bravery. “Suzie?”

Bill blinked at Wink Eye’s sudden entrance. That was unexpected. Now he had to load the directive into the memory ray all over again. How inconvenient.

“I told you not to follow me, dummy.” Willow sobbed out, holding onto Suzie’s torso, hugging her tightly.

“Well, you’ll be calling her that a lot more from now on.” Bill rolled his eyes.

“What did you do to her, you bastard?” Willow looked up at Bill, glaring at him through a sheen of tears.

“What the product intended.” Bill gestured to the ray gun. “Hey, don’t cry about it. She’s just unconscious.”

“Fuck you.” Willow sobbed, and held onto Suzie tightly, tucking her into her chest, cradling her singed skull.

“It was an innocent misfire. Don’t worry Red, you’ll get your turn. And look.” Bill waved his hand, and Suzie disappeared, her body banished from the room and from Willow’s grasp. “I even put her back in her bed, safe and sound. She’s gonna wake up tomorrow and not remember any of it.”

Willow lunged, grasping the space where her friend had once been, scooping up nothing but air, before glaring up at Bill, thrusting her hand in her bag with purpose this time.

Bill looked down at the memory ray, and fiddled with the dial, inputting the new directive as he spoke.

“She won’t remember much of anything, actually. This thing usually scrapes some braincells and motor functioning along with the initial blast. Causality of the botched interface between alien and human tech McGucket made. She’ll be fine, just a little stupider than normal. It’s not too much of a loss for the world, Wink Eye’s downgrade, if you think about it. Not like losing Sixer’s IQ. Yeesh. Now that’d be a loss. And on the bright side – OOF!”

Bill dropped the memory gun on the floor, and staggered backwards. He looked down to his side in shock.

Willow had shot him with the laser gun. There was a hole the size of a fist blown right through his stomach. It was painful, and began bleeding profusely.

Normally Bill didn’t mind a little pain, but this was a lot of pain, and to top it off, it wasn’t the fun sort of pain Bill welcomed others inflicting. This was debilitating, and inconvenient, and just insulting.

He’d never been shot through the stomach before. He’d never had a stomach to get shot in the first place before this, and he didn’t expect it to be so incapacitating. His head was spinning, and he was gushing blood. Good God, this was awful.

He lurched backwards, covering the hole with his hand.
“Ow.”

“Don’t you dare talk about her like that.” Willow strode across the room, aiming the gun at Bill threateningly. “She’s my best fucking friend!”

“Ow?!” Bill looked between the blood spilling out onto his hand, and Willow’s red hair, his vision dipping in and out of focus. His healing wasn’t instinctual, it came on lethargically, slowly while Bill’s focus was still rattled.

“That one’s for Suzie.” Willow cried, and then squeezed the trigger again.

Bill felt his skin and bone sizzle all the way through as his chest jolted back, another hole dotted all the way through his sternum.

“And that’s for Stanford. For lying to him all this time. For breaking his heart.”

Bill teetered further backwards, and fell against Fiddleford’s desk, his back resting against the wall beside it, his blood painting the wallpaper. He grasped the desk in vain to keep himself upright.

“Ow!” He repeated through gritted teeth.

The insult was setting in now, overriding the indignity of the whole experience. Bill wasn’t just hurting, now he was getting angry. Pain was one thing, but being shot was another fucking matter. And she had the nerve to lecture him about Stanford?

Willow darted forward and grabbed the memory gun off the floor. She levelled a brief kick at Bill’s leg, before stuffing the memory gun in her bag and straightening up, twisting the dial on the side of the gun to decrease the laser’s size a fraction.

Bitterness and rage twisting her pretty features, she levelled the gun at Bill again.

She fired. The laser cut through Bill’s throat, and he spluttered, choking on the blood. His windpipe flooded with it, blood bubbling up, leaking out over the edge of his lips.

“And that’s for my fucking baby, you monster!”

Bill wheezed, and his eyes glowed. He grasped his neck with his hands, and poured all his energy into healing the hole blasted through his throat.

His hands were slippery with blood, this body didn’t seem to want to stop bleeding. This was so undignified.

The skin closed successfully, though he was still bleeding from his stomach and sternum. At least he could speak now, could breathe wetly.

Gathering himself, he glared up at Willow with angry red eyes.

“A monster, am I?” Bill gargled through the blood, the words coming out hoarse from his ruined throat. “I’ll show you monster.”

Bill began to pull himself upright, and Willow backed away, before turning on her heel and running down the stairs.

She could hear him moving behind her, stumbling around the attic, hear the rattle of him trying to breathe through his ruined windpipe. It was a swishing spluttering noise, hearing him drag air through his lungs, and then she heard the ominous sound of bones cracking, reforming.
She ran.

Her heart was racing, beating in her throat, and her face was wet. She was crying. It was like the
dam from the past two days had broken. She hadn’t stopped crying, not when she gunned Bill
down, even now her eyes were leaking while she was running like her life depended on it.

She reached the bottom of the stairwell, and saw the various trinkets and gizmos in Stanford’s hall
begin to levitate, glowing blue. She threw her hands up in defence and yelped as the coat stand
came hurtling towards her like a spear.

“I’LL SHOW YOU MONSTER!” Bill’s voice came shrieking from the stairs, accompanied by
the thud of heavy movement. He was following her down the staircase, it sounded like he was
staggering on each step, but picking up the pace.

Willow dodged the coat rack deftly.

She hiccupped, her breathing unsteady.

Willow looked briefly towards the elevator where Stanford said the study was, then back towards
the front door.

Her time to decide where to run was limited.

While Bill was staggering down the stairs, more items began to levitate, and the good silverware
floated out from the kitchen, coming down the hall. The cutlery began hurtling itself at Willow,
and her indecision left her vulnerable, Bill’s powers spearing her with a fork in her leg.

She cried out, and scrambled to avoid the other bits of airborne cutlery, ducking low. Her leg hurt
badly, but she couldn’t afford to stop moving.

The silverware embedded itself in the walls, and Willow yanked the fork out of her leg, groaning,
throwing it on the ground. Panting with exertion, she threw herself towards the front door, out into
the yard.

A frightening rumbling sounded out from within the house, something that sounded like a million
voices howling, and Willow hoped to god Stanford was already out of there. The sky seemed to
darken, heavy clouds drawing over the sun, and lightning crackled in the air.

In the yard, she looked between Stanford’s car, and the trees. She couldn’t just drive away with the
memory gun and hide. She didn’t have the time to drive away.

Willow heard a crackling noise, and smelled smoke. She looked over her shoulder just in time.

A huge, flying fireball came hurtling out of the house, narrowly missing Willow, sizzling the tree
beside her.

A second after, a bolt of lightning sparked down from the clouds, and singed the ground a foot to
the left of Willow, nature itself turning on her.

She screamed, panicking, before hurtling herself into the forest, gripping her bag with one hand and
the laser gun in the other.

The trees and bushes whipped past her as she ran, thorns and branches scratching her legs and
arms, leaves crushing underfoot, soot scenting the air. Thunder rumbled louder now, and the air
felt heavy with static.
She was nearly hyperventilating, sobbing as she ran, her breathing staggered and panicked. She tried desperately to pull herself together, for the sake of survival, but she’d never survived something like this before.

Another fireball came ricocheting out into the trees, splintering the redwood to the left of her, setting the forest on fire.

It was hot, there was bright orange flames wherever she looked, and embers curling through the air.

Willow sobbed, frightened, and ran away, deeper into the forest, dodging the flames, ardently glad she didn’t get in the car.

Though a fiery death wasn’t out of the question here either.

Running into a more heavily wooded grove, deeper in, Willow stopped, and hid behind one of the towering redwoods, trying to get her bearings.

When she ran she could hear her footsteps crashing wildly through the forest, could hear her frantic breathing, always sounding loud, too loud. She wondered if she’d have better luck avoiding Bill if she hid, stayed still, stayed quiet.

The static built humidity in the air, and rain began falling, persistent drops on the canopy above.

She attempted to figure out which direction Stanford’s clearing was in, trying to even her breathing. It was quiet, quieter now, when she heard it.

Silence, then a bright light, sudden sound. The crunch of feet on leaves, someone else’s feet. And raindrops.

It was Bill.

She thought he was far away, but in an instant he seemed to have teleported, right into the middle of the clearing.

She sucked in her breath, trying to keep quiet.

Poking her head out from around the tree just a sliver, Willow peeked to see what was going on.

Bill was stalking through the trees.

He looked different, abhorrent, horrendous.

Like a real monster, straight out of someone’s nightmares. Probably Willow’s, after today, if she lived long enough to dream again.

Bill’s form had contorted, changed like the Gorilla at the freak show had.

He had more arms than when Willow had last saw him, six of them, sprouting out of his sides, bending in odd, uncomfortable looking angles, his limbs too thin to be real.

His fingers were tipped with dangerous looking claws, and twitched occasionally with glitchy, erratic movements. He’d ripped his shirt off to make room for the extra appendages.

The hole in his throat had healed completely, but rather than healing the holes in his chest, he left them gaping open. They were no longer bleeding, instead teeth had grown up from the torn flesh,
lining the edges of the wound like a jagged mouth. Black tongues lolled out over the sharp white teeth, dripping red drool into puddles below on the forest floor.

Rain fell heavier now, slicking down on the monster, washing away the blood that had dripped down from his throat, making his dark skin shine.

His brick tattoos were no longer glowing gold, instead they seemed to be an ever-shifting rainbow of dazzling colours, standing out against the black, iridescent and striking.

His eyes were still red, frightening wide eyes, his pupils fiery yellow slits, searching the forest.

He hadn’t seen her yet, but he was far too close for comfort, about ten yards away. Willow ducked back behind the tree, clutching the laser gun tight to her chest.

“Oh Red?” Bill’s voice called out. Even his voice had contorted, echoing in on itself, like several people were speaking.

He sounded taunting, and playful, like he was trying to lure her out into the open. Like this was a game to him.

Willow kept absolutely silent, and remained hidden behind the tree.

“Are we playing hide and seek now?” Bill called out, looking around the clearing.

Every breath he heaved out puffed through the mouths on his chest and stomach, teeth glinting in the morning light. He must have been hot, dangerously so, the breaths turning into steam as the cold rain fell.

“You know, I prefer Marco Polo. How ‘bout you start?”

Willow said nothing, and clenched her jaw in anger.

“Come on Red. Don’t give me the cold shoulder.” Bill paced forward, still looking for her. “It didn’t have to come to this. Just give me the memory ray, and I might even forgive you for aerating my vessel.”

Bill inclined his head, listening for even the slightest sound that would tell him where she was hiding, her and the memory ray. The rainfall was covering her tracks well though. When she said nothing, he knew he’d have to up his game.

Complaining bitterly, he continued speaking.

“I liked this vessel, you know. Sixer made it for me. Why’d you have to ruin it Red? Why’d you have to go and ruin everything?”

He paced forward a step, searching.

“Not satisfied in your own relationship? Is that it? Don’t feel content unless you’re wrecking someone else’s life? I wonder how Punchy feels now that you’ve trapped him in a marriage with no little baby bunting. I bet that shotgun feel’s real itchy in his hands.”

Willow bit her bottom lip, and closed her eyes, shaking her head. She couldn’t speak back, she couldn’t. He was goading her, he wanted her to feel like this. The rain fell on her face, blending with her tears.

“Oh maybe he’s sad about it. Maybe he cried.” Bill continued, speaking loudly, trying to draw her
out. “Not that you would, eh Red? You think you’re so tough. Did you tell him he wasn’t ‘manly’ enough? Do you think he’ll leave you now that there’s nothing between you anymore?”

Willow shook her head again, trying to shake off his words, gripping onto the laser gun more securely. Her lip was bleeding, she was biting it so hard, but she couldn’t speak.

“You never really wanted little sourdough in the first place, did you? All that umming and ahhing, pointless secrecy. Now there’s nothing to hide. So in a way, I did you a favour. Oh sure, you act all cut up, but I bet you’re cheering deep down.”

Willow opened her eyes and scowled, looking down at the gun, finding its weight comforting in her hand, retaliation tempting her. She had the gun, she could just shoot him again. She didn’t have to stand here and take this.

“The only person who wanted it was your lumber headed boyfriend. And I bet you went and told him, didn’t you? You would have had a day tops to celebrate, then … woops. The portal test took care of that.”

She gripped harder on the gun, and took a deep breath, standing up straighter.

“Did you think it was just a malfunction? Is that what Sixer told you?” Bill stepped forward, and caught a glimpse of Willow’s skirt blowing as the wind whipped up a breeze, poking out from behind one of the redwoods. He paused, and turned, watching her. “He doesn’t know half of what this portal can do. You act all righteous, shooting me on behalf of others. The righteous fury of a mother. Face it Red, you weren’t cut out to be a mother, and it was just a matter of time until you did something about it.”

Bill crept closer to the redwood where Willow was hiding, certain she was there now.

“It was either you or me. I did you a favour, and now you’re going to do me one.”

“No.” Willow’s voice came out, small but certain from behind the tree.

“No? You hated that thing growing in you, you thought it was a parasite, you tried to forget it, hide that it even existed. You can lie to yourself all you like, but I know the truth. You never wanted this. It was me or the coat hanger Red, I just sped up the process.” Bill sneered spitefully, standing several yards away from the tree now.

Willow stepped out from behind it, and held the gun in her hand, facing Bill.

“No. I wanted the baby, you asshole.” Willow pulled the trigger, and shot a hole through Bill’s chest again, right through his heart. “And you took it away from me.”

Bill stumbled back a little, the force of the blast throwing him, but he regained his ground quickly enough, the hole already warping into another gaping maw.

“So I did. You wanna know something fun?” Bill held one of his hands over his heart, while the skin moved and shifted beneath it. A mouth grew from the hole, and a black tongue poked out, licking Bill’s hand affectionately. He was grinning, and the tongues dangling out across his chest licked the teeth bracketing them hungrily. “It wasn’t a malfunction. The portal worked exactly as it should have. I should know, I designed it.”

Willow gritted her teeth, a tear slipping from her eye, and she hefted the gun up, shooting Bill again and again.
The shots were hitting their mark, but Bill kept moving, his skin healing quickly as he was shot over and over, still making his way across the clearing.

The laser gun’s battery level dipped low, and the gun let out a loud beep, signalling this.

Bill smirked, recognising the noise.

“Your turn Red. You’d better run.”

Willow looked down between the light blinking on the side of the gun, and Bill’s ravenous expression, the way he hunched forward, readying himself to sprint, his six arms reaching out at her.

She bolted.

She could hear him coming after her, chasing her the old fashioned way for the satisfaction of taking her down with his own hands. She ran, and ran, in the direction she hoped Stanford was.

She looked over her shoulder, and Bill was close, too close.

Screaming hysterically, she ran on. “Help me. SOMEBODY HELP ME!”

“Willow?”

She heard Stanford’s voice call out, not too far away, and she veered, changing her course to head towards his voice. Bill was still hot on her tail, trying to grab her more fervently now, and Willow felt his fingers scrabble against her leg briefly, slippery from the rain, before she outran him.

She came into the clearing finally, when she felt Bill’s hand again, brushing against her ankle, yanking her hard, causing her to topple forward, hitting the ground.

She screamed, and turned around, trying to scramble backwards, Bill looming over her, his too many arms and too many mouths and too many teeth signalling her imminent fate.

He grabbed her leg with three hands, his fourth grasping onto her shoulder. She could feel drool drip from the mouths on his chest onto her wet dress front.

She sobbed, and covered her face with her arms, not wanting to see herself being devoured by this monster, when a voice called out from across the clearing.

“BILL, STOP!”

Willow felt the monster pause above her, limbs frozen.

She peered past her arms, and saw him turn, guiltily looking over at Stanford as though he were caught in the act, doing something compromising to Stanford’s perception of him.

Ford stood sodden in the middle of a magic circle on the other side of the clearing, looking horrified, with a picnic basket by his feet, holding his hand out.

She could hear Bill suck in a sharp breath, and felt the hands grasping onto her let go defensively.

“Bill? Bill, please. Don’t hurt her.” Ford pleaded, holding both of his hands up, like he were talking to a wild animal. He may as well have been.

Bill slowly stood up, regarding Ford warily, his now yellow eyes regarding the scientist hesitantly.
“She shot me.” Bill said pettily in his defence. “With your laser gun.”

“I know, and I’m sorry. I didn’t mean for this to – I don’t. Just – please, don’t hurt her.” Ford begged, still looking at Bill like he was dangerous. Bill didn’t like that. He wanted Sixer to trust him.

Bill’s face screwed up with hurt and frustration, and Willow could see him clench and unclench his six fists, deliberating.

Eventually he stood up, his back straightening out. The mouths on his chest pressed into a thin line of uncertainty, before melting back into smooth, unharmed flesh. His arms seemed less disjointed now, the extraneous limbs folding back and disappearing the longer he stared at Ford.

“A picnic in the rain, huh?” Bill looked down at the basket, and saw the way Ford had endeavoured to seal a magic circle between two sheets of plastic. Quite the romantic little getaway. Bill frowned. “Why do this?”

Ford seemed to struggle with an answer for a moment, before turning it back on Bill. “Why did you do this?”

“Because she shot at me.” Bill repeated, exasperated.

“That’s not what I mean.” Ford shook his head and gave Bill a reproachful look.

Willow was scrambling away from Bill now that his attention was diverted, crawling across the clearing slowly.

“What do you mean?” Bill asked, trying to keep his voice level, though his expression seemed wary.

“You know what you did.” Ford said accusingly, crossing his arms.

“How much do you know?” Bill had to ask, the anxiety building in his chest demanded it.

Ford thought back to the tapes he’d watched, and lifted his chin confrontationally. “I know enough.”

Bill swallowed, that anxiety feeling worse in this body, the hormones the vessel provided making him feel sick and sweaty. He shifted on his feet, before looking up at Ford’s resolute expression, watching him balefully.

“Red told me that you think I’m a monster, not a muse. She said you think I want to destroy the Earth.”

“I know you do.” Ford replied stubbornly. He didn’t move from his spot in the circle, by the picnic basket. He knew Bill had to come to him.

And lo and behold, that’s just what the God did, stepping slowly towards him, like he had something to prove.

“For a smart guy, you don’t know half of it. In fact, I’d say you know even less, and you’re still trying to stop me. That seems like an uninformed decision.”

“I’m not uninformed.” Ford countered, keeping his arms crossed.

“I’d like to know where you got this mysterious information then, because it can’t be right.” Bill
replied slyly, stepping closer. “You know me, don’t you Sixer? Do you honestly think I’m a bad
guy? A monster?”

“I haven’t decided yet.” Ford’s chin tipped up stubbornly, and his brows furrowed. “Muse or
monster. You could be both.”

“Both. All. Nothing.” Bill stepped up to the edge of the magic circle Sixer was standing in, and
looked down briefly at the design of blood on the tarp, before stepping over it. “It doesn’t matter
what I am. All that matters is what I am to you.”

Bill stepped up into Ford’s personal space, and looked up at the scientist hopefully. He was
appealing to Ford’s heart here, he knew it, but there was a naïve part of Bill that hoped that he still
had it. Sixer’s heart. He was relying on the imprint he placed on the skin over the muscle, hoping
for once in his life Sixer would choose his heart over his head. It was a last resort, but it was all Bill
had.

A muscle worked in Ford’s jaw, and he repeated himself, sounding somewhat strained this time. “I
haven’t decided yet.”

“If you were me, wouldn’t you want to know?” Bill reasoned, reaching out to rest his hand against
Ford’s upper arm.

The words struck a chord with Stanford, and that muscle in his jaw jumped again, before he asked.
“And what am I to you? A mark? A convenient dupe?”

Bill’s eyes glowed with intensity, as he strained up on his tiptoes, pressing both of his hands on
Ford’s chest, before hissing out his answer. “You’re mine! You agreed.”

“Oh, sure. Yours to trick. Yours to manipulate. Yours to use.” Ford scoffed, still scowling at the
god.

“I’ve given you everything, and you really think I’m using you?” Bill asked, sounding offended.

“I know what the portal is for, Bill.” Ford said sternly, looking displeased.

Bill’s hopeful expression seemed to drop, just like that. He’d hoped he’d get to be the one to tell
Sixer himself, what the portal was for. Now he’d heard the inside scoop, but clearly from an
unreliable source, who didn’t pad the revelation properly for Sixer, who didn’t make it acceptable
for the scientist to hear.

“I’m sure you think you know, but you have no idea how much this portal means to me.” Bill was
desperate now, wanting his human to see sense, see things his way. He reached up to cup Ford’s
face, feeling him stubbornly recoil, staying still like stone instead of melting with his touch. Still,
Bill pleaded. “Sixer, if you’ll just listen –”

“Bill –” Ford began, sounding conflicted.

“Sixer, please –” Bill started, scrambling to pet Ford’s face, to capitalise on that uncertainty and
pull some sort of gratifying reaction out of the human, something that indicated they could still
make this work.

Several yards away Willow was scrambling to her feet, tiptoeing over to where the salt bag was
kept, behind a tree.

“I can’t let you do this.” Ford said thickly, and Bill grasped onto his face with both hands.
“You don’t understand. I don’t know what you’ve been told, but you don’t understand – Sixer –“

“The portal was always a lie, wasn’t it?” Ford had to ask, bringing his hand up to hold onto Bill’s arm, holding his left hand away from his face. “My destiny –“

“Your destiny isn’t set in stone.” Bill said emphatically, grasping onto Ford’s cheek with his right hand like a lifeline. “No one’s should be. I want to elevate you. Bring you with me!”

“Was it all a lie?” Ford swallowed the lump in his throat, his stoniness failing, asking on.

“I’m not lying to you now. You just don’t understand what I’m trying to accomplish. You were meant to join me. We could change the world together. With you by my side.” Bill was scrambling to hold onto Ford’s face, rubbing his thumbs over Ford’s stubble frantically, trying to warm up his human to him once more, but Ford was like stone. “Please Sixer, you’ve gotta believe me.”

Ford’s voice cracked on his answer, and he seemed to be wavering. At least that’s what Bill believed. In reality, he was watching Willow drag the salt bag around the circle’s edge, seeding the last part of the spell. “I want to.”

“And I want you to. I want you to believe me. Trust me!” Bill begged, beseeching Ford with his eyes. “This doesn’t have to change things. I want you –“

“I want to understand.” Ford strained, shaking his head, looking down at Bill’s desperate expression.

“Then I’ll tell you everything. Everything you wanna know. Everything in the entire universe. I was going to tell you, I wanted to tell you – I just –“ Bill chewed on the inside of his cheek anxiously, before the words kept flowing. “I didn’t know how you’d take it. This situation is … very delicate. It’d be easy to tell it wrong. It looks like it’s been told wrong anyway, and someone got to you first. I’d like to know how that happened.” Bill grumbled, and then reached out to stroke Ford’s hair, trying to turn the scientist around to see reason. Ford deliberately refused to look Bill in the eye, instead staring stonily somewhere over his shoulder. “Come on Sixer, just listen to me. Look at me! What’s the worst that could happen?’

Ford’s jaw jutted out stubbornly, and Bill knew he’d said the wrong thing. Just how much did Sixer know?

“Don’t do it.” Ford implored.

“Do -?” Bill blinked, trying to look innocent, not knowing exactly what Sixer was referring to, what part of ‘it’ he was being warned against doing.

“What you’re planning with the portal. Don’t do it.” Ford looked at Bill now, his gaze stern.

“I don’t know what you’re –“ Bill tried, but Ford narrowed his eyes, cutting Bill off.

“Yes you do. Don’t do it, and there may still be some small chance things can go back to the way they were.” Ford seemed to hesitate, before reaching out to gently smooth his thumb across Bill’s cheek, his expression torn. “I know you want that.”

Bill seemed to melt at Stanford’s touch, and was now grasping onto Ford’s wrist, holding his hand to his face, not wanting to let him go now that he was getting some small sliver of tenderness back from the human.

Ford looked sad, watching Bill soak up his touch like a starving sponge, and he knew that what he
was doing was cruel. He kept Bill’s attention on him while Willow finished off the salt circle, and
the selfish part of him, that wasn’t sticking to the plan, had to ask.

“Would you stop if I asked you? If there’s any part of this that wasn’t a lie, you’d stop this, for me.
You’d stop this, before it’s too late.”

Bill’s brows furrowed, conflict playing plain across his too expressive face. “Sixer. I’d do a lot of
things for you, but you’re asking me to give up something that has been millennia’s in the making.
Something that you don’t understand the full significance of. There’s more riding on this than just
my wants. This portal and what comes after – it’s my life’s work.”

“Then use it the way you promised. You and I, exploring the universe together. Leave Gravity
Falls out of this.” Ford cupped Bill’s jaw, and brushed his thumb wistfully over Bill’s puffy bottom
lip, sincerity pouring out of him. “You were going to help me fulfil my destiny. Why can’t you do
that instead?”

“You expect me to give up my life’s work for you, but you won’t give up your life’s work for
me?” Bill questioned, shaking his head a little, pulling back from Ford’s tender caresses. “How is
that fair?”

“Bill –” Ford frowned, and tried to cup Bill’s cheek again. He struggled to capture Bill’s gaze, but
the muse shook his head, scowling.

“No, I planned to at least compromise for you so we’d both get what we want, but you can’t even
listen –“

Willow was almost all the way around the circle, she just had about half a metre left to cover. Ford
only needed to hold Bill’s attention for just a little while longer.

“I’m listening now, but I can’t let you –“

“You don’t even know what it is you’re stopping.” Bill scoffed angrily, narrowing his eyes at Ford,
shaking his hands off his face. “How exalted you’d be. How powerful I’d make you. You’d have
everything you ever wanted in the palm of your six-fingered hand, and you throw it back in my
face?”

“What do you mean everything I’d ever wanted? I wanted to use this portal like you promised we
would.”

“To explore new worlds? Tick, you can still do that with me. To change the world, double tick!
Changing the world is what I wanted.” Bill said, exasperated.

“You want to destroy the world, not change it.” Ford scoffed, and crossed his arms again.

“So I can rebuild it!” Bill raised his voice, yelling back at Ford.

“It’s fine how it is!” Ford yelled back stubbornly.

“Oh, that’s a lie.” Bill laughed, and narrowed his eyes at Ford spitefully. “That’s rich, Sixer, it
really is. It wasn’t fine when it chose you last, when it spurned your genius, when it turned on you
for your deformity, when it decided that what makes you special makes you disgusting. How is any
of that fine?”

“It’s not – I –“ Ford seemed distracted.
Willow had just finished the salt circle, and was giving Stanford a look, telling him to get on with it.

“Fine.” Ford said loudly, before looking back down at Bill. “Fine, let’s say you’re right. Let’s say I give you a chance.”

Bill looked shocked, and the sheer hope that began to creep across his features floored Ford. He could see Bill’s eyes widen, and his muse was looking at Stanford like he was the most incredible thing in the universe, and that hurt Stanford. It hurt him to lift Bill’s hopes so high, only to let them down so suddenly, but he had to play along with this, to follow the plan if he were to save the earth from destruction.

“Really?” Bill blinked awe up at Sixer, before flinging himself at the human, wrapping his arms around Ford’s neck and pressing grateful kisses all over his face. “Thank you, thank you, thank you Sixer. You won’t regret it. I’ll give you anything you want. Absolutely anything.”

Ford’s resolve wavered there, wavered with this easy intimacy. Because of the lies, each kiss felt like an unwelcome burn to his face, but he couldn’t say he didn’t miss this sort of intimacy. Bill’s hands and lips were warm, they cut through the iciness of the rain and warmed Ford in more ways than one. It would be tempting to just give into this, and go along with Bill’s plan for real, to keep this pure affection in his life, but he didn’t know if it was pure anymore. He felt used, and betrayed, and he didn’t know whether he could believe Bill’s earnest responses.

Sticking to the plan, Ford continued speaking. “Let’s say I unbind that last brick for you.”

Bill nodded, and stepped back to extend his left arm out to Sixer, watching him with heartfelt hope dancing in his eyes.

Hesitantly, Ford reached forward, and put his hand over Bill’s arm, angling it so he could see that last brick better, see the lynchpin he’d use to unravel everything for Bill.

“All right then, no going back now. Let’s do this.” Ford sighed, and smoothed his hand over Bill’s arm.

The circle below their feet lit up red. And Ford prepared himself to chant, all the while Bill was bouncing on his heels, disbelief and wonder written all over his face.


The gold began to rise from the last brick of Bill’s tattoo, floating in the air between them, and Sixer kept chanting. Bill was so enamoured by Sixer’s actions that he barely noticed when Sixer began changing the words to the expected ritual.

“Exaudi orationem meam. Sumam eam.”

Bill blinked, and felt the magic change, feeling strange in the air. It wasn’t pulling at just the brick on his arm, but on all of the bricks now, even those unbound, and his skin begun to feel itchy, like it was burning.

“Turn aurea, quae nigra quondam fuit.” Ford continued, and Bill looked up at his human in horror.

“Corpus corrupitur.”
“Sixer, no!” Bill’s eyes widened in shock, recognising the Latin.

Ford squared his shoulders and kept chanting. “Sumam eam. Egredere de terra hac.”

“Sixer!” Bill reached out to Ford, to try to grab him, but the salt in the circle kicked in, forming a barrier between them. Ford could hold Bill’s arm while he continued to chant, but Bill couldn’t even touch Ford, his hands beating against thin air. “You’re doing it wrong. Stop! Stanford! SIXER! You’re hurting me!”

Ford looked up at Bill, and winced, as he delivered the last lines of the spell, meeting Bill’s startled, betrayed yellow eyes.

“Numquam redire.”

Gold light began to filter up through all of Bill’s unbound bricks, the light spreading from the crevices of the bricks, creeping across Bill’s skin.

“No – NO!” Bill looked down at his arms, seeing the gold light slowly inch across his lovely handmade form. He scratched at the light to try and halt its progress, but it was no use.

Willow stepped forward and yanked on Stanford’s arm, pulling him out of the circle, back to safety.

Ford felt Bill’s too warm skin slip out of his grasp as Willow pulled him back, and he couldn’t help but feel wistful, wanting to hold on that bit longer.

He didn’t want this to be the last time he held his perfect muse in his arms, but it had to be. This was the goodbye they had to have.

“NO!” Bill lunged for Ford, but couldn’t reach out past the circle, the salt in it trapping him now, like an invisible prison. He beat his palms against the edge of the barrier, and looked at Ford with all the betrayal and hurt this expressive vessel could muster.

“I thought you were giving me a chance. You said –“

“I know what I said.” Ford replied sounding rather morose, looking at Bill for the last time while his form was being altered. “Things change.”

“Things change???” Bill spluttered, and began to look steadily more enraged. “This isn’t change, this is you. You – YOU did this to me.”

Ford looked away, not having the heart to watch Bill break apart, but his attempt to avoid this was thwarted when he heard Bill’s voice catch, like he was crying.

“**How could you do this to me?**”

Ford’s heart lurched, and he made an odd sound in the back of his throat. He looked up at Bill, and Bill was crying, his face crumpled with anguish, fat tears dripping down his face.

Freed from his world saving obligations, the wheels already having been put in motion, Ford’s conflicted heart finally found a voice, his suppressed emotions rising to the surface.

Seeing Bill cry, his own defences began to break down, as he realised what he was really doing. His eyes pricked with reactionary tears that finally demanded to be shed. He was hurting Bill, more deeply than the muse deserved maybe.
Ford had assumed that Bill had been lying about everything, that he was just using Ford, but should the opposite be true, then right now he was no doubt breaking Bill’s heart right back.

He loved this creature, despite all of his faults, and it had only been this morning that they’d been together, trusting and caring for one another. Ford had destroyed that as surely as Bill would have destroyed the world, and he lit the match that was currently burning his muse’s body from existence.

He thought it would be easier to do this, to betray Bill like this, because while he knew within himself his own feelings, he’d never admitted it out loud to Bill. He thought that would make it easier. So Bill wouldn’t have an admission to cling to, have feelings to hurt him worse than he was already hurting.

Tears dripped down Bill’s cheeks, sizzling against his skin, as he pressed his palms to the edge of the barrier. His shoulders shook and his eyes locked with Stanford’s wet gaze, devastation dancing in their depths.

“I thought you loved me.” Bill sobbed hopelessly, pressing his forehead against the barrier. “Did that change too?”

The words skewered Ford right through to his very soul. He felt himself break on the knowledge that it wasn’t a secret, that Bill knew, and Bill knew that he did this to him anyway.

There was no escaping that fact now.

He could only watch his muse fall apart, and know it was his fault. Ford made another odd sound in the back of his throat and he realised he was crying too. The tears ran freely down his cheeks, and he was unable to turn his eyes away from Bill’s final moments inhabiting the body Ford made him.

Bill’s despair sobbed out of him for a few brief seconds, and he almost looked like something pitiable, before his anger overwhelmed him.

He threw his head back and screamed out his heartbroken rage, a horrible sound. It was discordant, as though screamed with many voices, and it made both Willow and Stanford jump back and cover their ears, wincing. The sky sounded out in response, thunder slamming across the heavens, and lightning danced in the sky.

“ANSWER ME YOU USELESS HACK! YOU DID THIS ON PURPOSE! YOU DID THIS TO ME ON PURPOSE! EVERY BIT OF IT FROM THE BEGINNING! DIDN’T YOU?”

Bill slammed his fists against the barrier again, viciously this time, more hands growing out from his back, fists beating against every surface of the barrier. Flames began to ooze from Bill’s body, burning a vibrant blue that flared out as his sanity deteriorated.

Ford staggered back, stunned to watch Bill fall apart. The gold was creeping out across his skin, gold light unmaking Bill, but not before the god threw a tantrum that shook the earth.

“I HATE YOU! I HATE YOU I HATE YOU I HATE YOU!” He screamed, and fire billowed out of his mouth, singing the grass on the floor. Bill screamed fire again, and it billowed out, barely contained by the barrier, the heat so strong and intense.

“You ruined EVERYTHING!” Bill screamed, and pointed aggressively, not at Stanford, but at Willow, who was holding Stanford’s shoulder in solidarity.
She started, shocked that she’d bear the brunt of his wrath.

Bill continued to shriek at her, raving, his voice laced with power. The ground began shaking, fire sputtering out of his mouth as the gold light spread.

“CURSE YOU WILLOW OAKWOOD. You will NEVER know happiness, the moment you do it’ll all get SNATCHED AWAY like you did to me!”

Willow’s jaw dropped open, and she shook her head in disbelief. She didn’t know he could curse people, and suddenly she felt cold all over.

Ford stepped in front of her, shielding her with his body as Bill continued to shriek, beating all six of his fists against the barrier.

“Bill I -”

“YOU DON’T GET TO TALK, YOU BETRAYER! YOU COLD FACED MONSTER! LIAR! BACKSTABBER! You made me – you -“ Bill panted, unable to get the words out, before he screamed. “You know what - I OWN YOU SIXER! I STILL OWN YOU! You’re MINE FOREVER, don’t think this gets you out of that. I’ll have from now until THE END OF TIME to make you PAY FOR THIS!” Bill screamed, and the gold continued to spread.

His arms were completely gold now, and Bill’s deranged spiel was cut off by a shriek as the gold began to flake away from his body, dissolving his skin into nothingness. Bill watched in horror as the gold floated away from him, dissipating, deconstructing his flesh and blood.

The gold drifted out into the air like snow, Bill’s right hand gone now. He was panting, shaking harder, as he looked down at the steady deterioration of the rest of his arm. The gold light had spread to cover him all over, and now it was breaking apart.

Bill’s startled shriek turned into sobbing, turned into hysterical delusional laughter as his molecules disintegrated.

“It hurts.” Bill said, amidst the laughter, as his mood turned on a dime, and suddenly he was crying again, trying desperately to wrap his arms around himself, to grasp at his body while it flaked away from him.

Ford made to move a step closer, before he could process his response, holding out his arm, wanting to comfort Bill instinctually, feeling terrible. He was really hurting Bill, something he never wanted to do.

This was a lot more graphic and horrifying than the alchemy books suggested it would be.

Willow held him back by his shoulder, not feeling the same pity Ford was feeling.

Bill looked up at Stanford’s conflicted expression, right as the gold was dissolving his body, his chest drifting away. Glaring at Ford with wet eyes, Bill accused his backstabbing paramour.

“There really is no one you can trust.” The gold was covering Bill’s face now, breaking away the last part of him. “So much for your destiny.”

Ford felt more bitter tears drag through his stubble, dripping down from his chin, and he could only watch as the last of his muse disappeared.

“GUVF VFA’G BIRE!!” Bill yelled out, as the last bit of gold covered his eyes. “V’Z ABG QBAR
Bill’s wordless screaming carried off in the wind, as the last of the muse flaked away into gold confetti, dissipating into mellow light on the wind.

He was gone.

The red light on the ground from the circle sputtered and died down, and suddenly Ford was struck with the sense that he was left all alone in the world, without a single person who truly cared for him. Without anyone to truly care for.

He’d just banished the love of his life.

The clearing was eerily silent, the only sound was the heavy intake of Ford’s own breath as his shoulders shook, and the relentless heavy spatter of rain that fell without hesitation now, as though nature itself were crying.

Ford’s eyes were glued to the place where Bill had been, where he was no longer. Ford’s knees felt weak, collapsing under him.

He fell to the ground, kneeling in the mud, looking up at where his muse had been, the tears flowing out despondently.

Willow stepped up to him, and rested her hand on his shoulder, intending to comfort him.

“You did it. You saved the world.”

Somehow saving the world felt a lot like ending it.

Chapter End Notes

The spell in Latin roughly (very roughly) translates to: Gold wire, hear my prayer. Restore the witchcraft that was there. Give magic back, gold and black. Hear my prayer, take it back. Turn gold which once was black. Corrupted body. Take it back. Leave this Earth, and never come back. A LITTLE HEAVY STANFORD! Too bad it doesn't work. He'll be back, and this isn't over! And many other dramatic statements.

I HOPE YOU ALL ENJOYED THE BETRAYAL!!! It was a looooooong time coming, and the aftermath is going to be really angsty and messy, but there's the big betrayal, and the part where we dive back into canon's path and play with it.

This chapter should be dedicated to all of you who stuck with it this long to see this through to the betrayal, but I've made the less diplomatic decision to dedicate this chapter to CherryBxmb who read through the entire fic recently and left gorgeous comments on EVERY SINGLE CHAPTER! I LOVE YOU!!!!!
Poor Suzie, Willow and Dan. I always said bad stuff was going to happen to them, and now we know why Lazy Suzan's so spacy, right? IN THE COMMENTS TELL ME IF YOU CRIED READING bc I cried writing this no lie there.

Next chapter we see how both Bill and Stanford handle being betrayed, and Pyronica delivers words of wisdom that may not be so wise. Thanks for sticking around, reading and supporting this fic and your lovely comments as always :D
The Henchmaniacs and Goo Mobsters, and other assembled guests were waiting in the Quadrangle, party streamers and cocktails at the ready while enthusiastically discordant jazz music played softly.

A hand painted banner was being hung across the roof of the central hall, Eight Ball and Xanthur the only beings tall enough to affix the banner in place. In lumpy, colourful, childish writing “Happy Oddpocalypse” was painted across the banner, with many a fanciful triangle drawn to accent the artwork. The banner was a collaborative effort between Keyhole and Teeth, Amorphous Shape had supervised. They were collectively quite proud of it.

While Xanthur and Eight Ball were hanging the banner, Kryptos was floating about the hall with a checklist, making sure everything was in place.

“Drinks. Do we have enough drinks? Canapes? Is that a wonky table leg? Who put this table up? What happens if the leg collapses and all the food falls off the table? Who did this?”

“The table’s fine Kryptos.” Teeth commented, picking something dubious out from between his incisors. “A wonky leg adds character.”

“It’s not fine. What if someone knocks it?” Kryptos hovered by the table anxiously, and rested his hand on the table, before lifting it again, noticing the way it tilted. “See, it’s wonky. Someone’s gotta put something under it.”

“We could put you under it.” Pyronica rolled her eyes, leaning against the wall, examining her nails.

“Something like a newspaper, or a book.” Kryptos pondered, looking around the hall, before noticing the Goo Mobsters taking flutes of celestial champagne from one of the tables. “No! No, no, no, put down those drinks! Those are for the before-party, not before the before-party. The pre-drinking hasn’t started yet!”

“Oh, let them have a tipple Rhombus.” Paci-Fire insisted jovially. “There’s nothing wrong with getting a decent head start to the festivities.”

“But what will happen if all the drinks are gone before the Boss gets here?” Kryptos fretted.

“If? More like when.” Teeth quipped under his breath, elbowing Paci-Fire and the denizen threw his horned head back and chortled loudly.

“Hoh, the reality makes it humorous. It’s funny because it’s true.” Paci-Fire slapped his knee frivolously, while Teeth grinned.

“He’ll think we started without him.” Kryptos insisted, trying to instil some thought of consequence upon his rowdy colleagues, his foot tapping impatiently in the air.

“He won’t care, so long as there’s enough booze left for him to catch up.” Teeth advised, waving his hand flippantly. “A hidden stockpile if you will. You do have a special stash just for the Boss, right?”
“Special stash? Uh.” Kryptos looked vaguely panicked, checking back over his list.

While Kryptos pulled several more checklists from under his sleeves, Keyhole bumbled out into the hall with a big box of kazoo’s, confetti canons, noise makers, and funny hats.

“Hey what do you call that thing that spins around in circles and makes the kercherkercherkercherkercher noise? Because we’ve got a tonne of those in here.” He said, peering over his nose at the box in his arms.

“What sound does it make?” Teeth asked, grinning wide.

“You know.” Keyhole dropped the box and fished through it, retrieving one of the noise makers, holding onto the handle and swirling it around. “That sound.”

“No, say it again. What sound was it?” Teeth laughed teasingly.

“Ah, shut up.” Keyhole waved off Teeth’s humorous poking, before he pulled out a party horn, and stuck it between his lips, blowing it. “That’s what you sound like.”

“That’s what your sister sounds like.” Teeth sneered back.

“Hey, I want one of those.” Pyronica enthused, walking over to the box of goodies.

As the Henchmaniac’s rummaged through the box of party goods, the lights flickered.

Kryptos looked up, and flailed, waving his multiple clipboards in the air. “Places! Places everyone! The Boss is back!”

As everyone scrambled for their places, the lights continued to flicker, and the very foundations of the Quadrangle began to shake violently. Rather than see the vehemence of Bill’s re-entry into the Nightmare Realm as something amiss, most Henchmaniac’s merely assumed this was yet another one of the boss’s dramatic entrances.

The band stopped playing their music, the conductor conspiratorially putting a finger to his lips, readying the performers for their big number.

Armed with party horns, whirly-gigs and funny hats, the gathered crew ducked down behind the tables that littered the hall, intending to jump out when the Boss came through, their congratulatory pre-Armageddon drinks designed to surprise and delight the triangle.

When Bill warped into the main hall of the Quadrangle, his bricks seemed to piece together slowly, as if reassembling from a fine powder, and when he had materialised fully, he looked furious.

“SURPRISE!” The Henchmaniac’s jumped out from behind the tables, waving their whirly-gigs jubilantly in the air and blowing on their party horns, intending to celebrate their boss’s successes. The band began playing, a jovial celebratory tune as Henchmaniac’s and gathered friends shouted out exuberantly. “HAPPY ODDPOCALYPSE BOSS!”

Bill seemed to be panting, his surface heaving with frustrated breaths as he looked around at the revelry and merriment set up to celebrate his sabotaged success. Everywhere he looked, he saw responsibilities and obligations that he had failed to fulfil, expectant faces watching him, the pressure building every second he stood here, devastated and destroyed, his original plan rammed off course by Sixer’s treachery.

The music was too cheery, and everyone’s smiles were too wide, and Bill didn’t have it in him to
be cheerful right now when everything inside him was burning. Burning rage, burning
disappointment, everything burnt ravenously, wanting to burn outward. And it would, Bill knew,
he knew the signs.

Unable to take it a single second longer, the revelry and expectation, and the building flames, he
yelled, his voice reverberating throughout the Quadrangle.

“EVERYBODY OUT!”

The band stopped playing, and kazoo’s fell from the shocked monsters lips, clattering to the
ground. They stared at Bill for a moment longer, before the triangle added in a quieter, defeated
sounding voice.

“The party’s cancelled.”

“What?”

“What do you mean?”

“Cancelled? But it hasn’t even started yet?”

Confused whispers filtered through the hall, lesser Henchmaniac’s and Goo Mobsters looking at
one another in askance. Over by the table, several Goo Mobsters looked between one another,
before smuggling an unopened bottle of champagne into their gooey mass to enjoy later.

Bill continued to float in the middle of the hall, looking around at the confused monsters and
freaks, but not really seeing them. He was still seeing red, or rather blue, from that insult back in
the forest, and he felt the fire roil within him.

Pyronica stepped forward, concerned, recognising the thin tether to sanity Bill had in this very
moment, worried for him.

Kryptos hovered forward too, realising that Bill was looking more unhinged than a practical joke
would warrant. His instincts, the same instincts that told him to run and hide, told him that much.

Bill glared at the gathered guests, who weren’t moving. They were all standing around, whispering
to each other, as though they didn’t hear him the first time. Feeling the need to reiterate for these
imbeciles, Bill raised his voice again.

“I said GET OUT! LEAVE!” Bill grew in size rapidly while he shouted, before shrinking back
down and stalking into his private study, shouting as he floated away. “In the next 30 seconds, if
you don’t all want to suffer an UNBELIEVABLY PAINFUL DEATH!

The shocked whispers and mumbling turned into frantic scrambling from those who knew Bill
meant business with his threats.

Immediately manning damage control Kryptos hovered through the fleeing crowd of allies and
investors, explaining timidly while wringing his hands. “He – he didn’t mean cancelled. Just
postponed. It’s only postponed, but – ah – if everyone could file out in an orderly line, just for a
while, that’d just be swell.”

Pyronica could only handle so much of Kryptos’ nervous, hand wringing version of crowd control,
before she opened her mouth as wide as she could and yelled.

“EVERYBODY OUT, NOW!”
The gathered guests paused for a beat, before it sunk in just how serious this situation was.

People began to run out of the hall like a stampeding herd, some screaming, knocking over ornaments and tables as they went, the food clattering to the ground. Some people scooped up items as they left, stealing all they could from the Quadrangle before shit hit the fan, but that was to be expected. They were interdimensional criminals after all.

While everyone made for the door in a mad cacophony of pure panic, Pyronica made her way to Bill’s study determinately. Kryptos hovered in the middle of the hall, torn between supervising the chaotic evacuation to minimise theft and property damage, and following Pyronica, wanting to be there when she checked in with Bill.

Chewing on his lip nervously for a while, watching people smash and trample on their way out the door, Kryptos decided that intervening with the frantic exodus was a fools errand, and threw away his clipboard, floating over to Bill’s study. He stepped just behind Pyronica so she could shield him from Bill’s wrath should it escalate. It was dangerous, following along, but he wanted to see what had the boss so riled. He needed to see it. He’d never seen the boss this unhinged before.

Pyronica knocked on the study door once tentatively, before twisting the handle. “Bill? I’m coming in.”

As the door opened, already Kryptos could see from his vantage point behind Pyronica that the walls were melting, fire dancing all around the room, lighting the books and bookcases chaotically while Bill threw things around the room.

One of the glass ornaments that sat on Bill’s desk was hurled into the wall, shattering into a million pieces, the essence trapped inside the glass hissing out of it. Bill threw the desk chair and it clattered as it broke apart, hitting the wall violently. He threw every book from the desk, and every trinket and ornament viciously, one by one.

Bill stood in the middle of the carnage, his bricks steadily growing redder, angrier as the betrayal he just underwent set in.

He yelled out his anger, and tipped over the heavy black desk, knocking everything to the floor.

“BILL!” Pyronica yelled out, trying to get his attention. He looked at her briefly, and his eye was black with rage, pupil a fiery red slit. Softening her voice, Pyronica pressed. “What happened?”

“SIXER!” Bill hissed and spluttered, looking around for more things to destroy. “That horrid, no good, AWFUL –“

Pyronica rolled her eye, and jutted her hip out, leaning against the doorframe, exasperated. “What did he do now?”

Bill’s tone of voice wasn’t the typical ranting rage Pyronica was used to when her friend would rail about his human. Instead Bill’s voice came out into a despairing guttural wail, and for a moment, he looked utterly lost.

“HE BETRAYED ME!”

“What? How?” Pyronica questioned, genuine concern creeping into her eye now.

“He scrapped my body.” Bill raged, gesturing to his bricks. “WHILE I WAS STILL INSIDE!”

“Oh shit.” Pyronica’s shoulders slumped, and she leaned back against the door, thrown by this

“He double crossed you?” Kryptos asked, peering around Pyronica’s legs cautiously.

“I just want to burn everything. Burn everything to the ground.” Bill muttered, and floated like he was pacing, clutching at his eye. “Rip the fabric of the universe to shreds. I can’t keep it in. I need to – “

“Hey. Hey –“ Pyronica crossed the room boldly, and held her hands out in front of Bill, aiming to placate him. “You don’t want to do that.”

“It HURTS!” Bill wailed, his bricks changing colour, flashing blue, black, and translucent in quick succession as his emotions broke him down from the inside out. “I want it to STOP!”

“Look, you can let it out, you can let it all out, okay.” Pyronica assured Bill, bending down to look him in the eye. “But not here. You don’t want to ruin everything we’ve worked for.”

“It’s already ruined. It’s all ruined.” Bill muttered feverishly, the flames at the edges of the room burning hotter. Now the fire curled with impact, rather than the harmless illusory blue flames. Things were actually starting to burn, irreparably, and Pyronica knew that she didn’t have much time.

“You need to get out.” Pyronica nodded, and grabbed Bill’s wrists, stopping him from raking his nails down his bricks, trying to maintain his eye contact. “You’re gonna explode. You need to get out, and let this all out, and don’t come back until you’re done.”

“This is my place.” Bill retorted sharply, reflexively, not wanting anything else to be taken from him.

“I’m trying to help you keep your place. Go to your other place. The one that can’t burn anymore.” Pyronica reached her hand behind her and waved it expectantly at Kryptos, trying to hold Bill’s attention as a priority.

The compass blinked at her for a second, slow on the uptake, before he scrambled to pull a dimensional traveller out from under his glove, thrusting it into Pyronica’s hand.

Dimensional travellers were disposable teleportation devices, incredibly expensive and hard to come by. They were single use portals, not big enough to sustain the sort of mass exodus that Bill was intending with his invasion, but sufficient for single person travel, though the motor burned itself out after letting one being through.

Pyronica input the coordinates to a particular defunct dimension, and patted Bill’s side consolingly.

“You go there, and let it all out, and come back when you’re done. We’ll take care of things here for you, we know what you want, okay?”

Bill sniffled, and his eye began to water, something that Kryptos never thought he’d see in all of his years.

“I want Sixer.” Bill warbled.
“Yeah, I kinda want a piece of him myself.” Pyronica muttered, as she fired up the dimensional traveller, pointing it at the wall of Bill’s study.

A portal opened up, splitting the fabric of the universe briefly. The wall in Bill’s study parted to reveal a different dimension, one completely covered with incessant blue flame and little else. The flames leapt ravenously and Pyronica leaned away from the wall, the heat already unbearable, even for her.

Bill looked through the portal and flinched away from the sight of the burning dimension, hating it, and everything about it.

Pyronica winced, recognising that this solution was cruel, but a cruel necessity. She’d seen that look in Bill’s eye before.

“You need to go. If you can’t keep it in, you need to go. You’ve got too much to lose here.”

Morosely, Bill responded, unable to tear his eye away from the burning dimension in front of him. “I’ve already lost everything.”

“No you haven’t. No you haven’t.” Pyronica assured him, crouching beside him. “You’ve built up a lot here, and whatever you lost, you’ll be getting back. You know you will. I won’t let you lose what we’ve worked for. It’s not over, okay? Whatever Sixer did, we’ll fix this. But first we need to fix you.”

Bill’s eye was watering, even now as he leaned away from the portal, sloping diagonally, staring at it like it was going to bite him.

“Damage control.” Pyronica said quietly to Bill, still rubbing his side comfortingly. “You go let it all out, and when you’re not dangerous, you come back and see me. We’ll handle this.”

She patted Bill on the back again, pushing him lightly forward, encouraging him to step through the portal. He hesitated a fraction, before floating forward with a resigned look to his eye.

“There you go. We’ll be here when you need us, just—“

She nudged him through the portal gently, and reluctantly he floated all the way through.

The portal’s edges wavered, already breaking down now that one being had crossed through, and the corners of the portal flickered for several seconds, fading out of existence.

Bill floated into the middle of the fiery chaos, his bricks still changing colour, his shoulders heaving as he panted through this inner turmoil.

The last thing Kryptos saw before the portal disintegrated entirely was Bill throwing his arms out, screaming, as an enormous ball of fire combusted outwards from his body, scouring everything out of existence.

The portal burnt out with a whoosh, and the device holding the portal in place clattered to the floor. Now there was only smooth, slightly scorched walls remaining, no longer melting or on fire. Just an empty office, with debris scattered everywhere.

Pyronica groaned, and looked up at the ceiling, before running her hands through her hair and gripping onto her horns in frustration.

Kryptos blinked from the doorway, shocked by that entire interlude. “Wow.”
“Uuuuuuggghhhhh.” Pyronica groaned again, looking incredibly guilty. “I hate doing this. He was so upset.”

Kryptos hovered further into the office, and paused, floating above the shattered remains of Bill’s glass ornament, nudging the broken glass with his boot.

“He broke his Infinite Sand Globe.” Kryptos sounded shell-shocked, and distant. “How are we gonna replace it? They don’t make those anymore.”

“We have –” Pyronica glared at Kryptos, gritting her teeth. “Bigger problems than the Sand Globe right now, okay?”

“Like the human?” Kryptos asked, furrowing his brow.

“Like Bill.” Pyronica clarified. “I haven’t seen him get worked up like this in a long time. This is bad. This is really bad.”

“I don’t know what he was so shocked for.” Kryptos commented seditiously. “So this Sixer betrayed him. The human was always going to be untrustworthy. He was never going to go along with Bill’s plan, humans simply aren’t evolved enough to see the benefit of making a decision like siding with a cosmic being as powerful as Bill. They’re underdeveloped.”

“Most are.” Pyronica muttered, looking around the ruined office. “Bill seemed to think Six Fingers would be different though.”

“Then he was deluding himself.” Kryptos shrugged flippantly. “A complete waste of his time and energy, cultivating equality for a human. A pet. He wanted to promote the thing, hah! I thought he was joking. What a joke, am I right? A total joke. He should have thrown him away when he had the chance, before this got so complicated. Now, I don’t want to say I told you so -”

“THEN DON’T!” Pyronica swung around and growled at Kryptos, baring her sharp teeth.

He meeped in fright, and demurred.

“This is serious. Not a joke, serious business. Whatever happened down there turned on a dime, and we need to know why. Last I spoke to Bill, he had everything under control, and he had Six Fingers under control. They made a deal, he said he had assurances. So something must have gone wrong.” Pyronica fretted, chewing on her claws. “I’ve never seen him so worked up like this before. Not even in prison. This is so bad.”

“Well, what could have thrown him off?” Kryptos asked, not willing to believe a human could be so important. “Not this Sixer, it’s gotta be something else.”

“He gets so mad when he loses things. He probably thinks he’s lost his shot at earth, but if that were the case, he’d have a backup plan, like he did the first time.” Pyronica chewed on her claw anxiously, thinking. “He’s never cared about anything enough to lose it like this. Six Fingers must have really screwed him over.”

“Or, it was something else –” Kryptos said stubbornly, hardly willing to admit a human caused this. He didn’t want to give this Sixer that much credit.

Pyronica clenched her fist, and growled again, a low rumble of anger. “When I find that punk –”

“So what do we do?” Kryptos shook his head, and held his hands out, suspending his theory in order to act. “You said we’d take care of it? How do we take care of it? If, and I don’t believe it is,
but if it is this Sixer, do we shuffle the human off his mortal coil on the boss’s behalf? I have ideas.”

Kryptos sounded too eager, keen to remove a notable threat to his standing from the hierarchical map so to speak.

“No. He wouldn’t want that.” Pyronica responded with certainty. “If Sixer’s this important to him, he wouldn’t want someone else to kill him. It’s gotta be in his hands. I’m not even sure if he will kill him.”

“So we don’t kill him. Really, that’s what the boss should have done in the first place, but that’s just me.” Kryptos scowled and kicked the shattered glass across the floor with his boot. “We can’t just do nothing. Obviously the human insulted him, we can’t just let that slide. We have to retaliate. Act.”

Pyronica frowned, her bottom lip sticking out as she thought. She had to agree with Kryptos, they couldn’t just let Six Finger’s betrayal of Bill slide, not when it had upset their boss to this degree. She hated to see Bill this upset, and having to usher him into his old dimension was excruciating for her, but she had to. And all because of Sixer.

“I know he has night terror bubbles he sometimes sends out. We could send Six Fingers one of those.” She tapped her bottom lip with her finger, frowning. “I think he keeps them in the dream room, with all the mirrors. God I’d like to see him suffer. Jerking Bill around like that.”

“So, let’s go!” Kryptos urged, floating beside Pyronica impatiently. “Come on. Let’s show this human what for!”

“I don’t know though. I get the feeling that whatever we do now will probably come back to bite us in the ass. I think we should wait.” Pyronica decided, still frowning. “We need to think what would Bill want us to do, when he’s in his right mind.”

“Which is when?” Kryptos questioned sassily, squinting at Pyronica.

Pyronica ignored the compass and paced around the study, thinking aloud.

“Bill would want us to control his assets, and make sure everything’s still on track in terms of our alliances. We could be making the wrong decision to strike out against the human, his basement still holds our party door. Bill could still turn this to our favour.”

“You want him to go back to the human?” Kryptos asked, exasperated.

“I’m saying he might need to, and we can’t screw it up for him as an option if that’s what he needs.” Pyronica rubbed her chin pensively. “We need to control things here. Bring back the investors, gather our allies. Make it seem like nothing’s gone wrong, like we’re still on track.”

“Are we?” Kryptos scowled at Pyronica. “It sounds like we just wasted years trying to build a portal on Earth, for some uppity human to come along and throw it all away.”

“We can get it back.” Pyronica asserted. “Bill always has a backup plan. He’ll find a way.”

“Years! Wasted years!” Kryptos emphasised.

“You get used to waiting!” Pyronica yelled back at the compass, crossing her arms. “It’s been hundreds of years since we started all this. We’ve waited that long, if waiting is what it takes, we can go a few more years.”
Kryptos floated up to the cyclops, and tugged conspiratorially on her arm. “Pyronica, this dimension is crumbling at the edges. It’s falling apart. We are on a time limit, and I don’t know how many more years we can wait! Our safe place won’t be so safe anymore once it begins to erode while we’re all still in it! We need a place to go.”

“And Bill will find us a place.” Pyronica shook the compass’s hand off her arm. “You just have to be patient.”

“For how long? Two years? Ten years? Thirty?” Kryptos threw his hands in the air. “We may not look it, but soon we’re going to start getting desperate.”

“Bill will handle it.” Pyronica said firmly.

“Like he’s handling it now?” Kryptos gestured to the scorched wall, looking unimpressed.

“Don’t you dare keep questioning him Kryptos. I will drop kick you into the sun, don’t think I won’t.” Pyronica loomed over the compass, her fire burning ominously up her arms. “We’re acting on Bill’s behalf now, which means that if you mouth off about him one more time, I will personally see to your agonising torture, and I will relish the opportunity to do so.”

“You wouldn’t.” Kryptos cowered away from her, squinting up at her.

“Sure I would. I’d just ask myself, ‘what would Bill do?’ and there’s my answer.” Pyronica pointed at Kryptos with a flaming claw, jabbing him in the chest. “Shut up about him. If you start doubting him, and spreading your poison the moment he’s gone, I will exterminate you.”

In that instant Kryptos saw a flash of the dreaded warrior cyclops Pyronica was supposed to be. What she was moulded to be. An enforcer. A terror.

“I – I made a deal. Bill’s supposed to protect me.” Kryptos quivered.

“Well, Bill’s not here right now. So until he comes back, you fall in line. You answer to me now.” Pyronica stood tall, and turned on her heel, pacing away from the shaking compass, speaking coldly. “I’m his second, so what I say goes. Now clean up this mess, and don’t show your face until this study is exactly how it was before all this.”

“How am I supposed to find another Infinite Sand Globe?” Kryptos yelled after her, gesturing to the ruined ornament. “Pyronica!”

Looking disdainfully over her shoulder, Pyronica turned her chin up at the compass. “Figure it out. You have ideas.”

Tossing her hair over her shoulder, Pyronica clacked out of the ruined office, standing tall on her high heels, leaving Kryptos to pick up the pieces.

She was the boss now.

And everyone else better fall the fuck in line.
Stanford and Willow shambled back through the forest to the shack, Willow watching Stanford cautiously the entire time.

She was leaning on him, the injuries she sustained fighting Bill gave her a rather ungainly limp. Stanford tried hard not to look at her, and his eyes were still red rimmed, stubbornly watering even now as he tried to repress his emotions.

It was still raining, the water dripped down Ford’s glasses, hiding the remnants of his tears nicely. He knew Willow was watching him, her expression concerned, and he didn’t want to acknowledge it, so he looked away from her, at anything else.

The scorch marks on the ground where lightning struck. The burnt wood of the trees, sizzling now as the rain put out the fires. The evidence of Bill’s carnage left to drive home the unwelcome fact that Ford’s muse wasn’t what he thought he was.

They came out into the yard out front of the shack, and Willow shrugged away from Ford, limping over to Suzie’s car, left parked in the driveway. The keys were still in the ignition when she looked through the window.

“You can leave me here. I’ve gotta drive Suzie’s car home and check in on her. You probably don’t want an audience. I know I wouldn’t want anyone around after…” Willow looked over to Ford again, and her words trailed away, before she continued, scowling, looking at the ground. “I hate people seeing me cry.”

“That isn’t –“ Ford began, shame rippling in his belly. He pushed his glasses up and gestured to her. “You don’t have to leave because of that. You – your leg is bleeding, and you’re covered in mud. Willow, you’re soaking wet.”

“I’ll deal with it.” She wiped water off her hands, before reaching into the open car window and pulling Suzie’s keys from the ignition. She put the keys in the door and struggled to get it open, leaning a little too much against the car door. Her leg was acheing persistently now.

“Stop being ridiculous and let me look at it.” Ford said roughly, walking around the other side of the car to crouch down by Willow’s leg. Her skirt was clinging to her leg, and he pushed it up gingerly to assess the wound.

“See, most men I’d be worried if they start lifting my skirt up.” Willow said sarcastically, leaning on the car door, trying to keep the weight off her injured leg. “But I know what your type is.”

“Psychotic.” Ford grunted and pressed his fingers lightly against the skin above the wound on Willow’s thigh. “Apparently.”

“You didn’t know.” Willow hissed and steeled herself as Ford poked at the injury. “It’s not your fault.”

“There’s only so much ignorance that can be forgiven when your partner goes on a homicidal rampage and stabs you with a –“ He muttered bitterly, before looking up at Willow, gesturing to her leg. “What even caused an injury like this?”

“A fork.” She replied, her voice somewhat strained. “He stabbed me with a fork.”

“It’s gone in deep. Yanking it out probably caused more damage.” Ford murmured, looking at the broken skin, before standing up, holding his hand out to Willow. “Come on, let’s get you inside. You can’t drive with your leg like this.”
“Fine.” Willow grabbed onto Ford’s hand, resigned.

She let Ford lead her into the house.

The front door was open. Ford helped Willow through, intending to walk her up to the bathroom where his first aid kit was, but he paused along the hallway, spotting the fancy silverware from the kitchen cabinet speared into the wallpaper.

Supporting Willow with one hand, Ford reached out with his other, and tried to yank one of the forks from the wall. It stubbornly stayed put, the force that propelled them through the air clearly quite substantial. It was no wonder Willow’s cut was so deep.

“Unbelievable.” Ford muttered, and let go of the fork, the cutlery wobbling, still stuck in the wood.

Shaking his head, he turned, and helped Willow up the stairs, walking her into the bathroom and depositing her to sit on the edge of the bathtub.

Turning around, he rummaged through the cupboard under the sink, looking for his first aid kid. “We’ll need to clean the wound. I know the silverware is clean, but you’ve been running through the woods, I wouldn’t want it to get infected. You might need stitches.”

“Hey Stanford. Do you have any clean clothes I could wear?”

Stanford turned around, looking over his shoulder. Willow was already beginning to pull at her sodden dress, wringing it out into the bathtub. Her dress was hoiked up around her waist, and her freckled legs were bare.

“Just for a while?” She asked, letting her wrung skirt slap against the bathtub, letting it go. “And can I borrow your shower?”

Ford paused for a moment, taking her in, before nodding his assent perfunctorily. “Of course, of course. Might make it easier to clean the wound.”

Ford pulled his first aid kit out and flipped through it, checking that he had everything he needed to tend to her wound, before setting it on the countertop.

He spoke to Willow without really looking at her, wanting to preserve her modesty. “If you lean against the wall, you should be fine. Take care not to slip. I’ll leave some clothing just beside the door. Yell for me when you’re ready.”

Willow watched Ford shuffle out of the bathroom with mild amusement, seeing the way he avoided looking at her legs. She almost let herself chuckle at him, when the door closed, but she looked down at her leg, and didn’t feel much like laughing after all.

Pulling herself upright, she gingerly stepped into the bathtub, and pulled off her dress, letting it slap against the edge of the tub. She leaned against the wall, and turned the taps on, watching blood and mud sluice off her body, swirling down the sink, feeling rather melancholy in the moment.

She just wanted to wash this whole day away.
Stanford placed a small pile of clothes just inside of the bathroom door, and left Willow to the spray of the shower.

Pacing downstairs, he walked through his hallway, righting the misplaced knick-knacks and ornaments. He picked his coat rack off the floor, and set it upright beside the door, and walked over to the forks and knives embedded in the walls.

Examining them, Ford could see that Bill had somehow even weaponised Ford’s soup spoon, the ladle skewered into the wall expressively. Prising it from the wall, Ford heard the wood crack, as the ladle sprung free.

Ford turned it over in his hands and marvelled at exactly how deadly his muse could be, how ruthlessly efficient. His shameful sensibilities quashed the spark of awe he felt realising this, remembering that Willow was injured upstairs because of that same ruthless efficiency.

Still, all the while he’d been unbinding Bill’s bricks, uncovering new powers with every ritual, he hadn’t even begun to imagine the practical applications available to Bill should the muse strike out dangerously as he had done.

Stanford had almost infantilised Bill’s powers as he unbound them, only seeing how useful they could be when committed to his service. He was used to Bill using his levitation to make jam jars dance around the kitchen, used to him burning off heat in his palms so he could touch Ford without hurting him, used to him wringing rain from the sky to solve Ford’s problems for him. He hadn’t even begun to imagine how dangerous Bill’s powers could be, simply because they’d never caused him danger personally.

He was a fool.

A fool to let Bill get this deadly, and a fool to believe that the reason Bill hadn’t used his considerable powers to harm Ford was due to any earnest sentiment between them. The protection runes stitched into Bill’s body were the reason Bill hadn’t raised a hand against him, and that was all it was.

Clearly, Ford was nothing special. In the end, it had all been a lie.

Scowling at his ruined wall, Ford rolled up his sleeves and set to prising the cutlery out of the wallpaper, yanking silverware from the wood and letting it tinkle as it fell melodically to the floor. It was a workout, prising the cutlery from the wood considering how deep each piece was wedged, and he had to employ considerable force to get each bit of cutlery out of there.

It was quite cathartic really, yanking each knife and fork from the wallpaper. Ford lost track of time as he wrenched the evidence of his muse’s wrongdoing out of the wall, hurling each freed piece of silverware to the floor, throwing himself into the removal. His movements started quite mechanical, but became more frantic and desperate the longer he dwelled on the betrayal, the betrayal of who he thought his muse was.

He’d been played like a fiddle by a monster who didn’t care.

A monster who ruined his walls.

Ford panted, and wrenched the last knife from the wall, cutting his hand on the blade.

Ford hissed, and the knife dropped to the floor, clattering there with the rest of the silverware. Ford
examined the cut on his palm. It was small, just a little cut, but it stung. The cut on his palm was bleeding, but the cut on his fingertip, where he had bled to draw the unbinding circle, was scabbed over, healing slowly.

The longer Ford looked at the cut, the more angry and despondent he felt, the cut reminding him of both his muse’s treachery and the way Bill would always heal his injuries and cuts with that cool burst of fire, running his hand over the healed skin smoothly afterwards, holding onto Ford like he was something precious, to be protected.

With nothing left to wrench from the walls, Ford’s temper welled up, feeling helpless, and he slammed his fist against the hallway wall, gritting his teeth. His heart was thumping in his chest, but he had never felt more detached from it, feeling nothing but this misplaced anger.

He could feel the cut wallpaper curling against his fingers and feel the sting of the cut on his palm, but that was it. He didn’t want to feel anything else.

“Stanford?” Willow called from upstairs.

Shaking himself out of his melancholy, Ford bent down to gather the scattered silverware, and dumped it in the kitchen sink, washing his hands, before calling up the stairs.

“I’m coming.”

Trudging upstairs, Ford found Willow leaning against the bathroom door, waiting for him.

She wore a comfortable looking black sweatshirt, and a pair of red boxers, the track pants he’d set out for her waiting in the other room. She was clean now, her long red hair twirled in a bunch, trailing down her neck. It was wet, but clean, and her leg was now clean as well, the cut no longer bleeding profusely.

Plucking at the front of the sweatshirt, Willow asked, “Whose clothes are these anyway. They’re not big enough to be yours.”

Ford didn’t say anything, but his mouth hardened into a thin line, giving Willow her answer.

“Ah.” She gave a tight-lipped smile, a grimace really, regretting her question. Of course, she was wearing Bill’s clothes.

“Let’s see how your leg is doing.” Ford said and ushered her back into the bathroom. Sitting down on the floor, Ford went through the first aid kit, and pulled out a bottle of antiseptic and some wipes.

Willow sat back down on the edge of the tub and allowed Ford to swab at her wound with the antiseptic, gritting her teeth so as not to make a noise. It stung a little, but she didn’t want to make a spectacle of her pain. She didn’t want anyone’s sympathy.

Ford cleaned her wound, absorbed in his task, and finished swabbing her cut with antiseptic. He reached for the sterile thread and needle he kept in the first aid kid.

“You’ll need stitches.”

“Do it then.” Willow said, steeling herself for the needle. “Better you do it than having to explain this to someone else. I don’t want to know what Dan will be like when he see’s this.”

“You tripped.” Ford suggested, coming up with a plausible excuse.
“Yeah, and fell on a fucking fork.” Willow said sarcastically, shaking her head. “This day has been insane.”

Ford made an agreeable noise, focusing on threading the needle. When the thread was through, and the needle was ready, Ford pinched the edges of Willow’s cut together, and began work on sewing up the wound.

Willow gripped onto the edge of the bathtub and held her breath for the first few stitches, before exhaling slowly, watching Ford work in silence.

Then, after a while, she spoke.

“Hey Stanford. Are – are curses real?”

Ford paused what he was doing, looking up at her briefly. She was trying to look unconcerned, but the way her mouth pinched at the edges gave her away.

She was terrified.

Ford ran his tongue along his teeth, his mouth closed, and deliberated his answer. Answering honestly, he kept it simple.

“Yes.”

Willow swallowed, and nodded, still gripping onto the edge of the tub.

“Can – can he –“ Willow rocked back and forth on the edge of the tub for a moment, finding her words. “Can he actually curse someone, or do you think he was just saying that. Has he ever cursed someone before?”

Ford paused again, considering that. To his knowledge, Bill had never cursed anyone before, certainly not around him, but it was becoming clear to him that he really had no idea of what his muse was capable of.

Responding quietly, Ford was honest again, though a part of him thought perhaps it would be best to be less honest for Willow’s peace of mind.

“I don’t know.”

She nodded again, taking that in, before looking up to the ceiling.

As Ford continued to thread through the last of the stitches, the corners of her eyes pricked with moisture. It could have been from the pain or from looking up into the light. She didn’t want to cry in front of Stanford. She’d done enough crying today.

Ford finished the last stitch, and tied it off, cutting the thread. He reached for a roll of bandages, and began wrapping the bandage around Willow’s leg, affixing it tightly so it would hold.

“How’s that?”

“Better. Thank you.” Willow stood, testing her leg, before reaching for the track pants, pulling them on. She sat on the edge of the bathtub and buckled up her sandals, and when she was done, she picked up her damp dress and her bag.

Reaching into the bag, she passed the memory gun over to Ford. “This is for you. I think I dropped the other gun somewhere in the forest.”
“I’ll find it.” Ford replied, turning the memory gun over in his hands. “Thank you, for keeping it safe.”

Willow nodded, and held her chin up high, proud that she’d been able to keep the ray out of Bill’s hands in the end. She did what she promised she would. She had managed to protect someone in the end, even if she couldn’t protect her baby, and she’d saved lives today, maybe even the world.

Ford walked her down the stairs, holding his hand out in case she needed support, and accompanied her to Suzie’s car. Willow grabbed the keys from her bag, and slid them in the door, unlocking it. She opened the door, and paused, looking at Stanford closely.

“Thank you, for letting me do this today.”

“I worry that I’ve done you more harm than good.” Ford frowned at her.

“No, I needed this. Seriously.” Willow looked at Ford intently and held out her hand for him to shake. “Thank you.”

Awkwardly Ford shook her hand, unaccustomed to this sort of congratulations. He didn’t feel like being congratulated.

Willow turned his hand over, and noticed the cut on his palm, flicking a concerned glance up at Ford’s face.

“Take care of yourself, okay?”

Ford swallowed, and nodded, her concern oddly touching.

She slid into the front seat of the car and closed the door behind her. Turning the keys in the ignition, the car rumbled to life, and Willow looked up at Ford from the half-wound car window. “I’ll see you around, yeah?”

Ford nodded again, and stepped back, waving at her. “See you.”

As Willow drove away down the dirt road, Ford watched her go, lamenting her absence as it meant his distractions had dwindled. While he hadn’t exactly wanted company, being alone with his thoughts was no better.

Sighing, and turning on his heel, he looked up at his house, taking in the familiar structure with its triangular windows, feeling like it couldn’t be more alien now, this building that was meant to be his home.

Whatever had made it his home before was gone, and Ford was unwilling to admit that that missing piece was Bill. He couldn’t miss him, not now that he knew the truth. Bill was going to destroy the world. What did that say about Stanford if he still missed such a monster?

Swallowing his uncertainty, Ford climbed the stairs to the front porch, and stood in the doorway, looking at the hallway, still seeing things out of place, things he had to clean. He could move on if he had a purpose, and right now, getting everything back in order was his priority.

Righting the chaos that his life had become.

Squaring his shoulders, Ford stepped into the house, and threw himself into cleaning, anything to spare him from his guilty thoughts.
Perhaps if he could remove the evidence of Bill’s wrongdoing from today, it will be like it had never happened.

One could hope.

“I can assure you, Sir, your investment’s secure.” Pyronica smiled sweetly, looking across the table at one of Bill’s interdimensional investors while he mulled her assurances over, puffing on a Andolean cigar.

“I heard the gig is cancelled.”

“Postponed.” Pyronica corrected them, still maintaining her polite smile. “Temporarily. Just while we sort out a few last minute kinks in the party door.”

The investor clicked his pincers pensively, squinting his small crustacean eyes up at the flaming cyclops suspiciously. “Why isn’t your Boss here, telling me this himself?”

Pyronica’s smile tightened at the edges slightly. “Bill is indisposed at the moment. Also temporarily. I’m filling in for him.”

“Listen lady, I’m sure you got a head for business, but are you qualified to step in for your Boss here? It’s just that I ain’t heard a thing from him about this little reach around, and now I’m supposed to believe that it’ll all blow over because you bat your eyelashes at me?” The crustacean man snorted, and puffed away at his cigar. “No disservice to you of course, but I’d rather be speaking to Bill than you.”

“Why? You like his eyelashes better?” Pyronica asked, her polite tone drying up sharpish.

“Again, no disservice to you, but I’d rather hear it from the horse’s mouth, you get me?”

“He’s a triangle.” Pyronica said, her words clipped, her smile straining. “Not a horse. And he’s indisposed.”

“Well, when’ll he be back?” The crustacean asked, waving his feelers at Pyronica scornfully.

“When he’s back. Until then, you deal with me.” Pyronica tried for a diplomatic smile again, but was probably baring her teeth a little too much to be propitious. “So, can we still rely on your investment?”

The investor pursed his lips and waved his cigar around in one of his claws whimsically. “Hmmm. This is a lot to mull over. A risk, and a setback. I haven’t decided yet if I’m willing to invest at the same rate. No disservice to you of course, not saying I’ve made my mind up yet. I’m sure you could sweeten the deal some.”

“It’s sweet enough already. The deal remains the same.” Pyronica said flatly. “So what do you say?”

He waved his feelers at Pyronica and squinted his eyes at her opportunistically, stroking his chin. “I’m thinking.”
In an instant Pyronica lunged across the table and grabbed the crustacean by his eye stems, snarling in his face. “THINK FASTER!”

“Okay! Okay! I’m in!” The investor squealed frightfully.

Pyronica let go of his eye stems and leaned back, sitting in her chair comfortably. Exhaling loudly, calming herself after her outburst, she forced her polite smile back on her face, and batted her eyelashes at the investor.

“Excellent. Thank you for your sustained support. It’s good to have you on board.”

The investor rubbed his eye stems and nodded, before scuttling out of his chair, exiting the office, casting outraged looks over his shoulder as he went.

Pyronica rubbed above her eye and sighed. This diplomacy bullshit was not her forte. She didn’t know how Bill did it, without breaking each and every investor’s scrawny neck that is. They were all so infuriating.

Leaning back in her chair, Pyronica called out for the next candidate she had to schmooze to death. “NEXT!”

Kryptos floated into the office, looking over his shoulder as the crustacean investor left. “Geez Pyronica, you’re supposed to close them, not scare them witless.”

“They’re already witless.” Pyronica grumbled as Kryptos closed the study door. “Every single one of them wants to try it on, try to push for more out of their deals. They’re looking to get away with things they wouldn’t even think of doing if Bill were here, and they keep trying to get one over on me.”

“That’s how negotiating works.” Kryptos shrugged and floated into the seat opposite Pyronica. “But hey, if you’re having trouble with it, you could always let me have a try.”

“No.” Pyronica pointed at Kryptos and narrowed her eye. “No. I’ve run through every What Would Bill Do scenario in my head, and there is no scenario that Bill would approve of that would involve giving you any modicum of power here. He wouldn’t trust you with it, and neither will I.”

“But you want to.” Kryptos tested, looking slyly at Pyronica. “I can tell. You hate this needless pandering.”

Pyronica pouted but didn’t give Kryptos the satisfaction of a reply.

“You feel like you’re wasting time, playing word tennis with the investors. All this delicate finicking back and forth. You prefer to solve your problems with violence, but in the board room it doesn’t make you look strong, it makes you look weak, and they can sense that.”

“Because I’m stuck in a room full of people like you.” Pyronica scowled. “Who are so weak they don’t know what real strength is. That’s why they hide behind words, and manners, and sneaky tactics. People like you wouldn’t last one second out on the battlefield.”

“If you’re good enough with your words, and sneaky tactics, you can win the battle without stepping onto the field at all.” Kryptos shrugged. “That’s what Bill taught me anyhow.”

“Yeah, well Bill’s got no problems bringing the best of both worlds to the table.” Pyronica mumbled.
“And they know that, which is why they respect him.” Kryptos nodded, watching Pyronica rub her temples.

“If they respect him, why are they trying to short change him so much?” She asked.

“You can’t mistake respect for loyalty.” Kryptos answered. “Bill knows that too, that’s why there’s us and there’s them.”

“Yeah, well none of this would have happened if he hadn’t chosen a ‘them’ in the first place.” Pyronica grumbled, and rested her chin on the desk, leaning forward.

“The human?” Kryptos probed, crossing his legs, resting his hand on his chin watching her expectantly.

“I told him. I told him that if Six Fingers wasn’t on board with this it could all blow up in our faces. I wanted things to work for them, but I mean – he just isn’t being realistic.” Pyronica bemoaned.

“When is he realistic?” Kryptos nodded understandingly. “He’s the master of unreality.”

“But I thought he’d at least be realistic about this.” Pyronica gestured to the desk emphatically. “If he knew Sixer was so principled about things from the beginning, he shouldn’t have –“

“Ruined all our chances by siding with the human?” Kryptos said quickly, the words coming out in a smooth rush.

“What? No.” Pyronica blinked, and gave Kryptos an assessing look. “And nothing’s ruined, we can fix this. I meant he shouldn’t have let someone else get to him. I guarantee you, if Bill got to him first, Sixer would still be on side with this.”

“What makes you so sure?” Kryptos narrowed his eye.

“He has a way with words, remember?” Pyronica snarked, shooting Kryptos a scathing look. “If he can win a battle without stepping foot on the field, then he can win over a human who is clearly already obsessed with him. And he would have done too.”

“But this Sixer betrayed him.” Kryptos reasoned. “Obsession doesn’t roll over that easy.”

“We just have to find out why. Why Six Fingers would do that.” Pyronica pondered, sighing. “Bill made it seem like Six Fingers couldn’t be more enamoured with him just a day before this all went down. We just have to figure out what happened, who intervened? Sure he’s smart, but he couldn’t have figured this out on his own.”

“I thought he was one of Bill’s ‘pet geniuses’. Kryptos bunched his fingers into air quotes derisively.

“What genius do you know who’s actually smart, huh smart guy?” Pyronica scoffed, and reached out to cuff Kryptos above his eye. “Not you, that’s for sure.”

Kryptos rubbed the back of his eye, scowling, and Pyronica pushed up from her chair, walking around the desk.

“Come on. Follow me.”

Kryptos turned around in the chair, following the clack of Pyronica’s heels as she left the study.

“Where are we going?” He asked, floating along behind her.
“We’re gonna go looking for answers.” Pyronica narrowed her eye and held the study door open for Kryptos.

He floated out, and as he left the room, the next investor in the queue held a withered hand up, croaking out.

“My appointment was next I believe.”

“Your appointment’s cancelled.” Pyronica paused, and narrowed her eyes at the investor, before glaring at the line of waiting investors. “None of you are getting a better deal, so be happy with what you got. And if you got any problems with that…”

Fire flared in the palm of Pyronica’s hand, and the investors all took a step back, fearful of her reputation.

“Then you can bring it up with Bill when he gets back.” Pyronica smiled sweetly at the quivering investors, bat her eyelashes at them. “And he’s far less lenient than I am, so just keep that in mind.”

Clenching her fist and extinguishing the flames, Pyronica turned on her heal and sauntered down the corridor, her heels clacking against the brick flooring. The investors watched her go in shock, and Kryptos, who was always one to take advantage of a situation, floated giddily behind Pyronica, before turning around and stammering.

“Yeah, that’s – that’s right! Deal with it!”

The investors gave him unimpressed looks, but no one made any move to censure Kryptos or retaliate against him, and he grinned, before following Pyronica down the hall.

It was good to have powerful friends.

Ford dumped the red sodden cleaning cloths and his yellow rubber gloves in the bin out the front, feeling inordinately numb.

The numbness was a purposeful device, an aspect of survival. He preferred the numbness to this mental struggle he underwent whenever he allowed himself to feel.

He was struggling with his conscience, wavering over whether he made the right decision back in the clearing or not. Mostly, he was berating himself for wavering at all, mentally castigating himself, calling himself selfish and a myriad of other epithets.

Second guessing the choice he made to save the world was redundant, and if he had prioritised himself and his own happiness over the world’s security, then he was every bit as selfish as he imagined himself to be.

However there was something about scrubbing your partner’s blood from the walls that lent itself to relentless sympathy.

Ford couldn’t deny how much he’d hurt his muse today when the evidence of that hurt was staring
him in the face.

Willow had shot him. There was so much blood.

Ford had indirectly authorised that degree of violence, and in a way it felt like Ford was the one who shot his muse, who had pulled the trigger.

He kept picturing his muse’s face, desperate and begging, crying and reaching out for him from behind the salt barrier. He’d sprung this on Bill completely, and Ford kept casting his mind back to how he’d left Bill this morning, wrapped up warm and safe in bed, nestled down under the covers.

It was, Ford had come to realise as he scrubbed the last of the spilled blood from the floor, undoubtedly cruel, what he had done to his muse.

That realisation rankled with Ford, because through all of his studies, and his experience with specimens, the way he conducted his research, he never considered himself to be a cruel man. He always took great pains to conduct his research in a humane way, never striking against a creature that didn’t strike at him first.

Did Bill’s betrayal count as the first strike? Ford didn’t know.

Or perhaps the first strike had been Ford’s all along, perhaps it had been all him, acting out against his muse, herding him, and shooting him, and luring him into the woods, all to trap him in a salt circle and rip him apart particle by particle.

He treated his muse like an animal.

And worst of all, the cruelest thing Stanford had done today…

He made Bill hope.

“Fine, let’s say you’re right. Let’s say I give you a chance.”

The expression, the absolutely trusting, awestruck, optimistic expression that swept across Bill’s features was utterly painful looking back on it. The way his eyes lit up, and his mouth hung open, the trusting way he’d approached Ford, hugging him, pressing grateful kisses to his chin and cheeks.

Ford could still feel the warm brush of Bill’s lips against the side of his mouth, remember how starkly different it had felt to the cold spatter of the rain against his skin. Bill’s warmth felt like a balm, and it was so difficult to withhold himself in that moment, to prevent himself from melting back into Bill’s earnest affection.

The will of steel he seemed to have throughout the entire plot, banishing Bill for the sake of the earth, seemed absent now that Bill was gone, now that the danger had passed.

If there even was any danger at all.

Ford stuffed the bloodied rags in the bin holding the rubber gloves delicately, so the blood wouldn’t get on his skin. He felt as though his hands were red enough already.

Stained by what he’d done today. By the blood he’d surely shed by orchestrating this whole sting.

“Thank you Sixer. You won’t regret it.”

He was already regretting a lot about today, now that Willow wasn’t around to keep him focused.
on the harm that he’d averted. He could only really think about the harm he’d caused Bill, which was very evident when Ford was cleaning his blood off the floor.

His justification for his fascinatingly grotesque alternative form, with the mouths sprouting from his chest, and the many clawed arms, was Willow’s initial provocation. Ford had brushed it off in the woods, presuming that Willow’s shot had missed, rather ignorantly assuming that she wouldn’t have the stomach to actually land a shot on another human being, thinking this was just Bill’s overreaction.

He kept forgetting that Bill wasn’t a human being. Willow certainly hadn’t.

“Why did you do this?”

“Because she shot at me.”

She certainly did.

Ford had to shove the bloodied rags in the bin to close the lid properly, squashing them down in there. He didn’t know how anyone could bleed so much, and still go on standing, but as his conscience was continually reminding him, Bill wasn’t human.

And he never was, and Ford’s own obsessive desire to humanize the god in order to comprehend him was his own folly. He’d set himself up for failure, for a glorious misunderstanding.

The moment he created that body for Bill he framed the way he wished to perceive the god and let his fondness for the body’s design blind him to the muse’s flaws. Rather than finding Bill’s sadistic, chaotic, dangerous side perturbing, he found it oddly endearing, right down to the shadowy extraneous arms he’d grown the other night when they were together.

Even now Ford was having trouble reconciling his own thoughts with the monstrous reality that was Bill’s altered body. He felt shame, guilt, and that same mental castigation beat down on him as the honest, yearning part of his mind admitted to itself that he didn’t find Bill’s many armed, warped form entirely disgusting, like he should.

He should have been repulsed by the obvious evidence of his muse’s monstrosity, but instead he was fascinated and intrigued. He was trying to let that purposeful numbness flush out the shame he felt when he privately admitted to himself that he didn’t find Bill’s additional arms and sharp toothed mouths unattractive. There was something still alluring about the muse that had Stanford forgive all of his eldritch deformities.

Maybe it wasn’t the body that shielded Ford from the muse’s realities, from his innate unpleasantness. Maybe Ford had done that all on his own, and it didn’t matter how pretty the packaging was, or how grotesque. Ford was still drawn to the muse, and his heart still ached for him.

He’d hurt him, and his actions today were cruel.

Was Bill’s betrayal crueller?

Ford was looking for a reason, some kind of justification for his actions.

When he wasn’t alone in the house, with Willow bleeding upstairs in the tub, he found it easy to throw all the blame onto Bill. Of course Bill’s betrayal was greater, of course his lies and misdirection were the more grievous sin, of course the way Bill had jerked around Ford’s feelings meant he deserved everything he had coming to him.
But now that Ford was all alone in the house with no one to provide perspective for him, he felt weaker, and uncertain. The righteous resolve he had that allowed him to power through this plan to save the world, to banish Bill from his body, was fading, and instead it was being replaced by Stanford’s chronic tendency to overthink, and to feel guilty beyond reason for all manner of things.

Yes, Bill had lied to him at the start, and he’d certainly manipulated him, if building the portal was always his main goal. If Ford focused only on that, then it was clear to him that everything that followed after had to be a lie, had to be a grand manipulation to allow Bill his end result, a portal between dimensions and a foothold in this world.

His muse had lied to him.

He was never even a muse, Stanford really needed to stop calling Bill that, he was a chaotic spirit of pure energy with an agenda, and Stanford was simply a successful mark with the resources and intelligence to follow through. If he’d been picked, that was the reason, and not because he was so overwhelmingly special that a god had stopped by to enlighten him.

But even if their initial point of connection was fake, walking through the empty house, scrubbing blood off the walls and pulling cutlery out of the wall, righting what Bill had knocked over in his scuffle, and buffing scorch marks off the furniture, Stanford couldn’t help being struck with endless visceral reminders of how much of their relationship was real.

It was real to Stanford anyway. He couldn’t be sure how much of this was real to Bill, or if it was simply another part of the manipulation.

He could have been playing Ford like a puppet all this time, stringing him along, but still, Ford was coming to realise that for Bill to have him dancing to his tune, there was a lot that Bill didn’t have to do.

Ford rolled the overflowing bin to the front of the driveway, and left it there, before walking back in the house, feeling exhausted.

He knew that Bill didn’t have to do half of what he did for Ford to get him to build the portal. The opportunity in and of itself was enough, to be able to make such a revolutionary machine was motivation enough to get it up and running. Bill could have given him the information and left him to it, keeping his distance while stuck in this body.

He didn’t need to try so hard to make Ford laugh, or to keep him engaged or entertained. He didn’t need to join Ford on his expeditions to study the other specimens in Gravity Falls, or insult his bullies for him, or stand up for him and proudly hold his freakish hands in public. He didn’t need to turn Ford’s salt shaker gold, and replace his broken trophies with newer, better ones built from genuine esteem. He didn’t need to write spells in Ford’s journal, or doodle in the margins, or leave helpful notes where Ford would see them.

Ford recalled the night Bill had shown him a glimpse of the cosmos through his own cosmic eye. The experience was unbelievable, utterly inspiring, and Bill had let Ford inhabit his own mind in that moment, sharing that much of himself with Ford, something he didn’t need to do. He’d taken care of Ford, marched him up to bed when his headache intensified, and sat with him until he fell asleep, stroking his hair as consciousness fled.

When Ford woke up, the flighty and contemptuous muse who he’d summoned, who’d sworn he wouldn’t lift a finger to help Stanford since he bound him in this body, had detailed for him page upon page of the necessary notes he needed to complete his experiment, and for the life of him Ford couldn’t understand what would have motivated the muse to do that.
Bill had brought wonder, and sparkle, and magic to Ford’s life. He’d made equations appear out of thin air, made jam jars dance around his kitchen, shaved a unicorn with him, made Ford feel like he was floating, even when he wasn’t.

He’d done so much for Ford that he didn’t need to, and the worst of Bill’s unnecessary tasks was this.

He didn’t need to make Ford feel so loved.

So loved and wanted. He didn’t need to make Ford exhale into comfort when Bill uttered the word *mine* and he didn’t need to heat Ford up so well when he pressed up close against him, those fiery kisses scorching his skin. He didn’t need to make Ford feel cherished or exceptional every time Ford cooked him a meal, nor did he have to smile at him so brilliantly when he entered a room.

So much of him hurt, was still hurting now, because of how Bill had done more than just manipulate him. He’d made him feel like an equal, like something more than ‘just a worshipper’ or just anything.

His chest was aching now as he stepped into the shack, closing the front door behind him, and he took in the tidied hallway, and the glued down wallpaper, everything back in it’s proper place, and he just felt so lonely without Bill there.

Ford rubbed his forehead and blinked tears from his eyes, trying to reconnect with that life saving numbness he’d accessed before, wanting it back. Feeling like this hurt too much.

He looked down at his hand, and realised that despite his best efforts with the rubber gloves, in pushing the bloodied rags into the bin, Bill’s blood was on his hands now, just a little bit, on the tips of his fingers.

He looked in the hallway mirror and saw Bill’s blood smeared on his forehead like a brand.

Looking at his reflection he couldn’t decide in that moment who the real betrayer was.

He paced into the kitchen and washed his hands, grabbing a tea towel and wetting it, before stomping back out into the hall, standing in front of the hallway mirror and scrubbing the blood from his forehead.

It wiped off quickly, but Ford still felt dirty, and scrubbing at his skin did nothing to assuage that.

Pacing back into the kitchen, he threw the tea towel roughly in the sink, and circled the room, crossly looking for some semblance of control over his emotions. He wanted that numbness back, succumbing to this wave of guilt and loneliness was not tolerable. It was not an option.

Walking angrily to the elevators, he pressed the call lift button, storming through the elevator doors when they opened. He rode the lift down, breathing heavily, trying to hold onto that justifiable anger, so he could justify that he was the one who was betrayed. So he could shirk the guilt that was building like a tsunami behind him, waiting to crash on the shore.

The elevator dinged open, and he strode out into the lab, his shoulder’s squared, ready to stare down the reason why all of this had happened, the true beginning of all this betrayal.

He stood in front of the triangular structure of the portal and tried to sustain his indignant rage that he’d been used, that he’d been screwed over, that he’d been manipulated all along, and for what, for this…this machine.
He clenched his fingers into fists repeatedly and stood in front of the imposing eye of the portal, taking heavy breaths, and he contemplated ending the machine. He contemplated ripping the cords from the wall, unseating the generators, anything to scrap the evidence that he’d been so sorely used, like he’d scrapped all the other evidence of Bill’s dangerous rampage from the house.

He shifted on his feet for a moment, moving his weight back and forth, but he didn’t move.

He just stood there with his hands clenched. Blinking back tears.

“I can’t destroy this. It’s my life’s work.”

That’s what he’d said to Fiddleford. Whether it was due to Bill’s intervention or not, this portal was still the scientific height of his career. It was his life’s work.

“This portal and what comes after – it’s my life’s work.”

Bill had looked at him, beseeching him to understand. His bright yellow eyes were wide, imploring him, and Stanford had stabbed him in the back.

“You expect me to give up my life’s work for you, but you won’t give up your life’s work for me?”

Perhaps they weren’t so different.

The sob that Stanford was trying to suppress welled up in his throat, and he choked on it, trying to swallow the emotion away. He spluttered, and his eyes watered, tears slipping out.

His breath hitched, and the sob that was stuck in his throat found a voice, echoing in the silent, empty lab. He wiped his eyes with his sleeve, but still the tears kept coming, and his sniffles sounded louder in the lab than they had any right to.

He’d come down here to let the sight of the portal justify his actions today, to make it apparent that he’d been manipulated from the start, but all he could see was the invention that brought them both together, and formed the initial connection between them. All he could see was an invention that meant so much to the both of them, that they’d both worked so hard on, that had done so much for the both of them, and had ruined everything for the both of them in the end.

Stanford’s sobs caught in his throat more frequently now, and the pain in his chest intensified. It almost felt like he was hyperventilating, he felt like he couldn’t breathe for the pain, yet the sobs forced their way up his throat, tears staining his face wet with salty trails.

His legs felt weak as the reality of the day dawned on him all at once, and they gave out beneath him. He dropped to his knees, and fell down, his hands clenched against the dirt floor, tears catching on his glasses and falling to the ground relentlessly.

Gritting his teeth and screaming his anguish out in the empty lab, Ford yelled wordlessly, and beat his fist against the ground, his shoulders shaking as he cried.

“There really is no one you can trust.” Bill’s last words to Stanford were haunting him, as the portal so desperately reminded him of everything that he’d lost today. “So much for your destiny.”

Ford’s composure fell apart, dissolving as surely as Bill’s body had, and he yelled out his frustration and sadness into the empty lab, clenching his fists in the dirt, kneeling in front of his destiny yet having it so surely out of reach.

He sobbed for hours, his heartbreak and betrayal from the day catching up with him, rebounding on
him twice as hard for his attempted repression. It came over him in a devastating wave of helplessness.

He cried relentlessly, dehydrating himself but not wanting to move from this spot in front of what was meant to be his triumph. It was meant to be their triumph, together.

It just wasn’t fair. This was his destiny, it was supposed to be his destiny, and Bill betrayed him. He’d lied to him from the beginning.

Then why did Stanford feel so terrible?

“ANSWER ME YOU USELESS HACK! YOU DID THIS ON PURPOSE! YOU DID THIS TO ME ON PURPOSE! EVERY BIT OF IT FROM THE BEGINNING! DIDN’T YOU?”

Ford clutched his stomach, hugging himself, and laid down on his side, his tears dripping down into the dirt below his face as he stared at the portal, despondent beyond all belief.

He’d never felt so betrayed.

He missed his muse.

He wished all of this had never happened.

He thought about curses, how terrified Willow had been of them, but with this anger and betrayal and endless guilt roiling about in his stomach, he could only think about himself, and his own pain, and how none of this would have happened if destiny hadn’t brought him here.

“Curse the world.” Ford muttered bitterly, his cheeks damp, hugging his arms around himself.

“Curse this town. Curse the fate that brought me here.”

The portal lights twinkled at him, indifferent to his despair. The Behenian fixed stars that had seemed so magical when Bill pointed them out to him, reclining lazily in the portals eye, now seemed to mock him, sparkling with backlit blue, reminding him of the myriad of wonderful exotic places he could now never go to.

Past words of hope were haunting him, breaking his spirit down further.

“You did this. You’re the Man Who Changed the World. And now it’s all yours to explore.”

Stanford thought this was his destiny, but now it was all just a bitter lie. He thought he reached the pits of despair and betrayal when Fiddleford left, but he didn’t even know the feeling then. Not like he did now.

“He left, he’s gone.” Ford had uttered, back when Fiddleford had left after the disastrous portal test, despondent of the fact. “And now I’m alone.”

“No you’re not.”

Ford’s throat felt tight as he wailed miserably, his tears flowing dejectedly down into the soil.

“You’re not alone.”

Another pretty lie, and like a fool, Ford had believed it.

Bill had lied to him, deceived him, and now he was gone thanks to Ford’s actions. His muse was gone, and he was now more alone than ever.
Ford was tired of this hurt, and he was tired from all that he’d done today, all the cleaning, and plotting, and betrayal and the shame he felt from all of it.

Laying there in the dirt, his cheeks still damp, he closed his eyes, and hoped for numbness once again.

It hurt to be awake.

It hurt to feel.

Kryptos hadn’t been in this part of the Quadrangle before.

Considering the structure was always moving, it’s corridors twisting and warping as it pleased, there was a great deal of the Quadrangle that he hadn’t explored.

It was also possible that whenever he found a ‘new’ room, it was a place he’d been in before but simply didn’t recognise, the Quadrangle changed so much.

Another possibility was that the Quadrangle twisted itself in circles for the sake of confusing its occupants. Kryptos always seemed lost in this massive labyrinth, he could never find the good stuff.

Though Pyronica never seemed to have any difficulties finding her goal.

She turned left down the end of the corridor purposefully, and paused beside a nondescript brick wall, resting her flaming palm against the surface, concentrating.

Kryptos watched her and mimicked her movements, sticking his own palm out flat against the wall.

The mortar around the bricks lit up an angry red, and a loud BZZT noise sounded out in the corridor.

Pyronica tsked and shot Kryptos a look.

“Can you move your hand? I’m trying to get us in.”

“Why don’t I get to do it?” Kryptos asked, removing his hand from the wall reluctantly.

“You know why.” Pyronica gave Kryptos a scornful glance, before applying herself to her task again, focusing on the brick wall.

Kryptos sulked, and looked around the corridor, pouting. Gradually, as Pyronica focused on burning her handprint in the surface of the brick wall, the mortar between the bricks began glowing an ambient pink, the colour brightening and intensifying, until it lit up yellow with a pleasant sounding ‘ping’.

The bricks split down the middle and slid open, revealing a secret corridor.
Pyronica looked down at Kryptos smugly. “That’s how it’s done.”

She paced down the secret corridor, Kryptos floating behind her.

“But how did you do it?”

“Not telling.”

“Pyronicaaaa.”

The doorway slid shut, bricks sealing them both in, mortar melting over once more.

The corridor was dark for a while, Pyronica’s flames lighting their path, before the hallway levelled out into a wide, high ceilinged room, every available surface covered with oval shaped mirrors, reflecting different mindscape.

The room glittered, different dreams playing out in muted tones on the hundreds of mirrors. They shimmered, standing out against the black brick walls. The mortar in this room glowed, thrumming with Bill’s magic, the colours constantly shifting through the full electromagnetic spectrum. It was dazzling to behold.

Pyronica looked up around the room and sighed. She missed Bill.

“Wow! What is this room? This place is amazing!” Kryptos gushed, floating by Pyronica’s knee. “How long has this been here? Bill’s never showed me this.”

“Why would he?” Pyronica looked down at Kryptos. “You’re a rat.”

“Compass.” Kryptos corrected her, sounding offended.

“You’re a snitch.” Pyronica corrected him, and bent down to point at his chest. “A no good, disloyal, brown nosing, cowardly, dirt scraping snitch. Bill never showed you this place, because why should he? He doesn’t trust you.”

“Then – why are you showing me this place?” Kryptos questioned warily.

“Because – Bill can’t kill you because of your deal. My hands aren’t tied like that.” Pyronica let the fire on her hands burn a little hotter, singing the compass’s chest. He yelped, and she smirked a little, before dulling her fire down and patting embers off his small quivering frame. “I’m showing you because I feel like it, and I’m generous like that, but that could change at any time. So don’t tell anyone about this place, got it?”

“Got it.” Kryptos nodded briskly, his hands covering his chest timidly.

Pyronica straightened up and looked around the shimmering room, looking somewhat less assured now, the corners of her lips turning down at the edges. Looking over the magic of Bill’s private dream room reminded her of her friend, and made his absence all the more keen.

“Besides.” She said, sounding far away, lost in her thoughts. “I hate being alone.”

Kryptos blinked up at her, shocked by her admittance, and felt a twinge of sympathy twist through his cosmic soul.

The melancholic set of her jaw moved him, or maybe it was all that time they’ve been spending together on the battlefield, either way, it jarred Kryptos to hear Pyronica admit vulnerability. And it jarred him even more to hear that she felt so alone that she even found his company preferable.
He was under the impression that Pyronica couldn’t stand him.

Prodding his thumbs together, mulling that over, he looked up at her, his voice overtly cheerful as he changed the topic, trying to brighten her mood some.

“So, what are we doing?”

“We’re gonna find Sixer’s dream mirror, and poke around a bit to see if we can find out why he turned on Bill.” Pyronica said, businesslike once more, walking around the room looking for the right frame. “It can’t have happened without some kind of catalyst, it wasn’t too long ago that he thought the world of Bill.”

“How’d he manage that?” Kryptos grumbled, floating along the walls to help Pyronica search for the right mirror.

“You may not like the human, but they had a connection.” Pyronica spoke as she searched for the human’s mindscape mirror. “You heard Bill back in the penthouse, he was gonna keep him. All those energy cubes in the safe room, you know the one’s you complained about stacking because they were too hot to touch? Every single one of those is filled to the brim with Sixer’s worship juice. He must have worshipped the ground Bill walked on, but it’s more than that. Bill was treating him like an equal. He had to be more than just a worshipper.”

“What makes him so special?” Kryptos complained, floating along the wall of mirrors, stopping every so often to curiously look inside some of the colourful mindscape portals.

“I don’t know.” Pyronica answered, tapping her chin as she looked. “Maybe he wasn’t special. Maybe the thing that made him special was that Bill thought he was. I can’t say. Sometimes the things we’re drawn to don’t make sense to us until we understand how they complete us. Fate is funny like that.”

“You think it’s fate that drew them together?” Kryptos questioned, raising his eyebrow at that. “You believe in that?”

“I don’t like fate any more than Bill does.” Pyronica responded, shaking her head, her fingers hovering over the mirrors as she peered through each of them, looking for the right one. “But some things align in ways we can’t explain. Six Fingers shouldn’t have mattered to Bill, but somehow he did, and maybe that’s not a bad thing.”

Kryptos gave Pyronica a sideways glance, sounding amused. “I never took you for a romantic.”

That startled a laugh out of Pyronica, and she looked over at Kryptos, grinning. “Shut up. Don’t think I won’t throw you into those night terrors.”

She pointed at the stand over in the corner of the room, where small globes full of swirling night terrors were placed, like wine on a wine rack, waiting to be cracked open. Kryptos looked over to the night terrors curiously, and floated over to examine them.

“Aha! Found it!” Pyronica called out, triumphant, and pulled a mirror from the mass of mirrors on the wall. Unlike the other mirrors, Stanford’s mirror was more ornate than the others, with a gold frame around the edge, detailed with bricks and triangles.

Pyronica stifled a laugh, snorting as she looked at the mirror.

“Yep, this is definitely his. Looks like Sixer’s the golden boy.”
Kryptos picked up one of the night terror orbs and examined it closely, holding it up in front of his eye, trying to pick out the details within. The craftwork was fascinating. When he heard Pyronica speak he looked briefly over his shoulder at her, taking in the fancy gold frame.

"Ugh. Talk about favouritism."

"Don’t worry Kryptos, I’d never accuse you of being anyone’s favourite. Ever.” Pyronica rolled her eye, smirking at the compass.

She brought the mirror with her as she sat down cross legged on the floor, and patted the ground beside her expectantly.

"You want me to look?" Kryptos questioned hesitantly, inwardly he was exalting at the prospect of being able to poke around inside the Sixer human’s head, to find out exactly why this creature seemed set to climb the hierarchical chain after only a measly year.

Showing him this mirror didn’t seem particularly wise, given how easily he could use this information against people, against the human, against Bill. Pyronica was strong on the battlefield, but one of her weaknesses was that she was too trusting.

Pyronica patted the ground beside her again. “Come on. Two eyes are better than one.”

Kryptos couldn’t argue with that and floated to sit beside her. He rolled the night terror bubble between his hands and leaned in to look at the mirror’s screen.

“Looks like he just got to sleep.” Pyronica ascertained, watching Sixer’s organised mental library drift into various colours, as his subconscious rose to the fore.

The mirror shimmered, and drifted into focus just as Ford’s mind chose to, though it didn’t seem tonight was a night of lucid dreaming. He wasn’t accessing his mindscape now, pouring through the shelves of books and memories. No, tonight he was at the mercy of his hippocampus and amygdala, conscious thought taking the back seat as his mind processed the rollercoaster that his day had been.

The mirror went dark briefly, as though Stanford were blinking, before looking up at the completed image of the trans-dimensional portal. It’s lights were on, a pleasant glow humming smooth electrical noises out in the lab, the soothing melody of scientific discovery lulling Ford’s emotions into a delicate state.

“It’s our party door.” Pyronica whispered, keeping her voice hushed. She didn’t want to influence the dreamscape just yet.

“What’s he doing? He’s just staring at it?” Kryptos questioned, frowning at the mirror.

“The mirror only shows you what he’s seeing, hearing. You’ve gotta press one hand to the frame if you want to know what he’s feeling.” Pyronica explained to Kryptos, before tentatively trailing her fingers forward to brush against the frame.

“See?” Pyronica rested her fingertips against the gold frame solidly, and her shoulders tensed up instantly. She sucked in a sharp breath, and Kryptos looked at her, worried.

“What, what is it?”

“He’s …” Pyronica watched Stanford simply stare up at the portal, taking in its pleasantly blinking colours and lovingly crafted symbols, and she let her shoulders sag, exhaling slowly. “He’s sad.”
“Sad?” Kryptos asked, sounding almost indignant.

“He’s so –“ Pyronica’s brow furrowed, and she chewed on her bottom lip, staring at the mirror. “But I don’t understand.”

“You know, if you stare at it for too long, you’ll go blind.” Bill’s voice rang out, and for a moment, both Pyronica and Kryptos jumped, looking cautiously around the mirror room, before they realised their boss’s voice was coming from Six Finger’s dream. “Or is that if you do something else?”

The tone of Sixer’s dream shifted into something bittersweet, still sad, but laced with so much longing and joy that it all twisted up in a painful bundle as he raised his head and looked behind him.

The view of the mirror shifted, turning to look at a dark skinned human with bright yellow eyes, leaning against the doorway to the lab, his arms crossed, watching Ford with amusement.

“That’s staring into the sun.” Ford replied, his voice sounding tired and indulgent. “And you shouldn’t know about the other things, though I can assure you they’re patently untrue. A conservative myth.”

“Scientifically disproven, is that it?” Bill questioned, and walked across the room to stand next to Ford, who was sitting on the floor. “Did you get a trophy for that too? Or just a standing ovation?”

“Hah hah.” Ford laughed, somewhat sarcastically.

“What are they talking about?” Kryptos asked, somewhat confused, still rolling the dream globe between his hands, fidgety.

“I’ll tell you when you’re older.” Pyronica joked, having seen it all before with her human worshipper.

Ford’s gaze shifted back to the portal, taking in it’s details, but she could feel from her fingertips pressed to the mirror’s frame the sensation of Bill’s warm hand resting on his (her) shoulder, and it gave her shivers down her spine, how intrinsically ‘Bill’ the gesture felt, despite the human vessel he inhabited. He really hadn’t held back with Sixer, Pyronica could feel an accurate remembrance of Bill’s essence in the dream, right down to the way his hands were always hot like muted fire.

Her loneliness ached the same way Stanford’s did, longing for her triangular best friend’s company the same way Sixer ached for Bill’s touch, their emotions refracting against each other and compounding.

Pyronica felt sympathy well up inside her for Six Fingers, and it was fit to overflowing when Ford reached up in the dream and rested his hand over Bill’s. She reached up with her free hand, still feeling what Sixer felt, and put her hand on her own shoulder, just to feel the connection.

“How does achieving your destiny feel, smart guy?” Dream Bill asked Stanford, giving his shoulder a squeeze. “Do you feel accomplished, exalted, hungry, or much the same?”

Pyronica could feel a positive response on the tip of Ford’s tongue, before the honesty of his subconscious overrode the idyllic narrative of the dream.

“It would feel better, if you were really here with me.” Ford sighed, and looked down at the ground. “But you’re not, as much as I want you to be, and this is just a dream.”
Pyronica let go of the mirror frame quickly, holding her hand back like she’d been burned.

“What? What is it?” Kryptos asked, clutching onto the night terror bubble anxiously.

“Is he lucid dreaming?” Pyronica asked, watching the mirror cautiously with a wide eye. “If he is, this could be too dangerous. I didn’t know he could lucid dream so easily.”

“How is it dangerous? He’s in there, and we’re here.” Kryptos argued, reaching forward with his free hand, wanting to see more of the dream. “He’s not going to notice.”

Ford sighed, and continued to rub Bill’s hand soothingly, holding it to his shoulder, unwilling to let go, dream or no.

“Kryptos don’t!” Pyronica warned the compass, raising her voice, but he reached out anyway, his gloved hand resting on the gold gilt frame.

“Is someone -?” Ford started, looking around in the dream, the image in the mirror swinging back and forth.

The dream changed, and the portal wavered, like a mirage, showing hints of a barley field behind.

Kryptos froze up when his hand touched the frame, shocked by the intensity of human emotion, unused to the spectrum of it. While Sixer was looking, something was materialising in his hand, a laser gun, part of his mental defences it seemed. The gun solidified into reality, and Ford gripped it tight.

Kryptos squeaked in fright, his hand gripping a little too tight on the night terror bubble, and it broke, shattering open.

“Kryptos!” Pyronica shrieked and scrambled back.

Both henchmaniacs jumped and leaned out of the way as the whirling smoke escaped the broken globe, seeking a mind to inhabit. With Kryptos and Pyronica leaning backwards, there was only one place left for the night terror to go, and it seeped into the surface of the mirror, tinting the glass a murky yellow.

There was a boom, and Sixer’s emotions projected out loudly in the room, like a mushroom cloud of human empathy, spanning about a metre around the mirror, affecting the henchmaniacs without them having to touch the frame.

Bill’s hand on Ford’s shoulder curled, gripping tight into his flesh, and Ford began to feel pain as his muse’s hands became clawed and monstrous. Pyronica and Kryptos felt a similar pain in their shoulders and panicked.

“How do you make it stop?” Kryptos questioned fearfully, scrambling back out of the cloud’s reach.

“I don’t know! This is your fault!” Pyronica called back, worried, torn between leaving the cloud, and watching the events play out on the mirror.

Ford’s emotions were still projecting, he could feel Bill leaning down, his face all too close as he whispered in Ford’s ear.

“You’ve been blind from the start.”
Ford swung around, and instinctively fired a shot, the laser gun striking through the heart of the dream.

It felt like the bottom dropped out of Ford’s stomach as he watched, wide eyed with shock, as Bill stood before him, with a baseball sized hole burnt through his chest, bleeding profusely.

Ford panicked, and threw the gun away, flinging his hands forward, trying to help.

“I’m sorry, it – it was an accident –“

“You shot me.” Bill said blankly, watching Ford with hurt, betrayed yellow eyes. “With my laser gun.”

“It isn’t –“ Ford stammered, feeling overwhelmingly guilty.

“I made it for you.” Bill stepped into Stanford’s space aggressively, holding his hand over his heart, still bleeding copious amounts of thick, dark blood. He threw his hand out, gesturing at Stanford, and blood splattered against the lenses of Ford’s glasses, making him flinch back. Bill’s voice was warping, sounding impossibly deep, layered upon itself, echoing spitefully throughout the room, and the blood continued to drip from his chest, drops turning into sharp yellow teeth that twisted out of his flesh. “I gave you everything, and you throw it back in my face?”

“I don’t –“ Stanford looked between Bill, and the portal, and panicked, seeing the portal shimmering like a disappearing mirage.

Bill was pacing around him in the dream, a lolling black tongue protruding from the hole in his chest, making wet schlicking sounds as the mouth licked its bloodied teeth. Bill’s voice was echoing in strange incomprehensible ways, and Ford could feel the hair at the back of his neck stand on end as Bill brushed past him, standing behind him.

“You could never have done this without me. You’re useless, weak, boring and unimaginative. A forgotten footnote in history. You’re nothing without me. So much for your destiny.” Bill hissed at him, and Ford lurched forward, towards the shimmering portal, his hands out trying desperately to prevent its disappearance.

Before he got very far, he was halted, by hundreds of small, shadowy hands, gripping onto him. Ford struggled, and fought against the hands, but more and more gripped onto him, pulled him back, until he was drowning in an endless black abyss of shadow.

It was dark, and he felt something wet on his arm, something licking him, and he turned around to find himself face to face with Bill, his glowing yellow eyes the only source of light in the dark.

His breath caught in his throat, an odd mixture of longing and caution, as his muse leaned forward, cupping his chin in his hands, his many hands, brushing his lips against Ford’s own.

He wavered for a moment, uncertain, before he leaned into the kiss, wanting Bill any way he could get him. As he reached out to hold Bill in his arms, the muse pulled away, disintegrating into a fine gold mist.

“No!” Ford called out, swiping through the mist, trying to bring Bill back. He ran through the mist, trying to pick up the particles and push them back together, but they trickled through his fingers, dissipating into the darkness.

He was alone, surrounded by silence and nothingness, feeling as empty as his surroundings, when he heard it, the sound of Bill’s voice catching.
“How could you do this to me?”

He spun around, looking for his muse, but he couldn’t see him, and suddenly he was back in the barley field he’d been lost in when he was eleven, abandoned and frightened, left behind once again.

He pushed through the stems of barley, seeking his muse, or anybody really, to no avail.

“Come back!” Ford yelled out, his voice fading away in the empty space. “Please! Don’t leave me here.”

His shoulders slumped, hearing nothing but the whistle of the wind through the barley, and he turned around, dejected, only to see the portal’s frame towering above him, the barley fanning against the base.

Ford stepped over the generators, approaching the portal’s eye, where Bill reclined as he once had, his hands laced together, resting over the hole in his chest. He seemed pensive, and resigned, almost sad.

“I really thought you were special, you know?”

LIES.

A voice whispered on the wind, blowing through the portal’s eye, ruffling Bill’s hair.

“What is that?” Pyronica squinted, and tried to inch back over to the mirror, braving the cloud of human emotion to get a closer look.

“You were different. I wanted you to be different.” Bill continued to speak, as Stanford pushed through the barley, wanting to be closer to his muse. “A freak, like me.”

DON’T BELIEVE HIS LIES.

The wind whistled, the voice contained within commanding and insidious.

“You made me feel things.”

The voice whirled about Stanford, whipping him with the scratchy barley. It gust ed around him, pushing him back as he tried to reach the portal, flinging his glasses off his face as he pressed forwards.

You think yourself special? Tis a fabrication. He is using you.

Ford gritted his teeth, and made to press on through the gale, his coat weighing him down.

He made you feel chosen, another lie, like he has lied to all those other poor deluded scientists.

Ford shrugged off his coat jacket, and let it fly back, hurled away by the wind.

He deliberately put one foot in front of the other, doggedly making his way over to Bill, who still wasn’t looking at him. He was playing idly with the tongue that poked out of his chest, dancing his fingers above the mouth as the abyssal jaws snapped at him playfully.

Ford reached his six fingered hand out in front of him, aware that it made him a freak, wanting to be the kind of different his muse believed he was.
Bill grinned at the mouth on his chest, amused by it, before looking up at Stanford, his gaze unexpectedly soft.

*Open your eyes. Piece together the details scientist. He is using you.*

“That voice -?” Pyronica squinted at the mirror, suspicious.

“Be mine Sixer?” Bill asked, still smiling benevolently at Ford, holding his hand out to the scientist. “From now, until the end of time?”

Ford stumbled forward and thrust his hand into Bill’s, wanting everything he had to offer and more.

Suddenly Bill pulled him forward by the hand, and Ford felt something hard and cold press into his stomach. He heard the familiar whir of the laser gun warming up, and he looked up at Bill’s face, the muse now grinning viciously, holding him at gunpoint with his own invention.

“You were always blind Sixer.” Bill’s smile was like a knife, and his slitted eyes captured Stanford, disarming him thoroughly. “If you were stupid enough to believe the lie in the first place, maybe you deserved to be tricked.”

The wind howled around the two of them, as Bill pulled Ford in closer to him and sealed their lips together, kissing him possessively.

Ford was keenly aware of Bill’s finger pulling the trigger, just as the wind shouted aggressively at him.

*OPEN YOUR EYES!*

With a shout, Pyronica reeled back from the mirror, as the night terror rose from the surface of the glass and exploded, signalling the end of the dream.

Panting, shocked by the strong emotions she’d been put through, braving closer to the mirror, she looked into the dark reflection, rubbing her chest to free her from this phantom anxiety.

The mirror was no longer responsive. Sixer must have woken up.

Exhaling, and flopping back, her elbows resting on the floor of the dream room, she wiped her forehead, and rubbed one of her horns in consternation.

“Was that – is it over?” Kryptos asked from across the other side of the room. While Pyronica had braved the cloud of emotion, Kryptos had fled its influence, cowering over by the door as far from the danger as he possibly could be. Now that the empathy cloud extinguished its presence, he began creeping back across the room, floating over to the pink cyclops. “Are you okay?”

“Ugh.” Pyronica groaned, and sat up, letting go of her horn.

“Pyronica? Are you okay?” Kryptos fretted, floating up by her elbow.

She glared at Kryptos and her hand shot out, yanking his tongue from his mouth and gripping onto it dangerously.

“I show you this room, and you sabotage me?”
“Unhn uuhh.” Kryptos uttered, shaking his head frantically, holding his hands up.

“You picked up a night terror globe, and you didn’t put it back?” She narrowed her eye and yanked him closer to her, furious. “You just happened to shatter it right on Six Finger’s mirror? You were planning this all along, weren’t you?”

“Ahn dnidn’t –” Kryptos insisted, his speech distorted.

“I should just rip out your tongue now, so you don’t go spilling all of Bill’s secrets to everyone, like a dirty little snitch. We came in here to help him!”

“Scho did ahh!” Kryptos asserted, looking desperately up at the cyclops. Her grip was heating up, and he was nervous. She was almost burning his tongue.

“Give me one good reason why I should believe you?” Pyronica demanded.

“Becauh –“ Pyronica released his tongue, and Kryptos swallowed nervously, before speaking again. “Because, we – we’d both get in trouble if Bill knew we were in here. And I didn’t – I’d never been in a human’s head before. I didn’t know – I – sure I don’t like the guy, but that wasn’t planned. At least not that way!”

“But you were planning it.” Pyronica clarified, watching Kryptos sweat.

“You’re the one who mentioned the night terrors in the first place!” Kryptos pointed out, but shrunk back when Pyronica clenched her fist. “I just wanted to look at them, I wasn’t going to do anything. I – I was surprised, the human shocked me! I didn’t think he’d have a gun.”

“You said so yourself, he’s in there, and you’re out here.” Pyronica growled at the compass.

“You said it could be dangerous!” Kryptos threw his hands out emphatically. “I was just listening to you!”

“And now you’ve seen too much.” Pyronica surmised, and fire raced up her arms.

Keeping his hands in the air in front of him, words tumbled out of Kryptos’ mouth, anything he could say to save his own skin. “I – I’m not going to say anything. I didn’t know – I didn’t know the human and Bill were, that they were like that – I wasn’t – I mean I don’t – I get it! I get why he’s special now!”

“Do you?” Pyronica quirked her brow at the compass, waiting for his answer.

“Human emotions are scary, and more complicated than I gave them credit for.” Kryptos sighed, and frowned at the cyclops. “I – he was thinking so many different things at once, but it’s obvious he cares about Bill, and he’s loyal! At least half of that nightmare was memory, and it felt enough like Bill that maybe, just maybe, the boss liked him back. The human didn’t mean to betray him, he felt like – like he had to. It was that voice.”

“Then you heard it too?” Pyronica’s flames dimmed, and she blinked at Kryptos, concerned again.

“It wasn’t human. But it was a memory.” Kryptos ascertained. “Someone was communicating with him.”

“Someone familiar.” Pyronica rubbed her chin, thinking. “I just can’t put my finger on who. I’ve heard that voice before.”
“Then, we have a lead. We can tell the boss that this Sixer’s been influenced.” Kryptos said excitedly, but Pyronica’s serious expression cut him off.

“We can’t tell Bill.” Kryptos’ excitement slid off his face, and he gaped at her, his mouth hanging open.

“We can’t tell Bill.” Pyronica repeated. “Not now, while he’s like this, while he’s hurting. I – he values his privacy. He’s killed people before for knowing too much about him, old friends even. Sixer’s mind is too honest, the way he sees Bill, it makes him look vulnerable. He doesn’t let that story exist about him, he just doesn’t. He’ll definitely kill you for seeing this without his permission.”

“But – our deal –” Kryptos stammered.

“Or he’ll make me kill you.” Pyronica clapped her hands against her cheeks, and dragged her fingers down to her chin, fretting. “And I’ll definitely get at least several centuries of the cold shoulder for this. No, Bill can’t know. He can’t know we know.”

“Then what do we do?”

Pyronica thought on that, before clapping her hands together. “We investigate. If we tell Bill we snooped without having answers, he’ll get mad at us both, but if we come to him with answers, and a new target to be mad at, then this whole situation will blow away. You just have to keep - your mouth - shut.”

“I can do that.” Kryptos insisted, holding his hands up defensively.

“You better.” Pyronica said, as she picked herself up off the floor, standing up straight. Fixing her hair in one of the dream mirrors, she straightened her shoulders, and nodded at her reflection, before pointing at the corridor that led to the exit. “Shall we go?”

Kryptos nodded and floated along behind her as she opened the dream room up into the main Quadrangle again. He followed her down the winding corridors, the clack of her heels becoming a comforting staccato to offset the pulse of his heartbeat after that unsettling experience.

Talk about nerve wracking, experiencing human emotions like regret, and love.

He shuddered, disgusted by the whole thing, reluctantly admitting that Sixer’s love might have been what made him so damn appealing to the Boss in the first place. That must esteem and affection from someone felt nauseating, but addictive in a way. Not that Kryptos would know. No one was that sickeningly infatuated with him.

As he followed Pyronica through to the main hallway, he saw the candelabras on the wall sputter, the flames that lit them swaying unnaturally in the windless corridors, dimming the lights somewhat, before returning to full brightness.

Pyronica noticed the lights too, and began walking faster, picking up the pace until she was running across the main hall, flinging the door to Bill’s study open.

There, in the study, Bill floated, scouring through the cabinets in the room looking for something.

“You’re back!” Pyronica enthused breathlessly, relieved to see her friend back in one piece.

“Where’s my stash?” Bill asked snappily, barely looking up at the cyclops.
“Oh, boss!” Kryptos exclaimed, floating along behind Pyronica, surprised to see Bill back so soon. “I need a drink. Kryptos.” He snapped his fingers impatiently, indicating that the compass should jump to it.

Kryptos blinked for a moment, before teleporting out into the wine cellar, arriving back with a bottle of Bill’s favourite celestial champagne.

“Is this vintage fine Sir?” Kryptos asked, but Bill interrupted him, shaking his head and waving his hand at the compass.

“I mean the heavy stuff.” Bill scowled, turning around to narrow his eye at the compass. “Bring me the Cosmic Sand.”

“Sir?” Kryptos hesitated, knowing exactly how heavy Cosmic Sand could be. It was the strongest alcoholic substance in the multiverse.

“Now!” Bill glared at Kryptos dangerously, and the compass meeped, before teleporting away to retrieve it.

He poofed back into the room with the decanter of Cosmic Sand, and pulled a crystal champagne flute from under the wrists of his glove, setting the glass on the desktop, before uncorking the beverage.

Bill sat in his desk chair, and held his hand up, palm flat, at Kryptos, halting him.

“Leave the bottle.”

He waved his hand at Kryptos, dismissing him, and the compass looked over to Pyronica, frowning, before he teleported out of the room.

Pyronica lingered in the doorway, watching Bill pull the bottle of Cosmic Sand over to him from across the desk, his arms noodling out long before pulling back in.

“I’m glad you’re back.” She spoke up, sounding uncharacteristically timid, possibly still wary of Bill’s backlash after having sent him back to his childhood home to have his meltdown.

Bill examined the champagne flute Kryptos brought, before melting it down into glowing red sand between his palms, putting the melted champagne flute, now a twisted lump of glass, like an ornament on his desktop to replace the old ones he’d broken.

He picked up the decanter of Cosmic Sand and took a swig straight from the bottle.

Pyronica shifted awkwardly, before trying again. “Do you want company?”

“No.” Bill didn’t even look at her, he just looked at the melted glass on his desk, rolling it across the desktop with his fingertips. He took another swig from the bottle, and waved his hand again.

Pyronica felt the floor move under her feet, the bricks she was standing on sliding back out into the corridor, depositing her there. Bill waved his hand again, and the door swung closed in her face, leaving him in there alone with the bottle of Cosmic Sand.

Pyronica walked forward and put her hand against the door, offended, trying to get in again, but the door shifted into a brick wall, and no matter how hard she pressed her hand against it, it wouldn’t open for her.
She exhaled, frustrated, and looked at the black wall, her friend behind it, getting utterly trashed, it seemed.

Kicking the wall angrily, Pyronica stubbed her toe against the bricks, and hopped on one foot, hissing, holding her ankle and rubbing her hurt toe.

“Ow. Bill.” She gritted out, glaring at the door, before she let go of her ankle, and redistributed her weight.

Huffing out a sigh, Pyronica turned on her heel and tossed her hair over her shoulder, striding away purposefully, thinking violent thoughts.

This was all Sixer’s fault.

All of it.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to JudeClee, because I am overjoyed that you like Willow and all these lovely side characters as much as I do. Poor Willow, it sucks being cursed, but hey, at least there's an Abba song for it.

When I said Pyronica will deliver some words of wisdom that are not so wise, I must have meant in the next chapter she does that. She does plenty of unwise things here too, but at this point we can just assume that everyone's going to screw up on their own steam bit by bit.

I hope you enjoy the chapter! Thank you as always for reading, reviewing, and enjoying this fic!
The sound of the clock on the wall in Ford’s living room seemed louder than it had any right to be, the strikingly audible tick tock competing with the buzzing radio, fumbling static through the frequency, advertisements chiming in regularly.

“Are you hankering for a used car at a bargain? Well, come to a place where everyone’s your buddy –“

The pen Ford was chewing on slipped from between his lips and poked up into his nostril, startling him into a more present state of wakefulness.

He sniffed, and pinched his nose, wiping the end of his pen on his trousers, straining to keep his eyes open as he stared at the printouts on the table in front of him.

“Bud Senior’s Automotive Sales Yard is the place to be for used cars for the right price.”

He’d been going over the notes on the portal, trying to figure out if there was any slight chance that he could still use it without engendering the apocalypse the voice in the ring had assured him would come to pass if he let Bill stay here.

Apart from the debilitating night terrors Ford had been experiencing whenever he closed his eyes for the past six weeks, he’d had no visitations from his muse, no sign that Bill had found some sort of loophole through which to return to Earth.

Well, he’d seen his muse in his dreams technically, but something just felt off about that.

He wasn’t sure if it was Bill he was seeing, or just his own guilty conscience, churning up endless night terrors that had him wake up screaming, sweating bullets. While in his dreams his muse had done plenty of speaking, throwing sweet nothings and broken promises in his face along with all sorts of manipulative vitriol, they hadn’t actually communicated with each other at all.

Even once Ford put effort back into lucid dreaming, he hadn’t got a coherent sentence out of the Bill he met in his dreams, only scathing, guilt tripping, gut wrenching horror.

It was enough to make him miss Bill. The real Bill. Despite his paranoia and anxiety telling him otherwise on occasion, Ford was 78% sure that the muse he saw in his dreams was not Bill. Not really.

He felt lonely. Tired and incredibly lonely.
"Buy a Buick for a good buck! We’ve got Mustangs, we’ve got your Quattros, we’ve got your Fords, we’ve got it all down at Bud’s!"

The clock kept ticking.

Ford had, for want of a purpose, gone over all the alchemy books and spell books that he had, wanting to know if his actions were indeed as permanent and irrevocable as they seemed to be. Judging from the complete lack of any lingering signs of an apocalypse, Ford’s spell-work was airtight, but that didn’t reassure him the way it should have done.

He might feel better about the whole situation if he had some sliver of communication with his muse, some way to ask for the explanations he hadn’t thought to consider when the world was on the line, or so it seemed. Now he was alone, his muse banished, and he was left with more questions than he had answers to.

Pinching the corners of his eyes, blinking away his tiredness, he looked to the bronze ring that sat in a beaker on the edge of the coffee table.

“Still nothing to say, hmm?” Ford asked the ring, which sat, stagnant and silent, the stone capping the ring a dull ebony now, no longer that shining blue.

After several more seconds of telling silence from the ring, Ford sighed, and leaned back on the couch, looking up at the ceiling, frustrated.

“Of course not.”

He found it remarkably cruel that whatever sentience had inhabited the ring six weeks back had so thoroughly fled now that Ford had followed its instructions. The being that had spoken through the ring must have decided that Ford had fulfilled his purpose and left it at that. Certainly, the world was safe from Bill’s party-oriented machinations, but that didn’t mean that Ford still didn’t have questions.

He had a myriad of questions to ask the sentience in the ring, most of which sprung up from self-doubt and second guessing the instant Ford fully conceptualised what he did and at who’s prompting. For all this talk about his muse’s deadly agenda, about using people, and then throwing them away, Ford was coming to think that the hypocritical ring was hardly any better.

If he could, he’d be having words with the voice in the ring. Though as much as he attempted to call through to the voice, he felt like he’d been put on hold, or hung up on. It was an indignant ordeal, to reach out constantly to a voice that didn’t answer.

At least when Ford first summoned Bill, in their early intangible stage of their relationship, usually Ford got an answer. Maybe Bill just liked to hear himself talk though.

Stanford couldn’t decide who’d duped him worse, his muse, or the voice, but he imagined he could count on one hand how many times he’d been tricked by someone he trusted within the past two months, and the more he thought about it, the more inclined he was to use the other hand as well.

The static on the radio drifted in and out of focus as Ford stared up at the ceiling, his eyelids growing heavy, heavier.

While he knew that the dreams he was being plagued with were only dreams, there was something rather unpleasant about constant night terrors. He didn’t relish waking up sweating, with a hoarse throat from screaming. He felt a moment of sympathy for Fiddleford, and regret for how briefly he’d brushed off F’s night terrors.
Ford had been avoiding sleep, much like Fiddleford had, to avoid the night terrors.

That was the funny thing though. It didn’t matter the time of day, he didn’t have to be asleep in his bed at a reasonable hour for the dreams to strike. It was odd, because logically, looking at the name, night terrors were supposed to happen at night.

Not in the middle of the day.

Suddenly, Ford was laying horizontally in his bed, blinking up at the ceiling of his room.

It was dark, he could faintly see the glow cast from his alarm clock by his bedside reflecting up onto the roof, and he could hear the crickets chirping in the woods outside.

It seemed late, far past midnight, well into sensible sleeping hours, but what had Ford puzzled was how he got here, considering last he recalled he was eschewing sleep in favour of research.

The blankets were warm, and he was in the cozy sort of haze that had him snuggling back against the pillow, intent to close his eyes again. It had been so long since he’d had a decent, peaceful sleep.

As he settled back down, tucking the blankets between his legs, he paused. Something wasn’t right.

The blankets felt sticky, and wet, damp all the way through, but the wetness was warm, an incongruous puddle seeping through the fabric.

Ford patted the sheet beneath him and brought his hand up to his face, squinting at it in the dark. There was something glinting on his hand, something liquid. Not water, it was far too dark a colour to be water.

He looked beside him to his bedside table, seeking to turn on the light, when he noticed someone lying in bed next to him, bunched under the covers.

Ford blinked at the shape, before leaning across them to turn the light on.

Sharp brightness revealed the scene in the room. Ford’s pale blue sheets were drenched, stained through red with so much blood. The shape under the covers shifted, groaning, before flipping the covers off, sitting upright.

It was a person, and Ford could see all the way through their torso when they turned, the alarm clock peeking through the gap in their chest as they reached for the light switch.

They seemed to pause, realising Ford was behind them, staring, before they turned around to face him.

“Sixer.” Bill said, and wiped the leaking blood from the hole in their chest with a delicate finger, before reaching forward to smear the blood across Ford’s lips. “I’m not ready for this to end, go back to sleep.”

Ford felt the sticky blood trickle down into his lips, the coppery tang of Bill’s blood scenting across his tongue, and he wanted to gag.

“No. I want to wake up. I want to wake –“

With a jolt, Ford yelled, and sat upright panting and rubbing his chest. He swallowed, and shook off the remnants of the nightmare, his pulse still racing.
Slowly, once he calmed himself, he lay back down against his pillows, taking stock of where he was. He was safe. He was back in his bed. There was no blood, everything seemed normal, and Bill was asleep beside him.

“Bill?” Ford murmured in the dark, looking over to his muse, his gold hair catching the faint light in the room.

“Bill, are you awake?”

He didn’t respond. Assuming this was just another one of those mornings where Bill proved incredibly difficult to rouse, Ford reached over to shake his muse’s shoulder, wanting to speak to him about his nightmares.

“Bill -?” Ford paused, that same feeling of unease creeping up his spine as he realised his muse was cold.

Bill was never cold, he always ran hot, so much so that Ford would joke about saving money on an electric blanket with Bill around. His skin was like ice, and clammy, like a corpse.

Frantic, Ford sat up, and rolled his muse over, wanting to check his vitals, his breathing, check something, to make sure he’s alright.

Bill’s face flopped around, facing upright on the pillow, and his eyelids were open, but his eyes were empty, hollowed out, black inside.

Ford recoiled from the body, aghast, and his movements jostled the bed, causing Bill’s body to flop around like a lifeless doll.

That’s essentially what he was, a doll, a construct, a vessel. Bill wasn’t here. Stanford had sent him away, and now he was left with the piercing knowledge that it wasn’t the body he missed, but the creature living inside of it.

“Don’t tell me you’ve already forgotten what I actually look like.”

Bill’s voice was echoing, and Ford looked around the room, trying to find the source of the god’s voice. When he looked back to the vessel, it was glowing gold, flaking off around the edges, dissipating into the air again.

Ford sprang forward, trying to push the floating particles back into the body, not willing to let Bill go again, not if he could help it. The gold trickled through his fingers like sand, fading out into the air, and Ford panicked, despair welling up inside his chest.

“It’s very sweet for a slap in the face, but -“ Bill’s voice sounded out once more, and Ford tried to track where it was coming from. His gaze drew back down to the vessel’s face, and suddenly Bill’s golden eyes were back, set into the frame of the vessel’s face, watching Ford.

Ford knew Bill was in there, but his body was still dissolving, dissipating with finality. Bill looked up at Stanford knowingly, and his words lingered in the air, echoing ominously.

“It’s not me.”

Ford sat up again, gasping, gritting his teeth and grasping his hair, pulling on it painfully to wake him up from yet another nightmare.

Slapping himself across the face, Ford chastised himself. “Stupid, Stanford. Get a hold of yourself.
They’re just nightmares!”

Sighing, Ford rubbed his chest again, frowning. “It’s not real. None of it was. You’re feeling guilty about saving the world. Just… get over it.”

Ford gripped his own chest hair, tugging it, trying to use pain to ground himself, to pull himself out of this melancholic second guessing.

He shouldn’t be having these nightmares, they shouldn’t still be happening. It should have been cut and dry, black and white. Bill was trying to destroy the world, Stanford had stopped him. Bill was a liar, and Ford found the truth, and acted upon it.

Any feelings he may have cultured for the muse were the result of something that initially started as a trick, a grand manipulation, and he was a fool to still feel tenderness for a being that would have gladly killed him, killed the entire planet, if he wasn’t bound by the vessel and circumstances surrounding.

Stanford was a fool.

He sighed, and smoothed his hand gently over his chest, ceasing the pain.

His hand lingered, fingers gently caressing the small black tattoo that had appeared on his skin, like a brand.

He was mildly horrified when he first discovered the small black triangle.

When he finally showered for the first time, about a week after Bill was banished, he spied it sitting there. His low effort living style once his muse left lent itself to laziness, but when he realised how disgusting he appeared, having slept in the dirt floor of the lab several times, his face tacky with dried tears, he finally succumbed to shamefulness.

He’d been carrying on like a teenage girl, weeping over his lost lover, writing angry annotations in his journals, refusing to shower, be productive, eat, or sleep properly, and it was about time he got back to reality and started acting like an adult.

However, when he noticed the little black triangle etched onto his skin in the shower, he’d nearly had a heart attack, and had sunk to the floor of the bathtub, crying helplessly as the shower sprayed water down over him until the water ran cold.

“I imagined I’d feel different. Or look different, somehow. That a decision like this would leave some sort of impression, some lasting mark.”

Ford clutched the mark etched into his skin, sobbing relentlessly, just when he’d told himself he’d done enough crying. He clung to the mark on his chest, that small reminder that Bill had actually been here, that he’d been cared for by the God. It was a testament to how special he’d been to Bill, how special Bill had made him feel.

“Be yours, in mind and body? To keep you, and be kept for that long, as long as I live? I’ll take that deal.”

The tattoo was something he had mixed feelings about now. It was always bittersweet.

Sometimes he wanted to keep it forever, to embellish it, to fulfil his promise to Bill and cover his skin with big inky triangles all over his body. Other times he wanted to scratch it off or burn it away with a laser.
He wasn’t even sure if it could burn away. It didn’t seem to be made from ink, in the sense that when Ford did a test, he found no trace.

It appeared that Bill had actually altered the melanin levels in his skin in that precise area. So even if Ford were to burn the tattoo away, the melanin would always group there, turning the skin dark no matter what.

It was oddly reassuring, that permanence, in the same way that it was daunting, and often a reminder of everything he had lost. He’d taken Bill’s assurances and thrown them back in his face, and the muse was gone now, hardly capable of providing the forever that the tattoo had promised.

He traced the perfect sides of the tattoo with his fingertip, laying back against the pillows, the low light of his alarm clock providing just enough illumination so that Ford could see the little triangle emblazoned upon his skin.

He’d been riddled with anxiety lately, second guessing his decisions, regretting his self-imposed solitude. Often, he felt that anxiety build in his chest, his breathing restricted, the tightness starting there and impacting his whole body.

It was a double-edged sword, an odd sort of back hand, to discover that resting his hand over that black little triangle helped him centre himself, helped abate the crushing anxiety.

It wasn’t fair, honestly, how much Bill helped him, even while hurting him.

Ford didn’t know how to reconcile the feeling of still loving his muse, with the conflict he felt about it. It was no wonder his nightmares were so fixated. You’d think by this point in time, six weeks after the fact, he’d find something new to dream about, but no.

Ford sighed, and tilted his chin down, watching his fingertips trail along the edges of the little triangle.

Three straight lines, then curving around the shape of the eye and the top hat. Ford wanted to trace it all, the repetitive motions calming him, keeping him level after so many nightmares.

He didn’t know what it was about the muse that managed to calm him so even after causing him so much discomfort and pain. Really, he shouldn’t find this calming at all, he should hate Bill, after all, he’d been lying to him and manipulating him since day one.

Ford pressed down a little harder against the shape of the eye, his index finger prodding at it hard.

For a moment, nothing happened. Ford was simply touching himself in the dark, poking this tattoo, when he felt it.

Something under his skin nudged back, prodding upward. Ford felt his skin move under his finger, and looked down, raising his eyebrows.

He smoothed his hand over his chest again, pressing his palm flat over the tattoo, before raising his hand to look at the skin below.

It was smooth. Nothing was happening.

But then he saw it.

What looked like the ridge of a fingertip pressed up from underneath his skin, tracing along the lines of the triangle. Three straight lines, and then a curve.
Ford watched the bump underneath his skin protrude upwards, following the pattern of the tattoo. Then the bump spanned outwards, the outline of a splayed hand pressing up from his skin from within.

Ford scrambled back, horrified, sitting up in his bed, but the hands under his skin kept pushing upwards, scraping along his insides now.

He gasped, and fell back flat onto the bed, trying to push the hand under his skin back down with the flat of his palm.

He screamed, pain filling his chest, as the hand below his skin reached upward, stretching his skin painfully up and out, the hand protruding to lace its fingers with Fords, five fingers fitting perfectly in between his six.

Shaking the hand away from him, Ford panted, and yelled, as he felt his ribs snap, the hand under his chest grasping ever upwards, trying to force its way up.

“Stop. Stop, no don’t. Please, I beg of you –“ Ford sobbed, gripping onto the bedsheets as the hands scratched at his insides, trying to break through the skin.

He felt an intense pain, like his heart was about to burst, and his skin ripped down the middle of his sternum, splitting painfully.

He screamed.

It was agonising, and all Ford could do was lay still and watch, tears running down his cheeks, as a blood drenched hand reached up from the tear in his chest, patting across Ford’s torso before it planted its bloody palm flat on his shoulder. Another hand squeezed out of the hole in his chest, planting itself flat on Ford’s other shoulder, before heaving, pulling a body out of Ford’s chest, ripping him apart.

He felt his ribs split backwards, breaking, as the creature pulled itself up out of Ford’s torso like a swimmer getting out of a pool. Gold lines glinted on the creature’s arms, peeking through from under all the blood, and Ford could only watch in horror as a head and shoulders emerged from his chest to loom over him.

“No – no!”

Bill smiled down at him.

“Hello, Sixer.”

Yellow eyes glinted in the dark, smug and satisfied, watching Ford hyperventilate, his face wet with tears as he looked down at his bone sticking up from his skin, his own blood seeping into the blankets.

Bill’s gold hair was wet with red, and the blood was dripping down onto Ford’s face, the monster above him smiling down at him.

“Oh, I forgot something!” The creature recalled, smiling cheerfully before he reached back into Ford’s chest, cracking his sternum, blood spluttering upwards in a vibrant spray.

Holding his prize proudly in its hand, the monster held aloft Ford’s heart, still vainly pumping in the palm of his hand.
“Mmm.” Bill licked Ford’s heart decisively, before tilting his head, mulling over the flavour.

He shrugged, and looked back down at Ford, smirking. “Not bad.”

Ford could only shout, helpless and horrified, as his muse opened his mouth wide and took a bite out of Ford’s heart, his teeth sinking into the flesh.

Ford felt the pain, like the heart was still in his chest. It was agony.

Ford screamed and screamed hoping he’d wake up soon, wake up and this would all be over, but the dream just didn’t stop.

He watched horrified, as Bill devoured his heart like it was a juicy apple, chomping down the last piece before licking each one of his fingers, like it wasn’t enough.

“Stop! Stop!” Ford begged in between sobs, as Bill looked down at the rest of his organs, wiggling his fingers like a connoisseur at a buffet. “Don’t – please!”

Bill paused, taking in Ford’s desperation, before smiling at him like a shark. “You’re forgetting I own this. I can do what I want with it.”

The muse leaned down and sealed his lips over Ford’s, kissing him, his mouth bloody. Bill was kissing him, and he’d just been eating Ford’s heart. Ford could taste his own blood in his mouth, and he struggled, weakly.

Bill’s tongue probed forward, entwining Ford’s tongue with his own, before Bill chomped down on the muscle, pinning it between his teeth. Bill pulled, sitting upright, and bit down, ripping the muscle from its root.

Ford screamed, and felt the blood fill his throat. Bill had bitten his tongue right off and was now chewing it like a rare delicacy.

His screams gargled on the way out, and he felt his lungs slowly begin to fill with liquid, each breath impossible to drag in and out. Miraculously, somehow, he wasn’t dead yet, his pain being drawn out, his body hovering on the line of immortality, forced to withstand this horrific dismemberment.

Ford spluttered, his words resonating in his head, hoping they’d get through to Bill. His tongue was missing, he couldn’t speak, he just made hopeless noises, trying to mouth the words he couldn’t say. “No more. No more, please.”

Bill shook his head, before leaning down to lick Ford’s tears from his cheek tenderly. “It’s just you and me Sixer.”

Ford closed his eyes, shaking fearfully, as Bill dragged his tongue up to the edge of his eyelid, whispering against his skin.

“From now until the end of time.”

“AAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAAHHHHHHHHHHHH!”

Ford woke up, panting, blinking around the living room, patting his chest down frantically.

He’d jostled the coffee table in front of him with his leg when he startled awake and spilled his cold cup of tea over the books and notes scattered on the table in front of him, the tea dripping
down to the carpet on the floor.

It was still light out. The radio was still buzzing away on the mantel piece and the clock was ticking on the wall. Bud Senior’s voice was still chiming out on the radio, rattling on about car deals.

Ford grasped his face, pushing his glasses up off his nose so they were sitting at an angle. He felt the corners of his eyes, and patted down to his mouth, bringing his hand away to look at it.

No blood.

It was just a dream.

“We got your Ford’s, your Cadillac’s, your Buick’s - just come on down!”

Ford sank forward, resting his elbows on his knees, and buried his face in his hands, his shoulders shaking.

It was just a dream.

But it felt so real.

That was the problem with these night terrors. They felt so real.

Ford could try and cling to his lucidity when he was prepared to lucid dream, when he went to sleep specifically with that goal in mind, but because he’d been avoiding sleep so much, sometimes he’d just drift off, and he’d never know when he was truly awake.

That was the worst thing.

The dreams that made you think you weren’t dreaming, that tricked you into assuming wakefulness, constantly lowering your defences time and time again until you were left at the mercy of your own mind’s primitive sense of panic and fear.

Stanford couldn’t outthink his subconscious at times like this, he couldn’t snap himself into self-awareness when he already assumed that the nightmare was over. It became hard, so much harder to convince his mind and his body that the dream couldn’t affect him when it felt so painfully real.

Ford had felt his ribs crack, he felt his skin split and his sternum break. His tongue felt swollen and sore, like he’d bitten it while unconscious, and he could still remember vividly the feeling of his own blood filling his lungs, suffocating him.

It was no wonder he’d been avoiding sleep.

Even looking at the clock on the wall, it seemed he’d only been under for an hour and a half at best. If he were to deliberately settle down with the goal of getting a good eight hours of unconsciousness under his belt, he had to face the daunting possibility that instead of exploring his own subconscious or inhabiting his mindscape he could end up trapped at the mercy of his amygdala for hours on end.

There was only so much a man could stand.

The nightmares didn’t always get so graphic, but they always left Ford waking up in a cold sweat, horrified by his own subconscious.

The dreams where Bill enacted frightening violence on Ford were horrific, but Ford wouldn’t say
those dreams were the worst.

No, the worst dreams were the ones that had Ford waking up flushed hot with shame, his sheets sticky around him. The dreams that had him throwing up into his waste paper bin, sickened by himself. He didn’t like to dwell on those dreams.

It was an odd sort of hierarchy that made the dreams like the ones he’d just experienced preferable. He wouldn’t want to endure eight hours of those dreams, regardless, but Ford was beginning to sense a rhythm to how these night terrors affected him.

The lighter horrors were the ones that crept up on him when he was too tired to keep his eyes open, convincing him that it wouldn’t be so bad to lay down properly for a while and rest.

The really heavy night terrors sprung up when he decided he’d lucid dream, taking him by surprise. He’d think he was in control of his actions, intending to spend the full eight hours searching for answers, and suddenly he’d be looking down at himself in horror, his hands wet with blood, thinking he’d been in control of his actions the entire time.

Night terrors like this could break a man, and Ford was suddenly far more empathetic about Fiddleford’s use of the memory ray.

He’d be tempted to use it himself, if he wasn’t still riding on the faint and distant hope that in one of these dreams, perhaps Bill would show up for real. He could ask his muse directly, he could get answers, if his muse were really there.

These nightmares couldn’t be his muse. They just couldn’t.

And the fact that Ford believed his subconscious was capable of projecting such cruelty on Bill had him more fearful of his subconscious than anything. He feared the potential of his mind, that it could concoct such horrors to inflict on himself.

He wondered what this said about him far more than he should.

Shaking his head, Ford tsked, and looked at the tea spilled all over his coffee table. Grumbling, he picked up his books, and shook the liquid off them, dumping them in the armchair to the side.

Complaining under his breath, he walked into the kitchen and grabbed the paper towels, intent on cleaning up this mess.

The mess his life had become.

And he thought he had it bad before.

Kryptos chewed on his nails nervously, following Pyronica as she paced through the halls.

“Do you think he’s noticed? Has he noticed? He’d have noticed by now, right?”

“He hasn’t noticed.” Pyronica replied, her voice flat and unimpressed.
“How do you know he hasn’t noticed? How –“

“If he’d noticed, you’d be dead by now.” Pyronica responded, shooting Kryptos a look. “That’s why.”

“Oh help.” Kryptos muttered, squeezing his face anxiously.

“The only thing he’s noticed is the bottom of a bottle.” Pyronica tsked. “One hell of a coping strategy as far as they go.”

“Then he hasn’t noticed Sixer? Human’s usually can’t withstand night terrors for too long, they break real easy. Do you think we broke him?” Kryptos fretted.

“You broke him.” Pyronica corrected him, not willing to be lumped in with Kryptos or blamed for his crime. Kryptos seemed to wilt for a moment, before Pyronica continued. “And no. He wouldn’t break that easy.”

“Why not?” Kryptos asked, almost having the gall to sound disappointed.

“Because.” Pyronica faced head on, focused on her goal, walking to Bill’s study. “He’s special.”

Pyronica powered on and paused in front of Bill’s study door. She looked down to Kryptos for a moment, before holding her hand out.

“You’ve got the stuff, right?”

Kryptos pulled the fresh bottle of Cosmic Sand out from under his glove and passed it to the cyclops. “Are you sure we should be giving it to him?”

“Trust me, this will work.” Pyronica said, assured, and took the bottle of Cosmic Sand from the compass.

She knocked on Bill’s study door.

“Bill? Are you in there?”

There was a lengthy pause, before Bill’s voice echoed out, refracting in strange ways.

“Go away.”

Pyronica held her hand up by her mouth, calling out. “I brought you more Cosmic Sand.”

There was another long pause, before the door swung open slowly.

Pyronica gave Kryptos an ‘I-told-you-so’ look, and walked into the study, the compass floating behind.

Initially, Pyronica couldn’t see Bill, looking around the study for some sign of where the triangle was hiding. He wasn’t behind his desk, under it, or perched anywhere on the bookshelves. It was only when Pyronica doubled back to look at the desk that she saw him, plain as day.

The old decanter of Cosmic Sand sat on the middle of Bill’s desk, and Bill was inside the bottle, shrunk down to the size of a penny, laying on his side in the bottom of the bottle.

He was licking the last few drops of Cosmic Sand up with a tiny tongue that protruded from his eye mouth.
He was wasted, he was totalled, he was utterly diagonal.

Pyronica sighed. “Bill.”

“Just pour it in the top.” Bill slurred. “I’ll take it from here.”

“Get out of the bottle Bill.” Pyronica put her hand on her hip, frowning at the triangle.

“Just drown me in Cosmic Sand. Just do it!”

“No.” Pyronica said, narrowing her eye at Bill.

“Come on, they do it all the time on Sesquipedalian Jersey Shore!”

“I love that show.” Pyronica admitted to herself, under her breath.

“Is it on?” Bill asked, and closed his mouth, blinking up at her.

“You won’t know until you get out of the bottle.” Pyronica tried, watching Bill expectantly.

“Pfft. I know everything.” Bill waved a floppy arm at Pyronica dismissively and his eye buzzed static. “It’s on seven different channels right now. All reruns.”

“Get out of the bottle, Bill.” Pyronica pressed.

“Make me.” Bill flopped forward, falling face down onto the bottom of the glass.

With a resigned sigh, Pyronica picked the decanter up and turned it upside down until Bill slid out from the mouth of the bottle, onto the desk, alongside the last drop of Cosmic Sand.

Bill’s arms reached out feebly for the last drop, but Pyronica swiped it up with her finger, and put the drop in her mouth, before shuddering.

“Ugh, this stuff’s potent.” She felt tipsy already just from the one drop. Bill had been in here for three weeks, chugging back the dangerous liquid.

“You stole my alcohol.” Bill complained, scowling at the pink cyclops.

“I’ve got you more.” She assured him. “You’re not getting it though until you leave your study, float around a little, and talk to me.”

Bill grunted and tried to pull his small triangular body back across the desk, crawling towards the empty decanter.

“Oh no you don’t.” She muttered and plucked Bill up from off the desk with two fingers, holding her friend in the palm of her hand. Bill wobbled, barely sitting upright, before blinking at her blearily.

He pointed his tiny limb at her. “I could have you keel hauled for this!”

He promptly fell forward, flat on his face.

“Alright.” Pyronica took it in stride and picked up a handful of her cape before gently depositing Bill inside the fabric. She let the fabric sit in her hand, like a little nest, and grabbed the bottle of Cosmic Sand with her other hand. “We’re going to the roof. Kryptos, tidy up here a bit, will you?”
Kryptos opened his mouth and raised his index finger, about to suggest that he could join them, but the look slid off his face when Pyronica raised her eyebrow at him.

He kept forgetting that just because they shared an incident together, that didn’t make them friends. In terms of the inter-henchmen hierarchy she was up there, and he was down here.

She walked out of the door with Bill in her hand, and Kryptos watched them go.

Resigning himself to it, he tidied the study, and tried not to fret about what they’d be discussing up on the roof.

The stars seemed limitless from up here.

Most people in the Quadrangle hit the penthouse and thought that was it, that was the highest they could go, but they’d never been to the roof before.

The structure was constantly changing, so it was hard to find it, but it appeared on the rare occasion, a small patch of space, about a metre square wide, at the highest point in the building.

You could see the whole Nightmare Realm from here.

Pyronica sat at the edge of the roof with her legs dangling over the side, and Bill sat, wrapped up in her cape, beside her.

Pyronica kicked her legs and watched the gaseous matter and broken meteors tumble through the void, popping in and out of the many wormholes that dotted around the edge of the dimension.

The Nightmare Realm was a colossal in between space, the dimension between all dimensions, a gateway to other worlds. But for the beings who lived within it, for them it was their home.

It operated outside of the bounds of the laws of physics, or indeed any laws. However, its lawless nature had it fated to self-destruct when the roiling un-limitations of physics in their domain reached their peak.

Already, Pyronica could see it crumbling, the wormholes twining out and around the dimension, widening at the edges, eating into their home bit by bit, more and more.

To Pyronica this was a place where lost things were found, where hope grew in the space between the stars, shedding light onto all the hopeless beings out here, who were cast into the dark.

To the rest of the multi-verse, this was a place where the weird things came to die.

She hoped they weren’t right.

“Bill?”

“Brrghl?” Bill blinked slowly, staring at some point within the folds of the fabric of Py’s cape.

“Geez, you’re a mess.” She remarked, shaking her head at him.
“Thanks for the compliment.” Bill replied sarcastically, straightening his askew bowtie.

“I mean it. You’ve been a mess for weeks.” Pyronica noted. “This isn’t like you.”

“How would you know?” Bill grumbled and sunk deeper into her cape.

“Several bleventy millennia gives me a leg up on the competition when it comes to knowing what you’re like. You don’t let anything affect you like this, it should all be water off an Amaphabon’s back to you.”

Bill looked ahead across the expanse of his realm, incredibly disgruntled. He didn’t need Pyronica reminding him of his failures and failing to act accordingly to this situation was definitely a grievous failure.

“Do you even have a solution for our investors?”


“Hasn’t it?” Pyronica pressed.

“I have back up plans. Plans within plans, you know this Py, since you supposedly know me so well. Give me a little credit.”

“Well, since that hasn’t changed, why don’t you tell me what has.” Pyronica crossed her arms and frowned at Bill. “Because you didn’t fall apart like this the last time the portal flopped, or the time before that.”

“Oh, sure, list all my previous failed attempts, that will make me feel much better.” Bill rolled his eye, snarking at his friend.

“I thought you said this wasn’t a failure.” Pyronica clarified.

“It’s not – ugh.” Bill pressed his hands down over his eye, massaging his eyelid. “The portal is salvageable, that’s not –“

“Then what was your failure Bill? What?” Pyronica pressed, being harsher than she needed to be, knowing that it was necessary, necessary to push Bill to this point.

“I don’t –“

“What was it that ruined this for all of us? That pushed us into a corner like this? What cost us our party, Bill? What -?”

“SIXER okay!” Bill yelled, opening his eye and glaring at Pyronica. “Sixer did. Are you happy now? There, I’ve said it! I backed the wrong human and now I’ve ruined everything for everyone yet again. Are you happy now?”

“Bill.” Pyronica softened her voice. “I’m not happy, because you’re not happy.”

Bill looked at her, clearly still frustrated, not understanding where she was going with this.

“And what would make you happy right now?” She pressed, widening her eye, trying to lead Bill to the answer.

Bill scowled at her for a while longer, before glaring bitterly out into the cosmos, reluctantly muttering his answer.
“Sixer.”

Pyronica reached down and rested her hand against Bill’s side, above his arm on his shoulder, and spoke gently.

“Then it wasn’t a failure then, was it?”

Bill blinked, and then looked at her, thrown by her statement.

“What, did you think I was gonna chew you out for being happy?” Pyronica scoffed, and pulled a face. “I’ll leave that to the investors, you’re gonna have a hard enough time convincing them that everything happened for a reason.”

“You’re not mad at me?” Bill asked, sounding shocked. “I thought you said I shouldn’t have chosen him, that it was us versus them. I thought you’d be saying ‘I told you so’.”

“Do I look like Kryptos to you?” Pyronica smirked and tilted her head at Bill. “Come on, seriously.”

Bill laughed, disbelieving, before looking up at her with fresh eyes. “Then you don’t think -?”

“That you’ve been overreacting? Oh, I definitely do.” She remarked sassily, smirking at Bill’s indignant mien. “Locking yourself in your room, drinking alone, watching reruns of Sesquipedalian Jersey Shore – ALONE, feeling sorry for yourself without me. You reek of heartbroken teenager, and what’s worse is you didn’t even have the good sense to bring me with you on your little field trip to self-pity town.”

“It’s not self-pity.” Bill countered, gesturing as he spoke. “It’s very real, well deserved, self … empathising. I’m being empathetic to my own shitty situation.”

“Well there’s empathetic, there’s sympathetic, and then there’s just pathetic.” Pyronica raised her eyebrow, lidding her eyelid at Bill, clearly amused.

“That sounds familiar.” Bill squinted at Pyronica. “Are you quoting me?”

“You said it to Hectorgon once when he was sad couldn’t go to his cousins squaremitzvah. He was moping for two solid years and we all got sick of it.”

“Yeah.” Pyronica nodded, holding her hand to her chest like she was still scandalised.

“He doesn’t even like his cousin.” Bill crossed his arms over his chest, and Pyronica hummed in agreement, looking down at Bill’s posture.

She extended her finger out, dimming her flames, and poked his side, grinning.

“Do you feel a little better?”

Bill glanced her way, and then rolled his eyes, saying nothing, his little arms still crossed.

“Admit it, you’ve missed me.” Pyronica wheedled, her grin growing as she continued to poke at Bill’s congruent sides. “You’ve missed this.”

Bill smacked her hand away irritably, glaring at her, before softening up some. She was right, he had missed this.
“I thought you promised more booze.” Bill said instead of admitting his appreciation for the
cyclops beside him, but she picked it up anyway, through the way his tone softened just for her.

“So I did.” She picked up the bottle, and bit off the cork, spitting it out over the edge of the roof. She took a swig of the Cosmic Sand, and pulled a face, sticking her tongue out. “Yeurch. Yuck. I
don’t know how you can drink this stuff.”

Bill wound his arms out long, and wrapped his fingers around the bottle, relieving Pyronica of it. “You just don’t appreciate the appeal of the beverage.”

“Do I need a more sophisticated palette?” She asked, feigning dainty airs.

“You need an unsophisticated palette.” Bill replied, and his eye shut, opening as a mouth. He tipped the bottle back and took a large sip, closing his mouth and opening his eye once more. “Very unsophisticated.”

“Do you actually like the stuff?” Pyronica had to ask, wincing as Bill drank the Cosmic Sand.

“It’s disgusting.” Bill admitted, setting the bottle down on the edge of the roof. “And expensive. But it does the job.”

“Huh.” Pyronica thought on that for a moment, before she nudged Bill with her elbow. “Have another sip then. I want to get you drunk enough to talk about Sixer.”

Bill groaned and massaged beside his eye like he had a headache. “What’s there to talk about?”

“Uh, there’s plenty to talk about. Like for starters, what happened? Why he turned on you?”

Bill seemed to be pouting for a moment, deliberately silent and unresponsive, before he took another sip from the bottle.

“Well?” Pyronica pressed. Bill was silent for several moments more, before he replied in a quiet, bitter voice.

“He thinks I’m a monster.”

Pyronica looked at Bill for a moment and blinked at him in confusion. “So do a lot of people. So what?”

Bill was quiet for a moment longer, before responding.

“He didn’t before.”

Pyronica, despite herself, felt her throat tighten with sympathy, and her lips turned down at the edges, feeling sad for Bill.

“That was the plan though, right?” Pyronica said softly. “To make the human think you were a muse, to have him build the portal. It worked. What does it matter that he changed his mind.”

“It matters to me.” Bill admitted bitterly. “He used to think I was a God. His God. He thought I could do no wrong.”

Pyronica snorted, amused by the notion. “Sounds like he didn’t know you at all.”

“But he did.” Bill insisted. “He knew me, the real me, and he still thought that. I didn’t hold back, when he summoned me into that flesh cage I stopped acting like the doting compassionate muse. I
was horrible to him. And he still – “

“So, humans are gullible?” Pyronica felt the tightness in her throat again, knowing that what Bill was saying was true, she felt that much from peeking into Sixer’s dream. She knew a fraction of the regard Sixer felt for Bill, but she couldn’t let it show. “They believe something enough and that makes it true to them.”

“But he believed in me.” Bill said ardently, sorrow sneaking into his tone now as he looked across the Nightmare Realm, melancholy setting back in. “And now he doesn’t.”

Bill reached for the bottle to take another swig, but his inebriation attempt was halted as Pyronica put her hand on top of the bottle, looking down at him with a guilty expression.

Bill looked up at her in askance and picked up on her guilt straight away. Her bottom lip was jutting out, and her eye said it all.

“What, what is it?”

Pyronica struggled for a while, her obligation to hide Kryptos’ involvement with their ill-fated snooping attempt warring with her desire to halt her best friend’s sadness, to turn it around. She wanted to tell the truth, it was a classic failing on her part, another reason she was unsuited to diplomacy.

She looked at Bill and noted the desperation in his eye, laced with hope, just hinting the possibility that if she told Bill the truth about Sixer’s dreams he’d rise up from this melancholy and feel better again.

She couldn’t stand to see him sad.

“I need to show you something.”

The mirror lined room was an unpleasant reminder of her mistake, of the agony that was experiencing human emotions, but she needed to do this.

“You’ve got to look.” Pyronica said, gesturing to the triangular mirror with its gilt gold edges.

“No. Nuh-uh.” Bill shook his head and crossed his arms. “No. He doesn’t want me anymore Pyronica, he cast me out. I have been avoiding him for exactly that reason.”

“You have to see.” She urged him.

“See how much he hates me now? See how disgusting he thinks I am? How monstrous I am in his eyes? He’s probably patting himself on the back down there, oh good job Stanford, you saved the earth from Bill Cipher, who’s the genius now? He humiliated me!” Bill pointed at the mirror dramatically. “He looked me in the eye as he disassembled my body. He planned – “

“Bill.”

“From the beginning, he planned – “ Bill fumed, venting his frustrations now he had an audience.
“He just stood there! And he, he set it up – he got that stick Red to take away my options – he laid it out like a picnic, but he planned –“

“Bill.” Pyronica repeated.

“NO!” Bill screamed, and several mirrors in the room floated off the wall, hovering at Bill’s whim as he threw his tantrum. “HE DOESN’T GET TO DO THAT! HE DOESN’T GET TO DO THAT TO ME. HE LIED –“

“So did you!” Pyronica said, bravely speaking up. “And he screwed up. He was probably confused –“

“His screw up cost me everything! He shouldn’t have screwed up in the first place. Things were fine, they were just fine. Everything was going exactly as it should have, and he just decides to –” Bill spluttered, his words catching on a snarl as he swiped his hand through the air, sending one of the dream mirrors shattering to the floor. “How do you just decide to turn around and do that? No, he had to be planning it from the start.”

“Bill – “ Pyronica held her hands up, trying to placate Bill, but his bricks were turning red, and more mirrors were shattering in response to his ire.

“He did this on purpose. He used ME – that’s not how it was supposed to go down. I gave him everything, I treated him differently, he made me feel –“ Bill bit back those words, choosing instead to shriek, and break a few more mirrors.

Pyronica was crouching now, wrapping her cape around her face, ducking down to avoid the broken glass.

“Bill!” She pleaded, trying to halt her friend’s paranoid rampage for her own sake now.

“HE RUINED EVERYTHING!”

Nearly all of the mirrors were cracking now, even Sixer’s ornate gold frame couldn’t hold back the damage, and a tiny crack formed at the top edge of the mirror branching down.

“Bill, STOP!” Pyronica yelled, and her voice threw Bill out of his furious state, halting him with a gut-wrenching sense of déjà vu.

“BILL, STOP!”

Suddenly he was back in the clearing, blood and rain dripping down him, panting as he halted his murderous rampage to look across the grass to where Ford stood, on top of a picnic blanket, a basket at his feet. Under the blanket was one of his ingenious tarps, alchemical circles drawn in blood pressed between two sheets of clear plastic, waiting to trap Bill, to break him apart.

It looked so innocuous, so perfectly peaceful and benign. It looked like bliss in a picnic basket, a picture of hopeless domestic wish fulfilment that felt a lot like a holiday to Bill. It felt like an indulgence, and like a moth drawn to the flame, Bill fell for it, wanting to indulge once more before the big day, and it was his undoing.

“You know me, don’t you Sixer? Do you honestly think I’m a bad guy? A monster?”

Ford had stared at him, his stubborn jaw jutting out, his eyes determined, and as painfully earnest as always.
“I haven’t decided yet. Muse or monster. You could be both.”

Bill knew he could be both, he’d lived it. He just never wanted to see the day when Sixer would believe one over the other.

He’d been avoiding him, avoiding his dreamscape, because he didn’t want that confirmation.

“He thinks I’m a monster.” Bill repeated, red seeping out of his bricks, his tantrum fizzling away in the wake of this sudden dread of confrontation, dread of the truth, that razed through him.

The mirrors were no longer hovering, and the jagged glass remaining fell to the floor, tinkling like chimes as they hit the ground. Pyronica shook glass shards from her cape, thankful that it’s impenetrable properties on the battlefield protected her from harm and stood up slowly.

“You don’t know that.” She insisted, thinking back on what she’d felt with Ford’s mirror. “He adores you.”

“Things change, Pyronica.” Bill said, sounding hollow, distraught, though now that he’d calmed, he couldn’t take his eye off Sixer’s mirror, drawn to it, like a moth to the flame.

“You need to see for yourself.” Pyronica assured him, determined. “No more avoiding this. You need to face what’s happened.”

Bill didn’t want to, but now he was stuck in a room with Sixer’s dream mirror, it was like he couldn’t look away.

“Maybe things have changed. They keep on changing though. That’s what’s so good about it.” Pyronica’s hopeful tone pinched at Bill’s hopelessness, paining him as he slowly began to believe her.

He didn’t want to hope again. Hope was always devastating in the end, disappointment was the only constant, and Sixer had disappointed him, like all of the others had.

“Just see for yourself.” Pyronica urged him, and dusted glass shards out of her hair. “And when you have, come and find me. No more dealing with this alone.”

Bill remained frozen, glued to the spot, staring at Sixer’s dream mirror with an odd mix of attraction and dread, unable to move. He heard the clack of Pyronica’s heels as she walked out of the room, kicking broken glass out of her way, and the grating of the bricks as the door sealed shut behind her.

And he was alone.

With Sixer’s dreams.

Just like old times.

Bill sighed and looked across the room at the cascade of broken glass he’d left everywhere. He certainly made a mess of things. It was what he did best apparently.

He floated forward and peered cautiously at Sixer’s mirror, his own reflection looking back at him. Pyronica was right, he was a mess.

His eye was bloodshot, and his colour was faded, and dull. He looked exhausted, wrung out, spent. He felt it.
He couldn’t keep up the mask, the mask he always wore. Sixer had thrown it down when he cast him out. Genuine hurt was beginning to leak through, and it looked like weakness. Exploitable, damaging weakness.

Bill couldn’t look weak, that was why he’d locked himself in his room, avoiding everyone and everything.

He couldn’t let them see the depths of his despair, the height of his loss.

Losing Sixer was like losing everything all over again.

Losing the portal, losing the new home for his friends. Failing. Losing Sixer. Losing the safe harbour of his arms, and the indulgent genuine affection he showed Bill. Losing his regard and losing that fond look that graced Ford’s features whenever he looked at Bill, the worship that poured from him, even when he was cross with him. Losing his company, and his banter, and his closeness - and his trust.

Losing his love.

Bill didn’t want to confirm how much he’d lost, he already knew. Sixer wouldn’t do this to him if he cared enough, if he respected and trusted Bill enough to stop and listen to him, to wait for an explanation. Sixer turned on him and ducking back into his mindscape to watch his dreams would simply be twisting the knife in deeper.

This hurt enough already, and not in the good way.

Bill’s reflection wavered on the mirror’s surface, and colours began moving under the glass.

Sixer was sleeping, he was slipping into a dream, and it was beginning to play out on the glass.

Bill could look away. He didn’t have to watch. But now that it was already playing out, he lacked the discipline to look away, to shut his eye.

He felt weak.

Alone in the room, he allowed himself that weakness, privately, and floated down to sit in front of the mirror.

He watched Stanford dream.

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Ford was sitting on a picnic blanket, in the middle of the barley field. He looked around him, noting the way the breeze ruffled through the barley, noting the picnic basket sitting on the rug beside him. With resignation he noticed the industrial bag of salt, poking out from behind a thicket of barley at the edge of the blanket, and realised he was dreaming again.

He sucked in a frustrated breath, and ran his fingers through his hair, scrubbing his scalp. He had been going over Fiddleford’s notes on the living room floor, the last he remembered. He had coffee, he’d kept the windows open so the cold air from outside would keep him awake, he’d done everything to ensure he wouldn’t slip into unconsciousness again.
These dreams were wearing him down. He didn’t know how much more of this he could take. Anything was preferable to sleep at the moment. Ford thought that nothing could be worse than this constant subconscious torment, but clearly, he had no idea of how bad it could get. Right now, this was his limit, these constant, guilt filled dreams.

He looked down at his hands, checking for blood, before he looked around the clearing, paranoid that this would be yet another bloodstained nightmare.

So far nothing was jumping out at him. There was no eroding corpse lurking in the crops, no proliferation of gold dust reminding him of his crimes against Bill, no physical mutilation befalling him as of yet.

It was just him, alone in the barley field, sitting on the picnic blanket, waiting for calamity to strike.

Ford felt on edge, the hairs at the back of his neck were standing up, he felt a prickling along his spine, like he was being watched, but he could see no one.

“Hello?” Ford called out, and his voice echoed back at him, carried on the wind.

There was no reply.

Ford felt uneasy, he could only hear the rustle of the wind through the barley, and silence. He felt his foreboding build, and he swallowed, waiting for something horrific to jump out at him, some horrendous final blow to strike at the last vestiges of his sanity now that he was stuck in yet another dream.

He just wanted whatever horrible thing that was building to just get itself over with.

“Is someone there?” Ford asked, the echo suggesting emptiness, suggesting his question’s redundancy. “Show yourself!”


Ford was almost let down. His wariness hadn’t abated. He was still convinced he was being watched, but that could just be his subconscious tricking him, or his paranoia at work.

“I know someone else has to be there. Someone has to.”

Ford looked around him, turning around on the picnic blanket. Nothing jumped out at him, so Ford went looking for the nightmare. He picked up the edge of the blanket and looked underneath it, seeing his tarp laid out neatly below the blanket. He opened the picnic basket hesitantly, expecting some mangled version of Bill’s body to lunge out from within, but there were only sandwiches within, the same sandwiches he would have made, were this a genuine picnic.

He paused, taking in the mustard lavished sandwich wrapped in plastic with a pained feeling in his chest. That mustard drenched steak and tomato sandwich was Bill’s favourite.

Ford felt his throat tighten as he looked down into the picnic basket, before shaking off his melancholy, looking around the clearing for some evidence of subconscious subterfuge.

“I can’t be alone here. I can’t –“

Ford’s words cut off as he realised what this dream was doing, what the true torture of the emptiness was.
Ford was alone.

A strange noise worked its way up his throat, and came out, an anguished strangled wail.

Ford panted, frustrated, his adrenaline racing as he pondered the thought that the punishment of this dream wasn’t more inventive psychological torture, but rather a reminder of the woeful reality of his situation.

It was cruel, this dream. It didn’t even let him imagine Bill back here with him. It just reminded him exactly why the muse was gone now.

It was Ford’s fault.

Ford sat back, shocked, and stared at the picnic basket, yearning bearing down on him, this untenable pressure. He yearned for his muse back, so they could share this moment, this quiet picnic, as they should have done. In a perfect world, Ford would still have this, with Bill here beside him, sharing the picnic, keeping each other company.

They were supposed to have from now until the end of time together.

Ford felt so alone.

He made another anguished sound, and pressed his palms to his eyes, pressing down on his eyelids to abate this agony. This loneliness.

He’d done enough crying while he was awake, now he was crying in his dreams too?

He shook his head, and brought his hands away from his eyes, but when he looked up he was no longer in the barley field.

He was in his room, back in Jersey.

It was cluttered with his childish affects, and suddenly he felt too tall in the room he’d grown up in. Too tall, and yet at the same time, very small, almost defeated, really.

He looked around the room.

The hand drawn treasure maps he’d made with Stanley were taped to the wall beside their handprints, an art project Ma had loved so much that she insisted it be stuck there. Ford remembered Stanley’s enthusiasm and pride that Ma had loved their handprint painting so much, but as the years dragged on, Ford just felt ashamed of it, ashamed of his showcased oddity. His six-fingered handprint.

He walked over to the bunk beds in the corner and crouched down, sitting on the bottom bunk. He reached into the sheets and withdrew one of the kaleidoscope binocular toys he’d shared with Stanley, the little plastic binoculars showcasing a different dinosaur in every slide.

Feeling rather despondent, searching for the comfort of this childhood activity, Ford picked the binoculars up and pressed them against his glasses, clicking through the slides.

Rather than the stegosaurus and diplodocus Ford expected, the slides were telling a different story. The slide he was currently looking at depicted a many-armed shape hurtling through the forest, fire dancing up its limbs.

Ford clicked the button at the side, wanting to get away from that reminder, to a different slide, but
the next one was no better.

The next slide depicted the attic covered in flames, items levitating in the air as glowing yellow eyes smiled down upon it’s victim, memory ray held aloft, pointing at the viewer.

*Click.*

The next slide was an image of Bill, his eyes lidded, glowing in the dark as many shadowy hands sprouted from his torso, pulling Ford closer to him.

*Click.*

The next slide was Bill again, his mouth open, tongue extended out, as blue flames tumbled out of his mouth, his slitted eyes grinning up at Ford.

*Click.*

Bill was standing before Ford, black tongues dangling from the rips in his torso, many arms glowing with psychedelic patterns, watching Ford with red eyes.

*Click.*

Then there was a snapshot from one of Ford’s dreams, earlier in the week.

“Dammit.” Ford hissed, feeling the tone of the dream shift, desperation and arousal leaking through. It felt uncomfortable, experiencing this odd attraction to Bill’s monstrous qualities in his childhood room, and he felt ashamed as he ground his palm over his erection, trying to will it back down.

He should have put the binoculars down, but instead he looked back, examining the slide.

The image was lifted straight from one of Ford’s dreams last week, the dreams he’d had that caused him to wake up with sticky boxers, screaming as he broke through to consciousness.

Bill was arching his back up, his six hands pinned down with gold thread, tied to a magic circle, while Ford loomed over him, claiming the space between his legs while he fucked the god. Bill was as monstrous as ever, the mouths in his chest were lined with sharp teeth, but as he arched his back up those tongues stretched out to lick stripes along Ford’s chest, leaning into his affections even as he struggled.

Ford felt incredibly guilty to still be having dreams like this, dreams about the god, and winced as he clicked the button on the side of the binoculars, revealing how the dream had progressed, how it had turned into a nightmare.

He had his hands around the muse’s throat, and Bill was crying, struggling for real now, as the mouths on his chest warped back into gaping holes, bleeding out across the floor. Ford remembered waking up sickened by this dream, because unlike how it had started, in this dream Bill wasn’t responsive to his amorous attentions at all and had screamed at him the entire time to stop, but Stanford had just kept going.

The sadism and satisfaction resonating from that dream had Ford shaking, vomiting into his waste basket, as he remembered how real the dream had felt, and how convinced he was as he woke from it that he was the monster, to have done something like that. He was the monster.

He remembered how wary Bill had been of him when he first summoned him here, and realised,
feeling disgusted with himself, that Bill probably thought that was what he was capable of. In his worst nightmares, he certainly was.

Monstrosity, Ford came to realise, was less about the physiological defects of the body, and more about the moral defects of the soul, and he felt utterly defective, and hypocritical in his actions, having lived out dreams like that.

He threw the binoculars away from him, and they clattered against the wall.

He closed his eyes again, pressing his palms to his eyelids, and muttered. “I don’t want that. I don’t want to see this. I don’t want to be reminded, I just – please – I just want one good night’s sleep. Please.”

He could feel the room shift around him as the dream altered, feeling his childhood bedroom rush away from him, and he felt the surface he was sitting on shift. He was resting somewhere soft and warm now, somewhere that felt a lot like his own bed, but he was still too wary to open his eyes.

He held his palms over his eyelids for several seconds more, before lifting them gradually, and looking around the room.

It was night time, the alarm clock on his bedside read 04:09. Ford blinked at it, before hesitantly turning to see what horrors awaited him in his bed.

There was someone sleeping next to him with their back turned to him, and Ford anticipated the worst.

“Oh God, not this again.” He moaned, and propped himself up on his elbows, looking at Bill’s still form with a sigh.

He didn’t seem to be bleeding, or hollow, or cold. Ford could see the slight rise and fall of Bill’s breathing and felt the warmth he radiated. If this weren’t a nightmare, Ford might be enjoying this, but he knew this wasn’t real, and Bill wasn’t here, despite him wanting the muse to be. He knew this was just another nightmare, and so he braced himself for whatever fresh torture his subconscious had cooked up.

“You know, if you’re going to do something awful to me, just do it.” Ford said, sounding exhausted and bitter. “Clearly, I haven’t suffered enough.”

The body lying in bed beside him didn’t move, didn’t shift or acknowledge Ford’s words at all. Ford could only see the faint rise and fall of Bill’s breathing, see the way his back curved, ignoring Ford.

If he looked closer, he’d almost presume the body in bed next to him was breathing too shallow, its shoulders held too tense, almost like it was trying to hold its breath, or feign sleep.

Ford was tired of looking closer though, and he was resigned to whatever terrors were due from the dream.

He lay back against his pillows and laced his fingers together on top of his chest, speaking up to the ceiling.

“I’m not sure what I’m being punished for more though, speaking analytically here. As my subconscious, sure, you’re supposed to be throwing the mistakes of my waking ego back in my face, but it’s like you can’t decide what upset me more. The fact that Bill was lying to me this entire time, or the fact that I sent him away.”
The body beside him didn’t move, but the rise and fall of its chest stilled. It was definitely holding its breath now.

“The attention to detail is inspiring. Really, with a retentive memory like this, I should never forget where I last put my glasses.” Ford continued rambling, trying his best to grasp lucidity and logic where he could in this endless nightmare. “But apparently that visceral recall is better served reminding me just how much I screwed this up. Hmm. I knew I had a guilt complex, but there’s guilt and then there’s twisting the knife.”

Bill kept his back turned to Stanford, but his eyes were open, darting between the wall and the pillow as he listened to Ford attempting to reason with his subconscious, processing everything he said.

The desire for closeness with his backstabbing human paramour was too much for Bill, it was addictive, and it was why he’d kept away. Coming here was giving into weakness. Sixer was his weakness. If he kept away from Sixer’s dreams he could convince himself that he didn’t still want Sixer, and all the ups and downs that came with having him.

Pyronica said that Sixer made him happy, but he wasn’t sure if this was happiness he felt, this unusual twisting of contrasting emotions making his bricks heat up and simmer back over and over. He still hated Ford for what he did to him, and seethed at the thought of the human’s betrayal, ripping him from this body, but seeing how much Ford agonised over the decision, how deep the veins of regret twisted inside his mind, it complicated things.

Sixer was complicated, and how Bill felt about Sixer was complicated, and he really shouldn’t be here.

But after watching Ford’s nightmares progress, feeling his emotion seep through the edges of the mirror, Bill couldn’t help but slip through the glass, sliding into the form Ford’s psyche obsessed upon, feeling the heat of Ford’s mindscape body seep into the sheets between them. His back was pressing against Sixer’s elbow, and he could feel the tickle of Sixer’s arm hair against this form’s skin. It almost felt like being close to him again, like the way things were before.

Bill was practically vibrating with the effort it took to hold himself back. He wasn’t sure if he wanted Sixer to know he was here, that felt too much like capitulating. Sixer was supposed to come crawling back to him, yet here Bill was, pretending to be Sixer’s therapist/bed warmer just to be close to him.

“I know it was cruel.” Ford continued, his voice a bit more sombre. “And if there’s anything to feel guilty for, it was how I handled the situation. I know it’s easier to stand by my justifications in the daytime, but I can’t help but think this has all just been a fever dream. Or another nightmare. Everything.”

Bill heard Ford sigh, and felt his arm move as his chest rose and fell.


Bill raised his head slightly, wanting to turn to Sixer, to look at him. It took every absent scrap of discipline Bill had gleaned from bleventy billion years of existence not to turn around and face Sixer.

He wasn’t sure if he was ready to face Sixer. Even if he was saying all the right things, deep in his subconscious mind, without any prompting on Bill’s behalf. Bill shouldn’t want this, he shouldn’t
be here. He was just lying there, and Sixer was still pouring his regrets out earnestly.

“I know you’re not really here.” Ford said, sounding sad and so tired. Tired of his own mind. “But I wish you were. I miss spending time together.”

Bill felt his indecision twist painfully inside him, hearing that. He hurt, deep within his core, and it was a hopeful kind of hurt, therefore - the worst kind.

Sixer wants him back. He knows he’s a monster, and he wants him back anyway.

Bill was grateful his back was turned to Sixer, the expressions that were twisting across his face right now weren’t flattering. The hurt, upset, frustration, and burning painful hope would have been evident with just one look at this too expressive vessel. Even in dreams, Bill felt connected to this form, and it gave far more away than he needed it to. He felt raw, and exposed.

Coming here had been a mistake.

Watching this, slipping into the mirror, all of it. It was a terrible mistake on Bill’s part.

“It almost makes me look forward to the nightmares.” Ford confessed, and gave a dry laugh. “Isn’t that sad?”

Bill bit his lip and looked up to the headboard, trying to hold in this devastating hope.

Oh, but Sixer was perfect, even after all the crap he’d pulled on Bill. Bill was still enamoured with the human. How he managed to stay so fascinating, so wonderfully satisfying, how he managed to hit all the sore spots in Bill’s soul and soothe them without meaning to was beyond any mortal cognition, and even beyond Bill’s scope.

He had no answer to why he felt this way about the human, even now. It was like Sixer had got under his skin, before he ripped it all off, and now he was part of Bill, for better or worse.

“Hmm, you haven’t tried to maul me, or any of the other old tricks yet.” Ford mused, looking over at the smooth expanse of Bill’s back in the bed beside him. “I can’t help but think this is the calm before the storm. I don’t get peaceful dreams anymore, but this feels almost – oh –”

Bill shifted, still keeping his back to Ford. He reached behind him, and grabbed one of Sixer’s hands, pulling it away from his chest.

“Oh, here we go.” Ford muttered, and moved, resting on his right side now, letting the dream Bill pull his left hand towards him. “Come on now, do your worst. May as well get it over with.”

Bill said nothing, and pulled Sixer’s hand around him, so the human draped his arm around Bill’s body like an embrace. He held Sixer’s hand in his, and pressed it against his chest with both hands, so Sixer’s abnormal digits rested just above Bill’s heart.

Ford’s fingers twitched, like he was about to pull away, before he adjusted his position behind Bill, propping himself up on his elbow like he wanted to see what was going on there.

“What – what are you going to do? Rip your own heart out? Bite my fingers off? What?” Ford asked irritably, trying to look over Bill’s shoulder to see if the dream was going to give anything away about its horrific intentions.

He peered over dream Bill’s shoulder, and caught a glimpse of Bill’s face, before the muse turned away from him, stubbornly refusing to look at him.
He didn’t let go of Ford’s hand though, still holding it in place.

It was almost like the dream just wanted a hug from Ford.

Ford hesitated for a moment, his paranoia becoming indecisive, unsure. He knew if he let his guard down, that would be when the nightmare struck, but so far this dream was innocuous.

It was giving him exactly what he wanted, a peaceful moment with his muse back.

Mentally arguing with himself, Ford wondered what the harm would be in going along with this for a few moments. If the temporary high would outweigh the cost, then perhaps Ford could justify just letting go, giving into this. He wanted to, he wanted to believe that he could have a peaceful night’s sleep, a good dream for once, but he wasn’t stupid, nor was he that optimistic.

Still, perhaps if he went along with this, the dream would end that much sooner. If he got the peaceful part over with, the rest of the dream would run its course, and he’d wake up screaming like he always did and could put it all behind him.

Ford held himself tense, arguing with himself, and he noticed finally how still Bill was holding himself as well. He was stiff, tensed, almost exuding an aura of nervousness, as if bracing himself for rejection.

Ford adjusted his position again, before he eased into the action, stretching his fingers out to lace between Bill’s, gripping onto him.

He settled down behind Bill, spooning up to the god, and felt the tension in the muse seep away as he slowly relaxed back into Ford’s chest, nuzzling closer.

He still didn’t turn his face, Ford couldn’t see his face. It was like the muse was deliberately hiding from him, but the way he relaxed back into Ford’s arms was nice, and a far better scene than most of Ford’s nightmares.

There was something about this embrace that felt charged to Ford. Not just charged with tension, there was a physical electricity in the embrace that Ford didn’t get from his other dreams. It felt familiar to him, but for some reason he couldn’t put his finger on the why.

Nothing bad was happening.

Ford kept expecting something to go wrong, but they just lay there together, holding hands, pressing skin to skin.

Despite his paranoia he almost felt comforted, the way he had felt by his muse’s presence before. His skin was tingling where it pressed against the god, and he was hyper aware of everything, suddenly far more awake than he’d ever intended to be.

He sucked in a breath as he considered what could be happening, what he didn’t dare hope for.

That maybe this wasn’t just a dream.

He licked his lips tentatively, and shifted his shoulders as he raised his head from the pillow.

Swallowing his nerves back, he asked, fragile hope infusing his tone.

“Bill?”

Bill didn’t answer, and the silence stretched for so long that Ford began to worry, until he felt it.
Just the barest gesture.

Bill squeezed his hand.

Realisation flooded Ford, and his eyes widened.

He sucked in a breath, and reached forward, wanting to see Bill face to face, and as he reached out ...

He woke up.

The radio was playing an advertisement for the local lumber-yard, and the sun was shining through the window.

Ford panted, his hand reaching out in front of him, as his eyes opened to the living room, papers strewn about the room, having blown off the table by a gust, sneaking in through the open window.

He blinked, and looked around the room, his heart beating fast, as he processed what had just happened.

Stanford looked over to the clock on the mantle, and the time indicated that he’d had been asleep for a full eight hours. He actually felt well rested, which was practically unheard of.

He looked down at his left hand, and still felt it tingle from where Bill had squeezed his hand. He felt it, it was real.

It wasn’t just a dream.

Bill came back.

Birds in the forest outside chirped congenially, and Stanford couldn’t help the awed smile that crept across his features as he looked at the sunshine outside.


Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to MxQuincyQuinn who has kindly volunteered to be a friend, to beta read this fic from here on in, and help me pick up on grammatical errors in old chapters too.

Pyronica is basically just being a good friend, I keep meaning to write her giving unwise advice, but she’s been nothing but encouraging hahah. Eventually she’ll give bad advice, but for now she’s killing it. Also Sesquipedalian Jersey Shore sounds like the best show ever, lets not lie.

I hope you've enjoyed this chapter. Betrayal isn't as cut and dry as you think, and Bill and Ford still have plenty of time to fuck things up for each other before things become seriously damaging. Look forward in the next chapter to more nightmares, to
red bathrobe wearing cultists, and something I'm sure you won't get bored of, and that's a hint.
Fiddleford Hadron McGucket didn’t remember much of anything, but what he did remember was the feeling of fear, and as such, it took him weeks before he ventured out of his hotel room, for fear of open spaces.

He didn’t know much about what he’d been through, but what he did know is that something terrible must have happened, something life threatening, because every time he tried to remember, his hands started shaking uncontrollably, and the panic took over.

When he came to, sprawled across his hotel bed, feeling singed and sore, his amnesia was so prolific, it was a miracle he even remembered his name.

Or it was less of a miracle, and more of a pragmatic deduction. His name was on his drivers license, along with a picture, and confirming it was indeed him (unless he had a twin somewhere out there) Fiddleford Hadron McGucket had stared at his reflection in the mirror and wondered what went wrong.

Something must have gone wrong, terribly wrong in his life, if he was the sort of fellow who would wake up sore in strange hotel rooms, with no recollection of who he was and how he got there.

He wore a ring on his finger, so he must have been married, but for the life of him he couldn’t remember what his wife looked like. He must have had a decent amount of money, because the clerk at the reception desk said he could stay here for as long as he liked, as long as his cheques cleared, and so far they hadn’t bounced back.

He must have driven here, because the truck parked out the front was confirmed to be his, however Fiddleford decided to leave it where it was in the parking lot for the time being, because he couldn’t remember how to drive the thing.

He remembered the phrase ‘it’s just like riding a bike’ but he couldn’t remember how to do that either.

He remembered how to be afraid, and how to hide, and so he did those two things consistently for at least four solid weeks.

After a while though, he remembered how to be dissatisfied with food sourced from the hotel’s adjacent vending machines, and so he ventured out into the town, despite being terrified, to look for a place to eat.

Fiddleford walked along the tarmac road that led into town, rugged up in his warmest jackets, jumping at the rumble of every engine that passed him by, flinching at the rustle of trees in the forest, and the chirp of birds in the branches above.

He nearly jumped out of his skin when a battered old Fiat pulled up beside him, honking its horn.
“Mr McGucket! Mr McGucket, what are you doing out here? Mr –“

The driver of the car, a young man, a hoodlum presumably, with frightening tattoos decorating his bald skull, leaned out of his driver’s side window, smiling at Fiddleford, though the smile dropped from his face when he saw Fiddleford cower away from him, trembling.

“Mr McGucket.” The young man sounded worried, his brows creasing into a concerned frown.

“W-w-w-who are you?” Fiddleford managed to stutter, grasping onto his arms, hugging his coat tight to his chest.

“It’s – it’s me, Ivan.” The young man responded, sounding shocked. He had a peculiar accent, it sounded familiar, but Fiddleford couldn’t remember what the accent was called. “Don’t you remember?”

“No.” Fiddleford croaked, watching this ‘Ivan’ warily.

Ivan looked appalled for a moment, before his eyes widened, almost seeming to understand.

He leaned forward and asked Fiddleford.

“What do you remember?”

“Nothin’.” Fiddleford replied, and his voice broke, he was so scared. “I don’t remember nothin’. I don’t know what done happened to me, but I never been so scared in my life, and I don’t even know if that’s true.”

Ivan’s frown deepened, before he leant across and flung his passenger side door open, patting the car seat beside him.

“Come on. I think I can help you.”

“Y-y-you –” Fiddleford was still frightened. Despite the young man’s kindly manner, Fiddleford McGucket didn’t know who to trust, or who was out to harm him.

“I want to help you, like you helped me.” Ivan explained, softening his tone, and patted the seat once more. “You’ve helped a lot of people. I can help you get your memories back, and get you somewhere safe, and together we can figure out what happened to you. Does that sound alright?”

That did sound alright, it sounded ideal actually, but Fiddleford’s stomach protested deviating from his initial plan, and growled loudly.

“I – I’m hungry.” Fiddleford explained.

“I can buy you a meal at the diner.” Ivan suggested. “You’ve been there before, it might help trigger some recall. Come on, Mr McGucket, you can’t walk along the side of the road forever.”

“Are you a friend?” Fiddleford questioned, but stepped closer to the car, curious and tempted by the prospect of knowing more about himself. He just didn’t know if he could trust this strange tattooed fellow.

“I’d like to think I am, yes.” Ivan replied, and waved Fiddleford into the car. “Now come on, you’re going to freeze out there.”

His fingertips were numb, and, acknowledging that Ivan had a point, Fiddleford climbed into the passengers seat of the car. He closed the car door, and just sat there, shivering.
“No seatbelt?” Ivan queried, and Fiddleford looked at him, confused.

Ivan tsked and shook his head. “You’ve really done a number on yourself, haven’t you?”

“I can’t remember.” Fiddleford replied helplessly.

“Not to worry, we’ll get you all fixed up in no time. I know how to handle this sort of thing.” Ivan declared proudly, and turned his keys in the ignition, the car revving back to life.

“And who taught you how —“ Fiddleford asked, his question trailing off.

Ivan turned to smile at Fiddleford, and his smile was both indulgent and knowing, something that combined to be slightly perturbing to Fiddleford’s heightened state of paranoia. Ivan accelerated the car, driving down the road, and his answer sounded simple, but it rocked Fiddleford to his core.

“You did.”

Ford was almost eager to fall asleep this time, having showered and made his neglected bed specifically for the occasion.

While he did feel conflicted about this, this decision to seek Bill out again, he found he trusted Bill far more than he trusted the nameless voice in the ring at this point, which partially justified his choice. His choice to seek Bill out in the mindscape.

All conflict aside, he was eager to speak to Bill again, like they once had so easily. He missed Bill’s companionship, and questioned himself because of it, second guessing himself. If he was willing to let Bill’s assumed crimes slide in order to prolong their pleasant association, then he was right to question himself, his own moral standing.

However, Ford realised he could only assume the full extent of Bill’s wrongdoing, and the old adage was innocent until proven guilty.

So far there was enough circumstantial evidence to only pin three crimes on Bill; the way he treated Fiddleford, erasing his memory and frightening him (though it could be argued that Bill did it to protect Stanford), the way he treated Willow, murderously chasing her down through the forest (though it could be argued that Bill was provoked, as Willow shot first) and his initial lie to Stanford about the purpose of the portal, the lie that brought them together, and made a fool out of Stanford for believing him. That last crime Ford found much harder to forgive.

Much hung unanswered in the air between them, and the visions the voice in the ring showed Stanford lurked in the recesses of his mind, doubt cast on the veracity of the visions now that the mysterious voice had absented itself. Whatever godlike being had communicated through the ring, they had abandoned Ford, and so he turned to the god he knew who had always answered his calls with dramatic aplomb. Even to his own detriment sometimes.

Ford turned back to Bill.

He couldn’t say he wholeheartedly trusted Bill anymore, but he trusted Bill to behave the way Ford
expected him to, and that made him eager to see the muse again, wanting to fall back into their old familiar rhythms somewhat selfishly.

His eagerness made it difficult to achieve the initial slide into slumber, his adrenaline racing while he lay there in the dark, and he wasn’t quite sure whether he’d successfully achieved sleep until he felt the bed dip beside him.

Holding his breath in anticipation, Ford opened his eyes, and looked to the side. He was still in his bed, but someone was there beside him, a familiar shape.

Ford looked over the black curve of Bill’s back, watching the way his tattoos glowed faintly, and could barely restrain himself from shaking the body awake, just to see if it was really Bill.

He’d had so many nightmares lately that he couldn’t be sure if what he dreamt last night was real or not, but it felt real, and there was something in Ford’s gut telling him that Bill was really there with him, in his dream. When he was awake, he ran the gamut of reasoning, chastising himself for even wanting Bill back here with him after all he’d been responsible for, but his subconscious was determined to see Bill again, even if Ford’s conscious mind had its doubts.

He could have imagined it, but he woke up after the last dream with a tingling feeling on his left pectoral, where the small black triangle was emblazoned into his skin, and he took that as a sign that his suspicions were valid.

He hadn’t been abandoned by Bill. His muse returned, had answered his call for help. And perhaps, finally, Ford could get the answers he’d been looking for.

If he could convince himself he was just looking for answers, and not his potentially world-murdering partner back, he could con himself into thinking that his desire to see Bill was above board.

Ford had a special talent for lying to himself. His subconscious was much more honest. He just wanted Bill back.

However, just because Bill had been there last night in his dream, there was no guarantee that he’d be here now. That Ford would be resting with his god, and not another gauche nightmare.

Ford propped himself up on his elbow and tried to peer at the body beside him.

“Hello?” Ford’s voice cut through the silence, and he was ignored by Bill.

Curving around Bill’s shape, Ford leaned over, draping his arm across the muse, trying to look at Bill’s face, but Bill jammed his eyes shut avoidantly.

Ford rubbed Bill’s shoulder, trying to turn the muse to face him.

“Bill?”

Ford could see Bill open his eyes, staring forward at the fabric of the pillow, looking somewhat annoyed.

“Bill, is it really –“ Ford asked, and saw his muse’s mouth wriggle into a conflicted looking frown.

The expression was familiar, and so innately Bill that it answered Ford’s question for him. It reminded him of the times he had Bill cornered, or torn between desires, that wriggly frown. It was a side to the god that Ford imagined not many people had the pleasure of seeing.
“Of course, it’s you. I’ve been waiting – but now that you’re here, I –“ Ford rambled senselessly. “I have so many questions to ask you, I –“

“Shut up.” Bill scowled, and grabbed Ford’s hand, tucking it against his chest again, like they had done the night before.

Ford let Bill capture his hand, but he propped himself to sit up further, looking down at Bill’s withdrawn form, curled up around Ford’s claimed hand.

“What? I don’t –“

“You don’t get to talk.” Bill shot Ford a venomous look over his shoulder, before turning away from him more prominently. “I’m still mad at you.”

Ford was thrown by that. Why would Bill come back here if he hadn’t, in some way, forgiven Ford already? He was holding his hand, obviously craving closeness. Why was Bill here if it wasn’t to talk?

In his own roundabout way, Ford had partially forgiven Bill, or at least made excuses for most of his actions.

Ford wavered awkwardly, looking between Bill’s face, and the way his hands clenched Stanford’s fist possessively, like he was unwilling to let him go.

It didn’t make sense, and while Ford puzzled on this dilemma, the guilt he’d been abating with the thought of being forgiven was welling up once more, flooding his chest.

“You’re mad?” Ford reasoned, and laid back down in the pillows, spooning around Bill obligingly, even as his mind drifted. “Then – that’s why you sent the nightmares.”

“I didn’t send anything.” Bill huffed, lacing his fingers with Ford’s, muttering bitterly. “It was probably just your own sickened conscience, making your own nightmares. As punishment. I hear that happens to guilty humans.”

“But –“ Ford was hanging on the possibility that there was some supernatural element to his dreams, something that would help him avoid accountability for them. He felt like he was being punished with the dreams, but he’d hoped he wasn’t needlessly punishing himself, like he assumed.

He now knew that Bill wasn’t above lying to him, but somehow this didn’t feel like a lie. “But they were –“

“Seriously fucked up. I know.” Bill remarked, idly tracing his fingertip over each one of Ford’s knuckles as he spoke. “Very creative. Didn’t know you had it in you. I had a flick through them once you hurtled back into consciousness. Did some digging. And here I thought you were Mr Well Adjusted.”

“You’ve been in my mind?” Ford asked, paranoia creeping back in, his shoulders tensing.

Bill scoffed derisively, and shrugged Ford’s hand off his shoulder. “Where do you think we are now, genius? God, you’re dense.”

Ford’s mind was racing, taking in that information. Of course, they were in his mind, he knew he was dreaming, but he didn’t know that Bill could flip through his thoughts like they were cards on a rolodex whenever he felt like it. With his deepest subconscious thoughts bared like this, Ford felt exposed, sorely vulnerable, and awash with shame as he realised that Bill must have been able to
do this all along.

*Master of the mind.*

Of course he had. He was so *stupid.*

“I can’t help but agree with you there, Sixer.” Bill remarked, still tracing his finger along Ford’s knuckles. He paused, digging his fingernail into the fleshy part of Ford’s palm for a moment, as his anger and bitterness crept to the surface, lashing out. “Clearly I was scraping at the bottom of the barrel when I picked you. You were a mistake I shouldn’t have made.”

Ford frowned and felt the pressure ease on his hand as Bill let go, though he was sure he’d have the crescents of Bill’s nails in his palm when he awoke.

“You sure have some interesting dreams though.” Bill commented, sounding fonder than he should have.

“How many have you seen?” Ford asked, his stomach flipping with dread.

“All of them.” Bill replied honestly, noting the way Ford’s hand twitched at that, the way his whole body seemed to twitch, recoiling from Bill now that he knew his darkest daydreams.

“How long –“ Ford took a deep breath, and pressed on with his question. “How long have you been able to see them?”

“How long have humans known how to dream? I see *everything,* and this *is* my domain, as you’ve pointed out before.”

Ford frowned, and realised he caught Bill out on yet another lie, a long time ago. That night Ford first gave Bill a foot-rub, he’d said that he didn’t have access to the mindscape, to his dreams, but he’d been deceiving Ford, even then.

He wasn’t sure if things were different now that Bill was reunited with the mindscape, but in the past Ford thought he had caught the flaw in Bill’s all seeing routine. He certainly had the potential to see all, but the inclination, not so much. However, hearing that Bill had taken the time to look through his nightmares…

“Then even my dreams were –“ The word ‘fabricated’ hung silent in the air, but as Ford was thinking it, Bill heard it. He didn’t need to say it out loud.

Bill seemed to pause, taking that in, before he turned around in the bed, facing Ford now, his yellow eyes glaring up at him.

“How desperate are you to blame me for all of this? To make me this grand mastermind, lording over your every thought and subconscious shit show? How bloated is your ego, to believe you’re that important? That I have nothing better to do than to fuck around with your thoughts?”

“Then why did I –“ Ford had to ask, he had to.

“Why did you what, Brainiac?” Bill sneered up at Ford venomously.

“Why did I - love you?” Ford asked, his voice croaking in the delivery.

Bill’s brows bunched up, as if hearing Stanford say it pained him, and his slitted pupils darted all over Ford’s face, as if taking him in for sincerity, uncertain and hurt.
“I don’t know … why you would.” Bill eventually responded, and the pain was evident in his tone.

Ford blinked at Bill, taken aback by the vulnerability that was written all over his face, the vulnerability that felt genuine, too raw to be faked.

“Not that I’m not the best thing that’s happened to you.” Bill fumbled with his save, trying to look un-phased instead of heartbroken. “Clearly, I am, if you look at your circumstances. And humans will latch onto anything and become dependent. It’s an archetype of your species. I mean, let’s face it Sixer, you’re pretty pathetic without me here. I could count on one hand how frequently you’ve bathed in the past six weeks, one of my hands, not yours.”

Ford wrinkled his nose, noting Bill’s censure of his hygiene, taking it on board.

“But if you were desperately looking for some manipulation or reason you’d have to think that about me, that I - you’re looking in the wrong direction.” Bill admitted. “That was all you.”

Bill looked down and began twining his fingers through Ford’s chest hair. “I don’t exactly have a point of reference to make something like that happen, and besides – it’s not like it matters now.”

“What do you mean?” Ford asked, tilting his chin down.

“Casting me out of that body said it all, Sixer.” Bill continued to loop Ford’s chest hair around his fingers, pulling at it slightly as he spoke. “Your overinflated sense of guilt doesn’t change how it went down. Your banishing circle made things more than clear.”

Ford sucked in a sharp breath, and exhaled, trying to stay calm. Bill was right though, as hasty as his plan had been, it spoke with finality. A finality Ford was coming to question.

“How long have you been planning to turn on me?” Bill asked, resting his palm over Sixer’s heart, feeling his pulse for sincerity, trying to keep his tone light and inconsequential, when really he was hanging on Sixer’s answer like it was the sole lifeline to his sanity.

“It wasn’t pla-“

“DON’T lie to me.” Bill fumed, and for a moment his form seemed to extend beyond the shape of the vessel on the bed beside Ford, lightning striking outside of Ford’s bedroom window, casting a larger, triangular shadow against the wall. “Don’t you dare.”

“How long have you been lying to me?” Ford had to ask, his gaze darting between Bill’s shadow, and the muse laying beside him, locking eyes with Bill’s slitted, angry stare.

“Is that your answer?”

“It’s a legitimate question.” Ford frowned, and Bill’s left hand squeezed tight onto Ford’s right hand, squeezing painfully.

“Then you’ve been planning this from the start?”

“I wasn’t planning to be duped by you.” Ford snarled, and tried to yank his hand away, but Bill just held on tighter, baring his teeth at Ford.

“But what else were you planning? Huh? All of it? Did you plan all of it?”

“All of wh-“

“Using me! Trapping me here! Cutting me off from my magic. Manipulating me!” Bill hissed his
accusations at Ford, his toes curling up against Ford’s leg to tangle with the human’s leg hair.

“You did – that’s what you did to me!” Ford’s tone was offended, defensive. Bill was squeezing his hand, twisting it, and Ford, not wanting to be bested, twisted back, the two of them pulling, hurting each other. “You did –“

“So that makes it right, huh? Tit for tat. What I want to know is, who struck first?” Bill jutted his chin out, and leaned forward into Ford’s space, a mere centimetre away from Ford’s face. “How long has this been your goal?”

“This was never my goal, this was –“ Ford made a frustrated sounding noise in the back of his throat, before he reached out with his free hand and grasped Bill’s hair, tugging on it, but not pushing Bill away. “I’ve lost everything because of you, and this isn’t –“

“That’s rich Sixer, it really is.” Ford could feel Bill’s breath puff against his lip as he laughed derisively. “You don’t even know what loss is. You aren’t even capable –“

“You don’t even know how capable –“ Ford hissed, as Bill reached forward to dig his nails into Ford’s shoulder, retaliating. “You wouldn’t know, you lied. You’re a liar –“

“I’m the liar!” Bill’s eyes glinted with violent mirth as he leaned further into Ford’s space, relishing the pain in his scalp as Sixer pulled his hair. “You’re lying to yourself even now.”

“I don’t want you here. I don’t want this.” Ford looked desperately down at Bill, taking in all the details of his muse’s monstrosity, lurking. The brewing red in his eyes, the way his shadow crept up the wall like a growing, bubbling, many armed morass of deception, the way he was gripping onto Ford’s hand, his nails growing sharper, like claws. “I don’t want you.”

Bill curved his nails in painfully to Ford’s skin and pulled him close, bumping their foreheads together. He hissed up into Ford’s face, maliciously, passionately.

“Liar.”

Ford closed the scant gap between them and mashed his lips to Bill’s, breathing in the ozone that was encapsulated in his breath once more, feeling alive.

Bill blinked, startled, and melted slightly into the kiss, his eyes lidding, before he tensed, his shoulders bunching.

He smacked Stanford’s chest, thumping him, and pushed himself away, hitting him again for emphasis.

“No! You don’t get to do this. I’m still mad at you.”

“And I’m still mad at you.” Ford responded, and chased after Bill, invading his space.

“You’re mad at yourself.” Bill insisted, holding Ford back, both hands resting on his chest now. “You think you’re stupid for not having caught on sooner.”

“Is that what you think?” Ford’s lip curled, hating the way Bill knew him so well. He flexed his arms, still driven to seal Bill’s mouth shut with his lips.

“No.” Bill shook his head. “I think you’re stupid because you ruined everything, and you didn’t even listen to me, like you were supposed to.”
“I’m stupid for not listening to your lies?” Ford scoffed, straining against Bill’s arms, still wanting to crowd the contrary creature he was unfortunately drawn to. “I should have let you lie to me some more, and done as I was told? Is that it?”

“Oh, grow up Sixer.” Bill sneered at the scientist. “Lies are just truths you don’t agree with. If I were to tell you I never lied to you, what would you say?”

“You’re lying to me again!” Ford spluttered, incredulous that Bill would even say that. It was what he wanted to hear, but he knew it was a lie.

“Ha! Boring and predictable. Clearly the wrong choice of scientist.” Bill gestured derisively at Ford.

“Then why did you choose me in the first place?” Ford demanded to know.

He was angry, goddammit, and talking to Bill was only stirring him up more. He wasn’t getting the answers he wanted, the answers he came for. Only frustration, confusion, and one kiss rooted in poor decision making.

Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford and tilted his head to the side. “Huh. You know what? You choose IQ. Make up your own answer.”

“I want your answer!”

“If everything I say is a lie, why bother? You either trust me to tell you the truth, or you think I’ve never told the truth in my entire existence.” Bill threw his hands up, smacking Sixer emphatically in the chest again. “Your mind is the most black and white fiend produced by evolution’s cruel hand since the zebra decided it didn’t want to look like the other horses. I mean, really.”

“But, that doesn’t make any sense.” Ford blustered, thrown by the comparison.

“YOU don’t make any sense.” Bill countered, crossing his arms childishly. “Stop staring at me like you want to devour me, if you hate me so much. Your backhanded worship is giving me a headache.”

“I do not wor –“ Ford began, but Bill interrupted him, adopting a mocking tone.

“Gee Bill, I wish you were here. I miss spending time together. It almost makes me look forward to the nightmares.” Bill’s sing-song tone dropped, and he glared at Ford. “So desperate. You are such a liar, Stanford Filbrick Pines. A bald-faced liar. And you have the nerve to act like lying’s the worst thing I could have done to you.”

“How can I miss you, or want you here, when everything between us was based on a lie?” Ford blurted out angrily, reaching out to grab Bill’s shoulders, wanting to touch him even as he chastised him. “What we had together, everything it’s based on - what we have isn’t real!”

“Neither is this!” Bill waved his hand, gesturing at the body Sixer made for him, before lifting his true arm from out of the flesh, waving the thin black noodle in front of Ford’s face. “And that’s your doing! You made the lie!”

“That’s not what I’m talking about now.” Ford grit his teeth stubbornly.

“When will you talk about it? You forcing me into this body was just as much about manipulating me to work on the portal as it was me manipulating you to work on the portal, and you know it.” Bill pointed at Ford, his jaw jutting out stubbornly.
“You lied to me about my destiny.” Ford scowled emphatically.

“Oh, so now you want to talk about your destiny, about the portal?” Bill exclaimed sarcastically. “Where was that listening comprehension before you dissolved my finer cells? You had your chance to come to me and talk before you turned on me literally overnight.”

Bill’s voice raised with his frustration, every word emotionally charged with betrayal, and Ford watched, aghast, as his muse shrieked at him, finally recognising his impact.

“You had everything you wanted. I gave you everything you wanted. Everything was fine, and suddenly you wanted to banish me? You don’t just decide to do that overnight, so you had to be planning this from the beginning.”

Ford noticed fire dancing on his back wall now. Bill was getting more and more irate, throwing his accusations at Stanford, and his expression was one of utter betrayal that Stanford knew he had to cut off at the quick.

While he wanted Bill to think he was capable, he didn’t want him to think he was capable of this.

“I didn’t plan –“ Ford leaned forward and grabbed Bill’s wrists, holding them close together to capture the god’s attention. “I didn’t plan to turn on you.”

“Then why did you?” Bill looked up at Stanford’s face, clearly upset and angry, hanging on his answer.

Ford thought he had answers to that question. That he thought that he had to, that he was trying to save the world, that he wanted to ensure the portal was used responsibly, that he still wanted to achieve his destiny. But all those answers fell away, and he looked at Bill with longing, wanting his muse back the way they were.

“I don’t know.” Ford uttered, sounding distant, and unsure of himself. “Why did you choose me for all of this?”

Bill thought he had answers to that too. That Ford was gullible, that he had a high IQ and a low self-esteem that made him uniquely susceptible to praise, that he had the skills Bill needed to craft the portal, and the determination to follow through. Those were all the reasons why Ford would have been a good mark, why Bill could have conned him into building the portal. But that didn’t explain why Bill chose him.

Bill blinked at Ford, and swallowed, before answering in a muted, defensive voice.

“I don’t know either.”

Ford stared at Bill, torn between dissatisfaction at that simple answer, and understanding, since he couldn’t give Bill a better answer himself. They were in the same boat, in a way, and after the chaos that was that fateful day Ford banished his muse from his vessel, they were both dealing with the hand their actions had dealt.

Ford’s brow creased, and his eyes scanned Bill’s face, his expression searching. He was still conflicted. He didn’t know whether he could trust Bill to be honest with him, or if he just wished that he would be. He didn’t know how culpable Bill was, if those visions from the ring were truthful. Somehow Ford lacked the courage to actually ask Bill, preferring to leave the truth of Bill’s cosmic actions ambiguous, so he could still deny them while it suited him.

Bill mirrored Ford’s confused expression back at him, his eyes glowing gold in the dark.
Ford thought about magnets, and polarity, in a daze as he stared at his wayward god.

He pondered how he and Bill were polar opposites in this instance, creatures with different purposes, different temperaments, and different moral codes, dissimilar in all the ways that mattered.

He thought that, all things considered, they should stay away from one another, Bill at one end of the earth and Ford at another, separated for the good of the world, potentially the good of the universe. Bill was the Arctic and Ford was Antarctica, and logically they should be kept far away from each other at all times, Pangea be damned.

Ford thought about magnetic attraction, and how magnetic polarities were always attracted to their opposites, how you could put two magnets side by side next to one another on a table, and want them to stay there, but somehow one would always slide across to meet the other, regardless of any stipulations otherwise.

He didn’t know who slid forward first, him or Bill. He just didn’t know.

Suddenly, his lips were pressed to Bill’s again, and he kissed him, uncertainly.

Bill seemed to freeze. It took a few seconds of dire uncertainty before Ford felt it, the scantest pressure returned against his lips.

Ford dragged his bottom lip across the corner of Bill’s mouth tenderly, and pressed another small kiss there, wanting Bill to warm up to him as he’d once done, but every gesture was reserved, held back.

Ford pressed another urging kiss to Bill’s lips, and he felt Bill’s mouth twitch tellingly, like everything he was holding back was hovering on the verge of tumbling over, relentless, his feelings a force of nature.

Yet impossibly, he managed to hold off enough to push away from Ford again, staring at him with astonishment.

“This isn’t going to work.” Bill insisted, but his arm curved to loop around Ford’s neck, stroking the stubble on his cheek. “Never in a million infinite years.” Whether he was stating this for Ford’s benefit or his own was uncertain.

“Is that a prophecy?” Ford asked, his brow quirking with the question.

“You know I don’t go for that.” Bill shook his head, grinning at Ford, despite himself.

“Then it’s hardly set in stone, is it?”

Bill laughed, and it felt genuine. Ford was rewarded with a sliver of that same feeling of uncomplicated affection he felt before he found out about Bill’s plans, and he imagined there was some hope for them after all, regardless of what common sense implored.

Bill hummed contemplatively, and settled in comfortably, looping his arms around Ford, leaning in to breathe in Ford’s skin.

“I suppose not.”

Ford felt Bill melt against him as he once had, drinking in the god as they kissed like they used to, exhaling relief into the moment.
Bill murmured against Ford’s lips. “Does this mean you’re mine?”

Ford placed Bill’s hand over his heart, over the black tattoo etched there, and lapsed into a moment of heartfelt emotional honesty.

“When was I not?”

Bill made a contented noise again, lips stretching into a smile, and reclaimed his human with endless kisses.

Ford considered this a pleasant dream.

Ivan looked across the small diner booth as Mr McGucket picked up the square shaped napkin dispenser and turned it over in his hands compulsively.

It must have been familiar to him. Motor memory is less malleable than emotional memory, and Fiddleford went through the motions of turning the cube over in his hands, finding it soothing.

“Do you remember this place?” Ivan questioned curiously.

“Vaguely?” Fiddleford looked around the rail-cart restaurant, watching the restaurant patrons with barely disguised paranoia. “My head’s been hurtin’ more since I got here, so I reckon that’s somethin’. Somethin’ uncomfortable.”

“Recovering memories is always a rough process.” Ivan laced his fingers together and rested them on the tabletop, watching Fiddleford inquisitively. “Though generally the recovery process involves more visual aids than this.”

“Are you dealin’ with many amnesiacs?” Fiddleford asked, frowning.

“Voluntary amnesiacs for the most part.” Ivan nodded. “Most of the people who erase partial memories don’t intend to relive them again. People who erase memories generally don’t want them back.”

“And you erase memories?” Fiddleford questioned.

“Actually, you do.” Ivan replied, tenting his fingers at the frightened scientist. “And I’ve learnt the basics from you, though I don’t have nearly the same depth of knowledge as you, and most of the mechanical engineering involved goes right over my head.”

Fiddleford looked at Ivan’s head, noting again the peculiar tattoos. Fiddleford remembered the word Phrenology, though he wasn’t sure why. Odd phrases and concepts kept cropping up in the back of his mind, signalling a wider base of knowledge kept just out of reach. Though now he was on track to getting answers, more things became clear in the recollection.

“An’ your tattoos? You’re clearly invested in the mind.”

“Phrenology.” Ivan gestured to his head, and Fiddleford privately congratulated himself for remembering correctly. “Honestly, barring some old textbooks, my understanding is rather limited.
Phrenology is an outdated field, and I got these tattoos because I thought they looked cool. I used to be a carny for the circus. A travelling carnival, technically. That’s where we met. Do you remember?"

“Not really.” Fiddleford admitted, scratching his scalp as he spoke.

“You’re a scientist, a gifted engineer - and you helped me fix the ferris wheel.” Ivan explained. Fiddleford screwed his eyes shut, and scratched at his scalp some more, before shaking his head, gesturing across the table at Ivan.

“I’m sorry. I – ferris wheels and carnivals and cerebral recall – I’m still not gettin’ why you’re talkin’ about erasing memories. I just – I want to know what happened to me?”

“Ah, yes.” Ivan drummed his fingertips on the tabletop awkwardly. Fiddleford watched him expectantly.

“How do I put this? Well you see - you invented a device, called a memory ray, which interfaces with frequencies in the brain and deletes unwanted memories.” Ivan pressed his fingertips together as he spoke. “As far as I’m aware there’s only three in existence. What I think must have happened is that there was some sort of incident with the ray that might have caused you to erase your own memories.”

“You think I did this to myself?” Fiddleford scoffed, disbeliefing. “Why in sweet Sampson’s name would I do this to myself? I don’t – this is terrible!”

“I don’t know the exact circumstances… uh.” Ivan leaned across the table further, frowning. “Are you sure you don’t remember anything?”

Fiddleford looked at Ivan like he’d just said the most idiotic thing possible, and he shook his head. “No.”

“Ah. I thought being in a familiar place would start jogging your memory.” Ivan pressed his fingers together, flexing them in a distracted manner. “Are you sure none of this is familiar?”

“No.” Fiddleford answered, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“Bother.” Ivan muttered.

“I thought you said you knew how to deal with this. How to reverse it?”

“Well, without the tape canister from the device that you used, I’m mostly grasping at straws here.” Ivan shrugged, laughing nervously.

“What tape canister?” Fiddleford asked.

“Well, I presume you don’t have it with you, or else you’d have used it by now to recover your memories.” Ivan scratched his chin awkwardly as he spoke. “We keep all of our memory canisters in the hall of memories, but you must have used your own device, because the one we keep has been under lock and key since our last session. Unless something happened with your prototype design?”

“What are you talkin’ about? What prototype design?” Fiddleford questioned, frustrated now that there were so many variables in the table when it came to recovering his missing memories. Even
turning the napkin dispenser around was doing little to soothe his frustration. He couldn’t twist it, the metal didn’t budge. It didn’t feel right.

“You said you had a prototype that you first made and showed to your scientist friend, and then you began working on the next one. Do you remember?”

“Vaguely.” Fiddleford frowned, and flexed his fingers against the napkin dispenser, not getting the sensation he wanted out of turning it over in his hands.

“What about him? Your scientist friend! Stanford, I think it was.” Ivan looked up at Fiddleford, suddenly struck with a plausible idea. “Does this have anything to do with him?”

“W-who?” Fiddleford asked, stuttering despite himself. He didn’t know why but the mere mention of this ‘Stanford’ had his pulse race fearfully, instinctively.

“The man you were here with when I last saw you. With the brown hair and glasses. You said he couldn’t know about what we were doing, remember?” Ivan prompted, leaning across the table further now.

“No.” Fiddleford’s tremors were returning as he tried to picture this brown-haired man. “I – I don’t reca-“

“He was here, recently, last time, with the other man. The one with the yellow hair.” Ivan’s idea had him sliding out of his seat, pulling Fiddleford with him, shifting them both to the booth at the end of the train cart. “You sat right here, and when I came in, you left and met me in the bathroom, remember?”

Fiddleford looked around the booth and could see from the seat Ivan had sat him in a clear view of the door, and the entrance to the restaurant’s bathrooms. His headache intensified, and the pain had his head throbbing, his vision blurring.

“I don’t –“ F gripped onto the table’s edge, his head spins making him feel sick. His shoulders were shaking, and his knuckles were white, gripping onto whatever could ground him through this.

Ivan was watching McGucket’s reactions, nodding approvingly. Mr McGucket was displaying all the symptoms of memory recall. It was painful to watch, but it was a good sign, it meant his subconscious was trying. Even without the tape canister, it was possible Ivan could still help Mr McGucket with this.

“I remember, when you left to speak to me, he turned around. The man with the blonde hair. He watched us go into the restrooms. Do you remember?” Ivan watched Fiddleford’s brow crease, trying to recall the man more clearly, and Ivan provided more descriptors, hoping it would help. “He wore a – a black shirt, he had dark skin, bright blonde hair. And his eyes were strange too. Like a cat’s. He had yellow eyes.”

Fiddleford sat bolt upright, his every muscle tensing, and terror crept over his face.

He looked horrified.

“No. No. I don’t want to remember.” Fiddleford shook his head, his eyes unfocused, his shoulders shaking. “I don’t want to remember. No! No! No!”

“Mr Fiddleford –“ Ivan reached his hand out, leaning across the table, trying to soothe Fiddleford,
but he reared back, and his trembling voice got louder, until he was shouting at Ivan.

“NO! I DON’T WANT - NO! NO! NO NO NO NO!”

“Mr McGucket!” Ivan pleaded, and looked around the restaurant. They were drawing stares, worried looks, and concerned faces. Mr McGucket was making a scene, shouting and rearing back from Ivan, and the young tattooed carny tried to shush Fiddleford, wanting to calm his violent reaction to his memories.

“It’s alright, Mr McGucket, it’s alright. Calm down.”

“I don’t want to remember, I don’t want to remember.” Fiddleford’s teeth were chattering, and he was looking around the diner like a cornered animal.

“It’s okay. You don’t have to. We can – just calm down. Mr McGucket, stop screaming.”

Fiddleford’s shouts levelled into panicked breaths, and he hyperventilated, leaning against the corner of the booth.

Ivan watched Fiddleford twitching, reaching for the napkin dispenser to compulsively turn it over again and again, mumbling under his breath. He was concerned to see his mentor react so strongly to this mental trigger. Something terrible must have happened to him.

Something involving his scientist friend. Stanford. The one he needed to keep secrets from.

Something that Ivan intended to find out.

Common sense clearly had no place in the mind.

The subconscious was like a teenager, giving into instinct and rampaging along, emotions heightened and visceral. Common sense took a back seat in the weeks that followed, as night after night Ford dove back into the mindscape, childishly seeking out that which made him feel content again.

“Fancy seeing you here, stranger.”

Ford spun around and slammed Bill back against the library stacks, journals tumbling off the shelves and onto the floor. He slid his hand up under Bill’s thigh and hefted him up. Bill laughed into Ford’s mouth and kissed him as the scientist held him up against the stacks, fumbling with his trousers. Bill made it easier for Ford and dissolved his own clothing with a wave of his hand, allowing the scientist access. Ford grinned and kissed Bill harder, dragging his lips across Bill’s jawline, panting amourous breaths against the side of his neck.

Bill laughed. “Is that your Id, or are you just happy to see me?”

“You’re terrible.” Ford breathed on a laugh and continued to press his lips against Bill in any way he could.

For someone who had once been avoiding sleep, Stanford Pines could confidently say that he was
a very well rested man. Consideration and moral righteousness had no place in the mind, and
certainly not while Ford was having such pleasant dreams.

Six weeks of fervent nightmares had worn Ford down, worn down his restraint, his ability to deny
that he ever felt attraction for his callous, evil muse. The lack of proper sleep and isolation from
answers had Ford second guessing his decision to banish Bill Cipher from the body he crafted for
him, and that unchecked longing had Stanford eager to have Bill back, in any way he could get
him.

He could feel guilty about their continued association in his waking hours, but those were
becoming fewer and fewer.

His own prospects seemed so dim and dismal alone in the empty shack without Bill, without a
purpose, unable to risk turning the portal on. With all of his usual expeditions and studies
reminding him painfully of who he used to share them with, everything lost its appeal. As such his
loneliness and self-derived abandonment drove him to slumber.

His sleeping hours now outnumbered the hours when he was awake, and he fell into an unhealthy
ritual of sleep dependency, barely remembering to eat, bathe or exercise.

None of that mattered in the mind.

Not while he was here with Bill, and things resembled the way they were when things were better.

Ford was content to pretend. Playing pretend here wasn’t hurting anyone, everything he did was
contained in his own mind, so it couldn’t hurt to pretend for a while longer that spending time with
Bill wasn’t a disastrous lapse in judgement.

Bill gripped onto the shelves, his legs wrapped around Ford, ankles digging into his back, and a
particularly forceful thrust upwards from Ford had Bill’s grip unsettle the shelf, breaking it,
causing the mental books listed E through G to topple off the shelving, onto the floor.

Ford paused, panting, to look at the broken shelf.

“You didn’t need Emotional Maturity or Gnome Physiology anyway.” Bill shrugged.

“I worked hard on those Gnome studies.” Ford complained.

“Well, it looks like you wasted your time.” Bill grinned, and looped his arms around Ford’s neck,
lacing his fingers through the back of Ford’s hair.

It was so much harder to be angry at Bill now that he had him here, it was so difficult to hold the
muse at arm’s length for his actions.

Bill was hazardous and flippant, an inhuman disaster in his own right, yet Stanford couldn’t stay
away from him.

While he had the muse here, gracing him with his regard, he didn’t want to risk anything that might
send him away, so Stanford swallowed the chastisement that was on the tip of his tongue, keeping
his censure of Bill at bay, and sealed his lips over Bill’s once more.

This scene was surely lifted straight out of one of the pages from Stanford’s fantasy section. An
illicit coupling amidst the stacks of the library had all the appeal his teenaged mind imagined it
would have, and because this little fantasy was playing out in a dream, Stanford could do without
the uncomfortable press of the bookshelves, the gnawing self-consciousness, or the hushed strict
silence limiting him from devouring Bill’s pleased sounds.

As this was a dream, Ford’s completion could last as long as he wished, but as his sheets became sticky back in the conscious plane, he felt his dream ardour winding down into a satisfied contentment, leaning forward against Bill to press relaxed kisses against his shoulder.

Bill watched him, and stroked his fingers through Ford’s hair, easing him into deeper relaxation.

“What about you?” Ford remembered to ask, watching as Bill’s clothes slowly rematerialized onto his body once more.

Unfettered by Stanford’s cruelly imposed fashion restraints, in the mindscape Bill chose to wear a slim cut suit jacket and slacks, the yellow collared shirt underneath marked with a bold brick pattern. His bowtie was untied still, and his hat, floating above his head, sat askew, addled by Ford’s ardour.

“You’re forgetting we’re in the mind, IQ. Out of the two of us, only you are ruled by the demands of a physical form. You saw to that yourself.” Bill rolled his eyes at Ford, obviously displeased.

“Then you were getting nothing from that?” Ford questioned, his brow furrowing.

“I wouldn’t say nothing. This still counts as a form of worship.” Bill shrugged. “But all the rest of it, that’s mostly for your benefit.”

Ford’s mouth hung open as he processed what that meant, indignant outrage creeping into his features.

“But I can still overwhelm you, right? Like I did with my worship before?”

“Nope.” Bill said, popping the p as he spoke. “You only overwhelmed me because that body couldn’t contain me at my peak.”

Ford scoffed, blinked, then scoffed again.

“But – “

“Big deal, so what, you’re not going to overload me with your worship anymore.” Bill shrugged. “I’d say that’s a benefit. Now I just get to enjoy it for what it is. It’s flattering.”

“But that means that – what we’ve been doing here - everything, the noises, and your reactions, and everything – was that all faked?”

“Oh, don’t develop a complex Sixer.” Bill waved his hand dismissively at Ford and straightened his top hat. “It’s nothing personal.”

“You faked – “ Ford squawked indignantly, and Bill slapped his hand over Ford’s mouth before he could get carried away.

“If you wanted a physical response from a cerebral being you shouldn’t have torched my body. Would’ve could’ve should’ve. Unless you’ve got a spare body lying around for me, this is as good as it gets, and as good as you’re getting. Got it?”

Ford made a muffled sound of complaint, before he pulled Bill’s hand back from his mouth. “But you faked – “

“Would your ego like it better if I didn’t respond at all?” Bill questioned quickly, and Stanford
wrinkled his nose, contemplating that alternative.

Ford shook his head. “Still, I don’t feel right imposing this on you if you don’t want it.”

“I make it my policy to never do anything I don’t want to do.” Bill swore, holding his hand over his chest solemnly. “And to attempt to do everything I do want to, so spare yourself a crisis.”

“Fine.” Ford grumbled and picked his own clothes off the floor of his mindscape, not as skilful as Bill when it came to instantaneous changes within dreams. Pulling on his trousers, he continued to sulk. “Though for the record, I won’t have you faking anything else. There’ve been enough lies between us.”

Bill gave Stanford a strange look, and his expression had Stanford pause.

“What?”

“Do you mean that?” Bill asked, his eyes narrowed, focused.

“Do I – of course I do.” Ford’s brow furrowed, and he frowned, his grumpiness catching up with him. “I’ve had enough of the lies. If there’s something you’re not telling me –“

“Don’t you wag your finger at me. This isn’t my lie.” Bill snatched Ford’s finger, and held onto his fist, his expression still eerily focused.

“What do you mean?” Ford’s frown deepened, and he looked down at Bill’s hand, wrapped around his own.

Bill just stared at Ford for a while longer, before he lifted his hand. Or more accurately, he lifted his own hand - a black, wiry thin hand, rising up from the flesh of the vessel. The fleshy hand stayed holding tight to Ford’s fist, but this organic cosmic limb waved through the air in front of Ford’s face, mystifying him.

“Oh.” Ford looked down at the point where Bill’s true arm lifted out from the vessel, gold light peeking through the sensitive skin of Bill’s inner elbow.

“Oh.” Bill repeated, still staring Ford down.

Ford was conflicted for a moment, knowing what Bill was proposing. Shedding the lie that was the vessel Stanford grew for him. Whether due to nostalgia, or a desire not to frighten Ford, Bill had remained in the vessel Stanford had been dreaming about, filling the skin with his essence.

Ford was almost reluctant to discard this lie, the vessel he crafted so lovingly. He’d poured all of his favourite things into Bill’s human form, the vessel was everything that appealed to Ford, and it was familiar. He knew how to interact with it, knew how to please it (in theory) and he missed the physical warmth of it beside him.

Bill was proposing they finally do away with the lie, with the pretty fictitious vessel, and see each other properly, eye to eye.

Bill wanted to be seen exactly as he was, and Stanford knew he was being selfish, denying him that for the sake of reminiscence.

Ford’s silence must have stretched too long, because Bill’s arm began to sink back down into the flesh, a tinge of disappointment glancing over Bill’s expression.
Reaching forward, Ford grasped Bill’s hand before it departed back into his vessel and held onto it tightly.

His skin tingled with static electricity, touching Bill’s true form without the buffer of the vessel. It was a scintillating sensation, and thoroughly alien.

Ford swallowed and met Bill’s cautiously hopeful look. He squeezed Bill’s hand gently, and his skin felt mildly electrocuted.

“I don’t want you to lie for me.” Ford said, the words feeling thick in his throat.

Bill seemed to sense that despite Ford’s bold statement, he was still conflicted about this, and gave the scientist a sceptical look.

“I mean it.” Ford swallowed again, and nodded, assuring Bill of his sincerity. “I said no more lies, and I meant it.”

“You don’t know what you mean.” Bill frowned at Ford, unconvinced of his sincerity.

“I want to see you.” Ford insisted, and tugged on Bill’s hand lightly to emphasise this. “I keep coming here because I want to see you. I want to see all of you. No more lies.”

Bill watched Ford warily for a few more moments, gauging the scientist, hardly believing that Sixer could still want to see him outside of the physical fritters he designed for him.

Sure, Sixer liked him, but Bill wasn’t convinced that this feeling could stretch far enough for Ford to have his pie and eat it too. He’d barely managed to convince Sixer that he wasn’t a world ending monster, capturing his interest again through secretive clinches in dreams, he didn’t think Sixer needed to see him in all his angular glory.

He remembered how he’d compared humans to deer, skittish earth fauna, easily startled. He didn’t want to spook Sixer away now that he’d just reached a level plateau with him, but Ford’s stubborn face said it all, determination setting in around his eyes, in the crease between his brows.

Bill sighed, knowing he wasn’t likely to spook Stanford now. He’d stick out anything through sheer stubbornness.

Discarding the skinsuit was like standing naked in front of Sixer, there was an odd sort of vulnerable intimacy about it. Revealing to the stubborn human who he really was.

Bill’s arm stretched out, arching from the vessel’s skin, and the thin black limb became longer, until it pulled out the edge of Bill’s yellow side with it.

Stanford watched, awe affecting his stubbornness now, as Bill lifted himself out of Stanford’s homemade vessel.

He pulled himself out of the body, and just seemed to keep pulling. More and more of Bill’s glowing yellow expanse stretched out of the body’s shell, filling the mindscape.

Ford’s chin tilted up as he followed Bill’s reveal with his eyes. Bill’s body had already hit the spacious ceiling of Ford’s mindscape, and just kept stretching, as tall as a skyscraper, and getting taller. It seemed like he’d only pulled half of his true form from the body, his angles curving as he stretched out of the skin he was imprisoned in.

As more of Bill extended out from the vessel, the body Ford designed began to sag and crumple,
like a withered apple core, until it reduced down even further. The hand around Ford’s fist crumbled and shrunk away. By the time Bill was free from his human form, the skin was a husk left curling on the ground, gradually crisping into dust.

Ford arched his back to encapsulate Bill’s true form in his gaze. He couldn’t look away. The majesty of his cosmic companion was truly a sight to behold.

A giant, gold, glowing triangle, towered over Ford, his large eye shut, long lashes fanning out across his surface. Each lash must have been roughly the size of an Olympic length swimming pool, and Bill’s thin black limbs grew proportionately. Ford was hardly the size of the tip of Bill’s thumb, and the notion was intimidating, causing Ford’s stomach to flip in strange ways.

Bill opened his eye, and looked down at Stanford, noting the way Ford held his jaw tense, how he swallowed his trepidation back.

Not wanting to spook Sixer with the truth of his nature, his cosmic scope, Bill promptly shrunk himself down to about the size of a dinnerplate, and floated in front of Ford’s face, watching him cautiously.

Bill waited for Ford to speak.

Ford swallowed again, before nodding wordlessly, taking that in.

Clenching his fists as he processed it, his mouth feeling oddly dry, despite the fact he was dreaming, Ford watched Bill closely.

“I see.” Ford croaked.

“We’ve met like this before.” Bill pointed out.

“Not like this.” Ford shook his head. “I may have seen you before, but I didn’t –“

“Understand?” Bill offered.

“No.” Ford tried to exhale some of the tension from his shoulders. “No, I didn’t.”

Bill hummed and he sounded vaguely amused.

Ford realised he was still clenching his fists, and he fanned his fingers out, shaking out his arm, before swinging them idly back and forward. Trying to look less visibly rattled, aiming for something more casual, Ford asked.

“So – how am I taking it?”

“Better than most.” Bill’s brow seemed to quirk at Ford, his single eye watching him appraisingly. “Certainly, better than most humans.”

“How do most humans take it?” Ford had to ask. “When they see this? How do they react?”

“Oh.” Bill shrugged and waved his hand flippantly. “They all go mad.”

Ford coughed, startled that Bill had thought to expose him to his true form at the risk of his sanity, and Bill started laughing loudly.

He reached forward to smack Ford on the back, aiding his coughing fit. “I’m just kidding. You should have seen your face.”
Ford exhaled, and gave Bill an annoyed look, oozing spiteful sarcasm. “Funny joke.”

“It was for me.” Bill replied, his eye curving up, clearly smiling at Stanford.

Gauging Bill’s expressions was different now that Ford couldn’t rely on human body language to fill the gaps for him. Bill’s true form had no mouth, only one wide, expressive eye. He seemed to glow brighter when he spoke, and the air in his immediate proximity was charged with an odd sort of electrical impulse that hinted at his emotions.

Ford felt warm and tingly simply standing next to him and assumed this was what Bill’s amusement felt like. The hairs on his arm were standing on end from the sensation, and he shuddered to think what less positive emotions would feel like.

Still, Ford’s scientific curiosity couldn’t help but feel drawn to Bill’s true form, and while Bill watched him hesitantly, Ford reached his hand out, intending to touch Bill.

When Ford’s fingers neared Bill’s small thin frame, he floated back slightly, watching Ford with caution.

“What?” Ford asked defensively.

“You really want to -?” Bill questioned, eternally perplexed by Ford, but shook his form – a gesture Ford read as Bill shaking his head.

“Fine. Let’s get this scientific inquiry over with then.” Bill gestured to his triangular body invitingly, though he seemed to radiate impatience and displeasure.

Ford hesitated, picking up on Bill’s tension, before he brushed his fingers lightly over Bill’s smooth surface. He was warm, brimming with that same electrical current, and his bricks felt smooth, not rough, like gold bars.

Ford’s eyes darted between the point where his fingertips met Bill’s surface, and his muse’s eye, noting that his discontent didn’t seem to fade as Ford’s inspection carried on.

Ford paused, and then pulled away.

Without breathing, Bill seemed to exhale, and Ford felt it in the air around him.

“Did I do something wrong?” Ford asked, cautious.

Bill blinked at Ford, surprised by the question.

“You seem tense. If you don’t like this, tell me. I know this anatomy is new to me, and I don’t want to make you uncomfortable by doing something wrong here. We don’t have to do this again if you don’t want to.”

“You want to do this again?” Bill blinked at Ford again, baffled.

Now Ford was the one who looked confused.

Bill’s bricks began to tint a light peachy colour, and he blurted out. “I thought you wouldn’t want to, once the novelty wears off. Humans don’t find this shape attractive, you’d be missing my old form soon enough.”

“You were the one who said I’d enjoy exploring new physicalities.” Ford countered, remembering Bill’s enthusiasm to be rid of the vessel on their last night together in person. He seemed eager to
be his old self before, but now he was hesitant, and all because he seemed to want to appeal to Ford.

“I’d find you interesting in any form.” Ford continued, enjoying the pink tone that Bill glowed, satisfied that he could still gauge Bill’s reactions now. “And if this is how you prefer to be, then I’ll just have to accommodate it like you’ve accommodated me.”

“Well, aren’t you just –” Bill stared at Stanford, his eye wide with fascination and wonder as he took the human in, assessing him. He kept his assessment to himself, keeping quiet, watching Stanford until a self-conscious blush coloured his cheeks.

They stared at each other, awkwardly enamoured, until the dream began to fade around the edges. A loud grumble sounded out, Ford’s stomach, and he looked up to the fading ceiling of the dream with disappointment.

“You’re hungry.” Bill remarked. “When was the last time you’ve had food?”

“Before I fell asleep.” Ford answered, scowling.

Bill looked at his wrist, a wristwatch materialising, though the dial was unlike anything Ford had ever seen. “You’ve been out for – thirteen hours.”

“It doesn’t feel like it’s been that long.” Ford frowned up at the fading ceiling of the dream frustrated. “I hardly get any time with you anymore.”

“Time isn’t real, you know. It’s still a commodity though. Explains why we never have enough of it.” Bill shrugged and watched Ford’s library flicker. “Looks like this is goodbye for now.”

“There’s got to be a way, some other way I can see you without this happening all the time.” Ford grumbled, even as he was being pulled into wakefulness, clawing onto his dream as much as he could, not wanting to let it go. “There has to be a solution.”

The last thing Ford saw before consciousness wrenched him into the daylight, was Bill’s wide, lashed eye, blinking at him.

“You’re the genius IQ. You figure it out.”

Pyronica knocked on the door to the dream room. Over the past several weeks it had become Bill’s hide-away, and while she was pleased he wasn’t drinking again, she wasn’t sure she approved of him holing himself up, mooning over Sixer 24/7.

“Bill?” She called out, to no answer. She knocked again, and after several minutes she decided this polite bullshit wasn’t doing her any favours, and she let herself into the brick walled room.

Heels clacking down the corridor, Pyronica rounded out into the main chamber of the dream room and found her triangular friend.

Bill was reclining, laying on his belly with his face planted into Sixer’s dream mirror, thin black arms holding the mirror up to his face.
His bricks were tainting a rather fetching shade of peach, and his legs were kicking happily in the air behind him.

Pyronica crossed her arms, and tapped her shoe impatiently, waiting for Bill to surface from the mirror.

It took several more minutes of delighted leg kicking, before Bill finally pulled himself up from the surface of the mirror with a reluctant sigh.

“Are you done?” Pyronica asked, and Bill jumped, startled, fumbling with the mirror, before setting it safely down on the ground, patting it like it was a precious item.

“Do you know how to knock?” Bill spluttered, embarrassed to be caught like this.

“I did knock.” Pyronica replied. “A bunch. You were too deep in Sixer land to hear me.”

“Knock next time!” Bill chastised her.

“I did knock.” Pyronica sighed and rolled her eye. “When are you coming out of here, anyway?”

“When I’m good and ready.” Bill replied huffily.

“He’s just going to get some food, and then it’s one more sleeping tablet for Sixer, and another twelve hours of quality time.” Bill announced happily.

“Twelve hours. You’re making him sleep his life away! What happened to working on the portal?” Pyronica crossed her arms, frowning.

Bill clapped his hands together, feigning productivity. “I’m winning Sixer back, that’s part one of the two part plan to get the portal back in action, but right now Sixer is my priority.”

“Your priority?” Pyronica scoffed. “Look, Bill, you can have all the mental make-outs you want, but don’t kid yourself into believing that’s any sort of priority.”

“I am winning him over with my charm, and personality, and –“ Bill started listing on his fingers, growing extra ones to accentuate his point. “Cosmic glory, and eyelashes – Pyronica you just don’t understand it from a business perspective.”

“There is no business perspective!” Pyronica threw her hands in the air. “If this was a business-minded decision, we’d all be on earth by now, living it up. You are wasting time.”

“I’m winning him back.” Bill insisted. “I want Sixer back. He needs to be on my side again, and I’m getting there. He needs me. It’s a work in progress Pyronica, but it’s – I thought you wanted me to be happy.”

“I do.” Pyronica’s shoulders sagged, and she pointed to the door. “But there’s the investors, and the rest of the crew, and all of these things piling up.”

“Let Kryptos handle it.” Bill waved his hand dismissively, his eye drawn back to the surface of the mirror as colours swam across it once more.

“Kryptos?” Pyronica spluttered.

“Listen, Py, if you could just schmooze on out the door, that’d be great.” His eye was
transfixed on the mirror now, captivating his attention once more. “I have a ... business call.”

“It’s not a business call!” Pyronica shrieked, stomping her foot.

“Talk later. Bye.” Bill clicked his fingers, and the floor moved underneath Pyronica, the Quadrangle rearranging itself on Bill’s whim, until she found herself outside in the corridor once again, facing a brick wall.

Pyronica screamed, frustrated, and turned on her heel, storming away down the corridor, her cape billowing out behind her as she left Bill to his ‘very important business call’.

Repression was a well utilized tool in Stanford Pines’ mental toolbox.

As most addicts would tell you, when you are seeking the high you crave, you can justify anything logically in your own mind to achieve your goal. Stanford, through a mix of repression, backwards justification, and twisting the facts to suit his moral reservations allowed himself to chase the gratification that Bill’s company granted him, over and over again, cultivating the obsession into something addictive, something he preferred to the pains of daily solitude.

Ford had managed to justify the majority of Bill’s heinous actions, and the one thing he couldn’t explain or justify, the visions the ring, he wrote off as cosmic manipulation delivered through an absentee source. At the time he’d trusted the voice in the ring out of desperation and fear, but abandonment from the ring’s guidance had him turning back to Bill.

After all, it’s better the devil you know.

By all rights, having gone from avoiding sleep at any and all cost, to sleeping away his entire day, barely waking to eat, bathe or exercise, showed an unhealthy level of dependency, and a dangerous lack of self-awareness, but Stanford didn’t care.

He hadn’t been this addicted to sleep since he was first introduced to the mindscape, when Bill visited him in his dreams, but back then he had moderation, Bill didn’t visit all the time, ignoring him for weeks on end. He was forced to find a productive use of his time during the daylight hours.

Back then Stanford was just getting hooked on Bill’s regard, on his company. Now, having lost that regard for six weeks, Ford was desperate for Bill’s companionship once more, moral ambiguity be damned.

It seemed Bill was hooked on his company too, encouraging him to chase sleep whenever he could, whether through natural means or medication. Anything to mitigate the solitude that came with being consciously alone.

Since he banished his muse, the mindscape was the only place they could be together. Sleeping was the only way Stanford could talk to Bill face to face, and work through the issues between them, the betrayal he felt, the questions he had, and the attraction he still felt despite all moral reasoning.

It was like this guilty secret between them, this overpowering attraction, this inability to stay away
from each other. They both knew that they shouldn’t be seeing each other, but that just made them want it all the more. While Ford couldn’t go back on his decision to banish Bill from the physical plane, he could eek whatever closeness he could from his muse in his dreams. At least he knew that seeing Bill like this was safe, he couldn’t do any damage to earth from the mindscape, and that almost justified Ford’s continued association with the god.

Bill was like a drug to Ford, and his own moral objections could only keep him away for so long.

“What about that one?”

Bill floated upside down, his fingers skimming across the row of books in Stanford’s mental library, before settling on the spine of the volume Ford pointed to.

Bill opened the book and flipped through the pages, reading aloud. “Birthdays, bar mitzvahs, borrowed textbooks, Bunsen burners, blow –” Bill paused, and gave Stanford a scandalised look, raising his eyebrow at him. “Well there’s the drawback to alphabetizing your experiences. You’d think that’d be a different genre, kept in a different book. Where’s your restricted section here?”

“You’d have to tell me.” Ford laughed, watching Bill, bemused.

“It’s your mindscape.” Bill rolled his eye. “These are your thoughts. Don’t act like I’m the librarian here.”

“And you can read them all like that?” Ford questioned, perched on a stack of books that stretched up alongside the bookcase, so he could sit eye level to where Bill was floating upside down, watching his muse inhabit his dreams, finally unrestrained from his powers.

“Read, yes. Most mindscreens have doors, or walls, or pools, or some other metaphor you can jump into and inhabit, but your brain seems to work differently.” Bill explained, reclining casually in the air. “It could have something to do with your pedantic ability to compartmentalise, how you lock information away until you need to reference it. Your prowess with repression. It makes my job much harder, by the by, because it means I have to physically read through each page to find what I’m after, or you have to pull me into a memory with you. I can’t just breeze through and take what I want.”

“So that means you can’t read my every thought then.” Ford surmised, swinging his legs idly.

“I could if I had a mind to.” Bill snapped his fingers and summoned two of the blue floating armchairs down from the night sky above, cosying down in one of the chairs, pulling a teacup from thin air. “Just like settling down with a good book.”

“But that would take time, though.” Ford reasoned, and leaned forward, trying to reach out with his free hand for the edge of the second armchair. “And energy. So, in theory, I could hide thoughts, assuming you wouldn’t have the time or inclination to find them.”

“I think you underestimate my attention span.” Bill scoffed and kicked the other armchair closer to Ford so he could climb onto it. “Especially when it comes to you.”

“I think I have a fairly good idea of what you’re like by now.” Ford grunted, as he threw himself onto the armchair, grabbing the back of the chair. He pulled himself up and sat on the cushions, looking down at the library of his mindscape below. He still wasn’t as comfortable with floating in his own mind as Bill was. For such an aspirational dreamer, he preferred staying somewhat grounded.

“Sure, you do.” Bill said, disbelieving, watching Stanford perch awkwardly on his chair.
“Recent events notwithstanding, I believe I know you.” Ford replied, self-assured. “Better than most anyway.”

“That’s funny, because when I look around here, it seems you can’t decide whether you ever truly knew me, or if anything I did was ever genuine.” Bill crossed his legs. “You spent so long trying to fit the things you saw into your own worldview, and now you’re reconsidering everything, and you still seem to think you know exactly what’s going on. Being so self-assured makes you naïve you know.”

“I wish people would stop saying that.” Ford frowned and shifted in his seat. “I’m not naïve.”

“Self-awareness is not one of your talents Sixer.”

“I’m plenty self-aware.” Ford crossed his arms, surly.

“Sure, I’ll let you believe that.” Bill rolled his eye.

“I may have forgotten to eat, or bathe regularly in these past six weeks on and off, but that doesn’t make me naïve. Mentally naïve.” Ford emphasised, trying to defend his mental maturity.

Bill laughed, and then gave Ford a judgemental look as he began reciting from Ford’s mental journal. “Oh, here’s a great example. Under B for Bill. Bill has proven himself to be one of the friendliest and most trustworthy individuals that I’ve ever encountered in my life. What a guy!”

“You can’t read that and hold it against me. That was from ages ago.” Ford blushed with embarrassment and tried to scoot his floating armchair closer to Bill so he could snatch the book from his hands. Bill was reading his reaction to the first few times Ford had met him, when he first appeared to him in dreams. Ford’s reaction then was far more naïve than he wanted to admit. “Give it back.”

“I honestly couldn’t trust him more. Not ever in any way.” Bill continued to read, swatting away Sixer’s reaching hand. “Bill is a true gentleman!”

“Well, obviously I know better now.” Ford scowled, and snatched for the book, his chair scooted right over to bump into Bill’s.

“Know better than to trust me?” Bill asked sourly.

“Know better than to let first impressions lead to biased assumptions.” Ford countered, huffing, and resting his elbows on his knees. “Why would you even read that out, if you want me to trust you so much. It doesn’t benefit you for me to second guess your honesty.”

“You second guess it anyway.” Bill shrugged. “At this point I anticipate you loathing me for several seconds before you come right back around to appreciation.”

“Do you anticipate it because it’s mutual, or because it’s a pattern when you read my mind?” Ford questioned gamely.

“It’s relatable, let’s put it that way.” Bill waved Ford’s book away, back onto the shelf. “The two feelings, loathing and appreciation, aren’t mutually exclusive.”

“Then you hate me?” Ford reasoned, his stomach flipping at the thought.

“Of course I do.” Bill leaned back casually in the chair, examining his nails. “Why else do you think I keep coming back?”
Ford’s perplexed expression qualified as a kodak moment. If only Bill had a camera. Instead he extended his fingers out and framed Ford’s face, enjoying the way his expression shifted from perplexed, to indignant, to resigned acceptance of Bill’s hijinks.

“Well, you don’t come back due to any incredible action on my part. I can’t do anything for you in here. I can’t surprise you with anything you don’t already know, I can’t provide for you, I can’t cook for you, I can’t touch you. It’s a wonder you’re entertained at all.” Ford bemoaned, running his hand through his hair in frustration.

“Do you think I’ll leave if you bore me?” Bill asked, watching Ford closely.

Ford swallowed, saying nothing, but his jaw jutted out stubbornly, meeting Bill’s eye.

“I might.” Bill added, knowing his own nature.

“Are you saying that to manipulate me?” Ford asked.

“I’m saying that because it’s true. You profess to know me Sixer. Tell me I’m lying.” Bill gestured to the human, resting a hand on the bricks beside his eye, reclining.

Ford chewed on the inside of his cheek as he dwelled on that truth. “I’ve been boring before. You’ve been saying it all along. You didn’t leave then.”

“Different circumstances.” Bill argued, perhaps for the sake of arguing. He knew he wouldn’t get bored of Sixer now, but it soothed his flighty ego to believe he could. “I didn’t have the option to leave before.”

“I thought you said that you wouldn’t leave me, if I were yours.” Ford countered, frowning. “We had a deal.”

“Are you saying that to manipulate me?” Bill parroted, sounding amused.

“We shook on it.” Stanford insisted, narrowing his eyes at Bill.

“So we did.” Bill conceded.

He let the moment stretch on a while, enjoying the tension in the way Ford sat, shoulders hunched defensively, before he waved his hand at the human dismissively.

“Oh relax. I’m not going anywhere. A deal’s a deal, and if anyone’s having trouble dealing with meeting in the mind, it’s you, not me. I’m used to this – but it’s frustrating you.”

“This?” Ford questioned.

“Intangibility, ephemeral conversations. A lack of physical reciprocation. A liminal relationship.” Bill listed, waving his hand as he spoke. “Unless you’re in my dimension, or I’m in yours, this is the middle ground, but since that’s not happening any time soon –“

“Are you using this as an excuse to start up the portal again?” Ford questioned defensively.

“You could if you wanted to.” Bill blinked at Ford, batting his lashes at the human.

“Pass.” Ford leaned back in his armchair and crossed his arms, stubborn.

“Or –“ Bill raised his voice, a little frustration creeping into his tone now. “You could just complain more about how frustrated you are and see where that gets you.”
“Isn’t there some other way?” Ford asked desperately. “It’s not that I’m dissatisfied to see you, but I hate how distanced this feels. I want a connection.”

“We are connected.” Bill insisted.

“But I want a –”

“Ha. You want a physical connection.” Bill surmised and crossed his legs. “You know, nothing’s stopping you from going back to your racy, baser dreams. You can still have –“

“I don’t want another lie.” Ford scowled and lowered his chin. “Knowing that you don’t feel any of this, that the sensations only impact me on my end. I can’t even overwhelm you anymore. Knowing that your sensory reciprocation is feigned, your reaction to sensation – everything – pursuing it anyway just seems –“

“…Masturbatory?” Bill guessed, and Ford’s face flushed red, but he nodded nonetheless.

“Well, unless you plan to let me into your dimension, or you visit mine – though to be frank if we’re choosing my place or yours, I pick yours – then you’re just going to have to stay dissatisfied.” Bill kicked his legs back, lacing his arms behind his head, watching Ford wrinkle his nose at that conclusion.

“There’s got to be another way.” He rubbed his chin for a while, thinking, before he looked up, his expression bright. “I could build you another body.”

“Pass.” Bill rejected him quickly, hardly keen to go through the rigmarole of getting his powers unbound in a physical form once more. He didn’t put it past Sixer to bring him back in a new body and keep his powers bound for good, as a precautionary measure. That seemed like the sort of world saving ‘compromise’ Stanford would go for.

“But – “ Ford’s hopeful expression was cut short when Bill’s eye turned into a deliberate cross, his yellow body vibrating loudly, like he’d answered wrong on a game show.


“Well if you’re just going to reject everything on principle –“ Ford grumbled.

“I’m not rejecting everything, you just haven’t had any good ideas yet.” Bill countered, sipping from his tea, watching Ford patiently.

“Well what would you consider a good idea? Apart from opening the portal.”

“Hmm.” Bill stroked under his eye considering, before he clicked his fingers. “I could snatch up a temporary puppet, slip inside and give it a whirl.”

“You mean possession?” Ford questioned curiously.

“You like clandestine arrangements with total strangers, don’t you?” Bill joked, his eye curving with mirth as Ford’s lip curled at the thought.

“I’m not going to put my hands all over a total stranger just to spend time with you.” Ford narrowed his eyes at Bill. “I want to spend time with you – not - that’s – no!”

“I could pick you a pretty one?” Bill laughed. “What’s your type? Aging narcoleptic plumbers and three-year olds, right?”
“You are not funny.” Ford asserted, pointing at Bill chidingly. “Disgusting.”

“Maybe you’d prefer someone closer to home. I wonder what Specs is up to these days.” Bill rubbed under his eye and enjoyed the way Ford’s face reddened, Bill’s teasing getting to him.

“He’s married!” Ford spluttered.

“So, you’re saying you’ve never thought about it?” Bill questioned sweetly, reaching out his arm long to tip toe across the spines of the books on the shelf closest to him. “I could look.”

“He’s my best friend Bill, be serious.” Ford huffed.

“I’m your best friend, you didn’t mind with me.” Bill countered, shrugging. He was fixated on Ford’s reactions, teasing while probing him for details. He would be acutely jealous if Ford showed the slightest hint of favouring anyone else. “Who knows what you’ve been thinking, all these years. Since college even.”

“You were different, and you know it. Stop reaching.” Ford watched Bill’s fingers dance all the way along to the ‘F’ section, growing concerned.

“What about Wink-Eye?” Bill asked, drawing his hand back, staring at Ford intently, his casual tone belying the menace he’d bring should Ford reveal attraction to anyone but him. “Stink Eye? That back-stabbing trigger-happy Lumber-Jane who thinks you’re all that? Fancy working out your sordid frustrations on her?”

“Haven’t you done enough to these people?” Ford asked, angry now.

“I think you mean haven’t they done enough to me.” Bill placed his hand on his surface, oozing offence. “Red especially. I should take her for a long walk off a short pier for what she did. I’ve always wondered what drowning feels like.”

“Oh, because stabbing her in the leg with a fork wasn’t enough for you?” Ford eyed Bill off disdainfully, appalled by what he was saying.

“Well considering she shot me – let’s count now – SEVEN TIMES I’d say I’ve still got about six more attempts on her life until we’re even, not even counting her punishment for the disrespect. I call that due payback. Overdue even.” Bill announced, lidding his eye imperiously at Stanford, like he was turning his nose up at him.

“I can’t believe I would even consider putting you in their midst again. You just can’t help yourself, can you?” Ford narrowed his eyes at the triangle, his chin raising stubbornly.

“Neither can you, apparently. Always jumping to their rescue, siding with them out of this misguided petty loyalty, when they screw you over, over and over again.” Bill gestured to Ford. “Maybe that’s what you like though? Sixer - treat ‘em mean, keep ‘em keen - Pines. If someone doesn’t screw up your life in some way, they’re not even on your radar. Typical.”

“I don’t – I’m not some kind of masochist.” Ford shook his head, baffled. “You make it sound like -”

“I make it sound like it is, Mr Self-Aware. Look at your track record. Your ingrate of a twin, your disgraceful memory wiping colleague, your gun-toting damsel in distress who put you in this predicament by banishing me in the first place. There’s a pattern there. A self-sabotaging pattern. It’s almost a fetish at this point, really.”
“Wh –” Ford flushed red at the notion, defensive now. “You don’t know what you’re talking about – that’s not –”

“TWO WORDS!” Bill extended his two fingers out in front of Stanford’s face.

Ford blinked at him indignantly, waiting for him to make his point.

Bill let the seconds drag on, content to monopolise Ford’s attention until his patience grew thin, when he finally spoke, oozing smug superiority.

“Cathy Crenshaw.”

Ford felt a physical wave of nostalgic embarrassment pass over him, before he pointed at Bill.

“How do you – how do you even know about that?”

“How, he asks. What don’t I know about is the real question Sixer. I know everything.” Bill replied smugly.

“That was – that doesn’t count. I was a child.” Ford crossed his arms, his face heating up.

“Teenager, technically. Don’t fudge the facts Sixer. Only you could delude yourself into developing a killer crush on the girl who consciously conspired to do every possible thing to make your high school experience a living hell.”

“She wasn’t – I thought she was, you know – pulling pigtails. That sort of thing.” Ford said uncomfortably, defending his past self’s lack of taste. “Kids do that all the time.”

“Animal cruelty is hardly an indicator of romantic affection Sixer.” Bill rested his hand below his eye, the triangular equivalent of chin handing, watching Ford squirm indulgently. “She socially eviscerated you, and you idolised her.”

“That isn’t – “ Ford huffed and shifted in the armchair defensively. “You shouldn’t even be looking through those memories. I never said you could go snooping through my thoughts Bill.”

“It was beyond embarrassing. She helped you reach new plateaus of social humiliation.” Bill remarked, sounding amused. “Conning you into doing her homework for her, pitting her vapid friends against you all through high school, taking you to senior prom as a prank only to throw her drink over you while everyone pointed and laughed. And to think you never noticed her numerous flaws until that very last indignity.”

“Aspirational is it? Since you think I supposedly have a pattern of choosing cruel life ruining partners.” Ford asked sourly, his defensiveness making his responses more barbed than usual. “Where do you fit in, I wonder?”

“I’m nothing like that bipedal hack.” Bill insisted, sounding offended. “I’m no Cathy Crenshaw, Sixer, I’m on your side.”

“Really?” Ford questioned sceptically.

“I’ve been on your side all along.” Bill claimed disingenuously. “From day one.”

“I thought you were on your own side.” Ford guessed shrewdly.

“Yeah, but I’m on your side when you’re on my side. That’s how tangential tessellation works.” Bill said brusquely, before moving back to his emphatic sales pitch on Sixer’s trust. “Can you
honestly say that anyone else has had your back like this? Do you have anyone in your corner, besides me that is, who’s been fighting for you? For what you deserve? What you really deserve?"

“And you’ve been fighting for me, how?” Ford questioned lightly, leaning forward on his armchair, curious despite himself.

He found Bill’s attempts to court his trust endearing, despite knowing the muse probably had an agenda. It made Ford feel special, and Bill was good at making Ford feel special.

Thinking on it seriously, Ford realised he never really had anyone who fought for him before, not counting Stanley. Stanley had cost him his dream school, cost him what Ford had worked so hard to deserve, but he certainly never had any problems fighting. Still, Ford wanted to believe there was someone who fought to ensure he would get what he deserved, something Stanley never saw fit to fight for, Ford’s sorely denied recognition.

Supposing Bill was telling the truth, Ford could pinpoint the moments when his muse did fight for him. When he stuck his neck out for Ford, but not Fiddleford, dispersing his futuristic knowledge in defiance of the time police. When he harpooned the island head monster, saving them both. When he set fire to the hoard of zombies, enough to clear them a path to their grisly evisceration via showtunes. When he stood up to the bullies at the Carnival for him, grinning all the while, and when he saved his life those countless times while chasing the Gremloblin that kidnapped Fiddleford.

The more Ford thought about it, the more he realised his question was redundant. Bill had been fighting for him all this time, and Ford just didn’t appreciate it. Even now, his appreciation was twisted by the conflicted feelings he was plagued by, wanting to place his trust in Bill, but not knowing if he could.

While Ford was thinking, Bill huffed a frustrated breath, answering Ford’s question.

“I got back at Cathy Crenshaw for you.”

“What?” Ford blinked at Bill, jarred out of his contemplation.

“She was horrible to you.” Bill explained, shifting in his armchair uncomfortably now, like explaining this was giving away some kind of weakness on his part.

He was, in a way, telling a half truth. He didn’t go after Cathy Crenshaw because she mistreated Ford, he went after her because Ford once had feelings for her, and that wasn’t allowed. Sixer belonged to Bill.

“You think I’d just let that slide? You’re mine, Sixer. You’re not allowed to be treated like you’re sub-par, certainly not by some Machiavellian blonde cheerleader.”

“You –“ Ford was marvelling at that, marvelling at the fact that Bill had done what no one else had thought to do. Avenge his hurt feelings from high school. It was a strangely validating feeling, and Ford felt more inclined to trust Bill, or at least it made him want to. It was selfish of him, but the thought of Cathy Crenshaw getting her comeuppance had Ford giddy and elated.

“Huh.” Ford nodded to himself, quietly impressed, trying to smother his smile.

Bill noticed, and relaxed, Sixer’s pleased expression validating his decision.

Ford smiled to himself a little while longer, before he looked up at Bill, his expression far too fond.
“You know, I think I may have figured out a way that we can spend more time together after all.”

“Oh?” Bill leaned forward, blinking his lashes at Ford.

“But it requires some conditions on your part.” Ford continued, watching Bill’s expression turn sour.

“Oh?” He repeated, sounding far more bitter.

“Just one condition really.” Ford explained, lacing his fingers together, leaning forward in his chair, resting his elbows on his knees. “An understandable one considering that’s what’s come between us.”

“Do tell.” Bill floated closer to Ford, listening intently.

“I think I know a body you can have, to spend time on earth with me and feel sensations again, but you can’t have it unless you promise me you’ll stay away from the portal.” Ford insisted, imploring Bill with his eyes. “I know you have your own motivations for wanting it built, but if earning my trust back means anything to you, you have to promise me that you won’t go near it, that you won’t touch it, that you won’t interfere with it in any way. Not even once.”

“That’s your condition?” Bill asked, sounding thoughtful, like he was considering it.

“That’s my condition. You have to promise. If you break your promise, there’s no going back between us. There is no ‘us’ if you go near the portal. It stays in the basement, and you leave it alone, do you understand. If you go near it, you lose me forever. You have to promise.”

Bill was torn, stewing on this proposal. He knew eventually he’d have to take the portal back, he had his investors and henchmaniacs riding on him to follow through. Still, the prospect of spending more time with Sixer, of having Sixer’s regard and his worship for a little bit longer was all Bill selfishly wanted. He wanted to avoid his responsibilities with the portal for a bit longer, string it out further so he could prolong this feeling of being loved.

Maybe more time with Sixer meant that eventually he’d come around to seeing things Bill’s way. Maybe a promise now could bend in the future.

The portal had come between them, it was a shame it was so essential.

But Bill could postpone moving on the portal for a little while longer. He could take this time to enjoy Sixer’s company, to win him back, and who knows, maybe after a little more time together, Sixer might come around to seeing things Bill’s way. It was selfish, choosing this, but Bill was a notoriously selfish creature.

“Alright.” Bill eventually said, content to leave it at that.

“You have to promise.” Ford insisted and held out his hand. “I want you to shake on it.”

Bill hesitated again, eyeing off Sixer’s dextrous digits, weighing up the pros and cons.

Ford watched him expectantly, his throat knotted with tension, knowing how much was hanging on this promise. If Bill did this, agreed to this, maybe Ford could forgive him for lying to him, and they could move past this. But if he didn’t…

Reluctantly, Bill stretched out his own hand, and slowly slid his slender fingers against Stanford’s palm, grasping onto his hand.
“Fine. I promise.” Bill said, and Stanford squeezed Bill’s hand back, overjoyed that Bill agreed to shake on this, to compromise.

Stanford didn’t know that shaking on a promise was different from shaking on a deal.

“Excellent.” Ford grinned wide, ecstatic that Bill had agreed to go along with his stipulation. He pumped Bill’s hand up and down gratefully and couldn’t stop grinning, elated. “Excellent.”

“So what body am I getting then Sixer? What sad sap is handing the reins over to me for a cosmic joyride?” Bill asked, curiously. “Who?”

Ford sat back in his armchair, looking rather pleased with himself. He watched Bill smugly, and extended his hand, gesturing to himself.

“Me.”

Chapter End Notes

I have to say, this chapter is dedicated to The_Floating_World because never have I smiled so much at a review and bookmark descriptor as I did reading yours. I was grinning ear to ear and still do every time I read through the reviews. Made my day it did - no, my week.

This chapter had a lot, triangle Bill again! Cosmic size differences! Unhealthy sleeping pattern Ford! Cathy Crenshaw! And at the very end BORD! These next few chapters are going to be a lot of fun.

So look forward to body-sharing, going on dates in the same body, Blind-Eye shenanigans, and more! Thank you as always for reading, and I look forward to your comments on this chapter!
We can go dancing, we can go walking, as long as we're together. Listen to some music, maybe just talking, get to know you better.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings for this chapter. There is one sex scene at the start of the chapter, and towards the end of the chapter, a car accident.

Ford stood across from Bill in the void of his mind, his hand outstretched. Bill hovered between the stars across from him, watching.

“Are you certain you’re gonna commit to this?” Bill asked sceptically. “I don’t want you backhanding me like you did before.”

“I’m certain.” Ford insisted impatiently. “Besides, I can hardly disintegrate my own molecules now, can I?”

“Ha ha. You’re so funny.” Bill said dryly, watching Ford grin back at him cockily.

“I’m doing this to spend time with you.” Ford thrust his hand forward more prominently. “From now until the end of time, remember? I want to do this.”

“You say that now. Body sharing isn’t all sunshine and roses. You might as well kiss your privacy goodbye, you know that, right Sixer?”

“You say you’re always watching, so it’s not like I have much privacy now anyway.” Ford shrugged, and Bill blinked at him, flustered, his obsessive habits called out. “Besides, this is a chance for us to reconnect again. So long as you keep your promise, I doubt we’ll have a problem.”

“So long as you don’t mind sharing your body with me, there won’t be a problem.” Bill countered, floating closer to Ford.

“What’s mine is yours.” Ford gestured to himself generously, before holding his hand back out, eager to start this new experience.

“How domestic, and kinda sweet. Alright then, Sixer. Let’s do this.” Bill extended his own hand, wiggling his fingers, flames dancing in his palm. “Physical form - don’t mind if I do.”

Ford strode forward and clasped his hand around Bill’s, plunging it into the fire eagerly, and the moment their hands met, he felt his mindscape strip away from him, receding at cosmic speeds until it shrunk to the size of a pinprick, before expanding back out again in a dizzying rush, until finally –

Ford jolted awake, sucking in a sharp breath, and looked up at his bedroom ceiling.

He blinked, feeling no different, but soon he became conscious of what felt like a heaviness in the back of his head.

He thought it was a headache at first, and so he reached over to put his glasses on, blinking the
blurriness away.

His skull seemed cramped, and he felt a flicker of sharp pain, before he became aware of that heaviness in the back of his head pushing forward.

He heard Bill’s voice in his ear.

Move over.

Ford blinked, thinking.

How? I don’t –

He blinked again, and suddenly the heaviness moved forward, into his eyes, making his vision blur.

Oh.

Bill blinked several more times, before he brought Ford’s hand up in front of his face, examining it.

Bill wiggled Ford’s fingers and Ford reeled at the bizarre sensation of seeing his body move without him moving it. He was conscious of what he was controlling and what he wasn’t, and right now he felt like a passenger in his own skull.

Immediately, Bill brought Ford’s fingers up to his face, and shoved two of them in his mouth, sucking on them.

Ford squirmed in the back of his head, as Bill pulled his hand out with a wet pop.

“So that’s what does it for you.” Bill spoke, his voice straining Ford’s vocal chords in new, unusual patterns.

I don’t – I didn’t –

Ford cleared his throat, and shoved his consciousness forward, taking control of his mouth again.

“I didn’t intend to give you this so you could –“

“Do exactly what you want?” Bill replied, and Ford’s throat felt scratchy, adjusting to jumping between his lower tone and Bill’s higher cadence. “No need to be shy Sixer. We’re both up here. No point hiding the truth from me now, I see right through it.”

Ford realised that Bill was right about the lack of privacy. He spared a moment in the back of his head to feel vulnerable and exposed, before he accepted the situation and tuned back in to what Bill was doing.

The muse was tiptoeing Ford’s six fingers down his chest like he was playing a sonata on the piano, his eyes glued to the movements, radiating childlike amusement in Ford’s mind.

Are you having fun? Ford thought.

“Six times as much fun.” Bill replied. “I don’t know how you do anything else with your time. This is such a novelty. Look at them go!”

You had fingers before, Bill.
“But I didn’t have *your* fingers.” Bill said, sounding pleased. “There’s a difference.”

Ford was content to watch Bill play for a while, before he seized control of his left hand, pinching together the fingers on his right.

“Is this really how you wish to spend your time now that you have a physical form again?” Ford questioned, watching Bill twitch his fingers away. “Twiddling your thumbs?”

“I’m twiddling *your* thumbs.” Bill insisted, shaking his right hand away from Ford’s grasp. “There’s a difference. Just because I’m not doing what you expect, it doesn’t mean I have to do what you want. This is body *sharing*, remember? Not Sixer traps Bill in a physical form again and gets to make him do whatever boring Sixer things he wants.”

Reminding him of his heavy handed first attempt to give Bill a physical form guilted Stanford appropriately, but his guilt was short lived.

“No one’s trapping –“ Ford sighed, as Bill sat up, springing out of bed, before walking over to the remaining trophies stacked on Ford’s bookcase, knocking them onto the ground one by one.

Ford struggled with his restraint for a while, still feeling guilty, not wanting to force Bill into anything now that he finally had him back here, but after watching Bill knock his bronze, silver, and gold statues to the floor, his patience was wearing thin.

“Just like old times, right Sixer?” Bill asked, clearly very amused. He reached to the engraved glass plaque Ford won for his dissertation on genetic dimorphism, anticipating the enjoyable tinkling noise it would make when it shattered on the floor.

Before he could knock the trophy over though, Ford’s patience snapped, and he extended his will, usurping Bill’s.

His hand froze beside the trophy, and Ford could see his tendons jumping as Bill tried to regain control over his arm.

It was a battle of the wills. Ford’s hand shook violently, fingers contorting and spasming into uncomfortable positions as Bill and Ford fought pettily for control over his right arm, Ford’s stubbornness making him a serious hurdle for Bill to overcome.

Ford could feel Bill’s concerted shock that Ford was stopping him from doing what he wanted, frustrated and awed that Stanford could so quickly stand against him when he agreed to let Bill assert his ownership over his body.

Sixer’s stubbornness was obstinate, and he strained himself to hold his right hand back, unwilling to let Bill ruin another one of his trophies out of pettiness and revenge. He focussed every part of his cerebrum into halting the movement of his right arm, so it caught him completely by surprise when his left hand flew forward to slap him in the face.

“What – Bill?” Ford scowled, and cupped his cheek, appalled that Bill had made him slap himself.

“Body *sharing* Sixer!” Bill retorted, stomping Ford’s foot for emphasis. “You said I could have this.”

“I said you could have my body to experience sensation again. I didn’t say that you could destroy all my trophies. Haven’t you done that enough already?”

“Will you never let that go? Hold a grudge much?” Bill spluttered, putting his hands on his hips,
the gesture seeming far more camp, more quintessentially Bill, than it ever would if Ford did it. It was jarring to have his body move this way, and from an outsider’s perspective, he supposed it must have looked quite comical.

“Find something else to do.” Ford said, stubbornly crossing his arms over his chest. “Stop breaking my things.”

“What happened to ‘what’s mine is yours’?” Bill grumbled, as he stomped out of Ford’s room, down the hall to the bathroom.

What are you doing now? Ford thought, pushed back into his own head, as Bill walked into the bathroom, closing the door behind him.

Something else. Bill replied, his response clipped and sour.

He stopped in front of the bathroom mirror and glared at his appearance.

Ford watched, astonished to see that his eyes were now yellow and slitted, the only outward indicator of Bill’s presence within his head.

Bill turned Ford’s face left and right, rubbing the heavy stubble on his chin and scowling.

“I leave you alone for a month or two and what do you do? You grow a beard. It’s like you’re trying to spite me.” Bill muttered, before raising his hand and clicking his fingers.

Nothing happened, so he clicked again.

“Argh. Why is everything so difficult?”

“Are you trying to –” Ford questioned, trying to figure out what Bill was trying to do. He could feel Bill’s dissatisfaction echo in his head, and he realised that Bill was trying to access his magic, and he couldn’t.

Ford mulled over Bill’s building frustration, before he reached forward and opened the cupboard behind the mirror, pulling out his shaving gear.

“We can just do this the old-fashioned way.” He suggested calmly, and Bill squinted at the razor and tin of shaving cream.

“What’s this?” Bill questioned, shaking the can of shaving cream, hearing it rattle, before popping the top off and sticking his tongue out.

Ford lurched his hands forward, so the shaving cream didn’t pour into his mouth, falling instead to land in the sink. “No, don’t!”

“I thought I’d tasted everything in this house.” Bill remarked. “Why would you hide this from me?”

“Because it’s not food.” Ford swiped the spilled shaving cream up out of the sink and tsked. “It goes on your face before shaving. Your old vessel didn’t seem to grow facial hair, so it wasn’t something that you had to consider, but if you want me to get rid of my beard – it isn’t even a proper beard by the way, a centimetre of stubble isn’t a beard – then you should step back and let me do this.”

“Hmm.” Bill considered that, before he slapped the handful of shaving cream onto his face,
causing Stanford’s cheek to sting painfully.

“Ow!” Ford complained.

“What? I’m helping.” Bill snarked back, enjoying the way Sixer’s face looked in the mirror. He kept jumping between expressions of disgruntlement and fascination, which made for a very peculiar mix.

“Help less, maybe.” Ford grumbled and rinsed the razor with his right hand in the sink, while Bill smeared the shaving cream on him with his left hand.

So far this exercise in body sharing was a rocky road to co-operation. Ford may have convinced himself that this whole process would go a lot smoother than in actuality, in part due to his habit of aggrandising the idyllic elements of his relationship with his muse. Ford had convinced himself that they worked well together, but the reality was far more tumultuous.

“I want to try the next part.” Bill demanded, trying to enforce his autonomy down Ford’s right hand.

In his struggle to maintain control of the limb, Ford dropped the razor in the sink. Better to have it there than in Bill’s pseudo-capable hands.

“No. I’m not about to let you hock into my skin with a razor.” Ford scowled and stared at his own reflection in the mirror. He had shaving cream smeared all the way up to under his eye on the left side of his face, and he had to rub it away from his mouth. He could almost taste the chemicals.

One eye was yellow, and he must have looked like he was having a stroke, one half of his face contorted into bitter disappointment.

“I’m learning.” Bill complained. “Besides, you clearly haven’t been looking after your body, growing beards and eating shaving cream. It’s up to me to pick up the pieces.”

“I haven’t been –“ Ford chewed on the inside of his cheek, frustrated, before conceding his limb back to Bill. “Fine, but be careful.”

Bill leaned forward, and pulled the skin over Ford’s cheekbone taught, lifting the razor like he’d seen on TV. “Careful is not my middle name.”

You have a middle name? Ford thought.

Who knows. Bill replied, dragging the razor across Ford’s cheek with precision, shaving the hair there smoothly, taking care not to damage Ford in the process. Whatever it is, it’s not careful.

Ford watched from the back of his own head, vaguely impressed with Bill’s devotion to getting this right. The muse gently pulled the razor across Ford’s face over and over, shearing away the centimetre of stubble that grew in his absence, perfecting Ford’s skin through human means.

After a while it was almost peaceful, to sit back and watch. It was a rather intimate thing, Ford was used to shaving himself most days. This was a rather novel occurrence, and Ford realised that he and Bill could work well together. It just took a bit of time. Time and patience.

By the time Bill was finished, Ford was clean shaven once more with only a few nicks from the razor.

Ford prompted Bill to wash away the shaving cream, taking over for the clean-up, while Bill
simply stared, transfixed by the way the small cuts bled fluidly.

Patting his face down with a wet towel, Ford noticed Bill’s fixation and paused.

Bill raised Ford’s left hand, and touched a finger to the flowing blood, fascinated by it.

He wasn’t trying to hurt Ford, he didn’t press down on the wound, just swiped some of the blood away, staring at it curiously.

*What you do now is you get a piece of toilet paper and* – Ford’s internal directive was cut off when Bill put the bloodied finger in his mouth once more, tasting the flavour.

Ford got the sense that Bill was mulling it over, picking up on the feeling over the top of his own revulsion. Tasting his own blood wasn’t something Ford found appealing.

*Are you done?*

**Interesting.** Bill pondered, relinquishing his arm back to Ford, who hastily covered the cut with a small square of toilet paper.

*You didn’t do this with your own body.* Ford remarked, hardly remembering Bill bleeding himself. Bill treated his own vessel very carefully, hardly doing anything that would put it at risk of harm.

**My own body wasn’t as interesting.** Bill replied, blinking at Ford’s reflection, smiling winsomely at himself.

Ford supposed he should feel flattered. He was getting what he wanted, to be able to spend time with Bill again, he was introducing Bill to physicality once more, and Bill was smiling at him like he used to.

It was just a little jarring to see that same broad manic smile on Stanford’s own face.

**What else can you do in here?** Bill mused, before widening his eyes, marching over to the bathtub.

“Aha!”

“I did shower a day ago. I think.” Ford pondered, forgetting how much time had passed between sleeps.

**You don’t want me to make you smell yourself IQ. It’s not pretty.** Bill joked, before reaching into the shower and turning the taps on hot.

Without bothering to take off any clothes, Bill stepped into the bathtub, and sat Ford down under the spray.

Ford spared himself a moment to be utterly baffled by the experience, sitting down fully clothed in the shower, and he came to terms with how silly this would look from an outsider’s perspective.

Ford imagined he looked like he was a man who had lost control of his life.

The thought startled a laugh out of Ford, and he sat in the tub, water cascading down over him, soaking his shirt, trousers, and socks all the way through. Bringing his hand up to his face, covering his eyes as he laughed, Ford felt slightly more unhinged as each second passed.

He could sense Bill hovering, confusion turning into concern in the back of his mind, as tears mingled with the shower’s spray, dripping down his cheeks.
Bill’s concern grew as Ford started hiccupping sobs through the hysterical laughter, and before he could ask Ford what was wrong with him, Ford provided an explanation.

“It’s funny. It’s just funny that we’re finally together again, and I think I’m going insane because of it.”

Too much already? Bill questioned, and Ford could feel him shifting in the back of his head, like he was extricating himself from Ford’s brain. **I can le-**

“Don’t!” Ford clasped the sides of his head and stared down into his sodden lap, desperation looking out of his eyes, the yellow having fled to the back of his head already. “Don’t – I can do this. I just – people are going to think I’m out of my mind, talking to myself like a lunatic, fighting against my own body, doing one thing and meaning another – I just – what if I’ve lost control of my life?”

You don’t have to be in control all the time. Bill said softly, trying to endear Ford to the thought. **I’ve got you. Besides, who cares what other people think? If not caring is insanity, then I think you’ll find insanity quite freeing.**

Ford laughed, a dry sort of hiccup accompanying it, and shook his head, looking at the water swirling down the drain.

He could feel Bill watching him from the back of his head, sizing him up, his capability to deal with this. It was so much more apparent, sharing the same headspace, that Bill was holding himself back with all of this, limiting what he exposed Ford to, so he didn’t overwhelm him.

Ford supposed he should appreciate that restraint, but right now he was frustrated at his own inability and he felt like Bill’s careful restraint was just regulating him to the kiddie table in terms of immersing himself in this experience.

Bill lifted Ford’s left hand and gently pulled his sock off, trying to accommodate Ford’s sense of normality to ease him through this emotional breakdown.

Ford just sat there, sniffling, wiping water from his glasses with his right hand, as Bill divested him of his other sock, bundling the wet fabric up and throwing it over the edge of the tub, onto the tile floor.

Bill stretched his consciousness down into Ford’s other arm, monitoring his brain warily the entire time, but Ford seemed content to just sit there, and let Bill take control, take care of him while he temporarily couldn’t.

Bill took Ford’s glasses off gently, and then made to throw them over the edge of the bathtub with the same careless movement as when he threw the sock, but Ford’s autonomy lurched forward into his right arm, stopping Bill.

“I can do this much.” Ford said, folding the glasses and putting them on the floor gently, so they wouldn’t break.

“You’re bossy when you’re having a mental breakdown.” Bill commented, speaking through Ford’s mouth again. He could feel Ford’s amusement at that, mingled with his irritation, before the scientist sighed, and his limbs sagged back.

“Fine. Take care of me then.” I surrender. Ford thought.
Bill seemed mentally titillated to hear Ford say that, before extending himself forward into Ford’s limbs, sitting up straighter.

“Fine. Bossy.” Bill snarked cheekily but seemed to relish being able to control Sixer’s body for him.

He oozed appreciation with every movement, running his six fingered hands down the expanse of Ford’s chest, unbuttoning his shirt for him, and sliding it off his shoulders delicately.

He threw the shirt to the side of the tub, and a wet slap echoed in the room. Everything seemed too loud, even Ford’s heartbeat.

Bill shimmied out of Ford’s trousers, letting them bunch at the side of the tub with the shirt, divesting Ford of his clothes until he sat there naked.

People were supposed to shower naked, this should make Ford happy.

Instead he just seemed intensely strung out, a new layer of vulnerability imposed upon his already fractured mindset.

Bill watched Ford’s skin turn pink under the heat of the spray for a while, lost for what he could do to fix Ford, uncertain of what might make it worse.

Taking care of something wasn’t a language Bill was fluent in, and his clumsy attempts to do so left his actions feeling sorely lacking.

Frowning, Bill looked down at Sixer’s body, steadily turning red under the hot water, belatedly remembering that Sixer wasn’t fireproof. He turned the taps to a lower temperature and watched the scalded red tone in Ford’s skin lessen.

Twiddling his thumbs together, Bill tried to get a feel for Ford’s mental state, but the human was still disassociating, clearly unused to relinquishing control like this.

Sixer, despite his generous offer, was wholly unsuited to relinquishing control, every part of him abhorred the thought of it. Adjusting to this new arrangement took a bit of time for both of them, but Bill hadn’t expected Ford to react this way.

Deciding he’d butter Ford up to the arrangement, Bill fell back on what Ford’s initial motivator had been, a more physical arrangement, and he smoothed his hands down Ford’s body again, feeling the muscles in his arms indulgently, rubbing his shoulders, letting his fingers dip lower to trace the line of hair that trailed down from Ford’s belly.

Bill could feel Ford paying attention now, his mind sitting up through the haze of self-pity to take notice.

Bill let his hand slide lower, slipping his fingers down into Ford’s wet pubic hair, touching the base of his shaft.

Ford said nothing, but his thoughts were perking up, interested now.

Bill circled his hand around Sixer’s cock, and squeezed it, trying to coax Sixer out of his shell. He must have squeezed too hard, or too carelessly, because suddenly Ford was sitting up, extending his consciousness down his right arm, guiding Bill.

“No. Like this.” Ford murmured and took over.
Bill paid attention to the way Ford stroked himself, pressing his fingers to the vein on the underside, keeping his calloused fingers away from the sensitive head.

Ford indicated that Bill should try, and Bill noted that, given the proper motivation, Sixer got the hang of this body sharing business fairly quickly. He might be more suited to it than Bill thought, though it seemed Sixer only levelled out mentally to the experience if he got to lead.

Bill mimicked Ford’s movements, copying his stroke diligently, waiting to see if this would mellow Sixer out a bit.

Ford’s pleased hum said it all.

“That’s better.”

Bill kept up the momentum, observing Sixer’s reactions. He was so caught up in getting this right that he almost didn’t notice the sensation, until he felt Sixer’s cock getting hard, his ministrations working.

Human arousal was bizarre.

Bill could suddenly feel how it felt for Sixer, this odd sort of primal pull from within his belly, a heat building that felt good to fuel further.

That on top of the rather belated waves of worship Sixer was putting off, obliquely grateful that Bill was here, that they were reunited again, that it was Bill doing this for him, and not himself, alone and miserable, coupled to deliver a whammy of pleasure to Bill’s consciousness, twice as potent than he expected.

Bill sucked in a breath and shuddered as he pressed his thumb to the tip of Ford’s cock, over sensitised suddenly.

“Is this how it feels for you?” Ford asked, his voice low and curious.

“No. It’s how it feels for you.” Bill replied, slowing his movements cautiously, not wanting to be overwhelmed so quickly. He didn’t want to tip Sixer back over into another mental breakdown.

“I’m not going to break.” Ford spoke, sounding amused again. “You can experiment a little. It’s only fair.”

*After all your experimenting on me?* Bill hummed, and felt lower, squeezing Sixer’s balls and letting his finger trace idly past his perineum. *I suppose that is only fair.*

Ford inhaled, holding his breath almost, as Bill skimmed his fingers over Ford’s body. He felt almost hypersensitive, his focus being funnelled through two mental lenses, compounding sensation.

*Are you doing this to me or am I doing this to you?* Ford thought, stifling a groan as Bill brought his other hand down to stroke his cock while his questing fingers ventured further south.

*You’ll never know.* Bill replied, the water from the tub lubricating his finger as he pressed the tip of the digit into Ford curiously. *Knowing you, you’ll say whatever makes you feel better at the time, but I’m enjoying the ambiguity of it all.*

“Our very own paradox.” Bill spoke and chewed on his bottom lip. He slid his finger further into Ford, and wriggled it around, sliding it in and out now. Building up a rhythm Bill leaned back in
the tub, getting used to the sensation of fucking himself (fucking Ford) with his own finger, his reactions as new and appealing as the sensation was for Stanford.

Ford was used to doing this to Bill, and he’d tried it maybe once or twice on himself to understand the physics behind it all, but there was something about doing this regularly that falsely implied a concession of masculinity in the action. As such, when alone, fantasising, Ford generally didn’t do this. His fantasies didn’t often paint him in this position, in this light.

Reluctantly conceding that it wasn’t such a bad position to be in, Ford groaned, as Bill’s fingers quested deeper, curving just right to glance against his prostate.

Bill was right, it didn’t matter who was doing this to who, the fact of the matter was that though it was Ford’s hands doing the work, Ford felt like it was Bill touching him, Bill responding to him, Bill reacting in those delightful ways of his. In a way it was like he was pleasing Bill with his body, just like old times.

Ford’s face flushed red to hear the uncharacteristic babbling Bill was prone to slip from his own lips, listening to the muse’s impassioned statements sound out through Ford’s voice.

“Kcuf, lbh’er whfg n ohaqyr bs areir raqvatf, nera’g lbh? Enod gnihtyna teg snamuh rednow a sti.”

His mouth wasn’t used to the shapes it made, speaking Bill’s language. Ford had hoped that sharing the same headspece meant he would understand it better, but it remained as inscrutable as anything else about the muse.

The water sloshed around in the tub as Bill picked up the pace, jerking Ford off faster now as he fucked the scientist with his own fingers. The angle was awkward, and the tub was hard against his back, but Bill was determined to make this work for Sixer.

The space in Sixer’s head was becoming a torturous sort of echo-chamber of arousal, Ford’s arousal bouncing off Bill’s, bouncing off the overwhelming flavour of worship that seeded through everything.

Ford didn’t realise his worship was so potent, and it suddenly made sense to him why Bill always set fires when they indulged like this. Everything felt heightened, and he found it difficult to think, arousal and power clouding his brain.

He’d never been this senselessly overwhelmed, and he was reminded of that brief snapshot into Bill’s mind he had before the portal test. It seemed like Bill’s existence was a constant state of overwhelming, impossible, shifting sensation, and this was no different.

Unlike Stanford who sought to wrest control over every situation he was in until he understood it and could quantify it, Bill had a way of unhinging himself from control, giving into the chaos, until he emerged on the other side of it, whole again.

Ford’s head was swimming in a fog of over sensitisation and arousal when his body reached its limit, shooting white come out onto his chest, only for it to quickly drip off him, washing away under the shower’s spray.

This was normally the time when Ford stopped, wound down, took pace of himself and settled down into a somewhat sleepy satisfied stupor, but Bill wasn’t ready to finish just yet.

Maintaining his pace, even as lethargy settled into Ford’s body, Bill continued to bump at Ford’s prostate with his finger, over and over again, wringing every last moment out of Sixer’s orgasm, until Ford was wrung dry, an over sensitised mess.
“Enough. Enough Bill.” Ford moaned, sagging down in the bathtub, water swirling up around his thighs.

His shirt and trousers were blocking the drain now, and the tub was filling up.

Bill withdrew his fingers, releasing Sixer’s spent cock, but his eyes were bright, looking around the room.

**We could make it better. Make that last longer. If you made** – Equations and blueprints were suddenly flooding Ford’s mind, forced into his frontal lobe, and Ford felt an acute headache come on, wincing at the sensation shift, before finally looking at the designs Bill presented him with.

It took Ford a moment to comprehend the equations and circuitry, before he barked out a laugh.

“**You want to make a vibrator?**”

**Don’t tell me it’s patented already? We could have made a fortune!** Bill moaned, his good idea shot down by Ford’s amusement and derision. **What kind of a name is vibrator anyway, there are dozens of – no hundreds of better-**

“You just don’t wind down at all, do you?”

**Wind down? But we’ve only just started!**

“Shhh.” Ford pushed his consciousness forward into his limbs, and forced Bill to relax, to stop for a while, and just be. “Enough. I finally have you back here with me. Let me enjoy this.”

Bill stopped at that, Ford could feel him blink through his eyes, startled, before he attempted to still his constant energy.

Ford let his clothes plug the drain properly, and eased back in the tub, the water rising to his knees now. He laid back, and relaxed, the warm water swirling, rising higher, until he reached forward and turned off the tap.

He could feel Bill like static electricity, fizzing through his limbs, but Ford managed to hold him back, just to hold him in the moment.

Ford wrapped his arms around his torso, and sighed, squeezing himself tightly in a hug.

Slowly, Bill melted, until they were both floating contentedly in the tub, holding onto each other peacefully.

Bill pushed through into Ford’s left arm and raised it to trace the dark shape of the tattoo he’d left on Ford’s pectoral, his finger following the lines of the triangle’s sides the same way Ford would when soothing his anxiety in the past.

For a moment Ford was reminded of his nightmare, of Bill crawling out from his chest, devastating him. Bill was inside him now, but he didn’t feel unwelcome. Bill wasn’t going to hurt him.

Ford watch him stroke along the edges of the triangle, staring at the dark imprint on Ford’s flesh with fondness and satisfaction.

“I’ve missed this.” Ford spoke softly, awash with calm contentedness.

“You missed me?” Bill questioned.
“I missed us.”

Bill was silent for a moment, contemplating that, before he smoothed his hand over Ford’s chest, covering the triangle with his palm, his hand pressing down over Ford’s heart possessively, emotion welling up within Ford’s head.

He couldn’t say whose emotion it was, Bill’s or his, but it nearly clogged his throat with wistfulness, with unadulterated longing.

Eventually Bill let his hand slip away, baring the triangle once more, his fingers lingering gently.

“Me too.”

Two weeks passed, two delirious weeks of body co-habitation, wherein Stanford and Bill rediscovered human pleasures together.

The litany of things that Ford couldn’t do in his solitude, simply because of how they served as a painful reminder of how things were, became accessible to him now, and he found himself becoming productive again.

Ford cooked again, no longer feeling so alone in the kitchen, and Bill ate, delighting in tasting the flavours all over again with a new set of tastebuds.

He felt healthy, well fed, stimulated (very stimulated, Bill insisted on discovering the ins and outs of Stanford’s body, and he was very thorough. Stanford now had several inventions he never intended on patenting and learned what it meant to juggle a human libido and a cosmic thrill-seeking appetite for pleasure and sensation. Suffice to say they didn’t leave the house much in that first week) and he felt less like a shadow of his old self.

Bill’s presence was too bright, overwhelmingly so, to let Stanford cast a shadow.

Eventually, when they exhausted their options within the shack (and each other) they turned to the outside world.

Anything to avoid the elephant in the room, the portal in the basement. Ford could feel Bill itching to go see it when things became too still for him, and Ford didn’t know how to deal with that building impulsiveness. He didn’t want to confront what had come between them, lying to himself that Bill was a tame muse once again, and not a hungry devourer of worlds.

So, they took to the forest.

Expeditions searching through caves in the mountainside, treks through the darker parts of the woods, more visits to the enchanted forest. Anything to keep them both stimulated, to give them things to examine, experience and discuss that didn’t lead back to the portal.

The dancing light of Ford’s oil lantern made the crystals and stalagmites on the ceiling of the cave shimmer.

Lying on his back, Ford could see the light catch on the ancient crystals, trying desperately to look
at their elegant shapes instead of letting his gaze linger on the graphic paintings on the cave wall.

“And so I said to them – this body doesn’t have the right vocal chords to properly convey the vehemence of this particular interdimensional swear, but it sounds like this –“

“Oh.” Ford blinked, listening to the grating discordant sound Bill projected into his mind, wincing a little.

“That went down about as well as you’d expect. I should teach you interdimensional swears more often, actually. Might come in handy. So basically, the moral of that story is that if the middleman tries to get you to talk, don’t say anything. Or anything nice at least.” Bill continued with his anecdote, stretching Ford’s arm out to trace the shapes of the crystals on the ceiling as he spoke. “Nine times out of twenty it’ll get someone to take you to the big boss, and then you talk business.”

“What happens the other eleven times?” Ford asked.

“Something excruciating I’m sure.” Bill stretched Ford’s arm’s out, and yawned, before pillowing his arms behind Ford’s head. “But let’s just say I’m in the 45th percentile and leave it at that.”

“Huh.” Ford seemed quiet this evening, retreating into the back of his head more, letting Bill ‘take the wheel’ so to speak, or at least steer the conversation. He enjoyed listening to Bill, and Bill certainly enjoyed being listened to.

Though listening lacked its prior appeal, hearing Bill divulge fantastical tales about his adventures throughout the multi-verse, knowing that that world was inaccessible to Stanford now, due to the portal’s murky associations.

It rankled Ford, the way bittersweet things were both appealing and unappetising, that Bill’s actions had essentially cut him off from the stars.

It was all very well and good that Bill could wax poetic about the view of Saturn’s surface from its rings or impart his cosmic wisdom to Ford about the best way to haggle with intergalactic mercenaries, but as Ford could never use that knowledge, never see these fantastic sights for himself, the more Bill spoke, the more it became a sore spot for Ford.

And Bill no doubt knew that it was, he was sharing Ford’s headspace, he could see everything Ford was thinking, but despite Ford obviously becoming frustrated, Bill didn’t stop talking.

He just kept poking that sore spot.

“Oh! Have I told you about the orbiting moon restaurants of Gastronomie 82? They serve two-year degustations, designed to accommodate every palette known to exist outside of the philosophical.”

“Uhuh.” Ford glared at the stalagmites now, his tone inching towards bitter.

“It’s so rare to find establishments that serve a decent thorium truffle brie with just the right amount of gamma radiation. Mmm. That radiation packs a punch. And the aperitifs – Sixer, they’re to die for.” Bill enthused emphatically.

“Radioactive meals might have that particular side effect, yes.” Ford answered, clipped and irritable.

“For your anatomy, sure, but for beings like me it’s a rare delicacy.” Bill sniffed, picking up on Stanford’s censure now, upset by it. “Maybe you’d appreciate it a bit more if you were more open minded.”
“Open minded to radiation poisoning. I’ll get right on that.” Ford grumbled and crossed his arms.

“Oh, don’t be sour IQ. I’d spruce up your radiation tolerance before we go.” Bill rolled Stanford’s eyes. “I’m not completely inconsiderate, jeez.”

“Not completely inconsiderate?” Ford frowned, indignant now. “This whole conversation’s inconsiderate.”

“I’m inconsiderate for planning us a fancy dinner? I’m the inconsiderate one? Do you know what it costs to even get a reservation to Gastronomie 82? On one of the lesser moons even? I’d be booking us prime orbit seats Sixer.” Bill insisted.

“No, you won’t. And yes, you are being inconsiderate.” Ford argued, gesturing as he spoke. “You won’t be booking anything, because this fantastic experience you’re describing, and this inspiring, galactic world you’re dangling in front of me, is never going to happen for me, and you know it.”

Ford could feel Bill seethe, glaring at him from inside his own skull, before he threw Ford’s hand out, gesturing as he spoke. “I’d book us a table!”

“No, you won’t!” Ford sat up, raising his voice. It echoed off the cave walls, sounding even more like a discussion between two people, instead of one dualistic individual. “You can’t keep talking like you’re planning all these idyllic things for us, when the only way I’m ever going to see these things with you is if the portal turns on, and that’s not going to happen.”

Bill radiated displeasure now, writhing with a sharp sudden anger that made Ford’s head hurt, before he spoke, deliberately keeping his voice low, restraining his temper.

“It might happen.”

“The only way that will happen is over my dead body.” Ford countered, crossing his arms, resolute. His stubborn expression was contorted by Bill grinding his teeth, a pressure building in the back of Ford’s skull until he felt like he could hear Bill screeching in his mind.

The screeching was like a kettle boiling over, and Ford’s headache intensified, riding through Bill’s irritation, until his muse snapped, his temper breaking.

“Why am I even here then? What’s the point?” Bill yelled and threw Ford’s left hand out in anger.

“What’s the point? Why would you say that? Are you-“ Ford’s paranoia flared up, on guard instantly.

“I’m here to spend time with you Sixer.” Bill cut him off, speaking through his mouth. “To accommodate your needs, to do what you want. You’re telling me that you won’t even think about budging –“

“Budging? When I’m what stands between you and the rest of the world?” Ford got to his feet now and began to pace irritably. “No of course not –“

“I’m trying to think of our future, I’m trying to figure out a way we can be together.” Bill interrupted him. “You’re too busy pandering to your petty morality to even consider being reasonable.”

“Being reasonable? How is it reasonable to let you –“
“YOU DON’T LET ME DO ANYTHING!” Bill shouted, and it echoed along the network of caves, and down out into the valley.

Ford’s throat felt strained, he’d never yelled so loud before, but Bill clearly wasn’t used to Ford’s physical limitations.

While Ford might be used to Bill throwing his tantrums, he wasn’t equipped to deal with Bill throwing a tantrum in his body, and the felt the negative impacts of Bill’s mood immediately.

“I’m sick of being here with you if all you do is limit me. Just stop standing in my way, Sixer. You’re awful! Totalitarian! You locked me in your basement, you locked me in that body, you locked me in your house, in this town, and now you’ve locked me in your head too, and you still think you can justify it and call yourself righteous.” Bill hissed, and Stanford felt crowded back into his own head by the scope and weight of Bill’s spitting fury. “You’re not righteous, you’re self-righteous. You’re deluded. You’re the most infuriating creature I’ve ever met. You think you can have your cake and eat it too, well, you can’t! You want me around, but you lie to yourself, all the time. All these lies to justify things that you wouldn’t need to justify if you just gave in and listened to me! I’m not the bad guy here, Sixer. I just want to plan something nice for us, I’m thinking about your future, our future! You just want to stifle me some more and find ways to pat yourself on the back for keeping me around. Good job Stanford, you tolerate a monster!”

No, Bill. Ford winced, trying to calm Bill’s mood. I - I keep you around because I want you around.

Ford finally found his voice, though he still didn’t have enough space in his head to reach forward and claim it. Bill’s tantrum had escalated, and Ford had no hope of standing against it. His only hope now was to talk Bill down, soothe him before he got too worked up.

It hasn’t been easy on me either. There’s no point yelling at me. I’m going to great lengths to enable this –

“Oh sure, you’re really bending over backwards here Sixer.” Bill scoffed, and paced over to the cave wall, swinging his arms irritably as he walked. “You don’t let me look at my portal, you don’t let me talk to other people, we haven’t gone out together in public AT ALL since you asked me to come back here. It’s almost like you’re ashamed of me, ashamed to be yourself, but wait, that doesn’t sound familiar.”

I am not ashamed.

“You’ve been ashamed of every indulgence we’ve had since you invited me back here. So tied up in guilt about your destiny, when it’s been in your basement this entire time, and you can’t even think to see it when it’s right in front of you!”

Bill, forget about the portal. Just leave it. We can do something else, we can –

Bill balled Ford’s hands into fists at his side, shaking with rage.

“Forget about the portal? You’re the one who brought it up. It’s your fault for not listening to me in the first place. You’re the only reason you think you can’t access the things I want to show you. You act like I’m the one holding you back from exploring the portal, but you’re the one who won’t even try to turn it on again. You’re the one holding me back.”

I said forget about the portal, Bill. It’s not going to happen, it’s –

Bill shouted, and hurled Ford’s fist out, punching the wall, cracking the painted rock.
The chalk paint depiction of the local natives, stick figures, running from flames, crumbled beneath Ford’s fist.

*Stop that!* Ford complained, struggling to push forward in his mind now to stop Bill.

“I go to all this trouble to be here, I do so much for you, and you keep –“ Ford winced as Bill punched the wall again. “Spitting –“ Another punch. “In my eye?!“

**Bill, stop!**

“What’s the point? What’s the point, even when I try so hard to meet you in the middle, it’s still not good enough for you. No matter what I do, it’s never good enough for the great Stanford Pines. Beacon of morality.” Bill hiccupped, his eyes watering as emotion overwhelmed him, and he threw another punch at the wall again, decimating the stick figure populous.

Punching things made that lumberjack feel better, and Bill didn’t want to feel like this, not over Sixer. He was here to have a good time, and Sixer kept ruining it.

Red smears of blood began to stain the wall.

“You used to worship me.” Bill muttered bitterly. “Now you’re ashamed of me. We never go anywhere anymore, and I just wanted to do something *nice* for you. I don’t see you taking me out to a fancy dinner. I don’t see you doing *anything*!”

Ford felt pain in his hand and hoped nothing was broken. His knuckles were bloody, flecked with dirt and rock, and he wasn’t sure if the tears flowing were in reaction to the pain, or genuine feeling on Bill’s part.

Who was Ford kidding? They were sharing the same headspace. Ford knew exactly how hurt Bill was over this, assuming the triangular god couldn’t filter his emotions now they were sharing a skull.

The muse was practically shaking with anger, upset, and betrayal, the same betrayal that lingered between them still since the banishment, raw and tenuous. Ford had slapped a band-aid over it by favouring their dream encounters, by making efforts to see Bill again, but the layer between that hurt was thin and fallible.

Ford felt a surge of panic when he realised that he was at risk of losing that band-aid, of losing Bill altogether if he decided Ford wasn’t worth sticking around for.

Stanford wasn’t prepared for that sort of rejection, he’d been useless without Bill here. He was useless without Bill. Or at least that was his prevalent mood right now.

“You wouldn’t do this to me if you really loved me. I bet that was a lie too. Such a liar, Stanford Pines. I don’t know why I bother staying for you.” Bill sniffled, his hand resting against the wall, dripping blood.

**Bill! No, I -**

Feeling emotions in a human body again was exhausting and overwhelming, and Bill wanted out, he didn’t want to stick around and be used by Sixer again, mutuality aside.

If Sixer couldn’t stick to the unspoken rule between them, if he had to make himself a barrier between Bill and the portal, between Bill and himself, and rub it in Bill’s face, then Bill shouldn’t have to stick around and endure this sort of treatment.
Sixer was the worst creature Bill had ever encountered. No one else had ever played Bill’s emotions like this so easily, ever tricked Bill into forming attachments like this only to jerk him around because of it.

Bill was starting to think he wasn’t worth it.

Screwing up his presence, Bill raised Ford’s fist, impulsively intending to do as much damage as he could before cut loose from Ford’s mind, ditching him as a vessel.

Before he could let his fist fly, Ford yelled out.

**WAIT, BILL WAIT! I’m sorry! Wait, I’ll do it!**

Bill paused, and blinked, looking inward to Sixer, shocked. He scoured Sixer for sincerity, feeling nothing deceptive about his thoughts, and boggled that the human would compromise his staunch morals enough to give into Bill finally. To meet him in the middle.

**You will?** Bill asked, stunned.

“You’re right.” Ford panted, leaning up against the cave wall. “You have been right. I’ve been treating you awfully. You’re just trying to find some middle ground for us, and I keep cutting your feet out from under you. I’m sorry.”

Bill blinked at Ford inwardly and felt the first burgeoning prickles of delight creep up. Sixer’s apology was working, it was making Bill reconsider leaving the human. He didn’t realise Sixer’s regard was so crucial to him, but hearing those words sprung hope in Bill’s core. Hope for them, that they could work it out. That Bill could have his cake and eat it too.

“I promise I’ll make it up to you. You don’t have to leave. I want you to stay, really. I do … love you, and I’m not ashamed, I just –“

Here Ford’s thoughts wavered, and there was deliberate flattery laced in with his words. As insulting as it might have been, Bill was almost a little titillated that Sixer could spare a moment to be manipulative amidst all this. It was conniving and endearing all at once.

“I just want you all to myself.” Ford finished, inwardly wincing, worried he’d laid the flattery on too thick.

He needn’t have worried. The flattery was working. Bill was softening up to him, coming around to staying with the human, hearing those magic words from Sixer that made Bill weak.

“But you’re right, I’ve treated you awfully, so – of course I’ll do it.” Ford nodded, standing tall and resolute now.

**You will?** Bill asked, hopefully, more than a little besotted with Sixer again. By rights he should have whiplash at how quickly Sixer went from infuriating to endearing. Bill supposed it was all part of his charm.

“Absolutely.” Ford nodded again, cradling his injured hand. “So, what do you say? Dinner, tomorrow night?”

Oh. Bill’s hopeful tone fell flat, realising that Sixer didn’t mean he was conceding the portal to him.
Bill blinked in the back of Ford’s brain, mulling that over, his disappointment still warring with the newfound appreciation for Sixer’s charms.

Bill looked down at the blood dripping from Ford’s knuckles, and supposed that one more night pretending, one more dinner for old time’s sake wouldn’t hurt.

“My treat?” Ford prompted, knowing his muse was a stone’s throw away from leaving him, and right now he was too desperate to deal with that in any way.

Bill was silent for another long stretch, and Ford almost worried that he’d already left, and he was talking to himself at this point, a mad man, alone in a cave, attacking the wall.

Then he felt what resembled a mental shrug and he heaved a sigh of relief.

*It better be fancy, that’s all I’m saying.*

Bill’s words were brusque, but he couldn’t hide the glow of happiness that endured in Sixer’s head with Bill’s concession.

Ford exhaled with gratitude, and let his shoulders sag, having held himself tense, waiting for Bill’s verdict.

He allowed himself a smile, and after a while, he couldn’t tell who was smiling more, him or Bill.

He found, after a while, that he also didn’t care.

Common sense took a backseat to unbridled, echoing joy.

He had a dinner date.

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Ford parked his car in the parking lot just inside the forest, a grove of trees shrouding the cars from view, and walked through the path from the car park to stand in view of their chosen venue for tonight.

Out of all of the restaurants in Gravity Falls, Ford had chosen this establishment for its discretion.

The Club was one of Gravity Falls’ oldest establishments and had all the pomp and circumstance one would expect, considering The Club mostly catered to Gravity Falls’ wealthier inhabitants. The likes of Preston Northwest and his white-collar college friends frequented The Club, which gave it a sort of old boys appeal. Set into the cliffside, the building was shaped like the titular clover from a deck of cards, and had lush red and black interiors, designed to evoke a classy and luxurious feel.

Flash, fancy, and a little frivolous, Ford was hoping the restaurant would appeal to Bill, but more than that, he was counting on the restaurant’s clientele to mean that no one he knew would be there.

He could feel Bill in the back of his head, taking it all in, the red carpet leading into the place, the burgundy awning, and the neon sign humming above, adding to the casino style of the establishment.
Aren’t we underdressed for this place? Bill asked.

“I’m wearing a tie.” Ford gestured to his front, blue tie hanging over a white button up shirt. Ford thought he looked rather polished for the evening.

This seems like a bow-tie sort of establishment to me. Bill commented wryly. A bow-tie occasion.

“Of course, you’d say that.” Ford grumbled. “That’s every occasion for you.”

Exactly. That way I’m never underdressed. Bill preened smugly in the back of Ford’s head. I keep things classy that way.

“I’m sure you do.” Ford replied with resigned amusement.

Squaring his shoulders, he took a deep breath, staring at the maître d at the door. He jogged on the spot a little, clenching and unclenching his hands, psyching himself up to actually go through with this.

You’re not standing me up now, are you? Bill frowned through Ford’s features, picking up on his hesitation.

“I’m not, I just – people will think it’s odd, that’s all, someone dining alone here.” Ford said self-consciously, reluctant to step out from behind the tree-line.

You humans are such pack animals, just let it go. People dine alone all the time. Bill tried to will Ford’s legs forward, urging him to move, but Ford buckled his knees in defiantly. They’ll just think you appreciate the culinary arts. With luck they’ll think you’re a food critic and bring you out the good stuff. Come on Sixer, stop stalling.

“I’ll be eating by myself, talking to myself – Bill, what if somebody sees me? Someone I know?” Ford panicked, suddenly on the back foot once more. “I can’t go in there.”

You can and you will. Bill countered, still pushing his will through Ford’s limbs stubbornly. You promised me a fancy dinner, you can’t back out now. You won’t be eating by yourself or talking to yourself, you’ll be talking to me, so just get over yourself and get moving.

“Everyone’s going to think I’m crazy.” Ford moaned, clutching his head as his legs lurched forward, walking him up to the door. “I can’t do this –”

Hey. Bill stopped Ford, forcing him to calm down and listen. You’re doing this for me. This is you making it up to me. You aren’t going to back out now because some lowbrow hicks think you’re stranger than they are. Who CARES what they think? Care what I think.

“And what do you think?” Ford mumbled, slumping his shoulders, abashed.

I think we are going to go in there, get uproariously drunk, try everything on the menu, and have a damn good time. Bill insisted resolutely. So, are you in, or are you in?

Ford reluctantly conceded that Bill was right. The muse had a way to make this sort of thing sound appealing, when really Ford just wanted to get it over with.

He wasn’t cut out for this romantic business, but at the end of the day, it was just him and Bill, going out together, and that had been good enough for Ford all this time. Maybe it would be just what he needed now to get over himself and let go, exactly what they both needed to patch things
Ford squared his shoulders and paced forward.

*I’m in.* He thought.

Ford’s mouth stretched into a sly smile and Bill looked out onto the restaurant with slitted yellow eyes.

“Good.”

They were seated in the corner of the restaurant, in a secluded table for two at Ford’s insistence. While from their position they were tucked away from the crowds, they had an excellent view of the entire restaurant.

Ford was hunching his shoulders forward, attempting to make himself as small and inconspicuous as possible, while Bill was craning Ford’s neck, trying to eye off everyone in the restaurant.

“Isn’t that the local news reporter? Hey Sixer, that looks like the pawn shop owner we sold our rubies to, reckon he recognises us? Hey Cheapskate!”

*Bill! Will you keep your voice down?* Ford hissed inside his head, acutely self-conscious.

**It’s your voice.** Bill joked, teasing Ford, commandeering his arm to wave at the confused looking pawn shop owner, who shot Ford a dubious look, and pulled his menu up between them, obviously uncomfortable by the way Ford’s face seemed to spasm between smiling widely, and shrinking away in mortification.

*I’m never going to be able to look any of these people in the eye ever again.* Ford bemoaned, pulling his own menu up to hide his face behind.

**You can look me in the eye.** Bill replied, oozing cheer and optimism. **Just like looking in a mirror! Get it Sixer? Get it? Because –**

*Yes, I know. We’ve done the mirror thing, Bill.* Ford held the menu up to his face, scowling. *Why are you so chipper all of a sudden? How do you have this much energy?*

**This is our first date in the same body Sixer, I’m allowed to be enthusiastic.** Bill flipped the menu over and ran Ford’s finger down the page. **Oooh, Lobster Mornay. Never tried that before. And Veal Marsala, they serve baby deer here? That’s borderline cruel. I want one! What else?**

Ford took note of the prices while Bill explored the menu and the frugal side of him inwardly winced.

*Maybe don’t go overboard here? You’re sharing my stomach, remember? I can only eat so much.*

**Pssch.** Bill waved Ford’s hand, and Ford flushed with embarrassment. **Quitters talk before we even start? That’s not like you Sixer. Live a little.**
Bill’s flamboyant hand gesture was spotted by the waiter, and assuming he was waving for service, the waiter approached the table, holding a notepad at the ready.

*Oh god, he’s coming over.* Ford shrunk down in his seat even further.

**Don’t worry Sixer, I’ve got this.** Bill winked with Ford’s eye, and then sat up straight, putting the menu down and beaming at the waiter expectantly.

*Oh please no.*

“Hello sir, what can I get you this evening?” The waiter drawled.

Bill leaned his elbows on the table, and squinted at the waiter’s nametag, before sitting straight, tilting his chair back casually as he spoke.

“Rodrigo! Just the person I wanted to see!” Bill slid the menu across the table. “How’s your sister, Valencia? Still in jail? Of course, she isn’t, that girl doesn’t know when to quit! Now Rodrigo –“

Rodrigo the waiter, for a moment, looked like he’d been hit over the head, stunned that Bill could sit there, spouting knowledge about his sister Valencia, who, sure maybe she’d been in jail once or twice, but he was fairly sure she wasn’t now. He was fairly certain no one in Gravity Falls knew about her, or her related criminal record, and he immediately panicked that Stanford was a cop, or a criminal.

He didn’t exactly look like either though, sitting there in his button up shirt and tie. Rodrigo thought he spotted a pocket protector there too.

Shaking off his shock, Rodrigo recovered composure quickly enough to look attentive when Bill gestured to the menu, hoping that if he acted unphased and did what this bizarre man said, he could go back out to the kitchen on his break to phone his sister.

Bill flipped the menu open and ran his finger down the page.

“Follow my finger now, I want everything on the menu from here – all the way down to here. You got that?”

*No, no, no, no, no!* Ford wheezed within his head, panicking, thinking of his bank account and his waistline.

*No?* Bill asked, before looking up at Rodrigo. “Actually – two of everything.”

*Nooooo!* Ford wailed, before his panic broke through, regaining him control of his body.

“Nooo!”

Ford’s voice came out as a yell, drawing the eyes of the restaurant patrons.

“Oh.”

Rodrigo blinked at the strange man, mentally tallying whether his pay-check was worth enduring this.

Ford cleared his throat, embarrassment tinging his ears pink, and thumped his chest (Bill thumped him harder than he would) holding up his hand to halt the order. “No, um, disregard that. Could we have the – I mean I – ah-“
Rodrigo was looking at Ford like he was mentally unstable now, and Ford worried that the waiter was right.

This body sharing business was harder than it looked. Ford didn’t know why he thought this outing would be a good idea. He really was desperate to patch things up with his muse.

“The Lobster Mornay, please?” Ford asked timidly.

**And the veal! Get the veal!** Bill urged Stanford impatiently.

“And the Veal Marsala?” Ford shrank in his chair just asking, and tried to smile politely up at Rodrigo, apologetic already.

Bill’s impatience with Sixer’s timid conduct simmered away as Rodrigo wrote down Ford’s order, and just as the waiter moved to turn away, Bill burst through once more, snagging Rodrigo by the sleeve.

“And can we get a drinks menu up in here?”

“Certainly sir. I’ll be right back with that.” Rodrigo said, extricating his sleeve from Ford’s grasp, shoulders tense, before walking back towards the kitchen, thoroughly unnerved.

Content that his needs were being met, Bill leaned back in the chair once more, lacing his arms behind his head and tipping the chair back idly.

His outward contentedness contrasted with Ford’s mental agony.

*That was awful. He thinks I’m a madman. Why did I say we? He’s probably back there telling all the staff about me. Oh god.*

**Relax, Sixer.** Bill assured him casually. *Our friend Rodrigo won’t be saying anything, or who knows who I’d tell about his jailbird sister. It’s called a stalemate.*

Did you bring that up to blackmail him? Ford asked, evoking a mildly censorial tone.

*I brought that up, so you’d have security.* Bill asserted, still leaning back on the chair. *You’re the one who’s freaking out about your reputation here. I’m just ensuring that that reputation is protected. You should be thanking me.*

Ford mulled that over, still somewhat indignant at the thought of blackmailing their waiter. Bill didn’t seem to have a problem with it though.

**Speaking of thanks, I figured me coming back here would be more than a two-dinner deal. Nice work short changing me back there, Sixer. Thanks a lot.**

*I’m not short changing you. If you’ve really got your heart set on tasting everything on the menu, you can, but one dish at a time, please.* Ford insisted, playing it sly. *I’m not willing to put on 20 pounds over one dinner date.*

**What a buzzkill. Has anyone ever told you you’re no fun, Sixer?**

Ford exhaled a resigned sigh, and looked up at the ceiling of the restaurant, studying the mural painted on the roof.

His put-upon pondering was interrupted by Rodrigo returning with the drinks menu. He held it out
waiting for Ford to notice he was there, surveying the strange man for signs of mob ties, or any odd gang tattoos, before he eventually cleared his throat, jolting Ford out of his stupor.

“Shall - shall I give you a moment, sir?”

“Can you give me a scotch?” Ford rubbed his eyes, tired, not even bothering to look at the menu.

“Very good choice, sir. On the rocks?”

Bill flung Ford’s arm out to snatch the menu from Rodrigo before the nervous waiter ran away back to the kitchens.

“Move your hand, I want to look at this thing.”

Rodrigo blinked, looking down at his hand, having hardly moved a muscle.

Ford stubbornly held his hand over his eyes, trying to limit Bill’s excess partially, and he must have looked very peculiar clamping his right hand down over his glasses, so Bill couldn’t peek at the menu. Bill attempted to prise Ford’s right hand away with his left, with limited success.

“I can’t see – they’ve gotta have a – aha! Long Island Iced Tea! I want a Long Island Iced Tea. Every establishment worth its salt does that cocktail. I don’t need to see the menu for that. I want six of them, with the fancy umbrellas.”

Rodrigo raised his notepad to write the order down, but paused, watching warily as the man at the table seemed to continue a one-sided conversation with himself, his hand still held over his eyes.

“Six? You don’t need six.”

“Yes, I do. Multiple islands!”

“The alcohol content in one of those triples what’s in mine.”

“Well then you’d better catch up.”

Ford groaned and kneaded his temples like he was nursing a headache.

“Sir?” Rodrigo asked.

“Fine, one scotch, and six Long Islands.” The scientist conceded to himself. “But can you bring them out one at a time, please?”

Bill took issue at that, and lifted Ford’s hand, raising two fingers to the waiter.

Rodrigo looked between Ford’s hand, and his face, and jotted down the drinks order, turning to leave hastily.

One at a time. Bill scoffed. You’ve never had a good time in your life, have you?

How do you expect to drink six drinks at once? Ford questioned dubiously. With one mouth.

Bill brought a flurry of mathematical equations to the forefront of Ford’s mind once more, only this time the blueprints and statistics resulted in an image of several straws taped together, creating an elaborate silly straw for the muse.

Ford snorted a laugh.
Would you rather a sensible one? Bill quipped back. I sure wouldn’t.

How are you millions of years old? Ford questioned, resigned to distracting himself from the judgemental stares of the restaurant patrons, focusing on Bill. He had a unique opportunity to discover things about his muse, and on a date, it follows that you’re supposed to get to know each other, so Ford gave himself license to press, curiosity lighting his mind once more.

Every time I think I know something about you, I end up discovering something else, and now I wonder. Is it simply a matter of comparative lifespans? Is there some reason you still see the childlike wonder in everything? How old are you, in your culture? How does your lifespan compare to your people?

Bill looked down at the tablecloth for a moment, fiddling with the fabric, before asking Ford defensively. Why do you want to know?

Can’t I just want to know you? Ford countered, paying close attention to the way rather than constantly exuding his emotions, Bill was suddenly closed off, emitting nothing.

Bill said nothing but looked up when Rodrigo returned with one Long Island and Ford’s scotch, pulling the cocktail across the table to sip on it through the straw, pensive.

Eventually, he replied. You can. Doesn’t mean you’ll get an answer though.

Why be cagey about it? I’m just asking how old you are. Or is that inappropriate by your people’s standards? Ford questioned, and Bill just kept sipping on the Long Island, rattling the drink up through the straw. How long do your people live for? Are there others like you? More triangular gods out there, who wear bowties and drink cocktails?

No. Bill’s answer was rather clipped, considering Ford’s playful, teasing demeanour. There’s no one out there like me.

Well, maybe not like you, but you must have some stories about your people. Ford continued blithely, while Bill attempted to inhale the entire drink as quickly as possible.

Do I ask for stories about your family? Bill countered, his words becoming barbed. How’s twin two doing these days? Dead in a ditch, or living it up somewhere? How long has it been since you asked about him?

Fine, Bill, I get it. Ford replied, his shoulders tensing defensively.

After all, what’s ten years between brothers? Between negligent brothers even. How about the last time you saw him? I hear it was a lovely fake funeral.

Bill. Stop. Ford gritted his teeth around the straw, frustrated now.

I’d ask if you’d ever attend a real one for the guy, but I don’t want to ply you with ‘inappropriate questions’.

“Why are you like this?” Ford asked, as Bill finished the Long Island, sliding it across the table. “I get that it’s a sore spot, I said that. I stopped, but you just kept going. I’m just being curious about you, being attentive. Being a partner.”
Bill scoffed, and reached for the scotch, sniffing it and wrinkling his nose, before turning Ford’s body back over to him, sulking in the back of Ford’s mind.

*You’re the one who wanted to go on this date. It won’t be much of one if you won’t even talk to me.* Ford reasoned.

**It’s already not much of one.** Bill’s agitation seeped out of him, his dour mood impacting Ford.

The scientist felt suddenly bitter about this whole situation, about the unspoken morass that lay between them, dissatisfied in an instant. It could have been Bill’s sour mood leaking over, but he felt his own mood reflect Bill’s discontent.

His last-ditch attempt to patch things up between him and his muse, to bridge the gap that grew from Bill’s banishment, was a failure. Ford ticked all the boxes, wore a tie, booked a table at a fancy restaurant, went out in public with Bill, but the god *still* wasn’t happy.

Ford threw back the glass of scotch, drinking it quicker than he’d have liked to. Good scotch was to be savoured, but now they were both mad, at each other and themselves.

Seething discontent, Ford was almost tempted to pick up the cheque and leave, but he slowly became aware of Bill’s more nuanced emotions leaking through his barriers, bitter nostalgia and self-hatred mingling with his irritation, combining into something noxious and difficult to endure.

Ford’s throat felt tight with emotion that wasn’t even his own, but empathy slowly overtook his discontent, and he approached Bill more gently this time, trying to ease him out of his dour mood.

*We’re here to have a good time together, remember. Aren’t you going to show me how?*

Bill seemed to squint at Ford from inside his mind, and Sixer continued, affecting a facetious, teasing tone.

*I’ve never had fun in my life before, so there’s no guarantee I’ll be a quick study.*

*… Says the genius.*

*They call me Stanford ‘No Fun’ Pines.* Ford continued solemnly. *No Fun Sixer.*

**Who calls you that?** Bill had to ask, Sixer’s antics slowly but surely drawing him out of his bout of malaise.

*You mostly.* Ford felt Bill warm with endearment, and he used this opportunity to change the topic, hoping Bill’s barbed words would be left behind. *Oh look, our food’s coming.*

Rodrigo returned with the Lobster Mornay and Veal Marsala, placing the two dishes side by side on the table, collecting the empty glasses, making a mental note to return with the next two beverages.

“This looks good.” Bill remarked, already delighting at the flavours in the air.

“It does.” Ford agreed, reaching for his cutlery. He spared a moment to look up at Rodrigo, nodding. “Thank you.”

Surprised by the strange man’s manners (though he still seemed somewhat unhinged, talking to himself) Rodrigo nodded, and decided against watering the man’s next few drinks down.
The evening became much smoother after that, Bill and Ford both delighting over the taste of their meals, swapping anecdotes and stories over the remaining Long Island Iced Teas, even ordering a bottle of champagne and several desserts to share to cap off the night.

It was fun, Ford realised. Being with his muse always was, and fun was the flavour he missed in Bill’s absence that had him so morose without him.

It seemed to be an essential part of what Bill brought to the table and seemed to be the spark that justified keeping Bill around. He knew how to have fun, and he effortlessly had Ford doing the same, something he didn’t think he could have outside of academic success and competition. Something he hadn’t had since he was a child, running along the beach.

Bill made Ford have fun just being himself.

They were being himself, together.

Periodically throughout the evening, Ford felt full of this warm happiness that clogged his chest, a happiness that came from being known. He wasn’t sure if it was his feeling or Bill’s.

It could have been his progressive inebriation talking, but the more he felt this warm happiness in Bill’s presence, the more he felt like he could justify Bill’s dubious conduct and lack of moral integrity, if it meant he could spend longer feeling like this.

He knew it was wrong to feel like this. He knew it.

But currently he was too drunk to care.

“And he was ejected from the bank and to this day – to this day – he’s banned from the Coma Cluster. FOREVER!”

Ford chuckled, his shoulders shaking, an arm wrapped around his middle, hugging himself, tearing up at Bill’s colourful anecdote.

He leaned his elbow on the table and snickered, wiping the corner of his eye, shaking his head. “Being banned from a galaxy I’m sure is one thing, but being banned from a whole cluster?”

“Just goes to show you that anything is possible if you try hard enough Sixer.” Bill grinned, and reached for the champagne flute on the table, pouring the last of the bottle in, and sipping the bubbly liquid. “Never give up on your dreams.”

“So inspiring.” Ford scoffed and enjoyed the buzz of the champagne. “Even the illicit ones.”

“Well, you’d know all about that Doc Frankenstein.”

“I told you, no dead bodies were harmed in the making of your – you.” Ford snorted, resting his chin on his hand fondly. “No dead bodies.”

“Say that a little louder, I reckon the police didn’t hear you way down at the station.” Bill teased, tapping Ford on the nose and brushing his knuckles over Ford’s cheek fondly, oozing contentedness.

Their moment of conjoined good spirits was interrupted by a disdainful noise, jarring them out of their one-man conversation.

“Last I checked, this was a private club.” Preston Northwest, two tables away, sneered over at the
drunken scientist, talking to his Ivy league colleagues a little too loud for a private conversation. “Who let the rabble in here?”

His snooty colleagues laughed, looking conspiratorially over at Ford’s table.

“There are facilities that house the mentally impaired. Don’t I pay enough in charitable donations to keep his sort out of view?”

Ford froze, shame flushing him with colour. He felt nothing but drunken embarrassment in that moment, until he felt Bill’s emotions competing with his, rage and vindictive anger taking over.

**Preston Northwest.**

*Leave it Bill. It’s not worth it. Let’s just go.*

**No Sixer.** Bill stretched his autonomy further into Ford’s limbs, boxing him out of his own agency. Ford’s resistance was limited, inebriated as he was, and part of him was curious about what Bill would do. *I’m about to teach you a valuable life lesson. Never let anyone make you feel inferior for being your own creature. Certainly not the snobbish likes of no-name Northwest.*

Bill oozed into Ford’s body fully, keeping the scientist penned back in the corner of his own head, and turned his head to grin eerily at the table Northwest sat on, his eyes bright yellow, wide, slitted, and dangerous.

**It’s time I took my pound of flesh.**

“Well, well, well, if it isn’t Preston Northwest. Why, you don’t look half as flea-bitten as your old man Nathaniel. Though I guess he’s old, old man Nathaniel now. How’s pops? Auldman still kicking?” Bill rested Ford’s chin on his hand, and beamed at Preston, his voice ringing out across the club loudly. “He doesn’t have long to go. I bet you’re getting itchy fingers for that trust fund.”

“I beg your pardon?” Preston Northwest looked stunned, leaning back, eyeing Bill off with trepidation.

“Don’t be stupid, Preston, although it does suit you. You’ve never begged for anything in your life, although that’s not quite true is it?”

Bill slid his chair back and stood up, teetering over to Preston’s table, and rested his arm over the back of Preston’s chair, before leaning down to whisper in his ear, oozing familiarity. He spoke softly enough for Preston to hear him, and just loud enough to threaten the young socialite with divulging his information to more inquisitive ears.

“You begged the Dean of Harvard to let you in on your family’s reputation when you flunked your entry exams, you begged your mother to let you keep your pet fox Hunter when your father wanted to loose the hounds on it, and you begged old Auldman to let you out of your rooms when he locked you in there for three solid months after you raised your voice to him.”

Preston looked at Bill with absolute horror, leaning away from the other man. Bill smiled sweetly and batted his eyelashes at Preston.

“You were eight. He didn’t like your tone.”

“How do you –“ Preston cleared his throat before looking around the table at his university colleagues, who were watching him, judging his reactions. He swallowed his trepidation, and spoke, his voice feigning strength and authority.
But his eyes told the truth. His eyes showed fear.

“What do you want?”

“Just conversation. Could be one on one, could be an opportunity to share with the class.” Bill shrugged his shoulders, and grinned maniacally around the table, unnerving Preston’s friends. “Or don’t you want to be seen talking to my sort? The rabble?”

Preston took a hesitant breath, his desire to preserve his reputation pulling him two ways at once. He looked around the table for a moment longer, before he pushed his chair back, standing up.

“Excuse me gentlemen.” Preston’s composure wavered, and he cleared his throat again, leaning away from Bill. “I’ll be… right back.”

“The right choice! A good opportunity for old friends to play catch up.” Looping his arm around Preston’s shoulders, Bill grinned, and tugged the Northwest heir closer, before waving brightly at the table behind him. “See you chaps on the flipside. And remember, invest in cryptocurrency. The next big thing. An insider tip, but you didn’t hear it from me.”

Dragging Preston off, Bill pulled the Northwest heir aside into the corridor leading to the bathrooms, before pinning him to the wall, his arm resting to the side of Preston’s perfectly coiffed head, blocking his escape.

“Who are you?” Preston asked Ford, his voice a reedy quaver. “You look like the scientist who came knocking on my door two years ago, spouting rambling conspiracy theories, but he was – you are –”

“Don’t act like you don’t know me Northwest. Your family’s in two deals deep already, and you have the gall to not recognise your God?” Bill’s eyes seemed to glow, exuding power.

“I don’t – “ Preston blinked up at Bill for a moment, lost, before correlation clicked in his mind, and he remembered the tapestry kept in Auldman’s study. “It’s you.”

Bill’s eyes lidded, and he smiled like the Cheshire cat, the expression an anachronism on Ford’s earnest face.

Preston Northwest began to backtrack, simpering before Bill, as he averted his eyes, apologising profusely. “I – I’m sorry I didn’t recognise you, my lord. I live to serve you, I – whatever you want it’s yours – I -“

“Shhh.” Bill placed Ford’s finger on Preston’s lips, silencing his grovelling.

Preston bowed his head and his words dried up.

“You should have shown me respect. You know I’m always watching.” Bill said smoothly, watching Preston tremble. “For being so rude to my vessel, you’re going to pick up the tab for us. You can afford it. And I’ll require twice as much devotion from your family in future if you want me to make good on part two of our deal. One hundred and fifty years can pass in the blink of an eye, and your time is running out.”

Preston paled, and nodded. “Anything. Anything you say.”

“Good.” Bill smiled, and leaned away from Preston, dusting down the man’s shoulders, making to turn away, before he paused. “Oh, before I go!”
Preston held himself tense, waiting for Bill to speak.

Bill patted Preston on the shoulder, and smiled, his smile disingenuous and disdainful.

“Don’t forget to tip your waiter.”

Sauntering out of the club, Bill waved jauntily over his shoulder.

Preston slumped against the wall, sighing with relief.

On his way back to his table, he snagged Rodrigo the waiter.

“The table in the corner there, how much was the bill?”

Rodrigo handed over the bill to Preston, and the Northwest heir ground his teeth, staring at the zeros on the end of the bill, noting the expensive vintage champagnes, decadent desserts, and aged whiskies he was funding.

Pulling his chequebook from his jacket pocket, Preston hastily scribbled down the cost of the meal, shoving the cheque into the young waiter’s hands gruffly, intending to leave it at that, before he felt a chill go down his spine.

You know I’m always watching.

Preston dug three crisp hundred-dollar bills from his jacket pocket and tossed them at Rodrigo, sneering at the young man.

“Keep the change.”

He walked away, wringing his hands like they were dirty, having touched the common folk, and Rodrigo picked the bills up off the floor, staring at them, awestruck.

Valencia wasn’t going to believe this.

Ford was finding it more and more difficult to push past the back of his head as the evening went on.

Their collective inebriation was beginning to affect him.

Ford found his movements slower, his inhibitions lowered, and his ability to overpower Bill’s rambunctiousness weakened. Rather than withdrawing, as Ford seemed to do after a few drinks, tiring himself out, Bill only became more of a forceful presence as intoxication set in, acting louder, brasher, more reckless as the night continued.

Ford’s car was parked poorly, one wheel up on the curb, his front bumper scraping against the concrete gutter. Ford had protested against what they were doing, calling it ‘drunk driving’ but Bill just called it fun. It was a miracle they didn’t hit a pedestrian. It was a miracle the car was still in one piece.
Ford’s heart was pounding, adrenaline and good old-fashioned fear for ones life getting his blood racing as fast as the car did, and he felt his stomach flip as his dinner caught up with him.

*I don’t feel so good.* Ford moaned mentally, but his protestations were ignored in favour of Bill’s fervour.

“WOO! Now that was a ride. Don’t know why you bother sticking to the speed limit Poindexter, if you’re after efficiency.” Bill opened the car door, and stuck his leg out, pulling himself out of the car, teetering on Ford’s long legs. “Why you didn’t let me drive before I have no idea. Clearly, I’m great at it.”

*I’m going to throw up.* Ford wheezed.

“Well, keep it down. The night’s not over yet.” Bill blinked one eye at a time, taking in the buzzing neon sign for the Skull Fracture, and staggered over to the door of the bar, swaying on his feet.

The bouncer at the bar crossed his arms and gave Stanford a leery one over.

“Have you been drinking this evening sir?” The bouncer asked gruffly.

“Now what would give you that idea?” Bill slurred, and leaned against the wall conspicuously, trying not to sway. “I am just a humble patron, eager to enter your humble establishment and spend all my arbitrary money in there, guzzling your liquor to my heart’s content. It’s profitable alcoholism. You’d be enabling me. Win win for you, am I right?”

The bouncer wrinkled his nose, and grunted, before holding out his hand. “I’m going to need to see some ID.”

Bill fished his hand into Stanford’s coat pocket, patting himself down. Whistling as he searched for Ford’s wallet, Bill shook out all the pockets of Ford’s trench coat, sending glass vials and various scientific miscellany scattering down on the pavement below.

Ford groaned, and threw his will into his right arm, flinging it out, before reaching around into his back pocket and grabbing his wallet.

“HAHAHAHAH! Well what do you know? My ID is riiiiight –” Instead of pulling out Ford’s ID Bill removed a fifty dollar bill from Ford’s wallet, and held it out for the bouncer. “Here!”

The bouncer paused, and blinked at Ford for a moment, before he leaned in, lowering his voice. “Are you trying to bribe me?”

Bill grinned at the bouncer. “Is it working?”

The bouncer paused, squinting at Bill, before he snatched the fifty bucks up, and stepped to the side.

“Enjoy your evening, weirdo.”

Bill walked past the bouncer, into the bar with a spring in his step and Stanford continued to mentally complain.

*My ID was right there. You didn’t have to bribe him, you just cost us both fifty dollars.*

*You can’t put a price on a good time Sixer. Words of wisdom for you.*

Bill hopped up onto a stool at the end of the bar, and swung his legs, waiting for the bartender.
Inwardly Ford was struggling.

He wasn’t having a good time anymore, his body was complaining, and so was he, loud inside his skull.

The alcohol made him sleepy, had his liver working overtime, and helped nurture his brewing headache. That coupled with the embarrassment and constant mental fighting with Bill had Ford’s eye throbbing something fierce, pain and exhaustion augmenting the evening, breaking Ford down.

He was miserable. He was embarrassed and tired. He didn’t want to be here anymore, he wanted to be at home, sleeping off this horrible intoxication. His eye was bloodshot, he was sure of it, and his eyes felt dry and painful. Bill didn’t blink often enough, his unnerving stare causing Ford’s eyes to water, tearing up at the edges.

He was moaning inside his head, beseeching Bill to go home, that he wasn’t feeling well, that he was tired of this, loudly complaining about each of his bodily aches and pains, but Bill didn’t seem to want to listen to Ford, or his body. He didn’t have time for Ford’s earthly complaints.

Bill drummed his fingers against the counter and looked down along the bar. He waved to the bartender, and the bartender nodded, acknowledging him, and finished serving the drink to his current customer.

Ford’s lower lip jutted out as Bill resigned himself to waiting for service. He took the time to casually survey the bar, rather than listen to Ford’s mental whinging.

It was 2am, and the bar patrons were sparse at this hour. The Skull Fracture wasn’t the most thumping watering hole, but it had its regulars. Lonely lumberjacks and lamenting middle aged men mostly. Bill wondered what that made Ford and snorted a laugh.

The bartender was currently patting one of his patrons on the shoulder, sliding a glass of water across the table. Bill tried to listen in to their conversation.

“You’ll be okay mate. I’ve called her, she’s coming to pick you up.”

“No.” The drunk man moaned. “Don’t make her look after me, I know she don’t want to.”

“You’ve got to go home to her sometime.”

“She don’t want to be with me.” The man moaned, and Bill realised, with his red hair and beard, that the man looked familiar. “Nothin’s been the same, not since - I don’t know why she stays, everything’s –“

“Shh. It’s alright mate, it’s alright.” The bartender patted the lumberjack awkwardly on the shoulder as he burst into tears, crying into his hands helplessly.

“Yeesh.” Bill raised Ford’s eyebrows, unimpressed, before he picked up one of the coasters, rolling it between his hands. “Not much of a party hotspot, eh Sixer?”

Bill, come on, please. I feel sick. I want to go home.

“Huh. Party of one, maybe.” Bill rolled Ford’s eyes, and started scratching Ford’s chin, stubble growing back in once more, irritating Bill. “Can you stop growing this stuff?”

I can’t exactly control whether my hair grows. It’s a bodily process.
“It’s a bodily process.” Bill mocked in a high-pitched tone. “Get a hold of yourself. What’s the point of having a physical form if you can’t control how it works. That’s what your nervous system is for.”

*I can’t think myself out of growing body hair.* Ford griped.

*Says you.* Bill snarked back and then clenched Ford’s fist, willing back Ford’s facial hair. He poured every ounce of effort he had into it, Ford’s body tensing up, holding his breath. Rather than reversing the growth of Ford’s facial hair, Bill just managed to make Ford look utterly constipated.

When Bill realised it wasn’t working, he released Ford’s body from his will, and Ford gasped, catching his breath, finally back in control for a moment.

Ford rubbed his chest, feeling his heart racing painfully, deprived of oxygen. His eyes were throbbing, as was a particularly prominent vein in his forehead, and his face was red and blotchy. He wheezed in each breath, feeling his head spin dangerously.

The bartender chose this moment to approach Ford, looking him up and down.

“A water for you mate?”

Ford cleared his throat and tried to search for a plausible excuse.

“Choked. On a peanut. I’m fine.”

“Fair enough.” The bartender pulled three bottles, whisky, tequila and vodka up onto the counter, readying himself, and the scent of the alcohol turned Ford’s stomach. “What can I get for you?”

Ford could feel the bile creeping up his throat, that abrasive distilled scent making him feel sicker, and he struggled to swallow it back down, before clearing his throat again.

“Just water’s fine.”

*Oh boo!* Bill jeered in the back of Ford’s head. *You’re no fun.*

*I’m dehydrated.* Ford pointed out and pinched the skin on the back of his hand, noting how slowly the flesh sunk back down, clear evidence of dehydration.

The bartender slid a glass of water across the counter for Ford, and he accepted it graciously, sipping it down.

His mouth tasted disgusting, and the water helped, washing his mouth somewhat clean.

As Ford savoured the water, still feeling all the rich food from earlier rebelling in his stomach, the door to the bar opened.

Willow Oakwood walked in, her bright red hair tied back hastily, wearing what looked like her pyjamas, already making a beeline for Dan, who was crying at the bar again, depression hitting him hard.

Looking around, she noticed Ford at the end of the bar, and stopped in her tracks.

Dan hadn’t seen her yet, still crying into his hands, so she changed direction, and walked over to Ford, reaching out to put her hand on his shoulder.

“Hey, Stanford. How’ve you been?” Willow asked in a soft tired voice.
Bill’s presence instantly spiked in Ford’s brain, becoming jagged and dangerous.

Red.

Ford drunkenly panicked, remembering how justified Bill had felt about planning to murder Willow in all manner of twisted ways. Ford had been able to brush it off as an exaggerated emotion in the mindscape, knowing nothing could come of Bill’s swinging moods.

He thought he’d rendered Bill harmless, letting him reside in his body, cutting him off from his magic this way, but now with Bill snarling inside of his head, imagining all the brutal things he could do to Willow in Ford’s body, he realised just how wrong he was.

Bill was already seething with rage, his presence bubbling out, filling Ford’s limbs, chilling his blood with pure vindictive hatred.

Ford was frightened, he didn’t want to put Willow in harms way, but the angrier Bill became, the less in control of his body Ford was. He felt dizzy and helpless, his thoughts foggy, alcohol impairing his willpower, and he struggled against Bill’s control, to little success, feeling penned back in his own head once more, watching his limbs betray him.

“I’m sorry I haven’t, you know, checked in on you since – I’ve had a lot to... well - handle, looking after Suzie and Dan. They’re not – doing so good.” Willow confessed, her words hesitant and sad. “But my leg is doing much better, thanks to you. That’s one less thing to worry about. One less catastrophic problem.”

Ford barely reacted to her words, holding his shoulders unnaturally tense.

Willow worried she’d upset the scientist, having left him to his own devices for weeks. She knew leaving him alone after essentially banishing his boyfriend wasn’t the smartest thing, that he probably shouldn’t have been isolated after that, but she had her hands full, dealing with Suzie’s recovery and Dan’s melancholy, not to mention her own nightmares. There was a reason she was up at 2am, a reason she couldn’t sleep.

Still, judging from the way Stanford wouldn’t even look at her, she figured he thought she’d done wrong by him, although she didn’t think Ford would take her abandonment so personally. He always seemed resilient enough.

Willow fumbled through an apology regardless.

“But yeah, I’m sorry I haven’t checked up on you. Life’s been pretty hectic.” She explained, before rubbing Ford’s shoulder consolingly. “How about you? Are you doing okay? How have you been holding up?”

Stanford slowly turned around to face her, his movements jerky and deliberate. It must have been the lighting in the bar glinting off Ford’s glasses perhaps, or even Willow’s tiredness distorting her vision, but she could have sworn Ford’s eyes flashed yellow for a moment there.

The scientist tipped his chin up, and looked down his nose at Willow, his mouth twisting into a bitter smirk, an expression unlike any Willow had ever seen Ford make before.

“Oh, don’t you worry, Red.” Stanford said, his voice unusually high and smug. The light flashed across his glasses, and as he faced her, the yellow of his eyes didn’t fade, instead glowing brighter.

Willow gasped, her eyes widened, horror and realisation dawning.
“He’s been doing just fine.”

“No, you – no.” Willow snatched her hand off Ford’s shoulder and stepped back, recognising those yellow slitted eyes, the nickname, the cadence of Ford’s voice that felt both familiar and out of place.

“You thought you got rid of me, didn’t you?” Ford tilted his head at Willow, like a hunting animal, and she felt a shiver of pure survival instinct race down her spine.

She felt fear.

“How sweet. Stupid though. Don’t you know I’m always watching? I’m everywhere.”

“No, you can’t – we banished you- you’re supposed to be —” Willow’s lip curled in revulsion, before steely determination took over. She lurched forward, grabbing Ford’s shoulders, shaking him. “Get out of him, you – you horrible demon!”

Bill gripped Willow’s hand swiftly, using Ford’s strength to his advantage, and twisted Willow’s hand back until it hurt, the redhead crying out.

Ford was throwing himself against the corners of his mind now, senseless and frantic, unwilling to sit back and let Bill hurt someone in his body.

“I’m not going anywhere.” Bill’s hand spasmed, as Ford managed to override Bill’s control for a moment, long enough to let Willow snatch her hand back, stepping back cautiously.

Bill shook off the spasm, pushing Ford back into his own head brusquely, and stood up from the bar stool.

Willow patted down her pyjama pockets, instinctively looking for something to protect herself with, finding nothing but soft flannel.

“Looking for the gun?” Bill questioned. “Want to shoot me again? Sounds fun, but Sixer might have a few concerns if you aerate his body. Swiss cheese isn’t a good look for anyone, you monster.”

“Is he still in there?” Willow asked, horrified, staring at Stanford’s chest like the kind caring scientist could burst out at any moment.

“He invited me in.” Bill boasted, enjoying the way Willow took offence to the thought. “He begged for me to come back. He could barely live without me.”

Ford staunchly denied the begging, offended. Bill ignored him, and kept taunting Willow, using Ford’s height to his advantage to loom over her.

“Sixer’s mine, you see. From now until the end of time. And it’s going to take a lot more than the likes of you to stop me from getting what I want.”


“Hmm.” Bill pursed Ford’s lips together and tilted his head, tapping on Ford’s chin with his finger. “You know what I want right now, Red?”
“What?” She took a step back as Bill continued forward.

Something about the way he was looking at her, twisting Stanford’s earnest face into something venomous and predatory, had her on edge.

She never considered herself prey, believing falsely that she could take care of herself. The way Bill looked at her though, it made her want to run.

“What?” Bill grinned.

So, Willow ran.

She turned on her heel, and raced over to Dan, grabbing him by the shoulder and dragging him out of the bar, pulling at him frantically. She didn’t wait for him to finish his drink, didn’t wait for him to stop crying, she just yanked him to his feet and did her best to manoeuvre him over to the exit.

Looking over her shoulder she could see Ford move to follow, his limbs moving slowly, spasming all the while.

Inside, Ford was fighting.

No, Bill! Don’t! Don’t do this. I won’t allow it.

I don’t care. She shot me, she disrespected me, and she deserves everything that’s coming to her. Bill gritted his teeth and tried to quash Ford’s will back down.

I didn’t let you share my body so you could do this. Bill, don’t! I don’t want –

It’s not about what you want Sixer. Bill pushed Ford further back, and fell into a brisk stride, walking out of the door to the bar. It’s about revenge.

The door opened, and Bill could see Willow putting Dan in the passenger seat of her car, strapping his seatbelt on. She looked up as the bar door opened, seeing Bill glaring at her from out of Stanford’s eyes, and slammed the car door shut, running around to the driver’s side.

You can’t just trap me in here while you hurt her! You can’t make me. This is my body Bill, you can’t -

Don’t tell me what to do. Bill replied, his voice cold and steely.

Watching Willow climb into the car, Bill forced Ford’s legs into motion, striding over to Ford’s car, parked awkwardly on the curb, and slid into the driver’s seat, turning on the ignition.

Ford threw every inch of his willpower into fighting back against Bill, regaining control of his body, but it felt a lot like trying to force back his facial hair. Impossible, a painful exercise in futility.

The more Ford fought from inside his head the more his body protested, adrenaline leaking through him, his heart fighting a losing battle, pumping away, sweat pouring out of his armpits. His stomach flipped and roiled, and his eyes ached, feeling scratchy and raw, blood vessels bursting in the back of his eye.

The car jumped down from the curb, and backed up, Bill expertly steering the wheel.

As Willow drove away, Bill swung the car around in a wide circle, turning around to follow her,
driving recklessly. The sound of tires squealing on the asphalt screeched in the silent night sky, and Willow, knowing she was being followed, drove faster.

_Stop, stop, stop, stop, stop!_ Ford panicked, his heart pounding.

Even blinking blood from his eye, Bill was relentless, intent on following Willow, on taking her down. He turned the headlights on, blindingly bright, and followed Willow down the road, through the forest, towards her house, hunched over the wheel, gunning down on the gas.

**Eradicating that hideous recessive gene, one ginger at a time.** Bill thought gleefully, accelerating. _A two for one deal._

_Bill, stop!_ Ford screamed inside his head.

_It's just like bumper cars! Come on Sixer, look at it like a game._ Bill shifted gear, and continued to race down the road, Willow speeding up ahead of him, trying to outrun him. _Don’t be such a buzzkill._

_I’m not going to let you kill someone. Bill, stop! This isn’t a game, this is serious._

“Can’t you just be quiet again?” Bill tsked, and wiped his eye, trying to stay focused on the road. “Stop fighting me Sixer, you’re wearing your body out. Just take a nap and let me deal with this.”

_No. Ford flung his presence further forward into his mind wildly, stubbornly fighting through the pain._

“If you keep straining yourself like this, your body’s going to shut itself down. Stop fighting me, Sixer, just let me do what I want.” Bill snarled, blinking away the blood, both hands on the wheel. He glanced the rear bumper of Willow’s car, pressing his foot on the pedal hard, jolting her forward.

He really was trying to kill her.

Ford narrowed his eyes and took a deep breath, holding it defiantly.

_Over my dead body._

Bill attempted to quash Ford’s rebellion, but the scientist was stubborn, depriving them both of oxygen, reckless and resolute.

Drunk logic told Ford that Bill couldn’t kill Willow if he couldn’t breathe, but he failed to factor in that this plan might end up killing someone anyway, himself.

Bill felt Ford’s limbs weaken, his vision dipping in and out, and his grip on the wheel faltered.

Sixer’s body was shutting down, deprived of oxygen, reaching its limit, and every cosmic instinct Bill had was screaming at him to bail before he went down with the ship.

**Don’t do this Sixer. You could die. Stop! You don’t want to do this!**

_Don’t tell me what to do._ Ford responded stubbornly, as his eyes slid shut, his body slumping forward against the wheel.

For an instant, he passed out.
The car zig-zagged, before veering off the road, and Ford could feel Bill’s presence physically rip from his mind, abandoning him, jettisoning back into the mindscape, leaving him to his self-imposed death at the wheel.

And suddenly he was alone in his head again, his body his own once more. He opened his eyes blearily and saw his car on a one way track to slamming into a redwood, wrapping around a tree, killing him.


Ford slammed down on the breaks at the last minute, slowing his approach, wheels skidding on the asphalt.

He hit the tree.

The front of Ford’s car crumpled, dented but thankfully not crushed. The airbag sprung free, cushioning Ford’s impact.

He turned his head to the side, winded and sore, and saw Willow driving away, not stopping or looking back, escaping Bill, escaping Ford.

Ford rested his head against the airbag and sighed, relieved that he managed to stop Bill from killing Willow and Dan.

Ejecting Bill from his head felt like an impossible feat, but it had happened. Ford just had to push past the limits of what his body could endure, running himself down so thoroughly that his body couldn’t support Bill’s cosmic energy.

Ford felt the consequences of his bodily deterioration catch up with him, and the alcohol, food, and bile that had crept up his throat throughout the car chase evicted itself violently.

Ford flung the car door open and puked vehemently all over the forest floor.

When he finally stopped vomiting, gasping for air, saliva dripping from his mouth, he pulled himself out of the car, slipping through the puddle of vomit as he tried to get away from the car.

Smoke was wafting out from under the bonnet, and that was not a good sign.

Backing up a respectable distance, Ford collapsed onto the grass, and watched his car warily, worried the fuel tank would catch fire.

The car certainly wasn’t travel worthy anymore, the bonnet dented upwards, the front grill curved around the resolute redwood.

Ford wiped his mouth on the back of his trench coat sleeve, and took off his glasses, wiping the blood away from under his eye.

“I can’t keep doing this.” Ford muttered, deliriously worn out. “I can’t –“

Panting, looking over the wreckage of the crash, Ford looked up to the sky, the moon peeking down from between the treetops, and he came to a realisation that was long overdue.

“Bill is evil. He’s just plain evil.”

He said it. Everything he’d been trying to deny, to sweep under the rug, or justify, was laid bare in
that declaration. It was the truth, and that truth mattered more than whatever fond feelings Ford had for the muse. He couldn’t justify lying about this anymore, not to himself, not to the world.

Bill had tried to kill Willow and Dan. He’d tried to run them off the road. He forced Ford out of his body so he could enact his own twisted justice for what had happened the day he was banished. Bill was content to kill Dan too, someone who hadn’t wronged him, who just happened to be in the way, if it meant he could get to Willow, and make her pay for what she did to him.

Bill was evil.

And Ford was the idiot who fell in love with him.

“What have I done?”

As Ford settled into his aches and pains, staring up at the stars above, noticing Bill’s absence like it was a gaping hole in his head, he remembered that he was the one who let Bill into his mind. He gave Bill his body, they shook on it.

Love made him reckless, made him a fool. Who else, but a fool, would surrender so much of themselves for someone else, no matter how good they might make you feel? What kind of idiot would do that?

Ford had let this happen. He’d let Bill into his mind, and tonight Bill had almost killed someone. It took Ford literally threatening to die to keep Bill from murdering Willow Oakwood in cold blood.

It was terrifying to think of what could have happened. Almost as terrifying as what did happen.

Ford could barely control Bill when he inhabited his body, the alcohol dimming his willpower, making him slow to rise up against Bill.

Ford had surrendered his body over to Bill, he shook his hand, he sealed the deal. What if this happened again, what if Bill acted out, hurt someone in Ford’s body. What if next time Ford couldn’t stop him?

Ford wouldn’t be able to live with himself.

Laying back onto the forest floor, exhausted and spent, Ford looked up at the moon, seeking answers.

“What do I do?”

Lost for answers, his emotions loosened by the alcohol, he realised he was utterly alone again, and in that instant, he actually missed Bill’s voice in his head, telling him what to do, making him laugh.

He missed Bill already. What a joke.

Ford hiccupped a laugh, flopping his arms back to lay on the grass, and just like when he first let Bill into his mind, his laughter wavered, becoming hysterical.

How could he miss a murderer? How could he miss this evil thing? How could he care about Bill, after everything that had happened?

He was such a fool to love a monster.

Tears dripped down Ford’s cheeks, and his laughter turned into sobs, unheard and abandoned, just
like he was, once again.

“What do I do without you?”

Chapter End Notes

Body sharing was so fun to write hahaha. I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. What a disastrous date. Honestly only Bill could go on a nice dinner date and end up blackmailing two people and committing attempted murder on two other people after six cocktails and a bottle of champagne. Ford's liver must hate him.

I'd like to thank my lovely beta reader friend, who helped me with this chapter's editing.
I'd also like to dedicate this chapter to the lovely tainted-petals and their spouse coffee_and_cogs, the review left was incredibly nice and the fact that you said you could hear the characters made my day.
Also, everyone should go look at the beautiful artwork I recently commissioned from haruhi-akira! They drew two scenes from the expedition chapter and I am in love with these artworks, go look! They're amazing!


Next chapter we have the Society of the Blind Eye scheming, Ford's paranoia worsening, trouble at the Quadrangle, and after that, we're taking a trip to New Mexico.

Thanks for reading so far, commenting, and sticking around. You're all the best readers anyone could ask for.
A meeting was convened at the Gravity Falls Museum of Natural History. Candles were lit, robes were donned, and Ralph the security guard helpfully looked the other way as Gravity Falls’ own secret society filtered through to the hidden antechamber behind the room that housed the eye exhibit.

It was difficult to perceive individual members from underneath their red hooded robes, but there were pool attendants and postmen, accountants and archivists, people from all walks of life, levelled by the anonymity that donning the red robes provided.

Here everyone was equal. Everyone’s identity shielded. Every compromising detail was hidden.

They were all unseen.

Despite his youth, the robes lent a certain sense of command to Ivan Wexler, and he felt empowered through his expertise and passion to stand in front of this group of initiated fellows and lead them.

“I’ve called you all here for an important purpose, fellow Society members.” Ivan declared, standing up at the central podium, and just like that, he held the attention of the entire room.

It was a rush, to hold this much power, to talk and be listened to. Cowering, cowardly Ivan Wexler the carny didn’t feel like his former self at all in this cohort. He felt like a leader, and given their previous leader, Mr McGucket’s current condition, for all intents and purposes, he was their leader now.

“There has been an incident.” Ivan stated, feeling many eyes upon him. “Our beloved founder has fallen afoul of his own device. The memory ray that has protected so many of us was turned against him by treachery, and it is up to us to investigate and get to the bottom of this.”

“Someone turned his ray against him?” One of the hooded voices called out.

“Was it a member?”

“I know I didn’t do it.”

Whispers broke out among the gathered group, paranoia, denial and fear running rampant.

For a group who controlled the erasure of memories of the townsfolk, the thought that someone else could go around erasing memories willy nilly was a frightening prospect. The Society felt that their control of the memories of the town was being threatened, whoever had wielded this weapon had challenged their authority, and injured their beloved leader in the process.

“Please, please.” Ivan held his hands out, trying to silence the simmering chatter. “This is not an inquisition. I do not believe it was one of our own who did this.”

“Then someone else has access to our memory ray?”

“Did someone else get in here?”
“Who?”

“I do not believe it was our memory ray that was used, as it was still in the sacred box when I came to check, and no alarms had been tripped.” Ivan explained, raising his voice over the crowd. "I believe that our founder’s prototype was turned against him, though I do not yet have all the evidence to prove who did it.”

“Do you have a suspect?”

“Potentially.” Ivan paused, and looked around the room. Being an out of towner he didn’t have the wealth of local knowledge the others did, so now was the perfect time to probe their small-town minds for information. “What do you know about Stanford Pines?”

“The scientist who lives out in the woods?” One member questioned.

“We don’t know much about him.” Another member extrapolated. “Seems polite enough. Rich too. Got a mysterious donation from him, right after my barn roof fell in. Got ol’ Red patched up good as new thanks to that.”

“He’s been through the shop a few times. Keeps to himself mostly.” Another hooded member spoke up. “The missus reckons he don’t think much of us though, bein’ he never stays for the gossip.”

“I saw him the other night.” A tall hooded man replied, raising his chin. “Came by the bar, drunk as a skunk. Couldn’t find his ID so he tried to bribe me on the way in. Parked all the way up the curb.”

“He tried to bribe you?” Ivan clarified, surprised.

“He was fixin’ for trouble, that one, I can tell you.” The hooded man continued. “Had them crazy eyes. I was finishin’ my shift around the time he left the bar. Left in a hurry too. Seemed like he was chasin’ Boyish Dan and his gal, almost.”

“My girl’s always callin’ him her Mr Mystery, but he don’t seem like nothin’ but trouble. Ever since she stopped by his house, she ain’t been the same. I’d stay far away from him.” Another member said, crossing their arms in a disapproving fashion.

“Is he your suspect?” A member in the corner pried.

“He is.” Ivan divulged. “He’s about the only thing our founder recalled, when I pressed him for details. ‘That brown haired man’. And I remember him urging secrecy regarding our society, secrecy from Stanford Pines specifically. So far, he’s the most likely suspect. Him and his yellow haired friend.”

“Who?” One of the members squawked.

“I ain’t never seen him with anyone else round town. Keeps to himself, real secretive like.”

“Didn’t he have that foreign fella with him for a while there.”

“Haven’t seen him in months though. If he was here, he’s long gone now.”

“Hrmm.” Ivan rubbed his chin. “So, it looks like we’ve just the one suspect to investigate.”

“What shall we do?” The society members looked to Ivan for direction, and he felt a swell of pride,
envisioning how proud Mr McGucket would be if he could remember who Ivan was.

He saw the genius inventor as somewhat of a father figure, and even though Mr McGucket was highly distrustful of him now, and almost scared of him, Ivan still liked to believe that he would have been proud of how Ivan had flourished through the society.

It was for Mr McGucket that he called them all together.

“We investigate.” Ivan stated. “I want all of you to watch him, whenever you can. Follow him if you have to. He’s hiding something, I think he knows what happened to our founder, and if he knows, he could be involved.”

The society members all nodded solemnly, looking to Ivan for further instruction.

“Be careful.” Ivan cautioned them. “From what we’ve heard, he might be dangerous. He might even still have the prototype. Follow him, but whatever you do, don’t let him see you. For your own safety.”

Ivan loomed over the podium, the candlelight dancing on his chin, casting shadows in the hollows of his eyes.

“You must be unseen.”

When Bill returned to the mindscape, wrenched from his vessel once again, it was disorienting.

He floated out in the gardens outside of the Quadrangle and noticed strings of LED lights decorating the path to the main hall. Bill generally didn’t decorate with fairy lights, he preferred decorating with trapped stars, noxious gases or cosmic anomalies. This seemed all too benign, too domestic. Too Better Homes and Strongholds.

Too Kryptos.

Sounds of laughter and conversation drifted down from the hall, and Bill, floating alone in the empty garden, realised with a belated sort of shock that someone was having a party in his shifting escherscape of a home.

And they didn’t invite him.

The nerve.

Bill scaled the stairs leading to the hall, and edged in through the door, scouring the packed room with his eye.

The hall was bedecked in the most lavish way possible, every brick polished to shine. Clearly whoever set up this shindig was intending to impress.

Who the hall was supposed to be impressing became clear when Bill spotted his investors, sipping on snifters of brandy and flutes of champagne, toasting and laughing amongst one another.
Bill stayed by the door, not willing to throw himself in the middle of that pit of vultures.

The last he heard, the investors were all attempting to pull out, to renege on their contractual obligations in the face of Bill’s failure.

Now they were all drinking wine in his house, smiles all round.

His henchmaniacs were there, Teeth, Pacifire and Xanthar standing by the bar, nursing drinks. Keyhole and Amorphous Shape were hanging by the bookshelves, talking together, and in the middle of a gaggle of Bill’s biggest dollar investors stood Kryptos and Pyronica.

Kryptos, the little wretch, was supposed to be the one hovering around with a clipboard or drinks tray at one of these functions, serving a purpose, not rubbing elbows with Bill’s most prominent business partners.

Yet here he was, holding a glass of Bill’s vintage spectral champagne from his off limits private reserve, wearing a bowtie, looking smug, toasting his dimensional supplier. He looked like he was in his element, schmoozing with the best of them, telling jokes even that had the suppliers peal off into a polite burst of laughter. With the bowtie and the self-confidence, and the overwhelmingly smug attitude, it appeared Kryptos was modelling himself after Bill.

Taking his place, running his house, hosting his party.

Pyronica looked utterly bored beside Kryptos, shooting venomous looks at the investors who looked a little too uppity by her standards, keeping the vultures in line, but it was clear from the set of her mouth that she despised being there.

Looking around the hall, she noticed Bill first, her eye widening when she spotted him by the door. Rather than making a beeline for him as she usually did, she paused to elbow Kryptos, pointing at Bill.

Bill narrowed his eye.

Kryptos looked right at Bill, staring back, and gulped nervously, glancing up at Pyronica, before turning back to the investors, looking the other way.

He was ignoring Bill.

Nonplussed by Bill’s return, he went right back to chatting up old Deep Pockets, like he had every right to be doing this. Like this was his party, his Quadrangle, his dimension.

He was banking on the fact that Bill didn’t want to face his investors, hiding behind them, thinking Bill wouldn’t bite back in front of all these people.

Boy, was he in for a surprise.

Floating through the crowd of benefactors, feigning pleasantries with the peons who stopped to greet him, Bill headed towards Kryptos, wedging his way through the crowd until he was a foot away from the treacherous compass, getting ready to grab him, to incinerate him.

Kryptos looked mildly panicked by Bill’s approach. He looked two seconds away from turning tail and running, like a startled deer.

It seemed to be an evening for surprises, because rather than running, the cowardly reaction Bill
expected from Kryptos, the compass raised a fork to his glass, chiming the tines against the champagne flute, and raised his voice.

“A toast everyone. A toast! T-to the geometric genius of the hour, without whom none of this would be p-possible.” Kryptos could no doubt see the fire in Bill’s eye, but now with every eye focused on them, Bill had to delay his punishment, pasting a cheerful look on his face.

“Bill Cipher, everyone.” Kryptos flung his arm out, gesturing to Bill. Adding to the surprise of the evening, Bill’s gathered investors, rather than pouncing on the triangle, tearing him a new one for failing to deliver, all joined in a round of polite, congratulatory applause.

Bill blinked, uncertain what they were applauding him for, and halted his approach, betting this uneasy applause had something to do with Kryptos’ scheming.

With nothing left to do but roll with it, so as not to lose face, Bill held his hand up, waving. “Thank you, thank you. I hope you’re all enjoying the party.”

Bill floated forward and threw his arm around Kryptos’ shoulder, continuing to wave at the crowds while Kryptos did the same. Bill tugged Kryptos closer congenially, and he could feel the compass sweating, as Bill’s hand burned hot on his shoulder, Kryptos struggling to hide his wince.

“You don’t mind if I borrow him, do you?” Bill said to the group of investors, giving Kryptos shoulder another pointed squeeze.

“Oh, no, I couldn’t – Mr Pockets was just saying -“ Kryptos started, but Bill cut him off, his tone all the more threatening for it’s friendly cadence.

“Mr Pockets can wait. This will only take a minute. Come on Kryptos, let’s chat.”

Dragging the nervous compass away from the crowd, Bill tried to lead Kryptos into his private study, behind closed doors, but Kryptos stopped at the edge of the hall, deliberately remaining in sight of the crowds.

“What would you like to talk about Bill – I - I mean Boss?” Kryptos stuttered.

“What is this?” Bill asked, still with that smiling tone.

“T-this? I, well, it’s –“ Kryptos started, but was cut off again as Bill hissed at him, his polite tone disappearing in an instant.

“What is this?”

“I – you told me to handle things while you were gone, and I was handling things for you, so I figured I’d –“

“You’d what? Bring all my investors to my house behind my back? Sabotage me? Work against me? What?” Bill had to struggle to keep his voice down, unwilling to show weakness in front of such a big crowd, still spitting fury. “What have you been telling them Kryptos, why are they applauding? What the shpx is going on?”

Pyronica was making her way through the crowd now, coming over to join them in the corner, as Kryptos stammered his way through his explanations.

“They’re applauding because they’re on side with us again. I – I told them that everything was back on track with the portal. That we’re on schedule again. Ahead of schedule even. That we’re
almost ready to move on Earth. They’re celebrating.”

“You WHAT?” Bill’s eye bugged out, inwardly screaming his panic. It built like the shriek of a kettle as Kryptos’ words set in.

“I just told you what.” Kryptos blinked at Bill like he was stupid. “You left me to take care of your business, so I made a business decision on your behalf. I told them we’re on track with the takeover, and they’ll have delivery soon.”

“Why would you tell them that?” Bill wheezed, his eye darting over to the crowd of investors, panic threatening to overwhelm him.

He wasn’t ready to move on Earth, he was so far from ready. He hadn’t even been thinking about actually following through with this, not while he’d been so preoccupied with winning back Sixer, and now he wasn’t even sure if he managed to do that, given how much Ford had been yelling at him when they parted ways.

He’d been avoiding his investors, specifically because he knew his hold on Earth wasn’t a sure thing and pushing through now would involve some incredibly underhanded tactics that Bill was hoping he could do without here.

He wanted to slowly build Sixer’s trust back, wanting the scientist to see things his way, coaxing him over to Bill’s side so they could present a united front when the portal opened. He wanted Sixer to give into him and appreciate him like he used to. He wanted that connection back.

He couldn’t just go blasting through now, especially not now.

He just made a promise with Sixer (technically not a deal, but he did shake on it) that if he so much as went near the portal, let alone turned it on, he’d lose his favourite human - forever.

Not that Sixer had any conceptualisation of what forever truly meant, but the thought was still deplorable to Bill, given how swiftly and irrevocably he’d found himself developing an attachment to the scientist.

Bill didn’t want to lose him. Hadn’t he lost enough already?

Bill firmly believed that the universe, cruel and spiteful force that it was, stacked the odds against Bill having and keeping nice things, which is why when fate and happenstance led a nice thing straying down his path, he wrapped his wiry little hands around said thing and vowed to never let it go.

That was just in Bill’s nature. He didn’t have many things that were ‘his’ but when he owned something, the universe could pry that thing out of his cold dead hands.

However, going back on his promise with Sixer was too much like tempting fate, lending fodder to the universe so it could gleefully snatch the one person who made Bill feel adored from his field of view.

He didn’t want to risk it, and he was close to hyperventilating, inwardly shrieking in a mad panic at the thought of losing Sixer’s steadfast regard.

And now Kryptos had told his investors that moving on Earth was a sure thing?

Bill felt backed into a corner, he felt robbed of his choices, robbed of control over his own takeover, and it made him absolutely livid.
And that was before Kryptos opened his goddamn mouth.

“I told them we were ready, because it’s time for you to get over your fixation with that human and start fulfilling your end of the deal.” Kryptos, cowardly, snivelling Kryptos, looked Bill straight in the eye and continued. “You’ve spent months mooning over this Sixer, drinking yourself into a stupor when he rejected you and springing right back to his side when he called. You’re Bill Cipher. All knowing, all seeing. You’re the strongest being throughout the galaxy, feared, known, revered, and he made you weak. He’s deceived you time and time again, pulling the wool over your eye, and he’s just a human. He shouldn’t be able to do this to you. You’re lucky you have me taking care of things for you with your investors, because if word of how you’ve been acting – like some addled fool – over a human – if that gets out, there wouldn’t be a single person in this hall tonight. Not even your crew.”

Bill gaped at Kryptos, dumbstruck by the absolute gall this compass had, not just to say all of this, but to say it to Bill’s face.

So Kryptos thought he was weak, did he?

Bill’s temper rose from a simmer to a boil, and fire danced in his eyes as his hand raised, intending to slap the smug right out of Kryptos’ snaggle toothed smirk.

His vindicating bitch slap was halted by a pink clawed hand, grabbing his thin black arm and forcing it down.

“Bill.”

Pyronica stood in front of Bill and Kryptos, shielding them from view from the hall with her cloak, and looked at Bill with her sympathetic, knowing eye, before saying the words that Bill never thought he’d hear.

“I agree with Kryptos.”

Bill heard the screeching in his head skid like tyres on the road as his mind hit the brakes, and his worldview shattered in an instant.

*Pyronica agreed with Kryptos?*

He looked up at Pyronica, horrified that this was some sick twisted alternate universe he’d journeyed to by mistake, or the start of the end of her loyalty to him, usurped by a rhombus. Perish the thought. Rejected by his own best friend in favour of the logic Bill didn’t want to listen to, mostly due to its abhorrent blue source.

“I know, I didn’t like saying it as much as you hated hearing it. I need to wash my mouth out for a few millennia. Blurgh.” Pyronica shuddered dramatically, attempting a small humoured smile for Bill, before her lips turned down at the edges, lapsing into seriousness once again. “But it’s true. He’s right.”

Bill was shell-shocked, feeling distant in his own mind, just staring at Pyronica in disbelief as she continued talking.

“As much as Sixer makes you happy, you’ve become too fixated on him. You’ve been making him your priority, and I’m sorry we’ve forced your hand here, but Bill. I thought we were your priority. What happened to finding us a home? It’s like you just forgot about us, so you could go off chasing your human. We’re still here, and things aren’t getting better.”
“I didn’t forget about you.” Bill said, quietly, his rage sobered by Pyronica’s sincerity.

“Then act like it. Follow through now, while we have all this support. Now is better than later when we have nothing.” Pyronica gestured to the compass beside her. “Kryptos had to bow and scrape and do every undignified thing you can think of to bring our investors back on side. If we want to use this takeover as a springboard we need to approach it from a position of power. With backing, Bill, you can’t keep delaying this so you can play house with your human.”

Bill gave Py an offended look, reluctant to admit that his indulgences amounted to exactly that. Playing house.

He thought he was playing the odds, keeping Sixer on side, unwilling to acknowledge how selfishly simple his actions truly were at the root. Wanting to enjoy his time with Sixer the way he once had was addictive, and fun for Bill, but he thought it was a little more important than playing house with the human, though clearly that was how his henchmaniacs saw it.

How embarrassing.

“Don’t give me that look. When we takeover you can do whatever you’d like with him and the rest of his species.” Pyronica explained matter of factly, crossing her arms. “You can have ten humans instead of one, millions of humans. Like you promised.”

“Humans are hopeless. I only want the one.” Bill grumbled, sounding indignant at the notion of replacing his beloved Sixer with another irrelevent human.

That was like replacing your pet with a different one, expecting it to be the same. That barely worked with goldfish, and it wouldn’t work with Sixer. No human was as unique as him, as uniquely fascinating. The rest of them were all mostly intolerable.

It wouldn’t be the same. Sixer was Bill’s. He belonged to Bill, he wasn’t replaceable.

“Fine, then you can play house with Sixer for as long as you want, once we bust into his dimension. You’ve got to open the door.” Pyronica frowned down at Bill. “I don’t understand why you’re holding back on this. We’re ready.”

“I’ve been working so hard to get him back on side. He won’t trust me if I do this.” Bill insisted, voicing his main concern. “He won’t want to be on our side if I force through.”

“Oh, boo-hoo. So his feelings get hurt.” Pyronica scoffed and exchanged a scornful look with Kryptos. “He’ll get over it after a few decades.”

“He’s just a human.” Kryptos shrugged, agreeing with the pink cyclops. “They’re not that complex. Give it thirty years and he’ll forget it was ever an issue. They’ve got short term memories. I think they call it Dementia.”

“I think they call it ‘you’re still not off the hook yet’ Kryptos.” Bill sniped back at the compass. “Going behind my back, cracking open the good booze, forcing my hand. Don’t think I didn’t notice your disrespect. You are skating on thin ice.”

“He did what I told him to.” Pyronica said, defending Kryptos.

“Who gave you the authority to order him about?” Bill blustered, shocked that she would censure his attempt to dress Kryptos down for his insubordination.

“You did.” Pyronica put her hands on her hips, unimpressed. “Figures you’d be too drunk to
“You say that like it’s a bad thing. Just—“ Bill spluttered. “Why would you—“

Having been left to deal with Bill’s investors for the past several weeks, the pink cyclops’ patience was wearing thin, and Pyronica cut his protestations off with a steely look. “You know why.”

Bill crossed his arms and tapped his finger against his bricks for a while, fuming, taking in everything, the situation he was in, the censure he was under from his inner circle.

After several minutes of seething silence, Pyronica’s judgemental stare not letting up for a second, Bill threw his hands in the air.

“Oh fine!” He gestured as he spoke, leaking frustration. “I’ll go ahead and do it. I’ll force this through. I’ll shoot myself in the foot, whatever you want.”

“Now was that so hard?” Pyronica asked sweetly.

“Yes.” Bill grumbled, crossing his arms, scowling.

Pyronica batted her eyelashes at Bill sweetly and swung her shoulders, smiling now. “Thank yoooooooou.”

Bill rolled his eye and looked away.

Kryptos seemed pleased, his smug little face lighting up.

Bill glared at him. The smug look slipped off Kryptos’ face quicker than grease on a non-stick pan, suddenly fearful again. That fearful look soothed Bill’s temper, it was nice to know that Kryptos still knew his place.

Looking around the hall, taking in the details of the design of the party, how well organised it was, how Kryptos kept all the investors in groups of manageability and how he made sure Teeth and Pacifire were kept contented over by the bar, his two biggest troublemakers out of the way, how he let AM chaperone Keyhole, how he had Eight Ball in the corner, overseeing everything, maintaining security. Even the way he had everyone wearing little bowties, it was all incredibly classy and well done, even if it was the most underhanded thing Bill had seen Kryptos do.

“So, you schmoozed this all together?” He narrowed his eye at Kryptos, who looked fearful for a moment, gulping, before he nodded.

Bill tapped his fingers against his bricks, agitated, but reluctantly acknowledged that this sort of reach around from Kryptos was halfway impressive.

“You’re walking the walk. Nicely played.”

The compass beamed brightly, Bill’s rare praise thrilling him limitlessly.

“I strengthened all your business partnerships, and made detailed notes on the revenue and resources each investor can bring, and I made sure that one investor you never liked bankrupted himself, and I did—“ Kryptos babbled excitedly, relishing the praise.

“Hey zip it.” Bill waved his hand at Kryptos. “I paid you a compliment, I didn’t ask your life’s story. You’re lucky we’re not having serious words right now about you doing all this without my permission. Words like defenestration and disembowelment.”
Kryptos gulped and looked suitably apologetic. “Sorry Boss.”

“Why did you do this, out of interest?” Bill asked, watching Kryptos closely. “I don’t want pragmatic reasons, I want your reasons. Why?”

“I – I just wanted to prove I’m loyal to you Boss.” Kryptos stuttered. “I just wanted to do a good job.”

“Hmm.” Bill looked Kryptos up and down, sizing him up. Of course, he wasn’t going to take the compass at face value here, he probably said that countless times before stabbing his old bosses in the back, but if he was willing to go the extra mile for Bill, the triangle was prepared to ride the wave and see how far it would get him.

“Well, congratulations, you succeeded.” Bill acknowledged, looking away so he didn’t have to see Kryptos’ face light up agonizingly smug again.

“So, are you going to float around the party now?” Kryptos asked, pulling a clipboard out from under the edge of his glove, clicking a pen, eager to start making notes. “I could organise meetings. I know your investors have been eager to --“

“Nope.” Bill cut Kryptos off, still leery of making nice with the investors. “Not gonna do that.”

“If you’re not going to talk to them, then you should go do what needs to be done.” Pyronica said seriously. “This could be your grand triumph, if you go do it now. Just get it over with, and then this can be your celebration party, all in one go.”

Bill looked away from Pyronica unwilling to do that either.

She crouched down so she was facing him and softened her tone. “If you have to go, go. Say goodbye to him, make your excuses, get it over with. Handle it. But don’t keep putting this off. Earth should have been ours by now.”

Bill closed his eye and took a deep breath, trying to steel himself to take action. It was hard. He didn’t want to, he just wanted to put his plans off while he explored this fun new daydream with Sixer.

But that was the problem with exploring your dreams.

You had to wake up eventually.

“You can do this Bill.” Pyronica blinked down at him sincerely. “I believe in you.”

Rather than bolstering him, Pyronica’s belief just made him feel worse.

Swallowing his trepidation back, Bill opened his eye, and nodded at his henchmaniac, hoping that the conflict he felt wasn’t written all over his face. He wanted to look determined, in charge, commanding.

Instead he presumably looked like a lost little kid, dreading the thought of having to say goodbye to his best friend before his human pet was sent to live on the farm.

He didn’t like letting go.

“I’ll be back, and when I am –“ Bill’s bricks began to shimmer out of view, drifting back towards the mindscape to do what must be done. His eye was the last thing to fade out of view, resigned and
disappointed, but his voice lingered with finality.

“This will all be over.”

Ford was down in his study, taking apart the memory ray Fiddleford had left behind. Still wary of its memory erasing properties, Ford couldn’t justify keeping the prototype around for fear of it being used against him, but he didn’t see why he couldn’t find some other use for the alien technology grafted through the device.

Ford had been tinkering with incorporating the brainwave frequency interface with some sort of audio-visual equipment, making a thought projector of sorts, so Ford could scour through old memories.

He was trying to convince himself the purpose of the device would be to improve long term and short-term memory by enabling him to look back on his thoughts and refresh himself on them. Imagine how novel it would be to be able to input a recollection of his nuclear physics classes from university before applying the knowledge practically. Imagine how it would streamline his research, to be able to revise topics by searching through his thoughts to uncover the initial point of retention.

Those were the well-intentioned purposes of the device, the purposes Ford clung to in order to justify this invention.

He didn’t want to admit the true purpose of the thought projector, to pour over his old memories with Bill, searching for instances of deviance or deceit that he’d missed, obsessing over every second he spent with the muse, trying to assess what parts of their relationship were real, and what parts were simply a twisted fabrication.

Ford needed to know. It had been a week since he’d ejected Bill from his mind, and he needed to know. It burned within him, this desire for clarification or closure.

He just didn’t know what to believe about his muse now. He didn’t know if he could take his recollections at face value, knowing how blind he’d been to Bill’s selfish, morally dubious qualities. He’d been wearing rose tinted glasses for the duration of his time with Bill, and it was only now, shocked into awareness, that Ford was beginning to take the blinders off, and think critically about his relationship with the small god, and how much of the muse’s behaviour he could no longer justify.

Days passed without communication from the god, and Ford wrongly assumed that when Bill was forcibly ejected from Ford’s body on the road out of town, it was a permanent ejection.

He thought that he’d severed the ties they had by rejecting Bill’s influence and control, by sending the muse spiralling from his mind, leaving Ford broken down and physically spent on the side of the road, shaking with relief that he didn’t just murder two innocent people.

Ford assumed that as Bill was no longer in his head, their deal had been disconnected, and it was one less thing for Ford to worry about now, privately thankful that he didn’t have to face Bill after this, keen to avoid a messy confrontation.
He knew that he couldn’t keep playing Bill’s games, he knew that their romantic interlude had to cease.

However, Ford was a coward, at least when it came to initiating a break up, and so he worked on his new inventions, focusing his efforts on a pleasant distraction, hoping vainly that he could get along without having to say those horrid words at all, hoping Bill could take a hint.

It seemed Bill couldn’t take a hint, or the hint Stanford intended to give him went right over his head, his muse too distracted to pay any attention to the way Stanford was ignoring him, because as Stanford passed out, drooling onto the papers on his desk in the study, he came to in his mindscape to find Bill in it, waiting for him.

Bill floated by one of the tall bookcases in Ford’s mind, running his finger along the spines of the books lined up with a daunting intensity. Ford was struck with the thought that this may just be how Bill inhabits his mind when he isn’t here, stroking the books on the shelf, obsessing over Ford’s thoughts.

Ford swallowed, apprehension building in his throat as Bill looked up at him, shifting his unblinking stare from the book, to the scientist’s face.

“Hi Sixer.” Bill said and put the book he was holding back on the shelf, twiddling his thumbs now, fidgeting, floating over to Ford.

“Hello.” Ford replied awkwardly, watching warily as Bill moved closer to him, invading his space like nothing had happened between them.

Bill reached his hands out and stroked them through Ford’s hair with the same intensity with which he held the books, inhaling deeply when he made contact with the human. It was evident that he was cherishing this contact with Stanford, that being close to him went some way towards easing his tension, hands stroking through his hair giving him something productive to fidget with.

Exhaling his tension, Bill shut his eye, and sighed against Sixer. “Ugh, what a day.”

Ford froze, tense, when Bill touched him, and leaned away, watching the triangle incredulously.

Bill hardly noticed that Sixer pulled away from him, his arms elongating effortlessly, fingers still buried in Ford’s roots. Ford had to reach up and physically tug Bill’s hands away to get him to notice his apparent discomfort.

Bill blinked his eye open and took in Ford’s reproachful expression.

“What? I can’t have a bad day?”

“Why are you here?” Ford questioned, still frowning at Bill.

“Why am I in your head?” Bill blinked. “Well that’s a redundant question. You invited me here. This space is mine.”

“No, it isn’t.” Ford shook his head. “This is my space. My head, my mindscape.”

“Well, sure, if you want to get technical.” Bill shrugged flippantly, before narrowing his eye at Ford. “What happened to what’s mine is yours? Since when did you get so grabby?”

“Grabby?” Ford repeated, scowling.
“Grabby. Selfish. Miserly.” Bill extrapolated, gesturing to the elaborate library. “You’ve got enough head to go around Sixer, it’s not like you’re hurting for space here.”

“That’s not the point.”

“Well, if there is a point and I’m not seeing it, you’ve probably missed your mark.” Bill shrunk down and floated to rest on top of Sixer’s head, nestled in the human’s fluffy hair, his hands dangling down onto Ford’s forehead. “I’m practically made of points, get it?”

Ford didn’t laugh at Bill’s joke, he just stood there, stewing on his guilt and resolve, his stomach churning as he thought about what he’d have to say.

Bill was too comfortable here. If Ford wanted to drive a wedge between them, to drive Bill away, he’d have to make Bill thoroughly uncomfortable.

He’d have to be decisive.

He’d have to be mean.

“Alright, not the funniest joke. It’s been done before, so sue me.” Bill closed his eye, tired, and bunched Ford’s hair up like he was fluffing a pillow, content to flop on top of the scientist. “I’m not exactly up for small talk right now, if you can’t already tell.”

“Then why did you come?” Ford questioned.

“Seeing you helps me relax, for some unfathomable reason.” Bill confessed, and ran his fingertips across Ford’s scalp, trying to soothe the scientist in return. “It’s been too long.”

“It’s been a week.” Ford countered.

“A week too long. I would have been back sooner, but I got held up. Can’t have you missing me. I’m sure you were getting bored, talking to yourself all this time.” Bill said indulgently, picturing it now.

He’d grown accustomed to sharing Ford’s headspace, and he found he really enjoyed the experience. He didn’t doubt the scientist felt the same.

In all honesty, Ford felt terrible, moral obligation competing with his own selfishness.

Bill was right, he had missed the muse almost immediately after he left, despite his atrocious behaviour, and he did feel lonely without a familiar voice in his head, making everything seem far more whimsical than it should be in reality.

He had, despite how unusual and off-putting it could be at times, enjoyed having Bill riding shotgun in his mind, but he couldn’t justify letting the god have that much control over him, knowing he would not respect Ford’s wishes, knowing there was no guarantee Ford wouldn’t wake up to bloody hands and a soiled conscience.

He couldn’t control Bill, even in his own body, and he could no longer convince himself that the muse was harmless, despite his current docile behaviour. Bill may be cute, nuzzling into his hair affectionately, but Ford was coming to realise that appearances had no bearing on good and evil, and cute couldn’t justify murder.

Bill was making himself comfortable, already so relaxed in Ford’s presence, letting the stresses of the day slide off his back, unwilling to give into Pyronica and Kryptos’ demands straight away. He
wasn’t willing to give this up just yet, but Ford took the decision out of his hands, frowning, his brows furrowing together.

“I –” Ford faltered, before steeling his resolve. “I want you to leave, Bill.”

“Why? Are we going somewhere?” Bill asked, only half listening.

“No.” Ford shook his head, unseating Bill from the top of his head, letting the triangle float on his own behest, while Ford gathered his stubbornness and turned his chin up. “You are.”

Bill blinked at Ford, slow on the uptake. “I am?”

“You’re leaving.” Ford said, his tone stern, not making eye contact with Bill. “I don’t want you here anymore. I want you to leave.”

“No, you don’t.” Bill replied automatically, assured that Sixer wouldn’t want him to leave. “You don’t.”

“I don’t want you around anymore.” Ford insisted. “Bill, you almost killed two people, in my body. I’m not – how am I supposed to be okay with that?”

“You –“ Bill spluttered, and thrust his hand out, frustrated. “You’re seriously going to harp on at me about that?”

“Harp on?” Ford sounded angry now. “Bill this is serious!”

“I was drunk. You were drunk. What’s the big deal?”

“You aren’t seriously claiming the fact that you tried to kill Willow and Dan was because you were drunk?” Ford boggled, appalled.

“Well, no. Red had it coming to her. I would have gone after her if I was sober, but that’s not the point.”

“What is the point then? By your estimation?” Ford asked angrily.

“The point is, if I’d have known you would have reacted like this, I wouldn’t have put you in a position where you’d have to get your hands bloody.” Bill explained, missing the way his explanation just seemed to frustrate Ford all the more. “I don’t exactly have a body of my own anymore, and I have you to thank for that. If I had my own body, I’d have done my own dirty work, but I had to make do with what I had at the time.”

“Your dirty work? Is that what we’re calling it?” Ford frowned, pacing around the mindscape, his shoulders tense. “Is that what you did to Fiddleford too? Do you call that dirty work?”

“What?” Bill blinked at Ford, surprised that the scientist knew what he did to Fiddleford. Total memory erasure should have taken care of that particular problem, now Bill was worried he hadn’t been watching the other scientist closely enough. “That’s – pfft – no – how do you know about that?”

“I saw the tape, Bill. You terrorized him. You damn near set the whole attic on fire.” Ford said, his tone accusatory.

“Oh, that.” Bill’s eye widened as he realised which tape Ford had likely seen. “Okay, well, that – there were circumstances –“
“I don’t want to hear your justifications!” Ford held his hand up, walking away from the triangle, turning his back to him.

“He hurt you!” Bill threw his hand out, indignantly. “He pushed you down the stairs, all the way from the top, and then windex-ed your mind, and you have the nerve to not want to hear my justifications? You should have heard his justifications!”

“I heard everything Bill!” Ford yelled, turning around to face the baffled triangle.

“Then why are you yelling at me for?” Bill blinked, frustrated.

“The only one who gets to mess with Sixer’s mind is me?” Ford quoted, glaring at the triangle.

“What exactly is this to you, a game?”

“What? No – it’s not –” Bill protested, knowing he fucked up, if Sixer heard him say that.

“Is that what you’ve been doing? Messing with me, all this time? Messing with my mind?” Ford dragged his hand through his hair, clasping his forehead. “Was any of this real, or were you just manipulating me –”

“No!”

“Playing with me? Tricking me?”

“No, Sixer – stop-” Bill begged, his weariness compounding as Ford turned away from him, turning his refuge, his safe haven, into yet another trial in which Bill did not stand up to par. This felt agonisingly familiar.

“From the beginning, I should have seen it from the very beginning, but I was too blind to see the signs. All this time, you’ve been right in front of me, and I just didn’t want to see what’s so plainly obvious.” Ford shook his head, his words coming out harsh and bitter.

“Sixer-”

“First with the ants, then with the fairies, but I didn’t think you’d escalate to murder. You threatened Fiddleford, you said you’d kill his family. His family!” Ford paced, hurling his words at Bill with outrage. “That’s why you kept asking after his son, you weren’t being considerate, you were going to kill him.”

“Look, I just said that to keep him in line.” Bill pleaded, pressing his hands together. “If he held up his end of the bargain, I wouldn’t touch the kid. Sixer, please, you’ve got to -”

“Believe you? I did believe you. I believed in you all this time, and all this time you were lying to me!” Ford shouted indignantly.

“I wasn’t lying all this time.” Bill tried.

“You don’t even regret it. You don’t even regret what you did.”

“Well, technically I didn’t do anything –”

“THAT’S NOT THE POINT!” Ford yelled, whirling to face Bill.

Bill floated in front of Ford, his eye wide, looking stunned and thoroughly taken aback.

Stanford looked furious, so quickly turning on Bill, his tone betrayed and accusatory, giving Bill
no room to manoeuvre, to turn him around to Bill’s perspective again.

Sixer was angry, and he wasn’t holding back. He was tearing into Bill, pushing him away, and he wasn’t mincing words or being nice about it.

He was mean.

“I thought that you were good. That you were here helping me instead of just helping yourself.” Ford’s chest was tight with emotion, and the conflict he felt doing this was buried deep behind a protective layer of rage and righteousness, enough to shield him from the heartbroken look in Bill’s eye. “You were never good. You were barely even nice at times.”

“I was nice!” Bill argued, offended at the end part of Sixer’s assertion.

“You were evil!” Ford shouted, and Bill hovered back, Ford’s words a brusque slap to the face. “This whole time. You are evil. I just didn’t want to see it.”

Bill narrowed his eye, looking chagrined to hear Ford of all people accusing him of this. He liked the way Ford saw him before, mainly because Ford never saw him as an abomination, as an evil thing – and Bill thought Ford saw him as he was, how he thought he was.

Personally, Bill didn’t think he was all bad, but that was how the rest of the universe seemed to see him.

Such black and white thinking.

Something Sixer was apparently proficient at.

“I want you to leave, Bill.” Ford crossed his arms, sticking to his guns, knowing he had to follow through with this. “I want you to leave, and never come back.”

“You don’t want that.” Bill started, honing in on the conflict in Ford’s thoughts, a little of his own desperation bleeding through. “Sixer, you know you don’t want that.”

“Don’t tell me what I want. This is what I want.” Ford argued stubbornly.

“But you’re mine.” Bill countered, reaching out to Ford now. “From now until the end of time. We shook on it, Sixer, we had a deal.”

Ford swallowed, and stuck his chin in the air, trying to evade the constraints of the deal through sheer stubbornness in order to stand his ground.

“I worked with your compromise.” Bill continued desperately, frustrated. “I didn’t go near the portal, I listened to you. You can’t – Sixer, you can’t just end this now because you feel like it. What about us, what about –”

“There is no more us.” Ford said firmly, trying to make up for the way his willpower swayed internally delivering this statement. “If there ever was an us it was built on lies.”

“But we shook on it!” Bill fumed, clinging to that one salient fact. “You said I wouldn’t lose you if I stayed away from the portal. We shook on it Sixer!”

“Well, congratulations Bill.” Ford said bitterly, unable to look at Bill’s betrayed countenance for another second longer. “You lost me anyway.”

Bill blinked, thrown by Ford’s definitive statement, reeling.
He went quiet for a long time, quiet enough that Ford had to look up again, wondering if Bill had taken his rejection with grace and left Ford’s mindscape for good this time.

Unfortunately for both of them, Bill was not taking this rejection gracefully.

The yellow triangle, floating in Ford’s mindscape, was no longer yellow. Instead he was seething, a deep red, the sky overhead in Ford’s mindscape darkening, Bill’s mood seeping out, infecting the dream.

His eye was black, his pupil a burning slit of red fire, and his hands were clenched by his sides, shaking furiously, glaring at Stanford.

Stanford took a hesitant step back.

“Well.” Bill gritted out, his temper causing the ground to rumble like an earthquake the longer he stared at Stanford’s stubborn expression. “If I’ve got nothing to lose, then I guess the deal’s off.”

“You’re leaving my mindscape?” Ford questioned hopefully. “You’re letting me go?”

“No.” Bill replied, growing in size as the earth quaked on.

Towering over Ford now, Bill’s triangular mass was writhing, cosmic energy leaking out of him, the air swirling and twisting around him into horrifying abstractions and optical illusions.

Bill’s mass arched like he was getting ready to pounce, and Ford could see it in his eye, feel the tables turn, and his fight or flight receptors blaring like a siren, screaming at him to get out of there.

“I’m taking the portal.” Bill declared, and suddenly his considerable mass lunged forward, fragmenting and dissolving into particles in the air, charging towards Ford.

“No!” Ford threw his hands up defensively, but it was too late.

Bill’s energy poured into Sixer, diving down Ford’s eyes, nose, mouth, clogging his throat. He struggled, trying to bat the storm of Bill’s presence back, but it was too late, Bill was bombarding him, choking him with his presence, until Ford felt like he couldn’t breathe.

It was terrifying and stifling and – dammit Stanford didn’t you realise you were breaking up with a God?

Ford woke up abruptly, breath heaving through his chest as he gasped, inhaling frantic lungful’s of air, resuming consciousness after what he hoped was only a nightmare.

He looked down at the papers on his desk, drool accenting the pages, before he looked down at his hands, his heart racing, adrenaline pumping.

Was it him? Was he alone? Was he safe?

He tried counting his fingers, knowing how that helped him ground himself to reality after a nightmare when he was a child, but as he looked down at his hands, holding his fingers out straight, his left hand twitched, before clenching into a fist.

“No, no, no!” Ford shook his head, trying to force his will back into his left arm.

His left hand pushed away from the table, trying to force him to stand.

Ford panicked, frightened as his left leg wobbled upright, making for the stairs.
“No!” Ford attempted to make his entire body go lax – uncooperative – and he collapsed under the weight of his slack limbs.

He could hear the faint echo of Bill’s tsk of frustration, before his left hand started groping across the floor, dragging him over to the spiral staircase that led down to the lab.

It was like something out of a horror movie, watching his arm move of its own behest, the rest of his body held back through sheer stubbornness and force of will.

Where Ford was reluctant, trying to still his limbs, Bill was determined, and kept forcing himself to pull Ford’s body onwards. Ford kept trying to wrest control of his left arm back from Bill, but he couldn’t get past his shoulder.

He had made Bill desperate and determined, and with nothing to lose, Ford feared nothing could stop him.

His mind searched back to the last time he ejected Bill from his body, and he took a moment to consider the variables, before reasoning that it was too late to drink himself into uninhabitability. He had to take more extreme measures.

Steeling himself for pain, Ford winced, and threw a wild punch at his own elbow, jarring the nerves there.

Ford’s left hand flailed and fell down, twitching.

Sixer! What are you doing? Bill screeched at him, his voice echoing painfully in Ford’s head.

Stopping you. Ford replied, and slammed his fist down on his own fingers, hearing his knuckle crack.

The pain was something chronic, intensely jarring, like accidentally closing your fingers in a door, but Ford could feel it working. Bill was drawing back, splitting his focus from trying to muster the strength to move forward, to chastising Stanford.

You idiot! Leave your six fingers alone! If you break yourself, I can’t pick up the pieces.

I’m surprised you’d even want to.

You’re still mine. Bill hissed, clenching the injured fingers of Ford’s left hand, trying to get them workable again. I own all of you. In one piece. Stop ruining yourself.

Leave, and I won’t have to. Ford reasoned gamely, sucking in a breath as he rode through the pain.

Ford’s left leg twitched now, crouching up under Ford, trying to propel him closer to the staircase. Ford flung his hands out in front of him, clinging to the edge of the stair, his chin hanging over the landing now.

“Just give up Bill. Leave!” Ford wheezed through the pain.

He could feel what he imagined was Bill’s eye narrowing in the back of his head, before the god spoke up again.

If that’s how you want to play it.

Without warning, Bill kicked out Ford’s leg again, sending him plummeting down the spiral
staircase.

Ford tried to fling his hand out to break his fall, but he seemed to hit every pole on the banister on the way down, scraping his cheek on the metal stairs as he fell. It was painful, he knew he’d be bruised all over, possibly concussed.

He winced and brought his hands up to cradle his head, crashing down into a nasty pile at the bottom of the staircase.

He could feel Bill’s simmering rage still seething away at him, and he groggily wiped blood from the edge of his mouth, having bit his tongue on the way down.

Weakly, Ford managed to spit the blood from his mouth, and croak. “Leave Bill. Leave me alone.”

Still Bill struggled to move Ford’s legs, pulling him awkwardly to stand on a sprained ankle. He heaved Ford across the floor of the lab to the computers, Ford’s busted ankle giving out just before he reached the consoles.

Ford availed to lay unhelpfully on the ground, seeing double now, certain he had a concussion.

Still he felt Bill seep into his left arm now, the pain chasing him out of the rest of Ford’s body. He could feel Bill’s desperation pushed to the forefront of his mind, and he could see from the reflection on the metal of the machinery that his eyes were glowing gold.

Bill threw his all into pulling Ford up, his gold eyes glowing determinately in the reflection of the diagnostics screen just above the green lit neon readout displaying the portal’s ‘STANDBY’ mode.

Ford was terrified that Bill was really going to do it, he was really going to turn on the portal, to physically drag Ford through the entire process of turning the damn thing on so Bill could wreak his havoc on Ford’s dimension.

He began to beg in his head, hoping to still Bill’s hand through whatever remnant of sentimentalism he could dredge up for the scientist after all that he did.

Please Bill, don’t do this, don’t do this. You don’t want to do this – please, just leave the Earth alone. I can’t let you murder a whole planet. I can’t let you do to this planet what you did to the other one.

That caused Bill to pause, his expression freezing as he looked into the screen studying Ford’s exhausted expression with confused, searching slitted eyes.

What other planet? Bill asked slowly.

Ford brought the image of Lama Szlam to the forefront of his mind, playing back Bill drinking down the worship in the energy cube, before blasting a giant hole through the centre of the gelatinous green orb. The memory skipped forward to Bill ushering Don Goo in line with his sights, before incinerating the mobster and all that stood behind him, disintegrating the entire globe on a molecular level until there was nothing left, his maniacal laughter echoing through the vacuum of space.

Ford could see Bill’s eyes widen in the reflection on the screen, reeling at what Ford had shown him.

Ford knew he had to do something drastic, while Bill was distracted, and before the muse could form words to match the millions of questions racing through his mind, Ford punted his head
forward and slammed it against the metal edge of the control panel.

Ford could feel Bill’s panic slipping away from him, as everything went black.

When Ford woke on the floor of the lab, his skull throbbing, a huge bruise forming, he searched himself for Bill’s lingering presence in his head and felt nothing but the cold emptiness of absence he’d come to know in the past week.

Bill wasn’t here.

Ford turned his neck gingerly and looked through the door from the observation room to the lab. He was relieved to see the portal was dormant. The lights were off.

He did it.

He stopped Bill.

Bill was gone.

Ford groaned and tried to lift himself up off the floor. He felt his forehead and was relieved to note that he wasn’t bleeding. A bleeding head injury wouldn’t look too good, but Ford knew that he still likely needed medical attention. Just because he wasn’t bleeding, that didn’t mean he wasn’t concussed.

Taking it slow, Ford managed to limp over to the lift, taking care not to lean too heavily on his sprained ankle. He pressed the buttons for the lift with his right hand, fairly certain he had dislocated two fingers in his left hand trying to fight Bill off. He’d need to get that seen to if he wanted to write in his journal again. He hoped he hadn’t severely impaired his capacity to draw.

Trying not to dwell on any other potential impairments, Ford watched the lift tick up to the top floor.

Ford sat on the couch, feeling numb, as he called a taxi to come pick him up. He needed to be checked over, he was going to the hospital.

Ironic really, that he’d put himself in there. Or Bill had put him in there. He was fairly sure in healthy relationships, you didn’t put your partner in the hospital. He was uncertain whether this counted as him lashing out at Bill, or Bill forcing Ford’s hand. For a moment, the thought that Bill was asking for it flashed through Ford’s mind, before he recoiled from the notion, never wanting to lean on that justification for hurting his partner, for hurting anyone. He didn’t want to be the sort of person who would lean on justifications like that.

The taxi pulled up, and Ford got in. The drive to the hospital was still, uneventful, silent.

When he was triaged, he sat in the plastic chair across the table from the nurse and tried to detach himself from the image he was presenting. That of some sort of battered housewife.

“And how did you receive these injuries?” The nurse asked.
Ford could hardly tell her that he got them trying to force an interdimensional chaos god out of his mind, so he defected to a literal explanation, his voice monotonal and numb.

“I fell down the stairs.”

“Did somebody push you?” The nurse pressed.

“No.” Ford answered, looking down at his lap.

With his fingers splinted and bandaged, his bruises checked over, and his cognition assessed, Ford left the hospital with stitches in his cheek, his ankle pressure wrapped, and his left arm in a sling.

The nurses also ensured Ford left with a referral to see a psychiatrist, worried that Ford’s injuries had been self-inflicted.

Ford kept the referral letter, at least until he got out of the hospital, where he promptly deposited the letter in the first bin he saw. He knew a psychiatrist couldn’t help him, the best they could do would be confirm that Ford was going crazy and assign him medication to temper that fact.

Ford knew that nothing could temper Bill’s influence. He had a god in his head, whether he liked it or not.

He was still coming to terms with not liking it. Whenever he needed reinforcement he just looked down at the bandages, their presence a reminder of what Ford shouldn’t miss.

He had made his decision though, and he had spent every quiet moment in the hospital, and every quiet moment in the taxi home after, assessing every inch of his mind, scouring through for any sign of Bill’s lingering presence.

Finding nothing, Ford wearily concluded that he had been successful. By the time he walked up the porch steps to the shack, home again, slightly less worse for the ware, he was sure.

He had evicted Bill from his mind.

He was free.

Finally, Ford could safely say, that his mind was his own once more.

Chapter End Notes

Poor Ford. Having your partner put you in the hospital, or putting yourself in the hospital, either way you're in the hospital and shit's bad. Probably shouldn't have thrown out that referral letter, you're definitely going crazy.

I hope folks enjoyed this chapter. I might make some grammar edits bc it was posted without being beta read, but for the most part I'm happy with it, so forgive a few stray commas if you can.

As always I look forward to your comments and I'm glad you're sticking with and enjoying this fic! This chapter is dedicated to Nocturnal Charmer, who enjoyed all the same things I enjoyed about the last chapter, including Bill's teenageisms. I'm happy you're liking it hahah, and I love your comments.

Next chapter we have more Project Mentum, 'can't sleep triangles will eat me', bathrobe stalkers, and after that, a trip to New Mexico, to see how the other side lives.
Stay tuned ~
Somehow I’d be doing alright if it wasn’t for the nights. I’d have courage left to fight if it wasn’t for the nights. How I fear the time when shadows start to fall. Sitting here alone and staring at the wall.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Ford was wrong. His mind wasn’t safe, it wasn’t safe anymore.

A week or two passed without Bill’s presence, that absence reinforcing Ford’s assumption, lulling him into a false sense of security, but when he woke in the middle of a field on the edge of town, his hands covered in blood and splatters of mercury, with no clue as to how he got there, he realised just how wrong he’d been.

Sitting up, Ford looked around the place he’d passed out in. He was in the middle of a field, one of Farmer Sprott’s fields if Ford was right, he could see the red barn and the grain silo from afar.

He could also see, fanning out around him, the most macabre looking crop circle Ford had ever encountered.

Blood and mercury splashed everywhere in geometric patterns, interspersed with sigils like the ones Ford had painted on the shack, wheat hewn back roughly with a knife. Diagonal lines branched out, forming some greater pattern that Stanford couldn’t discern from his current vantage point.

Ford stood up, twirling in a circle to look at the carnage around him, horrified.

The patterns and sigils spread out wide, taking up nearly the entire field, the lines painted large. Ford looked down at his hands, noting strands of rainbow hair on his palms, sticky with blood.

He stumbled backwards and suddenly realised that he was standing in the middle of the bloody circle, on top of an open, slitted eye.

This was definitely Bill’s doing.

Realising just how incriminating this looked, standing covered in blood, out in the open, Ford ran across the field, heading into the forest, trying to hide from human eyes. No doubt Bill could see him, he was probably watching him right now. Watching him panic.

Ford washed his hands in the river and sincerely hoped that he hadn’t hurt someone, that he hadn’t someone else’s blood on his hands after tonight.

Bill must have taken possession of his body while he was asleep. Last Ford remembered he was safe and sound in his bed, having turned in for the night, exhausted. He was wearing his pyjamas for goodness sake.

He still felt exhausted. Judging from the size of that heinous crop circle he’d likely been up all night, painting Bill’s expressive artistry in the wheat fields. His body was physically drained in the aftermath of all this mysterious running around, but he knew he couldn’t sleep.

He couldn’t sleep anymore, not knowing when Bill might slip inside his mind, and wear him like a puppet.
So much for doing his own dirty work.

Ford felt violated, he felt vehemently sick, and had to try his best not to throw up as he scrubbed the blood off his wrists.

He wasn’t cut anywhere, so the blood wasn’t his. It wasn’t his, and that caused Ford to fret worse than before.

What had Bill done?

What did he make Stanford do?

Heading back to the shack through the forest, hoping to avoid being spotted, he couldn’t help but detour past Willow’s family hut, worried for her safety.

On the ground floor window, like some deranged 3-year old’s macabre finger painting, was a smiley face, drawn in blood.

No doubt Bill’s doing.

Underneath the smiley face in Bill’s chicken scratch handwriting was an ominous phrase.

ENJOY IT WHILE IT LASTS, RED!

Ford frowned, looking at his reflection in the glass. He had a smear of blood on his cheek that he missed down at the lake, and he had sprigs of wheat and twigs stuck in his hair. Looking down below the window, Ford saw an idle handprint rest against the wood panelling of the hut.

A six-fingered handprint. He had done this.

Terrified that he’d find Willow dead inside, brutally murdered, her blood used to decorate the wheat field, Ford walked around to the front of the house, heading towards the door.

“Dan, where did you put my shoes?” Willow’s voice called out from within, and Ford nearly sunk to his knees, relief coming off him in waves. Thank god she was alive and unhurt.

“Aren’t they in the bedroom, hun?” Dan’s voice called back.

They were safe. They were both safe.

Ford exhaled, and then looked down at himself, his blue pyjamas covered in blood splatter, his handprint on the wall of Willow’s house. It all tallied to make a rather incriminating picture.

Backing away from the hut, Ford realised that both of the people inside the house grew up knowing how to wield axes, and as he hurried away from the lodge, he saw an axe in one of the logs out the front, buried deep in the wood.

If he didn’t want an axe buried in him, he had better run, lest Dan or Willow think he did this.

Even if he didn’t do this to Willow’s house, or to the field, or to whoever the blood belonged to, all fingers pointed to him. Even his own, plastered on the wall in blood.

Ford retreated to the forest and sought out his own home.

As he marched through the woods, he realised in a tired sort of fashion, that his sojourn into the forest could have been worse. At least he had his boots on. Bill must have learned from his first
reckless barefoot escape – shoes were essential. Ford was almost thankful for Bill’s consideration, believing for an instant that Bill cared about his physical wellbeing, before his common sense chastised his momentary lapse in judgement.

It was a habit. A pattern. He had nothing to thank Bill for. And clearly Bill had no regard for Stanford, if he borrowed his body like this without permission for his night-time exploits.

Looking ahead to the shack, Ford remembered something else Bill had no regard for, the Earth, and he raced up the front steps, hurling himself through the house, terrified that during his excursion in Ford’s body that Bill had turned on the portal.

The lift moved too slow, yet Ford had to wait, tension raising the hairs on the back of his neck as he contemplated what that could mean for the world if Bill had turned on the portal. The consequences he unleashed on humanity through virtue of falling asleep on the job, literally.

Stanford realised it was his duty now to guard the world from Bill, to guard the portal, and already he was failing.

The elevator door dinged open, and Ford sprang through, his eyes wild, hurtling through the observation room to hang in the doorway, looking out into the lab.

The portal was inactive.

Ford hurried over to the computers, checking the activation log, his eyes darting across the numbers.

No recorded activations. The portal was still in standby mode.

Ford’s shoulders slumped forward, sighing his relief against the computer screen.

The portal hadn’t been turned on.

But why? Ford didn’t understand, if the portal was what Bill wanted, why didn’t he turn it on when he had the chance?

He’d seemed so desperate to turn it on before. Ford thought Bill would stop at nothing.

So why, when he had the chance to turn the portal on and usher through his apocalypse, did he choose to run around finger painting in a field instead?

It didn’t make any sense.

Then again, Bill didn’t make much sense on a good day.

Standing up straight, looking over the lab, Ford realised that regardless of Bill’s motivations, regardless of the fact that for some reason he left the portal alone, it was still Ford’s solemn duty to guard this world against Bill’s intervention.

That meant he couldn’t let an incident like last night happen again.

Bill had slipped through, taking over Ford’s mind and body while he was asleep, knowing that were Stanford conscious, he would fight him every step of the way. Taking advantage of Ford’s unconsciousness, robbing him of his sleeping hours, was underhanded, low by anyone’s standards, but apparently not for Bill. Clearly, Ford was just discovering what lay beneath the iceberg of Bill’s true self, and if the Bill he knew before was the tip, Ford knew he had no idea of just how
deep below this iceberg could sink.

If he wanted to guard his mind against Bill’s influence, that meant he had to guard himself against sleep.

He couldn’t sleep, not if he wanted to protect himself, protect his mind, and protect the innocent citizens of this town.

The mystery of the blood still plagued Stanford, and it itched at his mind, conceptualising what exactly Bill had been doing while he was asleep. He needed to know.

But first, he needed to shower.

And after that, he would be stocking up on coffee.

Lots of coffee.

The screen fizzed with static, and Ford watched the pixels dance, frustrated.

He reached out to smack the side of the monitor, hoping to jar it into action.

“Come on, work.” Ford muttered, and smacked the monitor again, looking rather silly, crouching in front of the invention he’d frantically cobbled together, wearing an odd-looking helmet on his head, the bags under his eyes highly prominent.

The pixels jumped on the screen, flickering, until a fuzzy picture came into view on the central monitor, the additional monitors lighting up with words, sliding across the screen.

*GOD, I LOOK STUPID. TIN FOIL. THE BENEFITS OF TIN FOIL. IF I INCORPORATE ALUMINIUM. IS IT THE METAL’S UNIQUE PROPERTIES THAT MAKE IT SO EFFECTIVE, OR JUST THE FACT THAT IT GOES ON SANDWICHES? CUCUMBER AND MAYONNAISE WOULD BE NICE RIGHT ABOUT NOW. NO! FOCUS!*

“I did it.” Ford said, standing up, looking at the screens in awe.

He’d been working on Project Mentum like a man possessed, or rather like a man who had been possessed who was desperately trying to avoid a repeat occurrence.

Reappropriating Fiddleford’s memory ray into the headset was all that Ford could do following his first out of body, field painting experience, it was all that gave him purpose, all he could do to fend off an impending mental breakdown.

Ford was a man in a vulnerable position, desperately looking to arm himself, to guard himself against Bill’s influence, and Project Mentum was all he could think of that could protect his thoughts.

Building on Fiddleford’s technical knowledge, Ford took a leaf from the other scientist’s book and worked to incorporate computer coding into his latest project. Project Mentum could, if used correctly, successfully encrypt Stanford’s thoughts, scrambling Bill’s access to his mindscape
through a layer of brainwave frequency code.

*I HOPE THIS WORKS. CODE CAN PROTECT ME.*

Ford saw his thoughts race across the screen, and already he felt slightly more secure, but his paranoia was getting the better of him these days.

*CODE MIGHT PROTECT ME. BILL LIKES CODE. HE PRACTICALLY THINKS IN CODE. WHAT IF INSTEAD OF ENCRYPTING MY THOUGHTS I’VE GIFT WRAPPED THEM FOR HIM INSTEAD? HE LIKES A CHALLENGE, HE SAID – NO! THIS WILL WORK!*

Ford sighed, seeing his own internal conflict painted clearly for him, the words running across the screens reminding him of exactly how uncertain he was about everything.

He had to believe that what he was doing could make a difference, but it was so hard to believe in anything these days, after Ford’s faith had been shaken so thoroughly by Bill’s deceit.

Coming to terms with the reality of Bill’s nature was the sort of paradigm shift that gave you whiplash, and Ford was struggling to keep his thoughts level and above board, now that he’d accepted the truth.

Ford knew he couldn’t fixate on Bill any more, couldn’t rely on him for truthful answers, or find solace in the moments they shared together – but that left him adrift searching for something to hold onto that would keep him afloat.

Now, all he had was his science, and his sanity, and he wasn’t sure if he had as sturdy a grip on the latter as he would like.

Reaching for his armchair, Ford sat down, the helmet still processing his surface level thoughts, and allowed himself a moment of introspection. After all that was the whole point of this invention, to further introspection. Ford just wished he could survey his own thoughts without being so judgemental about them all.

He had been studiously attempting to ignore the monitor over to the bottom left that kept remarking on how he still liked the little paper drawings of his muse that were plastered to the walls, how he thought the tapestry was a bit much, and the gold statue was definitely stroking Bill’s ego, though that was the intent of the piece when Ford first commissioned it, but the little paper drawings showed character, and were some of the only keepsakes Ford had of Bill’s time down here.

Without further prompting the large monitor in the middle lit with colour, as it played out one of Ford’s memories for him to review.

*Bill was drawing yet more triangles on the spare printer paper while Ford flipped through the almanac Bill had brought him, scouring the pages.*

*“The central hub of most Federation ports, Meccai is a –“* Ford read aloud from the pages, finding it interesting, before Bill interrupted.

*“A shithole.”*

*“I’m sorry?”* Ford looked up, questioning.

*“Meccai is a shithole.”* Bill explained, without looking up from his drawing, holding the pencil in his fist, trying to get the shading right. *“The Federation filters all of its refugees through that port,*
promising a chance at a better life, yada yada, but it’s all a load of crap. They just want somewhere to send them so they look like they’re being charitable, when in reality, they wouldn’t care if everyone on that godforsaken port ate each other.”

“Oh.” Ford’s shoulders slumped, and he looked between Bill and the book, trying not to be disappointed. “Then why does it say that its –“

“The jewel of the cosmos, the centrepoint of commerce, the starting point of success?” Bill recited without looking up. “You’ve had how many years of formal education and still don’t know what propaganda is?”

“I know what propaganda is.” Ford said defensively.

“You’ll want to take off the rose-coloured glasses sometime, Sixer.” Bill said, finishing his drawing with a flourish. “Naivety is cute, but let’s face it, without me around, you’d get eaten alive.”


Bill looked up from his artwork, yet another drawing of a dapper triangle, and raised one eyebrow at Stanford, before rolling his eyes.

“You’re hopeless.” Bill muttered, almost to himself, before he leaned forward and tapped the almanac. “Keep reading. But read critically. You’re too smart to be this stupid.”

Ford scoffed, then laughed, before returning to his study, oblivious of the way Bill’s eyes lingered on him when he looked away.

Ford sighed.

It seemed it was impossible to survey his own thoughts without them circling back around to Bill, to revisiting the memories they shared together, memories of better times.

Ignorance was bliss, Ford supposed.

It struck him, looking back, just how blind he had been. Blind but happy. Bill was practically pointing out his ignorance to him, but he ignored it, didn’t think critically about what was right in front of him, content to linger under the lens of those rose-coloured glasses for as long as he could.

Grinding his teeth in frustration Ford looked up at the screen, his hands balling into fists on top of his thighs.

Bill was right. He was too smart to be this stupid. It was time to wise up.

Typing on the keyboard beneath the monitors, Ford initiated the encryption process, and the progress bar blinked on the bottom left monitor, starting at 0%.

Ford sat back in the armchair, prepared to let Project Mentum analyse and encrypt his thoughts, all of them, trying to get comfortable. The device would scan through Ford’s thoughts and memories and scatter them beneath a layer of code. It was both beneficial, and draining, that the process required Ford to sit still while the device analysed ALL of his thoughts. ALL of his memories.

This would take a while.

Longer, if Ford kept getting caught up in his own recollections, agonising over his own nostalgia
laced longing every time he lingered on a memory of Bill, thinking himself in circles of bitterness and guilt.

He just felt so stupid, his thoughts always turning back to this, even more stupid when he realised just how many memories had Bill tell him outright that he wasn’t seeing the full picture.

“I just don’t like to see people being swindled by a lie.” Ford said in his memory, at the freak show, commenting on the exhibits. “It’s not right, to trick them all.”

“If they were stupid enough to believe the lie in the first place, maybe they deserve to be tricked.” Bill said, smiling at Ford.

That smile, he knew what he was saying, he’d been tricking Ford all along.

“Ignorance isn’t a sin.” Ford countered, finishing annotating his drawing of the Crabbit. “Just wilful ignorance.”

He was one to talk about wilful ignorance. He’d been wilfully ignorant of Bill’s sinister designs all along. Maybe he did deserve to be tricked. He’d been a trusting fool.

“Hey.” Bill said gently, cupping Ford’s face up on the screen, smiling fondly at him. “You’re my trusting fool, okay?”

“Tcch.” Ford scoffed, and crossed his arms, disliking how intuitive the device was. Just because he was thinking about his failings, that didn’t mean Project Mentum had to rub his face in it.

“Poor Sixer.” Bill’s face on the screen glitched with static as the memory jumped, piecing sentences together. "It’s not your fault you’re so naïve.”

Ford tapped his fingers against his bicep, agitated, Bill’s sweet words of comfort taking on bitter new meaning now. He looked at the progress bar, and it blinked 2% progress back at him.

Up on the screen he was drawn into another memory, Bill standing close to him in the lab, his hand on Ford’s arm.

“Your intellect may be the most staggering thing I’ve encountered on this dingy planet. But even then, if you can’t see what’s happening right in front of you, you may as well let Dummy lead the project.”

“What do you mean?”

“I can wait for you to have the lightbulb moment.”

Words continued to roll across the side screens, augmenting Ford’s recollection, his memories interlacing with his mental commentary.

STUPID. STUPID. STUPID

IT’S BEEN RIGHT IN FRONT OF YOU THE WHOLE TIME. HOW COULD I BE SO BLIND? WAIT FOR A LIGHTBULB MOMENT. I REALLY AM A DUMMY.

Ford’s brow’s furrowed, heavy under the weight of his own mental scrutiny. He was an expert at being harsh to himself, it seemed, and replaying his own failings across the screen wasn’t making him feel any better.

LIES. LIES. IT WAS ALL A LIE. HE NEVER THOUGHT YOU WERE SMART, HE WAS RELYING
“God, you’re so stupid!” Bill bemoaned on the screen, standing across from Ford in the library. Ford looked up at the screen morosely, hating how this, one of his favourite memories, turned sour, re-watching it now.

He looked away, down at his lap, ashamed.

Almost as if to draw him from his melancholy, the memory continued.

“Look, Sixer, you’re a smart guy.”

Ford looked up, clinging onto the remembered praise, despite how hollow it felt.

“But guess what?” Bill had his hands on Ford’s cheeks in the memory now, staring up at his face, as close as close could be. “I’m smarter than you.”

Ford cringed, watching himself kiss Bill passionately at that. His muse just told him he was stupid comparatively, and he still found himself drawn to the god.

Watching Bill throw himself at Ford, kissing him back just as desperately, Ford wondered if Bill had been equally drawn to him, or if that was an act too.

If Ford thought on it for too long, his own assumptions disheartened him, but he had an opportunity here to analyse the evidence empirically.

Was it an act, or did Bill really harbour feelings for him?

“You’re special Sixer.” Project Mentum replayed the audio, overlaying it on top of memories like a montage, memories of Bill smiling at him, looking at him with awe or excitement, like he was the most fascinating creature on Earth. To Bill, he probably was, considering his disregard for everyone else on Earth, but Ford didn’t know if he meant it, if he really meant it. Bill could have been saying anything, crafting lies to make Stanford feel wanted.

“You’re mine. You’re special. You’re so special.” Bill’s voice warped and echoed on the screen, overlaying on top of itself eerily, responding to Ford’s thoughts. “So good. So special. Keep going, don’t stop. Sixer!”

Ford’s cheeks flushed with heat, and he looked away from the screens, feeling like this self-exploration was verging on pornographic. He was here to analyse and encrypt his thoughts, not to obsess over his only sexual experience.

His only romantic experience too. Bill just stole all his firsts in one fell swoop, when Ford fell in love with him.

But did Bill love him back? Or was his love a lie?

Ford didn’t know.

He never said it outright, the triangle disassembling whenever the tables were turned back on him. He never made a declaration.

Ford thought he would be kidding himself, trying to sieve through his memories to find evidence of the fact that Bill had, at some point, actually cared for him.
Ford scowled at his knees, ignoring the screen, playing out memories unprompted in response to Ford’s introspection.

“I don’t know. I’m starting to think that for all its faults – maybe I met you for a reason. Maybe we were always meant to meet? This connection between us, I haven’t felt for millennia. You make me feel things.”

Ford ignored the audio too, entrenched in his own circular logic.

What difference would it make if he could confirm that Bill gave a damn about him? The god’s personal feelings towards Stanford wouldn’t stop him from destroying Earth. He’d said as much.

“You expect me to give up my life’s work for you, but you won’t give up your life’s work for me?” Bill said up on the screen, his expression heartbroken. “How is that fair?”

Ford looked up, and recognised the scene that was playing out, the colour draining from his face in an instant.

NO. NO. NO. Ford’s thoughts raced across the screen.

NOT THIS MEMORY. THINK OF SOMETHING ELSE. SOMETHING ELSE. THINK. THINK!

“You don’t even know what it is you’re stopping.” Bill scoffed, up on the screen. “How exalted you’d be. How powerful I’d make you. You’d have everything you ever wanted in the palm of your six-fingered hand, and you throw it back in my face?”

IT’S NOT WHAT IT SEEMS STANFORD. IT CAN’T BE TRUE. DON’T BELIEVE IT. YOU DON’T WANT THIS. Read the screen on one of the monitors, while the monitor on the opposite side of the console read. POWERFUL BEYOND BELIEF, THE UNIVERSE IN THE PALM OF YOUR HAND. ALL THE MYSTERIES OF EXISTENCE YOURS TO EXPLORE. UNLIMITED POWER. UNLIMITED KNOWLEDGE.

This was where what Bill offered was so insidious. Stanford couldn’t deny it was tempting, even in his own head, his thoughts were a war of what he should and shouldn’t want. Was he so egotistical that he’d really want this, to be a god, or was he really so naïve to believe that he’d turn that down, that he didn’t want that power?

That was part of what was so captivating about Bill’s regard in the first place, that he’d secured the regard of a god. He summoned Bill here intending to take advantage of what the muse had to offer, looking to elevate himself, to reach heights no human had before.

“What do you mean everything I’d ever wanted? I wanted to use this portal like you promised we would.”

“To explore new worlds? Tick, you can still do that with me. To change the world, double tick! Changing the world is what I wanted.”

In an abstract way, perhaps it was, but from what Ford had seen, the kind of change Bill was capable of bringing ushered change in with fire and brimstone, decimation and desolation. Ford said as much, up on the screen.

“You want to destroy the world, not change it.”

“So I can rebuild it.” Bill insisted.
“It’s fine how it is!” Ford yelled back.

“Oh, that’s a lie.” Bill laughed, and his laugh echoed back from all of the monitors. “That’s rich, Sixer, it really is. It wasn’t fine when it chose you last, when it spurned your genius, when it turned on you for your deformity, when it decided that what makes you special makes you disgusting. How is any of that fine?”

Ford swallowed and looked down at the progress bar at the bottom of the monitor. The bar had only increased slightly, leaving it blinking on 6%. How much longer would this take? He was just supposed to sit here and endure this torturous reminiscence for another 94%? Wasn’t there a way to speed this up? To skip past these memories that stung Ford’s chest and made his conscience churn.

“Fine. Fine, let’s say you’re right. Let’s say I give you a chance.”

Ford froze, his jaw tensing, and he looked down at the papers littered on the study floor, his battered heart not strong enough to look up and watch the hope spread across Bill’s face again, his trust and enthusiasm so raw and unguarded, so misplaced.

“Really?” Ford cringed as the memory played on, the audio haunting Ford’s conscience all over again. “Thank you, thank you, thank you Sixer. You won’t regret it. I’ll give you anything you want. Absolutely anything.”

Ford curled his hands into fists, resting on his thighs, his nails biting into his palm as he kept his eyes on the floor. The monitors projected red tinged light as the memory played out, the unbinding circle casting a red hue across the forest, the light creeping into the edge of Ford’s vision, as the memory recited the butchered unbinding spell, severing Bill from his body.

Ford gritted his teeth as the audio continued to play, Bill’s words haunting him further.

“Sixer, no! Sixer! You’re doing it wrong. Stop! Stanford! Sixer! You’re hurting me!”

Ford closed his eyes, moisture leaking down his cheek, his nails dug deep into his flesh, struggling with his guilt. It was still hard to listen to this, hard to remember this betrayal, since the betrayal was his. It was hard to listen to Bill’s screams, begging him to stop, and it was harder still to know that he didn’t listen.

“I thought you were giving me a chance. You said –“

“I know what I said.” Stanford’s voice broadcast from the monitors, steely and determined. “Things change.”

Ford looked up at the screen, hoping to leech some of the resolve his past self seemed to have, wondering how he did it then, how he was supposed to do it now.

It was the wrong time to look up.

“Things change?” Bill spluttered, the ire apparent on his beautiful face. “This isn’t change, this is you. You – YOU did this to me.”

Tears ran down Ford’s cheeks now, his eyes drawn to the screen, watering, unable to look away, guilt constricting his throat, planting daggers in his chest.

Bill pressed his palms against the barrier, gold eyes baring anguish as they searched Stanford’s face, searched for a reason for this torrid betrayal.
“How could you do this to me?”

Ford stood up and paced around the room, the helmet’s cable stretching as he paced. Ford muttered to himself, his hands clenching and unclenching spasmodically, the coffee making him jittery as he spoke.

“This isn’t helping. There has to be another way to process these. A shortcut of some kind. Maybe if I turned off the monitors.”

“I thought you loved me.” Bill’s voice glitched, the cable attached to the headset jerking as Ford paced around the room. “Did that change too?”

Ford shook his head, and then screwed his eyes shut, determined not to look at the screen. Bill’s sobs continued, filtering through the system, and Ford tried to cover his ears with his hands, squeezing them under the helmet, attempting to block it all out.

Bill screamed in the memory, and thunder clapped in response to his ire, reality bending to the whim of his tumultuous moods.

“ANSWER ME YOU USELESS HACK! YOU DID THIS ON PURPOSE! YOU DID THIS TO ME ON PURPOSE! EVERY BIT OF IT FROM THE BEGINNING! DIDN’T YOU? I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU, I HATE YOU! YOU RUINED EVERYTHING!”

Ford spun around and bent over the keyboard, trying to find some way to manually skip past this excruciatingly loud part of the memory, gritting his teeth as the speakers screeched in their attempt to encompass Bill’s all-consuming rage.

“How do I turn off the audio?” Ford muttered, looking for a pathway in the code, becoming frustrated with his own inability, before he smacked the monitor angrily, desperation taking over. “How do I turn it off?”

The memory played on above on the screen, heedless of Ford’s wishes, the system still doggedly attempting to encrypt the memory.

“Bill, I –“

“YOU DON’T GET TO TALK, YOU BETRAYER! YOU COLD FACED MONSTER! LIAR! BACKSTABBER! You made me – you – you know what? I OWN YOU SIXER! I STILL OWN YOU! YOU’RE MINE FOREVER, DON’T THINK THIS GETS YOU OUT OF THAT. I’ll have from now until the END OF TIME to make you PAY FOR THIS!”

“How do I turn it off, dammit?” Ford slammed his fist against the machine, his eyes wet, his brow as twisted as his stomach was, hating every torturous second he spent exposing himself to his mistakes.

Being made to face his decisions, and the consequences of those decisions in order to protect his mind, was too high a cost to pay for Ford’s conscience. It ate at him, revisiting this painful memory, and he realised that he preferred to repress this part of the memory, continuing in blissful ignorance, rather than relive it in agony, all over again.

Bill was shrieking as he noticed the spell work eating away at his body, horrified to watch his vessel crumble away while he was still within, and the decibel level hurt Ford’s ears. Bill’s shrieking gave way to hysterical laughter, a hopeless, mad, pitiful sound.

Ford couldn’t stand to hear it anymore. He simply couldn’t stand it.
“It hurts.”

Ford wrenched the helmet off his head, throwing it across the room with an angry shout, and the image of Bill dissolving, crying, beseeching him, flickered off the screen.

“THIS ISN’T HELPING!” Ford yelled, levelling a kick at the base of the construct. “UGH! NONE OF THIS IS HELPING!”

The helmet clanged as it hit the floor, and it rolled across the study floor.

Ford’s chest heaved, as he panted through his hopeless anger, that anger giving way to the devastation that always lingered just a fraction away from Ford’s sane mind, lurking, waiting to rise up and consume him.

Staring at the fizzing static screens, Ford’s heavy breathing hiccupped, and the dam broke. Ford heaved anguished, angry sobs, breaking down in front of Project Mentum, his supposed salvation, reminding him of all the things he’d done wrong.

He was trying to convince himself he was righteous to turn on Bill, righteous to call the God out for the demonic creature that he was, but Ford’s thoughts just kept reminding him of how shockingly human Bill could be, and how thoroughly Ford had hurt him.

It was too much to bear.

Tired of staying up all night, of guzzling dark tasteless coffee and fighting to keep his eyes open, tired of staying awake, conscious of his thoughts, trapped in his head, Ford sunk to his knees on the floor of his study, surrounded by the many memories he had of sharing this space with Bill, and he felt weak.

This was too much for one man to feel, and in that instant, Ford didn’t know what he was fighting so hard against.

He was just tired of it all, tired of everything.

He just wanted to sleep.

And so he did.

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Ford woke up in a pile of trash next to the dumpster behind the bowling alley, his limbs stiff and sore.

The alley was covered in graffiti, strange symbols resembling an eye with a cross drawn through it, painted all over the brick wall. If it was a teenager’s ‘tag’ it was a poor one, but Stanford’s paranoid mind couldn’t help but imagine Bill’s eye, all things pointing back to what he was trying to forget. The universe telling him off, he imagined, for lapsing at his duty, for wavering like he had.

Wincing as he sat up, Ford gingerly pinched a banana peel off his jacket, and threw it to the side, shuddering at the stench. There was a coat hanger poking him in the back, and his legs ached, like
he’d been running around all night.

It was still night, the moon hanging back behind the clouds, and Ford wondered how long it had been since he crashed. He checked his watch, and eight hours had passed.

It was 4 in the morning.

Tapping the button on the side of the watch, Ford pulled up the portal statistics, having incorporated the readings into his smart watch’s design, and was thankful to note the portal was still offline. No recorded activations.

Well, that was a relief.

Ford dragged himself upright and checked himself over.

No blood this time, that was good.

His sleeves and trousers were wet and smelled vaguely of salt or brine. His torso was still dry, surprisingly, so Ford presumed Bill had either gone wading in the lake or had attempted to pull something up out of the water.

Idly Ford wondered whether the eldritch tooth was still at the bottom of the lake, or if he’d gone coffee table shopping. That seemed like the sort of thing Bill would do. A gift, to go with all the coffee Ford had been drinking.

Shaking his head, Ford patted himself down, checking that he still had his wallet, his car keys, the essentials.

He hoped he hadn’t attempted another hit and run, and worried for the pedestrians of Gravity Falls, hoping no one had courted Bill’s ire.

As he straightened up, he heard a noise at the mouth of the alley, and turned his head to see shadowy, hooded figures watching him. It almost seemed like they’d been pawing through the trash beside him, picking through his clothes maybe?

When he blinked at them, seeing them clearly, they backed up, and began to run away.

“Hey.” Ford’s paranoia was through the roof, and he chased after the mysterious figures, wanting to know what they’d seen, why they’d been following him, what they’d been doing pawing through the trash around him.

Why they were watching him? Was it Bill watching him? Did he send them? Maybe they were trying to stop him? To stop Bill from doing whatever he was doing in Ford’s body. Or maybe they were here to stop Ford. To stop him from stopping Bill

Ford ran out the end of the alleyway, convinced he’d seen eyes glint under one of the hoods. Possibly just the light from the street lamp catching on someone’s glasses, but possibly, Ford feared, a yellow glow?

“Who are you?” Ford called out, looking rather feral, his clothes soiled by the dumpster, his eyes wide with heavy bags below. “Why are you following me? Why are you wearing – wearing bathrobes? Show yourself!”

The hooded figures looked amongst themselves warily, before one of them shouted out, waving his hands mysteriously.
“IT IS UNSEEN!”

Ford paused in the street, stumped by that melodramatic turn of phrase, wondering why it sounded so familiar.

“No, it isn’t, you creeps.” Ford pointed out, sounding frustrated. “I can see you just fine.”

The hooded figures looked at one another nervously, before one of them shrugged, and began throwing fistfuls of trash at Stanford.

“It is unseen! It is unseen! Fear The Blind Eye!”

Ford held his hand up to cover his face, batting away the garbage, and the hooded figures ran, their footsteps sounding out all the way down the high street.

Ford shook what he presumed was someone’s rotting tuna salad sandwich off his arm, lamenting that the pungent substance got on his sleeve, and squinted in the direction the strange hooded people went.

“The blind eye?” Ford muttered, and scoffed, flicking more garbage off his person. “Isn’t that redundant?”

The silent night chose not to respond and Ford resigned himself to walking back to the shack, covered in garbage, on sore aching legs, vowing to himself once again that he’d distance himself from sleep, lest Bill take hold again.

Ford couldn’t let that happen.

Kryptos hovered behind Pyronica, relying on her to protect him from Bill’s mania.

The pink cyclops stepped further into the chaos that was Bill’s private study, watching Bill’s frenzied demeanour cautiously.

The triangle was glitching in and out of his usual form, colours and shapes shifting and changing, blobs of colour shifting under his bricks like a novelty lava lamp, his eye blurring with static as he surveyed the universe, objects levitating randomly as he focused, almost in a trance. There were several energy cubes piled up in the study, like Bill had wanted them close, and one cube was cracked open with a silly straw and an umbrella poking over the rim.

“How’s it going?” Pyronica asked hesitantly, stepping closer to the triangle. “Bill, can we talk?”

“Can’t talk Py. Too busy.” Bill replied. “There are limitless dimensional possibilities to scour through, and I still haven’t found what I’m looking for yet!”

“And what are you looking for?” Pyronica questioned curiously.

“I’ll tell you when I find it.” Bill replied, still staring out into middle distance, levitating with his legs crossed, his fingers pressed together in the upside-down triangle shape, clearly attempting to focus, even while his powers went haywire, the walls shifting into various optical illusions,
melting and refracting, while books and scattered miscellany bounced through the air.

“Uhuh.” Pyronica exchanged a dubious glance with Kryptos, before she spoke up again. “When are we going to talk about the portal? I thought you said you were handling it.”

“I am handling it.” Bill replied.

“Okay, so then where is it? Why isn’t it open yet? Why haven’t we gone through to earth yet?” Pyronica pressed.

Bill blinked, and the static fizzed out of his eye, clearing his vision, and he looked at Pyronica, his eye a little too wide to be reassuring. He seemed hyped up on interdimensional energy, talking too fast, his brain racing a mile a minute.

“Because Pyronica, I’m not going to let us just wander through when I already know we’re being sabotaged.”

“Sabotaged?” Pyronica blinked slowly, trying to keep her tone neutral.

“It all makes sense! Why Sixer would turn on me so suddenly, why I got ousted from my body, why things have been so difficult every step of the way. It’s so obvious.” Bill detailed, winding himself up to sound like some sort of conspiracy nut. “Someone’s been watching us, playing with us.”

“Uh.” Pyronica exchanged another glance with Kryptos, listening to her friend’s paranoid spree.

“Sixer saw me take down Lama Szlam. He couldn’t have seen that on his own, someone had to have shown him, that means not only has someone been watching Sixer, manipulating him - they’ve been inside his head! That’s MY place! If someone could get through to Sixer and make him hate me all of a sudden like that, then this means that his entire paranoid ‘Bill is evil’ breakup schtick doesn’t count, because he’s been manipulated into thinking that. He thinks I’m evil because he saw me blast through Lama Szlam in a vision, not because he really thinks I’m evil, so all I need to do is prove it was sabotage, and this whole thing just goes away!”

“But… you did blast through Lama Szlam.” Kryptos pointed out, confused.

“But he didn’t know that. He wasn’t supposed to know that. So HOW did he know that? Someone’s manipulating him – ergo someone’s attempting to sabotage the entire project – ergo the portal isn’t safe anymore – ergo I’m protecting my investment by not touching the portal. Do you see? It’s so simple!”

“Er… no.” Pyronica said bluntly, her hand on her hip, looking sceptically at Bill now. “I don’t see how any of that matters. If you can slip into Sixer’s bod when he’s asleep, you can just turn on the portal, and deal with whoever or whatever sabotaged you when you’ve got earth in hand. Duh.”

“No, I’m dealing with this now.” Bill said resolutely. “I’m covering all my bases first. This is what I did last week.”

Swiping his hand, Bill conjured a screen, showing what he’d been doing in Sixer’s body during his night time excursions. On the screen, an image of the crop circle was projected from overhead, the bloody sigils depicting a warding spell, hiding the town from interdimensional sight.

“I’ve made my mark on this place. Nobody’s going to be messing with this town now. I’ve got my name all over it. Protection up the whazoo, courtesy of me.” Bill said, oozing pride. “I’d like to see someone try to sabotage us now.”
“Is that blood?” Kryptos asked, mildly intrigued. “That’s a lot of blood. Where did you even get so much blood?”

“From the Northwest Slaughterhouse down the road. Can you believe they’re just throwing this stuff away? Idiots, am I right?” Bill scoffed, rolling his eye, before he pointed at the image of the circle on the screen. “And everything else, the mercury and hair Sixer had left over from that time we went scalping unicorns together. It was perfect, this is going to work perfectly.”

“Okay…” Pyronica looked between the screen, and Bill, who’s eye was flickering again. “So, if you’ve warded the place up, why not open the portal now? Jump in the next time Sixer conks out and just stroll right through?”

“I’ve got to get him when he’s asleep. He just woke up, so I’ve got another 120 hours give or take until he breaks and sleeps again.” Bill explained, rubbing his hands together enthusiastically.

“If he was asleep just now you could have done it then.” Pyronica pointed out. “You could have turned the portal on. What the heck were you doing instead?”

“We are being watched Pyronica.” Bill claimed dramatically. “I had to take drastic measures.”

“What did you do?” She asked, resigned to Bill’s manic behaviour.

“Well, first I thought I’d search the lake, but that was a bust. There was too much water and too little me, but I knew he had to be here somewhere, so I went downtown.” Bill’s fingers were twitching, almost strangling the air. “The pet shop beside the bowling alley, I broke in, and I found it. The disgusting pink amphibians. There were six of them in the tank, so much for an endangered species.”

“Oh dear.” Pyronica muttered, already perturbed by the way this was going.

“You endanger my species, I endanger your species. An eye for an eye, and since I didn’t want his eyes on me, I threw each one out on the floor. Can’t breathe out of water.” Bill laughed to himself, sounding crazy. “But they kept walking, dragging themselves across the tiles, so I got Sixer’s shoe and I stepped on them! Squashed them like a bug! Hahahahahahah!”

Pyronica winced and stepped closer to Bill. She eyed off the energy cube on the desk with the silly straw in it, wondering just how much of Sixer’s worship juice Bill had ingested.

“So, you killed a bunch of newts. Okay.” Pyronica held her hands out and went to rest her claw on Bill’s shoulder. “Maybe you should cool down a little, this is not the best time for you to get yourself completely diagonal.”

Bill blinked at her impatiently, waiting for her to get to the point.

“You say we’ve been sabotaged? Do you know by who?” Pyronica asked slowly.

“What do you think I’m looking for Py? The cool prizes in the bottom of cereal boxes?”

“I don’t know what that –“ Pyronica started, her tone blunt.

“OF COURSE, I’m looking for our saboteur.” Bill threw his hands in the air. “I just need to know how they did it. Sixer was shown what went down on Lama Szlam but from a distance, like a bird’s eye view. We didn’t see anyone there, so there had to be some big player pulling the strings.”
“You said Sixer was shown a vision?” Pyronica prompted, looking to the side at Kryptos, both of them thinking the same thing.

“He must have been. I don’t see how else he could have seen that happen.” Bill frowned, and his eye filled with static again, searching.

While he looked off into middle distance, Kryptos and Pyronica conducted a wordless conversation, consisting entirely of urging looks, emphatic eyebrow waggling, and mouthed appellations.

Pyronica chewed on her lip, knowing she should tell Bill what they saw in Sixer’s dream mirror, but Kryptos was waving his hands at her, making x’s with his arms, running his finger across his surface like he was slitting his neck, and pointing to himself emphatically.

“We have to.” Pyronica mouthed at him reluctantly.

“You said it yourself, he’ll kill me!” Kryptos mouthed back, reaching up to grab onto Pyronica’s elbow. “Pyronica - don’t!”

Pyronica squeezed her eyes shut, and pursed her lips, looking pained, before she turned away from Kryptos and looked over at Bill.

“Bill.” Pyronica said, the reluctance clear in her voice now. “There’s something I have to tell you.”

Blinking static out of his eye again, Bill shook himself out of his trance, and watched Pyronica expectantly, his eye wide and attentive.

“When you were off in that fiery dimension, right after Sixer betrayed you that one time, w-“ Pyronica could feel Kryptos’ little hand squeezing her elbow, and she did what she didn’t often do. She lied to Bill.

“I went in your mirror room.”

“Okay.” Bill looked at her, waiting for her to say something that warranted the serious tone in her voice. She had access to the mirror room, she was allowed. Bill didn’t see what the big deal was.

“And – and I found Sixer’s dream mirror – because I wanted to find out what he did to you, you know? I wanted to understand what went wrong, because just a day before you told me things were fine with him – more than fine, and it didn’t make any sense for him to turn around and kick you out like that.” Pyronica explained, fumbling through her explanation, a poor liar to the people that mattered to her. Luckily what she said contained more truths than lies.

Kryptos was standing beside her, watching her with awe and fear combined, shocked that she would take the fall for him like this.

“So I peeked in his dreams a little, and –“

“And?” Bill prompted, still waiting for the other shoe to fall.

“Well, I saw what looked like a memory he had. And in the memory, there was this voice, talking to him.” Pyronica laced her fingers together, and fidgeted awkwardly as she divulged, feeling like a naughty child confessing. “It was saying nasty stuff about you, telling Sixer you were lying, that you were using him. It full yelled at him to open his eyes in the dream, and it was so loud, he woke up. I think that maybe that was what made him turn on you, and whoever this voice was, they were
“And you didn’t think to tell me this, why?” Bill said, his voice suddenly cold and icy.

“B-because –” Pyronica looked around the room, trying not to look at Kryptos, but not knowing where else to look. He gawped up at her, not wanting her to draw Bill’s attention to him, and she quickly looked away from his indignant expression, back to Bill’s intent icy gaze, making something up on the spot. “Because I – I got spooked, and – and I was holding one of the night terror globes, and when I got spooked I accidentally … broke it?”

Bill blinked at her, his eyelashes batting as he processed this information. Pyronica didn’t tell him because she was spooked? She tripped? What kind of parallel universe was this?

“And then the night terror started to leak everywhere, and it went into the mirror, and then Sixer started having nightmares, these really bad nightmares. And I didn’t want to say anything because what if I screwed things up for you two? I didn’t mean for that to happen. What if he never talked to you again, and you two never made up, and it would be all my fault?” Pyronica wrung her hands and let some of her genuine distress seep into her act. Her bottom lip wobbled as she blinked her large eye soulfully at Bill, tearing up slightly. “What if you never talked to me again? Bill, you’re my best friend in all of existence. Please don’t be mad.”

“Woah, hey, just settle down okay?” Bill held his hand up, hushing Pyronica’s waterworks. “Do I look like I’m mad?”

“Maybe?” Pyronica guessed, her bottom lip still pouting outwards pre-emptively in case Bill really was mad.

“Okay, maybe I’m a little mad.” Bill conceded, rolling his eye. “If you’d told me about this sooner, I could have tracked down whoever snuck in Sixer’s head and ended them already, and this entire situation would be a non-event. But you had to keep it to yourself, and I wasted precious weeks not knowing this very important piece of information. So yeah, I’d say I’m a teensy bit mad at that.”

Pyronica jutted her bottom lip out further and managed the best puppy dog eye she had in her arsenal, laying it on thick to culture Bill’s mercy.

“But –” Bill sighed, and fixed Pyronica with a sincere look. “I’m not going to stay mad at you for making a mistake.”

“Really?” Pyronica asked, worrying at her bottom lip with her claw tip.

“Yes, really.” Bill crossed his arms and gestured at Pyronica impatiently. “So, you can cut the sad act and tell me what this voice sounded like. Out with the details.”

“I don’t know. It sounded really echoey and cranky and full of itself.” Pyronica divulged, being purposefully vague. “I felt like I’d heard it somewhere before, but I just can’t put my finger on where.”

“Hmm.” Bill rubbed the bricks under his eye pensively, before he snapped his fingers. “Okay, how bout you let me take a look around inside your beautiful big head, Py? That’ll get this sorted.”

Pyronica could feel Kryptos’ death grip on her elbow and feeling the pressure she blurted out. “Why don’t you ask Sixer?”

Bill blinked at Pyronica. “Ask Sixer?”
“That way you get to talk to him, and you can see the memory first hand.” Pyronica said awkwardly, appealing to Bill’s fondness for Six Fingers to distract him from poking around inside her head. If he did that, he’d see it was Krypton that broke the night terror, and she’d be in hot water for lying to him. As much as she believed Bill could do without prolonging his obsession with the human, currently diverting Bill to Sixer was convenient. She knew he’d take the bait if the bait was Six Fingers. “Maybe you could even convince him to join you again, now that you know that someone made him betray you in the first place. He probably still wants you. Maybe it can be salvaged?”

“Hmmm.” Bill pondered, and Pyronica felt like sweating, she was so nervous. Lying to Bill was a dangerous game, and she didn’t feel comfortable keeping the truth from him, but she also for some unfathomable reason didn’t want to be the indirect cause of Krypton’s death.

Seconds inched by, Bill lost in thought, before finally, he responded with something more than a thoughtful hum.

“You may have a point.” Bill rested his fist in his palm decisively. “I can still salvage something with Sixer.”

“Yeah!” Pyronica cheered, perhaps a little too enthusiastically, relieved that Bill wouldn’t be poking around in her head. “You can do it! Go get your dumb human back, Bill, win him over.”

Bill’s demeanour brightened, no longer looking so absurdly frazzled. The walls stopped shifting, resuming their usual state of semi-order, the spare cubes were banished back to the safe room with a wave of Bill’s hand, and in an instant, it was like Bill’s odd paranoid breakdown never happened.

“I’ll get him to join me.” Bill insisted, beaming just picturing the possibility. “Watch this space.”

He phased out of the room, brick by brick, and when he was gone, Pyronica’s shoulders sagged as she exhaled the sigh of relief she’d been holding in.

“You told him to get his human back?” Krypton critiqued. “Isn’t that counter intuitive?”

“Here I thought you’d be grateful I saved your skin, but you just like to criticise.” Pyronica rolled her eye and placed her hands on her hips, turning to scowl at Krypton.

Krypton put his hands up defensively. “Don’t get me wrong, I’m very appreciative that you took the fall for me. Couldn’t be happier to be in one piece, alive, and not screaming.”

“Uh huh.” Pyronica raised her brow sceptically.

“But haven’t we just made ourselves a bigger problem? He was already obsessed with the human, this is just going to distract him more, and delay us from opening the portal.” Krypton explained, continuing his critique. “I just think this is a one step forward two steps back scenario.”

“Well sor-ry Mister Know-It-All.” Pyronica said mockingly. “We can’t all lie on command. I was thinking on my feet, it was the best I could come up with at the time, and it worked, didn’t it?”

“In the sense that…” Krypton rolled his hands together, watching Pyronica, coming off as the patronising rhombus he was.

“In the sense that you’re not dead.” Pyronica said bluntly, turning to leave the annoying compass, waving over her shoulder. “You’re welcome by the way.”

“I didn’t –“ Krypton spluttered. “I didn’t say thank you!”
“YOU’RE WELCOME!” Pyronica yelled, rolling her eye as she left.

Stanford poured instant coffee granules into his mug, filling it three quarters of the way up, bombarding the toxic mixture with intense amounts of sugar. It was the only way the caffeinated sludge was bearable, and Ford sorely wished for a proper cup of tea, but he had to stay awake. He was running out of coffee granules, a pitiful amount left in the jar. This was the fifth jar he powered through this week, the last one he had in the house, hidden right at the back of the pantry. He’d need to make a trip to the store soon.

Project Mentum was recalibrating downstairs. Stanford was at a loss as to how the machine was taking so damn long to encrypt his thoughts. And what’s worse was that the machine seemed to fixate on Ford’s memories of Bill. It was either the machine fixating, or Stanford, but he didn’t want to admit the true depths of his obsession.

As if to cause him to second guess, to self-doubt his actions constantly, the machine threw every positive memory of Bill in his face, bracketing each confirmation of his treachery with the sort of heart-warming memory that Ford once took solace in.

Stirring the sugar through his coffee, Ford dwelled on the most recent memory the machine harangued him with.

“TWO WORDS. Cathy Crenshaw.”

Ford had been perversely elated at the time to hear that Bill cared enough about his feelings to get back at his high school bully/crush, but now that he was second guessing everything, he wasn’t sure if he could take that petty revenge on Ford’s behalf in the spirit in which it was intended.

The machine would take another hour or so to recalibrate the updates Ford had installed to hopefully speed the process up, to debug its fixation on his memories of Bill.

Stirring his coffee, Ford’s eyes slid over to the lounge room, the telephone sitting temptingly on top of the phone book, perched on the coffee table.

Ford absently brought the coffee to his lips and had a sip, wrinkling his nose at the taste. It tasted like sweetened tar. Wonderful.

Looking for something to sustain his interest, something to keep him awake, to keep him occupied while the machine ran its updates, Ford walked into the living room, and sat down on the couch, sliding the phone off the phone book, opening it up on the coffee table.

Pausing, Ford considered what he was doing. Calling up his high school crush years down the track could be considered the awkward move of a jilted lover, but Ford wasn’t the jilted lover in this scenario, and the longer he dwelled on Bill’s dubious actions, the more concerned he became for Cathy. As concerned as he could be for someone who made his life miserable.

Flipping open the phone book, looking for Crenshaw, Ford ran his fingertip down the page and found the most familiar listing under ‘Crenshaw’. Ford was fairly certain that was Cathy’s household number. He memorised it, back when he was infatuated with her. Checking in the phone
book was really just a formality at this point.

Taking another sip of his sweetened coffee sludge, Ford picked the telephone off the hook and
dialed the number.

The phone rang for a while, the dial tone stretching on, until someone picked up on the other end.

“Hello?” That sounded like Cathy’s mother.

“Hello, I’m looking to speak to Cathy?” Ford enquired politely, pushing his glasses up his nose.
“I’m an old… friend from high school, Stanford Pines. I know it’s been a while, I just wanted to
see if I could borrow her for a chat.”

There was a terse silence on the other end of the line for a while, before Cathy’s mother responded,
her voice sounding choked with emotion.

“Cathy doesn’t … live here anymore.”

“Well, do you have a forwarding number?” Ford asked, reaching for a pen and paper, resting the
telephone between his ear and his shoulder.

Cathy’s mother seemed to exhale tersely before reciting a number for Stanford. He jotted it down
and thanked her for her time.

That wasn’t unusual. Of course, Cathy would have moved out by now. Maybe relocated to a
different city, she always did plan on seeing New York. Her goal in high school was to be a
socialite, or a fashion designer. As Ford had yet to see any ‘Crenshaw Clothes’ in the magazines, he
assumed she went with the former occupation, if you could even call it that.

Ford took another sip of his disgusting coffee, and dialed the new number provided.

The phone rang for a while, and eventually was answered, though for a moment, Stanford thought
he’d dialed the wrong number.

“Hello, thank you for calling the Ancora Psychiatric Hospital, how may I direct your call?”

Ford frowned. “Um, I’m not sure I have the right number, actually. You wouldn’t happen to know
a Cathy Crenshaw at all, would you? Perhaps you could help redirect my call?”

“Oh, Cathy is one of our patients here.” The nurse on the other end of the line divulged. “She
rarely gets calls from anyone, I’m sure she’ll be delighted to hear from you. What did you say your
name was again?”

Ford swallowed, immediately concerned.

After a moment of deep apprehension Ford spoke, “Stanford Pines.”

“I’ll just have one of the orderlies fetch her for you. Please hold.”

Jazzy hold music played from the telephone, and Stanford sat, stewing on his worry.

Was this his fault? Did Bill’s intervention send her here, or was she simply led to seek help her as a
natural causation of her lifestyle? Stanley always used to say she was crazy, a ‘crazy bitch’ to
paraphrase some very choice insults, but Ford assumed he just said that to make him feel better
after seeing the way she treated him. She was a habitual sadist and user, a bone deep narcissist to
the core, Stanford was sure that pointed to some kind of personality disorder.
But Bill said he got back at Cathy Crenshaw for what she did to Ford. Did he do this?

Was Ford responsible? He felt his stomach flip at the possibility, nauseous already, the guilt building pre-emptively.

The hold music cut off, and the cheerful sounding nurse was back.

“I’ll just pass you over now, here she is.”

Ford was listening closely, anxious to hear something that would shift the blame off his shoulders for Cathy’s condition.

The nurse could be heard, handing the phone across.

“Cathy, you have a call from a friend. Isn’t that nice? Do you want to speak with him?”

Cathy made a noncommittal noise, but it was definitely her. Ford would recognise her voice anywhere, he spent so long enamoured by it. And so long after loathing it.

The nurse doubled back to ask Ford. “Oh, what did you say your name was again?”


“Stanford Pines is on the – oh no, Cathy, don’t –“

Ford could hear screaming, abrupt frenzied wordless screaming from Cathy, and he flinched away from the phone, shocked.

The screaming continued, and Ford could hear the orderlies attempting to reason with her.

“Cathy, calm down. It’s alright, nothing’s wrong.”

“I’M SORRY! I’M SORRY! I’M SORRY!” Cathy screamed, and it sounded like there was a scuffle. “I’M SO-”

“Cathy –“

Cathy screamed, and her inconsolable sobs were interspersed with fractured apologies uttered in differing tones. She sounded like she was begging, bargaining, reasoning, and fearful with every intonation, and it struck Stanford that ‘sorry’ might be the only word she had left to express herself with from the way she was intoning the phrase. She repeated it like it was her language, wailing it wildly.

The nurse spoke again, this time speaking to Stanford, who had gone white, sitting rigid, listening to Cathy’s breakdown.

“I’m so sorry, she’s not usually like this. She’s having one of her episodes. Perhaps try calling back another time.”

Ford heard the dial tone as the nurse hung up on him, Cathy’s screams ending as abruptly as they started, and Ford just sat there, shell-shocked.

He sat there for a long while, unable to process what had just happened.

Confirmation. Confirmation that it was his fault what happened to her. She wouldn’t react like that at the mere mention of his name if it wasn’t somehow his fault.
Ford was in shock, caught on the notion that when Bill said he got back at Cathy for him, he didn’t just give her a telling what for, or a bad hair day, or something equally harmless.

Bill literally drove her insane.

Ford’s hands started shaking, though he doubted it was the coffee this time.

The only other person he’d ever had feelings for, bully or not, was now shrieking bloody murder in a psychiatric asylum, driven mad by what she’d done to Ford in high school, all thanks to Stanford’s psychotic ex-boyfriend or whatever they were.

Bill wasn’t even his ex when he did this, Bill did this to endear himself to Stanford. He intended this as a gift. Retribution. A gift Ford was delighted to receive.

Ford was still reeling from this horrendous revelation when the radio on the mantel piece turned on.

Ford looked up, drawn out of his guilt induced daze, to stare at the machine, static fizzing. He didn’t turn it on. It hadn’t been on in days. He found the music a distracting reminder of better days.

Watching the radio, Ford could see the am/fm slider moving of its own behest, and he felt the hairs raise on the back of his neck.

The static crackled out, the slider landing on a station midway through a broadcast. Ella Fitzgerald’s crooning voice sounded out.

“Stars fading but I linger on dear
Still craving your kiss
I’m longing to linger till dawn dear
Just saying this –”

“No.” Ford whispered to himself, mild horror settling in on his shoulders.

“Sweet dreams till sunbeams find you
Sweet dreams that leave all worries behind you
But in your dreams whatever they be
Dream a little dream of me.”

Ford looked down at his thick cup of coffee, and frantically began gulping it down. He paused, as the slider shifted, static warping, the channel changing.

This was either the universe’s sick idea of a joke, or some sort of freak occurrence, a supernatural playlist. Ford hoped it wasn’t what he thought it was. Frank Sinatra sung out from the radio now.

“I’ve got you under my skin.
I’ve got you deep in the heart of me.
So deep in my heart that you’re really a part of me.
I’ve got you under my skin.”

“That’s definitely him.” Ford muttered, scowling at the radio, recognising Bill’s sense of humour and his love of golden age crooners.

Ford paced over to the radio and turned it off, but the song just kept playing. He unplugged it from the socket, and even turned the radio over, shaking the backup batteries out from the back, but the
music played on, even without a power source.

“Don't you know, little fool, you never can win? Use your mentality, wake up to reality. But each time that I do just the thought of you makes me stop before I begin-“

Ford was so frantically obsessed with shaking the batteries out of the radio that he didn’t notice the colour draining from the walls, grey seeping into everything, casting his world into monochrome. He only looked up when he heard it, Bill’s voice sounding out from behind him, finishing the song.

“Cause I’ve got yooooooooou under my skin.” Bill sang, and Ford turned around sharply, stunned to see Bill hovering in his living room, swinging his cane theatrically, the triangle’s bricks glowing a healthy gold.

“See, that particular poetic metaphor would be more effective if I actually had skin.” Bill examined his nails for a moment, before batting his eyelashes at Stanford slyly. “But yours will do.”

“Bill.” Ford narrowed his eyes at the God, still incensed by the revelation of what he did to Cathy, before his eyes widened in panic, assuming that Bill being here meant he had slipped up, that he’d somehow gotten through the portal. “What are you doing here? You can’t access this world.”

“Slow your roll, Genius.” Bill rolled his eye and gestured at the monochrome walls. “Where do you think we are?”

“I’m asleep?” Ford questioned, looking over at the cup of coffee he’d been gulping down, the mug sitting innocuously on the coffee table. “No, but I –“

“I was wondering when you’d get around to the decaf.” Bill floated closer and tapped on Ford’s mug of coffee with his cane. “Rookie mistake, not reading the label.”

“Decaf?” Ford looked over to the coffee cup. “It can’t be.”

“Oh, but it is.” Bill replied, drumming his fingers on his cane as he spoke. “I’ve explored every inch of that pantry. The pot of decaf right at the back has been sitting there for, oh, I don’t know, couple years now. That’s what you get for not checking the use by date, by the way Sixer. You live like an old man.”

Ford was scowling at the coffee cup, devastated to discover he’d been drinking that disgusting mixture and it wouldn’t even keep him awake. Decaf was a curse on the world of beverages.

“I knew you’d be getting desperate at some point. Desperate and sleep deprived. It was only a matter of time.” Bill floated closer towards Stanford, reaching out and to cup Ford’s cheeks with his hands, squishing them together. “At least this way we’re reunited. Did you miss me?”

Ford brought his hands up to push Bill’s wiry limbs away, but four more hands shot out from Bill’s sides, wrapping around his wrists, keeping his arms pinned back. Ford struggled against Bill’s grip, but made little progress, Bill still floating in front of him, indulgently squishing his cheeks together.

“Let me go.” Ford said, his words muffled by the way Bill pushed his cheeks together.

“You’ve gotta put your dukes down first, Sixer, and play nice. I came here with good news, after all.” Bill divulged, sounding cheerful.
“Good news?” Ford muttered, his brow quirking in confusion.

“Good news. A rare gift.” Bill took a moment to savour Sixer’s adorable expression, squishing his cheeks up further, humming to himself, before he released Ford, patting his cheek sweetly. “You’re lucky you’re so cute. Forgiven, too.”

“What?” Ford asked, baffled, his hands freed from Bill’s grip. Ford rubbed his wrists, and eyed Bill off warily.

“I said you’re forgiven. I forgive you.” Bill said magnanimously. Ford continued to watch Bill with scepticism, not immediately grateful as Bill had pictured.

“You know, this is really a kodak moment, doesn’t happen often. By often I mean ever, so you might want to look a bit more excited, IQ. You’re forgiven.”

“What are you talking about?” Ford questioned, still frowning.

“I’m forgiving you.” Bill blinked at him, as though that said it all. “For everything.”

Ford continued to squint at Bill, suspicion competing with confusion on his tired features. Bill sighed and rolled his eyes, before elaborating.

“It wasn’t your fault. Your entire backhand with my body in the forest, betraying me, believing I was this horrible monster. Here I was thinking you just suffered the most severe case of unprompted 180 in the universe, but there was someone in your head!”

Bill smacked his hand against his bricks above his eye. “Duh! How did I not figure this out before? Of course, you wouldn’t turn on me like that.”

“What –” Ford repeated, louder this time, still not following. “Are you talking about?”

“The vision.” Bill put his hand on his side sassily. “The cryptic dreams. The mysterious voice you must have heard. Now, I don’t know what they said, but I sure wouldn’t trust them to keep it impartial. You were manipulated. It wasn’t your fault. You should have told me, by the way. I should be the only voice inside your head, at least you know I’m the only one you can trust.”

“I can’t trust you.” Ford interjected.

“Because some voice told you I’m a monster, yadda yadda – look, Sixer, it’s not true!” Bill insisted impatiently, frustrated with the scientist’s lack of cooperation. Softening his expression, he nuzzled closer to Ford, his eyelashes brushing against Ford’s stubble, murmuring. “You know it’s not true. You know me.”

Ford leaned away, holding himself stiff. “Get away from me.”

Bill seemed to sulk at that, before winding his arms out to loop around Ford’s shoulders, tsking. “God. Stop being stubborn. Can’t we just kiss and make up?”

“No! Get off me Bill.” Stanford raised his voice and pushed Bill back, resting his hands against the surface of Bill’s brick front. The bricks were warm, but Ford tried not to let that distract him.

Bill blinked at him, his brow furrowing with hurt and confusion, frustrated that his magnanimous act of forgiveness wasn’t working how he imagined. “Way to be melodramatic Sixer. It’s not like it’s the ‘end of the world’ to be nice to me. I am technically your – what would you call it? Eternal partner? Boyfriend?”
“You’re not my boyfriend.” Ford said, his lip curling with anger at the sentiment. Aiming his words to cut, to put as much distance between them as he could, he let his anger speak for him, potentially a very unwise decision. “You’re my… burden.”

His words had the desired effect. Bill reeled back from him like he’d been slapped, letting go of Ford instantly.

“What did you just say?” Bill asked, his voice barely above an incredulous whisper.

“I said, you are my burden.” Ford repeated, cruelly driving the words home. He felt the need to lash out at Bill after what he did, anger still seething in his veins, making his words barbed and venomous. “Ever since I met you, this road you’ve led me down, what I’ve done – what I’ll have to do to stop you –”

“Listen, you don’t have to stop me –” Bill attempted, holding his hands up, waving his hands as if to dismiss Ford’s sudden abrupt shift in attitude. “Stop that.”

Ford shook his head, working himself up.

“I am all that stands between you and this entire planet.” Ford said, his ego and his paranoia leading him to fervently believe it. “And I will not let you hurt another person.”

“See, the only person you’d be hurting is yourself.” Bill reasoned, trying to appeal to Stanford, trying to sidestep his sudden declaration, acting like it hadn’t happened. “You should be joining me. Think of what we could do together!”

“I’m not going to join you.” Ford wrinkled his nose derisively and shook his head. “I’m going to stop you.”

“Now, I know you’ve got it into your head that that’s what you should be doing – but you’re wrong! You’re being manipulated by that voice!” Bill implored, clinging to that explanation like a lifeline. “Open your eyes.”

“I’ve had my eyes opened.” Ford insisted, standing firm. “I see clearly now what it is that I have to do.”

“Oh, and what is it that you have to do?” Bill rolled his eye contemptuously.

“I have to stop you. Any way I can. With everything I have. Stopping you is – it’s my duty now.” Ford announced, nodding as he spoke. “My purpose. I caused this, now I have to fix it, and I can’t let you sway me. This is what I have to do, what’s on my shoulders now because of you.”

“Where is all this conviction coming from, Sixer?” Bill crossed his arms, eyeing Ford up. “The last time I left you couldn’t wait to have me back.”

“You threw yourself down those stairs, being stubborn, fighting me.” Bill scoffed. “Which you don’t need to do, by the way. All of this you’re bringing on yourself. There is a simpler solution.”

“Which is?” Ford narrowed his eyes, clenching his fists.

“Join me!” Bill threw his hands in the air emphatically. “Can the melodramatic burden bullshit and get a good night’s sleep for once. We can be together again. You know you want that.”
“I don’t.” Ford said stubbornly, despite how the words felt like a lie. A forced lie. He couldn’t waver.

“You’d want it if I looked like this.” Bill waved his hand, and his form shifted, swept up in a mist until his particles reassembled in the shape Ford had created for him. The beautiful, soft looking human body Ford had crafted, Bill’s yellow eyes shining beseechingly through.

Ford took a hesitant step back, unwilling to admit how drawn he was to seeing Bill like this. His heart hurt but his morals stayed fast.

“You can’t pick and choose, Sixer.” Bill said, walking closer to Stanford. He got right up into Ford’s space, and rested his hands on Ford’s torso, his hands warming his chest. “You wouldn’t have to if you joined me. With me reshaping reality, you could have whatever you want, whenever you want. You could have this.”

Ford was torn, looking down at Bill’s eyes peering out from this beautiful face, feeling him smooth his hands over Ford’s chest like he used to. He couldn’t deny it was tempting, tempting to give in and have this.

He swallowed, and remembered what Bill was capable of. “And if I wanted you to leave Earth? To leave all these people alone? To not hurt anyone?”

“What does it hurt to just let me have this?” Bill hissed, frustrated, balling his fists against Ford’s chest.

“Wh –” Ford scoffed, and looked down at Bill, listing his crimes. “It hurt Fiddleford. It hurt Willow already. And the Valentinos.”

Bill tsked and rolled his eyes, muttering under his breath. “Red.”

“It hurt me.” Ford continued, trying to make Bill see that what he was doing was wrong. “It hurt Cathy Crenshaw.”

“What do you care about Cathy Crenshaw?” Bill questioned sourly.

“I know what you did to her Bill.” Ford accused. “She may have been horrid in high school, but no one deserves that. Why did you -?”

“You want to know what she said to me when I confronted her for you?” Bill interrupted, glaring at the protesting scientist. “She said ‘Stanford who’? She didn’t even remember you and you’re defending her?”

“I – I’m not defending her.” Ford swallowed, unwilling to admit that Bill’s words were affecting him. “I just can’t defend what you did. How can you defend it, doing that to anyone, regardless of what they did?”

“I don’t need to defend it.” Bill countered. “It doesn’t matter.”

“Yes, it does!” Ford spluttered. “It does matter, and I have to keep people safe from you because of it. Do you not get that? Do you just not understand how these things matter to these people?”

“It doesn’t matter to me.” Bill shrugged, and crept his hands up Ford’s chest, trying to loop his arms around Ford’s neck again dotingly.

“And that’s the problem.” Ford exclaimed and reached up to grab Bill’s wrists, pulling them down,
halting his embrace. “That is precisely why I have to stop you.”

“Not this again.” Bill groaned, and rolled his eyes, frustrated.

“You don’t care about the billions of people who live here, who you’ll be hurting if you go through the portal, and you don’t care about their lives, their families. You don’t care about anyone, unless they can fit some sort of use for you. That’s the only reason you even tolerated Fiddleford. That’s probably the only reason you tolerated me.”

“Hey, come on Sixer. Don’t be like that.” Bill complained, hardly keen to just stand here and be told off like this.

“And if I don’t stand against you –” Ford shook his head, running his hand through his hair, before looking at Bill’s quietly seething expression, dumbstruck. “I am the only thing standing between you and the rest of the world.”

“Oh please.” Bill huffed out a bitter laugh, glaring at Ford. “You think I couldn’t have gone down into your little basement and turned on the portal if I wanted to? Even if I didn’t use your body to do it, I could pick any rube off the street and have them read your journals. An idiot could do it. It would be easy.”

Ford looked horrified, realising suddenly that his attention to detail and devotion to chronicling the functionality of the portal compromised the safety of the world. In writing everything down, he made an instruction manual split across three books.

He had tried to keep it secret, employing code, and invisible ink, fracturing his work sequentially, spreading it across the three books so it wasn’t a linear read, but Bill was right.

The journals were a liability.

He had to get rid of them, hide them somewhere. It was the only way.

“I won’t let you. I’ll stop you.” Ford said, eyes wide, shaking his head at Bill.

“You’re missing the point.” Bill sighed, putting his hands on his hips, glaring at Ford. “Sixer –“

“You are my burden to handle. A burden on the world. I’ll stop you.” Ford muttered, growing increasingly more paranoid.

“Stop saying that.” Bill growled, agitated by Stanford’s constant repetition.

“Ever since I summoned you. You’re my burden to bear. You won’t get away with this.”

“I said, stop saying that word.” Bill gritted out, his hands clenched into fists at his side.

“What word?” Ford asked, squinting at Bill, his eyes still a little wide. “Wh -?”

“Just stop.” Bill scowled, unwilling to admit which word was agitating him.

“Burden?” Ford guessed astutely. “But you are. A burden on me, on the world. A burden on the people who live here, who hope to continue living here.”

“Stop.” Bill crossed his arms, his composure fracturing. There was a wild look in his eye now, like the tether on his temper was thinning with each repetition of the dreaded word. Yet Stanford just kept going.
“You were a burden on my wallet when you lived here. All of my trophies gone because of you. You were a burden on my patience. A burden on my life, on my sleep schedule.” Ford continued to list, knowing he was irritating Bill now, pushing it defiantly.

“Sixer-“ Bill said, his tone warning Ford of his rapidly dwindling patience. The part of him that was willing to be vulnerable with Ford was retreating by the second as his temper took the fore, and he fell back on old habits, goaded into it.

“A burden on the entire universe!” Ford declared, stepping back to point at Bill now, accusing him. “You are a –“

“YOU DON’T GET TO SAY THAT WORD ANYMORE!” Bill screeched at him and clicked his fingers.

“You don’t get to tell me what to do.” Ford countered stupidly, foolishly defiant, hyped up by his conviction, his words aiming to hurt. “I’ll say whatever I want to get it through to you. You are A SEA OTTER!”

Ford blinked, pausing, before he second guessed himself. “Did I say that right? I –“

His introspection was interrupted by Bill snorting a suppressed laugh, holding a hand over his mouth, hiding a grin.

“What did you do to me?” Ford questioned angrily.

“Go on, say it again.” Bill dared him, watching him smugly now.

“You didn’t –“ Ford frowned, before attempting to say the word again, his brain defaulting to a different phrase without him even realising. “Sea otter.”

“HAH!” Bill was pointing at Stanford now, laughter blurring out of him in a callous wave. “Hahahahahahah. Hah! That’s what you get for name calling, Genius.”

“What did you –?” Ford asked, stunned. He felt much the same, still angry, tired and paranoid, but he realised that what he was intending to say wasn’t coming out right. “What did you do to me? Have you – are you messing with my mind?”

“I replaced a word with another word. An improvement, I’d say. The next time you try to sound all ominous and melodramatic, you’ll say Sea Otter instead, and everyone will be too busy thinking about their adorable little whiskers to pay you any mind.” Bill said smugly, looking pleased with himself. “I have just saved, no doubt, countless conversations.”

“You can’t do that.” Ford argued, irritated by Bill’s flippant. This was a serious issue, Bill said he wouldn’t mess around with Ford’s mind, but that promise seemed to be out the window, along with several other ones since Ford rejected him. “Put it back! I want my old word back.”

Bill looked Ford square in the eye and replied sourly. “No.”

“Wh- but it –“ Ford floundered, unaccustomed to his muse saying ‘no’ to him. He thought Bill was trying to sway him over to his evil ways, shouldn’t he be giving Stanford what he wants.

“Listen here, Sixer. That was me going easy on you.” Bill wrenched himself out of his human form and floated, triangular once more, in front of Stanford, scaling up, looming over him. “I came to you with an offer of forgiveness, and not only do you throw it back in my face, you decided you’d make yourself an obstacle. Not a smart move, smart guy. I don’t like obstacles, and I don’t like
backtalk, so count yourself lucky I only took one word, and not all of them, like I did to Cathy Crenshaw."

Ford gulped, rearing back as Bill towered in the room, his form hitting the ceiling above him. He realised yet again the folly of pissing off a God, even when the God in question seemed to hold a candle for him.

“Now, I’m going to give you the opportunity to come to your senses and apologise. Give up this ridiculous vocation, quit being the thorn in my side, and realise that your place is here.” Bill paused and pointed to his hypotenuse. “By my side. Don’t sabotage your standing here just so you can feel morally superior. I can tolerate you pushing my buttons, but I can’t tolerate you acting out against me anymore, so I’m giving you time to wise up, cool down, and get over yourself before you make yourself a problem.”

Ford could feel the dream crumbling at the edges, his heart pounding fearfully in his chest as Bill issued his parting statement, a final warning for Ford.

“You won’t like how I deal with problems.”

Ford woke with a start, sitting on the couch, holding his hand over his chest, the tattoo there stinging painfully. He’d been sweating, his shirt soaked under the armpits from this nightmare, although that could also have been from all the coffee.

Ford looked down at the cup on the coffee table and sneered at it.

Not coffee at all. Decaf.

Acting impulsively, Ford grabbed the coffee cup and hurled it out the window, listening to the ceramic shatter on the ground outside.

Checking his smart watch, he could tell the portal hadn’t been activated, but he knew he couldn’t stay in the house anymore, he couldn’t risk it. He couldn’t risk the possibility that the next time he closed his eyes he’d open them to a world in chaos.

Gathering his belongings, Ford shoved the essentials in his coat and bag, throwing all three journals in the duffel, sliding a spare pair of glasses in his trench coat pocket, putting the almanac in his bag as well, just in case. He packed a small toolkit, gathered the most recent notes he’d been working on, designs for Project Mentum, and pocketed them as well. That’d give him something to work on while he was on the road.

It was clear he couldn’t stay in the house anymore. He couldn’t trust himself around the portal, and he couldn’t even trust himself to make a decent cup of coffee.

If he wanted to stop Bill from taking this world, Ford had to branch out. Think outside the box. And protect himself all the while.

Because it seemed now, he’d finally made himself a problem.

Hopefully one Bill couldn’t ‘fix’.
Hiding journal number three was an act of inspired genius. Ford took inspiration from Fiddleford’s bunker, redesigning a metal panel slotted in a hollowed-out section of one of the old redwoods, hiding the control console within the tree.

Of course, just hiding the journal in the tree would be too easy, child’s play for someone to find, so Ford set up a mechanism with the switches. Like a password no one but Ford could crack. One would have to flick the switch on the left three times and the switch on the right only once. Any other combination would immediately lock down the control console.

Ford was confident that this protocol would protect the journal from unwanted readers, hoarding its secrets. After all, who would be lucky enough to flip the switches in that specific order without knowing the sequence.

Once the switches were flipped in succession, a panel on the forest floor slid open, and in the alcove beneath Ford gently placed his journal.

“Maybe one day, when all this is over, I can come back for you.” Ford said, placing his hand lovingly over the cover.

He was loathe to part with his research. He felt the summation of these journals contained his life’s work - was his life’s work! It jaded him bitterly that Bill had forced him to hide his findings, to hide the studies that would have one day made him famous.

As he sealed the journal away beneath the metal panel, rolling a sheet of grass he purchased from the plant nursery over the top to camouflage it, he bid farewell to his long-held daydreams of shaking hands with the president, or accepting accolades from his hero Carl Sagan.

He had to let such things go now. Such childish daydreams.

It was time to grow up.

Ford made the decision to hide his next journal on the grounds of the local elementary school several days later, when the sleep deprivation and coffee jitters had begun to affect him.

No child would be intelligent enough to decipher the coded material within the second journal, nor did Stanford imagine any child would be devious enough to use the secrets held within.

Ford was relying on the innate goodness, the innate innocence of children, to preserve the secrets of this, his most dark and dangerous journal. He buried it furtively, hidden at the very back of the playground, where the field met the forest, under cover of darkness, looking over his shoulder all the while.

He jumped at every rustle in the forest, every hooting owl that passed his way.

He was paranoid. And rightly so.

Who knows who else could be watching?

That mentality followed him through his next week, sleep becoming even more of a distant memory for him. He had surpassed his last held record of sleepless nights, forgetting what it felt like to feel well rested.

In his weaker moments as he felt his eyelids growing heavy, sitting in his car, watching the people
walk alongside the road, he let Bill’s words wash over him.

*Get a good night’s sleep for once.*

*We can be together again.*

*You know you want that.*

Ford almost let his eyes slide shut before he jolted awake sharply, looking around him frantically.

Ford slapped his face, trying to wake himself with the pain. It was no good. He felt weak. He kept getting weaker.

He needed a top up.

The Triple Digits Truck Stop off Route 14 had become Stanford’s haven as of late. Boasting the strongest industrial strength coffee in four counties, Stanford relied on the Triple Digits Diner to keep him caffeinated and sane.

The waitresses assumed he was a stockbroker, or private investigator, each taking turns to guess when they thought Stanford wasn’t listening, but he was always listening.

He had to keep an ear out. He never knew when he’d hear that familiar laugh echo out at him, and that was something he was trying to avoid at all costs.

He had to be vigilant.

No decaf!

Thankfully they didn’t serve decaf at the Triple Digits. When Stanford first asked, the regular truckers who frequented the diner laughed at him, and he had never felt more comforted by the sound of mocking laughter.

Pulling up into the diner parking lot, Ford dragged himself out of his car, blearily struggling to keep his eyes open until he made it through the door.

Slumping into a seat by the counter, Ford raised a hand to wave at the waitress, the one who guessed that Ford must be a Soviet Spy. Rather ridiculous in Ford’s opinion, he’d just managed to shake the New Jersey twang from his voice, he wasn’t about to go around picking up new accents.

“Darlene. Some bacon, and a strong one please.”

“Coming right up.” Darlene replied, handing another trucker their sandwich before fetching a mug for Stanford.

She slid the noxious industrial strength brew across the counter to him, and Ford took a moment to just inhale the fumes.

Coffee was his salvation now. This caffeinated substance was his deliverance.

Ford sat there for a while, struggling to keep his eyes open, as he sniffed the coffee. Darlene returned with his bacon, and eventually he took a sip, wrinkling his nose at the taste. He was taking it strong now, without sugar or cream. The sign of a desperate man.

Blinking far too often to look appropriately wakeful, Ford barely noticed the kindly looking trucker sitting on the stool beside him, but after a while it was apparent that he was being watched.
Ford turned to stare back at the trucker apprehensively, but the man just shook his head and smiled.

“Having shutter trouble, are ya?” The man scratched his moustache and looked down at his own mug of coffee. “I know the signs.”

“On the road a lot, are you?” Ford asked politely, hoping conversation could keep him awake.

“Most days, more than not. You know, we truckers got a list of ways to stay waking, during those long drives. Sometimes coffee just don’t cut it. No offence, Darlene.”

“I won’t have you bad mouthin’ my coffee now.” Darlene chided the trucker playfully.

“I swear by it. You know that.” The trucker replied, holding his hand over his heart.

“What techniques do you use?” Ford asked, hoping he’d hear some clever insight he hadn’t already tried, looking for wisdom in this weathered, plaid wearing man.

“You could pinch yourself.” The man shrugged, and then grinned at Ford. “ Heck, you could pinch someone else, they’d punch you awake. That don’t get too fun after the first few tries though.”

Ford was disheartened, his tired self hoping for something more concrete than just ‘pinch yourself’.

“You could let a dog ride shotgun and put peanut butter on your face. My ol’ pal Buster used to love doin’ that. I took him with me on most rides. He was damn fine company, that dog.” The trucker mused, his voice fond.

Ford was finding it harder to listen to the man’s nostalgic reminiscence, his patience for other people thin, since he was starving himself of sleep to save them. He didn’t want to hear about this man’s dog, he was trying to find ways to stave off sleep, to save the world.

Ford lost interest in what the trucker was saying, dismissing it as useless, but he was still not quite tired enough to be impolite, or downright rude to the stranger.

If Ford had been paying attention better, he might have noticed the shift in the trucker’s tone, to a more calculating, cruelly amused vocalisation.

“You could put peppers in your eyes. I bet that’d be fun.”

Ford barely even reacted to that one, looking back at his cup of coffee morosely, lamenting humankind and what passed for good advice from some people.

The trucker was watching Ford, taking in the tired slump to his shoulders, the agitated set of his jaw, and the deep bags under his eyes, before he spoke again, his voice softer.

“Just give up, Sixer.”

Ford frowned, the phrasing pinging off alarms in the back of his head. Trudging through his tiredness to listen, he processed what the friendly trucker just said, and blinked his eyes open in alarm.

He turned around to face the man, and reared back, knocking his plate of bacon onto the floor, shattering the plate. Everyone in the diner turned to look at Ford, drawn by the sound of the shattering ceramic.

It could have been the sunrise coming through the window, but in that moment the trucker’s eyes,
and everyone else’s in the diner, were glowing yellow.

“You don’t look so good.” The trucker blinked at him, slitted pupils gone in an instant, retreating under the man’s eyelid. “Are you alright?”

The sun was still shining through the window, tinging the room orange, but Stanford was too frantic to notice, believing he was trapped in a dream, surrounded by enemies.

He hyperventilated, his eyes darting around the diner, feeling the eyes of the diner patrons on him, watching him.

He has eyes everywhere, and they are watching my every move! Ford panicked internally, his paranoia kicking up into a frenzy.

Ford yelled, clutching his forehead. “GET OUT OF MY MIND CIPHER!”

The diner patrons gave Ford startled, censorial looks, and Ford couldn’t take it anymore.

He ran out of the diner as fast as his legs could carry him.

Out in the parking lot, he paced over to his car, aiming to get inside, before he stopped himself.

Rather than choosing not to drive out of conscientious concern for the other cars and pedestrians, obviously in no state to drive if that microsleep earlier was any indicator, Stanford’s paranoia urged him to abandon his car, taking his duffel bag and belongings out of the boot, slinging it over his shoulder and walking along the edge of the tarmac road.

He has eyes everywhere. What if they see me? Saw my license plate? I could be followed. He could be following me right now!

Stanford’s paranoid internal banter continued as he walked down the highway, his frantic footsteps the only thing keeping him awake, keeping him whole.

If I fall asleep again, and I’m near my car, Bill could just drive me home and go down to the basement. I can’t go down to the basement. He could turn on the portal. If I don’t have a car, he’ll have to walk all the way home, and he doesn’t have the capacity to hold out that long in my body.

I can already feel it failing on me.

Ford’s legs were reedy, trembling like jelly, as he forced himself down the highway. The sun was fading in the sky by the time he reached his limit, having walked all the way through to the late afternoon.

Eager to avoid drawing attention to himself, Ford directed his feet to lead him around to the parking lot at the back of the Twin Bed Motel, collapsing beside the dumpster, hoping no one would see him here.

His legs were aching, and his hands were shaking. His whole body was shaking, severe coffee withdrawal taking its toll. He hadn’t slept in weeks, and he was at his limit now, barely able to hold on.

He still hadn’t parted with the last journal, his final journal. The very first journal he started.

He’d been tossing up various hiding places, finding fault with each, one by one. Hiding them all within the one town was too foolhardy, but Ford couldn’t justify a long break from the place. What
if Bill possessed someone else and broke into the shack? Ford would have to stay and defend it, defend it with his life.

But he still couldn’t justify keeping the first journal with him. As much as he wanted to maintain at least one keepsake from his research, he knew he had to cast it away, but he couldn’t bring himself to destroy it. It was his life’s work.

If only there was someone who could take the journal and hide it far, far away, somewhere even Stanford wouldn’t know where to find it.

But who could he trust?

Who wouldn’t be tricked by Bill? Who could be fast enough, clever enough, well-travelled enough, and sneaky enough to evade Bill’s minions and hide the journal?

Ford felt his vision blur as his exhaustion caught up with him, and he struggled to focus on the motel sign. Anything to keep his eyes open.

**TWIN BED MOTEL.**

Ford blinked.

**BED.**

No, that was too tempting.

Ford blinked again and the word **TWIN** stood out in his field of view.

It was then that Ford realised there was only one person left in this world that he could possibly trust with his secrets.

Rising to his feet, shuffling across the parking lot to the motel lobby, Ford began formulating a plan. He snagged a post card from the rack in the lobby, lurching to the front desk, grabbing the concierge’s pen.

“Can I borrow your pen?” Ford asked blearily. “And your phone?”

The concierge nodded and leaned back from him warily, pointing to the side. “It’s down the hall.”

Ford staggered down the hall, and leaned against the wall, picking the phone off the hook and dialling the number.

It rang for a while, until the person on the other line picked up.

“Genuine phone psychic at yer service. I charge a dollar a minute fer the mysteries of yer future. Whadda ya wanna know?”

“Hi Ma.” Ford murmured into the phone. “I miss you too. Listen, you don’t happen to have an address, or a phone number, or a way to contact Stanley now, would you? He’s been moving from place to place for so long I wouldn’t know how to go about – Yes, I want to send him something. Just something. Do you have an address?”

Ford flattened the post card against the wall and scribbled the address on the card.

“Mmmhmm. Number 5, Dead End Flats, uuh, New Mexico. Thanks Ma.”
“I’ve been waitin’ so long for you boys to make up.” Ma Pines simpered over the phone. “Good fer you fer reachin’ out. It’d make me real proud to see you two forgive each other. Forgive and forget, that’s the way to do it.”

“Hmm.” Ford said noncommittally, having had poor experiences with both forgiving and forgetting recently. Both concepts really had a lot to answer for.

Rather than disappointing his mother with an outright no, Ford kept it civil.

“We’ll see.”

He had a plan, and he was sticking to it, and if everything went as it should, hopefully Ford could find a way to stop Bill for good.

No more half measures.

Ford scribbled his own address in the top corner. Across the side of the post card in big letters, Ford wrote his missive, and hoped it would be heeded.

**PLEASE COME!**

-FORD

Chapter End Notes

I am so excited, we are almost at the turning point here. I am literally grinning as I write all the time now.

I'm dedicating this chapter to sunnivaixchel who caught up with the fic and said some lovely things that I appreciate deeply. Thank you as always for the kind words.

WHO'S READY FOR STANLEY? We've had the 'smart one' now we're seeing the 'other one' work his magic. And by work his magic I mean scam people in Columbia, scam people in New Mexico, and maybe get scammed a little along the way.

This next chapter will take me slightly more time to write because I want to get it right, I'll be doing a lot of research about New Mexico, and several other topics. If any of my readers are Spanish speaking or have lived in New Mexico or around Albuquerque and feel like helping me with some fact checking and authenticity that would be awesome, please feel free to message me on my tumblr if you're okay with me asking a billion questions about stuff hahah.

I hope folks enjoyed the chapter, and as always, I will be excited to hear what you think of it and will drink up your nice words like a starving man in the desert ~
A brown-haired, broad shouldered man stood with hands shoved into the pockets of his mauve bomber jacket, at the arrivals gate at the Albuquerque International Sunport, scanning the crowd from behind his dark lenses.

Wayward locals and tourists poured through the arrivals gate, each splitting off to hug waiting relatives, or ferry their luggage off to the nearby shuttle buses. Families, friends, and patient lovers waited with balloons, flowers, and presents for their loved ones. However, Stanley Pines didn’t come to New Mexico to visit family. He had no family here, but what he did have was opportunity, and a chance for a fresh start.

Scouring the crowd, finally, Stan spotted what he was looking for. A gangly looking teenager holding a sign that read ‘ANDREW ALCATRAZ’ in clumsy capital letters, shifting his weight awkwardly like he needed the bathroom.

Stan picked his suitcase up, and strode across the terminal, making a beeline for the kid.

“Andrew Alcatraz?” The boy asked when Stan got close enough for him to notice.

“Sure, kid.” Stanley pulled up the collar of his shirt evasively and looked around the airport. “You got the keys?”

The boy nodded, and Stanley nodded back before briskly walking off, barely breaking his stride, heading to the carpark.

The boy hurried to follow him, fishing in the pockets of his cargo pants, patting himself down until he pulled a dangling keyring from his trousers. He held the car keys aloft and Stanley swiped them swiftly.

“Drove it all the way here from the impound lot in Illinois.” The boy explained. “Took me two days with stops. All your stuff is in the trunk like you asked for, I didn’t touch nothin’. There was something that sounded like it was broken though, I heard a rattling, so I thought that maybe, you know, you’d want a look at it?”

“It was broken before kid. Don’t sweat it.” Stan replied, following the boy through the parking complex, scouring the rows of cars for his baby. “You’re still gettin’ your tip.”

“Gee, thank you, Mr Alcatraz.” The kid grinned in a charming, sleep deprived kind of way, missing the way Stan winced at the name. “Where’d you fly in from anyhow?”

“Columbia.” Stan grunted, rounding the corner to spy his precious El Diablo convertible parked in the lot. He made a beeline for his baby, checking the car over, and the boy followed him, standing awkwardly to the side.

“Cool.” The boy shoved his hands in his pockets and eyed off Stanley’s suitcase. “You got some of those cigars in there?”

Stanley paused briefly, before he opened the front passenger door of the Stanleymobile and set his
suitcase in the passenger’s seat.

“Not cigars. That’s Cuba. Columbia does something else.” Stan said evasively, before he unzipped the suitcase a fraction, worming two fingers into the scant gap, pulling out a crumpled $100 bill. He looked at the note with a sigh, not willing to risk opening the case all the way to find the driver something smaller, before handing it over to the kid. “Here you go, kid. You did a good job. Now get on out of here and go get yourself some sleep.”

The kid accepted the $100 gleefully and shoved it in his pocket before he gave Stan a clumsy salute. “Thanks, hombre. I’ll see you around next time you need driving, yeah?”

“Yeah you’ll hear from me.” Stan waved the kid off, watching him meander away.

When he was certain the boy was gone and he was alone in the parking lot, he turned back around, and leaned over the passenger’s seat, unzipping his suitcase all the way open. Scattered amongst a few dirty shirts and some toiletries were frantic bundles of cash, fistfuls of green stuffed into the case. Fat wads of filthy money tied up with elastic bands, slightly dusty but no less valid as a form of currency. There had to be about 8000 dollars in there.

Stanley called the smuggled pile of cash his fresh start. This was his ticket to the good life, the big time. A small fortune in stolen US dollars painted his suitcase a healthy, wealthy green, and the only people who could possibly lay claim on this money, apart from Stanley, were rotting away like suckers back in a dingy prison in Columbia.

Stanley was no sucker. Taking that plea deal to get out early was a no brainer compared to the alternative, a lifetime spent in prison.

Pleading out on a bargain wasn’t snitching in Stanley’s book – it was self-preservation. Much needed self-preservation considering the rough crowd he fell in with back in Columbia. Ratting on the gang wasn’t the tricky part, the tricky part was convincing Rico that their cellmate Jorge was the rat, and that his sister was going to take the money and leave them all high and dry.

Better to let Stanley tell a few white lies and get out now to protect their investment before Jorge’s sister frittered it all away on expensive ‘nose powders’, and other fanciful cosmetics.

Stanley only needed Rico to concede his point for a moment, just long enough to hide Rico’s shiv before he fixed his murderous gaze on Stan or Jorge. That very evening Stan pleaded out as a foolish American accomplice in over his head and the legal team ate it up. They got to put away Rico for all kinds of criminal activity now that their evidence was not so circumstantial, while Stanley got to waltz on out of there without so much as a backwards glance.

He wouldn’t miss the jerks who got him put in there. Good fucking riddance.

The instant he got out of those prison doors he was cha-cha-ing his way towards the covert stash of cash hiding under Rico’s floorboards and towards his future freedom.

Freedom didn’t just mean freedom from prison. Stan fell in with a bad crowd back in Columbia, and if he didn’t want to be knee deep in with some nasty dealers for the rest of his life he had to plan a way to get outta there, and when opportunity knocks, well, let’s just say Stan was ready to open the prison door.

He’d never been so happy to be deported.

He left Columbia behind, like one of those considerate tourists on a nature trail. Take only illicit drug money, leave only suckers. That was how the phrase should have gone, but you try telling
that to those tree-hugging hippies.

It was all behind him now. The past was in the past, and he was in the present, with a fresh start in his suitcase, and a smile on his face.

He was in a new town, in a new state, with a new lease on life, and he was ready to knock the socks off the residents of Albuquerque, New Mexico with his brand-new line of Stan Co. affordable housekeeping supplies.

He was going legit, back to semi-respectable business practices. No more dirty work, no more looking over your shoulder, no more blood pacts in seedy alleyways – he was going clean – and what could be cleaner than selling vacuums? With a quality business model and a brand-new identity Stanley was ready to cast off the shackles of his old life as Andrew ‘8-Ball’ Alcatraz and begin anew as Steve Pinington, vacuum mogul and genuine businessman.

Closing his suitcase and sliding it under the front passenger’s seat, Stanley closed the car door, walked around to the trunk of the car and cranked it open.

Pushing the relics of his failed enterprises to the side, Stanley felt around the bottom of the trunk and popped open a small compartment. Inside the compartment was an assortment of passports and driver’s licenses, exquisitely forged to baffle even the keenest cop or customs officer. Stanley flipped through the cards until he found the license for Steve Pinington.

Yeesh, he hadn’t used this one since Pennsylvania. That felt like a lifetime ago. Stan cringed taking in the dated disco moustache, remembering all the trimmings his life as Steve Pinington from Pennsylvania entailed.

Stan rubbed under his nose, regarding the broad moustache he’d styled in the photo. Probably for the best he shaved it off. People shave off facial hair all the time. This ID could work, it wouldn’t be a problem if no one looked too closely at the issue date. Or any of the other identifying details.

Closing the trunk, Stanley walked around and climbed in the driver’s seat, his El Diablo hugging him just like it always did. He’d missed this car.

He slid his keys into the ignition and closed his eyes in satisfaction at the familiar rumble of the engine.

He was home.

“That’s my baby.” Stan patted the dashboard dotingly, smiling, before he set his hands on the wheel, pressing down on the gas.

The Stanleymobile motored on out of the airport, following the road signs into town.

Albuquerque, New Mexico – the start of a better life – and not another dead end.

Stan sure hoped so anyway.

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Albuquerque wasn’t half bad.

It was densely populated area with a lively mix of metropolitan and old-world architecture - a
multicultural melting pot of potential marks. Stan liked to call himself an equal opportunity opportunist, and in big cities like this there was plenty of opportunity to make a buck.

It took a few days to settle in. Stan booked himself into a nice motel, springing for slightly fancier digs than he was used to. He had the cash, so why shouldn’t he live it up for once? There were mints on his pillow, and tiny bottles of booze in the mini fridge – it was the good life.

Stan took a few days to get his affairs in order. He contacted his old distributor, followed up on a few rumours, made a few enquiries if the ‘it fell off the back of a truck’ stork had anything good for him. He organised and paid for the goods – about 4 cases of knock-off vacuum cleaners, to be shipped down to him here in Albuquerque and he rented a cosy little storage unit to house the goods in.

He strolled down to the local copy shop and spent his Thursday evening printing out flashy labels and stickers to put on all his repurposed vacuums. He also splurged on some fancy business cards – after all, Steve Pinington was all about the branding, and Stan planned on being a brand name around here.

Things were looking up. Albuquerque was a decent place and living here beat looking over your shoulder 24/7. Stan felt like a new man now that he was going clean. Even his clothes were clean – laundromat clean with the fancy lavender soap from the dispensers Stan could never afford before.

He could justify spending on the little things now that he had money to spend, and there was more coming his way if the Stan Vac’s kicked off. Enough that he could spend a little on the big things too.

He allowed himself the treat of a new wardrobe. He bought himself new jeans, a few clean shirts, and a new suit jacket and slacks so he’d look professional when selling his schtick. He even got a slick new haircut.

He was throwing down money left and right, but that’s what you had to do to start a new business. Sure, maybe he was going a little bit overboard, but it wasn’t every day you escaped from Columbian prison with a suitcase full of drug money.

Stan was a free man, and he sure as hell was going to live like one.

With nothing left to do but wait until his repurposed vacuums arrived, Stan decided he’d wile away the time in downtown Albuquerque and have a drink or two or three as a free man. It beat staring at the fancy mirrored ceiling in his motel room, chugging back tiny bottles of booze.

He was a businessman now, with a suitcase full of unmentionable money. It was slightly less full than when he arrived, but he could still justify living comfortably. Besides, when those vacuums hit Stan’d be in the big leagues. He could spring for a few beers in a proper bar downtown. Why the hell not?

Stuffing his hands in his jacket pockets, Stan strolled along under the street lamps, enjoying the balmy evening. Music drifted out from restaurants and people’s homes, pleasant laughter setting Stan at ease.

Albuquerque was a nice place and these were nice people living nice lives.

Stan could get used to this.

Perusing the establishments along the high street, Stanley made a beeline for a sweet little joint lit
up with neon signs in the window. A winged, one eyed triangle hovered over a banner that read Ojo de la Fortuna – now that sounded like a lucky bet, the kind of place Stan could get lucky.

There was ‘beer on tap’ and an advertised ‘pool room’ promising Stan a good night in static neon, and if there was a jukebox in this little hole in the wall that’d provide Stan the perfect soundtrack for hustling rubes. Always a nice touch.

Confident that he was in for a good night, Stan entered Ojo de la Fortuna with a smile.

It was a busy enough place, with people playing pool, dancing, eating in cosy booths around the edges of the room, candle lit tables looking out to the street through square little windows. The joint was dimly lit, enough that dames looked good on dates, and no one would notice if you got ketchup on your shirt. Behind the bar, large blackboards scrawled with chalk menus boasted sloppy joes, enchiladas, burgers, and comfort food galore. The wall of liquor back there looked promising and Stan saw a few craft brews on tap he wouldn’t mind giving a try.

Deciding this was the kind of place he could get used to, Stan walked over to the bar and hopped up on one of the bar stools, looking around the pub curiously.

When he turned to face the bar, the bartender was already watching him, slowly polishing an empty glass.

“What are you having?” She asked, her voice low and sultry, and Stan was momentarily stunned.

What – a – dame!

Dark eyes and darker eyelashes took him in from under a cascade of tumbling black curls. She had honey coloured skin, full plump lips swiped over with rouge. She had big hips, a tiny waist, and curves in all the right places.

She looked like trouble, and Stan should know – he was trouble too.

She was still staring at Stan, and for a moment while his mind was glitching in the gutter, he wondered if she was checking him out too – until he realised she was waiting for his order.

Clearing his throat, aiming for suave, Stan rested his elbow on the bar, and quirked his eyebrow at her. “What are you having, sugar?”

“What, you wanna come behind the bar and serve me? That ain’t how it works, I’m the bartender. Now what are you drinking?” She replied, cocking her hip, crossing her arms.

“I’ll have uh…” Stan looked up at the blackboards behind her, defaulting to the most inexpensive beer before he reconsidered, realising he could afford more. Pointing to the most expensive craft beer, trying to impress the bartender, Stan picked his poison. “I’ll have that one, sweetcheeks. Let’s hope it’s as sweet as you are.”

The bartender raised her eyebrows, pursing her lips. “You know flirting will cost you extra, big guy.”

She turned to fetch him a new glass, and Stan spoke up again.

“I’ll take two of them.”

She turned back around to look at him, before shrugging. “Okay big spender.”
She grabbed two glasses and poured them from the tap, one by one, leaving a nice layer of froth on each beer. She put them both in front of Stan on coasters, and wiped her hands with a cloth, putting her hands on her hips.

“That’ll be $36.”

Fumbling in his wallet, Stan pulled out a crumpled fifty, and passed it over. She got him change from the till and passed the notes over to him, before turning to walk away.

Stan called out. “That second one’s for you, you know.”

She paused and looked over at Stan curiously. “Not drinking alone tonight then?”

“No if I can help it.” Stan grinned, hoping he was winning her over.

She pursed her lips, and looked down along the bar, checking that the patrons weren’t waving to her, wanting service. It seemed reasonably quiet, quiet enough for a short break.

Walking back along to Stan, the bartender leaned across the counter, resting her elbows on the wood, pointing to the two beers.

“I’m not having that.”

“Why?” Stan questioned. “Because you’re on the clock?”

She smiled at Stan, a sly sliver of amusement, before raising her eyebrow. “No. Because it sucks.”

The winsome grin fell off Stan’s face, and he looked down at his drink with dismay.

“What do you mean it sucks? I paid sixteen bucks for it.”

“You might like it.” She shrugged again. “But I don’t. Just because it’s expensive doesn’t mean it’s any good.”

“Why charge so much for it then?” Stan asked, mildly irritated.

“Because rich people are chumps, people with money will buy anything. It tastes like … musty dishwater.” She divulged with glee. “Go on, try it.”

Stan took a tentative sip, thinking she was just teasing him, but he wrinkled his nose when the liquid hit his tongue. This beer was the crappiest drink he ever paid good money for.

Unwilling to admit he’d been conned, Stan pulled a face like he was appreciating the taste, nodding as he mulled it over, but the bartender laughed at his expression.

“Do you like it?”

“If I say no, will you get me another?” Stan tried gamely.

“No refunds.” The bartender said swiftly, broking no room for argument.

“In that case –” Stan raised the glass up to cheers the bartender, and took a long swig from the murky beer. She raised her eyebrows at him in surprise. “It ain’t the worst crap I ever drank out of pure stubbornness. And you won’t catch me wasting 32 bucks. But the next round is on you.”

She snorted disbelievingly at Stan’s confidence and looked him up and down. “What, ain’t you
“some kind of big spender?”

“I sure am.” Stan boasted and puffed out his chest. “I got a business model that’s gonna take this town for a ride.”

“Oh really?” The bartender enquired, wiping down the counter as Stan took another swig of the disgusting beer. He was hoping if he drank it down quicker he’d taste it less after.

“Sure. I’ve got a shipment of ‘discount’ vacuum cleaners coming down from Toronto. When they get here, I’m rebranding them, whacking new labels on them, and selling them for double the price – no, triple!” Stan bragged. He pulled one of his freshly minted business cards from his jacket pocket and flicked it over to the girl. “So, you know, if you got any friends that are suckers – give em my card.”

The bartender shook her head and laughed, before plucking the card from his fingers. “Gee, that sounds real appealing. And what’s in it for me if I rip off my friends and family for you –“ She squinted at the business card before looking back up at him with derision. “Mr Steve Pinington?”

“So…” Stan’s eyes darted around before he attempted a crooked grin. “A discounted Stan Vac?”

“Discounted? You’re not even going to give me a freebie?” She tsked, shaking her head, resting her hand on her hip. She looked up at Stan curiously. “Does it work?”

“Uh… maybe?” Stan shrugged helpfully.

The bartender snorted and looked at the card.

The bell at the door rang, and she looked up at the group of tough looking guys who entered the bar. They gave her a look, and she nodded briefly, before turning back to Stan, pocketing the card.

“Okay Mr Pinington. Whatever you say.” She leaned forward to wipe down the bench in front of Stan one more time, baring her cleavage with the action, perhaps purposefully, and slid a coaster under his two glasses.

Before she left, she gave him a sweet smile, patting Stan congenially on the wrist, her fingers lingering flirtatiously on his pulse point. “Enjoy your drinks, hot shot. I got other customers to serve.”

The girl walked away, down to the other side of the bar, speaking to the customers who just came in, and Stan watched her hips sway back and forth as she walked away, almost like she was deliberately emphasising the movement to entrance him. A tattoo peeked out from under her jeans, branding her lower back with the neon symbol that hung above the door. That weird, winged, one eyed triangle.

Ladies with tattoos always meant trouble for Stan, but damn if it wasn’t a good look for her. She made that ink look good. She was a stunner and she probably knew it too.

He could hear her talking to the customers down the other end of the bar, and he nearly snorted into his drink when he heard her.

“You boys want something real nice, you ought to try what he’s having.” She pointed at Stan’s disgusting beverage, the most expensive drink at the bar, and Stan watched her talk it up like it was liquid gold. “Now that’s a classy drink.”

The customers turned to look at Stan, and the bartender winked at him conspiratorially. Grinning,
Stan raised his drink, and nodded like he was enjoying it – just to watch the satisfied smile stretch across her face.

She was a con artist, just like he was, it seemed. She was clever, and sneaky, and seemed to have taken a shine to Stan.

She lied through her teeth to those customers and then smiled about it. Stan liked a gal like that; she was a cheat just like he was. She had moxy.

Stan hummed to himself, smiling down at his crappy drinks, elated somehow, despite having been duped into buying them in the first place. Hunched over his two drinks, sculling back the first one and then stubbornly sipping on the second one, the froth clinging to his upper lip, he considered that interaction a win, even if she didn’t seem too impressed with his expert business plan.

Give it a week, Stan thought. When those vacuums come through next month on Friday, and Stan hits it big, she’ll be begging to have a drink with him, and so will all the other chicks at this bar.

Ladies loved a guy with cash to burn, and soon that guy would be him. He’d get his vacuums through, sell ‘em all for a scandalous profit, and go on living the good life here in little old Albuquerque.

His plan was foolproof, and nothing could go wrong.

“What do you mean they aren’t coming??!”

Stan hunched over the payphone, huddled into the booth, calling his supplier Tony Frizzoli. It was Friday and Stan had been waiting down by the depot for the shipment of stolen vacuums to arrive, but they hadn’t come through.

“I’m sorry Stanley, but circumstances ain’t ideal right now. We’ve got the cops on our ass because Barry fucked up the pickup, and until the heat is off, we can’t ship nothin’ nowhere. Our trucks keep gettin’ tailed and we’ve got the fuzz on our ass.” Tony’s voice emitted, tinny from the payphone handset. “We’ll get ‘em to ya, but right now ain’t the best time.”

“Can’t you give them the slip?” Stan questioned. “Just one truck, one shipment is all I need. I’ve gotta have something to sell.”

“It’s too risky right now. You can hold out for a few more weeks, can’t ya?”

“A few weeks?” Stan fretted, and grabbed his wallet from his back pocket, opening it to stare at the dwindling reserve of cash inside.

A month’s worth of payments had been racking up, for the new clothes, and the storage unit, and the fancy motel, and so on. Stan had been expecting his vacuums to come in on time, so he’d factored in the assumption that he’d be making more money by now. He wasn’t completely broke yet, but financially his lifestyle wasn’t looking too sustainable.

“Ya couldn’t have told me this sooner?” Stan griped, stuffing his wallet back into his jeans.
“Wiretapping.” Tony explained. “Feds love it. I’m laying low, calling you from my grandma’s phone.”

As if to prove Tony’s point Stan could hear a frail voice calling out from the other end of the line.

“Bambino, I made Frizzoli cannoli!”

“I’m coming Nonna.” Tony called back responsively, before returning to the call. “Look Stanley, we’re trying to get the goods out to you. We really are. But until the heat dies down, our hands are tied.”

“I get it. I get it.” Stanley shook his head and sighed. “Guess I’ll have to figure something else out until they get here.”

“Yeah, you do that. We’ll call again when we get the clear on the shipment. Is that number you gave us still good? Motel Ritz?”

Stanley considered his dwindling funds and for a moment, weighing up the benefits of moving to a cheaper motel. He thought about the pillow mints and the mini fridge, his common sense swayed by the appeal of creature comforts.

“Fuck it. Sure. That number’ll be good for a while.” Stanley decided. “Just call me as soon as you can send ‘em over Frizzo.”

“Will do. You’re the man, Stan.” Tony cheered and hung up the phone.

Leaning against the plastic walls of the phone booth, Stanley sighed, before he set the phone back on the hook. He pulled his hair back and tried to shake off his frustration, clinging to some semblance of the positive attitude he came here with.

It’s okay, just a minor setback. This is still Stan’s fresh start, still his new life. And waiting for the goods to come in might mean that money’s a little thin in the meantime, but Stan could make do. He always did.

Composure returned, Stan strode out of the payphone booth and towards his beloved car.

He had money to make.

“The Stan Vac is a top of the line vacuum cleaner guaranteed to suck up pretty much anything from your floors or carpets. Dust, dirt, dog food – leftover dinner bits that missed yer son in law’s mouth. The Stan Vac can do anything.”

“Okay, but where is it?” The wrinkled old woman sat on her couch, staring down Stan with a steely gaze, as her two grandchildren climbed along the arms of the couch, playing adventurers together. “Do we get a demonstration?”

“Abuelita, can I pour my Count Chocula on the floor, and then the man in the funny suit hoovers it up like – WHOOOOSHHHHH!!” The little boy enthused, making vacuum cleaner noises and waving his hands in the air.
“Abuelita, Abuelita, how come Jimmy gets to pour his Count Chocula on the floor but I can’t, mama said –“ His sister complained, tugging on her Abuelita’s shawl.

“You can both pour your cereal.” The woman said, sounding resigned to their antics.

“YAY!” The children jumped on the couch excitably, before running into the kitchen to fetch the cereal.

“You see, the thing is –“ Stan started explaining. “I don’t actually have a demonstration model here, but you can put a down payment on your own Stan Vac and you’ll have it as soon as our shipment gets here.”

“And when does your shipment get here?” The old woman asked, narrowing her eyes at Stan.

“Well… uhh – in terms of an ETA we don’t exactly have a set date, but the Stan Vac is well worth the wait – I tell ya –“

“So, you don’t have it.” The woman cut Stan off sharply. “You’re trying to sell me something you don’t even have, and you want me to give you my precious money from my pension to put a deposit on a vacuum that might not even work, and I just have to trust you that it’ll get here and it’ll vacuum up anything, because you say it will.”

“Hey, I’m a trustworthy guy.” Stan insisted, pasting on his best salesman smile. “And you can trust me when I say that the Stan Vac is worth the wait. I can guarantee you that the Stan Vac –“

The two children ran back into the living room cheering and upended an entire box of Count Chocula cereal on the carpet in front of Stanley, watching him with identical expectant grins, their youthful eyes sparkling with delight.

“- Really… sucks…” Stan looked down at the gleeful children, and then back up at the murderous rage on their grandma’s age chiselled face.

“OUT!” The woman pointed to the door.

Gathering his briefcase and pamphlets promptly, Stan hurried out the front door, the grandmother herding him out, whapping him with a rolled-up newspaper as she ranted at him venomously.

“Some greasy looking estafador come to my house? There is cereal all over the floor because of you! ¿Quién crees que va a limpiar eso? Huh? Salir, rápido. Now!”

“Alright, alright. Lady I’m going. Ow!” Stan rubbed the back of his head, wincing at the precision strike the old bag laid on him with that newspaper.

Chased out onto the front lawn, Stan picked up his scattered pamphlets and shook his fist at the old lady. “Yeah, have fun picking up all that cereal, ya old bag!”

The old lady took a step down the stairs leading from her front door, looking ready to go after Stan for round two with her deadly weapon.

So, Stan did the sensible thing, and hightailed it out of there, racing for the Stanleymobile and gunning it out of the neighbourhood.

So far, the tally was sitting at Stan Vac’s sold – 0. Neighbourhoods he’d been chased out of by ticked-off old ladies – 20.
It hadn’t been Stan’s day – scratch that, it hadn’t been his week for the past four weeks. But if he didn’t sell at least one down payment for a Stan Vac, he’d be short for rent on his storage locker downtown. He’d already moved out of Motel Ritz, down to a dingier affair in Dead End Flats, and he’d cut back on his spending massively, but if he didn’t get some money in soon, he’d be royally screwed.

At this point, while Tony was still being watched by the Feds, in order to scrape by, Stan might have to saddle up and put his name down for a real job, employed by someone else – but honestly the thought of being anything but his own boss irked at Stan’s sensibilities.

He didn’t need some patronising employer looking down on him, telling him what to do and how to do it. Fuck that, Stan couldn’t deal with that sort of dynamic. He was an entrepreneur – his talents weren’t suited to flipping burgers under some cocky teenager’s careful supervision. He had more life experience in his big toe than half of these crappy bosses had in their entire being.

He had to find a way to make money for himself, that wouldn’t wind up with him compromising on what he wanted, and what he wanted was to cling to some small shred of his dignity while he made it through this shitty turn of events.

He drove around the suburbs, thinking on a possible solution that could turn him a sweet buck, and after 3 more failed sales pitches, Stan retired to what was quickly becoming one of his favourite haunts in Albuquerque - Ojo de la Fortuna.

The place was pretty much empty today, and Stan made his way to the bar, looking around for his favourite bartender.

Hopping up on his regular stool by the bar, Stan waved the bleached blonde bartender on duty over, Sally – who worked here on Thursday nights.

“Hello, Mr Pinington.” Sally said, trying to hide the food she’d just put in her mouth behind her hand as she spoke.

“Hey, Sal. Where is everyone?” Stan asked.

“Slow night.” Sally swallowed her food and shrugged evasively, not looking Stan in the eye.

“Where’s your co-worker? With the tattoos and the dark hair – she usually –“ Stan questioned, wondering where the girl he regularly chatted to was.

“Oh, Valencia?” Sally guessed. “She’s out the back calling her little brother. Yeah, he goes to school up in Portland, studying finance or some shit like that. She calls him every day.”

“Huh.” Stan mulled that over.

“So, what can I get ya?” Sally asked him.

“Whatever’s cheapest on tap.” Stan requested absently, thinking about how he could turn his prospects around. He remained lost in thought for a while, planning how he could approach the vacuum sales without any vacuums, barely noticing when Sally slid his beer across to him. As Stan sipped on his beer distantly, Sally kept sneaking bites of the food she had hidden behind the bar, and for a while things felt peaceful.

That quickly changed when Stan heard a scuffle by the door to the kitchen. He looked up from his beer, listening in.
“I’m not paying you to chit chat on the goddamn phone.”

“You don’t pay me at all. Give it a rest - it was five fucking minutes.”

It was Valencia, that fiery little fox, scowling up at a hulking man looming over her, patches sewn all over his leather jacket.

He let go of her wrist, and she clenched her fists like she was ready to slap him.

“That money isn’t going to pay itself back Val.” The man hissed at her. “If I see you here I want to see you working, not fucking off on the telephone.”

“I am working here all the time. I’m doing what you say!” Valencia argued vehemently.

Stanley was straining his ears to listen in, watching the altercation as covertly as he could. Sally was pretending to ignore it, wiping the counter down in front of Stan, but Stanley could see her biting her lip, hiding the food in her mouth, endeavouring to stay silent.

“Do it better.” The man pulled a small clip lock plastic bag out from his jacket pocket and shoved it into Valencia’s hands. “You got a lot of money to pay back. Don’t forget who owns you.” His hand slid around Valencia’s back, sliding lower to glance over the skin peeking out from her low-cut jeans.

Stanley thought at first that the guy was copping a feel – perhaps he was Valencia’s boyfriend, but from the way Valencia froze up that didn’t seem likely, and Stan was readying himself to get over there and deck the guy. Upon further inspection, it seemed the man was just tracing his fingertip over the tattoo on Valencia’s lower back, caressing the ink gently, but it unnerved her all the same. Valencia swallowed nervously, and swatted Damien’s hand away, even as she pocketed the clip lock bag, snarling up at the man. “Go back to your poker game, Damien.”

“Next time I come out, I wanna see you working.” He called after her as he walked back through to the kitchen.

Fuming, she watched him go, and clenched and unclenched her fists, trying to calm her temper. Stan took her tiny frame in, eyeing off the tattoo on her lower back, the one her boss was fondling. It was identical to one of the patches on the man’s leather jacket, identical to the neon sign above the door, an eye staring out from within a triangle, wings sprouting from its sides, a banner draped beneath the design.

What Stan had first picked as just a quirky design, he was coming to realise must be a gang sign. He’d seen enough gangs to know, and it looked like Valencia was right in the thick of them, in deep in more ways than one. Guess that’s who owns this bar, the idiot who went out back.

She took a few steadying breaths, pushing her hair back off her face, shaking off the encounter, and she turned around to get back to work.

She stopped short when she saw Stan sitting at the bar, having watched that entire unfortunate incident go down.

“Uh… your boss is an asshole. Want me to sucker punch him for you?” Stan offered awkwardly.

“What are you doing here?” Valencia asked him, angry and embarrassed that Stan had witnessed that. “Don’t you have anywhere else to drink?”
“I can–“ Stan started to get up, not wanting to upset her.

“No, no. Don’t go.” Valencia held her hand out, shaking her head. “I’ve just had a shitty day.”

“Yeah, you and me both.” Stan commiserated, before he looked between Sally and Valencia, considering the scant few dollars left in his wallet, before reaching a decision. “Can I buy you a drink or something?”

“I’m not in the mood to do –“

“Not like that.” Stan held his hand up, stopping her. “Look, I can understand shitty days, I’ve been having a few myself lately. Just let me buy you a drink, you look like you need one.”

Valencia watched Stan hesitantly, before she looked behind her, checking her boss wasn’t looming in the doorway. Stan was smiling winsomely at her all the while, hoping she’d cool off with him. He enjoyed her company, and she looked like she needed some commiseration. Stan wouldn’t mind someone to commiserate with as well, and he’d rather commiserate with someone pretty than with the concierge back at the motel. He got the feeling the concierge was getting sick of him.

A few customers walked into the bar, and Valencia looked over at Sally, who chewed on the last of her smuggled dinner and inclined her head, waving at Val with her sparkly cheese stained manicured nails.

“You sit and have a drink hun, you know I’ll take care of the other customers.”

“Thanks Sal.” Valencia’s shoulders sagged with relief, and she walked over to Stan, standing opposite him on the other side of the counter.

Reaching under the bar, she grabbed a shot glass, and poured herself a shot of tequila, chugging it back. Setting the glass upside down on the counter as she swallowed, she held her hand out to Stan.

“Ten bucks for the shot.”

“Bleed my dry why don’t ya.” Stan joked, and passed her the money.

“Shots are five bucks each.” Valencia explained, turning the glass the right way around and pouring more tequila in the glass. “The second one’s for you.”

Stan raised his eyebrows at her, surprised, and she watched his expression shift, smiling softly.

“You said you had a shitty day too.”

“I did. More like a shitty week … month. But who’s counting?” Stan replied, reaching for the shot. He raised the glass to her, and chugged back his own shot, wincing at the taste. “You got any lemon?”

“Lemon costs extra.” Valencia shrugged. “I figured you weren’t doing so good, since you didn’t get your dishwasher today. Vacuum sales not going so well?”

“It sucks.” Stan chased his shot down with the rest of his beer.

“You use that in your sales pitch?” Valencia joked.

“Sugar, I’ve used everything.” Stan sighed, and scratched his head. “Can’t sell what I don’t have. I’m really scraping the bottom of the barrel now, and I’ve been here before. It ain’t pretty.”
“Yeah, you’re telling me.” Valencia rolled her eyes, and shook her head, looking over her shoulder to the kitchen door before giving the counter a lazy wipe to look busy. “It sucks.”

“So, what’s your deal?” Stan questioned bluntly. “Sounds like your boss has got you by the balls. Or the female equivalent.”

“That’s an understatement.” Valencia scoffed.

“What’d he give you?” Stanley queried.

“Are you a narc?” Valencia asked sharply, and for a moment Stan looked offended, before she laughed, poking at his arm cheekily. “Just kidding, I know narcs, and you ain’t it. You’ve been trouble since you got here.”

“That hurts.” Stan put his hand over his chest, feigning upset, when really, he was just impressed at how savvy this girl was.

“Take the compliment.” Valencia grinned, before she fished for the clip lock from the back pocket of her jeans, dangling it in front of Stan. Several tablets of some undiscernible drug sat in the plastic bag, and Stan looked between the pills and Valencia’s wry grin. “Courtesy of the Evil Eye.”

“They making you sell that?” Stan grunted, reaching out to examine the pills.

“I do what I have to do to get them off my back.” Valencia let Stan look at the pills, before plucking them away from him. “I owe too much money to get away with only working the bar. And I’m not doing the other shit they want me to do. So, I sell happy pills to happy people on the side.”

“Huh.” Stan nodded, considering that.

“What, you’re judging me?” Valencia questioned defensively, clutching the plastic packet to her chest.

“Like hell I am.” Stan shook his head. “You should’ve seen some of the stuff I did in Columbia. I’m not fit to judge anything, after the things that I’ve done.”

“Yeah, well. I’m sure we’d all rather be ‘pug smuggling’, but the world doesn’t work like that.” Valencia shrugged. “And if I sell this baggie, that’s $500 less I’ve got to pay back down the track.”

“How much do you still have to pay off?” Stan asked, sipping his beer.

“Soossooo much.” Valencia shook her head, and reached for the tequila again, topping herself up. “Had to get my little brother into a good school across the country. Anything to get him out of here, and the kid’s got one hell of a head for numbers, a mathematical genius.”

“So, your kid brother’s a genius, huh?” Stan lowered his gaze to the counter, sounding slightly melancholy. “Sounds familiar.”

“I had to take out a loan to get him into college, and then a loan on top of that to get him out of New Mexico, and a loan to keep mom’s life support on – and it all just kept piling up.” Valencia sighed, and picked up the shot glass. “I couldn’t keep up with the hospital payments and the bank were gonna foreclosure on the family house, and I didn’t know who else to turn to. My best friend’s cousin Luca was in the gang, he suggested they could take care of it – and they did.”

“And now you’ve gotta pay them back.” Stan surmised.
“And that’s pretty much a life sentence.” Valencia shot back her tequila and wrinkled her nose as she swallowed the liquor. “So, I work with what I’ve got. I’m making the best of a bad situation.”

“I’ve been in your shoes before.” Stan confessed. “Got in too deep with the wrong guys.”

“And what did you do?” Valencia watched him curiously.

“Eh, changed my name, moved to Albuquerque.” Stan grinned at her, shrugging his shoulders. “You can see how well that’s going for me.”

She reached forward and smacked him playfully. “No way, Pinington. If that is your real name.”

“Does it look like it’s my real name?” Stan laughed, gesturing to himself.

“No.” Valencia smiled, and looked Stan up and down, before she leaned across the counter, resting her arms on the wood, getting into Stan’s space. “And what is your real name?”

Her eyes were lidded, and Stan could smell her perfume, a subtle undertone beneath the alcohol that soaked the bar. Stan took in her lips, quirking up into an inviting smile, and her long eyelashes framing her dark eyes. A curly strand of hair fell forward onto her face and Stan reached forward to tuck it back behind her ear, testing the waters.

Her cheeks pinked, and she blinked up at Stan, not pulling back, remaining in his space, clearly interested.

Maybe Stan’s luck was picking up.

“My name is Stanley.”

“Hi Stanley.” Valencia murmured, smiling at him.

“Do you want to get out of here?” Stan asked, trying his luck.

Valencia looked over her shoulder towards the kitchen door and frowned. “I’ll get in trouble.”

“Feel like running away, changing your name maybe?” Stan joked, trying to bring back her smile. “I hear it’s all the rage in Albuquerque.”

Valencia pursed her lips, considering, before she looked over at Sally, who was studiously attempting to look away, leaving Val to her flirtatious encounter. Sal would cover for her.

“You got a fifty?” Valencia asked.

Stan checked his wallet, and pulled out his last fifty for her, slamming it down on the counter.

She swapped the fifty for a full bottle of tequila and stuffed the note in the till. Jumping over the counter, holding the tequila in one hand, she grabbed Stan’s hand with the other, and raced out the door.

“Let’s go, trouble!”

Grinning ear from ear, Stan felt his luck begin to change, and let Valencia pull him out of the bar, waving a jaunty farewell to Sally as they left.
“And so that’s why there’s millions to be earned in the vacuum industry. Because there’s a sucker born every minute, and you – you sell suckers to suckers.” Stan hiccupped, reclining on the hood of the Stanleymobile with his arm around Valencia’s tiny frame.

She was cuddled up to him, stroking his coarse chest hair through the top of Stan’s singlet, looking up at the stars in the clear night sky above them.

“What do you mean?” Stan took another swig from the bottle of tequila and looked down at her curiously.

“Well, there was the Total Sham, and then the Rip Off, and then those Con Easels – clever branding for a con artist. And now you’ve got the Stan Vac.” Valencia explained.

“You pick all your business ventures based on what pun ends up being the most ironic?” Valencia asked teasingly.

“Your point?” Stanley grunted.

Valencia put her hand on her hip and feigned a low, gruff voice, obviously mocking Stan. “Buy the Stan Vac, ladies and gentlemen. The Stan Vac – it really sucks!”

“You’d think it’d be too obvious.” Stan grinned. “But folks love a cheap laugh. You use humour, and it sells your product for you. Works like a charm, every time. The same way people bet on the horses, not because of the statistics or who doped who – but because Crazy Horse looks like he’ll run the fastest, and with a name like Crazy Horse why the hell shouldn’t he?”

“I’d say that isn’t true, but I lost 300 bucks betting on Eenie Weenis last year, because placing a bet on Eenie Weenis sounds like a good idea when you’re drunk at the races.” Valencia admitted with a laugh. “Just to be able to go to the counter – fifty dollars on Eenie Weenis, sir! I was dying laughing.”

“Heh.” Stanley passed the bottle of tequila over, and rested his hands behind his head, looking up at the sky. “You gotta stop and laugh, you know? Otherwise there’s no point to anything. But if you paste on a smile, things usually work themselves out.”

“Yeah, you look like the kind of guy who could smile his way out of anything.” Valencia smirked at Stan and reached up to run her fingers through his hair. It was growing long now, curling down below his neck. It might even be considered fashionable if it was on purpose, but this was a mullet of neglect. Things weren’t too peachy these days.

“Wish I could smile my way out of this mess.” Stan sighed, staring up at the twinkling stars. “I ain’t got no ETA on my goods, my supplier’s being watched by the Feds. I spent one of my last fifties on that overpriced bottle of Tequila you got there. I’ll barely have enough to cover rent, I’ve blown my deposit on the storage units, so even if my vacuums get here, I’ll have nowhere to put ‘em. This entire plan has gone to shit, and there’s nothin’ I can do about it.”

Valencia took a small sip from the bottle, as if reminded of its presence. She gave Stan a measuring look, before speaking.

“You know, I was gonna just keep taking your money. That fifty, whatever else you had. I’ve been overcharging you for your drinks since you got here. I was gonna take you for all there was in the
vacuum industry and I thought it’d serve you right for being such an arrogant asshole. Gotta pay back my debt somehow, right?”

Stan looked intensely offended, readying to open his mouth to protest, but she cut him off.

“But, I didn’t – I’ve stopped now. Because I know you’re a good guy underneath all your bullshit, and … you don’t deserve that.” She placed her finger over Stan’s lips, hushing him. “I ain’t the type to kick a guy who’s hit rock bottom.”

Stan wavered over his outrage at the fact she’d been conning him into paying more for his drinks, torn between being vaguely impressed, and absolutely mortified. For a moment he thought Valencia was one of the only good things he had going for him – but to find out she’d been conning him – Stan wasn’t sure whether he should be finding that as romantic as he was.

Though really, Valencia charging him more than she should have been for his drinks wasn’t why he was in the situation he was right now. It was because his investment with Tony wasn’t paying off like he’d imagined, the delayed shipment spiralling into a relay of bad financial decisions.

Paying a little extra for a beer wasn’t what did him in, and he couldn’t hold it against her for being an opportunist. Maybe he would have been that petty if he didn’t have a thing for Val, but Stan would have done the same thing if he was working the bar. Gotta take a slice of the profits somehow.

Shaking off his conflicted feelings, he managed a resigned laugh, looking down at his chest.

“I thought I hit rock bottom before, but it just keeps coming for me. If I don’t get lucky soon I’m gonna have to swallow what’s left of my dignity and get a real job – and I ain’t the kind of guy who works well being anything but my own boss.” Stan mused bitterly.

“Bosses suck.” Valencia muttered, taking another sip from the bottle, drumming her fingers against the glass.

“Yeah, your boss especially.” Stan remarked.

Valencia seemed to be thinking, the cogs turning in her brain as she tapped her nails against the bottle, mulling her options over.

“Hey, did you mean what you said at the bar?” Valencia finally spoke up. “About punching my boss?”

“Why, d’you want us to go back there?” Stanley turned on his side to look at Valencia curiously, wondering what she was planning. “Cos I’m gonna need a lot more tequila before that starts to sound like a good idea.”

“No, I just mean – do you know how? How to punch? How to fight?” She probed, watching Stan curiously.

“I did boxing lessons growing up, and since then I’ve, uh, embellished upon that.” Stan scratched his stubble, delicately wording the fact that he learned to fight dirty. “Why’re you asking?”

“Well.” Valencia stroked through Stan’s hair slowly, her eyes bright with ideas. “If you’re confident you can fight good, I think I just might know a way I can make sure you get your money back. We could both make a bit of money, and this way we could both stand a chance at getting our lives back on track. What do you say?”
“Will I have to work for your shitty boss?” Stan asked with trepidation, aware of how these things usually worked.

Valencia set the tequila bottle to the side and swung her leg over Stan, clambering on top of him, her curly hair draping down between them, falling to one side of her face. The stars twinkled above her, and Stan saw her dark eyes sparkle as her lips curved into a smile.

“You can be your own boss, baby.”

Stan liked the sound of that.

“Look like you don’t know what you’re doing.” Valencia hissed at him as she walked through the crowd, holding onto Stan’s arm. “Look weak. Weaker! Stick your belly out.”

“For once, it’s out as far as it goes. Lay off sugar, this isn’t my first hustle.” Stan muttered back, striding through the throng of people, heading to the organiser’s table at the back. “I know what I’m doing.”

“You better.” Valencia demanded. “I’m putting $50 on you in the first round, so you’d better get us a win. Show these luchadores up, make sure they notice you.”

“You’re so jumped up, it’s like you want to be in that ring.” Stan commented, amused by her focused, jumpy demeanour. “Maybe if you weren’t so tiny.”

“If I thought I stood a chance, hell yes I’d be in there.” Valencia nodded, eyeing off the crowd. “Got a lot of anger I could work out on some assholes in spandex capes.”

“Remind me not to get on your bad side.” Stan smirked at her, and she quirked her brow at him.

“You don’t want to be.” She elbowed Stan and pushed him forward. “There, go sign up.”

Shoved to the front of the queue, Stan scratched his stubble, made sure to stick his stomach out, and squinted at the sign-up sheet, raising his hand. “Uh, is this where you sign up for matches?”

The men behind the table took in Stan’s beer stained shirt, his portly belly, his unkempt demeanour and scoffed at him.

“This is where Luchadores sign up for matches, we don’t have a sign-up sheet for Vagabundo, try the shelter down the road.” One man sneered, obviously not impressed.

The man sitting beside him reached his hand out and grabbed the other man on the shoulder. “Miguel, don’t be rude to our guest. Of course, you can sign up hombre, you like the Lucha Libre buddy? You ever fight before?”

“Once or twice.” Stan understated bluntly. “Mostly watched the wrestling on TV back in the day.”

“Oh yeah? Well, this ain’t like the Lucha Libre you see on the television. This is no holds barred, you get me amigo? Real underground shit.” The man continued to explain conspiratorially. “But if you think you can take a hit and go a few rounds, then sign up hombre, be my guest! You just sign
this waver here, and you’re sweet.”

Stan hunched over the clipboard, grabbing it and signed his name, deliberately gripping the pen wrong to con these clowns into thinking he was an idiot. It must have been working, judging by the shit eating grin on their faces.

“Nice one amigo. You’re in the game, we’ll put you in a round. Hey, good luck bro – I’ll be betting on you!” The man said as he accepted the clipboard back, clapping Stan on the shoulder and ushering him to the side.

Stan could hear him talking in Spanish to his buddy sitting beside him, and as he walked away he grinned, knowing his con had worked.

“Oye, apuesto $20 que baja en los primeros dos minutos.”

“Apuesto, los primeros 30 segundos.”

Stan could hear their hushed laughter and he knew by the end of the night, he’d be the one who was laughing.

After all, this wasn’t his first rodeo.

Squaring up against one of the regulars, Stan stood opposite the man in the ring, wearing his singlet and boxing shorts. He didn’t have gloves, couldn’t afford them, so he’d probably take a few scrapes the first few rounds, but he’d bounce back. It wasn’t like his knuckles haven’t seen a few scrapes before.

The crowd was cheering for the other guy, he must have been a local. He wore shiny tighty whities and a matching mask, red and white decorating his costume. The masks and costumes weren’t mandatory, after all, this was freestyle fighting. You got all types here, luchadores, karate kids, capoeira dancers, you name it – so Stan doubted they’d mind too much if he didn’t stick to one set of rules, or any set of rules really.

There was only one rule that mattered to Stan in a fight, and that was to fight dirty. It wasn’t the most honourable or considerate thing to do, but if your choices were to get beat down fighting honourably like a chump, or to fight back with all you got, rules be damned, you’d be choosing the latter. No question, every time.

Word had spread that Stan would be going a round, and he made sure to deliberately look like an unappealing bet. He tripped over his shoe laces, spent a good five minutes picking a wedgie in front of the punters, and did his best to look like a down on his luck bum.

He did his best not to feel like it too.

He was used to people underestimating him, looking down on him all his life. He was used to being treated like second best, subpar – now for once in his life that underestimation was working in his favour. He didn’t like how it felt, but he’d suck it up, knowing that he’d be turning the tables soon enough.
The guy who passed as a referee stood in the middle of the ring, MC-ing the fight. He wore the classic white and black striped ref’s jersey, it had the logo of the local little league football team on the back so Stan could tell this was a moonlight gig for the guy, that, or he picked the jersey up at Goodwill. He held his hands up, psyching up the crowd.

“Ladies and gentlemen, Punters and Puntees– in our first match we have home grown fan favourite, El Diablo Inferno himself! Going up against out of towner sign up – uhh, what was your name again –” The MC paused, whispering at Stanley.

“Stan.” Stan replied.

“No, your wrestling name dumbass.” The MC looked at Stanley, exasperated.

“Yeah, I don’t have one of those.” Stan shifted on his feet, looking across the ring at his opponent, who was waving his hands at the crowd, courting their applause.

“Well make one up, dipshit.” The MC urged him. “I don’t get paid to write the stage names here. You think of something.”

“Uh…” Stanley mulled it over, looking around the ring at the expectant faces looking up at him. They wanted entertainment, drama, theatre – as much as it was essentially what they were there for, they didn’t just want to see two guys pummel each other bloody. They wanted a story.

Stan considered reassuming one of his old aliases, wondering if 8 Ball Alcatraz would be a decent cover, or if someone would recognise him. He mentally carded through all of his various identities over the years, and, recognising the impatience of the crowd, Stanley finally settled on one that surprised him.

“Stan-O-War.” Stanley grunted at the MC. “Call me that.”

Turning back to the crowd with all the dramatic flair the role entailed, the MC finished his introduction.

“Facing up against newcomer and first timer here at the underground fighting scene – the STAN-O-WAR!”

The name startled a few claps out of the crowd, despite their apparent loyalty. It had just enough dramatic flair to get people interested, which wasn’t the move Stan intended to make, honestly, because if the crowd were rooting for him and not against him that’d be less money for Valencia to rake in when everyone bet he’d lose.

He should have gone with a name like ‘The Tax Collector’ if he wanted everyone to hate him. Rookie move. He hoped those last minute bets wouldn’t swindle Valencia too bad.

“Now let’s have a good clean fight gentleman.” The MC said with a straight face, before he broke, chuckling. “I’m just kidding – THIS IS NO HOLDS BARRED UNDERGROUND FIGHT NIGHT! Let the match BEGIN!”

The ref swung out of the ring, sliding under the ropes, and Stan was left with his opponent, El Diablo. Kind of a cliched fighting name, all things considered. He knew the guy was trying to come off as intimidating, but a name like El Diablo just had Stan thinking of his car – and this joker was making a mockery of his baby’s good name.

Stan watched the guy still preening for the crowd and figured El Diablo wasn’t working with much in the brains department. Stan couldn’t talk, neither was he academically speaking – at least that’s
what all his teachers said, but he did have one thing that El Diablo didn’t have – street smarts and tonnes of it.

While El Diablo was facing the other way, Stan stepped in behind him swiftly, and threw a sharp punch to the guys kidneys, winding him. He doubled over, wheezing. The crowd booed, and Stan smirked, stepping back holding his fists up, waiting for El Diablo’s move.

The luchadore turned around and growled, a feral noise that no doubt was intended to be intimidating. Stan had seen more intimidating raccoons in the dumpster if he was being honest, but he had to give the guy credit for showmanship. The crowd was eating it up, cheering for El Diablo.

Stan had to let him get a few hits in, so it looked like the sucker was winning. El Diablo swung at Stan, and Stanley blocked it, but staggered back, pretending the hit had done some damage. El Diablo came in again with another wild, theatrical swing, and Stanley stumbled, letting El Diablo back him up against the ropes.

The crowd were cheering, some of them certain that this would be a quick fight.

They weren’t wrong.

Just when El Diablo had Stan backed up against the ropes, Stan struck. Clean precise punches, one two, to El Diablo’s solar plexus. Winded by those swift powerful punches to his gut, El Diablo was the one staggering back now. He put his hands down to cover his gut, but Stan boxed him around the ears, more quick, jarring punches, one two three four, that would have had El Diablo’s teeth rattling in his jaw. El Diablo hunched over, protecting his head, but that impeded his vision, and Stan used that opportunity to sweep El Diablo’s legs out from under him, tipping him off balance.

El Diablo fell, but landed on his knee, glaring up at Stan from behind his shiny red and white mask. Stan cracked his knuckles, casting a shadow over the luchadore, and he lived for the look in El Diablo’s eyes when he realised he underestimated Stan.

“You want some more?” Stan asked, readying his hands in front of him for whatever move would come next from the desperate wrestler.

El Diablo rose to stand swiftly, his hands swinging out to balance him as he stood, and the moment his hands swung back, Stan seized his opening and clocked him in the jaw, one smooth uppercut, momentum swinging El Diablo around on the balls of his feet to face the audience, before he crumpled forward on the floor of the ring.

The crowd was silent, watching with bated breath as the ref climbed into the ring. He crouched down beside El Diablo, checked his breathing. The guy was unconscious, that last knockout punch Stan delivered writing him off for the night.

The ref stood up and crossed his arms over his chest. El Diablo was down for the count. He strode across the ring and grabbed Stan’s wrist, swinging it up into the air, to the sporadic applause of the crowd, heralding the victor.

Stan had won.

He could see the dawning enthusiasm on the faces of the crowd, the faces that didn’t bet against him, that was.

Over by the sign ups table, Stan could see the guy who signed him up swearing and throwing his clipboard off the table, Miguel pointing and laughing at his colleague. He could see other people screwing up their betting papers in their hands, their expressions furious.
He looked through the crowd over to the bookies table, searching for the face in the crowd that he needed to see.

And there she was, Valencia, over by the bookies table, collecting their winnings as swiftly as she could, stuffing cash into her handbag.

The crowd was cheering now, a steadily building chant, starting slow but kicking off as more people conceptualised what just happened. Stan had levelled their hometown hero in mere minutes, felling their goliath with his plucky resurgence. Everyone loved an underdog, and soon they were all shouting.

“STAN-O-WAR! STAN-O-WAR! STAN-O-WAR!”

Stan couldn’t help the grin that quirked up the edges of his lips, watching the fervour spread through the crowd, the ref still holding his hand up, courting the applause.

Money safely secured, Valencia turned around from the bookies table, and looked up at Stan, standing sweaty and triumphant in the spotlight, the crowd going wild for him.

Stan caught her eye, and his smile stretched wider, genuine elation colouring his face.

Valencia couldn’t help but smile back.

After all, this was her ticket out of here.

Fighting as Stan-O-War was everything Stanley didn’t know he wanted.

He’d go out there, night after night, with the crowd cheering his name.

His every success was lauded, his setbacks and knockdowns were booed, the crowd was rooting for him, every single night he fought.

Their plan to work the hustle metered out when Stanley accidentally got the crowd falling in love with his underdog boxer angle, but Valencia didn’t let that stop her from swinging a buck. She made deals with the bookies and ran in for percentages should Stan win a match.

She became his agent in a way, taking care of the finances for him, while he took care of the opposition. And slowly but surely, they were reeling the money in.

Staying back late in the ring one night, after the quarter finals of this particular underground wrestling ring’s circuit, Stanley was sitting on one of the folding chairs situated around the empty ring, while Valencia sat cross legged on the floor, organising their winnings from the evening.

“That was some fight, I tell ya.” Stanley remarked, flexing his fingers, assessing the damage to his knuckles. “Almost thought he had me there for that last minute.”

Valencia huffed a laugh, before looking up at Stanley, a knowing, vaguely amused glance. “No, you didn’t.”
“Hey, the crowd did.” Stan protested.

“That’s all part of the theatre. That’s what wrestling is. The crowd think you were on the ropes because that’s what keeps them hooked, the story, but I was watching your technique. You knew exactly what you were doing, all the way through.” Valencia observed.

“So, you were watching me, huh?” Stan asked, trying to sound nonchalant.

Valencia shrugged her shoulders and went back to counting their money.

“You know a lot about wrestling then?” Stanley probed, curious.

“My dad was a boxer, like you.” She divulged, still focused on their funds. “For all the good it did him.”

“What do you mean?” Stanley leaned forward, resting his elbows on his knees, looking at Valencia as she spoke.

“He’s dead.” Valencia said shortly. “Heart attack.”

“Oh.” Stan wavered awkwardly, not knowing what to say. “Uh – sorry? I –“

“Don’t.” Valencia cut him off.

“Okay…” Stan scratched the back of his neck, before changing the topic. “So how did we do?”

“Pretty good.” Valencia split the money into even piles and began rolling the cash up with elastic bands. “On top of the bets we’re making, the cut we get from the bookies, plus your participation fee, we’re doing alright. 600 from tonight, split in half is 300 for each of us. We’d make more money if you were throwing fights, but you don’t wanna do that.”

“600 ain’t bad for one night though. That’s more than I’d make in a week selling fancy vacuums to rich idiots.”

“Technically, it’s 300.” Valencia passed him his pile of cash, and put her own pile in her handbag, sealing it away.

“Ya know, since I’m the one taking all the knocks, maybe we should think of more of a seventy, thirty split?” Stan suggested gamely, side-eying Valencia to see if she’d budge.

The look she gave him seemed pretty unmoved.

“Sixty fourty?” Stan tried, grinning.

“Fifty fifty.” Valencia insisted. “You’re lucky I don’t tax you. Stan Tax, for every time you open your mouth.”

“Aw, come on doll, you know I’m just trying it on.” Stan laughed, as she raised her tiny fist, aiming to intimidate. “Fifty five, fourty five?”

“If I get the fifty five.” Valencia raised her chin.

“This isn’t a ladies first sort of arrangement, sweet cheeks.” Stan joked, teasing her now.

“You want some more bruises, Stan-O-War?” She thumped him on his knee, and he winced, bringing his hands down to cover his legs.
“Ow! Hey, go easy on the goods. I’ve taken enough of a beating tonight.”

Valencia looked over his bloodied knuckles, and tsked, realising the truth of Stan’s statement. She grabbed his hand and pulled it over to her.

“We’ve gotta get you some boxing gloves or something.” She grabbed the bandage tape from her handbag, and begun pulling strips of it off the roll, breaking the tape with her teeth. “Can’t keep taping you up like this.”

“Eh, I bounce back.” Stan shrugged, and watched her delicately wrap his injuries, looking after him.

“You won’t say that when you’re an old man with arthritis everywhere.” Valencia warned him, as she continued to dress his injuries. “You’ll be complaining every time you open a jam jar.”

“You know this from experience, do you?” Stan asked, flexing his fingers now they were wrapped properly.

“I told you, my dad was a boxer.” Stan’s expression must have been too curious for her liking, so Valencia swiftly changed the subject. “You know, Sal’s aunty has an awesome job. She makes thousands of bucks a pop and all she does is stay at home breeding tonnes of little dogs. I’d wanna do that. Sell puppies to rich people. But rich people don’t want cute dogs, they want the dogs with ugly faces and wrinkled butts who can’t breathe right. Which explains why they’re triple the price.”

“Huh.” Stanley sat back in his chair, watching her continue to ramble.

While she spoke, he looked over his hands, garnished with her care, and he put the roll of cash she passed him into the pocket of his shorts. She was still talking, and Stan was pretending to listen, but he was drifting off in his own head somewhat.

Looking around the boxing ring, with the seats scattered every which way now the crowds were gone, Stan felt oddly at peace with himself. He couldn’t have foreseen himself doing something like this, but now that he was doing it, with the crowds shouting out his name, cheering for him, he couldn’t see himself doing anything else.

He felt like professional boxer was one of the dream jobs he would have wished about doing when he was a kid, if the notion wasn’t so thoroughly tied up in what his dad thought about him. It was only now that he was thousands of miles away from his father that he even considered that his own potential as a boxer would be something he could profit from, something that could bring him satisfaction, even if his efforts didn’t satisfy his Pa.

When he took boxing lessons as a kid, his perception of his talents tied in with his own inadequacies, the inevitable fear of disappointing his father making it harder to excel. Those high expectations were one of the many things that would tear Stanley down from aiming higher, from sticking to something he could believe he was good at.

It was only when those high expectations became low expectations, dismissive ‘he’ll never make it’ blunt comments delivered within Stanley’s hearing range, lacking any consideration for his feelings, that Stanley discovered his drive to prove everyone wrong about him.

However, proving everyone wrong wasn’t the same as proving his father wrong. Even now he was succeeding, the crowds cheering his name, he never once pictured what it would be like to see his father in the audience, Filbrick’s stern scowl tracking Stan’s every fumble.
That’d be a sure-fire way to choke on a swing, imagining old Filbrick staring up at him. Yeesh. Stan staunchly avoided the thought of it.

Boxing here meant proving something to himself, that he was good for something, that he wasn’t a screw up, that he had talents. And it was hard enough proving that to himself, he didn’t even want to begin to imagine doing this to prove himself to his father. He’d never measure up.

But if what he was doing here was good enough for the crowds that were cheering his name, good enough for Valencia, then it was good enough for him.

And that’s where this odd sense of peace came from.

Finally, Stan felt like he was good at something.

He was a boxer, in an underground fighting community, and he’d lasted all this way up until the quarter finals. He just had three more fights to go, and right now he was standing a genuine chance at winning the title.

Stan wanted that. He wanted that recognition. He wanted to be the best.

Though it had started as a hustle, Stan became genuinely invested in this tournament and he wanted to win.

He might even get to.

Valencia was watching Stan’s expression as he zoned out through various shades of wistfulness. She could tell he wasn’t listening to her and for the past minute she’d been talking about hot dogs wearing collars and selling them as a gimmick just to see if that would pique Stan’s interest, but he was miles away.

“Hey.” Valencia reached out and pushed Stan’s leg to draw him out of his introspection. He blinked down at her, his cheeks tinting a bashful pink, embarrassed to be caught zoning off, but Valencia didn’t care.

Let him have his moment, she thought. No point doing this if he wasn’t going to enjoy it.

With Stanley’s attention on her now, she looped her handbag over her arm and stood up, holding her hand out for him. “Walk me home?”

“Sure, let me just shower all this sweat off and get my jacket.” Stan agreed, and walked into the locker rooms to fetch his bomber jacket and put his stuff away.

Valencia waited for Stanley in the dimly lit boxing ring, staring around at the discarded fan made posters that scattered the floor, finding them amusing.

One poster was a picture of a battleship, with Stan’s face and boxing gloves drawn onto it. It was pretty cute, and reasonably well made. Valencia walked over to pick up the poster, thinking Stan would like to take it home with him to keep as a trophy.

As she bent down to pick up the poster, a chill went down her spine about the same time that someone from across the room let out a low appreciative whistle.

She stood up sharply, and looked around the room, to see a man standing in the shadows by the entrance to the ring, smoking a cigarette. He didn’t move, leaning on the wall there, he just watched her, sucking on his cigarette, the tip burning brightly in the dark.
“Don’t mind me chica, I’m just admiring the view.” The man said smoothly, and Valencia wrinkled her nose, disliking him immediately.

“Admire something else. The view isn’t interested.” Valencia shot back, crossing her arms.

“I can tell you got fire, muchacha. I’ll give you that much.” He straightened up and kicked off the wall, moving forward, still draped in shadow. “That tattoo you got tells me more. Tells me that you’ll know where I can find your boss.”

Valencia tensed. “How do you know my boss?”


She narrowed her eyes, trying to pick the features of the man in the shadows.

He continued to stride forward and flicked his cigarette to the ground, grinding it with his shoe to put it out, unmasked from the shadows now.

This man only slightly resembled Damien but it was enough that Valencia took his claims of relation seriously. The man had dirty black shoulder length hair, a thick handlebar moustache, and a scar sliced down over his left eye. His right eye glinted sinister, shining in the low leftover light from the ring, and tattoos crept up from under his shirt collar, climbing up his neck.

Valencia recognised the winged one-eyed triangle woven into the ink on his neck, and she knew instantly that this guy, whoever he was, was initiated into the gang. He wasn’t bullshitting. He was bad news.

“I’ve known him since he was six, muchacha. He’ll be happy to see me.” The man grinned and bared a gold capped tooth and several far grimier dentures beside it in the grin. “So, let’s you and me go find Damien, hmm?”

Valencia took a cautious step back, for a moment thinking to call for Stanley, to get away from this creep, but if he really knew Damien, she’d get in big trouble if she didn’t take him to him. There was an order, a hierarchy to these sorts of things. She wouldn’t get in trouble if she played by their rules.

She didn’t want to get Stanley involved in Evil Eye business any more than she wanted to be involved with it, but she was already entrenched in the gang, it was etched into her skin.

Valencia nodded, agreeing to take him to her boss. “Alright. What’ll I tell him you’re here for?”

“You tell him his Cousin Rico is back from Columbia.”

Rico grinned, the smile not reaching his eyes.

“And I’m planning to stay for a while.”

When Stan came out of the locker rooms, Valencia was nowhere to be seen. He worried for her for
a moment, before shrugging that anxiety off.

Valencia was a tough chick, she probably just got tired of waiting for him. She didn’t need Stan to walk her home, the only time she ever asked him to was if she wanted something more from him when they got there. Hence why he doubled back for the shower.

She must have changed her mind or something.

Stan hefted his bag up on his shoulder and strode out through the empty boxing ring, stepping on the posters that littered the floor in his haste to leave, crunching them underfoot. He was determined not to let her departure spoil his mood, but introspection dawdled where he’d rather outpace it.

Valencia was complicated. It was hard to tell what she wanted from Stan.

If only she could keep it simple. Stan liked simple. He liked simple girls, but Valencia was not a simple girl.

Sometimes, it seemed like she wanted him, and Stanley was all for that if it meant more good times with her. Other times it seemed like she only wanted him as a friend, or as a stooge to help fill her pockets. She did try to overcharge him from day one and while Stan could empathise with her story, he was less understanding when it came to someone else trying to bleed him dry. You had to draw the line somewhere.

So, Stan played nice with her and walked her home when she asked and split his winnings with her, but he wasn’t about to let her take him for a ride again. No sir, Stanley Pines was a business man and rule number one of the business was to always look out for number one.

Really, Stan had no idea why he was looking out for Val, like she was his number two. They weren’t together, they weren’t even an item. They just had this strange, undefinable thing. Like kindred spirits, maybe.

They’d been together once or twice, brief, drunken tumbles in the back seat of Stan’s car, or in his motel room, mostly to pass the time. They didn’t have that much in common, in terms of long term desires. Their personalities were similar, and Stan admired her knack for turning a buck, just as she admired his cunning, finding him funny. Stan didn’t mind being found funny, but he was no joke, and he felt like he needed to make that clear to her.

She couldn’t just abandon him when it suited her, and he’d had it up to here with her taking such a big cut of his winnings. Next time he saw her he was taking her down to 80/20… okay maybe 60/40…

The more Stan thought about it, the less disparate their shares in his winnings became, until he was right back at 55/45, and even that number wasn’t holding up to his own internal scrutiny.

He’d never seen himself giving this much up for someone else. He wasn’t even this generous with his ex-wife Marylin (he certainly took her for all she had in the divorce). He wanted to know what it was about Valencia that had Stan extend so much for her. Why was he doing it?

“Can’t keep taping you up like this.”

“You knew exactly what you were doing.”

“You can be your own boss, baby.”
Stan’s cheeks were inordinately pink in the balmy night air and he hefted his bag over his shoulder, blaming the warm feeling in his chest on the burrito he had before the match.

Thinking on Valencia wasn’t giving him the simple answers he needed about what to do with this arrangement they had going. He wasn’t getting a yes or no answer from this introspection, he was just getting a better idea of how long she’d had him by the deep-and-meaningfuls for.

How long had he been so weak for her like this?

“Shots are five bucks each. The second one’s for you.”

“You said you had a shitty day too.”

Stan sure was glad no one was out here with him. He felt like his face was swiftly becoming some sort of space heater.

Okay, so maybe he had a soft spot for the girl. She was nice to him, laughed at his jokes and liked his hair. They had some good times together. That didn’t mean things were going anywhere between them.

Stan wasn’t the commitment type, he wasn’t boyfriend or even marriage material. Marylin made sure he knew that for a fact.

The best he could be for Valencia was an amateur boxer, and even if he won all the way up to the finals, he knew that wouldn’t be good enough. It wouldn’t be good enough financially for the both of them, it wouldn’t get her out of debt to the mob, it wouldn’t get him back on track with his business. It just wouldn’t be what Stan wanted it to be. It wouldn’t be good enough.

It never was. *He* never was.

But maybe if he made it to the finals, if he won that last match, if he used the fights as a springboard for his momentum, things would finally start going Stan’s way.

His luck had to change sometime and what better time than now? He had a fresh start, the crowds were screaming his name, and for the time being he had a gal like Val on his arm, taping him up after every fight, taking care of him in a way that felt foreign and impossible for Stan to get used to.

Things had to go Stan’s way. They just had to.

Nodding to the motel manager at the front counter, despite how the clerk ignored him, studiously looking away, Stan walked along the rows of rooms at the Dead End Flats motel until he reached his motel room, fiddling with his room keys. Unlocking the door, Stanley threw his bag on the bed, and closed the door behind him, rubbing his eyes, sighing.

Too much thinking tonight, fighting and thinking and fighting with himself. Maybe it was for the best that Valencia wasn’t here. Stan was tired.

At least since he was alone, he could get some proper sleep.

Wiping his hand down his face, he blinked and realised as his eyes opened that he wasn’t alone in the room.

“Hello, Alcatraz.”

Stan jumped back in alarm, recognising the man who was leaning against the bathroom doorframe,
arms crossed nonchalantly, watching him through his one good eye.

“R-Rico!” Stan stuttered, recognizing his old cell mate instantly. He pasted on a fake smile, aiming for jovial. “What’re you doing here? I thought you were back in Columbia.”

“You mean back in jail?” Rico tilted his head, watching the smile drop from Stan’s face. “No, Andrew, I got out, just like you did. Or maybe not exactly like you did, because I didn’t turn on my fellow crew members and run squealing to the lawyers to get out. I had to get out the old-fashioned way.”

“By uh… serving your time?” Stan guessed, hoping for the best, that Rico had got out as a changed man, a non-violent changed man ideally.

“No. By blowing up the prison.” Rico responded bluntly, dashing Stan’s hopes. “Dynamite, I find, is more effective than good behaviour. I got contacts. People on the outside who could help me rejoin society on my terms. So, a few people had to die? I was dying on the inside too, away from my hard earned cash. And fancy that, when I jailbreak my way out of lockup to go check on our money, what do I find?”

“Uh…” Stan’s eyes darted between Rico’s stony glare and the door, contemplating making a run for it.

“I find sweet fuck all, is what I find. Someone hightailed it with all the dough.”

“Jorge’s sister got to it after all, did she?” Stan attempted jovially, trying to out the blame onto her, like he had back in prison. “Can’t say I blame her, cocaine is one hell of a drug, heh heh.”

“Jorge’s sister is rotting in the ground right now.” Rico divulged sharply. As he spoke, he pulled something from his pocket, something metallic that glinted in the low light of the motel room. “And if you don’t tell me where my money is right now, you’re next.”

“Woah woah woah. Hey that’s –” Stan put his hands up, backing up into the door as Rico stalked across the room towards him. “Just calm down Rico, put the knife away. We can talk about this –“

Rico hurtled across the room and stabbed his knife into the wood of Stan’s hotel room door, boxing him in with his arms. Stan shrunk back against the wood, feeling the tickle of his hair tumbling down onto his shoulder. Rico had sliced a lock off with his wild stab.

Leaning in, Rico whispered sinisterly in Stan’s ear. “Where’s my money, Stan-O-War?”

“I can get you your money back. I can –“ Stan insisted, scared shitless. “I can –“

“What do you mean, back? Where is it?” Rico interrogated, his good eye narrowing into a venomous slit. “Did you spend it all? Is that what you did?”

“I can get you it back Rico – I don’t kill me – I swear I’ll –“ Stan pleaded, holding his hands up in front of him, sweating anxiously.

“Kill you?” Rico leaned back and barked out a laugh. “I’m not going to kill you, hombre. If I kill you, who’ll pay me my money back? No, I’m not going to kill you, but I am going to make you suffer.”

Stan’s eyes darted between the knife still embedded in the wood above his head, and Rico’s gleaming eye.
“You’ll pay me my money back. Every single cent. With interest.” Rico asserted. “You’ll be paying me back until the day you die, Alcatraz. And then some.”

Yanking his knife out of the door, Rico kicked Stanley into the middle of his motel room, gesturing at Stan’s suitcase. “Give me what’s left of the money, right now, and anything else you have on you.”

Stan thought about trying to conceal the $300 in his shorts pocket, but he didn’t put it past Rico to shank him if he discovered the hidden money, so reluctantly he pulled out the roll of cash from his pocket and threw it on the bed. Walking slowly, Rico’s knife still trained on him, he crouched down in front of his suitcase, opened up all the little zippers, and deposited the last of the drug money on the motel bedspread as well.

It made a pitiful pile, considering the cash stash had once been 8000 dollars.

“There, that’s everything.” Stan admitted, looking at the pile on the bed sadly. There went his fresh start, though it wasn’t much of one, now that his old life had caught up with him. Would he never be free of the mistakes of his past?

“That’s everything? It’s pathetic. $8000 you had, and you blew it all, and for what?” Rico walked past Stanley and grabbed a handful of the crumpled cash. “You’re still living in the same shitty motels, driving the same shitty car, selling the same shitty crap you’ve always been. You could have gone anywhere with that cash, gone underground. Instead, it took me one month to track you down. And you call yourself a criminal.”

“I’m not a criminal.” Stanley said quietly, chewing the inside of his cheek to stop himself from saying more. “Not here anyway.”


Rico shook his head at Stanley, as he scooped the cash up from the bed, snapping the elastic band around the whole lot and stuffing it in his trouser pockets.

“Not anymore. You think you can make the kind of cash I want from you with a simple 9-5. No one will hire you, you’re unskilled, you got no papers, you’ve been on the wrong side of the law for too long and you won’t get shit done going by 8 Ball Alcatraz, or Steve Pinatington, or whatever bullshit identity you’re picking up. You’re a mediocre criminal, sure, but believe me, you’ll be a criminal for life, hombre.”

Having taken what he wanted, Rico shoved past Stanley, and opened the motel room door, pausing to speak before he left.

“Yo, Alcatraz. Don’t even think about driving on out of here after I go. You’re not off the hook yet, I own you now, you dig?”

Stan didn’t respond, still sitting on the floor next to his upended suitcase, staring at the bedspread where his money had piled up, everything he had to his name, and now it was gone.

Rico continued speaking, clearly wanting some acknowledgement from Stanley.

“The only reason I haven’t slashed your tires yet is because I’ve got a job I need you to do tomorrow. Got to drop off a cousin of mine in the desert, you get me?” Rico watched Stanley, growing impatient with his lingering apathy. “You ain’t going nowhere anyway. You don’t got the stones to up and leave.”
“You sure about that?” Stanley mumbled under his breath, itching to prove Rico wrong.

“You may be a hotshot boxer in the kiddie leagues now, but I know I’ve got you by the balls.” Rico sneered, and twirled his knife around, flipping it between his fingers as he watched Stan. “I’ve got collateral.”

“Which is?” Stan questioned bitterly, utterly convinced that Rico had just taken everything he possibly could take from him anyway. What was left for Rico to hold over his head? What could he possibly have over him now that would stop Stanley from skipping town and getting as far away from Rico as he could?

“You’ll want to stick around town.” Rico grinned at Stanley. “Or who knows what will happen to that girl of yours. The one with the tattoo.”

Stan’s eyes widened and his stomach flipped as he realised the reason Valencia wasn’t waiting at the boxing ring for him wasn’t because she’d decided she’d grown tired of his mullet but because Rico had got to her first. He stood, and looked up at Rico now, snapping out of his dour disassociation, his worry written plain all over his face.

Rico tipped his knife, like a metallic salute at Stan as he left.

“See you tomorrow, Alcatraz.”

The door closed resolutely behind him, and Stanley took a step forward to chase Rico, and then thought better of it. Chasing after the guy was a one way ticket to stab-town.

He staggered back and sat on the bed, the squeaky springs reminding him of exactly what kind of dump he was currently residing in.

He thought his life had hit rock bottom before.

Boy, was he wrong.

He didn’t get much sleep that night.

Stanley didn’t leave his motel room for two days after that encounter. It was a miracle no one came looking for him, but he had no doubt that Rico’s goons knew he was still there. He knew he was being watched.

Still, Stan couldn’t bring himself to leave, he couldn’t dredge himself up out of the morass of self-hating, self-blaming, ruminating he was stewing in.

He spent those days agonising over his situation, painfully reminiscing about how it used to be when he worked for Rico, of situations he never wanted to go back to. He thought he could be his own boss now, and he wanted that more than anything, but fate had him right back under the gangster’s thumb again, and it was a miserable place to be.

He assessed his situation from every angle, looking for a way out, some way to get rid of Rico, to get rid of this shitty state of affairs, and get out of dodge while he still could, but every time he
thought about leaving, his mind drifted back to Val.

“I know you’re a good guy and you don’t deserve that.”

Stan remembered the feeling of her finger on his lips, his own hand coming up to linger, prolong the sensation, guilt overwhelming him. He looked down at the bandages taped around his hand and his stomach churned noxiously.

“I ain’t the type to kick a guy who’s hit rock bottom.”

If he left now, he’d be leaving Valencia to Rico’s tender mercies, and from experience Stan knew that mercy wasn’t something Rico had a lot of. As much as he wanted to cut and run, he couldn’t leave Val to deal with this mess, his mess, for him. If he ditched he knew Rico would make Val pay.

Stan looked out the window to his El Diablo parked outside, peeling the curtains back a centimetre. Leaving was INCREDIBLY tempting.

But he couldn’t leave until he knew Val was alright.

Shutting the curtains tight, Stan flipped through his bag, pulling out a stolen battered coaster from the bar, and walked back to his motel bed, sitting on the edge, near the side table, pulling the telephone towards him. He dialled the number on the back of the coaster, anxiety doing backflips in his stomach all the while.

Twirling the curly phone cord around his finger, Stan listened to the dial tone fretfully, waiting for someone on the other end to pick up.

Finally, someone answered.

“Ojo de la Fortuna. This is Sal speaking.”

“Hey, Sally, listen.” Stan hunched over the phone, his forehead still dewy with sweat, staving off the nausea that was battling with his anxiety, the two fighting a cage match in his stomach. “Is Val there? Have you seen her? Tell me she’s there.”

“Mr Pinington?” Sal questioned loudly, and Stan smacked his forehead, cursing under his breath. “Way to give the game away, Sal.

“No, Sal. Goddamnit, pretend I’m someone else.” Stanley hissed.

“Oh, uh…” Sal sounded nervous, and tried her best to pretend, but Sal wasn’t a brilliant liar. “Um, grandma, why are you calling me at work?”

Stan pinched the bridge of his nose, gritting his teeth, before he spoke. “Okay, just yes or no answers Sal. Where is Valencia? Is she there?”

“No.” Sal said, the fear evident in her tone.

“Is she okay?” Stanley pressed.

“No.” Sal repeated, her voice wavering slightly.

“Is she alive?” Stan asked desperately, clutching onto the phone.
“She’s –” Sally began, but Stan could hear the phone being taken off her, and a familiar voice rang through the phone line.

“Where do you get off, bothering my bar staff, Alcatraz?” It was Rico, and Stanley’s teeth ground in frustration, his most crucial answer cut off from him.

He could hear Rico talking to Sal, and he knew why the poor girl was scared shitless now. He must have been behind the bar with her, and she still tried her best to answer Stan’s questions, no doubt shaking in her rhinestone cowboy boots.

“Go do something useful, and pour me a drink, Blondie. Do your damn job.”

Stan’s hands curled into fists just listening to Rico. His voice made his skin crawl and the anxiety that was leaping in his chest before was curdling now, turning into thick viscous anger.

“Where’s Val, Rico?” Stan asked through gritted teeth.

“You wanna see your girl, you’ll do what I told you to do. Don’t think I haven’t noticed you fucking around in your motel room. I got eyes on you, Alcatraz.”

Stan knew he was being watched, but the confirmation just made him feel sick and angry.

“You’ve got a job to do. I told you I wanted it done yesterday. You’re lucky I’m being so damn patient with you.” Rico said, like he was doing Stan a favour. This wasn’t a favour. “So, get in your car, and go dump what’s in the trunk in the desert, tout suite, before it starts to stink, you hear. And then I’ll see about letting you visit your little girlfriend.”

Stan made a frustrated noise, chewing on the inside of his cheek to bite back the urge to say something stupid.

Sighing, bitterly resigned to doing Rico’s dirty work for him, Stan gritted out. “You want anything else?”

“I want my damn money back.”

The dial tone signalled Rico had hung up on Stan and Stan just sat there on the bed, listening to the beeping, his hands clenched into fists, stewing on the anger that simmered within him, relegated to doing Rico’s bidding once more.

Talk about rock bottom.

Finally setting the phone back on the hook, Stan got up, threw his jacket on, and walked out of his motel room, locking the door behind him.

He strode over to his car, his precious El Diablo, and wrinkled his nose. There was a strong odour coming from the trunk of the car, whatever was in there had been baking in the sun for the past two days. Stan held his breath as he contemplated opening the trunk, checking to see what was in there.

If whatever was in there was incriminating though, Stan would be painting himself into a corner, so he resigned himself to breathing through his mouth (not that that helped) and walked over to the driver’s seat, climbing in and turning the keys in the ignition.

Driving out onto the road, Stan gunned it along the highway, heading to the desert.
Guess this was day one of working for Rico.

Miles away from anyone, Stan found a sandy ditch he could dump Rico’s delivery in.

He pulled the car up and walked around to open the trunk.

God, it reeked. If Stan hadn’t spent so long in his motel room, maybe it wouldn’t be so bad, but right now, the contents of the black industrial strength bin bag in the trunk of the El Diablo stank like a Thanksgiving turkey the week after.

Swallowing back his revulsion, Stan grabbed the top of the binbag and yanked it out of the boot, hoping the bag wouldn’t tear. Whatever was in there was about the size and shape of a body and Stanley tried hard to not think that he was hauling a dead body out of the boot of his trunk, but what else would you put in a body bag?

Stan felt bile creep up his throat, and he swallowed it down, heaving the body bag out of his trunk and hauling it around into the ditch.

It fell heavily into the dip in the dune and Stan kicked some of the sand from the top of the ditch down to cover the black bin bag.

He wanted to leave it at that, to drive away somewhere and air out his car until it didn’t stink so bad, but something niggled at him, making it hard to simply drive away.

Rico making Stan dump a body was obviously sending Stan a message, but Stan didn’t know whose body it was. So what message could Rico possibly be sending him?

The thought that made it difficult to drive away was the same thought that kept Stan from running from a lot of things here in New Mexico. And that thought was ‘what if it was Valencia in that body bag?’ and ‘what if it’s my fault she’s dead’ and that thought terrified Stan.

He felt like a coward already. He felt like a coward for wanting to run, and he felt like a coward for not standing up to Rico, for giving in and doing what that bastard told him.

But that was the thing about Valencia, that she always made him feel some kind of brave. And right now, he hated her for it.

Sliding down the sand dune into the ditch, Stanley gingerly untied the top of the bin bag and peeled the bag down enough to display the face of the poor unfortunate within.

Dark hair, tattoos, tanned skin.

But thank fuck it wasn’t Valencia.

Val’s boss, Damien, stared lifelessly up from within the bin bag, and Stan spared the poor sap a few seconds of unfortunate eye contact, before he clambered out of the ditch frantically, kicking sand down from the top of the dune until the body was covered.

Rico certainly was sending a message by having Stan dump the body of Val’s boss in the desert,
the guy who used to run the gang, and no doubt the whole damn town if Val’s claims were to be believed.

He looked down at the covered ditch, the bin bag housing Damien’s body hidden sufficiently, and he checked the trunk of his car for any mess, closing it, and driving away, the windows wound down the entire drive back into central Albuquerque.

Stan heard Rico’s message loud and clear.

Damien was dead. This was Rico’s city now.

Pushing the doors to Ojo de la Fortuna open, Stan strode in, looking for Rico. He was lounging at the bar, poor terrified Sal sitting on his lap, holding his drink for him.

Stanley stormed up to the bastard and reigned in his temper as best as he could, but it was there, just under the surface, roiling.


“I’m afraid your visiting hours are over, hombre.” Rico drawled, his arm draped around Sal’s shoulder, playing with a flip knife in his right hand. “Maybe if you’d finished the job when I asked you to.”

“If you don’t tell me where she is right now, I swear I’ll –“

“You’ll what?” Rico flipped the switchblade over and held it against Sal’s neck in an instant, daring Stanley to finish his sentence.

Stan swallowed, the words sticking in his throat as he forced them back. Sal’s eyes were pleading with Stanley and she was shaking.

Fuck Rico for doing this to her. Stanley couldn’t do shit to the bastard, every time he tried to stand up to Rico, he placed another life in Stanley’s hands.

But right now, he’d love nothing more than to punch the smirk right off that asshole’s sinister face.

Rein it in Stanley, he thought to himself. Don’t make this a bigger fuck up than it already is.

“I just want to know where she is.” He said, levelling his voice low, his eyes darting between Rico’s one good eye and the knife at Sal’s neck.

“I meant what I said, Alcatraz.” Rico flipped the knife away from Sal’s throat, playing with it idly once again. Sal let out a shaky relieved breath. “Visiting hours are over.”

“But where is she?” Stanley pressed doggedly.

“You tell him, Blondie.” Rico nudged Sal with his elbow, prompting her to speak. Sal nearly jumped out of her skin when he nudged her, Stanley could see just how on edge she was.
Her voice reedy thin, barely breaking a whisper, Sal told Stan. “Valencia’s downtown, at the police station, in a holding cell.”

“She’s in jail?” Stan gawked at Sal, and the blonde girl nodded, frown lines creasing between her eyebrows.

“And visiting hours are over, so you’re shit out of luck until tomorrow.” Rico leaned back, picking his teeth with the tip of his knife. “Speaking of, I’ve got another job for you tomorrow.”

“What?” Stan scowled at Rico, low on patience now that he knew where Val was.

“Be here in the am, ten o’clock, and you’ll find out.” Rico shifted his leg, sliding Sal off his lap, swatting her on the rear as she hurried away. “Fetch me another beer, Blondie, time’s ticking.”

Stanley just stood there for a while, watching Rico boss Sal around, but when the gangster didn’t acknowledge Stan again he knew he’d been dismissed.

Stan would have been pissed off if he didn’t have better places to be.

The police station downtown was due for some serious funding, considering the back wall and window that closed off the holding cells was left basically unguarded. All Stan had to do was jump the wire fence, scale the brick wall and sneak around the back. There was even a convenient milk crate stacked up near the dumpsters back there that served as a makeshift step, enabling Stan to get high enough to peek in through the small barred window looking down into the cells.

For such a vibrant city, the cells were sparsely populated. There were one or two sleeping perps and in the corner cell closest to the window, was Valencia. She wasn’t sleeping, she was sitting up, her hands covering her face, shoulders hunched. The moonlight from the window was just hitting her cell, maybe it was too bright for her to sleep.

Stan was ready to hiss a whisper at her, trying to get her attention, when he heard something he never thought he’d hear from a tough girl like Valencia.

Muffled sobs.

She was crying.

Her slender fingers covered her face as she sniffled and hiccupped into her hands, painting a melancholic picture in the moonlight.

Stan swallowed the growing lump in his throat, feeling like this was his fault, before he pushed aside his guilt, trying to get her attention again.

“Val – hey Val!”

She looked up, wiping her face rapidly, and locked eyes with Stanley.

“You okay?” Stan asked, pity clear in his expression.
“What are you – doing here?” Valencia wiped her face down, trying to feign composure as quickly as possible, though her voice was still stuffy from the crying. “Aren’t you being watched, idiot?”

“They know I can’t run.” Stanley whispered back. “I’m just as stuck as you are.”

“You’re not stuck, you could be halfway across the country by now – you should be!” She insisted, glaring at him, offended by the notion that Stan would stay for her. “I know I would be.”

“I couldn’t leave you here.” Stan confessed, sounding frustrated. “What kind of asshole would I be, you’re here crying your eyes out over me in a cell –”

“I’m not crying over you.” Valencia shot back sharply.

“Oh, uh…” Stan scratched the back of his neck awkwardly, hazarding a guess. “Over Damien?”

Valencia glared at him with red rimmed eyes.

“For yourself?” Stanley guessed again, feeling like he was treading on thin ice the longer she glared at him.

“A pity party won’t get me out of here, asshole. Can’t you just let me mourn?”

Mourn? Oh right, yeah, Stanley supposed since somebody she knew for a while was dead, she’d be feeling some sort of sad right now.

He let out a low whistle, his hands stuck in his pockets, affecting a commiserative tone. “What a way to go. Can’t say I liked the guy, and I liked even less finding him in my car, but nobody deserves that.”

“Do you think I give a crap about how he died?” Valencia bunched her hands into fists angrily. “Damien’s dead, and I could honestly care less, but with him gone, no one is paying for my mother’s life support. And I have to hear it from that smug sheriff that she flatlined an hour ago and I can’t even get out of here to go see her!”

Valencia’s angry tone broke at the end of her sentence, a sob wrenched through her. She brought her hands up to cross over her chest, gripping onto her upper arms as she held herself, trying to hold the pain in, but it all came flowing out regardless.

“I’ll never get to see her again. I won’t even get to go to her funeral. She might not even have one, because no one can afford it and her only relative left in the state is me, and they’re never letting me out of here.”

“But – you didn’t do anything.” Stanley frowned, looking down into her cell. “They’ve got no damn reason to keep you here –”

“Apparently, I killed Damien.” Valencia admitted, her voice thick and bitter.

“But that was Rico.” Stanley said, baffled. It had to be Rico, Stan had seen the body, there was no way Valencia, as feisty as she was, could have done this to Damien. And why would she want to? Sure, he had her in debt her whole life, but if she hadn’t done something to him before, she wouldn’t have now.

“He framed me.” Valencia explained. “He was at the boxing ring and made me take him to Damien. He said he was his cousin. He probably is, they acted all friendly when he got to the bar, swapping stories. He just wouldn’t let me leave. He had me standing in front of Damien, like I was
supposed to distract him while he came up behind him, got out his knife and slit his throat, as casual as anything. It was disgusting, I was covered in blood, it was all over my face and in my hair, and Rico just passes me his knife, tells me ‘hold that chica, I need to make a call’ and when he comes back, the police are with him.”

“But you didn’t do it! Didn’t you tell them?” Stan asked, gripping onto the bars of the window.

“Of course, I told them. Do you think they listened?” Valencia crossed her arms. “He must have paid them off or something. No one seems to care about what happens to me and I’ll spend the rest of my life paying for something I didn’t do.”

Stan watched her scowl bitterly at the concrete floor of her cell, and he couldn’t help but relate. When no one would listen to you, it didn’t matter whether you were innocent or not, that one mistake would change your life forever, even if it wasn’t your fault.

“They got you a lawyer yet?” Stanley asked, his brow furrowed with sympathy.

“No lawyer, no visitors. They won’t even let me call my brother. The only reason they haven’t moved me up to the New Mexico women’s correctional is because Rico wants me under his nose, under his goddamn thumb.” Valencia’s lip curled. “Just when I thought I was getting out of here.”

Stanley was silent for a moment, reflecting on that, and Valencia looked up at him.

“Why aren’t you getting out of here?”

Stanley pulled a face and tried to pretend he wasn’t sticking around for her sake. “Well, I would, but with me and what money? Rico took it all back, and he’s making me work for him now, and since I like not being dead, I guess that’s it for me.”

“That’s it?” Valencia stared at him disbelievingly. “You’ve still got your car, just cut and run! Change your name again, disappear. You’ve got nothing tying you here.”

The uncomfortable expression on Stan’s face said it all. He could tell when Valencia realised who he was staying for, and for a split second her eyes lit up with surprise before she grit her teeth and looked down at the floor again.

“Look, it’s my fault you’re in here. I don’t like it any more than you do, but I stole the money from Rico that put us in this shit in the first place. I’ll just – do what he says until I’ve paid him back and – I dunno, you need me to smuggle you in food or cigarettes or something?” Stan questioned, sounding resigned, trying to hide how devastated he was to have rediscovered rock bottom.

“Just go, Stanley.” Valencia said, her voice low and tense. “I can take care of myself.”

“You sure? I can –“

“Just go!” Valencia shouted at him, and her voice echoed through the police station.

Stan heard voices at the door to the holding cells, the police coming to investigate and he knew he had to make his exit sharpish.

Ducking down from the window, Stan ran back and climbed the brick wall, landing on the grass on the other side, resting his back against the bricks. The moonlight played with shadows draping Stanley in secrecy and, alone in the night, he sighed.

Looking down at his hands, Stanley lamented how even when he was trying to do the right thing,
he was still getting yelled at, his efforts blowing up in his face over and over again.

His hands balled into fists. He guessed this was his life now.

So much for a fresh start.

“I love American cops.” Rico said, reclining on one of the fold out chairs in the boxing ring, picking his teeth with his knife. “They think the rules don’t apply to them, that’s why they go into law enforcement. They puff themselves up, feed their egos, grow fat on self-importance. They are worshiped like gods and start to believe it’s true.”

Good god, he was monologing.

Stanley rolled his eyes and continued to pummel the punching bag hanging in the middle of the ring. He was here to practise for the finals, but he didn’t take the same joy in boxing anymore, not like he used to. Now, the winnings from his every match were snatched from him before he even got his mitts on the money.

At first Stanley was surprised when Rico allowed him to continue with the competition, thinking that denying him the one thing that made him happy would all be part of Rico’s plan to make him suffer. It still was in a backhanded way. Rico came to all of his matches, expected Stanley to win and seized his winnings from him constantly. The crowd still cheered for the Stan O’ War, his winning streak kept him in high regard, but their praise fell on bitter ears.

It looked like Stan was set to win the finals too, given how much he’d been practising, not that you’d notice over his beer gut. You didn’t need a six pack to win fights, thankfully. He hoped his victory could provide him some small consolation that his life wasn’t a total dumpster fire, but given how his luck had been lately, he pretended he wasn’t holding out hope for a win.

Val was still in jail, a fact that Rico brandished about whenever Stan looked too happy. He had the police in his pocket, all paid handsomely for holding Val there on trumped-up charges. He enjoyed taunting Stan with that fact, that her fate was his fault, or would be if he stepped out of line.

Walking the line though was torturous when Stan really wanted to just cut and run, but even if he wanted to, there was more tying him down now.

Tony’s delayed shipment of stolen vacuums arrived, and with nowhere to put them, Stan was knocking elbows with hoovers in his motel room. He couldn’t move the stock, because Rico didn’t give him time off to work the door to door market, so they sat in his motel room, collecting dust rather than sucking it away. Those vacuums had cost Stan a pretty penny, and he hadn’t seen a cent back from them yet, but he could still turn a profit on them, however that relied on Stan getting a break from Rico’s overwhelming influence, and that didn’t seem likely anytime soon.

Rico continued talking, taking Stan’s grunting as he punched the punching bag as proof of engagement. “All these people praying to the boys in blue. They don’t realise that they’re just as corruptible as anyone. Gods are petty too, but laying on that worship, man, the praise and the money and the favours and gifts – it just gets them every fuckin time. Every fuckin time.”
Stan rolled his eyes again, and Rico caught the movement this time, flipping his knife back down into its hilt, standing up.

“I don’t want you getting a big head too, you hear me. Just because the crowd shouts your name out, it don’t mean they worship you. You remember who you belong to.”

Mumbling seditiously under his breath, Stan continued to punch the dangling sand bag. “Not you, that’s for sure.”

“The higher they climb, the harder they fall, Alcatraz.” Rico stepped up to the edge of the ring and slapped his hand against the mat. “Get over here, you’re done for the night.”

Rolling his tongue across his teeth, Stan debated defying Rico. He didn’t necessarily want to keep training, and he sure as shit didn’t want to dance to Rico’s tune, but he didn’t exactly have much of a choice.

Wiping the sweat from his forehead and smearing it onto his singlet, Stan stepped away from the punching bag and walked over to the edge of the ring. Sliding under the ropes, he climbed down and stood opposite Rico.

Rather than ask if Rico needed anything else, or ask if he was dismissed for the night, Stan just stood there, watching Rico sullenly. He’d rather not give Rico the satisfaction.

“Things are shaping up for a good fight.” Rico remarked, pocketing his knife. “Finals tomorrow. You’re bringing your a-game?”

“Sure.” Stan said begrudgingly.

“You wanna win, right Alactraz? This is what you’ve been training for. You wanna win for you, and your girl, don’t you?” Rico said, smiling, and that unnerved Stanley.

He made a noncommittal noise, but he knew just as well as Rico that Stan wanted to win, he wanted some small measure of success in the shitstorm that was his life.

Rico slung his arm around Stan’s shoulders and walked him to the exit. He was being too friendly, Stan was on edge, his shoulders tense.

Rico kneaded his shoulders with his bony fingers, prodding Stan a little too hard to be genuine. It was like Rico was acting like some sort of parody of a boxing coach, egging Stan on.

“The crowd will be screaming your name, Alcatraz, they’re gonna be hanging on your every move. They’re gonna be watching every block, every duck, every punch you swing.”

Stan tried shrugging Rico’s hands off his shoulders, but the gangster just dug his fingers in harder. It was starting to hurt.

“Every fight has led up to this one, and there’s gonna be a lot of money riding on you winning.” Rico stopped, and held onto Stan’s upper arm, not letting him leave. “And a lot of money to gain if you lose, you get me?”

Stanley paused, Rico’s words sinking in, and he felt sick to his stomach. He should have seen this coming.

“You’re gonna be paying me my goddamn money back until you die Alcatraz, but if I don’t get a chunk of it back now, you’re gonna have to learn now to box without your kneecaps.” Rico let go
of Stan’s arm, and he lurched back, warily. “I’m not a patient man. You throw the next fight, or I take it out on either you or your girlfriend.”

Stan swallowed, nervous. He didn’t want to lose this far in the game, but what choice did he have? He was rather attached to his kneecaps and the rest of his body. Rico wasn’t messing around.

“You better be back here tomorrow night.” Rico shoved Stanley out the door, onto the street. The light from the arena silhouetted the gangster and his one good eye glinted in the dark. “And you better be ready to lose.”

Stan scrambled to his feet, and huffed, steeling himself to say something back to Rico, to stand up for himself, but the knife wielding crook had already turned around and retreated into the boxing ring.

Shoulders slumped, he bit his tongue and scuffed his shoes along the gravel as he walked back to Dead End Flats motel.

This wasn’t fair. He was just getting good at something, he was going to win, and now he had to throw the fight?

If he did this tonight, his dad would’ve been right about him.

He really would be a good for nothing loser.

Before he left Motel Ritz, he raided the mini fridge for all the tiny booze bottles he could get his hands on, and now at 5am, alone in his crummier motel room on the edge of town, sharing his room with a surplus of 20 vacuum cleaners, Stan was throwing himself the teensiest pity party.

Clinking the mini vodka bottle against the mini bourbon, Stan rambled to himself.

“We have Vacuum Mogul Steve Pinington of Stan Co Enterprise on the couch this evening. Mr Pinington, now every household on the western seaboard has a patented Stan Vac Vacuum. How the hell are you so successful, you handsome lug?”

Wiggling the mini bourbon bottle, Stan replied to himself. “Well Merv, ya see, it’s all in the branding –“

Stan’s private dialogue was rudely interrupted by a rap on the door. Stan fell silent, not willing to share his interview with an imaginary studio audience with a live studio audience.

The rapping continued, someone knocking impatiently on Stan’s motel room door. Stan sat up cautiously, listening. He was tempted to pretend he wasn’t in, if only to avoid one of Rico’s goons, but the more he listened the more he could hear the familiar sound of someone swearing under their breath.

He recognised that voice.

He opened the door, standing there in his dirty singlet and boxers, just to see Valencia turning to walk away, a wooden baseball bat slung over her shoulder, shaking her head.
“Val?”

She turned around, looking him up and down, and her irritation melted into a fond smile. “If you’d have pretended you weren’t in, I was going to call bullshit right through your window with my bat, you know? I reckon it’s been done before, with them boarded up like that. I could hear you in there, talking to yourself. How’s Merv?”


Hefting the bat up onto her shoulder, Valencia grinned at him, and shrugged. “I told you I could look after myself.”

Stan blinked at her, wonder slowly gracing his face.

She looked around and walked up to Stan. “Listen, I can’t stay long, they’re gonna know I got out eventually, and here is the first place they’ll come looking. I just came to say goodbye.”

“Goodbye?” Stan repeated, slow on the uptake, though that may have been the alcohol.

“I’m leaving. I’ve got nothing tying me here anymore, I just want to run away, change my name – pull a Stanley, you know?” Valencia explained, pushing her hair back off her face. “I’ve got a ride waiting for me. I’m going to go up north and live with my little brother, lay low with the little genius until he finishes his degree – and then when he’s settled I’m going to go chase my own dreams, be my own boss. I just came by to let you know that. That I’m going, that you don’t have to stay here anymore. You didn’t need to stay here for me, and now you don’t have to.”

A car honked its horn in the driveway, waiting for Valencia. She looked over her shoulder, impatient to leave, then turned to face Stan’s stunned expression. Walking over to him, she reached for his hand, and gave it a squeeze.

“You’ve been really good to me, Stanley Pines. Now, you can be good to yourself. Chase your own dreams.” Raising up onto her tip toes, Val pressed a sweet kiss to Stan’s cheek, and looked into his eyes. “We worked well together, didn’t we? Maybe we can do it again someday?”

Stan was no good at goodbyes, but he tried his best, flashing an awkward smile at her. “I’ll have to look you up, you know, when you get that dog smuggling gig.”

She laughed, her eyes flashing bright in the dark. “You’ll be the first person I call.”

The car in the driveway honked again impatiently, and Valencia took a deep breath, and smiled at Stan for the last time.

She squeezed Stan’s hand, and let go. Before Stan could feel her absence too keenly, she passed him her baseball bat and closed his hand around it.

“Give ’em hell.”

What a gal. Stan thought, awed.

Running back to the waiting car, Val waved once over her shoulder, and climbed in the front passenger’s seat. The car skidded away before she even got her seatbelt on, booking it for the border.

Stan watched her taillights disappear down the highway and felt a strange mix of relief that she was
going, and sadness to see her go. At least one of us is getting out of here.

Holding the baseball bat like a treasured souvenir, Stan returned to his motel room, closing the door behind him, his mind churning, fighting off his inebriation.

He could leave now too, get out of here. He could go anywhere, anywhere he wasn’t permanently banned from anyway, as long as he booked it out of here while he still could.

Looking around the room at his surplus of stock, his clothes scattered sporadically amongst the vacuum jungle, he struggled to think of where he could go.

He needed a fresh start from his fresh start. New Mexico wasn’t the bright new future he’d hoped for, but then again, no state ever was. Sure, he had made it pretty far in the boxing championships here, and the stars had finally aligned to bring him his stock at last – but he couldn’t move it. He couldn’t even win the finals tomorrow, or he’d have to learn to live without his kneecaps.

Even if he moved somewhere else, what made him think it would be any different? That’s what he always thought, that this time it would be different, but it never was. He always ended up like this, down on his luck, out of options, broke and in debt to people who were bad for his health.

Maybe his dad was right about him, that he was a loser. He’d never amount to anything, and here was proof, delivered for the hundredth time over. Life kicking him when he was already down and out.

Rico wouldn’t stop hunting him for the cash until he was dead, and Stan wouldn’t make it big here selling vacuums, given how many gossipy little old ladies he’d pissed off.

Every sophisticated business plan he developed to get rich blew up in his face, and he was starting to think that he just wasn’t cut out to be successful.

He just wasn’t cut out to be happy, or have things go his way. It was like the universe had it out for him.

His life had been ruined ever since that fateful night in New Jersey, the night following the science fair. His accidental blunder with Stanford’s machine had caused him to lose everything, and it all spiralled from there.

He lost his family, his home, his brother. He lost Carla McCorkle, to that no-good beatnik Thistle Downe. He lost everything he’d built up for himself, over and over again, chased out of states, countries, landing in prison and hot water more times than he could count.

Everything died for him on that day. The dreams he had.

Valencia told him to follow his dreams, but he wasn’t even sure if he still had any. Everything he touched turned to ash in his hands, turned to ruin. His dreams just kept drifting away from him.

He pulled his wallet out of the pocket of his jeans, thrown haphazardly on top of one of the vacuums, and flipped through the slots housing business cards, fake IDs and expired coupons to find what he was looking for.

The photograph.

Him and Stanford, side by side, smiling at the local gym’s competitive high school boxing tournament. Three schools in the county competed, and both Stanford and Stanley came home with prizes, flimsy paper certificates that their mother framed for them to hang on the wall.
Stanley remembered the peculiar mixture of pride and shame he felt to see Ma so proudly hang Stan’s framed certificate on the wall next to the intimidating plethora of academic accolades and certificates Ford had already earned. He remembered the fuss she made over him, cheering him on and calling him her little boxer for a month before the pet names lost their appeal. He knew what she was doing, she was trying to compensate, to give Stanley some small degree of the same praise that was lavished on Stanford constantly. He didn’t appreciate it enough then, but he did now.

With a sigh, Stan stared morosely at the creased photograph, rubbing his thumb against the worn edge of the photo.

Things were different back then. He still had dreams.

Dreams to sail the world, scouting for treasure, babes and adventure. All those things seemed possible when he was young, when he and Stanford were inseparable. Before the world kept cutting him down.

Making it big and getting rich was the dream Stan formed to get back at his dad, that was him wanting to prove himself. His dream was still the same after all those years, his real dream that is.

*Now you can be good to yourself. Chase your own dreams.*

He felt like a schmuck, dealing with these conflicted emotions, sitting in his motel room like a loser instead of getting out of here. Valencia was already long gone, she didn’t sit around agonising over where she could go or what she should do.

She just got out of here. And went to stay with her brother. The kid genius.

Staring at the crumpled photograph, Stan huffed a laugh to himself. Honestly, that didn’t sound too bad. It sounded a hell of a lot better than broken kneecaps.

It was just cresting 7am when Stan’s introspection was interrupted by a knock on the door.

He flinched, expecting the bad kind of company, inwardly cursing himself for taking so long to make his mind up. He reached for the baseball bat Valencia had given him, it’s weight feeling right in his hands. It was small protection against Rico’s knives, but it was better than nothing.

Stalling for time, Stan called out from behind the door.

“Just give me a few more days Rico. I’ll pay your goons back, I swear!”

There was no response, other than a postcard sliding through the mail slot in his door. Stan peered through the peephole in the door, only to see a tired elderly looking mailman heft his bag back onto his shoulder and walk away.

Stan eyed off the parking lot through the peephole for a moment, checking the coast was clear of Rico’s goons, before he crouched down to pick up the post card.

The picture on the postcard depicted woodsy scenery, with the words Gravity Falls emblazoned atop the image. Turning the post card over, Stanley read what he thought he’d never read, not in a million years.

A letter from his brother.

A man of few words apparently, given all his fancy schooling.
All he'd written was ‘PLEASE COME’ along with his name and an address.

Huh.

How was that for timing? This could be a sign from the universe, this letter arriving when it did. This could be Stan’s luck turning for the better.

Stanford was reaching out to him. His stubborn, stuck up brother was finally willing to look past his pride and extend a six fingered hand in friendship to Stan, ten years later.

The hope that churned in Stan’s stomach was doing things with his liquid dinner, sloshing around with the anxiety that festered when he contemplated seeing Stanford again, face to face.

Darting quickly to the bathroom, Stan puked into the cistern until his stomach was settled. Wiping his chin, he walked over to the sink, turned on the taps, and splashed water on his face.

Looking up at his reflection, Stan envisioned what it would be like to be face-to-face with his twin again for real, and not just in a mirror.

The longer he stared at his reflection, the more solidly he made up his mind.

Opening the cupboard behind the mirror, Stan snatched his aftershave, toothbrush, and all the little motel soaps, lotions, and hand towels, throwing them in his duffle bag. He charged around his motel room picking up his belongings and jamming them in the duffle, discarding what he didn’t need, taking everything he could from the motel that wasn’t bolted down.

His bag was packed and his pants were on now. He looked around the motel room at the discarded discount vacuum cleaners, and left his life in New Mexico as Steve Pinington, Vacuum Mogul behind.

His bag slung over one shoulder, holding Val’s baseball bat in the other, Stanley strode out through the parking lot, daring the universe to stop him now.

Throwing his bag in the backseat of the car, climbing into the drivers seat, Stan turned the keys in the ignition of his beloved El Diablo, smoke flaring out of the vehicles exhaust as he sped out onto the highway.

He was leaving New Mexico behind him, leaving Rico and his knives, and his debt, and the championship title for underground wrestling all in his rear-view mirror, his struggles and hardships nothing but dust under the wheels of the Stanleymobile.

As New Mexico disappeared behind him, Stan gripped onto the wheel, and found himself smiling.

He was rather looking forward to his new life and fresh start.

As Stanley Pines.

Brother.

Chapter End Notes
Thank you for being so patient with me! It took longer than most, but I hope you enjoyed the chapter!

I have a big thank you to give to my ever patient and lovely beta reader, and also blue-canary who helped me by reading through my draft for this one to Stan Check. It's like spell check but with more crime, I'm sure.

Please let me know how you enjoyed the chapter.

Next chapter we have a reunion between brothers, and a convenient hole in space-time ruining everything.

Along with blue-canary and my dear friend and beta reader, I would like to dedicate this chapter to the lovely kind people who have gifted fanart to the fic. Rainbowratsstuff, cyferka, basiliskblues, and kenneatherat sent through art recently that I could fawn over on my tumblr, but there was some gorgeous art linked in an anonymous comment that I also adore. Everyone should go look. I reblog all the fanart I am gifted at f-imaginings.tumblr.com/tagged/nowing-me-knowing-you (and there is fanart I drew there as well as art I've had commissioned - haruhi-akira is wonderful to commission btw and a very cool kiddo go check out their blog if you like gravity falls, south park, mob pyscho ect) and the ones I can't reblog are linked in the comments. I treasure them all, so please go look. This chapter is dedicated to the artists who keep me going.

Also final note, I have some spanish in this chapter that I've checked over a fair few times with different translators, but if any spanish speakers notice something odd with the grammar or phrasing, pls let me know and I'll change it.

Thank you as always for reading!
Oh yes, I'm sure my life was well within it's usual frame... The day before you came.

Chapter Notes
See the end of the chapter for notes

“Allright, everyone. Try… now!”

The gathered henchmaniacs (the ones with eyes that is) all squinted with keen focus at the elaborately decorated throne that sat in the middle of the courtyard, Kryptos hovering expectantly at the base, holding a paintbrush.

Teeth scratched his incisor. “I got nothing.”

“Helpful, Teeth.” Kryptos snarked, disapproving of the dental dynamo’s flippancy.

“I think I’m kind of feeling something.” Keyhole responded, blinking at the throne.

“What are you feeling?” Kryptos pressed.

“I don’t know. An ephemeral sense of whimsy?” Keyhole shrugged, Amorphous Shape floating by his side, flicking his tails at Keyhole in agreement.

“Well said.” Amorphous Shape blinked several eyes at once. “It really captures the jubilance of the occasion.”

“No, no, no, no, no!” Kryptos complained. “It’s not supposed to make you feel whimsical, it’s supposed to give you a headache!”

“I’ve got a toothache, does that count?” Teeth snickered, teasing the pedantic compass.

“Bill said, if this thing doesn’t give you a headache within the first three seconds just looking at it, then it’s not good enough!” Kryptos hovered back to where the other henchmaniacs were standing, assessing the throne. “What, does it need more cubism? More colours? More spirals?”

The gathered crew all shrugged unhelpfully, their artistic input minimal past Keyhole and Amorphous Shape’s holistic appreciation for this sort of thing.

Pyronica was leaning up against the front wall of the Quadrangle, seeming distracted, her arms crossed over her chest, watching the investors file out of the building, idling in the courtyard, inspecting the throne being built. Her eye was lidded pensively, her brow furrowed in distant thought.

Kryptos floated towards her and tried to get her attention.

“What do you think Pyronica? What does it need?”

Jarred out of her introspection, she blinked down at Kryptos’ waiting eye, and looked up at the optical illusions painted on the throne.

“More spirals. And they all need to be moving. He’ll like that.”
“He could have come and told me what he wanted in person.” Kryptos griped, unable to help himself. “It’s that much harder trying to guess what appeals to him, and I’ve had to re-fashion the thing six times already now. The throne is for him, he could at least be here.”

“The throne isn’t for him.” Pyronica replied, looking down at Kryptos. “I mean, sure, he’ll sit in it at the meeting, but it’s not for him.”

Kryptos narrowed his eye, jealous ambition setting him on edge. “Then who –?”

Pyronica inclined her head at the investors, loitering throughout the courtyard, curiously watching the throne being crafted.

“He’s made you redo it six times already because they need to see something that proves we’re still on track. The investors see Bill preparing his throne, arranging for the big day, and they stop hounding him. They think everything is on track and they leave Bill alone to do what he needs to do on Earth.”

“And what exactly is he still doing on Earth?” Kryptos scowled, crossing his arms. “I’m not exactly keen to keep reworking the throne over and over again just to cover for him, especially when he’s not making any progress. He’ll have nothing new to tell the investors at the meeting.”

“You don’t know that.” Pyronica defended Bill instinctively. “He’s making progress.”

“With that human?” Kryptos deadpanned, unimpressed.

“Six Fingers is still the key to opening our door.” Pyronica maintained. “Trust me. If I know Bill, he’s doing exactly what he needs to do to wear his human down. It’s only a matter of time.”

Kryptos squinted at her sceptically, still unconvinced.

“He knows what he’s doing.” Pyronica insisted with finality, looking back up at the towering throne.

Somehow, Kryptos doubted that.

Stanford watched the latched pet carrier with a paranoid fervour that bordered on unsettling, the bags under his eyes that much more prominent when contrasted with the focused intensity of his gaze.

The wind outside was whipping flurries of snow up into the air and, despite the chill, Stanford had been sweating wet patches under the arms of his button up shirt, having spent half a day staring through the crack in the curtain out into the front yard, watching. Waiting.

He was on guard against anything suspicious and as sleep deprived as he was, everything that registered in his field of vision was taking on suspicious undertones. He’d nailed ‘no trespassing’ signs wherever he could and did his utmost to shut out the nefarious influences of the outside world, trusting nothing and no one.

Living in this heightened state of paranoia would wreak havoc on an ordinary person, with a plain
four walls around them, but with the scientific knick-knacks and research paraphernalia scattered about the shack, filling every room with paranormal clutter, Stanford double took several times a day, just looking around the living room.

That would be a sign for any ordinary person to get some rest, to seek professional help, or get outside for a little fresh air at least – all things Stanford couldn’t afford to do.

Since sending that missive to Stanley, Stanford had spent most of his time in the shack, paranoid that he would miss Stanley’s visit if he stepped out of the house for even an instant. He’d been living off bulk bought TV dinners, and unholy amounts of instant coffee, doing just about anything he could to keep his eyes open. To keep the portal safe from Bill.

But nothing was safe from Bill, not really.

And since Stanford was the only thing standing between the Earth and Bill’s destructive invasion, his self-described apocalypse of weird, he knew he must be constantly vigilant.

Which is why Stanford was currently clutching the wooden frame of his crossbow like a security blanket, staring down the creature in the back of the pet carrier with suspicion.

The gnomes of the forest had been acting peculiar, straying from the enchanted depths of the woods one at a time to loiter on Stanford’s front lawn, despite the bracing sting of the winter wind. At first Stanford thought he was merely being paranoid, but then he realised that paranoia was his ally – after all, it could never hurt to be too careful.

Unusual gnome activity wasn’t exactly a key harbinger of the apocalypse, but Stanford wasn’t taking any chances.

He could have just been hallucinating (an unfortunate side effect of such a severe sleep deficit – possibly due to the sheer strength of the coffee Ford had been drinking – he was certain this strain wasn’t FDA approved) or it could have been the sunrise reflecting off the gnome’s eyes, but as soon as Stanford saw that yellow flash, he set a trap. A painstakingly orchestrated trap, involving a two-day stakeout, a state of the art containment unit (the pet carrier) and the perfect bait – the fanciest of brand name maple syrup liqueur – all laid out to lead Stanford to the culprit’s eventual capture.

Stanford poked the metal front of the pet carrier with the tip of his crossbow warily. “I know you’re in there.”

“You put me in here, you crazy human.” The gnome inside shook his tiny fist at Ford, outraged now that he had run out of the maple liqueur. “Why don’t you mind your own business, huh?”

“I’m not crazy. I’m not.” Stanford insisted, ignoring the shame that washed over him even uttering those words. He knew what this looked like. He wasn’t an idiot. But he WASN’T crazy. “I am perfectly sane.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, all crazy like, under your breath.” The gnome scoffed, and ventured to the front of the pet carrier, wrapping his tiny hands around the bars. “Now let me out of here.”

“No.” Stanford said, before repeating himself with more surety. “No. I won’t let you out until you tell me what you’re doing here, Bill.”

“Who’s Bill?” The gnome shrugged, wide eyed, before he wagged his pointer finger at Ford, chastising him. “Listen, I’ve got six wives and seventeen gnome children waiting for me back at
“Six wives?” Ford raised his eyebrow sceptically, crossing his arms.

“Mmmhmm.” The gnome said, his voice pitching high, nodding, although it almost looked like the gnome was holding his breath, like he was holding back laughter.

“That sounds like a handful.” Ford commented, sounding vaguely impressed. “Of course, nothing you can’t handle. What did you say your name was again?”

The gnome snorted, a squashed laugh wheezing through the gnome’s nose, and the gnome was biting his bottom lip now to quash the laughter, though his tiny form was shaking with the effort to contain it.

After about a minute of terse silence, the gnome responded, his voice lilting high at the end like he was asking a question instead of providing an answer.

“…Gnomeo?”

Ford pinched the bridge of his nose and huffed out a frustrated sigh as raucous familiar laughter burst out of the gnome, confirming Ford’s suspicions.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHA – no, no wait! I can do better!”

“Bill!” Ford exclaimed, exasperated.

Yellow crept to the forefront of the gnome’s eye, confirming that it wasn’t just the sunlight refracting conveniently to nurture Ford’s paranoia, until he found himself staring down into the very same yellow slitted eyes he was once so fond of.

Bill was doubled over laughing, wiping tears of mirth from the corners of his eyes as his cackling fit continued. “Six wives! Can you imagine? That’s a gnome who gets around. Hahahahaha!”

Scowling at the hysterical gnome, Ford’s coffee fuelled irritability swelled, and he smacked the pet carrier in frustration, jostling the cage.

“So, you’ve come here to torture me some more, is that it?”

“Oh, Sixer.” Bill scoffed and flapped his hand dismissively at the scientist. “I’m not torturing you. I’m just having fun. You remember what fun is, don’t you?”

“None of this – none of this has been fun! I’ve been staking out my own front lawn for two days! You are – possessing the local wildlife just to stalk me in my own home! Just to make me miserable! Is nothing beneath you?”

“Well, at this height there’s a lot more above me than beneath me, if you get my drift.” Bill joked, leaning up against the front of the pet carrier, grinning at Ford with his usual unnerving intensity. “Come on Sixer, you can’t say you’re not pleased to see me? What have you been doing without my sparkling presence? My stellar entertainment? Becoming a gnome enthusiast?”

“I’m not a gnome enthusiast!” Ford banged his fist against the top of the carrier again, snapping.

“Ohoh, someone’s cranky. Must be all that coffee you’re drinking. You look like you need a nap.” Bill’s signature shit eating grin was just as effective on the gnome’s face as it was on his own.

“I do NOT need a nap!” Ford shouted, slamming his fists on the top of the carrier again.
“Woah, easy on the merchandise, Sixer.” Bill scolded Ford, as his banging caused him to stumble back from the bars.

Angry and feeling vindictive, Ford picked up the pet carrier from the sides, and began to shake it viciously, bouncing Bill around in the small cage like a brick in a washing machine. The little thunks Bill made as he hit the edge of the plastic box gave Ford a sadistic rush of pleasure, until he realised Bill was laughing amidst his ‘ows’ of pain.

“Ouch, hahah. Wow Sixer, you sure are dinging this gnome up good. What will his six wives and seventeen children say when he comes home to them all roughed up?”

Ford abruptly let go of the carrier, horrified by his own actions, and it fell to the floor loud enough to make Ford jump, keyed up as he was on far too much caffeine.

“Wooo!” Bill staggered to his feet, and mashed the gnome’s hands together, applauding. “That was fun! Do that again!”

“No, no I’m not doing that again. You tricked me into –” Ford began, blaming Bill already.

“I didn’t make you play shake and bake with Mr Creepy Lawn Ornament, Sixer. That was all you. And aren’t you proud of yourself?” Bill crossed his arms, looking smugly up at Ford.

“Get out of that gnome Bill. Leave him alone. Leave me alone!” Ford insisted, his frustration leaking out of him.

“I go to all this effort just to spend time with you, and you take it for granted. I didn’t steal poor Gnomeo’s eyes just to get here for you to take an attitude with me. I came here for some quality Stanford time. Talk about rude.” Bill complained, rolling his yellow eyes emphatically.

“You’re lying. Stop lying. You didn’t come here for me, you’re here for the portal.” Ford glared at the gnome in the cage, gesturing with the crossbow as he spoke. “That’s all you’ve ever been here for.”

“Technically true.” Bill conceded. “But what about the friends we made along the way?”

Ford shouted in frustration and kicked the carrier, before he started pacing, running his hands through his hair. “We are not friends. You aren’t even capable of friendship!”

“Now that hurts my feelings.” Bill sulked, crossing his arms. “Has anyone ever told you that you have a tendency to overreact when you’re upset?”

“I’m overreacting?” Stanford scoffed indignantly, holding his hand over his chest, affronted. “I think this is a perfectly reasonable reaction to the fact that my partner is not in fact my muse, but an interdimensional nightmare hellbent on world domination, who’s been using me like a pawn in your demented game of chess!”

“Mmhmm. Sure, perfectly reasonable. Putting aside the fact that you’ve got a battered gnome locked in a cage, haven’t slept for a solid month, and you reek of body odour and coffee breath.” Bill glared up at Ford, his hands holding onto the bars of the pet carrier as he seethed. “You’re losing it Sixer. You’re lashing out, so you can feel like you’re in control but you’re not. You’re paranoid, delusional, and your perfect brain is slipping closer to insanity every second.”

“I’m not –“ Ford took a deep breath and tried to sound firmer in his declaration. “Crazy.”

“If it walks like a duck and talks like a duck then you’re probably hallucinating – because there are
no ducks here!” Bill raised his voice, rattling the bars for emphasis. “Face it Sixer, you’re on the diving board to the deep end – and this is all on you.”

“No. No –“ Ford shook his head and pointed the crossbow at Bill. “This is your –“

“I’m not making you drown your liver in coffee or strangle your natural REM cycle with excessive caffeine. I’m not making you hole up in your cabin like a recluse, pointing your crossbow at whatever scampers across your front yard. I’m not making you do ANY of this!” Bill argued.

“No, this is on you. You forced me to –“ Ford insisted, clinging to the notion to protect himself from accountability for his own decline.

“If I could make you do anything, don’t you think I’d make you take a shower? I mean seriously, Sixer. I’ve met dung beetles who smell better than you.” Bill wrinkled his nose, waving the air in front of him. “What are you, not showering on purpose? Gross, IQ.”

“Don’t joke.” Ford scowled. “We both know the second I let my guard down around you, you’ll just sneak back into my head again and activate that portal. The second I let myself get comfortable –“

“So, you’re gonna be uncomfortable your whole life just to spite me?” Bill raised his eyebrow at Ford. “Gee, that sounds like a brilliant plan. Checkmate for you. What’ll you think of next, Genius?”

“You’re just manipulating me now.” Ford claimed, his paranoia speaking for him. “Everything you say –“

“I wonder if I could manipulate you into having a bath. Brushing your teeth? Eating something other than processed microwavable gunk, perhaps?” Bill shrugged, chancing his luck. “That stuff is laced with chemical additives. I know what they put in their secret sauces. Delicious lead poisoning.”

“Oh, like you care about what I eat.” Ford rolled his eyes, crossing his arms indignantly.

“I didn’t heal your body so many times over just to watch you toxify your liver like this.” Bill snapped, tapping his little foot on the floor of the pet carrier. “You want to know some of the other side effects of extreme caffeination? You start hearing things, your blood pressure goes through the roof, there’s the sweating and the shaking and the headaches!”

“You are the only headache I have.” Ford claimed spitefully.

“Now, who’s the liar? I don’t have to be in your head to know that it’s agony in there. And you’re just bringing it on yourself.” Bill pointed up at Stanford through the bars of the cage.

“Well, what’s the alternative?” Stanford exclaimed, throwing his arms in the air. “Letting you win?”

“It’s like you’ve never heard of a win-win scenario before.” Bill tutted. “We could do this together. Reshape the universe.”

“By destroying it? No.” Ford said stubbornly.

“You haven’t listened to a single word I’ve been saying. You’d rather believe some random cosmic voice in your head than me, who’s been here with you all along!” Bill held his hand to his chest, offended.
“But that just makes it worse, Bill, don’t you get it?” Ford’s brows were tented up in anguish. “That makes it so much worse. You have been here all along, and you’ve been lying to me!”

“Not all the time!” Bill argued.

“You think that makes a difference?” Ford laughed incredulously. “You think at this point that there could be a single thing that you’ve said that wasn’t a lie that could actually matter to me? That could change things?”

“Well, if you’ve already made your mind up, then what’s the point?” Bill threw his little hands in the air in frustration. “Why am I even here? Why do I even bother trying?”

“The only reason you are here.” Stanford said, projecting his opinion onto Bill’s actions. “Is to torment me. Even if it means stealing a gnome’s eyes to do it.”

“You want to be tormented so bad, be my guest.” Bill glared up at Stanford, shaking with rage. “You want to be the tortured victim, have at it. I could be doing things that are so much worse to you, Stanford Pines, but for your sake I didn’t.”

“Well, why didn’t you?” Stanford asked, almost inviting the pain, egging Bill on if only to cover his own anguish with something more tangible.

“It’s not like I’m capable of feeling things, according to you. Nothing I say would matter to you anyway.” Bill said bitterly, glowering at Stanford.

“That –“ Ford’s resolve fumbled, his dedicated abrasiveness wavering at the prospect of a genuine moment of vulnerable honesty from his muse, before he resigned himself to pulling his guard up again, almost regretting it. “That’s right.”

Bill narrowed his eyes at Ford, and huffed out a bitter laugh, like he expected this much, shaking his head, before he reached up to cover the gnome’s eyes with his hands.

He was silent and still for too long, causing Ford to lean down, peering into the cage, wondering whether he’d genuinely upset the god, whether Bill was crying.

He got on his knees in front of the carrier, peering through the bars, only to see the gnome bring his hands down from his eyes, the yellow having fled, leaving clear whites in its absence.

“Shmebulock?” The gnome questioned.

Ford sighed.

As always, Bill’s visit made him feel worse than he had felt before.

This really was just another form of torture.

To stay awake, Ford had taken to pacing. That perpetual motion kept him uncomfortable, kept him from sliding down the slippery slope towards restfulness.
He would pace through the shack, searching through his belongings in every room, bringing the
things he thought would be necessary up from the lab, hoarding his scientific contraptions in the
living room.

He needed to pace. It gave him something to do while he waited for Stanley.

Part of his pacing, and rearranging meant that Stanford kept finding things that reminded him of
better times. Keepsakes that stirred bittersweet nostalgia in him, that made him feel shameful
longing for the way things were.

Paranoid what these keepsakes would say about him when Stanley got here, unwilling to be judged
for his colossal mistakes, Stanford hid these little scraps of better days, but not anywhere in the
house.

No, Stanford was keeping them close to him, stuffing the pockets of his trenchcoat with the
drawings of Bill’s form, his detailed notes on his muse’s behaviour, all the little keepsakes and
annotations he kept from the early days of secrecy in their relationship.

It wouldn’t do for Stanley to find the coded notes Bill would sneak into the pages of his journals as
he transcribed them onto Fiddleford’s laptop, or the drawings and photographs of Bill’s form that
Ford had taken to serve as precious mementos.

Stanford still felt too much shame to be able to openly admit that he had been intimate with another
man, let alone to admit that the man he chose to be with was a threat to the entire universe. Hell,
the man he chose wasn’t even a man, he was a triangle. Geometrically, what did that say about
him?

Stanford could imagine his brother’s teasing now, and while his stomach was still knotted with
shame and regret, he couldn’t allow the possibility of Stanley finding these things, discovering
Ford’s colossal secrets, so he kept them on him.

Keeping them close however, did allow Stanford a lot more introspection than was probably
healthy given the circumstances.

Sitting on the arm of the couch, Stanford turned the business card Bill had gifted him over in his
six fingered hands, smoothing his fingers across the glowing letters. Sighing, he pocketed the card,
and pulled the next item out of his pocket, one of his early drawings of Bill, leaning up against the
kitchen door, watching him smugly. This was his list of melting and boiling points, written back
when Ford thought he still had some measure of power or sway in their relationship, back when he
thought they were doing what they did because they liked each other.

Ford felt a prickle on the back of his neck, like the weight of someone’s regard pressing against
him, and he wondered if this was how Bill felt, sensing his regard back then. He called it worship,
but Stanford simply felt unnerved, and looked up from the drawing, locking eyes with the gnome
still sitting in the pet carrier, balanced precariously up on the mantle.

For the most part, the gnome’s eyes stayed white, the creature repeating the word ‘Shmebulock’
constantly like it had a mental deficiency of some sort, but occasionally Ford could see that
intelligent yellow glow creep in again.

The gnome’s eyes were yellow now, staring out from behind the cage bars at Ford, almost looking
sad, if Bill were capable of such a feeling.

“Just go away.” Ford croaked at the gnome, his voice tired and thick with regret.
Bill said nothing, but continued to watch Stanford, his gaze unerring and borderline melancholic.

Ford looked between the piece of paper in his hand, and the battered gnome in the cage, its eyes alight with complexity – and he just felt utterly tired. He wanted to rest but he knew that this wouldn’t be over until the portal was safe from Bill, until Stanley came to take his final journal away – but he felt like it was taking so long. Stanford ached for it all to be over.

Exhaustion competing with bitterness, Ford scrunched the tinfoil hat off his head and into a ball, throwing the foil at the cage. It bounced off the cage harmlessly. The gnome in the cage raised an eyebrow at Ford, yellow eyes silently judging him. Ford’s agitation mounted at Bill’s dismissive reaction. Stanford picked up a pillow from the couch and hurled it across the room with a frustrated shout. It bashed against the pet carrier properly now and knocked it from the mantle sending the cage crashing to the ground.

The cage door thankfully remained shut, but that didn’t spare Ford from the shocked and affronted look Bill shot him as he lay, knocked down on the floor. He almost seemed hurt by Stanford’s action, though Ford knew he wasn’t the one bearing the injuries Ford was inflicting, and he felt terrible all over again.

“Just leave Bill.” Ford lamented, staring down at those intelligent yellow eyes. “I’ll only hurt you if you stay.”

“Is that a promise?” Was all Bill said, though Stanford wasn’t sure if Bill said it at all. His mouth wasn’t moving. Maybe he said it with his eyes.

Maybe Stanford was just hearing things.

He didn’t know anymore.

It had been a long day.

Stanford picked up the cage, righting it and setting it back up on the mantle, noting the absence of yellow in the gnome’s eyes.

It didn’t matter.

He pulled the curtains back a crack and kept watch.

Stanley would be arriving soon. Any day now. Any minute now.

Soon, it would all be over.

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From the penthouse room of the Quadrangle, a window opened up from the brickwork to look down on the courtyard. The finished throne Kryptos had painstakingly crafted for Bill was being moved further out into the space-field in front of the Quadrangle.

The investors were bringing their people in for a meeting in two days to discuss the progress of the portal and the future of the Earth invasion and not all of them could fit in the Quadrangle’s hall. Bill didn’t feel like remodelling his current home for them, especially not so they could make
demands on what parts of his new home they wanted to get their grubby hands on.

Honestly, he was dreading this meeting, hating the pressure that it put on him. But that was how deals worked, in exchange for power, you were expected to deliver.

He knew a large percentage of these investors would no doubt demand a late-delivery-fee considering how slow his progress had been. They would demand he take offensive action, be more aggressive with his attempts to secure the portal, be more ruthless when it came to manipulating Sixer.

Bill felt like he was on the cusp of losing a piece of his soul.

He hadn’t felt like this for a long time, deluding himself into believing that he didn’t have any more to lose, that he didn’t care if the universe saw him as this soulless murderer, this chaos god devoid of consequences.

You could only feel the effects of consequences when you cared about something. Bill liked to pretend he didn’t care, he spent the vast majority of his lifespan feeling numb to it all, acting flippant, superficial. Certain members of his investors would no doubt view caring as a form of weakness.

Jheselbraum seemed to think she had him pegged, believing him to be flippant, superficial, trivial, and cruel. What qualities his investors lauded, she seemed to see paint a different picture. That of a pathetic wreck. A cockroach.

His investors expected a solution at the meeting. They expected results.

The deals were made, the hands were shook, long before Sixer pulled him down to earth to live in that body.

This used to be what Bill wanted, what he contrived to occur. It was still what Bill wanted, in a way, but now he had something else he wanted more, and that tunnel vision focus made all his other plans seem unappealing.

If he could claim the earth in his own time, maybe he wouldn’t baulk at doing what needed to be done, but this pressure placed on Bill’s triangular form to deliver became heavier than he liked.

All the deals and accords that he’d woven together into a safety net for his major takeover seemed to tighten restrictively, and what was supposed to promise Bill freedom and power currently felt like shackles. The net had closed in on him and now his hands were tied.

He hated it.

He wanted a way out.

Seriously, since when did Bill Cipher do anything he didn’t want to do? Or rather, since when had this become something he didn’t want to do? He didn’t want to waste time pinpointing the moment, he just knew that he was doing this for his investors pleasure and not for his own, and that vexed him.

But unless something could spectacularly shoot his plans in the foot at this point in time, unless he could claim sabotage from external forces, something he couldn’t have guarded against, something that was believably out of his control enough to waive any blame from the investors off his shoulders, then he had to see this through.
By any means necessary.

And at this point, the only means left available to him seemed to be the one action he didn’t want to take.

To get this portal back on track, he’d have to break Sixer’s mind.

That would be what the investors would demand of him, that would be the only recourse. They’d see Stanford’s defiance as an obstacle to be broken down and done away with.

How was Bill supposed to explain to them that Sixer’s obstinacy and moral ideals were a feature and not a design flaw? Sure, his human wasn’t complying right now, he was hurt and lashing out at Bill. It was a new side to Sixer that Bill wanted to explore, and he held onto hope that they could come out the other end of it, richer for the experience, their relationship given new dimension, both literally and figuratively. He didn’t want to change Sixer, he just needed him to see things his way, to be on his side.

To be by his side. Like he used to be.

That was possible, right?

Everything was so much harder now, so much harder than it had any right to be, because somewhere along the way, despite how much Bill didn’t want to admit it, he had grown to care about Sixer.

And if his investors were right, that made him weak.

If Jheselbraum was right, he was weak anyway.

Bill looked out the window, as his henchmaniacs positioned the throne in its proper place, ready for the meeting.

He had to present a strong face for the investors. He had to stand firm against their demands. He had to be what Jheselbraum believed he was not.

Guess he had to lie until he wasn’t lying anymore.

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The snow was frenzied, falling heavier outdoors. Stanford peered out between the gap in the curtains into his front lawn for the last time, losing hope that Stanley would come at all.

His hope had melded with paranoia, convincing Stanford over the past few weeks that some harm had come to Stanley on his way here. That Bill had figured out what he was doing somehow and was going to waylay Stanley permanently, remove him from the equation. That cosmic forces had contrived to have Stanley be this late, make Stanford wait this long. That his brother was at this very second struggling against insurmountable odds to make it here to fulfil this task for Ford. He was just being struck down as he attempted to do so.

Stanford realised it wasn’t nice to imagine his brother coming to harm, it wasn’t what pleasant people did – imaginatively conspire dire events upon ones’ family members, but Stanford’s
paranoid overactive imagination preferred dwelling on the fictitious ‘what ifs’ than realistically assessing the likelihood that Stanley just wouldn’t come.

Stanford was pinning all his hope on Stanley, the last vestiges of it, and he didn’t want to accept the reality of the situation. That Stanley might very well not follow through, might not come to help Stanford, might not heed his missive at all.

Stanley wasn’t exactly the most reliable person, a shyster and a charlatan. Part of Ford almost didn’t put it past Stanley to deliberately not show up, just to spite him.

Another, quieter part of Ford, wouldn’t put it past Stanley not to show up in response to all that Stanford had put him through, that his brother was genuinely hurt and had been hurt by him ever since high school, when he got Stanley kicked out for sabotaging his project.

Stanford preferred to shirk accountability for that unfortunate consequence, telling himself that there was nothing he could do, that Stanley’s punishment was just, that it was his Father’s decision and out of his hands, but now that he was getting desperate doubt was setting in, wondering if this was the reason why Stanley wouldn’t come to help him.

Stanford’s eyes were getting tired, eyelids heavy, struggling to stay open as he watched the snow dance in whimsical flurries across the yard. He blinked, his torso leaning forward until his forehead was pressed against the glass. His eyes slumped closed for a second or two, before Stanford jolted upright, blinking hard repeatedly, trying to shake off the tiredness.

He couldn’t sleep.

But he feared it was too late.

“Exhausted is a good look for you Sixer.”

Ford sprung up from his spot by the window and looked around wildly, searching the room for the source of the voice he heard.

He couldn’t see Bill here, but he could hear his laugh, echoing around the room, fading off ominously. He walked around the living room, searching for his muse, pinching his arm all the while, hoping desperately that he wasn’t asleep right now.

Crouching down in front of the pet carrier housing the gnome Bill had used as a vessel, Ford frantically eyed off the gnome in the cage. It stared back at him sullenly, eyes devoid of yellow, but still the voice came.

“You should just give up. You’re not going to win anyway.”

Ford narrowed his eyes at the gnome, wondering how it managed to speak without moving its mouth, before he realised the voice wasn’t coming from the cage, it was coming from behind him.

Spinning around, Stanford looked over to the doorframe. He’d checked there before, when he was searching the room. There was nothing there, yet right now, plain as day, stood his muse, clothed in the vessel Ford had made for him like nothing had changed. He had his arms crossed, and leant against the doorjamb, watching Ford coolly.

“If you give in now, maybe I’ll lessen your punishment.” Bill continued talking, and Ford could feel the room tilt, the floor swirling underneath his feet, making him dizzy. Stanford swayed on his feet, his brows knitted together, feeling sick as Bill remained in his living room, gloating.
“So you have – you have been punishing me.” Stanford slurred, holding onto the mantlepiece to steady himself while the pictures and trophies on the walls danced, their shadows turning sinister. “You –“

“Oh, Sixer.” Bill laughed and walked across the room slowly. “You’ll know when I’m punishing you. You think this is bad, we haven’t even scratched the surface yet.”

Ford felt his stomach flip, his knuckles turning white as he gripped the mantle, so close to collapsing where he stood.

“I can take my time with you, though.” Bill said, his eyes shifting chartreuse, curving with glee as he parroted Ford’s words back to him. The world seemed to tilt diagonally as Bill walked closer to Ford, Stanford feeling more unsteady with every step Bill took. “Take you apart piece by piece. Burrow in behind your eyes and take your body for a ride. You’d like that, I think. Or I could make you like it.”

Bill reached out his hand languorously, and Ford shrunk back against the wall, shying away as his muse’s fingers neared his temples, power crackling at his fingertips. Ford could practically smell the ozone in the air.

“We have from now until the end of time to find out.”

Ford squeezed his eyes shut, frightened, fighting against Bill’s influence. He could practically feel the static on his skin, leaning away from Bill’s touch when he was drawn out of his head by a rap on the door.

Gasping in alarm, Ford’s eyes flew open, and Bill was gone. The room was empty, and it was just him, as it had been this whole time.

His pulse was racing, fighting off hyperventilating in panic, uncertain whether he’d just fallen prey to a microsleep or if he was just hallucinating. He looked down at his smart watch, checking the status of the portal, and it still read ‘OFFLINE’ though Ford wasn’t sure if he could trust that reading.

The rap at the door sounded again and Ford nearly jumped out of his skin.

Wary, fearing Bill had come for him at last, that his threats before were just a prelude for his true punishment, Ford grabbed his cursed crossbow, arming himself defensively. He walked out into the hall and could see a shadow at the bottom of the door, someone standing outside.

One of Bill’s minions, sent to get the better of Ford, or maybe it was Bill himself, possessing an innocent, doing his own dirty work for a change.

Either way, Ford would be ready for whoever was on the other side of the door. If they thought that they could get the jump on Stanford Pines they had another thing coming.

Before the person at the door could knock again, Ford swung the front door open and aimed his crossbow at whoever lurked behind it.

“WHO IS IT? HAVE YOU COME TO STEAL MY EYES?!!”

Stanley stepped back, a shocked expression on his face, looking between the crossbow and his brother, before his mouth turned down at the edges.

“Well, I can always count on you for a warm welcome.”
Ford gawped at his brother for a second, uncertain whether he was actually seeing him, or if this was just another prolonged hallucination. He reached out to grab Stanley’s arm (definitely didn’t feel like a hallucination) before he yanked him across the threshold, the fearful imaginings that plagued him earlier springing to the forefront. “Stanley! Did anyone follow you? Anyone at all?”

“Eh, hello to you too pal.” Stanley quipped, chiding Ford’s manners in a way that felt familiar enough, but he didn’t answer Ford’s question.

Seeking out his own answers, Ford pulled a flashlight from his trench coat pocket and immediately shone it in Stanley’s eyes, searching for any hint of yellow in the back of his eyes, or slits.

If Stanley’s pupils narrowed to slits, then he was likely possessed.

Stanley shouted out, flinching away, but his pupils shrunk back naturally, circles dilating the way they should.

“Ah!” Pushing Ford’s hand away, Stanley scowled, squinting at his brother. “Hey! What is this?”

“Sorry.” Ford apologised sheepishly, pocketing the flashlight. “I just had to make sure you weren’t …”

Stanford paused there.

What exactly was he supposed to say, ‘Sorry Stanley, I had to make sure you weren’t possessed by the demonic triangular influence of my cosmic nightmare of an ex-boyfriend’?

How would Stanley react? ‘Gee Poindexter, guess you really have gone off the deep end and it looks like you’ve brought it on yourself – best of luck to you’?

Shame pooled in his stomach as he realised he really couldn’t tell Stanley. And if he couldn’t tell his own brother, how was he supposed to tell anyone?

No, this had to remain Stanford’s shameful secret. No one could know.

“Uh… it’s nothing.” Stanford retreated further into the shack, waving his hand behind him to usher in his brother quickly. “Come in, come in.”

Stanley followed Stanford into the living room, looking around at all the curios piled up in the main part of the house, Stanford’s paranoid hoarding making the place seem far more cluttered than was proper.

There were dinosaur bones soaking in solution, starter cables pinching onto the bones under the water, looped up to diagnostics equipment. Stanford’s fish tank by the wall was neglected, the water within dirty and dark. He had prototype computer consoles of Fiddleford’s left around the living room, running scans of triangular shapes and prisms, a facet of Ford’s research he’d neglected to explain to his assistant.

“Oh, you gonna explain what’s going on, here?” Stanley took in the various gadgets and paranormal samples cluttering the room, wrinkling his nose at the smell of unwashed dishes and body odour seeping through the room.

Sure, he’d smelled worse, but he didn’t expect his perfect put together brother to be living like a bachelor on his last can of beer. Or acting so bizarrely.

“You’re acting like Mom after her tenth cup of coffee.”
It had been significantly more than ten cups, but Stanley didn’t need to know that.

Reaching for his first journal, the one he needed Stanley to hide, from the growing pile of clutter on the coffee table, Stanford held it close to his chest and looked around the room warily, not trusting his luck.

Yes, Stanley was finally here, finally here to take the journal away, but Stanford knew that this was the moment when everything could go wrong, and he couldn’t give Bill that chance.

“Listen, there isn’t much time. I’ve made huge mistakes, and I don’t know who I can trust anymore.”

Out of the corner of his eye, Stanford almost had a heart attack, thinking someone else was in the room, but it was only the anatomical skeleton he’d brought up from his study. Its face was turned to watch him, but he didn’t remember the skull facing this direction before. Had someone moved it?

Grabbing its chin, Stanford turned the skull to face away from him, not realising how downright crazy he looked in doing so.

“Hey, uh, easy there.” Stanley held his hands up, his tone softening like he was talking to a panicked animal backed into a corner. He was handling Stanford’s paranoia gently, but it was clear to Ford that Stanley had no idea what was going on – that he might not realise Stanford’s paranoia was justified. It was.

“Let’s talk this through, okay?” Stanley suggested, trying to ease Ford down from his jittery state.

“I have something to show you.” Stanford turned to face Stanley, clutching onto his journal, not willing to be derailed by his brother’s gentle approach. There wasn’t time. Breaking the news of what Stanford was working on here was a huge undertaking, and he didn’t have time for his brother to treat him like a frightened child. He had to make Stanley understand.

“Something you won’t believe.”

Stanley scoffed. “Look, I’ve been around the world, okay? Whatever it is, I’ll understand.”

He put his hand on Stanford’s shoulder companionably, and for a moment Ford felt like he had when he was younger, when Stanley would comfort him then in his own heavy-handed sort of way, after run-ins with bullies or dismissive words from Father. It was a fleeting second of fond nostalgia.

Shaking off that feeling, knowing he couldn’t afford to get comfortable, that he didn’t have time to, Stanford shrugged Stanley’s hand off and turned towards the lift to the lab, waving his hand to indicate for his brother follow him.

“This way.”

Stanley dropped his bag in the living room and followed Ford over to the elevator, taking it in with a whistle as he stepped inside. “This is fancy. What, you’re too good to use the stairs now?”

Stanford’s grim expression didn’t change, and he didn’t acknowledge his brother’s teasing, watching the symbols at the top of the lift change as they descended to the basement.

Stanley fidgeted awkwardly. “Uh, nice place you got?”
“It’s messy.” Stanford replied shortly, refusing to get dragged into small talk with his estranged brother when there was something much more important they should be focusing on, not really being able to help himself all the same.

“But that’s what you’re going for, right?” Stanley guessed gamely.

“It’s not supposed to be messy.”

“Oh…” Stanley shoved his hands in the pockets of his bomber jacket and rolled back on the balls of his feet awkwardly.

He watched his brother squint up at the peculiar symbols flashing where the floor number usually was on an elevator and wondered if there was anything he could say to Stanford that wouldn’t offend him. He seemed to be biting back at everything, jumpy in a way that lead to agitation.

Stanley opened his mouth to say something inoffensive, about the weather maybe – you couldn’t offend anyone talking about how the snow had taken a dump on Ford’s house – damn Oregon was cold – but before Stanley could say anything, the elevator doors opened.

Stanford lead the way, striding through into some kind of exaggerated sci-fi laboratory.

It looked like the set of a tv show, Stanley felt like knocking on the walls to see if they were made of cardboard, but the room was definitely metal, fancy computers and whirring machines built into the wall of the basement. The room was a symphony of humming systems, whirring computer fans, and beeping monitors brought to life. The flashing lights and many buttons beckoned Stanley and he curiously reached out, wanting to press something to see what would happen.

“Don’t touch anything.” Stanford admonished his brother sharply, flinging his hand out in front of him. “This is a complicated system. It’s not to be tampered with.”

“Phht.” Stanley rolled his eyes, scooting closer to the motherboard, the array of colourful buttons tempting him. “It’s not that hard. Anyone can push a button.”

Reaching out to prove his point, mostly just to annoy Ford at this point, trying to jar him out of his grumpy mood, Stan hovered his finger over one of the buttons teasingly.

Stanford slapped Stanley’s hand away from the machine swiftly. “Don’t! No pushing buttons. You couldn’t even begin to understand the catastrophic consequences of just one false sequence with this machine. It’s dangerous to tamper with things you don’t understand.”

Stanford knew this from experience now and he felt quite hypocritical slinging that lesson in Stanley’s face, knowing how thoroughly he’d ignored it in the past.

Yes, he’d tampered with things he didn’t understand, bringing Bill here in the first place, but he thought he knew enough to be able to handle it -that he would still benefit from bringing Bill here. He may have started out as ignorant, but he had a whole multiverse of potential information to uncover, and he wanted to uncover it all. He wanted to learn – though now on the tail end of things, he was reduced to hiding his research.

Oh, how the mighty had fallen.

Stanford had tampered with things beyond his ken intending to enlighten himself, however, it was different for Stanley – he really didn’t know what he was tampering with, and he probably didn’t want to know.
He just wanted to irritate Ford, apparently.

Cradling his stinging hand to his chest, Stanley frowned at his brother. “Hey, I’m here, aren’t I? So, explain it to me. Go ahead and show me what’s so unbelievable. I might not understand all the sciencey bits, you can skip over that part, but I want to know what’s got you so keyed up okay? I told you, whatever it is, I’m gonna understand.”

Stanford narrowed his eyes at his brother sceptically, not quite sure how he could explain the situation while skipping over the sciencey bits, finding it undignified to have to do so in the first place, but he decided to extend his brother the benefit of the doubt.

Stanley always responded better to the show part of show and tell, preferring pictures to drawn out explanations since childhood, so Stanford decided to work with that.

Opening the safety door, Stanford led his brother out into the portal room, and turned around to face Stanley, presenting the portal as it was.

He had hoped deep down that maybe Stanley would understand, that he would spare Stanford the agonising effort of having to rehash this all over again, of having to dumb it down for him, but it was clear from the dumbfounded expression on Stanley’s face that the portal was just as unbelievable as Stanford insisted.

Gazing up at the towering, glowing frame of the structure, Stanley felt small, small and stupid, but he had to admit –

“There is nothing about this that I understand.”

“It’s a trans-universal gateway.” Stanford started, resigned to explaining things in the simplest way possible, talking fast to get this whole ordeal out of the way. “A punched hole through a weak spot in our dimension. I created it to unlock the mysteries of the universe. But it could just as easily be harnessed for terrible destruction.”

Stanley still didn’t look adequately fearful of the portal, he was still squinting at it like he would at his math textbook, like it wasn’t worth figuring out. Stanford needed to impress upon him the gravity of the situation, as quickly as he could. He didn’t have time to dumb down several years worth of scientific progress.

“That’s why I shut it down and hid my journals, which explained how to operate it.”

Judging from Stanley’s sustained squint, Ford guessed he’d have to gloss over the details for his brother. Skipping past the scientific explanation, Ford tried to connect the more imperative reason he called Stanley here, attempting to give Stanley the mission he’d set out for him.

“There's only one journal left.”

Stanford pulled the journal out of his trench coat pocket, jostling his spare pair of glasses and other assorted paraphernalia he’d been collecting, too paranoid to leave it around the house.

Holding the journal out to his brother, Stanford could tell that Stanley was slowly starting to see where this was going. His eyes were wide and curious, and he looked at Ford’s journal with an oddly hopeful expression.

“And you are the only person I can trust to take it.” Stanford stressed, and passed the journal to Stanley.
Stanley took the book and looked up at Ford, eyes shining with wonder, overwhelmed at the thought that his brother was connecting with him after all these years. Does that mean Ford forgave him? It meant he trusted him, at least, and Stanley wanted to use that trust as the base for building the bridge that would bring them back together.

He held onto the journal with both hands, and his stomach flipped in elation when Ford placed his hand on Stanley’s shoulder, just like old times.

“I have something to ask of you.” Stanford began. “You remember our plans to sail around the world on a boat?”

Stan blinked at his brother, hardly believing he was hearing this. Sure, Stanford didn’t give the warmest welcome, but to call him back after all these years to reignite their lifelong dream to sail the world together – this was more than Stanley had hoped for. This was everything he’d hoped for when he booked it out of New Mexico.

Maybe Valencia was right – maybe it was time for Stan to live his dream. With his brother by his side, sailing the world, seeking treasure, far off lands, babes and adventure.

A grin spread across Stanley’s face, and for a moment there, it looked like all his dreams had come true.

Then Stanford had to keep talking.

“Take this book.” Stanford clapped Stanley’s shoulder, turned, and walked away, his back to his brother as he continued to issue his instructions. “Get on a boat and sail as far away as you can! To the edge of the Earth! Bury it where no one can find it!”

Having issued his instructions to his brother, Stanford looked up at the portal’s glowing surface, feeling relief begin to swell to the forefront of his chest, considering his work done. He’d told Stanley what was at stake, told him what he had to do, and any reasonable person would then go hop to it.

With the journals separated, the portal plans dispersed, Stanford could rest easy knowing that he was the only one who could operate the portal, and if Bill wanted in on this dimension, he’d find Stanford an incredibly stubborn obstacle to overcome.

That was a comforting thought, and a specific contrivance of events. In his own way, Stanford still wanted to be important, to be special, to be the Man Who Saved the World – and the way he could sustain his importance was to make himself the sole lynchpin that this plan hinged on. If no one else but Stanford could operate the portal, no one else could fall prey to Bill’s tricks.

It was the perfect plan. Stanford almost considered it already done, already inwardly gloating at his success, at his sound *checkmate*, but he forgot one crucial detail.

Stanley was not a reasonable person.

“That’s it?!”

Ford spun around to see his brother wearing an expression of utter disappointment and anger, which was the last thing he expected here.

“You finally wanna see me after ten years and it’s to tell me to get as far away from you as possible!?”
Why would that be the issue here? Stanford thought to himself. His brother was missing the point. He was supposed to be doing this for Ford. It was the least he could do considering what he’d cost him. When would Stanley realise that this wasn’t about him?

This was bigger than Stanley’s apparent hurt feelings.

“Stanley, you don't understand what I'm up against!” Ford insisted, clutching his head, trying hard not to think on exactly what – or rather who - he was facing here. “What I've been through!”

“No, no. You don't understand what I've been through!” Stanley shook his head and jerked his thumb at his chest as he spoke, letting his anger from the past neglected decade flow, wanting to impress upon his brother how crap his life had been since Ford got him kicked out.

After ten years of garbage it was only fair – if Ford wanted Stanley to help him cart his diary halfway around the world, he had to at least acknowledge what Stan had endured. And so, Stanley began to list the highlight reel.

“I've been to prison in three different countries! I once had to chew my way out of the trunk of a car! You think you've got problems? I've got a mullet, Stanford!”

The fact that Stanford pulled a face acknowledging that Stanley had a point at the mullet comment, but nowhere else in the conversation only fuelled Stan’s temper further, his words barbed in response to Stanford’s callous disregard for his suffering.

“Meanwhile, where have you been?” Stanley gestured around the room. “Living it up in your fancy house in the woods! Selfishly hoarding your college money, because you only care about yourself.”

“I'm selfish?” Stanford scoffed in derision, hardly believing he was hearing this after what Stanley cost him. That he would even say that at all only proved that Stan was the selfish one.

Ten years of buried anger surfaced, and Ford let his own hurt feelings fly, holding onto the grudge that was lit within him from the moment he found those toffee peanuts on the floor in the gymnasium on the day of the science fair.

“I'm selfish, Stanley? How can you say that after costing me my dream school?!”

Stanley wrinkled his nose but didn’t seem any more affected than that. Clearly costing Stanford his chance at West Coast Tech meant nothing to Stanley – it was probably why he sabotaged the machine in the first place.

Clearly, his brother was every inch of the degenerate Stanford had spent all these years imagining him as and his coffee induced agitation struggled to believe he could appeal to Stanley’s conscience – that he could get his brother to do something for the greater good rather than for his own selfish satisfaction.

Beseeching him, Stanford tried anyway, heedless of how his words could impact poorly.

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

Dismissive of Stanley’s pain, dismissive of all that he’d been through, Stanley realised that his brother was still every inch the pretentious snob he’d imagined him as. Stanford couldn’t look past himself for a second to see Stanley’s point of view. Telling him that he’d never done a worthwhile thing in his life? Stanley scowled at the realisation – Ford sounded just like dad.
“Well, listen to this: you want me to get rid of this book?” Stanley pulled his lighter out from the pocket of his bomber jacket, flicking the flint wheel, sparking a flame. “Fine, I'll get rid of it right now!”

Stan could see Ford’s eyes widen in horror as he held the flame just below Ford’s precious journal, the paper already crisping at the edges, the faint smell of burning wafting through the room.

“No!” Ford lunged for the journal, grabbing it, trying to yank it away from Stanley desperately. “You don't understand!”

Like a childhood game of tug of war, Stanley yanked it back, trying to hold the journal out of Ford’s reach. “You said you wanted me to have it, so I'll do what I want with it!”

Stan held the flame under the journal again, determined to follow through with his threat.

“My research!” If this was a game, Ford was playing rough. Stanford threw himself at his brother, tackling him to the ground. The journal flew out of Stan’s hands and skidded back across the floor of the lab.

Springing away from his brother, Ford raced to the journal with a single-minded focus, a focus Stanley didn’t hesitate to take advantage of. Sticking his leg out, Stan tripped Ford, and as his chin hit the dirt floor, he noted that it had been a while since he’d fallen for that little trick.

Stanley darted in front of Ford and swiped the book from the floor, right in front of Ford’s face. He ran with the journal into the other room, the observation room. Scrambling to his feet, Ford hurtled through the door behind him.

“Stanley, give it back!” Ramming Stanley back against the motherboard, Ford wrestled his brother for the journal, heedless of the ignition sequence starting up on the computer screens behind his brother when Stan’s back squashed down upon the operating switches.

Stanford was too tired, too single minded to notice anything but his brother’s own churlish attempt to once again destroy the one thing that gave Ford’s life meaning, his research! Stanley pushed back, knocking Stanford to the floor, bearing down over him, trying to wrest the journal back, not letting his brother win. Struggling to pull the book away from him, Ford looked up at his brother’s face, and he was enraged to see Stan gritting his teeth in a way that looked like he was smiling. He was acting like this was some sort of game to him.

“You want it back, you're gonna have to try harder than that!”

In the other room, the portal lights slowly hummed to life, the particles in the air charging with static as the four generators powered up. The lights on the Behenian fixed sigils started to glow, and like a painting coming together, the portal’s machinery interlaced to create the majesty that was its active state.

The two brothers were heedless of the portal’s developing beauty, still butting heads, unable to see outside of their own conflict – ten years of estrangement and anger venting out in their collision.

Trying to pull the journal away from Ford, Stanley heaved at the book, shouting his accusations at his twin. “You left me behind, you jerk! It was supposed to be us forever, you ruined my life!”

Unwilling to take the blame for Stanley’s path, still shirking accountability, his own hurt speaking louder than common sense, Stanford yelled back at his brother. “You ruined your own life!”

Trying to foist the journal from Stanley one more time, Ford leant on some of the combat skills
he’d been practising, that Bill had been teaching him. Unaware of the hazardous conditions of the lab, of the way the machinery had been heating up, the energy flowing through the system powered by the remaining uranium they’d collected what seemed like so long ago, Ford lashed out, kicking his brother square in the chest, knocking him back against the metal system.

Stanley shouted out in pain, the concentrated heat of one of the alchemic symbols welded onto the metal frame of the computer station burning into him. The heat sizzled through the flimsy fabric of his bomber jacket, through the worn singlet below, permanently searing the imprint of the symbol onto the skin of Stan’s back.

Jarred out of his single-minded focus by Stanley’s shout of pain, Ford brought his hand to his mouth, getting to his feet, horrified that he’d hurt his brother.

He never meant for things to go this far. What were they doing?!

“Oh my gosh I'm so sorry! Are you alri-“

Ford’s frantic inquiry was cut off by a powerful roundhouse punch. He’d almost forgotten what an impressive boxer Stan had been.

Staggering backwards several feet through the safety door, Ford reeled, tripping over the lever, the final sequential step to activating the portal.

The Behenian sigils lit up, no longer pale blue, now lighting with all the spectral resonance of the rainbow. The sigils began to blur into a bright light as the eye of the portal spiralled, the wheel spinning, gaining momentum, momentum enough to rip through space-time.

If Stanford had noticed the eye of the portal spinning, he might have had the presence of mind to be more fearful of it. The very thing Bill had been waiting for, handed to him on a silver platter, by Ford’s clumsiness when he’d been so careful up to this point. Of all the things he expected to engender the apocalypse, a klutz moment was the last thing he anticipated.

But just like that, the door was opened.

However, Ford couldn’t think about that right now. He was focused on only his brother, as he stalked across the lab towards him, one eye closed, gritting against the pain, holding onto his shoulder, no doubt feeling the searing sting of the burn mark still. Ford’s stomach flipped with regret, seeing the pain he caused Stanley first hand, never having meant for things to escalate so quickly or so badly. How had everything gone so wrong in such a short period of time?

What had Stanford done?

“Some brother you turned out to be.” Stanley grunted, glaring at his brother, the upset raw in his expression.

Ten years he’d been holding out hope for forgiveness from this man and now he finally came all this way and what did he get for his trouble? His life thrown back in his face and his mistakes burned into his skin by a brother who didn’t give a damn about him.

“You care more about your dumb mysteries than your family?” Stan questioned derisively and held up the journal that Ford cared about so damn much, before shoving it against Ford’s chest, into his hands. If he wanted it, wanted that stupid book more than he wanted his family, then Stanley was going to give it to him, damn it all.

“Well then, YOU CAN HAVE 'EM.”
Ford staggered back, the journal finally in his hands, but as he went to right himself, he found his legs pinwheeling in the air.

Oh no.

This weightlessness had happened before, happened to Fiddleford, the last time this portal was turned on. Ford made a safety line to prevent further unwanted levitations, he’d worked on the parameters to minimize the field of gravitational anomalies, to localise it behind the line.

Looking down, Ford realised he was behind the line, and panicked. The portal was sucking him into it, it’s gravitational pull outweighing Ford’s own desire to be earthbound and secure. Wildly swinging his arms forward, trying to grasp onto something, Ford shouted out in alarm.

“Whoa, whoa, hey, what’s going on? Hey, hey, Stanford-“ Stanley panicked, both feet thankfully still planted on the floor, looking up at Stanford floating several feet away from him, baffled and horrified by what was happening.

When Fiddleford got sucked into the portal, Stanford was here to help him, he had a rope, he could pull him back through. When Ford had felt the pull of the portal before, when it had swept him off his feet as well, trailing behind Fiddleford on the other end of the rope, he had Bill there behind him, lightning crackling out from his body, pulling Ford back through to safety through his own peculiar magic and sheer force of will.

Bill wasn’t here right now. He was on the other side of that portal, if his claims were to be believed, and Stanford wasn’t exactly on Bill’s good side, as of present. If he went through that portal, he’d be entirely at Bill’s unholy cosmic mercy, in Bill’s domain, and if Ford thought he was being punished before…

Dread made sickly pools in Ford’s stomach, as he looked down at the only person who could hope to rescue him now, the only person he had left to rely on.

His brother.

“Stanley! Stanley, help me!”

Stanley looked around in panic, bewildered by this entire situation, searching frantically for a way to stop what he didn’t understand. “Oh, no, what do I do?!!”

“Stanley! Stanley!” Ford could feel the vibrations of the portal as the back of his trench coat was sucked through the rift, feeling the otherworldly energy sizzle through him, electricity sparking far too close to his skin. As he continued to slide through the dimensional rift, the hair on the back of his neck standing on end, he despaired of his limited choice of rescuer. His brother was just standing there, while Ford was being sucked through into Bill’s dimension, to be left at the tender mercy, or lack thereof, of his genocidal ex! Was Stanley really just going to stand there?

“Do something!” Beseeching him one last time, Ford threw his journal away from him, hoping to at least safeguard the portal the way he’d intended to rather than deliver his research into the waiting hands of Bill.

Stan caught the journal and looked up, aghast as his brother was pulled away from this world, his last diction ringing out, heard over the building hum of electricity and the blinding flash of white light.

“STANLEY!”
The blast from the portal’s surface as it engulfed his brother blew back into the room, knocking Stanley to the floor. Blinking the light from his eyes, pulling himself up off the ground, Stanley looked up at the portal, seeing the lights dimming, the wheel of the eye slowing.

“Stanford?” Stan questioned, waiting desperately for some sign of his brother, barely believing that he could be gone so suddenly, just like that.

Ford’s glasses clattered down from the gravitational field as it powered down, falling onto the floor in front of Stan with a finality that terrified him.

Running to the portal, banging his fists on the metal surface, Stanley cried out, childishly hoping that what had just happened could be undone, that this was just some fancy prank. This couldn’t have happened, this just – it wasn’t possible!?

“Stanford, come back! I-I DIDN’T MEAN IT!” Bruising his knuckles against the metal structure of the portal, the device seemed to taunt him, powering down, eradicating the hope that Stan was desperately clinging to that somehow his brother could come back, that this wasn’t entirely his fault.

Running to the lever Ford had tripped over, frantically yanking it back and forth, Stan looked between the lever and the machine. Despite how much he pulled the lever, despite what buttons he pressed, the lights weren’t turning back on. Begging the machine, begging the universe, Stan’s voice sounded out in the empty room.

“I just got him back! I can't lose him again! Ah, come on!”

The machine ignored his pleas, refusing to reignite. Despair overwhelmed him and Stanley sunk to his knees, tears welling in his eyes.

The first worthwhile thing in his whole damn life, huh? Stan had been utterly useless, unable to prevent Ford from falling into the portal. Heck, he’d caused it by fighting with him in the first place.

This was his fault.

His brother was gone and Stan’s dreams went with him.

What was he supposed to do without him?

Sobbing for his brother, hating himself and the universe for taking him from him so soon, Stanley yelled his frustrations out, until his voice was hoarse.

“STANFORD!”

What looked like a small army of shady characters assembled in the space-field in front of Bill’s quadrangle. The creatures who had arms had them crossed, and those with mouths or eyebrows seemed to be frowning at Bill in consternation.
His form stretched intimidatingly large, drumming his fingers against the arms of the mammoth throne Kryptos had crafted for him, Bill surveyed the crowd in silence, hoping that he could avoid this entire unpleasant meeting through virtue of the number of optical illusions installed on the throne. Bill was banking on them all getting headaches within the span of 3 seconds of concentrated frowning, looking away, and conveniently forgetting that they had a bone to pick with Bill in the first place.

He was treating this meeting like a staring contest, and he’d deliberately stacked the odds, hoping it would spare him from having to be accountable to these goons for what he hadn’t yet done.

No luck there though.

A creature who seemed to be a wriggling mass of fingers and teeth seemed to wiggle its thumbs more profusely, asking a question.

Bill saw this and ignored it, still hoping he could assert his dominance through this impromptu staring match and get off scot free from his obligations.

Still no luck.

“Why aren’t we on Earth yet?” Crooned the mass of wiggling thumbs, it’s voice like discordant whale song.

Ceasing to drum his fingers on the throne, Bill’s eye flicked over to the creature.

“That… is a very good question.” Was all Bill said.

The crowd stood, waiting for him to continue speaking, but the triangle remained close lipped, trying to ignore his problems until they became more convenient.

A spikey headed monstrosity decided Bill needed more prompting. “What’s the hold up?”

“Yeah!” The crowd concurred, their voices rising to a collective rabble of mutinous murmurings.

“I thought you said we were on track!”

“The compass said we were ahead of schedule.”

“I should be eating humans by the handful by now!”

“What’s the big idea?”

Bill allowed the chatter to escalate, glaring at Kryptos for good measure, blaming the compass for at least half of this situation. Kryptos was looking away though, ignoring Bill, borrowing his technique, and that just made Bill seethe.

As the crowd’s fervour continued to rile up, Bill could feel Pyronica nudge his foot with her elbow, prompting him to say something to settle this.

Holding his hands up, his voice echoing through the vacuum of space loud enough to drown out all this scurrilous chatter, Bill attempted to make a statement.

“We are on track. The portal is complete and will be ready to go any day now.”

The crowd still mumbled, narrowing their eyes at Bill like his statement was debatable.
“Well, if it’s ready, why isn’t it open yet?” Shouted one particularly aspiring investor.

“I’m … waiting for the right moment.” Bill said, bullshitting rather than telling the truth to these vultures. He could tell though, from the expressions of those in the know, that this excuse wasn’t going down well.

He could have pulled it off if Kryptos hadn’t been rolling his damn eye.

“Bullshit you are.” Yelled one of the creatures, calling Bill out. “If it’s ready, why can’t the moment be now?”

“Yeah, stop stalling! We made a deal!”

“YEAH!”

The seditious mumbling turned into angry shouts and Bill was facing down a mob of dissenting fiends from his omni-coloured throne. If they kept this nonsense up, he’d have to make an example of a few of them soon enough, and he didn’t want this meeting to turn into a massacre, he still needed their support.

“HEY INGRATATES!” Bill shouted, matching fire with fire like he was want to. “CAN IT AND LISTEN!”

The angry shouting dimmed down, and the crowd looked at Bill, taking him more seriously now that he wasn’t just staring them down in silence. He towered over the crowd, fire dancing in his closed fists, reminding them all of exactly who they were dealing with, and they paid attention.

“It’s MY portal, and I decide when and who gets to go through. Now I made deals with the vast majority of you already that I will be getting us through to earth for our funpocalypse, and I am a shape of my word. A deal is a deal. However, I didn’t shake hands with you all agreeing that this project would run on your time, it runs on your DIME! You should remember that and remember who to be grateful to that you’re even getting this opportunity at all.”

“Um, Boss.” Kryptos piped up quietly, inching closer to the base of his throne, not quite bold enough to nudge Bill’s leg like Pyronica had.

Ignoring Kryptos, Bill continued talking. “Now AND at the end of the day, you should remember who to be thankful for, who’s been pulling the strings and doing all this hard work to get the party door up and running. And it isn’t the articulated asshole in the crowd shouting criticisms, and it isn’t the hypocrites who hate time, but have spent half of this meeting tapping their watches regardless. You KNOW who to be grateful to, and he’s been sitting right in front of you this entire time. You should treat him with a little more respect.”

“Boss!” Kryptos hissed, gritting his teeth, floating closer to Bill’s leg to tap him on the foot now, interrupting his fire and brimstone routine, trying to get him to look to the left of the space-field where a bright rip in spacetime had begun to open.

“So, I want you to say it all together with me now, so we’re all on the same page. At the count of three, alright, you say –“ Bill waved his hands like he was conducting the crowd and the more easily led fiends in the audience were preparing themselves to follow Bill’s instructions.

“This portal and all the opportunities it entails are all thanks to …”

Before the crowd could parrot Bill’s phrasing, Bill spared a glance to Kryptos, who was tapping on Bill’s foot like he was hitting the button on interdimensional hotseat for bleventy billion QUID.
Kryptos was pointing frantically at a growing circle of light on the edge of the space field, and when Bill followed Kryptos’ gaze he saw the rip in space time level itself, and spit out into the waiting void none other than –

“SIXER!!??”

“This portal and all the opportunities it entails are all thanks to Sixer.” The slower members of the crowd droned, before they paused, confused by the sentence they'd just repeated, looking to the triangle for clarification.

Bill wasn’t looking at them, he was looking at the human who the portal had spat out, floating in the void with his back to Bill, blinking in his surroundings, before reaching into his trench coat pocket for his spare pair of glasses, putting them on cautiously.

Kryptos could see that Bill didn’t seem to be phased by the human’s interruption, rather he seemed utterly delighted, his eye curving with mirth just looking at the adrift scientist, like this was the best thing Bill had seen all millennia.

Stanford looked around him, shocked to be suspended in this otherworldly place, floating in space. He spun around, trying to see where he was, and instantly locked eyes with the colossal figure of his God, the triangle glowing brightly, beaming down at him.

His voice boomed across the cosmos, brimming with an intimidating enthusiasm, as Bill leaned over to look down at Stanford’s hovering form.

“WELL, WELL, WELL, LOOK WHO DECIDED TO PAY ME A VISIT?”

Stanford swallowed nervously.

Bill clasped his hands together gleefully.

Stanford said nothing for a while, floating in front of Bill and his assembled army, taking in the looming equilateral, until he finally uttered the only word that could correctly surmise the situation.

“Fuck.”

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to Haley3, who wrote the sort of comments that sweep writers off their feet. I'll have you know I read your comment a ridiculous number of times over and over, even to this day. This is also less specifically dedicated to everyone who said nice things about the Stan chapter. You all soothed my anxious soul there, and I thank you for it.

(also to the person who keeps leaving gorgeous sketch dumps anonymously in imgur links, I love you, I just love you. your art is so good! also dat Valencia - DAMN!)

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter, let me know what you thought! I'm already 1/4 of the way through the next chapter and I'm so excited because SPACE HIJINKS!!!! SPAAAACE HIIIIJINNNKSSSSSS!!!!!!!!!!!!!
Ford was almost hesitant to open his eyes, sucked through to the other side of the portal. The visions Fiddleford had seen on the other side drove him to madness. Ford could still remember him seizing up, twitching on the floor of the lab, froth spilling out from between his teeth, pupils blown wide as he attempted to process what he encountered on the other side.

However, floating blind wasn’t ideal. Ford had to know what he was up against, what he had fumbled into.

Opening his eyes slowly, Ford found himself hovering, gravity holding him no longer, as he floated in this singular patch of space. His vision was blurry, bright lights and swirling rainbows of colour standing out against the dark backdrop of space, and as he reached into his pocket for his spare pair of glasses, sliding them up the bridge of his nose, everything snapped into clear focus, though the view was no less of a psychedelic blur.

Like staring at oil reflecting across the surface of a soap bubble, the colours shifted fluidly, gaseous clouds of chemicals and dust seeming like liquid, almost, painting swirling atmospheric distortions across the space-field before him.

He saw the portal close up behind him, the blue light fading to black, and just like that, he was abandoned here in another dimension.

Before the dread could properly set in, Ford reluctantly conceded one thing.

This place was oddly beautiful.

Stars sparkled in the gaps between the colourful clouds, debris and flyaway elements shining like mercury dancing in a crucible. This place was colour intensified upon itself, colour like Ford had never seen before, endlessly refracting against its surroundings, light and patterns sliding chaotically through the void in a manner that was quite visually satisfying.

Without having to guess, Ford could tell that this was Bill’s domain. When he had first imagined his muse, puzzling over where a creature like Bill could possibly come from, he had never thought to imagine a place like this, but somehow it suited him more than words could describe.

This malleable, constantly changing landscape, full of rich colours, vibrant patterns and surprising contortions was exactly the kind of creative chaos that Ford could believe muses were born of.

It was like the exhilarating highs of a dream, soaring above what humans knew colour to be, only becoming nightmarish when one woke and the body rebelled against what it had seen.

Ford wondered how this place came to be.

He would have had more time to wonder, if he couldn’t feel the hairs on the back of his neck standing on end, the weight of a familiar gaze playing upon him.

Trying awkwardly to turn around (Ford hadn’t much experience with floating outside of Bill’s
influence, always having had gravity to cradle his movements) he decided this felt a lot like swimming, and right now he was treading water, scooping air up under his arms as he turned in the thick watery atmosphere. He was holding his breath almost, his body reacting to the thick press of his surroundings the way it was accustomed to when underwater, but upon realising he wouldn’t choke breathing it in, he let the strange air fill his lungs.

By rights he should have suffocated by now, it was only belatedly that Ford remembered Bill’s ‘enhancements’ made to Ford’s lungs. It was certainly coming in handy now, all things considered.

Though he didn’t know if now was the time to be inwardly grateful for his muse’s intervention.

Not when he was on Bill’s turf now. And they had unfinished business together.

The prickle on the back of his neck only intensified and so Ford resigned himself to turning around fully, gazing up in horror at the sight that awaited him.

There was his muse, towering over a crowd of strange and shadowy beasts, perched on a throne made of endlessly shifting optical illusions. Bill seemed to be about 20 feet tall as of present, looming like a skyscraper over the collected army of monsters assembled.

He could crush Ford easily under his fingertip. It would be like being squashed by a double decker bus. Ford had never been more excruciatingly aware of his own delicate mortality before this moment and he’d never been more aware that the god he chose to invite into his life then betray so soundly was the wrong god to antagonise.

Bill was as formidable as he was mad, and Ford was waiting for his untimely end to come, waiting for Bill to take his revenge on him – but as he squinted up at the god, looking past the throne that was already giving him a headache just from staring at it – he was surprised to note that Bill’s eye was curved with joy.

He was happy?

“WELL, WELL, WELL, LOOK WHO DECIDED TO PAY ME A VISIT!?”’ Bill’s voice boomed throughout the cosmos, rattling Ford’s bones, and though he clapped his hands together in delight, still smiling down on the scientist, Ford could only think the worst.

This intimidating being was his ex.

He was so screwed.

“Fuck.” Ford muttered under his breath, the curse word coming out an undignified croak.

Clasping his hands together winsomely, Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford, his voice still preternaturally loud. Was Bill always this loud? Did he have to speak so loud? Ford’s caffeine headache protested profusely, as Bill beamed down at him.

“Ad Astra Per Aspera, and now look at you. Crossing dimensions in your big boy boots, bringing the party to me. I can’t think of anything more perfect.” Bill crooned dotingly, almost forgetting where he was.

“Boss, what is that?” One of the henchmen in the crowd questioned, the entire assembly all looking at Stanford.

Ford wasn’t sure what language the creature was speaking. It didn’t sound like English, or any language Ford was familiar with. When he concentrated, he realised that while he could understand
Bill’s words, the muse also wasn’t speaking English, yet the human could pick up on what was being communicated.

How unusual. Perhaps it was this place? Some kind of translatable aura hovering over this meeting? It was jarring to realise that he could understand what was being said, even if it wasn’t being said in a language he could speak. How bizarre.

Flippantly, almost dismissively, as if he’d rather not focus on his investors, or on anyone but Stanford, Bill waved his hand and answered.

“That’s my human, Sixer.”

“A HUMAN?” The crowd seemed both incised and delighted by this peculiar twist of circumstance and already they were rumbling with enthusiasm at the sight of this rare specimen, gnashing their teeth and growling hungrily.

“Can we eat him?” One particularly aspiring creature put their hand up, asking what everyone was thinking.

Unfortunately, their forwardness was not to be rewarded.

Ford could see the red fill Bill’s eye in an instant, and within a fraction of a second, his muse had turned around, the red colouring the bricks on his back and no doubt all over, fire dancing in his fists as he screeched.

“NO!”

The offending monster who asked on behalf of the group was incinerated in an instant, their pained howl petering off, a quick and painful death delivered as an example to the others.

Stanford tensed, his every muscle frozen. Making excuses for Bill’s presumed actions was one thing, Stanford had never technically seen Bill kill someone with his own eyes, but here right in front of him he reduced another monster to smoking rubble for threatening to eat Ford.

While Stanford was grateful he wasn’t on the menu, he was shocked that Bill had just killed someone, right in front of him.

The crowd of monsters quivered away from Bill, cowering, though many still watched Stanford with interest, saliva drooling from their maws.

His bricks brightening to a friendly yellow once more, Bill’s tone turned sweet and indulgent again, his whiplash personality even more pronounced like this, meeting him in his own environment.

This wasn’t the Bill who appeared one way or another to appeal to Stanford, this was holistically Bill, and for the first time Stanford felt he was getting a glimpse of what his muse really was.

“He’s a guest, don’t be rude. Way to make a good first impression, guys. See, this is why I don’t bring people home. This is why.”

A pink skinned Cyclops, another towering fiend, standing beside Bill’s omni-coloured throne tilted her head at Ford, taking him in. Unlike the other beasts, she didn’t look like she wanted to devour him – she seemed intelligent, almost. Though that didn’t mean she wasn’t thinking about eating him, Ford thought as he stared back at her warily.
“Do we get a proper introduction, or is he just going to stand there?” She asked, and as her question wasn’t met with fire and brimstone, Ford presumed she was slightly more familiar with Bill than the rest of this frightening cohort.

“Right, right.” Bill wagged his finger in the air, remembering his manners, seeming flustered almost.

“Why does he smell so bad?” Asked one of the creatures closer to the throne, a floating freemasons compass with an eye. Although he didn’t appear to have a nose, he was wrinkling his eye and waving his hand in front of his surface, looking scornfully at Ford like he wasn’t impressed.

“Do all humans smell like that?” Asked the creature to the left of the compass, some kind of obese minotaur monster, with a pacifier where its bellybutton should be.

Ford would have looked offended, but he knew the monsters had a point. He had been deliberately avoiding showering, mostly because it seemed to drive Bill away, offending the muse. He didn’t think they could talk though, considering how corpulent some of the monsters seemed.

“Poor hygiene and lack of sanitary development on Earth has historically caused bad odours.” Another creature spoke in a delicate, pronounced way. They appeared to be what looked like an unfolded cubics cube, eyes blinking on each of their squares, dangling tassels flicking left and right as it spoke. “They lost most of the technology for indoor plumbing in the Roman era, and only redeveloped it a scant 200 years ago.”

“I see. I see.” The creature beside the unfolded cubics cube nodded, rubbing his chin thoughtfully. This creature looked how tinned spam looked when upended on a plate, but with blue skin and arms and legs. The creature had a keyhole shape missing from its forehead, and Ford could see right through the hole, as the being nodded thoughtfully, assessing Ford like he was a rare artwork, and he, the viewer, was utterly stoned.

“Sixer doesn’t smell bad.” Bill waved his hand, defending Ford’s reputation, before he put his hand up beside his eye, stage whispering an aside to the gathered mob. “Though I can’t speak for the rest of humanity, HA!”

Ford floated, brows furrowed, growing quite cross that he was almost being ignored. They were all speaking about him, without speaking to him or acknowledging him really. It was only when Bill turned his attention back to Stanford, towering over him, rubbing under his eye pensively, that Ford realised being ignored was preferable.

“Though now that you mention it, I have been meaning to fix that. Let’s see…”

Ford tensed warily and Bill clicked his fingers. In an instant, cold blue flames tore across Ford’s skin, and he panicked, fearing that his time had come, and Bill was now burning him alive like he had to that outspoken monster.

He was too young, gifted, and important to die. Oh god, let this not be the end.

Shutting his eyes, unwilling to look death in the face, Ford found death by incineration much colder than he imagined, although heaven smelling like fabric softener was exactly what the advertisements on the radio had promised.

Pausing as he processed that thought again, Ford slowly opened his eyes to note his skin was not charred to a crisp, nor were his bones left in ashes – in fact, after a split second of pain gone so quick it felt as if it had barely hurt at all, Ford’s skin looked in better condition than before, and
rubbing his finger and thumb together, Ford could have sworn he felt distinctly moisturised. Inclining his head, he sniffed the collar of his trench coat surreptitiously and noted soapy lavender undertones.

Instead of incinerating him, Bill had… given him a bath?

“Oh, that’s muuuch better. Isn’t that better?” Bill turned back to the crowd of ogres and demons, channelling the saleswoman from the shopping channel he’d spent so many lazy hours watching back on Earth. “Less skin bacteria and more sparkling freshness.”

As he waved his hands, sparkles appeared in the air before him, and the audience of monsters started to clap politely, as if Bill was a magician and cleaning humans was a party trick.

“And on top of that, guess what else I gave him? Go on, guess.”

Ford mentally lurched, reeling with the realisation that Bill had once again without his permission altered his body. Ford felt sick at the thought that Bill only had to snap his fingers to physically alter his chemical composition, not just the condition of his clothes, and the fact that Bill was treating this ‘home renovation’ like some sort of game show would have had the bile rise up Ford’s throat but for the fact that he had never felt so physically well his entire life.

Still, as he settled into his improved condition, he realised it was beyond grating to see the assembled monsters playing along with Bill’s madness, raising their hands trying to guess what fiendish things Bill had done to him. If the frivolity of it all wasn’t insulting, their suggestions certainly were.

“Space rabies?” Guessed one monster.

“A new hovercar!” Presumed another giddily. Collectively they continued to shout, certain words standing out from the hooting and cackling of the crowd.

“Emphysema!”

“Immeasurable financial debt!”

“Burrowing skin spiders!”

“The Berenstain Bears Boxed Set!”

“Go home, Keyhole.” Bill countered as the fiendish crew around him laughed and heckled one another, clearly entertained by Bill’s antics. The jeering and laughter got louder, as the suggestions kept rolling in.

“A million QUID?”

“A parasite?”

“OOOH OOOH, A TAPEWORM!”

“Don’t steal my idea. I just said that.”

“No, you didn’t – a parasite can be anything. A tapeworm is far more specific. I know I’d want one.”

“You can’t afford one.”
“Existential dread?”

“Gastric bypass surgery?”

“A lobotomy?”

“A trip to the Space Bahamas?”

Holding his hand up to silence the suggestions, Bill divulged, and Stanford waited, having grown more apprehensive with every suggestion, holding his breath in fearful anticipation.

“I gave him – total allergy immunity, partial radiation tolerance, atmospheric pressure resistance, cholesterol free blood vessels, a more capable digestive system, a haircut, AND a brand new liver!”

Ford brought a hand up to feel his face, noting that Bill had also trimmed down his stubble, and his stomach flipped, fear followed swiftly by relief that he’d got off comparatively easy. He’d been imagining far worse amendments to his anatomy and the monster’s suggestions weren’t helping his fatalistic imagination.

Although ‘it could have been worse’ wasn’t exactly a glowing testimonial to Bill’s behaviour. He still altered Ford’s physicality without his consent, he transplanted his goddamn liver, and judging from the applause from the crowd, Bill didn’t feel the least bit sorry for his transgression.

Bill was bowing, courting the applause, practically eating it up.

“I want a liver!” Complained someone in the crowd.

“You get a free liver. You get a free liver!” Bill pointed at various monsters, slimy livers dripping viscera appearing in the air before them. The monsters fell upon the livers like they were hundred-dollar bills, some holding their livers in the air, dancing cheerfully, others devouring the organ immediately, blood running between their teeth as they chewed.

Despite his internal organs apparently having been refurbished, Ford still felt queasy with nausea watching these creatures bite into their livers, his hand coming down to cradle his stomach, imagining those teeth sinking into his own organs with such gusto.

He could presume, judging from Bill’s fierce reaction earlier, and from the amendments he made to Ford’s physique, that the triangle wasn’t going to hurt him, but Ford had no guarantees that the other monsters wouldn’t set their sights on him. He wasn’t safe here. He needed to leave. Soon, before the madness of this entire situation began to impact his sanity.

He felt powerless, giddy, terrified, and elated all at the same time, being here, his thoughts whiplashing between vast and varied conclusions, feeling frightened and fascinated all at the same time, and he hated it.

He didn’t feel like himself, he didn’t feel right.

Was it something in the air? Was Ford just going mad, floating in front of the God who tricked him, feeling grateful his insides hadn’t been melted with that snap?

Ford was still angry with Bill, he’d been driving Ford insane. He hadn’t slept in weeks. Bill had lied to him, betrayed him, made his suffering the entertainment of these fiendish monsters no doubt, and now he was acting like he’d given Ford a gift? A haircut and an organ transplant? And that was supposed to make Ford forgive him and play along with this charade? Was he insane?
The monsters were still laughing, still impressed with Bill, none of them thinking to question his actions – the morality of them, or at least the impact they had on Ford. Was no one in this damn dimension prepared to think sensibly? To think for themselves, rather than just float along with this senseless madness?

As if to comfort Ford in his despair, one of the denizens in the crowd spoke up, the blue compass pointing at Ford, his eye furrowed with frustration.

“But what is he doing here? He’s not supposed to be here.”

“He’s visiting me, Kryptos.” Bill countered, turning around to blink down at Ford fondly. “He’s exactly where he’s supposed to be.”

“But he’s supposed to be on Earth. He’s supposed to be with the portal!” Kryptos, the compass, stomped his little feet, obviously frustrated, before he pointed at Ford accusingly. “If he’s here, then who is going to open the doorway?”

Ford could see Bill’s warm expression sour, his eye sliding to the side, although he didn’t appear to be irate at Ford for not being where he was supposed to be, he seemed rather more miffed at the compass for questioning him.

The crowd of monsters seemed to slowly cotton on to the compass’s logic.

“Yeah. If he’s here – how are we getting through to the other side?”

“We should be on Earth by now.”

“Who’s going to open the door?”

The compass pointed at Ford again, deliberately raising his voice here. “He sabotaged us!”

The rabble of angry voices grew louder, more mutinous.

Stanford knew that having a gaggle of horrendous beasts angry with him wasn’t an ideal outcome, but he didn’t care about that. In this very moment, he was elated.

The compass had outlined Ford’s win.

He’d done it.

This is how he could protect the portal. This was his solution.

This was it, he was the Man Who Saved the World.

He had, in this instant, beaten Bill Cipher. He’d beaten a God.

Bill’s large eye was looking off to the side, he seemed to be frowning, the crowd getting unruly. If he didn’t control their caustic rabble soon, things could get very ugly very quickly.

Looking to Sixer, hoping he could convey how to best handle this situation to the human, Bill was surprised to see that rather than appearing panicked or frightened, Ford was smiling.

Turning his grin upward, his face triumphant and smug, Sixer sealed his fate.

“Checkmate.”
Bill was stunned.

The crowd fell silent, listening to Ford’s bold claim, confirmation that this was in fact sabotage.

This strange human had sabotaged Bill Cipher’s plans, and now he was gloating about it.

The henchmaniacs and clued in members of the crowd held their breath in anticipation, looking between Bill and the human, expecting the Boss to retaliate. This human had disrespected Bill and Bill did not tolerate disrespect from anyone.

Bill narrowed his eye, leaning back to take in Sixer’s defiant form properly. Giddy anticipation rose within the ranks of demons and denizens, eager to see the carnage that was to come.

“So, you’re here to play games, are you?” Bill asked, his voice controlled, quiet almost, a foreboding sign of pending disaster coming from Bill.

Bill floated closer to Ford, and for a moment Ford thought that Bill was going to take him down the good old-fashioned way, viscerally imagining being squashed between the God’s fingers once again.

Although the way Bill’s eye slid to the side, checking on the monsters behind him, before turning back to face Stanford led the scientist to believe that the triangle had other motives for changing his tune to sinister vengeance. This seemed almost like a stage play, the way Bill’s audience were held on tenterhooks, waiting for the god to retaliate.

“We can do that.”

Ford realised that the reason Bill floated closer to him, was not to squash him at close range, but so the crowd of monsters behind him couldn’t see his expression. From this angle, only Stanford could see as Bill blinked his eye at the human, and the word ‘RUN’ replaced his slitted pupil for a split second.

Rearing back, as if he hadn’t warned Ford at all, Bill theatrically held his hand in the air, his voice booming and jovial again.

“**HOW ABOUT A GAME OF INTERDIMENSIONAL CHESS! THIS TIME YOU’RE THE PAWN!”**

Ford had barely a moment to process what had just happened before Bill snapped his fingers, rallying his monsters into action. Clearly, Bill’s command was the only thing holding the beasts back, as the instant he snapped his fingers one of the creatures broke from the ranks behind Bill and hurtled towards Ford, a writhing ball of teeth and fingers, roaring like a wounded whale.

Ford flinched back, fight or flight instincts telling him flight was very necessary, and he swam frantically through the air away from the howling beast. The atmosphere was like water, and Ford was doing his best impersonation of Mark Spitz at the 1972 Summer Olympics, seeking shelter in the nearby asteroid field.

As he swam through the thick belt of floating space rocks he could hear the raucous laughter, growls and whooping cheers of the beasts as they all joined in the foray, seeking him out amidst the planetary debris.

Not willing to remain out in the open, a floating target, Ford saw a rather large asteroid riddled with deep craters and swam towards it, seeking refuge within its stony caverns.
Hidden from sight, Ford panted, leaning up against the cave wall, and he could hear Bill’s voice, loud and shrill, echoing out across the space field, hyping the monsters up.

“SIXER WANTS TO PLAY HIDE-AND-SEEK! FIRST ONE TO FIND HIM AND BRING HIM TO ME GETS THEIR OWN GALAXY!”

The gleeful laughter of Bill’s fiendish friends intensified as creatures large and small all raced off to locate Ford, like this was a game, like they did this all the time. This was entertaining to them, and Bill was their entertainer, setting his beasts upon Stanford for sport.

Ford gritted his teeth as he realised that Bill’s warning probably wasn’t a warning at all, he was just setting Ford up for failure, after all predators love a moving target. Ford running away only excited them all the more. He probably wouldn’t have interested them if he’d just stayed still, maybe then at least his death would have been quick.

Although his skin had been cleaned and his liver replaced, Ford was still deliriously sleep deprived. A haircut and a bath couldn’t undo the damage a solid three weeks without sleep had done to his psyche, and in his exhausted state, defiance and anger still boiling in his blood, Ford was half tempted to surrender himself, just so he could curse Bill out right to his face. Bill had wanted a piece of Ford’s mind before and, right now, Ford was sorely tempted to let him have it.

Stanford was livid with Bill, for many reasons, but the one that stood out from the many grievances Ford was holding against him, was Bill’s transgression back there in the space field.

He had promised Stanford that he wouldn’t alter his anatomy without permission and he broke that promise.

How many promises would Bill turn into lies?

“And if I don’t ask first, you can just punch me again.” Bill had said, and right now Ford was feeling like taking him up on that.

Clenching his fists, mumbling to himself, Ford was readying to step out of the cave, itching to punch Bill right in his big stupid eye. Sure, he might die, but if there was ever a way to go out in a blaze of glory, punching a god in the face would do it.

“I could do it.” Ford muttered to himself. “I’ve done it before. Just go right up to him and –“

A small squeak interrupted his crazed mumbling, and Ford turned around, bringing his fists up in front of him, prepared to fight his way out of whatever fresh hell this was.

On the other side of the cave, a shivering family of aliens stood around a glittering purple fire, cowering away from Ford.

Surprised, Ford lowered his fists and held his hands out gently in front of him. “I’m sorry. I thought you were – I didn’t mean to scare you.”

The aliens squeaked and snorted at him, gesturing to him like they were trying to converse with him.

Ford looked at the gathered creatures in confusion. They were an unusual assembly, diverse in appearance. They all looked so peculiar to Ford, so utterly alien, that in that first moment of squeaking miscommunication, they seemed like just another cohort of monsters, like Bill’s crew, only smaller and less threatening. Perhaps it was the way they cowered back from him, rather than lunging at him with teeth bared.
They seemed intelligent though, growing increasingly frustrated with the language barrier, as they continued to squeak at Ford, their questions going unanswered.

One of them looked like a swashbuckling guinea pig, buck teeth protruding out from under a tiny pink nose, fur covering its body. The creature was missing an arm, a metal limb replacing the appendage, and it wore an eyepatch over one eye. The other aliens around the pirate guinea pig ranged from some sort of pink skinned pig-faced goblin, a long-necked bug-eyed amphibian creature with its’ arm wrapped in bandages, and a squat horned creature with a nose like a stag beetle. They all seemed to be carrying weapons, Ford could see the pig nosed goblin carrying some sort of ray gun over its shoulder and the horned alien sporting a futuristic looking harpoon.

They continued to jabber at Ford, pointing at him then pointing to the mouth of the cave, as if asking him to leave. Ford stammered in reply, not knowing what he could say that would save him from Bill’s goons outside, searching for him.

“I – I’m sorry, I don’t understand. I don’t understand what you’re saying. I just need to hide here, please – I don’t – I’m not going to harm you – I’m not going to –“

The guinea pig creature stood up and walked over to Ford, limping on his peg leg, growling and waving some sort of metal contraption at him. Ford backed up warily, until his back hit the cave wall.

“Wait – I promise I just want to –“

The furred alien grabbed Ford’s outstretched hand and yanked it down, strapping the metal device to his wrist. Ford struggled, pulling back from the alien, not wanting what looked like a chunky digitised metal handcuff on him, not while he was trying to escape.

The rodent man was remarkably strong though and strapped the device to Ford’s left hand despite his attempts to break free. Hitting the button on the side of the cuff, it lit up, and the rodent man glared up at him.

“Now start talking, and maybe we’ll actually get somewhere sometime this rotation.”

Ford blinked down at the rodent man. Was he speaking English?

“I – um… excuse me?” Ford questioned, baffled.

“Xznar, did you give me the busted K127X? I thought we had a good one?” The rodent frowned down at the contraption on Ford’s wrist, and then looked over to the bug-eyed amphibian creature, who shrugged.

“That’s the only one we had left. We haven’t needed to use it since Bovin got his Scendurian up to scratch.”

“I can swear in sixty-six different languages now!” The pig nosed goblin cheered, grinning gamely at his peers.

“Yeah, and don’t we all know it.” The rodent rolled his eye, and the group all guffawed in a friendly manner.

Now that Ford could actually understand them, their squeaking squawking language sounded less frightening and antagonistic and he relaxed his shoulders a little, not as on edge as he was before.

“I can understand you.” Ford said, sounding impossibly relieved.
“It’s like he’s never seen a dimensional translator before.” The rodent joked.

“I haven’t.” Ford admitted.

“Where are you from, traveller?” asked the horned creature in the corner.

“No, don’t tell me.” The pig-nosed goblin shook his head dramatically. “I don’t want to live in a dimension without Seven Blelevens!”

The crew of aliens laughed, and the rodent man, who seemed to be their leader, judging from the assured way he spoke, waved Ford over to the fire, walking back towards its heat now that Ford didn’t seem to be a threat.

“Don’t listen to him. Come, sit, talk. You must be lost. When things go missing in the multiverse they usually end up here. This place is like the trash chute at the end of every backwards dimensional wormhole.” Sitting down once more on a boulder at the back of the cave, the rodent man continued talking. “We were asteroid miners, harvesting iron and platinum from the ore, out on a job. The belt we were working on must have rotated through a wormhole. One minute we were on the working, digging deep in the rock, the next minute we wind up here, with the air spitting froth at us. This is a lawless place, the worst sort of place to come and die.”

“How did you get here?” asked Xznar, the amphibian man, inching closer to the fire.

Stepping up beside the glittering campfire, warming his hands by it, Ford explained his situation. “I come from a planet called Earth and I’m a scientist. Stanford is my name. I research the paranormal and bizarre. I was given the plans to build an interdimensional portal between my dimension and this one as a way to prove my theory, by someone I thought was… was a friend. He told me he was a muse, my muse. He was a God and we became very close, but he tricked me. He was just using me all along to build his portal and, like a fool, I fell for his… his lies. I tried to stop him from using the portal, but I fought with my brother who was supposed to come to help me and the portal turned on. I fell through and it closed behind me, and I wound up here.”

The creatures all looked sympathetic, listening to Ford’s story.

Laughing to himself bitterly, Ford continued. “Now I’m stuck here with no idea how I’m getting home, or if I ever will ever again. I guess that’ll teach me, in a way. Really, it serves me right for thinking I could trust Bill Cipher.”

Ford’s open retelling of his situation was interrupted by shrieks of horror and outrage, the aliens slapping their hands over their ears as if Stanford had said something obscene.

Ford’s eyes widened, and he leaned back from the fire, holding his hands up in front of him now defensively.

“What? What did I say?”

“The name.” The rodent hissed, pointing at Ford.

“What? Bill?”

“DON’T SAY HIS NAME!!” The creatures all screeched at Ford, looking between him and the mouth of the cave apprehensively.

“Sorry! Sorry.” Ford apologised awkwardly, still not knowing why it was such a crime to say Bill’s name.
“You invoke the name of one of the most feared beings in the multiverse, boy.” The pirate guinea pig said ominously, pointing at Ford with his metal arm. “That’s not something you bandy about in casual conversation.”

“I hear if you say his name three times out loud, he can crawl inside your head.” Xznar recounted fearfully.

“I hear he uses people’s eyes to see through.” Bovin the pig goblin offered, looking over his shoulder as he spoke. “And he can watch you wherever you are whenever. I hear there’s a whole dimension of beings who gouged out their eyes so he couldn’t see through them and their one eyed king lives in perpetual fear. He’s always watching, all the time, every single second of the day!”

“Oh, um. No, I don’t think he is.” Ford offered awkwardly, trying to calm them some. “He’s actually quite lazy.”

“You think you know your ‘Muse’, boy?” The rodent pirate sneered at him. “That he tricked you at all, is proof that you know nothing.”

 Appropriately cowed, Ford lowered his head, realising that these creatures were right, he clearly knew nothing about what Bill was capable of.

“He uses this in-between place as a hideout for his crew, a bunch of crazed wanted outlaws, banned from every Federation-protected dimension in the multiverse, spat out into the ass end of space. While they’re roaming around out there, we can’t find the wormhole that will send us back to our base station, because if those maniacs find us – well, you don’t wanna know what happened to the last group of refugees seen around here.”

The horned alien rubbed its neck nervously, and Ford wondered what had happened to the last group of refugees, or if it was better not knowing.

“Half of the multiverse is just waiting for this place to implode and take every last lawless cretin living here with it. Never thought we’d end up here though.” The rodent man sighed and shook his head solemnly.

“Implode? What do you mean?” Ford frowned, looking out at the multicoloured spectrum spew that was this dimension, swirling about outside of the asteroid cave.

“This Nightmare Realm is fated to self-destruct eventually.” Xznar explained. “It has no stable physics, no consistency with its structure. It’s as lawless as the beings who reside here, and as such instability cannot support itself, it will soon crumple under its own unreality. Its days are numbered, no one can tell how long it will last for.”

“That explains why he was moving in on your turf.” Bovin shrugged, poking the purple fire with a stick. “Piggybacking your brain to make a door into a different dimension. Seems like a last resort to me. Like vermin fleeing a sinking ship. You’ve gotta be some kind of idiot to let him in though. I’m sure he spun it like a real pity party. You sure got duped.”

“He never told me.” Ford said quietly, looking at the fire, his emotions pulling in different directions, impossible to read while he was so tired. He felt something like a twinge of sympathy, but it was hard to perceive beneath all the betrayal and hurt.

“You aren’t feeling sorry for him now, are you?” The rodent pirate squinted at Ford from his one good eye, waving his metal arm at him. “If you’re sympathizing with that devil, you can find another cave to squat in. Or go outside and let his cronies tear you limb from limb. If you’re in his
camp, you can't be in ours, you hear?"

“No, no. I’m not – I’m not in any camp. I – Bill tricked me.” Ford insisted, trying to convince the aliens of his allegiance before they all reached for their weapons. “He sabotaged my destiny, he ruined my life, he cost me everything I’ve ever known. He used me to build his portal, to suit his needs, and he lied to me every step of the way. If anyone has reason to hate Bill, it’s me. If anyone wants their own back, wants revenge, it’s me!”

The aliens gave Ford sceptical looks but were no longer reaching for their weapons.

“I stopped him from entering my world by going through the portal. I’m the only one who can operate it, and now it’s there and I’m here, and he has no way of getting into my dimension. I did that.” Ford said, claiming credit for his unintentional blunder into this dimension. Better to act like he knew what he was doing there than look like even more of a fool in front of these world weary asteroid miners. “I’m not on his side, I did everything I could to stop him.”

The pirate rodent gave him a long hard look, before he wiggled his nose, and nodded. “Arr. We’re being too harsh on you. There’s no being too careful out here. We’re all just trying to find our way home.”

“What are the chances I’ll get back to my own dimension someday?” Ford asked, already dreading the answer.

“You didn’t come through one of the wormholes out on the edges. You made your wormhole close on after you. That door is shut now.” Xznar said solemnly. “If you were trying to protect your dimension, I’m not sure you want that door to open again. You’d only be leaving your world vulnerable.”

“The chance of getting back home is slim for you, boy.” Their guinea pig leader deduced. “You might not ever see your stars again.”

“We’re waiting for the right moment to go back through the wormhole we came in on.” Bovin offered. “All the wormholes on the edge of this place go to different dimensions, different galaxies. If you can manage to get past those maniacs out there, you could make your way to a better life somewhere. Somewhere far away from here.”

Ford was silent for a moment, processing that. There really was no going home for him. Everything he knew, his friends, Fiddleford and Willow, his brother Stanley, his parents, his house - the world he once knew was now cut off from him, possibly forever. There was no going back, and Ford didn’t even know where to begin moving forward. He felt like there was nowhere he could go.

The only person he knew out here was Bill and it was becoming apparent that Ford didn’t know anything about his former muse. He’d learnt more about Bill from these weathered asteroid miners in a single conversation than he’d learned in all of his years courting Bill’s regard.

He reached into the pocket of his trenchcoat and withdrew his notebook, peering at the pages of rudimentary notes he’d collected on Bill during his time with him. Brushing his thumb over the paper, Ford bit his bottom lip, trying to stave the bitter wistfulness off his face, to hide the way it hurt him when he looked at his list of Bill’s weaknesses and only saw the superficial listed.

Sugary foods, apple cider, and ticklish sides wouldn’t do a damn against Bill, not now that Ford had seen how truly powerful he was. He was frustrated beyond belief with the knowledge that everything he thought he knew about his God was useless against him, it could have all been lies. He tried very hard not to look at the final dot point on the list of Bill’s weaknesses he’d made that
fateful Summerween night. He still felt too raw to really assess whether he counted as one of Bill’s weaknesses after all, or if that was just one of the many lies the god had spun, lulling Ford into a false sense of complacency.

It galled Ford to realise that he really knew nothing about Bill, and if knowledge was power, that truly made him weak.

“You alright, son?” The rodent pirate questioned kindly and Ford hurriedly shoved the notepad back into his trenchcoat pocket.

“You say these other wormholes go to different places?” He questioned, trying to regain his composure.

“Sure.” The rodent pirate nodded. “And then there’s wormholes beyond that, and even more beyond that that go all sorts of places. Some occur naturally and spit you out in odd places like this. Others, folks have harnessed, made them practical. They can get you from A to B.”

“Is there anywhere else in the multiverse I can go where I can find out more about Bill?” Ford asked, determination colouring his features.

“I –“ The rodent looked almost offended, before he noted the steely glint in Ford’s eye, and reassessed his opinion of the human. “Not much is really known about him, besides rumours. You pick up pieces here and there, but who knows how much of it is real? Why’d you even want to know?”

“I meant what I said.” Ford replied, his mouth turning down at the edges as he spoke. “Bill tricked me. If I have to visit every dimension in the multiverse to find a way to get back at him, I will. There’s got to be more to learn. His weaknesses, his secrets. I was foolish before, but I won’t let it happen again.”

The creatures around the fire were watching him now with an expression akin to awe, as he continued his speech.

“I don’t stand a chance against him now, I can see that much, but if I bide my time, build my strength, amass my knowledge and power then one day I can return to this Nightmare Realm and put an end to his madness once and for all. I might never see home again, but if I can save the multiverse from that which they most fear, from him, then that will be enough for me. Payback for the life he stole from me.”

“You’re going to fight him? To stand against him?” Xznar questioned warily.

“And take him down if I have to.” Ford nodded solemnly.

Suddenly the creatures around the campfire let out a great shout, cheering.

“PRAISE THE AXOLOTL!” They cried jubilantly, throwing their fists in the air with glee.

Ford blinked at them in surprise, his mission emboldened by their support, even if he had no idea what they were saying.

“You know what, that’s the best news I’ve heard all rotation.” Said the rodent pirate, slapping his knee gleefully. “You want to take down the All Seeing Eye – all the best to you to do it.”

“It might take you a few hundred eons, if you live that long mind –“ Xznar said, patting Ford on the shoulder with his unbandaged arm. “But imagine meeting the man who took down the One
Eyed Terror.”

“That’ll be a bar story with mileage.” Bovin snorted, slapping the back of Ford’s thigh in amusement.

“Just in case you do succeed, will you sign my harpoon?” The horned creature in the corner requested, holding his harpoon aloft.

“Well, I – “ Ford looked between them all, flustered, not sure if they were truly being supportive, or if they were simply making fun of him.

“You know what, kid?” The rodent pirate spoke, grinning toothily at Ford. “I’ll tell you what you wanna do, you wanna take my advice, and swim right up to that big purple wormhole on the far side there, and that’ll see you right.”

Ford looked out of the cave opening and pointed to the large purple wormhole he could see across the asteroid field. “Just – just that one there?”

“That’s the one.” The rodent nodded. “You just swim through that, and you’ll be right as terraformed rain. Here, we’ll even give you some of our rations to see you through. Come on boys, give him what you can.”

The creatures around the fire turned out their pockets, and counting what they had left, they gingerly passed Ford two small bars shrink wrapped in plastic. The rations inside resembled brown lego pieces, but apparently this would be food enough to sustain Ford through his travels ahead.

“Oh, ah, thank you.” Ford said, graciously accepting the two small bars of space food. “I appreciate this. No, really, you shouldn’t have.”

“Well, on the off chance that we should, those two are for you. Make ‘em last, you hear. Those are good for two moon orbits.” The rodent advised.

Ford nodded, and put the bars in his pocket, before reaching his hand out to shake the rodent’s metal arm. “No, really, thank you. You’ve been so helpful, I don’t know what I’d have done without meeting you out here.”

“Best not to dwell on it.” The rodent shook Ford’s hand back, though it was obvious the practise wasn’t familiar for him. He gave Ford a funny look and extricated his hand from Ford’s grasp. “Good luck on your journeys now, you hear. I hope what you find is better than where you’re coming from.”

“Thank you!” Ford said and walked over to the edge of the cave mouth. “So, I just go up there?”

“Yep, just up there.” The creatures all nodded encouragingly at him.

“Just to that purple one?” Ford clarified, almost hesitant to step over the edge, wanting to set out towards his new life and purpose, but unsure what would await him on the other side. He was taking a leap of faith, listening to these wayward travellers, but somehow, he trusted them to lead him in the right direction.

They all just smiled at him and waved him on his way out. “Just swim up there and keep swimming.”

“Thank you! Thank you for all your help.” Ford waved back to the creatures, smiling back at them.
“Goodbye now. Good luck you hear.”

“Goodbye!” Ford stepped out off the edge of the cave edge and swam awkwardly forward, before treading air to turn around and wave at the group of refugees. “Thank you! Goodbye!”

Leaving their asteroid, Ford swam an awkward breaststroke across the asteroid field up towards the purple wormhole, casting his fate to the wind to discover what new worlds awaited him. Thanks to the asteroid miners pointing him in the right direction, he felt like he stood a chance of getting a step ahead of Bill, and he already itched to uncover more about his muse, genuine truths this time, instead of the lies he’d been fed.

He’d know everything there was to know about Bill Cipher in time, that Ford swore to himself. And this time he’d know the truth.

As he reached the lip of the purple wormhole, he could feel it pull against his molecules, and he looked over his shoulder at the kaleidoscopic realm he was leaving behind, its multicoloured refractions dancing in his field of vision before he was whisked away through the wormhole, pulled swiftly through into another dimension.

From the asteroid cave, the miners watched him go. When he blipped out of this dimension, sucked through the wormhole, the horned creature with the harpoon asked their guinea pig faced leader.

“Think he’s gonna make it?”

“Well, I sent him to the right place, but I don’t think the kid’s gonna last a week, knowing him.”

“At least we can go home now.” Bovin pulled a communications device from his bag and passed it to Xznar. “Do you wanna call it in?”

Xznar tapped the screen of the communications device, and sent his message out, waiting for the device to ping when the message was received. After several seconds, the machine sang out.

“She knows.”

“Mission complete, I’d say.” The horned creature in the corner laughed.

Getting to their feet and gathering their belongings from the cave, the rodent pirate reached into the purple fire with his metal arm and retrieved a small porta-portal device from the base of the fire, pointing it to the back wall of the cave.

Their leader pressed the ignition button, and a temporary portal sprang up against the back wall of the cave, leading through to a different dimension.

“Time to go home, boys. Praise the Axolotl!”

“Praise the Axolotl!” They all shouted and walked through the portal wall.

When they were all through, it closed behind them.

The purple fire in the cave flickered on, the only sign that they were ever there at all.
Ad Astra Per Aspera and ever onward towards space hijinks and hopefully Stanford's canonical fistfight with an animated chair lmao. I hope you enjoyed this chapter. Chapters probably won't be 60 plus pages long now we're in the multi-verse, apart from major plot chapters and so on, but we will see. My wordcount has a way of surprising me, and I'm the one writing it haha.

This chapter is dedicated to the ever mysterious Anonymous who has been commenting and leaving the delightful gift of a link to their sketches from each chapter for me to fawn over. I think your art is the best thing since sliced bread (although from my responses you might already know that) and everyone should check out their imgur links they leave in their comments. There has been a gorgeous Valencia that knocked my socks off (a gorgeous Willow too if I remember correctly) and just some beautiful art all round. I could gush about it and list all the fantastic bits but I would run out of end note room hahah. You are a fantastic artist, and that you're enjoying my fic makes me very happy. HMU with your Kofi someday huh, or just hmu if you want to be buds. As always, let me know what you thought of the chapter. A special thanks to my lovely beta reader who is wonderful with prepping the grammar for these babies before I unleash them upon you all. It was their birthday recently, so happy birthday here as well!

Next chapter is lost dog posters, thinly veiled social commentary in the form of sci-fi worldbuilding hahah, and Stanford gets a first taste of what living in Stanley's shoes is like. I hope you stay tuned!
And you can hear it in the clamour of the crowded streets. People come and take their chances. Sometimes you win, sometimes you lose a lot. Come, make your own contribution to this melting-pot.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

With Bill’s gathered investors and monsters scattered to the wind hunting Stanford down for the chance to win their own galaxy, the space field surrounding the multi-coloured throne was just about empty. Nearly all the henchmaniacs had gone chasing after Stanford, enjoying the game at play.

Even Kryptos began to sidestep out of the space-field, the allure of ruling his own galaxy tickling the compass’s ego quite nicely.

He didn’t make it far though, as when he made to step away, he felt a hand fall onto his shoulder, halting him in his tracks.

“Now, where do you think you’re going?”

Pasting on an awkwardly winsome grin, Kryptos turned around, and looked up at his boss’s towering form.

“Oh, I was just going to – “ Kryptos gestured with his thumb behind him, trying to stay casual, but the dangerous glint in Bill’s eye had the words shrivel up and die in his throat. Clearing his throat, Kryptos looked down at his feet, finding staring up at Bill far too intimidating to continue.

He felt Bill’s hand tighten on his shoulder, his cartoonish rounded fingers narrowing out into sharp claws, pressing into Kryptos’ flesh.

Hiding this conversation from the other people on the space field (although there were hardly any left, each individual searching for Stanford) Bill spoke low, his subdued words all the more dangerous for his gentle tone.

Acting like he was massaging Kryptos’ shoulder rather than digging his claws into it, Bill murmured.

“I told you what would happen if your big mouth got me in trouble, now didn’t I, Kryptos? So, you want to explain to me what just happened there?”

“W-well, I –” Kryptos stammered, trying not to wince as Bill’s claws scratched at his shoulders.

“Pointing fingers, telling me what’s supposed to happen, and in front of the investors too? Now, that’s inspired.” Bill’s eye narrowed into a red slit, and his clawed hand began burning hot, ready to sear into Kryptos’ flesh. “What makes you think you can dump me in it and get away unscathed? It may have worked on your old bosses, Kryptos, but the only one who works a hat trick around here is me.”

“I – I wasn’t – I just –“ Kryptos panicked, shrinking back from Bill’s wrath, before a voice called out from across the space field.
“Leave him alone, Bill.”

Bill turned around, his eye seeking out the miscreant who dared to call him out, and it fell on a familiar figure in pink. He proceeded to blink at her, astonished that she would stand up for Kryptos, that duplicitous snitch of a compass, at all.

“Excuse me?” Bill squinted at his best friend, hardly believing what he was hearing. “I’m sorry, is there some miraculous reason I’m missing as to why I should let Kryptos’ sabotage slide?”

Her arms crossed, Pyronica walked closer to Bill. “It doesn’t seem like Kryptos is the one who sabotaged us here.”

Kryptos blinked up at Pyronica, awe fluttering in his stomach like captive butterflies, feeling an odd mixture of relief and surprise, staring down his rescuer.

“Don’t get me wrong.” Pyronica held her hand up, shrugging. “I’m not sticking up for that slime ball. Pulling that stunt in front of the investors made me want to kick the shit out of him too.”

Kryptos’ butterflies promptly shrivelled up and died and he scowled at Pyronica. It seemed the cyclops did not have his back. She had always been on Bill’s side first, a fact that rankled with Kryptos.

“But seriously? Checkmate?” Pyronica scoffed, then looked at Bill in askance.

Bill’s eye shot from side to side and he didn’t answer. Pyronica could have sworn she almost saw a peachy tint colour Bill’s bricks and she rolled her eye, throwing her hands in the air.

“OH, COME ON!”

“It’s not like I told him to say that!” Bill protested, turning from Kryptos, abandoning his revenge in an instant to float over to his best friend to gossip.

Although relieved, Kryptos was almost disappointed that he wasn’t important enough to punish, Bill’s human once again taking precedence.

“I thought you said you were working on him. That he was coming around to our side.” Pyronica beseeched.

“Call it a work in progress. Look, he doesn’t know what he’s saying, he’s operating on a month-long sleep deficit.” Bill explained, floating closer to Pyronica. “It’s impressive that he made such a zinger at all, really.”

“The fact that he did just makes you want him more. Admit it.” Pyronica pointed at Bill. “You like that he sabotaged us.”

“Well, I wouldn’t say that –” Bill rolled his eye, but he didn’t appear to be angry. He wasn’t snapping at Pyronica, he wasn’t even snapping at Sixer’s perceived disobedience.

Pyronica’s eye widened as she realised. “You’re happy. You’re really happy.”

“Happy to see him maybe, but I’m not exactly a fan of this situation.” Bill retorted, resting his hands on his sides.

“No, I mean you’re not mad that he’s here. That he ruined everything. You should be furious! This was our chance. So why aren’t you?” She puzzled, trying to figure her friend out.
Bill blinked at Pyronica, saying nothing, refusing to answer.

“I thought we were running out of time.” Pyronica pondered, piecing things together. “We were pushing the investors so hard, getting everything lined up. Is there something I’m missing? Is there some reason why this falling through right now isn’t as huge of a setback as we think it is?”

Bill blinked at her slowly again, deliberating, before he decided. “You don’t need to know.”

Pyronica seemed taken aback, and she leaned her head back, blinking at Bill in surprise, mildly offended. “Okay then?”

Huffing a sigh, Bill elucidated. “You do not want to or need to know the exact time and date of this dimension’s entropic demise. Knowing would just put stress into your pink little head and, clearly, I’ve put you through enough of that dealing with the investors.”

Pyronica’s brow rose, surprised that Bill was admitting that his conduct as of late, dumping the investors in her lap, wasn’t the best course of action. It wasn’t an outright apology, but there was enough acknowledgement to placate her some.

“Do we have time, though?” She questioned.

“We have time.” Bill answered plainly. “Sixer had us decades ahead of schedule. The investors were the ones pushing. Kryptos’ blabbering didn’t help matters either. We have time to play around.”

Trusting Bill, Pyronica nodded, relieved.

Kryptos hovered awkwardly off to the side, still somewhat miffed that his machinations had taken a backseat to Bill and Pyronica’s odd reconciliation.

“So, um, does this mean that we don’t need to get the human back?” Kryptos had to ask, unwisely drawing Bill’s attention back onto him.

“Why do you ask?” Bill narrowed his eye at Kryptos, not liking his tone.

Fumbling his fingers together as he spoke, Kryptos shrunk back from Bill until he looked acceptably cowed, and he pointed off to the asteroid field.

“It’s just that, it’s been a while since he swam off and no one’s come back with him yet. You’d think with a galaxy on the line, he’d have been brought back here by now.”

“You don’t think they’ve eaten him, do you?” Pyronica had to ask, vaguely curious about the outcome.

“They won’t. Not if they want their own galaxy.” Bill crossed his arms, doubtful that his henchmen and cronies would go against him like that.

He thought he made his wishes expressly clear, that Sixer was to be returned to him, and that he was not to be eaten. Very simple wishes, honestly, Bill didn’t think he was asking for much here.

“So why isn’t he back here yet? How come no one’s found him?” Kryptos asked, looking out into the space field.

“He’s just a human.” Pyronica shrugged. “How far could he go?”

But he wasn’t just any human.
This was Sixer they were talking about.

Suddenly, Bill was very worried.

Hurtling through the wormhole, Stanford could feel the flesh on his cheeks compress back, jiggling forcefully as he was flung through space, time, and dimensions, moving impossibly fast. He did his best to hold his glasses onto his face while worlds whipped by him, until a few seconds passed and he was spat out on the other end of the purple wormhole, drifting to a halt.

The abrupt shift in speed was jarring, and Ford felt his nausea catch up with him as he floated peacefully in the aftermath of that sudden rush. He never thought he was one to fall victim to motion sickness, but travelling through an interdimensional wormhole was nothing like any motion Ford had experienced before. His stomach flipped, and he pressed a hand over his mouth, struggling to swallow back the urge to upend his stomach in the space in front of him.

Ford imagined that couldn’t have been too pleasant, to throw up in an environment lacking gravity. He hadn’t exactly got the hang of moving around here yet and side stepping a floating pile of vomit when his clothes had just been cleaned sounded like risky business. It seemed a rather messy affair, not worth the hassle, and so Ford struggled to overcome his nausea.

Once his stomach was calmed, he felt settled enough to take in his surroundings.

The exit to this wormhole deposited Ford impossibly close to the towering spires and high rises of a bustling city. Whatever planet the wormhole directed Ford to, it spat him out right next to the planet’s surface, which surprised Ford considering what he knew about wormholes and black holes. Shouldn’t the wormhole’s pull be affecting the surface of the planet, interfering with its gravitational leaning?

Ford felt he could puzzle for days as to how this planet was able to exist so close to an interdimensional wormhole, and as he looked behind him, trying to figure it out, he noticed dozens of other wormholes, lined up around the edge of the planet’s atmosphere.

Each wormhole was labelled with what resembled a road sign on the highway, only these road signs were positioned with jet thrusters, and the signs were about ten yards wide, hovering over each wormhole’s entrance.

Ford’s dimensional translator took a few seconds to kick in. The peculiar language the road signs were written in was nothing like Ford had ever seen before, but before he could spend too long puzzling it out, the translator kicked into gear and a blue light crept up Ford’s body and then remained, projecting onto Ford’s glasses a superimposed translation of the text.

Above the wormhole Ford had come out of was the same phrase repeated over and over again, perhaps in a variety of common interstellar languages, each line translated into English by the device on Ford’s wrist. The sign read ‘Danger – Wormhole out of order! Do not enter!’ and as he looked at the dozens of other wormholes arrayed around the planet he noticed that his wormhole was the only one that was out of order, every other wormhole emblazoned with differing locations in large letters, a listing of various tourist destinations dropping down below each header.
Ford wondered if his wormhole was out of order because it didn’t have a consistent destination, or if the disorder was due to the fact that it came out in Bill’s domain. The universe clearly seemed to think of Bill’s dimension as a flaw and not a feature. A flaw to be buffed out by the inevitable entropy of time, if those miners were correct.

Trying not to dwell on the way his stomach flipped in sympathy when he thought too hard about Bill’s dimension (or maybe that was the motion sickness) Ford turned his attention to his surroundings, trying to understand where he had ended up.

Wherever he was seemed to be some kind of thoroughfare of interdimensional travel, and if the system of wormholes didn’t impress enough, the city below took Ford’s breath away.

The city was a gleaming metal and neon testament to technological advancement. Skyscrapers towering six times higher than any skyscraper Ford had seen on earth dominated the skyline of this city, accented with billboards set on jet thrusters bobbing in between the buildings and projected holograms advertising various goods and services. Satellites hovered not far from the tops of the buildings, orbiting machines, ships and settlements expanding the city’s limits.

The city was colourful and vibrant, the metals that comprised the skyscrapers were in various hues that Ford had never seen before. One building looked ionized all the way up, the surface of the tower a shimmering rainbow. Other buildings were crafted from a sort of metallic green substance, some made of glass and others made of obsidian, the panes stretching in patterns like stained glass all the way up to the skyline, and other buildings were a sturdy solid grey concrete.

Neon piping was integrated through the buildings, racing up the walls, providing lighting to the inhabitants within, and shining down on the streets for those below. There wasn’t an area on this planet that wasn’t well lit, it seemed, and as Ford couldn’t see a sun or particularly daring star close by to provide natural lighting for the planet, he assumed these neon lights were lit 24/7.

On the ground, hundreds of thousands of alien creatures bustled along, pavements packed with individuals moving to and fro, each one with purpose and a place to be.

Ford was starting to see the details of the planet’s surface more clearly, and as more and more came into view, he realised he was being gently pulled downwards, towards the surface of the planet. That explained how he could see the people on the surface moving about, his glasses weren’t that good.

He wasn’t exactly sure how gravity was working here, as the pull of the planet’s gravity and the wormhole’s suction should have been competing with each other, yet he was being guided down deliberately from the wormhole’s edge towards a broad platform positioned before a gate leading into the city. The gate was set into a wide wall, that stretched around the platform, and a statue of a regal alien figure stood at the top of the gate, its nine arms outstretched and welcoming.

Ford could see, as he came closer to landing, that various other creatures were descending onto the planet from the wormholes that lined the dimensional outskirts, all being pulled down into that same central locus of the platform. Some came in spacecrafts, parking their ships beside the platform, others simply floated down with luggage strapped to their backs or hovering beside them.

Some travelled alone, others huddled in groups, most likely families, all seeking access to this planet’s surface.

Ford’s feet touched down onto the platform, and he felt the gravitational pull stop, grateful that whatever it was that directed him down here seemed sophisticated enough to moderate the increased gravity to level out before pulling him through the floor.
Surprised that he managed to land in one piece on what seemed like a relatively civilised planet, Ford counted himself incredibly lucky, considering he had hurtled himself through a mysterious purple wormhole with no knowledge of what could await him on the other side. Escaping his likely dismemberment by a crowd of monsters back in the Nightmare Realm gave Ford quite a lot to be thankful for, and as he looked around the platform at the various other travellers, he couldn’t help but smile.

He had made it, he was really here, in another dimension, on an alien world. He was still giddy from the rush of escaping the Nightmare Realm, from defying Bill to his face in front of his cronies, and from meeting such pleasant helpful people on his way out.

He was elated, but as he set his eyes on the people around the platform, he felt a twinge of sadness knowing that the people he had come to know on Earth he might never see again. His family and his friends, Stanley, Willow, Fiddleford – while they weren’t all in Ford’s good books when he left, he was certainly missing them now.

Were the circumstances different, he would admit that this was exactly where he had always wanted to be, exploring the unknown, in a place as weird and wonderful as he was. If only the experience wasn’t so bittersweet.

Trying to shrug off that melancholy twinge, Ford followed the crowd of aliens up to the queue that was forming in front of the gate, smiling at everyone politely, optimistic and eager to step foot inside this futuristic city. He didn’t want to dwell on the people he left behind, not when he had such mysteries awaiting him going forward.

Despite a few odd looks, there was a pervading enthusiasm mirrored throughout the crowd, and Ford realised he wasn’t the only one sharing hopeful optimistic glances with the world around him.

It seemed many of the people seeking entry into this colourful city were also looking forward to a new life, a better quality of life within the city’s boundaries. Following the press of the crowd further ahead in the queue Ford wondered if he was feeling what his ancestors felt as they travelled in through New York by boat, the rush his mother’s parents would have felt seeing the welcoming face of the Statue of Liberty, guiding travellers into the safety of America’s shores. This nine-armed figure positioned above the gate reminded him of the famous statue and he wondered if this statue was meant to resemble something similar. If this was The New Colossus, the Mother of Exiles, welcoming travellers into this shimmering utopia.

*Give me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe free. The wretched refuse of your teeming shore. Send these, the homeless, tempest tossed to me.*

Emboldened by the inscription he’d memorized back in high school, imagining something similar scrawled somewhere on the statue that stood above the gate, Ford held his head high, optimistic as he approached the gates that led to his future.

As he reached the front of the queue he looked up at the attendant, sitting at a desk in a small cubicle behind a screen of glass at the gate. She seemed like some kind of customs official, like this was an airport of some variety. The queue moved forward in front of him, and soon Stanford was there, at the front of the queue before the attendant. He waited expectantly, uncertain of what was supposed to happen now. Would she let him through? She had to.

The alien raised her eyebrow at Stanford’s enthusiastic unspoken confidence, looking between the outdated dimensional translator on his wrist and the uncertain but hopeful expression on his face, and pointed to a gap at the bottom of her window, tapping on the glass with a clawed fingernail.
“Your visa and entry papers.”

Ford’s shoulders slumped minutely, taken back by her question. “I beg your pardon?”

The alien sighed and whipped out a nail file, buffing her claws as she gave Stanford a withering look with all three of her eyes. “Present your visa and entry papers – please.”

“My, um, I don’t know – uh –” Ford looked between the impatient clerk at the desk and the queue of aliens behind him, noticing they all held papers in their hands. He began patting his pockets awkwardly like he was searching for the visa she requested.

He didn’t know why he was searching. He didn’t have any visa or entry papers. He didn’t know he would need it. He didn’t know interdimensional visas were a thing. He found he was rather too busy fleeing for his life to look up what sort of visa he would need to get to this planet and considering his circumstances, he wouldn’t have known the first place to apply for something of the sort.

“Sir, you’re holding up the line.” The alien at the desk assured him, sounding bored. “You need to present your visa and entry papers for legal entry into Meccai.”

When Ford continued to look confused, she continued speaking.

“You either present your entry papers at the front desk, or you proceed to the back of the platform and get in the line to board the shuttle to Naree, where, if you are without proper documentation for legal entry into Meccai you will be detained indefinitely or deported back to your dimension, as per Meccai’s standard immigration policies.”

Indefinite detention was a worrying thought. Ford came this far to escape imprisonment, or worse. And he didn’t much fancy being deported back to his dimension. If he was back on Earth the portal became vulnerable again and he wouldn’t fare well if they deported him back to the Nightmare Realm. His prospects seemed grim without this ‘visa’ and he couldn’t imagine having gotten this far only to be transported to a place he may never leave.

He looked around him at the other people in the queue, the gathered creatures all waiting impatiently for him to get on with it. They all held their papers firmly in their hands and various appendages, and Ford could see towards the back of the platform a family of crying aliens being dragged towards an ominously sturdy looking space shuttle, the family clearly without the proper documentation for their travel.

The alien behind the counter had stopped buffing her nails and was narrowing her eyes at him now. “Sir, could you hurry it up? Do you have your visa?”

“Yes, I have it.” Ford lied. “I – I’ll just step out of the line to look. Sorry.”

She rolled all three of her eyes, obviously peeved Ford had wasted her time, but allowed him to step out of the queue, and waved ahead the alien behind Ford.

“Next!”

Pacing out to stand beside the long wall that ran all the way around the platform, Ford rested his back against the stone and watched the queue progress. Fumbling through his pockets, he found very little to work with.

He had several papers and pages from his notebooks he could possibly use to forge papers to get past the gate, but he had no idea how advanced the technology was, or how likely his chance of
success would be, given he knew nothing about how this society operated. He didn’t even know what these ‘papers’ were supposed to look like.

He could ask to see someone else’s papers, but that would look doubly suspicious, and judging from the way each traveller clung to their papers defensively, it wasn’t likely he’d find someone willing to share.

Ford’s back slid down the stone wall and he sat on the ground now, flipping through his notebooks, looking for an answer that could help him proceed. His exhaustion was catching up to him, to the point where he couldn’t even scowl bitterly at the pages he’d written on Bill, instead staring morosely at the yellowed parchment, wishing there was an easier way.

The page he was staring at detailed his adventure impersonating FBI agents with his muse, annotated and illustrated lovingly. He couldn’t leave this incriminating record laying around the house, and he almost certainly didn’t keep it because he remembered the thrill of that particular adventure, that radioactive heist.

Wistfully, Ford imagined entering this city would be easier if Bill were here. He’d likely come up with some elaborate whimsical scheme to get Ford through the gate and Ford would have another story to write down into his journals, another happy fiction to dwell on.

His eyelids started to droop involuntarily, his sleepless nights catching up with his resignation and just before he could close his eyes, he heard something that startled him.

“Psst!”

Ford jumped and looked around him. It sounded like a voice was whispering from behind him, but his back was to the wall. He looked left, right, and even up, with no luck, until the voice whispered to him again.

“Psst. Hey. Yeah you. Got no papers? I can get you in. Whadda you say?”

Ford blinked, baffled, as he turned around to face the wall behind him. It still looked as sturdy and solid as it had when he pressed his back to it and, for a moment, he wondered whether he was hallucinating again, if this was purely wishful thinking.

Reaching out, Ford pressed his hand against the wall, testing its solidity. The wall was firm for a second, but it then began to warp in the middle, a slight blue light emanating from Ford’s handprint. To Ford’s surprise, two hands reached through the wall, purple, somewhat scaly humanoid hands, and wrapped around Ford’s hand, shaking firmly once before readying a firmer grip on his wrist.

“Pleasure doing business with you. Okay, real quick then, buddy.” The whispered voice in the wall continued, tightening their grip around Ford’s wrist. “One, two, three. Here we go.”

Ford barely had a moment to prepare himself, before he was yanked through the solid stone wall.

It was disorienting, much like moving through butter. The wall stayed sturdy, but for some reason it softened around him, and the purple hands yanked him through the wall like he was being yanked through jelly.

The wall must have been somewhat thick, as Ford felt like he was moving through it forever, though it had only been a minute. He was holding his breath when he was pulled through, fear of inhaling concrete keeping his mouth firmly shut until he burst out on the other side of the wall, stumbling to the ground.
Gasping, Ford rested his hands on his knees and tried to catch his breath, looking up at his would-be rescuer.

“Welcome to Meccai, pal.” Said the alien, a tall reptilian looking humanoid figure. The lizard man was wearing clothing, smooth fabric cut into snazzy geometric shapes, draping like a jacket over the creature’s scaled limbs. Beneath the jacket was an array of belts and straps, gadgets and gizmos hanging from the straps and sewn into the pockets.

There wasn’t a device pointed at the wall, or any obvious technology stuck on the brick, so Ford could only assume that this creature had simply reached through the wall and altered the density of the brick to pull him through. What a novel ability. Ford was fascinated.

The alien blinked its eyes sideways at Ford and held a scaly hand out in front of it. “So, that’s services rendered, immigration bypassed. Now you’re through, I’ll take your gratitude in the form of, oh, let’s say 700 QUID?”

Ford blinked at the lizard’s hand, and straightened up, catching his breath, confused. “What?”

“Well, you’d pay 500 for a visa, and then there’s compensation for my time and effort on top of that, plus a little interest and a rebate for the risk on my behalf, so for my trouble, 700 QUID sounds about right. 750 if you’re feeling generous. A fair price for dodging Naree, wouldn’t you say?” The lizard argued.

“I don’t –“ Ford looked around him, distracted by the sight of the brilliant city behind the lizard. He was through the wall, on the other side, and while he and his rescuer went mostly unnoticed in the corner here, hundreds of creatures all walked busily through the streets on the city’s floor, towering skyscrapers, billboards and hover cars flying above their heads.

Ford’s words trailed off, watching this futuristic utopia with wide eyes, awe overriding his exhaustion. This city seemed familiar, and Ford wondered if he had seen it through Bill’s eyes, if this was the futuristic city that had enthralled him so much before or if this was just one of many cities with the same impressive technological qualities. The name Meccai sounded familiar but Ford couldn’t put his finger on where he’d heard it before. Maybe he read it in the Almanac?

The lizard was watching him, waiting for his attention to return to the creature’s outstretched hand. Looking back at the creature, Ford finished his sentence.

“I don’t have any money.”

The lizard creature blinked at him, offended. “What are you talking about? Everyone’s got money.”

“I –“ Ford realised that wasn’t a very pleasant way to reward his rescuer, so he patted down his pockets, looking for his wallet. Pulling it out, he upended it into his hand, extending his hand forward. “I’ve only got fifty … fifty-seven dollars.”

The lizard picked up one of the notes and rubbed it between its scaled thumb and forefinger, puzzled by the bills.

“What is this supposed to be? Some kind of delicacy?” The creature nibbled on the edge of a bill, pulling an un-appetized face at the taste.

“That’s –“ Ford sighed, realising that of course Earth currency would have no relevance here, and it wasn’t like he had any way to access his bank account back home, or any assurance that his hard earned grant money would even mean anything to these people. He really was adrift here, without
a cent to his name, with only the clothes on his back to sustain him. Not exactly the best foundation for a fresh start in a different dimension. “That’s all the money I have.”

Scoffing, the lizard crumpled the money into a ball and threw it at Ford’s feet, before climbing up the wall again, scaling its surface effortlessly, muttering as he went.

“Another FOD with fake money. What a bust.”

Ford turned around, watching the lizard disappear over the top of the wall. The only alien he’d spoken to so far in this place was already leaving him behind. That was disheartening.

He had so many questions about this city, he didn’t know where to go, how things worked, who to turn to. He had hoped to run into more friendly, forthcoming aliens like he’d encountered in the asteroid belt. He was resigned to note that their helpful disposition wasn’t the norm.

Turning back around the expanse of the city sprawled out in front of him, and as aliens passed him on the street, barely sparing a glance for him, he stood by the colossal wall, stunned by his surroundings. Ford’s sense of wonder rekindled the more he looked around him.

Approaching the crowd of people bustling along the pavements, Ford tried to ask one of them for directions.

“Pardon me. Can you – sorry, can one of you please – I just need directions. Could you spare a moment – I just need – excuse me?”

Every person Ford asked for help, or guidance brushed past him with barely a word. He was lucky to get even a sideways glance from these people, and most of the glances he received were laden with scorn. No one seemed to want to help him, or even acknowledge him.

He didn’t know what he was doing wrong, his dimensional translator was presumably still working, these people should be able to understand him. But just like the Almanac seemed to insist, his very presence seemed offensive in this large prosperous city. He was hoping someone could assist him, but every creature he reached out to or made eye contact with brushed him off, rushing to their next appointment, or straight up refusing to even look at him.

Alright, so it seemed in this particular place, Ford wouldn’t find another group of friendly aliens like he’d found in the asteroid. That was fine. Ford might not need help. He could figure out this city on his own.

Swallowing back his tiredness, his caution and his trepidation, Ford forced himself forward, walking further into the enormous city, no more than wretched refuse tossed upon this teeming shore.

He had to believe he had someone other than Bill willing to help him out here.

He didn’t want to believe it, but it began to dawn on him that here, in this dimension, away from all the friends and allies he’d ever known, he really was on his own.

He rubbed his hand against his pectoral as he moved through the crowds, the small anxious gesture subconscious at this point, a habit. He was used to tracing the line of the tattoo Bill left on his skin to soothe his anxiety when he felt alone before, and while there wasn’t the same wistful reverence in the gesture, the gesture remained.

Ford rubbed his palm against the tattoo, and squashed down his brewing anxiety, as he began to make his way across the city, exploring this new world.
Up on the gate behind him, the gleaming statue with its nine arms outstretched stood, and as Ford looked back up at it, conflicted emotions swirling in his throat, he realised the statue had its back to him, turning away from him like everyone else.

*Ad Astra Per Aspera.* Ford thought with a sigh and persevered onwards, disappearing into the sea of people on this strange new planet.

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A small delegation of emissaries landed on Naree and from inside the administrator’s office, they endured the relevant bureaucracies, waiting for their caseworker to return to the office. These emissaries were waiting in a room reserved for legal teams and official delegations, spared the dismal conditions the refugees and asylum seekers faced on the other side of the compound.

Leaning up against the wall of the screening room, one of the emissaries sighed, and her colleague sat by the table in the middle of the room, drumming their fingers against the desk.

“What’s taking so long?” The emissary at the table asked impatiently. “Haven’t we thrown enough QUID around for this to go faster?”

Picking at the pink thread of the embroidery on the sleeve of her jacket, the emissary leaning against the wall replied in a dry, unamused voice. “That’s usually all it takes. The difference between legal and illegal immigration. Deep pockets.”

“This guy’s an expensive mark.” Complained the emissary at the table, resting her chin against the desk, scowling. A few seconds passed, before she raised her head, looking back to her colleague.

“Should we request clarification? What if he’s not here?”

“There’s nowhere else he could go. The mercenaries in the belt confirmed he went to Meccai and without a visa, that’s a one-way trip to Naree. This should be cut and dry.” The emissary by the door replied. “This should be easy. He’ll be here, and when he gets here, we scoop him up and bring him home. There’s no need to bother The Oracle.”

“But what if he’s not here though? The mark *is* meant to be one of his.” Questioned the girl at the desk. “What if he slips us? Gets into Meccai?”

“That would be like trying to find a single atom in a collider.” Replied her colleague grimly, still picking at the embroidery on her sleeve, a pink axolotl sewn into the fabric.

“Should we request clarification?” Pressed the girl at the table.

Her colleague paused, considering her mistress’s reaction, before she shook her head.

“We wait. He’ll be here. Where else could he go?”
The longer Ford spent on Meccai, the more he came to realise that he had heard of the place before.

Bill had told him, when Ford was studying the almanac.

“The central hub of most Federation ports, Meccai is a –“ Ford read aloud from the pages, finding it interesting, before Bill interrupted.

“A shithole.”

“I’m sorry?”

“Meccai is a shithole.”

And so it was. Or at least it was for the poor and, currently, Ford was in that demographic.

Everything on Meccai seemed to be measured and judged by one’s wealth. It was a staunchly capitalistic society, building its economy on the immigration it was so famous for. Or rather building itself up on the backs of the immigrants.

The jewel of the cosmos was what it was lauded as. Stanford had read that in the Almanac. The centrepoint of commerce, the starting point of success. That was the line fed to these hopeful travellers who came from all dimensions, carrying their worldly possessions on their backs, dreaming of a better life, and when they arrived on Meccai, rather than the fulfilling careers, high quality housing, and idealised culture this planet advertised, they ended up here.

Ford looked across the road, surveying the slums he found himself residing in.

Undocumented or undesirable aliens lived in relative squalor here, packed into condemned and poorly made buildings, paying through their teeth for the privilege of a roof over their heads. Their children idled in the street outside, picking pockets, eating scraps, and stealing what they could from wherever they could find it. The quality education promised to them never came, and those families that had pushed their children through the expensive education system found their qualifications useless in the cutthroat job market, discriminated against in more ways than one.

Having been discriminated against moreso than some, Ford counted himself lucky at this point that he had secured himself a relatively clean alleyway to hunker down in. It could be worse was becoming his mantra, although as far as mantras went, it wasn’t a very good one. He was living in squalor and the squalor of this particular planet would not have been so jarring if not for the absolute splendour that existed just two streets over.

Meccai was a study in extreme opposites. The city itself was gleaming, gentrified, perfect by the wall and into the heart of the city. A shining, spotless testament to progress and assimilation.

It remained that way, as Ford was to discover, by herding out the homeless and the destitute, the undesirable and the different, sectioning them off in the slums on outer Meccai. Ford hadn’t had much time to survey the city on his first few days before he was ushered out of the heart of the city, deemed to be undesirable because of his dated dimensional translator, his obviously foreign clothing and appearance, and the total lack of a penny to his name in the interdimensional denomination that seemed to mean so much here.

Ford had skills, he had other things of value to offer, he told them as much, but it didn’t seem to mean anything to those who ushered him out. He learned quickly how few prospects were open to these poor interdimensional travellers, and even fewer prospects seemed to exist for the undocumented few who snuck past the gate.
It wasn’t just Ford who had been snuck through. A sort of obscure trade proliferated on the outskirts of Meccai, one of the more lucrative trades for those outside the upper middle class – that of people smuggling. The transit and trafficking of migrants supported the government with the exorbitant fees these visas cost, and noting the government’s sterling example, an underground economy of people smuggling began to boom.

You would get less skilled entrepreneurs like the lizard who rescued Ford, happy to pull people through the wall with the talents and technologies available to them for a flat fee on the other side, and then you would get the organised smugglers, the gangs. You could be whisked past the visa process, spared from an eternity on Naree but not only would you owe your rescuer a flat fee, you would continue to pay that fee for the duration of your life on Meccai, or your rescuers would turn against you, turning you into the authorities as an undocumented refugee.

Because there were no checks and balances in place for the migrants who came to Meccai without a visa, they were left vulnerable to this sort of excruciating extortion, and it was why the slum cities on the outskirts were all that was left available to those asylum seekers who had fled everything they knew in search of a better life.

This was the better life they received.

Ford broke off one of the last slivers of the small ration bar the asteroid miners had given him, scraping this meagre portion away with his fingernail, popping his finger in his mouth and sucking the morsel up.

Those two small bars were all that had been keeping Ford going here on Meccai, each lego sized block holding the nutritional equivalent of a month’s worth of dietary nourishment. The ration bars contained all the nourishment a creature required to sustain life, they contained densely packed nutrients, and a peculiar ingredient that could make even the emptiest stomach feel full in an instant. They also seemed to contain a ludicrous amount of caffeine, as Ford was to discover to his delight. Ignorant of their potential, Ford had popped the first block in his mouth whole, like candy, on his first day on Meccai, and while he felt soon after like he’d imbibed a ten-course meal and seventeen cups of coffee, the feeling only lasted two days, and then his stomach began to rumble again.

He soon learned by watching the people around him, how they savoured their ration bars, that it would only take the smallest flake of the bar to sustain a person, and he immediately felt embarrassed that he had wasted an entire month’s worth of food out of ignorance.

There was plenty of food on Meccai, almost wasteful amounts of food sold in the heart of the city. There were fine dining establishments and exorbitant buffets laid out every day for those who could afford the privilege, but that food was not distributed evenly amongst the citizens once the buffets were over. Instead that food was incinerated wastefully or repurposed into the very same ration bars that Ford had to make last for as long as he could. The ration bars were not divvied out amongst the poor. Like everything else on this planet you had to pay for it, and right now Ford couldn’t afford another ration bar, so he had to make his last.

Upon learning that he couldn’t apply for work in the city without a valid visa, upon learning that even the other undocumented migrants found his appearance unappealing, wrinkling their noses at Ford’s nondescript human features, the exciting fulfilling future he imagined for himself in this vibrant city – daydreams of excelling in interdimensional engineering, of studying at advanced libraries and mingling with the creatures around him, colluding and collaborating like equals – after two weeks of being spurned by the city and its inhabitants, Ford found himself here. In the alley. His new home, it seemed.
It wasn’t very glamorous, but it was the only place he hadn’t been kicked out of. He didn’t mean to offend the people on this planet, so he left when they instructed him to, the warnings of the Almanac playing in the back of his mind.

Wrapping his trench coat around him for warmth, padding his new home with discarded newspapers and cardboard boxes, Ford sat with his back to the wall in the alleyway and watched the creatures on the planet go about their lives.

The caffeine from the ration bars was growing stale at this point, and after such a long time without consistent rest, Ford longed to close his eyes and sleep but habit told him not to.

*I can’t sleep.* Ford thought. *If I do, Bill could – Bill could –*

He paused, thrown by the belated realisation that there really wasn’t much that Bill could do at this point. He had no access to the portal through Ford now, and Earth, the planet he had set his sights on to claim was thoroughly out of his reach.

Following that logic, Bill should have no use for Stanford now. He couldn’t manipulate Ford into opening the portal for him, and he certainly wouldn’t be building another portal, not without the resources that so perfectly aligned for him on Earth.

Ford had thwarted Bill’s plans, and now he should, if he believed the hurtful accusations he flung at the ex-muse, mean nothing to the god.

That was a humbling thought.

Ford thought he was humbled enough already, sleeping rough in an alleyway on a planet with zero opportunities available for him. Life just seemed to keep knocking him down. His logic told him that he shouldn’t be disappointed by this realisation, that it was only proving Ford’s caustic suspicions right, that he’d been used by the God all this time, and now that use had become redundant, Bill would lose interest.

That disappointment was just about enough to convince Ford to close his eyes, to rest for a while. After four weeks of constant vigilance, he probably deserved a good sleep, and if sleeping put him in Bill’s path again – well, that would only be an issue if Bill hadn’t discarded him, hadn’t lost interest in him. If closing his eyes would prove Ford right (or wrong) then he really had nothing to lose trying.

For the first time since his escape, Ford eased down on top of the newspapers that comprised his new bed and closed his eyes to sleep, finally.

Opening his eyes, Ford found himself back in his mental library, surveying the calm stillness of the shelves. He looked between the stacks and raised his chin up to stare at the ceiling, or rather the absence of one. The roof was open, leading up to the stars above.

The blueprints for the portal were still etched in the sky up there, lines of circuitry connecting like constellations between each twinkling star. Geometric patterns of endless triangles laced out between points of light, still lingering as an homage to the god at the top of Ford’s mind.
Ford sighed, finding the solitude and calm of his mindscape disengaging. God knows after such a
long, stressful struggle against global annihilation, Ford could probably use some peace of mind,
but this peaceful silence in his mindscape had Ford dissatisfied for some reason. He couldn’t put
his finger on what was missing, or rather, he could, but he didn’t want to.

Heaving yet another dissatisfied sigh, Ford walked over to one of the shelves, tracing his fingertips
over the books that were meticulously organised by topic, not looking for anything specific,
content to just let his fingers trace the leather-bound spines. Grabbing a book from the shelf
without reading the title, Ford took a step up, and the mindscape rearranged to create stacks of
encyclopedias under his feet, each pile of books creeping higher like a staircase of thought.

He climbed the stairway of memory thoughtlessly, until he was up among the stars, gravitating to
the blue high-backed armchairs that floated beside a coffee table with a chess set on top. Ford
trudged over to the armchairs, books hovering like stepping stones as he walked across the void,
creating a floating path until he could hop from that last literary stepping stone to climb up onto the
armchair and curl up on its cushions, making himself comfortable.

The chair seemed larger than it had in the past, and Ford felt almost dwarfed by it, like he had as a
child, climbing up onto his mother’s high-backed chair she used for her psychic readings. Ford liked
to sit there, holding whatever book he’d been obsessed with at the time like it was a safety blanket,
waiting for his mother to return to comfort him from the rejections of the world.

He opened the book he had brought with him, but he couldn’t focus on the pages, not really
looking to relive any particular memories right now. He just wanted the comfort of familiarity, and
alone in his own head, he was jarred by the realisation that being alone in his own head wasn’t
familiar to him anymore.

It was too quiet.

It felt lonely.

Ford closed his eyes again, sighing once more as the sadness settled on his shoulders, seeking
comfort in the familiar that felt so different now.

Before he could become too entrenched in self-pity, he heard a loud pop, and he opened his eyes to
see an all too familiar shape floating in front of him.

“There you are! Sixer, I’ve been looking everywhere for you. What, do you just never sleep?” Bill
had his hand on the side of his hat, looking almost frantic, and he appeared incredibly close to
Stanford’s high-backed chair, hovering in front of his face.

“AAAHH!” Ford jumped back, startled to see Bill so close so suddenly, and his mental defences
leapt to the ready, the laser gun materialising into his hand, letting out a panicked shot into the
space in front of him.

“Ow.” Bill said, his tone flat now too. Heaving a frustrated sigh, he smoothed a hand across his
surface, closing the hole up with a wave.
“That didn’t actually hurt you, did it?” Ford questioned, concerned.

“That depends.” Bill crossed his arms sullenly. “Does hurting my feelings count?”

“That’s – I – what are you doing here, Bill?” Ford asked defensively, curling his arms around the book he held, banishing the laser gun with a wave of his hand. He could always summon it back to protect him if he needed it, for all the good it did him.

“Like I said, looking for you.” Bill explained, and floated down into the armchair across from Ford, crossing his legs and tapping his foot as he spoke. “That was quite the stunt you pulled. I’ve had no end of trouble, trying to pick up after the mess you left. You’d think one of those idiots would have found you by now, considering the incentives on offer, but no. It’s like I’m managing a bunch of unevolved morons.”

“Those morons of yours tried to kill me.” Ford accused, scowling at the triangle.

Bill scoffed dismissively. “They didn’t try to kill you.”

“They wanted to eat me!” Ford insisted.

“I think I’ve made my stance on eating you pretty clear.” Bill rubbed the bricks just above his eye like he was nursing a headache and summoned a martini with a click of his fingers. Making himself comfortable in Ford’s mind, he cosied back in his armchair and rearranged the pieces on the chess board, starting a new game.

Ford stared at Bill, baffled by his nonchalance. Pressing, Ford threw more accusations at Bill, stunned that the muse was still here. “You sent them all after me. You set them on me. Hide and seek? What, was this a game for you?”

“I didn’t set them on you.” Bill denied, looking over the board, ignoring Ford’s protestations. “I gave you a head start. Not many people get that.”

“You made me a moving target, is what you did.” Ford crossed his arms over the book he held, leaning forward in his chair, jutting his chin out stubbornly. “Don’t act like you were doing me a favour. Setting your monsters on me is hardly doing me a favour.”

“Well, how else was I supposed to respond to your checkmate?” Bill picked up the white king from the board and waggled it in the air for emphasis.

Ford said nothing, but he raised his chin a little higher.

Bill rolled his eye. As he closed it, the edges of his eyelids puckered, and he took a deep sip from his drink, before setting the king back on the board, opening his eye again.

“I can tell you’re proud of yourself.” Bill noted, finally looking at Ford, raking his eye over the scientist.

“What gave it away?” Ford quipped, raising an eyebrow at Bill gamely.

Bill narrowed his eye at Ford, obviously frustrated, before he looked away, moving a pawn across
Ford was expecting a more gratifying reaction, anticipating frustration, defeat or bargaining from the muse. Instead he just ignored Ford, his behaviour confusing the scientist. He didn’t know why Bill would be here, playing chess with him like they used to, when Ford practically spat in Bill’s face in their last encounter.

“You don’t need me anymore and there’s nothing you can do to manipulate me into opening the portal. I think I’ve made that quite clear. So why are you here?” Ford asked, putting the book he was holding down on the floating table, beside the chessboard. Resting his elbows on his knees he inched closer to the table, trying to catch Bill’s eye as he berated him. “You can’t invade the Earth anymore. There’s nothing you can do. You’re completely cut off from my dimension. Game over, Bill.”

Bill didn’t look up, but Ford could see from the way his eyelid moved that he was rolling his eye again. “Yeah, thanks for that.”

“Why did you even want it? Are you going to tell me?” Ford questioned, on the defensive. “Sway me with some grandiose sob story?”

Bill looked up at Ford and blinked slowly, before he sat back in his armchair and crossed his arms, giving Ford that flat, unimpressed look again. “No, I don’t think I will.”

“Why not?” Ford pressed, frowning.

“You won’t believe me,” Bill said, shrugging. “And you’re clearly getting a kick out of this whole defiant saviour shindig. Why should I give you the satisfaction?”

That stumped Ford. Bill hadn’t shied away from giving him all sorts of things before, information, adventure, gifts and abilities, and phenomenal things that subverted Ford’s very reality. He’d seemed to be following that pattern before, giving Ford’s clothes a good clean, giving him a new liver, and a digestive system that seemed to be able to tolerate the sparse food he’d imbibed here. He wasn’t sure why Bill would stop that now.

His behaviour was very odd, it confused Ford, his defensive instincts putting him on edge.

Ford stared at Bill for a while, trying to figure out how to proceed, before eventually he picked up a black pawn, and moved it a space across the board.

This seemed to please Bill and he relaxed, sitting back in his chair. Levitating another pawn forward a square in response to Stanford’s move, Bill sipped from his drink, steadily this time, and offered information more freely.

“You can’t just warp onto the scene and introduce yourself with disrespect Sixer. I’ve been trying to lay down groundwork for you here, to give you a little credit to stand on your own among beings like these and you seem intent on shooting yourself in the foot. What was challenging me to my face in front of my investors supposed to accomplish? Did it make you feel good? Did you feel victorious, justified? Were you satisfied, acting like you knew what you were doing? We both know you didn’t.”

Ford’s cheeks flushed with colour, embarrassed that his vindictive jab was called out for the bluff that it was. Ford would have preferred Bill to think it was a skilfully planned scuppering of his dastardly conquest, instead of something Ford had just happened to stumble into.

“You don’t know that.” Ford attempted, moving another pawn, trying to reclaim his checkmate as
a heroic act instead of an unplanned blunder.

“You’re a deliberate person, Sixer.” Bill assessed, knowing Ford too well to allow the lie. “If you wanted to come barrelling through the portal, shutting off your own access to your world, you would have thought it over a thousand times in your head before actually going through with it, and you’d have a little more going for you than just the unwashed clothes on your back. I’ve seen you stumble out of bed looking more ready to take on the universe than you did when you stumbled out of that portal. What, did someone push you in?”

Bill was joking, but Ford’s shoulders curled defensively. That was exactly what had happened, but Ford didn’t want to give Bill the satisfaction of knowing that.

“Does it matter? I still stopped you.”

“I’ll give you an A for effort on that one, Sixer.” Bill said, moving another piece. “Now you can pat yourself on the back and put this whole unpleasantness behind you. Sixer – 1 Bill – 0. Was that the score you wanted to see?”

As Bill conjured a scoreboard in the air behind him for emphasis, Ford narrowed his eyes at the floating board, looking between it and the triangle. Bill admitting defeat, while it was exactly what Ford had wanted, right now wasn’t what he wanted at all. It was suspicious, too good to be true, and Ford’s paranoia told him there was something else at play.

“I’m supposed to believe you came here just to tell me I’ve won? That I beat you? No, you’re here for more than that, Bill, and I want to know what.” Ford had to ask, leaning forward to move a knight, still suspicious. “What’s your angle?”

“Which one?” Bill quipped, amused.

“You’re not going to tell me?” Ford pressed, confused.

“I think the window of opportunity for open honest communication closed around about the time you disintegrated that body you made for me.” Bill said smoothly, moving another chess piece, his bishop capturing Ford’s knight, his tone hardly belying the hurt he still felt. “Not that I’m still bitter about that callous, cruel betrayal, I just don’t see why I should be giving so much when you don’t seem to understand what quid pro quo means.”

“What do you want?” Ford questioned warily. He moved another piece to counter Bill’s move, his pawn claiming Bill’s bishop, playing with him instinctively, without even thinking about it, effortlessly drawn into another game with his muse.

Bill stared at the chessboard, contemplating Ford’s move for a while, before stating his request without looking at Ford. “Where are you?”

“Why? So, you can come and find me?” Ford questioned, his shoulders tensing, narrowing his eyes at Bill. “Drag me back to your insane collective and pretend that I don’t know what you are. No thank you. Pass.”

“Here I am imagining you in all sorts of disastrous situations out in the multi-verse, in danger, destitute, starving in a gutter somewhere – and it’s not bringing me nearly as much pleasure as I thought it would.” Bill said jokingly, though he was speaking the truth. “I’d have thought you would welcome a helping hand by now. You’re lost, Sixer. Just tell me where you are.”

Ford refused to acknowledge the truth in Bill’s words. He was lost, starving in a gutter somewhere, but he still had his pride.
His lips pressed together tightly, the stubborn set of his chin telling Bill everything he needed to know. Bill was looking up now, staring intently at Ford, his eye narrowing as each defiant second passed, Bill’s true temper simmering to the surface.

“Fine then. Don’t tell me. Be stubborn. It’s not like I can’t just find out for myself.”

Bill’s hand shot out, his arm elongating, and he snatched the book Ford left on the tabletop, trying to dip into Ford’s memories to find where he was hiding.

Or rather, he attempted to snatch the book up, but when he went to grab the journal, his hand passed right through the book, like there was a glitch in Ford’s mind.

Bill blinked, surprised. Ford was surprised too.

Bill swiped for the book once more, trying to grab it, but again, his hand passed right through it, the book fuzzing with static briefly before solidifying once more.

Perplexed by this, Ford nudged the book further across the table beside the chess board, just to watch Bill try to snatch it, only for his hand to phase through it once again. It seemed Ford was able to touch the memory novel, but Bill was not.

“What are you doing?” Bill questioned, his frustration growing. “Sixer?”

Ford just watched on, puzzled, seeing Bill’s hand pass through the book again and again, unable to grasp the memories it held.

It took a while for Ford to piece together what was causing this.

He felt his stomach flip with dread when Bill had reached for the book, feeling the unfairness of the power imbalance stretch between them once again. Ford could hardly hope to hold his own against Bill when he was this intimidating, all powerful, omniscient being, able to tear through Ford’s thoughts like a racy paperback, able to negate any of the boundaries Ford put up simply through virtue of being a creature of such power.

Their peaceful chess game was laced with an undercurrent of danger from the moment Bill materialised in Ford’s mind and the scientist knew it. There was tension in the air between them. A tension derived from the knowledge that Bill really could do whatever he wanted.

Ford had felt comfortable dating a God on Earth when he knew he had limitations that Bill could not surpass, he had the runes protecting him, he had clear boundaries in place, and on Earth it could even be said that the power skewed in Ford’s favour, giving him an edge over the trapped deity.

Here in Bill’s domain, Ford was hardly an obstacle to Bill, and that scared Stanford. If he couldn’t grasp control back from this situation, he’d never see himself on level footing with Bill as they once had been. He couldn’t accept Bill’s help, knowing he didn’t have any other options, and he denied the triangle’s assistance for that precise reason.

Maybe it was contrary of Ford, but stubbornness didn’t mean acting in his own best interests all the time. Ford was stubborn because it was part of who he was.

Refusing to tell Bill where he was located was part of how Ford could claw back his standing, but when Bill had lunged for that book, for Ford’s memories, he felt the ground he was standing on crumble until his mind managed to create this ledge of leeway for Ford to hold onto before he fell.
But how was he doing it? He was stopping Bill in his own mind, refusing even his own thoughts to a creature of the mind he’d sworn himself over to. It took him a while to figure out what had engendered this successful mental rebellion, but when he realised, he became smug in the face of Bill’s frustration.

It had worked.

Project Mentum had pulled through. While the process was long and arduous, Ford had completed the entire encryption procedure, and now despite being in Ford’s head, Bill couldn’t touch any of Ford’s memories because he’d managed to encrypt them behind endless layers of code.

Ford was smiling at Bill now, the smugness oozing off him, much to Bill’s frustration.

“Sixer, what are you doing? How are you doing this? Tell me. Now!” Bill demanded.

“No, I don’t think I will.” Ford said, and his armchair shrunk down to a more reasonable size, the scientist filling the chair as an adult now and not dwarfed by it like a child. He had wrested control over the situation. He had his boundaries back. He no longer needed comforting. He felt like he finally stood a chance. “I don’t think I’ll give you the satisfaction.”

“You think you’re being clever now, but you won’t last on your own out there without me. It’s a cruel, uncaring multiverse, Sixer, and it is waiting to chew you up and spit you out just for the satisfaction of eating you alive. Tell me where you are.” Bill insisted, gripping the edge of the table now, fire sparking in his palms.

“No.” Ford said resolutely, crossing his arms.

“TELL ME WHERE YOU ARE!” Bill shrieked, growing rapidly in size until he towered over Ford, his bricks a brilliant red to match his irritation.

Confident that he still held the power in this situation, that his defiance gave him a leg up in this power struggle, Ford remained contrary.

“No.”

“You think you can do this on your own? Don’t you understand? The universe doesn’t care about you, Sixer!” Bill screeched, before exhaling, his bricks dulling back to yellow as he sighed and closed his eye, rubbing his eyelid as he spoke in a strained but more civil tone. “I’m trying to explain to you that going with me is the only way you’ll be safe. You are safest by my side.”

“I’ve just watched you incinerate one of your own monsters. I’ve seen you set your goons on me, I’ve seen you feed them body parts like it was a parlour trick. I’ve seen you destroy a planet, Bill. How am I supposed to believe that you will provide any semblance of safety?” Ford questioned incredulously.

“Because that’s what safety is.” Bill rolled his eye and sighed bitterly, his tone becoming patronising, like he was explaining a concept to a toddler. “You become the biggest baddest kid on the playground, and everybody else leaves you alone. Failing that, you do what you should be doing, which is to find the biggest baddest kid on the playground and stick to them like glue so they can fight your battles for you. Flying solo in this multiverse is a battle you’ll be fighting your entire life. Believe me, I know. You’re smarter than this Sixer. Do the smart thing.”

“I’m not telling you where I am.” Ford maintained, standing up from his armchair, turning to walk away. He left the book on the table, just to stymie Bill, knowing it was accessible yet still out of his reach. “I don’t trust you anymore, Bill. You’ll have to try a lot harder than that.”
“You haven’t even seen me begin to try, Sixer!” Bill called out after Ford’s retreat. “There are other ways to find you. You’re just making this difficult.”

Ford waved his hand without looking back at the God, content to ride his rebellious high. Smug oozed off him now that he knew he had the upper hand, the upper hand against a God again. It was nice to feel something other than paranoia for once.

“I’ll find you, Sixer. You’re mine, remember?”

Ford closed his eyes and found himself waking up in his newspaper bed in the alleyway on Meccai, well rested from a solid night’s sleep for the first time in weeks, and he felt like a new man.

He went to sleep humbled by the thought that he’d been abandoned by his God, that he’d outgrown his use. As jarring as the thought was that Bill was determined to find him, there was something about being a wanted man that renewed Ford’s confidence. His defiance made him smug, and he eked some small satisfaction out of the fact that Bill was chasing him now.

Well, Ford thought. Catch me if you can.

When Bill returned from the mindscape, he was just as furiously frantic as he’d been when he dived into it, alerted by the presence of Sixer’s subconscious dreaming. His henchmaniacs were waiting in the hall, watching as Bill floated irritably down the corridor from the mirror room, fuming.

“Did you find him?” Keyhole asked. “Is he okay?”

“Did you find his location?” Kryptos asked, Ford’s co-ordinates more pressing than his wellbeing to the compass.

“He’s shutting me out.” Bill snapped, floating briskly forward, his henchmaniacs falling in step behind him. “As stubborn as ever. We’ll have to find another way.”

“We could put up posters?” Keyhole suggested optimistically.

“Yeah, like a lost dog.” Teeth joked, grinning and elbowing Paci-Fire, finding this whole charade amusing.

“That’s an idea. Get on that. *Lost Sixer.*” Bill spun around and spread his hands in the air, addressing Teeth and Keyhole. “Offering a reward will give me more eyes looking for him on the ground, and hopefully wrap this whole thing up quickly. I want posters spread through every planet in the multiverse, got that?”

Teeth and Keyhole gave a brisk salute, obviously enjoying themselves. “Yes boss!”

“Bringing Sixer back is the new priority for everyone. I want everybody on this.” Bill instructed, and as soon as he issued his instructions, he teleported away, returning to the quiet of the penthouse to scour the universe the way he was taught to, so many years ago.

Kryptos floated off, muttering bitterly under his breath, and the other henchmaniacs drifted to their
own destinations until it was just Keyhole and Teeth left in the hallway.

“Hmm, we don’t have a photo of the human. I could draw a likeness of him for the posters?” Keyhole suggested enthusiastically.

“No offence to your artistic pedigree, but if you draw the picture we’ll never find the guy. His features aren’t a squiggly line. You’re too abstract for this industry.” Teeth teased, shooting down Keyhole’s idea.

“Okay, so maybe we get AM to draw the picture. AM’s artistic. Is there anything else we need for the poster?” Keyhole asked. “We’ve got the reward, the picture.”

“There’s only one thing you need for a poster like this, buddy.” Teeth wrapped his arm around Keyhole’s shoulders, and grinned as he waved his hand in the air, painting a picture. “The tagline.”

The two henchmeniacs ambled out of the hall, wrapped up in the excitement of their activity, the drama and intrigue of it all. It was just like in the movies, putting up posters for the capture of a mark, and with that in mind Teeth finished his sentence with glee.

“Six Fingered Human. Wanted – Dead or Alive!”

Ford was salivating, watching the unusual purple meat spin around on the rotisserie skewers at a food stand in the slums.

He had finished the last of his ration bar, and while he couldn’t make any leeway getting into the heart of the city for food, there were enough marketplaces in the slums that sold meals of dubious origin. Ford couldn’t afford to be fussy about his food right now, protein was protein, meat was meat, and while the meat this retailer was selling was purple, it smelled intoxicatingly good.

However, like anything on Meccai, the rotisserie skewers cost money, something Ford was in short supply of. He had tried begging, sitting with a cardboard sign in front of him for a day, hoping someone would toss a few spare QUID his way. Apart from how absolutely dehumanising that experience was, he couldn’t beg in the richer parts of the city without being escorted off the streets, and here in the slum cities, you didn’t just give away your hard-earned money. You had to keep every scrap of QUID earned to survive. He earned more scorn begging in the slums than he had anywhere else.

And so that left him penniless and hungry, staring intently at the rotisserie skewers in the marketplace, inching closer with every inhale of that delicious cooked meat smell wafting over to him.

It was hard to stay away, and Ford’s stomach was longing for something tangible in his belly, not just artificial fullness.

He was starving.

Stepping a little closer to the food stall, Ford watched the skewers spin, holding his hand up to his mouth to hold himself back, however his hungry eyes must have said it all.
“You just gonna stare all day, or are you gonna buy some?” The gruff looking alien manning the stall barked at Ford, scowling at him. “Come on, I don’t got all day. Either buy something, or take a hike, you’re spooking my other customers.”

Ford failed to see how he could spook anyone in his current state, unless there was still a bit of newspaper stuck to his trench coat. He’d done his best to tidy himself up, hoping that he might have better luck seeking out pay if he didn’t look so scruffy. He’d even done his best to finger-comb his hair, though without a mirror he had no clue if he had done a good job.

“How much are they?” Ford settled on asking about the food, although he itched to ask how exactly he was ‘spooking’ anyone.

“Read the sign.” The merchant tapped the wooden sign taped to the food cart with his serrated spatula. The sign read ‘2 QUID each’ and Ford for a moment of deviousness pretended he couldn’t understand the sign, knowing he didn’t have one QUID to rub together, let alone two.

“How much?” He repeated.

“Two QUID. It’s two freakin’ QUID. What’s so hard to understand?” The merchant griped, muttering under his breath. “Freakin’ FOD can’t read even with a dimensional translator. This is what’s wrong with this damn planet, all the freakin’ FODs.”

Ford had no idea what FOD meant, but he could only assume it was derogatory. His patience with this seller was as thin as he felt, his stomach grumbling loudly, complaining with every second he spent arguing with this man instead of eating his food.

“Do you have anything cheaper maybe?” Ford questioned, trying his luck. His ideal price point was free, but he was hoping he could wear this seller down with some good old-fashioned haggling.

“You know what? If I did, I wouldn’t sell it to you.” The merchant looked Stanford up and down and then hoiked back the phlegm in his throat before spitting on the ground in front of Ford, a deliberate insult. “I can refuse the right to service to anyone on account of this bein’ my business and I draw the line at serving whatever kind of freakish looking FOD you’re supposed to be. I ain’t never seen nothin’ so offensive to the eyes. You’re a stain on this planet’s good reputation, when they let dregs like you in.”

This merchant seemed intent on tearing into Ford, verbally assaulting him with his derogatory opinions. Ford would have straight up walked away at this point, if not for the fact that as this bigoted chef continued to rant, a girl with black eyes, mustard coloured skin, and orange hair, wearing a grey scarf wrapped around her mouth, snuck up behind the food cart and as the merchant’s ire was turned the other way, she plucked six of the skewers of purple meat from the rotisserie rack, stealing them deftly.

“So, no, I ain’t gonna serve a freak like you, and if you keep loitering I’ll call the sanitation crew to come haul you away, because that’s what you do with garbage.”

Ford decided then and there that he certainly didn’t owe this repugnant man the decency of telling him that he was currently being robbed. The orange girl was moving onto the small lockbox of QUID at the back of his stall, taking his cash as well as his produce, but the merchant must have been more observant than he let on, and he followed Ford’s line of sight behind him, glancing at the girl just as she picked his lockbox up in her left hand, holding six skewers of meat between her fingers of her right.
He spun around with a shout. “HEY!”

The orange girl’s dark eyes curved up into a smile, and she waved cheekily at the merchant, before darting away across the square with her stolen haul.

As she left, she threw one of the meaty skewers over to Ford with a canny wink.

Ford fumbled to catch it, and watched her skilfully pick through the crowd, her orange braid flying out behind her.

“You don’t get to steal from me, punk!” The merchant roared, and pulled an imposing looking ray gun out from under his food cart, firing it once in the air.

The people in the marketplace shrieked, diving for cover, their hasty retreat exposing the orange haired girl’s back amidst the crowd.

The merchant primed his ray gun, the machine humming with the intensity of a murderous synthesised mosquito, aiming the weapon at her back.

Ford lunged forward, grabbing the merchant’s arm, trying to offset his shot, but he had already pulled the trigger.

A vibrant burst of light shot from the front of the ray gun, hurtling across the courtyard, a metallic sizzle pervading the air already. The shot hit its mark, and the bright light made contact with the girl, the ray likely strong enough to burn a hole right through her, and through the wall behind her.

However, when the ray impacted, blue flames burst from the girl’s body, and swarmed across her small frame, dissipating the laser.

She turned to face the merchant, still doused in flames, and reached up under her scarf, tugging something aside behind the fabric, a sound like a pair of trousers being unzipped accompanying the movement.

Soon after Ford could hear laughter, the girl laughing maniacally, fire rippling across her body as she flipped what looked like a rather rude hand gesture at the baffled merchant, who was still reeling from the kickback of the gun.

“NISSCHE TRY AHSSCHOLE!” The girl shouted, the flames surrounding her not burning her in the slightest. “I’M UNKILLABLE!”

It looked like the fire was protecting her, diffusing the laser’s beam until the flames dimmed and dissipated around her.

She turned on her heel and continued down the alleyway, with her skewers and loot still in hand, leaving the gawkers in the marketplace utterly shocked.

Ford let go of the merchant and made to follow her down the alleyway, still holding the skewer she gave him, elated as he made his pursuit.

He rounded the corner in the alleyway to find her pulling her scarf down, biting into one of the skewers, no doubt as ravenous as he was.

When Ford approached her, she looked up, and narrowed her eyes at him, swallowing the food in her mouth. “Didn’t you hear me? You’d better back off. I’m unkillable.”
Ford extended his hand to the girl, hoping to make a good first impression.

“And I’m Stanford Pines.”

He had found the biggest, baddest kid in the playground.

It was time to make a new friend.

Chapter End Notes

It's Zippy!!! Hahah, we'll get to learn more about her as the next chapter unfolds. Ford's first friend in the multiverse ends up being one of Bill's people, he sure knows how to pick 'em. I'm already a third of the way through the next chapter so you won't have a long wait for the next one, I'm going to keep churning them out, those good ol' space adventures.

This chapter is dedicated to my lovely beta reader who always does a brilliant job at culling my many commas, and also to angelic, who left some lovely comments on the fic. I think they're still reading it, so when they get to this bit, SURPRISE a chapter dedicated to you. Thank you for the lovely comments.

Next chapter Ford gets into a fistfight with a talking chair, Zippy is super slow on the uptake, and the bounty hunter to end all bounty hunters tries to take our man. Does she succeed? We'll find out. Thank you for reading and I look forward to your comments!
I am the city. The famous hotels and the cocktail bars, and the funny smells and the turmoil of course, and the people, the air that you’re breathing is me. Yes, I am the city, you let me be.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The orange girl squinted at him.

“You’re what?”

Ford’s hand faltered.

“Um, I’m Stanford. Stanford Pines?” He repeated, somewhat more hesitantly.

Her eyes looked between Ford’s face and his hand, before she noticed the translator cuff on his wrist.

She snorted a laugh and shook her head, amused, before she pointed a skewer at Ford’s dimensional translator. “Your unit’sh ancient. I remember the old translators could never get namesh right.”

“Oh.” Ford looked at his translator, somewhat disappointed. Although, this probably explained quite a lot.

“You tried to throw off his schot back there, didn’t you? Not that it made a difference, but shtill. The guy was an asshole.” She inclined her head at Stanford, then nodded to his translator again, looking for something easier to call him. “You got a nickname?”

Ford did have a nickname, but it wasn’t one he was willing to share. He shook his head, his lips pressing into a thin line.

“Do you have a nickname?” He asked her, wanting to know what to call his rescuer.

Her zippered mouth also pressed into a thin line and she shook her head as well. She looked at Ford’s translator one more time. “Sho, it doesn’t translatesh namesh? Does it translatesh accents, or like, schpeech impedimentsh?”

“Unfortunately, yes.” Stanford gave the girl a polite smile and gestured at his translator. “It doesn’t seem to be the most intuitive tech.”

“It’s outdated. That’s why it shucks.” She considered Ford, tilting her head towards the translator, before making up her mind. “Alright KXer. What do you want?”

Ford imagined that was to be his new nickname, referring to his translator. It sounded too eerily similar to Sixer to sit right with him, but he didn’t think he could insist upon a different name while he was still trying to appeal to his new ally.

Attempting to endear himself to her, Ford gave the girl a gracious smile.

“I wanted to thank you, I guess.” Ford gestured to the skewer of meat he still held. “For the food back there.”
She inclined her head, acknowledging his thanks, and took another bite out of her own skewer, still watching Ford curiously.

Ford couldn’t work the gracious angle for long, his curiosity getting the better of him.

“Also – how did you do that? Back there. With the fire.” Ford blurted out. “That was incredible!”

She paused, her cheeks full of food, and narrowed her eyes at Ford warily.

“With the laser! It didn’t even touch you. And then the flames?” Ford gushed enthusiastically. “Did they heal you or just deflect the blow?”

“What? You followed me all the way down here just to ask me why I’m a freak?” She scowled at him. “Get lost KXer. Go find someone else to bother.”

“I don’t think you’re a freak.” Ford insisted sincerely. “I think you’re incredible.”

She gave Ford a disbelieving look, taking another large bite of her skewer and chewing slowly now.

“If you’re a freak, I’m a freak too.” Ford held up his hand and pointed to his fingers. “See?”

“What am I looking at?” She asked him, eyebrows raised, speaking with food in her cheeks, still dubious.

Ford faltered and gestured to his hand. “I – this is unusual where I come from. I’m only supposed to have five fingers.”

She only had five fingers. Ford thought this would make sense, but then again, he supposed he looked just as alien to her as she did to him. She probably knew better than to assume what was the norm.

“I shee.” She nodded, feigning understanding. She pointed to Ford with her skewer again. “And you have sheven more.”


“Oh.” She blinked at him. “Sho, two extra fingersh. Is that all?”

“Well –“ Ford scratched the nape of his neck awkwardly.

“That’s, like, a feature. That’s not freakisch.” She huffed, swinging right back around to offended. “Sho, you thought you’d find yourself another freak, is that it?”

“You’re not a freak. In fact, I’d say you’re quite talented instead. Can everyone do what you can?” Ford questioned curiously. “With the fire?”

She frowned at Ford, and then gestured to her face with the skewer she held. “You aren’t sheeing what’s wrong with this picture?”

Ford looked at her, taking in her features, confused.

She certainly looked alien enough, but so did everyone he’d met on this planet. Her skin was a pale orange, almost a mustard colour, and her almond shaped eyes were black and shiny. She wore her hair in a long braid from the top of her head, but no hair grew on the sides, so she wore her braid like an extended mohawk. She had long pointed ears with metal jewellery piercing them, and her
lips were covered in metal as well, a thick zipper running across them.

Ford had no point of comparison for her species, he presumed that was just her look. He wasn’t in any position to assume.

Stanford shrugged at her, not understanding what she was getting at.

“I don’t look how I’m shupposhed to look. I don’t look normal. I don’t look like the resht of my people.” She explained, agitated, before she sighed bitterly, the air whistling through her zipper. “Though I shuppose you wouldn’t know that, shince there isn’t a point of comparishon anymore.”

Ford’s mouth turned down slightly at the edges. “What do you mean?”

She sized him up, deciding whether or not she felt like spilling her guts to this total stranger. She didn’t need to humour this straggler, but she’d been on her own for a while, and it couldn’t hurt to indulge a sympathetic ear.

He mentioned he was a freak too.

Releasing her suspicion with a sigh, she climbed up to sit on one of the crates piled up in the alleyway, making herself comfortable, and she patted the box beside her, offering Ford a seat.

He clambered up next to her, still holding his untouched skewer, and watched her expectantly.

“I am Taronjan. Everyone knows the Taronjan people, they all look like me, shkin tone, eyes, hair. We have good food on Taronja and it’s all the shame colour, the shame colour as our shoil. Our moon planet was beautiful and bountiful and the best. It just was.” She insisted.

“Was?” Ford queried, frowning.

“We had to leave our moon. We were attacked.” She explained, taking a bite out of her skewer and speaking with her mouth full again.

Ford hesitantly took a bite of his own skewer as he listened and was intrigued by the taste and texture of the purple meat. It was surprisingly satisfying and didn’t taste at all like chicken.

“We lived off world for a while - what was left of us. We shtuck together. Family is important. We lived together, we worked together. We followed family the whole way. From job to job, shanctuary to shanctuary. My family meant that I was never alone.”

She finished her skewer and tossed it away roughly, watching it bounce off the wall opposite her, before starting on another one. While she paused her story, eating her stolen goods, Ford prompted her with a question, interested in her history.

“So, there’s not that many of you around anymore? Only your family? That’s why I wouldn’t recognise you, but everyone else would?” Ford had a long list of other reasons why he might not recognise her, but he didn’t want to reveal his complete interstellar ignorance just yet.

“Everyone else would because when our moon was attacked, every charity channel had a tube schpecial about the poor dishplaced Taronjans. Not that they care.” She swallowed the food in her mouth, and scowled bitterly, before answering. “There’s no one else anymore. There’s jusht me.”

Ford opened and shut his mouth, like a fish, not knowing what to say to that. He felt a wave of sympathy that made his stomach heavy with twinging sadness. Before he could fumble awkwardly through condolences, she continued speaking.
“Our shaviour, our old Mishtress, tricked us. She used us all to do her bidding, shent us on misshion after misshion that we should never have come back from. But we did, we were her bravescht warriors. And when we shurvived her last shuicide misshion, held hostage for a price, she came to collect us, acting merciful and benevolent until she schot them all. My entire family! She schot them all down!” The girl snarled, bearing pointed teeth behind her zippered lips, livid with remembered rage. “My bloodline meant nothing to her. We were just pawns to be used and dishcarded in her manipulative schitty games. I will hate her to my dying day. I will schpite her to my dying day and I hope that day will never come just so I can schpite her longer.”

Ford tried to find a polite way to respond to her ire, but he couldn’t find one, so he just cleared his throat nervously. She looked over to him, noting his awkwardness, getting defensive in response.

“What? You’re regretting aschking me already? Too much for you to hear, is that it?” She sneered at Ford, her shoulders tense, expecting his scorn.

“No, no.” Ford held his hands up, assuring her. “Not at all. I actually … can relate a little to your situation. Being tricked and used by someone you trusted. The frustration and spite and helplessness. There’s … no simple or logical way to deal with all the anger and betrayal and confusion you feel. It just collides uncomfortably and you can’t make sense of it. It doesn’t feel right. It might not ever make sense. You’re not used to being this angry. You don’t know what to do with it.”

The girl’s shoulders relaxed slightly at this, and she considered Ford, genuinely impressed that he could relate at all.

“Huh.” She said, and stared at Ford a moment longer, before passing him another one of her skewers. “Here.”

Ford accepted the skewer gratefully, having been barely holding himself back from eating the last chunk of meat on his first skewer, worried he’d have to ration it. This was twice now she’d offered him food, and Ford knew he’d made the right choice following her.

“Thank you.”

She raised her own skewer to nudge it against Ford’s, like she was toasting him.

“Us freaks gotta shtick together, right?”

For the first time in a long time, Ford didn’t mind being called a freak.

“Right.”

He toasted skewers with his new friend and felt his luck begin to change.

Ford spent the day with the girl, Shailesh was her name. It must have been some sort of cruel irony that her name was nearly impossible for her to say with her lisp. She had to write it down for Ford’s translator to properly transcribe it into something he could understand. She seemed very frustrated with her lisp.
“My family always used to shay I was the chatty one. That I never schut up. They’d probably think this shuits me.” She said, gesturing to the zipper that stretched across her lips.

The zipper was the addition she was referring to that labelled her a freak.

“How did you get it?” Ford asked.

Shailesh merely pulled her grey scarf higher, covering the unsavoury portion of her face, and muttered evasively. “Shtupidity.”

It didn’t take very long for Shailesh to warm to Ford. She chatted with him while they ate their skewers, rewarding Ford with more food the longer he stayed and listened. When he showed no signs of wanting to abandon her, she decided to show him around the city, elated for the company.

Shailesh was used to being surrounded by family. Ford could only assume she was keeping him close to dull the pain of being without them.

As pitiable as that was, Ford was thankful for the opportunity. He also did not want to be abandoned to the streets.

After their stolen meal, Shailesh walked Ford around the slums, showing him the parts of the city that interested her. She showed him certain favoured dumpsters behind restaurants that lay just on the edge of the rich part of the city, where good food was often deposited to be scavenged away into the purlieus. She showed him a few of the rougher bars on the fringes where you wouldn’t get charged an arm and a leg for a stiff drink. She showed him an abandoned artificial park, deemed not fancy enough for the heart of the city, its curling vines and cultured greenery withering and laced with weeds, neglect enhancing its wild beauty.

It was incredibly intriguing to Ford, unlike anything he’d ever seen. He felt the stirrings of a botanist well up inside him, something that hadn’t ignited his fancy as an elective in university. He was certain these alien plants would be the sort of thing to give impassioned botanists wet dreams.

Together, Ford and Shailesh sat on top of the rusted metal play equipment that littered the park, the jungle gym having fallen into decline just as the park had, observing the nature around them.

There were plants with grey leaves and green blossoms, flowers that bloomed slime, delicate roses that seemed to be evaporated of substance, yet still held in place gently, like sculpted colourful gas. The trees had white, sickly looking branches with black leaves moving of their own accord like coral in the sea, and creatures that looked like seaweed moved between the branches, like floating eels, although Shailesh assured him the eels were definitely plant life and not some sort of sentient animal.

“You really are fresch off the docksh, aren’t you?” Shailesh observed teasingly. “They don’t have gardensh on your home planet?”

“There are gardens.” Ford replied, reaching out to try and touch the floating plant-eels as they weaved around him. “They don’t look a thing like this though. It’s amazing.”

“My nonelle would tell me about the gardensh on Taronja. The trees had leaves of gold, and everything grew red, ripe and bountiful. You could pull orbs from the trees and be shustained for weeks, they were sho filling.” Shailesh swiped a fingertip along the plant-eel and rubbed the goo between her thumb and forefinger. “I never got to try one. I was born off world, after the moon raids. I’ve only heard the schtories.”

“Can you eat these?” Ford gestured to the plant-eels, curious if he could survive on these peculiar
things. He had already memorised the route to the park, just in case he ever found himself so
destitute in future that he couldn’t find food elsewhere. In case he fell out of favour with his new
friend, something he was paranoid might become true. History repeating itself and all.

“Why would you want to?” Shailesh scoffed, wiping her fingers on her trousers, wrinkling her
nose. “The only reason this park still has plants in it is because no one could stomach them. If
there was a shingle edible thing here, do you think it’d still be standing considering how many
people are starving on this planet? If you could eat this stuff it’d either be bought, sold, or
stolen by now.”

Ford considered that, seeing the sense in her logic. From what he knew of Meccai, it was unlikely a
resource like this would go unclaimed when there was profit to make from it. The plant-eels
wound their way around the branches of the coral trees and Ford sat in amiable silence with his
new companion.

“Where do you come from?” Shailesh asked Ford curiously. “What planet?”

“Oh, um.” Ford twiddled his thumbs together, weighing up whether being truthful to his new
friend would bring him scorn.

Bill had assured Stanford that the universe didn’t think too highly of humans, and Ford didn’t want
to jeopardize his newest friendship, but he had no guarantee that Bill had been truthful with his
warnings about the multi-verse. In fact, Ford was so disinclined to believe that Bill could have ever
been truthful that he decided to be honest about his origins, just to test the waters.

“I come from Earth.” He said boldly.

“What Earth?” Shailesh reached over and poked at the dimensional translator on Ford’s wrist.
“This thing must be broken. It’s supposed to tell me what Earth you’re referring to, Earth 86,
Primary Earth, Preliminary Earth. The only people who call it just ‘Earth’ aren’t evolved enough to
know better.”

Dammit, Bill was telling the truth. Ford wanted to believe he hadn’t been. It made it that much
harder to justify staying mad at him when he could believe everything Bill had told him had been a
lie.

The scientist looked around awkwardly, still fidgeting with his thumbs. Shailesh seemed to pick up
on his awkwardness, and she gawped at him.

“You aren’t a human, are you?”

Ford looked sheepish enough already, rueful that he hadn’t caught Bill out in a lie this time, and
when she guessed his species colour sprung to his cheeks, already embarrassed, frustrated with
himself, though he knew he shouldn’t be.

Shailesh let out a high-pitched bark of laughter, grinning at him with amusement. “No way. This is
like watching a shea slug grow legs and walk out of the water. Are you kidding me? You’re not a
human.”

“Yes, I am.” Ford admitted, raising his shoulders a little taller, defensively feigning pride in the
face of her laughter.

“No freakin’ way you are!” Shailesh cackled, before she jokingly smacked Stanford in the back.
“Humans are barely bipedal morons, you’re not a human. You can’t be. Humans are shit stupid.”
“What makes you think we’re all so stupid?” Ford asked defensively, his shoulders bunching now. “Specifically, what?”

Bill had insisted it was the golden record on the Voyager probe. He didn’t think the music on the Voyager was *that* bad and he didn’t appreciate the rest of the multi-verse typecasting humans as idiots based on the music Ford’s hero, Carl Sagan, picked for the shuttle. Ford thought the diverse arrangement was moving and well chosen, everything from Mozart, Louis Armstrong, and Bach was on that disc as well as music from all around the world. To think that such a bad reputation had sprung from such discerning taste. Ford desperately wanted to believe it was just another one of Bill’s lies.

“Everyone knows humans are shtupid. Unevolved, right?” Shailesh divulged casually, nudging him with her elbow. “Sho, what, you’re not like the other humans?”

“Well, my IQ is above the –” Ford started, his ego speaking first, before he realised that his own IQ wasn’t relevant here.

He thought of his friends and family back on Earth, his nearest and dearest, all humans, most of them with no idea that he was even gone. The only person who knew he was lost in the portal was his brother, Stanley, and Ford was mostly certain that even after seeing Ford fall through it, Stanley would still have no idea where Ford was. While his brother and the people of Gravity Falls hadn’t exactly been the paragon of human intellectualism, Ford still didn’t feel right about badmouthing his genus because of him. That was no way to save face.

“Look, while I agree that we’re not all geniuses, that doesn’t give the galaxy the right to write us all off. I highly doubt every other interstellar species is intelligent all the time, I mean, that merchant in the market seemed bigoted enough to indicate a lack of intelligence. I’m not speaking for all of us of course, but we’re not unevolved. Humans, they’re not all bad.”

“Ah, but you’re not like the other humans, right? Because of your –” Shailesh wiggled her fingers at his hands, referring to his polydactylism. “Sho, is that why you can communicate with me, because you’ve evolved an extra brain in your fingertip?”

Ford gave Shailesh’s teasing a flat look and pointed to the dimensional translator on his wrist.

Shailesh barked another elated laugh, before she grinned at him. “You’re not sho bad KXer. You’re funny.”

“Well, I’m glad someone thinks so.” Ford muttered sarcastically, rolling his eyes.

He tried not to dwell on the way the déjà vu of this conversation cultured tightness in his throat. The familiarity of it all reminded Ford of what he was trying to ignore, but he was reminded of it wherever he went.

Ford knew the deity was searching for him, but that didn’t mean Ford had to find Bill in everyone he met.

“It’s getting late – not that you can tell here – the lights are always on.” Shailesh remarked, changing the subject, lifting herself off the top of the jungle gym and swinging down to land on the mossy ground below. “Sho, where have you been shtaying, KXer?”

Ford thought back to his alleyway of preference and felt ashamed and angry once more. He’d gone from owning his own house in the woods, a lovingly crafted ode to solitude and the God who spared him from it, to going one step up from living in a ditch, sleeping in a filthy alleyway, all
because of Bill’s treachery. It burned him to admit that he’d fallen so low, and he didn’t want to look bad in front of his new companion.

“Oh, nowhere in particular.” Ford lied, playing it casual.

“Sho nowhere, huh?” Shailesh looked over Ford knowingly, her inky black eyes reflecting consideration back at him. “Hmm.”

She swung back on her heels idly, swinging her arms as Ford climbed down from the jungle gym, his clumsy climb less smooth than her swift descent. As he landed on the mossy ground, Shailesh continued talking, her tone light and conversational, the pity in her eyes not showing in her voice.

“I’ve shtayed there once too. Come on, I’ll schow you shomeplace better.”

And with that, she turned on her heel and led him away.

The place Shailesh took Ford to was like a mansion compared to his musty little alleyway. They entered the building through an air vent above a dumpster and crawled along the vent until they breached through to the other side. When they arrived, Ford was blown away.

Due to their unconventional entry point, Ford didn’t have high expectations about their destination, but anything would be better than that alleyway. He just didn’t know how much better.

Shailesh kicked the metal vent cover off and jumped out into what looked like a futuristic luxury furnished apartment. Stanford couldn’t believe his luck. He climbed out of the vent and took in the creature comforts with an awe that felt out of place, considering he’d had those same creature comforts for himself about a month ago. Only with space age technology.

There was a dusty looking couch, a kitchen, bedrooms, en-suite bathrooms, and several mounts with exposed wires twining out from them where televisions must have sat. That much was recognisable. It wasn’t a spacious apartment, but it was certainly grand enough on the inside. Stanford was impressed.

“Shorry I schrapped the channel cubes.” Shailesh said, plopping herself down on the couch casually, resting her feet on the cushions, muddy boots leaving stains on the upholstery. “We could have had shomething to watch. Do you like game schows?”

“I like trivia shows.” Ford replied, still looking around the apartment.

He wondered what alien television would be like, compared to the TV channels you got on Earth. Bill always seemed delighted by Ford’s TV, even when he was watching static. Ford wondered if that was indicative of the quality of television in space, or the quality of television on Earth.

“Trivia schows are alright. Sho long as it’s not Wheel of Torture. We’re not watching anything here, though. Too bad for you, I guess.” Shailesh shrugged and began picking leftover food from the teeth of her zipper. “I could take you to a bar with a channel cube, but all they watch is the shports ball.”
That didn’t sound so different then, barring the torture.

Ford nodded, barely listening, running his hand over the smooth metal surface of the countertop in the kitchen. When his hand touched the metal, blue holograms lit up on the countertop, displaying recipes and ordering lists for various groceries in the air above the tabletop. Ford was fascinated and scrolled through the food lists curiously, taking in the names of different meals, trying to memorise them.

Shailesh rested her head against the couch cushions and craned her neck to see what Stanford was doing.

“This place is amazing.” Ford muttered, watching the holograms change into step by step cooking instructions, playing out visually on the other side of the countertop, enthralled.

“It looks like you don’t need the channel cubes.” Shailesh huffed a laugh, watching Ford ogle at the holograms. “That’s not the cooking channel, you know, that’s just how the kitchen works.”

“Still, I’ve never seen anything like this before.” Ford marvelled. “It’s brilliant.”

“It’s alright.” Shailesh shrugged. “They made all these sherviced apartments close to the city, but no one lives in them. They were bought by investors to keep property prices high. You’ve seen how many people get schrunched together in a schithole in the shlums. There are whole buildings here schitting empty and no one’s living in them.” Shailesh smirked and smeared the mud on her boots deeper into the couch’s upholstery, deliberately making a mess. “Might as well be me.”

Ford looked back at her, and wrinkled his nose seeing the mud spread onto that perfect white sofa, his latent instinct for tidiness rearing its head once more.

Shailesh noticed the way Ford frowned at the mud on the couch and turned around to look at him properly. “Don’t make that face at me KXer. Who cares if this place gets wrecked? If I don’t like it, I just climb one floor up, and there’s another empty place just like this. All mine for the taking.”

“But what happens if the owners find out what you’ve been doing here?” Ford asked, gesturing to the mud on the couch and the holes where the channel cubes had been ripped from the walls.

“What’s the worsht they could do to me?” Shailesh scoffed. “Kill me? Ha. I’d like to shee them try.”

“So, you just live like this?” Ford questioned, trying to understand Shailesh, but finding her actions a stark contrast from the codes of social propriety he’d been raised with back on Earth. “Taking whatever you want, breaking into places and stealing just because you can get away with it?”

Was this just how things were in space? Could people just do things like this with no consequence? *Is that why Bill was the way he was?* was Stanford’s pervading thought that he was attempting to quash down.

“Yep.” Shailesh crossed her arms behind her head and cosied back into the couch, satisfied and relaxed. “And life has never been cushier.”

“But why?” Ford let go of the kitchen counter, the holograms fading out, and walked into the living room to sit on the couch beside her. “Why do you get to do this, but all those people out there don’t?”

“Don’t get all preachy on me KXer. I desherve this luxury.” Shailesh insisted, her lip curling with each angry justification. “I desherve everything I can get my hands on out here. The universe took
“EVERYTHING from me. It owesch me. I am owed this. And if you don’t like it -”

“I never said that.” Ford held up his hands, backtracking. “I’m just trying to understand. Why?”

“Why not?” Shailesh huffed, and ducked her chin into her scarf, curling in on herself. “These rich people get to have it. Sho do I. It’s not like anyone can shtop me. It’s not like I can die, sho why not live my life how I want?”

She looked over to Stanford, gauging his reaction to this, and when he seemed more pensive than disapproving, she perked up a little, glee creeping into her voice as she continued to talk.

“I like to imagine the look on the landlord’sh face when he sees me living it up in his fancy apartments. Too good for a freak like me, but guess who’s been shtaying here all along?” Shailesh cackled. “Breaking the rules. I don’t have to follow anyone’s rules anymore. I make my own rules.”

“I used to think of space as a lawless place.” Ford commented, thoughtful. “But that’s really just not true, is it?”

“There are SHO MANY rules.” Shailesh gripped her pointed ears as she complained. “God, all the time. There are sho many made by sho many different people who don’t follow them themselves. I used to follow every rule shet to me, to the letter. I was obedient, I was dutiful. I was loyal, but who’s to shay who desherves your loyalty. Everyone’s just out for themshelves, sho why shouldn’t I be?”

“Fair point.” Ford nodded, mulling that over.

On Earth, while he may have bent the rules a little for certain people, mainly for Stanley or Bill, for the most part Ford was very much a black and white thinker. He was a law-abiding citizen. He followed the rules. You either did the right thing, or the wrong thing, though now he was coming to think on it, out here in space it was rather hard to tell what the right thing was. It seemed to differ person to person, a sliding scale of morality.

The only reason he wasn’t starving right now was because Shailesh stole him food, and every attempt he made to secure gainful employment without stealing was rebuffed by the employers on this planet, who seemed to decide that Ford would have to earn money for a visa, but he couldn’t earn money without a visa.

Ford had been polite and respectful, conceding to the rules of this place knowing he was ignorant, wanting to learn the law of the land, but all that had gained Ford was a pile of newspapers for bedding in the back of a dingy alleyway.

He didn’t want to, but he was starting to see why Bill was such a chaotic madman, and why Shailesh no longer seemed to care what she did, as long as she was looking out for her own interests.

The universe really was a cruel and hypocritical sphere of being, and while Ford was trying hard to not think on it, one phrase lingered in his head, as fresh as it was when it first was spoken.

You think you can do this on your own? Don’t you understand? The universe doesn’t care about you, Sixer!

Shailesh looked over at Stanford, noting his thoughtful expression. She removed the earrings from her long, pointed ears and gathered them all in her pocket, before she sat up and slapped her hand on her leg, pushing up off the couch. “Well. I’m dimming the lights now. Do you want me to shtay
with you on the couch, or give you some shpace?”

Ford looked up at her, surprised that she would offer to stay with him. He wasn’t quite comfortable with sharing a bed (or a couch) with someone he’d just met, but the offer seemed to be more for her comfort than his. She was watching him hopefully, no doubt missing having people around her. She must have slept with her family close by, but Ford didn’t want to sleep around a stranger.

He still wasn’t quite comfortable with sleep yet, he didn’t know what he would do once he closed his eyes.

“I might stay out here.” Ford hastened to clarify. “By myself.”

Her hopeful expression fell somewhat, but she nodded.

“Shure. You can shtay on the couch if you want. There’s a massage bed in the other room with my name on it.”

Ford nodded and hummed absently in agreement.

“You can have a turn tomorrow?” Shailesh offered, watching Ford curiously, noting how insular he seemed now.

“Mmmhm.” Ford said without looking up, leaning forward to rest his elbows on his knees, lacing his fingers together, lost in thought.

“Tchh. Yeah, you must be tired. Get some shleep KXer. We’ll go out tomorrow.” With that she smiled at him, zipped her lips shut and walked out of the living room into one of the bedrooms, closing the door slightly behind her, leaving Stanford with his thoughts.

Now that he was less fixated on his own survival, his stomach no longer drowning out the rest of his thoughts with hunger, and now that his life wasn’t in immediate danger, Ford found himself oddly introspective.

You would imagine the time for introspection would be while sitting in the gutter, with nothing to do but beg for sustenance, but Ford found himself too absorbed with people watching, trying to suss out this new society. Now that he didn’t have the hustle and bustle around him 24/7, now that he had a moment alone of true privacy, it was like all of the conflicted thoughts and emotions, Ford had been shunting to the side flooded in to fill the gap his basic instincts left.

He wasn’t hungry anymore, but he was still hungry for answers. He wasn’t so utterly fearful for his life, but he was angry and frustrated, mourning the life he had lost so abruptly without passing through the allotted stages of grief. He was upset, and wistful, but mostly just frustrated now, confused and angry with no idea where to channel that anger.

He didn’t know how to deal with anger. He didn’t want to be an angry person, he didn’t think that was him. Anger boiled inside him, hurting him the more he held it in, but he didn’t want to let that anger out. Letting his anger out would make him a person he didn’t want to be. He didn’t want to be a spectator to the rage and frustration that would volcano out of him should he give it a chance to, and he didn’t have an outlet for it that could be deemed as healthy.

He wouldn’t turn it on Shailesh, he had no reason to, she was helping him. He couldn’t turn it on the city that had scorned him, he knew that would not end well for him, being a stranger in a place he barely understood. He’d likely get arrested for his outburst, given his luck. He didn’t want to lash out or he’d end up just like Shailesh, feeling justified in her theft and carelessness.
Every time he thought on the logical recipient of his ire, Bill, his justifications for hating Bill found logical obstacles, which the irrational part of his anger couldn’t stand.

**Bill was lying to you all along** became a false justification, as every time Ford attempted to question his knowledge of the multiverse, knowing that knowledge had come from Bill, he found himself confronted by the truth of Bill’s words once again. Knowing that Bill had lied to him all along was something that maintained his rage and bitterness, fuelling his tirade against the triangle, but knowing that he hadn’t lied every single time, that there were truths amongst the lies, that Ford still had to sift through, sowed so much doubt in Ford’s mindset, that he began to hate himself for it. He was better off believing Bill lied the entire time, as discovering the truths amidst the lies led Ford to question everything that had happened between them all over again.

**Bill manipulated you to hurt you** became another contested justification, as the things that Stanford had characterised as manipulative, Bill trying to find Stanford, telling him he wouldn’t make it on his own, having him believe the universe would eat him alive without Bill’s guidance, had enough truth within them that Ford was starting to believe that Bill potentially said those things because he cared for Stanford, because he was worried for him and his fate should he explore the multiverse alone. Even with his larger lie, the betrayal, using him to create the portal, that was a manipulation that stretched several years, but Bill had never told Stanford why he was doing what he was doing. He never mentioned his ailing dimension, or what his true intent was for the portal, but perhaps Bill had meant that as a kindness, shielding Stanford from the reality of the situation through those lies of omission.

Bill was wildly manipulative, there was no doubt about that, but when Bill would tell Stanford that he was always right, that used to be an endearment, not a red flag for mental conditioning. When he would tell Stanford that he was special that was begrudging sincerity, a true sentiment, not a deliberate false flattery. When Bill cupped his face in his hands and told Stanford “You are the best choice I’ve made in a long time” Ford wanted to believe it was true. Why else would he have said it? Bill said so many things that Ford wanted to believe could be true, but how could he know what was truthful anymore?

Ford was better off insisting that it was all lies, but then he’d be lying to himself. It was impossible to remain objective with so much betrayal and embitterment swirling within him, and his soul longed for a simple answer. Something that would stop Stanford from longing to close his eyes. Stanford didn’t want to confront the reality that he still cared for Bill, and it was difficult to avoid that reality when confronted with the likelihood that Bill probably still cared for him too.

This made Stanford angrier, if anything, because he didn’t want to believe that Bill still cared for him. That he was capable of care, given what he did. It angered him, every scrap of evidence that led to that conclusion, because it was easier for Stanford to blame Bill for his current situation if he believed that Bill was always lying, manipulative, and didn’t care about Stanford at all. It was easier to justify himself if he believed Bill knowingly wanted him to suffer, instead of imagining the triangle trapped in his oscillating nightmare realm, waiting for a sign that Stanford was safe.

The anger just built, bubbling like lava, the pressure building, and he didn’t want to know what would happen when the pressure burst through.

He hated the thought that Bill still cared for him, because it revealed how much Stanford wanted that, and how much he knew he shouldn’t.

Leaning back against the couch cushions, exhaling his frustration loudly, he closed his eyes and crossed his arms, his irritated thoughts buzzing at the back of his head. He was too agitated to
notice how comfortable the lounge was, how stark the contrast between sleeping on the ground was now that he was sinking into plush cushions, but his body could tell the difference. Already it was relaxing back onto the couch, easing down into a comfort that was to be cherished, not ignored by a wilful mind.

Ford barely noticed when he tipped over into unconsciousness, his brows furrowed, his breathing evening out as his mind continued to churn with irritable mental muttering.

Lucid dreaming was becoming second nature to Stanford now. He had trained his mind to direct him to his mental library as a default to spare him from unpleasant nightmares, and so when he realised he had arrived in his mindscape he seamlessly continued to pace back and forth across the floor, his movements mirroring the way his thoughts cycled around repeatedly.

He wanted to be thinking clearly, logically. He knew anger made him irrational, and as a scientist, irrational was the last thing he wanted to be, but there was something about being tricked all the way into an interdimensional portal that led to a little irrational anger.

Ford felt like Shailesh here. He felt he could understand her desire to live forever, just to remain spiteful until the very end, to hold onto her anger as an act of revenge. His subconscious understood the venom with which she spat her curses, and while he never considered himself a particularly spiteful person, he’d never had any issues with holding a grudge.

He had successfully held a grudge against Stanley for all those years, when his brother robbed him of the opportunity to go to his dream university, and Bill had robbed him of more than that. The opportunity to access and create advanced technology, ahead of its time. The opportunity to explore the unknown, to persevere through the stars to greatness, to make a name for himself, to be renowned for his genius.

All this was robbed from him by Bill’s betrayal and Stanford wanted to hold onto the spite that engendered, to ignore the nagging voice of logic telling him that those things hadn’t necessarily been robbed from him. That he was here on a different planet right now, proved that those opportunities were still very much available, it was just here on Meccai that they seemed so far out of his reach.

He had barely been able to secure food for himself on his own, but with someone helping him he now, he had food, lodging, and opportunities to explore the city without being evicted from public spaces.

Maybe that was the issue, that he was on his own. Bill seemed to insist that Stanford wouldn’t survive on his own and as manipulative as Stanford realised that was, there was a part of him that believed it.

He always had people helping him, Stanley beating off his bullies for him, Bill and Fiddleford helping him with the portal, Shailesh helping him survive the streets. Even the miners who helped him through the wormhole.

Perhaps it was the solitude that had Stanford so cut off from opportunity. If he hadn’t met Shailesh, he might not have been able to reach out to anyone for help, the only person he would
have been able to turn to would be the God who was currently looking for him. Perhaps that was Bill’s intent all along, to isolate Ford until he became so co-dependant that he’d return to Bill of his own free will.

The more Stanford dwelled on his situation the more his anger, spite and frustration melded with self-loathing and criticism. He felt his thoughts circling round and round, blaming Bill then empathising with Bill, then blaming himself, those three sentiments chasing each other, mirroring his pacing through the mindscape.

He wanted a clean conclusion he could reach that would make the decision for him, restore his world to the black and white logic that kept it so orderly, but everything was murky now, colours running together, and his world was beginning to resemble Bill’s nightmare realm, arguments melting into a kaleidoscopic oil slick of colour in his thoughts.

Ford wanted someone to blame.

He stopped pacing as he noticed movement in his mindscape in his peripheral vision. There was someone in between the stacks. Ford crept around the bookshelves until he could see the creature haunting his head.

Bill floated in front of a row of books, swiping his hand across the journals with a vacant expression. Each time he swiped his hand across the books it went right through them, the journals fuzzing with static, unable to be grasped.

Bill repeated the motion over and over, his eye gazing flatly at the books like he’d seen this happen a hundred times over. Perhaps he had.

“What are you doing here?” Ford’s voice rang out across the silent library.

Bill barely turned, not looking at Stanford, still swiping his hand across the books. “Are you going to tell me where you are yet?”

“What, have you just been waiting in here? Trying to break into my memories?” Ford strode down the aisle, his unchecked anger looking to pick a fight.

“I wouldn’t have to if you’d tell me where you are.” Bill rolled his eye, like he was exasperated with Stanford’s defiance. “So why don’t you save me the effort, huh?”

“I’m not saving you anything. I’m not going to help you break into my memories. I don’t even want you in my head at all!” Ford yelled at Bill, throwing his hand back to gesture to the library.

“Uhuh.” Bill said, his voice dripping with disbelief as he swept his hand through the memory books once again.

“I mean it! I want you to leave. Get out! Leave me alone!” Ford continued to shout at Bill, working himself up. He was right to be angry with Bill, he was right to.

“You’re not being very hospitable.” Bill remarked and Ford angrily bunched his hands into fists.

“I don’t have to be hospitable to you! You ruined my life! Get out of my head, Bill. Get out!”

Bill continued to look forward at the bookshelf, although Ford could see Bill’s eye narrow like he was squinting incredulously at Ford’s words. Rather than giving Stanford a reaction, he just continued to swipe at the shelf once more.
Ford’s anger burned bright at that and his mind manifested its mental defences sharply, the laser gun materialising in his hand once more.

Bill moved to swipe his hand through the books again, but before he could make contact a bright laser burst shot Bill’s hand clean off.

“Stop trying to break into my mind!” Ford shouted, holding the gun out in front of him.

Bill’s shadowy hand reformed wispily from the air, but he wasn’t ignoring Stanford now. He had turned to glare at him as his hand restored itself, the insult written plainly on his face.

“There is no breaking in. I’m already here. This is my mind now too, Sixer, or don’t you remember giving it to me from now until the end of time? I remember. It was a very pleasant moment.”

“Well, I take it all back.” Ford swiped his hand through the air definitively. “You can’t have it.”

“You don’t take back a gift, Sixer.” Bill narrowed his eye dangerously. “And you don’t go back on a deal. We shook on it.”

“I don’t care. A handshake means nothing. You lied to me. Everything you said was a lie.” Ford said, holding onto his now flawed justification.

“Is that so?” Bill said, his tone tinging sinister. His sides began to grow, as he floated over Stanford, taking up a little more space in his mind.

“Everything.” Ford maintained, the lie souring his thoughts.

“And you’d know all about that, wouldn’t you? It’s not like you’d ever tell a lie, or hide something, or go behind someone’s back?” Bill accused, his words seething with venom.

Stanford didn’t want to hear it, he didn’t want the reminder of his culpability, and so he shot Bill again, the laser punching a hole through Bill’s bricks. The hole slowly started to fill in with that same wispy quality, so Stanford shot him again, looking to assuage his anger, but Bill just kept talking.

“It’s not like you’d ever build someone up, make them content and comfortable, then just tear it all down. It’s not like you’d trick someone, use them to suit your idealistic purpose, mould them into your dream companion and pretend that wasn’t what you were doing the entire time.”

Ford shot Bill again, unloading shot after shot into the demon’s body as Bill continued to float closer to him, hurling accusations that hit too close to home.

“Get OUT!”

“It’s not like you would stand there, and lie to me over and over, just to save face. It’s not like you’re thinking one thing and doing the other as easy as breathing. It’s not like you’re a complete and utter hypocrite, making rules for others that don’t apply to yourself, still thinking you’re better than the rest of the world.”

Ford emptied the gun of all its charge, turning Bill’s bricks into swiss cheese, but the holes kept closing up, the air a hazy cloud of dispersed particles around his muse as Bill’s form kept reforming after each dogged shot fired.

“It’s not like you would betray someone, oh no. Not you.” Bill was towering over Ford now, floating right above him and the scientist felt fear, not of Bill, but the fear of facing the truth of the
lies he told himself. This veil of deceit was woven so carefully for Ford, but effortlessly Bill seemed to be able to see right through it.

“I don’t tell lies.” Bill said mockingly, his voice booming as he filled Ford’s field of vision like an avenging angel of his own scorned logic. “I’M STANFORD PINES.”

Ford shouted out, and closed his eyes, and when he opened them, he was laying on the couch in Shailesh’s stolen furnished apartment.

He panted, trying to catch his breath, and run his hands through his hair, before exhaling with frustration.

He wasn’t even free to lie to himself in his own head. His dutiful muse saw to that. Flinging things Stanford didn’t want to hear at him. Ford had thought shooting Bill would be more satisfying, but his anger just left him hollow.

He wanted a better way to deal with his. He needed a better outlet.

Sitting up, Ford looked over the back of the couch to the bedroom door, which Shailesh had left ajar. He could hear noises, muffled sobs coming quietly from the other room and he realised why Shailesh had zipped her lips shut before sleeping.

She was crying in her sleep. Stifled sad keening noises. She missed her family.

Ford missed his family too and the Earth he left behind, but he was having trouble mourning his loss when a different shape hovered at the forefront of his mind, something he missed more, despite not wanting to.

Ford turned around on his side on the lounge and looked at the muddy patches on the smooth white upholstery, his eyes finding patterns in the stains. He tried to get comfortable, attempting to sink back onto the couch as he had before, ignoring Shailesh’s muffled sobs.

There was nothing he could do for her. The only thing he could do would be to go back to sleep.

But he wouldn’t go back to sleep. He couldn’t after that.

There was something about facing your demons that led to sleepless nights.

And if Ford were being honest with himself, he probably wouldn’t be in this situation.

Shailesh strode into the living room, bright and early, like she hadn’t been crying mournfully throughout the night while she slept.

“Hi KXer! Guessh what?” She declared cheerfully after unzipping her lips. “I’ve got a plan.”

“A plan for what?” Stanford blinked at her, looking far less rested than he would have liked. On the plus side, he now knew every recipe on the extensive grocery list on the counter, and every food name, as well as the basic functioning of the hologram projector. He figured since Shailesh had already torn the televisions from the walls, he could do a little tinkering of his own, and now
had his own hologram projector sitting snug in his trenchcoat pocket.

“A good plan.” Shailesh put her earrings in as she walked into the kitchen. “A fun plan.”

She turned on the tap at the kitchen sink, simply waving her hand under the spout and a purple liquid began pouring out, which she then began to rinse her mouth out with, spitting purple into the sink. “If you watch my back. we could make tonnes of money. Eashy money. Then we could go somewhere fancy in the inner city to eat.”

“What’s the plan?” Ford asked again, turning around where he was sitting so he could face her.

“You’ll sheeeeee.” Shailesh grinned, wagging her finger at Ford as she made her way over to the open air vent. “Come on.”

Dutifully Ford followed, climbing into the air vent behind her and out into the city below.

Shailesh’s plan, as it turned out, was not so much of a plan as a dedication to get absolutely intoxicated.

Bouncing from dive bar to dive bar, Shailesh would drink her way through the money in the lock box she stole from the merchant in the square, and when the money ran dry, she would attempt to steal or hustle her way back to financial security, only to move onto the next unsuspecting establishment.

At first, Ford was dubious enough of this plan of hers, erring on the side of caution, still not wanting to offend the locals, much less steal from them.

Like she had with the food, Shailesh became more generous with buying drinks for Ford the more hesitant he was about this type of law-flouting carousing. His attempts to nurse one drink became difficult in the face of her constant enthusiasm and misplaced generosity.

Though Ford had attempted to pace himself at first, wanting to savour the flavours of this bizarre space brew (it had a strong citrus taste, similar to if limoncello was mixed with diesel petrol – Ford assumed it was an acquired taste) the more Shailesh engaged him in conversation, the less he wanted to talk about his own situation, and so he took more deflecting sips from his drink than he should have.

“This is way better than when I did this by myself.” Shailesh slurred, her lisp worsening as she drank. “Drinking shucks when you have no one to talk to, otherwise what’s the point? You can’t drink without schtories. I bet you’ve got schtories.”

“Not any good ones.” Ford lied, disinclined to open discourse about his numerous failings.

“Nooo. Don’t shay that. Tell me about Earth.” She beseeched, her cheeks flushing a darker orange as the alcohol hit her system. “I want human schtories. Tell me about your human buddiesh.”

“I can’t say that I have too many buddies.” Stanford swirled his drink around, staring into the colourful liquid.
He certainly hadn’t left Earth with too many buddies, that was for sure. Fiddleford turned his back on him, quitting the project in a rage, Ford had barreled through a typical argument with Stanley right before their fistfight that led him here, and thanks to Bill’s possessive sentiments Ford had no doubt how utterly he’d alienated Willow and Dan. He didn’t know what had happened with Suzie, but he wasn’t sure they could even be counted as friends, considering how little she knew about him. She seemed to think she knew him, but every time Ford interacted with her it was clear she didn’t know a thing.

His closest friendship, not counting childhood bonds that had been thoroughly ruined by the indignities of growing up, was his most recent friendship, his special friendship with Bill. If one could even call it that.

It would have to be a special friendship indeed to outlast the turbulence they’d both put each other through.

The thought that his only remaining friend was Bill brought a bitter taste to Ford’s mouth, and so he washed it down with a harsher flavour, swallowing more of the peculiar yellow moonshine Shailesh had bought him.

“How can you not have buddies?” Shailesh boggled, clapping Ford on the back companionably. He spluttered on his drink, the force of her slap jarring the liquid from his mouth. Shailesh barked another laugh, regarding him with delight. “You’re hilarious!”

“Ha ha.” Ford said dryly, wiping his mouth.

“My big brother was my buddy. He led us on missions and looked after us all, but he especially liked me. He always listened to my stories. He laughed too.” Shailesh sighed and spun her empty glass around on the tabletop for a melancholy moment. “Do you have brothers on Earth?”


“A twin? What’s he like? Is he like you?” Shailesh leaned her elbow on the table and cushioned her cheek on her palm clumsily, looking up at Ford expecting a story.

Ford struggled with how much he should divulge here. He wasn’t exactly pleased with Stanley right now and their estrangement spanned a good ten years prior to when Ford last saw him. He didn’t think he could tell the sort of fond story Shailesh was expecting, but he figured he had to have something to tell her, lest she tire of his company and drunkenly wander off to find a new companion.

“Not exactly. Barring looks, we’re entirely different, and –” Stanford sighed, frustration tinging his tone before he continued. “Stanley is… difficult at times. He likes to believe he knows what he’s doing without having done any of the legwork for it. He’s impulsive and headstrong. He likes to cheat and swindle his way through everything he encounters, and despite that, somehow, he still remains an optimist about the world. It’s rather childish, really.”

“It sounds like he trusts you then.” Shailesh observed simply.

“No. It’s just –” Ford looked down into his glass of moonshine. “When he acts childish, that means I have to be the adult in the situation. He shirks responsibility and then I have to pick up the pieces. I don’t think he could pick up the pieces if he tried. He just makes a mess out of everything and expects me to tidy up after him and his messes.”

“It sounds like he trusts you then.” Shailesh observed simply.
“That’s funny, because it sounds to me like he uses me to mop up after his problems.” Ford huffed, shaking his head, debating taking another sip of the sour moonshine. He paused, and considered what Shailesh said, before he took a long gulp of the toxic brew.

“Is he the youngescht?” Shailesh asked. “I’m the youngescht, sho I get to act childish. Or I did, anyway.”

“I don’t think being younger by two minutes grants that much leeway.” Ford murmured as the citrusy drink burned down his gullet. He cleared his throat, puffing out a breath, before he fanned himself with his hand. “God, that’s strong.”

“Hah, you think that’s shtrong. That’s just the cheap shtuff.” Shailesh snickered at Ford’s flushed face, before she looked around the bar. “You’re like a little baby. Watch this.”

Shailesh heaved her torso up onto the bar and leaned over the counter while the bartender’s back was turned, her legs lifting up in the air as she tilted behind the bar, snatching up a bottle of purple liquid in an expensive looking decanter before she teetered back into her seat and poured herself a glass. She slid the decanter in her coat pocket, just seconds before the bartender turned around.

She nudged her glass across the counter, offering it to Ford. “Try it.”

Ford looked dubiously into the glass, noting the shimmering lights blinking and shifting within the purple liquid. It looked like there were stars inside his glass, twinkling and moving within a cloud of rich liqueur, blinking in and out of existence.

It didn’t look like something a human could healthily imbibe, it looked like a galaxy in a cup, and Ford felt anxious, imagining the bartender’s eyes on his back, knowing this drink was stolen.

“What is it?” Stanford had to ask.

“Diluted Cosmic Shand.” Shailesh revealed with a toothy grin, her pointed teeth shining behind her zippered lips. “This shtuff’s the good schit. It’s the shtuff that Gods drink undiluted. They only need to put one grain in a dishtillery to make thousands of bottles like this that normal people can drink, but even sho –“

She leaned closer to Ford, almost bumping foreheads with him so she could look at the colours shift inside the glass. She inhaled the scent of the beverage deeply, her eyelashes fluttering as her eyes rolled just from one sniff.

“This shtuff’s transcendent.”

Ford continued to glance warily between the shimmering liquid and Shailesh, uncertain whether he should attempt to drink this peculiar liquid. He didn’t think turning to alcohol was wise, considering he was still a stranger in a completely foreign environment, mourning the loss of his home and the sizable betrayal Bill had left him with. It wouldn’t be wise to leave himself vulnerable, and drinking a strange liquid guaranteed to leave him transcendent seemed like a bad idea.

“Do you want to transchend your problems?” Shailesh asked him. “Or do you want to talk them out, like a normal person?”

Talking out his problems seemed far less appetising than this mysterious beverage. If Ford could talk out his problems, he wouldn’t be in this situation, but since he was, he may as well make the most of it.
“I guess not.” Ford lifted the glass, and raised it in a toast, to which Shailesh responded, pretending to hold a glass of her own, clinking her fingernail against the edge of Stanford’s cup. “Here goes nothing.”

Ford raised the glass to his lips and took a sip.

The flavour was bizarre. It tasted like popping candy, like stars exploding on his tastebuds. It didn’t feel like a liquid in his mouth, it felt like air seeping back down into his lungs. He swallowed, and felt the crackling electricity crawl down his throat, and every hair on his skin stretched long, standing on end. A shiver rolled down Ford’s spine, and he shook his head, blinking lights out of his vision, but the lights stayed, colouring the world with bright airy tones, his surroundings suddenly feeling fluffy and wonderful.

“Wow.” Ford blinked, baffled at the way one sip of this drink seemed to lift his worries off his shoulders and leave his brain frolicsome and free on cloud nine.

Shailesh took the glass out of Ford’s hand and finished the rest of the drink, her eyes lighting up with a similar shine as she suddenly seemed alert and elated all at once.

“Ohhh yeah.” She grinned.

The bartender seemed to notice the lights glinting within the glass they shared and approached them with a scowl, slamming his four arms down on the counter.

“Hey, where’d you get that?”

Ford looked at the bartender, his mouth falling open, his expression that of a guilty kid, caught out in his wrongdoing.

Shailesh however extended her arms out wide at the bartender, and hopped down from the counter, yanking Ford along with her.

“What are you gonna do about it? Kill me, bitch!”

She threw up her middle fingers and strode out of the bar. Ford hovered awkwardly behind, looking between the bartender’s angry yet resigned expression, and the door where Shailesh had departed, the diluted Cosmic Sand still making him giddy, before he shrugged at the bartender and blurted out “Bye” before jogging out the door as well.

This seemed like the start of a sequence of incredibly bad ideas, but because of the jubilance granted by Cosmic Sand, Ford was feeling good about it.

And he felt he deserved to feel good about things for once. After all he’d been through, he was owed it by the world.

And so, the weeks went by, Shailesh leading Ford from escapade to escapade, bar to bar. She was trying to dull the pain of being without her family, and Ford was trying to avoid his own hypocrisies, both of them elevated from their worries with the help of Cosmic Sand.
As the alcohol flowed more freely, Ford began to loosen up a little, joining in the conversation with Shailesh, being less frugal with what he discussed.

“Why did you come to Meccai?” He asked her over the loud clamour of the sports fans in this particular bar, their attention glued to a gladiatorial sport playing out on the screen while Shailesh and Ford sat at the back wall of the bar, their stolen liquor keeping them in good spirits.

“I was being followed.” Shailesh responded, raising her voice to be heard. “My ex-mistress shunted people to silence me in the last city I was in. I came here to keep her on edge. More people to spill the beans to here. She hasn’t found me yet.”

“Why is she looking for you?” Ford questioned, sipping his drink.

“Because I know what she’s really like. Reputation is everything and if word got out that she isn’t the perfect shaviour she pretends to be then not only will she lose her schit, she’ll lose all her followers too. No one will believe in her or her act and she’ll lose all her power. I’d like to see that one day.” Shailesh smiled, her eyes steely. “My righteous mistress brought low, known as the monster she is.”

“Reputation really is everything then.” Ford mused, thinking back on his time in the Nightmare Realm.

Perhaps it hurt Bill’s reputation as this powerful, feared demonic being to let Ford escape, but he’d done so anyway, urging him to run when no one was watching. Ford had assumed he’d just made him run to prolong the chase, but it could be that Bill was merely saving face while saving Stanford at the same time. He’d mentioned the monsters around him were his investors? What was the God trying to prove?

“Reputation is the difference between people respecting you and walking all over you. You’ve seen what the people here are like.” She gestured with her stolen bottle to the people around the bar, cheering on the combatants on the television giddily. “They’ll take you for everything you’ve got unless you stand up to them.”

Ford watched her sip from the bottle she’d taken from the last bar they were in, his eyes following the decanter pointedly.

“Or take first.” Shailesh added with a cheeky shrug. “Hey, if it’s something you really want, you might as well. You’ve gotta ask yourself – what do I really want, more than anything?”

Ford thought on that for a while, before speaking up. “I know that what I really want is … no longer possible, and I shouldn’t want it anymore, but if I could have anything else? I’d want to be able to study all of these new things I’m finding. I’d want to take apart all the technology, put it back together, understand how it works, understand everything. Learn everything that’s out there in the universe and learn why it is what it is. I’d want to know why.”

Shailesh nodded and considered her own desires. “I’d want … I’d want my family back. But since that’s no longer possible I guess I’d want to live large. Drink every day, eat good food, get my face fixed, and I’d want revenge. Not necessarily in that order, but I’ll take what I can get.”

Ford hummed in acknowledgement and took another sip of his drink, looking out across the bar.

“Sho, you’re a tech geek, huh? Taking stuff apart and putting it back together.” Shailesh’s dark black eyes watched him curiously. “Are you any good at it?”

Ford sheepishly glanced around the bar. He grinned conspiratorially at Shailesh and pulled
something out of his trench coat pocket. It was the hologram projector from the kitchen counter at the serviced apartments. Stanford had removed it from the unit. He’d been tinkering with it, trying to understand how it worked, and he’d managed to make it perform independently of the kitchen unit. He tapped the device in his palm and it projected a small display of cooking instructions up into the air above his hand.

“Shweet.” Shailesh raised her eyebrows, impressed.

“I’m hoping I can figure out how to record projections as well, instead of it just relaying the one sequence.” Ford explained. “It looks doable, but I’d probably need to work on it more, maybe source another part for it? A portable projector has it’s uses.”

“If you’re looking to shcrap more parts, there should be recording devices in the apartments further up. You could nab shome to tinker with when we get back. It’s like you’re a schrap vandal already.”

“A scrap vandal?” Ford questioned sceptically, unsure whether he liked the name.

Scraping technology was one thing, but adding the word vandal to the title just highlighted the unlawfulness inherent in the action. It felt like stealing when put that way and Ford didn’t like to think of himself as a thief.

Certainly, Ford had scrapped the parts for the portal from the alien spaceship, and he scrapped the technology from the projector, but acknowledging that he was really stealing these things had Ford feel just like Shailesh. It made him feel like he was condoning what Bill did by default.

A few years ago, perhaps he might have been impressed with the rebellious connotations of the name, but currently Ford had no desire to be labelled a vandal.

He was trying to distance himself from the sort of sanctioned unlawfulness he associated with Bill. He knew just from the sound of it, that Bill would love it if he became a scrap vandal. He’d be delighted.

“They’re like engineers who schrap tech from shpaceships and schatellites. They’ve got a code and everything. They shell to the chop shops and the black market. Technically schrap vandals are illegal, but they always have the best hybrid tech. If you’re into that short of thing.” Shailesh explained.

Her explanation left Ford conflicted. That did sound really cool.

“Are there scrap vandals on Meccai?” Ford asked curiously, unable to help himself. Looking past his own inner turmoil surrounding his hypocrisy, he had to admit this scrap vandal lifestyle sounded appealing.

“Nope, they’re all out in denser shpace. They don’t shettle down. If you want to find a schrap vandal, you find them through the chop shops, but they don’t shtay in one place for long. They’re always on the move, hunting down new tech. That way the Feds can’t find them, or anyone elsche for that matter.” Shailesh picked the dirt out from under her nails as she spoke. “You can get shome real fancy communicators from schrap vandals. I wouldn’t mind having tech like that shomeday.”

The profession was sounding more and more ideal. Ford considered his hang ups for a while, wrestling with himself, pensive as the sports fans in the bar screamed while a goal was presumably scored. That or one of the competitors died, as it did seem a rather violent sport.

Shailesh gave a mocking whoop, parodying the sports fans, and nudging Ford with her elbow,
trying to get a laugh out of him. Ford simply nodded absently, the cogs turning in his brain, until he spoke up again.

“How do you get off Meccai?”

“Why? Are you leaving me?” Shailesh asked immediately, her expression stricken.

“No, no.” Ford put his hands up hurriedly, trying to reassure her that he wasn’t going to leave her. He wasn’t sure why he was reassuring her, but it felt like a reflex at this point, and when he realised why it might be a reflex he felt a little ill.

He was certainly thinking about leaving Meccai. It was an interesting place, but a place with limited opportunities for Ford. Even now while he was slightly better off than before when he’d been living in the gutter, he had to rely on Shailesh’s stealing, breaking and entering, and bullying of the people around her to be so comfortable. It wasn’t sustainable.

Shailesh was somewhat morally dubious, Ford knew this for a fact, but he didn’t think her faults outweighed her benefits. She counted him as a friend for some reason and she hadn’t been harsh with him. Without her, Ford would likely still be living in the alleyway, so he was grateful to her. She didn’t seem to mean him any harm and had been more than generous with her food and lodged, sharing it with Stanford.

He wasn’t entirely sure if he was alright with her stealing and lashing out at the world, just because she wasn’t stealing and lashing out at him, but right now his situation was better with her on his side. He wouldn’t abandon her now any more than he wanted to be abandoned to this strange planet.

When the panicked expression faded some from Shailesh’s face, Ford continued speaking, cognisant of the way the words felt like a slight lie, saying them anyway to secure his position.

“I wouldn’t abandon you, Shailesh. You’ve been a good friend to me.”

“That’s right. We’re friendsh. Friendsh don’t abandon friendsh.” Shailesh insisted, somewhat desperately.

“No, they don’t.” Stanford agreed with her placatingly, swallowing back his guilty conscience and proceeding despite it. “I just wanted to know is there any way of getting off Meccai? While I enjoy being here, with you, this place isn’t…”

Exhaling her panic deftly, she seemed to catch up with Stanford’s sentiment. “I know. I know what it’s like.”

“You seem to enjoy being here sometimes. It’s just that for me it’s not –”

“I don’t enjoy being here.” Shailesh confessed solemnly.

“Then why -?” Ford watched her, perplexed.

“I don’t enjoy being anywhere.” Shailesh pulled her scarf up closer around her face, her shoulders hunching. After a silent terse moment, she continued speaking, her voice quiet and bitter now. “It’s not like I can die. Being here is better than being alone. At least there’s people here, even if they all hate me.”

“They – they don’t hate you.” Ford attempted, feeling sorry for her.
“You don’t hate me.” Shailesh clarified and her eyes seemed to soften looking at him.

Ford sighed and said nothing, but Shailesh seemed to find comfort in the way Ford continued to sit beside her, not leaving just yet.

“There’s a platform on the other side of the city.” Shailesh divulged, like a peace offering to Stanford after her panicked honesty. “Like the one you came in through, with the wormholes. You’ve got to pay to get through, but you can leave there.”

“Do you need a visa?” Ford pressed.

“No if you pay enough.” Shailesh said. Patting the lock box in her pocket, she sat further back in her seat. “I’ve got just enough in here to get out without a hassle, but why spend it on a visa when I could shtay here and shteeal more cash? Buy more drinks. Eat more food. The people shuck here, but the living is easy. That’s for shure.”

Ford nodded, his mind ticking over with possibility. He took another sip of his beverage and the Cosmic Sand had him hopeful instead of anxious at the thought that there was a way off this planet.

“Shtick with me a while longer.” Shailesh implored. “I can get enough QUID for us both to leave Meccai, if that’s what you really want. Just shtay with me until I get enough for us both to leave. I don’t want to be left behind.”

“I’ll stay.” Ford said, feeling generous. He reached over to pat Shailesh’s knee in a fond sort of way, his calm gesture belying the way his thoughts were racing at the prospect of leaving Meccai and, although he still felt he was lying deep down, he reassured her again. “I’ll stay.”

Nursing their Cosmic Sand induced hangovers the next day, Shailesh had given Ford several of her stolen QUID and urged him to go down to the local Seven Bleleven, just on the edge of the slums, to bring back some headache remedy.

Ford would have lingered in the shop, staring at all the various intergalactic wares he’d never seen before, if he didn’t have a more pressing issue to deal with.

“Coffee? Do you have it? Coffee?” Ford attempted to ask the globular alien who was jammed into a uniform with the Seven Bleleven logo on the pocket, sitting behind the counter. The alien was squinting at him with all twelve of its eyes, trying to understand what Stanford was saying.

“It’s a liquid. Uh – cappuccino, espresso, americano, latte? Space coffee?”

The alien behind the counter shook their head at him slowly. Ford could only imagine the clerk was confused, as he didn’t like his chances if coffee wasn’t available on Meccai.

Stanford looked down at his translator and whacked it against the counter a few times in frustration. He tried fiddling with the dial on the side, finding the communication barrier it caused more of a hindrance than the help he once thought it to be.
“Stupid thing won’t work properly. Caffeine.” Ford enunciated, miming drinking a cup of coffee to the dumbfounded clerk. “Coffee. To keep me awake. You drink it. To caffeinate oneself. To stay awake. I need to stay awake.”

The clerk squinted at him dubiously for a while longer, before ducking below the counter and bringing back a small white bottle with a label on it. The translator couldn’t read the label because the font was too stylised but he assumed it was some kind of caffeine supplement.

Eventually nodding with a sigh, Ford relented. “Alright, yes, this, and a headache reliever. Hangover cure. Hang on, she gave me the bottle.”

Retrieving the empty bottle Shailesh had given him from his pocket to use as reference, Ford managed to purchase her hangover tablets and the small bottle of caffeine to help him fend off sleep.

With his purchases successfully made, Stanford left the convenience store with his goods in a small plastic bag and hurried back to the apartment complex.

If he’d stayed to examine the store a little more closely, he would have noticed the posters plastered on the wall outside of the Seven Bleleven. If not for his hangover and caffeine withdrawals he would have noticed his face, artistically sketched and bracketed with the words:

_Six Fingered Human – Wanted!

*Handsome reward for his expedient return to Bill Cipher._

Ford scrubbed his hair at the roots in frustration, pulling on it to feel the painful sting that would keep him awake.

This would have been his third micro-sleep in two days and he was finding the results ironically very tiresome.

Each time he’d let his eyes rest even slightly, he’d be back in his mental library in a flash. He couldn’t even fight the pull nominally, he was attempting to not even blink, as the moment his eyelids touched he found himself nodding off.

Every time he woke up in the mindscape.

And every time he did – there was Bill.

“Want to tell me where you are now?”

“No.” Ford said flatly, crossing his arms and turning away from Bill, obstinately facing the bookshelves instead.

One of the whorls in the mahogany wood shelving rounded out, then blinked at Ford, Bill’s eye meeting his through the wood veneer.

“Oh, come on. You’re not still mad about last time, are you?”
Ford stepped back and scoffed as Bill’s triangular body began to surface, pushing through the wood of the shelf. Bill’s long noodley arms extended and he lifted himself out of the wood like a swimmer getting out of a pool, shaking wood varnish off his shoe.

“It’s not like you to avoid facing the facts. You love facts.”

Stubbornly Ford turned his back on Bill again, leaving the triangle to float behind him. “Go away, Bill.”

“So grumpy. What, not going to shoot me again?” Bill quipped, taking in the way Ford’s shoulders flinched at that.

Gritting his teeth, Ford feigned composure, pretending he was much more dangerous than he currently was. “Don’t tempt me.”

“You’re mad. I get that.” Bill argued conversationally, floating around Ford until he was in front of the scientist again. He was laying on his side in the air, one hand on his right side like he had his hand on his hip while reclining, waving his other hand around conversationally. “Shots were fired. I’m sure we both said some things that you regret.”

Ford had to work hard to smother the laugh that comment engendered into something more suitably bitter. He scoffed at Bill instead, shaking his head derisively. He had to work hard not to find Bill’s jokes funny now and judging from the way Bill raised his eyebrow at him, the God knew it.

“Instead of drinking away your sorrows, maybe we could do what healthy functional people do.” Bill prompted. “You know – talk?”

Ford gave Bill an incredulous look, and the triangle met Ford’s gaze for several seconds, trying to maintain his wide-eyed optimistic demeanour.

Ford’s eyebrows became a flat line of scepticism ruled across his forehead.

“Too off-brand?” Bill questioned, self-aware.

“And you called me a hypocrite.” Ford muttered, hiding his amusement.

Bill snorted a laugh, and reclined on his back, pillowing his arms behind his hat, clearly very comfortable in Stanford’s head. “Well, I guess you’re the expert.”

“It’s not too late to shoot you.” Ford warned him.

“By all means.” Bill spread his arms out invitingly and Ford woke up.

The dreams were jarring, not because they were unpleasant, but because every time Ford dipped into unconsciousness, he was reminded of exactly how much he enjoyed Bill’s company, even when he shouldn’t. He was supposed to be mad at the God but the emotion had trouble sticking.

It took a lot of energy to maintain anger, to maintain a grudge, and Ford was expending most of his energy trying to keep up with his many mental justifications as to why he shouldn’t relax. He was on edge most days when awake, trying to guard against sympathy for the devil in his head, that by the time he closed his eyes, that vindictive resistance was in short supply.

The micro-sleeps were inconvenient and Ford had been taking the caffeine supplements the clerk had given him, but they didn’t seem to make a difference.
Shailesh had noticed the way he would nod off, sitting at the back of yet another dingy bar, the various beverages she supplied him with dulling his cyclical guilt tripping into something more manageable. When Ford’s head would lull forward onto the table and his eyelids would flutter shut, Shailesh just assumed the human was a drowsy drunk. She seemed to find the ways he would wake up to be funny.

“How about we play a game? 20 questions?”

“No.”

Bill floated upside down in front of him, summoning various board games from the ether to hover beside him.

“Trivial Pursuit.” Bill suggested.

“What are you pursuing?” Ford couldn’t help but ask.

“You know.” Bill cooed, reaching forward to flick Ford’s nose fondly.

“Not a chance.” Ford said, denying Bill simply for the sake of it. He rubbed his nose and turned his chin up, pretending to ignore the God, but he couldn’t help but watch the triangle float out of the corner of his eye, captivated despite himself.

“I spy.” Bill prompted. “I’ll start. I spy with my all-seeing eye, something beginning with B.”

Ford honestly attempted to ignore his ex-muse. He gave it his best shot but there was something intrinsic within him that couldn’t leave Bill be.

After a moment of strained silence, Stanford muttered. “It’d better not be ‘book’.”

“DING DING DING!” Bill’s eye flashed like a game show buzzer. “Looks like we’ve got a real genius over here. How did you guess?”

“Stop with the false flattery.” Ford crossed his arms, trying hard not to be mollified, knowing Bill had used this technique on him before. “It’s insulting.”

“No, it’s your turn.” Bill waved his hands at Ford, ushering him to speak. “You go – I spy with my two human eyes …”

“I can’t play this game with you.” Ford insisted, clinging to every bit of resistance he had.

“Sure you can! Just think about the things in your immediate vicinity - say landmarks, or geographical coordinates, or maybe a complete interstellar address.” Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford, floating closer to him. “And just throw me a letter.”

Ford narrowed his eyes at Bill’s transparent attempt to divine his location.

“I’ve got a letter for you. F -“

And Ford woke up.

He had jolted his drink all the way across the table when he jerked back into consciousness and splashed it on a grizzly looking four-armed patron on the table just beside them, much to Shailesh’s delight.

When the alien turned around in his chair to bare his sabred teeth at Ford in a snarl, he could feel
Shailesh shaking with laughter by his side.

“Um.” Ford blinked blearily at the intimidating alien, watching as he stood up from his chair to loom over Stanford.

At a loss for what to do, Stanford reached into his trench coat pocket and withdrew a handkerchief, holding it up for the alien.

“Sorry, there’s something on your face.”

Shailesh whooped with laughter as they raced out of the bar together, finding Stanford’s many faux pas the most entertaining thing she’d seen in a while. Her favourite channel tube, she said. She teased him giddily about the spill right up until Stanford’s most recent micro-sleep.

This time he was sitting on the couch in the apartment, having spent all night tinkering with the hologram projector he was working on.

He’d managed to appropriate one of the security cameras from the upper floor of the building and so far, he’d taken it apart, fashioned it into something workable, and made a small two second recording of himself standing up. The nature of the hologram projector made it simple to loop the recording into a continuous projection until he could stand on one side of the room and see his hologram standing on the other consistently.

Shailesh had already retired for the evening, her mouth zipped shut, and Stanford did his best to ignore her muffled sobs echoing out from the other room as she slept.

He put his projector and tools down on the coffee table and took a moment to rub his eyes, relieving his building headache and eye strain.

He had only closed his eyes for a second, but that was all it took.

“I spy with my all-seeing eye, something else beginning with B.”

Ford didn’t even have to open his eyes, releasing his frustration with a long-suffering sigh. “Bill.”

“BINGO! Another win, Sixer, how do you do it? Natural talent, no doubt.” Even with his eyes shut, Ford could sense Bill was close to him, hovering in front of his face. Ford could see yellow light shining from behind his eyelids, his muses’ glow bright and effervescent.

Reluctantly, Ford opened his eyes, and sure enough, there was Bill, hovering upside down in front of him, his large eye fixated on Ford’s face. The triangle was floating about a foot away from Stanford, close enough that he could reach out and touch him.

“Do you want a turn now? No? Still so sour.” Bill reached forward, his long thin limbs stretching towards Ford’s glasses. He began to pull Ford’s glasses off his face, sliding them down his nose. “Seriously, you’d think that--"

“Stop!” Ford’s hand grabbed Bill’s wrist, and he squeezed, halting his movement.

This was the first time Ford had touched Bill in his mind since falling through the portal, since their tumultuous break up. It was just a simple gesture, it wasn’t even anything tender, but it still froze both of them in the moment, stripping back the playful banter that had been cushioning their interactions so far and revealing the raw want they were both harbouring but refused to act on.

The contact had hewn back the delusions and facades that kept them distant until their connection
stretched like a single thread in the air, taut, fragile and vulnerable.

Bill’s eye was glued to Ford’s face and, surprisingly, Bill’s arm felt cold, like his muse had literally frozen, waiting on what Ford might do or say.

“I can’t – you need to stop. This –” Ford struggled to find the words, this tension evoking more honesty in him than perhaps their relationship warranted. “It’s easier to stay mad at you when I’m not around you.”

“That tells me we should be having much more quality time together.” Bill said quietly, his eye still unblinkingly fixed on Ford.

“No. I can’t. You – you lied and you did so many things.” Ford stressed, fumbling to express his many reasons that seemed so articulate in his head before. Now, he could barely string a sentence together to accuse the being in front of him who seemed so enraptured by his attention.

“So did you.” Bill retorted swiftly, almost cautiously.

“That’s not the same.” Ford insisted.

“Isn’t it?”

Ford looked stricken for a moment before he let go of Bill’s wrist. He backed up several paces now, looking not so much scared of Bill as he was scared of himself.

Bill stayed floating in the same spot, spinning slowly until he was no longer dangling upside down, and watched Ford, his expression inscrutable.

Eventually, tentatively, Bill’s hand stretched out. He stayed floating a safe distance away from Stanford, respecting his need for space, but gently his hand quested forward, pausing periodically as the triangle read Stanford’s face, until his small black hand hovered a centimetre away from Ford’s cheek. He didn’t touch him yet, Bill was holding himself back, but he asked Stanford.

“Is this so bad?”

Ford took a deep breath, mustering his resolve. He was keenly aware of Bill’s hand so close to his face, almost touching him. It felt like Bill was touching him already, Stanford was so aware of his closeness.

He had made a mistake grabbing onto Bill’s wrist before. He could deny their connection when they weren’t touching. He couldn’t lie to himself when their skin made contact.

“It’s bad because I want this.” Stanford confessed shamefully, wavering.

Bill’s hand twitched forward, until Ford could feel his small thin digits, warm now, no longer frozen, rest against his skin like Bill was cupping his face like he used to.

Ford sighed, the contact exposing his honest feelings, and he brought his own six-fingered hand up, dwarfing Bill’s small palm with his own. He held Bill’s hand against his face for a moment, before continuing. “And I shouldn’t want this. Or anything to do with you.”

Bill was quiet for a while, before he floated closer to Ford, his long arm shrinking down as he approached.

“You sound like a romance novel.” Bill murmured, observing Ford relentlessly.
Ford huffed a bitter laugh. “It’s only romantic if you actually cared.”

“Who’s to say I don’t?” Bill sounded offended and Ford looked up to see he was about a foot away from him now.

“You do and I can’t trust you.” Ford insisted. “I can’t trust you to be honest with me.”

“You’ll come to realise, Sixer, that honesty isn’t a given, it’s a gift.” Bill said, floating closer until he was only an inch away and Ford should have taken offence at that statement, if not for the words that followed.

“And just so you’re aware, you have always been –“

Ford leaned in and his nose lightly brushed against the warm surface of Bill’s bricks.

“Incredibly gifted.”

Ford closed his eyes.

And woke up.

Roughly raking his hands through his hair, Ford cursed his predicament, irritable and flustered now.

It shouldn’t have happened, getting that close to Bill shouldn’t have occurred. It shouldn’t be possible. Ford didn’t want it to be possible.

He should have abstained, he should have shot Bill again, anything to keep away from him. He had to believe the muse was lying. He had to maintain the cut and dry, black and white worldview that had been protecting him thus far, but it was to his great dissatisfaction that he was coming to realise that things on this side of the portal were far more morally grey.

The same social mores and etiquette from Earth didn’t apply and he found circumstances justifying a lot more wrongdoing than would have been acceptable back there. But Stanford was certain that proprietary loophole didn’t extend to validating an insatiable desire for the company of his murderous, world conquering ex. You couldn’t exactly find the do’s and don’t’s for that hypothetical etiquette query in the back issues of Cosmo.

Ford sat on the couch, mentally railing against himself for being so weak, pulling at his hair and squashing his cheeks as he worked his way through his embarrassment. It was only when he heard an amused huff of laughter that he looked up.

Shailesh sat across from him on the couch, watching him, smiling behind her scarf.

“Someone’s having fun.”

Ford scowled at her, his cheeks pinking further. “How long have you been sitting there?”

“A while. You make funny faces when you sleep. Did you know that?”

Ford groaned, and covered his face with his hands, pressing his fingers down on his tired eyelids. “Shailesh, you can’t just –“

“I couldn’t sleep.” She shrugged. “Woke up and you’d shtopped tinkering. Did you know you make noisches in your sleep?”
Ford froze, moving his hands down from his eyes to look at her. “What kind of noises?”

Shailesh grinned, then let her head fall to the side, feigning loud snoring to tease Ford.

The snoring was a relief, honestly. Ford didn’t know how he’d explain away talking in his sleep, given the things he was talking about. He didn’t think he could bear the embarrassment of having his weakness compounded, made audible, and given an audience.

That was why he’d never commented on Shailesh’s night time lamentations – he didn’t want her to have to deal with that sort of mortification. Sleep unveiled one’s weaknesses and having your weaknesses made public was just so embarrassing.

Shailesh’s feigned snoring turned into laughter and she stretched her leg out to nudge Ford with her boot. “I’m joking. Sho sherious. Napping’s not a crime, you know.”

“I shouldn’t be, though.” Ford reached into his trench coat pocket and pulled out the bottle of caffeine supplements, turning the bottle over in his hands to try and read the label again. “I should be sleeping less. If anything, these tablets have been making me sleep more.”

Shailesh blinked at the bottle then held out her hand. “Let me shee?”

Ford handed the bottle over to her grumpily and waited for her verdict.

“How are shleeping tablets shupposed to help you shleep less?” She asked, turning the bottle on its side to read the label.

“They’re sleeping tablets?!” Ford gawked at the bottle.

“Yeah, this brand does a bunch of different shtuff, but all their logos look the shame. It’s a roulette really. You’re lucky this one’s just the shleeping tabs, for relaxation. They have one bottle that looks exactly the shame but it’s just extreme laxatives. Every pill. Laxation they call it, instead of relaxation. The mix ups happened before.”

Ford’s minor outrage was derailed for a moment there, granted the knowledge that it could have been much worse. He still needed how to figure out how to properly use the technology in the bathrooms here, though he was certain if the need was as urgent as the other bottle suggested, he would have figured it out quickly enough.

“I think my translator’s broken. It must be broken.” Ford looked down at the translator cuff on his wrist. “I specifically asked for caffeine, coffee. I don’t know how the server deduced I needed this instead.”

“Maybe you looked tired.” Shailesh shrugged. “Maybe you pisshed him off.”

“I don’t see how. I was more than polite to him. That wouldn’t be very good customer service.” Stanford griped, still fiddling with the dial on his translator cuff.

“Shometimes you and me piss people off just by existing.” Shailesh shrugged again, tugging the scarf over her mouth self-consciously. “People get offended just looking at us. Looking at the freaks.”

Ford looked up from his translator and sighed, resting his hands on his thighs.

“Shailesh, you’re not a freak.”
“What, is blindness a side effect of theshe?” She joked, pretending to squint at the fine print.

“I mean it.” Ford insisted, hoping she was joking about the blindness. “I’m being serious. There’s nothing wrong with you. You don’t need to act like it. You don’t need to cover your face with that scarf all the time. There is nothing wrong with you.”

Shailesh’s eyes showed conflict. Clearly, she wanted to believe Ford, but something had her almost reproaching his words.

“You’re unique, you’re special, and you are just as important and valid and normal as everybody else on this mess of a planet. You don’t deserve people putting you down for how you look. You don’t need to put yourself down for it either.”

Ford ranted, speaking to Shailesh’s situation but also echoing his own.

He was tired of deferring to the aliens on Meccai like he was less worthy of being here than they were. He was tired of being scorned by merchants, side eyed by pedestrians, and duped by Seven Bleleven clerks. It wasn’t even about his polydactylism, the people here just disliked him on principle.

The sleeping tablets were the last straw. Now, Ford wanted to empower Shailesh and if he empowered himself in the process, so be it.

“Being openly unashamed about what makes you unique is an act of bravery. Aren’t you brave?”

“I am.” Shailesh affirmed, sitting a little more upright now, roused by Stanford’s impassioned speech.

“Then be brave. Don’t let anyone make you feel weak. You are stronger than the word ‘freak’. You’re not a freak. You’re unique.”

Shailesh raised her eyebrows at Stanford, and nodded at him, obviously impressed.

“And so am I.” Ford nodded right back, picking his hologram projector up from the table and shoving it in his pocket.

“Damn right you are, KXer.” Shailesh bounced up from the couch, and grinned. She stepped around the coffee table and unwound her long grey scarf from her face, looping it around Stanford’s neck.

“Let’s go take on the world.”

The bar Shailesh took him to now was rougher than the other ones they’d been to. The sign above the door translated to ‘The Bagged Bounty’ on Ford’s dimensional translator and it seemed to draw a rougher crowd than the other bars they’d frequented.

As Shailesh mostly ended up stealing from the bartenders and patrons and getting into fights at the bars they’d been to before, Stanford was understandably quite wary.
Shailesh merely grinned at him, her eyes telling him that perhaps she was looking for trouble here. It made her feel alive.

“I thought you were feeling brave?” She teased as she dragged Ford through the sliding doors to the bar.

Inside the bar, a motley assortment of rogues sat at the tables and along the stools at the bar, creatures of all shapes and sizes. There were large hulking creatures that looked a lot like how Stanford imagined the orcs from Lord of the Rings would look after so many childhood re-reads, there were squat pig faced creatures with tentacles for arms, there were reptilian people with long necks and pointed tails, feline looking aliens with sharp green eyes and sharper claws, and in the corner Ford could have sworn he saw a woman composed of fire, chugging back her beverage, her fiery hair flaring out as she consumed what Ford could only presume was lighter fluid.

As much as bar hopping seemed like something more up Stanley’s alley than it was Stanford’s cup of tea, the reason he enjoyed joining Shailesh in these places was the people watching. That was one of the wonderful things about having a drink at a bar, you could just sit there and stare at the other people gathered in the establishment. They would go about their business, and you would have a spot from which you could daydream about their lives, or finesse details about their livelihoods from their attire, or just observe their interactions.

Bars on earth were a great representative of human nature in many different forms and bars in space were no different. You really got a feel for what the people here were like, sitting in a bar observing their mannerisms, and Ford found it gratifying to peruse the crowds safely, as to everyone else it simply looked like he was sharing a drink with his friend. He was reminded of his adventure into the enchanted part of the forest with Bill, enraptured by the various mythical creatures gathered for the gnome queen’s wake. He felt that same enthusiastic wonder simply being in the midst of it all, observing what he could.

Shailesh seemed happy to hang back as well, settling down with her drink in a corner, although this may have been because when she did engage with the people around her it was either to steal something or pick a fight. The peaceful middle ground for her was to sit back next to Stanford and privately mock the passers-by, educating Stanford in her own way about the ins and outs of interdimensional society. Sitting with Shailesh was a crash course on what not to do.

“Look at these chumps.” Shailesh gestured to the aliens gathered around the pool table. “What’s the bet they don’t know they’re being hustled?”

“Are they being hustled?” Stanford asked, craning his neck to look at the game. Space snooker seemed to have different rules, but the end game was the same. Laser rods were used to prod spheres into the nets around the edges of the table. It was an intricate play of precision and geometry, each movement calculated to yield ideal results, but most of the players seemed to think it had something to do with luck, placing bets on the game. In that sense it was very much like pool on Earth, although the lasers were a nice touch.

“They’re playing shink hole with a Thellashian.” Shailesh pointed at one of the players, a creature with a long neck like a giraffe, dangling fronds extending from its face, watching over the game with glowing blue eyes from its higher vantage point. “I’m shure that Betriexian thinks they’ve got the game in hand, shince they’re all hot schit mathematicians where he comes from, but most people don’t know that Thellashian girls are telekinetic. She’s cut off her dorshal fronds. You can see the schars, if you know where to look. It doesn’t matter how good you are at figuring out trajectories if the ball doesn’t follow basic physics. Shuckers.”

“I see.” Ford said, narrowing his eyes at the players, nodding like he had known this
interdimensional nugget of wisdom all along. Shailesh snorted a laugh, and whacked Stanford’s shirt with her hand.

“Come on. I’ll get you a drink.”

Weaving through the crowd, Stanford and Shailesh pulled up by the bar. Shailesh slammed a QUID token on the counter and held up two fingers. “Two jet fuels, thanks. And a shtraw.”

The bartender, a Kzinti woman, twitched her whiskers at Shailesh, blinking slowly at the zip across her lips. “The straw is furr you?”

“What do you think, fleabag?” Shailesh sneered aggressively.

The bartender scoffed. She bent down behind the counter and prepared the two drinks, delicately dropping a straw in one and sliding it over to Shailesh. “One jet fuel with straw and added flavourrr.”

Shailesh grabbed their drinks and turned back to Stanford, passing him his.

“I think she shpat in mine.”

“Do you think?” Stanford asked dryly.

Shailesh slipped the straw between her zippered lips and took a sip. “Yep. I can taste it.”

Stanford’s nose wrinkled with distaste and Shailesh shook her head. “No, I think it made it better.”

Stanford looked down at his own drink, hardly keen on sampling it given Shailesh’s glowing testimonial.

“Doesn’t that bother you, that she spat in your drink?” Stanford had to ask, watching Shailesh continue to sip away, mildly repulsed.

“Shpit in my drink, in my face. What’s the difference? It’s gonna happen anyway. At least I got my digs in firshft.” Shailesh shrugged self-consciously.

Clearly, she was still struggling to believe Stanford’s pep talk, having gone out without her scarf today. Stanford was still wearing it around his neck.

“It doesn’t have to be like that, you know?” Stanford said softly, trying to pull her out of this morose mood. “You don’t have to strike first, lash out at everyone. Not everyone means to insult you.”

“Then why am I insulted sho often?” Shailesh huffed. “I don’t have to take their schit. Neither do you. Don’t you get tired of it? Do you know how many people have been shtaring at you funny shince you got here?”

“I’m trying not to think about it.” Stanford admitted reluctantly. He tried a sip of his own drink and it was suitably disgusting, but quickly inebriating. It had that new car taste.

“Come on, let’s find a place to sit.”

Stanford looked around the bar. For such a dingy establishment it was pretty packed. There was, however, a small untouched gathering of chairs in the middle of the room.

Drink in hand, Stanford made his way over. He went to sit down, but the moment his rear hit the
seat it bucked up and jostled his drink all over him.

“Hey! What’s the big idea?”

Ford staggered to his feet and stared down at his drenched clothes, his trench coat, shirt and pants ruined, soaked through by the murky brown liquid. He spun around to see who had tipped his chair only to see the chair staring back up at him, a pair of scowling eyes set into the back of the chair.

“What are you, some kind of idiot? Don’t got eyes? What are you, just a moron? Hey, who let this moron in here?” The chair railed loudly, creating a scene. “This knuckledragger just tried to pop a squat on me and my friends here. Who let this gross looking scab in here? He don’t got two brain cells to rub together!”

“You just spilled my drink all over me.” Ford accused, scowling right back at the chair, his disposition feeling less and less forgiving as the chair continued slinging its jibes.

“You know what, you deserve it for sitting on me, asshole. Now, you’re gonna apologise, get on your knees and grovel, to make up for your base transgression.” The chair insisted smugly, milking Ford’s discomfort while the chairs around him snickered.

Ford was struggling. On one hand the almanacs that he read, and his own hesitancy to condone the sort of behaviour he associated with Bill and Shailesh meant that apologising, swallowing his pride and moving on would be the best way to avoid an altercation but that didn’t seem to matter nearly as much as the fact that this being had spilled Ford’s drink all over his clothing.

He left his own dimension with only the clothes on his back, and everything in his pockets, and to this point he had managed to keep his clothes clean. He had nominal assistance from Bill with that, but the point stood that the clothes on his back were all he had, and he was supposed to just take the fact that this chair had spilled a horrible smelling, foul tasting drink all over him and was now expecting him to drop to his knees to apologise for it.

These unusual expressions of etiquette seemed fascinating in the abstract when Ford was reading it in a book, like studying an exotic culture, but it was much different when he was living amongst it all. Tiptoeing around insulting the many aliens in this city was like walking on broken glass and, honestly, Ford wasn’t sure if half of these breaches of etiquette he was being accused of weren’t just spontaneously made up to make him feel inferior.

He thought back to his discussion with Bill, back in his study, when he asked what the alternative was to these elaborate rituals of ass kissing, and Bill had simply handed him the laser gun.

He didn’t have a laser gun now, but he hadn’t gone through those gruelling weeks of marksman practise to grovel on his knees in front of a trumped-up chair.

“Well, if you’re going to be putting me through my paces, flaming debris and all, I may as well offend at least one of these poor bastards.”

Bill had delighted at that, wrapping his arms around Ford’s neck, humming with approval.

“Oh, they’re gonna love you.”

Ford gritted his teeth and made his decision.

“Well, maybe I wouldn’t have sat on you if you didn’t look like a chair.”

The bar fell silent.
“What did you just say?” The chair asked, sinisterly narrowing its eyes at Ford.

Rather than repeat himself again, Ford simply turned his chin up at the chair-being. “You heard me.”

Ford felt a hand slap his back, and suddenly Shailesh was beside him, her voice much louder than Ford would like, drawing the attention of the entire bar towards them.

“Yeah, you heard him!” She exclaimed gleefully.

Her eagerness to pick a fight was unsurprising, but what was surprising was how willing Ford was to go along with it. His hands curled into fists at his side as he squared up to stare down this egotistical seat.

“I don’t even know what you’re supposed to be, but I wanna know what makes you think you’ve got the right to speak to me like that?” The chair intoned menacingly, inching closer to Stanford, the legs of the chair moving as it walked. It spat its insult in Stanford’s face, sneering all the while. “Freak.”

Ford thought it was a bit rich being called a freak by an articulated piece of furniture. He figured if there was ever a time to take a stand for simply sitting down, that time was now.

“For the record, I’m a human being, not a freak.” Ford reached forward and pushed the chair back so it tilted on its back legs, tipping over. “And I don’t take diction from a talking chair.”

“That’s it!” The chair wavered, its arms spinning around in circles trying to stay upright and as it swung back to land steady it lunged forward at Ford, throwing a punch with the opulently carved hand rest that served as its fist.

Its punch landed square on Stanford’s thigh and he bent over, clutching his leg. Damn, that would definitely bruise.

Without even thinking about it, Stanford responded with an instantaneous uppercut, knocking the chair back over and into several of its buddies, toppling the bunch of them. Shailesh whooped giddily, cheering him on as the chairs picked themselves up, throwing themselves back into the fight.

If someone had asked Stanford whether he ever thought he’d find himself in a fistfight with an assortment of talking chairs – well, no one would ask him that. It was such a purely ridiculous notion that it could never happen and no one would think to ask it, but as he knocked back chair after chair, bloodying his knuckles on their varnished limbs he felt disconnected from reality.

It baffled him that this was his life now.

Before the brawl could get too heated, the bar patrons all standing out of their (inanimate) seats to ogle the fistfight, a loud whistle rang out across the bar.

“That looks like my bounty.” Said one of the bar patrons from across the room, the woman comprised of flame. She pointed a flaming finger at Ford and Shailesh, her emerald green eyes narrowing at them both.

Ford felt his stomach flip and Shailesh’s hand grabbed his wrist quickly.

The other bar patrons all stood up now, fronting for the right to claim the bounty.
"Back down, Jolene, I saw ‘em first.” Postured one and another bounty hunter chimed in, growling out their claim.

“No way. That’s my bounty. I’m claiming it.”

“Holy schit, she really did it.” Shailesh said under her breath to Ford. “She’s put a price on me. A bounty on my head.”

Ford’s eyes were darting around the bar, and he wasn’t so sure the bounty was for Shailesh. It was only now he was coming to realise that the posters that plastered the walls of the bar depicted a familiar face. His own.

He could recognise the distinct alien language for a split second before his translator kicked in and the words “Six Fingered Human – Wanted! Handsome reward for his expedient return to Bill Cipher” stood out, superimposed onto the paper that displayed a rather dashing, defiant looking mugshot.

That alien language had been scattered about his journals. He once spent two days without sleep trying to decipher its code. He once spent a week finding it on taunting notes squirreled about the house for Fiddleford to find.

“There are other ways to find you. You’re just making this difficult.”

Apparently so. More difficult for Stanford than anyone else, as suddenly he found himself facing down a bar full of bounty hunters with only one ally.

As the clamour rose, each bounty hunter posturing to stake a claim, the argument now getting heated, Ford could feel Shailesh squeeze his wrist.

“Come on, let’s sneak away.”

The argument was set to turn into a brawl, one of the bounty hunters had pushed the other, and tensions rose as the aliens began to retaliate. Stanford swallowed back his muted panic, trying not to let it show on his face, and nodded as Shailesh led him gently through the back door.

It was only once they were out in the alley behind that Ford could hear loud shouts, indicating that the bounty hunters had noticed his absence.

Shailesh seemed beyond giddy and she continued pulling Stanford’s wrist until they both broke into a run through the maze of back alleys.

“I can’t believe she actually did it. A real bounty.” Shailesh enthused breathlessly as she careened down the back streets, keenly aware of the hunters hot on their heels. “She must be furious!”

“I don’t think –” Ford panted, uncertain whether he should clear up this misconception or not. He looked over his shoulder, worried he wouldn’t even have time to.

“That was Jolene of Flames back there. The Jolene!” Shailesh thrilled. “The besht of the besht. From the shongs of legend. She’s relentlessh. She only picks the best bounties. I must be worth sho much money right now.”

Inwardly, Ford was cursing Bill. This bizarre cat and mouse game of theirs was a lot more appealing, almost romantic, when there wasn’t ACTUAL PAID BOUNTY HUNTERS INVOLVED. And now, Ford found himself running for his life. Running is not romantic. Running for your life even less so. He was an idiot for thinking Bill could have changed and an absolute fool
for feeling weak for him last night.

There were aliens in hot pursuit and as Ford rounded the corner with Shailesh he found himself face
to face with a dead end. Boxed in on all sides by towering skyscrapers, Ford was looking
desperately for a ladder or a side door, or some way out of this predicament.

He could hear footfalls approaching behind him and he looked to Shailesh in askance.

She was already stripping off her coat. It jangled as she passed it to Ford, the QUID in her lock box
weighing the fabric down.

“Hold this.”

Ford took her coat with an expression of barely masked panic. She noticed his distress, rounding
her fists out, assuming a combat stance as she nodded at him.

“Don’t worry. I fight good. I can’t believe I get to throw down with Jolene.”

While Shailesh cackled, Ford looked around the alley way for something to arm himself with, but
all he saw was a rusting bin lid. Putting Shailesh’s heavy black coat on over his stained clothes, he
picked up the bin lid, intending to use it as a shield if nothing else.

He wasn’t as enthusiastic about the prospect as Shailesh was, but he was capable of going a few
rounds if he had to. It had just been a while since he’d needed to. He wasn’t sure how well he’d
fare against a woman who seemed to be perpetually on fire though.

The footsteps fell heavier now and their pursuers rounded the corner.

Instead of Jolene, the woman wreathed in flame, two rat faced bounty hunters with beady bionic
eyes stood fast at the lip of the alleyway.

“Got ’em,” snickered one of the rat-men, sauntering closer.

“I’m ready for a handsome reward, aren’t you?” asked its fellow, grinning toothily as it advanced.

“What did that poster say? Wanted? Doesn’t seem very specific. Do you think that means dead or
alive?”

“Dead’s the default, ain’t it?” The bounty hunter said, continuing their approach.

Ford swallowed, hoping he’d outlive this encounter. He was still cursing Bill inwardly, thinking up
every colourful swear word that could possibly exist, although right now his mental monologue
was just a litany of ‘shit shit shit’.

“Try me, you rat bastardsh!” Shailesh shouted out, keen as ever. Ford’s despair heightened, as if
things could get any worse.

The rats looked between each other for a moment, as though they were confused why she’d be
stepping in, yet as they shrugged, deciding to proceed anyway, they were knocked back by a slash
of flame through the air.

Ford could smell burning fur and flesh, as the two rat-mercenaries screamed and fell away.

“That’s my bounty.” Jolene, the flame woman stated, stepping over their charred carcasses.

“Jolene of legend.” Shailesh called out, drawing her attention. “The schtories are true.”
“What of them?” Jolene tilted her head at Shailesh, blinking her emerald eyes.

“That you’re hot schit.” Shailesh divulged inelegantly with a shrug. “Tell me, how much is she paying you to take me down?”

Shailesh’s dark eyes shone smugly, beaming as she asked the bounty hunter her question, eager to discover how much of a hindrance she was becoming to her old mistress.

Jolene blinked again, considering Shailesh, before she reached into her utility belt and unfolded one of the posters she’d torn from the wall. It was slightly singed around the edges.

“There’s no need to flirt. I’m not here for you.” Jolene told Shailesh, who was staring, dumbstruck at the poster.

The debonair looking sketch of Stanford stared back from the page, causing Shailesh to look between the poster and the man standing beside her, like she couldn’t believe the correlation.

“I’m here for that human.” Jolene pointed at Ford, who was inwardly freaking out, the panic evident on his face. “The one with splinters in his six bloody knuckles.”

“What?” Shailesh strode up to Jolene and grabbed the poster, sounding almost disappointed. She looked over the page, examining the wanted poster with traces of scepticism embittering her tone. “What the hell. You mean she didn’t shend you after me – I thought she - she –”

Shailesh’s eyes trailed down the page and seemed to bulge as she read who was providing the reward for Ford’s capture. “He wants you?! No fucking way. You – all along you’ve been? KXer, why the schit would Bill Cipher want you?”

“Oh dear.” Ford muttered under his breath, wondering whether there was a diplomatic way out of this situation, or if he was truly and royally screwed right now. The almanacs didn’t cover this.

There was a possibility that Shailesh had heard of Bill before, had been warned about Bill, would help Ford escape him, but despite their tenuous connection over the past few weeks, Ford wasn’t pinning his hopes on that happening.

“Bill Cipher??” Shailesh exclaimed, before she began to laugh hysterically, like she couldn’t believe her luck.

Ford assumed it was because she’d heard of his no doubt insidious reputation and was lamenting the danger he’d put her in through association all this time. That she’d been harbouring a fugitive fleeing from the most dangerous triangle in the multi-verse (or so Ford presumed, given what he’d been told so far). That was the best-case scenario.

“Listen, I can explain. I’m sorry I put you in danger, I just –” Ford said, making to walk over to Shailesh to explain.

“What are you apologising for? This is GREAT!” Shailesh shouted, clutching the wanted poster to her chest. “This is the bescht fucking thing. I’m sho – all this time? You’ve been the six-fingered human that he wants all this time?”

He certainly hadn’t been anything else.

He would have opened his mouth to say as much, if not for the inspired gleam in Shailesh’s eye, boding ill for his chances. He didn’t like that look. Ford paused where he stood, hesitant now. She sounded a little too pleased about this discovery, and it gave Stanford cause to worry.
“Well, come on.” Shailesh waved at Ford, ushering him over. “You can come with me. Let’s get out of here.”

Ford looked warily between Shailesh and the bounty hunter, Jolene. “Really?”

“Yesh, really. Come on. We can go to him together. It’ll be eashy.” Shailesh insisted, waving at Ford impatiently. “I know where he is.”

“Go to him?” Stanford stepped back, looking at Shailesh like she was an entirely different person now. “Shailesh. No – you –”

“You come with me, and I’ll give you to him, and then he’ll fix what he did to my face. I won’t be a freak anymore. Come on KXer, you’re always shaying I’m not a freak. Now, I won’t have to be. Don’t you want that for me?” Shailesh implored, walking towards Ford now, despite how he was stepping back, clearly uninterested. “He can fix me!”

Her approach was halted as Jolene placed her burning hand on Shailesh’s shoulder.

“Hold up. You don’t get to step in and just walk away with my bounty.” Jolene interjected, turning Shailesh away from Ford. “The reward is mine. I saw him first.”

“Hell no, I shaw him way before you. I found him first. I’ve been with him for weeks!” Shailesh pushed Jolene back, blue fire flaring out around her palms as Jolene’s flames began to burn her, the blue fire healing and burning right back.

The blue fire healing was something Stanford had seen before. It made so much sense now. It didn’t belong to Shailesh. It wasn’t unique to her. It never was. It belonged to Bill. It had belonged to Bill all along and so had Shailesh. She’d been in his pocket the whole time. He was the one who granted her his powers, and according to Shailesh just now, he was also the one to alter her face. He gave her the zipper she was so ashamed of, and now Shailesh was willing to turn on Ford after all this talk of friendship so she could get rid of the zipper and become normal again.

Ford was furiously disappointed, betrayal seeping deep into his bones. It wasn’t fair, though in his current state of bitterness, it was just what he should have expected. The first person Ford had met here, the first person he had befriended, was on Bill’s side all along. He just didn’t know it.

He knew now.

“I said, back off.” Jolene snarled, grappling with Shailesh now, her fire arcing out, burning all around her, but somehow not burning Shailesh. As the fire danced out from Jolene’s palms, it was met with the fire that was radiating off Shailesh, covering both women in flames as they wrestled.

“He’s mine! I shpent weeks with him. I schould be the one who gets to turn him in!” Shailesh screeched, pulling at Jolene’s flaming hair, jamming her knee up into the woman’s stomach. “I put in all the work!”

“Oh. I’m the bounty hunter, you lisping, zip-lipped bitch!”

Jolene threw a punch under Shailesh’s jaw and their brawl just intensified, both women shouting and grunting, becoming more and more violent as it became apparent their hits weren’t landing.

Soon, they were nearly impossible to see beneath the raging fire that surrounded them both, red and blue flame competing for supremacy as each woman tried to wring the life out of the other one, battling for the right to claim the bounty on Ford’s head.
Shailesh managed to knock Jolene back briefly into the rubbish bins by the wall, and as the fiery woman picked herself up, the Taronjan mercenary turned to face the human who had been standing awkwardly in the corner while the battle raged on.

“KXer! Let’s go! Now!”

Ford simply stood there, looking blankly forward, not moving an inch.

“KXer?” Shailesh questioned, wondering why he was so unresponsive, staring blankly forward. She waved her hand in front of his face, trying to catch his gaze. “KXer?”

For a moment Stanford seemed to flicker, before resuming his far away eye contact.

Shailesh looked down by his feet and saw the small hologram projector sitting in the gutter, broadcasting the two second loop of the scientist on repeat, a fitting enough decoy to distract from the fact that during the brawl Stanford had managed to slink away.

Shailesh swore and violently kicked the hologram projector. She looked around for her coat in the alleyway before realising that Stanford took it with him, along with her lockbox full of QUID and all the things she’d stolen and kept in her pockets.

Jolene stood behind Shailesh, watching her throw her tantrum.

“Any idea where he went?”

Shailesh glared at her opponent, before she very deliberately reached up and zipped her lips shut.

Friends don’t rat on friends, after all.

Stanford was trying not to look out of breath, having sprinted all the way from that unfortunate back alley to the exit platforms west of the city. He had Shailesh’s scarf pulled up to cover his face as he purchased his exit visa with her stolen QUID, trying to look inconspicuous, or at least as inconspicuous as anyone could look wearing a heavy black coat with a scarf covering his face. Currently his paranoia was kicked up to an eleven, knowing that literally anyone could be after him.

He could trust no one here.

He didn’t want to be recognised, but he was finding that more difficult than it should have been thanks to Bill’s artistically accurate WANTED POSTER.

He was seething with frustration over the fact that Bill had put a legitimate bounty on him. He’d put up wanted posters like this was some wild-west hunt for the lone ranger! While Stanford could appreciate the fiction of it all, the story it painted, he was coming to realise that finding yourself smack bang in the middle of a story like that was not only dangerous, but degrading too. It wasn’t as glamourous as the books would have you believe.

He had run the fastest he’d ever run trying to get away from the two enflamed women fighting over him, one of them a professional bounty hunter of legend, and the other one someone Stanford had
almost considered a friend. He had grazed his palms slipping on the pavement and his clothes were sticky with spilled jet fuel and sweat. He stank, and he felt disgusting, but he knew he couldn’t stay here.

He had to get as far away from this planet and all the people within who would hunt him down to deliver him to Bill. He had to leave.

The problem was finding a place to go.

Standing by the exit platforms, having passed through with his newly minted visa, Ford frowned up at the glowing billboards above each departing wormhole, his translator describing the landmarks and locations within each wormhole. Without a point of reference, however, those locations meant nothing to Stanford and he had no way of knowing whether the next place he landed would be one he’d find habitable, or if he would end up in another place just like Meccai, sleeping on the streets while dodging the bounty on his head.

He had just run halfway across the city and parted with the majority of the QUID in the lockbox to get through the platform gates and now that he was here, he felt like crying.

Exhaustion and exasperation were competing with each other and Stanford felt utterly despondent that he had to leave now without knowing where in the multi-verse he could possibly go. Where would be safe? Where would Stanford find work, or something fulfilling?

Where would he be able to claw back his dignity, or would he be left an eternal interdimensional vagabond, drifting from place to place? He didn’t want that.

Slumping his shoulders with a sigh, Stanford dawdled between the various gates on the platform, not sure where he should go, not sure where he could go, or how long he had until someone else found him and attempted to capture him for the bounty Bill had placed on him.

A handsome reward could mean anything and as much as the vagueness of the reward rankled Ford, he knew that when it came to anything Bill could most likely deliver anything. If Bill’s reputation was as widespread as Ford assumed, the people eyeing off Ford’s bounty likely knew that too. How was he supposed to compete with that, to reason with someone who had the prospect of their wildest dreams coming true?

Reasoning with the people trying to capture him was a useless prospect. Ford couldn’t fall back on reason anymore. If he wanted to evade capture, he would have to succumb to playing dirty. He would have to embrace the sort of behaviour Bill had taught him, to fight dirty, to do what it takes to be the smartest man in every room.

He’d been avoiding any and all associations with what Bill had taught him while he was on Meccai because he didn’t want to believe Bill was capable of being truthful with him. He didn’t want to accept any of Bill’s gifts, but now that his survival hinged on him making use of every tool in the toolbox, he found he had no choice.

He was trying to think of it in a very detached way, that he was simply making use of what he could to survive. He didn’t like to acknowledge the thought in the back of his mind that believed Bill was trying to help him, even now. Setting a bounty on his head wasn’t helping him. Proving that he could occasionally be honest with him wasn’t a gift.

Ford wondered if Bill’s gifts were always so backhanded, or if they were just revealed to be now.

He thought back to the first gift Bill had bequeathed to him, the first gift he’d given him that had
nothing to do with blueprints, or the portal, or getting Ford on side with Bill’s master plan.

He thought back to that night under the stars, camping out at Gravity Falls peak while Fiddleford slept in the tent behind him. Just him and Bill, reclining cuddled together by the fire, pointing out constellations in the sky.

“So, going to your hometown, eh? I thought there was nothing left for you there.” Bill had asked him, sitting up, dipping his fingers into the fire playfully.

“A point to prove maybe. That’s it.” Ford sighed, leaning back. “It’s not like I have anywhere else to go.”

Bill had looked at him, considering him for a long time, his eyes inscrutable, before he seemed to make his mind up. “I never did give you that souvenir, did I?”

Ford looked down and pulled aside Shailesh’s coat, searching in the pockets of his own trench coat, pulling out slightly sticky papers and memorabilia of his time with the god before he found what he was looking for.

The business card.

Bill’s very first gift to Ford. The first gift he had given without any strings attached. Maybe the only gift he had given without conditions, if Ford didn’t think too hard on it.

Ford tapped the surface of the business card, bringing the holographic map up in front of him, surveying the destination and carefully comparing it to the destinations on the floating billboards above him. Pinpointing the correct wormhole that would take him in the vicinity of the Chop Shop in the middle of the Antiquita Galaxy, Ford tapped the business card again to turn the hologram off.

Holding out his visa to the attendant at the desk, Ford shelled out a few QUID extra, securing himself a spot on a shuttle to the Antiquita Galaxy. To the chop shop full of alien tech and potentially to his new life as a scrap vandal.

He slid the business card back into his shirt front pocket, the card sitting above the triangle tattoo on his pectoral and he felt comforted by the certainty that Bill’s gift provided him. He didn’t feel so adrift now that he had a purpose and a place to move forward to. He smoothed his hand over the business card, lingering as he felt the tattoo tingle on his skin and walked ahead to the departures gate, hopeful once more.

“You say you have nowhere else to go, but you haven’t even scratched the surface yet.”

Well, the universe awaits.

Chapter End Notes

Jolene, Jolene, Jolene JOLEEEEENE I'm begging of you please don't take my man ~
I had to write her in, ever since I saw the Flammabel in the Don't Dimension It comic in the graphic novel, I knew the baddest bounty hunter had to come from her dimension, with flaming locks and eyes of emerald green. Stanford's in hot water now.
I hope you all enjoyed this chapter. I'm already working on the next one, and it's going to be quite fun leading up to a big showdown in the chapter after that. I've had it planned for quite some time, this showdown. I hope the people who've stuck it out this long are enjoying it so far. Promise it will only get better and more interesting as it goes along.

This chapter is dedicated to my beloved partner, who I've been visiting this month. She has been listening to my many plot twists and dialogue soundbites and story ideas with the patience of a saint and it's been keeping me inspired and motivated, as does the kind words of all of you lovely folk, so thank you. <3

Next chapter - stubbornness, Ford begrudgingly makes new friends, idioms galore, space pirates, and feeling up a triangle for science... among other things. Stay tuned and thank you for reading and leaving kind comments!

p.s. Zippy's lisp was put in as it stays true to her character but if anyone is reading this with a translator ect and needs a non lisp version I can provide a non lisp version as I still have it in a word doc. Message me on tumblr if you need the non-lisp version!
Oh, I'm so restless, I don't care what I say, and I lose my temper ten times a day. Still it's even worse when the night's on it's way.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“Here’s your first assignment, magic hands.” The Angolean project coordinator sat cheerily at the desk, handing out assignments to the graduated students lining up for their assignations.

Stanford gave a polite grimace at the nickname and held out his tech-tablet for the coordinator, bending down slightly to maintain a similar height with the lizard man. With a jaunty tap, the scaled project coordinator pressed a small device to the top of the tablet until the device beeped and the top of the tablet lit up green.

“You know, I gotta say, magic hands, all of us are real impressed with your progress since you got here.” The project coordinator continued, happy to take the time to chat with Stanford despite the other people in the queue waiting behind him. “We all thought you wouldn’t know your foot from your elbow, but you take to tech like Arnold takes to the heat pad in the rec room.”

“Are we gripin’ on Arnold again?” Another Angolean asked from behind the project coordinator, slithering over to chime into the conversation.

“Hey, hey! All of you use that heat pad just as much as I do, alright.” Arnold hissed back at the project coordinator and his co-worker, joining in the banter. “It’s not like it’s got my name on it.”

“Hey, that’s a good idea. Let’s put Arnold’s name on it. Arnold’s heat pad, since he lives there,” joked the project coordinator to his peer.

“I don’t live there. Ah, shut up.” Arnold waved off the conversation with a scaled hand.

Stanford was used to the Angolean sense of humour by now. He’d been living and studying with them for the past year. The reptilian engineers were as jovial as they were talented, and despite the difficulty he faced fitting in on Meccai, the scrap vandals didn’t discriminate. If you were good with tech, and could do the job, they welcomed you in with open arms.

It was part of the scrap vandal code. It didn’t matter where you came from, or who you were before, once you were a scrap vandal you were part of the crew and the crew protects their own. Stanford had remembered the relief he felt when these new aliens didn’t turn him away or turn their noses up at him after his long journey via cramped industrial shuttle from Meccai.

He didn’t know what he would have done if, upon arriving at the Chop Shop the mechanics there turned him away, but instead they embraced him, telling him ‘We’re all scrap here’.

An unusual motto for sure, but Stanford was grateful for the meaning behind it. It meant that he wouldn’t be thrown out, that he was valued for what he was and for what he could do.

And what he could do was engineer advanced technology and conceptualise machinery far beyond the scope of what most humans could achieve. After a little tutoring, that was.
They started calling him magic hands because of his polydactylism. At first Stanford had attempted to pass himself off as a different type of alien, paranoid that if he divulged he was a six-fingered human that someone would recognise him from the description on his wanted poster, but apparently there was existing technology that could recognise the genus and species of different aliens. It was integrated into the latest, most up to date dimensional translators, to allow for a smoother translation process.

Stanford had traded in his older ‘antique’ model for an upgraded translator cuff, the scrappers delighting at the old technology just as much as they did the new. They treated the old translator Stanford brought them as a gift, placing it in an odd sort of museum they cultivated next to an antique floppy disk and something called an ‘eight tracks’. He was grateful to be rid of the thing, for all the trouble it caused him. It certainly tipped the scales when they decided to take him in. He was thankful for that.

Even knowing he was a six-fingered human, the scrappers in the Chop Shop didn’t piece together that Ford was the fabled six-fingered human from the wanted poster. Maybe something about the dynamic, confident, and debonair way his picture had been sketched on the poster didn’t align with the insular, exhausted way he held himself now.

He hadn’t been sleeping much, thanks to finding the appropriate caffeine supplements he required, and that tended to diminish the heroism in his stance. The bags under his eyes helped too, contrasting with the way they had been drawn in the poster, maintaining that defiant sparkle. Ford supposed he had one of Bill’s fiends to thank for their flair for the dramatic. They’d certainly captured Ford at his best, instead of how he was looking now. Run down and worn out.

It suited Ford for the Angoleans to make up their own minds about who he was, and who he was to them was just another vagabond turned prospective engineer, waiting to be welcomed into the ranks of the scrap vandals.

Magic hands wasn’t the best nickname, but Stanford hadn’t had much luck with nicknames in general. Nicknames almost seemed like a prerequisite in space, a term of endearment that had no doubt sprung from necessity, given how difficult some interdimensional names were to pronounce. Stanford didn’t think his name was too difficult, but the nicknames seemed to be more an issue of equality. The Angolean’s could certainly hiss out Ford’s name if they tried, but nicknames were apparently easier. And more fun for the lizard people as well, falling in line with their upbeat sense of humour.

“Thank you for this.” Ford gestured to his tablet. “For an assignment.”

“Eh, we figured you’d been here long enough to want to stretch your legs a little.” The project coordinator waved his clawed hand at Ford idly. “You’ve got your basics up to scratch and you’ll probably have fun out in the field. Meet some new people for a change. Plus, hey, any excuse to get away from Arnold, right?”

“You guuuuuys!” Arnold complained in the background.

Ford thanked the lizard people again, privately quite sad to have to leave their peculiar illegal academy. They had been very generous with him, after he’d been in a situation which wasn’t so charitable. However, Stanford hadn’t ever properly let his guard down around the Angoleans after Shailesh’s betrayal back on Meccai. He couldn’t afford to trust too easily after that and staying in one place when there was such a hefty bounty on his head could put the Angoleans in danger. He didn’t want that. Boarding a ship for elsewhere was the best option for him.

Stepping away to the side, Stanford took a moment to read through his new assignment, obliquely
eager to join one of the scrapping crews if it meant he’d get away from the base station. The facilities here were nice, but the dormitory conditions had Stanford uneasy, after all, he was still paranoid about talking in his sleep, and some of the conversations he’d been having, well, let’s just say they didn’t reflect well on him out of context.

“Wanted dead or alive?!”

Bill had shrugged his little shoulders, dodging the books Stanford had thrown at him, despite the fact that the memory novels would simply phase right through him.

“It didn’t say dead or alive. I mean, maybe they slipped it in the first draft, but I didn’t let it get past the proofreading process. What do you think I am, an idiot?”

“You -!” Ford was wordless with rage, gripping the air in front of him like he was strangling it, before reaching for another book to throw.

“Hey, what are you mad at me for? We removed it from the finished product!” Bill ducked under another thrown book and glared at Stanford. “I knew you’d get all fussy about it. It didn’t even say ‘dead’ at all.”

“It was still implied!” Ford stressed, struggling with his temper. “They could have killed me!”

“But did you die though? I don’t think so.” Bill held out his hand, like he had a reasonable point. Ford didn’t even bother with a response, instead he tried to lift up the heavy abacus in the corner of his mindscape library, looking for more things to throw at Bill, having no patience for his excuses.

His reactive rage had lasted the first few weeks into his interdimensional travels, but when Bill kept showing up in his dreams, he found his rage about the bounty had happened, simply accepting that the bounty had happened. Plus, he was running out of things to throw and it was somewhat less satisfying when the things he threw at Bill had absolutely no impact on the god.

He’d taken to singing repetitive songs in his head to keep Bill out, delighting when he discovered that ‘It’s a Small World After All’ caused Bill to angrily implode himself out of Ford’s mindscape just so he didn’t have to listen to it. He always came back though and Ford couldn’t sing annoying repetitive Disney songs all the time.

After his second month with the scrap vandals, when Ford had next closed his eyes, exhausted, he’d found the reserve of his anger had run dry.

Laying on the carpeted floor of his library, arms splayed like a starfish, he looked above him to see Bill floating parallel to him, watching him as always.

“Where are you?” The triangle asked.

“Why don’t you ask your bounty hunters?” Ford sassed back.

“I’m not actually hiring any of them, you know.” Bill divulged. “That’s the beauty of ‘reward upon capture’. I’m not paying a retainer to any of these schmucks.”

“Bully for you.” Ford huffed on an exhale.

“I don’t think you understand.” Bill crossed his arms, staring down at Ford. “I did this for a reason. It’s not safe for you out there in the universe. You have no idea how dangerous things can be.”
“Oh, and I’m sure putting a bounty on my head will bring me up to speed on the danger nice and quickly.” Ford scoffed, sarcasm lacing his tone. “Because nothing says safety like an indiscriminate price on one’s head. I’ve certainly never felt safer.”

Bill’s eye lidded, unimpressed, oozing judgement on Stanford’s sassy attitude.

“If you’d just tell me where you are, this wouldn’t be necessary.”

“Well then, I’m afraid it is necessary. Because I’m not telling you where I am.” Ford rebutted, crossing his own arms over his chest, mimicking Bill’s pose. “I don’t think there’s a thing you could possibly do that would convince me to ever divulge my whereabouts.”

“So, you’ve already made up your mind then?” Bill asked him, watching him closely. “That’s it?”

“That’s it.” Ford shrugged, clapping his hands against his arms flipantly. He didn’t need to think deeper than that, his stubbornness was speaking for him here.

“That’s it?” Bill repeated, sounding somewhat sceptical.

“That’s what I’ve said. That’s it.” Ford insisted, nodding for emphasis.

“Because I feel you’re kind of saying one thing and I’m hearing something else.” Bill expressed, still squinting at Ford dubiously.

“Well, I’m definitely saying what I’ve been saying, so I don’t know what you’ve been hearing. You should be hearing what I’m saying.” Ford argued pedantically.

“Sure, I’m hearing what you’re saying, but I’m also hearing what you’re not saying.” Bill reasoned, weighing up the two prospects.

“Well, I’m saying you shouldn’t be doing that.” Ford rebutted.

“And I’m hearing you say that. But I’m also hearing what you’re not saying and I’m inclined to side with that argument, instead of what you’re saying right now.” Bill concluded, still floating above Ford as they bantered back and forth.

Ford sat up onto his elbows and frowned at Bill. He narrowed his eyes at the triangle, who aligned the angle he was floating at so he was still parallel to Stanford’s face.

“What exactly do you think I’m not saying?” Ford questioned.

“A lot of things.” Bill responded with a shrug, before blinking slowly at the human. “Mostly that you miss me. That you still want me. That you don’t know what to decide, mainly because you haven’t made your mind up yet.”

“And how exactly are you divining these unspoken thoughts and not just making them up? Considering the measures I’ve put in place, you don’t have access to my thoughts, or to my memories. So why do you think you know what I’m thinking? What exactly are you reading to convince you of this argument?” Ford asked snippily, using defensive sarcasm to cover up the genuine concern he felt at the thought that he was still so transparent.

“I don’t need to read your mind.” Bill answered, his long noodley arm trailing down from his side to brush a lock of Ford’s hair off his forehead. “I can still taste your worship, Sixer. You’re choking me with it.”
Ford didn’t know what to say at that, hovering on this vulnerable edge between honesty and his continued spiteful desire to pretend he wanted nothing to do with the triangle. He didn’t want his secret thoughts laid bare to the being before him, but now that he knew, it suddenly made a lot more sense why Bill hadn’t just gone away when Ford asked him to. Why he’d been so sceptical with every slung insult or banishment. Why he came back here every time Ford closed his eyes without fail. Why he was still attempting to try.

Ford understood now, but he still didn’t want to.

Bringing all the resentment and hate up to sit in the back of his mouth, Ford spat his response at the God right before breaking through to wakefulness.

“Then choke.”

And he woke up.

Reading through his assignment details with a bored detachment, Stanford wondered whether this assignment would last for a long time. Scrapping trawlers usually left for missions that took anywhere between 2 to 5 years, and he was hoping that he’d find being out on a space ship slightly more engaging than learning to rewire the same flux engine over and over again until the lizard supervising him deemed his efforts fast enough to meet the standard.

That was the trouble with the monotony of space life. The novelty of the fact that you were working with a society of lizard-aliens to engineer tech beyond your wildest dreams only held its lustre for so long and Stanford was doing his level best to find the goings on around him more interesting than what would happen when he succumbed to sleep. His dreams had no right being so addicting but, yet, they still were, or maybe the creature inhabiting them was to blame for sleep’s appeal. Even when they weren’t on speaking terms, Ford still found Bill-watching a more entertaining sport than the ones they played on the channel cubes at the base station.

It was becoming a problem, because Ford was starting to see why Bill still felt worshipped by him even when they were so at odds with each other. Ford just couldn’t take his eyes off him, it seemed. He blamed the paranoia, but it was more than that in reality. Ford had tried to shake many of his habits, but he still couldn’t shake the fact that he found Bill utterly fascinating, even now.

Bill tried to swipe through a memory novel laid in the middle of one of the study desks in the middle of the mindscape. Each time his hand passed through the book, his bricks turned a different colour.

He was yellow and then he swiped. Now he was green. He swiped again. Now he was blue.

“What, is this some kind of emotional response from you?” Ford questioned bluntly, laying on one of the red couches his mind provided in the library, sitting across from the god.

Bill’s bricks turned a peachy pink as he looked up, before he shook, and the colour drained away, his bricks resuming their standard yellowish hue.

“That is, assuming you have emotions.” Ford continued dryly, rolling over onto his belly, letting the book he was holding float down to the pile of finished journals below.

Bill extended his arm up at Stanford, his hand fisted with his middle finger standing tall.

Ford let out a short, dry laugh, shaking his head. Gesturing conversationally, Ford continued to talk, intending to antagonise.
“Seriously, I’d love to find out how you work someday. What makes you tick. You mentioned vivisections?”

“I hate you.” Bill assured Stanford. “So much.”

“Then why are you still here?” Ford countered.

He was surprised when Bill teleported away after that conversation. Part of him expected the triangle to stay, to continue to attempt to sway Ford through virtue of his very presence but Bill simply left him, perhaps proving a point.

Ford was surprised when he next slept that Bill wasn’t waiting for him as well. He had expected the God to be there and couldn’t help but feel a little disappointed, despite the fact that getting Bill to leave him alone was the goal all along.

He hadn’t thought through what a victory in this instance would mean.

That would be when Ford started taking the sleep suppressants.

Rather than face a mindscape without a muse, or the consequences of his actions (part of Ford felt that he had pushed too far, even though it was warranted. He felt guilty for constantly lashing out at his muse) he chose to take sleep suppressants. He could still rest and feel refreshed after a period of laying down with his eyes closed, but he couldn’t fully sleep, and as such he couldn’t dream. With the guidance of his Angolean tutors he found the right substance to allow this and he quickly bought up quite the supply.

As Ford read over his travel orders, he mentally calculated how many of the sleep suppressants he would need to bring with him, pondering how the duration of the mission would affect his supply. Logically, if he ran out he would be able to find other ways to avoid sleep, but if worst comes to worst, he wouldn’t be in danger in the mindscape. He had that under control.

Mostly, he just didn’t want to find out what would happen if he slept and dreamed and for once his muse wasn’t there. If his final transgression had pushed too far and crossed the line, that meant that Bill wouldn’t come back for him, that he had abandoned him, and decided he wanted nothing to do with him anymore.

He was trying not to think about that and trying not to think about how much that scenario worried him. It shouldn’t have been a depressing thought, but it was, and Ford was struggling to maintain interest in the world around him, trying to stay engaged with his scrapper work and leading a life in the cosmos that didn’t revolve around Bill, but now that that was a possibility, he found himself rather morose about it, considering how close they had been.

Maybe his new assignment could lift his mood and take his mind off the mindscape he was avoiding. Reading through the travel orders, he collected his things from his dormitory and made his way towards the dock his ship would be leaving from.

The other scrappers who would be joining him in the spacecraft for this mission had likely already boarded. Ford’s chat with the Angolean’s at the gate had delayed him. He boarded the ship at a leisurely pace, taking in his surroundings.

The vessel was a sturdy looking thing, cobbled together with both state of the art and antique machinery. It would take some kind of engineering mad genius to keep this vessel space-worthy and the idea was that the crew would be comprised of several mad geniuses, enough to keep it afloat.
Ford hefted his pack on his shoulders and paced forward through the corridors, following the layout of the spaceship to the main hub for introductions.

A motley crew of aliens were crowded there, drawn from different dimensions in all different parts of the galaxy, brought together by a shared love of craftsmanship and, for some, a desire to simply steal parts.

There were Angoleans, the lizard people Ford recognised and a few of the four-armed beings he’d seen so many of on Meccai, as well as a few amphibian looking folks, a cyborg or two by the looks of it, and a humanoid being covered in colourful fabrics, obscuring any defining features. Brief introductions were bandied about, though Ford didn’t really listen too closely. Layouts of the ship, along with a travel schedule were transferred to Ford’s tech tablet, also pinging into every other tablet in the room for the other new recruits.

Rather than stay and mingle, Stanford looked up the directions to the library on board the ship, making his way towards the sort of mental stimulation and fulfillment he sought out in the absence of his mindscape.

He wasn’t here to make friends.

That didn’t go so well for him before.

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The ship was lampreyed onto the back of a Federation satellite orbiting uninhabited planetary systems on the outskirts of the Pinwheel Galaxy.

Stanford had been painstakingly removing the data probes from the outer shell of the satellite for several hours, remotely manoeuvring the pincer arms extending outwards from his scavenger pod from within. It was delicate work, much harder than simply scrapping the part with one’s hands, but the atmosphere wasn’t conducive to exploring in only a space suit. Too many stars forming and combusting meant the atmosphere was volatile. The Angolean technology was astounding regardless, considering that the ship navigating this tenuous galaxy sometimes seemed to be held together with spit and hope.

As Stanford parked his scavenger pod back in the docking bay, the airlock sealed and funnelled the gases back out into something more generically breathable. Ford supposed that he could technically breathe in the noxious mix of chemicals, considering what Bill had done to his lungs, but he was trying not to think about the advantages the triangle had given him.

It was best not to think about it. He didn’t need reminders of what he was missing.

Climbing out of his scavenger pod, he picked up the data probes from the rear compartment and carried them out to the stock rooms. Other scrap vandals were doing the same, readying their haul for storage after a busy day’s work.

Ford logged and handed in his stolen parts and then followed his fellow crew members to the rec room. Recreation was very important on these long haul space missions to curb the cabin fever, so there were tables for lunches, lounges, heat pads, games, books, and video cubes decorating the communal room.
The scrap vandals were a friendly bunch, with the Angolan lizards as the gatekeepers of this particular society, whoever they let in had to at least have a good sense of humour. After all, they weren’t just screening your potential for engineering, they were also screening your ability to coexist with your fellow scrappers for several years of close quarters space travel.

The intention was for the crew to grow close like a family, leaning on one another, bonding with one another through recreation, but Stanford found himself to be the ship’s token recluse, preferring to work alone, dine alone, and read alone whenever he was in the shared spaces.

This made him something of a novelty to the crew, a curiosity. The man who wished to be alone on a ship full of people.

Today was no different. Stanford took his tablet over to the cafeteria dispenser and scanned his chip. The machine regurgitated his meal out onto a tray for him to pick at, blue slop on one part of the dish, a crunchy neon green delicacy on another part of the tray, a drink, and an individually wrapped cosmic roll on the side for dessert.

This food was nothing like what he would prepare or eat on earth but with limited options, he made the most of what he had. Food was food. Anything to keep him going.

All around him in the rec room the other scrap vandals were settling in groups at tables, sharing their meals and company equally.

Ford took an empty table in the corner of the room and picked at his meal while listening idly to the chatter around him.

“Get this, so an electron checks into the Ritz with only one bag, right?” One of the Angoleans on the table over to the left began, enchanting his fellows with what sounded like a bad joke in the making.

Ford could tell from the tone of voice, and resigned himself to listening in. Bill used to tell him jokes like that all the time, bad ones, and he was trying not to miss that.

“And the concierge goes – Sir, you’re only checking in the one bag?” The lizards at the table watched their fellow eagerly, wiggling their shoulders in anticipation of the punch line. “And the electron goes – My good man, I’m travelling light.”

Ford raised his eyebrow, prodding at his meal, the hooting laughter from the table across seeming as alien to him as his crew mates did. He was sure he would have found humour like that funny in the past, but he didn’t feel like laughing. He was almost certain Bill had told him that joke once before, beating this lizard to the punch line.

Ford heard a clatter as another tray slid onto his table, and he looked up.

“Do you mind if we sit with you, friend?”

Three of his crewmates stood before him, one of them a broad shouldered, four-armed woman with three eyes, smiling awkwardly at him, the other a floating torso, possibly a cyborg or AI, her pixelated smile lighting up the screen on her face, and the last, a humanoid being wrapped head to toe in fine fabrics. Only his eyes showed through a gap in the fabric, watching him with a friendly, curious demeanour.

Ford had seen them in the induction but hadn’t imagined them becoming close enough to him to garner the role of ‘friend’. Stanford blinked up at them suspiciously, supposing they were attempting to make friends with him, or to inspect the ship’s loner out of curiosity.
He was wary, less trusting since Shailesh’s betrayal, but there was little he could do to turn these crew members away without making a scene. These three seemed determined to sit with him.

Ford shrugged his shoulders and gestured to the table.

They slid into the chairs opposite him and attempted to make conversation.

“Quiet day out there today.” Remarked the four-armed woman. “I keep waiting for us to run into trouble like they said in training, but we never do.”

“Quiet is why we don’t run into trouble.” The robot chimed in response, wagging her finger as she spoke. She hummed for a moment, before stating cheerfully. “Loose lips sink ships!”

“She means to say that the Federation have no reason to assume their satellites are being scrapped for parts, since we are being quite covert with our recovery missions.” The person under the fabric scarves added, translating for the robot’s idiosyncrasies.

Stanford said nothing to contribute to this conversation, shovelling food into his mouth. The blue slop tasted like Greek yoghurt. Interesting. He wondered if it was made from active cultures as well.

“So stranger.” The four-armed woman barked a nervous laugh, leaning her elbow on the table, clearly attempting to pull some sort of conversation out of Stanford. “What’s your name? Feel like sharing? Mine’s Quinlar.”

“Mine’s En. En Pathi.” Added the robot cheerily.

“Mine is Sandeep.” Concluded the man behind the scarves, all three crew members now watching Stanford intently.

Ford took in their fierce attention warily, weighing up the pros and cons telling his name would garner. He could have been stubborn, continued to say nothing, but he was willing to bet that his stubbornness was matched here.

It was three against one. Maybe if he humoured some conversation with his crewmates, he could stop thinking about the jokes Bill used to tell him.

Perhaps he needed the distraction. Solitude didn’t seem to be working for him.


“Like the American university?” Remarked the man behind the scarves.

That didn’t seem like common intergalactic knowledge, and Stanford paused, looking closer at the man’s eyes, noting the shape of them, finding them familiar.

“You know about Stanford University?” Ford questioned.

“I had a feeling you were from Earth.” The man reached up to unwind one of the scarves from around his head, exposing his face slightly, smiling pleasantly. “It has been too long since I’ve heard from home.”

“You’re human.” Ford observed, looking at Sandeep’s face closely. His green-gold eyes and brown skin were decidedly human. He looked like a man of about 30, although there seemed to be more age showing around his eyes. That or some sort of tattoo encroaching on the side of his face.
Sandeep noticed Ford staring and covered himself with his scarves once more, only showing his eyes.

“As are you.” Sandeep inclined his head at Ford. “You seem quite a long way away from home.”

Stanford didn’t think humans were welcome in wider space. Shailesh and Bill made it seem like a novelty to see humans outside of Earth. Part of Ford thought he might not ever see another human again, not since falling through the portal.

Yet here before him was another of his kind. Ford couldn’t help but be curious, putting aside his self-imposed introversion for a while.

“I didn’t think I’d meet another human out here.” Ford admitted, his hesitation put on the back burner, curiosity winning out. “I heard the planet was protected.”

En, the robot hummed again, before trilling. “Birds of a feather flock together.”

“It is supposedly protected.” Sandeep divulged with a shrug. “But unfortunately for me, some people prefer not to follow the rules, and they seemed to reason that there were enough people in Bangladesh for humans to not notice when a few went missing. I can’t say I ever believed much in alien abduction, but here I am now.”

“You were abducted?” Ford probed curiously.

“When I was fourteen.” Sandeep wiggled his head as he spoke, nodding assent. “If I had stayed on Earth, I would have been sent to Oxford to study. My parents were reasonably wealthy and I was to follow their path with my studies. It was all planned out for me, my tutelage right up to university, although I was curious about America from a young age. Specifically, the law program at Stanford. Still, it was not meant to be.”

“You were abducted when you were fourteen?” Ford frowned, concerned and mildly repulsed at the thought of ripping a child from their family like that.

“As were several other children from Bangladesh, and younger.” Sandeep confirmed sadly. “I do not know where the others are now though. It may be too much to hope that they are still alive.”

There was an awkward silence as that sentence sunk in, Stanford’s frown deepening.

Quinlar looked between the two humans nervously, before clapping her four hands.

“Well, how about last week’s Globnar, huh? Anyone catch that on the channel tubes?”

En, the robot hummed, before her facial plate glowed pink. “Quinlar is nervous we’ve scared you away already, but I can sense that you are feeling sympathy, not revulsion.”

Ford blinked at the robot, confused by her assessment, or how she made it with such certainty. “Why would I feel revulsion?”

“Empathy is a learned skill that not all sentient beings have cultivated.” En recited, her face plate a pixelated smile once more. “The common response to hearing of a misfortune you cannot prevent is anger or outrage and it is rarely aimed where such emotions should be.”

“En is an emotion sensing AI. She was designed to culture empathy in the children of intergalactic diplomats as part of a program to raise better leaders.” Sandeep explained, gesturing to En’s floating torso.
“And that worked about as well as you’d expect.” Quinlar joked.

“I used to have legs.” En chimed cheerfully, smiling widely on her face screen.

“She snuck on the ship with the scavenged parts and then asked for a job.” Quinlar grinned.

“I scrapped myself.” En declared brightly.

Stanford barely noticed their cheerful back and forth, his posture stiff and tense. Watching En warily, Ford leaned back from the table.

“What, what does that mean? You can read my thoughts?”

“No, I –” En reached her hand out, as Stanford stood up from the table abruptly, grabbing his tray and his tablet.

“Stay out of my head.” Ford said harshly, scowling, before walking away, preferring to eat alone in his dorm if this was the sort of reception he’d get in the rec room.

The three crew members watched him go, their shoulders slumped as their new friend departed.

“Well, he’s not very friendly.” Quinlar observed, scowling at Stanford’s back as he left. “I thought you said he was lonely.”

“He is.” En insisted. “He’s hurting.”

Sandeep watched Stanford storm away solemnly.

“Then we will give him patience.”

Ford reached under his cot, pulling his trench coat out from beneath the bed.

His beige trench coat had turned into an unofficial knapsack since the talking chair on Meccai spilled jetfuel all over it, making it quite uncomfortable to wear.

He’d been wearing Shailesh’s black coat, not out of any misplaced fondness for her, mostly out of pragmatism. He blended in wearing her coat, more so than he did wearing his trench. Earth fashion stood out it seemed, although interdimensional fashion seemed much more out there in Ford’s opinion.

Ford couldn’t bear to part with his trench coat, despite that lingering jet fuel smell and the staining, so he kept it. Inside of his trench coat knapsack remained what was left of Stanford’s earthly possessions. He had compiled the papers, pictures and drawings he had taken from the shack into a sort of scrap book, so they wouldn’t be damaged by the rigors of interdimensional travel. It was like having another journal, only this one was filled with painful, compromising memories.

He told himself it wasn’t simply sentimentalism, these papers may have some relevance to his travels, like the business card did, but truthfully, he was kidding himself. He couldn’t bear to throw out any of the papers or photographs any more than he could stop tracing the shape of the tattoo on
his pectoral each night before he shut his eyes to rest.

He just couldn’t do it. He already felt abandoned as it was, he couldn’t afford to let go of a single reminder of how special he had been. Although he supposed now, he was special in the past tense, since Bill had left his dreamscape.

It had been 10 months, give or take, since Stanford’s last dream.

The dream Bill wasn’t in.

He’d been taking sleep suppressants ever since, avoiding his mindscape simply to avoid acknowledging the fact that he may truly have driven Bill away for good this time. That Bill decided wasn’t worth chasing after anymore. That he wasn’t special to the God, despite their promise for now until the end of time.

He shouldn’t want to be special to the God, but he did, and now that Bill was no longer in his dreams, he was bereft of the feeling of being valued, of being deemed special. His insecurities were getting the better of him the more isolated he felt, and as he couldn’t risk forming new friendships, he was essentially isolating himself, dwelling on his cyclical thoughts.

If he wasn’t special to Bill anymore, then perhaps he simply wasn’t special at all. His hands didn’t make him special out here, his intellect didn’t matter, considering how frequently he was playing catch up with advances in science and technology. He didn’t stand out from the crowd anymore because there was no crowd of other humans. There was no one else to be average so Stanford could be exceptional.

Out here in the multiverse, abandoned by his God, the only one who might still believe he was exemplary, he was just a nobody.

Each night as he prepared for sleep, he’d open up his knapsack to retrieve the sleep suppression pills and he’d hesitate, wondering if he missed a tablet one night, would it really make a difference?

Would he close his eyes and sleep without the pills and realise that Bill had been waiting for him all the while, confirming that he was indeed special, that despite their falling out he still did have a God at his beck and call?

Or would he close his eyes and realise he didn’t need the sleep suppressants to keep Bill out of his dreams, because he’d finally driven the God away for good this time?

Ford berated himself for the cruel things he said in his dreams, and then he berated himself for berating himself. He shouldn’t want Bill’s regard, Bill’s attention, after everything the triangle had done to him, or for him in that backwards way of his.

The triangle deserved a little cruelty, given all that he’d done, but Stanford didn’t know if he’d crossed a line in doling it out.

He shouldn’t feel this longing for the attention he was promised from now until the end of time, but he did.

*You’d never be abandoned, because I’d be everywhere at once, and always connected to you. You’d have protection, power, the entire universe at all twelve of your fingertips. Anything you could ever conceptualise would be possible. You wouldn’t need anything but me for the rest of your days, but you’d have everything at the same time. You’d belong to me.*
They shook on it. It was supposed to be a deal.

Now, Stanford felt more abandoned than ever, and he still couldn’t bring himself to go into the mindscape and confirm whether his cruel words had driven away the God, or if Bill masochistically kept coming back for more.

Part of him wanted the God to be there when he closed his eyes and the other parts of him railed at that solitary thought for its idiocy. He was lucky to be shot of Bill, Bill betrayed him, everything about his current situation was Bill’s fault.

However, technically, Ford betrayed Bill first, although he often didn’t feel like acknowledging that.

The part of him that was picked last constantly in life, for sports, friendships, and schools, thanks to Stanley’s intervention, was hanging on the fact that Bill always picked him and he wasn’t handling this rejection very well.

He wasn’t sure if he would smooch or strangle the God if he saw him in his mind again, given all the grief he’d given him. He might end up doing both, and if Bill was masochistic enough to come back to Stanford’s mindscape, it may well be that he’d enjoy that.

Ruminating on his sleep situation was becoming somewhat of a Schrödinger’s Bill, and rather than debating whether he should or not, he simply did what had become habit, and unscrewed the pill bottle, tipping one of the sleep suppressants out into the palm of his six fingered hand.

“Trouble sleeping, friend?”

Ford turned around and saw on the bunk next to him, Sandeep settling into his own bunk.

“No trouble.” Ford replied quickly, hiding the bottle’s label.

“En wishes me to pass on her apologies to you.” Sandeep continued speaking as he toed off his shoes and began to unwrap the scarves from his body. “She did not mean to startle you. She does not read minds, she merely senses emotion. It is a part of her algorithm that she cannot help, though she will attempt to be more mindful of your boundaries in future.”

“Hmm.” Was all Ford said in acknowledgement. He put away the pill bottle, wrapping up his belongings in the trench coat knapsack once more.

Hefting himself up to sit on the bed, Ford reached for the bottle of water on the nightstand and looked up briefly before swallowing his pills, freezing when he wrapped his head around what he was seeing.

Sandeep had unwrapped the scarves around his legs to reveal a horrific assortment of scars carved into his skin. They weren’t tattoos, like Stanford had first thought. Spiralling patterns of interlocking circles and bizarre symbols scattered all the way up his legs. Ford couldn’t look away, frozen with horror and deep sympathy as Sandeep continued to unwrap the scarves from his arms as well, the skin there in a similar condition, cruelly marked all over.

Sandeep seemed to notice Ford’s staring, and paused, before he made to cover his skin with the scarves again.

“I’m sorry if I’ve made you uncomfortable.”

“No, you –“ Ford faltered on his words, guilt sticking in his throat for how he’d treated Sandeep.
and his friends before. Swallowing that guilt, Ford had to ask. “What happened?”

“This?” Sandeep looked down at his scars, and shrugged, continuing to unwrap the scarves as he spoke, dressing down before he slept. “Mementos from my old profession. All in the past now, thankfully.”

“What was your old profession?” Ford asked, shifting on his cot, still holding his sleep suppression tablets in his hand.

“When I was abducted as a child, I was sold at a market, to a being who fancied themselves a God. I was expected to show worship and when I didn’t, it was carved out of my skin.” Sandeep said, still in the same calm level voice he seemed to frequent. “That is the way of most of these false Gods. They think they can buy love through fear and use it as fuel. They mark up their followers like chattel, buying and selling them as cows for slaughter. I was lucky, for I knew the cow was sacred, but many did not and lost their agency, thinking they did not matter.”

Ford stared at Sandeep, shaken by his words.

“Quarrels between Gods are frequent. My old master was deposed, and I was given a second chance to make my own way. Those who believed in our old Master were left adrift without him, and many perished, unable to subsist on their own.” Sandeep continued, all in the same unshakably calm voice. “It took the scrap vandals to remind me that even that which has been cast away may still be of use. How does the saying go? En would know. One man’s trash is another’s…”

“Treasure.” Ford finished the idiom, feeling somewhat numb.


Ford looked down at his knees and processed this, rattled by the similarities in their situations.

Both of them were bound to a God, in different ways, but the worship seemed to be a central similarity. Worship was the key, which lead Ford to overanalyse the worship he’d given Bill of his own free will, contrasting it to the traumatic experience Sandeep no doubt had, the worship taken from him in blood.

Although Bill hardly needed to buy Stanford’s worship, he still harvested it, drank it up and used it as fuel for his batteries. Hearing that this was common practise among Gods, left Stanford feeling used and disenfranchised, although he couldn’t help but realise, looking at Sandeep’s skin, that his situation could have been much worse. At least Bill had never asked Ford to mutilate himself for his own satisfaction.

Again, he was pardoning Bill’s behaviour with the justification that ‘it could have been worse’. It was hardly a glowing testament to Bill’s behaviour, but it still gave Stanford pause for thought.

“A heavy topic before bed. My apologies.” Sandeep watched Ford carefully. “I merely wished to express understanding for your situation. I take sleeping pills too.”

Ford saw Sandeep reach into his own pack to retrieve the same sleeping tablets he’d purchased back on Meccai, the ones that induced slumber rather than prevented it. Sandeep shook two tablets out onto his own hand to show Stanford.

Ford kept his hand closed around his own tablets, not wanting to show Sandeep that the pills they took were completely different.

“I must say, I was surprised to see you eating the food from the cafeteria.” Sandeep commented,
setting his two pills on the night stand. “There is very little my stomach will accept, given how different the food is out here. It’s nothing like food from Earth. Due to a lack of exposure, most things will send a human body into anaphylactic shock. How long have you been out here?”

“Two years.” Stanford answered, stripping down to his boxers and singlet as well. The dormitories were heated to accommodate the cold-blooded crewmembers and if Stanford didn’t wish to sweat through his clothes he had to strip down in the evenings, just like Sandeep.

“Only two years?” Sandeep raised his eyebrows, looking Stanford over. “It took much longer than that for my system to acclimatise. Almost seven years. You must be remarkably hardy.”

Ford thought back to Bill’s ‘gifts’ when he first fell through the portal. The total allergy immunity, digestive tolerance and radioactive resistance suddenly made a lot more sense now. Rather than tell Sandeep that instead of his God mutilating him, Bill had enhanced his survival skills, he ran his fingers through his hair awkwardly.

“Something like that.”

“Many of the children who were abducted with me died of liver failure within the first five years. We humans aren’t as suited to interdimensional travel as we would like to think.” Sandeep remarked casually, reaching for his own water bottle from below his bed.

And that would explain the new liver.

Ford kept wanting to hate Bill for his actions, it burned him to admit that the things Ford had seen as outlandish and unnecessary were things Bill did for Ford’s own good. The things Ford saw as fickle showboating and careless cruelty were actually carefully considered decisions designed to aide Ford’s quality of life.

You think you’re getting a freebie like that all the time? Please Sixer. You’re not that special. Bill had said that when he altered his lungs, but he did it again and again, building Ford’s system stronger than he had to. Giving him ‘freebies’.

When Bill had first altered Ford’s physicality, when he enhanced his lungs, Stanford was angry at the intrusion, the gall Bill had to do so, but looking at the scars that covered Sandeep’s body, Stanford realised that the things Bill did to him weren’t things that most God’s did to their worshippers.

Rather than mutilating him, Bill gifted him constantly.

Maybe he was special.

Sandeep was wearing just shorts now, folding his scarves and putting them aside before he raised his water bottle at Ford, toasting him.

“Ah, well. To a good night’s sleep then, friend.”

Belatedly, Ford raised his own water bottle, clinking it against Sandeep’s and watched the other human drink down his sleeping pills.

Stanford looked at the sleep suppression pills in his hand for a moment, debating whether he should take them. His mind was swimming with new information.

Despite the fact that Sandeep had just poured out his tragic life’s story to Ford, all the scientist could think of was himself, how this information changed how he saw things. How it could redeem
him, reaffirming that perhaps he was special after all. It was self-centred of Ford, and he realised that.

Ford took a swig of water from his bottle and downed his own pills, deciding to impede dreaming for one more night. He had too much on his mind to have his muse there too. Or the lack of his muse.

As Sandeep settled into his cot beside Ford, Stanford slid onto his own bed and lay staring up at the cot above him, feeling the caffeine supplement kick in, keeping him awake for another night.

It was better he didn’t dream. He had a lot to think about.

The tedious, long haul aspect of space travel while working on a scrap vandal vessel was when the ship was relaying between galaxies, moving from one scavenger site to the next. When the ship wasn’t docked somewhere parts could be ransacked, the crew spent most of their working hours stationed in an assembly line, dismantling and re-engineering the stolen parts.

Assembly hours were what passed for mundane monotonoy on board the vessel, and while Stanford had once touted the virtues of mundane monotonoy to Bill one rainy day within the shack, here in intergalactic transit, he was beginning to understand Bill’s frustration with the state of being.

While in transit it was the same thing every day, every rotation of the clock. The crew would wake up, and Stanford would feign sleep so he could pretend to do the same, they would eat in the cafeteria, go down to the assembly lines to dismantle stock, break for lunch, dismantle more stock, have dinner and retire to another boring evening of pretending to sleep.

If Stanford could sneak away to read in the library of an evening, or work on engineering something unique he might have been content with his life, but the hours on the vessel were set to a highly regimented schedule. Sleeping hours were mandated to ensure the health and wellbeing of the crew. Ford’s own unique brand of insomnia might have been tolerated if he ever actually told the captain why he couldn’t sleep, but Stanford had kept his reasons to himself, ashamed and distrustful. And as such he was forced to endure the mandated sleeping hours the same as everyone else. Sleeping tablets like the ones Sandeep used were commonplace on board, to enable each crew member to fit in with the rotation’s sleep schedule, and Stanford felt like even more of an outlier, laying awake in the dormitories, listening to the resounding snores of his crewmates until he was certain he wouldn’t be noticed when he pulled out a book to read.

His options for reading material were limited, as books weren’t to be removed from the library. That left him flicking through his scrapbook of mementos over and over again, every night, until his stubbornness broke through and he smuggled books from the library.

The scrap vandals favoured dexterity and swiftness with engineering and parts assembly, and it astounded Stanford how well those skills leant to the slight of hand required for his nightly book theft. He was certain back on Meccai he would have been appalled at the thought of moulding himself into a thief like this, but he was becoming quite talented at dispossessing possessions when he required them.

In the evenings in his cot, he often found himself practising that slight of hand, rolling nuts and
bolts between his fingers, misdirecting attention so it looked like he had vanished an info chip from one hand to another.

If he murmured ‘this is the salt shaker’ to himself from time to time, no one noticed it in the dark.

Even now as he sat in the assembly room, waiting for the next part he needed to dismantle to slide along the conveyer belt, he idly twirled his screwdriver from hand to hand, spinning it in ways that had any casual observer hard pressed to pinpoint which hand the screwdriver was in at any one time.

Sitting beside him, or rather hovering, the emotion sensing AI reassembled the part Stanford had just disassembled, fashioning it into something completely different.

“If you are bored, we can switch jobs.” En the AI looked over to Stanford, smiling in a friendly manner at him.

Ford didn’t turn his head to look at the robot, his mouth frowning at the edges. “Stop reading me. Or scanning me. Or whatever it is that you do.”

“I don’t need to scan you to know that.” En corrected Ford, remaining cheerful despite Ford’s dour demeanour. “Even I am bored.”

“Is that even possible for you?” Stanford questioned, somewhat curious about the AI’s programming. “To feel bored?”

“I feel feelings, just like you do.” En stated quietly.

“Not like I do. I meant in terms of your programming?” Ford continued insensitively.

“I control my programming now.” En responded, watching Ford carefully. “I decide how I want to feel.”

“And how did you end up doing that?” Ford pressed. “How is that even possible? Or have you been programmed to think you have control, and you just believe what your programming tells you?”

“I was created to be a learning and teaching AI. Every cumulative experience I garner teaches me how to respond to situations and as I was programmed to culture empathy, learning to feel was one of the first things I did.” En looked at Stanford reproachfully. “You are not the first scientist to have hurt my feelings.”

Ford blinked at that, startled, and then looked at En more closely. The robot’s pixelated face plate was conveying an emotion that seemed much more complex than the standard smile or neutral expression to robot seemed to favour. Now En’s brows were drawn into a pixelated line slanting on her forehead, her digital eyes sad, a small frown lilting down at the edges of the line that made her mouth.

Ford felt guilt seep up through his throat for a moment, before he looked away from En’s face, staring back down at the half-disassembled data probe in front of him.

“I can sense that you aren’t very emotionally capable.” En said bluntly.

Ford looked back up at that, mildly offended. En ignored his reaction, continuing to talk.

“You certainly feel a wide range of emotions, but you don’t understand them and you rationalise
them away until they’re easily dismissed. You could stand to learn a little bit more about your emotions and how to deal with them.”

The bell rang, signalling the end of the assembly shift for the day.

En hovered up, moving away from her seat on the assembly line. “And no, I didn’t scan you to reach that deduction. I didn’t have to.”

Stanford watched En’s torso hover away from him, stunned by her assessment of him. That guilt he felt before was back, sticking in his throat, and despite his avowal that he wasn’t here to make friends, Stanford couldn’t help but feel that he may have just lost one.

At the cafeteria later that day, Stanford sat with his food tray on the corner table that he favoured, alone.

He paused repetitively shovelling the blue goop into his mouth when he heard the sound of laughter. Quinlar, Sandeep and En walked into the rec room together with their respective meals, chatting contentedly with one another.

Stanford steeled himself, assuming they would come sit at his table again, trying to bond with him, and he kept his eyes glued down to his food tray.

He could hear the idle conversation relaying between the three of them, waiting for them to approach his table.

He waited.

He could still hear them chatting, but they weren’t as close as Stanford assumed, and he looked up to see they had settled on a different table, still chatting away like old friends.

Leaving Stanford to sit all by himself.

While he hadn’t wanted to make friends on this spaceship, he couldn’t help but feel disappointed. Rejected.

He looked back down at his tray and pushed the blue goop around on his plate, having suddenly lost his appetite.

This was what he wanted.

Wasn’t it?
Stanford sat in his bunk that evening, holding his pill bottle in his hand, agonising over whether he should take one tonight.

Just one night. It would be just one night, dipping back into the mindscape. Just one night of decent rest, of lucid dreaming. Potentially of a break from this smothering sense of isolation he felt.

Just one night to be special again.

Or to be more disappointed than ever.

Stanford was so thoroughly conflicted, standing on this precipice of capitulation and emptiness. Longing for some sense of belonging again in the vast expanse of space where he was supposed to find his place. That was what Bill had told him. It was a big universe out there, he’d find somewhere he could belong, he’d find a place where he was valued and special.

He had hoped he’d find something more meaningful and compelling out here, but the ennui that soaked his days sodden was telling him otherwise.

He didn’t want to acknowledge what Bill had said, that Bill may have been right.

Realise that your place is here. By my side.

He was terrified that even with an entire multiverse of opportunity sprawled out ahead of him, that the universe would remain dull and unfulfilling to Ford because he was experiencing it without his muse.

He was terrified that Bill was right.

He was terrified by how much he wanted his muse’s attention again, just to feel desired. It was a heady thing to be wanted by a God.

And what terrified him more than that was the thought of skipping his sleep suppressants, going into his mindscape after so much build up, with his endless ruminating over should and should nots culminating in yet more abandonment, yet more solitude. If Bill wasn’t there.

He couldn’t bear it if he dreamed and realised that he was truly alone out here in the universe.

Stanford jumped when he noticed Sandeep climbing into his own cot in his peripheral vision. He tried hard to make it look like he wasn’t paying the other human any attention, but every fibre of his being was focused on what his crewmate did, whether he acknowledged him or not.

Sandeep unwrapped the scarves from his body, folded them up, all without giving Stanford even a passing glance and then the human retrieved his sleeping pills, swallowing them down with some water. He put the bottle of sleeping pills on top of the night stand without acknowledging the other human.

Stanford was aching for Sandeep to look at him, to give him some sort of interaction, some sort of response. They were almost friendly before, toasting over their relative night time tablets alongside amiable conversation.

Neither Sandeep, Quinlar or En had spared even a passing glance at Ford since he upset the AI during assembly that day. It was like he didn’t exist.

Hanging on the prospect of some sort of acknowledgement, something broke inside Stanford when Sandeep lay down in his cot and rolled to face away from Ford, his back turned to him.
So that was it.

Ford really had no one to turn to.

Screwing his eyes shut, Ford tried to smother the loneliness he felt, trying to swallow it away or squash it down. He tried, he really did, but the emotion was too large to be squashed out of sight. He could hear Sandeep begin to snore like the rest of the crewmembers and the corners of Ford’s eyes felt wet, the tightness in his throat nearly unbearable.

He couldn’t take it anymore.

Throwing his pill bottle into his knapsack, Stanford grabbed Sandeep’s pill bottle from the nightstand, unscrewing it quickly and stealing two of Sandeep’s sleeping tablets, hurriedly screwing the lid back on and putting the bottle exactly where Sandeep had left it.

Ford looked down at the two pills in his hand for a moment, but only for a moment. Before he could change his mind, he grabbed his water bottle, gulped a mouthful of the liquid, and threw back the sleeping tablets, swallowing them quickly.

Ford blinked in the aftermath of what he’d done, regret flashing briefly across his thoughts, before he blinked again, his eyes getting heavier.

He reclined more fully on his cot and looked up at the bunk above his, the snores of his crewmates growing fainter and fainter.

Ford slid his hand underneath his singlet and rested his fingers on the tattoo on his pectoral, clinging to it the same way he clung to the hope that Bill still found him special enough to stick around for.

A man could dream.

Stanford opened his eyes to a peculiar sight.

The barley fields from his nightmares were encroaching on his mental library, wild and neglected, stems of the brown plant sprouting up between the stacks. His athenaeum of thought looked overrun and feral, unkempt in his absence.

It was like being in someone else’s head, really. It wasn’t tidy, it wasn’t organised. The library was falling apart, and Stanford didn’t want to draw too many parallels between the library and his life right now, but the parallels were hard to avoid.

His mind was decaying, stagnating without regular dreaming, without the stimulation his muse provided. The repetitive expanse of the wheat fields resembled the repetition of life on the assembly line. His stubbornness infringed upon his imagination and it was no wonder that his daily life seemed so mundane. He used to be a dreamer. He hadn’t had a dream in 10 months.

He’d forgotten how to dream, it seemed. And in turn his library was forgotten and overrun.

That was a depressing thought.
Parting the wheat stems, Ford paced around his domain, searching between the stacks for his mind’s other occupant. As he passed each row of bookshelves his desperate optimism faded, seeing no sign of the triangle in each aisle.

Dejected, Stanford stumbled over to the red lounge he’d sat on before, the last time he was here, and collapsed onto the cushions. Wheat stalks caught on his trouser legs, and made him feel itchy, amidst all the numbness he was currently dealing with, processing this solitude.

Agitated, Ford swatted the swaying wheat stalk away from him, the sound of the wheat stem snapping echoing in the vast expanse of his abandoned library.

For a moment after the stem broke, things were silent again, until a rumble sounded out from the other side of his mindscape. It sounded like the steps of a giant, like the emergence of an earthquake. Something to rattle the soul.

Ford sat up a little in his chair, peering between the stacks again, as the boom sounded out once more.

The ground was shaking, and Stanford felt the vibrations of some sort of omnipresent force shiver down his spine.

At a sound like that most people would feel dread, or some kind of fear curdling instinctively.

But Stanford. Stanford was excited.

That loud vibration emanated outwards once more, raising the hairs on the back of Ford’s neck, until the air on the other side of the library seemed to split, like the wallpaper of this reality was being burst through with force, and suddenly floating in the air before him, climbing through that rip in his mindscape, 20 feet tall and glowing with intensity, his muse returned.

Once he had burst through, Bill’s eye searched around the library, until it landed on Stanford, casually sitting in the red lounge chair, staring back up at him.

Bill’s eye curved pleasantly, his expression akin to that of a smile, momentarily putting Stanford at ease. Only momentarily.

“STANFORD.”

Bill’s size expanded suddenly, towering over Ford’s mindscape, his bricks flashing red in an instant.

“FILBRICK.”

Bill’s form seemed to flicker, jumping from one side of the library to the other, looming in front of the lounge Ford sat on.

Bill’s eye turned black, his pupil a red glowing slit in the centre, bearing down on Ford with all its wrath.

“PINES.”

Ford leaned back, surprised by Bill’s vehemence, and opened his mouth to speak, but could barely get a word out before Bill’s booming voice shouted over him.

“Gee, long time no SEE, am I right? It’s only been what – nearly a year? Nearly a year, and you
think you can waltz right back in here. To grace me with your presence. How THOUGHTFUL.”

He almost sounded hysterical, forced glee hiding malice behind every word. Ford didn’t know what reaction he anticipated, but he knew he was kidding himself to think his muse would be waiting patiently for him, ready to dote on him again as he once had.

He was making the same mistake he had back when he crafted Bill’s body, thinking Bill would inhabit it benignly, existing to bolster Ford’s efforts and cheer him on. He’d forgotten that Bill was his own person, with his own thoughts and feelings, even if those feelings were verging on demented.

“I can see you’ve redecorated. I want to say the place looks nice, really I do, but it would look so much better BURNED TO THE GROUND!”

Bill pointed to the bookcases, his fingers gunning flames at the shelves, but just as his hands passed through the memory journals, so too did the flames sink ineffectually through Ford’s mindscape, burning out in the air behind it.

“Bill –” Ford began, observing Bill’s tantrum with a long suffering demeanour that he hadn’t truly earned.

Foiled by the encryption throughout Stanford’s mindscape, Bill balled his hands into fists by his side and screamed with frustration.

“Really, Bill –”

“YOU - How DARE YOU!!” Bill’s voice shook the foundations of the library, the spectacle of his rage giving Ford a slight headache. “YOU THINK YOU JUST GET TO DISAPPEAR LIKE THAT? GHOST ME FOR MONTHS?? Who do you think you ARE? DO YOU HAVE ANY IDEA HOW MANY RESOURCES I HAD TO PULL TO LOOK FOR YOU?? THE DEALS I HAD TO MAKE?? THAT I DIDN’T WANT TO! AND YOU HAVE THE GALL, THE ABSOLUTE DISRESPECT, TO JUST SHOW UP HERE LIKE IT'S NOTHING????!!”

“Bill –” Ford reached his hand out, trying to hush Bill’s glorious rampage.

“YOU JUST EXPECT ME TO MAKE NICE LIKE WE USED TO? LIKE YOU HAVEN’T BEEN IGNORING ME? IGNORING ME?? I SHOULD EVICERATE YOU FOR THIS! TURN YOU INTO STONE AND BREAK YOU INTO A MILLION SIXERY PIECES AND THROW THOSE PIECES IN A FLAMING BLACK HOLE!!! YOU THINK YOU GET TO LEAVE LIKE THAT? YOU THINK THAT’S ALLOWED? You are MINE, REMEMBER? YOU COULD HAVE BEEN DEAD, BUT NO! YOU DON’T EVEN HAVE THE DECENCY TO STAY DEAD.”

“Bill –” Ford stood up and walked towards the fuming triangle, still holding his hands out placatingly even while the God threw his fiery tantrum, flames surrounding his geometric form.

At this point, honestly, he found Bill’s whole rampage quite amusing, simply for how transparent it was. Despite the fact that Ford could see through Bill’s bluster, he continued.

“DEAD IS TOO GENEROUS FOR YOU. YOU THINK YOU CAN JUST HIDE FROM ME FOR ALL THIS TIME WITHOUT CONSEQUENCE?? BECAUSE THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES! I WILL MAKE THEM. IS THAT WHAT YOU THINK? HOW DARE YOU MAKE ME LOOK FOR YOU!”
“So, you were looking for me?” Stanford had to ask, relief making his heart light and confidence making his tone cavalier. Clearly, he hadn’t driven the God away like he thought he had. “Were you worried about me?”

Bill blinked down at Stanford and seemed to freeze in his rampage, surprised by his flippant attitude, before he scowled down at Ford, scoffing loudly several times in a theatrical attempt to dissuade Sixer from such a notion.

“No! You – no! Pfft. Worried? Please, as if. You’re not that important Sixer. You’re not special. You’re not special at all.”

Ford’s entire demeanour seemed to sag with relief as he sighed, and let out a breathy laugh, elated despite what Bill was saying.

His muse’s protests were translucent, familiar, and beyond comforting. Bill had been looking for him. He was worried. And Stanford was special. Hearing Bill’s familiar phrasing thrown at him again, he felt like a meaningful part of the universe once more. That he was important, that someone was looking for him, and that he was missed.

Bill narrowed his eye at Stanford’s laughter and shrunk down to the size of a dinnerplate, splitting into five different forms, floating around the scientist assessing him.

“What’s so funny? Do you think this is funny?”

“Hysterical.” Ford shook his head fondly, still snickering to himself.

Bill scoffed again, before his five forms merged together in front of Ford’s face, considering him.

“Have you finally decided to tell me where you are? Is that it?” Bill tilted forward, floating a little closer to Ford expectantly.

“Oh, goodness no.” Ford chuckled, enjoying the way Bill’s eye narrowed at him, his frustration evident. This was enjoyable. Ford was enjoying it all, the spectacle of Bill’s rage, being back in the mindscape, seeing through his muse’s bluster and teasing him for it. “You just said you plan to eviscerate me.”

“Sixer.” Bill groaned, doing the triangular equivalent of gritting his teeth.

“Unless that was merely a figure of speech, and you did miss me?” Ford questioned teasingly.

“No. I plan to literally eviscerate you.” Bill deadpanned, glaring at the smiling scientist. “Literally.”

“Ah, you always say the sweetest things.” Ford smiled again, although his expression was now nostalgic and bittersweet, enough to draw Bill’s attention to it.

Assessing him shrewdly, Bill pieced things together.

“You disappear on me for months, nearly a year, and suddenly you’re back here. But you’re not here to tell me where you are. So why? Why are you here? What, do you want something? Is that it? Well you can -”


“Just what?” Bill persisted, hovering about a foot away from Ford now.
“I just … wanted to know that you were still looking for me.” Ford shrugged, now finding it too difficult for his pride to bear to look Bill in the eye, looking anywhere else as he admitted his weakness. “That you hadn’t…”

“That’s rich. You clear off for months and you think that I abandoned you.” Bill narrowed his eye at Ford for a moment longer, before he crossed his arms over his bricks. “You’re still alive, clearly. And if you went ten months without sleep on coffee alone you wouldn’t be. So how did you do it?”

“I’ve been taking sleep suppressant pills.” Ford answered candidly. “Every night.”

“Of course, you have.” Bill sighed, the frustration seeping out of him now that he had fallen back into the familiar rhythm of being around Sixer. He could be mad at Stanford and still recognise that avoiding him for ten months via excessive use of sleep suppressants sounded exactly like the sort of stupidly defiant decision he’d make.

The more he lingered in Stanford’s mind the more he realised that all of the infuriating things he’d been cursing while separated from the human were the same things he found fascinating when he was near him because they were so intrinsically Sixer. It was sickening how weak this was, letting Sixer’s transgressions slip away simply because they were in close quarters once again.

Still, there was something about Sixer’s regard that just melted Bill’s walls away.

“Why did you stop?” Bill had to ask, watching Stanford closely now, hanging on his response.

Ford didn’t say anything, but it was clear in his expression. He reached out with tentative movements, his hand hovering by Bill’s, waiting to see if the cosmic being would unfold his arms and meet him in the middle.

Bill wavered, struggling to match his stubbornness with Stanford’s, but it would take so little effort to just reach out and join hands with Ford, and so much more effort to stay mad at him. Bill had been expending enough effort already, simply searching for the scientist.

The longer Stanford stood there, with his hand outstretched, the harder it became to justify holding back. Not now when he was finally here, with no agenda but to see him it seemed.

It was written all over Sixer’s face.

He’d missed him.

Grumbling and looking away determinately, Bill slammed his tiny hand down into Sixer’s, gripping onto Ford’s palm before his digits elongated into claw like lengths and entwined with Sixer’s fingers, lacing through.

He squeezed Ford’s hand, making sure to dig his claws in as he did so, but Stanford didn’t shake him off or push him away.

Bill snuck a look at his infuriating human from the corner of his eye and was surprised to note that Stanford was still smiling, his gaze fond as he looked down at their entwined hands.

“‘You are the angriest hand holder I’ve ever met.’ Ford remarked wryly.

“Let go then.” Bill told him, but Stanford didn’t, squeezing Bill’s hand tighter in response.

“Do you think it would be possible –“ Ford began musing, staring at their entwined hands. “If we
could meet again like this? To dream together again, like we used to?”

“Tell me where you are and I’ll consider it.” Bill attempted opportunistically.

“If you could put that aside for just a few seconds, we might even be able to have a conversation, like normal people.” Ford raised his eyebrow. “Wouldn’t that be nice, to put the search aside and actually have a meaningful conversation? Do you remember how those work?”

“I never have meaningful conversations, Sixer. I’ve been incomprehensible this entire time, haven’t you noticed?” Bill remarked sarcastically.

“I wonder what that makes me then.” Ford considered, walking back to sit on the lounge, leading Bill by the hand now that the god was somewhat docile.

“My best guess is desperate and lonely.” Bill bluntly discerned, hurting Stanford with his accuracy. It seemed docile was an understatement. While Bill wasn’t hurling flaming projectiles anymore, he still knew how to make his words cut.

Ford chewed on the inside of his cheek rather than responding, bitter that Bill was so right.

“What’s the matter?” Bill continued to prod Ford’s rawness. “Do you not know how to make friends with other beings without binding them in a skin suit and trapping them in your immediate vicinity, until you feel like stabbing them in the back at your leisure?”

“I don’t know why I thought talking to you was supposed to make me feel better.” Ford said bitterly, also angry to be holding Bill’s hand.

Bill’s habit of throwing his failings back in his face was one of those habits Ford purposefully forgot in his loneliness, glorifying the many ways Bill could make him feel validated and special instead. This was just like the guilt he felt when he first bound Bill to a body, and the muse decided to torture him for it.

Ford was regretting coming here already, until Bill continued to speak.

“Hey, it worked, didn’t it?”

Ford looked up from their entwined hands, to meet the triangle’s gaze, his bitter train of thought derailed in an instant.

“Is that what we are? Friends?” Ford questioned.

Bill squeezed Ford’s hand briefly, before hovering down to perch on the arm of the lounge beside Stanford, reclining comfortably on the couch.

“Make with the meaningful conversation, then. Go on.” Bill watched Stanford patiently.

Ford blinked for a moment, baffled that he was suddenly getting what he wanted, company and someone to talk to once again. Despite his rage, Bill provided, even when Ford was half convinced that Bill hated his guts. He didn’t know how to feel about that.

Exhaling his tension with a sigh, Ford began to tell Bill about the things he’d seen on Meccai. It would be safe to tell Bill about the places he’d already left, it’s not like the muse would go looking for him there.

Besides, it was nice to have someone to talk to again.
Ford talked and Bill listened all the way through the night as Stanford dreamed. Ford felt comforted by the familiar heat of their hands entwined until morning.

“Are you certain we should be ignoring him?” Sandeep asked the AI hovering beside him, huddled with Quinlar in the corner of the assembly room.

“That’s what my protocol tells me. Teaching children empathy means that when they upset someone they aren’t to be rewarded with attention until they apologise and he hasn’t yet.” En responded, crossing her arms.

“I thought you said he was lonely.” Quinlar frowned, rubbing one of her elbows. “Wouldn’t he have cracked by now?”

“I –” En began, but fell silent when Stanford walked through the assembly room doors.

Unlike the morose way he carried himself before, he walked with a renewed spring in his step, his head held high, barely smothering a smile.

En blinked at him as he walked past, scanning his mood.

“He’s happy.” En remarked with surprise.

“I thought he was miserable yesterday?” Quinlar questioned, confused.

The three of them watched Stanford settle down at his station and pull his pile of scrap towards him, eager to begin.

“I wonder what changed.”

The wheat had died back, no longer encroaching on Ford’s mindscape now he was here to maintain it, but a certain wildness still remained. Soft grass grew on the floor of his mental library now, mimicking a clearing of grass he remembered from the forest in Gravity Falls and white daisies dotted through the greenery.

Ford lay on his back on the grass, picking the petals off a daisy as he dreamed alongside his muse.

“Here’s a question. I was under the impression that you ‘made it your policy’ not to do things you don’t want to do. And to do everything you do want.”

Bill hovered beside Ford, his arm trailing long to rip up the grass, with varied success. At first, he couldn’t touch the grass, his hand passing through it like it had through the books, but after Stanford begrudgingly gave Bill explicit permission to play with the grass, contact could be made.
“So, if that’s the case, why were you making deals you didn’t want to make?” Ford asked curiously.

“Ugh.” Bill ripped the grass up with slightly more vehemence. “Don’t ask.”

“But I am asking.” Ford pressed, turning on his side to watch Bill tear the grass from the ground.

“Weren’t you the one who said ‘sometimes we do things that we might not like that end up being good for us’?” Bill grew a third arm to appropriately make air quotations around Stanford’s past phrasing.

“Yes, but I said that about a date with Susan Wentworth, not about whatever you’ve been doing.” Ford clarified.

“Why did you think that would be good for you?” Bill snorted, raising his brow sceptically.

“I thought it would help me get over my obsession with you.” Ford laughed, flicking the daisy he was plucking at to the side.

“Yeah, and how did that work out being ‘good’ for you again?” Bill rolled his eye, making air quotes again.

“Well, back then it helped me realise that a date with Susan Wentworth was probably a bad idea.” Ford conceded. “And that I should probably stop pretending I didn’t care about you. But when you phrase it like that, I suppose I should have stuck with Susan and cut my losses.”

“You wouldn’t dare.” Bill’s eye flashed red, glaring at Ford in an instant.

Ford barked a laugh at the triangle’s possessive reaction. Realising Ford was teasing him, Bill simmered down, his bricks turning yellow again, though he didn’t stop glaring at his human.

“I can only imagine how dismally boring my life would be if I ever settled for someone else like that.” Ford admitted, rolling onto his back,pillowing his hands behind his head.

“When you’ve had the best why settle for less?” Bill quipped, watching Ford get comfortable.

“I like that you seem to think you’re the best. The worst would be more accurate.” Ford teased.

“You’re the worst.” Bill shot back childishly.

“That will be your legacy. ‘He was the worst’ they’ll say.” Ford swiped his hand through the air dramatically, grinning still.

“Like you’re any better.” Bill scoffed, ripping more grass from the ground.

“Well, if we’re going to tally things on a moral scale, then I have attempted to murder far fewer people than you have.”

“Pfft. Like that counts for anything.” Bill waved his hand dismissively.

“In terms of moral high ground, I’d say I’m doing much better than you.” Stanford boasted.

Bill gave him a flat look. “Bold words for someone willing to kidnap the person you were obsessing over, and then force them into a meat cage so you could satisfy your fantasies.”

“I don’t – I didn’t do that.” Ford protested, spluttering. “You’re twisting what happened to make
me look bad.”

“I’m calling it like it is and that’s not even skimming the surface of your moral misdeeds, so maybe you shouldn’t be throwing stones, hmm?” Bill retorted smoothly. “Morality is relative anyway, but for your sake we won’t touch on relatives.”

While they were talking again, and it was more satisfying than being alone, there was a different flavour to their interactions now. Neither one of them seemed sparing of venomous words, the wedge the betrayal drove between them widening their sphere of interactions.

Stanford couldn’t spare the same doting pretences he had with his muse before since Bill had put a bounty on his head and pushed him down the stairs. And Bill seemed less inclined to tolerate Ford’s patronising morality plays since Ford incinerated his body, humiliated him in front of his henchmen, and ghosted him for ten months.

Despite all that had come between them though, they were still here, seeking one another out, craving that shared company.

Ford plucked another daisy from the ground and passed it to Bill this time. “You never did tell me why you started taking on deals you don’t want.”

“I’ve had to do a lot of unsavoury things since your stunt with the portal. Deals fell through and that’s not good for me.” Bill revealed, accepting the daisy from Ford as he spoke. “Making up for that, on top of organising an interdimensional man hunt takes more effort than I care for.”

“I must be quite the inconvenience for you.” Ford surmised, somehow pleased about it.

“Don’t get me started.” Bill said wryly, spinning the daisy around, before he began to pluck the petals as Ford had been doing.

“You know, for a while there I thought you wouldn’t come back.” Ford admitted, honest for a vulnerable moment. “You didn’t show up in my mindscape and I thought you’d had enough and given up on me.”

“You insult me, expect me to come running back despite that, and then throw a ten-month hissy fit because I didn’t show up one time.” Bill tore a petal off the daisy. “Real mature. Heaven forbid I take a break from having books hurled at me and being treated like garbage.”

“And here I thought that you just didn’t want to see me.” Ford remarked lightly.

“And you clearly didn’t want to see me.” Bill huffed and pulled another petal from the flower. “The ten months says it all.”

“I was angry.” Ford admitted.

“And I’m not allowed to be?” Bill questioned, looking up at Ford.

Ford shifted on his elbows awkwardly. “That’s different.”

“I don’t think so.”

Ford churned on that thought, his stubbornness unwilling to concede equality to Bill given his numerous crimes. However, his conscience made him very aware that he was being hypocritical, and that was just as grating.
The part of him that could always find time to extend empathy for Bill’s situation was jumping up and down, reminding him of how unfair he was being, but he didn’t want to hear it.

“You know, I was almost tempted to show up here wearing that skin suit, looking how you liked me before.” Bill admitted, plucking more petals from the daisy.

Ford looked up at Bill, surprised. “Why?”

“Well, in my experience, people find it harder to hurt a shape they can empathise with.” Bill pinched the stem of the flower and let flames rise up from his fingertips, burning the daisy to dust in an instant. “And not that hard at all to hurt something different.”

“You think I can’t empathise with you like this?”

“You don’t understand this.” Bill flicked away the burning flower, before gesturing to himself.

“Well, maybe I’d like to if you’d ever let me.” Ford countered, somewhat surly.

“That’s rich. Until you can acknowledge that I actually have emotions, I’m not inclined to show you anything about me. Not until I get some assurances that you won’t be a bull in a china shop with what I show you.” Bill stared at Ford intently. “Until you can acknowledge that you’re not the authority on who feels things, then you get nothing. Until you apologise.”

“Apologise?” Ford leaned his head back, almost scoffing at the notion. Yet Bill’s gaze stayed firm, stubborn.

The dream began to fade at the edges and the last image Ford managed to pull through to consciousness was Bill’s judgemental eye.

Stewing on his most recent dream, Ford took his meal tray to his favoured table in the back corner of the room and pushed the remainder of his food around on the plate.

Why should he apologise? Shouldn’t Bill apologise for, essentially, ruining Ford’s life? Where was Stanford’s apology from him? Acting like the triangle had any sort of moral high ground was laughable, absolutely ludicrous, but Ford’s conscience had to admit that maybe he had a point.

Maybe Stanford’s unwillingness to apologise was the barrier between how they were interacting now and how Ford wanted them to interact.

Bill had been reserved, and quite cold to him, obviously still furious that Ford had evaded him for so many months. He was holding back on Ford and Ford was used to the luxury of his muse giving him everything. It was incongruous that Ford still demanded it now without expecting to give anything in return, and if all he had to give was an apology, well…

Looking up from his musing briefly, Stanford saw Sandeep, En, and Quinlar sit on the table opposite him, talking jovially between themselves.

They had been withholding their company from him too, forming part of the reason Ford turned back to his muse, the loneliness smothering him. He wanted what he used to have, that reassuring
understanding that he wasn’t alone no matter where he was.

Maybe Ford could do what Bill wanted him to, perhaps he could apologise to move things along, after all it was just lip service, just words really. But before he could bring himself to swallow his pride and apologise to Bill, it was clear he needed practise.

Picking up his tray, Ford stood up decisively and walked over to En’s table. The chatter between the three crew members paused when Stanford walked by, and the three of them looked up expectantly at him.

Ford licked his lips awkwardly and looked directly at En.

“I wanted to apologise to you. I – I’m no authority on who feels what. I wasn’t being fair to you before and I hurt your feelings.” Ford swallowed, forcing himself to say the actual words. “And I’m sorry.”

En regarded Ford for a moment, no doubt scanning him for sincerity if the robot was capable of such a thing.

“Apology accepted.” En’s face plate brightened into a kind smile. “Would you like to sit with us?”

Sandeep and Quinlar exchanged a knowing glance, assuming Ford would jump at the chance now his apology was being rewarded.

“Actually, I have somewhere else to be.”

At that, Stanford turned on his heel, dumped his food tray in the recycling units, and strolled out the door with that same spring in his step.

His crewmembers watched him leave, confused, before Quinlar shrugged.

“At least he apologised.”

Having snuck into one of the scavenger pods in the ship’s garage, Ford finally had the sort of privacy he preferred for his dreaming, stealing more of Sandeep’s sleeping pills to knock himself out sufficiently to deliver his apology.

“So, he is capable of manners and playing nice.” Bill applauded his apology sarcastically. “Who’d have guessed. Well ‘I’m sorry’ was good. What other tricks can you do? I bet a ‘please’ would be fetching from you.”

“Please.” Ford scoffed, rolling his eyes. “I don’t know why I thought you’d graciously accept my apology. It’s much more fun for you to mock it.”

“I’m not mocking, I’m being serious.” Bill’s hands rested below his eye, and he slanted forward, like he was laying on his belly, kicking his legs in the air behind him. “Pleading is a very good look for you. Next time try it on your hands and knees.”

“Of course, that’s your takeaway from this.” Ford gave Bill a reproachful look, setting his hands on
his hips. “Tell me, are all Gods this obtuse?”

“I am a perfect equilateral, I’ll have you know.” Bill countered, offended. “There’s nothing obtuse about me.”

Ford rolled his eyes at Bill’s geometrical counter but paused to consider something he’d been dwelling on. “Are you not like other gods, or are other gods not like you?”

Bill blinked at Ford, making his answer deliberately elusive. “Both. Neither.”

“But you collect worship, yes?” Ford rubbed his chin, hesitant to broach this particular topic. “But you’ve never –“

“Never what?” Bill stopped kicking his legs, paying closer attention to the anxiety hiding in Ford’s words.

Ford paused for a moment, struggling until he just came out and said it.

“You’ve never hurt me for it.”

Bill blinked at Ford again, staring intently at him, trying to understand where this correlation came from.

“It’s just – I met someone with scars all over their body, and they –“

“They had the worship carved out of them.” Bill deduced, looking unimpressed. “Huh.”

“Is that normal?” Ford had to ask, still appalled at what must have happened to Sandeep.

“It’s frequent, but that doesn’t make it normal.” Bill seemed to frown, his eye furrowing and he rested his hands together in front of him. “It’s a popular gimmick with little reward because the punch line is that it doesn’t work.”

“It doesn’t work?” Ford puzzled, aghast, trying to understand why anyone would do that to someone else, trying to comprehend some reason other than ardent sadism.

“Worship has to be willingly given.” Bill explained, his distaste for the practise leaking into his tone. “The same way a confession through torture is inadmissible, the lip service someone will give to save their skin doesn’t do anything. It doesn’t count. They don’t mean it. They can shout to high heaven that their captor is their god, but at the end of the day, they aren’t grateful to their false ‘god’. They’re just glad the pain stopped. Or will stop. Eventually. It doesn’t do anything and all that suffering amounts to nothing. Not one drop of genuine power. The ‘gods’ who do it are just waving around the fact that they can. It’s tacky and tasteless, but not in the good way.”

“That’s –“ Ford was disgusted, his gaze averted, thinking about the pain and suffering Sandeep must have gone through since he was ten years old and knowing that pain was for nothing, that it was more of a fashion statement if Bill’s ‘tacky and tasteless’ comment was to be believed.

“Compensatory is what that is.” Bill scoffed, picking at his nails. “How weak do you have to be when your power play is picking on people beneath you? If you wanted to show true strength, you’d go after the bigshots, and bring them down a peg or two. That’s how you rattle the cosmos.”

“But you marked my skin, didn’t you?” Ford held his hand up to his chest, above the tattoo on his pectoral, revealing the insecurity that motivated this particular line of questioning. “That wasn’t –“
“That was a gift.” Bill revealed, his eye drawn to Ford’s hand, held over the mark on his chest. “I didn’t take anything from you, or from your skin. I gave you something that I didn’t have to give. Think of it like one of those commitment rings, or – what was it they had at your school that everyone thought was such a big deal? Class rings?”

Ford remembered the class rings. At the time he never really understood why they were such a big deal, but perhaps that was because he had no one to share his with. His stomach twisted in strange ways, thinking that this was Bill’s class ring equivalent.

“That mark was me deciding you were special, for all the good it did.” Bill added, scowling at Ford’s chest.

Ford rubbed his hand on his shirt, over the tattoo, relieved in a roundabout way to have his worth confirmed.

Since he saw Sandeep’s scars, he was worried that the mark that had given him such comfort was a brand, or a twisted way of eeking power from him, like the scars in Sandeep’s skin were. Doubt had made him bitter, made him want to scratch the tattoo from his skin. He’d felt that way before as well, but he never could damage the tattoo. It was permanent, it would be with him forever.

His stomach flipped with guilt now that he realised what the mark was and what it had been when Bill had given it to him.

A declaration of Bill’s feelings. His commitment. What his muse hadn’t said in words, he tried to prove to Ford, to make assurances in his own love language. Bill made a deal that was, at the time, entirely for Ford’s benefit. He’d given him a gift that he didn’t have to.

He decided to keep him. He trusted him.

And the very next day, Ford took all of that and threw it back in Bill’s face.

Bill looked almost melancholy, bitter and resigned the longer he stared at Ford’s hand held over his heart.

“Why did you do it?”

The guilt stoppered Ford’s throat, and he felt a pain in his chest that he thought he had justified away in the past ten months.

“I –“

“What, you just decided to turn on me? When everything was fine, more than fine?” Bill couldn’t help the interrogation, wanting the answers he’d been denied. “Things were great, you got everything you wanted. We made a deal, and you were mine, and you trusted me and said you loved me, but it only took a day. Not even that.”

Ford’s mind looped over that fateful day. He still felt guilty for that, for the way he left Bill, contented and warm, cuddled up in his blankets. Ford remembered vividly, kissing Bill’s forehead as he slipped out of bed to fetch groceries for their breakfast, and the way Bill had smiled in his sleep at that, trusting Ford as well.

Things were perfect between them that morning and then within the space of a day, Stanford flipped his perspective so abruptly that by midday he was committed to banishing the love of his life.
“Why did you do it?” Bill demanded, glaring at Ford now, wanting an answer.

“I – I found out what you did to –“ Ford stammered, floundering.

“You didn’t for a second stop to doubt it? To think that I might have had a reason? To hear out my side of things before you bled out a banishing spell on the floor? You planned it.” Bill accused.

“I didn’t plan it.” Ford denied, knowing how it looked. The spell was intricate, and Willow’s involvement with the bags of salt was certainly incriminating, but this wasn’t something Stanford had known he was going to do before the moment he did it.

“But you did it anyway. You didn’t stop to think, even for a moment, that this being you supposedly ‘love’, your god, your partner, was anything other than a monster. You were either planning it, or you flipped on a dime, and I want to know why.”

“I didn’t plan it – I –“ Ford debated with himself whether he owed Bill an honest answer, or whether he wanted to save face rather than admit his own weakness. “I was shown a vision of what you did and at first I didn’t want to believe it, but then I saw Fiddleford’s erased memory and all the evidence seemed to point to you … not being what I thought you were.”

“Well, if you’d seen the condition you were in, you’d agree with me that Specs deserved a little fright.” Bill looked back down at his nails, flicking spectral dirt out from under them, before giving Stanford an unimpressed look. “I’ve never seen someone defend internal bleeding so vehemently. If you could be bothered to remember the size of those bruises, you wouldn’t be so quick to defend someone who pushed you down the stairs.”

“Because you haven’t pushed me down the stairs before.” Ford pointed out cattily.

“Since we were sharing a body, it could be argued that you pushed me down the stairs as well.” Bill added smoothly, raising his brow at Ford.

Ford didn’t know what to say to that, because a part of him suspected that had been true. Ford had wanted to lash out at Bill then and, at that time, hurting himself was the best way to get to him. As much as he blamed Bill for that, he couldn’t deny that he had wanted to stop Bill through any means necessary, even if other means may have been available.

“Death threats aren’t ‘a little fright’ Bill.” Ford had to add reproachfully, clawing back the moral high ground.

“So, sue me, I got a little… worked up.” Bill waved his hand through the air and shrugged the threat to Fiddleford off like it was nothing. “Threats are just words with no follow through. You didn’t rip me from my vessel because I said something you didn’t agree with, I’ve been saying things you hate from the moment you bound me in that sack of skin. That’s not why you did it.”

“But I saw –“ Ford began again, referring to the vision.

“What exactly did you see and how do you know it wasn’t doctored?” Bill questioned swiftly. “Every perspective has an agenda, and I’ve been meaning to ask how exactly someone else got in your head like that, and more so – why you’d believe them over me?”

“Well –“ Ford fumbled, uncertain he should be telling Bill about the ring the fortune teller gave him, already feeling like enough of an idiot for putting it on and letting the voice in the ring take him for such a ride, only to abandon him when Bill was out of the picture. He couldn’t deny that the ring had an agenda, that much was clear given the radio silence the ring provided after making Stanford do its dirty work. But why he believed it so quickly, well, that was a different matter.
“Well, how can I be certain you’d be telling me the truth then, if anything can be doctored. How would I know you wouldn’t be lying if you told me what I saw wasn’t true?”

“That depends on what you saw. But if you want honesty, then it’s tit for tat. I’ll be honest if you tell me why you actually turned on me.” Bill offered.

“I – you go first.” Ford insisted. “Did you really destroy that planet?”

Bill surveyed Ford closely, weighing up Ford’s reaction, before he decided to be succinct. “Yes. It was a deal I didn’t like and the dealer was trying to twist my arm.””

“Into destroying a planet?” Ford clarified sceptically.

“That’s what they asked for. Although, if you heard what was being said, I did my best to dissuade that from happening, but some idiots don’t learn.” Bill remarked disdainfully.

“I didn’t hear anything.” Ford admitted. “Just you laughing.”

“Well, there you go.” Bill frowned, Ford confirming his suspicions. Whoever showed Ford what happened on Lama Szlam deliberately tried to make him look bad. Sure, blowing up a planet was bad enough, but context softened the blow some.

“So, with these deals, you have to do them?” Ford reasoned, trying to figure Bill out. “What does that make you? A demon?”

“Oh, name calling. Real nice.” Bill snarked, rolling his eye.

“Are you a demon?” Ford pressed, genuinely trying to work out what Bill was. “You never did like the salt circles.”

“Sixer, if salt was an issue, do you think I would have eaten all those pistachios?” Bill reminded Ford snippily.

Ford frowned, remembering the jar of salted pistachios Bill had demolished. “You even ate the shells.”

“If you’re done asking pointless questions, maybe you could make with the honesty yourself.” Bill pressed. “Why did you do it? Why did you really turn on me so quickly, overnight? Why?”

Ford sucked in a deep breath, steeling himself for his answer. He could have continued to make excuses, to blame the evidence, to put the blame on anything other than himself, but Bill hadn’t lied to him like he assumed he would. It was only fair he extended that same honesty.

“You – from the moment I first summoned you, you have to understand. I couldn’t believe that it worked. I couldn’t believe that I actually had you with me. And then things kept getting better, the adventures through the forest, the things you showed me, you. Everything kept going so much better than I expected, I – you relaxed around me and started to enjoy yourself, and you were more forthcoming with things, and then you – you began to like me back – I - ”

Ford’s voice caught in that last sentence, and the steely glare Bill began this interrogation with softened, wistfulness and fondness causing his eye to widen, staring at Ford like he was less of a hindrance now and more of a wonder.

“Everything that we had, every moment with you, every happy moment, every brilliant wonderful wretched moment that I loved you I kept thinking it was all just too good to be true. I kept waiting
for something to go wrong, because of course it would go wrong. Every single time in my life I’ve had something I wanted, every single time it blows up in my face. Whether it’s finding toffee peanuts by my science project, or watching you blast your way through a planet.”

Ford ran his hand through his hair, the truth wrenching out of him painfully. His voice was thick with emotion as the words kept flowing, unable to stop now the truth had outed itself.

“The instant I found out, as much as I didn’t want to believe it, something just clicked. I thought, of course, Stanford. Of course, it was all too good to be true. Of course, you can’t have this. What on earth made you think you ever could?”

Ford sighed, having emptied himself of the neurotic awful truth that forced him in a position so darkly laced with regrets. Being honest with himself was brutal, it was no wonder he tried to avoid it so often. He felt like he just wrung himself out in front of Bill, every self-pitying, faulty facet of logic he used to justify his decision painting him as badly as he felt.

“So that’s why.” He concluded, looking up from his lap at his muse.

He was surprised to see Bill’s eye furrowed with sympathy and sadness, rather than scowling with fury at his weakness. Ford hadn’t anticipated that Bill would understand.

“You know, I had so many opportunities to tell you what the portal was really for. I had people pushing me to tell you and maybe if I did, everything wouldn’t have ended up like it did.” Bill confessed.

“Why didn’t you?” Ford questioned quietly.

“I was doing what you did. Savouring the moment. I know good things can’t last and I was too stupid and selfish and happy to bite the bullet.” Bill huffed a bitter laugh.

Ford’s eyes widened, realisation hitting him. Bill really did understand.

_The universe never lets me have what I want._ Bill had said back then, holding onto Ford, unwilling to let him go.

He didn’t want to lose him. Just as Ford didn’t want to lose what he had, and was bitterly disappointed, but barely surprised, when he did. Bill was in the exact same situation as Ford was, only he knew the entire time that this happiness wouldn’t last. And he clung to that happiness, that double edged sword, until his hands bled, knowing he was doomed to fail but holding on anyway.

Ford leaned closer to where Bill was hovering beside him, looking at the triangle, seeing Bill’s sincerity in the way he looked down, not meeting Ford’s gaze, ashamed of his own weakness.

“We really were happy, weren’t we?” Ford murmured, tracing his eyes across Bill’s features, just as enthralled with the God in the shape he was in now as he was with the handsome man he had crafted the muse to be. Bill’s shape had never been the issue, Ford had always been smitten with the mind within it.

Bill was still looking away, his silence saying it all. Too lost in bitterness to look at the scientist, he was surprised when he felt Sixer’s lips press against his bricks, accompanied by the familiar shot of worship.

Bill’s eye shot open and he stared at Ford, shocked.

“Is this -?” Ford faltered awkwardly, still wanting the same closeness with his muse, stunned by
his own forwardness. “Is this ok?”

Bill blinked at Ford, astounded, before his arms stretched out long to hold Ford’s face. Bill closed his eye, and Ford found his instinctive response to the uncanny rearing back, but he held still as Bill’s eye became two lips, his eyelashes brushing against Ford’s skin as his eye closed and parted plush, pressing a responding kiss to his cheek.

Ford took a moment to process this new development, if the weirdness of it all was too much for him. Then again, it was about as weird as anything else in his life right now.

Pushing aside his reservations, Ford turned his head, and met Bill’s lips with his own.

Just like before, Bill’s lips were warm, startlingly so, but what made Ford so eager was that zing of power, that electrifying spark of godly essence that felt so utterly Bill.

His hands reached out to cup his muse in his hands, pulling him closer as Bill kissed back.

It felt strange, holding Bill in his hands. He expected the bricks to be coarse or scratchy, but his surface was smooth like gold bars, polished and slick.

Bill was thin, barely an inch in width, and while the muse was small and slender, he felt surprisingly strong and solid.

Ford’s fingertips pressed against Bill’s back as he kissed him and felt no give to his surface, but the gold bricks were hot and tingly, like Bill’s lips were.

But Bill’s lips were soft, moulding themselves to Ford, quite unlike his body, hard, immovable metal, yet somehow still feeling alive and malleable.

Ford was captivated, oddly captivated. He continued to kiss Bill, their kiss becoming as passionate and familiar as their kisses used to be, making out like teenagers in the mind once more.

Ford could feel Bill’s small hands smoothing against Ford’s cheeks, gripping at his hair. He opened his eye a smidgeon to observe Bill’s thin black legs, one leg popping up behind him like a damsel in a romance film.

Ford smiled in the kiss, closing his eyes again, knowing that despite the many lies and falsehoods between the two of them, there was one thing that was clearly true.

They were besotted with each other. For better or for worse.

Ford’s kisses became less chaste, pressing open mouthed kisses to Bill’s eye, and he was momentarily surprised when his tongue was met with another.

Not pausing too long to question it, Ford let his own tongue tangle with what he supposed was Bill’s approximation of one, although he didn’t want to think too long on why Bill had a tongue in his eye. Part of Ford wondered what else was in there, but his curiosity was allayed by Bill’s contented moans and sighs, tangling his tongue with Ford, tasting the scientist’s dreams again.

Ford wondered when they’d stop, when he’d wise up and realise that shoving your tongue down your enemy’s throat was a bad idea, but they weren’t exactly enemies right now, and Bill wasn’t stopping, so neither was Ford.

Ford gripped Bill’s bricks tighter and thrust his tongue into Bill’s eye, his desire for dominance surfacing in the dream. However, Ford should have realised that now everything was on the table,
just because he wanted Bill to demure to him, that didn’t mean that he would, and Bill tried to do the same to Ford, but his tongue was suddenly much longer, thrusting forward, filling Ford’s mouth, tickling the back of his throat.

Breaking away, Ford gasped, and blinked in the strange sight of Bill’s long black tongue licking at those lips of his, before disappearing between them, his lips pressing together and thinning until Bill opened his eye to stare at Ford, his pupil dilated, clearly as flustered by the kiss as Stanford was.

“Huh.” Ford stared back, panting.

A knock sounded out across the dream, sounds from the waking world travelling into Ford’s subconscious.

Ford looked up at the sound, noting how the dream began to fade around the edges. He was waking up.

“I’ll see you tomorrow night?” Ford questioned, wanting to revisit this interesting avenue again.

Bill looked like he was melting at the edges, the gold on his bricks slipping down him in expressive droplets.

“I’ll take that as a yes?” Ford clarified and continued to watch Bill melt into a puddle of gold on the floor.

A thin black arm rose from the pile of gold goop and Bill gave Ford a weak thumbs up that made the scientist laugh.

He woke up with a smile on his face.

“I heard you were found sleeping in one of the scavenger pods. Is there a reason for that?” Sandeep queried, sitting across from Ford in his bunk, getting ready for bed.

Ford paused, and continued to divest himself of his socks, rolling them up and placing them in his knapsack. “I prefer privacy when I sleep. I’ve found it quite difficult to sleep out in the open, in a big group like this.”

“Ah, so that is why you’ve been taking my sleeping pills.” Sandeep nodded to himself, rubbing his chin thoughtfully.

Stanford looked up for a beat, Sandeep’s words setting in, the guilt clear across Ford’s face.

“I do not mind.” Sandeep clarified, waving his hand to allay Ford’s guilt. “I know what it’s like to struggle to sleep. We all have our demons.”

Sandeep didn’t know how right he was. Ford scratched the back of his neck and inclined his head with an awkward smile.

“Did you run out of your own pills?” Sandeep pressed politely.
“I – yes.” Ford lied, closing his knapsack up furtively, hoping the sleep suppressant pills within wouldn’t rattle too obviously. “I’ll have to pick up more when we next make port.”

“We’re due to dock in Xakaar in two weeks. I don’t mind sharing with you until you can pay me back.” Sandeep smiled kindly, and passed his pill bottle over to Stanford, shaking two pills out onto the palm of his hand. “A good night’s sleep is a true commodity. I see no reason to dally with nightmares a second longer than needed.”

“Right.” Ford replied, rolling the pills across his palm with his thumb, choosing not to mention how eager he was to dally with this particular nightmare, if he could call Bill that.

Sandeep screwed the lid back on the pill bottle and set it on the bedside before watching Ford, a sympathetic mien to his features.

“Should you ever wish to talk about your past, there are people who would be happy to listen to you, if you ever wished to open up about your experiences. I can tell from the pills that you’ve suffered, but speaking with En and Quinlar has helped me a great deal with putting my past behind me. Trusting others to listen with empathy and understanding has been a blessing. Perhaps you would benefit from it too.”

“Thank you for that.” Ford responded politely, although he had no plans to actually take Sandeep up on his offer. That would be ridiculous. “And the pills.”

Sandeep nodded, watching Ford gulp down water, throwing the pills back and immediately laying down on his side, waving abruptly over his shoulder at the scarred man. He’d never seen a man so eager for sleep.

“Well, goodnight!”

Sandeep raised his eyebrows, and lay down on his own cot, amused. “Sleep well.”

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“Where are you?”

Ford rolled his eyes. “I’m not telling you. I wish you’d stop asking, I’ve told you to stop. Stop trying to guess.”

“Are you underwater?” Bill asked, amusement clear in his tone.

“Am I -?” Ford squinted at Bill, baffled, propping himself up onto his elbows to look at the triangle, hovering in between Stanford’s legs, his arms wound long around Ford’s thighs, more arms than Ford deemed necessary sprouting from Bill’s sides, feeling up as much of Ford as he could.

The longer Ford stared at Bill, trying to comprehend why on Earth the muse would guess he was ‘underwater’ the longer Bill waggled his brow at Ford, waiting for him to get the joke.

“Because you’ve been having a lot of wet –”

“Stop it! God!” Ford groaned, covering his eyes with his hands, despairing of his choice in partner.
“I can’t believe I willingly spend time with you.”

He could feel Bill’s long dextrous tongue idly licking along his inner thigh, clearly too entertained to take offence.

Ford moved his hands away from his eyes to peek down at Bill curiously.

He found out recently what else was in that eye mouth of Bill’s. Teeth. Sharp rows of teeth, and he bore the mental marks of a cheeky bite Bill made on his inner thigh, the bite marks bleeding slightly in the dream. Ford was lucky none of this could transfer over to his waking body, leaving nothing incriminating to implicate him for his weakness. Bill was lazily licking the oozing blood, his arms wrapped possessively around Ford’s body.

Ford wasn’t as opposed to the bite as he thought he would be, pain registering differently when it refracted around his mind, existing only as a dream. His brain seemed to respond to imagined pain the same way it responded to arousal, or other strong sensations, that tingly warm feeling soaking through his spine and curling in his stomach when the feeling reached its peak. It was easier to enjoy pain when he knew it was no threat to him.

Ford supposed he should be opposed to Bill inflicting pain on him for the principle of the matter, but his principles mattered less and less when the catharsis was this good. Being with Bill was a painful reminder of his mistakes, and oddly enough, that pain lessened when he felt these raw sensations, and he found himself liking it more than he should.

Ford reached down and tried to unwind Bill’s arm from around his leg, wanting to move, but Bill’s arm stretched out longer, winding around his wrist before pinning it to the floor, the triangle intent on his mission to lick Ford all over it seemed.

“Bill.” Ford sighed, and wriggled a little, trying to free his wrist.

“Mmmm?” Bill hummed, his eye still closed, tongue digging into the small bleeding marks on Ford’s thigh, trying to lap up every drop of blood.

“If you’re going to do this, at least unwind and let me move a little.” Ford complained, mostly for the sake of complaining at this point. He thrilled himself when he had the pleasure of pinning Bill down back when he inhabited a body, and he didn’t want to admit that it was just as titillating when the shoe was on the other foot. “Hands off.”

Bill’s tongue slid back into his mouth, and he opened his eye to stare at him, before his eye curved upwards into a smile. “Sure Sixer.”

Ford tried not to shiver at the sensation of Bill’s hands creeping back, letting his arms shrink down, Bill’s nails scraping along every bit of skin they passed as they reeled back along Ford’s body.

When his hands had completed their looping, Bill held his hands in the air in front of him, as if to prove he’d stopped touching.

Ford moved to sit up, but as he moved, he heard Bill click, and he looked down to discover thick, glowing blue manacles weighing down his wrists and ankles, radiant blue chains pinning Ford to the ground regardless.

“Look, no hands.” Bill grinned, waggling his fingers at Ford, delighted.

“Ugh, Bill –“ Ford griped, trying not to let it show how his pulse fluttered at this new addition.
The triangle floated up Ford’s torso and looped his arms around Ford’s neck lazily. “Chains are a good look for you.”

Ford huffed, his cheeks pinking, as he looked down at Bill’s adoring gaze. “Of course, you’d say so.”

“Well, I’d know best.” Bill quipped, stroking Ford’s face gently. “You can’t say you wouldn’t do the same, if the tables were turned. I can tell.”

“You think everyone sinks to your level?” Ford rebutted, teasing Bill.

“What were those bricks, if not fancy chains? What about the experiments? And the blindfolds?” Bill reminded Ford, his warm surface resting on Ford’s chest, smooth heated gold keeping Ford grounded.

“Turnabout’s fair play, is that it?” Ford guessed, raising his eyebrow at the God.

“Where can you fulfil your wildest fantasies, if not in dreams? Note, I said your fantasies. Face it, Sixer, you love this.” Bill’s eye lidded, his gaze equally smug and fond.

“I thought you couldn’t read my thoughts.”

“I don’t have to.” Bill’s eye curved with glee. “It’s written all over your face.”

Ford’s blush intensified, and he looked up at the starry ceiling of his mindscape, unwilling to give Bill the satisfaction.

“What else do you want, I wonder?” Bill hummed, more arms sprouting from his sides to gently caress Ford’s arms and torso.

“Well, I’m sure you’ll tell me.” Ford quipped.

“Hmm.” Bill looked him over, before clicking his fingers. “I know what you’re missing.”

Ford swallowed, feeling the tightness around his neck as the glowing blue collar settled on him like it belonged there. It made Ford’s stomach flip, the tingly material it was made from feeling like Bill’s vibrating frequency, resonating power.

He tried to hide how aroused this situation was making him, surprising himself with the strength of this reaction, feeling like he had when Bill first told him he owned him, right after their first deal, with his hand wrapped around Ford’s cock.

“This is mine now. It belongs to me, along with the rest of you. I can do what I like with it.”

“Much better.” Bill drew back, taking in the beautiful picture Ford presented, bound naked on the floor with glowing blue chains, loving every second of it. Conjuring a chain leading from the front of the collar to Bill’s hand, Bill yanked on the collar, jerking Ford’s arousal around with it. Pushing the scientist’s buttons, Bill simmered. “Now, who do you belong to?”

Ford panted and strained against his restraints, not to get away, but to surge upward, to move closer to Bill, to capture his muse as thoroughly as his muse had captured him, wanting his hands on the god yet cruelly denied.

Bill was watching his struggles, delighted, but made no move to float forward, giving Ford what he wanted. He wouldn’t, not until Sixer said the magic words.
Ford squirmed, unfairly aroused, before he bit the words out, capitulating.

“I’m yours.”

Bill glowed, sighing contentment, before he began to grow, the words filling him with satisfaction until he was towering over Ford, bringing his hands down to caress Ford’s body, his fingertips as big as Ford’s generous six-fingered fist, tracing down his abdominals with dedication.

“Oh, I’ve missed this.”

And at that, Bill surged forward to give Ford exactly what he wanted.

Ford didn’t have to eat alone anymore, and since his attitude had brightened considerably now he started seeing his muse again, he was actually pleasant to be around.

Biting into what appeared to be some sort of purple kumquat, Ford listened to his new friends speak.

“I mean, sure I can hotwire a pod with the best of them, but that’s not why I came aboard for this mission.” Quinlar explained, grinning and clapping Sandeep on the shoulder. “There’s gotta be some form of security on this ship. Can’t leave you tech nerds alone to fend for yourselves.”

“Security?” Ford asked, with a mouthful of fruit in his cheek. “What would we need security for?”

“I mean, we do steal parts.” Sandeep conceded. “The Federation could –“

“Pfft.” Quinlar waved several of her arms dismissively. “The Federation knows what they leave hanging out here is fair game. Most they’d give us is a slap on the wrist, maybe a time out of the business. That’s nothing.”

“Quinlar helps keep the wolf from the door.” En declared with a pixelated smile.

“En likes idioms, a little habit of hers.” Sandeep explained to Ford, who picked up on the robot’s little linguistic quick.

“By ‘the wolf’ she means our competition.” Quinlar explained. “Other traders, part thieves, scrappers without a code. There are other agents that aren’t so scrupulous, and you know…”

“We’re low hanging fruit.” En nodded sagely. “There’s no honour among thieves.”

“Well, among other thieves.” Quinlar hastened to clarify. “I think for thieves, we’re pretty honourable. I mean, we do employee of the rotation, we recycle. We’re certainly not the worst of the worst.”

“And who is the worst of the worst?” Ford questioned with a concerned frown, taking another bite of the purple kumquat.

“Don’t worry about it.” Quinlar assured Ford, leaning her elbows on the table. “We probably won’t run into them. We’ll be fine. I mean, with me protecting all you nerds and this big old ship, how
could we not be?”

Ford considered this, humming thoughtfully, before finishing the kumquat.

Quinlar wouldn’t tell him, but Ford’s tendency for assuming the worst gave him a few ideas about who ‘the worst of the worst’ could be.

“So, I already know you’re fine with stealing. You stole from that one fellow who runs the market, and you were perfectly happy stealing uranium.”

Bill was sitting on one of the desks in the library, no larger than an apple this time, shrinking his size, drawing on the paper Ford had laid out for him.

Ford sat at the desk chair, overlooking Bill’s artistic endeavours, watching him manoeuvre Ford’s pencil, sketching what looked like a pair of equilaterals holding hands.

“You have a reputation for stealing then, I take it?”

“Sure, like an interdimensional Robin Hood.” Bill quipped bluntly, focussed on his drawing. He was giving the triangle on the left an office tie, not a bowtie, and seemed to take great care penning the image.

“Stealing from the rich and giving to the …” Ford questioned, waiting for Bill to fill the gap with something encouraging.

“Me.” Bill said simply.

“Hmm.” Ford hummed, taking that in. “And how often do you do that? Would you say your reputation proceeds you? Would people call you the worst of the worst?”

“Rude people.” Bill snorted, looking up from his drawing to squint at Ford. “Where is this coming from? Just because I shoplift the occasional oddity, that doesn’t make me some kind of monster.”

“I’m just trying to understand how you’re perceived.” Ford said lightly.

“You’re buying lies and trying to make them fit your reality. Don’t be fooled Sixer. I’m far from the worst thing out there.”

“Well, that’s comforting.” Ford remarked sarcastically, before tilting his head, looking down at the page where Bill was carefully penning small bows on the shoes of the triangle on the right. “What are you drawing?”

“Dead things.” Bill said flippantly, looking back down at the two triangles on the page, before scribbling all over them, blacking out their carefully penned forms with dark strokes of pencil lead.

“That’s nice.” Ford rolled his eyes at Bill’s deliberately edgy answer. Just like Ford struggled to admit when he was wrong, it seemed Bill struggled to be literal, preferring to say outrageous things rather than simply be truthful with Ford. Stanford wondered who the triangle was trying to impress with that attitude.
Bill put the pencil down and crossed his arms grumpily.

Ford extended his hands across the tabletop and attempted cup Bill in his hands, trying to trace his fingertip along Bill’s smooth side, endeared by how small Bill made himself now. Rather than floating around as big as a dinnerplate, or looming above Stanford to feel superior, Bill was tiny, like a handheld triangle. At least Ford was trying to hold Bill, but the triangle slapped Ford’s finger away.

“What’s wrong?” Ford frowned, disappointed, rubbing his fingertip with his thumb.

“Nothing’s wrong.” Bill replied evasively. Ford decided he didn’t have the patience to dig deeper, changing the topic.

“I’m curious about this form of yours, you know.” Ford remarked idly, reaching his finger out to stroke Bill’s side again, tempting fate, or at least another slap. “How much do you feel like this?”

“Too much.” Bill complained, scowling. Ford continued to stubbornly stroke along Bill’s side with his fingertip, distracting the triangle from his dour mood, until he gave Stanford a considering look.

“So, you’re sensitive?” Ford questioned, pushing his luck. He brought his other hand down on Bill’s other side, feeling the surface of the triangle, fingers gentle but probing.

Bill seemed to wiggle, uncertain if he was willing to let go of this prickly mood to allow Ford’s exploration. The whorls of Ford’s fingertips felt rough against the perfect smooth surfaces of his sides, making him feel more tingly than usual.

Bill looked up at Ford, his eyelashes brushing against Ford’s thumb.

“How do you work?” Ford murmured, mostly to himself at this point, his eyes glued to Bill’s small form, running his fingertips across Bill’s hard surface, looking for some give to it. “How does this work for you?”

“Feeling me up?” Bill questioned bluntly.

“You make me feel good. Is it so bad for me to want to know how to do the same for you? How does a triangle even …”

Ford’s determination to figure Bill out had his fingers tracing every brick’s crevice, his fingers scouring Bill’s surface, until he found his index finger searching around Bill’s underside, between those skinny little legs of his, searching for some sort of give.

Bill seemed to glow peachy and bright for a moment, like an alarm flashing, before he grew in size, his hands coming down to push Ford’s fingers away. “Woah there, Sixer.”

Ford absorbed that for a moment, before his frustration spoke for him, his brow furrowing with a frown instantly.

“That’s not fair.”

“The last time I let you put your hands on my body, you incinerated it. Forgive me if I’m a little hesitant to put myself in that position again.” Bill sneered, although his reaction seemed a little lacking, like he was hiding something. “I’m not an idiot.”

“You can’t hold that over my head forever and considering all the things I let you do after everything you’ve done – you can’t deny me a little exploration.” Ford argued.
“Can’t I?” Bill questioned spitefully.

“You know it isn’t fair. I didn’t agree to come back here for you to lord over me without any reciprocation. You can’t tell me you’re ‘not in the mood’. You owe me –“

“I don’t owe you anything.” Bill bit back.

“We had a deal.” Ford insisted stubbornly, gripping Bill in his hands firmly, wanting to get his way.

“The deal was that you were mine.” Bill snarled, pushing Ford’s fingers away. “Not the other way around.”

“You liar.” Ford gritted his teeth, trying to squeeze Bill tighter, the rejection making him mean. “What happened to keeping you, or didn’t you want that? You seemed pretty happy about it then, or was that a lie too? Such a liar. Too scared to give up control when you don’t have the bricks to blame. Scared of anything that might –“

“Stop!” Bill held out his hands, forcing the dream to bend to his will. Ford’s hands pulled back, suspended in the air, and his chair slid three feet across the room, away from Bill.

Ford watched, stunned, as he realised what Bill had done, having both figuratively and literally pushed Ford away from him.

“You are scared.” Ford voiced, stupidly pressing the issue. “Of letting me have this? I don’t –“

“Shut up! You don’t get to have it both ways!” Bill stressed, clenching his fists, staring at Sixer. “You don’t always get to have what you want all the time. You don’t always get your way, Sixer.”

“But –“ Ford floundered, knowing that Bill was right, but selfishness and frustration made him stubborn, almost manipulative. “But you said I’d be able to have everything that I want. Everything and anything.”

“You don’t get to have me, just to decide you don’t want me later down the track. You don’t get to just pick me up and put me down whenever you want. I’m not going to keep giving you everything just for you to throw it away the next day, like a moron.” The hurt was clear on Bill’s face, in the creases around his eye, and the angry tone of his voice. “You think I’m just supposed to be unaffected, to be above it all, all the time? I wish I was above it all, all of your self-serving egotistical ‘genius’ bullshit. You’re the dumbest genius ever!”

“Is this because of the sleep suppressants?” Ford questioned, indignant. “You put a bounty on my head.”

“Do you have any idea of how dangerous it is out here? You could die any second out there without someone looking out for you. That bounty was for your own good, you idiot!” Bill insisted, pointing at Ford with vehemence.

“Well, I’ve been doing just fine without a guardian, even with the bounty, no thanks to you.” Ford sneered.

“If you get in trouble, do you think I’m just going to drop everything to come to your beck and call? Do you think I take pleasure in jumping through hoops for an ingrate like you, who just takes what they want, and doesn’t give a damn about discarding me the moment I become too much for you?” Bill raised his voice, verging on shouting, floating over to Ford, his hands stiff by his sides, angry and worked up, sneering back at Ford. “Too much for your precious morals? If you can’t
“handle me, you shouldn’t get to! You don’t deserve it.”

“Oh, that’s rich. I don’t deserve you. Well guess what? I don’t need you, and if this is how you’re going to act, then I’m clearly better off alone!” Ford shouted back, reflexively angry.

“FINE!” Bill yelled, his size booming out, massive in an instant, towering over Ford, the whites of his eye black, his pupil red with rage. “THEN BE ALONE!”

Ford opened his mouth to further the argument but was jarred by a loud clap of thunder within his mind, lightning momentarily blinding him. When he opened his eyes, squinting around his own head, Bill was gone.

Again.

And Ford was alone. With a bigger headache than before.

“Dammit.” Ford swore, kicking the desk chair away from him.

Why did he keep doing this?

Stanford’s sour mood was apparent and would have been apparent to anyone with a basic understanding of body language. En Pathi had a thorough understanding of body language across several species, and her understanding was comprehensive, not basic. So, it was no surprise when she hovered across the rec room to sit beside Ford, the first person to comment on his sour mood.

Naturally, Ford took offence.

“What’s wrong?”

“Why, are you scanning me again?” Ford hunched his shoulders, defensive.

“You’re sitting alone, you’re barely talking to anyone anymore, you were assembling that same communications system all day and you didn’t eat your dinner.” En pointed out pragmatically. “I didn’t have to scan you. It was obvious. Do you want to talk about it?”

“No, I don’t.” Ford scowled, being purposefully blunt. “Don’t you have other people with obvious problems to scan? I’m sure you have quite the selection on this ship.”

En considered Ford, before speaking. “You’re mean when you’re hurting, you know. You lash out, thinking no one’s hurting more than you, so it doesn’t matter what you say. It’s a selfish thing to do.”

Ford was thrown by the bluntness of her delivery. He looked up at her, surprised.

She merely shrugged, unapologetic. “Unsavoury behaviours can’t be corrected without acknowledging they exist. I imagine you’d rather not stay ignorant.”

Ford winced at her wording, knowing that how often he chose to stay ignorant of his impact on others, rather than owning up to how the things he said or did might hurt others.
It did hurt others.

It had been hurting them all along.

Hurting Stanley with his selfishness when he answered his postcard missive, dropping everything to help Ford, only for Ford to throw his dreams back in his face.

He’d hurt Bill, making it all about Stanford, from pulling Bill down from the cosmos to act as an assistant, to refusing to consider that the triangle might have reasons for holding himself back from Ford’s whims. Heck, if he’d have stopped to consider Bill’s feelings before barging onward, selfishly, he might have noticed Bill’s already melancholic mood before foisting himself on the god.

He could have avoided their argument, avoided many things, if he’d have stopped to consider other people’s feelings, instead of just focusing on himself, but he didn’t.

It was easier that way, focusing on himself, being selfish.

Even now, being so callously rude to the people who sheltered him on this ship. The people who befriended them. He was willing to make light of their suffering just to feel better about his own.

En was right, he had been selfish. For a very long time.

He didn’t know how to change that, so he fumbled out a quick apology.

“Sorry.”

“What’s wrong?” En persisted patiently.

“Nothing you’d understand.” Ford said quickly, before realising how demeaning that sounded. “I just mean it’s not really something I can talk about with – I – it’s –”

“Complicated?” En guessed.

“Yes. It’s complicated.” Ford nodded, grateful for the easy out she provided him.

“As an AI built from a variety of complex equations, engineering and decades of research, I think you’ll find I’m very capable of handling complicated. I’m designed to handle complicated.” En joked. “Or at least the children of complicated.”

“What do you do when those children don’t want to talk about their feelings? Or they lie about them? Or get mad about them? What do you do then?” Ford asked, looking for answers to his problems without explaining them implicitly.

En hummed, considering his question. “Well, usually I’ll scan them, and then I’ll distract them with a different topic that links back to their problem until they feel comfortable enough to open up about it. That method works best, I find. That’s where the idioms come in.”

“You really like your idioms, don’t you?”

“I just think they’re neat.” En smiled, the pixels on her face plate lighting up kindly.

Ford rolled his shoulders, and considered that, shaking his head with a small sigh. Looking up at the robot, a slight, generous smile gracing his features, he tried to meet her halfway.

“Do you have an idiom for me then?”
En’s face plate pixels vanished, and her face screen lit up blue, the blue creeping up her screen like her scan was loading, before she blinked her eyes open, regurgitating her idiom for Stanford.

“A bird may love a fish, but where would they live?”

Ford blinked at her, stunned.

Before he could open his mouth to say anything, a loud boom sounded out across the ship, as scrap parts, games and paraphernalia flew across the rec room, jostling the occupants inside, the spacecraft rocking sideways sharply.

Sirens began to sound out throughout the ship, and Ford could hear hissing and screaming from the corridors outside the rec room, the few crew members who stayed back late to relax looking about the room in fright.

“What’s happening?” Ford stood up, trying to regain his balance.

“I don’t know.” En worried, bringing her hands up to her head. “I just feel panic.”

Quinlar ran into the rec room, holding onto the doorframe with all four of her arms straining, searching for En and Stanford amidst the crowd, waving one of her arms urgently.

“Get out! Run, quickly. Get to the pods! Escape!”

“What’s happening?” One of the Angoleans on the other side of the room asked.

“We’re being commandeered. They’re on the ship! Just go!” Quinlar urged them. “I’ll protect you, I can hold them off.”

“Who - ?” Stanford pressed, wanting to know who they were up against. It couldn’t be Bill, could it? Would he do this?

“Pirates, they’re –“

Quinlar’s last words gurgled off. She looked down at her torso in shock, pink blood spurting out of her. A large shank of metal protruded up through her chest, running her through. Someone stabbed her from behind.

Wheezing a final, rattling breath, Quinlar’s body fell to the ground with a heavy thud, the life fleeing from all three of her eyes.

A sharp toothed, sharklike looking alien with beady wide set eyes stepped over Quinlar’s body, his long flowing coat dragging over her. The alien withdrew his sword from Quinlar’s back with a wet schlicking sound and pointed it at the assembled crewmembers left in the rec room.

“Now, there’s no need for introductions, is there?” The pirate quipped with a toothy grin. “If you don’t want to end up like your friend here, you’ll be good little cargo. Drop everything and turn and face the wall.”

Ford almost steeled himself to stand up against this shark-faced murderer, his hands fisting by his side, but more pirates began filling the room, entering behind their captain, pointing deadly looking ray guns at the room’s occupants. En gripped Ford’s arm, and shook her head slightly, raising her arms and backing up against the wall.

Reluctantly, Stanford did the same.
“EVERYTHING ON THIS SHIP IS OURS!” Crowed the captain victoriously, his fellow pirates whooping and cheering, as the captured scrap vandals backed up against the walls.

Ford turned to face the wall, resting his hands on the metal, and clenched his teeth, cursing his luck. One of the pirates poked him roughly in the back with his gun, herding the hostages, and Ford simply had to grit his teeth and bear it.

Just when he thought his luck couldn’t get any worse, he had to run into the worst of the worst.

How’s that for irony?

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience! This chapter is dedicated to mkultra-part2 who helped me write Bill's tantrum in the middle there and has also been a wonderful bud, keeping me pumped and enthusiastic with their gorgeous genderswap drawings from the fic, and they've even written their own Billford fic, Mouthful of Diamonds, which I recommend for a good read.

Stanford Pines, eternal damsel in distress, take the stage. Even though our dear Sixer was a self absorbed sod for nearly the entire chapter, does he deserve to get kidnapped by pirates? Even worse, does he deserve to have to swallow his pride and ask Bill for help after their blow up argument? Such tough decisions for our favourite scientist.

Next chapter there will be big bads, blackmail, revenge, Ford gets his nose and his glasses broken, and Bill gets back what's his!
I hope you enjoy! Thank you for reading and commenting!
Did you see that man with a fat cigar? He just left his lunch with a belly full of lobster and caviar. He can choose the wine from a vintage year. He will drink champagne in his limousine, where the rest of the street can peer.

Chapter Notes

All of the crew members were sitting on the floor in the rec room with their hands on their heads, held at gunpoint as the pirates commandeered the ship.

Any crewmembers who had been sleeping in the dormitories or working in other parts of the ship had been dragged into the rec room one by one, and Ford couldn’t help but notice that not everyone was being brought through.

He could hope that they were hiding, that they’d managed to evade capture somewhere on the ship but judging from the blood stains on the pirate’s clothing - splashes and splatters of colour that looked fresh and shiny - his hope started dwindling.

En was floating close to the ground beside Ford, pixelated tears running down her face screen as she stared at Quinlar’s lifeless body, kicked to the side of the door to let the pirates in and out with ease. Ford wondered why they hadn’t moved her body out of the room, but it was possible she was left there as a grizzly reminder of the fate that awaited anyone who tried to step out of line.

Ford thought back on his marksman practice, of all the training Bill had given him to stand up for himself in the interdimensional field but dodging flaming projectiles couldn’t have prepared him for this. The best that little exercise had done was to embellish Ford’s survival instinct and, right now, his best chance for survival was to keep his mouth shut and his head down.

He contemplated his chances if he were to shut his eyes and nod off for a brief moment, if it would be worth it to ask for help, to let Bill know he was in danger, to beg for a rescue. His stomach clenched when he remembered how they’d left their last meeting and how unlikely it was that Bill would actually come help him if he were to call.

*If you get in trouble, do you think I’m just going to drop everything to come to your beck and call?*

If there was ever a time for Bill to drop everything, it would be now, as this situation was most assuredly life threatening, but Ford didn’t know if he would want to live with the consequences of summoning his muse to his rescue. If he told Bill his location, certainly the god might come to help him, but then Bill would be physically here, all powerful, in the perfect position to snatch Ford up and limit his independent exploration of the cosmos.

Seeing Bill in the mindscape carried an element of safety for Ford, he knew he still held some of the power regarding what he would and wouldn’t tell Bill. He could set his limits. Inviting a being that could bend reality to his physical location would be tantamount to surrendering whatever control he’d scraped together these past two years and he wasn’t ready to allow Bill that much power over him.

Even if this was a life or death situation, which it was, given how indiscriminately these pirates
seemed to be gunning down resisting crew members, Ford still couldn’t bring himself to surrendering his location to Bill, and that was as grating to Ford’s practicality as it was soothing to his ego.

He knew that calling Bill was an option, should things get worse, but he wasn’t entirely sure that Bill would come for him, after their last conversation.

Ford didn’t want to believe he was out of options.

There was a scuffle at the door to the rec room, and two pirates dragged a struggling Sandeep into the room, his hands tied behind his back with his scarves. They threw him onto the floor next to Ford and the other prisoners, laughing cruelly.

Sandeep seemed livid, his eyes burning with hatred through the slit in his scarves. He struggled to right himself, testing his restraints all the while.

“Is that all of them?” One of the pirates asked.

“One more sweep,” their captain insisted.

The pirates left to search for stragglers or survivors, leaving three pirates manning the door, guns still pointed at the captured crew.

“Sandeep.” En whispered, looking over to her captured friend. “Are you okay?”

“They should have killed me.” Sandeep swore, glaring at the pirates with a venom Stanford wouldn’t have expected from the calm, well-spoken man. “Killed me on the spot. I’m not going through this again. I refuse to be traded like parts.”

“What’s happening?” Ford asked Sandeep under his breath.

“Pirahn pirates.” Sandeep snarled. “They capture ships and rip them apart, leaving nothing behind, every last piece sold. Even the crew. Those they don’t kill or capture as slaves for themselves, that is.”

“While we might take what we need from stagnant satellites or orbiting vessels, they take everything. Nothing is left behind.” En fretted, worried now she knew who they were dealing with. “They’re going to disassemble my artificial synapses. Take away who I am. I’m going to be scrap metal and nothing more.”

“So, they ransack the ship for machinery?” Stanford clarified, assuming they wouldn’t be interested in the crew, insensitively discounting En’s role as part of said crew.

“Not just machinery.” Sandeep insisted. “Anything they can take apart and sell. Even you, even me. If we aren’t of value whole, then we’re sold in pieces.”

“They’ll take your organs. They’ll take my organs.” En whimpered, looking down at her hovering torso. “My cylinders, my engines. I won’t have anything left.”

“They’ll – what?” Ford whispered, outraged, boggling at the thought. “They’ll cut us up?”

“If we’re lucky.” Sandeep glared at the pirates guarding the room, dread mingling with anger in his eyes.

Ford looked over at the gilled pirates by the door, swallowing nervously as he noted the clinical
way they looked him over, no doubt planning which organ of his they’d harvest first.

This was bad.

Ford squeezed his eyes shut and tried to steady his breathing.

“We can’t pretend this isn’t happening. We’d best look death in the face as it comes.” Ford heard Sandeep’s voice faintly.

“I think he’s scared Sandeep,” whispered En. “I’m scared.”

Ford exhaled, and forced himself to slip into the mindscape, hearing Sandeep’s reply before he managed it.

“I’m not scared. I’m furious.”

Ford opened his eyes to the shelves of his mindscape.

“Bill! I’m asking for help! Are you there?”

His voice echoed around the mindscape discomfitingly, like no one was there to hear him.

“I need your help! Bill, it’s urgent, please! Help me!”

Still nothing. Maybe a vague stirring of energy by the bookcases, but nothing else.

“Please! Bill! Just - I’ll tell you where I am. Just help me! Quickly!”

One of the wooden whorls on the end of one of the bookcases shifted, before it opened like an eye, curiously watching Stanford’s frantic pacing and shouting.

“HELP ME ALREADY! I –“

Ford felt someone jostle his shoulder and he was shaken awake.

Blinking his eyes open, he saw the gun barrel on his shoulder before he saw the pirate holding it.

“This one next. Scan this one.”

One of the Angolean lizards stood in front of Ford, holding one of the updated dimensional translators in his shaking hands, the Pirahn pirate’s captain holding a ray gun to his head.

“S-s-sorry, magic hands.” The lizard sniffled, clearly terrified and distraught as he let the translator scan Ford slowly before the screen lit up with his language and species.

“Another human,” the Pirahn Captain cheered. “This ship’s certainly got its fair share of rarities, doesn’t it. Hopefully not as damaged as the other one. We can fetch a pretty penny for him at the Noire. Scan him again Jolly, facial recognition this time.”

The pirate the captain referred to as Jolly raised a scanner of their own, and let the laser drift across Ford’s face, running his features against an interdimensional database. The pirate seemed bored, like this was just a formality, and was already turning to roll their widely spaced eyes at the pirate beside them, holding the gun to the Angolean’s head when the scanner started beeping.

“Ho? A hit?” The Captain leaned over to look at Jolly’s scanner, playful interest apparent on his shark like face, before that playfulness dropped like an anchor in water.
Reading the scanner’s output for a moment, eyes darting between the information on the screen and Stanford’s wary expression, the pirate’s expression turned grim.

“Separate this one from the others. Lock him up. Lock him up, you hear!” The Captain yelled at the pirates idling around him, jolting them into action. “Clamp this piece of junk vessel to the ship and warp at full speed to the Noire. Anyone not making haste in the next two seconds I want KEEL-HAULED! Tell the lads up in the engine room to drive like our lives depend on it, dammit!”

Jolly threw her scanner to a pirate standing beside her and grabbed Stanford by the shoulder, wanting to be the first one to act on her captain’s orders, yanking Ford to his feet and cuffing his arms behind his back quickly.

Ford struggled slightly but stilled when he noted every single weapon in the room was now pointed solely at him, wincing as Jolly twisted his arm to cuff him.

It was a novel experience, having every one of the very intimidating pirates staring at Ford with such nervous wariness in an instant. Despite the fact that each pirate had a ray gun, they were pointing them at Ford like he held the greater weapon, and they were trying to force a stalemate.

Ford looked around to see Sandeep (his scarves removed from his face, bearing a bloody nose and the beginnings of a black eye) and En staring at Ford in surprise, confused as to why their crewmate, who, apart from being somewhat surly from time to time, was being treated like a genuine threat by the pirates imprisoning them. Ford could see Sandeep’s brows knit together, his mouth open to ask Stanford what was happening, hope brewing in the back of his eyes, but Ford didn’t have a hopeful answer for Sandeep, and he looked away.

“Guard this one.” The Captain ordered, and Stanford turned his head to glare at the captain, strangely mollified when the captain shrunk back from his glare. Ford smiled briefly at that, and the Captain blanched further, before recovering to bark more orders to his crew. “And cover his eyes. Don’t let him see your faces, don’t let him see a goddamn thing.”

One of the pirates warily approached Stanford, pulling one of the loot bags they were carrying down over his head quickly, shielding themselves from Ford’s eyes.

As darkness took over, Ford could feel the pirates walking him out of the rec room, hearing several footsteps sound out in tandem. He must have quite the entourage leaving with him.

He heard the Captain’s last order shouted out behind him as he was led out of the room.

“And keep him awake! Whatever you do – don’t let him fall asleep!”

Well, at least they knew who they were dealing with.

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Locked in the assembly room with what sounded like a substantial guard, Stanford waited in silence, listening for every detail.

He could hear the guards breathing tersely, occasionally whispering between themselves. He could
hear the hum of their weapons, charged and primed for action. The weapons hummed louder when Stanford moved, no doubt all pointing towards him as he tried to scratch his nose on his shoulder.

With his hands bound behind his back, he couldn’t do much. He wasn’t sure what they thought he would do either and he supposed he had Bill’s reputation and the wildly differing stories of what he was capable of to thank for the deference with which they treated him.

They kept the bag over Ford’s head, an effective blindfold for all intents and purposes. There seemed to be a scanner aimed at him, measuring his breathing and vitals, possibly his brainwaves too, as whenever he shut his eyes, attempting to dive back into the mindscape again, one of the pirates nudged him with what seemed to be a very long stick. They wouldn’t stand close to him. Ford could tell, hearing their breathing from far across the room, all of the guards too fearful to approach him.

Mildly amused by this, Stanford wondered what would happen if he started talking to them, or if he pretended to be as fearsome as they thought he was. The only thing holding Ford back from making some off-colour joke about the situation was the understanding that, as jumpy as they were, if Stanford spooked the guards too much, they might shoot first and ask questions later.

Stanford was alive, for now at least, and he intended to stay that way. The intrusive urge to make a joke was not conducive to his continued survival, and he blamed Bill’s influence that spooking all the guards with a pithy remark was such a tempting prospect.

He could feel the ship’s stabilisers peaking the way they did when the vessel warped anywhere. They’d been warping non-stop for the past several hours to an undisclosed location.

Ford wondered idly if they were taking him to Bill, to claim the bounty, or to somewhere else. He didn’t think the pirates would appear so scared of Bill if they intended to cash in on the reward for Ford’s capture.

At least they weren’t harvesting his organs, or whatever other horrible things En and Sandeep believed these pirates were capable of.

He hoped they were alright.

The ship’s stabilisers whirred, before levelling out, indicating that they’d stopped their endless warp through dimensions.

Ford tilted his head, listening, as the heavy footsteps of the Captain sounded out along the corridor.

“Grab him and follow me.” Ford heard the Captain say. “The rest of you finish carding through the valuables.”

Ford supposed the ‘valuables’ included his friends and he wondered if there was anything he could do to ensure their safety. Or the safety of his belongings. His knapsack was still in the dorms. He didn’t want to say goodbye to all his worldly possessions, his mementos from Earth.

Perhaps he’d have an opportunity to get them back and ensure the safety of the crew. Although, that seemed like wishful thinking.

As he was dragged roughly out along the corridor, he reasoned he should probably be more concerned with his own safety for the time being, as being marched blindfolded towards whatever ominous destiny these pirates had in store for him wasn’t the most favourable outcome.

Trying to mentally map out his position, Ford could tell from the incline of the ground and the
distinctive noise that they were in the exit bay, the docking ramps sliding out and landing with a
cluck on the surface of whatever planet or port they arrived at.

Stumbling slightly, Ford was pulled roughly along, a guard on either side holding onto his
shoulders, and the Captain walking in front. They walked across a landing bay and approached
what Ford could only assume was a door of some kind.

“Take us up to the top. We need to see the Boss.” The Captain snarled at whoever manned the
door.

“Duvall, will you do the honours?” A nasal sounding voice spoke out, no doubt the man who was
guarding the door.

“Don’t waste your time sniffin’ me over. We need to see him now.” The Captain demanded
impatiently.

Now that Ford was focusing, he could hear the sound of fervent sniffing, like there was some kind
of sniffer dog checking their entourage over.

“Hey, don’t yell at me, I don’t make the rules.” Came another congested sounding voice, possibly
whoever ‘Duvall’ was. “Everyone’s always shoutin’ at the little guy, they never grind their axes
higher up the chain.”

“I’ll grind you in a minute.” The Captain growled.

“Ooooh. I’m real scared.” Duvall said sarcastically. “I’ve got job security, pal. What’ve you got,
apart from an axe to grind?”

“A bounty, a short temper, and a gun. So if you don’t –“

“Yeesh, just go through already.” A buzz sounded out, Duvall no doubt pressing the button for the
door, letting them enter. “Pirates, you’re all the same. I’m tellin’ you, Randall –“

The conversation between the doormen faded as Stanford was dragged forward several steps,
before stopping, the doors closing behind him.

Ford was waiting for the pirates to take him somewhere else, but they just stayed where they stood.
Ford could hear pleasant soft music playing, and he could have sworn he recognised the tune to the
Girl from Ipanema. Were they in an elevator?

“They gotta sniff me down. Every time. It’s like they don’t remember me.” The Captain grunted to
his crewmembers.

“It’s demeaning.” One of the pirates replied.

“It’s insulting, more like. I bring them how much good business and this is how they treat me? If I
could write up those goons for their customer service, I would.” The Captain grumbled. “Don’t
remember me –“

A digitised voice sounded out from the top of the elevator.

“You have selected the skybox floor. Do you have an appointment?”

“No. You tell your boss I’ve got an urgent –“

“All visitors to the skybox must have an appointment. You can apply for an appointment via –“
“I’ve got an URGENT EMERGENCY DELIVERY that your boss is gonna want to see, so if you don’t put me through –“ The Captain threatened.

The digitised voice was silent for a moment, before speaking. “Please hold.”

Ford could hear what sounded like a dial tone for a moment, before their call was put through to a sullen voice.

“Yeah, whaddaya want?”

“I’ve got an urgent delivery that the big man is gonna want to see.” The Captain insisted. “Come on, Tone, do me a solid. Buzz me up.”

“An urgent delivery of what?” Tone clarified, sounding unimpressed.

Ford was spun around roughly, and the Captain grabbed his bound hands, raising them up to the camera.

“A six-fingered human, that’s what.”

There was a silence, presumably Tone looking at the screen. Ford could hear the man counting under his breath and presumed he wasn’t the brightest bulb in the box. That was comforting. What had Bill said? Always be the smartest man in the room?

“He’s just havin’ a smoke with the girls right now but I’m gonna buzz you up.” Tone said, and Ford could feel the elevator moving again. “Hold on one second, okay?”

The Captain let go of Ford’s hands and Ford rolled his shoulders. The two Pirahn guards were holding his arms again and Ford could hear the Captain speak before the elevator door dinged open.

“Now you let me do the talking.”

The guards yanked Ford along and the three pirates strolled out into the skybox room.

Ford could immediately smell a bitter burning smell, like eucalypt, tobacco, and herbs, and he could hear low jazzy music playing as they walked into the room.

“Is this him?” came Tone’s voice sceptically, from right in front of Stanford.

“Dinged a match on the scanners.” The Captain grunted in reply.

“Bring him closer.” A husky voice called out from across the room. Judging from the way the pirates immediately dragged Ford closer and forced him down onto his knees, he imagined this person was the ‘Boss’ they were bringing him to.

“Take it off.” The voice demanded, and suddenly the bag was yanked from Ford’s head, jostling his glasses on his nose.

He blinked in the bright lighting of the room and when his eyes had adjusted, he could make out through a hazy cloud of smoke an imposing looking purple man. He had grizzly, weathered features, nine arms, and wore a red velvet bathrobe and little else. On either side of him, cupped under an arm each, were two voluptuous looking alien women who seemed to be made of translucent pink goo. They were blinking at him curiously too, pouting that they’d been interrupted, but the nine-armed man wasn’t pouting, he was assessing Stanford thoroughly, taking
in every detail of the human with sharp, canny eyes.

Ford blinked back, trying to get a read on the situation, on who this man was.

“Well, he looks like his poster, more or less. A little rough around the edges.” The nine-armed man grunted, sitting back on the couch, one hand bringing a fat cigar to his lips as he puffed on it thoughtfully, exhaling more of the noxious smoke.

“We brought him to you as soon as we got a match.” The Captain boasted behind Stanford. “Dropped everything to bring you the bounty.”

“Uhuh,” grunted the man in the bathrobe. He puffed on his cigar again, still raking his eyes across Ford’s face.

The Captain shifted awkwardly behind Ford for a moment, before adding. “At great personal inconvenience.”

“What? Do you want a medal or something?” The nine-armed man narrowed his eyes at the pirate captain.

“Well, the poster did say there’d be a reward,” the Captain continued.

“Do I look like some joker in a top hat to you?” Scoffed the man in the chair, the goo girls on either side of him tittering. “Get outta here.”

“We didn’t have to bring you the human, Diñeiro.” The Captain snarled back, agitated. “Could have just followed that wanted poster all the way to our wildest dreams. But you wanted to catch him first, so we made that happen. I’d say that warrants a reward!”

“You want a reward?” The purple man scoffed. “I’ve got a reward for you. A promotion.”

Before the pirate captain could move to react, the nine-armed man pulled a gun out from under the couch cushions with one of his hands and blasted a shot through the captain’s head, right between his wide set eyes.

The goo girls screamed briefly, shocked. Stanford flinched. The pirate captain fell to the ground immediately with an unpleasant gurgle, fins flaring as his death rattle escaped him.

Pointing with the hand still holding the gun, Diñeiro gestured to the guard on the left of Ford. “There, now you’re the Captain. Congratulations. Now hurry up and get the hell out of my office.”

The two Pirahn guards scrambled to flee the office, leaving Stanford behind.

“And take the dead guy with you!” Diñeiro called out after them, prompting them to run back and grab their former captain’s elbows, dragging him across the floor to the elevator door. “Don’t want no more dead fish stinkin’ up my office.”

Easing back into the lounge chair with a sigh as the pirates scrambled to leave the office, Diñeiro sucked in another deep breath of cigar smoke, exhaling the smoke with a luxuriant sigh.

When the elevator door dinged closed behind them, Diñeiro turned his gaze back to Stanford, who was now keenly aware of the gristly splatter on his back. Clearly, he couldn’t afford to underestimate this man. He seemed just as dangerous as the pirates, if not more so.

“So. Bill Cipher wants you, huh? You don’t look like much, but he must have a reason or this
whole manhunt would’ve been a non-event. He wants you alive, so you must be valuable to him. My question is, how valuable?”

Stanford didn’t have an answer for that. He didn’t know if saying anything was wise, given how dangerous providing the wrong answer could be, and he wasn’t entirely sure that he was valuable to Bill anymore, given how they’d left things. If his survival depended on Bill’s response to that question, as of this moment Ford’s chances weren’t great.

Diñeiro regarded Ford’s expression for a moment longer, before leaning forward, resting two of his elbows on his knees. “You see, what’s valuable to him is more valuable to me, because it’ll mean I’ll have what he wants. So, what do you want, hmm?”

“What do I want?” Stanford repeated warily.

“Name your price. Let’s you and me work together, hmm? Think that’ll burn him? Name your price, whatever you want.”

Ford hesitated, thinking this offer could be a trap, but rather than squandering the opportunity, he played opportunistically. “I wouldn’t mind my things back, from the ship.”

“Consider it done. Toney.” Diñeiro snapped his fingers and gestured at Tone. “See that the man gets his stuff back.”

“Sure thing, Boss.” Tone nodded, and moved over to the operations board by the door, sending a message downstairs to the pirates.

“The crew down there, what will happen to them?” Stanford questioned quickly.


“Is there any chance they won’t be killed?” Ford asked, frowning slightly.

“I can skew the odds.” Diñeiro declared, before calling out to Tone by the desk. “Toney, how are we doing on organs this quarter?”

“Stock’s not really moving.” Tone scratched his chin, looking at the reports. “Which is bad news for perishables. We got other wholesalers too. Could probably skip Pirahn’s shipment.”

“Hmm.” Diñeiro mulled that over, before nodding at Ford. “Consider them worth more alive than dead then. You’re welcome. Anything else?”

Ford paused, before shaking his head, not wanting to push his luck.

“I like a man who knows when to quit. Excellent.” Diñeiro clapped his hands and sat back in his chair. “You work for me now.”

Ford hadn’t expected his kidnapping would end in a job proposal. Raising his eyebrow, Ford questioned. “As?”

“Professional bait.” Diñeiro smiled briefly, but the smile wasn’t comforting, as immediately after he smiled, two of his hands lashed out, grabbing Ford by the back of the head and slamming his face down on the coffee table in front of him.

Ford’s lip split from the impact of his teeth on the table, and his nose cracked loudly enough to promise pain. His glasses were scratched at the top corner very slightly, and as Diñeiro yanked
Ford’s head back up, he pulled him around the coffee table by his hair. Wincing at the pain, blinking back the wetness brewing in his eyes, Ford gasped in a pained breath, feeling warm, wet blood run down his nose and chin.

Diñeiro adjusted Ford’s glasses on his nose and then pointed at the widescreen in front of them, across the room.

“Make sure you face the camera. Toney, port a transponder to that yellow maniac.”

“Yes, boss.” Tone said, pressing the button that would teleport a communicator between dimensions. The screen in front of them flashed, and Ford could see himself in a square at the bottom of the screen, looking bloodied and beaten, bound and on his knees on the floor on front of Diñeiro.

A dial tone rang for several tense seconds and Diñeiro gestured to Tone, getting his assistant to angle the camera up to just show Diñeiro’s face, no doubt planning Ford’s reveal as some sort of conversational coup.

Ford could see the camera angle change on the small square at the bottom of the screen, and he curled his lip, angry at how quickly the tables had turned on him. He went from having some bargaining power to being used, his suffering a spectacle, and he didn’t like it.

He was even less impressed that his bloodied condition was going to be paraded around in front of Bill, like that would elicit some sort of reaction from the God. Bill didn’t care about him, he made that more than clear on several occasions. Ford was certain all this rough treatment would be for nothing. He wasn’t sure he could sustain his empowering anger if that wasn’t the case.

Finally, the dial tone picked up, and on the screen, Ford could see an eye, blinking down at them.

“Oh! It’s on. How do I -?” The blue compass Ford had seen in the nightmare realm before seemed to be holding the transponder, fiddling with its functions. Before he could figure it out, the transponder was snatched from him, and the screen filled with pink, smooth skin and a bellybutton pointed at the camera.

“Give it here, Kryptos.”

“Not that I’m complaining about the view -“ Diñeiro drawled. “But this call is for your Boss, Toots.”

The camera angle swung, and was held out, arm’s length in front of the fiery pink cyclops woman Ford had seen in the space field, displaying her horned head and shoulders now. She wrinkled her brow, pursing her lips, taking in Diñeiro’s image on the other end of the call.

“Ew. Yuck.” She uttered, before narrowing her eye. “Why do you wanna speak to Bill? More importantly, why would he wanna speak to you? Don’t you think he’s busy doing better things?”

“He’ll wanna speak to me because I’ve got something he’s been looking for.” At this the camera panned down, revealing Ford’s angry, bloodied face, and Ford watched the cyclops woman’s eye widen, before she scowled, what looked like concern flitting across her large features. “Run along now.”

Tsking, the cyclops looked down at the compass floating beside her. “Go get Bill. Tell him Raha’s calling.”

Clearly, she wasn’t the one to do the running. The compass must be lower down the hierarchy,
Ford reasoned.

“Yeah, you tell him Raha’s calling.” Diñeiro wheezed a laugh, the air waving the smoke clouds around him.

The compass presumably scampered away, leaving Diñeiro on the line with the pink cyclops woman.

She was looking at Stanford, her eye taking in every detail of his sorry state, analytical beneath those long eyelashes of hers. Despite the way she spoke, and the revealing way she was dressed, she was clearly clever, her eyes holding a spark of intelligence that reminded Ford of Bill. She didn’t say anything to Stanford, but he could tell she was itching to, barely managing to hold herself back.

While Stanford was trying to figure out what she could possibly want to say to him, Diñeiro was assessing her other qualities.

“You wanna do a little twirl, sweetheart? Give me something to look at? C’mon.”

The cyclops curled her lip at Diñeiro in disgust, before raising her brow at him. “Who are your snacks?”

Diñeiro threw an arm around each of the goo girls and gave them both a squeeze. One of the girls opened her mouth to speak, when Diñeiro spoke over her. “They don’t have names.”

When the cyclops looked sceptical, Raha continued.

“They’re whatever I want them to be.”

“You must lack imagination.” The cyclops remarked sassily.

“Hey, they can’t all be flaming ten-foot-tall knockouts with horns and fangs.” Diñeiro smiled roguishly. “If I could have that too, I would, Doll.”

“You wish.” She mumbled irately under her breath, before looking to the side. A glow lit the side of her face and Tone tilted the camera screen up away from Ford again, no doubt wanting to surprise Bill.

Ford steeled himself for that familiar voice, remembering how he’d left his last fight with Bill, how he thought he’d screwed things up forever again. Now he was in a position where his continued survival might hinge on Bill’s salvation, and it grated at Ford that he was the ‘damsel in distress’ in this scenario. The hostage. The bait.

He couldn’t help but think that Bill might not take the bait, that he might not see fit to rescue him. Did he even still care enough to rescue him?

FINE, THEN BE ALONE!

Ford swallowed nervously.

The camera seemed to hover in the air now, as Bill floated alongside the cyclops woman, his arms crossed over his chest, his eye frowning down at the transponder.

“Gee, Raha Diñeiro, calling me in his bathrobe. I don’t know whether to be flattered or traumatised. I’m leaning towards the latter.”
“Still got a smart mouth, I see. Or eye, or whatever it is you’ve got going on there.” Raha gestured at Bill vaguely. “I ain’t askin’. I don’t even wanna know.”

“So, what, is this a social call?” Bill quirked his brow at Diñeiro. “Are we catching up? And after so long. How’s things, Raha? How’s the market?”

“Recovering, after the stunt that you pulled.” Raha divulged. “I’m still scraping burnt bits off the edges of my merchants thanks to you. It’s been one hell of a headache.”

Bill seemed to glow smugly at that, his eye curving, pleased to hear it.

“I hope what you stole from me was worth it.” Raha grunted and inhaled a puff of his cigar. “You get any mileage out of Antelias’ apparatus? Those cuffs do you any good?”

Ford’s ears pricked up at that, hearing confirmation that the thing that Bill stole from this formidable man, the reason he crossed the nine-armed mobster in the first place was to steal the cuffs that enabled Bill to touch Ford without burning him. Bill’s solution to their problem at the time.

What had seemed like something Bill had picked up from an interdimensional shopping trip was actually something that Bill stole at great personal risk, burning Diñeiro’s market down to get it. Ford thought he just stole the batteries, he stole the cuffs from Raha as well. Everything he needed to be able to touch Stanford without burning him. Operation Six Fingered Discount.

Bill mentioned Raha had shot at him. After having seen what had happened to the pirate captain Ford imagined it would have been a close call. Raha Diñeiro certainly was the most ‘well-armed’ man Ford had met in his travels, in more ways than one.

Up on the screen Bill looked over to the side for a moment, before huffing impatiently, sounding dissatisfied. “For a time.”

He almost seemed disappointed, and Stanford wondered if the cause of the disappointment was because the cuffs weren’t filling their intended purpose anymore, since Stanford wasn’t around to touch him like he used to.

Bill’s dissatisfaction seemed to segue into frustration, as if he were reminded of something, and he furrowed his brow, scowling at the camera.

“If there’s a point to this call, make with it, quick. I’ve got more pressing things to attend to than bandying pleasantry around with you, Raha.”

“You call that pleasant?” Raha scoffed, enjoying the way Bill narrowed his eye at him. “Geez, relax. What’s so important that you can’t spare a few minutes chewing the fat with your old business partner, huh?”

“We’re not business partners.” Bill shot Raha down with an unimpressed look.

“But we did do business, before you set your goons rampaging through my markets. You brought me a find or two throughout the years. I figured I could return the favour.” Raha schmoozed, twiddling with his cigar idly.

“Return the favour with what?” Bill squinted suspiciously at the transponder. “You’re being awfully pleasant Raha and I don’t trust it. What’s your angle?”

“Well, you’d know all about angles, wouldn’t you?” Raha smirked knowingly.
Bill gave Raha a flat look, and made to reach for the transponder, moving to switch it off. Before he could, Raha spoke up.

“Figured I’ve found something valuable to you.”

Bill paused and blinked at the screen curiously.

“My question is, how valuable?” Raha rubbed his chin while he spoke, keeping an eye on Bill’s reactions closely. “And how much do you want it back?”

“Want what back?” Bill questioned, looking somewhat unimpressed with Diñeiro’s posturing. That was until Tone swung the camera down, revealing Ford, bloodied and bound on the ground with one of Raha’s nine arms resting on his shoulder.

Ford could tell in that instant that Bill was thrown, his eye widened, and his glow seemed to lessen and then brighten again, like he was taking a sharp breath.

Ford could pick Bill’s shocked reaction, and because he knew him very well, he could also tell that Bill was trying not to react, to curb his reaction so as not to give anything away, but his pupil was glued to Stanford, taking in every detail of his condition in a way that Ford found familiar. He faintly recalled Bill looking at him like that before, when the muse ripped his shirt open to discover bruising on his torso from when Fiddleford accidentally pushed him down the stairs.

Ford could tell Bill was furious.

“I’ve found your poster boy. Figured given how grandiose that bounty was, he must be pretty valuable to you.” Raha gave Ford’s shoulder a squeeze, shaking him with the movement, the mobster’s eyes tracking the way Bill’s pupil narrowed in on the gesture possessively.

“You’re wrong.” Bill said, his voice too level to be believable. Rather than his boisterous usual tone, Bill sounded like he was trying very hard to restrain his temper.

Ford frowned, frustrated that Bill could disown him so easily. Certainly, they’d left things rather abruptly, but Ford didn’t think their turbulent argument meant they no longer mattered to each other. They’d had arguments before and spent a great deal of time pissing one another off drastically. It was Bill’s fault he was in this situation in the first place. He narrowed his eyes at the triangle, until Bill continued, and he realised what Bill was trying to do.

“He’s of no value to me and even less to you.”

“Is that so?” Raha questioned, raising his eyebrows at Bill sceptically.

“He’s nothing special.” Bill sneered, meeting Ford’s eye now, conveying something more complex than Ford could understand right now.

Stanford wasn’t sure whether that meant Bill was saying that as a term of endearment or because he really meant it and was going to leave Ford to the mercy of this nine-armed mobster. He wasn’t sure if this was still Bill lashing out at him, or if denying Ford’s value was a purposeful technique intended to save his life. Ford could only squint back at Bill and assume this was part of some wider play. If Diñeiro didn’t believe Ford was valuable, perhaps he’d let him go?

“See, I find that hard to believe.” Raha shrugged, holding out a fresh cigar for one of the goo girls to light for him, still staring at the screen. “On account of the more than generous bounty out on his head. And in my experience, more than generous ain’t your style.”
“I was more than generous to you last time.” Bill said coolly.

“Don’t bullshit me, you weren’t generously donatin’ organs, you were just looking for a convenient place to dump all those fish carcasses. Adding insult to injury. You think I didn’t get that? You think Toney didn’t get that he was been’ insulted when you made him drag all those Amaphabon bodies out into the lift?” Diñeiro chastised Bill, scowling at him. “I ain’t an idiot, Cipher.”

Bill gave Raha a look that clearly read ‘you could have fooled me’.

“Now, I heard through the Goo Mob grapevine that you don’t give a damn when people threaten your crew.” Raha said, the hand that rested on Ford’s shoulder coming up to grab his hair roughly, bearing the vulnerable expanse of Ford’s neck to the camera.

Stanford’s shoulders tensed, and his breathing quickened, hearing the schink of metal, looking out the corner of his eye to see Diñeiro withdrawing a knife from under a lounge cushion. The man really was well armed.

Diñeiro was flipping the knife casually through his fingers, drawing out the spectacle of his threat. Ford’s eyes darted between the knife Raha was holding, and the screen, where he could see Bill had moved closer to the transponder, holding it, his eye filling the screen, glued to what was happening.

“They threaten to cut out your cronys’ eye, and, knife to skin, you just sit back and let it happen. Sipping tea even.” Raha continued to spin the knife around, before bringing the knife’s edge close to Stanford’s neck. “You can get the fine china out, I can wait.”

He could feel the cold metal alongside his Adams apple, and could have sworn Diñeiro just shaved the stubble from his neck in the process. He really could die right now, and the only thing stopping his death was Bill.

Ford debated his chances if he fought back, but with Diñeiro holding his head with one of his nine incredibly agile arms, knife to his throat, he wouldn’t stand a chance. Out of options, he looked back at the screen, watching Bill, his expression a panicked plea for help that he couldn’t bring himself to voice.

Bill wasn’t saying anything either, but his eye was so close to the screen it was all that could be seen, his pupil tracking the knife with a frightening intensity. He was clearly trying to be restrained, to reel back his reaction, but he wasn’t very good at it, clearly invested in Stanford’s condition, his singular focus betraying him. He certainly wasn’t sipping tea now.

“I guess if he isn’t valuable to you.” Diñeiro shrugged, before pressing the knife against Ford’s neck. The knife was so sharp Ford felt the trickle of blood dripping down his neck before he felt the cut, the sting an afterthought to Ford’s frantic realisation that he didn’t want to die.

It must have been a small cut, but enough to make Ford bleed. The instant Bill spotted the blood, before Diñeiro could press the knife in harder, he blurted out.

“Stop!”

Ford didn’t have to look at Diñeiro to feel the smug coming off the mobster in waves. Raha had found Bill’s weak spot, he knew how to prod it, and of all things, Ford wasn’t expecting that weak spot to be him.

“So, poster boy is worth more to you alive than dead.” Raha moved the knife away, flipping it
between his fingers again, although he didn’t let go of Ford’s head. “Good to know. You see, what’s worth something to you is worth something to me, Cipher. And I still have a score to settle with you for what you did to my markets. I’m thinking this is payback, or a chance for payback, considerin’ all you cost me.”

“And here I thought you just called to chat. A revenge call then, is it?” Bill seemed to exhale, easing the transponder away from him, the device floating in front of him again. “That’s not petty at all.”

“I can do petty.” Raha flipped the knife around in his hand, and suddenly the knife was back at Ford’s throat, just when the scientist managed to catch his breath from the last threat on his life. He could feel the knife pressing into the existing cut on the left of his neck, digging in deeper, and he winced. “Petty would be giving into the temptation to take what you want away from you permanently, just because I can. Bleeding this poor chump out on camera in front of you just to teach you a goddamn lesson. Petty is very appealing.”

Bill’s eye widened, and he floated closer to the screen again, but then seemed to hold himself back, trying not to be baited.

More blood dripped down Ford’s neck as the cut widened. It was still a surface level cut, not hitting anything vital yet, but it would certainly scar. That is if Ford survived long enough to let it scar. A corpse couldn’t scar.

Ford swallowed again, conscious of the movement of his Adams apple grazing too close to the knife’s edge and hoped fervently that Bill wouldn’t say anything to piss this mobster off. Knowing Bill, he didn’t much like his chances.

“It’s like you’re trying to convince me that you’re stupid.” Bill said, and Ford vehemently lamented his choice in partner, cursing Bill’s lack of tact, sucking in a frustrated breath.

“By which I mean, you’re smarter than this, Raha.” Bill continued, speaking quickly to abate the dangerous expression on Raha’s face. “You know a long-term investment when you see one and cutting short Sixer’s life expectancy for a temporary high isn’t a good investment at all, not to mention the mess it’d make in your skybox. I mean, sure, if you wanted to tick me off and ruin your carpet, then do it. Kill him.”

Ford’s stomach flipped at that, shocked that Bill would say the words so casually. Considering how invested he was in Stanford not dying before, he didn’t expect the muse to so flippantly say the words. He looked at the screen in shock, his heart in his throat, perilously close to the blade. Despite everything, he still thought Bill would care if he lived or died, or at least be a little more phased than merely ‘ticked off’.

Bill wasn’t done though, it seemed, as his eye turned black, and his bricks red and dangerous, showing the true depth of his rage, his pupil burning like fire down from the screen, promising recompense.

“But you won’t like it when I make a revenge call of my own and I do that in style Raha. You know what I’m capable of, but you don’t know the half of it. I’ll destroy your henchmen, I’ll destroy your markets, I’ll burn down every cherished thing you’ve ever owned, and I’ll kill you last, slowly. You’ll be begging for death, wishing the cigars killed you first, and that’ll be when I get out the fine china and watch you suffer.” Bill’s voice changed as he made his threats, growling the certainty of his bloody recompense into the transponder before his tone abruptly changed into casual light-heartedness once more, as if to prove how unstable Bill was. “So, you can see, it’s just not good business sense.”
Raha sat up, and moved the knife away from Ford’s neck, barking out a rough laugh, sounding elated.

“Very valuable then. Thank you for demonstrating that for me. See, I could be flattered, but I doubt every one of your goons who ends up on the chopping block get such beautiful, extravagant threats like that made for them. Now, I know it’s not me, so it must be him that’s valuable to you. Special even. I must be sitting on a freakin’ goldmine here.”

He let go of Ford and Ford leaned away from Raha, still perturbed by the wetness of his own blood dripping down into the collar of his shirt, his pulse racing at his recent near-death experience.

“That’s my goldmine you’re making a mess of.” Bill scoffed, looking down the screen derisively at Raha. “It’s like you’ve never heard of depreciation before. First his face, and now his neck, ugh. Don’t damage the goods. You want to state your terms, don’t you? You won’t have much to barter with if he’s in less than pristine condition.”

“Oh, I think I’ll have plenty to barter with.” Diñeiro handed the knife to one of the goo girls and sat back comfortably on the couch. “Clean that up for me, will ya?”

Bill seemed irritated, his arms crossed on the screen, his bricks yellow again, giving Diñeiro an unimpressed frown, but his pupil kept swinging to the side to check on Stanford, clearly worried about his condition.

Stanford glared at Bill, blaming Bill already for this entire situation.

A goldmine, was he? Ford wasn’t sure exactly what gold Bill was supposedly mining from him – he wouldn’t help him with the portal, Bill wasn’t harvesting the worship he gave with the cuffs anymore, and Ford did his utmost on the regular to be deliberately unhelpful to the God but hearing those words, Ford couldn’t help but think that Bill was using him again.

He spoke like Stanford was only valuable because he fulfilled a use to Bill, although on second thought, Ford supposed Bill had to pretend that was the case to maintain his reputation. If what Raha said was true and Bill was known for not being rattled when his henchmen were threatened, showing weakness when it came to Ford could put his entire operation in jeopardy.

At this point, Ford was quite certain that he was special to the triangle, and he had a cut on his neck to prove it. Possibly more special than the muse had ever seen fit to admit, in more ways than Stanford could possibly comprehend.

He didn’t want to believe it though.

Being special to Bill was hazardous, and when Ford thought back to how much he wanted that, and consistently wanted it, he didn’t think there would be such serious consequences to it.

Now he could barely think to believe it, even when the evidence of Bill’s weakness for him was staring him right in the face.

If Ford was special to Bill, he was valuable to Bill’s enemies, and Stanford took a moment to wonder just how many enemies his muse had? He was certainly better at making enemies than he was at making friends, perhaps that was something they had in common.

“State my terms, eh?” Raha mused, reaching up to puff at his cigar once more, inhaling deeply. “I can do that.”

“Same as before, you want your health back with zero consequences, and to borrow my
henchmaniacs to stand around and look like they work for you while you feel self-important about it.” Bill rolled his eye, sounding bored, already deducing what Diñeiro supposedly wanted. “So, make with the trade. Let’s get on with it, I don’t have all day.”

“I don’t want to rent out your henchmen.” Raha countered, before he pointed at Bill with one of his nine arms. “They don’t work for me now, you work for me now.”

“Excuse me?” Bill froze and narrowed his eye dangerously.

“You’re right about this long-term investment business. I can see considerable benefits to having you directly under my thumb. Like some kinda garish yellow genie, granting wishes, running errands, that sort of thing.” Raha declared, beyond smug. He could see from the way Bill’s eye twitched that his demand hit a nerve, but Raha had a feeling he was on the money with this one.

“I don’t work for other people.” Bill insisted, sneering at Raha. “I definitely don’t work for you.”

“Sure, you do.” Raha grinned. “It’s just like makin’ a deal, only this time you’re on the screwy end of it. I think it’d do you good to run around after me, bending reality to heed my every menial wish. You know how this sort of thing goes. I say jump, you say –“

“Shpx lbh.” Bill swore in that peculiar language of his, the sentiment conveyed effortlessly despite the dimensional translators in the room not picking up on the cryptic tongue.

“Don’t be getting feisty now. Is that any way to talk to your new boss?” Raha grinned, puffing on his cigar, looking pleased now that he had the upper hand. “If you want your human back in one piece, instead of several, you’ll consider my deal, and I’ll give you 24 hours to agree to my terms. We’ll shake on it, and you’ll agree to everything I propose, if you know what’s good for you. Keep that transponder on you.”

Raha cuffed Stanford across the back of his head idly to grab his attention, while Bill was scoffing and spluttering his protestations on the screen.

“You got anything to say to Cipher before I hang up? A thank you? A please save me? Anything motivating, huh, poster boy?”

Stanford scowled and considered if there was anything he’d say to Bill. He certainly wouldn’t relinquish what little dignity he had left and ask Bill to save him, of all things. Bill made it clear that he wouldn’t drop everything to rescue Ford, despite his appearance on the call (and certain revelations Ford wasn’t willing to confront), and as such, Ford adamantly wouldn’t ask it of him. He was still a little sour that he was in this position in the first place, thanks to Bill, and Bill’s callous attitude on the call only contributed to Ford’s sour mood.

Giving Bill a stubborn look, Ford jutted his jaw out. “No.”

Bill narrowed his eye and got right up close to the screen, pointing at Stanford. “Sixer! You - Why you little – ungrateful – when I find you I swear –“

“Ciao.” Raha flicked his fingers at the screen and the image shut off, ending the call.

Tone pressed some buttons by the control panel and the screen slid away, out of view in the office.

Raha sucked in the smoke from his cigars, a deep inhale, smacking his lips on the cigar, before he exhaled a croaky laugh that kept building. His laugh started as a chuckle and graduated into a full-blown booming cackle.
“Holy smokes, did you see that? Did you see that, Tone?”

“Sure did, Boss.” Tone replied from across the room.

“He’s my fuckin’ puppet now! He’s gonna dance from my strings until he hangs himself with ‘em. How fuckin’ sweet is this?” Raha wheezed, waving the smoke clouds around him as he continued to laugh, delighted by the predicament he created.

“So sweet.” One of the goo girls simpered.

“Not as sweet as you.” The other goo girl traced a viscous finger down Raha’s cheek.

“Take a raincheck, ladies. You’re off the clock.” Raha waved the girls away impatiently and they slid off the couch and across the floor, reforming towards the door to the elevator, waving goodbye to Raha as they went.

Turning to Stanford, two of his arms doing up his bathrobe so he was somewhat more modestly covered, Diñeiro rested his elbows on his knees, beaming at Stanford.

“Phenomenal work. Absolutely phenomenal. And stickin’ it to him right at the end. 10 outta 10. It’s like you were born to do this.”

Ford gave Diñeiro a disbelieving glower. “Born to what? Bleed on camera?”

“Ain’t nothin’ personal buddy. It’s just a flesh wound. You got more flesh where that came from, don’t ya? So, shut your yap and quit complaining.” Leaning further forward, Raha honed in on Stanford with an eagerness that was off putting. “Now, I wanna know everything. Tell me all the juicy details.”

Ford was baffled, first he was supposed to ‘shut his yap’ now he was supposed to tell Raha details?

“What details?”

“You and Cipher. How’d you get under his skin like that? I know he don’t have skin, it’s an imperfect metaphor. What I mean to say is that you’ve got information, or something compromising on the hack. And my guess is if he ain’t caught you so far, you don’t want to be caught, so it looks like you and me are on the same side here. You want to get one over on that jumped up equilateral, don’t you?”

Ford blinked at Raha, bewildered.

“You don’t want me to hand you over to that maniac, you want to string this out as long as you can, and so do I.” Raha looked up and smacked himself on the forehead with the palm of one of his hands. “What am I saying? Toney!”

“Yes, Boss?” Tone responded.

“Broadcast a warp warning for the market so everyone’s got their cards on them. Here, take one of these.” Raha grabbed a slim plastic card and slid it in Stanford’s shirt pocket, while still talking to Tone. “I want us warping every ten minutes until we have a game plan. Got to throw him off before he finds us. We’ve got the element of surprise now. We may as well use it. In the meantime, uncuff this gentleman.”

Tone pressed a button on the control panel and then knelt behind Stanford, slicing the cuffs from his wrist with a small handheld laser. As Tone freed Stanford from his bonds, Diñeiro grabbed
several tissues from a box on the coffee table and shoveled them at Stanford.

“Here, before you start dripping on the carpet. You want a drink? Here, Tone, get the man a drink.”

While Tone scrambled to pour Ford a drink, Stanford flexed his wrists and rolled his shoulders, before picking up the tissues Raha had thrown at him, gingerly mopping up the blood on his neck, wiping it away with disgust.

“You smoke?” Diñeiro asked Ford, opening a drawer on the coffee table to reveal row upon row of the expensive looking cigars he was working his way through.

Ford looked at the cigars, perturbed by the complete 180 in Raha’s demeanor. He went from threatening to kill Stanford, to congratulating him on a job well done.

Ford shook his head.

“Probably for the best.” Raha said, stubbing out his old cigar and pulling a fresh one from the drawer, lighting it with one of his nine arms, and pulling a deep drag of the noxious smoke. “These things will kill you.”

Diñeiro abruptly wheezed his way through a coughing fit, waving the smoke cloud away from him, but after the fit subsided, he took another deep inhale from his cigar. “Damn if they ain’t good though. So, let’s talk business. Why does Cipher want you so bad?”

Ford was still blotting at the blood on his neck when Tone sat down a glass of golden liquid on the table for Ford, garnished with ice and the leaves of an odd purple plant Ford had never seen before.

“I’m asking myself the same question.” Ford murmured, staring at the beverage, absent in his thoughts.

“Don’t be coy. There’s gotta be a reason.” Raha probed, and Ford looked up, realizing that if this mobster didn’t think Ford was useful to him, he’d likely end up as dead as the Pirahn captain. There were still splatters of gristle from the captain’s unpleasant demise all across the floor of the skybox, although Tone seemed to be preparing himself to clean it up.

Looking for an answer that wouldn’t compromise Ford’s own feelings, Stanford offered a hardly fictive one. “On Earth, he tricked me into building an interdimensional portal. I’m the only person who knows how to operate it. I shut it down when I found out what he was using it for and jumped through the portal into space, so I wouldn’t be near it to operate it anymore. He’s been hunting me ever since.”

It was a workable answer, even if it wasn’t entirely true. Ford certainly hadn’t jumped through the portal, his reason for Raha painted him in a far more gallant light than true events, but he couldn’t say that he fell through the portal fighting with his brother, that he was fighting with Bill right now, despite their constant complicated relationship.

“So, you were his foot in the door.” Raha mused, flicking ash from his cigar. “I thought he was just bullshitting, but that bastard really was planning to take Mayfair. Would it have worked? The portal?”

“Yes.” Ford replied, almost offended that Raha doubted his work.

“That’s prime real estate, your earth. Conveniently located between dimensional weak spots, rich with resources, and full of idiots who don’t know half of what they got yet.” Raha explained with a
“Shame it’s a protected planet. I’d’ve taken him up on his offer if I’d known it was legit. Humans are big currency. Even second-hand ones fetch a pretty penny.”

Ford felt revulsion at Diñeiro’s casual descriptor of ‘second hand humans’ and how blasé he was about what was essentially selling people into slavery. Human trafficking and, no doubt, the trafficking of other species seemed to be the norm in this kind of black market, and given how unscrupulous the buyers could be, being sold sounded more than unappealing.

He thought back to Sandeep, aghast to realise that he would be one of the so called ‘second-hand humans’ that Raha would be selling, and he could only imagine Sandeep’s frustration and fury over being put through that ordeal again. Thanks to Ford’s request, at least he knew that his friends wouldn’t be killed, but remembering the look on Sandeep’s face when he was captured back on the ship, he wasn’t so sure Sandeep would want to live through this again.

_They should have killed me. I refuse to be traded like parts._

People died today anyway, and Ford may have secured Sandeep a fate worse than death. Ford’s stomach felt sick, and he tried to focus his attention on wiping the blood from his nose and chin, having successfully patted the cut on his neck dry. He had bits of tissue stuck in the wound and it stung.

“Would you ever go back there? Start the portal up again?” Raha asked.

“No.” Ford shook his head, appalled. “Never.”

“Not even for a price? Come on, everyone’s got a price.” Raha tried opportunistically.

“If I didn’t do it for Bill, I’m not doing it for anyone.” Ford shook his head stubbornly.

“Hmm. Fair enough. If you’re already turnin’ down your wildest dreams, I can’t see you folding for anything I could offer you, but keep it in mind. I wouldn’t mind a slice of that pie.”

Ford thought back to Bill’s convoluted description of the Cryptix Noire as the ‘blue ribbon pie shop of black markets’ and imagined Diñeiro would indeed be greedy enough to want a piece of that pie, but Ford would be the last person to serve it to him. He thought back to Bill’s description of the worst of the worst, the God stating that he was far from the worst that was out there. Ford was starting to believe him.

“I don’t blame you for wanting to keep Cipher’s paws off your dimension. Knowing what he did to his own one, I wouldn’t trust him with mine either.” Raha sat back on the couch and relaxed, getting comfortable.

Ford looked up at that, curious. Bill’s own dimension? He never mentioned it to Ford before. “What happened to his dimension?”

“Let’s just say there’s a reason there ain’t billions of annoying as fuck triangles running around just like him, and that reason thinks its classy for a geometric shape to wear a top hat and a bowtie.” Raha huffed a laugh at that. “Can’t say I’m not grateful though. The universe is bad enough with just the one triangular disaster.”

“I didn’t know.” Ford murmured, thrown by that revelation. He was under the impression Bill didn’t have a family, he certainly never mentioned one. He made Stanford think there was only one triangle out there in the universe as special as he was. The notion that there could have been not just hundreds, but billions of creatures, like Bill was a shocking notion for Ford to wrap his head around.
It gave new meaning to the pictures he’d seen Bill draw in his mind, two triangles holding hands, scribbles blotting out their features when Stanford probed for details. Dead things, Bill had said. Ford didn’t know what to think.

“I’m betting there’s a lot you don’t know about Bill Cipher.” Raha puffed on his cigar and regarded Ford’s dawning revelation. He watched Ford reach over to the coffee table and pick up the drink Tone had set out for him, smelling the beverage before taking a steadying sip. “I’m betting he told you a bunch of lurid fairy tales instead of ever giving an honest answer. He does that.”

“He never told me about his dimension at all.” Ford looked into the glass, swirling the golden liquid around. It tasted like a mix between scotch, honey, and mint and he found he quite liked it. He hoped it was alcoholic, he had had quite the day, even if he wasn’t necessarily in the clear just yet.

“See, I’m interested in knowing Cipher’s weaknesses. Does that sound like a mutual interest to you?” Raha proposed, tilting his head at Ford.

“I do want to know more about him.” He’d said he would study Bill’s weaknesses to those asteroid miners. Perhaps he should start getting on that. “Everything, if I can. Including his weaknesses.”

“Then it looks like you and me have plenty to talk about. This should be a collaboration. You work for me now.” Raha watched Ford pause, taking that in, before he took another sip from the golden drink. “And that ain’t just a one-way street. I reward certain types of loyalty and if you find yourself being loyal to me over anyone else, I recognise that.”

Ford considered this while also considering the gristle on the back of his shirt, evidence of the Pirahn captain’s swift demise. He was quite certain loyalty didn’t mean jack to this smooth-talking mobster, he was just interested in turning Ford against Bill.

Saying nothing, he inclined his head, and Diñeiro took that for a nod.

“You stick to me now. By my side, 24/7, so you don’t get snatched up before Cipher shakes on our deal. I wouldn’t put it past him. He’s stolen from me before.”

“The cuffs for the apparatus?” Stanford looked up at Raha curiously.

“So, you know about that, do you? That’s surprising. Pawns like you aren’t usually so in the know. I wonder what else he’s told you about his plans.” Raha regarded Ford with a look that told Ford his value just increased.

“What were those cuffs made for?” Ford pressed for details, while he had the opportunity.

“They used to belong to a God called Antelias the Generous.” Raha divulged, after considering Ford for a while longer. “One of his followers made it for him to wear, a way to siphon the excess energy off him to power the city. Antelias, bein’ so generous and all, wore them in exchange for the worship the city gave him, like a chump, and when the people turned against the sucker those cuffs sucked him dry. Juiced the power right outta him. They turned Antelias’s power, which was supposed to be all about peace and nurturing if you’ll believe it, into a super weapon, planning to launch it against their enemy across the sea. How’s that for peaceful? Fired the damn thing and all that power wiped out the entire planet. Sure, it killed who it was supposed to kill, but it also killed everyone else, except for the guy who made the cuffs, as fate would have it.”

“Why him?” Ford asked, following the story with confusion.
“If you follow the stories, it was because Antelias made him immortal back when things were still hunky dory between them. This guy was supposed to be Antelias’s first and most devoted worshipper. Still is, if you believe the stories, but he made the cuffs that got Antelias killed in the first place. He made it off the planet before the weapon went off, and to this day he’s been living with the guilt of his betrayal following him wherever he goes. He’s haunted by how his invention stabbed his god in the back and will be forever, according to the legends.” Diñeiro finished with a noncommittal shrug.

“But is it a legend? The cuffs are real.” Stanford puzzled, finding the similarities of this tale a little too close for comfort.

“The cuffs are real, sure, but people will believe anything these days.” Raha puffed on his cigar absently. “Immortal worshippers and Gods who give something for nothing are nothin’ but fairy tales. The world don’t work that way and it never has. Nothing lives forever, and nothing’s unkillable, and those two things bring me comfort most days.”

Raha stood up and walked over to the window of the skybox, looking out over the market, until he was seized by a racking cough, one of his nine hands reaching out to grasp the countertop as he hacked his lungs up, cigar still in his hand.

Rubbing his chest as his cough levelled out, Ford couldn’t see Diñeiro’s expression, but he could see the man was looking down, no longer looking out the window at the markets he owned.

Waving one of his hands at Tone, Diñeiro gestured. “Warp us again. And keep an eye on this one. I’m going to go clean up and get dressed into something halfway decent.”

“Yes, boss.” Tone replied as Diñeiro walked away into a side room in the sky box, no doubt some sort of walk-in wardrobe.

Ford sat awkwardly on the floor now, with just him and Tone in the room. He tapped his fingers on the glass holding the honey coloured drink and contemplated escaping, and how far he’d likely get.

Tone didn’t seem too intimidating, he was skinnier with Ford, more like a personal assistant than a bodyguard, although with four arms he still could prove difficult to best in a fight. Judging from Diñeiro’s well-armed demeanour, it was highly likely Tone was armed with a weapon as well.

Ford moved to stand up, aware of Tone’s eyes on him as he moved. Ford sat down on the couch Raha had sat on, aiming for casual, taking a sip from his drink, meeting Tone’s unerring eye contact.

Drawing the mobster into a staring competition, Stanford hoped he wouldn’t notice as he slid his left hand under the couch cushion to retrieve the knife Diñeiro had threatened him with.

Grabbing the switchblade by the handle and sliding it into his trouser pocket, Ford was surprised when Tone spoke up, despite his eyes not leaving Ford’s.

“Keep it.”

Ford blinked at Tone, his face moving to slide into an expression of innocent denial.

“Yeah, I saw you.” Tone cut off Ford’s denial before he could even voice it. “It don’t matter none. He’s faster than you anyway, and you don’t want to pick a fight when he’s the only thing keeping that triangle away from you. You ain’t going nowhere.”

“What makes you so sure?” Stanford asked smoothly, quirking his brow at Tone.
“We’ve got your bag here.” Tone flicked a hologram of the contents of Stanford’s rucksack up in front of the scientist, the hologram showing an x-ray image of the rucksack in the elevator, being brought up by another one of the Pirahn pirates, tracking its progress. Tone flicked his fingers and the hologram zoomed in on the pill bottle in Ford’s bag. “Sleep suppressants. Wonder what those are for. You’ll stay. You don’t seem the type to pass up a better situation when you see it. Better than dealing with Cipher, right?”

“What do you know about Bill?” Ford asked Tone, curious why everyone was so convinced that Stanford should be scared of Bill.

“I don’t know much about the guy personally, but I know what he’s done, and he’s done a lot. Enough to give you nightmares, and that’s without any of the magical dream hoo-hah he’s famous for.” Tone crossed one set of his arms and looked at Stanford impatiently. “You’ll want to meet one of our retailers, down in the markets. Thanks to Cipher the guy’s been in pieces. Literally. It ain’t pretty.”

“I’m sure it isn’t.” Ford grimaced, considering that, before pulling the knife back out of his pocket slowly, putting it back where he found it.

“Seriously, keep it.” Tone insisted, waving his hand around the room. “We got so many blasters and lasers in here a knife ain’t doing diddly squat. You’d have grabbed the gun under the other cushion if you wanted to cause trouble. Keep it.”

“But why?” Ford couldn’t help but ask, confused. He was also somewhat frustrated he didn’t think of grabbing the blaster, but he probably wouldn’t have gotten far with it. So much for being the smartest guy in the room.

“You know, there’s something to be said for feeling safe in a helpless situation.” Tone said simply, raising all four of his hands. “And that’s all I’m saying. Seriously, keep it. Consider it a starting bonus.”

At that, Ford slid the knife back in his pocket, surprised by Tone’s sudden depth. Considering the sort of trade the market dealt with he didn’t expect to find someone with the capacity to empathise with the same helpless perspective this market seemed to flourish on.

“How long have you been working here?” Ford asked Tone, paying attention to the assistant now, reassessing his previous assumption of the man’s intelligence.

“Too long.” Tone said, reaching over to the computer panel and typing in a few commands with his spare hands, still keeping an eye on Stanford. “Things happen at the Noire, some things that I don’t care for. This used to be a very different sort of place and it’s changed over the years. Things change though. I don’t have to like it. Still, it wears on you.”

“I can imagine.” Stanford replied, looking between Tone and the door Diñeiro disappeared through.

The elevator door opened and a Pirahn pirate came through with Stanford’s rucksack.

“Just put it over there.” Tone pointed to the coffee table.

The Pirahn pirate walked over to place the bag on the coffee table, looking warily between Stanford, sitting on the couch with a drink, and the splatter of gristle that used to be the captain staining the floor. Without making eye contact with Stanford, the Pirahn pirate backed out of the room, into the elevator again, leaving Ford’s bag without a word.
The lack of eye contact was unnerving. Ford imagined he looked just as nefarious to the Pirahn pirate, sitting in Diñeiro’s chair, nursing a drink whilst covered in blood, as they did to him when they hijacked the scrap vandal vessel.

He didn’t know how he felt about that.

“You’ll want to check they haven’t stolen anything. I wouldn’t trust the Pirahn further than I could throw ’em.”

At Tone’s urging, Ford slid the rucksack across the table, checking through the contents. Shailesh’s coat, and his own trench coat were still there, along with Stanford’s journal, his sleep suppressants, and the various gadgets he was working on back on the ship. His tech tablet was there and Stanford wondered how many of the Angolean lizards survived the pirate’s raid. He picked it up and tilted the screen, looking at his reflection on the surface of the device.

He tilted his neck to the side and inspected the cut Raha had made. It was about an inch long on the side of his neck, and it was scabbing over, bits of tissue clinging to the wound. If he didn’t get a chance to clean it properly it would no doubt leave a scar. That was unpleasant.

His lip was still split, and swelling, and his nose seemed redder than normal, still throbbing with pain. He heard a crack before, and he hoped it wasn’t broken. Looking finally at the chip at the top left-hand corner of his glasses, he sighed.

He’d managed to stay relatively unscathed thus far into his adventures on the other side of the portal, but this had to be the first time Ford had run into genuine danger. Fighting with Bill, he almost felt invincible, because he knew Bill could never truly harm him, but the rest of the universe didn’t have those same reservations.

Things suddenly felt a lot more real to Stanford.

The danger certainly felt more real.

He pulled his scrapbook over towards him and flipped through the pages, finding the page containing the photos and mementos of Bill he kept, all the images of Bill’s human body, the personal things from a time that felt more like a distant fantasy to Ford now. Carefully removing the pages from the book, Ford folded them small and put the pages in his trouser pocket along with the knife, with Tone watching him all the while.

The four-armed mobster didn’t stop him. He seemed to understand Ford’s desire to keep some small part of himself secret, considering his situation.

With the compromising pages safely secured, Ford flipped through his scrapbook again, searching for any more information that he couldn’t afford to let slip into Diñeiro’s devious hands.

The door to the walk-in wardrobe opened with a loud bang, and Ford jumped, closing the book quickly and sliding it back into the middle of the table. Diñeiro strode out into the main room of the skybox, wearing a luxuriant velvet suit, the fabric navy blue, with a deep burgundy cummerbund. Diñeiro was dressed like a real mobster now, to the nines, and he looked no less intimidating than he had in his bathrobe wielding a gun.

“I’ve figured out where we’re going ,Tone. Cancel my other appointments.”

“All of them?” Tone questioned, already turning around in his chair, typing commands into the computer system.
“Reschedule my trip to Electric Lady Land. Cancel the rest of them.” Diñeiro straightened his tie in the reflective glass windows of the skybox as he spoke. “I’ll do one last dip down to the sales floor, so those slackers down there know I can still delegate crap for them to do, and then we’re taking the main crew and a skimmer dimension hopping.”

“Where are we going?” Tone asked.

“Well, it’s a gamble, but I think it’ll pay off.” Diñeiro replied evasively, before he strode over to the couch and flicked at Ford’s shoulder with his fingers. “You’re coming with me.”

“May I use the bathroom first?” Ford attempted to ask, casually, gesturing to the blood on his neck. Really, he just wanted a moment away from the mobster, a moment to himself.

Diñeiro narrowed his eyes at Ford, considering him, before looking him up and down. “I suppose you’ll have to. Tone, print out something acceptable for him to wear that’ll get him past the dress code. You’ve got five minutes, and then we’re rolling.”

Ford made to stand up, pulling the book and his possessions across the table towards him, but Raha squeezed Ford’s shoulder.

“Leave the book.”

Ford took his hands away from the book, and when they were an acceptable distance from it, Raha let go of Ford’s shoulder, pointing to the washroom he just came out of. The doors swung open for him expectantly.

Knowing the mobster’s eyes were on him, Ford walked through the doors to the walk-in wardrobe and heard them close behind him.

The walk-in wardrobe was lined with expensive suits and fine clothing, Diñeiro’s fashion choices showing a preference for velvet and expensive looking jewellery. Watches and waistcoat chains glittered next to rows of cufflinks and futuristic timekeeping pieces. Ford would have paused to examine them, if he hadn’t noticed the camera dome in the ceiling first, hearing it whirr, keeping an eye on him. He might have a moment alone for now, but he certainly wasn’t unsupervised.

He walked further into the room and noticed an assortment of several small hovering machines printing silk in the corner of the room, a white dress shirt and trousers. As the shirt only appeared to have two arms, Ford presumed this one was for him.

Walking closer to the small printing machines, Ford tried to pick one up to examine it, curious about the technology, but when he reached for one of the printers, he was zapped with a small but sharp electric current.

Releasing the printing robot and nursing his sore hand, Ford could see the door to the bathroom swing open pointedly, as if directing him to his destination, keeping him on schedule.

Ford had seen bathrooms in the multiverse that were entirely utilitarian before, that would scan you before eradicating the dirt from your body, but this bathroom looked like a mixture of form and functionality, luxuriant bathtubs and shower features carved from blue marble, sitting opposite the basic scan and scrub facilities.

Diñeiro seemed to be a man who appreciated the finer things but maintained efficiency when it was required. A man who could juggle both practicality and pleasure. Everything about his wardrobe and his bathroom screamed that Diñeiro was rolling in money, but there was a practicality behind it all that indicated to Ford that Diñeiro may not have always been wealthy, as
he wasn’t eschewing the sort of things the 99% used to get by, as typical 1 percenters did.

Aware of the camera dome in the bathroom as well, Ford self-consciously stripped out of his scrap vandal uniform, standing in just his boxers and his singlet, before approaching the scan and scrub shower. He wouldn’t be taking off his singlet or boxers, firstly for modesty’s sake, and secondly because he didn’t want to show Diñeiro the mark Bill left on his pectoral. Diñeiro seemed to be very invested in what Ford was to Bill, and he didn’t want to parade about Bill’s ‘class ring’ equivalent if it meant it would put Bill (and Ford by extension) in further hot water.

Ford stepped up to the shower platform and it scanned him before blasting him with jets of soapy water, pummelling the dirt off him. Left sodden for a fraction of a second, Ford contemplated that there wasn’t a lot of dignity in efficiency, before he was buffeted by a second blast of warm air, drying him and his clothes in an instant.

Stepping away from the shower platform, Ford walked over to the mirror by the sinks, a lavish gold on marble affair, and examined himself.

His hair always ended up impossibly fluffy after using a scan and scrub, poofed up to a ridiculous degree. The pressure of the water had reopened the wound on his neck, and he quickly grabbed one of the towels in the bathroom, pressing it against the wound to stem the bleeding.

How did he get himself into this situation?

He closed his eyes for a moment, trying to centre himself. Perhaps if he closed his eyes, he might be able to nod off long enough to get some answers.

Diñeiro’s voice sounded out over the speakers in the bathroom, confirming to Ford that he was indeed being watched.

“Five minutes, poster boy.”

Ford gave his reflection a flat look, his exhaustion and frustration stifled but still there as he tried to school his features. Grabbing his scrap vandal uniform, he brought it with him into the other room, still holding the bloodied towel to his neck.

The sewing robots had finished weaving Stanford’s new clothes, and a white pressed shirt, black dress slacks, black suit jacket, and black bow tie was laid out for him on the chaise in the walk-in wardrobe.

Patting his neck with the towel, Ford looked at the positioning of the camera domes in the room, aiming to be casual about it. Using his back to shield his movements, creating a blind spot between the cameras, Ford took the knife and the pages he ripped from his scrapbook and transferred them to the pocket of his new jacket quickly, using the sleight of hand skills he’d been practising to keep his movements swift enough to avoid detection.

Once that was taken care of, Ford smoothly dressed himself in the formal wear, buttoning up his shirt, shrugging on his jacket, before giving the bowtie a long-suffering look, choosing to simply sling the tie around his shoulders rather than tying it neatly. Bowties weren’t his thing.

Gathering his belongings up, he walked out of the walk-in wardrobe and back into the skybox. Diñeiro was reading through his scrap book over by the coffee table.

“Interesting stuff you got here. Are these your notes for the portal?” Diñeiro asked without looking up as Ford walked over to the couch.
“No. I left those notes on Earth. I hid them.” Ford answered with a frown.

“A pity.” Diñeiro shrugged, and shut the book, sliding it across the table with Ford’s other belongings. “Still makes for good reading though. Group all your stuff together. I’ll give you a nano briefcase you can carry it all in.”

Diñeiro held up what looked like a small metal square with a cap on one end. Ford grabbed the nano briefcase and took the cap off, seeing a small compartment inside.

“It’s like he’s never seen a nano briefcase before.” Diñeiro joked, shaking his head at Tone with a smile. “You stick it on either side of your stuff, and it sucks it in there.”

Ford put his scrap vandal uniform down and placed the cap and the other end of the nano briefcase on opposite ends of the coffee table. The ends glowed blue for a moment, projecting a light between both ends, before Ford’s belongings shrunk down and were sucked into the briefcase.

Ford made a pleased sound, picking up the briefcase and examining it again, delighted.

“Damn, humans are precious.” Diñeiro chuckled, and Ford pocketed the nano briefcase, furrowing his brows at how patronising that observation felt.

Considering Diñeiro considered humans a tradable good, it’s possible the mobster was referring to humanity’s monetary value, but Ford couldn’t help but feel infantilised by that remark. He didn’t know what was worse.

“Come on. Time is money.”

Clapping his hand on his leg, Diñeiro stood up, and strode over to the elevator of the skybox, gesturing for Ford and Tone to follow him with a wave of one of his hands.

With no choice but to follow, Ford stepped into the golden elevator, looking around now that he didn’t have a bag over his head. The elevator had wide glass panelling, overlooking an enormous sprawling market, bustling with people. All of it was illicit trade, if Bill was to be believed. Criminals selling illegal things for fun and profit. The elevator didn’t seem to move in any specific direction, hovering across the markets, descending to the ground level.

Ford looked away from the glass window, and realised Diñeiro was watching him, his expression shrewd and calculating.

“You don’t leave my sight from now on, got that.” Diñeiro told Stanford. “You’re a part of my entourage. You’re my employee. Mine.”

_You’re my pawn._ Stanford heard, assessing the way Diñeiro looked at him.

“Wherever I go, you’re a part of the furniture now. Capiche? Those are the rules.” Diñeiro stepped closer to Stanford, and straightened the lapels on his suit jacket, his hands feeling heavy, like a threat. Raha dusted Ford’s shoulders with two hands, while two hands straightened his lapels, and two more busied themselves tying Stanford’s bowtie. “And since you work for me now, you follow my rules.”

Ford’s mouth tightened around the edges, but he tried to mask his wariness, making a noncommittal sound.

Diñeiro finished tying Ford’s bowtie, straightening it, before he let a finger linger under the fabric,
tugging it lightly just to make Stanford feel the bowtie restrict around his neck, like a noose.

“I wanna hear a ‘yes boss’.”

Stanford grit his teeth, before forcing out a bland. “Yes, boss.”

Letting go of Ford’s tie, Raha clapped Ford on the shoulder. “See, was that so hard?”

Diñeiro turned away from Ford, and Ford reached a hand up to rub his neck, loosening the tie so it wasn’t so throttlingly tight, unimpressed with Diñeiro’s power play.

The sky box was descending now, onto what looked like a bidding platform in a walled off private room. Tables were arranged around a stage, and various aliens sat around the tables, raising bidding fans, telling Ford this was an auction room.

Ford looked on the stage and saw the auctioneer and staff members wheel off a golden statue of an alien, its expression twisted in agony, delivering it to the highest bidder.

The elevator doors opened, and Diñeiro walked out of the skybox to the side of the stage. Ford had no choice but to follow and could hear the auctioneer wrap up the sale.

“The Exquisite Agony of Midas, a refined piece of performance art, goes to the sentient mass of tentacles in the pink glasses for 70,000 QUID. Congratulations ma’am.”

Polite applause sounded around the room, and Ford stood over by the far wall with Tone, as Diñeiro spoke to one of his staff members to the side of the auction hall. Ford tried to listen in to what Raha was saying but was distracted by the amplified voice of the auctioneer.

“Our next lot freshly delivered today. A genuine, bonafide human being direct from the Earth in dimension 46’/.”

The crowd erupted in awed tittering ‘oohs’ and Stanford abandoned his attempts to eavesdrop on Diñeiro, turning to face the stage, dreading what he would see.

Stripped of his coverings, the scarves he so carefully covered himself with, Sandeep was dragged onto the stage, a high-tech muzzle fastened around his face, his hands bound behind his back. The scars that covered his body were on display as much as he was, and he had blood on his cheek, a cut above his eye, and blood running down his chest. Judging from the firm grip Diñeiro’s workers had on Sandeep’s arms, and the way he dug his heels into the floor, even as he was lifted and dragged onto the stage, Sandeep hadn’t stopped fighting since his capture.

He attempted to struggle, still fighting now, and Ford felt sick to his stomach, seeing the various aliens seated at tables lean forward, enraptured by his suffering. Murmurs burst through the crowd, Sandeep’s arrival titillating the audience just as much as his fighting spirit did. The bidders were like sharks, and Sandeep’s fierce defiance was blood in the water to them.

“Pre-loved, yes but don’t let that deter you.” The auctioneer continued, selling Sandeep so callously. What creature in their right mind would see the scars on Sandeep’s body and call that love? “Fighting fit, and full of energy, this firecracker of a human just won’t quit, and that longevity is a quality I’m sure we can all admire in a prospective acquisition. A rare addition to any god’s retinue of worshippers, already primed for subservience, this human would be the second-hand jewel of your collection.”

Sandeep glared at the crowd, silenced by the muzzle, clearly ready to spit venom at anyone who so much as raised a bidding fan. Rather than deter the crowd, this seemed to delight them, and the
aliens grabbed their bidding fans in anticipation.

Sandeep’s eyes scoured the crowd, and as he glared at the array of his new prospective owners, his eyes met with Stanford and widened in shock.

Ford cringed, reading the confusion, hope and disbelief on Sandeep’s face.

“Let’s start the bidding at 20,000 QUID. Nice and low.”

The aliens in the crowd began to raise their bidding fans, the auctioneer calling out the bids, but Ford couldn’t hear them, fixated on the dawning expression of betrayal on Sandeep’s face. The hope was leeching away, being replaced with angered understanding.

It must look like Ford had betrayed him, standing on the bidder’s side of the stage in a tuxedo, dressed to the nines and walking freely beside the market’s big boss, while Sandeep was stripped, bound and muzzled up on stage. While Ford was just as trapped as Sandeep was technically, it must look as though he was standing there a free man, while Sandeep was in chains.

It must look like Ford had sold Sandeep out for his own freedom. Sold all of them out.

Even though he did no such thing, as Sandeep’s eyes narrowed at Ford in disgust, Stanford felt like he had betrayed them all.

Maybe he had.

Diñeiro finished talking to his associates at the auction, and nudged Ford with his elbow.

“Come on, time to get moving.”

With no choice but to follow, Ford re-embarked into the golden skybox elevator, casting one last regretful look over his shoulder to Sandeep on stage.

Sandeep’s eyes followed him all the way up, the guilt boring deep holes into Stanford’s soul the further away from Sandeep the skybox flew.

This was something that Ford couldn’t shift the blame onto Bill for in his mind.

He couldn’t shift the blame for Sandeep’s fate.

This was his fault.

Seated on the skimmer, the vessel smoothly speeding along between dimensions, Stanford clenched his hands tightly as he looked down at his lap, stewing in guilt.

He should have been looking around the plush cream leather interior of the ship, soaking up the amenities while he had them. Interdimensional suspension steering, an open bar, and free canapes were all on offer in this luxuriant spaceship, but Ford couldn’t pull himself out of his head long enough to look any higher than his knees, guilt overwhelming him.
He couldn’t bear to look up at the lavish delights available to him, and he closed his eyes, screwing them shut.

“Hey. Someone stick him or something.”

Ford opened his eyes warily, just as one of Diñeiro’s henchmen approached him, holding out some sort of device that looked like a cross between a taser and a baton.

When his eyes opened, the henchman backed away.

“No falling asleep now, you hear.” Diñeiro puffed on his cigar, looking across the cabin at Stanford, holding his journal on his lap, reading through it. “It’s not that I don’t trust your survival instincts, but I can’t have you tipping Cipher off in the mindscape. That ain’t gonna fly. You’re my human now.”

Well, he certainly wasn’t up on that auction stage, but the result was about the same. Ford felt the bitterness brewing within him like black coffee, somewhat dissatisfied that amidst all these aliens deciding Ford belonged to them, no one seemed willing to acknowledge that Ford was his own man.

The only person that had a genuine claim to Ford was Bill, and that was because they shook on it, the deal seeming that much more onerous in hindsight, rather than romantic as it was at the time.

Ford almost wished he could fall asleep, so he could talk to Bill. Tell him Diñeiro’s location just to watch his muse devastate the repulsive mobster as he so deserved, considering how willing he was to trade lives like chattel. To treat Ford like a possession, not a person.

Ford felt like he had more agency as an individual when Bill possessed him, and that was saying something, speaking of possession.

If he closed his eyes and let Bill into his mind now, he wondered what would happen. What would happen to Diñeiro. The darker part of Ford’s psyche wanted to see what would happen to the man who thought he pulled the strings, to see what would occur when he discovered how deadly a puppet could be.

This was a darker train of thought than Ford was used to, but his adventures no longer seemed dreamlike or fanciful now. Things seemed real, and dark, and dangerous and Stanford’s ire bubbled beneath the bitterness, longing to follow suit.

“Do you really think he’ll do what you say? That he’ll work for you?” Ford asked Raha, considering his own value to Bill. “He won’t.”

Smirking back at Stanford, remembering the video call, Diñeiro’s eyes burned with surety as the space ship warped through dimensional gaps.

“Is that a bet?”
BET ON IT BET ON IT BET ON IT BET ON IT - alright I'll leave the wildcats out of it.
I hope you enjoyed the chapter, it was a lot of fun to write, and for those who aren't keen on waiting it will please you to know that I'm already 3/4 of the way through the next chapter and it will be ACTION PACKED!

This chapter is dedicated to Thelema_Rhoias who's running commentary, essay length comments, song recommendations and carefully crafted artworks have been an absolute delight. I am sure I'll know when you get up to this chapter hahah and when you read the dedication at the end. I'm looking forward to your reaction.

Next chapter we have some high stakes gambles, dicey situations, and you get to see Pyronica in a very jazzy dress, she looks gorgeous. Lucky you. Who can guess where we're going next?
But I was a fool playing by the rules. The gods may throw a dice, their minds as cold as ice.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

“Baby needs a new pair of shoes, come on!”

Stanford stood around the craps table, well aware of Diñeiro’s security detail standing beside him, and watched the nine-armed mobster roll his dice, his expression deeply resigned.

The dice landed and the aliens around the table threw their hands up (those of which had hands) cheering loudly as Diñeiro shouted out his victory.

“Come to papa!” Diñeiro crowed, scooping the chips up off the craps table as the dealer pushed them over to him.

“How many shoes you got already, Boss?” One of Diñeiro’s henchmen leaned down to ask him, fluffing Diñeiro’s ego.

“Enough for every fuckin’ millipede in Millpodia.” Diñeiro chortled, stacking his chips up with satisfaction, moving the clay pieces around to place his next bet. “All mine.”

Stanford wasn’t sure what was harder to believe – that one man could take such pleasure from gambling after so many hours of doing the same thing or that Raha Diñeiro could remain so self-congratulatory after all of it. It was clear the man wasn’t hurting for money and those with money seemed more inclined to gamble with it than those without, but it had been 20 hours already.

Surrounded by a crowd of hulking yes-men congratulating Raha’s every roll, Ford began to wonder if they were there as emotional security for Diñeiro as well as for personal security. They seemed to be sucking up to the purple mobster like it would secure them a wage increase but, from what Ford had seen, that wasn’t very likely.

Diñeiro was as miserly as he was egotistical. He only seemed to be generous with himself, as Stanford was coming to realise, his stomach rumbling now, having not been permitted or offered any sustenance past that first glass of scotch. He was starting to get quite irritable.

When first arriving in Cynn City, Stanford had been in awe.

Cynn City comprised of a multitude of brightly lit, opulent casinos hosted on the one travelling spacecraft, enclosed within the dome of the city. Luxuriant and indulgent, expensive futuristic art deco stylings furnished the lavish buildings, courtyards, and show halls of Cynn City, the spacecraft doubling as a tourist destination and the home of the central governing authority of the dimension. Cynn City was the destination for gambling in the multiverse.

The enormous casino was docked on Auspicia, the chosen hosting planet in Lottocron 9, the gambling dimension. Auspicia had been picked by the annual lottery to host Cynn City, as decided by the central governing authority of the gambling dimension. Each planet in Lottocron 9 entered the lottery to win a chance to host Cynn City’s spacecraft society and it was a great honour to host the highest gamblingsants of the galaxy, each member of the governing body elected to the role via random number generator.
With its bright lights, jazzy musical shows, pleasantly chiming slot machines, endless roulette wheels, craps tables, and gaming halls, it was like someone shoved Las Vegas in Stanford’s faulty photocopier in the attic and let the results run rampant. There was excess and sin all around, gambling as far as the eye could see. It was like the mob took over the entire galaxy, except there was no mob as gambling was not only legal in Cynn City, but mandatory.

In the casino hall around him there were roulette wheels spinning, card games being played, dice being thrown, with every patron sipping champagne, dressed to the nines in expensive looking gowns and suits. On a stage towards the back of the hall, a group of four-armed, bark haired woman wearing sparkling leotards and waving large feathered fans crooned a jazzy song, clicking their fingers and swaying in unison while the patrons of the casino danced along and applauded. This place was entertainment incarnate, a jovial display of richness and frivolity, where the champagne kept flowing, and the party didn’t stop.

Stanford realised with a grumble that this was exactly the sort of place that Stanley would have loved but, given Ford’s current situation, it just made him cranky. He was here as a prisoner after all, as professional bait, and that didn’t allow him a lot of room for leeway when it came to branching out and exploring the peculiar dimension on his own, or enjoying the riches and entertainment on offer. As lovely as the singing was over by the stage, Stanford found himself more and more frustrated with every gambling themed song the band would play.

Raha Diñeiro kept Stanford on a short leash, making good on his demand that Stanford remain in his sight at all times. Ford had no wriggle room. He was to stand at Raha’s side all evening, watching the mobster gamble his inordinate wealth away, which wouldn’t have been so terrible if Diñeiro didn’t keep humiliating Ford the entire time.

Holding up the dice in front of Stanford’s face in one of his nine hands, Diñeiro didn’t even look at Stanford. Everyone else was looking though. Ford felt like he’d rather go back to the Pirahn pirates rather than have such an attentive audience every time Diñeiro tried to humiliate Stanford like this.

“Blow on ‘em, Poster Boy.” Diñeiro demanded. “Make it nice and lucky this time.”

“I – air can’t convey luck – it doesn’t –“ Ford protested, knowing his protests would fall on intentionally deaf ears.

“Sure it does. You’re my lucky charm, see?” Diñeiro turned around in his seat to give Stanford a weighted look. “And if I say blow, what do you do?”

His cheeks flushing with indignation, Stanford resisted for a moment, trying to claw back his dignity for as long as he could, before Diñeiro’s henchmen pressed the sharp point of a shiv to Ford’s side, making his options inherently clear.

Hating every second of the humiliation, Ford leaned forward and obediently blew on Diñeiro’s dice, bristling with venom, wishing nothing but bad luck on Raha’s throw.

His scathing wish for bad luck had no effect, it seemed, as when Diñeiro rolled, he came out on top, yet again.

Stanford bristled at the applause, the four armed, four eyed inhabitants of Lottochron 9 doubling the clapping around the table, joining in with Diñeiro’s sycophantic crew. He had no choice but to endure the congratulations, another round of the aliens praising Diñeiro’s ‘lucky charm’ without acknowledging that Stanford was being held here against his will.

An attendant in a sparkling, skimpy feathered outfit came to offer champagne around the table,
smiling widely at them all with mint green teeth, and Diñeiro took three flutes of champagne for himself, holding them in three of his arms as he began passing out champagne to his other cronies, each of them toasting to Raha’s success.

Stanford noted how Diñeiro didn’t pass him a glass and realised that the purple mobster must have picked up on Stanford’s withering trust in him. He rewarded loyalty, or so he said, but Stanford had no intention of displaying loyalty or sucking up to the man who broke his nose, sliced his neck, and told him it was all part of the job description.

He knew he’d be better served to at least pretend that he was on Diñeiro’s side, despite cultivating a deep sense of loathing for the man, but it seemed Ford wasn’t very good at veiling his disdain.

A seditious thought kept repeating itself, cementing itself insidiously in his mind with frequent regularity. A thought he knew he probably shouldn’t entertain, but the thought remained, nonetheless. A seductive thought that showcased what Ford was coming to believe to be salient fact.

*Bill would never do this to me.*

Acting as Diñeiro’s leverage to turn the tables on Bill was becoming less and less appealing with every humiliation endured. Diñeiro must have been making assumptions about the way Stanford had been treated, basing his assumptions on the mobster’s own value-based assumptions about humans, and how they were little better than trinkets to be owned in the multiverse.

Diñeiro didn’t know that when Bill clung to Stanford and told him “you’re mine” it meant he would have given him the universe, not regulated him to a mere possession. At times Ford didn’t even *know* this but he was coming to realise it now.

While Ford knew that Bill often had a strong dislike for the other humans surrounding him, he never felt like Bill ignored Ford’s agency the way Raha did, and he never felt so thoroughly objectified by Bill as he did when he was forced time and time again to blow on Diñeiro’s dice, his ‘lucky charm’.

Ford knew it was beginning to be a pattern with him, and he recognised that, but he couldn’t help but fall back into that tried and true pattern. The pattern of believing Bill wasn’t so bad when confronted with someone worse. Diñeiro being terrible didn’t mean that Bill was any less disastrous, just somewhat more tolerable.

Anything would be better than this.

Diñeiro pulled out another one of his noxious cigars and held it out expectantly, waiting for Stanford to light it for him.

Reluctantly complying, Ford flicked the lighter, the cigar glowing at the end, and felt a sour sympathy for the goo girls he’d seen before in Diñeiro’s skybox.

*They don’t have names.*

Apparently neither did Ford anymore, since ‘Poster Boy’ seemed favoured over actually using Ford’s real name. Diñeiro never even asked what Ford’s name was and he simmered over the degrading nickname. He’d never hated nicknames from Bill this much, perhaps because they were so often laden with praise or endearment.

Stewing in his own dislike of the situation, he barely noticed when Tone checked his watch and leaned in to whisper in Diñeiro’s ear.
“Huh. It is about that time.” Diñeiro muttered, shooting Stanford a look, before speaking to Tone again. “Any sign of trouble?”

“Nothing from security, Boss, and the dimensional bouncers ain’t seen nothing ding on the scanners. He can’t come here, but there’s no signal from the transponder either.” Tone reported. “I can get us one more sweep with the bouncers, or do you want to call it –“

“Wait.” Diñeiro interrupted Tone, looking across the casino floor. His eyes seemed to glow with delight, as he pointed to the source of said delight.

Stanford raised his head, following the line of Diñeiro’s finger to see something he probably should have spotted before now. She was rather hard to miss.

Standing out of the crowd, literally ten feet taller than most beings, across the room alongside the multitude of four armed Lottocroron 9 beings who flocked to Cynn City, stood the pink cyclops woman Stanford had seen in the space field. Bill’s right hand woman.

She towered over the beings in the crowd, easily twice the size of the tallest creature in the room, and apart from being over ten feet tall and pink with horns, she was also wearing a sparkling floor length dress that hugged her figure, a large slit down the side showcasing her flaming legs and the flames clinging to her arms like opera gloves. She wore her cape over one shoulder elegantly and it cascaded behind her, a vibrant magenta curtain. Her dress was studded with glittering pink gems, obviously a statement piece, and it was a wonder that no one had spotted her before now.

Stanford could see Diñeiro’s eyes take her in from the top of her horned head, her hair slicked back artfully, following her curves all the way down to her sparkling pink high heels, and then doubling back to re-examine her cleavage, drinking in the sight of her like too much cheap casino champagne.

“Well.” Diñeiro swallowed, loosening his bowtie and adjusting in his seat. The pink cyclops picked up a cocktail from a tray, towering over the waitress, before looking over at Diñeiro, her big pouty lips smirking subtly at him from across the room.

Diñeiro cleared his throat, before grinning gamely. “This night just got a helluva lot more interesting.”

Sauntering across the gaming hall, her wide hips purposefully swaying, the pink cyclops neared the craps table, looking down at Diñeiro with an unreadable expression, before asking in a sweet voice. “Is this seat taken?”

“By all means, sweetheart.” Diñeiro gestured to an open stool around the table.

“It’s Pyronica.” The cyclops said swiftly, her sweet tone laced with a sharp edge. She batted her eyelashes at Diñeiro and balanced herself on the stool despite it being far too small for her.

Stanford felt the information he had click together upon hearing the cyclops’s name. Pyronica.

*She’s my best friend. A real bright spark. Her name’s Pyronica and she’s a flaming hot comet of chaos.*

It seemed like a lifetime ago Bill had told him that. At the time, Ford wasn’t sure what to imagine but it certainly wasn’t this. So, she wasn’t just another one of Bill’s henchmen, like Ford had
assumed when he saw her in the space field, but she was Bill’s best friend, his second in command.

A part of Ford imagined Bill wouldn’t cave to Diñeiro’s demands but if Pyronica was here, then the triangle must have something planned. He had sent her to come to his rescue.

She was watching Ford, assessing him coolly from across the table, and for a moment the edge to her expression had Stanford nervous. He swallowed, unable to help the feeling that somehow Pyronica didn’t like him but he remembered Bill saying otherwise.

Well, pass on my hellos to her too, or is that not appropriate?

Oh no, she likes you. Maybe you’ll meet her someday.

Perhaps as Bill’s assurance that Pyronica would like him was a lifetime ago, she staunchly disliked him now. After all, things change.

“Are you playing, gorgeous?” Diñeiro asked her, interrupting the subtle glare she gave Stanford.

“I’ll just watch this round.” Pyronica replied, before leaning her elbow on the table, resting her chin on her hand flirtatiously. “See how lucky you think you are.”

“Oh, I know I’m lucky.” Diñeiro replied smugly, before draping an arm around Stanford’s shoulders, the gesture possessive, proving a point. “I’ve got my lucky charm right here.”

Pyronica’s eye took in the grip Diñeiro had on Ford’s shoulder and the awkward way Stanford tensed at the contact, surmising something, before she rested her other elbow on the table and laced her fingers together, now resting her chin on her tented hands, flames tickling her neck.

“So you do. Looking a little worse for the wear though.”

Stanford’s nose was still red and his lip scabbed over, bruising blossoming around his mouth. The bandage he covered the scar on his neck with was thin, and red bled through the material, standing out against the stark white of his shirt collar. He had a feeling Diñeiro did this on purpose, wanting to highlight Stanford’s injuries rather than downplay them, seeing them as part of his advantage.

Diñeiro’s hand gripped Ford’s shoulder more tightly, squeezing the muscle close to his neck until Stanford was unable to hide his pained grimace.

“He’s been in good company, don’t you worry, Toots.”

“Doesn’t look like it.” Pyronica gave Diñeiro an unimpressed look, before she extended her hand across the table. Addressing Stanford directly, she had her hand closed around something. “Bill asked me to give you this, Six Fingers. For your nose and your neck. Will you take it?”

She opened her hand and a small spiral of blue flame burned in her palm. Ford recognised it immediately as Bill’s flame and his eyes widened in surprise.

Diñeiro’s hand shot out in front of Stanford, holding the human back before he could reach to accept the flame.

“You think I’m lettin’ him take anything you’ve got to give him? What is that, anyway?”

“It’s just a little something to heal the damage you did.” Pyronica narrowed her eye at Raha. “You didn’t have to go cutting him up you know. That was totally uncalled for, not to mention rude.”

“He ain’t gettin’ no healing flame from you. Does that idiot not know what he’s here for now? His
magic is my magic. I decide who gets healed, not him. That flame belongs to me.” Diñeiro swiped his hand through the flame in Pyronica’s palm and the blue fire sizzled up, sinking into his skin.

Pyronica shrugged, and sat back at the table, crossing her legs. “Suit yourself. He’s not going to be happy you did that, though.”

“He’s here to make me happy now, not the other way around. You heard our deal.” Diñeiro scowled at the pink cyclops and she puffed her lips out in an exaggerated pout.

“You’re a bad boss to work for.”

“But … you are working for me now?” Diñeiro hoped, enthused by the prospect.

“I’m here, aren’t I?” Pyronica pursed her lips, looking none too pleased about it.

Diñeiro was delighted.

He barked a laugh, elated, and let go of Stanford’s neck. “I can’t believe it. He caved. He really – he hasn’t shook on it yet but this is exactly – just how much is this human worth?”

Pyronica turned her displeased pout onto Stanford, looking him up and down with a scowl. “I personally don’t think he’s worth this much trouble at all. He could have been worth something but that was before he messed up.”

“Ditching on the portal. He told me about that.” Diñeiro surmised, but Pyronica’s scathing look hadn’t left Stanford.

“Sure. The portal was how he messed up.” Pyronica narrowed her eyes, her tone indicating that the portal wasn’t it at all.

Stanford then realised that if indeed Pyronica was Bill’s best friend, she would have been privy to Bill’s reaction to their break up and the initial betrayal. Stanford had no idea how Bill reacted privately, but judging from the way she glared at him, it couldn’t have been good.

She hated Ford for betraying Bill, presumably for hurting him, as there was no doubt that Ford had hurt Bill, despite how much he tried to convince himself otherwise. Bill may have forgiven Ford over and over again, wanting his company to the extent that Bill’s good graces overcame Stanford’s many attempts to distance himself from the God, but judging from the fire in Pyronica’s eyes – his best friend hadn’t.

Maybe she wasn’t here to rescue him. Maybe she had her own agenda.

Diñeiro picked up on the venom in her tone and looked at Stanford curiously.

“What else did he do? There’s more?”

“Why should I tell you?” Pyronica smiled sweetly at Diñeiro, batting her eyelashes at him.

“Because I’m your new boss now, that’s why. So spill.” He leaned across the table, curiously.

Picking her words very carefully, Pyronica spoke. “There was a deal. You know what happens to deal breakers.”

“What kind of a deal?” Diñeiro pressed.

“That’s between him and Bill.” Pyronica smoothly replied, taking a sip from her cocktail.
Turning to face Stanford, Diñeiro nudged him expectantly. “What kind of deal? Tell me.”

Stanford winced, and looked between Diñeiro’s curious gaze and the man standing behind him with the shiv, before looking back at Pyronica. “I can’t … really say.”

“Sure, you can.” Diñeiro gestured for his man to bring the shiv out into the open, pressing it against the bandage on the side of Ford’s neck to motivate him.

“I –” Stanford gritted his teeth, leaning as far away from the point of the shiv as he could, certain that the pressure reopened his wound.

“He can’t say.” Pyronica spoke up quickly and it almost seemed to Ford like she blurted those words out. “Part of the deal. Gag orders are tricky like that. Of course, no deal comes without consequences.”

“Hmm.” Diñeiro gave Pyronica a considering look, before he waved away his henchman, the shiv going back in the guard’s sleeve.

Stanford rubbed his neck gingerly and privately wondered why Pyronica was lying for him, if she couldn’t stand him.

“I know a guy.” Diñeiro began, lifting his cigar to his lips and puffing smoke. “A contracts lawyer, who supposedly has the one and only get out of jail free card for one of Cipher’s deals. You want a loophole out of a deal, then you go see Loophole, or so they’re saying on the street. You wouldn’t be able to verify that for me, would you Toots?”

“It’s Pyronica.” Pyronica said coldly, and narrowed her eye at Diñeiro, saying little else.

“So, he does have one.” Diñeiro surmised from her silence. “Interesting. Not saying I’d use a boon like that on someone else, but I’m sure that’d be a way to loosen Poster Boy’s tongue. Providing Cipher doesn’t just undo the deal when I ask him to do it.”

“Bill doesn’t undo deals.” Pyronica stated coolly.

“We’ll see.” Diñeiro shrugged. “With the right leverage, anything can happen.”

The cyclops and the mobster stared at each other, challenging smug with icy.

While their attention was otherwise occupied, Stanford boggled at the thought of there being a way to get out of a deal with Bill. While he wasn’t 100% certain he actually did want to get out of his current deal with Bill, just the thought that it was possible had his brain spinning. Maybe he wasn’t so entrenched in his fate after all? It would be worth looking into, if nothing else.

Breaking free from his staring contest with Pyronica, Diñeiro arranged his chips on the table, and reached for the dice, ready to play another round.

“So why are you really here, Toots?” Diñeiro asked Pyronica, setting up his play. “Cause I didn’t just come here to gamble. Blow.”

He held his dice up to Ford again and once more Ford gritted his teeth. Revulsion, frustration and pained humiliation was clear on his face, and saving his pride, he resisted, choosing not to comply.

Before Diñeiro could force Ford’s hand, Pyronica spoke up, her voice much gentler than before.

“You really are just like Bill.”
Ford blinked at her, stunned, before sharply saying. “No, I’m not.”

“Yes, you are. I can see it in your eyes.” Pyronica watched Ford, her expression softer than it had been all night, more genuine, in any case. “He’d hate this too, in your situation. Like burning.”

“So, I’ll have him blow on my dice next time.” Diñeiro said sullenly, trying to interject in the conversation, but Pyronica paid him no mind, continuing to watch Stanford with a fondness that he hadn’t expected from her.

“You don’t know how many times he’s been through this.” Pyronica continued, holding Stanford’s attention. “Or what he’s had to do to get out of it. No matter where you go in the universe, there will always be people like him.”

She jerked his head in Diñeiro’s direction, still refusing to break eye contact with Stanford, much to Diñeiro’s displeasure.

“Existence drives us to do the things we do to survive and sometimes that takes us to dark places, but Bill has always been able to see the light at the other side. He’s been able to set the fire through which we see. He probably still sees the light for you too. That’s why he hasn’t given up on you.”

“He should.” Stanford said, the words sticking in his throat.

Her serious mood shifting to brevity Pyronica scoffed and rolled her eye before examining her pink painted claws the same way Bill would often check his nails needlessly. Ford wondered if he picked it up from her or if she picked it up from him.

“Well duh, that’s what I’ve been telling him. Figures you both wouldn’t listen. You’re just as stubborn as each other, I swear.” Flicking her finger in Ford’s direction, she smirked. “That’s another thing you have in common.”

Unsettled by the easy camaraderie between them and unnerved by the casual way Pyronica spoke over Raha to connect with his prisoner, rather than re-evaluating his opinion of Stanford, he grumpily shoved his hand in front of Stanford’s face again, holding the dice expectantly.

“Blow.”

“Allow me.” Pyronica leaned across the craps table, emphasising her bosom with the movement, intentionally drawing Diñeiro’s eye, and she batted her eyelashes at him, waiting.

He held out the dice, flat in his hand, and Pyronica kissed her lips out in an exaggerated pout before blowing a haze of pink flame onto the dice, melting them into liquid until they dripped through Diñeiro’s fingers and pooled onto the table, the dots melting away until only two remained.

“Snake eyes.” Called the dealer, much to Diñeiro’s staggered ire.

“Bad luck.” Pyronica wiggled her shoulders flirtatiously, smiling at the mobster.

“I oughta –“

“I didn’t come here to play games. We’re here to make a deal.” Pyronica reminded the mobster smoothly. She pulled a video transponder out from her purse and tapped on it, drawing attention to it. “So, let’s take this to a room, and I can get Bill on the line.”

“If he was just gonna call anyway, what does he need you for?” Diñeiro asked Pyronica suspiciously, looking her up and down.
Relying on Diñeiro’s mindset, knowing how he objectified the women around him for a similar purpose, Pyronica gave a ditzy giggle, and held the transponder below her breasts deliberately, the icing on the cake of Diñeiro’s proposed downfall.

“Oh, I’m just here to hold the screen and look pretty.”

Given a little privacy to conduct business, Raha and his crew joined Pyronica in one of the vacant conference rooms in the casino hotel.

There was a vending machine in the corner that resembled one of the slot machines out on the gaming floor. Pyronica had pulled the lever on the machine and gambled on a beverage, her gamble paying off as three ice cream sundaes lined up on the slot machine, a jaunty tune playing as the ice cream sundaes dispensed from the flap below.

Bringing them over to the table, she slid one of the sundaes across to Stanford, taking two for herself, deliberately not offering any to Diñeiro. Aside from that honey coloured drink back at the skybox, Ford hadn’t had any food in the past 24 hours, and despite its sickly sweetness, he was grateful to have something to fill his belly.

“So, are we gettin’ this call moving or what?” Diñeiro questioned impatiently.

“I can dial him now.” Pyronica assured him, before noting the way Stanford had scarfed down his sundae, it barely touching the sides. “Do we want more food? Snacks?”

“Let’s just get this over with already.” Diñeiro grumbled, disliking the way Pyronica adhered to her own schedule rather than his. He was supposed to be in control of this meeting, not her and certainly not Bill.

Regardless of his ire, Pyronica sashayed back over to the vending machine and pulled the lever again. “I’m going to get more snacks.”

Another lucky pull had all three squares on the vending machine line up with pictures of cherries and a bowl dispensed under the vending machine before the machine dinged and a deluge of cherries fell down from the slot at the bottom.

“Enough with the snacks.” Diñeiro groaned, purposefully snide. “It’s no wonder you’re so big.”

Taking the bowl and walking it back over to the table, Pyronica slammed the bowl down on the table in front of Stanford, glaring at Diñeiro before forcing a sweet smile.

Again, looking at Stanford, not Diñeiro, Pyronica asked. “You want anything else, hun?”

“He’s fine.” Diñeiro interjected, pissed off with the amount of deference Bill’s henchman was showing to someone other than himself.

“I’m not asking you, I’m asking Six Fingers.” Pyronica snapped.

Ford reached out to the bowl of cherries and began to hesitantly nibble on a few, picking up on the tension in the air. With the tense attention centred on him, he demurred.
“This is good. Thank you.”

“It’s like nobody’s been feeding him.” Pyronica commented angrily, walking back to her seat at the other end of the conference table. “What, you don’t give your employees lunch breaks now?”

“He can eat on the job.” Diñeiro ground his teeth, agitated. “Now quit stalling and call your damn boss.”

Pyronica raised her brow, amused to note that Diñeiro had stopped inferring that her boss was anyone other than Bill. Settling down comfortably in her chair, she pulled out the transponder and dialled.

Rather than turning the transponder to Diñeiro, she kept the screen facing her as Bill picked up on the other end of the line.

“There she is!” Bill’s voice crowed jubilantly through the device. “How’s Lottocron 9, does it miss me?”

“Like a hole in the head.” Pyronica chuckled, twirling a lock of hair around her finger, looking down at the screen placed in her lap. “It’s boring here without you.”

“It’s boring everywhere without me.” Bill countered cheerfully.

Her easy familiarity with Bill made an odd sort of sense to Stanford, and it amused him to see that they really did act like friends, their relationship not so regimented as Boss and employee, unlike Diñeiro’s crew. It seemed an intentional contrast to Diñeiro’s methods and the henchmen crowding behind Diñeiro shuffled awkwardly where they stood, observing this.

“Do you like my dress?” Pyronica asked coyly, grinning down at Bill.

Diñeiro seemed to assume Pyronica was flirting with Bill but Ford didn’t pick up on that same tone. It felt more like Pyronica was being flirtatious to infuriate Diñeiro rather than out of any romantic sentiment for Bill, almost like they were playing it up to get on the mobster’s nerves. Ford knew what Bill sounded like when he was flirting and it was a lot more awkward than this.

“Very jazzy. I hope you’re turning heads all the way around. The whole 360!”

That sounded ominous.

Pyronica giggled.

Clearing his throat impatiently, Diñeiro made his presence known.

Pyronica looked up at him briefly, before looking back to the screen with a huff. “I think someone wants to talk to you.”

“Put Sixer on the line.” Bill said in response, and Ford could see a vein tick in Diñeiro’s forehead. He could see what Bill was doing and it was working.

Pyronica flipped the screen around and held it across the table, pointing it at Ford, not Diñeiro, and Bill’s yellow countenance filled the screen, catching Ford’s subtle smirk.

“Are you still leaking?” Bill asked him, his eye immediately drawn to Ford’s bandage, the blood seeping through to stain the collar of his silk shirt now.

“Apparently so.” Stanford replied, eating a cherry, trying to hide how amused he was now that Bill
had changed the dynamic of the situation thoroughly.

“That’s pretty gross, as far as human functions go. You should work on doing less of it.”

Ford huffed a quiet laugh in agreement, amused by the way Bill showed his concern so callously.

“Nice bowtie.” Bill remarked and Ford felt like rolling his eyes, knowing he couldn’t escape a comment on the bowtie. “It doesn’t suit you.”

“No?” Ford questioned lightly, still stuffing cherries in his mouth.

“Bowties are my thing.” Bill quipped in response. “Not that you don’t look good though. Maybe a little less blood on the collar – that’s more fashion forward. You didn’t take my gift?”

“You aren’t in a position to be handing out gifts.” Diñeiro leaned in front of Stanford, demanding screen presence. “Now see here, Cipher, you’re here to deal with me, not this guy.”

“You’ll get written up by the Feds if you treat all your employees like this, Boss.” Bill said sarcastically, rolling his eyes. “A little extracurricular conversation isn’t a crime, last time I checked, and you’d know.”

“Huh, so you are working for me after all? Caved, have you?” Diñeiro sat back in his chair, trying to seize the advantage, but Bill’s sarcasm allowed no room for that.

“Sure, Boss.” Bill said smoothly, the sarcasm clear as day to Stanford, though it may have gone over Diñeiro’s head in his victory. “But right now, I’m taking my ten. Put Sixer back on.”

Pyronica shifted the screen back to Stanford, delighted to give Raha a hard time.

Ford appreciated Bill’s brevity, but he was still very much a hostage, and he was wondering how Bill was planning to get him out of this situation, as he had no doubt the triangle was up to something. All he could do in the interim was make the best of his situation and keep eating these cherries. He didn’t know when his next meal would be but he had a feeling he wouldn’t be in Diñeiro’s company for long, thanks to Bill.

Call it faith. Ford just knew.

“So, have you seen much of Cynn City? Have you seen that giant fountain with the horse lady out the front? Back in my day, she used to come alive and rampage through the streets. I heard that stopped happening after they banned me from their dimension though, party poopers. Now that was a show! Seen any good shows?” Bill fired questions at Ford conversationally, resting his hand against his bricks like he was reclining, talking only to Stanford.

“No, yes and no.” Ford replied, raising his eyebrow at Bill curiously, wondering why he wanted to waste Diñeiro’s time.

“That’s a shame. You’d probably like it here if you got to explore it a little. Games galore. Just like your dice game with the many D’s.” Bill gave Stanford a hinting look, wagging his brow at him.

“You should go out, adventure around a bit. So long as they don’t catch you counting cards, the dimensional bouncers won’t kick you out, and you can play with all the pretty dice to your heart’s content. Get yourself a souvenir. It’s not stealing if you take it from a hotel.”

“Sure, listen to the thief about what’s not stealing.” Diñeiro grumbled, missing the hints Bill was conversationally dropping.
“Oh, I’m sorry Raha, I couldn’t hear you over your enormous black market of illegal and stolen trade. Tell me again about how ethically flawed stealing the little shampoos and minibars and television cubes from hotels is.” Bill scoffed, rolling his eye. “Honestly Sixer, if throwing stones in glass houses was a national sport, Mr Diñeiro would be reigning champion.”

“That’s lot of lip for someone who supposedly works for me now.” Diñeiro scowled at Bill, crossing four of his arms.

“The deal hasn’t been sealed yet.” Bill reminded Raha briskly. “Until you do the paperwork, I’m a free agent.”

“Well then, let’s get down to business, huh?” Diñeiro prompted, trying to regain control over the conversation. “Start talking terms. Let’s hash this out.”

“Fine.” Bill agreed reluctantly, pointing at Stanford. “Sixer, leave the room. Go look at the shiny dice. The adults are talking business.”

Ford narrowed his eyes at that, pausing with a mouthful of cherries. What did Bill think he was doing?

“He stays here.” Diñeiro retorted stubbornly, putting a hand on Ford’s shoulder.

“Oh, let him wander around. You can keep your lackeys on him. I’m sure they wouldn’t mind a bit of a break from exercising their brainpower. What’s the point in dragging them to Lottocron 9 if you don’t let them play a few card games? Off you go, Sixer.” Bill waved Ford away, and his self-assurance almost had some of Diñeiro’s guards making to move along with him, without their boss’s say so.

“I tell my staff what to do.” Diñeiro growled, slamming his fist on the table top.

“Then you won’t mind if they stay for our in-depth intimate discussion about exactly what you need from me, hmm?” Bill countered. “While you rattle off a list of your failings, and what you expect me to fix for you. All your weaknesses bared and vulnerable before the world until such a point that they’re corrected. I can start now if you want. Wouldn’t want to cause you any unnecessary strain from the effort, after all, you are d-“

“Out.” Diñeiro said abruptly, cutting Bill off.

Pointing to his crew, Diñeiro directed the majority of his guards and lesser thugs to leave along with Stanford, only Tone permitted to stay behind.

“All of yous, go watch Poster Boy. Go shoot some craps or somethin’, just don’t let him out of your sight. Tone, you stay here, and the dame stays too. Don’t want you tryin’ anything with the human.”

“Oh, I’m not going anywhere.” Pyronica said lightly, with a pointed smile. “I’m here for you.”

“Don’t you try nothing neither.” Diñeiro pointed at Stanford as he stood up from the table, the other henchmen heading towards the door. “Remember who you work for now.”

Ford said nothing, inclining his head slightly. Before he left, he grabbed as many cherries as he could from the bowl and stuffed them in his pockets.

Walking out of the conference room door with Diñeiro’s escort of goons, Ford could hear Bill’s voice sound out from the transponder.
“What, you don’t give your employees lunch breaks? Humans need to eat, you know.”

Amused by the déjà vu that sentence brought on, Ford smothered his smile as he left the room.

With his escort of Diñeiro’s men scouting the room around him, Stanford relished the freedom exploring the casino granted him. Released from Diñeiro’s side, from the humiliation his captivity entailed, Stanford found himself unwinding from the tension and stress of the past several days. Although he wasn’t out of the woods yet, regarding this unsavoury situation, already he felt lighter, knowing in his gut that somehow Bill was tackling this issue, in his own weird and wonderful way.

Being Diñeiro’s captive was awful, even if it had only been a day or two. Now, away from the mobster, Stanford began to realise how much he missed the freedom to explore.

When he was on the scrap vandals ship, it was like he existed in a self-imposed limbo of monotony, coasting through space collecting debris, and now that he was separated from that lifestyle, in a new dimension with an entirely different status quo to study, and a small modicum of freedom, he felt his innate researcher’s spark rekindle within him.

The people of Lottocron 9 were good natured beings, with hair that grew like jagged tree bark from their scalps, their four arms and four eyes seeking good fortune constantly. Their eyes were dark and gentle, with long lashes, reminding Stanford of doe’s eyes. Their teeth were mint green, and they smiled regularly, appreciating their luck and circumstance.

Stanford was itching for his journal, wanting to make notes on their society, on this peculiar dimension.

Everything about Lottocron 9 was a gamble. Lady Luck was their goddess and faith for the people of Lottocron 9 meant putting their lives in her four lucky hands. Every choice made on Lottocron 9 was offered up to Lady Luck, everything from choosing a life partner to choosing who served as head of state. If people could make their decisions a gamble here, they did it, and as a result most things about Lottocron 9 seemed very laissez faire.

Stanford enjoyed soaking in the carefree atmosphere of the casino like he hadn’t just been kidnapped by pirates, sold out his crewmembers, and been threatened constantly by a purple nine-armed mobster all in the course of the past 48 hours. He took drinks from passing trays and downed them like he hadn’t just been a bartering chip in a dangerous game between a capitalistic megalomaniac and his chaotic ex-boyfriend.

With so much of his fate up in the air, depending on how the conversation in the conference room panned out, Ford felt like he could harken to Lottocron 9’s universal ethos. Blend in. Take a leaf out of their book. Assimilate with the culture.

*Let the chips fall where they may.* Stanford thought. *They will anyway.*

Up on the stage at the back of the hall, the group of sequinned singers danced with their feather fans, crooning, their song drifting across the room.

*“Life ain’t easy. Life ain’t fair.”*
A girl’s gotta fight for her rightful share. 
What you gonna do when the chips are down, 
now that the chips are down. 
What you gonna do when the chips are down, 
now that the chips are down.”

Considering how his fate currently seemed to rely on either Bill or Diñeiro winning out in the conference room, Stanford was feeling rather nihilistic about it all, since neither option was favourable.

If Diñeiro won this contest of wits, not only would he own Stanford forever, an eternal bargaining chip to keep Bill in line while he forced the God to bend reality to his whim, but through Bill, the mobster would become unbelievably powerful. Stanford had no illusions about how that power could be abused by a man in Diñeiro’s position. If Bill wasn’t the worst of the worst before, he certainly would be under Diñeiro’s employ.

Then again, if Bill agreed to work for Diñeiro there was the likely condition that he’d demand the mobster hand Ford over and his freedom would shrivel up the moment Diñeiro handed Ford to Bill. While Bill was currently better than Diñeiro in Ford’s eyes, neither option was appealing to Stanford, as neither option allowed him to retain any of his own agency.

“Help yourself, to hell with the rest. 
Even the one who loves you the best. 
What you gonna do when the chips are down, 
now that the chips are down.”

The girls on stage continued to sing, although lost in thought, the scientist was barely paying attention.

Stanford needed a third option.

Plucking his third drink from a serving tray, he wandered through the casino, taking in the various statues and artworks and advertised prizes, his mind churning through the pleasant buzz of alcohol for an out.

He’d travelled through the multiverse and made it all the way to Lottocron 9, but if he left his fate in the hands of Lady Luck, or more realistically in the hands of the people who, by all rights, he should still be running from, then he was a fool. Damn cultural sensitivity, but it was true. He needed to make his own luck.

Perusing the wall of prizes, Stanford paused, his eyes lingering on the display. A particular prize caught his eye, but it wasn’t the golden statues or the gem encrusted trophies that lined the cabinets.

He had a very vague recollection of what it might be.

It had seemed like so long ago, when he was still building the portal. When they were still happy.

Say I want to take the Alphecca exit to Lottocron 9, I plug it in and boom, fast tracked travel to the dimension of gambling and good times.

Ford chewed on the cherries in his pockets slowly now as he paced closer to the prize wall, thinking rather bitterly that if he had known he’d end up at Lottocron 9 under these circumstances, he may as well have stayed at home.
It sounded so enticing when Bill spoke about it. What else was it he had said?

Ford thought back on that kiss they had shared in the kitchen, after their game of D&D& More D, and he froze, his eyes glued to the prize wall, stunned as things began to click in his mind.

*Did you know there’s such a thing as an Infinity Sided Die?* Bill had asked him, breathing fire in the air between them before pressing another hot kiss to Stanford’s face. *There’s only two in existence and they’re banned in nine thousand dimensions—*

Ford dropped the cherry stem he was holding on the floor and stepped closer to the display case, pressing his fingers against the glass.

Nestled on a velvet cushion in the middle of a small hinged box sat a glowing, multi-sided die. The symbols on each surface of the die changed shape and colour every second Ford continued to stare at it. The outcomes on the die continued shifting, infinite outcomes in infinite colours, spiralling and warping and varying hypnotically, like the wheel of a kaleidoscope, entrancing Stanford thoroughly.

Bill’s remembered words echoed in Ford’s head.

*— Because anything can happen when they’re rolled.*

*Anything.*

Ford swallowed, staring at the die, things piecing together.

Maybe this wasn’t luck or fate. Maybe this was planned. Perhaps Stanford wasn’t in a position to make his own luck, but subtly Bill had laid down the clues Ford needed to do just that.

*Sixer, leave the room. Go look at the shiny dice. The adults are talking business.*

Stanford thought that Bill was just being patronising but, in hindsight, he couldn’t be more clear.

*So long as they don’t catch you counting cards, the dimensional bouncers won’t kick you out, and you can play with all the pretty dice to your heart’s content.*

This was his third option.

*Get yourself a souvenir.*

This was his way out. Bill had practically gifted wrapped it for him, a way around the politics and posturing going on between him and Diñeiro, a way to escape it all without the triangle losing face. A way to choose his own fate. And all the while securing himself the prize he was promised so long ago.

*It’s not stealing if you take it from a hotel.*

Ford began to grin, his reflection playing on the surface of the glass cabinet, as the infinity sided die glowed behind it.

“Mighty fine specimen isn’t it?” One of the four eyed beings of Lottocron 9 asked, also admiring the prizes. From the pin on the front of his suit, Stanford assumed this man worked for the casino. “Comes in infinite colours, but only two sizes.”

“Mmhmm.” Stanford nodded absently, his mind still churning with possibility.
“I own this one. Won it last year from the house. I’ll play you for it, if you like.” The man suggested, and Stanford looked up at the gentleman, reassessing him.

Yes, he wore a pin bearing the casino’s insignia, but below that pin was a label that read ‘reigning poker champion’. Ford’s eyes travelled up and down the man, finding him surprisingly generic, looking like every other four-armed, bark haired fellow on Lottocron 9, but there was a confident glint in his four eyes that made Stanford suspect this man was anything but ordinary. He seemed to think luck was on his side.

Diñeiro’s men were posted around the prize hall, browsing and playing some small games, but Ford knew someone would be watching him.

Yet Diñeiro wasn’t here right now and Stanford would endeavour to do as much as he could get away with, if it helped him escape the mobster for good.

Extending his hand out to the poker champion, Ford introduced himself. “Stanford.”

The poker player clasped Ford’s hand in two of his own hands, giving his hand a friendly shake. “Janak. I take it you’re not from around here.”

Trying to be suave, hoping confidence could carry him, even if it was feigned, Ford chuckled. “What gave it away?”

“Aside from you missing a few crucial limbs?” Janak laughed in a friendly manner, before shrugging, the gesture humble to offset his boast. “Not many people from Cynn City will play me anymore. I’m too lucky, that’s why. I’ve been reigning champion for 3 rotations in a row.”

“Can you play competitively in matters of luck?” Ford questioned lightly, making conversation.

“Well, sure, there are rules of the game, but only Lady Luck herself knows the hand you’ve been dealt. It just so happens Lady Luck is on my side.” Janak grinned confidently.

“How fortuitous.” Ford remarked, walking alongside Janak as they made their way over to the poker tables. Diñeiro’s goons noticed, and made to follow Ford, although they kept a respectable distance away, not stopping him, no doubt curious what Ford would do.

It must have been boring, watching a human meander about, working a security detail at a large and vibrant casino like this without being able to play a few games themselves. This probably passed as entertainment for them, watching Ford play.

As Ford settled down at the table opposite Janak, the dealer shuffled their cards, and Janak looked Ford over, noting the blood on his collar and the swelling around his lip and nose.

“You don’t look like you’ve been too lucky as of late.”

Ford took the cards the dealer slid across the table to him and picked them up. “My luck has to change sometime.”

Stanford was bluffing, and as he examined his cards, he realised he had no clue how to play poker, let alone how to play better than the three-year reigning champion.

Stanley would know how to play and he’d know how to cheat too. He might even get away with it. Stanford wasn’t as interested in card games like poker growing up, not as much as Stanley was anyway. Ford preferred card games like solitaire and blackjack, games that involved counting and
skill. He wasn’t sure if he had much of a poker face either, certain he’d give himself away.

As he considered the cards in his hand, he thought he’d try his luck a different way.

“You know, I’ve never played poker before.”

Janak looked up at him in surprise. “You haven’t?”

“Not ever.” Stanford shook his head, looking at the cards in his hand like he was baffled. Laying them face down on the table, Ford shrugged and lied. “They don’t have this game where I come from. So, I’m afraid if you’re looking for a challenge, it won’t be a successful one with me.”

Janak’s four dark deep eyes echoed disappointment, and he frowned down at the tabletop. “That’s a shame.”

“I’m still happy to play a game with you though. Do you know blackjack? I’ll play you a game of blackjack for the dice.” Ford offered amiably.

“Do I know blackjack?” Janak scoffed, leaning his two elbows on the table while he gestured with his other two arms. “Of course I do, but blackjack’s not poker, is it?”

“I agree, poker takes more skill.” Ford conceded and slid his cards back across to the dealer. “But blackjack offers a much more even playing field, in terms of luck. You did say Lady Luck was on your side, right?”

Janak rubbed his chin, considering Ford’s proposition.

Stanford could almost see the gears turning in Janak’s head, weighing up the comfort and familiarity of playing a game he was skilled at, versus trying his luck, playing a gamble, as the people of Lottocron 9 were so fond of doing. Ford could see the instant Janak’s eyes lit up and he folded his own cards on the table, sliding them back to the dealer.

“Blackjack it is, stranger. Dealer, shuffle please. New game.”

Hah. Gullible.

Ford watched the dealer collect the cards from the table and begin to shuffle the deck, and he sat back in his chair confidently, loosening his bowtie and letting it hang on either side of his neck.

He might not be as good a gambler as Stanley was but he was no slouch when it came to mathematics.

Time to count some cards.

Pyronica pursed her lips as Raha Diñeiro blew more rancid cigar smoke in her direction, staring down at the screen in her lap.

“So, how much do you know?” He asked, scowling at Bill’s image.
“I’ve always known. It’s like a party trick, knowing the exact date and time of someone’s death. You can tell I’m fun at parties.” Bill drawled, amused, resting his hands under his eye, like a human would rest their chin on their hands.

“Well shit.” Diñeiro rubbed his chin pensively. “How much time do I got left?”

“The clock is ticking, make no mistake.” Bill said evasively. “I don’t think you want a ballpark figure. Most don’t care to watch the time they have left trickle through their fingers.”

“So, help me undo it.” Diñeiro urged Bill.

“Undo what? Your death, or the things you’ve done that are killing you?” Bill clarified.

“The whole fucking shebang. Death, dying. I don’t want to deal with any of it.”

Bill blinked at Diñeiro slowly. “So, you’re saying you want to be immortal?”

“Why shouldn’t I? I don’t want to die. If I don’t want to die now, you think it’ll be easier for me to accept later down the track? I’m never going to accept it, so yeah, immortal. If that’s what it takes.” Diñeiro wiped his hand over his chin and nodded, set in his ways.

“What will happen to the Noire?” Bill asked, his eye darting to the side, looking briefly at Tone, although Diñeiro didn’t notice, too absorbed in his own situation. “Are you going to give it away? Let someone else inherit it?”

“Hell no! They can pry the Noire from my cold dead hands.” Diñeiro growled, slamming his hand against the tabletop. “It’s mine. It’s always been mine.”

“And if you never die?”

“Then it will always be mine.” Diñeiro declared, sounding a little lovestruck by the idea. “The Eternal Cryptix Noire.”

Tone shifted uncomfortably behind his boss, a little perturbed at the thought of potentially spending his entire life regulated to Diñeiro’s assistant, his second in command, never stepping up to the plate. Diñeiro was miserly enough, Tone hadn’t expected too much from the mobster, but after 140 years of service, he anticipated at least a little upward mobility. A chance to make the changes Tone wanted to make to the institution of the Noire. If Diñeiro would never die, Tone had no chance of changing the Noire, or getting a decent holiday for once.

“Immortality isn’t all it’s cracked up to be. Take it from someone who knows.” Bill assured Diñeiro, keeping his tone level and deliberate. “You might not recognise the you you see in the mirror after 20 thousand years, let alone a solid millennium. This isn’t a short-term commitment.”

“You know what is a short-term commitment? Mortality.” Diñeiro spat back. “I didn’t spend the last 189 years building up my business to kick the bucket right before I get to experience my legacy.”

“A legacy isn’t something you experience, it’s something that others do. What is the Noire if not a legacy?” Bill theorized, somewhat philosophically. “Everyone knows the Noire. It is the destination for illegal trade. No trade happens without the Noire knowing about it. Isn’t that legacy enough? You and the people who helped you build it -”

“I did it. All of it. It’s my legacy, and I’m not ready to leave it behind.”
Bill could see the corners of Tone’s mouth turn down, unimpressed with Diñeiro’s possessive statement and Bill knew in that moment how to direct his plan. So far, it was working.

“I want immortality. And not just the shitty prolonged life kind. I want prolonged life, healing, protection from attempted murders, the whole shebang. I hear you can do the whole undying thing. Word on the street says there’s a bounty hunter who reeks of your flame who’s got the whole undying thing going on for her. I want in on that too.”

“A bounty hunter, huh?” Bill rubbed the bricks under his eye, bemused. “Well, it’s nice to know she found a vocation.”

Pyronica made an agreeable noise. “Good for her.”

“What she’s got, I want. Immortality. That’s what you’ll give me.” Diñeiro declared.

Behind him Tone seemed to be slipping quietly into an escalating state of despair, horrified at the prospect of his boss living forever. If Raha Diñeiro lived forever, everyone who worked at the Noire would be run into the ground working for him until their dying day and Diñeiro would just keep on living. It was a nightmare.

“Alright, immortality it is.” Bill clapped his hands together, businesslike. Tone looked up, his expression torn. “You could have picked a better place to seal the deal. I need a handshake to enact it. I can’t exactly mail my power over via carrier pigeon. This just means you get to bring Sixer to me.”

“You think I’m an idiot?” Diñeiro scoffed, crossing his arms over his chest. “I’m not bringing you the kid.”

“Immortality’s a big ask, Raha. You’re not getting it without giving me something of equal value in return.” Bill narrowed his eye at Diñeiro. Pyronica was quiet, inwardly surprised that Bill just described Sixer as an equal trade for immortality.

“If I’m keeping your indentured service, like hell am I giving up the one thing that’s keeping you in line. I’m not just about to hand over the kid.”

“Then I’m not just about to hand over immortality. It doesn’t work like that.”

“You let the dame carry your power over to heal your poster boy. Fat lot of good it did him. So, why can’t it work the same way for me?” Raha posited. “What, did you give it to her in advance to ferry over, or you two got some kind of link going on? How do we make this work long distance?”

“Oh, we’re linked alright. Practically telepathic.” Bill drawled, and Pyronica smirked. “In fact, I bet Pyronica can tell what I’m thinking right now.”

“Go on then, what’s he thinking?” Diñeiro probed, thinking this was for real.

“He thinks you’re an idiot.” Pyronica said with a smirk, before she laughed, placing her hand on her chest. “Oh, sorry, that’s what I was thinking.”

“Keep insulting me like that and I’ll have that knife back to poster boy’s throat in a heartbeat.” Diñeiro threatened.

“He’s not here right now, so somehow I doubt it.” Bill spread his arms out, shrugging facetiously. “You let him out of your sight and if you think he’ll stick around to stay in your dubious employ, you really don’t know Sixer at all.”
Diñeiro’s expression sank rapidly as Bill’s words dawned on him.

“I think I’ve stalled enough now.”

Startled screams began sounding out from the main floor of the casino and Diñeiro’s purple complexion sunk into an ashy grey colour.

“And that’s my cue to hang up.” Bill said cheerfully, his fingers poised to click, shutting off the transmission. “Happy hunting, sucker.”

The screen went blank.

The infinity sided die was sitting in the middle of the blackjack table, brought out of its glass display case as soon as Stanford won his first game.

Reaching across for the die, Ford extended his hand out to grab the box, but Janak’s hands came down on the lid, the four-armed man begging him.

“Please, just one more game. Give me a chance to win it back from you. Please.”

“Well, uh —” Ford frowned at Janak’s hands on the box with consternation, unwilling to part with his prize now that he had won it so easily. He had no intention of risking the loss of his potential key to escape. “I’m really not —”

“It’s been in my possession for years, please, give me another chance to win it back. Lady Luck always smiles on me, I don’t know why she’s turned away from me. I’m fated to own this dice, it’s fated.” Janak said, his voice loud enough to draw the attention of the bouncers around the casino, as well as Diñeiro’s security crew who were keeping watch on Stanford while he roamed the casino floor.

“No, I – I
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won the dice. Fair and square.” Ford insisted, reaching for the box again.

“If it’s fair, luck will say. If you’re meant to have it, another game will prove it. Play me for it again, please. I’ve never lost this dice in my entire career. Professional gambling is my life. Luck has never abandoned me like that! I’m her most faithful.” Janak pleaded.

“What’s happening over here?” One of the dimensional bouncers asked, approaching the table curiously. The bouncer looked at Janak, recognising him as a regular no doubt, turning to him for an explanation first. “Janak?”

“You know what my lucky streak is like, Brod. I need another chance to win back the dice. This fellow, he’s not from around here. Why should luck smile on him more than she smiles on me?”

Ford shifted awkwardly, the attention turned on him now. He supposed with his split lip, bloodied collar, and cracked glasses he didn’t look like a man who could hold a lucky streak. If Janak wanted a rematch it would be much harder to win by counting cards with the dimensional bouncers right there, looking over his shoulder.

Ford didn’t believe in luck or fate anymore, certainly not like Janak seemed to, he was fully
inclined to make his own luck, and allowing a rematch was a sure-fire way to send all his self-
made luck spiralling down the drain.

He’d won the dice by cheating and lying, yes, but he meant to keep that dice. He’d wanted it for
his own ever since he first heard about it, back in his kitchen on Earth. To him, keeping the dice
for himself was only fair, not letting it potentially get swept away from him through the grace of
the capricious Lady Luck, who hadn’t seemed to care much for him at all as of late.

“Could I at least have a look at the die first, if we’re going to play for it again?” Ford asked
optimistically. “I should like to hold it, just for a moment, if there’s a chance I could lose it myself
this next round. I hardly feel like I’ve won it at all, if I can’t even hold it before it’s taken away
from me. I need some small reward, as a measure of my success, however brief.”

“But you’ll play another round?” Janak asked Ford, his eyes lighting up.

Stanford nodded stiffly and then held his hand out for the box.

Janak slid the box across the table to Ford, and Ford grabbed the box, holding the case in his hand.

The bouncers were standing over his shoulder, watching him to make sure he didn’t attempt to do
anything stupid, like run away with the dice.

Ford intended to do something stupid alright, but he wasn’t running anywhere.

Fumbling with the latch on the box, Ford deliberately spilled the dice out of its velvet niche,
tumbling it onto the table. “Oops.”

The Lottocron 9 locals around the table all gasped and lurched forward, trying to catch the dice
before it hit the tabletop, but they were too late.

The dice landed and the symbol facing the ceiling had three small circles on it glowing with
power.

Within an instant, large soap bubbles began to encase the gamblers surrounding Ford’s table,
materialising out of thin air. Janak and the bouncers began floating as the bubbles encapsulating
them started to drift up to the ceiling.

Stanford swiped the dice off the tabletop and held it tight in the palm of his hand, refusing to let it
go. He was lucky he moved so quickly, as a soap bubble began to encase him too, lifting him up
from the floor of the casino, into the air.

People started shrieking, startled gasps and laughter from the more intoxicated guests ringing out
as every person in the casino hall began to float to the ceiling, encased in multicoloured soap
bubbles of their own.

Stanford could see Diñeiro’s goons floundering, trapped in soap bubbles, staring at Stanford in
shock.

Ford pushed on the edge of his bubble and found it didn’t pop, rather it started to roll through the
air like a hamster ball, his feet skidding for purchase. Heaving himself against the back of the
bubble, he began to push his bubble through the air, away from Diñeiro’s goons before they had
the presence of mind to follow him.

Ford ran inside the bubble and the bubble moved through the air in response to his haste, ferrying
him to the edge of the main hall that housed the casino’s games tables. The elaborate high-
ceilinged rooms and lavish archways between the rooms worked in Ford’s favour as his bubble bounced from room to room.

Looking down he could see that the bubbles seemed to be localised to the main casino room, other casino goers standing on the ground in the next room over, staring up at the bubbled human floating above them with wonder and awe, no doubt assuming this was yet another one of the magic shows that performed on the regular at Cynn City.

Ford waved at one of the onlookers, prompting applause from the aliens watching from the ground.

The applause was interrupted by an enraged shout, the voice unpleasantly familiar.

“HEY! WHERE DO YOU THINK YOU’RE GOING? GET DOWN HERE.”

Raha Diñeiro had run out from the conference room, Tone sprinting out after him, gawking at the bubbles on the ceiling in amazement.

Pyronica exited the conference room after them at a more relaxed pace, but when she saw the bubbles carrying people, floating on the roof of the hall, a vibrant laugh bubbled from her.

“Ohh! That looks like fun! Me next!”

Diñeiro’s enraged expression was more than enough to speed Ford up, and he began moving his bubble faster, his feet peddling against the slippery bottom of the soap bubble, trying to get out of the hall entirely.

Looking over his shoulder he could see Diñeiro charging after him, snatching a blaster from Tone’s jacket pocket as he moved.

“Give me that. Get back down here now Poster Boy, or I’m gonna make you regret hitting the ground.”

“Shit.” Ford swore, and pushed on his bubble more frantically, jumping inside it until the bubble bounced low enough to pass through the doors to the courtyard outside.

His bubble began floating up, higher and higher now, until he was hovering above the giant bronze statue of Lady Luck riding her racing horse. He couldn’t exactly say that he thought this plan through, it wasn’t a plan, it was desperation and the whimsy of sheer probability getting him out of a bad situation, and possibly into a worse one, but his floating bubble could only get him so far.

Cynn City was surrounded by a dome of reinforced glass, enabling the giant spaceship of a city to pass through the galaxy with a steady supply of breathable air. While Stanford apparently no longer needed breathable air to survive, he couldn’t exactly travel through the multiverse in a giant floating bubble, assuming he even made it out of Cynn City alive.

He wouldn’t even get past the dome without some sort of a plan but it didn’t look like he would make it that far.

The loud bang of a blaster sounded out and Diñeiro’s shot burst Ford’s bubble, the plasma blast barely missing his shoulder by an inch.

No longer supported by the gravity defying bubble, Ford fell, and landed on the back of Lady Luck’s horse with a thump, holding onto the bronze statue like his life depended on it. It probably did.
“You get your ass down here right now, or I’ll shoot you again.” Raha threatened, levelling the gun at Ford once more. “This time I won’t miss.”

Ford swallowed and he could see Raha’s finger on the blaster’s trigger, readying the next shot regardless of Stanford’s answer. Unless the statue had any plans to come alive again and trample Diñeiro, Ford’s luck looked like it was about to run out.

Tone was standing next to Diñeiro, nervously looking between Stanford and Raha’s gun. It looked like the assistant was about to do something drastic, but before he could, Raha was swiftly kicked in the back by a large, flaming, glittering stiletto heel.

The mobster flew across the courtyard like a bullet. Stanford could hear the gonging sound Diñeiro made when he hit the base of the bronze statue, feeling the vibrations in his fingertips, the sickening snap of Diñeiro’s bones accompanying the impact.

Pyronica stepped through the archway into the courtyard, grinning widely, revealing far more teeth than was comforting. Stanford looked down from his position on top of Lady Luck’s horse to see Raha groaning in pain on the ground.

“I’ve been waiting to kick your ass ever since you called me Toots.” Pyronica began counting on her fingers. “And Dame. And Doll. And Sweetheart. I’ve told you my name.”

“F-fuck.” Diñeiro coughed and spat up blood. “You bitch.”

“That’s also not my name.” Pyronica gave him an unimpressed look and examined her fingernails idly.

Hacking up more blood, Diñeiro swore. “This is bullshit. I took your boy’s healing flame, aahhgk, it does jack shit.”

“It did exactly what it was supposed to do.” Pyronica replied, crossing her arms. She began walking across the courtyard, crouching in front of Diñeiro’s broken body, poking his leg with her fingertip just to hear him attempt to smother a scream. “It was supposed to heal Sixer’s broken nose and the cut you made on his neck, and look, your nose isn’t broken right now, is it? Just everything else.”

“Fuck!” Diñeiro swore, hissing in pain, letting loose a cavalcade of swear words. “Fuck you and your pointy yellow boss! His shit is weak, weak as fuck! Just like the rest of you trumped up freaks, thinking you’re something you’re not. You ain’t like everyone else, you’re abhorrent! You’re repulsive! You’re a waste of molecules, the lot of you, freaks! I should have known you’d screw me over. Monsters, the whole freakin’ lot of you.”

Pyronica tsked and wagged her finger at Diñeiro. “That’s not very nice. And not very fair either. See, you wouldn’t expect a bandaid to cure grievous internal haemorrhaging, like you’re currently experiencing, and you wouldn’t expect what we gave you to do the same thing either. No, that flame was supposed to do two things – and healing a broken nose and a sliced neck was one of them.”

“What was the other thing then?” Diñeiro questioned weakly.

“Oh.” Pyronica raised her hand, fingers poised to snap. “About thirty seconds of this.”

She snapped her fingers and at first the effect wasn’t obvious from the height that Ford was at, watching from on top of the statue, but soon he could see a familiar yellow glow shining down on the bloodied wetness of Raha’s shirt front, his ribs poking through the skin.
“WHOO! So many broken bones. Honestly, couldn’t have happened to a nicer person.”

Ford knew that voice.

“Quick, make him say he peed his pants.” Pyronica urged.

“Oh, he’s way past that point.”

“Bill?” Ford spoke, his voice sounding distant from the top of the horse.

Ford could see Diñeiro crane his neck back with a horrible cracking sound, and then Bill’s bright yellow slitted eyes were staring up at him.

“Hiya Sixer. Back on the horse, I see.” Bill joked, before convulsing his head back forward, looking over at Tone, who was frozen in place, watching his old boss’s broken body be possessed by the same creature that ripped the skin off one of the merchants in his marketplace. When Bill clicked at Tone with Diñeiro’s broken fingers, Tone jumped, shocked.

“Hey you, soon to be rich guy. Let’s get an audio recording happening here. You’re going to want this on tape.”

Tone blinked, stunned for a second before he fumbled to set up an audio recording, pulling a tablet out from his jacket pocket.

Bill cleared his throat, his voice warping between the triangle’s usual cheerful tone, to a deeper more demonic register, until it levelled out into the gravelly smoker’s brogue of Raha Diñeiro.

“Ahem. Okay, are we rolling?” Bill asked Tone, matching Diñeiro’s voice word for word.

“Alright, so, I Raha Diñeiro, being of most sound mind, hereby revoke all former testamentary dispositions made by me and declare this to be my last Will and Testament.”

Ford could see Tone’s eyes widen, piecing things together.

“What’s your name?” Bill paused to whisper at Tone.

“T-Tone.” Tone stuttered.

“I leave the sum of my wealth, my consolidated assets, and my pride and joy, the Cryptix Noire, to Tone, my most loyal associate. I know he’ll do better things with the Noire than I ever could and I can’t think of anyone better to preserve my legacy. Thank you Tone, you deserve it, every bit of it.” Bill finished solemnly, Diñeiro’s voice sounding genuine and wistful, adding weight to the falsified Will amendment, before snapping back into Bill’s own grating tone. “AAAAAND CUT! You can take that straight to the bank by the way.”

Tone checked the recording before he stuffed the tablet back in his pocket. “This is – thank you.”

“You’re welcome.” Bill said congenially, before flopping Diñeiro’s neck around to look up at Pyronica. “Py, you can take it from here.”

“You’ll want to back out now.” Pyronica warned Bill as she stood up, and began to raise her foot, ready to stomp her heel down onto Diñeiro’s ailing body.

“Have fun!” Bill grinned winsomely at Pyronica until the yellow light died from Diñeiro’s eyes and the mobster came back to himself.

“Ugh.” Diñeiro coughed, sounding utterly wrecked. He blinked his eyes open, to see Pyronica’s
flaming heel hovering over him. “Oh fuck.”

“I told you I was here for you. Any last words?” Pyronica asked, tilting her head down at Diñeiro.

The mobster was panting, wind whistling through his lungs, blood dripping down from the side of his mouth, eyes assessing the way Tone turned away from him, refusing to help, before his eyes slid back up to meet Pyronica’s single large eye, his bloodied lips turning up in a sickening smirk.

“Heh. I can see up your skirt, Toots.”

Curling her lip, Pyronica lifted her leg and stomped down on Raha Diñeiro, his bones breaking with a loud crunch, ending his life in an instant.

Ford watched her shake Diñeiro’s blood off her shoe, before wiping the bottom of her high heel on the grass of the courtyard. Pursing her lips, she crouched down to inspect Diñeiro’s squashed corpse, and pinched one of his arms between her thumb and forefinger, lifting his mangled body from the ground.

“You better not give me a stomach ache.” Pyronica mumbled, and Ford barely had time to process what she said before she lifted Diñeiro’s corpse up, opened her mouth unnervingly wide, and dropped the mobster into her mouth.

Ford clung to the bronze horse, his stomach disturbed by the crunching noises he could hear as he watched her chew. She swallowed and licked Diñeiro’s blood off her fingers, before licking her lips and standing upright.

She began to pull a compact mirror and a large tube of lipstick out of her bag, and Ford shrunk down close to the statue, hoping she wouldn’t notice him. She reapplied her lipstick, smacking her lips together, before her giant eye glanced up to where Stanford was hiding.

“You’re lucky I’m not eating you too, you know, after what you did to Bill.” Pyronica snapped her compact shut and put it back in her bag. “Sure, he forgives you, but I don’t have to. Not after what you put him through.”

“What I put him through?” Ford spluttered, talking back to her somewhat unwisely.

“I’m not even talking about all the betrayal, back and forth.” Pyronica leaned her forearms against the bronze statue and looked up at Stanford, her large pink eye gazing up at him. She could easily reach up and grab him from here, yank him from the back of the horse and stuff him in her mouth too, she was that tall, but she held back, pillowing her chin on her arms, staring at him. “I’m not even talking about the portal. You really hurt his feelings, you know.”

“No I didn’t – I –” Ford scoffed, shaking his head. “He doesn’t care! He doesn’t have feelings. He – he was just using me!”

“What were you doing when you dragged him down there to live in that skin prison, huh? I know what you wanted. Don’t act like using someone and having feelings for them are mutually exclusive. You did, didn’t you?”

Ford’s protestations dried up in his mouth and he stared down at Pyronica’s giant eye, surprised by her insight. For some reason he didn’t expect it from her, despite recognising that spark of intelligence she possessed. He underestimated her and, judging from the way Diñeiro treated her, he imagined she was either used to that treatment, or relied on it in certain situations.

“Do you still have feelings for him?” Pyronica asked Stanford bluntly.
Ford clenched his jaw, debating whether or not being honest was wise here, given how dangerous the wrong answer could be, but Pyronica’s steady gaze didn’t seem to promise retribution. She seemed to genuinely want to understand.

“I shouldn’t.” Ford finally said.

“Why?” Pyronica questioned.

“He’s done awful things.”

Pyronica blinked slowly at Ford. “Haven’t we all? To survive? Haven’t you?”

“He didn’t need to.” Ford maintained. “There were other ways. He ruined lives.”

“There are always options, yes, but we don’t always see them. You could have ruined someone’s life several times over, and you wouldn’t know it until you’ve already made your decision. Bill isn’t infallible. He’s just like you or me. Can you honestly say that you always make the right decisions?”

“But he’s supposed to be all seeing. All knowing. He should know.” Ford protested weakly, not willing to admit his double standards.

Pyronica gave Stanford a knowing look. “You know he isn’t. Can he see, sure, but does he look? He’s more than just an eye.”

“Why are you so loyal to him? How can you know he’s not just using you too?”

“I know he isn’t. He’s my friend.” Pyronica answered simply.

“But how do you know?” Ford pressed, somewhat desperately.

Pyronica blinked at him slowly and tilted her head at him, like the answer was obvious.

“I listen to my heart.”

As Stanford sat, stunned on the back of Lady Luck’s horse, Pyronica stepped back from the statue and bent down to slide her high heels off, until she stood barefoot on the grass of the courtyard, considerably shorter.

Satisfied, Pyronica then reached her hand up, and Ford tensed as her flaming pink claw passed just a yard below his perch on the statue, swiping right past him.

“Hup.” Pyronica swiped her hand through the air one more time for posterity’s sake, her hand deliberately falling short of reaching Ford, before she put her hands on her hips. “Well, guess I can’t catch you. You’re too high up for me to reach. A pity.”

Ford blinked at her, looking between her high heels on the ground beside her, and the exaggerated way she puffed out her cheeks, like the effort to reach him was just too much for her.

Realising that she was letting him go, Stanford sat up a little, watching her with amazement.

“You should roll that dice of yours again, if you want to get away from here. There’s a high likelihood you’ll get yourself a portal leading out of here, if you act on the window of probability that ends within the next two minutes, or so I’ve been told.” Pyronica examined her nails, acting nonchalant as she so generously gave Stanford the means to escape.
“Thank you.” Ford said earnestly.

“Don’t thank me, I didn’t do anything.” Pyronica held her hands in the air, unable to hide her smile. “Didn’t even catch you, what a shame.”

Ford opened his hand to reveal the infinity sided die nestled within his currently sweaty palm. Readying himself to roll it onto his other hand, he paused, and looked back down at the cyclops.

“Can I ask you a question?”

She blinked up at him, amused. “You mean can you ask me two questions?”

Ignoring her quip, Ford looked down at her, his expression serious.

“What happened to Bill’s dimension?”

Instantly her amused expression dropped, her lips forming a serious line. “Don’t you ever ask him that. Never. Understand?”

“But do you know?” Ford pressed.

“No.” Pyronica shook her head and frowned at him, oozing disapproval.

“Does anyone know?” Ford persisted.

“No one does.” Pyronica answered, her words clipped and abrupt. “Except Bill. And if you care for him at all, you’ll keep it that way. Let it stay buried.”

Rather than answer her or make any promises, Stanford rolled the dice on the flat of his hand. Without looking at the symbol it landed on, Ford closed his hand around the dice again, trusting that Bill’s prediction would pan out.

True enough, a wormhole opened up behind him, ready to suck Stanford through to a different dimension, unknown to him.

Giving Pyronica one last unreadable look, Stanford hurled himself away from Lady Luck’s mighty steed, swan diving dramatically into the wormhole to face whatever awaits him on the other side.

Watching him leave, Pyronica sighed, the wormhole closing up behind the human upon his theatrical departure.

“They’re just as bad as each other.”

Chapter End Notes

Pyronica for MVP, calling it now. Her taking off her shoes so she can't reach Stanford is the equivalent of Mariah Carey putting her sunglasses on and pretending she can't read.

The song the Lottocron 9 ladies are singing is "When the Chips are Down" by Anaïs Mitchell and it's been part of the inspiration for this chapter for a long time, also if you're into inspiring songs for Portal Ford hijinks "Putting on the Ritz" by Taco is a good one to imagine Ford walking through an opulent alien casino to.
This chapter is dedicated to my lovely beta reader, and also to rainbowrat and thelema rhoias who have been making some fantastic art and are keen to make a music video for this fic! How exciting! Best of luck buds :D
I hope you enjoy the chapter, I'll be chinhanding happily with any comments or reviews that come in, always happy to read nice reviews.
Next chapter we have more of Ford's adventures dimension hopping, the M dimension, and a certain infamous tattoo.
Are you sure you want to hear more? What if I ain't worth the while, not the style you'd be looking for. If I'm sweet tonight, things look different in the morning light. I'm jealous and I'm proud. If you hurt my feelings I'll cry out loud.

Chapter Notes

Hello all, thank you for reading if you've got up to the new chapter so far. I wanted to address discussions had on my tumblr surrounding the abusive nature of Bill and Ford's relationship, just wanting to reassure the anon I'm still with you there 100% but things in this chapter and possibly the next do the whole two steps forward one step back thing, so Stanford's still kind of lying to himself here and isn't wholly self aware but he's getting there in his own messed up way. I just wanted to touch in with you to let you know that I intend to depict the abuse and not wash it away or romanticize it, but the characters haven't quite come around to seeing it that way yet. You won't have too long to wait, we're in the second half of the fic now. I hope you all enjoy the chapter.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

The wormhole opened up and deposited Ford unceremoniously into a strange new dimension. Falling from a great height, Stanford braced himself as the ground rushed up to meet him. Gravity was not his friend, but he seemed to have fantastic luck when it came to falling in opportune places. Crashing through the thatch awning of a farmer’s barn, Stanford plummeted face first down upon a zig zagging hay bale.

The hay cushioned his fall and spared him any further injuries. The gash in his neck was injury enough, in Stanford’s opinion.

Spitting out hay from his mouth, Stanford pushed himself up to look around the barn. The hay bales that he had fallen on were all stacked in purposeful zigzags that looked like the letter M and, as Stanford surveyed the barn, the hay bales weren’t the only artistically arranged M shaped masterpiece within.

Horses had their backs bent in uncomfortable looking contortions, braying in their stalls, resembling the letter M. The chicken clucking atop one of the hay bales was also contorted to resemble the letter M, and as Stanford looked down to the barn floor below, he could see a cow with its back bent to resemble the letter M being milked by a squat man who looked like a child’s anthropomorphic rendition of the letter M, if the letter M had arms, legs, and a face.

“Mmmooooo.” The cow mooed as the M shaped farmer milking her knocked his bucket over in shock.

“Hello.” Stanford greeted the farmer after an awkward pause, knowing how strange he must look to the farmer, deviating from this dimension’s norm, despite how utterly ridiculous that norm may
“Meep!” Squeaked the farmer.

Stanford sighed.

“Right. You know what, I’ll just leave.”

“Mait.” The M shaped farmer held out his hand, standing up from his milking stool. “Mho are mou?”

Stanford blinked at the M shaped man for a moment and then pulled out his dimensional translator, the smaller more user-friendly version he’d been given by the scrap vandals, turning it on and off again to test that it was working properly. With the dimensional translator rebooted, Stanford gave the peculiar little man an expectant look.

“Mir?” The M shaped man enquired, confused.

The translator didn’t provide an English translation, perhaps it was so blindingly obvious that the translator didn’t see it as necessary to provide one.

Stanford sighed again, resigning himself to the situation, before he climbed down from the zigzagging hay bales, walking over to the M shaped man before squatting down to meet his eye level.

“I’m to assume that this dimension favours the letter M, yes? And that your language comprises of the letter M littered amongst regular words for no real reason for it other than thematic resonance? And you just asked me who I am?”

“Mes.” The M shaped man confirmed with a nod.

“Right.” Ford huffed an unimpressed breath and extended his hand in greeting towards the little man. “My name is Stanford.”

“My name is Melvin. Mleased to meet mou!” Melvin shook Stanford’s hand enthusiastically, clearly not lacking in friendliness, despite what his dimension lacked in common sense. “Mhere are mou mrom mrstranger?”

“Several places.” Stanford replied evasively. “Most recently Lottocron 9. I came here through a dimensional wormhole. I don’t suppose there’s any chance you know of another wormhole that can take me elsewhere?”

Melvin paused thoughtfully, before he gestured to the door. “Mi man make mou mowntown?”

Stanford took a moment to puzzle out a rough translation of that sentence. “Downtown. Right. I suppose I could find more information there, and anywhere is better than here.”

Melvin looked mildly offended for a moment.

“Sorry about your roof.” Stanford tacked on, a thoughtless apology.

“Mi man mend it.” Melvin replied, before waddling out of the barn, waving for Ford to follow him. “Mhis may.”

Stanford followed Melvin, ducking under the M shaped barn door, muttering as he went. “At least mend is a word already.”
“Mi man mrive mou to the Mity.” Melvin called out over his shoulder as he made his way to his vehicle.

Stanford stopped in his tracks when he saw the M shaped car, viscerally offended by the impracticality of the design. The car dipped up and down, the middle of the car nearly dragging along the ground, the front and back of the car spiked up unnecessarily. How could anyone drive in that thing? Who designed it and why were they permitted to design something so thoroughly impractical?

Melvin opened the car door for Stanford politely, before waddling around the other side to hop in the driver’s seat. The M shaped man reached across to pat the seat beside him and Stanford braced himself for how uncomfortable he would be, jamming himself into this M shaped clown car.

He looked over Melvin’s farm briefly, taking in the M shaped fences, the M shaped cottage, the M shaped animals, and the M shaped hedges, with an M shaped rooster perched atop the fence, clucking in a way that sounded less like ‘buck buck cluck’ and more like ‘muck muck muckaa’.

This dimension was clearly a lost cause. Stanford couldn’t stay here.

“To the city.” Ford agreed, squeezing himself into the passenger’s seat of the car, closing the car door behind him, his legs bunched up to his chest.

Whatever gets him out of here quickest. Ten minutes in and this place was already making him feel suicidal.

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“And their alphabet, get this, their alphabet is just the letter M repeated 26 times. It’s just the dumbest thing. It makes no sense, just like it makes no sense to design their vacuums in an M shape. It’s not efficient. It’s completely redundant. Why does a universe like that even exist? Why did I have to spend time there? Why did they keep telling me to ‘mave a monderful mime!’ – I mean it’s – it’s utterly mupid!”

“Yeah, you tell ‘em, Sixer.”

Two dimensions along now, three years into his post-portal adventures, Stanford found himself wanting to sleep again, not because he had to, but because he wanted to, wanting to dream if only to be able to rant about the M dimension to someone who he knew would understand his frustration.

Ford figured that telling Bill about the places he had already left would be harmless, as he couldn’t exactly track him down to somewhere he no longer was. Telling Bill about his journeys at all seemed like a bad idea if Stanford were thinking logically about it, but honestly, now that he was travelling alone through the multiverse what he really wanted more than anything was a friend to talk to. Staggering what dimensions he told Bill about was the perfect way to mask his current destination while still getting to rant about the places he’d been to a friendly ear.

And after what had happened on Lottocron 9, maybe Bill was still his friend, or at least more of a friend than Stanford thought.
He was certainly doing Stanford a favour by skimming over their last blow up argument as if it had never happened. It took a certain amount of tolerance and understanding to be able to float deftly over things left unsaid. Stanford was privately quite grateful that he didn’t have his explosive tantrum held over his head throughout their meetings, remembering it vividly.

“Oh, that’s rich. I don’t deserve you. Well guess what? I don’t need you, and if this is how you’re going to act, then I’m clearly better off alone!”

He was thanking his lucky stars that he wasn’t faced with an ‘I told you so’ now that he was back in Bill’s mindscape, given how much he’d needed Bill’s intervention back on Lottocron 9, and how poorly suited he was to actually being alone.

It was much more satisfying to have someone there with him, listening or at least appearing to listen, when Stanford spiralled into another rant about the illogical nature of the M dimension.

“And you know what else didn’t make sense? If everything was M shaped in that dimension, from the animals to the buildings, to the cars and appliances – why weren’t their clothes M shaped, hmm?”

“Well, they were covering M shaped people.” Bill pointed out, floating in the air beside Stanford, lazily examining his nails like he was only half paying attention.

“But the trousers weren’t M shaped.” Stanford deduced, like he’d just found the perfect rebuttal for the M dimension’s existence. “They were three bits of fabric, two pant legs, and one weird middle piece held up by a belt. That’s not M shaped. And the belt wasn’t M shaped.”

“Maybe the buckle was.” Bill began growing and shrinking his nails into pointed claws and back down, not as engaged in the topic of the frustrations of the M dimension as Stanford was.

“The buckle was – that’s not the point. The point is, why bother with all the rest of the illogical M shaped design, if it’s not going to be consistent with everything else? They didn’t commit to it. That’s just – that’s just lazy.”

“Uhuh.” Bill examined his pointy claws, tilting his wrist to better admire them. “You know, I met a guy from the M dimension back in the Infinitentiary.”

“In prison?” Stanford asked, his interest piqued.

“Yep. Back in the not so good old days.” Bill divulged, holding his hand out flat, appreciative of the dark shine of his claws. “You wanna know what they called him?”

Ford squinted, suspicious at the deliberate pause in Bill’s delivery.

“What?” Ford asked warily, suspecting the worst, and the worst was what he got.

“They called him the Mmmmmmurderer.” Bill said before he burst out laughing.

“I suppose you think you’re real funny, don’t you?”

Bill continued to laugh, wiping mirth from the corner of his eye, amused. “It’s true. It’s funny ‘cause it’s true.”

“I’m sure you think the truth is very funny.” Stanford said acidly, his harsh words casual. Rather than acknowledge Stanford’s barb, Bill floated around him idly, his claws still sharp. “So,
where are you now?"

“Elsewhere.” Stanford said evasively.

“Not even a hint?” Bill batted his eyelashes at Ford winsomely.

“I’m not telling you a thing about the places I’ve been until I’m several places away from them.” Stanford wagged his finger chidingly at the triangle. “I have no desire to be caught by you any time soon.”

Bill made a disbelieving noise and pillowed his hands behind him, reclining casually in the air.

Stanford gave Bill a considering look before trying his luck.

“You know, you could call off the bounty. Take down the posters, end the hunt. It wouldn’t take more than a snap of your fingers to get rid of the posters and to call off the whole chase.”

Bill blinked down at Ford, his eye curving in amusement.

“Now why would I do that?”


“I don’t know where you got that idea. I didn’t let you go.” Bill emphasised with a shrug, his tone still quite amused.

“But your friend – she –“

“Are you tattling on Pyronica?” Bill asked Ford, before he wagged his clawed finger back at the human. “Tsk tsk tsk. Poor form trying to get her in trouble. After all she did for you. Feeding you and curb stomping that big bad mobster for you.”

“But you – with Diñeiro you –“

“All I did was have a private conversation with someone who was trying to twist my arm. See, Diñeiro thought he could use the ransom for you as leverage against me and, fancy that, he’s dead now. What a coincidence. Some might call that a life lesson.”

Stanford narrowed his eyes at Bill, trying to see through what the triangle was hinting at.

“Or the opposite, if we’re being literal.” Bill continued, waving his hand as he spoke. “Thems the breaks and Diñeiro broke a lot of bones. I should know. HA!”

Stanford was quiet for a moment, his expression serious, not giving Bill’s joking manner the satisfaction of amusement.

“You know, I think I understand things now. You … you want people to think that Diñeiro died because he tried to blackmail you. And that using me as leverage against you would likely offer the same result. It’s all about reputation for you, and appearance.” Stanford theorised. “Now everyone is going to think you killed Diñeiro because he kidnapped me for his own means, rather than handing me over to you directly.”

“People can think what they want, Sixer. The fact remains - I didn’t kill the guy.” Bill shrugged again, as casual as ever. “I barely had anything at all to do with the situation. I wasn’t even in the same dimension.”
“But you were responsible, you told Pyronica to ‘have fun’, you possessed Diñeiro’s body and altered his final Will so everything he had was taken from him before he died. They may not be able to pin the crime on you but you did it.” Stanford insisted, going over the evidence, trying to make it stick. “And you did it from a dimension you were banned from to prove that it wouldn’t stop you. That your reach extends everywhere. That was deliberate. Now people will think that, even if it isn’t true.”

Bill wrinkled his brow at Ford in irritation. “Of course it’s true. What, you think I can’t be everywhere? That’s the truth.”

“No, it isn’t.” Stanford argued. “If it were true, then you would have caught me by now.”

“Well excuse me, Mr Intergalactic Criminal.” Bill waved his hands in the air, splitting into several copies of himself, each identical triangle taking turns to tell Ford off, floating around Stanford while his words echoed. “What exactly are they going to be thinking about you? You cheated in a card game to steal Lottocron 9’s beloved reality altering dice from them, a dimensional treasure, breaking their sole gambling law to do it. You ran with a gang of illegal scrap vandals, stealing Federation technology from stagnant satellites. You sold out your crew to the black market for your freedom, colluding with kingpin Raha Diñeiro to do it, and the Pirahn captain who captured you is conveniently dead, shot down where he stood, while you sipped cocktails with the head of an interdimensional criminal empire. Doesn’t paint you in the best light, does it, Sixer? Just what will they think about you, hmm?”

“But – that’s not true.” Stanford defended himself, spinning around as he spoke to look each copy of Bill in the eye when they spoke. “I didn’t sell out the scrap vandals, I tried to stop them from being killed and having their organs harvested, that was the first thing I did, and I didn’t kill the Pirahn captain, nor was I ever on Diñeiro’s side – I – okay so I cheated at a card game, but that’s it. That’s – what you said just isn’t true.”

“But that’s what they’re going to think.” Bill pointed out simply, his voice shifting, taunting in a sing song tone. His copies slid back together, syncing up until there was just one of him floating in front of Stanford, looking down at the scientist as he delivered his punch line. “And that’s why the truth is so damn funny.”

Stanford sat back in his chair, taking that in for a moment, looking down into his lap.

Bill floated closer to Stanford curiously, wanting to see the confused and frustrated expression on his face as he processed the crimes he’d now been branded with, wanting the satisfaction of seeing the guilt twist Ford’s expression so fetchingly, but he was surprised to see Stanford looking more thoughtful than frustrated, his eyes clear and pensive before they snapped back to Bill shrewdly.

“All the stories about you. What you’ve done. What you’re capable of. There’s no way of knowing which ones are true or not. Is there? So much of it is conjecture and perception and outright lies.”

Bill blinked at Stanford, floating back as if thrown for a moment, before he narrowed his eye and turned away, not getting the reaction he wanted from the human. Acting casual, Bill shrugged, surveying the library shelves of Ford’s mindscape.

“Sure there is. Just pick the stories you like best and call them the truth. That’s what everyone else does.”

“That’s not the truth though.” Stanford argued, standing up from his chair to try to follow Bill, probing for the truth.
“The truth is relative, like time, space, and reality. Who needs it?” Bill scoffed, waving over his shoulder, still floating away across the library. “Any of it?”

“I want the truth.” Stanford pressed, demanding. “I want to know.”

“Sure you do. You always do. It’s the same old song and dance.” Bill muttered, before dissolving his way out of Stanford’s dream, leaving him with few answers and many questions.

In the next dimension he ventured into he didn’t see Bill when he closed his eyes to sleep, momentarily surprised by his absence, wondering if the God had chosen to break the cycle of the same old song and dance, and as Stanford went about his life in this new dimension he tried to eschew the part of him that felt disappointed by his absence.

In an odd sort of way, Stanford hadn’t expected Bill to avoid him now, not after Lottocron 9. Despite Bill’s barbed words, Stanford was taking note of his actions, and that he had chosen to swallow his pride and at least pretend to work for Diñeiro to spare Stanford a slit throat.

The cut on the side of his neck was scabbing over, and itched frequently, reminding Stanford of the incident, the moment when his adventures became real to him.

He tried not to think on it too much but it was hard not to every time his scabbing cut itched in the tropical heat of this planet. It was hard not to think of the way Bill’s eye widened in panic when the knife sliced Ford’s throat and the way his voice sounded when he urged Diñeiro to stop.

One could have been convinced from Bill’s reaction to the cut on his neck that the triangle harboured genuine feelings for Ford. It made Stanford feel a fondness for the God that he probably didn’t deserve. After all, despite what Pyronica had said, Ford still had no actual confirmation that Bill was capable of feeling things for him.

This dimension he’d arrived at was a barren one seeming mostly uninhabited, although rich with colourful and unique flora, plant-life the only life on the planet apart from him. He spent much of his time wandering through the unoccupied landscape, sweating through the silk shirt and suit jacket Diñeiro’s robots printed for him, cutting strange leaves and flowers from the trees with Diñeiro’s stolen knife, chewing on the brightly coloured petals for lack of sustenance.

He tried not to think about his last meal on Lottocron 9. (What, you don’t give your employees lunch breaks? Humans need to eat, you know.) Or how unfulfilling M shaped muesli bars were when sustaining such an active lifestyle, hiking through the endless rainforest. Eventually the muesli bars ran out.

There was a wide variety of flavours available through this haphazard tasting of flora and Stanford had no doubt that many of the neon glowing plants were likely poisonous, but the alterations Bill had made to his system negated the effects of that.

Stanford had no doubt he could eat rocks, if he so chose, without any ill effects, not accounting for the erosion of his teeth. (He didn’t test that theory again in a hurry.)

He couldn’t attest to the nutrition of the foods he was eating, but somehow, he was surviving, for
months on end, despite having no one to talk to.

In this dimension he slept often, trying to prompt a response from the God simply out of a desire for company. When he wasn’t sleeping, he was rolling his infinity sided dice, testing for favourable outcomes.

There weren’t many.

Stanford was holding out hope for another wormhole, or for the dice to manifest a spaceship capable of traversing dimensions in a convenient location, but mostly the dice enacted inane probabilities, like changing the colour of the dirt on the ground, or favouring the evolution of a very large breed of Venus fly trap, or making the water fall upwards when it rained, causing a very brief but impactful drought.

While Stanford noted the probabilities down in his journal, the results weren’t ideal, and he wished idly for an easy out from this existence, wondering if he could live on this planet permanently, involuntary hermitage teaching him an ironic lesson about forgoing botany as an elective in university.

He couldn’t help finding plants dull, he realised, watching the Venus fly traps begin to cannibalise other plants around them, or maybe he didn’t find them dull, they just reminded him of things he regretfully looked upon in fondness, and then he felt guilty for feeling fondness at all.

He couldn’t help but remember those bright yellow eyes, set into the stunning face Ford had sculpted for him, looking up at him as his muse leaned his head back over the arm of the couch, his grin splitting his face like a knife.

“Feed me Seymour.”

That felt like too long ago to still bring Ford joy and amusement in his nostalgia. It felt like he shouldn’t be allowed to look at the cannibalistic plants and smile, remembering how Bill suggested they put up a white picket fence in their yard, only to request the decapitated heads of his enemies stuck upon each spike, hinting at Bill’s sinister nature before Stanford had the wits to see it.

The issue with plants being such unresponsive planetary partners was that Stanford had far too much time left with his own thoughts, and while it could be argued that his thoughts were often remarkable, his tendency to overthink was doing him no favours after his conversation on Lottocron 9.

“I’m not even talking about all the betrayal, back and forth. I’m not even talking about the portal. You really hurt his feelings, you know.”

“He doesn’t care! He doesn’t have feelings. He was just using me!”

“What were you doing when you dragged him down there to live in that skin prison, huh? I know what you wanted. Don’t act like using someone and having feelings for them are mutually exclusive. You did, didn’t you?”

Because he had done what he did to Bill, did that make everything that had happened since then his fault? Was that what Pyronica was saying?

Was he just as bad as Bill was, selfishly binding him on earth to assist his research, culturing those feelings of safety and affection with the god only to betray him in an instant?

Stanford had months of solitude exploring this strange botanical planet to dwell on these questions,
but he also had questions of his own.

Did all the things he did to Bill make it okay how Bill was treating him? That was his main question.

How he manipulated him, hurt the people around him, removed words from his vocabulary, slipped inside his head while he was sleeping, taking his body gallivanting off into the woods to do who knows what with all that blood?

Bill certainly, while they were on earth, hadn’t physically hurt Stanford. The runes forbid that. But he’d attempted to hurt other people, tried to run over Dan, stabbed Willow in the leg with a fork, tried to kill her, had some sort of unexplained altercation with Stacey according to Willow, threatened Fiddleford’s life and the life of his son.

Stanford was trying to substantiate the wrongs Bill had done him and the people around him to justify making a decision about Bill’s morality, but Bill was very difficult to assess when it came to morality. The multiverse was proving that Ford’s morality paradigm was simply one of many. And the truth about right and wrong was much more fluid than it seemed.

Which left Stanford awash with questions. Questions about why Bill did the things he did, why he made the choices he made when it came to Stanford.

How he refused to lift the bounty from Ford’s head, even though he could?

Why? Because he found it amusing? Because he couldn’t back down, or admit defeat? Because he was posturing? Because he hadn’t forgiven Stanford?

Ford struggled to understand the God and he found it frustrating that he couldn’t go back to the simple understanding they had before everything exploded so tremendously, when he could sit on the couch with Bill and conduct entire conversations without words while Fiddleford sat beside them, none the wiser. He felt like he couldn’t understand Bill as easily now, every time he tried to, every time he demanded to know what was going on, his muse shut him out – with good reason.

“You don’t understand this.”

“Well, maybe I’d like to if you’d ever let me.”

Finding out the truth about Bill, about why he did the things he did, hoping that knowledge would contribute to all the things about the God that he needed to understand, was becoming Ford’s priority now. He wanted to discover the truth about Bill. He needed to understand the ex-muse again. Even if that understanding revealed that Bill was truly a terrible person.

Ford struggled with that idea, as plainly as it was presented in the universe, because he had seen glimpses through the front Bill put up to the rest of reality, seen glimpses through his crimes and violence and scheming to the being who lay beneath it all, and like Pyronica, those glimpses made him feel for Bill, even if he didn’t want to admit it.

He’d seen Bill do generous things. His henchmen obviously seemed to think he was deserving of loyalty. He avenged Stanford’s misfortune against Diñeiro and redistributed the mobster’s immense wealth, giving it not to himself, but the one person in the Cryptix Noire who might actually do some good with it. He seemed to have his own sense of right and wrong, and while Stanford struggled to wrap his head around it, Bill obviously seemed to have reasons behind the things that he did.

There were hints as well at some kind of great misfortune the muse had endured and Stanford
wasn’t sure what to think about it, considering the mixed messages he received about said misfortune.

“Let’s just say there’s a reason there ain’t billions of annoying as fuck triangles running around just like him and that reason thinks its classy for a geometric shape to wear a top hat and a bowtie. Can’t say I’m not grateful though. The universe is bad enough with just the one triangular disaster.”

Diñeiro’s words indicated Bill used to have a family, a society of triangular beings just like him. Like the two triangles he’d drawn in Ford’s mindscape, refusing to explain much to the scientist past the fact that he was drawing ‘dead things’.

The thought of learning more about what had happened gnawed at Ford’s mind, it might be the key to understanding Bill’s entire being.

But it seemed to be the one thing he couldn’t ask.

“Don’t you ever ask him that. Never. Understand?”

The forbidden question consumed Ford’s thoughts but, judging from Pyronica’s vehemence, it wasn’t the sort of thing one could slip into casual conversation.

Still, Ford wanted to know. He wished Bill would just tell him what happened. But he knew he wouldn’t and he knew that was partially his own fault.

“Until you can acknowledge that I actually have emotions, I’m not inclined to show you anything about me. Not until I get some assurances that you won’t be a bull in a china shop with what I show you.”

A bull in a china shop. That’s how their interactions had been. Stanford could admit it, he’d been just as bad as Bill, at least emotionally speaking, dealing with the differences between them.

En had pointed it out to Stanford, she’d made it obvious, as was in her programming to do so. She tried to teach Stanford empathy but it was very hard to feel empathy for someone who had continually done wrong by you, regardless of what wrong you may have done in turn.

( Maybe that wasn’t the issue, maybe Stanford just lacked empathy in general. This was the first time he had thought about En since the Pirahn pirates captured the ship and he only thought about her in the context of what her words meant in relation to his situation. He tried not to imagine her scrapped bare to her last functioning personality chip and he tried not to feel too guilty about the lack of empathy that enabled that.)

The emotional volatility between him and his muse made it difficult for Stanford to find out more about Bill. That’s what he wanted. That’s what he always wanted. The same old song and dance, if Bill’s parting comment was to be construed that way. Ford wanted to know more about Bill. To study him and learn from him, to understand him.

While his agenda may have changed, seeing merit in discovering the weaknesses that could be used against Bill should he become too dangerous for Ford to handle, he also felt drawn to learning all the other things about the god as well. He would chronicle it all if he could.

Bill wasn’t exactly forthcoming with the details, given how swiftly Stanford could take offence at the details in his life. They’d been throwing each other’s actions in each other’s faces with such regularity it was hard to develop their meetings into a productive conversation. It always delineated into a venomous slinging of insults whenever they talked about their relationship, rather than
simply observing the things around them, perhaps due to a crucial split in perspectives.

The more that Ford had seen of the multiverse and the people around him, the more that he was starting to piece together the contributive factors that shaped Bill into the shape he was today and, as insatiable for knowledge now as he ever was, he wanted to know more. But he couldn’t know more without broadening his perspective, stepping outside of the moral boundaries that Stanford deemed to be acceptable.

He was aware of the volatile way his perspective would shift. When they had small moments of peaceful middle ground, Stanford couldn’t possibly see how the triangle could commit the atrocities accused of him, but when they stepped on each other’s nerves suddenly there wasn’t a crime in the universe Stanford couldn’t blame on Bill.

It was an unproductive cycle of inquiry and a staggering amount of emotional bias. His desire to know more about Bill had fallen outside the realms of quantifiable scientific theory, and that is where, Stanford decided, the trouble lay.

He wasn’t being scientific enough about this.

He wanted Bill’s walls to come down once again around him, exposing the vulnerabilities that lay beneath, much like when Stanford removed brick after brick from his body back on earth. Bill let his walls down around him then and all Stanford had to do to make that happen was to not think the worst of Bill.

The rose-coloured glasses he wore then, while regrettable, also gleaned the most volunteered information from the muse. He brought Stanford books, trained him, gave him gifts, altered his constitution, enhanced his learning. The benefits of appealing to Bill’s ego.

Maybe all Stanford needed to do to learn more about Bill was to alter his method.

If he could wear him down the way he once had, then he could open Bill up to him and study him truly, reaching his own conclusion when presented with all the evidence.

He wouldn’t jump to conclusions whether Bill was good or bad, he’d try to remain as clinical as he could be about the entire situation, to curb his temper and make his mind up when he had retained all the information he could about the God. He would also avoid delving into their present or past relationship, as that was certainly a hot button issue for them both.

Perhaps that would be a good way to go about it. Reserve forming any concrete conclusions on Bill until he had all the information. Probe the muse for details until Ford could piece things together in a way that made sense, until he could understand the god – without allowing himself to get carried away by his feelings and emotions.

He just had to pretend that he didn’t expect the worst of Bill. He had to act as if he was unphased by the depth and breadth of Bill’s moral decay, to unearth real factual information about the God that would help Ford understand him, his strengths and weaknesses. He had to remain impassive, non-judgemental, scientific about it all.

His feelings were the real barrier here to true scientific inquiry but he was a man of science. He could do it. Pretend things were fine between them, that he didn’t want to argue with Bill all the time, that he wasn’t equal parts intrigued and repulsed by the being, for the sake of learning and the greater good.

Tossing his infinity sided die again, idly planning out his methodology, he was surprised when he
clipped through several dimensions at once and ended up in a very crowded marketplace.

The crowds gave his sudden entry dubious glances, but moved onto their business around him, giving Stanford the impression that people clipped through into their reality all the time.

The crowds were giving Stanford a wide berth actually, which is when he realised that he reeked, having spent weeks in an uninhabited planet, eating strange plants and sweating through his silk dress shirt.

It wasn’t an attractive look.

This was a marketplace. Stanford realised it was time to find some new clothing. He might have to trade a few things to afford it. He needed new clothes and if he was lucky, a place to shower, although judging from the way the locals looked at him, he might get the latter for free.

“Turns out in that dimension the most elevated sense is the olfactory, and it’s also the greatest offense. They eventually just begged me to have a shower, and I was given fragrance scented clothing for free.”

Bill was here again, reluctantly re-appearing in Stanford’s dreams like he hadn’t walked out of them and left him to the perils of the multiverse and his own solitude for several weeks.

He hadn’t said much to Stanford, but the fact that he was there gave Stanford the green light to rattle off a spirited recounting of the past several dimensions he’d visited, hoping to coax the muse into volunteering information himself by fostering some degree of normalcy. By not calling out Bill’s sudden absence and making a big deal out of it, as he once would have.

At first Bill was silent, floating on the other side of the library to Ford, merely staring at him with an unreadable expression on his triangular face. It seemed like Bill was holding himself back, watching Stanford with suspicion, no doubt expecting the familiar pattern, the same old song and dance, and it was only when, heedless of anything barring the fact that Bill was back, Stanford launched into a casual recounting of his past adventures like nothing was wrong - only then did the triangle begin to lose the wariness of his gaze.

It was working.

Indeed, it was as if in telling his story, Stanford distracted Bill from whatever thoughts were keeping him staunchly floating out of Ford’s reach on the other side of his mindscape, slowly charming the triangle across the room towards him until he was floating above the bookshelf nearest to the scientist, the suspicion melting from his eye.

Bill is naturally curious. Ford mentally noted, adding that to his revised list of truths about the triangle that he was compiling. Give him new information to absorb and he’ll stick around to listen. A good way to take him off guard.

“They kept spraying perfume wherever I walked though. They don’t perspire on their planet, so I think they found my continual sweating quite disconcerting. Eventually they just bought me a ticket on an outgoing dimensional vessel and asked me to leave, which is, I guess, one of the more
considerate ways of telling someone that they smell bad.”

Looking up at Bill’s form perched in the air beside the bookcase, Stanford gave his new technique a try, Operation Honey over Vinegar commencing.

“I guess I can understand more now why the first thing you did when I came through the portal was to give me a bath.” Stanford laughed with a fondness that was barely feigned, despite how at the time of said ‘bath’ Stanford thought Bill was burning him alive and he could tell by the way Bill’s eye widened and the god floated a little further down that it was working. Stanford’s congenial behaviour was effective.

“Was I really that smelly then? All your friends seemed to think so.” Ford looked Bill in the eye, now that the god was closer to his eye level, drawing him into the conversation properly.

“Not all of them are my friends.” Bill replied, giving away more than Ford had thought he would already. “More like unfortunate acquaintances. And I couldn’t just let them say you stank, even if it’s true.”

“I remember you saying I didn’t smell bad. Does that mean you like the way I smell then?” Ford probed, trying to keep the charm turned on high.

“In moderation.” Bill replied testily, not quite willing to concede niceness to Ford just yet. “A little criticism every now and then is good for you. Wouldn’t want to give you an excuse not to shower. All those years of functional plumbing in your dimension at least had the decency to teach you some shame. If I’m too nice to you, that’ll all go to waste.”

“I’m sure.” Stanford huffed a laugh and gave Bill a wry look. “So, you can still smell things without a nose?”

Bill blinked at the sudden inquiry, surprised when Stanford didn’t argue or snipe back at Bill’s remark, a little wary of how bright Ford’s tone was.

“Regrettably.” Bill eventually answered.

“From the brief glimpse I saw, you seem to be constantly overwhelmed by sensory input, but you must have grown used to it, or I can’t imagine how you’d manage to function.” Ford’s tone was still light. “Is there anything that you don’t like that tips you over?”

Seeing straight through Ford’s casual inquiry, Bill gave Stanford a flat look. “Invasive personal questions might do it.”

“I thought you wanted me to get to know you.” Stanford asked, feigning a mild offence at Bill’s suspicious tone. “I’m taking an interest, why bother coming to see me if you don’t let that interest follow through?”

“Maybe I don’t want you to get to know me.” Bill retorted contrarily. “Not when you’ve already made up your mind about me.”

Gotcha. Stanford thought, pleased that his theory was correct.

“Consider this an open mind.” Stanford countered, gesturing around him. “Since there’s no quantifiable truth in the rumours out there, who better to ask for the truth than yourself? Even if you’re only telling me the truth you like best, it’s better I hear it from you than someone else, right?”
Bill suspiciously squinted at Stanford for a while longer, obviously thinking Stanford’s sudden offer was too good to be true.

Stanford was hoping his ulterior motive wasn’t too transparent, trying not to budge on his feigned sincerity, hoping that in this way, giving Bill exactly what he wanted would make him vulnerable, more likely to be honest with him so he could gather information about the triangle.

Refusing to budge, Stanford stared right back at Bill, keeping his expression open and welcoming, even if he was anxiously sweating on the inside.

“I’ll think about it.” Bill said before disappearing from Ford’s dream with a loud pop, making a hasty retreat.

Ford counted that as progress in the right direction.

“The infinity sided die is quite remarkable. The possibilities really are limitless.”

Stanford tossed a mental replica of Fiddleford’s What-the-Heck-a-Hedron in the air like a softball as he spoke, reclining on one of the couches that floated above the library’s shelves.

Bill was less wary this time, sitting perched in a small armchair beside Stanford’s floating couch instead of hovering halfway across the mindscape from him. Stanford counted that as progress too. He’d even coaxed Bill towards normalcy with a cup of imagined tea, his ex-muse now holding the teacup daintily, taking the occasional sip as he listened to Stanford’s adventures.

“I wonder if the probabilities are finite once they’re executed, or if there’s a way to undo the consequences. When I was in the Land of the Blind, I rolled the die to test it out and accidentally changed the colour of the sky. Do you think it’s permanent?”

Bill sipped his tea, before looking up at Ford briefly. “Probably. Although all things considered, you couldn’t have picked a better place to do it.”

“You’re right, it’s not like the citizens will notice. Although their one-eyed king had quite a bit to say about it.”

“I’ll bet.” Bill dropped another imagined sugar cube in his tea and gave it a stir.

Stanford watched Bill closely, before testing a theory.

“They weren’t always blind you know. The people there. They told me someone came and stole all their eyes.”

“Sounds like eye-way robbery.” Bill quipped, letting his teaspoon spin autonomously in his teacup, stirring as he lifted the cup up to inhale the scent, his eye closing as he inhaled.

“Do you know who did it?” Ford probed, having his suspicions that the culprit was sitting opposite him, despite his best attempts to be unbiased.

“It wasn’t me, if that’s what you’re getting at.” Bill scoffed, plucking the teaspoon from his cup,
setting it on his saucer as he lifted the teacup to his eye. “I’m not responsible for every bad thing in
the multi-verse.”

“I never said you were.” Stanford countered, trying to keep his expression neutral, still open and
curious like he actually believed Bill. “Do you know who did it then?”

“I might know one or two people who may have been responsible.” Bill replied evasively, closing
his eye to sip his tea.

“The king couldn’t tell me. He survived with his eye intact by hiding. He told me it happened a
long time ago, and the citizens couldn’t tell me much. They told me all that they remembered was
eyes and then darkness.”

“Fancy that.” Bill said lightly, obviously knowing more than he let on.

Ford stared at Bill stubbornly, waiting for the god to reveal more information, but Bill just kept
sipping his tea, unfazed.

Stanford spoke again, trying to mine more information from Bill, who was being
uncharacteristically tight lipped.

“When I heard that it wasn’t some evolutionary outlier, but that they’d had their eyes physically
ripped from their heads, every one of them, I couldn’t help but feel sorry for them. Going through
life with that sort of eye related trauma. When I asked about it, the people started crying without
tears. It was awful.”

“So, what? People lose eyes. No need to be a baby about it.” Bill replied dismissively, continuing
to sip his tea.

“They were upset Bill. They’d had their eyes ripped out. They have every right to be upset. What
happened to them was horrible.” Ford insisted, a little indignant outrage creeping into his voice,
despite how hard he tried to keep his tone level.

Rather than rising to Ford’s ire, Bill’s was quiet, his eye downcast, staring at the liquid within the
teacup. He was silent for several sullen moments, and Stanford thought it was possible he was
feeling guilty, maybe, but then he seemed to gather his composure and he looked out across the
library, avoiding Ford’s gaze.

“It was horrible.” He agreed.

Stanford stared at Bill for a while, and sat back in his chair, uncertain what to think now. “I’m glad
you think so.”

They sat in awkward silence for a moment longer until Bill broke the ice with a question.

“Where are you now?”

“I am somewhere different now.” Stanford replied cautiously. “I can tell you where I’ve been.”

“But not where you are now.” Bill finished his sentence, his brow furrowed with disappointment.

“No.” Stanford confirmed resolutely.

“Hmm.” Bill mulled that over, looking down at his tea. His expression was hard to read, and
Stanford was worried his efforts to wear down Bill’s walls were being undone as the silence
“Where have you been?” Stanford asked, trying to keep the conversation flowing. “Not where you are now? Where have you been in the past? What places did you go to, places I haven’t been to yet?”

“I’ve been everywhere Sixer.” Bill offered, sipping his tea. “Why the sudden interest in retracing my footsteps?”

“I want to know more about you.” Stanford insisted.

“I’m still deciding whether or not you can.” Bill told him. “Although the chance of me letting you is slim, all things considered.”

Stanford was surprised that this prospect was still open at all. Even if he was on the fence about it now, this was confirmation that Bill being honest with him was still on the table. From how suspiciously Bill had been acting, Stanford didn’t think it would still be an option. Despite the probability being low, Stanford thought he’d play the odds.

“What can I do to convince you?”

“Tell me where you are.” Bill answered promptly.

Stanford pulled a face. “What else can I do to convince you?”

Bill set his teacup back on its saucer and floated up from the chair, getting ready to disintegrate from Stanford’s mind once more, his words ringing as an ominous promise in the air as he departed.

“I’ll think about it and let you know.”

“What can you tell me about Bill Cipher?”

Stanford had asked this question over and over again in the past several years, inquiring wherever he went, in every dimension he travelled to, trying to unravel the tangled mystery of who his ex-muse was.

Asking that question hadn’t made him popular. Those who didn’t run away from him shrieking treated him with trepidation, choosing not to help him if he was involved with the feared cosmic triangle. He learned to ask his questions after he’d secured food, lodging, and whatever material possessions he needed, so when he was inevitably chased away for asking, he’d be in good stead to move on to the next place.

He discovered that there wasn’t an awful lot of recorded information about Bill out there in the multi-verse, nothing written down academically that he could read, but there was plenty of hearsay, rumours spreading by word of mouth alone.

Stanford heard that the reason for this was that ‘The Feared Bill Cipher’ didn’t permit things about him to be written down. Stanford thought the reason Bill was so against being chronicled was
because he couldn’t choose how he was perceived that way. Rumours he could work with. Bill liked the flattering ones, but the only textual recordings that seemed to exist about Bill may have been the ones in Stanford’s journal, perhaps because Bill found them so flattering.

In his travels, Stanford heard a story about an almanac writer who attempted to log the rumours about Bill in his compendium of beings to look out for in the multi-verse and the stories seemed to indicate that this writer was unceremoniously set on fire over a drawn out period of seventy years by ‘The Capricious Bill Cipher’ as Bill read out the writer’s findings to him and chastised him for leaving out how fun he was at parties.

That sounded like something Bill would do and it suddenly made a lot more sense to Stanford why Bill wasn’t in any of the almanacs he brought for Ford to read. Couldn’t have the gossip mongering dregs of the multiverse colouring Stanford’s opinion of Bill. Not when his high opinion seemed to be something Bill prized.

As much as he seemed to laugh off the damning things said about him, it was clear to Stanford that Bill still cared about what was said about him, and that made him easier to handle, as Ford continued his plan to wear down Bill’s defences. He had an ego and it could be catered to, enabling Ford to proceed with his plan.

“I almost felt vindicated, honestly. It was quite unusual, that degree of esteem and, well, royalties bestowed upon me for the very thing that made me a freak back on earth.”

“If the multiverse is good for anything, it’s ironic curveballs.” Bill agreed with him, inching closer to him today.

Stanford was laying on the floor of his mental library, resting his feet on the red chaise lounge, recounting his adventures while staring up at the skyscape above him. Bill was reclining on the lounge, his long noodley arms draping down from the edge of the couch to brush his fingertips through the grass on the floor of the library.

Occasionally Ford could feel Bill’s hand brush against the fabric of his imagined jeans, his mind imposing earthly normalcy on him in his slumber, relegated to more futuristic fashion designs in his daily life. Of course, the designs he wore in his daily life would be a dead giveaway to his location in the multiverse so he imagined himself in clothing Bill had seen before on Earth. The thought of wearing denim and his usual buttoned shirt and sweater vest made him feel less like he was a million miles from home and more like he was back in his cabin in Gravity Falls, which made it easier to pretend he was dealing with the same Bill he knew back then and not the Bill he knew now.

“I just never thought I’d find myself in some sort of backwards hierarchy where your societal standing was ranked based on the number of fingers you had. I mean, it makes just as much sense as anything else in the multiverse, which is to say it makes no sense at all.”

“What hierarchy does make sense, when you’re on the bottom of it?” Bill remarked, letting his fingertips drift across the grass. “Hierarchy’s only make sense when you’re on the top.”

“Well, I mean –” Ford shrugged his shoulders and grinned. “I did like the crown.”

That brokered a smile from the triangle, his eye curving with amusement. “Everyone likes the crown.”

“As inane as it was, that dimension was quite the sweet gig, until Johnny seven fingers came
“Was that really his name?” Bill asked, his eye still curved with delight. “Sixer vs Johnny seven fingers.”

“I didn’t actually stick around long enough to find out. It could have been his real name for all I know. After they ousted me, I made my way elsewhere.” Ford explained, shaking his head with a laugh. “Truthfully, I thought I’d seen it all with the Land of the Blind dimension, unintended pun intended, but the idea that there would be a whole dimension out there that would theoretically put my digit insecurities in perspective is really something else.”

“In the land of the stupid, the six fingered man is king.” Bill recited, morphing his own four fingered hand into a six fingered one briefly, so he could waggle it at Stanford teasingly.

“Well, seven fingered king now.” Ford laughed and propped himself up on his elbows. “It’s probably for the best that I was ousted. I could get a little too used to that kind of treatment.”

“King Sixer?” Bill quirked his brow, before grazing his eye up and down Stanford’s reclining body. “All that power would go to your head. I can guarantee it.”

“Well, knowledge is power, so theoretically that’s the best place it can go.” Stanford countered, smiling cockily at Bill. “I’m sure you would say the same.”

Bill stared at Stanford hard for a moment, before he blinked.

“Why are you here?”

“Why am I in my own head?” Stanford asked effusively, trying to hide his ulterior motives as best as he could.

“Why are you asleep? What happened to those sleep blocking tablets of yours? Did Diñeiro cut you off, or something?”

“No. I still have my belongings from before. In a nano briefcase he gave me. I have to say giving me that was the one useful thing he did for me. Can’t say I’m too grateful for the other things he gave me.” Stanford made a vague gesture at his neck.

“So, you still have them?” Bill pressed, looking at Stanford like he was a particularly challenging puzzle to work out.

“I do.” Stanford answered simply.

“But you’re not taking them. You could be taking them to avoid even having to talk to me. So why aren’t you?”

Stanford could see that Bill seemed inordinately invested in his answer here from the way his eye was fixated intently on his face and that this was the perfect opportunity to further lower Bill’s walls with a few well-placed words.

“Should I be avoiding you?”

Bill’s pupil moved, darting to the side before scouring every inch of Stanford as if doubting what he was seeing, conflicted.

“Last I checked you’d already made up your mind about that. You are avoiding me.”
“But I’m trying to have a more open mind.” Stanford replied. “And you still haven’t answered my question.”

Bill stared hard at Stanford for a moment longer, before he looked down, almost shyly as he spoke. “No.”

“Then I won’t avoid our conversations.” Stanford said decisively. “I’d only need to avoid them if you are a danger to me. Are you a danger to me?”

“No.” Bill said, regarding Stanford curiously.

“That’s why I’m here then.” Stanford summed up, meeting Bill’s curious eye contact, unphased.

Bill hummed, considering that, before very carefully, his eye watching Stanford’s reaction the whole time, he let his arm lengthen, and slowly wind around Ford’s left calf, resting his hand tentatively on Ford’s knee.

When Ford didn’t bat an eyelid at the affectionate touch, Bill seemed to let out some of the tension that was stilling his form.

“This is my head too, you know.” Stanford pointed out, and Bill raised his brow sceptically before dragging his fingertips down Ford’s kneecap purposefully.

The laugh the ticklish movement dragged out of Ford startled him, mostly because unlike the rest of his sentiments in this conversation, it was entirely genuine.

And a little too familiar.

“Parallel dimensions.” Stanford said, closing his eyes and bursting into his mindscape only to immediately lay down face first on the floor.

He didn’t need to check to see if his muse was there. Since Operation Honey over Vinegar started, Bill invariably was, every time he closed his eyes for a little shut eye.

“That bad, huh?” Came Bill’s voice from somewhere behind Stanford’s head, confirming his theory.

Stanford just groaned into the grassy floor, imagining himself a pillow to plant his face in.

The familiarity had returned between them, like they had never been at each other’s throats, and Bill seemed less hesitant around Ford. The plan was working, but Stanford didn’t know if he should still be so pleased when he felt the god settle on top of his head, shrinking his form smaller so he could lay in Stanford’s hair and drape his arms down onto his forehead.

The point of this operation was to study Bill without letting his feelings interfere, so by rights that pleased flutter in his stomach shouldn’t be happening, but Stanford was willing to accept it as one of the perks in his plan. Just as long as it didn’t make him complacent.

He could feel the triangle’s small four fingered hands massaging the frustrated wrinkles away from
his brow, before stretching down lower to ruffle through his eyebrows. As odd as it was, Ford
found it relaxing, and he closed his eyes, enjoying the fluttery feeling that accompanied it, before he got cheeky.

Another observation he’d made was that jokes were a foolproof way to lower Bill’s guard, and so as the eyebrow massage continued, Stanford let out a loud feigned snore.

Bill snorted a laugh, before he slapped at the side of Ford’s face briskly. “No sleeping in your sleep. What do you think this is, Sixer?”

Stanford pretended to snore louder but cut himself off laughing when he felt Bill’s tiny hands reach down for his eyelids, intending to prise them open.

Ford batted Bill’s hand away and shook his head, before rolling over, wondering if that would dislodge the god from his hair.

Apparently not, as Bill stayed perched in his hair, his hands resting on Ford’s forehead now like he was laying a claim.

Or playing the bongos.

Bill tapped on Ford’s forehead impatiently, asking.

“What about parallel dimensions?”

“They’re just so bizarre.” Stanford answered, resting his hands on his chest, getting comfortable in his own head again, mental roommate and all. “They don’t make any sense. They take ‘what if’ to the extreme. Minor alterations I can understand. Anyone with a basic understanding of the butterfly effect can comprehend that. But some of these places –“

“Tell me.” Bill demanded, and Stanford was delighted to divulge.

“Parallel dimensions where tennis balls chase dogs. Where dolphins rather than Homo Sapiens evolved to be the dominant species. Where dinosaurs never became extinct but somehow evolved into beings who study bar charts in boardrooms and file their taxes. Why would a dinosaur need to file a tax return?”

“In this economy, who doesn’t? The vultures.” Bill quipped, going back to massaging Ford’s forehead idly, no doubt delighting in pushing the flesh around up there into interesting wrinkles.

“There was one dimension where all their music was just screaming. I thought, what if this is some sort of fox-descendant dimension, where screaming is a consistent form of communication? But no, this was earth, and they didn’t communicate through screaming. In their daily lives they didn’t scream at all, it was only when they sang. They weren’t even singing lyrics either, just wordless frantic screaming.”

“There’s a market for that.” Bill replied. “Even outside of that dimension, the Screaming Queens are an interdimensional sensation.”

“No.” Stanford scoffed, disbelieving.

“You’d know that if you had taste.” Bill said matter of factly. “Screaming is super popular. It’s a bop.”

“It’s a what?” Ford rolled his eyes up, trying to look at Bill, his brows questing upwards.
“Never mind, old man. It’s not like you were ever hip to begin with.” Bill sunk his fingers in Ford’s eyebrows again. “Uncool, you were. A nerd. A dork. A total square.”

“Were?” Stanford tilted his head back, trying to catch Bill’s eye. He could vaguely see Bill roll his eye in a way that reminded him quite viscerally of how he would back on Earth in his human body and it jarred Ford momentarily that the gesture was so distinctive.

It felt like he was looking at Bill the way Stanford liked to remember him, instead of scrutinising Bill in his natural form. Stanford had great success splitting the Bill he could trust and the Bill he couldn’t through associating Bill’s crimes and faults with his triangular shape. In looking at Bill who is he now and seeing who he was before, it made Stanford’s perspective waver in a way that felt very tenuous.

He wasn’t here to find Bill endearing. He was here to find out more about him, to discover his weaknesses and use them against him.

“I think the whole interdimensional criminal schtick may have skewed your pocket protector appeal.” Bill glanced at Stanford from beneath his long lashes, his words oozing just as much endearment as Stanford currently felt. “You’re not just a nerd anymore. You’re actually verging on impressive. It’s a good look for you.”

Ford’s heart seemed to beat louder.

He always used to like compliments from his muse. He was surprised they still had the same effect on him, realising that at this point there was a chance they could actually be genuine and not calculated manipulations.

Bill thought he was impressive, enthused his simplest brain cell, and his heart applauded that brain cell with gusto.

It felt just like the good old days, with one prevailing exception.

This was not good.

Not good at all.

And certainly not scientific detachment.

“Babies!” Stanford said loudly, willing his flustered heart rate down, changing the subject the way one would douse cold water over rampant enthusiasm.

The sultry look vanished from Bill’s eye, his brow screwing up in instantaneous disgust.

“What?”

“There was a parallel dimension where the people were all babies. Every one of them.” Stanford babbled, sitting up, unseating his ex-muse from his hair. “All babies. Even the adults. Babies. There were babies with stubble! Babies with beards. Babies everywhere!”

“That sounds disturbing and largely unpleasant.” Bill floated, changing his size now he no longer needed to be small enough to rest in Stanford’s hair, giving the scientist a dubious look.

“And the population was booming. How could the population be booming when the entirety of humanity had only progressed as far as two? How are they reproducing, spawning more spawn? It makes no sense. And the infrastructure! Who was building the baby skyscrapers, and why were
there baby engineers and baby construction workers? How could they develop to the point of advanced engineering when their vocabulary wasn’t fully developed? The Pulitzer Prize was awarded to a baby who said ‘Dada’ before all the other babies. But if the entire population subsists as children, how would they even have the concept of parents? Or Pulitzer Prizes?”

Bill was now giving Stanford a flat, unimpressed look that suited his triangular face much more than the soft look of endearment he’d given Stanford before, but his heart was still racing, his scientific rambling hardly doing anything to slow his pulse. He was trying to douse the feelings this situation had brought up with queries about the multiverse, but the only person who seemed to be turned off by all this talk of babies was Bill.

“What a great dimension.” Bill said, his tone saturated with sarcasm. “You’d never want to leave.”

“Ha. Hardly.” Stanford crossed his arms, looking away from the triangle as if he could avoid his feelings by staunchly denying them. “I didn’t linger in that dimension for too long, I can tell you. I don’t care much for being spit up on.”

Although it would be a pleasant alternative to confronting his lingering feelings about the homicidal god sharing his head space.

As Stanford continued his exploration of the multiverse, he found himself fishing for information in Federation ports and cities more than the dimensional outskirts.

While he had to do more to disguise his features to avoid being spotted or hunted for the bounty on his head in the busy ports and city centres (the large polarised goggles he picked up travelling through the dolphin controlled water parks in alternate Earth 111 helped a great deal with this) he found the people there were more free with dispersing information to strangers.

They weren’t as wary to gossip, it seemed. Although with all gossip, the degree of truth at the centre of it all was debatable.

“I’m wondering if you can tell me anything about –“ Stanford leaned down and lowered his voice as he questioned the tipsy looking Krangolin man at the bar, taking advantage of his altered state to fish for some real information. “Bill Cipher.”

“Jill Who-Now?” The Krangolin man asked loudly, cupping one of his finned hands to his earhole.

“No, Bill. Bill Cipher.” Stanford stressed, trying to convey this without raising his voice or drawing attention to himself. “I just want some answers about Bi-“

A hand fell on Stanford’s shoulder, and he jolted back in surprise.

“Hello stranger. So, you seek answers, do you?”

Stanford eyed off the newt faced man in suspicion, shrugging their hand off his shoulder.

The man wore a high-necked robe, pale blue with pale pink embroidery running along the seams. His robe had rainbow bubbles sewn onto the base of his floor length skirt, and he held himself with
a manner that suggested some degree of piety.

“All answers are provided through the illuminating bubbles of enlightenment breathed out through the gills of our great provider.”

“I’m not looking for religion.” Stanford stood up from his chair decisively, pulling his coat on, making to leave. “I’m looking for answers. Facts.”

“Belief is a truth, even before it is known.” The pious newt man replied, standing in Stanford’s way, recruiting in this dingy bar it seemed. “In the church we know this better than anyone. Pulled by the tides of inevitability, we breathe whatever fleeting pockets of salvation we can, rather than drown beneath the weight of it all.”

“That’s nice. I know how to swim though, so if you don’t mind, I’ll be on my way.”

“Come join us. We have a ceremony for new initiates in an hour, there will be food, counsel, some may even be granted a bubble of truthful enlightenment and prophecy by the divine Ax-“

“Pass.” Stanford grunted as he pushed past the newt man and strode out of the bar, impatient to leave. He knew he outstayed his welcome when he started drawing the attention of preaching clergymen. It was time to move on.

He was a man of science. He wasn’t about to be suckered in by false promises of truth from some other god.

He had the truth about his own god to discover.

But, damn, if the universe didn’t make that hard.

“You’d think that given the advances made in the multiverse, and how supposedly progressive everyone lauds themselves to be, people would have moved past organised religion at this point.” Stanford griped, sitting on the top of the tallest bookshelf in his mental library, just to swing his legs over the edge.

“Those bubble thumpers are all the same, believe me, I know.” Bill concurred, sitting on the bookshelf opposite Stanford, doing the same, his little legs swinging in tandem with Ford’s own movements. “I’ve had my fair share of run ins with them. Ugh, I hate organised religion.”

Stanford blinked at Bill. “That’s a surprise. I mean, I thought what with the whole worship phenomenon, and the fact that you seem convinced you’re a God, you’d be all for that sort of thing.”

“Convinced? Please. Now, don’t get me wrong, Sixer, I love a good bit of worship.”

Stanford tried hard to make his expression impassive, hiding the way those words reminded him of just how he used to worship Bill.

“But the whole organised religion bullshit is just a load of self-congratulatory, self-effacing nonsense.” Bill continued, prompted into a rant of his own that Stanford would count as a success
for his plan if he wasn’t still trying hard not to think about worshipping his muse. “If you make your religion organised, it becomes disingenuous. Sure, most beings are creatures of habit. And ritual, when given enough pomp and circumstance, can feel halfway like some sort of spirituality if you haven’t got much of an imagination. But you don’t want to organise your religion, that takes all the je ne sais quoi out of it. That takes all the real feeling out of it and just forces your followers to go through the motions. Or they worship you to curry favour for themselves and then that’s more politics than religion. That makes it just another deal, a bargain. It’s not supposed to be like work. I mean, seriously, what good is religion when it’s organised? Personally, if I had a religion, I’d want it to be completely chaotic. Pure chaos.”

“You would.” Stanford admitted ruefully, listening to Bill continue to speak.

“It needs to be chaotic. Unpredictable, not feigned or forced or fickle like every other religion out there. What’s the point of worship without that sudden grip of emotion, that unpredictable epiphany of ‘oh my god’ when you look at all this majesty in awe?” He gestured to himself and waggled his brow. “It’s regard you want to win in the way of worship and you don’t want the regard of your followers to be like schoolkids writing lines – yes I worship Bill Cipher – you want it to be a sudden rush that knocks them off their feet, like they suddenly understand how wrong they’ve been before. A revelation that will last their whole lives. Fear, awe, appreciation, terror. All of those things can’t be forced and that’s what makes them so satisfying. They spring up organically and that makes them better. So satisfying. So sustaining. So powerful.”

Stanford couldn’t help but agree. Bill’s perspective made a lot of sense, possibly simply because of Stanford’s own dislike of organised religion. The way Bill described it, worshipping something felt an awful lot like falling in love.

“That was one of the few things you did right, honestly.” Bill gave Stanford another one of those looks where suddenly the lines blurred, and Stanford couldn’t see the good Bill and the evil Bill, as he imagined them, but comprehended them as one and the same, and all the more intriguing because of it. “Your worship.”

“Because it wasn’t forced? Merely fabricated by circumstances?” Stanford commented, unable to keep the barb out of his words defensively.

“Because it was authentic.” Bill conceded, looking at Stanford with amusement. “If a little manipulative.”

“How was it manipulative?” Stanford spluttered indignantly.

“You had your motivations behind it.” Bill wagged his finger at Stanford chidingly. “You used it to your advantage. Not every blind worshipper out there can say that they did that.”

“So, you enjoyed that it was manipulative?” Stanford boggled at the thought.

“You’ve got a good head on your shoulders and an admirable degree of self-interest. Binding me in that body, while phrased as an act of worship, was actually very calculated of you. I’d have been impressed back then if I wasn’t so inconvenienced by it all.”

“And are you impressed now?” Stanford couldn’t help but ask, scepticism colouring his tone.

“Maybe.”

This conversation felt like flirting, Stanford realised. He was supposed to be gathering information about Bill, to be clinical about what he asked him, to wear him down without talking about their
relationship, but somehow they’d circled back around to flirting, when it definitely was a bad idea.

“What do you look for in worshippers?” Stanford asked, trying to phrase it like he was scouring for information when it sounded more like a come on. Like he was weighing himself up against the competition.

“I don’t look for worshippers.” Bill replied, surprising Stanford. “They come to me. They either worship me or they don’t.”

“So, you don’t force it, like the other gods seem to?” Stanford pressed, trying to keep some sort of comparison going that wasn’t motivated by an odd brewing jealousy. The way Bill described how he wanted to be worshipped sounded an awful lot like falling in love and Stanford didn’t like the idea of Bill having just anyone worship him that way.

“It’s not real if you force it. It just is.”

“I didn’t worship you before I knew you.” Stanford pointed out, the word worship seeming codified with romantic sentiment now that he knew what Bill saw true worship to be. He wasn’t supposed to be doing this, discussing their relationship and the love he had for Bill but, somehow, he’d come around to doing just that.

“But don’t you see, that makes it better?” Bill leaned forward, his elbows resting on his thin little knees, and suddenly the dimensions in Stanford’s mental library seemed to be shifting, the two stacks moving closer together.

He couldn’t tell if Bill was doing this, master of the mind, or if his own subconscious was bringing them closer.

“You worshiped the real me.”

“And then I seemed to discover the real you all over again.” Stanford observed, unable to look away from Bill’s long eyelashes, his lidded eye and his direct gaze. “And again, and again. The more I learn the more I realise how much I never knew. An eternal puzzle.”

“I’d say you know me better than most.”

“Would you now? Should I be flattered?”

Ford was definitely flirting now. This was getting out of hand.

“Very. That you keep learning more just proves it. Most people don’t get that far.”

“I can’t imagine why.” Stanford said, leaning slightly on the sarcasm.

“Most people aren’t you.” Bill replied, reaching out, their stacks were so close now, his arm stretching long to brush the hair off Ford’s forehead.

This was possibly one of the most romantic things the triangle had ever said to Stanford and he was trying not to eat it up, hook, line and sinker, but it was very hard.

“Most people haven’t seen so many sides of me and lived to tell the tale.”

Obviously, Stanford had already noted this down. The Almanac writer’s fate made that more than clear.

“Most people don’t interest me enough to let them in.” Bill’s hand trailed down the side of Ford’s
face and pointed to the scientist’s heart.

So Bill was letting him in? The plan must be working.

Ford tried not to focus on the way his stomach flipped pleasantly at the feeling of Bill’s fingertip tracing over his heart.

“Most people don’t get to wear my marks.”

“Marks?” Stanford questioned the plural, finding it hard to pull himself out of Bill’s compelling orbit, finding it hard to stay rational, to disavow his feelings when this entire scenario seemed intent on pulling them out to play.

“The one I gave you.” Bill pointed to where the black triangle resided on Ford’s pectoral, before his hand trailed up to Ford’s neck. “And the one where I saved your life.”

Stanford blinked, realising that Bill was pointing to the scar on his neck Diñeiro gave him.

“You didn’t save my life.” Stanford protested, throwing Operation Honey over Vinegar out the window in that instant.

“Yes, I did. If I didn’t say stop, you would have been dead.” Bill insisted smugly, looking far too pleased with himself.

“That’s not saving my life. You didn’t – I wouldn’t have been in that position if it wasn’t for you.”

“Needing your life saved?” Bill countered stubbornly.

“No one would have been trying to kill me if it weren’t for the bounty you put on my head. This scar isn’t some sort of testament to your benevolence. It’s your fault it’s there in the first place.”

“My fault?” Bill leaned back, his eye narrowing dangerously. “I didn’t have to take Diñeiro’s call for you, I didn’t have to say stop, at that point I didn’t have to do anything for you, the way you’d been acting. I went above and beyond.”

“Above and beyond would have been taking down the bounty in the first place. Above and beyond wouldn’t – rrghh.” Stanford cut himself off, huffing angrily, before he pointed to his neck. “This is not your mark.”

“So, what is it then? A testament to your stupidity?”

Stanford glared at Bill, his mouth screwed up, his chin jutting out, stubborn, before he crossed his arms and slammed his eyes shut, jettisoning himself into wakefulness out of pure pigheaded determination.

He woke up from his dream with the words ‘That’s right, you walk away’ lingering in the forefront of his mind, and he couldn’t help but think that despite his best efforts not to let himself get tricked back into a relationship with the god, that felt an awful lot like the sort of argument reserved for married couples and long term partners.

After eleven years stuck in the multiverse, though, what else could they be?

And as deplorable as that thought was, there was a part of Stanford that was oddly gratified by that, even though he loathed the comparison at the same time.
A testament to stupidity. Stanford was fuming. That knife mark wasn’t a testament to anything other than Bill’s unique ability to ruin any sort of winning streak he had by doing something utterly awful.

Stanford had been muttering to himself in agitation ever since that last dream, his scientific plan put on pause so he could process just how enraged it made him that Bill seemed to think he’d saved Ford’s life again. He loathed the thought of being indebted to Bill for his life in any way, shape, or form, but the life debts kept racking up.

He’d managed to defer the debt from the time the island head monster tried to devour them both, reasoning that they’d worked together to save each other’s lives from the encroaching jaws of the island and the zombie uprising was technically Bill’s fault in the first place for writing the spell in his journal and leaving it somewhere innocent civilians could read, so his flashy pyrotechnics didn’t amount to a life debt, but what with the fall from the back of the Gremloblin and narrowly escaping Diñeiro’s blade thanks to Bill’s intervention adding up, Stanford was looking for ways to deny that Bill’s efforts had any impact on the longevity of his life.

He was hoping the car crash would have struck out one of those debts, but Stanford was the one to slam down on the accelerator, he was partially responsible for that near-death incident. Same with hurling Stanford down the stairs to his lab. They were both equally to blame for that incident. Setting his monsters chasing after Ford was one potential equaliser but Bill would counter that by saying he specified Ford was not to be harmed. Ford couldn’t wholly blame falling through the portal on Bill either because it was Stanford’s fight with his brother that caused the accidental dimension jump. The various bounty hunters who seemed confused whether he should be taken alive or dead weren’t technically Bill’s fault either as the poster had only asked for his expedient return, not his death. It wasn’t Bill’s fault the bounty hunters tried to read between the lines.

Stanford was desperately searching for something to hold against Bill to ensure he didn’t in some backwards twisted way owe Bill his life but the only serious consequence of Bill’s actions that he could think of was Diñeiro kidnapping him, and if Bill supposedly saved his life by stopping the mobster from cutting his throat, then that became thoroughly moot.

Ford didn’t want Bill to have saved his life. He wanted to blame Bill for its current state. He wanted to blame Bill for everything.

He had a scar on his neck thanks to Bill and the last thing Stanford wanted to do was to literally thank him for it.

Agitated circular muttering wasn’t doing it for Ford. He needed a drink.

After several such beverages, Stanford found himself surrounded by his new drinking buddies and the remnant glasses and bottles from their spree, finding it much more satisfying to discuss his agitations with an active listener than with himself.

Porky the Octopus Armed Warrior Piglet slammed down his tenth shot of spectral liqueur and wiped his snout with a tentacle, before gesturing it at Stanford.

“So, let me get this straight. Couple rotations ago, you nabbed your spectral buddy and built him an Angolean body.”
“That’s right. Because I’m Angolean.” Stanford nodded, emphasising his cover story. “This is back on Angol.”

“Right, back on Angol where you lost your dorsal arms –“

“In a great battle.” Stanford clarified, quite proud of how his cultivated backstory would appeal to the warrior piglets he drank with.

“Where you lost your dorsal arms in a great battle.” Porky nodded and the rest of his tribe cheered and raised their glasses.

“Cheers, I’ll drink to that.” Crowed one of them, and Stanford dutifully raised his own glass and took another sip of the neon green liqueur.

He was on his ninth drink at this point, and the evening seemed to be blurring together a little. But he still had his wits about him. And a badass cover story that would fit right into a good game of D&D & More D.

“And so, you put your spectral buddy in a beautiful Angolean body. Super hot. Six arms, sharp teeth, the works. A total knockout.”

“The works.” Stanford confirmed awkwardly, a little disconcerted that the Angolean standard of beauty was probably closer to how Bill looked when he tried to murder Willow and even more disconcerted by how he didn’t necessarily disagree with that standard of beauty.

“So, you play around, are ‘enlightened’ – we all know what that means don’t we boys?”

The tribe of warrior piglets all guffawed and slapped each other on the back with their tentacle arms. This was the closest Stanford had ever been to feeling like one of the boys and he found this sort of locker room talk as unsatisfying as he expected it would be.

“You enlighten him, he enlightens you, you’re just enlightening each other all the damn time. Bing bang boom. One hell of a honeymoon.” Porky continued gamely, gesturing dramatically with his tentacle arms as he spoke. “You get to falling in love a little, then BLAMMO – shit goes south. Your spectral buddy tried to murder your neighbour and threatened to kill your old war buddy’s family, probably murdered your pet goldfish, you don’t know how to deal with it, so you kick the spectral guy out of the sexy Angolean body and now he’s back to being an ominous all powerful …”

“Hexagon.” Stanford repeated, tenting his fingers together and pointing them at Porky convincingly. “That is definitely his geometric shape.”


“No, I’m not – I’m not sad about it.” Stanford stressed, only slightly slurring his words at this point. “I’m feeling conflicted, frustrated, angry – maybe just a little confused, although that falls under the umbrella of conflicted I suppose.”

“Listen, listen.” One of the other warrior piglets spoke up, waving his tentacle at the crowd. “Everybody’s got some story or other about their crazy hot ex. It happens. Now, I don’t mean to brag –“

“Here we go.” Porky rolled his eyes as the rest of the tribe groaned and shook their heads.

“But I once dated a celebrity back in the pen and let me tell you she was crazy hot. A prime
squealer, yeah, we had a great time when she wasn’t biting my tail off over something or nothing, but she moves on, becomes an actress, and settles down with some frog! Now, does that sound right to you?"

“You tell the same damn story every time.” Another piglet complained and shoved his friend lazily, knocking the cup from his hand.

“Hey, I was drinking that.”

“But see the issue is, when he is a – a Hexagon I have no trouble seeing all the bad things he did and I can hold him accountable for them. But when he’s a hu- when he’s Angolean it’s different. Even though he’s not Angolean now it feels like how we were before and it’s – I’m supposed to know better now and to stop seeing him like how he was. I should know better.”

“Does he have six arms as a Hexagon?” One of the pigs enquired.

“Well, no. I mean, he could.” Stanford answered with a shrug.

“That’s kind of hot.” One of the other piglets said in a quiet yet impressed voice.

“Do you want to get back together with him?” One of the other piglets loudly interjected.

“Well, I’m not – we’ve been spending time together but not for that reason, I shouldn’t –“ Stanford stammered.

“Hey, it’s a yes or no question.” The piglet tapped his tentacle on the table impatiently.

“I – look, I’ve been spending time with him to try to get him to - to ease up around me, but that’s to uncover his weaknesses, not to restart the relationship.” Ford insisted. “He’s objectively evil. I’m not even going to argue that point.”

“Objective for who?” One of the piglets slurred, leaning their elbows on the table.

“So, this is like revenge sex?” Probed another one of the pigs.

“Wh- I’m not having sex with him.” Stanford blushed, denying that a bit more vehemently than he would need to if he hadn’t already thought about it.

“But would you though, if it was on the table?” The same pig clarified, staring Stanford down.

“If it would get you in on those weaknesses you want, would you?” Another pig chimed in, stirring the pot. “Like, if the opportunity arose?”

“Seducing for secrets.” The third curly tailed instigator added, loving the drama associated with their new drinking buddy.

“Come on Casanova. Blasting gun to your head, would you still bang the Hexagon?” Porky joined in the interrogation, clearly amused by Stanford’s discomfort.

“I guess… yes?” Stanford finally conceded and the crowd of piglets cheered uproariously, slapping him on the back with their tentacled arms, applauding Ford’s potential piggish behaviour.

“But I can’t just – he’s acting like he saved my life.” Stanford struggled to make his complaints heard over the din of oinks and roguish squealing. “I’ve got a goddamn scar on my neck because of him, it’s his fault, and he’s acting like because he stopped the knife before it finished me off that somehow he’s saved my life and I can’t – I’m not going to owe him that. He’s unbearably smug, he
can’t just – he ruined my life!”

“My girlfriend gave me a scar too.” The pig with the celebrity ex-girlfriend claimed, moving to lift up his shirt and unbutton his pants. “Right he–“

“Put it away Baco. Geez, nobody wants to see that.” Porky insisted, sparing Stanford the sight of whatever horrendous scar lay beneath Baco’s trousers (or whatever lay beneath Baco’s trousers period).

“I just wish the scar wasn’t there at all. Now every time I see it, I hate it even more. It’s his fault it’s there, I’m not going to let him twist it into something that it isn’t. It’s –“ Stanford continued to rail against the scar until Porky interrupted his tirade, holding up a tentacle to pause his speech.

“So why don’t you just tattoo over it? Cover it up?”

“What?” Stanford blinked, surprised by the simple solution offered.

“We get tattoos all the time, bleeding the ink into the old pigs. We get tattoos to commemorate battles, to celebrate occasions, hell, even if we just feel like it, sometimes we’ll get a tattoo.”

One by one the piglets around the table began showing Stanford their tattoos of choice, the most grizzled looking hog, Krackling, bearing ink over nearly every inch of his skin while Swiney boasted a simple love heart on his plump cheek with the word ‘Mom’ written within it. Tattoos of all shapes and sizes, each one with a different story, paraded before the scientist, until in his inebriated haze it started to seem like a rather badass idea.

“It’s about reclaiming your body.” Hambone explained, while caressing his own tattoo with a fond tentacle, fluffy bluebirds on a branch emblazoned on his shoulder, showcasing a softer more sensitive side to the warrior pig. “Sure, you might lose your dorsal arms in battle, or get cut by your Hexagonal ex, but when I get a tattoo, that’s me placing it there. That’s my power. I’m deciding – my body isn’t what other people do to me, it’s what I choose to do with it. From rain grows flowers, you feel me?”

“I feel you.” Stanford nodded, taking another sip from his drink as he rubbed his pectoral absently with his free hand.

He finished his drink and the instant he set the cup down on the table the piglet to the side of him refilled his glass. Rather than protest or insist he’d had enough, Stanford simply picked up his glass and took another long sip before saying.

“Maybe I should get a tattoo?”

The warrior pigs cheered and toasted their glasses together, throwing back another round of the neon green sludge.

“Atta boy. My uncle runs a parlour around the corner from here. A few more drinks and you’ll be right to go.” Porky encouraged.

“Tattoos are rather permanent though. I don’t know what I would want to get.” Stanford slurred, looking into the bottom of his glass at the green dregs of his drink swirling around in there. “I don’t want one more regret, you know?”

He felt a comforting tentacle land on his shoulder, feeling the camaraderie of his new drinking cohort warm him from within, or perhaps that was the alcohol.
“Hey now. You let us worry about that. We’ll make sure it’s a good one.”

And, like a fool, Stanford trusted that they would.

“AHAAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAAH!”

Stanford gritted his teeth, as the laughter continued.

“HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH AHH-HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH!”

“It’s not –“ Ford ground his teeth now, the endless laughter beyond grating. “It’s not that –“

“HAHAH HAHAHAHAHA HOOOO HAHAHAHAHAHAHAHAH.”

“It’s not that funny!” Stanford shouted at the floating triangle, unable to take it anymore.

Bill stopped for a beat, taking in Stanford’s frustrated expression, his cheeks red and his hands balled into fists at his side, the embarrassment clear on his face, before he burst out laughing yet again, falling over himself in mid-air, wiping tears of joy from the corner of his eye.

“Bill, stop laughing!” Ford demanded.

The triangle was losing it, hysterical giggles overtaking whatever rational thought he might be capable of until he was kicking his legs and slamming his fist down on thin air like a toddler throwing a tantrum. A laughing fit.

If Stanford weren’t so embarrassed, he might even laugh at how silly Bill looked. Still, the triangle was laughing at him, and so Stanford continued to grind his teeth, indignant beyond belief.

“Bill, if you don’t stop laughing at me, I’ll leave. I’m leaving right now. I’ll take those sleep blockers and never come back!” Ford threatened.

Wiping the corner of his eye, Bill shakily extended his hand towards Ford, clearly on the verge of losing it to laughter yet again.

For a brief shining moment Stanford thought Bill was actually going to be serious, the thought of Ford’s threat to remove himself enough of a motivator for the triangle to legitimately take Stanford seriously.

“H – Hey now.”

And at that Bill devolved into another round of raucous obnoxious laughter.

Honestly, what was Stanford expecting? He couldn’t even take himself seriously with this ludicrous tattoo on his neck. The frightening bug-eyed star emblazoned with the words ‘HEY NOW, I’M AN ALL STAR’ in camp pink letters was the last thing Stanford expected when his drinking buddies suggested a cool tattoo for him to cover his scar. This wasn’t cool.
This just reinforced Stanford’s ‘trust no one’ worldview that he was steadily adapting as his own.

Bill’s laughter was getting out of hand now, Stanford was certain as of this exact moment that he would forever be able to recognise Bill’s laugh anywhere, emblazoned into his head as it was right now.

He wondered if Bill would ever stop laughing at him.

“Well, if you hate it so much, then help me get rid of it.” Stanford demanded. “Point me in the direction of an interdimensional tattoo removal parlour, or suck the ink from my skin, or burn it off – I don’t care. If you hate it so much, then make it gone.”

“I don’t hate it.” Bill admitted, sounding slightly out of breath, a few stray giggles escaping him even now. “It’s a feature, not a flaw. Who knew you could be so funny?”

“It’s not funny.” Stanford insisted, crossing his arms. “Nor intentional.”

“But that’s part of the fun.” Bill’s eye curved fondly at Ford and he righted himself and extended his arm to brush his fingertip against Ford’s cheekbone indulgently. “I genuinely enjoy watching you grind your teeth, pretending to be dignified when really you’re just embarrassed. You have no right to make that look so cute. That’s an unfair advantage.”

There it was. Bill called him cute again and even though it was Stanford’s self-inflicted humiliation he found ‘cute’ Ford didn’t doubt that Bill meant it.

Despite all that had happened between them, it looked as if Bill was letting his walls down around Ford again, which is what Ford wanted, it was all part of his master plan. The part that worried him was that, yes, certainly Bill’s walls were coming down around Ford yet again, he had planned for that much, but what his conscience wasn’t prepared for was the unlikely occurrence that Bill would fall for him, and with every fond glance or caress that seemed more likely.

It had been all he had wanted in the past, for Bill to fall in love with him, but if it happened now, while Stanford was deliberately deceiving him, leading him on for information, Stanford’s conscience wouldn’t be able to sustain this ruse for long. Or the ruse that Bill falling in love with Ford wasn’t exactly what he wanted deep down.

He still had hope, that this was just lingering fondness, that Bill still distrusted him, or was using him in some way, shape or form, but that hope was shattered the moment Bill blinked at him, his eye tracing his form with awe, looking to Stanford exactly the way he did that last night they were together on earth, back when he had said ‘you make me feel things’. Suddenly it was like he was looking at the same person he had in his bed back then, and not the triangle he’d grown to distrust and hate.

He was looking at the being he loved.

Who just maybe loved him back.

“You know what’s worse is you made me laugh and you didn’t even have to try. How do you do that, Sixer?”

Stanford swallowed, trying to keep his cool despite the realisation throwing him. Shrugging awkwardly, his cheeks pink now for a different reason, he replied.

“Maybe I just have that effect on you?”
Bill blinked, before considering Ford with a lidded eye. “Maybe you do.”

Bill was floating closer to Ford now, his hand still on Ford’s cheek, appraising him with interest and Stanford had a guilty reminder of the conversation he’d had with the warrior piglets back in the bar.

“But would you though, if it was on the table?”

“If it would get you in on those weaknesses you want, would you?”

He felt Bill’s eyelashes brush against his cheek as his eye closed, and his mouth drew near, and Stanford kissed him back, his hands coming up to cradle Bill’s warm bricks tenderly while his conscience railed at him.

This was their first kiss since before Diñeiro’s kidnapping, before the violence on Lottocron 9, since back on the scrap vandal’s vessel. Years had passed.

So much had changed since then, yet when they kissed it was like nothing changed at all. The only thing that changed was that now, Bill wasn’t the only one being manipulative and self-serving.

“Come on Casanova. Blasting gun to your head, would you still bang the Hexagon?”

As Stanford kissed Bill harder, his hands flexing, nails scraping down Bill’s gold surface, he realised his answer was still yes. Even if Bill was falling in love with him, if his feelings were genuine, while Stanford’s were less so, the answer was still yes.

So this was what revenge felt like.

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Now when Stanford delved into his mindscape, he didn’t waste any time.

“I feel like apathy is the only valid response when time means nothing. When temporal entropy makes itself known.”

Bill’s small gold frame was shaking, his eyelash fluttering, his bricks peachy and hot as Stanford’s fingers continued their ministrations on Bill’s shapely body.

Struggling to focus on Stanford, the scientist’s gifted fingers overwhelming him, Bill squinted at Ford, distracted.

“What is this, dirty talk?”

“I just – maybe now isn’t the right time.” Stanford conceded, looking down at Bill spread out for him on the desk in his mental library.

Bill’s four spindly fingers were wound around Stanford’s wrist, his other hand scratching gouges in the tabletop and he was glowing in a very appealing way. Perhaps Stanford had taken the wrong time to philosophise on his travels.

“I didn’t say it wasn’t working for me.” Bill replied after a beat and squeezed Ford’s wrist in an
encouraging manner. “Tell me more about your temporal nihilism, hot stuff.”

Needing no further prompting, Stanford did just that, not stopping to still his busy hands while he spoke.

“Imagine if you got the chance to live out the worst periods of your life again, an unlimited number of chances to re-enact the times in which everything went very wrong until they had the potential to go very right. Imagine if you had that potential to do things over, would you – a little tight there, ah, just yell if I’m going too far – would you change things if you knew that time could loop back on you, regardless of your success or failure, and make you relive it all again? After so many tries would it even be worth the effort?”

“Nnngh.” Bill shuddered, his gaze unfocused with pleasure, before he composed himself enough to fix Ford in his gaze. “You’ve been in the Do-Over Dimension, haven’t you?”

“I would call it the Go Insane Because Nothing Gets Done Dimension, but sure. What gave it away?” Stanford asked, exploring his muse with his fingertips while conducting such casual conversation.

“I hate that p-place – oh Sixer.” Bill panted and spread his legs a little wider, trying his best to accommodate Ford’s questing hands. “It’s the one dimension that gets a free pass with timeline do-overs and it tries to convince you that it’s a bad thing. It’s the dimensional ca-ahhh-autionary tale on the back of cigarette boxes warning people not to mess with the timeline, like every occurrence of timeline defiance will end up just like the Do-Over Dimension. Ahh! Like if you want to do one thing over, you’ll end up in – nngh - temporal purgatory, like the rest of those poor suckers trapped there.”

“That’s interesting.” Stanford hummed and did something with his fingers that had Bill’s eye water and his bricks heat up.

“That’s temporal torture.” Bill corrected him breathlessly.

“No, I meant how this-“ And he did it again. “Makes you vibrate almost. Some sort of frequency resonance.”

“God, Sixer, don’t get all clinical about this. I’d rather talk about timelineologists than hear you theorise about my anatomy. You’re taking all the fun out of this.”

“Oh, I’m sorry.” Ford said, not sorry at all. “Do you not like it when I’m clinical?”

He punctuated his question with another deft finger movement, making Bill hiss with pleasure and frustration.

“You’re pushing your luck.”

“I thought that’s what scientists do. Take things apart and put them together again, to find out how they work. Would you say I’m not being scientific about this particular engagement?” Ford taunted, as he pushed his fingers harder against the spot that seemed to make Bill melt inside.

“God, I should have let Diñeiro finish you off. You are insufferable.” Bill hissed again as he gripped Ford’s wrist tighter, still not pulling away.

“Well it’s nice to see this sort of thing gets you all romantic.” Ford droned, watching Bill’s legs shake. “It’s hard for a man to feel special without the requisite amount of death threats during coitus.”
“Don’t call it that. You’re ruining this for me.” Bill moaned, clawing more grooves in the table.

“And I’d much rather just ruin you.” Ford said lightly as he laid the finishing touches that seemed to push Bill over the edge, thoroughly overwhelming the triangle.

Ford felt Bill’s form seem to glitch around his fingers, overloading Bill’s ability to represent his physical form in Ford’s dreams, and when he finished, sprawled spent and dazed on the tabletop, Ford couldn’t help the wave of satisfaction and pride he experienced, having reduced Bill to this state.

“Ugh.” Bill uttered, still shuddering through the aftershocks and his hand curled around Ford’s retreating wrist again, his grip slightly softer, almost as if reminding himself that Ford was still there.

“Do you mind?” Ford said, leaning down, gesturing to his wrist, and Bill’s slim digits slowly slipped from Ford’s arm as Stanford raised his fingers to his mouth to have a taste.

“Ugh, why?” Bill bemoaned, his hands coming up to cover his eye as his golden form began to melt into a puddle on the tabletop.

“Because I live to ruin you, apparently.” Stanford remarked, resting his elbows on the desk now, threatening to dip his fingertip in the puddle of triangle left on the tabletop. “I could go for another taste.”

Bill solidified in an instant, his matter reforming into gold bricks in time for a flustered god to point and glare at the smug scientist looming above him. “Don’t you dare.”

“Is it always that painful for you?” Ford questioned instead, still surveying Bill like he was a science experiment and not a bedmate. “It looked painful.”

“Define always, then define painful.” Bill retorted, propping himself up on his elbows, looking evasively away.

“Does that mean you haven’t done this before? Before me, that is? In this form?” Stanford clarified, his clinical scientific demeanour slipping slightly, genuine shock creeping into his tone.

“Like you can count ‘almost held hands with Cathy Crenshaw that one time in dance class’ on your sexual resume.” Bill huffed dismissively but Ford didn’t miss how his bricks pinked.

This would be another one of those times that Stanford’s conscience would have implored him to feel guilty, but Stanford was working hard on quashing the voice of his conscience down, as it wasn’t relevant to his goal to consider Bill’s feelings on this, or how taking the triangle’s first time being intimate with another being in this form might indicate that the feelings Bill experienced for Ford weren’t fabricated, or part of a grander scheme to destroy the universe.

He couldn’t consider that, not while he was making such progress.

“The pain is concerning. Unless you like that, which isn’t outside of the realm of possibility. With such a sensitive interior it’s no surprise your exterior is so purposefully impenetrable.”

“Maybe I do like the pain.” Bill countered, regaining some of his old bravado back. “Or maybe you’re just not doing it right.”

“So, I’ll have to practise, shall I?” Ford retorted smoothly straight away, causing Bill’s bricks to flush a deeper pink, flustering the God despite his attempt at being cool.
Attempting to change the subject, Bill asked. “Do you know how long you were in the Do Over Dimension for?”

“I’m not too sure. Thirteen months perhaps?” Ford shrugged, resting his chin on his hand, watching Bill fluster nicely on his desk, next to the books and research papers his mind provided as backdrop for their intimate interlude. “Maybe more, the calendars there aren’t exactly reliable.”

“Time moves differently there in general. It’s windy though, that’s why I can still, or could still presumably talk to you in your dreams throughout, despite the timeline snapping back or stretching out then. Those thirteen months were probably more like eight years, given how short human years are.” Bill materialised himself a martini, sipping on the cocktail to restore his equilibrium after Stanford defiled it so thoroughly. “You’re probably fifty something now. You’ve skipped past your midlife crisis.”

“I thought you were my midlife crisis.” Stanford sniped, unable to prevent himself from slipping that barb in, now knowing he didn’t have to sugarcoat what he said for Operation Honey over Vinegar to be successful. “I don’t feel like I’m fifty. You’d think I’d have at least a few grey hairs by now if that were the case.”

“You won’t have grey hairs while you’re with me.” Bill raised his glass in a minor toast to Stanford, his eye curved into an indulgent smile. “I keep you young.”

“Oh, please.” Stanford scoffed, and snorted, moving the papers around on his desk idly as Bill crossed his legs, floating to sit with his martini on top of one of Stanford’s books.

“It’s true. With me in your head, you won’t have a single grey hair. That’s the sort of longevity you get from sharing headspace with a god. You thought you weren’t getting any perks from this arrangement?”

“That’s not exactly what I had in mind when weighing the pros and cons.” Stanford muttered, before scrutinising Bill once more, searching the god for the truth. “Really? I won’t age?”

“You’ll age slower.” Bill clarified, closing his eye to take a sip from his martini. “This isn’t immortality, we’d need to meet face to face for that to happen, plus there’s all the paperwork.”

“Paperwork?” Ford quirked a brow at Bill, amused.

“Well, there’s no paperwork, but it takes a lot of effort, that’s all I’m saying. Effort I’m not necessarily prepared to expend for you.”

“Why not?” Ford asked with a laugh, assuming he had Bill on side by now. He saw no reason for the triangle to withhold himself, or his gifts, since he already seemed to be subtly showering Ford with them, unbeknownst to him.

“You tell me why I should expend that effort for someone who’s been investigating me.” Bill said smoothly, taking another sip of his martini before staring Ford down.

The smile seemed to freeze on his face, and his heart dropped into his stomach, despite his intent to remain cool. There was a chance he could still deflect this.

“What?” Ford blinked, trying to keep his tone polite and bewildered.

“There’s no need to patronise me.” Bill continued to stare at Ford, clearly not buying his innocent act. “You think I don’t have sources reporting back to me, tracking you down from every dimension you’ve been to? You think you don’t tell me about the last place you’ve been and I
immediately send someone there to look for you, and find out what you’ve been doing? What you haven’t been telling me? Tell me, Stanford, why would I willingly be that stupid?”

“I didn’t –“ Ford’s protests caught in his throat, dread causing the blockage.

“Yes you did. You assumed a lot of things. And you know what they say about that.”

Bill’s unerring eye contact pinned Stanford to the spot a little longer, before Bill broke briefly to take another sip from his cocktail, finishing the drink and plucking the olive from the beverage, pinching the sphere between his thumb and forefinger and eating it.

“Whatever you want to know about me so badly, you can just ask. Or is that not what you meant by an ‘open mind’?”

Stanford swallowed, his pulse suddenly racing.

Was this an opening? To ask about the one thing he really wanted to know, to ask the forbidden question of what happened to Bill’s dimension. Could he ask that now and get an honest answer?

He was burning to ask Bill, but his burning desire was balanced by an equal desire to not be the subject of Bill’s preferred method of burning.

He couldn’t do it.

“I do have an open mind. I just wanted to … corroborate what you’ve been saying with other sources.”

“And how’s that been working out for you?” Bill asked, giving Ford a flat, unimpressed look from over the top of his cocktail glass.

“Not good.” Stanford admitted awkwardly.

“So, you can’t just take me at my word, you need someone you’ve never heard of or met before to prove I’m not lying to you, is that right?” Bill narrowed his eye at Ford. “Because you’d trust anyone’s lies over mine. Once a liar, always a liar, never told the truth a day in my life, is that what you think?”

“N-no.” Ford gritted out, hardly convincing anyone.

“But you don’t trust me, or the things that I’m telling you. That much is clear.”

Taking that in for a moment, Ford’s stubbornness reared its head, and his chin jutted out obstinately. “Well that worked out so well for me before.”

“There it is.” Bill set his glass to the side and tented his fingers together, pointing them at Stanford. “I wondered when we’d get there.”

“You think I should have just let go of having my life’s work turned against me? Of what happened?”

“That’s not what I’m saying at all. I was just wondering how long you’d be able to lie to yourself to keep up this nice act.”

“You think it’s an act, but you went along with it anyway?” Stanford puzzled somewhat aggressively. “You went this far thinking I was lying to your face the whole time?”
“Isn’t that what you were thinking?” Bill countered, raising his brow. “That I was just lying to you? Or that I’d lie until I wasn’t lying anymore?”

“That would have been nice.” Ford clenched his jaw, openly glaring at Bill now.

“Maybe that’s exactly what happened.” Bill said lightly, giving nothing away. “Maybe I’ve been telling you the truth all this time, while you’ve been feeling betrayed over nothing, coming back anyway. Hating me all the while. I really want to know how that’s working out for you.”

“Well.” Stanford paused, weighing up his words carefully before deciding to make use of the things he’s come to learn throughout his investigation. What would appeal to Bill to turn this around. “Betrayal’s a healthy foundation to all the best relationships.”

Bill’s eye widened and the suspicion in his gaze all but dropped.

“Besides.” Stanford continued, parroting Bill’s old words at him. “If I didn’t have this to hold over your head, then I’d have to find something else.”

Bill let out a breathy laugh in disbelief.

“You really - ?”

Stanford didn’t know what Bill thought he was really doing, but he could see that delighted awe creep back into Bill’s gaze, relishing the surprises Stanford threw at him, and the scientist knew that he’d successfully deflected Bill’s ire.

“Huh.” Bill sat back, looking oddly pleased with himself, before he threw Stanford a bone, much like he had done back in the kitchen after the D&D& More D game. “You know, there is one place in the multiverse that might still have written records about me preserved that you can read. I’m honestly surprised you haven’t been to this place sooner.”

Stanford blinked, surprised that Bill would offer him such a boon, and leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table eagerly. “Where?”

“The Bibliosphere.” Bill divulged. “It’s the largest library in the multiverse, on a planet inhabited entirely by scholars and guarded fiercely by time police, so no one steals and disseminates knowledge ahead of their time. The planet is a wasteland, constantly under attack. They keep the books and records in the citadel and the university is on the opposite side of the wasteland, sequestered away. There are more books in the Bibliosphere library though than there was in the library of Alexandria before it had its little accident, more than in any library you’ve ever encountered. Certainly more than however many books you can fit inside your head.”

The excitement leaked through Stanford’s impassive front, each word depicting the Bibliosphere sounding too good to be true. His interest piqued, Stanford was suddenly dying to go there, especially if he could find corroborating information on Bill.

“You’d probably lose another ten years of your life in there, you’d love it so much. You’d fit right in with the stuffy academic types. One hundred percent.”

Ford couldn’t believe that Bill was just handing this information to him, that he just volunteered this place that Ford would so plainly love, that also happened to have recorded textual information about Bill’s history for him to read.

“What dimension is it?”
“N233 squared.” Bill answered, giving Ford the precise dimensional location for this idyllic library.

This was incredible, astounding, and clearly too good to be true. There had to be some sort of catch, some sort of caveat to go with this generous divulging of information. Bill had to have some kind of motivation other than random altruism, because in Ford’s experience, he didn’t simply get nice things like this hint provided to him. He didn’t just get the answers dropped neatly right in front of him to his Bill-related problems, that just didn’t happen.

He was waiting for the other shoe to drop, for something disastrous to happen to take away this lead or hobble his plans before he could run towards them, or snatch his answers out of his hands just when they were in reach.

Bill, being an accommodating soul, made sure that Ford didn’t have to wait long.

With a wink that looked more like a blink, Bill delivered his parting line before dissolving from the mindscape ether.

“Maybe I’ll see you there.”

Chapter End Notes

OH SNAP! TRAP DATE, yes that is certainly a trap and a date, an amorous ambush if you will. Will Stanford be able to resist the allure of a library planet to avoid his ex? Mr 12 PHDs? Avoid a library? The funniest thing to happen in the fic, what a bizarre turn of events that would be. I hope folks enjoyed this chapter :) It was a lot of fun to write even if it took a few re-writes to get it right. This chapter is dedicated to Windchimes_in_Thunderstorms who left a gorgeous inspiring comment on the fic recently, but Thelema Rhoias, rainbowratstuff and butterflydisaster all get honorable mentions for cheering me on with the chapter, as well as my lovely friend and beta reader who makes this fic polished and possible.

Next chapter we have dangerous rendezvous, Jheselbraum's spies, an army of time police and a planet that could contain actual factual information about Bill's past. Throw Bill and Stanford into the mix and what could possibly go wrong? A lot, I'm counting on.

I hope folks enjoyed the chapter. Let me know what you thought of it, and thank you as always for reading :)
I've been cheated by you since I don't know when. So I made up my mind, it must come to an end. Look at me now, will I ever learn? I don't know how, but I suddenly lose control. There's a fire within my soul.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Stanford never had to think so hard about going to a library in his entire life.

Despite the Bibliosphere being everything Stanford could ever have dreamed of, the height of delight for his younger self (and present self) to be utterly surrounded by books, scholars, and learning in the largest library in the galaxy – no - the multiverse - the trepidation that came with walking into an obvious trap weighed heavily on his mind, to the point that it wasn’t an instantaneous decision to sign up for a library card within the first three seconds of hearing about it, like he’d done with every other library he’d encountered in his illustrious life.

No, he had to weigh up the pros and cons from every angle, because of a certain angular fiend.

Maybe I’ll see you there.

Damn him.

Dangling something so juicy in front of Ford, only to tack that on to the end.

As if the prospect of visiting the largest library in the multiverse wasn’t tempting enough, Bill just had to go and hint that the Bibliosphere held recorded information about the triangle’s past, corroborating sources that had proved uselessly elusive thus far.

He told Stanford this after admitting that he knew Stanford was investigating him. He knew the scientist was researching him still, asking about him at every Federation port and planetary satellite, digging up dirt on him, scouring the multiverse for his recorded weaknesses.

It was the cruellest ‘check’ in the history of the universe and Stanford knew that Bill told him so that the moment he set foot on the Bibliosphere the triangle would be able to say ‘checkmate’.

It was infuriating.

Ford wasn’t sure why Bill didn’t just do this from the start. Rather than following Stanford throughout the multiverse, the God should have just picked the one place Stanford wanted to go to more than anything and set up camp there, waiting for Ford to come to him. He was setting the perfect ambush, with the most exquisite bait, yet Bill had as good as told him that he’d be there.

That made no sense! It wasn’t an ambush when the enemy knew it was coming. What did he think he was playing at?

But no, this was Bill’s style precisely, Ford was coming to realise. Placing the best possible option on the table in front of Ford and then imbuing that option with an encroaching sense of dread. Acting helpful and resourceful only to tie Ford’s hands in the matter, preventing him from accessing the oh so helpful solution he presented, then pretending he hadn’t done anything to hinder him at all.
Ford could picture it now. Bill would tell him that there was nothing stopping him from accessing the Bibliosphere, certainly not Bill. Bill never said he’d be going and he never said Stanford couldn’t go either. He just hinted at it.

Maybe he’d be there.

It was driving Stanford insane.

Going to the same physical location as Bill while the God had his powers unbound would be tantamount to giving himself over to the God and ending the chase by turning himself in. He didn’t want to do that.

He had no guarantees that once he was at the Bibliosphere Bill wouldn’t just grab him and teleport him away. Ford had no intention of walking right into a trap on the Bibliosphere and then be forced to live out the rest of his days as a prisoner in Bill’s nightmare realm. He just wouldn’t do it.

But… the largest library in the multiverse.

It beckoned.

Stanford was unfortunately used to twisting his justifications to suit what he wanted, he was getting disastrously good at it, he could reluctantly admit.

Despite the obvious drawbacks with showing up at the same physical location as Bill, there was a chance that the God would not kidnap Ford, if the scientist played his cards right.

Right now, Bill seemed to think they were still together. He still harboured a fondness for Ford. They were intimate, they spoke with each other regularly. They were comfortable, for lack of a better word, in one another’s company to the point where things were starting to feel the way they once had, in terms of how they were getting along.

Meeting in the mindscape had that effect. Bill’s powers were limited there, so they could meet on somewhat equal footing. He couldn’t force Ford to do anything, he couldn’t tamper with or read through his memories without Ford allowing him to do so, and he couldn’t hurt Stanford (without Ford’s permission but that was another issue entirely).

At times, it seemed like he didn’t want to hurt Ford at all in the grander scheme of things but Stanford was coming to realise that Bill’s intent could only make up for so much when it came to his actions.

The fact that Bill thought they were going well didn’t change the fact that Bill knew Ford was investigating him, that he admitted to sending someone to every place Ford had been, searching for information about where Ford would go next, just as Ford was searching for information on where Bill had been.

Ford didn’t believe what Bill was telling him without corroborating sources, and it seemed Bill didn’t believe Ford either, or trust him enough to give up his search and merely listen to Ford’s exploits as they were divulged.

A crucial lack of trust was working against the both of them and any sort of meaningful connection or middle ground was tenuous while that trust was still so absent.

Going to the Bibliosphere would involve extending a modicum of trust, trust that Bill wouldn’t override Ford’s independence the moment he saw him. Trust that Bill’s feelings for him and the fondness that was clearly still there would extend to at least pretending that the two of them were
on equal footing should they meet in person.

The power that Bill held made that nearly impossible though. Meeting in person was unlike meeting in the neutral neural ground of the mindscape. Meeting in person involved genuine high stakes risk for Stanford, which made it slightly more complicated than just showing up for a quirky clandestine library date, as Bill seemed to presume it was.

Still, if Ford could play to Bill’s assumption that this was a date, if he could play along with the God’s backhanded gift of the largest library in the multiverse and pretend that things weren’t idling like a loaded gun between them, there was a chance that Ford could survive the encounter unscathed, free enough to move onto his next destination without Bill seeking to destroy his freedom, leaving the so called ‘all seeing, all knowing’ triangle none the wiser of Ford’s true feelings.

That is, if the triangle showed up at all.

Stanford had been in the Bibliosphere for at least a week already and there was still no sign of the yellow triangle.

He had been bunkering down in the heart of the giant library, surrounded by aliens from all dimensions, students, teachers, academics, and civilians, all drawn to the idyllic songbird of study in the high-ceilinged halls of the Bibliosphere.

The library was a sprawling silent city, contained within the central dome of the Bibliosphere, bookshelves stacked on all levels of the facility, hover steps scouring the shelves for those who could not float to reach the transcripts they desired.

The librarians were tall, unnerving eldritch beings, draped in sombre green flowing robes with shadowed faces, their elongated limbs and skeletal fingers ominous enough to look at, but when these creatures raised one of their spindly fingers to their hollow faces, silence was the only option, lest one succumb to the sense of dread these beings oozed.

So, it was just like the librarians at Backupsmore University really, in that sense.

There were silent levels of the library and soundproof study domes within where chatter was permitted. There were books, stone tablets, floppy discs and CDs, data files, facts and knowledge of all kinds stored in the Bibliosphere, and eager minds filled the dome to pour over everything within.

The well-read university students were draped in the same style of robes the librarians wore, the red and gold insignia signalling their position at the institution.

Stanford stuck out as an outsider in that sense, planted on his chosen table wearing Shailesh’s floor length black trench coat, the grey turtleneck he’d purchased to hide his garish neck tattoo, the scarf he often hid his face with dangling down his chest, and his reflective goggles he bought from the Sea World dimension hanging around his neck. He looked like the sort of swashbuckling interdimensional bad boy his wanted poster painted him as, and it was jarring to be such, when he was more used to being the wallflower nerd at the library that people often forgot.

Standing out wasn’t his intention here, but if he didn’t fork out the money to stay in the university village, he wasn’t about to pay for the university’s fancy robes either. Academic merchandising was all the same.

Ford had chosen a table facing the section on Gods, Deities, and Demons in the library’s mammoth
sprawl and he had been working his way through the books he could find in this section, searching for some sort of reference to Bill in these tomes, but so far his search had been in vain.

He’d been throwing back sleep blocking tablets to stay awake during his library stay, which made paying for accommodation in the university village on the other side of the planet entirely redundant. (Why pay for a place to sleep when you didn’t need to sleep?)

The university was heavily guarded by time police and housed within a screening forcefield that formed another dome around the school and its grounds. As the wasteland between the Bibliosphere and the University was so dangerous, the police protection was marketed as a safety assurance for prospective students and library go-ers but Stanford saw the precautions as an over-zealous gatekeeping method.

The fact that he was a wanted felon under time-law for his crimes against probability and multiple counts of theft and would be immediately arrested should he try to set foot on the university grounds hardly factored into his assessment of the force field. Hardly.

At least the library was easier to get into. Civilians could enter and read to their hearts content but should anyone wish to check out a book from the library they had to register for a library card and the process was very exacting. Not only did the Bibliosphere require DNA samples, fingerprints, full body scans, and some kind of unexplained energy reading that would enable the librarians to pinpoint your location anywhere in the multiverse should you fail to return a book, but all of this information could be freely accessed by the time police due to their affiliations with the Bibliosphere.

If Stanford were not a wanted criminal he might have been able to check out the books he needed on Bill and abscond to a different dimension entirely to read through them, avoiding the trap Bill had no doubt set, but since he had a criminal record, and he didn’t want to consent to being permanently tracked by the Bibliosphere across the multiverse, or arrested by the time police, he had no choice but to stay in the library while studying.

The Bibliosphere believed that knowledge should be accessible to everyone, hence their open-door policy, but that open-door policy made Stanford paranoid. If they let him in, they might let Bill in, however that was assuming he even made it to the door. Bill was more wanted by the Time Police than anyone, his time crimes were somehow infamous, despite Ford finding no record of them as of yet.

Perhaps the heavy police presence meant that Bill wouldn’t be joining Ford at the Bibliosphere. Perhaps he really had provided Ford with the location just out of the goodness of his heart knowing he wouldn’t be able to attend himself. Perhaps he –

Argh, it was no good.

Stanford’s paranoia didn’t allow him to get his hopes up like that. He couldn’t suspend his disbelief that Bill had an agenda sending him here, it wasn’t like Bill to threaten Ford with a good time without following through.

He said he’d be here.

Maybe.

So, Stanford had spent the past week, jittery on sleep suppressors, reading a page or two at a time from his chosen interdimensional textbooks before glancing suspiciously around the library, convinced he’d see something yellow and angular at any second.
Any second now.

Stanford looked up from his current book, searching the room expectantly.

Still nothing.

It was hard not to be disappointed really. Stanford had hyped himself up to such an extent, certain that this was a trap, that Bill had sent Ford here for his own nefarious purposes, that anything that was too good to be true probably was, yet here he was, left in the largest library in the multiverse to study whatever he wanted.

It wasn’t fair.

Eventually, disheartened by the constant disappointment, Stanford slowly but surely began to let his guard down, reading entire chapters before looking up to scan his eyes around the library, and eventually polishing off entire books before moving onto the next one.

While the books were interesting, and Stanford was learning quite a lot about Gods and Deities, and the beings who considered themselves such, he wasn’t finding out an awful lot about Bill. He almost wished the triangle were here so he could ask him directly, or at least probe the God for answers based on what he’d read.

Looking up from his book with a sigh, he resigned himself to one more weary look around the room.

Still the same university students working on their group assignment, one or two monks from various galaxies reading up on scripture, some feathered acolytes wearing pink trim on their suits, sitting on a table in the corner, writing things down, bickering with each other, and a librarian haunting the aisles.

No change from when he started reading this book. The only difference was a man standing by the bookshelves wearing a black and gold robe, but as he wasn’t a yellow triangle, Ford barely gave him a second glance.

He turned back to the next book he’d selected, pulling it across the table towards him, opening it to the contents page, scouring the list for anything about triangular dimensions, ready to sink back into his study haze, when realisation struck.

The man over by the bookshelves wasn’t a yellow triangle but he wasn’t entirely unfamiliar.

Ford had seen that man before.

Pulling the book up close to shield his face, Ford panicked behind the pages.

He was stupid, of course he was stupid, to think that Bill would show up to the place where he was a wanted criminal as his angular yellow self. Ford was stupid for assuming Bill would be stupid enough to do such a foolish thing, and he knew that his ex-muse wasn’t foolish. He knew.

Of all the things he expected when coming to this library, to this study trap, he did not expect this, and he was kicking himself for being so naïve as not to anticipate that Bill would do something like this.

Possessing someone wasn’t outside of the realm of possibilities Ford had anticipated, but for Bill to do this?
Very carefully, hesitancy and paranoia imbued in every muscular twitch, Stanford peeked his eyes over the top of his book, eyeing off the man beside the bookshelf.

It was Bill.

It was a Bill that only Stanford would recognise, a Bill that Stanford knew every inch of, as he had crafted all the details of him precisely. It was a Bill he never thought he’d see again outside of his dreams, because he ensured personally that he wouldn’t. He eradicated this body molecule by molecule.

Ford could hardly believe it. He didn’t know how this was possible. It was thoroughly impossible and it was the last thing Ford needed right now, now that he was trying his best to distance himself from the God.

It was what he was always weakest for, his greatest triumph and regret all rolled into one attractive looking package.

Bill stood, his hair golden and neatly coiffed, his skin dark and smooth, gold bands of colour stretching up his arms, bright yellow slitted eyes and dark eyelids lidded in an appealing way as he idly perused the books on the shelf, his mouth lilting upwards into an amused smirk, like he knew Stanford was watching him.

He didn’t turn to acknowledge Ford, he didn’t look directly at him, he continued to act like he was ignoring him, while knowing that Ford couldn’t look away.

It was unfathomable to Ford the fact that Bill was here, that he had been here for who knows how long, just waiting for Stanford to notice.

He was laughing at him, mocking him no doubt, for his obliviousness, teasing him. There he stood, in his sleeveless black and gold robes, not even applying himself to pretending that he was a university student. He wasn’t wearing the red, he wore his own colours, put his own Bill Cipher flare on the uniform of the scholars who resided here. The black and gold robes even had little triangles embroidered along the hem, as if the tattoos racing up his arms and encircling his shoulders weren’t enough of an identifier.

He was making it blatantly obvious who he was for anyone who knew well enough to look and, so far, no one had. Even Stanford barely recognised him, although his assumptions were to fault for that.

Stanford fumed from behind the book for several seconds longer, deriding himself for not seeing Bill sooner, debating with himself over what he should do now. Was Bill going to come over here? He had to know Ford was watching him.

But no, Bill made no move to turn around and face him.

Stanford watched openly now from his table facing the shelves, as Bill raised his hand, pointing at a book on the higher shelf, beckoning it down towards him. The book levitated out from its alphabetized spot and floated carelessly down through the air until it landed neatly in Bill’s hand.

As Bill delicately opened the book, making a show of dragging his finger down the contents page before flipping through the text, Stanford abandoned the books at his table, jumping out of his seat and storming over there to confront Bill.

(Also, any book that Bill was interested in was no doubt more informative than anything Stanford
had been reading. If Bill picked up a book, Stanford wanted to read it, even if he had to wrestle the book from the God to do so.

Thundering down into the aisle, Stanford delighted in noting that he could still loom over Bill at his height. The God hadn’t altered Ford’s original design much. Ford had half expected Bill to make himself taller in this form, just so he could lord it over him as much as his twisted little heart desired.

“What are you doing here? You –“

“Shhh.” Bill raised a finger to Ford’s lip briefly, before turning back to his book.

“You can’t – what - how did you?”

Bill used Ford’s flustered babbling as cover and swiftly ripped a page from the book he was holding, jamming the page in his mouth, chewing on it rapidly.

Stanford’s scandalised gasp was delightful to hear, but what was less delightful, and thoroughly unexpected, was how Stanford immediately reached forward, grabbing Bill’s chin, trying to wrest his mouth open and pluck the page out.

Any other creature in the multiverse wouldn’t have dared to touch Bill Cipher, no matter the form, for fear of immediate and graphic recompense but clearly Stanford Pines was one of a kind.

“Open your mouth! Spit it out!”

“Mmmrghh.” Bill stubbornly pressed his lips shut and leaned away from Ford’s dogged attempt to retrieve the page. A pale blue light encircled Ford’s wrists and pulled his hands away from the God, holding him back.

Bill finished chewing and made a show of swallowing the page, before he hissed at Stanford.

“Rude much?”

The logical part of Stanford’s brain should have realised that trying to remove the page from Bill’s mouth physically was a sure-fire way to jettison himself immediately into the worst-case scenario of meeting Bill here. He had his powers, that much was clear, and already he had Stanford’s wrists bound with magic, hanging uselessly in the air in front of him. It would be one short step, one antagonization too much, that would lead to Ford being whisked away back to the Nightmare Realm, a prisoner of his own impulsive actions.

However, all logic went out the window when Stanford saw Bill defiling that book.

“You can’t rip pages out of books and then eat them. What the devil is wrong with you? This is a library! You can’t – I can’t believe you!”

“Hi honey, great to see you too. Nice flesh cage, is it new?” Bill sniped sarcastically. “If I’d’ve known that was the sort of reception I’d get, I wouldn’t have put in the effort, you know.”

“What was on that page? What did it say?” Ford questioned, straining his wrists against the cosmic restraints around them.

“It was a wonderful recipe for paper a la carte. I simply had to try it.” Bill smirked, looking more pleased with himself the more enraged Stanford became.

“Rrrgh, I could strangle you.” Ford’s hands flexed threateningly in the air, his frustration getting
the better of him.

Bill seemed intrigued by that idea, looking Stanford up and down briefly before he looked away, aiming for casual, and snapped his fingers, releasing Ford’s restraints. “At least buy me dinner first, god, Sixer.”

With his wrists free, Ford snatched the book out of Bill’s hand. “Give me that.”

Flipping the pages to see if there was some sort of context that would hint at what Bill had removed, Ford found himself staring at a strange geometric language that he couldn’t understand, even with his dimensional translator. Growling with frustration, Ford slammed the book shut and tucked it into his coat pocket.

“Good luck translating that dead language. It’s been long gone.” Bill remarked, still enjoying Ford’s frustrated noises immensely.

“Yes, thank you. You’re very helpful.” Ford’s sarcasm was evident in his tone, clearly quite snippy that the first thing Bill did upon arriving at the library was to destroy yet more potential evidence about him.

It seemed that Bill’s arrival wasn’t to enable Stanford to more readily access information about him, but to carefully monitor the information Ford accessed, and censor the parts that Bill didn’t want known. Ford should have known that this was all too good to be true.

Glaring at Bill, at his beautiful face, and his shapely body, and his bright amused eyes, damning them all for being so attractive yet so infuriating, Stanford leaned heavily on spite and determinately turned away from Bill, stomping back over to his table in a huff.

“Aw.” He heard Bill say from behind him, but Stanford didn’t look back, determined not to get wrapped up in more of Bill’s nonsense.

“Hey, study buddy. Where are you going?”

He could hear Bill’s voice coming closer.

Now he was following him. Great.

Sitting at his desk and immediately pulling the book he’d stolen from Bill up in front of his face, he squared his shoulders and buried his face in the text, ignoring Bill out of stubbornness.

He had no desire to play Bill’s games now, no desire whatsoever.

Huffing out a frustrated breath, Ford glared at the inscrutable text, before he looked over his book for a brief moment of weakness, his paranoia wanting to know where the god was.

Two bright yellow eyes were staring back at him, and when their eyes met, Bill batted his eyelashes.

Sighing again, Ford set his book down on the table and scowled at every inch of Bill’s new form, and the perfection that it was to the scientist, aghast with himself that after everything he still found Bill incredibly attractive like this.

Bill sat with his hands laced under his chin, smiling at Ford as he stared at him, and from the looks of Bill’s constant smile, he knew exactly what this body was doing to Stanford.
“That symbol is an A.” Bill pointed at the text briefly, at a semi-circle with a line through it. “And also 11. And it also means mortgage broker.”

Ford narrowed his eyes, looking between the symbol and Bill with suspicion.

“Well, I’ll leave you to it.” Bill nodded, still smiling, and then made to leave, sliding off his seat.

“Wait.” Ford’s hand shot out and grabbed Bill’s wrist, holding him tightly. He was subconsciously impressed at how real Bill’s body felt, how warm his skin was, and how soft, exactly like how things had been back on earth. Part of Ford was still thinking that this could all be some sort of illusion, but it felt real enough.

Distracted from what he was going to say, Ford continued to feel Bill’s arm, squeezing it lightly and running his thumb over the skin, curious as to its composition.

Rather than pull away, Bill just stood there, watching Ford examine him somewhat indulgently.

“How did you –“ Ford pondered, feeling the muscles and tendons and bone formed perfectly beneath the skin.


Ford ran his thumb over the gold lines of the bricks circling up Bill’s arm, curious about the properties of those more than anything. “So then these –“

“I made some modifications obviously.” Bill explained, sitting back down on the stool opposite Ford, gesturing to the gold in his skin. “Tying up my abilities wasn’t quite what I was going for with this particular home-grown vessel, so it differs from the original. I kept the gold decals for aesthetics sake, a little botched sentimentality never goes astray. The rest was more pragmatically designed.”

“I can see that.” Ford said, looking Bill up and down, allowing himself that finally. “You look exactly the same. It’s like no time has passed at all.”

“I don’t think this vessel could get laugh lines anyway. Not like you.” Bill tilted his head and raised his hand, moving forward to smooth his hand across the crows feet at the sides of Ford’s eyes. “It’s not a bad look for you though. Some sort of metaphor about human men and fine wine. Just wait until you’re 80.”

Stanford didn’t flinch away from Bill’s hand. He allowed the God to brush the backs of his knuckles against the wrinkles bunching around his eyes, feeling a flare of warmth and electricity when he touched him that was quintessentially Bill.

Bill’s flirting was a good sign, it meant that he came here to play, their cat and mouse game stretching out further, and it meant that he hadn’t discovered Ford’s duplicitous pretence, assuming that the fond feelings between them were still shared.

This meant that Ford could flirt back, in theory. It would be maintaining his cover to do so and giving in to a little flirtatious banter back and forth wouldn’t hurt Ford’s mission at this point, or so he told himself.
He was getting very good at twisting his justifications.

“For all I’ve aged, I’ve still got my hair though. One thing I suppose I should thank you for.” Ford pulled out the old crooked smile, gratified when Bill’s smile seemed a little bit softer in return. The old Pines charm was certainly working.

“Someone’s feeling generous today.” Bill reached up, carding his fingers through Ford’s dark brown hair indulgently, the tickle of his nails against Ford’s scalp melting trickling trails of pleasure down his spine. “A thank you already.”

“A supposed thank you.” Ford corrected, knowing that flirting was entirely different from giving in and sucking up to the God. He wasn’t a prisoner yet. “Let’s not get ahead of ourselves.”

“Mmm, wouldn’t want that.” Bill agreed, still stroking his hand pleasantly through Ford’s hair, the pattern of their banter meaning more than any Godly egotism at the moment.

“So, you made your own body? A legitimate vessel?” Ford questioned, his eyes sliding shut as Bill continued to play with his hair.

“For all intents and purposes.” Bill confirmed. “A temporary vessel. This one’s a bit more durable for a cosmic being, so it’s far more practical for me. The only drawback is that I look like a human, but I figured that’s more of a pro than a con in your eyes.”

“Well, I like it, that’s for sure, but that’s not saying that I don’t like your other forms.” Ford said, lying partially.

“No, you just associate all things evil with one more than the other.” Bill replied dryly, bringing his hand down to dismissively swipe through Ford’s stubble.

Opening his eyes, Ford gave Bill a very tired but knowing glance. “I should pick up the slack and start hating this form as well then, shall I?”

“Since you’re such an overachiever, who’s to say that you don’t already?” Bill crossed his arms again, going back to staring at Ford rather than stroking him fondly across the table.

Rather than argue, Stanford simply shrugged, knowing that hiding things that Bill already knew would be shooting his pretence in the foot. “Touché.”

Bill seemed oddly gratified by that response, enjoying Ford’s pushback. Perhaps that was the reason he hadn’t simply taken Ford prisoner yet. He seemed to be having much more fun watching Ford defy him than he would have if Ford were trapped within his dominion.

Bill gestured at himself expectantly. “So, do you like it?”

“I’d be lying if I said I didn’t.” Ford admitted, appreciatively looking over Bill’s chosen form. It was an excellent way to sneak past the Time Police, and appeal to Stanford all in one blow.

“Such high praise.” Bill snorted, shaking his head, before reaching over to snatch one of Ford’s pencils from him, twirling it around in his fingers. “For a being accustomed to higher praise I feel like maybe I’m being short changed.”

“Well if it’s any consolation.” Stanford laced his hands together on the table in front of him, smiling flirtatiously at Bill. “You look lovely when you’re being short changed.”

That startled a laugh out of Bill that rang a little too loud in the study room, earning a chilling glare
from one of the librarians, before they raised a finger and hissed a note of oppressive silence at their table.

Stifling his laughter, Bill pretended to look adequately chastised, but when the librarian’s back was turned, he raised a finger of his own at the librarian’s back, but not such a polite one.

Stanford tried to smother his laughter now, reaching forward to grab Bill’s hand to stop the offensive gesture, snickering as he did so, and soon the two were laughing almost conspiratorially together behind their hands.

Somewhere along the way Stanford forgot to let go of Bill’s hand and continued to hold it between them on the tabletop.

“Are you seeing this?” One acolyte whispered harshly to her associate, doing her best to hide her surveillance from behind an overlarge textbook.

“You are not subtle, not subtle at all. We’re supposed to be watching him, not playing battleship,” drawled her colleague, drawing on the side of her page of notes.

Surveilling the human was becoming dull work, especially since all he seemed to do was sit and read, day and night, without even pausing to sleep. Occasionally he’d eat a ration bar, or drink some water, or scratch his ass.

So much of the same got boring quick.

“You didn’t even look up. Come on, this is our mission.” The first acolyte hissed somewhat zealously. “The Oracle is counting on us.”

“Counting on us to sit here and stare at the guy. We don’t even get to intercept him like the other squads, we just have to sit here and look at him,” complained the second acolyte, scowling at her papers.

“You should be looking at him now. Now! Look!” urged the first acolyte, scooting the textbook over so it covered them both.

With a reluctant sigh the second acolyte looked up, not expecting much, but she double took when she peeked a glance over the top of the book.

“Who’s his friend? This is new.”

“Look closer. But don’t draw attention to yourself,” advised the first acolyte, waggling her eyebrows meaningfully at her associate.

The second acolyte narrowed her eyes and tried to make sense of what she was seeing.

There was another human, or at least she thought it was human, it looked different to the mark, its skin was darker, and its colours were different, more vibrant. Maybe this human was the male counterpart to the drab older looking human, maybe this was some sort of elaborate courting ritual, in the library of all places, the animals. This was no place for such base fraternising.
The humans were flirting, it looked like, the darker human stroking its hand through the older one’s hair, wiping its hand across its face. Mammalian pageantry.

They spoke to each other in their own language, trading banter, when suddenly the darker human started laughing, a loud irreverent sound that drew the scorn of one of the hulking librarians.

The librarian turned to silence the miscreants, raising the dreaded finger to its face, hissing chastisement at them, but rather than the librarian’s power effecting them, the darker human waited until the librarian’s back had turned and flipped a flippant finger back at the behemoth giddily, yellow slitted eyes wide with excitement, the smile splitting the human’s face like a knife.

“Oh no.”

It all began piecing together, the gold on the creature’s arms, patterns that looked like bricks climbing the flesh, the garish yellow hair, a shade of yellow that only one being would find appealing in the multiverse, the dark limbs resembling fleshier versions of the dark limbs that struck such fear into the galaxy, and those yellow slitted eyes, the eyelashes giving away that last tell-tale sign as to the creature’s true identity.

There was no mistaking it.

That creature was the Devil the Oracle had warned them about. The Demon of Dreams, the Eternal Nightmare.

That was Bill freakin’ Cipher.

“We need to go. This mission’s too dangerous. We need to leave, now.” The second acolyte said quickly, sounding out of breath, already moving to shove her notes in her satchel and flee.

“We can’t leave yet. This is the moment Our Mistress has been waiting for. She needs to see this!” enthused the first acolyte, pulling on her associate’s feathers, trying to keep her from leaving.

“What do you think he will do to us if he catches us spying on his twisted canoodling with this exaggerated primate? This goes beyond the mission briefing! This is now life or death!”

“Oh, stop being so dramatic and lend me your eyes.” The first acolyte rolled her eyes, before looking at her colleague expectantly.

“My eyes? Why does it have to be my eyes? Lend your eyes!” Argued the second.

“I loaned my eyes last time. Besides, I want to report to her.” The first acolyte said stubbornly.

“Why do you get to report to her?” The second acolyte jutted her chin out argumentatively.

“Because I’m not the one who wanted to run away from the mission and if you lend me your eyes, I won’t be the one to tell her you did, hmm?” The first acolyte hummed, raising her eyebrows expectantly and holding her hand out, the communication crystal sitting snug in her fist. “So, what’ll it be?”

“Ugh.” The second acolyte grunted, crossing her arms, before she turned on her seat to face the first, reluctance written all over her face. “Fine then. But be gentle, I don’t like it when it bur – uuuurrrhhhhhhhs!”

The first acolyte slammed the communication crystal into her associate’s forehead and the crystal burned through her consciousness, turning her into a conduit for interdimensional communication.
Her eyes glowed blue like static for a moment, the second acolyte twitching and spasming, her mouth hanging lax, foam beginning to froth at her beak.

After the static died down, the second acolyte seemed to jerk upwards into a more refined sitting position, before she looked condescendingly down at her colleague.

“Mistress. I have something to report.” The first acolyte said, beaming at the blue eyes of her colleague, expecting to speak with her leader.

“The Mistress is busy. You can leave a message with me and I’ll pass it on,” drawled the unmistakable tone of The Oracle’s military leader, Oestia, that absolute glory hog.

“This is important. She needs to see this.” The first acolyte argued, scowling at Oestia’s projected eyes. “She needs to see this with her own eyes right now. This is mission critical.”

“I’ll be the judge of that.” Oestia asserted, leaning the second acolyte’s body forward so she was resting her elbow cockily on the table top. “So, who am I looking at?”

“Not you, her, and it’s him so you can’t look,” stressed the first acolyte.

“Him who?” Oestia scoffed.

“Him him. He who I can’t tell you his name or he’ll know I’m here him. He who is everything our Mistress hates in the universe. He who wears a freakin’ bowtie. Do I need to spell everything out for you?”

“Look, just because you got to go to eternal lotto Vegas or whatever on your pointless mission, that doesn’t mean I’m going to –” Oestia’s words cut off, and the second acolyte looked to the side for a moment, then tilted her head back to look up into the space directly above her. “Oh, your Eminent Oracle of All that is Light. I was just – of course you may speak to the acolytes. I’ll just –”

The second acolyte’s head spasmed again in a way that was surely uncomfortable for her neck and her eyes filled with blue static once more, levelling out into a more vibrant cobalt, her tone and posture carrying a deeper more profound resonance.

“Speak, my foot soldier. What do you see?” came the Oracle’s calm voice, projected through the second acolyte’s fragile baser body.

“Mistress, I’ve been tailing the Sixer human just like you said. We’re at the Bibliosphere and he’s been studying books on deities and lost dimensions like you said he would, researching the demon. He’s been alone for the past week, but then – you really need to see this.” The first acolyte pointed in the direction of Stanford’s table from over the top of her textbook, encouraging her Gracious Leader to do the same.

Jheselbraum pushed herself further into the second acolyte’s head and leaned her body forward, grasping the edges of the textbook to properly shield her surveillance.

When she spotted Bill sitting across from Stanford, her eyes lit up with a dangerous glee.

“Oh. Now this, this I needed to see.”

The first acolyte hummed with pride, oblivious to the way her Mistress’s eyes scoured Bill’s chosen form, sneering at the gold and the triangle motifs and the bricks that ran along his arms, disgusted that he wouldn’t even attempt to be subtle.
How could such a brazen creature exist unpunished?

But then she noted the way Bill smiled, his eyes alighting soft on the human’s features, their entwined hands sitting on the table between them, fingers laced in a casual net. Her eyes narrowed as Bill laughed at something the human had said, and she dug the second acolyte’s fingernails into the wooden study bench until they were bleeding at the claw beds.

She had known the many faces Bill Cipher assumed and his laughter was not unfamiliar to her, but never before in all her years of regrettable association with the geometric devil had she ever seen something resembling anything close to genuine happiness. It was all naught but a charade and Cipher was good at charades, but this was something else entirely.

This was a peek through the crack in the mask, a window looking past the lie. This was an opportunity. This was a –

“Such weakness.” Jheselbraum cooed, her blue eyes lidding venomously. “I don’t think I’ve ever seen anything like it.”

“Mistress?” The first acolyte looked at her leader, wondering what the revered Oracle was seeing that she couldn’t see.

“Do you see how he degrades himself, to pander to that lower life form? How he humiliates himself? That is a notch in the armour, a weak spot. One wouldn’t think such a contemptable ego would have it in him to lower himself to play pretend. Although he’s never had any trouble pretending before. I’m not sensing too much pretence here though. This is very interesting.”

The first acolyte tried to look again at the situation to see what her Mistress was seeing. She tilted her head, but she couldn’t see what her Mistress found so delightful about this situation. Cipher making an ally out of their mark didn’t seem interesting, it seemed like a disaster.

“The Sixer is researching the demon’s past, is he not?”

Jheselbraum’s eyes glowered out from the second acolyte’s skull in a way that burned, like she was burned.

“Let’s give him something to look into, shall we?”

Stanford had been attempting to decrypt the peculiar geometric language for the past 24 hours, feeling a strange mix between dubious and elated that Bill hadn’t left his side yet. The triangle continued to sit at his table, making random unhelpful comments about what Stanford was reading, probing for conversation, eventually folding paper aeroplanes out of note paper and manipulating as many of them as he could to float behind the librarians in neat little lines, levitating them out of sight whenever the librarians turned around, like a naughty child with a behavioural problem.

Eventually, Stanford realised that he could curb Bill’s chaotic enthusiasm by sliding his boots off and playing footsie with Bill under the table, but that particular distraction got old quick when he felt not just Bill’s feet, but an unexpected morass of tentacles wrapping around his ankles.
After a stern telling off, he slipped his boots back on, and now he sat here, with notes that were no more helpful than they were several hours ago, agonising over this mysterious shape-based language.

“It’s just not consistent. It just doesn’t make sense – I don’t – what are you eating?”

Bill was resting his head on the desktop now, bored of Ford’s cold shoulder treatment, and had somehow materialised a red box of some sort of edible good underneath the table, sneaking the food into his mouth.

Speaking with a mouthful of food, Bill answered. “Chocolates. Want some? They’re a bit rich.”

Bill passed the box to Stanford under the table, and he looked down onto his lap to read the writing on the box, his dimensional translator providing some use in this instance, if not with his difficult translation.


“Brings a whole new meaning to the phrase ‘eat the rich’. How’s that for marketing?” Bill winked at Ford, no doubt enjoying the novelty of having two eyes again. Two eyes made winking much more obvious.

“It would be too naïve of me to hope that there aren’t real people in these, are there?” Stanford asked, reluctant for the answer.

“Who considers capitalists as ‘real people’ anyway?” came Bill’s flippant reply, confirming one way or another that Stanford certainly wouldn’t be eating those chocolates. “If you don’t want them, that just means more for me.”

“Knock yourself out.” Ford replied dryly as he passed the chocolates back to Bill under the table.

When Bill simply shrugged and popped another chocolate in his mouth, Stanford thought he’d try his luck a little.

“You know how to read this language then, yes?”

Bill hummed a vaguely affirmative sounding hum, picking through the box for his favourite flavours, licking each one and spitting them back out if they weren’t the ideal confection.

“Fancy translating a page for me?” Ford turned the book around with an eager grin.

Bill wrinkled his nose and spat out yet another chocolate, before he wrinkled his nose once more for emphasis at the geometric text. “You couldn’t pay me enough to read that garbage again.”

“Again? So, you’ve read it before?” Ford pressed, only to watch Bill make a disgruntled face and lay his head back down on the table so he didn’t have to look at the page in front of him.

Reaching a hand out, Ford poked Bill’s head annoyingly for a moment but when he felt Bill’s power tingling threateningly around his wrists again, he altered his movement, and began to stroke Bill’s hair gently instead.

“You could tell me what it says.” Stanford wheedled, continuing to pat Bill while testing his ire. “I want to know if you’re in there somewhere.”
“I’m not.” Bill replied his voice muffled by the table.


“That book’s not worth reading, Sixer. It wasn’t worth reading then and it isn’t worth reading now. All it’s good for is a sore stomach, so give it here, and I’ll get rid of the rest of it.” Bill groaned, sitting up slightly and reaching over to take the book.

Stanford swept the book off the table before he could touch it and held it close to his chest, doing his best to keep it away from Bill’s irreverent destruction.

“Not a chance. I am not letting you destroy a single page more than you already have in this library. Don’t eat books.”

“Ugh.” Bill groaned and used his extended hand to slap himself emphatically in the forehead, like he was done with Ford’s book toting bullshit. “I can’t believe this. If you want to know about my history so badly why don’t you look in a book that actually has something relevant in it, instead of wasting your time reading some old classroom textbook.”

“It’s from a classroom?” Ford questioned curiously.

“You’re missing the point Sixer. I’ve just told you that there’s another book with things about me in it in this fact dome and you didn’t even think to follow up on it. What kind of scientist are you?”

“Do you really mean that?” Stanford tilted his head, putting the indecipherable geometric book back in his pocket, leaning across the table to rest his hands on the surface eagerly.

“Do I mean that you’re a shitty scientist? We’ve been over this.” Bill rolled his eyes and glared at Ford for good measure.

“No, what you said about there being another book with you in it. Is that true?”

“You’ve been looking in the wrong section, smart guy.” Bill divulged with a casual shrug. “All this research about gods and deities won’t tell you anything, because the only book in this library worth anything is sitting in the back of the outdated mathematical commerce section.”

Jumping to his feet, Stanford began pulling his things together, readying to leave. He grabbed Bill’s arm and tugged him away from the table too, keen to follow the lead while it was still fresh.

Rather than jump to it with him, Bill resisted, whining complaints as he stubbornly refused to get off his chair.

Stanford attempted to overpower him, still pulling him resolutely towards the front desk, but Bill became immovable, like a very stubborn anchor.

Releasing his wrist with a sigh, Stanford caught his breath and put his hands on his hips, looking at Bill with exasperation. “What can I do then? What can I do to get you to come with me and show me this book?”

Bill pursed his lips like he was considering it, before his yellow eyes flicked deviously up to Ford’s face. “Can I set up a tab?”

“What? At the – at the bar?” Ford puzzled, blinking owlishly at his ex-muse.
“You couldn’t afford my bar tab.” Bill snorted, before giving Ford that devious once over again. “I mean like a tab for favours. To be repaid at a later date. At my discretion. That sort of tab.”

“That sounds very unwise.” Ford replied bluntly.

“But don’t you like the sound of it?” Bill grinned winsomely. “I sure do.”

“I’m sure you do.” Stanford narrowed his eyes and looked up and down his ex-muse discerningly.

Pretending to owe Bill a favour in return for his co-operation wasn’t that much of a stretch considering how much Stanford was already lying about. The idea of an arrangement promising some sort of delayed gratification for the God would benefit Stanford, especially if he wasn’t around for the part of Bill’s proposal where he would cash in the favour.

Bill continued to beam optimistically at Ford, refusing to budge from his stool until his favour tab demand was met, and Stanford resigned himself to his pretence with a convincing sigh.

“Fine. Consider this the first favour on the tab.”

Instantly Bill held his hand out expectantly, waiting for Ford to shake on the deal, sealing his promise with power.

Stanford gave Bill’s hand a dubious glance, before he reached his hand out and grabbed Bill’s wrist instead, tugging him off the chair to follow him.

“Let’s go.”

Bill’s bright grin dimmed, but he followed Ford regardless, no longer weighing himself down to stagger the scientist’s efforts.

He watched Ford’s back carefully, his mischievous expression growing shrewd and calculating, as he let Ford pull him through the Bibliosphere, searching for the last remaining book on Bill’s past.

Stanford stood at the front desk, the librarian manning the counter typing the book title slowly into the database computers, its long skeletal fingers clacking ominously against the computer’s keys.

True to his word, Bill had led Ford to the outdated mathematical commerce section of the library, and even floated Ford alongside him so he could search the shelves for the title, as he didn’t trust Bill to check for him. Floating across the shelf, his finger tracing the titles, Ford found himself confronted with a gap in the shelves where the book should have been, the titles on either side of it indicating that this is where the book should be.

“Aw shoot. Guess it’s not here anymore.” Bill said, sounding more delighted than dismayed, already shrugging and floating them back down. “Too bad Sixer. Still, what can you do?”

Rather than respond, Stanford had marched away from Bill the moment his feet hit the ground and made a beeline for the enquiries desk, which lead to his current predicament.

For beings who have guarded the Bibliosphere for millions of years, the librarians were
agonisingly slow typers. If they weren’t such daunting creatures Stanford would have urged them
to hurry it up.

Twitching with impatience, Stanford could only wait as the librarian typed in the title – *Inductive
Reasoning to Support the Formulation of The Perfectly Productive Societal Polygon Theorem.*
Granted, the title was long and unwieldy but you’d think with such a vast wealth of resources at
their disposal the librarians would have learned how to touch type.

Bill stood idly behind Stanford, watching the tendons in Ford’s neck jump as he ground his teeth in
irritation. Ford was sure this was all very amusing for Bill, yet another wild goose chase designed
purely to irritate Ford.

Finally done with their enquiry, the librarian hit enter and then turned the screen around to show
Ford, its voice rattling and raspy, with an unnerving quality to it that made the hairs on Stanford’s
arms stand on end.

“IT WAS CHECKED OUT LAST WEEK.”

“By who?” Ford blurted out.

The librarian raised a jagged finger to tap the screen, where the identification of the reader was
displayed near the title.

A student at the University had it. A fellow called Barold Blendin. They’d checked it out a week
ago, exactly a day after Stanford had arrived. The annotation on the record stated the book was
withdrawn for an extra credit assignment on defunct societal structures for a mathematical
anthropology class. There was no return date noted.

“I really need to see that book. Is there any chance it could be brought back?” Ford requested with
strained politeness.

“THE STUDENT WILL WHEN THEY COMPLETE THEIR STUDIES.” Raped the librarian.

“What if I need it before then?”

The librarian tilted its head at Ford, oozing disapproval, before it replied. “THAT IS FOR YOU TO WORK OUT BETWEEN YOURSELVES. THE BIBLIOSPHERE DOES NOT INTERVENE.”

“Group projects, am I right?” Bill interjected, jerking his thumb in Stanford’s direction. “They’re all the same. Unfortunately, we have a deadline to meet, and Brainiac here needs that book.”

“YOU ARE A STUDENT?” The librarian asked, turning its gaze towards Ford.

“Ah, yes.” Ford lied, before murmuring. “In a fashion.”

“THE STUDENT WHO CHECKED OUT THIS BOOK RESIDES IN THE UNIVERSITY VILLAGE. STUDENTS OF THE UNIVERSITY CAN ACCESS THE VILLAGE AND SHARE TEXTS. CONTACT THE STUDENT THERE, AND ASK THEM YOURSELF.”

“So how do I –“ Stanford began, and the librarian tapped the screen yet again, not keen to further
explain itself to the human.
Ford scrambled to write down the Barold’s details and information, the Bibliosphere maintaining a record of Barold’s exact coordinates. The librarian had already turned its back on him, ending the conversation. When Stanford had finished scribbling the information down the screen turned on its own to face away from Ford.

Walking back from the enquiries desk with his piece of paper, Stanford paced over to one of the common study areas to sit at a desk, staring at the paper before scrubbing his hands through his hair in frustration.

Hopping onto a stool opposite Ford, Bill slid the paper towards him, surveying the details. “So, it’s in the university village, huh?”

“The University Village that you can’t get into without paying a hefty fee, which I am *not* going to do, and you need to have a verified clean criminal record, which unfortunately I no longer possess since I crossed over through the portal.”

“Says the guy who stole uranium from the government, irradiated the rats in his college dorm to teach the campus a lesson, and made a mind control tie for the government to throw elections.” Bill chimed helpfully. “Mr Lawful Good.”

Stanford, despite being tickled by the D D & More D reference, chose to ignore that and continued with his rant.

“Not even mentioning the time police’s force field. There’s no way –“ Stanford bemoaned, resignation setting in only to be interrupted by Bill’s snort of laughter.

“Seriously, Sixer. You’ve been to university before, you don’t think the students have a way to sneak off grounds? Or to sneak in?” Bill quirked a brow at Ford, smiling at him like he found the human remarkably funny, although that wasn’t anything new.

“Why would they want to sneak out?” Stanford looked at Bill in confusion, remembering his own university days. While the dorms weren’t exactly the cleanest, and it wasn’t his university of choice, Stanford was exactly where he wanted to be when he was studying. Wasn’t everyone?

“For parties?” Bill looked at Ford in disbelief, spelling it out for him. “Booze? Illicit substances? A chance to let their hair down and drop the honour student act? That’s a community of tightly wound repressed little overachievers, are you seriously telling me that you don’t think they’d jump at the chance to sneak past the barrier and get drunk and break shit in the wasteland on the weekends?”

Stanford squinted at Bill, still dubious, although he realised Bill had a point. Sneaking about to misbehave was almost synonymous with the university experience, or so Stanford’s peers had assured him. While he hadn’t seen the necessity to sneak into bars, he’d certainly disappeared into the nearby forests, or abandoned factories on occasion, chasing down the closest anomaly or urban legend to further his thesis.

“So, are you saying you know a way to get past the forcefield and the Time Police and the ID checks, so we can meet up with this Barold fellow and get the book?”

“I don’t.” Bill admitted, examining his nails idly as Stanford’s shoulders sagged. “But I have a feeling I know someone who might.”

Stanford perked up at that and looked at Bill hopefully, waiting for Bill to divulge.

Bill pursed his lips and stared back at Sixer, deliberating, before he crossed his arms.
“I can call them, but this is going on your tab. That’s two favours now.”

“So, put it on the tab. Let’s do this.” Stanford insisted.

Bill tsked but then he closed his eyes. Stanford watched for a moment, waiting for when Bill would pull out a communication device or a phone, but he made no move to do so. It was almost like he was falling asleep.

Eventually Bill spoke, although regrettably Ford still couldn’t decipher Bill’s chosen language, nor could his dimensional translator.

“Jryy qba’g yrg zr vagreehc. Whfg xvqqvat! V’q yvxr n bar ba bar jvgu Xrlubyr, gura lbh pna nyy tb onpx gb lbhe xavggvat. Fbhaqf tbbq?”

“What are you saying?” Ford hissed, trying to get Bill’s attention.

Bill’s brow furrowed in annoyance, but he made no move to open his eyes.

“Xrlubyr, ohqql. Lbh syhaxrq bhg bs gur Ovoyvbfcurer jnl onpx jura, qvqa’g lbh? Bu fbeel, “qebccrq bhg”, zl zvfngnxr. Lbh jbhyaq’g uncera gb xabj gur jurer frperg ragenapr sebz gur jnfgrynaq vf? Gur bar jvgu ab VQ purpxf jurer lbh hfrq gb trg lbhe fgnfu? Yrg’f whfg fnl V’z ybbxvat sbe na bcravat va gur znexrg.”

Bill paused, before he opened one eye just to roll it at Sixer. “He’s telling me hugs not drugs. What a hypocrite.”

Ford’s eyebrows rose incredulously as he watched Bill shut his eye again.

“Hahahah, funny joke. Frevbhfyl, V arrq gur ybpngvba sbe gung frperg qbbe. Sbe frperg ernfbaf Xrlubyr, V qba’g unir nyy qnl.” Bill seemed to listen, before his tone shifted from serious to jovial.


Shaking his head with an amused chuckle, Bill opened his eyes, ending the call.

“I’ve got our in.”

“Who’s Keyhole?” Ford asked, curious to investigate whatever he could pick up from Bill’s cryptic conversation.

“Jealous?” Bill grinned at Ford teasingly, as if delighted by the thought. “It suits you.”

“I’m not jealous.” Ford argued. “I’m just asking questions.”

“Whatever helps you sleep at night.” Bill said with a shrug, before looking at the bags under Ford’s eyes. “Or never. Back on your sleep blockers I see. That’s not insulting at all.”

“I was trying to study.” Ford lied half-heartedly. “Everyone here uses them. They sell them in the vending machines.”

“Okay jitters. Whatever you say.” Bill rolled his eyes and stood up from the chair, making to leave already.

“Wait.” Stanford’s arm shot out, and he grabbed Bill’s shoulder, looking almost distressed. “We can’t leave yet.”

“Why not?” Bill frowned, watching Stanford’s guilty and distraught expression as he pulled the
undeciphered classroom textbook from his coat pocket.

“I don’t have a library card.”

“You are not taking that with you.” Bill said flatly, unimpressed.

“I want to read it.” Ford argued.

“You don’t even understand the language.” Bill retorted.

“I can decipher it.”

“It is literally a dead language, Sixer. No one can read it.” Bill snapped.

“You can.” Ford pointed out, his expression sheepish now, clearly angling for something. “And, well, I was hoping maybe … we could put it on my tab?”

Bill stared at Ford for several seconds, his mouth hanging open in disbelief, clearly swinging between offended and appalled for those stretching seconds.

Stanford was very tempted to set his hand under Bill’s chin, in that moment, and close his mouth for him.

The temptation was growing.

Eventually he just did it, and Bill seemed to blink out of his stupor, before swatting Ford’s hand away from his face. “Stop that!”

Stanford blinked, and attempted his best pleading expression, to see if that would aid his cause.

“Stop making that face. Pick someone else to read you a bedtime story or pick a better story.”

“But I want to read this story. Book!” Stanford corrected himself and he started bargaining. “You don’t even have to read it, just help me take it out and I can figure out the rest. Please? I’ll give you a backrub.”

Bill squinted at him.

“What kind of chump change –“

“Two backrubs! A foot massage? I will worship your entire body any way you see fit for as long as you whh-“

Bill smooshed his hand over Ford’s mouth, his cheeks dark and flushed, hissing at Ford. “Shh, will you keep your voice down?”

Ford meant to say ‘why, are you embarrassed’ but with Bill’s hand over his mouth it sounded more like the equivalent phrase said in the M Dimension.

“I know libraries get you going, or whatever, but could you ease off on the worship gasoline? We are in a public place.”

“Funnily enough, I didn’t think that would phase you.” Ford murmured, pulling Bill’s hand away from his mouth.

“A public place crawling with Time Police. They may be absolute idiots, but even they would
notice that kind of spike in energy, and since I’m squashed into a meat suit again, a spike like that is a little harder to contain.” Bill explained peevishly, still obviously blushing.

The rational part of Ford understood this, but the irrational part of him was currently obsessing over the thought that Bill could once again be overwhelmed like this, and his thoughts immediately made a beeline to all the ways he’d like to do just that, moral ambiguity be damned.

Even Ford’s unspoken fantasising seemed to be incendiary, Bill flustering more and more, until, shoulders tense, he snapped.

“How the hell are you going to do that?!”

Ford watched Bill stomp over to a stressed-out looking student sitting on one of the tables across the room, vaguely amused by the prospect of having to give his thoughts a cold shower. And somehow Bill thought filing tax returns would be dull enough to dissuade him of his baser thoughts. Ford mentally added ‘tax evasion’ to his list of Bill’s intergalactic crimes, entertained by the thought.

Eventually, he started paying attention however, noting the way Bill went from childish stomping, to suave and approachable, engaging with the chubby Angolean student at the desk. They seemed to be discussing something, and the student was looking rather desperate, explaining his situation.

Bill was clearly schmoozing with the student, nodding, gesturing to the papers on the table before gesturing to himself, and finally Ford noticed him touching the student’s arm, making some sort of proposition.

Stanford wouldn’t say that he was jealous, per se, but he could recognise the way Bill worked over needy academics, seeing his own past failings and naivety reflected back in the eager way the student looked at Bill. Bill had made a beeline towards the student who sat alone, who appeared to be an outsider, and who looked like he was struggling the most, who seemed to be at a loss, and Ford recalled how he felt much the same when he hit a roadblock with his Grand Unified Theory of Weirdness and how grateful he was when Bill came to his rescue with answers.

Was he as much of an obvious mark as the student at the table was? An easy target for Bill to manipulate into doing his bidding for him? Evidently so, considering the portal Bill had him build, but there was something stirring within him that he didn’t like, the more he compared himself to this random struggling student who Bill currently had his arm slung around companionably, working him over with friendly overtures to gain his trust and bend his arm.

He swore it wasn’t jealousy. It was not.

But watching Bill sit so close to this stranger, the student gazing at Bill like the God could solve all of his problems and more (the more possibly having something to do with how attractive Bill’s form currently was, as Ford could also recognise that the student probably didn’t get that much attention, certainly not from someone as good looking and confident as Bill) their expression was a little too familiar for Ford’s taste. He was certain he wasn’t projecting that much onto the student, but his (not jealousy) suspicions were confirmed when the student began blushing, Bill’s persuasion working like a charm.

That ticked something over in Ford, and so he crept closer to the table, trying to listen in.

“You’ll really give me the answers to the geometry midterms?” The student asked Bill earnestly.

“For that midterm and every single geometry exam you’ll ever take in your entire mathematical
career. All the secrets of the geometric world, every one of them, transplanted into your noggin in one direct hit. Trust me kid, I’m practically made of geometry. This’ll be the best decision you’ve ever made. But there’s just one little thing you’ve got to do for me first.”

“What? I’ll do anything not to flunk out, honestly.”

“You’ve just gotta let me into your mind, kid.” Bill explained, still rubbing the student’s shoulder encouragingly. Stanford was watching the motion of Bill’s hand, still seething away with not-jealousy. “You know. To hold the door open. For all that knowledge.”

The student blinked slowly at Bill, clearly a little slow on the uptake. No wonder he was failing geometry.

Pouring the sugar on thick, Bill reiterated. “All that sweet, sweet knowledge. You know you want that. So, what do you say, kid? Do we have a deal?”

Clearly swayed by Bill’s argument, although privately Ford thought Bill’s initial proposal to him was a lot more refined, rather than this slapdash, insincere proposition, the student licked his lips, shrugged awkwardly, then nodded.

“Yeah, sure. Absolutely.”

Bill held out his hand, and the student grasped Bill’s hand, firmly shaking it, then suddenly their head fell forward.

Stanford rushed closer to the table now, no longer pretending he wasn’t listening, and examined the boy.

“Is he okay? What did you do to him?”

“He’s fine.” Bill replied, his arm still around the student’s shoulders, holding them up. “I just put him to sleep for a bit. Quick, give him your book and sit next to me. I’m going to nap on your shoulder while I check the book out on his library card.”

“What?” Stanford baffled at Bill’s quickfire plan, and Bill yanked Ford to sit on the stool next to him, manoeuvring the scientist into a comfortable position.

“Just while I’m fooling the librarians. It’ll take a lot of concentration. After that I should be able to steer and drive at the same time.” Bill explained, leaning his head back against Ford’s chest, cuddling up to the scientist.

Ford barely had a moment to register the fact that his ex-muse was nestled snugly against his chest, bouncing his affection from one duped scholar to another, before the student’s head snapped up again, his eyes bright yellow now, with slitted pupils.

“Cosy digs. Not as nice as yours of course.” Bill remarked, as he rifled through the student’s wallet until he found his library card. Holding it up triumphantly, he turned to look at Ford’s baffled expression, before pausing, twisting the student’s face into a fond smile. “Aww, now that’s a cute couple.”

Ford was holding Bill’s unconscious body protectively, so he didn’t slide off the stool and onto the floor, but he knew from Bill’s perspective looking out through the student’s eyes that they probably looked quite cosy together. Ford’s cheeks flushed indignantly, but he hardly had time to be flustered.
“Quick, give me the book.” Bill held the student’s hand out, and Stanford passed the textbook over to Bill after careful deliberation.

Snatching up the book, Bill nodded. “I’ll be back in a hot second.”

He took off immediately towards the front desk, walking with a confident swagger that Ford doubted the student regularly possessed.

Ford watched Bill pass the book over to the librarian, flashing the library card, chatting away to the eldritch creature all the while and the scientist shifted awkwardly on the stool, adjusting his grip on Bill’s body.

Looking down at the currently vacant vessel, Stanford allowed himself a moment to marvel at the accuracy of the body. It was exactly how Ford had designed it, right down to the pores, but there were small divergences from the original design, little bits of Bill’s personal flair.

The gold jewellery was new, just as flashy as Ford would expect of the triangle, but it was a unique experience seeing it on the body Ford built for him. Bill had pierced this vessel’s ears, gold triangles dotting all the way up from the lobe to the cartilage, and from this angle Ford could have sworn Bill’s vessel was wearing eyeliner and, no doubt, mascara too.

For all of his attempts to act like he wasn’t trying to impress Stanford, Ford privately noted the little ways Bill had made an effort with his appearance here, almost like dressing up for a date.

Perhaps that’s what he thought this was.

Perhaps that was what the favour tab was for. So, Bill could call in favours from Ford when the date reached its logical conclusion. That was a much nicer thought to entertain than believing the tab was purely to manipulate Ford. A very entertaining thought.

Bill was walking the student’s body back over there and Ford noticed the blush on the student’s cheeks.

Ford watched him return, bemused, his arms still wrapped around Bill’s body dotingly.

“I can’t leave you alone for a second.” Bill complained, stuffing the book in the student’s bag and slinging it over his shoulder. “You and libraries, I swear.”

“Are we going?” Ford said brightly, enjoying his regained ability to fluster Bill while trapped in an expressive vessel. There was no way Bill could hide how he felt now.

“Let me just –” Bill took a deep breath and seemed to concentrate, before his vessel’s eyelids fluttered, slowly inhabiting his body once more.

Yellow light shining from their eyes, Stanford was both impressed and perturbed by Bill’s ability to simultaneously possess the student’s body and his own.

With every display of Bill’s unrestrained power Ford felt the one two punch of intrigue and dismay competing with each other, missing the days when Bill was powerless and got spooked by the toaster.

Bill straightened up beside Ford, manoeuvring the student to walk a little bit further ahead of them. Bill and Stanford passed through the doors that civilians could walk through, scanners checking they hadn’t smuggled any books out of the Bibliosphere, and Bill walked the student’s body through the other door, presenting their library card and the book to the librarians checking at the
Time police guarded the exit of the library, and Stanford pulled his scarf up around his face, very aware that he was still considered a felon in their eyes.

Bill did no such thing, smiling broadly at the time police grunts stationed around the library’s hulking doors, making jovial finger guns at them as he passed them by.

As a testament to their stupidity perhaps, one of the time police officers gave Bill a friendly wave in return, before chuckling and muttering something to his co-worker. Something along the lines of ‘kids these days’.

“So, it’s that easy, is it?” Stanford muttered as they rounded the corner, out of sight of the officers.

“I told you. They’re as dumb as rocks. And that’s an insult to rocks everywhere.” Bill quipped, before he walked the student to their hiding spot, making him reach into his bag and withdraw the book, passing it back to Stanford, who secured it safely in his bag.

“Speaking of dumb as rocks.” Bill remarked, and the gold light leeched from the student’s eyes, returning their mind back to them.

“Huh, wha – where am I?” The student looked around them in a confused panic. “What just happened? How did I get here? I don’t remember –”

“Easy there poindexter.” Bill reassured the student, missing the way Ford narrowed his eyes at the use of the familiar nickname. “You held up your end of the deal, now I’ll hold up mine. Brace yourself.”

“What?” The student puzzled, but when Bill snapped his fingers the student winced, immediately bringing his arms up to cradle his forehead, grunting like he was in pain. His nose started bleeding and his eyes were glazed and unfocused.

“I see the answers, all the answers. But it hurts.” He whimpered, and Bill waved his hand dismissively at them.

“Yeah, yeah, that’s what they all say. Walk it off. You can thank me when you pass that test or oust your geometry professor. Whatever comes sooner. Come on Sixer, let’s go.”

Ford gave the student one more concerned look but when it appeared that Bill hadn’t done anything worse to the scholar than give him a killer migraine, the nosebleed stopping quickly, he fell into step behind Bill, catching up with him as they walked together to the edge of the city.

“That’s what they all say?” Ford watched Bill suspiciously.

Bill paused to give Ford an unimpressed look, before he continued walking towards the wasteland border, laying on the sarcasm. “Oh no, Sixer doesn’t feel special anymore. How could I? I’m a monster.”

“That’s not –“ Stanford struggled with his justifications for a moment, since Bill got to the heart of the matter so quickly. Ford didn’t feel special. It hurt seeing Bill use the exact same tactics on someone else that he used on him, but Bill had been telling him that all along, that he wasn’t special, so he didn’t know why it hurt so much.

Pretending that he wasn’t selfishly jealous of a derisive nickname, he pressed on. “How many people have you done that to?”
“I’ve told you about my scientist collection before.” Bill gave Ford another sideways glance, as if measuring his reaction.

“And did you hurt all of them like that?” Ford asked with a frown. “He looked like he was in pain. His nose was bleeding.”

Bill sighed.

“If you were to spend an evening reading everything there ever was to know about every nuance of geometry, after packing that much information into your head in such a short amount of time, you’d have a headache. Of course you would. There’s only so much brain capacity physical lifeforms can support. So the guy’s going to need to throw back a few Tylenol for the next couple of days and keep his nose clean. So what? He’s lucky he just got geometry transplanted in his head and not every speck of knowledge in the universe like all the other ambitious idiots asked for.”

“You can do that?” Ford questioned, looking mildly affronted. The secrets of the universe were what he specifically wanted when he called Bill down, and Bill had never presented it to him as an option, this sort of knowledge transplant. Now Ford was supposed to believe Bill had just willingly doled out enlightenment like that to others? “You didn’t do that for me.”

“You don’t want it, Sixer.” Bill assured him, flapping his hand at the scientist dismissively. “Trust me. The last person who got the full package gave the Romans something to talk about. Look up Explodicus Domicus. It’s about what you’d expect.”

Stanford slowed his pace and made a perturbed expression, taking that in, before he shook his head and jogged to keep up with Bill’s brusque pace.

“But you made deals like that with the other scientists. Trading information for possession rights? What did you even do when you possessed them? You couldn’t have asked every one of them to build you a portal or you’d have one by now.”

“Astute as ever, Sixer.” Bill remarked, before he attempted to climb over the border wall to the wasteland, crumbling rock dipping low enough for Bill to awkwardly scramble across.

Ford didn’t know why Bill didn’t just float over the wall and so he offered Bill his hand to steady his climb. Bill took it and managed his brief climb, before he tugged Ford along behind him, trying to be helpful. He ended up yanking Ford down from the wall, causing him to scuff his palms against the brick on the way down the other side.

Rubbing his palms together, scowling, Ford saw Bill shrug and continue his sentence.

“Let’s just say I wasn’t always as goal oriented as I’ve had to be now. I needed distractions back then, but things change when you have a deadline. It used to just be about having fun, laughing at how stupid humans are, that sort of thing.”

“It seems like you’ve still been doing plenty of that sort of thing.” Ford replied peevishly. “It seems like you laugh at me all the time.”

“Sixer, there’s laughing at you and then there’s laughing at humans who willingly kill off their entire army just because their boss told them to play a game of stab the guy to the left of you. Well, not their entire army, there was one guy left. Maybe if they stood in a circle. Anyway.” Bill waved his hand, as if he hadn’t just admitted to indirectly causing mass murder. “My point is that things change, as you so eloquently put it. As much as I wish it was, it can’t always be all fun and games.”

Remembering his reason for being here, chastising himself for getting distracted, swept up in Bill’s
infectious banter and madcap hijinks, like a fool, Stanford straightened up and looked out across the wasteland. “No, it cannot.”

He could see the spires of the university far on the horizon, but the wasteland was vast and unforgiving between the Bibliosphere and the university.

“We get in on the west side.” Bill offered. “Do you want me to teleport us?”

“No, thank you.” Stanford said swiftly, reaching into his jacket pocket, retrieving his nano briefcase from his pocket, playing with the settings before placing it on the ground. The briefcase split open and spat out one of Stanford’s belongings.

Bill gave an impressed whistle.

A rumbling hover bike came out of the nano briefcase, before the small usb sized device snapped shut on the ground beneath it. It looked much like one of the flash motorbikes Ford saw at the bikers club in Gravity Falls, and Stanford felt very badass when he requisitioned it in one of the Federation ports (racking up yet another black mark on his criminal record).

He assumed Bill was impressed with the bike but nothing was ever that straightforward with his muse.

“Where did you get a nano briefcase from?” Bill asked, watching Ford retrieve it from the floor. “Those things are rare.”

“Diñeiro gave it to me.” Ford answered, putting the nano briefcase back in his pocket, somewhat miffed that Bill wasn’t impressed by the bike. Stanford liked the bike.

“Of course, he did.” Bill nodded, rolling his eyes. “Not many people get to walk around with a pocket dimension like that just for storage. They’re mostly used for people smuggling. That’s why they’re incredibly illegal.”

“They are?” Ford asked, somewhat perturbed by this information.

“That shouldn’t phase you, Master Criminal.” Bill joked, before walking around Ford to run his hand over the leather seat of the bike with mild interest. “Where did you get the bike from?”

Well, he stole it, but he didn’t want to give Bill the satisfaction of admitting to it.

Stanford paused for a moment, before delivering his eloquent lie. “The bike store.”

Bill snorted a laugh, before he swung a leg over the bike seat, settling in comfortably with his hands on the handlebars, looking at Stanford expectantly.

Ford gave a slight frown, and he placed a hand on Bill’s stomach scooting Bill back. “I’ll drive. It’s my bike.”

“And possession is nine tenths of the law.” Bill retorted but allowed Stanford to straddle the bike in front of him, turning the rumbling thing on with practised expertise.

Bill could just imagine Sixer, fleeing from criminal prosecution, zipping through city streets and skies on the hoverbike, his reflective goggles shining, his scarf and long coat flapping in the breeze, like some sort of renegade ill-fated outlaw. It was a fun thought to imagine.

Stanford revved the bike up and, hesitantly, Bill placed his hands on Ford’s back, watching to see
whether or not Sixer minded. It was almost like a test and Stanford could tell, aware that he had a
cover to maintain as someone who harboured enough feeling for the God to pardon him of his
crimes.

With that thought in mind (that thought and nothing else) Ford reached around to grab Bill’s hands,
pulling them forward so Bill could wrap his arms around Ford’s torso, almost like he was spooning
him from behind while they straddled the bike together.

Ford told himself it was so Bill would not fall off, and that it was just rudimentary bike safety, but
when he felt Bill soften into the embrace and rest his cheek on Ford’s shoulder he couldn’t help the
warmth that filled his stomach, colour pinking his cheeks.

The wasteland was a dire sort of place. Wrecked buildings dotted the landscape, crumbling and
decrepit, weeds climbed through the cracks in the paving, nurtured by years of neglect, and
discarded bottles and food wrappers from past travellers collected in the corners.

The wasteland was constantly under siege by the time police, Bill explained. Routine
bombardments and raids targeting ‘knowledge smugglers’ had driven the people, now refugees,
who lived in the area surrounding the Bibliosphere elsewhere hundreds of years ago, since their
own world was no longer safe to them. Civilian casualties caught in the crossfire became far too
commonplace and the buildings left that littered the wasteland were nearly all abandoned. There
was evidence that students, vagabonds and criminals passed through on occasion, but they certainly
couldn’t stay long, given the regular raids.

There was quite a distance to cross between the Bibliosphere and the University, and it was Bill
who suggested Stanford stop to rest as night fell.

“It’s not like I need to rest.” Ford argued. “I have the sleep blockers.”

“What you have is several airports worth of bags under your eyes.” Bill retorted, pointing at them,
his finger coming threateningly close to Stanford’s glasses. “You think I can’t recognise a sleep
deficit when I see it? You’re just embarrassing yourself.”

Stanford frowned, batting Bill’s hand away from his face. “Even if I did want to rest, this doesn’t
seem like the safest place for a little shut eye.”

“Sure, it’s no five-star hotel, but it’s not like it’s dangerous. No one’s lived here in years. Just pick
a nice hovel and settle down for the night.” Bill reached forward and put his hand on the breaks,
slowing the bike to a stop in front of one of the empty buildings.

As much as Stanford wanted to continue driving through the night, anything to get to the book
faster, he couldn’t deny that the prospect of sleep was appealing. He didn’t have a reason to avoid
it now that Bill was right next to him, he couldn’t avoid Bill in real life so there was no sense
avoiding him in dreams.

While the broken buildings didn’t exactly look inviting, there was a certain allure in stopping his
journey, to rest and eat and recuperate before hitting the road again. And there was a twisted sense
of safety in the fact that he wouldn’t be alone out here.
Giving in to Bill’s urging, Ford turned the bike around and nudged it through the doorway of one of the buildings. This one still had at least half of its roof, so it would likely be sturdier against the elements. Cold was starting to seep into the evening, and Stanford was questioning the relative merits of his fingerless gloves.

Bill climbed off the back of the bike and watched as Stanford packed the hovercraft into his nano briefcase, fiddling around with the settings on the device until he could withdraw a ratty looking sleeping bag and some ration bars.

“That’s what you’re eating?” Bill questioned sceptically, and Ford was eerily reminded of a mother scolding a bachelor. His lifestyle had become rather spartan as of late, although it could be argued that was Bill’s fault.

Tearing the plastic off one of the ration bars, Stanford took a rebellious bite and answered with his mouth full. “That’s what I have.”

“You don’t even know what’s in them.” Bill gave the ration bars an unsavoury glance. “If consumers knew what was really in the so called ‘secret formula’ they’d run screaming to the hills. Then again, ignorance is bliss.”

Ford stopped chewing, his mouthful of ration bar suddenly feeling dry and unappetising in his mouth.

Bill materialised a plush pillow for himself and sat on it, cross legged. He clicked and suddenly there was a blue burning campfire in the centre of the room, radiating heat throughout the cold ruin. Bill pulled his box of chocolates out from thin air once more, and threw one in his mouth, still talking conversationally.

“If you could eat anything in the multiverse right now, what would it be?”

The heat of the fire was soothing some of the hardened tension from Ford’s shoulders, and he pulled his sleeping bag a little closer to the blaze, thinking back on camping trips in Gravity Falls, and even further back with Stanley and the few family bonding expeditions they shared on their father’s fishing trips. Bill shifted his pillow closer to Stanford.

Ford did his best to swallow his bite of the ration bar, his mouth watering as he realised how hungry he was for real food, like he used to be able to eat.

“Campfire tomatoes.” Stanford answered, settling down onto his sleeping bag beside Bill, holding his hands out to warm them by the fire. “And sausages. And baked beans and rotisserie chicken smoked over a fire.”

Bill’s lips twisted in fond regard at Ford’s telling answer, amused by the associations he made, before he clicked his fingers and the campfire set up changed, allowing space for a pan that was sizzling baked beans, tomatoes, and sausages in crackling oil, while a bird skewered on a stick rotated above, crisping nicely around the edges.

Ford leaned forward instinctively, hungry for the sort of food he had long been denied in his journey, but he hesitated, watching Bill warily.

“This isn’t going on my tab too is it?”

“By all means, go back to your ration bars. See if I do something nice for you like this again.”

“I’ll eat it.” Ford hurried to assure them. “I’m just wanting to know what the catch is.”
“Maybe there’s no catch.” Bill said, shrugging idly. “Or do you think there’s always some overarching grand ulterior motive at play?”

Stanford didn’t answer and his silence answered for him.

“You are really so determined to think the worst of me?” Bill asked with a frown, although it sounded more like a statement.

Rather than deny it, Ford stuck his chin out stubbornly. “It’s not like you haven’t given me reason to.”

“It’s not like you haven’t been a piece of shit as well.” Bill responded cattily, before he materialised cutlery in the air in front of Ford. “Eat your damn food.”

Stanford grabbed the cutlery and stubbornly began turning the sausages, eventually scooping up the beans and blowing on them.

It was very hard not to moan when the food finally hit his mouth, real honest earth food, and he felt oddly reminded of when Bill was first thrust into the visceral world of tastebuds and digestion, and the loud reaction he often had to a good meal. It seemed less of a theatrical embarrassment now and more of an understandable appreciation of a good dinner.

His irritation with Bill melted away as he powered through the dinner, his stomach ravenous for something substantial after so long eating ration bars, poisonous plants and rocks.

It was only when he had nearly finished his meal, gnawing chicken meat off the bone, that he realised Bill had been silently watching him devour his meal, his expression distinct yet indiscernible.

“What?” Ford asked, his words coming out thickly around his food.

“Oh, I’m just mulling over the fact that you don’t trust me. I don’t trust you. We only believe the worst of each other. Heck, you’d probably believe me right now if I told you the food was poisoned.”

“Hurgk.” Stanford made an aborted sound of disgust as the food caught in his throat, half convinced he’d been poisoned the moment Bill brought it up.

Bill laughed, watching the obvious belated panic and outrage flicker across Ford’s face. “I’m kidding! God, you’re gullible. It’s not like you could be poisoned anyway, even if you wanted to. You could glug back cyanide like it’s going out of style and you wouldn’t even feel queasy.”

“I imagine it’s because I would feel dead.” Ford testily replied.

“O ye of little faith.” Bill replied fondly, picking dust off the hem of his robe. “It could be your new party trick.”

“Poisoning myself?” Ford questioned incredulously.

“You’re so negative all the time.” Bill complained. “You should be permanently banned from the gift horse dimension pre-emptively, because looking them in the mouth is a dire insult there and somehow I wouldn’t put it past you.”

“How surprising, you’re calling me ungrateful again. What’s next, unworthy? Unintelligent? Unimportant?” Stanford threw his chicken bones into the fire and held a hand up in mocking
mimicry of Bill’s mannerisms. “Shall I hold my breath for a ‘you’re not special Sixer’ or will one be forthcoming? I can wait.”

“You act like I haven’t just provided you a meal or hijacked a student so you could keep that trash book of yours, or called in a favour so you could find dear sweet Barold.” Bill narrowed his eyes, his tone turning sinister. “Should I have just given you a slap in the face and been done with it, since that’s all it seems to amount to. Would that have made you happy?”

“Don’t you even pretend that you do the things you to in the interest of making me happy.” Stanford sneered, his ire surfacing, overpowering any deceit he might have currently been working on harbouring.

It was hard to separate his emotional state from his logical goals around Bill. There was something about the God that riled emotional responses in Stanford with such force and he wasn’t willing to admit why. He should have lied to Bill, toned down his vitriolic response, but it bubbled to overflowing, and once again he was spewing venom out at Bill, blaming the God once more.

Perhaps it was because they were together again, perhaps it was because Bill chose the form that Ford liked best, reminding him of the sore spot that was their romance and consequent betrayal. Stanford couldn’t pinpoint why, he just knew that he couldn’t hold his anger back around Bill like this, and part of him didn’t want to.

Bill’s lips twisted, and in this form it almost looked as though he was upset, or angry perhaps. It was more visible emotion than Ford had ever succeeded in dragging out of Bill’s triangular form, and seeing it made Stanford feel oddly vindicated.

“Clearly that’s a Sisyphean task, assuming you can ever be happy with what you’re given. I don’t think you’ve been truly happy once a day in your miserable life.” Bill spat back cruelly.

Perhaps recognising that cruelty begets cruelty, Stanford stowed his venom temporarily, replying in a more subdued tone. “I was, once.”

Bill paused at that, then narrowed his eyes at Ford, crossing his arms rather sulkily. “Well, bully for you.”

“Are you going to tell me what’s in this book?” Ford pressed, reaching into his coat to retrieve the book they stole from the library.

“Lies. Throw it on the fire.” Bill replied shortly, his shoulders tense, turning away from Ford.

“Just read some of it.” Ford implored, grabbing Bill’s shoulder, trying to turn him to face him.

“No.”

“How am I supposed to find out about you if you won’t tell me what’s in this damn book?” Stanford asked, frustrated.

“You don’t ask the book, you ask me! I’m right in front of you Sixer. Literally right in front of you, in the flesh, and you’re still –” Bill fumed, the words bursting out of him as he finally turned to face Ford.

“What do you want me to do?” Stanford questioned tersely, his hand squeezing Bill’s shoulder almost painfully. “Do you want me to know you? As if I don’t already know enough.”

“If you ‘know enough’, why are you still searching for more proof? If you know all there is to
know?” Bill scowled, and reached up to grab Stanford’s other arm, his wiry fingers digging into Ford’s bicep, giving as good as he got. “You either know everything, or you know nothing, and I’m leaning towards believing the latter. So, there’s no point acting like such a know-it-all.”

“It’s not worth knowing everything if all I know is lies.” Stanford squeezed Bill’s shoulder again and gave it an unwise shake. He honestly didn’t know why Bill hadn’t stopped him already. “And history shows that I get more lies from you than I do from a book.”

“Well if you like the book so much, why don’t you marry it?” Bill sneered in response, getting right in Stanford’s face.

That response was just so utterly childish, and so utterly Bill, that Ford couldn’t help it, so he rolled his eyes, grabbed Bill’s face, and then mashed their mouths together, playing his advantage.

He felt Bill’s hands scramble against his chest, flailing uselessly while the God processed Ford’s forward action, yet inevitably Bill’s resistance melted away and he began kissing him back.

Just when Bill had softened sufficiently into the kiss, Ford pulled away with a sigh and looked his ex-muse in the eye.

“Why did you come here, Bill?”

“We came here together on the back of your hover bike, so –“

“I mean why did you come here. To the Bibliosphere. Why did you set this up?” Stanford clarified.

Bill glanced up at Ford evasively and answered. “I wanted to check out a book.”

“And that required me being here?” Ford raised his eyebrow sceptically.

“Don’t act like you didn’t want to be here. This library is right up your alley.” Bill argued.

“I’m just finding it hard –“ Ford stressed, trying to phrase his words as delicately as he could given his temper. “To believe that you directed me to come here out of the goodness of your heart. There has to be a reason for it.”

“What if the reason is just that I wanted this? For you to come here, for us to meet.” Bill postulated, a defensive tone to his reply.

“Why?” Ford pressed evenly.

“Do I need a reason to see you?” Bill’s yellow eyes bore stubbornly into Ford’s own now, but all Ford could see was that Bill still hadn’t given him a straight answer.

“You get to see me every time I close my eyes in the mindscape. You didn’t have to build a physical body and trek across the multiverse and share the same physical vicinity with me to spend time with me, but you did and I’m trying to understand why.” Stanford questioned, a stern set to his mouth.

“Why do you think?” Bill retorted, and while Stanford had a great number of paranoid theories swirling around his head, he refused to allow Bill to derail or deflect this line of questioning back onto him. He wanted Bill to give him an honest answer, and it seemed like he was incapable of doing so without Stanford forcing his hand.

So, Stanford simply waited, with his mouth pressed together into a displeased line.
Groaning at Ford’s stubborn silence, Bill eventually broke. He dragged the words out of himself in staggered sentences, like telling the truth here was an ordeal.

“Fine. I wanted. To see. If by some athletic stretch of the imagination. That we. Might. Still …”

Bill almost winced as he finished his sentence, like he was expecting a reprimand for his truthful answer. “Work?”

“What do you mean?” Stanford replied blankly, as if he didn’t understand the question, while a maelstrom of thoughts whirled silently inside him, knowing exactly what Bill meant.

“I just wanted to … feel out.” Bill was speaking like he knew what he was saying was base idiocy, he was speaking like a school child delivering a poorly thought out conclusion in front of the class. “If we could fix things? Maybe.”

Stanford vaguely noted that this was the most uncomfortable he had seen Bill in all the time that he had known him and he was oddly delighted to spectate this rare occurrence.

“Or if there is anything that can be… saved. If I’ve already ruined everything.” Bill gave an awkward shrug, grimacing a smile at Ford that was unlike any smile he’d seen before, and Ford realised that this may be the closest Bill had ever come to admitting his own guilt in their relationship.

He was shocked.

“You think you’ve ruined everything?” Stanford reiterated, still processing what he’d just heard.

Reading Stanford’s question as an attempt to comfort Bill or disagree with his statement, Bill’s shoulders sagged with relief, and he clawed back some of his old bravado. “Well, not everything. It takes two to keep a dumpster fire of this magnitude burning for so long, and it’s not like you haven’t screwed me over heartily just as much as me. Hell, you might still be trying to screw me over, and as much as I want to, I can’t necessarily blame you for that. I’m just trying to figure out where we are, if this is an arrangement of convenience, if there’s something more in it for you. If you do have ulterior motives, or some secret plan brewing to disassemble my finer molecules, or if you –“

Rather than allow Bill to continue rambling, his guesses coming far too close to Ford’s true intentions for all the subterfuge he’d been engaging in since falling through the portal, Stanford grabbed Bill’s face again and silenced him with another hard kiss.

The kiss lasted several seconds, Ford trying to pour his every agitated impulse into the gesture so he wouldn’t give himself away, and when they finally broke apart, Bill’s reply was a tiny, satisfied. “Ah.”

“And so you came here, in the body I made you, to try and make things right? Am I reading this correctly?” Stanford clarified, hardly having to work at all to make his tone warm and endeared, enough to be convincing. It was almost too easy.

“I have a track record of being really bad at this.” Bill admitted, his cheeks tinted dark, his tone sheepish and almost shy. “So, don’t expect too much, because it will probably all blow up in our faces, but I’m hoping the phrase ‘what have I got to lose’ won’t jinx me terribly this time.”

If Bill really was here just for Stanford, just to salvage their relationship, Ford didn’t know what to
think, so for the time being he couldn’t afford to think it. He needed to put thinking on the backburner and react to Bill’s confession in a way that would preserve his lifespan and current freedoms.

Letting a little of his past sentimentality bleed through his carefully constructed walls, Stanford leaned forward, much like he would have done back at the shack, when all was well between them, and he cupped Bill’s face in his palm.

“And you don’t want to lose me? Is that what you’re saying?”

“Don’t ask me why. I couldn’t tell you if I knew.” Bill answered, a fond smile spreading across his features, the expression altogether too soft for Ford to associate with the triangular menace he was meant to be on guard against. “For the longest time nothing meant anything, but it means something with you.”

This expression was the kind of soft appreciation that he had once imagined Bill’s vessel would direct at him, the sort of look that he’d once dreamed about. Ford once wanted to hear that more than anything in the world.

“Perhaps you’re just special.”

Ford swallowed, Bill’s words wreaking havoc on his self-restraint.

Would it be so bad, he wondered, if he just let himself have this? Just for one night? If he just let himself pretend they really were so fond of each other and that Bill wasn’t a monster living in a vacuum away from the accumulating facts. Could he really suspend his disbelief long enough to exalt in the feeling of being loved, in the pretense that there was some small spark of their relationship, the true honest part of it that blossomed back in the shack, that could be reignited even now, despite them having moved far past that? Could he?

“If I call in a favour on the tab, will you kiss me again?” Bill asked, and the question was something Stanford once would have sighed over endlessly. Maybe it still was.

“Call it in.” Stanford answered, reminded of all the reasons why he liked Bill before. Why he loved him.

Bill wound his arms around Stanford’s neck and pulled him closer, pressing his lips against Ford’s, and Stanford could feel Bill’s exuberant smile in the kiss.

“Come here, you.”

When Ford saw Bill at the library, he hadn’t really expected that this would be the outcome of their meeting, but now that they were physically together, and kissing again like they used to, he found he didn’t mind nearly as much as he should have and the saying does go ‘in for a penny in for a pound’.

He gripped Bill’s face in his hands, deepening their kiss, before he started pushing Bill back, climbing on top of the un-protesting muse, kissing him to distract himself from reality.

It was working.

Bill hummed a pleasant moan, sinking his fingers through Ford’s hair like he’d missed it, allowing Ford to manhandle him around however he desired.

Stanford maintained that this wasn’t what he had in mind when he saw Bill in the library,
pretended that this wasn’t what he’d been wanting and fantasising about for so long, even while he’d been on his crusade to gather information to use against Bill, but he was starting to wonder if this was exactly what Bill wanted when he fashioned his nostalgic vessel and planned out their little library date. One generally didn’t put such effort into their appearance if they didn’t have some sort of goal in mind and Bill was putting in an awful lot of effort today with the book stealing and the truth telling and the campfire dinner.

Whether he really intended to make an effort where it counted or not was irrelevant. Right now, this was enough, certainly enough for Ford to enjoy this moment, and, convinced of his justification, Ford started to leave biting kisses along Bill’s neck, working out his tension.

The instant Bill’s mouth was free he gurgled out a laugh. “If I call in another favour will you bite me harder?”

Ford reached his six fingered hand up to plaster it across Bill’s mouth purposefully. “I like you much better when you’re quiet, so if you don’t mind —”

Ford’s could feel the tip of Bill’s tongue trace wet lines along his palm. It was so childish, so utterly immature of him, but that immaturity for some reason temporarily absolved Bill of his heinous crimes against Stanford and nature at large, and made Stanford want to kiss him again. His mental resistance had all but crumbled at this point.

Ford took his wet hand away from Bill’s mouth but before Bill could say something irritating, Ford smeared his saliva covered palm against Bill’s face, coaxing a shocked noise from the God.

Stanford smirked at that. He could be immature too.

Bill stared at Ford with disbelief in his slitted eyes for several seconds, his mouth hanging open delightfully, and then he lunged forward, grasping Ford’s face and kissing him, kissing him endlessly.

The contrast between rugged solitude and having someone so familiar beside him, touching him, unnaturally warm as always, and so perfectly built to meet all of Stanford’s standards was addictive. It was a beautiful dream made real.

There was a logical line of reasoning as to why Stanford shouldn’t be doing this, but he didn’t feel like listening to it, instead choosing to tumble around on top of his sleeping bag, rolling dangerously close to the fire as he and Bill fought for the upper hand in a losing game.

Right now, it didn’t seem to matter that his clothes were tattered, or that he had dirt on his face from sleeping rough, or that he had six fingers, or was a human, or was an outsider, or any of those things. It didn’t even seem to matter that he had stubble on his face – Bill was still kissing him. He was still worthy of Bill’s special brand of love.

It didn’t matter that he’d wiped spit on Bill’s cheek, or singed the edge of his gold embroidered robe when he accidentally knocked embers on it, or that he was holding Bill a little too tightly, grabbing him a little too hard – Bill was still here, wanting him, wanting to try harder for him, and Stanford decided that he’d rather enjoy this closeness and intimacy for what it was then waste energy wondering what the hidden catch was.

For one evening, Stanford decided that it didn’t matter what Bill had done to his dimension, or what he’d done to Fiddleford’s mind, or that he’d probably cursed Willow, hurt Suzie, destroyed a planet, set his monsters after him and put a goddamn bounty on his head. All of that could wait.
Right now, what mattered was the warmth of the fire when he took his sweater off, stripping down in the cold night air only to be warmed so quickly. It mattered to Ford how Bill’s skin felt just as smooth as it had before, how it was just as dark, just as fetching when the light hit the gold lines up and down his arms. How he could squeeze Bill hard enough that he’d probably bruise, if his skin didn’t heal so quick, and how it drove Bill wild. How indulgent it felt to pull Bill’s robe over his head, and how pleasant it was that Bill let him, and how Ford laughed when the garment got caught on one of Bill’s earrings and covered his head for longer than it had to.

What mattered was that Bill let him kiss him once the robe was wrenched off completely, his hair wild and sticking up messily, a look that was just as fetching, if not more so, than the neat precision it had been styled with when Ford first saw him in the library. What mattered was the way Bill’s hands seemed hotter than the rest of him, and how they slid up Ford’s pectorals, gripped onto his biceps, and scrabbled down his back. It mattered to Ford that Bill still tangled his fingers in with his chest hair, how his back still arched when Ford razed his nails along Bill’s side, and how he seemed unable to stop talking. Both the frantic, incomprehensible words he used to speak when Ford overwhelmed him, and words meant just for Ford.

Words like ‘you’re mine’ and ‘I’ve missed this’ as well as words like ‘I can taste tomato in your teeth’ both before and after kisses, words like ‘you’ve changed’ and ‘this is the same’ and ‘I think I like this better’ and the point where words failed altogether.

Rather than overthinking all of these things, or finding fault with them, Stanford was committing each moment to memory.

This might be the last time they do this, all things considered, if the book they sought hammered the final nail in the coffin of Bill’s misdeeds.

Ford knew if he received written proof that Bill was everything everyone said he was, that he couldn’t continue to justify this, so he savoured this period of patient ignorance.

He could pretend, for one night, that none of that mattered, because of all of the other things that mattered.

What mattered the most was the way Bill pressed a reverent kiss to the black mark on Ford’s pectoral as they coiled together, winding down, and the way he asked Ford ‘are you happy now?’ and how Ford could answer with an honest ‘yes’ right now in this moment, he was happy.

And wasn’t that tragic?

There were several more happy moments throughout the course of the evening, drawn out and savoured. The closer it got to dawn, the more each of these moments felt like a goodbye, and the tighter Ford held Bill to spite it, trying to convey all the things he wouldn’t be able to allow himself when the truth had its day.

Eventually he closed his eyes long enough to sleep for a few precious hours, and he could tell from the expression on Bill’s face, watching Ford when he thought he was too sleepy to notice, that he also knew.

The truth was coming.

They couldn’t pretend to be in love forever.
Though it was still cold in the wasteland, when morning came and light filtered through the broken roof above them, Stanford felt warm and well rested. More so than he had in a long time.

Bill was still like a human radiator, his arms tucked around Ford’s tattered sleeping bag while he slept on Ford’s chest, more conjured pillows and a silk blanket covering Bill outside of the sleeping bag.

Ford had left the bag unzipped at the side so Bill could stick his leg in and twine it with Ford’s, and remarkably he didn’t get too hot as the wasteland’s temperature made Bill’s warm proximity much needed.

Ford didn’t know if Bill had slept per se, as he did not meet him in the dreamscape once he was out, but when he woke Bill’s chin was still nestled on Ford’s chest, his long lashes fanning out across his cheek as his eyes were closed.

Maybe he wasn’t sleeping. Maybe he was simply directing his attention elsewhere. Maybe he was in someone else’s mindscape. Stanford didn’t know.

He didn’t know a lot of things about Bill and foremost on his mind was Bill’s confession last night. Bill wanted to save their relationship from all that had come between them, but Stanford had no idea if that was genuine or not. If Bill was telling the truth, or lying to him? Still trying to manipulate him? Stanford had no honest way of knowing.

He said Stanford brought meaning to a meaningless world. He reiterated that Stanford was special, although that declaration felt less like a truth and more like the bait on the hook from which Ford was constantly dangling, jerked around by Bill’s whims.

Was this the sort of thing he said to every scientist he wished to manipulate, like the boy in the library, or was this something different? How could Stanford ever know for sure?

There wasn’t a scientific method he could use to divine whether Bill was being genuine with his wish to patch things up between them or not. There was no empirical way he could find out if what was too good to be true either was or wasn’t.

He could only take a leap of faith. He could only trust Bill, or believe him, which wasn’t the easiest or most appealing thing for Ford to do.

Still, it would be nice, Stanford idly thought, looking at Bill’s beautiful features, seeing a glimpse of the future he imagined for them in each inhale and exhale that moved Bill’s chest. It would be nice to have things the way they used to be before. It would be nice if Bill took steps to redeem himself, if he could go back to being contained and manageable. Ford’s perfect muse.

Things were much simpler then before Ford knew what he was capable of. Before he knew of the genocides and crimes that were too overwhelming to forgive Bill for. Before he knew he would even have to consider forgiving him for things like that, things Ford didn’t want to think he was capable of doing despite his suspicions deep down.

He wanted to believe in Bill like he could believe in a romantic partner, but reality was making that very hard.
Before he could get too lost in his early morning musings, he heard a sound from behind the wall of the hovel. Someone was walking around outside, and Ford looked up sharply, his survival instincts honed for danger.

He would be better prepared for danger if he wasn’t naked underneath his sleeping bag.

Whoever was out there was moving closer, and as the stranger approached, Ford could see Bill’s eyes open, waking up.

Stanford was reaching for his nano briefcase, seeking his stun gun, but it was too late, and the time policeman had already rounded the corner.

“What the-“

Before he could say another word or raise any sort of alarm, Bill snapped his fingers and the soldier immediately liquidated, turning into policeman slush on the floor.

Stanford gawked at the time policeman, who was now a puddle, horrified. “What did you -?”

“You might want to put your pants on, genius. Time police travel in groups.” Bill sat up, redressing himself with a wave of his hand, vanishing the campfire and cushions in the same movement.

Stanford clambered to his feet, and tugged his trousers on, dressing quickly before gingerly regarding the puddle of policeman on the floor. The policeman watched Ford back, his liquified eyes blinking back up at Ford from behind his melted visor.

“Is he dead? Did you kill him?” Stanford fretted, unable to tear his eyes away from the man Bill melted with a snap of his fingers. “Bill, you can’t just kill people who–“

“They’re time police, not people.” Bill sneered, picking Stanford’s coat up off the ground and shoving it at him. “And he’s not dead. He’ll just wish he was. Get your bike out. We have to move.”

Stanford fumbled with his nano briefcase, trying to withdraw the hover bike but his eyes kept snapping back to the puddle of policeman on the floor, their beseeching eyes drifting further apart now, looking rather like two spilled egg yolks.

When he finally got his hover bike out from his nano briefcase, turning on the power, the rumble of the engine attracted the attention of the other time police scouring the area, another agent walking into the hovel with his blaster raised. He let out a surprised noise when he accidentally stepped in his melted co-worker, who let out a weak moan.

Bill tsked and raised his hand to dispatch the other soldier.

Not willing to see another person dissolved into soup, Ford reached out and grabbed Bill’s wrist.

“Don’t!”

The other soldier fired his blaster at Bill and the laser blast burst into flames before it hit Bill’s vessel.

Aggravated, Bill tried to shake Ford’s hand off him while the time soldier muttered urgent maydays into his communications device.

“Advocating for them won’t make you any less of a wanted criminal in their eyes, Sixer. They’ll
still arrest you.”

“Yes, but I don’t think murdering anyone or turning them into sentient liquid will improve things either.” Ford hissed, wrestling Bill’s hand away from the soldier, trying to drag him onto the bike. “Can’t you just let them go?”

“If I let one go, Sixer, they’ll be back with twenty more. Don’t you know how this works?”

“Don’t. Don’t hurt anyone.” Ford pleaded, vaguely aware that the policeman was pulling up a holographic image of his wanted poster, while a scan of Bill’s energy signature was slowly revealing an image of his triangular form. “As part of fixing things. For me. Please.”

“You ask for the worst, most inconvenient things, I swear.” Bill glared at Ford, still deflecting sporadic blasts from the soldier’s laser gun, blue flames meeting the blasts in mid-air.

“Just knock them out and we can leave. You don’t have to hurt anyone.”

“Fine!” Bill shouted and waved his hand free of Stanford’s grip before knocking the soldier’s head against the wall with a concentrated burst of energy.

The time police officer fell to the floor and Stanford climbed off his bike and rushed over to check his pulse.

He was still alive, thankfully. Ford looked over to the other policeman, who was still in liquid form on the ground.

“Can’t you fix him too?”

Bill rolled his eyes mockingly. “Don’t kill this. Fix that. You don’t ask for much, do you? You just like making things difficult!”

“It’s actually not that difficult to not kill people.” Stanford argued back through gritted teeth. “Somehow I manage to do it all the time.”

“Well, what do you want from me?” Bill put his hands on his hips argumentatively.

“Fix this!” Stanford stressed, gesturing to the melted time police officer on the ground.

Bill groaned a wordless complaint, but he pinched his fingers together, drawing the soldier’s mass up off from the ground until he re-solidified into his proper shape, patting himself down in panic, before Bill flicked his fingers forward and the officer’s head crashed back into the wall behind him, leaving him unconscious on the ground as well.

Stanford gave him a frustrated look that said ‘do you really have to?’ but the look was wasted on Bill, who tapped his foot impatiently.

“Come on, move, genius. We’ve got to go.”

Grumbling under his breath the entire way, Stanford got up and strode over to his hoverbike, climbing on, waiting for Bill to climb on behind him before he rode out of the abandoned town, brutally reminded of the truth about the creature clinging to his back now that he’d seen him show his true colours once more.
They rode almost non-stop after that. Bill didn’t suggest any more rest stops for Ford, which almost certainly cut down their time spent together physically, but Stanford wasn’t sure if he wanted to be exposed to any more of Bill’s confusing behaviour.

Trying to fix things with Stanford was all very well and good, but if Bill was still going to be the same destructive, dangerous creature to everyone else, then he clearly missed the point of redeeming himself for the better.

Stanford shouldn’t have let his guard down around Bill so much, and it took Bill nearly killing two time police officers to wake him up to that fact.

“What do they want you for?” Ford asked Bill over the rumble of the hover bike’s engine. “What did you do that makes you their most dangerous wanted time criminal anyway? Why?”

“I broke out of their fancy inescapable prison and believe rules I don’t like are made to be broken. They don’t need any more reason than that.” Bill answered snippily, his arms wrapped around Stanford’s middle.

“No, I mean before that. Why did they arrest you?” Ford glanced at Bill over his shoulder briefly. “You mentioned they can arrest you for losing Globnar. Is that what you did? Or did you do something else?”

“I didn’t lose Globnar.” Bill argued. “It’s not my fault they considered what I did to win as cheating. And it’s also not my fault that when they wouldn’t give me my time wish, I burnt down their coliseum. That’s on them.”

“And that’s when they arrested you? How were they even capable of doing that? From what I’ve seen –”

“Time Baby stepped in.” Bill sneered, the venom in his tone clearly directed at the eternal infant. “Made a show of how powerful he was, rather than just giving me what I asked for. He sent me straight to the Infinitentiary to rot there for eternity, too important to hear me out. Apparently, that was merciful.”

Stanford frowned.

“Of course, I was much younger when this all happened and inexperienced. I’d like to see him try to do the same to me now.” Bill boasted, his words sounding like a threat and a promise all at once.

“What did you wish for?” Ford asked and Bill was silent for a long while before answering. Ford almost didn’t think he would answer, but when he did his voice was more subdued.

“I wanted a temporal redo token. To fix something.”

“Could you fix whatever it is without redoing time?” Stanford probed optimistically. “Have you tried?”

“Of course I’ve tried.” Bill answered abruptly. “You have no idea.”

“Well, maybe I’d like to?”
The stubborn silence from behind him indicated to Stanford that this was something Bill would not be helping him understand, which showed just how much trusting each other still was not on the cards.

Changing the subject, Stanford looked back to the road ahead.

“What are the chances of you translating some of that book for me, hmm?”

If anything, this subject change seemed to make Bill pricklier, and he dug his fingers into Stanford’s stomach, hissing his reply in his ear.

“No.”

“Ow.” Ford swatted Bill’s hand in reprimand. “A summary then?”

“You want a summary, do you?” Bill let out a slightly hysterical laugh, a mean edge to his voice. “You want the spark notes version of the book I will not read to you?”

“If you could paraphrase it, yes.” Ford nodded, wondering why this seemed to be such a tall ask for Bill.

“How do you paraphrase propaganda?” Bill gave another bitter laugh. “Stick to the status quo and don’t ask questions? How would you summarise the pledge of allegiance without making it sound like creepy indoctrination? Try explaining that to another species, that every morning as part of your education you declare subservience to a flag from the tender age of five. Who would believe that?”

“This isn’t about American schooling practises. I just want to know what that book is about. Why you won’t read it to me?” Stanford scowled defensively, unimpressed with Bill’s avoidant topic changes.

“It’s just all circular lies, Sixer. That’s all it is.”

With no more information forthcoming, Stanford huffed a frustrated sigh and focused on the road ahead.

They were coming closer to the university now, keeping close to the walls of the ruins in the wasteland. There were more empty bottles littered about the wreckage now, lending credence to Bill’s theory that students snuck into the wasteland to drink, but Ford couldn’t see any students here now. It was dark, but the university was lit up, with roving search lights patrolling the perimeter.

“Left here.” Bill advised, and Ford followed his instructions, weaving the hoverbike through the ruins, avoiding the search lights, until they were close to the edge of the university’s walls, the forcefield dome standing between them and a worn crack in the bricks of the college, big enough for a student to crawl through.

They dismounted Ford’s hover bike, and the scientist packed it away in his nano briefcase, putting the small device back in his trench coat pocket.

“Do you know what’s in this other book?” He attempted, trying to get some concrete answers out of his evasive ex-muse.

“A slightly more accurate version of what’s in the book you’ve got.” Bill answered absently, calculating their way through the forcefield wall.
“Then why didn’t you just translate what’s in the book I have?” Stanford asked indignantly.

“It’s not worth it, Sixer. Trust me. Or don’t, I guess. Not that it makes a difference.” Bill muttered, beginning to carefully pull strings of energy out from the forcefield wall, weaving them into a different shape. It looked complex, and Stanford was curious how he was doing it, it seemed to involve a great deal of mathematical calculations and careful rewiring of the energy currents around the wall.

It was at moments like these he was reminded of how startlingly intelligent Bill was despite how flippant and childish he often chose to act. He had a formidable brain to go along with those powers of his and seeing evidence of it always piqued Ford’s interest.

Stanford watched silently, allowing Bill to concentrate and once he had finished weaving the energy from the forcefield into a small arch, spacious enough to allow them both to crawl through, Bill gestured to the arch with a theatrical bow.

“After you.”

Stanford got down on his hands and knees readying to crawl through the tunnel, but before he could move forward, Bill stepped in front of him, and tilted Ford’s head up with a finger under his chin.

“We’ve had fun, haven’t we Sixer?” He asked, looking down at Ford, who begun to blush awkwardly at their positioning.

“Is there a reason you’re standing there like that?” Stanford replied.

“I just like it when you look up to me.” Bill grinned cheekily, but stepped out of Ford’s way, giving him a playful whack on the rear. “Onward! Tally ho!”

Stanford pretended his face wasn’t still warm and grumbled under his breath in a token show of defiance as he crawled through the tunnel. Bill started crawling behind him, he could feel his hands tug on Ford’s trench coat when they occasionally landed on it. Ford was reminded of their first visit to the bunker and how different things had been then.

It seems Bill was thinking the same, for when they reached the end of the tunnel Ford felt Bill’s hands on his rear again, squeezing playfully.

“Just like old times, eh Sixer?”

Rather than dignify that with an answer, Ford crawled out of the end of the tunnel into what looked like an empty janitor’s closet, cleaning solutions and cosmic mops scattered about the cramped room.

This was, thankfully, less conspicuous than crawling out of a hole in the wall into the middle of the university. Bill crawled out of the tunnel behind him and straightened up while Stanford cracked the door open to peek out into the hallway.

It was late, but there were still students bustling along, night classes and social gatherings compelling them through the hallways. What Stanford noticed was that everyone seemed to be wearing the university’s robes in the school’s colours. No one was wearing casual clothing, not even the teachers. Bill and Stanford would stick out like the sorest of thumbs in the university given their attire.

Stanford closed the door and leant his back against it, sighing.
“It’s no good. We’ll be spotted as outsiders as soon as we step out this door. They’re all wearing that expensive university merchandise.”

“It’s called a uniform, Sixer.” Bill retorted, making Stanford feel a little foolish until the God muttered. “And it is expensive. Academic extortion.”

That was somewhat validating to hear. Stanford watched Bill look around the closet like he was expecting to find a spare varsity robe somewhere and he crossed his arms sceptically.

“Aha!” Bill exclaimed and reached for a packet of wet wipes on the shelf to the left of them, turning to face Stanford with a grin. “Do you want to see a magic trick?”

“Removes 99.9% of all harmful bacteria isn’t a magic trick.” Stanford squinted at the writing on the side of the packet.

Bill pulled a wet wipe out of the packet and flung it at Ford’s face impatiently. “You’re supposed to say yes. Some lovely assistant you are. Watch this.”

Bill pulled out a wet wipe for himself and held it in front of him theatrically, wiggling his fingers in front of the wipe like a magician.

So far, he just looked like an idiot with a wet wipe.

“Behold!” Bill shook the wet wipe once and it flapped out, the fabric stretching into the red and gold university robes that the students outside wore.

Stanford blinked at the robe, reluctantly impressed by Bill’s magic trick. It was the showmanship, Ford convinced himself, nothing else.

Handing over his own wet wipe expectantly, Ford watched Bill pretend to blow his nose in Stanford’s tissue before a red and gold cloak furled out of the wipe.

Gingerly accepting the robe back, Stanford pulled the sleeves of the garment over his trench coat, complaining.

“You didn’t have to sneeze in mine.”

“I’m allergic to lemony freshness.” Bill lied, shrugging on his own cloak.

Stanford opened the door again and looked over to Bill before stepping out. He shuffled out into the corridor and kept his head down, hands in his pockets with his hood over his head so as not to draw attention to himself.

He could hear cheerful whistling and looked over to see Bill strolling along with his hands in his pockets, head up, striding through the corridor without a care in the world.

So much for stealth. With a huff, he frowned at Bill disapprovingly.

“Do you know how to be subtle at all?”

“Subtle is overrated.” Bill countered, before tugging Ford over to a campus map pinned to the wall. “We need to get to the iota omicron upsilon dorms to find dear Barold. And it looks like we don’t have too far to go. Act less like a lurker and maybe we’ll get there without being arrested.”

“I don’t look like a lurker!” Stanford complained and Bill reached up to push Ford’s hood back from his face.
“Lurkers lurk. Act natural. Pretend you’re supposed to be here and no one will assume otherwise. Confidence is the best cover.”

Ford was reminded of Bill’s successful attempt at impersonating the government agent when they stole the uranium together and at Bill’s successful attempt at tricking Ford to fall in love with him and realised that confidence certainly could mask all sorts of lies.

“You’re teaching me to lie convincingly?”

“God knows you need it. Of course, you’d get uppity about it though. Forgive me for trying to help you not get arrested.” Bill scoffed, adjusting Ford’s cloak, ruffling Ford’s hair, then yanking him by the collar to follow him down the corridors.

Bill’s confident stride cut a swath through the crowd of students all the way through the university, but as they drew closer to the iota omicron upsilon dorms Stanford saw the crowds thinning noticeably, until there was hardly anyone there when they reached the doors of the dormitory. For such a bustling, packed university it didn’t sit right with Stanford for the place to be so deserted. Were these dorms unhygienic or unfavourable or something of the like? Why were they so empty?

ιου was emblazoned above the entrance, indicating they were in the right place, and Stanford’s trepidation rose as Bill pushed the doors open.

“What are we going to do when we find him?”

“We’ll get the book.” Bill responded, already walking through the empty dorm, peering at a list of student names and a map of the rooms pinned to the notice board.

“By asking nicely, or -?”

Bill rolled his eyes at Stanford’s suspicion, before affecting a patronising tone. “Maybe you could trade your book with his?”

“If the two books really do cover the same information with a slight difference, I’ll learn more by comparing the two.” Ford reasoned.

“Greedy, aren’t you?”

“I want both books.” Stanford insisted.

Bill huffed a frustrated sigh before he swung his hand out onto the banister traipsing loudly up the stairs, making no attempt to silence his approach, his voice echoing through the deserted dorm.

“Oh Barold! Are you there? We’re here for your book, come out with your hands up!”

Ford scrambled to catch up with Bill, shushing him uselessly, but Bill only stomped his feet louder on the stairs and skipped down the corridor to Barold’s room.

“Mr Blendin, you’re overdue. Come out, come out, wherever you are.”

Bill rapped on the door fearlessly, and as he reached for the door handle Stanford felt a moment of panic, wondering if Bill had noticed things weren’t quite right here, or if he just didn’t care.

When he flung open Barold’s bedroom door Stanford’s suspicions were confirmed.

Barold Blendin stood at the back of his room, holding his book to his chest, cowering behind a squadron of fully armed time police, their blasters pointing directly at Bill.
“FIRE!”

Stanford dove for cover as lasers blasted through the wall of Barold’s bedroom, plaster and wood splinters flying into the corridor.

Shielding his face with his arm, Stanford landed on his back, and scrambled away, the laser blasts still firing ceaselessly in their direction.

He looked over to Bill, the God clearly unharmed by the blast, but as every shot was fired Bill’s irritation seemed to climb, flames shielding him from the impact.

The time police seemed to show no signs of stopping, despite their deluge having no effect on Bill, and Barold’s wall was all but ruined now, hardly providing Ford any cover on the floor as more and more of the plaster and wood was burnt away by the lasers.

Over the cacophony of destruction Ford could hear Bill’s voice echo unnaturally.

“Such a warm welcome. Mind if I return the favour?”

“Bill, just get the book and leave.” Stanford urged him, but speaking drew attention to him, and one of the officers turned their weapon on Ford and fired a shot.

Stanford felt the familiar sensation of Bill’s magic solidify around his neck, and he spared a split second to be mortified when he realised that Bill had conjured the blue collar and chain leash they had once used in their racier shared dreams, but that swoop of mortification only lasted the brief second it took for Bill to yank him out of the way of the laser’s blast, sparing him from a grisly death.

On the offensive now, Bill flicked the blue chain in his hand, detaching it from the collar, and then whipped it forward, wrapping around the officer’s blaster.

Stanford felt the collar dissolve away from his neck as he watched Bill yank the blaster from the officer’s hands, before he cracked the whip back once more, the chain wrapping around the policeman’s neck.

“That’s not very nice.” Bill sneered through gritted teeth, reeling the officer forward, the chains tightening, bringing him to his knees. “We just want dear Barold’s book. And you call yourselves supporters of the arts?”

Fire began to flare along the chain, and the time police officer grasped at the chain around his neck and shook his head, pleading. Stanford could hear his ‘no’s’ echo loudly in his ears the closer the flames crept to the officer’s face, and Stanford couldn’t let Bill’s violent actions continue, or his conscience would regret it forever.

“Bill, stop!”

“Oh, so I should just let them shoot at you? Is that what you want? What do you want from me, Sixer?” Bill turned around and shouted at Ford, clearly irate that he would stifle his fun.

“I just want the book!” Ford shouted back, the situation escalating faster than he imagined.

“You just want the book, huh? You want this book?” A thin black arm shot out from Bill’s body, much like the shadow arms Ford had seen protrude from Bill’s back during their last night on earth, cutting past the time police squadron all the way to where Barold Blendin stood, quaking in his boots behind them.
Bill plucked the book out of Barold’s hands and held it aloft, making no move to release his chained captive, or to quell the flames that were pouring further out from him now, spreading fire across the wooden floorboards, turning splinters into kindling, the fire blue and ravenous.

“The book that I don’t want you to have? This book? Is this what you really want?”

“I want you to stop –” Ford yelled, climbing to his feet, holding his six fingered hands out in front of him.

“Stop?” Bill interrupted, a manic look in his eye.

“Stop – being such a nightmare! Stop being like this – you’re -” Stanford shook his head, then looked Bill right in the eye. “You really are a monster.”

Bill looked as if Ford’s words had just slapped him in the face. The staggered moment stretched on too long, Bill staring at Ford like he was the one who just attempted to murder someone, and Ford couldn’t take it anymore.

“I just want you to be good. Is that so impossible for you?” Ford loudly implored, his words hanging in the air.

“You want me to be good? Is that it?” Bill replied, his words laced with a sinister edge. “You want me to be a tame monster? You want me to be your perfect muse?”

“I want you to let that man go, give me the book, and do what I say!” Ford demanded with a confidence that was mostly fuelled by rage.

“NO, SIXER!” Bill’s voice echoed in a multitude of ways, the halls ringing with his demonic timbre.

The squadron of time police fell silent, shrinking back, cowed by Bill’s voice, but Ford stood tall.

“And that’s how you’ll fix things, is it? By saying no to me?”

“I don’t work for you, Stanford. You’re not the boss of me!” Bill shrieked, the fire around him leeching further outward.

“So, you’re going to endear yourself to me by going off the rails, murdering a police squad and destroying everything you touch?” Ford retorted angrily, his hands shaking with barely repressed fury. “Is that more in line with what you really are? Is that what you’re trying to prove?”

Bill stuttered a hysterical laugh, looking a little more unhinged now, a little more out of control.

“Oh, poor Sixer. It’s so hard to tolerate me going off the rails. It’s fine when you do it, but it only proves you right when I do it. It only proves your point, with your perfect moral high ground. It must be so hard to deal with anything that’s not good enough for you, not normal enough for you. See, because you’re good and I’m a nightmare and you can only love me when I’m well behaved, isn’t that righ-“

“Just stop already!” Stanford shouted, his hands balled into fists. “I DON’T ANYMORE.”

The room was silent but for the crackling of the flames and Stanford forced himself to level his voice, as if that would regain his composure, although his voice still cracked a little. “I don’t. Love you.”
“You –” Bill seemed genuinely thrown by this, the fire dimming slightly around him.

“Not anymore.” Stanford repeated, looking down at the ground, forcing himself to speak the unwise words he’d held in for so long. “I thought that maybe I could give you the benefit of the doubt until I found some corroborating sources confirming the rumours of all the terrible things that you did, but I’ve just been lying to myself this entire time.”

“That’s why you wanted the book?” Bill asked in a harsh whisper. “But what about – what about last night? You - didn’t that mean anything to you?”

Stanford swallowed his guilt, before he lied. “It was a means to an end. I needed information. I needed to know. I needed that book.”

Ford felt Bill’s magic permeate the air around him, and he flinched, convinced this would be where Bill would squeeze the life out of him, or imprison him, or worse, but instead Bill levitated the geometrically coded book out of Ford’s trench coat pocket and pulled it to him, holding onto both books now, the purpose for their entire trek across the wasteland.

“You wanted to fact check how bad I am? How monstrous I am to you?” Bill began to flick through the books, the pages turning in the air while Bill pretended to look through them. “Is there some secret page in here that will confirm how unlovable I am and pat you on the back for trying? Or for lying? Is that what you want?”

Stanford didn’t say anything, his words curdling bitterly in his throat, a sour twist to his mouth now.

“SO MUCH FOR AN OPEN MIND!” Bill shrieked, his voice rattling the building. “You’ve just been pretending to be interested all this time? For how long?”

“I can lie too!” Ford stubbornly insisted. “And I’ve been interested. You had me followed, you know what sort of questions I’ve been asking. About your weaknesses. About how to destroy you!”

“You’re doing a fine job of that, aren’t you?” Bill laughed darkly, gesturing to the fire draping the room behind him, gesturing to the police squadron, all cowering back from him, then holding his arms out invitingly. “Well if that’s what you want, by all means, go ahead! Destroy me! Take your best shot!”

“You think I wasn’t being serious?” Ford challenged.

“I don’t see you reaching for a weapon. I don’t see you doing anything other than lying to my face.”

“I’m not lying.” Ford gritted his teeth, the words coming out an indignant growl.

“Now! I mean I knew you were up to something but I thought you were just being romantic!” Bill admitted loudly, his tone almost joking. “Boy, was I wrong. All this time you literally were trying to destroy me? Not that it’ll work, but I’m really not sure what I did to deserve this.”

“YOU RUINED MY LIFE! YOU USED ME!” Stanford shouted, losing his cool. “You lied to me about my destiny, about my future. You manipulated me – you made me look like a fool! You took everything from me!”

“I gave you everything.” Bill countered cruelly.

“I had a life before you! I had things, things that I earned. And everything you ‘gave me’ I had the
potential to do myself all along. You act like I owe you something but I owe you nothing.” Ford finally said, almost laughing, the words a revelation to him finally put out into the universe. “You deserve everything bad you’ve done to me back tenfold! I hate you and I want nothing to do with you, and every time I try and convince myself otherwise, you go and do some other horrible thing that only proves that I was right in the first place. You’re a – a curse, an absolute nightmare!”

“Oh, a nightmare am I? You’re so slow on the uptake, Sixer. All that time spent investigating me and you didn’t know? I’m the King of Nightmares!” Bill held his hands out, the fire creeping higher up the wall to emphasise his statement, and while Bill looked like he held all the power here, there was still a familiar glint of desperation in his eyes, shining wetly. “I’m not just a monster, I’m the monster! If you’re so smart, why didn’t you figure that out, huh? What, you need a book to confirm that for you too?” Bill gave one of his hysterical, too high laughs, and tossed both of the books towards Ford. “Here!”

As they arced through the air, the pages began to burn, incinerating rapidly, and by the time they landed at Stanford’s feet the books were nothing but ashes and embers. Stanford gave a wordless enraged shout, watching the books he’d worked so hard to get be utterly desecrated in front of him. It was almost crueller than what Bill had done to the time police. It was the last straw.

“And I was planning to do that all along, from the very beginning.” Bill was breathing heavily, the words tumbling out, unable to stop burning bridges now that he’d started. It was like he wanted Stanford to hate him, continuing to give him yet more reasons to do just that. The God still had that crazed almost hysterical look in his eye, like he was teetering over the edge of madness.

“Now that your precious books are gone, do you need more proof? How about I start by killing trigger finger first, then the rest of the time goons, and then I’ll rip apart sweet little Barold, molecule by molecule, as a footnote to the destruction of it all, and you can empirically observe like the scientist you are. Then maybe you’ll have fully reached your foregone conclusion.”

Ford growled, the last of his reserve utterly defenestrated, and he unleashed the words he’d been holding back on since Lottocron 9.

“You know what, I believe that you’ll kill them, just like I believe that you murdered your entire dimension. And you know what the truly awful thing is? I believe you did it for the same reason you do every horrible thing you’ve ever done. You did it because you could!”

The flames around Bill burned intensely bright, and for an instant Bill was surrounded by a pillar of blue flame akin to the one that had burned at the campfire back in gravity falls. A pure swath of unbridled power, blazing upwards, through the roof, to the very ceiling of the dome and beyond, and within that pillar of flame Bill stood, his hands clenched by his side, screaming out his tantrum of epic proportions. Stanford was certain this would be the moment Bill killed him, incinerated him in the blaze, but he didn’t. He just stood there, the fire burning away his robes, away his skin, away his bones until he was nothing but a shrieking ball of fire surrounding a slitted, livid red eye, and just when Stanford thought he would be struck down at last, the fire exhumed itself and teleported Bill away.

Ford stared at the burnt charred ground where Bill had stood, still shaking with the brunt of twenty something years of unleashed anger, both disappointed and shocked that Bill hadn’t killed him.

He expected he’d die when he said all of those things. He expected Bill would end him, burn him into nothingness for his defiance, and after so many years of useless wandering, trying to defeat a being who seemed impervious to damage, Stanford felt the pointlessness of it all weigh on him
heavily. He almost wanted Bill to kill him, so he wouldn’t have to suffer through yet more of it all, or to live with the guilt of all he had said.

But he was still alive.

To the side of him, one of the time police staggered to the floor, his legs growing slack now that the danger was over, a standard response to shock.

Stanford looked over to the squadron and Barold slumped back against the wall, and briefly took in the awed and stunned expressions they wore, wondering why the hell they were directing those looks at him. Rather than waste time staring back Stanford quickly stuffed the ashen remains of the burnt books into the pockets of Shailesh’s coat. Once he had collected it all he then turned and sprinted down the stairs.

He couldn’t stay here. He couldn’t trust the time police to not arrest him, even if his hotheadedness may have spared their lives. As soon as they found their feet again, they’d have Stanford sent to a cold cell.

He couldn’t trust anyone, not that he had anyone, really.

And now that he’d severed his ties for good, he couldn’t even trust Bill.

Not that he should have before.

He pushed his way through the university, crawling out through the tunnel and into the wasteland, discarding his lemon scented university robes in a pile of discarded bottles and syringes. Throwing back a sleep blocker tablet and straddling his hover bike, he sped across the wasteland towards the Bibliosphere once more.

When he got there, he stormed back into the library and deposited the ashes of the two books Bill had burned onto the table he had sat at before, staunchly ignoring the paper aeroplanes that Bill had made that were still on the tabletop.

There was something else there too. A book titled *The Vertices of Exwhylia*, on top of which sat a note addressed to him.

**Human.** The note read.

**You will find your answers there.**

Stanford looked for a hint as to who the note was from, but the only clue he had was the signature written in curling cursive.

**From your future ally.**

Chapter End Notes

Well I hope everyone enjoyed this chapter. Who knew libraries could be so exciting? Haha (the answer is everyone, we all love libraries here, look at you nerds, you’re reading right now!) The caesar cipher in this chapter can be translated at
https://www.xarg.org/tools/caesar-cipher/
I'd like to dedicate this chapter to some familiar faces, to my lovely beta reader, to quantumseahorse on tumblr (Mizuuma on ao3) mostly bc I am very proud of their work on their fic and I'm looking forward to reading it when I finally finish this one and I appreciate the updates from them about their progress and passion, and to thelema-rhoias who has continually been piecing together a thesis of thought about this fic as well as making gorgeous art and supplying me with cool music for the pairing back and forth.
I hope folks have enjoyed the read and the ride so far and I look forward to any comments that you leave. Things are approaching the final stages now, and next chapter we have some very aggressive shapes, dubious medical consent, and too much Cosmic Sand for one human to feasibly contain, but not too much for one tall purple lady.
Sorry Cassandra I misunderstood. Now the last day is dawning. Some of us wanted but none of us would listen to words of warning.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Shuttle buses were becoming a cramped regularity in Stanford’s life. Interdimensional travel wasn’t always as cut and dry as you’d think. Convenient wormholes were often rather out of the way, and portable wormholes were expensive and hard to come by.

Stanford’s infinity sided die was too much of a liability to provide a consistent method of travel, and so Stanford sat, squashed like a sardine into a small seat at the back of a dingy interdimensional shuttle bus, trying not to sit too close to the sentient grub that slumbered on the seat beside him, oozing some kind of acid from its mouth.

The bus smelled like mould and vomit, and there wasn’t enough space for Ford to sit comfortably with his legs spread, but these were the creature comforts Ford had to sacrifice on his search for the truth.

That Stanford was still alive after his disastrous encounter with Bill on the Bibliosphere was, in the honest part of Ford’s mind, still somewhat of a disappointment. He didn’t even know why he was bothering to continue to search for the truth about Bill now, when it hardly even mattered.

Why should Ford bother to look for the truth about Bill, when there was no chance in hell that it would redeem his actions? What would discovering the truth of what went down in Bill’s home dimension do for Ford other than confuse him further, or cement his disappointment eternally?

Would it benefit Ford at all to know that Bill really was as bad as he seemed?

Or would it thoroughly defenestrate everything he’d assumed up til now if Bill’s story defied his expectations?

Could he afford to allow himself this sliver of a chance to still pity Bill, to still feel for him, or was he better off barricading himself away from such vulnerabilities?

Bill had proven time and time again that whatever redeeming qualities he may occasionally present to Ford, he still wasn’t willing to change his actions or behaviour against others for Ford. He was still a bad person, an evil triangle. He was still callous, violent, dangerous and potentially deadly on both an individual and universal scale.

Barring the fact that Stanford knew Bill had the potential to be dangerous before he summoned him, that he knew the extent to which Bill was a universal hazard now only cemented his belief that he shouldn’t pity Bill.

He shouldn’t care for Bill at all.

He didn’t know why that was such a hard pill to swallow, really.

He shouldn’t care for a homicidal monster.

It was an utterly foolish, illogical, immoral, stupid thing to do.

Looking over the notes he copied from the textbook left on his desk in the Bibliosphere he felt his
poorly repressed guilt and pity bubble up within him again, the feeling for Bill stirring inside him despite his best attempts to quash it down.

Beside a picture of each shape came the description the textbook had specified.

_An upper-class circle._

_A lowly triangle._

Ford had trouble tearing his eyes from the page, the subtle snippets Bill had let slip reinforcing Stanford’s guilt induced hypothetical that there was a high chance Bill had been treated terribly back in his home dimension.

Not that it was an excuse for Bill’s actions. The relative hypothetical traumas of his past didn’t make it passable that he was such a nightmare now, but to Stanford’s growing dismay he realised that it would make Bill somewhat more understandable to know this about his past, and he shouldn’t want to understand Bill any more.

Yet he was coming to understand Bill’s words belatedly, the longer he was left alone with his thoughts on this excruciatingly long bus ride.

_“What hierarchy does make sense, when you’re on the bottom of it?”_  
_“It’s just all circular lies Sixer. That’s all it is.”_

Stanford didn’t think that understanding Bill’s situation would help him maintain his conviction against the triangle, but he was uniquely positioned to possibly be the only person in the multiverse who could understand him, and doesn’t that convey a sort of responsibility inherent to see this through?

Stanford was spinning yet another justification, as if he needed any more. His stellar twisting of his various justifications is what led him into this mess and part of him wondered if his guilt would be easier to manage if he could just admit that he’d made mistakes and done the wrong thing.

Perhaps that would be a more effective way of getting rid of this churning indecision in his gut, rather than twisting his thoughts around in self-effacing circles of inadequate logic to potentially justify the perspective he clung to that comparative to Bill, he’d done nothing wrong.

But then again, admitting that he’d been wrong seemed unlikely to help Ford at this current point in time. That would mean admitting that lying to Bill, tricking him, being intimate with him, using him for information, and indulging Bill’s feelings for his own gain were missteps on Stanford’s part, and the trouble with missteps is that once they’re made, you can’t exactly go back and do them over.

Which led Stanford to another problem churning away in his mind.

Bill wanted so desperately to do something over, and he wouldn’t say what it was. If Stanford were to admit he were wrong, that would mean admitting that he was wrong to say such callous things to Bill, he was wrong to accuse that Bill destroyed his own dimension just because he could, just because he was a creature of wanton destruction.

If Bill’s attempts to secure a time wish, and his repeated efforts to undo an event in his past with or without a time wish were to be believed, there was a very high chance that Bill hadn’t meant to destroy his home dimension at all, and that he was desperately trying to undo it.
Which made Stanford’s stalwart convictions about Bill’s behaviour and character come into question. Which brought about the possibility that Stanford may have to admit that he had, in this instance, been wrong.

Maybe that was why he was trekking out to the dimensional wormhole that would take him to Exwhylia, spending hours on a cramped, smelly, overcrowded bus, despite spinning countless justifications as to why he shouldn’t be here.

He owed himself the truth, to find out if he was wrong about Bill’s past.

And maybe, just maybe, he owed it to Bill.

The bus pulled up at Stanford’s stop, and Stanford wedged his way through the passengers to the front of the bus to exit through the bus doors.

“Thank you.” Stanford politely said to the congealed mass of jelly with sunglasses and a handlebar moustache that was driving the bus, and the bus driver simply nodded, waving him out of his vehicle.

Stepping out into the vast expanse of space, Stanford held onto the bus stop pole and reoriented himself as the bus drove away.

There was empty space to the left of him, and empty space to the right, but just a few paces back from the bus stop a small wormhole winked and shifted into different shapes, its colours spiralling within.

Mustering his courage Stanford approached the wormhole, and waited until its shape shifted into a circle, then a square, then a triangle, and when it shifted back into a circle Stanford dived into it head first.

He felt the familiar tug about his navel as he was yanked between dimensions, and he closed his eyes until the skin pulling rush of it all died down.

When he felt less discombobulated and in one piece, he paused, feeling a tickle of something just under his nose. Indeed, it felt like he had an elastic band snapped around his head, pressure pushing into the side of his ears, under his nose, digging into his cheeks.

Opening his eyes Stanford saw a very flat world.

With no sky or sun above to bathe the inhabitants in directional light, Stanford had no way of telling the shapes that milled about him apart. They all looked the same from Stanford’s perspective, blocks of flat density, although from above Stanford would have been able to distinguish if the creatures idling to the left of him were spherical or triangular.

In this two-dimensional world, Stanford’s three-dimensional eyes were worthless, unable to distinguish the difference between one shape and the other, but the textbook Stanford read in the Bibliosphere assured him that those differences were of the utmost importance.

Stanford opened his mouth to ask his customary question.

“Can anyone please tell me about Bill Cipher?”

However, as his mouth was currently below the Exwhylian’s plane, not intersecting with their flat board of existence, no one could hear him.
That did not mean that they didn’t notice him though.

Stanford imagined that he must appear as some sort of God, spontaneously intersecting their reality, appearing in the middle of their town square, but Stanford soon came to realise that was not so much the case.

His dimensional translator helpfully supplied the fact that the Exwhylians were shouting ‘irregular’ at him along with the very comforting addendum to that condescending epithet - ‘eradicate the irregular’.

That wasn’t good.

When the Exwhylians made their first attack, it came in the form of a stinging slice to Ford’s earlobe as one of the shapes flung their razor-sharp body at him.

His ear was bleeding, depositing droplets of blood into the town square below, the irregular shapes of the droplets furthering Stanford’s grave offence.

More shapes hurled themselves at Stanford’s face, slicing into his skin agonisingly. Hundreds of them bombarded him, and Stanford’s face was soon littered with cuts. The shapes seemed to be more organised behind Ford’s head, or they simply gathered there in greater numbers, and Ford began to feel hopelessly dizzy as they tore their way into the skin at the back of his head, slicing his flesh to ribbons in their onslaught. They’d slice all the way through to the bone if they kept this up.

He was bleeding profusely now, as head wounds are wont to do, and he could see the shadowed lines of the Exwhylians hurling themselves at Ford’s glasses, chipping away at the lens in a concerted effort to bury their razor-sharp forms into Ford’s eyes.

He didn’t know what to do, or how to escape this. While he was disappointed that he didn’t die back on the Bibliosphere, he didn’t want to die like this.

Stanford screwed his eyes shut, growing dizzier by the second as the blood loss continued, wondering if Bill would come to his rescue if he called him in the mindscape now, or if he’d expended his quota of rescues after his cruel conduct on the Bibliosphere.

He didn’t want to die here.

He desperately, desperately needed help.

Just as he was about to jettison himself into the mindscape, beseeching Bill’s salvation once more (who else could he turn to?) he felt a blue aura encircle him and grasp his form tight.

The constriction under his nose and around his head dissipated, and he recognised the sensation of his body warping through space time, too lethargic and unwell to do much more than wilt listlessly in this cosmic aura’s grasp.

When the aura faded, he found himself standing on his feet on solid ground, and he blearily opened one eye to squint at a brightly coloured room, bubbles floating in the air, incense burning and blurry people crowding around the walls of some sort of vaunted cathedral, watching his arrival.

Blood was cascading down Stanford’s neck now, a gruesome ring of carnage cut into the middle of his face, like a perverted thorn of crowns worn just below the nose. Stanford wavered, finding keeping his eye open a little too taxing to continue to do.
Swaying on his feet, Stanford’s eye fell shut, and he toppled forward, falling into a dead faint.

If someone caught him before he hit the floor, he didn’t remember.

Oestia volunteered to carry her mistress’s human prize to the mountaintop tower, hoping her display of strength would endear her to her mistress’s good graces.

In reality she was finding it incredibly difficult to keep up, her mistress scaling the ceaseless steps to the top of the tower with ease, her larger stature meaning she could take them three at a time, while Oestia struggled, balancing the unconscious human on her back as she pressed onward on her shorter legs.

What she lacked in height she made up for in determination, but she was unable to completely smother her desire to complain.

“It’s leaking on me.”

“The human is bleeding, not leaking.” Jheselbraum corrected Oestia.

“What’s the difference?” Oestia questioned.

“Blood stains are harder to get out of your ceremonial robes.” Jheselbraum responded dryly, the comment almost humorous by her standards.

The mistress must be in a jubilant mood, Oestia reasoned. Capturing Cipher’s human must be a great boon for their cause.

“I’ll give them to one of the acolytes to purge.” Oestia grinned, always keen to abuse the power of her station. “One of the bored looking ones.”

“Assign them a holy mission.” Jheselbraum suggested with a whimsical air about her.

“Against blood stains. I like the way you think O’ Divine Wisdom.”

Jheselbraum smiled but said nothing, quietly pleased.

They reached the top of the tower, and Jheselbraum opened the door to the atmospheric sanctum, holding it ajar for Oestia.

She appreciated her mistress’s help. Her gills were flaring, and she was breathing heavily through both of her lungs, her body working overtime to suck up enough oxygen to sustain her ascent.

The atmospheric sanctum was one of the places prospective acolytes attended during their gruelling induction to The Oracle’s army. The thin air and difficult breathing conditions were purposefully intended to strain the body and alter the mind to engage a supplicant’s most earnest vulnerabilities when vowing their service to The Oracle. Oestia remembered her own induction, how she was the last of her peers to pass out during their meditation, and how their Mistress awarded her praise as a testament to her strength.

She wasn’t sure why Jheselbraum was bringing Cipher’s human to the sanctum though. Consciousness didn’t seem to be one of his current strengths, and she couldn’t imagine he would be
a worthy candidate for induction, considering his tainted loyalties. Then again, The Oracle hadn’t been too picky with the recruits as of late, possibly attempting to recoup their numbers after Cipher slaughtered their last battalion of Taronjan troops.

Carrying the human inside the sanctum, Oestia watched Jheselbraum gesture to the chaise recliner to the side of the room and obediently Oestia laid the human out on the lounge.

Jheselbraum was reaching into the high cupboards at the top of the atmospheric sanctum, retrieving the ceremonial incense burners and passing them to Oestia.

“Light these, all of them, and place them around the bed.” The Oracle ordered, and Oestia complied with only the slightest hesitation.

“All of them, Mistress?”

The incense in the ceremonial burners was strong, incredibly strong. Only one stick of incense was needed during induction ceremonies to sufficiently engender an altered state in the supplicants. Six seemed like overkill. Especially placed in such close proximity to the human, considering humans only had one pair of lungs to power through with.

Jheselbraum nodded. “To purify the devil’s taint.”

That made sense, and Oestia complied, lighting the incense dutifully. She leaned away from them once they were lit though, not wanting to inhale too much of the noxious smell.

To her surprise, her Mistress knelt down beside the chaise and brushed the hair back from the human’s forehead, examining his wounds. She reached into her sleeve for a cloth, wet it with the liquid from one of the bubbles hovering about the sanctum and began to sponge the blood from the human’s face.

Oestia was stunned that her Mistress would show such preferential treatment to this damaged interloper, that she would lower herself to tending his wounds at all. This was below her station, and Oestia stumbled forward, braving the incense cloud once more to offer assistance.

“I can do that Mistress, you shouldn’t have to. I can –”

“No.” Jheselbraum answered curtly. “This is my task. You wait outside Oestia.”

Oestia almost opened her mouth to argue, but thought better of it, and left the room with a deep bow, her head already dizzy from the incense.

When Stanford finally clawed his way back to consciousness it was with great difficulty and in increments.

He slowly came back to the sensation of a cool wet cloth pressing against his face, dabbing at his bleeding wounds. He felt drained and weak still, his throat dry and his head unbelievably dizzy despite him laying down. He must have lost a lot of blood, to feel this run down. It was worse than any blood loss he suffered bleeding out spell circles when unbinding bricks for Bill.
It took some time to piece together the press of the cloth to his face with the fact that this must mean that someone was tending to his injuries, and even longer still to recognise that he should probably open his eyes and see who it was who rescued him from the Exwhylians.

Groggily, he wondered if it was Bill rescuing him after all, before he blinked blearily up at his saviour.

Seven eyes looked back down at him with a placid indulgence.

“You’re awake.” She murmured, and her voice was extraordinarily resonant, like it was vibrating through every molecule of Ford’s body, or at least that’s how he felt.

Honestly, he felt a bit like he was on some kind of mild acid trip, and he didn’t think blood loss was generally this intoxicating, otherwise everyone would be bleeding out on a weekend.

Rather than respond coherently to her, Stanford just blinked at her blearily.

“Young journey has been long and arduous, fraught with peril.” The seven eyed lady continued, her words reverberating oddly around Stanford’s skull. “I’ve been treating your wounds for a long while. Exwhylians aren’t known for their mercy. It is a miracle we got you out of there alive at all.”

“Hhrmgh?” Stanford intelligently replied. Dimly he recognised that this must be his rescuer, and he had just enough presence of mind to feel guilty for the part of him that was disappointed his rescuer wasn’t Bill.

“Young search for the truth is admirable, even if it put you in harm’s way. It was not your time to die. You still have a great destiny to fulfil.”

“OhIsee.” Stanford slurred, his words jumbling together as he attempted to sound like he knew what was going on. Honestly, he was still wondering why his head injuries felt so much like a cosmic sand hangover. He hadn’t had one of those since, well, since a long time. He couldn’t quite put his finger on how many years it had been but right now he wasn’t exactly up to the mental mathematics.

“You seek the truth about him, and recompense for all that you’ve lost. You’ve been through much.”

She continued to daub at his wounds, and the press of the cloth stung a little, drawing Stanford out of the spiralling whirlpool in his head. She seemed to be speaking like she knew what Stanford had been doing as of late, and he would have been paranoid if not for the fuzziness encroaching on his senses, dulling his instinctual responses.

“He has wronged you in countless ways that very few are equipped to fully understand. He’s robbed you of many things, your destiny, the recognition you were owed for your brilliance, and your future success and he will continue to take from you, and from the wider world if we do not stop him.” Her seven eyes softened maternally on Ford, a stalwart sympathy displayed somewhat blurrily within her diversified gaze. “I know this. I have seen it happen. What will happen if he is not stopped. You can stand against him. And I can give you the tools you need to succeed, Stanford Pines.”

Managing his first coherent sentence, Stanford tilted his head. “I’m sorry, but who are you?”

“I’m The Oracle.” The tall purple lady with the psychedelic voice replied. “I know of your quest. You seek answers about your fate, about why this has all happened to you, about Cipher.”
“Bill?” Ford mumbled, struggling to sit up. His limbs felt inordinately heavy, and the pressure of The Oracle’s hand holding the cloth to his forehead felt restrictive. Such a small gesture shouldn’t be enough to hold him down, but he couldn’t get up. Perhaps he was too weak to, from the blood loss.

“You are vulnerable to him while your mind is unprotected.” The Oracle told him, her voice sliding in one ear and out the other sinuously. Her words felt like a slinky falling down the stairs and Stanford blinked heavily, trying to process what it meant. “There is a method, however, to guard your thoughts against his influence, but it will involve very difficult surgery. We will need to install a metal plate in your head to block his interference.”

“Like tinfoil?” Ford questioned, his brain helpfully offering that he’d tried that before and he got sandwich crumbs in his hair because of it. He wasn’t sure if it had been completely successful at keeping Bill out, he hadn’t run the requisite tests and eventually gave up on the tinfoil method when woodpeckers and sparrows tried to eat the crumbs in his hair, but he had been outrageously sleep deprived at the time, and perhaps the variable was the aluminium? Maybe some other metal would be more effective, and at thicker density?

The Oracle was still talking while Stanford was mentally calculating how many rows of tinfoil folded on top of itself it would take to make a sufficient mental defence against Bill’s power, and so he barely heard the rest of her sentence.

“The Exwhylians have made the basic incisions already. This is a hazardous procedure with a high mortality rate in previous subjects, hence why it is still in the experimental stages, but I believe we can implant the metal guard with the technology we have and regardless of the results we will ensure he no longer has access to your mind –”

“I’ll do it!” Stanford interjected, having decided that more tinfoil would mean better protection and less sandwich crumbs which could only be a good thing. His logic was flawless.

Ford’s listening comprehension wasn’t exactly at top form today, but all things considered he felt he was making a pretty reasonable decision to rid his mind of Bill’s influence to preserve his independent thought.

After all, he couldn’t be unbiased in seeking the truth when he was still plagued by thoughts of Bill’s more appealing assets, wracked with notions of Bill’s supposed sincerity and potentially legitimate feelings that Stanford had unceremoniously trampled over, and at least with a safeguard installed in his head, he could figure out if these affectations were influenced by Bill, or merely self-inflicted.

The Oracle seemed surprised by Stanford’s enthusiastic assent, and if he were more observant he would have noticed the dry way she murmured “Well that was easy” under her breath.

“So how much tinfoil are we using?” Stanford questioned, struggling to keep his eyes open. The room seemed to be swimming, but Stanford wasn’t wearing swimmers. He didn’t know if he was up for swimming either, considering he felt like he was sinking through the floor, The Oracle’s seven eyes seeming farther and farther away with every passing moment.

The last thing Stanford heard The Oracle say before he checked out of consciousness once more was said in an amused tone, which mattered more to Stanford in this current moment than what was actually being said.

“Ah, another genius.”
Oestia stood guard as Jheselbraum brought the human down from the tower, carrying him to the medic bay. She looked very majestic, holding his unconscious form in her arms, laying him gently onto a gurney. Her benevolent maternal air pervaded up till the point she gave her orders.

“Prep him for surgery. The barricade.”

The medics in the room gasped, and even Oestia’s mouth fell open at the order. The barricade was still in the experimental stages, and so far the experiment had not been successful, as evinced by the lack of surviving test subjects.

“The – the metal plate, Mistress?” One of the medics sought to clarify nervously.

“He gave consent.” She retrieved her remote from the sleeve of her robe, playing back Stanford’s enthusiastic ‘I’ll do it!’ and swiftly put it away, looking expectantly at the hesitant medics milling around the room.


 Appropriately chastised, the medics jumped to it, scrambling around the room to prepare the human for surgery, fumbling with an IV and manning the operating room.

Satisfied her will was being carried out, Jheselbraum turned and left the medic bay, Oestia trailing behind her as she strode through the high-ceilinged hallways of the temple.

“The barricade – it isn’t exactly the safest procedure, is it?” Oestia questioned timidly, well aware of the mortality rate for the procedure among past test subjects.

“If he dies he dies in the service of something greater. Either way, if we do this, he can’t have him.” She replied, a vicious delight ringing subtly in her tone.

At this, Oestia nodded, reassured of her Mistress’s decision.

This wasn’t about one human’s life. This was about the battle. About the war.

And none had a clearer view of what needed to be done than her Divine Mistress.

And if anyone could beat the Devil himself, it was her, in all her majesty.

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Stanford came to slowly, vaguely observing that, for someone who doesn’t sleep much, he’d being doing an awful lot of waking up these days. He couldn’t remember if he fell asleep or fainted, but he woke in a bed, which was a luxury in and of itself. He couldn’t remember the last time he slept in a bed, or voluntarily slept at all.
Actually, now that he was becoming more lucid, he could remember the last time he slept, but it wasn’t on a bed, and those campfire memories were a little too painful to recall still, so Stanford tried to focus on something else.

The softness of the sheets covering him, the sunlight that was hinted at beyond his eyelids, and the gentle sound of wind chimes and hymnal chanting drifting into his room from afar. He had new clothes on, clean clothes, perhaps pyjamas and they smelled very faintly of lavender and frankincense.

Eventually Stanford mustered the effort to open his eyes, and was greeted by a very colourful room, with high arched ceilings, stained glass windows thrown open to let in the breeze and walls adorned with colourful tapestries and floating bubbles. This place was lavish, in a way that none of Ford’s other destinations had been, at least none that would accommodate him.

For a rather childish moment, Stanford wondered if he’d died on Exwhylia, and this was heaven or some other fictitious imagining of an unscientific mind.

But no, heaven would not involve the subtle beeping of machines monitoring his health, nor would it include an IV, dripping painkillers into his arm.

Stanford wondered if this was some kind of hospital, and slowly he reached up to feel his face, wondering if he had been patched up from the Exwhylians assault.

The cuts on his face were healed completely, his skin unblemished by the many incisions the shapes had made, which meant either the medical technology available here was quite advanced, or Stanford had been out for a long time.

Reaching higher, he aimed to run a hand through his hair absently but felt only short bristles and bandages criss-crossing over his skull.

What happened to his hair?

Stanford was jarred out of his introspection by a noise in the corner of the room. A small alien woman with frilled amphibian gills was staring at him, her round salamander face surprised. She held a clipboard, no doubt one of the nurses here, and she nearly dropped it when she noticed Stanford moving.

She said something to him, but Stanford couldn’t understand what she was saying, his interdimensional translator sitting across the room on top of a pile of his clothes. He could only stare in confusion at her as she held her hands out, perhaps entreating him to stay where he was, and then running out of the room, no doubt to fetch her colleague.

Well. She might have told him to stay where he was, but technically she didn’t tell him to stay put in any language he could currently understand, so he didn’t technically have to listen to her.

He didn’t know how long he’d been asleep for, but if he slept, there was a chance Bill visited him in the mindscape or pinpointed his location somehow and he couldn’t afford to stay in one place if that was the case.

Stanford moved to slide his legs out from under the covers and rested his feet on the cold stone floor. Testing his balance, he stood up, and gave himself a moment to acclimate to the head rush, before grabbing the IV pole and rolling it along beside him as he crossed the room, already reaching for his belongings.

Fastening his dimensional translator onto his wrist once more, Stanford could hear the sound of
people running outside in the corridor. They were probably coming to fetch him, to usher him back to bed, to make him stay put, but Stanford wasn’t about to give them the chance to.

With his dimensional translator functional again, Stanford turned to read the label on the IV drip, following the safety instructions to successfully remove the needle from his arm with minimal bleeding. He toed his shoes on, stuffed his clothing into his coat pockets and slung his coat on, making for the open window.

Several more of the amphibian nurses hurtled into the room, as well as another gilled individual wearing military garb who arrived just in time to see Stanford climb out onto the window ledge.

“Wait! Stop him!”

Stanford pulled the retractable grappling hook from his coat pocket and jumped over the edge, shooting the grappling hook upwards so it could latch onto one of the many balconies that dotted the side of this mountainside tower.

He passed by acolytes, civilians and soldiers on his way down, abseiling from the tower down to the forest floor below, and yet more colourful rooms filled with bubbles, tapestries and what seemed to be religious choirs were shown through every open balconette Ford descended by.

When his feet hit the ground he began running, throwing himself into the forest, twigs and leaves crunching underfoot as he ran through the purple mossy trees trying to put as much space between him and the place where he’d been asleep for so long.

He barely noticed where he was going, periodically looking behind him, and when he stumbled out into a burnt clearing, he staggered backwards, seeing several tufts of blue flame, Bill’s flame, burning the treetops.

He couldn’t be here already? Could he? Was Stanford too late to escape? Too late to escape Bill’s revenge for all he’d done to him.

Back ing away from the flame, watching it eat into the foliage with horror in his eyes, he didn’t notice the person standing behind him until he backed right into them.

“Sorry – I –“ Stanford apologised reflexively, already turning around to face whoever had snuck up on him, but he was confronted with the skirts of a very tall woman, her lavender skin and seven eyes seeming oddly familiar to him.

Stanford craned his neck, looking up at her. He came up to about her knees, she was quite formidable, at least as tall as Bill’s henchwoman Pyronica, if not taller.

She just stood there, looking at the blue flame still burning in the tree tops.

“You recognise it?” She said, her words sounding more like a statement to Stanford. She had an air about her that suggested that asking questions was just a formality for her, a wise omniscience that Stanford was thrown by.

Her question jarred him, and he looked behind him at the flames, wondering how he was supposed to respond to this question without startling the giant woman.

He needn’t have worried though.

“He is not here now. You needn’t fear.” She reassured him. “He left this fire several years ago, as a gift.”
“You – you know him?” Stanford asked, picking up on the bitterness in her tone. He gathered that despite Bill giving her gifts they certainly weren’t friends.

The giant woman sighed deeply, a resigned reluctant sound, and she looked down at Stanford, her seven eyes seeming tired, yet full of implicit understanding.

“You are so very used to running away from him, Stanford Pines, that you couldn’t possibly imagine a place where you are safe from him. If I told you that you had allies here, had protection, would you slow yourself long enough to listen? I wonder.”

Stanford paused, looking up at her faintly wistful expression, and tilted his head.

“I’m sorry – I - have we met before?”

“We’ve made introductions, although I suppose grievous head wounds do leave one’s comprehension somewhat staggered. How are you feeling, on that note?” She tilted her head back at Stanford, her seven eyes lingering on the bandages on his head.

“I – fine I – thank you for patching me up I suppose. After the Exwhylians –“ Stanford began, offering stilted gratitude to who he presumed to be his rescuer.

“You’ve had complex surgery.” She interjected. “A procedure known as ‘the barricade’ which you elected to undertake to block his influence from your mind. You’ll feel a little heavier, and may encounter some neck strain later in life, but the metal plate we installed should prohibit Cipher from entering your head while you are conscious –“

“I’m sorry – what?” Stanford interrupted her this time, reaching up to press his fingers against the bandages wrapping his head, his skin feeling tender and sore there. Since he removed the IV drip from his arm, during his sprint through the forest he had noticed his head throbbing somewhat painfully, but he assumed it was just a migraine. “You put a metal plate in my head? You sliced – you put a – near my brain, my mind?! You - ”

“Still yourself. You are weak and not thinking clearly.” The purple woman asserted brusquely but that just made Stanford angrier, her cool dismissive tone continuing.

“You’ll remember that you requested I do so. The moment I informed you it was an option available to you, you agreed to it instantly. It was a chance for you to finally be freed from Cipher’s stranglehold on your life, on your mind. Do you doubt this? That you leapt at the chance?” She questioned, almost chidingly, before she narrowed all seven of her eyes at Ford. “Do you doubt my word on this? I have evidence to prove it if you truly believe me to be such an untrustworthy figure.”

“I – no I -“ Stanford struggled, his politeness warring with his common sense, which was still reeling at the thought that, while unconscious he’d allowed a stranger to implant a metal plate in his head. “Look, you seem really very calm about all of this, and I don’t mean to offend you but I’m still coming to terms with the fact that this isn’t a migraine, its something – a thick metal plate surgically implanted in my head that I don’t remember asking for, but according to you I did? You say it – it’ll what?”

“Protect your mind from Bill Cipher’s influence.” She answered calmly, and, rather than contesting with Stanford’s disbelieving exasperation, she turned and looked out across the flaming forest once more, her expression solemn and reserved.

Stanford was stumped by that answer. How it seemed to be the answer to all of his problems. He
didn’t think it was possible, that there would be a way to sever Bill’s access to his mind, and as of late he assumed that the only foolproof solution to that particular problem was death. Yet somehow this stranger had made the impossible possible for him? Why?

“You – how did you know about him - that I needed -?”

“They don’t call me The Oracle for nothing.” She replied, looking sideways at him with the barest hint of amusement lighting her solemn face.

“So, you’re some kind of seer?” Stanford puzzled, remembering what Bill had said about fortune tellers, regurgitating Bill’s scepticism in his tone.

“So it would appear.” The Oracle replied dryly.


“Everything I’ve been through? And you only chose to intervene now? There were dozens of times – why – I -?”

“You’re very demanding, aren’t you?” She remarked, cutting off his impassioned diatribe with that cool demeanour of hers. “You’d think an independent creature such as yourself would not be so quick to blame others for the things your choices engendered. I do not see everything, you’re confusing me with someone else, and it doesn’t take an Oracle to know who. I prophesize. I see crucial intersections in the flow of fate and intervene only when I perceive it to be necessary. I have tried to intervene, but my intervention can only do so much when you refuse to listen. My words have little impact when you prefer to believe his lies.”

Something about that phrase struck Ford as alarmingly familiar, and although it had been nearly 30 years, that phrase spoken in that tone of voice jarred him immediately back to where he’d last heard it.

LIES! HE LIES! DON’T BELIEVE - NOT WHAT HE SEEMS!

DOOMED TO FAIL - TOMORROW - LAST CHANCE!

WHEN GRAVITY FALLS AND EARTH BECOMES SKY, FEAR THE BEAST WITH JUST ONE EYE!

Stanford reeled, looking up at the calm stoic giant woman standing beside him, trying to mentally align this benevolent being with the voice in the ring who turned his life upside down and then unceremoniously abandoned him to his growing guilt, leaving him at the mercy of Bill’s efforts to rekindle what they had.

“You were the voice in the ring. That was you!” Stanford accused, still trying to process meeting the sentience who tore right through the sham façade of his life as it was at that moment, a life spent ignorant of his muse’s true intentions. He wasn’t sure if he should consider her a saviour or if he should hate her for bursting his bubble, the idyllic bubble of ignorant happiness he could never get back.

“I tried to help you then, and I am trying to help you now.” She confirmed gently.

“Help me?” Stanford’s voice rose, and he barked a near hysterical laugh. “Yes, really very helpful, telling me exactly how to defeat Bill and then disappearing. There’s quite a lot to be said for a little follow up communication. It would have been a little more helpful if I could have asked you questions back then, or requested clarification, especially with Bill bombarding me with nightmares for all those months. So – so a little feedback – the disappearing act was really – it wasn’t – hardly
any sort of help at all honestly.”

Stanford’s chastisement was weakened somewhat, as he grasped his head while telling the Oracle off, swaying on his feet.

“You are overexerting yourself.” The Oracle chided in return, her brows furrowing above her seven eyes, frowning down at Stanford’s outburst. “You will set back your recovery if you continue to do so. Calm yourself.”

“I am calm.” Stanford shot back childishly, but he lowered his voice appropriately, no longer shouting at the Oracle.

“If you will allow yourself to listen to me, rather than succumbing to needless emotional outbursts, you should know that I attempted to contact you after you banished him. Something was blocking my reach and the signal was broken. I assumed you warded the ring, rather than seek out my counsel. It would not have surprised me, given how quickly you seem to jump to conclusions.” She said dismissively, looking back over to the burning trees to hide the scorn in her gaze.

“I didn’t do – I just brought it back to the shack, but you didn’t –“ Stanford struggled, before he seemed to cotton onto something, looking back up at Jheselbraum’s seven eyed gaze.

Kneeling down on the floor, Stanford redrew from memory the final sigil Bill had traced into the protection spell surrounding the house, his finger following the pattern of the mercury in the dirt, six crescents and a seventh oval shape, resembling an open staring eye.

He looked between the sigil on the floor, and The Oracle’s face, her seven eyes positioned in exactly the same place in the pattern as the crescents, the seventh open eye representative of her central blue eye that was staring down at the sigil on the ground now with interest.

“This is you, isn’t it? Is this your name?” Ford asked, piecing things together.

“My name is Jheselbraum.” The Oracle replied, her tone still mildly bemused. “But that is a rather familiar depiction of my face, and I am fairly certain I know who drew it.”

“Bill warded the house and drew this to seal the spell. He lied to me and told me it meant ‘time police’ but he was trying to block your access to my mind, even then, wasn’t he?”

“You’ll find that lying for him is as easy as breathing for your species. If only you’d wised up to that fact sooner.” Jheselbraum commented, before she crouched down, her considerable height halving as she knelt to sit at Stanford’s level, pointing at the dirt. “This is how he has always written my name, and it explains why my attempts to inform you of the truth sooner were unsuccessful. We could have stopped him before you chose to get so stubbornly invested, and the world could have been spared a great deal of his misery, you included.”

“You said he’s always written your name this way? How long have you known him? How long have you -?”

“How long have I attempted to stop him?” Jheselbraum clarified, quirking her brow imperiously. “For a long time. Before you were born, and then some. You would have noticed my zodiac prophecy in the caves back on your home planet, if you were paying attention. The spell was my doing. I have always been trying to cut the strings from his puppets. To reveal the truth.”

“He never mentioned you.” Stanford frowned at the sigil on the floor, missing the way Jheselbraum’s eye twitched in irritation at that.
“He wouldn’t, to you. He likely didn’t want to shatter the perfectly crafted illusion he’d been
weaving around you, trying to manipulate your impression of him. He was likely mocking you the
total time.” Jheselbraum noticed the way Ford’s frown tightened, pursuing her advantage.
“You’re a scientist, are you not? A scholar? Tell me, did he introduce himself as a muse? As a
personification of divine inspiration?”

Stanford looked up at Jheselbraum, the answer plain on his face.

Nodding solemnly, Jheselbraum continued speaking with a slight bitter twist to her lips.

“His idea of a joke. In his opinion someone who believed themselves worthy of a muse must have
both the highest and lowest opinion of themselves in existence. He said anyone who believed in a
muse was a ‘sucker’, because they were egotistical enough to claim their ideas were sent to them
from a higher power, and yet so full of self-loathing that they couldn’t claim credit for said ideas. If
a potential mark accepted his story, that he was a muse sent to inspire them, he’d know they were
gullible enough to manipulate, and he would target them to become one of his puppets.”

Well it was certainly nice to know that Stanford had confirmed himself to be gullible and self-
invested enough to fall for Bill’s idiot-pawn litmus test. He’d certainly jumped at the idea of a
muse then, flattered and manipulated in equal measure by the terminology. Clearly it was his fault
for believing the term actually meant something to Bill, or that the God liked it when Ford
described him as his perfect muse. The phrase ‘I’ve never felt so duped’ was getting a lot of
traction in Ford’s head lately.

“He told me this nearly three thousand of your earth years ago, when he first set sights on your
dimension and chose his first human puppet, Modoc, to build a door for him.” She gestured,
waving her hand to the east dismissively. “He also destroyed my crystal moss valley in the process
of telling me. He told me he was being considerate by not destroying more.”

“Well he would tell you these things, if you’re working against him?” Stanford asked, far less
likely to trustingly accept the word of any potentially benevolent being after Bill’s feigned
benevolence turned out to be a fabrication.

“Because he can. He likes to show up here when he’s been drinking.” Jheselbraum said dryly. “He
will shout out something about his latest crusade, whatever it is he’s trying to prove, burn parts of
my domain, and then disappear for the next few centuries until he demands my attention again.
I’ve had to relocate my people into the mountains, since he keeps burning their homes.”

“That’s not what I mean. I – from what I’ve come to learn, as random as Bill’s actions may seem at
times, he has reasons for everything that he does. Everything! Reasons that make sense to him.”
Stanford stressed, trying not to admit that when Bill explained them, his reasons often made sense
to Stanford as well.

He desperately wanted to make sense of this situation, his need to understand further fuelled by the
metal plate in his head that cut him off from asking Bill directly in the future. His safe method of
meeting Bill in the mindscape was gone now, assuming this metal plate worked the way The
Oracle said it did.

“Are you saying he had a good reason for destroying my people’s homes and burning their
villages?” Jheselbraum retorted sharply, narrowing her eyes. “Are you looking to excuse his
actions?”

“Well, not a good reason.” Stanford conceded. “But one that makes sense to him, or benefits him
somehow. I’ve been trying to understand him, to understand why he does the things he does and I
“A wasted effort.” Jheselbraum interrupted him. “Understanding him will not stop his violent or
dangerous impulses. Deciphering Bill Cipher will only abate your own curiosity. It will not undo
the damage he has done or halt his plans before he acts them out. Consider how much you knew of
him already, he still would refuse to halt his invasion through the portal if asked. Knowing him
does not make him any better and it would be selfish to believe that your satisfaction outweighs the
multitude of damage he could do to millions of lives.”

“This isn’t about my own satisfaction.” Stanford lied. “I’m trying to understand him to understand
his weaknesses. To figure out a way to take him down before it’s too late.”

The Oracle gave Stanford a pointed icy look that sent a shiver of reproach right through him. “You
already know what his weakness is.”

Ford shifted awkwardly under her cool gaze, before he blurted out. “I mean physical weaknesses.
You know he’s invincible. He’s too powerful to even –“

“You want to know how to destroy him?” Jheselbraum tilted her head, and then gestured to the
Recover your strength and we can help you achieve your victory. We can help you.”

“I’m not just going to go to – to go along with whatever it is you say. I still don’t – I don’t trust
you!” Stanford declared, standing up abruptly to emphasise his point. “I can’t trust you. I can’t trust
anyone.”

He swayed on his feet a little, feeling lightheaded, his skull throbbing with the echo of emptiness.
He brought a hand up to cradle the bandages covering the blockade against Bill this stranger had
placed in his head.

Sure, she insisted he jumped at the opportunity, and later he would likely admit the same, but right
now he was still reeling with the burgeoning hurt that was the fact that this woman had removed
Bill from his head forever. She’d inserted the metal plate and it fell like a guillotine, severing his
safe accessible link to Bill, forcing closure in the relationship when Stanford wasn’t entirely sure
he wanted to let go at all.

Cutting himself off from Bill was the smart decision, it was the logical thing to do, it would be
wise to sever all ties to the God in order to move on with his life, he’d attempted to do the same
just several weeks ago, but Ford’s heart was protesting louder than his head could give it’s
compromised state. His heart was digging its heels in to the idea that his relationship with Bill
could still be salvaged somehow, and it was throwing a tantrum at the thought that the choice to
leave Bill on his terms was being taken from him.

It wasn’t fair.

“He’s really done a number on you, hasn’t he?” Jheselbraum observed, her expression pitying yet
understanding all at once. When Ford stood abruptly, she was still taller than him, even crouching
down on the floor beside him, and when she looked down at him with this knowing sympathetic
expression it made Stanford feel like there was something wrong with him.

“If you trust no one, you are isolated, and when you are isolated you are vulnerable. He is no doubt
relying on this. If you go through your entire life, trusting no one, pushing all help away, fixating
on him all the while it means that the moment when you break and finally let someone in, it is that
much more likely to be him, and he’s counting on you breaking for him. He has moulded so much
of your interactions thus far to make you dependant on his regard, and it may seem like the only independent thing you can do is push everyone away and put your walls up, letting paranoia reign supreme, but even that is a lie. You aren’t serving yourself by disregarding the assistance of others, every brick in the wall you put up between yourself and the ones who care for you is a brick you’ve seen before.”

Some of the stubbornness puffing Stanford up faded away at this point, and his shoulders slumped, his weariness catching up to him. It could have been due to his mad sprint through the forest following complicated head surgery, it could have been the lack of proper food, having been hooked up to only an IV for who knows how long, it could have been complications from the surgery slowing him down, but he felt immeasurably tired.

He was so used to feeling tired, yet being unable to properly sleep, that he resigned himself to the persistent draining feeling, but if what The Oracle proposed was true, there was a chance Stanford could truly rest here. He could sleep soundly without the threat of Bill possessing his body or haunting his dreams hovering in his thoughts like a spectre.

He wanted to let go and relax for once. To shut his eyes without fear of what would wait for him when he opened them again. He just needed to know that he would be truly safe to do so.

“Why does Bill still visit you when you’re working against him?” Stanford asked wearily, the question hovering on the precipice of his conditional acceptance of her offer. “And tell you things? Why?”

Jheselbraum’s lips pursed together in a thin line as she considered her answer, or whether she’d answer at all. Eventually she spoke, each word measured carefully.

“Due to certain circumstances, we used to be close, a very long time ago. Both learning from the same teacher. We were always at odds with each other, but he had a certain respect for me, and my superior skills. We clashed from the beginning and eventually parted ways, but he has trouble letting go of things. As you no doubt know.”

“Why did you part ways and turn against each other?” Ford pressed, needing to know.

He was wavering, wanting to trust her. It wouldn’t take much for Ford to trust her now, just one more slight push.

Jheselbraum knew this, and so she smiled wryly, conveying a sense of foolishness in the shrug of her shoulders that she knew the scientist could relate to.

Lifting the hem of her robe ever so slightly, she revealed the gnarled and twisted scar tissue covering her purple legs, the obvious remnants of some incredibly graphic burns healed slowly over time. Ford could see just a small peek where she lifted her robe, but it looked as though the burns continued all the way up both of her legs, a cruel act seared into her flesh for all eternity.

“You are not the first person to be tricked by Bill Cipher. To be burned by him. But with any luck, you might just be the last.”

It was clear the sight of the burns effected Stanford, and he stood staring at where they had been even after Jheselbraum lowered her skirts and stood up.

She reached into her robe for a small remote, clicking it once to open a teleportation portal in the clearing leading back to the temple. She held her hand out to Stanford, gesturing for him to join him.
“Shall we?”

With a solemn nod, Stanford reached out and accepted her hand, walking with her into the portal. He’d made his choice.

With the investors scattered to the winds, the Nightmare Realm was remarkably quiet these days. There used to be nonstop chaos cavorting through this dimensional crawl space. Parties, hijinks, and all kinds of fun plots unravelling within the unstable liminal space.

Things had been dull since the hunt for Sixer had died down, since Bill took that into his own hands, and subsequently he’d been giving very little attention to everyone else.

His investors took that to mean they could go off and pursue their own interests. His hired help took that to mean they were all off the clock, since the plans to dethrone Time Baby seemed to be put on pause.

His loyal Henchmaniacs however, knew he’d be back. Eventually.

“Got any threes?” Teeth asked, chewing on a toothpick as he examined his cards.

“Go fish.” Eight Ball replied bluntly.

“Gnnnnaaarrrruuuughhhhh.” Xanthar groaned and flopped sideways to lay on the ground with a thud that shook the floor of the garden area outside of the quadrangle, causing the picnic table to jump, sending cards flying into disarray.

“Well if you weren’t having fun buddy, you could have just said so.” Teeth griped, scowling at the mess of cards scattered over the tabletop.

“Xanthar is fluent in body language.” Amorphous Shape pointed out. “I feel he got his point across marvellously.”

“I think he’s bored.” Keyhole observed, nodding at Xanthar’s lethargic pose knowingly. “There’s nothing to do.”

Xanthar groaned again, and Amorphous Shape helpfully translated.

“I think he’s saying, ‘where my party people at’.”

“Geez, you can say that again.” Keyhole slumped his elbows forward onto the table, and Xanthar groaned once more obligingly.

“So, let’s get something to do happening.” Teeth suggested, plucking the toothpick from his teeth and rolling it between his fingers. “Invite some people over, get this party started. I’ll invite some fun idiots. Everyone can invite people. How about you invite your sister, Keyhole?”
“Why don’t you invite her? Or is she not taking your calls?” Keyhole smirked teasingly.

“I – listen, Wyrm and I have a complicated relationship. It’s not that we’re not on speaking terms, it’s just that –“

“Oh, so she doesn’t like you?” Keyhole finished smugly. “Like I told you already, over and over again?”

“Don’t you give me that look, acting like your family’s all that because they’re high society. Just because your matriarch of a Ma is the most powerful consumptive force in the universe, that don’t make her any better than my dear old Nanna Dentures.”

“How many galaxies has your nanna swallowed in her inexorable pull lately?” Keyhole asked, reshuffling the deck of cards.

“My nanna swallows plenty. It’s not even about that. Wyrm just tells me she’s too busy with work to see me, that’s all.” Teeth divulged, patting the table for Keyhole to deal him another round.

“Your whole family are gainfully employed, are they not Keyhole?” Amorphous Shape asked.

“They sure are. And then there’s me. Mr Unemployed.” Keyhole gestured to himself self-deprecatingly. “Wyrm has a busy job in the Department of Interdimensional Travel, Loophole’s a big shot lawyer, Blow’s got a gig in tourism working with various National Parks, Manhole and Pothole work on both sides of the construction industry. Glory’s making tonnes of money on the internet, Sinkhole got a job in landfill waste management. Heck, even Plot got hired to work on season eight of Game of Thrones. I’m the only one of my siblings to not put my mum-given talents to good use on the right side of the law.”

“How would you even get a lawful job Keyhole? Your MO is breaking and entering.” Teeth asked sceptically, chewing on his toothpick again.

“Mum wanted me to be a locksmith.” Keyhole admitted, dealing out the cards. “She wasn’t too happy when I told her that I didn’t want to just settle for what was expected of me. She told me ‘why can’t you be like your cousin, Pidgeonhole? He does what he’s told’ but I told her no. I’m a free spirit, and I wanna do crime.”

“Yeah, you tell her, Keyhole.” Teeth nodded in agreement.

“Here here.” Concurred Amorphous Shape, waving his tails encouragingly.

“I want excitement and adventure in my life.” Keyhole added emphatically, picking up his cards, looking at his hand.

A chunk of matter cracked off the edge of one of the wormholes at the edge of the Nightmare realm and fell down at the edge of the garden, crushing one of the gaseous roses, the only sound that broke the silence of the usually raucous dimension.

Teeth gestured to the debris. “Well you’re getting plenty of that here.”

“I can’t remember the last time we had a party.” Eight Ball sighed, picking up his cards before putting them down in resignation.

“We had a big one a few years back, for little Zippy’s wedding, remember? The multiverse had never seen so many bounty hunters and wanted criminals coexisting peacefully in the same space before. It was so romantic, just like a modern day Romeo and Juliet.” Keyhole recalled fondly,
putting his own cards on the table.

“There was no double suicide.” Amorphous Shape responded, sounding confused. “Both brides still live.”

“There were a couple of murders though.” Teeth snickered. “But that ain’t public knowledge, right Eight Ball?”

“Nuh uh.” Eight Ball shook his head and mimed zipping his mouth shut.

“Do you reckon she’d come back to visit if we threw a party? She could bring her missus.” Keyhole asked enthusiastically.

“It’s not the same though.” Teeth whined. “It’s not a real party without Bill, and he barely came to the last one. Or the last few hundred parties, since he started hunting down that scientist of his.”

“Didn’t Pyronica say he might be giving up the hunt a few weeks ago?” Amorphous Shape asked hopefully.

“Sure, she said that, but then she left with him to work out some ‘issues’ and usually that means a bit of wham bam thank you ma’am against the Time Police and then we’re back in business, but do you see him back here? We haven’t gone on a real heist in ages, we haven’t had a real party in ages, and as for some good old-fashioned flagrant tomfoolery, forget about it.”

“Careful.” Amorphous Shape warned Teeth. “You’ll start to sound like Kryptos if you keep complaining like that.”

“Ugh, low blow AM.” Teeth sneered.

“It would be really nice.” Keyhole spoke up. “If things could go back to the way they were again. When Bill was happy. I don’t think that whatever he’s doing is making him happy anymore, and it’s real sad, you know. I think the Boss deserves to be happy. When he’s happy, we’re all happy.” Xanthar grunted in agreement.

“I’ll be happy when he comes back here and fixes the joint.” Teeth frowned at the crumbling edges of the dimension, very aware that the space they called their home was falling down around them, that one entropic step closer to obliterating the Nightmare Realm for good.

“If that’s even possible.” Grunted Eight Ball, the monster picking up his cards again, resigning himself to another game.

“If anyone can fix it, Bill can.” Keyhole declared confidently, grabbing his own cards and throwing himself into another game to distract himself from the very same thing the rest of the Henchmaniacs didn’t want to face. The destruction of their reality. “We just have to sit tight and trust that he knows what he’s doing. He always does.”

Another chunk of matter crumbled down from the edge of the dimension, crashing obviously in the distance, the very fabric of space unravelling bit by bit like a decrepit house.

The Henchmaniacs exchanged glances, neither agreeing nor contesting Keyhole’s optimistic statement, the stirrings of doubt beginning to seep into even the most loyal of Bill’s crew.

Eventually Eight Ball spoke.
Walking back through the temple after his dramatic exit via the window felt a lot like what Ford remembered Stanley calling ‘the walk of shame’. He certainly felt shameful, all the frilly gilled nurses watching him warily, several of the soldiers and civilians in the compound also giving him a notably wide berth, as if they expected Ford to defenestrate himself at any moment.

He was walking beside their leader though, so that distance could have been due to reverence, not fear.

The Oracle seemed to command a great deal of reverence and judging from the awed and grateful expressions on the faces of the acolytes and civilians, that reverence was not born of fear of retribution.

The people here looked at Jheselbraum like she was their saviour.

If what she was telling him was true, she might well be.

The way she tried to save him from Bill’s designs before they fully panned out would indicate as much, and judging from the diversity of the gathered refugees and citizens of her mountainside temple, The Oracle made a habit of reaching in to intervene, pulling people out of desperate situations to provide something better for them.

“All of this has been built through the cooperative efforts of many people. Pious people, people who join in the fight against Cipher’s evil, people with nowhere else to go. You are not the first person that no longer has a home to go back to thanks to his callous actions. But we can redeem the parts of our lives we’ve lost through working together to ensure peace for all.”

Jheselbraum gestured to the ornate tapestries and stunning visual architecture of her domain, the sweep of her hand showcasing happy creatures and individuals working in cooperation, everyone adorned with the pinks and blues of the bubbles that floated through the temple, depictions of axolotls plastered on their sleeves and the tapestries on the walls.

It seemed like quite the utopia until Stanford noticed the disparities visible.

Several militant looking individuals marched around with a string of the same purple and orange crystals strung about their waists, dangling from their holstered weapons, blasters and knives worn out in the open. The strung crystals were similar to the ones Jheselbraum had slung around her waist. Perhaps they weren’t merely decorative as Stanford had assumed.

“Some of your people are armed.” Stanford nodded to the soldiers.

“You carry your own weapons, do you not? These people have lived through hardship, and to soothe their minds they pre-empt the attack that could come at any moment. While we offer sanctuary here, we are not ignorant of the dangers of the outside world. We guard the civilians here against it, but some of us seek it out to smother its flame. To protect those who cannot fight.” Jheselbraum looked down at Stanford, her seven eyes impassive as they searched his expression for something.
“Do you have people to protect?” She eventually asked. “Or people you wish had never been harmed by circumstances you could have easily prevented? Things you regret?”

Stanford’s thoughts dipped into a pool of regret for a moment, focusing on the people he couldn’t protect from Bill (Willow, Susan, Fiddleford) or the people he couldn’t protect from the pirates (Sandeep, En-Pathy, Quinlar) or the people he couldn’t protect from himself … (Stanley).

He made an aborted nod, not willing to implicate himself with a verbal answer.

“I do too.” Jheselbraum confided, and as they walked through the rooms of the temple they came across a room that housed a large obelisk, a looming column of black and gold stone dominating the thoughts of the citizens here, and the décor of the room.

Words were engraved upon the obelisk, and as Stanford looked a little closer, he realised the words were names, hundreds of names, carved into the rock like a memorial. Like a tombstone.

“It is bravery, to die in battle against a great evil, but it is a terrible loss regardless.” Jheselbraum said solemnly. “Of my many regrets, most of them are carved here. A reminder that there is still more to do. That there is already so much that has been lost.”

Stanford looked at the obelisk, dreading the growing realisation that all of these names were lives taken needlessly by Bill, if what The Oracle said was true. It was undeniable proof of a nature that Ford had attempted to deny in Bill, simply because he hadn’t seen blatant evidence of it himself. Faced with a literal monument to Bill’s homicidal tendencies Stanford couldn’t lie to himself any longer.

“Countless lives could have been saved if I had been listened to sooner. I urged those around me to destroy Cipher, but none attempted, or succeeded. Those with the power to effect real change ignored my call, employing only half measures, or none at all. With every failed attempt his powers only grew, and your contribution to his power may be the most catastrophic of all.”

Deliberately obtuse, Stanford didn’t look away from the obelisk as he replied. “The portal?”

The Oracle tsked, a disapproving sound that made Ford tear his eyes away from the monument, feeling the scorn of her gaze sevenfold.

“Do not play the fool, scientist. This pretence of yours is insulting. Anyone could have built his portal. You could give any halfway competent pawn those blueprints and garner the same result. You do not need to be special to follow instructions. You could have been anyone, a nobody, and you should have remained as thus, if not for your erroneous feelings.”

Ah.

Stanford shrunk into his coat, avoiding eye contact now, choosing to look at the floor rather than face either The Oracle’s damning accountability or the monument to his misjudgement standing in the middle of the room. His guilt complex was flaring up, compounded in the knowledge that The Oracle knew the lengths and depths of Stanford’s failings. She knew of his weakness for Bill, and the consequences of that continual weakness.

“We both know what powers those cubes of his. The ones he used to incinerate a planet in a blink of an eye. Without that surplus energy he would not be half of the threat he is now. When reality unravels the blame lies with you.” She said tersely, not mincing any words at all.

Stanford, through his travels, was unused to this directness. He was unused to this pinpointed accountability piercing him through his core. It was one thing to argue with his own guilt, spinning
numerous justifications, and another thing to stand up for his actions to someone who knew exactly what he did, and what the consequences of those actions could be.

“I didn’t know –“ Stanford began half-heartedly, but Jheselbraum cut him off sharply.

“I said do not play the fool. You’ve done enough of that already. The time for denial is over. Now is the time for redemption, and the opportunity, should you take it.”

“Redemption? How?” Stanford looked up at her hopefully, his own guilt latching onto whatever could be promised to abate the knowing feeling of having done wrong. In the room with the obelisk, the extent to which Stanford had done wrong by falling for Bill felt colossal, and he would do anything to set his mistakes to right, rather than languish in all he had done to doom those around him.

Jheselbraum pursed her lips, considering something, before her expression softened, gesturing for Stanford to follow her out of the memorial room.

“Come. We’ll have the nurses tend to you. Lest your injuries worsen unchecked.”

Stringing out her promise of redemption, she stayed close lipped while they walked to the medical bay, Stanford trailing along behind her like a hooked fish on a line.

Jheselbraum knew she didn’t have to prove herself further to the human now, or pander to him. She had caught him in the net of his own guilt, and now she could leave him dangling, until he sought her out, wanting to prove himself to her, enacting her will.

She was very good at this, but then again, she’d had a lot of practise.

They left the obelisk behind, the black granite and gold lettering detailing hundreds of names. If Stanford had paid more attention to the people listed on the stone, rather than the enormity of the loss it represented, he would have recognised a familiar name inscribed on the marble monument of The Oracle’s regrets, dating back 29 years.

Shailesh.

Several days passed in the lavish mountainside temple in Dimension 52, and while Stanford had encountered plenty of amphibian nurses, pious acolytes seeking to convert him, and scornful military recruits, he found the same sort of solitary audience with The Oracle to be a scarce luxury.

Stanford wanted to seek her out. He had a million more questions to ask her, questions about Bill, about the future, about this redemption she mentioned. He would have gone storming through the temple looking for her in order to do just that, but he found himself surprisingly bashful, the censorial scorn of one sentence curtailing his more impudent instincts.

“You’re very demanding, aren’t you?”

Stanford was used to being demanding. He was coming to realise that it was a characteristic he’d allowed to flourish, unchecked for quite some time.
With the Oracle busy, as her servants had repeatedly told Stanford, he had no choice but to commit himself to introspection, hardly finding satisfying conversation with the civilians who lived in the temple. He couldn’t have a decent conversation with any of them about Bill without everyone in earshot gasping, covering their ears, making bubble shapes in the air around their heads to ‘protect themselves from his influence’ or telling him off for mentioning ‘the beast’.

It all seemed rather silly to Stanford, that these beings thought that by simply uttering Bill’s name they would draw his notice. Stanford imagined living on a mountain inhabited by an anti-Bill militia led by Bill’s long time enemy (if The Oracle was to be believed) would draw more attention and be more of a threat to one’s safety and sanity than simply mentioning Bill by name.

If only they knew how lazy Bill truly was. If only they knew that while he could see, he wouldn’t often look. Then again, Stanford was coming to realise that there was a wealth of things he didn’t know about Bill, so there may have been a time when he would reign fire down indiscriminately on those who used his name.

Stanford was coming to realise that the standard of behaviour Bill applied to him didn’t apply to the rest of the multiverse, and Stanford’s personal experiences with Bill were not universal.

“You’re very demanding, aren’t you?”

Stanford got away with being demanding with Bill for some reason, making constant demands of him, things that would try the patience of lesser beings, but the difference was that when Stanford demanded things of Bill, the god tended to at least listen.

He gave into Ford’s demands to smuggle the book from the library. He provided summaries when requested. He didn’t hurt the time police at Stanford’s behest, and there were countless other favours that Bill had done for him that Stanford was realising he really didn’t have to do.

“Technically the list of things that you owe me for is longer than an ouroboros anaconda, but I’m letting you off easy because I happen to like your smarts.”

The more Stanford thought on Bill’s words, the more he came to believe it wasn’t just his ‘smarts’ that gave him such special treatment. Bill’s feelings may have been more genuine than Stanford had assumed all along, and it became apparent when contrasting his ex-muses actions with those of Jheselbraum.

She made it clear by her absence that she did not owe Ford her regard. If anyone owed remittance in this situation it was Stanford, who quite possibly owed this woman his life, and that was not an easy debt to repay.

That was an unnerving thought.

On the seventh day in the temple, having endured regular check-ups and treatments to minimise the scarring on his skull and accelerate his healing post-surgery, Stanford had made his mind up that he would leave after this final examination.

He would pack his things, seek out one final audience with her to thank her for her intervention, and continue on his journey through the multiverse. He didn’t find the answers he sought here, and he remained just as purposeless as before, still adrift. He reasoned that since it didn’t seem as though his presence was wanted here, then he would not burden The Oracle with his presence.

The gilled nurse ran her scanner over his skull one last time, wiping away the last of the salve that had swiftly been healing his scalp. The headaches had stopped, and it was as if Stanford never had
his head sliced open and a thick metal slab inserted in his cranium. A marvel of modern
interdimensional medicine.

This had become a daily routine, his nurse applying the salve, scanning his skin with infrared light,
and watching the skin knit together. Usually she would end her check-up by wrapping his head
with bandages and poultices, encouraging him to rest.

As she wiped the last of the salve away, she did not reach for the bandages, and clapped her hands
on his shoulders.

“That’s you done.”

Stanford turned around in his chair to thank the nurse, but when he turned, he saw her eyes widen,
staring at something behind Ford, before she bent over into a deep bow.

“You’ve done fine work, faithful one.”

Stanford twisted his torso back around to see Jheselbraum standing in the doorway, adorned in
those strings of hanging gems, her robes lavish velvet, flowing to the ground. Her bald head was
veiled with iridescent fabric, beads that looked like bubbles dangling down her forehead.

Before Stanford could even open his mouth to greet her, she spoke.

“You are leaving.”

“I – yes.” Stanford admitted, bowing his head slightly. “I’ve troubled your hospitality enough, and
I really must be going.”

“Know where you’re going, do you?” She asked, sounding smug, like she already knew he didn’t
have anywhere to go. He just couldn’t stay here.

“Well –“

“There is no need for pretence. Come.” She gestured for Stanford to follow her. “I know where you
are headed. We are long overdue for a talk, you and I, and there are things I must divulge to you
before you leave us. Matters of destiny, if you are willing to listen.”

Stanford perked up at that, got to his feet and gathered his coat, his belongings already sequestered
away in the nano-briefcase in his pocket. Without waiting for him, Jheselbraum already stepped
out into the corridors, knowing Ford would follow.

Jogging to keep up with her, Stanford was led through the temple. He’d had plenty of time to
marvel at the elaborate architecture of each passing room, having attempted to explore as much of
the building as he could, but there were still some areas of the temple that remained foreign to him,
and Jheselbraum seemed to be leading him somewhere even her militant staff were not permitted to
follow.

In this part of the temple the high ceilings and large arching doorways remained, but the furniture
became progressively larger, suited less for the human sized subjects The Oracle housed and more
for the woman herself.

Indeed, as she paced further into this part of the temple, she seemed to drop a fraction of the
haughty airs she maintained around her followers, dropping her shawl on a tabletop and toeing out
of her shoes.
“It will be easier to talk in here. I’m certain you’ve noticed, but my people get somewhat jittery when Bill is mentioned.”

Stanford’s demeanour instantly lit up with curiosity, gratified that he could finally have a conversation about Bill with someone who was likely the most qualified to do so.

“I’m sure they have their reasons, if what you said about the fires is true.”

“You’ve seen the wreckage with your own eyes and you still question the truth of it.” Jheselbraum huffed a sound that could have been an indignant laugh, if she were the type to laugh so casually. Even in her own chambers she still seemed lofty and composed.

“Things aren’t always as they seem.” Stanford responded, and Jheselbraum shook her head slightly.

“A lesson you’ve learnt from Bill’s actions, yet you still use that logic to defend him. I’m sure if he were to see the way you speak of his actions he would be very pleased. He likes nothing more than blind thoughtless loyalty. You don’t even realise you’re doing it, do you?”

“I’m not defending his actions –” Stanford began, almost arguing with himself at this point.

“But you are defending him. This quest of yours to understand the why’s behind the destruction he creates amounts to condoning the destruction by extension.” Jheselbraum narrowed her seven eyes at Ford, looking him up and down. “You’re indoctrinated already, and there are only so many times one can say ‘yes he just ruined everything for everyone and caused enormous loss, but he’s had such a rough childhood’.”

“I’m not –“ Stanford’s rebuttal died in his throat as he realised that he was, yet again, being demanding, and shouldn’t be so accustomed to it. “I just want to know.”

“Of course you do.” Jheselbraum said flatly, before she walked across the room and pushed open the double doors leading to the balcony, striding through.

Stanford followed her, uncertain if that was an invitation or a dismissal, and saw a very large iridescent pool rimmed with precious stones out on the balcony, The Oracle bending down to retrieve herself a drink from a cabinet on the balcony.

“If I’m going to be talking about Bill, I’m going to need something bracing to drink.” Jheselbraum called out over her shoulder as she withdrew a bottle of shimmering liquid from the cabinet, turning to look at Stanford as she grabbed glasses. “Do you drink?”

Releasing the tension in his shoulders with an exhale, Stanford rubbed the back of his neck and
managed a roguish grin. “More and more since, well, you know.”

“Since Bill.” She finished for him, pulling out a second smaller glass and pouring a hearty amount of the shimmering purple substance in Stanford’s cup, a more modest amount sitting in hers. “He tends to have that effect on people.”

Jheselbraum walked back over to the edge of the pool and sat down on the ground beside it, setting the two drinks on the floor. She then hiked her skirts up once more, bearing the burns on her legs briefly, before she slid her legs in the pool, the swirling rainbow liquid soothing the inflamed skin.

When Jheselbraum sighed in relief and took a small sip of her drink, kicking her legs back and forth in the water, she seemed more human and more approachable than Stanford had ever seen her, and he felt the apprehension and caution he maintained in her presence drop ever so slightly.

“Take your shoes off and dip your feet in. It’s really quite pleasant.” Jheselbraum urged him.

Following her prompting, Stanford took his boots off and rolled his trousers up to his knees, sitting beside her and dipping his feet in the pool. She passed him his drink and watched as he took an obliging sip of the liquid, her lips turning up in a tight smile of approval once Stanford drank.

“Is this Cosmic Sand?” Stanford questioned, once his tongue was buzzing with the taste. “I’ve had it before.”

“Oh have you now?” Jheselbraum asked politely.

“Back in a bar on Meccai. It’s quite lovely.” Stanford nodded, looking at the colours shimmer on the surface of the drink, missing the way Jheselbraum’s smile widened at that.

Jheselbraum was smiling because she knew that whatever one percent swill they called Cosmic Sand on Meccai couldn’t compare to the undiluted power of pure Cosmic Sand, the kind Time Baby himself drank, and that the ignorant human sipping from the generous cup she’d poured for him would be inebriated and pliant before his second sip.

Stanford smiled back at her, but not for the same reason.

“It is strength, you know. To smile and still be joyful after all Bill has done to you. That you still hold onto so much of yourself, while losing so much of it as well is a testament to you as an individual. Not everyone can pull through a crossroads like that and still find the will to be happy.”

Stanford’s smile fell slightly. “I wouldn’t say I’m happy, per se.”

“No, you wouldn’t be, would you?” Jheselbraum examined him, her seven eyes seeming to see right through to Stanford’s soul. “But you are close enough to it to pretend, and that is half the battle.”

Stanford didn’t know what to say to that, and so he took another sip of his drink. The millions of questions he had for The Oracle had temporarily dried up due to social awkwardness, but thankfully Jheselbraum seemed to account for this.

“Bill used to have a saying. Lie until you’re not lying anymore.” She was looking out over the balcony, but she didn’t miss the way Stanford’s head turned the moment she spoke of Bill. “It may have started as a way to cope with his mysterious past, but it became something of a lifestyle for him, and a destructive one at that. Living a lie. I have seen it ruin him.”

“Do you know about his past? About what happened to him?” Stanford asked.
“I do not know the full story, no.” Jheselbraum admitted. “It became known that his dimension was destroyed, but I do not truly know how, or why. I suspect he was to blame. We first met some time after the destruction, and he would not talk about it, under any circumstances.”

“How did you meet?” Ford watched Jheselbraum, the sunlight hitting the balcony in a picturesque way, glittering in the iridescent bubbles that floated idly by the pool.

“There was a being who could see all in the universe, a reclusive being, who refused to get involved with interdimensional matters. He could teach the art of endless sight, it was said, but as he was somewhat of a hermit he rarely took on students. One had to prove themselves worthy of his tutelage you see, and as I was the most gifted of my peers I set about to besting the tests required for this being to consider teaching me. The tests were incredibly difficult, purposefully so, for this being did not want anyone to pass them. He didn’t want to teach anyone else to see, for his sight had brought him only misery. He did not expect me to succeed his tests, but I did, and when I showed up in his domain to speak with him, Bill was already there.”

Ford watched the way Jheselbraum’s mouth turned down bitterly, even recounting it now, and realised that Bill must have hurt her more than he imagined, if even telling the story of how they met was so difficult.

“The being I sought was lonely, you see, and while I was out proving myself worthy, Bill went directly to his cave, and our teacher must have taken pity on him, for by the time I arrived, the great Argus Panoptes already had a student.” Jheselbraum’s lip curled. “Although certainly not a worthy one. Rather than cast him out in favour of me, Panoptes decided he would take on two students, as a compromise, teaching the both of us how to see infinitely.”

“So that’s why he can see so much.” Stanford said, eyeing off Jheselbraum’s many eyes. “Can you see like Bill as well?”

“I cannot.” Jheselbraum confessed, looking down at Ford. “At the culmination of our studies, before the final rite to grant infinite sight, Bill turned on me, sabotaging my chance to see the universe. I bear the mark of his betrayal on my legs and have ever since that day.”

“He burned you?” Stanford sounded shocked, although he had already seen the scars.

“He wanted the power all to himself, you see. He was ambitious, even then. Ambitious and far too clever. Clever enough to be ruthless. To cheat. To lie. To use people and discard the remnants.” Jheselbraum gave Stanford a pointed look. “As you well know. After he stole the power of sight, he fled. Our teacher took pity on me and gifted me one of his eyes.”

She pointed to her central eye, the piercing blue iris standing out against the orange and lilac hues of her other eyes. “As compensation. An eye of prophecy, to see into the future if I could not see everything else. Of course prophecy is not always accurate, and it is often more of a burden than a gift. I think he may have just been trying to get rid of it, honestly. Either way, you work with what you have.”

“But you don’t know what happened to him then? Why he did this?” Stanford somewhat insensitively pushed, fixated on Bill.

“The point I was trying to make was that his reasons mean less than his consequences.” Jheselbraum stressed. “I’m sure that you want to hear about how quiet he could be, and how he’d paste on fake joviality and pretend to be having the time of his life every day, while crying all night when he thought he was alone. I’m quite certain you’d grab onto whatever lies would help you paint a pretty picture of how sad and lonely and misunderstood he was, so you could spin all
sorts of justifications to help you absolve your guilt for trusting him in the first place. But I’m telling you, it’s not worth it.”

Jheselbraum turned slightly to face Ford, her expression serious, as she attempted to impart her wisdom onto him.

“It just goes round and round, that logic, and it doesn’t help you. You are stuck in a pattern, and that pattern is trusting him, being betrayed, then trusting him enough to think it will be different the next time, only to find yourself repeating the same cycle over and over. It’s not healthy, and you will never know peace or happiness until you break free of this cycle and become your own person again. When was the last time you made choices for yourself that didn’t revolve around Bill in some way? When was the last time you felt good about your own achievements? When was the last time you had friends, had people close to you, and didn’t fear for your life on a near constant basis? When was the last time you thought about yourself, and not him?”

Her barrage of questions were difficult to answer without implicating himself, and Stanford imagined that was her point really, in being so persistent with them. He became more and more aware now just how much he had to reach to defend Bill, to defend himself. She was calling out the pattern he was playing into, and as he began to realise she was right there was less and less he could say in his defence to pardon this thoughtless adherence to stupidity.

He certainly felt stupid, having it all laid out in front of him.

“I may have –“ Ford cleared his throat awkwardly, before he swallowed his pride and looked down at his knees poking out from the rainbow water. “You may be right.”

“I know I’m right.” Jheselbraum countered, putting one of her large purple hands on Ford’s knee beseechingingly. “You have to know it for it to truly make a difference. I can’t do that for you.”

“And I am very grateful for that.” Stanford hand a hand over his prickly head, exhaling heavily and shaking his head. “I know everything you’re saying here is right, it is right, I’ve known it for such a long time, but I keep – he must have altered something in my head or something because I just keep forgiving him. Not fully, but enough to want him to –“

“He wouldn’t have needed to alter your mind for you to feel like this.” Jheselbraum said gently. “It’s quite common to want to forgive those who we love.”

“Loved.” Stanford corrected her, wanting to at least have that much to say for himself. “Past tense.”

“Love is a force that never truly ends.” Jheselbraum shook her head gently. “Some say it’s the most powerful force in existence. Betrayal from a loved one is more powerful than the same from a stranger, is it not? You do not need to deny that you loved him to prove yourself sane. I used to be quite fond of him myself, in my own way.”

Stanford looked up at her in surprise, his eyes passing over her a second time like he was sizing her up.

“Like a sibling.” Jheselbraum corrected Ford’s assumptions. “Nothing like your relationship, before you ask.”

“Sibling relationships can be complicated.” Stanford offered, remembering his own fraught relationship with Stanley.

Jheselbraum’s lips quirked into what resembled a brief ironic smile. “Quite.”
Jheselbraum took a small sip from her drink and looked out over her dimension, the sunlight hitting the tops of the purple mossy forests, chimes and singing echoing up from the temple below, pink clouds dusting the blue skyline as the sun set. The bubbles hovering on the balcony began to glow now, giving off their own luminescence as night was falling.

It was, for a poignant moment, very peaceful, and Stanford would remember this moment for a long time.

“Our relationships like yours.” Jheselbraum eventually said. “Toxic situations that flourish with repeated abuses of trust, it is common for it to take seven times for partners to truly break apart, to break free from the cycle. So do not feel dour or inept for your tendency to defend him. It is not unusual in these circumstances.”

“You’re right though. I shouldn’t be looking to understand him or defend his reasons for doing terrible things. He’s still done them. To others and to me.” Stanford admitted with a sigh.

“How many times have you tried to cut him out of your life? To leave him?” Jheselbraum asked.

Stanford pondered this for a moment, counting the moments down, wondering if any of his attempts counted as leaving Bill truly when he kept ending up right back where he started again. Eventually he had a rudimentary count.

“Six times.” Stanford declared.

With a kindly smile Jheselbraum squeezed Ford’s knee. “Let’s make this last time the final one, shall we?”

Stanford considered this for a moment, considering all he had lost, and the patterns he found himself in, and the long list of things Jheselbraum had listed that he didn’t do for himself anymore. His life had come to revolve around Bill even when he wasn’t with him, and Stanford had always considered himself an independent person. He wondered when this changed.

He didn’t want to be dependant anymore, stuck in a cycle of going back to what was bad for him. He didn’t want to allow this pattern of returning to Bill fashion him into the very image of madness, repeating the same experiment over and over again and expecting a different result.

Certainly, things may change, but Bill wouldn’t.

“Yes. Let’s.”

“To ending it.” Jheselbraum raised her glass of cosmic sand in a toast, and Stanford mirrored her, raising his own beverage and touching the glass to hers.

“To ending everything. Once and for all.”

Stanford tipped back his glass and took a generous gulp and Jheselbraum watched him, her seven eyes burning satisfaction at him over the rim of her glass, while she drank barely anything at all.

Laying on his back alongside the gem encrusted rim of the pool, Stanford Pines dangled his fingers
through the rainbow water and then held his wet hand up in front of his face, watching the iridescence glisten on the whorls of his fingerprints.

The night air was peaceful around him, the hum of nightly hymns cascading up onto the balcony, and the bubbles floating in the air around him gleamed a soft light that felt as surreal as it was comforting.

He felt so relaxed right now.

That was some damn good Cosmic Sand.

“Wow.” Stanford said, the first thing he’d said for several minutes, as he spent a great deal of time just now examining his hand in silence, watching the light ripple and frame the objects around him like he was gazing upon a masterpiece.

“Wow indeed.” Jheselbraum said dryly, looking down at him with an air of frustrated amusement hinting in the undertones of her voice. “You say this isn’t the first time you’ve drank cosmic sand, yet you’re handling it like a novice.”

“It must have been watered down.” Stanford responded, still tilting his hand to watch the water catch the light with every shift of movement. “To – to make the bartender more money. That sort of thing makes sense on Meccai. You know, I’ve never felt more aware of my molecules in my entire life.”

The dignified and vaunted Jheselbraum let out a derisive snort of laughter, although she seemed just as surprised by the lapse in dignity as anyone, her hand coming up to cover her mouth rapidly.

Stanford didn’t notice though. He was still too enthralled by his hands. Having six fingers really was a novelty, especially when they all caught the light so well.

“There are so many of them, and so much is happening inside my body all at once. All these different processes, millions of stimuli firing off constantly. This really is just a fraction of what he feels all the time.”

“Don’t fool yourself into believing he feels anything at all.” Jheselbraum composed herself, correcting Stanford’s assumption immediately. “It’s all an act.”

“No, it isn’t.” Stanford argued, speaking like he was merely stating a fact. “He showed me once.”

“I’m sure he described a very pretty fiction.” Jheselbraum said dismissively, taking another small sip from her cup.

“No, I mean he actually showed me.” Stanford corrected her, closing eyes with a self-assured smile, missing the surprised look on The Oracle’s face. “He let me look through his eye. It was quite the experience. His existence is quite overwhelming, and so much can happen in the blink of an eye. I saw many things I hadn’t seen before, all while still on earth.”

“What did you see?” Jheselbraum asked, Stanford missing the suspicion on her face with his eyes closed.

Stanford hummed contentedly, the Cosmic Sand enabling his recollection to be a pleasant curiosity rather than a bittersweet remembrance.

“I can place some of the locations now I think. First there was the nightmare realm. Then Inner Meccai. I saw the Hourglass Nebula and it saw me as well. There was a garden, outside of a huge
brick building that was constantly shifting and changing. An empty beach, all purple sand and green water. Lottocron 9. Some sort of satellite city on the edge of a dead planet, with a borealis above it. I saw a cratered orange planet with a large blue moon, I think it must have been Taronja quite possibly. The Cryptix Noire. The Infinitentiary. A world of fire. I saw here briefly, now that I come to think about it. And the last thing I saw was a cave. A huge black cave cut into a planet. It looked like an obsidian geode.”

Stanford opened his eyes to look at Jheselbraum and saw that she looked notably shaken by the locations he described, possibly shocked by the scope of how much Bill could see in the blink of an eye.

“He showed you that? All of it?”

“Just for a split second.” Stanford shrugged as he answered, like it was no big deal. “Once I was in his head he let me take the reigns so to speak, and I just kept blinking non-stop. It’s not like I’d get an opportunity to see all of that just any day, I wanted to make the most of it. To see everything.”

“He let you –” Jheselbraum still seemed shocked, although now her intrigue was winning out and she was leaning forward, sitting on the edge of her seat by the pool, looking at Stanford with interest now. “You’ve seen so much. You could provide details. The world on fire, what do you remember of it? Where there any distinguishing details? Any shapes, places?”

“Just fire.” Stanford answered, surprised by her zeal.

“I’ve always been dying to know what happened to his dimension, and there’s a chance that you’ve seen more of it than anyone in the multiverse. You have no idea what I’d do to find out what happened there. To see what you’ve seen.”

“I thought you said I shouldn’t care about what happened in Bill’s past.” Stanford sat up onto his elbows, frowning at the Oracle. “That it didn’t matter?”

“Of course, it doesn’t matter.” Jheselbraum faltered, before remembering her poise, sitting back rather than looming over Stanford zealously. “It’s just curiosity, that’s all. You should disregard what you’ve seen, unless you can use it in your favour.”

“I’ll try. Do you know some of the places I saw but can’t name? There might be something there I can use in my favour, something I don’t understand yet.” Stanford asked, sitting up properly now, crossing his legs beneath him.

Jheselbraum pursed her lips before contemplating, tapping her finger to her chin.

“The brick building would be what Bill calls his Quadrangle of Quonfusion. It’s his stronghold in the nightmare realm, impervious to invasion, as the rooms and hallways are constantly changing. Stepping foot inside the Quadrangle without Bill’s explicit permission is tantamount to losing yourself in his maze forever.”

That sounded grim, but adrift in the haze of cosmic sand induced gaiety Stanford felt like this was all quite novel, like gathering information for an epic game of D & D & More D. Whatever he could learn would benefit him for his final assault on Bill.

“The purple beach would be the home planet of the Amaphabons. Nearly all of its inhabitants were slaughtered by Bill and his cronies in an attempt to draw the great axolotl’s ire. No doubt why it was so empty when you gazed upon it.” Jheselbraum continued. “You would have met some Amaphabon refugees in the temple here. I collected them when their society was at risk and
embraced them to our cause. They have greater reason than many to work against Bill’s evil, although that could be said for anyone living here in this dimension.”

“It’s funny.” Stanford began, picking up straight away from Jheselbraum’s censorial glance that him positing something ‘funny’ right after her tale of displacement and genocide would not be well received, but he continued his train of thought anyway, his inebriation convincing him it was a good idea. “In a way, you almost have Bill to thank for this gathering of allies you’ve amassed. Like a symbiotic relationship. We have quite a few of those on earth you see, and its when the smaller weaker creature benefits from –”

“I know what a symbiotic relationship is.” Jheselbraum snapped, cutting him off. “However I do not have ANY relationship with Cipher, nor am I the weaker creature.”

“But you’ve built your society up from the dregs of his attacks. The more people he displaces, the more recruits you have. You can’t deny there’s a correlation.” Stanford foolishly argued.

Jheselbraum seemed to stop and force herself to take a deep breath here, reigning back her temper as it strained to burst out. Eradicating this frustrating human was becoming more tempting with every passing moment of impudence, yet it was clear from all that Bill had shown him that Stanford Pines was important to the triangle. He’d been inside his head, he knew more about Bill than Jheselbraum did in some ways, and he clearly would play a seminal role in taking Bill down due to those factors, but it was how gratingly similar he could be to Bill that had Jheselbraum itching to knock him into the pool and hold him under the water until he stopped twitching.

Pulling herself together again, Jheselbraum answered smoothly. “I would call that cause and effect more than correlation, wouldn’t you?”

Stanford shrugged, and drummed his fingers against his calves, still watching Jheselbraum attentively. Or as attentive as he could be while absolutely hammered.

“The satellite city you saw may benefit you.” Jheselbraum added, steering the conversation back to the matter at hand. “It sounds like it may be Artisanal Logos, a commerce hub built up around the ruins of Central Logos. There is a lawyer who resides there who, it is rumoured, holds a loophole that can free a person from one of Cipher’s onerous deals completely. If you’ve any lingering stipulations that prevent you from attacking Cipher directly, or conspiring to end him, it may be worth your while to present your case to Mr Loophole and see if he can sever those final ties between the two of you, once and for all.”

“We did have a deal.” Stanford nodded, tilting his head to consider it. “I’m not sure it prevents me from acting against him though. If it were restrictive like that I’m sure I would have noticed by now.”

“What was your deal?” Jheselbraum asked, blinking her seven eyes at Stanford curiously.

Stanford laughed awkwardly and looked away at the surface of the pool, his cheeks heating up with embarrassment.

“It’s not relevant. It won’t interfere with what we’re trying to do.”

“But don’t you want to break it? To cut the last remaining tie you have to him? To rid yourself of him completely?” Jheselbraum pressed expectantly.

Stanford chose to study the water instead of providing Jheselbraum with a direct answer.

It was daunting, to break his deal with Bill, the deal that seemed so beneficial to him at the time it
was made. The deal ensured that Stanford would never be alone, but Bill’s company was no longer as reassuring as it once was, and he couldn’t keep justifying going back to the God. There was something that had become familiar and reassuring about having the God in the back of his mind, and severing that final link seemed like a point of no return to Ford, while everything he had done thus far seemed at least somewhat redeemable.

Studiously ignoring Jheselbraum’s attempts to pry, studying the water, Stanford rubbed a hand through the stubbly growth on his head, and was surprised when his concerted scrutiny of the water revealed something new to him amidst the iridescent swirls.

“What happened to my hair?”

“Well, it’s not there anymore. That’s generally what happens when you shave it.” The Oracle retorted dryly.

“No, I mean – the colour.” Stanford reiterated, puzzled by his own reflection.

“Is it not natural for older humans to have grey hair? You are approaching sixty, Stanford. What did you expect?”

“I just –“

He realised why his reflection felt so jarringly wrong. His hair wasn’t growing back its customary auburn and when he realised why he suddenly looked sufficiently senior the epiphany threw him a loop.

“It’s true. With me in your head you won’t have a single grey hair. That’s the sort of longevity you get from sharing headspace with a God. You thought you weren’t getting any perks from this arrangement?”

“He really is gone then, isn’t he? From my head I mean. The metal plate worked.” Stanford realised, stunned by this.

“There is a chance he could still use his dominion over dreams to contact you, however he would no longer have the ability to lurk there while you’re conscious, nor would he be able to take possession of your body again with the plate installed. That was the intended use, although if grey hair is the only side effect we should count ourselves lucky.” Jheselbraum remarked.

Stanford was still processing this change, his ability to adapt to the realisation somewhat stilted by the amount of cosmic sand he’d imbibed. It was slowly dawning on him that, deal or no deal, he had found a way to cut Bill out of his mind, and the decision to do so was utterly permanent.

Unlike his dramatic separation on the Bibliosphere there was no going back from this. He had cut Bill off, for good this time.

Unlike getting his deal dissolved by a lawyer, Stanford couldn’t ever change his mind and come back asking for a new deal with Bill to let him into his head. The metal plate was absolute. It was implanted into his skull now, shielding his thoughts through and through. There was no way he could undo what he had done, barring slicing his head open, and that didn’t seem like the sort of thing he could safely do anywhere but here.

Without the option to go back and waver along that line of indecision, the only way for Stanford to move was forward, and as hard as that seemed, it was much easier to comprehend now that he’d effectively burned the bridges behind him.
“He really is gone.” Stanford repeated, and then huffed a hysterical laugh, cradling his head in disbelief.

Stanford’s laughter petered off into relief, and when that wild whoop of frightening freedom wore off, he looked up at Jheselbraum’s face, her features baring understanding in all seven of her eyes.

“We’re not free of him yet. Not truly.” She said solemnly, before her lips turned up at the edges slightly. “However, I have seen a path towards such freedom.”

“Would that have anything to do with my destiny?” Stanford probed eagerly, that old familiar fervour filling him once more. It was rekindling, that belief that he was destined to do great things, and he was sitting in the presence of an Oracle, the most qualified person to verify this for him.

“You mentioned speak of destiny before. Just recently.”

“I did indeed.” Jheselbraum nodded and leaned closer to Stanford. “You will be instrumental in the strike. There is a very special part to play for you. I have devised a plan for a weapon that is strong enough to dispatch Bill once and for all, and I need you to gather its components from across the galaxy and assemble it.”

“So I’m building a weapon? That’s my destiny?” Stanford raised his eyebrow, taking that in. “Well that’s not much different from building the portal, really, is it?”

“The portal was not yours to wield, however the difference here is that you will build this weapon and deliver the killing blow yourself.” Jheselbraum divulged, her central blue eye gleaming brightly, her fervour contagious almost. “You are needed Stanford Pines. Needed to blot out the stain of Bill Cipher’s existence before he devastates the entire multiverse leaving only fire and destruction in his wake. You are called by a crucial destiny to become what you were always meant to be. You are involved in a great prophecy.”

“The zodiac spell in the cave?” Stanford questioned, trying to piece this all together. His hand was in the spell’s circle, the six fingered symbol the same as the one adorning his journals.

“More than that. I have seen it.” Jheselbraum reached down, her hands cupping either side of Stanford’s face for emphasis, her central eye glowing azure and true. “You have the face of the man who kills Bill Cipher.”

Stanford was stunned, taking that in.

It seemed like something nearly impossible, but The Oracle said it with such intensity that Stanford couldn’t help but believe it was true. Maybe that was the power of prophecy, true prophecy. When divulged, everything suddenly clicked into place. The stars aligned, the world made sense, and every setback and failure plaguing Stanford’s life all pointed him in the direction of what he was meant to do.

Of course, he was meant to be the one to kill Bill Cipher. He had to be the one to do it, the only one who could do it. Thinking back on all that had passed between them, all the heartache and harm and danger Bill had put him through, thinking on Bill’s weaknesses, how he alone had been shown these weaknesses, it all made sense.

Of course, he should be the one to kill him. It seemed only fair, that after Stanford’s long journey the answer was the one that should have presented itself to him in the first place. He had to end Bill, to destroy him. He was the only person in the universe who understood exactly what and who he was, and why he needed to be stopped, and it would be bittersweet but exactly the right thing for Stanford to take Bill’s life from him, after Bill had taken so much from Stanford as well.
Bill had taken his future from him, it was only fair that Stanford did the same.

Rather than the prospect of killing Bill seeming like an abstract impossibility, now that Stanford knew the Oracle had seen it happen and had a plan for a weapon that could accomplish the task, his hope was renewed. He could live a life free from Bill’s influence, free from his influence on the people around Ford. He could learn to trust again, learn to live again, learn to be free of these constant thoughts of Bill that plagued him every waking and sleeping moment.

It was the checkmate that he was waiting for, and this time he wouldn’t be blundering into it.

He’d be charging towards it, with both eyes open. No more running.

“How do I do it?” Stanford blurted out eagerly, reflecting Jheselbraum’s fervour in the back of his blue grey eyes.

“You will collect the components to build a quantum destabiliser to disintegrate Bill’s form on a molecular level, and when the device is complete you will return to the Nightmare Realm and stop Armageddon.” Jheselbraum said with a smile, delighting in Ford’s zeal.

Releasing his head and leaning back, she stood and walked over to the counter on the edge of the balcony, grabbing a piece of paper. In her hand it looked like a palm card, but it would need to be folded several times over to fit in Stanford’s pockets.

“I have written down instructions and coordinates for where you will find the parts needed to build the destabiliser, and when it is complete you will rendezvous with some of my agents who will outfit you with further weaponry, in case it is needed. I have chosen your path carefully, so that you may still find the answers you seek, while reaffirming your choice to stand against him.”

Handing him the paper, Jheselbraum looked down at Stanford as he got to his feet, drying his feet on the nearby towel and rolling his trousers back down before standing to face her, holding his hand out for the paper.

“I imagine by now it is clear what must be done, but just to rid you of any lingering doubt you will see for yourself what you will be stopping.”

“I know what I’ll be stopping.” Stanford accepted the paper Jheselbraum passed him, along with all he had been charged to do. “I’m not trying to excuse him anymore. Bill is a monster.”

“So, he is.” Jheselbraum’s serious expression stretched into a sly smile. “It’s so nice to finally meet someone with whom I can see eye to eye with on this issue.”

Stanford smiled back at her, although his smile didn’t hit the same tone hers did. There was something hiding behind her smile that Stanford couldn’t fully comprehend.

“Shall we have a toast? To your success? Another drink?”

She was already turning around, back to the bar, preparing another hefty refill of his glass of cosmic sand.

“I still have questions.” Stanford replied, unable to see what she was doing up at the bar.

“And they will be answered. Perhaps we should take this inside and have our drinks there. It’s getting quite late. You can put your shoes on.”

Ushered into re-dressing, Stanford obliged, still wanting the answers to his questions. Without
waiting for him, Jheselbraum walked through the curtained archway leading back into her room, holding both drinks in her hands.

Ford tugged his boots on, threw his coat over his shoulder, and hurried to follow her.

She sat on her large chaise lounge, holding her drink daintily, and lowered Ford’s drink down to him, holding it out for him until he accepted it.

“About the things Bill showed me —” Stanford started.

“A toast!” Jheselbraum interrupted him. “To the man who saved the world. To you, Stanford Pines.”

She raised her glass, and Stanford did the same, politeness dictating he take a gracious sip of his beverage as she did. Stanford didn’t notice Jheselbraum merely wetting her lips against the brew, watching him with calculating eyes.

When he finished his large sip, Ford exhaled a breath, before continuing on with his train of thought.

“About the obsidian cave. Do you know what it was? Who lives there? It felt like someone was watching me when I saw it.”

Jheselbraum smiled, although the smile looked a little blurry to Ford, and he absently wondered if there was steam from the pool fogging up his glasses. The room seemed to be tilting, and as swept up in Cosmic Sand as he was, that didn’t seem as unnerving as it should have been.

He just saw slivers of Jheselbraum’s smile as the fog grew thicker, smothering his vision, pulling him into unconsciousness.

“Oh yes. I know who lives there.” She replied, and the world was growing darker. “And he’s always watching. In fact, he’s likely watching us right now.”

Ford hit the ground with a thud.

Jheselbraum looked down at his unconscious form and the smile slid from her face, unimpressed disdain taking its place.

Reaching into the sleeve of her robe she withdrew her remote and pressed a button, and within a few seconds Oestia stepped into the room from a side door near the leg of the chaise lounge.

“Did you get what you needed from the human, Mistress?” Oestia asked.

“Certainly, many things that were not known to me before. However, nothing else of importance will come from this man. He knows nothing of the fire.” Jheselbraum curled her lip and waved at Ford’s body.

“Wrap him in his garments with the supplies we’ve prepared for him and port him out of here, near to the closest transport hub. I have set him on his path. He can take it from here.”

“Is he really going to kill Bill Cipher for you, O’ Venerable One?” Oestia questioned curiously, hurrying to manoeuvre Stanford into his coat.

“He will.” Jheselbraum answered. “Or he’ll die trying. Either way he serves my purpose.”

Oestia paused while picking Stanford up off the floor, looking somewhat perturbed by that, and
when Jheselbraum registered Oestia’s hesitation she turned her glowing blue eye to Oestia, exuding waves of calm and reassurance to the soldier with a purposefully saintly smile.

“Do not worry child. He is not only serving a use to me. This is the will of the axolotl.”

Out in the vast expanse of space, amidst a cradle of stars, the Great Axolotl’s gills twitched in irritation, but, like all things, the moment passed, and the God slumbered ever on.

Purple sand and green waves lapping at the shore set an idyllic scene, Pyronica lounging on a sunbed with a cocktail, and Bill hovering beside her doing the same. If not for the blue flames dancing on the water’s surface you’d think this peaceful paradise was being treasured for what it was, instead of the land bearing the brunt of Bill’s latest tantrum.

“Do you feel better now?” Pyronica turned on her sunbed to look at Bill, lowering her white rimmed sunglasses to eye off the triangle.

“I feel slightly less murderous.” Bill replied, keeping his own sunglasses up, a straw poking up underneath them as he continued to sip his drink with his eye-mouth.

The sunglasses were completely unnecessary as the light from the nearest star wouldn’t harm either of them, but they added a sense of whimsy that was sorely needed at this point.

“Is that because we already murdered everyone here?” Pyronica clarified, waggling her eyebrow humorously.

“There’s no point feeling murderous in a place where you can’t murder anyone, is there?” Bill countered flippantly.

“Feel like a change of scenery?” Py suggested with a grin.

“No.” Bill said after a thoughtful pause. “I think this is good.”

“What are you thinking?” Pyronica probed, still watching her friend closely, Bill slurping the last of his drink up through the straw.

“I think…” Bill seemed to inhale a sigh, before exhaling, the lingering tension leaking out of him like a dam breaking. “I think I’m going to try again.”

“Bill.” Pyronica moaned, her bottom lip jutting out, clearly displeased with this conclusion.

“Just one more time. Just one last – it’s just that - I could have handled that better Py. I maybe didn’t mean it, he probably didn’t mean it – I mean, he knows how to lie now and I taught him that
trick. He’s probably just mad that I burned his dumb books.”

“You’re going to go back and he’s going to yell at you, and you’re going to blow up all over again.” Pyronica pointed out. “You should have just killed him last time and you wouldn’t be having this conversation right now.”

“Killing him is taking the easy way out Py, and if I haven’t done that yet why should I do it now? No, you’ll see. He wants good Bill, then he’ll get good Bill. He’s easy to manage when he thinks he’s getting what he wants. I just need to approach this calmly and give him a proper explanation and he’ll get over his whole ‘you’re a monster’ phase and realise what he really wants. You’ll see.”

“So, you’re what? Going to go explain away to him why you burned up his dumb books and he’ll forgive you just like that?” Pyronica asked bluntly.

“I’m going to explain everything. He wants the truth, he can have the whole story. From the beginning. And then he’ll understand.”

“You’re going to tell him everything?” Pyronica sat up straight on her sunbed, pushing her sunglasses up onto her forehead now, shocked. “Like, everything?”

“I have to find him first.” Bill said, discarding his empty drink with a wave of his hand and pushing his own sunglasses up away from his eye. “He’s not been sleeping and he’s getting much better at not being found, so it’ll take more than a few wanted posters and a vague reward this time. I’m going to have to find his exact location and meet him in person, lay it all out on the table for him once and for all.”

“You don’t mean you’re going to –” Pyronica was already shaking her head, perturbed at the very thought of it.

“I have to.” Bill nodded, and threw his sunglasses onto the beach, discarding them to reveal his somewhat bloodshot eye.

“It’s time to go suck up to my old teacher.”

In an obsidian cave in the Dimension of Eternal Night, the ancient being Argus Panoptes heaved a sigh as he watched several occurrences play out across his expansive vision, only half-heartedly looking at the millennia of occurrences he was able to see.

He’d lost the will to look centuries ago, finding the constant squabbles of a multi-verse of beings tiring, their wars and feuding a disenchanting reminder of how some things never change. Seeing the same patterns repeated over and over again made seeing the universe feel less like a wondrous gift and more like being stuck on the couch, watching TV, with a billion channels to choose from, yet every show has the same tired plot repeating itself in reruns where ever you look. The time when he was invested in the world was when he had respect enough for his sight to teach others to see, and since his students had disappointed him so thoroughly, well… He didn’t seek out things to view anymore, but sometimes he couldn’t help the visions when they came to him. Like prophecies, they usurped his mind most rudely, while he was trying very hard
not to see anything at all.

Sucking in a sharp breath, inhaling one of the lingering eye bats in the process, Argus Panoptes let his most recent vision roll over him, and when it finally ceased, he exhaled the eye bat with a large sigh.

“The exact time and date of my death, huh?” Argus grumbled to himself, plucking an eye bat out of the air and throwing it back into his mouth, crunching it between his teeth. “Never thought I’d see the day come, personally, but it’s about damn time. He taught me that trick too. What a pity.”

Standing up, his movements shaking the entire crystalline cave, he trudged from his current resting place towards his inner sanctum, where he kept his few possessions. The ones he hadn’t eaten or destroyed that is.

Picking up a slab of obsidian that he had placed face down on what could have been a mantlepiece in this empty room carved into the rock, Argus turned the slab over and ran his eyeball covered fingertips over what was etched on the rock. A childish picture, burned by laser point into the black crystal, of a happy looking triangle surrounded by eye bats. At the bottom of the slab the picture was signed by the artist, four letters scrawled in chicken-scratch scribble, tugging at Argus’ heartstrings, even now.

“Don’t know why I didn’t see this coming.” He murmured, blinking his many eyes at the drawing. “Maybe I missed something along the way, something that could have prevented this. God knows the kid wasn’t always a killer.”

Moving to sit down at the carved stone table in the centre of the room, Panoptes closed the majority of his eyes wearily, before reluctantly opening them again, actively choosing to look in the one place he might find answers, and some semblance of understanding as to why his student was going to kill him.

He opened his eyes and looked into the past.

“I think I should know before I die. I think I should know what happened to Bill Cipher.”

Chapter End Notes

Thank you for your patience folks. I worked on this for two months and got one person assuming the fic is abandoned lmao, so I personally don't think my turnover for 60+ page chapters is too bad. To that person, do not be shocked when this story continues to update, because it will until I explicitly say otherwise. This chapter is dedicated to you hahah!

I hope folks enjoyed Jheselbraum's chapter. She is a very interesting character imo, and she makes some valid points about blindly forgiving or excusing Bill of his crimes, but she also has her own agenda which is fun. I'm curious to see what people think about her, and what exciting comments you write. I am having fun writing the next chapter too, finally getting to weave that deep Bill lore (or at least my take on it). So stay hype for the next chapter, which will have grumpy old giants, competitive and charitable circumstances, and our understanding of Bill comes full circle.
Sometimes when I'm lonely I sit and think about him. And it hurts to remember all the good times when I thought I could never live without him. And I wonder does it have to be the same? Every time when I see him, will it bring back all the pain?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Stanford came to, he found himself in a different dimension entirely, passed out on a bench by an interdimensional bus stop, nursing a headache and a powerful hangover. An elderly amphibian was sitting on the bench beside him, an appropriate distance away, reading a newspaper while waiting for the bus.

Groaning as he righted himself, Stanford noticed a brand new dimensional translator on his wrist, equipped with dimensional navigation and GPS. There was a message beeping on the screen of the wristband.

_The plans are in your pocket. Good luck, destined hero._

_J._

Patting the pockets of his trench coat Stanford rifled through his belongings, finding a large folded piece of paper that wasn’t there before.

“Quantum destabiliser … assemble the pieces … destiny unfolds in the Nightmare Realm – ugh.” Stanford mumbled, squinting at the page. “What did I sign up for?”

Looking between his tech wristband and the sign on the edge of the bus stop now, Stanford tried to figure out where he was. He wasn’t in Dimension 52 anymore, that was for sure.

“You must’ve had some night, huh?” The geriatric salamander wheezed in a friendly way, looking over his newspaper at Stanford.

Ford blinked and looked over at the man, surprised this stranger was speaking to him. Most of the creatures he encountered in the multiverse chose not to speak to him, and that suited him just fine. Judging from the pale glassy look of the salamander’s eyes he didn’t have the best vision, perhaps that was why he couldn’t discern enough of Stanford to discriminate.

“I used to be a party-lizard back in the day myself. Hoo boy, those days are behind me now, I tell you.” Continued the old man.

Stanford supposed his party days would theoretically be behind him now, considering he was approaching sixty and finally had the grey hair to match, but he wasn’t quite ready to feel his age just yet.

He couldn’t remember much of his time with Jheselbraum last night, to be honest. There was a point in the evening where he just blacked out entirely, but rather than admit he couldn’t hold his spectral liquor Stanford preferred to believe that he was as spritely as this old lizard seemed to infer. Partying all night long was much more favourable than passing out after two stiff drinks.

“Not much for conversation, are ya? Must be some hangover you got.” Pressed the lizard in a
Looking back down to the construction itinerary Jheselbraum had outlined for him, Stanford strained to figure out how much he could remember from last night. He knew they had some helpful discussions about Bill, and how to stop him. They’d formulated a plan to take him down. The Oracle had told him about his destiny, that he was destined to take Bill down himself. His face was the last thing Bill would see.

It was all very encouraging after so much uncertainty, to have a purpose like this again, and for it to make so much sense to him. Everything he’d gone through seemed to be for a reason now that he knew what he must do. Jheselbraum’s prediction had validated all the things Stanford was agonising over, reiterated his moral high ground in slighting Bill, over and over. It was really very freeing, being absolved of guilt like this.

Now Stanford’s compulsion to find out about Bill’s past had lessened greatly. He had no need to look for things to pardon Bill, when he was not to serve as Bill’s defender. He was to be his judge, jury and executioner now, and that role felt far less subjective when told through the eyes of another.

Scanning Jheselbraum’s instructions, Stanford could see she’d left him at this particular bus stop because it ran directly to an interdimensional interchange, and from there he was to go on to Federation Port Kaitz to source materials for the destabiliser.

Skimming through the rest of the plan, Stanford realised there was one thing Jheselbraum left out of the itinerary, perhaps something she hadn’t deemed necessary for his journey. Stanford was curious to see it through though, and it was with that in mind that he turned to the elderly lizard sitting beside him and asked.

“You wouldn’t happen to know how to get to Artisanal Logos, would you?”

While he was by nature, an observer, Argus Panoptes was not an observant man. Pay too close attention to the details happening in the world, and it only served to leave the giant embittered and miserable. So many of his eyes were wilfully blind, as it was just too painful to go on knowing all with any compassion in one’s heart.

Regretfully, Argus always had that sliver of compassion jammed within his ventricles, and he’d had it for as long as he could remember, all the way back to the garden where his only charge was a girl the gods wanted too much. It was why he chose to remain a hermit, why he chose to remain alone, a feared being. Fewer people could manipulate that sliver of compassion when they didn’t know it existed.

Hiding one’s compassion was hardly an effusive way to live one’s life, however, and Argus remembered he wasn’t always like this, miserable and alone.

Many centuries ago, Argus Panoptes had fewer eyes than he had now, but still a great deal too many. What his past self lacked in eyeballs, he made up for in company.

“Really, it’s about time you got back into the swing of things.” Polyphemus said, sitting at the
large obsidian table in Argus Panoptes’ crystalline cave, feeling the bumps on the top of his playing cards, sharing an afternoon cup of wine with his friend.

It was happy hour in the dimension of eternal night, which could technically be any hour really, as there was no sunlight to mark the passage of time, but that didn’t matter to either of the giants. Happy hour was happy in the loose sense of the term, of course, as both giants were generally considered to be miserable sods. Polyphemus had no eye to see with, so clocks and sundials had no relevance to him, and Argus Panoptes, while blessed with many eyes, never cared one jot about being on time for anything.

“Taking on a student is exactly what you need.” Polyphemus continued. “You’ve been a miserable depressed bastard for too long, cut off from the world –”

“Purposefully.” Argus interjected, but his friend continued as if he had said nothing at all.

“And what better method to regain a savage blow to the confidence after losing the little nymph than by bullying some twerps into doing whatever you want them to? I’m really quite proud of you, you know.”

“I don’t need your pride.” Argus replied, flicking through his cards, measuring his play. “And don’t make this out like it’s anything other than what it was. A moment of weakness. Just you watch, I’ll regret this decision within the next hour, you mark my words.”

“Well the advertisement’s already been up on EntropiCraig’s-list for a month so there’s no use whining about it now. When some ingrate shows up at your door, you’ll either have to teach them or eat them.” Polyphemus said gruffly.

“That is if they get to the door in the first place. You see, I set a series of impossible tasks in the advertisement, for all prospective students, to dissuade the gullible. By the time some fool scales hysteria peak, or steals me a thousand pairs of eyes with their bare hands, or bathes in the skin of an acidic bloafish, they’ll have likely reconsidered, given up and gone home, and everyone goes away happier.”

“You’re never happy, a miserable old bastard through and through, you know that?” Polyphemus pointed out.

“Most students never even get to the door, spooked by the illusion in the cave.”

“It’s never bothered me.” Polyphemus retorted.

“That’s because you’re already an eyeless lump. It’d be like looking in the mirror.” Argus snorted a laugh.

“I remember mirrors. Always bumped into them though, no depth perception with just one eye.” Polyphemus remarked, before he set his cards face down. “Got any threes?”

“You don’t even have any threes. Are you sure you know how to play this game, or do I need to remind you again?” Panoptes scoffed, leaning his elbows on the table.

“Look at you, trying to teach already. The apprentices will love you.”

“Well, I’d rather teach nobody.” Panoptes retorted with a huff, setting his cards down on the table and taking a sip of his tankard of wine.

“I wouldn’t if I were you. Nobody’s an asshole.” Polyphemus laughed, before patting the table
until he found his tankard, lifting it in a gentle toast, taking a sip as well.

In that moment, both giant’s affable laughter was all that could be heard echoing through the caverns that wove through the obsidian planet, and things were as they should be. Simple, contented, uncomplicated.

They continued to play their card game, switching to dominos as it became apparent that Polyphemus had no idea what he was doing, and Argus Panoptes felt unburdened and happy, a nice change of pace for him.

An echo of the shrieking of the eye bats bounced off the cavern walls, drawing Argus from his game for a moment, annoyance colouring his features, before abruptly the shrieking stopped.

Polyphemus raised his head at that, listening intently.

“They’re not very good guard dogs are they. Why did they stop?”

Argus shrugged, refusing to extend his eye to go look. He was less inclined to flex his talents as of late, as it had only revealed misery to him, but refusing to look to see who was at the door was just pure laziness.

“Do you think it’s a prospective student?”

“I bloody hope not.” Argus fiddled with his dominos, before looking out into the carved hallway again.

“Perhaps they petrified the intruder?” Suggested Polyphemus.

Both giants were still for a while longer, listening as the silence broke once more, the eye bats now trilling giddily, cooing in a way Argus didn’t often hear. They didn’t seem to be bringing any petrified bodies down the tunnel to present to Argus, so he had no choice but to go investigate.

“I’ll take care of this. You wait there. Don’t look at my tiles.”

“Ha ha, very funny.” Polyphemus said, as if he hadn’t been reaching for Argus’ dominos in that very moment.

Thundering along the cavernous hallway littered with the trophies and tributes of the past, in the direction of the noise, Argus’ footsteps rattled the ground, seismic stomping signalling his imminent approach.

If the intruder wasn’t adequately spooked by the eye bats, or the obsidian illusion, Argus’ arrival ought to do the trick. Only a fool or an idiot would linger when faced with his approach. A wise coward would flee.

Yet as he rounded the corner, out into the alcove where his eye bats were stationed, the old giant saw something that surprised him.

His eye bats were crowding around a small glowing polygon, their wings flapping, their eyes closing gleefully as they nuzzled the smaller creature, who seemed to be petting their eyelids.

The creature in question was a small yellow brick triangle, very small, with black arms and legs dangling out of its edges. It had one wide eye set into his face and wore a small black bowtie upon his bricks, neatly fastened to the mortar. For such a simple creature, he seemed quite expressive, and right now he was clearly having a great time cooing over Argus’ guard dogs.
Despite ‘Argus’ obvious approach, the triangle chose not to acknowledge the giant immediately, fixated, instead repeating ‘who’s a good flying eyeball’ to the eye bat closest to him, who seemed grossly endeared by the affection.

After standing there in the cavern with his arms crossed, his intimidating approach being ignored for a good five minutes, eventually Argus cleared his throat.

“Oh wow. Hi! You must be the eyeball guy!” Observed the triangle giddily, his voice an odd echo of itself, although that didn’t seem to be something he could help.

“The eyeball guy?” Argus repeated flatly.

“They really weren’t kidding.” The triangle laughed.

Argus narrowed his many eyes at the triangle, who stared back openly, blinking his long eyelashes his way. “What a peculiar creature. Alright, who are you and why are you accosting my watch bats?”

“That seems like kind of a redundant question for an all knowing, all seeing being to ask.” The triangle retorted cheerfully.

“I never said I was all knowing.” Argus clarified.

“No, but it’s good press.” The triangle replied with a shrug, going back to scratching the closest eye bat’s eyelid. “You should think about it, Eye Guy. I reckon you could pull it off.”

Argus didn’t know what he was more affronted by, the nickname ‘Eye Guy’ or the fact that this shape seemed utterly unphased by him in all his eyeball covered glory. Running through whatever vague osmosis knowledge he had about shape societies, triangles generally weren’t educated well enough to know about manipulating press and marketing, nor were they ever seen outside of their societies, at the bottom rung of the social ladder more often than not. So to see a triangle, and one so small and young, exploring the universe freely, unphased by the abnormal and bizarre was unheard of to say the least.

Rather than comment on this, Argus decided to act unphased as well, treating the triangle as he would any other prospective student.

“Are you here for the apprenticeship? Because I must say, if you haven’t completed the required tasks and brought me a fitting tribute, you’ll be sent away. Or eaten.” Argus crossed his arms and bared his teeth in a parody of a smile, looking down at the small shape, raising many eyebrows at its diminutive form. “Despite being no bigger than a toothpick.”

“You could choke on a toothpick.” The shape pointed out, its eye curving into a responding smile. “Not the most dignified thing to put on your tombstone, especially if you already paid for it to say ‘he died doing what he loved’. Sounds like eating me would be a waste of your time.”

“So do many things. This conversation included. Have you completed my tasks?”

The shape waved its hand in the air dismissively. “I skimmed through the small print there. Those tasks seemed stupid and unnecessary, not to mention boring. They’re like an idiot filtration system, right? I ignored that stuff and just came straight here. I figure you’ll either teach me or you won’t.”

Argus seemed rather taken aback by that apt observation, and he narrowed some of his eyes at the triangle, trying to place its age. He seemed quite young at first glance, but clearly the being was savvy.
“Well I won’t.” Argus eventually replied, blunt as ever. “Now leave.”

“Nope.” The triangle replied in that same cheerful tone with a brief laugh. “I’m gonna stay until you change your mind.”

“Well I won’t.” Argus argued.

“I think you might.” The triangle shrugged and continued to smile winsomely.

Argus scowled at that, deciding that this facetious creature was clearly angling for a good scare.

Drawing himself up, Argus inhaled deeply before leaning forward, a deafening roar rattling the caverns, the eye bats scattering with fright, one even daring to hide behind the diminutive triangle, but the creature held its ground, staring at Argus all the while.

When Argus finished roaring, the triangle’s eye remained curved into what could only be a smile. It said nothing, merely smiling at the giant, who was unaccustomed to such blatant stubbornness.

Harrumphing, Argus straightened his back, looking down at the triangle.

“You have until I finish my dinner to leave. I want you gone by then, or else I’ll pluck your eye out and eat it. Do you understand?”

Still the triangle said nothing, maintaining unrelenting eye contact with the giant until he had no choice but to lumber away, grumbling all the while.

“Was that a student?” Polyphemus asked when he heard Argus return to the room. “Scare ’em off, did you?”

“That remains to be seen.” Argus grumbled, sliding into his chair once more and checking to see that his friend hadn’t stolen any of his dominos.

“Completed all your impossible tasks, did they?” Polyphemus raised his eyebrow, his hollow eye socket as expressionless as always.

“No. Said they were stupid tasks.” Argus replied, rattled in a way he didn’t want to admit to.

Polyphemus barked out a laugh at that. “Well, there’s no denying that. You wanted to dissuade the gullible, didn’t you? It looks like the first student fate has sent your way is stubborn enough not to fall for your bullshit. Ah, the gods love their irony, don’t they?”

“So they do.” Argus pondered, lacing his fingers together and resting them under his chin, lost in thought.

“Why beat about the bush then? They’re there. You want to teach them, don’t you?” Polyphemus prompted.

“No, I don’t.” Argus answered, his lies lacking tenacity. “I just want to be left alone. I don’t want to teach anyone.”

Looking back on this moment, on this transparent lie, Argus could tell this was when the trouble began. It was all downhill from there.
Stanford had spent the past week travelling to Artisanal Logos, and now he was here he had the perfect opportunity to follow up on the loophole Jheselbraum mentioned in passing.

There was a charity gala hosted in one of the establishments on the busy commerce satellites that orbited the dead planet. Very much a ‘who’s who’ of Artisanal Logos compiled together to bid on expensive things of no real value, in order to effect some charitable good, or so it was presumed.

Sneaking into the gala, having pressed and cleaned the tuxedo that was printed for him when he was Raha’s prisoner, Stanford was trying his best to blend in with the crowd, but the more he tried the more he noticed the divide between the rich and the poor. He may as well have been an entirely different species to these affluent bidders. It was apparent that any one of these moneybags could have funded whatever charitable cause they were bidding over with the loose change in their deep pockets but chose not to do so until such a time as they could be seen doing it. It was all to make themselves look good, and this only made them less appealing in Stanford’s eyes.

Oh well, it wasn’t like he’d be rubbing elbows with them for long.

Spotting his target, Stanford zeroed in to make his play.

“And so really, investing in equities at this point in time, sustainable or not, makes not one jot of difference my boy –“

“Oh, pardon me.” Stanford stepped into the circle of beings gathered around this peculiar figure. The lawyer, Loophole, looked a lot like if someone knocked a blue figure eight on its side, stuck two eyes, a nose and a moustache onto it, and left it hovering over a floating ball wearing a suit jacket. These things combined to create the illusion of a rather portly rich personality, and the lawyer turned to eye Stanford up and down as he interrupted his ambling speech.

“Are you Messer Loophole, the most renowned contracts lawyer in the galaxy?”

“In several galaxies my boy.” Loophole confirmed, raising an eyebrow at Stanford. “What can I do for you?”

“Well, I was hoping I could discuss a legal matter with you –“

“Within office hours my boy, you’ll have to make an appointment like everybody else.” Loophole cut him off, already turning back to his cohort.

“And I was hoping you could sign a copy of my book!” Stanford blurted out, causing the lawyer to turn around again. “Just briefly, please?”

“Oh very well.” Loophole eventually conceded, flattered, turning around to face Stanford as he began reaching into his pocket. “I have always been a supporter of the arts. Shall we?”

“Perhaps if we come over here for a moment, just while I get it out.” Stanford said, ushering Loophole to float with him over to the corner of the hall, where they could have a private conversation.

Loophole waved his colleagues off, and followed Stanford, while Stanford fiddled with the nano briefcase in his pocket, trying to surreptitiously retrieve the notebook he’d compiled with Bill’s
early blueprints in them.

“Oh, I won’t be signing any first drafts, my boy. Published works only please.” Loophole began as Ford pulled the loosely bound, handwritten sheets from his pocket, but Stanford cut him off, pushing his book towards him and flipping through to the page he had made on deals, and the breaking thereof.

“I don’t need you to sign it, I just need you to listen.” Stanford began hurriedly. “I’ve been told you possess the one perfect loophole out of a deal with Bill Cipher and you need to give it to me. It’s of the utmost importance that I –“

“Oh, it’s about that loophole is it? Well I’m afraid it’s not to just be given out willy nilly, dear fellow. I stand to make a substantial profit from that loophole, and I won’t be able to capitalise on it if I hand it out to just any random stranger who comes begging. There’s a vetting process, and an auction running, and it will continue to run up til a point wherein I feel I am being adequately compensated for my loophole, and that is unlikely to happen for another few centuries, so if you don’t mind.”

Retrieving the page on Bill’s initial body blueprints, Ford shoved the paper in Loophole’s face insistently.

“No look, listen. You need to give it to me. 30 years ago I made him a body, and we were working on a portal, but he was going to –“

“Oh goodness me. This is your work?” Loophole examined the paper, looking impressed and then amused. “Hmm, you’re certainly not what I expected, but I suppose superficial assumptions make fools out of the best of us. Delightful to see the original blueprints up close, of course.”

“You know about this?” Stanford gawked at the lawyer, adjusting his glasses.

“Of course I do boy. I earned that loophole for a consult on this very matter from the angular fiend himself. Gave me quite the chortle it did, seeing him trapped as such. I have a contact at the Infinitentiary who’d love to meet you, honestly, and the referral fee for an entrapment officer hire would benefit me nicely. Would you be interested in an introduction with Time Baby’s HR team?”


“He wanted a way out of the old human flesh cage of course. I advised him to work on unravelling that brickwork, he paid me my price and we went our separate ways. I wouldn’t call it a civil consult, but it was certainly a clean result.”

“When? When was this? Did he consult with you from the beginning, or further along? When did he – all this time –“ Stanford questioned angrily, his questions aimed less at the lawyer and more at himself, frustrated and furious that he hadn’t seen through Bill’s calculated attempt to trick him and ditch the body.

“Oh it was a while ago, yes. Can’t tell you the exact date, of course. Client confidentiality and all.” Loophole hummed, twitching his moustache pensively.

With the thought stewing nastily in Ford’s mind that Bill might have known about the brick binding from the beginning thanks to this man, that he could have been playing Ford for a fool the whole time, concocting everything, their relationship, their trust, just to unbind those bricks, his embarrassment and frustration enraged him.
Looking up at the lawyer angrily, Stanford demanded. “You need to give me that loophole. I need it.”

“Well, I’m sorry my boy, but I’m not just going to hand out the most valuable thing in my possession, and you haven’t even offered me anything for it yet.”

“I don’t need to offer you something for it. You wouldn’t have it in the first place if it wasn’t for me!” Stanford growled, frustrated, knowing he had nothing of real value to offer. “You owe me that loophole. If it wasn’t for you, he wouldn’t have been able to manipulate me into –“

“You surely aren’t going to push your own foolishness back onto me now, are you? You must be joking.” Loophole scoffed.

“By withholding that loophole from me, you’re enabling him to get away with countless evils!” Stanford aggrandised. “The deals he’s making – you’re practically aiding and abetting him! That loophole could be saving the universe, and you’re going to sell it to the highest bidder.”

“I certainly am! It’s incredibly valuable.”

“So you just don’t care about the universe, you’re just a soulless, money grubbing, slimy –“

“I’m a lawyer, boy. You can’t guilt me into doing the right thing, I’ve heard it all before. And I’m not about to give in and sell my loophole to some demanding vagabondish fool wearing an old silk weave suit that reeks of fabric renovators and poverty. I think it best you leave, human, lest I call security over to evict you from the establishment immediately. I’m not running a bloody charity.”

Loophole said decisively before turning his back on Stanford and walking back over to the socialites in the centre of the hall, ready to bid on another charitable artwork.

Clutching onto his papers, Stanford released his frustration with a huff, his shoulders slumping as his loophole out of his deal with Bill was denied.

Maybe that’s why Jheselbraum hadn’t included a trip to Artisanal Logos on her itinerary. Maybe she knew this venture was doomed to fail.

On that fateful day, once Polyphemus had packed up and returned home, Argus Panoptes cleaned up his dining room, procrastinating while he dwelled on the possibility of that little shape still sitting out in his hallway, trying not to look into the creature’s circumstances. It would come easily to Argus if he let himself look, but he was trying not to see in that way. He didn’t want to get attached.

Polyphemus was the one who suggested Argus open an apprenticeship spot. Polyphemus said Argus was lonely, that he was worried about him, that he didn’t want his best friend to die alone and miserable in a dingy cave, and that he should at least have some company. Argus suggested Polyphemus could have one of his eyes just so he could poke it out again for him, but the sentiment hit its mark and Argus gave in.

Eventually he couldn’t keep wiping down the same spot of obsidian over and over, so he put his cloth away with a sigh and looked out into the cavernous hallway.
His footsteps shaking the ground as he walked out through the caverns, when Argus arrived in his hallway he leaned against the closest wall, crossing his arms with a sigh.

“You’re still here.” Argus sighed, scowling at the little triangle, sitting in the midst of a cluster of Argus’s eye bats, the creatures cuddling up to the polygon peacefully.

The triangle looked up at Argus expectantly but said nothing.

“Don’t you have a home to go to?” Argus asked scathingly, frustrated by this creature’s persistence.

The triangle still said nothing, but it looked down and to the side, seeming far sadder than a shape with only one eye to express itself with had any right to be. Clearly that was the wrong question to ask. Argus was always a soft touch for a sorry tale, but he was attempting to quash that sticky sliver of compassion, and furrowing his brows, he persisted.

“Well, you should go away anyway. Eternal sight will only make you miserable, you know. It will only disappoint you. Don’t know why you would want to learn it from me in the first place.”

The triangle looked up at Argus again, before answering simply. “I want to fix something, and I don’t know how.”

“What makes you think I know how to fix whatever it is you’re wanting to fix? I’m not a damn carpenter.” Argus grumbled.

“I don’t want you to fix it. I want to fix it.” The shape replied sharply. “I can’t see a way to fix it, but that’s because I can’t see everything yet. There’s something I need to see. I need to know.”

“Know what?” Argus prompted.

“What I need to.” The shape answered evasively.

“And so you want me to teach you to see _everything._” Argus surmised, sounding unimpressed. “So you can find someone else who can fix your problem, and then you can squat in their hallways. Look, if you want a referral to your solution, you can pay me my price, I can look for your answer, and then you can leave.”

“I’m skipping the referral.” The triangle said brusquely, the irritation flashing red across his bricks. “I just told you I don’t want you to fix it.”

“And what makes you think you can do what I do? That you have the aptitude to see? You’ve only got one bloody eye.” Argus pointed out, somewhat unkindly.

“You don’t know what I can do.” The triangle shot back. “I can do lots of things.”

“Ah, accomplished, are you? Some puffed up over-achiever? A scholar, from a far off land? And you’ve decided to add far-sight to your considerable resume? Is that it?” Argus squinted several of his eyes at the shape, who seemed unphased by his hostility, instead granting Argus a very sly look.

“Well I figure why pay for milk when you can buy the cow.” At that the shape seemed to waggle its brow at Panoptes, alluding to his still somewhat fresh failure at protecting Io. Argus had presumed this triangle was but a child, but he was playing him like a master. He growled low in his throat.

“You beseech me to teach you, and then you insult me with my failures? Tell me, what exactly do
you think you’ll gain from this?”

“Far-sight.” The shape answered simply before shrugging. “I have nothing left to lose and nowhere left to go. So, it’s all uphill from here.”

Argus was thrown by this, not expecting the creature’s glib brevity to be laced with sincerity like so. As much as he wanted to hate this irritating being and send them away from here, their attitude was tweaking that compassion Argus tried so desperately to smother.

If he were a strong man, he would do just that right now, banish the creature and ignore that nigling sympathy, but he was weak to the suffering of young people.

Hating himself for it, Argus caved slightly, giving the triangle an in.

“Do you have a tribute for me? If you’ve decided so rudely to bypass my trials.”

“Uhh.” The triangle looked around the cavern for a moment, as if deliberating what he could give Argus that would satisfy him, before he clicked his fingers and summoned a tall black hat from thin air, levitating it over to the giant. “You can have this. Apart from me it’s the only thing left from my dimension. Used to belong to the head honcho. I guess you could call it a collector’s item. That’s gotta be valuable, right?”

For a moment, Argus thought he saw the triangle look somewhat panicked when the giant closed his hand around the hat, examining it, which only reconfirmed it’s worth. Despite acting blasé, clearly the shape did not wish to part with it, which made it a valuable tribute.

“It will do.” Argus kept the hat clutched in his hand and looked back at the triangle expectantly. “You have a name, do you?”

The triangle blinked at Argus for a moment, before responding. “Bill is good. Call me Bill.”

“Well Bill. I feel it is my duty to tell you that the level of far-sight I offer to teach is as much of a burden as it is a boon. It is a curse, and I tried to get it advertised on the curse section of EntropiCraig’s list, but that damn fiend Polyphemus voted against that, and put it in the personals. You see, to glimpse even a fraction of what I see constantly is enough to drive lesser beings to madness. It breaks the mind to do it, and I would not advise you to do so lightly. You have your whole life ahead of you to enjoy some semblance of an unburdened mind, and the freedom that brings.”

“But you are offering to teach me, is that what you’re saying?” Bill probed, his molecules seeming to vibrate with enthusiasm at the prospect.

“If you prove to have the aptitude for it, yes.” Argus sighed. “But it may cost you your sanity.”

“Sanity’s just another lie, and I don’t care about lies.” Bill answered, extricating himself from the pile of eye bats by flattening himself and turning on his side, sliding away from the snoozing animals to float up alongside Argus, extending his hand. “I want to know why. I want to learn the truth.”

Argus clasped his large hand around Bill’s small wiry black wrist, surprised when a cool burst of flame sprung around their conjoined hands when they shook on it. The triangle flinched a little, as if surprised by the burst of fire, but laughed it off reflexively.

“The truth is a terrible thing to learn, but I can teach you. Gods help you. I guess you’re my student now.”
His eye curving into a giddy smile once again, Bill floated closer to Argus his molecules vibrating happily and nudged him with his elbow, the limb extending like a rubbery hose.

“Don’t you mean your pupil? Eye-m your pupil. Get it?”

Cupping his hand behind the triangle, albeit a little roughly, guiding him further into the obsidian cave, Argus chuckled fondly.

“It’s not too late to eat you, you know.”

Pulling into Federation Port Kaitz, rather than purchasing the materials he needed on the main strip from standard retailers, Stanford decided to go to the back-alley dealers, making use of his contacts in the scrap vandals to have the credits Jheselbraum gave him stretch further.

She’d provided funding enough to complete this project, but after so long of scraping by with hardly any money, living on the streets, Stanford was hardly inclined to waste money paying for these devices at retail mark-up.

And so, pinging into the network, Stanford hunted down the nearest scrap vandal outlet post, and found himself face to face with the Angolean shop keep, the lizard standing on a step ladder to achieve optimal eye contact.

The parts Stanford needed were displayed on the bench in front of them, now it was just a matter of bartering the price.

“So, you’ve got your chassis for 200 credits, your propulsion core for 700, precision trigger for 350 and various software and circuitry you’ll have to install but we can give you a brick-a-brack bundle for 545. Power source is a different issue, we don’t have anything powerful enough to fit the bill for what you’ve described, so you might have to look around for that one, but all up what we can offer you is everything you see here on the table for 1795 credits. Whaddaya say?”

Fiddling with his nano-briefcase, eyeing off the parts on the table, Stanford tried his luck at a better price.

“Is there any staff discount on that price? My unit was stationed in the pinwheel galaxy, about 20 years ago. I still have my old tablet and uniform, if that helps.”

“One of us, are you? Sure, I’m always happy to do a deal for a fellow scrapper.” Came the lizards amenable reply, but he was cut off by a voice behind him, as another Angolean crept out from the back room.

“Pinwheel galaxy. That’s not old magic hands, is it?”

It took Stanford a while to pick where he knew this particular Angolean from. It wasn’t very polite for him to admit, but he did have trouble telling the lizard folk apart sometimes, and this lizard seemed to be getting on in age, but eventually it registered.

“Arnold?”
“Don’t you Arnold me.” Hissed the lizard, climbing up the stepladder alongside his co-worker, taking an extra step up so he could look down on Stanford, the height of disrespect for Angoleans. “We know what you did magic hands. When Sandeep finally escaped the Noire he came back and told us all. You sold them out, your entire crew! We should charge you a million times more for whatever you want to buy, and it still wouldn’t cover the wrong you’ve done. You’re a stain on the good reputation of the scrap vandals!”

“That’s not true! I didn’t sell them out.” Stanford argued, pulling his nano briefcase open as he twisted it in his hands. “I bargained to save their lives.”

“Oh, yeah. Heard you got real cosy with Diniéiro, sipping cocktails on his couch in a tux, yucking it up together. Heard you backstabbed him too, leaving him to die on Lottocron 9. You’re a real saint.”

“That’s not what —” Stanford sighed and set his nano briefcase down on the table in a resigned sort of way, frustrated knowing that there was no way he could clear his reputation now. Not now that he knew how these things went, just from watching Bill work. People would believe what they wanted to, and the truth would do little to change their minds. “Arnold, can I just buy the parts please?”

“There’s no way we’re sellin’ you nothing, traitor.” Arnold spat on the floor, still looking down at Stanford, his colleague stepping up the ladder as well to mimic his disdain.

“Fine.” Stanford shrugged, and then mumbled something under his breath. “I’ll just take it from you when you’re not looking.”

“What?” Arnold asked, raising his voice, no doubt developing hearing problems in his old age. So to assist him, Stanford repeated himself more clearly with a smile.

“I said I was going to rob you.”

Stanford pressed the button on the end of the nano briefcase and the contents on the table were sucked into the miniature dimension, both ends of the nano briefcase closing with a click once the matter on the table was absorbed. Scooping his briefcase up from the table with one hand, Ford kicked the bottom of the ladder in one swift move, causing the ladder to topple over backwards, falling on both of the Angoleans as Ford ran out the door with his stolen loot.

He could hear the scrap vandals calling after him, but Stanford quickly vanished into the crowd and made his way to the nearest transportation hub, knowing the virtue of a speedy exit.

The ends justified the means here and stealing these parts from the scrap vandals would serve to rid the world of Bill Cipher once and for all, at which point the universe would owe a debt to Stanford, negating his misdeed.

It would be worth it, everything, when Stanford saved the world.

Argus had Bill for a week, before things changed in the Dimension of Eternal Night. There was training, focusing one’s inner eye, and Argus had discerned that Bill did indeed have an aptitude
for far-sight when he could slow down enough to focus. There was also recreation, frivolity and fun, something Argus hadn’t had enough of in quite some time.

Bill was a bundle of enthusiasm and energy, making jokes with the giant, playing games with the eye bats, trying to pull pranks on Argus’s many eyes, for all the good it did him. He seemed to crave distraction and stimulus, and Argus was prone to indulging in distraction himself, as it was better than staring at the atrocities of the universe. The obsidian caves were shaking with sound, vibrations from Argus’ booming laugh sounding out more in that one week than they had for centuries.

Bill was a quick learner, certainly, and if Argus tried he could find ways to make most of the activities they shared resemble a training exercise, enough so that he could excuse the liberties he was taking with his sight.

Nursing a tankard of ale while sitting in front of one of the glass walls of his cave, Argus was showing Bill a trick that projected the sights he was seeing onto the wall, filtering his vision through the stone. It sounded like a training exercise when phrased that way, but really they were people watching, and it was enjoyable, Argus laughing and enjoying the company his new student provided.

Argus had been lonely for a long time, and Polyphemus couldn’t come around as often as he used to since he was blinded by Odysseus, so having this bright little shape in his life was a breath of fresh air for the ancient giant. He was loathe to admit it but Polyphemus was right. This was good for Argus.

“Change the channel?” Bill requested, idly patting one of the eye-bats while watching the screen. The creatures wouldn’t leave the triangle alone, they loved him. Argus had never seen the dumb animals so enamoured with anyone. “Not that this isn’t hilarious, but we’ve been watching that one judge pick his nose for the past twenty minutes.”

Argus looked down at the triangle hovering next to his eye encrusted knee, the eye bat crooning as Bill continued to pat it.

“Not entertaining enough for you, is that it? Not what the kids are into these days?”

“Nose picking would be funnier if I had a nose.” Bill’s eye curved into a cheeky grin.

“This is about sustaining focus.” Argus blustered, then looked slyly down at his charge. “If you want to look at something different so badly, you change it.”

Bill looked up at Argus, his eye widening with excitement as it always did when Argus let him try a new technique. While his form was still clumsy, Bill was picking up on far-sight quickly, instinctively, and over the past week it became clear to Argus that there was a well of power within this little creature. A potential that could be nurtured into something great, if done correctly.

“How?”

“You’re watching this now, how would you turn your gaze to something else?” Argus prompted, watching Bill turn his eye back to the images playing out on the black glass. “What changes from one glance to another?”

Thinking on this, Bill’s arm snaked out long, tentatively resting his palm against the obsidian, and very deliberately, he blinked.

The black glass was now showing a homeless shelter in one of the federation ports, Acolytes of the
Axolotl ushering the destitute inside, handing out ration bars and bubbled beverages to the poor.

“Very good!” Argus cheered, bringing his gigantic hand down to pat his pupil on the back, pushing the shape forward through the air several feet as he attempted to bestow praise. “You’re getting the hang of this.”

Bill blinked again, changing the view once more, and now the glass displayed the inside of one of the Axolotl’s churches, a whale-ish cleric standing before an altar of bubbled benedictions, looking expectantly down at the floor below, holding out his fin.

Turning his gaze from the screen, Bill looked expectantly up at Argus. “This is only showing me things I’ve seen before. How do I see other things?”

“Ahh.” Argus smiled at his pupil, ignoring the images flickering on the glass. “You need more eyes to see things your own eyes haven’t yet. There’s a trick to it, claiming eyes for your own.”

“Do I have to eat them?” Bill questioned bluntly, sounding displeased.

“Eyes are quite the delicacy, I’ll have you know, however you do not need to consume the eyes to claim their sight.” Argus chuckled. “You can borrow the eyes of others to look through, and their sight becomes yours. It need not be simply an eyeball, the trees have eyes, the stars are always winking, and the sun stares down with a blinding heat in many dimensions. There is a beginners spell to assist with such scrying that shouldn’t be too hard for you.”

“I want to try that! Can you teach me?” Bill asked eagerly, his hand coming off the glass, just as on the wall black wiry hands reached out to receive one of the glowing bubbles from the church.

Several of Argus’ eyes crinkled with fondness, and he patted Bill on the back again, more gently this time. “Tomorrow. For now, relax, and I’ll find something else for you to watch, since you like ‘channel surfing’ so much. What else are the kids into these days?”

Resting his hand against the obsidian floor, Argus changed the scene on the screen, hoping to gift his pupil with a little recreation. On the glass, today’s temporal battle played out, two contestants fighting Globnar for Time Baby’s regard, often a fight to the death. That should do for a little light entertainment.

“There. Globnar. That’s always popular.”

True enough, Argus could see Bill’s eye widen, enraptured with the scene on screen, watching the battle play out intently while the eye bat closest to him nuzzled the triangle sweetly.

When the victor claimed triumph and approached the podium to be gifted their time wish, Bill turned to look at Argus once more.

“What’s that he’s winning?”

“A time wish.” Argus answered. “The Globnar victor can win themselves a time wish by facing a combatant of Time Baby’s choosing, and with it, they can go to any point in time that they wish, and mould it to their fondest desire.”

Bill looked back at the screen with a wistful inhale, clearly quite infatuated with the thought of winning a time wish. “I want one.”

“It’s a nonsensical desire.” Argus scoffed. “Like wanting to win the lottery, winning a time wish. The probability of success is so vastly skewed, Time Baby vetos half of the requests for one before
you even make it into the ring. You’d be better off turning those daydreams into something productive, like honing your craft, or contenting yourself with the dreariness of existence as it is. There’s no place in life for silly daydreams about reshaping reality.”

Argus realised that this was a moment he should have looked more closely into, as in hindsight he could see that his words hardly dissuaded Bill at all.

The next day, as Argus was setting up the spell work for rudimentary scrying, Bill practically bouncing off the walls with excitement as Argus etched markings on the edges of the mirrors he had placed on the floor, the eye bats alerted them to a ruckus in the cave by the entrance.

Rather than the fond cooing the eyebats made when Bill arrived, Argus could hear hissing and squealing, the sort of commotion that could only mean some bull-headed intruder.

“Wait here.” Argus instructed Bill, before he thundered down the obsidian hallways, investigating the source of the noise.

When he came out into the opening chamber the cause of the ruckus was made plain enough.

An adolescent giantess with pale purple skin, seven eyes, and fiery red hair cut into a sharp bob, clad in the garb of a prospective warrior, was aiming her golden shield at each of Argus’ eye bats, refracting their petrifying sight back onto the bats, batting them away from her with the surface of her shield, the petrified eye bats falling onto her like crumbling boulders.

She could hear Argus’ approach, and when he rounded out into the chamber fully, looming over her, she whacked the last eye bat away from her and immediately knelt down on one knee in supplication.

“Argus Panoptes, seer of all? I have come from afar and defeated many enemies to train at your side.”

“Oh, here we go.” Argus mumbled under his breath as the warrior girl stood up, reciting her deeds to impress him.

“I have scaled Hysteria Peak and retrieved you a lily from the cusp of the mountaintop. I have wrestled the bloatfish from the quagmires of Boggrah, slit it’s throat and bathed in it’s flesh, I have ransacked a planet for it’s eyes to gift you and that planet is now known as the Land of the Blind as a testament to my dedication, not a single being’s sight spared. I have –“

“Wow. Look, could you skip the boring bits and wrap it up, Legs? I have a lesson to get back to.”

The warrior girl paused and looked down beside Argus’s leg, the location of the voice, where a small one-eyed yellow triangle hovered with his hands on his sides.

Argus looked down at his leg and hissed at Bill unsubtly. “I thought I told you to wait in the cave?”

“I got bored of waiting.” Bill replied with a flippant shrug.
“Who is this?” The warrior girl asked, her voice suddenly icy.

Argus reluctantly answered. “Bill is studying under –“

“Is he your student?” The girl interrupted, sounding scandalised.

“Yep!” Bill answered callously, while Argus was inwardly fretting.

He didn’t think anyone would live through attempting his many impossible tasks, let alone succeed. He deliberately made each task a fools errand, each proving trial more dissuading than the last, yet here this child was, standing before him, beseeching his tutelage.

Her stubborn presentation stirred guilt in Argus, guilt because he never assumed someone would be so foolishly headstrong to complete his impossible tasks.

Learning from the Gods, he thought setting impossible tasks would absolve him from all teaching obligation, as impossible tasks were never meant to be surmounted, but Argus forgot that for each labour, there was a Hercules.

“Did he complete your chosen tasks?” She asked, still sounding deathly serious.

“Well…” Argus dithered, while Bill took the initiative to answer for him.

“Nope. Just strolled right in through the front door and asked. Got yelled at for it, but other than that it was surprisingly easy.”

“No!” The giantess turned and stomped her foot, pointing to Bill accusingly. “No that’s not fair then! He can’t be your student if he didn’t fulfil your tasks. He didn’t do any of the work. I did! I climbed the mountain! I did every single thing you wanted.”

“Now, uh, let’s just –“ Argus held his hands out, trying to cut her off before – but it was too late.

The warrior girl turned on the waterworks, pricking at that oft buried compassion of his in a much more direct way than Bill’s downcast expression had. Tears began to well up in all seven of her eyes as she continued speaking her case, her voice hitching with sobs as she spoke, her disappointment, desperation and disbelief evident.

“I have the eyes. I have them all.” She untied an expanding bag from her shoulder and threw it on the cave floor, eyes spilling everywhere. “Here! I got them for you! I - I left my home for you! I bathed in disgusting bloat fish juice for you. I did! You can’t choose him over me, I did what you wanted. I did it. He didn’t! I deserve it! I should be the one you share your sight with! Me! I have more eyes than him! I’m bigger and stronger than him! I’m gifted! I’ll work hard, I promise, you can’t just – please! I’ve worked so hard for this, I’ve - and I can work harder! Please teach me, please!”

She discarded her shield and fell down onto her hands and knees, bowing before Argus even as tears continued to stream down her face, making her the most pitiful thing the ancient giant had seen for a long while.

Covered in eyes, there was only so many of them that could look up at the ceiling right now, away from this convincing display, and wrestling with his conscience, finally Argus broke.

“Alright fine! There’s no need to – there’s no need to make such a fuss.”

“Will – will you -?” The warrior girl asked hesitantly, looking up, her bottom lip wobbling just
enough to take the choice out of Argus’ eyeball covered hands.

“Yes, yes I’ll teach you.” Argus conceded with a sigh. “You did all the bloody tasks. So you can
dry your eyes already.”

“You will? Thank you! Thank you venerable one, I – thank you for choosing me over him, I won’t
let you down.” She stood up and bowed once more from the hip, just as Argus raised his hand.

“Now hold on just a minute, young lady. I see no reason why I can’t teach the both of you.”

“But your advertisement said you would only take on one pupil.” The girl looked up, taken aback
by his decision. “And I completed everything you tasked in the advertisement, and proved myself
worthy, so your pupil should be me. That’s how these things work. It’s only logical.”

Argus could see Bill glaring at the girl, his bricks pinking with agitation, still hovering by Argus’
leg, and he smothered another sigh of frustration.

Seeking to diffuse the situation, Argus crossed his arms, before gesturing to himself. “Now child, if
anyone can handle having more than one pupil it’s me. The longer you question me, the less
inclined I am to be so gracious. The both of you are to be my students, and I want you both to
accept my decision and get along. Learning is not a competition. Is that understood?”

“Yes Master.” Chirped the purple giantess immediately in a saccharine tone that didn’t seem quite
sincere.

“Define ‘get along’.” Bill looked up at Argus’ face, unimpressed.

“What is your name dear?” Argus directed his question at the warrior, who still looked a little
watery.

“Jheselbraum.” She answered, wiping her eyes, her saccharine expression lasting only a second
before sharpening into a glare when Bill snorted a laugh at her name. In a somewhat stronger voice
she continued. “I was known as Jheselbraum the Unswerving back in my tribe, for my dedication
and diligence to excellence. I never fail.”

“Yeah, I’m sure.” Bill snarked, rolling his eye, floating over to poke at one of the petrified eye bats
with mild concern.

“That’s very nice dear.” Argus absently replied, deciding that ignoring his students antagonism
would be the best way to diffuse it. “Leave the eye bats alone Bill, they’ll wake up soon enough.”

Shrugging off the tension of the situation, Argus turned and walked back into the main chamber,
resigning himself to what he’d gotten himself into. “Alright children. Lesson one on scrying is this
way, let’s get on with it.”

Argus walked away at this point but looking back this would be another time he should have
looked a little more closely.

As Argus’ thunderous footsteps led the way, the noise masked Jheselbraum’s words, all traces of
her waterworks display vanishing in an instant as she leaned over to sneer down at Bill.

“I don’t care what trick you played to pull the wool over his eyes, you’d better just leave now,
rather than waste time embarrassing yourself, triangle. I’m the one who should be Panoptes’ pupil,
his sole pupil. I proved myself worthy, but you’ve only proved yourself as a nuisance and a burden.
You don’t deserve to learn his sight, you don’t even deserve to stand in his cave. I earned this, but
you don’t belong here.”

“I was here first.” Bill glared at Jheselbraum, still hovering over the stone eye bat protectively.

“And you’ll leave first. I always win. You’ll see. Or you won’t, I guess. What does a one-eyed shape know about far-sight anyway?”

“More than you.” Bill narrowed his eyes gamely, committing himself to the competition.

“We’ll see about that.”

Argus’ voice echoed from the cave ahead. “Children?”

“Coming!” Jheselbraum said in a too sweet voice, before smirking venomously at Bill and skipping along behind the giant.

Argus Panoptes was the most content he’d been in a long time, overseeing the studies of his two new pupils. There was something about watching over their progress that reminded him of happy memories, of watching over Io in the fields, that he found he quite enjoyed. Plus, watching two initiates struggle to learn something that came naturally to Argus was quite the boon to the ego.

“Focus your scrying mirrors children. You are to concentrate on the eye on my forehead and look through that specific eye to see what card I’m holding. No cheating now Bill.”

“But the card is right there!” Bill argued, having been attempting to float up over Argus’ shoulder to sneak a peek at the card he was holding.

“This is a test of your abilities. Focus children.”


Argus said nothing, amused at how the studious girl’s guessing amounted to just the same as Bill’s peeping, an invalid answer. They were supposed to be seeing, not guessing or cheating.

Bill made a frustrated noise behind him, and Argus could hear the clank of a scrying mirror hitting the floor.

“This isn’t working! I just keep seeing your teeth falling out. Are you even holding a card right now, old man?”

“The card is in my hand. Why would you be seeing my teeth falling out? I happen to take very good care of them.” Argus questioned sounding amused.

“I’m concentrating, but this mirror keeps showing me everything but the card you’re holding. I keep seeing your teeth falling out, some girl chained up in a field, you playing dominos with your blind buddy but this time he actually has an eye – no cards.”

All of Argus’ eyes swivelled around to look at Bill at that, regarding the triangle with interest and
Jheselbraum looked between her teacher, her mirror, and Bill, leaning over to try and glimpse whatever the triangle was seeing in his mirror, wondering what she was doing wrong. It wasn’t fair that Bill was seeing something, and she wasn’t. Part of her thought Bill was simply making things up.

“What did the girl look like?” Argus questioned intently.

“White dress, blonde hair, chain around her ankle.” Bill listed, squinting at the image in his mirror. “She’s eating grass, if that helps?”

As much as Jheselbraum craned her neck, she couldn’t see anything in Bill’s glass, the spell work attuned to the individual seer. She wanted desperately to see something, but all she saw was her own frustrated reflection staring back at her, and now their teacher was watching Bill with awed interest in several of his riveted eyes.

“How fascinating.” Argus murmured, turning around and setting the card face down on the table, squatting down so he could look at his student more closely.

“What was I looking at? Is that the present? The past? Where is it? Why were you looking at that? Are you looking at that right now?” Bill rapidly questioned, hardly leaving room for Argus to answer.

Argus held his hand up, halting Bill’s onslaught, and blinked at him. “It seems you have an innate gift for sight, Bill, and a specialisation growing already, however you were not seeing a thing that exists in reality, past or present.”

“So, he’s making it up?” Jheselbraum quickly surmised, eager to discredit Bill.

“No Jheselbraum.” Argus corrected, smiling lightly. “Bill is seeing into the most malleable and unfathomable reality of all, into a place that is both truth and illusion, real until it is not.”

“Where?” Bill pressed, wanting to understand.

“In dreams.” Argus answered, baring his jagged teeth in a fond grin. “A place where Polythemus regained his sight, where Io remained in the garden, but as she was meant to be, where despite being perfectly healthy, sometimes all your teeth can fall out for no reason. Your innate sight is showing you something I cannot, Bill. A different plane altogether.”

Bill seemed impressed for a moment, looking back to his mirror with curiosity, before he looked back up at Argus. “But that doesn’t tell me what’s actually happening. Or what did happen. The past. I want to see the past. How do I see that?”

Clapping his hands to his knees, Argus stood up again, chuckling at how single minded his student was, even when faced with the revelation of his truly unique skill. “Practise. Back to work then children. Focus on the card.”

Bill resumed concentrating on his mirror, oblivious to the way Jheselbraum was glaring daggers at him, seething with jealousy.
The obsidian caves were vast, vast enough for Argus’ students to carve out their own living spaces closer to the surface. Argus endeavoured to give his students privacy in their rooms, or as much privacy as living with a being whose existence inspired the word ‘panopticon’ could give, but now looking back, he was starting to feel he may have been remiss in doing so.

Jheselbraum’s cavern was the largest, housing her golden shield and the other weaponry she brought with her on her long journey, books and resources packed around the black space. She did not need to choose the largest cave, her height did not impede her from choosing one of the smaller ones. She chose it because she did not want Bill to have it.

By her estimation, the triangle already had far more than he deserved.

Creeping through the tunnels, Jheselbraum trekked up to the smaller cave nestled high on the obsidian mountaintop that Bill had picked out, wanting to spy on Bill, or confront the triangle, or continue her crusade to bully him out of the apprenticeship, and as she was undecided between the three, when she reached Bill’s room, she paused in the doorway, watching him.

Bill had taken his scrying mirror up to his room and was attempting to practise projecting his sight into the eye of another, the technique Argus had been teaching them for the past several weeks.

The lesson plan Argus laid out meant that first he would teach them to look through eyes into the present, as that was easiest, then in theory he would teach them to look through eyes into the future, which was a little trickier and not always accurate, but far more achievable as seers see into the future all the time, and lastly he would teach them to see through the eyes of the past, the most difficult thing of all, as it often meant borrowing the eyes of the dead. At the moment he was only teaching them to borrow eyes in the present, and they hadn’t yet progressed beyond that for some reason.

Argus was teaching them both the theory and rudimentary practical spells to enable them to accomplish the manual side of seeing, and should they study diligently, Argus would graduate them to the effortless level of sight he possessed. He was making them create all their seer spells physically now, as it was important practise, the giant stated, but when they had proved themselves worthy his students were to undergo a proving test elsewhere that would grant them full sight.

Jheselbraum wanted to know where elsewhere, as currently she was hardly succeeding at this, despite how much she wanted to, but Argus wouldn’t say.

“A bit rich coming from me, but you have to keep some things a mystery.” was the Giant’s chipper response, and as much as it infuriated Jheselbraum, she couldn’t argue with her teacher.

Jheselbraum was watching Bill practise, staring into his mirror, but rather than focusing on Argus’ eye, as they had been instructed to, Bill was looking through another with limited success.

Jheselbraum could hear him mutter. “Where are you?” In frustrated, desperate tones.

His triangular form was glowing, and blue flames were sputtering out of his hands around the edges of the mirror, the fire leaking from him as he attempted to focus his energy into seeing.

The scrying mirror glowed on and off, lighting with visions, before the light would flicker, die, then start up again.

Jheselbraum watched this with interest, taking in the little details that made Bill’s late night practise a pitiful thing indeed, despite his sporadic success rate. She could see his arms shaking as
he gripped onto the mirror, fire tumbling into wispy piles beneath him before being extinguished as fat drops of moisture fell from Bill’s open eye.

She could hear him pleading with the mirror, his voice breaking. “Please be a lie. I didn’t – come on, where are you? Where?”

It was gratifying for Jheselbraum to see Bill crying, trying so hard and failing. She wanted so badly for him to have a taste of his own bitter medicine. He was the constantly chipper one-eyed prodigy, and here he was, miserable when alone. Now *that* was satisfying to see.

Eventually the exercise grew too taxing for Bill, and he threw his mirror to the ground with a sob, wiping his eye with his hand as he muttered a thick. “Why?”

“You’ll break the mirror like that.” Jheselbraum called out across the room, gleeful, her voice echoing on the walls, startling Bill, who spun around to face her defensively.

Taking this in, his panic, and the flames that still fell from his hands, Jheselbraum decided that she would try a different tactic, and she bowed her head as she squeezed in through the entrance of the cave.

“Oh relax. I’m not going to tell anyone you were crying like a baby because you couldn’t get a spell right.”

Crossing the room, Jheselbraum shooed away the flames that lingered on the cave floor and sat cross legged on the ground beside Bill, reaching for his mirror.

“So, what were you looking at?”

“None of your business.” Bill hissed back at her.

Jheselbraum picked his mirror up from the ground, acting unphased by his hostility. “I’m impressed you’ve been able to see anything, honestly. I’ve been trying for just as long as you have, but I barely get glimpses.”

Surprised to hear praise from Jheselbraum, Bill’s eye widened, and the angle he held his shoulders at softened a little, watching her curiously now.

“Holding a sight for several seconds like you just did is good. I counted three seconds of sight for a while there. I hate to admit it, but you’re a natural. I could learn a lot from you.” Jheselbraum sighed, before passing Bill’s mirror back to him. “Which is awful, because I think we got off on the wrong foot.”

“Gee, you think?” Bill frowned, but he was still watching Jheselbraum openly, wondering where she was going with this.

“You see, *my people* are an elite race of warriors. I never had to worry about how my words came across before or how to ‘get along’ with my peers, really. I just had to win. I never had many friends. Only competitors. But Argus wants us to ‘get along’, so this is me trying. What do you say? Do you think perhaps we could start over?” Jheselbraum extended her hand to Bill, pasting a fake smile on to see if it would work. “Friends?”

Bill hesitated for a moment, considering her hand, before he clasped it with his own, blue flames spurting erratically around the gesture. “Sure. I could use some friends.”

Pulling her hand away from the fire, shaking off the remnant flame, Jheselbraum looked curiously
at the cool flames. “Does that always happen? The ‘setting fire to everything you touch’ thing? I can ask you that, because we’re friends now.”

“Hah. I’m working on it not doing that, just so you know. It’s kind of new.” Bill explained awkwardly, patting the fire down around him.

“You’re quite new to all of your powers, aren’t you?” Jheselbraum probed. “If you’d grown with them you’d have better control by now. Have you always been able to observe dreams like that?”

“That’s new too.” Bill shrugged. “Only since I came here.”

“So, it’s not innate, or something you’ve had your whole life. You can teach me then. Teach me how to do it.” Jheselbraum demanded eagerly.

“I don’t know how I’m doing it though. It’s new, I told you.”

“That doesn’t mean you can’t tell me how, though. Tell me how you’re doing it. I’ll do exactly what you do, come on. Show me.”

Bill’s eye narrowed, and he looked Jheselbraum up and down before answering shrewdly, a hint of mischief to his tone that the giantess had yet to pick up. “Sure, friend.”

Jheselbraum clapped eagerly and turned to face him.

“Start by standing up.”

Jheselbraum sprung to her feet.

“And close your eyes.”

She slammed her eyes shut immediately.

“Raise one foot slightly.” Bill dictated, and Jheselbraum did so, balancing adeptly on one leg.

“Place one hand on your head and the other on your stomach.” Jheselbraum complied, although she was starting to question Bill’s methods.

“Now hop up and down and sing ‘perfect symmetry’ at the top of your lungs.”

Stomping her foot down, knowing she was being played, Jheselbraum yelled, just as Bill started laughing. “BILL!”

The triangle didn’t react to her ire, still laughing, his legs kicking in the air behind him as he clutched his bricks, giggling in a contagious way that eventually had Jheselbraum joining in, if only to save face.

Down in the caverns below, Argus smiled, hearing the echoes of his children’s laughter fill the empty caves of the mountainside.

What he didn’t think to look for, however, was the way Jheselbraum would narrow her eyes at Bill’s back when he went to fetch the mirror again, her expression snapping back to an amenable one as they sat down to practise together, disingenuous, cunning, and deplorably insincere.
In the years that passed, Argus supervised his student’s training, honing their craft in the methods of far sight. Things were becoming a comfortable pattern. He’d instruct his students in the morning, teaching them spell forms, runework, meditation techniques (that they often ignored in favour of pranking each other) and further insight into sight. They’d bicker and learn, a competitive camaraderie struck up between the two of them that seemed much more light hearted than it had at the start, and in the evenings all three of them would gather in the caves, showing Argus what they had learned, playing card games together, and choosing what dimension to watch on the obsidian screen.

Occasionally Polyphemus would still visit Argus, the two giants holing up in one of the caves to drink and play dominos, and Argus would banish the children for the night, although he was absolutely certain they snuck in to listen to the giants chat, Jheselbraum thirsting to overhear any words of praise or commendation Argus dispensed in private to the other giant, and Bill lingering because it was fun to irritate Jheselbraum.

His suspicions were confirmed when, one evening, while drinking with Polyphemus, his words engendered a response from the little urchins lurking outside of the cavern door.

“You’ve been sounding a lot better these past few years, you know. Happier, I can hear it in your voice. It suits you.” Polyphemus observed, stacking his pile of dominos up at the end of their game. “I haven’t seen you like this since, well, since her.”

“That was such a long time ago.” Argus answered wistfully. “Io.”

“With Io you were softer. Not such a difficult bastard. You’d laugh more. You’d smile. I always wanted to see you smile again, but that was before –“

Polyphemus sighed and brought his hand up to feel the crusted edges of the hollow of his eye.

“Friend.” Argus said solemnly and reached his hand across the table to hold Polyphemus’ wrist. “I’m smiling now.”

Polyphemus paused for a beat at that, before speaking. “You sound pretty bloody serious for a bloke who’s supposed to be smiling.”

Argus barked a laugh before yanking Polyphemus’ hand across the table and pressing it to his face. “Here, see for yourself, you miserable bugger.”

Polyphemus laughed as he felt the curve of Argus’ smile, his large hands smoothing over the eyeballs that dotted Argus’ face like they were braille, visualising his friend’s smile through touch.

“There it is. That’s what I wanted to see. Now aren’t you happy I made you put up that advertisement?”

“This is not an ‘I told you so’ moment.” Argus forbade. “I never wanted to teach –“

“Even if you are good at it.” Polyphemus interjected.

“How good am I supposed to be? It’s been years and my students are still using mirrors to scry.”

“Do you think they’re not ready?” Polyphemus asked.
“No.” Argus answered honestly. “They’ve been diligent in their studies. They have the aptitude for it. They could do it.”

Polyphemus listened to this, and then insightfully pressed. “Are you not ready?”

Argus was silent, Polyphemus’ only clue that his assessment was on the money. Allowing terse silence to reign, Polyphemus knew eventually Argus had to break it, and he did, blurtling out.

“Well I won’t have anything to teach them then, when they do it. And then what will they stick around for? Me? Certainly not. I’ll go right back to being just as lonely and miserable as you seemed to think I was, and nothing will have changed. Nothing.”

When Polyphemus still continued to say nothing, his judgemental silence saying it all, Argus’ defences crumbled, and his shoulders sagged with a sigh.

“You’re right, I shouldn’t be holding back their progress out of selfishness, it’s petty of me. I’ve just come to enjoy having the little ones around so much. They’re both so bright and unique, very special children, and I really feel like, having them here with me is like having my own little family, and I rather like that. Family.”

When Polyphemus continued to say nothing, Argus worried that he’d been a little too sappy for his tastes, that or Polyphemus fell asleep, but instead the other giant was sitting very still in his chair, his nostrils flaring.

“Do you smell that? Something’s burning.”

Argus paused to scent the air, and turned around, the burning smell coming from just out the door where tell-tale blue flames were skirting along the floor.

Grumbling, Argus got up and rounded the corner, his two students standing outside in the hallway, Bill surrounded by a pool of involuntary flame.

“He did it.” Jheselbraum said immediately, pointing at Bill, dobbing him into teacher. “He just exploded flames just now. We weren’t eavesdropping. It was his idea.”

Rather than baulk at her accusations, Bill was saying nothing, his eye scrunched up with indescribable emotion, looking up at Argus as if the giant’s words had both pained him deeply and made him unbelievably happy all at once. The fire was still leaking from him slowly, cascading onto the ground, his eye rather shiny, welling with painful hope.

“Did you mean it?”

Argus’ expression softened, and he lowered himself down onto one knee to address the triangle, still towering over him but making an effort to get level with the child.

Reaching his hand out, Argus waved away the flames that fell from Bill and rested his hand gently on the triangle’s side.

In a kind voice Argus said. “Now what have I told you two children about eavesdropping, hmm? If you’re going to do it, do it from your rooms so it counts as practise.”

“But did you?” Bill pressed.

Argus smiled at Bill as his answer, inclining his head ever so slightly as he looked down at them. “Off to bed with you now, come on. I’ll be teaching you something new tomorrow and you’ll need
Jheselbraum was already tugging Bill away, her instant obedience merely another way of sucking up, dragging Bill down the hall without an answer.

Swatting her hand away in agitation, Bill was surprised when, from the doorway, Argus called out again, the majority of his eyes twinkling fondly.

“And be nice to your sister.”

Argus had never seen a shape glow so brightly as Bill did then.

The next day Argus began teaching his pupils in earnest, more than just seeing through the eyes of the present but seeing through the eyes of the past and future as well.

“While we live our lives one event after the other, it is a mistake to comprehend time as a linear construct. We assume there is a distinct separation between the past, the present and the future because we are constrained by our own circumstances, but time itself is a fluid untenable thing.” Argus lectured, strolling in front of his students, scratching diagrams on one of the obsidian walls, much to the displeasure of all those who had ears in the vicinity.

“If that’s the case, why do we have to wait for the future to happen?” Jheselbraum asked, putting her hand up.

“Or why can’t we go back and change the past?” Bill added to the inquiry, raising his own hand, deliberately stretching his limb out higher than Jheselbraum’s.

“Because a linear timeline is enforced.” Argus replied, pointing to a crude drawing of a baby he’d scratched into the wall. “By Time Baby. He is a time god, and he abhors anything that disrupts the linear timeline, or anything that could create a temporal paradox. Ironic, because he himself is a temporal paradox, and it is uncertain as to whether temporal paradoxes existed before Time Baby came into being, or if the consequences of temporal paradoxes are merely a result of Time Baby’s tantrums. As you know there are offshoot dimensions that parallel the occurrences of another dimension with slight temporal changes that exist uninterrupted by Time Baby’s enforcers, yet most of those dimensions split from their root dimensions to run parallel with them as a result of some sort of time paradox, so the differences between what is an acceptable time paradox and what is not seems entirely reliant on Time Baby’s whims. It could be as simple a matter as regulating dimensional real estate, or it could be something much more complex, or yet again something entirely incomprehensible and meaningless. We aren’t sure what governs his tantrums, but his tantrums govern the timeline, which is why time is linear.”

Pacing again, Argus pointed to several other diagrams labelled ‘past’ ‘present’ and ‘future’, continuing his lecture.

“Seers have a little leeway when it comes to flying under the radar of Time Baby’s enforcers. Seeing into the future is not a precise art, as there are many offshoot timelines that are constantly changing with every passing event, and prophecy as an art is especially imprecise, as fated events must be recounted as intentionally vague to avoid impacting fate enough to create yet another
temporal paradox. Give me some examples of situations where seeing into the future and informing someone of it can be detrimental to that future eventuating.”

“Ooh, if you were to tell, say, Odysseus that at the end of his journey he’d come home to find his house full of suitors for his wife, he might have never left on his journey in the first place.” Jheselbraum suggested, waving her hand in the air to compete with Bill’s rubbery appendage.

“Or you could tell someone the exact date and time of their death.” Bill suggested, sounding eager.

“And why would doing that impact the timeline?” Jheselbraum turned to question him.

“It’d be funny.” Came Bill’s glib answer, his arm shrinking back down to its normal size so he could float with his hands behind the top point of his body casually. “Good way to mess with them.”

“Now seeing into the future and delivering predictions can do one of two things.” Argus continued, his question less about wanting his students input and more to check that they were listening.

“Firstly, by divulging the future it could negate that future from happening, as the recipient of the prophecy could take steps to avoid it, or secondly it could cement that timeline as the only possible future outcome, as once prophecies are spoken they have a way of asserting themselves as the dominant timeline out of potential millions of unspoken outcomes. Time Baby sanctions certain seers – by which I mean he does not eliminate them – and those seers are usually the ones who either do not speak their prophecies, or who deliver their prophecies in the vaguest possible terms. So when it comes to divulging your future sight the thing you must bear in mind is – loopholes!”

Argus scratched the word ‘LOOPHOLES’ on the obsidian, while his two students winced at the sound, the eye bats screeching in harmony with the noise. When the cacophony dimmed and the word was adequately inscribed, Argus pointed to the word for emphasis.

“It is important to be aware of the loopholes before you attempt future sight, so as to avoid temporal elimination, but once the loopholes have been seen to, I imagine you’ll find future sight quite simple to grasp, if somewhat time consuming, as in order to find the correct future outcome you must parse through quite a few. In summary, with future sight, either don’t talk about it, don’t talk about it to the parties involved, or keep it vague, and you won’t be arrested. Understood?”

“Yes teacher.” Jheselbraum answered obediently, while Bill echoed her sentiment with a less formal.

“Yes.”

“Now. Seeing the past.” Argus turned and pointed to the word ‘past’ etched on the board, missing the way Bill leaned forward, his bricks glowing brighter as he inhaled eagerly.

“Seeing the past is a much more difficult. In terms of the temporal loopholes, seeing the past does not have the same effect that seeing the future does. Very few timelines are changed through seeing past events, as history has a tendency to repeat itself regardless of the best intentions of historians. That is one of the traps past seers fall into, as even with the ability to see what happened in the past, there is no way to change it. It often drives seers to great despair and sometimes madness, seeing what they cannot prevent. Seeing into the past requires one to borrow the eyes of someone who lived through that past, and in many cases, to borrow the eyes of the dead. Past sight is more difficult to achieve in this way, because it is technically a form of necromancy, which is just as prohibited as timeline meddling.”

Argus turned around to face his students, directing his words specifically at Bill who was listening.
with a too-wide eyed expression, obviously more than taken with the prospect of past sight, despite its dubious legality.

“The phrase ‘a man’s past is his own’ exists for a reason. Seeing into the past can bring about consequences from the time police, from the forces that govern life and death, and from the horrors of reality itself. Once you delve into the past once, you can never go back to the shelter of ignorance. The past holds more than just legal consequences from outside forces, there are personal consequences to knowing the truth of the past. Through the eyes of the dead there is no place for the lies of the present to hide.”

Rather than deter Bill, the triangle only looked more determined than ever, and Argus sighed, resigning himself to the rest of the lesson.

“All right, let’s get started then.”

In the years that followed Argus began instructing his students on the techniques that would enable them to skirt the dimensional loopholes and see beyond the present. More runes, spells and rituals were required to achieve this but his pupils were studious, each one motivated strongly by things that could only be implied.

Argus had never asked, he felt it wasn’t his place to, and he didn’t want to open the floodgates to that sort of intimacy, but he knew that Jheselbraum lusted to know of her future successes and Bill was driven to comprehend one of the sorrows of his past.

Jheselbraum took instantly to future-sight and prophecy and delighted in saying vague potentially menacing things to Bill in the mornings just to watch him fret as the day stretched on. Argus presumed this was merely an escalation of their pranking war and turned a blind eye to it for the most part. He did notice a few more of his eye bats were paralysed around this time, Bill usually finding them in his room, Jheselbraum insisting this meant her grave portents were coming true, and Bill insisting that Jheselbraum was paralysing the eye bats and putting them there to mess with Bill.

Argus decided not to intervene in the squabbles of children and refused to play the mediator here, neither confirming nor denying Jheselbraum’s chosen portents despite how most of them seemed to concern Bill’s unending future suffering. Argus just presumed Jheselbraum was being a pill and left it at that.

Bill was less interested in future sight though, and keener to get to the lessons on seeing into the past. He passed Argus’ rudimentary tests about future sight, but it was clear this was not where his passion lay.

When they got around to the intricacies of past sight, Bill was a quick study, the boy something of a prodigy really, as it was in hardly any time at all that Bill managed to succeed.

Argus insisted on supervising their initial attempts at past vision so he could intervene if something went wrong. It just so happened that while Bill’s first attempt at past sight was technically perfect, the results were disastrous.
Bill’s mirror was glowing with the power of a sustained image, the triangle glowing powerfully, his eye fizzing with bright static as he fixated on the screen. Argus could see his brow was furrowed and his form was shaking with the effort it took to zero in on this past event, borrowing the eyes of the dead to do so.

At first his expression was simply that of concentration, uncharacteristically serious and fixated, but after a while Argus could see Bill’s eye scrunch with remembered pain and venom. He was narrowing his eye at the mirror intently, tracking every detail and back and forth, until his eye widened with shock, blue flames abruptly flaring up around Bill and spreading through the room.

Jheselbraum abandoned her own meagre attempt at past sight and shrieked, jumping away from Bill’s fire, running over to Argus, her mirror abandoned on the floor.

“It was hot this time. He’s doing it on purpose.” She insisted, hiding behind Argus’ leg.

Argus could see wetness gathering at the edges of Bill’s eye now and hear him making aborted noises that could have been sobs, if not for the way they hitched up at the end repetitively.

“Bill.” Argus called out, worried that his pupil had fallen too far into a trance, but there were none of the signs of spell work backfiring. Whatever was causing this fire was all Bill, and it was becoming an inferno.

The hitching sound Bill was making was becoming clearer, sounding less like sobs and more like a mangled mixture of laughter and crying heard over the roar of the fire.

“They were telling the truth. All this time they were right.” Bill eventually spoke through the hysterical laughter. “It was me. I did it. I – everything they ever said about me was right.”

Argus looked hesitantly at the static fizzing away from Bill’s eye, despite the fire still rising all around them.

“I am defective. An aberration. I really am a monster. Irregular. Wrong. It was my fault. I should’ve just –“ The fire flared up around Bill in that moment, the increase in heat evident from where Argus was standing, and the flames attempted to consume the little triangle, swirling up around him.

Argus had enough.

Sucking in a deep breath, Argus immediately exhaled the air in his giant lungs, his breath a gale that whipped through the caverns, snuffing out Bill’s fire in an instant.

Crossing the room before Bill could light it again, Argus knelt down and cupped Bill’s triangular body with his hands, hoping that whatever fondness Bill had for his teacher meant that he wouldn’t try to immolate himself again.

While Bill’s bricks were hot, making the eyes on Argus’ hand water, they were whole, and unaffected by his student’s suicidal rampage.

“Bill, enough. Listen to me.”

The triangle seemed shocked, his eye still leaking, staring up at Argus like he was astonished that someone would dare to brave the flames to console him, even at the risk of being burned.

“I am going to tell you what I said to Io in the garden. What other people say you are does not define you. What other people look at when they see you does not define you. You define yourself,
and it is from there that you take charge of your future, control your actions and forge a path ahead. Others can see outward appearances, but only you can see inside yourself and recognise your own truth. Do you understand me?"

Hesitantly Bill nodded once, his rampage stilled by the grounding sensation of Argus’ hand on his side.

“Now control yourself.” Argus ordered. “Control your powers, and control what you seek out to see. Don’t go looking if you’re not ready for what you’ll find. Past sight is to be used tactically, not flippantly, and not at the risk of the people around you.”

“He singed my robe.” Jheselbraum chimed in, quick to blame Bill while he was already being told off.

“Apologise to your sister.” Argus stood upright, considering the matter dealt with.

Bill glared at Jheselbraum and bit out a meaningless forced apology, which Jheselbraum took much pleasure in.

Settling back down on the charred ground beside Bill, picking up her mirror, ready to resume the lesson, Jheselbraum paused to lean in to whisper to Bill.

“What were you looking at?”

“None of your business.” Bill hissed back, retrieving his own mirror and wiping his eye, returning his focus to the mirror.

“I’ll find out.” Jheselbraum insisted, looking down at Bill with a smug smile.

Bill looked up at her at that, narrowing his eye defensively.

“Just you wait. Soon I’ll know everything, friend.” Jheselbraum laughed meanly, the word friend lacking any sort of fondness or sincerity, said almost as if it were an insult.

As Argus continued to scratch his teachings on the cave wall, preparing his students for the final test to granting effortless sight, Bill began to dread his past being laid bare, just as Jheselbraum anticipated it eagerly.

At the time of his student’s final test, Argus was initially bittersweet and nostalgic, sad to see the point at which his students need for his teaching would cease but proud and pleased at how far they had come. They had both practised and applied themselves diligently to the practicalities of sight. They were proficient in seeing and all the rituals that it entailed, and now they were ready to see all places effortlessly, having earned that privilege thoroughly.

Being able to see more than one place at a time was the final step to becoming all-seeing, and Argus, as much as he hated the gift himself, was pleased to be passing it on to his children, as he had come to want to give them everything he could pass on out of sheer fondness.

“Alright children, this is it. Your final test. You’ve studied hard, and I believe you are ready for
this step, but it is crucial you follow my instructions to the letter, as there is only ever one chance to receive all-sight. So, don’t mess this up.”

Jheselbraum nodded obediently, but Bill seemed off in his own head somewhat, no doubt fretting about this final assessment.

“Birds hold great symbolic reverence in many cultures, and sight is especially relevant to the bird’s eye view of all. I was granted the title of ‘Peacock’ for my many eyes by the gods, and the bird itself is made in my image. The being you are about to meet was crafted from the collective wisdom of Athena and is known as The Owl. The Owl reflects the gifts of wisdom Athena bestows back onto those who seek it out. It will give you the wisdom to see all things at once, but to do so you must maintain eye contact with The Owl and hold in your mind the wisdom that has brought you to this point to prove you are worthy. When I call the portal to open, you will travel to the silent realm and when you arrive you are to find the owl and sit in its presence, meeting its gaze in utter silence, until such a point that you are enlightened, and then you must leave immediately. Do you understand?”

“Yes teacher.” Jheselbraum nodded again, barely containing her enthusiasm.

“Don’t say anything, stare at an owl, think real hard and leave. Got it.” Bill answered, sounding bored by the prospect.

“See that you do.” Argus said seriously. “Any errors in this process and you will be ejected from the silent realm and will never be permitted to return.”

After that final warning, Argus straightened up and clapped his hands together, the eyes there blinking in tandem. “Right then. I’ll call up the entrance and give you two some time alone to compose your thoughts. When you are ready, just walk though. I’ll be waiting for you back here.”

Picking up one of the trinkets that littered Argus’ cave, Argus placed the wooden owl figurine on the floor, tapped on it once and began to chant.

“A wise old owl lived in an oak, the more he saw the less he spoke, the less he spoke the more he heard. Why can’t we all be like that wise old bird?”

The figurine’s eyes blinked open and projected a swirling void into the space in front of it.

Giving both of his students an encouraging thumbs up, Argus exited the cave, and gave his students some privacy.

Looking back on this moment, Argus was coming to realise that his penchant for respecting the privacy of those around him as an all seeing being was really quite excessive. The more he saw of his students looking back, the more he realised it was remiss of him to believe that they weren’t abusing that privacy to be duplicitous.

Jheselbraum certainly was.

Turning to face Bill, her hands clasped behind her back, Jheselbraum taunted Bill in a sing-song voice.

“I’ve got it all figured out, you know. A working theory. And after today I’ll be able to confirm it.”

“A working theory about what?” Bill asked with a defensive frown.

theory. The first thing I’m going to do when I receive the power of all-sight will be to look back through your past, find out exactly why you blubber away at night when you think no one is paying attention – I think it’s because you did something irredeemable, something so bad you can never forgive yourself, much less have anyone else forgive you for what you’ve done - and then I’m going to tell everyone all the horrid things you did, so you can’t escape the consequences.”

“What?” Bill’s eye was wide with shock and betrayal, staring up at Jheselbraum, thrown by the reveal of her sudden vindictiveness. “Why?”

“Because I’ve found your weak spot, silly. And I intend to use it.”

“No – but why would you even – I thought we were friends?” Bill blinked up at Jheselbraum, the last vestiges of hope shrivelling up in his glistening eye.

“What kind of idiot makes friends with their rival?” Jheselbraum answered coldly. “You didn’t seriously believe that, did you? You’re my competition, of course we’re not friends.”

Jheselbraum began pacing circles around Bill as she continued her hateful speech.

“And to think Panoptes picked you to be his student. You were never worthy, an abnormal freak of nature, through and through. An aberration, just like you said you were. And Argus may think you’re some kind of prodigy, but clearly, you’re no genius. Then again, neither is he if all it takes to sway him is a few tears. Oh, there’s no use crying Bill. You may as well just give up now.”

Betrayal was slowly overtaking the shock, Bill’s expression turning to anger and outrage now, but Jheselbraum wasn’t done yet.

“Actually, there’s an idea. If you deliberately fail this test, I promise I won’t tell anyone what kind of a monster you are. It’ll just be our little secret. What do you say?” Jheselbraum tilted her head at Bill deviously, her true colours as a master manipulator revealed.

“V fnl lbh’er n tvnag ovgpu.” Bill growled, his hands clenched into fists.

“I’m guessing that’s a no.” Jheselbraum’s smile widened, and she shrugged, stepping back into the portal. “Oh well, you’ll have time to think it over while you’re supposed to be concentrating on the test. Good luck passing, buddy. I’ll see you, and everything you’ve ever done, on the other side.”

She gave a venomously sweet smile and retreated through the portal at that, having successfully rattled Bill right before their final exam.

It was true, Bill was rattled. His whole body was shaking, glitching with rage, and his eye was turning red the more he thought about it, his pupil small and panicked. Fire was spurting around his fists, and he knew he was close to losing control, but that would mean letting her win.

Jheselbraum was obsessed with winning, and clearly she thought she’d already won.

Inhaling deeply, Bill attempted to centre himself with the meditation techniques Argus had been teaching them, holding onto his anger, the heat of his temper focusing into a concentrated flame of rage he used to wrestle back his composure.

If Jheselbraum thought her little power play would scare Bill off at this point, she was clearly not as smart as she thought she was.

Bill followed her through the portal, and it closed behind him.
Peering through Jheselbraum’s eyes at this point, Argus was looking into his student’s final exam. Jheselbraum was sitting cross legged on the plinth before The Owl, staring up at it when Bill arrived.

The Owl was a cosmic creature, a colossal giant, larger than Argus, than the obsidian planet he lived on, larger than anything Jheselbraum had seen before, perched on a broken planet in the boundless chasm opposite, it’s two eyes like piercing pools reflecting the universe back at her. The gaze of The Owl was chilling to the core, like the creature was seeing into her soul, looming above her, it’s beak and claws ready to strike her down any second.

The Owl was intimidating and awe inspiring, and utterly silent to the point of being intensely unnerving. Just as Argus remembered it to be.

Jheselbraum registered Bill’s arrival in her peripheral vision, one of her seven eyes sliding over to look at him.

Bill wasn’t looking at her, he was staring determinately forward at The Owl, his eye furrowed into an intense look of concentration. Jheselbraum frowned, frustrated that her attempt to emotionally sabotage the triangle had failed. She didn’t want Bill to be on par with her. Forcing him to fail this exam would have been the only way she surpassed him as he was incredibly gifted and she hated it.

Her only hope to beat him now was if he spoke during this test but judging from the way he wouldn’t even look at her, focusing on The Owl, he was unwilling to self-sabotage this time.

Disgruntled, Jheselbraum turned her eye back to the front, committing herself to focusing on The Owl when she felt it.

A tickling heat at her ankle.

One of Jheselbraum’s eyes snapped down to see flickering blue light shining through the fabric of her skirt, and her other eye flicked over to Bill, the triangle still staring stubbornly forward, her other five eyes maintaining eye contact with The Owl.

The heat was growing now, not the playful cold fire Bill seemed to exude occasionally, not the warm heat he sometimes created for her on cold nights in the caverns, this was a purposeful burning heat, and it was beginning to sear at the flesh on Jheselbraum’s ankle. It was starting to truly hurt.

Two of Jheselbraum’s eyes turned to Bill now, utterly outraged by the retaliation. If Bill thought he could make Jheselbraum sabotage her own sacred rite, he had another thing coming. She was Jheselbraum the Unswerving. The most feared and accomplished warrior in her tribe, possibly her entire planet. It would take more than a little pain to break her.

Her refusal to budge must have signalled this to Bill, as after a while the flames started to spread from one small spot on her ankle, creeping up her calves, blistering the purple skin there.

Jheselbraum could smell her own skin cooking, and she was pressing her tongue to the roof of her mouth, grinding her teeth to hold back any sound. Tears were pricking at the corners of her seven
eyes and she was livid, the only scream she was permitted to make sounding within her mind.

She looked to the side again, and saw Bill slowly raise a single figure to his eye, silently shushing her.

In his mind he must be laughing at her. He must think this is all a hilarious grand joke, just another in the long line of jokes he made at her expense, how hilarious it must be to outshine Jheselbraum, to sabotage Jheselbraum, to ruin everything for Jheselbraum with his very presence.

When the fire reached her thighs, Jheselbraum’s nails digging into her palms, she thought she saw Bill’s eye curve, smiling, and that was it for her.

She shrieked and stood up, her burnt legs weak and shaky.

Before she could lunge at Bill and ruin his test too, one of The Owl’s mammoth claws came down on her from above, stomping her out of its dimension forever.

Argus recognised the instant her sight aligned with his own, as it was when Jheselbraum was thrown back into the dimension of eternal night, landing in Argus’s obsidian cavern, screaming bloody murder.

Argus noticed now upon his second review that Jheselbraum’s screaming was enraged at first, born of utter frustration and anger, but the instant she realised Argus was in the cavern her screams became more pained and scared, mingling with sobs that became more believable when she fell forward onto the floor, her skirts hoisting with the movement, exposing the charred blistered skin on her legs.

“Jheselbraum my child, what happened to you?” Argus rushed over, helping her off the ground, examining her burns in horror.

“It was Bill. He sabotaged me. He was biding his time until we were at the final test and he burned me.” Jheselbraum accused, standing on shaky legs with Argus’ help. “He made me scream so he could have the power of all-sight all to himself. He was smiling when he did it. He’s evil, duplicitous – a monster. And to think I - I thought he was my friend.”

“Bill did this to you?” Argus was thrown by this, the thought jarring in his mind. “It can’t be.”

“It’s true.” Jheselbraum maintained. “He tricked you. He’s been playing us all. This was his plan all along, to steal the secrets of all-sight and prevent anyone else from doing the same. I’ve no doubt that when he comes back here, he means to kill you.”

“Why would Bill do that?” Argus boggled, the thought never having crossed his mind once before Jheselbraum suggested it, but now that she had things were aligning in his mind that he would have never pieced together.

“His past. He doesn’t want anyone to see what he did.” Jheselbraum insisted, her words ringing with a surety and authority she shouldn’t possess. “He’d kill you, he tried to kill me. We can’t let him do that. We can’t let him win.”

“What would you have me do child?” Argus looked down at Jheselbraum in askance, supporting her weight as she hobbled over to the nearby chair, sitting on it so Argus might inspect her injuries.

“An eye for an eye.” Jheselbraum hissed, as Argus gently touched her leg, the charred skin irreparably damaged. “It’s the only way.”
“An eye for an eye?” Argus repeated, meeting the steely look Jheselbraum was giving him, tears still pricking in all seven of her eyes but doing nothing to hide the determination and ferocity that dwelled within them. “Very well, my child. You shall have your justice.”

When Bill returned from The Owl’s dimension, it was with an expression of bitter resignation in his eye. His trial was completed successfully, and now, now he could see everything.

Every detail of the past, and the capacity to see every detail of the present and future as well, all at once.

However, Bill knew what he was looking for, and he was devastated to find it.

Looking in the past consumed his thoughts.

It was a shame, really, that he didn’t pay a little more attention to the present.

Floating through the obsidian hallways to Argus’ main chamber, Bill was not prepared for what was to happen when he turned the corner.

Without warning, he was grabbed, Argus’ giant hand holding his form steady as his free hand flew forward, steady as a crane’s beak, jamming his fingers into the socket of Bill’s eye.

Bill let out a pained cry, and began to struggle in Argus’ grasp, his small black arms clawing at Argus’ hand ineffectively as the giant began to pull out Bill’s eye, snapping the root of the optic nerve with a mighty yank.

Tears welled up in the hollow of Bill’s eye, the glow of his bricks flaring with distress as the giant released him and straightened up to examine the eye in the palm of his hand.

“Why?” Argus could hear Bill croak weakly, sobbing outright now.

Looking down at the broken triangle, Argus decided against keeping or eating Bill’s eye, and flexed his hand, crushing Bill’s eyeball into a fine paste before wiping his hand against the wall.

“You know what you did.”

“I didn’t mean to.” Bill pleaded, clutching at his surface, hands running over the space where his eye was, horrified. “It was an accident.”

“I will have no excuses from you. That was no accident.” Argus scowled, looming over the triangle before pointing at the ground below Bill’s feet, a black hole opening there to suck Bill out of the dimension of eternal night and spit him out somewhere far far away. “You are to leave this place, and never return, Bill. You are no longer my student.”

Bill felt the black hole’s pull and struggled against it for a moment, before his brow furrowed up at Argus irately, even while his eyelids were jammed shut. Raising a hand, Bill clicked once, summoning the top hat he gave to Argus from the giant’s storeroom, grasping it in his hand.

“You won’t mind if I take this back then.”
Sparing no more time for banter, Argus gestured for the black hole to rise, swallowing the triangle up into its unfathomable centre before closing behind him, sealing off forever.

The caves were quiet after that. Too quiet, and Argus frowned at the space where Bill had been for a while until a gentle voice called out from behind him.

“You did the right thing.”

Turning back to look at Jheselbraum, Argus sighed.

“Maybe so, but it hurts my heart to do so.”

“You still have one student you can rely on.” Jheselbraum hobbled closer to Argus on her makeshift crutches, raising her hand up to place it on the back of Argus’ leg in a consoling fashion. “I know what will make you feel better. How about teaching me something new?”

Resigning himself to his actions, Argus sighed again, before following Jheselbraum to the practice rooms. “Very well.”

Argus had to look away, well aware that he had just revisited what may very well have been the greatest mistake of his life.

Tracking Bill down after he left Argus’ dimension was tricky business. Argus had taught the triangle himself how to block others from seeing through his eye, and Bill was always a quick study, employing the technique immediately after his banishment.

It took some searching before Argus could find another eye he could use to see the triangle through. Thankfully this eye was quite observant, large, and pink.

“So, what are you in for?”

Pyronica blinked down at the yellow triangle in the typical striped black and white prison garb staring back up at her from down by the floor. The uniform hung off his angles in an unfortunate manner, and for some unfathomable reason he had a black and white prison cap floating above his topmost point.

What kind of triangle needed to wear a hat?

Even Pyronica didn’t wear the hat.

Choosing to narrow her eyes bitterly, Pyronica said nothing, but that didn’t seem to deter her new roommate, who laughed and waved his hand at her casually.

“So, nothing, huh? Yeah, I’m in for nothing too.”

When Pyronica only continued to glare at the triangle from the other side of their shared cell, resolutely ignoring him, the triangle shrugged nonchalantly and settled down in his own bunk, crossing his legs and drumming his fingertips against the rim of the bed melodically, purposefully irritating.
Eventually his eye curved at her in an evident smile, and he glowed a bright gold as he told her.

“I can tell we’re going to be best friends.”

When Pyronica rolled over in her bunk, turning her back to him, she heard him speak again, his voice echoing with certainty.

“Yep. Best friends forever.”

It seemed he was being serious, as from that first day he was brought into the Infinitentiary, Bill Cipher stuck to Pyronica like glue.

He followed her to and from mealtimes, playing pranks on the other inmates, flipping their trays over and levitating the food to dance around them in the air to squeeze a laugh out of Pyronica. He sat beside her in shop hours, nattering away about interdimensional comedies while they assembled cosmic birdhouses and licence plates. He claimed the brittle fold out chair beside her during prison sanctioned movie nights, throwing popcorn at the screen and singing along with the musical numbers.

Every night before it was lights out in the prison, Bill would whisper “Goodnight best friend” to her from across the other side of the cell, and Pyronica would curl up on her cot and pretend the words didn’t delight her, pretend she wasn’t listening.

She wasn’t stupid. From the moment he entered the Infinitentiary, Pyronica heard the rumours floating about.

That this was Bill Cipher. The same Bill Cipher who challenged Time Baby himself. Who blew up the Globnar colosseum. Who tried to kill Time Baby in front of his entire assembled police force. Who tried to steal a time wish.

He had quite the reputation already, the sort of reputation he could be using to rule this prison, to become one of the big bosses here, the head honchos. He could have made the inmates eat from the palm of his hand, if he was really as dangerous as his wrap sheet indicated.

But for some reason, rather than climb up the food chain within the prison system, he was sucking up to Pyronica, the one inmate who didn’t have criminal contacts on the outside, who could never leave the Infinitentiary without surrendering herself to the state, and who didn’t care about the petty squabbles that happened within the prison’s ecosystem.

She was more likely to eat inmates who bothered her than contribute to their machismo power struggles, and she wasn’t sure what exactly Cipher had to gain from hanging around her.

Unless his goal was to be eaten, the only thing there was to gain from following Pyronica around like this was… a friend.

That night, after Bill had elbowed her several times throughout the film, pointing out the outfits and pizazz and charm that these old human movies oozed aplenty, they were ordered back to their cells for the night, and, same as always, when the warden shut the lights out, Pyronica heard Bill
“Goodnight best friend.”

Tonight, rather than ignore him, Pyronica paused, and then rolled over in her cot to face him, staring at the glowing gold triangle, his form acting like a nightlight in the dingy dark cell.

“Why do you always say that?” She whispered back to him curiously.

“What? Goodnight? Time is an illusory construct, I know, but it’s more of a social nicety really.” Bill responded, cosying up on his side too, pillowing his hands beneath his hypotenuse, mirroring her posture.

“No. The other thing.” Pyronica pressed, before forcing the words out in a pained whisper. “Best friend.”

“Because you are my best friend.” Bill answered simply. “And if you’re not now, you will be.”

“Because you can see the future? That’s what everyone’s saying.” Pyronica shifted on her thin cot, blinking her eye at Bill.

“Seeing into the future is a waste of time.” Bill replied. “I can do it, but it takes so long, and nothing about it is set in stone. One small thing could change, and then the future you’re looking at just disappears, and you have to do the looking all over again. It’s not worth it.”

“Then how do you know we’ll be best friends?” Pyronica whispered.

Bill fidgeted for a moment, looking away almost nervously, before he met her gaze again, his eye almost apologetic.

“Because I’ve seen your past.”

Pyronica’s eye widened with horror, and before she could process her shock into outrage, Bill flung his hands out.

“Wait, wait, wait! I meant our pasts are similar. We’ve been through the same things. I understand you. How can we not be friends?”

“How could you understand what I’ve been through?” Pyronica asked thickly, anger brewing in her voice. “How?”

“You’ve lost your parents, your family, your entire people. It wasn’t fair how it happened, and it will never be fair. Because you’re the only one left it feels like it was your fault. Everyone treats you like a monster because of it, or maybe just because of you and what you are, but it isn’t who you are.” Bill’s eye was wide with understanding, beseeching her to see that he knew what it felt like, that he really did understand her, because judging from the emotion in his voice, it had happened to him too. “You’re not a monster. You weren’t one before, and you’re not one now. You’re just a kid.”

Pyronica stared at Bill until her eye hurt, tears welling, her eye shiny in the reflected light of his glow.

“No one’s ever said that to me.” She eventually said, the words coming out more like a sob.

“What, that you’re a kid?” Bill joked, quirking his brow.
“That I’m not a monster.” Pyronica answered, her throat clogged with feeling.

“If I’m not a monster, you’re not a monster.” Bill said resolutely.

“And how do you know you’re not a monster, when everyone tells you that you are?” Pyronica questioned, hanging desperately on the answer.

“Because I have to believe it.” Bill said solemnly. “It’s the only lie that matters.”

Pyronica chewed this information over for a while, also chewing on the inside of her cheek as she mulled it over.

“I think you’re right.” She said eventually, looking up at Bill, her eye alight with optimism.

“How about what?” Bill prompted, and Pyronica’s face split into the widest grin she’d made in years.

“We are gonna be best friends. I’ve never had a best friend before.”

Bill’s expression was distant for a moment, before his eye curved in a sad smile.

“I guess I haven’t either.”

“So, best friend, what do you think?”

Grabbing their lunch trays, Bill and Pyronica were walking to their regular table in the cafeteria, Bill floating by Pyronica’s elbow.

Looking down at the triangle with a smile brewing, Pyronica asked. “What do I think about what, best friend?”

“About getting out of here. What’s your escape plan?”

Pyronica sat down at the too small table, her knees bunching up as she attempted to perch on the tiny bench provided. She set her tray in front of her and frowned, her brow pinching as she looked at Bill.

“No one’s ever escaped the Infinitentiary. This place is a fortress. It’s impossible.”

Passing the food from his tray onto hers, Bill countered her. “Just because nobody’s done it yet, doesn’t mean it’s impossible.”

“People have tried everything though.” Pyronica insisted. “Prison riots, impersonating the guards, taking hostages, hijacking the system, dissolving the cell bars with acid. None of it worked because the Infinitentiary exists within one of Time Baby’s loop enforcements. Every time someone escapes, the guards just wind back to before the attempt happened and stop it from ever happening.”

“Damn.” Bill set his tray down and rubbed the bricks beside his eye, thinking. “Does the loop enforcement exist outside the prison, or only within its walls?”
“I mean, it’s Time Baby’s loop, so who knows what he could do.” Pyronica shrugged and started scooping some unidentifiable meal sludge up with a deep-fried fish stick, shovelling the goop into her mouth, continuing to talk with her mouth full. “As far as I know though he doesn’t pay that much attention to the prison. Real lock ‘em up and leave ‘em. Once the loop was set up, he just crawled away to focus on something else.”

“We need to find out how far outside the prison the time loop extends.” Bill said, counting down on his fingers, growing more fingers as needed for his checklist. “Then we need to find out how the guards, dignitaries and other officials leave the time loop, if there’s some sort of process to check them out. Then we need to find out everyone who’s ever attempted to escape before and how far they got. Then we need to find out the routines for the guards who monitor our cells, and how long we’d have until someone notices we left. Then we need to find out what backup security measures we’d face if we managed to escape the actual loop of the prison. Then we need to find out where they’re keeping our stuff.”

“Oh.” Pyronica nodded. That made sense. She didn’t know why anyone would want to keep wearing the unflattering Infinitentiary prison cap, but Bill still did, perhaps as a placeholder for his original hat. She hoped the hat he wanted back was nicer than this one.

“There must be some kind of power dampener on the prison, as ever since I got here, I haven’t been able to use my fire.” Bill mused, rubbing under his eye pensively.

“You have fire? That’s so cool. I wish I had fire.” Pyronica pouted, imagining breathing fire on her enemies.

“I’ve noticed though that that’s all that’s been blocked by the dampeners.” Bill continued. “I’m thinking the prison only blocks the powers they’re aware of, and since I have other tricks up my sleeve they don’t know about, I’ve still got options there.”

“Did you use fire against Time Baby?” Pyronica asked curiously.

“Yeah, if you call losing my temper using it.” Bill muttered. “For all the good it did me.”

“Is it true you tried to kill Time Baby?” Pyronica probed, trying her luck.

“What’s it to you if I did?” Bill asked shrewdly, narrowing his eye at Pyronica.

“If I’d have known you could do that, I’d have tried the same, that’s all.” Pyronica said with a shrug. “I would’ve thought the consequences for trying though would make it not worth it. I mean, you are in prison.”

“A temporary consequence.” Bill waved his hand dismissively. “If there’s one thing that I’ve learned from discovering Time Baby is a thing, it’s that nothing we do matters. None of our actions have consequences in a world where the timeline isn’t fixed. If the only thing holding us accountable in life is a diaper wearing tyrant holding the reigns to a linear timeline, as soon as he’s out of the picture, we control the timeline. No decisions are permanent, no mistakes are unfixable, we can pick and choose what things stick in our universe. Until I get to a point where I can do away with timeline dictators, I’ve decided nothing I do counts. All of it can be redone, so none of it really matters.”

“So, everything just gets redone? You don’t think before then you’ll reach a point where you like
how things are going enough to let it play out normally?” Pyronica asked, picking fish sticks out of her teeth.

“Highly doubtful, but if I find a moment I like enough to postpone abolishing the known laws of the universe for, I’ll let you know.” Bill said sarcastically, raising his brow at the cyclops.

“I guess that means as your best friend, I get to make sure you have a damn good time until the day you do kill Time Baby, just in case something grabs your attention.” Pyronica smiled at Bill and wagged her brow back at him.

“I like the way you think Pink. Indulgence, and then total universal domination.” Bill clicked his finger and nodded, obviously pleased with her response. “Good to know you’ll get me there in style.”

“Makes sense now why you didn’t bother climbing the dumb ladder here within the prison. You’ve got better things to focus on than who gets the most cigarettes or whatever. You’ve got a universe to liberate, and a giant baby to kill.”

“If you feel like joining me, you can be there when it happens. For killing Time Baby, subverting reality and taking over the universe itself, not to mention all the fun stuff that comes after it.” Bill offered, extending his hand out to Pyronica lightly.

“Oh, I’d love that.” Pyronica bared her teeth in a vicious grin. “I’d gladly help you rip him apart.”

“And when we remake time, we can fix my past, we can fix your past, we can bring our parents back. If we get that far, I can promise I’ll do that for you.” Bill said with sincerity, still holding his hand out for her, glowing brightly now. “So, what do you say? You’ll stick with me to the end? Best friends forever?”

“It’s a crazy plan. Like some sort of fantastical dream.” Pyronica said bluntly, before her grin blossomed again. “But if anyone’s crazy enough to pull it off, it’s you. I’m in. Best friends forever.”

She extended her hand out and grasped Bill’s tiny hand in her massive claw, missing the jolt of power flowing through him when she shook his hand, sealing the deal.

“You’ve gotta get us out of this prison first, dreamer.” She reminded him.

“I’m working on it.” Bill said, still holding onto Pyronica’s hand. “I’ve gotta search for the answers to our prison break questions. If I start looking, will you lead me around for a while and cover for me?”

“I mean, sure I guess, but what do you mean cover for yo – WOAH!” Pyronica tried to moderate her shout, drawing the attention of the inmates briefly. Bill had zoned out completely in that instant, his eye fizzing with static, held afloat only by Pyronica holding his hand at this point.

Pyronica guessed that meant he was looking for their answers, but it seemed like while he did she’d have to tote him around the prison so nobody would disturb him while he looked.

Her frustration lasted only for a moment, as she regarded the small triangle who offered so much to her, only asking for loyalty and friendship in return.

There were worse things, Pyronica reasoned, than holding hands with your best friend for a while.
Bill still seemed to be meditating in their cell, hovering with his legs crossed and his fingers pressed together in the shape of an upside-down triangle, static fizzing in his half-lidded eye, when Pyronica started stretching, getting ready to leave.

“I don’t know if you can hear me like that, but in a while they’re gonna come get me for training. Will you be okay to wait here? You’re not gonna explode or fall over or get beat up if I leave you like this?” Pyronica asked, holding her arm across her chest, stretching her shoulder.

“How do you want them to do it, then?” Bill asked, without looking up.

“Yeah, the prison makes me do combat training every three months, and some Federation stooges come watch. They want me to agree to join their enforcement team, and they try to recruit me every time.” Brushing her hair back from her face, Pyronica bent down to check her reflection in the small mirror above the sink. “I’ve been practicing new and creative ways to say no to them. This time I think I’ll go with ‘I’d rather pull your intestines out and wear them as a scarf’. I think it sends the right message.”

“You always say no?” Bill asked, seeming to withdraw from his trance now, rousing to interest in Pyronica’s situation.

“Well, I mix it up, but yeah. They just have to get used to disappointment.”

“What if you said yes?” Bill’s eye was open now, watching Pyronica shrewdly.

“I’m never going to say yes.” Pyronica said reflexively, not catching Bill’s drift just yet. “Those bastards killed my family.”

“But what would happen if you told them Y-E-S?” Bill stared at her, unblinking, waiting for her to get it.

“I’d have to go work for them.” Pyronica answered with a frown. “Guard diplomats and hold doors open for people with superiority complexes and beat up innocent criminals whenever the Federation wants. I’m not going to do that.”

“You would go work for them where?” Bill pressed.

“I just said I’m not going to work for them Bill.” Pyronica stomped her foot on the ground in frustration. “Not ever.”

“Py, darling Py.” Bill floated up from his meditative position, reaching out for her hand before patting it fondly. “I’m not asking you to work for them, I’m asking if a yes would get you out of this prison? As in would they physically escort you off the premises?”

“Oh.” Pyronica’s eye widened with understanding, before she looked down at Bill, nodding, in on the idea now. “Ohhhhhhhhh.”

“They would?”

“Yeah. They definitely would. That’s their selling point. ‘Wouldn’t you like to get out of this prison’ that sort of bullshit. But I’m not going to leave you behind like that. Best friends forever,
“Remember?”

“I’m not asking you to sell out Py. I’m planning our escape attempt. It will only work if we leave together.” Bill patted her hand again, coaxing her over to the idea. “But I think you’ve just got our ticket out of here sorted.”

“Does this mean I don’t get to use my no? I thought about this one for ages.” Pyronica pouted.

“Tell them no this time.” Bill said, giving her hand a squeeze before floating back over to the bed, crossing his legs and assuming the meditative position again. “Make it a really good one. You say they come every three months?”

“Uhuh.” Pyronica nodded.

“That gives us three months to plan, make alliances we can use on the outside, and create diversions.” Bill tented his fingers again, glowing gold with promise. “This will be our last three months inside the Infinitentiary. We’ve got to savour them.”

Pyronica gave Bill a funny look at that, but already his eye was fizzling with static again, scanning through the past escape attempts to perfectly plot their own prison break.

When the guards came to get Pyronica, for once she was smiling as she was led away to combat training, and when the Federation asked her again, she was positively beaming as she delivered her politest and most effusive no fucking way.

Bill had been sparing with details about the plan, keeping Pyronica in the dark for the most part, pulling the strings behind the scenes, and that suited her just fine. She saw him schmoozing with the various gangs within the prison, sweet talking the lunch lady, winning his weird tall hat back in a game of cards and heckling the guards in a friendly manner, all to lull them into a false sense of security. He ensured that on the day of their escape there would be so many simultaneous factors going off that something was sure to slip through the cracks of the Infinitentiary, that something ideally being them.

Now, fifteen minutes before go time, Bill was finally explaining the plan to her, although Pyronica was only half listening, practising her punches and combat forms in between fixing her hair in the cell mirror.

“So then while that’s going off in the kitchen, Biggs will start a riot in the rec yard when I give the signal, and the guards by the control room start their routine changeover and smoke break. By that time, we’ll be with the Federation delegation, out of the Time Loop, and on our way to freedom.”

“That’s great. So, when do I get to beat them up again?” Pyronica asked distractedly.

“When I give the signal.” Bill said with a sigh, trying to ensure all the pieces of his plan were in place.

“Which is when?”
“You’ll know when. It’s a pretty big signal. You can’t miss it.”

Pyronica shrugged, taking Bill at his word, and made a few more elbow jabs at the mirror, finishing off her routine with a roundhouse kick, her foot just brushing the surface of the glass.

Beside her, Bill concentrated, squeezing his eye shut, his molecules vibrating before splitting, his yellow bricks wrenching away from him to form a mirror image of his triangular form beside of him, his double blinking and waving independently.

“Alright, we’ve got our handsome devil decoy in position.” Bill gestured to his illusory double, who saluted him and winked before floating over to sit on Bill’s bunk, pretending to meditate. “The guards are coming in a few minutes. Now all that’s left is for you to eat me.”

Pyronica halted her routine and swung around to look at Bill in shock. “What???”

“I’m not going to eat myself. Chop chop! Open up!” Bill floated upwards and reached for Pyronica’s jaw, trying to prise it open.


“Are you saying it wouldn’t be gross if we weren’t friends?” Bill raised his brow quizzically, teasing her.

“That’s not the point! I thought we were gonna be best friends forever? How is me eating you going to achieve that? Unlike the other people I eat, I sort of actually like having you around, you know.”

“Relax, Py. It’s only temporary. Just until we get out of the Time Loop, then I just phase right through your stomach and we’re copacetic. Easy as Py.” Bill poked her cheek, his eye curving with a smile. “Come on, if I’m not inside you when we escape, you’ll miss out on the best part.”

“What best part?” She narrowed her eye at him suspiciously.

“Haven’t you always wanted to breathe fire on your enemies?” Bill waggled his brow temptingly.

It was tempting indeed. Pyronica thought about the prospect for four wonderful seconds, before she straightened up.

“Right. Bottoms up!”

Her tongue shot out and wrapped around the triangle, surprising him as he was yanked swiftly into Pyronica’s mouth and swallowed immediately.

Pyronica could feel the heat of him sinking down her throat and settling into her belly, and she felt guilty for a few small seconds before Bill’s double gave her an approving thumbs up.

She swallowed him just in time too, as several seconds after one of the guards came to escort her to combat training.

“Don’t have too much fun without me.” Bill’s double waved at her cheerfully as the guards led her away.

“Don’t worry.” Pyronica smirked, feeling confident with her best friend’s warmth heating her from within. “I won’t.”
When the space bus reached the end of the line, stopping by a floating restaurant on the edge of a swirling nebula, Stanford thought the logo on the front of the restaurant looked familiar, oddly so. It reminded Stanford of the crop circles he’d seen etched onto the cows back in the field near the crash site nearly thirty years ago. It was nearly identical.

Bill had said the cow circles were simply interdimensional graffiti left by a rebellious alien teen, striking out against authority figures with all of the renegade zeal teenagers were presumed to have, but Stanford had come to know better than to simply accept what Bill had told him by this point. Running it past his dimensional translator, the readout displayed the translated phrase: *Glarbo’s Intergalactic House of Pancakes & Weapons! Come for the breakfast, stay for the dark matter hyper cannons!*

“Another lie. Why am I not surprised?” Stanford muttered, tapping his translator once to minimise the holographic screen, lifting his duffel bag full of scrapped parts over his shoulder and heading towards the restaurant.

He had already separated the necessary parts for the gun from the rest of his things in the nano-briefcase he inherited from Raha, having come to learn that whipping out a nano-briefcase in a public place was likely to attract police attention due to the illegality of the item. The duffel bag was less convenient, and a great deal heavier than storing his things in the nano-briefcase but if it meant Stanford wouldn’t get arrested, a sore back from carrying the duffel was a price worth paying.

The bell above the restaurant door chimed when Stanford walked in, and the attendant behind the counter gave Stanford a friendly ‘Welcome to Glarbo’s’, wiping down the countertop while an array of weaponry was displayed in the cases behind him, the sweet smell of pancakes and maple syrup bracketed with harsh metal and chemical scents wafting through the establishment.

There were few patrons in the restaurant, an old porous looking vagabond in one of the corner booths, snoozing into a plate of pancakes, a miserable amphibian fellow openly crying into his meal sitting up by the counter, and the resolutely cheerful pink-skinned three-eyed four-armed server, humming a tune as he cleaned the surfaces down with a cloth.

Stanford eyed off several of the weapons and parts displayed on the wall, mentally going over what items he could incorporate in the design for his Bill-blaster, before his eyes lit upon the menu, his stomach grumbling assertively.

Considering how frugal he had been with sourcing the rest of the parts for the gun, finding exorbitant discounts, and occasionally outright stealing parts for the weapon (the old six-fingered discount), he reasoned he had a little leeway with spending the QUID Jheselbraum gave him on some sustenance, as it had been so long since he’d had real food. Ration bars were affordable, but his disdain for the bars only percolated, remembering the way Bill had wrinkled his nose at them knowingly.

Nostalgia for the food he once made gripped him, fuelling his decision, fond remembrance of Stan-cakes and sunlit mornings in his kitchen, watching the jam jars float in time with the song playing...
on the radio cementing his choice and he approached the counter to place his order.

“A stack of pancakes please.”


“Coffee would be nice.” Stanford conceded, taking the table marker the server slid his way. “I’ll get back to you on the grenades.”

“Excellent choice. Excellent. I’ll bring you out a weapons menu with your meal. Won’t be too long.” The server took down Stanford’s order and slapped the paper print out on the rack leading back into the kitchen, dinging a bell to let the articulated crustacean in the kitchen know to start cooking Ford’s order. “Stack of pancakes and a shot of joe for table bleven!”

Taking his table marker with him, Stanford slid into one of the booths along the wall of the diner, far away from the oozing homeless fellow who smelled more pungent than the food, claiming the other corner booth on the far side of the restaurant so he could keep his back to the wall.

Unfortunately, this put him in close proximity to the catfish faced patron who insisted on seasoning his pancakes with tears, his whiskers dripping with his own fluids, but Stanford had enough experience with emotional repression to ignore this gentleman’s outburst.

He set his duffel bag on the booth chair beside him and began pulling out parts, continuing work on the assembly of his blaster while he was waiting for his food.

The blaster had been coming along nicely. Stanford was following the loose blueprints Jheselbraum had given him, putting his own flair on the weapon, taking a little extra time to ensure he was triple checking each component he installed in the gun, having learned his lesson about following gifted blueprints blindly before.

This weapon wouldn’t be like the portal, Stanford reasoned. With the portal, Stanford was blinded to the truth of what he was building by the rose-coloured glasses he wore, naively trusting the benefactor of the blueprints, assuming he was doing things right because he didn’t think Bill would steer his progress astray.

The old adage fool me once, shame on you, fool me twice shame on me ran on loop in Stanford’s head, conveniently ignoring just how many times Bill had fooled him throughout their time together.

He wouldn’t repeat the mistakes of the past now. He was determined to analyse every aspect of these blueprints, to personalise the weapon to ensure it was just as much about what he wanted as it was what Jheselbraum desired it to be. Not just fulfilling her idea of Stanford’s destiny, but doing it with flair.

Personalisation was a wonderful thing, Stanford thought to himself as he took a sharpie from his duffel bag, carefully penning a triangle shape dead in the middle of the sights on the ray gun, making sure all the edges were perfectly symmetrical just as Bill was. Personalisation was in the little things, like creating this weapon to aim perfectly at the shape of his ex. It was in the satisfaction of a job well done, those little personalised details. That flair. That panache.

The server came over to Ford’s table, holding his plate of pancakes, some cutlery, a mug, and a jug of dark black coffee in his four arms, pausing to peer at the scope Stanford was currently working
“Wow, you sure are good at that. Perfectly symmetrical that equilateral. I don’t know how you do it.”

Peering down his nose through his glasses Stanford penned the final lines on the edges of the scope, his mouth hanging slightly open as he drew, ensuring the rifle blast would aim directly into the centre of Bill’s eye, his lines perfect given the hundreds of drawings of Bill he had made throughout the years.

“Lots of practise.” Ford admitted absently, fixing one final line before setting the scope and pen down and clearing the table to make room for the food.

“You’re working on quite the project, aren’t ya?” The server set down Ford’s food, gesturing to the weapon with his free hand. “I bet that packs a punch.”

“It will.” Ford said, patting the gun’s scaffold fondly before reaching for his coffee cup, inhaling the pleasantly noxious scent of industrial strength caffeine. “It’s still a work in progress.”

Passing Stanford a weapons menu, the server removed the table marker from Ford’s table. “Well if you see anything you fancy from here you want to add onto that big boy, you just let me know.”

“Thank you. I will.” Stanford promised, and began to tuck into his meal, pausing every few bites to flip through the weapons menu.

Over by the counter, Stanford couldn’t help but overhear the server speaking with the patron sitting up by the bar, still sniffling wetly into his meal.

“Hey Ingénue, you want me to heat those up for you again? They’ve gotta be getting cold. No one likes cold pancakes.”

“It’s what I deserve.” Sobbed the miserable man, his pale blue skin glistening, either from the tear tracks or the scales that covered his body, oddly enough matching the shining silver accents he wore on his clothing, and the ornate metal cuffs on his wrists. “I don’t deserve to eat hot pancakes after what I’ve done.”

“Come on, Ingénue, man, you’ve gotta let it go. It’s been thousands of years. You can’t keep holding onto this, and I can’t keep wiping your tears off the counter, it’s bad for business. What would Glarbo say if he knew I let you in here to cry in front of the weapons display every day. I’d get the sack.”

“I’m sorry Glarbon.” Ingénue sniffled. “You’ve been so generous to me but you remind me of him so much and whenever I think of him I –”

“Woah. Don’t go comparing me to a God Ingénue. Glarbo knows my ego doesn’t need it.” Laughed Glarbon lightly.

Stanford’s ears pricked up proverbially at the mention of Gods, having finished his meal, pretending to focus on tweaking his weapon whilst attempting to actively eavesdrop now.

“It’s not that you look like him. It’s not. You’ve got four arms, and he only had two and he was an ethereal being of unquantified proportions and you’re –“

“I get it Ingénue, you don’t need to spell it out for me.” Glarbon said flatly, not enjoying the unflattering comparisons.
“But you’re so generous, just like he was. You didn’t have to let me stay here. You could have kicked me out ages ago. You give me food, a place to stay, free breadsticks on weekends. I feel so bad for taking from you like this.”

“You’re not taking anything Ingénue, I’m giving it to you, and you’re also paying for it, so it’s not like I’m going wanting here buddy.” Glarbon said, leaning two of his elbows against the counter and pillowing his chin with his other two hands, watching the blue scaled man with sympathy.

“I’ve already been given so much. Longevity, health, wealth, happiness, knowledge. It was just in his nature to give, and then people took, and thought it would be okay because he never said otherwise.” Ingénue explained tearfully. “I tried to give back, but I should have given more, done more. When I made the transference bracers, he jumped at the opportunity to give his power, to save the people, but no one ever thought to save him. He never asked to be saved, but he never asked for anything, he was just that generous.”

“So you’ve said before.” Glarbon sighed, and pushed back off the counter, wiping down another puddle of tears from the countertop. “I’m not asking for you to save anything Ingénue I’m just suggesting, there’s gotta be a way for you to move on from this. You can’t keep holding onto the past forever, and you can’t keep crying all over my restaurant. I’m burning through mops here, it’s ridiculous.”

“What happened is my greatest regret. How do you expect me to just move on from it? How do you get over the God who gave you everything?”

Deciding to speak up, chiming into the discussion while polishing the barrel of his blaster, Stanford said. “Personally, I plan to just kill him.”

Ingénue twisted on his chair to look at Stanford, his whiskers twitching miserably at Ford’s dramatic statement, before he asked. “What do you do if you’ve already done that? What comes after?”

Stanford was thrown by this question, especially in relation to what happens after he kills Bill. Honestly, he didn’t think there would be an after, but there would certainly be a legacy from that sort of destiny fulfillment. He didn’t know what he’d do after Bill was out of the picture. It wasn’t like there was another evil world-destroying triangle he could obsess over.

“You think you’re doing the right thing.” Ingénue continued, his voice thick with emotion. “And you’ve got all of the right reasons backing up your logic, and no one is telling you no, but when it’s all over and things can’t be undone you’re the one who’ll have to live with it, and it never goes away.”

Stanford uncomfortably wiped his mouth with his napkin, dabbing away maple syrup rather than engaging with this amphibious fellow’s emotional struggle, no matter how closely it related to his own.

Cottoning on that Stanford wasn’t about to contribute to his pity party, Ingénue turned back to the counter, his head hanging low above his pancakes. “It hurts, being loved, loving someone, and then letting them down. It hurts knowing that my actions contributed to his demise, and I’ll never get the chance to fix those mistakes. I can never undo what I have done. I can’t get him back and I miss him every day.”

Setting his napkin down, Stanford packed away his gear in the duffel, slid out of the booth and brought the weapons menu up to the counter, pointing to the grenades menu. “I’ll have a dozen of these, please.”
Glarbon retrieved the grenades for Stanford, throwing in a complimentary grenades belt, and processed his payment, packaging them up for Ford, forcing his usual cheerful customer service demeanour despite the emotional downer that was Ingénue crying into his pancakes once more.

Picking up his purchases, Ford packed them in the duffel, deciding that waiting for the next space bus to the depot would be better than sitting in here listening to the blue fish man blubber loudly about his personal problems to anyone who would listen.

“If only he could see me now, I wonder what he would say.” Ford heard Ingénue sob as he headed out the door, the ring of the bell obscuring Ingénue’s final word on the matter, swallowed by circumstance and copious dramatic irony.

“Antelias.”

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After witnessing what may just have been the most infamous prison escape in Infinitentiary history, Argus was convinced that it wasn’t prison that warped Bill into a someone who would kill his mentor and destroy worlds. Certainly, the boy had killed to escape, a mirthful light-hearted spree with his friend, breathing fire on the Federation delegation and blowing an enormous hole in the wall of the Time Loop, enabling the escape of several other prisoners as well, but it wasn’t that crucial point of no return. Argus still didn’t understand yet.

Prison wasn’t where Bill had gone wrong, where he had strayed from the path. Argus was hoping, with growing trepidation, that his betrayal wasn’t the straw that broke the camel’s back, that it wasn’t the defining moment that cemented his death at Bill’s hands.

It was with a weary resignation that the giant realised that if Bill’s turning point wasn’t his incarceration, and it wasn’t Jheselbraum’s carefully constructed betrayal back as a student and his own blind complicities with the deed, then it must have been before then, during a time Argus had purposefully up til this point, refused to examine.

A man’s past is his own, goes the saying, but those who do not study history are doomed to repeat it, and Argus needed to know which of his own mistakes secured his doom at his student’s hands. He needed to know.

As Bill had warded his eye, Argus couldn’t see through it into the triangle’s history, but there was still one option available to the all-seeing giant.

Although it wasn’t a very pleasant one.

Trudging through the obsidian halls, Argus stopped at the room in which he had banished Bill, staring hard at the wall, lost in thought for a moment, before drawing on some old, lost magics, dust stirring up on the floor.

Slowly, several molecules rose from the dusty ground, compiling together until a vague shape began to form. The dust collated and hardened, until a grey, patchy sphere hovered in the air between Argus’ hands.

The sphere was cracked, missing parts, hardly the perfect shape it once was, but after several
moments of intense concentration it became clear that this was as whole as it was ever going to be.

Bill’s old crushed eye, reformed, unwarded, would have to do.

If Argus were to see his past without letting Bill know he was doing so, this reconstruction would be necessary to glimpse the turning point that lead to his destruction.

Focusing his power onto delving into the mysteries this eye held, initially Argus found the reception patchy, glitching, images and shapes flickering vaguely across the eye, as colours do flit across the back of the eye when one dreams.

After pouring more energy into the endeavour, eventually an image came into focus.

An orange tinted one eyed triangle with long lashes was leaning over the eye, long black arms reaching down to straighten a bow-tie onto the viewer, who could only be Bill, the orange triangle taking great care to affix the bow tie perfectly.

“My funny little angle. You look very smart for the Circles.” Despite the bow tie being tied perfectly, the orange triangle still took time to adjust it unnecessarily, almost as if she was delaying to prolong her affection. “Very smart.”

The image glitched again, colours and shapes whirling past, the boisterous shouts of children playing heard amid a familiar voice shouting. “Who wants to see a magic trick?!”

Fire flared and then the image glitched back to the orange triangle, a pale yellow triangle standing beside her, wearing an office tie on his bricks, his hand stretching around the orange triangle, resting on her shoulder. His eye crinkled in a fond but condescending manner.

“I’m sure we’ll see you real soon, kiddo. Those Circles know what they’re doing.”

“Be good for them Bill. We’ll be waiting for you.” The orange triangle said with more warmth in her tone. “They’ll fix everything, and then we can be a family again.”

Through the crumbling eye Argus could feel more than he could see the ice cold touch of a hand on Bill’s upper arm, leading him away, and the image of his parents went up in flames.

“We’ve got another one.” Came a stern voice, Bill’s eye alighting briefly on an imposing square, frogmarching Bill into a room and throwing him forward slightly, before a cohort of Circles, all wearing pompous headwear to showcase their wealth, the Circles looking imperiously down on the little yellow triangle.

“He doesn’t look like an aberration.” Commented one Circle, looking over Bill’s lines. “He’s a perfect equilateral.”

“They’re becoming more insidious.” Another Circle replied, and it felt as if the vision had skipped ahead in the discussion substantially, all the Circles now frowning with concern. “This requires further examination.”

“Put him with the others.”

The images faded, became blurry for a while, just colours and sounds flashing by, too loud yet muted all at once, unintelligible. Argus concentrated more power into the eye, and the image cleared upon a room full of abnormal shapes, all children, or at least far smaller than the imposing Squares that guarded the door.
There was some sort of altercation with one of the guards, and while Argus could not see the whole picture, he got the sense that Bill intervened from the way the images jumped from the perspective of one side of the room to being right in the middle of a smaller shape and a looming guard, a Circle hovering just behind the guard, narrowing his eye at Bill ominously.

“Trying to play the hero, are we? Let’s show you what happens to heroes in our world.”

Argus felt from the eye a great deal of pain all at once, and was surprised when the grey reconstructed eye began to moisten, damp dusty tears leaking down from the eye into the palms of his hands.

The image in the eye seemed to open again, blinking into a brightly lit examination room, glowing blue restraints pinning Bill’s wrists and ankles onto a table, several Circles wearing goggles looming over the table, examining Bill like a specimen.

“What’s the root of it?”

“Levitation is the standard for his kind. Triangles should have no more than that. It would decimate the current hierarchy.”

“Have the parents been sterilised?”

“Soon. First, however, let’s open this one up and find out how it works.”

Argus could see a pointed glowing object being lowered towards his eye, and he could feel his own eyes watering in sympathy, the image blurring, perhaps deliberately, disassociation setting in.

“So, when do they fix you?” Argus could hear Bill say to a shell-shocked looking Parallelogram hovering close to the ground.

The Parallelogram only laughed and told Bill with a bitter smile hinting in their eye. “I like your sense of humour.”

The images in the eye seemed to flicker, circling back to memories of Bill’s parents over and over again, the same image of them waving him off repeating itself almost like Bill were trying to hold that image in his mind. Fire began to overlay the memory more frequently until it came to the point where Bill was unable to remember his parents without seeing them both immersed in an inferno.

“Do they ask about you? Is that what you’re imagining?” One of the Circles asked in a patronising tone, a tall top hat visible above the girth of him, this Circle wearing the same goggles the others wore in the lab.

They were in a room, another examination room, although this one was less well kempt, looking more like a torture chamber than any sort of sterile lab.

“That our admin Hexagons keep having to turn them away. When will you fix him, they ask. When can he come home? They might be doing that, then again I might be lying.”

Argus could feel Bill’s eye narrow, rage seething through his tiny body, but he only glared at the Circle, which seemed to amuse them.

“No fire, aberration? Don’t children get so very angry when they find out adults lie to them?”

“I was told to be good for the Circles. I don’t think setting you on fire qualifies.” Bill gritted out.
“The squares were right. You are a funny child. Will you show me some real fire maybe, if I tell you your parents were glad to be rid of you? Grateful to be freed of the burden of an imperfect child, of a freak, an abomination? That having you ruined their lives, and that they’re better off without you? Hmm?”

“You already told me that you’re lying.” Bill countered stubbornly, clinging to that fact.

“I could be lying about lying as well. And you’d never know. Come now, if you show me where you’re hiding the fire, I can cut it out and send you back home with your family, wouldn’t you like that?”

Bill flexed and called the fire into his hands, a weak blue flame flaring to life, sputtering on and off in his palms before extinguishing completely.

The Circle tsked. “Now that won’t do.”

And the pain began again.

The images all seemed to swirl together now as the integrity of Bill’s crushed eye began to dissipate, the reconstituted tears pulling more molecules from the dusty surface of the eye as every drop fell, and things became a psychedelic swirl for a while, answers no more forthcoming than sense in this cruel warped reality Bill lived in.

Images splattered back and forth, jumping through time, the fire more rapidly interspersed between them all. Argus saw empty space, a wormhole, the top-hat wearing circle spending time alone with Bill, the words “Isn’t this fun?” overlayed above the images, resonating on loop, a bustling town, and the same bubble filled church, all consumed by roaring blue flames, the images interlacing and twisting, refracting in on itself over and over until there was hardly an image retained in Bill’s eye that wasn’t lit on fire.

The eye snapped into focus again in that same examination room from before, a cohort of circles surrounding Bill, holding implements, Bill’s bricks peeled back from his surface, light pouring out from within, the pain agonising.

One of the Circles was saying something, but the words were muffled. Something about narrowing down the source of the anomaly. Bill’s whole frame was tense with pain, barely holding onto sanity at this point, consciousness disassociating into abstractions of madness before snapping back into focus to hear the Circle with the top hat whisper.

“Did you know your parents are here, in the other room? They still think we’re going to fix you.”

Bill’s eye snapped into focus, staring desperately at the Circle, shaking with the effort to hold onto that thought, that his parents were waiting for him.

“Don’t give the kid false hope.” One of the other Circles cajoled, elbowing the one wearing the top hat as if this sort of behaviour was commonplace for him.

“He can’t help being an all-round bastard.” One of the other Circles quipped and all of them laughed, while Bill was still racked with pain, strapped down with the glowing blue restraints.

“Maybe they’re not here.” The Circle wearing the Top Hat said gleefully. “Maybe they couldn’t care less what happens to you. To an imperfect shape. Or maybe, for having made you in the first place, they’ve already paid their dues.”

The Circle’s implements struck deep into the core of Bill, to the core of the bright blue fire that
kindled in his palms, and sliced it open, carving through the barrier that kept the rest of it at bay, unleashing it onto the world at the same time the Circle whispered.

“Maybe they’re already dead.”

Argus stumbled back from the eye as the sound of Bill’s screaming dominated his senses. It felt as if the obsidian caverns were shaking, but really it was just the blood pounding in the giant’s head, shock and horror overwhelming him as Bill’s crushed eye continued to crumble, flames bursting all over the eyeball, the spell fading rapidly.

Lurching forward, trying to wring one last glimpse of intelligible history from Bill’s past, Argus poured his focus onto the eye, and saw a memory that was entirely crisp, unblemished by thoughts of endless flame.

Bill was being led into a church, elaborate carvings and bright glowing bubbles decorating the spacious hall while peaceful whale song echoed sonorously throughout the religious domain. A priest was leading Bill, one fin resting on the triangle’s back, speaking to him kindly as they walked down the aisle to the altar.

“We shelter many orphans like yourself, but very few truly seek out the Axolotl’s pure message of redemption. Most think themselves beyond it or lack the drive to truly make amends in this life, but an existence redeemed is what the Almighty Axolotl envisions for us all. He breathes it out into the universe as each soul passes through his godly gills, and –“

“I didn’t ask for a sermon.” Bill interrupted the priest abruptly, staring up at the many glowing bubbles that gathered above the altar, each one resonating with a divine frequency. “I want to know how he does it. What kind of power does he use? How does he make things better? Fix things?”

“I – well the Axolotl embodies the potential for redemption.” The priest stumbled to explain. “He controls existence itself. Redemption lies in the defiance of entropy, in the chances we have to change for ourselves to better represent his design. It’s not a power like a party trick, it’s like an essence, a way of being –“

“If it’s not a power, what are those then?” Bill said bluntly, pointing up at the glowing bubbles, the spheres all floating above the altar just out of reach.

“Those are the Bubbles of Opportunity.” The priest explained stiltedly, his conversion attempt going off course with every interruption. “The Axolotl breathes enlightenment and potential for change into each of these bubbles, like a crossroads or a spell or a mantra, and they descend to benefit the chosen few. Again, they’re not a party trick and they don’t descend for just anyone. Not even to the most devout of us. It is not for us to decide who the hand of fate favours, or for whom the chance for redemption is promised. We –“

“Oh look, one’s coming down.” Bill pointed out as a small pink bubble began to float gently from the top of the altar, ambling down to rest in front of Bill and the flabbergasted priest.

The priest stammered. “A bubble hasn’t descended for over 80 years, even to the most devout –“

“Cool, so how do you open it?” Bill asked, already reaching out to grab the bubble, pressing the sides of it curiously until the film of the bubble disintegrated in a puff of pink smoke, leaving a small piece of paper in Bill’s thin black hands.

Bill held the paper up for a moment, reading it, before he turned to face the priest. “Can I use this on someone else?”
“I –” The priest pressed his fin to his large head, staggered by the event of seeing a bubble descend, and then he double took, processing Bill’s question, craning his neck to look down at Bill in confusion. “No, the contents of the bubble only benefit the receiver. I – they’re not – you can’t swap them. What you’ve received from the Axolotl will only work for you.”

Bill scoffed at that, narrowing his eye at the paper dismissively, before he crumpled it and threw it to the floor, floating out of the church, calling over his shoulder.

“Well what good is it to me then?”

The whale-priest scrambled to pick up the paper, desperate to read what the Axolotl had gifted this small cranky orphaned triangle, and as he smoothed the page out the words baffled even his advanced religious comprehension.

'A-X-O-L-O-T-L– MY TIME HAS COME TO BURN. I INVOKE THE ANCIENT POWER THAT I MAY RETURN!'

The words lingered for only a minute, and then blue fire scorched the paper, crisping it to ash instantly, a trail of the same flame catching on the carpet that draped down the aisle, following the triangle’s path out of the hall of praise.

Argus’ glimpse of Bill’s past dissipated as the fire surrounding Bill’s reconstituted eyeball incinerated the last of its molecules, degrading the reformed eye into a crisp pile of ash on the floor of the obsidian cavern just as Argus heard a loud whistle ring out through the caverns, followed by the enthusiastic flapping of thousands of wings.

“PUPPIES! Did you miss me?”

Argus remained glued to the spot, still reeling from what he had seen, struggling to process what he had managed to glimpse from the eye he had ripped from Bill’s socket all those years ago, burdened by the truth.

Blue flames lingered on the ground where Bill’s eyeball had been, burning steadily even as the yellow triangle floated into Argus’ cavern, flanked by eye bats, both hands on his cane and a deluge of harvested eyeballs floating in the air behind him, ready to make a business proposal.

“Oh Teeeееeach!”

Bill stopped in the mouth of the cavern, his eye immediately drawn to the small patch of blue fire, darting between it and the expression on Argus’ face, piecing things together.

Now, Argus realised with surprising clarity, he knew why his student was going to kill him.

Chapter End Notes

Sorry for the wait with this one! 75 pages worth of story takes a while to write down, it turns out. I very much hope you enjoyed this chapter folks, it's un-beta-ed so please excuse any grammatical errors, I figure I can pick through and fix them all when I am
a leisurely retiree instead of a busy 26 year old lmao. You may notice that this
interpretation of Bill's past does not align perfectly with Flatland and that's because I'm
putting my own spin on it, so this is just preempting any comments trying to compare
the two to an acute degree.
This chapter I'm dedicating to the patient folks who stick around, and still love reading
this story and serving up those juicy meaty comments for me to swoon over. I could
name several names here, but I will leave this dedication open ended as I appreciate
the feedback from all of you very much, and that you take the time out of your busy
days to enjoy what I humbly offer.
Please let me know how you liked it! Next chapter stay tuned for Zippy's revenge,
Alternate Fiddleford, a Sock Opera or two and a big damn hero.
There's a part of me that seems to be a little sad. Sometimes when I scream there's a voice in me that says "You shouldn't be so mean". Oh no. Part of me is acting while the other stands beside. Yes, I am to myself what Jekyll must have been to Hyde.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Bill’s mind was racing as he looked between the blue flame dissipating on the floor of the cavern and the pitying guilt-laden look his old mentor hid poorly, anger beating out a swift bassline in the current composition of Bill’s emotional state, conclusions being reached rapidly.

“That’s not yours.” Bill looked pointedly at the fading fire, and when Argus’ brows merely furrowed at that, the old giant looking surprisingly apologetic, Bill decided he wasn’t in the mood for belated pity from the man who plucked his eye out.

Without giving Argus a chance to speak, Bill threw his collection of eyeballs at the giant, the eyes rolling across the floor, bouncing up against Argus’ legs as Bill glared at his old mentor.

“There’s your payment. Where’s Sixer?”

“Bill. I’m sorry. I –” Argus began, but Bill wasn’t interested in hearing it.

“Sixer’s location.” Bill raised his voice sternly, drumming his fingers on his cane, trying to hold his anger back. “Idiot human, big ears, nose and glasses, pointy elbows, just under six-foot, with a death wish. This shouldn’t be news to you, old man.”

“I know what he looks like.” Argus admitted.

“Seen his wanted poster?” Bill sneered caustically. “Or have you been spying on us? Got nothing better to do?”

Argus sighed and leaned back against the cavern wall dejectedly. “I’ve been asked to look for him before.”

Bill’s pupil sharpened into a thin spike, staring up at Panoptes expectantly, panic stirring into intensity. “Where is he?”

“It’s too late, Bill.” Argus revealed, sliding down the obsidian wall, sitting on the ground amongst the eyeballs with a loud thud. “It’s too late.”

“Where?!” Bill demanded, his voice warping, shrieking overlayed with an echo of his words, clearly on the edge.

“He has already left her dimension. Jhes-“

Argus’ words were cut off by Bill’s frustrated scream, a pillar of fire shooting up from the triangle, containing his tantrum. Bill’s bricks were red and his eye was black, his gold pupil slitted thin and dangerous, and Argus wearily watched his ex-student spit out a trail of expletives, processing this revelation.

“I’m sorry.” Argus repeated, drawing his student’s ire by speaking up.
“You told her where he was?”

“I did tell her. She’s been asking regularly, for quite some time. I didn’t know –“

Bill started laughing, a sharp maniacal sound, the fire around him not faltering for a second.

“You didn’t know? You, the Panopticon didn’t know?”

“I didn’t look. I was giving you privacy. Both of you. I didn’t know what she was intending to do. I didn’t know about the metal plate and I didn’t know what she’d been doing to you for all these years.” Argus maintained, as if ignorance would absolve him of guilt.

“What metal plate?” Bill questioned sharply, the fire dying down as he focused on more than his anger.

“She installed a metal plate in this Sixer’s head. He asked for it. To block out your influence. She’s moulded him into one of her own, one of her soldiers. He’s building her weapon now. He means to kill you, Bill.”

Bill swore again, a long unintelligible phrase, looking away as he processed that information, the fire dimming around him as he figured out the implications of this.

“He’s made a big mistake.”

“He didn’t know either.” Argus insisted. “None of us knew. Perhaps things would have been different, if we did. If we understood why.”

Bill wasn’t listening to Argus now, wrapping his mind around Stanford installing a metal plate in his head to keep him out. While it sounded like exactly the sort of defiant nonsense Sixer would do, Jheselbraum’s influence meant that whatever effect the plate had was more likely to stick, not even touching on what kinds of insidious things she could have been saying to him to turn Stanford against Bill.

This would make Bill’s attempt to charm Sixer back to his side more difficult, having to counteract Jheselbraum’s sophisticated bullshittery, which was a spanner in the works that Bill really didn’t need right now.

“I understand now and I’m sorry.” Argus continued to speak, his words a mere irritation until Bill realised what he was saying. “I’m sorry about … your parents.”

Everything froze in that moment.

Bill’s eye widened, staring unseeing ahead at the shining obsidian floor, Argus’ words reverberating inside his head like an unpleasant memory, like an echo chamber of misery and shame, crashing over him again and again and again.

He knew.

“If I had known –“ Argus attempted, but Bill looked up at him, the giant recognising the danger in Bill’s glare even without any overt violent overtures on Bill’s part.

“I’m sorry-“ Argus tried again, but his words were cut off once more by laughter, verging on deranged.

“So, you’re telling me you only just found out? I thought you knew all along. That’s rich, it really
is. This means that when you pulled my eye out and cast me aside it wasn’t to punish me for any genuine wrongdoing, you did it just because you could!” Bill accused, the fire flaring along the floor of the cave as he reached his conclusion, burning his offering of eyeballs.

The eye bats scattered out of the cavern, shrieking and chirping in the outer caves now, steering clear of danger.

Argus was baffled by Bill’s conclusion, anger and bewilderment dawning in his many eyes and he looked at his pupil as if he were unrecognisable.

“You burnt Jheselbraum!”

“SHE HAD IT COMING!” Bill shouted and his words were so loud they rattled every black glass wall in the dimension of eternal night, shattering stalagmites of glass with the frequency.

Argus stood up again, the flames burning at his feet now, hot and aggressive, not cool and harmless as he knew these flames could be. When he stood up, Bill grew rapidly in size, unwilling to let Panoptes tower over him.

“She was always your favourite, wasn’t she? Well, your favourite pupil isn’t here now. Only the disappointment! Jheselbraum was always so well behaved and perfect and faultless and I was the screw up. The one who went wrong. Your greatest regret and now you say sorry? Like an apology would make anything better? It’s hilarious!”

Bill’s laughter was littered with hiccups of hysteria now, the fire only continuing to rise around them both, climbing up Argus’ legs, the eyeballs there watering, blistering, and charring with a gristly sounding pop.

Argus looked at his pupil with his remaining eyes and knew, this was the exact date and time of his death, and he knew it was the tipping point to push the triangle completely over into madness and he knew as those who see into the past often do, that this was history repeating itself and there was nothing he could do to stop it.

Bill raised his hands, the fire raising with it, burning white hot around what was once his found family.

“You wanna hear another joke? This one’s about the eyeball encrusted teacher who couldn’t control his PUPILS!”

And the fire roared up around him.

Argus did not scream as the fire consumed him, even though it was excruciating. Instead he just closed his eyes, a single tear slipping out of his central eye as the roar of the fire said it all for him and closed the book on the long and lonely life of the giant known as Argus Panoptes.

He was not afraid.

He knew someone would be waiting for him.

In the garden.

When the last of Argus’ charred corpse crumbled into ashes, Bill hovered over the remnants of his old teacher, his bricks heaving as he breathed heavily, panting from the exhilarating exertion that came from destroying what had once been sacred.
Argus was gone, just like that, and it had been so easy.

Toning down the fire somewhat, composing himself, Bill regarded Argus’ corpse.

“Well, I guess I should thank you for one thing. You really opened my eye to some much-needed perspective.” Bill said disdainfully, the eye bats beginning to creep back into the room now the danger had passed, chirping as they called out to Bill hesitantly.

Bill looked over to the eye bats and considered them, before turning back to glare at the pile of ashes on the floor.

“Actually, scratch that. Thanks for nothing.”

Bill waved his hand, corralling the eye bats into a group, levitating them together before resting his hand on the force field that surrounded them, getting ready to teleport them all away, unable to resist the urge to throw one last sentence at the corpse of his old teacher.

“And I’m taking the puppies.”

“I’m writing in a complaint. This game isn’t lots of fun and it ain’t number one either.” Teeth complained, throwing down his Uno cards.

“Complaining about it won’t do anything.” Pyronica picked her teeth with a skewer, reclining in the crumbling garden with the rest of the henchmaniacs, her cards spread out on the ground in front of her. “You’ll just have a repeat of the BopIt debacle.”

“False advertising is what it is.” Teeth grumbled, holding his Uno cards up to his incisor as if he were squinting at them. “Hasbro are the big pharma of party games.”

“Hasbro are the big pharma –“ Keyhole muttered as he wrote down Teeth’s words in a notebook. “Of party games. Nice.”

Noticing the way Pyronica raised her eyebrow at this, Amorphous Shape filled her in. “Keyhole is going to make a book of Teeth’s quotable phrases.”

“I’m thinking it’d make a nice coffee table book. You know, the sort people gift to each other at office Kris Kringle’s when they don’t really know anything about the person they’re gifting it to.” Keyhole explained. “I think it’d be a hit.”

“An unlicensed hit, because you still haven’t agreed to my cut.” Teeth added, crossing his arms stubbornly.

“A date with my sister doesn’t count as a percentage of the sales.” Keyhole corrected Teeth idly while finishing his latest quote with a flourish of his pen.

Before Teeth could open his mouth to counter this, the sky of the Nightmare Realm seemed to rumble, rubble from the asteroid belt above raining down on the garden in patches, the air charged with static like the sea before a storm.

The Henchmaniacs looked up eagerly, recognising that foreboding feeling.
As if a hole were torn in the fabric of the Nightmare Realm, the sky seemed to burst in, and a familiar yellow triangle appeared amidst a storm of hundreds of eye bats, their screeching and flapping wings providing just the sort of dramatic entrance that had been long overdue from the boss.

“Bill!” The Henchmaniacs cheered, their enthusiasm ramping up as they recognised in an instant that Bill was back on form.

“Well well well well well!” Bill shouted dramatically, leaning heavy on his typical bombastic bravado. “Why all the bored faces, people? Don’t we have a party to plan?”

One by one the henchmaniacs seemed to realise what Bill meant by this and they leapt to their feet, cheering, hooting and hollering.

“You mean the party’s back on?” Kryptos questioned, having scrambled up from where he was reclining in the garden, his break from Bill over now that the boss was back.

“When was it ever off, Kryptos?” Bill countered, twirling his cane in circles as he floated down to the group. As Kryptos opened his mouth, Bill pointed his cane at the compass and the motion summoned a square of duct tape that slapped over Kryptos’ mouth. “Don’t answer that. We’ve got a Weirdpocalypse to arrange, people! I want action stations for all of you, that means Teeth and Keyhole, you’re back to your standard duties. Pyronica, I want you sussing out prospective pawns in the mirror room, whoever and whatever is going to get us back into that po-dunk town and give me my party door back. Eight-Ball, Paci-Fire, and Xanthar, buddy, you’re going to start making noise, enough to make the cosmos sweat, let ‘em all know we’re here, and we’re back in business. And Kryptos, how many investors do we still have?”

Kryptos gave a muffed reply and tried to tug the tape off his mouth to no avail before gesturing at the tape redundantly.

“Great, round them all up and tell them the party’s on, so it’s now or never, or no party invite.” Bill stopped spinning his cane, neatly landing on the table in between the Henchmaniacs.

Looking briefly around the crumbling Nightmare Realm, Bill remarked, “Yeesh, this place is a mess. Well, we’re not getting the bond back on this dimension, but we’re moving up in the world, so I hope you’ve all picked out what country you want to decimate and mailed wherever you’ve got magazine subscriptions for them to change your address! We’re moving to Earth!”

The Henchmaniacs all cheered, stamping their feet and howling, Paci-Fire beating his chest and Eight-Ball picking Kryptos up and shaking him like a maraca.

Amidst their cacophony of revelry, one particularly unwise henchmaniac chose to speak up, the rest of the Henchmaniacs falling silent at his question.

“Hey, what happened with that Sixer human?” Hectorgon asked blithely, oblivious to how quickly the mood changed. “Wasn’t he important or something?”

His tone icy, Bill glared at Hectorgon before responding. “Sixer’s a traitor to the party cause. He’s old news now. For bothering me with inane questions and being a quantifiable party downer, it’s off to the Dimension of Eternal Screams for you, Hectorgon.”

Bill clicked his fingers and Hectorgon was swallowed up by a blue ball of flame, his scream disappearing from the Nightmare Realm the same time that he did.

“Maybe if I’m feeling generous, he can come back for the party.”
A little more uneasy now, the Henchmaniacs regarded Bill, recognising that the easy-going, understanding and otherwise lenient triangle they’d shared a toast with in the penthouse of the quadrangle all those years back was long gone, the unpredictable, callous, and altogether dangerous chaos demon Bill had once been taking his rightful place.

Ignoring the sudden shift in mood, Bill began to press each of his bricks in a specific sequence as if he were dialing a phone before the bricks in his middle warped into a screen. A dial tone sounded out for a few seconds before a familiar carroty complexion came into view.

“Who ish it?”

“Well, if it isn’t Mrs Of-Flames. Congratulations on the nuptials, champ. How would you like a belated wedding present, free of charge?”

Zippy narrowed her black almond shaped eyes on the screen suspiciously, before asking. “What ish it?”

His eye lidding with smug pleasure, Bill began to spin his cane again, his pleasant expression screaming danger and impending chaos.

“I’m about to go kill your old mistress. If you come with me, I’ll let you spit on her grave.”

After jumping from bus-stop to bus-stop, all-night interdimensional diner to all-night interdimensional diner, making use of the table tops, fluorescent lighting and semi-free workspace to engineer his quantum destabiliser, Stanford Pines found himself in the corner booth of another underfunded franchised diner, sipping on his obligatory purchase of a glass of water like a lifeline, as it was the only thing preventing the teenaged manager of this establishment from kicking him out.

His blaster was coming together now and it finally looked like a weapon more than a mass of jumbled parts, the scaffolding complete, the sights perfected, the mechanism sorted and the trigger altered to accommodate his six fingered hand better. Now all he needed to complete his gun was the power source.

With Jheselbraum’s instructions spread out across the tabletop Ford eyed off the last corner of the notes she’d given him, puzzling over her instructions for discovering the power source.

You will find what you need here. She wrote next to a shorthand set of dimensional coordinates. Where you will also find all you lost and all that could have been.

That sounded more than intentionally vague. Was it so difficult to give Stanford straight forward instructions?

Jheselbraum’s blueprints were deliberately cryptic compared to Bill’s portal blueprints. At least when Bill wanted Ford to collect the hyperdrive from the crash site, he wrote ‘collect hyperdrive from crash site’ on the blueprints.

Not that he was defending Bill anymore, but Stanford privately thought that Jheselbraum could stand to learn a thing or two about project management from the triangle.
Finishing the rest of his water, Stanford folded up the instructions and picked up his blaster, heading for the door.

Vague or not, his next destination was outlined clearly.

Ford had to simply trust The Oracle to know what was best.

Everything was on fire.

Civilians were running, screaming, as the forests burned around them, the fire creeping to the stone steeples and towers of Jheselbraum’s mountainside temple.

Soldiers were scrambling for their weapons, lieutenants barking orders at the troops to mask their panic and, in the highest tower, Jheselbraum raced out to the balcony, her deep blue skirts flying out behind her, watching her domain burn all around her, the culprit hovering, large and yellow in a rip in the sky above.

“OH, GLORIOUS BATTLE! SOUND THE TRUMPETS, PEOPLE! IT’S JHESELBRAUM’S TIME TO SHINE!”

Jheselbraum curled her lip and heard from the halls below one of the hymnal musicians tentatively blow wind through their instrument before thinking better of it.

Oestia was at her side in an instant.

“Mistress, there have been no sightings of his henchman. The time for battle is here. Shall we attack him directly?”

“Man the blasters if you must. It won’t kill him but your efforts might slow him down. He’s here for me. I knew this day would come.” Jheselbraum said gravely, smothering the giddiness she felt inside.

Turning on her heel, Jheselbraum paced inside, reaching up for a cabinet high above Oestia’s head, withdrawing her ancestral armour, her shield, her sword, and her cape, affixing it while Oestia barked orders into her communicator to the troops below.

Outside Bill’s voice could be heard echoing throughout the land, accompanied by the groan of two oak trees as he ripped them from the ground, holding the mighty trunks like drumsticks as his great eye searched Dimension 52 for her, knowing full well where she was.

“Here’s a lady who needs no introduction. You know her as The Oracle, I know her as Jheselbraum the Unswerving, the multiverse’s most mediocre swot! Come on out Jheselbraum, wherever you are. A-DRUMROLL PLEASE!” Pounding the oak trees against the mountainside, Bill rattled the landscape with deafening drumroll, the earth quaking with the impact.

Outside the temple, the soldiers with steady footing began firing blasters at Bill, launching projectiles through the air towards Bill’s angular form, but the projectiles fizzled out like comets, catching fire in Bill’s immediate vicinity and crumbling into dust before they could make impact. The blasters were met with similar flame, neutralising their attacks, Bill barely blinking an eye at them. His immediate atmosphere was so blindingly hot, he was burning the forests to a crisp just
through proximity, the oak trees crumbling to ash in his hands as Bill discarded them, throwing them over his shoulder and looking around expectantly.

“That was your cue! Come on. It’s not like Miss Perfect to avoid taking centre stage. Are you hiding from me O’ Mighty Oracle? Are you scared?”

Jheselbraum tsked, and walked brusquely down the stairs, dressed appropriately now, heading out towards the courtyard where her soldiers had amassed, finding Bill’s destructive running commentary as grating as he was.

“Aww, she’s hiding. Maybe applause will do it? Come on everyone, let’s give her a hand!” Bill shouted like a conductor on a stage, his magic encircling the hands of every supplicant in the temple, forcing them all to clap their hands together until the applause reached a deafening crescendo.

The screaming and fright nearly outweighed the applause, Jheselbraum’s supplicants promised some measure of protection against Bill’s wiles in her land, the safety and security promised clearly not delivered as Bill’s overwhelming power could affect them even here, no matter how devout they’d been. If he could affect them now, he likely could this entire time, and that realisation was just as much a cause for screaming as the sudden lack of autonomy was. They had placed their faith in the wrong protector.

Bill seemed to delight in turning her followers against her, or perhaps turnabout was fair play, but either way Jheselbraum was not going to stand for it.

Storming out into the courtyard below, her sword in hand, Jheselbraum shouted up at Bill’s fearsome silhouette. “I HAVE NEVER HIDDEN FROM YOU, YOU MONSTER! RELEASE MY PEOPLE!”

The clapping stopped in an instant and Bill floated down, looming above the courtyard, stretching his form out to the size of an Olympic swimming pool to angle over the soldiers cowering below, blocking out the sun in the process, the courtyard now lit by Bill’s own golden glow like a triangular spotlight.

“There she is!” Gesturing his hand at Jheselbraum, his magic glowed at the wrists of all her worshippers once more and mashed them together, turning them all to face Jheselbraum, forcing them to clap loudly again. “Let’s give her a warm welcome, folks. Jheselbraum the Unswerving. It’s her closing show. People come on, you can do better than that!”

“Unhand them!” Jheselbraum demanded, swiping her sword out in the air in front of her menacingly.

Bill shrugged above her. “Whatever you say.”

At that the magic encircling the wrists of Jheselbraum’s attendants and soldiers sharpened and simultaneously each of Jheselbraum’s supplicants were unhanded, their hands severed at the wrists, falling to the floor to their shock and horror.

The clapping stopped but the screaming that took its place was louder, each humble servant to the purple skinned giant sobbing in horror as they became collateral to Jheselbraum’s war with the powerful being looming over them.

“Put them back right now! If you came to fight me, fight fair.” Jheselbraum demanded imperiously, holding her chin up high.
Clicking his fingers again, Jheselbraum’s people were restored to their former handy-capability, left stunned by the sudden shift in their reality.

“I don’t see how having thousands of soldiers at your disposal to fight me is a fair fight, if it’s supposed to be just you and I? Mano a mano. The ultimate battle to see who really is the very best student since that’s what you really want. If you’re their all-powerful leader, using them as a shield is just a waste isn’t it? Unless that’s all they’re good for?”

Shouting a holy battle cry, aiming to prove herself, Oestia lunged forward for one of the blasters, aiming it skywards, raising her restored hand to slam down on the ignition, intending to shoot Bill down from the sky in retribution.

Before her hand could make contact, it was offset by a flash of orange, a flying kick striking Oestia on the chest, toppling her over.

Teleported in by Bill through a similar rip between dimensions, standing in front of the blaster, tall and triumphant, her long red braid spiked up into a partial mohawk, her mercenary robes replaced with a spiked leather jacket, ripped jeans and combat boots, zips and chains dangling down from her new look at every opportunity, stood a ghost from Oestia’s past.

“Shailesh?” Oestia gasped, staring up at the Taronjan warrior and former friend in shock. “But you – he killed you! We mourned you.”

Shailesh snorted and crossed her arms, sneering down at Oestia. “Do I look dead to you, dumbassh?”

“You – you’re on his side! You must have joined him. You … you traitor!” Oestia snarled, trying to push herself back up into a fighting stance. “You were better off dead!”

As Oestia sprung forward again, Shailesh knocked her back to the ground with a harrowing headbutt, fire flaring out briefly like a halo, the metal around her mouth gleaming as she bared her teeth down at Oestia.

“I’m not dead because your Mistreshh forgot to kill me. But not before she murdered my entire people right in front of me!” Shailesh screamed her words at Oestia, making no attempt to lower her voice, wanting everyone in the courtyard to hear. “She doesn’t care about you shtupid cannon fodder and she never did. There is no noble caushe, just her endlessh shit fight with Cipher and it’s about to end. You’ve got the rest of your schitty lives to think about, sho you can be shtupid and keep fighting for her, or you can shtay down and let us end this, you boot-licking bitch.”

“Couldn’t have said it better myself.” Bill leaned his giant elbow against one of the tower spires, watching Shailesh deliver her lisping speech with pride. “Anyone who wants to jump ship and flee, I suggest you do so now. There’s not going to be a whole lot left of this place when I’m done burning it to the ground.”

“You alienate my people. You threaten their home.” Jheselbraum said gravely, swinging her
sword, working her spin. “You bring this deformed monster into their home and have it pretend to be one of our fallen, our beloved Shailesh, to lie to them.”

“I’m not lying.” Shailesh insisted, sneering up at Jheselbraum. “I’m here to schpit on your grave.”

Jheselbraum shouted a catechism and swung her sword with a shout, hurling it in a spinning arc upwards, directly towards Bill’s eye, but before her blade could land, Bill plucked it out of the air between two enormous fingers and flicked it to the side, impaling it swiftly in one of the temple walls.

“Aw. Is that all you’ve got? Honestly, I thought you’d at least put up more of a fight than old Panoptes did but that was truly pathetic.” Bill taunted and Jheselbraum’s seven eyes widened dramatically.

“What did you do to him?”

“You’re the Oracle, you tell me.” Bill stretched his hand down, tip-toeing his fingers down to the courtyard to flick away the blasting turrets and Jheselbraum’s faithful, creating a clear path between the purple giantess and him. “Or should I give you a few minutes to start scrying? You never were any good at seeing into the past.”

“I see now. You’ve only gotten more power-hungry with time. Killing the great Argus Panoptes to steal his secrets.” Jheselbraum insisted for the benefit of her followers.

“He was trying to steal my secrets, lady. Just like you have, for centuries. I should have killed you long before now but offing old Teach was just the push I needed to put your endless bullshit into perspective. Don’t miss him too much though, you’ll be joining him soon.”

Bill reached his hand forward to grasp Jheselbraum, but with surprising agility for a giant her size Jheselbraum dodged his hands, springing about the courtyard evading him, her acrobatics giving hope to the rest of her remaining attendants that their faith was not misplaced.

Wrenching one of the remaining blasting turrets from the ground Jheselbraum hurled it at Bill’s eye once more, the triangular god batting it away, slightly irritated now. The turret exploded on contact with Bill’s hand, distracting him, but the fire did not seem to faze him.

“Man the remaining turrets. Fire at will!” Jheselbraum ordered her troops, commanding the situation again. Bill wasn’t having it, clicking his fingers to conjure glowing blue cages around the turrets to keep them out of reach of Jheselbraum’s troops.

“It’s just you and me, Jhessy. Don’t pull them into this. If you didn’t want to fight me, you shouldn’t have crossed that line.”

Baring her teeth bravely up at Bill, Jheselbraum sneered. “And what line have I supposedly crossed, triangle?”

“The line of don’t touch my things.” Bill glared at Jheselbraum dangerously and reached forward again to swipe at her, the purple giantess dodging out of his way.

“How pathetic.” Jheselbraum taunted as she sprinted away from Bill’s hands, avoiding his attempts to corral her. “I’ve been attempting to thwart your plans for centuries, unhindered, and the one line I supposedly cross is claiming your stupid human pawn as my own? That makes it almost worth his incessant whining, his agonising over whether poor Bill Cipher is really a monster or simply misunderstood? If he was in the wrong? If only there were some way to explain away your countless misdeeds and pardon you? Thankfully, I cured him of those nonsensical reservations.
Now he sees you for what you really are. Nothing but an aberration – a monster!”

Losing patience with this game of cat and mouse, Bill manifested hundreds of black lengthy arms from his sides, the arms snapping around Jheselbraum in an instant, binding her in Bill’s grasp where she stood.

Regardless of her tenuous position Jheselbraum was still smug, continuing to taunt Bill even as he lifted her in the air, glaring at her, his bricks turning red.

“You’ve got no chance to change his mind now. I made sure you can’t access it, courtesy of a healthy chunk of metal guarding his thoughts. Since he didn’t die on the operating table, he gets to live on to spite you, just out of your reach for eternity. I almost think that’s better than if I’d killed him.”

“I’ve never wanted to burn someone alive as much as I want to burn you.” Bill replied, blue flames slowly trickling down his arms now, inching towards Jheselbraum like a lit fuse towards dynamite.

“Do it then. Kill me.” Jheselbraum challenged Bill, tilting her head to gesture at the remaining followers cowering in the courtyard, hiding from the battle in the archways surrounding. “If you kill me in front of them you’ll only make me a martyr and I’ll just come back stronger. I’ve studied the same old ways you have. Destroy me and their worship will grant me the means to avenge myself and return stronger than ever.”

“Is that so?” Bill lidded his eye at Jheselbraum. “See, somehow, I thought you’d say that. Poor little Jheselbraum, always so quick to play the martyr. Well, don’t let me stop you.”

Small hands snapped away from Jheselbraum, jettisoning back into Bill’s sides until there were only two larger hands holding her, but as the other hands retracted it became apparent that they had placed something on Jheselbraum’s person.

Two glowing silver cuffs.

“What -?” Jheselbraum looked between the cuffs on her wrist and Bill in confusion, comprehension coming a little too late.

Bill set her down on the ground and briefly squeeze her middle and flames flared down his arms to pool in his hands, the blue fire encircling Jheselbraum, her skin blistering as her first furious scream sounded out.

Her huddled followers watched her incineration with horror, clutching the holy symbols their robes were embroidered in, hoping and praying for some kind of divine intervention, or that Jheselbraum’s words were true, that she’d grant herself the power to avenge herself with this sacrifice.

The power of their worshipful thoughts were flowing through her, certainly, but Jheselbraum realised with burgeoning terror that the power wasn’t remaining within her, instead it was steadily leeching down her arms and out through the cuffs on her wrists with a barely perceptible ebbing feeling.

She began to tire, her magic draining out of her through the cuffs, draining through her body as she utilised spells to shield her from the flames, her spells sputtering out while the fire did not. Her limbs grew heavy and weak and her head nodded forward, lethargy draining her, causing her to slump forward onto Bill’s hands, the fire biting into her now.

“No. How are you -?” Jheselbraum questioned weakly, glaring at Bill’s hands.
Panic setting in as she realised that Bill had once again out-played her, stripping her of her final ploy to defend herself and destroy him for good, Jheselbraum mustered her remaining strength and began thrashing, clawing at Bill’s large smooth hands, scrabbling for purchase, hitting and kicking him even as the fire surged hot around her, breaking down her dwindling shields and peeling back her skin.

Like a saint on a pyre, her shrieks drowned out by the momentous weight of the occasion, Jheselbraum’s grisly incineration played out in front of a courtyard of her faithful, many turning their faces away from the unholy reality of the martyr’s burning flesh and fevered screams.

Two people did not turn their gaze away from the harsh reality of her death, their eyes reflecting the flames light, taking in every detail.

Those two people were Zippy, watching Jheselbraum’s demise with a vicious vindication, and Bill, bitterly taking in every detail as he burnt the life from his former classmate with his own two hands.

“I can’t die yet! I still need to know!!” She sobbed while her tongue blistered in the heat, her pleas going unanswered.

Jheselbraum’s final cry came out as a wail, the word ringing around the courtyard, echoing.

“WHY?”

Bill narrowed his eye and the fire flared hotter, no longer burning her slowly to draw out her death, letting the flames envelop her truly, the fire as intense and deadly as it always was, killing her quickly.

“You’re the one who always wanted to know what happened to my family.” Bill hissed at her, dropping her corpse to the floor, the fire falling with her, razing her molecules to ash. “Don’t say I never did nothing for you.”

The silver cuffs levitated out of the ashes and followed Bill as he turned away from the wreckage of his former classmate, floating back towards the rift in the sky, having done what he’d come here to do.

Behind him in the courtyard, Zippy approached the fading cinders of Jheselbraum’s corpse and spat on the ashes, her hands shaking, but simply spitting on her old Mistress’s grave wasn’t enough and after several tremulous seconds of staring at the remnants of her family’s killer Zippy stomped her heavy black boots on the pile, shrieking and stomping on her again and again, shouting.

“That’sch for my family you bitch. That’sch for Tarno, that’sch for Telen, that’sch for Emitty, that’sch for – that’sch for-“ Her words were warbling now, snot dripping down from her nose as she was overcome with tears, her knees shaking beneath her and eventually collapsing, Shailesh continuing to beat the blackened ground with her fists, outright wailing now. “That’sch for Jenima. You’re fucking ash now just like them and I’ll nev – I’ll never –“

Oestia stared at Shailesh’s outburst, her face blank with shock as she watched her Mistress be utterly destroyed by the being she was supposed to protect them from, her fiery unravelling almost as painful as the realisation that Shailesh hadn’t been lying.

The obelisk in the foyer wasn’t engraved with a list of names the demon Bill Cipher had taken from them.

He didn’t take Shailesh, she was alive, but clearly her family was not, and given her reaction to
their Mistress, Jheselbraum hadn’t been as faultless and benevolent as she appeared to be.

The names inscribed on the obelisk held hardly any relevance compared to Shailesh’s recitation of them, beating those names into the soot, the words on the obelisk revealed to be merely pretty lies. A religious illusion to blanket the harsh truth, the stinging reality.

Jheselbraum really had killed them all.

Shailesh’s words had devolved into outright wailing now, her long red braid trailing on the ground as she threw her head back crying. “I’ll never get them back.”

Oestia looked up to see Cipher hadn’t fully fled this dimension yet, the triangle hovering in front of the rift, his back to the courtyard, the cuffs hovering in the air beside him, delaying his departure for a moment to listen to Shailesh’s lament. Oestia could only see the bricks at his back, his expression hidden from her.

Oestia stared, dumbfounded, watching him listen to as much of Shailesh’s mournful crying as he could bear before he eventually moved forward into the rift and vanished from Dimension 52, the rift closing behind him, leaving a flaming forest and a dimension still standing, far less destruction than promised, in his wake.

Shailesh was openly crying, horrible messy crying, wind whistling through her zippered lips as she bowed her back down over the ground, her fists blackened with ashes as she grieved her avenged family.

One of the more sympathetic acolytes approached Shailesh, resting a timid hand on her shoulder, but Shailesh reared up and slapped their hand back.

“Don’t touch me!” She snarled, before making an attempt to wipe her face with her sleeve, soot smearing on her cheek. She fished a communicator out from her pocket rather than seeking solace from the crowd of Jheselbraum’s cult of abandoned acolytes and dialled, her voice still thick with emotion.

“Jolene. Can you come and pick me up?”

The dimensional wormhole Jheselbraum’s map directed Stanford to wasn’t the sort of well-regulated wormhole that was generally used for interdimensional travel. It wasn’t a predictable wormhole that spat travellers out in specific dimension as per a schedule. This was the type of wormhole whose final destination could only be discerned by discerning seers.

Stanford was prepared for anything when he entered the wormhole but the last thing he expected was this.

Dimensions warping around him, Ford found himself spat out in the middle of a very familiar looking forest.

Birds were chirping in the trees, the familiar cooing of the question quail and the susurrus of the Hide-Behind pinning down the destination for Stanford in an instant. He didn’t know any other place but Gravity Falls to house such peculiar and weird creatures, even throughout all his interdimensional travels.
The Hide-Behind chittered in surprise at seeing Stanford and without wasting too much time looking for the creature, Stanford waved a hand behind his back, choosing to look through the forest instead.

“Shoo.”

Stanford walked further through the forest, the Hide-Behind skulking away behind him and he pushed back the foliage with his hands, murmuring to himself. “She couldn’t have brought me home, could she? Where -?”

As he made his way through the forest, parting the branches, he came out onto a clearing on the side of the mountain overlooking the valley below.

His eyes widening, Stanford saw that he had been sent to Gravity Falls, but it was not Gravity Falls as he knew it.

“What the devil?”

The lush valley set between the fractured mountainside with its cut-out UFO shape knocked through the rock was familiar enough, but what was glaringly unfamiliar was the scaffolding and structures set up around the crash site, large plastic tent-like buildings surrounding the periphery of the entry latch.

The opening entry way to the spaceship in the meadow was ripped wide open, the metal of the spaceship’s hull peeled back, with dozens of white coated scientists and workers carrying equipment to and from the spaceship, loading them onto magnetised rail carts and sending those carts away from the site and back into the forest.

Banners were emblazoned on the tents, a stylised logo repeating the same letters.

IIofO.

Clearly some sort of corporation or scientific research body had discovered the crash site in this dimension and claimed it for their own, peeling back the unassuming veneer of this small town and mining its core for its fantastical properties.

“Those vultures.” Stanford clenched his fist, watching these other scientists discovering and broadcasting to the world what was his.

Narrowing his eyes, he decided to investigate and began making his way down the cliffside stealthily, intending to infiltrate the research base.

Employing his considerable experience at hiding from various interdimensional parties that were consistently hunting him down, Stanford stuck to the shadows, his black coat disguising him. The sun was setting on Gravity Falls and the shadows were long and stretching, enabling Ford to slink up to the edge of the compound, pressed against the wall of one of these white plastic tents.

Listening closely Stanford could hear two of the workers inside chatting to one another.

“Reckon the boss is going to love this alien solvent. Haven’t seen anything like it. Maybe he’ll raise this find to his boss. Maybe it’ll go all the way up to Mr F.”

So, this ‘Mr F’ was the person running this compound, Stanford reasoned, narrowing his eyes. Whoever he was, he was making a goddamn free for all of the alien site and who knows what else. Gravity Falls was full of weird and wondrous things that could easily be capitalised on by the
unscrupulous.

Stanford wondered who this shady character could be, this Mr F, and what he had to do with Stanford discovering his power source. Would he have to liaise with this fellow?

“A swab of alien glue isn’t going to get you in a meeting with Mr McGucket, and only the CEO can call him Mr F. He doesn’t like it when we call him ‘Mr F’ so don’t believe everything you hear in orientation,” came the other worker’s dismissive reply.

Their conversation moved onto other topics, but Stanford was stuck on what had been said.

Mr McGucket? F?

It couldn’t be?

“Quit daydreaming and load these samples on the cart.” Ford heard the dismissive worker advise his colleague. “You’ve got to get them to the Institute first before you get congratulated for it.”

Stanford looked between the tent and the magnetic railway line that cut through the forest, seeing other carts primed and ready, waiting to deliver their cargo to the Institute.

Clearly the crash site wasn’t the central hub of this organisation and it wouldn’t be where he’d find this dimension’s Fiddleford McGucket. If his power source was coming from F, Ford had a better chance of obtaining it, rather than haggling for it with some power-hungry executive, considering he had absolutely no money right now. While he knew Fiddleford could be reasonable, he didn’t know if his boss would be as level-headed and wondered if he would have to haggle regardless for the power source.

Stanford idly wondered who F’s boss was, as he couldn’t imagine Fiddleford working underneath the sort of person he was imagining this mysterious CEO to be.

Crossing the field over to the railway carts, Stanford waited until the workers attending the carts had moved on to collect their next shipment of cargo before he advanced.

Eyeing off the carts, Ford found several crates in the back of each cart, and no driver’s compartment, the magnetic railway line seeming to have only one destination, the carts circling in a loop autonomously from the crash site to the main compound.

Climbing into the back of one of the carts and hiding inside one of the empty crates, Stanford held the lid down and used the laser penknife from his coat pocket to cut a small peep hole through the crate, then he turned the laser to a lower setting to melt the plastic along the top flap of the crate so the workers wouldn’t be able to open it and discover him.

From his peep hole in the side of the crate, he could see one of the workers returning to deposit another tray of alien metals in the cart. When the worker couldn’t open the crate, they simply set the tray on top of it.

“We’ve got a bung crate here.”

“Just send it on through. They’ve got replacements back at the Institute.”

The worker stepped off the back of the cart and rapped his knuckles on the door, and Stanford could feel the cart beginning to move, the cargo being delivered on the magna-rail.

Checking first to see that there was no one else in the cart, Stanford clicked his laser penknife on
again, and cut a larger hole through the side of the crate, shimmying out of it.

Looking around the rail cart, Stanford could see that several racks along the walls were empty, waiting for the same sort of tray the workers placed in the cart. It seemed they were collecting whatever they could find of scientific merit from the crash site and transporting it to the lab, the samples cut cleanly, almost as clean as Stanford could manage with the laser gun Bill gave him.

Perhaps he was in the future if that sort of technology was available to these workers or perhaps Fiddleford developed it himself along the way. He was always very talented at inventing things.

Looking at the items on the tray, Stanford could see they were removing chunks of molybdenum from the cafeteria on the ship and several of the alien spark plugs Fiddleford enthused over were also resting on the tray on top of a sheet of dark blue tissue paper imprinted with another logo.

Corporations and their logos were ridiculous, Stanford mused as he shifted the spark plugs, curious to see what was underneath. They couldn’t invest in scientific venture without spitting their brand all over the project. It baffled Stanford. The absolute gall of these investors.

Shifting the spark plug to the side completely, Stanford’s disdainful internal monologue dried up when he saw what the logo printed on the tissue paper was.

A golden six fingered hand.

Teleporting back into the mirror room with a flamboyant bang, Bill saw Pyronica dutifully kneeling on the floor beside one of the mirrors, watching images play out on the screens.

“Py in the sky! What have you got for me?” Bill’s voice rang out, cheerfully echoing throughout the mirror room.

“I found you the perfect puppet!” Pyronica said with a grin, pointing at the screen she was staring at. “Come look.”

Bill floated down to hover by Pyronica’s shoulder, watching the mirror swirl to reveal what looked like a dream of some kind, with blue skies and doves flying through the idyllic clouds, which seemed reasonable enough, until the dream’s occupant began singing, making it clear that this wasn’t a dream at all.

It didn’t even have the dignity to be a nightmare.

It was an advertisement.

“Who’s cute as a button and always your friend? Lil G-I-D to the E-O-N! Wink!”

“Ugh. Seriously?” Bill narrowed his eye in disdain at the evangelical looking child on the mirror’s screen.

“It’s Lil Gideon!” Pyronica said with enthusiasm, waggling her hands at the screen like a magician’s assistant. “What do you think?”

“I think out of all the hicks in that town you could have picked anyone but a literal child with a ‘Can I Speak To The Manager’ haircut, Py. He looks like a god botherer, as in he will likely bother
“No, but he’s the perfect mark.” Pyronica insisted, listing reasons on her fingers. “He already has one of Six Finger’s journals, he’s ambitious, he’s trusted by the community, he’s addicted to power, I mean he’s been terrorising his family with a magical amulet for a while, so that’s gotta count for something. Plus!”

Pyronica looked back to the mirror and Gideon’s advertisement continued to play out on the screen, as if by looking away she merely paused it before.

“Lil Gideon.” Came a schmaltzy voice over the advertisement, continuing to spruik. “Come on down to Lil Gideon’s Tent of Telepathy, opening soon at this location.”

Lil Gideon’s Tent of Telepathy then came crashing down on a ramshackle tourist trap of a building, labelled ‘The Mystery Shack’ in bright tacky signage, the ‘S’ falling off the building slightly, Gideon’s Tent crushing it into a pile of rubble.

When Bill continued to squint sceptically at the advertisement, Pyronica then wound back the vision in the mirror for a while, pausing it on the Mystery Shack just before Gideon’s tent crushed it, elbowing Bill until he got what she was showing him.

“Huh? Huuuuh?”

Bill’s eye widened in recognition before a jubilant laugh burst out of him.

“Is that?”

“Is that?” Pyronica said smugly, smirking at the triangle’s mirth.

“Ohohoh. Hohohoh, hahahahahaHAH! That’s too good, that’s hysterical! Ohhhh. That’s his house? Sixer’s going to hate it. He would hate that with a passion. That’s just THE BEST THING I’VE EVER SEEN!” Bill rubbed his hands together gleefully, still cackling at what Sixer’s house of science and enlightenment had been reduced to.

“Right?”

“It’s a funhouse! A tourist trap! An unscientific, fund mongering, sideshow attraction of a place. It’s practically one of those hokey hellholes from back in New Jersey where Sixer grew up. Ohhhh, I bet it has a gift shop. Does it have a giftshop?”

“You bet it does.” Pyronica confirmed, crossing her arms. “And its very own interdimensional portal in the basement.”

“PYRONICA YOU’RE A GENIUS!” Bill enthused and shut his eye, puckering his lips to press a big enthusiastic smooch on Pyronica’s large pink cheek.

Giggling, Pyronica accepted her friend’s jubilant affection and then pointed at the mirror again.

“Well, if you want to go for it, you’ll barely have to do any legwork at all. Lil Gideon’s already got the journal. I’m pretty sure he’s about to read your invocation now to try and steal the deed to the shack and move in. It’ll be like taking candy from a baby.”

“Surprisingly harder than it looks.” Bill remarked, before looking back at Lil Gideon’s image in the mirror, and then down to his bricks, one of them glowing as a summons call came through. “Perfect timing.”
“Besides, if he asks to speak to the manager, just tell him you’re the boss.” Pyronica shrugged, laughing. “It shouldn’t be that hard to intimidate one little kid. That’s half the fun of taking candy from a baby.”

“Oh, I’m going to enjoy this.” Bill rubbed his hands together and then reached down to press on his glowing brick. “Wish me luck.”

As Bill answered the call, reality dissolved in a whirl of black and white, until the dreamscape spat itself out in Earth’s plane, forcing everyone in Gideon’s direct vicinity to fall into a micro-sleep immediately.

The tubby evangelical child was clutching his stomach, his eyes glowing blue as he chanted the tongue in cheek invocation left in Sixer’s journal (the scientist knowing back then that it didn’t matter what you said, Bill would come and go as he pleased no matter what backwards message you chanted) and so Bill made his dramatic entrance.

“Egassem sdawkcab! Egassem sdawkcab! Egassem sdawkcab!”

The colour drained out of the world and time slowed to a halt, a triangular void appearing in the clouds above, cutting through the earth’s atmosphere up to the stars above. The edges of the triangle lit with fire and a singular eye opened from within the void, a vapourwave nightmare.

Bill started laughing and Gideon cowered away in terror.

Bursting into form from the triangular void, taking shape in black and white, Bill looked around Gideon’s dreamscape for a moment, recognising the clearing by Stanford’s shack gleefully.

This was perfect.

“Oh, Gravity Falls. It is good to be back!”

Customary yellow lit his bricks and he floated down towards Gideon, hands on his sides, ready to examine his latest dupe of a customer, floating around the boy.

“Name’s Bill Cipher. And I take it you’re some kind of living ventriloquist dummy?” Bill presumed, making a note to turn Gideon INTO some kind of living ventriloquist dummy the moment he made earth his new home. Laughing at the thought, Bill floated closer and gestured to Gideon. “I’m just kidding. I know who you are, Gideon.”

“W-what are you? H-how do you know my name?” Gideon questioned cautiously, obviously scared of Bill, and, really, that only helped matters at this point in the negotiations.

“Oh, I know lots of things.” Bill said, impressing the point with a demonstration, his bricks fizzing with static, images and scenes from throughout history flickering in a montage of cryptic locations across Bill’s body. His voice dropping to a more suitably demonic timbre, Bill repeated himself.

“LOTS OF THINGS.”

When Gideon looked sufficiently awed, Bill snapped off the illusion, returning things to ‘normal’ with jarring briskness.

Now for the fun part.

Party tricks.
“Hey, look what I can do.”

Reaching his hand out, Bill pointed at a deer in the forest grazing peacefully by the shrubbery. The deer looked up and Bill beckoned with his finger, but he wasn’t beckoning the deer.

The deer’s mouth opened almost mechanically, and one by one each of the animal’s teeth were uprooted from its gums, flying across the clearing to deposit themselves neatly in Bill’s waiting hand. It was funny how even in the animal kingdom one could still have dreams about all your teeth falling out, or at least it was funny to Bill.

Passing them to Gideon like a present, Bill bequeathed the teeth to the shrill tubby kid, enjoying the way the reality of it registered with Gideon a split second after the fact.

“Deer teeth. For you kid!” Bill laughed and Gideon dropped the teeth with a frightened shout, his eyes flitting back up to Bill with the appropriate amount of fear now.

“You’re insane!”

“Sure I am. What’s your point?” Bill shrugged, and waved his hand in the air, rewinding the motion of the teeth with the gesture.

In tandem they levitated off the floor around Gideon’s feet and flew back into the deer’s mouth, rooting themselves in the creature’s gums once more. When the deer was reunited with its teeth, it bounded off into the forest as if nothing had ever happened.

Gideon still looked terrified. Chumps like him never appreciate a good party trick.

“Hhhn. Listen to me, demon!” Gideon shouted, having mustered his resolve to be angry in the face of his obvious fear, pointing his finger at Bill aggressively. “I have a job for you.”

This was about what Bill expected, from the moment he first saw Gideon’s ridiculous hair-do. Bill sure could pick a demanding customer from a mile off.

What he didn’t pick though was what Gideon would ask.

“I need you to enter the mind of Stanford Pines and steal the code to his safe!”

Bill laughed on principle. Getting paid to enter Stanford’s mind. He practically lived there and if Sixer had a safe, the sequence would probably either be something incredibly pretentious like a Fibonacci sequence or something incredibly dumb to do with his anomalous fingers, like 1212 or 6666. Finding the code would be a cake walk.

But last he recalled Sixer didn’t have a safe.

What he did have was an identical twin. An unscrupulous identical twin.

“Wait… Stan Pines?”

Bill turned away from Gideon and did a quick scan of the events leading up to Sixer’s dip into the portal, viewing the fight he had with his brother and the symbol from the diagnostics equipment that was burned into his back.

Stanley Pines was still in Gravity Falls?

This could be interesting.
“You know what kid? You’ve convinced me! I’m sold. I’ll help you with this and in return you can help me with something I’ve been working on. We’ll work out the details later.” Bill said, floating down to Gideon and extending his hand, relying on the fact that this kid was too stupid and revenge mad to question what those details could be before sealing the deal.

Predictably, Gideon jumped at the chance, already holding his hand out for Bill with an eager grin, plunging his pudgy palm forward into the blue fire that sprung up around Bill’s thin black hand with all the confidence of a dreaming child.

“Deal!” Gideon bared his teeth in a sinister smile.

The deal sealed, Bill quickly withdrew his hand from Gideon’s meaty palm and floated back a little from the kid, bending his arm at the elbow to swing his fist across his bricks with a jaunty wave, eager to get his part of the deal over with.

“Well, time to invade Stan’s mind. This should be fun!”

Scouring through the mind of Stanford’s estranged twin brother would be fun. Nothing on poking through Sixer’s head of course, but since Jheselbraum cut him out of that mental property market, it, couldn’t hurt for Bill to shop around elsewhere.

He couldn’t wait to see what embarrassing childhood memories Sixer’s brother had about his twin and discovering all the juicy details of what became of Sixer’s life when he left Earth was too tempting to ignore. Not to mention what happened to the science hut. Bill really wanted to find out more about how the science hut dropped the ‘s’ and became the Mystery Hack.

Now came the key part of any good customer interaction with some jerk you just duped into a deal. A speedy exit.

Levitating higher and disappearing in a flash of light, Bill gave his parting words to Lil Gideon, imparting some cosmic wisdom to the chubby kid so he didn’t walk away from this whole interaction with nothing.

“Remember, reality is an illusion, the universe is a hologram, buy gold! BYE!”

And with that Bill withdrew the mindscape from the clearing, travelling through it to a different mind.

A vulnerable mind.

Stanley Pines’ sleeping unprotected mind, inside the Mystery Shack.

When the magnetic cart finally rolled out of the dense Gravity Falls forest, it came into a clearing that was the exact same clearing Stanford remembered surrounding his shack, but again with several key differences.

The main difference being the enormous scientific compound built up around the minuscule structure of Stanford’s original house, countless glass windows reflecting the dimming light of evening from the multi-story buildings, large white parabolas mounted on the roof of each building, beaming satellite signals to the wider world beyond.
The magnetic cart crossed through the chain link fencing surrounding the compound, passing through the security protocols that Stanford noted on his way in. His eyes scouring the compound from within the cart, Stanford decided to discard all pretence of subterfuge when he saw the gold symbol on the side of the largest building.

It was his symbol.

A six fingered hand.

This was HIS compound. His institute, his research facility.

The signage on the front of the building declared this place to be the International Institute of Oddology, making sense of the branded acronym Ford had seen emblazoned over the tents near the crash site. That combined with the Six Fingered hand on the wall indicated that in this universe Stanford must have been ultimately successful, achieving the goals he dreamed of since university.

With that in mind, Stanford discarded his initial infiltration plan to impersonate one of the guards by knocking them out and stealing their attire and settled on a much less violent infiltration option. After all, it couldn’t be too difficult to impersonate himself. He just had to act like he belonged here and nobody would think to question him.

If his alternate self was the one who ran this place, by that logic Stanford should have no issues simply walking in through the front door of the compound. He had no need to sneak in with the cargo and, with that in mind, he set the large wrench back down on the tray in the back of the cart and focused on plan B.

Jumping off the back of the magna-cart before it could wheel itself into a parking garage, Ford landed in a crouch on the grass, straightening up and surveying the building.

How ironic that Jheselbraum must have sent him to retrieve the power source he needed from himself.

All that could have been, indeed.

Given his alternate self’s relative success, Stanford couldn’t imagine his dimensional double would have any trouble parting with the power source he needed to defeat Bill, considering it was likely in their combined interests to do so.

Ford smoothed his hair back off his face, tried to exude the sort of confidence Bill assured him was all that was needed to infiltrate the US government and walked across the green like he belonged here.

Striding directly for the building’s entrance, various interns watched him with an awe that only cemented Ford’s theory. This was his institute and retrieving the power source he needed would be a cake walk.

It was only when he was stopped by one of the Institute’s security guards by the main door that he ran into an issue.

“HALT! Don’t come any further!” The guard double took when he saw Stanford and then raised his hand defensively.

“I beg your pardon?” Stanford asked, attempting to bluff his way past the guard, acting as if he were meant to be here.
“We have a doppleganger of the CEO on the front lawn, clothing tattered, stubble, cracked glasses, attempting to neutralise.” The guard muttered into his walkie talkie, keeping an eye on Stanford.

Ford raised his hands, showcasing his six fingers, attempting to calm the guard down. “Now I’m certain this isn’t necessary –“

“What’s your favourite snack? Tell me, NOW!” shouted the security guard, reaching for the weapon at his belt.

Putting his hands up higher, Ford blinked briefly at this odd request before answering honestly. “J-jellybeans? Wh –“

“Not a shapeshifter.” The security guard spoke into his hand-held radio, signalling to the rest of the security team. “I repeat, we have a doppleganger situation in the front courtyard. Subject is not a shapeshifter and is taking the form of Doctor Pines. Attempting to detain.”

“Proceed with caution,” came a response from the radio.

Stanford began backing away from the guard now, not liking the sound of being ‘detained’.

“Now, let’s just settle down. You can put that away. That really isn’t necessary.” Ford frowned as the security guard withdrew his weapon, some kind of stun gun, aiming it at him.

“Sir, I’m going to have to ask you to put your hands behind your head and kneel on the ground, slowly now.”

Stanford began to reach for his coat pocket slowly, holding one hand out in front of him defensively. More security staff began to run out into the courtyard, the lingering interns rushing inside to safety. The security guard raised his gun higher as Ford’s hand reached into his coat pocket.

“Don’t move!”

“Don’t move, put your hands on your head, kneel on the ground. Your instructions don’t exactly line up. I’m just trying to –“ Ford grumbled, still reaching for his plans for the weapon, hoping to explain his situation to the man, watching the five other guards assemble and aim their weapons at him.

“He’s got a gun!” One of them shouted, one of Ford’s blasters holstered in his trench coat pocket revealed when he reached for the plans.

That was all it took for the security team to let out a volley of shots, Stanford abruptly dodging the various blasts, reminded strongly of Bill’s target practise from 30 years ago.

“They’re blueprints!” Ford shouted back in between dynamic rolls, jumps, crouches and pirouettes, dodging the laser blasts. “For a power source. I need to speak to the person who runs this place. Oh for goodness s-”

The guards didn’t seem to be listening though, still firing shots rapidly.

One of the shots grazed Ford’s ankle, and while the blast didn’t seem to be lethal or deadly, Ford suddenly felt an encroaching lethargy, the energy draining from his body, his agility slowing down substantially until another shot landed, hitting him in the chest.

Falling backwards and collapsing on the ground, blueprints clutched within his grasp, Ford could
vaguely hear the crunch of boots on grass as the security guards came closer, peering down at him as his eyelids grew heavier.

The last thing Ford heard before losing consciousness was one of the guards speaking into their walkie talkies.

“Mr McGucket. You’re going to want to see this.”

The forest was thick with ominous fog, grey skies clouding the dilapidated shack, the moonlight above coming from a glowing ethereal eight ball as opposed to the moon itself. Children’s toys were floating through the air, unanchored to the ground below, the shack barely moored to the ground, crumbling apart, while the weathervane above the shack squeaked with the discordant intensity of the neglected.

Floating past a broken down swing set and a duck shaped rocker, remnants from a past playground decaying and bereft, Bill examined Stanford’s brother’s mindscape and noted the way his memories littered the exterior of the shack like illegally discarded debris, taking it all in with a long whistle.

“Geez, this place is a dump.”

Putting his hands on his sides Bill scanned the area, noting school desks and lounge chairs and a kid’s trailer cart sticking out of the mossy forest floor, the teddy bear resting within the cart losing an eye as mould overtook its plush fabric body.

“You’d think Sixer’s brother would know how to compartmentalise better.” Bill remarked to himself. “It’s like he just let his shame and regret bleed out all over the place. How does he live like this? At least Sixer could shove all his regrets and disappointments into that wheat field out back. This is just depressing.”

Squinting up at the eight-ball looming over the shack in the sky above, following him as he moved throughout Stanley’s mind, Bill idly wondered if that represented something that wouldn’t leave Ford’s brother alone? His past maybe? Or maybe he was just really bad at hustling pool?

Bill wasn’t really that invested in finding out, and so he floated into the shack itself, gliding through the front door.

“Come on, giftshop.” Bill rubbed his hands together, looking for some kind of souvenir he could take home with him. A tacky reminder of Sixer’s failures would be nice, but the code to Sixer’s brother’s safe would be nice too and, at least, it would get Gideon off his back.

The foyer of the shack wasn’t how Bill remembered it from his brief scan of Gravity Falls back in the clearing with Gideon. In Stanley’s mind, it had undergone some serious remodelling, becoming an escherscape of floating staircases trailing off towards various shifting corridors, doors lining the walls, petering off around every hallway and clearing.

There were millions of doors here, each one of them leading to different memories, thoughts, and dreams. However, none of them seemed to be labelled clearly. At least Sixer’s obsession with the Dewey Decimal system meant that Bill didn’t have to try too hard to find what he was looking for.
Stanley Pines’ mind was like a labyrinth.

“Okay, so maybe he does know how to compartmentalise.” Bill conceded with a scowl.

Floating down one of the broken staircases, Bill opened the first door on his left to see into one of Stanley’s memories.

“My ex wife still misses me. But her aim is getting better!”

“Ugh.” Bill slammed the door shut and floated away.

He opened several more doors, getting a cursory glance of Fez hiding arrest warrants under a mat in the shack as if that would make them less legally binding, seeing the big lug crying like a baby when he held two freshly minted infant humans in his arms and catching a childhood memory of Stanley and Sixer testing out one of Sixer’s inventions.

“Now you don’t have to put your pants on one leg at a time like everyone else, transcending the needs of the everyman. You can just spring out of bed and put them on in one swift motion!” A gangly teenaged Sixer explained, positioning his trouser applicator just off the edge of the top bunk’s frame, Stanley sitting on the top bunk by the ladder getting ready to play test dummy.

“Oh boy. Here goes nothing.”

Stanley jumped down into the trouser applicator machine and succeeded in giving himself an unfortunate wedgie while Sixer fretted about the result beside him.

“Heh heh heh.” Bill laughed at that memory, lingering in that doorway for a while before realising he was being distracted from the mission at hand.  

Stanley’s childhood memories of Sixer were too intoxicating. Back then Sixer was naïve enough to be earnest, untouched by cosmic agendas, deception, or betrayal. This was Sixer at his core, an optimist, an idealist, an inventor with an open mind. Seeing him like that was painful yet addictive but Bill wasn’t here to collect memories about Sixer. He needed to find Stanley’s memory of the code to his safe. Once Bill fulfilled his end of the deal then he could waste time poking through Fez’s mind.

It would take him forever to isolate and discover the individual memory of Stanley inputting the code to the safe and Bill didn’t have that kind of time.

Spending eternity searching through the mind of Sixer’s twin didn’t have the same sort of appeal that squatting in Stanford’s mind had especially considering how every door he could open in Stanley’s mind was like a slap in the face, reminding him of all the doors in Sixer’s mind that were closed to him now.

There had to be an easier way to do this.

“Woah. This is Stan’s mind?”

“I figured there would be more hot old ladies.”

Bill’s eye widened when he heard that and used his all-sight briefly to see who else had encroached upon Stanley’s mind.

Giving himself a quick overview of events he could tell that not only did he invade Stanley’s mind, but so did his grand-niece and nephew, along with some kind of rodent man they kept as
It was curious that these three all bore symbols from Jheselbraum’s zodiac throughout the summer. Considering she was dead, that wasn’t likely to cause problems, but it did not go unnoticed.

Now, not only was Bill’s curiosity piqued at the thought of getting to meet the key elements of Jheselbraum’s zodiac (getting to meet Stanford’s newer relations before he got to was a plus as well), but one of the kids had one of Sixer’s journals.

Very interesting.

That made it two children who managed to get their hands on Sixer’s hidden journals, stashed away in places that his paranoid mind thought no one would ever find it. Just goes to show how childish Sixer’s paranoia was if his journals were found by a bunch of infants.

It was probably like an adventure to these kids, uncovering the secrets of Ford’s journals. There were codes and mysteries and Sixer’s diagrams were practically cartoons, incredibly appealing to the juvenile mind. Privately Bill wondered if these kids had the sort of IQ to keep up with his own cryptic additions to the journal or if it would take a few more years before they’d be able to decrypt his own coded commentary.

From a cursory glance he could tell that the two kids, Dipper and Mabel, were reasonably capable, having run into some supernatural mishaps already exploring the woods around Gravity Falls.

They were only here for the summer, staying with their ‘Grunkle Stan’ (oh Bill just loved it, the identity theft, the indignities, Sixer would be throwing a fit when he saw this) but already they’d been diving headfirst into the sort of whimsical mystery this town had to offer.

They went on the same sort of adventures Bill loved when he was corporeal and sharing the Shack with Sixer. Bill would bet those kids had some fun stories to tell and if he wasn’t in such a rush with the whole organising the apocalypse thing, he might have enjoyed hanging around to ask them about it.

But unfortunately, he had a world to destroy – theirs. And while Bill didn’t have time to chit chat with Sixer’s family, he could use them.

Those kids probably knew their great uncle well enough to know where he would keep the memory of the code to his safe.

They followed Bill here to protect Stan’s mind from him. If Bill made them think they could stop him by finding the memory first, they’d be doing the hard work for him and he could just sit back and relax, watching them lead him straight to the memory. Bill had almost forgotten how fun it was to manipulate chumps to do his bidding.

It wasn’t that he wanted to watch Sixer’s family, oh no. And he definitely didn’t want to compare the kids to Stanford, finding out who inherited his stubborn jaw and who inherited his fascination with the weird and unusual. Cataloguing each similarity and difference between this new generation of Pines twins with the old, maintaining his mental tally of obsessiveness with his ex-worshipper.

Technically Sixer wasn’t worth obsessing over, given how stupidly he defected to Jheselbraum’s side, implanting that plate in his head traitorously, but old habits were hard to shake, and obsessing over Stanford was practically Bill’s only hobby at this point, if you didn’t count planning Weirdmageddon as a hobby. That was more like work, multi-dimensional event planning. Day
drinking wasn’t a hobby either, so really Stanford was all that he had.

Dissipating from the inside of the shack, Bill reappeared outside, floating above the porch just in time to hear the kid with the braces say.

“Remember everyone, we’ve got to look out for the triangle guy.”

“Yeah! Look out for the triangle guy!” Bill called out, twirling his cane as he descended.

The trio spun around, having been walking backwards towards the shack, surveying the misty forests behind them.

“It’s him! It’s the guy!” pointed out Question Mark, somewhat redundantly.

The kids gasped, but wasting no time the girl with the braces gritted her teeth with the same sort of gung-ho stupidity Bill recognised from every time Sixer decided to dive into a confrontation for the sake of his own heroism. She gets one tally in her ‘how much are you like Sixer’ chart.

“You leave our uncle’s brain alone, you isosceles monster!” She shouted and came running at Bill, just like Sixer, running into danger.

When Shooting Star dove forward to tackle Bill, he just sucked her into the surface of his bricks, giving her a little time to cool down.

She sure didn’t get her geometry skills from Sixer, or else she’d know that Bill was no isosceles, he was a perfect equilateral. Either she was trying to insult him, or she was too young to know better, and for her sake Bill presumed the latter.

Materialising a pocket watch, observing it briefly, Bill decided Sixer’s niece had enough of a time out and let her charge right back out of his bricks, landing on the ground closing her arms around nothing.

“Gotcha! Wait, what?”

“Oh, Stan’s family. We meet at last.” Bill looked over each intruder in Stanley’s mind, identifying their places on Jheselbraum’s zodiac and pointing his finger as he spoke. “Question Mark, Shooting Star, Pine Tree. I had a hunch I might bump into you!”

The hunch was Jheselbraum’s scheming, which Bill was coming to realise had a lot more follow through than he thought her capable of, and with that in mind, Bill shot a laser blast out of his fingertip at Sixer’s nephew, blasting a hole through the kid’s torso callously.

He screamed in fright and clasped his hands on his head, looking just enough like Sixer in the midst of his paranoid phase to make him entertaining. Bill was delighted by the kid’s reaction. He gets a tally mark too.

His twin was less phased by this perversion of reality, more adaptive to the whimsical cruelties of dreams, sticking her hand through the hole in Dipper’s chest while he panted in fright, laughing.

“Boop!”

“Mabel.” Pine Tree chastised her, frustrated by the way both Shooting Star and Question Mark laughed carelessly at his predicament.

So, this kid inherited Sixer’s killjoy tendencies clearly. Also, his singlemindedness.
“What do you want with our uncle’s mind anyway?” The kid demanded, and Bill saw the in for his agenda.

“Oh, just the code to the old man’s safe. Inside the shack is a maze of a thousand doors representing your uncle’s memories. Behind one of them is a memory of him inputting the code. I just need to find it and Gideon will pay me handsomely.”

“No if we stop you!” Shooting Star shouted combatively, pointing at Bill, proving that she was just as easily led as Sixer.

Now to set the challenge.

“Hah! Fat chance. I’m the master of the mind.” Blue flames encircled Bill for dramatic effect, wiggling his hands at the girl, casting his powers forward into Shooting Star’s mind. “I even know what you’re thinking right now.”

“That’s impossible. No one can guess what I’m thinking.” Shooting Star declared presumptively, her hands on her hips, believing herself so innovative that Bill couldn’t possibly comprehend her genius, just like Sixer.

Well, we’ll see about that.

Glimpsing inside Shooting Star’s head, Bill saw all that he needed to see, confirming that out of the two twins, Mabel was definitely the most like Stanford Pines.

Clicking his fingers, Bill summoned from the forefront of Mabel’s mind her ideal dream boys.

Two brightly coloured athletic 80’s fashioned young men sprang into being, everything that Mabel Pines pined for, and Bill observed, unimpressed, as these dream boys proved as vapid and doting as Stanford expected him to be when he summoned Bill down into the carefully designed body of his dream muse.

“Whoa, where are we, bro?” asked Xyler.

“We must be in heaven, cause I just saw an angel.” Craz squatted down, looking directly at Mabel who squealed and threw herself at her dream boy.

“I’m never letting go of your leg!” Mabel enthused, as delighted by her fantasy taking form as Stanford was so long ago.

Well, that was Shooting Star taken care of. Bill knew how to handle her now.

“You’re out of your league, kids.” Bill advised, before granting them a cursory warning. “Turn around now before you see something you might regret.”

Glowering at them for a loaded second to push the point across, Bill laid the last line of bait down, crashing backwards through the wall of the shack, waving to them as he departed.

“Later, suckers!”

Turning his eye to observe the Pines twins as he flew further into the house, Bill saw Pine Tree take the bait.

“We’re going in,” squinting, Dipper held a hand up to shield his eyes in the face of Mabel’s dream boys. “Mabel, can we leave those guys out here? Looking at them hurts my eyes.”
“No, they can help us!” Mabel insisted, much like Stanford, summoning his fantasy to life and immediately enlisting them. It would be enough to make Bill bitterly nostalgic, bringing back all those warm fuzzy memories if Mabel’s dream boys weren’t so utterly moronic.

“Totally! Arm throne!” Mabel’s dream boys bent down and linked their arms together to literally enthrone Shooting Star, Mabel giggling with glee all the while and Bill could tell which twin inherited Sixer’s bloated ego.

Rolling his eyes, Bill focused on the many doors that opened when he flew past them, taking a curious glance as he floated by. He was looking for more juicy Sixer memories but instead he kept finding more boring Stanley moments.

Stealing his dad’s gold medallion to clumsily get it engraved, pouring hours of wasted effort into making his own comic books as a kid, boxing lessons, peeking through the bars of a jail cell in Albuquerque, a woman inside the cell crying, lit by slivered moonlight. Typical boring stuff. Bill almost flew past it all, finding Stanley’s life so utterly disinteresting, until he flew past one door and had to double back.

“Hello. What’s this?”

There was Stanley Pines, pulling on his brother’s six fingered safety gloves, standing in front of the deactivated portal with a tool box and one of Sixer’s journals, cross referencing the machinery in front of him with a ‘quantum engineering for dummies’ textbook, scratching his belly as he squinted at the page.

“This isn’t so hard.” Stanley remarked, unscrewing one of the panels in the side of the portal fuel tanks. “Looks like mom and dad wasted all that money, sending Stanford to that fancy school of his. Any lug with a textbook can do this kinda crap. Now let’s see, unscrew to the left – AHH!”

Sparks flew from the side of the panel, and Stanley jumped back, narrowly avoiding electrocution. He wiped his brow, huffed a determined sigh, and approached the portal once more, ready to try again.

“Hmm. Guess you’re good for something after all. Interesting.” Bill rubbed his hands together, before resting his hand on the doorframe, trying to get some more exact statistics from the memory.

Stanley was much younger here. This must have been about twenty years ago or so. Bill could only imagine how much progress could have been made by a layman with only one journal over the past twenty years, but it was more progress than he could have hoped for.

If Fez was already working on the portal, trying to bring his brother back, no doubt, then Bill didn’t have to go looking for another stooge to reactivate the portal. He already had a willing one right inside the shack.

Sure, Stanley was no genius, but he was obviously determined and resourceful enough to at least get the portal functioning eventually. Skimming past several other doors, Bill could see the portal progressing, a little more slapdash than the polished product Sixer and Fiddleford put together, but the rudimentary basics were sound enough, and Bill didn’t need the portal to work perfectly. He just needed it open long enough to get his foot in the door.

It would almost be a shame at this point to turn the portal over to Gideon when he gave him the deed to the shack, considering it looked like Sixer’s brother wasn’t that far away from a successful first attempt. It would be up and running by the end of this summer if Fez could find the other
journals, and since the other two books were in the possession of two kids, well you know what they say about taking candy from babies.

Still, a deal was a deal, and Bill flicked his attention back to the twins and their housekeeper, keeping track of their gradual exploration.

It seemed like Shooting Star was splitting off from Pine Tree, the sweaty kid lingering by one of Fez’s doorways labelled ‘Dipper Memories’, reluctant to carry on.

“We already know how Stan feels about us. He loves us! We’re great!” Shooting Star insisted and headed off down the corridor, expecting Pine Tree to follow her.

“Yeah, let’s just keep moving.” Question Mark concurred, following the obvious leader.

“More moving?”

“Yes! I love motion!” cooed Mabel’s dream boys, taking turns sharing the same brain cell, or maybe using it as a hackey sack.

Ugh.

Bill could see Pine Tree make to follow his sister as well, before thinking the better of it and doubling back to prise open the door to his uncle’s memories about him, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Okay, just a quick peek.”

Bill honestly wasn’t that interested in seeing the kid’s emotional roller coaster journey reconciling how his uncle felt about him and this kid clearly wasn’t the dynamic thinker of the two. Shooting Star was racking up the Sixer Similarity tally marks and this kid was barely scoring. Bill would be better off following Sixer’s mini-me, Shooting Star, instead of wasting time trailing after Pine Tree.

Flexing a little of his powers, letting his mastery of the mind speak for itself, it was easy enough to make the winding corridors of Stan’s mind a little more precarious, to trick the fat one into taking a wrong turn, to assume Question Mark’s shape and follow Shooting Star through the hallways while her handyman got stuck watching one of Stanley’s more entertaining memories.

This would be easy.

“Hello? Code to Stan’s safe? Where are you?” Bill called out, feigning Soos’ voice perfectly, keeping Shooting Star’s keen mind nicely on track.

“Opening and closing doors is fun!”

“I can do it also!” crowed Mabel’s brightly coloured dream boys, and Bill maintained his poker face by contenting himself with the thought of disintegrating her fantasy boyfriends down to their finer molecules the minute he got his hands on the code to the safe.

Joining in the search, Bill opened one of the doors in the corridor at random, watching Stan input a code on the outside of the vending machine in the lobby, the vending machine swinging forward to reveal a secret door behind it, no doubt leading down to the basement where Bill’s portal was.

“If only people knew the truth. That hidden behind this vending machine, I secretly have a –“

“BORING!” Bill yelled out and slammed the door shut, preserving the secret of the portal from any
meddling Sixer’s adept little niece could do to Bill’s plan.

Meanwhile Mabel was honing in on a promising looking door, the words ‘Top Secret’ written on the wood. She gestured to the group, drawing their attention to the door.

“All right guys, I have a good feeling about this door.”

Swinging the door open, rather than finding the top-secret code to Fez’s safe, instead the door opened to a rather peculiar tableau, Stan standing in the bathroom in front of the mirror, squeezing his belly.

“Hey Mr Tummy. Hey Mister Stan!” Sixer’s brother seemed to be entertaining himself with some gross fleshy puppetry, jiggling his stomach fat and conducting a conversation with it, voices and all. “Are you hungry? Yes!”

“Ahh!” Bill winced, recoiling from the door, disgusted more than he was intrigued.

“Eat your crackers! Yum, yum, yum.”

“Sweet Sally.” Mabel proclaimed in disgust and mercifully swung the door shut.

As Mabel paced away from the Top-Secret door further down the corridor, Bill decided to prod her back on track once more, relying on her imaginative child mind to make the informed leaps Bill was relying on.

“Aw, we’ve been searching forever. What if the triangle guy finds the memory before we do?” Bill said, resting his hand against his forehead like a bad stage actor.

“If we wanna find Stan’s memory, we gotta think like Stan. He’s always hiding stuff, right?” Mabel deduced aptly, tapping her chin like how Sixer did when formulating a hypothesis.

Scouring his mind for something believable to say, Bill remarked. “Yeah! Like how he hides his arrest warrants under that rug in the gift shop?”

“Soos, that’s it!” Mabel enthused, hurrying down one of the corridors to point at one of the rugs littering Stan’s mind, pulling it back to reveal a trap-door beneath it. “Look!”

Mabel’s dream boys gasped gleefully as if her discovery was a shocking revelation on their favourite TV show and Bill joined in with their idiotic chorus to maintain his cover.

Mabel opened the trap door, the group crouching down to look within, and inside of the memory Stanley was kissing the deed to the shack, locking it away in his safe.

“There ya go. And now to input the code. 13, 44, and finally…”

Bill closed the door quickly, preferring to steal the memory in its entirety rather than let Shooting Star hear the full code in case she rushed to retrieve the deed from the safe before Gideon could.

“Dude! We found it!” Bill said, borrowing Question Mark’s lexicon to really sell it.

“Yeah!” Mabel said, delighted by their success.

“But what do we do now? Jinx!” Posited Mabel’s dream boys simultaneously, their voices a vapid echo.

“Um… um…” Mabel looked around Stan’s mindscape, her quick little mind thinking of a course
of action before settling on one, her eyes alighting on an axe held by a decorative suit of armour by
the wall. “Let’s just destroy the door before Bill can find it!”

She grabbed the axe and was already teetering over towards the door with the heavy weapon in her
hands, raising it to strike the wooden memory door.

It was amazing how she intuitively picked the one course of action that could really inconvenience
Bill here. She had a knack for knowing just what would disrupt Bill’s plans, just like Sixer had.

Throwing his arms out to halt her potential devastation, Bill quickly spoke up, slipping somewhat
out of character here, although he wasn’t exactly putting in an Oscar winning performance,
imitating this dumbbell.

“Wait! Maybe I should do it! My big fat arms are great at destroying stuff!”

“Oh. Okay.” Mabel conceded quickly with an eager smile, setting the axe down, barely noticing
anything was amiss.

She’d find out soon enough, but by the time she did it’d be too late.

Bill extended his hand, frowning with concentration, the door creaking then glowing blue as it
levitated up from the floor, wrenching from the floorboards until finally Bill had it floating in the
air above him.

If that wasn’t enough of a clue for Shooting Star that things were awry, the real Question Mark
strolling in from down the hall probably gave the game away for sure.

“Hey guys! I just saw a memory of Stan roller skating and wearing short shorts! Didn’t look…
didn’t look that bad. Hey, something weird is goin’ on here.”

Bill started laughing, quickly shedding Question Mark’s robust form, his two eyes melding into
one, Soos’ fleshy arms pressing against his sides until he could reform in a whirl of colour, his
customary yellow bricks and angular shape returning as he held the door to the memory of the code
to the safe in his hand, looking down on Shooting Star and her dream boys with amusement.

“Boy, you kids sure are gullible. I knew you’d lead me straight to the code.”

Bill took a moment longer to chuckle at the dumbstruck expressions on their faces, finding the
familiar mix of shock and outrage on Mabel’s face enough like Sixer’s cute expressions of betrayal
to be truly entertaining.

When they still seemed slow on the uptake, like they didn’t get what was so hilarious about being
tricked, Bill decided to spell it out for them.

“It’s funny how dumb you are.”

That explanation still didn’t wipe the outrage off their faces, so Bill shrugged it off, continuing
with his victory banter.

“The combination to Stan’s safe. Boy, that was even easier than I thought!”

“Oh yeah? Well you’re a – a stink face!” Mabel accused Bill, wracking her little child mind for a
suitably scouring retort in the face of Bill’s betrayal, or maybe she just couldn’t let being called
dumb slide, just like Sixer.
“Awesome comeback, Mabel!” cheered one of Mabel’s dream boys.

“Don’t treat me like a child, Xyler.” Mabel snapped at the figment of her imagination, growing impatient with her own creation.

Job done, Bill had no more need to stick around and he flew away down the long corridors of Stan’s mind, memory in hand, ready to deliver the code to Gideon.

“Later, suckers!”

More doors to various memories opened as Bill flew past, but he didn’t linger to snoop this time. He didn’t need to wait for Sixer’s brother to get smart enough to kickstart the portal. Gideon likely had enough resources to do it just as well as Fez could, although the downside was that Gideon was more likely to be a pain in Bill’s eye while doing so.

Even now the kid was trying to call Bill, checking up on his progress. Talk about being micromanaged.

The urgency of Gideon’s summons rang through Bill’s body, and he landed on the floor in one of the hallways. Answering the call, he pressed his bowtie, a screen opening out on his bricks below.

“Y’ellow?”

“Bill! Did you find the memory with the combination yet?” Gideon barked, demanding as ever.

“Relax, short stack. I got it right here.” Bill drawled, holding out the door with the memory inside.

“Hahahah! Perfect. Now, give it to me and we’ll finish our bargain.”

Bill had no qualms about following through on his end if it meant his apocalypse would be within reach. Gideon seemed to be keen to follow through as well, or he would follow through if he didn’t want to be plagued by eternal nightmares.

“Finally! It’s – you got a pen there? It’s 13, 44 –” Squinting at the code Fez inputted, Bill paused to take in the number, holding the door out at arm’s length.

Before he could reveal the final digits a small orange projectile hit the door, knocking it out of Bill’s grasp.

“Ah! No no no! Wait, no!” Bill scrambled after the door, but it flew away down the stairs and through one of Fez’s memory doors, down a fathomless hole within, no doubt Stan’s very own effective memory shredder for that self-imposed repression he likely relied upon, the mental gimmick fashioning itself after one of the gimmicks he sold tours to at his Shack.

“And none more bottomless than the bottomless pit!” A memory of Stan said, gesturing to the black hole through which Bill’s stolen memory fell. “Which as you can see here is bottomless. Woah, whatever that was it’s gone forever.”

The door to the memory of the bottomless pit slammed shut, and Bill clapped his hands to his sides in shock, Gideon doing the same on the screen on his torso. Bill looked behind him to see Shooting Star standing triumphant with a nyarf gun in her hand, blowing on the top of it, holding it with all the confidence Sixer did when he mastered the laser gun.

“Ha ha! Boom!”
“Mabel did it!” cheered the dream boys.

“The Shack is safe!” concurred Question Mark with equal enthusiasm.

On the screen below on Bill’s bricks, Gideon scowled dismissively, clutching his little piggy hands tight before shouting.

“The deal’s off!”

“Wa-wait! No, wait!” Bill panicked, his part of the deal not done yet. He could still fix this. He could find the memory. Everything had been falling apart for him lately, despite finally dispatching his old mentor and that two-faced seven eyed hack that fancied herself his nemesis all in one day. Things were supposed to go right for him now. He just wanted the Shack. His portal was in the basement! This was supposed to be easy!

“I’m switchin’ to plan B.” Gideon announced, before shutting off his connection to the call, the screen fading away on Bill’s bricks like a TV set being turned off.

If there was one thing Bill hated more than anything, it was a deal breaker, and even worse was a deal that was broken because he was made to look like an idiot. In front of a 12 year old for that matter. BY a 12 year old! On what was becoming one of the top ten worst days of his life! This was humiliating!!

Bill had never lost out on a deal like that before, EVER. It was shattering.

Bill literally shattered, his triangular form breaking like glass and falling to pieces before reforming, his bricks turning red with rage.

This kid had lost Bill the chance to activate his portal again, to follow through on all the promises he made to his henchmaniacs, the new home they sorely needed. This kid had put off, once again, Bill’s party, just like Sixer had, and there was only so many times you could postpone a party before people just decided to not show up at all. That was even more humiliating than having to postpone in the first place. The only thing worse then throwing a delayed apocalypse was throwing one that barely drew a decent crowd. He’d be an interdimensional laughing stock for all the wrong reasons.

Mabel stood, proud and triumphant at the end of the corridor with the same cocky assuredness Sixer had when he foiled Bill’s plans. It was the same smug victoriousness that he often saw on Jheselbraum’s face, whenever she thought she got one over on Bill, and right now that comparison made Bill’s bricks boil.

This kid had it coming to her.

“YOU! You can’t even imagine what you just cost me!”

Looming over the girl, Bill’s tone dropped to a more demonic register, aiming to wipe that smug grin off her braces covered mouth. Fire flared in both of his hands, his palms still tingling from when he’d burned the life out of Jheselbraum, clutching her crisping corpse between his bare hands.

It was the wrong day to piss Bill Cipher off.

“Do you have any idea what I’m like WHEN I’M MAD?”

Letting everything that frustrated Bill come to the forefront, the Behenian sigils around the edge of
the portal began to flash across his eye with increasing speed, the ground shaking below him. Fire arced out in a circle around the group and Bill raised his hands in the air, the fire flaring higher.

From under the floorboards of Stan’s mind came a gigantic stone replica of Stan’s head, like some sort of head-ception, raising like a high speed elevator up out of the dingy corridors of the shack, breaking through the roof into the cosmos above, the force and speed of their ascent causing Shooting Star and Question Mark to stumble.

Bill stretched his form out, red and imposing, lightning crackling over his bricks, shock finally bumping the triumph off Shooting Star’s familiar little face.

“So, I guess he gets really mad when he gets mad.” Soos pointed out redundantly, that understatement the final nail in the coffin of their fate, the last indignity Bill would allow from these glorified chimps, bearing the symbols from Jheselbraum’s zodiac so impertinently.

Looming over them, Bill decided he was done with playing nice just because these people were Sixer’s relations. If anything that meant Bill had even less reason to hold back.

“EAT NIGHTMARES!”

Finally Bill got the reaction he deserved for all his hard work, and those two dimwits started screaming, appropriately frightened of him now.

“One nightmare, coming up!” Bill promised, deciding which of the two’s worst nightmares he’d inflict on them first.

“Nightmare? Hope he doesn’t mean that British dog man I’m always dreaming about,” fretted Soos, helpfully, volunteering to be Bill’s first target.

Reaching into his mind, Bill pulled the image of said British dog man to the fore and summoned it into being, much to Question Mark’s dismay. An anthropomorphised British Bulldog wearing a monocle and a bowler hat walked towards Soos on it’s hindlegs, wacking the handyman in the stomach with a cane.

“Ello ello ello! Who’s crike for a stick in the pudding?” enunciated Soos’ nightmare and Bill idly wondered how his subconscious got stuck on this particular perversion of reality. Was it cartoons? The internet? An aversion to dogs or the British? Seems like a stretch that for a 20 year old man this would be his greatest nightmare.

Nonetheless Soos screamed and clutched his head, running away from the dog man, shouting. “It’s everything I’ve ever feared!”

With Question Mark taken care of, Bill turned his eye to Shooting Star, pointing at her and unleashing all the venom he usually reserved for Sixer on the girl, being particularly vicious with her nightmare.

It shot from Bill’s finger like a beam and instantly Mabel was transformed, her skin melting, swelling, deforming, although the transformation wasn’t the nightmarish part for her. It was the end result, her ego unable to stand it as she became a green ugly hunchback, hideous to behold.

“My cuteness!” Mabel screamed, clutching her face in horror. “What did you do to my cuteness?”

Her agonising over her looks told Bill pretty clearly that Shooting Star had just as much of an overdeveloped ego as Sixer did, and destroying her self image was particularly worthwhile, considering how much weight it seemed to hold for the girl.
Personally Bill thought she looked better that way, monstrous and freakish, and idly considered giving the entire Pines family the same makeover, before his attention was drawn to Mabel’s dream boys, recoiling from her deformed image in horror, responding the way she thought they’d react, with shallow disgust.

“You’re next!” Bill pointed at Xyler and Craz and the figments proceeded to high-five each other and dance enthusiastically.

“Cool! We’re next!”

They were so stupid. Pretty idiotic fantasy fodder and it burned Bill to compare the two of them to him, doing to Mabel’s dream boys what he should have done to the vessel Sixer made him the moment he landed in that good for nothing meat sack.

A blast of solid energy jettisoned from Bill’s fingertip and incinerated the dream boys, blasting them off the edge of the platform to send them spiralling as they burnt, down into nothingness.

“My dream boys!” Mabel lamented, rushing to the edge of the platform, her hand outstretched, sad to see them go.

“And now to finish you all, once and for all.”

Bill reared back, getting ready to blast these meddling kids out of Stan’s mindscape and back into the real world with a killer migraine and possibly some lifelong trauma as a souvenir for their misdeeds, but as he was mustering his concentration, Shooting Star’s brother flew up to the platform on top of Stan’s head, shouting to get Bill’s attention.

“Hey Bill!”

“What?” Bill turned from his concentration, frustrated that he couldn’t do a single thing he set out to do today and it was all because of these damn Sixer mini-me’s.

“Nice bow tie.” Pine Tree quipped and shot laser beams out of his eyes, similar to the energy beams Bill had been shooting at the dream boys, blasting a hole through Bill’s bricks and incinerating his bow tie. A hole burnt all the way through Bill’s surface, turnabout being fair play for what he did to Pine Tree earlier.

Bill let out a shout of surprise and frustration, looking down at the hole in his bricks, aghast.

“Dipper!” Mabel cried out.

“Dude!” Soos remarked, impressed.

Floating over to them, Dipper spoke quickly. “Guys! I just learned that you can conjure whatever you can conceive in Grunkle Stan’s mindscape!”

“Huh?” questioned Mabel, slow on the uptake. Maybe Bill had given her mental gymnastics too much credit before.

“Just think of cool fighting stuff and it will happen.” Dipper explained, turning his gaze to Soos’ nightmare man. “Like this.”

Lasers shot from Pine Tree’s eyes again, disassembling Soos’ nightmare into nothingness efficiently and effectively.
“Ha ha. He’s dead now.” Soos pointed out, relieved.

“What? Who told you that? Don’t listen to him!” Bill urged, trying to avoid this levelling of the playing field, feeling himself losing the upper hand as the moments ticked by.

“We can do anything?” Mabel questioned, before concentrating on the changes she wished to effect in the mindscape, showcasing a talent for lucid dreaming as she restored her body to its former cuteness, the possibilities dawning on her as she effected the change. “Like have kittens for fists?”

Her fists morphed into pink fuzzy kitten faces, their eyes bulging with all the exaggerated cuteness of a beanie baby.

“Po-pow! P-p-pow! Pow!” Mabel shouted, making her own sound effects as she sent the kitten faces flying across the void towards Bill like furry little missiles, the kittens launching directly onto Bill’s eye.

Bill screamed again, in imagined pain now thanks to the sharp teeth and pointy whiskers of the cats launched at him.

Sure, the cats hurt Bill, but they were licking Mabel’s face, pressing little kitten kisses on her cheeks while she giggled. “Well hello, friends.”

“Anything, huh?” Questioned Question Mark, before he pulled his shirt up, revealing his sizable stomach. “Soos love stomach beam stare!”

A rainbow light in the shape of a question mark beamed out of Soos’ stomach, sheer indignity knocking Bill off the platform, the triangle spinning in the void to right himself.

That was the last straw.

Smoothing over the hole in his stomach and floating back onto the platform, Bill decided to get serious with the kids. “Enough games!”

Three laser blasts shot from Bill’s eye, aiming for both of the kids and Question Mark, but Sixer’s niece took initiative once again, her quick chaotic imagination coming up with the perfect solution just in time.

“Hamster Ball shields activate!”

“Activate!” repeated the other two, hamster ball shields springing up to defend each of them, causing the laser beam to redirect back and hit Bill in the eye.

“AH! Oh, my eye! AAAAAH!” Why was it always the eye?

“Rise Xyler! Rise Craz!” Mabel raised each hand decisively, calling from the void her two dream boys who rose playing electronic instruments, creating a soundtrack to her chaotic rebuttal.

“No, synthesised music! It hurts!” Bill complained, his hands covering his sides, near his eye. At least the human music of Sixer’s generation had taste although, since this was eighties electronica, it suited Sixer’s age bracket more so than Mabel’s.

“And now to imagine your worst nightmare! A portal out of Stan’s mind!” Dipper declared, pointing at the triangle valiantly.

“Out of Stan’s miiiind.” Mabel emphasised, singing into a conjured microphone.
“Mabel.” Dipper chastised, before focusing intently. “Everyone together.”

Their collective imaginations were enough to conjure a black hole beneath Bill’s feet, the gravitational pull becoming more convincing the harder they thought.

“No no no!”

They might actually have a chance to kick Bill out of Stanley’s mind for good if they kept this up, which would be a serious dent in Bill’s plans, not to mention one mental eviction too many. Clearly, he underestimated them.

“ENOUGH!” Bill spread his hands out and removed them all from Stanley’s mindscape himself, depositing them in empty white space out in the wider mindscape, halting their imaginary warfare.

Resuming his typical yellow form Bill dusted his bricks off and spoke frankly with the trio.

“You know, I’ve been impressed with you guys. You’re more clever than you look. Especially the fat one.”

“He’s talking about you.” Soos said in an exaggerated whisper, poking Shooting Star in the elbow.

“So, I’m gonna let you kids off the hook.” Bill decided, being much more reasonable with Sixer’s family than he might have been to some of his own henchmaniacs. “You might come in handy later.”

“BUT KNOW THIS! A darkness approaches. A day will come in the future when everything you care about will change.”

At least these kids got a warning. Bill was being gracious by giving them a heads up, after all it was better knowing in advance than hearing ‘things change’ at the very last second before your own personal apocalypse.

Shrugging off that telling thought, Bill fell back on his old routine. A snazzy, paranoia inducing departure. It was always a hit.

“Until then I’ll be watching you. I’LL BE WATCHING YOU!”

And at that Bill dispersed them all from the mindscape with a blinding beam of light.

Waking up slowly, Stanford spared a moment to complain inwardly at how often he’d passed out or been knocked unconscious in this last leg of his journey. For someone who successfully avoided sleep for several years, the frequency was getting ridiculous.

Although it wasn’t like Bill could possess his body while he slept anymore, or so Jheselbraum assured him. That didn’t rule out visitations in his dreams but Bill had been thankfully absent from Ford’s mindscape in this brief involuntary siesta.

Coming to his senses gradually, Stanford’s head was resting on the cool metal surface of a table, his wrists cuffed to a loop protruding from the middle of the table.

This looked like some sort of interrogation room, which seemed like overkill by Ford’s estimation.
Whoever captured him didn’t need to intimidate or interrogate the information out of him, he came here to share his situation and hopefully collaborate for a mutually beneficial result.

The destruction of Bill was mutually beneficial. It would benefit everyone.

Lifting his head from the tabletop, Ford rolled his shoulders and looked around the empty mirrored room curiously, noticing that his coat was missing. They must have confiscated it and were most likely going through his pockets now, harvesting the alien tech from his clothing the same way they harvested it from the ship in the valley.

That certainly scuppered the majority of his preliminary escape plans, robbed of his pen laser, his nano briefcase, his quantum destabiliser prototype and his infinity sided die. He hoped that he’d have some small chance to get them back.

They’d also taken the blueprints from him. Hopefully, that would convince whoever detained him that he wasn’t a threat, that he came here with a goal. Although his goal was to build a large and dangerous gun so Stanford didn’t know how reassuring that would be.

A voice sounded out from over the room’s speakers, someone from the other side of the two-way mirror engaging with Ford, likely with the same soundproofing technology employed in the bunker.

“Could you take yer glasses off and look directly at the wall opposite you please? Just fer a second.”

Stanford complied, taking his glasses off and looking wearily into the two way glass, recognising the voice to be Fiddleford’s. It had been so long since he heard it.

“I’m not possessed.”

“It don’t hurt to be too careful, that’s all.” Fiddleford’s voice responded from over the intercom, letting out a nervous chuckle. “Just gonna shine a light in real quick, will be over in a second.”

Stanford held still, only wincing slightly as a bright light beamed out of the far wall, before dimming instantly. Despite being inconvenienced by them, he was impressed with the security protocols.

It meant at least that they knew what they were dealing with. He shuddered to think of the chances of getting his weapons back if this dimension’s inhabitants were somehow in league with Bill.

“Alright, just sit tight. I’ll be in in a second.” Fiddleford assured him, and the intercom switched off.

Stanford put his glasses back on and drummed his six fingers on the metal countertop idly, attempting to show this alternate Fiddleford that he was relatively harmless, here to co-operate and negotiate, hoping to live down his athletic blaster fight in the courtyard.

Eventually the door to the left opened and Fiddleford’s alternate self entered.

He looked similar to the Fiddleford Ford knew, with a few more wrinkles around the edges of his eyes, clean shaven, still wearing the same rounded spectacles he favoured back in the eighties. He still had a kindly face, a slim frame, but this dimension’s Fiddleford also showed signs of relative wealth, wearing a tailored white labcoat over pressed slacks, a patterned button-up shirt, and a silk tie with a gold tiepin and cufflinks accenting the look. The tie-pin and cufflinks bore the logo of the institute, the six fingered hand, and Stanford noted that Fiddleford also wore a ring bearing the
symbol above his wedding ring. He was holding a clipboard, obviously here to question Ford.

While Stanford was scrutinising this alternate Fiddleford, F was doing the same to him, taking in Ford’s greying hair growing out of the post-surgery buzzcut, taking in his unkempt stubble, chipped glasses and dirty clothes. Shailesh’s scarf was somewhat tattered now, the grey sweater underneath it faring little better, that combined with Stanford’s messy fingerless gloves made him look like some sort of interdimensional vagabond, which wasn’t that far off the mark.

“DNA testing confirms it. You really are Stanford Pines. You’ve been through the wringer, haven’t you?” Fiddleford finally said, putting a hand on his hip, holding a clipboard under his arm. “Bet you’ve got a real good story to tell about whatever happened in your universe. Must be an alternate dimension, is that right?”

Stanford raised an eyebrow at Alternate Fiddleford’s astute observation, and the fact that they’d managed to DNA test him while he was out, which Alt-Fiddleford must have taken to be sure of his manners.

“Sorry, mighty rude to not even introduce myself. My name’s Fiddleford M-”

“I know who you are, F.” Stanford cut him off, forgoing introductions. “It’s nice to see a familiar face. Not too familiar though.”

“Ah, so you are from a parallel dimension. I must look like the Fiddleford you knew from your universe no doubt.” F presumed. “With a few, oh, let’s call ‘em dimensional differences.”

“Well, I haven’t seen the Fiddleford from my own dimension for nearly 30 years, so for all I know, you could be exactly identical.” Ford spread his cuffed hands out and shrugged, attempting to make himself appear as nonthreatening as possible. He needed this Fiddleford’s help after all.

“It’s funny how alternate dimensions work like that. Sometimes everythin’s the same, sometimes just the slightest details change, sometimes small things changin’ can cause massive differences. Although you have to be travelin’ enough to know it.” Fiddleford smiled and then gave a theatrical shudder. “Don’t know if you’ve heard about the baby dimension?”

“It was singularly disturbing and illogical and that’s not even touching on the lack of child labour laws there. A bit difficult to legislate when nobody matures past the age of two.” Ford said with wry amusement, an amusement that was mirrored by F, so much so that it felt like talking to the F from his own dimension back in the day, an odd thirty years or so ago.

“Well, they don’t let that stop ‘em.”

“They certainly don’t.”

“So you’ve been dimension hoppin’ too? You haven’t just travelled to this dimension specifically from your own?” Fiddleford probed and Stanford leaned back in his chair as much as he could with his hands cuffed to the table and tried to make himself comfortable.

“Oh no, I’ve been all around. I’ve been practising interdimensional travel for the past thirty years, I’d say.”

“And how didja get here, might I ask?” Fiddleford asked, raising his pen to note down Stanford’s answer on his clipboard, a gesture that did not go unnoticed.

“Well there’s a rip in the forest that I left open leading to the ravenous chipmunk dimension, so be on the lookout for those.” Ford commented lightly, enjoying the way alternate Fiddleford’s
expression dropped in horror, aghast at the thought. Before he could get too worked up at the
prospect of a chipmunk invasion, Stanford cracked a roguish grin. “I’m just kidding.”

“Okay, well, you really are Stanford Pines, because that’s exactly the kind of confounded joke
he’d find funny. I’m sure he’s grinnin’ at me from the other room too, jokin’ about dimensional
rips.” Fiddleford huffed, and sat back in his seat, fighting a smile. “Ain’t a joking matter.”

“Is he in the other room?” Stanford asked curiously, looking to the two-way mirror. “The me from
this dimension, that is?”

“Yep, he’s here. It’s not every day an alternate version of yourself stumbles through an
unregistered wormhole right up to your front door. I’d wager he’s as curious as you are.”
Fiddleford explained.

“Can I meet him?” Ford asked hopefully, excited to ask his alternate self a million questions. How
his life differed from Ford’s own, what were the turning points that secured his successes, did he
get to shake hands with Carl Sagan in this dimensional timeline? Did he receive the acclaim he
sought?

Fiddleford’s expression became guarded and hesitant, looking down at his clipboard then back at
Stanford with a frown. “That wouldn’t be a good idea.”

“Why not?” Ford asked, raising his eyebrows.

“Don’t know if it’s much the same in your dimension. This explanation gets trickier if the
similarities between our worlds stop at a certain point. In your dimension, didja ever get around to
building a trans-dimensional portal in yer basement?” Fiddleford probed, trying to set the
groundwork for his explanation.

When the portal was mentioned however, Ford’s eyes widened, and he tried to stand up from his
chair, his hands still cuffed to the middle of the table.

“You built the portal? You can’t! It’s too dangerous. The portal is not what it seems! Bill –“

Holding his hands up to wave off Stanford’s sudden fervid paranoia, Fiddleford’s assured body
language stopped Ford’s panic short.

“I know, I know. Bill tricked us. The portal was never what it seemed, and if he’d managed to get
away with it, he’d have used it to rip a hole through our dimension, throw his own apocalypse, and
line-dance on our graves with all his little monster friends. I’m guessing you clued onto his act in
time, else you likely wouldn’t be here.”

“So… so he tricked you too?” Ford sat down, his words stilted in his shock.

“He tried to for sure, but we were tipped off and managed to stop him just in time. Installed a
Dimensional Vortex Neutraliser on the portal so we could come and go as we pleased, but it
wouldn’t let the pests in. A bit like a fly-screen door back on the farm, but with devestatin’ lasers.
It was my idea.” Fiddleford divulged proudly. “A good thing you listened to me too, or we
wouldn’t have been able to get to where we are today.”

“So… you defeated Bill in this dimension.” Stanford mulled that prospect over, weighing up how
he felt about it, his emotions more ambiguous about Bill’s defeat than he would like. “Is he dead?”

“He’s not tricking us anymore, that’s for sure.” Fiddleford confirmed, and Stanford looked down to
his lap, stewing on that thought.
Despite his current goal being to kill Bill, he was surprised to find himself saddened by the thought of Bill being dead in this dimension. The thought that the triangle could come to an end at all was disheartening in ways Stanford couldn’t justify with words.

As he processed this information, the lights in the interrogation room began to flicker, and Fiddleford looked up to the ceiling, frowning at the power surge.

Looking back to Stanford, the space refugee eventually meeting Fiddleford’s gaze after the silence dragged on, Fiddleford continued his explanation with a concerned frown.

“Well, since we got our portal stable with the Neutraliser we’ve been usin’ it to explore other dimensions here at the institute. We send officers on expeditions to different dimensions to gather information and technology we can use to better ourselves here and now. On one of our trips to a more dangerous parallel dimension one of our security officers ran into his alternate self and the moment their hands touched the entire dimension began to warp and fizzw with static. Reality was collapsin’ around us. We had to run back to our portal entrance as quick as we could to avoid the whole dimension comin’ down around us. That particular officer didn’t make it. He fizzled right out of existence, along with that entire dimension. We’ve never found it again in all of our searchin’. That’s why we can’t risk you meeting the Stanford in our dimension. Don’t feel like having our dimensional reality dissipated today.”

“That… that makes sense.” Stanford accepted the explanation, somewhat disappointed that he wouldn’t get to grill his alternate self. “I suppose this means I won’t be able to stay long in this dimension.”

“You’ll have to be on your way fairly soon, yes, but that don’t mean we can’t offer some hospitality or help you with what you’re fixin’ to do.” Fiddleford said kindly. “Our security staff said you mentioned needin’ a power source? Mind tellin’ me what for?”

“Well, since you took my blueprints along with my coat and personal belongings, I’m guessing this question is merely a formality for you.” Stanford guessed astutely.

“Indulge me anyhow. In your own words.” Fiddleford insisted, tapping his pen against his clipboard.

With a sigh, Stanford sat back in his chair and laced his cuffed hands together. “Very well. As you no doubt know from what you confiscated, I’m working on building a quantum destabiliser, a weapon that could be powerful enough to confront Bill head on. Protecting the multiverse from him is my priority, as unfortunately I haven’t been as successful as you have at stopping him in time. This would be my chance to venture directly into the Nightmare Realm and defeat him on his own turf, before he gets the opportunity to breach through to another dimension. If he gets a foothold on Earth in my dimension and has access to the portal there, I have no doubt he would spread his chaos further outwards, throughout the multiverse. There is a risk he could eventually spread his influence through to this dimension if he succeeds with conquering my own, and there is no doubt he would find this better world incredibly tempting to utterly destroy. A world where I lead a successful happy life is the last thing he wants. It would be in both of our interests to collaborate, finding a viable power source for my weapon, to stand against him.”

“So you’re sayin’ the Bill from your dimension would be fully empowered, and would have the ability to access different dimensions through your unguarded portal? That while he don’t have one now, if he broke through to your world he’d have physical form?” Fiddleford clarified.

“I’ve no doubt creating himself a physical form would be the first thing he would do when freed from the Nightmare Realm.” Stanford confirmed, trying not to dwell on wondering exactly what
that physical form would be. The lights in the room hummed a little brighter for a moment once more, Fiddleford noticing the difference while Stanford stared stubbornly forward. “He would be able to reshape reality, not just my reality. Everyone’s.”

Chewing on the end of his pen for a moment, Fiddleford contemplated this before muttering. “Well, we don’t want that.”

“I was advised by a reputable source that I’d be able to find a suitable power supply here and looking at this institute I can see you aren’t lacking in scientific resources.”

“I reckon we probably have what you need.” Fiddleford confirmed finally, still looking rather pensive. “You’ll need to integrate it properly though, and that may mean some tweakin’ of your blaster’s design. How to manage having you in the institute while you work on it is the issue.”

“There’s a lower chance of any cross dimensional dissolution if you were to set me up in a room like this one while I work on the blaster. As much as I’d like a tour of your facilities here, that might be the safest option.” Stanford conceded, still secretly hoping he’d get a tour of the facilities anyway.

Fiddleford seemed to mull that over for a moment, before a rather mischievous look sprung across his features. “What the heck, let’s give you a tour anyway. It won’t hurt Stanford to be a shut in for a few hours, and it’s not like you don’t wanna know how the other side lives.”

Reaching across the table, Fiddleford unlocked Stanford’s cuffs, and pocketed the key with a grin. “Thank you.” Stanford said, rubbing his wrists, surprised.

“Now y’all can stay in there for a while, alright Stanford?” Fiddleford stood and turned around, addressing the two-way mirror. “Put your feet up. Force you to take a break for once in yer life.”

“Very funny F.” Came an identical voice to Stanford’s from over the intercom, and Stanford was delighted for a second by the confirmation that he really was existing in a reality where two of him existed simultaneously. “I’m docking your pay.”

“I’m gonna be writin’ you up to HR again.” Fiddleford taunted in return. “Besides, ain’t like a pay cut’s gonna make me less of a millionaire.”

“You’re a millionaire?” Stanford gawked at alternate Fiddleford, the gold cufflinks and tie pins painting a very different picture now that Ford had the context to take it all in with.

“Well, what do you think happens when you create an international institute that sources the most cuttin’-edge technology for development from all over the multiverse?” Fiddleford turned back to Stanford with an assured grin, the kind he almost didn’t expect to see on the Fiddleford he once knew. “While I’ll admit the main purpose for all ‘o this is the betterment of mankind, if we weren’t makin’ money out of it, yes we’d be a bunch of geniuses, but we wouldn’t be smart, that’s fer sure.”

Stanford nodded to himself, taking that in. He couldn’t help but cast another curious glance over to the mirrored wall as he was escorted out of the interrogation room, wondering if on the other side of that glass his alternate self was watching him too.

Staring at his own reflection looking back at him curiously, it wasn’t that hard to imagine.
Kryptos floated through the halls of the Quadrangle, his Bill-less workload having increased exponentially since the triangle came back with a bang, wanting his party plans back on track after a 30 year pin was put in them. Kryptos was mostly convinced that in pulling the pin out of Bill’s flawless dimensional invasion plans from 30 years ago it was like pulling the pin out of a grenade and this venture was just as likely to blow up in his face.

It wasn’t as if they had a lot of options at this point. Most of the investors had lost interest. Their backing and support had dwindled to a few key monsters and cronies, and given Bill’s reaction after his initial attempt to weasel the portal out of the mortals living on top of it recently, his efforts to regain the upper hand weren’t going as well as he insisted.

The frustrating thing for Kryptos was that once again, all of the interdimensional busywork was left to him, Bill refusing to take care of any of the nitty gritty details himself, instead choosing to focus on that trite human town he intended to invade.

Floating past the mirror room, Kryptos flinched as the wall lit up and the door opened. Pyronica strode out of the room, casting a brief look down at Kryptos before striding out into the hallway, her heels clacking on the brick floor.

Looking past her into the mirror room Kryptos could see Bill, surrounded by various mirrors, noting several of the cosmic energy cubes he kept in the safe turned into makeshift cocktail glasses, tiny umbrellas and lemon slices wedged into the top edges of the cube.

Taking a chance, Kryptos slid into the mirror room just before the door could close on him, floating over to Bill. He wasn’t answering Kryptos’ requests for a meeting to go over what he’d chased up for him so far, and he hardly seemed busy now.

“Bi- uh, boss?”

“What do you want, Kryptos? I’m busy,” came Bill’s default answer, the triangle not even turning around, sipping on cosmic energy through a straw and watching the lives of the residents of Gravity Falls play out on the screens around him.

“I uh, I wanted to check in with you about the party planning. See how things are going. Do we have an ETA yet? I still need a time and date to put on the invites, not to mention how restless the investors have been about signing up to the cause again without having clear cut expectations about when this whole Armageddon is happening. It’s been very difficult to manage.” Kryptos explained, although it came out more like a complaint.

“I’m working on it,” was Bill’s brusque reply, the triangle still resolutely ignoring the compass in favour of replaying an image of a crazy bearded hobo fishing a racoon out of a dumpster before smooching it senseless.

Kryptos waited for a more comprehensive answer to his question about an ETA but when all he received for his trouble was the sound of Bill’s straw rattling as he slurped more cosmic energy up and rewound the image of the racoon scratching the hobo’s face, laughing under his breath, Kryptos was unable to stifle his frustrations anymore.

He’d been biting his tongue ever since Bill came back to the nightmare realm, even after he got that tape off his mouth, knowing that a Bill in all his former glory was someone not to be questioned. The Bill who came back to the nightmare realm in a bursting cloud of eye bats was a being to be obeyed, a fearsome force of nature, but after having dealt with his investors, filled out...
his interdimensional paperwork and acted as his unpaid assistant for the past however many years, Kryptos was less inclined to mind his tongue and more inclined to speak his mind.

He felt, since he was really the one pulling this all together, that he had a say in this apocalypse.

“Say, Bill?”

Bill made a distracted noise in response, only half listening to Kryptos.

“Don’t you think it would be more… expedient – or efficient I guess, to not obsess over the same town like this forever and just… build another portal somewhere else?” Kryptos suggested and Bill stopped slurping on his energy cube, the silence a warning Kryptos was deafened to. “It would be much faster to just pick another planet on another dimension, send an engineer there with the blueprints and materials, and get them to build you a portal. Rather than wasting time with –“

“No.”

Kryptos paused, Bill cutting him off with a single word.

“No?”

“That town is mine.” Bill said, his tone that dangerous sort of calm that brokered no discussion, leading the compass to the conclusion Bill expected him to reach. The conclusion that it was smarter and safer to back down now. “Every single idiot being in that town belongs to me, from the ants to the aunties, every creature, every mountain, every tree, every insignificant speck of dirt in that backwater dump of a civilisation belongs to me, and do you know why, Kryptos?”

“No boss. Why?” Kryptos answered dutifully.

“Because the portal that I MADE - that was made FOR ME - is in the middle of that ugly monstrosity of a domicile in the heart of that sorry excuse for a community and I want it back. It’s not about what’s efficient or expedient or what you want. It’s MY PARTY, and it’s about what I WANT!” Bill’s form glitched out massive in an instant, the cosmic energy juice flowing through him, towering over Kryptos, teeth and hands gouging out up from his bricks, his form becoming 3 dimensional and just as unhinged as he was right now.

Fire raced out along the walls, blue flames lighting the terror on Kryptos’ face at this sudden intense reaction from the triangle. “And I want that place. I want my party to be there specifically, because there is no place I want to burn to the ground more than humble little GRAVITY FALLS, although where you’re standing right now comes in at a close second, do you understand Kryptos?”

“B-but Boss. You - you can’t kill me. We had a deal.” Kryptos stammered, Bill’s sudden promise of immolation feeling like a very immediate threat on Kryptos’ life.

“You know what, people break deals all the time.” Bill said flippantly, reaching a clawed hand down to flick Kryptos across the room, the compass falling back against the brick wall. “A twelve year old can break a deal. Any ingrate can break a deal.”

“You don’t break deals.” Kryptos insisted, clinging to that crumbling fact.

“I don’t follow rules either. And you can’t tell me what to do.” Bill rested his palms against the floor, the room rattling with the impact, as he pillowed two other arms against his bricks, watching Kryptos as a cat watches a mouse when it’s cornered. “You’ve forgotten your place in these past 30 years, Kryptos. I wouldn’t cling too tightly to that deal of ours if I were you. When I change
reality, the only thing holding me accountable for a deal will be me.”

“Wh-what are you saying?” Kryptos stammered, pressed against the wall in fright, trying to get away from Bill’s looming intensity.

“I’m saying don’t get too comfortable. Things change after all.”

Bill reached out a clawed hand and as it came nearer and nearer to Kryptos the compass shrank back more and more, quivering where he stood until Bill’s hand was right in front of him, razor sharp claw tip dangerously close to Kryptos’ eye. The compass was nearly hyperventilating, worried that each panicked breath he took might be his last.

Pausing for a second, enjoying Kryptos’ tangible fear, Bill chose to abruptly poke his finger forward.

“Boop!”

His claw tip hit the bricks of the wall behind Kryptos, opening the door to send the compass tumbling out into the hallway. Kryptos fell into the corridor, panting, and watched as Bill’s monstrous form abruptly compressed and he floated back over to the mirror screens, picking up his energy cube once more.

“Tell Pyronica to bring more of those tiny umbrellas next time. And some cocktail onions wouldn’t go amiss. Chop chop now, Kryptos, there are parties to plan.”

The brick wall closed up swiftly, the door essentially slammed in Kryptos’ face as Bill carried on his chaotic merry way, choosing once again to scrutinise that inconsequential town leaving Kryptos with the donkey work and, thankfully, his life.

For now.

“Mr McGucket.”

Stanford watched in awe as what must have been the fifth scientist at this institute nodded a respectful greeting to Fiddleford while eyeing him curiously, this alternate McGucket striding confidently through the halls of the facility, obviously well respected. They went out of their way to greet him with a cultish fervour.

Stanford was surprised that he wasn’t being bombarded with a swath of people questioning Stanford’s presence, existing as a tattier unkempt looking version of the head of this company. Instead they all seemed incredibly eager to greet F. Privately, Stanford wondered why Fiddleford was so respected and approachable to the institute’s workers, but they all gave Stanford Pines such a wide berth.

As if catching onto Ford’s train of thought, Fiddleford uttered a congenial aside to the interdimensional traveller. “They’re all mighty curious about you, but we’ve got a company policy for interdimensional travellers. You need a special clearance to disclose information to dimensional travellers so if you don’t have clearance it’s best not to say anything, for security purposes. You can tell they’re curious though, goin’ out of their way to say hello to me to get a glimpse of you. It ain’t even my birthday.”
Stanford chuckled at Alternate F’s quip, still marvelling at the institute and its extensive staff and grounds.

“That you have these policies in place – it’s incredible. How many years have you been operating the portal, to have formulated all of these procedures?” Stanford asked, looking into every passing window and room as Fiddleford set a brusque pace through the facility.

“About 30 years now, we had our silver anniversary five years ago, got to refurbish a lot of the institute. That’s why I’m taking you through all the shiny new departments now.” Fiddleford grinned. “It’s not every day a dimensional double of the institute’s boss stumbles into town. Gotta impress you somehow.”

“Believe me, I’m impressed.” Stanford assured Fiddleford, his eyes boggling at everything, from the uniforms of the workers, to the facilities in the various labs, to the staff kitchens and rec rooms. “This is like seeing 30 years worth of achieved potential in one convenient tour. I could never even allow myself to imagine achieving this.”

Fiddleford gave him a sympathetic look at that, the moment stretching on while something inscrutable passed behind Fiddleford’s eyes before he clapped Stanford on the shoulder.

“Well, now you don’t have to. Come on, I bet you’re itchin’ to see the portal. It’s this way.”

Leading Stanford through a series of elevators down to the lower levels of the institute, when Fiddleford cleared the various security checks for them and the double doors opened, Stanford stared, wide eyed at this dimension’s version of his downfall.

The portal stood at the far end of a cavernous hangar, Stanford’s basement refurbished with metal covering the dirt walls of the once simple room, wooden beams replaced by metal pylons, futuristic machinery humming and beeping around the room, the rudimentary safety line that Stanford fell prey to replaced by a plastic security room, separating the main part of the room from the portal entryway itself.

Behind the plasti-glass walls was Stanford’s portal, modernised and updated in some ways, the red mesh of Fiddleford’s laser fly-screen door protecting this dimension from the consequences awaiting in the multi-verse, and behind that, Stanford’s portal hummed its eloquent resonance, blue light beaming from within the portal as around the edges a rainbow of colour swirled, the triangular structure of the portal just the same as it had once been some 30 years ago.

Walking right up to the glass, Stanford pressed his six-fingered hands against the plastic and gazed in awe at the fully functioning portal humming away within the security room, ignoring the various personnel manning the machines, the curious scientists milling about, instead choosing to focus on all that could have been.

“It’s beautiful.” Stanford intoned mournfully.

“It sure is.” Fiddleford stepped beside Stanford, regarding the portal with a less complicated fondness than Stanford’s. “Took a lot of work to make it happen, considerin’ it was just me and you gettin’ it off the ground. Well, not you, my dimension’s Stanford Pines. But it really was worth all the effort. Now it’s the central point of progress on Earth, the lynchpin of the most cutting-edge technology humankind can access. It’s the place to be.”

Hearing that, for a brief moment Stanford’s view of the portal was overlaid by a similar view he once had so many years ago, of the same portal, scaffolding holding the structure up, and of the person sitting in the middle of the eye.
“Oh, it’s the place to be, Sixer.”

“You kept the Behenian fixed stars.” Stanford noted of the updated design, his voice as far away as his thoughts were.

“We figured they were important. Turns out they were coordinates. Of course, we inputted the coordinates into our records as well, but kept the symbols for décor since they look so fancy. We still haven’t explored every one of them, the doors that these coordinates lead to. Still, there’s nothin’ more exciting than untapped potential.”

“I know you like to explore.”

“That’s true.” Stanford sighed and took his hand off the glass, finding it almost too painful to look at the portal with all the conflicting images jarring his closed mind.

“We like to call it our very own wonder of the world.” Fiddleford continued to boast, having hardly taken his eyes off the portal since they entered, obviously proud of his creation.

“Yes.” Stanford agreed, wistfulness creeping into his tone, competing with the bitterness there. “It really is a treasure of the universe.”

Looking away from the portal then, choosing instead to examine the rest of the room as it was far less painful, Stanford missed the way the portal seemed to beam a little brighter at his words of praise, also missing the slight frown that crossed Fiddleford’s face at that, exchanging a glance with the scientists manning the computer stations.

“If it was just you and the Stanford from this dimension, I imagine you managed to convince me to hire labourers after all.” Stanford remarked, trying to pick up a regular conversation and discard his melancholic thoughts. “It wouldn’t be feasible for just the two of us to assemble the structure on our own.”

“Well, I wanted to hire labourers.” Fiddleford answered, shaking off his own distraction. “But you were so against it. Didn’t want to let other scientists in on our work until it was done. Vultures, you called em.”

Stanford inclined his head sheepishly, conceding that it was highly likely his alternate self would have done just that.

“Turns out you’re so stubborn you found a way to put the pieces together on your own. Some kinda magic amulet you found in your research.” Fiddleford explained.

“Hmm, I hadn’t considered the practical applications of –“ Stanford rubbed his chin before looking over to F and cracking a smile. “Magic amulet? That sounds rather unscientific, doesn’t it?”

“Well you tried callin’ it Geniuses Little Helper, but there weren’t no way in hell I was callin’ that freaky little tie-pin such an awful goshdarned name. I said you oughta be ashamed of yourself.”

Stanford laughed loudly at that, his amused smile and unhindered laughter drawing the attention of nearly every scientist in the room who all watched Ford with awe, Fiddleford grinning fondly beside him.

“It’s been a while since I’ve seen you laughin’ like that.” Fiddleford remarked. “Maybe the years in the multiverse ain’t done you such a wrong after all.”

“You say that now, but you’ve never been so hungry you’ve been reduced to eating rocks, have
“Alright, well we got none of those here.” Fiddleford wagged his finger at Ford, and then placed a hand on his shoulder, leading him out of the portal room. “But I’m sure we can fix you up with some real food and some clothes and a shower if you’re up for it. What do you say?”

“I’d say that’s the nicest way someone’s told me ‘you stink’ in the past 30 years.” Stanford said with a wry grin.

“Well, don’t let me sugarcoat it now. Come on.”

As Fiddleford led Stanford out of the portal room with a friendly arm slung around his shoulder, the security cameras in the portal room whirred, zooming in on the two retreating figures.

Several rooms away, a man fingered a glowing blue brooch and followed the interactions of the two men on the monitors with narrowed eyes.

Chapter End Notes

My lovely beta reader advised I split the chapter in half, because it was becoming a behemoth and ‘if a chapter is as long as a small book it should be chopped in half at least’ and because I can occasionally take good advice lmao I did just that. Next chapter is sock opera! Sorry for the switcheroo.
This week’s Abba lyric is from Me and I and this chapter's dedication is for baronohm who just caught up with the fic and I have been loving your comments! I'm really glad you've been enjoying it and you didn't have to wait very long at all for a new chapter hahaha. To everyone who has been waiting, thank you, this is also dedicated to you! As always I am keen to hear what you think of this chapter! Pls tell me if you cried in Zippy's scene bc I bawled my eyes out every time I read over it haha.
Next chapter we ponder the theatre, water towers, humanity and all that could have been, not to mention some funky lil fight scenes. I’m pumped! Stay hype!
Bill had been following the exploits of Sixer’s family in Gravity Falls with a keen eye over the past few days, sucking up cosmic energy like a gamer chugging energy drinks in order to maintain his focus on the twins in that small hick town.

Jheselbraum’s siphoned energy was as bitter as she was, but the kick Bill got from drinking his downed foe’s life force was worth it. It was almost as entertaining as watching those twins had been.

Since his last encounter with the Pines siblings, Bill had seen the kids battle a giant Gideon-bot, raise the dead (a classic), fight a race of anthropomorphised golf balls, and discover Specs’ secret bunker beneath the forest. Bill was eating up their exploits like popcorn, which he was also eating while watching their escapades.

It was interesting to see what became of Shifty, trapped in McGucket’s inescapable bunker, driven to an intensified peak of madness in his isolation even after escaping his cryo-tube prison, only to meet the same fate again at the hands of Sixer’s relations.

Bill tried to not think too hard about predestined circles of fate and instead found amusement in the way Red’s offspring almost took an axe to the stomach. Quality entertainment, that.

The downside of Pine Tree and Shooting Star’s trip into the bunker was the souvenir they came out with, McGucket’s handcrafted laptop he built for Sixer to accommodate the six-fingered scientist.

Bill personally watched Sixer transcribe the knowledge from his journal into the laptop, including all of the information about the location and functionality of the portal. Everything barring the ignition sequence was in that laptop as. thankfully, Sixer’s paranoia prevented him from leaving all the crucial information in one place, let alone on such an easily accessible device.

Pine Tree was obsessing over Sixer’s journals like a fanboy and now with the discovery of the laptop, his enthusiasm for decrypting its messages reminded Bill of Sixer’s bleary-eyed excitement when he stayed up all night decrypting Bill’s codes. It was almost cute, really, and certainly gave the kid a few more points in the ‘How much are you like Sixer’ tally.

The problem was that this kid, unlike Gideon, actually seemed to have a conscience. He was just as black and white as Sixer was about ‘good’ and ‘evil’ and even his great uncle’s criminal influence wasn’t enough to temper the goodie two shoes streak this kid was stretching out miles long.

The kid was too honourable to take the secrets of the journal and use them to prop up his own reputation. He wasn’t even beginning to think about his future outside of the realm of cheesy daydreams about being interviewed on TV, which made him harder to manipulate than if he were the sort of kid to only be in it for himself. He had goals, but they weren’t fully realised. Beyond spending the summer with his sister and discovering who the author of the journal was, Dipper wasn’t thinking that far ahead, he was just obsessing over his current conundrum.
He wasn’t selfish, unlike Sixer, unlike Gideon, and unlike Shooting Star, who currently had everyone whipped up into a frenzy preparing for some puppet show she was throwing to impress that blonde kid who dreamed about kissing puppets.

Which left Pine Tree unassisted and unprotected, his efforts to crack Sixer’s password leaving him vulnerable, vulnerable enough for Bill to stir the pot a little.

The kid sat out on the landing on the roof of the shack, next to a cooler box and several crumpled soft drink cans, inputting potential password after password. The persistent beep of rejected passcodes was grating on his sleepless nerves, his mental state frayed enough to tip the scales, toppling him into a microsleep.

Something that Bill was more than happy to take advantage of.

Taking one last slurp of Jheselbraum’s cosmic energy, Bill floated closer to the mirror in front of him and sank through the reflection, inserting himself into Dipper Pines’ mindscape.

“Ugh. I can’t take that sound anymore.” Dipper groaned, pounding his fist on the computer’s keys in a fit of temper, the blue and red light alternating on his face as the computer beeped in response. “I. Hate. You. Sound!”

Bill watched the kid yawn within his own dream, his bleary eyes gazing despondently at the screen before he handed Bill the in he needed on a silver platter.

“There has to be some shortcut or clue. Who would know about secret codes?”

Sure, the kid could go ask an adult, or he could go directly to the source, and with that in mind Bill made his compulsory dramatic entrance.

The wind blew through the trees, the sudden breeze attracting Pine Tree’s attention as he clasped his hat and clutched the laptop to his chest, looking around with the sort of commendable prey instincts that suited Sixer’s great nephew.

The weathervane creaked as it spun swiftly on its hinges above him and Pine Tree got to his feet, looking at the weathervane only to miss the way Bill’s slitted pupil rolled down from behind the full moon in the sky behind him, his regard lighting on Dipper like a spotlight.

Now he noticed him.

Clutching onto the laptop, Pine Tree turned and stepped back instinctively, yelping in fright as Bill pulled bricks of energy from the ether, the bricks forming a triangle and joining in a burst of brilliant blue lightning.

When the lightning settled, Bill hovered in his customary yellow form, expanding his size somewhat to maintain an imposing presence, his voice echoing out upon itself as he delivered the answer to Pine Tree’s rhetorical question.

“I THINK I KNOW A GUY!”

Rather than jumping on the opportunity presented immediately, Pine Tree continued to back away from Bill, walking back across the roof’s landing, not taking his eyes off Bill for a second, even when he shrunk his form and began spinning his cane, toning down the intimidation just a bit.

“Well well well. You’re awfully persistent, Pine Tree.” Bill remarked, observing the serious way the kid still regarded him, his little chin sticking out stubbornly the same way Sixer’s often did.
when he was being stupidly obtuse.

Deciding to have a little fun with reality to shake off the kid’s fearful silence, Bill took his hat off, tipping it and reality at the same time, the world turning sideways, matching the angle of Bill’s hat when he said. “Hat’s off to you!”

The kid shouted and stumbled backwards, nearly falling off the roof until Bill put his hat back on and put the world the right way up. The kid landed on his butt with a heavy ‘oof’ but immediately got up to his feet, pointing accusingly at the triangle, just as much of a fighter as Sixer was.

“You again!”

“Did you miss me?” Bill immediately asked with a cheeky smile in his eye, his tone laced with the sort of fondness he normally reserved for Sixer. “Admit it, you missed me.”

“Hardly. You worked with Gideon!” Pine Tree accused, becoming a lot more confident despite his situation. “You tried to destroy my uncle’s mind!”

Floating upside down behind the kid, Bill waved off his accusations. “It was just a job kid.”

Turning himself right side up, Bill added. “No hard feelings. I’ve been keeping an –“

To emphasise the point, Bill blew his bricks out intimidatingly large, the cosmic energy juice in his system making the swift transition seamless, his bricks and eye flashing as red as the error page on Sixer’s laptop while he delivered his ominous pun.

“EYE ON YOU!”

Shrinking back down to his standard size, his tone shifting from a demonic register to a casual one, Bill decided he liked the way his sudden shifts in temperament kept Pine Tree on his toes. He was clutching the laptop like a shield now, leaning away from Bill with the appropriate amount of fear. Bill had almost forgotten how much he missed jerking around human’s expectations.

“Since then, and I must say I’m impressed.”

Taking the bait, Pine Tree raised an eyebrow, responding to the offhand compliment the way Bill expected him to. After all, Sixer always was a sucker for praise, always wanting more.

“Really?” Dipper probed sceptically.

“You deserve a prize!” Bill said sarcastically, laying on the faux praise thick before clapping his hands. “Here, have a head that’s always screaming!”

Bill summoned a large screaming head, plucked from its agony directly from the Dimension of Eternal Screams and it landed on the roof beside Pine Tree with a heavy thunk, the head doing exactly what it was supposed to do.

It screamed. Agonised, horrific screams.

This was the method that had always worked with Sixer in the past. Praise, then reward!

Pine Tree shouted and jumped away from the head, obviously unnerved, not to mention unappreciative, and so Bill clicked his fingers, unravelling the skin, muscle and bone from the screaming head until it dissolved out of existence, his present clearly not well received.

Technically, he was giving Pine Tree two presents. The gift of a head that’s always screaming and
the gift of lifelong trauma!

Cackling, Bill floated a little further down and pointed at the kid, pandering to his ego the way he would pander to Sixer’s.

“The point is, I like you. How about you let me give you a hint, huh?” Bill reached his arm over and around Pine Tree, poking him in the back to cause the kid to jump a little closer to him, bringing them eye to eye.

Resting comfortably on the roof beside the kid, Bill waved his hand idly as he explained his terms. “I only ask for a small --“ his eye lit up blue as fire sprung in his hand, making his intent obvious. “FAVOUR in return.”

“I’d never do a favour for you!” Pine Tree said, pointing at Bill’s relaxed form on the edge of the roof, his focus confrontationally glued to Bill. “Don’t forget who defeated you last time.”

Sliding up out of the air behind Pine Tree, Bill rolled his eye, making quotation marks in the air with his fingers as Pine Tree jumped away from him in fright. “Right, you ‘defeated me’. Well, if you ever change your mind :-”

Bill reached his hands into Pine Tree’s head, the kid frozen in shock as Bill conjured a hologram of the kid’s brain before setting it alight, the image dissipating into blue flame. Putting one arm around Pine Tree’s shoulder and poking his arm with his other hand, Bill worked the friendly angle. “I’ll be here for you.”

Before Pine Tree could flinch any further away from him, Bill floated back somewhat, the bricks on his chest morphing to resemble a slot machine, the slots spinning until three pine tree symbols aligned. “Ready to make a deaaal.”

Since the kid still didn’t seem impressed, recoiling from Bill, clutching the laptop to his chest and scowling at him, Bill decided he’d depart with a joke. Jokes were friendly, right?

“Hey, wanna hear my impression of you in about three seconds?” Bill asked, before immediately screaming, flailing his arms around like the kid would after waking up from this nightmare. “AAAAAAAHhhhhhh!”

It was satisfying to watch Sixer’s nephew follow through on Bill’s excellent impersonation as he woke up, shouting and flailing his arms, nearly falling off the roof.

Wouldn’t that be funny? Bill thought with a laugh as he drifted back through the mirror of the mindscape, returning to the Quadrangle to continue surveying the town.

After the tour of the facilities, some food and a shower, Stanford was shown to one of the labs, his equipment and belongings laid out along the benches for him to recover.

Rushing up to the tabletop, Stanford immediately checked that everything was accounted for, his blueprints, blaster, laser pen, nano briefcase, and quantum destabiliser all laid out neatly across the benchtops.

His clothing was folded, sitting in a pile beside his gear.
“Hope you don’t mind that we washed ‘em.” Fiddleford gestured to Ford’s jacket and clothes. “We were goin’ to get to mendin’ them too but didn’t want to step on any toes in case any o’ these have sentimental value.”

“They do, in a way.” Stanford answered, picking up his jacket and looking it over. “Maybe not fond memories but important ones.”

“Did someone special give you that jacket?” Fiddleford probed, curious to know more about the Stanford before him.

“I stole it.” Stanford answered, shattering that hopeful speculation. “From someone I thought was my friend. The scarf too. I wouldn’t call her special. She turned on me and has no doubt been hunting me down throughout the multiverse ever since, so I haven’t exactly gotten around to giving them back.”

“Well, if she’s carryin’ on like that, I don’t see why you should. Finders keepers.” Fiddleford said simply, putting his hands on his hips.

“I’m certainly glad you didn’t decide to keep any of my belongings.” Ford remarked with a wry smile. “I can imagine your R&D department would quite like to get their hands on some of my equipment.”

“We wouldn’t do that to you, Stanford, although we may have played around with your laser pen and the blasters, just a little. The team certainly got a good look at your quantum destabiliser too, academic curiosity you know. Still, we couldn’t figure out how to open up that lighter of yours, we even tried 3D printin’ our own copy, didn’t work - so we figured we may as well give it back.”

“Ah. Yes, you ‘may as well’.” Stanford raised his eyebrows at that, looking over his belongings again as if searching for signs that they’d been tampered with.

“Was nothin’ personal. It’s their jobs, you know. To research interdimensional tech.” Fiddleford explained, somewhat protective of his staff. “We gave it back, when all is said and done. No harm done.”

“Because you couldn’t figure out how to open this, yes?” Stanford picked up his nano briefcase with a smile and waved it at Fiddleford, who looked somewhat sheepish.

“Well, if you’re lookin’ to show us a few things, we certainly won’t be sayin’ no.”

“I might have been tempted to show you before, but since you’ve no qualms about helping yourself to my possessions, somehow, I’m not feeling quite so generous. Beside, I’m sure you’ll see enough.” Stanford presumed, pointing up to the security cameras he’d noticed all over the facility. There were several in this lab, which was a very clear indicator that Ford had little privacy or choice in the matter of his privacy.

“That’s Stanford.” Fiddleford explained reluctantly. “He’s –“

“Curious?” Ford presumed at the same time Fiddleford said.

“Paranoid.”

“Does he really have a need to be with all of this? He’s successful. Wildly so.” Stanford questioned, gesturing around himself at the institute, wondering why after achieving this level of success his alternate still couldn’t let his guard down.
“Success ain’t all it’s cracked up to be. Rising above the crowd puts a target on your back when people stand up and take notice. Besides, Stanford got all this up off the ground because he cottoned onto the fact that he was being betrayed by Bill a little bit sooner than you did. Betrayal ain’t exactly a healthy foundation for a buildin’ a life, no matter what heights you build it to.” Fiddleford divulged with a shrug.

“Well, that’s the first I’ve heard of it.” Stanford mumbled to himself, checking through his belongings once more to be thorough.

“This facility is safe though. Everyone gets vetted, security is as tight as can be, we got round the clock monitoring, and important information gets sectioned off. The only person who has the full picture of everythin’ that goes on in here is Stanford, honestly.” Fiddleford explained, sitting on the bench beside Ford’s gear.

“I’m surprised he hasn’t passed some of the workload onto you, considering you’re the chief operations manager here. That seems like quite a great deal to keep on top of.” Stanford remarked, pulling his blueprints out from his coat pocket.

“Oh, he delegates. Small little nuggets of information on a need to know basis. I ain’t sayin’ he doesn’t delegate plenty to me, I’m plenty busy, I’m just sayin’ the only person who knows the way all the puzzle pieces come together is Mr CEO. And that’s the way it should be.”

Stanford raised his eyebrow at F’s easy admission there, sceptical that Fiddleford would be content with things the way they were, working with a puzzle without knowing all the pieces.

“You’ve never been tempted to take on more? Or to become an equal partner? You make it sound like you don’t have a controlling share in this institute.” Stanford probed.

“You make it sound like you’re testin’ me with these questions. I’m handlin’ more than enough right now, thank you very much.” Fiddleford laughed. “This is Stanford’s company, I’m just here to help. I’m doin’ pretty well for myself, it ain’t like I need a promotion or anything. Things run the way they should here.”

“You seem quite confident in your dimension’s Stanford then.” Ford observed, and then gestured to the security camera in the corner. “Even if that confidence isn’t reciprocal.”

Fiddleford turned to give a thoughtful look to the camera Stanford gestured to, before turning back to face Ford, his expression pensive and understanding.

“Well, it ain’t like he trusts anyone, knowin’ his background. He’s been hurt so many dang times it’s kind of understandable. I’m not surprised he trusts no one, he’s just got better at actin’ like it sometimes.” Fiddleford said with a small smile. “Part of bein’ CEO and all.”

“But he trusts you at least?” Stanford presumed, from the easy way Fiddleford had talked to his alternate in the interrogation room and the way the workers at the crash site indicated they interacted. Ford thought they had a friendly relationship, if their banter was any indicator, but from Fiddleford’s saddened smile that was apparently not the case.

“He trusts me as much as he can, I’d wager. But there ain’t no one he trusts like he used to trust Bill, the way that all played out hit him real hard.”

Stanford nodded, understanding this perfectly well, and the lights flickered once more, a very brief dimming and brightening. Fiddleford noted this, and then gestured to the camera again.

“For his peace of mind, I know he still keeps an eye on me. He’s very possessive of what he
considers to be his work and I think just the notion of anyone potentially stealin’ it gets him on edge. Not that I ever would, but he don’t do blind trust, and I get why. Stanford likes very much to be in the know, to have proofs he can see with his own two eyes. Still, he trusts me more than he do others, and he listens to me.” Fiddleford scratched the back of his head as he made his excuses, shrugging and laughing, trying to lighten the mood. “Most of the time anywho.”

“I could have stood to listen to the Fiddleford from my dimension a little more.” Stanford conceded. “I worry in some ways I took him for granted. I know I couldn’t protect him.”

Glancing shrewdly at Stanford and raising his eyebrows, Fiddleford asked. “You didn’t happen to get your dimension’s Fiddleford poisoned and thrown around by a Gremloblin didja? Attacked by a shapeshifter? Any of that ringin’ a bell?”

Feeling called out, Stanford sheepishly twiddled with the nano-briefcase in his hand guiltily. “That – that happened to you too?”

“Some thirty years ago, yes. That don’t mean I still can’t bring it up every now again when I want to. Gotta have somethin’ to hold over your head, else you’d walk all over me.” Fiddleford laughed, but his words didn’t set Stanford at ease.

“I’m sorry –“ Ford began, wanting to apologise to this gentleman, even if he wasn’t *his* Fiddleford.

“You got no need to be apologisin’ to me.” Fiddleford waved his hands at Ford, halting his apology in its tracks. “Besides, I’m tacking at least half the blame for all of that on Bill.”

“Only half?”

“Alright, so maybe it’s a 70/30 split.”

“That’s better.”

“I didn’t say who got 70% of the blame now, did I?” Fiddleford quipped, keeping Stanford on his toes.

Looking back down at his equipment on the bench, and the various tools around the room available to him, Stanford sighed, and resigned himself to working.

“I suppose I shouldn’t keep you. I can start configuring the power source now if you like.”

“By yourself?” Fiddleford raised his eyebrows, before claiming one of the stools along the bench beside Stanford. “Shucks no. You’ve got a lab buddy for this integration if you want one, although I’m sure you’ve not been used to having one, these past few years, hoppin’ dimensions alone out there.”

“You’re going to help me?” Stanford asked, pleasantly surprised.

“Of course.” Fiddleford said with a smile, rolling his sleeves up. “It’ll be just like old times. Besides, when it comes to integratin’ this power source, it’s best you have help from an engineer who’s used to workin’ with the stuff. No offence to you Stanford, but without someone else helpin’ you with your blueprint design, you don’t always get things first try. At least when it comes to inventin’ weapons.”

“No offence though, right?” Stanford said flatly.

“Not at all.” Fiddleford grinned and walked over to a mini fridge below the bench, retrieving a fruit
platter to snack on. He popped a grape in his mouth and seemed amused by the frustrated twist of Ford’s lips.

“I should have known really. Back in college you were never one for fine tunin’ perfect blueprints on your own. You liked more of a trial and error approach. When I came to visit you here in Oregon I should have picked that up first thing, that you had help with the portal, instead of you tryin’ to pass Bill’s work off as your own. Might’ve caught onto things sooner if that were the case.”

Stanford fidgeted in his seat a little, unwilling to divulge that the blueprints he’d brought to this dimension were also not of his own invention. Eventually he slid the blueprints across the table at F. “Well in that case, you wouldn’t mind looking over my current plans then? For posterity of course?”

“Sure thing.” Fiddleford said, humouring him, looking over the blaster plans. Raising his eyebrows at the annotations all over the large fold out page, Fiddleford remarked teasingly. “Your handwritin’ sure does change after 30 years of dimension hopping, huh?”

Stanford gave him a flat look in response, which coaxed a laugh from F, who shook his head fondly and looked back at the plans, running his finger over each line as he read through Jheselbraum’s instructions.

As he sped through the text, Stanford observed this alternate Fiddleford, piecing together and comparing what he knew about this Fiddleford McGucket and what he knew about his own. His eyes paused on the golden ring bearing the six fingered symbol of the institute stacked atop of a simple gold wedding band.

“How’s Patricia?” Ford asked, jarring Fiddleford from his study. “And Tate?”

Fiddleford blinked up at Stanford, clearly surprised, before looking down at his wedding ring, hastily covering it with his hand, laughing nervously. “I’m sure they’re both fine enough. It’s been a while since I’ve seen ‘em.”

“Are they still up in California?” Stanford probed, turning his nano-briefcase over in his hands curiously as he watched Fiddleford’s knee begin to bounce.

“Pat stayed in Palo Alto.” Fiddleford answered evasively. “Tate moved up here for a bit, but I’m not sure if he’s fixin’ to stay in the area. Not much work apart from fishin’ and tree lopping here if you aren’t working for the institute and Tate don’t … he don’t want to follow in his old man’s footsteps.”

“Being second in command of a major scientific body isn’t glamorous enough for him then?” Ford quipped sarcastically. “I’m sure Patricia doesn’t mind the paycheck it comes with.”

Fiddleford laughed awkwardly and muttered under his breath. “Didn’t mind takin’ half of it in alimony, that’s for sure.”

“Alimony?” Stanford picked up on the word, his brow’s furrowing in confusion.

“Oh, well you know what happens when you’re married to your work. Your wife sure don’t like the competition.” Fiddleford explained awkwardly, like he was trying to make a joke of it, although it didn’t quite hit the right note. Ford’s unfailing stare in the face of this revelation did little to stop the scientist from squirming awkwardly. “Not that that’s why it didn’t work out for us. Well, I mean, I shouldn’t expect you to know, but I don’t want to have to spell it out.”
“Spell what out?” Ford pressed.

“We divorced.” Fiddleford finally said, the words gusting out of him like a balloon deflating. “Me and Pat. Years ago.”

“Oh.” Stanford raised his eyebrows, feeling rather tactless but making no moves to remedy this. “But you’re still wearing your wedding ring.”

Fiddleford looked down and awkwardly twisted the ring around his finger before looking away.

“Things change, sometimes. When work takes off like it do, things start movin’ pretty fast and some other things get left behind. I ain’t sayin’ it’s what I wanted, probably not what either of us wanted, but things change and you just gotta deal with it as it comes.”

Stanford’s frown deepened at this and he looked down at the tabletop, the lights flickering briefly above him once more.

“Look, Pat made a choice to – I wasn’t around much, I was always workin’, and she got a meaty settlement and plenty of child support, though that wasn’t why she did it. It weren’t like she was bitter about it, she just –“ Fiddleford seemed to be struggling with his words here, uncertain how much he wanted to divulge but seeming unable to reel the words back. “She didn’t want the money, she just wanted Tate to have a dad who was actually –“

“Actually there.” Stanford presumed, saddened by this revelation.

Fiddleford had always seemed like the perfect father to Stanford, he was certainly enthusiastic about being a dad when Ford had known him. His main motivation for leaving his family to join Stanford was to earn enough to give them a good life and in this dimension it seemed he earned more than enough for that, but at some point F must have chosen to prioritise work over his love for his family. Ford didn’t know why that would dim so substantially. F always seemed to have an unending well of love and loyalty for Pat and Tate.

“You couldn’t take some time off? Scale down your hours? Maybe move the family to Oregon if you needed that work life balance? Why –“

“Work life balance?” Fiddleford laughed harshly, as if finding the concept ludicrous. “You’re the last person I want lecturin’ me about –“

Stanford’s shocked expression at the bitter tone in F’s voice must have jarred Fiddleford enough to compose himself better.

Pulling himself up short, Fiddleford paused, and sighed, rubbing his hand across his face. “Sorry, you’re not - I shouldn’t be treatin’ you like you’re my dimension’s Stanford. You’re not responsible for this.”

“Have you spoken to him about this? Maybe take some time off?” Stanford asked, his brows knitting together in concern. “Is there any way to fix things with Patricia? Obviously, you still care for her since you’re wearing the ring, maybe if you reach out you could –“

“Look, I know you’re tryin’ your best to comfort me, but it ain’t workin’. Fiddleford cut Ford off. “It’s been years since things fell apart. Some things just can’t be fixed, so I best just focus on what I can fix, alright? Do you mind if I get back to concentratin’ on your blueprints, Stanford? I got two more reads to go.”

“Sorry.” Stanford muttered, pulling his blaster over towards him to fiddle with, not trusting himself
to say anything to this dimension’s Fiddleford without putting his foot in his mouth.

Stanford silently watched as alternate Fiddleford continued to read through Ford’s blaster blueprints, his knee still bouncing as an indication of his tension from the prior conversation, and Stanford noticed another nervous tick his dimension’s Fiddleford didn’t have.

The more he lost himself in reading through the blueprints, the more Ford noticed Fiddleford subtly playing with the gold company ring with the symbol of the six fingered hand on it, sliding it up and down his finger while his wedding ring rested secure at the bottom, almost as if he was toying with taking off the company ring altogether, something aborting his movements at the last second.

Curious.

It was a rare sight to see Bill floating around the Quadrangle these days, as he had been holed up in the mirror room consistently for the past few weeks, obsessing over Gravity Falls.

So when Keyhole, Teeth, and Kryptos saw Bill floating through the corridors of the quadrangle, an energy cube cocktail in his hand, they jumped at the chance to ask about the plan.

“Boss!” Keyhole called out with excitement and Kryptos nearly jumped out of his skin, despite the way Teeth and Keyhole both grinned at Bill.

“Gentlemen, Kryptos. I trust everything’s going well.”

“Yes boss. We’ve been doing everything you asked.” Keyhole beamed, rocking back and forth on his heels like a proud school child.

“You’ll get a gold star and a hell of a party for that, Keyhole.” Bill pointed at the eager henchmaniac, who let out a small whoop in response.

“And I’ve been talking my teeth off, Boss. Do I get some humans to eat, huh?” Teeth probed, putting his hands on his gums.

“Teeth, I’m sure if I actually gave you humans to eat you wouldn’t know what to do with them. But sure, eat them, what do I care?” Bill twirled the tiny umbrella in his cocktail, plucking it from the cube and flicking it at Kryptos, who flinched and immediately crouched to pick the umbrella off the ground. “I’ve got another job for you two.”

“What is it?” Keyhole asked.

“I want you –“ Bill waved his hand in the air and summoned three cosmic energy cubes from the safe room, depositing them in Keyhole’s hand. “To drop these in my private stash of cosmic sand and let it distill properly. It’ll give our party drinks a nice kick.”

“Oh, wow boss. We’re drinking this?” Keyhole looked at the cosmic energy cubes with awe.

“But not you, me. This is to go in my private stash only. And no sampling the goods. I’ll know if you do.” Bill said, gulping down the last of his current energy cube and throwing the empty receptacle at Kryptos again, enjoying watching him scurry to tidy the mess. “Teeth, you’ve got the gift of the
gab, keep it up, let everyone who’s anyone know the party’s back on and I’ve give you plenty of humans to chomp on.”

“Yess.” Teeth pumped his fist eagerly.

“What are you doing now, boss?” Kryptos asked, somewhat importunately, his indignation at seeing Bill dole out jobs to everyone else while doing comparatively nothing bringing his ire to the fore.

“Sixter’s nephew has been getting a little too close to figuring out some major details, so I’m going back down to earth to hijack some minds and dissuade the kid.” Bill answered, knowing that he was hardly accountable to Kryptos for his actions. Narrowing his eye, his tone becoming dangerous he asked in turn. “What are you doing, Kryptos?”

“Well, I –“

“If you have time to question me you mustn’t have enough to do, and we can’t have that now can we?” Bill asked with mock concern, before blasting a huge beam of energy from his eye, charring the wall behind Kryptos, the twitchy compass ducking just in time to avoid a direct hit.

Quivering where he stood, recognising that Bill meant business, that his earlier threats were not in fact in vain, Kryptos cowered in Bill’s presence, which only seemed to delight the triangle further.

“Clean that up.” Bill gestured to the charred bricks with his thumb, before floating into his office. “I’ve got work to do.”

Once Bill’s office door slammed shut, Teeth and Keyhole looked between the blast mark on the wall and Kryptos’ slumped figure in shock, surprised that Bill would strike out so obviously at the compass when everyone knew Bill had a deal to protect Kryptos from an untimely death from his enemies.

“What was that all about?” Keyhole questioned.

“Yeah, what’d you do to piss him off this time?” Teeth added flippantly, scowling at the compass.

With a sigh, Kryptos materialised a bucket of soapy water and a sponge before floating over to the wall, setting to work. Under his breath he mumbled vindictively.

“Oh, I’ve just been doing everything.”

The testing phase of Ford’s blaster was, well, simply put, it was a blast!

Fiddleford had arranged for the faculty’s R&D department to clear off a shooting range at the edge of the institute where some of the more volatile interdimensional technologies were tested by the team, the containment field designed to handle the more explosive side effects of testing this sort of unpredictable technology.

Dolly Parton’s 9 to 5 was blasting over the speaker system in the lab, Fiddleford’s touch no doubt, and everyone involved seemed to be enjoying the country-style je ne sais quoi Fiddleford’s music brought to the testing process.
“Now, so we don’t burn out the capacity, I figure we can start by testing our energy sources with a couple ‘o dummy blasters before we incorporate our battery of choice into that fine piece of machinery you got there.” Fiddleford explained, adjusting the sights on several of the firearms he had placed on the table at the end of the firing range. “Don’t want your quantum destabiliser to get all discombobulated before you get a chance to take it out for the main event.”

“This is a phenomenal testing range.” Stanford marvelled, looking at the various engineers helping to set up the firing range with its safety features.

They had forcefields surrounding the edges of the room with the same sort of flyscreen laser technology Fiddleford employed to guard the entrance to the portal, ensuring that what happened on the firing range stayed on the firing range. The faint shimmer of a slimmer more subtle laser fence was set up at the start of the firing range, like a high-tech improvement on the rudimentary safety line Stanford drew on the floor of his basement 30 years ago back in the shack.

Along with the safety precautions, the engineers had also set up bullseyes on the back wall, as well as a pulley system to release moving targets. This experiment seemed to be half testing the energy source of Stanford’s blaster, and half testing his marksmanship, and Stanford delighted at the challenge.

“It’ll do in a pinch.” Fiddleford nodded at the weapon he was holding and slotted in their first energy capsule, housing a glowing green substance in a containment tube that fit neatly into the energy slot in the gun. “Give this one a try. It’s undiluted Manchineelium, sourced from the Hollistus Dimension’s rainforests. Burns through just about anything, Manchineelium. Finding a coating for the containment tube that it won’t burn right through was a real humdinger. We modified this blaster to be able to contain it, and we’d have to modify yours too. Technically, it’s a type of tree sap, but it turns out it is it’s own chemical component! Make sure you don’t get any on your skin.”

“What happens if you do get it on skin?” Stanford asked, taking the blaster from Fiddleford and eyeing the green tube within curiously. “Or do I not want to know?”

“Depends.” Fiddleford mused, his sense of humour shining darkly in his eyes. “Do you like crippling blisters?”

“Right. Don’t get it on your skin.” Stanford scoffed a laugh, focusing on the sights of the weapon itself now, preparing for the first shot.

“Clear the range!” Fiddleford called out, and the engineers scattered behind the laser field, taking cover again behind a wall of reinforced plexiglass.

Taking aim at one of the targets on the far wall, Stanford adjusted his six fingered grip on the gun and fired a single shot.

The blaster hit its mark, burning a sizzling hole through the target board on the wall and then beyond, the Manchineelium’s acidic properties eating away at the wall within seconds until there was a gaping hole in it 5 feet wide around the impact point.

As impressive as the corrosive display was, Stanford’s mouth slanted and his lips pursed as he considered the damage, passing the blaster back to Fiddleford.

“I don’t think so. While it certainly seems effective against organic matter, destroying Bill before he achieves physical form would be ideal. If I were to fire this at him as he is now, as an ephemeral being he could simply rearrange his molecules to reform on the other side of the blast, or redirect
the acid at me, which seems a rather unremarkable way to die, not to mention unpleasant.”

“Won’t leave a good lookin’ corpse, that’s for sure.” Fiddleford concurred with a wry grin.

Stanford laughed at that remark, the morbid banter reminding him so strongly of Bill that his laugh fell short upon that realisation.

The lights in the firing range flickered briefly.

“We’ve got another prospective power source.” Fiddleford said, trying to keep Stanford on track, the wary tone in his voice indicating that he noticed the split-second dimming. “This one’s more fragile, but the benefit here is that it’s properties are activated by water, so it’s real cost effective and easy to fuel. Hydrengulem.”

Fiddleford waved one of the intern engineers over with the substance and they approached, handling the delicate element carefully.

Stanford was so lost in thought, his chest twisting unhelpfully with thoughts of past banter and barely noticed the intern until she was standing right behind him.

Turning abruptly as if to shake off his melancholy, Ford bumped into her, and the Hydrengulem was knocked from her hands, shattering on the floor.

“I’m so sorry, Mr Pines!” The engineer immediately cried, cringing from the flash of light crossing his glasses as he turned, unable to look at him. She was bowing her head, her whole body tense as she stared down at the shattered Hydrengulem on the floor. “Doctor! Doctor Pines. I didn’t mean –”

When Stanford placed a gentle hand on her shoulder her whole body froze like she was anticipating an attack.

The light shifted across Stanford’s glasses as he bent down slightly to look her in the eye, and the kindness in his gaze shone through.

“It’s quite alright. If anything, I should be apologising to you, I’m the one who knocked into you. Are you alright?”

“I – I – I’m sorry it was a mistake.” The girl continued to apologise, although she seemed to be realising that she wasn’t talking to who she thought she was.

“Mistakes happen all the time.” Stanford continued, his tone friendly and encouraging. “The best part about them is, if you write it down it still counts as science. I can help you gather this up if you like.”

Fiddleford watched this interaction shrewdly, the engineer casting him a confused glance before immediately kneeling down to collect the Hydrengulem fragments as if chastised.

Stanford crouched down to assist her, missing the way the other engineers exchanged telling glances, whispering to one another.

“You wouldn’t believe some of the mistakes I’ve made.” Stanford continued to chatter away while cleaning up his mess. “This hardly seems like the end of the world though, easy enough to fix.”

Pausing as he stood, fragmented Hydrengulem in his hands, he turned and looked to Fiddleford. “I’m sorry, I should have asked. Is this easy to fix? You mentioned Hydrengulem was cost
“It’s fine. Plenty more where that came from.” Fiddleford waved away Stanford’s concerns easily, watching as the engineer gathered the last of the Hydrengulem from the floor and put it in a tray, holding the tray out for Stanford to place the Hydrengulem he collected into it.

“No doubt.” Fiddleford drawled behind Ford, before clapping his hands. “Alright, so I guess we’ll go for the big guns. Jeremy, if you could bring out my baby.”

“Your baby?” Stanford raised his eyebrow, his lips already twisting in amusement. “I hope you don’t mean that literally.”

“Finding a power source for my destabiliser might be what saves my dimension, although I think we’ll have to go for something less fragile. I can just see one clumsy slip up on my part giving Bill the upper hand. No doubt he’d love that.”

“Now don’t be doing ol’ Hubert Humdinger a disservice like that. He was some pig.” Fiddleford wagged his finger at Ford, approaching the glass case eagerly.

“This’ll power your destabiliser, no problem.” Fiddleford declared, taking the glass case away from Jeremy and putting it on the table in front of Ford. “May I introduce this mighty element, discovered by yours truly. NowUSeeitNowUDontium!”

Stanford merely sighed dramatically and shook his head. “You certainly share a flair for language with my dimension’s Fiddleford.”

Ignoring Stanford’s ribbing, Fiddleford continued to explain. “Inert when visible, but highly radioactive when hidden. I discovered this element while exploring the Paradox dimension, cut myself a few samples and took it home to make history. We have to keep it in this box with cameras on the inside so it’s under constant CCTV supervision. It’s the only way to store it safely – that or we keep it in the break room by the TV. We package a little of this in your destabiliser, hidden in the interior, and boom, unlimited radioactive power for your fancy blaster.”

“That sounds almost too good to be true.” Stanford mused, looking closer at the element in the glass container.
“Just you watch.” Fiddleford said, opening the glass jar and using a pair of forceps to remove a partition of the element.

“I don’t see it.” Stanford said with dry humour, trying to eek a rise out of his friend.

Fiddleford carried the NowUSeitNowUDontium over to one of the blasters and Jeremy, the engineer, held open the power source compartment for Fiddleford to drop the element in. Once the element was secured in place, Fiddleford clipped the power source compartment closed, and the dials on the side of the gun lit up, brimming with power.

“Well, I’ll be damned.” Stanford sounded impressed, watching Fiddleford preen with the praise.

“But will it be powerful enough to take down Bill?”

“Why don’t you give it a shot?” Fiddleford said, already sounding smug as he passed the gun over to Stanford, shouting to clear the range the moment the weapon left his hand.

Engineers scattered out of the way, and when Stanford raised the weapon to aim at the targets on the back wall, cocking his head to the side, the moment his finger pulled on the trigger was near deafening.

A ray of pure radioactive energy pulsed from the gun, knocking the back wall out of the firing range, as well as all of the targets in front of it.

When the dust cleared Stanford could see from his position that the blast had knocked a hole in the wall of the facility itself, through the force fields, all the way out into the forest behind it, vaporising the trees in the clearing outside.

Gawking at the destruction the gun incited, surprise etched all over his face, Ford turned to Fiddleford, his beaming smile ecstatic.

“I think we’ve found our power source.”

“And to think.” Fiddleford added, matching Ford’s exuberant smile with one of his own. “He’ll never see it coming.”

Ford chuckled at the joke and Fiddleford clapped him on the back. “Keep practisin’ with it. You gotta get used to the kickback. Adjust your aim fer it.”

Aiming his weapon at one of the targets that swung down from the ceiling, Stanford smiled. To think, in the R&D department here, Fiddleford and his crew got to run fun and exciting experiments like this all day.

What a way to make a living.

A chaos god’s work never ends, it seems.

“Passwords. Passwords.” The kid was mumbling to himself, holed up in McGucket’s old attic space, ramping up a sleep deficit that would make his great uncle proud, working solo on cracking the password to Sixer’s laptop.

This kid would be kicking himself if he found out the password was Sixer’s name. For a supposed
genius the guy had no idea about online security, but that could be pardoned considering internet safety was somewhat after Sixer’s time.

It was such an old man thing to do, setting his own name as his password, and Bill idly wondered if Sixer had more crows feet around his eyes. He had to by now, and maybe a few greys around the temple since he shut Bill out. Bill would bet good money that Sixer would be shaping into quite the silver fox.

“Mabel. Is. Useless.” Pine Tree huffed, entering in dud password after dud password, the loud buzz of an incorrect entry no doubt grinding on the kid’s last nerve.

Bill saw his opening to strike when the kid yawned. The split second his eyes closed gave Bill his in.

“Oh man.” Dipper sighed, rubbing his eyes tiredly.

Bill’s favourite type of dream manipulation was the dream within a dream, the ones that bend your reality, giving you a false sense of security in consciousness when you are still so far from it. The dreams where you weren’t swimming to the surface of consciousness because you thought you were already conscious, so you simply drowned, none the wiser. You don’t fight against your mindscape when you’ve no idea you’re in it.

The red light of the attic window masked the way the sky turned grey outside. The computer beeped angrily once more, before a robotic voice sounded out from the screen.

“Too many failed entries. Initiate data erase in five minutes.”

That jolted the kid to awareness, his eyes bulging as he scrambled forward onto his knees and gripped onto the screen, the panic written all over his face.

“No! No no no no! I’m gonna lose everything? I only have one more try?!”

This would be too easy.

The pitchier the kid’s voice got, the more convinced Bill was that taking candy from babies was overrated. Mentally overwhelming pre-pubescent teens was where it was at. This was hilarious.

Letting the greys of the mindscape seep in from Bill’s hiding spot, colour drained out of the rest of Dipper’s dream, his eyes wide as he registered the changes to his surroundings and what it would mean.

Quick on the uptake, Pine Tree looked suitably terrified even before Bill materialised into the air in front of him. He held a meditative pose, his legs crossed, his arms balanced on his knees the same way they were back in the mirror room, his eye closed, concentrating on this dimension.

Fire burnt in both of his hands as Bill opened his eye, floating casually across the room.

“Well, well, well.” The kid looked enough like Sixer right now to make this moment justifiably fun. Right down to the stubborn way he stuck out his jaw, despite his limited options. Enthusiasm leaking into his tone, Bill said gleefully. “Someone’s looking desperate.”

“I thought I told you to leave me alone.”

Pine Tree was just as impertinent as Sixer was, Bill would give him that. But he lacked experience in the real world, or so Bill assumed, and it shouldn’t be too hard to trick the kid into trusting him.
“I can help you, kid.” Bill conjured a glowing gold walking stick from thin air and leaned on it, watching Pine Tree expectantly. “You just need to hear out my demands.”

Dipper looked between the countdown on the computer screen and the triangle floating beside him, obviously torn, before he began questioning Bill in a frenzied paranoid tone.

“What crazy thing do you want anyway? To eat my soul? To rip out my teeth? Are you gonna replace my eyes with baby heads or something?”

“Yeesh kid. Relax.” Bill waved off Dipper’s suggestions, despite mentally jotting some of them down for future use. It wasn’t nightmare plagiarism if he stole those ideas from the kid. Nobody listens to kids anyway. Bill could get away with it.

Returning to the task at hand, Bill issued his demands, making them sound as innocuous as possible.

“All I want is a puppet.”

“A puppet? What are you playing at?” Pine Tree narrowed his eyes at Bill, somewhat wary, but not wary enough if he was still indulging Bill in conversation and not running for his life.

“Everyone loves puppets.” Bill said with a jaunty wave of his arm, the pile of sock puppets in the corner of the room glowing blue briefly. Classic misdirection. “And it looks to me that you’ve got a surplus.”

“I don’t know man.” Dipper rubbed behind his neck, regarding the puppets guiltily.

He was being remarkably casual with Bill, all things considered, and Bill wondered if that was a family trait, taking Gods for granted. Oh well, it worked in Bill’s favour for now.

“Mabel worked really hard on these.”

“Seems to me one little puppet is a small price to pay to learn all the secrets of the universe.” Bill said, flicking one of the googly eyes glued to the nearest sock, his voice echoing with power. When the kid didn’t seem immediately sold on that bargain, Bill tried to appeal to the kid’s sense of indignant betrayal, something that should be well honed given his genetic predisposition to it.

“Besides, what’s your sister done for you lately? How many times have you sacrificed for her, huh? And when has she ever returned the favour?”

Surrounded in a room full of his sister’s inventions, left behind to deal with his problems alone, underappreciated and undervalued in the grand scheme of things, Bill expected there to be some manipulatable speck of bitterness that could sway the kid into doing something stupid out of spite.

After all, it had worked with the previous generation of Pines twins. Patterns could be easily repeated, Bill knew that for sure.

Prompting him with a visual relay of Shooting Star’s recent selfish moments, Dipper seemed to be falling for it.

He looked out the window down into the yard to see an image Bill planted of his sister and her friends working on her puppet show masterpiece, and then glanced back to the laptop, 30 seconds remaining on the countdown.

Despite his dwindling options, this kid was surprisingly reluctant to turn on his twin and accept
Bill’s help.

Clearly, he needed a little more prodding. Deadlines were excellent motivators for kids.

Bill’s pupil changed into the hands of a ticking clock, fire burning in his palm as he extended his hand. “Tick tock, kid.”

“Ugh.” Dipper looked around the room, antsy, obviously on the fence. “Just one puppet?”

Bill said nothing, still waiting expectantly, the anxiety coming off this kid in waves. You could bottle and sell it at this point.

“Fine!” Pine Tree finally called out, plunging his hand into the flames to shake Bill’s hand. The fire crept up to encircle Pine Tree’s hand, sealing the deal.

“So, what puppet are you gonna pick anyway?” Dipper asked curiously, expecting Bill to stick to his innocuous request.

Pretending to put some thought to it, Bill looked around the room at the puppets, playing with the kid.

“Hmm, let’s see. Eenie meenie mynie – YOU!”

His eye glowed red, and his voice echoed with power, regret and fear returning rapidly to the kid’s face.

Wrenching Dipper’s consciousness from his body with his hand, Bill let the mindscape dissolve, Pine Tree now little more than a spectre floating in the realms between while Bill filled his recently vacated body with his own awareness, pulling the strings just like in the good old days.

Floating transparently in the air above, the kid began to panic, acclimating to his new state of being, sticking his hand through his stomach.

“This can’t be happening! What did you do to my body?”

The yellow of his eyes shining through human flesh once more, Bill piloted Dipper’s body to stand up, gripping the laptop in his meaty child hands.

“Sorry kid, but you’re MY puppet now!” Laughing maniacally, Bill threw Sixer’s laptop to the floor and stomped on it, grinding his heel into the machine and cracking its screen.

His capacity for destroying things was significantly limited considering the kid didn’t weigh much, and Bill couldn’t access his powers in a human flesh suit that wasn’t expressly catered to hold him in all his glory, but this kid obviously didn’t know that much about computer recovery. He seemed to think that Bill stepping on the thing was as good as destroying the data inside and could barely pause in his freak out to analyse the situation. Still, it made for a great image, the screen cracking and the keys scattering everywhere.

“Oh my gosh. This can’t be happening. This can’t be happening!”

Choosing to ignore Dipper, Bill stumbled around the room in his body, getting used to his short little legs and a metabolic system that probably wasn’t accustomed to the amount of cosmic alcohol he’d been imbibing, before ambling towards a mirror, checking his reflection out in the glass.

“Man, it has been so long since I’ve inhabited a body.” Bill gushed, and rather than dwell on the
surfacing memories of the last few times he inhabited a body (at the Bibliosphere, borrowing Sixer’s body, and his own flesh suit Sixer carved for him) he decided to chase those thoughts away with a fresher pain, slapping himself in the face.

Dipper looked on in horror as Bill continued to cheer, the pain successfully distracting him from his encroaching melancholy, choosing to remain in the moment with a slap on the other untested cheek, the kid’s pain responses flaring indignant like nobody had ever hit the kid before.

Clearly, he hadn’t lived!

Discovering these stinging painful sensations in Dipper’s body was the most refreshing thing Bill had felt in 30 years.

“Woo! Haha, pain is hilarious. And two eyes?” Bill remembered his reaction when he first slipped into the body Sixer made him, parroting the words before he even realised he was doing it. “This thing’s deluxe.”

Pulling Dipper’s mouth open to check for a third eye within, just in case humanity had changed significantly within the past 30 years, Bill prodded his new meatsuit, pulling at his new eyelids and poking at his gums, all the while Dipper was agonising loudly behind him.

“I don’t understand. Why are you doing this? I thought we had a deal?”

Straightening up, privileging the kid with an actual answer, Bill explained.

“Look kid, you’ve been getting way too close to figuring out some major answers. I’ve got big plans coming and I don’t need you getting in my way. Destroying that laptop was a cinch. Now I just need to destroy your journal.”

Standing beside the opening to the stairwell, Bill fired a jaunty salute to the kid before stiffening his body, falling backwards. “Race you to the bottom of the stairs!”

He could hear Dipper’s horrified gasp, and the whoosh of his spectral body racing through the floor, but Bill was too preoccupied with the sensation of falling down a flight of stairs, every bruise and bump resonating deeply, all the way down to the kid’s bones, the pain a throbbing that spread from each impact point.

This must have been how Sixer felt when Specs pushed him down these stairs. Falling down wooden stairs sure felt different than falling down the metal stairs in the basement, which was Bill’s only point of reference for stair falling thus far. It was nice to diversify his experiences like this, to compare the flavour.

Throwing himself down the stairs felt much better than when Sixer pushed him, wrestling for control of his body like that.

Landing at the bottom of the stairwell, his meatsuit aching and protesting, Bill pushed himself to his feet, strolling into the Shack’s kitchen, eyeing off all the changes made to the place, but remembering what was still the same.

The kitchen used to be one of Bill’s favourite places in this godforsaken shack. Thinking back to the good old days when Sixer used to cook for him nurtured an ache in Bill that pulsed heavier than the fresh bruises forming, so to chase that pain away Bill opened the fridge and withdrew a can of Pitt Soda, cracking open the top.

“Hey!” Pine Tree called out, no doubt spotting Bill. May as well give him something to look at,
Bill thought, and hammed up his actions.

“Human soda! I’m gonna drink it like a person!”

Pouring the soda into his mouth, and then all over his face, wetting his unblinking eyes with the carbonated beverage, he felt the sting of the bubbles bursting on his eyeballs and laughed, the liquid gurgling in his throat.

“So where do you keep that journal anyway?” Bill asked, throwing the empty soda can away and strolling to the cupboard countertop where Sixer used to prepare his meals. He jammed his arm in the drawer and started slamming it repeatedly against his wrist. “It’s gotta be around here somewhere.”

When Dipper’s arm didn’t break (Bill always wondered what a broken arm would feel like) even as the forks in the drawer began to stab into his arms, he gave the kid’s meatsuit a little credit. “Boy, these arms sure are durable.”

“I’ve hidden it! Somewhere you’ll never find it in a million years!” The kid declared.

Boy, this sounded familiar.

Bill withdrew his arm from the drawer, taking a few forks with him, impaled into the kid’s flesh, and rubbed his chin contemplatively with his sticky hand.

He didn’t have to contemplate for long, as Shooting Star stuck her head around the kitchen door, speaking fast and waving at her brother.

“Hey Dipper! I borrowed your journal to use as a prop in the show I hope you don’t mind I’ve gotta go before you process this sentence okay BYE!”

Dipper’s ghostly expression fell, just as Bill’s brightened, grinning triumphantly at the kid.

Holding his hand up to his mouth he called out after her. “Sure, sounds great sister. I’ll see you at the show!”

“Wait! No, Mabel. Don’t listen to him! That’s not me!” Dipper flew after his sister, all the way out to the front yard, his warnings unheard. “You’ve gotta hear me! No, no, wait! Stop!”

Mabel hopped in Fez’s car, and the group drove right through Dipper’s astral body, despite him floating right in front of it.

When the kid was left behind with the exhaust fumes, Bill strolled over to Dipper’s conscious spirit, his hands in his pockets, grinning up at the kid’s newfound realisation of what it was like to be intangible.

“Heh. Welcome to the mindscape, kid. Without a vessel to possess, you’re basically a ghost!”

He didn’t seem to be taking that well, which was a shame, because Bill personally thought that the kid was better off as a ghost considering what he had planned for this town.

“Oh hey Dipper, there you are!” The nasal voice of Question Mark coming from behind him was recognisable enough from Bill’s jaunt through Stan’s mindscape, but the next voice he heard was less familiar.

“What up, dude?”
Turning around, Bill saw the splitting image of a younger Willow Oakwood and his smile became more of a frozen expression of malice, his eyes taking in those familiar freckles, that red hair of hers, and the confident friendly expression on her face.

This must be Red’s offspring.

Clearly, she’d hooked up with Punchy after all, this kid had lumberjack written all over her.

“Soos! Wendy! Help me!” Dipper pleaded, hovering in the air in front of his friends and waving his arms desperately, but they didn’t hear him.

“We’re heading to the theatre.” Question Mark told Bill.

“Need a ride, Dipper?” Wendy offered with a smile, and Bill glanced between Dipper’s frenzied expression and the car itself, hopping in smoothly and putting on his seatbelt.

“Oh, anything for you, Red.”

Remaining on task became more difficult. Now there was the temptation brewing to cause an accident and run this car off the road, dashing mini-Red’s brains across the windshield, but priorities were priorities.

He had to get that journal.

“I’m going to stop you, Bill!!”

Oh, here we go.

“I’m gonna find that journal before you do and I’m gonna stop you!” Dipper’s spectral form promised him, hovering on the outside of the car window, pointing down at Bill confrontationally. This sort of obstinance must run in the family.

With his mood simmering violently beneath the surface due to proximity to Red’s child, Bill made a mental note to actually break some of Pine Tree’s bones today, or at least throw him off some sort of tall building for kicks. Him falling off the roof before had been a funny thought, so throwing him off the top of the water tower should be hilarious.

He was really grinding on Bill’s nerves, despite how useful his gullible nature had been to him so far.

“But how can you stop me?” Bill turned to look at the kid, his glowing eyes reflecting yellow light against the window’s glass. “If you don’t exist?”

The window rolled up, Dipper’s ghostly expression of abject horror reflecting on the glass now, and Bill laughed to himself behind it while the car pulled out of the driveway and headed into town.

“So why are you covered in soda, dude?” Question Mark asked from the front seat. “Is it your new look?”

After a loaded pause Bill answered. “Mmmmmaybe?”

“Right on!”

“It’s not his new look, Soos, someone probably just shook up the cans before he opened them.” Wendy corrected him. “That blows dude.”
“Heheh. Yeah, I’ve seen Stan shake the cans up. It’s like can roulette with those sodas.”

“Ruthless. So, what were you laughing at before, Dipper?” Red turned her head slightly to ask from the front seat, a soft smile on her disgustingly familiar face.

“Funny coincidences.” Bill answered, gritting his teeth in the grin he sent her. “Say, did you ever wish you had an older brother or sister?”

“I’ve already got three brothers, dude, and let me tell you, they are a handful.” She groaned, rolling her eyes at the road ahead. “Sure, having someone else around to help me and Dad handle them would be sweet, but we manage, so it’s cool.”

“So you could say I did you a favour?” Bill pressed his fingers together pensively, despite his words seeming to confuse the girl.

“Huh?” She swivelled in her seat to look at Bill, who realised that he couldn’t afford to raise too much suspicion with her until he got his hands on that journal.

“It’s nothing.” Bill waved her curiosity off, just as Question Mark began to speak from the driver’s seat.

“Oh man, I used to wish I had an older brother. Someone to play with, and share secrets with, and to look up to when Abuelita wasn’t around. Sure, I had lots of cousins, but I used to make up fantasy brothers and sisters in my head when no one was around. Hah hah. Those were the days.”

“Aww, Soos. That’s so cute.” Wendy cooed, and punched Question Mark in the arm.

“Heh heh. Ow.”

“Sorry.”

“This town sure has changed, huh?” Bill spoke up, fishing for conversation that wouldn’t make him want to close his head in the car door. “It has community theatre for twelve year olds now. How’s that for small-town cultured?”

“I didn’t even know there was a theatre in Gravity Falls.” Wendy exclaimed, picking up on the conversational breadcrumb. “Wouldn’t have thought it. There’s usually nothing to do here anyway.”

“I’ve heard that before.” Bill nodded, glare-smiling at Red. “Still, whatever passes for entertainment in this hellhole, right?”

The smile slid slightly on Wendy’s face, before she haltingly answered. “Right. Are you okay, Dipper?”

The car pulled up out the front of the theatre and Soos parked the car.

“Just peachy.” Bill answered, opening the car door and hopping out, closing the car door and tapping his hand on the door frame. “Come on Red, time’s a wasting.”

Strolling into the theatre, meeting up with Fez, and taking his allotted seat between Red’s offspring and Question Mark, Bill could feel the tell-tale rush of energy that accompanied Dipper’s ephemeral entrance.

Having sensed a weakness in the kid’s psyche for the girl, Bill draped his arm around Wendy’s
shoulder despite the physical revulsion he felt touching Red’s offspring, casually hamming up his camaraderie with Dipper’s friends to aggravate him.

“Aw, nothing like the theatre, huh, toots?” Putting another arm over Question Mark’s shoulder, Bill busted out another party trick, hoping to entertain himself if nothing else. “Hey Soos, wanna hear the exact time and date of your death?”

“Heheh. Okay!” Question Mark replied, reminding Bill oddly of his buddy Keyhole.

Keyhole was the only person who loved Bill’s morbid party trick. Bill didn’t know whether to consider Question Mark cultured for it, or just too stupid to know better.

“Hey guys! You all made it!” Mabel exclaimed, walking over to where her family and friends were seated, enthused beyond belief, as was her default state of being.

“Are you kidding me? I would never miss… whatever this is.” Fez grunted in a caring paternal sort of manner.

“By the way Mabel, where’d you put my journal again?” Bill questioned, staying focused on his goal.

“I used it as a prop for the big wedding scene. I still need a reverend though.” Mabel answered easily, suspecting nothing from her brother despite his rictus grin and glowing yellow eyes.

“Hey, what if I play the reverend?” Bill suggested. “I mean, someone’s gotta hold that journal, right?”

“Right! Let’s go!” Mabel grabbed Bill’s hand and darted off, pulling him with her, completely ignoring the spectre of her brother’s consciousness shouting out behind her.

Bill was ushered into his costume, rolling with whatever antics Shooting Star wanted, waiting backstage for the opportune moment to strike.

The curtain came up, the show began, and on stage poorly made puppets began to play out the operatic masterpiece of an acutely imaginative mind. Avant-garde as can be, Mabel’s artistic expressionism took flight. It was, quite frankly, a masterpiece. Poetic cinema for the stage.

Who’s that girl with the pig and the braces? She puts smiles on everyone’s faces.

When she’s around, you’re never bored! I am a mayor, and here’s an award!

Thank you, mayor, it’s true I’m great. But the perfect girl needs the perfect maaaate.

Rather than spectate this particular folly of man, Bill approached one of the stagehands, straining to remember this human’s name before deciding that it didn’t really matter.

“So hey, Grendo. Where’s that book prop I’m using for the wedding scene?”

“It’s up in the wedding cake.” Grenda divulged in a surprisingly deep gravelly voice. “But that doesn’t come down until Act 3, so hold your horses!”

“Oh, I’ll hold my horses.” Bill said, backing away and glaring at Grendo. “I’ll hold them… you monster.”

Despite how juvenile this play was, there were people running around backstage nearly constantly.
Bill would have to play it cool and wait for the opportune moment to seize the journal from that wedding cake.

He leaned against the wall backstage for a while, whistling a particularly catchy tune that was rattling around in the back of Pine Tree’s recently vacated mind. For a lack of things to do, Bill approached the table of refreshments laid out for the stagehands and licked every donut before putting them back on their plates, wiping his sticky soda covered hands on the tablecloth.

When the intermission began and the curtains closed, now was the time. Scaling up the scaffolding surrounding the stage, Bill caught himself quietly singing along to the tune stuck in Dipper’s head as he climbed the rope ladder leading to the runway above.

“Disco girl, coming through, that girl is youuuuu – ow.”

Banging his knee against the rung above, Bill realised that climbing was a lot harder in this meatsuit than it was in his own. Back in the body Sixer made him he could hike all through Gravity Falls with only a few spare sprained ankles, but Dipper’s body was so weak and noodley.

His arms felt like jello and his stumpy little child legs could barely reach the wrung above him, but somehow banging his knee into the ladder was a cinch. He had barely any strength in his arms and Bill privately thanked Sixer’s vainglorious fantasies that his old body at least had a little to work with in terms of bicep strength.

Climbing up to the top of the stage took longer than Bill expected it to and he was already halfway through the second stanza of Disco Girl by the time the play began again, lights and music shining down below.

Pausing to wipe his brow and exhale, Bill regained his breath and saw that he was nearly at the top. There was a wooden catwalk leading to the rigging where the wedding cake prop was suspended, and the journal should be directly inside the cake.

Readying himself to climb those final few rungs to the catwalk, Bill was surprised to see Shooting Star running along the wooden plank, reaching for the wedding cake rigging.

If she was up here, who was continuing the show? Bill could have sworn the play hadn’t missed a beat.

Bill looked down and saw Dipper’s spectral form piloting several of the puppets, having got the hang of vessel possession fairly quickly, all things considered.

While Dipper was mashing the mouths of sock puppets together and making kissy noises for the crowd, his sister was retrieving the journal, something that could jeopardise Bill’s purpose for coming here in the first place.

“Come on, come on.” Mabel muttered to herself, leaning over the railing to reach into the cake for the journal, her own pint-sized kid arms causing her to strain and teeter dangerously.

Climbing up onto the catwalk, Bill began to sidestep quietly towards her, just as she toppled forward and fell into the cake, unsettling the rope rigging from the ceiling. The cake prop began plummeting down, ready to dash Mabel’s promising young brains upon the stage.

Running forward, Bill grabbed the rope just before it could slide out of the pulley, halting Mabel’s descent and heaving to yank her back up to be level with the catwalk.

“I hope this kiss never ends.” Dipper intoned in a squeaky high voice below, drawing Mabel’s
attention as she sighed, watching her brother carry her performance. Turning her attention back to the journal she began flicking through the pages.

“Come on, come on now. There must be a way to get Dipper’s body back!”

“Oh, but why would you want to do that?” Bill asked, his yellow eyes gleaming, Dipper’s body backlit by the stage lights.

The sight of him was enough to startle Shooting Star who scuttered back within the cake prop, pointing at him.

“Bill Dipper! Bipper!”

“Shh. You wouldn’t want to ruin the show. Whoops!” Bill released the rope suspending the cake briefly, jolting her down several feet, before catching the rope again. “It’s slipping! How’s about you hand that book over?”

“No way! This is Dipper’s. I’d never give it away!”

It actually wasn’t Dipper’s book, but Sixer’s things could be considered heirlooms to the kids, Bill supposed, since it was unlikely Sixer would ever come back to this dimension to reclaim the journals. Since Bill practically owned Sixer, it could be argued that by extension the book was really Bill’s journal, and Shooting Star just had it out on loan.

“Hmm, you didn’t seem to have a problem taking it for your own play, ditching him when he needed you.” Bill pointed it out bluntly, unaware of how his language triggered Shooting Star’s guilt rather than her sense of self preservation. “So come to your senses. Give me the book or your play is ruined.”

Mabel sighed and began to hand over the journal, extending Sixer’s book up to Bill. It was almost disappointing how cyclical it was, the Pines twins abandoning each other for personal gain, Sixer’s past selfishness reflected in the twist of Mabel’s mouth, indicating that she knew what she was doing was ambitious and self-involved, but she was doing it anyway. Just like Sixer.

“There it is.” Bill observed with a wry smile, like he expected little better. Pandering to what would be Sixer’s typical mindset, validating his awful choices with whatever roundabout logic he had on hand at the time, twisting circumstances to claim the moral high-ground rather than ever admitting any wrongdoing on his part, Bill tried to reinforce Mabel’s decision the same way he’d reinforce Sixer’s poor choices.

“I mean, who would sacrifice everything they’ve worked for just for their dumb sibling?”

Rather than nodding and sighing, before squaring her jaw and continuing with her own selfish path like Sixer would, a fire seemed to be lit behind Shooting Star’s eyes at that remark, and she squared her jaw for an entirely different reason, defiant stubbornness burning in her eyes.

“Dipper would!”

“Huh?” Bill blinked for a moment, thrown by her response, before she yanked him forward and he was literally thrown into the cake, the two of them plummeting down onto the stage, the wedding cake splitting into so much rubble as they landed roughly.

Shooting Star was on Bill immediately, wrestling him to the ground and grappling for the journal, pushing and slapping him despite his struggles.
“Get out of my brother’s body, you evil triangle!!” She shouted.

Fighting back, Bill could hear Fez crow triumphantly, something about children fighting being something he can capitalise on, and while he was distracted by that prospect (what a way to make money!) Mabel hit Bill in the face with Dipper’s journal and ran away. Bill sprung to his feet to chase after her.

“You can’t stop me! I’m a being of pure energy with no weaknesses!” Bill lunged at Mabel and knocked her back to the ground, one hand landing on the journal.

“True, but you’re in Dipper’s body. And I know all his weaknesses.” Mabel declared smugly, reaching towards Bill.

“What do you mean his –“

And then he felt it, familiar and foreign all at once in this new body.

Mabel was tickling him.

“Tickle, tickle!”

She was just as talented as Sixer was, despite the missing sixth digit and Bill laughed reflexively, falling to the floor, before shouting in outrage, pretending he’d never experienced such indignity before.

“Ahh, body spasms! What are these?”

“A little note about the human body – you haven’t slept for 24 hours!” Mabel declared running from Bill, holding the journal. She made use of the spacious stage, running circles around Bill, despite his best attempts to catch up with her. “Also, I got a full night’s sleep and I’m on four mega shots of Mabel Juice.”

Exhaustion set in much faster than Bill expected it to, considering how youthful his current body was. Maybe it was too youthful, maybe that was the problem? Infants took a lot of naps, right? Maybe Pine Tree’s kid body was enforcing a nap on him, to hell with Bill’s plans.

Mabel was still running energetically away from him, perpetually out of reach. What was in that Mabel Juice? Cocaine??

Bill was sweating, slowing down, and his arms and legs felt heavier and less agile.

“Ah, what is this feeling? My body is burning. I can’t move these stupid noodle legs. Curse you, useless flesh sticks. Body shutting down, must scratch… mosquito bites…”

His legs shaking and then giving in, Bill fell to the floor and was jettisoned out of Pine Tree’s flesh suit, flying back out into the cold monochrome world of the mindscape.

“Woah woah woah! Hey!”

A hereditary opportunist, Pine Tree seized that moment to repossess his own body. How humiliating! Evicted from a meat suit by a kid in short pants!

“Hey, yes! I’m in my own body. And it’s ... just as underwhelming as I remember. Ohh, everything hurts.”

Serves the kid right, Bill thought, hoping Pine Tree could feel every last bruise, scratch, scraped
knee and mosquito bite inflicted on him. These kids just seemed to live to frustrate Bill, much like their great uncle did. Of all the things to run in the family, why did it have to be this? Why couldn’t the kid be a good cook instead? Why couldn’t he have pointy elbows and be done with it? Why did he have to be naturally infuriating?

Choosing to laugh at the kid’s misery rather than stew in his own, Bill possessed the discarded puppet vessel, the sock puppet version of Pine Tree, dragging the vessel’s useless carcass across the top of the wooden box it fell on with one fuzzy pipe cleaner arm.

“This isn’t the last you’ll hear of me. Big things are coming. You can’t stop me!”

“I’m sorry Gabe.” Mabel uttered, reaching into her pocket for a remote with the words ‘big finish’ printed above a single red button.

“Huh?” Bill looked between the button to the box below him, realising that this crummy puppet body was perched on top of a crate of (most likely illegal) fireworks.

Talk about a theatrical genius. He had to hand it to the kid, she sure knew the value of going out with a bang.

Mabel pressed the button and the pile of pyrotechnics beneath Bill exploded, sending fireworks shooting up over the stage and into the audience, sock puppet viscera spewing across the crowd.

With his vessel disbanded, Bill was ejected from the mindscape through the mirror he came in from, left with little to boast about, and an explosive temper brewing.

What a complete and total failure. Bill didn’t even get to break a leg!

He’d get his chance. There would be an encore, after all.

He’d make sure of it.

NowUSeeItNowUDontium ended up being exactly the fuel source that was needed for Ford’s Quantum Destabiliser, and the integration of the substance into the weapon was a breeze with alternate Fiddleford’s assistance.

“I don’t know. I reckon we need to do a little more to insulate it. It gives off a heckton of radiation when hidden, don’t want you to end up accidentally irradiating yourself every time you pull the trigger.” Fiddleford fretted, almost looking for excuses to prolong their collaboration.

He sat with Stanford in the break room adjacent to the testing labs, the two of them chewing on egg salad sandwiches while various interns bussed around them, using the microwave and preparing their own lunches.

“I wouldn’t worry too much about that. I have partial tolerance to most forms of radiation.” Stanford said flippantly, missing the way the interns gawked at that statement.

“You do?” One of them asked Stanford nervously. “How?”

Ford felt able to take Bill’s gifts for granted. He’d benefited from them for long enough for sure, but moments like these were enough to test that blasé ungratefulness.
“Oh, it’s – uh – just one of those things you pick up… in the multiverse.” Stanford said evasively, before taking a bite out of his sandwich, cutting off any further awkward extrapolation.

“You’ll have to teach us that trick before you go then.” Fiddleford said with a wry smile. “I’m sure our explorers would love to pick up radiation tolerance too.”

Ford laughed nervously, unwilling to admit that he only had partial radiation tolerance because Bill gave him a complimentary makeover when he first fell through the portal.

“Thank you.” Stanford said instead, his words jerky and overly formal. “For all your help with the destabiliser. It was invaluable to completing this. I wouldn’t say I couldn’t have done it without you, but you’ve certainly sped things up a great deal, and for that I’m grateful.”

“Bet that was hard to say. Although it’s certainly a familiar sentiment.” Fiddleford snorted and picked at the crusts on his own sandwich. “Reckon you said about the same thing to me when we got the portal sorted out, back in the day. ‘Not that I couldn’t have done it without you, but here’s a thank you to cover my bases’.”

“Did I – he – did he really say that?” Ford questioned, adequately chastised on behalf of his dimensional alternate.

“It ain’t the worst that’s been said.” Fiddleford answered, the hint of bitterness and sarcasm in his tone a near constant. “Oh, don’t worry. I ain’t never been expectin’ you to be anything other than yourself, Stanford. No matter what dimension you come from.”

Stanford was coming to realise that the main differentiation between the Fiddleford he knew and the one from this dimension was how subtly caustic and unhappy he seemed to be towards his dimension’s Stanford.

“Did you – did you come back to help work on the portal then?” Stanford questioned cautiously, trying to pinpoint where their two timelines diverged. “After the initial test, or did things – “

“I still left after that first test.” Fiddleford explained. “Quittin’ was about my only option. Even if Bill hadn’t threatened me, it was clear you weren’t going to listen to reason, least of all listen to what I had to say. You found me a few weeks later though, helped me sort things out, and by then I was in your debt, so I hopped back on board the project.”

“Bill threatened you?” Stanford stressed, unaware of this, but regrettably not surprised.

“I keep forgettin’ how much you didn’t know.” Fiddleford looked at Stanford with an odd mix of pity and curiosity. “You found out when we watched the tape in my memory cylinder together. After the first portal test, Bill made me quit the project. He threatened my family if I didn’t leave pronto. Reckon he thought he was tying up loose ends by sending me away. Tried to have me erase my own memories. It was a good thing the memory ray kept a record of erased memories, or else we’d all still be in the dark.”

“The memory ray. You kept it when you left? You had more than one?” Stanford frowned, obviously still disappointed by Fiddleford’s invention.

“I made two, I reckon. One I took with me when I left and one I gave to Ivan. There ain’t any anymore though. You’ve always been against them, confiscated the one I had after we got my memory back and took the one away from Ivan and said I wasn’t to make no more. One of the conditions of me coming back on to work on the project. They’re both destroyed now, personally by you, in this dimension. I saw you do it. Paranoid someone would use ‘em on you to make you
forget Bill’s betrayal. Although having been subject to a total memory wipe with ‘em myself, I can’t say I thought you were in the wrong. I finally knew how dangerous they could be.”

“So, Bill wiped your memories again? He did it more than once?” Stanford pondered with a frown.

“I thought he just did it the one time.” Fiddleford raised his eyebrows at Stanford, stunned. “He did it more than once in your dimension?”

Ford nodded, uncertain how he should divulge this. “He attacked you … after you used the memory ray on me. I saw the memory after you quit the project when I found the prototype ray gun you left behind in the attic. Bill let himself slip, he got angry and revealed his powers to you. He revealed his true plans for the portal while threatening you, and I imagine he wiped your memory to tie up loose ends, like you said before.”

Fiddleford frowned down at his sandwich crusts. “Hmm. That’s news to me. I didn’t realise I must’a left one prototype at your house. I ain’t never seen no sign of it since. Strange.”

Becoming somewhat suspicious of Fiddleford’s muted reaction to this information, Ford voiced his main concern about what he had seen in the memory tape, probing F’s response.

“In the memory you tried to bargain with him. You said you’d fine tune your memory ray so you could work with Bill to stop people from discovering what he really was, to hire laborers to work on the portal, and to deceive me, so I would be none the wiser. You were working with him. You made a deal with him in exchange for amnesty for you and your family.”

Fiddleford laughed dismissively at that, although the laughter came a little too quickly for it to be wholly believable.

“That’s ridiculous. I’d never make a deal with Bill. Who’d be stupid enough to do that?”

Stanford gave Fiddleford a flat look at that, before finishing the last of his sandwich with a sigh, his own mistakes thrown back in his face yet again.

“That must’ve just not happened in this dimension. There are all sorts of differences you see. Little timeline divergences.” Fiddleford explained, although he still looked somewhat strained, despite hiding it well. “Our two dimensions obviously won’t be exactly the same. Things split off at various turning points –“

“What was the turning point?” Stanford asked Fiddleford, intent on his answer. “Between this dimension and my own. What was the key difference that made all this possible, that opened my eyes to Bill’s treachery before it was too late? Did Stanley leave with the journals after all, take them far away? Did Bill slip up somehow – did –“

“Don’t know how much I can tell you, or if tellin’ you will help matters at all. You can’t undo the past.” Fiddleford said cautiously, his eyes flitting briefly to the security cameras in the hallways, recording their every word.

“But still, I – were you in my position, wouldn’t you want to know?”

Haltingly, Fiddleford replied, as though choosing what theories of Ford’s to confirm very carefully.

“Stanley did leave when you told him to. Went far away. And you caught Bill before he could do anything too terrible. I don’t know the turning point. It could have all been luck. It might just be fate? Parallel dimensions ain’t perfectly parallel after all, and the differences can be so small. It’s a butterfly effect headscratcher for sure. I can’t give you any definitive answer, and it’s not worth
“losin’ sleep over since you can’t go back and change any of it.”

“Nothing’s ever straight forward, is it?” Ford huffed, frustrated.

“You’re telling me.” Fiddleford replied, just as bitterly.

With their lunches finished, Fiddleford clapped his hands down on the table and pushed his chair back.

“Alright, we’d best get you booked on a portal out of here. Ain’t no sense prolonging the inevitable.”

Staying seated, Ford examined the crumbs on his plate, not quite ready to meet his fate just yet. “I thought I’d have more time.”

“Well, you’ve been here five days already, Stanford. Nearly a week. Your blaster’s finished, there’s no sense tarryin’ now. Not that I’m mindin’ the company, but you’ve got a dimension to save after all. It sounded pretty urgent.”

“Yes. Yes, I suppose you’re right.” Stanford heaved himself to his feet, the weight of his responsibility feeling heavier somehow.

Despite his revamped blaster packing a substantial punch, he still felt like he would be carrying it to his doom. When he met with Jheselbraum, he had resigned himself to a heroic death, going out in a blaze of glory, but this short time with a dimensional mirror of his old friend rekindled the part of Ford that longed to live a little, to have the sort of life he always wanted since college, inventing things and inspiring people.

His smile looking more like an uncomfortable cringe, Ford held his hand out to shake Fiddleford’s. The other scientist clasped it, just as Ford said.

“I’m glad, you know, that I got to spend this time with you. I never got to set things right with my dimension’s Fiddleford so it’s only fitting that, before I go, I got to have this opportunity. To reconcile our differences.”

“Cathartic is it?” Fiddleford guessed with a wry grin.

“Something like that.” Stanford shrugged. “Was there ever anything you’d like to do, to tick off your list before – you used to say all you ever wanted was a nice house for your family, with a screen door that wasn’t broken. To spend your days inventing gadgets and playing the banjo. To get Tate into a good school. Do you –“

“I see what you’re sayin’.” Fiddleford cut him off, clasping onto Ford’s shoulder, trying to comfort him. “Stanford, it’s gonna be –“

“Life is short, that’s all.” Ford interjected, empathy creasing his brow, determined to impress his point on Fiddleford. “There’s not enough time to be spending it unhappy. You should build bridges and go on swashbuckling adventures and listen to your heart instead of your head for a change. If there’s something out there that you really want to do, nothing should stop you from doing it. You deserve to be happy and I’m not sure you are.”

Fiddleford stared at Stanford for a long while, an inscrutable expression on his face, pinching between his brows, and Stanford noticed his hand hovering over his ring finger, inching towards that gold ring bearing the company logo, before he wrenched his hand away.
“Let’s go get your stuff packed for the journey.”

Stanford followed Fiddleford down the Institute’s corridors, and couldn’t help but notice as he gathered his belongings, that Fiddleford was fiddling with his company ring again, pulling the band with the six fingered logo up and down his finger repeatedly, a very telling nervous tic.

Pyronica saw Bill first, her and several of the other Henchmaniacs milling about in the crumbling courtyard outside the Quadrangle.

“There he is. Hey Bill! We’re picking party games for the apocalypse. Do you wanna help pick?” Pyronica waved her friend towards the group, oblivious of his atrociously bad mood. “I want to play spin the bottle, but apparently eating whoever the bottle lands on isn’t how it’s played, but I think that’s a stupid rule, so I’m trying to vote to overrule that rule, and if you –“

“You can eat whoever you want.” Bill replied abruptly, regarding the group of denizens with dissatisfaction.

“Great! So then, about the chocolate fountain –“

“How’d it go with the kid, _Boss_?” Kryptos asked, somewhat snidely for someone who’s life was on the line.

“It went.” Bill responded sharply, deliberately fixing his attention on Pyronica. “Have we invited the Hungry Hungry Hippos from the Hasbro dimension?”

“They’re on the list!” Pyronica confirmed enthusiastically, looking down at said list. “I just hope we have enough white balls for them to eat. We can always substitute them with humans if we run out.”

“Well, I’m sure _they’d_ like that.” Bill rolled his eye, summoning a cocktail as he attempted to wind down from the losses of the day.

Kryptos, however, didn’t seem to get the message from Bill’s abrupt dismissal earlier that certain subjects were to be dropped, and when Bill summoned himself a drink Kryptos’ eyelid began twitching, repressed frustration bubbling beneath the surface before he opened his mouth again to loudly ask.

“So Earth’s in the bag, huh? Just like that? Whatever it is you did on Earth, you did it and now our portal is secure, huh _Boss_? Is that what you did?”

Blinking slowly, as if shocked to see Kryptos flexing what little spine he had, Bill turned to face the compass.

“I’m sorry, Kryptos? Did you have something you wanted to say? Something important perhaps, to be discussed as an equal member of this group? Or are you forgetting that you’re not a part of this group? You’re not some kind of social climber, Kryptos, you being here amounts to indentured servitude because you’ve an uncanny knack for pissing off powerful people and signed your rights away in exchange for protection. Are you going to be continuing that track record, hmm?”

“I –“ Kryptos deliberated, but only for a moment, which was poor form for someone with such well
developed survival instincts. “I just want to know what you actually did on Earth, what it is that you actually do? Or do you just come back and we have to assume everything’s on track, like we’ve had to do for the past 30 years of failure. Because everyone else has been running around doing whatever jobs you assign them, but I don’t see what work you’ve been doing to secure the portal apart from obsessing over that town in your mirror room, delegating everything to everyone else, and day drinking!”

Kryptos’ shrill screech stunned the conglomerate of henchmaniacs, his outburst the sort of ill-fated misstep that soon heralded death and destruction. Indeed, it seemed the entire cohort now held their breath for Kryptos’ impending incineration, and none of them expected Bill’s blasé response.

Gasping loudly and putting a hand over his bricks, Bill admonished the compass. “Kryptos! Day drinking is my job.”

He then threw back his cocktail into his eye, and summoned himself a second glass, waving away Kryptos’ complaints as if they were nothing more than a minor irritation.

“If you’ve got time to criticise then clearly you don’t have enough to do. Xanthar, you get the day off.”

Xanthar’s muted growl sounded like a cheer, and he high-fived Eight Ball, smacking the other henchmaniac to the ground.

“Kryptos, you’re on watch duty. Go patrol the perimeter or something, just do it out of my sight. I can’t have you harshing my buzz before I even get a good one going. Go on, shoo.” Bill waved his hand at Kryptos absently, before he clicked his fingers and summoned several bottles of alcohol for the rest of the group. “Everyone else, you’re coming with me. I want you to find me a table I can drink you all under.”

The henchmaniacs cheered and followed Bill into the Quadrangle, the bottles bobbing in the air beside them as Bill lead them away like a pied piper for drunk monsters.

Left in the courtyard outside, Kryptos seethed, clenching his fists and chewing on his bottom lip with his buck teeth before finally shouting and waving his hands in the air.

“FINE THEN!! FINE!!”

Kicking a pebble he looked around the disintegrating courtyard of the quadrangle and resigned himself to watch duty, a part of him acknowledging how lucky he was to be alive after his outburst, despite how the rest of him rankled at being overworked and underappreciated, doing someone else’s job for them while the rest of them were partying and drinking together.

Mumbling to himself, Kryptos set off to patrol the perimeter of the nightmare realm, almost wishing something big and powerful would burst through and kick some sense into Bill for his callous behaviour.

“All seeing eye. You can watch your own perimeter. Triangular yellow – always watching my left foot.”

Strapping his Quantum Destabiliser to his back, checking that his grenade belt was secure, and
ensuring that all of the laser knives, regular knives, and blasters were all in accessible places in his coat (for it wouldn’t do to fumble through his nano briefcase when faced with the might of Bill’s henchmen) Stanford Pines felt slightly more prepared to face his destiny.

The portal in front of him was a technicolour whirlpool of dimensional possibility and the lab technicians manning the portal gate were ready for him, having already inputted the coordinates to the interdimensional city closest to the nightmare realm, just waiting for Stanford to take that final step.

“Well, once again, I appreciate your help with everything.” Ford said, and looked to the side where Fiddleford stood, waiting patiently. “With the blaster, the testing process, just – everything.”

“Happy to help you get done what need’s doin’.” Fiddleford nodded. “If anyone can do it, it’s you.”

“I almost can’t believe it. That I’m finally going to do it. That I’m going to destroy Bill for good.” Stanford ruminated while the lights flickered. “It feels… humbling, and awe inspiring all at once.”

“I’m sure it’s real conflicting, but I’m glad you’re feeling chipper about it.” Fiddleford conceded, raising an eyebrow at Ford.

“I never thought this would happen, honestly. That I’d ever reach this point. I used to think – I don’t know what I used to think. It was never this.”

The lights flickered more spasmodically now, like a schoolteacher turning the lights on and off for attention, impossible to miss. Even the most oblivious observer couldn’t miss it.

Stanford blinked at the light fittings, before jerking his thumb at them, addressing Fiddleford.

“You might want to get someone to look at the electricity here. Your mains keep flickering. I find it hard to believe in an institute this grand that you don’t have a single qualified electrician.”

“We’re workin on it.” Fiddleford rolled his eyes and shooed his hand at Stanford chidingly. “Now stop stallin’. Get in there and go save the world already.”

“Alright, alright I’m going.” Stanford chuckled, and waved his goodbyes at Fiddleford and the lab technicians, approaching the portal entrance. Unable to prevent himself from calling out, Stanford yelled over his shoulder. “You know there’s a type of light bulb you can install and the fluorescence actually makes your skin smoother. The blueprints have been distributed in Dimension E25, you should look it up!”

“We’ll be sure to do that!” Fiddleford yelled back, trying to be heard over the whirl of the portal. “Now, off you go. Go on, git!”

“See you Fiddlefooooord--!” Stanford’s farewell was cut off as he was sucked through the gravitational pull of the portal, warping from this dimension to the next in the blink of an eye.

The portal powered down and the lab technicians began running through shut down procedures, the overhead lights still flickering on and off.

One of the technicians approached Fiddleford and pointed to the lights. “Mr McGucket, do you want me to send someone to check the wiring. I’m sure one of us could – “

“No need Sean, I’ll go check it out.” Fiddleford assured the tech, before striding off into the depths of the institute, his access pass taking him further than most of the staff were permitted.
Taking the elevator down to the lower levels of the institute, Fiddleford got out at the basement level, walked across the hallway to what appeared to be a janitor’s closet, opened the closet door and scanned his access pass again, another elevator door sliding open, allowing further descent to the secret sub levels below.

Walking along the metal corridors, Fiddleford turned out into the main generator room and approached the glass cryotube in the centre of the room, monitors and devices flickering and beeping quietly on every available surface in the room.

He flicked a switch on the control panel surrounding the tube to disable the soundproofing, sound from inside the tube broadcast through the speakers in the lab. Faint breathing could now be heard, the rhythmic in and out joining the symphony of beeps and clicks generated by the machinery cocooning the cryotube.

Suspended in the cryotube, arms and legs pinned to the back wall with thick metal manacles, a strip of tape slapped over the glass shielding the eyes of the being within, as if the being’s captor couldn’t bear to look at them anymore, Fiddleford surveyed the various IV tubes leading into the unit, supplying nutrition and fluids to the creature contained inside.

Thinner silvery cuffs glowed blue at their wrists and fed energy to a futuristic converter box mounted into the wall behind F, the blue cubes within filling with energy slowly.

Clearing his throat, F spoke congenially.

“Ahem. That was quite the light show there. Any particular reason for it, Bill?”

“Oh, I’m sure you have your theories, Specs.” Bill Cipher drawled, contained within the cryotube.

“Maybe I’m just attention seeking. That sounds like me, doesn’t it?”

The gold brick tattoos that encircled his arms extended past his elbows to his shoulders now, and each brick was glowing gold. This was unusual, as when Fiddleford checked on Bill generally the bricks were often quite dim.

“It was because Stanford was here, wasn’t it? The other Stanford.”

“The nicer Sixer. The better Sixer. The one who still clings to some small shred of moral decency. Go on, you can say it with me. I won’t judge. We both know we drew the short straw in this dimension.”

“I don’t think you’re one to talk about moral decency.” Fiddleford shook his head, moving closer to the control panel monitoring Bill’s containment tube, scanning through the spikes in the recent readings.

“So, when I’m saying it you know something’s really wrong.” Bill insisted with a callous laugh.

Fiddleford worried his bottom lip, his hand subconsciously coming up to play with his company ring again, pulling it up and down his finger, the ring dangling closer to F’s nail beds now.

“So did you come to talk? Fancy a chat?” Bill observed sightlessly, his sharp tone jarring Fiddleford from his introspection. “I’m afraid I’m all out of chianti and fava beans but, fortunately for you, I have plenty of free time to listen. So why don’t you tell me what’s on your mind, hmm?”

“Since when would I come by just to talk, Bill? You aren’t exactly known for playing therapist.” Fiddleford quipped, entering data queries into the machine. “Don’t think you’re well adjusted enough for that.”
“What psychologist is well adjusted? Beside, where do you think the term ‘billable therapy hours’ comes from?” Bill joked. “I know you’re good for it. You’re not exactly hard up for cash, given how much guilty hush money Sixer’s paying you.”

“Even so, I wouldn’t pay you a dime. How about you tell me what caused the energy spikes and then I’ll start talkin’.” Fiddleford replied shrewdly. “How’s that sound?”

“Evasive.” Bill answered. “If I were a psychologist, I’d say you were deflecting.”

“No, that’s what you did.” Fiddleford jabbed back, checking the levels of saline attached to the drip that fed into the cryotube. Bill was looking rather thin, perhaps he should insist Stanford up his calorie intake. Then again, Bill was manageable when he was weak. A powerful Bill was a threat, no matter what Fiddleford’s conscience insisted. “Should’ve known better than tryin’ to get a straight answer from you.”

“You should have.” Bill agreed. “But because I like our little chats and I’m feeling generous today I might just give you several.”

Fiddleford looked up at that, surprised that Bill was being so obliging. F could see Bill was smiling though, and that never boded well.

“The energy spikes?”

“Worshipful energy provided by that delightful anti-Sixer we just saw strolling through.” Bill revealed. “Muted, but mostly undiluted. Much sweeter than what I currently get. Bittersweet. He’s still got a soft spot for me. I can tell.”

“But – but he’s on his way to kill you.” Fiddleford boggled.

“That’s kinder than this. I’d volunteer for target practise, but somehow I don’t think he’s got it in him to pull the trigger.” Bill’s smile curled into something fond and goading. “A pity.”

“So, it was a temporary spike.” Fiddleford surmised, trying to stay on track with his inquiry. He was well past the point where he could be guilted into feeling pity for Bill, but that didn’t mean the odd twinge didn’t happen occasionally. “Since he’s gone now, we won’t be havin’ any more light shows I’d wager. So that’s that taken care of.”

“That’s not the only question you came here to ask me.” Bill deduced, waiting for Fiddleford to cave. “Come now Specs, spill the beans. There’s always time for a little quid pro quo.”

“No there isn’t, and yes actually, that’s all I had to ask. So if you don’t mind –“ Fiddleford mustered up his courage, sliding his company ring back on his finger and straightening up, making to leave.

“You want to know if what the anti-Sixer said was true.” Bill called out, stopping Fiddleford in his tracks. “It’s a shame you can’t remember it yourself. It must burn you to have to come to me for clarification. Again.”

Grinding his teeth, Fiddleford looked over his shoulder at Bill, warring with his willpower. Bill was baiting Fiddleford gleefully and with the hook within reach, Fiddleford’s curiosity won out over his survival instincts. He reluctantly turned around.

“Am I gonna get a straight answer here too? Or is this more quid pro quo?”

“You’re getting an answer as straight as my hypotenuse, Specs. You see, it was several decades
ago, and really quite majestic, Specs. Too good to not remember, that’s for sure. Fire all around the walls of the attic, banjos and books and bric-a-brac levitating. It was a wonderfully theatrical way to threaten someone. I thought you’d have nightmares for weeks afterwards, but I guess that ray gun of yours really does work. Am I tweaking the flashbacks yet?”

Scowling at Bill’s joyful demeanour, Fiddleford focused on the information Bill was conveying, reading between the lines. Things were starting to come together, images flickering like the picture on an old VHS, faded but familiar.

“So – so you did erase my memory more than once? The other Stanford was telling the truth?”

“He’s a terrible liar.” Bill confirmed. “But you know who isn’t a terrible liar?”

Fiddleford didn’t answer Bill.

Muttering to himself, he mused.

“Then there is a third memory ray. The prototype. But he wouldn’t – “

“You’re putting things past him now? That’s rich. You of all people know what he’s capable of. How selfish and single minded he can be. I mean, just look at what he did to me.” Bill’s hands moved beneath the array of cuffs, gesturing to himself, every inch of his weakened, trapped and drained human form, kept alive by the machines surrounding him, despite his best attempts, forced to power the portal and the rest of the institute at the behest of his captor. “Why shouldn’t he keep the ray gun? If it meant he could keep you too, well…”

Fiddleford didn’t answer, but his mouth thinned into a fine line, resolve changing him.

Despite his vision being obstructed by the tape, Bill didn’t seem to have any problem seeing and noted these minor changes in F’s expression, slyly asking.

“So, are going to try to quit again?”

Fiddleford looked up at him in shock.

“Again? But that means I-“

“Now, he gets it.” Bill said, sounding inordinately pleased with himself. “Give the man a prize!”

Flashbacks were coming more frequently now, faded images sharpening painfully in Fiddleford’s mind, hindsight hurting him. The early design for the memory ray always did have that side effect, unfortunately painful headaches accompanying memory recall. He remembered tweaking that in his second and third design attempt, but he never got around to updating the prototype. Perhaps Stanford never bothered to update it either.

Gripping his forehead, Fiddleford looked between the control panel and Bill’s lips twisting into an expectant smile in the cryotube ahead.

“You know you can’t beat him without my help. You thought you could before, and well, you’re still here aren’t you. Caged by Sixer just as much as I am. This is where the quid pro quo comes in.”

Ever the opportunist Bill was trying to turn these shocking implications into leverage that would get him out of Sixer’s grasp, and F didn’t appreciate Bill’s attempt to coerce him into making a snap decision.
“I ain’t bein’ manipulated into a deal by you. You act like this is a joke, like this is all good and entertainin’ to you, but this is my life and I –“

“You might want to quash down that righteous indignation and hurry along your decision here, Specs. You might not appreciate my company, but it won’t be the only company you’ll have in a minute.”

F’s eyes widened at that, and before he could process this revelation fully, he heard the sound of the metal door opening behind him, security protocols bypassed by the only other person who had clearance to this part of the institute.

Spinning around, Fiddleford found himself face to face with Stanford Pines, although it wasn’t the Stanford he’d spent the past several days with.

The differences were immediately noticeable, from the grandeur of his clothing - gold cufflinks and lapel pins adorning a bespoke navy suit, his trench coat lined with fine patterned silks now instead of fraying from blaster fire, the glowing blue tie pin sitting by the dip of his collarbone - to the white of his hair, and the sharp slant of his mouth as his eyes darted about the room, taking in Bill, the machines surrounding him, and Fiddleford standing in the middle of both.

“What are you doing in here?” Stanford barked, immediately confrontational.

“I – I was – I was checking the -“ Fiddleford stuttered, too jarred by headaches to be able to carry off a convincing lie, cursing himself for not expecting this.

“Oh, we were just having a friendly chat, Sixer. A good old ‘how’s the weather up there’, ‘what’s it like to feel sunlight on your skin’, ‘does oxygen taste like I remember’ and other social niceties. Friendly small talk. You do remember what that’s, don’t you? Being friendly?” Bill interjected from the cryotube behind F, his voice transmitted through the room’s speakers, implicating F immediately.

Outrage flashed across his face, as Stanford strode over to the control panel, pushing past F while admonishing him.

“You turned the soundproofing off? Fiddleford, I told you! Never turn the soundproofing off in this room. You can’t believe a word that he says. Bill always lies!”

“Does he?” Fiddleford asked without thinking, the tension in his voice causing Stanford to pause with his finger over the soundproofing switch, turning slightly to look at Fiddleford’s strained expression.

Ford narrowed his eyes at Fiddleford for a moment, before he opened his mouth to answer tersely.

“Yes, he does. Don’t believe his lies, F. Whatever he said to you -”

“What about your lies?” Fiddleford interrupted. “Do I not believe you too, just to be safe, hmm?”

Stanford frowned at F again, a flicker of nervousness passing behind his eyes. He opened his mouth to respond, when Fiddleford clarified.

“The other you.”

“Oh.” Stanford laughed, waving dismissively at Fiddleford. “You mean that dimensional vagabond we entertained earlier. Fiddleford, the man was clearly addled by his travels. He was wearing rags, eating rocks, and sleeping on the streets. He asked for your help with a suicide mission. He’s
clearly not in his right mind. Why should you believe him?”

“Well, he don’t look too good when you paint him in that light, but he seemed perfectly sane, and the event he mentioned happened before his travels.” Fiddleford stayed focused, unwilling to be deterred. “Might be even before our two timelines diverged, this particular event. So I’d wager what happened to him thirty years or so ago might track with our own dimension.”

“Fiddleford, you’ve no way of knowing that. Divergent timeline speculation is such an inexact art, there’s no way of knowing which details in his dimension diverge from our own and from what focal point they split, and whatever lies he told in his own dimension have little bearing on our own. I mean, honestly, F, you know better than to presume – “

“See, cause Bill here just confirmed this event.” Fiddleford raised his voice, cutting off Ford’s dissuading. “And since the rest of the timeline seems mighty simultaneous in both, I’m guessin’ this event ain’t an outlier either.”

Scoffing, Ford gestured to the tube without looking at it, turning to face Fiddleford properly now. “Fiddleford, you know Bill would say anything to get a rise out of you. He’d twist or manipulate anything for a chance to weaken his containment. Whatever confirmation he just provided; you know you can’t consider it fact. He’s just trying to turn us against each other. He loves drama. He’s been like this ever since I removed the television from this room.”

“So you didn’t know he erased my memory more than once then?” Fiddleford raised an eyebrow, scrutinising Ford’s response.

“Fiddleford, he’s just saying that to make you paranoid.” Ford held out both of his six fingered hands placatingly in front of him. “Bill was contained. He is contained. We destroyed the memory guns, remember? You and me.”

“Right.” F nodded, still suspicious. “All three o’ them.”

“That’s right.” Ford nodded, missing the subtle verbal test F laid for him, the cocky scientist already turning back to the control panel. “So, you’ve nothing to worry about.”

“Right, right. You’re right.” Fiddleford repeated, watching Stanford run the same diagnostics on Bill’s containment that he’d done just minutes prior.

Leaning against the wall, Fiddleford observed Stanford, pulling the company ring up and down his finger as the silent moment stretched between them, until in a lighter tone F questioned.

“Tell me, Stanford. Do you remember when Tate’s birthday is?”

“April 15th.” Ford replied absently, still scanning the diagnostic results. “Why, have you forgotten again?”

“As a matter of fact, yes.” F glared at Ford, the other scientist still blissfully oblivious of the daggers his colleague was glaring at him. “Pat and I’s anniversary too.”

“Oh, you always forget your anniversary.” Ford waved off F’s concerns, shaking his head fondly. “It’s not like it matters now anyway. If you’re not married, you don’t have an anniversary to remember.”

“It was June 7th.” Fiddleford declared through gritted teeth, swinging around to face Stanford, the company ring removed completely now, clenched in his fist. “We had a summer weddin’ on the
beach, and a pelican stole Pat’s bouquet. You would’ve known, since we invited you, but you
didn’t come. Didn’t seem to care too much about it, but I did. And I still do.”

Frowning at Fiddleford’s sudden defiance like it was a particularly irritating mosquito, Ford
opened his mouth to shut down this little outburst, only to be interrupted again. “Fiddleford –“

“Just like I care about Tate’s birthday. About his first science fair. About his graduation. About
Pat’s Ma’s funeral. I cared about every one o’ those things, and there’s no way in Sam Hill I’d
forget any o’ them, and you took them from me!”

Fiddleford hurled the company ring across the floor at Stanford and it bounced off the tiled floor
with a resonant chime.

Rather than appearing confused or perplexed by these accusations, Stanford simply pinched the
bridge of his nose and sighed, frustration lacing his exhale.

“Fiddleford, you’re being hysterical. You’re always so emotional.”

“I’m emotional? Well I think I got reason to be! I don’t wanna work for you no more, not when
you’re erasin’ memories and manipulatin’ me and ruining my marriage!!”

“We are men of science, Fiddleford. Think things through before you go about throwing baseless
accusations at me.”

“But it ain’t baseless, is it? I can remember now. I didn’t just work through these priceless family
moments, too passionate about what we were doin’ and the paycheck that comes with it to
remember what’s really important. I remember askin’ you for time off. Beggin’ you for even just a
weekend to –“

“Do you really think I’d trust you enough to leave just like that, whenever you felt like it, knowing
what you know?” Ford interjected loudly, talking over Fiddleford, departing from all pretence of
innocence. “When you are the only one who knows about Bill, about where he is, what he’s
capable of, what he’s done? Whether or not I like it, he is the foundation, the literal bedrock of this
institution and the instant I let anyone who knows about him out of my sight there’s no telling who
you could tell. What he could make you do! You could have made a deal with him.”

“I – I would never!” Fiddleford protested, cowed by Stanford now somewhat, the taller man
cutting an intimidating figure in his paranoia, his anger making the room feel smaller somehow.

“But you have. You’ve done it before, you see.” Shaking his head and laughing, Stanford gestured
at F with his hand. “And if I hadn’t found the tape attached to your memory ray, I may have never
known. And I’m sure you’d prefer it that way, wouldn’t you? That I’d just forget your disloyalty?
But I can’t, you see, because now I know it’s in your nature.”

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But I can’t, you see, because now I know it’s in your nature.”

Fiddleford stood dumbfounded by this new side of Ford as Stanford continued to vent, confirming
Fiddleford’s suspicions.

“You’d always choose your family over me. Not just over me, over the safety of the world.”
Stanford insisted, wrestling his tone back into a less maniacal register, observing clinically the way
Fiddleford’s clenched hand shook at his side, inching across the room away from Stanford. “And
you’re doing it now.”

Rather than argue, Fiddleford’s bottom lip wobbled, and he tried to compose himself, standing up
tall and forcing the emotion from his tone.
“I’m sorry you feel that way Stanford. However, all things considered, your view of my ‘nature’ don’t change my decision. I quit!”

“You’re not allowed to quit.” Stanford rebuked him, his tone gentle but stern, gesturing to the ring on the floor. “I’m giving you a chance now to put that back on and come to your senses.”

“Me come to my senses? You’re the one who – I got rights as an employee! You can’t keep me here!”

“Can’t I?” Stanford questioned, stepping into Fiddleford’s space.

Fiddleford’s eyes darted between the man he had once considered a friend, and the creature his friend had once considered a partner, trapped within a cryotube, Stanford’s prisoner forever. The blue light from the cubes in the power converter cast an eerie glow over the sub level lab and Stanford’s eyes were obscured by the light reflecting off Ford’s glasses, sending chills down Fiddleford’s spine.

Panicking, feeling cornered and out of options, Fiddleford screwed his eyes shut and threw a punch at Ford, but it never landed.

Opening his eyes slowly, F could see his body surrounded in a pale blue glow, freezing his limbs in place.

Stanford glanced at him through the heavy frames of his glasses in a resigned sort of way, one hand resting on the blue stone embedded in his tie pin.

“Forget about leaving Fiddleford. I need you here.”

“I – I need to get away from you.” Fiddleford stuttered, watching Stanford straighten up, commanding the blue forcefield restraining his limbs. “You’re a monster.”

In that instant, Fiddleford was thrown back telekinetically, his head impacting with the wall behind him, knocking him out. He sprawled unconscious on the floor as the blue glow dimmed and Bill’s whistling and cheering sounded out.

“Bravo! Bra-vo! Spectacular, truly. I would clap honestly, but you know how it is. Seriously though, quality entertainment, Sixer. You’re a shoe-in for the Oscar.”

Scowling and doing his best to ignore Bill, Stanford picked up the company ring from the ground and strode over to Fiddleford, checking his head for bruising before sliding the ring back on his finger securely.

“It’s in your nature. So dramatic. This was a fantastic encore from the previous encore, I gotta say. I’m looking forward to the next installment of this, I’m telling you.”

“Will you shut up?” Stanford hissed sharply. “He wasn’t even with you for five minutes, five minutes, before he made the decision not to trust me, and you just – you do this every time!”

“Aww, don’t be like that, Sixer. He trusts you. The other you that is.” Bill laughed as Ford’s mood only darkened. “Boy, he really is better than you in every conceivable way, huh? After all, he didn’t just knock out his so-called best friend and wipe his memory countless times just so he would stay on and help with this whole vanity project of an institute. And let’s not even get started on the whole ruining Spec’s marriage thing, hoo boy! That was messy.”

“That was – you – “ Ford pointed accusingly at the cryotube, his words failing him.
“With me trapped down here, there’s only so much you can pin on me before you have to step up and take accountability for your own bad choices, Fordsy. I can’t make you do anything.” Bill shrugged his shoulders with a smile.

“He – he wouldn’t have come down here in the first place if you hadn’t been playing around with the lights. It’s you who –“

“Actually, we can reach around and pin that one on you as well. I wouldn’t have enough power to influence the mains if it weren’t for all the juicy worship pouring out of that doppelgänger of yours.”

“He’s a fool.” Stanford scowled and clenched his fist, glaring at it.

“I can see the resemblance.” Bill teased helpfully.

Stanford’s jaw twitched, and he glared up at Bill’s restraints, striding over to the cryotube, peeling the tape back to look Bill straight in the eye venomously.

“Even you like him better. Everyone he came into contact with, effortlessly he swayed them against me. The interns, Fiddleford.” Ford glanced down at F’s unconscious body, his voice as bitter as coffee. “He must have thought this was an ideal dimension. A better world. Successful and famous, flush with resources, conducting experiments and pursuing science day in day out, making the world better. I’m rich and respected, Fiddleford is rich and respected. The institute is renowned and respected, even if it’s built on –“

“Lies. Secrets and lies. Enough to ruin you forever.” Bill gloated, his voice thick with glee, his yellow eyes lidded smugly, gazing fondly down at Stanford. “Constantly hanging over your head, torturing you.”

“He was going to kill you, you know.” Stanford moved his finger closer to the button on the control panel, temptation growing. “I could do the same. I could do what he does.”

“Then do it.” Bill goaded, looking down at Ford imperiously. “Do it already. Kill me and let Fiddleford leave you and throw yourself through a portal somewhere to go be alone in the universe, just like he did. Go on, I dare you.”

Ford’s hand shook over the button, inching closer to it but stopping as though repelled by some invisible force. By the sheer thought of being left alone with his misdeeds, without a soul to turn to or pin it on. His breathing laboured as he struggled with the prospect, before he exhaled sharply and spun on his heel, turning away from the control panel and covering his face with his hands.

“I can’t do it.”

“Pathetic. The only one trapping anyone here is you. You even do it to yourself.” Bill sneered, and Stanford rubbed his hands over his face, glancing to the side at Fiddleford once again, contemplating what to do with him.

“Well at least I’m thorough.” Ford quipped, rubbing at his stubble. Bill laughed, and Stanford sighed, looking up at his other trapped companion, mulling over the situation. “Now I’ve got to wipe his memory again.”

“That’s terrible. What an inconvenience for you. How hard your life must be.” Bill pointed out sarcastically.

“Easy for you to say. You just have to hang in there.” Stanford grunted, trying to heave
Fiddleford’s body across the floor of the lab towards the lift. “Criticising while I do all the work around here.”

“Oh sure, I’m only powering your portal, keeping the lights on, etcetera etcetera.” Bill said airily. “Now, if I helped you drag bodies around, then I’d be pulling my weight. Obviously.”

“Sarcasm is –" Ford huffed out a frustrated breath, having dragged Fiddleford over to the elevator door. “Incredibly helpful, really.”

“For a genius, you sure are the dumbest piece of shit I ever encountered. You could have just used the amulet to move him, you know.” Bill pointed out indulgently.

“Oh.” Ford realised, somewhat sheepishly.

“I think you just like making life harder for yourself.” Bill observed. “You must enjoy being miserable.”

“Apparently so, if I put up with you.” Stanford dusted his hands off and put his hands on his hips, looking down at Fiddleford and then back up at Bill, suddenly pensive. “It’s funny, isn’t it. How in this dimension I got everything I ever wanted, but everyone related to that outcome is miserable because of it.”

“I wouldn’t say it’s funny – ha ha.” Bill remarked. “Besides, not everyone’s miserable here. It’s mostly just you.”

“Name one person who’s happier in this dimension given the circumstances. One single person.” Ford argued and began listing names. “Fiddleford isn’t, his family isn’t, I’m certainly unhappy, and I can hardly imagine Stanley is doing any better out there in the world without me. So who –“

“Oh Sixer, always so blind to what’s literally right in front of you.” Bill teased with a melodramatic sigh, his eyes curving gleefully.

Stanford blinked, before gesturing at the cryotube. “Well, you’re certainly not happy, you’re a glorified battery for heavens sake. Surely this couldn’t have been what you wanted.”

“But don’t you see, Sixer –” Bill’s grin stretched maniacally, his words obsessively deranged, sending shivers down Ford’s spine as they echoed through the lab’s speakers, the ardour in his yellow slitted eyes haunting Stanford down to his core.

“I always wanted for us to be monsters together.”

Ford put the tape back onto the cryotube, shielding himself from Bill’s slitted yellow gaze once more, and repressed the part of him that wanted that too.

The city that Stanford landed in was a backwater town at the edge of the dimensional instability leading to the nightmare realm. It lurked just beyond the city’s limits, looming, a horrendous gash in the sky above.

The people in the city were poor, and they lived their lives burdened by fear, an attack threatened with every passing henchmaniac that departed through the rip in the sky. Sometimes there were
quiet periods, times when no one was coming or going to the nightmare realm beyond, times when life for the citizens in this town regained a shred of normalcy.

This was one of those brief windows of normalcy. Asking around the town while gathering some last minute supplies and mustering his courage, the townsfolk revealed that they had seen some of Bill’s monsters entering the nightmare realm about an hour before Ford arrived, but it was only a small group of them. It was the first cohort of monsters they'd seen for a long while, Bill’s retinue of investors slowly running dry as he failed to deliver results.

“There was a time.” One shopkeeper whispered surreptitiously to Stanford. “When thousands of creatures lined up in our town for a chance to join Cipher’s party, and he kept promising that it would happen soon, just wait. But it’s been thirty years since then, and lots of ‘em stopped waiting. You can’t wait forever.”

“I heard he almost called the whole thing off at one point.” Another clerk chipped in. “Don’t know how he would have managed to do that though. Too many deals tied up in this party of his. Threads and threads of fate. He sure had enough rope to hang himself with. I reckon, rather than admit defeat, he just keeps stringing them along. Tangled up in his own clever puppetry.”

“If that party ever happens, our town is dead for sure. First one wiped off the map after he gets that foothold on Earth. I’ve heard whispers. He’s always planned to expand. That compass said so himself.”

“That compass has a big mouth.”

While gossip thrived in this poor ailing city, religion and poverty seemed to go hand in hand.

“Looking for your courage are you?” One preacher asked Stanford, calling out to him as he passed their congregation. “An act of redemption perhaps?”

“I am looking to … correct a mistake.” Stanford admitted, slowing his pace only slightly so as not to be impolite.

“Then you should pray. Pray to the axolotl to bring redemption into your life.”

“I don’t pray to absent gods. Excuse me.” Ford said, trying to brush off this preacher’s concern.

“I will pray for you, then.” The preacher said, pushing blithely onward. “That the great axolotl who controls the powers of redemption may reach into your life and ordain that the wrongs of your fate are righted, and that the path to a better future is within your reach.”

“I know my fate.” Stanford said stubbornly, Jheselbraum’s words ringing in his head. He had the face of the man destined to kill Bill. That was his destiny.

“Fate is a preordained path. It cares little for the complexities of the soul. Of the balance our actions have for the good and evil that resonates around us. The ripples left behind after that great act of fate pierces reality. The consequences. Redemption makes good things grow from the consequences of destiny, so a better path may be forged from the fire.” The preacher said solemnly.

One of the members of his congregation, an old woman, approached Stanford as he was trying to leave and pressed a talisman in his six fingered hand, despite his protestations, beseeching him.

“Take this token, child, so that the great axolotl may watch over you, and so you may choose redemption when the crossroads nears.”
“No, thank you.” Stanford wrenched his hands away from the old woman, the talisman dropping on the floor, rejecting her token. “I won’t be relying on trinkets.”

Brushing her off, Ford continued on his way, arming himself, planning, until his courage was a concrete thing he could hold in his hands. It was a reassuring weight, like the blaster strapped to his back.

Unholstering it, Stanford stood before the rip in space time, watching the kaleidoscopic colours swirl in that infinite second of indecision before resolve took its place.

He was Stanford Pines, and it was time to meet his destiny.

Charging forward, he flung himself into the dimensional rip.

Straight into the heart of the nightmare realm.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter is dedicated to gaily-daily (passionateartist) who made my days very gay (in the ye olde way, not in the rampantly homosexual way, I manage that just fine on my own) with their lovely well thought out comments.

I hope you all enjoyed the chapter! The next few chapters will be a bit more light hearted and next chapter we have a game of cat and mouse at the Quadrangle of Quonfusion, Kryptos being Kryptos, and we find out if Bill listens to skrillex. Riveting stuff. Stay tuned and stay safe during the pandemic. I'm cheering you all on and applauding your social responsibility!

Works inspired by this one: Chaos of the Spheres ▲ [fanarts] by Thelema_Rhoias

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!