Summary

The Barrier has been broken. Frisk has settled down happily with a loving monster family. Everything should be perfect. But as the past comes crawling back and as a bond of unfathomable power between two people is realised, the man who speaks in hands reaches out from the void in search of the child who Saved them all…

Or, the story in which the writer tests the limits of her ability to torture one skeleton.

Notes

(There's a fair bit to say before we begin so bear with me, but if you'd rather scroll down and skip the author's note, still maybe check in on the trigger warnings because, uh, there's a lot of those).
In this story, Frisk will also be portrayed as a girl. Please try to keep an open mind and remember Frisk's gender is up to the player. Frisk's gender bears no significance to the
plot of this fic, just like it bears no significance in the game. You can read Frisk as nonbinary or male if you want to in your head, and if using alternate pronouns in the reviews makes you feel more comfortable, then feel free. That being said, I mean to continue using female pronouns for Frisk, if only within the context of this fic. Thank you.

This story also draws inspiration from some Undertale authors vastly superior to me – mainly, Zarla's Handplates comics, but also some from ctzha's The Purpose, ABadTime's BOTWOT, a bit of PastelClark's Not as Simple as a Happy Ending, and talkingsoup's phenomenal The Scientist series. Cover art is done by the lovely tyl95 on deviantART, originating from his Undertale comic The River's Warning, and you can find it [here](http://www.deviantart.com/).

**Trigger warnings:** There are a lot of these – this is one dark story, so specific warnings will be posted on individual chapters, but main/general ones to look out for are some violence/body horror, inferences to depression & alcoholism, and child abuse/experimentation/torture.
When Sans was seven, he got a little brother.

Tap-tap. Tap-tap-tap.

Twitch, twitch.

Tap. Tap-tap-tap-tap-tap.

Twitch, twitch. Kick.

Tap-tap-tap --

“Stop that.”

Sans drew his forehead away from where it had been pressed to the Plexiglas tube and reluctantly let his hand drop to his side. After taking in the long, expectant look, Sans back-pedalled a few steps.

“But I like it when he twitches like that.”

“He’s not alive yet.”

“Yeah, that’s what you say. But how come he keeps twitching then if he ain’t alive?”

“Isn’t.”

“Whatever.”

“Isn’t.”

“… isn’t alive.”

“It’s a reflex, a simple physical spasm. He won’t be ready for a few more weeks.”

“How many weeks?”

“Until the body is strong enough to be removed from the solution, at which point the soul can be safely kindled from the dormant state it’s in right now. It was the same with you, you
know.”

“Oh. But, how many?”

*Sigh.* “Six or seven.”

Sans eyed the new skeleton with fascination. He wanted to go up near the tube again. The new skeleton just looked so *still,* floating there in the blue and green magic-based solution. If he didn’t kick every once in a while Sans worried he was dead. “… why are you making him again?”

“That’s my business, not yours.”

“But you always answer my questions! Always! And you said you always would! You said!”

“So long as they concern you, yes. This doesn’t.”

Sans backed down, staring at his feet. He chewed on the sleeve of his oversized sweater. “Are you gonna get rid of me after?”

“That’s ridiculous, Sans. Where in the Underground did you get that idea?”

“I dunno. ’cause you made him after you messed up with me, and maybe you don’t want me anymore. Like maybe… you want someone new.” Sans lifted a hand self-consciously to his right eye socket, prodding at the bandage. It was itchy. He hated the bandage. It was stupid. He didn’t get why he had to keep wearing it—and for a whole other week more, too, even though the accident had happened ages ago. That stuff Gaster had told him about having to shield it Just in Case of Side Effects was stupid, too. It wasn’t like it mattered if there were Side Effects in his right eye anymore, anyway, *seeing* as it was useless now. Ha-ha.

“Stop that.”

He’d been tugging at the bandage again. Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets. “Sorry.”

“I am not going to ‘get rid’ of you, Sans. But yes, after your… accident, having two of you will probably be for the better, and more efficient besides. It’ll be a year before I’ll really be able to start working with him anyway, just like I had to wait a year with you.”

Sans jumped when he suddenly felt a hand lay on his shoulder, then his breathing evened out again. As much as it ever did with physical contact, anyway.

“Why don’t you head on home? You can watch television until I get back, if you like. We’re done for today.”

Sans sighed, but began to make his way out of the room. He cast a glance over his shoulder at the new skeleton on his way, however, and stopped. “We’re gonna get to know each other, though. Like, you’re not gonna keep one of us shut up down here. ’cause that’d suck. I’ll get to… grow up with him and stuff?”

“Raising you separately would only overcomplicate things, yes.”

“So he’d be like… my brother?”

“… if you like. Now go. I still have things to do down here. You should probably make yourself something to eat.”
Sans went, making his careful way through the basement lab and to the elevator – navigating without depth perception still took some getting used to, though he was steadily improving. By the end of the week, he’d be ready to return to school. Perfect timing, too – the other children would inevitably have ended up laughing at him over the bandage, and he already spent enough time out of school as it was.

He made cereal for dinner, left the dirty bowl on the table, then headed up to his bedroom to read his comic books. He heard the front door open and shut downstairs, but he was left undisturbed. He was usually left undisturbed, especially these days.

But at midnight, he snuck out of the house through his bedroom window, trotting through the winding streets of New Home all the way to the lower labs, where he made a beeline for the Plexiglas tube. Alone, he tapped as much as he wanted, and the new skeleton—his brother—twitched and kicked away.

oOo

The new skeleton came out of its tube while Sans was at school. Or, more accurately, while Sans was skipping school, out in the main caverns of Waterfall. He’d been skipping school more and more often lately, and his grades were showing it. Well. Except for math.

Sans was really good at math.

But he hated school. He hated the teachers who cast him strange, pitying looks when they thought he wasn’t paying attention. He hated the other kids, who made fun of him and excluded him from their games, and who were all so painfully stupid they made Sans want to bash his skull against his desk until he dusted. He hated the schoolwork, which was either too easy or too boring or both. Sans was big enough to walk to and from school by himself now, and taking the ferry over to Waterfall instead of walking to New Home Academy wasn’t much of a task.

He liked Waterfall, liked the stones that glinted in the cave ceiling. He knew it like the back of his hand. Though the glittering stones could be found in most of the rooms along Waterfall’s main road, there were countless other little caves and grottos jutting off the path, which led to countless more little caves and grottos, and then there were other caverns that were so small and hidden only children could have explored them, or even known of their existence.

It was these little rooms Sans favoured. He could sit or lie down on the muddy cave floor for hours, just watching the glinting stones. They gave him a sense that there was really something out there, something beyond the Underground, beyond Gaster, even beyond the stars on the Surface. They were something that belonged to him and him alone. Nobody could find him in these caves.

When he got home, around the same time he would have done if he’d actually gone to school, the house was still. Quiet. Almost dead.

Sans set his schoolbag down by the door and looked around. Gaster hadn’t told him to report down to the lower labs, had he? He was sure he hadn’t. Maybe he was just doing paperwork, or monitoring the new skeleton.

The child faltered before venturing further into the house, peering into the kitchen. Empty. He was turning back to the living room when a voice at the top of the stairs made him jump.

“Come upstairs. Quietly, now.”

Sans looked up at Gaster in suspicion. He was standing at the top of the stairs, seemingly
expectantly. He was still in his lab coat. “Why?”

“Quietly, I said.”

At those words, his soul fluttered anxiously in his ribcage, thrumming a nervous rhythm like a skittish rabbit’s. Had someone from the school come to tell Gaster that he was hardly ever there? Had someone come about that time he’d been sent to the principal’s office for talking back to his teacher in History class? Was Gaster going to lock him in the closet again for the night?

But he really no other choice, so up he went, gripping the banister. As he approached the top of the stairs, Gaster turned on his heel and vanished into Sans’ bedroom. Sans followed.

At first glance, nothing seemed terribly amiss: his “posters,” pages torn from textbooks and encyclopaedias about physics and outer space were still taped crookedly to the walls. His curtains were still drawn, as Gaster always made him draw them shut. His bed was still unmade, his teddy bear resting on top of his pillow where he always left it. His desk was still a scattered mess of papers and pencils and crayons and books. But his comic books had been organised neatly on the bookshelf instead of lying in a heaping pile, and his toys had been stashed away somewhere from where they’d been strewn across the carpet. And, lying in the middle of the floor, was an unfamiliar large basket covered by a piece of cloth. Gaster was kneeling by it.

Sans, who had stopped in the doorway, frowned and stared. “Is that… uh, a new thing?”

Gaster snorted at that.

“If you like. Come. I removed the new skeleton from the solution this morning. He is ready.”

All apprehension forgotten, Sans bolted forward and threw himself to his knees by the basket’s side. “That’s him? Really? Is he really? Can I see?”

There was no response. Gaster brushed the curtain aside, reached into the basket, and pulled out a bundle of blankets barely bigger than Sans’ teddy bear. Sans scrabbled over to get a better view, his eyes very wide. There, swaddled in pale green blankets he recognised from the lab, was a skeleton. The same skeleton Sans had watched floating in the tube for nearly six months, only now—he!—was out of the solution and he was alive. It was a living skeleton with a soul, just like him, but tiny. Sans had never realised just how small the new skeleton was until now. Had he been that little once, too?

“… whoa,” was all he could say.

“Hmm. Yes. He is larger than most newborns — while in the tube, his growth was accelerated — far too many risks involved if he’d been removed before, not to mention all the unnecessary fuss. He is about the size of a three-month-old infant, and his intellectual capacity should catch up relatively quickly — that is one benefit of the solution. You caught up even quicker than I expected you to yourself. Astonishing, really. Perhaps it will be the same with this one.” There was a pause. “… I suppose you’d like to hold him?”

Sans’ head bobbed vigorously up and down, holding out his arms. Gaster had taught him how you were supposed to hold babies ages ago.

The skeleton had been sleeping, but as Gaster placed him carefully in Sans’ arms, he stirred and blinked open his eye sockets. Tiny fists opened and closed. He made a little cooing noise. Sans cradled the baby close and careful, just as he’d been taught. The new skeleton yawned widely, showing off his toothless maw, and Sans broke into a grin, running a finger along the baby’s
cheekbone.

“Heya.”

The new skeleton cooed and sort of gurgled some more.

Sans addressed Gaster, though too absorbed in his brother to actually look up. “What’s his font? Or do you not know yet, ’cause he’s just – ”

“Oh, I know his font, certainly. You should have heard him when he woke up. Bawling louder than any skeleton I’ve seen in all my life. It was not difficult to determine his font.”

“What was it?”

“His font, you mean? Papyrus.”

“Papyrus,” Sans mumbled to himself, only tripping over the name a little. “Hey, Papyrus. I’m your big brother.” He stroked the baby’s—Papyrus’—cheekbone again, and a new feeling was kindled in his soul. Something almost warm, warming, the feeling swelling to spread through his bones, through his very marrow, until it filled his entire body and he could feel nothing else.

For here was a creature, tiny, innocent, and defenceless, and whose creator was the same as his own. And he was holding it, holding him, and he was blinking up at Sans without fear. A creature who didn’t know what it was like to be locked in the closet for being bad, who didn’t know what it was like to have to be strapped down on the examination table and get injected with all manner of things that made him sick, or face strange and intimidating machinery. His brother.

His baby brother, who didn’t know how scary and lonely it could all be.

His brother.

His.

And holding him, all Sans could think, all Sans could feel, was an overwhelming desire to look after him, to teach him all that he knew, and to protect him, and make sure he never, ever hurt. He smiled down at his brother, and his brother was—he was, he was sort of smiling back—and he was his.

When Sans finally looked up, Gaster had left the room.

oOo

Gaster came for him in the early evening, when Sans was in his bedroom. He was playing with Papyrus, sat outside his brother’s crib and showing him the flash cards he’d made to teach him the shapes. At six months, he knew Papyrus was too little to make anything more than babbling noises yet, but he also knew his brother was smart, and he picked up on things fast. Gaster called it being an early bloomer.

Now the baby bounced happily where he stood, gripping the bars of his crib to hold himself steady. “Circle,” Sans said, grinning and holding up the appropriate card. “Circle.”

“BAH!” Papyrus replied, and he giggled, apparently pleased with himself.
“Circle.”

“Bah.” Papyrus, having lost interest, promptly dropped onto his bottom and began to play with his toes.

Sans sighed and tossed the cards aside, scooting closer to the crib and leaning over the top of it to stroke Papyrus’ skull.

There was a knock at the door, and Sans jumped and spun on the spot. Gaster was standing, hands folded behind his back.

“Sans. With me.”


“Sans.”

“But Papyrus –”

“Now.” He fixed him with a look that chilled him to the marrow.

There was a pause, and Sans nodded. He reached into the crib a moment and picked up Papyrus by the armpits. “See ya later, baby bones. Sleep tight.” He clicked his teeth against his brother’s skull before setting him back down and making his way out. Gaster, meanwhile, turned on his heel and strode back into the hall and down the stairs.

Sans looked over his shoulder one last time at Papyrus. His brother’s attention was wholly focused on gnawing at a teething ring. He’d be okay.

It’s just a regular old experiment. You don’t gotta be so scared and act like a baby bones, he reprimanded himself.

Sans shut the door to their shared bedroom and went to meet Gaster, but when he reached the foot of the stairs he paused, lingering. He glanced over his shoulder once more when he felt a sudden familiar heaviness weigh on his soul. He didn’t need to look down at his chest to confirm his soul had been turned blue. Although he was prepared for it, he stumbled as Gaster tugged him sharply forward, short legs struggling to keep up with the scientist’s long strides as he was lead out the door and through the streets of New Home, toward the lower labs.

When they got to the elevator, Sans dared to speak. He was nervous, yes, but anything was better than waiting in apprehension, in Gaster’s cold silence. “So, uh. You gonna tell me what we’re doing today?”

Gaster slid his gaze Sans’ way, and the child shifted slightly. There was a pause, weighed down by its lengthiness, then: “The Determination solution is ready.”

Sans had been looking down at his sock feet; now his gaze snapped up. Gaster sounded more excited than Sans had ever heard him. Not that Gaster betrayed excitement very often. Or much of any emotion, really. “The…”

“Yes, Sans.” A ding, and the doors to the elevator slid open. “Do you recall the studies I’ve been working on?”

“Kinda.” Sans stumbled as he felt Gaster give a sharp tug on his soul again. “You said Determination, uh, DT, is linked to the abilities of Saving and Resetting? And, uh, that only beings
“Only beings with high, concentrated amounts of Determination have the ability to Save and Reset, yes.” Gaster’s footsteps clicked on the tiled floor, echoing off the lab’s high ceiling. “And therefore have the ability to manipulate the timeline. Beings with such an ability are what we call…”

“Anomalies,” Sans recited dutifully.

“Indeed,” was all Gaster said. “And only humans have such amounts of Determination. Hence why I have been hard at work studying the souls of the humans who have, thus far, fallen into the Underground. Unfortunately none of the fallen souls have sufficient Determination that they have the abilities of Save and Reset. Not yet, anyway. We only have five at the moment. Those souls prove inferior subjects of study regardless – Determination is needed to manipulate the timeline, but seems a key component in prematurely shattering the Barrier as well.”

Sans paused. “Did you determine that?”

Gaster ignored him. “Despite that. The souls all have at least some Determination, as all humans do. Children especially, it would seem. It certainly helps that the oldest of the humans was but twelve. And each of the five human souls has varying amounts of Determination, varying usefulness. Green? Not terribly Determined. Orange, however…”

“Because orange and red are on the same colour spec-trum,” Sans piped up.

There was a pause. “Yes. Very good, Sans.”

Sans brightened a little, then a new tightness gripped at his soul, different from the kind brought about by blue magic. The lower labs were enormous, he knew, spreading below much of Hotland and a decently-sized portion of the capital as well. They formed a complex labyrinth of corridors only a fraction of which Sans had actually seen. He now realised that Gaster had led him to an unfamiliar part of the labs, and that unfamiliarity was making him feel very small.

As Gaster lead him into yet another unfamiliar corridor, Sans’ steps slowed to a stop. The room they were in was huge, larger than any Sans had visited before. From the ceiling loomed a machine, great and imposing and about five times Sans’ size. It reminded him of an animal skull—of Gaster’s blaster attacks, specifically, which he liked to call Gaster Blasters because the rhyme made him giggle—complete with a bifurcated jaw and two gaping holes like eye sockets. Thick wires curled from the machine’s top into the ceiling and out of sight, as if it were just a part of some much greater, hungrier creature whose head was peeking out from around a corner.

“…. What’s that?” Sans heard himself whisper.

“Ah, that’s right, you haven’t had the honour of seeing it yet, have you?” Gaster stopped before the machine, placing a hand against one of its curling mandibles as if stroking the muzzle of a beloved pet. A fond smile flickered across his face to complete the effect. “I finished working on this old thing just a little after you came out of your tube. I have been examining the human souls ever since, trying to discover the best way to put the Determination to use, pouring over my blueprints for more sleepless nights than I care to recall.”

Sans barely heard him, unable to tear his gaze away from the machine. He realised, dimly, that he
was trembling, and this time the tug on his soul took him by surprise. He nearly fell to the ground tripping over his own feet.

“Come on.”

Gaster led him past the room and through another few corridors, then, finally, into an enclosed room. It took Sans a moment to place it as the examination room in which Gaster performed most of his experiments, and he wondered whether it truly the same room, and that they’d taken a detour through the labs; or if Gaster had many of these rooms spread throughout the labs, all of them identical to one another.

It probably didn’t matter, anyway.

Yet still—it was familiar, and Sans took comfort in that. In the middle of the room was a metal examination table, and to the side of the examination table was a small tray table on wheels. Familiar pieces of medical equipment were already laid out upon it—syringe, scalpel, bottle of disinfectant. The far side of the room housed a desk with a computer, and a series of machines and strange equipment, most of which Sans had no names for.

Those machines had always been scary-looking to Sans, but they were nothing next to the Determination Extractor.

“Shirt off,” Gaster said, waving a hand as he dropped into his desk chair. He let go of his grip on Sans’ soul, but Sans didn’t feel any lighter. He pulled off his sweater and T-shirt and bundled them up before tossing them into a corner and climbing up onto the examination table without being asked.

There was only a very short pause before Gaster summoned his magic hands, and Sans lay still and flat on his back as the hands fastened the table’s straps around his wrists, ankles, waist, and forehead. The restraints kept him even from squirming very much, but he could arch his spine to try and get a look of what Gaster was doing from his limited vision. From what little he could see, the scientist was in the process of entering something into the computer. Meanwhile, the magic hands fastened a series of electrodes to Sans’ skull.

Sans swallowed, closed his eyes, and tried to relax.

“Sans.” His eyes snapped open again to see Gaster standing over him, holding a syringe filled with… something. Something red, a bit viscous. Sans had never seen blood before, but he supposed it must look a little like that. “Have you gathered what it is we’re going to be doing today?”

“Um, not everything.”

“Then allow me to explain. As we said, Determination is an ability and substance unique to humans, correct? Key to shattering the Barrier?”

“Yeah…”

“Now, Determination is an incredibly powerful substance. Truly, its potency goes beyond words. So powerful, in fact, that pure Determination would doubtlessly destroy a monster’s body. After all, we are not a very strong species, physically speaking.” Sans waited for the usual reminder that he and his brother were not, in fact, monsters, not really, but it never came. “Combine the Determination with magic suited to a specific monster’s body, however, just a tiny amount, and… well…” Gaster titled the syringe so that the light reflected off of it, almost
contemplatively. “Even a little goes quite a long way.”

If Sans had had lips, he would have licked them in his nervousness. “So that’s – ”

“Obviously. You are and always have been the vessel that will, one day, destroy the Barrier. I created you with that purpose in mind, and no other, as you know well. The machine extracts Determination from the human souls, but it serves no purpose beyond that. I have taken some Determination—a very, very small amount, from only one of the souls—and combined it with the kind of magic best suited to skeleton bodies. Over time, I expect, your body will develop a tolerance for it. By that point, the substance will have become a part of you, just as much as your bone marrow or even your magic.”

Sans kept his eyes on the syringe. “Lemme guess. If my body’s gotta develop a tolerance for it, that means it’s gonna hurt, right?”

“Most likely, yes, I’m afraid.”

“Hurt bad?”

Gaster ignored him, instead swiping his humerus with a cotton ball soaked in antiseptic. “Are you ready?”

Sans wasn’t ready. Not by a long shot. Gaster had referred to the Determination Trials before, but he’d never known they had to do with him, and hadn’t paid very much attention. They sounded terrifying.

*Just shots,* he reminded himself. *Just regular old shots. No big deal.*

He nodded.

A shuffle, and the needle went in with a slight sting.

For a moment, nothing. Sans almost let himself relax. Almost.


And Sans screamed.

His spine arched. His fingers clenched against the edge of the examination table. His feet kicked desperately as much as they could given the restraints, and he screamed and screamed. Every one of his senses seemed to have shut down, so this pain was all he knew. He was dying, he was going to die, it hurt it hurt it felt like his very marrow had been set on fire he was going to die the pain was going to kill him and he screamed –

Blackness took over faster than he could ever have hoped for.

oOo

The sensation of being awake, washing over him slowly.

Something soft and lumpy beneath him and laid overtop of him, too.
The hum of machinery, a thousand miles away.

A strange, warm feeling in his sternum, and in his soul, a tingling sensation. Like something was waking up inside of him.

Dull pain and *exhaustion*, also distant, but fast approaching.

Alive. He was alive.

Sans cracked open one eye, then the other.

He was lying in a bed in another part of the labs, in the infirmary. There was only one bed, of course, but Sans had been here before, when an experiment made him so sick, or left him in so much pain, he was too weak to go home to his room straight away. Gaster had kept him here for almost a whole week the time he broke his arm last year.

“Ah. Excellent. You’re finally awake.”

Sans startled, then turned his head. Gaster had been sitting on his right side, his chair positioned perfectly in his blind spot.

Still, now that he’d come to his senses, Sans couldn’t bring himself to do much more than groan and nod, raising a hand to his skull. Gaster studied him a moment.

“You must be very tired. That’s all right. I’ve deemed you strong enough to walk, once you get your wits about you. You should be able to return to Papyrus. He has… missed you, I believe.”

Painfully Sans pushed himself up into a sitting position. “Why? Was he okay without me to read him a bedtime story? How long was I asleep?”

A heavy pause. “Two days.”

Sans nearly fell off the bed. “Two days?”

Gaster nodded. “Initially, your body reacted poorly to the solution, and you had to be stabilised.”

“Oh.”

“Hmm. Are you thirsty?”

Sans paused before realising that he was. His throat felt dry and rough. He nodded.

As if he’d already anticipated Sans’ response, Gaster stood and walked over to a table on the far side of the room, where a water pitcher and an empty glass sat waiting. Gaster poured the water, then brought it over and passed it to Sans, who grasped it between his hands and gulped it down greedily.

“How do you feel?” asked Gaster once Sans had drained the glass, eyeing him carefully.

“Still really sore. My head hurts.”

“That is to be expected. But besides soreness, you feel fine?”
“I guess so…” Sans rubbed his humerus self-consciously, and realised Gaster had dressed him in a sleep T-shirt, though he was still wearing the same sweatpants and socks. “But I still feel pretty bad. ’m not real hungry…” He held back the whimper that threatened to escape between his teeth. “Can I go home now?”

“You feel strong enough?”

“Prob’ly.” He didn’t really, but he’d manage. He didn’t want to stay here any longer than he had to.

“All right then. Stand.”

Sans climbed carefully from the bed. He felt dizzy, but he was steadier on his feet than he thought he’d be. Even after stepping away from the bed, he could stand without holding onto anything, and he only swayed a tiny bit.

A pause, silence stretched out taut between them, like an elastic band on the verge of snapping. Then Gaster waved a hand. “Very well, then. You may go. It’s quite early in the morning; I doubt anyone will see you in the streets, and you’re clever enough to think of a good lie regarding your condition if you do.”

Sans nodded, but something held him in place. He hesitated. “Uh, Gaster?”

“Hmm?”

“You, uh, you… you said, uh…” Sans scratched nervously at his inner wrist. “You said my body, uh, didn’t react too good to the Determination stuff, right? ’cause it hurt really bad.”

“Yes, but it was to be expected, being introduced to a new substance, especially one such as Determination. But the short of it is that, yes, your body reacted quite poorly at first.”

“Did I almost die?”

“I stabilised you too soon for that to be a risk, but had I tarried, then you might have come much closer to death’s door, yes.”

Sans dared to be hopeful. “So the experiments are a failure then.”

“Pardon me?”

“The experiments, they’re a failure. My body reacted bad, so you ain’t gonna do them anymore.”

“No, I am.”

Sans balked. “No?”

“No. After I stabilised you, your body absorbed the solution. The marrow I extracted from you, as well as the small layer of bone I took, showed very promising results. The Determination Trials will absolutely continue. They are most imperative, and you’re being most unreasonable.”

Sans paused. “Well, maybe I don’t wanna do the dumb DT trials anymore.”

“I beg your pardon?”
“I don’t wanna.”

“You refuse to cooperate?”

Sans paused, then stood a little straighter. “Yeah. Yeah, I do.”

“Very well, then.” Gaster turned his attention to his notes and his back to Sans, and the child’s brow furrowed.

“Wait… for real?”

“Yes. You refuse to cooperate, then that’s all good and well. The Determination Trials, however, are invaluable to my studies and to our endgame of destroying the Barrier. So if you refuse to be a subject, I shall simply have to turn to your brother instead.”

Colour drained from Sans’ face. “You can’t.”

“And why not?”

“You, you can’t! He’s just a little baby, you can’t!”

“And yet, if you refuse, then you’re telling me you’d rather he be subject. He is small, and may suffer far worse symptoms, but there is nothing to be done about it. We shall simply have to deal with any problems as they come.”

Sans’ hands balled into tiny fists. “You… you suck! Go inject yourself with Determination and other weird stuff and see how bad it hurts! You’re horrible! I hate you! You’re a horrible scientist and I hate you!”

He cut himself off, breathing heavily.

The slap came out of nowhere, sending Sans’ head snapping sharply to the left. He teetered on the spot from the sheer force of the blow, one hand raising up to cradle his stinging right cheekbone. Sans looked down at his toes a moment, and when at last he lifted his head, his small features were twisted into an expression of hatred, the embers of a cyan glow kindling in his good eye.

“You’re not gonna hurt my brother.”

Gaster’s expression was impassive. “Are you going to be a willing subject and follow through with the Determination Trials, then? I only need one participant.”

The crushing reality landed on him then. Him or his brother. It wasn’t like there was a way out, and he’d been stupid to think otherwise. The glow in his eye sputtered, coughed, and died, until he was looking down at the ground again, tone dejected and eyelights gone dark. “… yeah.”

“Excellent. No need to change our protocol, then. Now, if you consider yourself ready to return home to your brother, I suggest you do so.”

Sans didn’t encounter a soul on the walk home, much to his relief. He was shaking so much his bones rattled. Getting out of the labs hadn’t been too bad, but it was nearly half a mile’s walk
home, and Sans was starting to feel as if his legs could barely support his weight. It didn’t help that he was still aching all over, and that the strange tingling in his chest had given way to a burning sensation.

Oh well. At least he’d get to miss school tomorrow for sure, if it even was a school day. He couldn’t remember anymore.

Still, he continued trekking on, even when he had to duck twice onto side streets to sit against a wall for a few minutes, recover his breath and his strength.

Just over half an hour later, he reached the house, and it had never seemed more welcome. Once he finally managed to get the door open, he stumbled inside and up to his room.

The lights were out, and the room was silent save for Papyrus’ gentle, rhythmic breathing. A quick check proved him to be peaceful and fast asleep. Good. That was good. Sans sagged against the crib as he reached inside to stroke his brother’s skull a moment. The baby didn’t even twitch. Sans smiled a little, then took a few steps back and dropped onto his own bed.

He was tired. He wanted to have a nap. Just a little one.

Without bothering to change into his pyjamas, Sans pulled his blankets over himself and tried to go to sleep. But the burning sensation in his chest was becoming hotter still, and after much tossing and turning, Sans realised it didn’t actually hurt per se. It was just a little… overwhelming. Distracting. And it was definitely keeping him awake.

He opened his eyes and stroked his sternum, expecting the strange sensation to spread to his fingers, like the slight burning you felt when you brought your hand too near a candle flame, but he felt nothing. Curious now, he sat up a little in bed and poked at his soul experimentally. Still nothing.

Another poke, then suddenly, the feeling in his chest swelled, and he felt warm and empowered all at once. He felt strong.

His fingers twitched, and then, a tiny bone materialised before him, emitting a faint, muted glow. Sans’ eyes widened, and he stared. The bone hovered in the air, just a few inches in front of him.

Magic.

He was doing magic.

He turned his hand this way and that, and the bone followed his commands as he guided it up and down, left and right. His fist closed, and the bone vanished.

“Whoa,” he whispered to himself. And he tried again. This time, he drew energy from the strange new feeling in his chest without even having to think about it. It just felt right, natural somehow, an extension of his body.

A second bone materialised, this one a little larger than the first. Sans amused himself by steering it this way and that, even making it bob up and down rhythmically.

And all of a sudden the ache was fading from his bones; he didn’t even feel tired anymore, just excited, because he was doing magic, finally he was doing magic, and it was easy. At school, they said most monsters’ magic didn’t kick until around age ten. But even in early bloomers, monster children had very little control over their abilities. The big kids at school all had special magic classes in the gym, which explained why the walls, floor, and ceiling were always covered in
scorch marks. Sans used to sit on the playground at recess and watch as the big kids showed off the magic attacks they’d been mastering, when the teachers weren’t around, longing to be able to do the same.

And now here he was, using, controlling his magic, three whole years before any of the kids in his class would even begin to learn.

He grinned to himself, a delighted giggle escaping him. He glanced over at Papyrus, but his brother slumbered on, undisturbed. Drawing more power from the feeling in his soul that he now knew must be the magical energy all big monsters gave off, Sans found himself summoning two, then three, then an entire collection of bone bullets, floating before him, soldiers waiting for his command.

And command them he did, realising there were more patterns he could make. Irregular patterns, summoning more and more bones at will. Swallowing down the urge to shout for joy, Sans concentrated, then tried to do what he’d seen Gaster do. He gathered the bullets a little closer together, then he thrust them out and away from him, in the direction of the door.

Crack. BOOM.

The kickback sent Sans flying back into his headboard, and he winced as his skull thumped against it. When he opened his eyes, he saw that the bones had embedded themselves into the door. They were fading now, but they’d damaged the wood, splintering cracks spiderwebbing from a small, smouldering hole.

In the same moment, Papyrus woke up and began to bawl at the top of his nonexistent lungs. Sans hissed under his breath, moving to climb out of bed and comfort him.

Then, from down the hall, rapid footsteps. They sounded angry.

Sans froze and stared, breathing hard. He hadn’t heard Gaster come in.

The door to his bedroom was whipped open, and Gaster stopped and stood in its threshold.

Gaster stared too—at the demolished door, at the last of the bones that were fading, at Sans sitting rigid on his bed. Their eyes met.

Sans found that he was drawing himself inward, pressing himself against his headboard and holding his teddy bear tightly to his chest. He didn’t dare let his gaze falter.

At some point Papyrus had stopped screaming.

A pause that might have lasted anywhere between ten seconds and ten minutes, and the whole time Sans continued staring, both fearfully and defiantly. And then, without a word, Gaster turned on his heel and left, leaving the door open behind him.

Once he was out of sight, Sans’ shoulders sagged, his bear dropping onto his lap. Sans held up his teddy bear by one ear, studying it. Stupid bear.

Teddy bears were for baby bones. Stupid crybaby baby bones, not big kids who could use magic, who were strong.

He hated that bear.

In a fit of frustration that was novel to him, he summoned another bone, not even realising he was
doing it. He sent the bone flying forward. It embedded itself into the wall, piercing the teddy bear through its chest.

Pinned to the bone skewer, the teddy bear hung there limply, stuffing poking out of its wound. Eventually, the bone dissolved, and without anything to hold it up, the teddy bear fell to the floor.

Stupid, stupid pathetic bear.

Gaster didn’t come running this time, and Sans let his hand fall to his side, dejected. He was really tired.

Eventually, Papyrus’ thin whimpers gave way to rhythmic breathing. Once he was certain his brother wasn’t going to hear him, Sans curled into a ball, hugging himself tightly, and cried himself to sleep.
Just a quick note to let you lovelies know that NWABBW has a tumblr, which you can find right here. There I’ll be posting the odd tidbit of behind the scenes, status updates, answering asks, and posting other related NWABBW content. You can also follow my study blog which is where I indulge my Instagram aesthetic side and also sometimes make content with advice for fellow students. Also feel free to check out my main tumblr if you want to see some of my regular fandom posts and mini-essays, mostly about Undertale, or just hear my daily ramblings.

And of course, thank you to everyone who's commented, bookmarked, or left kudos!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

**Warnings for slight body horror.**

Frisk visited the Underground in her dreams.

She had other dreams too of course, and most of the dreams she had of her time in the Underground were ordinary.

Most, not all.

This time, she was in a dark and endless void. There was a floor of sorts under her, or at least, rather than falling she was sat cross-legged upon some kind of surface, which she could simply sense: she could not necessarily feel it. She was wearing the same clothes she’d worn on her journey through the Underground: a pair of sturdy black shoes, which she’d lost along the way; Capri shorts; and her beloved pink-and-blue striped sweater, which was worn and oversized and slightly moth-eaten, and was the most comfortable thing she owned.

The child before her was also seated cross-legged, only a bit taller than Frisk. His own feet were bare, his expression uncharacteristically solemn, and he wore slacks and a green-and-yellow sweater.

Neither child spoke, their attention focused instead upon the daisy-chains they were making together, though there were no flowerbeds in sight for the daisies to have come from.

Suddenly, the other child stood and tossed down his daisy-chain. It vanished as it fell to the ground. Frisk stood too, lifting a hand to begin weaving the daisy-chain into her hair. Leaving the flowers to the darkness felt wrong, somehow.

“I think,” said the princeling Asriel in a quiet voice, “that it’s time for me to go and you to wake up.”


Asriel wrinkled his little muzzle and shook his head, ears flopping slightly with the movement.
“Oh. Gee, um. I don’t really know.”

“Thanks,” Frisk deadpanned, and Asriel laughed. He had a nice laugh. Had he lived and grown, Frisk thought he might have developed a great and hearty laugh, like his father’s.

“It’ll be okay,” he said. “It’s actually really easy! I think maybe it just happens?”

Frisk tilted her head to consider this, then nodded in agreement. In the past she’d always just woken up in these kinds of dreams, when the time was right.

“It’s kind of happening to me, now. I can feel it!” Asriel scrunched up his face for a moment, eyes screwed tightly shut. When he opened them again, his expression fell back into a peaceful one. “Frisk… you’re… you’re going to do a great job, okay? No matter what you do. Everyone will be there for you, okay?”

Frisk tilted her head, brow furrowing—he’d said those same words to her once before. But she nodded again. Then her frown deepened.

Something was wrong with Asriel.

Something was wrong with his face. It seemed to be crumpling, falling apart, and by the time Frisk realised what was happening it was too late.

“Well…” Asriel smiled, the bottom half of his body crumbling into pieces of soil to form a small patch of dirt beneath him, his face curling in on itself like paper set aflame, his top half shrinking and wilting into the ground, the green wool of his sweater darkening to form a stem. “My time’s running out.” There was hardly any of him left now. “Goodbye.”

And then all that was left was a small golden flower. It turned to Frisk, and the face on its disk blinked up at her, smiling placidly. Slowly Frisk sank to her knees, crawling hesitantly closer. “…Asriel?”

The flower continued smiling at her pleasantly, and gave a slight wriggle. A flash of near-blinding light made Frisk scrabble back, but then the light dimmed to a pleasant, faint glow, and she could make out its source quite clearly: a small, inversed heart, the shape of a monster soul, thrumming gently in the middle of the flower’s stem.

Frisk paused before scuttling closer once again. “Asriel?”

The flower bowed its stem in something like a nod. Then, with a sudden breeze that took the daisy-chain from Frisk’s hair where she’d only begun to weave it in, it crumbled to dust and was gone, taking the dirt patch with it.

Frisk stood, fiddling with the hem of her sweater. She would normally wake up at this point, but she was still here, and now she was unsure of what should follow. After waiting for a moment, she decided to go for a walk until something happened. It wasn’t as if there was anything else to do.

Her shoes clicked against the surface beneath her. It sounded as if she were walking upon tiled floor, and she looked down to see—perhaps she was making her way through Alphys’ labs? Environments had a tendency of simply appearing to her as they needed to in these kinds of dreams, piece by piece. But there was nothing but the same empty blackness under her feet.

And fog. Wisps of mist had formed beneath her, knee-deep, reaching up to stroke her arms and legs like phantom fingers, their touch strangely cool. Suddenly unsettled, Frisk lifted one leg high up before resuming a faster pace. Now she really wanted to wake up.
The wall of fog was lifting, surrounding her, until it nearly overcame the blackness. Against every possibility, shadows seemed to have formed in this empty place, and they crawled and skirted and skittered around her.

Frisk walked faster.

And the world in which she found herself (or was she trapped?) grew dark, darker, yet darker still.

Movement, just before her.

She shuddered and gasped as the darkness seemed to reach for her, the shadows cutting closer, and in the emptiness she heard a sound like her name. But the voice was strange—broken, somehow. Barely understandable.

“It’s just a dream,” she whispered to herself around the fingernail she’d taken to biting without realising it. She repeated it like a mantra. “It’s just a dream, it’s just a dream, it’s just a dream – ”

A shape stepped into view.

At first, Frisk was immediately reminded of her encounter with the other human children, the ones who had fallen before, as they’d helped her fight Flowey before they’d gotten where they were going. They had been blank slates of children, faces shrouded behind clouds of static, exact age and gender impossible to determine, their only distinguishing features the heart-shaped souls that had shone bright and clear in the centres of their chests. As the figure before her now stepped closer, however, it soon became clear that that was not the case. The figure looked to be female, and its face, though obscured by the fog, remained unhidden. At its chest thrummed a soul that was a deep, dark red.

Frisk bit her lip, then raised a hesitant hand and waved. “Hello.” But the figure was already gone.

Frisk rocked back and forth on her heels. The fog seemed to have dissipated, and the empty place did not seem quite so frightening, now. Still, she felt out of place, and she very much wanted to return home. Frisk waited, uncertain, impatient for the moment when she finally woke up. After several minutes went by and nothing happened, she stepped forward and the blank surface beneath her sagged as though struggling to support her weight. Her eyes widened; she didn’t want to fall—

Frisk surged into wakefulness with a thin gasp, and lay in bed for a moment, dazed, the sheets tangled around her legs. She shuddered a little, drawing her arms around herself.

A glance at the clock on the bedside table told her it was 4am.

A dream, she told herself. It had just been a dream. A scary dream, but scary dreams were normal. Frisk had had plenty of ordinary scary dreams in the past, but none about the Underground. None of those kinds of dreams.

Frisk told herself she was being silly.

Then she remembered Asriel crumpling like a wilting flower, remembered the red-souled child and the voice –

No, she definitely didn’t want to be alone tonight. Even if it was just a regular dream, she wanted—no, needed—someone to comfort her. It had taken her some time to realise that there were people who would be there to comfort her when the nightmares came, that there were people who cared
enough to want to. It had taken longer to get used to.

Frisk sat up and swung her legs over the side of the bed, hesitantly placing her bare feet on the wooden floor. It did not give way beneath her. Then she stopped to think a moment.

Normally, when Frisk had bad dreams, she went to Toriel. But her new mother was away at an important conference, in a big city several hours’ bus ride away. That left the rest of her monster family. Her next-best option, then, was Uncle Papyrus. He was very good at cheering anyone up, in any situation, and he always knew how to make her smile

Papyrus it was, then.

Impulsively Frisk padded down the hall as she made her way to Sans and Papyrus’ room, pushing the door open. Her gaze went to Uncle Papyrus’ bed, but it was empty, and neatly made. Her brow furrowed and she was about to slip away and seek comfort from her Auntie Alphys, who was at least warm and kind of squishy and good for cuddling, when a voice sounded from the bed on the far side of the room.

“Hey, kiddo.”

She stepped into the room, closing the door quietly behind her. “Dunkle Sans?”

He sat up, scrubbing a hand down his face. “Whatcha doin’ up, bud? Scary dream?”

She lingered by the door and bit at her thumbnail, nodding shyly. “I was looking for Uncle Papyrus. He’s really good with nightmares.”

Sans gave a chuckle. “Heh. Don’t I know it—he is at that. Anyway, I think he’s out for a morning jog. Wanna curl up here instead?”

Relieved, Frisk nodded, crawling into his bed and pressing herself against him. That a creature made of just bones should be comfortable to cuddle with went against all reason in every way, yet somehow he was. Dunkle Sans wasn’t much taller than she was, and Frisk rested her head against his clavicle and looked up at him. “Morning jog at four?”

“Eh, he’s Papyrus.”

She giggled.

He drew her closer, stroking her hair. It felt nice, even when strands of hair got caught in the joints of his phalanges and he had to yank to free his fingers, and Frisk closed her eyes contentedly. His voice came as a gentle murmur, smooth and subdued. “You wanna tell me about it?”

Frisk opened her eyes and thought. “There was a big dark place,” she said haltingly. “Empty. Like a void?” The stroking fingers faltered for a second. “And, um.” She steadfastly avoided mentioning Asriel. He had asked her to keep his identity a secret, after all. “Then it got really creepy. There was a kid there, a girl I think, and also there was this voice, but it was… weird, and, um, then I stepped and I was…” She blushed, looking down. It sounded so ridiculous and babyish saying it out loud.

“Sure sounds scary,” Sans deadpanned, and Frisk’s head snapped back up in surprise. She hadn’t expected him to say anything like that.

“Yeah, it was.” She shook her head. “But I’m okay. It was just a dream.”
“Hmm. Yeah. Dream. Guess I’m not as good with bad dreams as your mum, though, huh?”

“Nuh-uh. Mum is the best. You’re still pretty good, though. Almost as good as Uncle Papyrus.”

Sans cocked a brow. “Oh? Ah, geez. You’re flatterin’ me, kid.” He ruffled her hair, and Frisk relaxed, smiling a little. She held him a bit tighter, wrapping her arms around him slightly, burying her nose into the fabric of the oversized T-shirt he was sleeping in. Cuddling him closer like this, she could feel every little groove and ridge in the bones of his arms.

“Your arms are all bumpy,” she observed, the words a mumble.

He shifted next to her. “Yeah?”

Frisk nodded into him. “Mmhmm.”

“Guess they are,” was all he said. Frisk got the sudden, strange feeling he didn’t want to talk about it anymore.

“Did I wake you up?” she asked suddenly, biting her lip. “It’s really early.”

He blinked, then shook his head. “Nah. Wasn’t actually asleep.”

“Why not? It’s four. And you’re not Uncle Papyrus. You’re a napping lazybones.”

That made Dunkle Sans snort. “Ain’t that the truth.” He paused, seeming to think. “Sometimes I have trouble sleepin’, I guess. No big deal.”

“Maybe you can’t sleep ’cause of the light,” said Frisk sensibly. Not only was the nightlight on the wall switched on, but the curtains of his bedroom window were wide open too, and shafts of moonlight cut into the room, brightening it significantly along with the harsh glow of the streetlights. Frisk couldn’t imagine sleeping with so much bright light. There was nearly enough to read by, if you were willing to squint.

Sans seemed to falter. “Maybe. Us monsters ain’t so used to all this light. But we like it. ’s like a… reminder? Sometimes it’s easy to forget you’re on the Surface. I keep going to bed thinkin’ I’ll wake up back in the Underground.”

“Oh.” That made sense, at least a bit. Frisk shifted. “I guess this stuff is more new to you, so it’s still really cool and everything.”

“Hmm. Yeah.” Sans nodded. “’s really nice.” He patted her head. “Anyway. Let’s both try to get some sleep, huh, kid?”

Frisk nodded into him, and yawned, sleepiness beginning to fog her thoughts as it took over once again. “Mm-kay. You too.” Her eyes drifted shut. Then Dunkle Sans’ words, a low, soothing murmur, brought her back to wakefulness.

“You don’t gotta be scared of having bad dreams, y’know, kid. Or ashamed, or whatever. Everyone has bad dreams. And everyone gets scared by ’em. There’s nothing wrong with that. Anyway, you’re a little kid.”

“I’m eight.” Pause. “Almost nine.”

“Heh. Hate tibia blunt with ya, but that still counts as a kid.”

Frisk opened her eyes, looking up at him in accusation. “That one was bad. It didn’t even make
sense. No con-text.”

“Now you’re changin’ the subject.”

“I think you’re losing your pun sense.”

“You wound me, kiddo.”

“Mum says a good pun needs context.”

“Yeah, yeah, keep rubbin’ it in.”

Frisk giggled, closing her eyes again. “Goodnight, Dunkle Sans.”

“…Night, Frisk.”

The kid fell asleep barely a minute later, her arms still wrapped around his ribs and her features relaxed. She trusted him so completely, and at times it overwhelmed him. A little kid hadn’t trusted him this much since Papyrus was her age. Or anyone for that matter.

Sans chuckled dryly to himself, closing his eyes. Frisk was a good kid. Small. Sweet. And in the six months since the Barrier had been destroyed, she’d been growing more and more talkative and confident, and rapidly so.

It was hard to imagine that this little girl was the same kid who’d traversed across the Underground with such a calm, collected and fearless approach, despite countless near-death experiences (and a few real-death experiences), who’d believed in the good in every monster there with a stubborn assuredness remarkably similar to his brother’s. The same kid who’d freed all monsterkind and given them back the Surface and the stars.

God, he loved the stars.

It was hard to believe that this little girl was the same kid who had the power to take it all away.

When he finally fell asleep, Sans dreamed he was falling through a dark and bottomless void. The darkness seemed to be waiting for him.

Chapter End Notes

Another quick note that the next chapter will probably come with a fairly longer wait, as it’s going to be a real beast of a chapter and will almost certainly end up longer than even Chapter 1. But it will come! Just remember what we learned from our dear dead light blue-souled child. And reminder that if you check out the NWABBW tumblr, there might be previews! Thrill!
So, this chapter ended up being split in two – what would have been the rest of Chapter 3 will now be Chapter 4. Seeing as the first half alone ended up being 7.4k words, that was probably a good call on my part.

And to everyone who bookmarked, left kudos, or, especially, left a comment/review: THANK YOU! And don’t forget to check out the NWABBW blog for special extra content!

Trigger warnings for child abuse/experimentation, and Gaster being his usual dickish self.

When Sans was ten, he dropped out of school.

oOo

“Let us begin.”

Head bowed, Sans screwed his eyes shut, concentrating. He just had to make it to the other side of the room. He could do that, no bones about it.

The other side of the room. Twenty feet.

Over the past three years, Sans had had ample time to practise his magic. His other abilities, however…

Skeleton monsters were unusual enough as it was—their ability to speak and communicate in their own unique fonts, each one particular to its owner; their natural predisposition toward blue magic—the list went on. Some skeletons even had certain magical tendencies of incredible, exceptional power, completely separate in nature from the ordinary magic attacks innate to all monsters. Abilities like teleportation and telekinesis.

It was exceedingly rare, but not unheard of. But no skeleton had been able to teleport or use telekinesis since before the war—Gaster could do neither. Of course, most of the skeleton species had been wiped out in the war, and those that had survived had long since died out. All but Gaster. And in the limited historical records of skeleton monsters, none had ever been able to do both. Especially not a monster with such a weak soul as Sans’s.

But Sans had Determination on his side.

It made him special. He was special.

And he could—he would—get his magic to co-operate with him, and teleport twenty feet to the other side of the room.
Teleportation—the ability to cheat the laws of physical space. Think of it as… taking a shortcut across a material plane. Arriving at a destination faster than you would have if you’d walked.

Sans summoned every ounce of concentration he had, calling on the magical energy that burned at his very core, screwing his eyes tighter and balling his hands into tight fists, willing himself to glitch—

The surface beneath his feet was not cool tile—wherever he was, he wasn’t on the ground. Sans opened his eyes. He’d only teleported about two feet across the room, and landed on top of a table—in dangerous proximity to Gaster’s mug of coffee. An inch or two to the right and he’d have spilled the coffee all over the calculus test that waited for him for when the day’s training was through.

He quickly scrabbled back down onto the floor, preparing himself for Gaster’s response.

“Try again. Just ten feet this time. Aim for the computer desk.”

Closing his eyes again, Sans sucked in a deep breath, concentrating as hard as he could. Harder. He thought of nothing but the computer desk, fighting to hold its image in his mind and nothing else. For a moment he thought he’d really done it, he thought he’d passed the test, but as he opened his eyes it became clear he’d undershot again, having landed mere inches to the right of his original location.

The sound of Gaster’s pen was excruciating as it scribbled notes from where he stood in the doorway. His gaze flicked down toward Sans a moment. “Very well. One more try, same place as before. Again.”

Sans panicked, glitching immediately. This time he overshot completely, landing just behind Gaster and out in the corridor.

He felt Gaster’s gaze on him, cold and filled with disappointment. The sound of Gaster’s pen scratching across the clipboard drowned out the distant hum of machinery, the executioner sharpening his axe. He delivered his final sentence:

“As I anticipated. A regular failure.”

Sans looked down at his toes, angry and ashamed.

“It isn’t my fault,” he muttered, though he dared not meet Gaster’s eyes. “This is hard. And hey, guess what—at the end of the day, I’m still better at this stuff than you.”

Gaster didn’t even bat an eye. “Hmm, yes. A weak jibe—I lack the altogether ability to teleport. It is an uncommon ability found in only a few skeletons. I am not one of them, through no fault of my own, or indeed anyone’s—it all comes down to chance of the draw, in true monsters. You, however, have the potential to be an incredibly powerful vessel—you energy signature is astounding for a monster of your age, and yet your control of your abilities continues to be remarkably poor.” Beat. “Anyhow, that is certainly enough for the day, I believe.”

Sans didn’t give Gaster the pleasure of hearing him apologise. Instead he ignored him, slipping past his creator and making for the table he’d landed on just before. He pulled himself up to sit on it, taking the glass of orange juice that had been put out for him, draining it in two large gulps.
Gaster cleared his throat. “Sit in the chair, if you please, Sans.”

Sans ignored him.

“Now.”

Sans paused. He slid off the table and sat down in the chair, pulling the calculus test over to him. It was eleven pages thick, and a glance at the first page told him that it wasn’t going to be much of a task: he’d be finished in two, three hours, tops. “So now I do the test, yeah? And then I can go home?”

“Yes.”

Sans picked up his pencil—he realised with something of a jolt that Gaster had put out his lucky one, not that he needed it, this stuff was easy— and began.

SECTION ONE – WORD PROBLEMS

To test subject’s ability to associate words with mathematical symbols

Question #1: Calculate the antiderivative of: secant of x, cubed, times the tangent of x.

Sans got to work at integrating, quickly settling for using the u-substitution.

“Perhaps we will continue with your training this weekend. Heavens know you need it.”

Gaster came by the table to pick up his coffee.

Sans looked up. “Uh-huh.” At least magical training didn’t hurt. That wasn’t to say he liked it—he much preferred math and science tests, but anything was better than the Determination trials or the sting of the scalpel hacking into his bones. He tapped the end of his pencil on the table in thought. “Could we do telekinesis?” He was better at telekinesis than teleportation.

“I suppose it makes little difference – but we can if you wish.”

Pleased, Sans grinned to himself, looking back down at his calculus. He finished the first problem and moved on to Question #2, Calculate the antiderivative of: the square root of x times the cosine of x.

Then Gaster’s voice brought him back to attention.

“Of course, it is not truly telekinesis, you do realise,” he said, with a world-weary sigh. “You degrade yourself, truly. Scientifically and magically speaking, telekinesis does not exist outside of those comic books you cherish.”

“Yeah, yeah,” Sans muttered, annoyed. He abandoned his calculus test a moment, turning to face Gaster. “But it sounds cooler if you call it that.”

"Hardly. As I said, you degrade yourself. What you call ‘telekinesis’ is the ability to use blue magic, with a degree of precision, upon an object without a soul.”

“Well, I think telekinesis still sounds cooler.”
Sigh. “If you wish to continue insulting yourself and the abilities of your ancestors, suit yourself.”

“Whatever.” Sans returned to his calculus test.

Gaster meanwhile crossed the room over to the computer desk, dropping his clipboard onto it and skimming over the notes he’d taken. Sans, unable to resist, began to watch as Gaster brought up one of the files he had pinned to his desktop – Sans’ file. He opened several documents, and Sans tried to read what was on the monitor as Gaster muttered to himself, too low for Sans to hear.

“Seeing as it’s about me, can you say?” Sans blurted.

Gaster turned in his swivel chair to look at him, and Sans braced himself, expecting the magic hands to appear and deliver him a good, hearty swat over the head. Instead Gaster answered him, his tone indiscernible, “There appear to be—” he paused delicately—“complications… involving you and the Determination trials.”

“Complications like how much it hurts?” he muttered. Well. Now Gaster was definitely going to hit him, so he was surprised when he was instead graced yet again with a response.

“The pain is an unfortunate and immediate result of the administration of the Determination solution: it will continue to react poorly with your system even as you develop a tolerance for it and as we continue to slowly increase the dosage you receive. No, this is… different. An unfortunate… reaction, shall we say, I did not anticipate.”

“What reaction?” Sans paused. “Am I gonna die?” He’d almost died once, when he was eight, from a fever that got so high it nearly killed him. It had caused even more problems with his HP, and he’d been too weak to get out of bed for a month.

“No, no, nothing to that extreme; you needn’t be so melodramatic…” He trailed off.

“Then what?”

Gaster got up from his chair and held out a hand. “Very well then. Come.”

Sans shrank back a little, eyeing him warily. “Wha – why?”

“Just come.” He gave an impatient huff. “I am not going to run any experiments that will hurt you, if that’s what you’re afraid of. Come, now. I am simply going to make some basic measurements and take a small bone sample for further affirmation. Be sure I’m right.”

Sans sighed, but pushed the chair back and got up, stuffing his lucky pencil into his pocket just in case. Gaster took him by the shoulder, steering him into a corner. He fumbled around in a drawer, at last selecting a tape measure and a small magic scanner.

He stood stock-still as Gaster ran the scanner over his soul for a more detailed reading of his magic levels, and as he took measurements of his height and arm length using the tape measure, standing straighter and taller when Gaster bid him. At some point the scientist also lifted his shirt and bit into his spine with… something, something sharp that made Sans flinch, though he couldn’t see what Gaster was doing, and when he twisted around to try and look, he was swatted lightly but pointedly over the head.

At last, it was over, and Gaster returned to the computer, leaving Sans to rub at the now-stinging spots on his spine. Gaster started muttering to himself again, comparing the notes he’d just taken
with the readings on the computer and the scanner. Sans must have waited for ten minutes before Gaster finally spoke up.

“It has been quite a while since last I measured your height—a few months. In that given period of time, most boys of your age would be expected to grow at least somewhat. And yet it appears that… *Ahem.* The Determination seems to have interfered with your physical development.”

Sans’ brow wrinkled in confusion. “Huh?”

“Your growth, namely.”

“My growth? Like how tall I am?” Sans had always been one of the smallest kids in his class, except for some of the rodent-like monsters.

“Yes. Let’s see, how to put this simply…” Gaster’s tone was strangely halting, awkward even. “The Determination appears to have stunted your growth. You remain at the same height you were the last time I measured you, and the time before that. By all likelihood, you will remain permanently at the height you are now; and if you do grow, then it will not be very much.”

Sans found himself looking down at his toes again, Gaster’s words reverberating in his skull. Gaster may have put it “simply,” but the gist of it was that he wasn’t going to get any taller. He was going to stay like this, at the height of a considerably small ten-year-old, forever. And it was Gaster’s fault.

Because of the Determination trials. The trials Sans had been mentally willing to come to a stop since they’d first begun two and a half years ago, back when he was seven. Wasn’t he filled with enough of that Determination stuff already? Gaster had said Determination was key to shattering the Barrier, but Sans sure didn’t feel like he could do anything about it.

“Why?” he whispered instead. There was probably science behind it. Knowing the science behind it would make things easier. Then he’d have some facts to think about, and he wouldn’t be left small and alone like this.

Gaster delivered a short cough. He’d stopped looking at Sans, his gaze fixed instead upon the readings from the scanner. “I *have a theory.* The Determination that remains is your system behaves as an antithesis to magic. It is a human’s main source of power, and that is how they make up for a lack of the magic monsters possess. Now, some humans have traces of magic, just as some monsters possess traces of Determination, but at the end of the day, a being with high amounts of *both* should not exist.

“But Determination is also stronger than magic. When it entered your system, it came at the expense of the magic you possessed. Or perhaps more accurately, at the expense of its strength. Monsters, and those things that resemble them, need magic to grow. You do not have enough magic at your expense to grow. It is weak, and scarce enough that it cannot be wasted on your growth when its priority lies in keeping your soul together. I anticipate this may cause you additional health problems in the future, and it is likely a contributing factor to your poor magical output.” Gaster seemed to be thinking. “I apologise.”

He clawed at his inner wrist, rocking back and forth on his heels as he took this information in.
“Can I go back to my calculus now?” he asked at last. “Stoppin’ me in the middle of it to randomly check me over’s kinda distracting. You’re making me lose my train of thought.”

Gaster waved a hand, and Sans returned to the table. His gaze lingered on Gaster a moment, who began riffling through a new stack of papers and had resumed muttering to himself. Then Sans sighed, and pulled his pencil from his pocket, turning his attention back to the test.

**Question #2: Calculate the antiderivative of: the square root of x times the cosine of x...**

**oOo**

The next few months passed by uneventfully, and the “complications” associated with the Determination trials were not brought up again. Sans figured this made sense. It was like his broken eye—there was nothing he, Gaster, or anyone could do to change anything, nothing that could be done to fix him. Besides, if he was going to be stuck at a kid’s height for the rest of his life, he didn’t want to be reminded of it anymore than he had to be. His classmates would soon noticeably outgrow him—and one day so would Papyrus, he figured—but that didn’t mean he wanted to linger on it.

In those months, Sans saw very little of Gaster. Even the biweekly Determination trials drew to a near-halt. On one of the few occasions Sans saw Gaster, down in the labs, he asked him what he was up to. Gaster’s reply was vague—not that Sans had expected anything more. Something about his studies of the Barrier, he said—something was afoot in the CORE, and he was making “great progress,” whatever that meant.

One innocuous Saturday, Gaster came to look for him in his bedroom for the first time in almost than a year.

Sans shared his bedroom with Papyrus. Papyrus was cross with Sans for having finally thrown out the enormous pile of pencil shavings that had accumulated on his side of the desk—apparently he’d been **COLLECTING them, Saaans!**

Papyrus was now sprawled on his front on the floor, working hard on a fifty-piece jigsaw puzzle, which he’d insisted on doing **all by himSELF.** Sans wasn’t sure if that was because Papyrus was still upset with him, or because he really did did want the satisfaction of having completed the jigsaw on his own. There was a good chance it was the latter. He had a head for puzzles, his brother.

Sans was curled up on his bed, absorbed in a book on astronomy—one of his favourites—that Gaster had given him years ago, as an apology for breaking his eye.

It was quiet for a change; Papyrus was completely focused on his puzzle. On most days he amused himself by running about the house, shrieking at the top of his voice, climbing on the furniture, and generally causing a huge ruckus.

The knock on the door startled them both. Gaster didn’t wait for an answer before opening it. Sans realised he hadn’t seen him for nigh two days, and the scientist looked terrible. His lab coat was stained with something purple that had dried and gone crusty, and he looked as if he hadn’t slept in about a week. As far as Sans knew, he hadn’t.

Good. He hoped he was tired and groggy. He hoped his head hurt because of it.

Gaster said nothing at first, scrutinising each of them with a strange new light in his eyes, making Papyrus abandon his puzzle and join Sans on the bed.
“You will come with me,” said Gaster at last, and Sans drew Papyrus closer, meeting his creator’s gaze warily. Gaster’s voice sounded strange—it was cold as ever, but it held a tone, an ecstatic rush that bordered on glee. Sans hadn’t heard Gaster like that in years, not since the first day of the Determination trials. But even beneath all that, there was something else too, something Sans couldn’t quite place.

“C’mon, not today… it’s Saturday,” he muttered.

“Both of you. With me.”

Sans stiffened and swallowed, but he stood, picking his brother up. Papyrus just buried his nasal bone in the fabric of Sans’ blue-and-green striped sweater and nestled himself closer, their spat over the pencil shavings apparently forgotten. In Sans’ experience, his brother had only shied away from Gaster a handful of times. And he’d never, ever seemed quite this afraid, this unnerved. Papyrus spent most of his time around Gaster bouncing around him and trying to give him a hug. That it was so very hard to give him a hug made it a fun and challenging game.

Not that that was entirely surprising. Everything about Gaster—his mannerism, his tone, his voice, even the way he stood—exuded a profound wrongness. What frightened Sans the most was that he couldn’t quite place a finger on what was so very unsettling, just what frightened him so. Gaster was always cold, and brusque in his tone. Efficient. He always looked at him and his brother this way. But now something unnameable had been added to the mix. Something had shifted, making Sans feel much younger than his ten years.

“Where to?” he asked at last. He cocked a brow in the way he might have if Gaster had told him he was going to start a new series of experiments. “The labs? What, you wanna poke at both of us now? Do we get to do it in the same room?”

Gaster held his gaze for a second. Then, without answering, he turned on his heel and left the room. Sans glanced at his brother, then followed.

Sans had been expecting Gaster to turn his soul blue, but he never did. Perhaps he might have done if he or his brother had resisted, but it seemed as if expected, or perhaps just knew, that they would follow without protest. As it was, Sans didn’t even stop to put his shoes on.

With Papyrus clinging to him like a baby koala monster, Sans allowed Gaster to lead them through the network of New Home’s winding cobblestone streets—two blocks north, then a right and a sharp left. Across the square, where a few kindergarteners were playing a game with a ball. They stopped to stare at Sans and Papyrus as they went by, struggling as ever to keep up with Gaster’s long strides. The scientist seemed to be walking faster than usual. Around a corner, then straight for another three blocks before reaching the entrance to labs.

In the elevator, Papyrus asked what was going on, and please could they go back home now; he was sleepy. Gaster glanced down at him, still with his arms around Sans’ neck and his face peeking out from his sweater, then gave a vague hum by way of an answer.

That was enough to make Papyrus shrink back into silence, and Sans didn’t dare to press the matter.

The elevator dinged, doors sliding open like a set of jaws into the great, dark belly of the lower labs.

By now, Sans knew the labs so well he could have navigated their corridors blindfolded. He’d learned to do it one-eyed after the accident, and the Determination trials demanded his presence
more than ever before. So maybe it had something to do with Gaster’s ominous behaviour, or maybe he was just being paranoid, but stepping out onto the tiled floor behind his creator, the labs suddenly seemed a vast, dark place, foreign and frightening.

There were four sounds in the air: the distant hum of machinery; Sans’ shaky breathing; the click of Gaster’s shoes against the tiled floor, landing with metronomic precision and echoing off the walls. The telltale pattering of Sans’ own bare and bony feet against the ceramic rounded everything off very nicely.

Sans had been expecting Gaster to lead them into the examination room, or else the room where he did most of his magic training and completed many of his intelligence tests. But instead, he turned a sharp left into a corridor Sans wasn’t sure he’d been allowed to go down before, the one holding Gaster’s offices.

“You… do realise we’re still with you, right?” he asked as he followed Gaster into a room towards the end of the corridor. Predictably, Gaster gave no response.

The room was small and cramped, barely larger than the bathroom in their house, and there was nowhere to sit. In one corner sat a large machine on wheels, about twice Sans’ size, all shiny metal and vaguely box-shaped. A small monitor on one side of the machine was switched off. All manner of strange wires emitted from it. Every so often the machine emitted a series of irregular little beeps.

On the other side of the room, against the far wall, was a much larger monitor screen, stretching nearly from floor to ceiling, in front of which sat a control panel roughly at the level of Sans’ shoulders. A series of random characters scrolled steadily down the screen. This, it seemed, was the focus of Gaster’s interest, and he stood with his back to Sans, inches in front of the screen, hands resting against some switches on the control panel.

“What is that?” Papyrus murmured, but Sans just shook his head. Glancing hurriedly at the machine and readjusting Papyrus’ weight, he took a step closer.

“Gaster,” he tried again. “Why’d you drag us down here? What’s going on? What do those characters mean? And what’s that machine thing?”

Gaster glanced over his shoulder, then blinked as if he’d only just noticed the brothers were there. He stepped away from the control panel, clasping his hands together and looking down at them.

He smiled. “Ah. Sans. Papyrus.”

“What’s your deal?” Sans asked, warily cocking a brow and staring up at him.

Gaster’s smile widened. “Do you recall I have been pursuing – how shall I put this— independent studies?”

“You mean studying without hurting us?” Sans muttered, glowering up at him.

“Unless you can aid me in my analyses of the Void, Sans, then I doubt you or your brother would be of much use.”

“The Void? What’s that?”

“Yes. I’ve mentioned it in passing, though I don’t suppose you were listening.” Gaster glanced over at the screen, tilting his head contemplatively. “What you see before you are readings I
have been collecting from the Void.”

“Yeah,” said Sans, cocking his own head to one side. The characters continued scrolling down the screen. Studying them further, Sans realised they consisted entirely of zeroes and ones. Papyrus wriggled against him in an effort to get free, and Sans paused before setting him down on the floor, turning his gaze back to Gaster. “You didn’t even answer my question. What’s the Void?”

“You really weren’t paying attention, were you?” Gaster hummed. “Simply put, the Void is the space—or lack thereof—outside spacetime. It is the emptiness on the edges of the universe.”

Sans thought that sounded a little like something from his comic books. “But if it’s outside the universe, how can you get information from it? You ain’t making any sense.”

Gaster did not correct him with an aren’t as he normally would. Instead, he turned his attention to the computer monitor once more. “Here in the Underground, we are isolated from the rest of the world by means of the Barrier.”

“I know that,” Sans muttered.

“We are not just isolated from the rest of the world in that we cannot access it. We are cut off from it completely, existing in a near-separate universe in our own right—a bubble universe, you might call it. It is a fitting description. A closed system. The Barrier cordons us off from the rest of the universe, so we follow our own unique timeline, in the limited world to which we are confined. We experience that timeline in a linear fashion. Now suppose one were to… manipulate the timeline as they pleased. Any damage or alterations made would be contained within the Underground, thanks to our lovely Barrier. However—to rewrite and rearrange time would cause great damage to the fabric of spacetime: the material of our little universe is terribly fragile. And so –” Gaster gestured to the screen – “we are left with tears.”

Sans was trembling hard enough that he could hear his own bones rattling. He barely understood the half of what Gaster was saying, and even then, he didn’t see what it had to do with him or his brother, with the Determination trials or his purpose in destroying the Barrier. He was too scared to care very much. He wanted to run back to his room and read from his comic books, or do math, or play with Papyrus, do whatever it took to just forget everything. He’d never wanted to more in his life.

Gaster— he began, but his creator cut him off, not seeming to realise he was doing it.

“Of course, only an anomaly – you know what an anomaly is, don’t you, Sans? – could ever actually manipulate the Underground’s unique timeline. Bend it to their will. To an anomaly, our universe is a simple plaything. A game.”

“Yeah, so?”

By way of response, Gaster held up a small black box-shaped item, produced from the pocket of his lab coat, to his mouth – a Dictaphone, Sans realised.

He followed Gaster’s gaze to the monitor screen again. The characters continued scrolling down it, the machine in the background continuing to emit erratic little beeps. The longer Sans stared at the monitor, the harder it was to look away. He stared at the scrolling characters until they were all he saw, zeroes and ones and, very occasionally, other characters, filling his left eye socket, their movement constant, zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones, the never-ending scrolling. As he stared, hypnotized, something dark gripped at Sans’ soul, as if those characters were reaching out and touching it. He could feel them, feel them as they scrolled down the screen.
There was a click as Gaster began recording, snapping Sans to attention once more. “Void observation logs,” he said, and if his voice had had a strange, unsettling tone to it before, now it chilled him to the marrow. In that moment Sans realised just what was wrong with Gaster’s voice—for the first time in his life, he was having trouble understanding him. “Entry Number Seventeen.”

“Dark,” he said, and his voice lowered and took to trembling with a haunted kind of passion.

“The darkness keeps growing...

“The shadows cutting deeper…”

From behind, the clicking of bare feet on tiled floor. Papyrus had gotten up from where Sans had set him down, and pattered over to his older brother. He slipped his hand into Sans’ and buried his face in his side. Sans picked him up again.

“Photon readings n e g a t i v e …”

Gaster pressed his free palm against the monitor. The characters continued running up the screen, some of them visible through the hole in his hand. They made the hand look more complete, somehow, as if they had become a part of him. He leaned closer until his face was just a breath away from the screen.

“This next e x p e r i m e n t … s e r i o u s v e r y v e r y i n t e r e s t i n g.”

He paused then, a lengthy trail of a pause that slithered up Sans’ back. Then he turned, looking at the brothers with a smile on his face that was far too wide even for a skeleton’s permanent grin. “… what do you two think?”

“I think I want you to stop and leave us alone. I wanna go home,” said Sans, pulling Papyrus closer.

There was no response, just a small click as the Dictaphone was switched off.

“Gaster,” said Sans loudly. “I wanna go home. I wanna take Papyrus and I wanna go back home.” He struggled to keep the fear from his voice.

Gaster blinked several times, as if waking from a dream. “Yes. Yes, of course. You should both be going back home.” When Sans lingered, eyeing him warily, Gaster stepped forward, shooing the children toward the door. “Well, go on, then. If you wish to leave, then do so. I need to work.”

Sans eyed him another moment. Gaster already seemed to have forgotten they were there. Sans lingered for a moment, then he turned, and made his way out the lab complex and toward the elevators, Papyrus in his arms. Neither of them said a word to each other the entire way home.

oOo

Back in their bedroom, Papyrus toddled over to their desk and plopped down into his little red chair. He looked to be in something of a daze as he picked up a crayon and began to draw something on the back of Sans’ math homework.

Sans barely noticed. He stripped off his clothes and changed into his pyjamas, desperate to do
Sans flopped down onto his bed. He curled onto his side and closed his eyes, drawing the book he’d been reading to his chest.

“… Sans?”

Sans opened his eyes. Too soon.

He smiled a little, propping himself up on one elbow and reaching out to his baby brother. “Hey, bro. You tired?”

Papyrus nodded, then launched himself from the desk onto Sans’ bed in one impressive leap. He wrapped his arms around his brother’s neck and clung to him tightly, and Sans realised with a jolt that Papyrus was shaking a little, too.

“Hey. Hey.” he crooned, stroking his brother’s skull, gathering him closer. “Hey, it’s okay, Paps. I got ya. I got ya.” He clicked his teeth against the top of his head, and Papyrus cuddled closer still.

“That was SCARY.”


“Why was Daddy acting like that?”

Sans stiffened. “He’s not our dad, Papyrus.”

Papyrus immediately sat up straighter, all three-year-old indignance. “YES HE IS!”

“No, he’s not,” Sans replied, tightly. “We don’t have a dad, Papyrus. We just got each other, okay? We don’t even need a dad.”

“HE IS TOO!”

“No, he’s not, I said!” Sans snapped, frustrated now. “He isn’t our dad. He’s just Gaster, got it? He’s just Gaster. You’re my brother, you’re my babybones, but he’s still Gaster! He doesn’t care about us, Papyrus! He doesn’t love us, but I do. Okay?!”

Papyrus glared at him with all the defiance of a toddler. “HE DOES TOO LOVE US. He, once when you were at school, he, he PETTED MY HEAD! And then he maked me oatmeal.”

The words hit Sans like a punch. “No, he didn’t.”

“I LIKE oatmeal. It’s my FAVOURITE.”

“He didn’t do that, Papyrus.”

“DID TOO!”

Sans scrutinised his brother’s little face, trying to find the lie there. He couldn’t. And he knew that even for a three-year-old, Papyrus was a terrible liar.

“Well, then he didn’t mean it, Paps. He just did that to make you do what he wanted.” Something
clutched at Sans’ chest and made him turn away. He couldn’t say what it was.

It wasn’t envy, though.

That would be stupid.

“Did TOO mean it,” Papyrus muttered, and Sans could hear him sniffling.

Sans sighed, rolling over to face him again. Tears now streamed down Papyrus’ cheekbones, a steady, silent stream of violent tears. “Okay,” he said at last, pulling his baby brother into a hug again. “I’m sorry, babybones. Okay. Okay.”

Papyrus relaxed and snifflled, rubbing his sleeve across his eye sockets. “Tiredd...” He rested his head against the crook of Sans’ arm, sockets drifting shut.

Sans ran his fingers absently up and down his brother’s arms. Except for the odd imperfection or miniscule pinprick where a needle had gone in, the bone was smooth and unmarred. The same could hardly be said for Sans’ own arms, rough with years of scritches and cuts and faint cracks that served as a reminder of old breaks and fractures. You could see, too, where the bone had been hacked at and chiselled away if you looked closely enough—“samples,” Gaster called them.

His hand hit a deep groove in his brother’s right humerus and he frowned.

“Paps?”

“Nyeh?” Papyrus didn’t open his eyes, shifting against Sans.

Sans’ frown deepened. “Bro? What happened here?”

Papyrus cracked open one eye socket, then the other. He jerked his arm back, studied it as though seeing the groove for the first time, then shrugged. He closed his eyes again, but Sans was having none of it. Something was beginning to boil in his chest, fear and desperation and anger—mostly anger. He shook Papyrus by the shoulder, probably a bit too hard, and his brother opened his eyes again.

“Hmnngghh...”

“Papyrus. What happened?” he asked, struggling to keep the desperate hitch from his voice.

Papyrus whined loudly and tried to roll over, but Sans caught him by the shoulder, leaning over him.

“What’s it from? Marrow extraction?” They both got marrow extractions every few months, and even though they hurt for a day or two, they were nothing to fuss about. Even as Sans said it, he knew it wasn’t the case. Gaster extracted bone marrow from their pelvises, not their arms. And what kind of marrow extraction left a mark like that?

“No, sillybones!” Papyrus giggled at his brother’s foolishness, because he too knew how bone marrow extractions worked. “Da—he just...” Papyrus shrugged. “Don’t know.”

“What did he use? A sharp thing?” Sans demanded. “Like a scalpel or pick?”

Warily, Papyrus nodded.

“Did it hurt?”
A pause. Nod. Sans closed his eyes, shoulders slumping. He thought he was going to be sick.

“Did he inject anything in you with the needle?”

“No… Saaaaans?” Papyrus tugged on his arm. “Slee-eeep…”

Sans forced himself to open his eyes and look at his brother’s face rather than the chunk that had been taken out of his arm. Papyrus was sitting up, rubbing at his eye sockets sleepily, looking for all the world like there was absolutely nothing wrong. He probably didn’t even know anything was wrong. Sans hadn’t known any of that kind of stuff at his age, either.

He just looked like a cranky toddler who wanted to go to sleep. And if Sans kept him up with questions he didn’t understand for much longer, he was probably going to throw a tantrum. Sans didn’t feel like dealing with a tantrum.

“Right. Okay. Sorry. Let’s go to sleep. Great idea.” He lowered himself back down onto the bed, and Papyrus cuddled up next to him for the third time that night, closing his eyes and sticking his thumb in his mouth. Skeletons couldn’t suck their thumbs, exactly, like a monster with lips could; but they could gnaw on them lightly, and Sans hoped his brother would break the habit soon.

“You’re okay. You’re okay.”

“Nyeh,” was all Papyrus said, sleepily.

“I hate him,” Sans muttered a good five minutes later, finally closing his eyes. Hate was a strong word, and he thrilled in being able to wield it.

But Papyrus’ body had already gone limp with sleep, and Sans sighed, finding himself smiling softly as he drew his baby brother closer.

When Sans finally fell asleep, he dreamed of numbers, zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones, spinning in fast circles around him until the numbers were all he knew.

oOo

“Gaster?”

The scientist was in the kitchen, brewing himself a cup of coffee, when Sans came up behind him early the next morning.

“Yes, Sans?” Gaster’s tone was lazy and bored, and he didn’t even bother turning around, standing in sharp contrast to the behaviour he’d exhibited just last night. Sans was quietly relieved. He wouldn’t have been brave enough to face Gaster otherwise. This was normal. This Sans could deal with.

But he pushed Gaster’s behaviour to the back of his mind anyway, logging it as irrelevant. Because Papyrus had been hurt, hurt by Gaster, and Sans had vowed to make sure his brother never, ever hurt.

“Last night, I noticed…” He trailed off, and got to the point. “You hurt my bro. You did an experiment on him.” He said it plainly, like the fact that it was.

That seemed to capture Gaster’s attention. He turned around, arching a brow. “Why, yes. Yes, Sans. I did.”
Something about the matter-of-fact, nonchalant way Gaster said it filled Sans with a fresh rage. He balled his small hands into fists. “You… you really did hurt him.”

“I extracted a small bone sample, yes.”

“That was way more’n a small bone sample! You took out a whole entire chunk of his arm! You 
hurt him! He’s three!”

“He is three years old, exactly. I began working with you well before that age. I have respected your request to refrain from using your brother in any of my experiments wherever possible. As per that request, he has only undergone marrow extractions and routine, painless examinations to track his health and magical signature. And yet he is a creation, my own creation, made for no other purpose than to serve a role in my studies. Did you think I wanted another whining brat to look after for the purposes of my own enjoyment? I have put off work with Papyrus for long enough.”

“You hurt him,” said Sans, simply.

“I required a simple—all right, very well, admittedly somewhat large—sample of bone. Your brother proves useful to me in ways that you will never be able to fulfil.”

Sans looked away. “Like what?”

“I had no intentions of making another subject. Yet after the accident with your eye, I decided that having another one to work with would be for the better—the effects of that particular experiment were drastic, unfortunate, and permanent. Would you rather have been rendered completely blind in both eyes? And as time went on, I realised that creating Papyrus came with all kinds of benefits I had not initially anticipated.”

“Like what?” Sans repeated, looking back at him with new defiance. “You wanna cut to the point?”

The coffee machine beeped, and Gaster glanced at it. His coffee was ready. He fetched the milk from the fridge, pouring some into his own drink, and, after considering the carton a moment, poured a glass for Sans. Only when he’d sat down at the table did he answer, hands curling around the mug. He seemed to be contemplating the gaping holes in his palms. “You’d rather I spell it out for you? Fine. Your body is, at present, filled with Determination. Every marrow extraction or raw bone sample I take is full of the substance. Cut you, and you seem to bleed. Your body is filled with Determination, and that interferes with all kinds of other tests. Having a subject who is not tainted with the solution is very useful. …where is your brother, by the way?”

“Still asleep.” Sans took the glass of milk grudgingly. “So. I’m damaged goods or somethin’.”

“On the contrary. You are valuable beyond comprehension. You have insisted I remove your brother from the Determination trials, and despite the fact that using two specimens would be most helpful so as to compare contrasting results and to assess which of you is more predisposed toward the substance, I have respected your request. He is… still quite young, after all. The Determination trials would likely kill him at this age anyway.”

Sans’ shoulders sagged. Gaster was right, he supposed. “I know you haven’t used him in those. … Thank you.”
Gaster nodded once in acknowledgment, sipping his coffee, and Sans gulped down half his milk.

“He is also more readily available than you are, and that won’t last forever.”

Sans’ head snapped up. “Huh?”

The scientist set down his mug and spread out his hands. “He is not of the schooling age yet. Sometimes I need a sample immediately for the purposes of, say, cross-referencing, as was the case the other day.” He chuckled a little. “I suppose, however, that in this case, it was something of an error on my part—I was simply too impatient. I meant to inform you of what I would be doing and take the bone sample after school, or perhaps even on the weekend, so that you might be there to keep him from crying, but I misjudged the urgency of it.”

Sans took two things from this statement. The first was that Papyrus had cried. Of course he had—he was only three and a half, and having a piece of bone carved right out of your arm hurt like hell. Sans knew that well. It went without saying. He supposed Papyrus was too little to have learned about holding back his screams yet.

As for the second…

"You do tests on him because I'm at school?"

“Well, technically. In many cases. Yes.”

“You did it before?”

“Only a few times. But yes.”

“And… you’re gonna do more to him?”

“Inevitably.”

“Because I’m at school.”

“Oftentimes, yes. I believe we have established that. Things will be different during the summers, of course, and when your brother is old enough to attend school as well.”

Sans thought. “So me being at school’s inconvenient. Even if, even if you need to do experiments on him, or take samples that aren’t, uh, infected with DT, I could be there to keep him from crying.”

Gaster hummed his agreement. “If your brother did not throw such a fit as he did, it would be easier on all of us. It can be most distracting.”

Now Sans’ mind was really reeling, his head spinning. “What if I didn’t go to school?” he blurted.

Gaster nearly choked on his coffee. “Pardon?”

“What if I didn’t go to school? I mean, it ain’t like I really need to. You said it yourself that I’m… that I’m brilliant. I already know everythin’ that they could ever teach us, right? I mean, you said I’m advanced for my age and stuff. The things we’re learning in math and science now, I had down when I was four. I know how to read and write. And anythin’ about history or whatever that you might want me to know, I can learn way easier by myself with a book. You could teach me, even. So what am I even goin’ to school for? ’s just a formality, and I hate it anyway.”
He closed his eyes. “If I didn’t go to school… then I could be here for you. I could be there for Papyrus so he don’t cry, and a lot of the time you could do whatever the hell you wanted with me instead o’ him. Whenever you need me, for whatever experiment you want. And… and we could prob’ly do twice as much with the DT trials.”

The silence was palpable.

After what could have been one minute or ten, Sans cracked open his good eye. Gaster was watching him, fingers laced together and elbows resting on the table. He seemed to be deep in thought.

“You would be willing to simply—drop out of school to be readily available for experiments in which I would not have been able to use you otherwise due to your absence?”

Sans opened the other eye. “… yeah. Yes.”

“And undergo twice as many administrations of Determination each week? Despite the fact that you realise this would come at a great cost to your own comfort, that the trials are likely to become increasingly painful?” Thay part of the offer seemed especially intriguing to Gaster. Dammit.

“They woulda become ‘increasingly painful’ anyway, doesn’t make much difference,” Sans muttered, then caught Gaster’s eye. “Yes.”

Gaster stood. He’d finished his coffee. “You are correct. You hardly need the Underground’s near-useless education system. You are brilliant beyond imagination.”

A tiny flame of pride sputtered to life in Sans’ chest at those words. He tried and failed to ignore it.

“Very well. I shall make arrangements with your school to pull you out, under the guise of homeschooling.” He began to walk out of the kitchen, but stopped just before exiting into the hall. “This is excellent, Sans. I believe… only good things can come of this. For the both of us.”

He was gone then, and Sans was left to sit by himself at the kitchen table, his empty glass of milk in front of him, a small and lonely thing.
Chapter Notes

Before we hit Chapter 4, a brief interlude.

The Underground was a funny sort of place: incredibly beautiful, humming with magic, but small, and dark. It was a part of the universe, but surrounded as it was by the Barrier, it was also a sort of universe all on its own.

Time had a funny way of working there--it was contained, almost compressed. Airtight.

The arrival of the first anomaly caused Time a lot of suffering and a lot of extra work. In the anomaly's defence, it was hardly aware of what it was doing: manipulating the Underground's timeline, Saving and Resetting, came to it as second nature. The anomaly did not even know what happened when it Saved and Reset, apart from how those actions impacted it directly.

Time, however, felt it all. It collapsed in on itself, rearranged and rewrote itself, there in the Kingdom beneath the mountain, and that kind of strain caused it to tear.

On the very edges of spacetime, the Void lurked, waiting.

By definition the Void did not abide by the rules of space and time. It swallowed them up.

The Void had a lot to thank the anomaly for.

And so spacetime in the Underground tore, and though it worked very hard to rearrange itself in a way that made sense, it remained wounded.

Technically it had always been wounded.

Time is funny like that.

The greater the damage, the larger the tear.

Every Save, every Reset, everything undone and erased, caused it damage.

Not every Determined being is an anomaly.

But every Determined being carries memories across the timelines.

Determination is funny like that.

Time collapsed in on itself. It rewrote.

Time collapsed in on itself. It rewrote.

And again.

And again.
And again.

Rrrripp...
Let us Erase this Pointless World

Chapter Notes

I feel obligated here to draw attention again to talkingsoup’s The Scientist series – parts of this chapter draw inspiration from her writing, especially in terms of some of the imagery.

This chapter is very long, I should point out – 12k words! – so if you’d rather read it in two sittings, honestly, do so. I promise this will be the last chapter as ridiculously long as this.

You know the drill – warnings for slightly-more-graphic child abuse/experimentation.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“Determination Trials log, September 199X. Injection of Determination extract, Batch One Hundred and Eighty-seven, is now complete.”

Gaster was holding his Dictaphone up to his mouth again. He’d begun to favour it over handwritten notes lately, though Sans wasn’t sure why.

Sans was strapped down to the examination table, struggling weakly against the restraints, a series of small whimpers slipping past his teeth. He felt as if he was on fire, and his left eye was flaring wildly.

“Subject passed out briefly, for about ninety seconds, and continues to exhibit predictable signs of weakness. Subject is now in recovery and has reported sharp and acute pain, concentrated in the left humerus—where the injection was administered—, in the sternum and in the lumbar region, as well as pain in the cranial area, manifesting in the form of a dull ache. Subject’s left and only functioning eye appears to be...”

Sans let out a thin wail despite himself, and after glancing at him once, Gaster summoned his magic hands, which loosened and finally unfastened the restraints, allowing Sans to curl up into foetal position.

“... next injection is scheduled to occur early next week. If all goes well, it should be possible to increase the dosage the administration after that...”

Sans closed his eyes, trying to even out his breathing.

“... low fever...”

’s just another old test, Sans. Suck it up.

“... significant spike in readings from...”

Sans felt a hand on his skull, another on his back, steadying him. He realised he’d been shaking
and he opened his eyes, unfurling from his foetal position. His breathing finally evened out and he managed to push the pain to the back of his mind. After a minute he forced himself to sit up, shifting into a more comfortable kneeling position on the operating table.

“Ah, Sans. You feel better?”

Sans managed to nod, looking down at the floor. It seemed a very long way down. He wanted to sleep. He wanted to cry.

Then a hand was cupping itself under his chin, not a magical hand but Gaster’s real hand, attached to his arm and his body, to his shoulder and then to his head, and Sans looked up, blinking back the tears that had started to form in his eyes anyway.

“Deep breaths, now. Calm yourself. That’s quite enough, I think.”

Sans raised a hand to scrub furiously at his eye sockets with the back of his wrist.

There was a heavy pause. “Can you stand?”

“Nuh-uh,” Sans muttered, sullen—what did Gaster think? He wasn’t about to try standing; his legs would just collapse under him, they had done before, and then he’d just be lying there, crumpled up in a pitiful, snivelling heap at Gaster’s feet. His body was pain; pure, sharp pain, his head was swimming. And he was tired.

He was really tired.

Suddenly a glass of apple juice was thrust into his hands, and Sans blinked, dizzily realising Gaster had released his chin. He wondered where the apple juice had come from. Still dazed, and his entire small body trembling so much he could barely keep a firm grip on the glass, Sans looked up at his creator in confusion.

Gaster coughed, a little awkwardly. “Drink,” he said. “It would do you good to get some sugar in you.”

Sans stared down at the liquid, then downed the juice in one go. It did nothing to ease the pain, but it did a world of good for his parched throat, and for the headache. He quickly set the glass down next to him before he dropped it. “Thanks,” he managed.

Gaster just nodded once. “You should lie down. If you do not sleep, you may fall more seriously ill.” He held out a hand. “Come. Rest.”

Sans stared at the hand a moment, and at the hole in the centre of its palm. He could see a bit of the tiled floor through the hole, if he tilted his head the right way. After a long pause, he reached out, and took it.

And then a set of magic hands was easing him down, one on his back to steady him, another on his shoulder, helping him down from the operating table and onto the floor, the hands’ touch soft. Gentle wasn’t quite the right word. Sans tensed. He didn’t like it when Gaster touched him like that. It felt too close to caring, and he wished he wouldn’t.

Ding. His prayers answered, he felt blue magic secure itself around his soul, and now Gaster was picking him up, easing him gently along behind him and suspended in the air, as if Sans were a kite on the end of a string.
Through the lab complex, past the Determination Extractor with its great and frightening set of jaws, and into the infirmary. Sans was lowered down onto a bed, and at last the grip on his soul was released, leaving him to slide under the blankets and resume foetal position.

Gaster was saying something, and it took Sans a few moments to crawl out from under the covers and look at him again. His vision was swimming now. “Wha’?”

Gaster tilted his head. He had somehow procured a clipboard, and he was smiling too widely for comfort. “You will be a success, Sans. The vessel that frees monsterkind. You, and every monster, will see those stars you like to read about so very much in your astronomy books. You will…”

The words washed over Sans as sleep took him.

oOo

Over the next two months, the Determination trials continued with a renewed fervour. Sans was barely given a few days to recover from the last injection before Gaster hauled him down to the labs again. He seemed to have lost enthusiasm for Sans’ intelligence tests, interested only in pursuing the Determination trials he’d begun three years ago. In the days Gaster didn’t come for him, Sans saw neither hide nor hair of him, though he sometimes heard the scientist pacing about the house muttering to himself in the wee hours.

But then, two or three days later, Gaster was back, needle and scalpel at the ready. He always came back.

“Injection of Determination extract Batch One Hundred and Eighty-eight was a success…”

“Injection of Determination extract Batch One Hundred and Eighty-nine was a success…”

“Injection of Determination extract Batch One Hundred and Ninety was a great success indeed…”

The last time Gaster came for him, Sans was coming up eleven years old.

oOo

Papyrus was having his nap upstairs the day it happened. Sans was watching cartoons, curled up on the sofa. It was a very silly cartoon about a cat—an ordinary cat—who chased a mouse monster all across the Underground. In the cartoon, the cat kept running into various unlikely obstacles, and often experienced such delightful setbacks as falling into Hotland’s lava, falling off cliff faces, stumbling into the spiders’ territory, and encountering humans who apparently preferred dogs. At the end of each fifteen-minute episode, when it seemed as if the cat were just about to catch their prey, they ended up in a situation that should by all means have killed both of them, and the mouse monster just narrowly got away.

When Papyrus watched the cartoon, he always wondered why the cat didn’t choose a different monster to chase, or, better, just leave the mouse alone.

Sans wondered why the mouse didn’t just let the cat eat it already; all that running seemed very tiring.
The front door opened to reveal Gaster. He was wearing ordinary clothes for a change—a long black trench coat over a white turtleneck sweater and black work pants.

“Come with me,” said Gaster, and Sans mouthed the words along with him.

Sans shifted on the sofa. “Just lemmie finish this episode?” he wheedled. On the screen, the CORE exploded, creating a mushroom cloud. The cat somersaulted out of the rubble and set off after the startled mouse, tail on fire. This was why the cartoon was very silly—everyone knew that if the CORE exploded they’d all die. Actually, if anything large enough exploded in the Underground they’d all die, because the ceiling would cave.

“Now.” Sans reached for the remote, and froze. He turned his head to get a better view of Gaster.

Gaster’s posture was erect, his chin held high. His hands were folded in front of him. His head was tilted at a strange angle, and his face was alight with a strange fire.

Most notably, Sans had to put in extra effort to understand his speech.

“You will come with me.” Sans fumbled to turn the television off, sliding off the sofa, staring up at him with wide eyes. Gaster extended a hand. “The time has come.”

Sans cocked his head, gaze sliding down to the offered hand. Then back up to Gaster’s smiling face. “Time for what?”

Ding. His soul was turned blue, and he yelped as he was suddenly tugged forward across the room and deposited none too gently onto the ground. “Time,” he said, a gleam passing across his eyelights, “for our work to become a success.”

“Succ—”

Gaster turned on his heel. Sans was forced again to stumble along behind him. “But what about Papyrus?” he called out after him. “He’s gonna wake up from his nap soon, can’t I at least wait ’til he’s up to tell him – ”

Gaster kept walking.

Sans tried a new tactic. “You left the door to the house open, genius.”

A magic hand appeared and swatted him over the head for that, but it wasn’t very hard.

Gaster kept walking.

Two blocks north. Then a right. Then a sharp –

Gaster kept walking.

“Wrong way, stupid.”

Gaster didn’t even hit him this time, and Sans managed to catch up a little. “Gaster, you missed the turn to the labs – ”

He stopped in his tracks, making Sans stop too. “We are not going to the labs, Sans.”

“We’re… not?”
“We are going,” said Gaster, “to the CORE.”

Sans’ eyes widened. “What?”

Gaster paused. Then, as if leading him by the soul was somehow insufficient, he took Sans by the elbow and began to tug him along behind him, muttering something about wanting him to keep up. Sans struggled violently until it started to hurt, and he felt his HP drop just a bit. Finally, he stilled, allowing Gaster to haul him along.

A new path now. Sans looked wildly around, daring to let his feet drag just a little. “Why the CORE? What’s at the CORE?”

Gaster paused, and his steps slowed, making it easier for Sans to keep up. He cast the child a sidelong glance. “You never did. Learn what I was pursuing as part of my independent studies. Did you?”

His voice was oddly broken, pauses randomly placed.

“Uh… no. I thought you were just doing pet projects maybe. Like for fun. That’s what I’d do if I were a scientist.” Sans thought. “Am I… getting a new sibling?”

“I only have two hands,” was the response. Already Sans was lagging behind again, and Gaster gave him a yank. “No. My ‘pet projects’ have always been linked. To you.”

“To me? But you didn’t hurt me.”

Gaster laughed for some reason. “No, Sans. I did not hurt you.” Pause number…. Nevermind, Sans was quickly losing track. “We are all trapped by means of the Barrier. Do you remember when I showed you and your brother the readings from the Void?”

“… yeah?”

“Do you recall the machine you saw?”

“The box thing? It looked like it was made of scrap metal. I thought it was a hunk o’ junk.”

“Well. The machine is made of scrap metal, yes. However. It is far from a ‘hunk o’ junk,’ as you so eloquently put it.” They were crossing another square, this one mostly deserted save for a young couple enjoying some ice creams outside an ice cream parlour that overlooked the square. They stared as the two skeletons passed through. “The machine is one of my own creation, something I invented long before you came from the tube. Its purpose is to detect the entrance of an anomaly in the Underground.”

“Oh. So, like, when the humans come, it tells you? Don’t you got the cameras to tell you that?”

“No. It detects an anomaly – a being with incredible amounts of Determination. Not all humans are anomalies. An anomaly has not set foot in the Underground for a very long time.”

Sans wrinkled his brow in confusion. “Huh?”

“It has been nearly a hundred years since an anomaly has entered the Underground. Not that I would not expect you to know that part of our history. It has been all but erased, brushed under the rug by His Majesty. All very hush-hush. Few monsters are alive today that remember it.
“We all have our own paths to follow in the Underground. We experience time in a linear fashion. And the Underground, as I have explained to you, is a closed system. Think of it as a very complex equation, with each monster here as one of its variables.”

“Oh. Big equation.”

“Indeed. Now what happens if you add a variable to an equation? Or remove one?”

“Um. Doesn’t that happen all the time? Like, when babies are born or when people die? It just, like, changes, right?”

“It is not that simple. No. Perhaps it was a weak analogy, forgive me—but suppose something from outside the equation were to enter the Underground. When a human falls in, that is. The Barrier delivers a great shudder. By all means, a human has no business tumbling into our Kingdom. The equation must be rearranged, the variables redistributed. Things shift.”

Gaster began to walk faster. Sans felt like his arm was about to pop free from its socket, and held back a whimper.

“Suppose time were damaged. Suppose it were damaged beyond repair, great feats undone and unaccomplished. Events that never took place. One would think all of time would collapse, no? And yet the universe carries on, perseveres. Hastens to stitch up the opened wounds, repair itself to the best of its ability. But still, a tear is a tear.”

“I said the machine. Detects an anomaly. But I abandoned work on the project years ago. It had very little merit that anyone else could understand, and it was draining resources to boot. His Majesty was trying to persuade me to leave it behind, try something new. And so it sits in the lab. Collecting dust. A half-finished side project. Where it has been sitting for the past four and a half years.”

Sans felt he should say something. “I’m sorry.”

“It is no matter. It has its uses, and besides. I no longer have a need for it. The future holds much greater things in store. For you and I.”

Gaster pulled him round another corner, and Sans winced as his elbow was uncomfortably jolted. This was a dead-end street, and at its end was an entrance to the CORE. The CORE’s main, more impressive entrance was in Hotland—that was the entrance they took you through on the third grade school trip—but there were several other, unpretentious workers’ elevators all across New Home and Hotland, for the Underground’s great powerhouse extended all the way to the Capital. Without letting go of Sans’ elbow, he reached into his breast pocket and produced a key card, which he swiped over a reader panel next to the elevator. The doors slid open, and Gaster pushed Sans inside, finally releasing him and leaving him to huddle in the corner and rub his now-aching elbow.

Gaster followed him into the elevator and the doors slid shut. He scanned his key card again, pressed a button, and the elevator gave a great shudder before beginning to lurch its way down the elevator shaft with an overworked groan.

Sans waited for Gaster to say more, but instead he was met with silence. He hesitated, listening to the elevator’s descent. It was moving remarkably slowly. Then he heard himself ask, “Why are you telling me all this?”
Gaster glanced at him. “Do not worry, Sans. You shall see soon enough.”

Sans paused. He had other questions, of course. One had been nagging at him in particular. “Why can’t I understand you?”

Gaster looked over at him. “You cannot understand me?”

“I… I… I can. But it’s hard. Takes effort.” Normally it took Sans no effort at all. Skeletons had ways of understanding each other’s fonts, even strange ones that came in different alphabets, like Wingdings. For other monsters, understanding foreign fonts took some getting used to.

Gaster’s gaze returned to the elevator doors. It struck Sans that it was a very long ride down. They must be going to the very bottom of the CORE. “Interesting,” was all he said, and Sans knew better than to dwell on the subject.

The moment the elevator landed and its doors slid open, he was struck by a great, profound sense of wrongness, deeper than anything he’d ever felt before. It rolled into the elevator and surrounded him, gripped at his soul, clung to the air like a bad smell.

Feeling Gaster’s eyes on him, Sans forced himself to ignore the sensation and focus on the view of the CORE just beyond. Sans had only ever been to the CORE once, on the third grade school trip. Based on his memories, this part of the Underground’s great powerhouse was all but unrecognisable – it was empty, here, and the lighting was dimmer, and the floor was uncarpeted. There were no puzzles in sight. Sans stepped out behind Gaster onto cool metal floor.

His creator waved a hand, and Sans winced as he felt a great heaviness grip at his soul again, so tight it was hard to breathe.

The pair made their way down a very long corridor. It seemed to have a dead end, but Gaster simply swiped his key card, and a hidden entrance slid open in the wall. Like a secret passageway in a story, thought Sans.

The secret passageway opened into yet another foreign part of the CORE: not deserted, but not very active either. At least the lighting was better. A pair of monsters – a short, fleshy red monster and an enormous slime-like creature with a head that comprised most of her body – were replacing the fuse in a fuse box on the wall. The slime monster was holding a toolbox between her jaws. They nodded to Gaster – or rather, the short one nodded and the second one bent her entire self forward, causing the toolbox to clank against the floor – respectfully as he passed.

“Ah – sir – I mean, Doctor?” the fleshy monster called out. He shuffled forward from one foot to the other in a kind of teetering motion. “I’d normally encourage showing my children around my workplace, but given the recent readings – ”

Gaster stopped, glancing over his shoulder. “Yes?”

“Well, you know, Doctor.” The monster laughed a little uneasily. “That radiation’s dangerous for a little one.”

“Do not worry yourself. We will not be very long.”

The monster hesitated. “If you say so, Doctor.” He returned to helping the slime monster with the fuse box, casting a concerned glance at Sans.

Gaster nodded once, and with Sans in tow, rounded a corner.
The feeling of wrongness grew stronger the further they walked. Sans closed his eyes, allowing himself a moment to reflect on it – with Gaster pulling him along behind him, he didn’t really have to worry so much about walking.

It was not, he realised, the vibes of wrongness he’d gotten from Gaster, that day he’d hauled him and his brother down to the labs to show them readings from the Void. This wrongness cut deeper, crawled up his spine. It reached out and filled the air, pulling everything it touched towards it like a black hole. (Sans had read about black holes in his astronomy books, and he thought they were the coolest thing in the universe. He’d rather face a black hole than whatever waited for him at their destination).

And all he wanted was to go home.

Sans did the predictable: he began to struggle again, and, silently, he began to cry, letting his feet drag, pulling back against the dark blue grip on his soul. The effort alone burned, his soul felt as if it were on fire, but he managed to stay rooted to the spot.

Gaster suddenly stopped in his tracks, turning to look back at Sans with a frown on his face. “Stop that.”

Sans shook his head stubbornly.

The grip on his soul was pointedly maintained, but Gaster turned on his heel and strode back over to Sans. He stared down at him. “What. Is the matter? Are you… unsettled?”

“I wanna go home,” he mumbled, avoiding his gaze. “I miss Papyrus. I… h-he’s… he’s prob’ly woken up from his nap now. He, he must be scared, he’s prob’ly wondering where I am, he’s prob’ly crying…”

Gaster looked at him a moment. Then he turned again, and began to stride forward. In one dispassionate move, he raised one hand above his head and curled it into a fist, as though crushing a piece of paper into a ball.

The strain on his soul grew unbearable. Sans let out a choking gasp and found himself flying forward in the air. Then, at Gaster’s heels, he was dropped unceremoniously to the ground. He scrabbled to his feet, and allowed his creator to drag him forth a few steps.

“Where are we goin’, anyway? We’ve been walking for a real long time.”

“We are going. To the very heart of the CORE.”

Sans stumbled, and he struggled, if only a little bit now, a whimper escaping his teeth. “C’mon, Gaster. C’mon, I’m scared —”

But Gaster ignored him.

They passed another pair of CORE workers, a tall, ginger-furred cat monster, and a smaller, armless dinosaur monster. Desperate now, Sans cast a pleading glance their way as Gaster dragged him past. They glanced at him, and at each other, and finally at Gaster, striding efficiently forward with the younger skeleton in tow, but they didn’t say a word.

Then Gaster pulled him around a corner and out of sight.

There were no turn-offs in this corridor, no rooms branching off it. Only a heavy metal door at the end. Here, Sans noticed for the first time that the air seemed thicker, denser, more compact. Like a
well-packed ball of clay.

His head was starting to hurt.

They reached the end of the corridor. Gaster pressed his hand to a reader panel on the door. There was a beep, and a click.

The door slid open, overhead lights flickering to life on the other side.

Sans’ stomach, such as it were, gave a violent lurch.

The room on the other side of the door was circular, and it was vast – it must have been half a mile wide in diameter. A domed ceiling loomed high above. A narrow, railed catwalk hugged the circumference of the room.

By all means a room of this size should not have been able to fit inside the CORE.

Below, perhaps a few storeys below, there should have been floor, or, if not that, than the magma that churned at the very bottom of the mountain.

Instead, there was nothing.

Nothing but darkness.

When Sans was three, Gaster had locked him in the closet for the first time. It had been over a temper tantrum – he’d been tired, or hungry, something like that. He’d locked him in there for two hours. Since then, Gaster had locked him in the closet as punishment more times than he could count. The longest he’d ever gotten had been half a day.

It never stopped being terrifying.

It was cramped in the closet, and it was dusty, but most of all it was dark. Sans was too ashamed to admit the darkness still frightened him—it was deep, and endless, and all-encompassing, the kind of dark that seemed to devour everything around it. Dark enough he couldn’t even see his hand in front of his face. Not even the slightest sliver of light bled in past the door. Just a deep, infinite black.

This darkness was more profound.

“G-Gaster?” he asked, and his voice was small and high and frightened. “Where are we? Is this really the… the… ”

Gaster smiled wide, the Cheshire cat who’d gotten the mouse.

“Welcome, Sans. To the Void.”

“The… ”

“In the heart of the CORE, the very soul of the Underground, I have isolated a tear in our world. A tear in the very fabric of spacetime. And on the other side of that tear is the Void: the nothing on the edges of the universe. The project that has consumed so very much of my time for the past seven months or so.”

He stepped out onto the catwalk, and Sans, trembling so hard his bones rattled audibly, was forced to follow him. Gaster waved a hand and released his grip on Sans’ soul, but the stress there did not
ease. It was held instead by the feeling given off by the Void, for here was the great wrongness that had been unsettling him since his arrival in the CORE. It was the feeling of the absolute nothing that was bleeding into the world.

Gaster began to make his way along the catwalk, Sans at his heels.

Sans fiddled with the hem of his T-shirt. “… but… why are we… I-I mean… ” He lifted a hand to scrub furiously at his tears. “You said your, your pet projects were… were linked to me.”

“I did not create this hole in the world. It was created, as I have mentioned, by the first anomaly to set foot in the Underground. According to my research, that anomaly initiated countless Saves… even its fair share of Resets. Manipulation of the timeline. Events that. Never occurred. And yet they did. If they had not occurred, they would never have been undone in the first place. That damage is certainly not lessened by the fact that an anomaly even has the ability to carry memories past Saves and Resets.

“And our little bubble universe is forced to rearrange itself. The timeline is forced to rearrange itself, for how is it to compensate for this new course of events? But even if the timeline is rewritten, damage occurs – every Save, and especially every Reset, causes a tear in the world. And this is what we call a paradox.

“A refresher – what is an anomaly?”

Sans answered automatically. “A being with incredible, concentrated amounts of – ”

Oh.

Gaster paused. Then he turned a full 180 degrees to face Sans. He knelt to his level, placed his hands on the child’s shoulders. Sans squirmed, but did not struggle. “You, Sans. Are the vessel that will free monsterkind. The anomaly of my own creation.”

Sans could only bring himself to stare back at him with wide, frightened eyes.

“You will initiate a True Reset.”

His mouth opened and closed in shock. “I… I’ll… what?”

Gaster held out a hand. “Come. Take my hand.”

Sans looked at the extended hand hesitantly. Then he took it, looping his fingers through the gaping hole in his palm. Gaster stood up, and Sans allowed himself to be lead along the catwalk.

“I thought at first. That I could create a vessel that would be able to trick the Barrier into letting it pass unharmed. A weapon, that would harvest the remaining souls and lead us into war against the humans. But I was wrong. You resemble a true monster too closely.

“I then thought that, using the power of Determination, I could use the vessel I had to shatter the Barrier, with no need for the remaining souls. But it later became evident that this would never work. The Barrier’s magic is too strong. And besides. Humans, too. Are strong. Not even my vessel would stand a chance against a human army. And so another option occurred to me.

“If an anomaly is a being with high amounts of Determination. Then why not. Create one?”
Sans paused. “I’m… an anomaly.”

“Your body is filled with Determination. It is. Remarkable, really. What we have done together. According to my research. Yes. You have enough Determination. To be considered an anomaly.”

They had been walking along the catwalk for a couple of minutes now, and Sans was careful to keep his eyes on Gaster and not on the Void that simmered away beneath.

His headache was getting worse.

“I don’t understand,” said Sans, very quietly.

Gaster didn’t answer him, just kept leading him along the catwalk. “Close your eyes,” he said abruptly.

“Close my – why?”

“Go on.”

Sans closed them. He felt Gaster tug him forward a little more, his strides slower now, giving Sans the opportunity to comfortably keep up. A few more steps, and he felt Gaster pull him in front of him, nudge him forward. “And open.”

Sans opened his eyes, and took an enormous step back. He was standing on the very edge of the catwalk, facing the Void. Part of the encircling railing had been removed, and he’d been positioned right in the gap. He shook his head violently.

“What’s the matter, Sans? Surely you are too old. To be afraid of the dark?” He laughed then, like it was funny.

Sans spun to face him. “I wanna know what’s going on.”

Gaster knelt to his level again, cupping his chin between thumb and forefinger. “Today is the day. That you will free monsterkind. Now, you will initiate a True Reset. You will draw your energy from the Void, and you will rewind time. You will go back over a thousand years, and undo the war.”

“But I…”

“Upon the Reset, a great explosion of time energy will occur. The nothing, the emptiness of the Void will devour the Underground, and erase it from time. The Barrier will never have been erected. You and I. Are at the eye of the storm. We will open our eyes. And we will find that we stand in an empty, unremarkable cavern that is fully open to the world outside, this very cavern a thousand years ago. We will be the only creatures with any memory of what we have accomplished, and we will celebrate our success.”

“But if we Reset to… I was only born eleven years ago.”

“Yes. But you are standing here, at the heart of the explosion. You are an anomaly. By all definitions you exist outside of spacetime, outside of our closed system. You will remain as you are now.”
“But –

**You will initiate a Reset.**

Sans shook his head. “But what about Papyrus?”

Gaster’s expression turned sour. **What about your brother?**

Sans frowned. “He was born less’n a thousand years ago, too, and he’s not an anomaly. He won’t…”

**When we Reset the timeline. Your brother will not be there. No.**

Sans batted Gaster’s hand away and raised his chin. “Then no. I won’t do it.”

Gaster cocked a brow. **No?**

Sans shook his head and sucked in a deep breath. “No. I’m not gonna Reset. Not if I can’t have Papyrus. I want my baby brother. If we can go back and get him, then okay, fine. If he’s here at the eye of the storm, and he don’t get erased with the rest of this timeline, then I’ll do it. Otherwise, I won’t. No way.”

The look Gaster gave him was long and hard. Sans did not break his defiant gaze. At least, not until the slap came.

It was an especially hard blow, and Sans fell to the floor with a cry, a hand flying up to cradle his cheekbone. His shoulders sagged; he could only act brave for so long.

His creator’s shadow loomed over him. **You will initiate a True Reset.**

A hand still pressed to his stinging cheekbone, Sans shook his head violently. “No. I’m not gonna do it. I don’t wanna!”

**How, then, do you propose we shatter the Barrier?**

“If Papyrus ain’t gonna be there, then I don’t even care about the Surface,” Sans shot back.

Gaster stared at him long and hard. Then he turned away. **You do recall. What I told you once long ago?**

“I do not always need your explicit consent in these experiments. I do not need your participation. If you refuse. There are. Always other options.”

Sans froze, and Gaster looked back at him. **I have two subjects, Sans, not one.”**

Sans didn’t dare say a word.

“I may have to start from scratch, allow your brother to develop a tolerance for the Determination solution as I did with you. But there is still plenty of it left. Far more than enough. And he is so small. Perhaps. He will not require quite as much.”

Now Sans shook his head violently. “I dropped out of school so you wouldn’t hurt him. You said you weren’t gonna make him do those. You promised.”

“And my promise remains, so long as you participate, Sans. So then. What shall it be?”
Sans looked down at his toes, dejected, eyelights gone dark. It always came down to this, at the end of the day. “If I Reset. Is there… any chance we could bring him with us?”

Gaster paused. He seemed to think for a very long time. “You are the anomaly,” he said at last, his tone pensive. “All of time is in your hands. It may be possible.”

When Sans initiated the Reset, he told himself, he would think of his brother. He would think only of his brother. He would do it for his brother. And maybe, just maybe, if he kept the thought of his brother in his head, he would be able to bring him back with them.

Sans drew in a deep breath, and nodded. “I… okay.” Pause. “But… I don’t think it’s gonna work.”

Gaster lifted a brow. “You don’t think. It will work?”

Sans shook his head. “Somethin’ feels wrong.”

Snort. “And you’re the expert on the subject.”

Sans didn’t answer that. “My head really hurts,” he admitted.

“Yes. You have the Void pouring into your head. That is hardly a surprise.”

“Oh.”


Sans faltered. Then he nodded. “What do I do?”

Magic hands settled themselves firmly on his two shoulders, easing him gently forward.

“Concentrate. The Reset should come to you naturally, if you allow it. Call on the energy from the Void, on your magic, on your Determination. You are the anomaly. Because the Reset is so huge in scale, we will be relying on the time energy to help us along. The Void feeds on excess time. That worker we passed mentioned dangerous radiation, if you recall. That “radiation” — “radiation” is not entirely accurate, but it suits the naïveté of those workers — is given off by the Void. You may be more susceptible to detecting it, being an anomaly. Few workers have access to this level; only some of the most qualified monsters are able to work here. The CORE is a well-built structure, and the “radiation” given off by the Void is contained to this level alone — unless. Of course. You initiate a powerful Reset. Now. Go on.”

The magic hands let him go. Sans gripped the railing on either side of him – the gap was just wide enough for his small body – and he closed his eyes. If he moved even a centimetre forward, then his toes would be hanging out over the edge of the catwalk.

He concentrated. He called on his Determination, felt it burn inside him. He called on his magic. Even with his eyes closed, a bright cyan flame was kindled in his left socket. He gasped in shock; magic seared through his marrow with more power, more heat, than ever before. His soul flickered rapidly just under his ribcage; its dull glow grew a little brighter.

“Excellent, Sans. Keep going…” Gaster’s voice was faint in the background, and rapidly fading away.
He called on the Void.

And the Void answered.

What followed was the strangest sensation Sans had ever experienced in his life – the searing hot of his magic began to combine with the power of the Void. He gathered the time energy to him, and it was cold, so very, very cold; and the cold did not overpower the heat, nor vice versa. Instead he felt both of them, icy hot and burning cold, at once. Inside him, his magic pressed against the insides of his bones until it felt they would explode in a shower of dust.

“Sans...”

He tried to Reset the world.

But it refused.

FLOOM.

The explosion was so powerful it knocked Sans clean off his feet, throwing his backwards. It came with a blinding light, and Sans screwed his eyes shut and shielded them even as he flew through the air. He flew through the air for a very long time. Long enough that he had time to wonder if he had gotten his directions mixed up, and that he wasn’t flying backwards but falling down, down into the darkness and the nothing, for surely he should have run into something by now.

And in his head, he could hear the universe screaming.

It must have been a minute before he finally hit the wall behind him, hard. Sans cried out in pain as his bones made impact. He slid down to the floor beneath him and lay there for a moment, slumped on the catwalk.

Somehow, the catwalk was still there.

Sans moaned. When he opened his eyes, another full minute later, he was met only with blackness. He wondered if he had gone fully blind – he even touched his left eye to make sure it was open.

Then, the darkness began to recede, pulling back into the Void. Sans stumbled to his feet, surprised his legs could hold him so easily, and inched towards the railing as his vision cleared. He stood on tiptoe to lean over the edge. What he saw then, he could not describe. The nothing had escaped, leaked out of the tear, and now it was returning home, but it seemed to have taken something with it. Sans could feel it.

Time cried out. It had been hurt, and now it was hastening to stitch itself back together, and Sans could feel it.

Gaster. Where was Gaster? He’d forgotten Gaster.

He looked wildly around him, and the world gave a great shudder that nearly knocked him off his feet again.

Here is a small fact: when you have all of time and space and the lack of time and space pouring into your head all at once, you sometimes find yourself knowing things, with an overwhelming certainty with which you surprise yourself.

Sans knew that Gaster had fallen, and that he was gone.
Another fact: even when you have all of time and space and the lack of time and space pouring into your head all at once, you do not know everything.

Sans did not know if Gaster having fallen and being gone was going to last.

But he did know one thing, and it was something he knew at his very core – that he had a chance.

Sans started to run.

Then the darkness came.

Gaster was falling.

He was screaming.

His employees fell and screamed along with him.

They screamed, and they fell, and they did not stop.

He woke up in his bedroom. Papyrus was sitting on his bed reading from one of his picture books.

His face lit up when he saw his older brother sitting up on his own bed and he shot to his feet, bouncing up and down on the spot. “YOU’RE AWAKE! YOU WERE SLEEPING FOREVER AND NOW YOU’RE AWAKE! SANS! SANS SANS SANS SANS – ” Then his brow furrowed, and he stopped bouncing. “Sans? What’s wrong?”

Seeing his brother, seeing that he was all right, made him relax slightly. Sans realised he was dizzy. He brought a hand to his head and sank back down to the bed, closing his eyes a moment. In an instant, his brother had scrambled to his side, eyes wide with more concern than any three-year-old should be capable of. “Saaans? You’re scaring me!”

“I’m okay, Paps,” he muttered, reaching out to pet his brother’s skull. “Jus’ tired. Got a bit of a headache.”

Papyrus tilted to his head to the side, bearing striking resemblance to a curious puppy monster. “Me, too,” he said, as though he’d only just realised it. “I feel very funny.”

Sans forced himself to sit up a little straighter as he remembered himself, and the desperation began to kick back in again. “Listen, Paps. We gotta go.”

“Where?”

“Just… we gotta go.” Sans stumbled to his feet, and Papyrus, dutifully, backed up. “Right now. C’mon. We’re gonna pack our bags and go. Put some of your things in your backpack.” It had been Sans’ backpack, once, but after he’d stopped going to school, it had mostly become Papyrus’. Now, Papyrus just stared at him in confusion. Sans had to suppress a growl of frustration. “Come on, Papyrus.”

Papyrus looked frightened, and with a huff, Sans knelt in front of his brother, placing his hands on his shoulders. “Listen. We’re gonna go, and we’re not coming back. We’re not gonna stay here anymore. But we have to go, and we have to go now; we don’t got much time. Gaster might come back. I… I don’t… know really.” He had to fumble for the name a moment before he said it.
“What?”

Sans sighed. “Gaster. Our… dad, Paps.”

“What dad?”

Those words stopped Sans cold.

“Y’know,” he said, frowning. “Our… our daddy? Paps, what—”

Papyrus whimpered. “Saans? You said we had to go now. My head is still hurting.”


Sans looked around the room, then began to stuff some of Papyrus’ favourite toys into the backpack; his crayons; a few changes of clothes. There was a drawing sitting on their desk, done in messy crayon scribbles, that Papyrus must have made while Sans was out at the CORE. Or while he’d been asleep, apparently. Sans added it to the backpack without looking at it. The whole time, Papyrus sat on his bed, hugging his knees to his chest and watching Sans with huge eyes.

Once Sans had stuffed the backpack nearly to its full capacity, leaving a bit of extra room for food, he took a moment to suck in several deep breaths. “Okay,” he said. “Okay, let’s go. We’re gonna go get some food, and then we can go.”

“Why would there be food here?” Papyrus piped up.

Sans blinked at him. “Why wouldn’t there be? There’s food downstairs, in the, in the fridge, and in the cupboards. Those crackers you like, we’ll take some packs of them.”

“But… we don’t… live here….”

This was wrong. This was very, very wrong, in every sense of the word. “Where d’you think we live?” Sans asked carefully.

“I… I don’t know. I don’t know. I’m hungry.” Papyrus sniffled dramatically, and Sans held out a hand. Papyrus took it, allowing his big brother to lead him out of the room and into the hall.

“It’s okay. We’re gonna go downstairs, and then we’re gonna get some food, and then... ”

They arrived at the top of the stairs. The realisation hit him then.

The house was wrong. It was empty. The wallpaper was peeling, and the carpeted floor in the hall was faded and smelled mouldy. All the furniture was gone, and the windows were boarded up. When Sans turned around, he realised their bedroom was empty too—the desk, the beds, the very beds they’d just been sitting on a moment ago—gone.

Suppose time were damaged. Suppose it were damaged beyond repair, great feats undone and unaccomplished. Events that never took place. One would think all of time would collapse, no? And yet the universe carries on, perseveres.

Sans tightened his grip on Papyrus’ hand until his brother tugged it away with a small whine of protest. Was he going to disappear too? Was Papyrus? What exactly had happened, down there in
the heart of the CORE? If Gaster had fallen, what did that mean for them? For the entire Underground?

At the bottom of the stairs, the door creaked open. A large brown bird monster stepped into the house, a clipboard tucked under their wing. They seemed distracted, surveying the house and muttering to themselves. Sans and Papyrus could only stare at them in confusion.

After a minute, the bird monster looked upstairs, gaze falling on the two children standing there on the landing. At first they squawked in surprise, then a mean glint came to their eyes, and they snapped their beak angrily. “And what exactly are you two starlings doing here?”

Sans was dazed, looking down at the monster, who was now making their way up the stairs. They stopped after a few steps, glaring up at them. “I… we… ”

“This house is going up for sale,” the monster snapped at them — quite literally. “This is a big house. Could easily divide it up. House lots of families.” Click, click. “Useful. Don’t know why it’s been empty for this long. Don’t need a couple of homeless orphan brats holing up in here.” They flapped their wings, nearly dropping their clipboard. “Out! Fly!”

Sans took the stairs slowly, one at a time, Papyrus just behind him.

His mind was racing in confusion — why was Gaster’s house for sale, and why had it been empty when he’d just been living in it this morning? What was happening to their house? Why couldn’t Papyrus remember Gaster, remember… what did Papyrus remember? What did Papyrus know or think, if Gaster, their creator, was missing from the three and a half years that made up his memory? And amongst his confusion his head ached, the world still seemed to shake and tremble, and at the centre of the quake thrummed an all-encompassing emptiness.

Then the bird monster just snapped their beak, and Sans realised they had reached the foot of the stairs and were being chased to the door, and that Papyrus was gripping his hand again and sniffing. “That’s enough! Out Fly! Fly!”

They stepped out of the house, the realtor slamming the door shut at their heels, and in Sans’ mind the world seemed to give one last, great, shudder, a stone hitting water after a long plummet down a well. Everything fell still and quiet.

Papyrus tugged on Sans’ sleeve, snapping him from his reverie. “Sans? I’m HUNGRY.”

Sans glanced down at him. “Yeah?” He smiled a little. “Okay. Sure, Paps. Let’s… let’s find somethin’ to eat, huh?”

Papyrus nodded. “Where?”

Ah. Yes. They had no money.

That might be a little problematic.

Gaster was gone. It was strange, Sans thought, just how certain he was of it, for surely he should have doubts. Yet the fact remained in his mind; the knowledge seemed almost innate.

Sans tightened his grip on Papyrus’ hand, chose a random direction, and started walking. He was vaguely aware that Papyrus was asking him questions—“Sans, where are we? What’s going on? I’m HUNGRYYYY…” —but for now he blocked them out. He was aware he needed to think, to sit down and think and figure something out, but for now, Papyrus was whining that he was hungry. For now, he had to find food. From there he’d… he’d figure something out.
He was almost eleven, for god’s sakes. He could figure something out.

They hadn’t been wandering for long before Papyrus’ feet began to drag, his voice a whine that was threatening to blow into a full-out temper tantrum.

“Shh,” he muttered, distracted.

“SAAAAAAAAANNNSSS…!”

*Dammit.*

Sans hesitated before tugging his brother over to a wall. He looked around. The street they were on was deserted, and Sans supposed it must be fairly late—not late enough for everyone to be in bed, but enough so that most people were in their homes. And, luckily, not so very late that all the shops were closed.

“Okay, Papyrus,” he said, fighting hard to keep the impatience from his tone and kneeling down to his brother’s level. “Okay. Let’s get somethin’ to eat now.”

Papyrus perked up immediately, bouncing up and down on the spot. “Yay! Can we get CUPCAKES, Sans? PLEASE? Can we can we can we can we?

Sans looked around again. “Let’s see what there is.” He shrugged the backpack off his shoulders. “Here, you look after this.” Papyrus took the backpack and put it on, looking pleased that he could be trusted with such an important item. “How about I give you a piggyback ride, bro?”

Papyrus squealed and clapped his hands, moving to scrabble onto Sans’ back even before his brother crouched down. Little arms wrapped themselves securely around his neck as Sans hoisted him up, holding onto his ankles so that he wouldn’t slip and fall—Papyrus had a tendency to squirm around and lose his grip.

Once he was sure he had a secure hold on Papyrus, Sans straightened and resumed walking—slowly and casually at first, then picking up pace until his strides were so rapid he nearly tripped over his own feet and had to slow down again.

“What are we DOING?” he heard Papyrus ask, but the words washed over him and he kept walking, looking for the right shop. He’d need a store with outdoor displays, he thought, and so far, the only such places were a bookshop, a stationary shop, and a beauty shop advertising a variety of scale creams. Perhaps a little ironically, New Home was the only part of the Underground Sans wasn’t at least 90% familiar with, and he was starting to wish he’d spent more time wandering its streets now.

Another five minutes of walking, and Sans saw it—a small bakery, at the corner of the next block. The monster that ran it seemed to be closing shop, but a display stand of the day’s last baked goods remained outside the front window. Baked goods that would probably end up in the trash in a few short minutes. It was barely stealing in the first place, and he hadn’t much time. Sans ducked into a side street, poking his head out to survey his surroundings. The main road was empty.

“Hey, Paps? I know ya said you wanted a cupcake, but how about some donuts instead?”

Papyrus cheered, and Sans promptly shushed him. “Okay, bro, just… if we want ’em, we gotta… we gotta be quiet. Pretend like, um, we’re Royal Guards, okay? We’re Royal Guards staking out a scary human enemy.”

“OKAY!”
“That means no talking.” He bit back his annoyance, and Papyrus fell silent.

Sans looked around one more time. Still, he saw no-one. The display stand was still there, and the baker seemed to have disappeared, probably out back. This was his chance.

He could have teleported, he knew, but the risks of missing were too great. So, giving Papyrus’ ankle a squeeze, Sans looked left and right one final time before bolting forward. Papyrus was bouncing on his back, giggling, and now the shop was just two or three strides away, and he was finally going to get something to eat, and Papyrus would be happy. Just a few more seconds…

Sans’ fingers closed around two large donuts, the kind that were covered in powdered sugar and stuffed with jam, Papyrus’ favourites. Grinning to himself victoriously, he turned on his heel to run back the way he’d come—

In the exact same moment that Papyrus let out a shriek of “SANS!”, a large, long-fingered hand came down on his right shoulder.

The hand spun him around, causing him to drop one of the donuts on the floor. “Hey -!” Sans struggled to break free, but the hand’s grip was strong, the long fingers wrapping themselves around his clavicle, and Sans didn’t have much fight in him.

He struggled and writhed anyway.

The monster that glared down at him looked a little unusual, clearly the spawn of a cross-species couple somewhere along the line. He was part-Froggit, it seemed, but he stood on knobbly, overlong hind legs that looked as if they should not have been able to support the weight of his upper body, and he stood tall, almost as tall as Gaster.

“Excuse me, young sir.” His voice was a low and threatening croak. “I hope you were planning to pay for those.”

Sans struggled, but the grip on his clavicle tightened, causing him to wince in pain and still somewhat. The monster’s other hand took his wrist, raising Sans’ arm slightly. On his back, Papyrus remained mercifully silent, probably too frightened to say anything. “Leggo of me—”

The frog-like monster’s vocal sac throbbed in irritation, in sync with the vein that pulsed at his temple. “Don’t often get little thieves around here. Ribbit, ribbit. Why don’t we head inside and give a nice call to the Royal Guard? Sure we’ll be able to sort things out.” He began to drag Sans towards the front door of his shop.

The Guard?! Sans began to struggle again, and Papyrus started whimpering. Sans wasn’t sure if he was saying anything or not. “No—no, we weren’t stealing—c’mon, mister, let go—”

The grip on Sans’ wrist tightened now. “Oh? Ribbit, ribbit. Well, unless you plan on paying, young sir, then—”

Sans panicked. Screwing his eyes shut in a desperate sort of prayer, he called on his magic, and in a split second he shortcut.

He felt it happen at once, felt the flare of magic inside him, felt space shift around him. All of a sudden there were no sticky, long-fingered hands holding him, and when he opened his eyes, he was on the side street he’d ducked into just before. And he’d managed to bring Papyrus with him in one piece.

And the donut.
He was still holding the remaining donut.

Sans fell to his knees, and his brother slid off his back and got up as if to look around.

Just around the corner, he heard the clank of armour, the heavy steps of Royal Guards’ boots. Sans cursed under his breath and pulled Papyrus over to him, holding him close to his chest. He willed himself to breathe quieter as the Guards passed their hiding place and stopped, having apparently reached the bakery.

He had to get out of here, somehow, but this was a dead-end street. Maybe if he waited until the Guard were gone, and prayed they wouldn’t bother to look around the corner —*ha!*— he could make a break for it? Or he could shortcut again, but he dismissed the possibility soon as it came to him. To shortcut, he’d need a clear mental image of his destination, and he knew he wasn’t familiar enough with New Home to do that. Travelling to Hotland was an option, but Sans could scarcely teleport ten feet across a room; he didn’t trust himself to travel long distances, especially not when he had Papyrus to account for.

“Sans?” whispered Papyrus.

“Shh,” he said automatically.

Papyrus fell silent.

The clanking of the Guards’ boots resumed and headed off in the other direction, but their steps were slow. They must have begun to look for them. Sans held his breath, and pulled Papyrus closer to him, so he wouldn’t move around too much.

What he didn’t anticipate was Papyrus beginning to whine again: “Saaans?”

“Shh,” he admonished, just as Papyrus began to cry.

The clanking footsteps faltered.

“Papyrus, *shush,*” he hissed, which only made Papyrus cry harder. The footsteps drew closer.

“I wanna go hooome, I’m SCARED, I don’t know what’s happening, and you STEALED and stealing’s BAD, I’m SCAAAAARED—” Papyrus’ whining gave way to unintelligible wails.

“*Papyrus, stop crying,*” he said fiercely, even though he knew it was inevitable, the Guards had heard them and would catch them now and they’d—they’d—what did the Royal Guard do with young shoplifters anyway? Deliver them to the King, throw them in the dungeon? What if Gaster came back, crawled out of the Void like the cat in the cartoon, able to survive anything? Would they send them back to Gaster? That would be even worse.

Papyrus howled.

Sans knew capture was inevitable. But something inside him snapped, and next thing he knew, he was yelling, too. He screamed the words. “SHUT UP PAPYRUS!”

Papyrus fell into shocked silence, his eye sockets brimming with tears, in the exact same moment Sans’ magic flared and burst around him in an eruption of magic and Determination.

When he opened his eyes, he and Papyrus were sitting huddled in an unfamiliar alleyway in New Home. Sans had no idea how he’d gotten here; he must have visited this alley a long time ago, the memory of it imprinted into his subconscious.
Everything was quiet, and when he craned his neck up high and squinted, the ceiling here was much lower down than it had been in the previous street, near the bakery. It stank here, the ground was covered in litter, and the wall behind him was plastered in peeling old posters and covered in graffiti. Moreover, whereas that street had had a dead end, this one clearly branched off into an entire network of alleys and pathways half-hidden. A whole city of dodgy back-streets for the Underground’s poor and destitute. He must have shortcut quite a long way.

The Guards would not find them here.

Now, Papyrus was sniffling quietly and had taken to hugging his knees, looking like he didn’t give a care in the world that he and his brother had just teleported across the capital, if he’d even noticed at all.

_Dammit._

“Ah, geez, Papyrus. Hey. Hey, c’mere, I’m sorry, I didn’t mean it…”

Papyrus gave a pitiful sniffle, but he looked up, rubbing at his eye sockets. Sans held out his arms, and Papyrus went to them, throwing his arms around his neck. Sans rubbed his brother’s skull the way he liked, until Papyrus’ tears ceased, murmuring apologies all the while.

“I-it’s okay,” Papyrus mumbled into the fabric of his T-shirt.

“I know you’re scared,” Sans mumbled. “I am, too. I’m still tryin’ to figure out what’s going on.” He paused. “Let’s eat our donut and just... figure somethin’ out, I guess, or somethin’, huh? We’ll find a place to sleep.”

Papyrus wiggled free. “Sleep where?”

“Uh… somewhere around here, I guess.” Sans shrugged. “Still got your backpack?”

“Mhmm!” Papyrus nodded importantly and clutched the backpack’s straps.

“‘kay.” Sans figured he should run an inventory or something; he hadn’t been paying all that much attention when packing. He tore the donut in two, and handed the larger half to Papyrus, who devoured it. He himself picked at his own half donut, nibbling on the deep-fried dough and letting the jam leak out.

He had to think—he wasn’t a baby bones anymore.

He had to _think._

Gaster had fallen. Sans hadn’t seen it per se, but it would have been too dark to see him fall anyway. Some kind of magic, or perhaps his Determination, _told_ Sans he had fallen, and he could picture it to boot, picture the darkness rushing to meet him, swallowing him up. It was a very nice mental image, better even than the picture he’d once drawn of Gaster as a pile of dust.

When Sans tried to think of him, now, the sensation was strange. He could remember everything, technically. The memories were clear, but they felt they’d happened a terribly long time ago. And there was, at the same time, a hole in his mind.

So, the facts:

The house hadn’t been lived in for years.
Papyrus couldn’t seem to remember a thing.

*Upon the Reset, a great explosion of time energy will occur. The nothing, the emptiness of the Void will devour the Underground, and erase it from time.*

So that was that, then.

But why could *he* remember?

Sans hadn’t been able to Reset, so he wasn’t an anomaly… was he? He’d *failed*.

**As I anticipated. A regular failure.**

Had he really caused an explosion of Void energy? At least that would have been pretty cool.

But that only led to more questions: why hadn’t Sans been erased if he’d been right there on the brink of the Void with Gaster? And how big had the explosion had been? Had it even spread beyond that room?

The doors… Gaster had said something about doors.

**The CORE is quite a well-built structure, and the “radiation” given off by the Void is contained to this level alone.**

So the explosion of Void energy had been contained, then? He hadn’t been strong enough for it to properly spread, or something, not strong enough to Reset.

Sans sighed, scrubbing a hand down his face. He was tired, and his headache was getting worse. He didn’t know *what* he was thinking. He didn’t even know if his thoughts made any sense. Probably not.

It probably didn’t matter, anyway.

He had greater things to worry about, now. He had to look after Papyrus. He would need to find them food, and shelter, and clothes. He would need money. A job. He didn’t really care how he got it, or what kind of job it was, as long as it kept him and Papyrus alive.

Sans looked into the depths of the alleyway. There was nobody in sight here, but deeper into the labyrinth of narrow paths and back streets, there might be people who would be willing to give them a helping hand. Maybe he wouldn’t find them tonight, or even tomorrow, but he would find them.

He had to figure something out, he thought. And he would. He would. Just… after he… rested…

“Saaans?” It was a small, subdued whine. His baby brother tugged on his shirt. When Sans glanced down at him, Papyrus had stuck his sleeve in his mouth and was chewing on it. It was a nervous habit Sans himself had yet to outgrow. Heh. Papyrus must have picked up on it.

Sans smiled down at him softly. “Yeah, bro?”

“You look sleepy."

Sans blinked and laughed a little. “Yeah, I am a bit.”

“I’m sleepy too.”
He ran a hand over Papyrus’ skull. “I know, Paps. Let’s just do our inventory, and then we can go to sleep. ‘k?”

“Okay,” agreed Papyrus, sitting up a little straighter and recognising this as an Extremely Important Task.

One by one, Sans went through the items in their backpack. There were two shirts of Papyrus’ and one pair of his pyjama bottoms. One of his own T-shirts and a set of pyjamas with rocket ships on them, and a sweater for each of them. He’d also packed a box of Papyrus’ crayons, three markers, one smiley-face pencil, an eraser in the shape of a bone, two toy cars and a toy truck, a bouncy ball, and Papyrus’ stuffed bunny. When he pulled the stuffed animal out, Papyrus squealed in pleasure and hugged it tightly to his chest.

And, slightly crushed at the bottom of the bag, a sheet of paper. Right, he’d packed Papyrus’ drawing. As the toddler fussed over his bunny, Sans pulled out the drawing and looked at it.

And froze.

The drawing was done in messy three-year-old crayon scribbles. It was a picture of two smiling skeleton children, one slightly bigger than the other and with a rounder skull. The little skeletons were standing on either side of a larger skeleton, and were holding the larger skeleton’s hands. The larger skeleton was smiling widest of all, and he wore a pair of glasses and a white coat. At the top of the drawing, Papyrus had started to write something in his three-year-old’s scrawl, then violently crossed it out with the fury of his orange crayon.

“Paps?” Sans asked quietly.

“Nyeh?”

“What’s… what’s this?”

Papyrus looked up from smoothing out his bunny’s fur. “Oh! That’s a family I drawed when you were sleeping! There’s me, and you, and, um, I dunno who the other skele is. I think I must have maked him up.”

“Is he a… a daddy?”

“Mhmm!”

“There’s no mommy,” Sans observed, voice low.

“Yeah, I didn’t draw a mommy.”

“How come?” he pressed.

“Because I didn’t want to,” was the sensible reply.

“Ah. Right.”

“Do you like it? I did the colouring very careful.”

Sans laughed weakly. “Yeah, Paps. It’s… it’s real nice.” Papyrus looked pleased with himself, and took initiative in beginning to re-pack their backpack.

As Papyrus packed, Sans let out a whooshing breath he hadn’t known he was holding.
Sans had spent the first eleven years of his life wishing for another one; on bad days he’d gone so far as to wish he’d never been born. Now he had the chance to pretend none of it had ever happened.

A part of him wanted to forget Gaster, to let the empty spots take over his memory and start afresh. He would be free, after all—free from bad dreams and ill memories, free to pretend like he was a true monster.

And yet…

Sans lifted a hand to cover his left eye experimentally. Except for the faint spots of light that slipped through his phalanges, he couldn’t see anything, the vision on his right side remaining totally dark. He dropped his hand to his lap, dejected: he’d forgotten what it was like to see out of both eyes anyway.

From here, he looked down at his arms, pockmarked with little scars and cuts, the bones rough and bumpy.

He wrapped his arms around himself, his self that would remain this small forever, allowing a dim blue glow to kindle in his single good eye. He couldn’t bring himself to glow very brightly.

He was like this because of him. Because of Gaster. A broken doll that didn’t even belong to anyone anymore.

This body—this tiny, fragile body—had once been Gaster’s. Gaster’s to hit, Gaster’s to carve up, Gaster’s to snap the bones of as easily as if they were toothpicks, Gaster’s to strap down to the examination table and inject with Determination and all manner of experimental drugs.

But Gaster was gone now.

Sans lifted a hand to the top of his skull and ran it down his body, stopping at the base of his ribcage. His ribs, his hand, his eye, his body, his, his, his, and he found himself—himself!—smiling.

Gaster had once owned this body, but not anymore. He was gone, and Sans had taken it back from him.

Sans had taken something of Gaster’s and made it his own. That was far, far better than letting himself forget.

“Sans, this place is stinky,” Papyrus was saying, snapping Sans from his reverie.

Sans made a show of sniffing the air. “Phew, it is, huh? Wanna find a better place?”

“Yes.” Papyrus secured the backpack onto his back.

“Okay, let’s go.” Sans cast the paper one last glance, then, picking up the pencil, which had rolled out of Papyrus’ reach, hastily scrawled “don’t forget” at the top of the page before stuffing the drawing into his pocket.

Sans crouched down for his brother to climb onto him and ride piggyback again, but this time Papyrus clung to his front, giggling. Because I already went on your back, brother!

Sans laughed a little, standing up. “Yeah, you’re right, bro. We don’t wanna skull-k around in a yucky, stinky dump like this.”
Papyrus made a high-pitched squawk of protest, and Sans laughed louder, tickling his sternum. “Aw, c’mon, Paps. Ain’t I ticklin’ your funny bone?”

“Hmph,” said Papyrus, and refused to say anything more for the grand total of ten seconds. When he spoke again, it was only two words: “I’m TIRED.”

“Me, too,” Sans murmured, walking to the end of the alleyway. He was presented with a fork in the path. “Left or right, whaddya think?”

“Left! Because you draw with your left hand!”

Sans laughed softly at his toddler’s logic, and abided by his request. The network of alleyways expanded here, the city within the city finally revealing itself, passages going in all directions, some made by buildings, others by fences, still others by rock faces. Sans ducked into a small cavern that quickly gave larger one.

He continued exploring, alley after alley, up and down ill-carved sets of stairs, wandering even as he didn’t know what exactly he was looking for. Somewhere private, maybe. Cosy. As cosy as an alleyway could be, heh. His standards were plummeting. Papyrus was half-asleep, his head weighing heavy on his shoulder.

At last he rounded a corner into yet another alleyway, this one a dead end. It would do for this first night.

Sans shut his eyes briefly and leaned his forehead against one high, weathered stone wall, breathing hard. It wasn’t until Papyrus began to squirm amidst his soft, constant whimpers that Sans realised his brother was pressed up between the wall and his ribcage. He half-rolled, half-turned on the spot so that the back of his skull rested against the wall instead, then sunk down to sit on the pavement, cradling Papyrus close.

Only then did he notice the other children huddled towards the back of the alleyway, against the opposite wall. There were three of them in all—a toad girl, an insect-like monster, and a cat boy with soot-coloured fur. Or perhaps it had once been white.

The children wore ill-fitting clothes, and seemed none too warm. They’d gathered around them piles of old rags and flattened cardboard boxes like a kind of nest. None of them looked to be more than fourteen years old.

Sans watched them solemnly as Papyrus’ soft, erratic whimpers gave way to rhythmic breathing—and locked eyes with the cat boy. Sans would have pegged him at around twelve. He couldn’t have guessed how long they stared into each other’s eyes, but after a long stretch of time, the cat boy slid a slab of cardboard and a few rags over to Sans.

Neither child smiled.

But Sans set Papyrus down on the cardboard mattress, placing as many rags over his small body as he could. Then, drawing his brother close, he lay down himself, curled up on his side, and fell asleep.

When he woke up, it was morning, and the children were gone.

Chapter End Notes
This chapter was probably a little confusing, lol, so feel free to pop by the NWABBW blog or my main tumblr with any questions you might have. (hint, hint?) (I'm so sorry).
Stay Determined

Mt Ebott was a vast mountain – not especially tall, but unimaginably wide. It needed to be, to house all those monsters. Tucked neatly at its base was the town of Ebott – Ebott was hardly a metropolis, but it was a sizeable town all the same, and this was where most of the monster population was presently situated.

Humans hadn’t exactly welcomed monsters with open arms, but they hadn’t run out with their torches and pitchforks on sight of the first Snowdrake, either. Which was better than anyone had expected. No-one had had very high hopes for human-monster relations, except perhaps Papyrus, but six months since the destruction of the Barrier and things were going along more smoothly than anticipated. It turned out being a society that used solid gold pieces as its currency had its advantages, and the technological feats that had been achieved by Doctor Alphys proved that this strange new race had something to bring to humanity. All this certainly encouraged humans to be a little more open-minded about an entire civilisation showing up on their doorstep literally overnight.

The two races co-existed, more or less, in that monsters had been granted education and work permits and in that humans were not, technically, allowed to bar monsters from any public spaces or refuse them service. It remained a lingering problem anyway.

But things could have been worse. Excluding those monsters that had chosen to remain behind in the Underground, efforts had been put aside to make sure every member of the monster race, plus Frisk, was provided with sufficient housing. Even if that housing was restricted to the worst neighbourhoods in Ebott and many monsters were forced to live under the same roof in groups as large as twelve.

The house that had been found for Toriel was one of the better ones – the neighbourhood was poor, but not crawling with crime, and it was spacious enough, considering that it was home to six people.

It was on the porch of this house Frisk was now seated, curled up on a rickety, oversized lawn chair, homework untouched on her lap. Her gaze was fixed on the sky, just starting to darken with the first bruises of nighttime.

An October breeze rustled past, disturbing the dried fallen leaves on the lawn. Frisk shivered slightly, wrapping her arms round herself. Her thin sweater did nothing to keep out the cold, but she stayed put.

The front door creaked open. Sans poked his head out, hands stuffed, as ever, into the pockets of his omnipresent blue hoodie. "Hey, bud, aren'tcha freezing out here? Even I'm cold, and I'm a skeleton."

Frisk looked over at him, flashing him a toothy grin. "Are you chilled to the bone?"

Sans made a show of wiping tears from his eye sockets, making Frisk giggle. "You make me prouder every day, kid. Move over, lemme sit down."

Frisk obliged, scooting aside to make room. The lawn chair was plenty large enough for both of them. Sans settled down next to her, ruffling her hair.

"Heh, heh. Hey, speaking of bein' chilled to the bone, wanna piece of advice?"
Frisk looked up at him questioningly.

"Don't go falling asleep in the snow when winter comes. Happened to me in Snowdin once, talking to your mom. Rude, I know, but she has a soothing sorta voice, y'know? And a guy can only listen to someone talk about snails for so long. Anyway, dozed right off, woke up a few hours later, and found that so much ice had formed in my joints I couldn't move. Had to shortcut home and thaw out by the stove."

Frisk giggled.

"Seriously! You don't know how freaky it is, having ice stuck in your kneecaps like that. And boy, did Papyrus give me an earful when he got home from whatever the big guy does. Though I guess that whole thing's more of a skeleton experience, huh?" A custom chuckle. "Anyway. Whatcha doin'?" Sans took the notebook from Frisk's lap and squinted at it. "Homework? Isn't it too dark to see out here?"

Frisk took the notebook back, shrugging. "I wasn't really doing it. It's just math. Boring."

Sans leaned over her slightly, angling his head to further study the paper. "Multiplication, huh? Timetables? Yeah, that stuff's pretty slow, I guess. Jus' memory work. Math gets pretty great later, though, once you start playing around with the equations, solving stuff."

Frisk shrugged. Math had never interested her, and Sans gave a small chuckle. "Not so much your thing, huh?"

Frisk shrugged again, and Sans sighed, scratching the back of his skull.

"You're awful quiet tonight." Sans' expression softened. "More'n usual, anyway. What's rattlin' your bones, huh?"

The porch light gave a flicker; Frisk craned her neck up to look at it and pressed closer to Sans. "Nothing."

Sans wrapped an arm around her, giving her shoulder a squeeze. "You miss your mom?"

"Yeah." She nodded into him.

"Heh. Me too. Miss her cooking. Except for the snail dishes, anyway."

Frisk nodded enthusiastically.

Two pairs of eyes made their way to the sky. It had darkened significantly since Frisk had last glanced at it; stars were beginning to emerge. After a few minutes, she looked over at her Dunkle Sans. He was still watching the sky, face alight with a soft smile. It wasn't as wide as his usual cheeky grin, but more genuine. It met his eyes. The only times Frisk saw him smile more genuinely than that was when he was watching his brother. He looked a little sleepy, he looked content, and he looked at peace.

It suited him.

"You gonna keep starin' at me all day, or were you planning on saying something at some point?" His voice was a low murmur, but Frisk startled anyway, and Sans laughed.

"What, no-one tell you skeletons have peripheral vision? Well, I do, on the left side anyway. Papyrus has it on both, though, he's cool like that. Geez, kid, you've only been livin' with us six
months. Thought you'd have noticed by now. Hell, I'm pretty sure everyone's got at least some peripheral vision – nevermind, forget the skeleton thing, one would think it'd just be intuitive, no?" Frisk stared at him uncertainly, and Sans laughed again, ruffling her hair. "Aw, only jokin' with ya. You can keep staring if you want."

Frisk looked down at her math homework instead. Even by the flickering porch light, it was too dark to see it.

"Hey." A thumb and forefinger positioned themselves under her chin, guiding her face up. Frisk tried to avert her eyes, but feeling her Dunkle Sans' gaze on her, gentle yet pointed, she returned it. "You really are bein' quiet," he mumbled, releasing her chin to stroke a hand over the top of her head. Frisk resumed leaning against him. "Wanna tell your Dunkle Sans what's up? I'm a great listener for a guy with no ears."

"I... " Frisk bit at a thumbnail, her gaze sliding down to her sock feet. There was a long pause, in which Sans waited patiently. "It's stupid," she finally muttered.

"Well, then, kid, it's your lucky day. I like to hear all about stupid stuff. The stupider, the better, I always say."

She smiled shyly at that, then drew in a deep breath. "Yeah, but it... it really is stupid."

"On the edge of my seat, kid."

Frisk sighed, wringing the fabric of her striped sweater. "Remember how I had a scary dream last night? I know it's dumb, but... I can't stop thinking about it."

A weighty pause. Frisk waited for Sans to tease her, or even laugh at her. Tell her to stop being silly. Being scared of a nightmare nearly twenty-four hours later was taking things a bit far, after all. She awaited his judgment with bated breath. When he finally delivered his verdict, his words were slow and thoughtful.

"One o' those kinds of dreams, huh? The kind that ya can't shake no matter what you do?" He gave a little shudder, and Frisk found herself nodding in agreement.

"Yeah." Her grip on her sweater tightened. "It's like it's clinging to me. I know it's just a dream, but... do things ever happen to you and you feel like they want you to remember them? Just like that."

He didn't answer, his gaze focused on something in the distance. She could feel him stiffening against her, and she worried she'd said something he didn't like.

"Dunkle Sans?"

A twitch, and then he jerked right back, like a machine that had been given a good, hearty thump to gets its gears turning again. "Wha – oh. Yeah. Whoops. Think I might've just been fallin' asleep back there. Must be the lazybones kicking in. Thanks for waking me. I'm lucky I don't have skin; else Papyrus would have it."

She hopped off the seat herself, incredulous. "You only came out here to talk because you were hiding from her?"

"Weell. Partially." Sans laughed, scratching the back of his skull. "C'mon, you can pass me some
carrots or something while we talk more about that dream o' yours. And keep an eye on the kitchen
doors, too. Papyrus and Undyne'll be back soon and we can't have them near the stove."

"Mum says we can't afford to have another kitchen installed," Frisk agreed, and she took his
outstretched hand to follow him inside, leaving her math homework behind on the lawn chair.

Cooking with Auntie Undyne had been fun, but, in hindsight, a bit hazardous. And she'd never
actually gotten to find out if Undyne's aggressive approach to cooking really made the food taste
better or not. Privately, Frisk doubted it: she'd gotten used to her mother's cooking and was certain
that there wasn't a person in the world, human or monster, who could prepare a better meal. Her
mother had a way of making even regular commercial breakfast cereal taste delicious. Even the
snail dishes were tolerable with enough salt, and if she held her nose while swallowing.

Her mum had been nervous about leaving for a week, and in the end, she'd stuffed the fridge to its
capacity with food to be heated up. The only responsibilities she'd left the four remaining adults in
the household in terms of cooking had been to wash and chop vegetables for salad.

Frisk pulled herself up onto the table, swinging her short legs contentedly. A bunch of carrots –
Frisk counted five of them – were lying next to her on a plate, already washed and peeled.

"Right, then," Sans muttered to himself, riffling through the cutlery drawer. "Knife… knife…"
At last he found a suitable one, placed it next to the cutting board on the counter. "And carrots."
Frisk reached for one, but Sans held up a hand, a playful grin on his face. "Wait, hold up. You're gonna
love this – just be careful." He snapped his fingers, and suddenly, all five carrots were flying
hovering in the air, floating slowly towards the counter. All of them emitted a faint blue glow.

Frisk's jaw dropped.

Sans' grin widened, and, waving his hand, he sent the carrots flying this way and that, even
throwing in a loop-de-loop. The second time he tried, the magic wavered, and the carrots fell to the
counter with a clatter.

Frisk was delighted anyway. She clapped her hands together. "That was so cool!" she crowed,
kicking her feet a little, and Sans took off an imaginary hat and gave a bow.

"Thank you, thank you, m'lady. You've been a great audience. I do shows twice weekly,
astonishing displays of telekinesis, right here in the same place. Next time I'm thinkin' of doing
cucumbers. Tell your friends. Spread the word. Thank you. Thank you."

"I didn't know you could do telekinesis," said Frisk appreciatively.

Sans placed one carrot on the cutting board and picked up the knife. He began to chop, a little
sloppily. "No-one ever told ya? Yeah, I can do a little telekinesis. Cool, huh? But no big deal. 's a
skeleton thing. Well, sort of. Not for every skeleton. Not even for Paps. But he can do other cool
stuff. Like – "

" – walk on air," Frisk finished. "I know, I've seen him. It's really neat."

"It is, yeah." Sans fell contemplatively silent for a moment, and the only sound was that of the
knife coming down on the cutting board, slicing the carrots in pieces. Then, "So. Your dream."

Oh. Right. Frisk bit at a thumbnail. "I just… I dunno. It's like the dream won't go away. Like it's…
trying to hang on to me. And it won't let go. Does… does that make sense?"

The sound of chopping carrots had a certain finality to it. "Yeah, I guess I know what you mean.
See, the thing about dreams is – "

Whatever he was going to say next was cut off by the sound of the knife, and a sharp intake of breath. Sans dropped the knife, finger flying to his mouth, as he winced. "Gah – dammit – "

Frisk hopped down from the table and hurried to his side, brows knit in concern. "Are you okay?!" She tilted her head to look at his injured finger, and saw the beads of red there.

"Yeah, yeah, 'm fine. Just nicked my finger. Stings a bit is all. 's nothin'."

"You're bleeding," Frisk protested, in a mix of both concern and fascination. "But you don't have blood or veins or guts or anything."

Sans' eye twitched. He brought his finger surreptitiously to his pants, wiping it off. "Heh. Don't worry. It's, uh, not really blood… "

Frisk tried to see. "What is it, then?"

He flexed his hand, and the red stuff from his finger was wiped clean. Only a tiny bit was leaking from the cut. "Nothin'." He turned to face her, laying his hands on Frisk's shoulders, and his eyes softened. "Listen, kid. I know that dream scared you. But your Dunkle Sans knows a thing or two about dreams, so listen up, k?"

She bit her lip. "Okay."

He let go of her shoulders and, hand now pressed against the small of her back, began to lead her over to the living room, which Frisk took to mean that they were about to have a serious discussion. "Here. Dreams can't get ya, Frisk. Okay?"

Frisk sighed. "Yeah. I know. … I mean, okay."

"Dreams can't get ya." They reached the sofa, and he broke into a sudden grin as they both settled down upon it. "…But I can!"

And he pounced.

Frisk wriggled in delight, shrieking in her attempt to evade tickling phalanges. There was something about bare finger bones that gave them an especial tickling power, and she continued to scream as Sans tickled her stomach and under the chin, her two most sensitive spots. Sometimes, she tried to reach up to tickle back, but then she'd find herself consumed by a fresh wave of laughter and her arms could only flail uselessly at her sides.

"Stop – tickling – meeel!" she managed to gasp out, sock feet kicking as Sans went for her ribs.

"What was that? Sorry, didn't catch that; you're laughing too much, kid."

Frisk squealed.

"Oh, I think I got it!" He nodded his head in exaggerated thought. "You said, 'keep tickling me, Dunkle Sans.' That's what you said, right?"

"Nooo! Nooo, I said stop tickling me! Stooop!"

"Keep tickling ya? Okay, got it," said Sans, and went in for the kill.

"NOOO!"
The front door burst open; Papyrus and Undyne were home from their jog. The distraction gave Frisk an opportunity to escape. She climbed over the sofa and fled for the door. "Uncle Papyrus!" she gasped out. "Uncle Papyrus, Auntie Undyne! Help! Sans is tickling me— eek!" She shrieked as Sans turned her soul blue, bringing her back to the sofa to resume his attack.

Papyrus stepped forward, a hand pressed dramatically to his chest as he assumed his most valiant position. All he needed was a wind to blow his scarf in the breeze and the look would be complete. "DO NOT FEAR, TINY HUMAN! FOR I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, KNOW ALL MY LAZY BROTHER’S MOST TICKLISH SPOTS AND SHALL COME NOBLY TO YOUR RESCUE!"

Sans froze for a moment, his eye sockets widening. "Oh, no. Oh, no, no, no, no. Oh, no, you don't, no, bro, please—"

Papyrus was already on the sofa, hauling Sans off Frisk and onto his lap and tickling him in the ribs. Frisk, giddy at the sight, stood up on the sofa and began to bounce up and down on the spot, egging Papyrus on. "Come on, Uncle Papyrus! Get him! Get him!"

The brothers fell to the floor with a muffled thud and began to roll around, tickling each other in every sensitive place they could reach—under the arms, under the jaw, in the ribs, on the feet.

"Get him! Get him!" Frisk cheered.

Undyne had, thus far, been taking in this display with an amused expression on her face. Now, kicking off her sneakers, she broke into a wide grin. She snatched Frisk up and gave her a brief, slightly painful noogie before tucking her securely under one arm and took to tickling her in the belly with her free hand. Frisk shrieked and wriggled in a futile attempt to escape; Undyne's grip was strong. After some wiggling, Frisk twisted, reached over, managing to tickle Undyne however briefly in the ribs. The two of them collapsed onto the floor in a blur of limbs and laughter.

A fierce tickle battle broke out, the likes of which had never been seen before in the history of monster and humankind, and the four of them rolled around on the floor, tickling each other and howling with laughter. Any attempts to escape resulted in the coward in question being yanked forcefully back into the heart of the battlefield, usually by Undyne.

At some point, Alphys came from upstairs, where she'd been watching anime in the privacy of her and Undyne's bedroom, to see what all the commotion was about, headphones still looped around her neck. Undyne wasted absolutely no time in heading straight for her.

At some point, Undyne snatched up a sofa cushion and a pillow fight was initiated. They laughed and they shrieked, tickled each other and whacked each other with pillows. By the time they finally settled down to dinner, Alphys having escaped to finish chopping the carrots, Frisk had forgotten her unsettling dream entirely.

OoOo

In the dream, Frisk was in Waterfall. Barefoot.

Yes, that was right, she remembered that. Almost as soon as she'd gotten there, she'd stepped in a deep puddle, soaking her feet right through. She hadn't been able to stand the squelching of her feet, and the shoes, which she'd never liked in the first place, were probably ruined anyway. So she'd stopped to pull them off along with her dripping socks, and had left them behind against the cave wall before traipsing on.

The feeling of thick, cool mud between her toes was just as nice in the dream as it had been in
reality.

She'd liked it best in Waterfall, had revelled in the quiet and the peacefulness and the dark. Snowdin had been nice enough, but rather too bright and loud. The caverns here were far smaller than those of Snowdin. Darker. The cave ceiling dripped stalactites and water droplets, and the rock was embedded in generous scatterings of those beautiful stones that glinted in a mockery of what monsters had once had. That, combined with the historical plaques on the cave walls and the Echo Flowers that repeated snatches of the passing conversations they overheard in mournful murmurs, set it apart from the other regions of the Underground.

Snowdin was lovely enough, but it was all bright, warm Christmas lights and obnoxious facade.

Waterfall was more honest of the monsters' experience.

She passed Gerson's shop, poking her head inside, but the Royal Guard veteran was nowhere to be seen. Then she paused, listening. The sound of rushing water was louder here, filling her with Determination, and she could hear a breezy voice humming to itself. The Riverperson must have been at their Waterfall station. Frisk headed down the path toward the dock, giving the cloaked figure a wave.

"Hi."

The Riverperson turned their hooded, faceless form towards the human child. "Tra la la," they singsonged, voice featureless as the wind. "Care for a ride?"

"Yes, please."

"Where will we go today?"

Frisk thought. "Do we have to go somewhere? I thought maybe I could just go for a ride and see what I feel like. It's just a dream, after all."

The Riverperson bowed their head solemnly and under their cloak some unseen limb was raised in a gesture of invitation. Frisk climbed aboard.

"Tra la la. Then we're off." The boat pushed gently away from the dock, the river burbling and bubbling away beneath them.

After they'd been riding for a few minutes, Frisk made herself more comfortable, drawing her legs out from under her and letting them dangle over the edge of the boat so her toes skirted she surface of the water.

"I would not touch the water if I were you. Best to stay back, small one."

Her head snapped up and her brow crinkled in childish confusion. A strange feeling churned in her stomach. She'd taken the ferry many times on her journey across the Underground, and a few times in her dreams, too. And never, never had the Riverperson ever actually spoken in something other than riddles, actually reacted to something she said other than a request for a ride. She swallowed, but obliged, drawing her legs back up onto the ferry and shuffling into a more comfortable kneeling position. "Why not?"

"Tra la la. Beware the man who speaks in hands," the Riverperson hummed by way of reply.

Frisk's breath caught. "You said that to me once before. What does it mean?"
The Riverperson resumed humming their song, and didn't answer. Dejected, Frisk leaned over the edge of the boat, trying to get a glimpse of the water to see what was wrong with it. The water of the Underground's main channel was dark, she supposed, darker than the rivers and ponds that filled the rest of Waterfall, but then this entire network of caves had always been poorly lit.

She squinted and continued staring. Then, after a minute, it struck her. No reflection.

They glided there, along the river together, for a while longer, with nothing but the quiet rush of water and the Riverperson's strange, tuneless song to fill the empty silence. Frisk was startled when they unexpectedly spoke again. "Waterfall is so quiet. Sometimes you can even hear yourself think. Tra la la, that's impossible to do anywhere else nowadays."

Frisk drew her knees to her chest, thinking. "Can we go back there? To Waterfall?"

The Riverperson inclined their head, and the boat headed on. Frisk had never quite been able to make sense of the course of the river. It seemed to go in a straight line, not a circle, and the boat always seemed to head in the same direction. Yet somehow it always arrived at its destination without passing any other docks.

The boat did the same thing now, pulling back up at the Waterfall dock, where it had only just picked Frisk up in the first place.

Frisk disembarked, giving the Riverperson a thank-you and a wave.

"Come again sometime. Tra la la."

Frisk waved once more, then turned – and startled.

At the top of the riverbank, a figure stood, with shoulders hunched and arms crossed across its chest. A human figure, a child not much taller than she. Frisk recognised it as the girl she'd seen in last night's dream. Shadows fell across the girl's face, which was only further obscured by the bangs that hung in her eyes. Frisk was struck by the strange impression that she knew the girl from somewhere, that in wakefulness she might have recognised her, but in the dream she couldn't for the life of her recall who it might be. The girl's identity lingered just out of reach.

"Hello," she called out, waving as she approached. "I'm Frisk. What's your name?"

The girl did not respond. Her arms dropped to her sides. She stared at Frisk a moment, then, quick as silver, turned on her heel and ran, disappearing around the corner.

"Hey!" Frisk exclaimed, and set off after her. "Hey, wait! I want to know your name! What are you doing here? Who are you? I won't hurt you, I prom – hey!" The girl's longer legs served her well, and she kept a steady pace ahead of Frisk, darting through the caverns with the easy grace of one who knew them off by heart. The girl's feet sidestepped and leapt over deeper puddles where Frisk had to make a conscious effort to avoid them.

Past the turnoff to the Blook Farm and Undyne's house.

They reached the cavern of the little bird that was always pleased to carry passengers across the stream. The bird was not there. Frisk expected the girl to make a running leap across the river, but instead she stepped into the water and ran straight across it. The water barely came to her knees. She climbed out of the shallow stream and in one fluid motion she was running again, out of sight in the next room. Frisk hastened after her.

"Hey, wait!" Frisk slipped in the mud at the bottom of the stream and fell, and was forced to pick
herself back up again and clamber awkwardly out of the water. The mud clung to the side of her legs.

Through the opening to the marshlands alight with phosphorescent mushrooms and lined with ponds of water so bright with magic it would have been considered dangerously radioactive on the Surface.

Past the turnoff to one of the Nice Cream Vendor's stops.

Past the telescope Sans had pranked Frisk into trying to look through. The telescope stood alone, pointed meekly to the glittering stones above. Although the telescope hadn't looked terribly old to Frisk when she'd been in the Underground, it was now beginning to rust in places. It looked like it was falling apart.

The girl was just ahead of her. Despite her stumbling awkwardness, Frisk was catching up.

Beyond this one should have been the room with the little table in it, on which had sat that piece of cheese that had been on the table so long a crystal had formed around it. Frisk remembered creating a Save point in that room, though she'd had no cause to return.

Instead, Frisk could see a new and unfamiliar cavern, one she was certain she'd never passed through while crossing the Underground. It was darker than the other rooms, long and narrow and empty.

At the cave mouth, the girl stopped, quite abruptly, without slipping and stumbling the way one normally would when running. She was simply running one moment and standing death-still the next, without the slightest in-between or transition of motion.

The girl angled her head to one side, as if listening for something. Even with her back to Frisk, Frisk could feel her smile.

"Hey," Frisk spoke up as she finally caught up to her, stumbling. "Are you trying to show me something?"

A raindrop fell on her nose, making her blink in surprise, and when she opened her eyes, the girl was gone. Frisk found herself wondering if she'd ever been there at all.

The room before her waited in anticipation.

An Echo Flower at her feet, barely more than a bud, whispered to her: "Frisk…"

Frisk's heart skipped a beat and she spun around, her fist clenching reflexively where it would have held her stick. "Hello?"

"Frisk…" the flower repeated, and the voice it echoed was like the skittering of a thousand insects' legs.

Frisk shivered at some unfelt breeze. Her gaze slid down to her feet. The Echo Flower was gone.

She was reminded further of last night's dream, with its grabbing mist and disembodied voices and that girl –

But it was just a dream, and in her dream state Frisk told herself she was being silly. She was sure the girl had meant no harm – no more harm than any of her friends had meant while she'd been here anyway.
She entered the cavern.

The room was plain, nothing setting it apart from the other caves Frisk had walked through. It resembled every other cavern in Waterfall, but it lacked the natural beauty possessed by so many other caves of this region. Something seemed to keep it from the room; though Frisk couldn't have said what.

The room was completely empty save for a single grey door that had been built into the cave wall. It did not look as if the rock face had had to be carved to accommodate for this addition. The door looked as if it had always been there, as much a part of the mountain as the rocks and the glinting stones.

Perhaps a monster lived here. Perhaps they had been alone down here all this time. Perhaps they had been forgotten about in all the excitement.

Frisk went to knock on the door. Then, fist in the air, she paused, thinking.

Maybe she was wrong.

Maybe she had passed through here before. It wasn't as if she'd memorised every single cavern in this place, after all. She was fairly certain she would have tried the door, but maybe if it had been locked, she'd continued on and forgotten all about it.

It was just an ordinary door, after all. Not half so mysterious as that door in Snowdin, near Gyftrot's lingering spot, or even the door to Sans' bedroom.

Forgettable.

She lowered her fist.

She reached for the doorknob, gave it an experimental jiggle.

The door opened.

On the other side, a blank slate of a room. Grey concrete floor, very clean.

It was cold.

The air here was strange – tense and wavering, as if it itself were holding its breath.

The room opened into a short, narrow passageway, that gave way to a small, blank foyer at the end of it.

In the centre of the foyer, a man was sitting.

So someone had been forgotten down here. How long had he been alone? Frisk wasn't sure if speaking to the man in the dreamscape would do anything for him in the waking world, but it was worth a try. Hey, Mister, why are you still here? Haven't you heard? The Barrier broke, and monsters can return to the Surface now! They're living with humans peacefully and everything. You shouldn't be alone down here; you should go join them. You'd like it.

Maybe they were both asleep, sharing the same dream in the impossible way of the Underground.

The sound of rushing water had faded to nothing, replaced by a long, monotonous buzz, like the distant hum of machinery.
She lifted a hand in a wave, unsure of why she suddenly felt so wary. "Hello."

The man didn't answer.

*Click, clack, click, clack.*

A sound like knitting needles.

It took Frisk a moment to place it as the sound of bones clicking against each other. Dunkle Sans sometimes made that noise when he drummed his phalanges together.

Frisk realised she wasn't moving. She blinked out of her trance and headed forwards towards the man.

He seemed to be kneeling on the floor, slumped forward with his head lolling like a marionette with its strings cut. He wore what looked like an old-fashioned black overcoat. It was draped around his broken form like a beggar's shawl, and if his hands hadn't been resting, palm upturned, on his lap, Frisk would have thought he was clinging to it. Instead, the coat seemed to cling to *him*, and its hem gathered at his feet in a pool like black blood. He cast no shadow. His head – no, no, his skull – was badly damaged, a long crack running up from one socket, another trailing down his face from right below the other eye. He looked something like a skeleton, but he better resembled a wax figurine of one half-melted.

*Click, clack, click, clack.*

He did not respond to her presence as she approached him.

*Click, clack, click clack.*

"Hello? Mister?"

*Click, clack, click clack.*

She reached out a hand to touch him, give his coat a light tug.

Her fingers closed around the material, but where she should have felt fabric, the coat was thick and warm. There was a squelching noise, like petting an Amalgamate.

In that moment, the man began to push himself off the ground, but he seemed to grow and expand as he did so, that pathetic form now looming. Frisk startled and quickly took a step back as she felt her soul give a sudden painful jolt, as if it were being wrenched from her chest. She cried out, hands flying to her breast to claw desperately at her sweater as if that could keep her soul in place, and the thing that had once been a skeleton vanished.

The world narrowed to a point, and she was blinded by a brilliant white light.

A ringing in her ears.

The sound of lingering nothing, pressing in on the edges of her mind.

*Ding.*

Frisk surged into wakefulness, sitting bolt upright, a hand flying up to clutch at the front of her pyjamas. She could almost feel her heart thudding against her chest. She sat there for a long time, breathing hard. Her entire small body wracked with shudders. She didn't know why she was so unsettled. But once her breathing evened out, she lay back down, pulling the covers high over her
She didn't want to disturb Dunkle Sans tonight. Not over this.

She tried to fall back asleep, tried not to think back to the strange grey room and the man with the cracked face. But she ended up doing so anyway, and thinking back to her dream, she thought she recalled a voice, incredibly faint and almost broken, filled with static as though coming to her through a badly tuned radio. The very same voice that had whispered her name in last night's dream. She'd heard it in the split second before the man had disappeared.

"Human... stay determined..."
Another Medium

Chapter Notes

A quick note that this chapter draws some inspiration from pastelclark's "Not as Simple as a Happy Ending." Namely in the representation of the Temmies – I've seen similar theories floating around, but Clark's is my favourite for a number of reasons. If you want to see more of the Tems somewhat similar the way I write them, I definitely recommend their fic. Parts of this chapter are also definitely inspired from the [now early version] of the "Judge and Jury" comic by Zeragii on dA.

This chapter is long. Again. Oops.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

When Sans was twelve, he got a job.

oOo

"Hey, you! Get back here!"

The heavy clanking of the Guards' boots matched the rat-a-tat-tat of the cans in Sans' pockets clanking against his bones, as he ran full-tilt across the plains of outer Snowdin.

The Guards had been chasing him all the way from the heart of town. They were new recruits from the Capital; of higher rank than any of the royal guard dogs here in Snowdin. This would never have happened with the dogs; they didn't mind Sans so much and were willing to turn a blind eye to the petty theft of anyone in need and who could get them dog treats at an affordable price.

The Guards of Snowdin were laid-back, easygoing, and altogether a bit useless – it was one of the reasons Sans had chosen to settle here – but the Guards of the Capital were a different story. He supposed they'd been stationed here on account of the shoplifting problem, of which, frankly, he was probably mostly to blame.

They patrolled the village twice daily, and Sans figured the Snowdin Guards' lax attitudes had allowed him to let his defences down. Stupid, stupid, he knew better than that, he should never have let himself get so careless. Just because the Snowdin Guard made his life easier didn't mean he had to let it turn him soft. He had street smarts; he couldn't go throwing them to the winds to be picked up again at will.

Sans stumbled on a patch of ice and felt his legs wobble under him as he nearly lost his balance, then he'd slid across and was running again, bare feet falling on the snow with rhythmic thumps.

Still, his little stumble brought the Guards closer. He could hear them shouting to stop where he was, and he wondered why they kept bothering. He'd probably made it clear by now that he had no intentions of letting himself be arrested.

Sans screwed his eyes shut and tried to run faster, calling on his magic. The shed, he thought. The shed, the shed, the shed. He could feel his soul warming up, charging with magical energy. The charge was weak, and after a moment, it died down to nothing.
Stupid. Stupid, stupid, stupid; he should have known better than to practise his magic before stealing. His magic wore him out considerably, and once he'd worked at his attacks, or his telekinesis, or his teleportation for more than an hour, he could barely summon the tiniest bone for the rest of the day. Sans hadn't been able to shortcut somewhere out of desperation since that first night in the alleys of New Home.

So he went on running.

He was coming near the edge of the accessible woods. The pines that lined Snowdin Town and its immediate outer reaches grew so close together and in such thick clusters that not even Sans could run through them without an assault on his face; a monster had to head a good ways out of town to be able to walk easily through the trees.

Sans chanced a glance over his shoulder; the Guards were getting close. He skidded in the thick and fluffy snow; then ducked into the trees.

Once he got to the woods, he let himself slow down. Even in this part of the woods, where the trees grew tall and slim and bare, it would be easy for a monster to get lost here. Sans weaved easily between the trees, taking advantage of his small size. Those New Home Guards were large and bulky, and though he could still hear their thudding, clanking footsteps, they were starting to waver, uncertain.

"Come on," he heard one say, voice muffled behind her helmet. "It's not worth it. Poor kid looked like he was starving anyway."

Sans skidded to a stop and stood erect, listening. The other Guard said something Sans couldn't catch, then the footsteps headed off in the other direction and out of the woods.

It wasn't until they were gone that Sans relaxed, sliding down to recline against a tree. He was exhausted. He shut his eyes, revelling in the quiet. He liked it in these woods. He could have sat resting here forever; though he knew he couldn't really. It would be hell if he allowed ice to form in his joints. Still, he could rest long enough to recover his breath.

Every bone in his body ached from the tireless run, and he was almost dizzy with hunger. Sans reached a hand into his pocket and produced one of the small buns he'd stolen. He studied it for a moment, the pangs of hunger battling with the guilt he'd inevitably feel if he ate it.

The hunger won out, and Sans tore into the bread, eating with animal-like motions. Less than a minute later, the bread was gone, and only the guilt remained.

Still. There was more food for Papyrus. His brother would be fine. He didn't even have to know.

The small bit of food had done a world of good for Sans, and he stood, brushing the crumbs from the front of his jacket. He rolled his shoulders, then continued off into the woods.

Yes, Snowdin Forest offered just about all the privacy he could ask for. Hardly anyone lived out here – the odd little cottage or cabin, a few Moldsmals.

Their shed came into view.

Sans had found this place a year and a half ago. He'd stumbled on a clearing while scouring the woods for some old human junk to sell. Barely larger than his old bedroom, the wood starting to rot. The shed had been abandoned for years – it was run-down and horribly draughty, windows and doors boarded shut. But Sans had managed to pry some boards covering the door loose, enough to make an entrance for him and his brother to squeeze through. It was a dump, but it meant a roof
over his and Papyrus' heads – shelter, after months of sleeping on the streets.

It had taken a few weeks, but little by little, he'd managed to make the place a home. One wall was lined in storage crates, in which he kept food, clothes, and the few toys and books he and Papyrus owned. Some of the stuff he'd found at the main dump in Waterfall; for others he'd scraped some gold together and bought for his brother's birthdays. Another wall was covered with Papyrus' drawings and pages torn from library books with pretty pictures on them. After another few weeks of living in the shed, he'd even managed to get some bedrolls off the Tems. There were two bedrolls, but normally the brothers crawled in with each other anyway.

The crunching of snow as he approached the shed apparently alerted Papyrus to his presence before Sans could actually reach it, and then his brother was bursting out and hurtling towards him at a dangerous speed. Sans braced himself for impact, and the next thing he knew, Papyrus had barrelled directly into him, and Sans fell on his back with an *oof*.

Papyrus made himself comfortable on his ribcage. "There you are! I MISSED you, brother!"

Sans gave a weak laugh, reaching up to swipe the top of his brother's skull. "I was only gone for about an hour, bro."

"I'm allowed to miss you for an hour!" Still, Papyrus climbed off him and ran towards the shed. Sans was slower to get to his feet, and so Papyrus made a game of it, running from the shed to Sans and back again, over and over, his trips becoming shorter each time, until Sans reached the door. "Did you get anything really cool?"

Sans pushed the board aside, and they both squeezed through. "Some stuff. Wanna see?"

Papyrus was already jumping up and down on the ground and all but vibrating with excitement like a Temmie high on Tem Flakes. "Yes! Yes, yes, yes! I'm HUNGRY."

Sans turned out his pockets, letting his haul clatter to the floor. A delighted Papyrus joined him in gathering the food, inspecting it and storing it into their food crate, dutifully stacking the cans and arranging the buns. It wasn't a half bad haul, either – a couple of cinnamon bunnies and the rest of the bread, a bottle of milk – Sans always made sure he had a steady supply of milk; it was good for Papyrus' bones.

Everything else came in a can or a jar. Pickles (Papyrus made a gagging noise), beans, peas and corn, anchovies, soup. He'd accidentally grabbed a couple cans of dog food – inedible, but he could always sell them to the dogs here in Snowdin. There were even a couple containers of tinned fruit. Tinned fruit was always a good find – it was horribly oversweet and therefore some of the most filling stuff a monster could get.

For now, though, Sans took up a can of tomato soup, prying off the top with the small knife he'd acquired ages back. He handed the can to Papyrus, who downed it hungry gulps. As always, his brother drank exactly half before handing it over to Sans, wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve as he broke into a grin.

Sans took the can, but he'd barely brought it to his teeth before Papyrus asked with a frown, "Brother? What happened to your SHOES?"

Sans looked down at his bare feet and wiggled his toes. Both of his slippers had fallen off his feet in the chase. "Heh. Wouldn't ya believe it – I ended up slippin' on the ice like a big dork and lost 'em both."
He set down his can of soup and brought a hand to his forehead for comedic effect. It delivered the desired reaction – Papyrus rolled his eyes and giggled, poking Sans in the chest. "Sillybones."

Sans smiled sleepily, and leaned back against a crate as he took a long swig from the can of tomato soup as if it were soda. Papyrus was crawling away, and Sans watched as his little brother picked up one of his picture books and sat down to read it. He was wearing a raggedy pair of pants, a striped T-shirt, his shiny black school shoes, and the tattered red scarf Sans had found at the dump and given to him for his fifth birthday. Papyrus hadn't taken it off since.

In quiet moments like these, he allowed himself to think about it.

They'd been living out here on their own for nearly two years.

Two years since Gaster. Two years since they'd been hurt. Two years since being grabbed by the soul and dragged around, or locked in the closet, or struck, or strapped down and experimented on. Two years since the prick of the needle, the sting of the scalpel, the overwhelming pain of the Determination –

Papyrus was five, now. He'd be six in March, and Sans hardly dared believe it.

Sans hadn't really wanted to send Papyrus to school. His brother knew how to read and spell his name, and he knew how to count, and Sans could have taught him the rest. For Sans, school was nothing but a blur of bad memories – boring lessons and uncaring teachers and teasing children. School meant having his and his brother's names legally documented somewhere. School meant leaving Papyrus to the mercy of strangers for hours every day.

For a long time, he'd fought with his brother about it. *I can teach ya anything you want,* he'd said. But Papyrus had insisted. He'd wanted to go to school like the other kids. He loved watching the local Snowdin children troop to and from school in Waterfall every day, in their perfect uniforms with their beautiful, beautiful backpacks on their backs, and there was never any missing the longing in his eyes as he did so. And so, in December, after a great deal of wheedling and with great reluctance, Sans had taken his brother to the Waterfall school (for Snowdin had none) to sign him up for kindergarten with the rest of the kids his age.

Sans had only gone ahead with it to appease Papyrus, certain that there was no way he'd actually get him registered. If he went, Papyrus would finally stop his begging. He'd be able to say to his brother, *you see?* He didn't really see how a pair of street rats could swan over and simply sign themselves up for education – Sans was only twelve, after all, and the legal age for living on your own in the Underground was fifteen. He'd been terrified of it all – of the paperwork, of the questions – but instead, the good people of the Waterfall school had scribbled a few notes down, asked a few questions to which Sans had answered by lying, and Papyrus was registered.

Sans didn't think anyone really believed that he was sixteen, as he'd told the secretary, and that their parents had tragically fallen into Hotland's lava a few months ago, but he didn't think anyone cared enough, either.

As far as the good people of Waterfall were concerned, signing up a street rat for school meant a street rat that was going to get a good education, rather than have to live off scraps and thievery. Even if that street rat was obviously living in less-than-ideal conditions.

Papyrus, for the record, loved school. He'd been very nervous on his first day, starting months after his schoolmates as he was. But when Sans had picked him up, Papyrus had come to him with tales of his new, VERY BESTEST FRIEND, a little fish girl named Undyne, though he had yet to report any others. Sans had met the kid a few times. She wasn't a bad sort. Maybe a little rowdy, but Sans
could tell just by watching her with his brother that the two cared about each other with the profound and unconditional love of five-year-olds.

And besides, with Papyrus at school six hours a day, it meant Sans got to spend time doing work he wouldn't have had the chance to do otherwise.

Speaking of which…

Sans finished the last of his soup and wiped his mouth with the back of his hand, tossing the can aside to be properly disposed of later.

"Hey, Paps?" he forced out.

Papyrus looked up from his picture book, smile bright and eager as ever. "Nyeh?"

Sans winced, running a hand down his face as he tried to best come up with a way to tell his brother what he'd been holding back from him since early that morning, when he realised just how low they were on spare gold. "Hey, uh, listen, Paps… I know I said I'd spend the day playing with you tomorrow, but, uh… I need to. Do some work at the dump. Just for a little bit of the afternoon."

Papyrus went from smile to sulk in a nanosecond. "But you PROMISED."

Sans withered a little, and he felt his soul twist with guilt again. "Heh. I know. I'm sorry. But this is pretty important. It'll only be a coupla hours."

"But you promised me all DAY." Papyrus huffed and threw down his picture books, crossing his arms over his chest and scowling deeper even as his eye sockets brimmed with tears. "You're ALWAYS going off to the dump. ALWAYS. And you don't ever let me come and it's not FAIR."

"Hey. Hey." Sans reached out to his brother, and he flinched when Papyrus pulled away. "Tell ya what; I'll leave you at Undyne's, okay? You can play with her."

"But I don't WANT to play with Undyne. I want to play with YOU."

Sans sighed and ran a hand down his face. "C'mon, bro. Just this once. I promise."

"You ALWAYS promise. But you're very bad at keeping them."

"Heh." Sans sighed again. "Guess I am. But I'm sorry, Paps, really – listen. You stay with Undyne, and it won't be long, and you two can play Capture the Human together, huh? You can tell me all about it when I come pick ya up, and… and I'll make it up. I promise. For real this time. Not one o' those Sans-sucks-at-promises promises."

Papyrus looked torn. At last, he caved, crawling over to Sans, who wasted no time in gathering his baby brother in his arms. Papyrus buried his nasal bone in the fabric of Sans' sweater and sniffled mournfully. "… fine. But… Sans?"

"Yeah, bro?"

"If… if you go and leave me at Undyne's… promise you'll bring me something cool if you find it?" Papyrus pulled away, looking hopeful.

"'course, bro. Don't I always?"

Papyrus nodded. "I would like a new Fluffy Bunny book! Or a suit of armour! Or a marble run!
Though… I'd need marbles too, so marbles and a marble run! Or a car magazine! Or a race car!"

"I'll be sure to bring it if I find anything, yeah?"

"And Sans?" Papyrus paused. "I MISS you when you're gone. So… so if you go, you must read me TWO bedtime stories tonight. Or else I'll be mad at you again."

"Oh?" Sans cocked a brow. "That's not an idle threat."

Papyrus paused, frowning thoughtfully. "Well, I won't be MAD at you. But I will be very, very sad and very dipsa-jointed."

Sans laughed again. "Disappointed, bro."

"That's what I SAID!" Papyrus huffed, crossing his arms over his chest. "But will you?"

Sans ran a hand over the top of his skull. "You got it, bro. Two bedtime stories. That's a real promise too."

There were tricks, Sans had learned over the past two years, tricks to staying alive on the streets. Ways of thriving, even.

One of the first things he'd learned – the peak points of rush hour in crowded New Home.

Papyrus clinging to his back, he slipped small and unnoticed through hordes of workers making their way home, pickpocketing or swiping things from shopfronts as he went.

Sans learned how to pick through trash cans; he learned which shopkeepers were willing to look the other way if they caught him, and which ones threw stones and insults and threats to summon the Royal Guard. He learned which proprietors were willing to let him do small favours in exchange for a meal or a bit of gold. He learned which alleyways were best for sleeping in. And perhaps most importantly, he'd learned never to expect much.

Sans was rooting through a human garbage pile at the Waterfall dump. The satchel at his hip was empty; so far he'd found nothing he could sell to the Tems, and nothing for Papyrus, either. As he sorted through the trash, however, he thought he saw something else of value – what looked like the cover of a textbook. The rest of the book was covered in useless trash, obscuring it from view, but what Sans could see was a piece of the title – A Stud and, on the line below it, Copenha and, just below that, Inte.

Sans knew well enough how to fill in the blanks.

He fought with the surge of excitement that began to blossom in his chest – don't expect much – as he shoved aside banana peels, miscellaneous food wrappers, unidentifiable items of plastic. It didn't take much more digging to uncover the book – and to find it was waterlogged beyond use.

Sans sighed. Books were such a rare find in the dump anyway – seldom did they survive the river that brought them here. Sometimes, though, they'd show up wrapped in shiny plastic covers, all brand-new, or in large sealed crates.

He resumed digging.

"Hey! Sans!"
A shout from the top of the water bank caught his attention, and he spun, fingers twitching as magic curled instinctively around his phalanges. Then he saw who it was, and let himself relax: Linda, a fox monster only four years older than himself. He trusted her, as much as he let himself trust anyone who wasn't himself or Papyrus. They'd first met on the streets of New Home. Linda had been on the streets most of her life, and she'd helped him and his brother out, had shared some of her food even though she had to fight for it as much as the rest of them.

It had been Linda who'd suggested he seek out the Temmies for employment. The Tems were a strange species, never breeding with other monsters, all of them strangely identical, seldom wandering outside the outer edges of their establishment in Waterfall. But the Tems' reach ran far beyond a few little caves in Waterfall, and they had just about every destitute kid in the Underground working for them. They ran an expansive network of knowledge, trade, and gold. Every child in the Underground knew of the Temmies, and the ones in need went to them solely because the only alternative was the spiders. They were the scum of demons as far as Sans was concerned, and they covered it all up with a guise of charming idiocy. It was good for reeling the younger ones in, and for keeping the Guard off their tails. So long as they kept the charade up, they were frustratingly impossible to deal with. And so the Guard were content to look the other way and leave them be, allow their black market operation to continue, and snag their underlings whenever they could.

Sans had gone to them only a little after Papyrus had started school. And at first, the Tems had helped – loaning him gold, clothes for Papyrus, even food. Less than a month later, Sans had found himself perpetually wading knee-deep in debt.

Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets and graced her with an easy grin. "Hey. What's up? You find anything today?"

But Linda arrived at his side breathless. "I just came from – listen, Sans, the boss wants you."

Sans froze, a nervous feeling clutching at his chest. "W-what?"

She shrugged in sympathy. "I don't know what; she wouldn't tell me. She didn't look too happy, though, I'd keep my wits about me if I were you. And you'd better go now. The boss – "

"– doesn't like to be kept waiting," Sans finished. "Yeah, I know. But I went by there two days ago. And I ain't found anything good yet. What'm I supposed to sell them?"

Linda patted his shoulder with her tail. "Good luck, Sans. See you. If I find any toys for Papyrus, I'll put them aside."

"Thanks," he muttered, shouldering his empty satchel. "See ya."

Temmie Village was all bright and obnoxious façade as Sans stepped into its central cavern. He winced as two of the Tems came pattering out to greet him. They glanced at each other, then burst into a gratingly cheerful ditty, complete with bobbing heads and vacant smiles. Sans hunched his shoulders and stuffed his hands into his pockets, casting them a glare. "Really? Not today, guys."

One of the Tems froze, but the other one frowned, eyes widening. "Tem no UNDERSTAND! Why be mean? Why make Tem sad?"

"Drop it," he muttered, and in an instant, the Tem's eyes went hard. She hissed, revealing a mouth lined in small, razor-sharp teeth before scuttling away into the shadows.
Sans sighed, and braced himself for whatever was to come, fighting back the wave of nervousness that threatened to overwhelm him. Linda had told him you got more and more used to it, over time, but he was a few months in and he hadn't gotten used to it at all yet. He was dimly aware of how foolish he was being: after all, he had dealt with much worse in the past.

As he walked along the village's main path, a few stray Temmies came out to inspect him, some of them circling around him with bouncy, cheerful steps that did nothing to fool him. Sans toed them out of the way, finally stopping at the entrance to the Shop. He glanced down at the two creatures guarding the entrance.

"Should visit Tem Shop!" one of them piped up, bouncing on the spot, and Sans balled his hands into fists.

"Whaddya think I'm doing?" he muttered, trying and failing to ease the tension in his bones. "I heard she wanted to see me?"

The two Temmies glanced at each other, then blinked at him passively. Sans took it as a cue to enter the shop, and after bracing himself, he did so, swiping aside the curtain that hung in the doorway.

The head Tem was perched on a wobbly stool behind the enormous cardboard box that served as her desk. Miscellaneous knickknacks covered the crookedly-installed shelves, though Sans' eye went to the bright orange coat that hung on a nail on the wall. He stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets and hunched his shoulders further, as if that might keep him safe.

"What do you want," he muttered, having been greeted by the head Tem's blank and expectant stare, the smile on her face stiff and unsettlingly doll-like.

Another blink, the smile twitched, and Sans suppressed a shiver. The look she was giving him was almost contemplatively hungry. Whether the Tems actually ate their inefficient employees like the spiders did, no-one knew. "I heard you were looking for me."

"Yes," said the head Tem at long last. He watched her eyes stray to the empty satchel at his side. "Nothing to trade with Temmie?"

"Couldn't find anything." He paused. "You didn't want me to come in for a trade, did you?"

The Tem didn't answer, instead reaching into her cardboard box. She rummaged around, then stopped, one paw having apparently found what she was looking for, but she didn't reveal it yet. "Sansy still owes Tem much goodies. Much gold. Much favours."

Sans grit his teeth. He was too tired to play along. "What, so you want a favour, then? That it?"

The Tem purred, and her blank smile curled into a satisfied grin that showed off her fangs – a reminder. "Temmie is long overdue on delivering to customer in New Home. Customer SAD. And so Temmie thought little Sansy might like to be nice and help. She tilted her head to one side. Her eyes strayed to the coat, still hanging on the hook, then finally produced the item – or rather, items – she'd been concealing. Three boxes of Tem flakes – a grand order. A Post-It note was stuck to one, on which a name and address had been scrawled.

Sans shifted from one foot to the other. "What do I get out of it?" he stated dully. He'd long since learned that not asking meant he got nothing. "Gold? The coat?"
Those beetle-black eyes narrowed. "Coat is very good. Very expensive. Sansy must work hard to earn coat for Papy."

Sans made a noise of incredulity despite himself and for a moment, he nearly forgot who he was speaking to. "You're sending me off on a Tem Flake delivery in New Home. D'you know how dangerous those are? Or how much trouble I could be in if I was caught? It's not just any old drug, it's Tem Flakes."

"Then Sansy must not be caught."

Sans sighed, dejected, his shoulders slumping and eyelights dimming to barely-visible pinpricks. "What do I get, then?"

"Tem will give gold – " Sans held out an expectant palm, and the head Tem's eyes flashed – "when job is done." His hand dropped limp to his side. No point in resisting.

The head Tem nudged the boxes of Tem Flakes closer to the edge of the table, and Sans sighed again, stuffing them into the deep pockets of his jacket. He turned on his heel and headed out of the shop, pulling his hood low over his face as he went.

As he re-entered the central cavern, a trio of Temmies launched into song as if on cue.

 oOo

The New Home streets were quiet as Sans navigated through their networks, and for that he was grateful. He kept his hood low and shoulders hunched; when he passed the odd pedestrian, he retreated further into his jacket, taking every effort not to be noticed.

He hated making deliveries; there was nothing in the world that put him more on edge. The repercussions for being caught with illegal drugs were high – or at least, Sans was pretty sure they were. They must be.

The customer he was delivering to was new, which did nothing to ease his nerves. At the moment, Sans was lost and trying to find the unfamiliar address. It was in one of New Home's nicer neighbourhoods, and he knew he stood out with his bare feet and ratty, oversized jacket.

He tried to focus on putting one foot in front of the other, and his eyes darted from left to right, taking in every corner of his surroundings as best he could. He passed a bookshop and had to restrain himself from lingering to peer in at its window.

Towards the end of the street he was currently on – whichever street that was – a door opened, catching his attention. An imp monster stepped out from a shop carrying a large chalkboard sign that proclaimed, "SALE! 30% OFF ALL TOY CARS, ALL OF TODAY! MODELLED AFTER REAL UP-TO-DATE CARS FROM SURFACE!" Under the other arm she carried a large cardboard box, which she set atop a small folding table in front of her shop. The box was stuffed with toy cars of all varieties.

Even as he stared, Sans stuck to the shadows cast by the buildings on the other side of the street. The monster that ran the toy shop took no notice of him as she adjusted her display table and chalkboard before heading back inside.

Papyrus' voice reverberated in his mind: Promise you'll bring me something cool if you find it?

His soul began to thrum faster; he could feel the magical energy gathering there.
It wasn't as if he had no expertise in shoplifting.

Sure, he'd been practising his magic earlier today, but… he'd gotten away with it last time, hadn't he? And looking up and down the street proved that there was nobody around.

It would be cool to have an extra toy car.

And he had made his brother a promise. One he intended to keep.

Sans looked up and down the street one last time to ensure the coast was clear, but he was so caught in the moment that the movement was rushed. Then he surged forward.

Car magazines were forever washing up in the dump, and there was a good market for them across the Underground; they often showed up wrapped in plastic and fully intact. Papyrus simply adored them, and Sans set a car magazine aside for his brother whenever he found one. Papyrus knew the name of every kind of car model his magazines could teach him, and which ones were the best; apparently you could tell by the little symbol at the front of the car. Through osmosis, Sans, too, had learned to recognise the very best.

Like anything exclusive to the surface, cars were an object of endless fascination to the monster race. When toy cars started washing up at the dump, monsters began to learn to replicate them themselves, as they did with most "modern technology." Sans only needed to take one glance at the box of toy cars to know that these were of optimal quality. Before he knew it, he was riffling through the box, picking through it with the same precision he used to root through trash bins for food. He stuffed a small red sports car into his pocket.

Then he kept looking.

Later, Sans would never be sure if he simply hadn't heard the Guard's clanking footsteps behind him, or if they simply moved with incredible stealth given their size and cumbersome armour. But he certainly felt that great hand come down to rest upon his right shoulder, covered by that heavy iron gauntlet.

He didn't even have time to struggle before he was whipped around, and found himself staring up at the helmet-covered face of a Royal Guard.

They were massive; and even as he began to struggle in the Guard's iron grip – iron, literally, ha-ha – he knew there was no escape. Not this way at least. The Guard towered over him; they must have been seven feet tall, with a wide, bulky frame. The two ram's horns curling up from their head indicated they were probably some distant relation of the royal family.

In the window of the pastry shop, the imp monster had appeared in the window, looking onto the scene with an expression of vague satisfaction.

Sans' soul flared wildly in a frantic attempt to channel enough of his magical energy to teleport, but he was so startled and panicked that his magic sparked and died in short bursts, someone trying to light a fire with flintstone without the proper care.

The Guard's voice rumbled out from behind their helmet, deep and throaty. "For God's sake, kid, don't you look around before robbing a shop?"

Sans writhed wildly, still to no avail. "Let go!"

The Guard sighed. "Listen, I'm really not up for hauling you over to the King for a goddamn shoplifting charge, especially if you're not even good at it. And hold still – neither of us wants to
”Go to hell,” Sans bit out, the worst curse he knew, and he could feel the Guard rolling their eyes behind their helmet.

”Touché.” They slung their bow over one shoulder, the fragile weapon looking comical next to their huge frame. A gesture of peace. ”Just hold still and turn out your pockets.”

When Sans didn’t comply, the Guard sighed, and used their free hand to reach over and carry out the task themselves. They pulled out the toy car Sans had just stuffed into his pocket, but then they kept going, unearthing two or three small coins and the button eye that had come off Papyrus’ stuffed bunny last week, and which Sans had promised to carry around with him for safekeeping.

Then the Guard noticed, for the first time, the extra bulk under Sans’ jacket. Sans began to struggle more violently even as it began to hurt to do so. He even made a feeble swipe at the Guard; but their armour was hard and sturdy, and the only result was a smarting fist, and a Guard who remained unfazed.

They wasted no time in unzipping Sans’ jacket; though it took them a couple tries – Sans’ near-animal struggles combined with how small the pull tab was in the Guard’s massive hands brought an added challenge.

One of the boxes of Tem Flakes fell to the ground; and the Guard pulled out another from where Sans had stuffed it inside his ribcage. They turned the box from side to side, inspecting it in disbelief. Then their gaze turned back to Sans. ”Aw, Jesus, kid…”

Sans’ soul sparked more frantically than ever, because it was going to happen it had finally happened he was going to be caught, he’d been caught, and now he’d never come home to Papyrus, he’d failed his brother, he’d never see him again, he’d been caught he’d been caught and he was – he was going to – he was going to –

His soul flared to life with a burst of magical energy so strong that Sans buckled over with the sheer force of it, and the Guard suddenly pulled their hand away as if burned.

Sans shortcut.

Just not very far.

He reappeared just a few yards down the street.

For a moment, he and the Guard stood, staring at each other. The Guard swore, and lurched forwards towards him. It took Sans a few dizzied moments to realise that this was his chance, and he turned on his heel and ran.

But it was too late. The Guard was too close, and he had barely taken a few running strides before his bare foot caught on a cobblestone and he tripped, sprawling onto the street. He bit back a cry as the cobblestones scraped painfully against his palms and knees.

He felt the Guard’s shadow fall across him as he tried and failed to get up.

Sans turned around, and before he knew it, his fingertips were warm with magical energy. He didn’t think. He summoned several bones and fired.

His attack struck the Guard off the chest, and they gave a muffled curse of pain, followed by a loud ”Jesus Christ – “
Sans scrabbled back, readying another attack, trying to summon one of his blasters to score some real damage, enough to get away. Then the Guard's own attack hit him square in the sternum, and Sans fell back against the cobblestones with a choked gasp as he felt his HP drop by several points.

The Guard took their chance. They bent over and grabbed Sans by the elbow, hauling him easily to his feet. In the same moment, they fumbled for something at their side, and clamped something tight and heavy around Sans' other wrist.

Sans felt the burning magic in his soul ebb down to nothing, leaving him with a cold, empty feeling inside. He knew what had been fastened there before he even looked down at his wrist.

Magic inhibitors.

They were an old invention of Gaster's, created over a century before Sans had even been born. It was all in the name, really: cuffs that could be fastened to a monster's wrist that prevented them from using their magic as long as they were worn. They worked by way of draining any magic to a tiny container inside the inhibitor, keeping it trapped there, and useless.

*A wretched invention, really,* Sans remembered Gaster telling him. *To rob a monster of their most primal defence mechanism. But there was a brief period of political tension at the time, a result of some illness outbreak, and there were rumours of an uprising. Not even rumours – mere petty gossip. Foolishness. The tension lasted less than a month, but by then I had already finished work on these things. Still. They are rather impressive, are they not?*

Gaster might have been gone, erased, but he'd left traces of his time in the Underground behind. Traces like the CORE, like the inhibitors, like Sans.

The Guard's voice came to him muffled, as if he were underwater: "All right, enough's enough. You're coming with me." Adjusting the bow at their side, they began to haul Sans forward.

Something about the inhibitors, about being gripped by the elbow like he was, brought a distant memory to surface. And all of a sudden it was Gaster grabbing Sans by the elbow, Gaster hauling him in the direction of the labs for another experiment, and the hand that held him was slim and made of bone, with a hole in the palm. And it was blue magic, not an inhibitor, that left him at his captor's mercy, and Sans felt any fight in him die, going limp in the Guard's grip.

They took him to the King.

**oOo**

Once upon a time, Sans had thought Gaster tall and intimidating. Sans had thought the Guard who'd captured him was massive. But he had never felt smaller than he did now, as His Majesty King Asgore Dreemurr towered over him, all eight and a half feet of him.

Sans ducked his head, daring to raise his eyes.

"Your Majesty." The Guard inclined their head in respect, giving Sans' elbow a little shake. "Sorry to disturb you. Just came from Goldenflower Lane, Your Majesty, where I intercepted this little – "

The King raised a paw, and his frown deepened. "That is a child," he said slowly, as he took in the sight before him. He didn't sound angry, just perplexed. "Why is he wearing those inhibitors? Why is – why is a child wearing those inhibitors?"

The Guard gave Sans another shake. "He don't look it, but the kid's old enough that he has magic.
Freaking teleported out of my grip, then when he tried to run and I caught him, he attacked me. He was strong, too – stronger'n he looks."

King Asgore's brow furrowed deeper. "Start from the beginning. What exactly happened? Why was this young boy in your grip in the first place?"

Shake number three. "I was patrolling in New – "

The King stepped forward. "That's enough, please. Let the boy go. I am sure you do not mean it, but you must be hurting him."

Sans blinked, startled – he saw no reason for the King of all monsters to care about an effective thief like him who was apparently dangerous enough to be shackled with magic inhibitors, and he was only more surprised when the Guard obliged, releasing his elbow. Sans had been relying on the Guard for support, and now he fell to his knees, biting back a pained grunt.

The King moved towards him, and Sans jerked backwards, but remained where he was.

There was a very lengthy pause, until at last King Asgore gestured for the Guard to continue.

"I was patrolling in New Home, and caught this boy stealing from a toy shop; he took a toy car. I was gonna let him go s'long as he returned it, but then when I searched him I found Tem Flakes on him. Three boxes," they added pointedly, but there was a note of unease in their tone. "After that – "

"Tem Flakes?" the King interrupted, staring down at Sans.

The Guard gave a hasty bow. "Yes, Your Majesty. Forgive me, but if I may continue before the boy is questioned – " They waited for the King to nod before going on – "Then, like I said, he just teleports from my grip, halfway down the street. He starts running, right, and I'm figuring I'll chase him, and then he trips. So then when I get closer, he just straight-up attacks me – look!" Sans was staring down at the ground again, but out of the corner of his eye he could see the Guard gesture towards their breastplate, where the metal had been singed slightly. "So I – "

"– hit him with a low-damage attack and apprehended him, yes," King Asgore gauged. "Thank you. Now that he is here… Please, my friend. Remove those awful inhibitors from the boy." His deep, rumbling voice was low with warning, and this time the Guard didn't protest. They knelt to Sans' level, holding out one massive hand.

Sans didn't move.

"C'mon, kid," they sighed. "Damn thing's probably tight on your wrist as it is on your soul. It hurts, right? Give me your arm."

Sans felt himself stiffen, and almost subconsciously yanked his arm back.

"For God's sake – " the Guard muttered, and in the next moment, they reached out, grabbing him by the elbow again. Sans flinched, but in the next second, rather than pain, there was a click, and warm magical energy rushed up his arm and into his soul. Sans felt as if an anvil had been removed from his chest, and he pulled his arm away. His wrist was smarting from the tightness of the cuff, but his hand went to his chest to rub the breastbone there, relishing in the simple feeling of magic returned to his soul.

The Guard got to their feet, adjusting their bow. "Right. So – "
The King held up a paw. "Leave us, Magnus."

The Guard balked. "But Your Majesty –"

"Magnus, please."

The Guard – Magnus – sighed, and bowed. "Of course." They cast a glance over their shoulder as they stalked out of the room, footsteps clanging even on the soft garden floor.

Sans remained where he was, kneeled on the floor and eyes downcast. He awaited whatever sentence the King was about to bestow upon him, not even aware that his entire small frame was trembling.

The King looked down at him. And then he said, "Child. Would you like a cup of tea?"

Sans froze, and he craned his neck back up to stare. The words were so strange, so unexpected, that all he could manage was a weak, "Wha'?"

King Asgore knelt down to his level. "Would you like a cup of tea?" he repeated, his words slow, rumbling, and deliberate, his brows coming together to form a V. He extended one benevolent paw, but Sans felt himself flinch back on instinct. The paw retreated.

"I… " Sans continued staring. He wondered if he was dreaming, and clawed at his wrist just to be sure. Nothing about this made any sense. Why wasn't the King angry? Enraged? Why wasn't he readying his famous trident in case Sans try to flee, or even to attack him? Why wasn't he being hauled down to the dungeons to be re-shackled and questioned before being locked up forever and ever? His bones went stiffer still. "Okay," he said, because what were you supposed to say when the King offered you tea? "Thank you. Your Majesty."

The King offered to help him to his feet, but Sans ignored the offer, getting up by himself. He stuffed his hands deep into his pockets, waiting for whatever might come next. He waited as the King hauled his own hulking frame up, and as his face softened with a smile. "I'm afraid I only have a mild chamomile with me today. I hope that suits you. I'd just put a fresh pot on. A moment, if you please." He turned, and disappeared the way Sans and the Guard had come.

Sans teetered on the spot, feeling suddenly light-headed. A part of him realised that he now had some sort of chance – a chance to flee, or to teleport. It would have been that easy, and then he could lie low and remember to be careful and look after Papyrus. Papyrus. Oh, God, Papyrus – Sans had promised he wouldn't be gone long, he must be so worried, and scared. Angry and betrayed, too. And it was still quite possible that Sans might never even be able to see him again.

But something else kept him rooted to the spot.

He heard the sound of padding feet coming from the hallway. The King materialised in the doorway bearing a tray, on which sat two enormous mugs and an even larger teapot. Each of the mugs must have been about the size of Sans' skull.

"Here we are." The King smiled down at Sans as if they were old friends, and sank down to the floor so that he was sat cross-legged, placing the tea tray down in front of him. After a moment, Sans got the impression he was expected to do the same, and so he joined the King among the flowers.

"Comfy, no?" King Asgore chuckled, patting the flowerbeds with one paw. Then he took the teapot and poured the liquid into the mugs in one practised motion. He offered one to Sans. "Here."
Sans studied him hesitantly before taking it. "Thank you," he mumbled. "Your Majesty." He stared down into his mug. The tea was hot enough that steam rose from its surface in smoky tendrils whisper-thin; translucent and uncertain.

He was distracted by a loud slurping noise, and looked up just in time to see the King taking a large sip from his mug. He wiped water droplets from his beard with the back of his sleeve. "It's really very good when it's still hot, but if you'd like to let it cool a bit first, I understand." He chuckled low. "Have you ever had freshly-brewed tea before? Proper tea with tea leaves, I mean, none of that newfangled teabag nonsense."

Sans tilted his head, gaze sliding back down to the tea. Its warmth seeped through the ceramic, burning his phalanges slightly. It wasn't that unpleasant a sensation. "Don't think I've ever had tea at all before, really."

"Really? Well. That is a shame. You have been missing out." The King took another sip. "But there is a first time for everything. And you are starting out with the very best – not to toot my own horn." He seemed to be waiting for Sans to speak, but Sans couldn't think of what to say, of what he could possibly be expected to say, and at last the King cleared his throat awkwardly. "Well now, child. Let's start at the beginning, shall we?"

Sans' gaze darted back up again. "Whaddya wanna know?"

"Well. You have been stealing, have you not? And I would guess that you have been living in… notable poverty, by the look of you. But you're so young. How old are you exactly, young one?"

"Fourteen," Sans lied.

The King just stared at him expectantly; it was clear he didn't believe him, and Sans sighed. He hadn't expected him to. "Fine. Ten, then." He looked it.

Still no answer, and Sans tapped a phalange against the mug, gaze sliding over to the throne that sat in the corner of the room, covered by a lonely white sheet. "I'm twelve," he said at last, and King Asgore gave a barely perceptible nod.

"Twelve," he repeated, his voice contemplative, and Sans caught the sadness that settled there. "Yes, that sounds about right. Too young," he murmured, and Sans remembered history classes from long ago, and that the King had been a father, once. The Crown Prince and Princess had been his very age when they'd died.

Sans just shrugged. He sipped the tea, and was startled by the way it warmed him, its effect soothing his soul instantaneously and cradling it like a promise.

"And have you been living on your own?"

Sans nodded.

"What of your… parents?"

Sans hesitated. "Um, CORE accident a coupla years ago." It wasn't exactly a lie, if a creator constituted as a parent. If a thing could even have parents. "I've been making it on my own since. Dropped outta school." He surprised himself by just how many words fell out of him, then, as if some dam inside him had been torn down. "First I was livin' in New Home, but now I'm in Snowdin. 's quiet there. And yeah, I've been stealing to get by, though mostly food. Still, this ain't the first time I've shoplifted. 's just the first time I got caught." He clenched the handle of his mug tighter. "And yeah, I've been workin' for the Tems too. Even though, y'know, it's illegal. Trading,
doing drug deliveries – Tem Flakes, Woshua cleaning powder. Dog treats, without the taxes. For a few months now. So… I dunno, whatever you wanna do, do it, I guess. Arrest me, throw me in the dungeon.

His mug began to tremble in his hands, and after a moment, he gauged that the smartest move was to set it down on the tea tray before he broke it. Then he'd be charged for destruction of royal property, which would just be the cherry on top of this ice cream sundae. Ice cream Sunday, ha, because today was Sunday. Heh. If he ever saw Papyrus again, he'd have to tell him that one. He could already hear his brother's groan.

If he didn't see him again, he hoped to God he'd never forget that groan.

A huge paw suddenly settled itself on his shoulder, and again Sans flinched back immediately, screwing his eyes shut and stiffening in anticipation, though of what, he wasn't sure. Then the paw was gone, and he cracked open his good eye to see the King staring down at him with a look of such sadness on his face that Sans felt slightly uncomfortable.

"Twelve," the King said again. There was a fumbling, almost nervous, pause. "I am not going to arrest you, child. Or anything of that nature."

Sans didn't dare answer.

"That toy. It wasn't for you, was it?"

Sans blinked at him in surprise. But he found himself shaking his head, gaze sliding down to his lap. "It was for my bro. He's five. He really likes cars and stuff."

"Neither of you attend school, I take it."

Sans looked up again, clenching the front of his jacket. "Paps does, though he's still just in kindergarten. But I work. Illegal stuff, 'member?" A part of him told him he really had no right to speak to the King this way, and he considered adding a "Your Majesty" to the end of his sentence, but at this point he wouldn't be able to do so without giving it a sarcastic twang.

But King Asgore didn't seem to mind. He hummed, pouring himself another cup of tea. He moved to refill Sans' before realising that the brew was barely touched. He filled the mug to its rim anyway. He was studying Sans with a look that was entirely foreign to the child. "It is… terrible," he said at last, and his words were slow and delicate, as if he wasn't quite sure of what to say. "That a child of your age should have to be so alone in the world. That a child your age should be fending for himself, on the streets, rather than being raised in a loving home with a loving family."

"I'm not alone, Your Majesty. I got Papyrus," Sans blurted, confused.

A sigh. "Yes. But a child your age should hardly have to raise a five-year-old by himself either."

Sans' defences went right back up where they'd started to ebb away, sensing the implied risk in those words. He scoffed, speaking before he could restrain himself. "Why, what's the alternative."

His voice was flat.

The King opened and closed his mouth, seemingly baffled. At last he said, "You have been through quite a lot, haven't you?"

Sans shrugged and reached for his tea.

"Child." This time, the awkward pause was longer. "There are laws, of course, around which age a
monster may live by themselves, and a minimum age for working. That age is fifteen. However… I believe that exceptions can always be made. In this… case, certainly. They can. And I have the authority to make those exceptions. Being the King has its perks.” He chuckled, but Sans didn't laugh, listening carefully for whatever bad news was sure to follow. "First, how would you feel about being hired for work as a page, here in the castle?"

These words were so unexpected Sans just stared. He wondered if he'd somehow shortcut into an alternate reality, one where misdeeds and weaknesses were met with understanding smiles and rewards. His jaw felt as if it were about to unhinge at any moment. And the only word he could think to say was, "What."

"Well." The King hummed again. "There are a few pages working about. They're all of age, of course, though most of them are still very young. It's not really a… formal work position. Mostly you would be standing about and seeing if the castle staff need help. And I get so many visitors in the throne room here, it might be useful to have someone to hang by the entrance, give them a sort of welcome. Gosh, 'page' isn't even an accurate description, not really. But I can't think of anything else to call it, can you?"

Sans shrugged, a jerky, precise movement. "Not really, I guess."

"Excellent. Now, then, child – would you be interested?"

Sans eyed him warily. "Is there a catch?"

"No. Well. Sort of." Pause. "I don't… like the idea of two children fending for themselves like you and your brother are. Even if you are working a steady job. If you ever find yourself in need of anything – anything at all – I want you to tell me, and I will do my best to accommodate the situation."

It made no sense to Sans, but he was starting to get the distinct impression that he wasn't about to be barred from seeing his brother again, so he wasn't complaining.

"Second… this shoplifting business would have to come to a stop."

"And finally… you would have to leave your work for the Temmies. The Guard does what they can, but what they can isn't very much, I'm afraid. What can be done about those monsters… I don't suppose you'd be willing to help by providing a bit of information?" For a second, the King looked pitifully hopeful.

Sans thought for a moment of Linda, and the other kids. Then he shook his head, and the King looked crushed.

"Well. Perhaps another time. Whenever you feel comfortable."

Sans cocked his head. Something about this still exuded a profound wrongness, an air of being so utterly nonsensical that he might have found it funny if the stakes hadn't been so dire. "You actually wanna hire a street urchin to stand around the castle and work for you," he deadpanned.

"Yes."

"And you want me to just… stop workin' for the Tems."

"I would prefer it, yes."

"I'm in debt."
"Then, perhaps, now would be a good time to settle on your wages. Hopefully you can pay that
debt off soon enough, hmm? I understand the Temmies are not creatures that would allow a debt to
go unpaid without consequences. What do you say to 600 Gold a day?"

Sans just stared. Again, the sentence didn't quite come together in his head, as if it were mixed with
words in a language he couldn't understand. 600G a day was a lot of money. If he worked five days
a week, that would make a week's wages 3000G. It was more than he could fathom, could ever
have fathomed. That the King was offering him work – paid work – at all was hard enough for him
to wrap his head around as it was. This was another level altogether.

"Is that… agreeable to you?" he heard the King say, but Sans was beyond reach.

He chewed on the end of his sleeve.

He wanted to believe it. He wanted to believe, more than anything, that his luck – his life – had
somehow turned around, under the sort of circumstances he only ever read about in books. He
could earn honest money. He could be free of the Tems' debt. He could go on looking after
Papyrus – he could have enough money to look after Papyrus, properly. He could feed his brother,
every day. Get him toys, clothes, books, everything he needed to be happy. He wanted to believe
his brother could be happy.

But then Rule One made itself known: Don't expect much.

It all seemed a miracle, and Sans knew better than to rely on miracles. And yet…

It was something. It might earn him a bit of gold. Enough to get him by for a while.

The promise of good times had been dropped into his lap, and Sans wasn't entirely sure what to do
with it. He doubted it would last. But it couldn't hurt to take advantage of it as long as it did.

words were slightly muffled by the sleeve still stuck in his mouth, and Sans dropped his arm, a
little embarrassed.

"Excellent." King Asgore moved as if to rise to his feet. "I am glad." He really sounded it, too.
Relieved might also be an appropriate adjective.

Sans pulled back a little. "So, do I sign some forms, or… ?"

"Well, in time, yes. I suppose I'll have to draw up the paperwork. I wasn't, erm, very prepared for
this situation."

The child hesitated. "That don't sound very professional to me, Your Majesty. … no offence."

"The day after tomorrow, at the latest. That is a promise." The King gestured that Sans should
stand up, and he did so, hovering uncertainly. The King cleared his throat. "If you like, we could…
shake on it. For now."

Sans paused, then shrugged. "I guess. Okay." This time, when the King extended a paw, he was
expecting it, and didn't flinch or stiffen. He reached out a hand and wrapped it around as much of
the King's enormous paw as he could. They shook hands, and Sans could feel soft fur and the
velvety cushion of the King's paw pad. It was probably a little squishy, a thought that made him
smirk to himself as they released hands.

There followed an awkward pause. "Um," Sans said. "Can I… my bro's waitin' for me. I-I've been
gone a long time; he's prob'ly worried – "

King Asgore jolted for a moment, then nodded. "Yes, yes, of course." He waved a paw and rose to full height, but he didn't seem quite as tall this time. "Run along, then."

Sans turned to go, but then the King's voice bid him wait and he stopped in his tracks, turning around.

"Would you like to report here at, shall we say, ten o'clock then? It would, ah, give you time to leave your brother off at school."

Sans lifted a shoulder. "Okay." King Asgore looked like he had something else to say, and Sans waited expectantly.

"Golly," said the King at last, shaking his head. "Where are my manners? All this time and I've forgotten to ask your name."

Sans paused, fiddling with his sleeve. "Sans," he said, raising his chin just a little. "My name is Sans." He paused again, and felt himself smile.

Chapter End Notes

Just a friendly reminder to feel free to check out the NWABBW blog (and by that I mean please do) to send me asks, see chapter previews, and status updates, and thanks for reading!
The Thought Terrifies Me

Chapter Notes

Warning: This chapter contains alcohol use/implied alcohol addiction, and PTSD implication. Also, possible arachnophobia tag for some spider-y imagery, if not actual spiders.

Last night's dream clung to Frisk like wet clothing. She fell back asleep at some point, and when she awoke to the sound of her alarm she felt almost chilled, her soul weighed down by something sodden and heavy. As she ate her oatmeal, smiling her way through Papyrus and Undyne's ritual breakfast battle, she stayed mostly quiet.

Everybody noticed. Everybody asked her what was wrong, and Frisk fed her family the obligatory "I'm okay; just tired," which wasn't technically a lie. She noticed Dunkle Sans watching her hard after she said that, and was careful to avoid his gaze for the remainder of breakfast.

Frisk was relieved when it was finally time for her to leave for school. Ebott was small enough that she could go some of the way on her own – there was only one main street to cross, and every day, in shifts, one member of her family took her as far. On Fridays, when it was Uncle Papyrus' turn, he never failed to bolster her confidence for the coming day, and this Friday, she was positively relieved by his presence and overenthusiastic chatter. The streets were deserted that day, and she clung tight to his scarf as they walked, losing herself in talk of puzzles and great battles and DID YOU SEE what UNDYNE did when we were sparring last night, tiny human?

"AHA! The Great Papyrus senses that you are distracted!" Papyrus spoke up, and stopped in the middle of the sidewalk, narrowing his eye sockets in thought. "You give off an AURA OF UPSET! You must tell me what troubles you, tiny human! The Great Papyrus is VERY SKILLED and WELL-PRACTISED at warding off demons, NYEH-HEH-HEH!" Frisk gave a startled yelp as she was suddenly picked up. She could never figure out how Papyrus could do that, anyway – she must weigh three times as much as he did, what with him being made of nothing but bones.

But Frisk avoided his eyes. "I'm okay," she mumbled. "I'm just kind of tired. I didn't sleep good – it, uh, must have been the popato chisps I shared with Dunkle Sans last night before bed."

Papyrus huffed loudly. "Yes… do not let my lazy brother's UNHEALTHY HABITS pass over and INFECT YOU!"

"I won't," Frisk promised, and Papyrus beamed.

"Well, of course you won't! How COULD you, after all, with a cool skeleton like ME to guide you along the right path?!"

"Uh-huh! Anyway, let's go," she said quickly. "I'm gonna be late for school."

Papyrus' eyes widened. "Of course! You do not want to arrive late!" And then he picked her up, set her on his shoulders, and began to run. They crossed the street to arrive at the corner where she was to be left off. Papyrus then set Frisk back down; his heroic sprint had been short-lived. "Goodbye, tiny human! GOOD LUCK AT SCHOOL TODAY AND DO NOTHING THE GREAT
PAPYRUS WOULDN'T DO!" He ruffled her hair, and Frisk was grateful for the gloves.

"I won't," she promised again, and Papyrus beamed wider than ever, pleased.

Frisk looked out to the streets she had yet to navigate by herself. It was just over a five minutes' walk from here, really, she just had to turn a corner, cross the little bridge that went over the river, and from there it was only three blocks to her school. And yet…

Frisk reached up to clutch at Uncle Papyrus' scarf, and he cocked his head at her. "Tiny human?"

"Hmm?" Frisk murmured, distracted.

"Something disturbs you. Perhaps you do not want to make the treacherous journey to school by yourself and yearn for my noble company! The Great Papyrus would be MORE THAN HAPPY to escort you!"

She tightened her grip on Papyrus' scarf a moment, then dropped her hand, her eyes still on the path ahead. "I-I'm fine. Really." Frisk broke into her most cheerful toothy grin. "Bye, Uncle Papyrus! See you later!" She assumed a quick stroll, looking over her shoulder to give a quick wave.

Papyrus waved back, with both arms.

As soon as she'd turned the corner out of sight, Frisk broke into an even faster pace, her steps so quick she herself was nearly tripping over her own feet. She felt a sudden burning sensation in her chest and she lifted a hand to press it against her heart, clawing at the suddenly stiff and oppressive fabric of her shirt, but the feeling only worsened to the point that it felt as though her soul was being clutched very tightly and squeezed so hard the Determination oozed out.

What was nagging at her so much? It was just like Dunkle Sans had said last night: dreams couldn't get her. They meant nothing. Her dream hadn't even made any sense, and now that she reflected on it, she could only recall a few tattered scraps. She remembered the drooping man and the girl who'd run, remembered a garbled, broken voice and a cryptic warning of a man who spoke in hands. Typical dream nonsense. And yet the dream would not let her go.

Frisk clutched the straps of her backpack and kept her head down. She couldn't wait to get to school; she was desperate for something to take her mind of all this. Maybe they'd have a pop quiz or something; that would do the trick. Hadn't the teacher been hinting towards one in spelling class?

She'd only taken a few steps across the bridge when the world fell away.

It happened very suddenly. One moment she was walking across the bridge, the next the sky began to unravel, the bridge crumbling underneath her in mere seconds, and she fell.

Frisk might have screamed, but the only sound she managed to produce in her shock was a choked gasp. Her hands reached up to claw at the infinite, all-surrounding blackness where the sky had once been, as if she might somehow be able to find something to hold onto, and she felt her backpack slide off her shoulders. The void space beneath her swallowed it up, as if it were hungry, as if it had been waiting.

Suddenly she felt a tugging pressure and came to a jerking stop, as if a bungee cord kept her suspended in the air. Now dangling in place, Frisk kicked and wriggled, and her toes brushed something solid beneath her. She stretched one short leg and scraped against it with the toe of her shoe, testing it. Good, definitely solid. Frisk wriggled some more, and suddenly whatever had been holding her came loose and dropped her a few inches onto the ground, finding whatever surface she
was standing on to be made of planks of wood.

Frisk stood uncertainly in place, rocking back and forth on her heels. The wood creaked under her weight.

It was cold.

She hugged her arms across her chest, shivering, and peered out into the surrounding blackness. It was the kind of blackness that was so deep, so profound and infinite, it seemed to swallow up everything around it. But the longer she looked, the darkness began to dissipate, a scene manifesting before her.

It started with faintly blinking lights that distributed themselves across the blackness in scattered clusters, and at first Frisk thought they were stars. Then the scene cleared and she realised they were in fact glowing stones embedded in a rock ceiling. Waterfall again.

She was standing on the edge of the pier that hung over the lake. She'd passed through here, once, just before evading Undyne's spears for the first time. Her heart had been racing then, her blood pounding in her ears, but now Waterfall was eerily silent. She couldn't even hear the rhythmic *plink-plink* of raindrops as they dripped from the cave ceiling, or the distant sound of rushing water from the river.

Frisk tried breathing a little louder, just to fill the silence. There was nothing to see around here, so after one last brief look around, she turned on her heel to continue.

But what was happening? What was happening to her? To the world? This wasn't a dream; she knew it wasn't. She pinched herself to be extra-sure, and felt the pain.

It struck Frisk, oddly hazily, that she'd never been more afraid in her entire life. For some reason, images of the melted man from her dream came to mind again.

Behind her, the groan of wooden planks – someone there. Frisk gasped and spun around, small hands forming small fists, which was ridiculous because she wasn't a fighter and, according to Undyne, couldn't pack a punch to save her life.

They were standing on the very edge of the pier, facing away from her. Their toes were nearly peeking out over the edge of the dock. They were small, about her height. A little armless dinosaur monster, like Monster Kid; but this monster's scales were a pale, dusty grey, as if something had tried to erase them from the world, the ghost of writing left behind on a chalkboard wiped clean.

Frisk swallowed, then timidly approached. "Hello," she said quietly, uncurling her fists to raise a hand in greeting.

The monster did not seem surprised she was there. They turned around slowly, face blank, and now Frisk could see their eyes, which were far too empty, a vacant milk-white.

Frisk came closer. "Um… I'm Frisk. Do you know what's happening?"

The monster blinked at her, tilting their head in vague curiosity.

Frisk held out a hand, then, remembering the monster had no arms, thrust it sheepishly behind her back. "Um… you look kinda like my friend Monster Kid. But they're… yellow…"

They spoke then. Their voice was a low whisper. "Have you ever thought of a world where everything is the same… except you don't exist? Everything functions perfectly without you."
Frisk balked. "Um, pardon?"

The monster laughed mirthlessly. "Ha, ha… the thought terrifies me."

Frisk bit her thumbnail. "That… that does sound pretty scary." The wood bent slightly and she nearly toppled over. When she steadied herself, the grey monster was looking out onto the lake. She swallowed hard. "Excuse me, but… where are we?"

_Blink._ The monster turned to face her again. "We are nowhere."

"Huh?"

"Nowhere. This is the Void. The empty nothing that is found both outside and between space and time. And so. Effectively. Nowhere."

"Oh. It looks like Waterfall."

"Yes."

"Um… how'd we get here? Do you know?"

The monster's tail gave a slight twitch, empty eyes flashing with something like recognition. "I believe… I fell. We all did. This is the place where lost things go."

"Oh." Frisk didn't know what to say to that. "And what about me? Am I lost? Did I fall too? How did I get here? What's going on?"

This time, there was no pause. "Him," said the monster, simply.

"Him?"

"Him."

Frisk's soul felt oddly tight in her chest. "Well… like I said, I'm Frisk… who are you?"

The grey monster smiled, a little sadly. "I don't remember."

Frisk blinked. "Oh. That's sad. I… I'm sorry to hear that."

The wood creaked again. Frisk looked down at it and in the faint light she realised it was rotting, slick with moss and mould and crawling with maggots. Her stomach lurched and her face twisted in disgust. Then the monster stiffened, standing rigid, capturing Frisk's attention. "He is coming."

The air was suddenly filled with static. Frisk wheeled around, and on the far end of the dock, a mass of television snow had gathered, hissing and crackling. Approaching. Her heart began to race faster. She turned desperately to the grey monster, but now their head was obscured by a cloud of static, too, and their body flickered in and out of existence.

"What's going on?!"

"Him… the Void, he… he is returning… " The monster was glitching so rapidly it hurt Frisk's eyes to look. "He is… the timeline. Your. Determination. …. Save. Reset. You… it is Sans who you… holds the answers… the … Doctor Gaster….. "

The mass of television snow on the other end of the dock was getting closer. It was spreading outward, now, reaching out to touch the cave walls, the ceiling, consuming even the lake water on
either side of the pier. And then, from that lump of static, hands began to emerge. Pale, skeletal hands, with gaping holes carved into the palms and fingers too long for comfort. Five hands, ten, twenty, a hundred, crawling from the static and skittering towards her along the rotting wooden pier like spiders.

"Just a dream," Frisk whispered to herself, holding onto the words like a prayer.

"No," she heard the monster behind her say, and she spun to face them. Their entire body had been obscured by static, the glitches large and fizzling, humming like live electricity. "Not a… hands… beware…"

"Shut up!" Frisk's voice went high and frantic. "It is too a dream, it is too, shut up, shut up, shut up –"

The hands were quicker than the static. One made a grab for her ankle and Frisk cried out, snatching her leg back and giving it a panicked kick. The hand fell into the water with a hollow splash, its fingers still opening and closing in a clutching motion.

"Just a dream," she whimpered. "Just a dream, just a …"

Two hands closed tight around her ankles, and Frisk screamed, trying desperately to shake them off, but to no avail. Another pair of hands crawled up her legs to take hold of her wrists, holding her arms high above her head.

"Help me!" Frisk shrieked, struggling desperately. But nobody came.

She managed to turn her head around, only to find that the cloud of static where the grey monster had been was now entirely gone. She turned back around to face the cloud of static, it was approaching faster now, and there was nothing, nothing she could do, nothing she could do to stop the oncoming static that was not so much a cloud anymore as opposed to a wall, nothing she could do to stop those skittering skeletal hands –

Her soul flared, desperately. There was a flash of blinding, brilliant red light.

The world gave a lurch.

And then Frisk found herself standing on solid concrete, the world restored around her, in the middle of the road.

And a car was heading straight towards her.

Frisk's body responded accordingly: she froze on the spot and stared at the oncoming car – it was really coming quite quickly – with enormous eyes.

Ding.

Her soul was suddenly gripped by something, magic holding it tightly in place, and Frisk looked down, saw the deep blue glow there, recalled her dream, and instinctually she let out a strangled gasp, clawing at her chest.

The car must have been mere inches away and there was no way it could slow down in time –

And all of a sudden Frisk was hurtling through the air and across the street. She nearly rammed directly into a small figure before she came to an abrupt stop and the grip on her soul was slowly, gently released. Frisk took in the sights around her, the breath she'd been holding back coming out
Home. She was home, she was in the world, the real world, she was sure of it—no, no, she wasn't just sure of it; she could tell, she could simply tell, as if her soul were telling her the facts, as if the knowledge sat at her very core. She could feel the sun on her neck and the slightest hint of the cool October breeze, and the solid pavement beneath her feet. She could see the cars whizzing by, including the one that had come so close to hitting her.

And she could see Dunkle Sans, standing in front of her, final traces of glowing blue magic fading from his fingertips. "Frisk?" he uttered. "What the heck were you thinking, standin' in the middle of the road like that?"

Frisk stared. She teetered on the spot for a moment, then threw her arms around him, and promptly burst into tears.

Sans looked shocked for a moment, then his arms enveloped her, pulling her closer to him. "Ah, jeez. C'mere, kid. Hey. Hey, it's okay."

"I… I… " Frisk clung to him tighter, burying her nose in the fabric of his hoodie. Sans shushed her softly and rubbed the small of her back, pointedly ignoring the stares of passers-by. He did it with notable expertise, as if he had a good deal of practise in comforting crying children.

"Hey. Heya, 's okay, kiddo. Why don't you tell me what happened, huh? It's okay." He held her out at arm's length, allowing her to mop at her tears with her sleeve. "And, uh… you can tell me what you were doin' wanderin' the streets two whole hours before school gets out."

Frisk sucked in a breath, stopped and frowned. "Two hours—school hasn't even started yet."

Sans raised a brow, letting go of her shoulders to stuff his hands into his pockets. "Frisk, it's one in the afternoon."

Frisk froze, her mouth opening a little in shock. "It's… what?" Sans pointed upwards, and when Frisk craned her neck up to look she saw that he was right: the sun was much higher in the sky than it had been when she'd left the house.

She frowned deeper. "But… I was only there a few minutes… "

"Where?"

She bit her lip, recalling her strange—no, not dream. Vision? Now she realised something else was wrong, too—her backpack was missing. "The… the grey monster called it the Void."

Silence. Frisk wondered for a moment if he hadn't heard her, or misunderstood. But then, when Sans spoke, his voice was low and oddly forceful. Gone was his usual easygoing drawl. "How do you know about the Void?"

Frisk took a step back, startled. "I… I don't know! I was just there, I didn't know where I was but it looked like Waterfall and then the grey monster said—"

"What grey monster?" Sans seemed to take in her frightened state. "No, no. It's… okay. Calm down. Start from the beginning. What happened?"

Frisk hesitated. And then, in a rush, she did. She told him about last night's dream, the one with the drooping man. She told him about how she'd been crossing the bridge when the world had simply fallen away beneath her feet, of the pier in Waterfall slowly rotting, of the grey monster's words
and the static. She left out the detail of the hands. When at last she was finished, she let out a
whoosh of air. "The grey monster said you had the answers," she added.

Sans had started clawing at his inner wrist in what was clearly some sort of nervous tic. "Did they,
now," he said, voice hollow.

"Mmhmm. So… do you?" Sans didn't answer right away, and so Frisk pressed on. "They also said
something about – " She winced; feeling a sharp pain in her chest – "to beware somebody called
Doctor Gaster?"

Ever since her first dream, Frisk had caught Dunkle Sans acting a bit strangely. Worryingly. Bones
going stiff when she said certain things to him about her dreams, gaze fading to fix on something in
the distance she could not see. The way he reacted now topped them all off. He stiffened now,
certainly, but his gaze didn't just become unfocused; his eyelights vanished completely, making his
eye sockets look as hollow as they were. He stayed that way for a spell, and then he started to
tremble ever so slightly, his breath coming in short, rattling rasps.

Frisk had to say his name three times to bring him back to earth, but even as he stilled and his
breathing grew normal again, even as his usual eyelights returned, he said nothing, his gaze
remaining unfocused.

"Dunkle Sans?" she finally prompted, reaching a hand out. "Are you – "

Sans looked pointedly away. "I don't talk about that," he said shortly.

"But the grey monster said you – "

"I said, I don't talk about that," he snapped, and Frisk flinched. It didn't pass his notice, and he gave
a hefty sigh. "Sorry, kid. I just… that's a part o' my life I ain't shared with anyone before. It was a
pretty long time ago, but it's… not somethin' I look back on too fondly."

Frisk looked down at her shoes. The tight feeling on her soul was starting to come back, and she
knew if her dreams hadn't been able to leave her alone, this vision certainly wouldn't. "Please,
Dunkle Sans," she whispered. "Please. I-I'm scared. I wanna know what's going on, and, and the
grey monster said you know. I don't know what's happening and I'm scared it's gonna happen
again. I don't think I can tell anybody else."

Sans went very quiet, then, somehow even quieter than before. He held himself in an oddly rigid
manner, his shoulders slightly hunched, hands stuffed too stiffly into his pockets, permanent grin
both frozen and faded. The lights in his eyes had dimmed again to barely-visible pinpricks, and
they were looking downward. Finally, he let out a sigh and his form relaxed like a deflating ball
until he stood sagging and limp. He raised his eyes and looked at her, hard, before lifting a hand
and running it down his face.

"Okay, kid," he said at last. "I guess it ain't fair otherwise. Let's go to Grillby's, whaddya say? I'm
going to tell you everything."

Grillby's was one of the few establishments in the Underground that had so far managed to re-open
on the Surface. This was due in no small part to the bar's immense popularity, for even the
monsters of exciting New Home had to admit that a grubby little restaurant in Snowdin served the
best junk food in the Underground, not to mention the best drinks.

Though the new Grillby's had been open for almost three months now, the fire monster had yet to
serve any human patrons. When Sans and Frisk walked through its doors, however, it was crowded with the old regulars, and Sans greeted them all, slipping right back into his laid-back old self, a well-practised routine.

"Hey, everyone, no need to get up from your seats, hold your applause, 's just me and the kid." He shuffled, slow and casual, across the hardwood floor, Frisk staying close behind him. Sans climbed up onto the barstool that Frisk was pretty sure had been elevated just for him, and Dogamy got up from his seat to help her adjust the height of the barstool next to him. Sans nodded to Grillby but held up a finger – just a sec – to turn to Frisk. "So, whaddya want? Fries, burger, milkshake, grilled cheese?"

"I'm not really hungry," she admitted. "I just had breakfast."

Sans raised an eyebrow at her. "No, ya didn't. You had breakfast hours ago."

Frisk opened her mouth to argue, then realised he was right. She was hungry. Her stomach grumbled as if to make a point. "Okay. Then strawberry milkshake, please."

Sans glanced over at Grillby, who was hovering. "You heard the kid. One strawberry milkshake, and the usual for me." Grillby nodded once, then disappeared into the back kitchen.

Frisk grinned teasingly at Sans. "Is the usual a burger with lots of ketchup?"

"Hmm? Oh. Nah – aw, man, thanks, Grillbz – the usual's a drink. I'm not too hungry." Sans slid the bowl of peanuts over to Frisk. "Want one?"

Frisk took a peanut and looked at him pointedly. "You, not hungry?"

"Nah. I'll eat at dinner, Al's gonna heat up that mushroom dish your mom made." He winked at her. "Anythin' you can't finish, I don't mind takin' from your plate – really it's okay – hey, thanks, Grillbz!" Sans grinned at the bartender as he delivered a clear drink in a small glass with a wedge of lime floating in it. Frisk leaned over curiously to get a closer look, then pulled a face.

"What's that?"

"Gin and tonic." He bopped her on the nose. "This little guy contains al-co-hol. Not for kids to drink."

"I wouldn't want to – it stinks!"

Sans chuckled. "Well, your milkshake'll be here in a minute, and you know Grillbz makes one hell of a milkshake. Go, have your peanuts."

Frisk popped a few into her mouth, then frowned. "But you said – you just said – you brought me here 'cause you were going to tell me about… Gaster."

Sans' grin faltered just a bit. "Heh. I did, didn't I? That's funny, huh? But y'know, a good story needs a good drink to go along with it. Why don't we wait 'til – "

"No. Now." Frisk hesitated. "… please?" When Sans didn't answer, she continued. "Does it… hurt you to think about?"

He didn't so much chuckle as burst out laughing at that. "Oh, you don't got the faintest idea."

Frisk looked down at her lap. She felt very guilty, really, over forcing Dunkle Sans to talk about
something that was so hard to discuss. If anyone knew what it was like to try and avoid unhappy memories, it was her: in her short life, Frisk had been in and out of nearly twenty foster homes, and not all of them had been good.

But the strained feeling on her soul wasn't going away anytime soon, and Frisk was afraid. She tried not to dwell on her selfishness as Grillby arrived with her milkshake, and she busied herself in stirring the straw around in her glass. Sans' wish had been granted after all: a good story accompanied with a good drink. If he shared, at any rate. Frisk was just starting to doubt he really would, so she was surprised when he spoke up.

"So, Dr W.D. Gaster, huh?" Frisk's head snapped up to see Sans swishing his own glass around. "Okay. I guess since I'm the only one with the answers accordin' to your Monster Kid friend."

"The grey monster looked like Monster Kid," Frisk corrected. "But it wasn't really them. They didn't even sound like a kid. They must've just been small, like you, or Auntie Alphys."

Sans grunted. "Maybe. Anyway. Couldn't tell ya who they were, and you said they couldn't either, so I guess it's just a mystery all-round." He knocked back much of his drink. "So. Here goes." He let out a long whoosh of breath, and his voice went quiet so as not to be overheard. Frisk almost had to lean in to hear him properly. "So you know how Alphys is – was – the Royal Scientist of the Underground?"

Careful to keep her voice similarly low, Frisk nodded. "Mmhmm! But then Mum fired her." The pair of them actually got on quite well, considering.

"That's right. Well, there was a Royal Scientist before her, see – she'd only been Royal Scientist, what, eight years? Still pretty new to the job. Anyway. This other Royal Scientist guy…. That was Doctor Gaster. Dr W.D. Gaster." Sans hunched forward, tapping a phalange against the rim of his glass. "And he was somethin', let me tell ya."

Frisk tilted her head. "So did he do some bad things?"

"You could say that." Frisk watched as Sans ran a hand up and down one arm, seeming to ponder on something. "He did all kinds of things really – guy was a genius. That much I can't dispute." He released a whooshing breath. "And he'd been Royal Scientist, for, oh, I dunno – most o' the time we monsters were stuck underground, so maybe… seven hundred years?"

"Whoa."

"Heh. I know, right? Anyway, as Royal Scientist, his main job was to study the Barrier and find a way to get us all out – he did other stuff, too, of course, but trying to find a way to shatter the Barrier was a pretty big deal down there. But he really did do all kinds o' things as Royal Scientist. Prob'ly the biggest thing he ever did was build the CORE."

Frisk was impressed. "The CORE was huge! And it powered the whole Underground and everything, right?"

"Yep. Now. Another project of his? Create a vessel that could break the Barrier before the, ah, seven human souls were collected. Save us a lotta pain and suffering, y'know?" An awkward pause. "Sorry, us monsters are just kinda – don't mean anythin' by it."

"I know. It's okay." Frisk paused, taking a long slurp of milkshake. "So what happened?"

Sans chuckled dryly, crunching a peanut between his teeth. "What happened? Phew. Well. That's the question. The short of it is that the project was a failure." He bit the word out with a bitterness
that seemed out of place to Frisk. "He tried it from all kinds of angles, but it never worked. Guess that bit's obvious, seeing as he was gone by the time you showed up."

Sans paused, tapping his finger against the side of his glass again. "He… made me to try and trick the Barrier into letting me pass through. Make a powerful weapon outta me, make me nice and strong, so that I could take the remaining human souls, bring 'em back, and return 'em to the King, and help lead us monsters into the war against humans."

Frisk stopped and stared. "What?"

He sighed, and Frisk missed neither the hesitation nor the guilt that flashed across his features. "Look. I'm an experiment."

The human child just continued staring, at a total loss for words. She had no idea what to make of this information, or of Sans' attitude towards it. Perhaps because the idea was just so very out there, or perhaps because she had not been sufficiently exposed to science fiction. She barely even understood what he meant. Frisk had been through her share of rough foster families, but most of them had just kind of ignored her all the time. She knew lots of kids whose foster parents had hit them, but that had never happened to her. The idea of being an "experiment" sounded quite a lot worse.

But Sans ambled on: "Anyway, pretty soon it became clear that wasn't gonna work. But he wasn't just gonna give up. So he got the idea I could just straight-up shatter the Barrier, boom. He ran with that one for a while – crazy, I know, heh. He tried all kinds o' things. He even tried making another test subject when stuff started to go wrong with me. That's how I got my brother, heh. I was seven."

He glanced over at her, noticed the way she was staring with her eyes wide and frightened. "Aw, don't look at me like that, kid – look, you've barely touched your milkshake."

Frisk had forgotten about it. She took a long slurp. "Oh." She hesitated. "But I don't understand, um –"

Sans cut her off smoothly. "The big idea was to try and make me, I dunno, more like a human, I guess. And humans have something called 'Determination.'"

Familiar words. Frisk slurped at her milkshake. "You said I have that!"

He tilted his head. "That's right. You do. You're prob'ly the most Determined thing of all, who knows. You got the will to go on, to hold on, no matter what. A physical will, a power that's the key ingredient of the magic making up your soul." His gaze slid to his drink. "But you ain't the only human with that power. And when humans started fallin' down here, their souls were made of pretty strong stuff. Doctor Gaster got permission from the King to study the souls o' the fallen humans. And he started workin' from there. He got pretty hooked on this whole Determination thing. It was a helluva power – don't tell your mom I said that word – to work with. None of those kids were as Determined as you, but…"

"Eventually he decided to drain the Determination outta the human souls – literally suck it right up." He mimicked a slurping noise. "And that… well, that did work. Made this giant machine, called it a Determination Extractor."

He cast a glance at Frisk just as she shuddered, and chuckled. "Yeah. You saw it, right? Scary-looking thing. Kinda funny how big it was, and those souls were so small. But hey, whatever. He did what he was out to do. And decided to inject it into his most grown-up test subject. I was a kid then – just about your age, don't really remember exactly no more."

Frisk's eyes had gone even wider as she recalled the Amalgamates. "'course," Sans went on, "no
offence to Al, Al's great, but Doctor Gaster spent way more time studying souls and DT than she
did. A good hundred or so years more. He got a better idea of how powerful it could be. If you start
out with a teeny, tiny amount o' Determination and combine it with a magical extract specially
suited to a monster's magic type to inject it into 'em… well. That monster can start to develop a
tolerance, y'know?"

Her eyes widened further still. "Did it hurt?"

"Hmm? Oh, nah. 'course not." At her pointed look, he chuckled dryly and gave a little shrug,
looking off to the side. "Well, maybe a little when the needle went in. Just a sting."

Sans' voice went hollow and flat again. "But it's different for you humans. Determination comes
naturally to you. 's what makes you so strong. With the power of Determination… comes the
opportunity for a whole bunch of power. Like the ability to Save. Reset." He cut his eyes in her
direction. "Only a few Determined beings got those abilities. And they're what's called an anomaly.
Ever heard that word before?"

Frisk shook her head.

"Well." Sans walked his fingers across the counter like a pair of legs. "That's what he tried to do
with me. Make me an anomaly. Make me do this huge Reset that'd undo the whole war.

"But it didn't work. He fell into the heart o' the CORE after that, and next thing ya know, he got
erased from existence. So, uh, if you ask anyone about him, they'll just look at you funny." Sans
smirked a bit, then knocked back the last of his drink.

"But how – why – "

Sans flagged down the fiery bartender. "Hey, Grillbz. Wanna get me another?" He swished the last
drop of liquid around the ice in his glass. The ice was melting.

Grillby paused, giving Sans a long look. Then he approached, taking the glass from Sans, and made
to fix him another gin and tonic.

Frisk shifted uncomfortably on her stool. She waited a moment, then spoke up. "Mum says you
drink too much."

He stopped. "Does she, now."

"And Auntie Alphys. And Uncle Papyrus – "


Frisk stopped, staring down at her empty glass. She'd finished it without realising. Then she
shrugged. "I… no thanks." It felt rude to be slurping away at a milkshake at a time like this.
Something that she could scarcely wrap her head around. It was scary seeing her Dunkle Sans so
serious, and she badly wished he would just make a bad pun, or pull out his whoopee cushion, or
do a terrible impression of his brother. Anything but this.

She didn't want to think about all this anymore.

"Well. If ya say so – though if I were you, I'd've finished, like, ten milkshakes by now, d'you know
how much sugar's in one of those things? It's amazing."
"You could," Frisk suggested meekly. It would probably be a lot better for him than what he was about to order.

But then his second gin and tonic arrived as if on cue, and Sans winked at he raising his glass. "Naw. I got this." He knocked back most of the drink in one go before wiping his mouth with the back of his sleeve. "Hey, don't look at me like that, kid – I ain't finished yet. Want me to go on? Don't worry, story's got a happy ending."

Frisk paused, then nodded.

"Well, Doctor Gaster fell, and then it was just me and Paps – he was this little toddler back then, smaller'n me if you'd believe it – on our own. He doesn't remember anything. He'd've been too little to remember even if Gaster hadn't been erased. I took him from our house and ran. Raised him on my own. We lived rough for a coupla years. Then I got a job with King Asgore. After that… well." He finished off the last of his drink in one shot. "Time passed, and then you showed up."

Frisk stared down at her lap. She didn't dare speak for a very long stretch of time. Then she felt a hand cup itself gently under her chin, lifting her head and turning her face to look at him. Sans smoothed her hair back from her face, and gone was the dead, hollow look and the empty eye sockets: his expression had softened, his gaze warm and tender, and he looked much more like his usual self. "Hey. Kid. Listen. I know how it sounds, but listen, I promise ya, you don't gotta worry about me. Your Dunkle Sans is fine. Totally fine. And whatever's happenin' now… 's gonna work out okay. I'll see to that. 'kay?"

He tapped his teeth against the top of her head, a skeleton kiss, and Frisk smiled a little, leaning over in her barstool to give him a hug. "Okay."

"There." Another skeleton kiss. "Ya feelin' better?"

Frisk nodded into him. "Yeah. I'm just scared."

"I know. Me too."

At last he pulled away, expression contemplative. "In that other dream… when ya saw him – it musta been him – what didja say he looked like, again?"

Frisk scrunched up her nose in thought. "Um… kind of like a skeleton, but not really. He was all melty and droopy."

Sans chuckled and grinned to himself. "Oh, man. Awesome."

Frisk gave him a pained little smile and didn't say anything. There was a prolonged silence. At long last Frisk glanced at the neon clock on the wall. "Maybe we should call Uncle Papyrus and tell him he doesn't need to pick me up. I don't want him to wait for nothing."

Sans seemed pleased. "Good idea. I'll tell 'im I was hanging near your school and decided to save him the effort. Speaking of which… I should prob'ly give your school a call too, tell 'em you're sick today, or else they'll ring the house if they haven't already, and we'll all be in trouble."

Frisk kicked a toe against the bar but nodded, eyes on her lap.

"Just lemme get one more drink and we'll head on out."

Her head snapped right back up. "What?" But Sans was already nodding to Grillby again. This time, Frisk didn't say anything as he ordered another gin and tonic and then requested some more
peanuts, even though Frisk had barely touched them since her milkshake.

The drink arrived faster this time, and Frisk still didn't say anything as Sans knocked it back with an *ahh*. He set the glass down on the counter, slid it over to Grillby, waved his hand in a *put-it-on-my-tab* gesture.

"Oh, man." Sans brought a hand to his head. "Three gin 'n' tonics… maybe not a great idea, heh-heh. Paps is gonna gimme hell f'r this." He was slurring ever so slightly. He slid down from the barstool and teetered on the spot slightly for a moment. "Whoa. Ha."

Frisk hopped down from the stool, reaching out to support him, but he waved her off.

"Nah, I've got it."

"Are you, um, drunk?" Frisk bit her lip.

He chuckled. "Eh. Gettin' there. But nah, 'm good. Don't sweat it, kid." He thrust his hands into his pockets and began to make his way out of the bar, his steps maybe a little more careful than usual, but certainly steady. Too steady, considering. Frisk waved goodbye to Grillby and his patrons, then scuttled off after him.

Once in the street, Frisk reached out to slip her hand into his, remembering to approach from his left side as Papyrus had taught her. "Dunkle Sans?" she asked, very quietly. "Dunkle Sans, what about that vision thing? What does it mean?"

He swivelled his head to look at her, permanent grin unreadable. "It means I got work t' do."
Chapter Notes

Hey, so those shiny tags at the top of this story? Yeah. This is where they’re gonna start coming in. So please take a good look at them before reading. Also note the rating’s been bumped up to M, though this will only really start applying in the next chapter, but... well. You’ll see. Have fun, guys!

*When Sans was sixteen, the world reset.*

-oo-

The past four years had treated him and his brother well.

Within three months of being hired as a page in the castle, Sans had managed to pay off his debts to the Temmies. Within a year and a half, he and Papyrus moved out of the shed for good.

There was a property on the main Snowdin road, near the Waterfall border, that had been up for rent. The house was huge, especially for a pair of children – and Snowdin was so far from the Capital, not to mention so very cold, that the rent was cheap, enough so that Sans could manage to pay off his monthly debts while also making sure he and his brother had enough to eat.

But all these years later, and he and Papyrus were still getting the place properly furnished – once Papyrus' room was done, decorating the rest of the house had gone on the back burner. The vast majority of the rest of furniture had been found at the dump, and the carpet the house had come with was a real eyesore, but Sans didn't feel like going through the effort of replacing it.

Though the brothers now slept in separate bedrooms, and had been doing so for a while, Papyrus sought him out nearly every other night, and Sans was more than happy to let his baby brother crawl under the covers and snuggle against him as he fell asleep.

The page job itself, meanwhile, was painfully easy, and Sans got on well with the castle staff and other pages. He was careful to keep up an easygoing air and shrug off questions – most of them about where his parents were, or why he wasn't in school – with puns, and those were enough to ward the questions off.

The job even came with perks. Although it hadn't taken too long before the brothers were able to regularly afford their own food without stealing or begging, the kitchen staff often slipped him plastic containers of food in exchange for small favours – helping to fold laundry or wash the dishes and such. One of the chefs made a killer porridge – using real oats and barley instead of the instant packets – and Papyrus absolutely loved it. He had never seen barley before, and for some reason took to calling the coarse grain "dinosaur eggs."

"Pretty sure dinosaur eggs are bigger'n that, bro," Sans had informed him, watching his brother devour the latest oatmeal the chef had sent him back home with.

"Of course they are! They are baby dinosaur eggs! It just takes too long to say!"
Sans grinned. "Y’know, you could save even more time by callin’ it barley."

Papyrus threw his head back and groaned. "I KNOW it’s called that! I’m not a BABY! I am nearly double digits! I just LIKE calling it dinosaur eggs because it’s more exciting, and way COOLER that way!"

"Hey, I’m not out to stop ya. Just thought I’d save you a lotta work if you wanted."

"Yeah, because you're LAZY."

"Oh, ’course I am. I’m the king of relaxing. The relax-king, ya might say."

"Sans!"

Times were good, and at a certain point Sans let himself get used to it. He almost let himself believe it would last.

oOo

Papyrus woke him up one morning, like he did nearly every morning, by poking him in the ribs and shaking him, hard. "Sans. SAAAAANS. Sans, wake up!"

Sans groaned, sliding his eyes open with great reluctance just as Papyrus began to jump up and down on the bed, already dressed in his school uniform. Even his tie was done up to the best of his nine-year-old ability, though it looked awkward with his omnipresent red scarf wrapped around his neck and stuffed under his shirt in a poor attempt to hide his daily uniform violation from the teachers. "Wake up, you lazybones! I’m going to be late for school!"

"You are?" Sans stretched. "Well, that’s no good, is it?"

"No, it is not!" Papyrus hopped off the mattress and began to tug on Sans’ arm. "It isn’t good at all, which is why you need to TAKE me!" When tugging with his hands didn’t work, he bit down on the sleeve of Sans’ pyjama top and began to tug like a puppy monster.

Sans chuckled at the sight, allowing Papyrus to continue tugging while remaining stoutly in place. "What day is it, anyway? Sure it ain’t Saturday? ’cause I’m pretty sure it's Saturday, bro."

Papyrus dropped his sleeve and scowled. "It's TUESDAY! SANS!"

"Okay, okay, I’m gettin' up." He sat up with a groan, scrubbing his hands down his face. "Lemme get dressed."

"And brush your teeth! It's important to get rid of the germs!" Papyrus called, already bolting out the door.

"Aye, aye, soldier."

Ten minutes and a granola bar breakfast later, Sans stepped out the front door, dressed and with his teeth brushed and germ-free, Papyrus at his heels. Despite his apparently life-threatening lateness, Papyrus didn't run ahead but walked alongside his brother at a comfortable pace.

"So what’s the plan for today?" Sans asked.

"Well! TODAY! Undyne is picking me up at the Waterfall border and will walk with me the rest of the way to school!"
"'kay." Heh. So much for fussing about being late for school. Even though the border was well out of the young fish girl's way, Undyne and Papyrus arranged to meet this way at least once a week. They liked walking part of the way to school together, and this plan ensured Undyne actually went to school, even if the children tended to get a little distracted along the way.

And despite the fact that the brothers lived a stone's throw from the Waterfall border – not to mention that Papyrus was plenty old enough to wander the Underground by himself – the younger skeleton still liked it when his big brother took him as far. Undyne was almost always late, anyway, and Sans kept him company during the wait, listening to Papyrus chatter away.

Today, after fifteen or so minutes, Undyne came barrelling forward in a blur of red, grey, and blue. She made no signs of slowing as she approached, and next thing Sans knew, she'd rammed directly into his brother, tackling him to the ground, skinny nine-year-old limbs wrapping around his waist with a battle cry of "SNOW WRESTLING!"

"Noo –" Papyrus' cry was suddenly muffled as his face was shoved into the snow. He wiggled, then finally Undyne's grip slackened enough for him to break free and get to his feet to brush the snow off his clothes.

"You're supposed to attack me back, stupid," Undyne grumbled as she picked herself up. She shook the snow from her long red hair. "It's a wrestling battle."

"You just caught me by SURPRISE! That's all! Ugh!"

"Off-guard, you might say," Sans cut in with a wink, and Papyrus groaned loudly.

Undyne apparently was having none of it. "You can't be caught off-guard on the battlefield, Papy! It's really important, or else a human could come and kill you and not even care if you were paying attention or not. And then you'd be dust like that." Undyne couldn't snap her fingers, so she clapped her hands together to get her point across.

Papyrus jumped, but looked appropriately cowed. "Okay, Undyne, I know… well! Bye, Sans!"

The children turned to go.

"Hey, whoa, whoa. Where's my hug goodbye?" Sans pretended to be mortally offended, and Papyrus turned on his heel so fast he nearly slipped in the snow.

"Right here!" He barrelled into Sans in a hug, nearly knocking the elder brother over as he buried his nasal bone in Sans' shoulder and squeezed him hard.

"Whoa," Sans chuckled, hugging him back and reaching up to rub the top of his skull: Papyrus was nearly as tall as he was now, coming up to his eyes. "I swear you're gettin' bigger every minute. No way you were this tall when we left the house."

Papyrus suddenly pulled back, eyes shining. "Oh, yes! That's because I wrestled with Undyne! When you fight, it makes you grow! AND grow MUCH QUICKER and STRONGER, TOO! HA!"

"That's right," piped up Undyne, grinning her trademark sharp-toothed grin. "'cause it calls on your fighting spirit, and training and fighting makes you really tough! So me and Papy have to fight constantly if we're going to be in the Guard! Every chance we get! We're gonna be sooo much taller than you when we're old teenagers, Sans. Come on, Papy! Let's go see if there are any HUMANS to fight on the way to school!"

"YEAH!" Papyrus punched the air in excitement and bounced up and down on the spot before turning around again and returning to Undyne. "BYE, SANS! I LOVE YOU!"
"See ya, Paps. Drink your school. Eat your milk. Have fun at vegetables."

Papyrus giggled, turning to wave over his shoulder. "Sillybones."

Sans caught Undyne roll her eyes. "Your brother's so weird, Papy," he heard her say as the two walked away.

Sans smirked to himself, stopping to rest his back against a broad pine tree, watching the children as they made their way towards the school. He could hear Undyne saying something about slaying humans at recess before the pair disappeared into the next room and out of earshot. Heh. He was sure Papyrus would have all kinds of exciting tales of the day's tribulations when he got home, as he always did. Undyne certainly kept him on his toes. Sans privately woed the day the two of them got their magic; Undyne was active enough as it was.

From there the day passed by uneventfully – work was its usual pleasant lull. He and his brother nuked a frozen pizza for dinner, and he helped Papyrus with his math homework before playing a puzzle game with him until it was time for bed. He read Papyrus' favourite Fluffy Bunny book as a bedtime story.

Sans slept on his own that night, and though he could not recall his dreams, he was painfully aware of a sudden jolt, a lurch, in the space around him even as he slept. For a moment he was almost displaced: he felt as if he were drifting in the middle of a great dark chasm, and that chasm surrounded him. Something was shifting. Something was spinning. Shadows snapped and snatched at each other. The space around him began to stretch in every direction, outwards and inwards.

Then it was over, the sensation gone as quickly as it had come. And in his dream, Sans shrugged, and carried on.

oOo

It started out like a mild toothache.

A nagging feeling of discomfort he couldn't quite shake – not bad enough to be considered actually painful, but uncomfortable to the point of distraction.

Papyrus woke him up by poking him in the ribs and shaking him violently. "Sans. SAAAAAANS. Sans, wake up!"

Sans groaned, sliding open first his good eye, then the other. As was his wont, Papyrus clambered up onto his bed and began to jump up and down. He'd changed into his uniform on his own again, though his tie was done as sloppily as ever. "Wake up, you lazybones! I'm going to be late for school!"

Sans chuckled, propping himself up on one elbow. "Paps, it's fine… you're late half the time when you meet Undyne at the border anyway. 'member last week she dragged you off to the marshes to look for humans disguised as bugs and I got a call from your teacher sayin' you walked into class two hours late covered in mud?"

"Well… yes!" Papyrus emphasised each word with a hard bounce. "But as I'm! Meeting her today! I don't! Want! To be late! MEETING her!"

"Oh, you meeting her again? You met her yesterday, bro."

Papyrus stopped bouncing to look at him, and Sans put his hands up in surrender quickly. "Never said ya couldn't. It's fine."
"Yesterday I walked to school all by myself!" Papyrus sat on the edge of the bed, tugging on Sans' sleeve in an effort to get him out of bed. "You don't remember?"

Sans cocked a brow. "Wasn't that Monday?"

"Of course, sillybones – YESTERDAY was Monday. It's Tuesday today!"

A cold, unsettling feeling took hold of Sans. "Bro, today's Wednesday…"

"No it isn't! I KNOW yesterday was Monday! Because Monday is library day! And yesterday we went! Anyway, come ONNNN, I'll be late!" He took Sans' sleeve between his teeth and tugged like a puppy monster. Sans pried his sleeve free.

"Okay, okay, I'm coming… lemme just get dressed and brush my teeth."

"Yes! Brushing your teeth is important to kill the germs!" Papyrus scurried out of the room. "Be quick, brother!"

"Yeah," Sans muttered, staring at the door as Papyrus shut it behind him. "You got it."

Once his brother could be heard making his way downstairs, Sans brought his hands to the side of his skull, screwing his eyes shut a moment. Well, of all the confounding things. He could have sworn yesterday was Tuesday – that Papyrus had met up with Undyne at the Waterfall border. Undyne had tackled him to the ground in a snow wrestling contest. And then after picking Papyrus up from school, he'd helped him with his division homework and stuck a frozen pizza in the microwave for dinner. They'd played a puzzle game, and read Fluffy Bunny before bed.

He could recall it all in clear detail – like it was only yesterday. It had been only yesterday. Clearer than he could possibly have recalled a dream. So why was his brother…?

Sans didn't keep a calendar in the house, so he couldn't just check to see if he'd crossed off the date or not – he'd never felt a need to keep track of specific dates and it wasn't as if his and his brother's daily schedule changed up very much.

"SANS! Are you dressed yet!?"

Or maybe it had been a dream. Hey, he'd even go as far as to say it'd make a nice change. He'd take a weird, boring dream of his daily routine over the usual nightmares any day. "Coming, bro!" he called.

He took the time to change into his page uniform, then quickly brushed his teeth in the tiny bathroom at the end of the hall to the sound of Papyrus jumping on the couch and singing the theme song to some cartoon he liked to watch at Undyne's house.

Papyrus bounded over to him as he came down the stairs with eager demands for breakfast. Sans snagged some granola bars, partially out of habit and partially as a test, and Papyrus didn't whine about having to eat them for breakfast two days in a row. (They'd had crab apples from Gerson's shop on Monday if he recalled correctly).

He listened to his brother's chatter as they walked to the Snowdin-Waterfall border. Papyrus could chatter about all kinds of things, and Sans didn't always pay much attention, but as they walked he realised that Papyrus' words – pretty much his every word – sounded familiar. As though he'd heard it just yesterday. He couldn't quite finish his brother's sentences in his head – he hadn't been paying that much attention before – but he recognised far too much to simply ignore it.
… if it had been a dream, then how had it been able to predict the mundane goings-on of the
upcoming day, in such precise detail?

*A jolt in the space around him…*

"Sans?"

Sans blinked back into reality to see Papyrus frowning up at him with wide eye sockets. They had
reached the border. Papyrus tugged on Sans' sleeve, and the older skeleton grinned weakly, rubbing the top of his brother's skull. "Sorry, Paps. Spaced out for a second."

"Did you hear what I just said?" was the scowled challenge.

Sans paused. "Uh… somethin' about puzzle class, right?"

"… yes." Papyrus huffed. He looked off toward the border, still annoyed, and Sans followed his
gaze to spy Undyne, again. The nine-year-old fish girl was barrelling towards them in a blur of red,
grey, and blue. Sans put a protective hand out in front of Papyrus. "Watch out – "

"SNOW WRESTLING!"

Undyne slammed into the both of them, causing both herself and the brothers to be knocked to the
snowy ground. The young fish monster was undeterred, however, crawling straight for Papyrus
and trapping him in a headlock before shoving his face into the snowy ground.

"Noo – " Papyrus' distressed cry was muffled by the snow, and Sans couldn't help but chuckle to
himself as he got to his feet, brushing the snow from his uniform. It didn't matter whether or not
he'd been witness to the same thing yesterday – this was a rather frequent occurrence.

After a minute, Papyrus managed to wriggle free and got to his feet, shaking snow from his eye
sockets and brushing his own uniform down. "Did you HAVE to do that?" he complained.

"Yep!" Undyne jumped to her feet and gave her blazer a shake. "You need to learn *defence*, Papy!
And you need to fight back! That's why it's called a *wrestling* battle."

"You just caught him *off-guard*, is all." Sans grinned, causing Undyne to harrumph. "Heya, scales."

"Hi, Sans." Undyne tugged hard on Papyrus' tie. "Come on, let's go see if there are any humans to
fight on the way to school… "

"kay. Bye, Paps. Drink your school. Eat your milk. Have fun at vegetables." He couldn't really
think of what else to say, so he just repeated yesterday's brotherly advice.

Papyrus just rolled his eyes. Huh. He didn't show any signs of remembering anything from
yesterday morning. Sans waited for his brother to turn and follow Undyne, but this time, Papyrus
went right for his hug, and Sans squeezed him back.

His brother let go far too soon for Sans' taste, joining Undyne and giving a wave. "Bye, Sans! I
LOVE YOU!"

"Love ya, too Paps."

The children turned to go, Undyne saying something about hunting humans, when Sans found
himself stepping forward and stopping them. "Hey, scales?"

Undyne paused and turned. "Yeah?"
Sans made himself give a little laugh and shake his head. "Sorry, weird night last night. Uh, did you walk with Papyrus to school yesterday, too? Can't remember."

"No. Of course not." Undyne shook her head and looked at him oddly. "Maybe you have snow in your skull and it's mixing up your head and stopping you from thinking right," she said, helpfully.

"Heh. Maybe. Okay, you better get going before you're late for school. Maybe you could race."

"Oh, yeah! Good idea!" Undyne grinned at him toothily. "Come on, Papy! Ready set go!" She shot off then, causing Papyrus to squawk in alarm before he set off after her as fast as his legs would carry him.

Sans stared after them for a long time, returning to lean against the broad pine tree. Then, sighing, he stuffed his hands deeper into his pockets, hunched his shoulders, and began to walk back home – he always ducked behind the house and out of sight before teleporting to work. Not that he needed to, Snowdin was quiet today – yesterday – but it was a habit he'd formed long ago, and Sans stuck close to his habits.

Just as he was nearing the house, however, he spied Tex, Snowdin's maintenance officer. The lynx monster was washing the windows of the Librarby before it opened. Sans jogged over to her. "Morning, ma'am."

"Oh." Tex smiled at him politely, tipping her hat with her bobbed tail. "Good morning, Sans. Off to work?"

"Yep." He shuffled on the spot, the snow crunching pleasantly under his feet. "Hey, sorry, d'you know what day it is?"

"Tuesday. The seventh of May," she added helpfully.

"Tuesday… "Oh, right. Thanks." Sans gave a nonchalant shrug. "Weird, could've sworn yesterday was Tuesday."

"No. I can assure you it's today." Tex touched a paw to the glass where she had not yet begun to wipe it. "I always do Main Street on Tuesdays, see, so if I had any doubt then this would confirm my answer."

"Right-o. Okay. Well, thanks, ma'am. For confirming the day and all. See ya." He quickly turned on his heel with a wave as Tex returned the farewell.

Sans bowed his head, walking quickly in the direction of the house. Ducking behind it, he stopped a minute to lean against the wall, bringing a hand to his forehead. This was weird, far too weird. And something was very, very wrong.

… Or maybe he was just overreacting. After all, he had a tendency to get a little paranoid over any strange goings-ons. There was this recurring nightmare he had, about Gaster escaping the Void and coming back to reclaim him and his brother, but that was just a nightmare.

Gaster was gone for good. Gone from existence. The Void wasn't the sort of place you could crawl out of.

Sans sighed. Whatever. Maybe it was some weird sort of dream. He was Determined, after all. Who knew what kinds of wild time energy he could pick up on?

oOo
But after that, any doubts that he’d had that the "day before" had been some sort of weird dream vanished when he woke up that same Tuesday again.

Papyrus woke him up by bouncing on his bed. He told Sans that Undyne was meeting him at the Waterfall border and that they were walking to school together.

Sans picked out granola bars for breakfast, and Papyrus didn't complain.

"SNOW-WRESTLING!" Undyne shouted as she barrelled into Papyrus.

Frozen pizza in the microwave for dinner. Sans could never get tired of it.

Papyrus had the same math homework, and Sans helped him through it, faster this time now that he already knew the answers.

A bedtime story of Papyrus' favourite Fluffy Bunny book before bed.

And that night, there it was again. He must have missed it the last time, his yesterday – a jolt in the space around him. Something shifting. Something spinning. Space stretching around him in every direction…

oOo

Tuesday again.

oOo

And again.

oOo

And ag –

For whatever reason, Tuesday only lasted until half past two before everything ended and he was jolted back into bed of the same morning.

Sans was growing tired of this very quickly.

oOo

Determination.

"If an anomaly is a being with high amounts of Determination. Then why not. Create one? "

"By all definitions you exist outside of spacetime, outside of our closed system."

Heh. Funny. Thanks, Gaster, old buddy.

oOo

"SANS! Sans, wake up!"

Sans groaned as he felt Papyrus shake him. He batted the small offending hands away, yanking the sheets over his head. If time had to repeat, one day, on a loop, over and over again, did it really have to be on a weekday? And on a day Papyrus insisted on shaking him so violently awake?
"Ugh. Go meet Undyne on your own, bro, you're big enough... I'll pick ya up or somethin', lemme sleep...
"

"Sillybones! I met Undyne YESTERDAY!"

"... wha'?"

Under the sheets, Sans opened his eye sockets. He slowly emerged to see Papyrus standing over his bed with an irritated expression on his face. And he was still in his pyjamas.

"I met Undyne YESTERDAY," Papyrus repeated. "On Wednesdays Undyne shows up to class late, don't you remember? It's tradition!"

Sans propped himself on one elbow, rubbing the sleep from his eyes. "Wait, bro... hold up. You mean... is today Wednesday?"

"Yes! And yesterday was Tuesday!" Papyrus rolled his eyes. "OBVIOUSLY."

"Obviously?" Sans' voice cracked. "What's so obvious about it, huh?"

A huff from his little brother. "Lots of things! Sans, why don't you -- " Then Papyrus paused, and frowned. "Brother? What's wrong?"

Sans quickly lifted a hand to his cheekbone to see if he'd been crying, but no, it was dry. He didn't answer Papyrus straight away, instead reaching out to him with a weak laugh. He pulled Papyrus onto the bed in a hug and rubbed his skull. "Nothin', bro. Everything's... everything's great. I just... get the feelin' this is gonna be a really good day."

"And it'll be even better if you WAKE UP." Papyrus' voice pitched into a whine as he wiggled free. "And I can't find my shirt, what have you done with it... "

Wednesday carried on from there, and Sans had no idea what was going to happen one moment to the next.

And it was wonderful.

And when that day closed, it opened again onto Thursday, then Friday, then the weekend, and before Sans knew it, three weeks had passed without a trace of time jumping back.

The staggering truth hit him in the face one day, a delayed realisation. That it really was over. That all of those repeating Tuesdays were starting to feel like a bad dream.

Not that he didn't think about it.

There could be all kinds of reasons for the repeating Tuesday. Time was so fragile here in the Underground, after all. It could be just a small glitch, like a scratch on a record.

... or it could be Gaster. Sans was well aware that was a possibility. But he didn't want to think about that more than he had to.

The thought stayed with him anyway: once it took hold, it refused to let go.

Papyrus was sleeping over at Undyne's that night, so Sans volunteered to work a later shift at the castle. He needed something to do anyway. But now that it was eight o'clock, Sans and a few of the other pages were finally gathering their things to go home. The King was bidding them all a good night as usual. Sans was the last to sign off his shift. While he was in line, it occurred to him that
there was a question he could ask King Asgore, a question he wasn't comfortable asking anybody else.

It was probably a bit risky. And definitely a total gamble. But Sans had to be sure – though of what, precisely, he couldn't say.

He ducked to the back of the line, so that he and the King would be left alone together in the throne room.

"Hey, Your Majesty? Can I ask you a question?" he asked, before the King could open his mouth.

King Asgore blinked, startled at Sans' abruptness. Then he lifted a paw in invitation. "Of course, Sans. Whatever I can do to help you."

Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets and shuffled from one foot to another, his gaze sliding down to the golden flowers on the floor. "Uh. I was just wonderin', I don't really keep up to date with this stuff – what you can tell me about the Royal Scientist right now? Like, I don't even know who they are – figure I oughta know at least that – "

The King's brows came together in puzzlement. "Royal… Scientist? Well." He cleared his throat, seeming to think. "Royal… well, there isn't one right now. Didn't you know?"

Sans blinked. "There isn't one?"

"Well, no. There hasn't been for a number of years. I… quite a number, I believe."

"Oh." He hesitated. "Could ya tell me anything about the last one? Like, what they did, or… ?"

"The last one?" Asgore rubbed his beard. "No. No, I'm afraid I couldn't, not on the spot, at least. Golly." He gave a deep chuckle. "Isn't that funny? It really must have been a while, then. I believe they did something with the CORE, but that is not so much my area of expertise. However, if you are curious, I'm certain there must be some form of documentation in the Royal Archives somewhere – "

"Don't sweat it, Your Majesty," he said abruptly.

"It would be no trouble, really – and with you having expressed such interest in science – "

"No, really. I was just… idly curious. But it don't matter."

Asgore coughed. "Well, if you are certain. Just let me know if you change your mind, hmm? Now, Sans. Is there any other way I might help you tonight?"

"There is, actually," he said, impulsively. "Just one more question." He shuffled on the spot, gathering his courage. "Does… the name Doctor Gaster mean anythin' to you?" Internally, he winced – it felt so strange to say the name out loud, so many years later.

"Doctor… " The King gave a deep and thoughtful hum. "No. No, it does not. I am certain it would ring a bell had I heard it before, though. Do they work at the New Home hospital or the CORE? Why do you ask?"

"No reason," Sans said quickly. "It's nothin'. Forget about it."

There was a pause. "Something troubles you."

Sans gave a grin, and a shrug, tugging his jacket on over his page's uniform. "Who, me? Aww, you
know me, Your Majesty. I don't wear worry."

Asgore's brows came together to form a frown before he sighed. "If you insist. Perhaps I am just a foolish old man who worries too much. Well. Goodnight, then. And get home safely."

"Yeah… 'night, Your Majesty."

The thought stayed.

oOo

It started out like a mild toothache.

Papyrus woke him up from his sleep by shaking him hard on poking him in the ribs. "Sans! SAAANS! Sans, wake up!"

This was not, for the record, out of the ordinary in any way. Not even on a Saturday. Sans groaned and rolled over, tugging the sheets over his head. "Ugh. Ten more minutes, Paps… "

Papyrus climbed up onto the bed, beginning to jump up and down on it.

Sans mimed a snore and he heard Papyrus groan loudly. The mattress creaked as he jumped off the bed and began to tug at his arm.

"Ugh… " Papyrus tugged harder, and Sans sighed, rolling over to face him. "Okay, okay. Calm down. I'm up, I'm up." He cracked open his dead eye. "Happy?"

"You can't even SEE me!"

But just because he couldn't see Papyrus didn't mean he couldn't tell he was rolling his eye sockets in exasperation. "Heh. You're too smart for me, bro." Sans shut his right eye again.

"Wake up, you lazybones! Or I'm going to be late for school!"

Sans froze, opening both eyes this time. Papyrus' figure came into focus. His brother's eyes were bright but annoyed. He was wearing his school uniform. As innocuous as that statement was… something was off. And a cold dread filled Sans. "… what?"

"School! I'm going to be late for school!" Papyrus thumped his chest dramatically. "AND! I am meeting UNDYNE before school at the Waterfall border and don't want to be late meeting her!"

"I thought it was Saturday," he said, his voice going quiet.

It was happening again.

It was all happening again.

"No, sillybones! It is TUESDAY today! I know because we went to the library yesterday, and Monday is library day!"

"Right." Sans paused. He just had to check. Just in case. "Hey, uh, bro? … d'you know the date?" Not that he kept that close track, but it was somewhere around the first week of June.

"Yes! It is the seventh of May! I've been keeping very close track on my calendar!"

A hollow pit opened in Sans' chest, the world narrowing to a point as he felt himself tumbling
down into it.

"Brother – " When tugging at Sans' arm seemed to do no good, his brother took Sans' sleeve between his teeth.

And tugged.

Like a little puppy monster.

"I'm… getting up, bro," he heard himself say, drifting back down to earth.

Papyrus let go, tilting his head in concern. "Brother? Are you all right?"

"Fine, bro," he bit out, plastering on his grin to be a little more genuine. "Just sleepy. Just… gimme a minute, okay?"

Papyrus pressed his mouth together into a tight line, eye sockets narrowing. "Fine," he said. "But one minute, brother! NO MORE! And remember to brush your teeth! It's important to get rid of germs!" With that Papyrus turned on his heel and dashed out of the room.

As soon as Papyrus was gone, Sans dropped onto the bed. He found himself staring down, hollowly, at his hands.

He'd really believed that the time jumps back were over. It had been weeks, after all. Freaking weeks of the same old routine; nothing out of the ordinary had happened at all. But sitting on the edge of the bed now, the sounds of Papyrus singing (a song from one of his favourite cartoons) downstairs, the entire idea seemed so laughable.

Just the notion that he might really have been free.

It was a joke.

If not for this, it really might have been some kind of glitch, a scratch on a record. Spacetime was so fragile in the Underground, after all, and Sans remembered Gaster telling him once that some of his readings had indicated a surge in Void energy. That could lead to all kinds of instabilities. But if time had dialled all the way back… there was no way this was a glitch. This had to be intentional after all, the work of an anomaly.

The question that remained was what made that – this – Tuesday so special. Why the anomaly had chosen – today, he supposed – to return to, every single time they Reset? Unless their control over the timeline wasn't that straightforward?

"HURRY UP, SANS! IT HAS BEEN, LIKE, TWO MINUTES!"

Sans blinked, forced himself to get to his feet. "Oh. Right. … sorry, babybones. I'm coming," he called, and even from downstairs he heard Papyrus groan loudly.

It was Tuesday again for him. But for Papyrus, it was Tuesday for the first time. He had to put something in for his brother.

So Sans got changed into his page's uniform as quickly as he could, brushed his teeth, and teleported downstairs just to save a bit of time and effort, and Papyrus seemed pleased enough. He went through the motions, helping his brother make last-minute preparations for the school day.

And everything was the same. Everything was exactly the same.
Granola bars. Papyrus didn't complain.

Walk to the Waterfall border. Papyrus chattered away, and Sans let the words wash over him.

Undyne came barrelling forward with a battle cry of, "SNOW-WRESTLING!"

It was the same damn thing.

Undyne and his brother chattered about hunting humans before heading off to school.

And tonight, Sans would nuke a pizza in the microwave. He'd help his brother with the same math homework and read him the same Fluffy Bunny book before bed.

And as far as he knew, when he woke up tomorrow morning, it would be today again.

Sans stayed in his spot against the pine tree, staring after them long after they'd gone. He knew he should probably get to work soon, but he couldn't quite bring himself to leave his resting place just yet. He was tired.

Then, from the corner of his eye, he saw a flash of yellow and green. Sans blinked, startled, and turned towards the distraction.

There, popping out from the snow, was a small yellow flower. A flower that hadn't been any of the other times. At least, not that Sans had noticed. Granted, the flower was rather small and easy to miss. But on the other hand… maybe it really was the first time the flower was here. If spacetime was being manipulated and toyed with by an anomaly, the timeline was likely to come with variations. It could well be their influence, in this timeline, this today, that had brought about these little changes. Small ripples. Small tears sewn together in new and innovative ways.

It took Sans a moment to notice the face on the flower's disk – a monster, then. The flower's "head" tilted to one side, and he was fixing Sans with the oddest look, as if he were studying an equation he couldn't quite figure out.

Sans frowned, pushing off the tree. "Heya. Noticed you were starin' at me back there. Can I help you?"

The flower blinked, then straightened his stem, looking startled. "Oh! Oh, yeah. I mean, no thanks, heehee! Sorry about that! I just, um, what's the… I spaced out, that's it! Heehee, sorry again – didn't mean to creep you out or anything!"

Sans shrugged, offering the flower a grin. "No worries. We all space out sometimes." He cocked his head to the side in thought. "You new in town? Ain't seen ya around before. I didn't know flower monsters could grow in Snowdin. Heck, I didn't even know there were flower monsters anymore."

Blink. "Oh. Well, I'm from New Home, really, heehee. But my roots go deep." The flower gave a little shiver, seeming almost elated. "Way, waaaaay deep. I can pop up anywhere I like! It's really neat!" He extended a leaf. "Anyway, I'm Flowey!" He paused. "Oh. Guess you couldn't really shake my hand too easy – old habits. Um… but it's the thought that counts, right?"

Okay, so this "Flowey" was a little eccentric. Sans didn't know what he could mean by old habits. The longer he stared at him, the more unsettled Sans started to feel. He felt as if he were looking at something he couldn't quite place, something that didn't quite belong. His head hurt just slightly, and a cold sensation prickled at his bones.
But Sans shrugged it off. If the anomaly had initiated a Reset after so many weeks, he was bound to be jumpy. And the Void was bound to be a little more active, too, what with being having torn open once again. "Sure. I'm Sans. But ya know, I better get to work. See ya 'round, bud."

Flowey didn't respond for a minute, then threw back his head with a dramatic groan that reminded Sans of his brother. "Puns. My mom used to make those aaaaallll the time. It annoyed me so much!"

Sans politely noted the past tense, and didn't comment on it. "If you're sayin' ya don't find my puns humerus, it's okay. My little bro hates 'em too."

"Good! He has standards!"

Sans chuckled. "No, but I really am late. So still see ya."

Flowey studied him for a moment longer, then gave him a little shudder. "Oh, you bet!"
The following week lasted five and a half days – another midday Reset. Then the world reset back to Tuesday again.

The time after that, the world reset back to Tuesday overnight, as it usually did.

Just the same damn thing, every time.

Mostly, anyway. There were still small changes. Papyrus complained about the granola bars for the very first time since a Reset and Sans froze in front of the cupboard, his hand hovering in front of the box. For a moment, Sans worried his brother was beginning to retain memories, but when he turned around, the look on Papyrus' face was certainly annoyed, but not unsettled.

"We haven't had granola bars in a few days now, bro," said Sans, frowning down at Papyrus. "We had – " he struggled to remember – "crab apples. We had crab apples for breakfast yesterday."

Papyrus blinked, then huffed. "SO? I still HATE granola bars. You should make fancy oatmeal like the cooks at the castle."

Sans gave a shrug, running a hand down his face. No, his brother certainly remembered nothing. It had to be déjà vu of some kind – that sort of thing was probably to be expected. "Well, too bad. I thought you said you were gonna be late to school. Granola bars are way quicker'n that fancy oatmeal. Geez, make up your mind, bro." He brought down the box and flashed Papyrus a teasing grin, but it was a little forced.

Papyrus sulked as he took his granola bar and peeled back the wrapper. "When I grow up," he grumbled, "I will become a MASTER CHEF, and I'll make really fancy breakfasts EVERY DAY. Like pancakes! And scrambled eggs… without grease!" He paused, then explained. "Grease kills your fighting spirit. It SLAYS it. That's what Undyne says. She says grease kills your fighting spirit with the exception of cheese fries, but you have to eat those in the warrior way, and she trains with the King so she knows everything."

Normally, his brother's chatter amused Sans, but today he was just tired. He sighed, leaning against the counter and staring moodily at his own granola bar. "Just eat your breakfast so we can go."

Papyrus groaned dramatically, but finally he complied.

And Tuesday continued on as usual, snow-wrestling and all. Though Flowey did not appear this
time, affirming Sans' theory that the anomaly liked to change its playtime up a bit.

But his impatience was growing, and rapidly. When Sans sat down to help Papyrus with his math homework, which he'd practically memorised the answers to by now, he gave his brother a much shorter explanation than usual about the concept of "bringing down" in long division, leaving Papyrus more confused than ever.

Sans snapped.

He tossed the pencil down. "God, you don't understand anything."

Papyrus stared up at him, his eye sockets wide and brimming with hurt. Quickly he fumbled with his own pencil and hunched over his homework, drawing it a little closer.

There was a brief moment of lingering frustration, a delay in response, then –

_Shit._

"Hey. Heya." Sans scooted his chair a little closer, putting an arm around Papyrus' shoulders. "Hey, babybones. I'm sorry. That was real stinky of me, I didn't mean it."

Papyrus peeked up at him.

"Hey." Sans stroked Papyrus's back a bit. "It's okay. Sometimes this stuff can be confusing, that doesn't mean anythin' about how smart you are, huh?"

Papyrus looked a little hesitant. "I don't even LIKE this. It's boring."

"Heh. You can say that again. But hey, how about we think of it like… not a math problem, but a puzzle, huh? It's a puzzle you gotta solve."

His brother sat up straighter, eye sockets brightening a bit. "And the Great Papyrus will solve it," he said, matter-of-factly, and pushed his homework out so Sans could see it.

But even as they resumed work on the homework, Sans' patience remained thin, and Papyrus was quiet. He didn't even demand two bedtime stories later that night.

Later, Sans flopped into his own bed, still dressed, staring up at the ceiling. God, what he been thinking? _You don't understand anything._ What was wrong with him? He knew Papyrus had been struggling in school lately, especially in math. And while he hadn't sat him down and had a proper talk with him, he knew his baby brother was a lot more sensitive about that than he let on.

What kind of brother was he?

Sans ran a hand down his face, trying to work up the will to switch his light out even as he felt himself slipping off to sleep. Welp. The anomaly would undo this day, eventually, and Papyrus would have no memory of it. It didn't even have to matter…

_oOo_

Wednesday came. Then Thursday.

The week carried on, linear, day to day to day.

The whole time, Sans waited tense, anticipating the next Reset. Anticipating the next jump back to Tuesday, to Papyrus jumping on his bed by way of morning greeting, to the _same damn day_ he was
starting to know off by heart. He'd let his guard down once, and he wasn't about to make the same mistake again.

But that Reset never came.

Not even as the days turned into weeks, and before he knew it, four months had passed. Four wonderful months, that were sure to be undone any day now. Sans knew better than to let himself live by false hope.

An old rule of thumb came to the surface of his mind: *don't expect much.*

It really was Rule One, wasn't it? And now that he thought about it, he'd been living by that rule well before he started raising Papyrus on his own. Heh. Funny.

And then something changed.

Time jumped back in another midday Reset (those were always the most unsettling; this one occurred while he was hanging out in the Judgement Hall, chatting with a fellow page), but Sans neither jumped back to the Tuesday nor woke up in his bed.

There was a sharp jolt (*a lurch in the space around him*) and then Sans found himself standing in the middle of the kitchen back home.

The sensation was a little like taking a shortcut, but far more unsettling.

He teetered on the spot a moment, dazed, as he tried to come to terms with his surroundings. For a moment, he almost thought he'd shortcut by accident. But then he realised that he could hear Papyrus playing with his cars in the living room, devotedly making every *vroom* and *crash* noise. There were leftovers heating up in the microwave.

He cut his eyes to the clock on the wall. *6:10pm.*

But it had just been 2:15 in the afternoon.

He brought his hands to the sides of his skull. It was another Reset. It had to be.

The anomaly must have created a new Save point.

It was learning. It was discovering. It was progressing.

It was exploring its limits, and who could say what else it might try out.

\[\text{oOo}\]

The next day, after work, Sans stopped in at the local shop and bought a calendar, one with pictures of cars on it, and hung it up on the living room wall.

\[\text{oOo}\]

Sans was on shift in the Judgement Hall, leaned back against a pillar, eyes shut and grin faded. It was quiet about the castle today, with little work to do be done, giving him the chance to loiter about and think for a while. Night before last, Sans figured out that time had been Reset about three days back – irritating for certain, but well ahead of that one repeating Tuesday.

There had been no Resets since the anomaly had created its new Save point.
He supposed that, at the very least, he wouldn't have to experience that one Tuesday again.

The anomaly had moved past that.

At this current point in time, Sans was about a month shy of his seventeenth birthday, though it occurred to him that for him, mentally, it must have already passed – there'd been that big three-week Reset a while back.

Eh. Not that it really mattered all that much. How much difference did a few weeks or a few months make? Besides, he wasn't really up to lingering on it all that much. Thinking about this time stuff was complicated; it was giving him a headache.

Sans allowed his mind to wander. He thought about his brother, of which bedtime story they might read tonight, of what he might do with him over the coming weekend. Maybe he'd take Papyrus to the big library in New Home to pick out some books; it had a vastly better selection than the Snowdin Library and Sans wouldn't have minded getting his hands on a couple new sci-fi reads himself.

It was the King's voice that broke him from his thoughts, and Sans' eyes snapped open as he returned to full wakefulness. "Shit, sorry, Your Majesty – uh, sorry times two now – " Then he saw Asgore's expression, those brows come together in deep concern, brown eyes full of pain. Sans' own expression grew a little wary. "Uh… Your Majesty?"

The King was stooping down a little closer to his level. He seemed to be struggling to find his words. "Ah… there's been a bit of an – incident – at the Waterfall school. I'm cutting your shift a little early today, Sans."

The world narrowed to a point.

Never, in all of Sans' life, had a few small words been able to fill him with such an instantaneous cold dread. He hadn't known a few small words could have so much weight, and come with such implications of darkness. He was aware of his breathing hitching as his eyes widened, and he struggled to form the words. "You…"

Asgore's own eyes widened a bit. "Oh! Your brother is fine, you don't need to worry about him – " Sans felt himself relax, shoulders going slack with raw relief – "Forgive me. I did not mean to alarm you so. But… " He paused. "They are letting the children out early, and word is being sent out to their families to pick them up. The current circumstances are… Waterfall is preparing to enter lockdown mode."

Sans froze, tension re-entering his bones. *Papyrus is okay*, he reminded himself. *Everything's fine so long as Papyrus is okay.* "What… happened?"

"Asgore paused again. "After lunchtime recess, ah, a trio of eighth-grade students failed to come back into class. When some teachers went to search for them, monster dust was discovered on the grounds, in a back alley behind the school. The Guard have been called to the scene, naturally, and are investigating, but – well, you understand."

Sans just stared. Asgore's words seemed to come through a wall of water, muffled out. He felt dizzy.

"Sans?" King Asgore moved to lay a hand on his shoulder, and Sans jerked back; he hated it when he did that. The King moved back respectfully.

"I'm fine," he managed. "Dandy. Just… yeah, kinda…"
"I understand this information can come as quite a bit of a shock. Especially considering how close…" The King's voice was sounding more and more broken by the minute. His tone was notably forced.

"… how close it was to my bro, yeah." Sans ducked his head. "Your Majesty, I'd better get goin’ now. Pick up Papyrus."

The King took immediately took a step back. "Naturally. Forgive me for alarming you. Afraid I have to go and contact the Guard now… see if there have been any – updates – notify the rest of staff… I think I ought to cut everyone's shifts off early today, really, yes, that seems…" He took to muttering to himself, losing coherence, as he quickly strode from the room.

Sans waited until he was gone before shortcutting to the Waterfall school.

oOo

Over the next couple of days, people stayed indoors, especially families with children. The day following the discovery of the children's dust, it was announced school was cancelled for Hotland and New Home, as well.

In the human murder mysteries Sans had found at the dump, the "police," which appeared to be the humans' version of the Guard, could examine the bodies of dead humans to figure out how they'd died. That was right, he remembered thinking as he read, humans leave their dead bodies behind; they don't turn to dust.

Monsters didn't have that advantage. When monster dust was found in the street (a rare occurrence regardless) it was difficult to identify the deceased, and harder still to determine the cause of death. The Guard could investigate the scene for any hints, but any conclusions they might make were really just conjecture.

As a result, rumours were rampant.

Some people theorized the children had been roughhousing – there were some long and trailing scuff marks in the mud around the place their dust had been found – but that a troop of eighth-graders could play so rough as to result in death seemed astronomically unlikely.

There were murmured fears that some Temmies had wandered onto the school property. The Temmies denied any association with the deaths upon questioning from the Guard, and while their word wasn't exactly trustworthy, the little evidence that could be gathered was in their favour. Besides, vicious as the Tems were, it wasn't in their character to kill on a whim.

The most popular theory involved a human, which got several people excited – a human hadn't fallen into the Underground in over thirty years, and while the human was certainly something to be feared, it meant that monsterkind was just that much closer to breaking the Barrier. For this human's soul would make six.

This particular rumour caught like a spark in the wind and spread, rapidly. Soon, everyone had their own version of the story. Monsters phoned the Guard to report supposed human sightings to the point that the Captain threatened to cut the phone lines for the entire Underground. If one were to go by every description of the human that had been provided, then the human had the ability to shapeshift into about forty different forms. Either way, soon the supposed human was all anyone could talk about, once they worked up the courage to venture out of their own homes again.

But where other monsters said human, Sans heard anomaly.
He didn't know for certain what the anomaly truly was, though he was well aware it could be a human. He couldn't think of anything else it might be.

On the fifth day after the incident, Sans prompted Papyrus to a conversation. His brother had been a little more quiet than usual of late, which was hardly a surprise. Sans had tried to avoid mentioning what had happened, had tried to take his brother's mind off things, but it soon became clear that that wasn't working.

Papyrus would recover eventually, but for now he was still rather shaken up. It would probably do him good to talk about it – poor kid was probably terrified. If Sans had been his age when three kids suddenly died at recess on the school grounds, he'd have been terrified too.

And besides, he'd been suspecting Papyrus was bottling up his own troubles of late. Sans worried it was a habit his brother had picked up off of him. It wasn't good for him, and it was a habit that was far too easy to build.

And so, a little reluctantly, as he was putting his brother to bed, Sans addressed the issue that had been plaguing the whole Underground all week. "Hey, Paps. You copin' okay – with what happened to those other kids and stuff?"

Papyrus shifted. "I'm fine! It's just very scary and very, very sad."

Sans stroked his brother's forehead gently. "You didn't know those kids at all, didja?"

Papyrus shook his head. "No. They were big kids."

Sans continued stroking his skull. "Heya," he said, managing a small smile. "You know everything's gonna turn out okay in the end, right? I'll keep ya safe. If there is a human down here, the Guards will find it and they'll… capture it, make sure it don't hurt any more monsters before sending it home. Just don't you go gallivanting across the Underground huntin' for humans with Undyne, huh? 'Cause I know what you two are li – "

    oOo

– A jolt in spacetime.

Sans jerked awake, rocking on the spot. He was sitting on the living room floor with Papyrus, an enormous jigsaw puzzle splayed out in front of them. Papyrus was crawling around the carpet, hunting for a certain piece.

Sans' head was spinning.

Another Reset.

And, apparently, the anomaly had created a new Save point – he wished he had some way of detecting when a Save point was created.

He brought his hands to the side of his skull.

Papyrus' high, young voice brought him back down to earth. "Sans?" Sans blinked to find his brother had materialised at his side, crouched with his head cocked curiously to the left. There was however no missing the way his brows had come together in concern. "Are you okay?"

Sans tugged him into a one-armed hug. "Yeahh, I'm fine. Don't worry 'bout me. Just spaced out for a sec."
Papyrus huffed loudly. "Maybe because you're not paying ATTENTION. Look, I found a piece that fits over here!"

"Heh. Good job, bro." Sans let his hands fall to his lap, let his gaze stray off to the side. It fell on the calendar he'd pinned to the wall. Papyrus had been so pleased when Sans had bought the calendar, he'd been so excited that Sans was finally getting organised, and even more excited when Sans let him decorate it with stickers. Sans surreptitiously scuttled closer to get a better view of it.

He'd decided to cross off every day before he went to bed. And quickly scanning the calendar told him that he'd landed…

Six days ago.

One day before the deaths of the children.

He could have guessed it was before, of course, by Papyrus' cheerful demeanour, but all the same Sans felt himself relax.

The deaths had been undone. Repaired. Maybe the anomaly had seen what had happened and decided to set things right, maybe it planned to do something this time to stop the children from being killed. Maybe it planned to be there tomorrow to save them.

… or maybe the anomaly had killed the children, itself.

Sans let his gaze fall back down to his lap.

"After we finish the puzzle, we must pack my play kit!" Papyrus was saying. He was still crawling around on the carpet on the hunt for the correct puzzle piece.

"Play kit?" Sans repeated.

"Yes, my PLAY KIT! For my playdate at Undyne's tomorrow! I need to take all the best games and my puzzles and my foam sword and…"

Right. Papyrus had been scheduled for a playdate at Undyne's after school the day of the incident, but it had of course been cancelled given the circumstances. Sans had forgotten. He ran a hand down his face. "Sure thing, bro. I might grab an extra shift after work, then. Want me to pick ya up this time, by the way?"

Papyrus squeezed one eye shut to closer examine a puzzle piece. "No, brother! I'm nearly double digits and I can walk home by mySELF!"

Sans paused. "Maybe I'd like to walk ya home anyway, Paps. C'mon, you're staying for dinner so it'll be late –"

Papyrus huffed. "Just help me build my puzzle! Come ON, Sans, you're not HELPING!" He tugged on Sans' sleeve, and at last Sans gave a dry chuckle and rubbed the top of Papyrus' skull before turning his attention to the jigsaw. Maybe he could remember a thing or two from the last timeline…

oOo

The following day passed without incident. No monster dust was found on the playground of the Waterfall school, or anywhere else for that matter. Sans' shift ended at the usual time, and then, because Papyrus was going to play at Undyne's, Sans kept to his word and signed on for another
shift. It never hurt to bring home a little extra gold, and while Papyrus' birthday wasn't for another four months, Sans wanted to buy him something special.

The extra shift ended at six. There was very little to do, so King Asgore just left Sans on duty in the Judgement Hall. It was a poor choice. Having nothing to do left Sans to his thoughts. And he really didn't want to be left with his thoughts.

*The anomaly.*

The anomaly had created three Save points thus far – and he could only assume they were going to make more. As far as he knew, anomalies couldn't venture earlier in time than their latest Save points. They could only jump back to them. Anomalies were powerful, but they weren't entirely omnipotent.

*The anomaly had something to do with those kids' deaths. It must have.*

*And then it had undone everything.*

Sans couldn't imagine why. Maybe it really had Reset with the intention of rescuing them this time round.

His shift ended.

Sans shuffled to the throne room to sign off with the other pages and castle staff. He heard the King ask him something, to which he responded with a noncommittal grunt. He shuffled through the castle, following his co-workers out into the New Home streets. He didn't know most of them, and they were a few years older than the pages he shared his shifts with.

*The anomaly might have killed those children, or it might have tried to rescue them. Maybe that difference didn't matter.*

*What mattered was that both were in its absolute control.*

"Hey, man," one of the older pages said to their friend, elbowing him in the ribs. "You're free tonight. Wanna grab drinks? I could do with a drink."

"Sure," said the other monster. "Yeah, I'm game. Where to?"

"The usual. Where else?"

"Yeah? There's that new place downtown..."

"Maybe another time."

Sans glanced up at them. Then he glanced at his watch. It was only ten past six. Papyrus would probably be having dinner now. He had time to spare. And money wasn't so short he couldn't treat himself once in a while. Anyway, Sans never treated himself, and he was tired.

Must be the extra shift.

*The anomaly could do whatever it wanted, really. It could help whoever it wanted. It could hurt whoever it wanted.*

People drank away their troubles, didn't they? Sans had never had alcohol before, had never even thought about it. But it was starting to sound awfully appealing.
The anomaly could do whatever it wanted, and then it could undo it all, so that none of it had ever happened.

But it didn't have to. It didn't have to Reset. It could create a new Save point, so that everything that had happened before it was set in stone. Fixed time.

People hurt. People killed. With no way of going back to help them.

A drink. Yes. He'd like a drink.

Sans followed the pages through the New Home streets. He wasn't entirely sure where they were going, but it couldn't be that far.

That a bartender might not be willing to sell alcohol to a seventeen-year-old kid who stood at an oh-so-imposing four foot four didn't even occur to him until he'd followed the workers into the pub and climbed, with some effort, onto a barstool.

The pub was a small, homely sort of place, made all of warm, soft woods. A fire crackled in one corner. The place was dotted with old-fashioned armchairs and low, round tables.

Sans took no notice of any of it as he reached into his pocket and pulled out a large handful of gold coins, jiggled them around in his palm. When he looked up, he saw that the bartender, a tall, slim reptilian monster, was staring at him, her expression unreadable.

"Don't suppose you're here for the peanuts," she said, after another moment of staring. "Come on, kid, how old are you?"

"Eighteen," he lied.

She just stared at him, placing hands on her hips.

Sans shrugged, dropping a few coins onto the counter. "Well, I'm enough to work as a royal page, right?" He pointed to his uniform. "Ain't my fault if I'm a little on the small side."

The bartender continued to stare. "What can I getcha?" she asked, at last.

Sans lifted a shoulder. "I dunno. Whatever, I guess. Something... reasonably strong?"

She fetched a glass in her long, scaly fingers. "How about beer?"

He stared at her blankly. "Is that really strong?"

The bartender raised a brow. "... not an experienced drinker, huh? Sure. Strong enough."

"Then, sure I guess."

The bartender turned to a tap-like device on the bar, filled the glass nearly to the top, and handed it to him. "That'll be 45G."

Sans whistled under his breath, but counted out the coins and passed them over. "Thanks." He pulled the glass closer to him. He studied it for a moment. And then he tipped his head back and took a gulp.

His face contorted instinctually. The drink didn't taste bad, exactly, but it certainly tasted strange – a little bitter, and quite bubbly, with a sharpness that frothed just beneath it all. It tasted almost like a weird sort of ginger ale. Sans took a smaller sip, and this time round, it wasn't all bad. The beer
gave off a nice feeling that warmed him up inside.

*The anomaly could hurt whatever, whoever it wanted, and even if it Reset, Sans would remember. Traces left behind. An echo of choices made, of consequences.*

*Or it could just create another Save point and move on. If it wanted.*

Sans let his shoulders relax, finishing off his drink in a few gulps even as his face twisted at its strong flavour. Maybe chugging wasn't the best idea. He chugged the beer down regardless, and before he knew it, he was staring at the bottom of his empty glass.

He set the glass down on the counter, moving to climb off the barstool. He should probably be picking up Papyrus soon.

*Papyrus.*

*The anomaly could hurt Papyrus.*

Sans swung his legs back around and waved to get the bartender's attention. She wore a nametag, he realised, but she was standing a little to his right and he couldn't read it from this angle.

"Hey," he said, once she came over to him. "That was actually pretty good. Could I have another one?"

The bartender hesitated until he dropped another 45G on the counter. Then she sighed, and snatched the coins up. "Just one more, you hear me?" she said, her voice carrying a note of warning as she held up one finger to complete the effect.

Sans shrugged. "Fine with me." He drummed his fingers on the counter as he waited for the bartender to prepare his drink. It gave him time to realise that his mind felt a little hazy.

Just slightly.

He should really be picking up Papyrus. Maybe this second beer wasn't such a great idea after all.

Then the drink was deposited in front of him.

*The anomaly could hurt Papyrus. It could hurt him, and then it could Reset and undo it… Or it could move casually on.*

His gaze flitted to the door he should probably be walking out of right now. Then it returned to the beer. It bubbled away, and just looking at it caused his mind to fog over a little more.

*Forget,* it seemed to promise him, in a voice soft and airy like the foam that had gathered at its surface.

*Forget.* Sans closed his fingers around the glass.

*Forget.* He brought the glass to his mouth, and took a long swig. It made him feel warm inside. It felt like home.

*Forget.*

It was finished before he knew it, and he set the glass down hard on the counter. He lifted his eyes to the bartender.
"Take a look at yourself, kid," she fired at him, before he even had the chance to speak. "No more. Forget it. Go home. Oh, and if your parents ground you for a month, don't go telling them it was me who gave it to you."

Sans blinked at her.

Home. Right. He needed to get home. He was too tired to beg for more. He lifted a hand in a gesture of both thanks and farewell, then climbed down from the stool. The ground seemed to lurch. Sans swayed on the spot, blinking hard as he struggled to come to his senses, only to find them just out of reach.

He took hold of the stool to steady himself.

After a moment he let go. The world seemed a little more steady now. He began to shuffle from the bar.

Sans was vaguely aware that all eyes were on him as he made his way out the door. *Stupid kid*, most of them were probably thinking.

Outside, it had started to go dark: the Underground's caverns were lit with a kind of fire magic specially enchanted to brighten and dim in a way that mimicked the rise and fall of the sun. Their flame would never go out as long as the Barrier remained.

There was a costume shop next door and Sans leaned against it, reaching out to his magic to shortcut home. But his reach was just a little sluggish, and his magic felt far away and faint. A weak spark came to life, then faded tiredly out.

Okay. Fine. Whatever. He could walk.

On foot, Snowdin was, what, an hour from here? A bit more? Though Snowdin hadn't been his favourite childhood haunt, he'd made the walk enough times in the past.

Sans pushed off from the wall and took off. He rode the elevator to the Western edge of Hotland to save time.

The shadow of the Hotland lab fell over him, a looming reminder. Sans hunched his shoulders, as if that could put a barricade between himself and the memories. Gaster had hardly used his public lab, but the memories came to life anyway.

But the pain lacked the usual bite, more numb than actual hurt.

It had to be the booze. The beer had taken the edges off of Sans's pain.

Gaster.

The Resets.

All of it felt so far away.

If just a couple of drinks had this much power, Sans needed to get out there more often.

Sans carried on through Waterfall, his every step leaden and weighed down by the area's thick, dark, all-absorbing mud. Then, Snowdin, the area's crisp, firm snow crunching gently beneath his feet.

It took him two tries to get a grip on the key in his pocket, and another three to fit it into the lock.
Finally, he turned the key, and stepped inside.

"… Sans?"

Sans looked up, and the world crashed around him.

*Papyrus.*

He'd forgotten Papyrus.

How could he have forgotten Papyrus?

His baby brother was standing halfway down the stairs, already clad in his pyjamas. His stuffed bunny dangled from one hand, and the thumb of the other was still stuck in his mouth where he appeared to have been gnawing on it, even though he'd finally broken that habit when he was four.

Judging by his attire, he must have been waiting for Sans to put him to bed.

Or maybe he'd given up and had been getting ready to put his own self to bed.

"… SANS?" repeated Papyrus, his voice coming out in a high, distressed whine.

But all Sans could do was stare. Papyrus must have walked himself home when Sans didn't pick him up as he'd been wanting to do last night. Probably feeling very grown up about it too. And he must have been so confused, so distressed, when his big brother wasn't even there waiting for him.

The door swung shut behind Sans with a slam. Sans lifted his eyes to properly meet his brother's. "Paps," he finally managed. "Paps, I…"

Papyrus's bunny dropped to the floor. And then he was hurtling himself down the stairs and throwing his arms around Sans, barrelling into him so hard he knocked him to his knees.

Sans didn't mind. His arms went around Papyrus instinctually. He rocked back and forth there, cradling his brother, stroking his back, his skull, burying his nasal bone in his sweater, his body wracking with silent sobs.

"I'm sorry," he murmured, over and over again. "I'm sorry. I'm sorry. I'm sorry."

He kept saying it for a long time.

\[oOo\]

The anomaly created a new Save point the following day. The events of the previous night were set in stone, fixed time.

Papyrus would remember everything.

\[oOo\]

Months passed. Staggering. Jerking back and forth, back and forth, back and forth through time.

\[oOo\]

(Over the course of the timelines, Sans would celebrate his brother's tenth birthday exactly five times. The fourth time, Papyrus guessed what his presents were – a puzzle book and a remote-control race car, to add to his collection – before he opened them).
In New Home, a report was filed for a group of monsters who'd gone missing; they had never come home from their shifts. They were co-workers, technicians at the CORE. King Asgore told his employees to get home safe.

Two days later, piles of monster dust were found in a New Home alleyway, just around the corner of a workers' exit. The same exit the missing monsters would have been given access to. Nametags had been found among the piles of dust.

And then it was all undone, lives restored, strings pulled back into place. It had never happened. It didn't even matter anymore.

And the world reset.

The world reset.

He was –

The world reset.

Again.

Again.

Again.

The world reset… he… he was… the world, he…

(He was spinning Papyrus around in circles in the living room, using blue magic as his brother's size now made it awkward for him to pick him up physically. Laughing, laughter, Papyrus was shrieking with laughter as Sans suddenly sent him high in the air, caught him, flipped him around, dangled him upside down. He finally dropped him onto the sofa and dove in for the kill, tickling him mercilessly. Papyrus finally wriggled free, jumping up and down on the sofa in delight. "Again, Sans, again! Again, again, again!")

The world reset.

(He considered ending it, once, fleetingly. It would have been easy. But then he changed his mind. Because Papyrus needed him, didn't he, if he died Papyrus would have to go live somewhere else and who knew what would happen to him. And even if he did die, who was to say it would last? He could die and then time could be reset and he'd wake right back up again. What a joke).

The world reset.

(He was the end of a yoyo, the anomaly's toy, bouncing on a string. He tumbled down, and then he was pulled back up again).

The world reset.

Boing, boing. The world reset.
(He wondered if it knew).

The world reset.

The world re….

The world…

Again.

Again.

Again.

Again.
A Massive Anomaly

Chapter Notes

Warnings for PTSD implications throughout the chapter, plus implied alcoholism, and lots of bs science.

A quick bit of context – in this timeline, Frisk is aware of the details of Flowey’s backstory (when he first woke up in the garden and how he came to experiment with the timeline etc). You only get to hear his monologue in Genocide, and NWABBW Frisk has only ever done one Pacifist run, but I'm diverging slightly from the canon for plot convenience here.

Sans took a nap when they got home from Grillby's. He slept through dinner, and it was only a couple hours later that he woke and Papyrus brought him his meal up to their bedroom.

Frisk could hear Sans and Papyrus fighting after that.

The sound of it frightened her: she'd never, ever seen the brothers do anything worse than bicker over stray socks.

She tried to ignore them, and focus on her spelling practise where she was sat at the kitchen table, but every so often her gaze slid upstairs to their bedroom door, and she'd catch snatches of their conversation.

"... quit nagging me, god…"
"... WORRIED about you!…"
"...nothing, Paps, you don't gotta worry…"
"...THOUGHT you were…"

The door opened and Sans stalked out, wearing his hoodie over a pair of pyjamas. "I said it's fine, Papyrus. I know what I'm doin'. Just go spar with Undyne or something." He slammed the door shut behind him, then teleported out of sight. Frisk just caught a glimpse of Papyrus before it shut, standing with his shoulders slumped and expression defeated.

Frisk hesitated. Though Sans, having been asleep, didn't know it, Undyne was out; she had been invited to tea at Asgore's. And more importantly, Papyrus was obviously distressed. She ought to go see if he was all right, comfort him.

She got up from her seat and began to make for the stairs when her soul gave another painful pang, and she winced.

She faltered, glancing over her shoulder.

Though Dunkle Sans could technically have gone anywhere, Frisk had an idea of where he might be. She needed to talk to him more, needed more answers, and hadn't he said he had work to do?
When they'd moved into the house, her family had put a good deal of work into upgrading the basement, which hadn't been much more than ugly concrete floor and the washing machine and dryer. (The latter of which still didn't work). Though it was still a work in progress, it currently doubled as a sort of makeshift lab for her Auntie Alphys, who spent a great deal of time down there to work at her personal projects.

But Alphys also shared the space with Sans, who used the basement to tend to whatever it was he did when he wasn't napping. Though he spent much of his time in the basement doing casual math with Alphys on the whiteboards that had been set up, he had his own little work desk in a corner, and he'd even brought the strange, broken machine from his old workshop back in the Underground. This was a large, tall, boxlike contraption made of metal that set next to his desk. Pet projects, he'd told Frisk when she'd asked, and hadn't said anything more on the matter.

If Sans had "work to do," chances were that he was down there.

Frisk headed down to the basement, and indeed she found her Dunkle Sans hunched over his desk, a steaming mug of coffee next to him. Instant.

He glanced up at her as the stairs creaked and gave her a small, faint grin. He looked tired. "Hey, kid. Whatcha doin' down here?"

Frisk's gaze fell on the machine in the corner. Normally, it was covered by a tarp, but today the tarp lay in a rumpled heap on the floor, though the machine didn't look any better than it had when Frisk first discovered it – it was still malformed and dented in places, the metal covered in scorch marks and seeming to have melted at some point. Frisk came to stand next to him. "What are you doing down here?"

Sans shoved his paperwork aside, giving Frisk just enough time to catch sight of it. It was all scrawled equations, and some of the older-looking papers were covered in nothing but strange symbols like a secret code. "Work. I'm a man of my word."

She fiddled with the hem of her sweater. "About Gaster?"

Sans almost flinched, then sighed, and waved her closer. "Here." He nodded at the weathered armchair sitting between the two desks. Frisk hesitated before perching on the arm of the chair to get a view of Sans's desk. "I can explain it to you, if you like." When Frisk perked up a bit, he shrugged noncommittally. "'s all just theory really. No point in explaining the math of it. And anyway… could do with a bit of your input."

"My input?"

He cut his eyes at her. "You're the time anomaly. You know all kinds of stuff about the timeline I don't."

Frisk, intrigued, leaned a little closer. "So… what are you working on?"

Sans tapped his paper with the end of his pencil. "Well, I was tryin' to get this old machine working, but it's messed up pretty bad. So I was just thinking. Looking over some older work."

Frisk stared at him, confused. Sans sighed, and knocked against the body of the machine at his side.

"This machine's been pretty busted up. I brought it up when we moved here, meant to try and fix it, but I never got around to it. I've been trying to see if it can do anythin' for me, but it's a lost cause. So I, uh, might hafta do something I'd really, really rather not do, but if it comes down to it… " He
sighed and looked off to the side. "Man, I really brought this one on myself, didn't I?"

Frisk's blank stare didn't change, and at last Sans ran a hand down his face. "Okay. Let's start at the beginning. I sure hope you like science, kid."

Sans grabbed a blank piece of paper and his pencil. "So. You can Save. Reset. Reload. We talked about all this earlier, yeah?" Frisk nodded solemnly, and Sans tapped the eraser of the pencil against the desk. "And like I said back at Grillby's, that power makes you what we call a time anomaly.

"You're powerful. Incredibly powerful. That power you have, Saving and Resetting… it gives you control over time itself. And that power, well, it comes from that Determination of yours.

"Determination comes naturally to humans. It's the reason your souls are so strong. We don't really know why you're all so Determined; that doesn't matter with what we're dealing with here. But the fact is that you humans got all this natural Determination. All of you." Sans's eyes flicked up to meet Frisk's briefly as if in anticipation of some reaction, but Frisk was intent on listening and just waited expectantly. After a moment, Sans averted his gaze.

"So you know that there were human kids who fell down here before you, the ones whose souls the King gathered. And those kids were pretty Determined too. But like I said, they weren't as Determined as you – which is saying a lot, considering how much DT Doctor Gaster and Al managed to get outta them. They were tough kids, but not so Determined they had control over the timeline. They didn't have your power to Save and Reset." Sans paused. "With me so far?"

Frisk nodded. "So the kids before me weren't anomalies. It's just me." She thought briefly of Flowey, then pushed the thought from her mind. Out of respect for Asriel, she would keep that part of her journey to herself.

"Ah… not exactly."

"Not exactly?"

Sans was staring at the blank piece of paper almost pointedly so. "I dunno how much you know of the story exactly, but… well, you know a little of what happened to the Prince and Princess, right?"

At Frisk's nod he continued. "Well, it's not for certain, but, ah… there's evidence that suggests that before she died, the Princess was an anomaly too. The first one ever to enter the Underground."

Frisk sat up, intrigued. "I knew she was Determined like me, but… she was an anomaly?"

"By all likelihood, yeah. She could Save and Reset just like you, and she probably did."

"Huh." Frisk let her gaze wander around the basement, thoughtful and intrigued. That made sense. It would help to explain why Flowey had mistaken her for his sister, Chara, for so long. She'd always assumed it was just because she and her looked alike, and because he'd missed her so badly, but if she'd had similar powers to Frisk's, it would only have gone to solidify Flowey's conviction.

"Anyway," Sans was saying, "so the human Princess Saved and Reloaded a bunch and then she died. But she wasn't the only anomaly the Underground had before you came around. There was one more." He lifted his eyes to Frisk again, expression unreadable. "Your little flower friend."

Frisk froze. "You know about him?"

"Hard to forget a guy who tries to squeeze ya to death with vines and absorbs your soul. Though I'll admit that memory's a little hazier than normal. I'd blame the soul-absorption. But nah, he'd been
around for ages before you came around. And he had his fun.

"Kid. That flower dragged me through more timelines than I can count, or would care to. And he had me live through a lotta timelines I'd... really, really, rather not remember." For just a moment, his eyelights flickered out. "I don't know as much about him as I tried to learn, though. And far as I'm concerned, I'm probably better off not knowing. He's gone anyway.

"But the point, is that that flower had Determination. Which I gotta admit is still pretty interesting. See, the research I did determined one thing, heh – that something from within the Underground can't be an anomaly. That was never for certain, mind, but all the evidence sure pointed me in that direction. By all likelihood that's where Gaster went wrong with me." His expression turned briefly contemplative – frustrated, too. "So why Flowey? Hell, why a thing without a soul? An injection of the will to live shouldn't give sentience to a flower..."

"Dunkle Sans?" Frisk tugged at his sleeve. "You're getting off track."

"Hmm? Oh. Right. Sorry, kid." Sans blinked. "Just questions I never got answered. But I guess it don't matter. That flower's lost control of the timeline. It's down in the Underground, and it can stay stuck there for all of time for all I care."

An image flashed through Frisk's mind: Asriel, in her dream two nights ago, his body crumpling and withering into a tiny yellow flower. He was probably lonely down there. She said nothing.

"Anyway," Sans was saying. "So the Underground's had two anomalies. And they, especially that flower, had a real grand time of it messing with the timeline. And then... you came along.

"And listen, you're a good kid and all, Frisk, but... just how many times didja Reset?" He ambled on before she could answer. "Well, strictly speaking, you never Reset – I'd know if you had. You Reloaded, back to your Saves."

Frisk cocked her head to one side, curious. "What's the difference?"

Sans seemed to take a moment to digest her words, surely trying to think of a way to best explain it. "So when you Saved, you did it in a specific place at a specific time. A specific coordinate, a point in spacetime. Now you, an anomaly, you can jump around in the timeline, and while you got a fair bit o' wiggle room, you ain't got total freedom. Once you create a Save point, you've made a fixed point in time."

"What's a – "

"It means you can't go and change what happened before it. Say you made a mistake. Then, after ya made that mistake, you went and Saved. Well, now, that mistake you made's permanent. You can't travel back to before the mistake to fix it. When you jump back in time, you can't go any further back than your most recent Save.

"But you made all these Save points, right? You were Saving all over the place. Geez, how many Save points did you create, anyway?"

"A lot," Frisk shrugged.

"Yeah. Well." Sans tapped the end of his pencil against the table again. "You made these Save points, and then you jumped back to 'em, when you needed to."

"When I died," Frisk protested. "I went back when I died."
"Exactly. When you needed to. Will to live and all. So that jump in time back to your Save point? ’s what's called a Reload. Going back in time and putting everyone back in the positions they were in at the exact point in time you made the Save. The Saving is just the fixing of that location in spacetime." He paused. "You understand this stuff?"

"So far."

"Right, good. Well, like I said, you Save, you create a fixed point in time. You can't go back. Unless you do one thing, one thing so powerful it can undo even fixed time." He hesitated. "A Reset."

"A Reset."

"Erasing your Save points. Undoing ’em. Undoing everything. Going all the way, way back to when you were first created."

"But if I – "

"Not when you were born," Sans interrupted. "Created as far as the Barrier – the Underground - is concerned. See, the Barrier did a funny thing for us monsters. In trapping us down there, it made a kinda… sub-universe. So every time you Reloaded, time on the Surface was unaffected. It kept going on as normal. All that messing with time remained in the Underground.

"When you came along, it was like a whole new lifeform came in outta nowhere. As far as the Underground is concerned, your creation." Sans cleared his throat. "That's what a Reset would do. Even now, up here on the Surface, you can't Save or Reload or any of that stuff anymore, right? But Resetting, undoing even all that fixed time, putting the Barrier back… that'd be… well. Quite something."

He wasn't looking at her, Frisk noted. She leaned over, and laid a hand over his. "You know I'd never do that, Dunkle Sans," she said quietly. "Right? Never ever."

Sans nodded, and flashed her a grin – too quick, too easy, formed too hastily for it to reach his eyes. "Anyway, want me to keep going? 'cause here's where things get real interestin'."

"What?"

"What I'm trying to figure out." He folded his hands behind his head, fingers laced together, and leaned back.

He was humming her, Frisk knew. "What?!!"

Sans sighed, then got up from his seat and joined her on the armchair. "… look, kiddo. All this messing-with-the-timeline business? Well, I ain't usin' messing lightly. When you… Reload, Save, and especially if you Reset… that power don't exactly… come without cost." He scratched the back of his head. "Hmm, lemme think of a way to explain…" His gaze went on to search the room until it fell once again on Frisk, and then he cocked his head to one side. "Here. Gimme your sweater."

Frisk frowned in puzzlement, but when he extended his hand, she shrugged and pulled it off so that she was just dressed in her T-shirt. Sans for his part took the sweater and held it up in front of him.

"Okay," he said. "So try and think o' the Underground as this sweater."

"The Underground… as my sweater?" Frisk raised her eyebrows.
"It's an analogy, just stick with me on this."

"What's an – " Frisk shook her head. "Okay, so pretend the Underground as my sweater. Dunkle Sans, I don't get it."

"Hey, stick with me. So pretend like the Underground is this sweater. Well, not so much the Underground. More like the stuff that makes the Underground up. Sorry for the confusion. Now, say you don't really like a part of your sweater too much. And you wanna repair it. So what you do is unravel some of the yarn – heya, don't worry, I'm not going to really – to a certain point." He pretended to tug at the thread of yarn and then stopped his hand in midair. "And just say, I dunno, there's some little knot in the needlework around here you can't really undo, so you can't unravel the sweater past that point." Sans tapped a random spot on the front of the sweater. "And then, using that very same yarn, you fix it. Re-knit it." There followed a hefty pause. "Undo, and rewrite time."

Frisk frowned, reaching out to stroke the wool with the ends of her fingers. "Okay. So that's what I was doing when I… " – her brain struggled to keep up – "Reloaded back to my Save files."

"Bingo!" Sans grinned at her, bopping her on the tip of the nose. "You're good at this. And now say you still don't like what you did. Maybe you wanna change the pattern a little. So you do it again." He repeated the previous motion. "And then, you fix it again.

"And pretend like you just keep doin' it, over, and over, and over. Again, and again, and again. And, well, that's gonna be pretty hard on your poor sweater. Eventually, it's not gonna be able to hold together no matter what you do. The sweater's gonna tear, and it's gonna fall apart." He returned it to Frisk, who frowned before tugging it back over her head. "It's gonna be… damaged."

"Damaged," Frisk repeated in a low murmur.

"Yeah. All that timeline business caused an awful lot of strain to spacetime in the Underground. To literally undo time and rewrite it… you can imagine, kid." Sans sighed and ran a hand down his face. "That kind o' power really should be used sparingly. 'cause see, here's the real issue: if you rewrite time, and change somethin' – even the tiniest thing – then it's like, what happened before never really happened in the first place.

"Now, there's some people who think that when you unravel the sweater and change something, the thread of yarn splits into two. That you make two universes. One where things went one way, and one where things went the other way, y'know? Hell, they think something like that happens every second anyone does anything. But Doctor Gaster pretty well disproved that. There's just one universe – only ever has been, only ever will be. And everything you do has got consequences, and they stay right within it.

"Let's use a big thing, just for the sake of argument. Say, I dunno, you saw your Monster Kid friend trip and fall off a cliff. And well, you didn't want that to happen to 'em, now, did you? You were awful upset. And lucky for you, you hadn't Saved yet. So you decided to go back to your old Save point – the last fixed point in spacetime ya made – and this time round, you made sure to be there and save them. And then the two of ya go on your merry way. Monster Kid never fell off the cliff anymore, so everything's fine and dandy, right?"

Frisk avoided his gaze. Did he know? There was no way of telling unless she asked, and she didn't really want to.

That had been one of the few times she'd jumped back to a Save point for reasons other than her own death.
She still remembered everything so clearly – standing on the precipice of that cliff in Waterfall, watching Monster Kid slip and land on a crumbling ledge, just low enough that they couldn't pull themselves up with their mouth. She remembered their cry for help – *Yo, w-w-wait! Help! I tripped!* She remembered the way Undyne had appeared in that very moment, before Frisk even had a chance to step forward and help.

And she remembered freezing on the spot in terror at the sight of the armoured Captain. And staying frozen on the spot even as Monster Kid continued to beg for her help.

It didn't matter that Undyne had saved them, in that timeline. Just as it didn't matter that she'd chosen that moment to go back to her old Save point – *Reload* – to make sure that she helped Monster Kid this time round. Frisk still felt beyond guilty for failing to help her friend and besides, Undyne had been hurt too.

It was Sans's voice that brought her back down to earth. "Kid? You okay? You following?"

"Yeah," Frisk spoke up, quickly pasting on a smile much like his a few minutes ago. "Sorry, um… what were you saying? After me going back to help them. Uh, hypo… hyper…"

"Hypothetically?" Sans shrugged. "Well, yeah. You'd think everything would be great then, right? You helped your friend so they didn't get hurt. Except they *did* get hurt. Because if they hadn't gotten hurt, then you woulda had no reason to go back and help them – and besides, you still remember it. There's like a… contradiction, now. And that's what's called a paradox."

"A paradox," Frisk repeated.

"Exactly. A contradiction. 'cause by all means, something like that shouldn't be able to happen. And paradoxes express themselves… through tears. Rips in the fabric of spacetime, if you understand." He glanced at her.

"I… I think so."

Sans cocked an eyebrow at her and grinned. "Y'know, you're pretty good at this. I'm impressed." Frisk grinned back, pleased, as he continued: "So if there's a tear in spacetime… you gotta ask yourself, well, what's on the other side of the tear?"

"Right."

"And the answer… is what's called the Void."

"The Void?" Frisk repeated.

He nodded curtly. "So everything in our universe – both this whole big one, and the little one in the Underground – has a fixed location in spacetime." He scratched the back of his head. "Like, you're Frisk, sitting on the armchair in the basement, at – " he glanced at the clock – "8:34pm. So say you stayed here, in the same spot, for an hour. Your location in *space* would be the same; but 'cause it was an hour later, your location in *time* woulda changed."

"Or say you napped," she teased.

Sans smirked. "Touché. But hey, you're right, it's definitely a more… likely example. Anyway, that make sense?"

"Uh-huh. You were a napping lazybones so your space, um, location didn't change, but your time location did because a whole hour went by. Lazybones."
"Papyrus is a bad influence on you," Sans grumbled teasingly, reaching over to ruffle her hair. "Anyway. Everything's got this point in spacetime that they occupy, right? You can show it through coordinates, and there's a lotta calculations and stuff that goes with that, but we don't need to get into that." Frisk was about to protest – she wanted to know – until she remembered seeing the calculations Sans had been doing, and thought better of it.

"But I don't get what this has to do with – "

"With the Void? I'm getting there. Basically… the Void is nothing. It's the nothing outside the universe, outside time. It feeds off paradoxes. And that nothing is where… well, where Doctor Gaster fell. That's what was at the heart o' the CORE. And that's why he was erased. The energy of the Void ate him up." Frisk did not fail to notice the vaguely satisfied expression on Sans's face, nor the pain that lingered behind it all.

Frisk peeked up at him, thinking way back to what Sans had told her at Grillby's that afternoon. She ventured, 'Dunkle Sans. The DT injections… they hurt, didn't they?"

Sans seemed to freeze for a second, and he made a motion as if to brush the question off. Then he deflated, like a punctured ball, and sighed. "Yeah," he said quietly. "They hurt a lot."

Frisk paused, then, impulsively, wrapped her arms around his waist and held him tight and close. She buried her nose in the fabric of his shirt.

Sans flinched.

Then, after a moment, he laughed weakly, drawing his arms around her, too. "Thanks, kid."

She didn't let go yet, but shifted to look up at him. "Dunkle Sans… if there's tears in, in spacetime that open into the Void – doesn't that mean he can come back?"

He stiffened. Eyelights went dark. "No," he said, and his tone was cold and forceful. "No. There's no way that could happen. Void doesn't work like that."

"But you said – "

"It can't happen, Frisk," he said, sharply. "So get that idea outta your head and shut up about it."

He jerked from her grip. "Mind if we get back on topic?"

Frisk faltered. Then, "It's my fault, isn't it."

He stopped at that, turning his head to frown at her, brows knit together in a combination of incredulity and confusion. "What? No. No, course it's not."

"Yes, it is. I did those Saves and Reloads, and it made tears. I did it a lot. I… Asgore killed me so many times, and Mettaton too, and "

Sans cut her off swiftly. "Yeah, well, first off, you only did that to save your life, right? And even then – kiddo. Spacetime was fulla tears way, way before you got here. I'd been studying it for ages before you even came into the equation. The first two anomalies did tons of Reloads, and y'know, Doctor Gaster getting all eaten up by the Void caused some serious damage, too. More'n an anomaly could do with a hundred Resets."

"But I Saved too, I Reloaded too! It is my fault. I was the last one to do it! And I didn't even have to keep coming back after dying, I could have just let go and given up, it is my fault." Frisk found herself fighting tears.
"Kid. Kid." His hands settled firmly on her shoulders, and he looked her square in the eye. "Frisk. Listen." Frisk lifted her gaze hesitantly. "Listen, kid. It ain't your fault."

Frisk paused, then sighed. "Okay," she said.

She didn't believe him.

And she didn't believe that he saw her as entirely blameless, either.

Silence fell between them. Frisk's gaze wandered to stare at the strange machine, lips pressed together in thought, and Sans returned to his work. For a moment, the only sound was that of shuffling papers.

"That doesn't make sense," Frisk spoke up, suddenly.

Sans glanced up. "What doesn't?"

"That… he isn't coming back." She thought Sans might appreciate it if she didn't actually use Gaster's name. "From the Void. He's got to be. Or else nothing makes any sense."

His expression was all cocky defiance. "Oh? And why's that?"

Frisk took silent note of the sweat beading at his brow, and she only paused a moment before pressing on. "cause then my dreams don't make sense. Or whatever happened this morning with the Void, when I got pulled in. If he's not coming back, what else could it be?"

"It's nothing," Sans said, too suddenly, with the careful tone of words rehearsed. "Just a bit of a Void leak. 's all. A tiny bit of energy leakin' from the Void I gotta deal with, and I dunno, maybe a bit of his essence is in there. But it can't do anythin'. It's nothing."

"Then why did the grey monster say 'beware'?" Frisk challenged.


She watched as Sans's shoulders sagged and he ran a hand down his face, shoving papers aside. "Sorry, kiddo. I'm just… on edge today. Don't worry. He can't come back. I dunno what your monster kid friend was saying. The Void can be funny sometimes. And… when bits of it leak out, stuff gets weird. You ain't in any real danger, okay? Promise."

"Okay," she repeated.

The grey monster had said they were in the Void. They had told her to beware of Doctor Gaster, and that Sans held the answers. Frisk believed all three were true. But she could also tell Sans was only giving her half of the answers he had.

He didn't seem to be sure of just how much he wanted to tell her, she reflected. Why tell her all about Gaster and his childhood and teach her about Saves and Reloads and anomalies if he was just going to conclude it all with a lie?

She was trying hard to be understanding. And she could be, to a degree. But she was getting scared, and that fear made it all the easier for her feelings to lend way to frustration.

If she was going to find out more, and uncover the truth about her dreams and visions, she'd just have to dig deeper, it would seem. She needed to be ready, though for what, she was not certain.
"So, kid," Sans woke her from yet another reverie. "‘member how I was sayin’, about needing your input?"

Frisk turned to him. "Yeah?"

"Well, now's that noble time." Sans searched his desk for a blank piece of paper, and, finding none, elected to tear one piece of paper in half that only had a bit of writing on it. "When you Saved – not Reloaded, Saved – d'you know just how many Save points you made?"

Frisk balked. "I don't know. A lot."

"More or less."

"I dunno. Thirty? But I went back to use them a lot, so I actually Saved more than… more than I made Save points, I guess."

Now it was Sans's turn to look puzzled. "Went back? You mean, if ya wanted to Save… you had to go back to some other point you already made? You couldn't just make a new one?"

Frisk shook her head. "I wish."

"Huh." Sans scribbled something down. "So – seein' as I never got to have a lengthy civil conversation with an anomaly before - how'd it even, you know, work?"

Frisk had never seen Sans this focused on anything before. His eyes held many emotions she struggled to place.

"I… I could do it when I felt especially determined. Usually there was a thing in the room that made me feel like that. That's why I think I felt determined again when I went back to visit it. Like… I made one Save point outside the Snowed Inn. Because that was the first thing I saw when I got to the village, and it was just so nice there, and friendly and cosy and homey, and that made me feel good. And more Determined. And when I went back there, it would remind me of it."

"Or… I could Save when I felt really scared. And when I felt scared, it made me feel more determined." Like before she fought Undyne, or Asgore.

"So it was involuntary. You weren't all that aware you were doin' it. You just kinda felt determined, and… that was that?"

"No. I used the Save stars."

Sans's pencil stopped. "Save stars?"

Frisk nodded. "That's what I called them. I mean, the first time I saw one I didn't know what I was doing. But I just touched it, and I guess I felt a little different. Then they showed up again and again when I felt determined, so… "

"You noticed the pattern," Sans finished. "Save stars. That's interesting… Doctor Gaster never mentioned anything about… " He trailed off, and his gaze wandered over to the basement window, near the ceiling. It was very dark out now, and Frisk knew from the TV it was meant to rain tonight. "So other parts of this are like he – we – figured. Your power came right outta being Determined. And if you, or your determination I guess, if that faltered… "

Frisk could always have just given up, if she wanted to. And if she had, then she would not have been able to come back.
"Dunkle Sans," she pressed, "what are you doing with this stuff?"

Sans had resumed tapping the end of his pencil against the table. "D'you figure those Save points are still there, with the Barrier gone?"

Frisk shrugged. "I don't know. Maybe."

"Well, even if you didn't, those locations might still … And you said you made one outside the Snowed Inn…" Sans reached over, brushing the tips of his phalanges over the machine. "Ah, forget this old thing. I guess I really gotta do it. No way around it."

"Do what? No way around what?"

"These readings." Sans picked up several of the sheets of paper covering his desk. "I gathered them in the years… well, you know. That your flower friend was doing his thing. I gathered them using this here machine. It was a pretty powerful thing, in its time. Could detect an anomaly by tracing irregularities and disturbances in the spacetime continuum and magical sphere." At Frisk's blank stare, he scratched the back of his skull and made a vague gesture as he tried to explain. "The Underground bein' all contained to one area as it was, it had its own kinda special energy signature, and when you started seeing an anomaly Saving and Reloading all over, the machine could pick up on that stuff. And I'm pretty sure I can't fix it on my own."

"What did happen to it?"

"Well, not much. Just, the critical circuits got fried and metal got a little melty. Problem is some o' the parts are back in the Underground. And I hope to hell – heck – that all those parts are in my workshop, and not… Please don't tell your mum I said hell in front of you. She's considerin' starting a swear jar."

Frisk thought Undyne would suffer more with a swear jar, but all she said was, "I won't, I promise." Pause. "Not where?"

Sans sighed, heavily. "… the Royal Labs."

"… oh."

"And see, thing is, there's other machinery down there too, that might be useful. I'd get a better read off the Void, if I used some o' the equipment down there." He winced. "His equipment."

"I didn't see anything Void-y when I visited Alphys's lab," Frisk put in helpfully. "Just the DT extractor."

Sans was fidgeting now, Frisk noted. "Nah. A bunch o' the labs got sort of cordoned off even before Al became Royal Scientist. Renovated, by some folks from the CORE. They're even bigger than what you saw, when you were down there. I'd need to blast down a couple walls. All that stuff oughta still be there. Once I bring the parts up, ya might be able to help me fix the machine. Might be fun, huh? You done any work with machines, kiddo?"

Frisk shook her head distractedly and crossed her arms over her chest. "And then what would you do?"

Sans fell silent. "Don't really know. I guess there's a chance I could… well, I sure wouldn't mind…"

From upstairs came the sound of the front door being kicked open, accompanied by a battle cry,
making them both jump. Undyne was home.

Frisk was suddenly reminded of the fight that had taken place earlier between the brothers. "You know," she said, tilting her head to one side, "you weren't very nice to Uncle Papyrus, earlier."

There was a pause. Then Sans groaned, closing his eyes and throwing his head back. "Oh, geez. I really wasn't, was I?"

Frisk shook her head at him. "He's really upset," she provided. "You should go and apologise."

"Yeah. I will. I will. I didn't mean to... I was just, y'know... oh, boy. Let's go do that now." Sans dragged his hands down his face and got up from his seat. "Anyway, kid. You know to keep quiet about all this, don'tcha?"

She nodded solemnly.

He ruffled her hair on his way out of the basement. "Thanks, Frisk."

Frisk watched him go, then slowly lifted a hand to clutch at her chest. Her soul still hurt.

Frisk stopped to peek into Sans and Papyrus's room on her way to bed that night. The lights were out, and she saw both brothers curled up together in Papyrus's bed, Sans's arms wound tightly round his brother's waist. Frisk smiled a little to herself, then carried on to her own room.

That night she dreamed of nothing at all.

Sans woke up at 3am to feel Papyrus still pressed gently against him, sound asleep. Sans smiled slightly, carefully lifting an arm to reach up and stroke the side of his brother's face. He watched him for a long moment, then, slowly, tried to get out of bed without disturbing him.

It was a failed effort: Papyrus stirred as soon as Sans was sitting up, eye sockets sliding blearily open. "Sans?" he mumbled, his normally booming voice quiet and slurred with sleep.

Sans stopped on the spot and sighed, then ran a finger gently across his brother's cheekbone again. "Shhh. Go back to sleep, Paps."

Papyrus moved as if to sit up. "But where are you – "

"Shhh. Shhh." Sans put a hand to his sternum, gently pushing him back down. "Just getting a glass o' milk, I'm thirsty. I'm fine. I'll be right back."

"YOU, drinking milk, brother?" He scoffed. "Of your own VOLITION? When you are surely the most stubborn monster over drinking it in the history of monstercind?"

"Yeah, well, maybe I've made a sudden change in character overnight. I'm actually considerin' going for a jog tomorrow before breakfast."

"I SEVERELY doubt that!"

"Go to sleep, babybones," Sans soothed, leaning over to tap his teeth against Papyrus's skull. "I'll be back soon, promise."
Papyrus looked as if he were going to protest, but he also looked tired; his eye sockets starting to slide shut. "Nyeh," was all he said at last, and Sans smiled, giving him another kiss before slipping out of bed and shuffling out into the hall.

Once there, he took a shortcut down to the basement, where he took a fresh bottle of ketchup out from behind the washing machine. He had to hide his stash or else Papyrus would probably confiscate it. It had certainly happened before. Afterward, he took a pad of paper and a pen, for the letter he planned on writing.

Then, he took another shortcut upstairs to the kitchen.

He unscrewed the lid off the ketchup bottle.

He opened the fridge and got out the bottle of wine that Toriel used for cooking.

He opened the wine, poured a small amount into the ketchup bottle, closed both containers. Returned the wine to the fridge, gave the spiked ketchup a shake, took a swig.

Sans pulled a face; he really wasn't a wine guy. Still, he leaned back against the counter, taking another sip.

He turned his head to the ceiling. There was a crack in the paint. He sighed, lifting the ketchup bottle as if in a toast.

"Well," he said aloud, "guess it's gonna be just like old times pretty soon, huh, Gaster?"
The Royal Scientist

Chapter Notes

First half of a split chapter, yet again.

Quick disclaimer, this story definitely isn't intended to be Papyton. I don't really have a problem with the ship, I just don't ship it myself so it won't enter my work. I'm a huge fan of aro-ace Papyrus, being ace myself, and Papyrus's admiration of Mettaton here is just intended to be platonic celebrity admiration, like in the game, but I guess if you prefer to read into it as implied Papyton, you can if you want? Just don't expect it to amount to anything, haha.

When Sans was twenty-three, he returned to the labs.

To his torturer's credit, time progressed.

It progressed slowly, agonisingly, and on one glorious occasion nearly a year went by before that year was set back by over a month, but it progressed.

There were good timelines. Many treated of extraordinary developments taking place at the CORE, for instance. But more often, they were good because nothing particularly interesting happened – not that Sans heard of anyway. Life went on at its usual, casual pace, and that was safe.

But there were bad ones, too – the anomaly was such a curious little thing, after all. Timelines that tasted of fear, of blood, whose air was choked with dust and tattered scraps of hope.

These timelines didn't tend to last long. In one timeline, all the CORE workers were trapped inside and presumably murdered one by one. The effects only lasted three days before the timeline reset, back to before a single person was hurt at all.

The case was similar for all bad timelines – as a rule, the anomaly would eventually fix things and Reset, almost out of some twisted sense to remain good.

It was almost like a child, one whose eyes were perpetually bright with mischief, but who always came home to confess to its mother at the end of the day, guilty, when it knew it had overstepped.

Then came the Reset, and everything was forgotten, because mothers are always forgiving.

Timeline after timeline, rearranging and rewriting itself.

Again.

Again.

Again.

But still, time progressed.
His body began to fail him. It came out in slumped shoulders and a perpetual tiredness. It came out in a heaviness on his soul, and an itch for drink.

Over the course of the timelines, there was one thing that kept Sans going: his brother. His very own babybones, always so energetic, so eager, so overwhelmingly kind, who seemed to have the capacity to keep a smile on both their faces no matter what – it was more than Sans deserved, certainly.

Not that he was much of a babybones anymore. At sixteen, Papyrus had shot up nearly a foot and a half taller than Sans and vaguely resembled a lamppost.

And there was one other thing, too: a lingering, twisted curiosity that quickly lent way to desperation. For it didn't seem to matter how many timelines he lived through – he could never find the anomaly. By this point, chances that the anomaly was a human were all but null, he came to realise. A human would have been found out by now, its soul claimed by the King, and all this would be over.

Sans often wondered what he would do, if he found it. It was unlikely he could just get it to feel guilty and stop, for it had all but proved its tampering with time was thoroughly intentional.

If Sans killed it, it would just Reload back to its old Save file again.

Discovering the anomaly would accomplish nothing, ultimately. It wouldn't change what was happening to the timeline, and it wouldn't give Sans any more control, or bring him any more comfort.

And yet, Sans wanted to. He wanted to find the anomaly. He wasn't entirely sure why – maybe he felt it would lessen his feelings of desperation and powerlessness ever so slightly. Maybe he felt it would sate the lingering curiosity he still had, despite everything.

Maybe he felt that, if he knew who or what the anomaly was, he could keep it from hurting Papyrus. Granted, his brother had not been touched by the anomaly yet. Yet. The anomaly had tried out so many different things over the timelines, over the years. Some things were inevitable.

Or maybe discovering it would accomplish none of those things.

Sans still wanted to.

The new Royal Scientist was hired a little before Papyrus started eleventh grade.

Her name was Doctor Alphys, and she'd been the talk of the Underground for weeks. And not just because of the fact that they finally had a Royal Scientist after the position having been empty for so many years, either. Doctor Alphys was, at twenty-one, only a couple years younger than Sans – unfathomably young to be taking up one of the most important and prestigious positions in the Kingdom.

She was an engineer by trade, and had been working at the CORE since she graduated high school. Her great accomplishment, of course, was the creation of Mettaton, the robot with a soul. She was native to Hotland but had apparently moved house to the public laboratory near the Waterfall border. In the wake of her employment, she had been visited by a barrage of enthusiastic visitors, though civilians were quickly starting to gain more interest in her creation than in the gifted scientist herself. The robot was a lot more inclined to the publicity than Alphys was. It had only been a few months and already Mettaton had his own cooking show, fashion show, and line of
merchandise.

Doctor Alphys had consumed Sans's thoughts, too.

Sans wasn't interested in Mettaton, one way or the other, though Papyrus had become addicted to his programming recently. It was pretty bizarre, seeing his brother sitting on the sofa and glued to the TV set – normally he condemned practises of such a sedentary lifestyle.

Sans wasn't even interested in Alphys, exactly.

He was interested in her resources.

Sans still remembered the time Gaster had showed him and his brother those readings from the Void, a long thirteen years ago. He still remembered the numbers that scrolled endlessly up the screen, zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones. And he still remembered the half-finished machine, the anomaly detector.

Was it still down there, in the labs? Were the rest of Gaster's things? Doctor Alphys had surely tried to make the space her own, but anyone with a scrap of sense would at least try to figure out what the old Royal Scientist had been up to, especially when the rest of the Underground couldn't remember a second thing about their work, or even who they were.

Sans took solace in the fact that Gaster's reports, the reports and files on him and his brother, were written in Wingdings, incomprehensible to anyone but another skeleton.

It was a dangerous, foolish move, he knew. She looked nice enough on television – Sans was even strongly inclined to say *sweet* – but that wasn't enough grounds to prove anything.

Sans asked the King about her once, and Asgore's eyes seemed to shine as he spoke of her.

"You two would get along grandly, I think," King Asgore had said. "Painfully – *painfully* – shy, but she really is such a nice girl, and with your enthusiasm for science…"

That still didn't prove anything. Gaster had been well-liked in the Underground, too, even if he'd never been *sweet*, exactly.

Sans went to her anyway.

oOo

He took a day off work for his intended visit, and King Asgore was more than happy to grant it to him, saying something about Sans overworking himself.

It had taken him three hours since Papyrus left for school at 8:15 to work up the courage and the willpower to make his way to Hotland. Now, factoring in the walk, it was just past noon, and here Sans stood, before the looming public laboratory.

The exterior structure hadn't undergone any renovations since the new Royal Scientist had been hired. He was faced with a pair of automatic doors like steel jaws, clamped tightly shut. A sign above the doors read simply, ominously, "LAB."

Sans closed his eyes. He raised his fist, and knocked on the door. Under different circumstances, he might have tried to think up a knock-knock joke.

On the other side of the door, silence.
Sans paused, opening his eyes and tilting his head to one side. He waited a moment, then tried again. *Knock-knock, who's there? Nobody, apparently.*

It seemed the excuse he'd been waiting for. The Royal Scientist must be out, or downstairs tending to her latest project. There, now he didn't have to face her, didn't have to see any more labs again.

But thought of the anomaly gave him pause. Even as he reflected on how hideously pointless it was, he lifted his hand again – this time to press down on the doorbell.

A pause. Then what sounded vaguely like a yelp, though it was quite muffled behind the metal door.

Scrabbling noises, followed by a shout – "H-hello! Hey! Um, just hang on a sec – be, be right there!"

More scrabbling noises. Sans could hear the sound of claws scraping against tile. Then, the metal doors opened with a *whoosh*, and he took in the sight of Doctor Alphys.

She was a lot smaller than Sans had been anticipating – he'd gotten the impression she was small from what he'd seen of her on television, but then everyone was small next to the King. It made a monster's height difficult to gauge. But Doctor Alphys only had an inch or two on Sans if that, not counting her headspikes. She was covered in tough, yellow scales. A round pair of glasses was perched crookedly on her snout.

She was also not wearing a lab coat, but rather, what appeared to be an oversized purple pyjama top covered in glittery hearts.

"Um… hi!" She broke into what seemed a friendly grin. "C-can I help you?"

Sans tensed, stuffing his hands quickly into his pockets, and offered her a grin of his own. Then it occurred to him he probably ought to treat the Royal Scientist of the Underground with a little respect, so he removed one hand from his pocket and, after taking a moment of trying to decide what to do with it, held it out in a shake. "Uh… Doctor Alphys?"

She seemed puzzled by his extended hand, but took it nonetheless, shaking it almost gingerly. "Um… yep! That's me! Though, uh, just Alphys is good, aheh… d-do you want to – I mean, what's your name – I mean, c-come in! I mean, both those things!" She stepped out of the way of the door, hopping seemingly nervously from foot to foot.

Sans remained where he stood. He craned his neck and tilted his head subtly, trying to get a better view of the lab. "Uh… name's Sans. And I was just gonna ask for a favour, if you ain't too busy – "

He paused another moment, then took a single hesitant step into the lab. He could feel the tiles beneath his slippered feet, and stopped.

Doctor Alphys seemed to take this for sarcasm on his part, and blushed. "Oh! Y-yeah, sorry about the whole… j-just got up, haha… I was up late last night doing, um, science! Yeah! Really important science stuff! Because that's my job!" She scampered into the lab, then ushered him in. "C'mon in… here, just give me a second to change into my lab coat – "

"That's okay." Sans took another steps inside. "Don't worry about it. I don't really mind." The doors slid automatically shut behind him and he flinched. "But yeah, if you ain't too busy, I, uh – "

"Oh! Um, n-no. No, I'm not… " Doctor Alphys hurried over to the computer desk and began to stack the papers there into piles without looking at what they were. "S-sorry the desk's a mess, I can just – "
"Don't worry about it," he said simply.

Actually, the entire lab was a mess – it looked as if several bombs had gone off inside of it at the same time, and that a horde of high Temmies had gone on a rampage through the wreckage afterward. The computer desk was covered in so many papers, Sans couldn't see an inch of its surface underneath them all. A stack of empty boxes of instant noodles towered over their heads in one corner of the desk. Lined up against the walls were piles of empty cardboard boxes, bizarre metal contraptions Sans could only guess were her own invention, and a crate overflowing with wires.

The mess was a small comfort, but standing here still hit a little too close to home.

"Hey, um, are you okay?" Doctor Alphys's voice snapped him from his reverie, and he realised she was standing directly in front of him, twiddling her claws with a look of deep concern on her face. "It's just that you're, uh, standing kinda stiff…"

Sans flinched, then forced his shoulders to relax and said the first thing that came into his head. "Oh. Yeah. Just cold, I guess."

Her concern shifted to deep confusion. "W-we're in Hotland."

"Yeah, well, I'm a funny guy." Sans shrugged, and an awkward silence fell between them.

Alphys broke it. Or rather, the swivel chair at her computer desk broke it, as she nudged it toward him. There was a hideously pink cushion in the shape of a cat's face on the seat. "Well, uh, I was up so late last night doing that, um, really, really important science like I already established and – that is, why don't you, do you want to sit down? And uh, you can finally tell me how I can help you." She giggled uncomfortably when Sans didn't answer straight away, and the chair squeaked as she nudged it a little closer toward him. "A-are you sure you don't want me to change? Sorry, I'm in my PJs, this is totally unprofessional – "

"No, it's fine," Sans repeated, and sat down gingerly on the edge of the chair. Doctor Alphys pulled herself up to sit on the edge of the desk in front of him. She had to shove several papers aside to make room. "I'd walk around in my pyjamas all day too if I could."

Doctor Alphys blushed, but smiled at him. "S-so… the whole helping thing… ?"

"Right." Sans wished he'd planned his speech ahead of time. "So, uh, you know the old Royal Scientist, right? This used to be his old lab. I was just wondering if all his old stuff is down there. Science stuff, I mean." He paused again, let the words hang in the air.

Doctor Alphys tilted her head to one side, visibly perplexed. "Uh… I mean… I guess so? Th-there's a few rooms of stuff down there, like in a kind of storage locker. I-I've been looking through it, 'cause, you know, but I don't know what any of it is. And uh, m-most of the files are in this really weird language, I can't read it. See, th-there's this corridor that was supposed to have been offices or something, I guess, and they offered to clear them out but I said it was okay because I was… you know… curious… " She had resumed twiddling her claws together. "D-do you know something about it?"

"Sure," Sans shrugged. "I guess you could say I know a bit." He leaned back slightly in his chair, letting it swivel from side to side, producing a hint of a squeaking sound that was ever so slightly grating on the ears. While doing this, he kept his eyes carefully on Doctor Alphys; he had never been allowed to play with the swivel chairs before. But it didn't seem to bother her.
Alphys hesitated. "D-do you mind if I ask how? B-because um, nobody knows anything about the old Royal Scientist. I-I didn't even know he was a he. For some reason, I don't imagine anyone did." She frowned. "I don't even really know why. Why nobody knows about him, I mean. I asked lots of different people when I was working at the CORE, but nobody knew. A-and the King doesn't know either." A shadow passed over her face. "I… I feel like I should know something about the old Royal Scientist, you know? Not just b-because I'm the new one, even though I actually should, but because like… " She trailed off for a moment. "I don't know. It was a really long time ago, I guess. M-maybe it doesn't matter. But how do you know?"

"Ah… " Sans scratched the back of his head. "That's kinda complicated. Too complicated to explain. You're right, it don't matter. But look, all his old science stuff. You're tellin' me it's still down there?"

"Um… yes?" Doctor Alphys paused. "Listen, I-I'm just a little lost." She stepped toward him. "I'd love to help, okay? I really would. But you – you still haven't told me exactly what you need, and, um… s-saying it's complicated doesn't really… answer anything I want to know."

"Yeah, well. Maybe another time." He leaned forward. "Listen. I'm looking for this… machine. It should be down there."

"Th-there's a lot of machines," Alphys said pointedly.

"Yeah, well, this one's sorta… box-shaped. Yeah, like an oblong box. 'bout twice our height. Should have a little screen on one side, near the top. Metal?" he added, at Alphys's blank stare.

"Oh, yeah. That really narrows it down," she sighed.

"Sorry." He'd only seen it once after all.

"Well… okay, fine, maybe the height thing narrows it down a tiny bit. A tiny bit." She glanced over at the elevator. "Y-you can come down with me and try to find it if you want." She broke into a friendly little smile, inviting, that showed off her teeth.

Sans surreptitiously scooted his chair back, feeling the tension re-enter his bones, his soul. "I'm good."

"No, come on." She hopped down from the desk and motioned again toward the elevator. "I mean, you have a better idea of what it looks like than I do. You have a better grip on this whole… situation, I guess. I, uh, still don't know how you know so much about this stuff, but m-maybe we can talk about it later, like you said. Anyway, as for the lab, yeah! I-it's really not super private or anything, I-I mean. You're welcome to come! There's no bodies down there or anything, aheh." Doctor Alphys paused. "I mean, monsters turn to dust when they die, so… that joke doesn't really… make any sense… okay, yeah, that was stupid, nevermind. But the point still stands that there aren't. Bodies. Or dust, for that matter. Well, there is the other kind of dust, e-especially in those old offices, because I never, um, go there to clean. Not that I clean the part of the labs I actually use either, I really need to get around to that someday… "

A part of Sans was comforted by these words, by the implication that Doctor Alphys had nothing to hide. But still the feeling in his soul tightened until he felt he could scarcely breathe. He hadn't had cause to truly think about Gaster in a long time, but now memories were starting to flood back, crashing hard against the dam he'd built in his mind to keep them out. Hands, cold hands, bone hands, his hands, clasping his soul and squeezing it tight, re-claiming it as their own.

His eye flared. Then both of his sockets went dark. "I'm good."
Alphys looked frightened. "Okay," she said. "You don't have to."

Sans's shoulders sagged, his soul relaxed, the hands disappearing. He managed to crack a grin, and he was aware of his eyelights fading back into existence. "Sorry. Just, uh, don't like basements," he said, lamely.

"Oh! Yeah! I get that," she smiled at him, and Sans suddenly noted the way her eyes darted about a little nervously, even as she spoke to him. That they'd been doing that from the start. He became a little more keenly aware, too, of the twiddling of her claws in a seeming need to keep her hands busy. "I get that," repeated Doctor Alphys. "Um, can I admit something?"

"Sure," Sans said on a shrug.

Alphys looked relieved. "I'm, um, not really great at the whole talking-to-people thing? I just tend to get k-kinda nervous when I do? But… not so much with you? Y-you just seem really nice, I guess, and, um…" She paused, then groaned, rubbing at her temples. "Ugh, why am I telling you this, you don't know me, you don't need to hear about me, what's wrong with me, that's not what you're here for…"

"No. No, hey, it's okay." Sans said it automatically, but he realised he meant it.

Doctor Alphys smiled a little. "I'm not too busy these days," she began. "You could leave me your number and then I could go down and look for it. I-I mean, it's still probably Royal property or something, but, um… what do you want to do with it? Exactly? Like, I-I think it's cool you know this but you still haven't told me how, which is kind of a big deal and I don't mind helping but, like, this is really irresponsible of me and I probably should have asked you all that before now...." She shuffled uneasily in place and groaned, burying her face in her hands. "Ugh, forget PJs, this is unprofessional, I suck at this job. And, um, for that matter… what is it? The machine?"

Of course, it had been going too well. He didn't exactly have any ownership over the machine. It was more than a wonder she wasn't showing any signs of suspicion at all. He could be anyone, could be trying to do anything with it. It had been stupid of him to even consider visiting the labs, to even toy with the option of the Royal Scientist helping some skeleton who came out of nowhere. Had he really thought he would just be given the machine, no strings attached? Even if he'd been anticipating buying the machine, he wouldn't have been able to come close to affording it.

Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets. He would have had to explain the machine's function anyway, and since he was already here, he might as well play his last card and try his luck.

"So way back when the old Royal Scientist was still around, he started work on this machine." Sans paused and glanced over at the desk. "Got a pen and paper to spare?"

Doctor Alphys jumped. "Oh! Yeah! Sure! Right over here!" She scurried over to the desk and began to rummage through a toppled stack of papers. At last she found a small notepad of stationary, and after some more digging found a pink gel pen, and handed both to him.

Sans snatched them up as he stood, and leaned over the spot of empty desk that Alphys had been occupying previously. "So before I forget here's my number at the top…" He scrawled it down quickly, then at the bottom of the page he drew a hasty sketch of the machine from memory. He circled the drawing, then tapped the centre of the page with the tip of his pen. "This is the machine. Should be about twice our size, like I said. Maybe even a little more'n that. When you get access to the side corridor you should find it in this room with this huge monitor screen on one wall, but I might be wrong about that.
"So what this machine does is detect an anomaly – that's a Determined being with the power to manipulate and reset time however it wants. The Royal Scientist's name for it, not mine. This thing is relentless, and dangerous. It could be a human, or it could be something else too. A monster down here, even. I don't know. And I need to finish the machine to, well, detect it. If it's down here," he added hastily. "Which is, uh, totally a hypothetical, but when the future of the Underground's at stake I figure it's best to play safe and be prepared." He coughed, hoping he sounded convincing enough and not off his rocker, which was far more likely by this point, then ambled on.

"And I'll also need… the files that go with it. It should contain everything we need to know. I can fix the machine, but to do that I need a starting point. I only know what it does, not how it works, but with the files, and enough time, I can figure it out. Blueprints would be helpful too. Because the project was passed on to the King and later abandoned, chances are the files were translated into English and then logged in the Royal Archives, so we won't need to, uh, decode out the originals." He looked up at her, finally.

Alphys fell silent, taking all of this in. "W-wow," she murmured. "Okay. And here I thought you wanted me to get you a contract to go on Mettaton's show or something, th-that's what most people come by here for … "

Sans found himself smiling a little, amused, hopping down from the chair. "Nah. Not really a big fan – no offence."

"None taken." Alphys shifted, looking off to the side a moment.

"My baby brother is, though, so who knows, he might come by."

Alphys looked up, fondness in her eyes. "Y-you have a baby brother?"

Sans's grin widened. "Yeah. Well, he ain't really a baby anymore, he's sixteen, but he'll always be my babybones. Papyrus. He's the coolest. And the big guy's totally hooked on Mettaton's show, he watches the channel all the time. Like, really hooked. You got no idea. When he ain't talkin' about joining the Guard, or nagging me for not doin' the chores, he's off gushing 'bout the MTT Network. Already asking to get all the merch for Gyftmas, too. Years of painstakingly carvin' his sandwiches into little bones or maze patterns for lunch, and all of a sudden he's demanding rectangles." Sans shook his head.

"Isn't that less work?"

"Heh. Good point. And y'know, I'm a pretty lazy guy. I like a good slacking off, y'know? I mean, hell, I'm supposed to be at work right now. But he's my brother. I liked cutting up those sandwiches for him."

"Oh. Your parents didn't do that?"

"Nah. It's just us. 's only ever been the pair of us."

Beat. "Oh. Oh! I see! Oh, gee, I – I'm sorry, I didn't think – so you're an orphan – I mean, I didn't mean – that is, I – I'm really sorry – "

"Don't be," said Sans simply.

Alphys dropped the subject, looking rather grateful. "So, I'll just, um, go look for that machine then, and, um… "
Sans nodded once. "I appreciate it. Thank you." He was unsettled by the words coming from his own mouth, of their dual weight and simplicity.

He turned to go, then, paused, just as the automatic doors slid open.

They stood there in awkward silence for a moment.

Alphys cleared her throat. "H-hey! Just before you go. You said the files were probably translated in the Royal Archive, right? You're free to come with me and look sometime… if you're free…”

Sans hesitated, then shook his head. "Nah. It's sort of a one-person job anyway. Thanks anyway, though."

"Not really," he caught her mumble under her breath, but was thankful she didn't push any further. Instead, she said, in the tone of one blurring something out quite without meaning to, "Hey! Um, do you mind if I… ask you something?"

He shrugged. "Depends on the question."

"Well, you just know so much, and it's really, really amazing, so, so I was just wondering, like… who did you study under? I-I mean. You must have studied at the CORE, right, after school?" Her eyes lit up. "Ooh! That's who taught you all this stuff, isn't it? Ooh! I-I bet they knew the Royal Scientist! They were his… his friend — no, his partner — no, his secret lover! And they worked on the project together! And… and after their lover the Scientist died they were so wrought with grief they swore to keep the project a secret because they never wanted to complete it without their one true love taken from them too soon, and keep it a secret they did! Until! They were assigned a proficient young student with an unbridled passion for things relating to the timeline, and they knew that this was it, that they had to teach you everything, and they did that too! And recently, they died tragically too, and the last time you two spoke, they passed on the secret knowledge of the project to you, and out of devotion to your inspirational mentor, you've taken it to heart as your secret mission and… and… " She seemed to sense Sans's mounting confusion then, and cut herself off, scales having turned a fierce shade of scarlet. "So yeah, aheh… who did you study under, again?"

For Alphys's sake, Sans chose not to comment on that first bit. He couldn't really think of anything to say anyway. So instead he just said, "Study at the CORE? Who, me? Aw, nah. I could never get a position there even if I wanted one. Never actually finished fifth grade."

The expression on her face at that remark was priceless. And that was how Sans chose to leave her.

oOo

That night, Sans dreamed many dreams, in rapid succession. He dreamed of his childhood, of the dark, and of vines, which came tearing up from the ground like some creature long repressed.
He received a call from Doctor Alphys six days later, one evening while he was out at Grillby's. Doggo, one of Snowdin's Royal Guard Dogs, had volunteered to buy a round of drinks for everyone, and Sans had been nursing a second beer, relaxed and entertaining the other regulars with his own generous round of jokes.

"One sec, folks, I gotta take this," he said, getting up from his seat. He teleported out back, brought his cell phone to the side of his skull. "Doctor Alphys. Heya. What can I do for you?"

"I think I found it," was all she said, in an excited rush.

He just flashed her an easy grin. He'd only taken a moment to say goodbye to the other regulars and to text Papyrus to let him know he'd be home late. "Guess I'm just a fast runner," he said on a shrug, and paused before letting himself into the lab.

She was wearing her lab coat today. Sans tried to ignore it.

The lab had changed quite a lot since his last visit a week ago. The desk had been organised, for one thing. While the stack of instant noodles boxes remained – actually, it seemed to have grown – the mess of papers was gone. Only one corner of the desk was occupied by a neat stack of file folders. The boxes and equipment that had been lined up along the walls were gone, but in their place was –
"Is that really it?" he asked in a low voice, nodding over to it.

Doctor Alphys nodded, stepping forward. She gave him a sidelong glance, expression unreadable.

"That's it. A-at least, I think it is. You can, um, pull off the sheet, if you want." She wrung her hands. "A-and if it isn't, then I'm really sorry, it's just – there's so much stuff down there, b-but I, I can keep looking, and – "

But Sans was already stepping towards the machine, slowly. Before he even realised he was doing it.

His hand closed around the sheet, and for a moment he swore he saw the coded readings, zeroes and ones and zeroes and ones, flashing before his eyes. He hesitated, then he tugged.

The sheet came down in rippling crinkled cascades.

For a long moment, he stood there, staring up at it. He dared not touch it – not yet.

So it was. Thirteen years, and the machine was still here. It was a little dusty, and in places the metal had oxidised, but it was there. Gaster's machine. Its small monitor screen had been dark for a very long time, and was slightly cracked. A tangled mess of wires spilled from its side like an open wound. The only thing that might bring him any closer to solving the issue of the anomaly and its timelines. The only thing that was something like… hope.

He heard Alphys's claws tapping against the tile behind him as she approached. "S-so… is that really it? The machine you were… "

"Yeah," said Sans, finally finding his voice, though he didn't tear his eyes from the machine. "Yeah, that's it."

A pause, then he heard her take a few timid steps closer. She was approached from his right side – it was grating on him, but he wasn't in the mood for bringing it up. "Um… s-so yeah! I found it!"

There was a pause, then, "You could say 'thank you,' you know."

"Oh. Right. Thank you," Sans said, distractedly. He glanced at her his shoulder. "So from here… "

He turned his gaze back to the machine, then gave a dry chuckle as he contemplated it. "Guess I figure out how to lug this thing home, heh. That's all the way back in Snowdin."

Alphys made an alarmed little noise. "T-take it back to Snowdin?"

"It's where I live." He took a step back, subtly shifting in such a way that Alphys stood to his left. He was compelled suddenly to shoot her a teasing grin. "What's wrong, Doctor? Think I'm too small to carry it?" He cut her off before she could open her mouth. "Well, you ain't wrong."

He hummed to himself, thinking. He probably wouldn't be able to manage a shortcut all the way back home with the machine in tow – taking a shortcut that distance with only himself to carry was taxing enough; taking the machine with him would be nigh impossible. He supposed he could try and see if there were any strong monsters at the CORE who'd be able to haul the machine over to the ferry dock. There were definitely monsters large enough, but Sans wasn't sure he could afford to pay them for the favour, and besides, he didn't want to give rise to any questions. The fewer people who knew about the machine, the better. Undyne was almost definitely strong enough, but he and she hadn't exactly been on the best of terms for a few years now. He hummed again, wracking his mind for other possibilities. "I guess I could – " he began.

"Why don't you leave it here?" Doctor Alphys spoke up. "You don't have to get it all the way back
to Snowdin at all!"

Sans stopped short, staring at her. "What."

Alphys hopped nervously from foot to foot. "W-well… if you don't mind – I mean, I don't mind – I mean, you could keep the machine a-and I could… well, now's the part where I say i-if you don't mind… I could help you. You could j-just come by whenever you're free, I don't have a schedule, and we could work on it… together…" She trailed off.

Sans continued staring – at her shoulders, which were hunched ever so slightly, and at the way her whole frame almost quaked in anticipation. He took in the way she bit her lip and seemed to hold her breath. He took in the look in her eyes. He stared at her, and for some reason he couldn't fathom, he heard himself answering her, the word slipping past his teeth before he realised it. "Okay."

She froze, then her eyes widened. Even behind her glasses, he could see the way they shone. "Really? Y-you really want to… "

He tried for nonchalance. "Yeah, sure. I mean, unless you need me to pay you, 'cause I prob'ly couldn't afford it. But just working together? Why not? It's a lot easier for me if the machine is right here where I don't gotta move it, and besides, you know a thing or two about machines. Hell, you definitely know more than I do. I'm more of a theory guy than a tech guy."

Alphys's smile widened. "Wow… that's… thank you. I mean!" In an instant, she was back to twiddling her claws, and this time Sans caught the way her tail gave the occasional twitch. "Y-yeah, that makes sense. I… I'm not bad with machines."

Sans turned his attention back to the machine. "So now all we gotta do is – "

"F-finish it." His gaze snapped back to her, and he realised she'd moved to stand by her desk, hands resting atop the stack of file folders.

"Right. Finish it."

It took him a moment to piece everything together. Then, it clicked.

"Oh. Oh. Shit. Wait, are you tellin' me… those are the… "

"E-everything I could find on them that was translated. I-I guess there might be more down there, but we can't do anything with it." Alphys shrugged. "These were in the Royal Archives, b-but they were for the eighties and even early nineties. The King said s-someone must have misfiled them by mistake; th-there's no way the old Royal Scientist was around that recently. O-or else people would remember him… right?" Her brow knit together as she trailed off.

"Right," was all Sans supplied. He cast the machine another glance, then went over to join her at the table, and Alphys jumped before beginning to spread the file folders out on the desk. She knocked the stack of instant noodle boxes onto the floor, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Right," was all Sans supplied. He cast the machine another glance, then went over to join her at the table, and Alphys jumped before beginning to spread the file folders out on the desk. She knocked the stack of instant noodle boxes onto the floor, but she didn't seem to mind.

"Oh, wow… " she breathed, opening one of the folders and starting to leaf through the papers. "Just look at some of this stuff, it's amazing. Whoever the old Royal Scientist was, gosh, he must have been brilliant, I-I'd have loved to have been able to meet him. Or even just see him for a second… I mean, look at all this work!"

"You're quite somethin' yourself, though," Sans said, tilting his head to one side. "I mean, a robot with a real soul. Can't say I've Mettaton o'those."
Alphys stared at him in confusion, then put her claws to her mouth, and muffled a giggle. "H-hey! That's pretty good! Um… jokes aren't really my thing, or… or being funny at all, really, but I liked that one! Oh! And, uh, thanks! I-it was just kinda… well, he's a synthetic soul! Very engineered! Definitely not from a real – I mean, thanks! He's still, like, a… y-yeah! Thanks!"

Sans raised a brow, then shrugged. "Still quite the accomplishment," he said, turning his attention back to the papers.

It wasn't, really, of course. Or at least, not as much as it was being advertised to be. Creating an artificial soul was certainly quite a feat, and she had taken her own spin on it, but Alphys hadn't pioneered such projects, even if she thought otherwise.

He and his brother were living proof of that, after all.

Not that Sans was too keen on sharing that information.

And besides, why not make her feel better?

"If he did all this, h-how come nobody's talking about him?" Alphys breathed. "I mean, all this work… it's not fair if the person who accomplished it all doesn't even get acknowledged." She pressed one hand to a piece of paper. "I-I wonder what all the other files, the ones in the weird language downstairs, say? There were some kids' drawings in the files, I looked. M-maybe his kids are still alive."

"Doubt it." Sans changed the subject, as much as he could afford to veer off-course. "So, back to this whole helping me thing… " He began to leaf through the files.

He couldn't have guessed how many years of research were sitting before him. He just knew that Gaster had been studying the Barrier and investigating the timeline long, long before he created Sans.

Sans had never been allowed to look at Gaster's files before, and seeing them in the regular alphabet rather than in Wingdings was strange, yet helpful too, he realised. As far as he knew, no-one had been hurt in Gaster's studies of the Void, and looking through them now… they were almost beautiful, in a way.

Sans knew he had a lot to thank Gaster for, in a twisted sort of way. His own curiosity. His love for science. Papyrus.

For he could appreciate these documents, truly appreciate them. And just glancing over them left him with a profound feeling of satisfaction at knowing, at learning. Here was a sheet covered in equations, here was a written observation log. Here was a folder filled with nothing but readings of magical energy levels in the Underground, probably measured over the course of over a hundred years. Here were some early sketches of the machine.

"Th-they were all logged under 'Void and t-timeline study'," Alphys spoke up. When Sans didn't answer, she frowned and rubbed her snout. "Is it r-really true you never finished the fifth grade?"

"Nope."

"Oh. Nope as in 'no, you never finished' or 'no, it's not true'?"

"Nope as in 'no, I never finished.' I dropped out." He raised a brow at her. "I take it that's surprising."
"N-no offence, but, um… kinda?" Alphys admitted. "I-I mean, you just, you seem to know so much about science, important, difficult science –"

Sans dropped into the swivel chair and shrugged. He didn't look up from the files, but he found himself answering her. "Never said I stopped trying to learn what I liked on my own time. This stuff's always gripped me, and I mean – have you been to the Capital Library? 'sides, even when I was in school, I was pretty great at math and science. Not to boast or anything. Not much, anyway, heh."

"R-right." Alphys tilted her head to one side. "Wow, that's… I mean, y-yeah, I guess that makes sense. S-so you kept on trying to learn after you – that's so admirable. And really impressive, too." She hesitated. "Um, c-can I ask why you dropped out of fifth grade? And, um, how? Because it's kind of the law to go up to at least tenth."

He just flashed her a teasing grin, and she sighed.

"And I g-guess you don't work at the CORE at all, huh?"

"Nah." Sans shook his head. "I've been working as a page at the castle since I was twelve. So… eleven years now. Shit. Makes me feel old." He chuckled dryly.

"Oh. That's really neat! B-but, um, what were you doing working when you were twelve? Because, you know, the legal working age is fifteen, b-but of course you have to know that, you live here, and I know a lot of kids work illegally, especially orphans, a-and that makes sense because you're an orphan, a-and if you were working anywhere else that would make sense, b-because everyone knows there's lots of homeless kids in the Capital who work for the Temmies, but if you work as a page for the King that really doesn't make sense, because he's the King, so I-I hope you'll excuse me for, for wondering if the page thing isn't true, and if you did just lie and you do some illegal work I won't judge you or t-tell anyone, I promise, and –"

Sans didn't answer, his gaze trailing across the files spread out immediately before him.

"Sans?"

He ignored her.

"S-sorry, I think I just started rambling back there, I do that sometimes, haha - !"

His eyes fell on one particular sheet of paper, and his breath caught. He snatched the piece of paper up, holding it closer. It was as though the universe was, in that moment, trying to make up for all the shit it had dealt him so far. When he considered the perfect timing, he was almost inclined to say he and the universe were square.

"Alphys, look at this," he cut her off, turning the chair in her direction.

Alphys squinted. "Something… important?"

"Yep." Sans broke into a grin. Alphys reached for the paper, but Sans tugged his hand back, so it was just out of her reach. "You don't mind if I do the honours, do ya?"

"Be my guest."

Sans's grin widened and he got to his feet. He gave a bow and a flourish of hand worthy of Papyrus and cleared his throat. "So. We thought the machine was never totally finished, right? This thing's supposed to detect an anomaly, and we figured we'd have to, well, make it do that."
"… right?" Alphys paused and frowned. "A-are you saying he did finish it?"

"We're not quite that lucky." Sans dropped back into the swivel chair. "But we got less work ahead of us than I figured. The machine can't detect an anomaly yet, per se, but it can run a scan of significant energy levels in the Underground – like magical energy levels, which are important to monitor 'cause they're always in flux, y'know – and it scans for Determination. We might have to update the circuitry or whatever, but apart from that, we already got half the work done for us." Sans let out a whoosh of air he didn't realise he'd been holding. "This thing can already analyse Determination levels in the Underground. And Determination levels are supposed to stay fixed, unless – " he stopped to scratch his skull – "well, y'know, if they rose, then that would mean an anomaly was here. Had been… created."

His soul flickered. Sans brought a hand to his sternum, thinking of the Determination that filled his body, that had been integrated into his system so completely that it filled every bone in his body, bonded with his marrow as if it had always been a part of his biology. It hadn't gone away or even faded in all this time – he leaked the stuff with every odd cut and scrape he'd received over the years – and by now, Sans was certain it never would.

For a moment, he was afraid – if the machine could detect Determination levels, wouldn't it point to him? But no. No, Sans wasn't an anomaly. He was just a failed attempt at creating one.

There was a true anomaly out there, though. Somewhere in the Underground. And now…

"Look here." Sans pushed one of the documents across the table, covered in a collection of complex equations. "According to this, it's a report of magical energy and Determination levels in the Underground in June of 1996." About three months before Gaster fell. "And here there's a report of, uh, Void energy readings as well. Interesting. Uh, that's the nothing outside spacetime," he added at her confused look.

"E-excuse me?"

"Uh, whatever. Not important." Sans leaned closer to the document. "So, if we keep these in mind, and run a scan whenever we get the machine back up and running, we can compare the results and get a good idea of, like, how things have changed over the years. I guess. And from there… we keep working.

"See, if there was an anomaly here, right now, I'm not totally sure we'd be able to tell," Sans said warily. He coughed. "That's hypothetical, again. Uh… very hypothetical…. " He ambled on before Alphys could say anything. "We could tell if one entered the Underground, though – there'd be a spike in Determination levels and possibly some fluctuations in the other readings as well. The only thing the machine's missing is the ability to explicitly identify one."

He didn't realise he'd fallen silent until Alphys laid a hand very gently on his shoulder.

Sans flinched violently, and Alphys's hand retreated. She looked almost frightened.

"Sorry," he said, shortly. "Got kinda lost in my head, ya startled me. And, y'know – " he knocked lightly against his own skull – "it's a hollow head, so there's a lotta space to get lost in."

Alphys smiled at him weakly, and Sans turned back to the files. Fair enough; it hadn't been his best.

"That's, um, really good news!" she said, finally. "Um… "

"We can do it, right?" Sans looked up at her. "I mean, this is feasible, ain't it?"
Her tone was solemn. "Y-yeah! Yeah... I really think we can."

He stared at her a moment, taking in the sight of her smile – bright, but timid. Taking in the way she stood, the way she looked at him. He reflected on the way she spoke. He broke into a fresh grin and held out his hand.

"It'll be a pleasure workin' with ya, ma'am."

oOo

Sans was never quite sure when or how it happened. But he found himself visiting Doctor Alphys, and visiting whenever he could.

At first, the visits were short – an hour or two at most, on the weekend, or after work – and confined strictly to finishing the machine. And then they started talking more and more, and working less and less, having a good deal of back-and-forth, teasing each other and making science jokes. Alphys seemed at least a little amused by them, and even tried making a few of her own. They weren't very good, but Sans laughed anyway, and that made her happy.

They talked more and more of their personal lives – or Alphys did, at any rate. Sans tried to avoid answering too many of the questions she asked about him, but he enjoyed talking about Papyrus, and she seemed entertained by the stories he told of him.

Talking gave way to active procrastination, and at some point, Sans found himself taking her up on offers just to come over and "hang out." Alphys was passionate about some strange cartoons from the Surface called "anime" she'd found at the dump. Sans thought they were nothing short of ridiculous, but she seemed so passionate, he let her show it all to him anyway.

At some point, they started hanging out outside of her lab – going out for drinks in New Home, browsing the small science section of the Capital Library, even foraging through the dump together.

At some point, he realised he liked Alphys, very much so, and it seemed foolish that he'd ever been afraid of her.

oOo

"Hey, Al?"

"Y-yeah?"

It had been a full six months since they'd started working together.

But even then, the advances they'd made had been minimal. Work on the machine was slow going and difficult enough on its own, and when factoring in their limited schedules and their combined tendency to get distracted or sidetracked, they'd really made very few advances indeed. Alphys had managed to update the wiring, and polish the metal, and Sans had solved the nitty-gritty of the way the machine was intended to work, but that was about it.

Nor had there been a single Reset in these six months – it was a relief, to be sure, but a part of Sans felt frustrated too. If the anomaly wasn't Resetting, then it had to be doing something.

Sans spun to face her in his swivel chair. "Why are you helping me?"

Alphys peered up at him over the circuitry she was working at on the floor. "Huh?"
"Why are you helping me?"

She raised an eyebrow. "Well… uh, for one thing, because you know about a machine that can detect irregularities in spacetime, which is p-pretty interesting scientifically, and you know more about it than I do, which is really weird. And uh, second of all, because…. Because…" Alphys trailed off, looking embarrassed. "Well, uh, b-because you're my friend. My best friend," she added.

Sans froze, looking off to the side, though he could feel Alphys staring at him nervously.

Friend.

"Yeah," he said at last, grinning at her. "Yeah. You're mine too."

Alphys gave him a weak little smile, but she seemed strangely relieved at this news as she turned back to her work.

Friend. Sans's smile stayed fixed in place as he turned his attention back to the calculations.

Yes. He liked that. He liked that a lot.

oOo

Sans was walking through Waterfall when it happened.

His head had been upturned as he gazed up at the cave ceiling, so at first he was startled when his ankle caught on something – a root, perhaps – and he tripped, falling into the mud.

"What – shit –"

He'd scraped a little of the bone on his kneecaps and palms, but no serious damage had been done; not enough to make a dent in his HP. Sans felt a little foolish, and now his clothes were spattered in mud. Great. Papyrus was going to give him a lot of grief over this. He shrugged it off, and moved to push himself back up, only to feel a pressure around his legs, holding him down.

"The hell –"

Sans tried again, twisting around.

There were vines. Vines wrapped around his legs. And they were working their way up, twisting themselves between the tibia and fibula of each leg, coiling all the way up past his knees.

So, he struggled.

It didn't help.

The vines kept going, curling up his legs until they'd reached the base of his pelvis.

If he hadn't been so shocked, and so confused, he might have been reminded of the examination table, of the straps that held him down, that kept him from moving even as he struggled and screamed and sobbed. As it were, he was far from the reach of reason or thought. One single, primal instinct had kicked in: Get away.

Get away, get away, get away, determined to get away.

He did not try to teleport. He knew it would be useless.
He struggled, and the vines squeezed tighter and tighter, until he felt his HP slip down a full tenth of a point, and he hissed in pain. When he tried tugging at the vines with his fingers, it only got worse. His bones seemed to groan under the pressure. He let out a choked noise of pain, clapping a hand over his mouth. Sans stilled, and tried to regain his breath.

Just in front of him, at his toes, a small yellow flower popped up from the earth, shaking specks of mud from its petals.

It had a face on its disk, and it wore a wide, bland smile as it blinked at him innocuously.

Sans wasn't sure why. But the sight of that flower was enough to make his soul, which had been pulsating so frantically not a moment ago, go absolutely still, weighed down by a cold dread. From somewhere deep within the recesses of his memory, an image came to surface, pertaining to a timeline from long, long ago.

"Howdy!" it chirped.

Sans just stared. After a moment of nothing happening, his eyes slid down to the vines, still tangled round his legs.

"Hello-o-o-o?" The flower swayed back and forth, waving a leaf. It squeezed again, holding back just enough to keep his HP from slipping any further, and Sans's gaze snapped back over to it.

"Good! Got your attention!" It blinked at him again, the smile never leaving its face. The flower wiggled, and burrowed itself under the earth. Then, before Sans got the chance to even try struggling again, it popped back up, this time right next to him.

Sans's body jolted in response, but his mind was somewhere else entirely, lost to some hollow place. "H-heya," he managed. "Yeah, you got my attention, all right. Congratulations. Uh… howzabout letting me go now, yeah?" The flower didn't respond, and Sans gave an experimental squirm.

Immediately, the vines tightened their grip, and Sans's HP dropped another tenth of a point – 0.8. He hissed again, a sweat breaking out on his brow, but decided it best to go still for now.

*Just play it cool, Sans. Try and work out what's going on. Be careful.*

"Or not, I guess, huh?" he said, looking down at his legs. Yep, definitely no teleporting. "Okay. What's up? You wanna chat?"

Another vine tore up from the earth, sending flecks of earth flying everywhere. Some of it got into Sans's eye socket, and he suppressed a shudder at the uncomfortable feeling.

The flower waved its vine back and forth in the air – a reminder. "Oh, Sans! Don't you *remember* me? You *don't*, do you? Aww, that really hurts my feelings!" The vine smacked him lightly upside the head. Not enough to hurt, but Sans flinched anyway. "Golly! And here I thought you're supposed to be the guy with a really good memory!"

Something clicked. "You're the anomaly," Sans said.

The flower's smile widened into a wicked grin. Its eyes narrowed. "Ooh, very good – you *bet* I am!" Its tone that could only be described as gleeful.

"… you're the one who's been playing around with the timeline these past years."
"Yep!" The flower giggled, and resumed waving its vine in the air. "Isn't it neat? I'm {super} strong now. I guess we share that in common, don't we? Weeell, not {quite}, I guess. After all, I'm super strong and powerful! The whole entire timeline is under my command! I can do whatever I want with it! It's neat-o! But you…" It sighed, almost mournfully. "You're not an anomaly, are you, Sans? No, you're just an attempt at creating one. All that Determination in you, all that trouble, and what's it even for? You can just remember, but you can never do anything at all! What a waste, am I right? A failure – that's what he always called you, isn't it?"

**As I anticipated – a regular failure.**


Sans felt his breath return, in short, rattling gasps. He just stared at the flower.

"So you really don't remember me?" The flower's petals drooped, the picture of dejection. Sans didn't buy it for a second. "Gosh, I guess I didn't leave much of an impression, then. I'll just have to do better next time! I sure hope this'll do!" It disappeared under the ground.

Then it popped up again, this time just behind him.

Sans tried to twist around as best he could. At once, the vines squeezed tighter – 0.7 HP now, shit shit shit – and snaked further up his body. One intertwined itself between several of his ribs, effectively pulling him face-first into the ground.

Sans groaned, lifting his head and spitting out dirt. The flower studied him a moment, then the vine that had entangled itself between his ribs retreated somewhat – just enough for Sans to prop himself up on his elbows.

"Oops!" The flower giggled. "Wouldn't want you running away, now, would we? That would be awfully, nasty rude of you. No, I want you to stay right here and talk to me for a little!"

"Thanks for reminding me of my manners," he shot back. He opened and closed one hand, trying to gather enough blue magic. He had it in a moment, and thrust his hand out, ready to close his attack round the flower monster's –

With nothing to wrap itself around, the magic faded.

He froze.

There was no soul there. Nothing.


Sans's fist opened and closed. One part of his mind told him to summon his bullets, use a real attack, anything. But he couldn't remember how. He felt numb in his shock.

"How…?"

"How come I don't have a soul?" The flower hummed. "Gosh, I don't know! Why? Do I seem like the sort of thing that would? I'm almost flattered!"

"You're an anomaly," Sans said. "You… you're supposed to be Determined. You need a soul to, to…"
"Well, aren't you something else!" The flower sighed, seeming almost annoyed with Sans. "Thinking you know all there is to know about anomalies and the timeline. And you're so curious about it, too, aren'tcha?"

"What are you?" Sans demanded, voice low. *Attack!* his mind screamed at him, and this time, he remembered, summoning several bone bullets on instinct. He kept one hand lifted, aiming them at the flower, but kept them poised in the air.

The flower turned its disk up to the bone bullets and squinted at them. "Is that supposed to be intimidating?"

Sans didn't answer, keeping his gaze fixed on the flower. Idly, he wondered where everyone was: Waterfall was quiet, and the least populated area of the Underground, but normally a commotion such as this would surely draw people's attention.

Then he recalled the events of some previous timelines, and it occurred to him that he really didn't want to know the answer to that.

"I guess it would help you look a little more cool if you weren't tied down like that, huh?" the flower crooned. "I mean, just look at you! So pathetic! My bad! Here… " The vines around Sans's legs began to uncoil, pull back. Sans scrambled to his feet, though as soon as he was standing, one of the vines caught around his ankle. He chose to ignore it for now.

"There!" the flower was saying. "That's better, isn't it? Now you look really cool! Like a superhero!"

"Yeah, cut it with the crap, all right, pal?" Sans allowed his bone bullets to flare with blue magic. "I'm not gonna ask again: *what are you?*"

The flower – what was its name, Sans was sure he had told him his name the one time they'd met, or did it even matter – just giggled. "You're not really gonna fire those things, are you, Sans? You're too curious. You want to know the answer."

"Oh, yeah?" Sans was barely aware of the way his voice was shaking. "Try me."

"What do you think I'm doing?" the flower fired back. "But curiosity's a noble trait! My mom and dad always told me that! They loved it when I asked them questions about the world, no matter how dumb! It's okay – I'm not mad at you. Do you want answers? Do I want to give them to you?" It titled its "head" to one side. "Well, I don't know about that – what if I gave you a hint?"

Sans said nothing.

"No hint? Okay, if you say so… "

"Really not up to games right now," he burst out.

"No, no, I get it! Of course I do! You're a grown-up now, right? Not some sniffling little kid. Of course you don't want to play games. But I do want, so if I just disappear down here… " The flower began to sink back down below the ground again.

Sans glared. His bullets dissolved. "Okay, fine. I'll bite. If you wanna play, I'll play. Howzabout you answer me this: *what are you? Where are you from?*

The flower popped right back up, beaming. "You *do* want to play? Hooray!" It tipped its head from side to side as if in time with some gratingly cheerful ditty. "Well, you know I'm an anomaly,
right? I've been playing with the timeline for ages now, and it's so much fun! It sure does stink you never got to be one – you're really missing out!"

Sans cleared his throat, trying not to focus on the vine still wrapped around his ankle. "And where did you come from?" he asked. It took him a moment to find his voice to continue. "Did... he make you?"

"Him?" The flower paused, blinking seemingly in confusion. "Oh! Oh, him!" A pause, then it broke out into a fresh fit of laughter. "Him! Did you... do you really... do you really think he made me? That's hilarious! Oh, Sans." The flower stopped laughing suddenly, and its gaze turned mean and hard. "Do you think if he managed to make an anomaly out of something else, he would really have kept you?"

The flower paused, seemingly waiting for a reaction. Sans didn't offer it the honour, and while seemingly disappointed by this, it continued: "No. Oh, gosh, no. I go back. I go way, waaaay back."

"From where?" Sans shut his eyes. He would not ask the flower how it knew about Gaster. He would not. If the flower was an anomaly, a creature existing outside the timeline, it made sense that it remembered Gaster. It did not explain how it knew about Sans, of course, but Sans didn't want to know. When he opened his eyes again, it was to the sight of the flower still bouncing merrily in place. "Where the hell do you come from?"

_Blink, blink._

"Fine. Don't answer."

"Wеееell... " The flower dragged the syllable out, tilting its "head" to the side. "I guess I could give you one more itty-bitty hint. Would you like that?"

"I said I don't care."

"Oh, no, of course you don't!" The flower nodded enthusiastically. "You don't care about anything! Why would you, right? I mean, you can't really _do_ anything with this information! Who are you going to tell? Your brother?" It laughed. "I bet that's why you aren't attacking me, right? You know if you do, even if you kill me, I'll just Reset! You really can't do anything at all!" The flower laughed again. "But I _want_ to give you more hints! This is fun! It'll be so refreshing to see you finally _react_ to something, you know?"

"Gimme a hint, then." Sans tried to keep his bones from rattling.

"Of course! I'd love to! And your hint of the day is... dang, if only we had a drumroll – Doctor Alphys!" The flower cut itself off abruptly, grin turning victorious.

And for good reason – Sans felt his soul go colder still, if that were possible. "... what the hell do you mean, Doctor Alphys? What the _hell_ has she got to do with anything?"

The flower giggled. "Right! She's your best friend, isn't she? I've been watching you two for ages. Working on that stupid machine like a couple of nerds. It's like you two really think you have any power at all – it's adorable! You really _care_ about each other, don'tcha?" The flower dropped its voice.

"What?" Sans managed. "You gonna tell me that she made you or some shit?"

And now the wicked grin was back. The flower's eyes shone. "Oh, she _wishes_. She _thinks_ she does!
Or, she will do! See, she hasn't even tried yet. But she will. Ooh, will she ever!

"Bullshit." The word flew from his mouth automatically. It was all that Sans had. "You're an anomaly. You can play around with time, but you can't actually travel through it. You can't see the future. You don't know what people will do unless you already saw it happen in a previous timeline. And if you had, then I'd know about it by now, wouldn't I? So yeah. I call bull."

"You see, Sans… that's where you're wrong." A fresh vine tore from the earth, reaching up toward Sans. It reached into his ribcage, toward his soul, and Sans recoiled. The flower seemed especially pleased by this, but pulled the vine back just so. "You're so very, very wrong. I am so much more than you think I am. Just like I am so much more than anything that stupid reptilian scientist could ever make. All she can do, all she ever has done or ever will, is make mistakes." It giggled ominously. "So many, many mistakes."

"What mistakes?" Sans demanded, voice low. "I'll take it you ain't referring to that time she forgot to carry a four."

"Oh, you know." The flower winked and stuck its tongue out. A small, round bullet appeared in the air just above it, then floated down to the ground where it disintegrated. "The super-big kind. The kind that all those scumbag scientist types make. I'm surprised you still trust her, Sans. The kind of monster she is… and what she's gonna do… gosh, I can't believe you still want to have anything to do with her at all!"

If Sans had felt like he was standing before a black void before, now he felt like he was standing with one foot over the ledge, seconds from falling in. His eyelights had dimmed to pinpricks. "Listen. Whatever you are, you can go to hell."

The vine was still coiled tight around his ankle, its tip reaching up his leg and stroking it almost gently, in some horrible parody of an embrace.

Then, with no warning, it suddenly tightened its grip even further. The bone groaned, and bent, and, finally, cracked under the pressure.

Sans bit back a scream and collapsed to the ground. He cradled his broken ankle, body curling around it as though to shield it, struggling to recover his breath.

The vine retreated.

"You know, Sans," the flower crooned, "you're such a piece of work. Able to retain memories across my Resets and everything. I really thought you'd be interesting! I loved watching you, at first. You were like my special friend."

Sans screwed his eyes shut. He tried to focus on something other than the flower's words. Tried to focus on anything, even the pain, but it didn't work.

"But," the flower continued, "you never did anything! It doesn't matter what I do. All you ever do is sit and brood and get drunk like some loser. That's why I came out here looking for you; I just wanted to give something new a go. But even now, after all the work I've done just to have an itty-bitty bit of fun, the payoff is way less than I expected. I'd almost say it wasn't even worth it if I wasn't so bored. I mean, do I really want to waste my time with you in the next run?"

"Shut – gghhhk – shut up," Sans bit out. "Jus'. shut… " He trailed off, sensing how his speech was giving way to thin whimpers. He curled up tighter. He didn't want to know what his HP was right
"I bet you want to know why I'm doing this, too, don't you?" He was barely aware that the flower had grown, that it now loomed over his broken form. "I get that! I must seem really mean and nasty from your eyes. I've killed so many people, you do not want to look at my LV, trust me, haha! But there's a good reason for all this – promise!"

Sans tried to turn his head away, moaning.

He didn't care. He didn't care what the flower was anymore, he didn't care why it did what it did. He just wanted out of here – any way would do.

He wanted his brother.

"I play with the timeline because I'm curious, Sans," the flower was saying. "It's so boring, and so tiresome. So I decide to have some fun. Because I'm curious! Just. Like. You."

"Hnngh… shut up."

"It's okay, though – none of it really matters in the end, right? If it can just be undone like that, nothing counts for anything! You know that too, don't you? See! Told you we're more alike than you thought!"

"Shuddup," he mumbled.

The flower sighed to itself. "Though not as much as I'd like. Like I said, you're just boring. I mean, look at you now – just lying there! Ugh!"

Sans slid his eyes open. The flower was sneering at him cruelly. On some instinct he couldn't explain, Sans began, slowly, to unfurl.

"Your brother, on the other hand…" The flower shuddered. "Ooh-hoo! He's awfully interesting."

Sans froze.

And slowly, he lifted himself up into an upright position, injured leg crumpled uncomfortably beneath him. It had stopped hurting. Gone numb.

"Ooh, now we're getting something!" The flower looked pleased. "Oh, did my mentioning your baby brother get to you? Did I touch a nerve?" It shrank back into the ground, until it was just the size of an ordinary little yellow flower. Its smile was simpering sweet. "It's really cute, you know. The way you love your brother so much. Anyway, I bet there's a ton of stuff, I could try out with him. It'd be all brand-new."

Sans lifted an arm. A blaster appeared in the air.

For a moment, something like alarm seemed to flash in the flower's eyes. But then its look turned malicious again. "Are you really going to attack me this time, or is that just to make you look tough or something? Because you really don't look all that scary, sitting there like that – "

Sans fired.

For a moment, the air held the lingering scent of smoke, of burnt vegetation.

Then the world reset.
Sans wasn't sure how far back this Reset had taken him. Maybe a couple weeks, maybe a little more. He'd forgotten about the calendar in the living room. He was beyond caring anyway.

All he had known, all he had been able to think, was the flower.

The flower was the anomaly.

He'd found it.

He'd found the anomaly, and absolutely nothing had changed.

He'd found the anomaly, and it didn't matter, it didn't change or fix anything, it didn't make anything better. He couldn't stop it. He could only sit back and watch as it dialled back time, again and again and again, forever.

In the exact same position he'd always been.

Pathetic.

He did not feel more empowered. If anything, he felt as helpless as ever.

And everything was so very, very pointless.

Now it was morning, and Sans was dragging himself from the ferry stop in Hotland to Alphys's lab, nursing a skull-splitting headache. He'd gotten home from Grillby's late last night, long after Papyrus had gone to bed, and when he'd finally woken up, head aching and mind hazy, it was ten in the morning, and his brother had left for school. A note had been left on the fridge, complaining about Sans's laziness.

He found Alphys sitting at her desk and typing something on the computer. She jumped a foot in the air when she saw him come in, then turned brilliantly red and hastened to close the document. "S-Sans! Wow, you're here early - hi!" Then she frowned, squinting at him. "Um, are you okay?"

Sans leaned against the edge of her desk and bit back a groan, rubbing his skull again. "Oh, just dandy. How you farin' yourself?"

Alphys waved the question off, getting to her feet. "A-are you sick or something?"

Sans shook his head, wincing. "Nah. Just, uh, went to the bar last night and had a few too many."

He almost missed the dark look that passed over her face and she sighed, stepping back. "Have you, um, had anything for it yet?"

"Uh, a coupla glasses of water."

Alphys heaved another weary sigh. "Great. Well, o-okay. Just… just wait here. I'll, um, go get you some more water, and um… um… I-I don't really know any hangover cures, but… oh, gee." She began to wring the hem of her lab coat. "I could, I could go out into town and get something, or I could look something up on the Undernet, b-but I don't want to mess anything up, and um…"

"Just water's good."

"You know coffee d-doesn't really help, right? A-and, um – "
"Well, it can't hurt. Do you mind?" It came out harder than he'd intended, and Alphys jumped and quickly looked down, shoulders hunching even more than usual, before mumbling something about a coffee machine being somewhere downstairs and disappearing into the elevator. Sans was too tired to apologise.

He closed his eyes, leaning back in the chair. He almost drifted off again, but then he felt Alphys's hand on his shoulder, shaking him gently. He pulled back, and forced his eyes open.

Alphys held out a glass of water and a mug of coffee. "D-did you really walk all the way here from Snowdin like that?" she frowned.

"Took the ferry." He certainly hadn't tried teleporting. Sans drained the water in one go, then took a sip of the coffee. He pulled a face, squinting up at her. "Your coffee's shit."

Alphys flinched, looking hurt, and this time, he felt a stab of guilt, despite everything.

"Sorry," he muttered. "It should still help. Uh, thanks."

Actually, it already was, somehow – the edges of the headache were quickly starting to wear off into something more akin to discomfort. He wondered if Alphys had put something in the water, or the coffee, then decided not to think about it. The headache, he could ignore, no trouble.

She just nodded, leaning against the wall. "Um…are you sure you're okay? We, we d-don't have to work on the machine today, you know, e-especially since you're definitely not in the, uh, best of shape to really get anything done... and actually, aren't you supposed to be at work right now?"

Work. Right. He'd forgotten about that. Shit. Well, it was too late now. He'd apologise to the King tomorrow.

He got to his feet and crossed the room, suddenly antsy. "Came to talk to you, actually," he said. "About the project."

He wasn't sure what he wanted, or why he'd come. Not entirely. He wasn't sure what he thought, how he felt. He wasn't sure of why he still cared.

He wasn't sure of anything.

And wasn't that the story of his life.

Alphys seemed suddenly nervous – more than usual at any rate. "Oh. O-okay. Um… what about the project?"

Sans rubbed at the bridge of his nasal bone, letting his gaze wander the lab. It fell on the machine, covered by the sheet. He wondered how much progress they had made on it at this point in time.

Not that it mattered.

"I want to finish work on it alone," he said. The words came out short, clipped, all hard edges – the way he might have said it, Sans realised. He didn't bother trying to soften them now; any damage had already been done. "That is… I don't wanna work on it together anymore."

Too late, Sans realised that he was looking right at her when he said this. He quickly looked down at the ground, but it didn't matter. He'd already caught the look on her face: that disappointment, and that hurt, so devastatingly quiet.
And the slightest hint of quiet acceptance, that she'd been expecting something like this to happen all along and was surprised it had taken so long in the first place.

Sans didn't bother trying to fill the silence. Instead, he waited for her to answer, his gaze fixed resolutely on the ground. And, eventually, she did, her voice so small he barely caught it at all.

"Did I do something?"

She didn't even stutter when she said it. Sans wasn't sure what to make of that.

"No. No, God, no, Al. Not… not because of you." Not entirely. "Jus’… you're busy, you're the Royal Scientist, and – "

"I-it's okay if it's because of me," she said quietly. "That is – I-I'd get it, I mean, not that I think you're that nasty sort of person who'd ever do that b-because I could sort of tell that you were – I mean, not that I'd m-make those kinds of judgements about the character of someone who – "

"Al," he cut her off. "I just need to work alone. From now on. You wouldn't understand. But I promise, it ain't… " He trailed off.

"Sans?" Alphys frowned at him.


"You've done everything you can," he said, quickly. "Seriously. And I appreciate it, yeah? I just can't… I'll hire one o' the guys from the CORE to carry the machine for me, we got this cellar in our house we don't use. It'd make a decent workshop. I just… don't figure there's much you can contribute to the project anymore. You prob'ly wanna get to all your scientific advances – "

"I-I kind of haven't really done any work at all since we started… I mean, when you're not here, I just kind of sit in my pyjamas and eat ice cream while watching anime…"

"There, exactly." He shoved off from the table, and realised his head had stopped hurting. "I'm holdin' you back."

"I-d-didn't mean like that…" he heard her mumble, and ignored it.

The headache was almost entirely gone by now.

He turned his gaze back to the machine.

It was a waste of time. A total waste of time for him, and especially for Alphys. Someone who had the potential and the privilege to actually do something and care about it.

And…

Flowey had said that Alphys would make mistakes. Well, maybe if Sans wasn't around, it would keep her from making them.

"Right. I'll be off then, yeah?" Sans made his way for the door. He was almost to the threshold when Alphys stopped him.

He heard her feet tapping hurriedly on the tile and turned just as she reached him. One hand was in the air, and he supposed she'd meant to tap him on the shoulder. Now the hand fluttered awkwardly by her chest before she finally lowered it, then, after another hesitant moment, travelled up again as she crossed her arms. "Um," she said.
Sans raised his brow. "Um?"

Alphys paused, then stood up a little straighter. "Oh! Oh, r-right!" She bit her lip. "S-so, um, you
know how the machine was, um, t-technically ready to do the whole scan thing but then the wiring
was sort of outdated s-so it didn't work quite right and how we were working to get it t-to do that
for a start?"

Sans's brow rode up further. "… yeah. For the past, like, several months?"

"Well, y-yes!" Alphys paused. "Um, so, since you were busy yesterday, I, um, may have decided to
work on the machine b-by myself without you and um, last night I k-kinda got it to work and did a
whole scan?"

Sans froze. He took another step into the lab and found his gaze wandering over her head toward
the machine.

He really wasn't sure how to process this new information, truth be told. A scan of the
Underground, already completed? Some of the information he'd so desperately craved? It seemed a
little too good to be true, given the most recent Reset.

And even then… what Alphys had just done should have been impossible. Or at least
unfathomable. The anomaly's Resets undid time, yes, to whatever point it chose to unravel the
timeline. But it couldn't change anything that had happened before the Save point.

Sans had the impression this last Reset hadn't taken him back very far – somewhere in the span of
one to two weeks, three at the very most – but if Alphys had been able to finish the machine, she
would have told him.

Wouldn't she?

"When yesterday?" he heard himself say.

Alphys seemed notably puzzled by this. "Like… oh, I-I don't know, last night? A-around six or
seven? I-I didn't pay that much attention… " She looked down at her feet a moment. "I'm s-sorry, I
did call, but your phone was out of battery, and then I w-wanted to tell you when you got here but
we kind of got, um, sidetracked… "

Behind him, the lab doors slid shut, and Sans jumped, turning to stare at them a moment.

Then his gaze turned back to the machine.

No. It doesn't matter. Don't bother. Don't. Don't.

"And you really ran a scan, huh?" He stepped past her, striding over to the machine.

"O-of the whole Underground!" The quick patter of her feet following him over. "Including the
Ruins, actually, b-because even though we can't get there, um, it's still p-part of the Underground
and gives us detectable magical energy signatures, and um… " She grabbed a bunch of papers off
of her desk, bound by a paper clip, and thrust them out at him. "Here you go!"

Sans grabbed them and walked back over to the desk, removing the paper clip and leafing through
them.

The readings had been separated into sections: Determination, Concentrated Magical Energy,
Residual Magic, and one final section that read simply, "Void."
Alphys bit her lip, leaning over his shoulder, and tapped the Void header. "Um, still not t-totally sure what this is, you only mentioned it once, b-but I compared everything to the last scan from, um, 1996 th-that we already looked at together and… " She rifled through the papers on her desk and pulled out a second bundle of documents, handing them over to him.

Sans dropped into the chair. He laid the results out in front of him.

He'd had ample time, over the past several months, to familiarize himself with the complex way in which the machine presented the results of its scans, and what they meant. Just as he'd had ample time to study the results of all the scans Gaster had done. It turned out that while the machine had been a relatively recent creation, Gaster had been analysing and studying Determination and magical energy levels in Underground for years, with simpler, more primitive technology. The earliest scans Sans had been able to find went back to the late twenties, about half a decade before the deaths of the royal children.

"So… if we compare today's scans from the ones in 1996… " Sans leaned closer over the readings.

"I-I already looked at them," Alphys interrupted. "I, um, I-if you look here, magical energy has had some minor fluctuations, which is t-to be expected, that's normal, a-and D-determination levels have actually remained t-totally stable since – "

"Wait, what?"

Alphys pointed, and Sans leaned closer only to realise that she was right. The DT levels in the Underground had not even fluctuated the slightest bit in thirteen years – in fact, they hadn't fluctuated since the last human fell, a few years before Sans had been born.

Forget Alphys advancing on the machine in this new timeline, that was impossible.

Gaster had fallen thirteen years ago, yes, but it had taken several more years for the Resets to begin. How old had he been, sixteen? It was hard to remember. If the flower had been created, or come into the Underground, before then, then why had it waited so long to Reset? That was almost thirty years. It simply didn't make sense for a creature that malicious to bother waiting. Why hadn't it grown "bored" before then?

*It doesn't matter*, he reminded himself.

And it didn't.

He was about to hand the reports back to Alphys when she reached out for them herself, flipping through several pages.

"I-I know you said it wasn't important, b-but, um, it looks like the Void energy levels, o-or whatever you want to call them… well, they've spiked. A lot. S-since, um, the last scan was d-done."

Sans stared.

Well.

So they had.

Significantly.

Alphys pinched the bridge of her snout. "B-by the way, I'm, uh, still not sure h-how the Royal
Scientist could have been working thirteen years ago, but I g-guess you don't have the answer to that either, huh?"

He shook his head, frowning. "No, but look. This Void energy's been growing in the Underground for ages over the course o' the past few decades, right? We saw that in the older reports. But this… is a lot for just thirteen years."

"I-is it bad?"

"I don't know," he lied. "Probably."

"It d-does sound bad," Alphys agreed. "Wh-what was it you called it? The um, never… "

"The nothing outside spacetime," Sans supplied automatically. "The total lack of time and space."

Alphys seemed confused, then sighed. "I-I'll leave that up to the physics guy in the room. B-but do you… you do know what it means?"

"Some," he said, simply. "Anyway. Thank you." Sans grabbed the report and slipped the paper clip back on. "I'll be off, then." He stood up.

"Oh. R-right." She seemed to be holding her breath, and Sans swore she was standing on tiptoe as she suddenly burst out: "S-so you still, um… you still r-really want to work on it alone? You don't wanna… "

"No," he said simply. "I'll take it from here." He held up the new reports. "Take these too, if ya don't mind." After a moment's consideration, he stuffed them into his ribcage.

"Oh. Y-yeah. Of course. Of course, th-that makes… I mean… W-well… o-okay, I can arrange… I mean, I understand if you don't, but – w-well, you'll still come by sometime, right? What you said, we're st-still… friends… r-right?"

Beat.

I'm surprised you still trust her, Sans.


... wrong?

Sans turned around and forced himself to look at her. He deflated. "Yeah," he said softly. "Yeah, 'course we are." And he realised he meant it.

The kind of monster she is… and what she's gonna do… gosh, I can't believe you still want to have anything to do with her at all!

No. Wrong.

He couldn't trust a word of what that flower said.

He trusted Alphys. He had to. As much as he possibly could. She wasn't him, nor could she ever be. The flower was an anomaly, and it couldn't know the future. It had been lying. Alphys wasn't going to do anything. She had no way of knowing Sans was Determined. She wasn't going to…

Wrong.
He trusted Alphys, but… it couldn’t hurt to keep his distance. Just a little bit. Just in case.

Sans faltered. "No," he said, turning away. "No. They don’t mean anything. Forget it. I wouldn’t waste my time on ’em." He stuffed his hands into his pockets and turned for the door. "Forget I said anything. See ya, Al."

He left, without looking back.

Maybe there was nothing he could do about the timeline, one way or the other.

And yes, it was all hideously pointless.

But it couldn’t very well hurt to, at the very least, try to keep tabs on the Void and DT levels himself. Run a few scans on his own. Just in case.
Into the Dark

Chapter Notes

I’d just like to point out that NWABBW now has even MORE fan art, made again by the amazing PerpetuaTheBrave, or unexpected-profundity on tumblr. Do check out her gorgeous, gorgeous drawing of Sans meeting Asgore in Chapter 7, and be sure to give her all of your support!

Also, don’t forget to check out the NWABBW blog for chapter status updates, bonus lore, silly writing-related ruminations, and a special deleted scene for this chapter that will be coming very soon after this one’s release!

Morning found Sans sprawled on his front on his brother's bed, one leg poking out from under the blankets and dangling over the edge of the mattress.

Sans groaned, rolling over to look at the clock on the dresser. 10:03 AM, it proclaimed in glowing red digits. 10 in the morning. Oh, boy. Papyrus was going to kill him.

It took him another ten minutes to find the willpower to drag himself out of bed and change, but as he finally made his way downstairs, it was to the welcome sight of Frisk and Undyne playing some sort of racing video game against each other. Papyrus stood a little off to the side, cheering both of them on.

Sans leaned over the banister with an easy grin. "Morning."

Both Undyne and Frisk crashed their cars for the distraction, but while Undyne groaned dramatically and lobbed a stray sock-ball at him – she missed – , the kid didn't seem to mind. She smiled brightly and tipped her head back. "Hi, Sans! Guess what! I beat Undyne two races in a row!"

"Congratulations, kiddo. You make sure ya slay her in the next one, now – I'm rooting for ya."

Well, that explained why Undyne looked so very irritated. More than usual, at any rate. Undyne, it was discovered a little while after the family moved in together, had never gotten the memo about letting little kids beat you every once in a while so they didn't feel bad, and continued to be as fiercely competitive with Frisk as she was with everyone else. But, as it turned out, she really didn't need to "let" Frisk win at anything. She was a tough little cookie. Good on the kid.

Sans began to make his way downstairs just as Papyrus took to berating him for sleeping in so late and being "SUCH a LAZYBONES, BROTHER, for 'MORNING' is nearly FINISHED." It allowed Sans to make quite the entrance. He made his way into the kitchen, tailed by Papyrus, and popped a slice of bread in the toaster. He finally managed to ward his brother off when the toast was ready by slathering it in ketchup, peanut butter, and far, far too much mayonnaise. Papyrus left in a predictably irate huff, claiming that he refused to be in the same room as Sans if he was going to perpetuate such revolting eating habits.

Score.

Once he was gone, Sans gave the toast a hesitant nibble, then gagged and tossed it in the trash. He
standards may have been pretty low, but at least he still had them – he wasn't a barbarian, even if Papyrus was convinced otherwise. Instead he made his breakfast out of one of the many pies Toriel had stored away in the fridge, heating it up in the microwave before teleporting downstairs.

His desk was still scattered in papers from last night. Sans took a bite of pie, pulling one of the reports closer to him as he leaned over it.

There hadn't really been anything written on the Void, before. Gaster had been the one who discovered it, the one who studied it. Sans, in turn, had done a lot of thinking about it, but he'd never done anything with those theories, never proved anything. It was little more than conjecture.

Even so, Sans had his own hypotheses.

He still had had nightmares about his creator, every once in a while. Demons coming out from the closet and reminding him they were still here. They were always the usual shtick - he was back to being strapped down to the operating table, back to being injected with Determination, to being subjected to even more experiments that made him scream and scream.

Subjected, ha.

It made no difference that the nightmares got real old, real fast. Every time, he'd wake up in a panicked sweat, his magic flaring around him, and when he finally came to his senses he'd bury his face in his pillow so Papyrus didn't hear him crying.

But as a child, in the first year or two following Gaster's fall, he'd had a recurring nightmare Gaster came back, crawled out of the Void to reclaim him. In the dreams, he would be back in his childhood bedroom, and there would be a crack in his wall that opened up into the Void. He'd watch as the crack grew, oozing a black, tar-like substance and splitting open like a smile. And from this tear, his creator would pull himself out of the Void, using his arms first. Spiderlike.

He'd wondered about this later, as he resumed work on the machine and finally saw proof that each Reset did in fact tear open the fabric of the world just a little more, letting the Void in. He'd wondered if Gaster really might be able to return, if the tear grew wide enough. Really pondered it, from a scientific standpoint.

ButSans had never really been able to come to a firm conclusion one way or the other.

The report he was looking at now was from 1996, but the one next to it was from 2013 – just two years before Frisk had fallen. There was a minor spike in Determination levels, which could be traced to the sixth human child who'd fallen a year previous. That human had had a yellow soul. It had contained natural traces of Determination all human souls possessed, but the human had lacked the power to Save and Reset. They hadn't been an anomaly.

Not quite Determined enough, just like him.

Sans took another bite of pie, finger tracing a row of complex equations the machine had spat out, then flipped through the 2013 report to the readings that had been gathered off the Void. They were higher, obviously.

He polished off the last of the pie and wiped his hands on his shorts, leafing through the papers on his desk, which were growing messier and messier at an alarming rate.

Indeed, with every report, the Void energy readings grew higher – no fluctuations, just a steep and steady upward climb. This was the fundamental result of the wounds to spacetime that had come with every single one of the flower's Reloads – and the kid's. All of that energy, that anti-energy,
the total nothing on the edges of the universe, creeping closer.

Sans had never studied the reports from the machine very intimately. He hadn't noticed it before, but now was drawn to the fact that Void energy wasn't the only thing that had been increasing in the Underground over the years.

Fluctuations in the Underground's magical energy signature – both concentrated and residual – were to be expected. The Underground's magical energy signature shifted a little each and every day: the factors at hand were too many to name. Hell, if magical energy levels had remained entirely stable over the course of two decades, it would be an indicator of something seriously wrong.

These readings were different. There was a pattern here. The reports didn't just indicate fluctuations. Just like the increase in Void energy, the rate of disturbances in the magical sphere had been increasing steadily over the years.

And every bit of Void energy that the machine detected was energy that had been leaking into the Underground. Poisoning it.

The relationship was not a coincidence.

Sans quickly shoved the reports across the table.

"What do you want, Gaster?" he murmured. "The Barrier's broken. What the hell could you want now?"

He brought a hand to his chest, wincing, and clutched at his sternum.

His soul had been aching for three days straight.

It wasn't just an ache, though. His soul felt weighed down, waterlogged. It was similar to the sensation of having it held by blue magic, only worse, and cutting much deeper. Like hands gripping his soul and squeezing it tight, wringing it out like a damp cloth. Mine.

Sans pushed the feeling aside.

It was strange, looking at these reports again. He'd monitored the timelines across the flower's erratic Resets for years, alone in his basement workshop. But always without any real purpose. He'd done it as though someone had assigned him to the task, as if it were his job and he had to, though of course that couldn't have been further from the truth. Simply keeping an eye socket on the Underground's Void energy and Determination levels was a pointless endeavour, really.

Like watching an oncoming storm you knew you were powerless to stop; or knowing that a meteorite was about to hit the Earth and not even bothering to break out the champagne while you still could.

Yet he'd done it anyway, running formal scans on a monthly basis, sometimes even twice or three times a month. He'd even found a way to rig his phone up to the machine so that he got a notification if it picked up on any strong disturbances. He'd been so ludicrously dedicated to his task, even when it had no purpose.

But he did have a purpose now. A real purpose, something to fight for.

They were on the Surface, and there was only one timeline now. One course of action, with consequences that couldn't just be undone anymore.
Not that he really knew what he was doing. If his theories on the Void were conjecture, then all of this was just a shot in the dark.

And he was probably just prolonging the inevitable besides.

But that was fine. Just so long as he found a way to keep the kid safe. Because what Gaster wanted was Frisk, apparently. And he had to protect Papyrus - and the rest of the family, for that matter. No matter what it took.

Sans continued staring at the reports a moment longer, then stood up. Nope. He wasn't the least bit sure what he doing just yet, but whatever it was, he might as well get it over with.

But before he headed out, he had a last bit of business to tend to.

He picked up his plate, then teleported back upstairs to the kitchen. There, he found Alphys washing the dishes. He landed directly behind her, but she took no notice of him. Sans grinned a little, leaning over her shoulder. "Heya."

Alphys made a sound like a mouse being stepped on and nearly dropped the mug she was washing. She spun, then groaned and rubbed at her temples. "God, Sans, don't scare me like that. D-do you have t-to that every time?" She flashed him an irritated look, whipping the dish cloth in his direction.

Sans sidestepped easily out of the way. "Hey, careful with that – 1 HP here."

Alphys just rolled her eyes, then sighed and turned off the tap. "W-what's up?"

Sans shrugged, leaning back against the counter.

"Oh, the usual." He cleared his throat, then cut to the chase. "Actually… had a couple things to ask ya."

"O-okay?" Alphys looked sceptical.

"I was thinking about the timelines," he spoke up. "The machine. I've really been meaning to fix it for a while now, y'know? So I wanna gather up some spare parts and whatnot, see what I got back home. Maybe when I get back, you wanna give me a hand?" He tilted his head to one side and offered her a slight, inviting little smile. "Like the old days."

"The old days," Alphys echoed, her voice going distant. She snapped back to attention just a moment later, and took up the task of drying the coffee mug. "Y-yeah. O-okay. But, um… well, wasn't the machine, ah, designed for the Underground? I-it wouldn't have much purpose here on the Surface, would it?"

"We could update it." It was a piss-poor excuse, one that Alphys was more than clever enough to see right through. She'd also just pointed out a major hole in Sans's logic – a major hole in his entire plan, which was irritating.

Especially considering that his plan currently consisted of little more than a few tattered scraps. He didn't need the reminder.

"Listen," Sans continued. "I'm just gonna head down there, gather what I want, and bring it back up. I got this… " Sans trailed off and shook his head. "Just wanna check some stuff out while I'm at it."
Alphys was silent for a moment, letting Sans's mind drift. His and Alphys's relationship had been a little strained ever since he'd taken up work on the machine alone, but they'd remained friends, officially.

"Wh-why don't I come with you?" she spoke up, snapping him back to attention.

Sans sighed. Oh, but he knew her so well. Of course she'd offer.

"I-I mean! I-I could help you c-carry all the stuff! I-I'm not very strong, actually I'm s-sort of the opposite of 'strong,' but I'm still k-kinda stronger than you, n-no offence – that is! Yeah, I could help you carry… Well, also, i-if you need to go to the old, um, the True Lab I-I could head down for you and see what I can find, because, you know, you have that weird hang-up about the place; you s-still haven't told me why by the way…"

"Do I ever tell ya why?" Sans grinned, fast and easy. If he couldn't get away with being secretive, he might as well play the part.


"Anyway. No, I don't need ya to come down with me. I'd rather go by myself. And since I know you're about to ask what I wanna do with the machine in the first place, I'll save time – I'm a lazy guy – and inform you beforehand that I'm not gonna answer. Not exactly certain what I wanna do myself, see. Maybe I've just been on the lookout for an adventure." Sans broke off and stared down at his feet. "And, uh, I actually gotta ask you for a kinda favour thingy."

A dish cloth and a plate, dripping wet, were suddenly thrust into his hands. "I-if you help me with the dishes, maybe."

Sans stared down at them. He shrugged a little. "Fair enough." He began to dry the plate, not really paying much attention as he did it.

Alphys resumed washing the dishes. Sans had been drying the same plate for over a minute when she gently pried it from his hands and placed it in the cupboard. "Sans?" she asked. "A-are you going to…?"

"Yeah," he said. "Right." He released one last, long sigh. "Listen, Al. I trust you. Y'know that?"

The tap was turned off. Just silence now.

Alphys laced and unlaced her fingers together in quick, anxious motions. "Y-you really shouldn't, you know," she mumbled. "B-but… um, I-I think you were about to say something important there, s-so… Sorry, I-I really killed the moment there, didn't I, would you still -"

"I do trust you," Sans said firmly. "But, uh, yeah. Listen to me for a sec."

"… o-okay."

He breathed in, out. His soul tensed suddenly, and he suppressed a wince. Then, the feeling passed. "So, first of all. Disclaimer, you can't tell anyone what I'm about to say. Not a word. Not to anyone. Not even Papyrus. Especially not Papyrus. Capiche?"

She faltered, then nodded carefully.

"So. I'm off to the Underground, yeah? Won't be back 'til pretty late. Now, I'm gonna have my phone on me, so if I don't come back in a while – say by, I dunno, twelve hours – then you're
allowed to maybe get a little worried. So just… give me a call, won'tcha? And then maybe start to get really worried if I ain't back in 24. And, uh, if 48 hours go by and I still haven't answered… "He gave a noncommittal shrug. "There's this letter. In my desk drawer, down in the basement. So yeah, give it to Papyrus for me, if I ain't back by then. 'course, that would, uh, render the little don't-tell-anyone-especially-Papyrus clause null. But only after 48 hours."

Alphys did not seem very happy with this – which Sans figured was fair, since it really did sound awfully morbid without context – but mostly she seemed confused. Also fair. "Um.. w-what? I'm sorry, what? Sans, what are you – "

Hands spread out, he began to walk backwards into the living room. "That is. That was a joke. I was kiddin'. Tryin' to get a reaction outta ya."

Alphys crossed her arms over her chest. "Y-you don't think I actually believe that." She said it flatly – not a question, but a statement. Scientific fact.

Sans only waited a moment before stopping where he stood. He offered her another grin, but he didn't bother trying to make this one genuine. After all these years, he supposed he owed her something, at least. "Yeah, didn't actually think you would."

She bit her lip. "What is it, then?"

"Just don't worry about it," he replied. "Go treat yourself today. Tori's coming back in, what, three days? Take Undyne out to dinner or somethin'. Papyrus can watch the kid. And then tonight you can tell me all about it." He smirked at her immediate blush, then, before she could respond, took a few more paces back, and out of the kitchen.

And as soon as he'd stepped out into the living room, he took a shortcut out to the porch.

He didn't think Alphys was going to leave this alone; she could be persistent when she wanted to be.

But that didn't matter.

He didn't plan on sticking around long enough for her to do anything about it.

Sans leaned back against the door for a moment, sockets sliding shut. He needed to go. He would go. Soon. Just not now. Not yet, not ready.

He must have stayed like that for ten minutes before he turned his head and peeked into the house through the front window. The blinds were halfway shut, and he couldn't see Undyne from over here, but he could just make out Frisk sitting on the sofa, her body angled to look at something behind her. Good. It would be better – easier – if the kid was distracted and didn't notice him; otherwise she'd probably insist on coming or some shit.

Which Sans absolutely couldn't have.

It would be a lot easier if he didn't see Papyrus, either.

Right.

Time to leave.

He'd only taken one step off the porch when the front door opened and Papyrus stood there, holding the recycling in one hand and a garbage bag in the other.
Sans froze.

Welp. So much for that.

"Brother?" Papyrus, too, stopped where he stood, though he did shoulder the door shut behind him.

"Hey, bro." Sans thrust his hands into his pockets, so they were right at home, and plastered on a quick grin. "I, uh. I was just gonna head back to the Underground for the day to – "

"Yes, Doctor Alphys MENTIONED you were going back for the afternoon."

Sans was vaguely aware of his eyelights dimming to pinpricks. He took a step or two back. "Yeah? She, uh, say anything else?"

"No." Papyrus stepped off the porch and strode efficiently past Sans to the garbage and recycling bins on the edge of the driveway.

Sans searched his brother's face for a lie, but finding none, he relaxed, if only a little. Papyrus had always been a terrible liar, anyway. On one memorable occasion, when he'd been twelve, he'd insisted that he and Undyne had absolutely not been riding their bikes over the steam vents in Hotland despite multiple eyewitness accounts claiming the contrary.

Shortly afterward, he'd burst into tears and had been inconsolable for the next hour.

"Well – " Sans began, but Papyrus cut him off.

"But Sans … " He set his load down to lift the lid of the garbage bin and paused, thinking. "She seemed VERY upset. Brother, did you say something to disturb her?"


"She seemed very worried about you." From here, Sans could see the way his brother's brow bone came together in a deep frown. "And I worry, too." He dropped the garbage bag into the bin and dropped the lid. It came down with a heavy thud that made both of them jump.

"Aw, Paps." Sans strolled across the lawn to join him. "You don't gotta worry about me. 'm fine."

"But Sans … " He set his load down to lift the lid of the garbage bin and paused, thinking. "She seemed VERY upset. Brother, did you say something to disturb her?"


"She seemed very worried about you." From here, Sans could see the way his brother's brow bone came together in a deep frown. "And I worry, too." He dropped the garbage bag into the bin and dropped the lid. It came down with a heavy thud that made both of them jump.

"Aw, Paps." Sans strolled across the lawn to join him. "You don't gotta worry about me. 'm fine."

Beat. "This ain't about yesterday, is it?"

Papyrus's silence was enough of an answer. His brother placed gloved hands on the lid of the recycling bin, palms laid flat and fingers splayed out. He stared resolutely down at them as if they might provide an answer to some unposed question.

Sans clenched his teeth together. He should be going. Doing something to protect the kid – and, for that matter, Papyrus too, probably. He hadn't wanted to encounter his brother for this very reason. Because now he was distracted, because now he was tempted to stay.

"Hey. Hey, Paps." Sans reached up and rubbed his spine like he had when he was a little kid.

"C'mon. Listen, I really am sorry 'bout yesterday. Was just a ba – "

"A bad day," Papyrus finished heavily. "You ALWAYS used to say that, before the tiny human arrived! Always! And you SAID you were better here on the Surface, but that is obviously not the CASE!"

Sans looked away. "I'm trying, Papyrus."

"You're ALWAYS trying! And brother, I believe in you as I WISH you knew, but for all you try,
nothing ever seems to WORK!"

Sans flinched.

Papyrus faltered, then placed his hands on his hips. He was trying to sound strict, but fell short, so that the only thing discernible in his tone was strained concern. "If you are having bad days like THAT again, perhaps you ought to wait until you are feeling a bit better before heading back to the Underground!"

"Bro – "

Now Papyrus found the tone he was looking for. "And however do you plan on GETTING there when you are SUCH a LAZYBONES? It is SEVERAL MILES to the mountain, and then you must still climb it!"

"I was planning on takin' a shortcut."

"UGH! I should have known!"

"And," Sans said, grinning, "you might worry about me skull-king around the Underground when – "

"Brother," Papyrus interrupted. "If you try to distract me by making some dreadful puns, or, or, out-of-place joke about the road-crossing habits of poultry, I will be EXTREMELY UPSET and MORE THAN A LITTLE CROSS."

"Okay," he said, grin not fading in the slightest. "Okay, fine. Maybe you deserve a day without puns for once, then. Might as well make it a day I won't be around so's I don't gotta worry about resisting the temptation of telling a real rib-tickler."

"SANS!" Papyrus huffed loudly, lifted the lid of the recycling bin, and dumped his load in before letting the lid drop again with an even more aggressive bang. Then his expression softened. "Brother… maybe I should accompany you?"

Not this again. Sans shook his head. "Nah. I'm – "

"If you allow me to accompany you on this venture, I can WATCH you, brother, and ENSURE YOUR ULTIMATE SAFETY!" He paused awkwardly, then thrust a hand to his chest and assumed a typically heroic pose. "NYEH HEH HEH! Would you DENY the GREAT AND NOBLE COMPANY of THE GREAT PAPYRUS?"

Sans grinned up at him, wider still. "Ya said great twice, bro. Can't go round usin' the same adjective in the same sentence. Ain't proper."

"VALIANT, THEN!"

"Valiant works. 's a good word." Sans glanced out at the street. "Look, I know you prob'ly miss it back there, too, and wanna pay a visit home, but maybe next time. 'kay?" Papyrus looked disappointed. "So I, uh, better head out now."

Sans faltered, staring up at him. Because by God, now that Papyrus was here, all he wanted to do was just stay here, in the yard, with his brother, and be scolded for telling atrocious bone puns he'd beaten like a dead horse. Be lazy, sit back and relax as the storm came his way.

He resisted the urge to hug him.
Sans just kept on staring, trying to memorise every detail of his brother's face.

His bright eyesockets, his own permanent grin. The slight arc to his brow bone that perpetually made him look as if he were on the verge of asking a question, the point to his nasal cavity, and every tiny, beautiful imperfection in the bone. There was the tiny chip in his front tooth, only noticeable if you were looking for it, that he'd gotten when he was fourteen during a sparring match with Undyne.

The face that Sans had looked down upon for the first time, one day when he was seven years old, and changed his world forever.

"Brother? What are you doing?"

"Sorry. Sorry." Sans looked sharply off to the side, in the direction of the house. He caught a glimpse of Alphys in the window, watching them, and grit his teeth before pointedly turning his head the other way. "Just, uh, spaced out." He drew in a breath. "See ya, Papyrus." His hand rose to reach out to him, then fell limp at his side.

Sans took one last, long look at his brother, then turned on his heel and walked away without looking back.

oOo

He wouldn't be able to teleport to the Underground. Not really.

It was too far, miles just to reach the base of the mountain. Sans hadn't had too much trouble using his shortcuts back in the Underground, but then he'd never had to travel any great lengths. Even a trip from the Ruins door to the furthest corner of New Home didn't match the distance of teleporting to the Underground from all the way over here. That was the way of things up here on the Surface. And while Papyrus was convinced otherwise, he'd always used that particular power of his sparingly.

Mostly.

So maybe he had been showing off just a little when the kid arrived. Just a tad.

Well, it would do him good to conserve his energy as much as he could. Something told him he was going to need it.

So now, Sans walked, on foot, to the nearest bus stop, four blocks from their house. The bus would take him to the furthest edge of town – nearly to the base of the mountain.

He'd only made it two blocks when he heard the sound of little running shoes hitting the pavement, coming from behind him.

"Sans! Dunkle Sans! Sans, wait for me!"

Sans stopped where he stood. He shut his eyes and breathed out. "You're not gonna stop me from heading back to the Underground, kid."

Frisk stumbled to a stop next to him – his left, she was good at that. "I wasn't going to." She sounded surprised. She had her windbreaker slung over one shoulder; now she finally put it on.

Sans cast her a sidelong glance. "Alphys send ya?"
"No." Frisk shook her head, then bit her lip, suddenly a little nervous. "I sneaked out of the house. She doesn't know I'm here; nobody does. I left a note in my room, but... probably no-one knows I', gone yet. Don't tell on me, please?"

Sans winked, drawing an X over his sternum. "Wouldn't stoop to that level, kid." He kept walking, however, forcing the kid to hurry forward a few paces to catch back up to him. "So. How'd ya know I was out here?"

"I heard you talking to Auntie Alphys and Uncle Papyrus about it."

"You were eavesdropping," he clarified, calmly. Frisk faltered, and Sans chuckled, reaching out to ruffle her hair. "'s alright. What be your mission?"

Frisk sucked in a deep breath. "I wanna come with you," she blurted.

A part of him had suspected as much. But it was still enough to make him freeze on the spot. Sans swivelled his head to get a better look at her.

He couldn't have it, of course. He just had to find a clever way to shake her off. "That a fact?"

"Yep!" Frisk seemed inexplicably proud of herself.

"Thought you were playing video games with Undyne. I wouldn't wanna take you away from that."

"Yeah, but then Auntie Undyne started to get mad that I kept beating her so she went to the backyard to punch her dummy for a little. And then after I heard what you were saying to Alphys and Papyrus and then I – "

"Came out here."

Frisk nodded solemnly, then crossed her arms over her chest. "I can tell you don't want me to come. But I am coming with you and you can't stop me, so there."

"Uh. Yeah, I can." Sans resumed walking, placing one foot calmly in front of the other. The kid did the same, the challenge never fading from her expression.

"No, you can't! I am coming, I'm gonna follow you, and you can't make me go back home. What are you doing down there, anyway?"

Sans raised his brow bone. "Well, seein' as you listened in on both my conversations, I'd have thought you'd know just as well as me. You should practically know better than me. Also, I did tell you last night."

"Yeah, but what are you gonna do if you fix the machine?"

"Already told you I don't know," he said, more sharply than he intended. Frisk flinched, and Sans sighed. "Sorry, kid."

They had reached the corner store. Sans came here often; the human who worked here wasn't bad. He paused, then swung over in the direction of the door. "I'm gonna get myself some chips. Little treat for the road. You want anythin'?"

"Iced tea?"

He waved her in the direction of the fridge at the back of the store as the owner gave him a nodded greeting. Sans returned it, then took a bag of chips from the shelf. He paused. Then, changing his
mind, he put them back, joined Frisk by the fridge, and grabbed a can of beer instead.

Sans paid for both their drinks, then led Frisk outside and carried on in the direction of the bus stop, the kid making a brief but suspicious comment on "keeping him company." It wasn't until they were seated at the bus stop that Frisk spoke up again.

"Are you just gonna bring up parts, or are you gonna scan stuff, too?"

Sans cracked open his beer and took a long swig. Ah, that was better. He squinted out at the passing cars. "Might scan some stuff – get some base readings on what the Void levels are like now. I got some less sophisticated equipment in my workshop that'll do the trick – it won't tell me much of value, but it should pick up on anything that's real off."

Frisk swung her legs, the picture of innocuousness. "Are you gonna try to study anything else down there?"

He shrugged. "Guess I could also try and get a good look at the locations o' the old Save points; there might be something there. Lingering energy of… not quite sure."

The kid smiled.

He did not like that smile.

Shit.

"But you don't know where the Save stars are, do you, Dunkle Sans?"

"Nooo," he ventured. "Guess I don't."

Frisk beamed wider. "But I do. So you need me to show you, right? How else are you gonna know where to even find them to study 'em?"

"… you told me there was one outside the Snowed Inn."

"That's just one, though! Don't you wanna study the others?"

Yes, he'd expected as much. And he could not deny that this little girl was good.

"You could tell me," he offered weakly.

Frisk shook her head from side to side. "Nope. Only if you let me come."

There came a screech as the bus pulled up to the stop with the release of an acrid puff of fumes. Frisk stood up along with him just as the doors swung open.

Sans turned on her. "You're not coming, kid."

"I am, you need me to come!" Frisk crossed her arms over her chest again. "Or I'll tell Uncle Papyrus you're doing something dangerous. And I'll tell Auntie Undyne, too."

Sans cursed under his breath, bringing a hand to his skull as he looked between Frisk and the bus in bewilderment. He tried not to imagine what might happen if Undyne got wind of his plans. Though it would probably be worse if it was Toriel. She'd be upset with him, undoubtedly. Sans wasn't sure why, but he didn't like the idea of Toriel being upset with him.

"Hey! You gettin' on or not?" the bus driver called out.
Sans swore again, not caring for now if Frisk heard him. He pointed a finger at her. "Fine. Fine. Let's go. Get on." Frisk all but squealed and bounded aboard the bus, making a beeline for the best seats by the back window. Sans followed a little more slowly, dropping two tickets into the collections-box and ignoring the bus driver's irritated remarks.

He couldn't just have an eight-year-old tagging alongside him on this venture. Especially not this eight-year-old. He was supposed to keep her safe; that was the whole point.

Did Frisk know just how much danger she could very well be in? She seemed absolutely ecstatic, but then she hadn't been too phased by strange monsters in a strange land trying to claim her soul when she'd first journeyed across the Underground, either. But this was different – even she had to understand that.

Sans had told her about Gaster, as much as he'd seen fit. There was still plenty she didn't know, of course, plenty he would never tell – all of it probably enough to fill the Royal Library. He hadn't thought he would need to tell her anything more, had thought that the barebones story he'd related had been more than enough.

Now, however…

Sans took the seat next to Frisk, and though she seemed to be in a fine mood, he didn't miss the way her hand moved to clutch at her chest, small fingers worrying the fabric of her sweater as her face contorted.

Her soul was hurting too.

He would let her join him to Snowdin, he decided. Snowdin was safe, familiar. But if it came down to it, and he was forced to return to the labs to gather his equipment, then he would send the kid back home, no matter how much she protested.

Everyone would probably be wondering where Frisk was by now. Maybe they'd even found the note after searching for her in her bedroom. Sans didn't plan on asking what she'd written.

God.

Toriel was going to find out about this, whether he visited the Royal Labs or not.

And then she was going to kill him.

Against all expectations, Frisk chattered away the whole bus ride – about school, about cartoons, about the book she'd started reading, about the games she'd invented with Monster Kid the other day at recess.

Sans nodded, offered "hmms" and "yeahs" and "greats" in all the right places, but he was barely listening. He rested his elbow against the back of his seat and his chin in his hand, staring out the window. At some point his eyes drifted shut. He felt Frisk poke him in the chest and tug at his sleeve, but he pretended to be asleep, and at last came the kid's huff of frustration before she threw herself back against the seat, giving up.

The bus ride was another 30 minutes – last stop. Frisk bounded off the bus and waited impatiently for Sans to disembark. Judging by her behaviour, one would think he'd promised to take her to the beach or something.

From here, the base of the mountain was less than a ten-minute's walk. A hikers' path had been made, marked by a plain wooden signpost, leading up the mountain and into the mouth of the
cavern, the one that opened into the castle. The path had initially been made by the monsters on the day the Barrier broke. They'd trampled down the mountain in desperate, eager streams as they rushed to greet the world that they had been shut away from.

Sans didn't realise he'd stopped dead in his tracks, staring up at it, until Frisk's hand slipped into his.

"Are you scared?" she asked quietly.

He paused.

He considered lying to her, but what would be the point, really? He had lied to her enough – was lying to her enough. And even if he did lie, it was clear she wouldn't believe him.

"Yeah," he said, voice low. "Sorta." He jerked his chin in the direction of the mountain. "Come on. Let's get moving."

"Okay." Frisk dropped his hand and skipped forward a few steps, then turned and began to walk backward. "Can we do a shortcut?"

Sans chuckled. "You like the shortcuts? Better not let Papyrus hear ya say that."

"He'll say you're a bad influence," Frisk giggled. A few more steps; she nearly tripped once, then steadied herself. "Please?"

"Sure." Sans nodded. "Once we get to the base of the mountain, how's that? Bit of a long shot for me to travel if we go from here. And shortcuts are, uh, a little harder here on the Surface."

"Okay," said Frisk again, and shrugged, as if it didn't matter. But he caught her eyeing him suspiciously before she began to concentrate her energy on walking backward again. Then, just a moment later, "Dunkle Sans?"

Sans tensed. "Yeah, kiddo?"

She stopped walking backward suddenly. She resumed a normal pace, joining Sans at his side. She bit her lip. "Dunkle Sans, you know how you said… you said there's a Void leak and that's why I'm having my weird dreams?"

"… yes?"

"Is that for the whole world, or just the mountain?"

He hesitated. "That's a good question," he said warily. It was, too. Sans scratched the back of his skull. "Well, I figure… " The truth slipped out before he could stop it. "Truth is, prob'ly – well, maybe not the whole world, but I'd say the leak's prob'ly enough to make it beyond the mountain. 'cause before, in the Underground, whenever a bit o' Void energy came into the world with a Save or Reset, all that energy was contained by the Barrier, right? But now the Barrier's gone, there ain't… ain't nothing to stop it from spreading further. You understand?"

Frisk nodded. "Spread further to find me."

There was no fear in her tone, and that worried him. "Hey. Hey." Sans snapped his fingers at her. "You're gonna be just fine, okay? Nothing's lookin' for ya – no Void, no weird grey monsters, and definitely not him, before ya start goin' on about that again."
"But why – "

"I don't know." He cut her off sharply, harsher than he intended, but there wasn't any use in apologising at this point. "Whatever you're about to ask, I don't know."

Frisk fell silent. But only for a moment. "Could we close the tear?"

Sans almost tripped. "What?"

"Can we close the tear?" She turned on him, eyes shining. "The tear into the Void, do you think we can close it? And get all the Void stuff back where it came from? You and me could try together. With our Determination, maybe we could do it."

Sans had to keep himself from scoffing out loud. It was a nice idea, so sweet it bordered on saccharine, and was precisely the sort of thing the kid would come up with. "Yeah. And how would we do that? Exactly?"

Frisk shrugged.

He shook his head, unable to keep from laughing just a bit. "It's… a nice idea, okay, Frisk? But the Void don't work that way. It feeds on DT. 's what let it break out into the world in the first place."

"But if both of us tried! We just gotta stay Determined!"

Sans released a heaving sigh. Right. Great. Fantastic. Not only did he have to protect the kid, now that he'd made the stupid decision to let her tag along, but he had to deal with this nonsense. This absurd conviction that everything could be solved with love and friendship and just enough determination. Believe and it will come true. It was endearing, it was what made her so fundamentally good. And it was exactly what had made him come to love her so much, everything that reminded him of his brother. But right here, right now, it was a liability.

So too was that Determination of hers.

Yep. This one was really coming back to bite him in the coccyx.

And they weren't even in the Underground yet.

"You're Determined," he clarified, forcing patience into his tone. "The anomaly. I got Determination in me too, but it ain't – well, it ain't like yours. Not like I asked for it to be put there. It's not even in my soul, it's not a part o' me like it is with you."

Frisk stared at him hard, expression unreadable. At last she said, "But it's like we have a special connection! And I still think maybe we could – "

Sans groaned. "C'mon, kiddo. Drop it, okay? I just remember the timelines – I watch, never actually did any of the real work you did, Savin' and Resetting and all that jazz. Just put in the bare minimum of effort. I'm too lazy to be a real anomaly – that's old Sans for ya, heh."

"But Saaaaans – " Her voice pitched into a whine.

"Kid," he said warningly, and she gave a heavy, irritated sigh, then fell finally, mercifully silent.

They kept walking. Inside his pockets, Sans wrung the fabric of his hoodie. A connection. Seriously, what a notion. He was not an anomaly. The kid belonged to a world he would never be a part of. She was a powerful human anomaly, one with control over time itself, one who really
mattered, whereas he was – God, he wasn't even a real monster.

"Hey," he spoke up, nodding toward the mountain. "I can shortcut from here – ready?"

The kid perked up, reaching out to take his hand again. Sans paused, then squeezed back. "You, uh, said there was a Save star in Snowdin, right?"

"Uh-huh. Right outside the shop."

"Okay. Should be familiar enough." Sans closed his eyes, concentrating, gathering his magic. He needed a clear image of his destination in his head to take a shortcut – successfully, anyway. His magic required that he have some kind of impression of his target location, however subconscious. After that, it was just a matter of breaking a few rules. Glitching across space, twisting it to his needs for a nanosecond. Hacking a code.

He pictured his hometown, pictured the squat little structure on the edge of town next to the Snowed Inn, and reached out to take a shortcut.

Radio static.

Glitching squares cutting across his vision.

The space around him jerking and halting, jerking and halting.

A tug on his soul, and then he'd landed.

Sans opened his eyes, suddenly dizzy and unsteady on his feet. Swaying on the spot, he brought a hand to his skull.

Yes, they'd landed – outside the mouth of the cavern leading into the Underground, all the way back at the castle. He'd missed.

"Okay, that was… weird." He lowered his hand and looked over at the kid at his side, still hanging onto him.

"You could try again," she suggested.

Sans started to respond in the affirmative, then shook his head. "No. No, I, I can't, I'm... I'm tired."

It dawned on him as he spoke the words. "Real tired. You feel anything weird back there, bud?"

"No... Not more than usual when you shortcut... " Frisk looked into the cavern, craning her neck. "It's okay! We can walk to Snowdin, and there's supposed to be a Save star just inside the cave!" She let go of his sleeve and stepped into the cavern. "I can't see it from here."

Sans joined her. "Well, they woulda just disappeared when the Barrier broke, right? That power o' yours only existed in the Underground. Aw, kid, did you think they'd still be here?" Frisk said nothing, and Sans faltered. "Listen, kiddo, I'm sorry about that, but I just figured – "

"It's not that. I can feel where they're supposed to be. It feels empty." Frisk snapped her head up. "There used to be one in the throne room, come on!" She broke into a run down the dark corridor.

"Kid, wait – " Sans sighed, then followed at his usual easy pace.

The garden that had adorned the throne room had died. Where bright golden flowers once flourished, only the shrivelled remains of petals lay in dry browned clusters. Frisk stood in the centre of the room, directly under a patch of sunlight, hands cupped in front of her as if to catch it.
Sans came to her side.

"Heya. Anything here?"

Frisk sighed and shook her head, curling her hands into fists and letting them fall to her side. "No…" Her voice trailed off and she paused, her mouth half-open as her gaze arced around the cavern. It flitted over to Sans. "Dunkle Sans? Something feels wrong."

Sans's head snapped over to her. Yes, yes, he was beginning to feel it too – a profound sense of wrongness, of something fundamental having shifted just out of place. The feeling started in his soul, then unfurled and spread through his bones like a rot.

"Yeah," he said, hand coming out to grip her arm. "Yeah, I was about to say the same thing."
The Promise

Hi, everyone! So, uh, it's been a while, huh? Ahem. Just over two months since the last update. *awkward shuffling* If you follow the fic's tumblr, then you've probably seen a whole bunch of my apology posts with no actual results, but I guess for now I can say that at least the chapter is finally here? I'm going to apologize one last time, and I really hope you won't have to wait this long again for an update. The truth is that, while I was home for the summer, and that was amazing, the last few months have been very busy and very chaotic, which left me with very little time for writing, and very little energy/motivation/self-discipline to write when I did have the time. So that was a thing. But I'm back now, and right when the fic is ready to start really picking up! Hope you enjoy!

And be sure to check out yet another fan piece by unexpected-profundity on tumblr, this time [this cute little doodle of Sans and Frisk!](https://example.com)

Finally, this chapter is being posted the day after Undertale's third anniversary. While I'm unhappy with this chapter, it kind of feels like the right chapter to be posted on such a date. Be sure to check out [the tribute piece](https://example.com) I wrote for the special occasion over on my tumblr if you missed it!

When Sans was twenty-nine, he made a promise.

oOo

White. Everything was white. Only white, drifting gently down.

It was so peaceful here.

Sans sat in the snow against the great Ruins door, eyesockets closed and skull resting against the cool stone.

"All right, all right, here's one – knock, knock." He reached behind him and rapped his knuckles against the door, twice, in rapid succession.

"Who is there?" The woman's voice sounded unusually muffled – more so than usual, given that it was coming from behind a heavy stone door. It sounded strained… weaker. Maybe, Sans reasoned, she had a cold.

"Wood shoe." He returned, with an anticipatory grin.

"Wood shoe… who?" Still off. Weird.

Nevertheless Sans grinned wider. "Wood shoe like to hear another one o' my knock-knock jokes?"

From behind the door, silence.

"Uh… lady?"
It was strange, the way he could just picture her startling even though he had no idea what she looked like. "Oh! Oh, yes, that one is very… yes, very good, yes…" Her voice trailed off, and still there was no laugh.

"Uh." He turned slightly, opening his eyes. "Guess that one, uh, wasn't very funny. Not my best. Or worst, that is. I mean, I know my jokes can get a little old hat, but –"

"No… no, it isn't that…"

"Oh. Okay, then." Sans turned back around, crossing his arms over his chest. "Are you… okay?"

Silence.

"Lady?"

Still nothing. Sans listened closely for any response, concern nagging at him now.

Then he heard it – tears. A soft, muffled weeping coming through the door. It sounded like she'd been trying to hold the tears back for quite a long time, but hadn't been able to any longer, and now they came rushing out at full force.

Sans understood that nobody – not even his brother – could be happy all the time.

And sometimes the woman's words held such a sadness behind them, a loneliness he couldn't deny.

Sans supposed it made sense – after all, something had driven her to shut herself away in the Ruins, whatever it was.

Despite all that, he'd never heard her crying. She always seemed so strong, after all, so resolved, even if they did spend half their time together telling knock-knock jokes. She might have been obviously lonely, but crying openly like this was something else entirely. Sans wasn't really used to people crying in front of him – except his brother, maybe, but Papyrus hadn't cried in front of him since he was a teenager. And Sans couldn't help but feel a little taken aback.

"Lady?" he asked again. His tone wavered. "You sure you're okay? 'cause, uh, you sound like maybe you're kinda upset –"

God, if he wasn't an idiot.

But the woman made no comment on his blundering remark. Sans was preparing to crack another joke in the hopes of snapping her out of it – he sure as hell didn't know what else to do. But then finally, her voice came through the door again, trembling and faint as ever.

"I'm very sorry – I'm fine. You needn't worry about –"

"Uh, sorry to break it to ya, you don't sound fine."

Beat. Then, "If a human ever comes through this door… could you please, please promise something?"

Sans froze. Before he could say anything, she kept going. "Watch over them, and protect them, will you not? Could you… do this for me?"

*Protect a human.* That would need more than a moment to sink in. It was the strangest, most preposterous thing Sans had heard in his entire career. And he had a lot of careers now, and had lived through a lot of timelines to hear strange, preposterous things in.
"A human?" he repeated warily. "You, uh, run into a lot 'em back there?"

The woman laughed, without mirth. "No. I do not. But still… out there… I really should not be saying this, but let us say I have a few disagreements with the King's policies regarding humans."

Sans had never really spoken to Asgore about the Kingdom's policy on humans before, and he'd never been involved with the capturing and killing of the human that had fallen down some years ago. But it wasn't as though he was naïve on the subject – on the contrary. Nobody was, except perhaps Papyrus, but Sans saw to that. His brother didn't need to worry about that shit.

For now, he paused. "Those would be ethical disagreements, I'd take it," he ventured at last.

"Yes."

"Uh," Sans said. "Listen, I hear ya, but… you gotta understand, lady, that ain't a small favour to ask."

The woman made a pained sound. "I know. I know that. I… forgive me, I never should have asked you at all. The position it would put you in… and you, my dear friend… But… I trust you. So please. I would understand if you said no, just please… please, at least tell me. Do you promise?"

She trusted him? Why? Sans didn't see why she should.

It was his job to keep watch for humans – actually, it was four of his jobs. Not that she knew that. She'd voiced a distaste for the Royal Guard once, in passing, and for the King as well, and Sans had decided it best not to bring the whole sentry thing up.

But even then… the woman knew about the King's policies on humans. Why the hell did she think he'd listen to her?

Desperation, he supposed, as soon as the thought crossed his mind. But even so. He and she may have gotten a little chummy these, they might have been speaking through this door for over a year. Sure, they enjoyed each other's company and all – Sans really enjoyed her company. She was wonderful.

But a human? For God's sake, they didn't even know each other's names.

I would understand if you said no.

Well, he'd have to say no. Of course he would.

Sans wouldn't normally have cared about humans one way or the other, but normal didn't exactly apply when it came to him. Humans were dangerous. He knew that better than anyone.

If the next human – whenever it fell – didn't turn out to be an anomaly, he figured he didn't have to involve himself with the situation. After all, the human that had fallen about two or three years ago hadn't turned out to be one. The human hadn't caused any trouble, hadn't even made it past the lower pools of Waterfall if he remembered the gossip correctly.

But if the next human was… well, just in case, it wouldn't be fair to make a promise he couldn't keep. Not to her.

The flower hadn't Reset in more than a year. Sans had spotted it popping up around town a few times, so he knew it hadn't gone anywhere, but he hadn't bothered doing anything about it. It would just come back, after all, as it had so many times before. And it wouldn't do to antagonise the little
weed even further.

A very small part of Sans was fool enough to hope that maybe, just maybe, the flower was bored of Resets, and that it wasn't just biding its time and plotting for something new.

To believe in that would be to ignore Rule One, of course. But it was a possibility he could toy with.

A human anomaly would shatter any chance of such a possibility.

And really, protecting a human, anomaly or not, was just out of the question.

And yet.

There should not have been an *and yet*, but it came anyway.

*And yet* there was something about the woman, a sincerity and integrity she possessed, that he couldn't just say "no" to. He'd have to be a pretty shitty person to listen to that voice and straight up refuse.

*And yet* she was so damn kind, even if it was a different to the sort of kindness that his brother possessed. Kind and gentle. Christ, if anyone in the Underground was going to be concerned with the welfare of fallen little humans, it would be her.

So it was.

"My friend?" Desperation in her voice.

Sans sighed, his whole frame sagging with the action, and closed his eyes again. "Sure, lady," he said softly. "Yeah. Sure. I promise."

Beat.

Then, "Thank you." It was so soft, he barely caught it.

On their opposing sides of the door, the two of them sat in silence once more, letting the weight of his vow sink in. When Sans opened in his eyes again, it was to the sight of the lights dimming in the cavern, casting the snow in a crystalline blue.

"'s getting late," he spoke up, stretching. "I should probably get going."

"Oh! Oh, yes – yes, of course; I shouldn't like to keep you – I am so sorry –" Shuffling sounds from the other side of the door as the woman probably stood up. Yes, her voice was coming from higher above, now. "I need to get going myself, actually! I have a pie that's baking!"

Sans grinned at that, and sniffed the air. The pie's smell didn't carry through the door, but it was nice to imagine anyway. "Oh, yeah? What kind?"

"Ah… a bit of an experiment, actually! Butterscotch and cinnamon. I do hope it turns out nicely."

"Oh, man. I'm sure it will. Sounds delicious." Sans placed his hands on his kneecaps, hauling himself to his feet. "Well… see ya 'round. Or hear ya, if you're bein' particular about it. I'll try to think of some better content for next time."

He walked away as she bid her own farewells. His slippered feet faint left imprints in the fresh-fallen snow. By morning, they'd filled all the way in without a trace, as if he'd never been there at
Sans woke to the sound of the vacuum cleaner, sprawled on his front on the couch where he must have fallen asleep in front of the TV the night before. He groaned, lifting his head, the vertebrae of his neck popping uncomfortably.

And now he was being woken at – Sans squinted at the clock – seven-thirty in the morning, an ungodly hour if there ever was one. Papyrus hadn't noticed he was up yet, and was busy cleaning the living room floor. Sans settled back to watch him a moment. Despite being a normally diligent cleaner, his brother was making a point of avoiding a certain patch of carpet, just to the right of the TV.

Sans summoned a small bone and sent it in Papyrus's direction, dangling it in front of his eyes rather than hitting him with it. His brother blinked several times, taking a moment to bat irately at the bone before he realised what it was, and shut off the vacuum cleaner. He turned toward Sans with a stern expression.

"It's about TIME you woke up, brother! You have been napping for HOURS!"

For the first time, Sans took notice of the blanket that had been draped over him. He pulled himself into a sitting position and offered a drowsy grin. "Mornin' to you, too." He nodded in the direction of the vacuum cleaner. "Aw, c'mon. Waking me up with that thing's, uh, a little passive-aggressive, don'tcha think?"

Papyrus looked suddenly guilty. "Oh, no! I'm sorry! I didn't mean to WAKE you, brother! You normally sleep through rackets much greater than this!"

"Do I?" Sans tilted his head to the side, half-interested. He'd always been something of a light sleeper. Well, maybe not after he'd had a few drinks the night before. As Grillbz had once put it, he was a predictably sleepy drunk. "Huh."

"You CERTAINLY do! You even manage to sleep through the sound of your own snoring!"

"Ooh, cuttin' deep there. Right to the marrow."

"Well!" Papyrus moved on, efficient as usual. "I'm very glad you're awake! There is breakfast in the fridge I made while you were sleeping – spaghetti and fried eggs! Nyeh heh heh!"

"Oh." Sans's grin wavered. "Yeah. That, uh. Sounds good, Paps." He grimaced. "I just, uh, think I'll grab a coffee first and –" He averted his gaze before he could catch Papyrus's expression. "By the way, I think ya missed a spot there when you were cleaning, bro. Uh, many times."

That seemed to grab Papyrus's attention. His eyes narrowed in a decidedly concentrated expression. "Ah, YES – your sock spot!"

Sans sat up straighter, so that his feet now dangled a couple of inches above the ground. He cocked an eyebrow, trying to see behind his brother. "My… sock spot?"

"INDEED!" Papyrus stepped aside and gestured pointedly to where a single one of Sans's grey socks lay. The same sock that Sans had dropped on the living room floor three days ago and left there. The same sock that he and his brother had been communicating over via sticky-notes ever
since.

Apparently, things had ascended to a new level. Papyrus was really taking this quite seriously – more so than Sans had realised. He didn't really see why; Sans had always left his clothes lying around before, and his brother was hardly ever home these days anyway. He was always so busy, jumping and running from one puzzle-trap in Snowdin Forest that wanted recalibrating to the next. And then there were the recent visits to Undyne's for "warrior training." His need to be constantly in motion had gone into hyper drive.

"You're seriously just leaving the sock there? Ain't even gonna move it over a bit to vacuum under it? 's all dusty around there, bro."

Papyrus stomped his foot suddenly. "NO! I will NOT move your sock for you! That is STRICTLY your responsibility!" He turned to the laundry basket that was resting on the ground, in close proximity to Sans's sock. "I will now continue with my important household duties like taking these clothes to the Laundromat – most of which, I might add, are YOURS!"

Well. Papyrus's clothes would be in there too, if he hadn't been wearing that costume for a month straight.

Sans just gave a cheeky grin from his spot on the sofa. "You sayin' I should wear the same dirty clothes every day so you don't gotta wash 'em, then? Sheesh, Paps. Never took ya for a lazybones – "

Another foot stomp. "SANS! That is not what I meant and you KNOW it!" he whined, snatching up a T-shirt from the laundry hamper and lobbing it at him.

It hit him square in the chest. Sans made a show of falling back against the sofa cushions with exaggerated choking noises. "Ack… right in the sternum – you got me, bro… " He paused, then clutched at his chest and added some twitching for good measure.

Papyrus just rolled his eyesockets and went to return the shirt to the hamper.

"Bro – " Sans made his voice into a rasp, sliding his eyes shut and continuing to twitch. "Tell Undyne – 'm sorry for all the missed shifts… " Now, dry-heaving. "Pay off my tab for me… I love ya, Papyrus… " He twitched once more, then went still, allowing his head to loll back against the armrest.

He heard Papyrus sigh heavily and move around near the TV; it sounded like he was putting the vacuum cleaner away.

Sans cracked open his good eye. "Wow. Geez. Good to know you love me, bro."

"MAYBE I WILL LOVE YOU WHEN YOU PICK UP YOUR SOCK!"

He grinned and propped himself up by his elbows. "Ooh, touché."

He threw another shirt at him. It landed on the armrest by Sans's head. "AND YOU'RE NOT FUNNY!"

Sans made another exaggerated dry-heaving sound, clutching at his chest. "Oof. Now you've really wounded me."

"SAAANS!" His brother was fighting a smile.
Sans paused. Then he reached up, grabbed the shirt, sat up, and threw it back.

Beat.

Papyrus seized another article of clothing and threw it back at him – a pair of pyjama bottoms, which landed on Sans's skull.

In an awkward motion, Sans half-fell, half-clambered off the sofa. He shook his head to be rid of the pyjamas and kicked at the blanket that had tangled about his legs; one corner was stuck in his kneecap. He took a lurching step, then tripped and fell forward.

A small, white bone flew past him.

Sans looked up. He grinned wide. "Oh, it is on." He lifted one hand, summoning a small bone of his own and twirling it above his raised forefinger.

He didn't even get the chance to fire before Papyrus summoned an entire wall of bones and sent them gliding across the living room floor. Breaking turn-based etiquette? Oh, now that was playing dirty.

Sans dodged to the right and closed his fist, allowing his attack to disintegrate. Then, fingertips warming with charging magic, he summoned another few bones and fired. They bounced off of Papyrus's chest plate. His brother leaped in the air, eyes alight, and responded in kind. Sans dodged all but one. The damageless attack passed right through him, dissolving on contact, but he staggered backward against the sofa anyway.

"SANS, YOU CANNOT USE THE SAME STRATEGY TWICE IN ONE SPARRING MATCH!"

Sans tilted his head. "Aw, was the sparring match already on back then? That ain't real fair, is it? Ya know I like to open with my prize attack."

"ANOTHER FOOLISH TACTIC!" Papyrus declared, holding an index finger up in the air. "IT IS FAR GREATER TO CLOSE WITH A GRAND FINALE! AN EPIC SHOWDOWN! A SPECTACLE SO STUNNINGLY JAW-DROPPING YOUR OPPONENT SHALL BE THOROUGHLY THWARTED!"

"By sheer wonderment, huh?" Sans sent a couple more bones drifting off lazily, which his brother easily deflected.

"NYEH HEH HEH! EXACTLY SO!"

"Well." Sans shrugged, shortcutting a few inches to the left of Papyrus's oncoming attack. "Guess you're right. That system ain't half-bad either. Or… " – he reached behind him – "ya could subvert all expectations and throw in your strongest attack right in the middle!" He dove forward, whipping out the sofa cushion and smacking his brother over the skull with it.

Papyrus looked momentarily shocked, then his expression turned scandalised. He took a leaping stride forward –

"– glad you're awake! There is breakfast in the fridge I made while you were sleeping – spaghetti and fried eggs! Nyeh heh heh!"

Sans was sitting on the sofa, reclined against the armrest with a blanket tangled about his legs.

He felt a sharp jerking sensation in his soul. The feeling spiked, like the quick and immediate
swipe of a knife, then ebbed quickly down.

It took a moment for it to click. It took longer for him to react.

It had just been one little Reload – the result of a small accident, perhaps, or a slip of the tongue.

Such an insignificant little jump back. Barely a couple minutes, if that.

Nothing.

But the fact was that there had been a Reset, another after more than a year. And, apparently, the flower had kept up the habit of making its little Save points this past year, even if it hadn't used them. Until now.

It was all happening again.

This little jump would lead to another, and another after it, and another and another and still more after that. Over and over again, without end.

Glitching, stuttering, staggering time.

A wheel.

Again. Again. Again.

His brother was at his side all of a sudden. "SANS? Sans, are you all right?"

Sans brushed him off, kicking at the blanket that had tangled itself about his legs once more. This time, he tugged at the corner of fabric that had become stuck in his kneecap. "'s fine, Papyrus. Don't worry about it." He spewed out his standard excuse. "Just spaced out for a sec."

Papyrus drew back, his brows coming together in a stern frown. "HMMPH! Well, if you're QUITE sure… " He fiddled with the ends of his scarf for a moment. "Well, ANYWAY, brother, now that you're awake, you can spend the day recalibrating your traps! I KNOW you have a shift at your Snowdin station starting in an hour, so I shall expect to see you there! Exactly on time! Meanwhile, I shall spend the morning getting an EARLY START!"

"Guess there's no harm in that." Sans slowly swung his legs over the edge of the sofa. "I'll, uh, catch ya later, Paps."

His brother narrowed his eyes. "VERY WELL! BUT NO NAPPING!"

"No napping. Just get going."

"Well… all right." Papyrus, the poor thing, looked so unsure. "I will see you anon, brother!" He scooped up the laundry basket, balancing it efficiently on his hip, then whisked out the door, kicking it shut behind him.

Sans sat there on the edge of the sofa for one more minute.

Then he dove for his phone.

Just as he'd been neglecting the machine, he hadn't charged his phone in ages. Now he fumbled for the power cable, sticking one end into the outlet on the wall and shoving the other into his phone's charger port.
It buzzed to life.

A moment's delay, then his phone began to ding sporadically – with texts and notifications from Alphys, Papyrus, Undyne, a few of the regulars from Grillby's – mostly from Alphys.

And then a series of new notifications, from yesterday evening. Not much earlier than when he'd been talking to the woman.

When he'd rigged his phone up to the machine, he hadn't done anything too fancy – he'd just set it up so that he received a notification on the chance that the machine detected a truly substantial disturbance. On the chance something went kablooey.

With this many notifications…

Sans shortcut to the basement.

The machine towered over him as he crossed the room. It was always running, technically – it had to keep running. But it was comparable to a computer in Sleep Mode; only now did he power it on completely to conduct a proper scan.

The machine began to emit a low hum as it warmed up.

Sans stood tense, his soul beating so hard it was a wonder it didn't shatter.

Then the scan results began to appear on the monitor screen.

[RESIDUAL MAGIC] – DECREASED.

[CONCENTRATED MAGICAL ENERGY] – ELEVATED.

Sans dismissed these readings, tapping out a desperate rhythm against his femur.

[DETERMINATION LEVELS.]

>> SCANNING…

>> SCANNING…

The machine gave a cheery ding.

[DETERMINATION LEVELS] – ELEVATED.

Sans's soul dropped. A change in Determination levels – that could only mean one thing.

The machine began to vibrate as it continued its scan.

[VOID.]

Sans clenched the fabric of his shorts.

>> SCANNING…

>> SCANNING…

The machine began to vibrate a little more fervently. Sans found himself frowning a little – that didn't seem quite right. Still, he stayed rooted to the spot, his attention captured by the pixelated
The machine started to shake harder than ever, now producing a high, constant whining noise like that of a screaming kettle.

The screen cracked, then went dark.

Sans jerked backwards just as sparks began to erupt from the vent.

"Shit – " he uttered, then, on an instinct he didn't know he possessed, dove for cover under his desk.

The machine exploded in a shower of sparks, then went still.

Sans hesitated, then crawled out from under the desk.

The machine was a wreck, so much so that it might have been considered impressive under other circumstances. Its screen remained black. The entire structure of the machine seemed to sag, lifeless, and the metal was charred in several places. In others, it seemed to have practically melted, and the air was pungent with the smell of fried machinery. The occasional sad spark burst and fizzled from the circuitry.

Sans approached, closing the short distance between him and it, then slowly drew his hand toward it. He could practically feel the lingering heat emanating from the machine, and quickly took a step back. Okay, maybe not the wisest idea to punch it just now.

This option now lost to him, he sank to his knees, head dropping.

"Shit," he said again, very quietly. Then, louder – "SHIT!"

He punched the floor, instead.

Sans lifted his head, staring at the broken machine and taking in the cruel irony of it all. An anomaly had come to the Underground and he had no means of getting the full report he needed.

A new anomaly was here, and this one was Determined enough – dangerous enough – that it had already made its first little tear in their world, a tear so large the machine couldn't even handle it.

Was it eager? Stupid? Cruel? Did it even know what it was doing?

Where was it now? When had it come?

His conversation with the woman came back to him in a taunt.

Oh. Right.

Sans buried his face in his hands momentarily, then climbed to his feet. He didn't know where the human was now, but at least he had something to go by. A jumping-off point.

Then again, if it had already left the Ruins, Sans was certain that half the Underground would have heard of it by now, and the Royal Guard and sentries definitely would have. It would have shown up on Alphys's cameras.
Meaning it was still in the Ruins.

Meaning it would move on to Snowdin Town next.

The same area his brother was working.

And maybe it was harmless, and maybe it would stay in the Ruins for the next month, and maybe it would get itself killed by one of the guard dogs and not bother Resetting again, but Sans didn't care. He was already throwing a tarp over the wrecked machine.

He took a shortcut.

  oOo  

The woods on the furthest edges of Snowdin were halfway to dead, the spindly trees void of any broad leaves, but they remained clustered closely together enough that they provided decent cover anyway. And here Sans hid, and waited.

Just as he'd been waiting for the past twenty minutes.

Sans groaned, leaning back against a tree. This was a waste of time. If his brother found him now... well, he'd throw a fit. Sans could already picture him, brows together in a frown and arms gesticulating wildly about mid-monologue. He'd go on about *laziness* and *slacking off* and *YOU'RE MEANT TO BE RECALIBRATING YOUR TRAPS, BROTHER, WHAT ARE YOU DOING WASTING TIME OUT HERE IN THE WOODS? YOU WEREN'T EVEN NAPPING THIS TIME, YOU WERE JUST STANDING HERE DOING NOTHING!*

Sans smirked at the image, then sighed again, shifting against the tree. Papyrus was probably right, and not just because Papyrus was usually right, even when he was a hypothetical image in Sans's head. He *was* wasting time. He didn't know how long the human was going to spend in the Ruins, even if this was the only exit. On that note, he didn't even know for sure whether or not the human was *capable* of making it out of the old Capital via this door. Maybe its predecessors had found some other exit.

And even if it did show up, what could he possibly do about it, really? Blasting it to nothing certainly had an appeal, but it would probably just Reset if he did that.

He kept waiting. At least he had a good view of the door from here. He spied a pair of Snowdrakes venturing deeper into the woods to smoke dog treats. The teens took no notice of him, and Sans let them believe they were alone.

God, this really was a waste of time. He was missing out on valuable napping time right now. Or else he could be hanging out with his brother, or brainstorming for a new routine at the MTT Resort, or taking some time off at Grillby's, or browsing the science section of the New Home library, or just swapping jokes with the woman.

A part of him hoped Papyrus would discover his abandoned sentry station and come to find him – and he *would* find him. He always did, after all. He always knew where to look.

He was just thinking this as the door to the Ruins opened.

It opened slowly, with a deep, almost earth-shaking rumble, as several tonnes of centuries-old stone began to move. The door did not open all the way. It didn't open very wide at all. It barely opened a crack, just enough for a human to slip out.
As if of its own volition, the door shuddered shut just behind it.

It wasn't every day that a human came falling down here. So Sans took a few moments just to *stare* at it. He'd probably be slack-jawed, if not for the tiny hiccup of his own jaw being fused shut. He'd been anticipating the human's arrival, but seeing it *in the flesh* was quite another thing. Even so, it wasn't too long before he recovered from the initial incredulity. Now, Sans stayed frozen to the spot, and watched, silently.

The human stood hovering before the Ruins door, comically dwarfed by its majesty. It shifted from foot to foot, crossing its arms over its chest as it craned its neck to take in its new surroundings. It kept glancing over its shoulder at the sealed door. At last, the human seemed to heave a sigh, then, for some reason, wandered over to inspect a bush off to the side of the door.

Hell. Sans had seen pictures of humans before, mostly of the Princess. Black-and-white photographs, grainy and faded, mementos to days long gone, lying around the castle on shelves and on wobbly tables in the King's living quarters. Sans had never brought them up.

He knew what a human was supposed to look like. Seeing a live one, right in front of him, was something very different.

He continued to watch.

The human took a sudden step back from the bushes, looking around nervously.

It finally turned around, facing the path. It stopped, took another deep sigh, then set off, well, determinedly forward. Sans quickly surveyed the ground at his feet, and then, from his hiding spot in the trees, he followed, careful not to take his eyes off the human even for a second. It didn't really seem to be doing anything for now, so he took the opportunity to observe it more closely.

It – no, *they*, he supposed was probably more appropriate. He squinted, but he couldn't really pin down the human's gender; humans were weird. No matter. *They* would do well enough for now.

They were a lot smaller than Sans had imagined – close to his own height, and maybe even smaller than that. He'd always thought humans would be a lot larger, even human children. This one was definitely a child, though Sans didn't know how he could be so sure.

Strange as it was, they also looked disarmingly like a skeleton – more so than Sans had anticipating. They had *skin* and *flesh*, of course, and they'd have guts and lungs and a stomach and other internal organs beneath all that. And they had *hair*, dark brown hair that was cropped short, not going past the nape of their neck. They were different to be sure, but the anatomy was all the same, something Sans hadn't really given much thought to before. Like a skeleton wearing a fleshy suit over their bones.

God, they really were small. And probably freezing out here in Snowdin, now that he thought of it. The human didn't seem to have a coat, dressed in nothing but shorts, a pink-and-blue striped sweater – did human children wear stripes too? – and a pair of brown shoes that looked kind of beaten up. Did humans get cold easily? Sans cautioned a step closer.

*What are you doing?!* His mind screamed at him. *They're an anomaly – it's an anomaly! You have to stop it!* *Who cares if it hasn't done anything yet that you know of? This is an anomaly we're talking about! It might not have done anything yet, but it will do something, you know it will! Just stop it before it does do something! At least give it a fucking try!*

The human had stopped to take in their surroundings again, as if they could feel his presence. They
peered into the trees, thankfully just off to the side of where Sans was hiding, then kept going. If they had spotted him, they showed no signs of it.

Sans half-closed his fist, allowing the magic to charge and warm his fingers as he readied a Blaster. He was just about to summon it when another voice came to the forefront of his mind, this one gentler than his own.

*If a human ever comes through this door... could you please, please promise something? Watch over them, and protect them, will you not? Do you promise?*

Sans sighed, and let his hand fall to his side.

It almost felt stupid. But he'd made a promise, and it was one he intended to keep, whether he wanted to or not. This wasn't a matter of *wanting*.

Of course, the woman knew zilch about the timelines and anomalies and all that other stuff. Good. He was happy for her. Really, he was. He wanted her to be happy. But she was oblivious to some fairly damning information about the little human she wanted so badly to keep safe, information that did make the promise a little harder to keep.

He'd... keep an eye on the human, then. Make sure it didn't get into trouble, and make sure it didn't cause any, either. And if it did... if the trouble was big enough... *Sorry, old lady. Read the fine print. Conditions apply. But your kid's good for now.*

But promise or no promise, now his fingers were itching with the magic he'd gathered there. It would be uncomfortable to simply force it back down when it had already been called, and now the energy was waiting to be released.

There was a large fallen branch lying on the pathway; the human had just stepped over it. With a surge of energy, he reached out, swaddled the branch in blue magic, and snapped it cleanly in two.

The noise rang out with a reverberating *crack*.

The human jumped, whirled around, then froze on the spot, eyes darting this way and that.

Sans remained hidden, and couldn't help but smirk just a little bit. *Scared? Well, good. You should be.* He watched as the human stared at the broken branch, then faltered before turning back around and carrying on. Sans followed.

The human was walking a little more slowly now, their steps more wary.

Sans was so focused on keeping his eye on the human that he nearly lost his footing on the root of a tree, causing a disturbance on the forest floor. Again, the human stopped, head snapping in his direction.

Their soul flared.

A rush of alarm, defensiveness. Determination. A surge of energy so potent that Sans *felt* it, almost staggering on the spot as his own soul gave a similar twang.

The human was approaching the bridge now. Sans hesitated, then stepped out from the cover of the woods, making each step slow and deliberate, the snow crunching clearly under his feet. This time, he let the human hear him. He made sure they could hear him.

One foot in front of the other. Slow. Deliberate. Snow crunching.
The human came to the bridge. Sans expected them to run or something, but for some reason, they went stock-still, keeping their back to him. As Sans came closer, he saw that their shoulders were hunched forward and their hands were clenched into tight fists at their sides. And while he wasn't an expert on human respiratory practises, their breathing seemed to be a little off. Leaning on the trembly side.

*Promise*, he reminded himself.

Then, another thought, coming to his mind unbidden: *They're just a little kid.*

As he came to a stop behind the human, who for some reason still didn't budge an inch, he stuck his hands in his pockets and his hands found something rubbery and soft. A whoopee cushion. Heh. He closed his hand around it.

"Human," he uttered, making his voice as low as it would go. "Don't you know how to greet a new pal? Turn around and shake my hand."
"So… are we going to Snowdin now?"

Frisk looked to Sans for an answer. They'd been standing there wordlessly for a solid minute, and by now the silence had lingered far too long, amplifying the heavy, empty feeling where the Save stars should have been.

Sans startled, then let go of her arm and took a step back. "Yeah," he said. "Yeah, I guess. But we're gonna have to walk. Sorry, kid. I know this must hit kinda hard."

Frisk giggled. "I'm not a lazybones."

He hummed. "Guess that's true." He worried the hem of his sweater, and Frisk couldn't help but notice just how on edge he seemed. Twitching, fidgeting, fiddling, keeping his hands ever busy. It was very unlike him. "Anyway, we can take the ferry from Hotland, so it won't be that bad." He nodded his head at the entrance to the throne room. "Let's go."

They set out.

Asgore's home, as they passed through it, felt empty as ever. The King's small living quarters had always been a bit barren, but the vases of golden flowers covering every surface had previously done their job in breathing life into the castle. Now, like their counterparts in the throne room, these flowers had died, too.

Frisk didn't have to work to keep up as they went. Sans kept to a lackadaisical pace on a good day, but now his steps were a little slower than normal. She tried not to worry about it.

They carried on that way, walking together in a comfortable silence until they reached the Hotland elevator.

The doors slid shut with a *clang*. Frisk glanced over at Sans and saw that his shoulders had hunched slightly.

The elevator groaned.

Frisk faltered. She hadn't realised how attuned she'd become to Sans's mannerisms before, but it was obvious by now that his behaviour was off in about every way she could think of. Frisk knew why, of course, but she couldn't help but worry.

And her soul was starting to ache again.

She reached out and laid a hand on his arm. "Are you okay, Dunkle Sans?"

He jolted. "Oh. Yeah. I'm fine. Just feelin' a little claustrophobic." And there it was, the standard grin, flashing across his face too quickly for Frisk to be able to tell how real it was. "Nothing bad at all," he added. "I'm okay. Just not the biggest fan o' small spaces most days. Not really used to 'em, y'know? Why take the elevator when you could take a shortcut instead? Then you don't gotta wait for the elevator to show." He winked.

"Oh. Okay."

The elevator came to a stop and the doors slid open once again. A pause.
"Welp. After you, bud."

Frisk glanced at him, then nodded and started toward the Hotland ferry dock; Sans catching up to her after a few paces.

Just like always, the Riverperson was there, perched on their boat and humming to themselves as they stared off. It was impossible to tell where they were looking under their hood, and that was assuming that faceless form could see at all.

Frisk lingered a short ways from the dock, leaving Sans to deal with the negotiations and busying herself by scuffing a toe against the ground. She dragged the tip of her shoe through the dirt in the shape of a heart and took a step back to admire her work.

She sighed, glancing back at the dock. How long did it take to ask for a ride to Snowdin anyway? Sans was still talking to the Riverperson. She strained to hear without coming too close and being obvious about it, but Dunkle Sans was keeping his voice carefully low.

A hot breeze blew past, ruining her drawing and in its wake she felt a slight prickle on the back of her neck. The feeling of being watched. Frisk hesitated, then looked over her shoulder. But there was nobody there. She peered out into the next room, trying to get a closer look, but the feeling passed as quickly as the breeze before it.

"Kid? Thought you wanted to come."

She glanced back and saw that Sans was already seated on the ferry, legs crossed. He raised an eyebrow at her.

"I do! I wanna ride in front!" Frisk hurried to climb onto the boat and Sans obligingly scooted back. "We're on a special mission," she added to the Riverperson, as the ferry pushed off from the dock. "We're trying to get a bunch of Dunkle Sans's science stuff to fix a machine."

She did not expect an answer from the Riverperson, and indeed she received none. The boat glided out of the small cavern and into the expansive tunnel through which the river ran.

Frisk was careful to tuck her legs underneath her this time. "Dunkle Sans, what is the Riverperson?" Embarrassed, she lowered her voice. "Like, what kind of monster are they?"

Sans shrugged. "Honestly, no-one knows. River just kinda is what they are, y'know? Pretty sure they've been here a long time, though."

"Oh."

"Guess maybe it is a little weird if you think about it." Another shrug. "You know what, though? This ferry ride is gonna be a good five minutes. Time that could be well-spent on a nap. Wake me up when we get there." And with that, he closed his eyes.

Frisk sighed, turning back around. Sans's ability to fall asleep within seconds was both impressive and downright infuriating. Sans could nap his way out of anything, Uncle Papyrus said.

For a minute or two, there was nothing but the quiet, just the distant sound of rushing water lapping against the cave walls. Another minute or two lulled past. Then, just as Frisk thought they would, the Riverperson spoke up. "Tra la la… the Angel is coming… tra la la."

Silence. She glanced back at Sans, but he was still fast asleep, snoring softly with his head lolling about his chest.

The child turned back around, peering over the edge of the boat and staring down into churning dark water that offered no reflection. She wondered how deep the river was.

After another few minutes, the Riverperson's ferry eased to a stop at their Snowdin station. The pause in movement jolted Sans awake, and he mumbled sleepily before disembarking, shaking his head to bring himself to full alertness.

The Underground was mostly empty, of course. Only a few monsters remained here nowadays. Frisk knew that. And she knew that it stood as a testament to how well the monster race was adjusting to life on the Surface.

It still didn't change how desolate the place felt. Everything had been so lively the first time she'd passed through here, and even the monsters that had tried to kill her had been friendly.

Now, it was as if the entire world had been thrown off-balance. Snowdin Town was supposed to be bright and cheerful, with fairy lights strung from every rooftop and warm light seeping from the shop windows. Instead, the village seemed dead, the lights unlit, the windows dark and shuttered, the once-crystalline snow turned an ashen grey.

"It's like a ghost town," Frisk said to Sans as they passed the little cluster of houses by the river.

He grinned. "Well, the Blook family did decide to stick around here for a while, even if they're from Waterfall."

"Oh, yeah! I didn't realise! It's a—"

"—human expression, I know. We kinda figured out all your monster-y expressions some time ago, with all the old junk that made its way down." Sans tilted his head to the side, bemused.

"How's a little kid like you learn so many big sayings?"

"Everyone says them." Frisk rolled her eyes. "Duh. Anyway, I read a lot." She paused. "And I'm almost nine."

Sans just laughed, then his grin faded. "You're right, though. Something feels off."

"What?"

"I dunno. 's just…. quiet here. Too quiet. Feels dead. Or I dunno, guess I'm just not used to it without all the people. It's probably nothing. Let's just check out the workshop, then take a look at those Save stars of yours by the shop."

"Okay," said Frisk, though she was fairly certain the Save star would be missing, just as all the others had been.

They turned the corner to the skeleton brothers' old house. Sans slowed to a stop as they approached it and fished a key out of his pocket; Frisk recognised it as the key she'd swiped from his bedroom.

Frisk had only been to the basement the one time, back when the machine was still there. As Sans flipped the light switch, she took the room in for a second time. Like every other part of the
Underground they'd passed through so far, the workshop looked much more empty without the blueprints spread across the countertop. The walls and floor were charred black around where the machine used to be.

Sans didn't seem to notice the eeriness of his old workshop, or if he did, he wasn't troubled by it. He headed for the drawers under the counter and began removing several boxes that Frisk was pretty sure were too big for the space they'd been held in. There were four boxes in total, spilling over with wires and cords and pieces of scrap metal.

Frisk stood in the doorway for a moment, watching him, then pulled herself up onto the counter. "Why do you have so much machine stuff, anyway? You said you knew a little about them, but machines are Auntie Alphys's thing. You like, um, physics and space and stuff."

Sans kicked one of the boxes over and knelt on the floor as he began to rifle through its contents. "Well, yeah. But sometimes you need machines to do experiments, and we didn't have all that much in the Underground. Had to try building some things myself. And some of this stuff is from when me and Papyrus were tryin' to get the TV and computers set up. Like, machines are cool and all, but you're right, they're not really my thing. Prob'ly for the better, anyway. Working with machines don't mix well with having a lot of exposed bones. Cords," he clarified, pulling at a wire that had already begun to tangle between his tibia and fibula.

"Oh."

Sans seemed to be concentrating, so Frisk fell silent and let him go about his work. Before long, she grew quite bored, and hopped down from the counter and took to idly circling the room. Sans glanced over his shoulder at her, then returned to his task.

Frisk opened one of the drawers. It was shallow and narrow, definitely not big enough to hold those boxes of equipment and machinery. Dunkle Sans was weird. The bottom of the drawer was lined with magazines and papers.

With nothing better to do, she pulled them out and began to leaf through them. There were waterlogged science journals, candy wrappers, pages covered in calculations mostly scribbled out, random texts of science jargon Frisk couldn't understand. Old calendars

And something else, too.

On a sheet of printer paper not quite starting to yellow with age, a child's drawing done in harsh, bold strokes and coloured in with a toddler's care. It looked to be of three skeletons: a little one in orange, a slightly bigger one drawn with many blue circles, and a tall one in black wearing a huge smile. A speech bubble coming from the largest one with a big pink heart in it.

The drawing was signed with a large backwards "P," and at the bottom, in smaller, neater text, were the words "don't forget."

The fonts looked very familiar.

Frisk didn't say anything. She stood there, staring at the drawing in her hands, entirely unsure what to make of it.

She didn't notice that Sans had stood up until he'd snatched the paper out of her hands.

Frisk took a step back, startled. Sans stuffed the drawing into his pocket.

"Don't look at that." His tone was like his expression: toeing the line of unreadable but not all the
way there. Somewhere between angry and defensive. Afraid.

"But what is it? Did Uncle Papyrus draw that?"

"Just forget it. It doesn't matter."

"But what – "

"I said, forget it. It's not important, it's just some stupid- goddammit." Sans growled, kicking at another box. "I don't even know what I'm doing here. There's no parts lying around to fix the machine. And even if there were, even if I did fix it, it ain't like it would do anything. It'd teach me, what? That there's a—Void leak, if we wanna keep callin' it that. As if I already didn't know. Real useful. What a waste of time this was. What the hell's the point of knowing things are gonna go to shit if all you can do is sit back and watch?"

"Sans—"

"What?" He turned his glare on her. "Can you do something about it? No. No, you can't. Let's just get out of here. We wouldn't even be in this mess if you hadn't made that tear in the first place."

Frisk froze. Something hollow opened inside her, and she fell.

He was right, of course. She knew that, she'd always known that. She'd run off and up a mountain and fallen into a strange kingdom and done irreversible damage to its timeline and even though she'd freed its people she didn't even know if it was worth the damage because Sans wouldn't tell her anything.

She did not cry.

Then, a pair of arms wrapped around her. She was being pulled into a hug. Frisk hugged back, burying her nose in Dunkle Sans's shoulder.

"Sorry, kid," he muttered, rubbing her back.

Frisk pulled away. "Me, too."

"No." He avoided meeting her gaze. "You got nothing to be sorry for, okay? I shouldn't've snapped at you like that. Anyway, you didn't even make the tear to start with. You just… made it bigger. Like when you pull at a seam on your sweater."

She recalled the metaphor he'd used the night before. "Unravelling."

Sans gave a dry chuckle. "Yeah. Exactly. And c'mon, bud, we've been through this. You didn't really know what you were doin'. You were just trying to keep alive. Perfectly noble reason. Okay?"

"Okay."

"Good." He coughed. "Still don't think we're gonna get a whole lot done here, to be honest. Let's just go home, okay? You can even tell your mom I need to put a few gold in the swear jar."

"Okay."

He nudged her. "C'mon, cheer up. Where's all that Determination gone, huh?"

Frisk smiled shyly and tapped a fist against her chest. "Still here."
"There we go."

"Should we go back and see if the Save star outside the shop is still there?"

"Nah. No point. Let's just go home." Shoulders hunched, he stepped past her and went up the stairs.

oOo

The Riverperson was missing.

Sans and Frisk stood on the edge of the dock, staring at the place where the Riverperson should have been but wasn't.

"That's… " Frisk fidgeted. "That's not good, is it?"

"Uh," said Sans. "If I were to hazard a guess, I'd prob'ly go with no."

"Yeah. That's what I thought."

"I guess we gotta walk."

Frisk looked over at Sans in surprise. "I thought you were gonna say we should nap 'til the ferry gets back. Or shortcut."

"Also a good idea, but nah. We gotta get you home. And I, uh. Don't think I'm ready to shortcut just yet. Maybe in a bit. C'mon, let's go." He turned then and began to head down the path toward the main road.

Frisk turned to follow, tugging at the hem of her sweater. A lone snowflake drifted down and landed in her eyelashes. She blinked in surprise as it began to melt, blurring her vision. She paused to wipe at her eye with her sleeve.

From behind her, the light crunch of footsteps on the hard-packed snow. She spun around, but there was nobody there. A tingle began to grow in her soul. Not a wrenching pain this time, but a mildly uncomfortable prickle.

"Kid? You comin'?"

"Here!" Frisk rubbed at her chest, then hurried to catch up with Sans, glancing over her shoulder one last time. Still nobody there.

oOo

By its very nature, Waterfall had always been quiet. You can hear yourself think, the Riverperson had said in her dream. It felt much more comfortable here than it had been in Snowdin, traversing through the dark muddied caves. The emptiness of the Underground wasn't so apparent.

Frisk kept an easy pace alongside Sans, careful to avoid the puddles that littered the path. Once again, the pair said nothing over the whole journey, lapsing instead into a comfortable silence and allowing the quiet of Waterfall take over. Soon, it was just the distant sound of rushing water and the ever-constant hush-hush of the Echo Flowers whispering in the background.

As they entered the room with the crystalized cheese in it, Frisk found that she was holding her breath as she recalled the dream from two nights ago. The long, featureless cavern with the grey door that she had never seen in the waking world. Would it be here now?
A short, narrow passageway giving way to a blank foyer.

Thick, warm fabric that squelched at her touch. A painful tug on her soul.

A ringing in her ears—

click, clack, click, clack, click, clack, click, clack—

Frisk gasped as if breaking out from underwater, catching Sans’s attention. He tilted his head, cocking a questioning browbone at her. "Uh… you all right there?"

The child shuddered but nodded, taking in her surroundings. They’d passed through the room without her noticing, and now they were at the entrance to the marshlands. Just as things had been the first time she’d crossed the Underground. She looked over her shoulder, and she could still see the little table with the cheese on it.

"I just… " She squinted into the room for any signs of movement, but finding nothing, she turned her attention back to Sans. "I thought there was another room between this one and the one back there. A long one, like a hallway."

"Nope," Sans ventured. "Definitely no hallways. Nothing between here and the room back there."

"But—"

"Trust me. No offence, but I kinda know these caves a little better'n you do, kid. Lived here my whole life, came to Waterfall all the time as a babybones, et cetera, et cetera. That cheese has been sitting there as far back as I can remember, too, actually." Sans made a face.

They kept going. The little bird that carried you over a disproportionately small gap was missing, so they were forced to wade across the stream instead. Now soaked from the knee down, they pushed on across Waterfall.

Soon they arrived at Hotland, where they were greeted with a blast of hot air that dried their clothes and shoes in a heartbeat. No sooner had they taken a few steps into the area, however, than Sans suddenly staggered to a stop and swayed where he stood.

"Sans!"

"I just… gotta sit down for a sec." Sans lurched forward and sank down onto the rickety stool behind his old Hotland station. He closed his eyes, releasing a long, heavy breath.

"Dunkle Sans? What's wrong?" Frisk leaned against the front of the sentry station, watching him in concern.

"Eh. Not really used to being awake for this many hours at a time." He slid his eyes open a crack and lifted his head, propping his chin on his hand.

Frisk was pretty sure there was more to it than that, but all she said was, "oh." She crossed her arms and followed Sans’s gaze across the bridge. Alphys's public lab loomed on the other side of the lava lake.

"You know what I'm thinking, kid?"

"Um. What?"

He nodded in the direction of the lab. "I'm thinking I might be able to find some of what I need in
there. Downstairs, if you wanna be particular about it."

Frisk couldn't help it; her jaw dropped. "You wanna go down there? But…"

"Yeah. I wouldn't usually be very nostalgic for the old place, but, well. I just figure that... Maybe it'll be worth it after all." His expression was decidedly determined. It looked out-of-place on his face.

"Now? You're not still tired?"

"Nah. No, I'm good. I feel better already. Loads better." Sans ran his hands down his face, then pulled himself to his feet. "Wanna come with me up to the entrance?" Only one hand entered the pocket of his hoodie this time; by the way the pocket moved, he seemed to be holding onto something inside of it.

So that's what he was doing. Go figure. Frisk should have known, and she pushed back her irritation. Dunkle Sans was being so stubborn, and he seemed to be going round and round in circles, unable to settle on one decision. One minute, he said that her insight as an anomaly was important; the next, he wouldn't let her do anything. And he still wouldn't answer her questions, not even the important ones.

Frisk stood her ground. She crossed her arms over her chest and glared. "I'm coming."

Sans looked similarly annoyed. "No, you're not."

"Am so."

"Kid." He looked vaguely around. "Frisk. Buddy. It's late. Everyone will have noticed you're missin' by now. Your mom's coming back in a couple days, and you're gonna be in serious trouble if someone tells her that you disappeared the whole day. And even if Papyrus and Undyne decide to stick by you, you know Al's gonna wind up telling everything by accident. And she'll prob'ly find a way to make it sound a lot worse than it could ever be."

"I'm coming. You don't want me to come 'cause you think it might be dangerous, but I don't care, I'm coming. I'm not letting you go somewhere dangerous and scary alone."

"You'll be banned from video games for a week."

"I don't care."

"You're gonna get grounded. From pie. For a month."

"I don't care."

"You're gonna get pickled snails for dinner," he tried, weakly.

"I don't care."

"You – " Sans shook his head in bewilderment. "Geez, you actually mean that, don't ya? Okay. Okay, fine."

"Wow!" Frisk brightened, and skipped ahead several steps before turning back to look at him. "That was even easier than I thought!"

"Don't you go getting too cheeky." He stepped forward to join her. "And if we get even a little inkling something might be dangerous, you're going back. No arguing."
"We both will, then." The child tilted her head to the side and slipped her hand into his as they crossed the bridge. "I know it's gonna be really scary for you to go back down there. 'cause you've never been down there since you were a little kid, right?"

Sans startled, then nodded once. "Yeah. Never."

She smiled timidly. "So then I gotta come." She squeezed his hand.

As they came to the entrance to the lab, the automatic doors sliding open like the maw of a great beast, Sans squeezed back.

oOo

The lab beyond the elevator was dark as a pitch.

"Oh," Frisk heard herself say. She reached into her pocket to retrieve her phone to use as a flashlight, but the movement prompted the automatic lights to flicker on in the corridor beyond, bringing the True Lab to grim, ghoulish life. She put her phone back.

The young human looked over at Sans as they stepped out of the elevator.

"Are you…?" she began.

"I never came this way before," Sans mumbled, seemingly more to himself than to Frisk. "Always went through the elevator in the Capital. Not the one in the castle, I think that one was added after… him. There used to be one not far from where… from where we lived with him in New Home. I think that entrance might've gotten walled off."

"Oh. Well, I mean, I only came here once, but here. It's this way." Frisk pointed, feeling a little silly. There was only one path, at least for now. "Um, where in the labs are we going?"

"Nowhere, really. We're just… having a look around."

"Okay."

They continued down the long corridor. In the dead silence of the lab, their footsteps on ceramic tile resonated and echoed off the walls, which had cracks running up and down them like veins, splitting their concrete surface. It was a silence in which you could hear the skittering of a spider across the floor. The monitor screens on the walls flickered and crackled with static as they walked by, but blinked off again just a few seconds later.

Frisk gave Sans another concerned glance. His movements were slow and stiff, eyelights dimmed to the faintest of pinpricks.

They carried on, without any real sense of direction.

Up and across the infirmary, taking a left.

Frisk saw it first, but when Sans caught sight of it, he froze on the spot.

The Determination Extractor looked just as ominous as it had the last time Frisk had seen it. Looming at what must have been two storeys high and shaped like the skull of some sinister beast, it looked ready to come alive and consume her. Red paint flaked off of it like a reptile shedding its skin, revealing layers of rusted metal underneath.

For Frisk, it was chilling. But she supposed that the machine held an entirely different meaning for
Sans.

She glanced over at him again. His head was bowed, his eyelights peering upwards at the machine, and his shoulders had hunched forward; looking, by all rights, like a scolded child. He was chewing at the end of his sleeve.

"Dunkle Sans," Frisk urged, her gaze darting over to the DT Extractor.

When he didn't respond, she took a step toward him, hesitantly laying a hand on his shoulder. He flinched, and Frisk took a startled step back. But otherwise he did not react. He just stayed there, small and slouched and chewing on the end of his sleeve.

The human sighed, shifting uncomfortably from foot to foot. She was worried for Sans, but she wasn't sure what was the right thing to do. Should she shake him to try and snap him out of… whatever it was he was going through right now? She didn't want to assume he'd phase out of it but she was afraid that if she tried to snap him out of it, she'd make things even worse. She couldn't go get the machine parts on her own because she didn't even know what she was looking for, and she didn't want to explore the labs by herself.

She didn't want to stay here any longer than she had to, either. Especially not in front of the DT Extractor.


Nothing.

Then, something bright and flashing captured her attention, just off to the side. Frisk turned toward it.

It was a Save star.

It flickered candle-flame weak—nowhere near as bright as the ones she was accustomed to, but still, it was a Save star. A Save star, here in the labs, after finding so many of them to be missing.

Frisk found herself stepping slowing towards it, entranced.

Lemon Bread the Amalgamate had once disguised herself as a Save star, in this very same place before the DT Extractor (though Frisk still wasn't entirely sure how she'd had done that).

It could be a trap, she thought.

And even if it was some kind of monster disguising itself… well, what was the worst that could happen? She'd be pulled into combat mode, but she'd gotten quite good at dodging over the course of the timelines. She'd just work out whatever she needed to do until the enemy could be spared, and…

The power of Saving had made her reckless.

What would happen if she didn't make it through the battle the first time? If this wasn't a real Save star, then she wouldn't be able to come back if she died, or even heal herself if she was hurt. And even if it was a true Save star, then she risked weakening the timeline even further if she initiated another Reload.

The Save star blinked enticingly, a beacon in the darkness of the lab. It seemed to reach out to her and her alone, speaking her name in a seductive whisper.
Frisk stared at it a moment longer. Then, slowly, she reached out and closed her fist around it.

*There it was.* She felt the familiar rush of Determination warming her soul, then quickly opened her hand, stepping back.

The Save star was gone. But this time, she didn't feel the cold, heavy emptiness that she'd felt where the other Save stars had been missing. Frisk looked down at her hands. Had she imagined it?

She stood there, staring at the spot where the Save star had been, when she realised that Sans was gone.

"Sans?" Frisk spun in every which direction, alarm growing rapidly. "Sans?!"

"In here," came a voice, from around the corner.

Frisk followed the sound of his voice just a little bit back from whence they'd come, up a short passageway and into a room she didn't remember seeing before, but which turned out to be no different than any of the others they'd explored.

Sans's gaze was fixed on a desk covered in papers. Frisk approached him a little nervously, following his eyeline to the desk. "What's that?"

He didn't answer. Frisk leaned closer. There was what appeared to be a blueprint for the Determination Extractor, rolled out and weighed down with Mew Mew bobbleheads for paperweights. There were notes marking it – some of the writing she recognised as Alphys's illegible scrawl, but most of it was in strange symbols, each one formed neat and precise.

The rest of the desk was covered in documents, and in one corner there was a stack of file folders. There was too a child's crayon drawing of what looked like outer space, half poking out from one of the folders.

Frisk turned her attention to the documents. There was a combination of handwritten notes and documents printed from a computer. These, too, were written in the same strange cipher.

"Dunkle Sans, what are these papers? Are they a secret code? Do you know what they say?"

His voice, when he spoke, was flat and far too quiet. "Nah. 's English. Just a different font." He sucked in a shuddering breath. "These things are pretty old. They shouldn't be here. They shouldn't be out."

Frisk picked up a fresh-looking piece of paper and studied it. It was oddly sticky, and stained with black splotches here and there. The ink was still wet. "But do you know what they say?"

A beat.

"Kid. We need to get out of here. Right now."

Frisk nodded. "Okay," she said, very quietly, and waited for Sans to respond. A flash of movement just over his shoulder caught her attention, and she froze.

Perched on the edge of the desk was a single, skeletal, disembodied hand. A gaping hole carved into its palm. Frisk stared, waiting for it to move again, but the hand remained still. She could not tell if it was watching back.

She stared a moment longer, then reached out and tugged on Sans's sleeve without turning her gaze
from the hand. "Sans," she whispered, and pointed.

To his credit, Sans only remained frozen for a moment, his eyesockets gone dark, staring vacantly. Then he grabbed the human's wrist. "Kid," he said. "Run."

"What?"

"Now!"

He took off, causing Frisk to stumble before falling into pace. But she was faster than he was, and in a few running strides she was tugging him along behind her. When she looked over her shoulder, she saw that the hand was giving chase, scurrying along the floor behind them.

"I thought you hated exercise!"

"Yeah, well, desperate times call for desperate measures."

"And what's happening?!"

"Nothing good—just keep going! The Hotland – the – the elevator!"

She dared to glance over her shoulder again. "There's more of them!" she cried. Indeed, there must have been a half dozen in total, squeezing out from cracks in the floor and the walls.

Sans made a low hissing sound in what was probably an effort to keep from swearing, though Frisk really couldn't have been troubled by it at the moment. His soul was flickering wildly, and his features were twisted into a concentrated expression. He seemed to be trying to summon his magic.

But Frisk had no time to ponder on it, as she made a hairpin turn round a corner.

"Wrong way, wrong way!"

They stumbled as they tried to wheel around without letting go of each other. The crawling hands grasped at their ankles, and they scarcely managed to avoid the snatching fingers.

"What are they?" Frisk wailed. Her heart was pounding, and even with the adrenalin coursing through her veins she didn't know how much longer she could go without resting. Sans must have been exhausted by now, too. It would be so much easier if she could just run in a straight line, as opposed to having to weave through the True Lab's intestine corridors.

"Like I said, nothing good."

"Are they him?"

Before Sans even had the chance to answer, the air came alive with garbled shrieks and moans. The low, deep hum of machinery starting up. Here and there, clouds of glitching black squares flickered in the air, on the walls, phasing in and out of existence, and the hands still crawled after them.

Somehow they could hear the tips of their bony fingertips tapping on the tiled floor amidst the din.

Distracted, Frisk almost tripped over her feet and stumbled, momentarily losing Sans's grip. Something closed around her ankle and yanked, sending searing stabs of pain directly to her soul and she screamed—

"Shit," Sans gasped out, lifting a hand. His left eye was flickering erratically, from blue to white to completely black. "Kid, just —"

"Help!" The hand pulled again, and now a second had joined it, asserting its grip on her ankle in a
spot just above the other's. The human tried to plant her feet in the ground and resist, but the hands were strong, and with their next tug she toppled over. She scrabbled for a grip in the tiled floor. "Sans, help!"

"Hang on- I got a few tricks up my sleeve." He summoned a small array of bone bullets, though his features contorted visibly with the effort.

"Sans!"

He fired.

The attack landed perfectly, and the hands flexed and fell back with a sizzle, releasing their hold. But the attack grazed Frisk, too, and the human hissed in pain on reflex.

"Shit. Sorry, kid –" Sans made to help her to her feet, but he wasn't very strong, leaving Frisk to do most of the work.

"It's okay," the child gasped. The pain was already fading. "It was just… 1 HP…" She looked down the corridor from whence they'd come. It had gone totally quiet. "The hands are gone," she mumbled.

"Yeah." Sans bent over, resting his hands on his kneecaps. He was breathing heavily, his forehead dripping with sweat (somehow). "Don't think we should take it as an invitation to stick around, though."

"Yeah," Frisk echoed. Still, she took the opportunity to catch her breath.

More glitching black squares materialised in the air, in larger clusters this time, fizzling in and out of existence, and in the next instant the air was punctuated with screaming static once again. A hand wriggled its way out from behind one of the monitor screens.

"Let's go," Frisk said.

They pressed desperately on, the glitches gaining momentum, until finally they reached the small foyer by the elevator. Sans summoned another bone and fired it at the elevator call button. In a burst of sparks, the doors opened, and the pair dove inside.

Sans slammed his hand down on the "up" button and they both bent double, gasping for air—

*Ding.*

Frisk looked down at her chest, wide-eyed. But it was Sans's soul that had been turned blue.

He released a choking sound, but already he was being yanked backward, back out of the elevator and straight toward the hands and the cloud of static.

Frisk screamed, lunging forward, but the elevators doors slid shut before she could reach them. The elevator groaned, shook, then began its lurching journey upwards.

The child threw herself against the doors, like that might help, pounding her fists against the metal. When that didn't work, she pressed furiously on the "Down" button, but the elevator didn't respond. Of course it didn't. She'd have to wait for it to reach the top before it could follow a new command, except of course she couldn't wait because Sans was in trouble and she hadn't even begun to register what had just happened and the elevator was so slow, and… and…
Frisk slumped against the wall and slid down to the floor, her small frame shaking.

The already-long elevator ride seemed to last even longer than before; it seemed an age before it finally shuddered to a stop and its doors slid open to reveal Alphys's upper lab.

Frisk sat dazed for a moment, then shot to her feet, pressing the down button on the elevator. Nothing happened.

She pressed again on the "down" button. Nothing happened.

"Come on, come on," she muttered to herself, pressing repeatedly, furiously.

Nothing happened.

Frisk turned to look out the elevator doors. She heaved a shaky sigh. There were other ways into the lab, other routes she might yet take to go save Sans. An elevator from the castle.

She swallowed. The elevator across Hotland, she thought. Up to the MTT Resort and the elevator to the castle. Then back down.

She recited these steps to herself a few times, running them over in her head as though not to forget, then finally exited the elevator. Alphys's lab was still untouched, at least. The lights were still on, but she and Sans had done that as they'd passed through.

Then, crossing the lab, she froze. There was somebody at Alphys's desk, facing her way. Somebody human. Their hair covered half their face, but something told Frisk that whoever they were, they weren't here by coincidence. She swallowed again. "Hi," she ventured. Small steps forward.

The figure stilled, then brushed their hair away.

Frisk's jaw dropped. It took her a moment to find her voice, Sans entirely forgotten in the moment. "Chara," she uttered at last.

Chara smiled, and stood.

Frisk had been told before that she looked a lot like the long-dead human Princess. She'd seen photographs – not very many; apparently Chara had never liked having her picture taken and thus most had been candid shots. But it was hard to make out any distinguishing features in those grainy images eighty years old, captured by cameras another twenty years older. She'd never really believed it before.

Seeing Chara now, though, was something very different. It wasn't uncanny, not really. But it was chilling nonetheless. She was taller, and indeed looked older than Frisk, but younger and smaller than the twelve years she'd been when she died. She wore similar, but not identical clothing – brown slacks and brown shoes and a green sweater marked by a single yellow stripe. Her hair was lighter, a warm, auburn-hued chestnut next to Frisk's muddy brown, and her skin was much, much paler.

But there was something else about her, too, some quality about the other girl that made Frisk feel like she was looking in a mirror. Something about the arrangement of features on that pale face. Something about her eyes.

Chara took a single stride forward. "Hello, Frisk," she said, her voice level. "I'm glad you're finally here—you took your sweet time. I've been wanting to talk to you for a while now."
Frisk just stared. Then everything came rushing back at full force, an avalanche raining down. **Sans. The labs. Hands.**

"I—I have to—we have to save my Dunkle Sans, that—" The child gulped for air. "That was… that was that scientist, wasn't it?"

Chara pursed her lips and folded her hands behind her back. "That was Doctor Gaster who took Sans, yes. He was the Royal Scientist before Doctor Alphys. You know this already, but his name slipped your mind, so I thought to remind you. It's perfectly all right. That happens sometimes, even here."

"What do you mean? What are you talking about?" Frisk shook her head, then bounced anxiously on the spot. "We have to save Sans! You… you can help me, right?"

Chara said nothing.

"You showed up in my dreams," Frisk insisted. "I remember now. That was you, wasn't it? I thought it was."

"I entered and influenced your dreams, yes."

"And you've been following us."

"Yes."

"Why? Why are you…?" Frisk shook her head again. "I'm saving Sans." She looked from side to side, still a little frazzled. "I just need to—"

"You cannot."

"What?"

"You cannot save him from Gaster. Don't worry. He'll live."

"How can you say that?"

"Because." Chara remained eerily still. "Doctor Gaster is not going to kill him. Hurt him? Yes, certainly. That is a given. But he is not going to kill him. That would be counterproductive."

Frisk looked at her despairingly, and Chara continued.

"He took him for a reason, after all. And he wants both of you, you know. He needs both of you for his purposes. I would suggest that you try to get to safety while you still have the chance."

"I'm not leaving Sans." Frisk said, resolute.

Chara rolled her eyes, but finally she moved, unfolding her hands from behind her back and taking a step closer. Frisk, for her part, remained where she stood. "Fine. If you want to be optimistic, then there is a chance that Doctor Gaster will release Sans once he gives up on affirming his hold on you. He needs the pair of you, after all."

She thought of what Sans had told her of Gaster. "He's not really going to do that, is he?"

"Snort. "Your levels of deduction astound me. No. Of course he's not."

Frisk looked down at her toes. What was Doctor Gaster doing to Sans right now? "Why did you
come here if you didn't want to help me?"

"Frisk!" Chara snapped. "Listen to me. Don't you understand? You can't rescue your… skeletal uncle. It's pointless. This is Doctor W.D. Gaster that we're dealing with, and you cannot beat him. Not anywhere, not ever, and most certainly not within the here and now. This is his domain."

"His… domain?"

Chara raised her eyebrows just so. "His domain, yes. I'll assume you know what that word means. You're well-read, for your age." She spread her hands out in what was definitely a mocking gesture. "Welcome to the Void."

Frisk's heart dropped. The nothing outside of all of time and space. Wasn't that what Dunkle Sans had said? Her mind was racing; she couldn't make sense of it all. "The Void? But…"

"Yes. Or something very close to it. We aren't in your world at any rate, not entirely. But I'll say again that's it's really rather complex, and if I tried explaining it to you now, in your current state of mind, my words would be entirely lost on you."

"… what are you even doing here? I mean… you just died, didn't you?" Frisk paused, suddenly unsure of herself. "You did die, right?"

"Yes. I died. And before you feel the need to ask, yes, I am still dead."

"So what are you doing in the Void?"

Chara smirked, without mirth. "Oh, Frisk. Did no-one ever tell you? This is the place where lost things go."
But Nobody Came

Chapter Summary

Which treats of a tearful family reunion.

Chapter Notes

So… this is, almost without a shadow of doubt, the darkest chapter in this entire story. I’ve written some pretty heavy stuff, but I’m going to be honest that writing this chapter broke my heart—and this is me we’re talking about, so please enter with caution. Like… if you read FINAGLC you should be fine, but this really isn’t a very pleasant chapter.

MAJOR warnings for this chapter, including psychological torture, minor violence, heavier-than-usual themes of PTSD and manipulation/brainwashing, plus implications/references to child abuse, depression, and alcoholism. Told you stuff got dark.

I’m also shamelessly borrowing a quote from the finale of Orphan Black here because it’s too freaking perfect and that hit me when I was re-watching it this summer. I have been saving it all this time! Side note, everyone go watch Orphan Black because it is amazing.

Sans was hurtling backwards. Greyish green tiles whipped by him in a sickly blur, intercut here and there with glitching black squares. He was falling. Time seemed to slow, then at random intervals it sped up before slowing once again.

He fell, and kept falling. Suddenly—a sharp jerking motion. The shrieking in the air dimmed down to a piercing hiss as his skull slammed into something hard.

Blacness.

When Sans came to, he found himself sitting on a cold, hard floor, propped up against a wall. A throbbing pain in the back of his skull. He groaned, reaching back to feel for any cracks, but the bone remained perfectly intact. His soul still ached terribly.

The air was pungent with the familiar scent of antiseptic and cheap floor cleaner.

Where was the kid? Was she okay? And where the hell was he?

Sans shifted before slowly sliding his eyesockets open. His vision swam for a moment before
coming into focus: he was in a small, square room—clearly part of the labs, but the walls and floor were a dull and featureless grey, tiles leeched of any colour. A short passageway, which opened on the far side of the room, led to nothing.

Then he saw the furniture that occupied the room: a large computer desk tucked into one corner with a built-in storage unit. A single wooden chair. An IV stand, a tray table on wheels, and another couple of machines for which he’d never had a name. And the steel operating table placed in the exact centre of the small space, adorned with leather straps.

He surged to his feet, or rather he tried to—he staggered in his attempt and swayed on the spot once he managed to get upright.

_Ding._ As if on cue, his soul turned blue again.

_“Hello, Sans.”_

Sans heard his creator before he saw him: footsteps slapping heavy on hard tile, and a steady _drip-drip-drip_ sound, like that of a tap that had not been closed properly.

Wait. That was wrong, wasn’t it?

He turned his head to the right, to the source of the sound. What he saw would have been enough to make his stomach turn, if he’d had the biology for it.

He could certainly recognise Gaster, but what he saw was all wrong.

He was solid, for the most part. But still his form remained slumped and half-melted, and in places it seemed to drip a sticky black liquid. A long crack ran down from his left eye; and another similar crack crawled up from the right. The cracks bled that same tarlike substance. He wore a long black cloak over his clothing, but the fabric seemed fused to the bone, and his whole form seemed to flicker and ripple at times. It would have been a strain on the eyes to stare at him too long, or too directly, like staring at the flickering static on a broken TV screen.

But still there was his expression, unreadable even behind that sly smile too wide for comfort.

Gaster folded his hands behind his back and leaned over him. Even in this state, he still towered a good couple of feet taller than Sans, maybe even more so.

_“Well. How fitting you return to your cage. All lab rats do, in the end.”_

His speech was calm and measured, more monotonous than Sans remembered it being. Or maybe it was the Void’s doing. Either way, Sans glared up at him, saying nothing.

_“It has been. A long time.”_ Gaster tilted his head to one side. His eyes narrowed slightly in thought as he scrutinized his old subject. _“I see you have changed quite a bit. Though you still have not. Grown at all. Since we last saw each other.”_

Sans clenched his teeth, writhing a little under the grip on his soul that the scientist still maintained. “Yeah, and whose fault is that? And—” he summoned his courage—“I can’t say you’re lookin’ too great yourself, Gaster.”

Gaster’s sagging shape flickered again. _“It is difficult. To maintain physical form in the Void. I am still working toward fully emerging from it. Your comment, however. Is justified. It is due to the Determination trials you remain the height of a child.”_
“Want to keep drilling it in? The reminder’s always appreciated; sometimes I forget to notice when I’m walking around town.” Sans drew in several deep, shaking breaths. Maybe if he kept this up long enough, he’d forget that he was afraid. Whatever the hell was going on, he couldn’t afford to be afraid right now. “Where’s Frisk?”

“The human? Do not trouble yourself. It is a long way from here. But it will return, you’ll see.”

So the kid was safe, for now. Good. Sans took his word for it. It wasn’t like he had any other choice. He struggled against the blue grip on his soul again, but Gaster just tightened his hold and lifted him a few inches above the ground so that his feet now dangled in the air.

“You are unsurprised to see me,” Gaster hummed, thoughtful.

“Yeah, well.” Sans tried to reach out to his magic, without taking his eyes off Gaster. It was weak, but still there. He focused on gathering it, slowly, and ignored the sweat that already rolled down the back of his skull. “Maybe next time you should give a little less warning if you don’t wanna ruin the surprise. Can’t say I’m real pleased to see ya, though, either way. No offence.”

“I do not need you to be surprised. Or pleased, for that matter. Though I am surprised. You came to seek me out. Feeling bold these days, I suppose.”

Sans said nothing.

“No matter.” One hand still balled into a fist to maintain the grip on Sans’s soul, Gaster began to circle the room, as he’d sometimes done when he was deep in thought. “Your method of arrival. Is irrelevant to our purposes here. You have spared me a good deal of effort. I appreciate it.”

Sans followed his gaze to the examination table, then quickly looked away.


“And what would those purposes be?” Sans tugged on his weakened magic again, not gathering it at his fingertips, but rather letting it charge in his soul. Slowly. Slowly. “What the hell do you want, Gaster?”

No answer. Gaster stopped at the tray table, peering down at the medical instruments.

“And how’d you get out of the Void?”

Gaster looked up at him. He smiled. The same oozing black substance trailed from one corner of his mouth. “I think you know the answer to that. Don’t you, Sans?”

Sans screwed his eyes shut. Just one last tug…

“At any rate. It is nigh impossible to escape the Void. I have not been able to emerge from there. Not really. And that, Sans, is how you and the human will—”

With a burst of his own magic, Sans broke free from the blue grip on his soul. He landed on his knees, hard, but scrambled to his feet and gathered his magic again, at his fingertips this time. He had neither the time nor the energy to summon a Blaster, but he managed to make a bone attack, and fired it in Gaster’s direction.

Years of sparring with his brother had Sans well prepared. Papyrus’s proficiency in damageless attacks made him one of the very few monsters Sans could afford to spar with, and as it happened,
Papyrus was an excellent sparring partner. It afforded Sans the chance to be as decent a fighter he was physically capable of being, considering. Papyrus had always said something along those lines, though he’d been more encouraging about it. Sans could dodge, sure, but just as importantly, he knew how to put an attack together, and he had pretty good aim to top it off.

By all means his attack should have landed perfectly. Sans knew it should have.

Instead, Gaster’s form seemed to shift, to twist, curling into itself like a malleable ball of clay, and Sans’s attack passed right by him, hitting the wall instead and dissolving on impact.

There was that wicked smile again as Gaster lifted one hand, holding his palm open like an offering. It was only a few small bones that he summoned, but Sans stiffened immediately. He was ready when Gaster fired, and shortcut swiftly to the right as the attack came flying his way, but the act left his soul aching even more than before. The bones fizzled out of existence when they missed their apparent intended target.

Gaster’s smile widened, somehow. By this point, it was starting to get a little irritating. “Your reflexes are impressive.”

Sans didn’t answer, just flashed his creator something between a smirk and a pained grin. His next attack was even smaller and more pathetic than the one before it, and the knobbed ends of the bones he’d summoned blurred in and out of existence even before he actually fired them. Again, Gaster neither dodged nor deflected the attack, simply reshaped himself so that the attack missed passed harmlessly by.

Sans remained silent, just readied himself to dodge Gaster’s oncoming attack, a small Blaster this time.

They went on like that, ping-pong fashion, for a couple more turns. They exchanged bullets as Gaster shifted to avoid his increasingly pathetic attacks, and Sans dodged. It could have been mistaken for a sparring match, and inwardly Sans was grateful for it.

A pattern was good, made matters easier. It kept him from thinking.

Thinking was the last thing he wanted to do right now.

He fell mindlessly into the exchange, such that he could almost forget the circumstances. But he couldn’t keep it up for much longer, and this time, when Gaster fired a small cluster of bones, he didn’t manage to dodge at all.

The attack hit him square in the chest, and Sans went flying backwards. He slammed, hard, into the opposite wall and crumpled to the floor.

The pain in his sternum was blinding, both searing sharp and a smarting ache, and he choked and struggled for air.

Shit, did everyone’s attacks hurt that much? He must have been less than nine the last time he’d been struck by even a low-damage attack. He couldn’t afford to get hit by monster bullets, and now he fumbled to find a reason as to why he might still be alive.

Squish-tap, Squish-tap. Gaster’s footsteps half-squelched on the cold tile as he came near. He watched Sans, and he said nothing.

Sans choked again, though the pain was finally starting to fade. “What the hell, Gaster?” he managed. “What the hell was that?”
Gaster just drummed his fingertips together. “You are familiar with the concept of damageless attacks, Sans, are you not? It is a challenging, though not too impossible, skill to master. I believe your brother became quite proficient with them—one of his few accomplishments, I suppose. They never hurt, did they? But did you know there are different ways of creating damageless attacks? One might, for instance, design an attack that mimics the sensations a monster would experience if actually struck, all the while maintaining HP and causing no actual damage.”

He smiled. Bastard.

“Well, I call rematch.” Instincts long suppressed screamed at him to shut up, just shut up with the snarky comments and do as he was told. Sans ignored them, for the moment. “Pretty sure you were cheatin’, Gaster.”

Gaster seemed to preen. “I dodged.”

“Touché,” Sans muttered. He wasn’t even surprised when he heard the *ding*, blue magic wrapping itself tight around his soul.

Gaster lifted him up and deposited him in the chair. There, he held his subject in place, and Sans didn’t bother struggling even a bit. He was so damn tired. So, instead, he went back to talking. “Pretty big show you’re puttin’ on here, I gotta say. Crawling out from the Void, invading Frisk’s dreams or something. I mean, I figure you must have some pretty exciting plans, right? Maybe a wild night out at the human nightclubs or something? What you got in mind?”

“No just now,” Gaster said dismissively. “We’ll get to that in a moment. But first, Sans, I must reacquaint myself. It has been. A long time. After all.”

His speech was beginning to glitch again, Sans observed numbly, obscured by short-cut sentences and blips here and there. Gaster seemed to notice, too, and he shook his head in irritation. A bit of black tar dropped from the crack under his eye and landed with a sickly sound on the floor.

“I trust you will answer these questions honestly. They are important if I am to create an accurate update on your file. We will begin with the basics for now, but I would like for us to get into more detail in the future. Twenty years is quite a while, is it not?” He pulled a file from the drawer and picked up a pen and clipboard from the computer desk.

“What?” Sans snorted. “You mean you weren’t watching me from the Void every second?”

“I was unable,” Gaster said simply. “Shall we?”

Sans blew air out from between his teeth. Gaster’s grip was tight as ever. “Guess I don’t have a choice, right?”

Gaster said nothing, just placed the tip of the pen to the paper, and it was an answer in itself.

The first few questions were fairly simple: stuff about his regular diet, medications (as if), his sleeping patterns, the frequency at which he succumbed to illness. Then—

“How would you describe your emotional state over the years?”

Sans remained silent, staring, not sure if he’d heard correctly. It sounded like a sick joke.
“Sans,” Gaster pressed.

Sans clenched his teeth and suppressed a laugh, balling his hands into fists. “Well, what do you think, Gaster? I mean, go on, take a guess.”

Gaster made an impatient noise. “Your lack of a clear answer gives me cause to believe that it has been mostly negative.”

“Congratulations.” Sans fought to keep his voice from wavering. “Always knew you were a genius. They oughta give you some kind of recognition, with deduction skills like that. Maybe even position as Royal Scientist.”

Gaster slapped him, hard, across the face.

A trail of the cold, inky substance trickled down his cheekbone.

Abruptly, his creator made a nondescript sound, which spiked suddenly in volume as it gave way to the same high, screaming static Sans and the kid had heard earlier. The pen slipped through his fingers, which seemed to be melting like wax. It clattered to the floor. His mouth and eyes disappeared for a moment behind little clouds of television snow. Then the static cut off abruptly, and Gaster returned to normal.

Sans stared.

“Excuse me,” Gaster muttered. “As I have said. It is. So difficult to maintain. Physicality. One of the many places. In which you will help me.”

His hand solid once more, he bent to retrieve the pen, wiped it off on his cloak, and returned to his little questionnaire with no further comment.

“Did you ever pursue a formal education again?”

“Nope. Never bothered.”

“I see. What has been your employment status over the years?”

“I dunno, a few things, I… what does this actually matter to you?”

“Answer the question, please.”

“Okay, but—” Sans shook his head. “Gaster, do you seriously know none of this stuff? You must’ve been watching some of the time.”

Gaster tapped the pen against the paper in thought. Sans often did the same thing when he was thinking or searching for words. “I was always watching,” he said at last. “Just not in the direct fashion you are thinking of.”

“Right.”

“Now then: your employment status. How have you been supporting yourself and that brother of yours?”

Sans glowered. “Papyrus. He has a name. And… I’ve done a bunch o’ different stuff, I guess. We… after you… after it happened, I worked for the Tems for a coupla years. Then I found better work and I stopped. Then after I picked up a whole bunch of jobs, kinda at the same time. A sentry for the Guard. Ran a hot dog stand. Oh, and I picked up a stand-up job at the MTT Resort – that’s
new. It’s in Hotland.”

He didn’t offer any description of the robot himself, and he didn’t mention his job for the King. He wanted to have at least some information to keep for himself. He didn’t want it all to belong to Gaster. It was a small, pathetic kind of victory, but Sans meant to take whatever he could get.

He’d been expecting Gaster to make a comment about the Tems, but his creator just hummed, jotting everything down.

“Have you ever engaged in self-destructive habits or behaviours?”

“Like what.”

Gaster made a vague gesture in the air. “I’m sure you can think of a few examples. Drug addiction—perhaps a rash assumption, but you did mention past employment with the Temmies, these things happen… Or alcoholism, perhaps… self-harm…”

Sans hunched his shoulders and shut his eyesockets, turning his head from side to side as if he had a migraine. “Yeah.”

Gaster looked up sharply. “Self-harm?”

“No… no… not… no, before that…” He plucked at his sleeve. “Drinking, I guess.”

His creator stood up a little straighter—no, he just… expanded. His whole form grew and stretched so that he loomed several inches taller. Or maybe it was just Sans’s imagination. His gaze bore down on him in scrutiny. “You… guess,” he repeated pointedly.

Sans swallowed. “Yes,” he managed. “Yeah, I’ve…”

“Alcoholism.”

Sans just nodded mutely.

A measured pause. Gaster shrunk back down to his normal size and noted it down. “Thank you. That is important for us to consider, though it shouldn’t impede our present concerns.”

“Oh, good,” Sans muttered. “You had me worried there for a sec.”

Gaster, to his surprise, didn’t react, just looked at him long and hard. “We will, of course. Have to work towards treatment regardless. In the future. But. Perhaps that shall be all for now.”

Sans heaved a sigh. “On that note. You ready to let me in on the big plan?” he asked at last, and his creator seemed slightly smug.

“Ah. Of course. We are going to finish what we started.”

Sans nodded once, gaze straying to the examination table. He’d figured as much. Before he could say anything—ask another question, make a snarky remark, he didn’t know what—Gaster carried on.

“The Determination that remains is your system behaves as an antithesis to magic. It is a property that humans have as opposed to a monster’s magic, and that is what gives them power because they do not have the magic monsters have. Some humans have traces of
magic, just as some monsters possess traces of Determination, but at the end of the day, a being with high amounts of both should not exist.

“Determination is also stronger than magic. When it entered your system, it came at the expense of the magic you possessed. Or perhaps more accurately. At the expense of its strength. Making you even less of a monster than before. Biologically speaking. This, as you know, stunted your growth. For monsters, and those things that resemble them. Need magic to grow. You do not have enough magic to grow. It is weak, and scarce enough that it cannot be spent on your growth. This, too. Has led to your poor magic output and low health.”


“When we first began the Determination trials,” Gaster continued, as if Sans hadn’t said anything, “there was an important detail regarding the nature of anomalies that I had overlooked in my research. This— I can guarantee it—is the reason for the. Incident. At the CORE. And the reason you failed to become a proper anomaly.”

“For unfortunately, no matter what approach we might have taken. Making you a proper anomaly would have been impossible. For you see, Sans. An anomaly must come from outside the Underground. We cannot simply alter a pre-existing variable and expect the achieve full results. An anomaly must be an external force. Causing a disruption in spacetime within the confines of the Barrier. That is what makes an anomaly’s abilities. So potent.”

Sans’ mind was reeling. Too much information at once, he couldn’t separate old from new.

Something about Gaster’s words seemed off. Inaccurate, or misinformed, maybe. Something to do with the flower, he was pretty sure, but he couldn’t tell exactly what in the moment. For now, he disregarded it. It wasn’t like he cared. It wasn’t like it mattered.

He managed a dry chuckle. “So all that shit you put me through with the DT. Goin’ through fucking hell. All for nothing, huh, Gaster? Great. And here I was thinking these past twenty years it was worth something at least.”

Gaster turned his back to him, scanning the notes on his clipboard. “No, Sans. That is incorrect. Though I was initially misguided in my efforts, the Barrier is shattered now. We are no longer impeded by the Underground’s closed system. An anomaly can come from anywhere.”

Pause. Sans closed his eyes.

“You will initiate a true Reset.”

He opened them. He thought of the CORE.

“You’re kidding me.”

Gaster didn’t look up. “On the contrary.” He seemed distracted. “That project failed before. However. We’ve no reason to believe it will fail us now.”

“Gaster, we’re on the Surface now. Don’t gotta worry about Resetting to—what was it, before the war?—to make sure monsters go free. And I sure don’t feel like gettin’ stuck a thousand years in
the past. Try and find something else to do.” He tried to stand, but his soul flared and twisted. Gaster forced him back down onto the chair.

“And you believe the humans can be trusted?” Gaster didn’t really look angry, not exactly. He looked more annoyed, as if Sans had interrupted him to ask what a big word meant in the book he was reading.

“Is our race. Living in peaceful co-existence with the humans? Integrated without issue into their society?” He didn’t wait for Sans’s answer. “I remain committed. To my title. To my people. And their well-being. Even if things are more or less peaceful now. They will not remain that way.”

Something shimmered behind Sans, and he turned around in his chair.

Where there had once been a solid wall—it suddenly hit him that this room was made up of nothing but solid wall, all around, with no points of entry or exit—there was now a translucent barrier, already fading into nothing. And on the other side of that dissolving wall was a hallway, the rest of the labs. The room they were in was directly opposite the Determination Extraction Machine.

Sans’s breath hitched as Gaster suddenly yanked him upwards so that he was forced to stand on his feet, though the grip on his soul was not relinquished.

Dizzily he thought back to the labs of his childhood. Yes, that was right, there’d once been a room across the hall from the Extractor, hadn’t there? There’d been a room there when he was little. He remembered it. The room hadn’t been there when he and Frisk had gone on their tour of the labs, but apparently, it was back in its place, and it was where he and Gaster were right now.

Gaster strode over to the Extractor, and pulled a lever on the wall. With a low, bone-chilling groan that made the floor tremble, the machine was powered to life. He flipped a switch on the Extractor’s side then, and the machine opened, its front swinging back and revealing an assortment of wires and tubes and miniature mechanical contraptions. The wires and tubes fed into the top half of the machine, which was occupied by some kind of storage unit. It was lined with enormous jars, held by metal clasps, that Sans recognised as the units that had been once used to house the human souls. There were seven in all. Only the middle container was empty.

The other containers, however, did not hold souls, but something else. The ones to the right were filled with what Sans recognised as Determination, and those to the left were filled with a thin, cloudy substance coloured a light cyan, which swirled around in the glass containers as if in a dance.

“Raw, undiluted magic,” Gaster supplied, apparently sensing Sans’ confusion. “Less common than one might think. You have seen it before, but you were very small. I doubt you remember it.”

Sans just shook his head. “So you’re just gonna… what? Stick more needles in me, fill me up with more DT until you think you can take a stab at making me Reset again?”

“More or less,” was the offhanded reply.

Sans stared at the Extractor a moment longer, then tore his gaze away. He realised his sleeve had made its way to his mouth, and he quickly dropped his arm. “No, you’re not gonna… ” A delayed realisation hit him then. His soul dropped. “What about Frisk? You were tryin’ to get her here, too,
“The human will come in due time. Remove your sweater.”

“I—what?” A pair of Gaster’s magic hands manifested, one on either side of him. They grabbed at his sweater and yanked—at the hood, at the collar. Sans wrestled against them, but soon his sweater had been stripped from him. The hands draped it over the back of the chair before dissolving.

“I believe you can keep your T-shirt on this time. It is very cold here. No need to cause you unnecessary discomfort.”

Sans ignored him. “What the hell do you plan on doing to the kid?”

Gaster didn’t even flinch. He tapped his knuckles against the side of the Extractor. “When the human arrives, its soul will be taken and stored here, so that I may study it sufficiently.”

Sans didn’t know why he was surprised. A cold dread filled him anyway. “No.”

“After that,” Gaster continued as if he hadn’t heard, “and if I can eliminate the possibility of any serious risk, we can then proceed to the next stage in the experiment, and you will absorb the soul before preparing to initiate a Reset.”

He must have stopped shaking at some point, because he became all too aware of the fact that he was trembling now, his bones rattling loudly as he stared at his creator.

“Gaster, please,” he gasped out. “Please, just… fine, whatever you do with me, I don’t care, but please, please, don’t hurt Frisk, leave her alone, she don’t know anything about you, just please leave the kid alone, let her go, please…” He was rambling in his desperation, and he knew it.

Gaster frowned. “Are you suggesting you trust the human, then, Sans?”

“I… what? What the hell are you talking about, I—”

“That human is one of the most powerful forces imaginable. It has the ability to return each and every one of you back to the Underground and undo all that has been accomplished. To play with time, to play you. As it pleases. It could slaughter every monster alive if it so chose, and all for a lark. To the human, we monsters are nothing but disposable playthings. This is for your own good. And for the good of monsterkind.”

Sans gasped, trying to ease his breathing. “Frisk ain’t gonna do that. I don’t know what the hell you’re on about, but she’s a good kid. Ain’t known a soul that damn good since Papyrus, and I’m not… I’m not gonna let you hurt her,” he finished, lamely.

Gaster stared at him, expression a blank canvas as always. He raised a hand and curled it into a fist. The blue grip around Sans’s soul tightened further, so tight he couldn’t breathe—

“You do not have a choice,” Gaster replied calmly.

Sans clenched his teeth, tears gathering at the corners of his eyesockets, until finally Gaster dropped his hand, and the hold was lessened. Sans was aware of his eyelights fading to black.

“So what,” he said in a low voice. “You gonna yank her over here again once you’re ready, like when you did whatever the hell you were doing in her dreams?”
“No. My control is not that complete, I’m afraid. We are already in the Void, or very close to it. I have the ability to bring a being into the Void, but once that being is here, it has the will to explore as it pleases. I can assure you, however. That the human will come here eventually of its own free will.”

Sans refused to say anything more, soaking it all in. Frisk had gotten away. She didn’t have to come back here. Maybe she’d find her way back home. Maybe she still had a chance.

Just so long as she was smart enough not to try and come back for him. Of that, Sans couldn’t be so sure.

“Now, then. If you’re quite through with your little tantrum.” Gaster seemed to be satisfied, for he stepped back and laid his palms flat against the tray table. “I am eager for us to begin. Can I expect you to be compliant from here?”

Sans’ eyes flicked to the operating table again. Something in him withered then, and he nodded slightly, looking down at his toes. *Come on, kid…*

“Yes, Gaster.”

His creator gave a firm nod in return. “Very good. Thank you, Sans.”

“Don’t mention it,” he muttered.

There was an awkward pause. Gaster cleared his throat. “You know… I am explaining these things to you. Because you have. The right to understand. The nature of these experiments. And what is being done to you. I would not deny you that right.”

Sans just stared at him, and at last Gaster sighed, almost in disappointment, and got to work.

He remained quiet through the procedure. Gaster scanned him quickly, re-confirming his HP, his Attack and Defence stats. He weighed Sans—eleven pounds when clothed, apparently—and measured his height, the circumference of his skull and ribcage, the span of his arms. He tested Sans’s reflexes and shone a penlight into both his eyesockets.

All the while he took down notes and muttered to himself, his words too low to hear, and obscured by so much static that he would have been indiscernible anyway. Here and there his speech was accentuated by small blipping noises, cheery little trills amongst the din. Sans didn’t pay very much attention either way, just subjected himself to the procedure of preparing for the experiment.

There was a joke in there somewhere, he thought distantly. He’d have to try and remember it for later.

A little secret: the worst part of it was that Sans couldn’t even bring himself to fight back anymore. Not because he was tired, this time, or even because he was afraid.

The worst part was that he found himself at ease, comforted as things fell back into familiar routine. So many details of his memories of the labs had faded over the years, but now everything was starting to come back, and it felt like all was right with the world.

“Very well, then.” Gaster cleared his throat. “We are nearly ready to begin. Up on the table.”

A few sets of magic hands materialised next to him again. Gaster made to lift him up onto the table with blue magic, but Sans climbed up by himself. The table was higher than he remembered, and
so the magic hands gave him a boost, hoisting him up. They eased him down so that he lay flat on his back. One set of hand constructs removed his socks and shoes.

The hands began to fasten the restraints, strapping him securely down.


The leather bit into him, the material rubbing uncomfortably against his bones. Sans began to struggle, but he could barely move, and struggling only made the restraints dig deeper into his bones. The table underneath him was cold and unyielding, especially against his tailbone. He’d forgotten how horrible it felt to have his movements completely inhibited. With his forehead strapped down, Sans couldn’t even turn his head, so that he was forced to stare up at the ceiling. He could only see a portion of what was to his left side if he moved his eyes, and the world to his right remained totally dark.

Something cool swiped against his arm and he flinched before realising what it was. A cotton ball soaked in antiseptic.

“Just a last few minor preparations before we start.”

“You… what—” Sans hissed, sucking air in between his teeth as something sharp bit into his right humerus. Scalpel. The sound of metal chiselling away at bone was unpleasant and grating, and he could feel it all the way up in his skull. The feeling was somehow reminiscent to that of a hangover. At least it didn’t hurt as much as he remembered.

A few more seconds passed, and it was over. Clickey-slap, clickey-slap, went Gaster’s footsteps as he circled round Sans’s head. He was using a dropper to add a cloudy fluid into the test tube he’d just filled with tiny slivers of bone. Sensing that Sans was looking at him (as best he could, anyway), Gaster straightened his shoulders and sealed the tube with a stopper.

“A simple magic solution. To keep the bone from turning to dust.”

Sans said nothing. He sort of remembered that, though.

“I will need to study it more closely. I am curious to see if your physiology has been affected by the Resets and Reloads you lived through. The alcoholism as well,” he added, as an afterthought.

Huh. So he knew about the flower.

Of course he knew about the flower, another voice in his head countered. There was no way in hell he was just referring to the kid’s Reloads. Gaster knew.

Sans said nothing. He stared up at the colourless ceiling and counted the ceiling tiles.

Clickey-slap, clickey slap. Gaster had stored his bone sample somewhere; now Sans caught a glimpse of his creator as he passed the examination table again in the direction of the Determination Extractor. That made sense, right.

Counting the ceiling tiles didn’t take very long. Sans tried to find something else to distract himself with.

“Alright. We’re very nearly ready.” Gaster appeared at his side again, fixing something to the IV stand—it was an IV bag filled with the cloudy blue magic solution.
Sans peered up at it. “What’s…”

“I want to fix you to a magic solution drip for the procedure,” Gaster was using that toneless but inexplicably patient voice he’d sometimes use when Sans was very small and had trouble understanding how an experiment was supposed to go. “A rather standard procedure in the medical practise, actually. In your case, it has been a long time since you’ve received any Determination, and you have never received such a large, concentrated amount before. I do believe you will be fine, but it pays to be cautious. A constant flow of magic solution into your system will help to balance out the Determination.” He waved his hand, then pulled Sans’s soul into visibility.

Sans choked, staring in horror. His soul pulsated weakly, hovering just millimetres above his sternum. He struggled as Gaster, impassive as ever, brought the needle closer and closer.

There was a slight sting as the needle pierced the fragile membrane of his soul. Sans shuddered as it was followed by a rush of coolness. He braced himself for the pain, but there was nothing. It wasn’t even uncomfortable, in the strictest sense of the word. It just felt wrong, foreign, and he couldn’t tell if it was the magic solution or the catheter that delivered it or both.

His body twitched in the restraints and shuddered again.


Sans squinted. “… kinda weird. But okay, I guess.”

“Very good.” With no further comment, Gaster disappeared from his line of vision once more.

Sans allowed his eyes to slide shut again, and tried to relax, and not worry about the kid. Which was a laughable concept, but pretending was always nice. And about all he could do right now, anyway. Maybe he could pretend like the magic solution was some fancy spa treatment like Mettaton used to offer at the MTT Resort.

He didn’t have to pretend for very long; Gaster returned just moments later.

Another cool swipe as his forearm was cleaned with antiseptic. The wheels of the IV stand squeaked.

That was when he saw the IV sac, loaded with deep red Determination.

That was when all his fears came bursting to the surface. Sheer, undulated terror.

It didn’t matter that it was attached to an IV tube this time, and not a syringe like he was used to. It was Determination, it was memories of the flower’s Resets and his brother’s dust, it was blinding, searing pain that made him scream and scream no matter how badly he tried to suppress the sound.

It was Gaster, back from the Void when he thought he’d finally been free of him. Again Sans struggled vainly in the restraints, thin whimpers escaping him.

“No… nonono… this can’t – Gaster, you’re dead. You died.”

Gaster paused, fingering the needle. He tilted his head, studying the instrument closer. “No,” he said at last. “No. I was not granted that much.”

Sans just bucked hard against the restraints, teeth clenched tight. “I’m gonna get out of here. Can’t keep me strapped down to a table forever. You can’t… I don’t care where you were these last
years, I’m not a little kid anymore, Gaster, I’m not your subject, I—”

“You are only making this more difficult for yourself,” Gaster cut him off.

He paused, then stepped back and drummed his fingers together in thought.

*Click-clack, click-clack, click-clack,* like knitting needles.

“You know, Sans. I fail to see. How fighting this benefits you.”

So his speech was breaking up again. Was that a good sign? Sans couldn’t waste his energy by hinging his hopes on it. So instead he unleashed a barking laugh.

“Gee, I dunno. Maybe ’cause I’m not a real big fan of getting tortured and goin’ through agony. Just a thought, if you wanted to write it down on your little file you got on my behavioural patterns or whatever.”

“That isn’t what I mean.” Each word carried such weight. “Fighting this will be of no real value to you. What did you ever hope to accomplish outside of these experiments? What worth could you possibly carry outside of these labs?”

“What?”

“What have you managed to achieve since the incident at the CORE?” He went on before Sans got a chance to answer—not in a forceful way, but as if he sensed that Sans had no response to give. “Uneducated, a fifth grade dropout. No outlet for the scientific knowledge you so desperately seek out. Sloughing through life from one ill-paying job to another. Spending half your earnings to indulge your alcohol addiction. Failing the brother you assumed responsibility for.

“You were grown from in a tube from small extracts of bone and soul, an artificial life form. You were created for the sole purpose of serving the Underground as an experiment. A vessel to free monsterkind from the constant cruelty of humans. That is your only function. Fulfilling your purpose.”

Gaster’s words washed over him, each one ringing with what he knew to be the truth.

A well opened up in his mind. He fell in.

It was quiet, but it was not peaceful. He fell down a bottomless abyss of swirling primary colours—blue, yellow, red—that twisted and turned and raged. And all round, like stars in that warped watercolour landscape, were glitching black squares.

One square yawned open, expanding, as Sans tumbled in its direction. He fell in.

The scene changed as he landed on his feet, constructing itself around him before his very eyes.

Sans saw himself aged five. He watched his child self, and yet at the same time he was his child self, was both observer and participant.

The five-year-old Sans walked across the playground at recess time, dressed in a school uniform that was just slightly too big for him, eyes on the ground. Hot, angry tears streamed silently down his cheekbones and his hands were clenched into fists. The other kids had excluded him from their game, and Sans could hear their taunts bouncing around in his skull. The children’s words had
faded into obscurity, the sound muffled, but their sting was fresh, and the child Sans was burning with anger and shame and envy.

He sat down on a bench and pulled a book out from his backpack. He began to read it, or rather pretend to. Sniffling, his gaze flicked up every so often to watch his schoolmates at their ball-bouncing game, and each time, he was overcome with fresh waves of emotion. He would hastily look back down at his book, and yet, only a minute or two later, he would peer up again. And the cycle repeated.

“Pathetic.”

The voice in his head was Gaster’s, but somehow the thought belonged to Sans.

The scene changed.

Darkness.

He was still very small. Perhaps still five, definitely no older than six, sitting huddled in a corner of the dark, dark closet with his knees hugged tight to his chest. His hands smarted from having banged them repeatedly against the closet door. Sans shared his child self’s burning anger, and he shared his desperate fear, the darkness surrounding him, all-encompassing, pressing in on the edges of his mind.

“Pathetic.”

The scene changed.

Now he was eight, sitting at a desk in the labs with a cup sitting before him and his wrists tied to the armrests of his chair. Electrodes fastened to his skull. He was staring with fixed concentration at the cup. Sans felt a tightness in his chest as he gathered his blue magic, such that it hummed with energy. He tried with all his might to transfer that energy over to the cup, but try as he might he couldn’t get a grip on it.

“I can’t, I - I… I’m sorry, okay?” he heard himself say, in a high, young voice slightly accented by a lisp from a missing front tooth.

And God, he was crying, just sitting there and crying, crying because he couldn’t get the damn cup to move. Christ, kid, don’t you know by now you’re just wasting your energy, don’t you know by now there’s no point, don’t you know crying isn’t going to help anything, crying just irritates him and it’s never going to make him stop and it’s all so –

“Pathetic.”

White.

Everything was white.

Snowdin. Outside their shed.

But no, that was… Gaster hadn’t been there, he wasn’t supposed to know about this, how could he —

Sans was eleven, pacing back and forth. His hands were stuffed in his pockets and he glared down at the ground he stomped on, kicking up clouds of snow. Angry and annoyed.
The planks of wood that functioned as their door had been slid shut as far as possible. Papyrus could be heard kicking and screaming inside. He was throwing a tantrum.

He was hungry.

He was hungry and throwing a tantrum because this was the start of their second day without any food and they were out of money and Sans hadn’t been able to steal anything because he wasn’t very good at it yet. And he could feel the hunger pains seizing at him, too. He didn’t know how much longer they could go without eating, and he already knew trying to eat the snow didn’t do anything. Sans was tired and hungry and so was his brother. He didn’t know how Papyrus even had the energy to throw such a tantrum.

But the fact was that he did have the energy and he was throwing a fit. Didn’t he understand that they didn’t have any food or money and Sans couldn’t do a thing about it? Didn’t he understand that Sans was tired, he didn’t have the energy to deal with this, and…

Sans watched, thinking he might be sick.

Jesus Christ, of course Papyrus didn’t understand. He’d only passed his fourth birthday two weeks ago. And instead of comforting him, he’d left him alone in the shed.

The young Sans slumped down against the side of the shed, and buried his face in his hands. He didn’t cry, he didn’t make any move to comfort his brother even as he went on howling. He just sat there, useless.

“Pathetic.”

He came back up, gasping and coughing as though emerging from underwater.

His chest heaved as he grounded himself back in reality. The labs, right.

“What the hell, Gaster?” he managed. “What the hell was that?” He clenched his teeth, swallowing a sob. “How the fuck did you… what are you… ?”

“May we begin, Sans?”

“Go to hell.”

This time, he felt it: a force reaching into his mind, or maybe it had always been there, and only now was it beginning to stir. He tried to hold it back, but he didn’t have anything to hold it back with. So then he tried to run, but there wasn’t anywhere to run to, and the force found him.

Back under again. One last image, a final teasing touch.

Snowdin again, years later. Nighttime. The ground tipped and teetered beneath his feet, uneven and unstill, and at the same time it spun. His whole body felt warm and fuzzy. Heh. Funny. Probably.

Him, staggering through the door to their house. Standing in the threshold, swaying on the spot before lurching forward and faceplanting into the middle of the living room floor. The cold breeze coming through the open door. He remained there, not sure how he’d ended up on the carpet but too tired to bother moving.

And Papyrus, all of fourteen, patiently removing the key from where it had been left in the keyhole, gently closing the door behind him. Papyrus gathering his limp form in his arms and carrying him upstairs as Sans remained useless, eyes closed and mumbling incoherently.
Calm and collected. This had happened before. It was already part of a well-established routine.

“Pathetic.”

This time, when he came back up, he was crying.

“As I said. This is the best use you’ll be to anyone. Yourself included.”

“Get out of my head,” he whispered hoarsely.

He didn’t know if Gaster heard him or not, just that he sounded pleased. “It seems we’re about ready to begin, then.”

This was really happening. God, it was really… something was wrong, something had changed, a crack splitting open in his bedroom wall, no, he was… there was something he was forgetting, something about his brother, or maybe Frisk, or maybe both, he couldn’t remember, maybe it didn’t matter… he was drunk, coming home from Grillby’s drunk and he’d keeled over in the snow… Papyrus was disappointed in him, no, Toriel was disappointed in him, no, he was… he was here, on the examination table with an IV full of magic dripping into his soul, unable to move, and Gaster was standing over him and God oh God this was really happening.

He said: “Please.”

Then again. And again. And again — “please, please, pleasepleaseplease” — like a mantra.

He said it even as he knew it would do nothing, just as it had done nothing in the past.

“That’s enough, now, Sans,” was Gaster’s only response.

Sans didn’t answer; he barely even registered what Gaster had said. He struggled and whimpered, like a stupid, snivelling, pathetic little kid.

Instead of pain, there was a pause. Gaster was leaning over him at such an angle that he could see his face, and what he saw was something akin to a smile, awkward and faltering. “It will be alright. And it will be worth it. In the end. For all of us. You will see.”

He took a moment to correct himself, shaking his head and clearing his throat. “Resuming Determination Trials, 201X, subject age: twenty-nine years. Let us begin.”

And then the needle went in.
Chapter Summary

In which Frisk and Chara do an awful lot of talking.

Chapter Notes

Hey guys! If you missed the notice on tumblr, I'm doing a video q&a for the fic's upcoming 2nd anniversary. It's already been filmed, but be sure to check out the NWABBW tumblr on May 11th to see the video!

Chara, Frisk was quickly discovering, was frustratingly quiet when she wasn't dropping bombshells. The dead girl stood just a few strides away from Frisk, her hands folded behind her back, with something between a smile and a smirk on her face.

*This is the place where lost things go.* Apparently she liked being cryptic, too.

"Lost things?" Frisk finally repeated.

"Yes." The smile didn't leave her face.

Frisk flinched suddenly, then shuddered, as something cold seemed to grab at her soul. She plucked the collar of her sweater and looked down at the tiled floor, balling her hands into fists as the feeling in her soul passed. She took a deep breath, as her mum had taught her to do when she woke from a bad dream, then looked up again to face Chara. "I'm saving Sans. I'm gonna find a way to do it, and—" she hesitated. "I think you came here to help me. Right?"

A sharp thunder-clap of static pierced the air. Chara took a stumbling step back, and for a moment Frisk allowed herself a victorious grin. Then the dead girl righted herself, and in place of the placid smile was a look of annoyance. "Maybe so. But if I—well. If I did, then it was to help *you*. I couldn't care less about some skeleton from Snowdin."

Now it was Frisk's turn to be annoyed. She needed to start looking for a way to help Sans, not stand around in Alphys's lab talking to a dead girl. And if that dead girl wasn't going to help, well, then Frisk would just have to figure it out herself.

She stuck her chin in the air and marched past Chara.

*The elevator across Hotland. Up to the MTT Resort, then through the CORE to the castle, then back down to the True Lab.*

Chara's feet clicked against the tile as she began to follow, making a resounding echo. "What are you doing?"

Frisk sighed, turning to look at her. "Saving Sans. If the elevator doesn't work then I'll just go the long way round."
"Ah." There was a pause. "I would not go out there unassisted."

"Why not?"

The smirk was back. "See for yourself."

Frisk faltered, then nodded. The automatic doors slid open.

Looking out, there was nothing out of the ordinary at first. Just a stretch of the rough red sand of Hotland with the churning stream of lava and the rickety bridge that cut across it visible just beyond. Then, the scene changed. The landscape was disappearing; before her very eyes it tapered off into bottomless black.

"It's a bit unstable." Chara took a step forward. "Come. It's quite harmless."

And Frisk took a step back. "It doesn't look harmless."

"Maybe so, but I assure you that it is." Chara half-turned, stretching her hand out in invitation. "Walk with me." When Frisk made no move to join her, she sighed. "Perhaps you'd like proof? You came here in your dreams."

"But those were dreams. This is real. I'm.... actually here."

"Yes. But your mind was here. And when it comes to places like the Void, not quite real, it really amounts to the same thing."

"I don't know..."

Chara huffed again in annoyance. "Do you want to help Sans or don't you?"

Frisk faltered. "...yes."

"Then walk with me."

Frisk shuffled her feet. "We can take the castle elevator down to the labs, right? How are we gonna find it if things are... like this?"

"The Underground has not been rearranged by any means. I'm quite confident we will what we —you—are looking for. If that is the castle elevator, I will escort you." Chara's hand remained stretched out in an offer.

"Okay." Finally, Frisk accepted, taking her hand, touching the dead girl for the first time. She'd expected it to be cold, but the hand was warm; too warm, the pale skin rough with callouses and streaked with dirt. Mud was caked under her fingernails.

There was a heavy pause as Chara scrutinised her with narrowed eyes. "You trust me, then."


Chara said nothing, just took a step out into the blackness. Frisk followed. The moment she stepped past the door's threshold, the lab disappeared behind them.

The blackness surrounded them now, the absolute nothingness stretching in every direction. There was no surface beneath her feet that Frisk could see or feel, and as she and Chara began to walk, she could not hear the sound of her own footfalls.
"So… how come this something close to the Void?" Frisk spoke up. "Why aren't we just in the Void? It looks like the Void. Or, um, how I think the Void would probably look. I guess."

Chara suddenly let go. Frisk gasped, expecting to fall, arms windmilling on instinct, but nothing happened. Just a few strides ahead, Chara spread out her hands and began to walk backwards.

"An in-between place. Limbo, as it is sometimes known. The nothing outside of all of time and space does not operate by strict rules of outside, simply surrounding the edges of reality. Things were always going to be more complicated than that. And with all the meddling with the timeline that's been going on, the edges between the Void and reality were bound to blur even further."

"I don't know what you're talking about."

"Sans meant to lie to you when said you were dealing with a 'Void leak,' but actually, he was telling the truth. Rather without knowing it, mind. The Void has been bleeding into reality very, very, slowly, ever since I came to the Underground. But I, the first ever anomaly, did not understand the power I had. I created many Save points in the time I was alive, but I never used them. And those other fallen children did not have the Determination you and I possess. So it was you who caused the most damage. You and that flower." Chara's expression soured, and she quickly turned back around, hiding her face. "At any rate, you are still stronger, more Determined. More than I ever was."

Frisk fiddled with the hem of her sweater, realising they'd stopped walking. "Um. I still don't get it."

"That is because I wasn't finished," Chara snapped. Then her voice slid back into its casual, careless tone. "Without the Barrier to keep things in check, the Void has been contaminating reality. Poisoning it." She laughed softly, for some reason.

"You and Sans have been pulled into that in-between place," she continued. "For you see, Doctor Gaster has not truly managed to escape the Void. Not completely. Not yet. He's only been able to make it this far. But even here, it has become much easier for him to find both your souls, and yank you into this place." She paused. "He's been calling you—that's why you've had a pain in your soul of late."

As if on cue, Frisk's soul flared with pain again. This was a new kind of pain, like the sharp prick of a needle. Her soul fluttered wildly, beating like the wings of a frightened small bird. When she glanced down at it, she caught it flash with something white before returning back to its usual red. Then the pain settled.

Frisk plucked at her collar. "…right."

Chara nodded once. "It's an interesting place we're in, actually. When the Void seeps into reality, forming an in-between world, it makes it easier for Doctor Gaster to pull you into his clutches, but it also makes it possible for—how shall I put this—for someone to stumble across it, though thankfully not unwittingly. It must be entered with some sense of intentionality."

Frisk was having a hard time keeping up again. "…does it make it easier to leave?"

"Sometimes," was all Chara said.

Frisk hesitated. She still had so many questions, so thinking of the dreams she'd had, she voiced the first one. "So why did you come looking for me?"

"To help you. We've established that, I believe."
"Yeah, but... why?"

Chara looked forward pointedly. "It gets very boring here. I was bored."

Frisk shrugged. "Okay. Good enough."

They resumed walking. It seemed to Frisk that they weren't walking in any particular direction. The dead girl was a few strides ahead, and Frisk jogged forward a few paces to catch up. "Are you sure we're, um, going the right way? 'cause there's nothing here."

Chara held up an index finger, signalling for Frisk to wait. Then—"Yes. Look."

There was nothing to look at in the endless black, besides Chara. "Look at wha—oh!"

Chara was still walking, but now Frisk saw that small patches of colour blossoming wherever her feet fell, like flowers that she left in her wake. Now Frisk could hear the crunch of coarse sand beneath her shoes, could feel the heat from the lava lake warming the stones. The scene of Hotland began to reshape itself around her, spreading from the patches of ground left in Chara's footsteps.

"You're doing that?" Frisk asked earnestly.

"Partially." For the first time, Frisk saw something a little like a spark in Chara's eyes, but it quickly died down. "Intentionality has a certain influence here. Especially if you've been here as long as I."

A moment longer and soon all of Hotland was restored. Everything but the CORE in the distance, and the elevator up ahead, which would take them to the entrance of the MTT Resort at the Hotland border. These were obscured by the clouds of television snow that Frisk was growing all too familiar with. A thin, low whine emitted from them beneath the crackling static.

Chara stopped abruptly. "We cannot go there. I'm sorry. We shall have to make a detour."

"A detour?" Frisk bit her lip. "Like, go the long way across Hotland?"

"No. We must leave, and Sans must wait." Chara turned sharply on her heel and began to walk back to the main road, toward the bridge. "Hotland is not safe right now."

Frisk struggled to catch up. "What do you mean? What about Sans?"

"I said, he shall have to wait. Later, perhaps, we can find him. For now, we need to leave." Chara stepped onto the bridge. "Those squares of static you see? Those are openings into the Void, and if you were to let them touch you, then you would be gone for good."

"But Sans—"

"If we linger here, then we will not be able to save him at all. Sans will be safe if Doctor Gaster is with him. Safe from the Void, I mean. But you and I must wait." Chara's expression softened a little. "If it brings you comfort, then perhaps we can stay close, in Waterfall."

Frisk faltered, then nodded. "Okay," she said, and followed Chara across the bridge.

oOo

Frisk and Chara trekked through Waterfall in silence. Trailing behind slightly, Frisk took the opportunity to study the other girl more closely. Chara held herself upright, her movements graceful, but there was a certain momentum to her step that Frisk could only hope was a sign she
knew what she was doing. But her movements were oddly repetitive, too, looping somehow, like watching a video on repeat.

"I really think we should make a plan," Frisk spoke up.

Chara stopped, turning to look at her. "Ah. One of those. But, of course."

"Do you have one?" Frisk asked hopefully.

"No."

"Oh. Um. Well, maybe we should –"

"There's no point."

"Okay… Well, then, maybe we can go back now and check to see if –"

"We cannot. Not yet." Chara paused, then dropped down to sit on a rock. Frisk joined her, resting her elbows on her knees, and studied the dead girl carefully. Her expression was pensive, but otherwise unreadable as ever. "It isn't safe yet. I can tell," she said after a lengthy pause.

"How?" Frisk frowned.

"You get used to this place," was all Chara said, turning her gaze skyward. Or in the direction of the glittering cave ceiling, anyway.

Frisk looked up, too, thinking back to the first time she'd passed through these caves. Maybe it was just the quiet, but for some reason Waterfall felt more real than the other parts of the Void-infested Underground. All the details were right, right down to the feeling of the air and the touch of muddy earth beneath her feet and the distant plink-plink of water droplets that dripped from the stalactites a few rooms away.

"You must have been really lonely here," Frisk said at long last.

Chara said nothing. Using the toe of her shoes, she took to tracing stick figures out in the mud. Frisk tried another angle. "The other kids…. they were here, right?"

"The other fallen humans, you mean? Yes. They were. They've been gone for a while now." She raised an eyebrow. "Since the Barrier broke. I suppose they would have thanked you if they'd had the chance, but… well, as I said. They left this place."

"That's good." Frisk inched a little closer. "Did you talk to them while they were here?"

Chara scooted pointedly away. "No."

"Oh. Well… maybe… maybe if they got out of here, you can too."

"I cannot."

"But—"

"Don't mock me," Chara glared. "I am incomplete," she added, after a heavy pause. "I could not leave this place even if I was worthy of it. I told you, this is the place for lost things."

Frisk gave up. "Well…. maybe we can try to make a plan again." She tugged at the hem of her
sweater. "I'm really, really worried about Sans. I don't even know what's happening to him and –"

"He's being tortured," Chara supplied, and Frisk looked at her despairingly, feeling another sharp twinge in her soul—a quick flash of pain that was gone the moment it came.

"Please, Chara. I—we've got to help him. We've got to."

A pause—one, two, three seconds—then the other girl sighed heavily. "You trust me," she said, her words laced with caution. "You truly trust me."

"Well," Frisk shrugged. "Yeah."

"But why? I've given you no reason to. I've done nothing to help you. I've told you nothing about myself or my intentions. How do you know I'm not siding with Gaster? I could be leading you astray, for all you know."

"I trust you," Frisk offered. "You saved me from the openings to the Void."

Chara smirked a little. "Well. Perhaps I only did that because you annoy me, and I'd rather avoid being stuck with you here for all eternity."

"Um," said Frisk, and Chara turned away again.

"You shouldn't trust people like me." A light breeze passed through the cave, shush-shush, and the Echo flowers picked up on the noise and murmured it back, as if the wind had left behind a shadow. Chara stared at the nearest cluster of flowers with a pained expression. "No good will come of it."

"Well," Frisk contended, sticking her chin in the air. "I do, so there." She paused. "And anyway… it's not like I have another choice, right?"

At first, Chara said nothing. Then a soft chuckle passed her lips. It escalated into a high giggle. Her whole frame began to shake, she bent double, tears welling in the corners of her eyes, and then she laughed, and kept laughing, louder and louder and more hysterically.

Frisk just stared.

"Forgive me," Chara said when at last she quieted down, after far too long. She wiped at her tears with the back of her hand. "I did not expect that. You caught me quite off-guard."

"Expect what?"

Chara ignored her. "You want to make a plan."

"Yes," said Frisk heavily. "Can we please make one now? 'cause if you don't, I'm gonna… I'm gonna… " She wracked her brains for what she was going to do. "I'm gonna go back to Hotland myself, even if I have to wait until the Void openings disappear. Even if I have to wait, like, a million years."

The dead girl tilted her head to one side. "I see. Well. I have some ideas, but I highly doubt you'll take kindly to them. They are not true solutions anyway—not the kind you're looking for," she added.

Before Frisk had a chance to say anything, Chara went on. "I really don't understand why you're so very insistently on a plan at all. It won't do any good. I've told you so already: you cannot save Sans,
and you most certainly cannot stop Doctor Gaster." Her expression darkened. "Here, I'd say, you can trust me. I have gotten to know him, in this place, and he is—he is vile and cruel and cold and he will stop at nothing to get what he wants."

"Determined," Frisk murmured.

Chara gave a half-snort that stopped short as her expression twisted into one of disgust. It was the most passionate Frisk had ever seen her. "Indeed. I did not realise you were funny."

But Frisk had a different takeaway. "You know Doctor Gaster?"

The dead girl stiffened. "In a sense. I certainly wish I didn't."

"But… but you know him enough, right?" Frisk shot to her feet and began to pace in excitement. "So… so maybe you know… something about him that could help. Something I could use to my advantage." That was a good saying, she'd learned it in a book a long time ago.

Chara gazed up at her dispassionately. "And you think that simply having information about him would help you… how, exactly?"

"Well, like when I was going through the Underground. If I knew something about a monster I met, then I'd have a better idea of how to act without having to fight them."

"You still think those rules still apply." Chara's tone was typically flat, but Frisk noticed she was trembling. "They do not. Do you not understand what Gaster means to do? You cannot just… talk to him like you did with your friends." She didn't give Frisk a chance to respond. "He is going to take your soul, take your Determination."

"Oh," said Frisk. She fell quiet for a minute. "Well, I guessed that part."

And another laugh, this one short and biting. Chara seemed to have the capacity for a great number of laughs. "You really understand nothing. I've told you that he will stop at nothing to achieve his goals. And so you have it. That is what I have learned about him, what I have to teach you."

"I just meant –" 

Chara spun on her, and for just a moment, her eyes seemed to flash red. "He took it from me, too, you know. He took my Determination."

"What do you –" 

In an instant, she yanked her soul into visibility.

Frisk had guessed a dead person's soul might look a bit different to a living person's. She had guessed a being stuck in the Void might change matters, and she could even have guessed the strange nature of Chara's death might mean she'd have a funny-looking soul. But it didn't prepare her for what she saw.

The soul was a mottled, brownish red, the colour of dried blood, and speckled in strange white spots. It was also somewhat disfigured, jagged points jutting out from the smooth edges of its heart shape.

It was suspended there, withered like a piece of overripe fruit hanging too heavy from a branch.

Chara was breathing heavily. "I was the first one he went after. For many years I had thought, I had
been so certain, that it was the only thing keeping me bound to this place. But I was wrong. I truly
belong here, I deserve nothing better, and Doctor Gaster took away the only power, the only value,
I had to my name."

"I'm sorry," Frisk said after a long pause, but even as the words came out of her mouth, she knew
they fell about a hundred miles short.

Chara just looked down, and her soul faded out of visibility. "It happened not long after the Barrier
broke. I suppose he realised then that he might find a way out of this place, and that he needed
Determination to do it. He began with me, and after that he sought little scraps of Determination
from those other monsters. The ones who fell with him, a small group of CORE technicians.
Collateral damage. They had admired him once, you know, when they were alive. But Doctor
Gaster drained their Determination, and they ceased to exist after that, even here. It took him some
time to find them all, though. They all hid after what happened to the first."

Frisk thought of the grey monster she'd seen in her vision, the one who'd tried to warn her about
Gaster to begin with. She thought of how they had been consumed by the oncoming wall of static.
"Oh," was all she said.

"Indeed. I expect he would have gone after the other children, too, if they'd still been here.
Whatever happened to them, at least they escaped that."

When Frisk said nothing, Chara nodded once, as if in satisfaction, then looked out onto the road.
"Perhaps we should keep moving. I hate this place; it's ever so quiet."

"To Hotland?" Frisk perked up.

"No. The other direction."

"Oh." Frisk couldn't help it. "Snowdin." That would take them even further from Sans. But it
wasn't like she had any other choice. "Okay, I guess."

Chara stood up swiftly. "Well, then." She paused, cocking her head to one side as she scrutinised
Frisk with narrowed eyes. Then she scoffed quietly. "Forgiving to a fault, you are."

"Huh?" But then Chara was suddenly several strides ahead of her, so that Frisk had to scramble to
catch up.

They walked in silence for a very long time—too long, it seemed—and Frisk couldn't help but
wonder if Waterfall had really been this large, or if this had something to do with the Void. All the
while, Chara continued to walk with the same smooth, repetitive movements.

They crossed a long tunnel of caverns, which Frisk remembered passing through with Monster Kid.
Raindrops continued to drip from the cave ceiling at a slow, rhythmic pace. One landed on Frisk's
nose, and she blinked in surprise, batting at the air in front of her like a distracted kitten. The rain
left massive puddles interspersed across the muddy floor, and Frisk, unable to resist, paused to
jump in one, trying to create the biggest splash she could, not caring for a second that her shoes had
soaked through. Up ahead, she heard Chara laugh faintly, and looked up to see the dead girl
looking at her with a bemused expression.

"I thought this was a serious rescue mission," she said, and Frisk flushed and pressed on.

It wasn't until they'd made their way into the next room that Frisk realised something strange: she
had no reflection in the puddles of water. Chara did.
I would not touch the water if I were you.

Frisk swallowed, and sidestepped out of the puddle she was wading through. Her shoes continued to slosh with every step.

A rustling in the tall grass up ahead caught their attention, and they froze on the spot, heads snapping toward the source of the noise in sync.

"Chara," Frisk whispered. "What was that?"

Chara shushed her fiercely.

The grass rustled again. Everything was still for a moment. Then, a Temmie leaped out at them, pouncing from the patch of grass and landing in a tumble of limbs at their feet. It looked up at them and stuck out its tongue, its smile bright and vacant. "hoI! i'm TEmMIe!"

Chara grabbed Frisk by the collar and yanked her forcefully back. She glowered down at the little monster, apparently not one to be swayed. Which wasn't very surprising, really.

For her part, Frisk had only heard passing snippets of the Temmies' supposed treachery; but nobody would tell her what exactly made the bizarre little monsters so terrible. She hadn't encountered one since the day the Barrier broke because Asgore wouldn't let them integrate into a full life on the Surface, so she still found the tales hard to believe. Even so, she made sure to stay a few paces back, her eyes darting between Chara and the Temmie.

The Temmie blinked up at them innocuously, tail wagging. Then it stumbled to its feet, swaying on the spot, and its whole body jerked violently as it gave an abrupt cough. It hacked and hacked, like a cat coughing up a hairball. Instead of a hairball, though, it brought up something else—a small, flickering cloud of television snow that produced a faint crackling hiss. The Temmie blinked again, then turned and disappeared in the tall grass, the ball of static vanishing along with it.

Frisk stared after it. "What was that? What was wrong with—"

"Void residue," said Chara. "Nothing more."

"What—oh." Frisk shivered, puzzling it out. "If you touch the static…."

"Exactly so—very good. You're a fast learner. It does not bode well for the monsters that remained here in the Underground, however."

"Oh," was all Frisk said, again, as she tried not to think of all the monsters, all her friends, who'd decided to stay behind. Old Mr Gerson's shop wasn't far from here, and when the Barrier broke, he'd stubbornly refused to leave his establishment of a thousand years in exchange for the bustle of Surface life. Was he okay? Did he know well enough not to approach mysterious any clouds of static? Possibly, but even Asgore said that Mr Gerson had gone a little funny in the head in his old age.

"Asriel and I were nearly eaten by a horde of Temmies once," Chara said suddenly, snapping Frisk from her thoughts. Her expression was pensive.

Frisk stared, wondering if she'd missed some important piece of context. "What?"

"My fault, of course. I'd roped him into it. I don't even recall what it was I wanted to do in the Temmie Village in the first place. I expect I just wanted to stir up the usual mischief. But what a sight we were when we came back home! Naturally, Asriel burst into tears and reported everything
the moment we stepped through the front door. I don't believe I ever saw Mamma so angry." A smile spread across Chara's lips that developed into a soft chuckle. Then she cut herself off abruptly, so abruptly she swayed on the spot. "Well. No matter. Those days are long behind me, and we all know that."

"But you can still think of them, right?" Frisk nudged her.

"There is no point."

"Why not?"

"Because—" Chara's face twisted as she looked like she was about to explain something, then changed her mind. "There just isn't. I cannot go back to those times. I cannot go back to when… I cannot just Reset or reload my last Save point, you know. Not like you can."

"Save point… " Frisk murmured, then she perked up. "Save stars! Oh! That reminds me!"

Chara's eyebrows rose up. "The… Save stars? What about them, pray tell, could be relevant to our present predicament?"

"I saw one in the labs."

"Well—yes, more than one, wasn't it? There's nothing very important about that, you would have seen Save stars all across the Underground. Your Determination is the reason you're in this mess to begin with."

"No." Frisk shook her head, eager. "I don't mean from when I fell. I mean now. When I was here with Sans, before Gaster found us. I saw a Save star."

Chara's expression morphed into one of awe. "You were able to create a Save file? Just recently? Here?"

"I don't know if I Saved my file or not—nothing really happened after. Touched it and everything, though."

"Even so… " Chara shook her head and tilted it to the side, studying the other girl with curiosity, and something a little like pride. "Saving and Reloading, all of that should be impossible here. Certainly I was never able to do it. Well, then, Frisk. Perhaps you're even stronger than I thought."

Frisk frowned. "Is that a good thing?"

Chara's excitement, though, had already retreated back into pensiveness. "I wonder… " she murmured. She clenched and unclenched her fists. "That is—I was only thinking, but, well… Doctor Gaster can drain Determination from a soul. That is how the Extraction Machine works."

"Yeah… "

The dead girl shook her head. "Well. As I said, it's just an idle thought, but I cannot help but think it all the same… it might serve us to have a Determined, yet soulless being on our side. If you follow my meaning."

Frisk narrowed her eyes in thought, then they widened as the realisation struck her. "Oh. Oh!" She bit her lip. "Do you think… he's here?"

"I can think of nowhere else he'd be."
They were coming close to the Snowdin border.

"And—" Frisk tripped over her feet as she tried to keep up with Chara rather than trail behind her—"do you think, do you think he'd help us?"

Chara smirked. "Doubting him, are we? Flowey knows a great deal about the timelines—more than you, certainly, and I would imagine he knows more than even Sans, or myself. It may help, at any rate. A small hope to go on, perhaps, but it's not as if we had very much hope to begin with. I daresay it's cause for celebration."

"Yeah." Frisk nodded thoughtfully. "Plus, you're his sister, so I bet he'd listen—"

Chara spun on her. "That thing is not my brother."

"But he was… Asriel. The last time I saw him, I mean. And even, even if he's Flowey again… I mean, even when he was Flowey, he really missed you. I think he did a lot of that stuff because he missed you. I bet he'd want to help you even more than me—"

"I said, he is not my brother." Chara looked pointedly ahead. "Asriel is gone."

Frisk dropped the subject. "Where do you think we'll find him? The Underground is pretty big."

"Well, were was he the last time you last saw him?" said Chara, as if it were obvious.

"Just outside the Ruins. Where I fell."

"How convenient. We shall continue heading that way, then, though I imagine you'll be wanting to rest by the time we reach the Ruins door. It is still a long journey across Snowdin Town and the old Capital, if you'll recall."

"The Ruins door…" Frisk's voice trailed off, then she broke into a toothy grin. "Okay. Race you!"

Without giving Chara a chance to react, Frisk shot off, feet pounding hard on the slick, muddy earth. It was quickly becoming harder with cold as she neared Snowdin. For a few moments, she thought that she might have actually left Chara behind, and that she'd have to turn back around and fetch her, but just as she was crossing the Snowdin border, a streak of colour shot past her in a blur.

Chara ran with the same grace with which she walked, her movements fluid and easy with none of the flailing awkward limbs of childhood, footfalls landing silently on the snow, somehow avoiding the hidden patches of ice that littered the landscape.

"Hey, no fair!" Not one to be beaten, Frisk tried to pick up the pace, only to slip on a patch of ice and find herself face-first in the snow, her clothing soaked. She heard Chara laugh softly up ahead, but the dead girl wasn't stopping or slowing down. Frisk grit her teeth, took a moment to catch her breath, then picked herself back up and scrambled after her.

They ran down the main road of Snowdin Town. Past Sans and Papyrus' old house, past Grillby's and the turnoff to the ferry. Even though the town was all but dead, and they were in the Void, and Chara was winning easily, Frisk found herself laughing, and the abandoned village didn't seem quite as grim as it had earlier.

They kept on running, out of town and into Snowdin Forest, the path lined by snow-kissed conifers on either side. It wasn't until they'd run past the dogs' sentry stations that it occurred to Frisk she really ought to be tired by now—lungs bursting, muscles in her legs aching, sweat streaking down her back, unable to continue. She was not tired, but now that she let her mind wander enough to
notice it, she really was very cold.

But she didn't say anything. It felt good not to talk for a while; she wasn't really used to talking so much. She just kept running, and she tried to think about that, and focus on the now clearly impossible task of beating Chara. So long as she could keep that up, then she wouldn't have to linger too much on Sans, and what Gaster could be doing him right now. It was a little harder not to think about it when she ran past Sans' old sentry station.

Her soul pulsed and twinged, and when she glanced down at her chest, it looked almost whiteish in the half-light. But then her vision cleared, and there it was, the same vibrant red she knew so well.

Before long, she found herself running across the bridge to Snowdin, and with the great stone door to the Ruins in sight, Frisk let herself stumble to a stop, nearly pitching forward as the exhaustion started to catch up with her. After that, it seemed a marathon to walk the remaining few metres to the Ruins door.

Chara was already waiting for her there, leaning against a nearby tree with a smirk on her face. "Slowpoke."

"Cheater," Frisk shot back.

"Cheater? Whatever gave you that idea?"

"You used your Void powers or something," insisted Frisk as she finally reached the door. She all but collapsed against it, turning her face skyward. "Because you're 'part of this place' or whatever you're gonna say. The race wasn't fair."

"Well, pardon me. I'm dead. Surely you could allow me the courtesy of winning a race or two." Chara turned her attention to the Ruins door, stepping forward. "Are you ready? I'll wait for you here."

Frisk squinted up at her. "You're not coming with me?"

"No. You needn't worry. I won't be going anywhere, and you should be quite safe in the old Capital."

"But… why?"

"I'd rather not, and I'll thank you not to press the matter further. I shall wait for you, you know." Her gaze was heavy upon Frisk. "Or don't you trust me?"

Frisk tugged at the hem of her sweater, but picked herself up so that her eyes were level with Chara's. "I do trust you."

"Good. Then there should not be an issue."

"I guess. Fine."

"You've nothing to fear beyond this door," Chara said calmly. "Unless that flower tries attacking you, I suppose, but I find that scenario unlikely."

Frisk turned to the door, pressing a hand to the cool stone. "You really think it'll help to have him with us?"

Silence.
Frisk sighed. "I'm gonna help you too. Not just Sans. Just so you know."

She expected the dead girl to scoff, or reject the very idea. Instead, her expression was impassive. "How noble of you. Saving everyone. Perhaps you're going to try and save Doctor Gaster, too."

Frisk looked away. "Well… see you pretty soon, I guess."

"And you're… quite certain you want to do this?"

Frisk bit her lip, drawing in a deep breath. "I have to be." She shuffled her feet, and pushed on the great Ruins door.
Chapter Notes

Haaaappy anniversary, everyone! Two years ago on this day, I posted the very first chapter of NWABBW... it's been quite a journey, hasn't it? And we're only like, halfway through. Thank you so, so much for supporting this fic over the past two years. All of your comments and kudos and reblogs (and fanart!!!!!!) mean so, so much to me, they make me so happy, and I just wish I were better at expressing it. Please know that even if I sound perpetually awkward, your support just kind of makes me melt into a flustered happy puddle on the floor. I'm surprised you have stuck around this long despite my terrible update schedule, but I've never had an audience like you guys before, and I just can't say how excited it all makes me. So... thank you. Really, thank you.

If you follow the NWABBW tumblr, then you'll know by now that I decided to do a video q&a for the fic's 2nd anniversary. The quality is just terrible, but as promised, [here it is](#).

This chapter contains **body horror**.

**Before**

After the shattering of the Barrier, Prince Asriel sat in the dark for three days with his body fully restored. Over this period, he experienced no hunger, no thirst, no tiredness. This was his first clue that he was not truly back to normal.

Nor did he experience boredom. It’s hard to feel boredom when your soul is busy crumbling away, and you can feel the loss of yourself bit by bit, fully aware of it every second, and caring less and less all the while.

When the last of Asriel was gone, his body followed suit, twisting and contorting and shrivelling, until finally he was back to being a flower. The transformation process hurt terribly, by the way.

Flowey didn’t know how much time had passed since the Barrier was shattered. At first, he’d counted the days, but on day number 114 he decided that was sort of morbid and that he should quit while he was ahead.

A few times now, he’d ventured further out into the Underground – his roots ran as deep as they always had, and he still had the ability to pop up wherever he pleased – and he’d sat and watched the remaining monsters go about their daily business. He’d considered killing them, just for a laugh, but ultimately decided against it.

Killing still made him stronger. This he knew from the time he’d killed a squirrel that had made its way down here, but when the number of his LOVE increased, he experienced no rush of joy as he
had before. A voice inside him said, *Why are you even bringing up your LOVE at all? What for?*

Things just weren’t the same as they had been.

Flowey had thought it was awful, before, not having any feelings – he’d bemoaned the perpetual emptiness. The closest thing he’d had to feeling at all had been an insatiable curiosity. But now his feelings were *back,* and they were *horrible.*

Not in full, thank god, but there they were there all the same. And now those stupid feelings had started bleeding into his memories.

Even the faint echoes of *her* memories he’d always held were infected. They were foggy and distant as ever, but now those foggy, distant echoes of memories came with *feelings.*

Flowey scoffed in disgust and tossed his head back.

_Do you like me, now?_

_You don’t still hate me, do you, all this time later?_

_Where are you, anyway?_

He’d been thinking this a lot, lately. He wasn’t bored anymore; he’d been bored for far too long. No, Flowey was just tired.

He didn’t know how long it had been since the Barrier had broken, but he had a general idea. Some leaves had fallen down into the mountain and skittered into the cavern where he now resided.

Flowey sighed. The Determination inside him – both that from the injection that had woken him and what was left of *hers* – felt distant now, too. Out of reach. It was the only thing that had been keeping him going all these years, and he wasn’t really up to holding on much longer.

And what a strange existence it was, in this world where his powers were lost, where he could no longer Reset, where all of a sudden everything *mattered!* Where all of a sudden every action had consequences, real consequences that couldn’t simply be undone with a simple little Reload.

It was a terrifying world, and Flowey didn’t belong to it and never had.

*He* had, though.

But *he* had died eighty-one years ago.

Maybe it was his turn to die, now.

And maybe he could finally find Chara.

What would happen, Flowey wondered, if he died? Where would he go? Would he go anywhere at all, or simply cease to exist?

Oh, those questions applied to *him* anyway – what difference did it make? He didn’t care. By definition, he didn’t.

Flowey let go.

Petals wilted, shrivelled, fell to the ground. Unable to support the weight of his head, his stem drooped and sagged and went limp.
He followed.
Everything's Under Control

Chapter Notes

This chapter contains depictions of **PTSD, self-loathing, experimentation** and **abuse**.

Also, just in case you missed it, NWABBW celebrated its 2nd birthday a couple months ago! You can see the anniversary Q & A video here.

And just while I continue to ride the wave of self-promo, you can also follow me on Goodreads for more of me being a nerd and to stalk my reading choices. Plus don’t forget to check out my tumblr and the NWABBW blog if you’re not already!

See the end of the chapter for more notes

To his credit, Sans didn't scream.

He whimpered softly, jaw clenched, the low and ill-suppressed whines and gasps of pain slipping past his teeth.Stubbornly, he kept his eyes open instead of closing them immediately as he always had before. His fingers braced themselves against the edge of the examination table, and his toes and feet twitched slightly in the restraints, like those of a dying animal.

Doctor W.D. Gaster watched.

Gaster was surprised Sans hadn't given way to unconsciousness yet; he nearly always had as a child. Perhaps it had something to do with the delivery of the Determination, or the magic solution streaming steadily into his soul. On the other hand, Sans seemed to have zoned out almost entirely, his gaze unfocused and expression blank.

It was a matter of concern to be sure. It might have just been a reaction to the Determination solution, but still, it was worrisome.

Taking another quick glance at his subject, the scientist turned to his files, meaning to note down his observations.

Static flashed across his vision, crackled in his mind, and he staggered, pressing a hand to one eye as it flared with pain. Gaster felt his entire body jerk and pulse as he was overcome by a sudden coughing fit, bringing up clouds of television snow and black bile.

The crackling rose to a high, grating screech, like metal on metal, and the sound formed a dome around him. Somewhere in the cacophony he could hear screaming and swords clashing, rain pelleting down on armour, the sound of warfare. Somewhere else, a child was crying.

The static faded to a low ringing noise and for a moment he could see nothing but blackness before the laboratory began to form itself around him once again.

It was getting worse. Already his flimsy connection to reality was beginning to fade. The sooner the human anomaly arrived, the better.

Gaster's gaze strayed over to his test subject. Sans's whimpers appeared to have ceased. Gaster continued to watch him for a moment, then, finally, spoke up.
"How do you feel?"

Sans didn't answer him, though another pained whine escaped him, this one a little more desperate than before.

Gaster stepped closer, leaning over his subject. Sans's gaze remained hazy, his expression empty. If Gaster hadn't known otherwise, he would have described him as halfway to dead. Either way, it was apparent by now that Sans was not truly present, not mentally.

How much time had passed since he'd been hooked up to the Determination solution? Gaster was uncertain. The IV sac was still about three-quarters of the way full, but then, time was not exactly linear in the Void. Things shifted as they needed to.

Gaster dragged the wooden chair over to the computer desk, the harsh scraping of its legs against the tile floor oddly reminiscent of the screeching produced by the static. He dropped into the seat and brought his hands to his temples.

He sat, at length, in silence.

The silence was worse than the howling static.

Silence was the Void, the blackness and the quiet stretching endlessly around him, before and behind him.

In silence, Gaster was left alone to his own thoughts. He'd had nothing but his own thoughts to keep him company in the empty Void. The only other conscious beings there had been the six fallen humans slain by Asgore and the Guard. But they had avoided him at all times, preferring to cluster together, clinging to each other so closely they resembled one shapeless entity.

Sometimes, they spoke to each other. Sometimes their warbled whispers would make their way over to Gaster, wherever he was, the individual words reduced to meaningless white noise in the endless dark.

He'd wondered if they even understood each other. He'd wondered if they could keep each other warm.

The human Princess had been in the Void too, but she'd been a solitary being, keeping her distance from the others as well as Gaster. The scientist had held a distaste for the girl even in life, from the handful of times he'd met her. Dinner parties at the castle and so on. Her brother, though clingy, he could tolerate; but the Princess, he could not. She'd been strange and unfriendly and so very human, with inexplicably old-fashioned speaking patterns—though not lacking for a sharp tongue.

Much like the CORE technicians that had fallen along with Gaster, the Princess was poor company. But at least they'd all had their uses recently.

Why did the Princess remain tethered to this realm, then, after Gaster had captured her and extracted the Determination from her soul? Why had she not been destroyed like the technicians of the CORE? The human girl was already dead. What had brought her to this wretched place to begin with, what had kept her from truly dying, when it was an ordinary illness that had killed her? Gaster would very much have liked to study the remains of her soul, but reason dictated that the fallen Princess was no longer a priority. She'd played her part already with the Determination she had to give.

Determination that was currently dripping into his subject.
Gaster glanced up, but though Sans was still conscious, nothing had changed – he remained troublingly still.

And it was quiet.

So very, very quiet.

To pass the time—a strange concept in such a place as this, but Gaster could think of no other saying—he went through Sans's files. In the past, he'd sorted the information on his elder test subject by age—one large folder per year. Then the documents were divided into sub-folders: physical development, magic skills, behavioural patterns, and so on. The different experiments all had unique folders of their own. The file on the Determination Trials was near to overflowing with data, and that was only what Gaster had collected between 1992 and '96. The invaluable data that had been lost over the past 20 years was immeasurable. He might be able to retrieve some information by running a few basic tests, but it would be almost meaningless next to all that had been lost.

Gaster felt a twinge of regret as he started a new folder, marking it "Subject 01 'Comic Sans'—Age 29." A fading profile shot of an eight-year-old Sans stared back up at him from one of the old folders with dull, tired eyes. Gaster shook his head and began to sort and retrieve the information he'd just collected into the new folder. He recorded Sans's newfound dissociative behaviour, as well as notes on what he'd observed regarding Sans's emotional responses to Gaster's probing.

One general observation: Sans was significantly less compliant than he had been as a child, and was much more resistant to the experiments. That was undoubtedly due to those unfortunate 20 years removed from Gaster's necessary influence. The conditions under which Sans had been raised were harsh—the experiments downright cruel—but necessary for accomplishing what had to be done with optimal results.

Then again, Sans had been right when he said he wasn't a child anymore.

He would be more difficult to control, now. Gaster realised it might take some time to figure out how to ensure Sans's full obedience and compliance. That would be an experimental undertaking all on its own.

Gaster sighed heavily, and some of the black Voidstuff dripped from his mouth onto the paper, as if it were a trail of drool, and he grumbled in annoyance.

"So what're you planning to do to my brother, then?"

Gaster spun in surprise at the sound of Sans's voice. His subject remained still even in the restraints, but he seemed to have come back down to Earth, such as it were. He was staring pointedly at the ceiling, jaw set, seemingly trying hard to keep his features from contorting in pain, and was only half-succeeding.

"What do you mean?" uttered Gaster, when he finally found his voice. His grip tightened on his pen.

"Ghk," Sans gasped. "I just mean. Me and Paps, we ain't little kids anymore, y'know? He's grown up, just like me. Ya never did much with him back then, but you still made him. Test subject of yours, not a real monster, just a tool as a means to an end. The works. So I wanna know what you're planning to do with him now. I wanna know – ghk – what's gonna happen to my baby brother."
Gaster set his pen delicately down and folded his hands together, a position that helped him think. "And here I thought you were making some grandiose statement about your brother being an adult," he quipped. "He is twenty-three now, is that not correct?"

Sans seemed to stiffen, but he made a noise of affirmation. "He's still my baby bro, though. And it was me who raised him. Never you. I looked after him, and he's my babybones. Always will be. That's how this family shit works, by the way. Least I think so. You never set the greatest example."

Gaster bristled at that. It was a statement that would have warranted a swat, under different circumstances. But in truth, he was glad to have someone to speak to—banter with, even. Sans was sharp and made oddly good company. He always had been, even as a child. Not like his brother, who'd been so loud and rowdy and overly energetic. Gaster was grateful for the distraction now, especially with so little to do besides wait and let the IV do its work, let the experiment run its course.

The silence lasted another moment, until Sans broke it. Again.

"You could bother answering. While we're just sitting here. Or you sitting there and me lying here strapped to an examination table, if you wanna be particular about it."

Gaster looked down at his hands; his fingers were still laced together. He clasped his hands more tightly. "I no longer have any use for your brother. He is. Of no importance. It has been enough time that… well. He is free to do whatever he pleases. With his existence."

His speech was breaking apart again; that was a bad sign. Gaster waited for Sans to respond, a little impatiently, but instead his subject lay there in silence for a very long time. Thinking?

"Huh," said Sans at last, and his expression was unreadable. "Well. You're full o' surprises today, aren't you, Gaster?"

"Not really."

"That's prob'ly where my luck runs out, though, right? Heh. Shouldn't bank my hopes on you having a change o' heart or anything and letting me and th—letting me go?"

He had cut himself off before mentioning the human, Gaster observed. He unclasped his hands and drummed his fingers together in thought.

"No," was all he said, simply.

"Huh," Sans murmured, his eyes drifting shut. Then another pained gasp escaped him, his sockets flying back open. His expression, once it settled, was almost pensive. "Am I ever gonna see him again?"

"It is. Unlikely."


"Yes." Gaster shifted. "That is understandable. I apologise."

More silence. Gaster was starting to think his subject had zoned out again when Sans spoke up, his voice so small that Gaster scarcely caught it. "I missed you too, y'know. Sometimes."
That was unexpected. Gaster raised a brow, reaching for his pen. "Really?"

"Yeah. That used to be the worst part of everything. I used to hate myself for it. But now…"—Sans blew air out between his teeth—"I dunno. Don't matter."

"I see." Gaster jotted this down in his notes. "And you are sharing this with me… why, exactly?"

"Hmm. Dunno. I guess I just never had anyone to talk to about this stuff. Wanted to. Sometimes."

Gaster didn't know how to respond to that. He changed the subject. It wasn't very subtle, but then, there was no real need for subtlety in this case. "Are you in pain?"

Another pause, shorter this time. "That's a joke, right? 'cause, y'know. I'm in fucking agony over here, Gaster."

"I am aware." Gaster had to bite back his annoyance. "I meant to ask if the pain is significantly worse or better than it was before. When you received more traditional injections of the Determination solution, via syringe."

"Well I don't remember. Just kinda different, I guess. Soul fluid or whatever it's called is kinda weird, too, but. I don't think it's changin' anything. Maybe keeping me alive, what do I know. But this is good, talking I mean, talking's good, good distraction." He was rambling, Gaster noted, and this speech came completely unprompted. The pain must be getting worse. That Sans had made it this long without passing out was astonishing. "Maybe not talking about this, though, nah, this ain't so good. Makes me think about how much it hurts, and then I end up thinkin' about my shitty childhood, and, yeah. Less fun. Let's find another topic, yeah? 'cause you're bored and I need to not think about how I'm bein'—" he gave an appropriately-timed gasp of pain—"tortured right now."

Sans could not turn his head, but a wry grin flashed across his face that Gaster assumed was meant for him.

"Very we—" Gaster began, but Sans cut him off.

"So your True Reset. How's that gonna work? I mean, okay, back to monsters' glory days or whatever, but I just thought you'd know by now not to mess around with time and undo centuries of our history, I guess. Wipe out every monster even born since the Barrier went up with the Reset, go back a—ghk—thousand years, and what, just hope the humans won't trap us underground this time? Won't just crush us all to dust? How d'you even know I'll make the trip? I wasn't born yet, and just because I can remember what happens when some—"

It was crossing a line. "Enough," he said, sharply. Sharply enough for Sans to fall silent, even wither a little where he lay.

"All I'm sayin' is," Sans muttered, almost sullen. "How can you be so sure I'm gonna follow through your big plan? That's all."

Gaster had started to fiddle with the pen he'd set down, but now he looked up sharply. "You will," he said simply. His gaze ventured to the lab complex beyond. "You'll have to excuse me," he said. "I have other matters to attend to. I must go monitor the human's actions."

"On the… cameras?" his subject's voice remained smaller, but he didn't miss a beat.

"The cameras are no longer in operation. No. I mean to use the anomaly detector."
"The machine," Sans murmured, again unprompted. "But... the machine's on the Surface. And it's broken. I thought you knew that."

He did. "I think, Sans, that you will find. This place does not always echo reality in the way you'd think. Now. If you'll excuse me."

Gaster finally got up from his chair, tucking a bundle of folders under his arm, and crossed the room, just giving Sans a brief glance as he passed the examination table.

He thought he heard a pained wail as he made his way down the hall.

oOo

The telephone rang.

Alphys jumped about a foot in the air, fumbling to retrieve her cell phone from her pocket before realising it was the landline that was ringing. No call display. She scrambled over to the old rotary phone attached to the wall (Toriel's choice), knocking her chair over in the process. In her rush, she knocked the receiver against the wall, dropped it to the floor, and had to scoop it up again before pressing it against her ear. "H-hello?"

"Alphys?" It was Toriel. Alphys's heart sank. "Hello! How are you, dear?"

In that same moment, the front door whipped open, snagging Alphys's attention. But it was just Undyne, back from another search with the old Royal Guard dogs. She looked exhausted, and when Undyne looked exhausted, that was never a good sign. Her eye widened at the sight of her girlfriend on the phone, but Alphys shook her head.

"Oh. Um, Hi, Toriel."

Undyne's shoulders slumped, dejected, then her expression turned to one of alarm.

Toriel's voice carried the note of slight insistence it usually held during these calls. "I'm really very sorry I haven't been able to call the past—oh, dear, nearly three days now, isn't it? There was some trouble with my cell phone as the little charging cable broke when I was trying to plug it in, and it's been quite a hunt trying to find one that fit. But you warned me! This model is a little outdated compared to what they're using on the Surface these days. Even in a human city as large as this one, imagine!" She laughed faintly, then the concern dropped right back into her tone. "How are things over there? Is Frisk there? Is she all right? Was she very worried or upset without me to call and say goodnight? Has she still been eating all her vegetables—"

"Oh. Y-yeah." Alphys gave a shaky laugh. "Things are great. Sans and Frisk d-definitely haven't been missing for two days or anything..."

Undyne, who was still standing by the door, waved the spear she was holding to grab Alphys's attention, mouthing, "What the fuck?"

At the other end of the line, Toriel went deathly silent. When at last she spoke, her tone fell somewhere between incredulous and alarmed. "Excuse me?"

"I said, um." Already Alphys was sweating, and she was starting to get that horrible constricting feeling in her soul, the one that made it hard to breathe. She tapped her claws against her hip in a desperate rhythm. "I said..." She glanced, then squinted at Undyne, trying to interpret her flailing gestures, but in all honesty she was just flapping her arms in the air. It looked a bit like she was trying to impersonate a large sea bird. "I mean! That was a joke! Yeah! Just n-not a very funny one,
I guess… 

Undyne threw her arms in the air.

"Doctor Alphys." Toriel's voice had gone steely. "If Frisk is missing—if my child is in danger—"

"Nope, nope, everything's just fine and absolutely nothing is wrong so you don't need to worry bye!" Alphys hung up, then slumped down onto the floor and buried her face in her hands.

The door slammed shut, causing Alphys to startle and look up. Undyne seemed to have realised she was still standing in the threshold, letting the cold air come in.

Her spear dissolving, Undyne stood there awkwardly for a moment before crossing the room in two strides and kneeling down next to Alphys. "Hey," she uttered. She placed a hand on her girlfriend's shoulder, trying for a comforting smile. It wasn't very convincing. "It's gonna be okay, Alphy." Pause. "But, uh. You probably should've told Toriel the truth. She's coming back tomorrow morning. I mean, she's gonna find out, and she has the right to know—"

"I know that," Alphys moaned, dragging her hands down her face. "I—I was going to, but then—I panicked," she admitted.

The phone began to ring insistently again. Alphys shuddered, then tried to reach up to answer it, but Undyne stayed her hand, guiding it gently down. "It's okay," she repeated. "Let it ring. We can call her later! I mean, it's shitty to worry her, and she's probably losing her mind right now, but you need to look after you, too. Y'know? Just give yourself a minute to like, catch your breath."

Alphys shuddered again as her breath hitched. "I—I can't, I—that's not fair, I can't do that to her… Her kid is, oh my God, her kid and her best friend are missing and she's already lost so many kids a-and—"

"Hey." Undyne squeezed her hand, and the action pulled her back into reality, just a little bit. Undyne was good at that, better than anyone; but Alphys wished she wouldn't have to all the time. It was embarrassing. "It's okay," Undyne was saying. "You're right. Toriel deserves to know. But just give yourself a minute. Or I can do it too, you know. But I think even I need a minute, giving Toriel that news." She laughed darkly. "And anyway. Once she finds out, Sans and Frisk won't be the only ones we'll have to worry about."

Alphys looked up sharply. "Th-that's not funny."

Undyne cringed. "I guess, yeah. Sorry," she tacked on, to no-one in particular.

It felt wrong, seeing Undyne so disheartened and quiet and still. Undyne wasn't supposed to be quiet and still. There were bags under her eyes, her scales too dry and her fins sagging. She was overworking herself in her search, of course, but it seemed like all her passion had been drained right out of her, and she was leading the search party with a detached, mechanical persona. Like she'd been programmed to do it. And that was nothing compared to how Papyrus was taking it all.

She slumped into her girlfriend's side. Even when she was sweaty, Undyne smelled…. nice. Alphys didn't really know of what, but she liked it. "I'm so scared," she mumbled, and felt Undyne draw her into a tight hug. It made it difficult to breathe for an entirely different reason.

"They're okay," Undyne answered. Her voice was soothing, but hollower than it ought to have been. "They're gonna be okay. We'll find 'em. We'll get them home safe. They're okay."

Alphys just shook her head. "W-we don't know that."
"We have to."

"Y-yeah. I guess." But hoping had never gotten Alphys anywhere. Cheating, lying, and keeping secrets, on the other hand... now that was more familiar territory. And it tended to work too, at least in the short term. "So... I guess no progress with the search party today."

Undyne shook her head. "Nothing. Zilch. Nada. Things just keep getting more and more confusing. We keep running into these dead ends, or what seem to be dead ends." She finally let go of Alphys to tick them off on her fingers. "We talked to the Riverperson and surprise, surprise, they were totally useless. They said something about reading between the lines, which, okay, honestly seemed like kind of a diss? And the goddamn Temmies were no help, obviously. And the little shits seemed to be getting a kick out of this mess too! But the weird part? The Guard dogs are getting nothing on Sans and Frisk's scent trail. It's there at the top of the mountain but then at the mouth of the cave it just... stops. Doesn't fade away, and there's no signs of, like, the earth giving way or anything like that. It just stops. I don't know. It freaks me out."

"Oh," was all Alphys said. The gears in her head were starting to turn, but none of this boded well.

She hadn't told Undyne or Papyrus, or anyone, about the conversation she'd had with Sans before he left. He'd asked her to keep things a secret, and she wasn't going to betray his trust. Not when he had such a hard time trusting anyone at all, not when she'd been such an untrustworthy person, period, for so many years. A liar and a fraud.

Sans hadn't spoken to her about the machine for years. Not since that day before the amalgamates when he'd come by, badly hungover, and announced he wanted to continue the project by himself with barely an explanation. When the sixth human had fallen into the Underground, he'd just sent her a text saying that the Determination levels in the Underground had elevated, but there didn't seem to be any cause for alarm. And then he'd left it at that. He hadn't even picked up the phone when she tried to call him back.

It just didn't make any sense. It didn't make any sense that he wanted to repair the machine now, up here on the Surface. That machine didn't even have a purpose anymore. It wasn't as if Sans was one to complete discarded projects for the sake of it; he was too lazy for that. Alphys knew that well: Sans was her best friend. He was the first person she'd ever felt like she could just relax around, like she could just be. Not even Undyne could make her feel the same way.

But even if he was her best friend, he'd always been secretive, and Alphys was never really sure of how well she knew him. But he'd been in poor shape even when they met. Something had happened to him before then, something horrible. Alphys was convinced it had something to do with the machine, and that something was coming up again now.

Sans had been drinking again the night before he left.

It just couldn't be a coincidence.

She'd gone down to the basement after he left, gone through the files still spread across his desk. (Another warning sign; Sans was never that careless when it came to this stuff.) There'd been nothing but reports and readings from the machine over the years. All with fluctuating magical energy readings, inexplicably near-static Determination levels, and a steady incline of Void energy in the Underground.

Alphys knew what the reports said, but she wished she could better understand just what they meant, and more importantly, what they meant to Sans. But physics and theory were his strong suits, not hers. It was part of the reason they'd made such a good team, before.
If I don't come back in a while – say by, I dunno, twelve hours – then you're allowed to maybe get a little worried. So just... give me a call, won'tcha? And then maybe start to get really worried if I ain't back in 24. And, uh, if 48 hours go by and I still haven't answered...

Whatever situation Sans had gotten himself into, he was in danger, and he'd obviously been anticipating it beforehand.

Which was why Alphys couldn't remotely understand why he'd let Frisk tag along with him.

But she just couldn't tell Undyne and the others—not yet.

One promise kept, and here she was, hiding more secrets.

"Alphy?" Undyne's voice snapped her out of her reverie, and Alphys jumped, blinking as she came back to reality.

"Oh. S-sorry." She rubbed her arms, and stood up, swaying a little on the spot. She glanced at the phone on the wall behind her, but it was staying silent. "I guess I just... zoned out, aheh."

"It's okay," Undyne pulled herself to her feet, and led Alphys over to the sofa.

"Sorry," Alphys repeated.

"Hey, don't apologise."

"S-sorry. I-I mean, okay."

Undyne reached up and freed her hair from its too-tight ponytail, red locks cascading down her shoulders. She looked pretty with her hair down, but she almost never let it hang loose, grumbling about how impractical it was in the case of an unexpected battle or enemy invasion or impromptu sparring match. Alphys didn't know what to make of her untying it now, but she didn't bother mentioning it.

They sat on the sofa in silence for a few moments.

"Oh, what the hell. I guess I'd better call Toriel—" Undyne began, reaching into her pocket for her phone, but Alphys stopped her.

"J-just... sit with me for another second. Please?"

Undyne bit her lip, then nodded. "Yeah, okay."

Alphys drew her knees up to her chest and wrapped her tail around herself much as she could, letting herself wallow in her own worries for a moment. "God," she muttered, mostly to herself. "Tell me this isn't happening."

Undyne glanced at her sidelong. "It is," was all she said, then repeated, "but they're okay. They're gonna be okay. I mean, Sans is, like, super weird. I've known him since I was five, and he's always been weird. Total nerd. Only he could manage to make his scent randomly disappear off the face of the planet. And he stinks. Honestly, when was the last time he showered?"


Undyne's eye widened, her fins perking up. "Papyrus is back?"
"S-since a few hours ago," Alphys confirmed with a nod. "He's, um. Not c-coping well, I think. H-he should be upstairs. I made him rest."

Once Frisk's note, scrawled in marker, had been discovered—I'm going on an adventure to the underground with Sans so you know I'm ok and mum doesn't worry about me bye!—and it came to everyone's awareness that she and Sans were missing, Papyrus had been beside himself, even if he pretended he wasn't. He'd left to go looking for his brother and Frisk before Undyne could contact Asgore and start organising a search party, and he hadn't been back until just recently.

Alphys was pretty sure he hadn't eaten the whole time, and he definitely hadn't slept. It had been close to 48 hours since Sans had left, and more than that since Papyrus had rested. That was a long stretch of time, even for him.

If 48 hours go by and I still haven't answered... There's this letter. In my desk drawer, down in the basement. So yeah, give it to Papyrus for me, if I ain't back by then.

Even if 48 hours hadn't gone by yet, it wasn't fair to keep this secret.

Undyne was already near the top of the stairs when Alphys got up so quickly she managed to fall back onto the floor with a crash, tripping over her tail. "I-I'm okay!" she said, scrambling to her feet and rubbing a sore spot on her knee. "Um! Actually! How about you g-go call Toriel, right now, before she, um, tries to get in touch with Asgore or something, a-and I go! Talk to Papyrus! M-maybe I should j-just, uh, check on him. First. He p-probably doesn't want to worry you, so he, um..."

But Undyne was already nodding in agreement—and sliding down the banister. "Right, yeah. Might respond better or something. Like, I already know he's gonna lie and say he's fine. Smart thinking, Alphy," she said, and Alphys couldn't help but blush, despite the circumstances. Undyne sucked in a breath. "Right, okay. So gonna go call the ex-Queen and tell her that her kid's been missing for two days. No biggie. Wish me luck."

"G-good luck." Alphys trooped up the stairs.

The door to Sans and Papyrus's bedroom was ajar, but she knocked anyway before nudging it open at Papyrus's overly bright, "COME IN, DOCTOR ALPHYS!" The younger skeleton brother was seated on the edge of his bed, bouncing one knee. The takeout spaghetti that Alphys had brought up to him sat cold and untouched on the windowsill.

"H-hi, Papyrus," she said, shuffling from foot to foot. She'd long since given up on asking Papyrus to stop calling her "Doctor" Alphys, just like Toriel had settled for being called Lady Toriel and Frisk had gotten used to being referred to as tiny human. "How'd you know it was me?"

"You have a VERY TINY KNOCK compared to Undyne's! She is, after all, quite the PASSIONATE KNOCKER! Also, the door is still intact."

"Yeah, she's, um. P-pretty passionate at. Knocking. Aheh. M-makes sense." Alphys glanced around the room, her eyes falling on Sans's empty cot. Papyrus had washed the sweat-soaked sheets, and made the bed in his brother's absence, and organised the stack of science and joke books on the bedside table. Papyrus followed her gaze, and Alphys gestured vaguely in the direction of the bed. "Is it okay if I—I mean, c-can I, um, s-sit there?"

"Naturally!"

"Thanks." Alphys drummed her fingers against her side again and lowered herself onto the bed. She
was terrible at this, and she didn't even know Papyrus that well. She'd never even met him before Frisk brought them all together. She should have just admitted she was lying and gotten Undyne to do this. "H-how are you doing?"

"The Great Papyrus is ALWAYS WELL! My bones and emotional wellbeing are in PRISTINE CONDITION! NOTHING WHATEVER is plaguing me! For I am doing excellently and DEFINITELY NOT WORRIED OR FRIGHTENED for my brother and the tiny human, even though Sans… only has 1 HP… " Papyrus shook his head. "I am CONFIDENT that Sans is safe and ABSOLUTELY NOT HURT! I am sure he only went to find a place to take a nap and fell asleep. Sans is ALWAYS falling asleep in WEIRD PLACES, the LAZYBONES! Once I found him draped over the rafters at Grillby's. And I am QUITE SURE the tiny human is keeping an eye on him and that they will both come through the door ANY MINUTE NOW."

"Oh," was all she said. "That's. Good."

"INDEED," Papyrus agreed, too quickly.

Alphys nodded and gave a half laugh, twiddling her claws. She couldn't put this off much longer, and she'd inevitably end up ruining things anyway. It was probably cruel to string him along much longer anyway. Papyrus deserved better than this; she could only begin to imagine what was going through his skull right now. Hiding his troubles seemed to come far too naturally to him, but Sans was the only family he had.

"We… we h-have'n't heard anything from Sans yet," she began. "S-so we don't know where he and Frisk are. Yet! I-I mean, the Underground is pretty big, especially when there's nobody in it, a-and the Surface is even bigger so really they could be anywhere." Great start, Alphys. If a hole could open up in the middle of the floor and swallow her whole right now, that would be so convenient. Maybe that was where Sans and Frisk were, and then they could climb out and she could stay there until the end of her days and stop embarrassing herself, stop making things so much harder for everyone around her. They could swap. She cleared her throat. "I-I mean! Anywhere but also. Not dead. Or hurt! V-very not dead or hurt somewhere we j-just don't. Know yet. Yeah! I-I mean… I talked to Sans? Before he left?"

Papyrus's gaze was fixated on her as he nodded, almost desperately, for her to continue. He'd stopped bouncing his knee, and was leaning forward slightly where he sat. Alphys quickly looked down to avoid his probing gaze, plucking at a loose thread on Sans's bedsheets.

"A-anyway," she pressed on. "H-he seemed to be, um. I-I mean, I just got this FEELING from him, like this v-vibe, you know the one, that he… " She steeled herself. "Papyrus, listen. Sans said h-he left you a note. In his desk drawer in the workshop. H-he asked me to tell you if he didn't come back home soon."

Pause.

"I-I think he just didn't want you to worry—" she added, but Papyrus was already on his feet and out the door.

Alphys sighed, her form crumpling as she sat there, on her missing best friend's bed. In the silence of the room, one horrible thought came to plague her, looming over her in the quiet space.

*It's your fault they're in trouble.*

*Why didn't you say something?*
You knew he was getting himself in danger, and he was drinking last night too.

It's your fault if he gets hurt.

Your fault.

"Alphy?"

Undyne was standing in the doorway, her brow knit in concern.

"I'm fine," Alphys said automatically. "Just thinking. Um, how'd the conversation with Toriel go? Is she okay?"

"Line's busy." Undyne aimed a kick at the doorframe, then turned her attention back to her girlfriend. "I guess she figured she'd start reaching out and call other people, so she probably knows by now. Heh, she's probably getting on the next bus to Ebott right now."

"J-just so long as she didn't try Asgore," Alphys quipped.

"Oh, my god. I'm so not ready for that drama right now. Nope, nope. Can't do it." Undyne dragged her hands down her face, then pointed a thumb over her shoulder. "So, uh, Papyrus just ran into the basement and then he left the house. What happened?" She frowned. "He still hasn't eaten, has he? Ugh, why couldn't he have waited just another minute before going? I don't care that his brother's missing; I need to punch some sense into him!"

Alphys nodded vaguely along. "I-I don't know. I think he's in denial, o-or he's pretending to not be worried, but I guess that's not really surprising. He probably just needed some air. I-I'm sure he'll be back soon," she added, pathetically.

Undyne was leaning over Papyrus's bed to peer out the window, even though he had to be long gone by now. He was almost as fast a runner as Undyne. "Yeah," she said, turning her face away. "Yeah, I guess that makes sense. Come on. Let's go try Toriel again or something. If punching the stuffing outta something's not gonna be useful, I need something else to do."

Chara sat cross-legged on the ground, chin resting in one hand. Elbow propped against her knee. With her free hand, she traced pictures in the snow, using a branch she'd snapped off a nearby shrub.

And as she drew, she hummed, an old lullaby Mamma used to sing to her and her brother each night. Music as soft as the fingers Mamma ran through her hair, washing gently over her until she fell asleep.

The song had had no words, and while Asriel had been quite content to be lulled asleep by Mamma's peaceful humming, Chara had always been curious about it. Once, after her brother had given way to slumber (for he'd always fallen asleep before her), she'd worked up the courage to ask. "It hardly troubles me," she'd hastened to add. "I just thought lullabies were meant to have words."

Mamma had smiled then, a sad smile, still running her fingers through Chara's hair. It had been long then. "Oh, it's a very old song, my child. Even older than me. I'm afraid I don't remember them anymore. Just the tune."

Chara hadn't said anything more, and she'd fallen asleep just as she always did—to fingers in her
hair and soft humming, and a feeling of warmth and safety that still frightened her a little. In all her four years in the Underground, it had never stopped frightening her, not completely.

Chara hummed the song now, and she thought of home and ancient battles and things lost to time and the Void.

There was no point in thinking thoughts that cheered her, and besides, there was a peculiar comfort to be had in melancholia. It felt more honest, for there was no use in lying to herself. If she was to be trapped in the Void for all eternity, she might as well act like it.

Chara soon grew bored of drawing pictures, and so, tossing aside her stick, she summoned her soul into visibility. She cupped the wretched thing in her palm and studied it with a passive disinterest. Just for something to do.

It had not been this bad before Doctor Gaster found her, because at least then her soul had not been so withered and sickly-looking. The white speckles had been there ever since she woke up in the Void, but it was only recently that they had begun to lose their white, almost ephemeral glow. Chara hadn't minded the spots before; they were pretty. Rather like the glittering stones in the cave ceiling of Waterfall. Unhappy things that passed as stars.

But really, her soul had been a horrible, unsightly thing even in life, and she'd always hated looking at it. It made magic-based sparring matches with her brother intolerable, so she and Asriel had turned to wrestling and rolling around on the ground like a pair of animals instead.

Chara blew a raspberry. Frisk was taking a long time in the Ruins, and it was doing nothing for her boredom. She flopped backwards onto the snow-covered ground and made a snow angel.

Once she was done, she lay there, limbs splayed out, and looked at her soul again where it hovered just above her chest. How strange that it should retain its reddish tint when all the Determination had been drained from it. And the extraction process had been excruciating. Even more painful than dying—infinitely more painful—and that was saying something.

It seemed a sick joke, and one that was entirely unfair. Chara thought you weren't supposed to feel pain after you died. But then, not everyone wound up trapped in the Void after dying either.

Still, her soul had always been a duller red colour; so different to the vibrant bright shades of Frisk's soul. Chara wondered if it meant anything. The living girl was proving herself to be a lot stronger than Chara had previously given her credit for. A lot more of a nuisance, too, and arguably quite a lot more stupid—she was, at the very least, dangerously naïve. Hers was a premature confidence, an impenetrable self-assuredness built of fantasies of what she presumed the world to be.

But still… if Frisk could Reset in this place…

The Save star she'd spotted might not mean anything, or it might mean everything in the world.

There was really no way to know unless Frisk died, a turn of events that Chara would rather avoid, even if it was inevitable. If she could Save and Reset in the Void, if she could manipulate the course of time in a place such as this, here where time had no meaning…

It would only increase Gaster's interest in her, and there was no escaping that.

Unless, of course…

Chara sat up and looked up at the Ruins door. There was no telling how far into the old capital
Frisk had made it thus far. And it was only an idea. But even if that flower was there—especially if he was still there—then maybe she'd had the wrong idea when it came to sitting here and waiting.

That was her problem. That would always be a problem. And it was never going to stop being a problem, she was too much like—

Chara stopped herself, picked up a small pebble at her feet, smoothed it with her thumb, watched as the snowflakes melted to water in her chapped red hands. She tossed it as far as she could into the woods.

She turned her attention back to the Ruins door. It was getting so cold out here.

Chapter End Notes

I know most people are going to assume that the song Chara is humming is Home from the soundtrack, and that's fine and all, but if you were wondering, the song I personally had in mind was the lullaby from Pan's Labyrinth. Pan's Labyrinth is one of my all-time favourite movies, and the main theme/lullaby has stuck with me ever since I first saw the movie three years ago. It's sort of the default song I think of now, when I think of lullabies. It's a gorgeous tune, and I just think there's something so beautifully haunting and bittersweet about an old lullaby whose words have been forgotten, and it seemed appropriate here.
Chapter Summary

The Void sisters stop for a moment of reflection. Chara looks for something that's important to her.

Chapter Notes

Lots of announcements today—NWABBW has now posted its very first bonus chapter! There will be more coming, though unfortunately I can’t say anything as to when just yet. But for now, in case you missed it, please enjoy The Letter.

Also, I forgot to mention this last time, but NWABBW now has a discord under the Fanfic Paradise Discord Group! Please feel free to pop in and chat whenever you like; I try to be pretty active. Though please let me know who you are beforehand if you send me a friend request, ideally via tumblr or here in the AO3 comments.

And as a final announcement, for those who missed it on tumblr, I’m now on Spotify! For a taste of the kind of music I listen to when I’m writing, you can listen to my Void Sisters playlist right over here or click here for the YouTube version if you aren’t on Spotify. (Admittedly this isn’t 100% accurate because I usually listen on iTunes where there are no ads and also Spotify doesn’t have all the music I listen to… but this Void Sisters playlist is, for the most part, fairly close!)

This chapter contains self-loathing and what could pass for discussion of suicidal ideation. It’s not too heavy and doesn’t play a major part, but you know yourself best—always remember to look after yourself and assess your needs.

Frisk didn’t remember the Ruins being quite this huge, or requiring quite this long to travel through. And this was without leaving the old castle—there was an entire city out there, a city that, only a couple centuries ago, used to house the entire population of the Underground before monsters began to expand outward. She could glimpse it from the balconies near the top of the castle, standing on tiptoe to peek over the parapets.

A part of Frisk wanted to venture out into the old capital, just to see if she could find any of the monsters that had chosen to stay behind. Many of the monsters from Home had done so, too intimidated by the prospect of a busy, crowded life on the Surface. All the Whimsums had stayed; they were so timid. By this point Frisk was starting to yearn for the company of a live person, but she knew that she wouldn’t find anyone here, not really. This was just an echo of the real Ruins, and it struck her that the world might turn dark and empty as a pitch any minute. Was it Chara’s projection that kept this place intact, broadcast by her doing all the way from Snowdin? Or some
other force entirely?

Then again, they could be real—this wasn’t even the real Void. This was an in-between place. Limbo.

But Void or not, the castle had turned into a ghost of its former majesty. Without anyone tending to them properly, the Ruins had finally begun to crumble, true to their name.

The walls towering over her were marred by deep cracks that spread out like parasitic roots. The stone floor centuries old was weathered down, scuffed with claw marks, testaments to the generations of monsters that had spent their lifetimes passing through here without ever glimpsing the sky. And the stones themselves had lost their unusually vibrant violet tint; had gone dull and desaturated. Only the ivy, which climbed up every wall and pillar, wearing away at the castle’s infrastructure, seemed to thrive.

Layers of dust—real dust, not monster dust—coated every surface, clinging to Frisk’s shoes as she walked, her every footstep reverberating through the chamber. The dead leaves crunched under her feet like the bones of small rodents.

After what seemed an eternity, Frisk finally reached the stairs in the castle’s entrance hall. She trotted down the stairs and crossed the foyer. Then, in the stone archway, she paused, sinking down to sit on her haunches.

It was so quiet here.

Frisk hated how her list of options just seemed so short, now. She just needed time to think. If Asriel really had turned back into a flower… well, even if he’d tried to kill her countless times, Flowey had always had pretty good ideas. One way or another, she would save Sans. She would stop Gaster from hurting him again. She would secure the happy ending she’d built.

A jolt of pain made Frisk realise she’d been biting at her thumbnail; the nail was split in half. She winced, sucking on the stinging wound. Then, keeping her head high, she marched into the next room.

The golden flowers were thriving, their petals wide and bright, their stems a deep and healthy green. A single stream of sunlight filtered in from above like a benediction, catching the dust motes and flecks of pollen that danced in the air. And there, directly in the centre of the bed of flowers, the sun catching it like a spotlight—

Her stomach dropped. Her mouth went dry.

Frisk raced forward, dropping to her knees before she’d even come to a complete stop. It was different from the rest of the flowers, taller even in its condition. “Flowey?” she whispered, but there was no response. Hesitantly, the child reached out a hand toward a withered brown petal, only for it to crumble at her touch. Frisk recoiled. She thought she might be sick.

Half the flower’s petals had fallen off, and those that remained were shrivelled and dried. Flowey’s head—for she knew it was him even as her heart denied it—sagged, and his face was gone.

“Flowey?” she tried again. “It’s, it’s me.” Then, in scarcely more than a whisper, “… Asriel?”

Nothing.

Just an ordinary, dead golden flower.
Footsteps sounded behind her, and Frisk spun round. Chara was standing just a few paces behind her.

Frisk swallowed, brushing her hair back from her face as she took in the sight of the other girl. “You came after all.”

Chara was staring fixedly at Flowey’s remains, her face a mask. She nodded once.

“Did you follow me?”

Chara crinkled her brow, thinking. “No. You were quite ahead of me when I changed my mind. I believe I was able to catch up with you quite quickly, though. And I knew where to look.”

“Oh.”

“So.” Chara came a few steps closer, until she was standing directly behind Frisk. “This is what’s become of our little detour to the Ruins, then. What a sorry fix we’re in!”

“Is he…” Frisk couldn’t say it, leaving Chara to do the hard part.

“Dead? Yes. He has been for a few days now, I believe.”

Frisk swallowed. “I’m sorry.”

The look that passed over Chara’s face was one of curiosity, but Frisk caught the anger flashing across it before her expression settled into something milder. “Are you? Why? It may not bode well for the success our mission, but it seems rather out of place to deliver condolences.”

Frisk had nothing to say to that. She frowned suddenly. “Why are you all wet?”

“Because I lay down in the snow.”

“Oh. Aren’t you cold?”

Chara remained deadpan. “Yes, very.”

“I didn’t think you’d feel the cold after being, um, dead.”

“Oh, yes.”

That sounded like a sorry deal to Frisk, but she didn’t say anything more, turning her attention back to Flowey’s withered remains. She heard Chara shuffling behind her, and when Frisk peeked, she saw Chara seated cross-legged on the ground, poised with her hands resting on her knees, like she was gathering on the carpet for storytime at school.

“So…” Frisk sat back as well, drawing her knees to her chest and scooting backward so that she was positioned beside Chara. “What do we do now?”

There was no sarcasm in Chara’s tone, for a change. “What, indeed.”

“Saving Sans?” Frisk prodded.

“Well, yes. We have our end goal in mind. Unfortunately, we still need to figure out the steps to get there.”

“Yeah…”
They lapsed into an uncertain, uncomfortable silence, both of them staring at Flowey’s remains and not moving from where they sat. The beam of sunlight from up above was starting to dissipate. The small patch of sky that was visible was darkening into a deep and cloudy grey—night was approaching, and this was a no-nonsense sky without time for sunsets. Frisk wondered if they’d be able to glimpse any stars from this angle.

“I’m buried here, you know.” Chara suddenly spoke up. “Mamma buried me under these flowers.”

Frisk glanced at the spot Chara was indicating. “Oh, yeah. I, um. I knew that, I think.”

“It’s funny. You fell here and you were not hurt. None of the humans were. But I broke my leg rather badly when I landed. It’s like I cushioned your fall.”

It was a strange sentiment, but a sweet one. Frisk offered her a half smile. “That’s kind of nice. It’s like you were looking out for us.”

“Oh, I don’t believe it was on purpose.”

“Right,” Frisk cautioned, but Chara had stopped paying attention. Now she stood on alert with her eyes skyward and her whole body rigid, like a dog with its ears pricked.

Frisk wasn’t sure if she should be hopeful or frightened. “What is it?”

“Shut up,” said Chara, sharply, and Frisk fell silent, straining to listen with bated breath. It took a moment, but after a while, she could hear it too—a faint hissing sound, like a kettle on the brink of boiling. She could not locate the source of the noise, only that it seemed to come from very far away.

“Something is shifting.” Chara’s eyes flicked over to Frisk. “An opening.” She shot to her feet, and for a moment she actually looked excited. “Get up, you.”

Frisk scrambled to stand up. “An opening? Is it the Void squares? Are they disappearing so we can get back to Hotland?”

Chara snorted at that, seeming to surprise herself as one hand flew up to cover her mouth. A teasing smirk played at the corner of her lips, though she fought to suppress it. “Void squares,” she mimicked. At last a small laugh escaped her, and she shook her head with an eyeroll. “Gracious. Well, no matter—let’s go.”

Frisk faltered, then nodded, turned on her heel, and began to head out the room. It wasn’t until she’d reached the other end of the cavern that she realised that Chara wasn’t following her. “Now who’s the slowpoke—oh.”

The dead girl stood with her back to Frisk, just on the edge of the flower patch. Her hands were balled into fists at her sides, and her head was bowed, a curtain of reddish-brown hair obscuring her face.

“Chara…?” Frisk was careful to approach slowly.

Chara jumped, swiping at her eyes with the back of her sleeve. “I am fine. I only just caught something in my eye.”

Frisk giggled at that despite herself, remembering. “What’d you catch?”

But apparently Chara wasn’t in on the joke, turning her face the other way again. “I apologise for
LINGERING. WE REALLY MUST MOVE ON.” SHE LIFTED ONE FOOT AS IF TO MOVE, WOBLED IN PLACE, THEN WOUND UP SINKING, SLOWLY, TO HER KNEES. WITH THE LAST OF THE SUNLIGHT STREAMING DOWN ON HER BOWED HEAD, CHARA RESEMbled AN IMAGE TAKEN STRAIGHT FROM A STAINED GLASS WINDOW.

EACH STEP PLODDING AND CAUTIOUS, FRISK FINALLY REACHED HER COMPANION, LOWERING HERSELF TO KNEE DOWN NEXT TO HER. SHE KNEW BETTER THAN TO REACH OUT OR LAY A HAND ON HER SHOULDER. SHE JUST WAITED, UNTIL AT LAST CHARA SPOKE, HER VOICE TIGHT AND HER TEETH ALL BUT CLENCHED.

“It is just—very strange. I hated that flower with every fibre of my being. That wretched thing that passed itself off as my brother, or some version of him. Grown from his dust, it took his memories, used them as some—twisted motivation to wreak havoc and misery and do all manner of things that Asriel could not have dreamed of. That thing which stole my brother from me, trapped him inside its essence. And then it had the audacity to seek me out, crying that it missed me. I hated it. I should be glad that it’s dead.” Chara’s voice shook, her hands shredding at blades of grass. “So why… why aren’t I…?”

FRISK STAYED QUIET FOR A MOMENT, THEN, BITING HER LIP, DARED TO Inch CLOSER. “YOU’RE… MOURNING HIM?”

She thought Chara would turn on her, shout, become angry. But the dead girl answered her: “I don’t know. I don’t… But I should know.” She peered up at Frisk, brown eyes bloodshot. “This was truly where you left him?”

Frisk thought back her last trek across the Underground, after the Barrier had been broken. She nodded. “Asriel… he was waiting here for me. He knew I was coming, but… he didn’t want to come with us to the Surface. I think… I think he must have never left this room. He must have turned—back into a flower, eventually,” she added, remorsefully.

Chara nodded vaguely. “Ah.”

“When I met Asriel, he was… really, really nice,” Frisk ventured. “I wanted him to come with us. I was thinking I’d do anything to save him, maybe even Reset and try again. But he was already dead, I guess. Way before I came into the story.”

“Some things are inevitable.” Chara’s gaze had returned to the withered flower. “But yes, my brother had already died. No Reset could have reversed that.” She allowed for a delicate pause. “Asriel was astonishing. He was so good, and so very stupid. Merciful to the point of idiocy—not so different from you,” she added, and this time, Frisk knew to take it as a compliment.

Frisk waited a moment before pondering: “If Flowey’s dead, though, and if… if Asriel was stuck as part of Flowey, like you said… maybe he’s not stuck in the Void anymore. Maybe he’s happy.”

“Perhaps.” Chara’s voice was a whisper, then she shook her head and stood abruptly, her face clearing. “Well. We ought to be going—we’ve wasted enough time as it is.”

“Sans.” Frisk nodded, getting to her feet. Her gaze fell upon Flowey’s remains, and she paused despite the urgency of their situation, staring down at the shrivelled, browned petals, the bent-over stem. A strange sense of clairvoyance, deep down in her soul, told her that she would never see him again—not in either form.

“Do you really think he could have helped us?” Frisk spoke up. Could, not would. She didn’t want to think about whether or not Flowey would. “If he was alive?”

Chara snorted, then sharply turned on her heel and began to walk away. “No.” Her voice was flat.
Perhaps not. More fool me.”

Frisk nodded vaguely, her gaze lingering. “Bye, Asriel,” she said softly, and left it at that.

Up ahead, Chara had already turned the corner into the next room. Back to business. “Come on, slowpoke!” she called over her shoulder. “We’ve quite a journey ahead of us!”

“Okay, okay, I’m coming!” Frisk broke into a jog to catch up, muttering under her breath. “Cheater.”

If Chara heard her, she didn’t say anything. But she was right; it was a long journey to Hotland, and it would be longer still if they were forced to loop round via New Home. For now, though, they had to cross the Ruins, and eventually, eventually, they would save Sans. And through the Ruins they trekked, with their legs streaked in dirt and grass stains on their knees.

The children remained silent as they crossed the Ruins, but Frisk found the trip to be far less lonely with Chara by her side. Chara resolved to remain stoic, but just the sound of her footsteps, and the occasional glance over her shoulder she aimed at Frisk, were a comfort on their own.

Still, Frisk’s mind wandered. It would be a while yet before they reached Hotland, but it wouldn’t take more than a couple hours at this pace. They needed some kind of plan before that—Frisk didn’t think Gaster would let Sans go very easily, and if she didn’t have easy access to her powers…

Her feet were starting to get sore. With every step Frisk felt as though her legs were made of lead; she began to drag her heels. Chara shot her a look of annoyance. But Frisk was finding it harder than ever to keep up, and now her stomach was beginning to pang and twist with an unknown pain. Chara frowned at her again. The ground was teetering.

“Blast,” she heard Chara utter, and the next thing she knew, the dead girl was leaning over her. It took a moment for it to strike Frisk that realise she was lying sprawled on the ground.

Frisk blinked blearily. “What happened?” she mumbled as Chara dropped back onto her haunches.

“You collapsed suddenly,” Chara supplied. “Do not worry, you were only out for a few minutes. Sit up—slowly, now. Take your time.”

Frisk obliged, slowly propping herself up on her elbows. Her head was sore, and she still felt weak and lightheaded. She blinked in an effort to clear the black spots flashing before her eyes. “…. Why?” she managed, and Chara hummed in thought.

“Do you remember the time you were pulled into the Void? Before Sans found you, and rescued you from being hit by a car once you emerged? We did not see each other that time—it wasn’t my doing.”

“… yes?”

Chara tilted her head to one side. “Time passes differently here.” She spoke in a flat kind of sing-song, as if quoting a familiar saying she’d gotten bored with. There was no missing the sarcastic bite behind her words, however—she knew Frisk had heard it too. “When Doctor Gaster pulled you into the Void, you only spent a few minutes there—at least from your perspective. In reality you’d been gone many hours. You were hungry when you emerged. Do you remember that?”
Frisk nodded, not sure where this was going.

Chara, who seemed to be enjoying monologuing, carried on. “The same thing is happening now. You have already been here for quite a while. I believe you have been here a full day. Most likely longer. Meaning—” she paused for full effect—“your resources are low, and you are weak. You have gone a very long time without eating or sleeping. Reality has caught up with you. It would be ill-advised to press on without pausing to tend to your mortal needs.”

This was a lot to take in. “So… time passes faster here?”

“Slower,” Chara corrected. “In this case, yes. Sometimes time passes slower, and other times it goes by faster, and other times it is more complicated than that. You get used to it.” She shrugged, as if it didn’t matter.

Frisk sat there, letting all of this sink in. Days… in the real world, she’d been here in the Void for days. Her heart dropped as the full implications of that hit her. “Everybody at home must be so worried,” she whispered. “They’ll be looking everywhere and they’re not gonna be able to find us here. Papyrus and Alphys and… oh, no. Mum.”

“And,” Chara said pointedly, “you must eat, and you must rest. Come. It isn’t much further to—” she froze, catching herself. “—the house. That is a good place.”

“But we can’t, what about—”

“—Sans?” the other girl finished on an eyeroll. “For pity’s sake. You’ll be no use to him like this and you know it. How do you expect to fight Doctor Gaster while starving, on two days without sleep? No.”

“Fight him?” Frisk wrinkled her nose at that. “I’m not going to fight him.”

“You—” Chara looked momentarily disgusted. “Fine. When you dodge his attacks, then. Whatever.” She batted away a troublesome strand of hair that had fallen into her eyes. “Either way, you must eat and rest and that’s the end of it. The skeleton will have to wait.”

Frisk stared at the ground. She’d been so certain when she’d set out to the Underground with Sans, but now, everything was falling apart. She should have done something before Gaster had taken Sans. She never should have let him come here at all. “He’s hurt,” she said, very quietly.

“Yes. But he is not at risk of dying. Gaster will look after him.”

“But—”

“He is being tortured, yes. But the torture has already begun and he can’t be in any more pain than he is right now. Trust me. So for the sake of all that is good in this world, would you please take my hand and come with me so we can take you somewhere to eat and get some blasted rest?”

Frisk blinked at Chara’s outstretched hand. She got the impression it had been extended like that for quite a while, but she hesitated to take it. She didn’t want to stop and rest, not when so much time had been wasted already. Not when her family was worried. Not when Sans was hurt and in pain, not when he must be thinking she’d just left him there to suffer at Gaster’s hand. And Frisk got the terrible feeling Sans wouldn’t try to escape even if he was given the chance. He needed her, now more than ever.

But she also didn’t think she could stay awake much longer, let alone make it all the way to Hotland and then face off against the notorious Doctor W.D. Gaster. Not like this. A pang of
hunger flared through her, as if to make a point.

She looked at Chara’s pointed, measured expression. “Okay,” she finally said, then added a “you win” just to make her displeasure known.

Chara snatched up her hand before she could reach for it, hoisting Frisk to her feet. “Very good,” she said in delicate tones, and Frisk only had time to nod once before her legs buckled under her. Chara caught her before she could hit the ground.

When Frisk woke up, she was propped up against Toriel’s big, tan-coloured reading chair. (That wasn’t right, her mum had brought the chair with her to their house on the Surface; it wouldn’t be here in the Underground anymore). She must have passed out again on the trip to the castle’s living quarters. Apparently Chara had tried to lift her up into the chair and then given up, or perhaps just changed her mind. Frisk also got the distinct impression she’d been dragged here rather than carried, judging by the scrapes on her calves and the leaves clinging to her clothes.

Frisk pulled herself up onto the chair just as Chara emerged from the kitchen. She blinked when she saw Frisk.

“Awake, I see.”

“How long was I asleep this time?” Frisk asked, daring to be hopeful. Maybe she’d slept long enough to satisfy Chara, and they could move on out of here after a bite to eat.

“Barely five minutes,” said Chara, and Frisk tossed her head back in exasperation.

“But there’s a spot of good news,” Chara continued. “There was pie in the icebox—actually, there were several pies—and I’ve just put one in the oven. The taste will be better if it’s warm.”

“Icebox?”

“Refrigerator,” Chara corrected herself. “So that is one problem solved. I am currently scouring the cupboards for more food. Afterward, you will sleep—properly—and then we can continue with our mission.” Frisk nodded, and started to get up, still a little shaky at the knees. “Careful,” said Chara, not quite a rebuke. “You must take it slowly.” Then she disappeared back into the kitchen.

Frisk waited for a spell, trying to take a moment to gather her strength. She could hear Chara rummaging around through the drawers, then came the muted clap of the cupboard doors opening and closing, joined by the expected crash and clatter of pots and pans. “Aha!” followed the victorious cry, and Frisk turned around just in time to see Chara hopping down from the counter, holding something high above her head. She seemed to be waiting for Frisk to acknowledge her find.

“Chocolate,” Chara echoed with glee, already stripping away the tinfoil wrapper. There were several more bars sticking out from the pocket of her slacks. “Oh, marvellous day! Oh, yes, this is a happy day indeed.”

“Except that Sans is in trouble,” Frisk reminded her, but Chara waved that off.

“Never mind that,” she said around a full mouth. “We’ve scores and scores of chocolate to eat, now
come and enjoy it. Have you a preference? Because I have full intention of keeping the hazelnut to myself."

“I guess plain,” Frisk shrugged, and Chara tossed her a bar, muttering something that sounded suspiciously like “amateur.”

Frisk turned to her chocolate, peeling the wrapping away. It was different than any candy wrapper she’d ever seen; it was plain silver tinfoil all around with only a small paper label on the front to identify it. But as soon as she snapped off a piece and popped it into her mouth, her taste buds exploded with the rich, sweet taste of creamy milk chocolate. It was way better than anything she’d had on the Surface—monster food was, at least most of the time.

Chara seemed satisfied, turning around and going back into the kitchen. Frisk followed her, leaning against the doorframe and watching as the dead girl resumed her ransacking of Toriel’s kitchen. It was the calmest Frisk had ever seen her.

But it soon became clear that there was nothing much to do but watch, and as she munched away on her chocolate bar, Frisk was even starting to feel a little bored. She turned, wandering in a lazy, looping circle around the living room.

*Clatter, crash,* came the sounds from the kitchen. Then, a heavy pause, and Frisk turned to see Chara through the doorframe, frowning as she stared into one of the kitchen drawers. “Where are the knives.”

“Why would you need knives?” asked Frisk alarmed, but Chara had already moved on.

Frisk resumed circle-pacing the living room. She finished off her chocolate bar, and spared Chara another glance. She could see more chocolate bars sticking out from the dead girl’s pockets, but one full candy bar was more chocolate in one sitting than Frisk was used to. Besides, she wanted to save room for pie.

Frisk looped around the living room one last time, then wandered into the hall. She paused before the door to what had, briefly, been her bedroom—what had been Asriel’s bedroom—then kept going. At the end of the hall, she stopped before the mirror.

Frisk sighed heavily. For some reason, it seemed like it had been a long time since she’d looked at herself in the mirror. Which was silly—she’d seen herself in the mirror just that morning, or however long ago morning had been, when she brushed her teeth and combed her hair.

But maybe it was the first time in a while that she’d taken a long, proper look.

“Still just you, Frisk.”

Frisk startled and almost spun before she saw Chara in the mirror, standing just behind her. Her hands were folded neatly behind her back, and she wore a bland smile, head canting to one side.

In the mirror, Frisk met Chara’s eyes. “What’s that supposed to mean?”

She was only met with a quiet hum.

“Chara—” Frisk shook her head and frowned. Then her nose crinkled up and she lifted her head again, sniffing the air. “Do you smell something?”

The girls met eyes. “The pie!” they said in sync, and shot off down the hall toward the kitchen. Chara got there first, Frisk at her heels.
Smoke poured from the oven in thick, billowing clouds, so much that it was hard to see. Here the smell was acrid and unpleasant; not so much hanging in the air as opposed to curling up in tightly coiled spirals.

“What did you do?” Frisk was dismayed.

“I was only warming it!” Chara crouched before the oven, and using one of Toriel’s oversized oven mitts, reached in and pulled out a blackened, circular thing that must have once been a pie.

“Yeah, but even I know how to warm things up in the oven. Though…” Frisk eyed the scene. “Maybe not in an old wood stove, I guess.”

“Hmm. I expect not.” There was a long pause as Chara stared down at the burnt, crispy remains of the pie. “Did you know,” she said, “the last time I tried doing anything with a pie, it went very badly too?” Her head snapped up, and she began to giggle, high and closemouthed.

Frisk swallowed, shuffling from one foot to the other as she waited for it to be over. It frightened her when Chara got like this; it frightened her that she was starting to get used to it.

Somewhere deep down inside her, a shadow of doubt flickered to life. She shoved it away. She couldn’t expect to get by without trusting people, and right now, Chara was her safest bet. Her only bet, really.

And besides—it wasn’t fair to Chara.

So Frisk waited for Chara’s fit of maddened giggles to pass, trying not to think of yellow flowers and cups of butter and lips stained with pollen, and when at last it did, the dead girl sighed woefully and stared at the pie a moment longer as if nothing had just transpired. Then she shrugged, plopping it into onto the countertop. “Well, there are other pies. I suppose a chilled chocolate pudding pie would not be so terrible.”

Frisk chanced a small smile. “No. I guess it wouldn’t.”

They ate cold chocolate pudding pie straight from the pan, pressed together on the reading chair together with elbows jammed uncomfortably into each other’s ribs. Chara smacked her lips the whole way, and when Frisk couldn’t finish more than a few large mouthfuls of pie, the dead girl polished off the rest without a second thought, even licking her fingers when she was finished.

“Maybe we should eat something healthy,” suggested Frisk, whose stomach was starting to hurt.

“Monster food is always healthy. Why, monster chocolate is better for you than any Surface vegetable.”

“I think that’s… wrong.”

“Nevermind that. You need to sleep!” Chara practically shoved Frisk off the chair.

Frisk couldn’t help but roll her eyes, laughing a little as she picked herself up off the floor. “Okay, okay. Let me go get ready.” She trotted obediently off, but stopped to stick her tongue out at Chara on her way out.

Unsurprisingly, the little bedroom was exactly as she remembered it. The toybox at the foot of the little cot, the cosy red rug in the middle of the room that seemed to soften all its edges; the child-
sized furniture tucked up neatly against one wall. A faint aroma of must hung light in the air.

Frisk remembered how, the first time she’d set foot into this room, shaken and weary and hesitant to trust Toriel, the room had seemed too perfect to be true. She’d been suspicious, and frightened of the monsters she met. But then she’d lain down on the bed, which was so old it made creaking sounds every time she moved, and somehow that had comforted her enough to settle down into a heavy sleep without fully meaning to.

Frisk shivered a little and drew her arms around herself. She was starting to miss her mother more than ever.

Shaking her head, Frisk wandered over to the nightlight in the corner and flipped the switch. With a click, the rest of the room darkened, and the nightlight began to play its soothing, tinkling melody from a tinny speaker. Frisk listened for a moment, then stepped back and dropped onto the bed, but she didn’t lie down just yet.

Sitting on the stiff old mattress, she couldn’t help but wonder if Chara might be a little insulted, or find it a little morbid, that she was going to sleep in her dead brother’s bed.

As if on cue, there was a gentle rap on the door. Chara didn’t wait for Frisk to answer before pushing it open.

“What do you think?” Chara stood in the doorway, her arms crossed.

“It’s… what do you mean?”

“I did quite a good job with it, did I not?” Chara gestured around herself, and Frisk remembered what Chara had said about her influence over the Void.

“It looks like his room,” she supplied. It seemed to be the answer Chara was looking for. The dead girl’s eyes softened as she crossed the room and came to flop down on the bed next to Frisk. Frisk paused, then lay down next to her. The bed was so small that when they crammed into it facing each other their noses almost touched. “So, how does it work?” Frisk couldn’t help but ask. “Did you restore the whole Underground? It looked really cool, what you did to Hotland. Can Gaster do it, too?”

Chara stiffened at the mention of Gaster’s name, but she still answered. “Not really,” she said. “I had no control over the Void, you know. There was nothing at all there. Nothing but blackness, in every direction, no matter how far you went or how long you stayed somewhere. Have you been to the ocean before?” Frisk nodded. “It was something like when… you float on your back, and let your limbs go quite loose, and let the waves carry you. And your ears are underwater so any sound becomes muffled. When you lose sensation of anything, really. If you stayed like that long enough, you’d forget your own name. It was like that. But there was no sky above you to stare at, nothing at all.”

She’d been looking directly at Frisk, her eyes wide and wild. Now a glaze passed over them as Chara flicked her eyes away. “There was no Underground, at any rate.” And now back at Frisk with a catlike intensity. “Until you came along. You were so strong. And thanks to you, time tore open wide enough for the Void to begin seeping into reality. And we crawled out, too. Me, and Doctor Gaster. Only then did I find myself in this in-between place, a pantomime of the Underground. Reality flickered in and out, and at intervals I would be plunged back into the abyss. It was… frightening at first, I admit. Before very long, though, I began to realise what influence I had over this place. I could maintain images of the Underground as I pleased, and it was no time at all before I’d mastered the skill. Normally I can only handle a few bits at a given time, but then
there are times when my control is stronger. These things vary. But…” Chara rolled onto her back, taking in the room in its entirety. “There are certain places I like to try and maintain as often as I can. As I said. Intentionality is quite a big deal here.”

Frisk mulled this over. She started to say I’m sorry, then realised it wouldn’t do much good, and Chara would probably just scoff at her anyway. Instead she said, “But Doctor Gaster has control too.”

Chara sighed, irritated. “Yes. He does at that.”

The pair lay for a while in the silence of the room. The tinkling music box song had faded into white noise; now Frisk drew her attention to it again, and she knew Chara was listening, too.

“Chara?” Frisk spoke up. “How do you think he died?”

A pause. “Well,” said Chara, “I certainly have an idea. Really it’s intuitive.”

“What’s intu—I mean. Okay. Tell me.”

The words burst out of Chara, as if she’d been burning to put them out into the world, but her tone remained measured as always, never rushed. “Well, he hadn’t a soul as a flower. You know that. There was nothing keeping him alive but Determination. Without it, he’d be an empty husk again.” She sighed, now lacing her fingers together and resting her head beneath her hands. “It is much more complicated when it comes to creatures with souls, like you or me. We cannot simply lose our Determination and cease to exist. I’m still here, after all. But when all you have, quite literally, is a will to live, and you simply lose that will, then there is nothing left.” She shrugged, indifferent, before lapsing into contemplative silence. “He must have made a choice.”

A choice. It seemed like everything came down to choices, at least the way Chara framed things. Sans did, too, Frisk realised with a slight jolt. She wasn’t sure what to make of that. Loading her old Save files when she died hadn’t been a choice. She hadn’t even known she was doing it. It had been thoughtless; raw instinct.

But then, maybe letting go was different.

Frisk thought back to the flower patch and wondered at how Chara could be so knowledgeable, so methodical about these facts, reciting them as if from a script, yet could still lay her heart out when it came to her concern for her brother. Frisk was drawn once again to the plinking music box melody, and tried not to think about what might have happened to Asriel, wherever he ended up.

“Oh, yes.” Chara mimicked Frisk’s pose, nodding enthusiastically. “Quite an intriguing concept, actually. Contemplating it does so nurture the mind. I doubt she would have been able to create a
sentient creature, had it not been for my brother’s dust within that flower’s essence. But it’s possible, I suppose, that she might have been able to create an especially resilient flower.” She cleared her throat. “That isn’t the point, at any rate. The point is that she wouldn’t have made an anomaly.”

Frisk frowned. “But she did! Flowey came alive when Alphys gave him the Determination and then he figured out about his powers.”

Chara arched an eyebrow. “And was a prick of Determination enough for Sans? No. If he’d been made into an anomaly on the first try, then none of this would be happening now. It takes an indefinite amount of Determination to create a fully-fledged anomaly like yourself. That soul of yours is a treasure-house! Oh, Frisk, just think about it. Flowey was always Determined.”

“… how do you mean?”

A huff of impatience. “Well, when I died, our souls fused together, didn’t they? And I still had Determination at the time. Flowey is Determined—he is an anomaly—because of me. My Determination.” A smile twitched at the corners of her lips and was gone in a flash. Chara’s hand rose up to grip at her sweater, bunching up the fabric at her chest in her fist. “Really, he was an anomaly well before Doctor Alphys created him. He just needed an extra little prick to wake him all the way up. My Determination that started it. The original Resets, all this trouble. My Determination. My fault.”

Frisk waited for Chara to laugh, but she never did. The silence that followed felt like a judgement, and Frisk scrambled to fill it. “It’s not your fault, Chara,” she said softly, obligingly.

“Oh, it is.”

“No—”

“If I had not made a very foolish decision, then he would not have died. Nothing bad would have happened.”

“No, it’s not like that, you—”

“I am not a good person, Frisk, no matter what you seem to have convinced yourself. It is in your best interest to understand this. Dreadful things happen when people get close to me.” Her voice had gone unsettlingly flat, but now her lips quirked up into a crude smile that didn’t match her tone. “You know what happened, of course. The night we died.”

Frisk nodded.

“When he absorbed my soul, we shared control over his body. It was I who carried us through the Barrier and to my village. He was the one who resisted at the end, who would not fight back against our attackers. But did Asriel tell you that we could communicate for that period? I was a little voice inside his head.” Chara lifted one hand in the air, index finger sticking out, and traced out lazy heart shapes in the air. “So do you know what I said to my brother?”

Frisk didn’t dare answer, feeling her insides curdle.

“I said, ‘You’ve ruined everything. I hate you.’ He died after that. Those were the last words he ever heard.”

Oh. There was nothing to say to that, and Frisk couldn’t imagine Chara wanted her to. But it seemed nothing could be worse than the empty silence that followed, heavy and punctuated by the
same tinkling music box theme that now played like a taunt. Frisk wanted to get up and turn it off.

But then Chara said, “Well? Have you no words?”

Frisk shrugged a little. “I’m sorry,” she acknowledged, then sat up a little. This time, she was quick, not even giving Chara a chance to scoff or roll her eyes. “But… but even if that was awful, you were upset. You didn’t mean it, and he knows you love him really. He was looking for you, he isn’t mad at you, or—wasn’t.” Frisk fell to silence, worried she might have made it worse. “He forgives you,” she tacked on. “For all of it.”

Chara blinked. “Oh, but I did mean it. Certainly and wholeheartedly. He could tell. I was furious, angrier than I had ever been in all my life. At the time, I mean. I didn’t understand him; he was…” She shook her head. “It is such a complicated matter. He was so much better than me, so fundamentally good. If he had been willing to fight back, to defend himself, not so driven to be kind, then he would not have been hurt. Such carnage! We would have been so much better off underground. People were happy there. I believe… I believe I was, too.”

Frisk thought of the old photographs she’d seen, those candid shots capturing the Dreemurr children wrestling on the floor, climbing on the furniture, running through the garden in a game of pretend. Up to their elbows in batter in the kitchen with Toriel. The laughter that was etched across Chara’s face, or sometimes a look of surprise captured just before she could express her irritation. She thought of the way Toriel looked at those pictures, even now.

“Yeah,” she said, and a small grin broke across her face. “I know. And… Mum still really misses you. Asgore, too. I don’t see him as much, but he thinks of you guys every day.”

“Well.” Chara hummed with vague interest, but she seemed… Pleased probably wasn’t strong enough a word, but happy didn’t account for her subdued reaction either. Contented?

“I don’t know what’s happened to Asriel. But at least you have good memories of him. Right?”

A smile flickered across Chara’s face, wavering, like a glitch. “I expect so, yes.”

“Wanna tell me?”

That Chara answered at all surprised her. “I could. Though I remember nothing in particular detail.” She half-laughed. “But… well, we were both a pair of rambunctious scamps. Fantastic makers of mischief. I am under the sure impression Asriel was a much more quiet and obedient child before I fell from the sky. He was a terrible liar—lack of practise. I made quite the rascal of him. Poor Mamma and Papa! It must have come as such a shock.” She trailed off into silence. “Once I had the grand idea to try and con the spiders out of their money. It was not going entirely badly, either, until Asriel burst into tears from the sheer guilt of our little operation. Heaven knows why; the spiders are most unpleasant monsters and they con or intimidate innocent people out of their money all the time.” Chara’s smile faded. “But Mamma and Papa never stayed angry with us for very long. Not even me. They never struck us, never raised their voices. And by evening Mamma would always put us to bed, even though we were surely getting too old for it by the time we died. Sung us to sleep every night.”

“She sings to me, too,” Frisk said quietly.

“That is unsurprising.” Chara blew a stray lock of hair from her face.

“Are you mad? Or jealous? That I call her Mum? Because, um. I do, by the way.”

Chara made a *tch* sound. “No. I have many loathsome qualities, but pettiness and jealousy are not
Frisk’s lips quirked up. “Are you pleased for me, then?”

The dead girl appraised her with seriousness. “She deserves a child like you,” she said at last. “I believe I shall turn that lamp off.”

“Good idea.”

The bed creaked as Chara climbed down off of it. Frisk rolled onto her side to watch her patter across the room, pause before the lamp, then reach out and turn it off with a resounding click. The room was plunged into darkness and silence, snatch up the light like a fist.

Frisk waited for Chara to join her on the bed again, but nothing happened. She couldn’t even see the other girl on the side of the room, couldn’t make out her silhouette as she waited for her eyes to adjust to the sudden darkness. “Chara?” she called out, but there was no answer.

She swallowed, her palms going slightly sweaty. She thought she heard the crackle of static from somewhere above her but she couldn’t be sure. The knot of dread tightening in her chest, she groped around in her pocket for her phone, hoping to illuminate the room with the glow from its screen, but when she pressed the Home button nothing happened.

Tap-tap-tap. Tap. Tap-tap.

Frisk’s chest seized. Wringing her hands, she slowly pushed the blankets aside and moved to climb off the bed. The soles of her feet brushed against the wood floor.

**BAM!**

There was a loud crash followed by a thwump as something landed on the bed. Frisk gasped, gulping back her scream as she nearly threw herself backward over the headboard. Then she made out the small silhouette crouched, gargoyle like, at the foot of the bed. Barely a moment later, she heard the cackling giggles.

“**Chara!**” she exclaimed, but she settled down into the covers, heartbeat easing. The laughter came at full force now as Chara crawled forward to lie back down next to her.

“**Oh, your face!**”

“You can’t even see my face! It’s too dark in here!”

“No, but I can certainly imagine it.”

And Frisk could picture Chara’s face perfectly—a great toothy grin on her face and eyes alight with wicked amusement. She scowled, jerking the blankets away and wrapping them around herself. “It’s not funny.”

“On the contrary. It’s extremely funny.”

“Not right now, it isn’t.”

“I could not be more inclined to disagree.”

“No, it’s **not** funny. You really scared me.”

“Asriel used to say that all the time, too.” Chara reached to tug the blankets back. “He fell for it
every time. And oh, how he’d yelp! Have you ever heard a goat scream?”

Frisk shook her head, but surrendered the quilt.

“I thought you would be more accustomed to pranks, living with that jokester skeleton.”

“Not like that, he isn’t,” Frisk contended. “Not mean pranks. Mostly he just leaves whoopee cushions everywhere.”

Chara snorted. “I see.” She delivered a long, drawn-out sigh. “So what is it like, living with all of them? I should think it would… not be very peaceful.”

Frisk shook her head, giggling. “No way.” She paused, then, without being able to stop herself, launched into a rant. “cause it’s the six of us, there’s always something going on. Sans and Papyrus always break things when they’re sparring, Undyne and Papyrus too. And Alphys has a lab down in the basement where she does all this cool science stuff with Sans sometimes, but she can’t do anything with chemicals or explosives because of what she calls Undyne precautions. And Undyne used to try cooking all the time, but Mum banned her from the kitchen ’cause she says we can’t afford to renovate anymore. We have a lot of fun, though.” Her heart swelled as she thought of home. “Mum cooks the best food ever, and she and Sans and Alphys are really good we get to watch movies and play video games and board games together all the time. I get to have friends over to play whenever I want. And everybody… I know they really care about me.” Frisk trailed off, a lump forming in her throat. “So. Anyway. It’s just… really nice.”

“And here I thought you had a reputation for being quiet,” Chara shook her head. “Well, clearly I was mistaken. Or somebody else was.”

“No,” Frisk faltered. “I mean… I’m getting better at talking, but. I didn’t used to before. Hardly ever. I talk way more now, so that’s good, I guess. But… it’s easier talking with you,” she confessed. “Than it is with anyone else. Even Sans and Mum and everyone.”

“Well, since you’re so chattery. I should think it’s my turn to ask you a question, now.”

Frisk shrugged, indifferent. “Okay.”

“Why do you want to save Sans so badly?”

Frisk opened her mouth to voice her incredulousness, because how could Chara even think to ask such a question, then changed her mind. After taking a second to gather her words, she just gave her answer, honest and deliberate. “Well. Because he’s my friend. He’s family, and I care about him. Because I couldn’t even think of just leaving him. And because it’s right. I just need to save him.” Frisk shrugged and smiled a little. “I guess I just need to save everybody.”

“Except you didn’t,” Chara said pointedly, and Frisk looked away.

The silence was weighty; an edict. Finally Chara rolled over, too, turning to stare out into the empty blackness of the room. “You should get some rest,” she said. “Replenish your energy for the morning. Save whoever you want.”

Frisk waited a long moment, clenching a corner of blanket in her fist as the tiredness settled in. “I’ll make things right,” she whispered. “For everyone. Promise.”

“I knew you’d say that,” Chara muttered. But she shuffled a few inches closer on the bed.

Frisk smiled to herself, despite everything, wrapping the blankets tighter around herself and closing
her eyes. As she drifted off to sleep, she thought she heard Chara humming.

Please drop by the archive and comment to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!