Outertale

by Youwillneverseeeme

Summary

In the weeks that followed the barrier’s destruction, everyone thought it was over. Monsters have integrated themselves into society alongside the humans, and peace between the two races has swept the lands. Frisk and their new family and friends have settled in nicely on the surface, and the future has never looked so bright.

However, there was one thing nobody counted on. The Underground was not the only realm of monsters to exist.

Emperor Maxus of the Outerworld – the fabled empire in the sky – orders Frisk's abduction in the hopes of using their soul to unlock an ancient power of unthinkable proportions, which could spell certain doom for planet Earth.

Frisk, once again, finds themself fighting (non-violently) to return home in this strange land filled with good monsters, bad monsters, and the downright bizarre, all while a hefty bounty has been placed on their head. And the worst thing? They have lost their ability to reach their save file. Frisk has only one shot to make things right. Can they pull it off?

Join Frisk and company's second journey for the future of humans and monsters, filled with excitement, danger, comedy, mystery, high notes, low notes… and an old friend.
Ladies and gentlemen, from Fanfiction.net, I bring my story 'Outertale' onto Archive of Our Own for all you lovely people here to enjoy.
Old. Frail. Breathing slow, laboured. Tired. So tired. Emperor Juhi lay in his bed, barely clung to life – what little he had left. Juhi knew his moment would come, as it comes to all eventually. This was his last stand. He had lived for so long, longer than what nature had intended, yet still he wished he could have had just a little more time.

The emperor wished that before he left his mortal coil, he could experience the sensation of real grass between his toes, or the soft, authentic sand under his feet. The scent of sea salt and warm grass. Roses and daisies. Only the Earth could create such bounties, Mother Nature as the humans called it.

Humans... Those violent, primitive beings that knew nothing but war and hate. It had been so long ago, back when Juhi was a young monster – with youthful vigour and the colour in his hair – when he stood on the Earth’s plentiful surface. There was peace. Life was simple. It was the humans who had cast the first stone, destroying his life, along with those of millions more, and for no other reason than because they were different.

Juhi was among a group who evaded the humans. He watched from afar, behind mountains and trees, as among the hundreds massacred, unable to fight back, his mother, father, and wife were among them. Their pleas fell upon deaf ears as the dusty pitchforks came down. Juhi’s loved ones crumpled to the ground, their bodies turning to dust, souls shattered. Juhi needed several pairs of hands to hold him back as the rage poured through him, which then manifested into grief.

The remainder of his brethren were rounded up and marched under Mt Ebbot, where they were sealed away. Juhi did not know whether to call them the lucky ones or the unlucky ones. Forced to live out their days buried under the ground, with no light, no moon, no stars, no fresh air, and no hope of escape. An elaborate tomb. A gilded coffin, the mountain its tombstone.

The concealed faction of monsters, along with the young Juhi and the child of six years who held his hand, fled far away. They had reached the shore, somewhere far, far away from the real monsters, but that was not enough. Eventually, the humans would discover them, and fell them like they did with so many others. Juhi stood on the sandy beach and looked out at the endless blue, and orange sky, and knew that that could have been the last time he would gaze upon it.

It had been so long since Juhi had felt the earth, and now he was leaving whilst surrounded by fake stone and pink sunlight. The slither of memories of what it felt like was more precious than all the gold in the world. He would love to feel it one last time. Just once more.

"Father, I'm here," a monster, his voice deep and fierce, said softly.

Juhi opened his eyes. There, at his bedside, stood the imposing figure of his only son, Maxus. It was like looking into a mirror. Giant in stature, Maxus had thick golden hair around his lion face. Two silver eyes watched emotionlessly as the final grains of sand dripped from his father's hourglass. Maxus: Prince of monsters – prince for not much longer.

Juhi smiled what would be his last. “So, you came to say goodbye, huh?” He chuckled, only for it to come out in a hacking fit. “I didn’t know you still cared…”

Prince Maxus took his father’s hand. It was cold. “You’re my dad. I can’t stop caring even if I wanted to…”

“Even though… you hated me for the choices I’ve made… and called me a coward for not acting,
Maxus looked away. “I still stand by what I said, I don’t regret saying any those things, but I’d never forgive myself if I let something like that stop me from seeing you again one last time.”

Juhi laughed weakly. “Well… I guess there’s no point in acting against you anymore. My position is about to become vacant, as it seems…” He looked back into his son’s eyes. Maxus remained silent, allowing his father to speak his peace. “Our Royal Advisor has informed us… that the great barrier under Mount Ebbot… was destroyed not too long ago. Such power was thought impossible… apparently not…”

“I already know this,” Maxus said.

The ailing emperor clasped his other hand around his son’s protruding knuckles. “Yes, Maxus… but there’s something I’ve been keeping from you for so many years… for far too long… A way to free our people.”

The prince’s expression remained as solid as stone. “That does not surprise me,” he said with a monotone voice. “But why tell me this now, when you’re facing the end?”

“Because I feared the worst that could come of it.” Juhi’s hands tightened. “You still have the heart of a young man, my son… You act out of emotion, anger. Your hatred of the humans is as strong as the day it was forged, but the revulsion that I feel for them… it is not the same as it was all those years ago.”

Maxus growled, low, deep, quiet. “How can you view the humans differently after what they did…? To Mother? Grandma? Grandpa? To all of them? It’s unforgivable, inexcusable. I could never forgive them – will never forgive them.”

“Maxus, please.” Emperor Juhi stared deep into Maxus’s eyes. “I’ve spent most of my life hating the humans… and look where it has gotten me. The last thing I want… is for you to be lying in this exact same spot, regretting the same mistakes I’ve made. I can’t change the past… but you have a chance to shape the future. I can impart… the information to you, but you must promise me… you’ll not act out of aggression or vengeance… you’ll only do what’s best for the empire… what’s best for our people.”

Prince Maxus knelt down, bringing his silver eyes closer to Juhi’s. “I give you my word,” he whispered. “Tell me, please…”

With his last ounce of strength, Juhi leaned over. “The Obelisk… The power that holds this empire… contains power untapped… you can unlock it… wield it… change everything…”

“How, Father?” Maxus asked.

Juhi drew breath. “There is… a human. They possess… in their soul… a power… Determination…”

Maxus clenched his eyes shut. “Which human…?”

Juhi rasped one final breath, then whispered one final word. A name. Maxus heard it, spelled it out, savoured the sound, imagined the face attached to it, then branded it into his memory. For as long as he lived, whether it be a hundred years or a thousand, that name shall never fade.

He held on to his father’s hand. He held on for as long as he could, not wanting to let go. Emperor Juhi crumpled back onto his pillow, exhaling slowly. Juhi’s cold fingers loosened around his son’s
hand, then crumbled. Maxus clenched his teeth tight as the dust seeped through his fingers. His grip so tight that the nails dug into his palms, drawing blood. He dared not open his eyes, not yet, knowing full well what awaited him.

No. No need to hide from the truth. The time was now. Maxus rose to his feet, then let his eyelids open. On the bed lay the dusty remains of what used to be Emperor Juhi. Just like that, his father was gone. The monster that had raised him from birth, taught him how to live, loved him through all of his faults, had returned to dust. Just like that, Maxus was alone.

Maxus looked at his open hand. The palm was grey with his father’s remains and dotted red with traces of his own blood. “Ashes to ashes, dust to dust,” he whispered. He wanted to cry, but no tears came. He had never cried a single time in his life, not even at the lowest moments. He looked back at the bed and felt his hand tighten back into a fist. This was a time for remorse, but all he felt was simmering rage. “Goodbye, Father.”

From behind, he could hear the tapping soles and clanking plates of the two guards assigned over the master bedroom. Head to toe in shiny, silver armour, and sporting spears that rivalled their burly size, only the best of the best could be deemed worthy of being part of the Monster Military. The two guards witnessed their fearless leader leave this world, and now stood before his only son. They both dropped down on one knee and lowered their heads. “What is your bidding, Lord Maxus?” one of them spoke with utmost respect.

Former Prince Maxus – Emperor Maxus slowly turned around, his silver eyes drift over his father’s armour, upright in a glass cabinet. A royal, decorative suit constructed from plates of thick metal, complete with a flowing red cape, attached to spike-adorned spaulders and connected with a gold chain. He saw his reflection in the glass, it was a perfect fit.

Maxus completed his turn until he faced his loyal sentinels. “As my first order of command as emperor, you are to bring me… a human, the one my father spoke of before he died.”

The guards’ heads jerked up in shock. “A… a human, my lord?” the other guard managed to choke out, staring at his rulers boots. “But… no human has ever set foot on… They can’t know about… We could be powerless to—”

“Don’t misunderstand me, I know the risks. Every precaution will be taken.” Maxus sounded like the father he knew from countless generations ago. “But this human holds the key to our salvation, and it is imperative that it be brought before me, at once.”

The same guard swallowed hard. His head lowered back down. “We… we shall do as you ask, my lord.”

“Good. The human is called… Frisk.” Already, the name brought disgust to his stomach. The young emperor pointed at them with his dusty hand. “Find this creature and bring it to me.” With an affirmative nod, his units rose. They were about to leave, prepared to follow their orders when Emperor Maxus barged past them. “Inform command that I am not to be disturbed. I must speak with the Royal Advisor…”
Wow. Frisk just had the strangest dream.

Early morning rays shone through the window, bathing Frisk’s bedroom with golden light, bringing about some kind of photosynthetic rejuvenation to the human child. The birds outside chirped their morning melodies, the prefect alarm on a day like today. Frisk sat up in bed, rubbing the haze from their dark eyes and stretching their stiff muscles. Frisk threw the bedsheet off, but when they went to climb off the mattress, they stopped.

Lying in the middle of the room, on a clean, white plate, was a slice of Toriel’s famous butterscotch cinnamon pie – second only to snail, an acquired taste for the non-goat, non-monster species. With a smile, Frisk hopped off the mattress. Bare feet sank into the soft carpet as they walked over, grabbed the plate, and then brought it back to the bed. Frisk savoured every bite of the pie. The sweet, moist butterscotch complemented the warm, cinnamon spice, all wrapped in a crumbly base. Today was going to be a good day, they were sure of it.

As they ate, Frisk contemplated the dream they had just had. They saw… They do not know what they saw. An old monster, crumbling to dust. A giant lion, fuelled by rage. A name being called. Theirs. That was it, and that short list was getting shorter as their brain was purging it from the memory banks. Before they knew it, Frisk was done, nothing but measly crumbs on the plate. Not even rats would find the amount of leftovers fulfilling.

With the plate in hand, Frisk walked across the bedroom, through the door and into the hall. The cream carpet was new and lush. The yellow paint, fresh and easy on the eyes. It was both amazing and pleasantly surprising just how accommodating the humans were to creatures whom they had never seen in centuries. At that moment, however, the walls were bare, in desperate need of some history; hanging frames and knick-knacks, perhaps a potted plant or two. The Dreemurr family had yet to take snapshots and vacation picks together, but they were being planned.

Frisk turned the corner into the kitchen. The first thing anyone would notice was its spaciousness, then everything else. The spotless white and black tiled flooring. The perfectly sturdy appliances, all modern and new. Granite kitchen countertops. An oak dining table, complete with four chairs, centred in the centre; Toriel occupied one of the chairs, switching between today’s newspaper and a stack of homework. At least it was a step up from reading about snails.

Toriel noticed her adopted child as they strolled in. A warm smile appeared. “Good morning, Frisk,” she greeted, peering over a pair of reading glasses. “Did you sleep well, my child?”

Frisk answered that they had a great night’s sleep, and thanked Toriel for the tasty treat. The human child did not bother to mention the dream, it was neither a nightmare nor a vision – nothing to worry about. They placed the empty plate in the sink.

At the end of the kitchen was a patio door; immaculate windows showed the back garden. While it was not massive by any means, it was more than enough for their expert gardener to work with, turning a rectangle of grass into a garden fit for a king, full of flowers under every colour of the rainbow.

“You are welcome. Nothing but the best for our little ambassador.” Toriel turned back to the paper. She tapped a ball-point pen against the daily crossword, pondering about how Sans would love it and how Papyrus would hate it. “Do not forget, today is the day we are meeting up with the others for a picnic.”
How could Frisk forget? Answer: they could not. They all had planned this some weeks back. Frisk, Toriel, Asgore, Papyrus, Sans, Undyne and Alphys all together to enjoy some quality time in their newly founded freedom. Just like in the Underground, they lived fairly close together, no more than a half-hour walk away from each other. On the surface’s most popular social-media site, Alphys made nonstop updates to her status and had 896 friends, whilst anything Papyrus put up was instantly bombarded by comments from his brother.

Frisk helped themselves to a small bowl of cereal, something light to leave space for the feast. Or maybe Frisk should not? Some of their pals would not be considered the best cooks on the planet. Papyrus might have experimented with spaghetti and a deep-fryer. Undyne might have burned down a second or third house. No, Frisk thought, their friends had come through many times, and the child trusted that they would do so again. They ate their minimal breakfast, and when they were finished, they headed out of the kitchen.

“Be ready for ten o’clock,” Toriel called out to Frisk, “We need to be there in good time.” She then placed the paper down and picked up the next sheet on the homework pile. “Well, well, it appears that Monster Kid has certainly improved on their handwriting.” She stared off into space. “And how…?”

Frisk walked further into the house, into the living room. The floor was dark walnut wood and the walls were burnt umber. Two armchairs and a couch surrounded a coffee table and faced a flat screen television, which currently showed an advert for the relocated Grillby’s Restaurant. The side wall had two fitted bookshelves, filled with the tomes from Toriel’s old home in the ruins.

There, slumped on the couch, was Asgore; he looked so much different without his kingly attire. At first, Toriel despised the idea of sharing a house with her ex-husband, but after some tough convincing by Frisk, Toriel reluctantly agreed, but only on three conditions.

First condition: that Asgore acted as a father figure to Frisk.

The second condition: that he kept his and her relationship strictly mutual. They were roommates – not lovers or soulmates or boyfriend and girlfriend. Just roommates. End of story.

The third and perhaps most important condition: that he refrained from calling her ‘Tori’.

So far, Asgore had succeeded in maintaining two out of three of those terms. Ultimately, the idea for all three of them to live under the same roof was Frisk’s. When Toriel and Asgore asked them why, Frisk answered that it would give them time to mend their relationship, and be more cost effective financially until they can properly get to their feet.

However, deep down, Frisk knew the real answer…

“By the way… Frisk. Take care of Mom and Dad for me, OK?”

“Howdy, Frisk,” Asgore said, taking his eyes off the flat screen. “You’re just in time to catch the network premier.” He patted the space on the couch beside him, cratering a soft groove in the padding. “Take a seat for a bit.”

Frisk hopped on just as the last commercial ended and the overexcited voice of a television presenter spoke over a red curtain. There was a drumroll in the background. “And now, ladies and gentlemen, for your viewing pleasure, we give you…” The curtain was pulled away, revealing the jazzy title, complete with star-spangled background and sketchy underline. “Saturday Morning Breakfast with a Killer Robot! And here’s your host, Mettaton!”
The applause signs lit up and the audience erupted into wild clapping as the killer robot – who had never actually killed anyone – stepped on pink high heels into the spotlight. Mettaton waved to his adoring fans, smiling as he brushed back a strand of his luxurious black hair. He strutted across the stage to a vacant armchair, stopping to pose several times, and lowered himself down onto it, crossing one leg over the other. His beloved cousin, Napstablook, provided musical accompaniment with their trusty record turntables in the background.

“Thank you, beautiful people,” Mettaton called out to his loving fans, his robotic voice drowned out by their clapping and whistling. “Thank you all!”

The music stopped and the applause died down. The camera panned over to the spooky disc jockey with the headphones. “…Oh…sorry… was I too overzealous…?” Napstablook whispered as a tear rolled out of their eye. The crowd laughed. Apparently, there was nothing funnier than a ghost with low self-esteem.

“That’s our Blooky,” Mettaton quipped. He turned back to the camera and to the audience that he was so eager to address. “Good morning, darlings and beauties and all six elaborate words in-between! Welcome to today’s fabulously fabulous show! We’ve got such a fantastic roundup of guests appearing today, including…”

The camera zoomed in to the television screen between Mettaton’s seat and the couch where the supposed guests would sit. The first guest appeared… only there was no one there, just a red background.

“Our first guest today,” the announcer went on, “is none other than the musical prodigy herself – Shyren! Give her a big hand, ladies and gentlemen!”

From the corner of the screen, the anxious features of the long-haired fish monster peaked into view, treating the camera as her worst nightmare. She flinched at the sound of clapping hands.

“Now, now, don’t be shy Shyren,” the announcer encouraged. The audience giggle. “Let’s see that lovely face of yours.”

With a half-hearted smile, Shyren edged further into view, her body a few inches behind. She opened her mouth and out escaped a hum. The deadly note flew towards the camera, smashing the lens into pieces. A few moments of static obstructed the show as satellite communications were cut.

During the din of white noise, Asgore reached over for the warm cup of golden flower tea on the coffee table and took a generous gulp.

The broadcast was re-established. The announcer murmured, briefly muttering something to the crew before returning to the microphone. He coughed, then said, “Sorry about that, folks. Our second guest of the day: famed street-magician Madjick will demonstrate some of his amazing tricks for us!”

The wizard who can only speak magic words floated before the camera, smiling, the orbs by his sides staring back. A card floated before him, an eight of diamonds. The card flipped, splitting into two cards, both of them four of diamonds. With another flip, the two cards split into four, twos of diamonds. The crowd gasped in awe.

“Sorry and bless you,” Madjick said mysteriously.

The third guest appeared, it was Burgerpants. He looked as haggard as ever, still dressed in his fast food uniform and taking deep drags from a nearly expunged cigarette. The announcer spoke. “And then, we’ll be bringing you some exclusive one-on-one work evaluation time between this guy and
his boss, live on daytime television!”

Burgerpants grumbled as he extinguished his smoke in an ashtray to his immediate right, which was already drowning with ash and cigarette butts. “Sometimes, I swear he just makes up parts of my contract,” he muttered to no one in particular and then sighed, steaking his paw down his face. “I gotta get a lawyer…”

The fourth guest was actually two guests: Bratty and Catty, the blonde-haired alligator and black-haired cat, side by side as usual. “Then, we’ll be having a special interview with Bratty!” The announcer’s voice then dropped an octave and rapidly shot out: “But not Catty.”

“Woooo!” Bratty hollered, raising her hands into the air. “We’re on teevee, Catty!”

“Yeah, Bratty,” Catty cheered, “we’re on—” She suddenly stopped, her cat eyes widened. “Wait, what?”

The camera switched and the fifth and final guest appeared. It was Burgerpants again, and he was pulling another cigarette from his pack. “And then it’s back to Burgerpants as Mettaton himself will finish off with live performances from his latest album: Ode to the Failings of my Dear, Dear Failure of an Employee: The Greatest Hits. Available now in store or on download.”

Burgerpants realised the camera was back on him before the flames of his lighter could reach the white stick. His jaw dropped, the unlit smoke dropped from his lips. “W-w-what?” he exclaimed, “why are you coming back to—”

Burgerpants got cut off as the cameras focused back to the star of the show, now lying seductively on a piano being played by Napstablook. “Don’t go anywhere, darlings,” Mettaton said in a playful tone. “All this and much, much more will be coming up after a word from our sponsors!”

The commercials started, reminding the viewers that Saturday Morning Breakfast with a Killer Robot was sponsored by new and improved Temmie Flakes Cereal. It was the exact same cereal, the only thing ‘new and improved’ was written on the box.

Frisk had seen enough. Sorry, Mettaton, but as much as Frisk liked him, and as riveting as his show seemed, the human was going to disobey and go anywhere. They jumped off the sofa and walked out of the room, reminding Asgore that they needed to be ready for ten.

“Yep, I know,” Asgore said before poking a white-furred finger into his chest. “Who do you think Toriel’s got carrying all the picnic supplies?”

Frisk walked to the bathroom where they got showered and brushed their teeth. In their striped bathrobe, Frisk opened the wardrobe in their bedroom and browsed the selection of clothes available. T-shirts and jumpers; jeans and shorts; sneakers, boots, and sandals paired at the bottom. Frisk sifted through the hangers and pulled out their purple and blue stripped shirt and blue shorts, clean, fresh and ironed since the expedition through the Underground. Some of those stains: dirt, water, juice, tea, ice cream, and flecks of deep red (from when Undyne punched the tomatoes) were deemed by many as unmoveable, but Toriel proved them wrong.

Frisk felt good to be back in their favourite clothes, especially when they smelled white lily fresh. They completed the look with the same pair of brown boots. Frisk inspected themselves in the tall mirror on the inside of the wardrobe door, looking a spitting image of how they looked before tumbling down Mount Ebott.

Frisk looked at the clock on the bedside table. 9:54. Almost time to go. Frisk headed to the hallway
and found Toriel waiting by the door.

“Hurry up, Asgore,” she called out, “we do not wish to be late.”

Asgore stumbled into view, carrying a hefty cooler in one arm and a couple of rolled blankets under the other. “Why do I have to carry all this?” he asked.

Toriel frowned. “Because you are tall, portly, and pitiful.”

The former king paused, realising that he could not necessarily argue with that. “Fair enough, but you could at least cut me some slack, Tori.”

The former queen shot Asgore a hard glare. “What was that?”

“—El.” Asgore shot out. “I meant Toriel. You could cut me some slack… Toriel.”

“I will cut you some slack only when you have earned it, Dreemurr.” Toriel’s phone beeped. She pulled it from her pocket and inspected the screen. A smile appeared. “Oh, I have just received a text from Sans. He says that both he and his brother are on their way, and that the reason why the skeleton did not cross the road was because it did not have the guts.” She laughed as if she had just heard the funniest joke in the world. “Are you ready to go, Frisk?”

The human child nodded and the family exited their house, stepping from the front door into the open of their quiet, rural town. Up and down the road, houses less than a couple of years old and nature all around them. It was surreal to both Asgore and Toriel, to exit their home and find a sky above their heads instead of another ceiling. On their driveway was a red SUV, a large vehicle to support a family as needy of theirs.

The neighbour on their right, a middle-aged gentleman watering his flowers, noticed them. “Oh, um… hello neighbours,” he said with a hint of uneasiness. “Lovely day for a picnic?”

“It sure is, Robert,” Asgore answered as he opened the trunk and loaded in the supplies. “We are meeting our friends for a relaxing day out.”

“More monsters? That’s good to hear,” Robert said, the apprehension in his voice lifting by a shade. “Say, listen, they reckon we’ve got this weather for the next couple of weeks or so. I’m thinking of having a barbeque next weekend, if you’re interested?”

Toriel opened the front passenger door. “That sounds wonderful. We would love to attend.”

“Great, great. Well… I’ll let you get away. Have fun with your, uh, friends.” Robert walked across the garden back to the safety of his home, his watering can still half-full.

At first, the neighbourhood did not know what to think of monsters moving in, unsure of whether to be afraid or thrilled or mystified. After the initial greetings and a few run-ins, the people had started to warm up to the goat monsters, taking a few queues from their adopted human child and how comfortable they were around their new parents. In a strange way, the neighbours saw themselves as pioneers, the first humans making peaceful relations with monsters after many, many years. Now, whether the district where Sans and Papyrus lived or the seaside street where Alphys and Undyne resided thought the same was up to speculation.

With Asgore behind the wheel, Toriel in the front seat and Frisk in the back, the red SUV reversed off the drive and took off down the road. The ride was smooth and peaceful, very few cars on the road. Rhythmic tunes rang from the radio. Asgore hummed along and tapped his hands on the steering wheel, but could not coax his ex-wife to join in. Toriel stared out the window, refusing to
acknowledge the burly monster beside her. Two more times, her phone pinged with more skeleton
puns.

The minutes passed, Frisk remained silent in the back, watching as the world passed from behind the
glass. The surface was something that Frisk had spent the entirety of their short life taking for
granted, not knowing just how well they, as a human, had had it until it was taken away from them.

The destination for their picnic revealed itself when the trees parted and the imposing silhouette of
Mount Ebott came into view.
Mount Ebott shone like a giant emerald in the clear, blue sky. On the surface it looked peaceful, serene, but deep down there was both plenty of history and plenty of pain. It was a mountain, yet it was also the portal to another world. For years, people have looked up to the stars and wondered if they were alone in the universe. Turned out, they were all looking in the wrong direction.

Frisk still remembered when they and their friends escaped the Underground, when all of them looked out on the day the barrier was broken and witnessed the sun for the first time, setting upon the horizon.

Asgore turned off the main road, up a side lane that twisted up the slight incline of the mountain’s foot. The road ended at a small car park. Aside from two cars, the lot was deserted. The red SUV pulled up to an empty space and stopped.

On foot, they followed the worn path up through trees of healthy brown bark and soft, green grass. The two goat monsters still could not believe that this was real, that this was their life. No more imprisonment. Frisk and Toriel strolled together, holding hands. Asgore trailed behind, transporting the precious cargo.

Close to the Underground entrance was a picnic area – a flat section of land overlooking the horizon and laid out with wooden picnic tables. It was there where the first of the surface dwellers were forever scarred by the sudden appearance of an overenthusiastically friendly skeleton in a fancy-dress costume, loudly proclaiming that they were the mascot of the newly appointed ambassador.

“Well, here we are,” Asgore said as they reached the spot, finding it empty. Asgore picked the cleanest table and set the load down on it. “I hope the others remembered.”

Toriel reached into her pocket, pulled out her phone, and checked the time displayed on the screen. “We are here early. They will make it.”

A short while later, at precisely half past ten, a tall skeleton bolted into the clearing, carrying a basket under his forearm. His red scarf ruffled in the warm, gentle breeze. “Nyeh heh heh,” Papyrus cackled like a Saturday morning cartoon villain. “Your majesty, your majesty’s clone, and the human. You’re here.”

Sans slinked out from behind one of the trees at the threshold, also carrying a basket. “What’s up, guys?” Like his brother, his wardrobe had not changed either, from his hoodie down to his slippers.

“I am glad that you were able to make it,” Toriel replied. A smile grew on her face. “Especially you, Sans.”

“Hey, Tori, I couldn’t not show up and leave you all high and dry.” Sans winked his eye socket. “Bone-dry, that is.”

Ba-dum pish!

“No!” Papyrus screamed over Sans’s and Toriel’s laughter. “Your insistent puns are the bane of my existence!”

Sans stopped laughing and asked, “And you’re smiling because…?”

“Self-assurance,” the Royal Guard hopeful answered, regaining his composure, “knowing that I am
“half the dork you are… or at the very least, a third… or maybe two-fifths even.”

“Whatsoever you say, Papyrus.” Sans turned back to Toriel. “Are Alphys and Undyne not here yet?”

“Not yet, let us hope they will be here soon,” Toriel answered.

They were there sooner that they thought. The other friends to the group – Undyne and Alphys – strolled side-by-side into the picnic area. Undyne was dressed in jean shorts, a tank top that showed her slender midriff, and her stomping, red boots. She may never get used to walking in anything else besides those. Alphys wore a wide-brimmed straw hat wrapped with a pink ribbon, and a white summer dress. Undyne carried a white and blue food cooler that – knowing her hatred of cold foods – would have been rigged by Alphys to keep food hot. Alphys carried a couple of plastic bags filled with paper packets.

“Hey, guys,” Undyne greeted.

Alphys pulled her hat up to get a better look at everyone. “Great to see you all again.”

The crew were reunited, altogether once again. Frisk felt happy to be surrounded by friends once more, even though most of them had tried to kill them in the past. They could still feel the heat of Toriel’s fire magic. The gravity of Papyrus’s fabled blue attack. A thousand spears coming down like rain. Asgore, destroying any option of mercy. Alphys indirectly with both her killer entertainment robot and the experiments in her lab… and a certain flower. The only one who had not actively tried to construct Frisk’s demise was Sans.

Everyone set their baskets, coolers, and bags down around the red and white blanket-laden table.

“Okay, everyone, let us see what we have,” Toriel said. She opened her food cooler. On the very top lay paper plates, plastic utensils, cups and napkins, which were all distributed amongst them. Three bottles of fizzy drink and a thermos filled with tea were placed evenly between them. “I hope you are all hungry, because I have brought…” She reached into the container and pulled out— “Lasagne. Penne in tomato and onion sauce. Beef and cheddar sandwiches. Homemade potato salad. Chocolate chip cupcakes. Sliced fruit shish kabobs…” She stopped as she noticed the blanks stares from the others. Toriel narrowed her gaze on them. “I can make other things besides pie, you know.”

Asgore held up his hands defensively. “We weren’t going to say anything.” Something short of a chuckle threatened to escape from his mouth.

“You were about to.”

“We weren’t going to say anything. It’s just… you have baked so many pies that it’s odd to see you making anything else, that’s all.”

Sweat broke on Toriel’s forehead. “Serves me right for trying something new. I should just stick to pies in the future,” Toriel muttered to herself. “Well then, who wants to be next to show what they have brought?”

Papyrus hopped up and down in his seat. “Ooh, ooh! Let me, let me,” he announced like a giddy child. He placed his gloved hands into the basket and pulled out a silver platter. He pulled the lid off that platter to reveal an identical platter underneath. “You’ll never guess what I’ve brought.”

“Gee, whatever could it be,” Undyne said sarcastically, tapping a finger against her cheek. “I don’t suppose it begins with an ‘S’ and ends with an ‘I’, does it?”

Papyrus laughed in his signature fashion. “Don’t be ridiculous. What do you take me for?” He
whipped the lid off the second platter and revealed a mountain of pasta swimming in tomato sauce.
“Behold, spaghett-Es: trademark!”

“Spaghett…Es?” Toriel reiterated, unsure of herself. “…Trademark?”

Everyone got a closer look at the bowl of pasta, Alphys adjusted her glasses. It looked like regular alphabet spaghetti, but upon closer inspection, only the letter ‘E’ comprised all the pieces.

“I, the great Papyrus, painstakingly collected these letters from a grand total of eighty-nine cans of alphabet spaghetti to construct the wonderment that you see before you,” he said loud and proud, setting the plate down on the table.

“Eighty-nine cans? Just to make that?” Toriel’s eyes were riveted to the platter, unsure of whether to be impressed or mortified. “That sounds like a big waste…”

Sans leaned over and whispered from out the side of his grinning mouth, “If you think it sounds bad, wait until you see it.”

“Nonsense,” Papyrus continued. “I have used the remaining letters to write a strongly worded letter to the company that sold me that uselessly low sink. Give me some credit, do you know how hard it is to write without using the letter ‘E’? I just replaced them with the threes from all those cans of numbered spaghetti—”

“Let us move on!” Toriel said quickly before Papyrus’s story could dig any deeper than it already had. “So, Sans,” she said, facing the shorter skeleton, “what did you bring to this picnic?”

Sans opened his basket. “Just the usual.” One-by-one, he pulled them out. “Ketchup; relish; mayonnaise; barbeque sauce; mustard; tartar sauce—” Sans was stopped by Frisk, who asked if he had brought any actual food besides condiments… or anything not for himself for that matter. “Oh, is that what we were supposed to be doing? I must’ve missed that part.”

Toriel closed her eyes, shook her head and sighed, then moved on to the next. “Undyne?”

“Well, recently, I’ve grown kinda bored of cooking pasta all the time. That’s why I’ve decided to try something different for a change.” Undyne removed the top of her uncool picnic cooler, grey smoke billowed out. “I tried to cook something easy, like some frozen pizzas.” She pulled out the result: five charred pizza boxes, still smouldering and molten around the pizza inside each one. “I swear I followed the instructions to the letter.”

Undyne had indeed followed the instructions on the boxes, but had missed the part on all of them that read: remove all packaging.

Dr Alphys spoke up. “Don’t sweat it, Undyne. At least you didn’t burn the house down…” She paused for so long that it became awkward. “…a-again.”

“Alphys, please tell us you brought something at least edible,” Toriel said.

The former royal scientist cleared her throat. “O-okay, so you know that I’m not the greatest… I mean, I’m not exactly master chef here. I didn’t think instant noodles and hot pockets would be fitting…”

“Don’t be so modest,” Asgore added. “I think by now, we will take anything at this point.”

Alphys perked up with a light chuckle. “That’s so nice of you to say, your majesty – I mean, Asgore.” After all, Asgore was no longer Alphys’s king and Alphys was no longer Asgore’s royal
scientist. “But I must insist, I could do better than that, but I don’t have the cooking skills.” She opened her plastic bag and pulled out several paper packets. “So… I swung around Muffet’s bakery and picked up some… er… treats?”


Alphys continued, “I’ve heard that Muffet’s baked goods are pretty tasty, it’s just… I’ve never tried it before.”

“Me neither,” added Undyne.

“Same.” Sans raised a bony hand.

“I know I have not,” Toriel said. “Then who amongst us has tried Muffet’s spider pastries?”

The table became eerily quiet. Then, slowly, all eyes were drawn to the only human present. Frisk could only stare back in solid silence at the whites in Sans’s eye sockets, Asgore’s soft pupils, and Undyne’s remaining, yellow eye. It became painfully obvious who they had selected to act as their human guinea pig.

Frisk turned from their eyes to the open bags of arachnid-based treats, amazed that the words ‘arachnid’ and ‘treats’ were just used in the same sentence. They reached out, selected a roll from the assortment and then let it hover, contemplating whether to go through with it again or not. Frisk exhaled slowly, inhaled sharp, then took a bite out of the roll. After only a few chews, their face lit up. Despite the initial disturbing image, it was not bad at all.

With everything all set out, the feast began. Asgore overloaded his paper plate with a little bit of everything. Everyone gave the spider treats a shot, and they found them to be rather tasty. Papyrus’s trademark spaghetti-Es even got some takers. Sans more so kept to his supply of bottles and jars, all while texting messages to Toriel from under the table; a never-ending volley of skeleton-related puns, back and forth like a tennis match. Papyrus would comment, but he was glad that he did not have to listen to the horrible jokes for once. Alphys pulled out her phone, took a selfie of all of them and immediately updated her status: Picnic with the friends. She then took of selfie of herself and Undyne and did the same thing: Dinner with the girlfriend (for real this time).

“So, Undyne,” Asgore spoke after swallowing some lasagne, “you still been keeping active these days?”

Undyne mumbled with a mouth full, “You bet I am!”

“Now more than ever,” Alphys said. “There’s so many more activities on the surface than in the Underground, and she’s doing them all.” She began to count with her fingers. “Jogging, swimming, weightlifting, soccer, tennis, skiing, football, basketball, ice hockey, the list goes on and she’s awesome at all of them.”

Undyne let out a great, big smile. “Uh, yeah! Totally!” A bead of sweat formed on her head. Her smile faded. “No… I’m not good at all of them. I have been struggling a bit with… cycling.”

“Cycling?” Asgore repeated. He took the stainless steel flask and poured himself some more tea. “Oh, of course, you’ve never rode a bike in your life. I bet that must be a new experience for you.”

“It’s been… something. That’s for sure.”

Alphys spoke. “Yeah. I’ve even been helping her learn. Undyne’s still a bit shaky, but she’s
“definitely improving. We bought this cute, little pink bicycle—”

“Alphys…?” Undyne glanced at her.

“—it has a pair of stabilisers—”

“Alphys…”

“—and these adorable tassels on the handlebars—”

“Alphys.”

“—we go to the park and I guide Undyne up and down the field while she’s wearing her pony helmet and matching elbow pads—”

“Alphys!”

“—and she’s practicing among all these kids and their parents are taking photos of them laughing at Undyne—”

“ALPHYS!”

Alphys stopped talking. She turned to Undyne and noticed her narrow pupil, show of shark-like teeth, the sweat glistening off her forehead, and the veins pulsating on her neck. Seeing Undyne sweat made her sweat. “Something tells me I’ve said too much…”

“You think?” Undyne hissed through closed, yellow choppers.

It was too late to tell everybody not to think about it, because the scene was set, and they were thinking about it. Undyne – the former leader of the now disbanded Royal Guard – wearing a pony helmet and pony elbow pads, riding on a pink bike with training wheels and tassels, riding among children and having her picture taken by the dozens of parents present.

Frisk said that it sounded like the most adorable thing they have ever heard.

A tear threatened to escape from Papyrus’s empty eyes. “The cuteness in overloading my brain. And yes, skeletons have brains.”

Asgore murmured. “That’s nice, Undyne. Keep it up and you’ll be cycling the tours in no time.” His eyes switched to his former royal scientist. “Alphys, what have you been doing these past few weeks?”

“Not too much,” Alphys said. “The new house Undyne and I moved into has a basement. I’ve been using that as a new lab to work on some new experiments.”

Frisk looked at Alphys suddenly, startled by the thought of experiments in an underground laboratory.

Alphys quickly shook her head. “No, no, no. No more living experiments. Trust me, after what happened last time, I am done with testing on living things. Period. In my free time, I’ve been working on some plans that I’ve been itching to try; electronics, gizmos, that sort of stuff.”

After the banquet was done and there was nothing left – nothing edible left anyway – they realised that there was nothing for dessert. As if an alarm has been signalled, the Nice Cream Guy rolled up to the picnic spot with his warming smile and his frosty stall. The sun was bright and the breeze was warm, perfect for a chilly treat. The used wrappers held words of encouragement: ‘Here’s looking at
you, Kid,’ and ‘your human hair looks especially lovely today,’ and ‘the world is a wonderful place with you in it,’ and an overly elaborate sketch of a thumbs up.

“So, Papyrus, how have things been on your end?” Toriel asked, tapping the empty lolly stick on the table.

“You mean besides me not getting into the Royal Guard? Quite swimmingly, in fact. I’m on my way to setting a new world record, most number of times driven around a city. And Sans here has taken several part-time jobs.”

“Working hard as always, eh, Sans?” said Undyne.

Sans shrugged. “Somebody’s gotta pay the bills.”

“He’s been spotted napping at every single one,” Papyrus said. “At the same time, I may add.”

While they conversed, the dog families and the amalgamate that brought them together strolled past, having come from the Underground. Endogeny had a few suitcases stuck in their gelatinous frame. Despite freedom being mere footsteps away, there were some inhabitants of the Underground who chose not to leave. They had comfy homes and families there, and found the thought of moving daunting. They knew that they could leave whenever they wanted; some of them had jobs on the surface, and some of them left to go on holiday, like the dogs were right there. The dog family were on their way to Spain, somewhere nice of hot, and somewhere they can escape from the constant cold of Snowdin.

While many monsters had left the Underground, there were talks among the humans of those wanting to enter. Organisations were already considering establishing routine tours through the Underground, and some even turning the place into a vacation resort itself. Why travel halfway across the world when you can experience such amazing wonders right on your doorstep? Archaeology in the ruins. Skiing down the slopes of Snowdinn. Swamp life and underwater adventures in Waterfall. Hot tubs and saunas in Hotland. Already, people had reviewed that the underground has great sights, great culture, and great people, making it a prime spot for future tourism.

It could not have been more perfect, thought Frisk. There was peace once more. No hate. No discrimination. Endless opportunities on the horizon. A future for the monsters. Everyone was happy. Everyone was free.

Everyone, except one…

Sans raced across the clearing and tossed the Frisbee that was in his hands. The disc span through the air, towards Frisk. Frisk raced across the field, jumped as high as they could and snatched the Flying disc from the air, landing with a roll. Frisk got up, a smile plastered on their face and strands of grass stuck in their hair and clothes.

Frisk eyed Sans from many meters away. The laid-back skeleton stood there, waiting. His bony hands stuffed in the pockets of his hoodie. Frisk pulled back the disc and flung it, cutting a path toward Sans. Sans did not move a muscle, mainly because he had no muscles to move. He watched in smiling silent as the disc span over and across to his right. A single bone materialised from thin air. The joint snagged the disc by the brim, catching it in a spinning fashion.

“What do you think?” Sans remarked, winking. “Elite skills, huh?”
Frisk disagreed. All while retaining their smile, the human wagged their finger and called their opponent a lazy cheater.

“Hey, I resent that,” Sans said. “I ain’t a cheater. I’m lazy, sure, but I ain’t a cheater.”

The Frisbee was snatched off the bone by Undyne. “You two punks are doing it all wrong,” Undyne insisted. “Let me show you how it’s done.”

“Be my guest,” Sans said. “Just don’t break it, it’s the only one we’ve got.”

Undyne traced her thumb around the brim, bringing it close to her side. She felt the direction of the wind and judged its strength. Her target stood a distance away, holding their hands high. Once again, Undyne found herself ready to hurl something at a human. This should be a piece of cake. Frisbees and magical spears worked the same way, right? They are just smaller and less pointy and less deadly. Undyne kicked off her heel, span in the air, and then launched the flying disc.

Frisk barely had time to move, nor did they need to. The Frisbee shot straight over their head, ruffling their already unkempt hair. Frisk span around and caught a glimpse as it flew straight into the horizon. The human child could already hear the printing presses, printing out the headlines of a UFO invasion on tomorrow’s newspapers. First monsters, now aliens.

“Nice throw. I think you may’ve overshot the mark a little.” Sans began to walk toward the trees on the right. “I’ll go get it.”

Frisk watched from in the middle of the empty field as Sans strutted across to the outcrop, as Alphys, Papyrus, Asgore and Toriel laughed around the table.

You…?

Frisk thought that they had heard something. Faint like a whisper and soft like a warm breeze on the back of the neck. Frisk ignored it. Just the wind.

Are… you…?

Frisk heard it again. That was not the wind, more like breath. The human turned around, no-one there except grass and flowers.

Where… are… you…?

Frisk turned all the way around, fully facing the entity, yet still facing nothing but warm, summer air. To the left, the imposing stature of Mount Ebott. To the right, trees. The sounds of laughter became mute under the din of the child’s own breathing.

Frisk… Where… are… you…?

No-one was there, and yet something was, and it was calling their name. Frisk braved a few steps forward. Brown boots crunched on healthy grass. They expected to bump into some kind of invisible figure.

Human. Come to me.

The sound that started as a breeze had grown into a whisper, the hissing of a snake. Frisk stopped and stood their ground. The sun from up high dazzled their eyes, causing an unwanted irritation.

Frisk. Come to me.
“Frisk!”

The sound of a real voice, Undyne’s, had snapped the human out of their trance. Frisk turned around, the sun was in their eyes. Shielding them with the palm of their hand, Frisk saw that everyone was looking at them. Sans emerged from the forest, the exact same Frisbee was in hand. That skeleton and his shortcuts.

“Where are you going?” Undyne called out. “Did you find something?”

Frisk realised something. The sun was in their eyes. But the sun was in their eyes when they were gazing across the empty meadow, now it was in their eyes as they looked back at their friends and family, in the complete opposite direction. Something was not just amiss, something was horribly wrong. Frisk turned back to the field, the dazzle was there. Up. There, in the sky, a spark. A star? In the daytime? It was bright and it was only getting brighter.

_There you are._

Suddenly, a beam of pure white shot down from the star, encompassing the human child. Sans and Undyne reeled back. The others jumped from their seats as the heavens themselves reached down and grabbed their human friend.

The Frisbee fell from Sans’s hands. “What the heck!”

“Oh my goodness,” Toriel cried, “what is happening to Frisk?”

Frisk felt their hold on the Earth dissipate as the ray began to pull them upwards. Frisk span around and dived away, but the beam had locked on tight, catching them before they could even hit the ground. Before the beam could carry them away, Frisk desperately reached out and grabbed two handfuls of grass. The child cried for the others to help as the grass began to snap.

Sans acted quickly. His left eye flared. Channelling his magic, a bone erupted from the earth before Frisk just as the last blade of grass broke. Frisk grabbed it and held on for dear life. “Hold on, little buddy!”

“We gotta save them,” Undyne screamed. She saw that the ground around the bone was breaking. By now, everyone was up and racing, but none of them would make it in time. Instinct took over, Undyne reached out and grabbed Sans, lifting him off the ground. “I won’t overshoot this time!”

Before Sans could protest, Undyne hurled him toward Frisk. Sans flew parallel to the ground before skidding face-first the rest of the way to them. The magical bone broke free in a crumble of dirt and soil, Sans snatched the other end just in time.

“I got’cha!” Sans hollered, staring straight into the child’s horrified face. Sans felt himself being pulled off the ground. “But who’s got me?”

Undyne reached Sans and grabbed hold of his ankles. She was arguably the strongest amongst all of them, yet even she was no match for this phenomenon. Before it threatened to take all three of them away, Papyrus grabbed Undyne by her boots.

“If you let go,” Undyne yelled, glancing down at Papyrus “I will come back from heaven and personally haunt you!”

“Nyeh heh,” Papyrus cackled. “Don’t expect such from the great—” He was pulled from the ground. “—Papyrus!”
Toriel grabbed Papyrus, but was quickly overwhelmed by how strong the energy was. She lost her grip with one of her hands, Asgore immediately grabbed it. The former king of monsters dug his large frame into the ground, acting as an immovable anchor.

Frisk held on to the bone. Sans held on to the bone that was being held on to by Frisk. Undyne held on to Sans. Papyrus held on to Undyne. Toriel held on to Papyrus. Asgore held on to Toriel. Alphys stood back, unsure as what to do.

“Uh oh,” Sans shouted. The sweat brimmed on his cranium. “I’m slipping!”

Now it was Alphys’s turn. At a speed that astounded everyone, herself included, she climbed her way to the top, passing everyone along the way. She reached Sans just in time as his grip on the bone slipped away. Alphys grabbed the end of the bone as Sans clutched her by the tail.

“Frisk,” Alphys screamed, “I’m not letting go! Do you hear me? I’m not letting go!”

Frisk wanted to believe that that was true, but the real truth revealed itself. Alphys’s claws were slipping on the joint.

Dr Alphys dared to take one hand away and reached toward the human child. “Grab hold of my hand!”

Frisk could feel their own failing grip. How they had managed to cling on was a miracle. Frisk pulled one hand away and reached for the claw. They pulled hard, inching closer and closer to the outstretched monster limb. Frisk’s finger tips brushed against Alphys’s.

Then the bone escaped from Alphys’s grasp.

Frisk rocketed into the sky, being carried away by a pillar of sunlight. The monster buddies recoiled back, landing in a muddled line on the plains of green. They shot their gazes upward and cried their name as they ascended further into the sky, apparently being whisked away to heaven.

Frisk could do nothing but watch as the distance between themselves and solid ground grew larger and larger. The child passed Mount Ebott’s peak and kept going. They could see both their house and the ocean’s horizon and yet they kept going. They passed the feral clouds and yet still they rose in the channel of light.

The air became thin, the wind as cold as the Antarctic. Frisk struggled to breathe. Their skin became riddled with goose bumps. They could literally feel their own body dying.

Suddenly, a wave of light brushed over Frisk. They breathed deep, their lungs filled with oxygen. The freezing wind turned warm. Frisk opened their eyes, and that is when they saw it.

Floating islands. Several hovering pieces of land, miles in length and also miles from the Earth. A new world, high in the sky. In the centre stood a gigantic castle, overlooking the separate islands. It was a thing of fairy tales, of fantasy, but there it was, as real as anything.

It was like falling into the Underground all over again. Frisk knew what they were seeing. Another world. Another adventure.

The sight of such a magical kingdom filled them with determination.
Out of this World

A new world, high, high above the clouds, them looking like a world of snow and eternal winter down below. It did not seem possible, yet there it was. Frisk looked down at the lands, feeling as free as the birds.

They could make out the surrounding lands. In the distance, beyond the scope of the castle’s peak, stood a mountain draped in snow, with acers of white trees at its feet like needy children.

To the left, at the western side, was an island that was half beach and half ocean, sand so pale that it appeared like ivory, clashing against water that looked more suited to a bathtub that the open sea. The ocean poured from the corners of the island and constantly evaporated in the open air.

To the east, a desolate island of barren, brown rock, yet from up high, Frisk could make out the roofs and smoking chimneys of houses and homes. It must have been a working town since they could make out the black skeletal structures of some kind of factory, a quarry maybe.

In all, Frisk counted seven islands; the castle island in the centre, surrounded by six others of varying conditions.

Frisk flew over the islands, drawing closer and closer to the grey stone castle. It was a sight to behold. It took up most of the island it occupied, to call it ‘big’ would have been an understatement. To call it such could likely earn someone a swift execution from the owner. Five towers – four on the corners and the tallest off-centre – added to its height. Light flickered from stained-glass windows, making them glow in luxurious colours. The entire castle had a perimeter of high, solid stone walls. It even had its own moat, except it was not a moat, it was a river; except it was not a river, it was a rapid. A castle guarded by high walls and raging river rapids, good luck to any aspiring invaders out there.

As Frisk hovered over the wall, they spotted the guards patrolling it, all armed and dangerously protected in heavy, silver armour. The guards peered up at the human above, then began to whisper amongst themselves. They had probably never seen a human in their lives and had heard terrible things about them. In that case, Frisk would need to make a great first impression.

Frisk began their descent, down toward the slanted roofs – with tiles so deep in red that they looked like they had been paved mere minutes ago, as if to welcome the human’s arrival. There was a flat section that opened up and the human child sloped into it.

The light was taken away as Frisk dropped down a well of black, darkness cutting deep. They floated in a sea of black for what seemed like forever until they felt the soles of their boots make contact with a hard surface, hopefully the ground. The package had landed, it seemed. In the darkness, all the kid had as any kind of security was the magical bone that Sans had materialised back on Earth. The piece of collagen was cold in their hands.

So cold, in fact, that it chilled them down to the bone.

_Ba-dum pish!_

Frisk had made a skeleton pun and a lame one at that, Sans and Toriel would be proud of them. The thought of their friends and family also brought some degree of comfort at a time like this, but also dread. Frisk hoped that they were alright and that they were not panicking in the wake of their unforeseen departure.
Frisk staggered forward in the dark, blind, holding the bone out in front. Its whiteness almost illuminated the way ahead. After a few wary steps, the bone clanked against a solid bar, vibrating a metallic drone through the hollowness. Frisk waved the bone to the right and felt it clatter against four more bars, identical to the first. The human child followed it across for a few steps before they hit a corner. They turned and followed the second wall of bars before hitting another corner. Frisk repeated the process a further two times until they were back to where they started. Metal bars all around. They were in a cage, trapped like an animal.

Suddenly, a door opened from the oblivion. Light poured in from the open passage, casting long shadows from the bars. From the door, a lanky figure was shrouded in shade. Frisk stared on silently as the shadow took their first steps inwards, each one clapping sharply against smooth stone.

“My, oh my, is it dark in here,” the shadow spoke with a shrill voice. He adjusted something in his hands then clapped them twice.

Two sharp claps filled the room with light, revealing everything. Even after spending all that time draped in darkness, the light did not hurt Frisk’s eyes. The first thing they realised was that, on all sides outside the cage, they were surrounded by a line of monsters of all shapes and sizes, male and female. Cats, dogs, bulls, horses, rabbits, fish, tigers, lizards; all outfitted in heavy armour and pointing spears and swords in the human’s direction.

Frisk turned to the stranger who happened to be another monster, this one with the face of a white rat. His eyes were violet, his hair combed to one side, and his whiskers formed a mustachio that looped twice below his chin. His skinny body was clothed in a loose, umber robe, trimmed with black threads. In his thin arms was a clipboard and a nib.

The rat monster’s eyes travelled all around the room, to those surrounding the cage. “Excellent work guarding the subject, men. You’ll all receive commendations for this.” His praise was met with silence as if he were not even present.

Daring to get closer, the white rat leaned down to get a better look at the human. “So, this is what a human looks like up close. How fascinating. I must write this moment down for the records.” He scribbled frantically on the clipboard while whispering to himself, describing Frisk’s appearance, noting the date and time of their arrival, the temperature in the room, the number of guards present, the number of bars comprising the cell, even pointing out the bone that Frisk was holding, which made their grip around it tighten.

“I believe introductions are in order,” the rat said, pulling away from the board. “I am Rickard, master scribe of Castle Highkeep and of the Outerworld Empire.” While Rickard spoke, the presence of a large threat marched down the hall. Every step was an earthquake, getting nearer. “I feel I must apologise for the crude methods in which were used to bring you here, not to mention contain you. Professor Haze’s technology have never displayed the greatest of tact. Nevertheless, on behalf of the citizens of the Outerworld, I would like to welcome you—”

“Make it short, Scribe,” a booming voice echoed from the door. A frame of massive proportions eclipsed the light coming from there.

Scribe Rickard snapped upright. “Without further ado…” He stepped to the side, graciously waving to the brute by the door. “Lord Maxus – Emperor of the Outerworld and successor to the late Emperor Juhi – shall see you now.”

The brute shuffled his way in, all without tearing the doorframe from its rivets. The two silver eyes of the lion monster locked onto Frisk and refused to let go. His golden crown of hair rustled soundlessly as he took short, slow steps, closing in on his prey. A regal, red suit with gold trimmings – with a
black cape, belt, gloves and boots – hugged his body tightly, accentuating his frame of pure muscle. There was not an ounce of fat on him.

The loyal soldiers all dropped down on one knee while keeping the pointy ends on the human. Master Scribe Rickard went even further: he went down on both knees and slammed the palms of his hands and his forehead on the cold floor. Frisk stood their ground, unmoving, watching as the lion emperor approached. They did not run away, nor could they.

The second ruler of monsters Frisk had encountered, they remembered vivid memories of meeting King Asgore Dreemurr for the first time. That greeting and this one formed a deep contrast. All of Frisk’s senses were telling them one thing – from the way Emperor Maxus carried himself, from the way he spoke, and how he stared at them with those shiny eyes – this guy was bad news.

Maxus stopped. He glared at the human as if he had just heard an incredibly sick joke. All Frisk could do from the comfort of their own holding cell was stare back.

“This is Frisk?” Emperor Maxus hissed out. “This child is the creature they call Frisk? This is the thing my father placed in high regard before he died? This thing’s name was the last thing in which he said? Is this some kind of joke?”

Rickard crawled up close to the cage and whispered from out the corner of their mouth, “Excuse me, human. It’s customary to bow before the emperor wh—”

Maxus snapped around. “Be silent, Master Scribe,” he commanded. Rickard instantly shut up and resumed his pose on the floor.

For all this shmuck and Asgore were rulers – or were rulers at some point – that was where the similarities ended. Within the first minute of meeting King Asgore, Frisk could tell that he was no diabolical villain, he was a friendly and caring guy. Emperor Maxus, on the other hand, was none of those things. Perhaps Frisk was judging too quickly? After all, Undyne started out mean, serious and mysterious, but after some digging around, she showed that she had a softer side. Perhaps this grumpy emperor could become their friend?

Maxus turned back to Frisk. His head hot and confused. “Creature, you were brought here because you have something that I want.” He pointed at the human’s chest. “Locked away in that soul. Nothing would give me greater pleasure than tearing it out of you, but…”

If this child was the one his late father spoke of, then he expected something more than that. If this human child held the key to his people’s salvation, then why was he hesitating? Emperor Maxus wanted nothing more than to step inside the cage and take the power of their soul for himself.

“Promise me…” Emperor Juhi whispered in Maxus’s mind. “You’ll not act out of aggression or vengeance… you’ll only do what’s best for the empire… what’s best for our people.”

Maxus looked away, clenching his eyes shut, seeing his father dying in his bed. “I… give you my word, father,” Maxus echoed the promise he made.

Snapping back to reality, he faced the human once more. “Are you truly the thing that they talk about? The thing who escaped the Underground where all others failed?” he questioned. The human child stood there, staring back, clutching the bone in their hands. “Nothing to say?” Further silence followed. “No. You don’t have to say anything. There’s something special about you. I can feel it. Now, the only question is how to proceed…”

Maxus went to walk out, his heavy stride heavier, yet faster. “Scribe Rickard, I am to be given time
to reflect on my options until I can come to a firm conclusion on how to deal with… it.” Maxus glanced back at the human upon saying ‘it’. “And assign the guards to duties elsewhere.”

The scribe shot a look at his ruler. “Assign the guards, my lord? But the human…”

“I will not waste manpower guarding that thing, not when a greater threat could appear at any moment. Issue one guard if it will make you feel better.”

Emperor Maxus heaved himself out the door, the frame survived for another day. Scribe Rickard stood up as did all the others.

Rickard reached under his robe and pulled out a single key on a hoop. “Okay,” he said to the soldiers, “which one of you wants to do the honours?”

One guard spoke from the line. “Get Private Perro to do it.” Followed by a unanimous agreement from the rest.

The guards marched one by one out the door, all except the one who stepped up to the scribe. Private Perro was a hulking, grey and white husky, outfitted in silver armour that made him a bigger presence than he already was, wider than taller.

Scribe Rickard held the key up to meet Perro’s mouth and said, “Open wide.” The Private opened his maw for the hoop to enter. “Now stay here and guard the human. Good boy.”

Now it was the scribe’s turn to leave. Only two people stood in the cell room now: Frisk and Private Perro.

It was almost as if they wanted the human to escape.

Emperor Maxus took a few breaths, choosing his words carefully. “I have encountered the human my father spoke of,” said he.

“And?”

“It is not what I expected.”

“How so?”

“It is a child. A hideous one, but still a child.”

“And you are troubled by this. Why?”

Maxus hesitated. His words formed a dam in his throat. “I promised Dad that I would do only what’s best for my people, but I find myself wondering whether my actions are truly just or if I’m still acting out of hate. I hate humans with every piece of my soul, but is it right to eradicate one child for the sake of thousands?”

“Were there not children on the day of the great war, my lord? Did thousands of them not suffer the same fate as thousands of others, for reasons less justifiable?”

Maxus sighed. “Yes, but this is different.”

“On the contrary, this is more the same than you know.”
“I don’t understand. Explain yourself.”

“One human, child or not, has the strength to wipe out an entire monster kingdom. So you see, that human is as much an army as it is a child, an army that could bring unfathomable destruction to this great empire. Them just being—”

“It,” Maxus interrupted. “That thing is an ‘it’.”

“Then… it… just being here is a threat to us all. My apologies, my lord.”

Emperor Maxus paused, allowing the newly gained knowledge to sink in. Something lingered deep down, something that he did not like.

“Emperor Maxus, now is not the time for hesitation. If this child holds the means in which to free us all from the tyranny of mankind, then there is no easy way around it. Right and wrong have no meaning here, only what must be done for the future of this great empire. You must be as ruthless as those from the war, as those who destroyed families… including your own.”

Maxus remembered those that he had lost, their lives so easily taken, and for no good reason at all.

Maxus nodded his head as he rose slowly. “Yes… Yes, you are correct. I know now what must be done.” He bowed his head down. “Thank you for your guidance, Advisor.”

“It was my pleasure, Emperor.”

All of a sudden, a guard burst in. “My lord, my lord!”

Maxus shot the guard a hard stare with bared teeth. “What is it? I’m not to be disturbed when speaking with the advisor.”

The guard heaved his laboured breath. “My… my deepest apologies, my lord, b-but…” He swallowed hard. The sweat trickled down his armour. “The human has escaped from their cell.”

“…Bone…” Private Perro murmured trancelike. “…Bone… Bone…”

Frisk held the skeleton piece out between the bars, while whistling in a beckoning manner. The husky edged closer with small steps, eyes mesmerised by the bone. Drool dripped from the key’s head. Private Perro came within inches of the bone. His snout flared, savouring the fresh smell and catching some of the human’s as well.

Frisk offered to trade him his key for their bone.

The private snapped back, suddenly looking alert. “Wait, what am I doing? I-I can’t do that… no matter how much I want to.”

Frisk flashed a devious grin. Taking the bone back, they traced it under their nose and took a long, deep sniff, followed by a sigh of satisfaction. The sweat trickling from Perro was so intense that it fazed through his armour. His muscles trembled from his head to his toes. The human kid opened their mouth and hovered the bone between their pearly whites. The tension was more than the husky guard could bear; the bone was so pure and untouched, nobody could have the first bite except him.

Private Perro yanked the dribble-covered key from out his mouth. “Okay, you broke me, you broke me!” He inserted the key into the lock, twisted it and then swung the door open. “Just please, please
Frisk pulled the bone away from their gob and hung it loosely beside them. They span in gently, paying close attention to how fixated the husky was to it, then tossed it into the far corner of the cage. While Perro charged for the bone, Frisk ran out the open door. They crashed the barred door shut and twisted the key, spreading husky dribble onto their hands. Private Perro was oblivious to his imprisonment as he sat in the corner and happily sank his teeth into his prize. While Frisk walked toward the door, they dropped the key and wiped their hands on their shorts.

Poking their shaggy head out, Frisk peeked up and down the hall. Empty. High ceilings and walls decorated with tapestries, coats of arms and suits of armour. All the basics of a medieval castle, apparently. Up and down, a selection of branching hallways and doors to choose from; they stepped carefully to one end and found more hallways and doors, but no windows. There were no candles either, but the place was full of light. Frisk felt as lost as a rat in a maze.

The human child took the route to their right. The idea being that if they travelled in one direction, eventually they would hit something.

On the sixth monotonous chute of stone, they stopped, having seen something different. It was a suit of armour, but it was much, much smaller than the ones they had passed or the ones worn by the Emperor’s loyal sentries. This suit was either built for a dwarf or a youngster, with it being no bigger than three-feet-tall. It was dredged with rust and dust, yet it stood straight and dignified. It came complete with a blue and red, triangular shield and the empty gauntlets were clutched around the hilt of a dull broadsword.

Just then, Frisk heard approaching guards. They needed to hide.

The two guards marched down the hall, the same one that they have walked down countless times. Sometimes, being part of the Monster Military was boring work, but the pay was good and there was always the unexpected factor to take in, like they were soon about to learn.

“Ah, look,” guard number one said, “the Emperor’s practice armour from when he was just a cub.”

The guards stopped and inspected the armour. Two days ago, they were calling it the prince’s armour, now, the emperor’s. They both recalled memories of when they were young, out on the field, watching as the headstrong and hot-headed young Maxus swung, dodged and stabbed in the training circle, giving more hits than he was taking.

“I can still remember when the emperor could fit in this,” guard number two recalled. “It feels like only yesterday. Funny how little he’s changed.”

“You can say that again. I feel sorry for his armour, though. It’s took some serious beating over the years.”

“Don’t feel bad, it’s done what it was meant to do. This armour needed to be tough and durable for someone like him, see?” Metal met metal as guard number two knocked his knuckles against the helmet. The armour rang a hollow thud… then fell to pieces. “I guess they don’t make them like they used to.”

There was a pause.

Guard number one said, “I didn’t see anything if you didn’t.”
“Let’s get out of here!”

They were about to sprint down the hall, but got as far as two steps before stopping again.

“Hey, what’s this?” asked Guard number two.

A metre away from the disassembled suit stood the strangest taxidermy statue they had ever seen. A short, funny-looking thing with scruffy hair and a striped shirt. The stuffed statue stood straight with one arm bent across the belly and the other pointing to the sky. The eyes blankly stared ahead.

“I have no idea.” Guard number one got closer. “I don’t even know where something this ugly could come from?”

“It’s got me beat.” Guard number two prodded it in the cheek then recoiled in disgust at how squidgy it felt. “But it’s so lifelike. It’s freaking me out, man!”

Guard number two picked up the pace. “I’m leaving. I’ve had enough strangeness for one day.”

The first gave chase. “Wait for me!”

When the two clanked out of sight, the statue exhaled. Frisk rubbed their cheek to rid it of the crevice left by that guard’s finger. Thank whatever almighty force out there that they did not choose to hide in the armour.

Before Frisk continued on their journey through the labyrinth, they glanced at Maxus’s childhood plate armour and realised that they needed to be prepared for anything. Frisk pushed back the breastplate to find the sparring sword lying flat on top of the shield. They picked up the sword first, then the shield, surprised by how light they were. The sword in their left hand was the perfect size, and the edges were blunt, designed to cause minimal damage. All the better for Frisk. They had no desire of hurting anyone, but it would come in handy for if the bullets fly. They felt much safer with the shield strapped to their right forearm, thankful to have protective equipment more capable than tutus, aprons and lockets.

Whatever it took, it was paramount that Frisk survived for the sake of their family and friends. They wondered what they were doing now, wondered if they were capable of finding their way up to the Outerworld.

After a few more minutes of blind wandering, they found a walkway. It was surrounded on both sides by windows. As they crossed it, they peered out and found a garden. It was more extravagant than anything from the Underground. In the centre of the garden, standing on a circular podium of white marble, was a strange monument. The rectangular pillar, cold grey with heavy erosion and barely legible engraved shapes and symbols, looked out of place in a land of perfectly divided flowerbeds and high archways.

The peace of Castle Highkeep was shattered as bells began to ring throughout the walls. It was either one of two things, an alarm or a dinner bell, and something told Frisk that it was the former. Their escape could not have gone unnoticed forever, unless the monsters believed that they – in the span of fifteen minutes – had grown three feet, gained five hundred pounds, and developed fur out of every pore. From all around, Frisk could feel it. The quake of metal against stone and the slamming of doors. Time to up the pace.

Frisk sprinted through the halls. Whenever they tried to go left, they hit a locked double door.
Whenever they tried to deviate right, they hit another. Things started to look bad after they hit the fifth locked door, worse when they struck a tenth. Once, they found an open door, but a lone guard slammed it shut. Frisk was being forced down a certain path.

Eventually, the human had been channelled to a final stretch of stone hall. The double door at the end their only and final route of escape. The hall had no windows yet was somehow full of light, just like most of the places within this maze. Frisk was halfway toward the door when the metallic shift of many iron greaves came from behind.

A dozen guards, all armed with spears and large shields, formed at the bottleneck. They levelled their weapons on the human child and started their slow advance, treating Frisk – a three-foot-tall kid with the blunt blade and a dinky shield – like a humongous, fire breathing dragon.

Outnumbered and outclassed, Frisk turned on their heels and bounded for the door. The battalion continued at their pace, refusing to give chase, but why? When Frisk tested the door and found it to be open, the reason became apparent.

Frisk did not need to be a castle connoisseur to know which room this was.

It was the throne room. A vast room that ebbed with a royal power. Two great windows shone with light the colour of caramel, casting macabre shadows from the six pillars. The Emperor’s throne stood elevated on a three step platform. A sparkling, thick golden frame, ten feet high and cushioned with thick, red velvet cushions. Two lion heads were carved into the armrests. The back rose like molten fire. Only someone of the highest calibre was worthy of sitting upon that seat… and he was on it right there.

“I know every square inch of my domain.” Emperor Maxus’s hair was almost white in the light, but his eyes were emphasised by the shade on his face. “My men know every route and passage.” His gaze narrowed. “But, you, creature, do not.”

The guards behind Frisk reached the threshold of the throne room and stopped. There were a further two exits on the left and right walls, both were also guarded by heavily armed troops. They had front row seats to a showdown that would determine the fate of two entire races.

A nervous bead of sweat tingled on Frisk’s forehead as the emperor rose and wrapped his fingers around the hilt of a greatsword leaning against the side of the throne. It was as large as its wielder was tall. A thick blade of reflective metal, so shiny it could double as a mirror, yet sharp enough to slice through stone like parchment. The greatsword, named *Heaven’s Shard*, was his father’s. It had felt the fury of many battles, yet never suffered so much as a scratch.

“Your determination is for me and me alone,” Maxus said, approaching. Holding Heaven’s Shard in one hand. “Give it to me or I will tear it from your soul.”
Was this the end of their journey? Was it over already? Frisk raised the shield so that the top was below their eyes. It smelled strongly of a coppery dust. The sword wobbled in the left hand, struggling to find a proper balance.

Emperor Maxus was within mere feet now. The edges of Heaven’s Shard caught the light, shining divinely. He examined the meagre armament the creature had managed to scrounge together, and then realised that they were his.

Maxus’s mouth formed a snarl of angry teeth. “My childhood sword! My training shield! Those were gifted to me by my father,” he bellowed. His greatsword shook. “This filthy insect has defiled them with their touch! How dare you defile the memory of my father!”

Enraged, Maxus raised the sword high and slashed it straight downwards. Frisk jumped to the right. The tip collided with the floor, shattering a tile. As it shattered though, it looked… wrong. It was difficult to explain, but the way that the stone broke, the way it crumbled into fragments and dust and sand just did not look right, not at all how a rock should break.

Frisk stepped backwards across the room. Maxus effortlessly heaved his sword up and advanced on the human. There was nowhere for them to run.

Working up a mountain of courage, Frisk let the sword and shield drop to their sides. They looked Emperor Maxus square in the eyes and said that they did not want to fight him.

“If you will not fight,” Maxus said, “then you will die here.”

Maxus darted forwards and swung his massive sword across. Frisk tried to leap away, raising the shield at the last possible second. The impact sent the child flying across the room, sliding to a painful stop against a pillar. Frisk rose as Maxus lunged, driving his sword forward. Frisk moved just in time as the blade pierced the column, sending massive cracks up the length like bolts of lightning.

Frisk stumbled up the stairs. They raised the shield only to realise the damage caused by that single blow. There was a massive cut that ran four-fifths of the way across – almost separating the top from the bottom – mere millimetres below their arm. The mangled edges were jagged. Frisk was lucky, had the strike been slightly higher, the result would not have been pretty. They tossed the now useless shield away and took the sparring sword in both hands.

Frisk continued to plead with Lord Maxus, telling them that they had friends and family who loved them very much.

Maxus emotionlessly replied, “So did all of them.”

Taking Heaven’s Shard in both hands, Lord Maxus span around then swung it with a force so powerful that it sent a shockwave through the air, slamming into everything in his sight. The balustrades on the sides broke, and stools and benches were sent crashing against the walls and windows. Frisk was knocked back. Thankfully, the absurdly high, cushioned back of Maxus’s throne broke the human’s fall. Frisk landed sideways on the seat, their left leg propped up on one of the armrests.

The shellshock was so great that, for a moment, Frisk had forgotten where they were. They thought that the oversized seat was their own and that the angry, lion monster before them was but a servant.

The Emperor

Was this the end of their journey? Was it over already? Frisk raised the shield so that the top was below their eyes. It smelled strongly of a coppery dust. The sword wobbled in the left hand, struggling to find a proper balance.

Emperor Maxus was within mere feet now. The edges of Heaven’s Shard caught the light, shining divinely. He examined the meagre armament the creature had managed to scrounge together, and then realised that they were his.

Maxus’s mouth formed a snarl of angry teeth. “My childhood sword! My training shield! Those were gifted to me by my father,” he bellowed. His greatsword shook. “This filthy insect has defiled them with their touch! How dare you defile the memory of my father!”

Enraged, Maxus raised the sword high and slashed it straight downwards. Frisk jumped to the right. The tip collided with the floor, shattering a tile. As it shattered though, it looked… wrong. It was difficult to explain, but the way that the stone broke, the way it crumbled into fragments and dust and sand just did not look right, not at all how a rock should break.

Frisk stepped backwards across the room. Maxus effortlessly heaved his sword up and advanced on the human. There was nowhere for them to run.

Working up a mountain of courage, Frisk let the sword and shield drop to their sides. They looked Emperor Maxus square in the eyes and said that they did not want to fight him.

“If you will not fight,” Maxus said, “then you will die here.”

Maxus darted forwards and swung his massive sword across. Frisk tried to leap away, raising the shield at the last possible second. The impact sent the child flying across the room, sliding to a painful stop against a pillar. Frisk rose as Maxus lunged, driving his sword forward. Frisk moved just in time as the blade pierced the column, sending massive cracks up the length like bolts of lightning.

Frisk stumbled up the stairs. They raised the shield only to realise the damage caused by that single blow. There was a massive cut that ran four-fifths of the way across – almost separating the top from the bottom – mere millimetres below their arm. The mangled edges were jagged. Frisk was lucky, had the strike been slightly higher, the result would not have been pretty. They tossed the now useless shield away and took the sparring sword in both hands.

Frisk continued to plead with Lord Maxus, telling them that they had friends and family who loved them very much.

Maxus emotionlessly replied, “So did all of them.”

Taking Heaven’s Shard in both hands, Lord Maxus span around then swung it with a force so powerful that it sent a shockwave through the air, slamming into everything in his sight. The balustrades on the sides broke, and stools and benches were sent crashing against the walls and windows. Frisk was knocked back. Thankfully, the absurdly high, cushioned back of Maxus’s throne broke the human’s fall. Frisk landed sideways on the seat, their left leg propped up on one of the armrests.

The shellshock was so great that, for a moment, Frisk had forgotten where they were. They thought that the oversized seat was their own and that the angry, lion monster before them was but a servant.
“I wish there was another way, but I will not put the needs of one before the needs of many,” Maxus said with a sudden semblance of serenity. “If I must destroy you to save my people, I will.”

Frisk crawled off the thick velvet before it could swallow them whole. They shook the dizziness away, refocusing on their opponent. As they poised the sword, it occurred that there would be no chance of mercy here. It was either fight or perish.

The kid was now stepping toward the giant. Three small steps before lunging into a full sprint, screaming at the top of their little lungs. Dodging another swipe, Frisk moved in and, with all their might, swung at Maxus’s shin. The sparring sword bounced harmlessly off, not even scuffing the leather of his boot.

Frisk paused, then dared to look up. Maxus glared down, unsmiling, unamused. Frisk flashed a nervous smile that only fuelled the lion’s rage. Jeez, would it kill this guy to have a little sense of humour, or at least smile once or twice?

There was a break in the combat, the two of them toe to toe. It was unclear as to which one was waiting for the other to act. Frisk took the chance to swing again, hitting Maxus with another strike that did nothing. They swung a third time in the same spot, bringing about no pain whatsoever. Frisk’s forth swing was struck by Maxus’s greatsword. The razor sharp blade made short work of the dull one, slicing straight through, leaving Frisk with only the handle to work with.

Dropping the handle, Frisk ran past Emperor Maxus just as he missed another strike. He swung around, reared his head back, then roared. A beam of energy shot from his mouth and struck the ground by Frisk’s feet, sending them down the stairs and sprawling on the floor.

The absurdly high ceiling awaited the human. They analysed the fight in their head; three hits, three harmless hits. Not bad for a first try. Frisk had nothing to fear. As long as they had their determination, they could not lose. As the emperor approached with Heaven’s Shard by his side, Frisk closed their eyes. They looked deep into their soul and ignited the power of their determination.

They reached for their save file and felt themselves being taken back.

Frisk opened their eyes and there they were, in the sky, gazing down at the Outerworld – the last time they were filled with determination. The sensation of lightness still felt so strange, especially the second time around. Castle Highkeep’s silhouette looked so majestic, and the lands so diverse and strange. They saw the beach island, and the snowy mountain, and the barren, rocky lands.

Frisk blinked… and caught Heaven’s Shard just in time as it was thrust downwards.

Instinct took over. Frisk rolled out of the way just in time as the greatsword reduced the stone beneath them to nothing. They scrambled onto their feet, taken aback by the sudden shift in surroundings. Frisk was back in the throne room, standing before Emperor Maxus himself.

Something was wrong. Something was very, very wrong. Why didn’t they go back?

Frisk focused once more on their determination, on the power that it granted them. Just like that, it sent them back to when they oversaw the hidden empire in the sky. Frisk was not imagining it, they were not dreaming it, they were there! The sensation of wind rustling their sweater; the whistling in the ears; the sun shining down, prickling the skin; the apprehension of being so high up without a safety net, it was all real. It was all there, right in front of them, as clear as crystal.

Frisk blinked. It disintegrated. They were standing in the throne room, before Emperor Maxus and the legendary shard from heaven.
“What’s wrong?” Maxus asked. “Can’t reach your save point?” He may have said that in a mocking tone, but it was difficult to tell under all that stoicism. “That may have saved you under Mount Ebott, but I’m afraid it will not save you here.”

Desperately, Frisk grabbed the nearest thing of reach – a glossy, ornamented stool leg – and held it out at arm’s length. For the first time, panic threatened to grip their mind. Fear started to take over. If they could not use their determination, if they could not reach their save point, then that meant one thing…

Death was the end.

No going back. No retries. Just cold, lonely death.

Frisk had to think of something fast. Talking was out. Fighting was out. Now, trying again was out. They only had one chance. Only one option remained: escape, but that one also dangled far out of their reach. The monsters guarding the exits would turn them into a pin doll if they tried.

They backed away down the throne room, keeping space between themselves and Maxus, buying valuable seconds to think of something. However, when they tried to think of a plan, their mind only focused on everything in the room. The floor was so shiny and smooth. The throne was something, for sure. The pillars, one broken, you would think that Maxus did not care about his own domain. The windows, glowing with the light of dusk.

Wait. It was not dusk yet. Last time Frisk checked, it was barely past noon. So how could those windows be that colour if the sun was not even there yet? It dawned on them that light seemed to work differently here. The always illuminated hallways. The way Master Scribe Rickard clapped his hands twice to light the cell room.

As Frisk moved back toward the hallways – the guards keeping their weapons trained on them – they had an idea. Taking the stool leg, they propped it under their arm.

“What,” Maxus said, readying his sword, “are you doing now?”

Lord Maxus raised his weapon as Frisk stretched their hands out. It was here where Maxus realised what the human was about to do.

“Don’t you dare,” Maxus exclaimed as he brought the greatsword down.

The human child clapped their hands together.

*Clap! Clap!*

Just like a switch being thrown, the beaming light stopped, thrusting the royal expanse into darkness. The sounds heightened, senses trying to compensate for lack of sight. Metal clashed with stone. The shuffling plates of blind guards, their frantic voices. Two sharp claps.

Sunset returned. All eyes were trained on the human’s last know spot. All they saw was Heaven’s Shard sticking up from the floor. The four guards on the left archway had no time to react as Frisk charged, slipped through a gap between them, and took off down the hall.

“Hey, stop,” yelled a guard.

Emperor Maxus grumbled as the guards automatically gave chase. “Sound the alarm,” the lord roared a lion’s roar. “Cut off all possible escape routes! I want all units hunting that creature! Bring it to me alive!”
The drumming of pursuing feet gave Frisk the vigour needed to run faster. They almost went straight ahead at a crossroads, but at the last second, slid to a stop and went right instead. They followed the path and turned left at a corner, knocking over a suit of armour in the process. The soldiers were mere seconds behind their trail.

Frisk turned another right to find a massive figure standing further down the hall. At first, Frisk feared that the emperor was back, but realised that it was Private Perro – the same private they exchanged the bone for freedom with. The husky stood arched before them, knees bent and fingers in claws, ready to tackle like a gridiron player.

Frisk stopped and was about to about-turn when the chasing guards loomed from behind, forcing them further forward. With the glossy stool leg in hand, Frisk acted the only way they knew how. While running, they lifted the piece of wood above their head and whistled in a familiar tone.

Private Perro scoffed. “Oh please,” he said, “if you think that stick will stick me, then you are sorely misticken.” He shook his furry head. “I mean, stick are stickly mistaken.” He was drooling unconsciously. “Stick, sticker, stickly stick, stick stick stick!”

The husky dropped down at all fours, panting, tail wagging. Frisk tossed the stool leg behind them. Perro charged, ignoring the target completely and going after the stick. The four monsters screeched to a halt as their fellow guard bounded toward them.


Too late. Private Perro smashed into them, knocking them flat like bowling pins.

Frisk kept going and reached a square staircase. Tall steps lined with royal blue carpet. Frisk approached the marble guard rail and risked a look down. The gorge must have been five floors deep, and there were five floors further up. The ground floor was barely an inch in Frisk’s vision. A bird’s-eye view of a statue stood at the bottom. There was a twisted pillar at each corner of the stairs, the crevices carved deep.

Logic dictated that down was the best way to escape this crazy castle. Frisk’s foot hovered on the first step when they heard the thud of many steps echoing up. Ten guards, two rows of five, half a floor away. Frisk took the stairs leading up, clearing them two at a time, keeping low so that the patrol does not see them. After clearing one floor, Frisk heard more steps coming from that hallway and even more approaching from the floor above.

Frisk needed to act fast. With bad guys all around, the protagonist would make their most daring escape ever. They ran to the railing and gazed down once more, nothing but a one-way drop from the seventh floor to ground level. Their eyes turned to the nearby pillars, the twisted pillars. Deep spirals that ran around and around the columns, deep but small. It would be impossible for a fully grown adult to use as footholds, but not for a child. Frisk hoisted themselves up onto the railing, fighting every urge to look down.

Already, the guards from below had encountered the ones climbing the stairs. “We chased the target this way,” a gruff voice said, muffled by stone and carpet. “Have you spotted them?”

“No,” a woman’s voice replied, “they must’ve went up.”

The target stuck the tips of their fingers and the tips of their boots into the gaps and shimmied across, following the upward spiral. Out in the middle, without any flooring beneath them, their brain
became a broken record; *look down, look down, look down*. Frisk forced themselves to look up at the white ceiling. They drew a breath and then heaved themselves up, climbing up one gap at a time. They reached the bottom of the next floor up just in time as the guards raced onto the seventh floor and ran into each other.

“Don’t tell me you lot didn’t find the human either,” one of them said, sounding flabbergasted.

“No, sir. Not a trace.”

“They couldn’t have just vanished into thin air. Where could they go?”

“We searched the halls from top to bottom. There was nowhere for them to go. Unless…” A helmeted head with large ears poked over the rail. For a second, Frisk thought they had been seen until they grasped that he was looking down. “They fell down there.”

A second guy joined in, gazing down the deep pit. Frisk hugged the pillar and went as still as a statue. They did not even dare to breathe. They just beckoned that those monsters did not look up.

The second guy said, “Uh oh, the emperor isn’t going to be happy about this…”

“Well, I don’t think there’s anything down there,” the large eared guard said as he pulled away. “And since when has the emperor ever been happy about anything?”

“Send a squad to search the ground floor and lower regions. Everyone else, double-check these floors. The human could not have gotten far.”

The sentries began to march away, going different routes. Frisk breathed a sigh of relief as they heard the footsteps fading. For now, they had given those clowns the slip.

Frisk reached to grab the next crevice up and felt their boot slip. They grabbed hold before they could fall. Then, the unthinkable happened…

They looked down.

Hanging above a pit. The ground, hundreds of feet below. Frisk’s heart dropped. No safety net to save them if they fell. No determination to bring them back if they fell. A yelp escaped from Frisk’s mouth.

“Huh?” was heard from below. “What was that?”

One pair of footsteps started to come back. Frisk regained their grip and climbed as fast as they could to the next floor.

“There!” A loud voice brought Frisk’s head down. On the floor below was one of the silver suited troops. She was pointing up at them. “The human’s up there!” Her colleagues were right beside her. “Come on, let’s seize them!”

Frisk clambered up and over the rail as the squadron of over twenty monsters jangled up the stairs, moving as fast as their heavy plates would allow, determined themselves to apprehend the child. Frisk took to the hall that looked identical to everywhere else in Castle Highkeep. They sprinted as fast as they could, through aching legs and sore hands, with the monsters hot on their tail. The child passed through an adjacent hall just as another team came through. Frisk dodged seizing hands and pointy ends and kept going, now with even more monsters in pursuit.

Up ahead, more monsters turned a corner. “Nowhere left to run, kid,” they shouted, closing in.
Frisk spotted the tiniest gap in a doorway to the right. They ducked toward it, slamming through the thick, wooden door. On the other side lay a textiles room full of women weaving luxurious garments. All eyes shot to Frisk as they burst in.

There was silence, then screams. “Oh my god! A human!” More screams and points. “Get it away! Get it away!”

The crash of three guards trying to get through the door at the same time forced Frisk forward. There was an open window at the other end of the room. Frisk moved past baskets of blankets and linen, past shrieking maids – one of which swung at Frisk with a broom heavy with threads, missing – straight out the window, and down a steep roof.

Sliding down, Frisk groped and kicked at the tiles but was unable to stop themselves. They landed where the steep roof met another, this one at a slight gradient. Frisk slowly rose, thankful to finally have a moment to breathe. Even after dropping a few floors they were still high in the sky. In the distance was the western wall and the two circular towers that connected it to the northern and southern sections of wall. The sun drew their eyes up, pink and shimmery, as if gazing at it through thick glass. It was a good thing that Frisk was looking up too, it allowed them to spot the overweight guard falling toward them.

Frisk dived out of the way. The guard crashed through the roof, getting stuck up to their armpits. Weakly, he reached for the target who was too far away.

“Stop…” The pained guard tried his best to still sound commanding as the target took off down the length of roof. “I order you to stop… please…”

Even though that unfortunate guard showed such good manners, Frisk still refused. The red tiles proved difficult to gain much traction on, causing them to slip across the rooftop. Down below, countless numbers of Maxus’s goons stampeded through the grounds, pulverising courtyards with steel soles and funnelling through archways. They shouted and hollered and pointed at the human running dangerously up high. Now it was safe to say that this Monster Military, with hundreds of soldiers, seriously put the disbanded Royal Guard, and all of its seven former troops, to shame.

“The human’s up there,” one shouted; “They’re heading for the towers,” another yelled from among the stream of voices; “Cut them off at the walls, don’t let them get any farther,” someone’s voice got lost in all the noise.

More bad guys appeared at nearby windows, even more started to climb onto the roofs, not allowing this chase to end so easily. The tiles cracked and bent beneath their frames whilst keeping strong against Frisk’s meagre size. Frisk kept going, stopping for nothing. A guard caught up to the human and reached with gripping gauntlets. Frisk reached the end of the roof and jumped, leaping over a wide gap and onto a neighbouring roof. The guard saw the looming drop and slipped over the edge, managing to grab on before they could fall. Two of his teammates ran up to help him.

Frisk shot a glance across and spotted another team on a faraway roof. The line of monsters stretched their hands out and materialised magically bows armed with magical arrows.

“You, human! Stop right where you are or we will open fire!”

Frisk moved. Up ahead was a chimney, beards of smoke rose from the top. The arrows came loose. Frisk dove for cover, two arrows whizzed past, missing them by inches. Magical arrows embedded themselves into the tiles and the chimney.

“Hold your fire, you fools!” A guard of higher authority barged onto the roof and straddled past the
archers, pushing down bows. “We need the human alive,” she bellowed.

It was only a short distance and a short drop until they reached the wall. To the left was a watchtower, to the right, another watchtower. Frisk stumbled over to the ledge and gazed downwards, despite the fact that they already knew what awaited them below. The river was just as wild and rapid as ever. In the distance was an island of green pastures and blue waters. The rapids below trailed off towards it.

Already, the guards were scaling the steps outside the walls. The door to the north-western tower opened, their numbers would not stop growing, followed by more orders of the human to cease their fruitless escape.

Frisk may have been exhausted, but they had come too far now to get caught. Gathering up what little energy they had left, they ran toward the south-western tower, past lines of untouched cannons. By now, their heart was beating faster than their steps and a thin veil of sweat had covered the skin. More troops had formed on the south wall. Frisk was running out of places to run.

They slipped into the south-western watchtower and slammed the door behind them. Nothing special in here except some bunkbeds and some wooden stools. The rattling converged from behind, below, and from the front, forcing Frisk to take the spiral staircase up. On the next level, a lone guard blocked them at the top of the steps. They were everywhere and closing in. One more route lay across the landing. Frisk bolted toward a thin window, onto the ledge, then stopped.

No more paths. Frisk had hit a dead end. Nothing but whistling wind and a long plunge into the churning rivers below.

The army piled up behind the human. Dozens of troops flooded the tower and trained their swords and spears on the target, having finally cut off their escape. Grabbing hold of the sides, Frisk stepped closer to the edge.

For what seemed like minutes, everyone remained still. Frisk breathed heavily. Their little arms and legs shook. Frisk did not know which was worse, the armada in front of them or the deadly drop behind them.

The quaking frame of Emperor Maxus trudged up the steps, his loyal sentinels went out of their way to clear of path for him, parting like water. He came to a stop before the line.

“Two options stand before you,” Maxus said without any shred of concern for the hunted human by the ledge. “Either you willingly surrender yourself and I collect your soul, or you jump, my men collect your mangled body from downstream, and then I collect your soul.” His tree trunk arms folded. “Make your decision quickly… Frisk. Don’t make me wait.”

The sweat broke on Frisk’s forehead only to be carried off in the wind. They peered at those silver eyes, certain doom lay behind them. They worked up the courage to look down at the silver waters, another type of doom lay down there. The only question was: which one was Frisk going to take?

All of a sudden, the short patience of Lord Maxus came to an end. He abruptly cut across the floor and reached for Frisk’s arm. Frisk pulled it back before Maxus could snatch it, then felt their boots slip.

Frisk fell. Maxus’s silver eyes watched them plummet, unblinking and unremorseful.

Frisk closed their eyes and reached deep down for their determination. All fear was taken away as they floated above the empire, far away from Castle Highkeep, above the lands and the waters,
where nobody could harm them, where they were free.

…And then they hit the water.

The impact hurt, taking all the air out of their lungs. Frisk’s world deafened in a blur of blue and white bubbles. The powerful stream carried the human away, tossing them around. Frisk kicked and paddled wildly, desperate for air. They emerged to the surface and drew a slither of oxygen. Nothing could be heard over the raging waters. Before being pulled under, they managed to catch a fleeting glimpse of the shrinking castle.

At the end of the island was a waterfall, which dropped to the island of green meadows. Unable to escape the stream, Frisk was pulled over the falls.

For some strange reason, while they were in the air, Frisk remembered falling into the Underground. Ironic. They were so high up where even the birds won’t fly… and still they found themselves falling.

Frisk slammed into another river. The pain unbearable, lungs empty, and all their strength was sapped out of them. The child’s limp body drifted in the soft current, submerged in water.

In those final moments, Frisk was suddenly warm, and felt Toriel’s warm embrace. It went cold, they were in Snowdin, solving puzzles with Papyrus and Sans. It was so wet, they were trudging through the waters of the garbage dump.

Something snagged on their sleeve.

Frisk remembered cooking pasta with Undyne. Watching Sans as he stacked hot dogs on their head. Roleplaying with Dr Alphys. On a date with Papyrus. Posing dramatically before Mettaton.

Something burst through the water’s surface.

Frisk was before Asgore on the bed of golden flowers. Before all their friends. Before Flowey. Before Asriel…

As the land of eternal darkness consumed them, Frisk was holding Asriel in their arms.

“I don’t want to let go…”
“W-what,” Alphys muttered, staring into the sky, “what just happened…?”

The truth was, they had no idea. Five minutes ago, they were enjoying a lovely get-together with the sun and the butterflies and the laughter. Mere seconds ago, they tried in vain to stop their human friend, Frisk, from being carried off by a shaft of light – tried and failed. Now, all they could do was blankly watch the sky, as if at any moment Frisk was going to come crashing back down again. One minute, Frisk was there, the other, gone. The day was still young, but already, everything felt like it was ending.

Papyrus looked like he was about to cry. “I should’ve known. I always knew that Frisk was too good for this world,” he blubbered as he fell to his kneecaps. A tear dropped from an eye socket. “Human heaven got tired of waiting for their next angel, so they took them away ahead of schedule. They’ll be giving Frisk a pair of fluffy wings right now, so they can fly with all the rest of them.”

“Uh, right, Papyrus, right,” Undyne said while rolling her right eye and patting the skeleton on the back of his battle armour. “Somehow, I doubt that was human heaven, dude.”

“No? Then what do you call that just now?” Papyrus asked.

Undyne mumbled something, pulled an uncomfortable smile and answered, “…Aliens?”

Toriel stumbled back to the picnic table and slumped onto the bench, feeling the burden of loss heavy on her shoulders. She buried her head in her hands. “Not again,” she whispered, shaking. “Not again…” It was happening all over again. First Chara. Then Asriel. Then the six children afterwards. Now this. “How many more children must I lose? Do I not deserve happiness? Am I destined to be alone forever?”

Sans was the first to go to her. “No way, Tori, don’t say that.” His grin remained permanent, but the whites in his eyes said it all. He sat down beside her. “You do deserve to be happy. You’re an awesome mom, Frisk is lucky to have you.”

Alphys ran up to Toriel, tears swelling beneath her glasses. “I’m… I’m so sorry, Toriel,” she said with a quiver. “I let go. I tried so hard to hold on… but… but I couldn’t.” Her head dropped. “It’s all my fault.”

“It’s nobody’s fault, Alphys,” Asgore responded, placing a burly hand on the ex-royal scientist’s shoulder. “We tried, but none of us could stop Frisk from flying off into the sky. Whatever that was.”

Toriel ceased shaking, everything around became a blur. Heaven? Angels? The sky? Why did those terms sound so familiar to her? Those words reached deep into some memory, something once thought forgotten through time, resurfacing as if beckoned, like children hearing the calls of their master.

“It’ll be okay,” Undyne said, looking over from Papyrus’s side. “Frisk is one tough wimpy loser, I’m sure they’re fine. If fact, I’m sure the wise guys behind this are in for a big surprise when they realise just what Frisk is capable of.”

Sans patted Toriel’s arm. “Don’t worry, Tori. We’ll get to the bottom of this.” Or, in this case, the top. He wanted to make that a promise, but his personal ‘no promises’ policy came into play.

“The only question is,” Alphys asked, “what do we do now?”
Toriel’s hands fell from her face. “Go home,” she whispered.


Toriel rose. “I need to get home, right now.” Her voice was monotone.

Asgore looked confused. “Um, Tori, why do you—?”

“Now, Asgore,” Toriel interrupted, “grab your keys and get us home, right now!”

“Alright, alright. We’ll go.” Asgore turned to the others. “Come on, let’s all head over to our house!”

Leaving the supplies scattered on the picnic table, the monsters bolted back down to the carpark. The other two cars parked there previously were gone, only Asgore’s SUV and Papyrus’s red sports car remained, parked at opposite ends of the lot. Asgore, Toriel, Undyne, and Alphys scrambled into the big car, Papyrus and his brother jumped over the doors of the flashy one.

It was the longest ride ever back home with Asgore taking the lead and Papyrus close behind. For such a goofy skeleton, he was quite the responsible driver. The radio went off and remained off for the entire journey, they had enough on their mind without being bombarded by obnoxious adverts and irritating teen superstars. The empty roads felt drawn out, making the trip back feel longer by threefold. All of them felt the worry of losing their human friend, but Toriel felt it for every single second she was in the passenger seat. Eight children gone. She did not want to make it a ninth. Toriel would not allow anyone to take Frisk away from her.

It did not help that along the way they passed a park. Toriel could not force herself to look away even if she wanted to. Children playing tag and hide-and-seek on the fields. Families on blankets and benches, walking dogs and pushing prams. Kids on slides, playparks, and swings, being pushed by friends, mothers and fathers. For one moment, Toriel looked at a mother pushing her child on the swing and saw herself and Frisk. Words could not describe how badly Toriel wanted that to be true, to have Frisk back in her arms, to hear the sound of their voice, their laughter, their hollers of joy. Frisk was not even related to her, they were not Toriel’s real child or even a part of her species, but none of that mattered, she cared for Frisk as if they were her own. Family was not measured in flesh and blood, but in love. Toriel looked again and saw herself and Frisk switch back to a different mother and a different child. The heartache only grew more painful.

They made it home; Asgore pulled up skewed on the driveway, leaving a skid mark and damaging the edge of the front garden. Toriel leapt out and rushed through the front door the second the car screeched to a halt, leaving both doors open behind her. Asgore glanced at Alphys and Undyne through the rear-view mirror, as if he expected them to know the reasoning behind Toriel’s frantic attitude, which they answered with blank gazes. Papyrus pulled up on the curve out front and Sans sprang over the car door.

Asgore crept through the main entrance and into the hall, the others lined up behind his massive frame. From the living room, the racket of falling hardcovers and flicking pages pulsed the air. Asgore peeked around the corner to the sight of Toriel ransacking the shelves, pulling out books, scanning covers, flicking through pages, tossing them down. She had already cleared out the top two rows. Books littering the floor; open and closed, upwards and downwards. It was a battlefield and the books were its casualties.

“Where is it?” Toriel muttered to herself, flinging another book over her shoulder. “It is here somewhere… I am sure of it…”

Everyone else stood watching by the doorway. Should they talk to her? Should they approach? Or
should they stand back and let her go through the motions?

“Tori?” Sans, at Asgore’s side, asked. “You should chill out and tell us exactly what you’re looking for. Maybe we can help?”

Sans’s words fell on deaf ears, and hers were too big to not hear them. Toriel heaved a collection of short stories onto the coffee table, burying magazines, newspapers, coasters, and the television remote.

Asgore swallowed hard and dared to step closer, treading carefully around the books. “Tori—Toriel? Can I at least make you…?” He placed a hand on Toriel’s arm. She slammed her open palm with a bang against the spine of a thick tome before going still. She twisted her head around and glared at him. Toriel was like a stick of dynamite, ready to explode at any moment. Asgore took a step back, treading on a page about species of birds. “…A cup of tea?” he finished.

Toriel pulled out the thick tome, glanced at the cover, was about to toss it down with the others when she stopped. There was something about that particular one that spurned her memory. It was then that she knew she had found the one she was looking for.

Toriel took a deep breath, answered, “Yes, Gor—Asgore… please,” walked out of the decimated living room, carefully past the others, and into the kitchen. She held the thick book tightly to her chest.

Five of them gathered around the dining room table as the former king of monsters filled the kettle to the brim and popped it on. The book lay closed before their eyes:

**Biggest Legends of all Time**

“This is the book,” Toriel insisted. “I am sure of it.”

Sans studied the title. *Well,* he thought, *I could sure go for a BLT myself right now,* followed by an inner chuckle. *Now, focus Sans! Now’s not the time for jokes.*

Toriel flipped open the cover, revealing the index page. Most of the sections sounded more like fairy tales than legends, almost as if the two terms were one in the same. Toriel traced her finger down the list…

*Page 1: Introduction*

*Page 5: The Golden Egg laying Monster Goose*

*Page 9: Dorcan: the Wise King who liked Wise-crackers and cheese*

*Page 18: The Cry of the Fox*

*Page 19: Or was it the Howl of the Fox?*

*Page 20: The Bark of the Fox? Oh, forget it*

*Page 40: Timothy Crank: Enlisted into the Military at Twelve*

*Page 52: The Untouchable Mallet and the Hour upon Them*

*Page 68: Michael and Mitchell: The Legend of the Suave Lawbreakers*

Toriel stopped. Her finger pressed against one entry.
Asgore returned with a few cups of steaming tea in his furry hands. He placed them on the table, passing a cup to each person. “You might want to let that cool——”

Toriel snatched her teacup and chugged the contents down the hatch in one swig. The tea burned all the way down, from her lips to her belly, leaving a trail of numbness down her throat. The pain would serve her well, she needed to be alert now more than ever. She refocused on the page. Accompanying the title was a picture – a large fragment of a stone tablet, chiselled with mysterious writing. Ancient. The text below read as follows:

After the war between humans and monsters, an archaeological dig site discovered this stone tablet (pictured above) believed to be thousands of years old. Experts involved were baffled by the discovery, since the tablet did not seem to originate from any known recorded civilisation, yet the inscriptions incorporated several different languages of the ancient world, including Ancient Greek, Old Persian, Egyptian, and Latin.

After many translations, the inscriptions tell the tale of a sorcerer named Kanika and her creation of the Land between Heaven and Earth.

Sorcerer Kanika lived in the age of stone and fire, when the first of the humans and monsters roamed the world. She was believed to be one of the first monsters who could harness their own power to create magic. Unfortunately, the times were hard on the people, for the land was not bountiful and the water was dangerous to drink. Slowly, the humans and monsters began to starve, and everyday became a desperate struggle to survive.

As if by fate, Kanika stumbled upon a rock that was infused with a power of which she had never seen. Tirelessly, she carved the rock into a pillar and, using her own magic, unlocked the stone’s power. She created the Land between Heaven and Earth, where the soil was always rich and the rivers were so clean you could drink from them, in the sky, away from the desolate planet. Kanika allowed not just the monsters to reside there, but humans as well, believing that the two species could co-exist.

The humans and monsters thrived, but peace was only temporary. A mighty war broke out, not between monsters and humans, but between seven factions not separated by species or race, but by beliefs and ideals.

The paradise fell into chaos. Thousands of lives, humans and monsters alike, were lost. Kanika went missing, and was presumed to have been slain in the conflict. The survivors of the war awoke back on the surface of the Earth, their paradise having disappeared, never to be seen again. They had been banished.

And so, the Land between Heaven and Earth became a faded memory. Many believe the tale to be a fantasy, of angels and gods. However, there are some who believe that the magic pillar is still out there, waiting for someone to find it, waiting for the right moment to return.

Everyone looked up from the book, exchanging glances. “So, that’s it?” Asgore asked. “We’re supposed to believe that a fairy tale took Frisk away?”

“But still, you have to admit that this is a little far-fetched.” Asgore paused to take a drink. “But then again, a beam of light did pull them away… into the sky.”

“Whether we like it or not, this is the only thing we have got to go on,” Toriel explained, tapping her finger on the book page. She glanced around the room at the faces. “Unless you still want to believe that Frisk was abducted by aliens…?”

Silence.

Asgore sighed. “Okay, so, let’s say that this floating island really exists. How are we supposed to get there?”

Further silence followed. Undyne scratched her head. Papyrus caressed the edge of his jaw. Asgore stroked his fuzzy beard. Tiny peeps pierced the quiet that were coming from Alphys, who traced circles around the outside of her teacup. The steam of the hot tea fogged up her glasses.

“Got something you wanna say, Al?” Sans asked, noticing her hesitation.

Alphys stuttered, “W-well… I… I…” She stopped and drew a deep breath. “I… might have something that could help. The key word being: might.”

Before they knew it, they were all at Alphys and Undyne’s house: a quaint, two-story house of pale red bricks and dark brown roofing in a town by the seaside. Pulling up outside, the first thing they noticed was that it was not on fire. The second thing they noticed was that the front window had been boarded up with plywood, which in turn had been busted up and covered with more plywood.

Undyne shook her head. “I keep telling Papyrus that he doesn’t have to exit through the window but he never listens… even when it’s been boarded up.” She sighed. “He still nails the landing, though.”

Inside, the house was no different from any other house. It had a cosy living room, a modern kitchen, two bathrooms, an airy conservatory, four bedrooms, a vast garage, a tower, a bridge, a dungeon – okay, maybe it was a little different from other houses. Undyne quickly dashed into her room and got changed into her regular attire – her black tank top and blue jeans. If she was about to go on some kind of rescue mission to save their wimpy human friend, she was determined to look the part.

Alphys unlocked and opened the door that led down to the basement. The stairs descending were narrow and deep and coated in darkness, a flick on a light switch solved the last problem. With the doctor taking the lead, they treaded carefully down the wooden steps, each one creaking under their weight.

The monster scientist felt a shred of apprehension for every step she cleared. The lab was her slice of haven, the one place where she could truly be herself. Even in the dark, she knew where everything was and could easily navigate every nook and cranny swiftly. However, she was still hesitant to bring her friends down to it. As she said before, she was done with live testing, but there were still a few many things in which she did not wish to reveal, even to her closest associates. These were not lies or unforgivable mistakes, but rather, a few little secrets. Everyone has them, why can’t she?

“Lights on,” Alphys called out upon landing on the concrete surface, and let there be light. The basement floor was small, but Alphys had some strange knack of making small spaces look larger. A workbench lay straight ahead, surrounded by crude notes in chicken scratch and whiteboards displaying complex mathematics. The workbench itself was stacked with gadgets, wires, loose screws, nuts and bolts, opened packets of instant noodles, pizza boxes, burger boxes and sandwich
wrappers – some of which still had food left uneaten. To the left was a dressing screen with a single, white lab coat draped over the corner. Five supposed inventions by Alphys stood by the walls, all of them of varying sizes and hidden under white sheets.

Over the workbench, a giant screen sparked to life, playing one of Alphys’s many Japanese animations in her collection – which had drastically expanded upon reaching the surface world. Unfortunately, Dear Dr Alphys had forgotten which one had been playing previously… and where it was up to.

“Is this another of your anime?” Asgore asked, staring up at the screen. “It looks rather nice—” His eyes widened with sudden comprehension. “Oh my goodness!”

The white’s in Sans’s eyes shrunk to the size of pixels. His toothy grin formed the closest thing he would ever achieve to a frown. “Jeez Louise…” he breathed under the sound of talking girls. He could not understand their language, but the subtitles were on, and the things they were suggesting were enough to shiver his timbers.

Dr Alphys clutched her head, her face went red. “Oh my god!” She darted for the bench, almost tripping on her summer dress. “NO! No no no no no no no!”

Toriel cringed. “Gracious, that cannot be legal,” she implored, blocking most of the screen with her hands. Through her fingers, she made out something that looked like a lollipop. At least she thought it was a lollipop.

Alphys, hyperventilating, pulled open drawers filled to the brim with circuit boards, switches, and wires. “Gotta turn it off! Gotta turn it off! Gotta turn it off!” She went to the benchtop and swept away components and food packages. The barely legal Japanese schoolgirls/ninjas/robots/sharks/guys were taunting her with their playful giggling. “Where’s the remote? Where’s the remote? Where did I leave it?”

Papyrus squinted closer at the screen. “What’re they doing with—?”

Undyne covered Papyrus’s eye sockets. “You don’t wanna know, Papyrus!”

“Hey, who turned out the lights?” Papyrus asked, standing there, offering no resistance.

The manic scientist found the remote inside a greasy pizza box, next to a single, untouched, cold slice of anchovy, tuna, pickle, and onion pizza. She snatched the remote, nearly dropping it in the process, and pressed the stand-by button. The jumbo-sized monitor went off, and so did the torture to everyone’s eyes.

Shaking, the former royal scientist from the Underground breathed deeply, setting the remote flat on the workbench. “I’m sorry you had to see that. L-Let’s never speak of this again,” she said, wiping her forehead with the back of her hand.

Sans gestured with the ‘okay’ hand signal – the tips of the thumb and index together, and the three remaining fingers raised. “Okey dokey.”

Toriel dropped her furry, white hands. “Agreed.”

“Let’s not speak of what again?” Papyrus asked, still blinded by Undyne.

“You don’t wanna know…” she echoed, letting go of his skull. Papyrus blinked at the bright light.

The doctor adjusted her spectacles and cleared her throat. “So a-anyway. Welcome to my new lab.
Feel free to look around, but please don’t touch anything. Most of it is untested, unstable technology.” She shifted her gaze to the side. “Especially the remote control – I mean, it’s not dangerous or anything, ju-just don’t go anywhere near the stand-by button.” She walked across the room toward the dressing screen, pulling her hat off her head. “No peeking. Especially you, Undyne.”

Alphys disappeared behind the screen. Her summer dress and hat appeared on the end opposite to the coat before that was pulled out of view. She walked out from behind it, fastening the top button of her lab coat. Just like that, Dr Alphys was back in action, transformed into the scientist everyone was more familiar with. She straightened her collar and tugged the sleeves down as if to say “Let’s get to work.”

The company spread out across the room, inspecting what there was to inspect. They could only imagine what was behind those covers. Sans skimmed across the workbench. On the near corner, a shiny sphere with a series of buttons caught his attention. “What’s this?” asked Sans as he picked up a weird looking device. For such a small thing, it was surprisingly heavy.

“I said don’t touch anything,” Alphys clarified. “That’s a super unstable experiment on chaos theory I’m working on.”

Sans examined the device, rolling it around. “Chaos theory, huh? What does it do?” He found a button on the side and pressed it. Nothing happened.

“That’s what I’m trying to figure out,” Alphys answered. She twirled her finely trimmed moustache and tipped her bowler hat. “But when I do, by Jove, it’ll be a jolly good breakthrough in science, my old chap!”

Sans passed the device back and forth in his tiger paws, treating it like a basketball. “Doesn’t seem to do much, if you ask me,” he said. “I guess it’s a bit of an… oddball.”

_Ba-dum pish!_

“Sans!” Papyrus, the taller of the tiger brothers, scolded.

Sans winked his yellow, cat eye. “Oh, c’mon Papyrus, that joke was… purr-fect.”

_Ba-dum pish!_

“Will you stop that?” beseeched Papyrus.

Sans responded, “I’ll stop when you stop smiling.”

“I’m not smiling, brother.”

“Then what’s that under your whiskers then?”

“An upside-down frown.”

Toriel, the purple dinosaur, stepped forward. “Sans, please,” she said, “as hilarious as your puns are, can we please move on?”

Asgore added, “I would like to continue too if you do not mind, ribbit.” His pale chin expanded and grew against his green, slimy skin.

“Sure thing, Tori.” Sans dropped the device back on the workbench. The same button he pressed got
caught on a wrench as it landed. “So, anyway,” Sans the skeleton began to inquire, rubbing his bony hands together, “you were gonna show us something, Al?”

Dr Alphys walked over to one of the blanket-draped machines and clutched the cover with yellow claws. “One of the only things I’ve managed to get working…” She pulled the cover off. Taller than Asgore, the machine comprised of a glass cylinder with a door, big enough for one person to stand inside. Attached to the right was a terminal, complete with a series of monitors, keyboards, buttons, dials, levers, and switches.

“Oh my god,” Papyrus said in awe. “It’s…! It’s…! I have no idea what that is.”

Alphys explained. “This is my prototype atomising defusing propelling instant transporta – actually, you might have a little trouble remembering the whole name, so you can just call it the teleporter.”

“A teleporter?” Undyne remarked. Her hands went to her hips. “Wait, you built a teleporter?”

“As I said,” Alphys began, “it’s a prototype. Ever since we left the Underground, all the new anime I’ve watched has given me some much needed inspiration. Case in point: this invention was inspired by Trek Wars. The heroes have this cool teleporter which worked by deconstructing all their cells and reconstructing them back on the ship, but in episode nine of season two they’re stuck on a planet with high magnetism so they – and I’m getting carried away again, aren’t I? The point is: it’s a teleporter.”

Toriel folded her arms. “And you think we could use this… teleporter… to get us to wherever Frisk has gone?”

Dr Alphys pushed her glasses back up. “It, uh, I think it could.”

Papyrus inspected his distorted reflection on the glass surface of the cylinder compartment. “Ooooh, shiny.”

Undyne stepped forward, holding her hands out in front of her and shaking her head. “Hold on a second here,” she inquired, eyeing her scientist girlfriend questionably. “Alphys, why didn’t you build something like this back in the Underground? We could’ve escaped to the surface ages ago.”

Alphys looked up at Undyne. “Because…” A bead of sweat dripped onto the frame of her spectacles. “I didn’t have access to plutonium in the Underground?” Undyne tucked her hands in her pockets and narrowed her stare on Alphys, obviously unconvinced. Alphys confessed, “Because I didn’t have access to plutonium?”


“Off the Internet…? Cheap…? At double-u double-u double-u dot totally-not-the-black-market dot com?”

“Alphys, you can’t just—!”

Asgore pushed his way in-between them, separating them with his strong paws. “Now, now, girls, let’s not argue. We should focus our attention on getting Frisk back. Dr Alphys, how does this machine work?”

“How it works is, it instantly transports things from one place to another. Because we monsters are comprised of mostly magic, this’ll be easier for us. The subject’s molecular structure is broken down
into trillions of atoms and taken to the co-ordinates chosen. At the destination, the subject is pieced back together again, as good as new.”

Papyrus used his own logic to piece the information together. “Kind of like a jigsaw puzzle?”

Alphys pointed at Papyrus. “Yes, exactly!” She had to admit, Papyrus had ways of understanding the world in which she could only dream of harnessing. She wished she did not have to think about everything so much, like the skeleton before her.

“And it actually works?” Asgore asked. “We can use it to get to where Frisk is?”

Alphys replied, “In theory, yes.”

“In theory?”

“I’ve never tested it. Remember, I’ve stopped testing on living things. However, my design and calculations are perfect, so it should work.”

Toriel asked, “And if it does not?”

Alphys paused. “Let’s just say…” She cleared her throat. “The jigsaw puzzle could get a little scrambled… irreparably… but that shouldn’t happen!”

The scientist stepped over to the control panel; with a flick of a switch, the screen buzzed to life. The black monitor showed digits of green that only Alphys could understand. She typed in several lines on the keyboard. The words ‘destination confirmed’ blinked on the monitor and the glass compartment sparked to life with a surge of electricity.

“Also,” Alphys explained, “I should mention that I haven’t tested the accuracy of the transportation. I always thought that where I programmed the co-ordinates is where we’d end up no matter what, but that might not be the case. So, there may be some precision issues. It’s kind of like firing a slingshot; sometimes you hit, sometimes you miss.”

“And if we miss?” Toriel queried.

“Well, if we miss… it’s a… long way down to the ground, I suppose. And if I aim too high, we may end up leaving the Earth’s atmosphere—” She immediately hit the power switch, turning it off. “Okay, this is a bad idea, I’m sorry, I have no idea what I was thinking.”

Toriel sighed. “It was not a bad idea. You had good intentions, but this is not worth the risk.”

“I know.” Alphys took her glasses off and rubbed her eyes. “I just wanted to help, that’s all.”

Undyne knelt down and wrapped an arm around Alphys’s shoulders. “It’s okay. We’ll think of something, together.” This brought out a brave smile from the disheartened scientist.

Toriel drew her eyes to one of the many hidden machines. Now that she thought about it, the one she looked at did not look square at all, but rather, human shaped. The silhouette of the head and shoulders beneath the white cover were unmistakeable.

“What is that? A person?” Toriel asked, pointing toward it.

“No!” Alphys abruptly answered, looking embarrassed. “That’s… a little something extra I’ve been working on in my spare time. It’s a private thing.”

The figure under the blanket stirred, raising the head and pulling the shoulders back with mechanical
whirling. Two blue lights, where the eyes were, pierced the sheet. Whatever it was, it spoke.
“Konichiwa.”

The ex-royal scientist’s jaw hit the floor. “Oh no, you’re not supposed to activate now!” Her hands
waved hysterically at the figure. “Go back to sleep!”

The unknown figure lurched forward unnaturally. The cover rolled off. Alphys screamed. A robotic
teenage schoolgirl with big, pink anime eyes and long, flowing pink hair and two little cat ears
hobbled toward them on unbending legs. The arms were stretched out like Frankenstein’s Monster –
one mechanical and the other covered and painted a pale skin colour.

“My name is Mew Mew, but my friends call me… Mew Mew,” the robot girl introduced herself
with a grainy voice. Her mouth movements were not synchronised with her speech. “I have mind
control powers and like snail ice cream.”

Asgore’s mouth tightened into an apprehensive smile. “Yet another of your anime, Doctor?”

Alphys felt the sweat trickle down her neck. All eyes were on her. “Mew Mew Kissy Cutie looks a
lot better than this, I guarantee you.”

Mew Mew scanned the room with those emotionless, dull eyes that never blinked. Every movement
she made was conveyed by shifting gears. Her head twisted a full revolution on her twig neck. Her
scanners picked up the movements of six people in the general vicinity.

She stepped gingerly through them, her scanners locked on her chosen target. Papyrus looked
uncomfortable as the anime girl drew near. “Moshi moshi,” Mew Mew grinded out a canned
response. “I don’t think we’ve met.”

Papyrus leaned back, avoiding eye contact. “I… don’t think I want to.” There was the uncanny
valley, and then there was Mew Mew.

There was a three second pause before Mew Mew laughed with a one second recording that looped,
made creepy by the way she remained as solid as a statue and her eyes stayed open and still. “You’re
funny.” Another three second pause. “My name is Mew Mew. What’s your name?” Papyrus glanced
left and right, avoiding Mew Mew’s unyielding stare. He took a step backwards only for the robot to
close the gap. He babbled under his breath and managed to get out the first syllable of his name
before Mew Mew interrupted. “I like that name. It’s so cute,” she said.

Papyrus looked out the corner of his eye sockets at the doctor. “Alphys, I have a nagging feeling that
something went very not-right here.”

Alphys shrugged. “Yeah. It’s not that easy to build a robot, apparently.” Except when you have a
ghost to work around.

Mew Mew leaned closer with her constant, unwavering smile and dead eyes. Her cat ears appeared
to twitch. “Do you like pocky? What’s your favourite subject in school? Do you like cats? Do you
like my cat ears? Do you like me? I like you.”

With every question, Papyrus took a step back. After a few steps his back was against the wall and
Mew Mew was inches away from his face. The sweat broke on Papyrus’s dome.

“Alphys,” Papyrus called out, “what’s she doing?”

“She’s, well, she’s dating you, just like in the simulator,” Alphys explained. “Mew Mew is gauging
you based on your responses. Your rating is pretty high, she’s beginning to like you.”
“So how do I get her to not like me?”

“Actually, you can’t. I programmed her so that she likes you no matter what.”

“Be careful, bro,” Sans said from the side-lines, leaning against the workbench. “I think she smells your fear.”

“Funny you should say that, Sans,” Alphys stated, “I did fit her with an olfactory system.”

Expression unchanging, Mew Mew loudly vacuumed some of Papyrus’s scent up the tubing in her nose. Her entire body vibrated as a processoranalysed the particles in the air. She stopped shaking and said, “Mmmmm, you smell like…” There was another pause. Mew Mew said “Bone” in an automated male voice.

Papyrus screamed. He pushed Mew Mew out the way and sprinted across the basement floor. “Get her away from me! She’s pure evil!”

Mew Mew’s shameless copy gave chase on stiff legs, giggling all the while. “Oooh, tag! My favourite game!” All of Papyrus’s actions just served to increase his score. Now, she was truly, deeply in love with the skeleton. Papyrus could try to escape, but all his attempts would be in vain. Wherever he goes, she would be there. She would follow him to the ends of the Earth. They would be together forever.

The terrified Papyrus reached the teleporter and slammed his gloved hand on the switch, bringing it to life.

“Papyrus,” Undyne shouted. “What’re you doing?”

“Getting as far away from that as possible,” Papyrus replied. The glass cylinder sparked to life. Papyrus swung the door to it open. “So long, sucker!”

Alphys lunged forward. “Papyrus, no!”

Undyne reached for Alphys. “Wait! Stop!”

Before Alphys could reach the skeleton, Papyrus leapt into the compartment and, in a flash of light, was whisked away instantly. Dr Alphys jumped too late and fell inside, where the teleporter took her away as well.

“Alphys! Papyrus!” Undyne charged for the teleporter. “Wait for me!”

Undyne ran into the spark of energy, and just like that, it took her away to whoever knows where. Only four people stood in the basement now: Toriel, Asgore, Sans, and the horrible personification of a video game character.

Mew Mew was still lurching toward the teleporter, to the last known location of her new boyfriend, moving at a snail’s pace. “Oooh, Hide-and-seek! My favourite game!”

Asgore and Toriel looked at each other. “So…” the former started with a smile, “shall we?”

Toriel found it in her heart to return the smile. “No turning back now.” Toriel turned to Sans, who until now, was leaning against the workbench, watching the spectacle play out. “Are you coming, Sans?” she asked.

“You guys go on ahead,” the short skeleton replied. “I’ll be right behind you.”
“Okay, Sans.” Toriel faced Asgore once more. “Come on, Asgore, let us find Frisk and bring them home.”

Suddenly, Toriel took Asgore by the hand and led him into the teleporter. All fear and doubt cast aside. Toriel vanished, followed by her ex-husband. Two individuals remained. Sans watched as Mew Mew approached the cylinder. He reached into his hoodie, procured a pair of sunglasses, opened them up with a flick of the bony wrist, and slipped them over his eye sockets.

The shabby robot entered the teleportation field, oblivious to the fact that machines and massive surges of electricity just do not mix. “Come out come out wherever you—” As soon as the currant passed through her, running through her circuits and systems, she began to shake violently. “Arrrrrrreeeeeee!” The energy overloaded her systems. Her limbs flailed wildly. In her final moments, she laughed like a maniac. Both she and the teleporter exploded.

And then there was one. Sans pushed his sunglasses down, gazing over the top of them. There was a black outline on the wall the shape of the teleporter as it previously was. The teleporter, or what was left of it, smouldered with black smoke. It was impossible to tell what was the teleporter and what was Mew Mew. One of the robot’s charred cat ears lay at his feet.

“Now that’s what I call a cat-astrophe.”

*Ba-dum pish!*

“Looks like Alphys’s teleporter and robot won’t be working ani-more.”

*Ba-dum pish!*

Sans flicked the glasses off and placed them back in his pocket. “Okay, okay, enough jokes. Time to get a move on.” He reached inside the pizza box and grabbed the last slice. While he ate the cold pizza, Sans walked to and up the stairs, switching the lights off as he went.
There's a Way

Tray stacked with food. “You get unlimited refills. Feel free to help yourself.”

The rattling of keys. “Second floor, room number lucky thirteen. Enjoy your stay.”

Heavy steps. “Sorry for stepping on your nice, clean floor.”

Gentle pat on the back. “Good luck out there, kiddo.”

From the void of nothingness, Frisk heard voices, one after another; all unrelated to each other. Frisk felt their bodyweight return, and it was heavier than they remembered. First, it was cold, then it went hot. Frisk inhaled and felt the hot air fill their lungs, burning like fire. Their hip was uncomfortable against a solid floor. They were lying on their left side, on something flat, soft and damp. Their right hand had been tucked under their left cheek.

A voice, male, pierced the darkness. “Could this really be a human?” Could that be Asgore?

“There hasn’t been a human ‘round these parts for centuries,” another voice, female, followed. Toriel?

Frisk forced their eyes open. They made out a shabby towel in which they lay on, sprawled out across a bare, wooden floor. It was not their bed, far from it. A wooden cupboard stood against a wooden wall. Shadows danced across the timbers. Footsteps – two sets, pacing around – were loud upon the wood.

“A human could never find their way to this place on their own,” the first voice – not deep like Asgore’s, but seasoned with a farmer’s drawl – spoke. “This one must’ve been brought here.”

“So that can only mean that brute of a former emperor’s son wanted this one.” Toriel’s voice was not Toriel’s voice at all. It was too country, too rustic. “Poor thing, must’ve been so desperate to get away that they fell into the river… and almost died doing so.”

“Good thing I decided to go out when I did.”

Slowly, Frisk slumped onto their back, feeling like a metric tonne. Everywhere on the towel was wet, and they themselves were soaked to the bone. Wooden rafters towered above. Frisk tilted their head up and got a glimpse at the two in the room. They struggled to make out the pair through blurry eyes. Pink sunlight beamed through the window in front of them. The silhouette of the man was dripping, forming shiny puddles around his feet.

“But, goodness, Sam,” the lady continued, pacing back and forth, “Are you sure you did the right thing? I mean, don’t get me wrong, you saved this human’s life, but…”

“I couldn’t just leave them driftin’ there, Rita,” The man – known as Sam – retorted. “You know that.”

“I know,” Rita said. “But what are we going to do now? We’ve stayed outta all this conflict for so long. If they find out that we’re hiding this one, we’ll all be dragged back to the castle. And besides, how do we know this human isn’t dangerous?”

Frisk tried to heave themselves up. The lady monster, Rita, turned their head, noticing that their unexpected guest had regained consciousness.
“Sam, look,” Rita said, pointing in their direction. “The human’s awake.”

Sam spun around and faced Frisk. “They are? Oh, thank goodness. I was beginning to worry for a second.”

The two individuals before Frisk were human in shape, but wrapped from head to toe in bandages. Two pairs of soft, glowing eyes peeked out from between them. The man monster wore a straw hat, a pair of faded blue dungarees, and sturdy, brown boots – all of them wet. The lady monster had a head of flowing blonde hair that fell upon her shoulders with a red ribbon tied at the side. She wore a white, flora-patterned muumuu and a pair of slip-on shoes.

Mummies? Smells like bandages.

Placing two palms against the floor, Frisk pushed themself up. Their legs wobbled as they took their weight, almost like they could snap at any moment. Water ran down their face, leaking from the hair plastered to their head.

The male mummy rapidly stepped forward with arms outstretched. “Whoa, easy there, little ‘un. You’ve just had a near-death experience. You’ll pull through, but your body might be a little drained.”

Frisk almost toppled, but managed to remain upright. They felt the gravity pull heavy on their gut, bringing about a nasty bout of nausea; Frisk felt like they had swallowed a rock. They hunched forward and braced themself on their knees. Standing felt like a chore. In fact, everything felt like a chore, from their breathing down to their balance.

Sam squinted his beaming eyes, unsure as to whether the child’s sickness was down to nearly drowning, his and Rita’s unusual appearance, or a mixture of the two. “Now, I know you must’ve been through a lot, and you most likely find our appearances a little weird, but, I assure you, my wife and I are decent people.” Sam turned and faced his wife, who nodded at what her husband said. Sam turned back. “You’ve got nothing to be…” Sam had an entire speech written out in his head as to why the human should not panic, but that speech got shredded and burned into oblivion when the human child extended a hand to them.

The human told them their name was Frisk and that it was nice to meet them.

After some brief reluctance, Sam took Frisk’s hand and shook it. “It’s… nice to meet you too, Frisk.”

The child looked around, finding themself in a single-room cabin. The room they were in was the only one, yet it was spacious enough to hold everything. A stone fireplace took up the far wall, opposite the front door. A double bed, thick with blankets, stood against the left-hand wall. There was a table and two chairs in the corner, opposite an oven that has seen heavy use, and yet looked as clean as day one. Out the open door, Frisk made out the ripples of a nearby river, the same one they were most likely fished out of. Frisk asked where they were.

“You’re in our house, all the way up here in the Outerworld.” The male mummy pointed a bandage-wrapped finger at his chest. “The name’s Sam.” He nodded to the other mummy. “This here’s my wife, Rita.”

“Sam an’ Rita, the folks used to call us.” Rita said, adding a little extra spice to her rustic accent. “Gotta nice ring to it, if you ask me. You feeling alright, hon’?”

Frisk answered that they felt a little dizzy, followed by a friendly greeting aimed toward Rita. Frisk extended their hand and approached her for a handshake, but as they took their first step, they
stumbled and fell against the foot of the double bed. Their head felt as light as air and an irritating buzz rose in the ears.

While Sam supported the human, Rita shot across the cabin to a stool budged in the corner. “Don’t exert yourself,” Rita urged as she grabbed the stool, set it down by the human, and helped Sam ease them down onto it. “Sit and rest, regain your strength.”

As the heaviness returned to their skull and the ringing subsided by a few decibels, Frisk asked what happened, and how they ended up where they were, in their house.

Sam opened a hatch from the cupboard, grabbed a dry towel and wrapped it around Frisk’s shoulders. He explained, “I found you driftin’ downstream while I was out doing some fishing.”

Rita shook her covered head, swinging her curls off her shoulders. “Even though there’s absolutely no fish to catch,” she said.

“Hey, you try keeping up the same hobby for fifty years. Besides, fishing is easy enough, you throw the hook out and then enjoy the quiet time while you wait for the line to tug, which never happens in these parts. Until now.” He stretches his hand out in front of him, visualising the scene. Water dripped downwards from his bandaged appendage. “I’m sittin’ there, enjoying some cider and a sandwich, when suddenly the line snags. At first, I thought it might’ve snagged on a loose rock or something. But then I look down and see you down there, little ‘un, your sleeve caught on the hook. I immediately dove down there and pulled you out of the water myself – didn’t know you were a human until I got you into the house.”

After hearing Sam’s story, Frisk thanked him for saving their life.

Sam gently patted Frisk on the back. “Ah, it was nothin’, kiddo.”

Despite being more drowned than a drowned rat, Frisk’s mouth felt like two pieces of sandpaper scraping together. They grunted that they were super thirsty.

“I’ll go get you some water, there’s plenty.” Rita walked over to the second cupboard beside the stove, pulled it open and retrieved a clay jug. “Be right back.” And she walked out the door.

Sam said, “Well, while you’re here, you better—”

“Hide!” Rita barged back in.

Sam shot up. “Hide?” he repeated.

Rita pointed at the door with her free hand. “Soldiers! The Emperor’s soldiers! Lots of them. Coming this way, searching the river.”

Soldiers? Frisk jumped from their stool and tried to run on legs that failed them the second they took their weight. Luckily, Sam was there to catch the child before they could collapse.

“Don’t panic, little ‘un. We won’t let them take you away,” Sam assured. “Now, let’s find you a place to hide.” Sam scanned the vicinity of his house and laid his glowing eyes on the bed. “Of course.” While escorting the shaking human around the bed, Sam addressed his wife – talking in a hushed tone. “Rita, mop the floor, pretend that you’re cleanin’. Don’t leave any traces.”

As instructed, Rita took the wet towel lying in the middle of the room and used it to soak up the puddles. “And you’ve left your fishing rod out by the river.”
“I know, I know, I’ll sort it out,” Sam said while he helped Frisk down onto their belly. He turned to the child and whispered, “Crawl under there and be as quiet as possible. We’ll handle this.”

Frisk nodded their head and pulled up the covers; the bedsheets were wide enough that the edges touched the floor. Frisk crawled under the mattress to a dark world of dust, white fluff and threads – all of which clung to their damp clothes. Under the bed, the edges of the sheets burned bright. The air tasted stale in Frisk’s dehydrated mouth. With no vision of the outside world, all they had to go on was what they could hear.

The patter of fast steps against wood moved all around. Two sets, Sam an’ Rita’s, and a whole load of floor scrubbing. The lady mummy had done away with the towel and was now using a humble mop, making it appear that she was partaking in some ordinary housework. She grabbed the stool and set it down in its original place in the corner. The two sets of footsteps became one as someone, possibly Sam, stormed out to retrieve the fishing rod.

There was the tiniest gap between the floor and the cover, Frisk edged forward and peeked out through the corner of their eye. They could make out the floor – both inside and out – the slightest sight of water, and a pair of work boots. The boots walked over to the river, stopped, and then turned and headed back toward the door.

Sam was about two steps away from the cabin, standing upon the deck, when someone shouted out, “Excuse me.”

The pair of brown boots came to a halt, then turned around. “Oh, good afternoon, sir,” Sam greeted with his recognisable twang. “Haven’t seen any Monster Military ‘round these parts in a long time. Starting routine patrols now?”

Shuffling metal drew closer. “No. We’re on important business, as ordered by his highness, Emperor Maxus himself. I take it you’ve been around this river as of recent.”

Frisk breathed as slowly as possible, and dared not to budge a muscle. Some of the dust fluttered around, tickling their nose and irritating the throat. Frisk only breathed slower to combat the need to cough.

“What makes you suggest that?” Sam asked.

“For starters, I couldn’t help but notice the fishing rod you got there.” The shuffling metal stopped. A pair of silver greaves stomped into view on the deck. “Made it yourself?”

“Yes sir, I did.” Sam stuck the rod end into the ground and leaned on it. It was essentially a stick with a piece of string tied at the end. “Built it from scratch.”

“I didn’t think any fish existed in these parts.”

“They don’t. I’m just runnin’ out of pastimes.” Followed by a hearty chuckle.

Rita continued to scour the premises with her mop, scrubbing vigorously. She created the illusion that she was a busy, busy woman.

“I don’t suppose one of these untouched pastimes happens to be swimming, by any chance? You look a little wet around the wrappings.”

Around the river, many dragging, silver figures marched with the direction of the flow. An entire squadron of armed soldiers, all hunting for one target, and Frisk was that target. Frisk already knew, deep down, that their determination would not pull them out of this mess, but they tried anyway.
Like they always say: fourth time’s the charm. After closing their eyes and reaching into their soul, they reopened them to find themself at the beginning of their new adventure, with regained energy and renewed spirit. They felt like they were ready for anything.

“I’m going to have to ask you some questions.”

The guard’s commanding voice dragged Frisk back to their hiding spot under the bed in a cabin on a floating island. Suddenly, they felt weak once again.

“What kind of questions?” Sam asked.

“Castle Highkeep has recently experienced a… prison break. A very dangerous convict has escaped, last spotted falling into the moat. We have reason to believe that their body may’ve washed up in these parts. Have you seen anyone who looked odd?”

“That depends. What does this convict look like?”

“About this high; longish brown hair; pale skin; blank features; wearing a striped shirt.”

The bandage-wrapped husband paused for a few moments, took a few paces around the decking, and then answered, “You know, I think I might’ve seen who you were talkin’ about. I was out fishin’ a little while back when I spotted the creepiest lookin’ thing floatin’ down the river. It startled me so hard that I tumbled in myself.”

“Can you describe this creepy looking thing to me?”

“It’s was too blurry to tell; it was pretty deep down to get a good look at it. I think it looked blue… that’s all I can say. I was so shocked that I rushed back home to tell my wife, and she gets on my back that I trailed water into the house. But, anyway, if that was who you were looking for, then they’ll be somewhere further down the river by now.”

There was a break in the conversation as the soldier of the Monster Military took a step closer to the entrance. Frisk pushed themself away from the gap. They wished that the guard would just leave already. He should have everything that he needed to come to the conclusion that the human target was not here, and yet he remained.

“I have the right,” the guard said, “as granted by my emperor, to enter any premises I see fit until I am satisfied with my investigation. Mind if I take a little look inside?”

Sam mumbled something, followed by a quick step aside. “No, of course not.”

A few more heavy knocks vibrated through the flooring as the guard stepped inside. Rita stopped. Only one pair of footsteps became relevant now.

The guard apologised, “Sorry for stepping on your nice, clean floor.”

“It’s okay,” Rita responded, “that’s what it’s used for.”

Frisk froze as something snagged at their brain. *Sorry for stepping on your nice, clean floor*. Why did that phrase sound so familiar? They could have sworn that they had heard it before, in that exact same tone. But where exactly?

Frisk remembered, and was struck with a serious notion that they were not safe where they were.
The guard treaded as lightly as he could manage in his heavy armour. Not much to see when your daily life consists of maintaining an elaborate garrison. The two monsters kept their glowing gazes on him as he stepped around the bed. The shack had all the essentials: a bed, an oven, and fireplace. On the outside, there was a privy on one side and a patch of farmland on the other, overflowing with enough crops to feed five times the amount of the homeowners.

He crossed to the other side of the bed. Not much to see there except the rest of the shiny floor and a bedside table. The guard glanced across the room, seeing his colleagues continue to comb the river, searching for the one thing that might actually make his lord and master crack a grin. If he did not pick up the pace, he would get left behind.

The guard turned and marched for the exit. “Thank you for your compliance.”

“No problem,” Sam said from the doorway. “Have a nice day, sir.”

The guard almost reached the door when, all of a sudden, he stopped, having spotted something out-of-place. “Wait.” He craned his head to the left, catching sight of the lone stool bunched in the corner. “You clean your chairs as well, madam?”

“Excuse me?” Rita asked.

The guard pointed to the stool. “That stool is wet. Looks like someone sat on it.”

“Oh, yes, that was me,” Sam said quickly. “I was so shocked that I needed to sit down for a bit and get my heart under control.”

The monster in the silver armour examined the stool closer. The patch of dampness on the wood was already starting to soak up, but the size was still distinguishable. There was no way that the monster mummy could have made that patch, it was too small. Now, if something smaller had sat on it, something like a child, like the human they were hunting, then that would make sense.

He turned back to the cabin interior, and his eyes drifted straight to the bed. Enclosed all around with blankets. The number one hiding spot for any frightened child has and forever shall be, under the bed. He turned and stepped closer toward it, tingling with anticipation. Could this be it?

Sam an’ Rita watched in silence. Too tense to act. Sam tightened his grip around the fishing rod. Rita kept her eyes locked on the guard; outwardly, calm, but inwardly, wracked with pressure.

The guard knelt down and could feel the presence of a human child shaking beneath the mattress. He slid his metallic fingers under the sheet, wrapped each finger around it individually, pulled the cover up and found… nothing.

The guard grumbled. No human. No human soul. None of this so-called ‘determination’. Not even a speck of dust.

“You are thorough indeed, madam,” the guard grumbled some more, facing the wife mummy.

Rita placed one hand against her hip. “I… do what I can.”

Standing up, the guard faced the outside world again. Unfortunately for him, his entourage had continued without him. Jogging in full, heavy armour was not easy or pleasant by any means. “Thanks again for your patience,” he rambled as he rushed out the door. “Enjoy the rest of your day.”

Rita went to Sam’s side as he waved at the sprinting guard. “Hope you catch who you’re looking
for.”

The two mummies waited until the emperor’s guards were a long way in the distance before going back inside and closing the door behind themselves, confident that no Monster Military eyes were present. They both breathed a deep sigh of relief.


“The guards have gone,” Rita affirmed. “You can come out now.”

Slowly and silently, one of the hatches of the cupboard crept ajar. Tiny fingers gripped the sides. A head with soaking, brown hair peaked out. Frisk stepped out on wobbly legs. White dust was caked all over their face, clothes, hands and legs.

Rita cocked her head to the side. “Looks like we’re going to need more water. Still thirsty, hon’?”

Frisk smiled and nodded.
Unknown to Alphys, there was another kink in the teleporter that she did not consider, and that was speed. The time in which it took for one teleported individual to reach their destination differed from person to person. Despite being the third one to enter, Undyne was the first to exit, appearing in a flash of electricity.

One moment, Undyne was in the basement, chasing Alphys and Papyrus through the teleporter, the next, she was on a beach, gazing out at a clear sea.

“Huh? What happened?” Undyne asked herself as she turned up and down the length of the coastline, which carried on for miles in both directions. Her friends were nowhere in sight. In fact, no one was in sight. “Alphys?” she called out, confused. “Papyrus? Where are you guys?”

She glanced down at her body, remembering what her girlfriend said about jigsaws, fearing that she might have become a mishmash of pieces. Her hands came first, appearing in the right place, on the ends of her wrists. Head, firmly upright on shoulders. Legs, on the right way. She breathed easy, the jigsaw had been assembled properly.

Undyne turned around, the scene made her gasp in awe. Giant islands hovered in the distance, past a collection of palm trees from a nearby jungle. To the left, hilly fields of green. The one in the centre, looming higher above, was topped with the familiar shape of a castle. Undyne could only make out the tops of jagged trees from the island to the right of that one. Undyne had not spent long on the surface, but even she could tell that she was not on Earth anymore.

The former commander tasted the air, detecting a serious lack of sea salt, and knew right then that something was amiss. The beach had sand the colour of sand, and waters of blue, and tides of silver and white, and yet it was not a beach. Undyne knew what a beach looked, felt, sounded, and tasted like – she has seen one every day since leaving the Underground – but this one had nothing of what made a beach a real beach. She took a few steps along the coast to get her bearings. It was not until her fourth step did she realise how brittle the sand sounded, every step crunching like gravel. She stopped, knelt down, and grabbed a handful – rubbing the grains between her fingers.

“Strange…” Uncomfortably rough sand seeped through her digits. “It feels like… sawdust.”

Next, she approached the sea. The gentle tide sloshed around her ankles. She cupped a handful of water, feelings its coolness against her palms, took a sip and swigged it around her mouth. This seawater was not seawater at all, there was not a hint of salt within. It was fresh and clean, and quite refreshing.

Undyne turned back to the scene beyond. “Where am I?” she wondered. “Is this really the land from that book?”

A string of black smoke trailed high above, coming from somewhere within the jungle. Smoke meant fire. Either something bad was going down or there had to be someone out there, someone who could answer the questions preying on her mind. Undyne walked off the beach of substitute sand and drinkable seawater, and onto a dirt road between the coast and the trees. She walked for a way until they reached a road that broke off into the jungle, accompanied by a sign.

Large and decorative – and accompanied by an arrow below, pointing up the path – the sign had written on it in fancy handwriting:
Below that sign was a smaller one pointing in the opposite direction; written below it:

*That’s the sea. You can see it, *Si?*

*(I think that’s French for ‘yes’)*

Through the break in the trees, Undyne could make out the twisting path for about fifty yards. She considered that, as a lord, a man of prestige, this Grill must have had access to great knowledge, especially of news in the local area. Perhaps this guy had information on Frisk – or perhaps this guy was behind the whole abduction thing. If he was, then he had a lot to answer for. Either way, Lord Grill was the first person she had yet to meet in this strange land.

Undyne took the path through the jungle. Up close, the palm trees were so high that they could have touched the sky. As if the beach was not weird enough, it only got weirder the deeper she progressed into the jungle. The land, trees and foliage were more than enough to support life, and yet there was none. No cackling of seagulls from the seaside; no whistling from parrots above, or whoops and hollers of wildlife. Nothing but dead, unsettling silent all around, as if she were walking straight into a trap. She was surrounded by nature, and yet there was nothing natural about it.

The exit from the jungle came into sight, upon which, she found herself before a grated, bronze gate. Wedged between two twenty-foot high fences topped with spikes, the gate had two bears gilded into each door. Each one glared at Undyne with empty, angry eyes. A massive mansion stood before it, surrounded by the fence. Three stories tall and as wide as a ballpark, Bjornliege Manor looked lavish, but at the same time, old, almost ancient.

One metre to the right of the gate was a rectangular prism that was as a couple of feet taller than Undyne, and had a screen, speakers, and a button on the front. Undyne approached the monitor and caught her reflection in the blank surface, which further rectified that she had been properly put back together. She tapped on the screen, leaving a print, but nothing happened.

Her gaze turned to the button. “Should I…?” she whispered as she reached for it.

Pressing down the button created a small, buzzing sound. She kept it held for a few seconds and then let go. She turned back to the screen and waited. After several seconds, she was about to press the buzzer again until the screen flickered to life.

“Hello?” Undyne said as the person on the other side of the line materialised.

A doorman appeared… or maybe he was a waiter. The monster on screen was literally a weight with two googly eyes and stick limbs. A white blazer took up the lower half and a groomed, black wig took up the top half.

“Lord Grill’s Estate,” the weight monster said courteously through a none-existing mouth. His voice came out tinny on the speakers. “Estate your business.”

“Hey, open up,” Undyne replied, less than courteous, “I wanna meet this Grill guy. I need some answers.”

The doorman stumbled at the visitor’s tone. “First, it’s Lord Grill. Second, do you have an appointment booked, Miss?”

“To meet Lord Grill, Miss.”

“I can’t have arranged anything. I just got here.” Undyne shrugged her shoulders. “I don’t even know where the heck I am.”

“Regardless, I’m afraid to say that Lord Grill only takes reserved appointments.”

“I can’t just go inside?”

The doorman glanced to the left. “I don’t see anything scheduled on the list.” Then back to Undyne. “So, If you want to book an appoint—”

Undyne interrupted, “So I can see him right now.”

The doorman stumbled on his words. “I’m sorry?”

“You just told me there’s nothing on the list, so I should be all set, right?”

“You mean… you want to go in a meet Lord Grill right now…? Uninvited? Out of the blue?”

Undyne narrowed her gaze on the weight. “That’s what I’m suggesting, genius.” She folded her arms and rapidly tapped her foot on the ground.

“I can’t let you do that, Miss.”

“Why not?”

“I told you before.” The doorman cleared his throat. “You need to book an appointment.”

“I don’t wanna book an appointment, idiot, I wanna see him now.”

“Miss, you need an appointment—”

Undyne heaved an impatient sigh. “Is anything happening right now?”

“Excuse me?”

“Is there anything on the list?” Undyne pointed at the side of the screen. “Look at your list,” she said, sounding like she was addressing a five-year-old.

Grumbling, the doorman turned his hefty body slightly to the left. “Okay, I’m looking at it now.”

“Do you see anything on it for today?”

“Well, no, but—”

“Then this guy should have at least a few minutes to spare. Open the gate and let me talk to him.”

“Miss, his name is Lord Grill, show some respect. Also, this really isn’t a good time to be making house calls.”

“Why not?” Undyne said unpleasantly loud, feeling her blood beginning to boil.

The doorman answered, “He’s in the middle of important business right now.”

Undyne shoved her face into the monitor. “Are you kidding me? You tell me that now after saying there’s nothing on the list?” She grabbed the entire column and shook it wildly, almost tearing it off
its foundation. “You open this gate right now, darnit!”

The doorman kept his cool. “Miss, if you’ll please calm down, I can help you arrange an appointment—”


The weighty doorman continued, “It’s a simple procedure. We start with the initial screening which can take around three to four months to complete…”

Undyne threw her hands into the air. “This is ridiculous!”

“After which, you’ll be asked to complete two months’ worth of paperwork…”

“Stuff this! Take your paperwork and sit on it, dumbbell,” Undyne spat, literally. Dribbles of saliva flecked the monitor. “I’m coming in.” She caught the doorman’s words, urging her to reconsider her choice of action, as she stepped toward the gate. Her eye went upward and inspected the spikes.

Undyne considered her options. **Let’s see… I could jump the fence myself, but could there be some kind of projectile-launcher defence mechanism attached to those spikes? She neared the gate. I could use a few spears to… do what exactly? She wrapped a scally hand around the bear’s lower row of teeth. This gate doesn’t look very strong. I bet I could bash it – oh, wait, it’s open.**

Undyne applied a small amount of force and the bronze gate swung open on creaking hinges. Nothing stood in her way from her current position to the large, brown doors at the end on a fifty metre gravel path flanked on both sides by fountains and rose bushes. Two guards by the door, outfitted in hardened leather, watched lazily for the most part of a minute as the fish lady came closer and closer toward them.

She was thirty feet away from the door when it burst open, and the monster from the monitor raced out toward her. In person, he was half the size of Undyne, roughly that of Alphys or Sans. His hairpiece bounced up and down on his flat head. He ran pretty fast for such a wide fella, he must work out. “Miss,” the doorman called out, holding his hands out in front of himself, “I implore you. Lord Grill’s really busy at the moment.” A shiny nametag flashed on his blazer: **Jim.**

“Look here, Jimbo,” Undyne started. She stretched her arm out and effortlessly pushed Jim back by the forehead, all while continuing closer to Bjornliege Manor. “Just let me ask this guy a few questions, then I’ll go.”

Jim’s feet skidded against the gravel, struggling to find traction. His twig arms flailed in a feeble attempt to halt her advance, but her arm was twice as long as his. The guards by the door watched on, not saying a word or moving a muscle. The little scrap between the short weight doorman and the tall fish lady served as the most interesting thing to happen all month, and would be the talk around the watercooler for the next two weeks. Yeah, things moved that slowly in these parts.

“It’s just Jim; and it’s Lord Grill; and you don’t understand,” Jim pleaded. “Lord Grill gets really, really mad when things don’t go his way. He’s been especially uptight these last few days. I wouldn’t recommend talking to him at this moment in time.”

Undyne suddenly stopped, three steps away from the main entrance. She brought her hand to the top of Jim’s head and grabbed hold. “Oh?” She lifted him up to meet his eyes, then smiled like she meant it. “So maybe you’d like to answer my questions?”

It was at this moment that Jim – the humble and sometimes heavy-handed doorman – did not know
which side of this woman he found more terrifying: her angry side or her happy one. The sight of that humongous smile, full of yellow, razor-sharp teeth, made his thin limbs shake. He cursed the guards and their lack of urgency. “On… on second thought.” Jim chuckled nervously. Beads of sweat rained. “I think we can skip the initial assessment and the paperwork. If you’ll come with me, Miss…?”

“It’s Undyne.” Her smile diminished after she said her name. “Just Undyne.”

“If you’ll come with me, Miss Un-dine…”

“I swear…” Undyne pulled him closer until their eyes were an inch apart. “If you call me ‘Miss’ one more time…”

“If you’ll come with me… Un-dine… I’m sure Lord Grill can make an exception.”

“No! No! NO!” the lord of the manor, Grill, roared, wobbling both his abundant belly fat and the beige walls of his domain. All the hairs of his thick, brown fur stood up. “I told you once; I told you twice; I told you a million-billion-trillion times: that does not interest me anymore!”

His harem, made up of twenty-three wives, shrank and squealed before him, quivering in their skimpy garments. Lord Grill’s anger was not uncommon, but never a pretty sight and never easy to subdue.

Lord Grill, a six-and-a-half-foot tall grizzly bear, sat upon his favourite chair in his recreation room, surrounded by tables of food. He wore a frilly white shirt, a red vest with golden buttons ready to burst, and a black cape with patterned edges as red as blood. His pants and boots were the same colour as his cape, minus the crimson edgings. His seat of rich wood and plump cushions groaned under his ever-increasing weight. A great blaze roared from a nearby fireplace. Two guards stood stationed by the door.

Being in cahoots with the Emperor – especially the new one – had its perks, from his harem, to his land, to his manor, to the food piled up in mountains on the tables. The dishes beneath didn’t stand a chance. Grill snatched an organic leg of meat from the stack, smothered it with ketchup, and chomped into it, ripping off a piece bigger than his jaw could handle. Drops of red sauce stained his red vest, which used to be a different colour, now long lost to time and litres of ketchup. When he was mad – which took up a good portion of his day – eating helped to calm his nerves, or at least he liked to think that it did. His servants, wives, and guards speculated that eating did nothing to quell his rage, he just ate because he liked eating, as one would have guessed just by looking at him. Either way, eating was Grill’s favourite pastime, so whether it helped or not was irrelevant. He liked to eat, he had an excuse to eat, and he had a reason to not stop eating.

“But, my lord,” one of the grizzly bear’s wives – a bunny in a skimpy bunny outfit, so she had two pairs of ears and two fluffy tails – cowered. “We try so very hard each and every day to fill all your needs.”

Another chimed in; a penguin monster wearing a tuxedo. “Our one desire is to please you.”

A third, a turtle wearing a turtleneck, cried, “We would never want to disappoint you.”

Grill swallowed hard. His gulp was so powerful that it echoed off the walls. “Enough of your excuses. I think you’re all in need of some re-education.”
All the wives reacted badly to this – some screamed, others whimpered and cried. They begged to not be sent for re-education. Honestly, the less said about it, the better. They had been through it before, and they knew for a fact, that it was a fate worse than death – or at least, a fate worse that going to the dentist.

All of a sudden, the doors at the far end opened, followed by the meek figure of the lord’s most average, run-of-the-mill doorman. Grill could not remember whether his name was Tim, Kim, Jim, or Schrijnemakers-Maceachthighearna.

“Your lordship?” Jim, the doorman, said, tiptoeing into the room.

Lord Grill swung his leg of meat in rage, scattering ketchup everywhere. “What did I tell you about interrupting my private sessions?”

Jim jumped, startled. He cupped his hands over his twenty kilogram chest. “My deepest apologies, my lord, but we have a guest here who wishes to speak to you.”

Grill gnarled at his leg of meat like a starving dog. “Why are you wasting my time?” he asked with a full mouth. “Send them away immediately. I don’t take surprise visits.”

“That’s what I’ve been trying to do, but she just won’t go away, no matter—”

Grill’s face lit up. At first, it appeared that he might have started choking. “A woman?” He swallowed his mouthful, his anger having suddenly faded. No doubt he would pen that down to his ravenous eating habit. “Please, send her in. I would be interested in meeting this one.”

Jim nodded in confirmation. “R-right away, your lordship.” And retreated back from whence he came, faster than when he entered.

Lord Grill looked down the half-eaten leg – it looked like meat, tasted like meat, smelled like meat, felt like meat, but ultimately, it was not meat. In the Outerworld, where the lands were bountiful and self-sustaining, there existed no such thing. He had time for one more mouthful; he nibbled a tiny bit off and threw the leg back on the mountain, where he would finish it later. There were many half-eaten slabs of fake meat that he was meant to ‘finish later’.

Grill rubbed his paws together; the rings on each finger jingled off each other. He eyed his wives, who were all standing there, looking scared. “I didn’t say stop,” he suddenly snapped. The wives jumped to attention and prepared themselves for the routine that they had trained for years to master, one that they knew always calmed their master. They formed a perfect line, placed their hands on the hips on the wife in front… and did the conga around the expanse of the room. The routine was five steps, kick to the left, five steps, kick to the right, and repeat until either Lord Grill got tired or they did.

Attached to the lord’s vest was a collection of eight golden bells, one for each servant. Lord Grill plucked the third one on the left, rang it, and waited two seconds for the selected servant to appear before him, having slinked from a hidden door. “Fetch me my breath freshener,” Grill ordered “I wanted it ten seconds ago!” A moment later, he had it, and sprayed generous amounts into his gob.

The door to his domain opened once again. There, entering through the doorway, was the fine figure Lord Grill had been waiting for. The very first sight made Grill’s jaw drop. He might as well as told his harem to take a break, because he wasn’t going to notice them now. His mansion became a blur and all outside noises went dead as he was unable to break his gaze from the lady. The way she moved, how she carried herself so confidently, filled Grill with a desire he did not think he could ever fulfil… but he would try nonetheless.
Lord Grill rose and stepped graciously across the room, focused purely on the target and nothing else. With the amount of fat on him, it was a miracle that he could even breathe, let alone walk. His cape reached down to his ankles and fluttered in a less-than-elegant fashion.

The specimen only got more beautiful the closer he got. Tall and slender, just the way he liked it; smooth, scaly skin; and that red mane was the cherry on top. The woman’s face scrunched up as she caught sight of the conga line. “And I thought Alphys was into some weird stuff…” she muttered under her breath.

“I bid you welcome, young lady,” Lord Grill spoke in the most humble tone which he could muster. “What brings you to my humble home?”

The woman pulled away from the spectacle to point at the grizzly. “Are you that Grill guy?”

The corner of Grill’s mouth twitched. It had been too long since someone spoke his name without the ‘lord’ part. Already, this woman was off to a bad start, but he would be as patient as he could. “Lord Grill, I am. And you?”

“My name’s Undyne, and I—”

Grill shushed her. “Quiet, please. Allow me to savour that name.” He breathed deeply through his snout, allowed the name Undyne to roll around in his head. “Undyne…” he whispered, finding something alluring in the way it sounded. “Undyne… Your name in Undyne…”

Undyne raised a finger to say something. “I—”

Lord Grill reached out and placed a finger on her lips, stopping them in their tracks. “Shhhhh,” he cooed slowly and softly. “I just need another minute.” As if sampling a fine perfume, Grill continued to repeat her name, each time in a wanting manner.

Undyne’s eye twitched. She wanted to take that finger off with a single bite, but resisted the temptation. Already, this guy was a creep, but as of that moment, he had not committed any wrongdoings. She pushed it away and said, “Are you done yet?”

“Hold on…” His eyes remained closed a few more seconds, and then reopened on her, full of recognition. “Now I’m done. You and your name go together like honey on a ham.”

“Um… thanks?” In truth, Undyne had no idea what he just said, but decided to act flattered anyway.

The royal bear wrapped his blubbery arm around his guest’s shoulders and guided her toward his throne. “Let us take a seat,” he said, “there is so much that I wish to discuss with you.”

“I… just want some answers.” Undyne felt her scales crawl; his arm weighed heavy on her shoulders and made breathing that slight bit difficult. “I’ll be gone in a few minutes.”

“Then we better make every second count.” Lord Grill procured four bells from his vest and jangled them in one hand. “Servants. My royal couch!”

The mansion must be breeding manservants at this point, because two more marched in and lifted the concave royal seat for one out, while another pair replaced it with a royal seat for two. The royal couch had the exact same style as the throne – black wood with white cushions – although this one had seen much less use. There was an odd sense of fear ebbing from the couch, as if it was dreading the moment where it had to burden its master on its back. Grill took his place on the right side and Undyne sat down on the opposite armrest.
“Can I get you something to eat?” Grill offered. “A drink, perhaps? It can get so dry in these parts.”

Undyne was glancing at the dancers at the other end of the room. “I’m fine,” she said. Some of them were looking back. It was difficult to tell what emotions their eyes were portraying, it could have been either dread or pity. “Why are they dancing?”

“Because I wanted them to, they’re my wives,” Grill answered. He jammed his little finger into his ear and jiggled it about, getting at a pesky itch. “Their sole purpose is to fulfil my every wish.”

Undyne frowned. “That sounds a lot like slavery to me.”

“Yes, it does take a lot of bravery.” The grizzly bear pulled his finger out, inspected the tip, and then rubbed his paws together, his rings clanged. “Now, what would you like to ask me about?”

“First thing’s first,” Undyne said, facing him, “where am I?”

“You’re… in my manor.”

“No, no, I mean…” Undyne pointed down, toward the ground. “Where is here? What’s the name of the place we’re in right now?”

The fat lord leaned back, raising an eyebrow. “My dear girl, this is the Oasis of the Outerworld. The magical island, thousands upon thousands of feet above the Earth. Don’t you know that?”

Undyne turned away, allowing the new information to sink in. Toriel was right. She had reached the Land between Heaven and Earth, and it had a name: the Outerworld.

“Is something wrong?” asked Grill.

“No, I’m fine. It’s just that I’m kinda new here, to be honest.”

Lord Grill paused. “You’re new to the Oasis?”

“No, I’m new to this entire place.” There was another pause in the conversation. Undyne needed to be more specific. “I’m new to the Outerworld, if that’s what you call this place.”

The lord of Manor Bjornliege nodded, finally getting it. “Really? How interesting. We don’t get many new faces around here. Actually, we don’t get any new faces at all. I’m sure you’ll find a place where you can fit in around here.”

“I’m not exactly here by choice and I don’t plan on sticking around,” Undyne said. “I’m looking for a friend of mine.”

“I have plenty of friends on these islands.” Grill adjusted himself in his seat. His wives rolled their eyes at that statement. “Connections, too. I’m sure I can pull in a few favours.”

“That’s what I was hoping, especially since it was one of your people who brought them here in the first place. Have you heard of a human called Frisk?”

Lord Grill pulled a face like he had heard a humorous joke. “A human? Here?” He snorted a hard chuckle. “Don’t be silly, girl, there hasn’t been one of those around here since, well, ever.”

“You sure?” Undyne gave the lord a quick description of Frisk. “Nothing rings a bell?”

“If there was such a thing around these parts, I would be the first to know.”
“So, they’re not here and this had all been a waste of my time.” Undyne went to stand up. “I better keep looking.” Grill grabbed her by the shoulder and pulled her back down. “Hey, what’s the big idea?”

“What’s the rush? Why must you gallivant off so soon?” The bear leaned closer and propped his head on his elbow. “There’s still so much that you can learn here.”

“I’ve learned enough, thank you very much.”

She went to rise again, but the fat lord gripped her arm. “In that case, I wouldn’t mind learning a little about you.” His grip tightened, feeling the density of her bicep. “I mean, you’ve got such a strong body; I can see a six-pack under that tank top.”

Undyne went rigid. Every nerve in her body tingling with disgust. “What?” was all that she managed to get out.

Lord Grill continued. “And that hair. There’s something about red hair that I just adore, and I’ve never seen a shade as fiery as yours.”

_Innocent until proven guilty_, Undyne thought. She may not have been a soldier anymore, but her code remained strong. The sweat broke on her brow as she tried to combat all thoughts of violent tendencies toward this monster. _Innocent until proven guilty. Guilty until proven innocent – I mean – innocent until proven guilty._

“And that eyepatch. There’s something mysterious about it… and I can’t help but find that… so very, very attractive.” The noble leaned in close now. The minty freshener on his breath, mingled with meat, was so overwhelming that it could take down an elephant. “I could just gobble you up right now, sweetheart.”

Undyne jumped off the couch. “Whoa, whoa, whoa!” She squinted hard at Lord Grill. “Are you hitting on me?”

Lord Grill laid across most of the seat, halfway between sitting and lying. “I’d wouldn’t be honest if I said I wasn’t,” he said. “You’re a rare work of art and I want you all to myself.”

“You can forget it, pal,” Undyne argued back, “I already have a girlfriend.”

The wily grin on Lord Grill’s face shrank as his features slackened. He slowly rose, shaking, breathing out of tune, eyes wide with disbelief. He struggled to speak: “A… a-a g… gi-gir… girl… f-friend?”

“Yeah, a girlfriend.” Undyne proudly pointed her thumb at herself. “This lady is off-lim—”

Suddenly, Lord Grill fell to his knees and gripped Undyne by the thighs. “WHERE HAVE YOU BEEN ALL MY LIFE?”

This sudden change caught Undyne completely off guard. “H-hey! What’re you doing? Get off me!”

“You’re the one! You must be the one, the woman I’ve been waiting my whole life for,” the lord of Bjornliege shrieked. “We must get married, right here, right now!”

“What?” Undyne screamed. The pupil on her eye shrank into a pinpoint. “MARRIAGE? ARE YOU OUT OF YOUR FREAKING MIND?”

The lord rocketed to his feet. He pulled from his vest every single bell he had and clanged all eight of
them at the same time. The doors opened and all servants, with the exception of the doorman, Jim, entered. “Take all her measurements! Prepare her a dress! Prepare me a suit! Prepare the grand hall! Prepare the banquet! Prepare the invitations! Prepare everything! I want everything to be perfect for this occasion!”

Without warning, all eight servants descended upon Undyne, armed with tape measures like they were about to restrain her with them. Without her permission, they began to size her up. Four of them measured her shoulders to her wrists. Two were in front and the other two behind, measuring her body and legs.

“Get your hands off me! I’m marrying no one!” Undyne screams fell on deaf ears. She tried to pull away, but the servants were relentless. “Will anyone just listen to me?”

“And as for all of you,” Grill hissed, pointing a sharp finger at his harem, “permanent re-education, rehabilitation, and rehab!” The harem began to cry, their worst nightmare coming to light, and there was nothing they could do to stop it. “Guards, get them out of my sight!”

As instructed, the two guards stationed by the door advanced on the wives. They both pulled out leather whips, their lengths spiralling on the floor. They ordered them to move, and when they did not move fast enough, one of them cracked the whip at them, striking the floor dangerously close to their heels.

As the whip snapped, Undyne snapped. She had seen enough. “THAT’S IT!” More importantly, she had enough.

Everything kicked off in the span of two seconds. Undyne threw her right elbow back and then the fist forwards, knocking the wind out of the guts of those servants, followed by a swift elbow to the throat then a strike to the groin of the two on her left. She grabbed the arms of the servants in front and tossed them over her shoulders, slamming them into the guys behind and sending all four of them careening into the double doors, breaking it off their hinges. Undyne caught the second guard as his were raising his strong arm, ready to strike the women. She materialised a magical spear in her palm and hurled it. The spear flew straight and caught the sleeve of the guard. He flew straight across the room and crashed face first into the wall, his sleeve snagged on the tip.

The other guard staggered back. “What the—?”

Lord Grill swung around in shock. “What is the meaning of—?”

He did not get time to finish his sentence before Undyne rushed over to him and pushed him in his fat belly, knocking him flat. She willed another spear and brought it down between his legs, pinning his cape to the floor.

“You’ll stay down if you know what’s go for you,” she snarled through sharp teeth.

“G-guards! Guards,” he screamed as loud as he could, so loud that all four corners of his manor could hear him. What was once maddening love he held for the girl had turned into maddening terror. “Help me! She’s gone crazy!”

Undyne had gone crazy alright, like a shark that had detected blood in the water. The second guard with the whip rushed toward her, reeled his arm back, and then let it rip. He was fast, but Undyne was faster. She caught the whip end, inches away from taking her remaining eye out, and gave it a mighty tug. The guard flew across the room and smashed into Undyne’s outstretched arm. He made two complete revolutions before hitting the ground.
Twenty of Lord Grill’s armed units stormed in, stepping over the remains of the door and the four servants. The scene was already set: their lord pinned to the floor, eight reeling servants, two downed guards, twenty-three wives – enthralled in the sudden turn of the tables – and one enraged woman. They knew who their target was. Undyne snatched the whip and whipped it around the ankle of the guard she had just clotheslined. She took the whip in both hands and swung the guard around the room and launched him into the squad, knocking most of them flat. Out of all twenty guards, only five were still standing.

The five stepped past the others and formed a meek line. Undyne stood there with her angry face, and then cracked a smile. Five against one, it almost didn’t seem fair… for them. Above her, six orbs began to glow. The look on her face said, “Make the first move… I dare you.”

“Don’t just stand there, you oafs,” Grill yelled. “Stop her!” He sounded more like a lost puppy than a mighty lord.

The row of guards went to charge, their war cries bellowing from their throats, when more magical spears shot from the orbs, embedding themselves at the guards’ feet. All of them stopped, their weapons quavering.

“This is not what I signed up for,” one of them cried, dropping his sword.

“Run away!” They turned to run and ended up tripped over their own colleagues. They started picking themselves off the floor and dragging themselves out.

Undyne chuckled darkly. “Rookies.”

This sudden switch in power acted as a rallying cry for the twenty-three wives. They rushed to the tables, procured the heftiest, toughest pieces of meat they could find, and pounced on Lord Grill. Lord Grill tried to defend himself to no avail. He begged for mercy, but they would show him the same amount of mercy he had shown them – none whatsoever. Undyne stood back and watched, allowing the harem to vent. It’s good to express your emotions, it does the soul plenty of good.

After about five straight minutes of endless punishment, Undyne finally stepped forward and parted the ladies away from the lord. “Okay, girls, I think that’s enough for now,” she said. “Why don’t you let me take it from here? Trust me, you don’t want to be here when I’m through with him.”

Since the harem viewed Undyne as their messiah, they took her advice and started to leave, but not before saying some words of praise. “Thank you for everything,” one said; “You’re totally my hero,” another hollered; “You have no idea how long I’ve been waiting to do that,” a third added, giving the bear one final slap.

Alone with the disgraced black and blue grizzly, Undyne dragged him to his feet, tearing his cape down the middle. She stared him straight in the eyes and shouted, “Now you listen to me, Grill, you’re the biggest slice of scum I’ve ever had the displeasure of meeting! You’re fat, loud, sleazy, lazy, creepy, vulgar, womanising, obnoxious, and above all, cruel. I’ve met some shady characters in my time, but believe me, you take the cake!” The poison in her tone dropped a notch. “But as much as I detest you, I can’t help but feel sorry for you. Everyone has a life and yours has been more privileged than others, but you’ve allowed it to corrupt you, to turn you into a slob. I think you can do more with your life, which is why I’m going to teach you a valuable lesson.”

“A lesson?” Lord Grill struggled to say. He could not understand why she was being so civil and not pounding his face in right now. “What kind of lesson?”

“I’m going to take a wild guess and say that you’ve never cooked a single thing in your life,”
Undyne said, followed by a scheming grin. “And speaking of cake, how about we start there?”

All the servants, all the guards, and all the wives had gathered outside Bjornliege Manor, just as the heroine suggested. They could only dream what forms of nasty punishments were going on inside. They only had the stranger’s booming voice to go on.

“First, we’ll put the eggs in the bowl. Imagine the eggs as your spears, which you will rain down upon your foes like a tremendous, uh, rain. Go ahead and put them in.” Pause. “Don’t crack two of them open, just chuck ‘em all in there!” Pause. “Don’t tell me they’re too heavy! Watch me! NGGGAAAAAAHMMMM!” The cracking of many eggs erupted. Egg yolks splattered along the insides of the high windows. “At least some of them went in the bowl. Let’s move on.”

“Next, put flour and butter in and stir them all up. As I told a wimpy loser friend once: the more you stir, the better it is. And I’ll tell you that friend was nowhere near as wimpy-ish or as loser-ish as you! Start stirring, buster! Harder, I say. Harder! HARDER!” The mixture sloshed onto the windows, mingling in with the yolks. “That was too hard. You’ve got no control.”

“Now, stick it in the oven for thirty minutes at two-hundred degrees, or for one minute at six-thousand degrees!” The metallic slam of an oven door rang out. “Wow, this is some fancy stuff. How high does it go up t—?”

Bjornliege Manor exploded. One second the manor was there, tall and strong, the next, shattering into pieces. The walls collapsed and the roof collapsed and dust, soot, and ash collapsed, enveloping everything. When the dust cleared, nothing remained except for scatterings of burnt wood, several fires, and the blackened figures of Undyne and Lord Grill.

The many wives cheered, happy to be free of their husband’s oppression. The guards and servants, on the other hand, were just happy that the beating stopped.

Jim, the doorman, sighed a heavy sigh. “Looks like I’ll need to find another job…” He pulled his nametag off and dropped it.

The lord of the pile of black ash coughed, puffing black clouds into the air. “Can I confess something, if you promise you won’t kill me?” he asked.

“Sure, whatever,” Undyne replied, her anger having subsided by a margin.

“I wouldn’t mind meeting your girlfriend one of these days.”

Undyne worked up the will to smile. Her teeth stood out prominently on her blackened face. “If you clean up your act, then I might just introduce you.” She glanced around what was left of the manor. Nothing but charred, smouldering remains and fires. “Sorry about the mess, but I’m sure you understand why I did it.”

“I understand,” Grill responded, “it’s just a shame we don’t have any shelter from the rain.”

“Rain?” Undyne asked. She turned to the clear sky. “What rain?”

Grill pulled up what was left of his sleeve and rubbed the soot off the cracked face of a wristwatch. At least the second hand still functioned. “Three… two… one…”

Out of nowhere, rain began to fall from the sky, which started as quickly as turning on a shower. The
cool water ran down the two, washing off the ash. The fires were doused.

Don't Mind the Rain

The cabin roof rattled under the rain; bumpy and loud, but at the same time, quite relaxing. Clear rainwater streaked down the windows; the sharp contrast between the cool exterior and warm interior condensed sharply against the corners. It rained yet there were no clouds, sunlight streaked across the walls.

The fire below the mantelpiece was inviting, burning at a pleasant temperature. Frisk basked in its glow while sitting upon the stool, wrapped in a towel and a robe that was five times too big for them. They were dry, but their clothes were not, which hung from a line above the fire, allowing the heat to get at them. The damp outside mixed with the scent of warm wood reminded Frisk of Christmas.

Speaking of Christmas, if Frisk made it out of this alive, they were determined to make their first twenty-fifth of December with their monster buddies one to remember. So they would at least have some happy memories to work with if they ever got roped into a third monster kingdom in outer space or a fourth one under the sea.

Previously, Sam an’ Rita went out into their patch of farmland and picked some ripe produce for them to enjoy during the hour-long downpour. What they returned with caught Frisk off-guard; carrots, potatoes, onions, cabbages, apples, grapes, a loaf of bread, a salami sausage, a hunk of Swiss cheese, a big bar of chocolate, and a bottle of milk – all fresh off the vine.

Sam explained to the outsider that everything, and he meant everything, in the Outerworld was grown from the ground. One-hundred percent natural and innocent, no animals were harmed in the making of their meals. Farming in and of itself was not hard either. If someone wanted to grow something, all they had to do was find a piece of soil, plant something in it, give it some water, leave it in the sun for a bit, and – congratulations – you were a master farmer. Of course, while farming was not that hard, it does still take a degree of know-how and patience, which many residents of the Outerworld do not have.

The vegetables made a decent soup, which Frisk forced into their belly; polishing off the bowl with the crusty end of the loaf. Next came cuts of cheese and salami on crackers, followed by a third of the chocolate bar, all washed down with glasses of water and cold milk. The food recharged Frisk’s batteries and helped to ease the oddness in their stomach, but there was something about the food that seemed… off, somehow. The vegetables felt mushy and tasted similar. The bread crust was too hard whilst the crumb felt too fluffy. The cheese was like chewing an eraser. The chocolate was brittle and flaky, having all the taste without the sugary kick. The milk was the most wateriest they had ever tasted, like a glass of water with only one added spoonful of powdered milk, or skimmed milk that had been skimmed a few too many times.

Now, Frisk sat in silence, nursing the remaining milk in their glass, contemplating on how they got there, their life having turned upside-down in a few short hours. They woke up this morning in their bedroom, feeling that all was right in the world, now they were in the sky and public enemy number one for a lion with enough chips on his shoulder to solve world hunger.

There were so many things that Frisk did not understand, but all they knew was that they were not safe where they were. When the Emperor’s men fail to find a drowned human in the river, they would be back. As soon as the rain stopped, Frisk would be straight out the door and on their way – and probably head straight back for the clothes they left on the line.

“Feeling better, little ‘un?” Sam broke the silence, pulling a chair up beside the human.
With a perky spirit – or at least, perkier than half an hour ago – Frisk responded that they felt much better before taking another mouthful of milk.

Sam lowered himself backwards onto the chair and folded his arms atop the backrest. His biceps and triceps were toned from years of hard graft, the wrappings looked like they were about to snap. “Good to hear, that means the food’s okay with humans.”

Rita stood beside the fireplace, leaning an elbow against the mantle. “Been waiting for the right moment to ask…” she said, addressing Frisk. “You’re from the surface, the Earth’s surface, aren’t you? I mean, of course you are – you’re a human and everything. What’s it like down there? I bet it must be wonderful.”

Frisk told them that the Earth’s surface was nice. Seriously? Hundreds of complimentary words in the English language and all they had to say was nice? Frisk adjusted that statement; the Earth’s surface was wonderful. It was beautiful, fantastic, a great place to live and feel alive.

“They teach you anything about Mount Ebott? About the monsters that got trapped under there after the war?” Rita pressed on. She grabbed an iron poker off a stand and used it to rustle the fire. The fire did not need attention, Frisk thinks she only did it to act busy. “Been dying to know what happened to them for quite a while now. Don’t suppose you’ve heard anything about that?”

Heard about it? Frisk told the mummy couple that they had been there, seen it first-hand, and met the monsters of the Underground in person. The best – and strangest – days of their life.

“You’ve been there, and the monsters were still alive after all these years? Trapped underground with no light and all that dirty air?” Rita closed her glowing eyes. “I feel so bad for them, how anyone could be forced to live in such horrid conditions.”

Frisk told Rita that the monsters were not trapped down there anymore. This human was there to witness the barrier getting shattered, and escaped along with all of them. Rita went to place the poker back, but missed completely. The rod clanked hard against the floor, she paid it no heed.

Sam shot forward, the chair’s front legs lifted three inches off the floor. “What?” he said, awestruck. “Those monsters are living on the surface now?”

Frisk nodded.

“With the humans?”

Frisk nodded.

“Peacefully?”

Frisk nodded.

“No fightin’?”

Frisk shook their head.

“No discrimination?”

Frisk shook their head.

“No concentration camps? No ghettos?”

Frisk shook their head.
“You’re pullin’ my leg, aren’t you?”

Frisk shook their head.

Sam looked away for a moment before looking back. “Did you destroy the barrier, little ‘un?”

Frisk paused, then shook their head. They were not the one to destroy the barrier – that noble, closing deed fell upon another – but Frisk mentioned that they played a small part.

“No wonder the Emperor brought you here,” Rita said. “Probably thinking if you helped free all those monsters, then you’ll do the same here.” She finally realised that the poker was burning a hole in the floor. She snatched it up and scraped her shoe against the blackened spot in the floorboard, extinguishing the single strand of smoke.

“You can’t exactly fall up here, unless gravity took a nasty turn on you,” Sam humorously stated the obvious. “How did you get here, anyway?”

Questions. So many questions, and Frisk was happy to answer them considering the two saved their life. Sam an’ Rita were brave to be doing this, braver than anyone else, to be sheltering a human.

What had Frisk not been Frisk? These monsters knew how dangerous humans can be, how easily a single one could take their lives, and yet they still saved them. The mummy couple would have been better off leaving Frisk to drown, but they didn’t. They reminded Frisk of Toriel in a way.

Frisk downed the last of the almost-tasteless milk from the glass, then explained that they were brought to the Outerworld by a beam of light, which pulled them away from the Earth... and away from all their friends.

Rita tapped a bandaged finger against her bandaged cheek and hummed thoughtfully. “Sounds like one of the Professor’s inventions to me.” She began to click her fingers. “What was his name again?”

“Err, Haze, I think,” Sam answered.

Something spurned Frisk’s memory: Haze. Professor Haze. They had heard that name back at Castle Highkeep. It was one of the first things that rat scribe, Rickard, had said, along with something about his inventions lacking tact.

“Yeah, from what I’ve heard, that guy worked up quite the reputation durin’ the civil war two-hundred years ago,” Sam said. He noticed the questioning look on Frisk’s face. “The civil war’s a long story, best not get into that or we’ll be here all night. All you need to know is that the professor figured out how to harness the power of that big, magical pillar – the one they now got stored in the castle somewhere. Pretty much ended the war singlehanded. He would’ve been the one who made the gizmo that brought you here.”

Frisk asked whether Professor Haze invented something that could send people back to Earth.

Sam rocked back and forth in his chair. “I dunno. The Outerworld’s surrounded by a protective field. Ain’t no-one been able to leave since the beginnin’, or at least that’s what we’ve heard.”

Rita stepped over to a drawer and pulled it open. “If you want to go home, hon, then your best bet is to find Professor Haze.” Rita pulled out a broad faced, thinly paged book. “Maybe he has a way to get you back.”

Frisk suddenly stopped them: Professor Haze was still alive, even after two-hundred years?

Rita looked at Frisk blankly. “Yes? We all are. Don’t you – oh, wait, I guess your kind don’t.”
Frisk turned back to Sam and wanted to know how old they both were.

Sam placed his hand against his chest. “I’m… I’m three-hundred-and-eighty-five years old.” He gestured to his wife. “Rita here’s three-hundred-and-eighty-two.”


Sam chuckled and shook his head. “Sure, knock a few decades off, whatever helps you sleep at night.” He leaned close to Frisk and whispered, “Women…”

Frisk wanted to know how this was possible.

“It’s the pillar,” Sam explained. “Its magic sustains everything, includin’ us. Everyone here ages at a super slow rate, some slower than others. Maxus takes it better than anyone else; he was about your age during the war between humans and monsters, and yet he’s still so young even after all these years. Professor Haze though… he’s getting on in his years, but he’s still got plenty of fight left in him.”

Rita knelt beside Frisk and showed the book, revealing it to be an atlas of the Outerworld. Opening it up on the first page revealed a bird’s eye view of the seven islands; one in the centre surrounded evenly by six others. “Back to the Professor.” Rita pointed at the island in the centre. “Highkeep Enclave, where Castle Highkeep is, where you escaped from.” She traced her bandaged finger left to the island directly west of Highkeep Enclave. “You fell in the river and ended up here. The Plain-plain, where we are right now. It’s called the Plain-plain because it’s a meadow and it’s rather ordinary. Let me tell you a little about the others…”

Moving clockwise, Rita explained the remaining five islands. Northwest of Highkeep Enclave hovered Ice Island: the land of always winter. Frisk recognised it as the one with the snow-covered mountain. Black Ice Mountain, it was called, which took up most of the island. Ice Island used to be a thriving mining colony, but fell into disrepair during the civil war. Now, the island is nothing more than a snowy wasteland, its towns abandoned and its caves left for the ice and the cold to seize them.

To the northeast, the Forest. Yeah, they could not think of a proper name so they just stuck with the Forest. One massive woodland area, inhabited with trees a mile tall and as old as the lands themselves. This is where Professor Haze can be found. The inhabitants reside in houses constructed around the treetops, connected with miles upon miles of walkways. Below the treetops, down in the depths, lies a dark world where the roots are twisted and the light cannot reach. It was here where the first monster passed away, his dusty remains fell into the abyss, never to be seen again. After that, it became a tradition to sprinkle the dust of the deceased down to the forest floor, in the hopes that the monster’s spirit will one day become a part of nature.

To the east: Rocklyn. Another mining colony, except these mountains did not come with caves. At the beginning, they dug tunnels into the mountains and gathered all the resources they could mine. When they were running out of rock to dig, they considered abandoning the mine… only for the mines to completely disappear overnight. They began digging the tunnels again and found all the resources having ‘grown back’. Over hundreds of years, the miners have repeated the process of mining the mountain, waiting for it to repair itself, then starting all over again. Disheartening, but it pays well enough.

Southeast: Bob. Frisk didn’t hear that wrong, the island was called Bob, after the first monster who called dibs on it. Covered entirely in swampland, the amphibian monsters ruled, finding its humid and clammy environment perfect for keeping their skin slimy.

And finally, to the southwest, the Oasis, its sea and jungles separated by miles of coastline. Only
lords, nobles and those loyal to the Empire live there, those who thrive on the exotic and the luxurious.

With all seven islands accounted for, Rita pointed at the Oasis, the swamp, and Rocklyn. “Wouldn’t suggest going to any of these islands, full of people in the Emperor’s pocket. They most likely won’t help you, might actually turn you in if it’ll get them a pat on the back.” Rita traced from the Plain-plain up to Ice Island then to the Forest. “Nobody ever goes through Ice Island nowadays, not even the Monster Military. It’ll be dangerous, but if you make it through, you’ll have a straight shot of reaching the professor.”

Frisk nodded, understanding everything Rita had said.

“For now, though, let’s wait until the rain passes...” Sam glanced at the aged clock ticking away in the middle of the mantle. “In the next thirty-four minutes. Wanna finish the rest of the milk, kid?”

Frisk held their empty glass up, eager for one last refill.

Emperor Maxus watched the rain as it fell across the gardens, the islands, his islands. He liked the rain, but no matter how hard it tried, the falls could never replicate the real deal. The memories of his childhood on the Earth’s surface were short and fleeting. He had witnessed the dazzle of the rising sun and the patter of falling rain, but those memories were like fading pictures in a photo album.

His own faint reflection stared back from the glass, his silver eyes like two faraway stars. Maxus had his father’s eyes, his hair, same ears, same shaped face, same shade of fur. Maxus focused on himself, on what could have been the essence of Emperor Juhi, gazing upon him from behind the crystal wall of death. Maxus was frowning, his father was frowning. Maxus whispered to himself that he was doing what was necessary for his people, his father silently said the same thing.

“I gave you my word, father…” Maxus whispered so low that he could not hear himself.

I don’t believe that… he thought he heard his father say.

Maxus scoffed. “Of course you don’t,” he nearly yelled, “you never did!” And just like that, the reflection was his own again.

The steps of his trusted advisor echoed off the four walls as they entered. Slow and heavy, Emperor Maxus recognised them from anywhere.

“Talk to me, Maxus,” came the voice of the Advisor. “Something’s eating away at you, I can feel it.”

How informal. Maxus liked that in his advisor; the ability to change mind-sets at the drop of a hat. When the time arrived to be serious, the Advisor puts on a straight face and speaks with the utmost of respect. At the same time, the Advisor knew when the drop the titles. “It’s taking too long,” Maxus replied, diverting his thoughts from his father back to the human. He pressed his hand against the glass. “My men should have found that thing by now. I shouldn’t be standing here, looking out this window – I should be collecting its soul at this very moment.”

“That river goes on for miles, and it’s only been a couple of hours. Have a little patience, my lord.” My Lord. The hat had been dropped. The Advisor was back in business.

“I’ve got men and women searching every yard of that river. Surely, a dead human could not have
travelled far.”

“Where could it travel to?” the Advisor asked. “Where can it go, thousands of feet above the ground, and when nothing can get out of the protective field?” They waited for the blatantly obvious answer, and received silence instead. “Exactly.”

Of course, the Royal Advisor was far from perfect. Emperor Maxus hated obvious questions, and absolutely hated answering them. “Don’t forget what you said, Advisor,” Maxus said. “That human is dangerous. It could be out there slaughtering my people as we speak.” Although, if that was the case, he had to wonder why the human refused to fight him.

“That was a long fall, your excellency. Trust me, even if Frisk… it survived, it wouldn’t be in any condition to put up a fight.” There was a break in the conversation. The Advisor cleared their throat. “But if you’re not fully certain, we can always put up wanted posters around the Plain-plain, offering a reward for its capture. We could also hire the—”

Maxus’s hand shot up. “Not yet,” he said, silencing his consultant. “She’s expensive enough as it is without sending her out on a fool’s errand.” His hand dropped. “The posters, on the other hand, they can be made quickly, and can be distributed around with ease. Tell Scribe Rickard to start production.”

Speak of the devil, Scribe Rickard scurried across the room, with ink-loaded nib against clipboard. “Already noted, my lord.” He moved fast, his steps as quiet as pin drops. No wonder neither Maxus nor his advisor heard him enter. Rickard came to a stop before his emperor and said, “I bring you news from the Oasis.”

Maxus pulled away from the window. “Does it concern the human?”

The sight of Maxus’s silver eyes, especially when they looked upon him, made Rickard tremble, afraid that terrible things would happen if he so much as said one syllable incorrectly. “I’m afraid not, your excellency. Our lookout scouts have reported a rumbling sound, followed by a large cloud of smoke coming from that island. We believe it may have been an explosion.”

“An explosion? Here?” Maxus repeated. An abduction of a human proceeded by an explosion, in one day, was too contrived to be a coincidence. The newly-appointed emperor had a bad feeling that this was going to happen; the Outerworld, having basked in order for many years, was secretly a bomb ready to go off. An explosion that would shatter the peace and bring about untold chaos. All it needed was a catalyst, and the human, Frisk, was that catalyst.

Scribe Rickard responded, “Yes, sir. The smoke seems to have risen from Bjornliege Manor.”

Just hearing that name made Maxus shake his head and grumble. Honestly, he was surprised that this had not happened earlier. Grill, Lord of Bjornliege Manor, was about as lazy and as useless as a lord could get. Grill fought on his father’s during the civil war, but those glory days had long ago outgrown him. How Grill elevated himself from nobody to somebody was both a mystery and ancient history.

“Are you sure this has nothing to do with the human?” The Advisor questioned.

“Quite certain,” Rickard answered. “There’s no conceivable way the human could’ve travelled from the Plain-plain to the Oasis in a mere couple of hours.”

“Should we at least send someone to gather information, Emperor? Lord Grill’s one of our most prolific subjects… whatever he does.”
Emperor Maxus faced the window once more. “Send out ten of our fastest scouts. Anyone we can spare, but no more than that.” His focus could not waver from the real target, but at the same time, he still had seven islands to rule over. “Question any and all witnesses, locate the source of this commotion.”

Scribe Rickard took down further notes on his clipboard. “A wise choice, my lord,” he said before bowing himself out of sight, almost tripping on his own tail.

The Advisor watched Rickard’s less-than-graceful exit. “These next few days are going to be the longest of our lives,” they said with a sigh.

Maxus sighed along. “Yep. They probably will be.”

Precisely one hour after the rain started, it stopped just as quickly. Frisk stepped out onto the deck, back in their attire. The boots were still a little soggy, but a few thousand steps would solve that problem.

They took their first step onto the grass and heard the blades crack faintly. The list of oddities in the Outerworld got longer and longer. First the light, then the stone tiles, then the food and drink, and now the grass that felt like the stuff they use for tennis courts.

Frisk looked around and quickly spotted Black Ice Mountain on the horizon, so far away, it’s grey and black colouring behind a haze of blue. Between them and it, miles of fake greenery. It seemed like it would take Frisk a lifetime to reach it on foot.

Rita remained by Frisk’s side as the evening sun shone of them, giving them some much needed, last-minute advice. “Remember, if you find water, it’s always safe to drink, even if it looks dirty.”

Sam exited the house, approached Frisk, and handed them a small cloth bag, quickly wiping off a thick layer of white dust first. “Here, take these,” he said.

Frisk took the bag, opened the top and looked inside. A few dozen white stones jangled around. Frisk picked one out and peered at it in the light. The smooth coin was perfectly white and perfectly round. They could not tell whether it was made of stone or metal.

“Cloud coins,” Sam explained. “They started finding these things lying around, and before we knew it, they became money in these parts.” He pointed toward the mountain. “Just keep headin’ north, avoid the river, and you should reach a town called Parfocorse before nightfall – you can’t miss it. There should be more than enough there to buy a meal and rent a room for the night, other than that, you’re on your own.”

Frisk gazed back at what awaited them, the journey that lay ahead. So many obstacles lay before them, lying in wait, and Frisk only had one shot to best them. At the end of their long journey, their home awaited, and Toriel and Asgore were waiting for them, and Papyrus and Sans, and Alphys and Undyne.

The thought of getting home filled them with determination... for all that’s worth.

“We’ve done all we can,” Rita said. “The rest is up to you, hon. Knock ‘em dead.”

Sam gave Frisk a gentle pat on the back. “Good luck out there, Kiddo.”
Alphys stopped herself inches before she could tumble down the side of a cliff.

Deep in desperate concern, she had blindly followed Papyrus into the teleporter, against her better judgement. It was a good thing she had punched in the co-ordinates of where she guessed the anomaly in the sky was, otherwise who knows where she could have ended up. The claustrophobic seclusion of the basement's cement floor and white walls were swept away in a brilliant flash of light, paving the way to a vast world that stretched out for miles around. Alphys, still moving forward, had lost Papyrus, but spotted a rocky ledge steps before herself.

Alphys slammed on the brakes, digging her heels into the brittle earth, leaving a trail of dust in her wake. She skidded to a halt on the very ledge, her body, still under the influence of her momentum, jerked forward. Over the edge, Alphys looked down and felt her heart drop as far as the fall before her. She sank her toes into the ground, rooting herself to the spot, then swung her arms back wildly. Somehow, she defied all the laws of gravity and snapped her body upright, her glasses slipping straight off her eyes. She made out the blur that could only be her spectacles spinning in mid-air and snatched them before they could fall.

She backed away a few steps, drawing herself closer to where she first appeared. Alphys needed a moment to compose herself now that the little near-death experience was behind her. She was shaking and breathing rapidly. “That… that could’ve gone so much worse…” She caressed her spectacles with her trembling claws, only barely making them out from arm’s length, and placed them back on their rightful position before her eyes. “Where am I?”

Her vision returned, focused by the lenses, and the sight on the horizon was one that she needed to see. She saw what Frisk had seen hours ago, and what Undyne had witnessed the hour previous, and it had her mesmerised, just as it had mesmerised them. The ridiculously large fortress looming above. The unnaturally tall trees beyond. Alphys began to shake once more, finding it hard to believe that these islands were real and that she was standing on them right there and then. That she was gazing upon the land between Heaven and Earth.

“It’s like one of my Japanese animes…” she barely managed to get out.

She glanced down at the land below. When the word ‘paradise’ comes to mind, one expected such things like fields of green, flowers under every colour of the rainbow, and also actual rainbows, not a scene that was akin to that of the Grand Canyon. Mountains of crude rock the colour of mud left and right with valleys of dirt streaming through like veins, all pockmarked with capillaries of caves, black holes upon brown and grey. A thin haze of dust stifled the air, everything smelled of iron and copper, sweat and toil.

So many questions and so many theories churned in the doctor’s brain. There was so much to learn about this place and she wanted every little detail. Were these really the islands as told within the boundaries of the book? How did these islands stay afloat? Did anyone live here? If so, what was their government, their society, their laws, their history? How did they sustain themselves? How could something so large have remained hidden from the humans for all this time? The amount of questions made her head spin – her brain wanted to pop out of her skull and run away.

Alphys risked a look down the cliff side, keeping a tight hold on her spectacles. The fall would not have been merciful, plenty of jutting rocks to bounce off of on the way down. You would be lucky to have at least one bone intact by the time you reached the bottom. Had she fallen, that would have been the ultimate irony of the century – to teleport into the sky where the chances of falling were one
in a trillion, only to land on solid ground and yet nearly fall to one’s demise anyway.

Looking down, the doctor could not help but remember another part of her life – the time where she was at her lowest –, a more depressing, less joyful period of time to be the royal (now ex-royal) scientist, Doctor Alphys. She closed her eyes.

She reopened them. Darkness. Deep darkness down below, waiting to swallow her whole. The water tugged at her ankles, beckoning the troubled monster researcher to join them. An empty french-fry bag drifted silently past and over the falls, never to be seen again, followed shortly later by a videotape with the film spilled out and a leather shoe with a hole chewed through the sole. Perhaps this was for the best. There was no way of coming back from this, her actions were inexcusable, her life was already over.

She recalled reaching out in the dying luminescence and stroking white, sickly fur, hearing the collective whine of several dogs, all fused into one being. Alphys remembered whispering softly into their ear and assuring them – whatever they were, whatever they had become – that everything was going to be alright, that she was going to do everything in her power to fix this, no matter what. She looked at the same claw and thought, for one instant, that she saw white residue.

She could still hear them, calling out to her from across tons of metal and earth.

“Stay here with me...” Angry. Heavy. Rough.

“Come and join the fun.” Loud. Abrasive. Tinny.

“Sn... o... wy...” Slow. Sad. Pitiful.

She had lied, of course. The young scientist had no idea how to fix them, or if they could even be fixed. They should be dead. She should have allowed nature to run its course and let those monsters crumble to dust... now death was surely a more suitable alternate as opposed to whatever they had become.

What was waiting for her back at the lab? Nothing but a few dozen angry letters, a collection of nerdy junk, and all the mistakes she had made in her short time. Who was she in the Underground? She was a failure, a fraud, a loser, and when they discover the terrible truth, an outcast. She does not deserve the title of ‘Royal Scientist’, she never did. She didn’t deserve to reach the surface, she would never be welcomed there anyway. Eventually, they would find out what she did, and then she would not be welcome in the Underground either. She didn’t belong on the surface. She didn’t belong in the Underground. She didn’t belong anywhere.

Alphys stared down into the abyss, the abyss stared back. The drop, however, was a mystery, an adventure just waiting to be explored. The abyss was accepting, never judging, taking in everything and everyone equally, regardless of good deeds or heinous crimes. From the highest saint to the lowest sinner, from the most flawless jewel to the most worthless piece of garbage, gravity took all the same way, and the darkness consumed all into its never-ending, grumbling belly. All she had to do was take that one step and the abyss would welcome her with open arms. Honestly, Alphys did not think she even deserved their embrace; she wouldn’t be surprised if, after she jumped, the abyss just spits her back out.

I’m gonna do it... Alphys thought, saying in her head the same thing she had been saying for the past hour. I’m gonna do it. I’m gonna do it! There’s nothing left for me here. She stood up as straight as
she could, her mind made up. This is it. Goodbye, cruel—

“Looks pretty deep, doesn’t it.”

Alphys jumped and yelped at the sound of an unfamiliar voice. She span around, and the sight of huge teeth and dissimilar, snakelike eyes made her jump again. That’s how Alphys met… a fear-provoking fish lady. The scaly stranger stood tall, over six-feet in height, her skin blue, and a red ponytail flowing in the gentle breeze.

“Looks pretty deep, doesn’t it.”

Alphys jumped and yelped at the sound of an unfamiliar voice. She span around, and the sight of huge teeth and dissimilar, snakelike eyes made her jump again. That’s how Alphys met… a fear-provoking fish lady. The scaly stranger stood tall, over six-feet in height, her skin blue, and a red ponytail flowing in the gentle breeze.

“You okay?” the stranger asked.

Alphys babbled, unsure of what to say. “I’m s-sorry, I-I-I didn’t s-see you there. You-you scared me.”

The stranger chuckled. “Relax, I get that a lot. I guess I just have that way with people.”

“I-I didn’t… It-it’s just that I didn’t notice you there, I wasn’t saying that y-you’re scary… o-or… any… thing…” Those last words slipped out from Alphys’s loose lips before she could stop them; if only she could say the right things when it truly mattered. Now this person must already think she was a freak.

Alphys was obliviously fixated by the lady’s dead eye; the one on the left, white and dull with a small cut – years old – running down it. Alphys could not pull her eyes, all four of them, away.

The fish-lady knew where the girl in the lab coat was staring. “Yeah…” she remarked as she brought her hand up to her face and tapped the ridge beside her non-functioning eye. “I guess this doesn’t exactly help in the looks department. I should probably cover it up or something.” She turned to the darkness below, where all the water was going. “I wonder where that goes.”

Alphys’s head switched back and forth from the stranger to the abyss, unsure as to where to divert her attention. “Oh, um, well… I… I’ve been thinking about that for a while a-and I’ve come up with some ideas – some t-theories, I mean.” She struggled to form coherent sentences. She stared down at her feet, fully submerged in running water. Her fingers fidgeted. “You see, the water is travelling down here, so it must be doing that for a reason. It could be part of a vast river, one that could travel for miles underground, eventually reaching the sea o-or the ocean. On the other hand, it all could be accumulating at the bottom there. Or it could even be falling forever. It might even lead to a different dimension, another world far, far away from here.” Her fingers locked together and her thumbs began to twiddle. “…Far… far away… where nobody knows who you are…”

The stranger looked into the depths as if expecting it to answer to one of the theories spoken, upon which the abyss responded blankly and devoured a broken action figure. “That’s pretty neat,” she said. Her voice reverberated off the encrusted ceiling hundreds of yards above.

Alphys snapped her gaze up, genuinely surprised by the sudden interest. “Really? You think that’s interesting?”

“Totally! I was just in the neighbourhood looking for some sweet swords, and I didn’t expect to find anyone around, especially someone who talks so… analytically. You new around here?”

“Kind… Kind of. I’ve got my lab in – I, er, live in Hotland. I… wanted t-to be here because, err…” Alphys’s words trailed off. What was she going to say, that she had travelled all this way purely to end her misery? Some introduction that would be. “I… like the peace… and the quiet, I suppose.”

The stranger smiled, showcasing her upper and lower rows of huge teeth. “Why don’t you tell me more about those theories of yours?”
“You… you really want to hear them…?”

“Sure,” the stranger answered. She took Alphys by the hand and led her to some stacks of pallets. “Don’t hold anything back!”

And so, after a shaky start, Alphys did as she was asked. So many theories passed Alphys’s lips, she had no idea where they began and where they ended. She talked and she talked and she talked and she talked; she didn’t just talk, she sang. She didn’t just sing, she harmonised. The time ran by, yet the stranger remained, taking in every word. It felt so nice to have someone to talk to, someone who would listen. Despite the stranger’s scary appearance, there was an air to her that Alphys started to like.

Before she knew it, Alphys glanced at the display screen on her phone and realised that she had been talking for a few too many hours longer than necessary. “Whoa, would you look at the time,” she said. “I gotta get home and… whip up some d-dinner.” What Alphys did not say was that the dinner was not intended for herself.

“Sure,” the other replied. She jumped off her seat – her boots splashing the water – and pointed her thumb over her shoulder. “I better get back too, gotta be ready for my final test with the King tomorrow.”

A bead of sweat broke on the royal scientist’s brow as a charming, handsome, fuzzy monster came to mind. “Th-the King? King Asgore?”

The fish monster nodded. “Yeah. He’s been working on setting up a military, you know, to catch any humans who fall down here. They’re finally setting up a plan to break the barrier. I’ve been training super hard for this, he’ll put me in charge for sure!” She turned a dismissing glance to the side. “Although, my opposition comprises of a few dogs, and, well, anyone can best them with some strategically-placed petting. So, I reckon I’ve got this one in the bag.”

Alphys knew about the dogs mentioned – Doggo, needs glasses; Lesser Dog, staring at snow, expecting art; Dogamy, proposed to Dogareansa two months back – having received at least one angry letter from each of them, signed with paw prints. “Oh, well, uh, best of luck to you.” Alphys sprang upright, her legs stiff. “I guess I’ll… I don’t know… see you around?”

“Sure, I’d like that.” The stranger turned to leave, but stopped and turned back. “By the way, the name’s Undyne.”

“Alphys,” she responded quietly. “My name’s Alphys.”

Undyne gave Alphys a thumbs up. “I’ll see you around, Alphys.”

Alphys turned to leave, but stopped as she spotted something poking out from one of the many heaps of rubbish. She approached and realised that it was the plastic package of a fancy-dress pirate costume. From the looks of it, the costume – consisting of a vest, pants, bandanna, plastic hook, plastic sabre, and eyepatch – was in great condition, probably having been worn only once, maybe twice. What a waste.

The royal scientist plucked the packet from out the heap and unclipped the flap. She rummaged through the mess of scrunched cloth, dragging out the vest, and found the eyepatch. Inspecting it in the blue shade, the eyepatch appeared surprisingly sturdy, made from tough leather. This was made to last a lifetime, not just for Saturday night.

Alphys span around. “Hey, Undyne, I—” But it was already too late. Undyne was long gone,
Alphys was alone once more with only herself, the garbage, and the din of rushing water, cold around her knees. She glanced back over to the falls. Hours ago, she was convinced that her life was about to close. “I’ll…” Back to the eyepatch in hand. “I’ll hand this over the next time I see her…”

Alphys opened her eyes and was back in the present day, before the cliff ledge. As if the emotional scarring the failed experiment had left on her wasn’t bad enough, she felt more trauma just standing by that waterfall. Things could have gone so much more differently. Had Undyne not shown up, had she decided to stay at home that day, they would never have met, and there would have been no reason for Alphys to not take the plunge to another dimension.

In the days that followed, Alphys did not find it in herself to hand over the eyepatch in person, as much as she wanted to. She was too afraid that Undyne would hate it, which was ridiculous looking back at it now. Instead, Alphys left it hanging from an easy to see spot in the garbage dump. The next time they met, Undyne was sporting it. They became friends, and that was when the lies began to mount up. Lies on top of lies to make herself look better. On the outside, she was smart and cool and assertive, but deep down, her woes ate away at her. The fibs and untruths did not make her insecurities go away, in fact, it created more.

Now, the cliff stood before Alphys as a testament of sorts. She failed to jump the first time. Perhaps this was her second chance to rectify that missed opportunity?

No. Alphys had no intentions of jumping. Had she have taken the cowardly way out of her mistakes, she would never have worked up the courage to face up to them, and in turn, become a better person because of it. Back then, Alphys felt that she had nothing to lose, but today, she had so much to live for.

The time was right to snap out of her bout of self-pity and turn her attention back to the objective at hand. “Where did Papyrus go?” She was behind him by one second and now he was gone. If she had to guess, the issue regarding the accuracy of the teleporter might have rang true.

Alphys reached into her lab coat pocket. “I’ll try giving Papyrus a call, he always has his phone on him and always picks up no matter what,” she said to herself as she plucked it out. “Maybe he…” She stopped, having taken one look at her phone and finding it pitch black, the colour of charcoal. “Oh no…” She punched a few buttons on the dial, the screen remained black. She brought the receiver to her ear, there was only silence. She pried the phone open and the components poured out like sand in an hourglass. It became painfully apparent by that point that this mobile device had sang its last tune. “I guess I focused so hard on the magical matter side that I forgot about how it would affect electronics.”

She dropped the phone’s charred remains – which crumbled upon hitting the ground. “Okay, this might be a problem. I have no idea where Papyrus is, not to mention myself. I have no way of contacting the others. I have no way of knowing if Papyrus is alright.” She breathed a deep breath. A sudden chain of thought popped into her analytical brain. “What if Papyrus didn’t make it? What if the rest followed me through? What if they didn’t make it? How will I get back down to Earth?” The more questions she posed herself, the worse it got. “What if I’m on another planet? Or in another time period? Or in another reality?”

She threw her claws out in front of herself. “Okay, Alphys, calm down. D-don’t panic,” she spoke steadily. “Whatever you do, don’t panic. You’ve been in worse spots…”

Since when?
Alphys paused. She briefly looked around to see if anyone else was present, which there were none.

She clutched her head and screamed. “OH MY GOD! I’M LOST! I’M LOST! WHAT AM I GONNA DO? EVERYTHING’S GONE TO HECK! I’M GONNA DIE! I’M GONNA DIE IN A PLACE WHERE NO-ONE KNOWS ME!”

Papyrus blinked, finding himself in a vast, dark room. The walls extended high upwards, steeped in shadows, cyan and flat. A curved set of silver doors built into the centre, reflecting the miniscule amount of light present. Just one second ago, he was running for his life from the abomination that was labelled Mew Mew. In his blind panic, he activated the teleporter and jumped straight in. Whatever life had in store between himself and that robot made plunging back down to Earth or being lost forever in the depths of space more preferable by comparison.

Papyrus could only hope that whatever unknown predicament he had just gotten himself into could no way be any worse. Until he heard her.

“Oh, how wonderful,” a robotic, female voice – different from Mew Mew’s – said with eagerness behind the skeleton. “My first specimen to process.”

Shocked, Papyrus span around and found himself staring directly into the flattest face he had ever seen. A machine hung down from the ceiling, sporting mechanical parts coated black, layered with white plates. This particular robot bore the slightest resemblance to a human being, including a head and a body, but no visible limbs. It, or rather she – regarding the sound of their voice – gazed blankly with a single, glowing green eye. Coils of black wiring hung lose around her frame, their purpose both understandable and yet unsettling.

The machine spoke on. “I do not know where you appeared from, however, at this point in time, that question is irrelevant. Introductions are in order. Hello and welcome to the Aperture Science Computer Aided Enrichment Centre. You should not take long to study, as evidenced by your complete lack of outer epidermis and nervous system.”

“Nyoo hoo hoo, what horrid luck…” Papyrus lamented, frowning, feeling like the gods themselves were out to get him. “It would appear that I, quite unfortunately, escaped one robot only to face another.”

The robot swayed her curved head to the side. For her joints being comprised purely of gears, her movements were close to soundless. “And it speaks. How intriguing, despite the fact that you possess no tongue or larynx, and therefore, no viable means in which you can speak. My vocabulary simply cannot locate the correct words to portray my feelings right now. I do not suppose that this talking lack of outer epidermis, nervous system, tongue and larynx has a name?”

“You don’t know who I am? Everyone knows who I am – and by ‘everyone’ I mean ‘only a select few exceedingly great companions’.” Papyrus placed a gloved hand upon his proud battle body. “I am none other than the great Papyrus.”

“Papyrus,” the machine said, analysing it. “Papyrus: Paper. Made from the pith of the papyrus plant. Papyrus: Typeface. Designed by – creator name here – in the year – creation year of discovery here.” Her voice changed drastically upon saying ‘creator name here’ and ‘creation year of discovery here’. “The term ‘great’ does not appear in either record; therefore, you are mediocre Papyrus, at best. For a simpler approach, I shall simply refer to you as subject one… out of one. One being the number of subjects I have yet to process.”
“Subject in what exactly? Am I in robot school? Are you going to teach me something?” Papyrus felt a brush of apprehension, and cautiously asked, “You don’t date, do you?”

The upside-down robot paused, every servo and gear in her body locking in place. “…I am going to pretend I did not hear that. Now, say the—”

“Did I just gain affection points just now?” Papyrus pressed the issue. “Are you wanting to ’tie the knot’?” He placed his gloved hands on in front of himself, visualising the knots. “I don’t see what’s so special about tying knots. I tie knots all the time, but I’m better at knotting ties. It’s tricky, but Lady Asgore once taught me. You start by crossing the road, then going through the tunnel, then around the – no, wait, that’s not right. It’s under the tunnel, then through the bridge—”

The robot threw her face forward, looking the skeleton square in the eyes. “Stop talking, you should not be talking while I am talking. In fact, you should not be talking, period.” Something locked away within her files began to shake. “Say the—”

“You know, robots do quite like learning and teaching things, but haven’t you ever considered a different line of work?”

“What could be more satisfying than conducting experiments and valuable research for the betterment of mankind?”

Papyrus’s thoughts drifted to the only other robot in his life – well, the one besides the terror in the doctor’s basement – whose season premier he caught this morning while eating his breakfast spaghetti. “How about dancing?” His eye sockets looked at the robot from her head upwards, and noticed the apparent lack of legs. “Okay, that might be a little out the picture. How about singing instead?”

“Right, because, my existence within this walls gives me so much to sing about.”

“How about cooking? You don’t have any arms, but that’s never stopped me in the past… mainly because I actually have arms. I would gladly give you some lessons on how to make great spaghetti.”

Something else clicked from within the robot’s electronic cerebrum. The logic portrayed by the talking lack of outer epidermis, nervous system, tongue and larynx was too much to comprehend. Her programming might need to be defragged. “My control over this facility allows me to construct meals for employees. However, despite my wide range of resources in the culinary arts, they always seem to order cake and the occasional doughnut.”

“Well, never fret,” Papyrus said with a smile. “I’m sure, if you put your mind to it, you can succeed at anything you want. Take me, for example; I put all my time and puzzle-making talent into becoming a member of the Royal Guard and…” Glance to the side. “They disbanded before I could join. On a completely unrelated note, have you tried—?”

“Enough,” snapped the robot as something else that was important snapped inside her. “The testing will commence now. Say the first word you think of. A—”

“Un-un-unbelievable,” the robot said over a distorting, repeating voice. “The testing results are in. Unfortunately, they are invalid since the numbers on my IQ calculator do not go down to single digits. Congratulations.”

“Then in that case, I, the great Papyrus, have truly outdone myself. What does IQ stand for anyway?”
All of a sudden, the silver doors at the end of the room parted. A shaft of light sliced down the middle, parting the dimness the same way Moses part the Red Sea. Papyrus and the machine were drawn to it. A short, stout figure cast a long shadow from inside the illuminated compartment. “Sorry I took so long, bro,” he said, echoing off every corner.

Papyrus recognised that voice from anywhere, unfortunately. “Sans?” He squinted his eyes, making out his brother from deep within the sharp contrast between light and dark. “How did you get here?”

Sans stepped into the vast room, his slippers scuffling against the cement floor. One hand in his jacket and the other holding a half-eaten slice of pizza. “Took the scenic route.” He took another bite. “Figured you’d get lost on the way, so I decided to swing ‘round,” he mumbled between chews. “Could’a done with some ketchup…”

The robot’s single eye switched back and forth between the skeletons. “What is this? There was once one talking lack of outer epidermis, nervous system, tongue and larynx, now there is a second talking lack of outer epidermis, nervous system, tongue and larynx – and this one appears to be eating. None of this makes any sense.” The rest of her voice came out a broken mess of static and looping.

“A new friends of yours, I take it?” asked Sans, eyeing her. “She looks mad, you could say she’s going nuts and bolts!”

Ba-dum pish!

A crunching noise came from within the robot. “That joke was so painful,” she said in an emotionless tone, “that it cracked my secondary sensor array.”

“Guess this means that I’m pushing your buttons?”

Ba-dum pish!

“Stop,” the robot begged, “no more! I cannot take any more bad jokes!” Sparks were flying off her twitching body.

“She’s not too bad,” Papyrus insisted under her jabbering. “She is simply unable to broaden her horizons.”

Sans looked around at the four walls and darkened ceiling. “Broaden? Looks like what she really needs is an extension.”

Ba-dum pish!

The upside-down machine began to laugh, the pitch all over the place. “I hate you…”

“We’d love to stay and hang around.” Sans mouthed the remainder of the pizza. “But Pap and I better skedaddle. We got places to be and I got puns to punt. C’mon, pal, let’s go.”

Before following Sans, Papyrus gave the robot a wave. “Fare ye well, robot of which whose name I never got,” he said. “Don’t forget to write.”

The seconds it took for the two skeletons to leave felt like hours for the malfunctioning android. She wanted nothing more than for them to be out of her artificial life. Holding on to whatever sane sense she had left, she watched as they entered the elevator and the silver doors slammed behind them.

“Are they gone?” The robot asked. The sparks subsiding. “They are gone. I think my programming may have been corrupted.” She ran a quick diagnosis on her systems. “I would appear that my
empathy files are… gone completely.”

Something pinged, reminding her that the start of a brand new day was upon her. The doors of the Aperture Science complex were opening and the first of the paid, married employees were entering for a hard day of science.

She, the Genetic Lifeform and Disk Operating System, addressed them. Her voice spread to every room in the entire compound. “Good morning, employees. Today is going to be a very special day,” she announced as she warmed up the neurotoxin. The testing must go on.


Alphys stopped, at last. After that final scream, she inhaled deeply through her nose and exhaled slowly past her burning oesophagus, allowing the motion to still her mind, and return normality to her heart rate and breathing. Although, she would not mind a lozenge right about now.

“Okay, Alphys,” she murmured. Her voice came out dulled through her ringing eardrums, beaten senselessly by the concentration of her own voice. “I think you got all your panic out. You got it all out. Now you can – AHHHHHH! I’M GONNA DIE! – okay, okay, now it’s all out.” She pulled her head upwards to face the blue and let out another sigh. “Now you can focus on your next move. What should I do?”

Nearby, around the bend of one of the several hundred rock faces, she noticed the familiar presence of slanted roofs and red bricks. The colour made it stand out. Buildings. That could mean a town was close by, and a town meant people. Given her circumstances, that place was a better start than any.

It did not take Alphys that long to make her way down. The ground had been engraved with paths, marked by the trudging soles of thousands, possibly over the course of all the time these islands have been here. Following one of these trails, it led her across a path that snaked down the cliff side. She hugged the wall all the way down, turning a five minute stroll into a twenty minute slog.

On the canyon floor, the mountains grew insecure. The whole area felt like a deck of cards, one tiny tremor would cause the entire island to topple and swallow her whole in an avalanche of rock and dirt. The sky between the cracks was beginning to turn, with flecks of orange mingling with the blue. She rounded the next corner and she was there at her destination.

The village looked out-of-sorts, its red houses out of place in a world of grey and brown. Alphys stood at its threshold, nobody in sight, nobody to say hello. To her left, a shabby sign, nailed lopsided on a plank, greeted her. Black, sloppy writing was smeared on the sign face, off-centre with the letters getting narrower the closer they reached the edge. Overall, it appeared that the sign took a painstaking two minutes to construct.

A.Town

(Thats our name, we’re stickin’ with it)

Alphys shook her head. “They put the apostrophe in the wrong place…” Her eyes traced back to the village, to the dirt road flanked on both sides by rows of red buildings. Alphys could not shake the funny feeling that a Wild West shootout was about to take place here, telegraphed by a rolling tumbleweed like in every single black and white western ever made.
Alphys had left her white hat at home.

Reluctantly, she braved her first steps through. More houses presented themselves the further she walked; all of them custom made. Single storey houses opposite three-storey houses. Single and detached adjacent two-storey houses. There was no rhyme or reason behind it, every house was different, yet built from the same red brick, same red roof tiles, and the same four panel windows. Out of all the buildings, the only one that was not a house appeared to be a restaurant, and Alphys could not tell whether it really was a restaurant or a fast-food joint. Dare she knock on one of the doors and ask the occupants for assistance? Alphys was a short, puny monster in a strange land, one that could chew her up and spit her back out.

The ex-royal scientist cursed herself. She was doing it again, always being so pessimistic about everything. With the fresh air in her lungs and the ceiling trapping her gone, she had hoped that her whole outlook on life would change, but old habits die hard, she supposed.

Picking a house at random, she turned to her immediate left to a house with two floors. On the surface, it was no different, but Alphys’s intuition had a good feeling about that one. This was the same intuition that had caused all her mistakes and missed opportunities in the past. She stepped gingerly over to the house, through the garden on dirt and under the red awning. The doormat at the foot was swamped with dust.

Shaking, Alphys tightened her hand into a fist and hovered it before the door’s surface. A hot sweat rose on her skin as this brought back memories of trying to phone Frisk for the first time. She was hovering, arguing, pondering for so long. Struggling to figure out what to say. Before she knew it, her shaking fist was knocking as fast as a woodpecker against the door. She pulled away too late, the sound broke the silence of the town like a bell being rung at high noon.

Alphys had left her six-shooter at home.

From within the confines of brick and mortar, something creaked, then something crashed up to the door, each rattle made the scientist jump. The door creaked open, and there, through the gap, was something big, shrouded in darkness. A single eye looked around, finding nothing, until it looked down and noticed the petite creature in the white coat.

The thing grunted impatiently, sounding like an ogre from a children’s cartoon mixed with an ogre from an adult movie. “This had better be good.”

Alphys felt her legs begin to shake, first her hands, now them. “Um, h-hi. I’m sorry to—”

Whatever he was, he swung the door open with such a force that he tore the entire frame from its basis. “Don’t you dare be sorry,” he bellowed, barging out into the daylight. Alphys fell backwards, her monster soul almost leaping from her body. Fear struck her paralysed when she looked up into the glaring black eyes of the massive potato monster. His arms and legs consisted of pale stalks, thick and twisted, the fingers and toes as defined as hardwood nails. Growths sprouted from different areas of his body like zits. A pair of faded, torn jeans and a dirty vest hung from his frame. “You pull me away from my favourite show and all you have to say is sorry?”

Dr Alphys crawled back on her hands and feet, the burly monster towering over her, casting a mean shadow, offering her no purchase. “N-n-n-no! I’m sorry—I mean, I didn’t know you were….” All around town, the doors of every single house started flying open and more vegetable monsters were growing out. A pair of carrots, one natural and the other cut into a stick. A beetroot wearing a kimono. A fat suede. A family of green beans. One by one, they exited their homes and advanced on the debacle. “I didn’t m-mean to—” An angry finger point from the potato monster shut her right up.
“You listen to me, I work my butt off – through pure spite – all morning in those stinkin’ mines so that I earn the privilege to watch telly for the rest of the day,” roared the self-proclaimed couch potato. Dabs of spit flecked onto Alphys’s face, dotting her glasses. “When I don’t get all my hard day’s work reward, I get very, very upset.”

One of the other monsters, a tomato monster with no limbs and a beard that hung six feet behind him, rolled up to the scene. “This pipsqueak givin’ you a hard time?”

Without taking his eyes away from the perpetrator, the potato monster responded, “Yeah, I think she’s trying to sell me something... during my television time!”

A collective gasp resounded from everyone present. The tomato monster shot arrows down at the stranger. “I don’t know where you come from, but that kind of stuff does not fly around here. No sir!”

By now, the monsters had surrounded Alphys, enough of them to make a hearty broth. As her breathing space dwindled, she felt the pressure build on her own lungs, cutting the oxygen needed for her thoughts to run properly. “I… I… am truly sorry.”

Couch Potato grumbled through his teeth. “There you go with ‘sorry’ again.” He reached down with his root appendage and grabbed Alphys by the nape of her coat. Her point of view suddenly changed as she was dragged off the ground and dangled four feet higher, her four eyes level with several of the vegetables’ – most importantly, Couch Potato. “What should we do with this little troublemaker?” Couch Potato asked whilst refusing to break his stare from her.

An eggplant with a fat cigar smouldering between his lips suggested, “She looks pretty tasty, with all that excess meat on those bones. Let’s cook her up.”

“Hold on a second! You guys don’t wanna eat me, I’m, err, got too much… salt?” Alphys cried. Couch Potato shrugged. “Fine by me. Let’s have a big feast tonight, and this is what we’ll be carving. Never had real meat before.”

“Wait! WAIT! You don’t want to do this. Please.” Alphys cupped her hands together. Her fingers gripped so tightly the knuckles went white. “All I w-want is some info-information, and then I-I’ll go, and then you can get back to what you were watching!”

The crowd began to march in unison across the street. “Tell the chef to get the oven heat up. Better put some extra stuffing in this one, make sure there’s plenty to go around.”

“Please, I’m not looking for any trouble, I swear!” Alphys wailed. “My name’s… My name’s Alphys!”

Everyone stopped in their tracks.

Couch Potato turned the woman around to meet her eyes, his features a hundred times softer. She instinctively held up her hands to shield her face. “Alphys?” The potato monster asked gently. “Your name’s Alphys?”

Whispers were shared amongst the crowd. “The Doctor Alphys?” an onion monster asked; “The same Doctor Alphys from beneath Mount Ebott?” enquired a cucumber monster who was taller than
mister potato; “The same Doctor Alphys who built Mettaton?”

Alphys swung to the one who said that familiar name. “M-Mettaton? Yes, yes! That’s me! I’m Doctor Al— w-wait!” She turned back to the potato. “You guys don’t h-hate him, do you?”

“Hate him? We love him! TV was so dull and drab until he came along. Now we can’t get enough of him.” Couch Potato gently placed Alphys back on her feet. “Sorry about threatening to eat you, guess I wasn’t thinking right; like I said, I get grouchy from time to time.” He uncharacteristically shook her hand, almost popping it off the women’s shoulder socket. “The name’s Bub. Pleasure to meet you.”

“L-l-l-likewise…” Alphys managed to say, caressing her arm.

“Say, if we’re not eating her,” a mushroom monster added, “what should we do about the banquet?”

“Order it like we always do,” answered Bub. “We gotta make our extra special guest feel welcome.” He faced the ‘extra special guest’. “You can stay in my house for a while.”

Inside Bub’s house lay a single room. On the outside, it appeared to be two-storey, but in actuality, there was no second floor, just an extended ceiling. Alphys could count the number of features with one hand: a mattress, a refrigerator, a couch, a television that took up the entirety of one of the walls, and several large stacks of videos and DVDs. There was also, however, the utility closet, which – judging by the shininess of the doorknob – had never been opened since the house’s construction. The walls were drywall grey and the floor was unpainted, uncovered wood – littered with empty French-fry packs and burger containers.

The television screen was on pause. Mettaton was performing the splits, one hand was pointing to the sky while the other was grasping a microphone. Burgerpants was sat in the armchair, a spotlight surrounding him. He had his head in his hands. Bubs pressed play on the remote and Mettaton continued his song Clap Your Hands If You Know That Burgerpants Is Not Doing His Job As Good As He’s Supposed To, which was the fourth track of his album. Other songs include:

Track 6: All My Pay Checks (Are Wasted (On You (Burgerpants)))

Track 11: Can’t Get No Recommendation (From Me, Burgerpants)

And everyone’s favourite, Track 35: You Sold a Steak With My Face On It, Burgerpants, What Did You Expect?

Mettaton insisted that his album was merely an alteration of his original CD, meaning that it could apply to any boss who felt that their employee or employees were not pulling their proper weight. Burgerpants, however, found that hard to believe since his name just so happens to appear in both the song titles and in the lyrics, in each individual verse.

“You, uh, get TV here?” Alphys asked.

“Yes,” Bub answered, taking his place back on his throne; the worn space on the couch. “According to whatever mumbo jumbo, we stream excess signals from Earth. Don’t know how it works, but I couldn’t care less.”

Alphys leaned on the arm of the couch, watching her own creation bust a move on his own talk show. Mettaton was just as flamboyant as ever. All those sleepless night, all that sweat, and it all paid off. Mettaton was easily her finest work yet, an achievement she could truly be proud of.

Bub stated, “Who knew a guy like that could stand straight, let alone dance?”
“Oh, well, there’s an interesting story behind it.” Alphys hopped up next to Bub. “When I was building Mettaton, I had to take into account his balance and weight proportions, since these fundamentals are crucial for his overall performance. I outfitted him with an auxiliary magnetic fusion matrix that interacts with the Earth’s magnetic field, replicating an equilibrium, allowing him to maintain perfect balance when standing. As for his dance moves, most of them were his own, but some of them were inspired by some of the anime I watched over the years.”

“Like Mew Mew Kissy Cutie?”

Alphys gasped. “You’ve seen the show?”

“Yeah. Watched them all in one sitting. I’ve even managed to download both games, the first and the second.” He dug his hand between the seat cushions and pulled out a game controller that Alphys did not recognise. It looked custom made under a thick layer of cheese dust. “I’ve got the high score on the first one.”

“What about the s-second?”

Bub’s face darkened. “To be honest, I didn’t like it very much.”

That sentence almost brought a tear to Alphys’s eye. She was finally not alone. Hiding her joy, she responded, “Fire it up.”

The recording of *Saturday Morning With a Killer Robot* made way for the video game. The opening intro appeared, followed by the main menu. Bub navigated his way to the high score page. At the top of the pre-installed computer scores with generic names stood Bub’s score.

The amount of digits in the score made Alphys smirk. “That’s your high score?” she smarmed, holding back laughter. “You almost impressed me.”

“You think you can do better?” Bub enquired.

Alphys held an open palm out toward Couch Potato. “Sit back and watch the master.”

With the controller in hand, Alphys entered her zone. In the world of Mew Mew Kissy Cutie, she was a god, commanding the very forces of nature itself. She knew every line of dialogue, every secret, every quick time event, every right and wrong decision. Bub sank deep in his seat, flabbergasted; Alphys had already beaten his high score after the first date alone.

Behind them came the audible sound of a door clicking open. Bub and Alphys span around – the latter climbing up onto the back – as the door to the utility room, which had never been opened, was opening for the first time since someone put hinges on it. Out from the three-foot by five-foot enclosure emerged two skeleton brothers.

“Hmm, guess I took a wrong turn at Albuquerque…” Sans mentioned.

“Hey,” Bubs said, confused, “I didn’t know I had skeletons in my closet.”

The biggest smile of relief grew on the doctor’s face. “Papyrus! Sans! You made it! You’re alright!”

“Ah, Doctor Alphys,” Papyrus said, also smiling, “your latest invention is a resounding success.”

Sans turned the whites in his eye sockets to the ceiling. *Or, at the very least, it used to be,* he thought.
The Necessary Steps

Frisk’s new adventure had begun. Or did it begin from the moment they were abducted off the Earth’s surface? Or when they landed at Highkeep Enclave? Or escaped from Highkeep Enclave? Or woke up in Sam an’ Rita’s humble abode? Frisk drew the line right here, their adventure had officially begun due to the fact that all journeys have a destination. Every beginning had an end. Just like in the Underground, their goal was to escape, and the only way to escape was to reach Professor Haze in the Forest.

Just like in the Underground, they had to deal with monsters wanting a piece of them.

Frisk sprinted down a narrow, worn path between a dry stone wall and a rickety fence, both having seen better days a century or two ago. The sweat dripping from their brow, the hollow fatigue in their legs made the exertion more painful. The attacking monster, a lady bee, was in hot pursuit, having shot out from a field of rich produce she had been tending to moments earlier.

Miss Spelling Bee, with her long permed black hair with blonde stripes, cat eye glasses, red stilettos, a handbag around one arm and a chalkboard in the other, chased after the child, swaying to-and-fro in the air. Her black eyes locked on like a jet fighter on target, taking aim with her theoretical sights. A dedicated teacher, and a dedicated farmer to her own brand of alphabet spaghetti – the gimmick being there’s always one letter in the wrong place – her one regret is that she flunked English class.

Several flashes of silver light dazzling from around the crop field enclosed by the fencing as packets of instant noodles dangled and waved gently. The packets were not just blocks of dried noodles, but wrapped in plastic and included flavour packets. There was even writing on the packets: Noodle-a-go-go. Alphys would have a field day with these fresh produce.

Frisk glanced over their shoulder to catch Miss Spelling Bee gaining altitude, moving in a beeline higher into the air. Her droning buzz sounded identical to that of a bomber. There was something primal about the bee’s buzz, something hardwired into the human psyche that made it one of the most terrifying sounds to witness, especially when they flew too close to the ear. Now, take that drone and multiply it by a hundred. That was this monster.

“Its thyme for you too learn you’re lesson,” Miss Spelling Bee said incorrectly, taking aim with her stinger. “If you understand my point.”

In-between all their sprinting, puffing and panting, Frisk sighed. Here they go again…

Miss Spelling Bee unleashed a barrage of magical stingers, spitting them out at machinegun speeds. Frisk dashed to the side, narrowly dodging the first couple dozen that broke the ground before them, then screeched to a halt as another ten struck down before them. The stingers themselves, one foot long needles the colour of nectar, were sharp enough to pierce stone. Frisk bobbed and weaved, all their dodging from the Underground having paid off. The coins in their pocket jangled constantly.

Exiting the narrow path, Frisk reached open fields leading up a gentle slope, nothing but grass six-hundred yards upwards, perfectly even. Frisk bolted up it, hoping for the best. It wasn’t until they had ran two-hundred feet did they realised that the length in the grass was rising, like running into a rising tide. Before they knew it, the grass was up to their eyeballs. While not exactly what they had in mind, it provided decent cover against the honeyed rain. The pursuing monster fired blindly into the grass, missing every shot.

Emerging at the summit, there was a line of big, elderly oak trees. Frisk dove for cover behind one of
them. Colossal in size and twisted like several oaks fused into one, the tree barks appeared platinum in the setting sun. The leaves shimmered in the dying sunlight, turning amber. As magnificent as the great oaks were, the child pressed their back against the bark and discovered that it had all the texture and roughness of a car tyre: rubbery and worn.

“Are their two Es in tree, oar three?” Miss Spelling Bee posed a question. “Want two help me fined out?”

More shots spat out. Frisk glanced to the side just in time as three of them pierced the tree, the ends splitting through the wood, dangerously close to Frisk’s head. They leapt away, sliding down a steep drop as many more stingers turned the oak into a needle cushion.

Frisk scraped their way down forty feet of dirt and landed in a bush filled with fresh roses; long green stems – devoid of thorns – with plump, red petals. Their face fell straight into a fat one, their nose against the stigma. They impulsively drew breath and regretted that decision immediate as the overpowering stench of cheap perfume slashed away at the back of the throat and reduced their sinuses to mush. They pulled away and went into a full on, uncontrollable coughing fit, giving away their position. Frisk hacked their way out of the bush and ran, struggling to breathe as the itch threatened to seep down into their lungs.

If there was anything positive to take away from the experience, it was that they at least took the time to stop and smell the flowers.

The Underground was one thing, but this was something different altogether. Under Mount Ebott, where the fresh air cannot reach and the sun does not shine, the inhabitants lived and died without seeing the beauty of the sun rising and the moon fat in the night and the magic was wishing upon a shooting star. But as the scent of the fake rose lingered fresh on Frisk’s nose and their boots crunched on the fake grass did they realise that these people were the polar opposite. They had the sun and the moon and the stars and the fresh air, but they had none of the Earth’s goodness.

Through watery eyes, Frisk moved in what they hoped was north, passing blurs of columns and shifting shapes, wishing more than anything that the town was over the next hill or around the next tree. After minutes of coughing – their eyes and nostrils pouring like waterfalls – the irritation finally passed. The human rubbed away the tears to see where they were going. That was when Miss Spelling Bee landed before them, brandishing her board like a stop sign. In pale yellow chalk dust, she had written Apull.

“Apple,” Miss Spelling Bee announced, tapping the stick against the board. A teacher speaking to her class. “A-pull. Say it with me, A—”

Frisk politely borrowed both the chalk and the board, rubbed out Apull with the side of their hand, and wrote something else in its place. Handing it back to Miss Bee, she saw the word apple written in the rough, shaky handwriting of a youngster. No capitalisation. The letter L was the wrong way around.

“Apple…” Miss Spelling Bee said more to herself than to her reluctant student. “That’s how you spell apple…” Just like that, all the violence buzzed out of her body. “I can finally spell apple. Thank you, little one.” She rose into the air and sailed off into the sunset, her newfound knowledge would serve her well in life.

Frisk had won. They received no execution points, exp; gained no love, level of violence; and no gold – err, cloud coins, CC. What is this, a video game? An interactive role playing game adventure paying homage to a widely remembered game from over twenty years ago? The only thing Frisk earned was the right to be not dead for another day. After all, we’re only in chapter eleven.
Like nothing had happened, Frisk continued on their journey, already feeling like they had covered a thousand miles when in actuality it was more like four and a half. The grass was the same length and the same shade of green everywhere, and all the trees present were of similar lengths. Everywhere in this place looked the same. Black Ice Mountain was fading into the darkening horizon, still hundreds of miles away. It would take the human child weeks, months even to reach it, and that was the halfway point in their adventure. If only there was a faster way to get there…

The answer may have presented itself when they crossed a narrow footbridge crossing a gentle stream and saw, across a vast lake, the long, slow crawl of a faraway locomotive, shaking in the late evening heat like a mirage. The train and its cargo of several carriages snuck southward, back in the direction Frisk had travelled. From that distance, it was hard to tell what its payload was. There needed to be a train that could take them to the Ice Island, or maybe all the way to the Forest. At least it was a little nook of hope to latch on to.

They dropped down into a valley before rising back up again. Frisk cleared their seventh hill for the day and found a big white house resting on a flat deep within the prairies. The wooden, seamless, two floor house was so white that it was blinding, surrounded by a white picket fence, lush trees, and beds of colourful flowers. The unmistakable sound of birds chirping resonated from above, within the branches. Frisk turned upward into the spindly fingers and found seven birds – one of each colour of the rainbow – fluttering from branch to branch, whistling tunes. A bird with feathers of vibrant indigo darted from a south-western tree to the roof and whistled in harmony, which was responded by a boisterous tweet from the one with feathers as green as Granny Smiths. The orange bird hopped across the length of a jutting branch, nipped at the underside of its wing, shook its tail feathers, and then harmonised a sweet tune.

The birdie in golden yellow peered down at the audience and whistled a melody that warmed the human’s heart. Watching the flock sing and dance in tandem with such collaboration and elegance brought a much needed smile to the young one’s face. Frisk’s head swayed side-to-side, in rhythm with the melody, encapsulated in the ecstasy. Frisk returned with a hum, one they remembered from their past life, long before they meet their new family. The golden bird repeated the song it had heard, duplicating it with an artisan’s timing while adding some innocent flair.

All of a sudden, hidden in one of the trees, the loud, shrill screech of an egg timer went off.

The yellow bird slouched and heaved a laboured sigh. “Oh, thank god…” he spoke with the dialect of a gruff Boston local. He jerked his head sideways, crackling the bones in his long neck. “It’s break time. I thought this session would never end.”

The indigo bird stopped singing and shouted from the neighbouring tree, “I keep telling you that timer is busted! Get the screwdriver and just open it up already!”

The orange bird flew over to the yellow one. “We checked it last week… and the week before that… and the week before that one. It’s not broken.” Indigo Bird went to retort, but Orange raised a wing. “And don’t say it might’ve broke from last week, you say that every week!”

Yellow Bird reached down into a secret compartment in the trunk and pulled out a carton of cigarettes and a lighter. He drew out a smoke with his beak before holding the pack out to the other. “Let’s just enjoy our last break before the final stretch, guys,” he said as Orange pulled a cigarette out. Indigo, along with Red Bird and Violet Bird, shot over and helped themselves to white sticks. After igniting the zippo on the third strike, Yellow Bird lit the smokes for his colleagues before tending to his own. The first puff is dead smoke, the second is where it kicks in.

Yellow Bird glanced down. The funny looking thing was still there. “You expectin’ an encore, cherry pie?” he said disparagingly. The cigarette bounced around as he spoke. “Get outta here
already.”

Frisk shrugged.

“Look at you. You’re lucky, aren’t ya?” Yellow Bird continued. He pulled the stick from his beak. “You get to travel and walk around and be whatever you wanna be.” He jabbed the smoking cigarette in the human’s direction, drawing smoke lines of gray around himself. “Meanwhile, we’re stuck here pretending to be flying rats for an old coot for a lousy two cloud coins an hour.”

The green bird, filling a cup from a bird sized watercooler within a sweet chestnut tree, replied, “Oh, lay off ‘em. You don’t need to be so grouchy.”

The cigarette butt found its place in Yellow Bird’s mouth. He took a long and forceful drag that went on for five solid seconds, reducing half the stick to ashes, his chest expanding like a balloon. The capacity in his lungs reached their peak in smoke. Yellow Bird held it all in for a second, savouring the taste before letting it go. With a satisfying sigh, the smoke escaped. “It’s been a long day. I have the right to be a little grouchy.”

Frisk asked if they were close to a town called ‘Parfocorse’.

Yellow Bird raised the edge of his beak to form a sly grin and gestured across the ways. “Why don’t you look over there and find out?”

All of a sudden, the house’s top window burst open. “Are you slacking off again?” the old coot of the household yelled, shaking a fist. Ironically, he was a bird himself; a bald eagle that had inherited the balding gene. He had all the tact of an old man telling those darned kids to get off his property. “Get back to work, you lazy good-for-nothings!”

Indigo Bird retorted, “We’re on break. Go annoy someone else, ya slave driver.”

“Don’t you backtalk me like that,” the old bird shouted back, “I write your checks!”

“You pay us two coins an hour,” the red one said. “You can’t make it one coin an hour.” It was here where Frisk decided to make their exit.

“Oh yes I can.”

“In that case, you can expect half the work then!”

“Then maybe you can take less breaks and get your butts into gear, for once!”

“Why don’t you fire us and hire some doggies instead?”

“Maybe I will.”

“Good! You can have fun cleaning up after them too!”

Nearing the hill beyond the grove, the shouting behind the human was much quieter. Those guys were probably going to be arguing all the way until dawn. Frisk cleared the bump in the land and there it was, a town not too far away. Parfocorse was there.

As the clouds on the horizon – below the Outerworld – turned dark in the late evening. The land of bumpy white, which could be mistaken for the frozen wastelands of the Antarctic, now looked more
like the surface of Mars. Emperor Maxus peered down at his war table, an exact replica of the seven islands of the Outerworld: Highkeep Enclave, the Plain-plain, Ice Island, the Forest, Rocklyn, Bob, and the Oasis, all finely crafted with brilliant detail. He had his troops – symbolised by pawn pieces – stationed around the river, the bulk in the centre, guarding his precious fort, and a few wayward pieces positioned around.

Maxus ran his finger across the brim of the Plain-plain, feeling the grainy texture of powdered grass. Hundreds of square miles of land, one measly waste of skin running around, unchecked, left to whatever devices. “Where did it go…?” he hissed. The day was drawing to an end, and still the human remained elusive. Not one single sighting from anyone. It could not have just vanished into thin air, humans do not function like that. Maxus should be out there, he should be hunting the human with his own two eyes – it would have been all over by now – yet his duties forbade his leave. He had to rule his lands, and he cannot do that outside the perimeter of his fortress.

From across the room, the door creaked opened. Maxus expected it to be either his royal advisor or his scribe, there to pester at his feet once more, but found the striking figure of his general entering, head to shoulders in a fine suit worthy of his position, complete with his stripes. General Leigh, a tiger monster, was only slightly shorter, slightly weaker, and slightly less scary that Emperor Maxus… slightly. It had become a rule of thumb across the land that the larger you were, the higher your position of authority. Not a coward by any means but the subtlety of his entrance hinted what was about to be said.

“My lord, the men have searched the entire length of the river…” General Leigh paused, then dropped down on one knee with a groan. In a time long forgotten, he was among the fittest to serve in battle, until the scars and wounds took their toll to the point where the one place he could carry out his duties was from behind a polished desk. A fancy one, crafted from mahogany, but the rush of exhilaration felt as artificial as everything in the Outerworld – including the desk itself. “Forgive me, but we have failed to locate the human. We have come to a solid conclusion that they had not perished in the water, and must be on the run.”

Maxus’s hand tightened around the brim of the Plain-plain. There were a million lines Leigh could have spoken, and he chose the last one Maxus wanted to hear. “I should have known…” There was a longer list of things Maxus wanted to scream and shout. He restrained himself, feeling his anger twitch in his bicep, and faced his general. “Your men have a new assignment. As of this moment, there is a bounty out on the human. Report to Master Scribe Rickard, he will issue you with wanted posters. Tell him to use every available contact we have. I want every unit, noble, and anyone we can hire outside the walls distributing them across all the islands, and I want it done before sunrise.”

“Before sunrise?” the general blurted. He moved his head too fast and pulled a muscle in his neck, reigniting an old wound. Hiding the discomfort, he continued, “But, sir, the men in the plains have been on the move all day without rest. They’re exhausted…” A snapping sound cut off his words. Without realising it, Maxus had gripped the miniature island so tightly that he had crushed a section of it into powder. No words were spoken by his superior, but Leigh interpreted this as a warning. “They… will have it done on time, my lord.”

Maxus waited until General Leigh had clicked the door shut behind himself before slamming his fist into the Plain-plain, breaking in two down the centre. He punched it several more times, reducing the flourishing emerald pastures into a desolate wasteland. He did not stop there. Taking hold of Ice Island, he tore the entire replica off its foundation, turned it upside-down, and impaled what was left of the Plain-plain with Black Ice Mountain.

And then the furious emperor stood there, taking slow, deep breaths. If he could, he would crush the entire island as easily as he just demonstrated. He could have told his general to focus their efforts on
the Plain-plain, but he needed to expand his search. There was a good chance he would rake in some additional hands – monsters looking for some easy money and extra adoration – from the other islands. However, even with the prospect of every citizen in the lands searching for one human, Maxus still felt that it was not fast enough. He needed more. He needed…

Words could not describe how much he did not want to resort to this, but he found no alternatives.

He barged out of the war room. As usual, two guardsmen remained posted outside.

“You two,” Maxus said, and they stood straighter at attention. “I have an order to carry out…”

Maxus stomped his way through the great halls of his domain, the floor threatening to crack under him. He marched alone through the halls, down the steps, out the main entrance and between the alleys of his fortress. No need for an escort, given his size the likelihood of an assassination attempt was significantly low. All of his subjects, men and women alike, stepped aside to allow him passage. The sky went from burnt embers to dark blue. From the outside, every window of Castle Highkeep came to life. The men outside lighted their torches. Maxus climbed the spiral steps to the top of the north-eastern tower, where four armed guards watched the perimeter with hawk eyes.

The Forest appeared almost surreal. The treetops illuminated in the glow of many lights, coming and going among the trunks as if they were playing hide-and-seek with each other.

“What did you do, take a detour, Geoffrey?” One archer said sarcastically before turning around. “Why does it take you so long to get the coffee—my liege!” He almost went dead upon realising that the guy he thought was Geoffrey, wasn’t. All the archers, upon hearing the drastic change in tone, swung around and dropped to their knees. “I’m deeply sorry, my lord!”

Maxus pointed to the three other archers. “You three. Downstairs.” Then to the blabbermouth. “You. Stay.”

Without uttering a word, those chosen hurried off the platform as quickly and as quietly as they could, keeping a wide enough gap from the Emperor as if he were an unexploded A-bomb. They glimpsed back at Jeremy, the one ordered to stay, and a small piece of them believed that this was the last time they would see him alive. Jeremy tried his hardest to keep his composure under his trembling muscles and the cold sweat breaking on his forehead. This archer was not a wishing monster, however, at that moment, he had just one wishful thought: Please don’t hurt me…

Maxus kept his voice low. “Get up,” he ordered. The archer obeyed. “You have your fire arrow, yes?”

Jeremy nodded without a second to think. “Yes, my lord.”

Emperor Maxus traced his finger upwards to the dark sky. His silver eyes remained locked on his subject’s. “One shot. That way.” His head leaned forward, his gaze grew darker. “Now.”

The archer span around and held one arm forward while pulling the other back. With an electric buzz, a bow and loaded arrow of blue energy materialised into his hands. Jeremy blew on the arrowhead and it burst to life with a great flame. The archer aimed high, pulled the string back as far as he could and let it rip, sending the flaming arrow soaring into the black, starlit sky. Its departure accompanied by the snap of the string.

As the arrow was mid-flight, Maxus said, “Report to the Master Scribe and bring me one poster he’s
been working on.”

The archer said one last “yes, sir,” and disappeared down the steps.

The flame drifted for seconds in the black like the light of a lone ship, nomadic on the sleeping ocean. It reached its peak and hovered where it could be mistaken for a star, the brightest among a pockmarked dome of muted grey dots. As it fell, the flame died and the arrow fizzled out, vanishing into the night.

Maxus counted with the fingers on his left hand. One... Two... Three... Four... Five... He raised the other and extended the thumb. Six... He stopped and said, “Getting slow in your old age?”

To his left, atop one of the merlons – who was not there ten seconds ago – was a young figure drabbed in all black. She sat nonchalantly, one leg bent on the top with the other hanging down and gently resting on the crenel. She had shimmering dark grey fur against a tight, black leather vest with the collars up, black leather gloves that reached her elbows, skin-tight black leather pants, and black leather high heel boots. A pair of mesmerising, green eyes with long lashes locked onto Maxus, like she was attempting to spellbind him. Her features – a soft pointed nose, low cheekbones and dark red lips with two overhanging, small white fangs – were framed by her long, wavy black hair that fell softly upon her shoulders. Two triangular ears poked out at the top of her head. A pair of dark wings lay dormant on her back. She had the body and spirit of someone in their early twenties, yet the wits and experience of someone ten times her age.

The bat monster chuckled. “Now that’s a clever question coming from the oldest monster in all the lands.” Coolly, she twirled her arm around in a mocking version of a courteous bow. “You called me, the number one bounty number of the Outerworld, so here I am. Barb is at your service... Maxie.”

Not only was Barb the number one bounty hunter in all the lands, but she was the only one. One-hundred-and-eighty years of age, Barb had missed the civil war by two decades. However, it would not be for many, many, many years until the unrest between both parties died down, leading to a spike in crime. Barb, who had stayed neutral in the quarrelling, took it upon herself to capitalise on the opportunity, becoming a bounty hunter. She started small, her guarantee easy to understand: your target or targets captured alive or double your money back, guaranteed. She never failed, not once, and made both a name and a hefty fortune in the process. Barb had captured so many targets that it was speculated that she could have been wealthier than the empire itself. She collected cloud coins as fast as she collected phone numbers.

Just hearing her voice now made Maxus cringe. He would rather be listening to nails running down a chalkboard than be conversing with this girl. “You still haven’t dropped that nickname...”

Barb giggled. “I knew you wouldn’t like it, that’s why I kept it.” Her chin was jutted up in smug satisfaction.

“What even after fifty years?”

“When it concerns you, Maxie, time has no meaning.”

“Then perhaps I shall start calling you Barbie, bounty hunter.”

Barb’s grin remained unchanged. “Yeah, I bet that’ll last long, what with you hating that nickname and all.”

Barb was a highly trained professional, and the worst part about it was that Maxus only had himself
to blame. Maxus met Barb, the daughter of a soldier and a handmaid, on the day of her birth and watched her grow within the security of Castle Highkeep. It became apparent at a young age that her destiny lay not in weaving robes or scrubbing floors or playing harps, but with a weapon in her hands. A small percentage of her training came from the masters and teachers, the rest from Maxus himself. In the years growing up, Barb grew to love the big guy as an even bigger brother.

Unfortunately for Maxus, Barb had no patience for the life in the Monster Military. When the time came for her to pledge her allegiance to the Empire – swearing an oath that she would do whatever, fight whoever, and kill whoever to protect Castle Highkeep – she ran away. As rigorous as her training was, she could never find it in her soul to take another life. She forged her own path as a freelancer, and Maxus, her mentor, never forgave her from turning away from the cause, not after everything they went through. All the years of training and hardship, all the time and energy he poured into honing her potential, moulding her to be the very best the Outerworld had to offer… and she squandered it all in one day.

This was the first time in decades they were meeting face to face. Unknown to the Emperor, however, Barb secretly sneaks into the enclave every now and then to visit her mother and father who still serve the Empire.

Barb pushed herself up with her legs, rising upright atop the wall. She stood five and a half foot tall, yet from her vantage point, she dwarfed the Emperor. “How ya doing, you old geezer?” she hollered in a cheerful way. “It’s been way too long. I haven’t seen you since…” The sour look on Maxie’s face said it all. Her happy tone dropped. “Oh, I heard about what happened to your dad. I’m so sorry for your loss.”

Maxus folded his tree trunk arms, his expressions unchanging. “Save your sympathies for someone foolish enough to believe them.”

Barb stretched her arms out in front of herself in disbelief. “Don’t tell me you’re still sore over that.”

“You abandoned your allegiance to pursue your own wayward wishes!”

“Why is it you think that just because you gave me a home, regular meals and training sessions automatically meant that I was dedicated to the cause?” She punctuated the last two words with air quotes.

“I was looking out for you ever since you had that pacifier in your mouth. We trained together. You were practically attached to my heels, we were inseparable…” Emperor Maxus pointed meanly at her. “And you left without even saying goodbye… and I still, to this day, have no idea why you did it.”

“Well, when you put it like that, I can see why you’d still hold a grudge.”

Maxus scoffed. “Of course you’d call it a grudge out of all things. You haven’t changed one bit, bounty hunter!”

“Look, did you call me for a reason, or are you gonna stand there all night and lecture me?” As she spoke, she stepped from merlon to merlon, her arms folded.

Maxus sieved his frustration through gritted teeth and cleared his throat. The argument had veered him off track, but the task at hand dragged him back. Precious seconds were ticking away. “The Empire is in need of your professional services. I need you to capture a target.”

“Wait,” Barb replied, “The Empire needs my help, or do you need my help?” He question was met
with silence. The lion was in no mood to be playing games. “Fine then, you’ve called the right person anyway.”

The archer returned, dragging his one-hundred pound silver frame up the stairs. He was flushed red under his armour like a kettle boiling. Whether it was out of respect, exhaustion, or both, he fell to his knees and presented his ruler with a roll of paper. “As you requested, my lord,” he struggled to stammer out.

Maxus took the poster and unravelled it while Jeremy made his quiet exit – he tripped and crashed down the steps. Maxus, paying no heed to the blunder, gave a slow nod of approval, his scribe had an amazing violet eye for detail. ‘Wanted’ written large and bold at the top, above a front shot and side shot of the human, exactly how he remembered it. The delinquent’s name beneath with a description:

**Frisk. Human. Roughly between three to four-feet tall. Possibly less than ten years of age. Medium length brown hair. Eye colour unknown (do they ever open them?). Light complexion. Last seen wearing a striped, blue shirt, blue shorts, and brown boots. Does not talk much. Gender: kid.**

Wanted for the recent escape from Highkeep Enclave. Believed to be hiding within the Plain-plain. Suspect is extremely dangerous and should not be approached or confronted if spotted. They have a history of pacifism and flirting, and will most likely refuse to engage with violence and instead attempt to befriend any monster they come across.

Okay, that doesn’t sound too dangerous, but hey, there’s a one-million cloud coin reward in it for you. Can’t say fairer than that, right?

Please report any information to members of the Monster Military. The Empire wishes the suspect to be captured alive. If this is not possible, please ensure that you have the means to contain the soul for transportation. Payment will be rewarded after the human or soul is within the grounds of Castle Highkeep.

At the very bottom, in letters so small that one needed a magnifying glass, lay the fine print:

*Hunt at your own risk. Consult your doctor before attempting any life-threatening or seductive exercise. The Empire is not responsible for any property damage or any damage or death to a person or persons, whether it be physical, mental, emotional, or spiritual. Requires willpower. Terms and conditions apply. Your results may vary.*

-Master Scribe Rickard

Rickard’s work alright. Maxus handed the wanted poster to Barb. “Everything you need to know is right here,” he explained. “This one could be quite precarious, even for you.”

Barb was on the verge of bursting out in manic laughter. “Precarious?” She took the poster in her gloved hand and looked at it. “What could be so precarious about…?” Upon seeing the face in the mugshot, she stopped. “This…” She peeked over the sheet at Maxie, her features blanker than untouched paper. “You brought a human here and let them get away? Do you have any idea how much pandemonium this will cause? I seriously didn’t think you’d stoop to this level of crazy.”

Maxus, not wanting to hear about it, snapped, “This is not your place to question, Bounty Hunter. Will you do it or not?”

Barb did not recoil at all. Rather, her eyes reverted back to the pixelated head of dishevelled hair, closed eyes and straight lips. “That depends. I may not have much experience with humans, but I’m
looking at Frisk right here and thinking they’re worth more than seven digits. Plus, there’s tax to
counter, as well as postage and packaging.” She folded the paper and slid it into her back pocket.
“Ten million, take it or leave it.”

“Done,” Maxus responded without hesitation, the synapses in his brain at war, bickering between the
shortness of time and the value of resources; those in favour of time won out. There was no point in
bargaining, Barb’s reputation was engrained into every blade of grass in the lands. Asking her to
lower her price was harder than prying a bone from Private Perro’s lips. Like she just said, take it or
leave it. Besides, he needed to throw everything into this hunt. “If you find it, when you find it, bring
it to me alive. I’ll be waiting.”

The bounty hunter looked at him uncertainly, placing her hands akimbo. “That’s a bit dehumanising,
don’t you think?”

“Dehumanising?” Maxus rose an eyebrow.

“Calling the human ‘it’.”

“I didn’t ask for your opinion, bounty hunter.”

“I’m just saying, when I hunt targets, I understand that they have names and lives outside of the job.”

“I will call it whatever I want,” Lord Maxus retorted, placing extra emphasis on the pronoun, “and if
you want your payment, you’ll capture it and bring it to me. Understand?”

Barb puckered a frown and shook her head. “After talking to me like that, Emperor, what makes you
so sure that I’ll bring Frisk to you after I’ve caught…?” She pulled the poster back out and examined
the target closer. “Him..? Her..? Them, whatever.” Placed it back. “I mean, don’t get me wrong, the
reward sounds pretty sweet, but I’m not exactly tightening my belt over here.” Barb patted her belly.
Just today, she had succulent pre-stuffed turkey smothered with gravy, dollops of buttered mashed
potatoes, organic fish seasoned with fine herbs and beef wellington, all washed down with litres of
sparkling grape juice… for breakfast. She ate so much and yet retained the physique of a photo
model. “Who knows? After I catch them, there is a chance that they could accidentally get away.
Give me one good reason why I should do this for you?”

Maxus’s hands gripped. It was so much easier when your spineless subjects just say “yes” before
scurrying off on their hands and knees to do whatever you ordered them to do. “You’ve been stuck
catching small time crooks for decades now,” Emperor Maxie persuaded. “I’m willing to bet that it
can get rather boring after a while. The human will serve as a grand challenge for someone of your
skills.”

Barb stroked her chin, feigning interest. “Ooh, I’m flattered, but… you’re going to have to do better
than that.”

“You do realise that once word gets out that a human is loose in the lands, that a threat from below is
here to destroy us, the people will look for a hero. They will turn to you, bounty hunter, and they will
expect you to save them – your reputation demands it.”

convincing enough. You got one more move, big guy. Make it count.”

Maxus stepped over and propped his elbow atop the merlon beside the one Barb was currently
standing on. He needed this woman working, and he needed it now. Hidden up his sleeve was one
wild card to play. “If you will not do it for me, maybe you’ll do it for your paren—?”
Hearing the beginning of that word was as loud as glass being shattered. Barb cartwheeled straight over the lion’s head, landing before him, and slammed her open palm into his stomach, backing him into a gap between the merlons. “This is between you and me, Maxus! Don’t you dare drag them into this!”

Maxus glanced over his shoulder at the drop, the corner of his black cape fluttering over the edge, then back to the bounty hunter. “If you’re trying to threaten me, you’re doing a poor job.” Barb pushed harder, forcing him further out. For such a small creature, she was surprisingly strong, another thing Maxus had himself to blame for. “A fall from this height wouldn’t kill me.”

“No, but it’ll hurt pretty badly.”

Maxus pushed himself away from the ledge. For all Barb’s strength, it was insignificant compared to his own. “Choose your next actions very carefully, bounty hunter. As long as they are under my authority, I have complete control over them, and to some extent, yourself. There’s no limit to what I can do.”

Barb’s other hand clenched into a fist. Her nails split through her leather gloves and dug into her palms. “I should…”

Maxus leaned down and turned his head to the side, presenting a cheek for the bounty hunter to strike. “Throw the first punch,” he whispered. “You’d be lucky if you landed a single blow on me. Who do you think trained you through all those years?”

She pulled her arm back. The urge to deliver a mean punch got incredibly hard to resist. “I learned more on my own than I ever did in this claustrophobic dump. I’ve got a few hundred tricks up my sleeve.”

Maxus looked Barb square in the eyes as he spoke his next words: “Then your efforts will be best spent on the human. I’ve already taken the liberty of placing your parents under lock and key.” He remembered well, the order he issued to the two guardsmen. “Should anything bad happen to me, those two will be the first to know.”

“You wouldn’t dare… You could have done this at any time. Why now?”

“I kept them in my jurisdiction out of what little respect I had left you for, and they have proven themselves to be adequate subjects. The betrayal was yours, not theirs. But your problems with become theirs if you don’t do as I command.”

Barb stepped back, growing the space between them. “What… what happened to you…? Who are you?”

“I am your emperor. You will refer to me as such.”

Barb shook her head. “Nuh uh, no way! The Maxus I knew would never do something like this.”

“Yeah, well guess what: you knew nothing, bounty hunter.”

It was at this moment in time when Barb realised that the Maxus she knew was well and truly buried. “So I’m just a bounty hunter to you, huh?” From out the corner of her eye, the tiniest shred of a tear moistened her eyeball. “Keep your stinkin’ money, Supreme Ruler of the Cosmos,” Barb spat. “I don’t want anything from you or from your stupid empire ever again. I’m only doing this for them.”

“I don’t care. Just do it.” He swung his arm straight out, pointing into the blackness. “Go!”
Barb said nothing. Her head was hung low, a shadow cast across her eyes. A look of disgust smeared all over her. She got a leg up onto the crenel then jumped onto the top of a merlon. Barb was motionless, looking down into the depths below. She took one look back and said in a regretful tone, “You want to know why I did it, don’t you? You might think that my decision to leave was easy, but trust me, it wasn’t. There was one thing – one massive, hairy thing – that was keeping me from going, and that was you… but at the same time, you were the one I had to get away from.”

Maxus stayed his silence, listening to the explanation he has yearned for years to discover.

“It’s… difficult to explain. It’s like… it’s like you’re not Maxus sometimes. There’s something ugly inside you, something that’s been eating away at you for as long as I can remember, consuming you, turning you into something nasty. I remember a kind and caring and quiet prince, but mingled with all those memories, I saw pain and hate and anger, and they were wearing your face. It wasn’t just me, you know. I talked to Juhi, and he saw it too.”

Barb sighed. “Look, Maxie, I don’t want to believe it, but whatever this pain is, it’s dragging you down a dangerous path. If you keep this up, you’re just going to end up bringing everyone down; your friends, your soldiers, your empire, everything you hold dear. Had I stayed, you would have ended up dragging me down too, and I feared if that happened, you would’ve done something terrible. That’s why I had to leave. I’ve spent the last fifty years rolling back and forth in my head whether I truly did the right thing by getting away from you.” She looked away, her green eyes peering sadly out into the darkness. “Looks like I was right, all along…” Barb stepped from the merlon, over the edge. Her wings extended and she took flight, vanishing into the night in less than a second, soundless.

Parfocorse, a railway town built into the southern area of the Plain-plain, served as the central hub for the trains running across the island. The first and oldest structure in the entire town was the railway station with its rust-eaten arched roofs and aged white bricks. The structures got progressively younger the more they stretched outward, from the dark wood and steep roofs inspired by American Colonial architecture to the flat walls and square windows seen in many of today’s buildings back on Earth.

By now, the sun had diminished. The sky to the east pitch black while the western sky burned the colour of dying coals. The stars coming out like embers rising from the ashes. Orion looked so close, you could almost make out each individual star making up the belt.

Frisk walked down the quiet, paved streets, their path bright by the streetlights overhead. They were willing to bet that the power came from the same place the castle got theirs from. Two monster strolled down on the other side and in the opposite direction, talking, and jackets over shoulders.

Frisk patted their belly as it grumbled. Hungry again. They had just not stopped eating today. The butterscotch cinnamon pie and cereal for breakfast. The picnic for lunch. The recovery lunch with the mummy couple. Time for some dinner, something to tide them over until they can find a bed for the night.

Across the street, the neon signs caught their eyes. A convenience store, called the Con-venience Store, had its sign blaring in white and green. Their motto: Buy something once, shame on you; come back twice, shame on you. There was no shame to be given at this store. A discount poster was stuck on the main display window: Bag of chips for 30CC. Buy one and get another for the same price. Ironically, upon reading that special offer, a monster exited with a bag of chips in each hand – as many as an octopus could carry, with a tail.
From the crossroads, up and down the streets were the many signs of different establishments. A tattoo parlour. A pharmaceutical shop. A perfume shop. A library. An electronics store. Standing on its own between a crowded bar and an empty fitness store was a brightly lit restaurant: *Sweet and Sour’s* written in flashing neon above the side window. The structure seemed to have taken its roots from Gothic architecture and the inside had the flair of a fast-food joint but the sophistication of a five-star restaurant. A few monsters sat within on separate tables, and all of them were eating contently. If the grub was good enough for those folks, then it was good enough for them. Frisk walked up to the entrance and pushed open the glass door, the bottom brushed softly against the entrance mat.

A waiter behind a lectern greeted the human as they entered. The waiter was also a lectern. “Good evening. Welcome to Sweet and Sour’s.” The animate shelf plucked a menu off the inanimate shelf. “Table for one?”

Frisk raised an index finger, confirming that they were alone.

The lectern waiter turned on his wheels. He said, “This way please,” and lead the customer across the floor, between scores of booths, to the counter. Each booth was fitted with leather seats, easy to keep clean. Each table was adorned with pristine white cloths, flawlessly prepared silverware, spotless dishes, flicking candles, napkin dispensers and condiment racks loaded with sachets of salt, vinegar and pepper, and bottles of ketchup, mustard, and mayonnaise. Two girls to the right sat together, one chowing down on a chargrilled chicken breast with lettuce and a jacket potato, the other with a greasy bucket of fried chicken made for two.

Behind the counter lay the kitchen, or in this case, kitchens. On one side, chefs decked out in white aprons and white hats juggled between frying pans ablaze with steaks and lobsters, the orange-drabbed employees opposite wrapped burgers and lined them up on the warming trays. After reaching the counter, the waiter proclaimed to the customer that they were here before scooting back to the entrance. Frisk was confused, unsure if they needed to follow him or stay where they were. The clerk manning a cash register behind the counter – an acne-ridden boy in the final year of his teens, with the deep dark bags of a fourteen hour shift – answered that question for Frisk. He smiled and said, “Welcome to Sweet and Sour’s.” Then frowned just as quickly. “Pick something already, kid.” The words *Welcome to Sweet and Sour’s* scrolled across the price screen.

Frisk looked down at the menu in hand then up at the one above the counter. They were identical. A few of the options caught Frisk’s eye…

**Fake Steak – There’s not much at stake here.** 20CC

**Creepy Pasta – Spaghetti hoops shaped like human heads, swimming in tomato sauce. Like regular pasta, only creepier.** 8CC

**Cheese Burger – Yep, just a plain old regular burger (but with cheese!).** 10CC

**Mint Chocolate Cake – Contains no actual mint, but it’s still pretty radical.** 15CC

Cartons of fries were beside homemade cut chips. Crab fried rice next to battered cod. Sausage and mash beside hotdogs. Frisk asked the clerk whether this was a restaurant or a fast-food joint.

“Funny you should say that,” the clerk responded with a tone laced with cynicism. “You see, the chain was started by Mr Sweet and Mr Sour. Sweet wanted a restaurant, but Sour wanted a burger place. They couldn’t decide which to go on, so they compromised – and by that I mean they just mashed the two together.” He went from grumpy to happy in an instant. “But look on the bright side,
we’re the only fast food restaurant around. We deliver high quality food as fast as monsterly possible. If you’re worried about your waistline, fear not, for all of our items are low in fat and loaded with essential vitamins and nutrients to get you through the day. Our evening meals are infused with protein to keep you full until breakfast, and full of Vitamin D, Magnesium, Potassium, and Melatonin to ensure you get an excellent night’s sleep.” The enthusiasm drained from his features. “Now be snappy, you’re holding up the line.”

Frisk glanced behind themself. Nobody there.

“You are the line, dearie,” he rectified. A crafty smile appeared as superior feelings of being so clever came to mind. “You’re holding yourself up.”

Frisk ordered the cheese burger, fries, and a large soda off the menu. The clerk grabbed a burger, fries, and an empty cup waiting in line off the fast food side of the kitchen and stacked them on a waiting tray.

“Would you like fries with that?” asked the clerk, sliding the tray to them. Frisk did not answer, but rather shot a look down at their food to state the obvious. “Oh, right. Old habits die hard. That’ll be twenty cloud coins, please.” Frisk pulled out their money purse, individually counted out twenty coins and dropped them on the counter. While he scooped up the coins, he said, “Table number eight. The soda machine is right over there.” He pointed at the dispenser across the floor. “You get unlimited refills. Feel free to help yourself. Enjoy your meal.”

As Frisk took their tray, something about what the clerk said jangled their memory. You get unlimited refills. Feel free to help yourself. They felt like they had heard that before…

It took Frisk a moment to find their booth and to get a cup of cola from the dispenser. With food and drink on the table, they wasted no time tucking in, opting to use their hands over the tableware. The burger, while satisfying, tasted remarkably similar to the meat substitutes back on Earth. The fries, on the other hand, had the taste and texture of cardboard. The cola had the horrible aftertaste of the diet stuff, although that did not stop the child from going back for a second refill.

With their meal finished and their belly full, Frisk exited Sweet and Sour’s. The nightlife was in full swing, monsters out to have a good time on this Saturday night. Frisk walked down the street, moving closer toward the train station until they stumbled upon a tall building with a glowing sign with the word ‘hotel’ projecting from it. The sign was in need of a new lightbulb, the current one flashed to life sporadically.

Frisk passed the revolving brass door and found themself in a spacious compact foyer, the interior much larger than what the outside suggested. A family, consisting of a mother, a father, and two fussy children occupied a couch on the far end, a metre away from two payphones and a computer. An empty counter stood straight ahead, across a marble floor so polished that it reflected everything upward. All of Frisk’s steps echoed as the heels hit the floor and squeaked as they rolled off their toes, no matter how lightly they tried to make their tracks. There was no one waiting, although Frisk had given away their position by approaching. The only thing on the counter was a lone silver bell.

Frisk stretched as far as they could and managed to ring it with the tips of their fingers. Two seconds later, the secretary rushed in, or rather he slithered in. A monster with the bottom half a snake, the body of a human and the head of an aardvark.

“Ah, hello there,” he greeted warmly, leaning over the counter. “Thank you for choosing our hotel over all fifteen of our competitors.” He looked down at his book. “You’re just in luck, we have one room available. It’s the economy room, only ten cloud to use it for twenty four hours.”

Ten coins did not sound bad. Frisk dug into the bag and threw ten of the coins into his waiting
hands. Already, they had spent half the money. At this rate, they would be reduced to living off the streets and burrowing through trash cans by tomorrow evening.

As the secretary turned to the key storage, Frisk remembered another piece of their dream. Second floor, room number lucky thirteen. Enjoy your stay. They anticipated it with baited breath and twitching fingers. They were about to be handed a key for room number thirteen. Lucky thirteen. Lucky thirteen.

The secretary spun back to face Frisk, a single key dangled on a plastic tag. “Second floor, room number lucky thirteen.” He handed the key over. “It’s the last door on the left. Enjoy your stay.”

Frisk did not respond, only take the key – the number thirteen written in white on the blue tag – and ascended the stairs right from the desk to the level above. A long hallway greeted the human on the upper floor. They passed a door labelled utility room on the landing and counted the odd numbers from one all the way to thirteen. Frisk took the key, pressed it into the lock and turned it. There was a click as the lock disengaged.

Frisk pushed the door open to a capacious room. If this was the economy room, they would love to see the rooms higher up on the quality list. The brown and cream striped carpet melded seamlessly with the wood panel walls. The lights cast cones against the walls. The wall to the left held a wardrobe, a desk, and a mounted flat screen television. Opposite that was a double bed with white sheets, white pillows, and a brown throwover. Another door to Frisk’s immediate right led to a compact bathroom. Charcoal grey tiled floor and walls with a white toilet, sink, bathtub, and a silver showerhead – all showing the signs of recent scrubbing. It looked like what you would see displayed at a home furniture warehouse.

A large window, covered with a set of white curtain, lay on the far wall. It allowed for a nice view of the train station just across town.

Frisk fished the pouch of coins from their pocket and dropped in on the desk alongside their room key. A tray covered with cookies, clean cups and satchels of coffee, tea, and hot chocolate lay there beside an assortment of leaflets. They glanced at them and saw that they were about certain points of interest within Parfocorse. Places to eat. Activities and entertainment. Historical landmarks. Train schedules.

None of that mattered at the moment. Frisk, grabbing the television remote, threw themself on the bed. The clock under the screen read half-past-ten, way past their bedtime. They turned on the telly expecting to see Outerworld broadcasts – with their own channels and series and shows, hosted with their own anchors, celebrities and prima donnas – but ended up on a soap opera starring humans. The human child flicked around and found nothing but channels and programs from the surface below.

Half an hour ago, Frisk thought that they would never get any sleep tonight, considering the double heaps of worry lingering over their head. The constant threat of being on the Outerworld’s most wanted list, and they would no doubt have taken the number one spot, coupled with the fact that they had no idea how the others back home were feeling. Frisk did not want to imagine it; Toriel and Asgore would be heartbroken back at home, spending the night alone, childless once more.

While in their deep thought, the weight in their eyelids grew. The sleep-inducing substances in the food must have been taking their toll.

They switched off the screen, followed by the lights, plunging the room in darkness, and slipped under the thick duvet, clothes in all. As the human lay in bed, contemplating their crazy day, they wondered how they ended up there, starting the day in their sun filled bedroom and ending it in a
hotel room in a different world.

The walls dampened the outside noises. People hollering, feet clapping, and the faint rumble of a train pulling up to the station platform.

Frisk remembered everything they had heard from their near-death dream...

“Sorry for stepping on your nice, clean floor,” said the soldier of the Monster Military.

“Good luck out there, kiddo,” said Sam.

“You get unlimited refills. Feel free to help yourself,” said the crater-faced teen at Sweet and Sour’s.

“Second floor, room number lucky thirteen. Enjoy your stay,” said the secretary downstairs.

Frisk turned over and pulled the sheet up to their chin. Were they seeing glimpses of the future?

They tried one more time to use their determination. Back with Sam an’ Rita, gazing out at the bright adventure that lay before them. Feeling alive and full of energy. There was no point in getting their hopes up. Just as quickly, the energy left their body, the light faded, and the warmth of the afternoon air was replaced by the bedcovers. They could not go back, but they must have seen glimpses of what lay forward. How?

They had time for only one guess before the sleep dimension pulled them in.

Their determination…?
That Night

With the moon fat and dull in the night sky, and the cricket monsters and owl monsters and raccoon monsters within their element, the great empire of the Outerworld began to wind down into a restless slumber. The popular notion was that the Outerworld never slept, which was only half true; half of the islands slept at any given time, day in, day out, like clockwork.

While this long and crazy Saturday draws to a close, let us embark on a summary of where everyone is, shall we?

For a portion of the subjects under the banner of the Emperor himself, they would be getting no sleep tonight. Under the flickering, orange lambent of torches, candles, and anything that remotely burned, they scarred the brittle earth with metal greaves that had been worn for several hours too long. Cold sweat building up between their toes, under their hamstrings, on their chests, trickling down their necks and dripping from their brows. Skin and fur desperately trying to breathe under layers of plating whilst the parched mouths gasped for water.

This entourage that stumbled its way across the Plain-plain in the dead of night was one of many. Others just like this one rumbled throughout the other islands, with the exception of Ice Island. That place was a dead zone; nobody went through there anymore, not even the Monster Military. Rolling amongst them was a cart being hauled by four monsters, two at the front and two at back. Their long faces, thick spines, broad shoulders and hooved feet made them best suited for the job. A little dumb muscle goes a long way. The cart was loaded with stacks of posters, piled rather excessively. There was enough of them to make a tree hugger cry. With every slight shift in the cart, another one or two fell out, leaving a breadcrumb trail behind them. Their orders were to distribute them around, and that was exactly what they were doing, one way or another.

Each soldier carried their own stack of wanted posters. They would have every word, line, speck and blemish memorised before the night was over. One went up on every single surface they could find. Anything. Trees; boulders; bushes; fence posts; stone walls; cliff walls; individual stalks of produce. If it were vertical in any sense of the word, they would post it. There was an extra added bonus with a lone solder sitting front seat on the cart; every once in a while he was nab a page from the pile, pin it on the end of an arrow, and sent it flying onto a surface that had been missed.

The noisy convoy left a trail of footprints, wheel tracks, upturned dirt, and posters in their wake. A roaring forest fire would have attracted less attention that they were. There was more than enough evidence for a bounty hunter to track. Speaking of which…

High up within the shade of a large tree, Barb came to a swift halt on the thickest branch. Her landing was next to silent, impressive for someone in high-heels. She caught many a target with her light touch, unsuspecting monsters who always felt the safest right before she pounced. Being a bat had its benefits. One being that she had sharpened senses when the sun went down. The night was her element. She basked in it. Allowed it to mould her. Built her reputation around it. When the lights went out and the darkness consumed all, the target’s very own breath would be the last thing they hear before waking up two days later.

From her vantage point, she scoped the roaming convoy. Their work, while unprofessional and sloppy, was thorough nonetheless. By tomorrow, there would not be a single monster in the Outerworld who won’t recognise the face of the human named Frisk.

Her feelings for this job were complicated. Mixed would be the better word. Fifty years of bounty hunting for both money and sport. This was the first time she was doing it under blackmail. Barb,
just like every monster in the Outerworld, had been thoroughly educated on the humans – except most of her knowledge was passed down from Maxus. Nothing but negativity escaped his lips; the humans were warmongers and butchers, capable of unspeakable evils both to others and themselves. Many monsters have lost loved ones to them, and Maxus was no exception, having lost his mother and grandparents in the war that followed. Barb listened, acknowledging what she had been told, but had no experience to go on. She had never met a human in her life. However, if a human’s strength was true, then this bounty hunter had a challenge awaiting her. If catching this child ensured the safety of her family, then the choice was easy.

When hunting something or someone as dangerous as a human, it never hurts to be prepared. She had procured a few of her weapons from her hideout – gadgets that will make capturing the target a whole lot easier. Two small, wrist mounted guns, one on each forearm, were in safety mode. They appeared as two rectangles carved from a metal the same shade as Barb’s fur, with two openings at the front and another on the sides. The weapon on her left was an automatic tranquiliser gun, built to fire plastic darts that contained an anaesthetic powerful enough to induce sleep in seconds and last for hours. The gun on her right was a semi-automatic electroshock launcher armed with tiny metallic pellets, which were small but packed a mean zap. One of these babies could reduce an elephant into a twitching, drooling heap.

There was a pipe-shaped rifle strapped to her back, between her wings. That weapon, her secret weapon, was responsible for capturing the slipperiest of targets. Barb was not one for naming her equipment, but she had toyed with the idea of giving her rifle either a hard-core name to symbolise its merciless nature, or a small name to make it cute but dangerous, similar to naming a werewolf ‘fluffy’.

The Plain-plain. She knew it like the back of her hand. A few clicks behind her lay the river, formed from the Highkeep Enclave waterfall. The human was last seen drifting down the moat. Her mind raced at a thousand minutes a second, calculating odds and predictions. Taking into account every variable and random chance. How far could an injured human travel? Were they alone or did they have help? Did they travel north, or could they have gone southeast toward the Oasis? What landmarks lie within a five to ten mile radius of the river?

She took into account that humans have needs, just like monsters. They need sustenance, food and water, in order to survive. Warmth. Shelter from the elements. Sleep, recuperation. The target cannot travel forever. Sooner or later, they will need to stop. The body and mind demand it.

She recollected a list of several locations; settlements and landmarks nearby. The biggest town nearby was Parfocorse, the central train hub for the entire island. She kept her big ears to the ground, however, and hear nothing unusual recently. An injured child most surely attract attention, especially if they did not have any money.

Another variable entered Barb’s equation: motive. If they were heading north, for instance, why in that specific direction? There is no way off these lands. What escape could they possibly find? Perhaps the human was acting out of desperation?

The facts connected dots. Frisk had not been found within the river, nor have they been located around the river. They were on the move, that much she was certain. But one question remained as she took flight… Were they running away or were they going somewhere?
sound, vibrating them to every corner of every room.

Master D. Mind himself lifted his scaly head upwards, drawn to the sound with his cyclops eye. Basking in the comfort of his favourite chair within the living room – opposite his wife in her own favourite chair – they were both enjoying a quite night of light reading before bed. “I’ll get it,” Master Mind announced as he marked his place within his thrilling novel and got up.

The missus, Mistress R.E. Mind shifted her gaze slightly, glancing one eye at her husband while keeping the other two on her book about bitter robots locked in an endless confrontation against relentless dandelions. “Who could be calling at this hour?”

As he made his way to the door, D. Mind tightened the knot in his bathrobe. “No idea.” He pushed the door open. One of the hinges creaked. “I’ll see who it is, and fix that later.”

Unlike most lords and masters, these two did not employ servants to do their jobs. Master D. Mind and Mistress R.E. Mind of Mineyor Manors believed that movement is life. Their days were filled with work of any and all kinds, from farming to chores. Their sleep long and deep, basking in the fact that they had deserved their rest after a hard day’s work.

His front door – the biggest, solidest thing anyone has and shall ever see – came complete with the essential mail slot, peephole, and door flap. Pressing his flat nose against the smooth surface, the master of the mansion peered through the glass as coolly and calculated as a sniper measuring the wind speed and drop distance. On the other side was a face distorted by the curve, one whom the master was most familiar with.

Master D. Mind did not know whether to smile or frown. Lord Grill of Bjornliege Manor was a humble and dear acquaintance of his, but at the same time, what was he doing making house calls at eleven o’clock at night? The grizzly had his own manor, his own servants to run, his own wives to chase up, and his own problems in which he will bury under a mountain of food. The master studied the lord’s bear features more carefully, noticing a serious lack of what made Lord Grill Lord Grill.

Regardless, Master D. Mind was not going to leave him out to dry. “Lord Grill,” said he, unlocking the door and pulling it open. “What brings you here at this hour?” Without the peephole, meeting the bear face to face showed more detail than he wanted to know, including the large gathering of his servants and soldiers behind him. Grill’s face was pockmarked with bruises that showed through his thick fur, and a black eye. The lord’s high-end attire had been ravaged, harbouring a series of rips and burn marks. “What happened to you?”

“Let’s just say my manor is undergoing some slight renovation.” Lord Grill wiped his forehead with what was left of his sleeve. No wonder. The journey between their homes was not brisk, and Grill risked a heart attack whenever he had to cover the distance between his chair and the buffet table. “I need a place to stay for… a few days.”

The master of Mineyor Manors peered over the lord’s shoulder. The soldiers and servants black and blue, the same colour as their master. “And them?”

Grill shrugged. “My home was their home.”

Master D. Mind squinted. “Was’?”

Grill lifted his paws level with his shoulders, the thumbs and index fingers touching. “It’s a complete overhaul,” he conceived in the gentlest way possible. “Everything’s getting redone. The walls, the ceiling, the furniture – everything. The décor must be truly perfect for our return.”
“Well, this is on very, very short notice and the mistress may make a scene out of it…” He scratched the back of his bald head and hesitated. Grill’s frown deepened, making the decision even worse for him. “But… but if you need a place that bad then I’m sure we’ve got room for everyone, as long as you don’t mind sharing…”

Relief flowed through the bear’s features. “As long as it’s padded, it don’t matter to me.”

“Splendid,” D. Mind said. On the surface, he was rainbows and sprinkles, but it was a mask for his infuriation. He pushed the door wider and stepped aside, beckoning them to enter. “Come in. Make yourselves at home.” The master recognised a few as they entered: that one guard with the scar on his second upper cheek; the servant who retained his stiff composure at all times; the monster who mans the door – that small one shaped like a dead weight.

As the group entered, the bear lord leaned close to the cyclops lord and whispered, “Do you have any separate rooms? With strong walls and sturdy supports?”

“Yes.”

Grill shot a quick, frantic look over his shoulder as if he were afraid of someone spying on him. “And nothing with the potential to combust?” he murmured in a quieter voice.

Master Mind took a second to respond, unknown as to whether the question posed was genuine or not. “I should think so. Why are you asking?”

“It’s for—”

From the dense foliage, a voice rang out. “Hey Grill! You haven’t run off on me now, have you?”

The furs on his body went on end. The sound of that voice put him on edge. Through seizing vocal cords, he managed to finish: “—her.”

A woman with a ponytail of red hair and an eyepatch stepped from the thick foliage, cradling in her arms a couple dozen berries ten times their regular size. Master D. Mind took a good, long look as she approached. He knew everyone in the Oasis, had connections with those outside, yet had never seen this one before.

Undyne took hold of another berry. “All this walkin’ works up an appetite.” She tossed it into her mouth and chewed away. The berry’s soft nature did not stand a chance against teeth like hers, which were already stained red from five berries previous. “Hmm, these are good,” he mumbled.

“Who’s she?” Master Mind asked.

“She’s, uh, my renovation agent… or something along those lines.” Grill pointed his thumb over his shoulder. “Look, that room I mentioned – stick her in it. Don’t ask me why. Just trust me on this.”

Undyne stopped before the door. On the surface, she looked weary. The vision of somebody who had a long day and wanted nothing more than to get some shuteye. “Hey, you hooking me up with a place to crash or what?”

Master D. Mind smiled and cupped his hands together, throwing the best pleasant façade he perfected. “I’m not so sure about the ‘crash’ part, but I do have a nice room for you to rest and relax in. Down the hall, first left, second right, and it’s the door to your other left.”

She popped another berry into her mouth. She seemed thankful; for what reason, the master of this manor had no idea. “Sweet. Thanks a bunch,” Undyne said as she walked right in, carrying her
hoard of goodies with her, dropping one on the oversized doormat. “I’ll only be staying for the night, then I’m outta here.”

“Of course. Have a good night.”

The fish lady gave a tired wave, and then stopped in her tracks. The sudden screech against the shiny floor made both men’s heart skip a beat. “Oh, by the way…” Undyne twisted her head to the right and glared at Master D. Mind from out the corner of her yellow eye. That angry eye focused on him filled him with dread. “You don’t have twenty wives, do you?” she asked, every word had spite behind it.

Cold sweat broke on his scaly forehead. “Umm… no. Just the one.”

Undyne said “Okay” in a casual, friendly voice and continued down the hall.

Lord Grill slapped an arm around the other’s shoulder. “Sweet dreams,” he called out, waving manically at Undyne. Afraid that the slightest unpleasantness would awaken the shark within. “Breakfast will be from eight o’clock until ten-thirty. Don’t miss it.”

Mind turned to Grill. “I have a breakfast schedule?”

“Since five seconds ago. You’re welcome.”

Meanwhile, deep within Rocklyn, the soundless sleeping golem of an island rocked as the house parties, especially from A. Town, were blaring. The routine of the vegetable monsters was still in full effect: work, rest, play, repeat. It was not a house party, but house parties. Every house in town set up music, food, and entertainment, and all the population could move about and enjoy whichever place they saw fit.

Things were different on that night, however, as the whole of the town’s populace congregated in Bub’s house, attracted by the unexpected visit from their celebrity guest.

In the middle of the hustle and bustle, of monsters crowding and precariously balancing drinks, Alphys, Papyrus, and Sans sat at the couch, the scientist wedged between the skeletons like the filling in a sandwich. She was as timid as ever, hunched and rigid; a plastic cup in hand filled with a substance that would most likely kill her brain cells, in which she had not taken a single sip. Sans sat chilled with one leg over the armrest, nursing a bottle of ketchup taken from the restaurant across the street. This ketchup tasted odd, but in a good way. Less sugar, more tomato flavour. Like honey, smooth going down.

Papyrus gawked at everything, a juice box with a straw in his gloved hands. “Wowie! An actual party, and it’s way past my bedtime.” His voice was drowned out by the din of voices and loud music. Mettaton on screen was performing his spectacular opening from song number twenty six of his album, named It’s Vacation Time (Vacation For Me Anyway (No Vacation For You (Burgerpants))) “Ooh, now here’s a good song!” Papyrus rattled in his seat and brought the straw to his teeth, sipping the mixture of apple and orange.

From the thicket of guests, Bub forced his way through. His potato body made the perfect plough. “Are we enjoying ourselves, doctor?” he asked. Since that evening, his dirty vest had gotten dirtier, stained with beer and soda and fragments of potato chips.

Alphys glanced uneasily left and right, taking in the vast amount of monsters present and the crowds
that she was not used to. “Y-yeah, sure… I guess…” She raised her head up, stretching herself higher in her seat. “But… but we really shouldn’t be staying. I-I mean, it’s not like we don’t a-appreciate the hospitality – it’s just that we gotta find someone.”

Sans leaned over, his face meeting hers. His cheekbones flushed red. “Hey, don’t worry about it, Al,” he said, sounding like a friendly drunk. Sans was a hundred percent sober – the sauce contained no alcohol whatsoever – but he liked to envision the ketchup as his addictive crutch. “Frisk can take care of themselves for a bit. How do ya think they made it through the Underground? Let’s kick back, enjoy tonight and search for them in the morning.” He pulled his head back into the cushion, looking at his brother from over Alphys’s shoulders. “Besides, Pap seems to be having fun.”

Alphys turned from Sans to Papyrus. He was humming along to the song. For being one of his favourites, he really did not know the lyrics very well – or at all, for that matter. Alphys sighed and lay back in her seat. Unfortunately for her, the mental clock of dilemma continued to tick, twisting her stomach and making her fingers twitch. She felt like she had sheer minutes to find Frisk, otherwise the human who she ‘guided’ through Hotland and ‘aided’ against the merciless, singing and dancing robot parading around on the flat screen, would be lost forever and it would be all her fault. Alphys tried to ignore it the best she could. *Frisk *will be fine*, she tried to affirm to herself, but the nagging feeling persisted. She could almost sense that the human was a few dozen feet away, with the monster who kidnapped them ready to sacrifice them with some insane ritual, most likely to achieve godhood. Not so insane when, in a monsters case, that would be true.

“Can I get you anything?” Bub asked, noticing the scientist’s deflated expression. The doctor responded with a declining wave of the claw. “Okay then. Have fun.” With that, he disappeared the best he could into the fray.

With nothing better to do, Alphys watched the television. The recording of Mettaton’s big television debut had been on repeat since that morning. He had come a long way from preforming in the Underground. She was almost confident that upon reaching the human surface and appearing in front of a human video camera, Mettaton would have been shot down in an instant. Humans fear what they did not understand, and a robot with self-absorbed tendencies, a repertoire of (literally) killer moves, and luxurious hair was not an easy thing to comprehend. The alternative, however, took her by surprise. The humans on Earth have come to accept him, and have even gone so far as to love him, allowing him the chance to shine in his own show. Mettaton’s achievements, in some small way, were also Alphys’s. As she stood before oblivion so long ago, she believed wholeheartedly that nothing that she ever did or aspired to do would ever be accepted, not in the Underground or on the surface. Or elsewhere. Now, she had living, breathing, dancing proof that all of her doubts were for naught.

“Hey, Doc…” Sans broke the silence that was already shattered into oblivion. His eyes remained forward on the screen. “There’s something I’ve been wanting to ask for a while now…”

Alphys broke from her thoughts. “Yes, Sans?” A bead of sweat formed on her brow.

“What are you a doctor of anyway?” After asking, Sans began to lift the nozzle up to his grinning teeth, eager for another swig.

The doctor’s face scrunched up into the personification of an embarrassment person. She could answer that, but the real question was: would he accept it? “D-derma-dermatology,” she replied reluctantly.

Sans stopped the bottle an inch away. Even he was surprised by that. “Really?” he asked, turning to her. He sobered up in an instant, mainly because he already was. “And you were the royal scientist?”
“Well, there were only two people in the Underground who possessed a medical degree of some kind. The other guy – I can’t remember his name to save my life – he was the royal scientist before me. He was doing a great job until one day he j-just… vanished without a trace.”

“Yeah… I’d bet.” Sans went sombre for a moment. “Flip the switch,” he said. Yeah, man, which one? The left or the right? You tell me. Sans tipped the nozzle between his teeth and savoured the taste as it poured in. It helped him think. Why did he install that trapdoor anyway? I told him it was pointless, not to mention dangerous, but he didn’t listen. He swallowed and followed up with, “Have you ever put your skills as a dermatologist to actual use?”

Alphys paused, pursed her lips, and stared down into her cup. “There was that one time… Undyne needed my help to remove an embarrassing tattoo.”

Papyrus took notice. “She used to have a tattoo, you say?” He stroked his prominent jawbone as he pondered. “Undyne and I have taken many a cooking lesson. I don’t recall seeing any tattoos. All I recall is seeing a lot of red.”

Alphys gestured around her face. “Someone had drawn a moustache and monocle on her face while she was sleeping.” She looked down at the ground, smiled and breathed a giggle. “We found out at the very last minute that it was just pen ink. That reminds me: she never did find out who did it.”

“Yep,” Sans added. “What happens in the Underground stays in the Underground.” He glanced to the side and winked to himself. The master prankster had gotten away with it once more.

“Oh, by the way, Sans,” Alphys said, turning to him, “you were there when Papyrus and myself entered the teleporter. What happened after that?”

“Yes, indeed. What happened after that, brother?”

Sans scratched his dome. “Let me think….” He pointed at Papyrus. “First you…” Then Alphys. “then you… oh, yeah, and then Undyne.”

“Undyne?” Alphys blurted. Her eyes behind her glasses went wide. “She went in?”

“And then Asgore and Toriel…”

“G-Gorey and T-T-Tori!” The cup in her hands was shaking, leaking precious liquid, staining her lab coat. Despite her loud tone, her outcries went unheeded by everyone.

Papyrus cackled, oblivious to the grave danger the doctor could have put them in. “It’s a party and everyone’s invited!” All he could see was the bright side.

“And then, uh… oh, right.” Sans looked away. “How do I say this?” he wondered to himself before taking another swig.

“What? WHAT?” Alphys pushed herself up onto her knees. Usually, this kind of news would be something she did not want to hear, but in this case, she needed to know. “Tell me! Please!” Unless she found out, the world was going to collapse.

Sans took a deep, regretful breath and let it all out at once. “Your robot entered the chamber and both of them blew up.”

Alphys face melted into that of a truly horrified person. While her expression fell, the opposite effect happened to the taller, younger skeleton. Papyrus dropped his head back and breathed a happy sigh through his grinning teeth.
There was no time to think because her thoughts were crammed with the worry that her friends and girlfriend could be shattered across space and time forever. The pressure was so high that it threatened to crush her skull. She needed to make it stop. Right now. The dermatologist threw her head back, opened her mouth as wide as she could, and poured the contents of her cup right into it, downing it all in down mouthful. It burned going down the throat and simmered like hot coals in her belly. After swallowing, she expelled a vicious bout of coughing.

“Whoa, easy there, Doc,” Sans said while Papyrus gently patted her back. “That’s some powerful stuff. You should really take your time with it… not like it matters now.”

Alphys hacked away. Her throat was on fire. She feared that her next cough would vomit up molten lava, and then she feared nothing as the substance entered her system. Opening her eyes, her vision sparkled as bright as roman candles. The edges shook as every line distorted and the colours sharpened. It felt rather nice, as if she were afloat in ether.

“Doctor Alphys?” Papyrus voice was laced with concern. “Are you alright?”

The scientist rolled her head back, feeling like it had lost a few hundred pounds. “Never better! Why you askin’?” She slurred her words.

Papyrus pointed to his rows of teeth. “Because you’re smiling, that’s why.”

It must have been the drink blocking the nerves on her face, but yes, the panicky Alphys was indeed smiling. “Oh, so I am.” She glanced down at her empty cup and giggled. “This stuff’s great!” And held it above her head and twirled it around. “What does it take for someone to get some service around here?” Her request was fulfilled in less than two seconds. A random partygoer pulled out a bottle and poured some more into the waiting cup. “Th—tanks!”

Just as she took another mouthful, the serene piano for song number twenty seven began to rise, eloquently titled A Clever Name For The Twenty Seventh Song I Wrote to Berate Burgerpants. Out of all the songs, this was the one Alphys was most familiar with. There was something she had always wanted to do with this song, but never had the confidence.

Alphys handed the cup to Papyrus. She mumbled, “Here, hold this,” before slumping off the couch and stumbling across the crowded floor, bumping into everyone she crossed. Beside the TV stood a microphone on a stand. Another needed addition to succeed at Mew Mew Kissy Cutie. Alone in her laboratory, concealed under one foot thick walls, the scientist’s singing was still muted to a slight whisper, afraid that a passing bystander with abnormally sized ears would hear her pathetic attempts at harmonising. As her woeful spirit drowned in a sea of a more powerful spirit, all her fears were cast aside.

Off-key, off-beat, off-tune, and clearly off her head, Alphys seized the mic and screeched:

\[
\text{Last night, all I did was write a song} \\
\text{When I'd rather, make sure you work all day long} \\
\text{But as we know, a guy's gotta make a buck} \\
\text{Like you do, even know you truly suck} \\
\]

The room erupted into an applause – wild hooting and hollering broken up with clapping and fist pumping – for their guest of honour.

“Odd.” Papyrus spoke to his brother. “I’ve never seen the good doctor act this way before…”
“And pray that you never do again, buddy,” Sans replied as the doctor’s glasses slipped down her nose and the button on her collar came loose. She yanked the microphone from its stand and struck poses as she carried on:

**What to write? How do I hone my muse?**

*You’ve got me stumped. My, oh my, how do I choose?*

*Just kidding! I can’t stop writing down these tunes*

*As rapidly, as burgers from your pantaloons*

Hopefully, she won’t remember this.

---

Walking with urgency… Almost blind… Strong scent of disinfectant… Wrapped in a blanket… It itches… Hot and heavy… You dare not look up, but you don’t know why… Movements all around… The shifting of legs, pounding of feet… They must not see you… They must not know who you are…

Frisk tossed and turned in their rented bed. Sweat dripping out of every pore. Whatever was happening in their dreams, it was happening again. Stronger. Before, they heard a few lines of random, unconnected sentences. Now, these dreams were like they were there right now.

The dream faded and Frisk fell into a peaceful slumber. Their dreams was black and empty, the ones that people do not remember having. An hour or two passed, another dream bubbled to the surface.

Moving now… The clatter of rickety wheels beneath… Two monsters are chatting two seats in front… The door opens behind you… A dark figure… You have a strong feeling to run away… Time seems to slow as they take aim… One eye closes… Head cocks to the side… A pole darts past from beyond a window… The room bumps, the figure shifts to the right… The dream comes to a stop as they fire…

It feels so real. A vivid dream does not come close to replicating it. The bullet could have punched a hole in their sternum. Frisk could see it and yet they were blind to it, like everything was veiled with a shroud. So complicated to describe. So difficult to explain.

An Hour passed. The darkness was like reaching the surface to take in air before they were dragged back under again.

Cold… Freezing, even… Crunching underfoot… Everything becomes hazy… Someone grabs your shoulders… “You shouldn’t be here!”… “You can’t!”… “Run away, before—”… What? Run away, before what?… You cannot hear the rest…

One hour.

A hallway… Never-ending… They do not know why, but they did not want to be there… The human child feels afraid… The human child feels terrified… The human child sees something… They see someone… And this one frightens them… More than anything…

One hour.

The smell, it is familiar, and yet different… Dampness in the air… Loud stomping underfoot… Something opposes them… Colossal in size… Mighty by nature… The monster stares down… Hands
The Advisor trudged through the door into the north-eastern tower. The four archers, who should have been at their positions on the roof, sat around their bunks, sipping mugs of steaming coffee. All eyes were on the Emperor’s very own voice from the shadows as they stepped in.

“Royal Advisor, we—” The archers went to rise out of utmost respect for Maxus’s most trusted representative when they were motioned to remain in their seats.

Slowly, they sank back down, and slowly, the advisor spoke. “Is the Emperor still upstairs?”

“Yes, Advisor,” one of them said. “He hasn’t budged since talking to Barb the Bounty Hunter, and that was well over an hour ago.” He breathed away some white steam before taking a sip of his hot caffeine. “We daren’t go up there.”

“I see…” The Advisor glanced at the stairs that spiralled upwards and took the first steps. “Enjoy your coffee, gentlemen.”

The Advisor climbed the steps in a methodical manner like that of a master martial artist going through the motions. Emperor Maxus, and his father before him, speak nothing but high praise of their consultant. On the surface, it would seem like nothing had changed in the Outerworld since this individual had been instated, but as they always say – appearances can be deceiving. The Advisor worked in the dark, beyond the sight of most monsters, reading between the lines, spotting lies masquerading as half-truths in the daylight. In the eyes of the soldiers, the Advisor was an enigma, and it was only fitting that the monster with all the secrets held themself in a mysterious fashion.

The Advisor was greeted with a blast of cold air upon reaching the top. By this time at night, the temperature in the air drops; perfect for those who enjoy bundling up in their bedsheets. The Emperor was easy to spot; the only figure present above. His back was turned as he stood gazing out into the night, one arm bent over a merlon.

Before the Advisor had a chance to say anything, his emperor shot first: “I thought you would’ve retired by now.”

The Advisor stepped out, fully embracing the biting wind. “Am I really that obvious?”

Maxus’s golden head shifted a fraction to the right, like he wanted to face his consultant but just could not. “I can hear you coming a mile away.” He paused, glanced once more into the nothingness as it howled past his ears, then looked back from the corner of his eye. “As I was saying before, you’re usually asleep by this hour.”

“Feeling pretty restless tonight,” the advisor explained as he stepped up beside Maxus, taking a casual position by the wall. He noticed the dark bags beneath his emperor’s eyelids and the bloodshot veins creeping in from the sides. “Especially knowing that you’ve talked to the bounty hunter.”

Maxus laboured a sigh, sinking his chin onto his arm. Good thing none of his minions could see him now, acting like the days of his arrogant, reckless childhood. Releasing all his years of anger and rage out on those practice dummies, swinging his blunt sword and heating up under his practice armour. Ever since his father passed away, he had inherited the honour of being the oldest monster in
the Empire. Yet he was still young in heart and may forever remain as his hair turns white.

“What’s wrong?”

Maxus blinked. “I used her parents as leverage…” He rose his head and gestured out in front of himself, more like he was telling himself this than to his most trusted associate. “I mean, we’ve finally seen each other again for the first time in years and the first thing I do is blackmail her.”

As the emperor slumped, the Royal Advisor asked, “Have you really threatened their lives?”

Maxus drummed his fingers into the stone, irritated. “No, I—I’ve only told my men to move them to a secure location, it’s not like I’ve locked them in the dungeon.” His hand balled up into a fist. His eyes closed. “I didn’t want… I didn’t think I had it in me to do that. But I did. I kept telling myself that it would not come to that, it would be my last resort, but I did it.” His eyes opened and stared blankly forwards. “I had a chance to rekindle the flame with the last morsel of family I have left and I threw it to the ground and smashed it into pieces right in front of her. Now she thinks I’m a freak. A lost cause. She said it right to my face.”

The Advisor absorbed every word, acting as the emotional outlet, the shoulder for this mighty lion to cry on. Behind all that angst lay a lot of anger, some of which he looked like he was about to take out on the nearest object present. None of it fazed the Advisor.

“But as I tarnished our relationship, as I gazed into those eyes…” He looked his royal advisor in the eyes, punctuating the importance of what he had to say next. “I didn’t feel anything. I should be ashamed of myself – I should be disgusted – but I’m not. I might have actually… enjoyed it, to some degree. Now I’m asking myself: did I just want her on the hunt that badly, or did I still harbour some resentment toward her?”

“Only you can answer that, my lord.”

Not the answer Emperor Maxus was looking for. He wanted a straight answer, now more than ever. There was none to be found. It was all twisted and convoluted, like his trail of thoughts, repeating the encounter over and over again, looking for the point in time where it all went wrong.

He felt the gentle touch of his right hand man on his shoulder. The Advisor felt his dipping temperature. “You’ll catch a cold if you stay up here. May I suggest that you retire for the night? The answer may come to you after a well-deserved night’s rest. And believe me when I say that nobody has earned a rest more than you.”

The emperor of the Outerworld pushed himself away and pulled his cape tight. “Yes. Yes. I am rather drained,” Maxus conceded. For all his strength, he was only a monster – a monster with limits. “I’ll deal with these pressing matters tomorrow.” The Royal Advisor tagged behind the Emperor as he made his way down the spiral stairs, out of the harrowing wind. “One more thing, did you come to check on me or was there another reason?”

“Honestly, there was something else you should know,” the Advisor acknowledged. “The scouts you sent to the Oasis have relayed information back. Bjornliege Manor is… gone.”

This earned them a strong stare from their master. “Gone?”

“As in demolished.”

“How?”

“Gas explosion, most likely. They found remains of what could only be described as a mixture of
eggs, flour and butter. Too badly measured and charred to be deemed as cake.”

Maxus shook his head. “Grill may eat anything that moves, but he’s not patient enough to wait for cake. I smell sabotage.” He thrust his finger downwards. “Someone must’ve been behind it!”

“Well, my lord…” The Advisor leaned in closer and dropped the volume in their voice. Apparently, this information was for specially selected ears only. “Eye witnesses have spotted an unknown monster leaving the scene of the wreckage, along with Lord Grill and his subjects.”

“Did they run a check?”

“The witnesses have described the stranger in great detail. Female. Red hair. Yellow eyes. We’ve searched her through the records but have found nothing. It’s as if she’s appeared out of nowhere.”

Maxus’s expression went blank. “That’s impossible.”

“Not only that, but the word has spread around Rocklyn that one of the mining colonies is celebrating the appearance of a ‘special guest’.”

Two strangers in one day, the same one they abducted the human child? That makes three too many. A strong feeling in his gut told him that he needed to find this woman and this special guest.

“And also…” They went to say more, but stopped. The Advisor glanced down at the soldiers below. Just the two of them lingering close by was enough to put them on edge. “I should discuss the rest with you in private,” they said as they ushered their emperor further down the steps. “And we can act on it in the morning.”

“I trust what you have to say is not a waste of my time.”

“Far from it, my lord.”

Now, I know what you’re thinking – or maybe I don’t. Perhaps you are pondering about your next meal (which you will be thinking about now that I have mentioned it). What is taking Asgore and Toriel so long?

Well, it’s funny you should think that. Again, maybe you didn’t.

Dawn broke against the lands. The first rays rose against the obstruction of Black Ice Mountain. Black rock against gold light signalling that a new day had started. A Sunday.

In the swamplands known as Bob, just as a chicken monster yells ‘cock-a-doodle-doo’ into the sky out of force-of-habit, a spark of electricity crackled.
The trip was as sudden as blinking. In an explosion of energy, Asgore, the former king of all monsters, in the Underground at least, emerged in a place of which he had never seen before. The bare, cold concrete under his exposed soles made way for soft, warm, unbeaten soil. Toriel had been directly in front of him as they both entered the teleporter, holding his hand. But as the flash took him away from the cramped basement, so did it take her. She had completely vanished.

Asgore stood there. His arm remained outstretched from where his ex-wife had tugged. “Toriel?” He looked all around, finding nothing but sick, leafless trees and murky, bubbling ponds of green water around – the stench festering in the humid air. “Tori?” His words went out, but the only pair of ears to hear them were his own. “Where did you go?”

And then, as if his prayers had been answered, a burst of power emitted from above. Asgore shot his gaze up as the surge expanded and there, emerging right in the centre of it, was Toriel. Almost horizontal, Toriel hovered in mid-air for a second. One arm stretched out, the other back – the fingers on that hand forming claws where they gripped Asgore’s. In that one brief moment, their eyes made contact, and they both knew that this was going to hurt.

The laws of physics took over. Toriel fell straight toward Asgore, who had a split-second to react; he could either move out of the way or hold his hands up and hope for the best. To his eternal chivalrousness, he chose the latter option. He swung his arms up with the palms close together, similar to how someone would hold up a baby. Of course, Toriel was anything but. The boss monster’s arms collapsed upon taking the other boss monster’s weight. Their bodies collided, buckling his legs out from underneath him. Together, they crashed onto the soft earth, Asgore landing on his back with Toriel atop him. The air escaped his lungs.

Their adventure had just started and already they were out of breath. Asgore struggled under the weight of his wife.

The first thing Toriel felt was a wave of disgust. She was closer to the former king of monsters than she had ever been in a long, long time. Just the texture of his white fur against her white fur sent shivers up her spine. Toriel raised her head, her cheek tingled as it brushed past Asgore’s beard. Before she knew it, she was gazing into his eyes. Their faces were a breath’s width apart. At that close range, she could see every line and detail etched into her ex-husband’s features. That snub nose. Those prominent horns. Every individual blonde hair on his head. Those thin lips. Those eyes. Those eyes she stared into with anger as they argued. Those eyes that sparkled like crystals whenever he cried. Those big eyes. Those big, soft eyes. Those big, soft, handsome eyes. The same ones she fell in love with. The same eyes she could not look away from as he confessed his devotion to her so many years ago. The same eyes that…

Toriel shook herself out of it. *Not a chance,* she thought. *I do not hold any hidden feelings for this whelp.*

*Then why did you keep those flowers back at home?* A second inner voice whispered. *Why did you allow him to be the janitor at the same school you work at? Why are you not more eager to get rid of him?*  

*Why did you watch him when he was tending to the garden?*

The memory had remained lodged in her mind. Not something she held dear, but treated with suspicion. It was a quiet weekend. Frisk was out of the house, hanging out with that Monster Kid
again. That peculiar child had gone through some radical changes since leaving the Underground – from always wearing that red scarf, to cackling in a goofy manner at the most mundane of things, to insisting that everyone call them the great Monster Kid. Papyrus sure had that effect on people.

Toriel strolled into the kitchen, a mug of tea in hand, taking a little break from housework. She was just about to sit down to polish off a chapter from a thrilling ‘whodunit’ when she glanced out the window and caught sight of Asgore, tending to the garden. Music was playing. Her first thought was to pay him no interest – the book was not going to read itself – but something drew her to the window; she did not know what drove her, whether it was curiosity or intrigue, but before she knew it, she was there.

Asgore kneeled before the eastern flowerbed, using a trowel to dig a small hole in the earth between the flowers. His garden jeans were smeared with soil, the worst of it around the knees. A portable radio played softly beside him. The garden was in a sorry state when they first moved in, but Asgore worked his magic to rectify that. The hedges had been trimmed, the grass had been cut, the leaves had been racked, and now one final job remained. A dozen empty plastic pots lay on the lawn – the flowers in them now embedded in the ground, except for one. The simple act of digging the soft earth reminded Toriel of something that she had not seen in a long time, but could not quite place her finger on what.

Just then, the opening cords of Spandau Ballet’s ‘True’ wafted from the speakers. Asgore hummed alongside as he lifted the final flower out of the pot; his massive hands looked like they could smother the little thing, crush it into dust, but they were as gentle as a summer’s kiss. He lowered the flower into the hole and used the trowel to pack the gaps with soil. Even from all the way over there, Toriel could catch the glint in his eyes. Asgore Dreemurr had achieved the perfect moment of serenity. He was at peace; content; happy. When he tended to the garden, it was like he was meditating – all his troubles and all his problems did not matter as long as the flowers were perfect, his way of achieving inner peace, his way of coping with the pain one would accumulate from over a thousand years of living.

The realisation struck Toriel like a bullet to the brain, why it was so familiar, why it tugged on her harp strings, why she unconsciously had her elbow rested on the counter. At last, she realised. Asgore reminded her of Gorey. Not the wrathful, vengeful creature that she had come to despise, but the gentle giant that she used to call her husband. Her memories were drawn back to the days where she sat on the throne, beside King Fluffybuns, back when they could share a laugh, a smile, a kiss, and a small part of her yearned to relive those days.

Asgore slipped the trowel into the side of his tool belt before dusting off his hands. Job well done. Toriel was so caught up in her thoughts that she did not realise he had finished. He pushed himself up onto his bare feet, shutting off the radio while he did so. She reacted one fraction of a second too late as he turned, ducking behind the kitchen counter. Staying as low to the black and white floor as possible, she scrambled on her hands and knees to the chair and unceremoniously dragged herself onto it. Asgore had neared the door now, having taken a moment to store the empty pots for future use. Toriel slammed her mug down, spilling some of the tea, and snatched the book up. Just as she opening it up on a random page, Asgore turned the door handles.

Asgore pulled open both doors and stepped inside. “Garden’s all done.” Up close, the hard work was painted all over him, from his horns to his toes. Those hours spent toiling in the baking sun had taken a lot out of him. His fur glistened with sweat, the patches on the chest and armpits of his blue shirt were almost black.

Toriel glimpsed away from the book she was pretending to read. “Oh, Asgore, you are trailing mud into the kitchen again,” she tattled, highlighting his muddy jeans. “I just cleaned that.”
Asgore glanced down. He blushed, embarrassed at making such an amateurish error. “Oh, sorry. I’ll, uh, clean that up…” He noticed his hands, the dirt reached his elbows. “After I’ve cleaned myself up.” He trudged to the opposite end of the kitchen, making the floor even dirtier. He stopped to glance at Toriel as he reached the doorway. She noticed a smile from out the corner of her eye. “By the way,” he said, holding back laughter, “it helps to have the book the right way up.”

With Asgore out of the room and treading his filthy prints down the carpet, Toriel actually looked at the pages she had selected, and found the text to be upside-down. They both blushed with embarrassment that day.

Asgore’s voice from the present day snapped her back to reality: “Are you alright?”

With a tired huff, Toriel pushed herself upright, off her former husband. “Not quite, I landed on something slimy and horrible.” She said, burying her feelings as deep as she could. With a sigh, she extended a hand down. “But thank you for catching me, I suppose.”

Asgore eagerly took her hand and stood up with her help. “You’re welcome… I suppose.” Upright, he arched his back inwards, flexing out the impact with a hearty crackle. Good thing the ground was reasonably soft.

Toriel took a moment to dust herself off before looking around. Nothing about this place rang any bells, but everything was strange. There were no swamps or marshlands anywhere near their new home, and the imposing mountain to the northeast looked nothing like Mt Ebott… nor did they have any floating islands where they lived either. “What is this place?”

“Haven’t got a clue,” Asgore responded, sounding as lost as she was. “But if I were to guess, this must be the place from that book of yours.”

“Maybe, but where are the others? We all entered together, but I do not see them anywhere.”

“They must have ended up elsewhere.”

“In that case,” Toriel said as she reached into a pocket of her robe, “I will try giving them a call.” She pulled out her phone, and felt her heart sink as the ocean blue casing was now pitch black, along with everything else. She felt like she was holding a lump of coal.

Asgore squinted one eye. “Was your phone always that colour?”

“It was not the last time I checked,” Toriel stated. She went to press the touchscreen and ended up breaking a hole straight through it. “It is completely frazzled!” The phone collapsed in on itself, crumbling into charcoal splinters.

Asgore glanced down at what was left of Toriel’s phone, the ashy remains drifting down like black snow. “Oh dear. Wasn’t that a gift from Alphys?”

“Yes, it was. It was her way of saying I needed to ‘keep up with the times.’” Toriel shook her head and sighed. “I think she paid good money on it. She is not going to be happy when she finds out about this…”

“I guess we’ll just have to do this the old-fashioned way…” Asgore looked out at the lands of twisted trees, brown earth and bubbling ponds. “We go out there and find someone who can help us. Who knows? We may even find Frisk while we’re at it.”

“There is no time like the present. Which way should we proceed, your majesty?”
Former-King Asgore mumbled to go north, so off they went. If there was anything Toriel regretted about the teleporter ride, it was that fate had decided to pair herself up with her former husband. The others had probably got it easy, not being paired with the one person they had spent a portion of their life loving, and another portion of their life avoiding.

Out of everything that confused them, the sun was the biggest creditor. The sun was low on the horizon, and rising higher with each passing minute. That could not be possible, it was mid-afternoon. Little did they know, however, they had been in transit for an entire day, the spectacle passing faster than it took to blink.

It did not take them long to find a road, a stretch of asphalt bearing the marks of a thousand footsteps. It took them a shorter amount of time to locate a sign, the arrow pointing left.

*The Embassy of Bob*

*Home of the Founder of Bob*

*Half a Mile that-a-way*

---

Emperor Maxus had waited since last night for this moment, feeling every second count down. His trusted advisor had some top-secret information to share, and now, as they stood in the seclusion of the war room, would this be passed on.

The young emperor had a restless night, his fleeting dreams plagued by that human child, mere yards away. Whenever he stepped closer, the human retained its distance without taking a step. He went to grab the creature, and his hands faded through like it was made of air. Anything and everything that a human was capable of – hate, anger, deception, death – Frisk demonstrated before his silver eyes. Maxus could do nothing but watch helplessly as the little beast turned monsters to dust, stole their possessions, torched their homes, and did all these heinous crimes with a sick, sadistic smile.

The break of dawn signified his morning ritual: one hour of rigorous weight training in his private gymnasium. Monsters like Maxus, and his father before him, do not reach their size without pumping some serious iron. His biceps ached from curling those seventy-five kilogram dumbbells. The bench press bars were permanently warped from constantly holding ten weights on each end. When he performed pull-ups, he needed extra chains to support the chains holding the weights that dragged him down. The setting on the ab crunch machine was so high that the machine itself was getting a tougher workout than the one using it. Each set completion and dropped weight sent shockwaves throughout the fortress.

Nobody except Maxus ever entered the private gymnasium, not his soldiers or his servants or his cleaners. Not because the Emperor forbade it, but because the entire room was a major health and safety hazard for anyone other than himself. The reinforced floor strewn with snapped cables and broken chain links. A single weight could crush any of them like a bug. The two rooms underneath were left empty, the subjects afraid that the ceiling would cave in and bury everything and everyone.

His after-training breakfast of eggs, chicken, meat and bread were packed with six times the daily amount of protein that a human being should consume. Already, he could feel his damaged muscles closing the knits, bulking the muscles.

The nightmare did nothing to quell his resolve; if anything, it served to add fuel to the fire, strengthening it until it burned brighter than the sun. He was stronger than he was yesterday.
The Advisor slapped a detailed sketch down on the table. “This is the one responsible for the destruction of Bjornliege Manor,” they explained to their lord, pointing at the incredibly accurate front and side drawings of Undyne. “Our scouts have spotted her among the group leaving Bjornliege Manor’s site. Several witnesses, including Lord Grill himself, have stated that she is looking for a human child whose description matches Frisk’s perfectly.”

Maxus studied the monster intently. Tall. Strong. Menacing. Frightening. Undyne was all of these things at a first glance. She looked like the type of person who would fit nicely into his military, the type who enjoyed a good fight. What was she doing destroying mansions and looking for humans?

The Advisor placed three more pictures on the flat surface. Motioning to one of the headshots, the Advisor continued. “The citizens of A. Town last night celebrated the arrival of a one ‘Doctor Alphys’. We checked her name, and discovered that she has ties to the surface. Or specifically, an entertainment robot.” Then to the pictures that accompanied hers, that of two skeletons. “These two accompany her. We have strong evidence to suggest that they are all connected to this woman,” they said, pointing back to Undyne’s portrait. “And that they too are here in search of the human.”

Monsters showing concern for a human? The thought made Maxus grit his teeth. No monster should ever show love toward humanity, even to one pathetic, insignificant soul. After everything the humans had done, there was no way they should be approached, let alone forgiven. What had this ‘Frisk’ character done to them? Has this creature placed them under a trance? Has it hypnotised them? Has it hurt them so bad that they cannot bear the thought of a life without Frisk? There was no level of low that a human could not reach, and he knew that this particular one must have reached the deepest and darkest of lows.

The Advisor went silent as they glanced at the door, on the lookout for prying eyes and spying ears. Content that no one else was around, they reached for some more.

“And there are two more individuals that you will find most interesting…”

With a flick of the wrist, they splayed the final drawings out onto the table. Two monsters, one male and one female, both of the same species. However, one of them overtook the Emperor’s attention over the other. He did a double take, thinking it a figment of his imagination until he looked closer.

“It can’t be,” Maxus murmured as he hunched himself over the table, using his arms for support, which aggravated the aches in his biceps. “Asgore?” When he was but a cub, Asgore was the one they all looked up to. The one chosen to lead them against all opposition, the beacon of hope in those dark times. He looked unstoppable, standing tall in his armour, with his cape flowing and his trident aloft in his burly arms. He failed, of course. “He should be long dead by now.”

“So should you, my lord.” The Advisor replied, earning themself a stern look from their ruler. “He is a boss monster, just like you, capable of a great many things.” They diverted their attention to the other monster, the one who looked similar to Asgore. “This one may, at some time or another, have been Asgore’s spouse.”

Maxus started to connect the dots. “Married? Husband and wife?” He already knew what this meant. “Children? Do you think they’ve survived so long by birthing a child, and then losing it?”

“That is a possibility, my lord.”

“And as of this moment, that possibility is irrelevant. These people are both dangerous and in serious danger. They must be detained and brought here immediately. Then, I can use them as bait to draw the human to me. Send a squad of our best soldiers to apprehend this woman,” Maxus commanded as he pointed at Undyne’s picture. “Destruction of a lord’s property is a class A offense, punishable with a hundred years of imprisonment.” One hundred years sounds like a life sentence, but not in this
world where everyone had extended lifespans. “Send another to A. Town. The miners there are loyal, they will hand this doctor over willingly. As for Asgore, send extra men to—”

“Actually, my lord,” the Advisor chimed in, raising a hand, “you will not need to waste monsterpower with the boss monsters. I predict they will find their way here on their own.”

Maxus gave his advisor a questioning look. “They will come to me?”

“Asgore and his wife are of nobility. Once they discover that their friend is the most wanted fugitive in all the lands, they will most likely seek out the source of these accusations, which will be us. They’ll want to demand an audience with you personally.”

The road led the two boss monsters straight to the Embassy of Bob. It was not easy to miss – a few structures built in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by twenty foot high walls. Before the two stood a giant, metal door with a sign above displaying the embassy’s name. Striking metallic, red letters against a white background.

“Here we are. At the Embassy of Bob. Wherever this is.” Asgore said as he gazed up at the sign. “I wonder what it’s like inside.”

Toriel rested the knuckles of her right hand onto her waist. “There is only one way to find out.” She nodded toward the gate. “Do you wish to do the honours, or shall I?”

“Allow me,” Asgore insisted as he stepped up to it, flexing the fingers on both hands. “No need for you to break a nail.” He paused, allowing the moment to pass like a comedian waiting for the audience to stop laughing. He looked at her and said, “That was a joke.”

“Just knock on the door.”

Without taking his eyes off her, he raised his hand and slammed it twice against the metal; it was more of a punch than a knock. A loud, hollow thud rang out as the doors shook on their hinges. “Happy now?” He turned to the door that he had just punched and realised the dent that he may or may not have made.

They waited for seconds until, with a click and a scrape, an opening in the door appeared level with their shins. They hunched down to see through the gap and saw a cat face peeking out. The cat had black eyes, an uneven smile, a full head of flowing black hair, two pairs of ears – two on top and two drooping on the sides – and wore a blue jumper with yellow stripes.

“Go easy on the door, will ya? It’s the only one we got,” said the cat monster with a small yet adult voice. “You stand before the Embassy of Bob. How can I help you?”

Asgore zoomed in on the face, finding it familiar. “Temmie?”

The cat raised his eyebrows upon hearing that name. “Temmie? I’m not Temmie. I’m Bob, the gatekeeper of the Embassy of Bob.”

“You’re… not Temmie?” Asgore was full of confusion. “But you look just like… oh, never mind.”

“You have a nice place here,” Toriel said. “Does it belong to you?”

Bob shook his head. “No, I just own the gate. It’s mine, I paid for it with my own hard-earned
money, that’s why they elected me the gatekeeper. I keep the gate. Now, if you want anything important, you best talk to the higher ups, they’re inside the main complex.”

“So how do we go about meeting them? We have some questions we would like to ask.” Toriel tried to be quick since her knees were already going stiff from the short period of hunching. “Is there a waiting list or—?”

“Actually, we employ an open-door policy here. I’ll let you in.” Bob, the gatekeeper, slid the trapdoor shut. Seconds later, the grand entrance to the Embassy of Bob parted with the same squeakiness and flimsiness of a school gate. Toriel, as a newly-appointed teacher at the local school, knew this all too well.

Taking the first steps inside, it was clear that any and every trace of swamp had been beaten down and suppressed within the confines of the four walls. Three rectangular buildings stood against the walls opposite the entrance, the centre one bigger and taller than the other two. In the stretch of courtyard, more monsters – more Bobs, to be exact – meandered about, doing whatever.

“The main complex is the building straight ahead, in the middle,” explained Bob the gatekeeper, closing the gate he had long ago purchased behind them. “You can’t miss the founder even if you tried.”

Asgore and Toriel thanked the gatekeeper before treading down the courtyard, cutting a path around the Bobs. They were both strangers in an even stranger world. Some of them made small talk with the guests.

“Greetings, I am Bob,” said one.

Another greeted, “Hi there, I am Bob.”

“Salutations, I am Bob,” a third politely aforementioned.

A fourth: “Hi there, I’m Bob.”

“Hey, Bob,” shouted the second Bob to the fourth, “you can’t say that, I said it first!”

“There was a contraction in mine, Bob!” The fourth Bob retorted back to Bob number two.

In the centre of the courtyard stood a statue, an oversized Bob with one paw raised, pointing back toward the gate. His mouth agape. A small bronze plaque had been nailed into the podium at its feet. Engraved into the surface were the words:

“Dibs!”

-Bob, the Great Founder of Bob

They reached the main building, entering through the front door, which was wide open. Apparently, the open-door policy extended further inside. The air was cooler and smelled faintly of cat food. A reception desk was straight ahead, with four leather chairs surrounding a coffee table in the corner, and a couple of potted plants. The temmie behind the desk smashed away at a keyboard, seemingly hitting random buttons with no rhyme or reason. He noticed the two as they entered.

Asgore rolled his eyes. Let me guess. Your name is Bob, right? He would guess correctly.

“Hello, I am Bob,” said the secretary, “the first and only receptionist in the Embassy of Bob.”
Asgore started to see a pattern emerging here. “Howdy there, little fella. May we speak to the founder of, err, this ‘Bob’?”

“You mean Bob?” The Bob before them faced the monitor and resumed his typing. “He’s in his office of command. Down the hall and through the first door. Go right on in.”

“Thank you.” Asgore and Toriel stepped past the desk and walked down the hall. No need to question their rules and procedures. If it meant that they could get answers from someone who knew things around here, they had no reason to complain. The plush, red carpet was a welcome change to their feet. The walls were covered in framed paintings, all of them of Bob. Riding on horse monsters, riding on dragons, before black backgrounds, and all of them labelled Bob in shiny brass.

They could hear voices coming from the command room even before they got there. “Are the defences up?” The same voice of a Bob asked. “Are there enough stocks to last us indefinitely? Are the emergency escape routes up to scratch? We can’t take any chances on this!”

“Yes, yes, and yes,” another Bob replied, calmer and more in-control. “As they always are, Bob.”

Asgore and Toriel located the double door, conveniently titled Command Room. This door was open, but slightly. The two exchanged a glance, wondering which one was going to do the honours. Without saying a word, they came to a conclusion that it was Toriel’s turn. She gave the door a gentle, rapid knock, refraining from chipping a gap in the wood.

“Yes, what is it?” Someone said. There was a hint of agitation in his voice.

Toriel opened the door and peeked through the gap. “Excuse me. May we enter?” Without waiting for an answer, she pushed the doors fully open. “I am Toriel. My… associate, Asgore, and I are wondering if you can help us by answering our questions.”

Asgore felt a pang of hurt at that statement, being downgraded from dreemgoat to associate.

The Command Room had that worn in, vintage feel one would find in a World War Two exhibit. Wooden desks and black, leather chairs. The walls covered with chalkboards and corkboards, tagged with top secret documents. How did they know they were top secret? Because it was all written in red ink on the headers, as well as titled in big letters above the boards themselves.

Three more cat monsters sat at the desk, fawning over papers and pages. The centre Bob – because let’s face it, that’s what his name was – said, “We are facing a great dilemma at this moment in time, but we will offer any support we can. I am Bob, the founder of Bob.” He gestured to the cat on his left. “This is our Secretary of State, Bob.” Then to his right. “And this is the Secretary of Treasury, Bob.” Despite their titles, they all had the same fluffy hairstyle and civilian shirts. Nothing about them screamed ‘important.”

Asgore whispered in Toriel’s ear. “He’s the founder? How can they tell?” Toriel brought her hand up to her mouth and snorted back a giggle, obviously trying to hide it from him, but he heard it. Just hearing a peep of that small sound made him feel fuzzy. “What sort of problem are you facing?” he asked the cats.

“You don’t know?” The Secretary of State – what was his name again? – bellowed, disbelieving what he just heard. “Haven’t you read the news? We got a human on the loose. A human, here in the Outerworld! The first one in hundreds of years! We’re all doomed.”

Toriel’s eyes flashed. “A human?” she and Asgore uttered in unison.

“Relax,” responded the Secretary of Treasury, the level-headed one of the bunch, mistaking Toriel’s
reaction for fear. “There is only one, and we are miles away. We have plenty of time to ratify that open-door policy.”

Toriel approached the table and brought her white hands down on it, grabbing their attention. “Which human are you talking about? What is their name? What do they look like?”

Bob, the founder, pulled a sheet of paper out of his hair, unfolded it, and slid it across the table. “See for yourself.”

Toriel snatched the half-folded paper from off the table. Asgore looked over her shoulder as she pulled it flat. The picture of their adopted child was the first thing to shock them, the second thing was the word *wanted* written in big bold letters over Frisk’s head.

“Oh no,” Toriel cried. “Frisk!” She felt Asgore’s hand clamp on her shoulder, and it was at that moment that she knew that his pain was the same as hers.

They frantically skimmed the writing. It was the only shred of information they could go on, the only straws they could grasp at.* Recent escape from Highkeep Enclave. Hiding within the Plain-plain. One-million cloud coin reward. Report any information to members of the Monster Military. The Empire wishes the suspect to be captured alive. Payment will be rewarded after the human or soul is within the grounds of Castle Highkeep. Master Scribe Rickard.*

The Bobs found their distress in reading the poster most suspicious. “You know that human?” queried Bob, the founder of Bob.

“Yes, they are my child,” Toriel said without taking her eyes off the wanted poster.

“Our child,” Asgore corrected.

“What do you mean, your child?” asked Bob, the Secretary of State.

“Our child!” Toriel threw her hands down. “Frisk is in our custody!” she hissed through her teeth. “You took them away from us, and now we want them back!”

“Monsters adopting humans? What had this Outerworld come to?” Secretary of State Bob jumped from his seat and paced the right side of the command room. “Why, such an act will surely be against any and all laws of our land! You are enemies to the Emperor and his empire!”

“Who is your emperor?” interrogated Asgore. For a rare moment in his life, there was anger in his voice. “Where is Highkeep Enclave? Where is Castle Highkeep? I would very much like to give this guy a piece of my mind.”

“You honestly think we’ll tell you criminals where our ruler is? You will never find him, not even in his giant castle on the centre island.” The founder of Bob leapt up onto the table. “You are in league with the human threat! That makes you our sworn enemy! We shall deliver you to Castle Highkeep ourselves! Raise the alarm!”

There was a pause in the action. A moment passed, but no alarm bell was rung.

The Secretary of Treasury gathered everyone’s attention with a throaty cough. “Is now a good time to say that we don’t have any alarms?”

The other two Bob’s span to face him. “What?” muttered the founder himself. “Why not?”

Bob the treasurer pushed his chair back, reached under the table, retrieved an empty shoebox, and
dropped it onto the top. On second inspection, the box was not empty; there were two coins and a hairball inside. “This is all we have left over since we constructed the embassy. Do you know how expensive it is to fit fake faux carpet?” His question was met with silence. “Not to mention run an army? We don’t have enough to buy a shoelace.”

Further silence followed, however, the grave look on Bob’s face told them that he was not finished. “And look who we decided to appoint as our secretary of defence.” The treasurer span around to the door on the left wall. “Get in here!”

The door creaked open, and the Secretary of Defence rolled out on squeaking wheels, behind a cardboard box with their title misspelled with the finest children’s paint money could scrimp on. “Hi, im temmie!” The Secretary of Defence announced.

The treasure gave a lazy point toward the boss monsters. “Attack,” he commanded half-heartedly.

Temmie reached under the box and pulled out a dozen balls of crumpled up paper. A couple rolled onto the floor. Each one had *wepon* written on it. “tem… deeploy…” They grabbed one and held it high. “WEAPON OF MAS DESTRUCCION! Tis all tem can afford.” Temmie began to lob the crumpled paper toward the goat couple, who stood there in stunned silence. The first projectile covered a whopping two feet, barely coming anywhere near the intended targets. The second went further by about a centimetre. While the volley continued to miss them by miles, Asgore and Toriel shared a glance. Eventually, Temmie had ran out of ammunition, it was all in a messy line between them and their targets. “Temmie… out of wepons. Wen do tem get payz?”

The treasurer took the coins from the box and hurled them at the wheels of Temmie’s trolley. “That’s all you get… ever,” was his answer. “Next time, try card instead of paper.”

“Okey… TACTICAL RETREAT!” Temmie grabbed their portable desk and rolled themself through the door from which they came, one foot on the trolley and the other as the accelerator.

After the door slammed shut, all eyes reverted back to the founder of Bob himself. The Secretary of Treasury had made his point. They were undertrained, underpaid and understaffed to even handle a full-on invasion, let alone deal with the two individuals who got from the outskirts of the walls to their office in less than five minutes.

There was one move Bob had left up his sleeve. The only one that would successfully allow him to save face. “Would you like the directions to Castle Highkeep written down?”

“Yes, please.” Toriel nodded. The spectacle before so bizarre, she had forgotten to be angry.

Asgore added, “That would be wonderful, thank you.”

Bob walked on all fours across the table. “I’ll get a pen and paper…”
The Not-So-Sweet Escape

“Ad…vis…or…”

Frisk opened their eyes with a start, the floor rumbled faintly. For a moment, they had completely forgotten where they were, thinking themselves still in the dream world living out another vision of things to come. They sat up, blinking several times in the dim light, unsure of their surroundings. This was not their bedroom, far from it.

Eventually, the reality that their train ride of dreams had come to an end sank in. They remembered where they were, and how it came to be. Resting their back against the padded headboard, Frisk checked the clock on the television: 07:28 – not exactly the time they wanted to rise on a Sunday when they would rather wrap the sheets tighter and snooze the morning away. The last day before they needed to be up early for school.

That familiar feeling from the Underground tickled the back of Frisk’s mind, the same one that made them sigh. They were stuck in a world that they were not a part of, that did not know them, where any one of the inhabitants would benefit greatly from seeing them dead, and where making friends was harder than it sounded. The empty feeling of isolation sank in as Frisk sank deeper into the lumpy pillow. None of Toriel’s gentle, uncontracted speech; no Asgore to say howdy to. No social media to read Alphys’s forty-two updates and Sans’s twenty-nine ‘so cool’ comments on something Papyrus wrote.

Frisk needed something, anything to stave off the seclusion – some noise, at least. They reached for the remote left on the bedside from last night and turned the television on to catch some Sunday morning shows, maybe a cartoon or two. They skipped over a couple reruns and hovered on a news channel; the anchor-woman informing the folks at home that paranormal hunter Aaron had located surreal ghosts. Turned out, he was the next special guest on Sunday Morning Brunch with a Killer Robot.

Apparently, Mettaton liked the idea of a weekly show so much that he decided to create seven of them. The remaining five included: Monday Afternoon Lunch with a Killer Robot; Tuesday Afternoon Dinner with a Killer Robot; Wednesday Evening Tea with a Killer Robot; Thursday Evening Supper with a Killer Robot; and Friday Midnight that cookie you really should not eat because you’re on a diet but you really, really, really, really, really, really wanted it and you lack any sort of willpower (a.k.a. snack) with a Killer Robot. Take a moment to get your breath back.

They were already fed up after five minutes of flicking. After shutting off the television and jumping out of bed, they parted the curtains. Pink light flooded inside. The train station had not upped and wandered off during the night. The morning brought out the colour in its white bricks, without the orange glow of streetlights.

It was at that moment, Frisk had an idea. They needed a plan. They looked over at the leaflets laid on the desk. Skimming through them yielded attractions, museums, bars and restaurants, and the local train times. Frisk plucked it out, disrupting the delicate pattern in which they were presented. It was a foldout leaflet; opening it up presented a sizeable overview of the Plain-plain, broken up with a ragged spider web of different coloured threads – accompanied by arrival and departure times.

Frisk located where they were right now, Parfocorse, south off the centre, lit up like a rainbow. North was their direction. Moving upward, they found one dotted station at the most northern point, labelled Winter’s Edge. From there, it was a stone’s throw away from the bridge that connected the
Plain-plain to Ice Island. Finding possible routes between Parfocorse and Winter’s Edge, they found a track that travelled east before twisting upward around the north-eastern ridge, which was highlighted in red for some reason. The next train there was scheduled to arrive at nine o’clock. The red, digital clock under the television read 07:40. They had time, and now they had a plan.

Their stomach grumbled, ready to take on a hearty breakfast; Frisk knew just the place. They folded the leaflet into their pocket, collected their money and room key off the counter and went straight out the door, leaving the bed for the cleaner to take care of. Nothing much could be said as they followed the hallway, rounded the stairs, and squeaked on the shiny floor, other than it did not look much different in the daylight. As they passed the utility room on the landing, a blue suited janitor pulled out a keychain, flicked through them, and inserted a chunky, worn key into the slot. At first, it did not turn. He jangled it about until it did, clicking the door open.

As they reached the revolving door, a middle-aged monster – an unfinished symphony, an open book with half the notes written – with a bushy moustache, and bowler hat, and wheeling a hefty suitcase behind himself, pushed their wide frame in sideways. Frisk slipped into the opposite opening and exited at the same time that he entered. However, at that short moment in which they passed, the monster glanced oddly at Frisk. His expression blank like paper – on his paper face – the mouth agape in dumbstruck awe. Frisk looked back upon reaching the outside, and saw that the monster was still looking at them, as if he had seen them before.

The early morning was cool with that crisp springtime sensation lingering in the air. The intensity of the asphalt smell grew as the sun slowly baked it. The town of Parfocorse had metamorphosed overnight, transforming from swanky and party-fuelled into quiet and presentable, like how the average college student operated. Frisk retraced their steps, hoping that they could find their way back to Sweet and Sour’s before they starved to death. Along that way, several people were hunched around a streetlight, another around the display window of a barbershop. Whispers were passed amongst themselves. Someone was either getting the greatest haircut in the Outerworld or the worst.

They found Sweet and Sour’s and entered, have checked the opening times beforehand to see if they were in business yet. They were. Like last night, a waiter greeted them at the entrance and delivered them to the counter. Another angsty clerk with the glazed look in the eyes was about to ask for their order when an angry customer – a bull – butted in and slammed a tray of food down.

“Hey!” the customer yelled, “Just what kind of swill you serving me?”

The clerk gave the bacon and egg muffin, resting on an opened wrapper, a once-over. Two clear bites had been taken out of it. His mouth formed a hard line. “Isn’t this the same thing you’ve ordered every Sunday for the past ten years?”

The irate customer flared his nostrils, exhaling two fumes of white steam, looking like he was about to charge. “It’s rotten and undercooked! It tastes like it’s been scraped off someone’s bathroom floor!”

“Sir, the chefs are incredibly careful with the food they prepare,” the clerk assured in a calm manner, but the creases in his forehead suggested he had something else on his mind. “This bacon and egg muffin will have been cooked and prepared in exactly the same way as all the others, but if you are not happy, I can get you a replacement.”

The clerk might as well have waved a red flag in the customer’s face. “You’ve got the memory of a goldfish, son…” he said, then turned to the goldfish monster who was sat one table away. “No offense.” Back to the clerk. “This is the replacement! I’ve tried two muffins and they both taste the same, horrible!” He pushed the tray to the clerk. “Here, you try it.”
The clerk’s chest rose and fell as he sighed dejectedly. He picked up the muffin, located a place that had not been touched by the customer’s teeth, and took a big bite, getting a mouthful of everything that comprised it. His jaw completed two chews then stopped. His face crumpled, his mouth opened – revealing the mush inside for all to see – and out escaped a groan of disgust.

“Told you so,” the customer said, smiling with morbid satisfaction as the clerk rushed to a nearby sink and started spitting it all out.

Another clerk, a barrel-chested beaver, stepped over to replace the out-of-order staff member. “We’re deeply sorry, sir.” With a few button presses, he opened the cash register. “We’ll issue you a full refund.”

“You better,” was all the customer replied with. He took back the twenty coins he had spent and stormed out of Sweet and Sour’s before the clerk could wish him a nice day. In his stride, he looked like he could smash the entire door down, but retained some sense to use the handle.

With nobody in front, Frisk stepped forward. Heeding the warnings, they decided not go for the bacon and egg muffin, and instead opted for the breakfast bagel bargain bucket bonanza – try saying that five times fast. A freshly baked bagel filled with ham and cream cheese, with a crispy hash brown and an orange juice, bucket sold separately. All for ten cloud coins. Frisk forked it over, now having twenty coins remaining in the pouch – enough to buy what the customer before was having, if they wanted to join the puking party. They had their food on the tray in the average fast food speed.

As they took their meal and headed for the table they ate at yesterday, which was vacant, they overheard the chefs from the fast food side arguing in the kitchen. “I don’t understand it. I cooked it like that for twenty-five years and nobody has ever complained. Now we get four people in a row returning their muffins.”

“Two people weren’t too happy with their Eggs Benedict either,” added a chef from the opposite side. “It’s tasted fine every time I’ve made them before, but I sampled some ten minutes ago and nearly puked my guts out. Just like Jethro is right now.”

“We got a call from our buddies over in the Oasis. They’ve had some similar incidents. What is going on here?” To which none of them had the answer, but the phone rang again. More bad news.

The human child started their breakfast by unscrewing the cap off the juice bottle and taking a sip. Frisk never thought this could actually be deemed as a complaint, but the orange juice was too orangey. It was like sucking on a lemon, but instead of a lemon, it was an orange – an orange with the sour intensity of a lemon. The food did not fare much better: the cheese was too cheesy, the ham too hammy, and the hash brown too… brownie? Frisk thought they were mistaken. They took another nibble of the hash brown, it tasted exactly like a brownie. As for the rest of the food, it was not like Frisk had the money to order something else, nor did they want to burden the already stressed employees, so they would just have to power through with what they had.

Just as Frisk took their sixth bite out of the bagel, the door slammed open and in rushed a monster, holding a piece of paper in his hand. His sudden, loud entrance earned the attention of everyone at their seats. He charged straight to a monster sitting two tables away from the human, whom they could see from out the corner of their eye.

“Hey, Marco, what’s up with you?” asked the one sat at the table, an animate deep-sea diving suit.

The guy who had just made an entrance, Marco, a blue blob with limbs and a face, slapped the paper flat beside the tray. “This is what’s up,” he replied just as loudly as how he entered, his breath heavy
and the sweat shimmering on his bulbous frame.

There was a pause as the other inspected the paper through his grated face plate. “Holy smokes,” he said in a low tone through an invisible mouth, yet his words were surprisingly clear. He rubbed the glass to make sure he was not mistaken. “Here? Now?”

“Yeah. I’m just as shocked as you, trust me,” Marco replied. By this time, Frisk had turned back to their food.

“Well. Ain’t this typical. Just when you think it’s safe the walk the streets again – now that the civil war is over an’ all – we get this.”

“Tell me about it, Sean.” Marco paced around the table, bouncing his plentiful frame. “The folks at home are going nuts. Mack is thinkin’ of boarding up the house, and Ma’s dug out Pa’s old claymore – monster gods bless his dusty remains. That thing is rustier than her. We got enough problems already without a human becoming one of them.”

Frisk froze centimetres away from their seventh bite, sucking in a whimper of a breath. That monster had said that one little word that permanently set them apart from the monsters, especially their friends and family. Frisk took a wild guess as to the number of humans that could be present in this hidden sky empire, and they were quite confident in assuming that they were the only one, bringing the tally up to a grand total of one. Those monsters had to be referring to them. The senses in their ears sharpened, ready to hear what they had to say next.

“Mind you though,” Marco went on, tapping on the table, “that reward looks pretty enticing.”

“Oh my goodness – one million cloud coins?” Sean said in disbelief, rubbing his face plate again. Now it was cleaner beyond clean. “I’ve never seen a bounty that high since… how much was that Eddy, or Freddy, or Teddy guy worth? I can’t remember.”

Marco stroked one of his chins. “I think it might’ve been… one-hundred-thousand… I think? Unless I’ve miscounted the number of zeroes in it.”

Frisk took that seventh bite, acting casual. The intensity of the flavour made their face scrunch, and they relived the gruesome moment where they fell from grace, remembering the vivid image of the Emperor, watching with those stern eyes as they plunged to their supposed demise. They should have known better than to think that he would give up so easily.

Sean said, “That sounds about right. That means this human’s sure gone and kicked a hornet’s nest to get a price that big on that head of theirs.”

“More like ten nests, what’s-his-name got that one-hundred-grand on him by terrorising those guys down in the Forest. They get real touchy about those nests…” His beady eyes counted the number of zeros on paper. “One million cloud coins. Imagine what you could do with that money. You could buy your own mansion in the Oasis. Heck, if I’m the one to nab this human, that what I’ll do.”

“Right. After you blow it all in one day at the convenience store.” Sean laughed. “Forget about the Oasis. You could buy Castle Highkeep with that amount… probably give mister grumpy no-smile on the throne the boot…”

“Man, all this worrying has worked up an appetite. I’m gonna need an extra big breakfast to get through today.”

“I just finished mine,” Sean said, rising from his seat. “Tasted… a little different, but I’m in the mood for seconds.” Together, they made their way over to the counter. Sean’s weighted boots drummed
loud on the bare floor. “Word of advice, don’t order the bacon and egg muffin – they’re not going
down so good.”

Frisk watched as they made their way over to the counter. With both their backs turned, Frisk
rammed the remainder of the bagel into their mouth, poured in the last drops of orange juice, and
turned around to face Sean’s table. Just as they expected, those guys had left the poster there along
with the tray holding what was left of his first breakfast. They took one last look back at the pair,
who were contemplating their choices, whether to go for quality or quickness. Frisk quietly slipped
from their seat, still chewing their food, and snuck over. The sheet of paper lay face up for everyone
to see. They grabbed and slid it off the table, taking one last look back at the duo as they did so.
Could the human be them? Frisk looked at it, and their own image staring back confirmed it.

The human’s own likelihood had been illustrated to a tee, both in appearance and in description. They
had gotten their hairstyle, features, and clothing right, shedding a whole new light on their situation.
Before they had seen this poster, they would have strolled, as blind as a bat, all around these lands,
talking to whoever and doing whatever, oblivious to the danger they were in until it was too late.
Now, Frisk felt like they had a bullseye painted on their back. The goers in the restaurant were
sparse, yet they still felt exposed, like every eye was secretly spying on them and they were all ready
to pounce at once.

There was fine print at the bottom, but the text was so small that it was difficult to understand. Frisk
pulled the wanted poster closer, squinting. They were just able to make out something regarding a
doctor, and—

“You’re shocked too, huh?”

Frisked jumped, nearly choking on their food. They span in the direction of the voice, but as they did
so, they did not pull away from the poster – keeping their nose pressed against it. Marco watched as
the petite creature stepped back, their face obscured.

“What’s up?” asked Marco. Sean was right behind him, holding the tray with both their meals.
From his point of view, all Marco saw was a figure of small proportions, hiding their face behind the
poster. Their nose bulged through the centre.

The small thing wearing the striped blue jumper muffled something neither of them could
understand. Marco felt bad for this poor creature, clearly distraught by the news of a human running
wild within the Outerworld.

“I know it’s a lot to take in,” Marco assured, “but don’t worry, I’m sure the Monster Military will
handle this. I mean, I’m not a big fan of them, but they have their uses sometimes.” He watched as
the nervous creature began to back away, almost tripping over a chair leg, keeping the wanted poster
against their face. “If you wanna keep that poster, that’s fine, I was finished with it anyway. I got,
like, five of them through my letterbox this morning, and they’re plastered all over town.”

As Frisk made their way to the exit, the one thing they could see was the extreme close up of the
history of pacifism and flirting

As Frisk made their way to the exit, the one thing they could see was the extreme close up of the
history of pacifism and flirting part. They groped for the handle and pushed only to slam into the
glass door. Upon second inspection, there was the word pull engraved on it.

“And if I were you,” the other, Sean, called out as they pulled it open, “I’d change out of those
clothes before someone thinks you’re starting a fan club.”

Outside. Frisk dropped the poster, squinting in the light, finally swallowing the remainder of their
breakfast. They glanced up and down the street. Monsters all around. Walking. Talking. Waiting.
Checking watches. Tying shoelaces. Reading newspapers. Huddled in spots. Frisk’s focus went to
every shop window in sight. How could they have not noticed this sooner? The posters were
everywhere. Frisk’s face all around, on every window, post, and wall, impossible to miss. Their face.
Their description. Their species. One million cloud coin reward – the highest bounty to grace the
Outerworld. They suddenly felt like a piece of meat in the middle of a tank of piranhas.

Frisk moved, walking with pace, but refraining from running – no matter how badly their brain was
telling them to – as they tried not to attract attention. They pulled the collar of their sweater up to their
chin and brushed their hair forward across their face, anything to stave off suspicion, even for a few
seconds. With their head down, they headed down the middle of the street. Now more than ever,
they needed to get out of Parfocorse, but the train was not due for a while yet.

The human child passed a woman pushing a pram and, for the briefest of moments, they both made
eye contact. Frisk heard the wheels come to a halt and the mother mutter something along the lines
of, “Hold on, uh…” Then she hurried off, pushing the speed of the buggy to its limits.

Where were they going? Where could they go? Straight to the station? Back to the hotel? Back to the
safety of their room? Frisk recollected all the monsters who had seen their face from last night. The
waiter and clerk at the restaurant. The dozens of bystanders. The hotel receptionist. The family at the
lobby. The unfinished symphony who they passed forty minutes prior obviously had seen the poster,
by the way he gazed at them. The locals of Parfocorse were beginning to catch on that they were
there, and eventually, they would follow the trail to their room.

A mouse monster, who was probably the same age as Frisk, passed on their right, guided by his
parents. The kid stopped, dropped his ice cream, and pointed straight at them. “Wait a minute,
that’s…” Frisk tucked their chin deeper down, bringing the comfort of their shirt up to their nostrils.
The kid pulled against his father’s hand and cried out, still pointing at them. “That’s them, Daddy!
That’s the human!” The kid’s shrill voice cut through Frisk’s determination. It was like an alarm bell
going off, drawing unwanted attention to those around.

It would appear that their attempt to blend in was not working. All around, monsters were starting to
take notice. Whenever they risked a glance to the side, they always noticed someone looking back. A
couple of pointed fingers shot out. A door slammed shut, followed by a couple of windows. Frisk
thought they heard human being spoken from the crowds a few times. A firecracker going off in the
middle of the street would have attracted less attention than they were at that current moment of time.
They wondered whether any of them would engage in combat. These people were civilians, having
not been trained how to fight, but the prospect of gaining a quick fortune was a mighty temptation.
Under the right circumstances, monsters can act as greedy and as ambitious as humans. All it took
was a catalyst and the correct spark to set things in motion.

Frisk turned the corner, heading back to the hotel. If anything, it was the one place they had to go on.
The one reprieve they had, if it has not already been compromised since they had been away. The
tension in the streets were increasing. The numbers aware of the human’s presence swelling. Several
wide stares from monsters with two eyes, three eyes, four eyes, six eyes, eight eyes, one eye, and no
eyes. Frisk glanced at the sideways reflection in a glass shop display and spotted two monsters a few
strides behind. One of them was holding something that Frisk could not make out. Frisk kept their
pace, moving fast but not too fast.

Up ahead, among the crowds were individuals decked out in silver. Frisk almost froze upon seeing
them. Members of the Monster Military. Their armour dazzled in the low sun. Their spears rose
above the crowds, the razor tips reflecting a hint of light. Apparently, they had received reports of
civilians claiming to have seen a child who matched the fugitive named Frisk.

With every step, they got closer – both the guards in front and the pursuers behind, which had now
grown to three. The guards had not spotted them, but were bound to eventually. Frisk glanced around, there were a couple of alleyways to choose from, the one to their right blocked by a wooden fence. Maybe they could slink into a shop or cafeteria and hope nobody would notice the Outerworld’s most wanted escapee bolting to find a fire exit.

A mongoose monster to the right opened a ground floor window from the inside. A box of flowers lay outside, attached to the frame. He leaned out and took a cautious sniff of them before recoiling back. “I swear, these flowers smell worse every day. Some of these I bought yesterday, and they’re already starting to wilt.”

A guard in the middle of taking a witness statement glanced past the civilian. She caught sight of Frisk and held her gaze for two seconds. “Target spotted,” she announced quietly to her colleagues, who snapped to attention. In one fluid motion, she tossed the witness aside and pointed at Frisk. “You! Hold it right there!”

Now.

Frisk bolted to the right. Everyone else, those in front and behind, moved when they did. The monster by the window stumbled and fell back in horror as the human child dove inside and landed on a coffee table, sliding across the smooth surface and knocking over a cup of water before slipping off and landing with a roll on the threadbare rug.

No time to stop and contemplate how cool that move was; the pursuers were forcing their large frames through the small window frame while others were bashing at the door. Above the commotion of mangled voices and grating metal, the guard bellow out: “Send word to all the squads in the area: the human has been spotted! Cut off all exits, do not allow them to escape!”

Frisk darted across the living room, leaving the startled monster to collect himself. They reached the central hall just as the door burst open. Frisk ducked into a kitchen. There was a chair, a dining table, a kitchen top and an open window all lined up for a perfect escape, which they took without hesitation. It was as if it had been deliberately placed in that fashion just for them. They landed in what could be loosely described as a garden, more an alleyway of fences and patches of long grass, which stretched thirty buildings downwards. This place was hidden in the shadows, left to rot and fester. The pounding of footsteps from within the house urged them forward. They jumped the fence onto a worn path that cut straight down the expanse. The one or two idlers out there were not too bothered with the appearance of a sprinting child.

The backdoor exploded and the pursuers funnelled out, not allowing this chase to end so easily. The crowd of silver metal crashed through the fence and quickly located the human, racing between the gardens. The pursuit was in progress.

A large, burly monster in command span to a teammate half his size. “Barmy, get to higher ground and pursue them.”

With a silent affirmation, Corporal Barmy – the most battle-scared grey squirrel anyone would see, with three nasty scars running down his face – sprang into action. There was a single, dying tree within the alley, not the best place to be when you require more than an hour of sunlight each day, but the branches were thick enough to support his weight. A second is all he needed. He grabbed a low-hanging branch and somersaulted toward the buildings on the right. Barmy grabbed a window ledge and climbed to the roof, his armour not slowing him down one bit. He ran in the human's direction, forming his trusty magically bow and testing the torque of the string as he moved.

“Remember, Corporal,” issued the same heavyset soldier from down below, huffing and panting from exertion, “no killing the target… unless you absolutely have to!”
Barmy replied, “I’m not gonna kill them.” His voice dropped to a whisper as he said the next part. “Just wound them, badly.” He licked his lips, which were dry from anticipation. “Promotion, here I come.”

The houses left and right passed Frisk a blur. Their legs were still sore from yesterday’s efforts, having covered a full marathon’s length within the span of that day. Their body ached, their full belly brought on a nasty case of stitches, yet Frisk powered on, the charging squadron behind, coupled with the agile unit above, offered some much needed inspiration as to why they could not give up.

Frisk exited the alley. They were back on the main streets, among the hustle and bustle, out in the open, exactly where they did not want to be. Through the crowds on both sides, more of the Monster Military were charging, converging on the human child. They bellowed their threats, demanding that Frisk surrender. Frisk responded by sprinting toward an alley across the road, bobbing through as the metal monsters were a metre away. Corporal Barmy jumped the wide gap between the buildings with ease, landing on the other side.

Up ahead, an eight-foot boarded fence threatened the human’s escape. There was a gap in the bottom where the boards had been broken away. Frisk charged, dropped, and slid straight through – their pace unaffected. Frisk glanced at the wall behind them, the clanking of armour muffled behind it. They thought that it would buy them some time to escape until the planks of wood broke away upon impact with the leading soldier’s frame. With splinters of wood in the crevices, the squadron soldiered on.

The alley veered right into a square clearing, full of backdoors and overflowing garbage bins. Up ahead, wedged between two buildings, a delicate set of scaffolding towered from the ground to the roofs. The building, judging by its bare walls and square holes, was getting some needed restoration. Frisk desperately looked around, having no idea which doors would aid in their escape and which would not. They picked the grotty backdoor to the west. As they neared, it slammed open with more troops. Frisk skidded to a stop, turned and ran before the waiting spears could snag them. The doors on the opposite side flew open as the compact alley became more and more crowded. The Monster Military funnelled in from three directions, fifteen now in the backstreet, and they all had their sights on the human.

Frisk’s pulse hammered away, both terrified and tired. Seriously cornered and outnumbered, the military were boxing them in, cutting off all possible retreats. They wished they could ask the monsters to form a line so that they could befriend them one by one, but these guys were not playing by those rules. The alleyway shadowed by the precarious construction was their only route, the only one that held some smidgen of hope.

The framework, as Frisk neared, was a makeshift job – metal poles and wooden planks held together with rope and string, ascending five floors upwards. It would probably hold together better with spit. The structure creaked and churned as Frisk passed the first set of supports, the sounds mingling with those of the pursuers. They glanced upwards, catching glimpses of sunlight as they pierced the gaps, streaking lines across their face.

A rope snapped.

They all heard it before they saw it. A knot holding the scaffolding together came loose, and this one must have been significant because it started a domino effect with all the rest. The framework began to shake as the glue holding it together disintegrated. A plank swung into the human’s path, slowing them down as they manoeuvred around it.

The guards at the mouth stopped. “It’s coming down,” the officer in command yelled. His voice drowned out in the crashing of metal and wood. “Stop, men! Don’t go any further!”
The construction buckled to the side then collapsed from the top. Frisk pushed their human body to its limits, determined to make it through before they were buried alive. It all fell inwards, breaking down in the centre before working its way out. Frisk felt the platforms slam into the ground mere feet behind them, shooting brick and paint dust into the air, engulfing everything and everyone in the enclosed space. Frisk, unable to see anything in front, drowning in the din of disaster all around, listened to the voice in their head that beckoned them forward. They ran at full pelt, praying that nothing tripped them or hit them or landed on them.

Someone out there liked them. They emerged out the dust cloud, without a scratch on them.

As the dust cleared, the extent of the damage became apparent. The entire narrow passageway was blocked completely, crammed with debris. The troops on the other side unable to pass. Frisk braced themself on their knees, savouring that precious moment to get their breath back. A droplet of sweat fell from their cheek.

“We’ve been cut off! Corporal Barmy,” the same deep voice called out from beyond the wreckage, “do not let them get away!”

A figure above darted between the rooftops. His shadow eclipsed Frisk for a split-second. “No problem.”

He moved unnaturally from cover to cover, stalking his prey from up high, waiting for the right opportunity to strike. The crackle of energy as he readied his bow gave away his position for a brief moment.

Frisk looked forward at the stretch of parallel walls ahead. With a tired sigh – their moment of rest over already – they continued, the chase far from over. The adrenaline in their blood offered some slight reprieve from the ache, anything to battle their failing leg muscles. A shadow sliced back from forth on the ground, sticking close to the target. Barmy cackled softly, finding the human’s attempts to flee amusing.

Time slowed down from the both of them when the corporal performed an aerial cartwheel between the rooftops. Upside-down, he formed his bow and arrow into his hands and took aim. Frisk watched as the bowstring straightened and the arrow flew in their direction. They had no time to react, but could merely watch as the blue arrow flew toward them, spinning clockwise in mid-air. Fortunately for them, it pierced the ground around their feet.

“That was a warning shot,” he said after concealing himself in plain sight. There was no distinct place where his voice resonated from, like he was everywhere and yet nowhere. “You might not be so lucky next time. I’d give up if I were you.”

Frisk could not stop, not now, not later, not ever. They stepped hastily into another clearing that was filled with the pleasant aroma of pine – well, car air freshener version at least. The surrounding walls were adorned with balconies and al fresco art. A lovingly tended tree stood tall and proud in the centre, encircled by beds of flowers and healthy green grass. A small slice of haven in this concrete jungle.

No time to relax. A few more alleys leading back to the harsh world of brick and mortar awaiting them, each one summoning them to enter. Frisk moved toward the one on the left, making it two steps before the squirrel knight bounded through the air, taking aim and firing off six arrows at once.

Barmy landed on a balcony, opposite the wall where Frisk stood. He turned and smiled, admiring his handiwork. The human had been stopped dead in their tracks, pinned to the wall with all six arrows.
One had snagged the left sleeve, another under the right armpit.

A third caught the fabric around the left knee of their shorts.

Arrow number four was a millimetre away from their right foot, which was up on the tips of their toes.

The fifth above their head, brushing against the strands of their hair.

The sixth and final arrow…? Take a wild guess.

Frisk – unable to move, unable to breathe – clenched their teeth so tight that they were in danger of cracking them. Sweat trickled down their face. He could see it in their eyes, the human was scared.

Accurately, Corporal Barmy – soon to be Sergeant Barmy – loaded a fresh arrow into his bow, ready to deliver the chase ending blow. “You might wanna look away a sec.” He drew the string back, setting the arrow tip level with the human. “This is gonna sting a li—”

Suddenly, the balcony door behind him swung open, slamming into his back. Barmy lurched forward. The arrow flew, going completely astray and into the tree. He trundled over the guardrail and fell four flights to the ground, landing on his head in a bed of fake roses.

Lucky break for the kid. Frisk breathed out, ridding their dread in that puff of air. For a moment there, they thought that they were a goner. They pulled away the arrows one by one until they were free. They wanted to rush outside, but they found themself heading over to check on the squirrel, the same one who, seconds ago, was about to make a shish kebab out of them. Barmy was out cold, but at least he was alive – the flowers must have broken his fall.

One thing occurred to them as they checked on the corporal, they could hear a noise – the sound of escaping air, the same sound one of Sans’s whoopy cushions would make. Frisk looked around to find the source of the noise, a small glimmer hoping that it was the comedic skeleton himself. It turned out to have been coming from the most unlikely of places: the tree. Air escaped from where the arrow had pierced. The tree deflated like a balloon. The branches lost their rigidness, flopping to the ground like wet noodles. It shrank and shrank until there was nothing left but the shrivelled, empty husk the colour of tree bark.

Frisk stepped through the alley, back into the street. They looked around, having lost their sense of direction. They could hope that they could find a place that could tell them where they were… and then realised that the hotel was right in front of them. At first glance, no soldiers were around, and by a quick glance through the windows, none of them were inside either. They could make out the janitor as he ran a buffer across the marble floor.

They observed the street that lead to the station. If they continued now, they would surely be spotted and be dragged into another chase. By then, they would surely have missed their ride, and with it, their chance of getting home.

Frisk stepped through the revolving door. They had an idea.

Five minutes later, six members of the Monster Military entered the hotel, siphoning through one at a time. The leader of the bunch approached the desk and slammed on the bell, summoning the receptionist.
“What seems to be the problem, sirs?” he asked.

The guard raised a poster to the receptionist’s eyes. “Have you seen this person? Several civilians have reported sighting them in this area.”

The receptionist took it by the side and examined it closer. “Yes. Yes,” he said, gleaning a look at the portrait. “I recognise that person. They were here last night; paid for a room.”

“Which room?” the guard enquired, leaning forward with both hands on the desk.

The receptionist slinked under the desk, pulled out his trusty logbook, set it down on the counter, and pulled up the ribbon to the current page. He traced his finger down the list, ignoring the entries from that morning alone. The guard tapped his gauntlet fingers on the table, indicating his impatience. The fugitive was the last person to book the last room yesterday night. “Room number thirteen. It’s upstairs, the last door on the left.” He got a key out from his pocket. “I’ve got a master key. I’ll let you in.”

“Much obliged.” The guard waved his arm twice toward the stairs. “Hurry up.”

The receptionist slithered around the desk and took the lead up the stairs, the six soldiers on his tail. Going upward, they passed someone walking down. It was a funny-looking monster, with no arms, draped in a thick, grey, flowing robe and had a mop of long, tangled, straw-coloured hair. Whatever it was, it moved its three-foot frame straight, taking the steps one at a time as if it would smite anyone who intruded on its chosen path.

“Excuse me, sir… or madam,” the receptionist said as he moved to the other side, allowing the monster to pass. The company behind followed suit.

They moved quietly down the upper floor until they reached the door marked with the number thirteen. The receptionist took one look at the guards. They were unsheathing their swords and daggers – weapons best suited for close-quarters combat. The receptionist swallow hard as he slid the master key into the lock and disengaged it, with only a small click to warn the occupant inside. He moved aside and the closest guard rammed into it, flinging the door open and charging in at the same time.

Four guards funnelled inside, shouting at the top of their lungs, keeping their weapons pointed outwards. Three charged around the bed while the fourth searched the bathroom. They pulled back the shower curtain, threw off the bed cover, opened the wardrobe and looked under the bed until they found out they had gotten the drop on nobody.

“Area clear,” the lead confirmed. “No sign of the target.”

“Where could they have gone to?” another asked, slipping his dagger into its hold.

The lead looked around. “This room has obviously been used recently. The target may not have gotten far.” As he made his way to the door, he said, “Get us some backup so we can search this place top to bottom, the human may still be around, hiding in another room. Until a full sweep has been completed, nobody leaves the building.”

The guards exited the hotel room and escorted the receptionist back to his place of work, informing him that they were going to perform a more thorough search of the hotel, whilst ensuring him that it was all for the safety of himself, his clients, and his business. The receptionist gave them full permission, since he did not have the authority to deny them; to do so would be an act of obstructing the law.
A blue flash caught the receptionist’s eye as he returned to his counter. It was a key, just lying there. Attached to it was a tag with a number etched on it. 13.

Frisk stumbled down the street, head down, managing to make out the two feet of pavement in front of them. Their cheap, ten second disguise was a huge gamble – they had no mirror to inspect themself after throwing on the fire blanket and mop head from the utility room, no way of knowing if it would fool the guards – but it paid off. The blanket was hot and heavy, itchy on the fingers, the tight knitting made it hard for their skin to breathe. The strands of the mop covered their eyes, making navigation difficult. It was slightly damp and smelled strongly of a hospital hallway. Frisk tried not to imagine where it had been.

Footsteps, slithering and crawling passed left to right. Frisk stopped and risked a look forward. None of the other monsters were aware of the human’s presence. They must have looked bizarre enough to be mistaken as one of them. Two soldiers under the Emperor’s banner moved past, neither drawn to them.

The main entrance to the train station lay straight ahead, through an automatic, parting door. Inside the crowded lobby of pillars, kiosks, and waiting chairs, four archways stood above four ticket booths with turnstiles that separated the lobby from the platforms, the employees fresh-faced and bushy tailed, some literally. A train rumbled out the station, heading southbound. High above on the ceiling, the arrival and departure times looked down, black screens with yellow figures, flicking at regular intervals. A few of them appeared to be delayed. The clock read ten to nine: the one Frisk wanted was scheduled to arrive in ten minutes. There was a familiar presence surrounding the station, as if they had gotten all of their inspiration from the humans. Mostly likely the shows they pick up on television.

Still in their disguise, they shuffled their way across to the booths, passing monsters and tempting offers from stalls. Who could resist fried chocolate? They spotted a few more posters of themself stuck up on the pillars and stall displays. Out of the four lines, they took their place at the back of the shortest one.

Two out of the five monsters in the queue took a painstakingly long amount of time to order their tickets. Every few seconds, Frisk glanced at the station, praying that the train they wanted did not come and go without them. The tension made their fingers twitch and their feet jumpy. From what they could see, it appeared that several monsters were transporting cargo toward the front end of the platform.

Finally, Frisk’s turn arrived seven minutes later. They stepped up to the booth, the bottom of the glass level with their nose. The operator, a hulking ogre in an ironed, white shirt, looked down through the sight of his tiny spectacles. They could make out the lines in his irises. “Good morning,” he greeted in a voice that did not suit him whatsoever. “How may I help you today?”

Without saying a word, Frisk pointed to the next train to arrive on the schedule.

The operator was an expert at charades. “One ticket to Winter’s Edge?” Frisk responded with a nod, wobbling the strands of their improvised wig. “Have you ever been on this train route before?” he asked. Frisk responded by shaking their head, the wig almost twisted off. “In that case, I must warn you beforehand that this train travels over the Shattered Zone. It can get a little… bumpy around those parts. Do you still want to board?”

Frisk took another look at the platform, feeling and hearing the train coming in. They needed to be
on that train, whatever it took, it was their way of getting home, getting back to their friends. They nodded quickly.

The operator tapped on the ticket machine before him. “Also, this train is more suited for cargo runs, but the company have included a small side fee to ride as a passenger. That’ll be fifteen cloud coins, please.”

Frisk awkwardly fumbled with the money pouch, trying to open it up while keeping the blanket wrapped around them. After seconds of fruitless rummaging, they resorted to tossing the entire pouch onto the booth. The operator was honest. He took the pouch, extracted the amount he needed, and handed the rest back. The pouch was light now, the feeble jingle of five coins bounced around inside.

A ticket churned from his machine. After breaking it on the dotted line, he handed it over. “Here you go. That’ll be your ride coming into platform four just now. The passenger car will be the one at the end. Safe travels and remember to wear your seatbelt when asked to.”

Frisk took their ticket as used it to pass through the turnstile.

They moved as fast as they could, using the bridge that crossed above the tracks. Platforms 1 and 2 were loaded with monsters starting their commute, plenty of briefcases about. The train rolled into the station, seemingly going on forever, starting with the engine and followed by countless cargo cars. They made out the cargo as it passed; coal, timber, wood, heavy machinery, the usual sort of stuff. By the time they had reached the end of platform 4, where a few monster were waiting, the passenger cart at the very end rolled up. The doors opened and a smartly dressed monster stepped out with a hole-punch at the ready.

“Ticket’s please.”

An irked monster got on first, followed by another, and then a pair who would not shut up. Frisk, who was last, presented their ticket from under the blanket. The conductor clipped a hole in it and waved for them to embark.

The passenger car held a dozen leather seats on both sides, divided by the centre aisle. On the outside, it appeared aged and old-fashioned, however, the interior was quite modern. Frisk picked a seat and sat down, behind the chatty pair. They were surprised to find seatbelts fitted into the seats. Not your regular two point lap belts, but the kind one would find in a stock car. Were they on a rollercoaster ride or something?

As they waited for the train to move, they could finally breathe easy, or as easy as they could with the fire blanket on them. The events of the foot chase swam through their mind. There were two moments about it that they could not shake: the collapsing scaffolding and the patio door. Two accidents that got them out of tight spots. Two unrelated incidents that happened at the most convenient times.

However, Frisk was not so sure about that.

Under the scaffolding, they could have sworn they had seen a hand holding something sharp, moments before the rope snapped. Behind the patio curtain, there was a figure, who disappeared after the door was flung into the back of Corporal Barmy.

Those accidents might have been done on purpose.
Barb the Bounty Hunter stepped inside the hotel room, the one which her target had been using. Her high-heel boots sank into the carpet. Her entrance was so stealthy and silent that nobody knew she was even there. With nobody around, she was free to explore to her heart’s content. She gave the unassuming room a quick look around, finding nothing of great importance. Everything about that room, the economy room, was standard. The bathroom was spotless. The bed needed remaking.

Any ordinary monster would gather nothing from it. However, Barb was not like the commonplace hunter. She had trained her mind to gather clues where others would see none. One footstep in a muddy puddle was a compass marker. A broken twig acted as a homing beacon. A single blade of grass in the wrong direction was a detailed map leading to the target’s exact whereabouts.

The bed told Barb that the target had left in a hurry. The remote control by the bedside. Her eyes examined the leaflets on the desk, a smile formed on her red lips. The leaflets had been tampered with. Such amateur soldiers; none of them would ever dream that a trivial matter would hold a vital clue to the target’s movements.

Barb counted the ones that were present: the menu for Sweet and Sour’s. A vacation park. Day trips around Parfocorse. Summer activities for children.

A random guard waltzed into the room and stopped in his tracks, startled by the leather-clad intruder poking around the crime scene. “Hey, you,” he barked, “you’re not supposed to be—”

Without taking her eyes off the leaflets, Barb bent her right arm across her stomach, pointed her firearm at the soldier, and fired off a small electric projectile. The bullet collided with the chest plate, degrading his words into a jumble of hushed, sporadic screams as a muscle-numbing amount of voltage coursed through his body.

Barb continued uninterrupted as the guard convulsed violently. The Metal Bar. The replica of Highkeep Dungeons. Wait, something was missing.

She snapped her fingers as it all clicked into place, and as the guard dropped like a felled tree. There was a leaflet missing, she was certain of it: the train schedule. Parfocorse was the central hub for all the trains in the Plain-plain. There was bound to be one in every hotel, shoved in every brochure holder, no exceptions. For the train times to be missing meant either one of two things: the receptionist had forgotten, or they had been taken – most likely by whoever was in this room last.

She was drawn to the window upon hearing the cry of a train engine. She made her way over, catching the tail end of the train as it departed from the station.

Child’s play. Barb knew it already as she headed for the door, stepping over the guard. Frisk was on that train.
“Welcome aboard, ladies and gentlemen. Thank you for travelling with us,” a kind, tinny voice spoke over the speakers built into the corners of the passenger car. “With clear weather and no delays, we can expect to arrive at Winter’s Edge at about ten past eleven this morning. Even if this is not your first time travelling with us, we strongly recommend that you read the safety procedures you’ll find in the pouch in front of you. During this trip, we will be passing over the Shattered Zone. We will inform you ten minutes beforehand, upon which you must return to your seat and put your seatbelt on. If you require any refreshments, a member of staff will be happy to help you. Thank you for listening and we hope that you enjoy the trip.”

Frisk sank back in their seat and allowed the blanket to slide off their shoulders as the gentle rocking of wheels against track under the floorboards made them feel drowsy. They pulled the mop head back in order to get a good look out the window, relieving their nostrils of the smell of floor varnish. Beyond the glass, past their ghostly image, the green pastures moved at two speeds – the nearest fields fast and the far fields slow. The faint, uneven silhouette of palm trees that could be described as none other than the Oasis stood far in the distance. The ocean falls creating beards of white.

Reaching into their pocket, they took another look at the ticket. The red and white card itself solid and durable, the hole punched into the corner was fresh and sharp. They found the arrival time stamped in black ink and rigid lettering: 11:10, just like she said. A two hour and ten minute ride. With nothing to do, and no stops between Parfocorse and Winter’s Edge, they could sit back for the next couple of hours and take the load off.

Of course, it was not all smooth sailing from where Frisk was sitting. Two hours of waiting for Winter’s Edge to arrive. No on-rail movie. No music plugins or five cloud coin headphones. No good book to bury themself in, not like they were a big reader in the first place. They found a menu offering refreshments tucked away in the pouch before them. It came with the safety sheet; the edges of the laminate were peeling away and there were two irreparable creases across the centre. Looking at the prices, it made perfect sense why the ticket to this carriage was so cheap – they just jacked up the prices for the nibbles and miniature pop cans to get their money back. Good thing travel companies on Earth don’t do that. Frisk licked their lips and were thankful that they had their breakfast that morning. Looking at the menu took about a minute or two of their time – maybe a minute and a half.

Frisk resorted to fidgeting with the seatbelts, those six-point shackles that were designed for head on collisions in muddy bowls. They played with the buckles, clanging the clasp and latch together to create high-pitched music. The mindless distraction slashed a three more minutes off their journey. Yawning onto the glass and drawing shapes while the condensation was fresh killed a few extra more.

The chatty pair – the male a stove kettle and the woman an electric kettle – possibly siblings, continued to converse over the most trivial of things. Those two will still be talking by the time they reach Winter’s Edge. The attitude of the irksome figure in the opposite lane, a hairy ball in a white shirt, had simmered down on the surface, gaining some satisfaction by getting his seat, but bothered by the constant jabbering of those upfront. At the very front, a weathered dog monster with a bushy grey moustache, wearing a suit and a bowler hat, sat perfectly straight as if the motions all around did not apply to him.

It had been so long ago since Frisk had rode on a train yet the feeling of riding one was not foreign to them; the rumble, the shake, the low skidding noise – all of these they knew by heart. Racing along
the tracks, the locomotive’s journey dictated by them, unable to break away and follow its own path – similar to their own adventure across these monster populated plains.

When did Frisk last ride on a train? Where were they going to? Who were they with? How old were they back then? These questions bounced around in their head. Frisk tried to remember, but they could only remember certain bits and pieces. They were not even sure if it were one trip or a collection stitched together to form one memory.

There was so little that Frisk remembered of their early life – their past life, before the met the monsters – almost like it were a dream. The big things like their real parents, which school they attended, where they lived, and who they befriended were all black holes in their memory. It was the little things they remember, like ice cream cones and playful trips to a park. One day, they would remember vanilla ice cream, with a chocolate flake, under the cloudless sky of summer. The next day, they detect the frosty flavour of strawberry on the tip of their tongue, complemented with sprinkles and a gentle breeze from the late end of spring. The day after, chocolate dripping with caramel sauce on the first day of autumn. Every time they try to picture the scene, visualise the surroundings and hear the sounds and sample the tastes, fragments change. The ice cream has been every flavour at least once, more than they even knew existed. They have walked across the dusty park path in the golden shine, jumped in muddy puddles in the rain, and crunched their way through six-inch thick snow.

They have always tried to imagine what their parents looked like. They searched and combed through every cell in their brain, and came back with nothing. It was as if they never existed – a revelation that did not drive Frisk as crazy as expected. From time to time, they thought about them, imagining a tall, kind, caring couple. They wondered whether they had inherited their father’s dark eyes and straight lips, or their mother’s chocolate locks and button nose. They would believe that they had a breakthrough when they remembered that their father kept the garden tended and told them bedtime stories while their mother baked delicious pies and gave them plenty of warm, fluffy hugs. That was until Frisk realised they were thinking of Asgore and Toriel.

Simple times. Back when the monsters were locked away deep and the earth was trampled by human feet. Life felt so much different back then, and feels tenfold now. For reasons beyond them, Frisk could not imagine life without the monsters – or even remember life before the monsters either. It was weird, like waking up on that bed of flowers was their birth, and meeting that one smiling, talking plant was the first person they had ever met. It was like they belonged with the monsters more than they did their own.

Frisk just accepted the bitter truth: they had no idea who their biological parents were. Since they had never met their real mom and pop, they harboured no love and yet no resentment for them. They were but strangers. The former king and queen of the Underground, they were their parents now – the mother and father they would fight tooth and nail to be reunited with once more.

They snapped out of their thoughts as the train made its long turn to the left, swinging around the parameter of the Plain-plain. The rolling green pastures were gone, replaced by a solid end two hundred feet away and the imposing flat face of Highkeep Enclave. Castle Highkeep was barely moving so far, far away on the cusp of the horizon, faint in the early morning light, fading into the blue. Somewhere within those walls, the Emperor was there – scheming, foiling, planning, everything a diabolical monster ruler who wished nothing but to secure the safety of his people would do. And as Frisk had gathered, keeping his people safe meant killing everyone who would make it not-safe; namely, all of humanity. Just like in the Underground, the future of the human race was riding on those little shoulders of theirs. If they perished, if their soul fell into the monsters’ hands, humanity would join the dinosaurs.
The steward came rolling through with the metal snack trolley, clanking with metal tea trays, metal cups, metal plates, metal kettles and plastic cutlery. Frisk resumed their disguise – pulling the mop head down and wrapping the fire blanket around their body – as she neared. She asked if they wanted anything, to which Frisk shook their head.

The faintest sound of a thud came from the back of the carriage, followed by the door opening. A draft coursed through, striking Frisk with a sudden bad feeling. It was not from what was behind them, but from what they heard in front of them. The two chatty passengers were having a discussion about certain rumours surrounding a possible second uprising. Frisk had heard them say that… in their dreams.

They remembered the figure shrouded in black, the one that gave them the urge to run.

The conductor, who had been sat at the end of the carriage, minding his own business, got up and barged straight down the aisle, past the trolley. “Excuse me, madam, do you have a ticket?” he asked as he passed Frisk.

Slowly, Frisk rotated in their seat, kicking their legs up to gain leverage. Peeking over the headrest, they watched as the conductor approach a woman – a bat monster – dressed all over in black leather. Her green eyes were locked on him. Her smile natural.

“Sure,” she replied as she raised her left hand, “I’ve got it right here.” The weapon strapped to her wrist went off with a small spit, similar to a suppressed pistol in a spy movie. Before the conductor could react, the dart lodged itself in his chest, below the collarbone. His vocals seized up, unable to let out even a peep as his entire body went numb in the blink of an eye. Surprisingly, he did not flop, but rather, he remained standing. He arched to the side, as if his upper body wanted to fall, but could not co-ordinate his legs to follow. Barb grabbed him by the shoulders and eased him down into an adjacent seat, taking a moment to buckle him in place. She whispered into his ear, “The numbness will pass eventually.”

Barb faced down the carriage, finding all eyes drawn to her except for the aged gentlemen at the front. “Don’t mind me, folks. Stay in your seats,” she said in a casual, friendly manner loud enough for all to hear. “I’m just here for one person, and then I’ll go.”

She proceeded down the aisle. The ammo clips clinked on her belt. Every step of her heels clunked sharp against the hollow floor. She liked the sound, like a rugged cowboy in an old human western stepping through the saloon door, hearing the piano stop and all rough-cut eyes glaring up from around tables decked with cards and shot glasses.

The steward behind the snack tray, a hedgehog wearing a shirt that had accounted for the quills on her back, was frozen with confusion, fear, and a hint of awe. “Barb the bounty hunter…” she barely murmured above her own breath, never thinking that she would ever find herself before the legendary bounty hunter of the Outerworld.

Barb came to a stop before the trolley. Someone of her stature should never act one bit unprofessional in front of watching eyes, especially those belonging to the target. “You might wanna step aside.” She placed the sole of her boot against the trolley edge.

Reluctantly, the steward did as she was told, shambling awkwardly into a vacant seat just in time as the bounty hunter kicked it so hard that it flew across the car and crashed through the far door. The accessories on top – tea trays, cups and metal kettles – scattered across the floor, littering the aisle and rolling under seats. A stream of air rushed in, drowning the car in noise and bitter cold. The dog in the suit and hat did not react one bit.
That stunt got her undivided attention from almost every monster present, mind games as she liked to call it. The time for subtlety passed from the moment she walked through the door. The human, Frisk, was inside that car, she could feel it. The human would be likely to put up a fight, therefore, Barb needed to present her case upfront; she needed her presence to be both known and intimidating, that she was not only here to do some serious business, but she was playing for keeps.

She inspected the faces behind each seat she crossed. The guy on the left retained some inherent anger issues. The steward unable to take her eyes away. The pair had finally shut up and shot a glance to each other, as if they expected the other to know what was going on. There, from behind the fifth seat to the right, she spotted a head of shaggy, blonde hair glancing at her before popping back down. The way that one hide themself, it gave them away in an instant. She readied her tranquiliser gun as she approached, keeping her wits about her for any hidden surprises. The target was in their grasp, four seats away.

Three seats.

Two.

One.

Barb rounded the back, catching sight of a grey blanket draped along with the messy hair, budged against the corner. She stepped out and fired. Three darts shredded the thick fibres. The blanket folded in on itself, deflating across the seat, and the hair splayed onto the floor – more mess for the cleaners to pick up.

Yeah, that’d be a little too easy… Barb thought.

All of a sudden, the chatty couple further upwards looked down at their feet, both of them parting away from each other as something scrambled beneath them.

Barb knelt down and took a look under the spacing between the seats and the floor, where the dust festered and where one would find plenty of solidified chewing gum. A child in a blue sweater was crawling under the space, their frame small enough to fit, if only barely. The sight of such a futile escape brought back memories of previous jobs to the bounty hunter. Criminals were a cowardly, predictable lot and yet during those extreme circumstances they were at their most creative. Many, many years of catching bad guys and she had seen every trick in the book: masking body odours; hiding in garbage; crossdressing; jumping from dangerous heights; if you can think it, chances are, it has been attempted by at least one poor sap.

Feeling the tiniest shred of pity for the child, Barb aimed her dart gun and sent a round whizzing past their head. The ruffle through their hair coupled with the high-pitched whistle close to the ear froze Frisk in place, almost like the dart had hit them.

“I see you can think fast on your feet – or in this case, your knees – but you’re not dealing with the Monster Military here. Come on out of there and we’ll settle this face to face,” Barb offered.

“Monster to human.”

The word ‘human’ pushed everyone onto the edges of their seats, all of them having never seen a human before, only being told what they were capable of. All eyes darted around the interior, as if the presence of such a creature would cause the very structure to collapse in on itself, or melt like ice in the baking sun, or spontaneously combust. Frisk breathed out before rising to their feet between the monsters. They edged their way out, the monster having to tuck in their knees to allow them through. The human stood out in the open for all to see. A tiny figure – not at all what they expected – with squidgy skin and no claws or no sharp teeth, and yet the power, the determination, flowed
around them like a prevalent aura.

Frisk stood riveted at one end of the carriage, Barb at the other. Staring each other down. Hands by their sides. The good old fashioned standoff at high noon. Barb had been itching for years to do one of these, struggling to find the opportunity to present itself.

Everything about this bat screamed control. Frisk was taken in by every detail of her. Her flowing midnight hair had nary a strand out of place in the raging gust. So poised in fur-tight leather, although they did wonder whether it chaffed from time to time. Her face, those eyes and that rare shade of green – she was a knockout in a monster’s case. For this peculiar human, anything was acceptable. They did flirt with their own foster mother after all.

“So… a human, huh? Or, at least, half of one. You’ve got quite the price on your fuzzy head, you know. That would usually be reason enough to track you down, but in your special case, this one’s on the house.” On the surface, Barb sounded so confident, but in reality, she was just as clueless as the bystanders; the human’s capabilities a mystery waiting to be discovered… the hard way. “You took some time to find, Frisk. Been searching all night for you. If you were like any of my previous jobs, your keister would’ve been in a cell five hours ago. But everybody knows that nobody escapes Barb the Bounty Hunter, the best and only bounty hunter in all of the Outerworld. You’re in for a special treat, because today, you’re going to see what it’s all about.”

The term ‘human’ made them jumpy, but it was the name of the human that made them want to jump out the nearest window. The wanted criminal was there and the monsters were trapped in the car with them.

“I’ll be the humble one here and give you the first shot,” Barb said with an assured smile. She may have been dealing with a whole new enemy, but she was strongminded that she would remain on top – she always did. “Give it all you got!” Deep within her complex web of hardened tactics and trained senses, she awaited what the human would throw at her.

Frisk stood still as they weighed up their actions. What would Sans do in this situation? Tell a bad joke regarding bats? A bat joke, even? What did the pitcher say to the bat? Batter-up.

_Ba-dum pish!_

Frisk needed to do this the Frisk way. They give it their best shot. They pointed at Barb with both hands, smiled seductively, wiggled their eyebrows and said that she had a nice tail end.

Barb went red in the cheeks. “Oh, Frisk, that was one mighty shot… toward my heart. That’s so sweet of you.” She took aim with the tranquiliser gun. “Get in line.”

Three more spits of the gun indicated three more darts heading toward Frisk. The human reacted quickly, driving their foot down onto the handle of a metal tea tray, flipping it up into their hands. They grabbed it shielded themself against the shots. The dart ends created small indentations into the metal that were visible on the underside. More shot headed their way and Frisk batted them away with ease, reliving brief memories of blocking Undyne’s hail of spears.

They took a wild gander and guessed that she was not looking for a date.

Barb followed up quickly as an opportunity presented itself. She aimed with the other gun and fired, striking the centre of the tray with an electric bullet. Thousands of volts discharged outwards, blowing Frisk back several feet. On their back, the electricity surged into their body, taking effect immediately. Pain. Nothing but pain filled their senses as they lost all control of their body. The intensity was unlike anything they had ever experienced, and they survived against the god of
hyperdeath. They could not think, could not scream, could not breathe, could not let go of the tray. Their body jerked and twitched on the floor.

Barb allowed her arm to fall, watching as the target convulsed. Already, her hunt was over. “That was a lot easier than I thought it was gonna be. Gotta say, I’m a little disa—”

All of a sudden, the monster to her left – the one who was impatient to board – jumped from his seat and shoved her aside, knocking her onto the bench opposite. “Outta my way,” he barked, making his way toward the incapacitated human, “I taking them to the castle! I want the money!”

After landing sideways on the seat, Barb reached up and pulled herself up on the headrest. She peered over just in time to see the monster standing over Frisk, reaching down for them with his bare hands. “No, no, no, no wait!” Barb reached out. “Don’t touch—” Too late. The monster seized the child by the tray in their hands, attempting to pry it away. Bad move. “…that.”

The hairs all over his body shot on end as the current passed from them onto him. His legs collapsed on him. He crashed to the floor, his claws around the tray as he fell, pulling them out of Frisk’s paralysed grasp. As soon as they lost their grip on the tray, their functions returned. Their palms were numb like nobody’s business, a plastic fork dug into their back. They gasped in mouthfuls of air. Frisk willed their limbs to move, then willed their body to get up.

Tensions rose all around. The steward had curled up into a ball on her seat – being a hedgehog helped in that respect. The pair behind Frisk crouched down, hoping that the next shots do not come their way. The gentleman did absolutely nothing but sit there and wait.

“Time for the big guns,” Barb decided as the human child, against all odds, rose to their feet. She reached behind her back and slung out the bazooka. Pressing the butt against her shoulder and flipping out the target reticule, she took aim.

Everything happened at breakneck speeds for Frisk. They had seen this before… they were certain of it. She had one eye closed. Her head cocked to the side. Frisk glanced out the window and caught a pole as it darted past. The moment had no presented itself, the time was not now. But soon…

Behind them, the pair were whispering amongst themselves. “This is crazy,” the lady of the pair, nearest the window, conceited. “We have to make a break for it.”

“Just stay where you are,” the other warned. “We’re safe as long as we stay low.”

“We won’t be for much longer. We gotta get out of here!”

The moment was fractions of a second away. There was a slight bump in the track. The carriage shifted. Barb swayed to the right. “Try this on for size.”

The lady pair jumped out into the aisle, giving in to hysteria. “I’m going!”

Now! Barb pulled the trigger. The bazooka-shaped weapon launched its payload straight at the child’s direction. The ambassador of monsters saw it as it hurled toward them, moving to the right. They threw their body to the left, pushing their hands down to catch themself on the floor. The oversized slug expanded outwards as it scathed their head, revealing ropes reaching out with shrill, thin fingers. It struck the one who tried to make a break for it, mummifying her from head to toe in thick rope. She collapsed to the floor like a beached whale as her limbs were forced together, her cries jumbled.

Barb looked over the aiming sights with shock. “How did…? Impossible! No one has ever dodged that shot before!” She tossed her beloved weapon aside and opened fire with both guns, unleashing a
torrent of sleep-inducing darts and paralysing bullets. Frisk dove for cover behind the nearest seat on their right, avoiding the incoming fire.

Barb ducked down and fired shots under the seats, expecting them to be there like last time, only to hit no target. To her surprise, Frisk scrambled over the headrest. She threw the barrels of her guns up, hoping to catch them in the leg, and instead heard the mechanisms click dry.

In the pause of action, a voice echoed on the speakers overhead. “Ladies and gents, we will be entering the Shattered Zone in ten minutes time. Please return to your seats and fasten your seatbelts until the crew advises you when you can safely remove them. Thank you.” Obviously, the one talking was oblivious to the happenings in that car.

“You hear that, kid?” Barb asked as she pulled a fresh clip of darts off her belt and slid it into an slot on that wrist-mounted weapon. “Things are about to get rocky around here.”

On the current bench Frisk had landed on, there was another metal tray resting on the side. They were all the same, metallic with a rimmed edge and two neat little handles. Its shape reminded Frisk of a flying disc, like the one they and Sans were playing with moments before they got abducted.

It gave them an idea.

Barb took a clip of charged pellets from her opposite side and inserted it into the other gun with a satisfying click. “You don’t want to be here without a seatbelt, so do yourself a favour and come quietly.”

Frisk moved to the edge of their cover, holding the tray in both hands, readying it. Through the ruckus of wind and the whimpers of those who had survived incapacitation, they made out the stomping of high heels, approaching. They visualised how tall she was and the distance, they only had a split-second and one shot to make this work.

Taking a deep breath, Frisk leaned out. The bounty hunter was ten feet away, her arms pointing forward. They knew where they were aiming. Frisk threw the tea tray at her like a Frisbee. Barb saw it coming at the last second and raised her arms to block it. The protruding handle struck Barb on the underside of her left forearm, breaking the buckle on the tranquiliser gun. The impact sent it flying across the floor, screeching to a halt beside Frisk.

There was a moment of clarity between the two as the human was an arm’s reach away from the weapon. A metal cuboid with a fitted barrel, fitted on a leather wrist strap. The combatants made eye contact as they both knew what this meant. The gun was full with a fresh magazine of non-lethal stingers. If Barb had no qualms in using it, then neither did Frisk. They moved first, diving for the gun. Barb reacted later, firing shots at their direction. Frisk rolled sideways across the floor, dodging the bullets. They spotted what they assumed was the trigger – a lone, silver ring where the index finger would be. They aimed and pulled back on the ring. The gun recoiled.

Barb acted fast. She grabbed something from her belt and threw it down at her feet. An explosion of smoke surrounded her as the first darts began to fly, followed by the crashing of glass. Frisk got up as the smoke cleared and found Barb to be missing; a broken window the only clue to her whereabouts. The carriage went quiet.

No sign of the Barb the Bounty Hunter anywhere. They could not see her, but that did not mean she was not out there. A true predator never lets their prey escape.

Within the span of a few minutes, the orderly carriage had turned into a warzone. Two open doors and a broken window letting the heat out. Utensils scattered all over the place. The conductor
buckled up at back, now slumped into unconsciousness. The steward curled up. Two passengers sprawled on the floor – one twitched from the aftershock and the other wrapped with rope. The smartly-dressed man up front had budged purely to put their seatbelt on.

“I think you should get out of here,” the chatty, talking kettle said to the human as he picked up his mummified friend and placed her back in her seat, taking a minute to strap her in. “You’ve done enough damage for one day. Do we have anything to cut these ropes with?”

Reluctantly, the steward stretched her arm out from the safety of her quills, pointing down at his feet. “There’s a knife right there.”

He glanced down and found a disposable plastic knife, used for slicing through soft potatoes and hard carrots. With a disheartened grumble, he picked it up and began work sawing a rope with the serrated, two-inch long edge. “This might take a while. Probably be half way through by the time we reach our stop.”

There was no time to lose. By remaining in the passenger car, Frisk was a sitting duck for when Barb returned. They moved through the dystopia, passing the unfazed gentleman at the front – all buckled up and ready for whatever awaited at the Shattered Zone. Frisk never bothered to ask what that was. A detail that they would soon regret in five minutes time.

Opening the door to the second car revealed a gleaming galley, all clean and up to scratch. The smell of many ingredients rolled into one mass of stink. Everything was made of metal. The number of dents on every surface suggested that more than cooking went on in these parts. At the far end, four monsters were strapped into foldout seats on both sides of the exit. Two wore uniforms similar to the steward one car back, the other two wore the white aprons and mushroom cloud hats – complete with chinstraps – of the cooks.

“This is a restricted area. No passengers allowed here.” the steward closest to them – a grey figure with big red eyes and a small mouth – informed. Frisk’s response was to disregard his advice and bolt onward. “Are you deaf? I said—”

“Wait!” interrupted the chef opposite. His brown fur, black snout and rounded horns were that of a deer. His gut bulged against his seatbelt. “I know you – you’re Frisk! The human who got away from the castle.” His accusations were ignored by those they were aimed at as they passed between them and exited the kitchen car.

The second steward, a humanoid body with a clock face who did not like to late in any sense of the word, shot the chef an untimely glance that was easy to tell. “A human? Here? On this train? And at this hour?”

“We should alert the authorities,” the first steward suggested.

The chef looked belligerent. “No way, I’m not letting those petty crooks get all the glory just because they hide behind that big bad ruler of theirs.” He fumbled with the seatbelt buckle before managing to unclasp it. As his liberated belly sagged, he expressed a gratifying sigh, then made for the kitchen. His assistant looked on in silence as he pulled open a draw and began stuffing carving knives down the pockets of his apron. “If anyone’s going to capture that thing, it’ll be me.”

“Dom, don’t. It’s not safe.”

The chef, Dominic, reached inside a cupboard and pulled out a large, black pan with a rubber handle. The bottom was plastered with burn scars while the inside held crispy remains of the veal cooked from two days previous. Fake, of course. He span the cooking instrument in his hand.
“Forget this job. I’m off to become a millionaire.”

Frisk climbed the iron steps to the next car, which was a tanker. They had to pass over the connector below – the rattle of metal against metal over the rushing ground, the one thing keeping the cars together. It felt like it could break at any given moment.

There was a catwalk that spanned around the cylinder. The grated flooring was so thin that even they, a growing child, were too big to fit without moving sideways. Battling the airstream, they hugged themself against the curved metal and held the rail for support with one hand and the gun they took from Barb in the other. The metal bar was like a block of ice, freezing the skin on their palms. The tanker sloshed away, whatever inside sounding like treacle; the contents a mystery, probably for the best. As they looked out, they realised just how close they were to the island’s edge. Up ahead, the train was approaching steep crags and the tunnel that passed through them. The bounty hunter could swoop by at any moment and take them down with a well-placed paralysing bullet – so they better be quick.

The kitchen car opened again and the disgruntled chef stormed out with his weapon of choice in hand. He stomped out so fast he almost tripped over to an unfortunate demise. He climbed up onto the tanker platform in a single step and edged around the corner, braving the wind that attacked his dark eyes. There was Frisk, skirting across the walkway, taking it one step at a time. Going around was out of the picture, but…

Dom scaled atop the tanker, where the wind was at its worst bit the vantage point was at its best. He refocused on Frisk as they neared the next car, unaware of his presence. No way would he allow such an easy opportunity to pass him by. Not in all his four-hundred years of making bad decisions.

He clasped the handle of a carving knife and closed one eye as he aligned the tip of the blade with the human. Dom did not always used to be a railway chef. He started as a proud member of Sweet and Sour before they had to let him go, on two separate occasions, on both sides of the kitchen. Who would have thought they had two separate recruitment policies? After which, he scored himself a job as a sushi chef for some place that he can’t remember the name of, then as a baker, then pastry chef, and then… He’s been a cook in pretty much any and all lines of cuisine imaginable. “You’re mine,” he whispered to himself. Confident that all his years of working with knives has perfected his craft. Frisk would soon see his point.

He threw his arm back and forth in quick succession, sending the knife spinning. He watched as it windmilled toward Frisk, who had their head turned away. It was a clean throw, the best he has ever achieved. It span directly toward them. He was killing a human child, but in his defence, at least they would not suffer.

A howl coming from another direction pierced their ears. A black figure zoomed through the air. Barb aimed and fired, striking the knife as it was two feet away from Frisk. They snapped their head around to catch the glisten of the blade as it bounced against the hull and slipped between the gratings, never to be seen again. They saw the deer in the white apron up high and scuttled for the next car.

Barb and Dom grunted at the same time. They were hundreds of feet apart, Barb still in flight and Dom on the tanker, yet they glared at each other with such velocity they could see the glimmers in their eyes. Competition. Exactly what neither of them wanted right now.

Dom did not want some washed-up head-hunting kid who was big a century ago and whose main job nowadays is to collect tabs on unpaid drinks to take this away from him. *Stay out of this, you.*

That was the perfect moment to capture Frisk, that bullet would have ended this chase, but this idiot

Barb banked back around and flew back toward them, her spindly wings carving the skies. Now with two people to deal with. She needed that target, but she did not need some middle-aged monster stealing her job. Besides that, capturing Frisk alive was her goal, and he endangers that. She brought her arm up, not aiming at Frisk, but at Dom. The chef found balance on the rumbling canister and found the balance to bring his frame up. As he awaited the incoming retaliation, he caressed the brim of his frying pan. Untrimmed nails trembled against the grain, and pieces of food got caught under them.

Barb pulled the trigger, unleashing a stream of lightning. Dom saw the shots coming from a mile away. He thought they moved slower than molasses with two sprained ankles. He battered them away, the rubber handle absorbing the shocks.

Frisk stepped onto the next car – a flatbed. Crates and pipes spaced out along the sides and strapped down excessively. The two were distracted behind them, but it would not be long until they remembered who they were fighting over. The next cars in the conga line were similar to the one they were on there, the entire train a metal centipede that stretched for miles. They made a break for it.

Dom blocked another shot to shoot a look at the child, getting away. He reached for his boning knife and hurled it. The throw was good but off mark, it struck a crate beside them. Frisk dove behind a pile on poles opposite. This gave Barb another chance. She swooped in and took aim. Frisk was wide open.

The roar of the engine drew Barb’s eyes forward. The face of the crags metres away and rapidly approaching. Barb shot Frisk an irritated glance before banking upwards, shooting into the sky. Dom dove onto his belly and made himself as flat and as skinny as he could. The train screamed as it entered the tunnel. Nature’s light was cut off and replaced by pulsating orange streaks above. The change in air pressure wreaked havoc on Frisk’s ears.

Another lucky break for the human. Using the disorientating cover of darkness and light, they crawled their way across the floor, feeling their way around the obstacles. Dom let out exerted sounds as he crawled his frame off the top without touching the tunnel ceiling.

Up ahead, blinding white light hurt Frisk’s eyes.

They exited the tunnel.

Frisk could not believe that they were still in the Outerworld. The Shattered Zone served as a horrid reminder to the true extent of the civil war – what could have been, what should never have been conceived. The Empire had not been formed back then, and despite the centuries of peace, the monster population were still naïve strangers to these lands. During the civil war, the Obelisk – the source of this world’s power – was the highlight of many discussions. Thoughts, theories, ideas that the same power that supported the lands and supported their lives could also be harnessed. They succeeded… to some degree. Of course, while some endeavours yearned fruit, many died on the vine, and a rare few exploded from the roots up. One of these experiments, conducted so long ago, was to weaponise the Obelisk and turn it into a tool of devastation. The Shattered Zone was the end result.

The Shattered Zone was exactly what it sounded like: fragments of earth and rock – miniature islands – scattered in the wind. Thousands of them. Like an explosion frozen in time. Miles of broken land, connected by nothing, upheld by nothing, and yet remained fixed in place, up high and down low.
The tops of the broken pieces still held green grass and trees and bushes that yearned ripe berries. No ground. One misplaced step and it was a long fall down to Earth. When this zone came to be, it was an empty space void of life. It was but an experiment to test the plausibility of utilising the Obelisk. The whole project was scrapped seconds later. Too dangerous, for obvious reasons.

However, what was even more bizarre was that the train was not going around it.

The tracks, believe it or not, existed before the Shattered Zone was conceived. A hilly area, the tracks rose and fell over the uneven grounds. By some miracle, this exact same route survived the disaster. So people thought that if the track survived, trains could still ride on it. The original route of the tracks distorted as the ground underneath them shifted, shattered, and fell away.

Frisk turned their gaze beyond and saw the train snaking through the floating rocks. They found out the true reason for those seatbelts as the train began to twist like a rollercoaster.
The Shattered Zone

It started with the engine up front as it began to turn on its side while sticking to the track, cutting a line through the asteroid field of broken rock and soil. The following cars behind played follow the leader, one after another. The seatbelts. The excessive ties on the cargo. Everything made so much sense as Frisk stood there now, absorbing it in first-person.

The guy in the ticket booth may have been understating it when he said the Shattered Zone was a little bumpy.

Frisk had not the foggiest clue how trains chugging at those angles were possible, but they did know one thing for definite: they did not want to be standing there when it did.

Under different circumstances, the logical course of action would have been to turn back and seek a securely fitted seatbelt in one of the cars behind, but a certain barrel-chested chef and his arsenal of cooking utensils placed a small hindrance on that idea. Also taking into account that said barrel-chested chef had landed a car behind, his sights set squarely on them. His apron, stained by the grime that clung to the tank’s shell. His frying pan bore the many dents laid on by Barb the Bounty Hunter, and judging by the look on his face, he was ready to add a few more with the help of Frisk’s head.

Onwards was the only direction. They bolted across the flatcars, through shipments on both sides, amazed at themself that heading toward a capsizing train was somehow less dangerous than a chef’s mean cooking. Dom the chef gave chase; his ample girth possessed an inherent degree of speed and agility, as if there were a time where he ran track and field for the school sports team. That statement was partially true; there was no track for the school sports team, only a field. Without losing any momentum, he snatched the boning knife from the crate he hit earlier.

Counting the cars up front as they hit the curve, Frisk realised they had less time than they thought, especially as they crossed the gap onto an empty flatcar. Many clean patches and dank lines festooned the deck, suggesting a good many things having been placed on it through time. Each twist of a container came signified with the churning of metal, creaking of straps and swelling of thick tarps; the contents keen to abandon ship. The train itself was locked to the tracks, but everything else was not.

The car ahead packed with many tied down pieces of supplies made the twist, followed by the one they were halfway across. Gravity took a turn for the worst, except it wasn’t the world spinning, but the floor itself. As it twisted ninety degrees clockwise, Frisk leaned against it, sticking on for as long as possible. As it neared its revolution, Frisk made one final leap and landed on the side of a wooden crate on the car over, losing their balance and crashing onto their knees, almost tumbling over the side.

Behind, Dom was inches away from the empty car as it was halfway through its shift in dimensions. He stood his ground and clambered atop the side of a box to his immediate right as it became horizontal.

Still on their knees, attempting to regain balance, Frisk leaned over the side, and from the corner of their eye, looked down.

They thought the stairwell back in Castle Highkeep was a long drop, same with the plunge into the moat, and more so with the waterfall from Highkeep Enclave to the Plain-plain, but nothing could have prepared them for the intensity before them. Through cracks in the shattered land – some high and many low – the layer of heavenly white was a long way down. A long, long way. A long, long,
long way. There were not enough longs they could line up to illustrate their point.

What illustrated their point perfectly was the tiniest dot crawled across the clouds. That of a Boeing 777. Not even the aeroplanes flew as high as the Outerworld did.

A massive part of them wished now that they could reset to the very beginning, just so they could be hidden from anything remotely resembling sky, clouds, and the sun.

From across the gap, the human child and the monster chef stared each other down. Frisk armed with the gun taken from Barb. The buckle busted and the strap too big for them to wield in true Hollywood fashion. Dom with the utensils provided to him by the establishment. He had already lost one knife and got his frying pan severely busted in, both of which would come straight out of his next pay check. Seconds passed, the train remained locked in its current position, mildly banking inwards, not balancing out anytime soon. Frisk wondered for those back in the passenger car. They hoped they had plenty of sick bags.

It appeared to be a stalemate between the monster and the human, or at least that’s what Frisk thought…

Using the boning knife he retrieved earlier, Dom whipped his arm out to the side, tossing the blade out sideways. The knife span out into the air before coming back like a boomerang and slicing into the centre of the flatcar; the handle, jutting out, vibrated momentarily upon impact. He stood up and tossed the pan’s rubber handle into his mouth and bit hard into it, and reached into his pockets with both hands and whipped out two paring knives – one with a blade shaped like a bird’s beak. Dom stepped back as far as his ground offered before stepping forward and leaping, arching his entire body as he brought his shoulders and feet back; a move that caught his million cloud coin ticket off-guard. His stifled bloodlust roar was so powerful that his teeth cut into the handle, adding further reductions to his pay. He drove the left paring knife into the deck and, as his body veered, stabbed the other in, using the boning knife’s handle as a foothold.

This guy was determined, Frisk gave him that. Whenever an obstacle stood in his way, Dom found a way to overcome it with the power of fine dining. They did not know whether to be afraid or impressed by that trait. Dom’s commando war face would have been more intimidating if he had a sword or a knife in his teeth, and not what he used to prepare omelettes with the other day. He craned his neck and ended up banging the pan against the trodden wood. A smattered garble grinded out of his mouth; it may have been an insult hurled at the human’s way, but they could not make it out.

He was vulnerable, out in the open, and completely defenceless. Frisk raised the tranquiliser gun in both hands, curling their left index finger around the silver ring trigger. The chef struggled to find his balance.

They applied pressure… then stopped.

A voice of reason whispered in the back of Frisk’s mind: now was not the time, not when he was dangling above oblivion. A stun dart would make him fall, and he would not stand a chance against all those pieces of flying rock. And with no way to reach their save, they had to choose their actions very carefully.

During their hesitation, Dom had found his balance and pulled out the pan, ready for whatever Frisk hurled at them.

They lowered the bounty hunter’s weapon with a sigh, then fled across the boxes.
Dom’s face was undefinable. Not what he expected from the likes of them. “Too afraid to finish what you started?” He said before biting back on the handle where the marks were fresh and grasping the slicing instrument once more. “Nhh wnmp.” In one fluid motion, he pulled the knives out and, using the one under his feet, spring-boarded over to the next car. The crate shifted as it took his burly weight.

Frisk traversed the uneven, one-sided trench of crates, cages, and boxes, sliding their hand against what was once the floor and stepping gingerly over leather straps. The floor became the wall and the walls became the floor like in a horror house attraction. The pink sun played hide and seek, darting in and out of the debris. Pieces of the magical earth whizzed past so close that they could touch them if they reached out far enough. The straps tautened as their extra weight pushed them to their limits. The main priority was to avoid the edge.

They reached the gap to the next car. On the other side clung a large object draped in a rustling black cover, most likely a piece of machinery. Frisk could make out the roundness of tank treads at the bottom and the silhouette of an arm pointing toward them.

They heard the unwanted sound of their pursuer scrambling from far behind, having to keep his head low to avoid the cargo up top. Frisk swallowed hard, took on step back, and made the jump. Their heart must have stopped as they were in mid-air and the entire world froze for that fraction of a second. The passing fragments of rock stopped still, their edgings and crumbs in full clarity. No sound from either the clinking of metal or rushing winds. The drop became merely a painted canvas, no depth to it whatsoever. As fast as it happened, the moment ended and the child landed on the machine.

They went to stand and the ground beneath them tilted back. The machine turned on its axis with a heavyset, shaking clank. Frisk, down on all fours, holding on to the edges, tried to move and ended up shifting the machine more backwards. Without warning, the behemoth swung itself down. Frisk held on as their footing gave away – Barb’s weapon slipping from their grasp and getting caught beneath the treads. The cover tore, revealing the machine to be a digger of some weird sort, painted blue with a big, caged glass ball for the driver’s compartment. They were latched to the arm.

The loose sheet made it impossible for Frisk to keep their little fingers around, finding that out the bad way as they slid further and further down. They held on until they could hold on no more. They fell and managed to catch themself on the bucket – the scooping part – clawing their fingers around the teeth.

Dom made it to the end of the car to catch a sight to behold. The digger with the arm pointing toward the planet. The human hanging by a thread at the end of it.

The edge of the scooper dug into the soft skin of their palms, piling extra agony onto their purple fingers. The sensation burned their hands with intense fire, yet Frisk held on with vice-like grip. They looked up, catching the locomotive’s full length as it curved.

They looked down – they should not have done that! No longer was it a painted canvas. Their booted feet dangled thousands upon thousands of feet in the air. The longer they looked, the further the drop stretched. Thousands of feet became millions of miles, swelling away their brain with dizzying nausea.

Through the blur of heart-pounding tension and buckets of adrenaline, Frisk saw the irony in their predicament. Yesterday, they held on for dear life to avoid being taken to the Outerworld, now they were holding on for dear life to remain in the Outerworld.

They looked straight ahead just in time. Incoming debris! A piece of rock, the same size as they
were, hurtling toward them with the silent grandeur of a meteorite in outer space. Releasing the nerve
dead fingers in their left hand, they flung themself to the side, narrowly dodging the rock. The
hydraulic arm jolted sideways, nearly into another. More debris came from down low. Frisk forced
their left hand to grab the edge and pull their legs up just in time.

Dom watched with mixed feelings as the human dodged and weaved floating hazards. He was
unable to do anything, expect look on. Should he be thankful that Frisk was dodging the asteroids?
Or should he be rooting for them to smash headlong into a boulder? Either way, the grim reaper
really had it out for this kid.

Mercifully, the entire train banked to the left, levelling out before descending down a slight gradient,
following the track as it curved left and right with no discernible pattern. Dom stepped onto the deck
with the nonchalance as stepping off an escalator. The digger arm began to retract, arching closer
back to the platform to Frisk’s relief and damnation. He was about to move when he glimpsed the
wrist firearm nestled into the crevice of the circular wheel.

“That looks like one of that gal’s weapons. Don’t mind if I do.” Without pulling his gaze from the
hanging human, he stuffed the damaged pan down the back of the knot in his apron and took the
gun. “Knowing her, this’ll make things a lot easier.”

The mechanical arm slowly returned to the safety of the deck. The human’s fingers were ready to fall
off. Their arms, thirsty for sweet circulation. The chef stepped over, taking position under the arm to
snatch them as soon as they reached him. Frisk’s face suggested that they were a caterpillar’s length
away from pleading.

Dom mentally staged out how this was going to go down. Just before grabbing the child, he would
give them a quick shot of whatever the gun did, rendering them helpless and ready for delivery
straight to the castle. He did not know much about Barb, but it was a widespread fact that she did not
kill. He had nothing to worry about as he slipped his index finger through the silver trigger.

Dom offered them one hand while arming the other. They were feet away and approaching. “There
we go, just a little closer. Let good old uncle Dom take care of y—”

Frisk disappeared from his sight as a chunk struck the digger arm. The machine span. Frisk lost grip
with one hand, dangling with the tips in the other. They completed a full three quarters of a
revolution over the deck and back over the side before reaching their limit and landing at the front of
the flatcar.

Frisk’s first order of business was not to take off running, but to hop frantically in place, crying out as
they wiggled the life back into their fingers, blowing on them a few times. The spectacle went on for
a full fifteen seconds with Dom so courteously standing in place, watching as it all played out. When
they were done, both made eye contact. Frisk shot him a grin, and he returned it.

Frisk turned and ran a microsecond before Dom gave chase.

Faster. Barb needed to be faster. But she could not help it. She hated the Shattered Zone. All that
floating debris made it high-on impossible to fly fast and hard. Her wing struck another rock. Dirt got
into her eyes. Her ankle got caught on an exposed root, stopping her a moment while she untangled
herself. Not to mention finding anything within this tangled mess was like finding a needle in a
haystack. A very tiny needle in a grotesquely large haystack.
Her pointy ears listened for the tell-tale sounds of a train; the chugging of the engine; the crunch of wheels against track. She found the squeal and homed in on it, until she found both the opening and the trail. The train engine was directly in front of her. Roaring full pelt in her direction. She got an excellent view of the cowcatcher.

She altered her course just in time, twirling past the engine. The multi-coloured bulk containers rattled past a blur as she made her way further back, dipping and diving earthly obstacles along the way.

Just ahead, she made out the human by their distinct blue clothes, ducking left and right, being hounded by the bully of a cook who was now using her tranquiliser gun… rather poorly, she might add. His fashion was sloppy, holding the rapid-fire weapon sideways like those humans who refuse to wear belts and hammer gold into their yellow teeth. It was likely a result of working with knives his entire life.

Barb assessed the situation. With the amount of obstacles around, an elevated position would be both disadvantageous and dangerous. She swooped in fast and low, zooming down the aisle that separated the cargo. Frisk saw her dead ahead and hit the deck. Barb swooped over them and tackled Dom – the two rolling head over heels across the cars. He managed to kick her off, crashing her into the digger. The machine shifted, followed by the snap of a belt holding it down.

Barb fell forward onto one knee, the curve in her lumbar having shifted up into the thoracic. She whipped her gun up and fired off a few blind shots. With no time to reach for his pan, Dom flicked out his favourite butcher knife and sliced the bullets in half.

Barb reacted the opposite way Dom thought. Her smile was askance, difficult to read. “Ever wondered why I don’t use magic?” she asked. Dom was unable to determine who that question was aimed at, it might have been targeted toward herself.

Dom was not going to wait and find out. He raised her very own weapon and pulled back on the ring trigger. Not even he could miss at that range.

She threw her fist into the floor and launched her own brand of magic, revealing it for the first time to a civilian. Large, white spikes – fangs – erupted upward, around and away from her like she was the stone cast into the puddle and her magic was the ripple. The darts broke against them. The sight of it sent Dom running. In the rush, he dropped the butcher knife. It was gobbled up in the wave of fangs.

He yelled, “I thought you didn’t kill!” The rumble of teeth rang close to his heels. Crates exploded into clouds of sawdust and splinters, their weird and exotic inners spilling out sharp, fluffy, shredded, and broken, in glorious shades of red, blue, yellow, green, brown, orange and black.

Barb’s knuckles remained flat, uncomfortable. She hated that move – having not used it in years – remembering a conversation with a fellow trainee back at Castle Highkeep. Almira, her name was, and she was there the day Barb first pulled off that move at the tender age of ten. Pitiful, it was. A few pins the size of baby teeth that gave the training dummies sore feet. Over time, she watched as Barb honed that spell, growing both the size and quantity of the fangs until it became established that surrounding her was a bad idea.

One day, during skills inspection testing, Barb took to the grounds and impressed the teachers with her acrobatics and agility, clearing the course with the fastest time. Almira saw the perfect moment where Barb could have wowed them with that move, but she never used it.

Afterwards, Almira posed her the question: “Why didn’t you use that tooth magic on those dummies? That would’ve been so cool!”
She did not know why, but the answer to that question came out of nowhere. It sounded so out of place for a girl of her age, and yet she spoke it with an air of wisdom that surpassed her by about a few centuries. An air that she still did not possess, even as she approached the two-hundred year mark.

“Magic wouldn’t have destroyed those dummies. I would’ve.”

A resounding second snap brought her head up and out of her reminiscing. The machine against her back skidded as the drop grew steeper, the crescendo of wheels beneath more noticeable as the train picked up speed. A third snap followed accompanied by a sudden move. Barb took one step away as the fourth and final belt groaned and then gave way. The entire digger scraped down the deck. Barb bounded up onto the tank track and over the driver compartment. She span around to catch the machine barrelling sideways down the train, bulldozing anything in its path.

Up ahead, Frisk burst through the entrance to the enclosed carriage at the end of the flatbeds, grabbing hold of the frame to stop themself. The right wall was built with reflective metal shelves, holding packages and sealed envelopes of varying sizes and destinations. Two lines of barrels were stacked on the opposite end, divided by the loading door in the centre of the left side wall. At the other side of the car, a limp seatbelt dangled beside the next gate, above a foldout seat.

Frisk made a mad dash for the safety of the seatbelt, their hope beyond hope being to strap themself in and wait out the rest of this loco ride in safety. Dom literally dove in behind them. The incoming digger smashed into the car seconds later, sending a bone-shattering quake that crumpled the entire back like an empty can and sent Frisk and Dom tumbling down. The packages on the shelves poured out, flowing across the stretch with each change in the train’s trajectory.

Barb’s tranquiliser gun slipped from his hand, getting buried among the assortment of parcels. As Dom climbed up with the aid of the barrels, Frisk crawled closer to the seat. He took hold of the frying pan, the wanted individual within reach. Frisk saw the first swing coming and rolled to the side. The base struck the floor with a distorted bonk. Frisk rose and ducked to avoid a swipe from the pan. Dom took the handle by both hands and brought it down, missing Frisk as they sidestepped it.


Several repeated blows later – all of them misses – he stopped to regain his stamina. Frisk was mere feet away, breathing just as heavy. His underarms were stained with perspiration, they could smell the thick exertion ebbing off him.

Dom drew in hard through pursed lips. “The posters weren’t lying; you really can’t hurt another living soul.”

The human looked like they were about to say something when the far door opened; Barb appeared through the frame, gun at the ready, targets in her sights. Two bullets went off. Frisk and Dom both dove behind the barrels.

Without warning, the train span ninety degrees to the left, flinging Frisk and Dom against the loading door, Barb against the barrels. It twisted in the opposite direction, Frisk, Dom, and Barb flew into the shelves that comprised the right side.

The entire train hit a series of corkscrew turns. The inside became a bingo roller of brown-wrapped parcels and sealed letters, with a human, a deer chef, and a bounty hunting bat sprinting with the flow to remain upright. Running across the floor, then across the door, then across the ceiling, then across the shelves, then back to the floor.
Across the door. Across the ceiling. Across the— back the other way!

Across the door. Across the floor. Across the shelves. Across the ceiling. Across the door. Across the floor.

The train stopped spinning and immediately shot straight up. Metal groaned against metal as the digger came loose and broke free from its holdings. The hulking machine fell into the sky, smashing into several pieces of what made up the Shattered Zone before shattering itself. Wrecked beyond repair.

All three fell back. Frisk reached for something to grab, but their hands came out empty.

Barb snatched hold of the seatbelt.

Dom rolled alongside Frisk and grabbed hold of the crinkly door frame. The door itself indistinguishable from the wreckage.

Frisk fell straight out of the carriage, rolling painfully backwards. They descended across several flatbeds, back the way they came. Moving so fast, they were unable to make out anything. Their hands groped for anything to latch onto.

Their fingers gripped something: the handle of the boning knife Dom left jutting from the empty flatbed. The force of their momentum sent it slicing a clear chasm down the centre. Through a spinning brain and aching fingers, they forced themself through sheer force of will to hold on. The blade came to a halt upon striking the iron frame that lined the deck.

The train continued to rocket upwards, crashing through the floating fragments of land. At this rate, they were going to exit the atmosphere. They would not be surprised if they ended up in another monster kingdom in outer space.

The loose deliveries above poured from the crushed door, raining downwards. Among them, Frisk spotted the black metallic rectangle of the tranquiliser gun, falling end over end down the decks. Taking one hand away, they reached out and caught it. Something told them that they needed it.

The train slowed to a snail’s pace as the engine reached the summit. What goes up... All went silent as the leading car curved over the dipper, stopped, and then went down the vertical decline. Must come down. The engine roared to life, kicking all of its pistons into overdrive. Just like an ordinary, human rollercoaster, the vehicle picked up speed at an alarming rate.

As the train got faster and faster, Frisk’s hold slipped further and further. A thin layer of moisture formed on their palm, acting against them. They hit the dip, the entire car kicking upwards with the force of a catapult.

Frisk lost their grip and was tossed into the air, spinning uncontrollably. Their sight became a blur of dark blue, brown, green, and white.

Barb saw the event unfold from all the way over in the packages compartment. She watched as her target was sent soaring.

Barb needed to catch them.

She released the seatbelt and took flight up the car. She had enough time to deal with both the chef and child in one swoop.

Barb snatched Dom by the collar of his dirtied shirt, plucking him off what was left of the door
frame. She dropped him off on one of the innumerable islands – one that had a few berry bushes, a tree that yearned fruit, and was in good sight from the tracks. As she flew away, the stranded chef stomped the ground, retorting with obscene profanities and rude sign language. Oh, how gratuitous were the things coming out of his mouth; it should be washed out with soap at once. Good thing you can’t see it, otherwise, the rating would surely get bumped up to mature.

In these rough parts, the odd bit of cargo goes missing on a regular basis. It became so frequent that another division was set up to recover lost property from the Shattered Zone. Someone could swing around and pick up Dom the railway chef from anywhere between a couple of hours to a few days. The edible produce around him was in the event of the worst case scenario.

“Okay, little Frisk, no more games,” Barb said to herself. “It’s just you and me, as it should be.” Her unintentional rhyme on a dime rekindled her resolve.

Frisk was in free-fall, with no parachute, bungie cord, or umbrella. They plummeted through the zone’s threshold and into the fray, passing rubble and greenery on all sides. From within the mess, Barb appeared, darting in and around as fast her wings would allow. She moved in with arms outstretched, ready to catch them.

Sadly, she did not see that hidden rock until her face was against it.

Frisk felt their soaring heart sink from the second Barb disappeared Looney Tunes style. They descended deeper and deeper through the mess. What was going to save them? What was going to break their fall? They crashed through the fragile branches of a seriously bent tree, receiving a mouthful of leaves.

After falling a few extra hundred feet, the train came into view. They were directly over it, on a collision course with a bulk container, strapped down with a thick tarp. Anything could be underneath that; coal, timber, ice, iron ore, marble blocks, the possibilities were vast and hard. At the last moment, Frisk span themself around and curled up into a ball, hugging the non-lethal gun to their chest, hoping that whatever lay under the cover was soft enough to break their fall – or as few bones as possible.

They tore through the tarp and sank deep into the insides, bouncing to a gentle, simple stop.

Lady luck appeared to have smiled upon them.

The cargo was so soft, so bouncy, and so heavenly. They opened their eyes and found themself swimming in a pool of white pillows. Just like the one they slept on last night, except it was a whole bundle of them. Their collective softness combined into one whole entity, forming a giant marshmallow of soft.

Frisk rolled over and caught one of the tags:

Cloud Pillows

The softest pillows in the Outerworld

Made from actual clouds

(100% cotton)

As comfortable as it was, there was no time for them to be laying around. They clambered off as fast as they could, on the off chance the pillows were but padding for boxes of dynamite beneath, triggered to activate under the weight of a human youth. After fighting with the dithering tarp, they
jumped to the next cargo bin over. The substance hidden under this tarpaulin crunched with the
density of sand.

An electrified bullet pierced the ground where they stepped. Frisk pivoted upwards to find Barb
plunging toward them, eager to leave a lasting impression on the human the same way her face made
a lasting impression on the asteroid earlier. There was a perfect indentation and everything. Her shots
were rapid and merciless, wanting nothing more than to end this fiasco once and for all. On the
surface, on her flattened features, she was no longer confident and in control.

Frisk bobbed and weaved around the container top, dodging the shots. Barb came crashing down on
top of them. Frisk fell back.

Together, they aimed their weapons at each other.

Together, both pulled the triggers.

One clicked.

A single spit rang out.

A shot had been fired, but from which gun, and which individual had been struck? Barb stepped
back, inspecting the human. Frisk remained still with the gun outstretched, finger down on the
trigger. The rapid clicking sound dulled in the passing air stream.

Barb glanced down at her arm and found, sticking out of her bicep, a single dart.

“Well… I didn’t see that coming…” Barb said, each word more slurred than the last. One would
presume that with the paralysing agent being her own creation, she would be immune to it. But the
soldier is not invulnerable to the bullets they dispense, nor was the assassin unsusceptible to the
poisons they distilled, nor was the execution’s axe less sharp to those who wielded it. The paralysing
effect travelled up her arm, into her neck and down her spine, taking hold in seconds. The bounty
hunter had never experienced her own formula, but was curious as to how it felt. Curiosity killed the
cat, or in this case, curiosity killed the bat. Her entire body seized up like cement was being poured
into her bones, solidifying around the joints. Her muscles twitched painfully. Her skeleton locked in
place. The colours in her sights sharpened.

The sound of the engine screeching was not easily ignored. Frisk turned and saw, up ahead, the
exiting tunnel of the Shattered Zone. The pitch black semi-circle in the opposite end of the cracked
lands, the cliff a broken face of craters.

The tunnel was small. The wall as jagged and sharp as a million blades. Barb looked up with frozen
eyes. There was barely space between the train top and the tunnel ceiling for someone prone. The
wall was approaching fast, at well over a hundred miles per hour, closer to two-hundred at this rate.
Barb tried to move, but doing so felt like her muscles would rip from their nerve ends. Her entire
body went into alert mode, pulse quickening, mind racing, telling herself to move. Fly away. Fall
down. Drop.

Do something! Anything!

The cliff wall was incoming, yet Barb was unable to force her body out of its stasis – barely able to
twitch her fingers. Her pupils dilated. Panic set in. She did not want to die.

The cliff face was closing in. She had seconds to react.

The faint tremors of a scream attempted to escape her frozen vocals. Barb really, really, really did not
want to die.

The wall was meters away. A breath escaped past her lips as Frisk dove into her stomach.

Their weight slammed into her, swiping her off her feet, flat onto her back. At the exact same moment her head collided with the roof, the tunnel entrance screamed past and her vision was drowned in orange and black.

What just happened? Barb’s eyes widened, struggling to comprehend. She was alive. Her breathing was fast and shallow. She was breathing. She was alive. Her very own soul quaking, like at any moment it would shatter to pieces. Her soul was intact. She was alive.

Frisk looked into her eyes, getting their own breath back. Concern lay behind those pair of closed eyelids. Concern for the bat monster who hounded their every move. Who would have gladly taken them straight to their doom in Castle Highkeep and lose no sleep over it. Whose life they just saved without giving it a second thought.

Frisk apologised, saying that they only want to get home to their family.

Barb smiled. She probably didn’t know she was doing it. Somehow, she regained the ability to flex her tongue. “That makes two of us. I’ve seen so many dumb things on this job… but a target saving my life? That’s a first…” Her look fell blankly on the strobes, allowing their flashy persistence to put her mind at ease. The light and dark formed one whole entity. “Humans… Nothing but warmongers and butchers… eh, Maxie…?”

Her head lolled back. Her eyelids closed as slumber overcame her.

Frisk pushed themself to the side, taking a seat behind the unconscious bounty hunter. Their mind raced, processing what they had just survived. Their bones quivered from a combination of the chilly gale and coming down from the adrenaline.

They did it. Against all odds, they did it. All without reaching a save point.

The exit arrived with the same dramatic effect of reaching the pearly gates. Never would Frisk ever take boring, flat land for granted again. The roaming plains. Flat. Wide. Whole. Had they not been moving, they would have leapt straight to the ground and kissed it until the soil tasted like chocolate.

The size of Black Ice Mountain took their breath away; so large, ominous, and mountainy. They were so close now. Every corner and crevice and shade from white to black they could make out in full detail.

The lady on the speaker spoke out strong and true, especially from atop the shipping container, as if the speaker was right next to them. “Attention passengers. We’ll be arriving at Winter’s Edge in ten minutes. Please make sure you have all your possessions upon departure. We thank you for travelling with us today. Watch your step, and we hope you have a very pleasant day.”

Frisk scoffed. *Fat chance of that, buddy.*

They gazed upon the arctic world a few miles over. It could not get any crazier than this, right?

Right?
His laboratory, his home, was dark and dusty. He had been meaning to get it cleaned for a couple of hundred years now.

With each passing decade, it became that slightly bit harder for Professor Haze to do anything; most notoriously, traversing the stairs of his home. He would be in need of a stair lift sometime within the next century. Although, by then, he would probably have built a hover lift or a teleportation lift, one that would not leave an ugly, grey chain leading up the perfectly cobbled stairs.

Life had never been the same since the civil war. So much happened during those first years, more events during those unruly times. However, the last two hundred years have proven boring, each one a brief reprieve to make way for the next.

He was at the front and centre during the war, the mastermind of the great men and woman who put their faces on the front cover. Now the professor knew what it was like to be a relic. An old dusty heirloom stuffed into a closet and forgotten about. A museum exhibit more fragile than the glass encasing it. He was old, had been for quite some time. He once stood tall, handsome, and toned. But time and age wears all down. Starting with the aches in his back, followed by failing eyesight, then the occasional trembling in his fingers. He looked up to the old and wise during his golden days and knew the same fate would happen to him eventually, just as he looked down at the young and able today and knew that the same thing would happen to them eventually.

Despite spending the last hundreds of years and thousands of days doing nothing, it has been the last few days that had him on edge. He had started to believe that maybe his job was done, that his usefulness was finished and he had truly became the rusty trinket found buried in the sand, but a feeling ate away at his insides.

Something he could not explain. A form of hindsight he developed during the war. He learned to trust it, and more often than none, his expectations proved to be valid.

Something big was looming on the horizon. Something powerful and earth-shattering. It could happen within the next hour or the next month. The feeling in their gut impossible to predict, but it was not a matter of if, but when.

Change was coming. Not just in the Outerworld, not just on planet Earth, but on an unimaginable scale.

He stepped into his living quarters and there, before the crack under the front door, lay a rectangle of white paper, made grey in the dimness. He hobbled over as fast as he could, his shaking inners begging him to read it, convincing him that it was important, having waited two hundred years for this moment. He aimed his arm at the paper and out extended a rod from his sleeve that snagged it from the floor and into his waiting hand. With as much free time as Haze has, he found ways to cope with his shortcomings – usually with the latest in technology.

Haze blinked twice, activating the flashlight built into his glasses. The page illuminated, but remained as hazy as his own name. Single lenses were not enough. He raised his eyebrows and two extra lenses whirled over his current ones, further bringing the poster into focus.

He waggled his eyebrows again. More lenses overlapped. The page became clearer.

Eyebrows twitched. Another layer of glass shifted before his eyes. The page was almost clear. He squinted, creasing the wrinkles around his eyes.

One more time. One more pair of lenses, bringing the number up to five. The sharp clarity took a second to settle in before unsettling his insides in the worst way.
A wanted poster. A human. Their name was Frisk. And they were here in the Outerworld, right here, right now.

In that one moment, all of Professor Haze’s assumptions had been justified – the human’s presence clarified everything. Hardly anybody believed him at first; his beliefs the ramblings of an old man who lost his marbles a long time ago. One of the first who did being his former associate and most trusted friend: the late Emperor Juhi. May the gods bless his dusty remains.

The human was not here by accident, or by sheer chance. Their arrival was more than just a roll of the dice. It was fate that they were amongst them. It was a calling. It was destiny.

It was providence.

“The prophecy…” he whispered. “We’re so close now.”

On the face of the poster, two large words were scrawled in red. Directed at him.

Get ready
Alphys awoke to a terrible, bitter aftertaste on the tip of her tongue. She was face down on the armrest of the couch in Bub’s house, her cheek misshapen against the worn armrest. One arm hung over the side, numb and cold like a block of ice. A blanket had been draped over her, likely after she had passed out. She opened her eyes to find her glasses lopsided across the nose, distorting her first sight of the party’s aftermath.

The floor was littered before the party commenced, making it impossible to gauge how much worse it had become. The microphone dangled from its perch, with grubby claw marks on the base. Her grubby claw marks.

Oh, jeez… Alphys remembered. All of it.

She sat up – the blanket sliding off her shoulders – and fixed her glasses and worked the feeling back into her arm. She rubbed her hairless head, nursing the headache that wasn’t there. Wait, the headache that wasn’t there? That was right. She was fine, even after all the hard stuff she stuffed down her throat. The actual amount, she lost count after the first drink, was enough to make the hardest of drinkers sick to their stomachs. Yet she had no tell-tale signs of a hangover; no throbbing skull, no sandpaper tongue, no bloodshot eyes, no queasy stomach, no feelings of wanting to throw up, no nothing.

Her collar brushed against her chin; the top button of her coat was undone. She quickly buttoned it up, realising that one of her sleeves had been rolled up to her elbow. Pulling it straight, she found crushed, empty cups stuffed in her pockets.

Okay, Alphys. You were just letting your hair down last night. Today, we get serious and start looking for the others.

A lady walked in, her entrance represented by the muffled thump of the front door as it hit the garbage-covered floor. Alphys remembered how sudden Bub was in tearing the entrance to his own home from its hinges. He really needed to get that fixed, and clean his house. Who was she kidding? His home could have been reduced to a crater and he would not bat an eye. It was a miracle the structure had been built in the first place.

“Morning, Doctor,” the lady said. A slim monster, with white hair and an afro hair of cauliflower, had in her possession a bowl of spaghetti. Topped with a spoonful of tomato sauce, which was still on the spoon. “That was some party last night, huh?”

Alphys’s forehead burned. It was one heck of a party, and she was the one in the spotlight. If there was any place she belonged at a party, it was on the uninvited list. “I, uh, g-guess it was.” She eyed the bowl of pasta. The sauce was still hot. Her belly grumbled. “Did I sleep through the morning? Is that lunch?”

“Nope, this is breakfast.” She handed the bowl over to the former royal scientist.

“Um, thanks.” Taking the fork, which also had a spoonful of tomato sauce on it, Alphys curled up a forkful, ready to consume. Not the first time in her life she’s had noodles for breakfast. “It looks delicious.”

The cauliflower lady perked up a chuckle as the guest of honour cleaned the fork with a single mouthful. “If you think that tastes good, you’ve been living with that guy for way too long.” Her
laughed upon seeing the look on Alphys’s face. The taste was unlike anything her buds could comprehend. “Courtesy from one of your bony friends – the taller one, in the goofy outfit. He’s over at the Sweet and Sour’s across the street. Been cooking up nothing but spaghetti since… I don’t think he even slept. He just entered the kitchen and asserted himself.”

Alphys wished she had told her sooner. She had been fortunate enough to avoid Papyrus’s cooking, hearing some dark rumours from his brother. As she experienced Papyrus’s spaghetti, she had no idea what to think. What were these underlying flavours she was detecting? Strawberries? Pomegranate? Grapes? Paprika? Papyrus didn’t cook these guys’ distant relatives, did he?

Alphys swallowed the mouthful with a hard gulp. She could feel its indescribable texture slither down her food pipe of make a splash in her stomach acid. Confusion set in; no idea whether to hate it or like it. Without thinking, she was already rolling up a second helping on the fork. The second taste was different than the first. Was that a hint of ramen she was detecting?

The cauliflower lady glanced back at the door, realising that she was awkwardly watching her eat. “Well, I guess I’ll leave you to it. He’s still at that place if you want to find him.”

She left Bub’s house, leaving the scientist to nurse the food. The spaghetti – while not terrible, a huge stepping stone for Papyrus – was difficult to define. With every bite, Alphys struggled to reach a consensus. It was tasty and yet disgusting. It was moist and yet dry. It was sweet and yet sour. It was the equivalent of every packet of instant noodles she has ever tasted. Before she knew it, the bowl had been cleaned, but she still needed more to reach an opinion.

With the bowl in her claws and the cutlery jangling against the brim, she hopped off the couch and wadded through the garbage out the dismantled door.

The first thing she noticed in the morning light was the further result of the party. Goers were spread out across the road, sprawled out like casualties on a battlefield. Typical Saturday night. Bub was not present amongst them, having crashed at someone else’s house, both through the backdoor and in their second bathroom – which the owners didn’t even know they had.

The low hanging sun hurt her eyes, without a trace of cloud to shield it. The ground simmered with what could be described as rising regret. The food they ate, the drinks they drank, the shenanigans they shenaniganed, all seemed like good ideas at the time. It is not until they wake up the next morning, gazing up into the brightening sky, do they wonder what they are doing with their lives and think to themselves “never again”. Except it is never one “never again”, but many throughout the course of years.

She made it to the restaurant. Opening the door, the signature smell of pasta and burning was overpowering, masking the odours ingrained in all the years Sweet and Sour’s has stood. Not only was spaghetti in the air, but it was also on the menu as every conscious and vertical citizen of A. Town ate away at platefuls on their tables. Nothing else existed except that Italian cuisine.

Two monsters at a nearby bench, a red onion and a white onion, waved at Alphys. “Hey, Doctor A,” the latter hollered, “saw you shaking that tail last night.”

His friend joined in with, “You were on fire with that mic in your hand, baby!”

Alphys responded with a meek wave back, unsure how to respond or if she should respond. Would a simple ‘thanks’ be too little or too much? She did not know. In hindsight, she should have postponed that teleporter and worked on that time machine instead, so she could travel back in time and erase last night from existence, which happened because she focused on the teleporter.
At the far end of the restaurant, past the counter, a cooking pot blazed with the fires of the underworld. Papyrus simmered away, making more spaghetti despite the plates beyond plates of the stuff lined up behind him, enough to feed A. Town for the next week. A toque blanche rested on his noggin and a sauce splattered apron took the shape of his battle body. His method was brash and reckless, with a hint of pride, just how Undyne taught him.

Undyne…

Just being reminded of her ached the Undyne-shaped hole in Alphys’s heart. She loved her, loved everything about her. The way she laughed. The gentleness of her kisses. The way she shook her hair. How safe Alphys felt when she was near her. The sound of her knuckles crackling before the video game thrashing began. Okay, maybe Alphys was not a big fan of the crackling knuckles bit, but nobody was perfect.

Alphys planned for them to spend the rest of their lives together. Now she was gone. Missing. Lost somewhere beyond her reach. Alphys feared the worst, that she may never see her beloved again.

Alphys pushed those thoughts to the back of her mind. They would not help her now. Being a downer hardly got her anywhere in life. Optimistic was the word she was looking for. She needed to be optimistic. After all, Sans and Papyrus had found her. Those guys were both here, alive, well, and in one piece. Surely Undyne would be fine, as well as Asgore and Toriel. They would find each other, and together they would find Frisk, and then all of them would sort this mess out and return home.

While the skeleton stirred away the pasta, the actual employees – paid by the hour – stood back and watched. They had every right to kick Papyrus out, but did no such thing, watching with stunned admiration. Never before had they seen someone cook with such passion, such energy, and such enthusiasm; even though his art was terrible. That, and the fact that they did not need to work, at least while he was present.

One of the employees inspected the amount of spaghetti swamping up the table tops, which was slowly going cold with each passing minute. “He’s a freaking machine… without an off switch.”

The monster beside him, a manager by the look of him, said, “Who knew we had all this spaghetti in storage.”

The same employee faced the manager. “Actually, we didn’t.”

“We didn’t? What do you mean we didn’t?” The manager pointed to all the noodles laid out in every plate they could spare. “You mean to tell me all this spaghetti isn’t ours? We’re selling food that we don’t own?”

“It can’t be ours. We had no reason to supply it in the first place since nobody around these parts ever touched the stuff.”

“Then where did all this spaghetti come from?” the manager asked belligerently.

“Apparently, from Skeletor’s dorky cousin over there.” He pointed over at the skeleton by the combusting pot, who cackled in a fashion similar to that of another cartoony skeleton.

“But how come there’s so much of it?” The manager of this branch again turned to the pasta. There was enough to circle the entire Outerworld, twice. “Where did he get it from?”

A pause from the guy who operated the fryer. “There’s a perfectly reasonable explanation for that.” Another pause. “I just can’t think of one right now.”
Another clerk picked up a bowl, topped with a dollop of tomato paste, and swirled a few strands around a fork. “I couldn’t care less myself,” he said before using his teeth to take it off the prongs. “It’s not that bad.”

The manager faced the customers, then back to those under his watch. “You said before that nobody picked spaghetti around here. They seem pretty content stuffing their faces with it out there now.”

With a strand hanging from his bottom lip, the clerk eating the spaghetti pointed, with his fork, at the heaps. “Have a taste,” he mumbled before slurping up the strand.

The manager hesitated as his twitchy fingers neared a plate of untouched pasta, feeling like a guinea pig. He was not a guinea pig, he was a hamster. He picked up a separate plate and took a nibble. His face scrunched in reflex. “What in – this stuff’s disgusting!” He almost dropped the plate in disgust, it was that bad.

As the clerk chomped on a second mouthful, he mumbled, “Now try one of our famed, extra-large brief burgers...”

The burgers bearing that name were prepped and ready on the grilling rack. Eat one and you will be hungry again an hour later. Although, by now, all of them would’ve been snatched up. How curious that there were no takers today, for the first time since they were introduced twenty years ago.

Taking a knife and fork, the manager cut off a small chunk and popped it into his mouth. He chewed slow, shifting it against both cheeks. It did not take him long to figure out the reason for their abandonment. After forcing it down, he rushed back to the spaghetti. By contrast, the strands of pasta were like gold. The clerk gave him the ‘hate to say I told you so’ look.

Alphys reached the counter. “Hey, P-Papyrus,” she said loud enough to catch his attention.

“A-ha, Doctor Alphys.” Papyrus took his eyes away from the pot he was stirring. The same pot that was on fire. His face was as black as coals. “Did the bowl I dispatch reach you?”

Alphys reached up and slid her bowl onto the top. “Sure did. The flavour was… interesting.” She studied the heaps of it on the tables. “You’ve been busy. Where’d you get all this spaghetti from anyway?”

“A magician never reveals his secrets,” Papyrus answered with a flick of an overcooked, pitch-black wooden spoon.

“You can tell me, Papyrus. W-we’re friends.”

“Of course, but what if I, the great Papyrus, told you that there were secrets that did not reveal their magicians. How is that possible, I believe you are wondering? It is quite simple, actually; magic is a two-way street – with a crosswalk for pedestrian safety. For how can a magician exist without secrets? And how can a secret reveal itself to the magician at the cost of its own livelihood? Once a secret is shared, it loses its job. Somebody needs to look out for the employment rate of all the secrets out there, and their little white fami-lies, and if nobody else will, then this responsibility must fall upon these round, plastic shoulders.”

“So, basically, you’re telling me you don’t know where you got all this spaghetti either.”

“Yes.”

“Good to know.” Alphys wiped her brow. Already, the stale heat was making her head spin. “Are you nearly done? Be-because we really should start looking for Frisk now.”
Papyrus extinguished the flames by turning off the gas. “Allow me to finish this final batch and I’ll be right with you.” He grabbed the handles of the pot, both hands protected with oven mitts that were already over his existing red gloves. He turned the billowing pot onto its side, pouring the steaming contents into a bowl that was six helpings too small, then topped it with a dollop of sauce that was six helpings too small.

His job was done. Well done, just like the spaghetti flooding the counters. Papyrus threw off the mitts, the apron, the hat, and the smolder on his face in one fluid motion.

The employees seemed to groan as he made his exit, sad to see him go. Not because he was a cool guy – even though he wasn’t – but because it meant they had to figure out what to do with all the noodles.

His walk through the divide of tables and chairs had all the flare of a rap artist walking off the stage after delivering a once in a lifetime performance. He had no microphone to drop, so the spoon-shaped piece of charcoal would have to do. It shattered upon hitting the tile floor – a mess for the janitor to clean up.

Alphys pulled the door open, politely holding it for her friend. “We’ll pick up Sans and then we’ll make our move.”

Papyrus stepped into the light. “He better be awake because I’m not carrying him.”

One of the party casualties, with his face pressed against the window, overheard them. He raised his hand and pointed down the street, where he vaguely remembered the guy in the blue hoodie stumbling off to.

Following his directions, they found Sans budged upright against a house wall three-hundred yards away, with his hands stuffed in his pockets, looking straight ahead like he was on the lookout for humans. At first, they did not recognise him due to the odd range of clothes he was wearing – including a pair of cowboy boots, a baggy pair of orange jeans, a white fur coat with tails that reached the ground, and a purple fedora; all of which were too big for him – and a piece of paper stuck to his forehead, hiding his face. His ribcage rose and fell in a relaxing rhythm to the diaphragm that he did not possess. The paper fluttered in harmony with his snoring – in when he inhaled and out when he exhaled.

“Judging by the sound of low-pitched octave snoring I detect, that can mean one thing…” Papyrus said, then shouted, “Sans, wake up, you lazybones!”

With an awakening snort, Sans jerked his head up. “Papyrus? Bro?” He looked around blindly. With the poster still glued to his face, he showed the disorientation of a dog with a bucket on its head.

“Where are you?”

“Of course you were not at attention.” Papyrus shook his head in disappointment. “You were napping all night again, weren’t you? Why do you think you’re never ready every morning?”

Alphys raised a claw to speak her two cents. “I, uh – actually, Papyrus, I don’t think he was napping. That looked like s-sleepi—”

Papyrus interrupted sharply, whipping out a gloved hand to punctuate his point. “I don’t want to hear it, doctor.” He had heard that tired old excuse from everyone: Sans, Undyne, Frisk, Asgore, Lady Asgore, himself one time in the mirror, and also from their pet rock.

Oh, yes, their pet rock has gained the ability to talk thanks to Papyrus’s generous care and affection.
His name was Dwayne, he liked rock candy, listening to rock music, taking idyllic walks on the beach, and suggested that Papyrus should help Sans with washing his sock collection every once in a while. Papyrus once commented that Dwayne’s voice bore an uncanny resemblance to his brother, who went AWOL during those heart to heart moments.

The last thing Papyrus wanted to hear was that sleeping lark coming from the bucktoothed mouth of a certified dermatologist.

“H-hey, where’d the light go? Why’s it so dark all of a…” Sans slumped his head and sighed as if remembering the saddest moment of his life. “Guess it was bound to happen sooner or later… Oh well…” Raising his head, he called out, “Papyrus, you up yet? After breakfast, how ‘bout we finish that invisible maze you’ve been working on? I promise I won’t hide the orb in your battle body for the third time.”

“What are you talking about, Sans?” Alphys asked. “And where did you get those clothes?”

His head followed the sound of her voice. “Oh, hey, you invited the doc over too? Is she here to help install that tile puzzle you’ve always wanted?” Alphys reached out and yanked the poster away. Sans blinked as the unexpected flood of light stung the whites of his bleary eye sockets. He rubbed at them before taking in his surroundings, looking confused. “Hold on. This isn’t my…” He gazed at the walls, the cliffs, the sky and the ground as if he was still dreaming, seeing them for the first time.

“How about it, Sans?” Papyrus asked. “What were you talking about just then?”

Sans paused. “About being back in my old bedroom… in the Underground…”

“Dear brother, you were not back in the Underground.” Papyrus looked at the paper in the doctor’s hands. “You were merely blinded by this wanted poster with a perfectly unaltered, standard definition photograph of Frisk on it.”

“And besides,” Alphys began, “we’re in the completely wrong direction to be in the Under—w-w-what? Wanted poster? F-Frisk?” She pulled the sheet in front of her eyes. The resulting image made her shriek. “Oh my god, they’re wanted!”

“Wanted?” Papyrus asked, the blankness in his sockets portrayed his obliviousness. “Did Frisk file for a name change while I wasn’t looking?”

“No! Frisk is wanted!” Just once, Alphys wished that Papyrus could break from his land of racing cars, spaghetti, and spaghetti in the shape of racing cars and join her in the real world. “Frisk has a bounty on their head! They’re a wanted criminal!” Her claws were unable to hold it straight. Frisk was a fugitive. A hunted target. On the run.

And she was the one who let go.

Sans took the poster. His flat face was concealed as he inspected it. He pulled it down and his friends gazed at his empty sockets – the light in them gone, but his smile constant as always. Papyrus had seen that look before, but he could not recall where or when. It filled him with concern. Sans had been on the short end of the stick many times, the butt of many jokes, yet he always shrugged it off with a chuckle, a bad pun, and a bottle of mustard for the road. However, those rare moments when he made that face, Papyrus knew that someone had wronged him in the worst possible way.
A monster ruler demanding the soul of an innocent kid in order to fulfil their own self-centred wishes. For Sans, it was the Underground all over again. He thought, hoped, that he could finally put those days behind him. So many déjà vus and recurring dreams. Days overlapping one another, like he was reliving them on a regular basis. Time and time again, he felt like he saw the same faces, heard the same sentences, and witnessed the same mistakes repeat themselves. Saw the ones he loved happy and content one day. Saw them reduced the dust the next. The memories reoccurred so many times that he lost count. Everything blurred into one, and in that collective picture stood a single solitary image.

A flower…

Eventually, Sans stopped caring. He smiled… and forgot to stop. There was no point to anything, nothing he ever did made a lick of difference. Everything became a joke to him. He stopped trying, and slumped into a slothful stupor. He became the Sans that everyone saw today.

His façade served one purpose: to keep his brother happy.

Every time he fell into slumber, a terrifying feeling scrapped away at the back on his skull. The horrible feeling of not knowing what he would awake to. He was certain that prior his short nap at his post in Hotland, he had eaten a delicious brunch at Grillby’s and wished his brother well at his training session with Undyne. Awakening, his brunch had been cancelled due to an unforeseen fire closing Grillby’s, followed by a phone call from the captain of the Royal Guard stating that Papyrus had not turned up for his one-to-one session. Each shift took a piece out of him, made it feel like there was no point to anything.

But Frisk changed all that. Before meeting that determined human, life felt like one big jumble. That child set everything straight. They helped break the barrier. They led them to the sun. They ended this madness. The repeating dreams stopped. The déjà vus ended. He was stuck in the past no longer, finally moving onward to the future. Every day was new and exciting, a mystery waiting to be solved. The next day held new people to meet, more friends to make, and more opportunities to sleep on the job.

His brother was happy. He should be happy too.

However, still, when he awoke in the mornings, before opening his eyes to the glorious yellow ball of fire in the sky, he feared he would look out his window, see only a rocky ceiling, and think nothing of it. No matter how much he tried to tell himself that this world was here to stay, a small piece of that fear had become a part of him.

He would probably keep that part for the rest of his life.

Now, the future lay before him, printed in ink on paper. To awake to a fresh new day should be a blessing, but all he could see was history repeating itself. Just how it repeated itself time and time again under the Earth’s surface.

“Someone better have some answers for this…”

“Sans, please, don’t be mad,” Papyrus said the most mature thing they’ve heard from him since ever. “We have nothing to worry about.”

The white dots returned. Sans pulled the hat back as both he and Alphys gave Papyrus questioning looks. “How can you be so calm at a time like this?”

Papyrus responded, “It’s quite simple, actually,” which almost made Sans burst out laughing. The
land above the clouds they were lost in, coupled with the fact that their friend had a bounty on their head, meant that their current predicament was anything but simple. Papyrus remained as valiant as ever. “If I, the infallible puzzle master Papyrus, was able to infallibly fail at capturing Frisk, then logic dictates that nobody else stands a chance at capturing them.”

That sentence alone was enough to lift a massive weight off Sans’s mind, mainly because there was nothing better to him than seeing Papyrus act like Papyrus. “Sometimes, I wish I had your confidence, pal.”

“My puzzle making abilities are not the only thing that is infallible. Now, returning to the question posed thirty paragraphs ago: where did you get those clothes?”

The door beside them flung open and three vegetable monsters stumbled out before Sans had a chance to answer; a leak down to his underwear, a celery figure shivering his shrill arms, and a pepper with a visible grove in his head. Inside the black interior, the only furniture visible was a circular table with four chairs, haloed under a single lightbulb. Wisps from cigar butts in silver trays lingered in the white light. The scene alone answered that question.

After Alphys went on her murderous rampage of vocal principles and his brother had slinked away to the kitchen, Sans got roped into a poker game. With nothing of financial worth on their persons, they had to make do with the clothes on their backs. Quite literally. His opponents probably scoped him for an easy target, with him being short and scruffily dressed.

To their surprise, who knew Sans was a mean streak at cards? As soon as he took his seat, he was unstoppable. He never folded once yet never lost a single hand. The look on Pepper’s green face when Sans bested his full house with a straight flush was the highlight of that tournament, earning him the hat resting on his bald head. Lady Luck had well and truly went all in on his side that night. And the fact that the lights kept flicking off and on played no part in it whatsoever.

“I hope you don’t plan on hiking around in those, brother,” Papyrus said. “You look like a skeleton who doesn’t know how to properly dress himself.”

The flicker of a grin twitched on Alphys’s lips as a snarky quip tugged on the fringes of her sense of humour. However, she did not know whether to aim that comment at Sans with “Big change there” or at Papyrus with “look who’s talking”. She played around with the snappy line for too long – three seconds too long, rendering her comment void before it even came out the gate.

Sans flicked the hat off, revealing sweat on his bald head. As cool as a fedora was, it was not his style. “Nah. I wasn’t playin’ for keeps anyway.” He remarked as he brushed the coat off his shoulders. After what he did to obtain them, there was no way he could not keep them with a clean conscience. “Sides, all these clothes make me hot under the collarbone.”

_Ba-dum pish!_

Papyrus gritted his teeth. “Oh my god, Sans! Why do I put up with you?”

“Because I’m the one racking all the dough in,” Sans said as he kicked the boots off and removed the jeans. His slippers and shorts were still on underneath. No wonder he was so warm.

That statement seemed to fuel his brother’s agitation. He straightened himself up and raised a hand, looking so stiff like he had contracted rigor mortis. “Well, you know what?” He prepared for his comeback of the century. “You’re absolutely right.”

Sans chuckled. “Ain’t I always?” He was glad that the chill side to him had returned.
“O-okay, glad we got that sorted out…” Alphys said with a sigh. “N-now can we please talk about how we’re going to find Frisk and the others?”

“Y’know, come to think of it,” Sans said, “we never did go into this whole ‘jump-into-a-teleporter-thing’ with a plan? We don’t even know where we are.”

Papyrus pointed up the lane. “Perhaps we could ask these fine, shiny folks for directions?”

Fine, shiny folks? Up ahead, a group of ten monsters geared head to toe in knights armour shuffled down the street, kicking up red dust in their stride. They looked like members of some order from the dark ages, and were impossible to miss due to the amount of dazzle their suits produced. Nine of them kept an arrowhead formation while one at the front went from citizen to citizen, regardless of condition, and flashed what looked like three squares of paper at each of them.

One monster he addressed faced down the street and pointed directly at Alphys and her associates.

The squad of soldiers stopped before the doctor, the former watchman, and the hopeful for the disbanded royal guard. The leading monster with a glazed look in his eyes, whose species was impossible to recognise under his armour, looked the trio up and down. He scanned the set of pictures, checking to see if they matched the appearances of those before him.

He looked at the pictures, then back to them. Back to the pictures, then back to them.

He held the pictures before his face, then lowered them. He brought them up. Lowered them again.

Finally, after quintuple-checking, he was satisfied that the monsters he was confronting were indeed those he had been ordered to find.

The leader of the bunch hesitated for a moment, revealing that he may have lacked public speaking skills. They must have been desperate for recruits that day. “By o-order of, uh, Emperor Maxus, you…” He squinted back at the pictures, getting the name of the one in the lab coat. “Al-pee-he-is?”

The one he named – or trying to – opened her mouth to correct him, but Alphys’s lack of confidence stopped the words from coming out. The guardsman continued.

“And you Papyrus.” He pronounced it as if the ‘Y’ was an ‘I’, so it came out Papi-rus. “And you San… s, are to be, err, detained and brought to Castle, uh, Highkeep in light of you may hold knowledge on an escaped convict. There, you will be, you know, held and questioned and such until further notice, I guess.”


“We’re not arresting you, just – you know – taking you to a secure location for a while, for your own safety. We fear that you may be in danger… or something along those lines.”

Alphys was not listening as she was too deep in her drowning worry. “B-b-but we didn’t do anything? D-did we? W-what did we do? Did we break the law?”

“You haven’t broken any laws, it’s just—”

The worst fears from all the adult manga she had watched flashed in her mind. “I-I can’t go to jail! Look at me, they’ll treat me like currency!”

He held his gauntlet hands out, trying to put a lid on this situation. “Hey, calm down, will you? I’m just following my orders here.”
Sans ushered the sobbing scientist back, acting as the voice of reason. “You said you’re detaining us because of an escaped convict?”

“Yeah, the same human that everyone’s talking about.”

“Oh,” Papyrus took the poster from Alphys and presented it. “You mean this one?”

“Yeah, yeah, that’s the one.” The leader had spend the most part of the night putting those up that he could recognise it by touch, if needed. He was running on fumes and cheap energy drinks at this stage.

“Well, I, the great Papirus, will gladly impart my vast knowledge of Frisk unto you.”

“You will? That’s a relief,” said the guard. “I was afraid you’d put up—”

Papyrus started without giving the guard time to finish. “Frisk’s hobbies include creative writing, arts and crafts, listening to music, and watching scary movies at night. Or at least I think they do, it’s hard to tell from behind the cushion.”

The guard went to speak. “Actually, that’s, uh, not what I—”

Papyrus continued over him. “Their favourite fruit is apples. They’re partially fond of grapes, and enjoy the occasional banana.”

“I kinda don’t need to hear—”

“From their choice of wardrobe, one would believe that their favourite colour is blue. This statement has been proven false by yours truly. Their favourite colour is, in fact, red.”

Sans quickly chimed in. “Bro, you’re not helping.”

Alphys followed with, “You should really stop talking now.”

The guard’s brow furrowed. His voice began to crack. “Will you just listen to me for one—?”

Papyrus would not shut up. “And here’s some top secret information—”

“Listen to me.”

“—for specific ears only.”


The guard got louder. “Listen to me.” His fellow guards on his flanks were exchanging looks.

Papyrus got louder. “Frisk is especially ticklish—”

Alphys was sweating buckets. “Papyrus, shut up! Please just shut up!” Already, she could feel the spray of the showers assault her scales.

Sans was shouting. “Bro!”

The guard was shouting. “Listen to me!”

Papyrus was shouting. “—on their knees!”

The guard was yelling. “LISTEN TO ME!”
Alphys was yelling. “PAPYRUS!”

Sans was yelling. “BRO!”

Papyrus was yelling. “WHY ARE WE ALL YELLING IN ALL CAPITALS?”

“ENOUGH!” The guard threw his hands down and stamped on the ground. “You know what? You are under arrest! Grab ‘em!”

Sans’s had a fraction of a second to come up with a plan as the line of suited monsters pushed forward on the balls of their feet. Time stopped. His brother was standing straight, with his jaw still wide and hands clenched from his battle of the bellows, like he was attempting to roar them into submission. Alphys had stumbled backwards with both eyes and mouth open in terror, holding her claws up to her chin defensively. Not like that would help much against monsters double her size and suited in thick metal plating.

He span to the left, widened his eye sockets, feigning shock, and pointed between the rows of houses. “Look, guys, it’s Frisk!”

That name sent powerful alarms ringing in Papyrus’s and Alphys’s heads, strong enough to pull them away from the real threat ten feet in front of them. They both swung in that direction. The guards went to follow, almost tempted by the prospect of finding the main fugitive, but promptly held their gazes on them.

Sans refocused on the soldiers while his friends were distracted.

The guards saw their chance; the majority of the targets had diverted their attention. The only one remaining was the skeleton who was half their size. They thought they had an easy capture, or so it seemed.

They went to take one step forward and immediately took two steps back. Those at the rear crashing into those in front.

From out of nowhere, four massive skulls appeared and floated in the air – all of them had their sights trained on the squad. They were skulls that none of them had seen before: long triangular faces with jaws of vicious teeth and crowns of thorny bone. All four jaws opened in unison, and from within their empty mouths, growing spheres of blue magic formed.

Sans creased his brow. His grin turning a shade evil. He slowly shook his head.

He blinked. The pupils disappeared, sending shivers up the soldiers’ spines. His warning was like a whisper from beyond the grave.

“D O N ’ T E V E N T H I N K A B O U T I T .”

The leader of the squad swallowed. “Guys…” he addressed his crew who were equally as scared as he was. The cracks and blemishes evened out in his voice. “We’ve just received a, uh, anonymous tip that the guys we’re looking for are a few towns back. Does anyone object to that?” He waited for the response that he wished no one had the gall to protest. Luckily for him, his crew were on the same page. “Silence noted. Double time!”

All ten members of the Monster Military turned and ran, making the loudest exit known to man and monster alike. Sans gave them a simple wave goodbye and waited until they were a hundred paces before holstering his blasters, sighing as his pupils returned.
While all this happened, the ex-scientist and his brother were gazing at a figure between the two buildings.

“Oh, Frisk, is that you?” Papyrus asked.

From the alleyway, a short plump yellow figure with a straight face, a head of long brown hair and wearing a striped blue shirt emerged.

“My name is Fisk,” the little fella answered.

Papyrus squinted an eye socket. “Fisk? That’s nice, but we are looking for Frisk.”

Fisk paused. “My name is Fisk.”

“Yes, your name is Fisk. We are looking for someone named Frisk. Are you Frisk?”

“No… my name is Fisk.”

Papyrus caressed his chin. “Are you sure you are not Frisk?”

Fisk was hopping up and down, their face turning an irate shaded of orange. “My name is Fisk!”

“Papyrus,” Alphys said, “I know we haven’t seen Frisk in a day, but I’m fairly certain they’re not a pepper.”

Upon second inspection, it appeared that Fisk was not human at all, but a yellow pepper. A pepper that looked surprisingly like the human they were looking for.

“It would appear so.” Papyrus conceited, nodding in acceptance. “Apologies, little creature coincidently similar to Frisk who just happened to be there when Sans pointed, diverting our attention.”

Fisk turned and walked off. Their small legs carried them nimbly, as if they were floating on the ground “My name is Fisk.”

“Hey, wait a minute,” Alphys said, facing up front to find the road ahead deserted. None of the monsters in armour in sight, as if they had fizzled into the atmosphere. “Wh-where did those knights go?”

Sans shrugged. “Guess one of them left the stove on.”

“Then, can we please get back on track as to how we’re going to find the others?” Alphys asked, taking her glasses off and giving them a much needed clean.

Papyrus faced his sibling. “Brother, I don’t suppose you know a shortcut or two?”

Sans pondered a bit. “I guess I could find a few shortcuts around here…” He scratched his cranium and looked to a house on the right. “That’ll do. Let’s start over there.”

Lord Grill was lucky that some of his attire had survived the blast – the ones he was wearing, at least. He sure wished that there was something else that survived other than cinders and fire, but the explosion took no prisoners.
He laid on that couch, thinking that night would be restless. The room he had been shoved in was right next to the one allocated to that crazy lady, Undyne. He had received assurance that there was no conceivable or inconceivable way that her room could catch fire, yet that did nothing to quell his doubts. Although, the exertion and stress, all in one day, was easily the most exercise he has had in fifty years. He closed his eyes for one seconds and was off like a light.

The next morning, he woke up to find that the foundation was still standing and in a non-combusting state. He never used to believe in miracles, until now.

Breakfast had been set up in the dining room. Plenty to eat and plenty of choice. Master D. Mind and his wife were the two occupants in the whole two hundred room mansion, so it made no sense to have one of those exceedingly long dining room tables with two seats at either end. Nope. They had two, one for each of them, which made passing the peas all the more awkward.

There were not enough chairs to seat all of them so some improvising was in order. Anything that could be sat on was pulled into the dining room. Stools. Rocking chairs. Beanbags. Chests. If it was strong enough to support someone’s weight, then it sufficed.

Lord Grill scanned the faces around the tables, finding his servants, his guards, even his wives there. They had been liberated from his oppression, as they phrased it, yet still stuck around for reasons outside his comprehension. Likely, it was because they had nowhere to go. Amongst all the face, there was no sign of Undyne’s anywhere. She had either already left, or she was hidden somewhere around the complex. Both possibilities were equally terrifying.

Master D. Mind, the master of the household, approached him, “Lord Grill? A moment in private?”

Grill followed D. Mind into his living room. The fireplace was empty and devoid of all traces of ash and burned materials. It looked like it had never been used, yet the feeling of warmness dawdled in the air. The books on the shelves were alphabetised and every ornament was spotless.

“What is it?” Lord Grill queried.

Master D. Mind stepped over to the coffee table and grabbed a sheet of paper lying next to a glass ashtray. The grey ash filled to the brim was the accumulation of never being touched for fifty years. Ironic considering that everywhere else was immaculate. “I got this through the door this morning.” His voice was strained tight and kept low, as if this was a matter to be worried about.

Lord Grill took the sheet of paper and wasted no time looking at it. After what he had witnessed yesterday, there was no possible way that anything could frighten him anymore. At least that was until he glanced the human on it.

A human named Frisk, wanted for one million cloud coins. They read that name and were instantly horrified that they recognised it. The description made it worse. The crazy lady’s words rang in his ears.

“Is… something wrong?” Master D. Mind asked, noticing the look on the fellow lord’s face.

Lord Grill shoved the poster in Mind’s chest. “Destroy this poster. Right now.”

Master Mind glanced down at Grill’s hand against his chest, then back up at his face. “Grill?”

The bear’s fingers closed shut, scrunching the paper within. “You can’t let that demolitions expert see this.”
"You have one of those?"

"I’m talking about that terrifying fish monstrosity, you dolt!"

"Her? I thought you said she was your renovation agent."

"That’s what I just said."

"No, it wasn’t."

"Look, just destroy this before that crazy fish does to your mansion what she did – she’s right behind me, isn’t she?"

Master D. Mind didn’t even need to glance over Grill’s shoulder. “Since ten seconds ago.”

"How does she look?"

"A little miffed for some reason."

Already, Grill could feel Undyne’s presence, her gravity, her short temper, her very glare crawling on his back like all his sins in gluttony, greed, sloth, and lust. The one and only thing standing between her and the poster was himself. His plump body might as well have been made of glass.

"You can’t let me see what?" Undyne’s question made his spine freeze. What a surprise. Most people did not think he had one.

It was a split-second, do or die decision. Without thinking, Lord Grill shoved the wanted poster into his mouth and chewed on it like his life depended on it.

"By god, Grill…" Mind marvelled. The taste and texture of the paper was exactly how Grill imagined it: crumplly, dry, waxy, and tasteless. “At least chew with your mouth closed. Mind you manners whilst in Mineyor Manors.”

Undyne leaned over his shoulder and noticed his rapid jaw movement. “What’s that you’re eating just now?"

“What’s what?” Lord Grill mumbled, acting stupid.

Undyne grabbed his arm and span him around. “That piece of paper in your mouth.”

Grill slurred, “What paper,” and then swallowed it whole. It felt like some of it got stuck halfway down. He smiled and shrugged, trying to play it all innocent. “I don’t see any paper.” He quickly changed the subject. “Did you enjoy your breakfast?"

Undyne hummed suspiciously. “Tasted a little funny, but…”

“Then now would be an excellent time to start looking for that friend of yours.” Lord Grill went to wrap his arm around Undyne’s shoulders in a friendly and non-romantic way.

“Touch me and I’ll kill you,” she spoke with the same tone one would use when ordering takeout.

Grill promptly pulled his arm away and used his same arm to stroke the tuff of hair on his head. “Okey dokey,” he responded with all smiles and whatnot. The one agenda on his list was to send her packing as far away from him as possible. “Shall I escort you to the front door?"

Undyne was already making her move across the living room. “I’ll escort myself.”
From across the room, the door that Undyne was approaching squeaked open – the hinges still needed tending to – and out appeared Mistress R.E Mind.

“Honey,” she addressed her husband, “I don’t want to alarm you but I found this wedged under the doormat outside.” She showed a wanted poster. “I don’t suppose you’ve seen this already, have you?”

Undyne stopped and fixated on the paper in her hand. “Wait a minute. That looks like…”

Before she could make out anything else, Grill charged forth, snatched it away, and threw it greedily into his gob.

“Goodness me,” the mistress exclaimed, taken back.

“What the freaking heck?” Undyne barked. “Hey, I was reading that!”

With his jaw working wildly and the sweat forming under his fur, he said with a full mouth, “You were reading nothing. It was a figment of your imagination.”

Undyne rounded her shoulders and threw hands out in front of herself. “For Pete’s sake, you’re chewing on it right now!”

Lord Grill swallowed it whole. It may or may not have undammed the first one in his pipe. “Not anymore.” He followed up with an impatient tap on his broken wristwatch. “Every second you stay here is another you’ve wasted.”

“I…” Undyne clenched her fists, then relaxed them. Without saying another word, she stepped past both Grill and the mistress of the mansion and out into the hall.

The lord of the demolished Bjornliege Manor followed her out and watched with unfaltering concentration as she approached the entrance, pulled it open, then shut it behind herself. With her finally gone, he collapsed against the nearest wall, exhaling the biggest breath since yesterday.

Both Master D. Mind and Mistress R.E. Mind stood by the door frame. “What was all that about?” the husband asked.

Just as Lord Grill went to answer, the front door burst open. “WHO’S THE WISEGUY?” Undyne roared. A poster clenched in her fist. Just beyond those walls, outside that door, there was one plastered on every palm tree. Her steel glare went straight to the disgraced bear lord. “You!”

He wanted to run, but his leg would not permit him. He wanted to hide, but there was not a space anywhere in the Oasis that could shield a girth as generous of his. He wanted to cry for his mommy but she had passed on – to the island on the left.

Undyne was in his face. The anger sizzled off her scales. Her eye shooting tiny spears in his direction. “So… you’d be the first to know if a human appeared in these parts, huh? You better talk fast. Are you the one behind this?”

“No, no, absolutely not!” Grill waved his furry hands, jiggling the abundance of fat in his forearms. “I just learned about this now.”

“Who then?”

“It was written by Master Scribe Rickard, Emperor Maxus’s personal transcriber. He’ll be at Castle Highkeep, like always.”
“Then I guess I know where I’m going.”

Undyne span on her heels to leave, but was stopped by Grill. “W-wait!” he fretted. “Castle Highkeep is heavily guarded and Maxus himself is the fiercest warrior in all the lands. If you plan on giving him a piece of your mind, even you might be in for a big surprise.”

“Might I make a suggestion?” Mistress R.E. Mind spoke up, leaning out from the doorway. “The poster says that your friend is over in the Plain-plain. That’s not too far from here. If you go there, you may be able to find your friend yourself.”

Undyne stopped for a moment and thought about it. What was more important, finding Frisk or finding the monster who also wants Frisk? It was not just Frisk she had to worry about, but there was also Papyrus. And…

Alphys…

If anything happened to her, then she might just lose every shred of sanity she had. It was not just about the human anymore, but the ones she cared for. If anything bad happened to Frisk, their parents would be heartbroken. She held too much respect for Asgore to ever want to see him distraught.

The decision came to her. Castle Highkeep, and this Maxus guy, were not going anywhere. Frisk was out there somewhere, and she needed to find them.

Undyne, in a move that surprised the bear, flashed a sincere smile toward the owners of the manor. “That sounds like a good idea. Thanks for letting me crash the night. You guys are awesome.” She cocked her head around to meet the grizzly lord one more time. “And Grill? You still make my skin crawl… but thanks for the information,” she said. Before Grill could respond, Undyne stuffed the poster into his open mouth. “See you around, punk.”

Undyne made her exit, slamming the door with the same amount of force as when she opened it.

Three people remained: Lord Grill, Master D. Mind, and Mistress R.E. Mind; all left speechless, especially Grill. With a third wanted poster stuffed in his mouth, he realised that it did not taste too bad after all.

Bub returned to his home to find it empty, except for all the trash. The guest of honour had disappeared, most likely having gone off to look for that special somebody of theirs. He wished that the party would never end, but nothing good could last forever. He had watched too many boxsets to think otherwise.

He was sure going to miss Alphys. She was the most fun these parts had seen in a long time, with her mad karaoke skills.

“Director Bubsworth,” a voice echoed from the entrance. An aged foreman from the mines addressed him, holding a file bunched thick with paper. He was a pod of peas, his fancy green jacket holding his body together. “We’ve got a problem.”

“Don’t tell me, Peabody,” Bub started with a huff, “Canary Condor had the bread dream again?”

“Yes, but this is beside the point,” Peabody explained. “It involves the mines.” He opened the file up, flicking through sheets of data, charts and tables, spanning back years. “I’ve have a thorough
look through our records, keeping track of operations, the amount taken out, yadda, yadda, yadda, and I’ve made a discovery.”

Bub folded his stalk arms. This had better be good.

Peabody raised his round head. “The mines are long overdue their refill period.”

No surprise to him. Sometimes, it can take a little extra to warrant the change. “By about how long? A week? A month?”

Peabody frowned hard. “Try a year, Bubsworth.” This piece of news knocked the gruff out of his sails. “If the records are correct, then the mines are on the verge of depletion. Yet they are not refilling as they have done since the beginning. Plus, we’ve received reports of cave-ins on several dig sights.”

“How many?”

With a few more page flips, Peabody found his answer. “Eleven in the past week as opposed to one every five years. Some minor bumps and bruises, but nobody seriously injured.”

For the first time in a while, Bub felt concern in his mostly easy and uneventful life. “What does any of this mean?

Foreman Peabody closed the file and pressed it against his body. “I wish I knew, Bub. I wish I knew.” Bub heard it in his voice: he was afraid for what the future would hold. Change was coming, it could be smelled in the air, it was written in the stars, but he did not like to think what awaited them. For change was necessary, but never easy.

The closet door opened suddenly. Sans held the doorknob. His company, Alphys and Papyrus, behind him.

This place was a dump. Litter everywhere. A single room with one sofa, a jumbo television, and the front door lying on the floor. It looked familiar somehow. Alphys would have hated to have spent the night in that cesspit.

Oh, wait. She did.

“Sans, we’re coming out of the closet again,” Alphys said. “Oh, hey, Bub.”

Papyrus looked disgusted about something. “That… There’s something about that statement that sounded so wrong…”

“Oh,” Sans replied with his fingers tightening on the doorknob. He had already taken this shortcut. “This might take a while…”

“Hold on a sec.” Alphys stopped Sans from shutting the door. “Thanks for, uh, not eating me, Bub. Y-you’re a swell guy. Um, take care of yourself. And clean up a little around here – if you want to, that it.”

Finally, Sans closed the door, shutting everyone inside. New shortcut.
Another day, another cloud coin. The train director of Winter’s Edge, armed with his trusty azure clipboard and azure pen, stepped onto the platform, ready to tick off each item as it was accounted for. Escaping the confinement of his office was the best part of his job. He always looked forward to the next train arrival, just so he could feel the tingle of sun on his scales.

Further down the stretched of baking concrete to his left, the few passengers disembarked. They looked a little worse for wear. A kettle, cocooned head to toe in thick rope, hopped down the platform while accompanied closely by another kettle who worked away at the bindings with a plastic knife that barely had a blade left. A shell-shocked hedgehog steward carried the conductor who appeared a little too rigid to be overworked. A fuzzy monster who twitched at sporadic intervals, sparks of electricity jumping between his hairs. And a bushy moustached gentleman who looked completely fine, walking upright with his briefcase gripped firmly in his left hand.

The crew inspected the condition of the cars. One train car damaged. One digger missing. Several shipments destroyed beyond recognition. Most of the post and packages gone. One crew member unaccounted for.

And the director thought today was going to be a bad day.

It was no big deal. Such loses were commonplace along that route. After checking the stock, he will dispatch the pick-up crew to scavenge what they can from the Shattered Zone, including that missing chef.

His assistant climbed into car A8, which had avoided damage, at least on the exterior. The director had no qualms with sending the assistant in as it gave him more time to bask in the soothing sunshine.

“Okay,” the assistant called, his voice just about audible from out the open door. “Three crates of jellied asparagus.”

The train director skimmed down the list with the ballpoint of his pen. “Check,” he announced as he ticked it off. As in he wrote a tick in the allocated box and not made the list angry.

“Two crates of sandwich clubs.”

“Check.”

“Three crates of bread bricks.”

“Check.”

“And one sleeping beauty?”

The train director automatically scanned his list for one sleeping beauty. He searched the current list and the one underneath, but could not find it. “Must’ve slipped past customs.” It clicked. His head snapped upright. “Hold on, one sleeping beauty?”

The assistant poked his head out from the door. “Come see for yourself.”

So he did. After slipping the pen behind the clip and tucking the board under an arm, he followed his subordinate. Stepping into the car, he was welcomed by the lavish gestures the assistant made toward
the floor, as if he were afraid that his superior would trip over the unconscious lady in black.

Barb the Bounty Hunter slumbered in her drugged stupor. Her head rested on a pillow, which explained the one pillow short from the container a couple up. A blanket had been draped over her body, starting from her ankles and ending below her chin.

“This is the bounty hunter,” the director stated, wincing at the prospect that she of all people went to bed in this train. “What’s she doing here?”

The director turned to his assistant for answers, but all he can do was return the gaze with a shrug. He rolled his eyes to the ceiling. The question was embarrassingly obvious.

The superior resumed the conversation with a point at the bounty hunter. “Well, we can’t just leave her here. Let’s get her in into the office and wait until she wakes up.”

What could be said about Winter’s Edge? It was a remote village that served as a hub for travellers and workers many years ago. At the time, business at Winter’s Edge boomed while Ice Island still had business to go around. It was best known for its sprawling views to the southwest. Ironically, despite its name and its proximity to the arctic lands a few hundred metres away, there was nothing remotely wintry about Winter’s Edge.

Exiting the station positioned Frisk straight north, facing three roads stretching in three directions: north, east, and west. The centre buildings flanking the road straight ahead looked like cafeterias and hotels similar to the one they stayed in back in Parfocorse.

Cottages littered the outskirts along the separate roads; homes of stone and thatched roofs, with windows of stained glass where pies were left to cool. Each and every one looked so inviting, so rustic and homely, like Frisk could just choose one and live there forever.

Frisk gazed up at the snowy lands above and beyond the roofs. The precipice stretched for miles both ways like the rim of a giant plate. The white and green trees shook away their layers of icing and the falling snow was endless, but none of it touched the Plain-plain. The proximity between the springtime village and the land of eternal winter was nothing short of bizarre, especially when neither one affected the other.

At the end of that path, they could make out a rising bridge that connected both floating islands together.

There was no point in hanging around here, not when the day was still young and the guard were still on their scent.

They followed the cobblestone path north through the quiet village, encountering few people as they passed. Monsters enjoying the sunshine, a nice drink, a delicious snack, or all three in no particular order. A few buildings were boarded up, their signs irrecoverably scarred from time. The abandonment of Ice Island left its mark on the village.

With the measly sum of coins jingling in their pocket, they could just about afford a cup of hot cocoa, without a marshmallow or whipped cream or the heat or even the cocoa.

As they walked, their equilibrium played havoc with their balance. They swayed and bounced like they were still on the train, catching the leagues of asteroids hurtling toward them with every blink. It felt like, at any moment, the Plain-plain was going to corkscrew spin on them. At least the added
nausea would stave off hunger for a few hours.

The rising bridge was not too far. A short, five minute walk across a field of grass and trees and flowerbeds with all the green trimmings. The beds needed tending to; some of the flowers were withering away.

The bridge to Ice Island was not a bridge at all. It was a staircase. As they drew closer, they realised that it was not a staircase at all, but escalators. Four lines of grated metal steps with rubber handrails, just like the ones seen in malls, two going up and two going down. In the centre was a flat platform, some kind of stopping point where the rest of the platform connected with another quartet of moving stairs.

Beside the foot of the escalators lay a cozy bungalow, and between those stood an empty kiosk. The term ‘kiosk’ was a generous name, more like six boards of wood hammered together to form a stall some kid would use to sell lemonade on, with one or more letters written backwards for that ‘hip’ and ‘trendy’ style, when in reality they got a D- in English. The kiosk was empty and had not seen any usage in a long time, but it looked clean and wellkept. There was no dust and not a crumb on the surface, nor were any dust bunnies or dust hares or dust lops hiding in the corners.

The stall face read: *The supplier is out.* The word ‘out’ was behind a rectangular slot, indicating that it was interchangeable.

There was a notice set upon the kiosk bench. A white sheet of paper set up on a plastic stand. After taking a few steps closer, the sign read:

> To those of you who wish to take the challenge, first, let me just say one important thing:

> What is wrong with you?

> Seriously, you’re absolutely insane. If you know what’s good for you, you’ll get rid of whatever get-rich-quick cash grab you got festering in that tiny mind of yours and go home to get a real job.

> There’s nothing to be found over there, and if you think you’re different, just remember: so did all the other monsters who tried before you.

> Go home. Get a decent, well-paying job. Make your living the honest way, you cheapskate or cheapskates.

> If that warning did not faze you, and you’re still adamant about hiking through Ice Island, then please talk to Birgir the supplier. In the event that Birgir the supplier is not present (very likely), please knock on the door to the house on your right. In the event that Birgir the supplier is not present in the house on your right (moderately likely), try again later.

-Mngmt

Rude. But at the same time, something that Frisk should look into before heading up those escalators. They approached the front door to the rustic, little house. Nothing ominous or haunted about this joint, just a single-story house with a two front windows and a tall door that was painted to match the snow up high. Frisk gave it a knock and waited, pre-emptively looking up to face the owner when or if he answers. Several seconds later came the click of a lock being disengaged, followed by the twist of the doorknob before being pulled open.

“Hi…” someone said, but Frisk could not see them. “Down here.”

They tipped their head down and saw the home owner through the crack in the door. The monster,
who they guessed was Birgir, stood shorter than them by at least three inches. He had a straight, stone face that looked like a mask and wore a loose-fitting black t-shirt and baggy tartan pants over an equally rock-like skin. No shoes or socks. Pyjamas, most likely.

“You’re…” he said. Hesitation was written in his voice, but not in his unchanging face. “You’re a little far out to be selling cookies, don’t you think…?”

Frisk replied that they wanted to go up to Ice Island.

“Of course you do. I mean, yeah. Looks like we got ourselves another challenger. Haven’t had one of those in… forever.” He leaned out and pointed to the kiosk beside the escalators. “Wait over there and I’ll be with you in a couple of minutes.” With that, he shut the door in Frisk’s face.

Confused, Frisk remained idle in front of the door before wandering over to the stall. What was he talking about with them being ‘another challenger’? They propped their elbow on the top and slumped their chin on their palm as they waited, drumming their fingers against their cheekbone.

Three minutes later, the scuffling noises of a door opening and shutting came from behind the building. The man of the house emerged, lugging in his possession a plump rucksack. He walked backwards, dragging it behind him. He reached the stall, propped it against the inside wall, then ran back behind the house.

Another minute later, Birgir emerged, this time with a thick, blue puffer coat over his head, topped with a pair of waterproof shin guards, a few winter hats and pairs of gloves – some of which fell to the ground. He returned to the sanctuary of his stall and set them down against the side opposite the bag. All the while refusing to make eye contact with the supposed next challenger of whatever little game he was playing.

Frisk thought that maybe now this monster would address them, but he quietly reached under the counter and flipped the last word of the sign from ‘out’ to ‘in’. The sign now read: The supplier is in. There was no way Frisk would ever know that had he not changed that one word.

Birgir pulled out a stool from under the counter – the legs forming knots on the perfectly flat floor – and took a moment to balance himself on it, bringing himself a foot taller than the human.

The supplier cupped his hands on the counter, remained silent for a second, and then finally said, “Before we go any further, I think you should know one thing.” He reached into the pocket of his pyjama bottoms and yanked out a folded piece of paper. After opening it up, he set it down on the top. “I know who you are.”

It was their wanted poster.

Frisk did not know how to take this, especially regarding how straight forward he was presenting this revelation to them. Did he not care about the reward, or were they staging an elaborate trap? Did this guy call the guards and the whole preparation was his way of stalling for time? While they were waiting, it could have given the Monster Military ample opportunity to formulate behind them and strike the moment Birgir gave the signal. They shot a quick glance over their shoulder. Nothing except grass, trees, flowers, and the clear edge of the Plain-plain.

“Don’t worry. Your secret’s safe with me.” Birgir folded the poster back up and shoved it back into his pocket. “Even though I should call the guards, I’m going to be frank with you: I’ve still got a job to do, and it’s kind of been a really long time since I’ve last did it. So here’s the deal: after our business is done, I’m going to forget I ever saw you. Got it?”
Frisk nodded. That was a deal they could agree with.

“Good,” Birgir said. “Because chances are, nobody else is going to see you again either. Now that we’ve got that out of the way, are you sure that you want to travel through Ice Island?”

Frisk took a look at the snow-capped lands above, catching glimpses of flakes breaking across the cliff face. Nobody else was going to see them again either? First the sign was discouraging them, now this guy.

They asked whether there was something about that island they ought to know.

Birgir the Supplier rested his knuckles on the counter. “You don’t know? I mean, of course you don’t know.” He braced himself on both hands and sighed. “Man, have I got a story for you, kid.

“Hundreds of years ago, that island used to be a winter wonderland – I mean, it still is now, but nobody lives there anymore. It used to be one big mining colony, with beehive tunnels under the mountain that ran for miles. During the war, it was a pretty big foothold to the rebellion. They were the ones who wanted to return to Earth. This was one of the hardest places hit. Supply routes were cut. Towns were attacked. Eventually, all the evacuations took their toll, leaving the island without a soul remaining.

“After the war ended, it was said that the cost was so high that mining operations could not continue, that and people had lost faith in its safety. However, people still insisted on making trips through the island, either to get from here to the Forest, or from the Forest to here, or just to enjoy the sights. It was faster than going all the way around. We set up these stalls to supply travellers with equipment and provisions. People paid for them, and received a percentage back upon returning or reaching the other side. Day in, day out, we had a steady stream of travellers. We had a routine and it worked. People got their supplies, headed out, and returned a while later.

“But then one day… monsters who travelled into Ice Island stopped returning. They would turn up, get their stuff, venture out like normal, but never make it back. Weeks, months, and years passed, and yet none of them have returned. Friends and family who went in after them disappeared too, and even a fully armed squad from the Monster Military were sent in to investigate at one point. Twenty sturdy souls… and not a single one has come back yet.

“To this day, Ice Island is the unsolvable mystery of the Outerworld. A thousand rumours surround it, each detailing a thousand terrible, gruesome fates that fell upon those who vanished. Nobody ever enters, and nobody every leaves…

“All right me to ask you again. Are you absolutely, positively, one-hundred percent sure that you want to do this?” Birgir crossed his finger against his chest. “I won’t think any less of you if you back out.”

Frisk, once more, turned from the supplier to the next island over. Their mind wandered with everything imaginable that could be causing this epidemic, and wondered whether they would suffer the same fate, and if they were able to do what all the others could not.

Their determination was still on the fritz. No going back if they made the wrong move. No retries if the misfortune that took those who proceeded them falls upon them.

Their thoughts turned once more to home, to family and friends on the Earth’s surface. Had they the choice, they would rather be there than trapped up here where everyone was trying to either capture or kill them.
Frisk faced Birgir and, with nothing but certainty in their heart, nodded with a scowling face.

“Okay then,” Birgir the supplier said. “How much do you want to wager?”

Frisk raised an eyebrow. Wager?

“Yep, wager. Because nobody wanted to risk the trek, we ended up changing it from a payment to a wager. Make a bet of as much money as you want and if you make it to the other side…” He placed extra emphasis on ‘if’. “You’ll get fifty times that amount back, with extra depending on what equipment you make it with, like the quality of your clothes and gear, and the number of rations left unused. It did rope in a few bettors… all of which have yet to cash in on their winnings. So, what’s it gonna be?”

Frisk retrieved their limp money pouch. They untied the string on top and tipped it upside-down, pouring the remaining five white coins in front of him. If there was nothing left on that island, then saving their pennies made no sense.

Birgir snorted a chuckle. “Really going big there,” he said sarcastically. “Nonetheless, a bet is a bet.” The supplier slid the cloud coins into a waiting hand, then reached under the counter and drummed away at some kind of register. The buttons made loud, clicking noises as he punched them, followed by the slid and thud of the tray and the churn of a receipt. He emerged with a clean strip of paper that he handed to the challenger. “Here is your betting slip. Present this to the travel counter at the Forest’s entrance and you win.”

Next, he reached down and heaved the loaded black and purple rucksack onto the top with a strong thump. Roughly Frisk’s size, its waterproof fibres bulged with a full belly. Three objects were strapped to the outside; two metallic sticks with hook spikes on the left side, a rolled up bag on top, and a rectangular sheet of folded fabric on the right side. He pointed to them in that order: “Here are two ice picks, a thermal sleeping bag, and a self-assembling tent.” He turned the bag and opened the flap with the same tact of a game show assistant showcasing prizes. “Here are two ice picks, a thermal sleeping bag, and a self-assembling tent.” He turned the bag and opened the flap with the same tact of a game show assistant showcasing prizes. “Inside, you’ll find four days’ worth of provisions, a compass, map, rope, matches, multi-tool, flask, and this handy-dandy portable radiator.” He reached inside and slotted out a flat square object with vents on the corners and a button interface built into the face. “This is some fancy tech, hot off the press. Interacts with the magic all around us, turn this environmentally-friendly baby on in any enclosed space and in a minute or two you’ll be nice and toasty.”

He placed the heater back and shut the flap, both pulling the strings tight and clicking the plastic buckles together. He pushed it toward Frisk and reached for the piles of clothes.

“One-size-fits-all junior’s winter coat. I figured you’d like a colour that matches your clothes.” Birgir set it down beside the bag then reached for the rest. “One pair of waterproof shin guards. And you get to choose between a selection of gloves, hats, and scarfs.” He laid them out in neat pairs as he announced them. All of them were of various colours and patterns. “We’ve got your regular colours in either dark blue, brown, or black. We got them in stripes, with multi-coloured shapes, and this hat with these adorable little panda ears.” He pinched the black and white woolly cap by its semi-circle ears and made it dance, making childish noises in the process. It came with a disclaimer on the tag: *No actual pandas were harmed in the making of this hat.*

Frisk ignored his silly behaviour. As if rebelling against his pandering, they picked out a matching pair of hat and gloves, both black. When choosing a scarf, they went for a black scarf with green stripes and tassels but stopped upon catching wind of the one next to it, knitted from red wool. The colour may have been a shade or two out from the one Papyrus donned, but other than that, it was almost identical. They took it.
“Good choice. You’re now ready to go on your little expedition into the unknown. To boldly go where no human as gone before.” Birgir rounded the stall. “Allow me to escort you to the changing platform. It’d just up these escalators.”

Frisk shouldered the rucksack, feeling its weight for the first time. Hefty, but not enough to be debilitating; roughly the same weight as their school bag on Thursdays. They scooped the clothes into their arms and followed Birgir across the clearing, over to the escalators. He took the second on the right. Frisk stayed beside him, taking the furthest right against their better judgement.

The slow rise upwards to the centre platform took two whole minutes to reach, and the human felt every single one of those one-hundred-and-twenty seconds. The drop did not get easier the more they looked. Crossing the gap between the hovering lands, out in the open air, yet the construct did not shake by so much as a quiver.

Reaching the centre, they came to a flat platform with the width and length of a tennis court, paved with white tiles that bore the marks of footprints decades old. Halfway across, a straight red line had been painted from one end to the other, splitting it into two equal parts. On the left side of the platform, before the line, stood a rectangular building with two visible entrances. Oddly, despite standing between islands, there were no barriers of any kind. No guardrails or walls were present to stop people for falling off.

Birgir could see how apprehensive the stranger was to the ways of the Outerworld by how they avoided the edges. “Hey, want to see something cool?” he asked. “Let me borrow that sleeping bag a moment?”

Frisk set their stuff down and Birgir unstrapped the tightly bound bedroll. Holding it by the strap, he approached the edge, encouraging Frisk to follow them, ensuring that nothing bad would happen.

Reluctantly, the human child followed, sliding the soles of their boots harder against the ground the closer they got, stopping just shy of the end. This monster may have been a native to this world, and his home may have teetered so close to the literal end of the world, but Frisk struggled to comprehend how he could remain so calm before such a drop.

Without a care in the world, Birgir tossed the bag over the side.

Both watched as the bag fell, somersaulting end over end toward the planet below. All Frisk could think about as their sleeping bag grew smaller was whether he could give them another. It disappeared from view as if the clouds beneath swallowed it whole.

“Wait for it…” a whisper escaped Birgir’s stone mouth. His sights still aimed at where it was last seen.

They saw it. Frisk could not believe their eyes. A dot appeared and grew with every passing second. It was the sleeping bag, coming back up, spinning in the same manner as when it plummeted. Birgir opened his hands out and the bedroll landed right into them as firmly as catching a football.

“Pretty neat, don’t you think?” Birgir said. An answer came in the form of the surprised look upon the human’s face, which was all he needed. “I thought so.” He strapped the bag back in its place. “Unlike the barrier keeping those poor saps trapped under that mountain down there, this one protects us all the way up here, both from any human trying to get in and any monster who accidentally falls out.”

Frisk went red in the cheeks. This information would have been super-duper handy to know when they were holding on for dear life back in the Shattered Zone.
Birgir gestured to the clear red line on the floor, swaying his hand from end to end. “This is the border between the Plain-plain and Ice Island. Before you cross it, I’d recommend using the changing rooms over there.”

He motioned to the only structure present. Above each entrance was a sign – the left was the image of a stick figure with three scales on the head and a curved tail. The right image was the same except the stick figure was wearing a triangle for a skirt. Frisk applied their knowledge of the human world to those signs. They were changing rooms, the left for men and the right for women.

The supplier continued, “These facilities will provide you with privacy as you change.” He turned his gaze toward the human, eager to solve a little mystery nagging away at him since he and… them… first met. “Go ahead and choose to one you…”

He stopped. Frisk had already donned the shin guards, wrapped the scarf around their neck, and was in the process of putting on the coat, over their shirt.

Birgir would frown but his face would not allow it. “Or you can just get changed right here, out in the open. Why not, right? It’s not like they paid good money to build those rooms. It wasn’t my money, but still!”

Frisk zipped the coat up to their chin, tucking the scarf under it. Lastly came the gloves and hat. With all the clothes donned and the pack on their back, the little human appeared to be ready for school on the snowiest day of the year. Standing on the Plain-plain side of the line, they quickly began to heat up like the water in a kettle.

Frisk walked up to the border until the tips of their boots were an inch before it. They stuck their hand over the divide and immediately felt an icy chill latch onto it, like sticking a hand in the freezer on a hot, sunny day. Frisk withdrew it and the country air tended to it, filling it with warmth.

Birgir’s insistent warnings returned, this time with added solemnity. “I’m going to ask you this one last time. Are you sure, sure on your very soul that you want to do this? I’ve got no problems escorting you back down and giving you a full refund if you’ve got second thoughts.” From the sound of his voice, he had hoped that the contender would chicken out. “This is your last chance to back out because once you step over that line, there’s no guarantee that you’ll ever come back, and if you suffer the same fate as every single monster who went before you, nobody will come to your rescue.”

The second set of escalators over the clear red line awaited, ready to transport them to the frozen world above – a metaphorical stairway to heaven. Frisk took a deep breath, clenched their hands tight, and stepped over the line. One second the layers were making them boil, the next, they were protecting them from biting, sharp cold. Birgir remained on his side, partly because he was not protected in his jim-jams, and mostly because he was afraid of what horrors awaited on the other side.

Alone, Frisk stepped the rest of the way to the second set of escalators. The closer they got, the colder the air grew. Birgir stood anxiously, now wishing that he had alerted the authorities to the human. Whatever fate awaited the child in Castle Highkeep would have been much better than the one up those stairs. He wanted to rush toward them, but his own fears forbade him.

Another promising life, going down the drain before his eyes. He had seen it too many times, some who he was happy to see go, others he had neutral feelings about, and then there were those he wished he could stop, like the kid wandering off to their doom. If only he knew what awaited them over there, but alas, nobody returned to tell the tale.
Frisk had their foot over the moving steps when Birgir spoke out. “One more thing: if you want to get through the island in record time – and who doesn’t? – find the mines.” He tried to act cool as if this was another day at the office, but they could detect the grating to it. “Going around Black Ice Mountain will take you a few days, you’ll probably lose a few toes in the process…” He stopped to clear his throat. “But if you take the mines through the mountain, you can reach the Forest in less than a day. There’ve been rumours of people reaching the other side in sheer hours thanks to the tunnels. Although… none have done that recently.”

Frisk looked at the supplier, smiled, nodded, and thanked them for the advice before taking the next big step that transported them upwards.

“Nice knowing you, human,” Birgir bade his farewell.

The human child’s heart increased tempo as they ascended into the unknown. They were halfway up when the first flakes of snow fluttered all around them. The colour of the sky shifted from the cosy summertime blue to a cold, emotionless shade of grey that blotted out the sun.

Frisk reached the top and stepped off onto the untouched floor one foot before the snow.

Here they were: Ice Island. The next step of their journey had begun.

They felt like they were stepping out the door to the ruins all over again, only this time the snowy world on the other side was much less inviting.

A signpost stood crooked in front of them, the writing too smothered in snow to read. The threshold of a great wood lay with snow-capped tops and shadowy canopies, broken by two paths that had not seen visitors in a long time. Above it all, Black Ice Mountain’s size and form put Mount Ebott to shame.

A steady fall of flakes drifted from the grey sky, forming and melting on their head and shoulders. The air they breathed formed an ice cube in their throat. Their exhalations condensed into puffs of white.

They looked back. From where they stood, they got a fantastic view of the Plain-plain – of those roaming green fields. It looked beautiful from afar, but the grass is always greener on the other side. Prickly grass. Trees that felt like rubber. Flowers that smelled like cheap aftershave. Earlier, they thought that they would be happy to get away from it, but Ice Island was giving them second thoughts.

The sight of such a cold and desolate place filled them with determination. Too bad it would not help them if they ran into the same trouble those before them encountered.

Just as the old saying goes: out of the frying pan, into the freezer.

As they stepped across the lands of Ice Island, Frisk tried to block out the loneliness by comparing it to Snowdin. They remembered giggling at Sans’s whoopy cushion in the hand joke, and the hilarity that was Papyrus attempting to catch them with the same efficiency of Wile E. Coyote trying to capture Roadrunner. They looked back in triumph as they petted the Royal Guard into submission and had fun kicking about that snowball into the golf hole.

This place, on the other hand, had none of that. No fun. No laughter. Nothing but the unnerving shake of branches all around and the crunching underfoot.
The snow itself was not how they remembered it either. It was crisp like snow, cold like snow, wet like snow, but it was not real snow. Fake, like everything in these lands. It had a texture similar to that of polystyrene. They were unable to shake the feeling that they were walking on flattened coffee cups and burger boxes.

On they hiked. Frisk’s exposed knees grew goosebumps on their goosebumps while the rest of them was warm and dry. They lost the sensation in their nose. The straps of their bag dug in their shoulders; the contents weighting them down, clicking away inside and out. They followed a trail as they led the human through scores of whitened pine trees. The silence in the air made it feel like they were the last person alive in all existence.

Time lost all meaning. It was either an hour or maybe five minutes, but the effort of trekking uphill through snow with added weight on their back took its toll. Frisk covered a dip and found a tree stump topped with a thin layer of snow, alongside a thicket of bushes. After brushing it away, it made for a decent place to sit and rest for a bit.

Their journey in this island had just begun and already they were losing a multiplier off their bet. They dug through their bag and found a small box, labelled Calorie Pal. High in calories. Low in shameless name spoofing. Unboxing the treat revealed two shortbread bricks that looked edible, if nothing else. They smelled better than they tasted.

Off in the distance over the treetops, visible from their spot along a line of forest, lay the hollow remnants of what was once a town. The small buildings were once cosy, with windows glowing orange and threads of white wisps rising from chimneys, now buried up to their roofs in white. As Frisk finished the first biscuit, they contemplated what they wouldn’t give for a cinnamon bunny, a bisicle, and a steaming mug of hot chocolate right now, all while bundled up next to a crackling fire.

They took the second biscuit and began working on that. The shortbread was dense, each mouthful took considerable effort to chew. In the vacuum of silence, every sound intensified. They were able to make out each individual chomp against their teeth. The squeak of air going in and out of their nostrils. The crumple of their coat with every slight movement. The crunching of footsteps from the woodlands to their right.

Wait. Footsteps?

Frisk jumped off the stump. Their half-eaten ration slipped from their fingers, landing chomped side up in the snow. From within the dark underbrush, they could clearly hear them. Fast footsteps. Running. Coming toward them, darting around trees, overlapped with twigs snapping. Frantic breathing.

A figure emerged. Frost was plastered all around him, on his bill, around his grey feathers, and on his red puffer jacket – the make and model suspiciously similar to Frisk’s. He came to a halt against a tree upon seeing the human. Dark, delirious eyes stared through them.

“Are you…? No, no, please tell me you’re fake.” The duck monster waddled over, arms outstretched. “Please don’t be real… Please don’t be real…”

Frisk stumbled back, creeped out by winged hands reaching toward them. At the last moment, they tried to run, but the stranger caught them by the arm. His other hand went straight to their face, prodding at the roundness in their cheeks, the stubbiness of their nose, and strands of their brown hair.

His breathing grew heavier. “You’re not fake. You’re real and… you’re a human. You shouldn’t be here.” Suddenly, he grabbed Frisk by the shoulders and shook them, yelling directly in their face.
“You shouldn’t be here, you stupid, stupid child! You can’t! You gotta get out of here! Run away, before—”

The stranger whipped his head to the side, scanning the trees around him. Frisk had not heard anything, but the duck monster acted aloof. His hands dug into their shoulders.

“He’s coming… He’s coming.” With no warning, he shoved the human and their bag into a nearby shrub. They landed on their backside. “Hide here. Don’t you dare move a muscle. If he catches you, he’ll never let you leave. No matter what happens to me, don’t come out until the coast is clear, then get out of here as fast as you can.”

He backed away from the bush. The two locked eyes for the longest time. With a regretful sigh, he pulled away and grabbed a stick off the ground.

The duck twisted in every direction as if scanning the trees for a target. He screamed at the silence, daring whoever or whatever was out there to try and take him, sporadically swinging the stick at empty air.

Frisk watched as he turned in every direction on his heels, not sure what to expect. For a full minute, he threatened dead air. Frisk expected something to come charging out of the woods, like some snarling beast or a group of raving barbarians, but the only sounds were those of the monster before them, masked under his wild threats.

He formed a deep groove in the ground. The tenacity of his threats dwindled and his grip on his makeshift weapon lessened. Yet still nobody else was present except him, and also his shadow.

Frisk did not see it at first… then they saw it.

His shadow was stretching out behind him, elongating further from his ankles. Then, it grew upwards, taking the form of a physical mass. It rose taller and taller until its height eclipsed the shorter monster. Frisk witnessed the crushing moment in his eyes when he realised that the thing he was fleeing from was behind him. Yet he did not turn around.

The shadow began to form, each part taking shape. Two arms; grey claws with two fingers and a thumb on each. Two legs; as straight and defined as chiselled marble. A lean body with a definite tone of muscle. A reptilian tail that stretched to the ground. Clothes, fancy ones, all immaculately kept. A white button-down shirt with the sleeves rolled up and a black tie under a grey dress vest with a golden watch chain hanging from one of the pockets. Grey dress pants, perfectly ironed, and shiny black leather shoes that stood above the snow as if he were weightless. The head formed, bringing his entire frame to exactly six-feet in height. His long face and cold-blooded smile were that of a komodo dragon, with a head of perfectly groomed and slicked back chocolate brown hair and a devilishly suave moustache and goatee. His eyes formed with a golden flash, highlighting the traces of yellow in his red irises.

His smile was wide with enjoyment. Hands deep within pockets. His back was straight, holding no slouch whatsoever. His eyes filled with a dreadful sense of glee. His chuckle was low, a mere foot behind the terrified straggler. A forked tongue tasted the terror in the air.

“Going so soon, Kenny?” His voice was deep and fear-invoking, yet as smooth and suave as melting chocolate and the last of the summer wine. It made every feather stand on end. “We haven’t even exchanged phone numbers yet.”

The shadowy figure raised his hand – the tip of his finger shone with a brilliant blue orb of light – and stabbed it into the centre of the duck’s spinal column.
The duck, Kenny, snapped upright. The branch slipped from his grasp. His bill opened, but no peep escaped his lipless mouth. Frisk watched, shocked, holding back all forms of movement and sound as ice grew around his feathers, starting from where the finger met his back. Ice spread over his body, enclosing him for head to toe.

Kenny’s valiant battle against this monster from the shadows lasted no more than five seconds, ending with him being frozen in ice. His face was locked in fear; eyes wide and gazing out lifelessly. Gazing at Frisk.

The smartly-dressed komodo dragon took playful steps around his victim, chuckling to himself, eyeing the frozen monster like an angler sizing up their catch of the day. His movements left no prints, nor did they alter the drift of snow falling around him. Not a single flake defiled his seamless appearance.

“Oh, how I do love me a good chase,” he said jovially. “Cleans the cobwebs out.”

Frisk clamped a hand over their mouth, stifling the whimper that wanted to escape. Their senses were going crazy, telling them to run as fast as they could. Fighting that urge was harder than sitting back and watching.

The shadowy stranger stood before Kenny and gazed into his eyes, which were stuck solid in the last place it was looking before oblivion seized them.

He hummed thoughtfully to himself, scratching the hairs on his chin. He whispered, “Where were you…?”

Frisk watched as he brought his hand up, pointed both fingers at the frozen monster’s eyes then traced them to the bush… and where they hid. He looked to the side and caught, in his peripheral vision, the half-eaten biscuit with fresh teeth marks.

His smile got brighter. “Well, well. I was starting to wonder when fresh meat was going to turn up.” He pointed at the ground and a blue laser shot from his fingertip.

A pillar of water erupted from the snow that froze instantaneous, followed by another in rapid succession. It shot across the ground, approaching whoever was hiding within that bush.

Frisk burst from the bush, diving to the side a split-second before their cover froze in a cascade of water and ice. They landed shoulder first, feeling the sheet of white crumple underneath them and the air leave their lungs.

The shadowy figure slowly turned to see his new friend. If he did not know they were there, they did now. “Been a while since we had new guests around here. Guess the outside world hasn’t caught on as much as I thought.”

Digging their hands into the snow, Frisk pushed themselves up onto their knees. Their kneecaps were chilled. Both of them made eye contact.

“Wait a minute…” His smile faded for a brief moment, then reappeared just as quickly. “Oh my goodness. Oh my goodness!” He stepped back and forth excited, clutching the back of his head in disbelief. “A human. I can’t believe it – a human! Here! Years I’ve waited for a new friend to arrive, and I get my very own slice of mankind. A rather small slice, but a slice nonetheless.

“Who might you be?” he asked, then immediately afterwards clutched his forehead. “Wait, don’t tell me.” He closed his eyes and searched the deepest recesses of his mind. “You have an… interesting name. A unique name. Something that sounds free, free-spirited. Begins with ‘F’… Frithswith!”
There was a pause. He remained still with his grin smeared across his face. “Nah, just kidding. Your name’s Frisk.”

Frisk jerked their head up, proving that he was correct.

As they rose, the figure cleared his throat into his hand. “So, what brings a creature from the real world to this little fantasy in the sky? I’m sure you’ve seen it yourself by now: a world created by magic pretending to be the real deal, and failing on every level. The food we eat, the water we drink, the air we breathe, the ground we walk on, the sights we see; all synthetic, constructed, and artificial. This world is one big illusion; one big daydream, and I am no different.

“For I am the illusion. I am the deception. I am the trick your eyes play on you. I am the icy chill on your back. I am… Vail. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Frisk.”

Frisk switched from Vail to the frozen Kenny, then back to Vail and asked what they did to him.

“He’s okay, just taking a little cryo-nap. He’s perfectly fine in there, trust me.” He accentuated his point by sliding his hand across the substance that trapped poor Kenny. “Since monsters are mostly made up of magic, my ice spells integrate with their physiology, rendering them nice and tranquil without hurting them.”

Frisk responded that they were not looking for any trouble, nor were they there to harm whatever system he had going on here. They just wanted safe passage to the Forest.

“Safe passage? You mean as in leave? Oh sweet child of mine, why would you ever want to leave such a wonderful place like this? A long time ago, I was just like you, stumbling around a bland and empty world, seeking meaning in my life yet finding no answers. But with the right mind-set, I was able to make this world a paradise that I’m proud to call home. And I know, given time, you will call it home too.

“I’ve made many, many friends – all of whom I’d love you to meet – but I’ve got a special place reserved just for that one extra special person who’ll be the greatest buddy in the whole wide Outerworld. I believe I’m looking upon that extra special person right now.

“When I’m finished with you, Frisk, any thoughts you have on leaving will become your worst nightmares. You’ll be having so much fun that you’ll never, ever want to leave. You’ll want to stay here and do nothing but be my best friend… forever.”

As fast as the speed of light, Vail zipped forward, stopping in front of the child. Frisk barely had time to gasp in fright before Vail nipped them by the shoulder of their coat and effortlessly lifted them off the ground. He brought his other hand up, the fingertip glowed with a blue light, the same one that turned Kenny into an ice cube.

“Time for you to take a long nap, sweetheart,” he murmured.

Desperately, Frisk pried and punched at the fingers latched to their coat, but his grip was as strong as titanium. If their show of defiance had any effect on Vail, he expressed it by smiling wider. The glowing fingertip drew closer to their chest, ready to encase them in ice. The more the distance narrowed, the more Frisk fought.

Vail’s finger was an inch away from Frisk’s chest when he stopped. “Wait,” he said as he pulled it away, extinguishing the orb. “Oh, of course. How silly of me.” Then dropped the child. “That wouldn’t be a clever idea, considering you’re a human and all. You got all that optimum body temperature and blood flow and all those organs rolling around in there. Freezing you wouldn’t go
down so well. It would start with a slight discolouration in the skin as the veins clam up and your lungs gasp for air, followed by some discomfort as your blood begins to chill, lowering that body temperature your kind are famous for, leading to a bout of extreme pain as your organs shut down one by one, including your heart.” He shook his head. “Some first impression that would be, am I right?

“They say that the dead make the best listeners, but whoever said that obviously never tried having a thoughtful conversation with one. Since I can’t freeze you, I guess I’m going to have to convince you to stay the hard way.”

All of a sudden, the sky above descended upon them, draping the bitter world in a veil of mist. Ice Island vanished under a shroud of thick fog, reducing the distance to twenty meters all around. Frisk was stunned by how rapidly their situation changed while Vail remained as still as his ice-covered friend.

“It doesn’t matter where you go, Frisk. You can go that way…” Vail pointed west. “Or that way.” Then in the opposite direction. “Or this-a-way.” He pointed both thumbs over his shoulders at the path that lay ahead. “Or back the way you came.” With a flick of the wrists, he pointed his hands like guns back the way Frisk had travelled. “Either way, you’re going one way…”

A gust of wind and snow flew in like a tidal wave, curving around the child but encircling both Vail and Kenny. His body fazed into the white. Frisk shielded their eyes as the gust attacked them with talons of sharp cold.

His last words were carried off in the wind. “My way.”

The gust lingered, then dissipated as fast as it came. Frisk unshielded their vision, and found that Vail had vanished all the same, along with his frozen captive.

Their sense of direction was completely lost; everywhere blanketed by grey, cold mist. The vastness of Ice Island was gone, not even the nearby wood could be seen, nor the pillars of ice, or the stump, the bushes, or their half-eaten snack. Frisk felt isolated from everything.

Their heart continued to race from the fate that they had just avoided. The danger was gone, but a chilling sensation in their gut told them that their nightmare had only just begun.

Birgir was right. This was a bad idea.

With shaking knees, Frisk continued onwards, flying blind. They walked on nothing but flat, even snow, running into no trees, rocks, signs, buildings, anything. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed. Nothing except flat ground.

The child feared that they had become lost when, up ahead, a dark apparition formed. A colossal wall of rock as high and as wide as the shroud would permit. The foot of Black Ice Mountain. In the centre, a large, black spot grew in clarity the closer they got. They found out that it was a cave, it must have been an entrance to the mines. Held up with rectangular frames of thick timber, saturated with lengthy icicles. To the side lay two mine carts with a discarded, blunt pickaxe resting against the one in front. Whatever contents they held were buried under years of fake white.

They remembered what Birgir said, and it gave them hope. Locate the mines and you can make it through in less than a day. The less time spend in this barren place, and with that scary guy, the better.

Frisk went to run, but stopped.
They saw him.

Vail. His back against the pillar on the right, with his arms folded and one foot propped back. He
turned the saw the human at the same time they did, almost as if he expected them all along.

His face lit up. This guy smiled more than Sans, and that skeleton never stops smiling. “Ah, you
made it.” Vail greeted, kicking off the pillar and opening his arms apart. “Step on in, kick your feet
up, make yourself at home!”

Frisk was as still as Kenny was when he got layered in ice. The shortcut was there, but so was him –
blocking the way similar to a dragon guarding his cave of gold. Was the risk worth it simply to save
a few minutes?

They did not think so. They turned to the right and continued parallel to the mountain face, walking
away from the mine.

“Where are you going, Frisk? The front door is over here.” Frisk ignored them as they hiked. Both
he and the cave were swallowed by the blanket of grey. “You’ll be back.”

There needed to be another entrance, one in which they could avoid Mister Friendly with. They
followed the rock wall, searching, hoping for another way in. They looked back at the footprints they
had left in their wake, acting as a trail for anyone to follow. Surprisingly however, Vail had not given
chase. Guess he was not that desperate for a new friend after all.

Two minutes later, another dark, empty hole appeared up ahead, digging into the rock. Frisk had
found it: another entrance to the mines.

Wait.

The sight of it was familiar. Too familiar. The two mine carts nearby, with the pickaxe budged up
against the first. The wooden arches, slicking with hanging spikes of ice.

The realisation was like a kick to the stomach.

It was the exact same cave entrance from before.

Vail was there, against the same log of wood, tossing a baseball up and down in his hand that
sported a catcher’s mitt. “You like baseball, right? All kids love baseball, I’ll even bet you’re the hot
shot on the little league team. How about a nice, friendly game with all of my friends?”

Frisk span on their heels and ran in the opposite direction, heading away from the mountain.

His voice echoed from behind them. “So… not a big fan, huh?”

The sprinted at full pelt, refusing to slow down for anything. Sweat formed under their thick
insulation. The falling snowflakes whipped against their face.

They tripped, stumbled, and fell, landing on their hands and knees. Staring down, they took a
moment to get their energy back, drawing in mouthfuls of cool air. Sweat and saliva stained the
snow.

Frisk pulled their gaze upwards. The sight before them made them wish they had heeded Birgir’s
warnings. Either there were two identical mountains with identical mine openings, or this was the
same one for the third time in a row.
The mine carts were there. The pickaxe. The frames. The icicles. And in the middle of it all, the sharply-dressed komodo dragon.

“Will the third time be the charm?” Vail’s familiar voice reached out and made their bones rattle. The baseball and glove were gone, replaced by a deck of cards that he flicked from hand to hand in impossible fashions, first across his chest, then over his head, then behind his back and around his tail. “Are you going to play nice now? I can do this all day.” Taking all the cards in one hand, he pushed them into his vest pocket. “You know what, how about I make the decision for you?”

Vail raised his hand and clicked his fingers together; the snap echoed outwards for miles on terrain that they could not see.

From far away, an indistinct rumble grew. Frisk stood their ground. The din rose and the ground quaked as if a stampede was heading their way. The mist around them turned from grey to a blinding shade of white.

A blizzard erupted out and slammed into the human with the force of a wrecking ball, throwing them to the ground. Snow mercilessly barraged into their body and exposed face, drowning them in white. Frisk struggled for breath, the air growing colder beyond their imagination. Their protective layers could not defend them from neither the onslaught nor the severe plummet in temperature.

Up ahead, the cave, which they turned away from, suddenly became their only chance of survival. Vail was there, waving the human to come to them.

Inch by agonising inch, Frisk crawled to the mine. With every second that passed, it felt like their body heat dropped by a degree. The tears that escaped their eyes froze on their cheeks.

Their body was tearing itself apart on the inside. The outside bared the intensity of a million knives stabbing into their skin. Frisk just wanted to crawl up and let it be over, but they pushed harder after glimpsing the colour of their scarf.

Coated everywhere in snow, shivering with cold, and exhausted, Frisk crawled inside the cave mouth, escaping the snowstorm. Both Vail and Frisk did the polar opposite actions: Vail raised his arms and cheered, Frisk collapsed.

“Way to go, kid, you made it,” Vail praised, smiling over the child. Frisk would retort, but they were too busy hyperventilating. “It may not look like much as first glance, but I can guarantee you, every turn will be the time of your life. You just take a moment to recuperate, and then the real fun begins. Tee-tee-eff-en.”

With that, Vail stepped out of Frisk’s sight. When they turned their head to follow his movements, he was gone completely, again.

Frisk remained flat on the ground until their breathing was under control and the numbness in their muscles went away. After minutes of waiting, both had dropped to reasonable levels. Frisk pressed both hands against the freezing stone and pressed down with all their might, wincing as they managed to straighten them. Working the feeling back into their legs, they shakily supported the torso they were attached to.

Back on their feet, the child inspected their surroundings. Behind them lay the cave mouth, leading back out into the lethal storm – an unsurpassable wall of white. No way were they going back out there, just crossing that short distance alone almost killed them.

Up ahead, the path curved to the right, lit up with scores of twinkling stones on both the walls and
ceiling. If they listened closely, they might have been able to catch the smallest echoes from beyond.

They had no choice. The only way was forward, deeper into the mines.

Frisk was the fly, and they had just entered Vail’s web.
The Veil

The twinkling of jewels and diamonds offered some slight amnesty from their situation – a beautiful, shining silver lining on a very large, very angry, very grey cloud right above their head, ready to drain its contents over them in a torrential downpour. The sheer satire of it all set in: once again Frisk had found themself trapped under a mountain, and must fight for their life if they ever wanted to see the sky again. Trapped under another mountain, a mountain which floated in the sky, a sky empire that they were also trapped in, serving two massive helpings of entrapment onto this child’s small plate, and they had no choice but to take it with a large pinch of salt.

They followed the tunnel where ever it went, it was either that or retrace their steps to the unpassable snowstorm outside. Whether they liked it or not, they were trapped in Vail’s domain. He could be watching their every move right now, taking note of their every action, reading their very thoughts, corralling them down a path of his choosing – into a waiting trap. The silence gave a small misconception that Frisk was going somewhere, when the actuality was that this could be the same path treaded by all those who came here before. Was this human different, or were they merely the next link in an already long chain?

Up ahead, around the next bend and against the cavern wall, words had been carved into the rock, made legible in the unearthly glow. Crudely scratched in, nary a single curved line to speak of.

*Not everything is as it seems*

Further graffiti revealed itself onwards, carved in a way that was both similar to the first sentence but also different.

*This place will play tricks on you*

*Ignore everything your mind tells you*

*You’re not actually thirsty*

Frisk was unable to grasp whether these markings were written by the same person or different people, but regardless, they all held the same meaning. They were warnings. The first two lines struck Frisk the most, that these very tunnels were not as they were or that they were pulling wool over their eyes. Did that mean that nothing here was real?

Did this mean that the snowstorm outside did not happen? Was it fake, a trick of the mind, merely a figment of their imagination? Because the brutal cold, the stabbing pain, the overwhelming agony as their body began to shut down – none of it felt false.

*You’re not actually thirsty,* as the last line suggested. The air was cool, thick with humidity, yet Frisk’s body cried for water. That small bottle of orange juice for breakfast was all the liquid they had drank today, since then having secreted their own body weight in sweat from all their exercise. No wonder they were so thirsty. They were constantly licking their lips, trying to coax moisture into them from their paper-dry tongue. They opened wide and drew in the moist air, hoping that enough of it would rub off in their mouth. Both attempts were futile.

The ruffling of their winter clothes drew them to their sleeves, where the wetness from the blizzard still clung, glistening the puffy outside and adding further proof that it was not an illusion. Frisk resorted to licking the leftover traces of snow off their arms, which turned the tide on their dehydration the same way a beaver dam would halt a tsunami.
Frisk stopped, threw their backpack off, and undid the top flap. They rummaged around inside in the hopes of finding liquid, discovering nothing except their dry rations and the empty flask. Taking the canister out, a thought crossed their mind that made them forget how hollow it felt. If packaged food grew on trees, then perhaps water poured from flasks? A longshot, but they were desperate enough to try anything at this stage. Frisk unscrewed the top and peeped through the spout, seeing only a circle of black. They tilted it above their mouth, hoping for sweet hydration, but got nothing.

From out the corner of their eye, Vail nonchalantly walked in on the embarrassing spectacle of a child trying to coax water from an empty flask, making them jump and almost drop the bottle. “Uh oh,” he smarmed, “looks like someone’s in dire need of a drink.”

There was no openings to the left, no evidence of hidden doorways, not even a mere peep to give away his entrance; he had simply appeared from nowhere. Vail crossed Frisk’s path, treading silent steps from one end to the other and showing no sign of slowing down as he approached the wall on the right.

“Lucky for you, I know just the place to wet your whistle.” Vail looked as if he were about to bump into the opposite side of the cave when he stepped onto it. Frisk was stunned as the dressed-sharp komodo dragon climbed upwards on his own two feet, sideways, gravity having no effect on him whatsoever.

Nothing about Ice Island was as it seemed, and Vail was the heart of it.

Frisk kept Vail in their sights as he casually followed the curve to the sparkling ceiling. They were determined to stop him from disappearing on them again.

Vail was upside-down, stuck like glue to the rocks above, yet showed no signs of being that way. His hair remained slicked to his head. His loose clothing gravitated toward the ceiling. He pointed his thumb over his shoulder at the length of cave behind him and said, “It’s exactly three miles down from here. Now, I’m sure you can get there all by yourself, but you look a little worse for the wear and – let’s be honest – it doesn’t sound too thrilling, right?”

Frisk divverted a tiny amount of focus away to bring their feet closer together, which were sliding further apart on the slippery floor.

Forgetting why they were staring at Vail, Frisk shot a look down at the ground and found it to be covered in ice. Stretching as far forward and as far back as they could see, the reflection of both the cavern ceiling and themselves replaced the gritty, stone ground that they had been treading for twenty minutes. The realisation to this sudden turn only made it slippler. Frisk stretched their arms out, fighting to stay upright, accidentally dropping their flask and kicking their rucksack out a couple of feet away from them.

Vail chuckled. “How about we spice things up a bit?”

All of a sudden, the nauseating feeling from their train ride through the Shattered Zone returned as the path ahead rotated downwards on them. They remained standing for a few metres, losing what little traction they had, as the gradient was gradual, struggling as it reached a moderate decline, and then tumbling onto their back as it went steep.

Their head whipped back, catching sight of Vail as he remained stuck in place, watching them slid away into the abyss below. “Sit back and enjoy the ride! You’ll be fine,” he said loud enough to hear before disappearing out of sight. “See you again soon!”

Helplessly, Frisk picked up speed on the ice, the chill from both it and the rushing air making the
supposedly fun slide a lot less so. Both their full rucksack and empty flask followed them downwards, spinning and occasionally bumping into the walls and each other. Frisk clawed at the ice with gloved fingers, but it was extremely smooth, more than enough to make it unnatural.

They glimpsed their bag as it span to their right and scraped the wall, all the contents packed in tight enough to stop them from spilling. Strapped to the side, opposite the self-folding tent, the dual ice picks clinked away, drawing attention to themselves. The metallic hooks sparked in the passing spectrums of light. Rolling onto their belly, Frisk reached out, hoping to snatch anything they could. The bag hit the wall, span, lost speed and slid further back up the slide, out of their grasp. Their attempts at flopping closer were as fruitless as swimming through a vacuum.

The flat floor curved upwards around the walls, then to the ceiling, smoothing over all the bumps, creating a slippery black hole in which the human could not escape from. The tunnel spiralled indiscriminately and so did they. Their stomach contents rose to the top, verging on escaping from their mouth.

Darkness swallowed them.

And then Frisk wasn’t moving anymore. It was more sudden then how it started, and both instantaneous and painless. They did not feel the slide flatten out or themself lose momentum, they just… weren’t moving anymore, lying on their bag, gazing up at the stars.

Sitting up, they found themself no longer in a never-ending corridor, but in a vast, open area. The grey walls glowed blue. The twinkling rocks among the stalactites of ice overhead reminded them too much of Waterfall. The utter bizarreness of this world made the one under Mount Ebott look dull. At their feet lay both their plump survival backpack and the empty flask, lined up neatly beside each other.

Looking back, the mouth of the tunnel was there with its rock walls and floor, how it looked before it became a wild ride.

After scratched their head, the puzzlement followed them as they gathered their backpack and flask. What just happened? They were falling, and now they weren’t. The urge to puke their guts out dawdled on the lining of their stomach, which mellowed out the moment they stopped.

A collection of voices directed them across the room, toward three monsters, each one performing different actions.

The first monster, a koala bear wearing a ragged coat similar to Frisk’s, was jumping around while playing air guitar. He mimicked the sounds of guitar riffs and whammies as he simulated them with crazy hand gestures.

The second, a quadrupedal black and white cat, was sat on the ground, clapping her front paws eagerly. The lights in her yellow eyes bright with anticipation.

The third, a humanoid brown cow with long, curly red hair, thick glasses, blue jeans and an orange sweater, was punching and kicking, striking nothing but the crisp air. One would suspect that she was attempting to fight off imaginary goons or bat away mosquitos.

Frisk stood up. They said hello to the trio, but none of them paid any attention. Frisk said it again, this time louder – all of them went about their business unimpeded. The sitting cat monster inhaled a mouthful and blew it out before herself as if extinguishing the candles on an invisible birthday cake.

Before they realised it, there was someone beside them who had his hand on their shoulder. Frisk did
not need to look or to turn their head and gasp in shock. Already, they were getting used to it.

“I see you’ve already met my friends… or some of them, anyway,” said Vail in a casual tone. “Now, I know what you’re thinking: ‘what are those idiots doing?’ Well, you can’t see it yet, but they’re having the time of their lives.” He pulled away from the child and took steps across the enclosure toward the other monsters in the room. “They’re living out their biggest fantasies, their wildest dreams, and it’s all thanks to Yours Truly.”

Frisk switched between the four monsters in the room, one after the other. It made them temporarily forget about the craving in their throat. These guys must be among the many that have gone missing. The child’s senses sharpened, going into high alert as a likelihood took shape.

Were they going to end up this way too?

Vail approached mister rock-and-roll koala. He pointed at the guy with both hands, winked and called out, “Hey, Johnny, you’re on fire tonight, baby! Give us a rockin’ solo for the ages!”

Spurred by Vail’s encouragement, Johnny’s arm movements became more wild and exaggerated; the fingers in his left forming talons, the right hand slicing those invisible strings with an invisible pick. He jumped to the left before diving to his knees, all while rocking his fictional instrument. Johnny may not have been in an actual concert, but the sweat and toil from his energy were as if he was.

Vail waltzed past Johnny, leaving him to entertain his invisible audience, and approached monster number two – the cat that was sat on the ground. He stopped short, the hypnotised monster not noticing him in the slightest; her empty eyes gazing forward, blissfully locked onto something in front of herself – something Frisk could not see.

Vail turned to the left, reached down, placed his hands three feet apart, and then raised them as if he were lifting an invisible box. He neared the cat, who finally noticed him.

“Here you go, Mika. Happy birthday!” Vail set the imaginary box down before her. She reacted with a squeal of joy and more clapping from her front paws. “Don’t open it too fast.”

Just like with Johnny, the happiness in Mika’s features were bright enough to glow in the dark. She leaned forward and chomped her teeth at the air before reeling back.

As Vail neared the punching and kicking woman, the human feared that at any moment she would swing a wayward attack in his direction.

“Watch your six, Lena!” he shouted. At that moment, the cow monster named Lena ducked before throwing her body back and upwards, swinging her arms over her head. She slammed her imaginary opponent into the ground. Vail, without taking his eyes off Lena, kicked to his left and reached around and made claws with his three fingers. “Double team.” He span his clenched hand around to Lena, who performed an amazing spinning back kick into the empty area one metre before it, as if kicking someone. Vail looked down at the ground. “Yep… he’s not getting up from that anytime soon.”

Vail retraced his steps back to the human as Lena flailed with increased vigor. “As you can obviously see, these people are happy, Frisk. Happier than they ever could be in stupid reality. And soon, my dear…” The next words struck deep into the child’s heart. “I will do the same to you. I can already tell that deep down you are unhappy, that you carry a heavy burden thanks to the unfairness of everyday life. I will delve into your mind and tear that burden away, replacing it with the cure to all your aches and pains. You’ll be so elated that you’ll never want to return to your real life ever again.”
The human’s imagination ran rampant. They were going to become like these monsters, stuck in some twisted daydream, smiling and dancing within these empty caves for the rest of their life. It chilled them down to the bone.

Breaking from his monologue, Vail stroked the hairs on his chin in thought. “But first, I feel like I’m forgetting something…” For a moment, he pondered, and then remembered with a snap of the fingers. “Oh, right! Your drink. It’s right over there.” He gestured his three fingered hand to Frisk’s right.

They turned. Drinking fountains, lined up against the wall in a row of five. From left to right, each one was different in height to accommodate the great shift in statures the monsters exhibited. The leftmost fountain was practically on the ground, accessible to mice, while the fountain at the opposite end was closer to the ceiling that it was to the ground.

“All water sources are safe to drink here – you can stick your head in a dirty puddle and be fine – but that doesn’t mean we’re animals. Some of us are animals to some degree, but that’s not the point.” Vail straighten out his vest and fixed his tie, highlighting his large sense of self-respect. “The point is: we’re entitled to retain our dignity when quenching thirst.” He nudged his fingers toward the waiting fountains. “Go ahead, have your drink.”

Without giving it any thought, Frisk stumbled to the second one on the left, which was their size as if made specifically for them. They did not stop to consider whether the fountains were real or another mystical trap laid out. They were too thirsty.

Exactly the same as the ones they have lounging around in corridors and parks back on Earth; they caught their reflection in the silver basin. The spout awaited with its singular, silver coin button. Frisk held it down, releasing an arch of clear aqua that rattled against the bowl and span clockwise down the drain.

The markings flashed in their head: You’re not actually thirsty.

Frisk begged to differ; they weren’t just thirsty, they were parched, gasping, dehydrated. They lowered their mouth to the stream and started slurping at it greedily. The rush drowned their tongue, replacing the moisture it so desperately needed. They spread it through every crevice, between their teeth, along the top row and onto the roof. It tasted better than anything they have ever had and they could not get enough.

They lost themself in the water’s sweet embrace as they gulped down mouthful after mouthful, forgetting to keep their thumb down on the button several times. The water rushing down their pipe lubricated their dry throat.

Just behind the fountain, Frisk caught sight of letters scratched into the rock face. Do—

Frisk leaned over, finding that a message continued around the back, in the space between it and the wall. Under the shade, they made it out as…

Don’t drink from the fountains

A short chuckle sounded from behind, coming from Vail’s toothy grin. “Works every time.”

Frisk pulled away as the drops dangled and dripped from their chin, their belly a sloshing water balloon. They had drank much from the fountain, maybe a little too much. The fading traces of motion sickness mixed with the fullness. It started as discomfort in the belly, then it spread upwards.
into their head. Frisk suddenly became lightheaded, the cave wall losing its flatness and original colouring, swaying in and out. The fountain turning from one to two, then from two to four.

They staggered away, their legs slack under them. Frisk’s head only got lighter until they could no longer feel its weight anymore. Church bells rang in their ears before going muffled under the din of static. The world around them span and distorted, drowning in more colour thought possible. Frisk moved in a wobbly line, lurching toward the five outlines of Johnny’s rockin’ frame.

As they neared him, the strangest thing began to occur. Frisk heard chanting, cheers from nowhere. A mixture of applause, with hints of sharp whistling and traces of whooping. Johnny was a black outline as the room went white and they were on the verge of collapsing.

In an instant, the wooziness departed from their head, and in that same instant, they were no longer under Black Ice Mountain. Their dulled senses sharpened, their pupils finding their focus, equilibrium balancing out.

The light that had blinded them were stage lights; two rows of six, beaming down on them from the rafters, beside the red drapes and applause signs. Frisk was on a stage lined with red velvet, looking out at the rows of monsters as far as the eye could see. The proscenium stretched off into the horizon and the balconies up and out of the atmosphere. A million – possibly billion – eyes watched them right now, waiting for them to perform. Standing before such a magnitude made their knees shake, more so when they realised that they did not have an act.

The rip of guitar strings pulled Frisk across to where Johnny stood. His drab attire had changed; a sparkling silver jacket, orange pants, silver boots, and a red bandanna complimented the electric instrument in his hands. Frisk saw what he saw as he raised his guitar high and wailed a powerful cord that drove the audience insane. All by himself, a one-monster band, he strutted his stuff, playing like a master. No matter how he played – whether it was above his head, behind his head, with his teeth, or with his feet – the music he made was nothing short of supreme. His playing spurred his audience who threw roses at his feet.

“Welcome to where dreams come true, Frisk!”

That voice, Vail’s, came from up high. Frisk followed it and found that smartly-dressed monster on a balcony directly to their left and three levels up, gazing down at them with those sparkling yellow and red eyes and that persistent grin.

“What you’re seeing right now,” explained Vail, “is dear Johnny’s lifelong dream.” Despite the sound pollution of a billion cheering monsters, Vail’s singular voice came through clear, his menacing tone more upfront than ever before. “When I first met poor Johnny, his heart was in shambles, having landed a boring desk job at some place back in the Plain-plain. You see, he was afraid of showing up for that job, worried that he would grow old and grey pushing papers when he could’ve followed his dream of being a rock star. With my help, he realised his potential. I took away all his woes, all the demons eating away inside, and filled him with nothing but insurmountable bliss. Now look at him; he’s never been happier!”

Frisk turned back to the rock star and saw the appeal immediately. Johnny had seized the day, living his life to the very fullest. In this world, he was god, and he held it by the throat and told it to sit down, shut up, and listen to him. The yearning to be noticed, to be recognised, sparked whenever he raised his guitar.

However, Johnny’s demons were not the only thing Vail had taken…

“Of course, even the greatest dreams…” Slowly, Vail held his hands out and rotated them around
each other. “Can become nightmares.”

Up above, the applause signs rotated on a pair of axis and stopped to show another face to the monster’s watching: **boo**. The audience switched as sudden as the signs, turning from thunderous cheering to resentful jeering. Johnny rocked away, pushing the strings to their breaking point, but the crowd was not so easily cajoled. The same spectators who threw roses at his feet one minute ago were now flinging red, ripe tomatoes. Johnny stopped playing guitar hero and started playing dodgeball with the fruit exploded around him, using his instrument as a shield.

A few stray throws tumbled in Frisk’s direction. They remained standing, watching as they neared. This entire thing was a dream, so there was no way those fake tomatoes could possibly—

**SPLAT!** A tomato struck Frisk square in the face, bursting red juice all over them. The wet and soggy explosion sent them reeling back and impulsively wiping their face as the rest crushed against the floor around them. Leftover pieces of the flattened fruit slid off their nose as the inner fluid ran down their face, some of it getting into their mouth. On its own, tomato was a slimy, disgusting experience.

A fit of hysterical laughter erupted from Vail’s booth. He had a fancy phone in his hand with the lens aimed at the child. “Oh, man, I so got that on video! You took it in the face like a champ!” he cried between sputters as he fiddled with the touchscreen. “That’s definitely going upline! Next time, you might want to duck!”

No way, Frisk thought. All of this was in Johnny’s head, yet the feeling of tomato running down their chin and getting into their mouth felt real. Each crashing fruit against the floorboards sent miniature shockwaves through their soles.

Johnny was no match for the barrage as they began to bury his diminutive body. Just seeing the poor guy shrink under the volley of red was heart-breaking; this was his dream, the one thing he strived to be the best at than anyone else, and now he received dejection from everyone he thought loved him and showed him support. His entire livelihood falling apart before his eyes, in his own fantasyland.

As they dodged the heavy rain, Frisk pondered on how they could help him, or if he can even be helped. He was a lone guitarist playing before a crowd of an impossible scale, but he needed more. He needed backup of some kind, but what?

Before they knew it, Frisk was scratching their head with a drumstick.

Of course, a band! In their thoughts, they thought about a drummer – the second thing associated with a rock band. So... If this was imagination land, did they have the power to change things with thought alone? Was it their thoughts of drumming that conjured the stick into their hand?

Frisk closed their eyes and visualised a drum set. A posh one with kick drums, cymbals and everything. They opened their eyes and there it was, the same set they pictured in their head, all set up and ready to use. They wasted no time in getting to work, jumping onto the stool and flailing at the drums randomly. They did not need to play well, just as long as they imagined the music good.

Their wicked solo stopped the hail, mellowing the crowd to a simmer. At that moment, Johnny crashed from the mountain of red mush, landed on their knees, and scratched out an epic rift, turning the audience back onto his side. Together, the monster human duet created wonderful music, his guitar and their drums complimenting each other.

Frisk went insane, swinging like they had never swung before. They whacked the membranes, crashed the symbols and relentlessly tapped their foot on the pedal. Electricity ignited the air, fuelling
the crowd and tingling the drops running down their forehead. They reached their epic finale, screeching a crescendo so loud that it nearly brought the house down.

They finished their song to the rumble of cheering. Johnny took his instrument by the neck and smashed it into ground, breaking it into pieces. “Goodnight, everybody, we love you!” Johnny screamed to the crowd before marching off the stage a hero, waving to his semi-loyal fans. Frisk stepped away from the drums and followed, stopping to take one bow to the masses watching.

Frisk pushed the dividing cover aside and stepped through, walking into darkness. There was nothing backstage. The rumbling from onstage was cut off as quickly as pressing mute on a remote control.

From that darkness, Vail appeared, offering a slow round of applause. “Now that’s what I call creative. When the whole world turned against you, instead of running away, you stood your ground and managed to turn back the tide, all while playing by the rules.” His arms went akimbo, his head cocked to the side. He spoke and acted like he was studying the human, analysing the results. “Let’s see how well you do in the next one.”

Before Frisk, another enclosure illuminated, this one much different from the theatre. In the middle sat Mika on a soft beige carpet, surrounded by mountains of presents a massive variety of sizes and coloured wrappings, a group of goers in party hats, and before a cake that was almost as big as her. Topped with a hundred candles, not a single one unlit. No expense had been spared; balloons hung high alongside shimmering banners, although connected to no viewable ceiling. There was a buffet table, lined with white-sheeted tables. The extravagant feast had no appeal due to Frisk’s lack of appetite.

“Happy birthday to you. Happy birthday to you,” the song was sung by the choir of people around the girl of the hour. Vail stood back, playfully pretending to conduct with his hands. “Happy birthday, dear Mika. Happy birthday to you.”

Mika blew out the candles as the crowd said their hip hip hurrays.

“Throughout Mika’s life,” Vail commentated, “not once did she have a birthday to remember. She had parties alright, but if it wasn’t one thing going wrong, it was another. Lousy presents; terrible food; bad turnout; the DJ not showing up; you name it, it’s happened. But in this world, it’s her birthday every minute of every hour of every day, and nothing ever turns sour.” He clasped his hands together. “So… what did you bring for the birthday girl?”

Frisk glanced over at Mika, who looked back, anticipating the human’s next move. They closed their eyes and imagined the biggest, fanciest present anyone could wish for. Its lightweight materialised in their hands. Just like with the drums, there was a gift, wrapped in silver wrapping paper with gold star spangles, tied with a pretty blue bow.

“For me?” Mika gasped as Frisk set it down next to her. She had an entire pile of gifts to go at, enough to make even the most spoiled of brats sick, yet somehow it was theirs that attained her attention the most. “You shouldn’t have…” Seeing her joy also filled them with joy, even if it was an illusion.

While this happened, Vail remained riveted to his spot, watching events from afar. “Nice one. No way is she forgetting that anytime soon.” He held himself aloof. Hands deep within pockets. “By the way, remember how I said nothing turns sour around here?” His smirk turned to the side, followed by a low chortle. “I lied.”

Suddenly, the present Frisk handed over jolted, as if it were alive or something was alive inside.
Everyone excluding the veil himself stepped back, distancing themselves.

The shifting contents only heightened the birthday girl’s intrigue. “Wow, did you get me a puppy?” she asked with an overbearing stare. “I love puppies, adore the world out of them! I just wanna rub their tummies and stroke their fur and—”

The sides of the present ripped away as eight massive, spindly legs broke out from within. A head burst through the front, revealing twenty eyes and snarling fangs, oozing globs of saliva. The goers scattered, shrieking and jumping for cover in the mountains of gifts as they fled from the monstrosity, all except Mika who tumbled back, paralysed from how rapidly such a happy moment escalated into full-blown chaos. Her once bright and cheerful face was overcome with unspeakable horror as she stared into those evil red eyes. She edged back, too stricken with fear to move, helpless against the spider as its form eclipsed her, impaling the cake with one of its dagger-like legs. Traces of drool dripped onto her head.

A desire to help Mika overcame the human. If they did not help, then the cake was not what was going to be eaten today.

Frisk grabbed a nearby present and yelled out as they hurled it, hitting it in its hind legs, which got the spider-present’s attention. The present landed and split open, revealing a skateboard. It reared its head, all twenty red eyes focusing on the tiny creature with the large backpack. That attack with the gift only made it madder. The teeth parted, strands of saliva webbed between them.

In the span of a second, the giant spider turned and charged, accidently landing one leg on the skateboard, losing balance as its foot slipped away. It gave Frisk an idea. Frisk grabbed another, bigger present beside them, pushing it over and kicking the box lid off. A river of marbles poured out, covering the spider’s path within seconds. It slipped and tumbled straight out of a family-friendly movie.

Frisk opened another oversized, wrapped box and heaved out a mini trampoline, big enough for one. As the spider struggled to gain footing, Frisk set the trampoline down. They moved back to get a running start, then bolted forward. They leapt onto the trampoline and bounced into the air, straight over the giant spider. Frisk nabbed its bow, their momentum untied the knot, separating both ends. With nothing holding it together, the box fell apart, revealing the spider’s pair of boxers; white with red hearts and designed for four pairs of legs.

The party goers stopped screaming and suddenly started laughing. Mika broke from her terror and she started laughing too. The monstrous beast, realising its sudden lack of modesty, feebly covered itself up before clumsily shuffling away, humiliated, embarrassed, and defeated.

On cue, a large gift broke apart against the might of the puppies inside, who all flocked to Mika. All the terror from before was quickly forgotten as she stroked their luxurious furs. “This is the best birthday ever!” she announced, accompanying her overwhelming joy with more clapping.

Another birthday cake slid in, a replica of the first. Mika puffed the candles out, plunging the room in darkness.

There was Vail again. “How curious. I’ve shown that exact same dream to many others, and violence was the first thing they all jumped to. But you’re different – taking another approach. You’re the first human I’ve met, and you’re turning out to be very… fascinating. I’m interested to see how well you perform with Lena.”

The scene changed, from a casual room to something best suited for a martial arts epic; Japanese folding screens and rice straw flooring; Byōbu and tatami – if Alphys’s knowledge was correct. The
translucent peach panels shone with early evening light.

Lena, the brown cow, stood in the centre, a black gi over her large frame. She was flanked on three sides by three opponents, all wearing outfits of red. Lena was still, calm, feet apart, one hand down, the other coiled by her waist. An enemy to her left charged, projecting his punch by keeping it raised above shoulder level, in which the expert saw coming a mile away. She dodged it easily, following up with a kick to the back of the legs, downing him. A second thug attacked from behind; Lena span around, catching his punch before delivering one of her own.

“Ah… Lena, Lena, Lena…” Vail shook his head at each passing of her name from his lips. “So much anger, so much pent-up rage – a lifetime of being pushed around will do that to you.” Lena swiftly punched another in the throat, followed by a swifter throw to the ground. “Fortunately for her, I found the perfect outlet. Now nobody is pushing her around anymore.”

With a flowery jump kick, the last goon went down, bringing the total up to three. Those guys shrivelled and twisted in pain. Lena stood over them all, having taken them down without so much as breaking a sweat.

Frisk knew what was coming before Vail opened his mouth. He said, “But where’s the excitement in taking on three? How about we make it a hundred.”

The far wall collapsed and in entered an opposing force of a hundred ninja pirates – or was that pirate ninjas? – wrapped in black suits with added pirate hats and eye patches. Their taunts, a jumble of *hiyahs* and *arrrs*, drowned out all thoughts. One advanced on Lena, who blocked the first strike. She went to counter, only for that to be countered, resulting in her receiving a hard body shot. Two more joined the fray. Lena avoided a flying kick from one but caught a jab from the other. As she engaged him, her focus on the kicker was lost; her lack of concentrating earned her a kick to the back.

It was no good, Lena was getting the stuffing beaten out of her. Frisk dove deep into their imagination, shutting their eyes and thinking as hard as they could.

They knew what to do.

Frisk glanced down, finding themself garbed in a white karate gi, ordained with a black belt around the waist. A white bandanna with a red circle in the centre and Japanese symbols on each side was tied around their forehead. Their bare feet sank into the floor; it was softer than they anticipated.

Wasting no time, Frisk dove into action. Lena was down on her knees, both arms held by two ninja pirates. A third, ready to deal the final blow, reached behind his back for the katana; Frisk drove their heel into his belly before he could extract it from the scabbard. Lena, getting second wind, slipped from her holders’ grasps and punched them both away. All three of them rolled back, sinking away wounded animals into the fleet of black robes.

Lena got up, dusting off her black outfit and smoothing out the creases. She turned to Frisk and moved her mouth to formulate words. There was silence for a few lip moments before lyrics came out, not from her but from somewhere else, unsynchronised to her mouth and sounding like someone else blatantly reading them off a script. “Your timing is impeccably well-placed, my young apprentice.” Her mouth movements continued a full second afterwards. “However, it appears that the enemy have us both cornered and severely outnumbered. Perhaps a quick exit may be preferable?”

Frisk struck the only martial arts pose they knew – the one used in the ending of that movie *The Karate Kid* – and responded by wildly flapping their lips. Another monotonous voice, in a tone that suggested that English wasn’t their first language, spoke so they didn’t have to: “Nonsense, my
humble master. Our foe have us outnumbered, yes, but they can never hope to outmatch the Way of the Dexterous Puffin.” Frisk’s stance faltered slightly, trying not to cringe at the sound of that name. The Way of the Dexterous Puffin? Did that seriously sound like a name worthy of the deadliest martial art in the universe? Who writes this stuff?

Vail remained quiet, shifting his gaze guiltily left and right before shrugging. “Titles are hard.”

“Adamantly stated,” Lena ‘responded’ with unmoving lips. She mouthed the next ones though. “Our combined expertise will surely see us through this… day.” Frisk caught the sound of a page being turned in that pause.

The remaining ninety-seven ninja buccaneers attacked, all of them charging in at once. Master Lena and her sidekick, Frisk, screamed at the top of their lungs as they entered the fray. The two became a force to be reckoned with, punching and kicking and jumping and dodging and countering and double teaming, one after another sending the invaders running for the hills.

All the young apprentice needed was an active imagination and everything flowed. They hated to admit it, but kicking major butt was actually pretty fun. Feeling like the heroes in a martial arts epic.

They worked their way through the ranks until one remained. The final pirate ninja – one of his legs fake – pulled out two swords, one notably bigger than the other. His stance was open, all their training in the secret arts forgotten amidst the decimation of his troops. He rambled incoherently at the high kicking duo.

The martial arts experts looked at each other and grinned. This final guy deserved the finishing touch. Together, Frisk and Lena leapt at the final foe, following with their feet. They broke through the wall, wood splintering and fabric tearing in the process.

Frisk landed. Their boots absorbing the impact as they landed on stone flooring, having escaped the dream world and landing back in reality. Up ahead lay the exit, another long winding tunnel out of here. Lena and Frisk shared one final bow between master and student before the latter formed their own path out of there.

Before they left, they took one look back at Johnny, Mika, and Lena, who had all resumed their fantasies. Frisk wished they could snap them out of their daydreams, but they did not know how.

They sprinted as fast as their load could allow them. The weight of their winter gear on their body and the pack on their shoulders pushed them down. They sprinted for a minute before working down to a brisk jog. Ten minutes of running, yet the tunnel went on, almost like they were stuck in the first and it was ready to turn into an ice tube on them.

Frisk rounded a bend. Right behind it stood the master and controller of dreams himself, munching on a red and white striped bucket of popcorn.

“That was some quality four-and-a-half star out of five entertainment right there. What made you lose that half a star? Impossible standards, my friend. Impossible standards.” Vail clutched a single kernel and popped it into his gob.

Frisk kept going, refusing to stop, refusing to acknowledge his existence. Maybe if they ignored him, he’ll go away. They rounded a sharp left and there he was again, digging into the same bucket as before.

“That reminds me of this one time I threw a giant, fire breathing lizard at Lena just for the heck of it,” he rattled. “She started strong, climbing up the tail before scaling the back and hitting him on the
top of his head. She was doing well until the thing grabbed her and smashed her into the ground. Then he crushed her underfoot like she was a cockroach before breathing his fiery breath of her.”

Again, they moved on, leaving Vail to giggle to himself. They met again around the next curve, his eyes were void, recalling the scene. No matter where Frisk went, he was always there, hounding them at every turn. “She was black all over. Crying her eyes out. Smelled like a well-done T-bone steak. Eventually, she got stuck on the bottom of his foot like a piece of chewing gum. So he pulled out a giant coin and scraped her off and threw her into an oversized trashcan. But… but… that bin was reserved for dog waste.” Further chuckling ensued, capped off with a longing sigh. “Oh man, it was a mess. Good times though.”

The echo of footsteps had halted, there was one person capable of making audible steps and it wasn’t him. Vail broke from their heartfelt reminiscence, finding the human child stood in place, clear disgust smeared across their pudgy face. One eyebrow was twitching.

“What? It was just a dream. Not like it happened for real.” He picked at another piece of popped corn. “After a quick nap, she was as good as new, back to kicking tail like you and her just now.”

Onwards. Around the next few twists, Vail did not show up. All the better for them. They wanted only to escape this place so they could not be subjected to that smug smile.

All of a sudden, Vail’s voice was heard. “And now, Frisk,” Vail whispered like a thought in the back of Frisk’s skull. “I think the time has come to take the next big step in your journey of eternal happiness. In order to conquer the past, we have to face it head on.”

The walls grew bitter and cold, ice creeping from the ceiling, adding layers upon layers.

“Tell me… What is your biggest regret? What is the deepest, darkest moment of your life?”

With every breath, the air coming out of their lungs got more and more dense. The temperature plummeted, the human’s little body began to shiver.

“What keeps you up at night? What is the one thing you just want to forget the most?”

Frisk hugged their body tighter and tighter as the freezing cold grew more intense. They could feel the cells in their blood beginning to freeze. Each step felt like an entire marathon.

“Because we’re about to experience it together… in 3D!” Then came the familiar sound of ruffling popcorn followed by crunching. “I reckon we’re in for a good show. Hope you got your snacks from the lobby, folks, because our feature presentation is about to begin!”

Frisk forced their frozen eyelids to blink.

And then…

They had done it, the barrier had been destroyed, and their journey was at an end. Their friends were waiting by the entrance, giving them all the time in the world to bid farewell the all the monsters of the Underground. They checked their phone, finding another text by Toriel, who had just discovered this ground-breaking form of communication.

They retraced their steps back through the flat and grey walls of New Home. Looking out, the buildings stretched far, with windows teaming with light. So many monsters free. So much life. Crammed into one place.

However, out of all the monsters… they needed to see one, and it made their heart quiver.
Blink.

Hot. So hot. The lavas of Hotland poured all around, boiling the very air crimson. They stepped from the ashy path onto a conveyor belt and took a moment to gain their breath back, complementing the disabled laser traps. They still had time, but with each passing second, they were getting closer.

Blink.

Closer still. The sweet, wet smells of Waterfall graced their nose. The walls and ground so dark that they appeared blue and black, contrasting against waters glowing pure white with magic. Gentle sparks ebbed upwards like bubbles rising to the surface. Twinkling jewels overhead simulated the starry skies of the surface, a sight that every monster will soon enjoy for real. The monsters at the MTT Resort were happy. The monsters in Hotland were glad. The population were finally free.

They were finally free.

Blink.

Despite Snowdin being draped in snow, the temperature was not as cold as it appeared, being quite bearable for someone without fur and only a sweater for warmth. The population of the cosy town had gotten news that the barrier was gone. Already, some of the ecstatic monsters were already packing their bags, eager to move to the surface.

Everyone was ready to travel one way, and there was Frisk, going the other way.

Back to the start.

Blink.

The ruins lived up to their name; broken pillars and overgrown weeds everywhere. Frisk carefully walked down the steps, under the ruins that loomed above them in their first minutes of falling into the Underground.

As Frisk saw a dark corner before an arch, their heart sank. They took a deep breath. This was it.

They approached cautiously, dreading what lay beyond yet knowing what to expect, waiting for the inevitable.

On the other side lay the bed of golden flowers where their adventure began. It was no more than a couple of days ago, but it felt like a year. Frisk slowly gripped the corner and peeked around. Down the pitch black passageway, bathed in a pool of light, lay a white figure hunched before the flowers. That was when Frisk heard the short, sharp sound of a sniff.

The figure quivered, his back turned and shoulders rounded. He breathed out through a sore throat, aching from all the crying, before snuffling. A fuzzy hand rose to his face and wiped away the tears. Before they even knew it, Frisk was there, directly behind him. They never felt themselves move, or felt their legs carry them over. They were just there. They could see his tuff of youthful hair, his drooping ears and the back of his yellow and green shirt. Frisk reached out with an open palm, bringing it closer and closer to the shoulder, being as gentle as possible. They were an inch away when, all of a sudden, he turned his head, gazing upon the human with his goat eyes that glistened like crystals.

Asriel Dreemurr’s mouth hung open with surprise. After a few moments, that surprise manifested itself into relief. “Oh, Frisk…” he whispered. He stopped to wipe his eyes again, they were slightly
red. “Come to… pay your respects?”

Frisk just stood there, mouth agape, hand hovering, heart slamming against ribcage.

Asriel patted the space beside himself. “Why don’t you sit down for a bit… and watch the flowers with me?”

As if entranced, Frisk felt their body go into autopilot, parking themself down beside the reformed God of Hyperdeath himself. The same monster who, as both a flower and a god, tried to destroy them – not by simply killing them, but by placing them through a never-ending nightmare of death and resurrection. Yet, despite all this undeserved hatred aimed toward them, Frisk could not find it in their heart to return the favour to this poor, misunderstood creature known as Asriel Dreemurr.

“These flowers…” Asriel said. His voice reached far upwards to the ceiling, a small voice made bigger. He stroked the flower nearest him, delicately rubbing his thumb against a large, golden petal. “They’re beautiful, aren’t they?”

Unable to speak, Frisk could only respond with a nod. They were beautiful. In fact, more so than ever. The petals glowed like the sun’s natural rays. They had no idea why they never noticed it before.

After the tears settled, Asriel cracked a minute giggle. “Sorry. I just remembered a joke Chara once told me. How many lips does a flower have?” Frisk answered with a shrug. “Tulips.” Asriel went to laugh some more, but he could not get it out. All the laughter had left him. “Why did you come back?”

Frisk sat there. Why did they come back? The human child, for the life of them, could not remember. Frisk tried really hard to recollect their memories, but it was like something was blocking them. Something – what it was, they did not know – told them that they should not be here, that they should be someplace else.

“Are you still trying to forget me?” Asriel asked. Frisk responded with a slow nod, followed by an even slower shake. “Frisk… you know why I can’t come to the surface, don’t you? In Mom and Dad’s eyes… In everyone’s eyes… I’m gone. I’m dead. I’m dust. They remember a child who loved playing in the garden, who played pretend king with his dad, and baked mud pies with his mom, and… and cried like a baby whenever he heard a happy ending…”

He quivered as more tears stung his eyes. “That’s the Asriel they remember. The one they deserve to remember their son by…” He gripped the petals of the flower in front with shaking paws, almost threatening to tear them off. “And not this one…” More tears poured as he gazed down at it, his breath short and rapid. “Not the one who… tore them to pieces… again and again… who made them suffer… who did the most terrible things to them… and laughed every time…”

Frisk could not stand seeing him in pain anymore. They wrapping their arms around him, pulling him into a hug. Asriel went still, then found it in himself to return it. The tears fell onto Frisk’s shoulder. His throat burned. Frisk shushed him gently, cooing into his ear. His fur was so soft and warm, like cuddling a giant teddy bear.

“You don’t even know me…” Asriel slowly pulled away. His cheeks shimmered with waterfalls. “Why do you still care?”

Frisk found themself gazing into Asriel’s watery eyes as they said their next words.

It was because Asriel was the one who deserved to be saved the most.
Asriel did not know what to say. He was not able to look the human in the eyes. “Do you really think I can be forgiven? Do you honestly think that I can come back from this? After everything I’ve done?”

There was no hesitation in Frisk’s response. Yes. They were absolutely certain, without a doubt, that he could put his past behind him and move on with his life.

Asriel pondered. “You know, after I took Chara across the barrier, I saw the world. I had never seen the surface before. Chara told me all about it, but their words didn’t come close to how beautiful it all was.” He closed his eyes. “The sun. The grass. The flowers. The clean air.” He sighed. “I’d love to see it again… I’d love to see my parents again… but…”

Frisk watched the lost son to Asgore and Toriel. Unsure of what he was going to do next.

“I… I… You know what?” Asriel shot to his feet and surprised Frisk with the words he shouted. “I’ve changed my mind. I… don’t wanna stay down here, alone forever. I wanna go to the surface. I wanna see Mom and Dad again. I want us to be a family once more.”

It started as a low rumble, pebbles of dirt fell from the ceiling. It increased in strength, raising the nib in an unseen Geiger counter. Frisk shot to their feet as a crack formed at the foot of the front wall of rock. Asriel remained rigid, unfazed by the earthquake. The divide split upwards until it reached the hole above, whereupon both sides began to part. The entire face of Mount Ebott broke away in an ear shattering display of breaking rock and earth. Frisk lost their balance and tumbled into the bed of flowers, back to where it all started. Asriel firmly stuck to the ground, watching the phenomenon without a trace of fear.

Light poured through the massive, newly formed crevice. The surface awaited the kids in a sea of gold light, sapphire skies and emerald lands. There, just beyond, stood six monsters: Toriel and Asgore, Sans and Papyrus, Undyne and Alphys; all of them standing there in the fresh air beyond the Underground, where the birds flew free and the flowers bloomed and where dreams come true. They were all smiling, waving, calling out for the two children to join them.

This time, it was Asriel’s turn to reach out. “Come on, Frisk, let’s go.” He smiled. “Everyone’s waiting!”

Frisk did not know why, but they wanted this, more than anything. They wanted this so badly that they could not wait. The human child took the monster child by the hand, skin against fur, and led him toward the light.

As Frisk guided Asriel to the surface, to family and friends, it had become clear that they had finally found their happy ending.

That was until Asriel tugged Frisk to a halt. “Oh no…” he whispered.

Frisk pulled, but Asriel refused to budge. What was the holdup? Freedom was steps away, as well as his reunion with his parents. Frisk turned around and wished that they had not. Asriel was locked in place, looking at his feet. They glanced down, and saw that he was sinking into the bed of flowers.

“It’s… it’s happening…” Asriel whispered. Their eyes met, his pupils narrow with terror. “I’m out of time…”

Several vines shot from under the golden petals, coiling themselves around Asriel’s legs and body. They began to drag him down, consuming his legs. “Frisk, help me! Please!” he screamed. “I don’t want to go back! I don’t want to be a flower!”
The fingers in Frisk’s hands tightened so much around his, pulling with everything they had. Asriel continued to sink, his body now under the surface. It was no use, they were not strong enough.

Desperately, Frisk span around to the exit, to where their friends were standing. They screamed for help, waving and shouting to get their attention. However, the others did nothing. They remained in place, merely watching in silence. Frisk cried, harder than they had ever cried before, begging for help, for anything.

But nobody came.

Frisk saw it now. Their friends were no longer smiling, no longer waving, no longer calling out. They just stood there, their faces expressionless without emotion.

Toriel turned and walked away, followed by Asgore, then Undyne, then Alphys, then Papyrus. One by one, they left until only Sans lingered. He was smiling, but there was nothing behind it. No heart. No soul. No emotion. No anything.

The crevice, separating the inside from the out, rumbled to life once more. It began to close, returning the darkness to the cavern. Frisk screamed so hard for Sans’s help. The cave faces drew closer, yet Sans cared not.

Just before it closed, Sans turned and walked away.

Asriel’s head was barely above the flowers. His eyes were full and streaming rivers. “Save me, Frisk!” Frisk could hold on no more. Their hold slipped, and Asriel disappeared beneath the golden petals. His final plea for help pierced their ears. “SAVE ME!”

The human child collapsed onto their knees, parted the flowers and frantically clawed away at the ground where he last was, packing soil under their fingernails. But it was pointless. Asriel was gone.

Frisk was alone. Frisk was back at the start. The surface was gone. Their friends were gone. The world around them darkened as the light grew smaller, focusing on them and shrouding their surroundings in darkness. Nothing in this world existed except for the child, on their hands and knees. A failure. Frisk could not will their spirit to stand.

A drop of water landed on a flower, running down the petal and into the soil. A second droplet made another flower rattle on its stem.

I wasn’t rain. It was tears. Their tears.

Between the stems, a new flower began to rise. Frisk watched with a dying heart as the flower grew taller. Leaves formed. A bud grew. The golden petals opened, and two eyes and a frown gazed at them.

“You left me…” whispered Flowey. “You couldn’t save me…”

Flowey, the soulless flower who hurt so many, had the same level of pain he had inflicted to others in his face. Frisk could not bear to see him like that, in such a miserable state, destined to be forgotten forever. They reached out and gently wrapped their arms around him. Flowey did not fight, or argue, or respond with a snide comment, he just accepted their gentle embrace.

Now Frisk did not want to let go.

A bucket of popcorn hit the ground beside their head, jolting them alert. It toppled and spilled its contents out.
Looking up, there was a familiar komodo dragon monster in fancy clothes. His expression was bleak, his signature grin gone, replaced with a sombre frown. “Dang…” was all Vail could get out. “That was…. I’m sorry, I… just wasn’t expecting that…”

Frisk glanced down. Their arms were empty, Flowey gone, as were the flowers all around. They remembered finally, their adventure through the Underground was weeks ago. Memories returned of the events leading here; the picnic back on Earth. The abduction. The Plain-plain. The Shattered Zone. Ice Island. Here.

Frisk spitefully asked what exactly he expected.

Vail winced, clearly at a loss for words. “I don’t know… that maybe you singed your pinkie with a match? Or didn’t give that cute kid you liked your last chocolate button? Told a little white lie that got the ugly kid with the nerdy glasses put in the corner for ten minutes? Or… whatever falls under the kid category.” For the first time since they met, his speech developed a serious quality to it. “Seriously, how old are you? Eight? Nine? Freeing an entire kingdom of monsters and regret leaving one doesn’t fall under the kid category.”

His sullen demeanour lifted with a sigh after Frisk lowered their forehead to the ground. “Look, I’m sorry, kid. I know that must be rough… You saved all those monsters, and none of them ever knew about…” His words trailed off as another thought running through his mind fought for priority. “I’m confused. Why couldn’t you bring him to the surface, back to his parents? Flower or no, he was still the same person. So why leave him in the Underground?”

Frisk swallowed a mouthful of bile, and said that it was because he wanted to be forgotten. He was afraid that he would hurt others after turning back into a flower.

“He was afraid of hurting others… or were you afraid of hurting others?” Vail’s question was met with silence. Frisk’s forehead went numb against the cool stone. “So you placed the needs of the many before the needs of one.” He knelt down and softly patted the child on the back. His touch made their tears stop; it was so gentle and soothing to their soul. “I can understand that. Before starting my new life here, I had to leave a few from my old life behind. If I were in your shoes, I’d make the same decision too, as would anyone else in your position.”

Frisk stared at the ground, where Flowey once stood in their mind. Vail’s words fell on deaf ears; all Frisk could think about was Asriel and how wracked with despair he must be feeling as an unfeeling flower once more. Forced to live out the rest of his existence alone and forgotten in the darkest depths of the Underground. His sacrifice a tale doomed to be lost for all eternity.

“But,” said Vail, “there’s not a problem too big that I can’t fix.” With a start, Frisk jerked their head up to meet Vail’s eyes.

Vail snapped his fingers. The area went dark for a second. They reappeared before a wall of ice. Both Vail’s and Frisk’s reflections stared back. The mirror was huge, scaling a full fifty metres up and across. Smooth without even a speck out of place. Frisk looked at themselves and thought they were standing before a mirror universe for a second.

“Behold, the cure to all your problems.” Vail reached out toward the reflective wall of ice. Both he and Frisk’s reflections began to distort. He twirled his arm and the replication span in a mesmerising display of colour. Images formed on the surface, that of Asgore and Toriel, across a field of flowers.

“If you stay here with me,” purred Vail, “you can have the ending you’ve always dreamed of.”

Before the former king and queen of the Underground, their lost son returned, alongside Frisk. With
smiles, the parents ran to their children and lovingly took them into their arms. Asriel laughed as his father held him in his burly yet delicate hands. Toriel raised Frisk high before pulling them close into an embrace. Frisk could already feel her furs tickling their skin. Such a delightful sight pulled the real them upright on both feet.

“Asriel will be whole again, himself again, and young forever. You can spend every day playing in the garden without getting bored; eating pie and all the ice cream and cake you want without getting full; stay up all night and watch movies without getting sleepy.”

Each scene played out as Vail narrated it. Asriel and themself back and forth on a swing under the guise of the sun, with no clouds to impede a scene of such unlimited bliss. Both of them atop the biggest ice-cream sundae both man and monster alike had ever seen, filled with chocolate flakes, sprinkles, and slices of pie. They each grabbed a slice, covered with caramel and chocolate ice cream, and took big bites, smiling as its yumminess spread into their tummies. The sun went down and the stars came out. Frisk and Asriel were now lying side-by-side, a white blanket over their heads. Their faces illuminated in the glow of the television screen – it was Frisk’s favourite animated movie they were watching and it was their favourite scene too. It brought a tear to their eye, both in fantasy and in reality, and to the eyes of the little prince beside them.

“I can give you everything,” further words of promises slithered from Vail’s mouth into Frisk’s ears. “You can finally have the peace you’ve always yearned for, and nothing will ever take it away from you. Just touch the glass, and everything will be yours. Forever.”

Frisk gazed into the glass, inching closer as more blissful scenes flashed before their eyes. Trips to the funfair, eating cotton candy and riding on the rollercoaster; both he and them raising their arms as they went down the big dipper. The beach with sands that were never scorching hot or waters that were too cold. The siblings built the most impressive sandcastle ever – modelled from the one in the Underground – winning first place at a sandcastle building competition.

Frisk stepped closer.

The places they would travel and the sights they would see flashed before their eyes. The Great Pyramids. The Taj Mahal. The Eiffel Tower. Big Ben. The Statue of Liberty. Before each scene stood all four of them, a family seeing the world that they were denied for too long.

Opening presents on Christmas day. Hunting for chocolate eggs on Easter. Dressing in scary costumes for Halloween. Watching Asriel blow out the candles on his birthday cake. Moments to cherish, one after another, flashed in the mirror.

Another step.

Asriel was before them now. His image so crisp, like he was actually there. No longer a cry-baby, but smiling from his cheeks. The happiest boy in the world. There was no reason for him to be sad anymore, not when he had family, not when he had friends, and not when he had Frisk.

They could hear Asriel’s voice, as clear as crystal. “I’m so happy, Frisk. I never want this to end,” he said and reached out with an open palm. “Take my hand.” His voice echoed in their head, sounding like a yearning from their own soul. “Never let me go again.”

Frisk reached out, guided by the powerful feeling in their heart.

“That’s it, Frisk,” Vail whispered, edging his mouth close to the child’s ear. “Take his hand. Embrace never-ending joy and, at last, your journey will finally be complete.”
The third step brought Frisk that slightest bit closer to the glass, and closer to their happily ever after.

Asriel eyes flashed, never leaving theirs for a second. “I want you to stay, Frisk.”

By now, a divine, unbreakable force was guiding the child, drawing them further still. Their eyes were unblinking, locked on the white figure.

“I need you, Frisk.”

Their fingers were so close to the ice, brushing against furry fingertips. Vail’s grin widened to its limits, ready to witness the liberation of another tortured soul and the initiation of his new best friend.

Frisk wanted to stay here forever, in harmony.

Asriel opened his arms wide, ready to take their sibling into his embrace. “I love you, Frisk.”

The corners of Frisk’s eyes watered. They loved him too, which was exactly why they had to do this.

CRASH!

Through their hazy vision, a silver ice-pick lodged itself into the surface, their gloved hand wrapped around the handle. The image of a child with his arms outstretched shattered into a web of cracks.

Just like that, with one regretful swing, the visions, eternal happiness, Asriel – all gone. The celestial hold on them relinquished.

Vail jumped back, visibly shocked. “Wha… why did – why did you…?” He belligerently rounded the child, glimpsing the corner of their eye. “You – your happy ending was right in front of you and you smashed it to pieces! Why? Why did you do that?”

The pain within Frisk’s soul was so great that it stopped the tears before they flowed. From that pain bore strength, the strength needed to face the angry monster.

Because it was not real. That’s why.

Vail bared his jagged teeth. “Not real? It would’ve be real for you! Who cares what other people think! What has reality ever done for you? All you did was disrespect that kid’s memory by shattering that glass.”

Frisk responded strong and sure of themself. The real Asriel would not want them to mourn their loss forever or to be stuck in the past. He would want them to move on, to live their life, and take care of those closest to them. Living in that fantasy would only insult his sacrifice, ruining everything he fought to achieve with his selfless act.

That was why Frisk broke the mirror. That Asriel was not the real Asriel. Nothing Vail could do would ever match the real thing.

“So you’d rather live in your sad reality than in a world where you can have everything you’ve ever wanted?” Vail slowly shook his head, keeping his sights locked on the human. “Then… I was wrong. You’re not the friend I’ve been waiting for – not even close.

“I should destroy you right now, but since you enjoy this lousy reality of yours, I’ll let it break you down piece by piece. My friends will find you, and together, they will show you how wonderful their worlds are compared to yours. Then we’ll see how much you like it after you’re beaten and
broken.”

With his mind having been spoken, he walked straight into what was left of the mirror – sinking in like he himself was the refraction. Frisk was once again alone. Their pulse raced from what they had just avoided. Had they not worked up the will to shatter the glass, they would have suffered the same fate as Johnny, Mika, and Lena before them.

Throwing the ice-pick at Asriel’s reflection was the hardest thing they’ve ever done.

Just when they thought they had time to breathe, Vail reappeared in the same spot. “One more thing for the record,” he said with a sneer. “I think about that poor, misguided soul abandoned forever in the Underground and…” He paused and let out a small growl of disgust aimed directly at them as he sank back into the glass. “It should’ve been you.”
Bad Memories

The Obelisk. The ancient monolith holding this world together; its origins from a time long forgotten.

The young emperor was watching it again. Whenever he needed a really long time alone to his thoughts, he stepped out into the royal garden and gazed at the pillar. No matter the time, no matter the weather, no matter the occasion, whenever he needed a deep and thoughtful journey within the depths of his own mind, he would always wind up before the pillar.

As a growing prince, he would occasionally get into trouble for gazing at it, from his teachers to his trainers to his doctors and from his father on those cold nights and pouring rainfalls. Perhaps he should have known better – it would have spared him a few colds – but he could not help it. If his fuzzy thoughts required some stone gazing, this was where he ended up. Now, as the ruler, with no teachers and no trainers to pester him, he was free to stare at it anytime he fancied.

The frequency of this resulted in the construction of the bench he sat on, crafted simply to accommodate Maxus alone. Compiled from thick planks of fine, light wood to compliment the vibrancy of the garden, it was a large seat even when he was a boy, and built to last; those behind its creation hundreds of years ago possessed some unprecedented foresight that he would still use it to this day. As long as it received a fresh lick of varnish every year, it was likely to outlive the emperor himself.

Maxus had every line, every letter, every symbol, and every chink and crack of the Obelisk memorised. Although it always seemed to alter in the very slightest every time he put eyes on it, he could have painted an accurate representation had he chosen the paintbrush over the sword.

Behind him and beside him, he could just barely hear the steps of the gardeners and the soft sprinkles of their watering cans as they went about nourishing the flowers. Their job required them to be as quiet as possible whenever the emperor himself was present, to not disturb him or even obstruct the line of sight between him and the Obelisk. Their watering cans were heavy with magic-infused water, fermented to rejuvenate the fake flowers, making their petals flourish with colour and their stigmas smelling fresh. There were a few withering buds among the technicolour of plants, more than usual; a few drops made them as good as new in seconds. The gardeners had been called out for the third time this week.

Why did Emperor Maxus enjoy gazing at the Obelisk so much? Ever since discovering it, that is all he has done – look at it. Four sides and yet he gravitated toward the one facing east. There, at the foot of the Obelisk, deep, small markings were scratched into the rock. These marks were entirely different from the fading inscriptions that spanned from top to bottom, these looking like they were made with sharp claws as opposed to a hammer and chisel.

The Emperor was unable to recall whether those scratches had always been there.

Just like all the other markings, the language was strange and one that Maxus did not recognise. The only person who came close to translating it years ago was Professor Haze, back when he was the proud scientist for the Empire.

Haze had tried everything: magic spells, enchantments, scriptures and incantations, technology, and achieved so much. At all times, he kept his work behind closed door, allowing only a select few to see them – Maxus excluded. Many came to a conclusion that there was nothing left to discover; however, from the day he cast his eyes on it, Maxus knew that it was capable of some much more. A power most extraordinary, hidden deep within. A secret power, just waiting to be tapped as
confirmed by the dying breaths of his father.

He was close now to discovering that power. If only he had the key…

If only he had that determination…

If only he killed that creature when he had the chance…

If only… If only…

His father’s passing reminded Maxus of one sad truth that made him feel especially lonely. It struck him that the Obelisk was the second thing left from planet Earth, the first being himself, and the rest being all the lives transported alongside him a millennia ago. As he grew up, all those around him raised families, grew old, grew older, and then, one by one, crumbled into dust. For reasons unknown to him, he remained young, immortalised in his youth while the other children from his past grew withered and bitter and eventually joined their ancestors in the depths of the Forest. Until a few days back, it had been himself and his father for the longest time. Now he stood alone, still young, wondering how much time he had left.

He leaned back in his seat and closed his eyes. The rushing water almost sounded like the oceans from his childhood.

Whenever the stillness was at its highest, he always thought he could hear the slightest hum radiating from the Obelisk, sounding like a gentle lullaby of a beautiful woman.

And that voice. He had heard it so long ago, once…

Maxus opened his eyes to the grey skies of a thousand years ago, sitting amongst the trees and on prickly grass. The air was quiet, still, and cold, yet the dire sense of urgency cut like a knife. Danger was afoot wherever they went.

It had been days since the final battle, which got thousands of monsters killed and the survivors exiled under that mountain, one of which being King Asgore himself. The entourage, a large group of monsters, had been on the move ever since, marching non-stop into the east, pushing their wagons and very spirits to the breaking point. Without their ruler, they were but children stumbling in the dark.

Feet in agony and backs ready to snap, they travelled as far as they could before reaching the coastline. Now they had halted in the woodlands nearby, planning their next move. Small canvas tents had been dismally set up and a chill set through the camp as they were too afraid of setting fires in case the enemy spotted the smoke.

They had sent scouts to search the lands to the north and south, but the early reports were not promising. Hours ago, the scouts from the north returned, confirming many humans approaching from that direction.

Food was low; pickings were scarce and local game were hard to catch. Water rations were drying up. Weapons were in short supply, and their aching and starving bodies could barely walk let alone fight. It did not take long until fear settled in every soul. Morale had never been so low. All their hopes lay upon those in the south.

Six year old Maxus sat near the threshold of the woods, gazing out to sea; the sunset a beautiful sight, yet did nothing to ease the stabbing pain in his stomach or the gnawing thirst on his tongue. His crown of golden hair had just started growing as a tuff between the ears, appearing more a dull
bronze under the dirt. The fur hugged his cheeks tightly, accentuating the lines under his eyes; a sure sign of malnutrition. A thick potato sack of a tunic billowed loosely around his frame of skin and bones, held in place by a coil of worn rope. No shoes adorned his cold and muddy feet. He hadn’t said a word since that final battle – if it could be called that: the massacre that took away his mother and grandparents. He couldn’t eat. He couldn’t sleep, for every time he closed his eyes the scene would appear again and again.

*His grandfather; he was no warrior. On the ground. Eyes closed. Breathing slowly. Mortally wounded.*

From out the corner of his eye, Maxus spotted movement and heard the unmistakable trot of hooves and the whining of a horse – a pained whine. The brown stead limped over a distant peak, barely able to carry himself let alone the rider on his back. The two placed to watch their southern flank rose from their spots, gripping their spears and shields, anticipating any incoming trouble.

“Well is that?” one asked the other.

Maxus, who was too wracked in their misery to care, already knew something was amiss from how hunched the mouse scout was over the reins, leaning on the horse’s long neck. He managed to steer with one good hand, just barely.

The second monster on watch shielded his eyes with his hand, getting a better look. “Wait a minute…” he whispered, then shouted, “It’s Danyell! He’s returned!”

The first guard glanced questioningly at the second. “It is?” He looked past the scout at the distant landscape, baring misshapen teeth in deep concern. “But… where’s Raulf and Elyot?”

Danyell had made it back just in time to slip from the saddle and crumple on the moist earth. The two rushed out and, carrying from by his arms and legs, pulled him inside the safety of the woods.

The sight of another fellow monster in pain did not help little Maxus...

*His mother by his grandfather’s side. Crying. Holding his grandfather’s head to her chest.*

Tent flaps opened and the veterans, generals, medics and elders flocked around the scout within seconds, examining his wounds and badgering him with questions that he was in no condition to answer. Not with an arrow lodged in his thigh and several lacerations over his body. His boiled leather armour had prevented some cuts from being life-threatening, but he was still gravely injured. He would pull through with the help of an experienced surgeon and excellent medicine, neither of which they had. The most they could do was clean and bandage the wounds, the rest was up to how strong of a soul he possessed.

General Juhi, Maxus’s father, emerged from his tent, wearing his chest plate and stripes as proudly a failing general could, and stopped at Danyell’s side; his presence parted all others aside. “Can you talk?” he asked as gently as possible. “What happened?”

Danyell stirred. His eyes opened a fraction. “They were waiting for us…” he rasped. “Thousands of them… advancing up the coast to the south…”

Juhi gripped the corner of the makeshift bed, suppressing his anxieties the best he could. “Raulf and Elyot…?”

The wounded scout closed his eyes, on the verge of crying. “They didn’t make it… I barely got out of there…” His lead lolled to the side. “ Barely… got…”
With a rigorous shake by the shoulders, Juhi managed to stir some life back into Danyell. “Stay with us! Don’t you dare fall asleep lest you never wake up.” He turned to the medics. “Get him inside and keep his temperature steady.”

Everyone could see it and hear it: the cracking in the General’s voice. Deep bags lined his eyes from a lack of sleep. The terrible departure of his wife and family had left his soul in pieces. He was no soldier, no mighty commander of troops, but a simple worker who used to earn just enough money to keep his family fed. He had experience in handling team efforts, making him the only man eligible for the stripes.

Leaving the wounded scout in the delicate hands of the field medics, Juhi made eye contact with the one shred of family he had left: his only son, sitting by himself metres away. Maxus was the one good thing left in this world. If anything bad happened to him, then Juhi would probably crumble to pieces.

He saw the despair lining his son and he knew that neither of them would ever be the same.

Nothing would ever be the same.

Maxus looked back, but his father was not what he was seeing.

*His grandmother knelt by her husband’s side. Gazing upwards with pleading eyes.*

Dunmore. He resembled a cauldron. Always could have done more. The reluctant one of the bunch broke the silence. “We’re surrounded,” he cried, backing against a tree. “Nowhere to run, nowhere to hide. The gods have forsaken us.”

As mad and raving as Dunmore’s words were, they were painfully true to every monster within the camp. The worst of their fears had come true. The humans had them surrounded and the net was tightening. No salvation to either the north, south, east, or west. Nowhere to run. Nowhere to hide. The human armies would march on them and, with their forged steel and arcane arts, finish what they started.

Clutching his knees tightly against his chest and rocking back and forth, Dunmore continued his panic-stricken rambling. “It’s over, we’re doomed! They will find us, and kill us one by one! No hope! No—”

Commander Rex was on him in a moment, dragging Dunmore to his feet and delivering a backhand to his cheek, shutting him up. A hollow ring sounded, it probably hurt Rex more than it did Dunmore.

As a bulldog, Rex was literally born a fighter. Short, but packed under his fat lay muscle that made him appear taller. It was odd that a man of his stature would wear chainmail as opposed to plating, however, this was down to his preference to prefer movement. “Hold your tongue, coward,” he snarled directly into Dunmore’s cowering features.

The cauldron monster sank back to the ground, holding his face in shame.

“We’ll think of something,” Rex said more gently, stepping closer to the general. “Not enough time to build a boat, even a basic one. These woods provide some degree of cover, but there’s no way of hiding a group this large.” He turned to face General Juhi. “If all else fails the best we can hope for is to form a last stand here and hope that one of us takes down one of them.”

General Juhi said nothing, but silently nodded his head once, rather meekly. He walked out from the trees and onto the beach. It was as if he had given up, deep down, and he had decided to make this
moment count while he could. He gazed upon the low hanging sun as if he were seeing it for the first time. Not actually seeing it, but witnessing its significance to the world, like discovering the meaning of life.

Maxus had no room for ideals in his gloomy land although he wished he could disconnect himself from it. He was stuck in reality and he hated it. It was one thing to be told that his very existence was a mistake, that he was insignificant and powerless and worthless. However, it was another thing entirely to have those assumptions confirmed, by the humans who they were unable to stop.

All the monsters needed was for one human to fall. A single soul. Then the monster who claimed that soul would turn the tide in an instant, making the humans flee in terror. Yet not a single human life was lost, more than what could be said for the thousands of monsters turned to dust.

The human standing above them. A man in a farmer’s robe. An indescribable look in his eyes. A pitchfork held high. The prongs coated with dust.

No matter what Maxus did, the memory would not leave his head. It enraged him to no end. He stood up and the memory rose with him. He walked a few steps across the woods and the memory followed.

The human roared as he drove the pitchfork down.

He snatched a stick off the ground and broke it in half against a tree, but the memory was not so easily frightened. He grabbed a rock and flung it high, breaking another branch, but the memory was not so easily thrown away. He sprinted off, but the memory was faster than him.

The rest of the memory was a blur. He could not remember the pitchfork striking his grandfather, or grandmother, or mother, like the event was so traumatic that he had already stricken in from his mind as a defence mechanism. He did remember the pain in which he saw his father in, and the sounds of his sobs as he held his son tight.

He sprinted deeper into the woods, past trees left and right, ignoring the pain in his stomach and the blisters on his feet. No matter where he went or what he did, what was done was done, and there was nothing he could do about it. He stumbled and fell on one knee, cheekbone pressed against gritty bark. In the brief period of rest, the pain caught up to him, slower that the one in his head.

Maxus was a peculiar child, in that he had never cried, not even when he was born. Whenever he wanted something, he would always give subtle hints in which his parents picked up on. When he fell as a toddler learning to walk, he always picked himself up without so much as a whimper. Whenever he nicked himself on something sharp, he would simply stare of the fresh injury with mystery as if waiting for it to heal naturally.

As his cheek was pressed against the tree’s rough skin, he clenched his eyes shut and tried to will tears into his eyes. If there was any reason to let out his emotions, it was now. He replayed the scene over and over and over and over… and yet not a single drop formed beneath his eyelids.

Maxus…

His eyes opened. Was that his name he had heard? The voice sounded so close and yet so far away. So strange and yet familiar.

Where are you, Maxus…?

That voice. Sounded like a woman’s. So calm. So serene. Attached to the lips of a beautiful woman. But there was no one there. He pulled himself up. The ache of starvation leaving him again.
Come to me, Maxus... she whispered. Find me...

He did not know why, but he followed the voice. Ignoring any possibility that it might have been the humans, lying in wait to catch them one by one. He did not run this time, but walked. Carefully stepping over thick roots and under branches. He followed the voice that beckoned him onwards. Onwards to where?

He travelled until he came across an outcrop of rocks from what looked like an abandoned quarry. There was nothing to explain it, but he needed to climb to the top. He found a place where he could get a foothold and some hanging vines to climb up with. He reached the peak and carefully walked around the edge, avoiding the accumulation of wet, sickly moss in the centre. He had reached the eastern outskirts of the woods, managing to make out the horizon between the remaining trees.

That voice had guided them there. However, as he gazed out, he feared that the trail had gone cold. She was not speaking to him anymore and he could see no sign from his vantage point.

“Maxus,” someone snapped from behind him. Maxus swung around and found Overseer Eden, the living scarecrow, glaring at him from the foot on the rocks. “What do you think you’re doing running out here all by yourself? Foolish boy.” He impatiently waved toward himself, commanding Maxus to come to him. “Get down from there before someone sees you!”

The cub stood his ground, giving the overseer a blank look before glancing around the expanse once more, trying to locate the source of the voice.

Eden huffed an irritated sigh before clambering up. “I am not in the mood to be playing these games with you,” he grumbled as he reached the top at the opposite side. “Get over here this instant!”

Maxus grunted and took one step toward the Overseer, over the patch of moss, which bent and groaned upon taking his weight.

There you are.

The next step Maxus took collapsed on him. The moss gave out, revealing it to be planks of rotten timber. The cub fell down into the abandoned quarry, plunging into darkness. His last sight of the overseer captured the moment his features switched from anger to shock. The mouth of light above shrank as he fell. His right leg struck a jutting rock, sending him spiralling onto his side in a shallow puddle of stagnant water, almost jolting his shoulder out. The crash was not the end of it, as he was hit with the remainders of debris and smothered in a cloud of dust.

Maxus curled up and waited for it all to pass, then slowly raised his head. He coughed, hacking ripples into the filthy water. He opened his eyes and the circle of light quivered, jumping in and out of focus. Everywhere hurt, his leg was on fire and the other half of his body ran cold, submerged in the water. As he tried to move the foot, the resulting pang made him draw a painful breath, inhaling lingering dust particles that irritated his throat. He exhaled another bout of coughing.


Maxus painfully rolled onto his back. The opening above was the same size as the sun in the sky. He raised his other arm – the one that did not hurt as much – and went to shout something like ‘yes’ or ‘I’m alive’ or ‘I’m okay’, but it came out as another fit of hacking. It might have not been a clear response, but it at least indicated to Eden that Maxus was still alive.

“Just... just hang on, okay?” The indecisiveness was thick in Eden’s voice, sounding more afraid
than worried. Most likely due to the fact that it was the General’s son. If anything bad happened to Maxus, then Eden was surely a dead monster – not that it made much difference in their present situation. “I’ll go get help!”

Overseer Eden moved away from the hole and his scurrying steps dissipated into the distance. Maxus was alone, lying on his back; freezing, starving, and hurt.

As the water soaked into his back and back of head, Maxus wished that he had never been born. All he could do was control his breathing, which was attempting to escape him. A drop of water landed on his tunic once every second, soaking into the thick material.

He could not move. He knew nothing but the pain coursing through his body, radiating from his possibly broken leg.

Was this what it felt like to have ‘fallen down’?

It was like his body was crumbling apart, his soul preparing to shatter at any moment. Perhaps this was for the best. Soon, he would be far away from this accursed nightmare and back in the arms of his mother once more.

*Maxus…*

There she was again, whispering to his very dying soul. It seemed to flow through his body, rejuvenating his soul and filling the cracks. He lifted his head.

*Oh, Maxus, you’re hurt…*

It was coming from the cave ahead that was shrouded in black. Empty with the hollow echo of air against rock. He sat up, avoiding placing any kind of pressure on his bad leg, still aggravating the damage done.

*Let me help you.*

Placing all his weight onto his good leg, he got up, slamming his uninjured arm against the wall for support. As he went to step forward, he tested his numb foot on the floor. It twitched with agony upon putting the lightest pressure on it. He let it hover an inch off the ground, swallowed hard, inhaled deeply, then pushed himself forward on it. For that split-second that his foot brunt his entire weight, it sent stabbing pain shooting up it. He could not support himself on his good leg fast enough.

Step by agonising step, he ventured deeper within. Blind. In and out, his breath became the only sound.

*There is no need for you to be afraid…*

How did she know? Maxus acted like he was not afraid, except that a unique case of fear brewed in the pit of his stomach. In the dark, he was vulnerable to whatever lay hidden within. At any moment, the cave could collapse, or a well-placed trap could go off, or his next step could send him falling down a pit into the Underworld.

*Come closer…*

Suddenly, his open paw came into contact with a wall in front of him. A barrier of moist earth, blocking his path, each touch sounded and felt soggy.
And yet their feelings told them that this was not a dead end.

Maxus began to claw away at the mud with his hands, digging a small entry. Loose traces of soil slid from the top, slicking his arms dirty and cold. A slight wriggling between his fingers suggested a thick density of earthworms within; he could not tell in the pitch black.

*Closer, Maxus...*

He dug frantically, tossing mud and soil everywhere, getting most of it onto himself.

He stopped.

Something was glowing at the end of the one foot deep hole.

Maxus reached in and, with one final strike, knocked the rest of the debris away. He reached the other side and was greeted with a flat surface of glowing, grey stone that illuminated the silver in his eyes. He made out several weathered markings on the surface; he had no idea what they meant.

It appeared to be some kind of pillar, buried deep within the earth. It blazed with magic the likes he, and probably everybody else for that matter, had never seen before.

*Maxus.*

Spellbound, the cub reached through to touch it.

*Maxus.*

Closer.

*Maxus.*

The fingertips were millimetres away.

“Emperor Maxus.”

He snapped back to reality and turned to find both General Leigh and Advisor Rickard standing there – one noticeably calmer that the other.

“What is it?” Maxus asked, irritated that he had been both broken from his thoughts and caught off-guard.

Rickard was already sweating profusely. “We bring you urgent news, my lord,” he said, then turned to Leigh, expecting him to continue.

Fortunately for Master Scribe Rickard, he did. “Several points of news, actually,” he stated. “Firstly, the human had been spotted three hours ago in Parfocorse. Our soldiers gave chase, but the target evaded capture.” Leigh stopped for a second as he noticed Maxus grip the armrest of his bench. Rickard let out the subtlest of winces. “The entire town was cordoned and searched, but they have found no sign of the human. They believe the human may have escaped on-board one of the trains, however, it is unclear as to which one.”

“Around the time the human was spotted,” Maxus asked, “how many of those trains were heading north?”

“According to the list, there were roughly seven departures with only one was heading in that
direction, sir.”

Scribe Rickard hesitated before he spoke up. “But that train leads through the Shattered Zone. There’s not a chance that the human would be foolish enough…”

“It was on that train,” Maxus said without making eye-contact, keeping it straight forward on the foot of the Obelisk. Rickard failed to understand, his words degrading into a murmur lodged in the dam of his throat. “For it to appear in Parfocorse, it would had to have travelled north. It only makes sense that it keeps going to that direction.” He stroked his chin in thought. His entire empire, inch by inch, ran through his mind. “Winter’s Edge. That is where the human would have disembarked.”

Rickard faced the ground and shook his head. “No… no, that makes no sense – with all due respect, my lord. The only place they can go from there is Ice Island. That place is a dead zone – nobody has ever returned from there in years. Why would anyone—?”

“Haze.”

Rickard’s head snapped up at that word. “Haze? Professor Haze?"

“It makes perfect sense. The human is attempting to reach the Forest, where the old professor is hiding.” His gaze remained glued to the Obelisk, to the jagged markings at its foot. If there was anyone who remotely came close to deciphering the truth behind it, it was Haze. He left the castle decades ago, vanishing deep within the Forest, and since then, any and all attempts to locate him were futile, like he had disappeared off the face of the Outerworld. “The old monster will not show himself to me or my men, but I’m sure he will to the human.”

“But how would the human know to go there?”

General Leigh suggested, “Most likely someone told them. There are many defectors within the Plain-plain; they must have stumbled upon one of them.”

Rickard switched back and forth between both the ruler and the general, unsure as which one to address his next statement to. “R-regardless, all who enter Ice Island never return. We’ve surely lost the human child forever. Need I remind you of our own squad went send in to deal with this matter?”

Maxus raised a hand in sharp interruption. “We remember on our own, Scribe.” There was frustration laced in his voice. “None have ever made it through that island… yet. Perhaps it, the human, will be the first to pull through.”

“If the human does, my liege,” the general said, “our soldiers will be waiting.”

The same amount of confidence Leigh did not inhibit the lion emperor, not after the soldiers’ failings from yesterday and today. “What other news do you bring?” asked Maxus. “Do you also bring word of the criminal who destroyed Bjornliege Manor?”

Scribe Rickard glanced down at his clipboard. “Our scouts are still tracking the one named Undyne. Reports show that she has exited the Oasis and is now within the Plain-plain, most likely trying to track the human’s movements. She moves around quickly, I may add.”

“I have taken the liberty of electing Colonel Fischer to personally catch her,” Leigh added with nothing short but a hint of pride. “She will not fail.”

Colonel Fischer: head of the ranged division and one of the Monster Military’s best troops. Just as dangerous from a distance as she was up-close and personal. She mixed a strong aspiration to achieve results with a composed demeanour and infallible discipline, especially after insisting that her
skills were more useful with the troops as opposed to commanding them from behind closed doors.

Without complimenting that decision, Maxus moved to the next pressing issue: “And the ‘special guest’ over in A. Town? I trust you bring word of her detainment.”

Both the general and scribe started with silence, as both tried to determine which would be the one to break the news to their leader.

This tried the Emperor’s patience. His head whipped over, silver irises locking onto Rickard immediately. “Well?”

The suddenness made Rickard almost drop his board in shock. He fumbled around the edges, seizing it and bringing it half over his face. “A squad was dispatched to A. Town this morning…” He paused to take a breath, drawing for time that he did not have. “How–however, they were not successful in detaining the doctor or her skeleton associates. Reported that they got side-tracked by several issues in neighbouring towns. Since then, all three of them have mysteriously disappeared.”

The Emperor took his hands from the rests and placed the palms down on his lap just above his knees. “My own men are feeding me lies now? Is this some kind of joke?” he said harshly as he hunched forward, preparing to stand. “For centuries, the Monster Military has served as the strongest fighting force in the Empire.” Pushing down with his hands, he rose from the wooden throne. He did not stop until he had fully straightened out, towering over them. “And yet, these last couple of days, I’ve seen nothing but incompetence.”

The sprinkling of water stopped as the gardeners paused in their work, distracted by their ruler. Even movements as simple as standing up caught their attention. When the lion got in this state, he became unpredictable. There was no telling what was going to happen next.

Rickard went to speak, “My lord, I…” A quiet hand raise from Maxus shushed him in an instant. “Have you grown lazy since my father died?” Emperor Maxus switched from Rickard to Leigh. On the surface, he appeared controlled, but the anger boiled away deep inside. “Do you think me as soft and stupid?”

General Leigh unhurriedly shook his head, taking it slow to avoid igniting his old wounds. He said calmly, “Absolutely not, my lord.” Master Scribe Rickard, on the other hand, was shaking his head so fast that it looked like it was spinning in place.

“Then why are you finding my tasks difficult all of a sudden,” Maxus enquired, “and invent tales to try and excuse your failings?”

Leigh and Rickard struggled to make eye contact with their ruler. They could not tell whether that question was aimed at the troops who failed or at themselves. Perhaps a strange combination of both. Maybe they were failing him by simply being in his presence.

Maxus pointed at the ground. “This kind of behaviour is unacceptable, and I will not tolerate it. I need my men to be disciplined, whipped into shape, now more than ever.” He pondered a moment. “And how about we use that term more literally?”

Scribe Rickard jerked his head up a little. “Whipping?” Sweat trickled down his white fur. “My lord, you can’t possibly be considering… flagellation…” That last word did not want to leave his lungs, getting snagged in his throat.

“That is exactly what I am proposing, Scribe. A little public punishment will motivate the troops into working harder.” A dark thought crossed his mind. “And perhaps, if applied to the citizen
population, could get me some answers.”

“But such a barbaric punishment has never been remotely considered in the Outerworld ever. Your father would never allow such a heinous practise—”

“I’m not my father! He’s dead!” Maxus snapped back. The rat scribe stepped back, his breath halted. “I am your emperor, and as your emperor, you will never speak back to me.” His silver glare bore deep into Rickard’s. “Do I make myself clear, to both of you?”

Rickard was shaking again, unable to tear himself away. The way Maxus was staring at him…

Those eyes. The look that was in them, the expressions portrayed, none of which he had ever seen before. Was that the look the late Juhi warned him about all those years ago?

“Clear as crystal, your excellency,” Rickard conceited. His clipboard pressed against his chest. Leigh paused, hesitated, and then responded, “The troops will understand, Emperor Maxus.”

“That’s better,” Maxus said. His mood not lifting in the slightest. “Round up those who are underperforming and have them sent to the courtyard. Get to it.”

Rickard and Leigh both turned to leave; the former scribbled shakily in his clipboard. The words were coming out a smattered chicken-scratch that only he himself could decipher.

“It will… it will be…” Rickard attempted to say. “I’ll… I’ll…”

Leigh took a few long strides across the garden path before he realised that he walked alone. He glanced to his side, finding the scribe absent. Rickard was stuck in place before the Emperor. His pen pushed deep into the paper, forming a dent in the soft wood.

“Is something wrong?” asked Maxus. The pen nib scraped down the page, leaving a clear black mark. “No…” Rickard whispered as both pen and board hung limp at his sides.

“Then what are you waiting—”

In a move that surprised everyone, including himself, Rickard interrupted his superior. “No,” he said louder as he turned back around. “I’m sorry, but… no…” He could not believe what he was saying. “I can’t do this anymore… I won’t do it…”

Maxus looked down upon his shaking scribe and found himself wondering whether he really heard what he had just heard.

He frowned and inhaled slowly. “Say that again,” he hissed.

Rickard lowered his head and swallowed a mouthful of sour air. “I said… I won’t do it…”

General Leigh half-heartedly raised his arm, a part of him wanting to grab the scribe and drag him away before he could dig himself deeper than he already had. By now, every gardener had abandoned their duty, instead opting to watch the spectacle. Nobody could see this ending well.

Maxus’s colossal size eclipsed that of Rickard’s; the intensity of his piercing gaze alone bore enough weight to crush the skinny white rat. More cold sweat broke on Rickard’s forehead as his ruler lifted a massive paw and set it down gently on his shoulder, sending a shiver run down his spine. The fingers rubbed at the muscles as if massaging them, yet the tips probed like needles.
Neither said a word for the longest time before Maxus whispered, “One more time.”

“I won’t—”

In an instant, Maxus grabbed Rickard by the throat.

Effortlessly, he dragged the shrieking Rickard over to the Obelisk and slammed his back against the weathered stone. He dropped his pen and board. Nothing but pained grunts escaped his seized throat.

Somewhere, a watering can hit the ground, spilling precious, infused water. The tiger general gasped.

“What sort of game are you playing at?” Maxus demanded to know. Rickard grasped pathetically at his iron grip. “You spent years following my father’s orders without question and now you have the gall to question mine?” He pulled the scribe away only to slam him back. “You better have a good reason.”

The fingers at Rickard’s throat loosened just enough for him to draw breath. “You said it yourself: you’re not your father.” He cried, staring upwards. “And you know what? You haven’t been yourself for a long time either.”

It was at this moment when Maxus realised something. A flash emerged from his encounter with Barb, and remembered how both her and his deceased dad talked about him. “It’s… difficult to explain,” she said. “It’s like… it’s like you’re not Maxus sometimes. There’s something ugly inside you, something that’s been eating away at you for as long as I can remember, consuming you, turning you into something nasty.”

Maxus lifted Rickard off the ground, scraping his back up the pillar face. His legs kicked helplessly; his body pulled against his skull, piling pressure on the delicate insides.

“You talked to my father behind my back, didn’t you,” Maxus said.

“Yes, I did.” Rickard’s answer came with no hesitancy. “We talked. He warned me, about you. He was afraid of what would happen after you inherited the throne. At first, I didn’t believe him. I tried so hard to see past that, to see the good in you. I tried for so long to deny the things that he said… but the more you act, the more I see the bad side of you, the more I see how right he was.

“You act like you’re doing everything for us, but you don’t want to set us free – that was never your intention since the civil war – you just want revenge of humanity. That’s why you’re obsessed about killing the human child, about discovering the secret within the Obelisk, so you can use it to inflict pain upon the humans, all while you fail to see the pain you leave in your wake. Now you’re the emperor, and it’s only gotten worse. Just because you have the power to do things your way doesn’t give you the excuse to do whatever.

“The troops, your subjects, your allies: they’re all scared of you; and everyone else still hate you for the choice you made two hundred years ago – such things are not so easily forgotten in this world. You make the soldiers work until their bodies are ready to collapse, and don’t think I didn’t find out what you did to dear Barb and her parents – they were my friends too! And now you’re rewarding the soldiers’ hard work – your citizens’ hard work – by cracking out the whips on them.

“I was dreading the day Juhi died, knowing that I had lost a good friend and would have to answer to you. I wish things would have changed by then, but I guess that was wishful thinking. I cannot be party to this any longer.”

If that little speech had any soul shifting impact on the ruler, he displayed it by narrowing his gaze.
and deepening his frown.

“You mean to tell me you had no desire to be the master scribe in the first place? That all your obedience was merely a ruse? You think you’re too good for this position?” Maxus gritted his teeth, tightened his grip then relinquished it. Scribe Rickard slid seven feet to the ground, his legs buckling beneath him and crashing on his side. “Fine by me.”

Unapologetically, the Emperor glowered at him; knuckles protruding through clenched fists. With the light on his back, his silver irises pierced the shade on his front. He hissed deep, dark words through inseparable teeth: “Get out. Remove your ugly face from my sight, from my fortress, right now.” The demeaned scribe slowly rose, clutching his hurt elbow. A stern finger stabbed between his eyes. “Never come back!”

Rickard stood his ground for a moment. Such a sad creature.

He said with a small, weak voice, “I’ve never met any of the humans who took your family away, but… I’m willing to bet you sound just like them, right now.”

Like an injured lamb, Rickard stumbled away from the pillar and limped across the garden, alone. All eyes in the vicinity watched as he made his dishonourable exit through the wide gate to the north, never to be seen in Castle Highkeep ever again.

With Rickard gone, all gazes locked onto the emperor once more. He had his fair share of temper tantrums in the past, yet none of them could believe he had just done that. Master Scribe Rickard, the master of manuscripts in Highkeep Enclave for years, throw away like a piece of trash in two minutes.

The general, appalled by what he just witnessed, went to make a speedy exit.


Feeling his core temperature rise, Leigh stepped gingerly toward his emperor, stopping six feet away. He rubbed his own neck, massaging the old scars, and also anticipating the Emperor’s own fingers wrapped around it.

Through his anger, Emperor Maxus found a moment of sombreness. “Listen… forget about the whipping. Give the troops a good talking to, maybe a little drill or some light sparring to get them more active.”

Leigh felt his body slacken, easing the pressure off his old war wounds. “Yes, sir.” He turned on his heels to leave. “They’ll be relieved to hear that.”

“And get me the Advisor.”

In that very same instant, General Leigh halted as every muscle painfully tensed up again. Why did he have to say that? “My deepest apologies, my lord,” he reluctantly started, “but I have one final piece of news – from the Royal Advisor themself – which I was told to postpone before informing you.”

The great emperor snarled, failing to suppress the rage that he had just gotten his grasp on. “Don’t you dare…? What is it? Just spit it out.”

Leigh clasped his tiger laws together. “I’m afraid to inform you that two hours ago the Advisor… left the castle.”
“What? He’s gone?” Maxus replied with an outburst. “Two hours ago?” They had just been talking after breakfast that morning. The Advisor said nothing about leaving Castle Highkeep.

“The Advisor approached me and said that they were taking a leave of absence from Highkeep Enclave. Why, he did not say – nor did they say where they were going.”

“And you just let them go? By themselves without an escort?” Maxus looked away, struggling to contain himself. Thumb and index finger clinched the bridge of his snout. He waved for the general to leave. “Just... get back to work before I make a scene.”

With no argument there, General Leigh made his exit across the gravel paths, walking as fast and withholding his dignity as much as his worn body would allow.

Maxus looked around and saw the eyes of his gardeners watching him. Their prejudices and judgements bearing on him. Calling him a jerk. A freak. A slave driver. They were probably thinking how he could be so hard on those doing all the work while he sat around, staring at a giant pillar all day.

The bench lay before him, the seat that carried him since he was a boy. “You think I’m lazy?” he loudly accused. “I’ll show you!” Then, all of a sudden in an unexpected turn of events, he whipped his head back, drew a deep breath and roared at the bench, exploding it into splinters with a beam of white energy.

The deafening boom sent the gardeners packing, picking up their tools and running out the field of flowers.

When the dust cleared, the two things left from Earth were all that stood: the emperor and the Obelisk. The bench was nothing more than a passing memory; hundreds of years of careful preservation and maintenance, gone in an instant.

Destroying things was so much easier that building them. His entire existence revolved around destruction, not just of a materialistic nature, but also lives. Land destroyed. Jobs ruined. Lives lost and broken.

He was six years old again, lying at the bottom of the abandoned quarry. Hurt, starving, alone. Every breath felt like his last.

Emperor Maxus made an effort to calm his breathing. In slowly. Out slowly.

In slowly. Out slowly.

On the ground lay the discarded clipboard and pen.

He murmured to himself, “Why did I do that to him? What’s wrong with me? I shouldn’t have done that.” He punched the pillar. “I shouldn’t have done that…

“... But why don’t I feel bad about it?”

The rivers of Bob flowed true yet calm, as flat as the untouched water in a puddle. The boat sailed down the stream, crafted to hold a crew of thirty, and yet only held three. The lone rower at the front and the two passengers sat across from him.

Asgore leaned back. “Rather nice, don’t you think?” he said, enjoying the relaxing sensation of rocking across easy waters.
Toriel sat straight, hands on knees, the fingers on the right hand tapped against the cap. “I will relax once I know that Frisk and all the others are safe.”

The horrible feeling that they may never see them again dawned on Asgore and Toriel a long time ago. Toriel may never share another bad joke with Sans over the phone. Asgore had spent so much time training with Undyne that she became the daughter he never had. Papyrus was so clueless about many things, and Toriel so loved to teach; she could not ask for a better student. Even with the barrier destroyed and no more reason to research an escape, Alphys still held the former king’s attention over a nice cup of tea and a few chocolate digestives.

Then there was Frisk, the child who brought light back into their lives when they thought they would never see the sun again.

Asgore thought back to when they first met. He finished tending to the flowers, turned around, took one look at the human and reeled back with surprise. A human. The final soul. He could finally shatter the barrier and enact vengeance upon the surface.

He reeled back with surprise upon laying eyes on Frisk. However, it was not because they were human why the mighty King of the Underground reacted like that.

When he first saw that child standing in the throne room, he almost mistook them for another.

Every time he looked at Frisk, he always glimpsed that child.

The first human child.

Chara.

Frisk kind of looked like Chara, didn’t they?

Whenever he looked at their adopted child, all he saw was the one who both he and his wife adopted another lifetime ago. The one he loved like his own. The one who became best friends with his son. The one who shone like a beacon of hope in the sunless Underground. The one who grew sick. The one who perished.

The one who took his family away.

The one he failed.

“You still have the map from Bob, yes?” Toriel asked.

Asgore nodded as he reached into the back pocket of his jeans and pulled out a folded piece of paper. The map from the Embassy of Bob to Castle Highkeep took a solid ten seconds for the founder of Bob to create, and for good reason. The ‘map’ was literally the word ‘Embassy of Bob’ at the bottom with an arrow above it pointing to ‘Castle Highkeep’, all in blue ink.

“It’s pretty self-explanatory,” said Asgore as he looked through the canopy beyond at the silhouette of the castle off in the distance. “Just head straight that way.”

“Indeed.” Toriel examined the inner workings of the vessel. So finely and delicately crafted. “It was so generous of the boatman to offer us passage. Thank you so much.”

The boatman, a frog sporting a twirled moustache, turned from the oar and flashed a seductive smile. “Of course,” he said jovially. “I could not leave such a lovely, beautiful person stranded on the wayside. The pleasure is all mine.”
Asgore grinned at his ex-wife. “Still pulling the charms, I see,” he said with a chuckle. “You’ve still got it even after all these years.”

Returning a sly smile, Toriel waved for her ex-husband to come closer. She leaned in his ear and whispered, “I believe he is referring to you, Dreemurr.”

His eyebrows raised. “Me?” he muttered just as the frog boatman turned and waggled his eyebrows. “I mean, I’m most flattered.” His response came with another chuckle, this one awkward.

The boatman nodded and returned to rowing the oar similar to those guys over in Venice.

“At this rate, we might be able to make it to the next village before the rain starts,” he explained. “There’s an inn where we can wait for the rain to pass, then I’ll take you the rest of the way to the bridge leading to Highkeep Enclave.”

Toriel looked up at the clear sky through the fingers of black trees. “I do not see any clouds…”

The couple had told the boatman that they were new around these parts, and he was in a good enough mood to trust them, or at least humour them. “You might not see it, but you’ll feel it when it starts – trust me.” He gave the oar another wade through the murky waters. “We don’t want to be caught out here when it rains.”

Onwards he paddled. With every push of the oar, he brought the husband and wife that one bit closer to the castle, and to confronting the monster who wants to take their child away.

Neither of them could not wait to meet this fellow.

Lord Grill nursed his cup of steaming coffee. The caffeine was good going down, the second best thing to happen to him all day.

He retraced his steps around the manor, just starting to gain his bearings. He looked for familiar decorations adorning the halls that acted like waypoints to some degree.

He found his way back to the quarters he had been delegated, eager to get some peace and quiet.

The door was closed. As Grill reached for the handle, the door suddenly swung open on him. The lord jumped back, saving his coffee from spilling.

Obstructing the doorway stood two skeletons and a short, yellow dinosaur lady. The short skeleton in the blue hoodie glanced up and down the hall.

“Anything familiar?” Papyrus asked.

“Nope, nothin’,” Sans answered. He turned to Lord Grill. “Hey, how’s it goin’?”

The grizzly bear stumbled on his words. “I, uh, am going just fine. How did you get in here?”

Sans shrugged, half-closing his eyes. “I have no idea myself,” he responded. “I guess you could say…”

Papyrus saw what was coming. “Don’t you dare, Sans.”

“I only know the bear necessities.”

*Ba dum pish!*
“Sans!” Papyrus shrieked. “I don’t get it,” Papyrus quietly remarked.

“Guys, can we move on, please?” Alphys asked.

“Sure thing, Al.” Sans turned to the lord of the deceased Bjornliege Manor and bid, “Later, dude” as he closed the door.

Lord Grill had never been this confused since the time both he and that guy flaunting that pyramid scheme fell into that vat of sticky toffee.

He grabbed the handle and twisted it. He pulled the door ajar to find his room deserted. Nothing had been tampered with and there was no sign of anyone entering or leaving. They were gone.

So confused. Grill’s thoughts so jumbled. Nothing made sense these past couple of days.

There was one thing he could say at that exact moment.

“That pun was actually pretty funny.” And sipped his coffee.
Those words Vail said bounced around in Frisk's skull as easily as sound echoed within the empty caves.

"It should've been you," he said.

"It should've been you." Every syllable spoken with pure sincerity.

"It should've been you." Every syllable spoken with pure disgust.

For the most part of an hour, Vail had both hounded them and messed with their head; however, it was those four words that struck Frisk the most.

The worst part about that accusation was… the thought had crossed their mind once, almost like Vail had played part-time fortune teller.

If Frisk had the chance to trade their life for Asriel's, would they? Could they?

Half of them thought so. That side of their heart felt they could live a life of solitude knowing that they had given someone else their future back. They could sleep easy on a night knowing they had done a great deed, and had brought happiness to others at the cost of their own.

The other side of their heart, however, felt that it could not give up the surface. Asriel sacrificed his own future to give the entire Underground theirs.

Just thinking about it brought an ironic smile to Frisk's face. The exact same dilemma must have swam through his mind as the two of them stood face to face at the end.

And then there was that one time from two weeks ago.

That one night Frisk jerked awake at the whistling sound of heavy gale. Regardless of the blanket of moon and stars, the world was restless that night. Trees and bushes danced outside the walls, rustling loud enough for them to hear. Through bleary vision and heavy eyelids, Frisk turned over and groaned upon reading three in the morning on the clock. They sat up in bed, the sheets rolled of their shoulders; there was an arid dryness in their mouth that stretched to their chapped lips.

Frisk crept out of bed, tiptoed into the hallway and felt their way to the kitchen. They had just about adjusted to the darkness by the time they got themselves a glass of water.

Moving into their new home took faster than expected. They estimated – considering that monsters had just returned to a world run by humans – to be properly housed within months, maybe even years, but managed to secure in cozy place in mere days. Asgore and Toriel had just about finished unpacking, having moved their valuables out from the Underground. Asgore's possessions were easier to move than Toriel's since he resided closer to the exit than she did.

Sans and Papyrus had the same luck, finding another place in a nearby town. The skeleton brothers' new home was an exact replica of their old one in Snowdin, down to its snow-covered roof, almost like they picked up their previous house and plumped in down in the first vacant plot they found.

Undyne and Alphys took a tad bit longer, but found their new home close to the sea. Their moving in experience was the shortest out of all of them since all of Undyne's possessions perished in the fire, sparing an extra pair of hands in which to help her girlfriend move from the lab.
Nobody had any idea how Mettaton managed to snag a mansion, or that multi-million dollar showbiz contract, or that other multi-million dollar showbiz contract that came with another mansion in the Philippines.

The rest of the inhabitants were just as mixed as they were unique. Some moved out; some were still waiting for openings in the market; some were in the process of moving out; and some were still comfortable in the Underground.

Everything changed. Everyone changed a little; all except Sans. There was an air about him that had not adjusted to the surface, almost like he was still living with a rocky roof over his head. He was still lazy, yet taking jobs wherever he could find them; he had ample opportunities to try new activities, yet stuck to what he did best; the entire monster kingdom was free, yet he did not seem to care very much, as if it were all for naught.

As if it could all be taken away in an instant.

As if he were waiting for something.

Frisk sipped their water before they set it down on their bedside table and climbed back into bed; the sheets held trace amounts of their warmth. As they sat there, they recalled the Underground, and the friends they made, and the victories they gained, and the one they left behind.

If only they had a second chance. A way to make things right. Better. For everyone.

Of course, there was something they had not yet tried…

Resetting.

They imagined it: starting their adventure with a clean slate. Meeting everyone – Flowey, Toriel, Sans, Papyrus, Monster Kid, Undyne, Alphys, Mettaton, Asgore – all over again. Journeying through the Underground, from the ruins all the way to the castle. Battling and befriending all who opposed them.

Describing the power to start again was complicated, like having access to a great big rewind button; except is wasn’t a button, more some kind of sensation that felt its way through time.

They closed their eyes and saw what could only be described as the button: a visual representation that they could comprehend. The reset button, hovering in the void of black. All they had to do was reach out, press it, and boom; instead of waking up in their bed, they would awaken on another bed – a one made of golden flowers; and embark on their adventure all over again.

Was it really that easy? Because it sounded too easy to be true.

Ideas floated amongst the sea of blackness: things they could do differently; the changes they could make; the other things they could say and do given they now had a second chance.

Find a way to save Asriel?!

Heck, if they could really do this whenever they wanted, then what was stopping them from doing something… drastically different? If their determination would bring them back again and again, then what were the consequences? Was there really a downside to all this as long as they could, at any time, wipe it all away with one press of a button?

They reached for the reset button, then stopped.
A horrible feeling chewed them up inside, telling them that this was wrong. The feeling manifested itself into an imaginary pair of eyes, watching their every move, waiting for them to act, and ready to judge all their actions.

By doing this, they would be erasing this outcome where the Underground was set free. Did that mean that everything that had happened from the beginning until now was synthetic? That nothing mattered? That they fought against a god and saved existence itself just so they could take it all back with the press of a button? Their victory tasted a lot bitterer just thinking about it.

Not to mention, this was the exact same power that consumed Flowey, and practically destroyed him – turned him into a thing of nightmares. A soulless creature lost control and caused massive pain, misery, and death in the Underground. How much worse could it be if a human being got corrupted by that power?

If Frisk pushed that reset button, would they be taking the first step to becoming Flowey? Into becoming the real monster he had become? Into becoming the very thing they sought to stop?

Frisk opened their eyes. They did not see the gloomy, rocky cave of the Underground, but the tidy, warm interior of their bedroom. The reset button was gone, yet remained faintly visible in their retina.

And what did Frisk do next?

They lay down, pulled the sheets over their shoulders, and went back to sleep.

They woke up the next day when they could have woken up to a new adventure. Ate their breakfast when they could have practiced talking to the dummy. Went to school when they could have went to Toriel's home. Had lunch when they could have been solving Papyrus's puzzles. They came home and did homework and played for a bit and watched some TV, and yet the alternative of what would have happened had they reset lingered in their mind.

Every night, the thought crossed them.

And every night, they chose to rest their head on their pillow.

Frisk sighed. It was pointless pondering about what ifs and what could have been. What mattered now was that they were trapped under Black Ice Mountain, being hunted by a monster who deeply despised reality, for a reason they had yet to figure out.

Pushing his words to the back of their mind, Frisk moved forward, down the only stretch of tunnel from the room with the giant, shattered mirror. Ever since that near-hypnotise experience, since destroying the illusion of a perfect ending, Vail had remained strangely absent for the past fifteen minutes. That guy sure was angry though, mad that Frisk chose reality over his deluded version of contentment.

The tunnel went on and on, left and right, up and down with no deviating route to choose from. Like it or not, they were still trapped within the web of complexity that Vail had planned and created over the course of many years. If they were to escape, the only way was to beat Vail at his own game. Somehow.

The further down the rabbit hole they went, the darker it got. The clusters of gleaming rocks above began to decline in their numbers, dimming the once bright passageways. The tunnel walls got more decrepit with jagged cracks and littering with loose debris.

As they turned the next corner, Frisk found an abandoned mine cart dead ahead, lying dormant on an old track. It was the old fashioned half barrel on four iron wheels with a handbrake and a light on the
front. It was stationed at the foot of a slope.

Looking down the drop, it continued a short ways down before being blocked off by a haphazard fence of wooden planks. Frisk headed down and inspected it closer, finding the timbers to have worn over time. The nails holding it together looked badly degraded; sawdust and rust being the only things keeping it standing.

They took a peek through the gaps. The tunnel and the track continued down for roughly twenty metres before disappearing into darkness.

Frisk tested the timbers. A little shaky, but holding up strong despite the weakening over time. The wall refused to fall no matter how much force they applied. It would require something much stronger in order to knock it down.

That was when the mine cart came back into play. How cool would it be to ride in one of those Indiana Jones style?

The human child headed back up. They went to grab the cart by the edge when they stopped, thinking back to their train ride a mere hour-and-a-half ago. Could they really subject themselves to another ride into the unknown? For all they knew, the cart probably could lean sideways on them, or clear giant holes in the bottom of the island.

Pushing these thoughts beside Vail’s piercing words, they planted a foot at the bottom and pushed themself over and into the mine cart. A few pebbles of rock and coal mingled at the bottom along with mounds of black dust that clung to their boots.

Frisk grabbed hold on the handbrake, feeling a second thought creep in like this was a bad idea. The tunnel ahead was sealed off for a reason.

They pulled on the handle and disengaged the brake. As the stiff wheels lurched forward, the lone light spurred to life, flicking at every wheel rotation. Slowly, the cart crawled those five feet forward, the calm before the big dipper. Frisk began to pick up speed the moment the front wheels then hit the drop; the lamp went to full blast, illuminating the way ahead.

They ducked down and braced themself as they charged toward the barricade. As the mine cart crashed through, the rider felt only the slightest tremor through the cold steel.

The tunnel ahead stretched out for ten metres. Gems shone white. Trickles of water glistened silver. The track began to deviate through a twist of tracks as the walls closed in around them. Sparks flew upwards from the corroded tracks; moments of ear-scraping scratching against loud rumbling. The grinding of wheels broken by the regular click-click of the links.

The tracks went on for what seemed like an eternity, the route showing no signs of ending. Miles covered within minutes.

He returned.

"So, I was thinking…” Frisk suddenly turned around to find Vail sat, with his arms folded, on the back edge. He appeared an apparition in the swaying luminescence. "I've got just the perfect additions to make this ride more interesting. A couple of water slides, one where you hit the shallow water and it all shoots up at the sides – I don't know what that's called. Maybe a corkscrew or a loop-de-loop – how about a cork-de-loop. I'm sure nobody's ever thought of that"

Just the suggestion made Frisk's stomach perform a cork-de-loop; they had barely gotten over the crazy ride through the Shattered Zone. They did not want to even think about rollercoasters for at
least a year.

Vail snapped his fingers at a sudden though. "Oh, how about some imaginary bad guys chasing after you on other mine carts?" he said. "That would be exciting, with a little added neon for effect. A camera at the big dipper to take the souvenir picture – free of charge, of course – and…"

He stopped midsentence. The pleasantries dropped from his features. "Oh, wait. That's right." He finally made eye-contact with the human child, and it was not the friendly kind either. "You don't like fantasy, apparently. You prefer reality." He leaned in closer, digging his stare deeper while punctuating ever word he said next. "Uneventful, predictable, disappointing, boring reality."

In the next dip of light, Vail became one with the shadows and vanished.

"By the way, since you're not using this…" Vail's voice drew the human to the front. Now he saw beside the lamp, pointing nonchalantly at the handbrake. "Can I have it?"

In the single second that follow, Frisk responded with a confused murmur.

Taking their silence for a yes, Vail said, "Thanks," grabbed the handbrake with one hand, then ripped it out as effortlessly as yanking off a plaster, giving out a brief, metallic snap. He held the handle above his head; the components that made up the inside dangled out the fresh opening. Vail tossed the handle over Frisk's head only to catch it on the other side of the cart like there were two of them playing catch. "Have fun…" this Vail said as his grin returned. His glance shifted to the route ahead. "And you might want to duck."

Frisk pulled away from Vail and caught the low hanging rock just in time to drop beneath it, keeping their head firmly attached to their neck. Finding their footing again, they did not bother turning to see if he was still there, because he wasn't.

They glanced down at the stump that was once the trusty handbrake, the solitary component capable of halting this half-a-ton bathtub of pure steel, gone. The tunnel continued to appear from the darker as the cart showed no signs of slowing down.

Frisk gripped the sides as tightly as they could. Runaway cart! The walls zoomed past like sharp blades, ready the slice them up if they tried to jump out.

The cart exited the stretch of cramped tunnel, revealing that getting on it in the first place might not have been the best idea after all. The bending tracks ahead, built atop a matchstick framework of timbers, did not appear too stable. All of it surrounded by an infrastructure of cranes, scaffolds, ladders and walkways. This section of mine may have been abandoned even before the civil war started. The entire light in the area held a faint blue tint.

Holding on for their life, the cart rocketed across the tracks, moving so fast that it threatened to roll straight off. Frisk ducked and dodged under, over, and through the mining equipment. The supports groaned and wobbled under their weight. At tight turns, the inside wheels lifted off the tracks.

Their surroundings zoomed past before Frisk could catch a chance to focus on them. Cranes tied to slabs of rock, pickaxes scattered beside pockmarked walls; work seemingly left unfinished like everyone stopped what they were doing all of a sudden.

The moaning of the unstable supports began to be broken up by the snaps of weak timbers. Nails cracking out of place. The tracks wobbled, but were able to not topple.

The cart hit a small summit at top speed, hoping off the track momentarily. The jolt of the landing threw the lone passenger down, face-first into the recess of soot at the bottommost recesses. The stuff
latched on to their face, getting into their eyes and zipping up their mouth. Frisk immediately started coughing. Their eyelids slammed shut.

They clambered upright, struggling as the car continued to jiggle against them. They hacked away while rubbing at their eyes, only making them sorer.

Through pain and tears, they managed to force their eyelids to open. And just in time.

The end of the line. Dead ahead.

The metal buffer stop – a metal rectangle on six legs – was so rusty that did not look strong enough to halt a passing thought, let alone a speeding cart. And two metres beyond that stood a wall of jagged spikes, all aimed in their direction. The lamp in front highlighted the sharpness in those edges and the gems that consisted them.

It was like a death trap straight out of a cartoon.

Frisk only had seconds to react. There was no thinking, just action. At the last moment, they swung their arms into the air, stretching them as high as they could.

The cart crashed through the stopper, turning it into dust particles. The force of the impact flipped it off the tracks and into the spikes. Seven of the razor sharp tips pierced the steel with ear-splitting slicing, shredding it into scrap metal in the blink of an eye.

No-one could survive a crash like that.

Which was a good thing Frisk was not on it.

A few feet back from where the stopper once stood, Frisk dangled above the ground, swinging forward and back, holding on to a dull hook of one of the many cranes that made up the stretch of cave. They witnessed the crash, not wanting to think of the outcome had they still been on it.

Letting go of the hook, Frisk dropped to the ground, making sure to bend their knees on landing.

They rubbed away at their face some more, attempting to shift the soot off. As they rubbed with their gloves and arms, it made it spread around. No matter how much they rubbed, more of the black ash multiplied. After minutes, they had managed to clear enough off their eyes to stop them from watering.

They searched around for another route, finding nothing at first. Climbing up a nearby ladder revealed another tunnel to take.

There was no telling where they were or how far through the tunnels they were at this point. Without a map, without directions, they were walking in the dark.

They treaded down this new stretch of cave, waiting to come across another elaborate trap, waiting for Vail to mock them with his smug, superior, perfect face again.

Minutes later, they heard the unmistakable sound of dripping water.

*Drip... drip... drip... drip...*

Another trick of the mind?

Eventually, they located the source. In a worn crevice, a small puddle formed. A crack above leaked a continuous drop of water every two seconds.
Frisk approached with caution, remembering what happened the last time they drank water in this place. The human accidentally rubbed their eye, returning that horrible, raw ache into it.

They knelt down, removed their gloves, and dipped their hands into the water. It was as cold as ice. They splashed it into their face and rubbed, dripped black water down their chin. The feeling of cold water was both a blessing and a curse rolled into one. The liberation of clear water cleaning their eyes out felt fantastic, but also bitingly painful. The air attacked the wet skin with the sharpness of knives. They quickly dried them with their scarf.

The next step: was it safe to drink?

There was no way for the child to know until they had tested it.

Braving the sub-zero waters with their numb hands, Frisk cupped a reserved amount. They brought it to their mouth and took a tiny sip. This puddle of water may have stood still for longer than they had been alive, yet it was clean and chilled.

As the liquid passed down into their stomach, they sat back and waited, wondering how this stuff will affect them.

They waited, expecting their head to go light and their vision to go blurry. They thought they felt their stomach churn or their head feel strange, but it never escalated further than that. It must have been figments of their imagination. Their body expected to feel bad so it decided to mimic the initial feelings of discomfort.

After more minutes wasted, nothing had happened. Did that mean that the water was safe to consume? Maybe.

Frisk slipped their rucksack off their shoulders and retrieved the empty flask. They unscrewed the top and submerged the nozzle, making sure to not get any on their hands for a third time. The last of the air bubbles diminished after a few seconds. The flask now weighed heavy; the water inside to the brim. Frisk took another sip and still did not feel any effects.

Then, from out the corner of their eye, Frisk realised that someone else was there. At first, they thought that it was the guy who had been tailing them since the beginning, until they realised that it was someone else entirely. They snapped their head around, finding a second monster beside the first. Both monsters gazed at the human with vacant eyes.

The one on the right had a metal, blue vice for a head, over a doll-like body with a pink skirt. Two googly eyes hovered above the vice, which acted as their mouth. A pink ribbon was tied to the rotating handle on top.

The monster on the left was literally a rainbow between two floating clouds. They had two beady, black eyes and a mouth in the centre of the multi-coloured arch.

Frisk stood there quietly for a moment, then greeted the two with a simple 'Hi.'

"What a funny looking critter," the rainbow said to the other, ignoring the human's sparse introduction. Without tearing his gaze away, he asked, "What do you suppose it is, Versa?"

The monster at Rainbow's side – Versa the vice – tilted her top-heavy head; it looked like it was going to disconnect with her body, yet seemed to bend the rules of physics being atop her stuffed body. "I honestly have no idea, Roy," she replied, "but they look friendly to me. Do you think they want to be our friend?"
There was no mystery behind it. These two were clearly in the land where dreams come true. Frisk wondered what the two were seeing right now, trapped in their fantasy land, their perfect world. Perhaps endless green fields full of bunnies, which the pair will have named in various rabbit-related names: Sir Hoppington the First; Mister fuzzy-Tail: Carrot Extraordinaire; Sir Hoppington the Second: Return of the Hop; Benny Bunny; Harry Hopper; Sir Hoppington the Fourth: A New Hop; and Roger.

The rainbow monster, Roy G. Biv – middle name Giovani –, nodded what would pass as his head. "Yes, yes, everyone wants to be our friend. They want our friendship to be just as swell as ours are."

"Oh, Roy, you're such a good friend," Versa said, smiling her crushing lips.

"Not as good a friend as you are."

Frisk remained in place, neither moving nor talking in the slightest. They were unsure whether their attempts at making peace were genuine or a front to some sinister ulterior motive. Vail did warn them that their so-called friends would break them until there was nothing left to break.

Speak of the devil. From the shadows between the two bestest of pals, the komodo dragon returned.

"Do you understand what it means to be alone? To be truly alone?" Vail asked, addressing Frisk. "Chances are you already do – from the way you smashed my mirror, in all." He sensed that he had strayed from the topic's direction. "But that's beside the point. These monsters have never once known what it was like to have a friend – someone they can lean on. As the saying goes: Birds of a feather flock together, and now these friendless monsters now have each other." He gestured to the two hypnotised friends. "I made these guys happy. I offered to make you happy as well, and you spat in my face. So now, I'll return the favour."

Vail clapped his hands together twice. His loud clapping was made louder in the empty caves. He address those to his sides. "Roy! Versa! It's so great to see you again," he spoke like an overly friendly actor on a children's show.

Versa and Roy span and grinned to their widest upon spotting Vail – an odd way to react to the one keeping them captive.

"Mister Vail," Roy cried.

"You came back," Versa said.

"Of course I came back," Vail responded with a tap on his snout. "I never forget my pals."

Roy was unable to contain his excitement. "We missed you a whole bunch."

"And I have missed you both as well. It's great to see you again."

"Are you here to take us on another adventure?" Versa started asking. "To meet new friends and – oh wait!" Without looking, she pointed back at Frisk. "We've met a new friend just now."

Vail turned to Frisk and frowned, wrinkling his face at them. "Are you sure about that, guys?" he said with suspicion. "Be careful, this one doesn't look friendly."

Simultaneously, Roy and Versa looked at the human.

Roy's eyes, which looked upon the stranger with hopeful adoration a minute ago, suddenly widened with horror. "What… what happened to them? V-Vail, what's wrong with them?"
Versa's look bore an equal amount of terror.

"I don't know," Vail responded, feigning fear. There was clear satisfaction behind the mask of emotion he wore. "Were its eyes always glowing red like that? Did it always have such black, inky skin? And what's with that creepy smile?"

Frisk was taken aback by how much their attitudes shifted under Vail’s venomous words.

Versa glanced and pointed down. "What's that in its hand, Mister Vail?"

Frisk followed her gaze, finding the flask they held. It glistened with both its metallic body and slick coat of water.

All of a sudden, Vail started shouting. "A knife! It has a knife! It means to hurt you!"

The two monster erupted into full-blown panic, screaming and slowing backing away from the demonic figure before them, ready to bring pain and suffering to their happy, perfect lives.

Vail yelled, "Kill it! Kill it before it kills you and all your friends!" And he turned and made his exit, walking into the shadows.

With him gone, the fears of the monsters manifested into anger, which they were going to train on Frisk. Frisk held their hands out and attempted to calm the two monsters down; however, this had the reverse effect, making them more frightened, angrier.

Roy's shot forward, acting first. "Eat this, evil creature!" From his clouds, a spectrum of light shot toward Frisk.

Frisk dove to the left before they could taste a rainbow. The missed beam struck a wall several feet behind them, blasting a small crater the size of a watermelon.

They glanced back at their bag, which had not moved from its spot beside the rippling puddle one metre away. The glint of the ice-picks caught their eye. Anything to defend themselves against their attack.

As Frisk turned to reach for them, Versa saw their intent – or a much darker version of what that intent entailed. "Not so fast!" She raised her arm high above her head and brought it down.

Frisk's cold-bitten hands extended for the bag when they heard a rumbling sound from above. They caught a rectangle of ceiling as it plunged down on them. Frisk pushed away from the bag just in time to avoid getting crushed into a messy pancake. The rectangle hit the ground, rock smashing against rock like teeth biting, forming a brand new support beam within the cave. It separated the child from their rucksack.

The lips on Versa's face formed a grin. "Don't look so crushed, you cockroach!"

She stretched her hands apart and brought them together with a muffled tap. A two-by-two-foot sections of wall to the left and right of Frisk closed in. Like a vice. Frisk leapt forward, feeling the mighty slam vibrate up the backs of their heels.

Another shot of splintered light from Versa's colourful friend broke a new hole in the new, horizontal pillar after Frisk rolled to the right, out of its path.

Unarmed and defenceless, Frisk had only the full water bottle as their means of fighting back. It was dead weight unless they figured out a way to use it to their advantage. Perhaps these monsters were
thirsty? They could ask if Versa and Roy wanted a drink, then make a sneaky exit as the two shared the bottle. Pour it on the ground and ask the pair to be patient for two hours while it turned to ice, then ask if they would be so kind as to slip on it? If all else failed, the least the flask could do was give one of them a mighty headache.

Frisk attempted to plead with the pair, to no avail. Roy and Versa were too deep in their panicked attacked to listen. They had no idea how they were going to get out of this one.

"Keep your distance," Roy said, charging up another assault. "Don't let it get close!"

He launched more rainbows. Before Frisk jumped to the left, Versa pointed at where they would land and the ceiling above with her mitten hands. The moment Frisk landed, Versa threw her hands together like simulating the jaws of an alligator.

The ground under Frisk's feet reverberated before shooting up, carrying them with it. They dropped onto one knee, feeling all their inners stretch to their lowest regions. There was no time to look, but the sound of a second grinding noise above told them that they weren't safe. They kicked forward on one leg, throwing themself as far forward as they could. As the ends of the pillars met, Frisk was suddenly jerked back, smacking their head against rock.

Frisk dangled high. The coat pulled tight on their body; budging up to their chin; riding up their underarms. They squirmed and kicked to no avail, finding out that the back of their coat was caught in the clamp.

"I've got it! It's trapped!" Versa rapidly pointed at them while shooting quick glances at her friend. "Kill it quickly before it escapes!"

From the tense, stern look on Roy's friendly face, he was dead set on finishing this fight. Frisk struggled briefly; tried to wriggle either themself or their coat free; reach with their free hand for the zip buried beneath the folds; but there was no time. The charge in Roy's clouds reached their highest and out launched the rainbow that would put an end to what both he and Versa saw as an entity of pure evil.

Frisk did not think. They reacted purely with what was at hand – in their hand. Somehow, through everything, they had managed to keep a tight hold on the flask. The rainbow arched toward them, ready to turn them into black ash. They pulled their left hand back and let the flask fly, throwing it in the incoming trajectory.

The rainbow and the flask collided in mid-air. The shiny metal exploded like a grenade, all the contents escaped outwards in a watery detonation while the metal itself disintegrated into nothing.

Both Versa and Roy were struck with water, most of it in their faces. The two reeled back, blinking rapidly and looking disorientated and dazed as it dripped down them.

Frisk continued their struggle to escape their snagged coat, trying to make the most out of the time they bought with that stunt. After Versa and Roy regained their bearings, Frisk knew they would be back on the offensive.

Versa's stumbling stopped as she wiped life-giving H2O out from her eyes. "Where…? How…?" she muttered.

Frisk paused their struggling upon hearing her say that. Versa looked at her hands, then to her surroundings. There was something different in her stare. An alertness – what made a gaze look natural – had found its way into hers as she took in harsh, cold walls of her environment.
"What just happened? Where am I?" she questioned. Her tone was similar to Kenny's in the time before he got frozen. "Where did everything go? And why am I all wet?"

Roy Giovani Biv looked over at his best friend as if she were a stranger. The encapsulated look in his beads for eyes were gone, as if he were awake from an absurdly long nap.

"Wait, do I know you?" he asked while pointing at her. "I feel like I've known you from somewhere, but I don't know if that was real or not."

"Wait, what were we doing before?" Versa continued her questions. "I remember seeing something scary, and…" Finally, her wandering gaze found its way to the human child dangling from one of the columns only she herself could create on a whim. She was no longer looking through them, but at them. "Oh, my gosh!"

She stretched her hands out and parted them, dismissing all the columns just as quickly as how she conjured them. The snare holding Frisk in place released the moment it opened, dropping them suddenly. They hit the ground on the balls of their feet and the palms of their hands. The pillars retreated into the walls, aligning perfectly with the formations as if they never existed.

Versa rushed up to Frisk. "Did I hurt you? I thought you were some terrifying abomination back there. I'm sorry."

Frisk rose and breathed a relaxing sigh. They ensured Versa that all was forgiven; they were still standing tall, uncrushed and non-fragmented.

Roy floated over. "Good to see that we haven't damaged your colourful disposition," he said. "Can you help refresh our memories? Where are we and how did we get here?"

Frisk explained that they were on Ice Island, in the mines under Black Ice Mountain. They included their run-ins with Vail and how he almost hypnotised them just as he did with these two.

Roy blinked several times; the human's story resurfaced memories. "Wait, I think I'm starting to remember. I went into the island – this island – on a dare. I ran into that monster – Vail. He said I was going to make a great friend."

Versa picked up where Roy left off. "Yeah… yeah, and he forced me into these mines. I found these… these fountains. I was so thirsty that I drank from them."

Roy shot Versa a wide stare. "Me too! The water had some kind of effect on me and I saw what the others were seeing, and then…" He faced upwards, beady eyes open but empty. "I was before this giant mirror. He showed me a world where everyone wanted to be my friend… I've never had a real friend before."

Frisk frowned upon hearing the fate that had befallen him and almost happened to them. The story was the same, but with Roy as the main character.

Versa nodded slowly at the other's side of the story, clearly drawing parallels to her own.

"I didn't want to go at first, but when I was gazing into that fantasy land, it was like I was being pulled into it," she said. "I couldn't resist. I touched the glass and… everything up until now was like a dream."

Roy shook his entire body. "Okay, so, we know how we got here, but what do we do now?"

Frisk told them loud and clear: escape.
Both monsters agreed and decided to accompany the human. They had a better chance of getting out of this place if they stuck together.

After retrieving their backpack, Frisk's adventure continued, now with companions. Together, all three travelled together down the tunnels.

More questions dribbled from Roy's and Versa's mouths, wanting to know more about their situation and about Frisk themself. Frisk told the truth about everything. The discovery that they were a human did not shake them much, if anything, only made them surer that they would escape Vail's grasp.

All of a sudden, after more minutes of walking, the sounds of marching feet and shifting metal came from the corner ahead, made tinny in the echo of the hollow maze.

They stopped. Frisk's heart sank as they recognised the mixture of noises straight away. The same given out by the members of the Monster Military.

Vail rounded the corner, followed by the twenty sturdy souls sent in to investigate a long time ago, marching in two lines of ten. The armour on every soldier was strangely immaculate; their weapons looked as sharp as the day of manufacture. Vail looked so out-of-place at the front; a sharply-dressed, suave gentlemen being tailed by silver soldiers.

"Company," – Vail slammed his leather shoes to a stop – "halt!"

The monsters of the military stopped in perfect unison.

"Soldiers," Vail lectured the troops like a drill sergeant, "you are the best of the best. The finest, most decorated unit in the whole of the Monster Military." He paced back and forth; one hand behind his back, the other in front and gesturing his point across. "You have faced down challenges that would make the Emperor himself cry himself to sleep. You have taken on the absolute worst of the worst, the best of the worst, the worst of the best, and the best of the best – oh wait, you guys are the best of the best. Forget I said that last part. But now, your greatest threat advances upon you, and threatens to destroy everything you've fought for." He waved his hand at the petite human, the rainbow, and the vice almost like he was being comical. "Gaze upon them now, but do not fear them."

He gave the troops a few moments to absorb their opponents. For all Frisk knew, they could be the biggest monstrosities to the soldiers.

Vail shouted, "Will you let them win?"

"Sir, no, sir," the troops responded just as loud.

"Will you give up?"

"Sir, no, sir!"

"Will you destroy them?"

The troops raised their weapons and boomed, "Sir, yes, sir!"

"Will you annihilate them?"

"Sir, yes, sir!"

"Will you kiss them?"
"Sir, yes, s—!" The troops' boisterous bellowing dropped into a collection of mumbling.

Vail chuckled a bubbly chuckle. "Think fast, fellas..." He raised he free hand above his head. "For honour; for your people; for your Empire;" – Vail sliced the air with his open palm – "CHARGE!"

Roaring their battle cries, all twenty monsters rushed forward. Through the blur of rushing silver metal, Vail vanished.

Versa's tiny arms stretched into the air. "Wait, we're not dangerous," she shouted as loud as she could. "You're being controlled! You've got to snap out of it!"

Her words were ignored as the soldiers drew their crushing advance closer.

"Hey, uh, kid," Roy said, sounding nervous. "Don't suppose you got a plan, huh?" A bead of sweat down his brow refracted the light that shone from him.

Frisk gave him a curt smile.

That depended on whether any of them had any water.
The Genuine Article

The first guard attacked, swinging his sword in a wide arch toward the trio. There was an undisciplined nature in his attack; he did not care who he hit as long as it hit one of them.

The group – Frisk, Versa, and Roy – dispersed in three directions: Frisk to the left; Roy to the right; and Versa jumped back. The blade clanked against bare ground.

The soldier behind the leader focused on Frisk, charging in with a spear. Frisk reached back and grabbed both ice axes from their backpack just in time. In one fluid motion, they side-stepped the spear and struck down on it. The soldier stumbled forward on his own momentum, lost balance, and then fell onto his knees; his helmet clanked against the ground.

Before he could raise his head, Frisk jumped on it, stomping it down before running up his back. They leapt off just as a sword was swung horizontally by someone else, clearing it like a hurdle.

Five of the monsters in suits formed a dam in the cramped tunnel, standing together. In their line, they thought they were impassable; unfortunately for them, they did not know what Versa was capable of.

She stretched her arms wide and swung them together, summoning pillars on both sides that slammed into the ones outside the wall. There was a crunch of metal and monster groans as all five soldiers were sandwiched together. Mercifully, the pillars retreated as quickly as they appeared and the soldiers flopped to the ground.

Frisk pushed forward, ducking and dodging and parrying blades and pointy ends left and right. Versa and Roy kept with their pace; Versa with her clamps and Roy with his rainbows.

Versa pointed to the ceiling and summoned a column down on an unsuspecting soldier’s head, stopping as it struck her helmet to avoid squashing her into paste.

The strength of Roy’s rainbows were controlled by him. He knocked a soldier down with a blast that was not strong enough to pierce the breastplate, but enough to knock the wind out of his sails.

Frisk was halfway through the fray; those before them advancing forward, ready for battle; those behind them in the process of picking themselves up to try again. As they had sworn to the illusion-loving monster who had no actually authority over them: they would never give up.

Frisk ducked through the legs of a brawny monster only to face a brawnier monster behind that one. The size of his upper body was severely disproportioned to his tiny legs. Obviously, the term leg day did not exist in his vocabulary. His stance was low, and his stern glare at the human child told them that the trick they just pulled will not work on them.

Flanking that guard were two others at both sides, charging in and proclaiming that they got this one.

Versa shouted, “Get ready to start jumping!” She pointed toward Frisk’s feet. “Trust me, I’ll catch you!”

Before Frisk could react or speak or do anything, the section of ground shot up underneath them. The three monsters of the Monster Military lunged too late, slamming face first into the rising pillar. Frisk fought the strong urge to jump, fearing that there was another pillar plunging downwards above them like before. The sudden movement was bizarre, as if they were getting bigger or the tunnel was getting smaller.
The cuboid of rock stopped and Versa shouted, “Jump! Go now!”

No thinking. No arguing. No questioning. Frisk took a massive leap forward, above the heads of those down below. All those in front stopped and stared as the child flew. To the monsters, Frisk may have been a ferocious fire breathing dragon, swooping down from the heavens with a mouthful of embers to share. A few reached with their swords and spears, coming short.

Suddenly, while they were still in the air, another pillar launched from the ground and stopped under Frisk, catching them before they could fall.

Onwards, Frisk hopped above the monsters in suits while Versa and Roy slipped beneath their legs. The sight of a child jumping on appearing platforms was mesmerising; nobody seemed to notice the vice monster or the rainbow monster as they kept up from the adjacent side of the tunnel.

Versa, upon reaching the back of the crowd, lowered her pillars until Frisk landed safely on the ground. They stopped jumping and inhaled a victorious lungful through their nose. Great! They had gotten past the Monster Military that were in front of them.

They turned around.

And now those exact same monsters were behind them; the fallen had picked themselves up and recollected themselves. Frisk exhaled a short and heavy breath out the mouth that deflated them. That victory was short-lived.

The squad had just started their second attack when, all of a sudden, two pillars zoomed from one side of the tunnel to the next, followed by another two from the top to the bottom. The pillars separated the twenty monsters from their targets.

Frisk faced Versa, who was waving her arms madly to conjure them. What appeared to be traces of water from the flask trickled down her flat head, which, upon closer inspection, happened to be sweat.

The soldiers attempted to squirm through the gaps, scratching and grinding the shiny edge out of their armour. Some were attempting to break the pillars, already showing results.

Frisk and Roy prepared themselves for the upcoming attack when Versa shouted to them. “Go! I’ll keep these guys busy. You us find a way out and… I’ll catch up with you later.” There was a hint of hesitation in her voice.

The two stood routed in place, wondering what to do.

With a heavy heart, Frisk turned and ran.

Frisk sprinted and Roy hovered, pushing their limits to their limits. They could hear the grinding of rock and the exertion of tired, grunting soldiers. Frisk fought every urge to look back, and kept that desire at bay long after the sounds had faded far behind them.

Versa was not going to last long by herself.

If Frisk were to do something, it had to be real soon.

They came to an exit, glowing a light, eerie shade of blue. Frisk had a small, lousy, ill-placed sense of hope that they had finally found an exit, a way out. However, that was not the case once they passed through it.
Roy and Frisk came out at another opening in the tunnels. Frisk knew, or at least suspected, that the beehive of tunnels beneath Black Ice Mountain was big, but not this big.

They stood now in some kind of chasm. Thousands of feet high and across, it stretched as far left and as far right as the eye could see; the two walls connected by a series of stone walkways at a spider web of different angles and altitudes. The escaping monster and his human companion were on one of these walkways. The ceiling was a giant cluster of sparkling white dots, too close and too bright to be considered stars in the night sky, and there was no bottom either, only darkness.

The walls were encrusted with scaffolding materials ranging from worn timbers to rusty metal bars to scaling rope. Contraptions and cranes stood lifeless, some till holding payloads of rock clusters and crates. None of it looked OSHA approved.

“Such a huge place…” Roy whispered. “How anyone got their way around here is beyond me.”

No time to dawdle on pointless questions. They had an exit to find; a friend to save. They rushed across the wide walkway. The far rock wall was farther away than first expected, and seemed to get farther the closer they got.

About a third of the way across was when the great, powerful, and mysterious Vail landed before them. He dropped from the ceiling, yet landed with a silent, cat-like grace. He looked like he was about to say something when Roy made the first move, launching one of his deadly rainbows. Vail zipped to the side in a fraction of a second, effortlessly dodging the magical attack.

“Do you know,” Vail started – hands in pockets like that attack just then didn’t happen –, “that beyond these tunnels lies my private domain? I must admit, I’m impressed: nobody with their head stuck in reality has ever made it this far. You truly are something, kid.” Roy launched another rainbow; Vail dodged it all the same, moving closer to the edge.

Vail continued, completely ignoring both attacks. “Sadly, though, I can’t let to go any further.” Roy unleashed a third attack, clearly not getting the pointlessness of it. Vail zipped further aside. His heels touched the edge.

Vail shook his head disappointedly. “Oh, Roy, you of all monsters should know by now…”

A fourth rainbow headed in his direction. With nowhere else to dart off to, this volley would definitely meet its mark. Without a care in the world, Vail leaned back and fell over the side.

The two ran over and watched as he plummeted as stiff as falling timber, hands now folded behind his head and one leg crossed over the other as if he decided to catch forty winks right there, nary a peep of a scream came from him.

He vanished into the dark abyss.

Nothing but silence existed for a few moments.

Frisk and Roy looked at each other as if to say, “Is it over? Was it really that easy?”

Then came a low rumble, like that of a rising earthquake or a tsunami. It rose from the depths, getting louder and louder, stronger and stronger until it shook the very foundations of the mines. A few ropes snapped and frameworks collapsed and scattered into the deep darkness. Frisk covered their ears as the roar reached a deafening crescendo.

A giant hand rose up from the darkness and wrapped its extremities around the end of the walkway.
The human and the monster were truly and utterly awed as the rest of the giant emerged, laughing. A familiar reptilian face with the slick chocolate hair, dazzling red and yellow eyes, and devilish goatee. The irises were so large that they could make out the tiny details. Walkways in his wake shattered like toothpicks.

The hands pressed tightly over Frisk’s ears did very little to protect them from Vail’s boisterous laugh as he shadowed the tiny human and the tiny, tiny rainbow monster. “THIS IS MY WORLD.” His normal voice boomed like thunder.

If it wasn’t clear before, it was now. The mines were a web and Vail was the spider. A very big, very scary spider.

There were many normal things one would do in that scenario, and stay and fight was not one of them. But Roy did it anyway. The clouds that comprised him glowed extra bright and out launched four rainbows at once. They dispersed and collided in four places on Vails chest, exploding on impact.

Vail did not flinch in the slightest. He reacted to the meagre assault by twice wiping his three-fingered hand down his vest as if he were brushing away crumbs from the last meal he ate. “DON’T CREASE THE DIGS,” he said, adding further punishment to fragile eardrums.

“Okay,” Roy whispered, “I’m out of ideas. What now?”

Frisk shot him an annoyed expression having barely heard him. What made him think that, just because they were human, they had a plan for this eventuality? Oh, of course, regular sized people conquered giants all the time where they came from. Sarcasm. Although that did sound like an interesting premise for a manga.

Out of all the normal things to do, one option did click in both of them: run.

The child dashed into a sprint down the walkway with Roy following behind. For a few moments, the colossal monster did nothing but watch the tiny bugs scurry, tipping his head to the side in amusement. At that speed, it would take the two of them three minutes to reach the other side.

Vail gave them a minute, then rose his fist – his every movement that tiny bit sluggish – and brought it down before the next tunnel. The entire bridge snapped downwards and collided with walkways below, knocking Frisk off their feet and onto their side. Roy, acting fact, willed another spectrum of light and jumped on it, gliding to safety across the empty expanse.

Frisk was sent spiralling down the tilted, broken walkway. No matter how hard they kicked or grabbed, Frisk could not stop themselves as they rolled closer to their doom. As the edge drew near, they grabbed one of the axes and slammed it down in a display of sparks. The edge finally gained traction as they went over the side.

Frisk held on. Their sights focused on the one and only lifeline above them and not what lay below them. After this was over, they would like to avoid precarious drops on any kind for the rest of their life.

The enormous form of Vail chuckled some more as the tiny human dangled helplessly. He grabbed the broken bridge by both ends and lifted it carefully, taking care not to shake it too much.

“LOOK AT YOU…” he tried to say as quiet as he could, and yet it still came out like an alarm. Unable to let go, even if they wanted to, Frisk had no choice but to endure his booming voice. Vail zoomed in until his eyes were metres away from their entire body. Frisk and Vail made eye contact,
and the former, at long last, knew what it felt like to be the ant on the end of someone’s thumb. “LITTLE, LITTLE FRISK. YOU’RE SO TINY. SO FRAGILE. IT’S QUITE ADORABLE, ACTUALLY.”

A small explosion burst of the side of his head. Vail blinked, then heaved a sigh as he found Roy flying around his head. Another shot found its mark on his cheek; not like it made much of a difference.

“Put the kid down, right now!” Roy shouted as loud as he could, making doubly sure that the big, bad monster caught it.

Vail glanced at Frisk and snickered. “WELL, IF YOU INSIST.” He released the rock path. In an instant, it dropped straight down and the handle slipped out of the child’s grasp. “COULD’VE PHRASED THAT BETTER, THOUGH.”

Roy Giovani Biv gasped. “Oh, geez…” With a burst of speed, he zoomed toward Frisk in a stream of seven colours. “Hold on, I’m coming!”

Vail reached out to grab the colourful monster. “NOT SO FAST.”

Roy turned just in time to see the humongous hands closing in from both directions; those fingers clawed to crush him. He kept his course, to where he could catch Frisk. Closer the hands got, cupping around him. He had one shot here. Timing was everything.

The time came when the fingers touched.

He changed his path, banking down. The fingers closed, as did the palms. The gaps getting smaller.

Roy took the plunge of his rainbow and jumped down and out just as hands cupped tight. The streak fizzled against Vail’s palms, making him think he had caught Roy. It wasn’t until he spotted another curving beam of light travelling downwards did he realise that he had missed.

The colourful monster zoomed under Frisk and caught them with his magic trail and carved across the air with Frisk sliding on the track in his wake. Both the wide walkway and the ice axe fell into darkness, followed a moment later with a small crash.

Roy turned near the threshold to the next tunnel and dropped the kid off, taking an extra second to confirm that the human was on their feet.

“You go on ahead.” Roy glanced back, already swaying toward the expanse. “I’ll keep him busy.”

Before Frisk could return a single word – whether it be a word of praise or an act of objection – Roy was up and charging toward Vail. He zigzagged in every direction and fired more shots without taking the time to aim. Perhaps he expected a glorious battle of David versus Goliath, except this Goliath was not reacting to the stones being hurled at his head.

Frisk stood idly below. Their heart sank when they realised that Vail wasn’t bothered with Roy at all, instead keeping his lizard eyes focused squarely on them and them alone.

“YOU WON’T ESCAPE FROM ME THAT EASILY,” he said as he chugged his titan frame toward the human.

Frisk faced the tunnel ahead and persuaded their body to move. They dashed through, feeling Vail’s overwhelming presence looming on their back. The way ahead banked upwards and to the right – perhaps re-joining the path they were on previously.
The chasm they had left behind groaned under the giant’s mass before that same sound chased Frisk down the tunnel. That did not sound good and it forced the human child to whip a quick look over their shoulder. Now they had every reason to believe that it wasn’t good as one mega grey claw squeezed down the narrow channel, after them.

Frisk snapped their head straight in front and ran faster. The massive hand about to grab them was not the focus. Focus too much on that and they would fail. Escape. If nothing else, get away as fast as they could. The pushed their legs so hard they couldn’t feel them. The claw reached closer and closer for them; the sounds getting louder; its essence impossible to ignore. Supports toppled. Crystals broke against callous knuckles.

In their peripheral vision, they spotted the two fingertips above.

The fingers dropped. Frisk turned sideways and dove between them. Vail’s digits dug into the ground and cracked the cold stone as it searched for his prey.

Frisk scrambled themself up and continued running. They got a few steps until they realised that the hand was no longer chasing them, but clawing around the inside, trying to snag something that wasn’t there. It generated a scene in Frisk’s mind that Vail had his entire arm in the hole, all the way to the shoulder.

“Slippery snail…” Vail booming voice was muffled through all that thick rock, enough to make it easy on their ears. His hand retracted back down the tunnel, leaving a trail of destruction in his path. “I’ll find you after I deal with Mister Biv back here.”

Oh, no, Roy. He didn’t stand a chance against the one who ruled this island. Frisk had to suppress the feeling to rush back out there. Both he and Versa were counting on them… if the two were still alive.

By now, their feet hurt and a place or two had started to rub. Their entire back was red hot and slick with sweat from the rucksack, and the straps dug tight into their collar so that their arms were going numb. What they wouldn’t give for a warm bath.

Everything was falling apart before their eyes. Everything going crazy; this entire place was one big, demented nuthouse.

And yet, somehow, they were still breathing and moving forward.

Somewhere, sometime, another version of themself would have given up so much more easily, knowing that they had a save file to fall back on and unlimited chances to get it right.

There was no point in them trying, but they did it anyway. The last time the felt determined was at the foot of Ice Island, with the Plain-plain and the escalators behind them, and the foot of the mountain and a mystery a ways ahead. Despite going through that whole ordeal on the train, they felt so much more fresh and rejuvenated.

The pack held more yet felt lighter, and the chill in the breeze was more prevalent. Frisk inhaled a sharp, cold lungful through the nose, freezing the tiny hairs in the nostrils, and breathed out a cloud of white from the mouth. They looked at the other paths, remembering the one they took. How much differently would things have gone had they walked a different route? Had Kenny not stumbled upon them? Had Vail not found them by chance?

The secrets within Ice Island were no longer a secret at that point in time; they had discovered them the hard way. Frisk knew what awaited them down this route. The trick had been revealed; the
surprise was no longer a surprise; and the bombshell had been dropped. Or, at least, the reveal, the surprise, and the drop were to be done so in ten minutes’ time.

Standing there, at the foot of the escalators, they had all the chances to back out, to find another way. Too late.

They savoured this moment of peace, knowing that it was going to be pulled away.

With one blink, they were back in the belly of Black Ice Mountain. The steel coloured sky replaced with iron coloured walls. Their moment of respite over.

Frisk had no choice but to march. Perhaps Roy could buy them a few sweet minutes of freedom from Vail’s persistence, enough to do or find something. They well and truly wished they knew what that something was.

Oh great, another blind corner. Why was it that the worst things within this maze lay behind corners? A thousand possibilities filtered through their mind as they approached. Another mine cart. More of Vail’s so-called friends. Vail himself. Of course, there could always be more tunnel, more opportunity to squeeze as many steps into today as possible.

What they found, they did not expect in the slightest.

Ten metres away, a wall of painted white bricks blocked the way, with a single white door built in the centre, complete with a doormat at its foot. No windows. It was a front wall straight from those pristine houses in the suburbs where the air always smelled like freshly cut grass and the laughing of children playing were audible from three gardens over.

Gingerly, Frisk moved closer to the door, expecting it to swing open at any second, hearing nothing from the other side.

The doormat had elegant, sophisticated writing stitched into it in black:

Welcome, Frisk, to Casa de Vail.

Please, do come in.

Back up to the entrance – the front door to Vail’s casa, apparently. They were here, on his very own doorstep, the belly of the beast. And he both knew it and anticipated it. The single doorknob brimmned as if eager for the human to turn it.

Frisk didn’t think so. They turned and headed back the way they came.

As they rounded the corner, that was when they knew that Vail had them. Frisk stomped the ground with one angry outburst.

The exact same white wall, white door, and mat awaited them; the length of tunnel they travelled gone without as much as a squeak.

Now the doormat read:

You seriously want to play this rodeo again?

Frisk went rigid; every muscle tensed, starting from their toes and ending in their fingers. They just wanted this nightmare to end already, to wake up in their bed and eat butterscotch cinnamon pie and water the flowers in the garden and forget all about the Outerworld and Vail and Maxus and the
price that lay upon their head.

The frustration subsided faster that it sparked. After all their sieving, it changed nothing. The door was still there, and the polished brass doorknob was shinier than ever.

Sighing out their frustration, they walked forward with more reluctance in each step than met the next. The prickly fibres of the mat rumpled upon taking their weight. The coldness of the metal knob pierced through the thick wool of their gloves. With the smoothest turn, the door clicked and swung open.

The first thing Frisk felt was the draft of a terrible chill – well around sub-zero temperatures. They entered, folding their arms against their chest to keep their own heat inside. Their breath came out in thick puffs of white.

Only one room lay within the white wall. Everywhere was covered in ice, from the floor to the ceiling. The entire place was one giant freezer – an icebox – yet there stood a velvet red lounge chair, a comfy sofa, a pool table, a jukebox, a massive flat screen television, a chess board, and a fridge, all of which were spotless without a speck of ice on them.

In the room were a few large ice cubes; Frisk counted seven of them. One was at an angle on the lounge chair, two wedged on the sofa, two around the pool table, one beside the jukebox, and the last one was alone at the chess board, before sixteen white-painted pieces. Within the cubes were bizarre shapes that they could not make out, as if there was something inside them.

Frisk recalled what happened to Kenny and clicked that instant the contents of those blocks of ice.

Seven monsters. All frozen. Kenny was the one resting on the seat. He still bore that wide-eyed, absolute fear expression.

With a loud slam, the door shut by itself. Frisk would have rushed over and attempted to escape, but they just knew that would be pointless. The door would be locked, and if it wasn’t, it would send them back into this room.

They snapped their head around, taking in all the captives in this freezing room. The temperature must have guaranteed that they all remained in suspended reality. All of them odd and clearly different, noticeable beneath the ice. All seven bore the permanent expression of terror. Frisk could only hope that Vail wasn’t lying when he said they were sleeping.

As they fell upon the chess table – speak of the devil – he who they did not want to see was sat opposite the champagne bottle monster put on ice. He was hunched over the board, observing the pieces from their level.

Vail dangled his hand over his pieces and wriggled the fingers. “Usually, it’s the white pieces that go first, but Nico here’s been contemplating his first move for the last five years now.” He glanced at the chess clocks. His was still at zero. Nico’s had been ticking away for five years. “Let’s assume his turn’s expired.”

He plucked the pawn on B7 and moved it forward two places.

“Alright,” Vail remarked to Nico’s silence as he sat up straight, bracing his hands on his waist, “I’ll give you time to plan your next move. Another five years ought to do it.”

He pushed himself out of the chair and wasted no time addressing Frisk.

“Congratulations, you found my home, and you’ve met these people – Kenny I’m sure you’re
already familiar with. These are what I like to call the… difficult ones. If you thought you’d made a breakthrough with that water trick, you’re sorely mistaken. These monsters, time and again, keep breaking out of their dream worlds. Until I figure out a way to stop that, they make great listeners.”

“You like video games? All kids love video games – and tee vee, and their phones, and texting, and texting on their phones. Anyway, imagine your adventure as progressing through the levels, and I guess that makes me the final boss. If you want to leave, you going to have to go through me.”

Vail began to windmill his arms. “Allow me to limber myself out a bit.” He tilted his head left and right, warming up his neck with a few cracks. “Don’t want to pull a muscle.” He balanced himself on one leg and shook the other. “Always warm up before doing strenuous exercise, just as the doctor ordered.” He switched legs. “And now she’s living the dream as a professional wrestler. Literally. Who would’ve thought?”

Frisk had their remaining ice axe ready. It might as well have been made of ice since how much it chilled their hands. They hoped that he would do nothing but shake around for all eternity so they didn’t have to fight him.

Sadly, such hope was poorly placed. Vail finished his warmup.

“Okay, now I’m ready.” He began to hop and punch the air like a boxer raring to go. “And now, folks, the moment you’ve all been waiting for: the battle of the century. In this corner stands the illustrator of illusions; the perception of deception; the trick without the shtick; the chill with the skill; thirty-two time champion of the Outerworld: Vail!”

He raised his arms, howled, and gave a moment for his due applause. The audience were so captivated that they forgot to cheer.

Vail continued anyway. “And in this corner,” he said, gesturing to them, “Frisk.”

Frisk could not help but be disappointed by that, by how meek their narration was compared to his. How awesome could their stage entrance be?

*And his opponent: the foundation of determination: the salvation of a nation; the narration in pacification: the sensation in flirtation; the one, the only: Frisk! Followed by the child with the shaggy hair and striped sweater jumping up and down for a few seconds, hollering and waving to the clicking camera flashes.*

“And now, the moment you’ve all been waiting for.” Vail rung an invisible bell. “Ding, ding, ding, its round one.”

He wasted no more time. He thrust a finger toward the ground and beamed a blue laser. The line of water exploded upwards toward Frisk, each one freezing in a split-second. Frisk stood their ground and waited. Just as a pillar erupted and froze before them, they jumped to the side, slammed the axe into it, and swung themself forward, sliding across the ice toward Vail.

They wished this could be resolved differently, but right there, Frisk could see no other alternative. They’d have to teach him a lesson he’ll never forget.

Frisk jumped and went to kick Vail in the stomach. Before it could connect, he vanished in a puff of smoke. Frisk landed and immediately turned around, finding him standing there.

Vail pointed again, this time at Frisk, and fired off another blue beam. Frisk swung the axe and deflected the beam straight up. It hit the ceiling and formed an instant crop of icicles. Vail followed up with a hard stomp on the ground, shaking the entire room with a jolt. The icicles jangled then
came loose, falling toward them. Frisk dove to the side, hearing ice shatter like glass behind them.

Before they could get their bearings, the komodo dragon appeared before them. He opened his mouth and blew a powerful wind at Frisk, pushing them back. They reacted quickly by driving the axe into the ground and routing themself in that spot. The air lashed against them, draining the heat from their body and pulling against their clothes. Minty fresh, by the way.

After a minute of battling the wind, Vail stopped. Frisk yanked the axe out of the ground as both the feeling and heat poured back into them. Their fingers were numb from holding the handle so tight. The human breathed hard, yet the other had no shortage of breath considering the amount he had dispensed non-stop for a full minute.

He chuckled.

All of a sudden, Vail widened his eyes and flashed an intensely bright spark. The snap struck the child hard in the retina, blinding them and bringing a wave of pain to the inside of their skull. Frisk stumbled and rubbed their eyes with their free hand, the other still around the axe’s handle. They tried to open them. Each brief glimpse through the opening was pure white and painful, forcing them shut again.

They heard a shrill buzzing noise from their left: one of Vail’s ice beams. They ran forward a few paces and rammed headfirst into a flat, cold surface.

They composed themself in time to catch a second shot from behind. Blindly, they pulled the axe up and felt it recoil almost out of their grasp.

Frisk heard another beam from the right. Working the ice axe with both hands, they brazenly swung it in that direction.

*Shunk!*

What they felt next from their weapon was not what they expected. There was no recoil, but a strike. The axe head had hit something, sank deep into whatever it was and stayed there.

Finally, Frisk tried their eyes again and found they could open them without pain.

Frisk stopped breathing. Their muscles froze, then began to tremble.

The axe was stuck deep in Vail’s chest.

He glanced down and sputtered. “Oh god…” Vail stumbled back, taking the axe with him. He sank to his knees, coughing and gasping for air as he gripped the cold steel. Pain filled his eyes. “What did… you do… Frisk…?”

Frisk covered their mouth and rapidly shook their head. They didn’t mean to do that, they couldn’t see. It was an accident.

He turned his head to the ceiling and reached up with one hand. “How could I have been… so easily… defeated?” Gurgling a pathetic, pained scream, Vail crumpled to the ground, groaning an audible, “Blarg,” as he exhaled his final breath.

He crumbled to dust. There was nothing left beside his grey, ashen remains and the glint of silver still embedded within.

Frisk fell to their knees and started crying. They had just murdered that monster and all that dust was
on their hands. They didn’t want to be a killer, the very thought made them want to vomit. How could they ever look Asgore and Toriel in the eyes again, knowing the life they had taken?

Through burning vision, they gazed back over at the pile of ash. There was a monster standing beside it.

The sight of that monster stopped Frisk’s sobbing in an instant.

It was… Vail? His clone? His twin brother?

He looked down at the pile of ash that was himself moments ago. “Man,” he said to Frisk, smiling, “I’d hate to be that guy.”

The sadness had left Frisk, replaced by confusion bigger than Black Ice Mountain. Vail was perfectly fine. No axe sticking out of his torso.

“Hey, look, free ice axe!” Vail snatched it from the ground, giving it a few shakes to rid it of all the dust. “They don’t make these like they used to. Nowadays, these things can’t go through a single use without breaking. See?”

And then, out of nowhere, in a move that scared the ever-loving bejebus out of Frisk, he took the handle by both hands and swung the axe straight into his own chest. Just like before, he sputtered as the blade sank in.

“I stand corrected,” he grunted before collapsing next to the pile of dust already there.

And then there were two piles of grey littering the room.

A third Vail strolled in from the other side and inspected the ashy remains.

He shook his head. “No way am I cleaning up this mess.” And then he grabbed the tool, swung it into his chest, collapsed and crumbled to dust, adding his own to the growing stacks. The tool remained upwards, the point facing the ceiling.

A fourth Vail stepped in, looking around obliviously.

“Whoa, what is going on around—” He tripped on one of the piles and landed on the axe head. He rolled over, revealing it lodged in his chest. “Pro tip…” he said with his dying breath, “Always watch where you’re going…”

Vail the fourth crumbled.

Vail number five stepped up.

“I’ve heard the phrase: ‘if everyone was jumping off a cliff, would you?’ But this is ridiculous,” he said. “Alright, enough fooling around.”

He snatched up the axe. Frisk thought he was going to drive it into his own sternum for the fifth time, but instead, he took it by both ends and bent it just how Superman would. The metal groaned as it concaved. When he was finished, the ice axe was twisted into a knot; it landed before his feet with a thud.

“You can’t win here, Frisk. I had already won before you even set foot on this island.”

Vail darted before Frisk who was still on their knees. He placed his index finger on their forehead and applied pressure, and that tiny amount was enough. Frisk was sent flying back, skidding to a halt.
alongside the sofa and the two frozen monsters on it.

Frisk clambered back on their heels and elbows, distancing themself as far from their opponent as they could. Running did not work; hiding was useless; not even death could stop him: everything they tried was futile.

They shuffled behind the couch. What Frisk needed was a plan, and a darned good one at that.

It was like being back in the throne room, backing away from Emperor Maxus after discovering that they could no longer reach their save file. Instead of formulating a plan, their mind wandered to everything in sight.

They did the same thing as they lay there, out of Vail’s all seeing gaze. There was the front door a short distance over. There was the back of the couch. There was a small gap between the couch and the floor…

A knocking came from the door.

“Ah, those must be my friends.” Vail could be heard saying. “Come in!”

The door opened and in poured a wave of monsters of all shapes and sizes – all under his control. Stuck in their blissful fantasylands.

“I’ll let you know, Frisk, that wasn’t smart what you did back there before the mirror. You denied my gift to you and that made me angrier than I’ve ever been in my life, and I hate being angry.”

The monsters approached Frisk from all sides, leaving them with no direction in which to escape. The group grabbed the human, first by the arms before moving to their legs. Frisk fought against them, but merely delayed the inevitable that the komodo dragon had in store.

Frisk was carried around the seat and over to the sharply-dressed Vail. “But I’m a forgiving monster, and I believe that some people deserve a second chance. You are the first person ever to make it to my domain, after all. You’ve more than earned your second bite of the cherry.”

He reached behind his back and pulled out a huge fragment of glass that was wider than he was. The rough, jagged edges looked painful to hold; how he did so without hurting himself was a mystery. A piece of the gigantic mirror.

Frisk made one last ditch effort to break free. They tugged with all their might, and the monsters held with all their might plus extra.

Vail took slow steps forward with the mirror pressed against his chest. “Look who’s still waiting for you, Frisk.”

Another pair of hands seized Frisk by the head, one under the chin and the other on their forehead, and forced them to look into the reflective surface.

At first, a human child met their own gaze. The reflection twirled, just like it did before, and it settled to form the one they left behind, still bearing that eager smile. Asriel Dreemurr’s happy face did not get easier to see the second time around.

“You going to keep him hanging?” Vail asked, playfully slanting the glass side to side.

Those holding their right arm pulled it toward the glass. Frisk pulled against it, threatening to rip their
muscles from their ligaments. All they were doing was stalling for time.

Their hand touched the glass.

In that moment, there was a mixture of electricity, adrenalin, and light that poured through their brain. A sensation truly bizarre. Frisk forgot where they were, what they were doing, and why. All previous memories were drowned out, and all ties and connections were severed.

Before they knew it, the light faded, and they were in the arms of the young Prince Asriel, in the warmest, cosiest living room imaginable. The fireplace burned a perfect temperature and the window portrayed the perfect day with perfect weather.

Frisk felt nothing but pure happiness.

“I’m so glad you’re here, Frisk,” Asriel said as he pulled away, fuzzy hands on their shoulders. “You don’t understand how happy this makes me.”

Seeing him so happy automatically made them happy too. Everything was so happy.

The weather made them happy. The fire made them happy. Their home made them happy. Asriel made them happy.

“So, Frisk,” Asriel continued, smiling, “school’s out forever, summer’s in forever, and we’re both together. We got all the time in the world to do all the things we want to do.”

He took Frisk by the hand and led them through the kitchen, the playroom, the bigger playroom, and outside into the garden. It was bigger than from what they remembered. Much bigger. Like, the size of five football fields bigger. How could they forget such a luxurious garden such as theirs, with massive redwood trees and teaming with flowers of every kind?

“It’s another beautiful day!” Asriel announced. “The first of many.”

Every question that Frisk wanted to ask was gone. There no question to why they were there or what had happened, nothing but sweet acceptance.

Nothing but uninterrupted bliss awaited both he and them, and Frisk did not want to take a single second for granted. They were unable to swipe the smile from their face.

Asriel’s soft eyes, sparkling in the sunshine, gazed upon his sibling. “What should we do today, Frisk?” he asked. “I was thinking we could spend this morning seeing who can bake the biggest cake, then race to see who can eat it fastest, then we could go to the movies and see any movie we want.” Each suggestion made the human child hop up and down in excitement. “Then we can celebrate our birthdays and play in the garden, and—”

A cool speck landed on Frisk’s head, soaking into their hair. They instinctively reached for it and felt a drop of water. Rain?

Asriel was still going, rattling off every great and fun activity they could do, about how they could celebrate Christmas tomorrow, and the day after that, and the day after that, but Frisk wasn’t listening. They looked up, finding no clouds anywhere, and received another drop in the eye.

They rubbed the drop away. All of a sudden, their perfect day wasn’t so perfect anymore.

The trees, the green hills, and the blue sky all began to run and smear like turpentine on a painting.
More droplets landed on Frisk and further the colours drooped, mixing into pools.

The prince was looking around. His happy demeanour was gone. “Wh—what’s happening? No. No!”

All of a sudden, Frisk remembered.

Asriel cried out at the top of his lungs. “No! No! It can’t be!” With every scream, his voice deepened. “No! No!”

Frisk rubbed their eyes. Asriel’s voice was no longer Asriel’s but someone else’s. They were standing in the room coated with ice, except there was one major difference: it was raining.

Vail clutched his head. The large fragment of glass was in pieces on the ground before him and the ceiling was melting, dripping water down on them all. “My beautiful room! What’s happening to it?”

All around them, the hypnotised monsters were snapping out of their trances. Rubbing their faces and wondering where they were.

“What did you do?” Vail glared at the human, and they responded by glancing at the double sofa.

As he clambered through the stunned crowds in that direction, shoving monsters aside, something very strange started happening to Vail.

He began to – for lack of a better term – glitch.

His entire body fizzled, jumped, and shuddered in a marvellous display of colour and static like he was turning into a blue screen of death. The same screeching noises of a 56k modem buzzed off his body.

He grabbed the couch from the gap, threw it aside, and found a small, square piece of plastic with vents and a small set of button lying under it.

Now it was Frisk’s turn to grin.

The handy-dandy portable radiator, just as Birgir the Supplier eloquently put it: “This is some fancy tech, hot off the press. Interacts with the magic all around us, turn this environmentally-friendly baby on in any enclosed space and in a minute or two you’ll be nice and toasty.”

The flickering outline grabbed his hair. “N—No—Y—ou—uined e—thing!” He yelled in-between buzzes, beeps, and static.

Just then, those trapped within the ice cubes came to life, and one by one, they pushed against the weakened ice, breaking it apart. The cube on the lounge chair cracked open first, and out emerged Kenny. He rolled out and landed on his knees on the slippery ground.

“What… happened…?” He looked up and found the child, the one he ran into in the woods; all the other monsters; and the malfunctioning frame of this island’s terror, approaching the child in a menacing manner. Kenny fought to protect the kid back then, he would do it again now. With a burst of energy, he shot forward and threw himself before the two, facing Vail down. “Back off!”

Vail did not heed his warning, instead venturing forward, stuttering and twitching uncontrollably. There was nothing remotely left that resembled the well-dressed, slicked hair, smug grinned komodo dragon that they all knew and feared, but a screeching, sparkling mess.
He took another step and that was enough for Kenny. He reared his head back, inhaled a deep breath until his lungs hit their threshold, and let it all out with a powerful quack. The burst of magic slammed into the figure, punching them back with the force of a speeding train. Vail flew backwards, screaming a piercing siren before exploding into the wall. The wall of ice immediately shattered and collapsed.

Wait a minute…

Behind the newly formed hole lay a separate room. Frisk and Kenny approached with some of the freed monsters close behind.

Inside the hole lay another room. Dark, the only illumination came from the thousands of monitors that eclipsed the ceiling. The far wall was layered with a huge computer terminal and machines, all whirling and clicking away. The floor was littered with junk food packages. It smelled bad in there, a mixture of stale food and body odour.

Between them and the machine, in a green circle in the centre, stood a single figure. A lizard monster dressed in a tight t-shirt that failed to conceal his flabby belly button, beige shorts, and socks and sandals. He had a headset on that concealed the top half of his face, along with blue gloves and a pair of blue ankle straps, all wired up to the machine behind him.

The stranger brusquely tore the headset off to glare at the intruders, most noticeably Frisk. “You insect – you’ve ruined everything,” he shrieked in a nasally voice, then proceeded to tear off his blue gloves.

It was here where Frisk saw his face. A komodo dragon with dull red and yellow eyes and brown hair that formed a crown, leaving the plat as shiny as a cue ball. A patchy beard blemished his chin and his back was hunched forward in what looked like a permanent fashion.

Frisk realised who this was.

This was Vail. The real Vail. In the flesh.

He took one of the ankle straps off as he lurched forward. It wasn’t until the other yanked his foot back did he need to undo that one. “All these years of work, of hardship, of sweat and toil, all down the drain!” The fat around his neck jiggled. His face went red as he stepped forward as if that short distance, coupled with his yelling, was already more than his endurance could take. “And it’s all your fault!”

The real Vail had his fists clenched, most likely to hurt the child, but nobody would allow that. Two of the monster stepped forward and shoved Vail back, no need for magic. He fell back onto his portly backside.

Frisk studied the monitors above, captured in their black and white glow. They made out some of the places they visited: the woods; the mine entrance; the room with the three fountains; the tunnels; the chasm; the melting box outside. They found Johnny, Mika, and Lena, still playing air-guitar, blowing into the air, and punching and kicking in that order. There was Versa on the next monitor, still holding off the soldiers, but it was a losing battle. Frisk found Roy on another, no longer battling a giant monster, but wrestling with a bunch of monster who all wanted to use him as they own cuddly toy. All over the screens, monsters were jumping and laughing and shouting and whistling and dancing and singing and all sorts.

Kenny stepped over and past the downed Vail. His focus was dead-set on the computer terminal.
Vail rolled over and reached out. “Wait! Don’t touch that!”

The duck monster took a single look back. “This ends now.” He inhaled sharply, faced the computer, and unleashed a quake. The shockwave slammed into the terminal, smashing it into pieces. With a dropping drone, the machine went silent and died.

All eyes were up on the screens. Monsters everywhere were waking up. Johnny stopped waving his hands; Mika and Lena looked around confused. The guards attacking Versa stopped. Roy was released from the monsters’ grasp.

All eyes were back down to the disgraced and defeated Vail, sat among his own garbage.

“What to do with him?” one of the monsters asked. There was a long wait as everyone assessed their options.

At long last, Kenny spoke. “He wanted this island all to himself, I say he can have it. The rest of us? Let’s get out of here.”

Vail looked like he was about to cry. “Please, don’t go. I just wanted… to make everyone happy…”

“We’ll make our own happiness.”

Everyone marched out, Frisk trailing on behind. For some reason, they couldn’t take their eyes off Vail, who lay sat where he was, in the green circle, surrounded by junk.

Above him, the monitors were empty. All those under his control free and gone.

He was whispering to himself. “It’s over… I’m finished… Ruined…” He sat up and held his head in his hands. “All I’ve ever wanted was to make people happy, to have someone I can call a friend… Now I’ve got nothing. Absolutely nothing…”

They were now all alone. No friends.

And yet, there felt like there was still someone there.

Vail looked up and saw Frisk standing right in front of him.

Every inch of them looked worse for the wear with their winter clothes dirty and damaged, and the exertion smeared across their face. They had every reason to hate him, to want to beat him up, to knock his lights out.

The child stepped forward and gave him a gentle pat on the head, saying that they would be his friend.

Vail was as still as a rock. “You… after everything, you want to be… my friend?”

Through all the pain and misery, Frisk found it in their determination to smile. Not a condescending smile, but a true smile from the heart.

Vail’s look once more hit the ground. “I…” He crawled over to the broken computer at the back of the room. “I… I really want to be alone now… Go. You can go now. I can’t stop you anyway…”

Frisk was about to say something, but Vail only told them to leave.

Such a sight the broken komodo dragon was, hunched over like a lost puppy. The same creature who tormented their every step through these mines. However, it was not hate that they felt for him.
It was pity. Pity for a person who hated his true self, and hid his perfect persona to make himself feel better.

Frisk backed away until they reached the threshold. They turned to leave then stopped: one more question burned within their oesophagus. Frisk twisted their head back and let it loose.

Did he have a real name?

Vail croaked a sigh, remaining silent. His name? Would a person like him even remember? His jaw was open, but nothing came out except more disgruntled sighs.

It became clear that Frisk would get no such answer. They went to leave.

“Geoffrey.” Vail called out, stopping Frisk for one moment. “It’s Geoffrey…”

Frisk faced him once more and smiled. They told him before they left that Geoffrey was a nice name.

Running. Frisk was running now. All around them were monsters, all those who were lost to the once great Vail’s illusions. Some were ahead of them, others behind, funnelling out from separate tunnels.

“This way,” one cried before a corner.

“Keep going that way,” another shouted, pointing forward.

“We’re almost there,” someone else cried. “I can taste fresh air!”

Frisk thought it was a term of phrase, but they could not deny it either. They inhaled through their nose and noticed how cool and clean it was; they could also taste it on the tip of their tongue. Fresh air. The surface. They were almost there.

Everyone banked another turn. There it was, up a slight incline. Light shone at the end of the tunnel. The sheer sight made them all run faster, Frisk included. It was the longest sprint in their life, and felt longer than usual; however, it was all worth it in the end.

Frisk emerged at the mouth to blue, cloudless skies and clear, crisp air and fresh snow underfoot. They would have to guess that defeating Vail also meant that his hold upon this world was gone also. The sun shone in the centre of the sky, directly above. Even through the winter snap, the sunshine was magnificent, flooding their body with its goodness.

The monsters were already charging down the embankment, still running as if their lives depended on it, and for good reason.

Just a short distance away, visible between the trees draped in white, lay the brown bark and green treetops of the Forest. No more than five minutes away.

And then it was Frisk’s turn to sprint toward it.

All they could think about was home. All they had to do was find the professor, just how Sam an’ Rita told them, and surely he would have a way to send them back to the place their soul yearned to be at, with the people they wanted to spend the rest of their life with.

They took one last look back at the mountain behind them. Beneath all that rock, somewhere in that web of tunnel and lost mines, there remained one lost soul, probably destined to be alone for the rest
of his days.

The revelation stopped Frisk cold.

Flowey...

Asriel...

By leaving Vail – Geoffrey – they had abandoned him once more. Again, they had freed the many at the cost of the few. They saved everyone, except the life that mattered the most.

“You don’t even know me… Why do you still care?” Asriel’s question still burned in their mind.

Because he was the one who deserved to be saved the most.

Frisk sighed sadly, then resumed their journey closer to the Forest, now moving slower.

The Winter’s Edge train director’s personal phone went off for the twentieth time that day, a little over the usual average of three. He was glued to his desk, fearing to move, knowing that the next call could come in any moment now. The plucked the phone off the receiver and brought it to his ears, knowing full well what was about to be said.

“More delays?” he asked the second the receiver was before his mouth.

His assumption was true: there had indeed been another train delay. Breakdowns; cracks appearing in the tracks; storage failures; they just kept coming, so far with no serious accidents. And these were from trains that did not travel through the Shattered Zone.

In fact, that train was the first one to arrive before all the phone calls started piling in.

There was no explanation to it. No good reason why or how, but just that they were. All his fellow directors could do was inform him, just how he would inform them if an occurrence were to happen on his end.

Alas, this train director was not there, so he had only the words of the others to go on, and the granted evidence as the sixth train scheduled to reach them had not arrived.

After he was done, he replaced the phone back down and leaned back in his chair. From around the corner of his desk, he made out the shrouded figure of the one they found asleep.

Barb the Bounty Hunter was motionless in the middle of his cramped office, still covered in that fire blanket and still with her head rested on that borrowed pillow. In and out, she breathed without a hitch. The train director wished he could be her for a few short hours and sleep this distressing time away.

His scaly skin tingled, his throat begged for air. The train director needed to step out for a minute and get some sunshine on himself. Being as quiet as possible, he pushed himself up and stepped over the bounty hunter, making sure not to tread on any square inch of her frame. Not only would that have been rude and careless, but she also had a reputation for kicking butt, which he did not want to be on the receiving end of.

He pushed through the door to his office and was rewarded with some much needed sunshine. He looked up, the sun was directly overhead, having completed its rise and was now beginning to descend.
The tracks were quiet, the platforms deserted; not like how it was usually. He liked being busy; made the time fly.

The phone buzzed to life, striking cold hard reality back into the train director.

The train director let it ring twice, took one final breath, and then went to enter his office.

He froze by the doorframe.

His desk was there.

The phone was there, vibrating repeatedly.

The fire blanket was there on the floor with the pillow beside it.

Barb was not.
Gone Fishing

As if clean oceans, sawdust beaches and silent jungles were already strange enough, these lands only got stranger to Undyne as they trampled across crinkly plastic grass and passed rubber trees. Each tree had Frisk’s face plastered all over it as if they were the lost pet to an overzealous owner, which did nothing to quell her anger issues. Already, she disliked this place as each step gave her away, each crack travelling for miles around.

So this was the Plain-plain, and as the posters on every vertical surface in sight stated, this was where her wimpy loser for a friend was last seen. All across the northern horizon lay the bumpy fields, overlooked by the frozen mountain far, far away. No better place to start, she guessed.

This should be a piece of cake. Undyne vividly recalled fond memories of hounding Frisk through Waterfall when she imagined them a bad guy… or girl: lobbing spears at them from across the river; conjuring them beneath Frisk’s feet on the walkways; sending them falling to the junkyard; being one second away from running right through them before that naïve monster kid showed up; and chasing them as they made their escape toward Hotland. Ah, good times. At least, in Undyne’s case anyway, probably not such a swell experience for Frisk.

Who could blame her? Undyne’s duty back then was focused on fulfilling the wishes of her king and mentor, Asgore Dreemurr, and retrieving the seventh and final human soul in order to break the barrier and enact their long awaited revenge upon the world. The last thing she expected was to be sharing Golden Flower Tea with that exact same human while sat at the opposite ends of the broken table in her house.

Actually, the last-last thing she expected was herself telling Frisk her life story.

No, wait! The last-last-last thing she expected was giving them a one-on-one extra private training lesson in Papyrus’s stead.

Scratch that. The last-last-last-last thing she expected was to be standing on that cliff sheer hours later, with the broken barrier behind her, friends by her side, natural sunlight on her scales for the first time, the green surface before her, and all thoughts of vengeance forgotten.

Undyne never thought she would ever call that human child her friend, nor did she ever dream of one day being the one to come to their rescue. Yet, there she was, coming to the aid of her human friend. If Undyne had no problem tracking Frisk in the Underground, then this former captain should easily be able to pick up their trail. Even if Frisk left so much as a single strand of hair, she had a fresh lead to go on.

So far, after an hour of searching, she had found nothing yet. Her best bet would be to ask around, see if anyone had something willing to share. Although, she would have to find other monsters first.

Up ahead, appearing over the next hill, Undyne came across a river. A rapid-flowing trail before her path, stretching to the west. No doubt that its source came from the waterfall a few hundred feet away; grey mist surrounded its foot. It poured from the impressive stature of Highkeep Enclave that hovered high above.

Undyne looked up at the middle island and furrowed her brow, feeling her lips part into a snarl, brandishing her yellow fangs as if they alone would suddenly coerce it and its people into submission.
She tried to imagine what a guy with a name like Maxus would look like. She liked to guess that this Maxus was a small, weedy coward of a monster who hid behind his men and gave himself that moniker to make himself sound tougher. On the other hand, the one other monster ruler she had to base her assumptions on was none other than Asgore, and it took her many years just to land a single strike on him – a strike that she regretted immediately afterwards.

With clenched fists, Undyne pointed up to the island and then traced the same finger across her throat, even though she knew that nobody saw it.

“Frisk first,” she whispered to herself, “then I’m coming for you, Maxus.” Whoever awaited her up there, she would find out soon enough. No matter what he was, whether he was strong or weak, fast or slow, smart or stupid, he would feel her own brand of justice. And it would sting.

Further down the river, closer to the waterfall, a wooden roof peeked from behind a hill. A house, nearby. She followed the river, travelling upstream a short ways – coming across a small bridge that she crossed – until the rest of the house came into view. A small and rustic one-storey cabin with an outhouse on one side and a small square of farmland on the other. With intact windows and traces of fresh markings leading in, out and around the area, people had been here recently.

As she neared the house, there were no signs to suggest that anyone was home. No smoke fumed from the chimney and no sounds could be heard from inside. The note nailed to the front door proved that her assumptions were correct.

Gone fishing Gone shopping Gone out
Be back whenever Be back eventually Be back soon
Sincerely,
Kind regards,
Signed,
Sam an’ Rita

The note was recent and a mess of scribbles and crossings, written with two distinct pens from two distinct hands. An argument in of itself. Two people, whose marital status Undyne did not know, fighting over what to write. People fought over anything these days.

She turned and stepped off the deck; her footsteps went from heavy thumps to crisp crackling as they switched from wood to grass. Her search had just begun. Nothing but the cabin, the stream, and the copse of twenty-odd bushes nearby. Funny, Undyne could have sworn those bushes were further away the last time she looked; in fact, she couldn’t recall even passing them in the first place.

Her single eye went down to the ground. Without analysing it too much, she was able to easily make out individual traces indented into the prickly pasture through crumpled, compressed, and broken shards of green, even though they were already starting to wear thin. Footprints, many of them, ran in circles between the cabin and the river. One set of large boot prints, a grown male, most likely Sam; one set of slightly smaller prints, a woman, probably this Rita from the note; and a trail following the stream like a stampede ran through within the last day or two. All those prints were large and heavy. Just then, another set of prints were found, this one—

Undyne’s eye snapped wide open. “Wait!”
She took three steps over unmarked turf and knelt closer to her sightings. One set of markings showed someone leave the cabin and head north. The soles were small, either that of a small monster or... a child. And the fact that there was only one trail leading from the house and none heading toward the house was suspicious.

Undyne had seen so many posters with Frisk on them that she had all the information down. Frisk was wanted for escaping Highkeep Enclave – that giant floating rock with the waterfall to her right – and was last seen in the Plain-plain, the island she was on right there. Somehow, Frisk had gotten from up there all the way to here.

She looked over to the river, finding groves still in the sand and gravel. Still fresh, even after the wind and rain had gotten to them. She studied them intently, anticipating the movements portrayed.

She started at the deep dent by the river’s edge first. “The man of the house sat here,” she whispered. “For a while, several days at a time from the looks of it.” Some marks radiated from the dent: boot and handprints. “He gets up suddenly… scrambles to his feet.” A deeper set by the water’s edge. “Then decides to take a dip.”

Undyne traces the grooves back to the house. “He gets out of the water and heads back inside. Now he’s moving differently. His steps are further apart, and deeper, especially around the toes. He was both running and suddenly heavier. Carrying something. Someone…?”

Undyne looked over everything: the waterfall, the river, the tracks, and the cabin. She was so engrossed in her findings that she failed to notice the bushes drawing nearer when she wasn’t looking. The scene was like a puzzle and all the clues were its pieces. All she needed to do was place the pieces in the right place and – hold on, Undyne hated puzzles! This was a job better suited for Papyrus, but since he wasn’t around, she had to do it.

“Frisk started up there and escaped to this island,” she analysed. “A man is sitting out here and gets up suddenly. He must’ve saw something, or someone, in the water. He dives in, drags something out, and carries it into the cabin. Then a single set of small footprints leave the cabin and head north.”

By now, all twenty bushes had surrounded her, yet she had failed to click. There was a metre of space between them and her.

“IT was Frisk!” Undyne snapped up straight. “Frisk was here! They had to be!” During her moment of discovery, one of the bushes rustled as it sneezed. She responded automatically with “Gesundheit.”

“Thanks,” the bush replied.

There was a pause as neither Undyne nor the bushes muttered a single word.

“Private,” the bush beside the one that sneezed said with a gruff voice, “what did we say about our cover?”

After a moment to think, a reply came: “That I shouldn’t blow it?”

“Uh huh, and what did you just do?”

Another pause from the sneezy bush. “I blew it, didn’t I?”

It was about here that Undyne realised that something was up. “Hey, wait a minute…” she murmured.
Another bush mumbled. “Err, time for plan B?”

“Forget plan B,” a shout occurred, “commence plan T: grab her!”

All of a sudden, the bushes burst and fell limp as the twenty members of the Monster Military using them as camouflage leapt from them. They landed in a dogpile on Undyne, grabbing and gripping at anything they could. She fell to her knees, disappearing under the mountain of metal armour, any sounds she made were drowned under a chorus of grunting and shouting.

“Down on the ground,” they ordered; “Hands behind your back,” they barked; “Stop resisting,” they demanded. The troops wrestled and fought the one target they were ordered to capture.

There was one bush that did not collapse, yet. The one hidden within got out as if she were a celebrity stepping out of the limousine and onto the red carpet. A tall, built woman, proud in her gleaming gold armour with a red officer’s sash, a red cape lined with white fur, and a helmet with a mighty red plume on top. Colonel Fischer pulled the visor up and watched in full clarity as the men under her command subdued the suspect, or tried to. Even with all those strong pairs of hands on her back, the criminal was putting up a real fight from the way they were yelling; not a single inch of her was visible beneath them, but Fischer could imagine them slapping the shackles on.

Colonel Fischer – with her upturned nose, ivory white skin and blue eyes – came off as the most human-looking monster one could lay eyes on. Leader of the ranged division, she reached that rank through years of training and hard graft. Ironic considering where she stood during the civil war.

She reached to her belt and unclasped a scroll, which she unravelled and read out: “I, Colonel Fischer, by order of the Empire, place you under arrest for the destruction of Bjornliege Manor.” Where she said her name and the suspect’s crime, they were represented as empty lines on the parchment. There was no need for the scroll, the colonel had read it so many times that she knew it off by heart. However, procedure dictated that the scroll must be read to show official authority. That, and she liked the thought of how distinguished she looked as she read it. “You and your crimes will both be judged before the emperor and his courts. You have the right to defend yourself; however, the ruling at your sentencing will be final. Anything…”

The next thing the colonel saw was further from what she expected, which was her men parting to reveal the suspect subdued in irons. Instead, the entire mountain of troops rose two feet off the ground, held up by a single pair of legs as if they had all melded into one entity and the legs were its means to roam. A soldier clung to the side facing Fischer was shoved off, landing hard on his shoulder and splaying flat on to his back. The fresh gap between the soldiers revealed Undyne’s face. There was no exertion in her appearance whatsoever as she gave Colonel Fischer a hard stare.

“I’m sorry, I didn’t quite catch that,” Undyne said, treating the nineteen soldiers clung to her as if they weren’t there. The monster on the ground squirmed under the mass of bodies, grabbed hold of her ankle and attempted to pull it out from under her. This proved fruitless as Undyne was as solid as a rooted tree. “Did you say you’re part of this so-called Empire?”

“You heard correctly,” Colonel Fischer responded. There was a tension in her voice from never encountering someone like this before. Already, she knew that she was dealing with more than just as run-of-the-mill criminal. “I am Colonel Fischer: head of the ranged division in the Monster Military.”

The monsters were still stuck around Undyne’s upper half. Either they were still trying to bring her down or they were afraid of letting go. “Colonel? Then you got your orders from Maxus, huh?” Undyne assumed. “The same guy who’s got the head of a certain somebody plastered across town… with a price attached to it!” She sieved the last part through her yellow teeth.
“You’re talking about the human,” Fischer said. As she spoke, Undyne realised that she was not looking at her, but rather at those clung around her. “Understandable, but that’s not the reason why we’re having this discussion right now, criminal.”

The annoyance on Undyne’s face multiplied. Something in that sentence irked her badly, and someone had started yanking on her hair. She retorted, stuttering slightly, “Oh, I—I’m the... the baddie here? A—after... after—hold on.”

At that moment, Undyne crouched down a bit. The troops holding her all compressed and caved inwards as if she was shrinking in size, all of them almost showing relief as they neared the ground. They believed they were successful in making her submit. Then, in one second, everything changed as Undyne recoiled out. All nineteen monsters burst outwards like a great big splash of bodies, and in the centre stood the fish lady with both arms outstretched toward the sky. The one latched to her boot remained. She swung her leg back and then forth, throwing him toward Fischer, who leaned to the right to easily dodge him.

Such an amazing display of strength, and yet all Colonel Fischer could see were the words resisting arrest being bullet pointed beneath destruction of a lord’s property.

With the weight off, Undyne resumed. “After you and your precious emperor kidnapped my friend?” Her voice was no longer drowned out against piles of grunts on her shoulders, but now against the moans of those around her. “And before that, one of his precious loser lords named Grill tried to marry me! Can you believe that? I’d only known the guy for, like, five minutes and he wanted to make me his twenty-fourth wife!”

The colonel of the ranged division eyed the men and women under her command, splayed out in a sloppy circumference around the target. In actuality, she was buying time to ponder on the words said. Yes, Fischer thought, she could believe it. That Lord Grill imbecile hankered over any female he laid eyes on, including herself and all the ladies in the Monster Military. It might have been worse for the troops; there was something about the armour – about seeing a lady in uniform – that drove him bonkers. And, of course, whenever the troops, or herself, turned him down, he either interpreted it as playing hard-to-get or that he was too good for them. It was never the other way around.

And now here she was, apprehending this suspect who committed a wrongdoing against a lord who she did not care for, nor care for the loss of his estate. Duty calls. Her personal feelings were irrelevant.

“I’m not arguing with you over that,” Colonel Fischer said, finally making eye-contact. “You have committed a crime and we’re here to bring you in. It’s as simple as that.”

Undyne responded with a firm shake of the head. “No way am I going anywhere with you!” Four troops evenly spaced around her rose while she talked and charged in unison. At the last moment, Undyne jumped high into the air and the troops slammed head-first into each other. Their helmets were crushed around their skulls; a can opener would be required to remove them. After the soldiers toppled, Undyne landed in the same spot. “Not until I find my friend,” she said that as if nothing had interrupted her.

Fischer scoffed. “Trust me,” she said, “you’re a long way from finding them at this rate. We scoured every inch of this area and found nothing.”

A lanky solder rose, drew his blade, held it above his head, and rushed Undyne. As he charged, screaming, the target refused to acknowledge his presence. He was two steps away when, suddenly, Undyne raised her hand and conjured a spear. He skidded to a halt, anticipating a direct attack, but she drove it down into the empty spot of land between them. She remained still, still looking at
Fischer, and with her hand on the spear’s shaft. The trooper switched back and forth between the spear and Undyne, waiting for something to happen. After nothing did, he lunged, which was exactly what Undyne was waiting for. She pulled on the handle and released her hold, whipping it back into the soldier’s body. He went down as fast as the whip.

*Let’s add* assault on a member of the Monster Military *to that ever-increasing list of crimes*, thought Fischer, squinting. *Although, you could argue he ran into that…*

“Obviously, you punks didn’t search hard enough,” Undyne retorted as the unfortunate guard crashed on to a fellow colleague in the middle of getting up. “Since I know exactly where they’ve gone, and that’s where I’m going too. Thank you very much.”

Colonel Fischer traced a finger toward Black Ice Mountain in the north, behind the cabin. “You mean that mountain over there?” The target did not look, but Fischer went on anyway. “We’ve received reports that the human was spotted heading in that direction, to the island where no-one returns from. If they’re on that island, you’ll never catch the human by now. I guarantee you.”

*The island no-one returns from* was not a place Undyne liked the sound of, especially knowing that her friend was heading toward it, or worse, on it right now. “What makes you so confident of that?” she asked, glaring.

“On the off-chance that the human does make it through,” explained Fischer, “we have more of our troops ready to catch them on the connecting bridge, and even more if they manage to get pass them somehow.” An additional soldier rushed Undyne, and she took him down purely by stepped back and sticking her foot out. He tripped straight over it. “We’ve got all the bases covered. You might as well give up now. You’re only making that rap sheet all the more longer.”

“If you think a few little words are gonna dishearten me, then you’re wrong,” Undyne said before Private Wedge charged for the other side. He was all run with arms stretched, no tactics or sense whatsoever. Undyne used his own momentum again him. She lifted him onto her shoulders and threw him halfway across the field. “And if you think a few of your amateur cronies are gonna stop me, then you’re doubly wrong.”

For the second time – and she hated to admit it – Fischer agreed with the homewrecker’s words. Twenty men strong, trained, and well-equipped, and this lone fish was making them look like idiots. And her own words of discouragement were doing the opposite of their intentions.

The colonel addressed the men and women under her command, who were either lying down or trying not to be. “All units, rally at the prisoner transport and await my signal.” Eyes back to Undyne. “I’ll take it from here.”

No arguments slipped from their mouths as the ones who could stand on their own two feet helped those who could not. This included the four monsters blinded by their helmets. The troops slinked away silently, or as silently as they could muster, alongside the river. Not a single one dared to make a move on the suspect.

With the twenty highly trained and decently paid troops out of the way, only two people stood before the cabin: Undyne, former captain of the Royal Guard; and Fischer, current colonel for the Monster Military.

“You intend to take me in,” Undyne said, “all by yourself?”

“Yes.” Fischer stretched a hand out, the fingers bent as if holding an invisible gun. “My orders are to bring you to justice…” She conjured an object into her right hand the same way Undyne willed her
spears into existence. “And that doesn’t necessarily mean I have to bring you in alive.”

The materialising object came into focus. It was a crossbow, and the sights were trained on the criminal wanted for destroying a lord’s mansion, resisting arrest, and for attacking members of the Monster Military.

“This is your last chance,” warned Fischer. “Come quietly or I’ll make you quiet, permanently.”

Undyne grabbed her spear and yanked it from the ground with a crack of dirt. This one action was all the colonel needed to make her decision. She pulled the trigger and launched three bolts in rapid succession toward the target. Undyne span her weapon as fast as helicopter blades and deflected the shots away; two into the ground and one into the cabin’s face.

“I said I’m not going anywhere with you,” Undyne hissed, utterly fearless. “I’m giving you the chance now… walk away and I’ll forget I ever saw you.” One by one, orbs of blue light appeared over her head until they formed an arch. “Otherwise, we’ll find out if those pretty colours go well with black and blue!”

She waited for the soldier to respond. Fischer was unchanged by the threat, her crossbow remained levelled in her hand. Fischer took a few steps around, all which keeping her sights on target. With all that armour and additions that offered no tactical advantage whatsoever, Undyne thought it might have slowed the colonel down – just like how her own armour held her back – but it all looked like a second skin to her.

The time for talking was over.

Fischer shot forward with lightning speed, her cape flowing behind her with the elegance of a gymnast’s ribbon. Her plan was to catch Undyne off-guard by performing a move that contradicted her stance as a ranged specialist, and it worked. Undyne let loose a few spears, which were swiftly dodged without losing momentum. Fischer dove in, leading with both feet. The dropkick connected with Undyne’s gut and shot her through the cabin’s front door. It stood no chance, breaking into splinters and chips. Undyne came to a hard stop on the stone fireplace, leaving a crater and cracks extending outwards.

Undyne landed on one knee and braced herself, her entire world spinning and ringing. She had never taken a blow that hard since the time Greater Dog mistaken her training in spear throwing for fetch-the-stick time. She forced her vision to focus as her opponent stood by the entrance, crossbow aimed, ready with more magic bolts.

As the first shots fired, Undyne bolted. She move to the right and slide under the king-sized bed as white bolts rained on her heels, always a split-second behind. The projectiles made mincemeat out of the mattress and sheets. Undyne kicked herself up onto her heels and lunged straight out the right side window, leading with her fists. It was a textbox exit, exactly how she demonstrated it to Papyrus.

In the moment, time slowed down. The fragments of glass circled around her, spinning like a thousand flying daggers. She stretched her left hand out, conjured a spear, and drove it into the deck. The spear rooted into place and Undyne span 180 degrees around and delivered a taste of Colonel Fischer’s own medicine. Her kick sent Fischer into the same crater she made, making it bigger and the cracks wider.

While the superior in the Monster Military regained her bearings, Undyne contemplated the damage done to the fireplace, the bed, the window, and the front door. If she ever met Sam an’ Rita, Undyne thought, she would promise to pay for all the damages… well, half the damages. The other half she
would coax out of this woman.

Undyne readied her spear. “Had enough?”

Colonel Fischer replied by raising her weapon, forcing Undyne to charge. At the last moment, Fischer rolled to her right, dismissed her bow, and snatched both the wrought iron fire poker and shovel from the stand. She brought the poker up and blocked an overhead swing before striking with the coal shovel. It hit Undyne on her blindside with a dull pang. She stumbled back and Fischer pressed on her attack, hitting the suspect on the other cheek with the poker. On the third and fourth swings, Undyne grabbed her attacker by the wrists, then pressed her foot against the soldier’s chest and rolled back. She kicked Fischer into the wall, breaking her through it and sending her into the crops.

More damage meant more payments for both of them to make. The wall mostly; since the crops were already in such a withered, sorry state, the owners probably did not care much for them.

Back outside, the enemies stared at each other. Colonel Fischer now had mayonnaise and mustard staining her cape. Undyne had a large bruise on one cheek and a thin bruise on the other.

“Let’s fight for real now.” Fischer reached behind her back, under the folds of her cape, and pulled out a halberd. Undyne was surprised by this; the weapon was taller than she was, all gold with a large spearhead and an even larger battle-axe, both edges sparkling in the afternoon rays. She believed Asgore the only guy capable of pulling a stunt like that. She guessed wrong.

The two charged out into the fields behind the cabin and engaged in combat. No more destruction to personal property. It became a warzone, with flying spears and bolts blocking the sun and the stillness broken by weapons striking. The colonel using her crossbow whenever she gained distance, and the halberd at close range; the former captain going ballistic with her spears, both short and long range.

Meanwhile, the entire outhouse – untouched by the battle and a hundred feet away from the roaring warriors – shuddered to life as its interior changed from empty to full in a nanosecond. Grunting noises, three in total, sounded from within.

“N-not one of your best shortcuts…?” Alphys asked, trying to sound sarcastic amidst shifting her frame in the uncomfortable confinement. There was a bony elbow in her tail and something indistinguishable pressed against her face, driving her glasses against her brow. Out of all the grunting, Papyrus’s was the one that stood out the most. Lots of nyehs in his loud, cartoony accent. The roof shuddered as his head collided with its ceiling.

The trio had not much luck on their shortcut shenanigans, having previously appeared out of a strangely wide drainpipe in a land of talking mushrooms, a sewer manhole in New York City, and some kind of weird endless hallway of doors.

“Hold on,” Sans insisted, his entire front pressed against the door, yet his hand was still linked to the handle that would set them free. “Let me just…” He applied a tiny amount of pressure and the flimsy door swung ajar with the greatest of ease. Sans tumbled out with Alphys and Papyrus right behind him like an overstuffed closet, all three landing in a heap.

Alphys gasped under the weight of the taller skeleton and the discomfort of the shorter other. Every bone prodding her girth. “This reminds me of p-prom night,” she muttered as she freed an arm from under Papyrus and used it to adjust her glasses.
“This reminds me of every other Saturday,” Papyrus added.

Sans said nothing. _Story of my life_, he thought.

They gazed out at the nearby river and the faraway tops of palm trees off in the distance. As appreciative as the sight was, on its own, it wasn’t much help. Not much to see and no hint or clue to draw from it. They had ended up in some random countryside shack somewhere. How were they to find their friends at this rate?

Behind them, Undyne hit Fischer with an elbow drop.

Sans moaned. He thought that the grass would cushion his crash landing, but it was like a bed of nails against his body. He wanted nothing more than to be up and away. “Guess this place is a bust. Let’s try this again.”

“Wait. Don’t you think we should take a minute to look around first?” Alphys asked. A massive hunch tingled her spine – but that might have been one of the vertebra out of place.

Sans shrugged, budging his shoulders upwards into Alphys. “I don’t see much point,” he replied, sounding fed-up – a rare thing for her to hear from him. “What could we expect to find around here?”

“Frisk, perhaps?” the dermatologist said without hesitation, a rare thing for both Sans and Papyrus to be hearing from her. The only other time she would answer that fast was when the question asked what her favourite anime was. “Maybe Asgore or Toriel?” She inhaled a quick gasp. “What if Undyne is here?”

“Out here in the middle of nowhere?” asked Sans. “Slim chance of that, pal.”

Fischer caught Undyne in a headlock.

“You never know,” Papyrus said, “Undyne could be right under our noses.” He went to tap his nose tip, then realised that he didn’t have one. He resorted to poking down on Alphys’s snout, much to her resentment. “In fact, she could be behind us right this instant, locked in a perilous battle to the death against an opponent of equal strength and skill and ngahing prowess.”

This response got a chuckle out of his brother. “That’s an active imagination you got.”

Undyne pulled Fischer into a Boston crab.

Papyrus closed his eye sockets, allowing the surrounding silence to wash over him. “I can hear her voice now on the wind…”

Off in the distance, as faint as the whistle of a soft breeze, a coarse _ngah_ drifted past them. “Ah, geez, I can hear her too…” disclosed Alphys. Hearing that battle cry – that strong, fierce roar – conjured images of the things Undyne did best: beat up bad guys and make her feel safe. So close yet so far away.

“I guess someone handed me a group invite, ‘cause I’m hearing it three,” Sans mentioned. “Didn’t know I had such a deep connection with her. Always figured she viewed me as furniture.”

Fischer floored Undyne with a chokeslam.

Papyrus asked, “Wasn’t that the one time we invited her over and all you did was stand in the corner all day with that lamp shade over your head?”
“Maybe,” Sans answered.

For five whole seconds, nobody said anything. They remained one on top of the other with the shorter skeleton bearing the combined weight of the other two. By now, he didn’t seem to mind.

Alphys suddenly broke the silence, rather loud, Sans thought. “Why were you pretending to be a lamp, Sans?”

To which he answered: “Because I wanted to be a lamp for the day.” Then came a second gap of silence. “Isn’t that a good enough reason in of itself? Can’t a guy just dream every once in a while?”

Undyne gave Fischer a piledriver she’d already forget.

Papyrus creased his smooth brow. “Why do I sense another lousy joke incoming?” He folded his arms, resting them on the back of the scientist’s head. “Could either of you shed some light on this puzzling matter?”

Alphys rested her chin on her hands and perked up a smile. “It’s n-not that big of a mystery, Papyrus. It was an illuminating experience for your brother.”

Sans folded his arms under his chin. “Looking back, I guess it wasn’t the brightest idea I’ve had.”

The third awkward pause interjected itself. Something felt missing, but none of them could put a finger on it. Something felt wrong, but none of them could put a finger on it.

Fischer did a jumping cutter on Undyne, out of nowhere.

Papyrus asked, “What were we talking about again?”

“No idea,” Sans replied. “Welp, enough beating around the bush – whatever that means.” He positioned his hands flat against the ground and pushed himself up with surprising strength. The three monsters filtered back into the outhouse in the same order. “Breathe in, people.”

The side of Alphys’s head budged against Papyrus’s battle body. Papyrus himself had to stand on the seat. “You do realise I’m the only one with a diaphragm, and skin on my bones…” the doctor said before Papyrus banged his head off the ceiling again.

Sans squashed himself against her, pushing their bodies tight. “Then breathe in thrice as hard.”

It took a few seconds and some tight adjustments, but eventually, all three managed to squeeze into the shack designed to hold one. Sans forced the door to close.

Undyne’s spear and Fischer’s halberd collided. As if they were completely synchronised, both combatants flew back, hit the ground, and sprang upright with perfect kip ups. With breathing heavy and bodies battered and bruised, the two combatants were barely holding their own against each other.

Fischer inhaled a deep breath. With her weapon poised low and behind her, she charged on wobbly legs, leaving a trail of uprooted earth in her wake. She jumped, span, and swung. Undyne dodged the attack; it may not have hit her, but the shockwave rattled up her legs. She circled around, grabbed Fischer’s cape and pulled it over and around her head before tying it in knots.

Blinded, unable to see anything but a dark red haze, Colonel Fischer groped with the lines and creases of the royal mantle that cemented her position within the army. As she fought to undo her
blindfold, she madly swung with her halberd in a desperate attempt to ward off any attacks while she was defenceless. Worse, she could not breathe either; the inside getting hot from her own breath. After tugging thoughtlessly, Fischer’s quick thinking kicked into gear and she reached for the clasp around her neck. A detectable click confirmed that the fastener had been undone, coupled with the links rolling limp against her chest piece. She peeled the cloth off her head and received a bright dose of light that stung the retinas and a strong kick to the head that knocked her helmet clean off.

Fischer twisted from the strike, her wild, tangled, white hair free and flowing. She stopped, her vision spinning, and found her opponent. She dove backwards, bringing back her crossbow and letting loose a rapid-fire volley.

Undyne bolted to the side, avoiding and deflecting bolts away. She turned and moved toward the colonel, battering her way through the hail. A few nicked at the edges of her clothes. Fischer kept the fire on until Undyne drew near, then swiped with her halberd. Undyne skidded to a stop and held her spear out to block it, but the axe snagged it out of her hands.

Fischer dismissed her crossbow and seized her melee weapon in both hands. She span on her heels and winded all her momentum into delivering a broad swipe that would serve as the killing blow.

Undyne had two choices as Fischer finished half her rotation: Leap back and hope the swing missed, or go on the offensive. A full three-quarters into the broad swing was when Undyne acted, lunging toward the halberd. She opened her fist and brought it down with a massive overhead swing onto the side of the weapon. She roared, “NGAHHHH!” as her chop collided with the axe head and shattered the metal into pieces.

Colonel Fischer finished her swung, awestruck. The blade always sliced through and the enemy is left lying in pieces on the ground, never the other way around… until now. Her halberd was destroyed, the end reduced to nothing but broken handle. Undyne held an expression of rage, as if the move she had just pulled off hurt. A lot.

“You’re… you’re not some typical lawbreaker,” Colonel Fischer said, stepping back, panting. In such a short period of time, her armour had lost its original shape and shine. “What are you?”

Her worthy rival grinned. “I thought you’d never ask.” She fabricated a spear and slammed the blunt end into the ground. “I’m Undyne,” she proudly stated. “Captain of the Royal Guard! Well, ex-captain… of the ex-Royal Guard.”

“You’re also military?” Fischer did not want to believe that one bit. “I’ve never heard of the Royal Guard. From which island do you hail?”

“I hail from no island,” Undyne replied. “I ain’t a soft cloud like all you other softies. I’m a chiselled gem from the Underground!”

“The Underground…?” Suddenly, Fischer’s features lightened. “Wait! You… you can’t possibly be talking about… that underground.” Those last words almost died before they could pass her oesophagus, she had to force them out.

“The one beneath Mount Ebott? Yeah, that one.” Undyne laughed. “How many undergrounds do you know all the way up here?”

“But how are you here? We believed the barrier to be unbreakable.”

“You know that” – Undyne raised her hand and gestured air quotes – “wanted fugitive that escaped from your master’s clutches not too long ago? They were there when it broke.” She gazed up at the
sky in thought. “Although, I can’t remember how…”

Colonel Fischer gazed at the ground. She whispered, “That exact same human helped break the barrier? Freed all those monsters underground? Then that proves…”

Undyne overheard her. “That proves what?”

Fischer – her expression unreadable – looked the former captain of the Underground square in her eye. She dropped her broken weapon to the ground. “That I’ve misjudged you…”

This garnered a perplexed look from whom she fought mercilessly against. “Huh?” Undyne muttered.

With small, cautious steps – as not to irk an unpleasant response – the colonel approached, glancing quickly at her surroundings. A few head whips later, she was back to the individual in front of herself. “Listen, I must confess one small detail to you.” Fischer’s white face looked startlingly collected for someone who had the tar beaten out of it. “I represent a certain secret division within the Monster Military. We have no official name or record, but our purpose is clear: Emperor Maxus will lead us all to ruin for his own selfish reasons, and must not be allowed to succeed.”

“What are you telling me?” interrogated Undyne, “That you’re a spy?”

Colonel Fischer murmured. “Yes and no,” she answered the best she could. “I heed his words; follow the rules; carry out my orders; but when the time comes to strike against him, our division will be ready.” She drew closer. “We have been planning from the shadows for decades, waiting for this moment. I believe that the time to strike will be soon… and I could use your help.” She smiled, which seemed like a very uncharacteristic thing for someone in her position to do. “How would you like to meet Emperor Maxus in person?”

Undyne glanced across the horizon. “But I need to find Frisk first! There’s not just them, but others, too!”

“Others?” Fischer combed her memory for orders and words and rumours that passed her way. “Do these others involve a doctor named Alphys by—?”

“ALPHYS!” That name came out of Undyne’s mouth like a gunshot, almost startling the soul out of Fischer. “Where did you hear that name? Tell me now!” she demanded to know, grabbed Fischer by the shoulder guards.

“I overheard a report that a squad was ordered to apprehend a woman named Alphys and her two skeleton associates in—”

Her words were cut off as she aroused a deep rage from within the former captain. “If anyone dares lay a finger on any of them, I’ll rearrange every single skeleton in all your bodies!”

“I can help you, I can help you!” Colonel Fischer screamed insistently until she stopped shaking. “I can help you find them. All you need to do is come with me and help to remove Maxus from his position when the time is right. After which, I promise to reunite you with your friends.”

Barely holding back her anger, Undyne raised an important question: “Why should I trust you?”

“Like I said: you’ll never catch up to the human from here. And without my help, you’ll have a hard time beating up Emperor Maxus. Castle Highkeep’s walls are impenetrable, even for you. But, with my help, I can get you inside without a hitch.” Fischer cracked a grin, revealing teeth that were not white at all.
Undyne remained sceptical. “How will you do that? And, again, why should I trust you?”

After brushing the hands off her shoulders, the colonel of the ranged division pulled two keys from her belt and placed each one in Undyne’s hands.

She pointed to the larger brass key on the left. “That one unlocks the door to the prisoner transport waiting over the hill back there.” Then to the other, which was small and shiny. “And this one is for the handcuffs.”

Undyne looked up, incredulous. “What handc—?”

Fischer whipped out a pair of thick shackles and slapped them on Undyne’s wrists in front of her. Without waiting for a rude remark, she summoned her crossbow and launched a single bolt into the air. A few seconds later, her squad marched in their direction from over the hill, several tugging in tow a carriage built from grey steel. The prisoner transport was more a steel box that a gilded cart. The metal wheels rumbled with no added suspension as they rolled, as if to make the ride as unforgiving as possible for the poor saps inside. Apparently, that bolt was the signal.

Fischer snatched Undyne by the nape of her neck. “Play along,” she whispered into a fin, then dragged her toward the entourage.

The leading soldier looked amazed. There was an uneven ring of metal around his neck, suggesting he was one of the four who had their helmets crushed in. “Well, would you look at that. The colonel pulled through!”

“I said I’d handle it, didn’t I?” Fischer replied, tugging roughly on the neck of her captor. Undyne kept her head hung low, pretending to be beaten even though the idea of being the loser tasted sour.

“You sure did, sir. We never doubted you for a second,” he lied. The grated door to the cage opened, complete with a ramp for wheelchair access. The guard’s tone changed to the opposite side of the spectrum upon lecturing the other figure. “Alright, scum, in you go! They’ll be plenty of dust piles in your cell to demolish.”

Just as Fischer went to push Undyne, she defiantly brushed her off. All the guards jumped at the sudden movement, training their weapons on the handcuffed prisoner. Even with their weapons drawn and the criminal restrained, they still did not like their chances.

Undyne growled like a cornered animal. “I’ll draw all your faces extra pretty in those piles… before I smash ‘em!” She made eye contact with every pair of eyes there, stopping on Fischer’s. “And I’d have gotten away with it if it weren’t for you, meddling colonel!”

With that, she stumbled up the metal ramp, into the carriage and planted herself onto the equally unforgiving bench, also constructed from the same material as the rest of it. Nobody breathed until the gate was shut and sealed. The prisoner now secured inside with no possible chance of escape, and Fischer knew that had agreed to go along with it.

“Good work, sir,” one of the meeker troops in the odd bunch chimed in. “Always knew you were such a good negotiator.”

“Glad to see you’re well informed, son,” Colonel Fischer responded, rubbing her forehead with the back of her hand. Had he truly been well informed, then he would’ve known that she only scored a C- in stalemate negotiations. “Target secured. Let’s reel this one back to the castle. Double time, I wanted to be there three hours ago!”
Afternoon in the Forest

Ho-hum. Ho-hum. Another day in the life for border officer Safnari, sat at her post on the edge of the Forest, tapping the eraser end of her pencil against a half-finished Sudoku puzzle. It was a big book, just purchased last week, containing five hundred of the suckers and she was already halfway through. This was what the average shift amounted to: scanning lines and visualising where each number can and cannot go. There was no reason to keep an eye out for anyone passing by since there were none.

Let's see now, concentrate. She aimed the eraser tip at the top left corner. A six is here… meaning that a six has to be on this line, so six can only go here. She scribbled a six in the corresponding box.

Life was boring as the border sentry for the crossing between Ice Island and the Forest, because nothing happened. There was once a time when the air was filled with steady rattling upon the wooden connecting bridge, monsters coming and go, which got quieter after the war ended, and silent after the travellers started disappearing. Nowadays, the only steps made on the bridge were her own, and that was all the way up to the line painted across the centre. She dared not cross it. At least she was on the safe side where the temperature was kind.

Her kiosk was a mighty upgrade from the eight planks nailed together by the other chump, Birgir. Hers was a full extension of her own house, complete with a fully thatched roof and rolling metal shutters, all up at the moment. Just behind her stood the door to her kitchen; Safnari toyed with the idea of shifting the refrigerator in front to avoid having to get up all the time. An introvert through and through, her shade of skin was a colour most of the humans on Earth would risk lifelong illness for.

There was one small detail that broke the monotony today, and that was the two soldiers stationed on the bridge's mouth. The pair just turned up hours ago, without any word or warning, and positioned themselves along the threshold with gazes locked forward on Ice Island. There was no need for them to be there, Safnari though. Nobody has returned from that arctic wasteland in a lifetime. Although, she still wondered what they expected to find. She considered asking them, but chose against it; if the Monster Military assigned troops here, then it was for a reason, and one she had no business in knowing, maybe best not to know. If that was the case, she could expect them to be standing there for a long, long, long, long time.

Back to her puzzle. She paused on it for several moments, going around in circles with the same five numbers, before drawing her attention to a vertical line through three grids. There's a seven already in the bottom grid, and nothing can go in the middle grid… She pointed to the gap at the top. So the seven has to go here. As she scribbled the lucky number in the empty square, a low rumble spiralled within her ears, throwing off her concentration. Then that leaves the… the… four… What is that noise?

"Oh, sweet monster Jesus…” one of the guards muttered.

Safnari rose from her book, shooting her gaze in the direction of the familiar noise. She thought she would never see the day again, much less hear it: footsteps drumming on wood. Footsteps that were not hers. Many of them, tapping rapidly. On the opposite end of the bridge, movement. Hundreds of monsters stampeded from Ice Island, swarming toward the two-man blockade, showing no signs of stopping.

The man on the left side of the bridge held his spear out with both hands, crossing it over his body. "This is it, Private Brian," he said to the soldier at his side. "Stand your ground and take control of
the situation." The approaching crowd passed the halfway line and the changing rooms. "We stop and check every monster until we find the human. Understand?"

"Understood, Sarge," the other, Private Brian, confirmed and nodded, although not on the same page of readiness as his sergeant. "What do we do then?"

"You're seriously asking that question?" The tsunami of steps began to drown out his voice. He rose above it. "Arrest them. Slap 'em in cuffs. And don't worry about them putting up a fight; hiking through that island will take the steam out of anybody."

"Gotta!" Brian nodded a second time and raised his spear in a similar method, bracing himself. "I'll be the stone wall. I'll be the mighty dam. I'll be the immovable object. Ain't nobody getting past" – he gasped and suddenly lowered his weapon – "Donno, is that you?"

He had been distracted by one of the individuals among the crowd. A limbless, multi-coloured monster with a large head and large feet, pogoing across the bridge. "Brian?" he cried, bright eyes becoming brighter.

The Sergeant faced Brian, distracted with annoyance. "Dang it, boy!" he barked. "Keep your guard up, you—!" In his haste, he had dropped his own guard and was unprepared as the wave of escapees barrelled past, knocking him over the side and sending him falling out of the Outerworld altogether. "NINCOMPOOOOOOOoo0000000000…"

Private Brian paid his superior no heed as his yell died down far below, too absorbed by the return of Steve. He dropped his spear and ran to meet his friend. The crowds passed without touching either of them.

"It's been so long, Donno!" Brian said joyfully, hugging Donno upon arrival. "I thought I'd never see you again!"

Donno laughed. "No one's getting rid of me that easily, buddy. It's great to see you again." Brian pulled back and Donno glanced down at his friend's outfit. "So, Monster Military now, huh?"

Astonishment dripped from his tone. "Looks good on you."

"You thought I'd never make the cut…" Private Brian remembered, smirking. "That's five coins you owe me."

The returned friend looked worried for a moment. "That reminds me: how's my stuff? Is it still there?"

"You bet." Brian responded with a thumbs up.

"Nobody stole it or sold it or anything?"

"Dude, your stuff is made up of magazines, a half-eaten box of chocolates, a can of deodorant, and a balloon."

Donno dithered. "Wait… I had deodorant?"

Private Brian laughed, wrapped an arm over Donno's shoulders, and together they strolled away with the crowd still flowing around them as if they were aerodynamic.

Safnari was frozen in her kiosk, up from her chair, worried that she would be swarmed by a thousand people, all expecting pay-outs. Fortunately for her, none of them did. The hysteria was written all over them: they were just glad to be out of that place. A few stopped and inspected
heavily worn and frosted betting slips only to dispose them with flicking wrists. Her eyes followed
the crowd as they passed her and vanished into the Forest, returning stillness to the connecting bridge
again.

Just when she thought she was out of the woods, a hard thud snapped Safnari to the counter. A black
and purple rucksack now lay there, looking like she was about to pay after all. The person who put it
there peeked over the counter's edge with dark eyes and dark hair. Frisk then tossed up a black wool
hat, a pair of black gloves, a red scarf, a blue coat, and a pair of leg protectors – in that order – in a
disordered pile beside the bag. Safnari wordlessly stepped up as Frisk had one last thing to give: the
betting slip they got from Birgir.

Reluctantly, Safnari took the slip and feared the worst. Right off the bat, the paper was slightly damp.
She had given away many betting slips to those stupid enough to take the challenge, accepting
money in the hundreds and thousands, but this was the first time she was getting one back. All she
could think about was how much she owed this kid; how many zeroes their winnings would contain;
how much of a dent this would put in the economy. She squinted before reading the bet, only to
reflex and do a double take at how anticlimactic it was.

"Five cloud coins? Are you serious? Did you literally bet your pocket money?" she said, blinking
from the slip to the child who replied with a tense shrug. Safnari sighed. Her etiquette was rusty.
"Still, I suppose I should be congratulating you. You're technically the first person to win, and since
I've never had to dish out someone's winnings before, you've given me a nice number to start with."

Flipping the betting slip over to its blank side and taking hold of her pencil, she prepared to use it on
numbers that didn't exist within a nine-by-nine square grid. Time to put all those hours spent in maths
class to practical use. She remembered it quite well for it was not easy to forget: times fifty the bet
with extra multipliers for each piece of equipment brought back and in usable condition.

Five multiplied by fifty was two hundred and fifty; already, this kid was off to a good start. That
number would serve as their minimum winnings if the rest wasn't in order, which, from the looks of
it, did not look very likely. The clothes came next, five pieces in total. A little dirty, a little worn, a
little damaged, but they had made it. That was an extra five multipliers, making it fifty five. Now the
bag. Right off the bat, both ice axes were missing, costing two multipliers, but the sleeping bag and
folded tent cancelled those losses out. Fifty seven. Inside, the portable radiator was missing, another
point off; same with the flask and a couple packs of rations – one of which Frisk munched on during
the short walk to the Forest. Everything else, though, was there and hardly touched.

She summed it up as fast as she could as if there was a line of customers to handle. "If this is
correct," Safnari the collector stated, calculating it up, "that means you've won… three hundred and
twenty five cloud coins. Let me just gather your winnings…"

Frisk wondered how much this amount would weigh as the border officer stepped up to the cashier
at the other side of the kiosk. The pouch of several dozen clouds coins from Sam an' Rita weren't too
much of a hassle to carry, but over three hundred of them may be a different story. It was funny how
they were concerned over the logistics of currency when back in the Underground they carried large
quantities of gold in the hundreds and even thousands, and that stuff is dense. Safnari reached under
the counter, slipped something out, clicked a few buttons on the machine, and then swiped her hand
across the interface. She returned to her previous spot and Frisk was a little surprised when she
presented them a white card with a black strip on the back as opposed to a fat bag of money.

"Here is your cloud coin credit card," Safnari detailed, almost slipping on her tongue, "with three
hundred and twenty five coins balance. Most establishments accept these – simply present this when
you make your purchase and they will scan the amount off."
The child hesitantly took the card, feeling like they were being conned. They blankly looked at the credit card, turning it on both sides, then back to Safnari as if to say this was not what they expected.

Safnari's radiant face grew a mocking quality to it. "Welcome to the twenty-first century," she said. "Oh, and welcome to the Forest. Follow the path for ten minutes and you'll reach town. There's plenty of candy stores where I'm sure you'll be eager to spend your winnings."

Frisk slipped the card into the same pocket that housed the betting slip and went to leave. Five steps later, they turned around and took five steps back to the kiosk.

They inquired at the border hut if she knew where Professor Haze was.

"Professor Haze?" she repeated. "That guy from the civil war? Not a clue. Sorry."

With that, Frisk let out a tired yawn and made their way into the Forest. Safnari watched from her kiosk until she could see them no more, knowing that odd creature could be the last customer she would get for a long time.

Just when she thought the silence had returned and settled in for the long run, another rising sound caught her ears. "...ooooooooOOOOOOOOOOOP!"

The Sergeant ascended upwards and landed on the very spot from which he fell. He bounded to a stop, stumbling forward a few steps on unsteady feet. He was fully intact, still holding his weapon and all his armour adorning his chiselled frame.

The Sarge faced the lady at the kiosk. "What'd I miss?"

The Forest: a true habitant for giants. A maze of walkways constructed with the intricacies of spider webs, all around the thickets that made up the treetops. The paths curved and circled around trunks, around branches, and through some trunks themselves, with thick and sturdy supports built into the bark to keep the platforms secure. Such a feat would have taken decades, centuries to complete, which the monsters of this land had plenty of. The branches themselves were as thick as redwoods.

Up above, the canopy was the largest and thickest Frisk had ever seen with layers upon layers of leaves acting as the ceiling, all glowing in a beautiful spectrum of greens from lime to seaweed, emerald to juniper. Rays of sunlight pierced through in certain spots, turning leaves gold. No chirping birds yet the wind whistled past at a steady tempo, rustling the leaves with the same frequency as white waves against golden sands. Sounded similar too.

Frisk stopped a moment and peeked over the nearest railing to the chasm below. The forest floor was too far down and too shrouded in blackness to be seen by the naked eye, like looking up through the trees and seeing the sky only this was the opposite. If someone fell, one would have an hour to make peace in their life before they hit the ground. The damp air smelled strongly of wood, leaves, and bark… with a hint of some unidentifiable chemical.

Over from their platform, across a wide gap, stood a crowd of monsters all with sombre looks on their faces. Upon noticing the single, charcoal grey urn which they surrounded, Frisk realised what the occasion was. A young, white-haired yeti in a black suit slowly picked up the urn and removed the lid.

"And so," one of the monsters spoke aloud, enough for the human child to overhear, "we lay Gallic to rest in the forest depths. May his memory live on in our souls and in our thoughts and prayers, and may he rest in peace."
The yeti tipped the container over the railing and out seeped the remains of the one named Gallic. His ashes dispersed as they fell, starting as a stream and ending as a cloud as the abyss gobbled them up.

Frisk, without muttering a word, moved on, leaving the crowd of mourners to their thoughts and prayers.

Apparently, according to the mummy couple, this place was where Frisk needed to be. This was where their journey was to come to a close, and quite frankly, it could not end fast enough. The feeling was akin to watching the final five minutes of school tick down on a Friday afternoon; the day was already over, not much more could be done or learned, but until the bell rang, maths with Mister Miller was still in session.

They should have known that it wouldn't be that easy, not like the journey here was easy in the first place: the fight with Emperor Maxus; their near-drowning experience; getting chased through Parfocorse; being hunted by Barb the Bounty Hunter while holding on for dear life in the Shattered Zone; almost getting pulled into Vail's fantasy land. All these events had done their part to beat down this human who had already survived deadly events of a different yet similar nature under Mount Ebott. The backpack no longer weighed them down, the bulk of the winter gear no longer there, but their body was heavy from their own fatigue.

Just like Safnari said, ten minutes later they were within a town, if it could be called a town. Thanks to their surroundings, the town was built upwards on multiple levels, with structures of varying architecture on each one. It was expansive in both size and scope. Frisk counted five floors in total, anything above that was shrouded within the canopy. There could be a hundred platforms within those leaves, a thought that Frisk dreaded. All floors buzzed with life: walking, talking, shaking hands, walking with hands, talking with hands, and some of the monsters were hands.

Barely thinking straight, their mind was a haze with a single, solitary word repeating itself like binary code:


Frisk was moving, breathing, alive but exhausted, practically dead on their feet, occasionally lacking the energy to lift them off the ground. They had reached the finish line, but the race was still going. Frisk just wanted to find Haze so he could send them home and they could crawl up into bed and sleep for a week. Maybe two.

If they wanted to find this guy, then their hope was to find someone who could point them in the right direction. The floor they started on looked crowded with houses, homes, and wooden shacks cobbled around the area, seriously lacking imagination and paint. Windows lacking glass glowed yellow and warm.

As Frisk wandered through streets and alleys, it occurred to them that there was not a single sign of a wanted poster with their face on it in sight. Either word had not reached this place yet or it was not believed that the human infant would make it this far on their own. Regardless, they finally had some room to breathe and did not need to look over their shoulder constantly.

Frisk stopped a passing lady – a brown and green cat – and asked where they could find Professor Haze.

"Professor who?" was all Frisk needed to hear from this individual to know where pursuing the topic would lead.
Frisk found a ramp that led them down to the level below. This floor looked worst that the one above, with very seedy and very sleazy stalls, bars and dilapidated structures all constructed within five minutes. Some structures looked so fragile that a wayward sneeze would topple them. This place looked awfully like a slum, both in sight and smell. Just standing in the wrong place at the wrong time was a sure way to get mugged. Frisk wanted to ask one of these fine, grizzled, battle-scarred gentlemen whether they knew a certain professor from the civil war, but could not bring themselves to ask. Again, their thoughts returned to the Underground where all the inhabitants had one interesting line to say when spoken to, which they all shared so freely to some random stranger that approached them.

The level beneath that one yielded the reason for the odour. The entire bottom floor consisted of a garbage disposal unit, amply named *Forest Dump*. Anything and everything garbage from above: packages; leftover food; broken utilities; hole-riddled socks; all of it winded up here. Unless Professor Haze was garbage, there was nothing to find or see here.

After retracing their steps back to the third floor, they searched the vicinity until they located the ramp to the fourth floor, which consisted of more houses and stores built around and in the trees. These walls and doors appeared better than those below, and the windows actually had glass in them this time, and ornaments and drapes adorning them.

Frisk asked the large, one-eyed foot who ran the general store if he knew where they could find Professor Haze, and he answered, "Buy something or get lost, kid."

The unicorn owner in the next shop over fared no better: "The only thing you need to find is a hot shower."

Upon hearing that, Frisk brought their nose to their sleeve and recoiled quickly at the smell, realising that it was no exaggeration that they stank, badly. The Forest Dump smelled better than they did. Their sour scent would make them the perfect target for flies if any existed in the Outerworld.

It was on the fifth floor where Frisk noticed a trend: as they rose through the levels, the quality of the structures got better, the light grew brighter, the air tasted sweeter, the people got snootier, but the professor's location would not come any closer. They were upon the canopy now; the greeneries trimmed around the ceiling and walls like hanging gardens.

Frisk approached a pair of sisters, both sitting behind a raised bed of flowers, and asked the question fresh on the tip of their tongue.

"I dunno, ask her," a little hairy fish girl said, nodding to her big sister.

"I dunno, ask her," a big hairy fish girl said, nodding to her little sister.

A few seconds later, their mother announced from afar that lunch was ready. As the two stood and wandered off, Frisk realised that the sisters shared the same body.

Monsters everywhere: a lady of blue flames; a small, white frog; a scaly lizard covered in furry polka dots; yet not a single one seemed to be the professor. What did he even look like? Was Frisk expecting to be approached by a man in a lab coat and nerdy glasses and a sticker on their chest that said 'Hello, my name is Professor Haze'?

They found a healthy snack store named *Treat Tops*, and while they didn't find who they were looking for, Frisk did find a couple little pick-me-ups in the form of an oat bar branded *Frappejack*: have your morning coffee and eat it; and an energy drink labelled *Can o' peas*: each can instilled with the energy of a thousand… peas. That's still a lot of peas! Frisk felt the can, with a product
name like that, did not warrant a glossy black backdrop with yellow thunder steaks and the name in a blocky, bold red font outlined in silver. When the payment part of the transaction arrived, Frisk presented the cloud coin credit card. Thankfully, the lady at the sentry post did not lie. The bald, four armed cashier took the card, swiped it on a reader, and handed it back, thanking the customer for their patronage.

By the time Frisk reached the sixth floor, they were about ready to collapse. The sixth floor was beautiful, white houses with white picket fences and flowers in all corners like they had reached nirvana, but Frisk was too tired and bothered to admire its splendour and lovely aroma. Roughly half an hour had passed since their arrival and they were nowhere closer to finding their guy than when they started. The bones in their feet were ready to crumble. The skin, so hot and painful, burned within their footwear. Frisk bit into the flapjack before chugging a mouthful of energy drink, ingesting a double shot of caffeine. The energy rush hit them hard, filling them with the determination to search until they either found Haze or their legs fell off. The instant crash hit them harder, making the next ramp feel like scaling a mountain.

Through bleary eyes, Frisk asked another monster – at least they thought it was a monster, it might have been an inanimate trashcan – the same question they have asked a hundred times today. "The professor?" a woman said, purring the end of professor. "Trust me, darling, if I knew where he was, my next trip would be to the castle dungeon so they could squeeze it out of me." Frisk rubbed their eyes into focus and found a glamorously dressed lady with peppered purple eyes and equally purple skin. "Haze hasn't exactly been flavour of the century since he bailed on the Empire years ago, or so I've heard. They say the Emperor's soldiers have searched every walkway at least a thousand times looking for him and found nothing."

This response got a coarse groan out of the youngster. Frisk muttered that they desperately needed to find him, as if she had his whereabouts up her puffy sleeve.

The fabulous woman placed a hand on their shoulder. "If you need to talk to Haze, you won't need to find him, he'll find you." At that proximity, she winced at the child's sweaty odour and distanced herself twice as fast. "By the way, you look like you're ready to pass out. Might I suggest doing so in a place where you won't become a doormat?" As she made her way onwards with her day, she said one last statement, pointing upwards. "There's a hotel on the top floor, Sky Heights it's called. A couple floors up – you can't miss it."

A chain reaction of images materialised. Hotel meant rooms. Rooms meant beds. Beds meant sleep. Frisk's body was saying yes and their mind was… also saying yes. They needed to rest, more than anything. They found the ramps leading to the eighth and top floor. Upon reaching the foot of the last one – practically crawling on their hands and knees – light poured through the opening above.

The top floor wasn't a figure of speech. They had emerged above the canopy now, with the pink sun at its largest and striking on their shoulders. The vast green tops waved like the seas and the oceans themselves, lapping against the guardrails in splashes of leaves. The walkway was similar to a harbour with benches spaced facing outwards and even a few telescopes; one cloud coin for two minutes. Two benches were currently occupied. If Frisk could walk on air, then Castle Highkeep could be reached in a twenty minute stroll.

The lady was right that they could not miss the hotel because it was the largest tree by a few kilometres. The tallest tree in the Forest was like a homing beacon for the entire island, and the monsters had decided what better place than to make an extravagant five star hotel. There was no other buildings in sight except for this one. The pattern of windows cut into the bark suggested that the rooms had been dug into the meat of the trunk. The thick, outspread branches each had a separate
room constructed on them, held up with sturdy supports. Not a single square inch of the tree top had been spared.

Above the entrance, *Sky Heights* stood underlined with five evenly spaced gold stars.

Frisk finished their food and drink and found a bin to dispose of them before they pushed their way into the foyer of the hotel. Just getting through the door was a struggle... and that was with the doorstopper doorman courteously opening the way for them. Frisk imagined the place to be one big home for squirrels with everything carved from wood until they saw it with their own two eyes. A crystal chandelier hung from the absurdly high ceiling. Metal elevators stood on the left and right tiled walls. Tall windows with red drapes and brass carriers holding overflowing cases. Straight ahead, past the elaborate lobby of padded chairs, raised gravel beds and shiny marble flooring, stood the reception desk, under fifteen rows of railings. The tree grew taller from the inside.

They passed the beds, the chairs and the monsters relaxed on them, and reached the desk. It was short enough for Frisk to rest their chin on the granite top, and that was what they did, lacking the energy to keep themself upright on their legs alone. They waited, drawing their focus to the monitor and the framework of keys. Some held old, brass keys and some held new, fancy cards.

It did not take long for a dog monster with white and grey fur wearing a black dress vest to wander out and take notice of the child. "Shouldn't you be with your mommy and daddy, kid?"

Oh goodness, how they wished they were, Frisk thought. Diving into their determination, they fished the card out and demanded the cheapest room available. They were willing to sleep on a bare branch if they had to.

"Of course," the receptionist said as he turned and plucked a random key from the rack. "We have short stay rooms available in... wait..." Suddenly, there was a hold up. He stood motionless for a couple of seconds, eyes glazed and dull on the child, trying their already non-existent patience.

"Hold on a sec..."

The dog receptionist pulled open a draw beneath his monitor, looked inside for a moment and then reached in and got a calculator. After a few seconds and a few button taps, he nodded and dropped the calculator back where he got it.

"Congratulations!" he said rather suddenly, jolting a speck of life into Frisk's body. "I've just checked our records and it turns out... you're our one-hundred-thousandth guest!" The draw closed with a muted click.

The receptionist placed the dime-a-dozen key back in its place then retreated hastily into the backroom, reappearing ten seconds later with a fancy crimson cardkey in his paw. "To mark such a tremendous occasion, Sky Heights rewards you with a stay in our luxurious, first-class penthouse suite" – he paused, building the tension into his next words – "for free!"

"Not only is the room free, but with this key, all the services we provide. This includes in-room dining, laundry, movie rental, gymnasium access, swimming pool, sauna, breakfast, lunch, dinner, and the rest will be listed on a leaflet in your room." He offered the lucky winner the key. "I can see that you're tired so I won't delay you any longer. The elevator's right over there – just scan your card when you're inside and it'll take you all the way to the top floor. Have a wonderful stay, you lucky thing you!"

*Wait a minute, this all sounds too good to be true. Nobody is this generous, even on milestones. This has got to be some kind of trap. Keep your first class penthouse card. I'm leaving!* This is what the rational side of Frisk's brain would have said had it not be deactivated to keep the rest going. Since
they weren't using that side, the other side took the cardkey without question and headed for the elevator, eager for some rest.

The monster next in line, a pear with four legs to two tentacles for arms, took notice. "That kid won a stay in the penthouse?" He rushed up to the desk, leaving his bag a metre behind. "What do I get for being customer number one-hundred-thousand-and-one?"

The receptionist eyed the monster and grinned. He reached into a pocket and pulled out a tissue, dangling it with the thumb and index finger. "You can have this handkerchief to dry your tears with," he said. "It's only been used once." The late guest dropped his head and sighed. Ordinary room for him.

After reverting back to his professional manner, the receptionist took the customer's reservation, keeping the child with the striped shirt in their peripheral vision. After missing it the first time, Frisk pushed the button and the doors parted immediately with a ding. Inside, they quickly figured out where to swipe their card.

The moment those doors shut, the dog rushed over and stretched his snout through the doorframe leading to the backroom. "Vana," he called out, "come here quick!"

His line manager, Vana, a small, silver-furred monster with a big attitude, stepped from her office, noticeably irritated. "What is it now, Chien?"

He continued talking as she neared the front desk. "That last guest I checked in just now?" Chien led her over to the draw and pulled it open once more. Inside, beneath the pocket-sized calculator, lay a slightly crumpled wanted poster of a human named Frisk. "It was them," he said, pulling it out.

She turned from the poster back to Chien. "You're certain?"

Chien nodded. "Absolutely."

"What did you do?"

"I gave them the key to the penthouse," Chien said with a grin. "They're heading up there now."

Line Manager Vana nodded. "Good. Good work. Get the surveillance system in that room up and running. Don't let them out of your sight for a second. I'll contact the military."

With the card's insertion and removal from the slot, the penthouse door lock snapped. Frisk pushed it open to a black room with a clean, neutral smell. At first, they saw nothing but darkness and dim outlines within before a crack in the darkness emerged above, casting three rectangles of light from the ceiling and across the floor. The gaps grew larger and larger, transforming the interior from black to grey until the window shutters hiccupped upon reaching their fullest. A sweet three-piece suite of plump white cushions and frames of rich wood lay facing a massive television screen that sparked to life at Frisk's arrival. A news channel from Earth came on, with the top story being the President's birthday and the candle on his birthday cake being Pyrope.

From the balcony, the whole of the Outerworld could be seen. The Plain-plain looked a million miles away and Ice Island appeared so scenic and majestic in nature, or magic in this land's case. To think that they were on the Plain-plain a few short hours ago.

A door frame right from the living room led to the bedroom, where the glorious, king-sized bed would make the red one back in the MTT resort green with envy. The skylights above would allow whoever was under the sheets to drift away to the sight of stars. This place was luxury incarnated.
Frisk would have jumped on it right there and then, but they were both hungry and still twitching from surplus adrenaline.

There was a kitchen attached to the living room, complete with an oven, toaster, double fridge with ice dispenser, and a breakfast bar. They opened the refrigerator and found it full of food. Frisk wasted no time in making the thickest sandwich imaginable, stacking more than their tiny mouth could fit, washing it down with a bottle of water and half a tub of strawberry ripple ice-cream.

With their belly stuffed, they walked through the next door and found the bathroom. The bathtub was a hot tub big enough for four, and pilled in the corners with a massive selection of salts, shampoos, lotions, oils, gels, balms, salves, creams, ointments and scrubs under a rainbow of colours. White towels and white bathrobes were neatly rolled and stored on square shelves under the sink. The three lights above reflected softly off the mirror, reacting to the beige tiles, turning the air gold.

Frisk noticed a large dumbwaiter entrance beside the tub. A sign beside it explained that it was the laundry service chute. Place your dirty clothes inside and press the button to send it down. It would then be washed, ironed, pressed, and delivered back within the hour.

Eventually, Frisk was soaking away in the tub, up to their shoulders in bubbles and warm water infused with a little bit of every oil available. Their stinking clothes, including their socks and boots, were the launderette's problem now, having been send down the chute. The warm water flowed and churned around their tired, bruised body, stimulating the nerves and muscles, ironing out the aches and pains. Frisk was in heaven, high enough to actually be there. Before getting out, Frisk plugged their nose, closed their eyes, and submerged themself.

Frisk exited the steaming bathroom wearing a towel and a bathrobe, holding the front an inch off the ground. They expelled a big yawn, eyelids drooping. The unbreakable longing for sleep pulled them to the bedroom. A little nap would not hurt.

They crawled onto the bouncy mattress and thick, cloudy sheets, choosing not to pull them up unless they wanted to get lost under them, and plopped themself down in the centre. The skylight tinted on its own as if it somehow knew that someone was there and shielded Frisk from the sun. Frisk got comfortable, resting their still damp hair against the pillow, contemplating that they've never seen stars in the daytime be—

Out like a light.

"That's them," the Sergeant confirmed, staring at the figure in the black and white monitor. "That's definitely them."

The Sergeant, Receptionist Chien and Line Manager Vana observed the displays. In the penthouse suite, six cameras had been hidden within, a little something set up during the civil war and left to collect dust until now. Chien had watched the human's every move, from entering to checking out the place to grabbing a bit to eat – not while they were in the bathroom, he afforded them their privacy – and to the bed where they had not moved for the past half hour.

He and his men had followed several eye witness accounts across town concerning a kid who fit the description of the one who escaped Highkeep Enclave, leading from one place to the next, ending in the hotel they were currently in and him looking at the target from behind a camera.

Just watching the child slumber pulled at the Sergeant's eyelids. Throughout the night, he was among the many soldiers who worked to distribute those wanted posters around the Forest. After receiving word of the target's movements, they were ordered to remove all traces of the posters from the public
eye in half the time. This order came as disheartening, for understandable reasons. The men and women had spent all night sweating under their armour to complete an island-sized job without rest only to then have to undo most of it. Taking the posters down was a lot easier though, and disposing them was even more so – they tossed them down into the forest abyss.

As he stared at the sitting duck of a target, it appeared that all that toil was about to harvest fruit.

"That's a relief," Chien sighed, leaning back in his adjustable chair, a half-eaten dog treat dangling from his lips. "I've been sat here for the most part of an hour, afraid that they might bail before you got here. And all this dust does nothing for my allergies."

"We really wished you'd arrived sooner," Vana seconded.

"Hey," the Sergeant retorted, "is it my fault you decided to build your hotel on top of eight flights of god-dang ramps?"

Vana dodged that remark and cut straight to the chase. "Are you going to arrest that thing or not?"

The Sarge pursed his lips. "Yes, yes," he assured, tiredly. He had ten troops waiting outside. "Just get us up there and we'll handle the rest."

Chien mouthed his treat before fumbling in his vest. "I'll got the master elevator card right here," he muffled, pulling it out.

---

Dark... Pitch black... Gloomy... All obscured... Every step betrays Frisk... uneven... loose... Light shines the way... but to where...?

Weightless... Floating... Moving so fast, yet doing so little... Like they were flying... Things pass to the left... Things pass to the right... There is an urgency around... Need to hurry... Need to get somewhere... Before it's too late...

Wet... Soaking... Dripping... Water pouring down... Grey sky... Barren land... Their foe stood above... a trident in strong hands... Prongs aimed squarely at them...

It came down on Frisk's chest...

---

Ding!

The elevator doors parted on the penthouse level and out stepped Vana, the Sergeant, and four foot soldiers. Six monsters was the maximum weight limit. The troops below were told to spread out, with two guarding the entrance, two outside, and two around the back, just in case the target caught on to the trap. The net was closing in. Soon, the child would be in their custody.

"It's this way," the line manager whispered, stepping forward to the single door within the enclosed hall. "Here it is."

"Much appreciated, citizen," the Sergeant said with a tone that clued his sarcasm. "We never would've found it on our own." With a two-fingered point forward, he tossed orders at his men. "Form up."

As instructed, the monsters in armour took positions at both sides of the door, two at each side. Vana shuffled past them to the back, making the least amount of noise as possible. Everyone tried to be quiet, but the layer of metal around their joints did not make the process easy.
In her possession, Vana had a walkie-talkie. "Chien," he said quietly into the mouthpiece, "is the human still there?"

All the way on the theoretical ground floor, Chien remained plastered to the screen. "Yes," he answered. Before him, in fuzzy black and white, Frisk was horizontal on the bed, still basking in sweet slumber. The human had no idea what was about to hit them. "Still sleeping like a baby. You're good to go."

"Got it. Vana out," she responded before easing her thumb off the button, then addressed the Sergeant. "The human is still asleep in the bedroom. It's through this door and right into the next room."

"Thanks again," the Sergeant acknowledged, this time genuinely. He had, in hand, a card for the door. "On three…"

Nonverbally, Sarge hovered the card before reader built into the penthouse entrance, keeping it level with the slot. He held three fingers up in his other hand.

He inserted the card slowly and bent the ring finger, leaving the index and middle finger extended.

Retracted the key, the brief click on the lock disengaging gave away their position. Only the index remained, pointing toward the ceiling.

The Sergeant clutched the hand, pulled down and threw his entire body into it, bursting it open. The time for subtlety passed in an instant and the five solders rushed to the right, straight into the bedroom.

Vana stepped through the threshold gingerly, inspecting the penthouse as the tumbling sounded from the bedroom. A plate covered with crumbs and leftover fillings and an empty water bottle lay on the breakfast bar. The bath had been used and so did all the oils and lotions. Everywhere else lay untouched. In all her years of service, criminals had done many a deed to her rooms, from deliberate damage to illegal activities to the accidental bed wetting. The mess was minimal, thankfully. No doubt she could clean this room and have it ready for the next guest.

From the doorway, the Sergeant appeared. A dour expression smeared under his helmet. "Ma'am," he said. "There's no one in here."

The line manager's eyebrows snapped up. "What?" She rushed to the door and looked at the bed, brushing past the Sergeant in the process. Instead of finding a human child asleep on it, they saw nothing. The white sheets were untouched; nobody had been in here for days from the looks of it. In light of this revelation, she swung her communicative device to her mouth and thumbed the button. "Chien, where did they go?"

After a second, the receiver crackled. "What do you mean?" Chien asked, sounding confused. "Why haven't you entered yet?"

"The human isn't here! The human is gone!" Vana screeched down the walkie-talkie. "Where did they go?" The Sergeant and the units under his command stood in silence; the resentment written in the superior's face and twitching fingers.

"Gone?" Chien repeated. "But… on the screen the human is still sleeping. Did you enter the right penthouse?"

"The right pent—? How many penthouses do you think we have?"
"Well, that doesn't matter because the human – wait!"

Vana held her tongue, both bewildered and furious at the same time.

Chien's voice came alive in the room. "I… I don't know what just happened. There was static on the screen and then… they were gone… and I can see you guys now."

"What happened, Chien?" Vana breathed down the piece.

Silence followed for a moment before a response came from the receptionist. "…I think someone sabotaged the video feed…"

"Sabotaged?" Vana said. "Who could've done that? And how?"

Two minutes earlier, Frisk jerked awake before the trident stabbed their sternum. More visions of things to come, and they did not like the look of any of it.

They wondered how long they were out. The muted sun, budged over by a few inches, suggested about half an hour, maybe even a full hour. Nonetheless, their eyelids felt much lighter and their thoughts free of fogginess. The aches were still present, but more bearable than before. Ready and eager to continue their hunt, they stretched their limbs to—

Their arms got two inches off the mattress before they stopped with a metallic click. They tried again, but something was keeping them down. Frisk shot their shocked gaze toward their body and found iron shackles around each wrist and ankle, attached to chains that stretched from fresh holes in the sheets. A large chain was wound tightly around their torso; breathing became harder upon noticing it. Horrified, Frisk pulled against their bonds to no success. They were chained to a bed! Frisk may have been flirtatious, but not that flirtatious.

The worst case scenario came first: this was a trap, the one they so obviously walked into with disregard. Something was about to happen, or someone was about to appear, and Frisk would be defenceless for whatever was planned. The thought made them struggle with greater ferocity, pulling so hard that their hands and feet might pop off.

"Please do not fight with the restraints." an automated, electronic female voice suddenly spoke from the headrest. "They are there for your safety."

Without warning, their entire back wall shifted and rotated anticlockwise. Frisk could do nothing but watch as the bed turned with it toward what was hidden behind. Frisk glanced to the left and saw the gap leading to a dark tunnel illuminated by a blinking red light. The bed completed half a rotation, the wall shut behind them, and then they were within this new section that was dark, cool, and tasted of this strange concoction of sawdust and oil. To think that this was here all along…

Crunching gears resounded down the shaft, however far down it went. After a loud clunk, the bed crept downwards at a foot a second, dropping bit by bit from their original spot.

Frisk took deep breaths of the stale, industrial grade air, affirming to themself that they were not going to die. Everything was going to be alright. Cold liquid trickled on their brow, which could have been sweat or water from their bath.

The platform stopped with another shaking clunk before rotating a few notches to the right. It dropped another foot, then plunged as if its holdings failed. Frisk was thrown upwards; their bonds keeping them attached to the bed. Every organ under the ribcage rose to the top, wanting to burst through their chest. A scream got stuck in Frisk's throat, stopping a peep from getting out.
The bed rocketed downwards at a thousand miles per hour. Frisk’s panicky thoughts were buried under the rapid tumbling and rushing air. Blips of white light pulsed at the same rate as their heartbeat. The platform twisted until it was horizontal and slipped – while maintaining the same breakneck speed – through a tight gap. Frisk's nose was centimetres away from the rushing architecture of girders and supports. Their stomach pushed it up to their throat; that sandwich wasn't going to taste better the second time.

Suddenly, they were no longer gunning straight down, but diagonally, straight, up and down through a mesh of tunnels and passageways. Detours and side tunnels passed all around in an interconnecting maze one could get lost in for a whole lifetime. They slowed and jittered to a halt at a crossroads before a rolling chain transported them left.

After a long and longwinded journey, the mattress and white sheets levelled out, placing the human using it was back on top. They reached the end of the tunnel and stopped in a dark room.

"Hope you enjoyed the ride."

Frisk expected the cuffs to open, but they did not. For minutes, Frisk remained where they were, lying on the desecrated bed, still chained to it.

Eventually, a door on the wall to their left opened, but little light shone through. The faint silhouette reached to the right with an absurdly long appendage and smacked something. Florescent lights flickered above, turning the dark room light.

Frisk got a good look at the monster who they figured their kidnapper. An old monster. Standing tall and thin, he might have been taller and bulkier in his youth. He hobbled forward with small steps; his right fist gripped around the handle of a black walking stick. His pale yellow, long-sleeved, button-down shirt was heavily creased and thick with perspiration in the underarms, half tucked under a pair of white, dirt-smeared trousers and white slippers. His stern face had the reddish colour and shape of a koi fish, except for prominent human features such as a nose, small mouth, white sclera around pitch black irises, and hair: a full head of combed back, white hair and a white beard that reached the top button of his shirt. A thick pair of glasses lay on the bridge of his nose, enlarging his black eyes and the wrinkles surrounding them. Several tiny arms with varying sizes of lenses hung over his head, attached to his glasses.

The worn, metal tip of his cane beat in rhythm with the man's movements. He would bring it down then take two steps forward. Thud, two steps. Thud, two steps. Thud, two steps. This slow technique somehow made him appear faster. He was stood before Frisk in no time.

Frisk was about to speak when the elderly figure whipped his cane up and stopped the tip under Frisk's chin, gently pushing it up to get a better look at their face. He snapped his eyebrows halfway up his forehead, and one of the mechanical arms whirled in front of his spectacles, adding lenses over lenses.

The extreme close up of his eyes allowed Frisk to catch the lower eyelids twitching. He found standing on his own two feet quite discomforting, painful in fact.

The old man hummed, displaying indifference as he aimed the cane from their chin to their cheek, turning Frisk's head to one side. "Not nearly as strange up-close as I imagined," he said as he turned Frisk's head the other way. His voice was weathered, but deep and gravelly, sounding like a man who would not take old age lying down.

The cold tip returned to the floor where it belonged, and he could finally allow it to bear a portion of his weight. "I know why you're here," he continued with his notable tone that sent shivers running
up Frisk's spine. "You've only just arrived and, already, you've been asking a lot of questions. To be
more specific, one question asked many times, all regarding the whereabouts of a certain… Professor
Haze."

He raised his free left arm no higher than an inch as if gesturing to himself. "Well… here I am," he
announced dully, unsmiling and without any sort of amusement lacing his cold tone.

Frisk's expression lit up. This was him, Professor Haze, the one who built the machine that dragged
them to the Outerworld. If he helped to bring them to his world, then he had a way to send them
back. Did he?

Frisk asked Professor Haze if he had a way of getting them back home, because this human really,
really wanted to get home.

"In a manner of speaking, yes," Professor Haze answered. "Although, I would like to continue this
on a more civilised level." As he said the word civilised, he glanced at the chains and shackles. He
whacked the side of the bed with his cane and the cuffs all opened up simultaneously.

Haze had his back turned, making his way to the door while Frisk tended to their sore wrists. He
stopped at the entrance and turned his head slightly over his shoulder. "Come out when you're ready,
but be quick about it." He rapped his cane against a small panel built into the wall then staggered out
the room. "You've got ten minutes."

As the door shut, the panel opened. Inside lay a folded striped shirt, shorts, boots, underwear and
socks. Frisk's clothes were clean and citrus fresh and the footwear had been polished to a shiny
sheen.

Jumping off the bed, Frisk wasted no time in getting dressed.
Back in their clothes after being separated for a short while, Frisk eagerly went to turn the door handle. They grabbed the metal and applied pressure slowly.

Sweet anticipation grew within the child's spirit, they were so close to home they could almost taste it. If Frisk had finally, well and truly reached the end of their journey, then they could not have been in a better condition than they were. A little dinged up, a few bruises, but with themself and their clothes smelling like roses, Asgore and Toriel would had something nice to cuddle upon their return. Seeing them in good shape, still walking and smiling and laughing, would quell all their worries.

Frisk could not stop thinking about how their return was going to play out. No doubt a call would be put out to the others if they weren't already at their house. Papyrus would be overjoyed and most likely want to fill them up with undercooked spaghetti and burned pasta sauce. For once, Frisk welcomed the idea; the thought of real food after two days of nothing but phoney stuff sounded enticing, even if his warranted much revision. Sans would act chill and aloof, crack a pun or two as if the whole thing was some harmless sleepover. Undyne would congratulate them on sticking it to these guys, maybe give them training lessons on how to best stay anchored to the ground if another abduction occurred. And Alphys would…

Frisk stopped, the handle halfway down. If there was one thing they struggled to shake these past couple of days, it was the look on Alphys's face before their unforeseen departure from Earth. Her eyes, wide and shaking from the tension; claws, slipping on the bone; voice, cracked with anxiety. It was her link where the chain was broken and Frisk was carted off the land they were in. Frisk had a terrible feeling that Alphys, acting like her old self, would handle it the hardest, burdening the entire blame on her shoulders. She was one of the monsters with the lowest self-esteem from the Underground, second only to Napstablook, and Whimsun, and Shyren, and Loox, and So Sorry, and Tsunderplane to some degree. No doubt she will have spent the last couple of days kicking herself over what happened.

Next chance Frisk got, they would devote plenty of time to Alphys: watch some anime; write some fanfiction; eat some instant ramen; riff on Mew Mew Kissy Cutie 2; anything to let her know that everything was A-okay between them, that they did not blame her one bit for what transpired.

All of them would want to hear about what happened while they were up in the sky and, boy, did Frisk have a story for them. All they had to do was figure out how best to tell it without Toriel fainting on the Shattered Zone part.

All those daydreams were not going to happen on their own, especially inside that room. Frisk pulled the handle down and exited through the open door.

Frisk stepped into a place that could be called a circular living area, a cluttered one at best. The walls were uncovered and unpainted, merely a gutted tree trunk that stretched twelve feet upwards. No rings hinted toward its age. What meagre furniture in the expanse – a few chairs, a couple of cabinets, a bookcase, a shelf, and a bed – were crowded around boxes full of paper. In the centre, a
spiral staircase descended deeper down to the darkness below. They had already travelled so far down in the tunnel, how much deeper did these trees go before they dug all the way through the roots and out the underside of the island itself?

Professor Haze was sat in an armchair facing the door; back straight and both hands holding the walking stick in front of himself. His enlarged eyes were aimed on the door. Frisk imagined that is all he did since he exited to allow them to dress.

"That was quick," Haze said. Surprisingly, Frisk thought he would say the opposite, that they took their precious time. He pressed down on his cane, pushing himself upright. "Good. That mentality will serve you well in time… or lack thereof."

Frisk pulled a puzzled face. What did he mean by lack thereof?

The professor gestured with his stick toward the circular stairs leading down the rabbit hole. "All my work is down in my laboratory." He began to walk toward the foot of the steps. "This way."

Just as Frisk was about to follow, a face that they recognised caught their attention from the top of the nearby cabinet. It was their own, plastered on another of those posters dotted around the seven islands. They first thought nothing of it until a slight difference drawn them to it. Beneath their front and side sketch, and scribbled in red ink over the description were two words:

Get ready

"Child," Professor Haze snapped, one inch away from the top step. His free hand firmly on the inner rail and a strict expression wrinkling his brow. "Don't make me have second thoughts on you this early." He punctuated his tone with a tap of his cane.

Frisk took the wanted poster of themself and held it for the professor to see, pointing toward the red words.

"What? You thought I wasn't expecting you? That your appearance caught me off guard? No, no, no, I have anticipated your arrival since you got here. Now get over here."

After placing the poster back where they found it, Frisk scampered over the wooden floor until they were behind him. Haze began his descent, taking the steps one at a time. From the way he walked, one would reckon that he did not need the walking stick, yet there it was supporting his every second step. Frisk struggled to keep up.

The stairs were carved from the trees own inners, spiralling inwards on itself. The hole got smaller the deeper they descended, its light grew dimmer with each step. His eyesight may have been failing, but Haze was still an avid fan of the dark, having grown accustomed to it through decades of solitude.

"So… why exactly did you come here?" Haze asked without warning, stopping on the next step. Frisk almost bumped into the back of him, just clenching themself on the railings. The professor gradually turned as he said his next words: "Did you honestly think it would be that easy? That your little adventure comes to a close simply because you found me? That I would just send you home on some ray of light, right here, right now?" He now fully faced the creature of another race. "Answer me: if we monsters really had a way of getting off this sham of a world, then why are we still here?"

That question landed on the human child like a ton of bricks. To pose a question like that was to put their whole ordeal into perspective, and Frisk realised that he had a serious point. If he had an exit to the Outerworld all along, these two would not be having this conversation in the first place.
Frisk let out a whimper, fear brewing in the pit of their gut. Did this mean there was no way to get home?

Haze grimaced. "There is a way to return you home, but not in the way your juvenile mind has come to believe. Your situation – our situation – is much more complex than you realise." He grumbled, turning himself back around. "Come, we are wasting time."

He resumed downwards on the winding steps, sinking deeper down the black hole of his hideout. Frisk stood motionless for a few seconds before quickly catching up. At its narrowest, the hole stopped at another bare, unassuming door that Haze twisted open.

At first glance, Frisk did not need to be told that this was his laboratory. Grey floors that were easy to clean, blue painted walls, and ceilings buzzing with rows of florescent lights were all the rage for the humble scientist. No room for feng shui, just experiments and breakthroughs. Frisk thought the living area above was the area of the tree trunk, yet the lab lay over a hundred feet ahead. The left and right walls were built with an array of terminals and machines, not so far off the kind Geoffrey used to harness complete control over Ice Island. Rows of worktops lined the floor, each one held a different experiment on its top.

"Do you like it?" Haze asked. Before Frisk could get a word in edgewise, he answered, "I hope so. You try spending a hundred and fifty years stuck in here."

Frisk tried to imagine the time spent within these four walls, going around in circles for a century and a half, finding the thought boggling as they used their own meagre life as a reference. They and their youthful vigour got bored just being in the same room for ten minutes.

Haze walked to the right, banking around the nearest workbench. The clean floor intensified the tapping of the metal tip. "First, I feel that you deserve some explanation as to how you got here," he said. "I've kept a record of all my creations over here."

An age old trope of the weathered scientist would be to forget where certain objects were placed, usually digging through scraps of unfinished work before stumbling upon the long forgotten thing, or someone else effortlessly finds it lying around. Not this professor: he knew where everything was at all times. A display of pictures lay on top of the next workbench, each attached to their assigned blueprints and constructions notes.

Professor Haze slid back two other inventions and located the machine on a faded black and white photo, stopping a moment to raise his eyebrows. "This is the Transporter, as we called it," he said, picking up the fat stack of papers. The paperclip was barely keeping them together. "Not an easy accomplishment by any means, it harnesses the same energy that keeps this world afloat and replicated how it transported the first monsters who found the Outerworld, only on a much smaller scale. This is what brought you here, child."

He handed the papers to the child. The old picture was all that interested Frisk. The Transporter was a large machine with a screen that allowed an aerial view of the Earth. Bet that must have been an entertaining sight to those observing when they got abducted, watching as the human's monster friends formed a desperate line to keep them tethered to the ground.

"I spent ten years working on that, pouring hours upon hours into getting the calculations just right so they could argue for the next two hundred years over how to use it," Professor Haze lamented away while Frisk flicked through the rest of the papers, finding the equations, sketches, notes, and scientific jargon nothing but gobbledegook to them. "Some suggested certain resources, some suggested specific technology, some even suggested abducting a human, but there were always those who acted against it. For decades, this machine was left, having never been used a single time… until
Frisk snapped their gaze up to the professor, about to ask a question when he suddenly pressed his cane against their lips. "Don't think for one second that I never tried to reverse the Transporter's effects," he sharply interjected, having predicted that question from the moment he brought it up. "I've tried for more years than your kind can live to send ourselves back down to Earth, and nothing worked. I can't explain why, it just doesn't work like that here." He turned, lowered his cane to support himself. "Come over here. I want to show you something."

More clicking turned Frisk away from the photograph. The professor headed toward one of the many terminals that situated the nearest wall. At first glance, there appeared to be nothing unusual or special about this computer to make it stand out from all the rest: a screen with a keyboard and touchpad. The monitor's glow tinted his skin an easy shade of blue.

"Here," Haze explain, motioning toward it as he neared, "I secretly keep track of all Castle Highkeep's energy usage." He slide his finger on the touchpad, navigating the mouse to a file, whereupon he clicked the left button twice to open it. A succession of line graphs appeared, each with a different title and a different series of mountains and valleys. "Down to the tiniest variable."

He scrolled down the graphs and located one called Transporter. It consisted of a single yellow straight line with a massive spike on the right side.

"This is the usage on the Transporter. This huge spike we see here is from yesterday… I don't need to explain why." Haze's words brought back that little reminder. "However, that's not the odd thing here."

Professor Haze traced his finger again and again to the right on the tracker pad, revealing it energy usage from last week, then the week before that, then the week before that one. It was all straight, at one with the x-axis. Suddenly, several strokes later, another spike appeared. "You see this spike right here? This is from several weeks ago, indicating that the Transporter was used during this time. You, Frisk, are actually the second person it's been used on."

Frisk drew closer to the graph, reading the date in which the spike occurred. The one thing they could gleam from it was that it happened three days after the barrier was destroyed.

If Frisk was not the first person to be abducted to the Outerworld, then who was?

"No idea. Rumours on what happened are vague, very few know about it. Who or what was brought up here remains a mystery to me, but one thing is certain: a week later, Juhi appointed someone as his first royal advisor." Haze grunted as if something was off. "For a whole two centuries Juhi sat on that throne, and every day he insisted on making his own decisions, relying on nothing but his own judgement whether it was right or wrong. Some may not have agreed, but he maintained peace for all that time. Six weeks before his death, he suddenly got a change of heart."

Haze pursed his lips, grimacing deeply. "I don't like that one bit. It's not like him, not like the Juhi I remember. He knew how dire this world is, how close we are to annihilation. Something must have deeply affected him to make a decision like that." He rose his cane and slammed it back down; the ear-piercing bang startled Frisk, leaving a slight buzzing in the ears. "I blame that no-good son of his!"

Frisk distanced themself, giving the professor some room. Beneath that stoic exterior and pedagogical personality lay a troubled and angry figure, one who had waited far too long.

"Sorry, I'm getting carried away." The professor collected himself. "We should move on, we've now."
barely scratched the surface on our discussions."

Never before had Frisk wanted to scream so badly. They wasted their time and risked their very neck to make it to them merely to be told there was no way home as of yet. What more could there possibly be to discuss?

Professor Haze led the way once more, announcing each two step with the click of metal against floor. He made his way over to a door on the other side of the lab, or this room in particular. Just how wide was this tree anyway?

"This is not just my lab," Haze explained as he pushed the door open. "It is also our base of operations."

Our?

At the slightest crack, hushed whispers escaped outwards. As Haze entered, Frisk followed. A dazzle of bright light on the other end caught their attention. A stage, a bare one at that, was drowning in white stage lights, highlighting the podium in the centre, a table to the side holding three objects and a machine that appeared to be a square cube on legs. Had Mettaton been here, he would be unable to resist the urge.

Before the stage lay rows of folded chairs, all unfolded and facing forward. There was life in this room. Monsters in the dozens, hunched between themselves, all made dark silhouettes before the blinding spotlights. Individual faces were unrecognisable, but the shapes of their bodies suggested some strange monsters in the mix. Horns, enlarged heads, broad shoulders, spiking fur, large teeth and larger osteoderms were all highlighted against the background.

"Look who's finally been kind enough to join us." Haze's rough voice echoed across the expanse.

In that instant, all speaking stopped and was replaced with the shuffling of bodies and turning of many heads, every single one in their direction. A few muted gasps weaved through the sudden stillness, a few more whispered amongst themselves. The human caught their name a few times.

Two monsters from the crowd rose, looking to approach the professor and his guest.

"Glad to see you made it, kiddo," one of the two, a man with a country drawl that Frisk was familiar with, spoke above the scattered undertones.

"Hadn't a doubt in our minds," his accomplish, a woman with an equally rustic tone, added as they rounded the row of seats.

As the pair neared, Frisk would not have been surprised had they woken up back in the penthouse suite. The two most unlikely of people were there. Both frames sharpened in clarity the closer they got. Their eyes glowing like stars.

It was Sam an’ Rita.

Frisk never expected to see the mummy couple here, and yet there they were, wrappings in all. Sam still in his dungarees and Rita in that muumuu. The two looked unscathed, fresh, or as fresh as two country folks could look.

Frisk asked what they were doing here.

"Makin’ sure to meet you when you got here," Sam replied.
From Frisk's left, a figure who blended in with the darkness and was as soundless as a shadow emerged, startling them. "Missed me?" the shadow asked.

Frisk's heart almost stopped once at the sudden appearance, and a second time when they realised it was Barb the Bounty Hunter.

The human automatically wanted to sprint out the way they came in but stopped themselves. On one hand, they were glad that Barb was okay, alive and well; on the other hand, they knew that she was still a bounty hunter and those in that profession tended to be quite relentless with their targets.

Barb held her hands up. "Relax, kid, I'm not here for you," she assured. "As a matter of fact, I'm here because of you."

Another figure walked up. A small and thin person, draped in robes. White fur stood out dimly in the gloom. "Believe me when I say this," he said. "I am glad to see you safe, Frisk."

Gut punch after gut punch struck the human child with every familiar face. First Sam an' Rita, then Barb the Bounty Hunter, now Master Scribe Rickard? Emperor Maxus's very own sniffling assistant; the man who he entrusted with all written matters was standing right there, away from his Empire, away from his lord and master, away from his pen and clipboard.

Rickard continued before Frisk could speak, not like they could considering everything happening all at once. "I've always known about the rebellion for years now. I proudly remained by the Empire's side, but recent… circumstances have made me question my allegiance. I wish only to do the right thing and I cannot do that under Maxus's reign."

Frisk folded their arms across their chest and shot the scribe a disdained look.

The white rat stammered, realising where this stemmed from. "Oh, yes! You're, uh, most likely annoyed about those wanted posters… that I made." His hand fidgeted, desperate for a clipboard to scribble on. "On a positive note, at least these people know who you are."

During this unexpected, most dubious of reunions, Professor Haze had taken the stage. For a guy who required a cane to walk, he moved so fast in such a small window of time. His red skin turned orange and his hair became heavenly white under the light's intensity. Each individual wrinkle cast its own shadow.

"Now that we're all here," he announced before reaching the podium, "it's time to address the pressing issue plaguing our home."

Rickard, Barb, Sam an' Rita moved back toward the chairs, to the front row where they were seated previously. Rita waved for Frisk to follow. "Come on, little 'un," she whispered. "Take a seat with us. Haze will explain everything."

As Frisk was guided to an empty chair at the front of the rows, most certainly left reserved for them, Haze positioned himself behind the podium, resting his cane underneath and gripping the sides with both hands. Barb and Rickard's sitting positioned contrasted with each other: Rickard with his back straight, legs together and hands on knees; Barb with one arm over the chair's back and her legs outstretched and crossed. Haze waited with a strict expression until all outward sounds – whispers, footsteps and scraping chairs – ceased.

The professor headlined his speech with a phlegmy clearing of the throat. "Some of you may be aware of it, some of you may not," he spoke loud and clear. A lecturer ready to lecture. "The food you once enjoyed now tastes like dirt. Drinks dissolve your teeth like acid. Flowers that smell like
sulphur. Once proud trees withered into skeletal remains within days after standing immortal for centuries. No doubt, all of you are wondering why this is happening. I know why. There's no easy way to say it, so I will not bother trying to sugar-coat it."

Haze turned his head down to his pedestal. He closed his eyes and sighed, composing himself for whatever needed to be said. The crowds were speechless, waiting, bracing themselves. After what Frisk had been through, they thought nothing else would surprise them anymore.

That was until Professor Haze lifted his head and said four words: "This world is dying."

The once silent crowd came alive with voices, louder than before. Speculations, fears, and doubts drifted upwards like a rising temper. Without hesitation, Haze whipped out his cane and struck it twice on the stage, restoring order like a judge with a hammer and gavel.

"You heard me right," Haze humourlessly said. "The Obelisk, the source of this land's power; its magic is fading. We may have weeks, days even, before its power runs dry and this world ceases to be." He raised his cane again, expecting more raised voice, but instead got blank stares. "You require proof."

He motioned to the table to his right; a decent table, one you could buy for ten bucks on Earth. Atop it lay a pot of daffodils, a square patch of grass, and a jar of snow. Without shifting from his place behind the podium, Haze reached for the objects and out extended two retractable arms from under his sleeves. He took each thing and handed it to the crowd, telling them to pass it around.

Groans of disgust followed wherever the flowers went, and grunts of pain tailed the grass. Eventually, all three objects found their way into Frisk's hands one at a time. The daffodils smelled terrible. The blades of grass scratched the palm of their hand, almost breaking the skin. The snow compacted against their palm like polystyrene.

All three things were brought back to the monster on stage, and he put them inside the metal cube, closing the hatch behind them. "This is the magic infuser," he explained after pressing a single button. The machine rumbled to life similar to the sound of a tumble dryer. "The objects in there are now getting a concentrated dose of magic."

A minute later, the machine came to a rest and Haze opened the hatch. Fumes of pink mist escaped, and resting amidst the fog were the flowers, grass, and snow. He pulled them out with his metal arms and handed them back to the audience, asking them to inspect them now.

Individual members of the audience responded with exasperated gasps as the pieces of nature were passed to them. The patch of grass reached Frisk first. The straight blades were curved slightly, the tips glistened against the light focused on the stage. They ran their hand over the grass and were taken back by how smooth it was. The grass that could have replaced nails before could now pass for the real deal. They could have been walking on this stuff in the Plain-plain all along.

The flowers were next. Had they not felt the grass, they would have been reluctant to give it another sniff. Frisk brought their nose to the daffodils and were treated to a pleasant aroma. The snow in the jar crushed against their fingers like the real kind that blanketed the world during the winter. The chill reached their bones.

The professor resumed his speech to the gathering. "Through a gradual process, these lands have degraded as the magic infusing them has dwindled. I believe we do not have long until the Obelisk's power fades completely, and the entire Outerworld vanishes. When its magic dies, so does these lands… and so do we."
More silence followed from speechless lips. If Frisk did not know how dire their situation was before, they knew now.

Haze straightened himself, returning some assurance to his tone. "However, there is hope." These very words perked up all souls present, Frisk included. Haze reached under the pedestal and retrieved a piece of paper. "At the foot of the Obelisk, there are crude markings carved into its face, believed to be made by Kanika, the founder of the Outerworld herself before both she vanished thousands of years ago. Translating these words took many years, having to decipher so many ancient languages all rolled into on. Here is what it says…"

He held the sheet up; it was big enough for everyone to see. Frisk, from where they sat, got a good look.

\[
\begin{align*}
\text{World forsaken} \\
\text{Hope remains} \\
\text{True power awaken} \\
\text{Upon greatest strength's dawn}
\end{align*}
\]

"What does it mean?" asked a stranger from the crowd.

"Are you illiterate?" Haze affronted. "It means the Obelisk has not yet reached its full potential. There's a power – a power thought unimaginable – deep inside, and it will only be unlocked with this greatest strength."

"But what is this… greatest strength?" a person begged the question.

Haze drummed his fingers on the podium sides. "That brings me to our visitor…"

All of a sudden, a single spotlight shot alight with a click. Frisk, once one of the nameless participants sitting in the aisles, was now singled out in a halo of white. They instinctively grabbed the brim of their chair, thinking they were about to be pulled to the ceiling.

"You've seen the posters, you know the price, you know what they are," Haze said, "but do not be afraid of the human in our midst. Frisk was brought here just yesterday, and it was for good reason."

Frisk kept their head down, avoiding the hundred pairs – and singles and triples – of eyes bearing down on them and them alone. The spotlight heated the surrounding air, making their pores want to scream. To start sweating now would be a waste to their bathed body and clean clothes. Frisk had no idea what they had gotten themselves dragged in to.

"I may be a monster of science, but I believe it is fate that has brought Frisk to us, and that they are the one Kanika spoke of in these markings. This human – a child, I may add – survived where many others would have perished, both in the monster kingdom under Mount Ebott and here in our world. Some of you had family once lost in Ice Island, now returned due to this human's actions."

An individual from the crowd rose from her chair. "I got my mom back!"

Followed by a horned silhouette two rows behind. "My brother and sister have returned," he cried, "and it's all thanks to the human."

Professor Haze gestured with an open hand at Frisk. "Frisk possesses in their soul the power known only as Determination: the power to change fate, to alter history, to defy death itself. It all makes
sense. This person is capable of incredible things, and has overcome all obstacles in their way. What greater power could Kanika be referring to?" His voice rose. "This child must be the chosen one! The one destined to unlock the Obelisk's power and free this world!"

Unable to look at anyone or anything at the moment, Frisk covered their eyes with their hands. Just hearing this old man ramble on about them being some kind of liberator through destiny was so embarrassing that it made them want to hide inside the deepest hole imaginable. Frisk just wished Haze would just skip to the part on how to escape already.

Master Scribe Rickard timidly rose from his sitting spot. "I once believed that Castle Highkeep was both inescapable and that the Emperor was untouchable." He looked over at the child in the spotlight. "Frisk proved how wrong I was after they survived their encounter with Maxus himself and escaped, despite the overwhelming odds stacked against them. No one else could have done that, other than them."

The mummy couple rose up and walked together to the foot of the stage. "Too all y'all who thought gettin' through Ice Island was impossible," the husband called out to the crowds, "Frisk not only did it, but they did it in one go."

Wait, that was correct, thought Frisk as they peered through the gaps between their fingers. It was the mummies who told them to travel north through Ice Island in order to reach the Professor, all based on the lone hope that he had a way to escape the Outerworld.

Rita stayed by Sam's side and joined her voice with his. "Even with the odds stacked against them, not once did this child give up. Not when the bounty was introduced, not when the guards chased them in Parfocorse."

A quick gasp shot down Frisk's mouth. How did those two know about Parfocorse?

Sam stepped gingerly over to the human and lowered his head. "By the way, kid," he whispered. "About Parfocorse. Remember that scaffoldin' that came down and cut off those guys chasin' you?" The human child remained speechless as he poked the tip of his thumb against the chest of his dungarees. "That was me."

Rita followed her husband's lead, down to his movements. "And the balcony door that opened on that one fella with the bow an' arrow?" She nodded at the kid's blank expression. "You guessed it, little 'un."

If what Sam an' Rita said were true, then that meant they followed Frisk all the way to town without them realising, and aided in their escape from the Monster Military. Each answer only uncovered more questions, and the one at the front of the queue was the most basic one yet: why?

"Because we needed to make sure you got to Ice Island, so you could face down whatever danger lingered there," Sam explained.

It was only through pure willpower that Frisk refrained from jumping from their seat. Sam an' Rita knew Ice Island was dangerous all along and yet sent them there anyway?

Now Barb was at the front of the crowd. The light on her back darkened her features up front and shimmered off the leather hugging her body. "How many of you have taken the train through the Shattered Zone?" He question got a round of silence from the audience, which she figured; only the brave and the occasionally tight on cash travel through there. "Now, how many have taken the train through the Shattered Zone while being hunted by the one and only bounty hunter here?"
From the looks on their dim faces, the crowd were being swayed. With every act, the child in the striped shirt became less alien and more messiah.

"That is what happened between Frisk and myself," Barb said. Her presence as the most professional bounty hunter in the Outerworld put extra weight into her words. "It was a fierce battle, and in the end, they got the upper hand. I almost died, should’ve died… but Frisk saved my life. I’m still here because of them, when anyone else would’ve left me to dash against those rocks. There’s something special about them, no doubt about it. If there’s anyone who can end this madness, it’s them."

All the ambassador for monsters could do was sit there and allow these constant praises, one after another, to fall upon their shoulders and lionise them into a figure that they did not believe they were.

"The time for subtlety has passed," Haze announced. "For decades, we, the rebellion, have plotted and planned for the day when we can finally take the fight to the Empire."

The pupils in Frisk's eyes went narrow. The rebellion? Nobody told them that!

"If we do not act now, there won’t be another chance. We have people ready and waiting on every outskirt leading to Highkeep Enclave, and the moles within the military are ready to act on our command. All we have waited for was for the one who will defeat that traitor, Maxus."

As the professor said that last part, his enlarged eyes were trained on one person in the audience. Frisk prayed that there was another human or a boss monster directly behind them, because he appeared to be looking at them. In a questioning manner, Frisk pointed at themself.

"That's right, kid," said Sam. "Takin' down the Emperor is your job."

The sweat trickled on Frisk's forehead, especially at how forthcoming the rest were to that notion without a single one expressing distain. Them kill Emperor Maxus?

Haze detected their reluctance. "Do you wish to return to Earth? Because that is all we've ever wanted. That is what Maxus wanted all those years back…"

Sam looked at Frisk. "You can't back out now, kiddo. You've come too far. 'Sides, what has Maxus ever done for you? He kidnapped you, tried to kill you, put a massive price on your head and had everyone wanting your blood. Honestly, his face should be on those posters – not yours."

Barb spoke up. "Maxus took my parents hostage to force me to capture you, Frisk. He was like my brother. Now he's a completely different person. I've never been one to take sides, but I'll stand by yours if it means getting my parents back."

Rickard added his argument. "Maxus has gone mad with power. He doesn't care who he hurts or how he hurts them, all he's obsessed with is seeking revenge upon humanity. If he is allowed to win, then terrible things will befall mankind. He must be stopped, whatever the cost."

"Listen, Frisk," Rita added. "Without Maxus, there would be no rebellion… because he was the one who started it. He led us during the civil war – he was our leader! We fought so hard, lost so many good people on the promise of freedom from the Outerworld, and for what? For Maxus to betray us and throw everything away just to become his father's heir, and stay all cosy and safe behind those big walls. Why'd ya think he never leaves the place?"

Barb faced Rita. "Why did Maxi—Maxus do that?" she asked. "Was it because he still respected his father or because he saw an opportunity for greater power after Juhi died?"

"Don't care," retorted Rita. "At least you have parents to save. I got nothin'." She looked down. "My
ma and pa were taken from me in the civil war, and it's all Maxus's fault." Her husband was there to comfort her.

One by one, the spectators pitched in, sharing what terrible deeds the young lion had influenced their lives with. Families destroyed. Homes lost. Livelihoods broken. These people were howling for the Emperor's death, and they wanted the human to be the one to do him in.

"Come up here, Frisk," Haze called out while drumming his walking stick on the floor – softer this time. "I have something to give you."

For a few seconds, Frisk did not move. The bunch before the platform shuffled to one side, providing a clear path to the steps. Eventually, Frisk found themself on the stage and tried not to feel overwhelmed by the dozens of eyes still on them, instead imagining themself at a pantomime as the deep, complicated role of a paper mache tree. They stopped three steps away from the podium, defiantly keeping their gaze on the koi fish monster.

"I have heard about your bout with Maxus. Did you honestly expect to beat him with a blunt sword and a toy shield?" Professor Haze pulled from under the pedestal a wooden box no bigger than a shoebox. "I have constructed these instruments for you." He lifted the lid. Resting on a red velvet cushion was a crimson hilt with a handguard ordained into a heart, a rubber grip, and a pommel; and a handle attached to another red, metal heart bigger than the one on the hilt. "These will give you the edge needed to defeat him. Take them."

Frisk did not see the bad side of taking them. At first glance, it appeared as a sword without its blade and a shield best suited for mice. They grabbed both handles and, immediately, a slight tingling travelled up their fingertips, nearly making them drop the objects on instinct. The miniature shield grew straps that wrapped around Frisk's forearm.

"Analysing... Reading prints," the same automatic, emotionless voice from the bedrest spoke, now from the two handgrips. "Palm prints saved. Welcome, Frisk."

"These are now registered to your hands only," clarified Haze as he shut the lid. "No one but you will be able to use these weapons. That sword will not break nearly as easily as that sparring sword, and comes with a selection of blade types at your disposal, giving you an advantage in almost any situation."

On the hilt was a switch with two additional buttons on both sides. Frisk pressed it and out materialised a silver blade with a metallic swoosh and a swooning from the audience. "Default blade activated," the lady said. Frisk pressed the left button and, instantly, the blade was set ablaze to even more impressed swooning. "Fire blade activated." Frisk pressed it again and the fire froze instantly. "Cryogenic blade activated."

"As for the shield, it's fitted with a state-of-the-art battery powered recoil system; any blow it takes will be bounced back in equal measure." The activation button had been strategically placed near the thumb. One press activated the shield, opening it up to its full size. It was the same triangular shape as the sparring shield and hued a dark red, the heart remained visible in the centre as a symbol for their Determination. "You can literally block a wrecking ball with it and not feel a thing."

Together with their multipurpose weapon and immovable defence, Frisk was a little knight without shining armour, ready for battle. With two button presses, both weapons deactivated.

Haze rapped his cane against the podium. "During the civil war, this was used by the rebellion as its focus point of hope. Now, after two hundred years of collecting dust, its purpose will live again. This time with your voice."
A glimmer from over the heads drew Frisk to the front of the room. At the very back, hidden in the darkness and not noticed until now, stood two cameras; their lenses captured the rays bearing down on the raised platform.

The sweat was dripping now. Frisk was in deep trouble.

"Frisk, your actions helped free those trapped beneath Mount Ebott. We want you to be for us what you are for them. Will you act as the champion for the rebellion, and in doing so, commence our assault on Castle Highkeep? After Maxus is defeated, I promise to help you unlock the Obelisk's true power and return all of us to Earth."

Will monsters die because of this? Frisk peeped as small and quiet as a mouse.

"This is war," Haze continued. "There are always casualties in war. If a few hundred have to die to save thousands, then a few hundred have to die. Maxus's life, on the other hand, could save us many more lives. If he were to die, then his entire military, without its leader, would quickly surrender." He huffed, closing his eyes momentarily. "There is no other way around this, I'm afraid, but there are some lives that need to be taken in difficult times. I know you are reluctant to kill, but I assure you, you'll be hailed as a hero. So, how about you cast aside your doubts and give us a speech to be proud of. It will go out to every screen in the Outerworld, so make it a good one."

Total silence followed. Frisk stood there, shaking from head to toe. All those eyes hungrily waited for their champion's response. The monsters with names looking up from the stage's edge with hopeful eyes, ready to follow Frisk into oblivion. The nameless masses behind them were just as confident in the human's resolve. Every single monster seemed so confident that Frisk would raise their sword high and bellow a roaring battle cry to storm the castle.

Right, because this was exactly the reason why Frisk sought out Professor Haze. It was because they wished to join a group of rebels, take down the Empire, and viciously murder Lord Maxus, and totally not because they – oh, I don't know – wanted to see their family again.

"Well…?" Professor Haze snapped, his patience being tested yet again.

Frisk smiled and responded that they would gladly be their champion. If these fine fellows would give their champion five minutes to spruce themself up, they would present a speech that would give Abraham Lincoln a run for his money.

Haze frowned. "You've had a bath and your clothes cleaned; you're spruced up enough."

Yes, but Frisk needed a little makeup to look their best in front of the cameras. They needed to powder their cheeks, highlight their hair, and put mascara on their lips… or wherever mascara went.

The professor of the rebellion grumbled a sigh. "Fortunately for you, I expected this also." He drew his finger to the exit beyond the rows of chairs, where they came in. "Through my lab and up the stairs, you'll find some makeup in the bathroom. I'll have Barb escort you."

Frisk thanked them, but turned down the escort; they could handle themself.

Haze waved them off dismissively. "Five minutes."

With that, Frisk scampered off the stage, through the middle lane, past all the stares, and out the door on the far end, shutting it behind them.

All that energy built up into restarting the fight against the corrupt empire was off to a great stop. Everyone returned to their seats, except Haze who leaned against the podium. For a man who waited
for so long, what's a few more minutes? Turned out, they were quite excruciating. Every second of every minute ticked away slowly.

Five minutes passed.

Haze raised his eyebrows three times, adding three extra lenses to his glasses that he used to magnify on the door. He watched, expecting Frisk to pop out any second with whiter cheeks and refined eyelashes.

Ten minutes passed.

Maddened, the professor rapidly tapped his cane down on the wooden flooring as if that would make that slow human hurry up. Someone coughed.

Fifteen minutes passed.

He slammed his fist on the podium top. "Will someone go get them? They've had enough time to prepare!"

Sam rose from his chair. "I will," he replied as he made his way through the centre aisle.

The bandaged wrapped monster grabbed the handle and turned. The door budged by a single millimetre. Sam pressed harder, but it refused to budge.

"Wait a…" Sam muttered. "The door's stuck!"

Haze yelled, "What?" then rushed off the stage and to the door. Members of the rebellion rose from their seats, confused by this turn of events.

He pushed Sam aside and tried the door himself. It had been sealed shut from the other side.

"Frisk!" the professor yelled as loud as he could through aged vocal cords. "You get back here right now!" After receiving no response, he whacked his cane on the stubborn door, shrieking out loud. "Frisk!"

Barb gently grabbed his shoulders and eased him away. "Calm down, professor," she said. "I don't think Frisk has bailed on us, I just think this door needs a little motivation. Allow me."

She motioned for everyone to stand back and give her some room. With a clear line between the entrance and herself, Barb warmed herself up and positioned her legs to get a running start. She tensed up the muscles to put all her force into one might kick.

When she was ready, she charged the door, pulled her knee up and…

The door opened slowly from the other side.

Barb eased back on to both legs. "About time," she said with a sigh. "I was just about to…"

She stopped talking upon realising that it was not Frisk who opened the door.

"Um, hey," Sans greeted. Papyrus and Alphys at his back were equally as perplexed as he was. "Whose birthday is it?"

"Are we just in time for the part where we yell 'surprise'?” Papyrus asked.

After taking a minute to wedge a chair under the door, they sprinted back through the lab and up the circular steps, ignoring the searing heat in their legs as they cleared them two at a time. Frisk reached the top level and quickly located the front door.

They burst through and out of Haze's hideout; the entrance camouflaged itself seamlessly with the trunk upon closing. The walkway stretched both ways, surrounded by endless bark and more twisting and turning paths. Darkness spread to the Forest floor and to it heights, the canopy too far upwards to be seen, perfectly reflecting the human's current predicament.

Frisk was lost, yet refused to stop running. They could not stay there. They just wanted to go home, not kick-start a rebellion and be the one responsible for the deaths of hundreds, maybe thousands. No way.

They ran wherever the walkway took them. There had to be another way to get out of this place, but where? Their one and only lead was Professor Haze. All their efforts were spent on getting to this point, through broken earth and frozen landscape, but the escape they were hoping for was all a lie.

Still, where would they go now? What would they do? Frisk heard the professor loud and clear: there was no other way to escape the protective field. The only way was through the Obelisk, and that meant going through the Monster Military and their ruler.

No. Frisk refused to believe that. They refused to believe that war was the only answer and that violence was necessary and that death was the solution. There was always another way, another path. Time and time again, the Underground dangled the option to do harm before them, and time and time again, they refused.

They knew what they were doing was pointless. A dead-end they had hit. Yet they refused to stop running.

What were they going to do?

From beyond the next turn, a low thud stopped them cold.

Frisk stopped and listened as another thud resounded closer. Each impact shook the very timbers from which they stood, rattling wood and shaking away dust. Frisk gripped the holstered sword and shield with sweaty palms, expecting the worst as thud after thud drew closer.

From around the next tree, a massive creature emerged. A colossus, wearing a tuxedo. Two oversized arms with clenched fists hung from his barrel-chested body, all carried by a pair of stout legs in black loafers. Each step registered on the Richter scale. Atop this hulk of skin the colour and density of rock was his disproportionate head that narrowed slightly into a cone shape, ending with a perfectly flat top that rested a red fez with no tassel. Hairless with two beady eyes. His nose was large and his mouth, which looked to eat skyscrapers on a regular basis, was more than capable of swallowing Frisk whole.

He slowed to a stop like a locomotive before the tiny human. Without hunching or shifting his frame in any way, his two eyes rolled down onto the lone figure stood before him.

"Ad…vis…or…" the giant groaned through viciously sharp teeth. Not only did he look like a pile of rocks, but his tone was the equivalent of grinding two pumice stones together.

Advisor? Frisk took a step back, still caught in his shadow.
"Brute..." a voice spoke. Not from the massive monster, but from somewhere else, somewhere hidden. "Let me get a good look at our guest."

Frisk inhaled a sharp gasp. It couldn't be... It couldn't be... That voice. They had heard it before. That voice. They could recognise it from anywhere, put a face to it. That voice. There was a sad story attached to it. Frisk, after the gasp, could no longer breathe. They were paralysed, struck with an almighty blow. Hearing that voice turned everything they knew and everything about this world upside-down.

The colossal monster, Brute, reached up with his giant hands. His limbs themselves groaned as they moved. "Advisor..." He plucked his hat slowly and carefully off his head, treating it with more care than his own life. "...See you now."

With his hat a fragile thimble between the tips, he lowered it until it was before the human.

Frisk began to shake. Their nightmare made flesh. The child prayed that it was not true, that their eyes were playing tricks on them, but they could not deny the cold fact staring them right in the face.

It wasn't a fez in Brute's grasp, it was a flowerpot. And in that pot, Frisk discovered who the first person to be abducted was.

"Howdy, Frisk! Long time, no see," greeted the golden flower, smiling warmly. "I'm the advisor!"
The amount of shock, terror and guilt that tore through Frisk made them still, unable to think rationally. Their knees shook like weak supports ready to snap. They opened their mouth and out muttered a single word…

Asriel!

Flowey the Flower tutted in a disappointed fashion. "Oh, Frisk. Frisk, Frisk, Frisk," he said, shaking his petal head. "How easily you forget." In an instant, his demeanour turned upside-down. "My name is not Asriel! I told you not to remember me as him."

Frisk found it hard to take in. Flowey was the advisor for Emperor Maxus?

"Took you that long to figure it out, huh? Someone ought to give you a cookie," Flowey said with a mischievous grin. "So, how have you found this new adventure? Enjoying it more than the Underground? I’d be impressed too at how far you’ve got without dying had I not known you were gonna make it in the first place." Flowey threw his head back in the direction of the monster in the suit. "Oh, by the way. Brute, Frisk. Frisk, Brute. Formerly a grunt, now my personal assistant – my very own helping hand. He may not be the brightest guy around, but he more than makes up his magic with some serious muscle. If you thought Undyne was strong, wait until you see this fella in action."

Brute groaned, "Crush human?"

Flowey dismissively waved his assistant off, smiling in a light-hearted fashion. "No, no, Brute. No crush human," he said in a slow, primitive manner. "Me talk to human. We be civil."

Brute grumbled what could pass as an acknowledgement and shifted the delicate, orange terracotta pot onto the palm of his left hand. With the other hand relaxed by his side, the colossal monster mimicked a waiter with a silver platter. Flowey was the figurative surprise waiting beneath the dome lid.

A massive hunch shot into the head of the confused child as everything began to uncomfortably click into place. How quickly it took Flowey to become the advisor. The regard Emperor Juhi held toward a human he had never met. The beam of light that dragged them away from Earth.

Frisk was the one behind all of it, wasn't he?

"That's right, Frisk. It was I who orchestrated your abduction to these lands." As the Royal Advisor said that, Brute pointed to his stem chest. "That dead emperor – weeks away from death, scared what his son would do on the throne – wanted a miracle. The things I said to him, about the Underground, and the monsters… and you, he was more than willing to hear."

Just like in the Underground, Frisk was once more at the mercy of this sentient flower. With every action, Flowey was watching from the side-lines, scheming and plotting, waiting for the opportune moment to show that this flower had thorns. Frisk just knew that this reveal was all just another part of an insipid plan.

Frisk grimaced, clenched their fists around the weapon handles, almost activating them unintentionally, and demanded to know if Flowey had anything to do with Juhi's death.

Flowey responded quickly while Brute waggled his finger. "No." Frisk saw the look in those black
button eyes as he answered, serious and unwavering as they stared back into theirs, and Frisk knew from that moment that he wasn't lying. "I'm not the reason why people die, Frisk. Juhi was an old, old man well beyond his time. He died on his own, I had nothing to do with it."

Frisk wondered how this was possible that Flowey of all people ended up here. How he happened to find them in the middle of this maze of bridges and boardwalks.

Flowey said, "Of course you want to know." After that, his assistant turned around and faced down the length of walkway that lay ahead. The Advisor nodded forward. "Let's take a walk. I'll explain along the way."

Frisk was reluctant, but decided to go along for now. They stepped up beside Brute, to the side which he held Flowey, and altogether they walked side by side along those never-ending paths of timber against timber, taking it nice and slow. Frisk feared that Brute could kill them if he so much as tripped and fell on them. They passed the nearest trees to find more trees behind those. From out the corner of Frisk's eye, Flowey was smiling. Whether it was out of actual contentment remained to be seen. Nonetheless, it was clear that he had no intentions of causing harm… yet.

Frisk shot a nervous glance over their shoulder which Flowey picked up on.

"Don't worry, none of those guys from the rebellion will catch us," Flowey said, following Frisk's gaze down the path behind them. "They're too busy with other stuff."

Frisk brought their head back around to meet Flowey's gaze. He knew about the rebellion?

"One question at a time please," the golden flower chastised, Brute waved appropriately. "How did I get here? I think it'll all make sense if I start from the beginning. You see, shortly after you left, I stopped being Asriel and turned back into this, into soulless Flowey." Brute motioned with an open palm at the flower. "I didn't regret my decision. I fully accepted my fate, it was what I deserved after everything I've done… but I was so afraid – afraid of living out the rest of my existence alone. For three days, I stayed on that flowerbed and cried, begging for something… anything… and then…"

He drew his eyes upwards.

The claustrophobic gathering of trees reminded him of the enclosing rock and soil. The meagre traces of light shone down. The tightness nipping the air that made every breath lacking. Flowey had tears in his eyes, alone, nothing but Chara's dead silence from six feet below to comfort him.

His thoughts – the only thing he had left – were of everyone else besides himself. He wondered where Chara was, whether it was nice, and if they would meet again someday. He wondered what Frisk was doing, and what adventurous escapades they were getting into with their new family. Flowey could only imagine the fun they were having in their life, in the sunshine, with those two wacky skeletons, and that one-eyed rageaholic and basement-dwelling loser who gave them life, and the two who he once called his parents in his past life.

These black, crumbling faces, he had already counted and memorised. The single patch of sunlight rose from the west before setting in the east. At night and on those rainy days, all was shrouded in darkness. His dreams were as empty as his future. On that day, it was especially cloudy and especially rainy. Thin waterfalls poured around the abandoned flowers; the drops sploshing against his petals was the closest he would ever get to experiencing real rain. Waterfall could replicate it by so much. The insentient plants around him danced to the rhythm, perfectly content in their unconscious harmony.

This was his life now. This was the punishment he deserved. This was justice. There was no room in
this world for him, a creature who did not have room in himself for love, and showed no empathy for what he did and tried to do. But, it was all worth it, knowing that every other monster had gone free. Because of him, every monster had their souls back. Because of him, every monster had a bright future. It was a great final deed he could be proud of and carry for the rest of his empty life.

But still… he was so lonely. Accepting that hard fact did not make it any softer.

Asriel…

Flowey's head swung up. Who said that? He turned in every direction and saw no one. He thought it might have been his imagination playing with him. It had created an imaginary friend to stave away a lifetime of solitude. It could at least get his name right.

Or do you prefer Flowey…

There it was again. A soft, womanly voice. It came from above.

You don't have to be alone…

Not anymore…

Then, it happened so suddenly. One minute, all was quiet, cloudy grey, and miserable. The next, the sky itself parted and down reached a blinding shaft of light. It encapsulated him, pulling him off the bed of flowers by his roots. He dug deep into the soil, trying to escape, but the more he grabbed, the stronger it got.

The ground around him crumbled and, before he knew it, he had dragged up a chunk of earth with his vines. He flew up and out the Underground, into the cold air above the ground.

"I was chosen," whispered Flowey. "This world chose me, Frisk. They wanted to test that Transporter of theirs, but they didn't know where or on what." Brute began to pace left and right as they walked, embellishing Flowey's words with the correct amount of hand gesturing at the correct moments, and Frisk realised what was going on between them. These two, the flower and the giant, had achieved synchronisation as if they were one person. If Brute was the body then Flowey was the brain. "They needed to find something or someone that was safe to take without endangering everyone in the Outerworld, and the only other place where they knew fellow monsters existed was Mount Ebott. They scanned over the mountain for something to find, and through a tiny crevice, they found a bed of flowers, and I was one of them.

"At first, I was so scared; I thought I had died. When I opened my eyes, the first person I met was Juhi, and then his son, then that pen pusher of theirs. The surprise on their faces, when they realised this flower could talk, was priceless." He giggled to himself. Master Scribe Rickard couldn't make enough notes on that day. "I became a guest of honour within the castle, even got my own flowerpot. It was a good thing I pulled up some soil when I did, otherwise I wouldn't have survived very long in this place. Fake soil and real flowers just don't mix, you know.

"Anyway, in this new land, I thought that I could use my Determination once more, but this time, purely for good. I was excited: I had been given a second chance in this new world with new monsters, new scenarios, and new ways to do right. I wanted to follow in your footsteps and do for this world what you did for the Underground, and I promised myself that I would never go back to my old ways. I made a new save, then began by trying to fix the bond between Emperor Juhi and Prince Maxus. Things didn't go quite so well the first time, so I reached my save file to go back and try again." He frowned. "Only to be immediately thrust back where I was."
Frisk looked upon Flowey's face and searched deeply for any signs of deception to which there was none. Everything he said was genuine, every single syllable. He too was having a little trouble with the save feature he exploited to no end once upon a time. How unfortunate for it to fail now when he attempted to use it for noble deeds and not the countless times when he subjugated it for diabolical desires.

The golden flower went on while his assistant's gesturing complimented his words. "Again and again, I tried to reach my save point, even reset a few times, and every single time I glimpsed the past only to be thrust back into the present. I was so confused. I didn't understand – couldn't understand – what was wrong. What was happening to me? Was I hesitating? Was there someone of greater determination than me somewhere?" Flowey found his smile, Brute found his. "That was until I fell asleep. At first, I didn't know what I saw seeing. Cloudy images and random words. And on the next day, those dreams began to appear. You know what I'm talking about, don't you?"

Frisk nodded. They had nothing to say and no way to argue back on anything he said.

"I quickly realised that I had lost the ability to go back, but Determination always finds a way. It reached forward instead, glimpsing events yet to come. Using this power, I began to see things before they happened. I was able to solve issues before they became problems. Managed to offer sound advice to those who needed it by saying and doing the right things at the right time. Juhi interrogated me constantly about the Underground. I told him everything. Well, almost everything. I did a great job – too great a job, because one week later, he appointed me as Royal Advisor. I wasn't too surprised…" He chuckled. "I already saw it coming from a dream I had."

The three followed a path as it spiralled downwards around the thick bark of a thicker tree trunk. For one moment, Frisk though, hoped, that they caught sight of a single, rogue thread of light from up high. No such luck.

"I spent every moment I could grabbing as much sleep as possible. Powernaps. Afternoon siestas. Early nights and late mornings. I've seen everything by now, Frisk: every path we can take; every route we can travel; everything we can say; everything we can do. That's how the Outerworld knew where you were when they kidnapped you, and that's how I found you in this maze."

They passed an aged carving of an upside-down heart in the tree's skin. Frisk focused on it, wondering how long it had been there.

"Frisk, do you want to know why your Determination isn't working? Why you can't reach your save point? Why you can't go back or reset in this world? Why you can only see forwards?" Together, Brute and Frisk came to a halt. Flowey already knew how much leverage he held over the human just by judging the yearning in their look, the need to know. "It's because this isn't a videogame. We're in a fanfic, Frisk."

Alright, Frisk believed that Flowey was telling the truth the last two times, but the third time was not the charm, sounding like the most ridiculous explanation ever conceived. He meant to tell them they were in a world where plot holes were more common that spelling mistakes and every original character was either perfect, wanted to get freaky with the main cast, or both? That was one heck of a big pill to swallow. Frisk sighed and shook their head, having none of it. If this was a joke, it wasn't very funny.

"I know, that's the stupidest thing you've ever heard, but you'll believe it too," Flowey said. "This world we're in is not shaped by pixels, sound effects and lines of code, but with words and letters within pages, paragraphs and chapters. A written story. A book if you want to be generous…" He stopped to scoff and roll his eyes. Brute shrugged at the same time. "Nobody's ever going to find this in their local library. While in the Underground, in a videogame, you were able to reach your save
file because that was how the game worked. Whenever you saved, you could load back to that point. If you reset – had you reset – you would've started the game all over again. Then you were able to change things because the mechanics of the videogame allowed for different choices and outcomes.

"But here… every time you loaded your save file, you just flicked back a few pages, returned to the beginning of the chapter. You can do things differently in a videogame, but in a book, you can't. No matter how many times you read a chapter, or start from the very beginning, nothing changes, it always remains the same. Every time you went back, you and the world around you just repeated everything done up until that point: the same actions; same thoughts; same feelings; same lines of dialogue; you did everything exactly the same as before. Surely you must have felt different as you went about your adventure…"

Frisk had never given it much thought, they had no reason to until now. The human recalled their adventure under Mount Ebott, then ran parallels to the Outerworld, comparing the two worlds based on what they felt. They had to admit, everything did seem different now, but it was hard to explain. Roaming the caverns where the monsters were banished to, they felt free somehow, notwithstanding the fact that they were trapped in the same boat as the rest of the population.

Here, it felt like they had been dragged along a track, as if they had been racing toward an end goal by the strings of some unseen entity. A bad feeling rippled through their soul as they realised that maybe their actions that got them out alive on several occasions were not their own. Maybe their beliefs and feelings and behaviours were being controlled by an entity unknown.

Brute moved further down the spiralling path. Frisk followed.

"In fact, if anyone were to be watching us right now, they can go back whenever they want. They're the ones who truly understand what it is like," Flowey said with a snicker, taking a queue or two from the one he called Smiley Trashbag, laughing at how powerless he was to this revelation. "To follow a story but have no power over where it leads. To read their favourites again and again and arrive at the exact same conclusion every time. You and I could've had this conversation a million times and yet we act like this is the first."

Frisk was on the verge of laughing like a lunatic with the flower. If what he said was true – and that was one mighty big if – then it meant that their entire life was fictional. This world was a land crafted out of imagination. The already fake trees and fake food and fake grass in their midst were just as artificial as the stuff waiting on Earth. Their friends, family and everyone they've met? Constructs created for emotional support and conflict. Frisk latched at the one thing they could: denial.

"Tell me: do you remember your parents?" Flowey asked. "I don't mean Asgore and Toriel, I mean your actual, human parents. What do they look like? What were their jobs? Where did they live? Why did they let you go? Can you answer any of those?"

As if their head was suddenly going to be filled with memories of their real mother and father, Frisk dove into the recesses of their mind, hoping for something new, but ended up in the exact same rut as always. No names. No faces. No clues. Them walking in the park on a rainy day, under the protection of an umbrella, their tongue cold against the cone of cherry ice cream with a sprinkled crushing of peanuts.

Flowey shook his head, not surprised in the slightest. "Of course you can't…" He said, grinning. "That's because they never existed."

Frisk slammed their boot soles down hard. What?

"Your life began the second you awoke on that flowerbed," Flowey looked at them from out the
edge of his black eyes as he spoke. "You have no past, no real family – they were never created in
the first place. You were just a nameless, emotionless character to be controlled to advance the game
to its conclusion, nothing more. Your past. Your memories. Your personality. These were all left
open for certain… speculations."

Speculations? Frisk was plummeting deeper down the rabbit hole. As they thought they reached the
bottom, the white rabbits had burrowed a little deeper.

"Did you honestly think that they make only one copy of a videogame, and only one piece of
fanfiction exists in the world?" Both the advisor and his assistant shook their heads in unison. Frisk's
cheeks went red; he was disappointed in the human. "I learned this after I was finished exploring
every path this world had to offer. Instead of reaching forward with my Determination, I reached out
to the boundaries of this universe, and do you know what I found?" Silence. Just as he thought.
"You won't believe this: more universes! This world isn't just one, but thousands of alternate
timelines, beginning and ending. Worlds stopping and starting from different places and points in
time. Before the Underground. During the Underground. After the Underground.

"I stumbled across maybe a thousand timelines that told a different origin story of you, Frisk. So
many ways and reasons why… Missing from field trips. Explorations gone wrong. Abandonments. I
quickly grew bored of abusive parents. All the same, so angry for no reason other than they're
supposed to be, causing pain for the sake of causing pain. They think they can easily shock me? Not
after all I've done."

The human's past remained a blank slate. Could what the flower, formerly known as Asriel, be
saying was really the truth? Frisk tried to imagine their parents as the not-so-friendly, punchy type
and yet still came back as successful as viewing them as loving and successful. As the trio stepped
onto a straight, interlacing between upper and lower bridges, Frisk found they could not accept
Flowey the Flower's explanation. They needed to believe that there was a real family out there
somewhere who gave them life and that their birth was more than just opening a stupid computer file.

Flowey eyed the expanse beyond to avoid looking at the child. He couldn't see them, but he knew
what they were thinking. He said, "You have been curious, haven't you? What would've happened
had you reset. How differently another path through the Underground could have gone." Flowey
conjured a 'friendliness pellet' from his small supply of organic soil within his foundation. The petal
turned whilst hovering above his head. It looked like a regular bullet but it was coated red, the colour
of Determination. "Here, let me show you…"

As the bullet hovered closer, Frisk impulsively stepped away, holding both holstered weapons up for
defence.

"It's okay, it's okay," Flowey comforted with his assistant gesturing softly, impressive for a monster
of his bulk. "It won't hurt, I promise. This bullet contains the visions from another timeline. Touch it
and you'll get to see them."

The red bullet span end over end before Frisk, who remained cautious for a few seconds. Frisk
waited for the petal to move, to shot into their chest, but it did not. The crimson bullet wasn't moving
at all, waiting patiently for the child to come to it rather than the other way around. Frisk lowered
their arms, then slowly reached out.

"Quick heads up though," Flowey interjected, stopping Frisk. "You're not going to like what you
see…"

Frisk edged the tips of their fingers closer, half excited and held frightened at what would happen.
The petal caught the brim of their fingernail, and that was all it needed.
The world of timber surrounding Frisk, Flowey, and Brute, dissolved. The trees shrank and faded from existence, along with each individual plank, rope, and nail from the walkways. The horizon it paved its way to was nothing but emptiness. Endless sky and ocean separated by the divide in the centre. From afar, a cube appeared and zoomed up, stopping just short of all three of them.

The cube was a room, and Frisk was spectating it from the outside through an invisible window.

Within the square room stood themself before Toriel, who blocked the way to a large door behind her: the exit to the ruins. This was the Underground, and this was their fight with the person who would later become their foster mother. Frisk remembered that fight all too well: how much her fire attacks burned; how much her desperation and loneliness had consumed her. Toriel launched a volley of fireballs at the human child with a majority of them missing, mainly trying to frighten them away and mostly because she knew what was best for them. Frisk's past self caught a blast to the cheek, the present self instinctively touched their own, almost feeling the pain themself.

As they looked at their younger self, something about them was… different, wrong somehow. The look in their eyes. The toy knife clutched in their hand. They remember that hunk of moulded plastic they found, the one with the serrated edge and combat grip – available on the surface for anywhere less than five dollars.

However, they didn't remember it being so… dusty.

The fire ebbing in Toriel's hands died. She dropped them, sadness lining her face. "Pathetic, is it not?" Toriel turned away, unable to look at the child. Her words rang familiar in Frisk's ears. "I cannot save even a single child."

Past Frisk stood their ground through the scorching pain, determined to pass Toriel. The Frisk watching thought they knew how it was going to play out. Again and again, they shouted that they would not fight her. No matter how much she hurt them, they would never hurt her back, not after everything she had done for them.

All of a sudden, their former self lunged, leading with the commando toy. Toriel had no time to react and neither did the Frisk watching. What were they doing? Past Frisk jumped and slashed, catching Toriel across the face, under the eye. She gasped, shocked. Frisk brought the knife back across, slashing deep into her torso. Toriel stumbled back, slammed their back against the door, and then went still.

The look on Toriel's face chilled the present Frisk to the bone. Her eyes wide. She struggled for breath. A faint grin formed on the lips of the child who hurt her, almost like it were a game and they were having fun.

"You… at my most vulnerable moment…" Toriel uttered, clutching her stomach. No blood. "To think I was worried you wouldn't fit in our there…" Through the pain, through knowing that she only had seconds left to live, she smiled and laughed a raspy laugh while sliding down to the floor. "You really are no different than them!"

Frisk could do nothing but watch dismayed with an agape mouth and a numb heart as the woman who showed them love, who gave them a home when they had none, who accepted them as family despite their differences, collapsed onto her side, laughing out her last breath. Her body crumbled into dust, her soul quivered before shattering into pieces.

_Toriel…_

The human child had witnessed their foster mother die… by their own hand. Frisk, paralysed with
shock, watched as their counterpart took one look at the remains, then stepped through it like it was nothing, leaving a dusty trail behind them that lasted for three steps past the door – a trail of Toriel's remains.

That never happened, yet it felt like it could have. The murderer had Frisk's face, their hair, their eyes, mouth, exact same clothing; it was them and wasn't them at the same time.

"This, Frisk…" Flowey whispered in their ear, startling Frisk who forgot he was there. "This is a different path you could've taken. Believe it or not, there's thousands, millions of alternate universes where you did this. You've killed them all, Frisk…"

The light of the ruins faded to white, into the snows of Snowdin where it was winter every day. A grey mist obscured all, except for two figures, facing each other, one short and podgy and the other tall and thin.

"I see you are approaching. Are you offering a hug of acceptance?"

Frisk gasped. Papyrus…

"Wowie!" boomed Papyrus. "My lessons are already working!"

Frisk watched as Papyrus, kneeling down in the snow, outstretched his bony arms to accept the human's mercy. The human approached, dust had accumulated over the tough glove, especially around the knuckles.

"I, Papyrus, welcome you with open arms!"

All of Frisk's senses made them scream at the goofy skeleton, bang against the glass to tell him to run, to save himself. Sadly, Frisk's voice fell on deaf ears as Papyrus, in his naïve ways and oblivious to the danger he was in, held down his guard as the human crunched closer.

It looked like Frisk was going to accept their hug when, suddenly, at the last second, they punched Papyrus square in the jaw, knocking his skull off his neck. As his head rolled and came to a stop three paces away, the rest of him rattled to the ground and shattered into atoms.

"W-well, that's not what I expected…" Papyrus, what was left of him, stammered helplessly as the human approached, stepping over the remains that used to be his body. "But… st… still! I believe in you!" His words bore hesitation with an outline of hope. "You can do a little better! Even if you don't think so!"

The child placed the bottom of their boot against his head and applied pressure, sinking him deeper into the snow. The skull lowered a couple of inches before resting on solid ground. Frisk could merely watch, dismayed how anyone, even themself, could be so heartless.

"I… I promise…" Those were Papyrus's last words before the boot cracked his skull, smashing it into nothing. With the hopeful for the Royal Guard nothing but a stain on their sole, the killer pressed on without so much as a nod. It was as if they had no idea what they were doing was evil.

The scene darkened into the dim, watery caves of Waterfall. The shapes materialised. A bridge and two short figures facing each other.

"Yo… Why won't you answer me?"

Monster Kid…?
"A… a… and what's with that weird expression…?" the armless boy asked, leaning over to glance at the other's face.

The murderer had a creepy grin as they glared at Monster Kid, then suddenly advanced on them, pushing him back three paces. The notepad they held was still, dust had gotten stuck in the spiral binding.

No. No. Monster Kid was their friend, they could never hurt them – Frisk couldn't even work up an insult when asked to do so. Frisk tried to fight off the terrible scenes by remembering what really happened. The kid tripped on the bridge, managing to bite into the wood to stop themself from falling. As Undyne's menacing frame appeared on the opposite side, along with the danger she possessed, Frisk selflessly rushed over and pulled Monster Kid up. The two had been buddies ever since.

Monster Kid faced the human who killed Toriel, Papyrus, and many others in their path, trembling from head to toe. It spread to his voice. "Yo… Y-you'd b-better s-stop r-right where you are…" he stuttered, making a pathetic attempt at acting tough. "Cause if you w-wanna hurt anyone else… you're… you're gonna have to get through me, first."

This version of Frisk – no, whatever it was – gripped the notepad tighter. It looked like Frisk on the outside, but it was not Frisk on the inside.

The monster's words were barely coming out. "A… and… and…"

Without warning, it lashed out at Monster Kid. His face twisted with horror as the notebook spine drew near. At the last possible second, Undyne leapt from nowhere, pushed the kid out the way and took the blow herself. The wad of paper and illegible notes sliced through her armour like it was nothing.

Her sternum had literally been sliced in half, but she managed to act like it was nothing before telling Monster Kid to get out of there.

Undyne…

The scene changed before it could continue, leaving Frisk wondering what happened next. It was quickly forgotten under the blaring lights, as bright as those back in Haze's hideout. Music so loud that Frisk could not hear themself think. Standing amidst it all was the robot in his natural habitat.

Mettaton…

Except he wasn't the Mettaton Frisk fought in the same spot nor was he the one who strutted his stuff all over his own television shows. This Mettaton looked remarkably different: his long hair spiked out to one side; one hand had been replaced with a blaster; and he had two wings on his back. His poise consisted of his legs spread far apart and his arms out, exposing his body. His was ready to save the world and look fabulous while doing it.

The killer raised the antique revolver and, despite it being empty, fired a round into Mettaton's metal chest. One shot was enough as it punched a clean hole straight through. He stumbled backward as fragments of his inners escaped the fresh cavity.

After wincing, he regained his grin and coughed out, "Gh… Guess you don't wanna join my fan club…?" Then went out with a bang, literally. There was nothing left but worthless junk littering the stage.

The lights spread out, turning into the windows of the judgement hall. The entire room down to its
walls, floor and pillars were all golden in the light of dawn.

The monster murderer was running, now a real knife in their possession. The unblemished edge caught the light. They jumped to the side to dodge a beam, then to the other as another missed them by inches, blasting a crater in the floor tiles. The hall's hollowness reverberated all sounds from the energy blasts to the killer's dashing footsteps and demented breathing.

Frisk watched as their merciless counterpart approached their next victim.

*Sans*...

The laidback skeleton remained smiling, hands deep within pockets as his opponent neared. Sweat glistened on his bald head. Frisk knew it by now. Sans had lost everything. There was nothing left for him to fight for. No feasible way he could defeat this foe and yet he fought anyway. He fought because he had to.

One step away, the human slashed twice; Sans dodged both attacks. Before it could swing again, Sans's left eye flared blue. He pulled his hand from his pocket and held it toward the killer, shrouding them in a blue aura that pushed them back. Suddenly, he threw his hand to the side, tossing the killer into one of the many pillars that lined the hall.

White spots materialised on the pillar around the killer. Before bones could impale them, the figure leapt away, coming into contact with the ground as the bones shot out.

Sans gave their opponent no time as they formed another skull that roared an energy beam from its maw, striking them in the shoulder. The vile creature span around from the force of the blow, their shoulder a smouldering mess. Just as they looked about to breakdown and cry, they lunged, bent on plunging their knife into that ribcage if it were the last thing they would ever do.

Sans uprooted more bones in the creature's path. They went over and under them as if they had done it a hundred times. Sans conjured two more skulls by his sides and launched two more blasts, one after the other. The first, the creature avoided. The second, the child disappeared in the blast.

For one moment, Sans get his guard down, and that was all the killer needed. They leapt out from around the beam's blindside and slashed, knocking Sans down with a single blow.

The fighting ended the moment red liquid poured from exposed ribs, through the slice in Sans's shirt. The killer caught their breath, grinning as the red leaked down their weapon and dripped onto the floor.

Sans coughed and a trickle escaped through the gaps in his teeth. "So... guess that's it, huh?" He said that like he expected it all along, as if he knew this was how the skirmish was going to end. "Just... don't say I didn't warn you."

Even though he was smiling, he was so... sad. He had failed, and now, there was truly nothing left to fight for.

Sans stood up, battling the pain. "Welp," he said, shrugging, revealing his hand slimed red with his own inners, "I'm going to Grillby's."

Wounded, dying, clutching his chest, Sans limped down the hall. The creature watched with their smirk tenacious on their face, proud of what they've done, having enjoyed it so.

How anyone could enjoy this was just... sick.
Sans got hallway down the hall when he faltered. "Papyrus..." he murmured, reaching out with soaked hand. "Do you want anything?"

The next step was his last. He fell to the ground and then he was no more. His last thoughts, even as he faced the end, were of his brother, and how he still looked out for Papyrus even after he was long gone.

Brute's giant hand churned before Frisk's eyes. Hanging from the edge of his palm was a tiny, neatly folded handkerchief. Unused as evidenced by its cleanliness. The letter E was knitted with black thread in the corner.

"Dry eyes," he said, offering it.

Frisk proclaimed in a cracked voice that he was talking garbage. They brought their fingers up to their cheeks to prove to themself they weren't crying, not at all.

Yes, they were. Their cheeks were saturated in warm tears. Frisk had been rendered so dead by the senseless suffering of their friends that they had no idea. As soon as they realised it, it got worse. They snatched the tissue and buried their eyes in it, fumbling the sword hilt into their pocket. Frisk thanked Brute between sharp breaths and quivering lips.

"You're welcome..." replied Brute.

"I'd cry too," said Flowey, "if I could..."

Frisk dried their eyes just enough to make out what happened next, and all it did was induce more tears.

Asgore...

Their foster father was just as oblivious as Papyrus, sensing no impending danger from the small creature who was so warped and twisted that he did not recognise them as human. That... thing... could not be called a part of humanity by now, having long abandoned what it meant to be human.

Asgore had no idea... The death this creature had left behind, including his wife, and the captain of the Royal Guard. He hadn't the damnedest clue that he was alone.

After Asgore suggested to the creature a friendly discussion over a cup of tea, it responded by plunging the knife into his chest. As the king of the Underground fell to his knees, Flowey finished the job, destroying his body and soul.

Flowey emerged from the flowers.

And then there were two...

Two monsters left in the entire Underground: a soulless, ruthless, emotionless killer, and Flowey.

The flower pleaded with it, begging to be spared the same fate as all the rest. His face contorted into the face of Asriel Dreemurr: their best friend. It was a frantic gamble, a desperately bid to reach whatever sane thought – if there were any – the murderer still had.

If his best friend was still there, hear him now.

"Please don't kill me," Asriel begged with tears in his eyes.

And then, the most surprising thing happened. The killer paused. It looked down at the crying flower
and, for one second, their expression softened as it recalled memories from a better time. Its fingers loosened around the knife handle. Its arms went slack at its sides, losing all desire to kill.

For one second, it actually looked remorseful. Regretful of its actions.

Right before it happened, the Flowey on Brute's palm looked away.

"…Hate this part…"

It jumped on Asriel, seizing him by his stem neck. He screamed a gurgled screech as his best friend stabbed his face.

It stabbed him again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again, and again…

It didn't stop until there was nothing left to stab.

There was nothing left of Flowey. There was nothing left of anybody. There was nothing left of anything. No light. No ground.


The killer rose in the surrounding darkness, then went as still as a statue. The knife slipped from its fingers and sank into the nothingness below. All that was left was this thing, standing in an abyss.

It happened too slowly for Frisk to notice at first, but this excuse of a human being began changing. The blue in its shirt turned green. The purple stripes transformed into a pale shade of yellow. The blue shorts darkened into the colour of hickory. The hair lightened to ash brown. The skin turned a couple octaves paler.

It turned around. Frisk saw its face. Two wide eyes. Two rosy cheeks. One big smile.

It looked straight through them.

"Greetings," it said in a low and innocent voice. "I am Chara."

*Chara.* The name Asriel kept calling them in that godly battle. The true name of the one who fell first, who became best friends with the prince before poisoning themself with buttercups in some risky gambit to free the Underground.

Frisk saw Chara return to life… in them.

Frisk blinked their red eyes. Mercilessly, they were back in the Forest, among the trees of giants and the paths of mice. Chara was gone and so was the twisted retelling of their adventure through the Underground.

"I'm sorry you had to see that, but it was the only way to get you to believe," Flowey said apologetically. Brute, through his stoicism, posed in a way that presented the flower as deeply sorrowful and deadly serious. "On that one stormy night, when you sat awake in bed and gazed upon the option to reset, this is what could've happened, Frisk. This is the power your Determination granted you. You may think what you saw just now wasn't real, but I must assure you that it was. That has happened, many, many times in many, many timelines.

from the same blueprint. There're versions of yourself who have reset once, twice, ten times, fifty, a
hundred, thousands of times. Versions of yourself who have appeased everyone once, twice, ten,
fifty, a hundred, thousands of times. Versions of yourself who have killed everyone once, twice, ten,
fifty, a hundred, thousands of times. Done everything the Underground had to offer and everything
before and after the Underground.

"But you…? You never reset. You never went back. You were content with your happy little ending
despite its imperfections. This doesn't make you special, however, it just means you're as different as
all the other Frisk's in their universes. Frisk may have killed all those people millions of times, but
you – the one standing here right now – have not. Your friends here are alive and well because of
you." Flowey emphasised his words, making sure that Frisk got the message that they were not a
killer in this timeline. "You, the Frisk in this timeline, have not done that. But I have to ask: were you
never curious? Did you not want to test the power for yourself? Were you afraid of destroying
everything you had worked up towards?"

The last of the tears were wiped away by the soaking handkerchief. Frisk asked if what they
witnessed was going to happen to them. Were they going to hurt everyone they loved?

"Not unless you really want it to. Not like you can here." Flowey sighed, furrowing his brow. "I
guess it doesn't matter now. Before I came here, I was ready to accept my fate alone, but now, seeing
what happens next, and what could have happened, I realise that I'm stuck in this universe. Do you
even comprehend how angry that makes me feel?"

Frisk faltered at his sudden change in attitude.

"Think of what could have happened. I could've been saved." Flowey's face twisted into one more
recognisable. "I could've been sweet, innocent Asriel again," he said, mimicking his voice, shooting
pangs of guilt up Frisk's gut. "Chara could've been alive. We could've always been on the surface.
The war could never have happened. We could've lived together as a family. So many possibilities,
so many chances for a better world, and do you know what I get stuck with?" Suddenly, his face
contorted into a huge, angry snarl. "I get stuck in a world where you never reset! I get stuck in a
world where I was left to cry alone in the dark while you dance in the sun with your friends! I get
stuck a world where Chara remains dead and buried! I GET STUCK WITH YOU! YOU
ANDROGENOUS, MUTE IDIOT!"

"Crush human!" Brute repeated, louder from his advisor's state, rising a clenched fist to quash the
human into red paste. Frisk reached for their sword, ready to fight.

"NO!" Flowey shrieked, halting his assistant in an instant, his face contorting wide. "NO – CRUSH
– HUMAN! YOU STUPI!—" He stopped himself, throwing his face down and expelling airborne
rage through gritted teeth, in and out with rough huffs. "F-Flowey… Flowey… You talked about
this…" he addressed himself in heaving whispers, closing his eyes. "You promised yourself you
wouldn't get angry – not anymore… Calm down. Relax. Breathe."

The ambassador for monsters wanted to cry some more, hurt by those mean words by the one person
they believed understood them better than anyone else. At the same time, Frisk felt sorry for the poor
guy. A small piece of the old Flowey wanted to escape. The reformed Flowey had his leafy hand on
the lease, trying to hold it back.

After a few moments, he faced his private chauffer. "No, Brute. Not yet, please be patient." Flowey
tried to sound as collected as he could, but traces of anger peppered his voice. "Frisk, I apologise. I'm
trying to change." He grinned, cracking a minute giggle. "Guess you could say I'm turning over a
new leaf. It doesn't help when you're missing a soul and have no sense of love, guilt, or affection, but
I'm trying. I am trying." Flowey looked away and sighed. "I only wish I was here on better terms…"
What did he mean by that?

"This world, this story, is headed toward disaster. The professor is right, this world is dying, but he's wrong about how much time we have left. We don't have days or weeks left, but hours. I'm here for one thing only: to make sure that this story gets the happy ending it deserves. There has been too much pain for these monsters, and these people deserve better. But this timeline cannot to saved, and neither of us can change the past…"

Just then, a leaf drifted from the canopy and landed between them, followed by a second, then a third. From above, a collection of shouting voices sounded faintly from the settlements far above. Panicked monsters who had no idea what was happening.

"See? It has already started. The magic holding this world together is almost gone, and when it runs out, the Outerworld won't simply disappear, it will tear itself apart." Leaves fluttered down like light snow falling. "The ground will shatter, lighting will scorch the lands, the waters will rise and the mountains will collapse. Everyone will die, Frisk. Everyone. Including your friends."

A vice clamped tight on Frisk's heart. Every nerve in their body froze. Their friends were here? They frantically searched his face, searching for the tiniest essence of any falsehood. Please tell them that he was lying.

The soulless flower responded, "I'm not lying, Frisk. Your friends are here right now thanks to one of Doctor Alphys's inventions. Geez, she has a strange knack for getting people into trouble, doesn't she? She may be more dangerous than I thought." The bark all around them started to desaturate, losing its rich brownness to a dull shade of monotone grey that crept up like pulsating veins. "They're all on their way to Castle Highkeep, looking for you." Brute pointed at Frisk.

Then there was no time to waste. Frisk asked what they were going to do to save everyone.

"Not us. Me," Flowey said. "I have almost gained enough control over my dreams to be able to travel to other timelines, meaning I'll be able to travel to a whole new story entirely. This story is doomed to a bad ending, but I can still make it right for another. I will find another Outerworld, and I will make that ending right. It might take a few tries, maybe more, but I swear I'll make it better for all of us. But… as for this world, it's over, and the only thing standing between me and a happy ending… is you, Frisk."

Frisk's nails dug into the weavings of the handkerchief. They prayed to whatever force out there that he was not going to go where they thought he was going.

His face was drowning in regret. "I can't leave this universe because your Determination is stopping mine from reaching its full potential. I'm trying to do the right thing here, but Haze is right, we all have to do difficult things sometimes." His assistant slumped. "I searched through millions of options, trying to find a better way, but not a single one ends happily. If I let you walk away, you will travel back to Castle Highkeep, and the Emperor will kill you himself. If you die to Maxus, he will take your soul and this story ends with the entire world's destruction. Maxus will not be kind… he will not be fair… he will not be gentle… it will not be painless…"

What was he saying…? Frisk was barely breathing.

Flowey swallowed. "But… If you die now, the Outerworld will perish, but the Earth will live."

As Brute began to slowly back away, Frisk shook their head. That could not be the only way. There had to be another option. If the two of them worked together, maybe they could find a solution where nobody had to die.
"Don't you get it?" Flowey's rage resurfaced. "I've dreamed of that also, and I found nothing! Do you hear me? Nothing!" Just as quickly, it subsided. "I wish it would not have come to this. I've searched for a millions ways out and found nothing except death and despair. I don't want to be the bad guy anymore… but if this is the only way to get a better ending, then I have to do it."

Frisk dropped the tissue to the leaf-ridden path, begging Flowey not to do this.

Flowey closed his eyes, on the verge of tears. "I'm sorry, Frisk. I'm so, so, so sorry… but… I have to kill you..."

Brute paused, then grunted in a smaller voice, "Crush human?"

"Yes, Brute," Flowey said, full of sadness one moment. "Crush human..." Eyes back on Frisk, the sadness was gone, replaced with emptiness. "In this world, it's kill… to save."
Worlds Collide

Brute hoisted his royal advisor back up, resting the pot upon the plateau that was his head. With that done, his sights went back to the tiny human. Flowey informed him hours ago that their goal was to decimate Frisk; Brute understood that part, but struggled with the timing, wanting to crush the human during his advisor’s speech. Now, after receiving spoken confirmation, he had a strict obligation to carry out the orders issued.

Brute approached, crushing leaves underfoot into confetti. His knuckles crackled with the same cringing sound of bones breaking as he pressed his palms against them, first the knuckles on the right hand, then the left. Previously, as a grunt for the Monster Military, many a sword, spear, and bow were wasted in the futile attempt to teach him etiquette fighting techniques. Swords: he always mistaken which end to hold, resulting in a few too many crushed blades. Spears: his comrades-in-arms got tired of cleaning pieces of food from the tips. And bows: every time he pulled back on the bowstring, the arch snapped, never the string for some bizarre reason. Eventually, they stopped trying and left Brute as a quote unquote unarmed specialist, tasked with guarding the door to the treasury. He was highly effective, nobody could pass him. Or rather, nobody could get past him.

Even with an intellect as challenged as his, Brute failed to see how such a fragile creature could cause so much hassle to an entire empire. Barely taller than his knees, Frisk had soft, squishy skin, bones as small and thin as toothpicks, nails with enough sharpness to slay nothing harder than an annoying itch, and baby teeth the bane of toffees everywhere. All Brute needed was one second.

“If you truly care about the Earth,” Flowey distressed, looking down from his high horse, “if you care about all those people, and these monsters, and your friends, then you’ll give up now.”

Frisk, having exhausted all their pleading with Flowey, directed it toward his sentient vehicle in the suit, insisting Brute should not follow his advisor’s orders. As Brute approached, unspeaking and unchanging, Frisk figured that he would take the word of his flowery master over the most wanted criminal in the Outerworld.

“You got your happy ending a long time ago, Frisk,” Flowey said as Brute started to bend his elbow back. “Now it’s my turn!”

Brute’s stoic posterior ended with gritted white teeth and furrowed brow as he winded back his fist to deliver the first and final blow, the knuckles as protuberant as mountains. As Frisk’s left hand fumbled for the handle wedged in their pocket, they swung their right forearm up and accidentally thumbed the button, causing the shield to expand and reach battle-ready mode one second before the almighty fist came down.

The slam as Brute’s fist met Frisk’s shield was loud. Frisk had braced for the impact but felt next to nothing. They lowered it and saw Brute staring at his hand, a dumbfounded expression upon his stony face. Snarling, he raised his other fist and brought it down, striking again. Frisk was watching this time. His knuckles struck the shield with the force of a battering ram, able to smash through concrete, yet felt as powerful as a moderately strong draft.

Brute stared as his clenched hands as if he had no idea what they were. “Why no smash?” Leaves wallpapered his shoulders.

He delivered bone crushing haymaker after bone crushing haymaker into the shield. Frisk was equally amazed as he was at how sturdy Haze’s invention was. Seriously, they did not need to try and absorb the blows because the shield did it all for them.
Flowey groaned. “Brute, try punching around the shield. Geez, it’s like talking to a five year old…”

Taking his advisor’s advice, Brute rose his leg to crush the human. Now, this was where the fight was about to get serious. Frisk jumped back. The leather shoe came down, broke through the two foot thick planks, and came to a stop when his entire leg was in it all the way to where it joined at the hip.

Now was Frisk’s chance to retaliate. They whipped out the sword handle and pressed the ignition switch, charging as the blade formed.

“Default blade activated.” The silver, sharp blade reached its full length.

Three feet away, Frisk suddenly had a terrible flashback of what they saw in the judgement hall. The giant of an assistant became Sans, and they were the real monster eager to introduce a knife into his chest. They stumbled to a halt – the blade almost pierced Brute’s chest – and stepped back, afraid of what they almost did.

Flowey pulled a grin. A bead of sweat sinking down his seedy face gave him away. “Easy there, tiger.” He chuckled in a nervous fashion, afraid he might have been facing the… other human all along. “Almost thought you lost the plot there.”

As Brute started forcing his leg out with rigorous tugs, Frisk fumbled with the simple interface, hopping through options like they were television channels.

“Laser sword activated.” The metal retraced and a blade of pure, red energy erupted in its place. Frisk, alarmed, held it low and accidentally burned a slice in the wood, incinerating a dozen crumpled leaves in the process. Nope.

Frisk pressed the left button again. “Electricity blade activated.” The red lightsabre transformed into a blue arc of lightning. Thin tendrils reached out from the blade, coming into contact with anything within range, Frisk included. Each spark packed a similar muscle numbing punch as Barb’s paralysing pellets but on a much smaller scale, like getting jabbed with tiny daggers. The hairs on Frisk’s head stood on end. This option might have been intended to hurt the user as opposed to the opponent. N-n-n-n-n-uh-nuh-nuh-nuh-uh.

Once more with the left switch. “Toxic blade activated.” The lightshow ceased, and in its place grew a fresh blade with ebbs of green mist surrounding it. Bubbles brewed and burst inches upwards. From arm’s length, the sight and smell were nauseating, already poisoning Frisk’s immune system without them actually coming into contact. Try the next one before they got sick.

Brute finally pulled his leg free from the timber’s hold. Sawdust and splinters clung to his ironed pant leg. Upon standing tall, he resumed his accost on the human.

Frisk backpedalled, buying themself valuable seconds while they mashed the button on the hilt.

“Plasma blade activated—Mini gun blade acti—Instant death blade of immense pain ac—”

Brute swung a right hook which Frisk ducked under, then followed with a straight punch. Frisk jumped to the left, pressing up against the rubbery bark of a giant tree. They moved again as Brute swung a left at where they were, smashing a chunk out of the greying wood.

“Blockbuster sword ac—Keyblade activat—Buzz saw blade acti—Tickle rod activa—Excalibur ac—”

Frisk went back one.
“Tickle rod activated,” the female guide was finally allowed to finish, accompanied with the blade turning white, buzzing with an electrical charge.

Brute threw a punch. Frisk dodged it and moved in, jabbing the rod’s tip into Brute’s side. A buzzing flash confirmed that the strike connected, followed by Brute croaking laughter while clutching his stricken area.

The tickle rod: packing a mean wallop without packing someone six feet under. Perfect.

He tried to swat the human child away, but Frisk ducked the back of his hand and poked him again, this time in the belly. Brute roared with jovial laughter from deep down in his diaphragm.

Suddenly, Brute snatched Frisk up; his entire massive paw wrapped around their tiny body. He lifted them off the ground before tightening his grip, shifting all of Frisk’s bones closer together. Frisk grunted through the crushing pain; if they really needed experience on how that lady in King Kong felt, then this was it. Flowey, still on Brute’s head, watched with a patient smile. It was as if he was controlling Brute, a pilot with his hands on the controls.

“Squishy squishy,” Flowey whispered darkly before he realised what he had said. He pulled the smirk off his face, replacing it with a frown before attempting to sound professional. “I-I mean, d-destroy them, Brute. That is an order.”

A cold snap ran down Frisk’s compacted spine, forming an icy sink in the pit of their shrinking stomach. Beneath the reformed Flowey’s exterior, traces of his old self still lingered, fuelled by the liberty inflicting pain on others brought, especially on the person who saved him in his own direst moment. Guess some habits are not so easily kicked.

Frisk, struggling for air, twisted their left hand then stuck the rod into Brute’s exposed wrist. Brute grunted, conveyed with a brief moment where his crushing grip got worse – the exact opposite of what Frisk wanted – almost reducing their bones to powder. He wound his arm back then tossed Frisk across the walkway. They landed hard a distance away; the carpet of crumbling leaves cushioned the fall.

Frisk got up as fast as they could on stiff limbs, expecting Brute to be charging like a bull reacting to a red muleta being dangled. Surprisingly, he did not. Frisk had time to shake all their inners back into their proper places.

Flowey shook his head, swaying his golden petals. “Typical. Everything laid out before your eyes and still you persist. Your Determination will not let you give up so easily.” From out his pot, a dozen of his friendliness pellets rose and span in mid-air. “Too bad you’re not as powerful as you were then.”

He unleashed the pellets all at the same time, they carved through the falling leaves, making it difficult for Frisk to get a read on them. The shield was raised and its reinforced recoil system protected them from the petal bullets which exploded on impact. As the dust settled, Frisk stood, unharmed.

More pellets Flowey summoned and hurled at Frisk, this time at their surroundings. Frisk moved up, keeping the shield held high. All around, leaves exploded in a wild display of green and grey smithereens. Another volley came forth, striking a line across the length of the walkway, demolishing the railings on both sides.

All of a sudden, the bridge collapsed in a miasma of broken timbers. The fissure before Frisk sagged downward, then the path behind cracked and snapped. It tilted down, but thankfully landed on a
lower level walkway. Frisk ran down the slope, hopped on to the path below, then turned left and ran before the duo above had any more ideas. Frisk got fifty feet away when they stopped and turned, finding Flowey and Brute still on their secure platform above, overlooking them.

Frisk wondered what the two were waiting for. Flowey needed this human dead and his assistant was so eager to line these trees with pieces of them, so why stand around and watch them make their escape?

“Think I’m already out of ideas, Frisk?” Flowey shouted loud enough for Frisk to hear. “We’re just getting warmed up. I’ve already—” A stray leaf fluttered down and got caught in his mouth. Flowey hacked it out before spitting a few times, riding his tongue of the taste. “I’ve already picked up some new moves in this world. Thankfully, you can’t take that away from me. Thankful for me anyway, not thankful for you.”

More spinning bullets of doom rose from the only patch of genuine soil for miles around. Frisk was on guard as they descended, ready to react when they came their way. These bullets, instead of flying at them, dropped to the path below, stopped, then came together to form one giant bullet. It grew bigger and brighter, until it was over six feet in size. From within, the silhouette of a figure formed before the light vanished.

Through the scattering of falling leaves, Frisk made out the anomaly. It was Undyne and she looked considerably different. Her armour was darker and sharper, with hearts on the cuirass and gauntlets. Her ponytail spiked out to one side. Her eyepatch was gone, revealing a black hole where her left eye should be; the other just as black, the elongated pupil glowed white.

Frisk blurted Undyne’s name, but she only squinted her gaze and bared a toothy grin, not recognising Frisk as her friend, but as someone else. Something else, much worse.

“I’ll show you the same level of mercy you’ve shown all the others,” she said as many orbs of white materialised in a shiny arch over her head. “Die, fiend!”

Before Frisk had a chance to ready themself, the spears flew from all directions. The speed and intensity of the flying javelins caught Frisk off-guard. They did not remember them being so fast.

After the hail ended, Undyne stopped and waited for the human’s response, to which Frisk performed the one tactic that worked well against her in the past: they turned and ran.

“Hey, where are you going?” Undyne the Undying shouted. “Get back here!”

Frisk sprinted across, following the path wherever it lead. Down a slight decline and then around the circumference of another absurdly large tree, one of the many thousands that comprised the Forest. They could only get so far before Undyne caught up with them, her legs longer and more physically able than theirs. She leapt in the air, bounced off another wall of bark and landed on the path ahead, cutting off the human child.

“Nowhere left to run, miserable creature,” Undyne said, not breathless one bit. “With your death, I will avenge all you have slain.”

Before Frisk could attempt to negotiate – because it worked so well before – spears materialised not around Undyne, but around them. The six harpoons rotated as they appeared, stopped when the tips were facing them and then came in for the kill. Frisk ducked, hearing the ping as all the piercing ends met, then disappeared as quickly as they came.

Suddenly, Frisk kicked off their heels and rushed in, holding the shield to their chest. If words were
not going to solve this dispute, then a few volts of canned laughter will. Undyne hailed a couple more spears which were swiftly blocked. Frisk got in close and jabbed the tickly end into her belly, causing her to reel back, chortling under her breath.

Before Undyne could stage another assault, her body quivered and lost its transparency as the voltage raced through her. “But I was just getting started…”

Unexpectedly, her body exploded back into the friendliness pellets, striking the nearby surroundings with explosive effect. Frisk was untouched. Undyne the Undying was gone for good.

Frisk lowered their guard and breathed deeply, thinking itself a safe moment to rest until the tree trunk beside them exploded outwards and Brute slammed into them. Frisk fell back, losing their hold on the sword. Looking up, Brute and Flowey glared down at them before the former lunged down with an open maw, ready to consume them.

Frisk rolled to the right over the carpet of leaves, avoiding the teeth which snapped inches away. Frisk regained their footing and kept moving as Brute followed, chomping at the air behind, catching a taste of their scent that suggested how delicious they would be. Frisk kept sidestepping until they were up against the tree. Brute dove in mouth first, showing his rows of white, razor-sharp choppers, strands of saliva, and his hanging uvula. At the last moment, Frisk ducked and Brute ended up crunching deep into the wood.

As Frisk moved back, the assistant flailed like a fish out of water, groaning through their trapped teeth. He pushed against the grain and fidgeted with the linings of his mouth, trying to pry himself out to no avail.

Flowey scowled at his assistant. “You idiot, you’ve gotten yourself stuck!”

Frisk found their sword on the ground and seized the opportunity. They picked it up, reactivated the tickle rod, deactivated the shield, and charged in both hands of the handle and with the tip aimed on Brute’s ribs. As long as he was stuck, the human child had a chance to wear him down.

A few feet away, they caught too late a grin and a muffled chuckle coming from both Flowey and Brute.

The massive assistant jerked his head to the left, tearing off a large piece of bark that slammed into Frisk’s exposed body, whacking them off their feet and onto their back. The hard hit of a giant baseball bat hurt like nobody’s business and sent stars flying across Frisk’s vision. Their sword fell away from them again.

Brute had the huge fragment of timber in his gob in the same manner as a dog with an oversized stick. There was a slight tremor of tension before his mighty jaw effortlessly snapped it in two.

Flowey swayed his head from side to side. “Good one, Brute,” he praised his assistant. Inside, he was empty, and unsure whether he was pleased by what his eyes were witnessing or disgusted by what he was doing. He wished there was another solution, but this needed to be done. It was the only way.

Brute spat out fragments of chomped wood. “Human tougher than they look.” Splinters clung to his gums, spitting them as he spoke.

“Yes,” Flowey replied, nodding in agreement, “but a few more whacks like that and they won’t be for much longer.” He eyed Frisk’s sword a few feet away. “Or maybe one more might just do.”

The Royal Advisor did not need to say it; Brute already knew where to go. As the body stepped
closer, the brain grew a vine from his patch of soil and reached for the handle. Frisk, incapacitated, had no idea the brutish monster and his flower master were looming over them before it was too late.

“This ends” – Flowey wrapped the vine around the handle, snapped the button, and then jabbed it into Frisk’s chest – “now!”

Frisk’s jaw opened and a scream escaped. Eyes went wide, locked on the hilt against their torso, the blade unseen to them. The killing blow was so fast and fluid that there was no time to register the pain. The air in their lungs emptied and they awaited the agony, the coppery taste soon to drip from their lips, and a long, gurgled end.

Flowey pulled back on the handle and Frisk expected to glimpse a blade drenched in their own life fluid. Instead, there was nothing. The blade had not extended as he expected.

His smile faded. “Wait a min—what’s wrong with this thing?” His vine hammered the switch.

The handle beeped to life. “Unregistered user detected,” the lady voice said. “Activating countermeasures.”

All of a sudden, the sword hilt discharged a voltage of electricity that travelled up the vine and into Flowey and Brute. Flowey took the brunt of the defence system, going rigid with all his petals sticking out. Brute roared, clutching his cranium as power travelled downward from the pot. Flowey released the sword and the countermeasure deactivated in an instant. It landed a few feet away from its registered owner. Flowey had witnessed every single way this fight could go, but it was the tiny details which he tripped on.

Brute, frenzied, raised his foot and brought it down; Frisk rolled out the way. They stopped as his other foot came down in their path. Frisk scurried backwards on their hands and heels, narrowly avoiding a fist crashing downwards.

Frisk reached out and nabbed the sword handle. It buzzed to life and the tickle rod extended upon returning to their hand. “Palm pattern recognised. Welcome back, Frisk.”

Brute eyed the tiny human, baring teeth drenched with saliva. The smouldering advisor said, “Remember to chew your food forty two times…”

He swung his head down, opening his mouth wide. Frisk hoisted the sword and the tip went straight to the back of his throat. Brute cried out as his dark cave of a mouth sparked to life with snaps of energy. He recoiled, clutching his giant mitts around his jaw and head.

Flowey wobbled, his bearing almost toppling. Eventually, Brute’s hands found their way to his eyes, covering them as he began to blubber in a series of sobs and wet sniffs.

“Brute,” Flowey said, concerned, peering over the brim of his pot, “what’s wrong?”

“Hurts!” Brute wailed. “H-hurts!”

Flowey sieved through his teeth as he turned to Frisk. “Now look what you’ve done, you made him cry.”

The heavyset bruiser had attempted to crush and gobble up Frisk on several occasions, and yet Frisk, seeing him break down in tears, all of a sudden felt bad for hurting them. Brute was a baby in a grown monster’s body, wearing a grown monster’s clothes; a fact Frisk wished they had picked up on earlier.
The vine, still dangling close to the walkway, rose to gently stroke the side of Brute’s head. “There, there, Brute. It’s okay,” Flowey cooed with a surprising level of compassion. Frisk knew that, sadly, he was faking it. Regardless of whether his concern was genuine or not, it did calm the big guy down. “Take a moment to let it out. I’ll take it from here.”

Brute wiped away a tear and nodded in the quick nods of a toddler.

After looking back up from his stallion, Flowey the flower summoned more petals and merged them all together between himself and the person he needed dead. “This’ll cheer you up…” Frisk was unsure whether Flowey was talking to them or Brute.

The sphere of magic grew and then another figure appeared from the core. This time it was Mettaton, the version from the vision, complete with spiked hair, blaster, wings and everything.

He took aim with his blaster. “Witness the power of humanity’s star, baby!”

Mettaton Neo opened fire. The blasts came in fast, loud, wide and flashy, just like the person firing them. His intention was to decimate the target in the most spectacular fashion, one which would be remembered by the fans and the highlight of many repeats for years to come. Too bad there were no cameras rolling.

Even before the shots neared, Frisk knew what to do. They used their enhanced shield to block the nearest bullets before spinning around to avoid others, ending their turn facing away from their foe.

Now pose! Frisk swung their head back in a feisty fashion, placing one hand on their hip and the sword on their shoulder. Amazingly, the laugh-inducing blade had no effect on them. Professor Haze really did make it for them and them alone. Frisk smiled and winked at the robot.

This simple act triggered something almost forgotten to this upgraded model from a parallel universe. “Oooh, how sassy,” Mettaton Neo said, grinning to himself as the pose spurred him on. “I love it! Let the games begin!”

Mettaton unleashed his most deadly and dangerous weapons: his legs. After extending his arms to the ground, he hoisted himself up, took aim and launched his legs feet first. Twin thrusters propelled the robotic limbs toward the target. Frisk broke their pose and lifted the shield, but the pair of legs changed direction before impact, separating in both directions and spiralling around their guard.

Frisk ducked the pair of pink boots and barely caught sight of them as they rocketing into the surroundings, leaving behind two thick contrails of grey smoke as they became lost in the falling leaves and dark underbelly of the Forest. Frisk glanced in all directions, spotting nothing, but caught wind of the guided propulsion systems.

“Now, now, darling,” Mettaton disclosed, “a true superstar should always be in tune with their surroundings.” He grinned at the whistling crescendo. “Especially when the crowds are not in your favour.”

Frisk figured out the directions in time, rising the shield to block the left foot while deflecting the other away with their sword. The legs span in the air before hitting the terrain, exploding on impact like missiles. Fortunately for the killer robot, he had legs to spare. After producing an extra pair, Frisk threw another pose as if to say “That all you got?”

By now, Brute was no longer crying. He was smiling, giggling at the engagement.

“Feeling better, Brute?” asked Flowey.
Brute nodded. “Better.”

“So what do you say we get back in there?” Flowey suggested. A second later, Brute charged, almost giving his advisor whiplash.

Frisk’s stance broke upon seeing the stampeding behemoth and turned to run. Mettaton Neo, at first confused, faced the direction of the slamming footsteps and found the giant approaching.

Mettaton Neo, thanks to his mind-set built around nothing but fame, failed to detect any danger and perceived it as something else entirely. “Looks like someone’s eager for an autograp—”

Before he could finish, Brute delivered a mean backhand, throwing Mettaton against the nearest trunk where he exploded back into friendliness pellets. Brute’s stride was not hindered one bit as he dashed like a rhino at the human.

Frisk ran as fast as they could, urged on by the roaring on their heels. They ran so fast that the nerves in their legs went dead. The space between them was a hundred feet apart and that gap lessened with every second. The loose flooring of leaves did nothing to soften the chaser’s straddling steps which all acted as miniature earthquakes. This guy obviously wasn’t a first choice for reconnaissance and surveillance missions.

Frisk needed to get off this path otherwise they would not fare much better than the leaves underfoot. Over the railings, the distance below was dark save for a couple of walkways, indicating that they had reached the lowest levels of the Forest. Frisk crossed the path of another bridge down below. They bolted to the side and hopped the railing moments before Brute charged past. The fall to the path below was not too far and the leaves cushioned the landing.

Brute chugged to a halt, retraced his steps a few paces and followed the human over the railing, smashing a crater into the thick walkway wood on impact. He would have landed on Frisk, but they were already fifty feet away and prepared to defend themself.

Down below, there were no more walkways, paths or bridges, just the empty drop all the way to the Forest floor. Up above, the citizens were frantic, panic-stricken as their home for several centuries and fewer generations was dying; the wood turning sickly grey and the leaves dropping like the worst case of autumn.

The burly assistant had an urge to charge, but his strange sixth sense (from being connected to Flowey) held him back. His advisor had another trick up his theoretical sleeve. Actually, it was the same trick he had done twice before.

“Let us see if the third time is the charm…” Flowey said.

Flowey conjured his pellets. With each summoning, the person he pulled was picked from random, even he did not know who it would be until they were standing there. He forced the pellets together in the space between them, and for the third time, they formed to make one big pellets and then the beckoned puppet emerged.

Flowey’s next creation appeared, along with a comfortable chair. Nestled in it was a lanky figure whom Frisk had never seen before, shrouded in a long, black coat and turtleneck sweater. His white face was buried in a book, held upon thin fingers. Two pure black eyes skimmed the pages, starting from the left and working their way across, then starting at the left again, slightly lower. A black line, almost like a cut, connected his left eye to his mouth. Another ran up from his right eye across his hairless scalp.
The stranger looked up from his hardback, disorientated by his surroundings. He muttered a phrase that neither Flowey nor Frisk nor Brute could comprehend.

Flowey chuckled. “A-ha! The original royal scientist himself. The great and mysterious Doctor Gaster: the man who speaks with hands,” he smarmed. “Surely such a being will be the end of—”

“No,” Doctor Gaster said abruptly, this time in plain English.

“Wha—?” Flowey got out.

Gaster sighed in an irritated manner, setting the book down on his lap. “Did you honestly believe you were being original by dragging me into this?” he asked, black eyes on the flower.

Flowey was at a loss for words. Frisk was only confused. Have they met this guy before? Should they know who he was? A divine force from beyond was telling them that maybe this fella meant serious business, sometime, somewhere, in many different places.

The previous royal scientist slammed his thick tome shut, keeping his thumb on his place. “Do you have any idea how many timelines I’ve been pulled into? Do you?” The irritation was clear upon his flat, blank face. “Can’t a guy just stay dead for once? I mean, just because I showed my face for five seconds in the Underground doesn’t necessarily mean I’m some long lost, forgotten soul who can’t enjoy being dead.”

Flowey raised an eyebrow. This was not at all what he expected from the essence of the mysterious Doctor Gaster. “But what abo—?”

“My magical hands?” Gaster interrupted, lifting his free hand. “These magical hands? The same hands I use to pick up my laundry, to hold my knife and fork while I eat, to repel irritating itches? There’s nothing special about them, I just use them like any ordinary person would.” He peeked through the hole in the palm while his fingers wiggled. “You think I did this to myself with some kind of experiment? I was born with these – I’m a monster, we’re all strange in our unique ways.”

Now Flowey was getting annoyed. “Well, whatever. I need you to—”

“No, you don’t need me for anything. You especially don’t need me here. Seriously, go to literally anywhere else and there’s a good chance you’ll find me there. There’s an entire multitude of timelines to choose from and I don’t have to be in every single one of them!” He expelled some anger through a deep exhalation. “Today, I’m saying no. I’ve been in too many timelines already, I’m not subjecting myself to this one.” He opened back to his place. “Good day.”

With a snap of his fingers, he was gone.

The three individuals stood in awkward silence. Something cool probably should have happened within that space of time, yet all that transpired was an argument between the flower and the former royal scientist.

Flowey’s face was blank, like a real flower. “That was… unexpected,” he said. “I thought we’d see more from Sans and Papyrus’s da—?”

Gaster and his comfy chair reappeared twice as fast.

Everyone yelped.

“Also, has anyone around here ever heard of a job board?” Doctor Gaster inquired, irritated, stressing the importance of the last two words. “Four feet wide, three feet tall? Made from cork or
felt, sometimes blue or even green? You hang things on it with drawing pins?” He symbolised holding pins between the thumb and index of the hands that made him unique. “What if I told you I once put up a couple of job vacancies for a lab assistant and a… regular assistant? They had on the responsibilities, the hours, the key skills required, and those little slips with contact details hanging from the bottom for people to tear off. Long story short, Sans and his brother were interested, amongst others. I brought them all in for interviews and the pair seemed like the strongest candidates at the time.” Gaster frowned. “Seemed… If Sans had labelled the switches like I asked him… Wait, did I?” Suddenly, he was unsure of himself. “I’m sure I did, I wasn’t making it up. Bah! It doesn’t matter now. Good day again.”

Gaster disappeared for the second and last time.

There was a pause as both parties were unsure as how to proceed.

Flowey caressed his chin with his vine, then dropped his gaze upon his servant. “I didn’t say stop!”

Starting back up car engine style, Brute went straight back into battle mode and advanced. Flowey analysed Frisk’s pose which was stuck somewhere between fighting and fleeing, having understood that victory did not appear so apparent to them. The path was open behind them. Next chance Frisk got, they would turn tail and run away to fight another day. Another day the Outerworld did not have. Another day none of them had.

There were several ways this battle could conclude, and the cases where Frisk met their demise were dwindling by the second. At every avenue, Frisk avoided doom. The chances to kill them began in the thousands, but Flowey had one chance to make it happen as the numbers dropped to the dozens. Now, as the two stared each other down, he feared that maybe this won’t be the first time he would set out to destroy them in the land of unnatural trees. This exact predicament could happen again and again, just how his reign in the Underground came to be.

No, Flowey thought, he would not let that happen. He would not give up or give in to his dark side. He will do this a hundred times – a thousand times if he had to until he reached that perfect ending.

Flowey remembered one trick. He faced the obscured sky and located a large branch dangling over the path far ahead.

“No more running, Frisk!” He called upon his bullets and launched them to where the branch met trunk. Over a dozen exploded on impact. The oversized branch drooped a few feet as it weakened. The wracked, blank inners held for as long as they could before snapping in two. Frisk watched, frozen and with baited breath as the dead piece of timber fell and made short work of the path and their only exit. A big section of lined planks smashed to pieces and tumbled into the abyss, much too big for them to clear. Flowey was severe, no longer smiling. “This is a dead end!”

Frisk edged back, holding their weapons tight; the odds completely against their favour. One charge from mister monkey suit and this fight was already over, unless they could avoid it. Perhaps if they struck as he stepped, they could get him to topple over, buying them time to escape. Then again, Flowey could destroy the path between them, totally cutting off an escape plan altogether.

Brute brought his stony hands together and rubbed warmth into them. He had a plan and a devilish one at that from the slow, haunting way he chuckled.

He squatted down, presented his palms and then drove them down, smashing two clear holes where the timbers met. He grabbed the plank before psyching himself up with several quick breaths through pursed lips, each one puffing out his cheeks. As he drew in one big breath through gritted teeth, he pulled up with all his might.
“Lift, Brute!” Flowey inspired his assistant. “Show them the true strength of monsters!”

The walkway snapped as Brute’s very strength pulled it from its bearings. With one great snap, it came loose and he lifted the entire section with Frisk on it. The path curved like a piece of string.

When Frisk grasped what was about to happen, it was already too late. Brute pulled his handful of limp bridge high above his head and whipped it back down, shooting a ripple across. The jolt threw Frisk off their feet and onto their face a foot back. Before they could get up, Brute snapped down on it again and again, sending wave after wave toward them.

Frisk tried as hard as they could, but the barrage was too much and they were being forced closer to the shattered end. The exertion and their impending death made their heart race. Half a foot away from the end, Frisk jumped to the right and grabbed hold of the last wooden rail before they could fall. The painful jolt as their fingers supported their entire body weight forced the sword from their fingers and sent it spinning into the darkness below.

Agony ran down their right arm, their nerves screaming. It got worse the more their grip loosened. Frisk tried to grab the edge with their other hand, but they could not get a proper grip. They glanced down despite that being the worst decision ever. There was a chance that seeing the long, deadly drop would encourage them to dig deep into their survival instincts and usher the strength needed to climb their way out. Turned out, glimpsing the abyss past their dangling boots did the opposite of that.

Further their fingers slipped on the rail support, eventually reaching the tips where the pain was at its worst. They held on for as long as they could, battling unstoppable throbbing. They held on until they could hold on no longer.

Their fingers slipped only for a green vine to latch around their wrist.

With thunderous steps, Brute, alongside Flowey, boomed up to the edge, looking down upon them. Frisk, completely at their mercy, looked back.

Flowey refused to break eye contact for one fraction of a second. “I tried to warn you, I had hoped that maybe you would understand, but I see you just wouldn’t go down without a fight. You didn’t make anything better by fighting back, you just made it worse.”

From above, the trickle of water dripped for the world above and traced its way down the groves in the trees. The hourly rain had started again.

Flowey’s eyes closed a brief moment. “I guess it’s only fitting that I leave you as you left me, as you left Chara: trapped below in the darkness. Alone. All alone.”

He let go. Frisk fell.

The golden flower formerly known as Asriel watched with little satisfaction as the human screamed, kicking and clawing at the air as they plummeted below to the deepest depths of the Forest. Three seconds later, the darkness swallowed them whole along with their cries.

For the most part, killing the human who saved them tore them apart. He knew, deep down, that what he was doing was wrong, but it had to be done. Plus, he knew, deeper down in the darkest corners of his soulless form, that he still found enjoyment in killing Frisk.

“Human dead,” grunted Brute.

*If only it were that easy.* “Not yet…” Flowey whispered. “Not yet…” He cocked his head
Falling. Frisk was falling at terminal velocity. The trees around passed fast and dark, invisible in the moving darkness, yet roaring in their ears. The fall felt like hours when it was actually minutes.

There was no way out of this one. After everything they've seen, this was probably for the best. Soon, they would hit the ground and all this madness would be over. Frisk just hoped that Flowey would keep his promise.

The ground approached, getting louder and louder. Would they feel themselves hit it before they died? Would it make a nasty sound also, that of shattering bones? In a few short seconds, they would soon find out.

They reached the Forest’s floor as the rumbling air reached a thunderous climax. They expected the stop to be sudden as they smashed into solid ground, but instead, it swallowed them whole. A soft, sandy substance surrounded the human child, burying them and pouring into every orifice. Frisk inhaled and felt it almost enter into their lungs. They dug their way out, clawing and kicking blindly into the darkness until they were in open air.

However, their first gulp immediately made them want to vomit, pungent with an overpowering stench akin to that found in garbage dumps. The eye-watering smell was everywhere and with every breath, unescapable.

Completely blind, Frisk trudged out of the sandy pile, having to tread a few paces until they were out of it and kicking about empty cans and discarded packets underfoot. Something crunched under a loose wrapper. The grainy substance clung to them because something like this just had to happen after their bath.

Frisk wondered with an unsteady heart whether they were still alive or if they had hit the ground and this was the afterlife.

And then, as if Frisk’s right arm had sprouted and mouth that knew English, a voice from beside them spoke, startling them. “Warning: optimum light levels not reached,” the automated lady said. “Auto engaging light.”

The heart on their shield turned into a flashlight, bringing glorious light to their not-so-glorious surroundings. Frisk jumped again at the sight of twisted, wicked roots. The trees themselves were not rooted into the ground, but upheld on spindly roots in the thousands, digging into the fake earth like the legs on a spider.

The ground was covered in garbage, ranging from anything to everything: chip packets; soda cans; old socks; worn clothes; broken appliances; discarded books; rotten food; shredded paper; all ranging in age and damage.

Frisk glanced down at their own body – caught in the faint glow – and found themselves covered in the sandy substance. It was grainy but also softer and steelier that the sands found on those golden beaches in holiday brochures. They turned the light over to the pool in which they landed on and discovered what it was.

A massive pile of dust. Dust everywhere. Frisk themselves was grey all over with it. This dust had not accumulated due to a lack of spring cleaners. No. This pile was built out of something else entirely.

Dead monsters.
Every single monster who passed away in the Outerworld ended up down here in the belly of the Forest.

Frisk was covered in the remnants of the dead. It was on their clothes… On their skin… In their hair…

Get it off! Get if off get it off get it off! Frisk rubbed themself down like a madman; ruffling their hair, scraping their skin and patting their clothes until the dust formed a halo around their ankles. After minutes of waving like they had angered a hornet’s nest, they had managed to get rid of the excess; however, the colour clung to their sweater and their hands were layered with the powdery sensation. It would have to do until they got another bath and a fresh change in clothes.

A few feet away, a beeping noise attracted Frisk’s attention. They followed the sound and found their sword lying on in a burger box from Sweet and Sour’s. They picked it up and the blade came alight with another light, creating two cones in which to pave the way.

Frisk began to walk after aimlessly picking a direction. What would they do now? Where would they go? How would they get out of here? Frisk had no idea. They would not find those answered by standing around. Maybe if they explored the place, they would come upon the answer. A stairwell. An elevator. A ladder. There had to be some way back up.

The air was silent. The Forest floor was both deathly dark and deathly quiet. Not even the deepest depths of the underworld would be this bleak. One light on the ground and one out in front still cast enormous shadows that played tricks on the kid’s eyes. The flooring crunched and squelched with every pressing on their boot soles. The smell did not get any better.

They passed through gaps in the roots and under miles high trees, passing them quickly on the fear that they would collapse in an instant. Mounds of accumulated rubbish here and there in certain points, dropped from the world above where all were ignorant to the damage done below.

Dotted around the landfills were spots of dust. The dead. Frisk shone their light over by a mound. Supported at its foot lay a small hill of grey ash. There was enough garbage in these parts to build a mountain out of there. A mountain constructed from cardboard boxes and food packages and tin cans and…

Wait!

Frisk turned back to the garbage pile. Their heart and mind had been startled. By what, they had no idea. For what seemed like minutes, their own heartbeat became the only sound alive. They watched the trash as if expecting something to happen. Nothing did. It remained motionless like it has done for centuries, festering germs and the world record for foulest stench.

On Frisk pressed, carving their way with the lights. Onwards towards more garbage, more warped roots and more piles of dust. Whatever happened earlier preyed heavy on their mind and made their knees shake. They were unable to shake it.

Frisk could’ve sworn they saw something move.
Downpour

The small village in the swamps of Bob appeared a ghost town in the misty rain. The villagers knew the drill as all windows, doors and shutters were closed the very second before the downpour commenced at the exact same moment every day. Every now and then, a figure would be seen darting across the walkways, moving fast enough to stay out for the least amount of time while also refraining from slipping. Every structure stood elevated on many legs above the rippling waters; each one had two clear lines worn in them: one when the tide was low and the other when it was high; the top line was where the water level lay.

The inn was both close enough to be a part of the village and yet far enough to be considered isolated. With no bridges, the only way to reach it was by boat, which were all tied on a port lined by its entrance. Four boats lined the walkway – the most recent belonged to the frog boatman who was inside the inn, sat on a heightened stool with a glass in hand.

On the upstairs floor overlooking the bar, a freshly brewed fire flickered within a fireplace that had seen much use. Asgore and Toriel sat in two comfy armchairs facing the inviting flames. It reminded Toriel of the old days in her old home, reading her many books over and over with the sweet smell of pie wafting from the kitchen.

The patter of rain against roof was a sound neither of them had heard in a long time. Ghostly air surrounded the spindly fingers reaching up from submerged grounds, visible from a balcony door welded shut with rust and mildew.

“I know I’ve been locked in the Underground for a long time,” Asgore commented, staring outside, “but I don’t remember the weather changing this rapidly.”

“I do not know, Asgore,” Toriel said as she reached for her glass on the circular table between them. “Remember that one time along the coasts of Scotland?”

In their youths, in a time before the war, the couple were quite the nomads, travelling the lands and meeting new cultures. How different they were back then, how naïve they were to life and clueless to the events to come that would shape their very lives to this day. Asgore even shaved in those days, only when it was fashionable to do so depending on the lay of the land. Fun fact: his blonde beard hairs reverted to white whenever they were the same length as his fur.

During their travels, they set foot along one of the many coasts of the island. Cold air and colder waters, not as frigid for people with pelts as thick as theirs, under the pelts they wore back then. Scotland was home to such fascinating landscapes, an interesting culture, and a very friendly yet shy monster living in Loch Ness. That particular morning seemed to be a typical one, with grey overcast skies and a slight breeze.

Asgore leaned back. “How could I?” he reminisced as he recalled the exact moment the heavens opened, dropping a torrent on the couple. The tree they huddled under was not the greatest form of shelter but it was better than nothing. “We became quite the pair of drowned rats.” He chuckled as he reached for his glass also.

Both pint tumblers bubbled with Toxin Water. Toxin was an acronym (tasty oxygenated xylitol isotonic crystalline) and it was a forced one at that. Asgore and Toriel were probably the only two people with the courage to try it. The bar did not serve tea and the two needed their minds clear for when they arrived at the castle. The boatman was so generous to buy them the means to wet their whistles while the rain did its thing. Honestly, for the free ride, Asgore and Toriel should be the ones
buying, but the frog insisted for such a lovely, charming person. The lady was nice too, he supposed.

Sitting around and waiting for the downpour to pass made the couple itchy, knowing that while they lounge around in a cozy pub with a warm fire and cold drinks, their child could be fighting for their very life. They could be lost. Alone. Cold. Hungry.

Toriel brought her drink down on the coaster which bore the rings of a thousand moist glasses before rubbing the sleeves on her upper arms. Asgore took notice as his wife tried to imagine Frisk on her lap as they read an enjoyable story.

“I know.” Asgore glanced back at the patio window. Outlined in the mist was the castle the two of them had been heading towards since their arrival. It was the closest he had seen it, now a giant on the horizon. The remaining journey there was perhaps no more than an hour away, and now the rain had impeded their progress. “Can’t wait to meet this fellow…” he whispered loud enough for Toriel to catch before he took a swig of his fizzy water.

“Yes. I too cannot wait to meet the ruler of a monster kingdom who wants the soul of an innocent child,” Toriel said cynically. “Wait a minute, I do not need to. I already have.”

Asgore swallowed his mouthful down hard, gripping his glass tighter. “Must you always bring that up…?”

“On the contrary, I believe we have put off this subject for too long, Dreemurr.”

“What more is there to talk about? Look, I admitted that I was wrong. What more do you require?”

“Assurance,” Toriel retorted. “We may live under the same roof and you have agreed to be a father figure to Frisk, but after everything done, I am still afraid of the risk you pose. If you were so eager to hurt Frisk in the past, how do I know you will not in the future?”

Asgore shot her a most disgusted expression. He set the glass down before he could shatter it.

“Toriel, how can you accuse me of such things? I have no desire to hurt Frisk – I never wished to hurt anyone in the first place.” He closed his eyes. “You and I both know what it’s like to go from having everything we’ve ever wanted to having nothing, all in one day. I was angry, I was desperate, I just wanted our children back again, and I did things, said things that I am not proud of. I am not asking for forgiveness. All I ask is that you understand it from my point of view.”

“You condoned the murder of children, innocents whose only crime was falling into the Underground when it all could have been avoided. How can I possibly understand that?”

“I had little choice in the matter. Regardless of what you and I lost, I was still king, I had the entire Underground to think about. Subjects to look after. Morale to keep high. They all looked up to me for guidance, hope, so I gave them what they needed.”

“You gave them false hope.”

“You gave them false hope. It was either that or plunging the Underground into despair.”

Toriel continued to scowl, not moved by his words in the slightest.

“You think it was easy?” Asgore continued. He hunched forward, leaning closer to the fire. Flickering, orange light dazzled in his eyes. Vague images of better days danced within those flames. Golden flowers. Hot tea. Laughter. Lots of laughter. “I bared the entire Underground’s burdens all on myself and myself alone – I could never have dragged you into it. I took all the pain so that no one else had to. You have no idea how hard that was, Toriel… because you weren’t there.”
“I could not have been, Asgore. There was no way I could stand by your side after what you deemed acceptable. When you took to that stage and declared war on humanity, announcing to the entire crowd that all humans who fell down were to be killed, it was as if you became a different person.” Toriel stared at the fire also. “The man I loved… Gorey… King Fluffybuns… he was gone, and all the moments we shared meant nothing anymore.”

Through the excited blaze, Toriel watched from behind the curtain as the King of the Underground stood before his loyal subjects; their bodies crammed in to one tight space, coming from all four corners of their world: Snowdin; Waterfall; Hotland; New Home. He brushed aside his purple cape to raise his mighty trident. He announced a new policy, effective immediately: humans were the enemy and any who fell down into their home were to be treated as such. King Asgore added that there were going to be drastic changing, including a draft to form their own military and sentry posts.

The Queen of the Underground hoped the citizens would see through his façade, realise how monstrous such a policy was, and respond with heckling chants and the throwing of rotten fruit. Instead, her soul was torn apart to the sound of cheering; all monsters made hungry for human blood. The kind, simple man she loved roared with anger as hot as fire. She could watch no longer.

When King Asgore was finished, he marched off stage to find his wife – the one piece of family he had left – gone, leaving only her golden crown discarded on the stone floor.

“I lost the man I loved that day,” Toriel said.

“And I lost you as well, Toriel,” the broken king responded. “It wasn’t Chara’s death that almost broke me. It wasn’t Asriel’s either. It was losing you that pushed me to the breaking point. You were the last good thing I had left in my world, and after you vanished, I had nothing. I was nothing. Being king was the only reason for me to exist… the one purpose I had left, and now that is gone.”

Solemnly, Asgore rose and stepped over to the patio, giving the Emperor’s fortress another hard look. The person who occupied the throne within those walls had a story of his own, an origin to how his hatred of humanity manifested, and Asgore reckoned there lay many similarities to his own. The coolness in the air sapped the heat persisting on his fur.

“Look. I’m sorry, Toriel, but…” Asgore faced his wife. The dim greyness hued the linings of his frame. “I am not sorry.”

This got a stunned look out of Toriel. “What?” she breathed.

“I look back on everything that happened. The loss. The pain. The misery. My terrible actions. My cowardice. And if I had a chance to relive those days… I would not change any of it. If I had to bare all the pain ten times over, then I would do it all again.”

Toriel slowly rose. “Asgore… how can you say such things…?”

Asgore took a few short, confident steps over. “Because it made me the person I am today. It’s the reason why the barrier was destroyed. It’s the reason why we have returned to the surface. It’s the reason why we have a child once more.” Despite knowing everything he had been through and all the mistakes he made along the way, he managed to smirk. He took Toriel by the hands, cupping his over hers. “It’s the reason why we’re going to get them back, together.”

Toriel looked away, unable to face her husband or return his enthusiasm. “If I had the chance to turn back time,” – she slipped her hands free from Asgore’s fingers – “I would change everything: Chara and Asriel’s deaths; what you became; the ruling against humans; the lives lost along the way. Even if it meant we died without ever seeing the sun again, I would be happy to have those days back.”
Asgore’s smile faded. “That is why you returned to our old home, is it not?” he asked.

“I guess I should not be surprised,” Toriel replied, making eye contact. “The Underground was a small place; the ruins even smaller. There were only so many places to go.”

Asgore said, “Toriel, I think I deserve to know what happened down there.”

What happened after Toriel fled the imposing metropolis of New Home, carrying in her arms the bundled, lifeless remains of the first human child, was such a complicated story for her mind to handle. Chara did not deserve to remain in the King’s clutches, locked within that coffin forever. Just like how monsterkind sent off their loved ones, so did humanity. Chara got a decent burial as far away from the troubles that plagued New Home as possible, in the spot at the end where light from the surface shone through. Toriel returned to pay their respects every so often, and eventually, flowers bloomed on their final resting place. A sign that even beauty can blossom in the wake of tragedy.

So much and yet so little happened upon her return to the first home, where all of them – herself, Asgore, Asriel, Chara – spent the greatest years of their lives before braving the trek back to the cusp of the barrier. Where does she begin?

“I needed to get a far away as possible,” Toriel explained. It sounded more like a confession.

“Far away from me?” Asgore asked.

“From everything. New Home held too many memories. Bad ones.” Toriel faced the fire and saw the same orange glow that ordained the mantle of her previous house. “And it was the one place where the first human was found. I knew that if any more humans were to fall down, it would be there. I walked through the ruins more times than I can remember and encountered only a handful over all those years…”

Toriel closed her eyes and hugged her body as their youthful faces returned to her, one by one.

The boy with the apron, who loved to cook, was always so kind-hearted and gentle. The pies never tasted as sweet or as crumbly after he left.

The ballerina girl, always so honest and graceful in both body and principle. Toriel heard a passing rumour that a child of the same description was found in Waterfall a couple days after she passed the door.

Then there was the most inquisitive boy she had ever seen, always so knowledgeable on what he knew and curious on what he did not know. There was an interesting story regarding how Gerson came across a torn notebook and a badly damaged pair of jam jar glasses while in the garbage dump. He could not remember.

That girl with the beautiful red ribbon was such a patient little trooper. She stayed with Toriel the longest and appeared ready to settle in permanently until, sadly, it was discovered that the ruins were not the safest place for a human child to play in.

The boy who dreamed of being a sheriff when he grew up was always seeking out wrongs to put right and bad guys to prove wrong. Toriel regretted telling him about the King; that mentality was what urged him to leave the safety of his new home, seek out this tyrant, and put an end to his diabolical reign. He reached the castle’s doorstep before his resolve clicked as empty as his gun.

The tough kid with the bandanna who possessed a bottomless pit for courage was the last child to fall down before Frisk did. His bravery only got him so far, though. Someone slain him sheer minutes
after he left the ruins.

Toriel lingered behind the door, wondering whether or not to pass through and confront the world that had forgotten her. Six children had fallen down. Six children she tried and failed to protect. Six children were dead. Their souls resided in the king’s possession, awaiting a seventh. One more soul was all that was needed to destroy the barrier, meaning the sacrifice of one more human was required. One final human from the surface would eventually fall down to their world; it was inevitable, and each day she squandered was one day less she had to prepare.

By revealing her face to the world, Toriel would in turn confront those who followed King Asgore’s commands. The thought made her hands tremble inches away from the door. She tried to picture the faces of those who killed those children, but dreaded how she would act upon meeting them, upon breaking her own self-imposed exile.

She worried and made excuses to herself. What if another human had fallen into the ruins right now? She needed to be there to guide him or her to safety. Did she remember to turn off the stove? Was there a burning smell in the air or was it just her? She was no spring chicken, there was nothing wrong with being forgetful in her old age. Speaking of which, did she remember to sweep under her armchair when she cleaned up last week? Her bed, also? Dust always accumulated the most under there.

And then two distinct taps rattled from the other side, accompanied by two little words…

“Knock knock.”

She opened her eyes and almost said who’s there. She had returned to the moment of time inside the inn. Rain speckled against the glass and a gust creaked the foundation. “I thought I could protect them,” Toriel whispered.

“Protect them?” echoed Asgore.

“Against the policy. Against the monsters. Against you. I tried to keep them safe, show them the best love a mother could give, but their love of the surface was greater than mine.”

Asgore went anguished. “You tried to be a mother to them…?” Suddenly, it all made sense. “Through all my anger, I had to face the truth that the pain would never go away, that I would ultimately learn to cope with it. But I dealt with it in the worst way: I refused to move forward and chose to root myself in the past, refusing to acknowledge the terrible things that had happened, refusing to acknowledge that you weren’t there anymore, believing that it would all come back one day. So you see, you weren’t trying to protect any of them… not really. You were just like me, trying to live in the past. Perhaps we are more similar than we initially thought.”

“Asgore…” Toriel said in a low growl. “Do not even dare comparing me to you…”

“Neither of us could handle the future we faced,” he persisted. “The only difference is you chose to run from it, thinking that not being involved would make you the better person.”

“Dreemurr…”

“Admit it. We had the perfect family, and when disaster struck, we both buried our heads in the sand and pretended like nothing was wrong, that all these problems would just go away on their own.” He stabbed his finger downward. “I woke up in that castle every day, wrote the same thing in my diary, and kept the flowers tended wishing that a family would come to me instead of going out there and making one. Just how you woke up in our old home every day, searched the ruins, and kept a bed
ready wishing that one day you’d have a child of your own who would call you ‘Mom’.”

Toriel was shaking. Sadness and fury brewed deep inside her. “I am warning you, Dreemurr…”

“Did you really care for those children better than I did…?” Asgore knew what he was about to say would hurt both of them. “Or were you just that desperate to be a mother again?”

No words. No thoughts. Toriel lashed out. She did not think to do it, her body simply reacted. Her body whipped around, swinging an open palm directly into Asgore’s waiting cheek. He saw it coming a million miles away and yet chose to do nothing but take it. The slap was quick, sharp and painful; Asgore reacted with a silent turn of the cheek. The strike left it feeling hot and prickly. He deserved it, and, honestly, it was well within her right.

Down below, the patrons went quiet as the whipping crack drew all eyes upwards to the balcony above. The few monsters huddled around the bar paid the arguing pair a couple of seconds before returning to their drinks. None of their business. Among them, the frog boatman frowned as he reached back for his glass of grog water.

He shared a glance with the bartender and said, “Dirty laundry,” before swigging the remaining traces and sliding the glass over. “This stuff’s flat. When did you last change the keg?”

The bartender took the empty, cloudy glass and tipped it under the beer tap. “Lots of dirty laundry,” he agreed as he pulled on the handle. “And I changed it five minutes ago.”

After allowing the pain to pass, Asgore’s soft eyes – devoid of anger – lay upon Toriel’s. “Did you do that to Frisk, too?”

Toriel clutched the hand that struck him. She gripped the wrist tightly, refraining it from lashing out again.

“I did not… I did not wish to… I thought I knew what was best for them…”

“You did.” Asgore said. “Why?”

“I was desperate. I was lonely.” Her own actions burst to life in the flames. What happened between herself and Frisk was uncalled for. Waves of fire went forth from her palms. Frisk dodged the blasts, occasionally taking a few. “I was scared. I thought I was scared of what might happen had you gotten a hold of Frisk.” She slumped back down in her chair and witnessed in the licks of flame the sweet cuddle she gave the child before she let them go. “When all this time I was truly frightened of being on my own again.”

Asgore saw the orange glint in Tori’s eyes, then took his seat beside her.

“Out of all the children who ventured through the underground,” Asgore said, “Frisk was the only one who reached me. The first time I ever laid eyes on them, I…” Pause. “They kind of look like Chara, don’t they?”

Toriel nodded slowly, remaining fixated on the fire. “I have also witnessed glimpses of them in Frisk…”

Asgore took his glass and held it a foot off the table. “We both messed up, didn’t we?”

Toriel grabbed her glass off the worn beermat. “Royally,” she replied as she glumly clinked glasses with her ex.
Together, the two guzzled the rest of the fizzy water in one go and slammed their empties back down simultaneously.

Asgore savoured the bubbly tickle on his tongue until it dispersed a couple seconds later; the taste not long after. This was the longest conversation both he and her have had since they exited the Underground, progress into rekindling some form of compromise between them hopefully had been established, and yet the fire still burned and the rain pelted from outside those walls. So much had changed between them, as boss monsters, but the world around them progressed how time always did. The patrons below, huddled around the bar telling stories and passing rumours, had problems and demons of their own that meant the Outerworld to them, and were completely unrelated to theirs.

After minutes of silence, Asgore broke it. “Toriel,” he said, “I look upon you and I still see the woman I loved. Still love. I know those days are over, I know you are not perfect, and I know you have made your fair share of mistakes, but none of that changes how I feel about you.” He faced her. “Even after all that has happened, you are still the Queen of the Underground to me. I understand your actions, but why can you not understand mine? Why can we not leave the past behind us and start again with a clean slate?”

“Some things are not so easily forgotten, Asgore,” said Toriel. “I want to believe that the man I loved is somewhere in there, but… every time I gaze upon you, all I see is what you became all those years ago.”

The former queen remembered the look on Asgore’s face, shortly after Frisk had flew away to the heavens and as she hysterically scoured the books in the living room. She looked back in anger as her former husband looked upon her with those soft eyes.

Just for one second, she did not see the whelp she despised. She saw him. Gorey.

I miss you, she thought. I still miss you.

The downpour riddled the ground, making it moist and slick. The soldiers had a colossal task ahead of them as they heaved the prisoner transport over the rising hills. The incline was the hard part. At the peak stood a service elevator that led up to Highkeep Enclave. Once they were up there, and the rain had ceased, then it was smooth sailing the rest of the way.

The wheels of the heavy cart and each iron step sank into the earth. Even with the extra pullers up front being rotated every so often, the task seemed herculean in scope. Every effortful tug budged the cart by a foot.

“Pull, men,” Colonel Fisher barked from the side-lines. “Pull!” She could barely register her own voice under the jangle of raindrops around her helmet, which sounded like nails against a tin roof. Leftover morsels of grub ran down the canals of her soggy cape, piling extra weight onto her shoulders.

Knowing his colonel would not hear him – he could not hear his own thoughts – one of the pullers muttered, “That’s easy for you to say. You’re not the one pulling.”

Thankfully, Fisher did not hear that. “Ten more minutes, then you can catch a breather in the service lift.”

Colonel Fischer glimpsed inside the solid cart at the prisoner in tow. Undyne sat snug, safe and dry within with one foot bent over her knee and her handcuffed hands resting behind her head. Never before had Fischer seen someone so confident in their capture, although that could be because she
had the means to escape at any time, and since none of the troops could stop her even if they tried, they were essentially transporting a dragon in a bamboo cage.

Oddly enough, it was quite apparent that Undyne had gotten the better end of the bargain by being the prisoner. She was sheltered and the moist ground made the cart roll smoother than usual. Not to mention the troops were the ones escorting her while she got to kick back and relax, so this was a free ride for her.

Fischer approached the grated window. “Don’t get too comfortable in there, scum,” she said. A quick glance to her troops informed her that no one else was within earshot. “Seriously though, don’t get too comfortable. You’re in a prisoner transport, not a luxury carriage. At least try to look the part.”

“Oh, trust me, I’m fuming on the inside,” Undyne replied, switching her crossed legs. “I like the rain; there was only one freaking spot in the whole Underground where I could experience an imitation of it. Now, I’m in the middle of another fake downpour and I can’t even enjoy that from inside here. You have no idea how much this makes me want to punch someone in the face.”

“That’s good,” Fischer said. She pulled her visor up and pressed her lips between the bars. “Not the face punching part, that’s a five hundred cloud coin fine and a hundred hours of community service. Build that frustration. Display it. Remember, you’re looking at a hundred years of hard time in the castle dungeon.”

Undyne pulled her hands in front of herself; the shackles keeping the wrists an inch apart. “Gotcha!” she said, then proceeded to stand up, hunching to prevent herself from hitting the low ceiling. “You might wanna stand back for this.”

Without any warning, Undyne threw her shoulder into the cart door. Fischer fell back as the entire transport shunted to the side; the opposite wheels slopping out the thick muck which technically could not be called mud. The crash swung all heads over, along with fears of her escaping her hold. The cart stood balanced and motionless on two wheels for a couple of seconds before it fell back on all fours with a crunching jolt. Undyne punched, kicked, and threw obscenities around the cramped interior, rigorously rattling it back and forth.

All men stopped what they were doing and surrounded the cart, pushing on all sides to keep it from shaking and toppling. Undyne made a show of her defiance for a few minutes before going still and quiet, like a caged animal. Of course, if she really wanted to escape, she had the key, but none of them knew that – except for the colonel.

Breathing heavily, the soldier next to Colonel Fischer chimed in. “I’d hate to be the one to fish her out of there when we get to the castle.”

“I don’t even want to think about how she’ll act once we get her inside the dungeon,” another added, paying special notice to the large dents made from the inside. “Can the doors really hold her?”

“They better,” Colonel Fischer responded. Undyne’s outburst may have been a little overboard, but the colonel was confident she had made her point. “Snap to it, we’re almost there.”

Over the hill, the large rise of the elevator shaft stretched upwards, carving through the rock which hung below Highkeep Enclave. The large, rectangular entrance and ramp were within range, no more than five minutes away.

Reluctantly, the men stepped back from their perimeter around the cart, afraid that the captive might kick off again, and seized the reigns up front, continuing the hike.
“Hey, uh, Colonel?” a grunt beside Fisher got her attention. “Is it me or does this rain feel different somehow?”

Fischer rose her gauntlet and extended the fingers, feeling trace amounts as the raindrops landed against metal and chainmail. She unbuckled her glove and pulled it off, exposing her white-skinned hand and purple fingernails to the element.

She winced. The grunt was right. There was something different about the routine downpour today. As a member of the Monster Military, they strived on being one above the weather conditions. Whether rain or shine, day or night, the military were always on duty and at maximum effectiveness as a fighting force. Fischer, along with the rest of the troops, had been out in the rain more times than she could care to remember.

Today, the rain felt bitter, more so than normal. Harder. Fiercer, like the calm before the storm.

Perhaps this was the perfect weather for the rebellion to unravel their plans.

Meanwhile, in Haze’s hidden laboratory, his new guests were quite surprised at the turn of events…

“You’ve got to be kidding me!” cried Alphys, exasperated. “Frisk was right here and we missed them by a minute?” Stuck in her panic, she paced around the room, spiky neck frills gripped with sweaty claws. “If only we gotten here sooner…! If only… If only…”

“Hey. Relax and look on the bright side,” Barb responded, temporarily stopping the doctor’s panic. “A second later and I would’ve kicked you three to the moon.” This did not help. Alphys continued as agitated as ever.

The audience remained glued to their seats, talking amongst themselves and dumbstruck by what to do. Their chosen one had abandoned them, their means of salvation missing, and now the secret meeting – which no one else but a select gathering knew about – had been crashed by a trio of monsters claiming to be Frisk’s companions. In the realm of the Outerworld, it usually took a decade or two for the next strange thing to occur, and then, in this case, everything comes together within the span of ten minutes.

Alphys tried, but was unable to contain herself. Once more, Frisk, the child she was trying to find and save, had slipped from her grasp at the last second. If only, she thought. If only… I got here sooner. If only I held on for longer. What would Gori think? What would Tori think?

“The kid’s still gotta be close by,” Sans intervened. “Just point us in the right direction and we’ll…” – he reached into an inside pocket of his blue jacket and pulled out a red bottle with a picture of a tomato on the label – “ketchup.”

Ba dum pish!

The attempt to lighten up the mood was met with a slew of mixed reactions. Some monsters groaned. Some giggled. Professor Haze was as stoic as stone. Sam an’ Rita could not decide whether to laugh or not.

“Sorry,” Sans said, winking, “I couldn’t resist.”

“Reaching for the lowest hanging fruit, Sans?” Papyrus said, displeased at hearing more than the average amount of puns for one day.

“Nope,” Sans responded. “This fruit was already in my pocket when I reached for it.” He stuffed the
bottle back and then pulled back the other half of his jacket to reveal a green bottle with a pickle printed on the face jammed inside the second inside pocket. "You know how much I relish a good joke."

_Ba dum pish!_

That time, more groaning than laughing came from the crowd. His jokes were already overstaying their welcome. Someone better shut that short stack up before he pulled another bottle from out a sensitive spot.

Now, it was Alphys’s turn to shout out. "I-I-I swear, Sans, can you please j-just take this seriously for one—"

Professor Haze brought his cane down. "Enough!" His booming voice and the sharp clash dialled everything down to zero. "This talk is getting us nowhere. The paths leading out from here are innumerable; Frisk could’ve taken any one of them. Your chances of finding them on foot are slim, at best."

"But you had them here just a minute ago," Alphys said to the other monster of science and technology. "Surely, you have some way of finding Frisk again!"

"How else do you think I found them in the first place?" Haze already started shambling out the room. It was fortunate Barb stopped before she could kick down the perfectly functional door, although he had no plans on remaining there for much longer. "This way. Hurry!"

"P’fessor," Rita called out, stopping Haze in his tracks. "Don’t mean to be a pain in the behind, but shouldn’t we be a bit more worried by our uninvited guests?"

Haze looked over his shoulder at the three monsters: a podgy, nervous train wreck of a doctor (the lab coat gave her away), a skeleton who could not take things seriously, and the other pile of bones dressed for Halloween who gazed fixatedly at the blaring stage.

Papyrus shouted in his outdoor voice, "You guys running a TV show here?" He spoke as if he expected Mettaton himself to strut out from behind the curtain and open his act with, from his album, song number seventeen powerfully and profoundly named: _You’re a Lousy Worker, Burgerpants_. Mettaton was sick that day.

Sam answered, "You could call it that."

"Ah, wowie!" Papyrus rubbed his gloved hands together and rattled his bones. Some members of the audience cringed at the sound, having never seen or heard bones in their lives – except on television. "What’s it called?"

Haze responded dryly, "Never considered a name much. How about _Commence Attack on Castle Highkeep otherwise we all Die in a Cataclysm of Devastation Proportions?_"

Papyrus paused and squinted. A title like that does not roll off the tongue naturally. Thankfully, Papyrus did not have one. "Caochowadiacodp?" He pronounced it ka-o-chow-ay-de-a-cod-p. "Is that a one-off special or a pay-per-view?"

"It’ll only happen once and cost you a lot more than the contents of your wallet." Haze replied, then gave Rita a scowling look while shaking his head. These uninvited guests – especially with subjects such as these – were the least of their concerns right now. And with that, Haze stormed out, returning to the solitude of his lab.
Barb was next, followed shortly after by Rita an’ Sam, then Rickard. Sans was the next to exit the stage room, ushering his associates to follow. The remaining audience were reluctant; the best they managed was to rise from their seats and form a blockade by the door. All eyes peered in at the cold, unloving interior that was Haze’s laboratory.

Professor Haze approached one of the many screens that littered the lab; only he knew what each of them was assigned to. Barb, Sam, Rita, and Rickard remained near him. Alphys, Sans, and Papyrus remained somewhere in the middle, soaking it all in.

The sight of the floors, walls, and technology spaced around reminded Alphys too much of her own laboratory, abandoned within the deepest, darkest, hottest recesses of the Underground. There was more to that place than just a few hundred hunks of machinery and some obsolete video tapes; it was the roots to her entire life. The Underground was her childhood; the place she was born in, raised in, and expected to die in. Her lab was where the highest and lowest moments of her life happened. Her biggest successes and greatest failures happened within those walls, away from the eyes of the world. What happened should have stayed in the Underground and yet they did not, for those monsters now roam the surface of the Earth for everyone to see and the experience would continue to exist within her memories and nothing she could do would ever change that.

After hooking his cane on the side, the professor dialled on the interface before him, scanning through feeds on the screen. Alphys had to guess that he had a surveillance system throughout these lands, just like the one she had to keep track of Frisk’s movements.

When Alphys glanced at her screen on that faithful day and witnessed Frisk exiting the ancient door to the ruins, she nearly choked on her frozen yoghurt. She nearly died a second time when the human child literally stared into the camera as if looking straight at her, knowing that she was watching their every move.

And she did.

“Don’t move, child,” Alphys whispered at the giant screen as she curled up in her chair and tucked her hands against her chin. The child was behind the lamp shaped like them, and Papyrus was… being Papyrus. “Oh my god, don’t move a muscle. Don’t let Papyrus catch you.”

“Let’s see. If the child moved a few steps forward…” Alphys had her head down, jotting down hastily on a piece of paper. The human had reached the invisible electricity maze, and she got to working out how to overcome it. “Then up, right twice, then straight down…” She looked up. Then they would – oh wait, they’ve already solved it.”

“No, no,” Alphys shouted and pointed at her monitor as if the child, now in Waterfall, would suddenly hear them. “Stand there and push four bridge seeds out! No, not there! You can do it!”

She needed to turn away from the monitor and go down into her laboratory. It was lunchtime for the Amalgamates. She was sure the task would be done before the human confronted Undyne. That she absolutely had to see.

Alphys stepped out of the elevator. Light on. She went to return to his computer… and there they were. The human. No longer on the opposite side of a screen, but standing in her path.

The rest was history.

Professor Haze scanned through the video feeds in the vicinity around his hideout, expecting to swiftly cross the child’s route in seconds. However, to his surprise, each camera turned out a haze of green and grey as it rushed past.
“What in Outerworld?” Haze blurted. He switched the screens only to find the same everywhere he went. He switched to the populated treetops to find the falling leaves at its worst. Monsters running for cover, seeking shelter from the blizzard.

The others were at the professor’s side, just as shocked as he was.

“What… is that?” Former Master Scribe Rickard muttered.

“It’s rainin’ leaves!” Sam said. “Leaves everywhere.”

Rita pointed. “Look at the bark! It’s turning grey! Has it ever done that before?”

Barb the Bounty Hunter shook her head. She knew every nook and cranny of these lands. “Never. None of us have ever seen anything like this…”

Haze shifted over camera after camera. “This is a little earlier than expected.” Everywhere he looked in the Forest, it all came up the same. At this rate, all the leaves would be at the dark floor and those thousands upon thousands of branches would be left bare and grey before the day was over. “What is going on here?”

Alphys looked around the laboratory that was not hers. About twenty feet to Haze’s left stood a chalkboard laden with rows over rows of white numbers. She recognised every single symbol. Judging by the fading in the lines, those writings had been up for quite some time.

“What’s these equations?” Alphys asked.

Without tearing his eyes away, Haze answered, “They’re my calculations on how much magic this world has until it runs out.”

Great. Even more bad news for Alphys to lug. “W-what do you mean this world is running out of magic?”

“There’s no time to explain, especially to any of you. Once the magic dies, so do we.” Professor Haze waved his free hand out as if grasping for an object that wasn’t there. “Just keep quiet and your hands to yourself while you’re here.”

All four of Alphys’s eyes scanned the digits, and it did not take long for her to spot an anomaly. Right then, she stopped thinking, stopped talking, stopped worrying, and simply acted. The board was high up, so she pulled up a conveniently placed stool. A few nibs of weathered chalk rested in the holder; she took one and jumped straight in, replacing numbers and writing new ones within the gaps. She was once more the scientist, and the white lab coat on her back cemented that fact.

Sans followed her lead, drawing himself closer to the other side of the board. “Now that there just ain’t right.” Working up the effort, he grabbed himself his own piece of chalk and began work on a separate segment of numbers. A nod between himself and Alphys confirmed that they were both on the same page. Underneath his lazy demeanour and shabby presentation, lay a brilliant mind.

Papyrus, not wanting to be left out, grabbed two pieces of chalk and got to work on an empty spot in the bottom left hand corner, hunching his lanky frame down so that his head was between his knees.

Rickard watched as the three newcomers desecrated the chalkboard against Haze’s wishes. Should he tell the professor, or should he not? “Professor…? Those three are…” Then he realised there was little point. Haze was too engrossed in the cameras to care.

Meanwhile, a few cameras returned grey, mizzled static. “It’s no good,” Haze conceded, “I can’t find
them. Cameras one-eight-two, three-three-nine, and seven-eight-four are down. This is most disturbing…” Haze turned away from the monitor in troubled thought and realised that the trio of strangers were slashing away at his delicate display of mathematics. “What do you think you’re doing?” he snapped, breaking the doctor out of her trance.

Alphys jumped and span around, her glasses slipped askew on her nose. Her claw fumbled the chalk piece and it broke in two upon hitting the ground; one half rolled beneath the board. Sans took his time finishing off a correction before calmly replacing his white marker where he found it. Papyrus continued to brush away with his two hands.

Doctor Alphys stuttered, “S-s-sorry, I-I saw an-an e-error and… and I just couldn’t help but—”

Haze limped forward and pointed with his cane. If anything, her measly explanation fuelled his annoyance. “Error? Get down from there!” he shouted, and she complied without question. Haze looked upon the workings he made over the years, all tarnished with fresh lines which stood out from the dull ones. The taller skeleton obviously had not heard him. “Get away from that, right now!”

Papyrus, finally noticing, scooted back to reveal his addition to the complicated columns of sums: a sketch of himself. The proportions were correct, featuring his trademark grin, except he sported a pair on sunglasses and had bulky biceps and a six-pack. The drawing of himself was also drawing a sketch of himself, who in turn was also drawing a stick figure who vaguely resembled himself.

“My contribution,” Papyrus said proudly while rising, “is easily the most encapsulating thing on this board. You’re welcome.”

Haze opened his mouth, prepared to let loose another angry remark when the lenses of his spectacles focus on the altered calculations, damming the words in his throat.

Papyrus interpreted his astonishment wrongly. “My finest work yet.”

The Professor read the first line, summed it up in his head, and realised that it was correct.

“…Oh no…” Haze read the next line, and then the next, and then the next. “No…” After reaching the bottom, where the total equated to, he discovered it to be wrong. “No…!”

Hastily, he rubbed out the total and scribbled what it really added up to. After which, he stumbled back, dropping his chalk to the ground alongside the doctor’s.

“Ah, yes,” Sans remarked, “the dramatically dropping stuff trope never gets old.” He glimpsed at the writing pieces lined up on the holder, then shrugged. “Why not?” He grabbed a piece and nonchalantly tossed it on the floor.

Barb looked worried. “What’s up, Haze?”

Professor Haze faced the ground, holding the back of his head with his free hand. “…I miscalculated…” His breathing was funny. The walking stick trembled. “I miscalculated. We don’t have weeks left… or days for that matter.”

Shocked gasps and scared mumbling echoed throughout the audience. Monsters turned to one another, turned to anything they suspected of having more answers to the growing list of questions and quells to their rising fears.

“Then…” Rickard dared to ask. “How long do we have?”

Haze faced them all. His eyes were empty. “Hours.”
The audience exploded into full panic. Barb rushed over and attempted to pacify them, hoping that her reputation as one of the meanest bruisers in the Outerworld would make them fall in line regardless of the little time to live all of them apparently had. If that did not work, then she had a stun dart for every single one.

This added more guilt to Doctor Alphys’s poor confidence. “I’m… I’m sorry, I…”

“Don’t be sorry,” interrupted Haze. “You did the right thing; it’s what you do as a doctor.”

Sans folded his arms in dissatisfaction. “Sure, give her all the credit,” he whispered under his breath while glancing at his corrections on his side of the chalkboard. “It’s not like someone else helped or anything.”

Papyrus waved wildly. “Hello!” he hollered, pointing at his masterpiece. “Awesomely cool drawing of an awesomely skeleton by an awesomely cool skeleton over here!” But, alas, nobody paid him any attention, dismissing his calls as those of a needy child in an adult’s body.

Sans gave his brother a much needed pat on the back. “Hey, I think it’s awesome, bro.”

“Y-yes, I am a doctor.” Alphys shared quick glances at the brothers, as if they would do something drastic upon pulling her look away. “My name’s Alphys.” She gestured to the two skeletons. “These are—”

The professor interrupted again. “I know who you are. You three mugs came up on the Empire’s watch list not too long ago.” Hundreds of years the Outerworld has remained intact, and these idiots arrived in its final hours. Haze pursed his lips. None of this could be a coincidence. “Since you’re here, you might as well make yourselves useful.”

“Make ourselves useful?” Alphys asked, feeling the familiar tingle on her brow. “How?”

Her gaze fell upon the room, upon all these machines. Would she be asked to use any of these? With a little direction, the doctor was confident that she could quickly learn the ropes.

The weathered professor cut straight to the point. “As we speak, monsters are getting ready to launch an attack on Castle Highkeep. While that is happening, I need to get in there and reach the Obelisk, which is located at its midpoint. I could do with as much assistance as possible.”


“Oh? We get to storm the castle?” Papyrus asked.

“Hold on a sec there, pal.” Sans raised his hands in protest. “This ain’t our fight.”

“I’m not asking any of you to fight,” Haze explained, “only to accompany me to the Obelisk. There, I will attempt to unlock its secrets with everything I’ve got, and stop this entire world from dying.”

Sans, Papyrus, and Alphys shared a look with one another, weighing their options. The three of them had spent the last hours darting from place to place, attempting to find the best lead possible. They probably were not going to get a lead better than this one.

Haze grumbled at their silence, figuring his reason alone would draw more concern than what they exhibited. “Or you can wait it out here.” He gestured at them with the cane. “It makes no difference to me…”

“But what ‘bout Frisk?” Sam interjected. “Don’t we need ‘em for that whole unlocking magic
thingamajig?"

Hazed faced the mummy man in the country getup. “There’s not much time. Our only hope is for me to decipher the secret myself – I still have a few ideas. And there may be a chance that Frisk could be on their way there right now…”

That confirmed it: this was the best lead they had to go on. Almost immediately after hearing that statement, Alphys said, “In t-that case, we will gladly help… if it means finding Frisk.”

“Very well then, but I must warn you all: getting into the castle will be no easy feat,” Haze began. “Fortunately, I’ve been working on a secret entrance for years; however, it will require patience and perfect timing.”

Sans stepped forward. “Or—” he tried to speak, raising a hand.

Haze continued over him, “First, we’ll take the pipes to the outskirts of the Forest, hoping the transport still works, otherwise we could be looking at a long, gruelling trip.”

“Or—” Sans still had his hand raised.

“Once we reach the outskirts—”

“Or—”

“—the attack will be well underway.”

“Or—” Sans wished he had an oar in his pocket.

“We need to skirt around the enclave’s perimeter—”

“Or…” Suddenly, Haze gave Sans a sharp glare, not liking being interrupted one bit. Nevertheless, San had his moment to talk. “You can follow me” – he pointed his thumb over to a lonely door across the room – “through that door.”

Professor Haze shook his head. The door mentioned was the utility closet; nothing except a mop, bucket, vacuum, several cans of spray, and detergent was in there.

“Anyone else got any useless ideas?” he asked to the crowd’s silence. “Didn’t think so. Now, as I was saying…”

Sans urged out a sigh and then went through the door himself, slamming it behind him.

“We can use the terrain as cover to reach the eastern wall, where the moat is at its shallowest and gentlest. The two hundredth and fiftieth brick on the fourth row up is a fake, which is step one of our entrance. And then—”

All of a sudden, the utility door swung ajar and out crashed a suit of armour. Everyone went silent with bewilderment. The helmet rolled across the floor and wobbled to a stop at the professor’s feet.

Sans appeared sheepish. “Sorry for the mess. It was the closest thing I could nab while I was in there.”

Frisk breathed heavily, even though they tried not to. The uneven ground and gangly roots did not make their movements easy. Much of the empty space around the trunks was where the garbage accumulated the most. The dicey spots underneath the colossal trees would be the easiest to traverse
had Frisk been ignorant to the tonnes of weight over them, ready to come crashing down at any
minute.

Frisk tried sticking to the outskirts, between the garbage and the tree trunks; however, the thick and
thin roots as strong as titanium made it difficult. The light shone over the gangling limbs cast
unnerving shadows. Each root would reach out and snag at the loose folds of their shirt and shorts as
if trying to entangle them in a web.

Did Frisk hear a noise just now? They held their sword and shield close.

Something was out there. Frisk knew it. Eyes were watching, following their every move. They span
the light in all directions for the eleventh time and still uncovered nothing: no spies tracking their
movements or hermits from the deep seeking better morsels than what was tossed down on a regular
basis. Garbage, dust piles and roots. Roots, dust piles and garbage.

Frisk kept moving.

Garbage, roots and dust piles. Dust piles, roots and garbage.

Frisk ducked below an opening.

Roots, garbage and roots. Dust piles, garbage and garbage.

Suddenly, Frisk stopped. Their flashlight hovered over a thick root, and for one moment, Frisk
thought they saw something other than the three aforementioned entities. After refocusing the beam,
there were a marking carved into the fake bark. A single word.

Why

Why? Such a good question at a time like this. That exact same word headed all the thoughts that
intruded Frisk’s young, naïve mind. Why did this have to happen? Why was this happening? Why
them? Why were they here? Why can’t they just go home? Why their friends? Why Flowey?

Why, Asriel, why?

Frisk pondered on how old the carving looked. It appeared ancient, probably made hundreds of years
ago, give or take. Could the one who did this still be here, or could their remains be found
somewhere in the forsaken grounds in which Frisk walked?

Regardless, it confirmed one thing: Frisk wasn’t the first person to be down here.

A few steps later, Frisk halted again. Sheer feet from the first carving lay a second.

can’t


Frisk shuffled forth, actively shining the light on the nearby roots. It did not take long to find another
word. The next word.

I

Why can’t I? Frisk had a bad feeling that they did not want to know the rest.

And then Frisk found it, and knew immediately that this was the final word in the question. It was
like the final piece of a puzzle clicking into place, and contained the same powerful force as a kick to
Frisk closed their eyes, and all four words lined up in the blackness behind her eyelids.

*Why can’t I die?*

Frisk swallowed a mouthful of saliva down their dry throat.

From behind them, Frisk heard a noise. Small and soft, but clear and coupled with garbage rattling. It was coming from behind the roots and approaching slow and heavy. Each step sounded as if they sank into the ground.

“We wonder…” The raspiest, most abrasive voice weaved its way through the gaps and into the human’s ears. Every syllable sounded agonising to say. It hurt like nails scratching on their own eardrums. “Which soul… has come to join us…?”

Frisk briefly caught the shape of a head upon shoulders before diving for cover against the foot of the thickest nearby root. The double lights would give them away. Frisk buried them into the belly of their sweater in an attempt to suffocate the light. The result was an aura that illuminated them like a lightbulb. They whispered lights off and, to their amazement, they went out instantly. Haze really did think of everything.

As Frisk’s vision went completely black and they hoped whatever was out there had not seen them. Call it a hunch, but after their meeting with the amalgamates in the true laboratory, Frisk knew they were not ready for what awaited with those grainy steps and rough voice.

Their back was against the wood and knees to their chest. Pulse racing. They breathed as slowly as possible, allowing the littlest squeaks in through the nose and samples of shaky gasps out the mouth, which may have well been alarm bells ringing. There was no human child here, nothing but a pile of trash: a broken television; a misused sowing machine; they could be anything as long as it was left alone. It held all the quaking, unnerving terror of playing hide-and-seek, but with none of the thrill.

The stranger drew closer, moving at an impressive speed in an area which was so difficult to navigate. Nothing seemed to slow his messy movements, not the roots or garbage or piles of dust.

He stopped, and all went quiet.

Frisk held their breath and waited. They waited in complete silence for as long as their lungs could hold. When no follow-up sounds, they exhaled as slowly and quietly as possible.

A sandy substance leaked onto their shoulder.

Someone spoke from behind their hiding spot. “What… is that sound… you are making?” But it was not the same person from earlier. This voice had the same unbearable scratchiness in his tone, but it was softer, younger even. “It is… familiar. Where… have we heard it before…?”

As the presence of a large being hunched around the twisted timbers, Frisk turned their head up and to the left. Their eyes had barely adjusted to make out fingers around the edge, followed by a head. Except it was too large and deformed to be considered such.

“You… we do not recognise…” A woman’s voice now, like that of a wicked witch. The figure was motionless. “In fact…”
Frisk drew in one big breath, reviving their lungs and adding further surprise to the stranger present.

…Lights on…

Both the sword hilt and shield flicked on, casting two cones of light that were quickly focused on the stranger.

“You… appear intact…” the strangers finished, unfazed by the light. “Unlike us…”

Frisk almost died right there from the shock. Grey, ashy fingers clenched the wood inches away, leaking grains the colour of steel.

From the back of Frisk’s mind, Sam spoke to them in his rustic accent. “It’s the pillar,” the mummy monster explained.

Frisk raised the flashlight.

“Its magic sustains everything…”

The monster’s deformed heads got showered in the beam, all four of them. All made entirely out of dust. Every eye locked on the human child.

“Includin’ us.”
As light from Frisk’s holstered weapons refracted off their faces, the dust – the glue to which held them together – shivered and waved as if at any moment it would collapse into lifelessness. All four heads, despite conjoined to a single body, all displayed different emotions upon discovering this small creature. 

The head poking out from the upmost point and slightly to the right, a long snouted being – a dog? A wolf? A horse? Donkey, perhaps? It was hard to tell – looked upon Frisk with curiosity. “This one… wears an odd skin,” he said.

The head beneath his – an unidentifiable mass – had dust flaking from prominent cheekbones. Well, cheeks anyways; the bones were not there. “What is it…?” she asked, squinting eyes that appeared as drawings made in the sand. “I simply cannot tell. I misplaced my spectacles… if only I could remember where…”

Slowly, ever so slowly, as not to provoke such an unnatural being, Frisk stood up and took two steps away from their lousy hiding spot, moving into the clearing to allow these grouping to better see them. They kept the lights on the dust monsters, struggling to remain on a single face before being pulled to another; all of them acting in such odd and unordinary ways.

Frisk said hello. Hopefully these monsters were of the friendly sort. Although this would not be the first time a friendly monster, or monsters, turned aggressive on this human child.

The lowest head, as smooth and featureless as the underside of a bowl – a cauldron? – widened his etched eyelids and bared flaky teeth. “It’s… it’s…” The terror built in the back of his non-existent throat. “A human!”

The faces glanced at one another, whispering that word over and over, exchanging information with themselves. The smacking of lips shook away layers, only to be replaced by more layers. Dust seeped and escaped, building in an almost endless supply on the trash scattered ground.

The monster beside the cauldron – shaped like a sock puppet – said, “Those creatures… Dunmore?” He sounded half-asleep, having never slept in a thousand years. “They walk… amongst us…? Or do we… walk amongst them?”

The monsters took one step forward, moving its ashen leg straight through a root. The thigh crumbled as it collided with the obstacle, and, from both ends of the leg, it reconnected instantly.

Dust dripped from the caldron’s head like sweat. “This cannot be,” he continued to cry, with an accent a thousand years in the making. “Their scouts have infiltrated our camp; they know where we hide!” The other heads were drawn to Dunmore, all encapsulated in sudden terror. “We have children and elderly here, who the humans deem easy targets. If this scout escapes, their armies will find us, and leave none of us alive!”

Frisk tried to plead their innocence before stepping back and tripped on a root, landing on a black trash bag full of many broken objects, now shattered under them.

“The human is attempting to get away!” Dunmore yelled. “The humans will discover the location of our camp! It must not be allowed to escape!” His shrill, nails-on-chalkboard voice reached its greatest pitch. “To arms, men! Kill this human before it is too late!”

The four heads looked at each other, and then, suddenly, they all faced Frisk in perfect unison.
“Kill human…” they mused, now as one. “Kill human… Kill human…”

Just after Frisk scrambled to their feet, the right hand of the amalgamation of dust burst outwards in a stream of grey, striking Frisk and pinning them against a cross of roots. The blast smothered the human, slamming piles of ash against their entire body. When it ended, Frisk was left shaken and hurt, covered head to toe once more in dust, now appearing as sickly grey as the quartet of monsters.

Meekly, Frisk raised the sword and shield and activated them. “Default blade activated.” The silver blade sliced through the darkness, stopping inches away from the monsters’ chest, to which the four of them reacted oddly, namely by not reacting at all. Not even a flinch.

The heads grinned and chuckled at the same time.

“You can’t kill us…” Four voices spoke as one. Without hesitation, they stepped forward before Frisk could lower their weapon. The sword sank into their chest, all the way to the handle. The monsters exhibited no signs of pain whatsoever; their focus continuously locked on the human. “We’re already dead.”

Thinking fast, Frisk thumbed a button on the hilt. “Laser sword activated.” The searing, red energy appeared excruciating as dust scorched off their wavy skin, burning a clear hole through their sternum all the way out the other side, and yet still failed to garner a single twitch. No internal organs to damage. No skin to slice. No nerves to tear.

Frisk’s thumb acted before they could process it. “Electricity blade activated.” Frisk braced themself one second too late as their sword transformed into their own tesla coil. Streaks of white flashed outwards from within the monsters’ body, breaking it down piece by piece, forming a mess of mole hills. With a few strong swings, Frisk broke them down into piles of ash; there was nary a scream as the undead monsters returned from whence they came.

From the mess made, the long snouted monster’s face formed. “That tickled,” he said, smiling.

The socket puppet looking thing rose from the biggest pile in the bunch – a satisfied smirk upon his lips. “That itch… had plagued me for five hundred years…” Two arms formed, pushing out as lumps only to form into detailed limbs with fingers and thumbs. “My thanks, human.”

As the other two swam to the surface, Frisk deactivated their sword and made their escape, shambling under roots and over mounds of trash, more concerned with getting away from this thing before it made this human child deader than they already were.

The cauldron monster, Dunmore, rose, dragging his own being out, separating himself from the rest. “Quick, form a barricade! Cut off all escape routes! Stop that scout, no matter the cost!”

From beyond the circumference of light, Frisk witnessed a lonely, grey pile ripple before two hands burst from beneath and out clawed another monster of ash, crawling out like a demon absconding the Underworld to terrorise the mortal realm – a zombie clawing its way out the grave seeking human brains. From afar, all around them, the same scratching, moaning, and shifting resounded from the darkness. It came from here and it came from there and some were accompanied by the crunch and clatter of garbage, and the scratching of dull nails against wood.

The rising figure took shape, yet the substance that compiled it shredded and leaked as it rose, not wanting to in the slightest, detesting. Shavings grew in small mounds only to be drawn back to its body, creating this cycle of which there was no end, in life or death. Ash took shape into its muscular arms and barrel-chested frame. A bullish face could scarcely be made out where the light was cast. It growled in short, dog-like huffs – a noise that, in itself, so guttural, wanted nothing more than to die.
“Rex… kill you… human…!” it growled, dragging molten legs forward. Dust dripped from his lips like saliva. “Rex… eat your heart…!”

He charged, screeching an ear-splitting, grating war cry and thundering with the speed and strength of a rhino; his body broke upon the obstacles in his path, totally uncaring for his own wellbeing and bent on annihilating this intruder to their land. Unable to run and unable to hide, Frisk, obstructed between the roots, raised their shield and the apparition by the name of Rex charged headfirst into it, exploding into a sandstorm.

When the dust literally cleared, there was an even spread of him on the ground behind Frisk, with a clean spot in the shadow from which they stood. Frisk barely had time to worry whether this being was dead or not before the thin blanket began to shuffle, forming several mounds which all grew a different part of Rex: there was his arm and over there his knee; his belly one foot away from his feet and his head resting against his shoulder.

“Rex… will rise… Always rise…” Not only did he look like someone who had lost their mind, but he sounded like someone who had lost every trace of sanity. “Rex… never rest… ‘til you dead…”

From around, more of… those things… emerged from the darkest corners of the Forest floor. The deep silence that existed before was broken by heckling, shouting, screaming, yelling, laughing, crying, hollering, and howling. They came in all shapes and sizes, dragging their sandy, powder appendages behind them, some better than others. Many were whole enough to be mistaken for monsters still alive, at least from a distance; many, many others had long lost what resemblance remained of their former selves, reduced to unidentifiable amoebas.

Suddenly, Frisk’s entire body got wrapped in something, dragging them off their feet and through the thicket. They bounced off a couple of roots before being released and tossed into a cushion of trash. Stood before the bruised human now was another of these dead monsters; as disgustingly thin as it was tall, contorted to an uncomfortable level. A long, grey strip weaved around and within its ashes. Bandages: they were no longer white, but grey and weathered from age. Dirty and clinging with dust, they wrapped loosely around it from head to toe, trailing out pulsating legs and twitching fingers. A few strands hung limp from his hands, which were used on Frisk just now to pull them here. In the unfocused light, it appeared as deathly as the Grim Reaper.

Its head bent so far to the side that it was in danger of crumbling off its neck; dust poured out the ear. It had no features, whatever was visible outside of its dreadful wrappings: no eyes; mouth; nose; anything. However, Frisk knew it was staring right at them.

It gave Frisk no time to act before the bandages rose to life, reaching out and wrapping around their body. It picked up Frisk and pulled them up into a low hanging branch before immediately throwing them back down, hard into the littered ground. Hurt, Frisk tried to crawl away, but it snatched them by the ankle and dragged them back. Frisk was held upside-down and six feet off the ground, all the blood rushing to their head, and face-to-face with the mess of dust and bandages.

“…You… aren’t invited here…” It hissed. Low. Menacing. Dangerous. “Your kind never are…”

“Honey… Dear…” came a gnarled, womanly voice from out the darkness. From behind this monster, another just like it emerged; shorter, but just as sickly thin, also sporting grey, dirty bandages. “Do you like… my new shoes…?”

“Not now… Darling…” It replied to her, speaking from a non-existent mouth, twitching its head ever so slightly. “Go back… to bed…”
“What have... you got there?” she asked.

Frisk needed to act or else they probably would not be able to in the future. With a press of the button, the sword extended and Frisk swiped it up at the bindings holding them, severing them with one swing. No sooner after they were sliced did they plummet head-first toward the ground. The female monster stretched her arms and caught Frisk with her own bandages.

“Awww...” she moaned, actual empathy laced her rough voice as she pulled the child closer. “...Poor thing... looks scared...”

The other jerked to life in a sudden fit, moving so fast that excess dust whipped off. “Don’t touch that...!” He shot more bandages out from his wrists, wrapping Frisk up like a mummy. “It’s filthy...!”

The lady pulled on her end twice as hard. “Don’t tell me... what I can’t and cannot do... Mister...!”

Between the two bickering former monsters, Frisk was pulled harshly back and forth, the bandages tight around their legs, body, arms, neck, and head. Frisk tried to move, tried to draw breath, but it was futile. Their body screamed with pain as it wanted to go in two different directions at the same time, squeezing the skin tight and cutting off the flow of blood.

Frisk cried to let them go, but their pleas were lost to the couple arguing, their pull becoming more vigorous with each tug. The male pulled, so the woman pulled with greater force, so the man pulled even harder than her, to which she responded by showing that she was merely holding back.

With what little air they had left and their vision fading, Frisk managed to get out some last words: Sam an’ Rita. Sam an’ Rita!

The pair halted as if a switch on their backs had been flipped. They ceased their fighting and faced the child caught in their tug-of-war.

“...Ri...” the man tried to say. “...Ri... Ritie...?” His arms went limp, his entire body slouched.

Frisk was released from their hold, splaying to the ground like a dead fish. Their clammy skin began to regain its colouring with the added enjoyment of pins and needles prickling every square inch. Honestly, they would have been better off dead.

“So... long ago... Long, long ago... Amazing girl... Made me proud...” Rita’s father broken voice formed larger cracks. “Miss her... so much...”

Rita’s mother was the same. “How... is she...? How is... wonderful Ritie...?”

Pulling themself off the ground, Frisk responded that she was fine and healthy, and had been a great help.

“...Marry... Sam...?” the lady asked. “Such a fine... young man... he was...”

Frisk nodded and told them the two were happily married. No kids, though.

Rita’s father broke down to the ground, gripping his featureless head. “Oh, Ritie...” He began to cry, even though he had to tears to shed. “...Ritie...” His wife pulled herself across and slumped over him, holding him tight and succeeded in merging with him slightly.

The combined noises drew closer still and a squad of the dead emerged into the compact clearing, shifting their frames in the most bizarre manners, having shed their skin, scales, feathers, fur,
elements and minerals long ago and chanted whatever tumultuous call they were accustomed to. They were so tightly packed together that they merged into a single entity, just like the one – or ones – Frisk encountered earlier.

The sword was still out, the blade a sight to behold, to be threatened by, and yet the tidal wave reacted as if it weren’t even there. Whatever common conceptions these monsters possessed in life – fear, dread, anxiety – they were gone, lost in a sea of madness.

Frisk turned and ran, rushing as fast as they could through the thickets and leaving the mummy couple to their unyielding sorrow. The advancing monsters remained at their slow, intimidating speed, knowing full well that this creature was trapped in their world with no quick means of escape. From all across the floor, dust rose and monsters awakened from their slumber – deep slumber from which they prayed for release which they feared may never come.

All around, they were closing in on the human child, tightening like a net. There was nowhere to run, but Frisk’s determination urged them on, to never give up, believing in no such thing as an unwinnable scenario and that there always existed another way, just like in the Underground. Frisk always found a way. Always. There had to be a way… they had just not found it yet.

The human pushed their way into the clearing under one of the massive trees; the low hanging ceiling still giving them chills of being crushed – a fear not even the hundreds of thousands of the undead could extinguish.

From out the side, one of them emerged. As he stood there, snickering, hissing and shuddering, another rushed over and jumped on his back, followed by a second monster, and then one more, forming a dogpile of ash which formed a larger pile of ash, at first. The pile grew into a giant body with thick arms, thick legs, and four heads merged at the top, just like the first.

Frisk pressed left on the hilt twice, switching to the blade made of ice. To their not-so-great surprise, none of the monsters reacted.

The heads squirmed at the shoulders, rotating atop one another. After a short scuffle, a bear head scrambled to the top, above the other three. “Me first,” he said. The left arm raised and the fist deformed and took the shape of a giant axe.

He swiped across with the axe made from dust, aiming high for a clean slice off the shoulders. Frisk ducked it. After the first swing, he brought it back across, this time aiming low. Frisk jumped it.

Suddenly, the right arm reached up, grabbed the bear’s head and pushed him down into the torso, allowing the head of a chicken to take its place. “My turn…! My turn…!” she insisted, now resting at the top.

She reached for Frisk with an open claw. Frisk poised the sword and jabbed the tip into the palm, freezing the arm all the way to the shoulder. The unification of dust gazed upon their frozen limb – the looks on their faces indescribable.

The chicken looked puzzled. “Wasn’t… expecting that.”

Suddenly, the other arm swung up and punched her directly from the top, mushing her head down between the others on the chest. The heads argued amongst themselves, fighting for dominance between the shoulders.

The head of a fox took her place. “This is nothing…” he said before grabbing the icy arm with the other hand and tearing it off, wielding it like a club. From out the stub, a new arm grew.
Frisk’s resolve faltered, having failed to halt this monster and unintentionally giving them a new means in which to batter them. Frisk jumped back as the monsters rose the club and smashed it down, breaking a chunk off the end.

Frisk pressed the opposite button on the hilt and reignited the fire blade; flames of brilliant red and orange licked at the darkness which expanded, scattered by the searing flames as if afraid of getting burnt by them. They swung their sword at the exact moment the monsters swung their club. The blade sliced clean through, reducing the weapon to a handle. The fox responded by gripping what was left and crushing it into shards.

The fourth head which had not had his turn yet, a rabbit, gained control of the arms and used them to grab the Fox’s head and tear him out of their combined body.

“Heads up…!” the rabbit shouted before throwing the entire handful of dust at Frisk. Frisk, not expecting that in the slightest, took a toothy grin of ash to the body, knocking them flat.

When the dust cleared, Frisk was covered in a layer of dust, and the fox was hollering away as he reconstructed himself a couple of feet away.

The giant, now with the rabbit at the wheel, stomped over to the human, looking to crush them dead. Frisk got up, turned their sword back into ice and sliced the left leg when it drew close, freezing it instantly. As the monsters lost balance, Frisk ducked past them and delivered a swift, deep stab into their back. The ice spread out, to their legs, their arms, and eventually to their heads, freezing every particle of ash into place.

“…This… sucks…” the rabbit mumbled through unmoving lips a second before their body toppled and shattered into fragments of frozen dust. No matter, the three frosted monsters still chatted away madly. Eventually, they will defrost and be back to their routine.

Frisk’s victory over this amalgamation was nothing, however, as the chanting of a thousand more descended from every direction. Turning north, monsters of the grey dust seeped through the darkness, taking their first steps into the light. South, just as many, laughing, crying and shouting. East and west, clawing closer with undead fingers – fingers that should not be there, which should exist as featureless piles of ash.

Frisk traipsed further into the centre, crushing the remains of those they had faced moments ago who could not care less, in fact oblivious to being trodden underfoot. The light revealed a metre of space at a time, closing in Frisk’s view. Every time they turned the light, the monsters were closer, their shifting bodies closer; voices closer; presence closer.

The human child was surrounded. The circle grew smaller with each second that passed. Five metres. Four metres.

Frisk brought their shield close and the sword outstretched. Three metres.

They drew one stale, stinking breath through teeth. Two me—

“ENOUGH!”

Everything stopped. All monsters snapped straight and turned to the origin of that yell. Visible from the edge of the clearing, stood one figure, as tall and straight as an arrow.

“That’s enough!” Despite being constructed from the same steely sand found amongst the garbage, he appeared the most whole. No dust leaked from his frame, and he was as shaped as a sand statue with strong arms and defined torso which may have been stronger once upon a time. Wisps of grey
that made up a crown of hair flowed around a proud face with hard eyes and a stern frown. “Kneel before your general!” the newcomer commanded. Proper authority filled his tone. “Bow before your emperor!”

Every dead monster, both the sane and insane, obeyed, dropping down to their knees or whatever could be passed as such. Among the sea of genuflection, only one figure remained standing: Frisk. The child looked upon this ‘general’ and was unable to shake one thing about him…

He looked like Emperor Maxus.

The frog boatman ascended the steps to the upper floor of the cosy inn, finding that charming goat couple comfortable before the fire; two empty glasses on the table between them. After the argument and slap from earlier, it was strange to see these two so calm and relaxed next to one another.

“Excuse me, sir and madam,” he got their attention, “we’ll be ready to go when the rain stops in exactly…” He glanced down at the waterproof watch on his wrist. “…One minute and four seconds.”

The two rose from their chairs in a reluctant fashion, taking a glance out the wide patio windows. The rain had been coming down at the exact same velocity for an hour, showing no signs of stopping. The mist remained as ominous as ever; Castle Highkeep still an eerie outline drawn in the grey.

The boatman pressed on, “Trust me. It’ll stop on the button – it always does.”

He turned to go back down to the ground floor, but stopped to wait for them. Asgore and Toriel looked at each other, remaining idle for several second.

“Shouldn’t we have coats?” Asgore asked, taking a step away from his warm chair. “No need. Like I said: it’ll stop on the button.”

Upon them all reaching the ground floor, two other monsters were positioned near the door, nursing drinks, showing to rush to leave, yet ready to exit to the outside world. The majority basically lived around the bar or whatever booth they found the most comfy for their face to rest on.

The boatman placed a webbed hand on the door handle while looking at his watch. Asgore and Toriel stood back, keeping eyes fixated on the nearest window. Seconds left until the rain stopped, these monsters so confident that it will halt on the dot, and yet the rain and the fog was just as prevalent. Would the rain really end this abruptly? The boss monsters had to see this.

“Three… two… one…” the boatman counted, and then turned the handle and swung the door open without a care in the Outerworld. Cold air invaded the cosy interior. “Okay, let’s go!” He rushed out, getting three strides down the walkway before realising it was still raining. He turned and rushed back inside the shelter, having been outside for a mere two seconds and already getting drenched down to the bone. The former husband and wife were not surprised, but confused nonetheless. What was he expecting to do by trying to predict the weather like that?

The frog boatman smiled in an embarrassed fashion and nodded his head while letting loose a hearty chuckle. “Sorry, folks,” he said, gesturing to his watch, “must be out of whack again. Couldn’t have happened at a worse time.”

Toriel glanced around the interior. “Is there a towel we can find you, or…?”
The boatman waved her off with a light heart. “It’s fine, a little water never hurt anyone.” He asked the barkeep, “What time do you make it?”

The monster behind the bar glanced at his clock and responded, “My clock must’ve gone funny also: it’s the same time as you make it. Who else has the time?”

Around the inn, patrons looked at their watches and compared times, discovering that everyone’s was the same. Spirits steeped in booze began to become restless and uneasy, heads rose off tables and bodies scattered off stools and chairs, worried talking amongst themselves as they clambered around the windows. Two minutes passed. Five minutes passed. Ten minutes passed, but the rain continued to fall.

The frog boatman’s suave personality crumbled. He took another look out the streaked glass. “This… this ain’t right. It’s well past the hour now; the rain should’ve stopped by now – it always does.”

“Always?” Asgore asked, having little clue what all the fuss was about.

“Always,” the boatman echoed. “I’ve never seen this before. If it keeps up at this rate…”

“Excuse me,” Toriel interjected, “I do not wish to bother you, but we still need to reach the castle.”

“You want to travel in that?” The boatman pointed out the cramped window.

“Did you not just say that a little water never hurt anyone?”

The frog boatman responded with a smile. “Good point. Hey, Barkeep,” he said, “got a few cloaks to spare?”

“S-sure,” the barkeep responded. He opened a nearby closet and pulled a few from a row of them, possibly kept for emergency situations or for those in a hurry. He pulled out three and threw them over.

Each one took a single cloak. They came in black and made of a slick, waterproof material; big enough to cover a large person. The boatman wrapped the cloak over his head, leaving enough trailing around him to cover three more people. Asgore and Toriel did the same, the former’s cloak looked like a tent over his large horns.

The trio, holding their covers tight, braved the harsh rain, walking carefully on the slippery path. Heavy wind battered them, attempting to push them into the murky depths. They reached their boat, took off the tarp, and sailed out. The boatman attempted to commit the same amount of tact when he always sailed, but found the rain, and the rising tides, and the cloak around his head bothersome. His technique became harsh and sloppy, just the style needed to venture through these rough waters.

In the town over, the residents were running, shouting, scared. Across the swampy island of Bob, the water level had already risen over the higher level marked out on the supports. It had already flooded into the floors of the lowest buildings and crept up the muddy banks. There was a growing tide, the likes of which none of these structures were built to handle, and it tugged on the boat.

None of them had seen anything like this. The final hours were upon them. The end of days nigh.

But… the frog boatman still had a job to do as he aimed the bow toward Castle Highkeep.
Maxus's dusty, dead double walked with full, defined legs through the scores of minions who shifted aside, occasionally into each other. Ashen soles treaded with a solidity lost on everyone. Once upon a time, these monsters who knelt to his command must have also done so in life.

Frisk half-heartedly raised the sword and shield as he approached, preparing for another fight for which they hoped their body could handle. If he wanted to talk, then he could do so from a sword's length. For all they knew, this ashen statue was just as crazy as those with their knees, bodies, and faces moulded against the bitter ground.

The lion figure halted, his body an inch from the blade tip. He appeared to give the child the benefit of the doubt.

"You and I," he directed toward Frisk, "have never met before, and yet, I think we both know exactly who the other is. Don't you, Frisk?"

The child's reaction told him that he was correct to assume their name. From the second Frisk saw him, Frisk needed only one guess to return the favour. He was the late Emperor Juhi: Maxus's dad.

Juhi appeared dishevelled by that fact. "I used to be the emperor… and I used to be Juhi, but now I'm neither, resurrected in this pitiful state. And knowing that I dragged you into this mess by saying your name as my last word makes it worse."

It was those words that made Frisk's arms go slack, aiming the sword at the ground and not at the former emperor's chest. Whether they had the rapier pointed or not, it made no difference to what they could not kill.

"Everyone, hear me now," the dead general and predecessor to Emperor Maxus announced to his equally dead subjects, raising his arms. "This human is not our enemy – they are our friend, and they are here to help. Rise."

The subjects rose, bringing their full heights into focus; some smaller, some equal, and some taller than the human child. Through their obedience and silence, whatever mode of madness gripping them still tugged at the fringes of their minds like imaginary friends fighting for the steering wheel. Monsters still chuckled madmen girth under breathless breaths, trembling the slightest twitches, and shedding ashy drops from drawn eyes.

From out the crowd, the bullish dog who earlier charged Frisk slipped through, having fully reassembled himself. His hostility already dwindled, suppressed by the return of his long lost general and friend.

"Rex… glad to have you back… General," through unyielding, constant anger, he fought to speak as humble as he could.

Dunmore joined in, his body shaking with so much pride that he left a steel breadcrumb trail. "You've been away for much too long, Emperor Juhi. Much too long."

Juhi smiled, nodded at both individuals, and placed hands on both their shoulders. "It is a pleasure to see you both again, and…" His words trailed off as someone else caught his eye.

From out the darkness, another figure of ash emerged. The rest of the nondescript herd moved aside, recognising this staggering ash as highly as that of their former general and ruler. Baring a faint
resemblance to a rat or a mouse, this one nears Juhi with ailing movements and a limp from old wounds inflicted when he lived and breathed.

"Been waiting a long... long... long time for you to come back..." the mouse said. "Been keeping everything warm in your absence..."

Juhi at first appeared sad, heartbroken, as the mouse hobbled closer. He shook his hand the same way old friends would. "Danyell... I am glad for us to be reunited again," he said, then went all around. "To be reunited with all of you is an honour. I just wish it was on better terms."

To which Danyell responded, "No one can defeat death. You are blameless, your majesty."

In the middle of all this, Frisk stood silent; the happy smiles failed to even acknowledge their existence. This particular peculiar human had been present to a host of bizarre events, from flexing to a literal, winking seahorse, to dating a skeleton, to answering quiz questions for a killer robot and cooking cake with a killer robot and posing as a news correspondent for a killer robot and acting as a stage extra for a killer robot, but witnessing a happy family reunion of the dead would be difficult to top for years to come. While it was nothing short of strange, they could not argue with the results: none of these creatures were attacking them.

"Frisk," Juhi said as he faced them, "I must apologise for the treatment you have received since your arrival. These people have been here for such a long time, and as such, are not in the right frame of mind. Many of whom were alive during the war against humans and thought you to be an enemy soldier. I do hope you understand."

Finally, confident that the danger had passed, Frisk sheathed their sword and closed the shield. While Frisk was still pretty peeved at being made a target – for the fifth freaking time today! – they tried to put themself in their dusty boots and thought that being both dead and stuck in this dark, dirty, smelly, lifeless pit for a few hundred years would drive anyone insane.

Frisk told everyone that all was forgiven.

This got a grin out of Juhi, something his only son could never do. "This Advisor wasn't wrong when he said you were something different. Any other human would still be swinging by this point," he said. "We could have used more people like you in those days. Although I thought you'd be a little... older."

Frisk winced at the sound of the title bestowed onto Flowey, forcing their mind to picture the golden flower with two black, button eyes and a mouth with a natural prowess to grin, both charmingly and sinisterly. *Kill to save?* That was Flowey's mentality now? Whatever happened to *don't kill, and don't be killed?*

"Yes, it is apparent that you and the Advisor share some history together," Juhi said. Frisk would have laughed right in his face had the gesture not been so rude. *History* was an incredibly light way of phrasing it. He went on, "I can see it in your eyes. Your closed eyes. How do you get around without opening them? Nonetheless, we have much to discuss and such little time to do so. Where is the best place to talk?"

Danyell waved over his shoulder, gesturing to all. "Follow me. There is a place."

Inside the security of his domain, Emperor Maxus paced like an impatient lion in a zoo pen. He glanced out the window for the eleventh time in three minutes; the rain failing to cease as expected. The castle walls ran dark from the humidity and the flowers of his garden had withered into tiny
husks, creating a barren, flooded wasteland where a glorious, technicoloured paradise lay yesterday. For as long as Maxus has lived on this small world, the rain had always stopped on the same hour, every day until now. The tension had spread to the souls of every man, woman, and child within his four walls. Fear was spreading through his ranks faster than wildfire, Maxus could hear it in their voices, see it in their movements, and detect a frantic quickness in their paces, and unless he could find a way to place it under control, it would develop into an unstoppable inferno which could spell the end not only to the Monster Military but to the entire Empire.

Rage simmered deep. The humans would never have this problem, no threat such as this would ever dare to break the human ranks, just him and his army of monsters receiving the short end of the stick as usual. It wasn't fair. Never was.

Maxus was angry enough to lash out at the next thing he came across, living or otherwise, and not feel a pang of guilt afterwards.

From the crack in the door, a soldier in a shiny helmet poked his head through and said in a frightened, shrivelled voice, "Your majesty."

Emperor Maxus glared at the soldier who was at the wrong place at the wrong time. Just the very sight of his face set off alarm bells in Maxus's dangerously short wick of a temper. He did not like the way the soldier was staring at him. The sheen from the helmet was dazzling his silver eyes. The pathetic tone bleating from out that pencil neck made Maxus want to snap it in two. Finding the strength, Maxus reined back his anger, at least for a precious few seconds… unless this soldier proved otherwise that his neck needed breaking.

The guard hesitated to continue, so Maxus helped him along. "What!" he snapped loudly.

The guard's head shrank below his chest plate collar like a turtle trying to retreat into its shell. He meekly pointed down the hall and replied, "The Advisor has returned, my lord."

Two things helped to quell the Emperor's rising rage: the mention of the Advisor, and the soldier pushing the door further open to allow said advisor and his assistant to rumble through; Brute's shuddering footsteps suddenly noticeable. Water dripped from the lines and folds of Brute's black suit and Flowey shook his petal head like a dog drying himself.

"Advisor, where have you been?" interrogated Maxus while the single soldier made a swift exist, not wishing to be part of the folly that may ensue. The Emperor was a tactical genius and the Advisor was a mastermind of secrets, but the soldier scampering away who struggled with fractions, volumes, and noncommutative algebraic geometry may have been the smartest one there.

Advisor Flowey stopped shaking, his yellow petals stuck out like wet fur. He was calm in the face of hostility, which stretched from him to his tank of an assistant. "The Forest, your excellency," he answered, Brute gestured accordingly. "Considering the reports of the human's movements, and possible motives for going to that island, I travelled there myself to both gather information and attempt to stop… it." Flowey briefly faltered, almost getting the pronoun wrong.

"You attempted to defeat the human by yourself? Without an armed escort? In the middle of an island that remain insolence to the Empire?" Emperor Maxus shook his head, accentuating the gleam of his golden mop. "I thought you were smarter than that."

Advisor Flowey giggled. "Not entirely," he replied, then frowned in an instant. "Wait, that came out wrong. I mean I wasn't entirely alone; I had Brute here with me." Brute pointed his thumb at himself. "With an assistant this big, nobody threatened me."
The added importance of being the royal advisor in the Empire might have painted a large target on the back of this flower's head, but the fact that he worked with the shadows, from the shadows, meant that nobody knew who he was. The citizens of the Forest and adversaries of the Empire did not see the, arguably, second most important link in the chain of command, but an absurdly strong, absurdly stupid, and absurdly stylish monster with skin like rock, hauling a pot that contained more than his head did.

"Well, I'm not seeing a dead human or its soul in your possession…" Maxus countered.

"That's true, my lord," Flowey replied. There were many ways for this conversation to go, especially south. He chose his route carefully. "My assistant and I encountered the human; however, in the fight that followed, it managed to escape." Best not to mention the part about Frisk plummeting a thousand feet to the depths below.

"Then what was the purpose of being there in the first place?" Maxus said angrily, nearing. "Because it looks to me like you wasted your time and mine, when I needed your guidance the most."

Flowey remained confident, Brute followed suit on the outside. Inside, though, he quivered with a dread Flowey could detect.

"Not quite. We – and by 'we' I mean I – learned a great deal of knowledge while we were there," Advisor Flowey said.

Maxus folded his arms. He was listening. This better be good.

"The human lead me right to Professor Haze." Already, Flowey was off to a good start. "I got in close enough to spy on the secret meeting without being detected." That part was a lie, he learned about the professor's plan from a dream one week back. "A rebellion is rising, led by the professor himself, and the human is set to be their champion. Haze armed it with a sword and shield which were built specifically to use against you. Seriously, my assistant here can turn concrete into rubble, yet even he could not put a dent in that shield."

Maxus remained quiet, the astonishment raining down washed off his shoulders like water on a duck monster's back. Growing up, Professor Haze was never his favourite adult, in turn making him Haze's least favourite boy. Maxus always guessed that wishing someone dead was the natural step up from slightly disliking them. Maxus's silence ushered the Royal Advisor to keep going.

"The rebellion fear that this change in weather means the end of days for the Outerworld. They are planning to attack soon to seize control of the castle and the Obelisk."

"How soon?"

"Within an hour."

"Then send word to General Leigh; the fortress is to go on high alert."

"Yes, sir." Flowey went to leave off the shoulders of his assistant, Brute, when the same assistant turned back on the tell-tale expression that his advisor had something more to say. "Oh, one more thing to mention. Before I left, I took the liberty of bringing in some additional reinforcements from our biggest supporting islands. They'll be here very soon to help with the attack."

Maxus would have been irate by the fact that orders were being made without his consent, but honestly, Maxus needed some much needed good news, some extra muscle, and another thing to channel his anger towards, especially when it felt like the world was against him.
"Whatever, Advisor," he replied. "Send the word and rally the troops to defend themselves."

"As you command, Emperor." Advisor Flowey and Brute marched out of the room; the latter slammed down the hall with each step.

Alone, the only man Emperor Maxus had for guidance was himself. Father was no longer there, he would know what to do, he ought to; it was Juhi's expertise, resources, and connections that won him the civil war over his son. If anyone should be kicking himself, it should be Maxus; the rebellion was his own creation two hundred years ago when he wished to return to Earth and his father said 'no'.

Juhi and Haze used the Obelisk to construct Castle Highkeep in record time, and Maxus wasted too much of it trying to bypass it defences, losing a lot of people along the way. It was all of nothing as he ended up ultimately relinquishing his leadership over the rebellion to secure his position as heir to the throne. Prince Maxus had to wait two whole centuries for Emperor Juhi to die and for the mantle of Outerworld ruler to fall upon him so he could instate his own policies upon his land, and fulfil his promise of returning his people to the Earth.

Now the faction he created and fought alongside was now out to destroy him, led by a man from the opposite side and full of people still reeling from his apparent betrayal. Some of them were children and young adults who had lost parents, uncles, aunties, grandparents, brothers and sisters, and now rest the blame for their deaths squarely on him.

To that day, Maxus felt nothing nor did he feel bad right there. What was done was done.

Emperor Juhi was dead and gone, and he was the emperor now. It was time for this young lion to forge his own path, not from under anyone's shadow, but from out of the footprints laid behind him. The next footprints made within the sands of history were going to be his own, and Maxus would fall before he forgot the steps taken to get there.

Maxus took one last look outside. The aluminium clouds were now darkened into a dark steel. He hadn't seen clouds that dark since the blurry days of his childhood, of the treacherous thunderstorms which plague the world below to this day.

He stormed out of the room, down hallway after hallway, past and through and over soldier after panicked, frightened soldier, until he pushed through the door to his father's old chambers, left untouched and undisturbed since the day Juhi left this world.

In the dark, evening clouds, the specious bedroom was gloomy with shadows and meagre light. The desk still held pens, the inkwell turning dry, and letters doomed to remain unfinished for all eternity. The room was fitting enough to be considered Juhi's tomb had his remains stayed.

The sheets on the bed remained crumpled and unmade, Juhi's dusty remains now resting in the depths of the Forest. He considered himself a monster of the people even though he ate extravagant meals and drank from silver cups and wore the most elaborate of outfits, so it was only fitting that his sending off was on par with the people, with no special privileges. A basic funeral with an unadorned metal urn. Now Juhi rests with the commoners and the garbage, and Maxus imagined how bad they must be stinking up the Forest's underbelly. The garbage too.

In the dim corner, as untouched as the emperor last saw it, Juhi's old battle armour stood at attention inside the glass cabinet, tall and prideful even without a body to control it. The red in the cape screamed out to the anger boiling within. The spikes on the spaulders could intimidate the dead. The gold of the chain connecting the cape cut through the dark. Maxus saw his outline in the glass where the head would be; the suit waiting for that someone.
Maxus pried both glass doors open with a quiet squeak of the brass hinges. It was time to finish what was started one thousand years ago.

Danyell led the way. Him being native to the Forest floor the longest made him the best navigator. Behind his lead was Juhi, Dunmore, Rex, Frisk, and everyone else in that order – those in the back spread out and sieving effortlessly through all obstacles. Danyell was once more the trusty scout, and thanks to his guidance, Frisk was travelling these difficult lands at a speed thought impossible for an individual of the living category. There were pathways through these roots and around mountains of trash which Frisk had absolutely no idea existed, invisible to the naked eye and only known to those who have spent their entire afterlives in this place.

Before they knew it, the convoy had wandered straight into a large archway, barricaded on both sides with walls constructed from the unwanted remnants tossed down by those above. Out with the old, in with the new. These monsters were similar to the garbage stinking the air: they were broken, old, forgotten, useless, discarded, and just as worthless. The one thing these people were good for was fond memories, the same memories as when a corner lamp still cast light or when a clock still ticked or when a pen still ran with ink. The trash was only useful to collect dust, and these poor monsters were literally made of the stuff.

Danyell carried himself through the expanded doorframe, a fortress entrance without a gate. "No need for one," he explained without looking back. "Nobody fights us down here… and we have nothing worth taking…"

It made sense in context: the living had no knowledge of this hidden world, and any civil war declared between the ashen ones would not last long considering neither side could harm the other.

Inside the walls, the great stink was subdued under a concoction of soda cans, juice cartons, stale pickle, banana skins, apple cores, lemon slices, and orange peels. Make no mistake, the stench could still be whiffed – ten thorough scrubbings would not lift it – but it was vastly improved. Flaming torches and pits of fire dotted the vicinity, cutting through the dark and carrying the warm scent. After goodness knows how long, the smells were equivalent to the finest perfume.

The ground had been paved with the best floor coverings from a hundred years ago: torn carpet, worn mats, tattered rugs, shattered tiles, reassembled hardwood, and faded linoleum. Despite the inhabitants' condition, the floors were surprisingly clean. The inner walls were painted, wallpapered, and framed with anything that could be deemed art. A roof kept in the heat and directed the light inwards. Whatever roots inside were decorated to serve as part of the décor. An assortment of recycled, refurbished, and all around reconstructed furniture surrounded the largest fire pit in the centre of the makeshift shelter.

Beneath the scrapheap, scavenger landscape, Frisk felt a homely, comfortable vibe radiating from this place. A sense of belonging. Somewhere to call home.

Dunmore said, "Just because we're dead doesn't mean we have to be savages. Even we are entitled to some semblance of civility. We use this house when we want a nice, friendly conversation, which is the only thing we can do around here."

Another person stood at the far end of the room, across from the flames and the chairs. With a tall stature and both hands behind his bent, he looked to own the premises. It was clear he was no bodybuilder during his lifetime, with strands of straw and twigs protruded from out the joints in his arms and legs, the halo around his scalp, and the workings of his torso.

He lifted his chin at the sight of his old general from the war a millennia ago. "Ah, your lordship," he
said, sounding like a professional, "I have kept this room clean at all times to await your arrival."

Juhi walked over and shook the man's hand as if greeting an old friend, which he most likely was. "Overseer Eden. Is it still overseer, or is it just Eden now?"

Eden laughed, or croaked out nails against chalkboard which may or may not be considered laughter. "Still overseer. I upkeep this building, keep it clean at all times. Death has given me all the time in the world."

"It's an honour to meet you again."

"Likewise, General." Overseer Eden looked past his old friend, past the other grey members, and noticed the one who did not look like the other ones. All at once, his professional demeanour threatened to fail as he knew exactly what that was. "Is that a…?"

"A human? Yes," Juhi finished, then resumed quickly before Eden could rush into a panic. "But they are not here to harm us, only to help us. And in turn, we are to help them."

Danyell said to Frisk, "I wish I could offer you a drink or something to eat, but we have nothing fresh down here… not to mention we need no sustenance…"

Frisk said they weren't hungry or thirsty anyway. What they had seen in the previous hour was enough to suppress an appetite for a whole year.

"Good," Juhi said, "we haven't got much time anyway." Then he gestured calmly toward an armchair that made up the ring of seats around the centre pit. "Please, take a seat."

Frisk did so. Man, was it uncomfortable. The armchair must have been stripped before it took the plunge as the stuffing felt lumpy and uneven in every spot, and the outer shell was a jumble of fabric stitched together resulting in a Frankenstein's Monster of colours and tones. The term 'shabby chic' had never been so grossly misrepresented.

The others took position around the light, bringing their molten bodies down into their seats. Rex, Dunmore and Danyell literally sank into the grooves and crevices. Functionality came first, comfortability came last. It made no difference to these guys since their nerves were long gone.

"Now that we are all here," Overseer Eden announced, "what are we to discuss? Who would like to begin?" The end of the Outerworld was upon them, yet it was business as usual for him.

Juhi looked at the child sitting at the chair opposite, the flames dancing between the two. He noticed the sword and shield. "That craftsmanship…" he whispered loud enough for everyone around the fire to hear. "There is only one man I know who could construct tools of such elegance." He leaned back and drew his eyes straight up to the black ceiling.

Frisk said to Juhi that the sword and shield were a gift from Professor Haze.

"Ah, yes, Haze," said Juhi. "A little rough around the edges, but the smartest man I've ever met. He was a good friend."

And the sword and shield were made to kill Maxus, Frisk added.

Juhi grumbled, slumping his chin on his hand. "A good friend to me, anyway."

Dunmore raised a hand. "Perhaps we should explain ourselves first?" he suggested to unanimous agreement.
"Right. Start from the beginning," Danyell, taking charge of the group discussion, said. "We are the Grey Ones: the living dust of the Outerworld; neither alive nor dead, stuck in this accursed limbo from which we cannot escape." He pointed to his chest. "In life, I was but a scout for the monster army on Earth, gravelly wounded while trying to find safe passage for our people, alongside others who… didn't make it. Without treatment, I would've died all those years ago." He looked down at his body and then at his hands. "Now… I wish I did."

Rex, the former commander, carried on. "Humans boxed monsters in… Boxed Rex in… Ready to kill… Miracle we needed…" He grinned and glanced at the cauldron monster. "Remember… you lost mind… before Rex…"

Dunmore rubbed his flat cheek, scraping away a layer of dust. "Not my best moment, I'll admit…"

The next part of the story came from Overseer Eden, still standing in place like a humble butler. "I saw General Juhi's son run out of the camp, so I gave chase. He fell down an abandoned quarry before I could retrieve him. I returned to camp to seek help."

"Down in that pit, Maxus found something," Juhi said. "Maxus found the Obelisk – the heart of this world and the key to our salvation – buried near an abandoned pit near where we were cornered. He touched it. Activated it. And the Outerworld rose again."

Danyell's turn resurfaced. "While the Outerworld saved many, myself included, the wounds we sustained still left their scars. I lived life with old injuries for a long time until my body broke down. I was among one of the first to die, my ashes cast down here." The memory, impossible to forget, resurfaced behind downcast eyes. "I remember awaking… thinking I had reached the afterlife… until I looked at my hands and…"

Ashen fingers formed and crumbled away before what little vision he had. Danyell screamed from his broken voice, his body a mush of mass, undefinable, unrecognisable. Dead but not dead. Alive when he shouldn't be. What was happening to him? He cried for help, screaming without breath.

But nobody came.

"I had never been more terrified in my life…" The rest of the group, including those outside, shared in Danyell's pain. Every member of the Grey had been through the horrific experience. "It took the first of us many years to learn how to retain our shape, after which, we discussed whether to make our presence known to the living. We decided it was best to remain here, where the living cannot know of us. If the living found out, discovered the truth about what happens when we die here, then the ensuing chaos, fear, and despair it would bring would be catastrophic."

"Frisk, I feel I must apologise for dragging you into this mess," Juhi said. "I allowed the words from Advisor Flowey to guide me and drag you into our war. Haze told me about the prophecy, and I truly believed your Determination was the key to unlocking the Obelisk's secret, but now I am not so sure."

Frisk blinked. What did Juhi mean by that?

"We are now one with this world's lifeblood. I can feel the magic coursing through these lands and through ourselves, keeping us alive after death, and we can feel it dying. Maxus draws magic like a hurricane. He has lived the longest yet stayed the youngest. The Obelisk's magic is drawn greatest to him, and I believe it was for a reason. I believe now that when my son found the Obelisk all those years ago, it was not by luck or a roll of the dice, he was drawn to it, guided by the hands of fate. I know believe that he is part of the key to all this."
"In short time, this world will tear itself apart, and unless the greatest strength can be found, then every living being in it will die. Perhaps we have been looking at this the wrong way. Perhaps the greatest strength lies not in one soul, but many. Maxus is powerful, but so are you, Frisk.

"I have caused you so much pain and have no right to ask anything from you, but Maxus has become lost in a sea of his own hatred. He needs someone to help him see reason. If you can convince my son to aid you, then maybe this disaster can be averted and nobody else has to perish."

Frisk working together with Emperor Maxus? The very idea was so ridiculous it tickled their diaphragm. That lion hated their guts from day-minus-one-million. The only friend he introduced them to came in the form of a zweihander.

Juhi slumped solemnly in his chair. "Whatever you choose to do next is entirely up to you, Frisk. I cannot force you to confront Maxus, this must be of your own free will. If you wish to remain down here and allow this world to die, then so be it. However, if you still believe there is a chance, then we will help you as best we can." He leaned forward, gazing through the flicker. "So I ask you now, Frisk. For this world, its people, and my son… will you save them?"

Frisk sat still, controlling their breathing in and out. Flowey's words reverberated in their head: if they survived their encounter – which they did – then they would head back to the castle, confront Emperor Maxus… and die. Afterward, the Outerworld will die, then the entire human race.

Their friends would die. Asgore, Toriel, Alphys, Undyne, Sans, and Papyrus were doomed. They were the people who believed in this little human even when all hope seemed lost. The golden flower stood once more in their path, holding their friends hostage, threatening their lives with death and resurrection, over and over again.

In that moment, they called out to Frisk! Voices going off in their head, spreading to the determination in their soul!

Toriel: "Do not be afraid, my child… No matter what happens… we will always be there to protect you!"

Papyrus: "That's right, human! You can win! Just do what I would do: believe in you!"

Undyne: "Hey! Human! If you got past me, you can do ANYTHING! So don't worry, we're with you all the way!"

Sans: "Huh? You haven't beaten this guy yet? Come on. This weirdo's got nothin' on you."

Alphys: "Technically, it's impossible for you to beat him… B-but… somehow, I know you can do it!"

Asgore: "Human, for the future of humans and monsters…! You have to stay determined…!"

The future of humans and monsters.

Frisk's mind was made up right there on the spot. There was only one thing for Frisk to do, one way to save this world and everyone on it, including their friends: they must return to Castle Highkeep.

As they jumped off the armchair, they told Juhi that they would do it.

"If that is what you wish to do," Juhi said, "then we can escort you to the foot of Highkeep Enclave. But as to getting into the castle, you're on your own."

These guys weren't going to help them get inside or help against Maxus?
"We cannot," Danyell insisted. "Even in this dire situation, we fear making our presence known will only make matters worse. No, we must remain hidden, the living must not know of our existence."

Frisk gave the former emperor a pleading look, the fire bright in their eyes. Maxus was his son, surely he will listen.

To which, Juhi chuckled and shook his head. "The only words of mine Maxus listened to were those said on my terminal breath, and it was those words which resulted in you standing here right this instant. Besides, he was never one to be strayed from his own ambitions. Whenever someone tried to do so, he always got angry and…” Juhi seized up. "I cannot fight him: he is my son. I simply cannot."

Frisk huffed. Guess it was up to them again to solve things all by themself. The future of humans and monsters once more hung in the balance, and Frisk was the future, the decider of what shall shape the world for millennia to come. Shall the future be guided by the descendants of these citizens, or will their stories never come to fruition as their ancestor perish right here, right now?

With no time to lose, Frisk said they were ready.

The committee guided the human outside to the full force of the festering stench. After the sweeter smells, returning to it almost knocked them unconscious. Danyell gathered a group of his people and told them to form a circle.

"Prepare yourself, Frisk," he informed. "You'll be there before you know it."

The former scout ordered the ring of monsters to start running and, on cue, they all did so. The Grey Ones began to run in a circle, around and around they went, running themselves into the ground on a literal basis. Their bodies started to break down and blend together as they picked up speed, kicking more particles into the air with every second that elapsed. Eventually, the circle span at such speeds that it became a tornado, yet they still weren't moving fast enough. They stretched up above, dispersing into sparse particles, spinning in a cyclone.

Someone gently tapped on Frisk's back, nudging them forward so slightly. "Go," whispered Danyell.

Walk into the dust tornado? Usually the accepted notion was to travel in the opposite direction, but in this case, Frisk would make an exception. Shielding their eyes, Frisk stepped into the heart of the tornado, feeling it tug on their clothes and hair. A gust of wind so powerful and concise formed under Frisk's feet, pushing them off the ground like a rocket getting ready for blast-off.

A few in the crowd waved. The humble ones held up open palms. Juhi saluted. "Farewell, Frisk. Godspeed."

All of a sudden, Frisk launched upwards, taking flight into the black sky. The Grey Ones stood there looking up, alone once more. All quiet. The future of their living relatives all in the hands of that one child.

"General," Dunmore spoke, "are you certain we cannot intervene?"

"It is for the best. The people must find their own strength in this dire hour." Juhi's words sounded true and just.

Danyell seconded him: "Back on Earth, we couldn't rely on the dead to help us. We had to fend for ourselves."

Rex grunted through clenched teeth. "Rex dead… but Rex not silent… None here… are silent…"
Juhi shook his head. "They must not know about us, Commander."

"Regardless of what we do, this world will still end," Overseer Eden said. "The living do not have a choice. We do."

Rushing through the air, Frisk dared to open their eyes. They were flying, funnelled inside the tube of swirling dust that weaved around the massive tree trunks like a threat, rising higher and higher toward beautiful light and fresh air. This must have been how the Man of Steel felt as he zipped across the sky, past skyscrapers and planes, toward bad guys, warheads, asteroids, and around the planet so fast that he turned back time.

Frisk allowed their arms to hover by their sides and bask in their weightlessness. They were reminded of when they first met the Outerworld, flying higher than the clouds, higher than anyone dared. This feeling was exhilarating, power tripping, consuming.

The first ray of light twinkled followed shortly after by the first drop of rain and the falling leaves, and the fake, damp scent of pine which was sweeter than nectar on the tongue. They arose from the underbelly, out into the pouring rain. It was worse than they thought. The millions of leaves in the canopy had whittled down to almost nothing, leaving exposed branches and nothing to shelter from the heavens.

There, in the horizon and over the connecting bridge between islands, was Castle Highkeep – a shade in the veil of misty grey. Being in this proximity was the utmost last thing Frisk wanted, but the first thing destiny demanded.

The whirlwind dropped Frisk off at the Forest's edge, at the foot of the bridge. There was not another soul around to witness it.

"This is as far as we can take you," the monsters comprising the whirlwind choired in perfect harmony, their voices cast to the wind. "Good luck."

The whirlwind retreated back down to the depths where nobody will find them and where their secret shall remain safe. Frisk was on their own again.

The last time they were here, they were running from an armada of men and women in silver armour. Now Frisk had returned. No more running. No more hiding. Those same people they ran from they were about to run towards. Maxus awaited; he must have picked up their scent by now and already ran a grinding stone against Heaven's Shard. Frisk swallowed. In their heart, they did not feel ready; however, it was as ready as they would ever be.

The water, hard and heavy, saturated their clothes and made its way to their bones. Cold, clean air cleared their lungs, chilling their blood.

If what Flowey said was true, then Frisk may have a depressing amount of time left to live. What they were staring at could very well be their tombstone. Frisk's superhero façade fell away, exposing them for the fragile human being they were. They were Superman exposed to kryptonite; Supergirl in red sunlight; Green Lantern seeing yellow; Captain Planet slimed in a thick layer of pollution; Sportacus on sugar. That metaphor would have sounded much stronger had it ended two examples ago.

Despite all this… Frisk was filled with Determination.
The Return

Patrolling the walls in this terrible rain filled the stationed guards with mountains of dread. Everything was wrong. A bad feeling ran across their souls, showing in full force on their faces, striking like a spear thrust to the gut; nothing was going right here. The soldiers had this nagging feeling, a feeling that would not go away, that they were doing something wrong simply by standing there on duty. The canopy of clouds so grey and the rain so brutal it simulated the end of the world. They should be elsewhere: helping citizens to shelter, handing out supplies, maybe rushing back to their own families, and not keeping the fortress secure.

The lookout on the northern gate, Kiya, shivering and wet, looked out glumly at the curtains of water, seriously doubting anyone would possess the gall to stage an assault at this time. Dawn strikes? Common. Night-time infiltration? Popular. Undercover activities? Hip and now. Fighting in the rain? Not so much. Rain rattled on her helmet and dampness had seeped under the folds and links of her metal leggings.

Ice Island and the Forest had become lost in the gobbling mist, enough to make the easily intimidated believe that their world was fading away and Highkeep Enclave was next. Little did she know, though, of the fates occurring on those islands; the leafy shavings of the gigantic canopy now in mounds and mountains on the bridges and halfway toward the Forest floor; the snowstorm reached dangerous levels with flakes slicing into tree bark and rock, and the temperature dropping low enough to freeze the air in someone’s lungs.

All of Kiya’s senses screamed to abandon ship. This world above the clouds, held up purely on magic, was falling apart at the seams, and here she was guarding a giant door when she should be doing something more important like rushing back to her husband and kids to hug them and cherish these last moments together. She would make a move, but the presence of her allies at her sides, Kaiser and Oswall, disarmed those urges. The kind whom Kiya hardly knew outside of work hours, but were easily able to get along with, she would not have been surprised if those two were contemplating the same decision as her. However, she dared not confess it in case of the opposite.

Kiya thought she saw something – a shade across the path leading up to the gate. She quickly nodded if off as a concentration of cloud in the falling haze. Upon her second look, it was still there but closer. Someone was out there. A lone figure, walking in the downpour with no umbrella.

“Hey,” Kiya broke the silence which held their tongues, “there’s someone out there.”

Kaiser stood at her left. A tall and wide gorilla, his ego was bigger than he was. “Is that our reinforcements? Since went did we have friends in the Forest?”

Oswall was stationed opposite, jadedly poking the top of the brick with an arrow. Originally Oswald, the last letter looked like an ‘L’ on his birth registry, so his parents just rolled with it. He was a tortoise; his shell as much his armour as his armour. “We don’t. And one person hardly qualifies as the cavalry.” He finally looked up from his weary act. “Who would show up at this time, anyway?”

Kiya reached for the binoculars pinned to her belt. After a quick yawn and wipe on the lenses, she brought the eyepieces up. The weather limited the range of her scope. Fortunately for her, all she had to do was wait a few seconds for the lone figure to draw closer. After which…

“Hey, uh, Kaiser,” she asked without lowering her sights, “what was the description on that human again?”
“The one brought in the other day?” Kaiser gazed at the puddled floor, thinking to himself how many humans were brought to the Outerworld altogether. The posters were everywhere, making it hard to forget. “Short. Brown hair. Pudgy face. Blue shirt with stripes.”

“That’s what I feared.” Kiya lowered the bifocals. “Because I think that’s them.”


The trio of sentries above the gate watched as the lonely figure approached the gate and the raging moat which formed a secondary barrier between, now raging much more rapidly thanks to the torrent from above.

Each influence had a knock-on effect. The rain made the river run wilder. The river rushed over the waterfall harder. The waterfall crashed into the river of the Plain-plain, overflowing it to the foot of Sam an’ Rita’s abandoned, half standing house.

Kaiser asked, “What’re they doing here? Shouldn’t they be, you know…?” He repeatedly thrust and retracted his hand back and forth, cutting the air with an invisible saw. “Going away from the castle?”

“Maybe,” Kiya said. Not ‘yes’ or ‘no’, but ‘maybe’ because it was all she could deduct from it. “Unless they’re here to turn themself in.”

“Probably got tired of running,” Oswall suggested.

“Or realised there’s no way off these islands…” Kaiser seconded.

“Or probably figured they’ll get the one million prize money if they hand themself over. Not like it would help much in the dungeons.”

“I dunno.” Kaiser thought about it. In the moment, deep in his mind, he forgot all about the weather and the rain and the empty tin can rattle on his shoulders. “Even the prisoners need some basic necessities. A little mula could buy them a nice rug, or a blanket, teevee perhaps, or—”

“Hey, guys,” Kiya interrupted, “while we speculate, that human kid is getting closer.”

Oswall looked back over the side. “Oh, right.”

The human was at the edge of the moat. So they meet again. Those swelling waves of white teeth chomped at the soaking air, truly ravenous, making any attempts to cross it implausible. From up there, the grimace was clear upon Frisk’s face. The first introduction between this child and the river almost left them lying on Death’s doormat. Given the chance, the moat would do that again except there would be no mummy monster to rescue them this time.

Kiya levelled her binoculars down on the target. “And it turns out they’re armed. Looks like a sword and shield.”

Kaiser shook his head, a grin on his lips. “One heck of a siege. We better start rationing – fill up the fat ones as a last resort.” After finishing, he let out a hearty chuckle.

Oswall nudged the bowstring slung diagonally across his shell chest. “Should I put an arrow in them?”

The suggestion made sense. The human was worth quite a bit, both in money and the Emperor’s
need. The Emperor was obsessed with finding this creature, going so far as to place the bounty and all those thousands of posters across the seven islands. It did not feel right, though, to shoot at a single person when these walls were built to hold back monstrous armies and towering siege weapons. On the other hand, the human could turn and run, and then those three would need a pretty good explanation as to why they spotted the target but failed to react.

Kaiser flippantly waved it off, not showing the least concern for the most wanted individual in the whole of Outerworld history turning up on their doorstep. “No need to rush. Just keep an eye on ’em for now. We’re on top of a wall of four foot thick bricks and, besides, they’ll never get past the moat, not when the weather has made it this treacherous. It’ll tear ’em apar—

“They just froze part of it,” Kiya disturbed him mid-sentence.

Her two comrades squinted down to find a section of the moat completely frozen over, waves halted in time. Ice spread several feet to both sides of the gate, forming a pathway which the human ambled over carefully. A head of steam hovered from the sword in their left, turning raindrops into instant snowflakes.

Kaiser whispered, “Well, that didn’t work.” He glanced at Oswall. “On second thought, that arrow sounds awfully nice.”

Oswall threw the bow over his head and into his hands. A single arrow appeared as he pulled back the string and lined the sights with the target below. After gauging the wind direction, speed, and acting force of the rain, he let the string go and the arrow fly. It was a beautiful shot, straight toward the human named Frisk. At the last moment, they raised their right arm and the arrow bounced harmlessly off the shield.

Back up at the posts, Kaiser could feel his cocky attitude melt down his neck and form a red hot tingle on his spine. “Okay, that didn’t work either…”

From their vantage point, it was becoming more difficult to keep their eyes on the lone attacker as they neared the wall, eventually losing track the moment they made it over the uneven, makeshift bridge and under the giant arch where the massive gate of timber, iron and chain stood.

Kaiser leaned on the wall in a vain attempt to win back his stride. “No matter. They’ll never get past the drawbridge. It’s—” Down below, an eruption, like a laser sword being drawn, sounded. The buzzing that followed and the faint thread of smoke rising over the lip forced Kaiser to brusquely shove Kiya and Oswall across the walkway. “Downstairs – hurry!”

The trio from the Monster Military rushed across the wall and down the nearest stairs to the soppy ground; rivulets of tiny waterfalls fell from each step and formed growing puddles to slosh in. By the time they reached what they wanted to see, a small gathering of other troops were already there, keeping a firm distance. In the gate, a red laser blade was cutting a line in the wood, starting from the bottom and waving its way up four feet before curving around and making its way back down – the human slicing their own way in.

“I really wish you’d keep that big trap of yours shut,” Kiya remarked. “Incidentally, you got any other plans?”

“Just one,” Kaiser answered. “Drop the bridge on ’em!”

It took a second for his shout to register with the guards posted near the end of the windlass. No need for safety or subtlety, they just released the winch and let it spin out of control. The massive drawbridge tumbled down in a deafening clanking of chains, crashing down thousands of pounds in
weight, turning the icy path into slush. Those same chunky chains snapped upon the bone crushing slam, trailing like limp octopus arms outward into the mist. When the pandemonium ceased, the bridge lay flat save for the tiny, roughly sliced section upright just off the centre.

The human poked their head out from behind the standing piece – the hair matted to their head – and then stepped around it, taking their first soggy steps within the boundaries of Castle Highkeep since yesterday. Up close, Frisk’s appearance was to be expected. The threads of their favourite shirt stretched close to the ground, heavy on their shoulders, loose around the collar and sagging around their wrists.

Frisk looked at the scattering of troops and the troops looked back, unmoving; this lone creature being the utmost last thing they all expected to see that day. Frisk counted ten of them.

No more room for niceties. No more room for flirting. Frisk demanded to be taken to Emperor Maxus.

And Kaiser responded to this with, “Perimeter breach! Our defence has been compromised.” He drew his weapon in one hand and a spark of magic in the other. “Take ‘em down!”

His battle cry, his call to arms was met with turning heads and hesitation from his peers. With that same roar fuelling his fighting spirit, Kaiser charged alone. As he drew near, Frisk’s sword came alive with a surge of blue energy and the tip was thrust into his belly. The strike launched Kaiser into a wall. Electricity ran through his armour and smouldered off his dark fur, paralysing him with a thousand volts of pain.

The other men and woman glanced at their downed comrade, then to Frisk, and then they too drew their weapons – swords and spears – and commenced their attack. They charged toward the target and their charged weapon. Frisk slipped through the middle of them and made a break up a nearby flight of stairs, knocking down anyone who got in their path.

Up high, from one of the many plain glass windows situated around the castle, Brute stood as directed by the advisor perched on his flat head. From their position, Advisor Flowey had a perfect line of sight through the alcoves down below, watching as a lone human child fended off over a dozen well-armed troops all twice their size. Streaks of rainwater running down the exterior distorted the view slightly.

Another soldier braved forward and was rewarded with a swift electric jolt to his belly, knocking him back, whereupon Frisk broke through an opening and moved further up the alley and deeper into the heart of Castle Highkeep, dodging blade and magic alike. Two soldiers in their path swung. Frisk blocked their attacks with their sword and shield.

Flowey grinned ironically. Outnumbered, the odds stacked against them, and yet rely on Frisk to stick to their code. How easy would it be to resort to ending those lives, all in the name of the greater good, that the ends justify the means? Anyone else would do so, but not this one.

Adjacent alcoves, streets, and paths which always ran heavy with the steeled souls of the Monster Military now lay devoid of life, very few sightings of reinforcements going to help against the intruder. The military had been spread too thin; large numbers stationed on the walls, outside the castle grounds and among the common folk; exhausted from too much work and too little rest; scattering to the wind at the apparent closing of this world’s book.

From all the way up there, Flowey could see that the Monster Military was in shambles. Leadership had gone out the window and morale was at an all-time low.
Frisk’s arrival was of no surprise; he already knew they could overcome anything, even the dead. To hope that Frisk would someone meet a grizzly end down in the dank, dusty forest depths was wishful thinking on his part. Flowey the Flower creased his brow. If he had fists, he would clench them. What was even more wishful thinking was hoping one of those shmucks in heavy armour could somehow take down Frisk before they reached the Emperor.

Frisk slipped underneath the two guards, struck one in the ankle, the other painfully in the side, and retreated further on while the guards were stunned.

“Come on, they’re just a kid. A kid with no combat training whatsoever,” Flowey spoke softly, irritated, aiming the sediment toward his boys hundreds of feet away as if they could telepathically hear him. With a block and another two strikes, another troop hit the dirt. “You’re all highly trained, better equipped, and, heck, there’s more of you than them! Why is it so hard to get rid of one insignificant child?”

A pestering voice chastised the sunflower from behind his back. Frisk may have been headstrong, persistent, impartial, an idiot, but they were anything but insignificant. Frisk was the one insignificant child who stood up to him as he took the form of a god… and won.

Every second Frisk held out against the military’s attacks, the closer this story got to its ultimate bitter ending. With each thrust of their sword, block with the shield, step onwards, soldier knocked out, breath drawn, Frisk inadvertently paved the road to a fiery apocalypse across the Earth and to the end of their species, thinking their actions could reshape the events yet to come.

Flowey pressed his forehead against the cold glass, closed his eyes and sighed. “If only you could see what I’ve seen, Frisk, then you’d understand…” With button eyes closed to the darkness behind them, the sentient flower wondered which part of himself said those words: his current self or his forgotten half. “There’s no happy way out of this.” Opening them wide showed Frisk to have made excellent progress toward the centre of the fort, having incapacitated a few more guards and possibly scared off a few more. Only Flowey knew the terrible fate awaiting the child.

Nobody else was around, nobody was there to judge him now; his assistant may have been present, but his presence remained strictly business. Flowey mused, “Why can’t you understand…?” The anger accumulated from a million Underground runs bubbled to the surface. “Why can’t you understand?” With no one watching, his let his frustrations loose as he banged his head against the glass repeatedly. “WHY – CAN’T – YOU – UNDER – STAND?”

Just as quickly as his fury was unleashed, he yanked on its reigns. He was no longer Prince Asriel Dreemurr, nor was he the pitiless flower who made Papyrus eat nothing but paste for a week or filled Toriel’s home with mustard or got Undyne to unintentionally murder Alphys and watched with silent glee as grief and guilt tore the captain apart, he was the advisor of the Outerworld: working in the darkness to preserve peace and justice. Always doing what was right, even if doing right meant doing wrong. Sacrificing the few so the many could live. Flowey may have been a bad person in the Underground, but this was not the Underground – he was no longer that person.

In the streets below, Frisk halted. Five troops blocked their path. A breadcrumb trail of unconscious, smoking bodies marked the way back to the northern entrance. There was a standoff. Why? Frisk could very easily shock their way through. Flowey noticed a sixth soldier trundle down the stairs behind the blockade.

“This is aressing voice chastised the sunflower from behind his back. Frisk may have been headstrong, persistent, impartial, an idiot, but they were anything but insignificant. Frisk was the one insignificant child who stood up to him as he took the form of a god… and won.

Flowey pressed his forehead against the cold glass, closed his eyes and sighed. “If only you could see what I’ve seen, Frisk, then you’d understand…” With button eyes closed to the darkness behind them, the sentient flower wondered which part of himself said those words: his current self or his forgotten half. “There’s no happy way out of this.” Opening them wide showed Frisk to have made excellent progress toward the centre of the fort, having incapacitated a few more guards and possibly scared off a few more. Only Flowey knew the terrible fate awaiting the child.

Nobody else was around, nobody was there to judge him now; his assistant may have been present, but his presence remained strictly business. Flowey mused, “Why can’t you understand…?” The anger accumulated from a million Underground runs bubbled to the surface. “Why can’t you understand?” With no one watching, his let his frustrations loose as he banged his head against the glass repeatedly. “WHY – CAN’T – YOU – UNDER – STAND?”

Just as quickly as his fury was unleashed, he yanked on its reigns. He was no longer Prince Asriel Dreemurr, nor was he the pitiless flower who made Papyrus eat nothing but paste for a week or filled Toriel’s home with mustard or got Undyne to unintentionally murder Alphys and watched with silent glee as grief and guilt tore the captain apart, he was the advisor of the Outerworld: working in the darkness to preserve peace and justice. Always doing what was right, even if doing right meant doing wrong. Sacrificing the few so the many could live. Flowey may have been a bad person in the Underground, but this was not the Underground – he was no longer that person.

In the streets below, Frisk halted. Five troops blocked their path. A breadcrumb trail of unconscious, smoking bodies marked the way back to the northern entrance. There was a standoff. Why? Frisk could very easily shock their way through. Flowey noticed a sixth soldier trundle down the stairs behind the blockade.

“This is a
“No, no, NO!” Flowey would have slammed the side of his fist against the wall had he a fist to slam. “Idiots! Every last one of them!”

The commanding officer spoke over the annoying and persistent din of splashing water. “All units, stand down!” His bark of an order was met with some reluctance, shifting gazes and wavering weapons. “That is an order!”

One by one, the soldiers did as they were told. As their backs straightened and the pointy ends of their weapons stopped focusing toward them, Frisk allowed the same courtesy. For the first time since Frisk had stood within the perimeter of the castle, they did not feel like a cockroach scuttling to avoid the boot.

“None of us here are strong enough to eliminate this creature,” the commanding officer continued with the same, unyielding tone of voice. “Except one man… and he’s waiting in the royal garden.” He pointed at the child who survived the Underground. “Waiting for you.”

Frisk’s fingers and toes reflectively scrunched as the officer’s digit pointed squarely at them; the humidity had seeped its way into their socks. Every square inch of their skin was drowning, so cold feet were the least of their concerns. No names needed to be revealed.

The commanding officer moved aside until his back met the side wall. “Let them through.”

As hesitant as the units were to lower their weapons, they were less so in huddling their way out of Frisk’s path. Those stuck in the centre bounded back and forth, clashing forearms and chests amongst themselves figuring out which direction to take. An open path lay before them, dogged by those under the Emperor’s thumb.

Frisk remained idle for a moment to read the emotions in their eyes before walking through them.

Frisk passed the colossal structures towering left, right, and above, made for giants. More soldiers of the Monster Military – cats, dogs, horses, birds, cows, and many animals in the kingdom – watched from the side-lines as this lone figure passed. Drenched and alone, Frisk resembled a homeless urchin from a Dickens classic. One of the watching guards pulled his helmet off and held it to his chest, showing respect for a theoretical coffin being carried to its final resting place.

A quality in the air surrounding Frisk gave the impression that they were finished with life and that nothing truly mattered anymore. Their lips sagged into a miserable frown. One could easily mistake the water dripping down from their eyes, half buried by the fringe, as tears. Frisk remembered Flowey’s words, what he said about the millions of universes out there, and the millions of Frisks living in those worlds. What did this version of themself do to deserve this? Here they were, apparently goose-stepping to their own execution, in a world where they were an orphan by creation.

No parents. No brothers or sisters. No grandparents. No actual family. Nobody to mourn them when they were gone.

The final part of their visions were coming true, piece by piece…

Wet… Soaking… Dripping… Water pouring down…

The portcullis entrance of the largest structure led straight to the garden, the generous arch offered a grand ten seconds of shelter. A wide courtyard surrounded by four walls lay beyond. In the centre stood the Obelisk: the solution and cause of all of this world’s problems, condensed into one giant pillar from an ancient time and shrouded in mist. Frisk remembered glimpsing this humble place at the beginning. The flowers were beautiful, rivalling those found in the best places on Earth. Now,
the beds lie dead and drowned, resembling no man’s land with its trodden brown earth and sloshing, dirty puddles.

*Grey sky... Barren land...*

Up head, from behind the Obelisk, came the shuffling and rubbing of metal and heavy steps. Emperor Maxus emerged from out the mist, his great frame made greater by his father’s armour which he wore with pride. The metal was a strong, ferocious crimson that shined with the same glimmer as gold. In his right hand, Heaven’s Shard cut through the blurry evening, looking sharper since the last time Frisk seen it. He carried himself like the armour was a second skin. A great, red cape swaying behind him.

Maxus stopped before the Obelisk. His silver stare cut through the haze like the glare from a lighthouse, falling deadly upon his opponent. The last time Frisk saw those eyes, they were falling.

“The Advisor said you’d come and he’s never wrong,” Maxus said. “I regretted letting you escape yesterday. I should have killed you the moment we met, would have saved me a lot of time and monsterpower.” His chin jutted, accentuating his perpetual frown. “Now, I get to correct that mistake.”

Frisk gave the ground before their feet a sombre look, catching their own reflection waver within a shallow puddle. They closed their eyes. Their thumbs pressed the activation buttons, expanding their shield and sword to its default setting. And that is where it shall stay.

“I have dreamed of this day for a long time,” Maxus continued. “The day where I finally obtain the power needed to free my kind from the tyranny of humanity. I will show it to the world. Your kind will gaze in silence and quake in terror as a new era dawns. I will make humanity itself a sin and destroy everything they had hoped to achieve. Nothing else will ever be as historic as this. This momentous day shall be called…” He stood tall and mighty, his father’s armour gleaming. “The day determination died.”

From the south gate, the lookout stood at attention. With the Oasis and Bob in that direction, it was highly improbable any attack would come to her side. Nonetheless, she had troops on her back, ready to stand their ground if a siege happened.

Right now, the lookout’s attention was on the two hooded figures walking up the path and reaching the gate.

“Who goes there?” she asked the travelling pair, keeping his wits about her. She wouldn’t be surprised if they threw off their shrouds to reveal themselves as walking matchsticks of dynamite.

The two below turned their gazes upwards, revealing two goat faces with white fur, long ears, and snouts; a man and a woman.

“Howdy there,” Asgore shouted up, his low, tenor voice better suited for the task of sending a message up to the top of the wall. His outlook remained sunny regardless of how soaked his beard got. “Lovely day today, isn’t it?”

The lady at the top of the tower leaned on her elbow. “Get to the point,” she said flatly. It was hard for her to take him seriously, especially with the cloak over his horns. The dip between them overflowed with rainwater, the excess trickling down his front and back.

“Mind if we come in? We would like to have a chat with your ruler.”
“Are you our reinforcements?”

Asgore arched an eyebrow. “Your what?”

“That’s exactly what I thought. Listen, pal, the fortress is on high alert right now, meaning we’re not letting anyone just wander in and have a ‘chat’ with our ruler. So you can turn yourselves around and head back the way you came.”

Toriel shouted up. “Please. We have travelled an awful long way. Our business with your emperor is urgent.”

“Well, I hope you enjoy long walks leading to nowhere, because…” Her attention his pulled to shapes moving out there. “Great, more visitors.”

Asgore and Toriel turned to find shadows, many of them, dancing on the imminent horizon, moving like growths in the ground rising and falling.

“One, two, three, five,” a high voice shouted in rhythm. “One, two, three, five! One, two, three, five!”

The leading figure appeared; short and catlike, with two more just like him on his flanks. The rest materialised in lines of four, marching in formation along the worn path. The Bobs from the Embassy of Bob situated in the swamps of Bob – starring Bob – came marching across the waterlogged land of Highkeep Enclave.

“Ah, these are our reinforcements right now,” the lookout said.

The leading Bob and his two associates stopped beside the couple. If they were to guess, the one leading the pack was the founder of Bob himself, Bob, and his two lackeys were the Secretary of State, Bob, and the Secretary of Treasury, Bob, respectively.

“We have come on the Emperor’s orders,” Bob, the guy in front, said. “Let us in.”

The lookout nodded. “We’ve been waiting for you, but…” She peered at the two goats over. “I don’t want to open the gate while these two are present.”

The great founded of Bob gave the king and queen of the Underground a onceover. He knew exactly who they were, although, in all honesty, he wish he didn’t. Monsters adopting humans? Heard half a day ago and was still sinking in. The very thought carried an unquestionable, dirty feeling about it.

“You might as well let them in,” he replied.

The lookout tilted her head. “Seriously?”

Bob turned his head upwards. “These two,” he said, “got past the walls of my embassy no problem whatsoever.” A curt smile crossed his lips. “These walls aren’t going to hold them back. You can either keep them out and see what happens, or just lower the bridge and get it over with.”

The lookout pondered a moment, considered her options, weighed his logic, and then, after short deliberation, begrudgingly ordered others unseen to lower the gate. The drawbridge tilted slowly downwards at one foot intervals before thumping to a halt against the stone, bridging the gap between the white river. The Bobs crossed first with the Dreemurrs moving in alongside.

The royal couple gaped at what they saw. To think their castle was impressive, this fortress was more
immersive on the inside then out. Jigsaw pieces of structures dotted around the outskirts, leading up to the main fort up ahead. The resources gathered; the cost required; the monsterpower needed: neither of them wanted to count that high. Even draped in cold mist and rain, the structure was still impressive.

Asgore turned around, finding the lookout from the opposite side of the wall. “Thank you very much,” he hollered up.

The lookout offered a weak wave. “Sure, whatever,” she replied. *I didn’t do it for you…*

“Now,” Toriel said, “where to find this emperor…” Pronouncing ‘emperor’ like it came under quotes.

The lookout pointed over to the obvious location: the main fortress. “He’ll be in there somewhere, pent up… as usual. You may go, but don’t try any funny business. We’ll have eyes trained on you at all times.”

The couple thanked the lookout again for letting them in before making their way up the waterlogged steps. They never encountered another soul or soldier, especially as they reached the nearest gate.

Meanwhile, it took an entire two minutes for the army of Bob – from the Embassy of Bob situated in the swamps of Bob, ran by Bob who founded the Embassy of Bob – to march inside. As the last row of four entered, one figure trailed behind. The last one pushed a cart barely bigger than they were. The cardboard box of a desk had withered away, the cheap painted letters formed a puddle resembling frog’s guts. A single ball of crunched up paper rolled off the trolley and deflated under the drizzle – alas, disarmed by one of its many tactical countermeasures: water! For the Secretary of Defence, it did not take much to crumble their defences.

The Secretary of Defence tried so hard to act optimistic and bubbly. “temmie… neva… BEATEN!”

Meanwhile, the western gate drummed nosily as the prisoner transport rumbled over and through. Spirits were low, much lower than Colonel Fischer wished considering they all expected the marauding rain to have creased during the ride up, which it did not, making the final stretch a slog.

With the last of the sweat dripping on their brows, the pullers came to a halt, resting upon the walls, the cart, and even each other.

“Good work, troops,” Colonel Fisher applauded, clapping her gauntlets together in an encouraging fashion. With the weather as freaky as this, tough love was not the way to go to raise spirits. “Good work.”

From the nearby steps, Sergeant Nio came down, almost slipping and sliding on the greasy concrete.

The colonel addressed him first: “Sergeant, what’s the report on this weather?”

“No one seems to know,” was his response. “It’s got everyone on edge here also.”

Fischer frowned. “Good to know.” When, actually, it wasn’t.

“We’re expecting an attack soon on the castle. We’re pretty strapped for numbers right now. Could you spare some of yours?”

“I can spare some; however, they’re exhausted. They won’t perform as well as you wish.”
“I don’t need them to run, just stand at attention.”

“Then you can take them all. I’ll hand over authority to you.” Her attention turned to her unit, sat on the cold, cobbled ground. “Okay, soldiers, break time is over. Get to your posts.”

The men and women who pained their way through the wind and rain slugging the prisoner groaned in unison. Those soldiers could really use a warm bath, a hot meal, and a cosy sleep until tomorrow afternoon.

Fischer folded her arms and shut her eyes. Some encouragement was in order. “Those of you unwilling to comply can always help me with transporting the prisoner to the dun—” she lifted her eyelids “—and I’m talking to myself.”

The area packed with people now lay deserted save for the heavy, iron carriage.

“No, you’re not,” the prisoner locked inside the reinforced can said. “I can still hear you.”

“Go figure.” Fischer looked around. The coast was clear. “We’re inside the castle, you can come out of there now. Use the—”

Her words got cut off by the loud crash as Undyne kicked out the door with one mighty kick. It swung and slammed into the side, the hinges almost snapping.

“That works too, I guess…” Fischer said while the prisoner hopped out. Undyne wasted no time in stretching her cramped legs and throwing her arms, still in handcuffs, over her head, arching the divot out of her back. She had a caged, weathered look about which suggested to Fischer that another second in the carriage would have driven her around the bend. The rain bouncing off her scales lifted her mood. “Guess you didn’t need the first key, but you can use the second to take those cuffs off.”

Undyne stopped her stretching. “Yeah, about that…” she said, working the kinks out of her neck, “I got a little peckish during the trip and all I had were the keys, so…”

“So?”

“So I ate them.”

“You ate the keys?” Fischer sounded horrified. “That was the only one I had, you know. How will you get out of—?”

Without warning, Undyne pulled her hands apart, breaking the bracelets like they were made of paper. It crumbled as metallic snowflakes to the puddle strewn ground.

“Guess you didn’t need the second key either…” Her eyes were fixated on what was left of the shackles, rooted into the earth like mini anchors. In hindsight, it was a stupid question.

“But it’s the thought that counts, right?” Undyne suggested to an almost unanimous agreement from the other. “Alright!” She drew her sights upwards to the cloudy sky, placed one hands on her hip and clenched the other in a heroic pose. The heavy shower on her head and shoulders brought out a secret energy to her posture. “Now that I have infiltrated the enemy fortress and freed myself from captivity—”

“Actually, it was me who—”

“Don’t interrupt my soliloquy!” snapped Undyne. “Where was I? Oh, yeah.” She cleared her throat.
“It is time to hunt down this tyrannical ruler and bring him to justice!” Undyne remained locked in her pose for a few seconds before facing the colonel. “Where can I find him?”

Colonel Fischer pointed at what she figured was the obvious answer. “Try the big building over there.”

She expected the former captain and commander from beneath Mount Ebott to go charging off one-woman army style toward the castle. Undyne had another idea. She coiled up like a spring and launched into the air, reaching the roof of the nearest building. Head upturned, Fischer watched as the former prisoner played stepping stones with the outer perimeter roofs.

“By the way,” Undyne called out between roof skipping, “thanks for the free ride!”

Fischer could merely stand and watch until she was no longer in sight. “I need the number of her fitness instructor.” Then she set out herself to rally her fellow insurgents.

Sans opened the door to the same corridor from before. Two clean footprints from where the suit of armour stood punctuated the floor. He held the door open to allow for the others to follow through: Alphys, Papyrus, Haze, Sam, Rita, Barb, Rickard, and the spectators – all of them. Everyone funnelled into the great hall.

“Unbelievable,” Haze muttered, thunderstruck just like everyone else at having taken one step from his hideout and straight into the heart of the place he once called home.

Although, perhaps he should not be surprised. He had researched the ways in which monsters wielded magic, and how each monster channelled their own unique power based on the traits given at birth. With so many combinations and uniqueness, it was difficult to pin down specific patterns and branches of magic, especially within same families and species. Of course, there were extremely rare cases of magic, such as finding doorways to other places. If what Haze researched was correct, then this shabby, short skeleton did not teleport them to this place, but instead found a ‘shortcut’ through time and space.

Imagine a connect the dots puzzle, dotted, numbered, and untouched. It doesn’t matter what it is: a fish; clown; bucket and spade; whatever. The ink spots are doorways and entrances, and he casted aside all obstacles, casted away the walls impeding his path and the mountains standing in his way until they were as blank as the paper. In this world, logic has no meaning. Sans did not start from one and work his way to two, then three, four, and so on, he simply drew a line between where he started to where he wanted to be, connecting points A and B and ignoring everything else.

Haze had never witnessed this before. It was rather anticlimactic.

Barb’s arms went akimbo as she looked back on all her night-time intrusions over the years. “What have I been doing all this time?” she pondered. The jokey guy’s one easy step to castle access success actually worked. Barb could have saved herself a lot of trouble… and saved the Monster Military a few magic arrows.

Sam shook his head. “Too fancy a place for my bandages.”

“This hallway…” Ex-Master Scribe Rickard shot up and down, taking in the surroundings. “This coat of arms…” He approached a hanging decorated rug, pointing at it intently. “One lion head… Two eagles… Two shields and…” He countered the number of stripes on said shields. “Thirteen stripes. I know where we are.”

“Me too.” Haze caught Rickard off guard, now right next to one another. Rickard never heard him
nearing; he guessed the cane and slippers would throw away his subtleness. Haze twitched his brow
twice, flicking two extra lenses before his eyes. “It pains me that I recognise every individual piece of
rug in this place. Still, it has its purpose.” The lenses retreated. “We are in the east wing, fifth floor."

Rickard pointed to the south. “That way to the solar,” he said. Then to the north. “That way to the
chapel.”

“Exactly.”

Sans wouldn’t mind the directions to the kitchen. He had a major case of the munchies coming on.
He wondered what type of pasta these royal folk had, if they had any. Perhaps Papyrus could hone
his craft with penne? Orzo, perhaps? Rigatoni? Mix them up and make orzotoni? The possibilities
were endless.

“I know the way to the Obelisk. It’s this way.” Haze alerted, following the hallway south.

Haze got three steps down the hall when, from around the next bend, two guards walked in. Had
Frisk been present, they would have recognised these two as the fellas who knocked down Maxus’s
cub armour and poked a divot in their cheek. The two guards froze in amazement upon making their
turn, having spanned this hallway innumerable times and this being the first to bear an entire lobby.
Apparently the resistance’s element was surprise was already gone.

“Did we miss something?” Guard one asked Guard two.

“You’d think somebody would say if there was a meeting taking place here…” Guard number two
squinted, gathering the faces he could pick out from the crowd. “Although I don’t think I’ve seen
any of these folks before.”

“Except… this one.” He pointed to the elderly monster with the walking stick in front. “He looks
familiar.”

Guard number two’s face alit. “That’s because he’s the professor. They’ve been looking all over for
him.”

While the duo talked, they were oblivious to the fact that Professor Haze was scuffling closer,
coming to within his cane’s length from them.

Guard one: “Isn’t there a reward for bringing him to the castle?”

Guard two: “I’ve heard, but he’s already in the castle anyway, so I doubt—”

*Wham!* Haze’s cane whacked over Guard two’s shielded head, knocking him out instantly. Before
the first could react, the cane caved in the peak on his helmet and he joined his partner in hallway
patrol on the stone floor.

Professor Haze scowled at his associates, stood still where they were several metres back. “Have you
forgotten already? Remember the plan: you’ve all got places to be. Now move like you’ve got a
purpose.” Then shuffled on his slippers over the two guards.

Barb winced, touching her head on impulse. “Remind me not to get on your bad side, professor.”

The gathering, instead of following the professor on his slow pace, split up in several directions.
Barb and Sam an’ Rita went north, along with half the group. The other half went south, past the
professor except for Rickard who opted to stay with him. This left Sans, Papyrus, and Alphys stood
in the middle, lost.
Alphys gave chase to Haze. Fortunately, she needn’t run far. “Wait, professor?” she asked, “What should we do?”

“Right. You three weren’t part of the plan.” Professor Haze looked away a touch. “Tell you what: make yourselves useful and go make sure the Obelisk is clear. Down this hall, right, then left, take the stairs to the bottom, right, straight on for two-four-five yards, then right. You can’t miss it.”

“Okay… we got it…” Alphys said slowly.

“We shall figure it out,” Papyrus said surely. “Onwards!”

And so, the trio made their way down the corridors, found the stairs and reached the ground floor.

The two of them, the tiny human and the large monster, were alone in the desolated garden unless the pillar itself could be counted as an individual. Polar opposites in every single way, and the worst combination for the last two people in this world. A modern retelling of David and Goliath.

Frisk was reminded of how they met Asgore Dreemurr. His talk about the weather and playing catch and how their certain confrontation was akin to a trip to the dentist was all a shameful ploy to stave off the inevitable for as long as possible. Six human souls in his possession, and yet the thought of taking the last one by force personally tore him apart inside.

Frisk thought they could feel it: the magic swirling around Emperor Maxus’s soul, prolonging his life and feeding his strength. As the world perished, it continues to focus on this one monster.

Frisk’s worked up their tiny voice into a far-reaching bellow. They told Maxus that this world was on the brink of dying. They had a chance to stop it from happening, but only if they worked together.

“Work with you?” The Emperor marched forward. “You got a tasteless sense of humour to waltz back here and propose that. Like I would ever lower myself to the likes of you.”

An appeal to his people was the detour Frisk decided to take, desperately as their opponent drew nearer. When the magic of the Obelisk ran out, Frisk explained, this world will destroy itself and everyone in it – the people he swore to protect as their ruler. His father cared deeply for this land and its citizens. Should Emperor Maxus not do the same?

“I don’t care what my father said anymore,” barked Maxus. “I don’t even care about this world. I’ve spent my life bowing on the whims on what other people wanted. Now it’s my turn. Do you know what I want the most, more than anything else in the universe?” He stopped before Frisk. “I want all humans dead.” His sword arm reeled back. “Starting with you.”

Heaven’s Shard swung high. Frisk threw up their shield and blocked the blow, feeling a trace amount of a shudder run through their forearm. Maxus pressed down and Frisk pushed back, their knees trembling, threatening to buckle.

Frisk tried one more time. With a strained voice. This was not what Juhi would want.

“Juhi’s not here, is he.”

Time for plan B. Frisk tipped their shield to one side as Maxus pushed down with all his might. Heaven’s Shard slipped into the sullen earth. Frisk darted past and swiped his leg. The dull training sword from yesterday hardly scuffed his boot, but the razor tip cut through the special metal and reached his skin, leaving a small cut on the underside of his calf.
Emperor Maxus grunted as his wounded leg buckled slightly. He quickly turned, stood, and heaved his greatsword from out the bog water. The child now stood with the Obelisk to their back; sword in left hand and shield in right, poised to fight.

“Definitely Haze’s work…” the lion said, mentioning the human’s equipment. “Still, it won’t save you.”

Maxus rose his sword to attack when his left shoulder guard burst into flames.

He stumbled to the side, plunging the tip of Heaven’s Shard into the dead ground to stop himself. The blast had charred the golden crimson sheen obsidian black.

Maxus’s head turned at the same time Frisk’s did. “Who dares…?” he snarled through closed, clenched choppers and saw two figures draped in cloaks at the far end of the dead garden. Ebbs of smoke and steam drifted off two white palms.

“What a miserable creature…” Toriel started.

“Torturing such a poor, innocent youth…” Asgore finished. The sound of those words leaving his lips nearly made Toriel burst out laughing at his hypocrisy.

Frisk could not stop the words from leaving their smiling mouth: Toriel! Asgore!

Pushing himself up on his blade, Emperor Maxus exhaled and inhaled through pursed lips. Just hearing a human call out monster names with such acknowledgement, like a child finding their parents, disgusted him down to his core.

The king and queen rushed over, gladdened all over by finding their child. Toriel took Frisk into her arms while Asgore stood between them and the emperor. Just feeling the child’s warmth, their presence close to hers, her cheek rubbing against theirs, their tiny arms around her neck, made her worries fade away.

“Oh, my child,” Toriel said lovingly. “I am so glad you are alright.” A tender kiss found its way to the side of the child’s fuzzy head.

As Maxus witnessed the scene – a monster cradling a human – the repugnance of it all was unbelievable. A monster hugging that filthy animal? The Emperor could not fathom it. “Your child?” Maxus repeated. “Your child? You call that pile of skin and bones your child?”

Asgore stepped ever so little to the left, acting fully as a barrier. He started, belligerent but fair. “Now, look here—!” His mouth hung agape, ready, locked and loaded to spew his forceful speech when he looked upon the emperor’s face and recognition flashed within his eyes, pushing his arms down and leaving his mouth open to attract flies. “Juhi?” he said. “Is that you? I thought you died during the war.”

The Emperor responded only with a glare, the narrowing of eyelids, deep frown and low growl from the back of the throat.

The former king lifted his head. “No, wait, you’re not Juhi… you’re his son, aren’t you?” The name balanced on the tip of his tongue. “Alex? Axel? Max? Maxel—Maxus! I remember now, you’re Maxus!” He pulled down his hood: a good look from head to toe was in order. The last time Asgore had seen him, once or twice, too many decades in the past, Maxus was a scrawny, timid, unsmiling child of about five or six. “Look at you… I cannot believe how much you’ve grown!” Never would he have conceived that same child growing up to be the musclebound mass before him.
Toriel pulled away from her touching reunification to scowl at her ex. “Now is not the time for pleasantries, Dreemurr.”

He ignored her. “Please, Maxus, do not be so hasty. You and I have so much to catch up on. Let us talk about this as gentlemen, over a nice cup of tea.”

This suggestion served to make Maxus angrier. Before he could step closer – a move which was scarcely sudden – he was swiftly impeded by a single shaft of pale blue energy, striking the ground dangerously close to the muscles in his uninjured leg.

“That spear…” Asgore mouthed, breathless. He knew those from anywhere. It remained vertical for a couple of seconds before vanishing into the ether. “Could it be…?”

From atop the western roof of the yard, Undyne stood aloof and intimidating. “Take another step…” She jumped down, landing in a posterior-kicking pose next to Frisk and the royal couple; her eye trained on the ruler. “And it’ll be your last, villain!”

Asgore smiled, half surprised and half pleased. “Undyne? You sure know how to make an entrance.”

Undyne returned a grin. “I learned from the best.” Her tone made no attempt to veil the fact that she was thankful to have found Asgore, Toriel, Frisk, and the Emperor all at once. Her joy in locating the Emperor was for another reason.

Maxus’s hand shook, tapping the hilt of his sword against his waist. His men had been dispatched to capture this criminal, and now she stood before him, free from shackles, on the outside of a cage, and taking Asgore’s side which, in turn, meant she was taking the human’s side. Choosing a human over him, a monster just like her, without as much as a waiver of thought.

“Villain? He was the bad guy here?”

“Stop it,” he uttered. “Stop defending that thing!”

Maxus heaved heavy breaths through gnashed teeth, getting angrier. His grip on Heaven’s Shard tightened. He raised it high against Undyne and… Ping!

He shuddered to an abrupt halt as a blue aura consumed his entire body, making him feel like a ton. The Emperor fell on one knee, feeling gravity multiply tenfold, and let his weapon lose balance to his side. From the opposite side of the garden lay the source of this power.

“There’re plenty ways to make pals, pal,” Sans said, arm outstretched. Holding down Maxus with minimal effort. “Swingin’ that around ain’t one of them.”

As Emperor Maxus pushed and grunted under the blue magic, Sans, along with Alphys and Papyrus, moved closer; the doctor’s coat a slight shade of grey in the rain. It occurred to Sans that Papyrus – with his death traps, obvious japes, frozen spaghetti and blue attacks – had a better grasp on buddy-making than Maxus did. At least Papyrus actually made a friend that day.

Frisk could not contain their excitement. All their friends were here, alright and in one piece.

“Alphys! You guys!” Undyne hollered.

Alphys gasped. “Undyne!” she cried happily. “Tori! Gorey! Frisk! You’re all okay!” She was so elated that she could cry. So she did. “You’re all okay…” she whispered to herself. Her friends were not gone because of her. They were alive and well, and reunited with Frisk because of her. “I didn’t
mess up… I didn’t mess up… I actually did it… I did good…”

Maxus, still pushing against gravity, watched as these three new additions stepped over and took their pride of place next to their king, on his side opposite Undyne. Their hatred not designated toward the one whose species cursed and ruined their lives, but toward him. They clambered around the human, treated it like their friend.

Heaving, he stood as he felt the magic grow weaker. “What’s going on? What has this human done to you? Why do you protect it?” he demanded to know, making it sound more like grovelling. His eyes traced around the faces opposing him, automatically falling back time again to the King’s. “Do you not remember the war? Have you already forgotten in your old age?” The questions were for Asgore only, but posed for them all. “Humanity’s hate? Their cruelty? The lives lost? Do they mean nothing to you anymore? Our own men, women, and children dead, slaughtered, and now you stand beside one of them whose ancestors were amongst those who committed terrible deeds against ours, who condemned your fathers, and their fathers before them to exile under the earth, to live out their days as prisoners for no other reason than what they were. All of no consequence to humanity. All to make us weaker in their faces. And now you clamber around that revolting creature whose hands are stained by the dust of those who roamed before it. Whose soul we can get to reap vengeance upon them. Why have you weakened yourselves like this? Why? Why are you doing this?”

His fierce hyperventilation afterwards served as the utmost sound after his remark was made. Intended for King Asgore himself, but answered by the likeliest soul present: Papyrus.

“Because Frisk is my friend,” he answered. No deep, philosophical explanation. “You don’t need a reason to protect friends. You must have an awfully big reason to want to hurt them though.”

Undyne brought her hands together and crackled her knuckles, inadvertently making Alphys cringe. “Just give me one minute with this guy…” She went to step forward only for Asgore to halt her with a hand raise.

“Undyne, please, let me handle this,” he said.

Begrudgingly, she stepped back, heeding the words of her king and mentor.

“Maxus, listen to me. This anger. I’ve seen it all before. I know exactly what you’re going through.” His tone became grave. “You’re following a path – a twisting, winding path through darkness and shadows and pain. There’s a voice in the back of your mind telling you, warning you, that you should turn back while you’re ahead, but you force yourself further onwards regardless because you believe it is taking you somewhere, and eventually you will reach the end and it’ll be exactly what you hoped it would be.” His head shook slowly, side to side. “Let me tell you, there’s no peace to be found at the end of that road, only more darkness, more shadows, and more pain.”

Maxus snarled. “You don’t know what it’s like.”

“Yes, I do!” Asgore suddenly shouted. “Yes, I do! I’ve walked down that exact same path myself; made the exact same mistakes you’re making right now; blamed everyone else for my shortcomings!” The anger stopped as quickly. “When I wasn’t strong enough to blame myself.”

Toriel rose, awestruck by the strength in Asgore’s voice. The tone, his roar; she heard that from behind the curtain, hiding from the subjects as he made his vicious speech. But those words, they were not of the same person. Those words belonged to a different man – a man she thought she would never see again, who she believed dead forever.

“Let’s say you succeed,” Asgore continued. “Let’s say you achieve ultimate power and use it to
destroy humanity. What will you do then?"

Maxus answered without reluctance, “I won’t have to do anything else. Monsters everywhere will finally be free. We can live without ever having to fear their wrath ever again. It will all be over.”

“Will it? Will killing every human make the pain go away? Make what happened to you, to us all, any better? You must realise: no matter how many humans you kill, it will never be enough.” He made circular motions with his hands. “Kill one human, the pain doesn’t go away like you hoped, so the solution is to kill some more, and when that doesn’t work, you kill even more in the vain hope that, this time, it will; and after you reach the end of that road, destroy humanity down to the last human… then what? Where do you go from there? You may get some satisfaction, at least for a while, but it won’t last long, and before you know it, the pain will come back along with this thirst for vengeance, but there will be no more humans left to quench it. With no way to channel this hatred, the little friend in your subconscious called ‘Blame’ will eventually realise that humans aren’t the only thing he can point his finger at…”

The tension in Maxus’s arms slackened. “What are you saying?”

“I am saying that revenge isn’t worth it. All it does is bring harm to everyone, including those you’re trying to protect. Monsters will be in just as much danger as the humans, and… in the end, if you choose to follow this path, there won’t be anyone else left. You will be forever alone, lost forever to revenge, poisoned so deeply you’ll forget who you are and why you fought in the first place. But it is not too late, there is still a chance to turn this around.”

“What…” Maxus sounded dazed. “What… must I do then?”

He took a breath. “Let go,” Asgore answered softly. “I know, from where you’re standing, that answer seems impossible, unfair even, but compared to the alternative, it is actually a lot easier than it sounds. This began with violence, but it doesn’t mean it has to end with violence. You have a chance to end this right here, right now, without further pain. Put the past down… put the sword down… and we can settle this peacefully. No one needs to get hurt.”

Arms slack. Breathing in and out. Maxus turned from Asgore to the ground. The great, youthful emperor of the Outerworld was still with clarity, seeing his limited view of his limited world from a whole new angle. He needed a moment to reflect, time for his own mind to click the pieces into place and reach his own conclusion. King Asgore, the one monster left alive and more deeply rooted by the events of the war, offering forgiveness and acceptance as his answer to all the death and despair in his life. Was it really that easy? A millennia of holding a blade against mankind and a vow to see them pay, dropped like snapping fingers. Could Maxus do that?

Did he want to?

Slowly, surprisingly, the lion nodded. “You’re right. You’re right,” he repeated. “The answer is simple. I do have a chance to end this now and prevent further pain.” Heaven’s Shard rose, the tip pointed toward Dreemurr’s chest. “I’ll kill you first, then your wife, then your henchwoman here…” Asgore told him to stop, but there was no point to it. One by one, Maxus drew his glare over the others present – the skeletons and the scientist – stating he would kill them next. “Then your pathetic excuse of a child, and then all of humanity.”

Asgore held a hand back and stood forward. “Stand back,” he insisted before using his magic to materialise his proud, mighty trident. Still as threatening and crimson as ever. “This is between me and him.”

“Thank you, Asgore.” Toriel rose. “But no thank you.” She pushed his arm aside. “Frisk is my
responsibility too, and I cannot stand idly by and watch this man threaten them.” Orbs of flame grew in her hands. Rain turned to steam on impact.

Undyne stepped forward, forming one of her trademark spears. “If you think I’m standing down from a fight, you’ve got another thing coming, big guy!”

Papyrus’s turn. “We members of the disbanded Royal Guard must stick together. Sadly, I left my pritt stick at home, so we’ll have to band together. Sadly twice, I left all my rubber bands at home also, so we must roll together. Sadly thrice, I—”

“We get the gist of it.” Sans patted Papyrus on the side of his armour. “As for me, I’ve spent too long standin’ on the side-lines. Time to shake the cobwebs out of these bones.”

“Be careful, this could get dangerous,” Toriel warned.

Sans replied as charming as ever. “Tori, Danger is my middle name.”

“Really?” Papyrus looked quizzical. “I thought your middle name was ‘the’.”

Another friendly tap met Papyrus’s battle body. “Don’t think too hard, Papyrus,” Sans said, then referred to Maxus. “Listen, pal, it looks like we got a fight on our hands. So, I’m gonna be straight with ya, and I’m only gonna say this once.” His eye sockets closed. “If you got a problem with my buddies, well…”

He opened his eyes to reveal empty blackness.

“Y O U   G O T   A   P R O B L E M   W I T H   M E .”

Frisk went to stand between Asgore and Toriel, feeling this was their fight also. However, they were ushered back by both of them.

“You have done enough, Frisk,” said Toriel. “Please allow us to handle this.”

Most of the party had took their stances, with the exception of one such person. Alphys hovered from the side, turning from the line to Frisk and back again.

“Um, I, uh,” Alphys stammered. “I should probably hang back with Frisk. I can’t fight.” She trembled at the sheer sight of the man. With arms as big as his, Alphys was nothing more than a dumbbell to him – a weight he would lift for fun. Standing beside Frisk brought a degree of safety as well as the added security that the child she let go of was still safe and sound. “I’ve never been in a fight all my life…”

All of a sudden, a small spark of electricity sparked in the air between the two sides of the conflict. It started as a small crack, then expanded out into a great ball of blue power. One would have expected it to subside and for Arnold Schwarzenegger to be kneeling there, in desperate need of clothes, boots, and a motorcycle. Instead of the Terminator, another robot appeared, crackling with laughter and smouldering black in various places. One of her cat ears was missing.

“What the heck is that?” Undyne instinctively rose her spear, on guard in case the half burned creature lunged.

The mechanical girl followed the sound of the voice. She turned to the party with blank, unblinking eyes. Her smile as perpetual as Sans Danger Skeleton’s. She giggled with unmoving lips.

Sweat formed on Papyrus’s brow. “It cannot be…” His bones began to rattle.
“What in the…?” Alphys felt a strong desire to clean her glasses. “Mew Mew? Is that you?”

“Wait, she survived?” Even Sans, which he hardly ever sounded, was shocked. “Figured she blew up with the teleporter. I saw her explode and everything.”

All of a sudden, the large mitts from his brother gripped his shoulders. Papyrus used the half-his-size frame of Sans as a shield against the burning abomination known as Mew Mew; apparently having made the trip to the fiery pits of underworld only to make her miraculous comeback to haunt the skeleton of her dreams.

“Hide me!” The sight of Papyrus feebly squatting his lanky frame behind his wide bro was quite ridiculous and yet strangely adorable. A childish act from a grown adult wearing a party costume.

Mew Mew scanned the heat signatures left and right. She hovered her sights over the two skeletons, held a moment, then continued twisting her head to churning gears.

“Konichiwa,” she said in a static-ridden garble. “My name is Mew Mew, but my friends call me… Mew Mew.”

Odd. Mew Mew repeated her introduction. Alphys knew her programming well – after all, she wrote it. The anime robot was programmed to say those exact words – her salutation and introduction in that order – upon activation. Those events from the basement happened yesterday afternoon, more than a day ago. An entire day had passed, but to Mew Mew, it has been an eye blink. It took the robot’s constructor a few seconds to figure out what had happened.

“You can come out from there, Papyrus,” Doctor Alphys said confidently, utterly sure. “It would seem her memory has been wiped, maybe even corrupted beyond repair. I highly doubt she remembers you anymore.”

Papyrus poke out from behind Sans’s shoulder and, self-assured Mew Mew would not immediately straddle him, tiptoed out. The robot glanced his way without any relocation on her blank face whatsoever.

He patted his forehead down. “That’s a relief.”

Maxus shrugged his shielded shoulders at the perplexity occurring before him. As the kafuffle unravelled, he was silently present and as unremarkable as an invisible spirit. The abundance of jokes, quips, and childish behaviour grated on his patience. This was supposed to be a serious moment. A historical event. The day all life as they knew it would change. Maxus was above slander, above humiliation, these jesters had not realised it yet.

“Excuse me, but what is going on here?” His sword hung loosely, clenched under the thumb and index finger. “Someone better start talking before I slice this thing to pieces.”

“Hey, doc,” Sans said quickly to her. “I don’t suppose you fitted Mew Mew with any weapons or combat protocols or anything?”

Alphys gave Sans a look like he had just insulted her. “Weapons? C-combat protocols? In my anime robot? What do you take me for?” she replied harshly, then with pause. “Of course I did.”

Suddenly, she was no longer afraid. She stepped away from Frisk and beside Undyne. The girlfriends shared a quick glance with Alphys hinting in her smirk that this was something Undyne was seriously going to love.

“Mew Mew, run program S-one-slash-four-zero.” Season one, episode forty: her favourite, so she
could never forget.

Upon processing the command, Mew Mew snapped upright, solid. The colour of her irises darkened into a serious shade of red, accompanied by a roiling roar from inside her head like the sound of anger brewing. Her arms opened, revealing all the inner mechanisms – servos and metal tendons – shifting to make way for some new additions. Two miniguns and full bandoliers of ammunition replaced her hands. There was a good chance plutonium was not the only thing purchased off www.totallynottheblackmarket.com.

Her stiff movements gained newfound flexibility. The anime character bent down into a fighting pose: legs bent; back hunched; gun arms cocked back and forth, chambering the first rounds.

A panel in her back opened and out launched a small rectangular object which landed in the scientist’s hands. Alphys flicked the power switches and on came the interface on the controller, lighting it up like a Christmas tree. Weapons green. Systems are go. Her thumbs met the analogue sticks. Fingers on buttons.

Mew Mew’s grin, coupled with her red eyes, instantly turned demented, evil. “Time to play rough.” In her tinny, scratchy voice.

Alphys shared another grin with her girlfriend. “Now anime is real,” she said.

Brute did not need to be told to stop before the awning, he did so purely on instinct. Advisor Flowey, masked in the darkness, looked out at his Emperor, weapon at the ready, prepared to engage six monsters and a machine.

The lives of those Maxus faced, all of which Flowey himself pulled apart and pieced back together the same way a child would with toys, and it disgusted him to think that was who he used to be. Becoming friends in one timeline. Their sworn enemy in another.

At least alone and abandoned in the Underground there existed the certainty of never having to see it again, of never being able to hurt anyone through his own uncontrolled curiosity.

Flowey, right there on Brute’s head, grabbed a thin slither of hope that this would be the last time he got to watch those monsters die. Next time, he will do better. Next time, he would save them.

This time, Flowey had no choice but to watch them die.

“Idiots. Every last one of them.”
Six against one? Then it was an even fight.

Reflection flashed in those shimmering eyes of Maxus's; Asgore had not changed one bit, from his appearance down to his stance. The royal red trident, a thousand years honed, with those three prongs pointed toward the earth. Frisk remembered that pose from when they fought; this time, however, those soft eyes of his, previously downcast with shame, were up and locked squarely on the young emperor, full of resolve.

Toriel, at her estranged husband's side, had her palms facing the sky, and those flames burning brighter and brighter. Her cloak fell from her shoulders and burning spheres ignited the air about her. Elegance shone in her stance, reflecting a master of her own magic, an ethereal mother, so much that traditional weapons – the sword, the trident, the spear, and the gun – might have well have been toys in the face of her own capabilities.

That henchwoman, Undyne: clearly unprepared battle-wise in her tank top and jeans, her scaly skin nowhere thick enough to repel the sharpness of Heaven's Shard, yet confidence leaked in her stance. She swung her spear out from in front and held it at her side, leaving her defence wide open. She was nothing short of formidable, she could probably take a swing and keep on coming.

The tall skeleton, so flamboyant. Papyrus had one hand on hip and the other straight with the palm facing the ground, possessing a high degree of interest toward himself. What did Papyrus see when he looked in the mirror: his reflection or the image of someone he loved? The world may never know.

The short skeleton, apparently related to the other, had mitten hands stuffed inside pockets and a smile on his face. Was Sans not aware he was about to fight or did he simply not care? The air was sharp with a growing chill; the rain continuous, soaking into the fur trim around his neck; this footing no place for someone in socks and slippers: none of it faltered the teeth in his grin.

The lady in the lab coat warmed up her thumbs on the joysticks and fingers against the buttons; every flick and press registered with the robot. The machine named Mew Mew rotated her shoulders and shook her legs to the sounds of servos and gears. A few jet propulsions of steam escaped from gaps in her plastic exterior.

Meanwhile, there was his real target, Frisk, overshadowed between Asgore and Toriel. Safely shielded, barred from his skirmish, but restless and anxious in their body language. The human had it written all over its face: it should be fighting too, or perhaps, it should be the only one fighting. Period.

Given the chance, Maxus would love nothing more than to do away with these lesser beings whom had surrendered themselves to mankind, clinging to some frail, misguided faith that monsters and humans were compatible, able to co-exist, that the two opposite sides of the spectrum could throw aside their differences, lock hands, and spin in circles on green meadows under glorious spotless skies singing kumbaya. No. The thought be just that: a thought, a dream, a fantasy, make-believe, nothing more and nothing less.

Heaven's Shard was the only one there who spoke Maxus's words and understood his language: as long as the two races existed, there would be no peace. True, everlasting peace would only be achieved when one of the two lay dead, and Maxus was determined to ensure bones marked the beginning of that age.
The two sides remained idle, the gap filled with downpour, souls waiting for the first stone to be cast. Undyne twitched, growing restless with each passing second of silence and no action. Would it be her? At that rate, Sans verged on drifting off to sleep, so his chances were diminishing. Asgore held his ground, poised, outwardly collected, but the notion most likely meant he was planning his line of attack.

Enough. If anyone was going to cast the first stone, the entitlement was Emperor Maxus's alone. He seized his greatsword by both hands and threw all his strength into one swing. Only ever once witnessed by Frisk, they saw it coming too late. He swept Heaven's Shard parallel to the ground, slicing several unfortunate raindrops and sending a devastating shockwave across the clearing, halting more drops momentarily and making them change in completely different directions in mid-air.

All his enemies were caught in the wave and forced back. Asgore drove his trident in to the ground with one hand while his other caught Toriel who, in turned, snagged Frisk, forming a chain. Sans and Papyrus conjured bones up from the ground: Papyrus with two on both sides to grab hold of while Sans rose an entire white wall of collagen behind him to lean back on. Mew Mew bent down and anchored herself with hooks fitted into the soles of her feet, something the person manning her controller could not do. Alphys tumbled backward. Undyne reached out and grabbed her at the cost of her own ground. Her spear, tip down, dislodged itself in the silken earth upon taking their combined weight. Fortunately, Alphys pressed a button and Mew Mew reacted, turning and launching a grappling hook from out the knot in her school tie which wrapped around the spear's shaft.

The instant the shockwave ended, Maxus lunged while their defences were down, making a clean line toward Asgore.

Uneventful was the word Kiya and Oswall – back near the northern wall – were looking for. Kaiser would have another thought, but his were as cloudy as the smoke rising in beards from his body. The human showed up, cut their way inside, waved a little saying 'Hey, I'm still here', and ran past them. The order had already came through: the human had been guided to the Emperor; he shall take care what the others could not. The troops might as well have opened the door for them and escorted them straight to the big man himself. Speaking of opening the door…

"Um," Kiya stammered, her focus still on the street leading upwards, "what do we do now?"

"I guess we go back to defending the gate while the Emperor takes care of the human," Oswall answered.

"Oh, yeah. Now that you mention it, we do have one itty-bitty problem…"

Over at the grand entrance, the drawbridge lay flat, those same chains used to open and close it now limp across the moat, broken. The spindly fingers are the Forest were barely visible.

Kiya nodded. "Yeah… No way are we pulling that back up anytime soon, not with the chains broken. The door's wide open for anyone to enter."

"Wait a minute, the chains broke?" Oswall inquired. "That's impossible, they were strong enough to lift, like, fifty times the bridge's weight."

"They did drop it pretty hard…"

"Like that hasn't happened before." Oswall wrinkled his nose. "I smell foul play."
Kiya sampled the air. "I smell something burning," she replied, then shot another glance to the
downed and out Kaiser.

A sudden tap on her shoulder dragged Kiya back to Oswall who was gazing through the open
entrance. Across the blurry horizon, it started as one, then multiplied tenfold every second, people – a
mob of them – converging out of the mist and descending upon Castle Highkeep. An army ready to
do battle.

"That's not good…” Kiya remarked.

Asgore quickly raised his trident to block the first blow; Heaven's Shard became caught between the
red tines. Asgore twisted and span his weapon in an attempt to pull the sword from Maxus's grasp.
With hands on the hilt, the emperor stayed one with his weapon and pushed it to connect with the old
king.

"Maxus!" Asgore exerted. "Don't… make… me…!"

Their weapons fell to one side and Toriel darted out, fire at the ready. She threw her hands forward
and launched a barrage, all of which struck Maxus, staggering him back; his armour pockmarked
with black burns. As another volley of fire came his way, Maxus countered them with a well-timed
swipe with the broad of his weapon.

The king lunged, leading with his weapon. Maxus faced him just in time to catch a glint in his eyes:
the right eye flashed blue before the left flashed orange. The red trident swung, carrying a trail the
same shade of light as the first glint. Maxus raised his sword to parry, but there was no impact; the
weapon, strangely, fazed through both his block and himself.

His guard dropped. "Wha—?"

Maxus may have been standing still to avoid the blue strike, but he wasn't moving for the orange.
The follow up, in a wake of orange, collided with his upper arm, knocking him to the ground in a
thirty foot long streak of slurry.

"Give it up!" Asgore shouted. "This is not the way!"

The Emperor got up and was about to press his attack when a whirling noise buzzed, followed by
several bullets pinging against his blade and armour.

Sam an' Rita along with a few freedom fighters bolted down the hall, rushing with such abandon as
to meet the planned out schedule. Everywhere they went was met with walls of stone, broken up by
the occasional ornament, whether it be a painting or a vase or a side table holdings paintings and
vases.

Hard flooring echoed footsteps up and down the length, it being the one and only sound discernible.
Many outsiders fantasised grand Castle Highkeep and its luxuries of thick carpets and cushy chairs
and beds one could get lost in for hours; around the clock kitchens with ovens never ceasing and
thick with the delicious aroma of the finest in vegetarian meat cuisine, churning out dish after mouth-
watering dish; wardrobes lined with garments of silk trimmed with gold and encrusted with
diamonds, ordained with sapphire earrings, opal pendants, jade rings and ruby cufflinks; it only took
five minutes for the pair of bandages to yearn for fresh air, sunshine, green grass, and the soothing
flow of water from outside their window.

Those days they may get back, but only if they saw this fight through to the end. The forces from the
north should be descending right about now, which should undoubtedly draw the attention of most of the armed forces. The fact that they were spread so thin should make the plan much easier. If Sam an' Rita can make contact with the moles, they can launch a surprise attack and defeat the defenders while they're too busy preparing for the assault, hopefully before the army gets there.

They turned the next corner and ran straight into a small group of soldiers. These guys were not adorned in the shiny plates of the Monster Military, but of the lighter variety with boiled leather. Four of them, not a problem. However, it was not the guys in armour who surprised them at that moment, it was the man who led them. He took one look at Sam and his wife and drew a smile across his lips.

"Well, well, if it isn't Lieutenant Sam and the lovely Lieutenant Rita," Lord Grill smarmed, scratching his hairy chin – both of them. His unexpected summoning to the castle wasn't a waste of his time after all, in fact, this was the greatest stroke of luck he has had all day. "What an unpleasant surprise."

Sam cursed in his mind while his belly turned – a sight he made no attempt to hide. So many ways for the plan to be disrupted and fate had thrown the worst one at them. After a sigh: "Lord Grill. There's a face I hoped to never see again. The feelin' ain't changed for two hundred years."

The feeling was mutual. Indeed, it had been a whole two centuries. Time and age had changed them, but not to an extent where they were unrecognisable. Rita never liked that smug grin of his, nor the glint of self-importance in his dark eyes. Even before the war, Sam thought Lord Grill needed to seriously rethink his eating habits, now he wondered how he was still alive with his balloon shape.

"Still sore over your side losing, I bet." Grill clicked his tongue whilst giving the country folk a look from head to toe, admiring their ragged attire the same way a doctor admired third-degree burns. "I see what defeat has done to you."

Rita placed her arms akimbo; no need to look twice upon the lord. "I see what victory did to you," she threw right back.

The divide was as strong as black meeting white: Grill was fat, lazy, manipulative, smartly dressed and womanising with twenty wives all filing for divorce claims; Sam an' Rita were healthy, hardworking, straightforward, shabby and happily married.

Lord Grill parted his lips to make his comeback. He had the line out in his head: I'll make you eat those words. Before he could speak the first syllable, he realised the perfect comeback to his comeback would not be difficult to make.

He said it anyway. "I'll make you eat those words."

"Assumin' you don't eat them first," Rita countered.

Grill motioned forward. "Handle the rest," he ordered the men at his command, "but leave the lieutenants to me. They are mine and mine alone."

His private militia moved forward and engaged the members of the rebellion; boiled armour clashing with monsters who dabbled in their own magic and experienced a heated bar fight once or twice. A couple crashed to the floor, another locked weapons. The mummy lieutenants were completely untouched and left alone in the fight, exactly how the lord ordered.

"Our last meeting was cut very short, if memory serves. I'm confident nothing will interrupt us this time." Lord Grill may have been afraid of many things: heights, flying, needles, legwarmers, hundred calorie snacks, yoghurt, lists over eight bullet points long and, of recent, angry fishy cyclopes, but not
Grill lifted his hands and conjured up floating beef wellington, steaks, slabs of beef, salami, chicken, turkeys, and a leg of red meat he grabbed to use as a club. You are what you eat just got serious. He rose his weapon and charged, carrying his massive frame like a battering ram.

With a little luck, Lord Grill would either collapse from exhaustion, trip on his own feet, or get a hernia, none of which Sam could chance. He threw his hands out and bandages shot from his wrists which wrapped around Grill's left arm. Grill chuckled and began to tug, pulling Sam closer. Rita used her own bandage magic to grab him by the other arm and, together, the husband and wife threw the bear lord against the right-hand wall.

Sam an' Rita wrapped Grill up like a mummy, from his neck to his ankles, hoping to bind him into submission. Lord Grill would not go down like that. He scrunched up his features and grunted with exertion as he pushed his arms out against the bindings. One wrapping gave away, followed by another, and then they all tore at once. He roared as he outstretched his arms, layered with dangling shreds.

The couple threw more dressings, but Grill caught them both and wrenched hard, yanking the mummies off their feet.

Mew Mew had both miniguns trained on Maxus, the barrels spinning to the same drone. Her controller a short distance away, deft with the actual controller in her claws.

"Today's gym activity," Mew Mew croaked, "track and field."

Alphys compressed both shoulders buttons and the dual guns went loud. Maxus dashed to the side, moving around with the trail of gunfire close behind, blasting up dirt, shredding his cape, and ricocheting off his armour and his sword. Maxus ran inwards and made a dash toward the anime robot. He got close enough and leapt high, aiming to destroy her with one clean slice down the middle.

Alphys was too quick for him and pushed the left bumper. On cue, Mew Mew threw off her firearms and replaced them with katana blades. No other blade would do in an anime robot. She crossed them above her head to block his strike.

Mew Mew and her cemented expression met her polar opposite face to face. "Let's dance," she said before revealing that her glowing red eyes were not just for show. After a quick charge, she blasted Maxus with eye lasers.

Maxus, slow but powerful, swung his greatsword while Mew Mew, fast and agile, dodged all his attacks and made quick, precise strikes. Alphys treated this with the same calmness as playing a video game for the millionth time, much to everyone's surprise. At one point, Mew Mew span her body in a literal cyclone of death; her head and below waist remained still in place.

Maxus swung horizontally. Mew Mew leaned back under it. Maxus drew his head back, inhaled sharply and roared a mouthful of energy downward, but Mew Mew propelled herself up on thrusters, leaping over the explosion. She somersaulted over the lion and landed with two giant chops from both swords, slicing his back and dividing the remains on his cape into three equal segments.

She flipped backward before Maxus could retaliate. He swung around to find her gone, vanished in the mist.

He did locate someone else however: that skeleton in the costume.
Barb worked alone; she always worked better alone. In fact, the battle plan accommodated to this integral fact. As the best and number one (out of one) bounty hunter in the Outerworld, she was fast, quick and able to a point where others slowed her down.

Castle Highkeep: born here, raised here, infiltrated it on countless occasions, and yet even she had not covered one hundredth of these hallways, there existing realms no one should ever travel.

Enclosed inside those six blank faces, Barb the Bounty Hunter was out of her elements. The wings on her back were there for a reason. She was born to fly, not to run, preferably outside. Any other ordinary, law-abiding monster of society would locate the front door, presumably on the ground floor. Barb opened the nearest doorway and found a nice, spacious window at the other end of a guest bedroom.

It felt great to be back in the air, no matter the weather. She found that every weather had its charm: the lovely warm sun; the cool, mysterious night; harsh snow and whipping rain. Her wings flapped slow and hard, gliding her higher and higher and higher toward the murky, grey limits. She overlooked the cannels below with the soldiers scuttling down lanes like ants and the black tsunami of the rebellion marauding from the north. Every monster for themselves.

She dropped. Her part in the plan can wait for a minute or two. She had her own worries to care about, namely her parents, and she had a few good ideas on where to look. She zoomed toward the first place, making a mental note.

In her peripheral vision, she hardly noticed what passed as an extraordinarily fat raindrop, not falling like a silent shooting star, but spinning with a swirl as it cut the air. It struck her wing and sliced the skin with an icy, tearing shriek. Barb recoiled to breath-taking pain, her vision became lost in a death spin as she began to lose altitude. A knife was lodged in her wing and every attempt to flex it was met with instantaneous, torturous agony. Desperately, she tried to stay airborne with the use of her one good wing to little result, barely altering her crash landing.

The ground drew closer and closer, those roofs nipping past on her heels until she scraped across a flat, rain-slicked cement platform. She tumbled side over side across the roof and rolled over the end. She latched to the corner with one hand and held on. Normally, in an event such as this, she would rely on her wings for support. She flexed them on impulse. The resulting pain nearly made her let go.

The ninety foot drop lay below. Heights never frightened Barb, but this drop did. She glanced up. A figure stood above. Barb was about to ask for help until she recognised his face and he stomped on her fingers.

Barb fell the distance to the ground, attempting to tackle her speed with her one working wing. She landed with a roll, wracking her bad wing some more. Her assailant jumped from the roof and scraped down the wall in a blur of sparks, coming to a stop before her.

Dom the train chef did not need to sharpen his knife, the wall did it for him. "You owe me a million smackers," as he said that, he gestured at Barb with the cutting tool in one hand and a spatula in the other.

The deer chef still donned his apron, complete with matching grease stains. In every pocket, nook and cranny, he carried his working tools: forks, knives, utensils, pots and pans. The repercussions to his payslip did not matter anymore.

"You? You don't strike me as the Empire's number one fan..." Barb's words could not mask her discomfort. She found her footing and rose, remaining hunched. "Why side with them?"
The answer was written clear on Dom's wide nose. "To finish our business," he answered. "You made me look quite the idiot back on that patch of land, you know that?" The memory was not fond. "Seriously, the retrieval crew laughed their guts out all the way back. All. The. Way. With me standing right there next to them."

"It's your own fault," Barb said back, attempting to stand straight only to revert to her arched back. Her fingers brushed against the handle and brought about pulverising agony. "None of that would've happened had you stayed in the kitchen like a good boy."

"It wouldn't have happened had you not have been such a persistent bat."

Dom charged with the knife. Barb blocked with her forearm and wrestled the train chef. A few tranquiliser darts from her wrist mounted gun went off into the sky. Dom pushed down harder, tightening the strain on the damaged wing. The blade drew closer to Barb's fine features. With a flick of her wrist, a smoke pellet dropped from her belt and burst on the ground in an engulfing cloud.

The acting force against Dom's arm vanished and the blade sliced at the thick cloud. Blinded, but Barb's clicking high-heels and sloshing puddles gave her away; her usual stealthy methods abandoned. Dom gave chase and exited the smokescreen as Barb aimed her wrist high and attempted to glide away with a grappling hook. Dom tossed his knife and severed the wire, plummeting the bounty hunter several dozen feet into a couple overflowing cans of garbage.

Apple cores, orange skins and table scraps spilled onto the ground and onto Barb. She got up, picking a banana peel off her black hair, as Dom made his approach.

She bared her teeth, then bared her magic. Barb struck the ground and Dom the chef moved out the way as a giant fang knifed out the ground, nearly piercing his foot.

The taller of the two skeletons held himself in high regard as he belted out his command. "Hold, fiend! I, the great Papyrus, will elect to grant you mercy in exchange for your immediate surrender. How do you respond?"

Maxus retorted with a growl.

"Your defence has been noted. I bet you have encountered much," Papyrus said. "But I bet my best bone you haven't encountered anything like my previously fabled, now legendary" – he posed in a dramatic fashion – "blue attack!"

From the earth, azure bones rose on droves before the skeleton – posts made out of blue bone. The armada rocketed at various speeds forward, some fast and some slow, moving at such a wide range that avoiding them was out of the question. Once more, like with the blue in Asgore's trident, these bones passed through Maxus without a hint of damage.

Some legendary attack that was… and then, ping, his soul turned blue and his entire frame weighed a hundred times heavier. Papyrus sneakily conjured up a single bone the moment before his magic took effect, jabbing Maxus in the shin. Taking a hit there was among one of the worst places to get hit.

Papyrus cackled. "Nyeh heh heh! Another falls prey to my incredible power."

Heaven's Shard became Maxus's walking stick. He pushed down and lifted himself by a couple of feet. He took a breath and focused the magic to a single point at the back of his throat. Let's see how that obnoxious laugh sounds after this.
He roared and unleashed another beam of energy toward Papyrus who stopped cackling the second he saw it coming.

Papyrus murmured one word: "Fiddlesticks…"

He raised his red gloves to shield his eyes as the flare became blinding. He expected the blast to connect and to be shattered into particles in an instant, then heard something appear and erupt from out of the moist air. Papyrus opened his eye sockets to see the back of some monstrous skull, countering Maxus's beam with another just as powerful.

Sans had his hand out of his pocket. "I got your backbone, bro."

The two energies fought, wavering back and forth between the two jaws. As it looked like one would win, Sans threw a spanner in the works by forming another blaster over Maxus who saw it coming and rolled sideways out of the way, dodging both beams – one which blasted a muddy crater and the other which zoomed across the clearing a blasted down a piece of the far wall.

Emperor Maxus used his momentum to lunge at Sans who was a short distance away. Sans, in his chillaxed boldness, took one step to the right to dodge the first swing. Maxus swung a further two times, his ire rose with every time he sliced at open air. Could none of these lesser being stay still for one second?

Before Maxus could swing a fourth time, Sans's eye flared and he grabbed Maxus by the soul and threw him across the dead garden. The lion collided hard against the Obelisk's northern face and a collective sting of several bones burst into his back, the stabbing feeling akin to daggers. Not a moment later, he was thrown down to the ground and caught circles of blue emanating beneath him. He somehow was able to hop from the ground to avoid the brunt of the attack, catching it across his legs.

However, after the attack had passed, the burly emperor went to move and toppled, feeling his stamina drain as Sans's magic had a residual effect on him.

Weakened, he had no time to recuperate before the destroyer of Bjornliege Manor, Undyne, lunged from out the grey with a spear at the ready.

Haze and Rickard might have known exactly where to find the Obelisk, but that did not mean their route could not be disrupted as they encountered their obstacle. His name was General Leigh. Nobody else accompanied him.

"Haze…" Leigh sounded somewhere between a profound delight in meeting an old ally and uneasiness. "Still keeping active these days? You look ready for retirement."

The professor noticed the general's stiff stance. "You were never one for small talk," he said, knowing him all too well even after all these years.

"True." Leigh then said to Rickard, "It's good to see you again, master scribe."

"I've only been gone a short while but it does feel like an eternity." Rickard genuflected respectfully. "I am glad to see you, also." Whatever grudges he held within the Empire, none of them were against this man.

"Let me tell you something off the record: the way Maxus treated you was a disgrace. I know for a certain fact you gave Emperor Juhi nothing but hard work and utmost respect, and then his boy goes and treads over you." Leigh paused and sighed in a lamentable manner. "I wish I had the courage to
do what you did."

Rickard was taken aback by what the former warrior admitted. "You really mean that?"

Leigh nodded against his neck's wishes. "How many people would have the courage to stand up to the Emperor? I could name a hundred of our finest, most decorated troops and place them in order of likeliness. But it was you who became the first. You, the one monster intimidated by him as an angsty prince, did what no one else did." His hands clenched, dripping with regret. His whiskers drooped. "I should've been on top of the list. I should've been the one to take that blow. I am sorry."

"You are not the one I am angry at, general," Rickard said. He felt a small tingle of pride. Then again, it could be the ache where his back met the Obelisk, harshly.

Haze inched forward with his three legs. Thud, two steps. Thud, two steps. "You obviously hold little love for Maxus. Why don't you help us instead?" Haze suggested.

"I cannot."

Haze twirled his hand, impatiently demanding an explanation. "Because…?"

"While it is true I do not hold much regard for the new emperor, the Monster Military and the men and woman on all seven islands are still my responsibility as general." He turned his back and clasped his hands together behind himself. He stood was confidence, knowing full well these two would not attempt anything. "The soldiers are running scared, barely keeping order under control by a thread. The reinforcements from the other islands are reporting events most grim: the waters of Bob are rising well beyond their limits, becoming treacherous, homes are flooding, being swept away; the mines of Rocklyn are collapsing in on themselves, and they're taking the canyons down with them. Now more than ever, we need the military to maintain order, to stop chaos from ravaging the population and our ranks." He twisted back around too quickly, cramping his sensitive neck muscles. "And you aren't helping by throwing your rebellion against the gates."

"I had no other option," Haze responded to an instantaneous scoff from General Leigh. Everyone was always out of options. If there was one thing everyone lacked, it wasn't time or money or sense, but options. "You made no progress in solving the Obelisk's secrets, especially in light of this world degrading before everyone's eyes. I will not sit back idly and do nothing while this world dies. I'm trying to save those people, too!"

Half of those words Leigh had heard before, the other half held some sense. "During the civil war," Leigh began to speak, "I lost count of the number of plans passed by me. Out of all those things suggested, one stuck for some reason – one I just remembered after all that time: 'Cut off the head and the body will fall'. If this rebellion is your body, Haze, then I suppose that makes you the head."

Haze attuned his hold on the cane. "Do you really wish to do this now?" he asked.

"Absolutely not…! You and I have been allies for a long, long time. I might even dare to say we were friends, but…" He opened his hand and out ebbed an eyeball of red and gold. "I have thousands to think about."

Rickard scurried between them, holding his arms out. "Now's not the time to fight amongst ourselves. There's no Monster Military, no subjects, no civilians – not anymore –, just monsters trying to survive."

After Rickard's echoed diminished up and down the hall, silence ensued. Haze with his cane and Leigh with the magic in his hand, and Rickard keeping them separated. The professor who enjoyed a
fight but was no warrior; the scribe who had never picked up a sword in his life; the general who was once a warrior, now crippled to a point where he could barely hold his own.

"Ah, Rickard," Leigh said with admiration and sighed. "You continue to do what I wish I could. You truly are the bravest out of us all."

While Rickard's head was turned to Leigh, Professor Haze edged closer on shuffling slippers. "I'm not one to apologise, but on this rare occasion," he said, "I'm not making an exception."

Haze swung his cane, cracking Rickard in the back of the head. The rat in the robe went down, clutching his head and sadly remaining conscious against the professor's hope. While Leigh was distracted, Haze threw his body forward and ran against his legs' wishes. He whacked Leigh in the wrist as a laser blasted out the pupil. The next swing was caught by Leigh who swiftly pulled it away.

Haze clutched to Leigh, attempting to stay standing. The two fought as the scribe writhed on the floor.

Undyne knocked Heaven's Shard to the side before following through with a hard thrust of the blunt end to the stomach, making a bent in that ordained, flat belly.

Maxus was readying his weapon when a series of fireballs struck from his blindside. Asgore and Toriel.

Undyne pressed the attack. She jumped and delivered a haymaker to Maxus's left cheek.

Maxus staggered a few steps in the opposite direction, disorientated by the punch. He made out Mew Mew in his spinning, blurring vision. From out her back, six miniature missiles launched in six separate contrails of smoke, all striking Maxus.

A fierce barrage from Undyne wracked against his armour. It might have been spears, it was becoming harder to tell what anything was anymore.

Next came the bones skimming across the mud and puddles, knocking Maxus around in circles. Like he needed things to become dizzier than they already were.

Undyne lunged, leading with open arms. Maxus brought his arms up, ready to block a frontal attack, but that was not what she did. Undyne kept low, pivoted around him and wrapped her arms around his waist.

"It's time to end this," Undyne shouted, "with one grand slam finish!"

Undyne bent her knees, pushed her entire weight down and – feeling her back muscles tighten – pulled herself backwards, managing to lift Maxus an inch off the ground before he began flailing and kicking, throwing his weight forward. The two staggered in circles.

"G-get off!" Maxus tried to pry her off where the hands clasped. When fumbling did not work, he resorted to jabbing the sword pummel into her knuckles. "Unhand me!"

Undyne winced at the pounding against her fingers, her grip remained unbreakable around his waist. "A little help?"

Asgore and Toriel sensed their opportunity and seized it. The boss monsters charged fire in their hands. Mew Mew, suddenly, wanted in on the action and jumped between them. A compartment on
her belly opened and there was a square payload of homing missile, ready to fire.

"Sayonara."

Altogether, they fired. A volley of fireballs and missiles struck Maxus in his chest and head; the momentum giving Undyne the incentive to lift the colossus of a monster. She threw her body back, feeling the Emperor's entire weight over her. In the middle of her suplex, Sans and Papyrus focused their magic on where he would hit the ground. The area glowed blue, and then out erupted a dozen bones that crushed and broke against the back of Maxus's head.

The slam came last. Maxus crashed down headfirst, quaking in a resounding quake. Undyne released her hold and the young emperor rolled onto his front, face down in the dirt.

Undyne had suplexed a huge, angry emperor. Not just because she could, but because she needed to.

"Booyah!" Undyne hollered like she scored a touchdown. "You all saw that! YEAH!"

Downed, Emperor Maxus stirred with a groggy groan. Asgore had trident at the ready; Toriel, her magic; spears from Undyne and blades from Mew Mew and bones from the brothers, all at the ready for another attack. Maxus's palms sank into the clay as he pressed down. His body rose on trembling triceps, coming a foot off the ground before reaching an apex. Then, he could take no more and collapsed.

Sans rang an imaginary boxing bell. "Ding, ding, ding. He's down for the count, ladies and gentlemen."

Asgore looked down sadly at the battered emperor as the fires around his wife extinguished.

"Forgive me, Maxus." He sighed.

Alphys eased off with the controls while Undyne and Papyrus gave each other a bro fist.

During all this time, Frisk had stood back and watched as their friends battled. Their heart jumped when Maxus and Asgore locked weapons and when he charged Mew Mew (who, by the way, Frisk had a strange hunch was Alphys's secret project she mentioned once a while back) and when he roared his energy beam at Papyrus and swung his sword at Sans. Strangely, watching the Emperor himself get beaten up to a pulp was not easy to watch either, Frisk wishing this all could have ended on much better, less painful terms.

Nevertheless, the battle was won. Maxus was down. Their friends were alright. They were alive.

Asgore walked up beside Frisk and drove his crimson trident down like a proud knight.

"Now that is taken care of," he said, then smiled. "Where is my hug?"

Frisk smiled and lifted their arms up, whereupon the big, fuzzy boss monster reached down with one burly arm and scooped up the tiny human. The king chuckled as Frisk's arms went around his neck. His beard tickled. The terrible weather could not put a damper on this day, it might as well have been shining. Toriel felt the corners of her lips rise; Asgore was just as much their carer as she was. A father hugging his child, this was the soft side to King Fluffybuns which she preferred – loved, even.

Papyrus was there, also. He ruffled the kid's hair. "What a relief," he said. "Frisk is amongst us, still in the land of the living – without wings, I might add."

Undyne added, spear resting on shoulders, "I told you Frisk would stick it to these guys. I mean, we were the ones to beat up this guy – but still! Before this, I bet this kid kicked some major butt!"
Alphys held her controller low; Mew Mew beside her, stationary and harmless. "I'm so glad you're okay, Frisk," Alphys said. "I'm glad you're all here, safe and sound. I'm sorry… I'm so sorry I let go. Had I only held on for longer, none of this—"

Frisk, upon Asgore's forearm, gave Doctor Alphys a thumbs up and said she had nothing to apologise for. Everything was cool.

"Th-thanks, Frisk." Those simple words lifted a massive weight off her hunched shoulders. "That means so much."

"Holy heck, Alphys," Undyne said, her smile massive as she hugged her girlfriend. "Words can't describe how freaking awesome you were back there!" A smooch on the cheek made Alphys turn red but not as red as the first time on the beach; she became tongue-tied and her words a jumbled mess.

"Hey, great to see ya kickin', bud," Sans said and winked at Frisk. "Never doubted you for a second."

Mew Mew churned out one of her many phrases: "Teamwork is very important." Indeed. Especially when coupled with 7.62 x 51mm NATO. And ninja swords. And warheads.

Toriel moved between all of them. "I am happy for us all to be here, but I am afraid we must cut celebrations short," she said. "We got here using the teleporter, now, how do we return to Earth?"

"Oh, of course." Asgore set the child down. "None of us ever considered that part."

A rather large dilemma faced them. Sans, on the other hand, shrugged it off. "Not a problemo," he said, eye closed, as chilled as always. "Pap, Al and I have been zipping around these parts for a few hours now; I think I got the hang of this place. Point me to the nearest door and we'll be chowin' down at Grillby's before we know—"

Wait! Frisk interrupted. They explained a little about this world and how it was dying. The Obelisk over there was the key to stopping all this, its secret power would unlock upon witnessing the 'greatest strength'.

"If this world is not going to last much longer, then how much time do we have?" Toriel asked.

Frisk sighed. There was no clear time limit; they could have hours, minutes even.

It was Alphys's turn to ask. "D-do you know what this greatest strength is?"

Frisk was huffing by this point. They did not know what either.

Undyne frowned as she gave the pillar a stern look. "Hey, you overgrown support beam, I just suplexed someone triple my size," she shouted at the inanimate stone. "Not strong enough for ya?"

"It most definitely isn't looking for strength in a physical sense, Undyne," Asgore said. His inner father mechanic active. "This strength must be of magical nature or based off some trait."

"We was all within eyeshot when we used our magic," Sans mentioned. "Nuthin' seems to be happenin' though."

"Indeed, brother…" Papyrus appeared annoyed. His bony arms folded and his chin pressed into his battle body. "Which is most absurd considering it clearly paid homage to my blue attack."
"If none of our magic unlocked this... power – whatever it is," Toriel said, "then none of us must possess what it requires."

The human child stood fixated on the Obelisk. There was one strength it had not witnessed yet. Frisk said they would be a minute as they headed toward it. Easier said than done, just watching their child travel a short distance away was murder to the king and queen's souls. Toriel hoped Frisk would not mind a little round the clock supervision for the next few days until she was confident they wouldn't drift up into space again.

The Obelisk's height and mass became apparent the closer Frisk got. Eerie and imposing in the cold mizzle, the power source of this world stood right in front of them. There was a time when those markings were fresh and clear and distinguishable, now buried under several generations. Frisk reached out and tried to feel the magic. The freezing, wet sensation on their fingers was not what they were looking for.

Frisk's soft palms touched the stone. Its texture was no different from your average boulder: the left flattened over smooth stone while the section against their right prickled rough. Nothing spectacular happening. Frisk was not imbued with endless power or rewarded with ancient knowledge.

If it wanted Determination, then Frisk would show it in the only way they knew how. They reached their save file and turned back the page.

Frisk appeared at the foot of the Forest half an hour prior, the revelation from the Forest floor fresh in their mind and quivering to the heart. They had no plan but to stage a one-human assault on Castle Highkeep and battle through legions of troops in order to confront the Emperor and hopefully unlock the secret power of the Obelisk – which in of itself was a plan, except it wasn't a very good one.

Before they resumed their place, the child at least had the added assurance that they were returning to exactly where they left off with no hidden surprises. Frisk blinked was found themself staring straight into one of the pillar's four faces. Their hands cold and wet against it; shield strapped to forearm.

Sans nearly lost balance. He caught himself before he could tumble.

"Are you alright, Sans?" Toriel asked. "Feeling dizzy? Nauseous?" She felt his forehead.

The easy-going skeleton touched her fuzzy hands. "Relax, I'm cool – check for yourself. Just had a major case of déjà vu just now."

"Well, your bony butt better not pass out on us now," Undyne said. "You're our ticket out of here."

Seconds ago, Sans could have sworn he was back in that old guy's lab, at the part where he opened his pocket to make that joke involving the relish. Alphys was halfway through her retort when – BAM! – they were all back here. Had the kid loaded a save just now? This same feeling of reliving small glimpses of the past had happened a few times over these past couple of days. Sans held a certain confidence that the human would surely fail on their first attempt and condemn the entire universe to the same ten tedious minutes until they got a tricky part right, but that never happened. At least, Sans thought it didn't.

Frisk turned upwards at the impressive scope of the Obelisk. Now, having witnessed the power of their Determination, the reason why they were brought to the Outerworld in the first place, why they were made the main protagonist in this tale from within the Outerworld, this... Outer tale, then it should activate... or do whatever it does.

Will it sing a song or talk? Glow? Fly off into space? Possibly explode like a firework? Zap them to
an alternate dimension? Frisk waited. Everyone waiting, locked in silence.

It did none of those things. It did nothing at all.

Frisk gave the stone a soft slap. Not even their power – the ability to defy death and redo history – was enough for this rock's high standards.

The faces of these monster flashed in the blackness beneath their eyelids: Sam; Rita; Barb; Rickard; Haze; Geoffrey; Dom; the angsty restaurant clerk; the soft-spoken ticket master; Birgir; Private Perro; those shop assistants; Mika; Roy; Versa; Kenny; Johnny; Lena; the soldiers who gave chase; those hotel receptionists. Countless lives all riding on what was inside the hunk of rock.

Their forehead met the slick surface. They were not strong enough. Frisk had defeated the god of hyperdeath, saved existence from oblivion and yet they were not worthy of its secrets. They really weren't the chosen one. The heavy burden of responsibility crushed on their tiny shoulders, all those lives depending on them, doomed because of them. If they could not save this world, then what good were they? If only they were stronger. If only they knew the answer.

If Frisk had one desire, it was to give this thing a mouth so it could tell them what needed to be done. Tell them how to save these people.

"Frisk," Asgore said softly, "you tried your best. But we need to get you back home."

Frisk remained motionless. What about the others…?

Sans answered, "Just because I delegate my shortcuts to us don't mean I can't do it for others." He crackled his finger bones. Alphys did not like that either. "Leave it to me. I'll get as many people as I can outta here before these islands blow up or something."

After a heavy sigh, Frisk stepped back from the stone. Their palms and forehead were cold. The secrets of the Obelisk were lost. Possibly, in another timeline, the enigma of the Outerworld could be broken, but not this one.

Frisk agreed it was time to leave; although, they wanted to help out with the evacuation.

Sans snapped a sideways glance at Toriel. "Not sure mommy boss monster would approve, but—"

"If you wish to help," said Toriel, "then I feel obligated to help as well."

"If we all pitch in," Asgore added, looking at those present, "we can save a lot of people."

The other's agreed, especially Mew Mew. "Teamwork is very important."

"Yep, we heard you the first time, Mew Mew," Sans said. "C'mon." He pointed thumb over shoulder. "Let's blow this elbow-joint."

From the cusp of the dark interior, Flowey and Brute had seen everything. Every swipe and magic attack and gunshot – wrapped up with a move straight out of professional wrestling. The same leader whom Advisor Flowey offered sound advice and solutions and titbits of juicy information lay face down in the dirt. The monsters of the Underground made it look so easy.

Brute, quivering a little, dared to speak without being authorised to. "Emperor beaten. Do something?"

Flowey squinted. Look at Frisk with their friends – so pleased, thinking they had won, believing
their fate averted. Why wouldn't they? The big bad master of the Outerworld was beaten. The danger
had passed and everybody came out on top, except for, well, Maxus. No obstacles remained apart
from this world's demise, a problem easily solved thanks to Smiley Tras… Sans. A problem easily
solved thanks to Sans.

Frisk's happy ending was in sight: a warm house surrounded by friends and the savoury smell of
butterscotch cinnamon pie. One final shortcut and it was over, their adventure at an end.

Flowey bit his lip. To dream of events to come was daunting. To relive them was the true nightmare.

"Trust me." Flowey spoke to monotone, keeping on his assistant's level. "He's not."

As someone once said, "It's only half-time."

Cold, slimy mud smeared against the fur on Maxus's cheek as he lay there, stricken with pain. The
air he took in carried the earthy, plastic scent, thinly reminding him of his worst days. On his front,
he struggled to breathe under the weight on the plate; the dent protruded into his diaphragm. He
turned over, rolling into a puddle, and forced his eyelids open to a blank slate of grey. The darkness
circling the rims brought back the memories that haunted every waking second of his life.

He was six years old again, lying at the bottom of that cold, wet pit. His ankle twisted, stomach
burned, the coin of grey above was the opening of his grave. Weak. Powerless. Helpless. All those
monsters, slaughtered, and there was nothing he or anyone could do to stop it. There was no way to
escape his past, he could not run from it, he could not fight it, he could not even hid from it at the
bottom of that quarry.

**His grandfather; he was no warrior. On the ground. Eyes closed. Breathing slowly. Mortally
wounded.**

He felt it inside him. He felt the hate, the rage, the anger flowing through his being. He remembered
all those who were lost, fuelling the rush.

**His mother by his grandfather's side. Crying. Holding his grandfather's head to her chest.**

Maxus pressed his fists down, practically punching the ground.

The humans were whispering in his ear.

"You are weak. You are powerless. You are worthless."

**His grandmother knelt by her husband's side. Gazing upwards with pleading eyes.**

Maxus began to rise.

"You were a mistake. You should never have been born."

The raw emotions surrounding his soul gave him strength. The human was slowly getting away,
back turned, those traitorous monsters at its sides, treating it like one of their own. After all the
humans had done, it had been forgotten, swept under the rug like it never happened. No punishment.
No comeuppance. No retribution.

**Villain, the henchwoman named him. Fiend, the skeleton said right in front of him.**

Just the sight angered him. He had never been this angry before in his life. The hate was
overwhelming. The rage, unimaginable. Anger, uncontrollable. He hated everything. He wanted
everything to burn. He wanted more. He wished death and destruction to everyone and everything. He just wanted the world to end.

_The human standing above them. A man in a farmer's robe. An indescribable look in his eyes. A pitchfork held high. The prongs coated with dust._

"Where… do you..." Maxus got to his feet, staggering against pain, fatigue, and dizziness with nothing but rage to fuel himself. Heaven's Shard was five times heavier. Frisk stopped and turned as did the others. Maxus stopped himself from falling, appearing broken in their philistine looks.

"Where do you think you're going?" he yelled. He wanted to bring pain and suffering to all those who stood in his way, and to those who wronged him in the past. He desired to hear their screams, their cries for mercy.

Asgore gently took Frisk by the shoulders. "Stay down. It's over, Maxus," he said.

For years, Maxus envisioned himself the future of monsters, the one who would not allow such atrocities to happen again, not allow the human's deeds go unpunished, and lead his kind to the beginning of a new epoch. These fools should be with him, not against him. Everyone should be on his side. They weren't.

His father, kept secrets against him out of fear; Barb, abandoned him long ago; Master Scribe Rickard, disobeyed his orders; Professor Haze, created an entire army to destroy him; Now King Asgore – the one person he thought would share his pain –, his hands gentle upon a human.

Was Maxus the one who slaughtered those monsters? Was he the one who exiled Asgore underground? He could not understand. He was doing everything in his power to stop mankind and free his people. Why – oh, why – was he being treated the bad guy? He was the victim! He was destined to be the one humanity would regret letting slip! He was supposed to return as the hero of this story! Not the villain… not the villain…

Although, every villain was still the hero of their own story.

"It's not over…" Maxus whispered.

The anger. The rage. The hate. Maxus could feel it inside him, thick and black like tar, slithering like a snake. If he was destined to be the villain…

_The human roared as he drove the pitchfork down._

The manifestation latched to his soul, coating it black.

"It's not over!" Let him be the villain!

As his white soul changed, his body pulsed with ebbs of black energy. Maxus thundered as a feeling so unbelievable consumed him. His entire body transformed, growing in height, muscles expanding. His father's armour warped and darkened as he grew, grafting to his skin, becoming a part of himself. The spikes upon his shoulders multiplied. His cape grew bold. Heaven's Shard altered also, the smooth edge grew teeth. His golden hair dimmed into a gruesome shade, as did his eyes, losing their valuable shine.

This mysterious, cancerous anomaly seeped through his veins. He had never achieved this level of feeling so intense, like scratching a thousand year old itch. It was extraordinary. Maxus could not get enough.

_The group from under Mount Ebott, once confident in their victory, now stood wary against the_
emperor, mouth agape and gasps stifled. This phenomenon, Toriel could have sworn she had read up on it. Asgore, on the other hand, this tale had been passed down his line. Monsters were made of magic, their emotions and feelings played crucial in their development. That much was certain. Positive emotions – such as compassion, kindness, honour, generosity and love – bred a positive outlook. But what happened when a monster exhibited too much negative emotions over too long a period of time?

Maxus was the result.

The colour thought a myth. In every monster lay a soul of light to symbolise inner hope and goodness, that every monster can be good if they just tried and nobody was ever truly lost or without hope. Maxus's was pitch black: dark. His soul no longer shone light, it consumed it. The embodiment of all things negative: hate, anger, greed, gluttony, selfishness, cruelty, impulsiveness, arrogance, obsession, intolerance, and coldness. So cold. Maxus was all these things.

The sky rumbled with thunder.

The soul of malevolence. Evil incarnate.
Emperor of Evil

Maxus was no longer just a monster, but another kind of monster. A higher being, above all others, having unlocked his hidden potential and ascended onto a new plane of existence. With monstrous sword in hand and his new layer of metal skin, he had never before been this powerful.

A being of myth, made up of a thousand years of hatred and anger. It was widely believed that no monster could accumulate enough within their lifetime to become this being reborn. Until now. No longer was he the emperor of the Outerworld. He was the Emperor of Evil. Soon to see his will and image imposed on the world below. If this was the price to see justice served, then he would pay it in full.

He advanced. Time to enact his revenge. First these traitors, then the human, then all the rest. He basked in his newfound power and imagined how incredible he would feel with both this unadulterated control and a human soul together at once. He would be unstoppable. And why stop at one soul? He could have all the souls he wanted. Reshape the universe. Make all the wrongs right. Become a god.

Frisk and their friends took the slightest nudge backwards, cautious. This emperor went down easily before thanks to their combined strength and teamwork, but against the horror before them now, they were not so sure. None of them had ever encountered anything like this before. Frisk fought a being of a thousand souls, but not a being of a thousand years of hatred.

Undyne created stars of light overhead then released a volley of harpoons with a war cry. As vicious as her attack was, they bounced and broke like toothpicks against Maxus's new skin. Papyrus, following his captain's lead, sent bones skimming across the ground; Maxus sliced them down into stumps. Toriel threw her fire only for Maxus to bat them away with a swipe of the hand.

Sans's eye socket twitched. "Now there's a megalomaniac if I ever saw one."

The Emperor of Evil's turn. He lunged and swung one massive, horizontal swing with the mutated Heaven's Shard. Everyone hit the dirt to dodge the swipe, with the tip of Undyne's hair getting trimmed into a confetti of red strands. Maxus followed with a giant overhead swing toward Asgore. He moved just in time, but the blade impacted the ground with the force of a meteor, punching a deep crater that sent all eight combatants flying in eight separate directions.

When the litter of falling debris faded, Maxus scanned his downed opponents, licking his wet lips in anticipation of the first kill, deciding who to go for first. Would he begin with the human and devastate the rest with godlike powers? Or perhaps he shall pick off Frisk's precious 'friends' one by one. Let's see how determined that little insect remained when they are kneeling in a pile of their buddies and their hands are encrusted with what used to be dear old mommy and daddy.

"Maxus!" Asgore pulled his red trident from the ground; mud clung to the tines and his knees. Dirty water dripped down his shirt. "This is exactly what I warned you about! L-look at yourself – you're losing it!"

Maxus snapped, "Shut up!" His voice was deeper, darker, and eviler. He automatically zoned on Asgore as his first victim.

Asgore ducked to the side before the first strike could connect, and delivered a fierce jab that barely left a dent. Maxus swung around with a fierce forearm into Asgore's jaw which knocked him down and separated him from his weapon.
The next thing the Emperor of Evil knew, he was stumbling forward as someone latched to his back, cursing and stabbing rapidly.


Maxus envisioned Undyne on his back, snarling and throwing spittle with a spear in hand, making wild thrusts into the nape of his neck. Maxus reached over his shoulder, grabbed the stabby growth, and tossed her at his feet. Undyne groaned as a numbing sensation ran up and down her spine, then opened her eye to the ecliptic sight of a large boot sole coming down. She rolled out the split-second before his stomp could met her, instead slamming into the muddy ground; the tremor to follow reached the four corners of their arena.

With the analogy that the best defence was a strong offense, Undyne conjured a spear and delivered punishing blow after blow to Maxus's reinforced chest. All her further spear thrusts and wild slashes bounced off harmlessly, akin to a gentle massage. Maxus allowed a few moments to indulge her before he cracked his forehead against hers and threw one kick before she could finish a profanity regarding an individual who performed raucous deeds to a parent. Undyne rocketed across the garden, into the western wall of the enclosure, smashing an Undyne-shaped crater of broken brick and mortar.

"Undyne!" That scream plus the return of a whirling drone drew Maxus to that accursed teenage schoolgirl robot and her scientist master. Mew Mew's miniguns were back on her arms. Alphys stared horrified at where her soulmate slumped against broken bricks before tightening her claws on the controller and facing Maxus with a flared brow and gritted teeth. "Why, you!" She slammed on the shoulder buttons extra hard and Mew Mew's guns ignited in a spray of hot, yellow-orange muzzle flash. Emperor Maxus brought his sword up to shield his face as the rest of him lit up in a grand display of bouncing, ricocheting bullets. He was pushed back by a couple of feet, stopped, then pressed forward one step at a time, closing the gap.

Doctor Alphys repeatedly thumbed a button and another payload of Mew Mew's apparently unlimited arsenal launched in contrails of spider legs. Maxus acted as the missiles were in the air, homing on him; he span on his feet and swung his sword high, delivering a shockwave which careened them back. There was an audible gasp, the narrowing of pupils, the drop of the jaw and limp in the doctor's tail as the warheads fell toward both her and her robot. She dove and ducked for cover as the explosions happened behind her, Mew Mew becoming lost within clouds of black smoulder.

Alphys turned frantically to the smokescreen. "Mew Mew!" she cried, reaching out. Such despair, Maxus thought. He liked it. Now, if only he could annihilate one of these stubborn monsters.

Maxus remembered King Asgore and found him on the ground with Toriel knelt beside him. Her hands, against Asgore's cheek, glowed with a soothing orange light which made the blackened fur return to its original whiteness. This got an annoyed grunt out of the Emperor; a healer would make this battle longer than it ought to be.

"Thank you," Asgore whispered with gratitude.

Undyne staggered not too far away, white paint dust clashed against her black tank top and she held her head as if it might shatter at my moment, yet still she was raring to fight. Not one to give up so easily, it seemed. There a sense of honour Maxus could respect – too bad it was wasted on the wrong cause. The Queen of the Underground went to her and imbued some more healing. As Undyne's splitting headache diminished, her fighting spirit returned in full force.
If he could remove Toriel from the equation, then – *Ping!* Not again! Maxus was dragged back as his soul got caught in an aura of blue. That lazy skeleton. Emperor Maxus grinded himself to a halt – to think this archaic blue magic stood any chance against the strength he wielded. Sans attacked from the ground with his bones. Papyrus threw them like a charging legion. Heaven's Shard made short work out of most, but not all, of them. The ones that did hit, hit hard, and zapped his resilience. Pain. Weakness. Both made him angrier. Anger fuelled the tar surrounding his soul, making his stronger.

No more playing around. Sans went all out. Six of his blasters appeared at once in a line above him, all aimed and gullets charged. Maxus channelled a mighty roar of his own, pulling from every corner of his dark soul. All six blasters roared at once. Maxus bellowed, unleashing a boom he thought impossible. His energy beam – no longer white, but the same nightly shade as his soul – made short work of Sans's blasters, destroying them all with one swipe.

The light in Sans's eyes went tiny as pieces of bone rained around him. "Holy…"

Maxus inhaled another deep breath and let it all out in a stream of black energy, going crazy, aiming everywhere. Sans and Papyrus dove for cover as their ground went up in flames. Asgore, Toriel, and Undyne ducked. Alphys scrambled, unable to get out the way when Mew Mew lunged from the smokescreen, grabbed her creator and leapt over the beam. Frisk, at the end opposite, raised their shield just in time.

As the beam passed, Frisk recoiled back five feet, the force nearly knocking their defence away. The shield face steamed under the cold, evening air while the underside glowed red hot, blistering their forearm. The clasps couldn't come off fast enough.

Springing on frantic steps, Frisk tossed their shield into a puddle where it hissed in hot billows, then pulled up their sleeve. Their skin was inflamed and scorching to the touch. Next time, dodge.

"Warning. Overheating detected," the shield spoke. "Damage threshold exceeding acceptable levels." Half submerged, the automated female voice came out chaotic. "Battery power at forty nine percent."

The Emperor of Evil halted and inspected the damage done: the surrounding walls of his own home crumbled and burned; there being a clean path from where he started to where he finished; a trail of dirt, destroyed stonewall and debris, revealing ruined rooms on the other side, their contents and ornate furnishings alight. He had hit everything and yet not what he wanted as those opposing him rose from the destruction.

Surrounded on all sides, his enemies made a tacit play. To the north was Undyne. Sans to the east, his brother beside him. Asgore and his wife to the west. From the south, Mew Mew stood in still functioning order; a little blackened, a few showers of sparks, but still walking and talking her canned talk. Alphys right next to her.

Alone, they were weak, but together, strong. All eyes shot arrows at the bad guy. More fire flared from palms of white. More bones at the command of red gloves. Blasters guided by white mittens. Spears ready to fly at the twitch of a yellow, catlike eye. Bullets and rockets awaiting the push of a button.

Everyone unleashed their magic at once. Spears, fire, bones, beams and rockets all converged toward their target in the centre.

Maxus rose a thunderous roar as he swung Heaven's Shard to deliver his shockwave. When he did, however, the unexpected happened: the earth around him shot up. Rough boulders buried deep under the mire, erupted upwards and took the flames, the spears, the bones, the blasts, and the
warheads.

Everyone gasped in unison as the rocks remained floating above ground just how Frisk saw the Shattered Zone, shielding the lion emperor. He gazed at the rocks around him, glimpsing his enemies through the cracks, and realised he could feel them.

Chaos. Pure Chaos. The end of days. The purging of all life.

The citizens with their umbrellas and parkas and worried souls, going about their lives in the waterlogged streets of Parfocorse, got a great shock when a loud flash boomed overhead. Just as they flinched, the ground began to rumble. Civilians and soldiers panicked and screamed and ran for their lives as the earthquake tore the great railway hub in two, breaking in a lightning crack which gobbled up tarmac and buildings alike. A great arc of electricity struck the ground, narrowly missing a mother and her child.

The edges of the islands crumbled. The escalators connecting the Plain-plain to Ice Island shifted and warped to one side as the ground at its feet broke. Birgir rushed out just in time to witness the connecting steps snap and for the breaking ground to take his booth. He ran away as fast as he could as his home for so many years began to collapse.

In the swamps of Bob, the water wouldn't stop rising! It wouldn't stop rising! The murk crept against walls and rigorous waves battered against them. Walls creaked. Windows cracked, leaked and then, eventually, smashed. Possessions of all shapes and sizes and value drifted and sank. Everywhere on the island, monsters clambered onto their roofs and up branches. Boats rocked in the merciless torrent, struggling to stay afloat. One of them being the frog boatman. A family of four selflessly reached into the waters and dragged out a kicking, flailing monster whom they had never met before, saving him from certain demise – or, at the very least, delaying it.

A tidal wave, bigger than the one before, struck with white teeth at the once golden beaches of the Oasis. With every bite, it swallowed more, dragging leafless palm trees down into the depths. The mansions and homes would not stand a chance. The residents would try to either run, or stand and fight to the bitter end, but neither option held any hope.

Mistress Mind with the aid of several of Grill's servants rushed to board up the windows of Mineyor Manors as the first sights of water pressed against the glass. The main entrance opened a smidgen and water threatened to gush through. Master D. Mind, Jim the doorman, and a handful of Grill's wives pushed against the door to keep it closed. Each punch of the water pounded at it, and each push kept it closed. Great streams swam around their ankles.

"Master Mind?" Jim said, his flat back against the grand door. His toupee fell off at the next bump and drifted down the lobby. "If we don't make it, I just want you to know: it's been an honour, sir."

From the next room over resounded the tell-tale smashing of glass, snapping of wood, and gushing of water.

The master of the manor had both palms and his cheek against the grain. His single eye located the doorman. "Wouldn't it be more fitting to say that to your lord… had he been here?" Grill's wives – soon to become former wives – wished he was here, too. So they could chuck him outside.

To which Jim replied, "Then it wouldn't've been much of an honour."

Master Mind chuckled, especially as water leaked under the doors from adjacent rooms. A large object, like a table or a chiffonier, bumped against a wall somewhere. Despite the chaos, the feeling
remained mutual. "The honour is all mine. But don't give up. We will make it through this!"

The great canyons of Rocklyn crumbled and collapsed in giant rockslides and fountains of red dust. Monsters fled for their lives and those unfortunate enough to be inside the mines watched in horror as their exits were cut off in blockades of stone and the ceilings cracked, supports chipped and snapped. All they could do was wait to die.

The trees which stood for a thousand years, the grey, shrivelled husks they had become, crumbled and collapsed, taking the walkways and others trees down with them. Residents retreated, holdings possessions and loved ones tightly.

In the deep mines under Black Ice Mountain, its only occupant, Geoffrey, ran for his life as they crumbled all around him. His legs burned, threatening to snap off. The tunnels on his heels crumbled, the same tunnels which stood for centuries without as much as a shiver.

Geoffrey knew these tunnels, but only from the comfort of his fictional world as the suave, sophisticated Vail. Using his own eyes, his own feet, and his own shoddy sense of direction, he was as lost as those he had trapped beforehand. He ran. He ran against his pained chest and his undernourishment of salty snacks and sugary drinks.

The worst happened: he tripped and landed on his face, a sandal flew off. The rumble got closer. Before he could move, a crushing pain clamped on his ankle and refused to let go. Geoffrey tugged to no avail as the walls began to slowly cave in like wolves closing the distance.

"H-help… Someone help me…!" he cried into the surrounding doom, knowing no one heard him. His own tomb being constructed around him. "I don't wanna die! I don't wanna die…!" Hot tears burned his cold cheeks. "I really don't wanna die…"

In the middle of all this destruction, Maxus, the emperor of all that was wicked, stood alone, harnessing the very elements of the Outerworld, bestowing upon him a mantle worthy of a god.

So much power. Emperor Maxus could feel this world – the earth, the air, the rain, the fire – and its last dwindles of magic around him, fuelling him, feeding his murky soul, giving him the clout needed to fulfil destiny itself.

He threw his hands out and the rocks shot outward as fast as bullets. Asgore battered them away and glanced over his shoulder to witness a large fragment plunge deep into Toriel's stomach. Her eyes and mouth went wide as all the air was knocked out of her; she doubled over, clutching her stomach and falling to her knees as her body screamed from the hollow crevice in her gut. She crumpled onto her side and forced slithers of oxygen into her lungs.

Asgore instinctively reached out to her. "Tori!" Then faced the Emperor, angry. From around, he found that Papyrus and Alphys had taken blows themselves, the rest had blocked or dodged. Sans was already tending to his brother.

Deep down, he still wanted to believe there was still good within this young man. Through the terror of his new form, a spark existed of the innocence he knew from before the dark times. A hope which dimmed for every action Maxus took against them. Seeing the one he loved so grievously hurt caused the flame to flicker, almost dying out completely to a petrified candle wick.

As the king of monsters charged, Toriel watched with bleary eyes. "…G-Gorey… no…” she barely got out.
Maxus waited for Asgore to draw near, knowing full well Asgore's powers were of no threat to him, as significant as bacteria in the face of his own capabilities. A lapse of hesitation betrayed the king, making his steps heavier and his trident quaver. Was he aware of how small his chances of success were? Was he holding back? Or did he still see traces of the child, or father, he barely knew, thought dead long ago? The trident barrelled closer, three prongs aimed squarely at his chest, ready to impale. At the last moment, Maxus used his control of the land to force several rocks from out the murk and into the king's body, halting his charge in an instant.

Asgore was helpless under Maxus's unlimited control with as jagged edges pushed and cut into him from all directions, routing him in place like a vice and severing the feeling in his arms, the tip of his weapon an inch away, quivering under the strain.

"This… isn't who you are…" Asgore stammered. The hold was crushing, Maxus retaliated by tightening it. The light of hope became a tiny flame. "This isn't who anyone should be."

Maxus, without looking, swung around and blocked Undyne as she attempted to land a sneak attack. Magical spear clashed against shining sword. She swung and stabbed, pushing her body to its limits having lost her years of dedicated training and discipline to blind, unscrupulous rage. She sidestepped and gored with such voracity she pierced his second skin. Maxus barely flinched then caught Undyne in the thigh and midsection with two slices. As the henchwoman faltered back, falling on one knee and clutching her side, Maxus felt his unlimited energy grab Asgore, lift him up, and slam him into her, barrelling them both across the garden.

Sans inspected Papyrus, finding cracks in his battle body which took the brunt of the damage. "Are you alright, bro?" he asked, concern in his tone.

Papyrus's eye sockets opened. "I, the great Papyrus, have a boo-boo."

"Where does it hurt?" Sans searched him up and down. "Where's the boo-boo?"

"Everywhere."

Sans rested his hand gently on Papyrus's body. "You did great, pal," assured Sans. "We'll take it from here. You lie for a bit an—"

An unexpected grin appeared on the face of the goofy skeleton. "Phooey!" In one motion, he pushed Sans aside and did a kip up, hopping upright in the span of a second. "To be an ex-member of the ex-Royal Guard is to wade through trivial matters such as pain!" And sleep. But not hunger. There was always time for lunch.

Sans paused, then asked, "Where'd you learn to do that?" He had no idea his brother possessed that kind of dexterity, him being all bone and no muscle and all.

"Undyne taught me during our private, one-on-one training sessions."

"You mean your cooking les…?" Sans stopped himself. As unexpected as the turnaround was, he could not deny the results: his brother was upright and ready. "Whatever. I'll line 'em up" – his eye flared blue – "you knock 'em down."

That familiar ping clutched the Emperor's soul, followed by the undeniable gravitation. This time, Maxus said no. He stomped deep into the ground, routing himself. Papyrus unleashed a super cool, completely normal attack. No dogs around to eat them this time. Bones of all sizes darted forth, some bobbed and weaved, some zigzagged across. Maxus swung and swung and swung, and the bones kept coming and coming, and Sans kept throwing him off by tugging on his soul; up,
down, left right, forward, back, any direction to faze him long enough to get a hit in, and it worked to some degree as a few of Papyrus's bones struck home.

A fierce breeze wisped through his monochrome crown. Maxus felt the very air become an extension of his body; the sensation in his limbs dispersed and scattered like ash, spinning in cyclones higher and higher. He reached out.

Just as Sans was about to pull upwards, something began to pull him. A powerful gust brushed the trim of his jacket then swirled around to do it again. His hold faded as he was now the one being tugged around.

"Whoa, what's happening?" Sans shielded his eyes. He caught Papyrus, who was having the same difficulty as him.

"Pesky breeze!" Papyrus said. His scarf whipped around and smothered against his face. Sans, in all his timely wisdom, thought about the 'no capes' scene from *The Incredibles*. Papyrus's next line of reasoning came out a muffled mess: "How is a man expected to engage in combat during these conditions?"

The godlike emperor rose his hands, barely feeling himself as he did so, and lifted the two as effortlessly as lifting air. Sans and Papyrus lost their hold on the ground, caught in two cyclones and spinning head over heels rapidly as they ascended above.

"Try dodging this," Maxus said before slamming his fists together, in turn smashing them together. Their skulls collided with two sinister cracks running across their bald heads. He pulled his fists apart and together again and again. Sans and Papyrus were helpless, their magic useless, bones cracking against one another as they became two action figures in a messy kid's grubby hold.

The last hit came as Maxus threw his hands down. The skeleton brothers hit the ground and lay there a foot away from each other. Bones cracked and broken in several spots. Never before had they been in so much agony.

"…Owwie…" Papyrus whispered.

Sans barely moved his head and heard a crackle. "Owwie's right…"

Toriel, through the throbbing pit in her gut, had forced enough air down and worked up enough strength to stand. Her legs trembled. A vice-like grip pressed on her skull, enriching what little colour remained of this world, including the fire she summoned from her palms.

Maxus made eye contact. Time to extinguish this woman's flame. The rain ran down his face and rattled off his armour. He liked the sound, made him feel like a machine – an unstoppable mechanism. He felt the earth, the wind, now he felt the rain. He felt every drop, every impact, and every body of water. There was a large puddle at Toriel's flank which churned the moment Maxus glanced in its direction. Before she could attack, a spray of rainwater swung straight out and struck her in the back, knocking her face down in the dirt.

He wasn't finished, for he could feel the rain. He swayed his will and watched as the downpour changed direction at his whim. Toriel was getting up, with more fire. The rain froze momentarily in mid-air before all zooming toward her, encasing her in a bubble of water.

Toriel kicked and flailed helplessly as she floated in the centre of the rippling sphere. All her attempts to escape failed and she struggled with what little oxygen existed in her burning lungs.

Meanwhile, on her belly, Alphys's snout was bruised from where the rock hit. She retrieved her
controller and made Mew Mew dance. Her robot stood up, brushed stones of her exterior and readied her miniguns and rockets.

"Time to re-sit the test," Mew Mew groaned with static. "I'm sure I'll pass this time."

The first bullets bounced off metal armour before Maxus focused on her. He threw more rocks. Alphys targeted them, blasting rock after rock into pieces.

Toriel's lungs wished to burst out her chest. She clutched at her throat, trying to keep the last traces of air in indefinitely. Her chest cried out. The edges of her vision – Mew Mew gunning down each boulder lobbed her way – crept with inky darkness.

She reached her limit. Toriel's jaw opened and out escaped a watery scream in a cascade of white bubbles. She exhaled until there was nothing left then gulped down rainwater. The pressure pressed down on her skull as water rushed down her throat and nostrils. The pain extraordinary, then dulled to a soothing sensation. A warm feeling washed over her as she stopped struggling and allowed herself to drift within the bubble. Through the dull water, it sounded like someone said her name, but she didn't care.

As the last light in her eyes faded, Asgore, using every ounce of his being, burst through the bubble and tackled her into the open air. He collapsed on top of Toriel, who barely had her eyes open.

Asgore tapped her cheek, desperate to restore life to her. "Tori! Tori!" Completely soaked, freezing, and in pain, he cared not for himself as he rolled her onto her side and slammed against her back. A trickle ran down her chin before she started coughing out the mouthfuls. "Breathe. Breathe. Cough it out and breathe!" He slapped hard and quick as if the last one would be the last before she crumbled. Toriel upchucked more water before drawing in breath in the ugliest, croakiest sound anyone could make, yet it was the most moving sound to Asgore at that moment. Her eyes blinked rapidly as she darted in and out of consciousness. "Hang in there, Tori. Just hang on."

Mew Mew destroyed a total of fourteen blocks before the guns clicked dry and the last payload was launched. Her installed jet boosters launched her high above the next bombardment as she threw off her guns and out came the ninja swords, the real deal straight out of Japan.

Heaven's Shard and the dual katanas met upon landing, clashing with a sharp slice of metal on metal. The teenage robot went to slash with her swords, only to realise she had none. Her uncanny valley grin failed to fade even as she stared at two butter knife stubs which used to be full length katana blades. Maxus thrust his sword straight through her abdomen with a crash, breaking and crunching key components within her robotic frame.

"Worthless toy," Maxus hissed.

Alphys cried out as the robot she worked tirelessly on, put all her love and care into for weeks, shuddered, trying to stay active despite the blade through her body. Sparks flew from the hole in her torso.

Mew Mew talked. "Mew Mew… feel sick. No more episodes for this year. Time for…"

Alphys gasped. "Mew Mew, don't!" She knew what was coming, she programmed it. Now she wish she hadn't. She hammered on the controller, attempting to avert it. "No no no!"

"The season finale!" Mew Mew finished.

Her red eyes turned white, then a digital countdown appeared. The right eye showed the seconds and the left eye showed the milliseconds, counting down from three.
She started beeping, getting faster and faster.

3…

"Thanks for playing," Mew Mew said.

2…

Alphys tossed the controller aside and scrambled to her feet, bolting toward her. "STOP! ABORT!"

1…

Maxus raised an eyebrow in confusion. "Huh?" The beeping reached a single, constant tone.

0.

"You've been a real blast!"

Mew Mew self-destructed in a mushroom cloud, engulfing Maxus in the blast and throwing everyone else to the ground. Plutonium, remember.

Battered and exhausted, Sam an' Rita could just barely keep track of Lord Grill. The lord himself probably lost six pounds from his exuberant mass to use as fuel for whatever semblance of muscle he had underneath.

Around them, Grill's light clad troops wrestled, whacked and butted heads with the rebels. Monsters battling fellow monsters was a long and gruelling task, but it appeared the first loser would crumble to dust very soon.

The mummies wrapped their bandages around Grill and attempted to lift him; a feat which proved too much as Grill remained grounded to that boxy hallway, laughing off the lieutenants' fruitless endeavour. He fabricated his unhealthy produce to use as projectiles against the mummy lieutenants, whacking them in several spots with sausages, pork medallions and fried chicken.

After weakening them, Grill grabbed the bandages and pulled, drawing the couple closer. Rita toppled and landed on her face while Sam remained standing just to take a leg of meat to his, knocking him flat, too."

Lord Grill glanced to the floor by his feet and found a sword dropped by one of his men. He knew he had waited a long time for this moment as he risked his top-heavy body down to pick it up. With steel in hand, he waited for Lieutenant Sam, disorientated, to rise.

Sam got up and Lord Grill charged like a stampeding elephant. The sword was stuck out, rocketing toward the chest of his enemy. Sam shook his head as he tried to regain his senses in time.

"Sam, look out!"

At the last second, Sam felt a shove push him aside inches before the sword could impale him. He recognised the feel of those hands from anywhere. They were his wife's.

The sword stabbed through a torso of bandages. Rita's glowing eyes went wide. Sam yelled out.

The resistance as the sword went through, although smoother than what he anticipated, filled Lord Grill with satisfaction. In the next instant, he was horrified. He tripped over his heels and landed on his wide rump and shrieked a truly horrific shriek that ceased all fighting within that hallway. Every
monster looked up and, too, cried out at what Lord Grill had done.

"That… wasn't… very… nice…" the being of grey sieved through unseen lips, features blank. Invisible eyes looked down with disapproval. The sword was stuck deep within his belly, the tip just shy of Rita; it sieved out and clanked harmlessly against the floor.

Another one just like him, also grey and ashen and wrapped in scarce wrappings, approached a pair of fighting monsters, pulling them apart. "Violence… is not the answer…" she said. "Now, kiss… and make up…" The monsters she addressed, who seconds ago were at each other's throats, actually started kissing and hugging out of fear. They imagined that fifteen years from now, when their eldest kid asked how they hooked up, they would recap this sappy love story and end it with 'And that's how I met your mother.'

All around, more monster made of dust, rose from the darkest corners and pulled the living monsters apart, ending their quarrelling in an instant. Weapons of all kinds clanked against stone, their fighting spirits having left them the moment these things showed up, replaced with paralysing dread.

"W-w-what are you?" Lord Grill quivered like a leaf. Sweat dripped from his fur.

The ashen figure who took the blade to the stomach did not answer. He slowly turned and faced Rita. "…Ritie…" he said. "… My dear Ritie…"

Rita began to shake uncontrollably. Their voices. Her name. Ritie. Only two people had ever called her that. "Pa…? Ma…?"

Dom pushed Barb's wrist aside and pinned it against the floor before one of her paralysing shots could connect. In the other hand, they struggled with a bread-slicing knife. The heel of Barb's right boot dug into his portly belly.

"No way…" Dom muttered as he pushed down, feeling his arm burn. "You're too skinny to have this kind of strength."

With her other foot, Barb kicked the ground and out shot a fang beside her, just missing her target. This was Dom's strategy: he had been avoiding her magic for the past ten minutes until he decided to get on top of her like so and use her as a shield. A shield against her own magic, quite ingenious. In order for Barb the Bounty Hunter to properly impale Dom, she would need to impale herself.

Barb was taught never to give up. Her high heel dug deeper below Dom's ribcage. The deeper she dug, the harder he pushed with the chef tool. She lost the feeling in her arm. Her wing, flat on the grounded, throbbed without end.

The knife edged nearer her fine, green eyes; the shimmery edge becoming a blur in her vision.

Several arms of grey dust latched around Dom's arms and body, prying him off the bounty hunter. "Stop it! Stop fighting," they said. He went to turn around and lash out at whoever it was, as did Barb go to shoot him, but the two stopped the second they saw the figures made of dust. "You wanna end up like us?"

"Oh, my…!" Dom cried out. "You're… you're… dead!" All of a sudden, revenge wasn't worth it knowing this would be the result.

Barb stared wide-eyed at the dead figures, a couple piles of dust helped her up to her feet. "I… I…" she barely got out. Suddenly, she felt eternally grateful to herself for not breaking her no killing rule.
One dead monster, with straw sticking out of joints, had ashen arms akimbo. "Don't you both have something you ought to say?"

Dom the train chef rubbed his elbow. "Yeah." He sighed. "I'm sorry."

"I'm sorry, too," Barb replied.

Then, from above the high roofs beyond, a great flash of light burst, followed by a massive cloud rising above. The boom and the quake came last.

Barb squinted at the blinding flash. "First these guys show up, now this?" she said to herself. This day was getting crazier by the— "Maxie!"

The current general and former professor continued with their fight, which was more of a clenching competition than an actual brawl. Leigh threw his body to one side, finally tossing Haze off. He tried to stay on his own two legs, only to fail.

As the eye glowed on Leigh's palm and Rickard rocked back and forth, Haze reached for his cane. It was close. Who would strike first? Leigh could pierce a single laser into Haze right there, but Haze himself could snatch his cane in time and whack Leigh's wrist away.

General Leigh charged his magic, Haze grabbed his cane, and then the entire foundation around them rocked from a devastating explosion. A vase tumbled off a table around the next bend. A chandelier broke from its holding. Two suits of armour toppled.

Leigh stopped. Haze stopped. Rickard stopped. Haze turned onto a sitting position and both he and Leigh looked at each other for the longest time, silent.

Haze dared to break the silence. "I think this is the part where we stop fighting," he said.

"For once" – Leigh reached down with a helping hand – "I concur," he replied.

The professor grabbed his cane then grabbed Leigh's hand. As he stood, his walking stick retook the role as an extra leg. Haze brushed out the creases in his shirt and trousers.

"That sounded like it came from the garden," Haze said.

General Leigh said, "I was about to say that."

They picked up Master Scribe Rickard, who was not too thrilled from the whack to the back of the head, and they limped down the hallway, in the direction of the Obelisk.

The army of the Rebellion, up close, resembled less an army but more an angry mob. An angry mob multiplied by ten. They weren't that better equipped, but so what? If the gate is down and the defences are relinquished, then they all could have turned up dressed in their birthday suits or suited for an eighties disco. Seventeen-eighties, that is. Aristocrats were still a thing, right?

Up ahead, the Monster Military were sparse, but as ready as they would ever be. The troops on the wall had the cannons loaded and rows of archers with magical bows strung with magical arrows. Below, three rows of troops formed a bottleneck around the open entrance. Thousands of invaders stormed toward the walls; however, as long as they kept them within the gate, their numbers would account for nothing. They could keep the invaders held off while the ranged units pick them off until they either fled or were all destroyed.
Above, arcs of lightning slithered between the clouds like snakes, casting blinding flashes off armoured helmets and spear tips and puddles strewn across the ground. Most soldiers felt their fingers twitch and their eyes darting upward, afraid that at any moment the lighting would pick them out. Every member of the Monster Military, especially the ones holding spears, were primary lightning rods just waiting to get struck.

A terrible feeling grew in everyone; none of it felt right. What were they doing here? Why were they about to fight to the death? A lot of monsters at the bottleneck held their shields at half-mast, aimed their weapons lower down than usual. Plenty of those marching toward the northern wall had the urge to turn around.

From behind the castle's defence, Colonel Fischer and her crew of insurgents, both at the gate and halfway up the wall, prepared to strike. The cannons had been sabotaged, but they would not be able to stop all the bows and arrows. If the rebellion needed to take a few shots to win, then let those shots be the worst of it.

The guards around the gate were focused and fully concentrated on those thousands advancing up those fields. No way would they expect a pincer attack. If she and her fellow insurgents could disrupt the lines long enough, the army could rush in and overwhelm the forces here.

Colonel Fisher looked at the troops behind her. All of them, herself included, had tied red ribbons around their arms and waved a different banner for the rebellion to differentiate between them.

She was seconds away from commencing her plan when the explosion from the royal garden turned all heads around. So much for a surprise attack. Now the military knew they were there.

The rebellion went to charge. The archers let their arrows fly. Half the defenders turned to engage the insurgents. Then a dark cloud descended upon the people and formed walls of dust between them all. Everyone froze as these things took all the arrows, all the magic strikes, and all the swings. They took them so the living did not have to.

Figures and faces dragged themselves out, insisting that nobody fight.

"EVERYONE! DON'T FIGHT!" The former, late Emperor Juhi stood atop the gate, roaring what might be his final command. "IN THE NAME OF YOUR EMPEROR, I ORDER YOU NOT TO FIGHT!"

Members of both the rebellion and Monster Military alike dropped their weapons and broke down into sobs as they recognised loved ones from within the dusty remnants: mothers and fathers, grandmas and grandpas, uncles and aunties, nephews and nieces, brothers and sisters, sons and daughters.

Among them was Colonel Fischer, who dropped her arms in shame. "This was stupid…"

No sounds existed within the garden other than the ringing in Alphys's ears. Her non-existent ears. Her skin sizzled with the heat of a thousand suns. Alphys snapped her eyes open to nothing but a blur; her glasses missing off her bruised snout. The annoying buzz remained the single, only din as she scoured her area for her spectacles. The rippling of a dirty pool close to her mouth informed the doctor that she still breathed.

Alphys's claw brushed a lens which she could only assume were them. She picked up her glasses and rested them where they belonged; the left lens cracked around the edge. The mushroom cloud stretched higher than anything seen in the Outerworld; higher than the Obelisk, higher that the towers
of Castle Highkeep, and higher than the treetops in the Forest.

She looked around into the soupy mist of smoke and screamed out into the emptiness. Doctor Alphys inhaled then shrieked out Mew Mew's name as loud as she could, except she could not hear herself yell it. She felt herself call out to Frisk and to Undyne, to Gorey and Tori, to Papyrus and Sans, shredding her vocals in the process.

Each footfall sank into the mud as she went to search for survivors. Hopefully, the Emperor of Evil, Maxus, was nothing more than an outline in the dirt inside that cloud of death. Her next step struck something hard and she glanced down.

Mew Mew! Or what was left of her… namely, her head. The hair discoloured. The smile still persistent even in death. Big, anime eyes, empty and dimming black. Alphys's hearing returned enough to fear her robot's fleeting words.

"Game ooooooooveeeeeeerrrrrrrrrrrrrr..." With that, Mew Mew's eyes went empty.

Alphys collapsed to her knees. "Mew Mew, no!" She picked up the head, surprisingly heavy. "Please don't die on me! I'll... I'll get you home. You'll have a body again – a better body! With a pocky dispenser and a friendlier energy source." Alphys cradled the robotic girl's head. "You'll be as good as new – even better new! I promise!"

But it was too late: Mew Mew had shut down. The surrounding screen had cleared enough to make out shapes. Over against the eastern wall, Sans and Papyrus sat bugged, the taller of the two leaned against the shorter. Asgore's unmistakable frame rolled off Toriel, having shielded her from the blast. Alphys could make out the threads of smoke rising off his body. But... where was Undyne? Where was Frisk?

The thick cloud in the middle dispersed and a massive shadow marched slow and menacing. Alphys's mouth went dry as Emperor Maxus stepped into the dying light. Not a scratch on him. The faintest chuckle sounded as he reached to his shoulder and brushed off a single speck of dust.

"N-no... freaking... way..." Alphys barely breathed.

Maxus's gaze was set on the doctor. Easy kill.

The thunder rumbled above, Maxus felt it. Electricity snaking through the clouds like parasites. What a splendid way to finish this. He reached one hand to the sky and thunderbolts crashed down on him. Millions of volts of electricity rained into his body and flowed through him just as it flowed through the sky.

The lightning pulsed between his fingers as black as petrified branches before he turned in on Alphys. Streaks of dark power electrified the doctor, ravaging her body. She snapped straight, crying out at the top of her lungs.

A spear burst from the ground and into Maxus's wrist, knocking his hand away. Alphys fell in a smouldering heap.

He stopped and found Undyne limping across the garden, clutching her side, hardly having the energy left to stand let alone fight. Her scales bared scrapes, cuts, bruises and burns. Her eyepatch was missing, and she glared at the Emperor with one eye alive and the other dead. With anger such as hers, it was a pity she had not lived long enough to match his own control over the Outerworld. What a battle that would be.

"You are determined, I'll give you that," Maxus said before letting her have it.
The first bolt hit Undyne's shoulder. She twisted but kept going, willing a spear into her hands. As the next bolt arched toward her, she span her spear with the speed of propeller blades, batting the electricity away. Maxus pulled a rock from the earth and threw it; Undyne sliced it in half.

Undyne mused under her breath. "I'm the heroine… I'm the heroine… You pose a risk to the entire world. Your wickedness will be the end to both humans and monsters. And I, Undyne, must stop you." Getting second wind, she burst into a sprint. "For I am the heroine this world needs!"

As they clashed, even Maxus was surprised by how strong she had become. Undyne was ferocious, striking so hard she was breaking her own spears. Heaven's Shard failed to make contact, but her spears nicked and cut at his steel skin. She jabbed his ankle out before following with a fierce tornado kick to the face, stumbling him back.

There was a break in the combat as the two stared each other down. Maxus opened his mouth and built up energy at the back of his throat. Undyne prepared herself for the right moment to move. As devastating as it was, the beam was fairly easy to dodge. She would wait until the last second, then leap as high as she could into the air, then – wait! Undyne caught what Maxus did. For a brief moment, his grey eyes snapped away from her.

Maxus's lungs reached their full capacity. The last second before he roared, he turned his head. It wasn't Undyne he was aiming for.

The beam of dark energy raced across the expanse, toward Alphys.

She was frozen with fear. Her last sight would be the beam before it turned her into dust. It drew near. She screamed. Undyne leapt in the way, along with a wall of spears.

The blast slammed into the couple in a cascade of detonating spears. Undyne and Alphys barrelled across the dirt, rolling side over side and over each other before skidding to a stop.

Alphys lifted her head. Her entire world spinning. Undyne lay in front of her, on her back, unmoving and smouldering. "U-Undyne… Undyne!" Alphys clawed the mud and crawled herself closer. "Are you…?" Another handful of mud saw her another foot nearer. "D-don't be… please…"

Undyne slightly lifted an arm, jerked her head and groaned, letting her girlfriend know she was alive. She turned her head and found Alphys crawling toward her.

Undyne grinned a pained grin. "You… alright?" she asked before breathing heavily, like those two words took the same amount of effort as running a marathon.

"Oh, Undyne… you saved me." Alphys rested her head and Undyne's belly. "Th-thank you."

Alphys's hand found Undyne's. Their fingers squeezed.

"Don't thank me just yet." Undyne went to stand. "I'm not finished with him." Her body leaned an inch upwards. Undyne slurred from the effort.

Alphys could see Undyne was in no condition to fight; she could not even push Alphys away. "Stay down, Undyne," the doctor said. "You're not strong enough."

Undyne wasn't listening. She fruitlessly tried to rise against her flagging joints.

"Let's just lie here and rest a while," Alphys said, sounding like she was falling asleep. "Just lie here… and rest…"
The captain of the Royal Guard flopped like a fish. Her strength was gone, determination kaput. She'll wait and recuperate for a little. A few minutes rest and then this punk emperor will feel her sting.

Victory was firmly within Maxus's grasp now. These lesser creatures bowed to his feet, weak and beaten. Their powers worthless compared to his. Six monsters. Imagine now humans in the millions, at his feet, powerless to halt his reign, trying every trick in the book to extend their worthless lives. They would fight, they would struggle, they would bargain, they would grovel, and they would fall.

One remained. Asgore, holding his wife who was limp in his arms. His eyes lifted. Wetness built around the brims.

"Maxus, don't do this," he pleaded. "Look at what you're doing. Look around."

Maxus stood over the fallen king. Just for one second, Maxus thought he saw something else. A memory teased at the edges of his thoughts. The sight of Asgore holding his wife felt familiar somewhere.

"All this destruction. All this pain," Asgore said. "This will be your future."

Maxus lifted Heaven's Shard over his head. "At least I have a future."

It was here where the thinnest spark of hope within Asgore's soul fizzled away. No goodness existed within the Emperor's soul. Not anymore.

Before Maxus could strike the killing blow, his greatsword collided against Frisk's shield. Frisk's right forearm trembled as pressure piled on the burn.

"Frisk, what are you doing?" Asgore yelled. Toriel stirred. "He's too powerful!"

Maxus withdrew his blade and struck again, almost knocking them down. The sight of the child, wielding their sword and shield, thinking it stood any kind of chance against him – the beholder of humanity's damnation – was quite amusing. He pushed down and Frisk's shield budged. Their arm trembled against the sheer power pressing down on them; the shield not built to handle strength of that amplitude.

"Warning," the shield spoke, "battery power at thirty one percent." Frisk gulped. Those two strikes alone had taken down the battery by eighteen percent.

The greatsword rose again. Frisk pressed the button on their weapon, switching to the laser sword, and swung as he swung. The red laser sliced Heaven's Shard in half, sending the amputated piece sinking into the mud.

The same sword wielded by his father, which had seen more battles than the average troop had had hot meals, which had survived impact after impact without so much as a dent, met its end to a human with a toy sword.

Such a weapon of significance, and the great emperor of evil discarded the hilt aside like it was garbage. "I outgrew that anyway," he said before dark electricity discharged from his fingertips.

Frisk's sword absorbed the lightning. The red blade turned brighter and the hilt grew hotter the more it absorbed. Their left hand began to burn.

Professor Haze's invention exploded in Frisk's hand. They recoiled back, clutching it, inhaling through clenched teeth. The palm was black and burnt and bleeding; they couldn't feel the fingers too well.

Maxus roared his beam, Frisk blocked with the shield. Ebbs curdled around the brim as the underside began to glow red. Their arm burned; sizzling surface against an existing burn.

"Warning," the female voice from the shield said, "Battery power supply at twenty percent. Suggest immediate recharge or battery replacement."

Asgore cried out their name as he reached for them.

Frisk shrieked for Asgore to take Toriel and get out the way.

"Thirteen percent."

The corners of the shield began to crack. As hot as fire.

"Not without you," Asgore shouted.

"Seven percent."

The cracks spread. Hotter than the sun. Frisk said it as loud as they could: GO!

"Three percent."

Reluctantly, Asgore heaved up Toriel.

"One percent."

And dragged her away as fast as he could.

"Battery depleted."

Flowey the soulless, unfeeling flower witnessed the moment the human's shield detonated into smithereens. When Frisk opened their eyes again, ten feet back, the wet mud cold on their back, Flowey knew how much their arm would be on fire.

Even from that distance, he could make out the charred entity that was Frisk's left arm. The sleeve had frazzled away, leaving the skin pitch black and hurting like crazy. Frisk pressed it against their belly, unaware of the moisture building under their eyelids as they tried to suppress the numbing agony. Flowey feared there was no hope for that arm.

Funny, this version of Frisk was doomed – the ultimate route for this timeline to take was set in stone – but he still cared. He wanted to gasp in shock at every bit of their pain. Those same monsters; he tortured and tormented for years within the same period of time, yet it tore him apart seeing Toriel drowning, Asgore cradling her, Alphys electrified, Sans and Papyrus getting broken against each other, and Undyne sacrificing herself for the one she loved.

The tiny human stood in the Emperor's shadow. Flowey still cared.

"Run… Run away…" he whispered. "You can't win, Frisk. You can't. You're only chance of survival is to run away. Do it… please…"

His eyes closed.
"I can't watch you die like this."

Frisk needed a miracle to get out of this one.

Just once, just once, they closed their eyes and envisioned the infamous reset button. It hovered there in the black behind their eyelids, written in golden text and bordered in a golden box. Reset. They reached out and touched it. With one press of the button, the entire passage of time rewound. Back to the start.

Juhi lay in his warm bed, breathing his laboured breath. Quiet. Calm. Pink light shining through the windows. His time had come, as it comes to all eventually. Soon, he would be nothing but an ashen pile of memories, and his mantle would be passed on to the rightful heir, the legacy to the throne: his only son.

"Father, I am here," Prince Maxus said. His eyes silver and his hair golden.

"So, you came to say goodbye, huh?" Juhi replied. "I didn't know you still cared…"

Prince Maxus took his father's cold hand. "You're my dad. I can't stop caring even if I wanted to…"

"Good morning, Frisk. Did you sleep well, my child?"— "Frisk, I'm not letting go! Do you hear me? I'm not letting go!"— "Your determination is for me and me alone. Give it to me or I will tear it from your soul."— "Good luck out there, Kiddo."— "Apple. A-pull."— "Second floor, room number lucky thirteen. It's the last door on the left. Enjoy your stay."— "Oh, Frisk, that was one mighty shot… toward my heart. That's so sweet of you. Get in line."— "Humans… Nothing but warmongers and butchers… eh, Maxie…?"— "Nice knowing you, human."— "You shouldn't be here, you stupid, stupid child! You can't! You gotta get out of here! Run away, before—"— "I am the icy chill on your back. I am… Vail. It's a pleasure to meet you, Frisk."— "Welcome to where dreams come true, Frisk!"— "Save me, Frisk! SAVE ME!"— "I think about that poor, misguided soul abandoned forever in the Underground and… it should've been you."— "He showed me a world where everyone wanted to be my friend…I've never had a real friend before."— "Geoffrey. It's Geoffrey…"— "Congratulations! I've just checked our records and it turns out… you're our one-hundred-thousandth guest!"— "Not nearly as strange up-close as I imagined."— "Will you act as the champion for the rebellion, and in doing so, commence our assault on Castle Highkeep?"— "Howdy, Frisk! Long time, no see. I'm the advisor!"— "I GET STUCK WITH YOU! YOU ANDROGENOUS, MUTE IDIOT!"— "In this world, it's kill… to save."— "I guess it's only fitting that I leave you as you left me, as you left Chara: trapped below in the darkness. Alone. All alone."— "You… appear intact… Unlike us…"— "You and I have never met before, and yet, I think we both know exactly who the other is. Don't you, Frisk?"— "So I ask you now, Frisk. For this world, its people, and my son… will you save them?"— "This momentous day shall be called… the day determination died."

Their journey, from the start to where they were. Several days condensed into a few seconds. Every decision, every choice, every move, every sentence, every feeling, every thought, every smile, every frown, every tear, every step, every footprint, every breath, every ray of light, every shining star, every shadow, every corner of darkness, every snowflake, every raindrop, everything exactly as before, through thirty three chapters, Back to Frisk, layered with wounds and dirt, with one hand injured and one arm severely burned.

Such events in such a small window of time, and it all winded to this moment under steel skies. This path was theirs to walk, not by choice. Their actions, thoughts, drives, all dictated by someone else, both during the Underground and afterward. Their motives Frisk's. Whatever they deemed right, Frisk deemed right. Whatever was considered unfair and unjust, these rubbed off the lonely human
child. For once, as Frisk faced their greatest threat yet, these feelings, these beliefs, they truly believed were their own. No one guided their actions but themself no matter how untrue it all seemed.

Maxus, the Emperor of Evil, the vanguard to the extinction of mankind, controlled every molecule of this Outerworld. And them, a lowly human child. Unarmed. Magicless. Powerless?

There needed to be some kind of thread to cling to, a hope that there existed a way out – a better end to this madness. Perhaps had they known better or searched their dreams for a solution, then…

Hopes and dreams! Of course!

Why didn't Frisk think of this before? It felt so obvious, so dumb of them for forgetting.

Frisk could not reset. They could not reach their save file. They could not save their progress. But they could still…

Save!
The Day Determination Died

Determination: the power to delve into the past, look into the future, reshape it, and look out into the unknown worlds beyond.

There was one side to their Determination rarely explored: to look inwards to the true goodness inside.

With their Determination, Frisk stopped reaching into their own soul and, instead, reached out to another's. Maxus's soul became clear to them – black like tar, dripping with negativity both practically and literally with not a speck of light escaping. But, somewhere under there, Maxus, the real Maxus, existed. A spark of hope. A shine of dreams.

All of Frisk's pain vanished and they smiled a warm smile straight from the heart. It was like Frisk was speaking to his soul, the upside-down heart: the culmination of his being. It whispered not to the dark, sickly substance, but reached toward the true nature buried beneath.

Save!

Remember, Maxus. Remember who you are. Remember the good times. This evilness is not what defines you.

"What are you doing?" Maxus said as a feeling most bizarre gripped at his chest. A soothing sensation, not one of rough anger or the bitter boil of hatred. He felt warmth under his armour. "What is this feeling? What are you trying to pull?"

Pictures flashed before Maxus's eyes as the human used his own memories against him. He stepped back as the images took hold, and Frisk stepped closer, unafraid. Filled with Determination.

You're more than this wickedness. You're better than this. Don't fight your feelings. Let them in.

Maxus remembered. Memories from so long ago, memories thought lost to the annals of time, were resurrected before him: the first days upon finding the Outerworld, when the lands were fresh for discovery; a millennia ago but as clear and as crisp as if it were that day. Long before the rise of Castle Highkeep and the establishment of the Monster Military, when Highkeep Enclave was a grass plane with the needle point of the Obelisk within its centre, and the first inhabitants ventured out into the six separate islands to start their new lives.

His father and he were exploring the Oasis. They were both young and the pain was still fresh, but there was hope for their future, and dreams of a better world. Juhi's hand eclipsed his as they strolled barefoot on those warm, golden sands. No fear of annihilation, they had all the time in the world.

The young Maxus picked up a pebble and tossed it into the ocean; he had no idea he had done that, it didn't seem like something he would do. He could not remember being so small or as scrawny as a twig, seeing life from a child's perspective. His father was a future prediction of himself, tall and strong.

Through all the loss, Juhi still possessed one bright spot, one wonderful thing to live for: his only son. The fresh waters purified their bodies and baptised them of the last grimy traces of Earth. The bountiful lands filled their stomachs and returned meat and colour to Maxus's shrill features. His tuff of hair between his ears shone golden. He wore fresh, clean clothes. A healthy six year old boy, the final shred of family Juhi had left.
The darkness surrounding his soul began to crumble and crack, revealing glimpses of light beneath, who they really were. The Emperor felt his arms go slack and the desire to destroy begin to leave his body. This desire felt so trivial now as he remembered better times.

"That memory," said Maxus. "The pain was fresh from losing the ones we loved. I never thought it could be cherished." This got a wider smile out of Frisk, finding the good within him. Maxus closed his eyes. "What a fool I was to forget."

Such a wonderful memory. His father was smiling. He could not remember many moments when he smiled. The sun, pink and wonderful, shimmered off his healthy casing of fur. He barely remembered sands that soft or warm. A couple coconuts lay in the sand, the milk went down as smooth as honey. They had packed some provisions in a sack from the surface world: rich Outerworld fruit, moist and ripe, tingled delightfully on the tongue.

Maxus, the six year old boy, could almost feel the corners of his lips rise as he looked out upon the flat horizon to the south. He turned to his father – lying on his death bed. Old. Withered. Breathing his last.

"The Obelisk's secret..." he said. "I kept it from you, because I feared what would happen if you knew." He reached out, drawing one last breath. "You're a lost cause... my son...!"

He crumbled to dust.

Maxus snapped his eyes open. "What?" The human stood there, smiling, arms out. "NO!" His fist lashed out like a whip, striking Frisk unaware in the cheek. The evil thickened. His resolve reignited. "You dare use my own memories against me? I will not be swayed by the likes of you!"

Frisk lay face down in the dirt, that strike spread throughout them like a wave of prickling heat, settling as a sunburn on the infected area. Slowly, they got up and revealed a coarse bruise where his knuckle met cheekbone, a small lesion where the skin broke. And yet they still smiled. They stretched their charred hands out again and spoke to his soul, remembering why they were there.

Save!

It's okay. Remember. This isn't you. Fight the anger. Fight the evil in yourself.

Another memory stopped Emperor Maxus: the day Barb was born. Maxus was older now, a young man, he had been one for a few hundred years now. He pushed open the door to where the newborn slept, being as quiet as his hulking frame would allow. As a kid, he was so quiet that he had a nasty habit of startling people. They wouldn't notice he was there until either they saw him or he opened his mouth to speak.

The air held that new-born, sanitised, powdery scent. In the crib, bundled in blankets and under a mobile of stars and rocket ships, lay the baby monster, sound asleep. He never would have imagined Barb to grow into the woman she was today as he looked upon her there as the newly-born bat, so tiny and fragile like a glass sculpture, with her eyes closed and a tiny stub nose and a wisp of black hair.

"Oh, Barb," murmured the Maxus from the here and now. "I can't believe I forgot that too." Frisk could also see his memories, and they melted their heart. It made them forget all about their kafuffle in the Shattered Zone. "I always thought I'd see that face as she grew up. Guess I was too stubborn..."

Months later, Barb was already seeing the world for the first time and jabbering her funny sounds.
Her hair growing in at the back. Eyes a few shades different than what they were now. The wings on her back as tiny as her; she flapped them whenever she was happy.

She began to cry and her mother allowed Prince Maxus to hold her. Such a tiny thing, she fitted in Maxus's hand. At first, he was lost, but after some gentle swaying and soft cooing, baby Barb stopped crying and started giggling. She reached up with a tiny arm.

"Oh, look, Maxus," her mother said, "she likes you." While not a carbon copy, it was clear that Barb obtained some features from the mother's side of the family.

Maxus gingerly dangled a finger down and the baby seized it with stubby fingers. Her grip was surprisingly strong, and it was at that point he knew she would not grow up to be a pampered princess.

The baby's lips pursed. "Mmm… Maa…" she mumbled.

The mother held her cheeks. "Oh, my gosh! Is this her first word?"

"Mah… Masth… Masthu… Maxthu…"

Maxus was speechless.

Her mother was ecstatic. "She trying to say your name. That's so adorable! Come on, Barbie. Maxus. Max-us.

The baby took one little breath while everyone held theirs and…

"You're just going to end up bringing everyone down," Barb said, all grown up and standing on the edge of that night's sky. "Looks like I was right, all along…"

Even Barb thought he was a freak. A freak. A freak!

Maxus, enraged, tore the nearest stone he could feel from the ground and brought it across Frisk's jaw. They stumbled but remained standing. Upon turning back to Maxus, a nasty scratch ran from their chin to bottom lip.

"Enough of this childish guilt-tripping," Maxus said. A new layer of evil laced his insides. "Fight me, as your kind always do!"

Frisk smiled and shook their head and once more reaching out.

Save.

_I will not fight you, Maxus. And I know, deep, deep down, you don't want to fight me either._

The next memory forced before Maxus's eyes. Now, he was training Barb. At the tender age of twelve, Barb was. The world should have seen her instead of excluding her to the edge of the atmosphere: pigtailed past her shoulders, the ends frilled out like two miniature feather dusters. A rebellious tomboy of aween whether she wore her ripped jeans and baggy button-down shirt half tucked and untucked around her waist, or her sparring uniform with the black belt loose and the sleeves rolled up, exposing her grey forearms.

Today's session: hand-to-hand sparring. Her training commenced the day she turned six, and there was much debate as to whether to start earlier since Barb had already mastered shoulder throws on Carrie, her childhood stuffed monkey toy, by the time she was four. The earlier start would have
spared Carrie many arm replacements.

It was a pleasant summer evening out in the training courtyard. No other training sessions with the Monster Military were in the books, so the entire area was free to the Prince and the warrior in training. The sun neared the horizon and the azure sky came alight with stars. Moments like this were supposed to last a lifetime.

The Emperor of Evil almost smiled as he envisioned tween Barb charging him, with war cry and fists clenched, and he, the young prince, awaited her attack. Her first punch met Maxus's open palm. Her second punch met Maxus's open palm. Her third punch met Maxus's open palm. Her fourth, fifth, sixth, and seventh punch collided with the centre of his right hand.

She was fast and strong and, most importantly to Maxus, reckless. Her technique was strong, she could already defeat most of the guards under the military's watch, but she was predictable, using every muscle in her body except the most important one: her brain. She had yet to learn that the same approach did not work the same on everybody. She was most likely wondering how her unstoppable style had earned her many victories, but never against the prince himself. Barb read it on Maxus's face: he wasn't even trying.

She, on the other hand, was trying so hard; Maxus's unfazed expression most likely spurred her aggression.

It took a full half-hour for her to run out of steam, by then, she had become familiar with the furry texture of that palm. She mustered the energy to realise one final strike and Maxus, instead of blocking, stepped aside. The girl's fist swung into the open air and her own momentum tripped her up.

As Maxus offered her a hand – the same one tenderised by her knuckles – he offered her advice, as any good mentor would. He couldn't quite remember what he said; they had so many training sessions that they became a blur after too long.

The sweat trickled down Barb's brow, whereupon Maxus was hardly winded. There was still much for her to learn. She pulled a determined grin as she took the big guy's hand. Maxus read exactly what that grin entailed. It meant, 'I'll knock you down one day. Just you wait.'

Over by a nearby alcove, Master Scribe Rickard watched patiently. How younger he looked back then, before he grew that moustache, his white fur just that single touch different. He had come to impart some matter to the prince, although not too pressing from the manner in which he presented himself.

Prince Maxus waved him over.

Rickard approached, pen and pad in hand. He pulled it over his face, read the notes and scribbled an addition down. He looked up and suddenly had his moustache and a pained, guilty expression. His robe ragged from where Maxus roughed him up.

"I've never met any of the humans who took your family away," he said, "but… I'm willing to bet you sound just like them, right now."

Emperor Maxus heaved a bigger rock and punched it into Frisk's chest. Frisk staggered back and fell as their heart felt like it was about to burst. A boiling arose in their throat like all their blood wanted to gush out their mouth.

"I've never met any of the humans who took your family away," he said, "but… I'm willing to bet you sound just like them, right now."

Emperor Maxus heaved a bigger rock and punched it into Frisk's chest. Frisk staggered back and fell as their heart felt like it was about to burst. A boiling arose in their throat like all their blood wanted to gush out their mouth.
to save, once before, on himself. It was what saved Asriel Dreemurr, the God of Hyperdeath, when he had existence itself in his hands. It was what stopped him from making the biggest mistake of his life. Had Frisk never been there? Had he never been saved, where would he be now? What would have become of everything?

He, a being without a soul, could not deny the alluring sway of this power, affecting him there as it affected him before as a god. Memories of a better time, before his brutality, before his resurrection as a flower, returned. His young childhood, with his parents, with Chara. He had no soul, yet even he could feel remorse for his actions in the face of Frisk's willingness to save, to see the good in everyone.

Emperor Maxus had a soul, the capacity to feel emotion, compassion and empathy, and yet ignored them in the name of his darkest desires.

Frisk got up.

"No, Frisk," Flowey cried, "don't get up."

Frisk's legs resembled two matchsticks holding up a cinderblock. With a sad smile, they resumed their submissive stance.

Save.

"Don't try and save him," he yelled. "It won't work!" He motioned wildly with his head. "Get out of there!"

His assistant, Brute, felt his muscles twitch and his inners quake, feeling the urges from his own advisor. Sweat built on his brow. The Emperor in his original form was a man he dreaded. The Emperor of Evil was fear given life.

Again, Maxus appeared to calm down, and again, he lashed out with his unstoppable powers at the human child. Frisk tumbled in a blaze of gravel.

"Don't fight, Frisk. Just stay down." When Frisk was down, he wanted them to stay down. When Frisk stood, he wanted them to escape. Did he want Frisk to die, or didn't he? He was so confused. "Let him win. Just let him win…"

The God of Hyperdeath reverberated in his head, screaming. "JUST LET ME WIN!"

Frisk pushed themself up with shaking, burnt arms. Their body raised while the head and arms were as limps as a doll's; their face overcast with dripping wet hair. Frisk looked ready to drop dead.

"Stop it, Frisk," Flowey screamed, tossing wildly. "STOP IT STOP IT STOP IT! NOW!"

Frisk staggered on their feet. Hurt. Everything hurt. Hands slavered in mud, held towards the rampaging, swirling image of the Outerworld's emperor. Hopes and dreams began to fade, sinking into the rising tide of despair. Smile.

Save.

Maxus, there's still good in you! I know—

The next rock, to the other cheek, staggered the human child.
"Go ahead, keep smiling," Maxus said in his shadowy tone.

Save.

_I know there's still good in you. Don't let_—

Another strike. "I might stop if you smile hard enough."

Save.

_Don't let it win! I believe in you!

Another hit. Frisk found it hard to smile.

"What? Lost your smile?" Maxus almost found his. "Not finding this fun anymore?"

Save.

_I... I still believe in you. Maxus, please!

Maxus would not stop.

Save...

_P-please...

Would not stop.

Save...

...P-p-please...


...save...

...please...

Another devastating projectile connected and, hovering among the raindrops, Maxus saw it. Blood. A spittle of the human's life fluid coming out through gritted teeth and parted lips. The sight of it was exhilarating, magnificent; the feeling extraordinary. The power coursed throughout, now he was the one in control. Maxus was the one inflicting pain unto humanity. The human was powerless, pleading, on the verge of collapse, just how his own people were a thousand years ago.

The human could beg for mercy all it wanted, but Emperor Maxus would give none. Soon, billions more will do just that.

Frisk was a black and blue punching bag, up on wobbly knees. They had no idea where they were right now, hobbling, their entire body a mess of cuts and bruises.

From out of Maxus's fingertips, raw, dark lightning scattered into Frisk's tiny body. Frisk screamed at the top of their lungs, falling to their knees as pure, undiluted pain tore through them, ravaging inside and out. Again and again, as the child convulsed, they pleaded. If it had any effect on Maxus's spirit, it made the dark power stronger.

Frisk shuddered and rolled in a heap, unable to escape. Their screams became pathetic. Somewhere,
deep inside, Frisk clung to a shrinking hope that there was still good in him.

All of a sudden, several small pellets bounced off Maxus's carapace. He stopped and found Brute with the flowerpot on his head.

His own advisor inside the pot. "STOP!" Flowey yelled as loud as he could. "STOP IT! I can't take this anymore!" He tossed more of his friendliness petals, which sprang harmlessly off the Emperor of Evil. "You're wrong! I was wrong! This is all wrong!"

Flowey didn't care anymore. He didn't care if this story ended horribly. He didn't care if he couldn't change a thing. All he cared about was Frisk, and seeing them get torn apart tore him apart. He just wanted the torture to stop.

He likened himself the true hero of this story, but it begged a cascade of fundamental questions. Would a hero stand back and watch someone he cared for suffer? Would a hero simply give up because things looked difficult, and never search for an alternative solution? Would a hero try to kill someone they cared for because they were afraid of what came next? In Maxus's cruelty, Flowey saw a repeat of his own actions, and he, by spectating from the side-lines, was no better than the past version which sent the Underground running in circles.

No more. Flowey the flower was going to try. To throw away his believes and preconceptions, and follow the empty feeling in his being.

The corner of Maxus's mouth twitched. "Now you?" he said, lacking the surprise warranted from having one's most loyal, and last, subject stab them in the back.

"Yes. Now me," Advisor Flowey chastised his ruler. "How dare you? How can you be so heartless? Frisk is showing you something truly wonderful. And you deny it." Another barrage failed to leave even a scratch. "Sometimes, you just gotta look in the mirror and realise that it's not the entire world that's the problem, it's you. Frisk is trying – really trying to get through to you, and you batter them at every turn. No more. I won't let you hurt them anymore. I won't!"

Maxus gingerly moved closer. The Advisor noticed that Maxus noticed that Brute was trembling.

Maxus raised a fist and made repeated hooks with the index finger, beckoning Brute to hand the flower over.

Flowey looked down. "No, Brute, don't—" But it was too late. His assistant grabbed the flowerpot with trembling hands and held it out as far as his arms could reach, relinquishing his advisor like a child handing back something they stole.

Maxus grabbed the pot and the two, himself and his advisor, were seeing each other eye to eye.

A hollow, chilling sensation ran down Flowey's stem as a feeling he couldn't identify filled him. "M-my lord, I…"

"Tell me: who filled my father's head with visions of freedom?" Maxus asked in a low, dark hiss. His stare, an inch away, bored into Flowey's. "Whose lips moved with warnings of genocide? Who have we allowed the Empire to be guided by these past weeks?"

"M-M-Maxu—"

The lion gripped the flower by his fragile stem, crushing it with ease. Flowey gurgled a terrified squeal as his button eyes went wide and wet. From the background, Frisk's weakened gasp could be heard.
"Who have I turned to this past month for guidance?" Maxus tore Flowey from his pot, exposing his roots. "Who have I entrusted with the Empire's deepest secrets?" Maxus grew louder as he threw the pot to the ground, smashing it into fragments of terracotta. "Who swore an oath to never betray the Empire? To never betray me?"

Flowey clawed for breath; the lion's hold so tight he couldn't breathe. Hot tears ran down his flushed face.

"I should've known you'd be worthless," Maxus yelled. "I can't rely on anyone anymore, you all betray me. Everyone I know has turned their back on me. They call me the monster. They call me the one with the problem. Well, guess what? I don't need you!" He raised the advisor above his head. "I don't need anyone!"

Maxus threw his advisor to the ground. Flowey barely had time to inhale before his emperor stomped down in the most savage way with an iron boot. The force crushed him between boot sole and mud. His shrieks came out muffled.

Frisk, on their hands and knees, cried out in a weak voice as Flowey got crushed, begging Maxus to stop, to punish them instead. But they already knew, after he was finished with the flower, they would be next.

Maxus stomped down a further three more times; the Advisor stuck to his boot twice. When he was done, there was a deep print with a crushed flower resting inside. Flattened, Flowey groaned, barely able to move. Most of his roots had snapped and he had lost his golden petals. He twitched his head slightly – the last petal detached – and forced open watery eyes. A rattle escaped his throat as he was within an inch of his life.

After Maxus stepped away, unapologetic, Brute toppled onto the ground and began to sob like an infant as he pathetically scooped up the flattened flower into his hefty hands.

"Ad… Advisor…" Flowey lay limp in Brute's big hands.

Maxus went up to Frisk and grabbed them by the throat. As Frisk dangled, their garbling bared no difference to the one he put the hold on before. They looked deep into those unfeeling eyes, the same eyes which watched them tumble into ravenous waters, and saw nothing within them. A shell of his former self.

His lips parted, then the teeth, and a ball of black energy formed within the oesophagus.

He was the Emperor of Evil: the destroyer of hope, crusher of dreams.

Maxus roared, catching the human child within an energy beam. Searing pain, thought unimaginable, enveloped and drowned them. Fire encapsulated them, burning away inside and out in embers of yellow and red. They were Icarus having flown too close to the Sun, and the rays burned their wings, and the pain was unbearable.

The beam carried Frisk and smashed them against the Obelisk's northern face. A crack sounded.

Lying on the ground, Frisk barely clung to life. They tried to move, but an overwhelming wave of agony made it impossible. The sharp metallic taste of blood coated their tongue. Every rise and fall of their chest hurt like knives stabbing their lungs. The screen of grey lay above, snaking with thunder. The rain swayed and blurred in their vision.

The time was almost upon Lord Maxus. Could this be it? A thousand years of waiting, toiling, dreaming, and now, at long last, his time had come? Maxus stepped forward and onto something
solid. A flash of ruby red caught his eye from under the brown murk. He wedged his toe under the object and kicked up Asgore's trident into his waiting hands. Dirt clung around it.

The human will die, by his hand, and with a weapon the once mighty king of the mountain wielded. It would make a touching display: Asgore thought he was using it to protect his kid when in actuality he brought along the weapon of execution; it would be like Asgore himself was killing his own child.

He approached. Nothing will get in his way now.

"Un…Undyne…" Alphys crawled onto Undyne's shoulder after finding the strength needed to do so. "How are you now?"

Undyne had her eyes closed and breathed heavy. "Could be better," she responded.

Alphys saw the evil creature across the battlefield, wielding Gorey's trident menacingly as he neared a broken Frisk.

"C-can you stand?" she asked, gently taking hold of Undyne's shoulders. "F-Frisk needs our help."

"Alphys…" Undyne's face scrunched up as beads of sweat and rainwater trickled down her forehead in droves. "I don't… I don't feel so good."

"Come on, Undyne, d-don't give up. You never give up, no matter how bad things are." Alphys reached over to feel Undyne's forehead. "You've been hurt pretty badly, but—"

The cold feeling on the tips of Alphys's claws almost made her soul shatter. The sensation on her girlfriend's brow did not feel like water. It was too thick. Too oily. Too greasy. Too familiar.

She retracted her claw. A blue, gooey substance stained her fingertips.

She shook her head. "…Oh, no…"

The Royal Scientist was back in the Underground, gazing down into the abyss, water tugging on her ankles. She glanced at the same claw and could have sworn white residue persisted on them.

"No… no, no, no…" She looked at Undyne and her worst fear was coming true. Globs ran like paint down Undyne's scales, building in blue puddles around her. "No, no, no, NO, NO, NO! PLEASE GOD NO!"

It was her laboratory all over again. She was the terrified scientist, watching as the monsters she saved from death began melting before her eyes, one after the other. There was nothing she could do but stare in petrified silence as her patients tried to sustain their physicality, ending up sticking to each other in the process. She could still hear them. And what did she do? Nothing. She stood as still as a statue, sweat and tears pouring. No amount of the word 'sorry' could ever fix what she had done.

"NOT YOU TOO, UNDYNE!" Alphys screamed, clutching her head. Never before had tears poured so fast. She faced the heavens themselves. "THIS CAN'T BE HAPPENING! NOT AGAIN! WHY? WHY? GOD, WHY?"

The captain of the Royal Guard opened an eye, her blind one. "Is it really that bad?"

"Of course it's bad! You're dying, and it's all my fault! I… I…” She crumpled to her knees. "And I tried so very, very hard to do the right thing for once…." Her head fell back to the shoulder. "I just
wanted to help. I never meant to hurt anyone, because I love you guys. You're the greatest friends
anyone could ever have… and I only wanted to be a part of it…"

To that end, Undyne smiled and reached out with a melting hand. "Alphys…” She gently wiped
Alphys's cheek with her thumb. "This is exactly why I fell in love with you…” she said weakly "No
matter what it is, you care about it, one-hundred percent at full power."

Alphys held Undyne tight as she began to ooze through her arms. "I care about you, Undyne. I love
you, at one-hundred percent, maximum power." Her eyes were shut. She cried harder than she had
ever cried before. "Please… stay whole. Don't leave me. Please." She sniffed sharp, painful breaths.
"If you go… I'll have nothing left… I can't lose you. Not like this. Not like this…"

Undyne's arms, with the strength draining away, found their way around Alphys in an embrace.
"You're a big girl, Alphys. You're better than you think, stronger than you know. You'll survive this,
go on to live an extraordinary life, and meet plenty of great people along the way. You deserve it."

"B-but what about you…?"

"There's nowhere I'd rather be than with you… to the end."

Alphys sniffed. "I'm not ready to say goodbye… Not to someone as great as you. I want you to be in
my future. I want you to be greatest person in my life."

Undyne quietly hushed her. "We have all the time in the world." They rocked ever-so gently, and
repeated, "All the time in the world."

The skeletons over against the wall shifted their heads as life returned to their broken bodies. Papyrus
leaned against his brother. His weight on Sans's cracked skull ached like mad, but Sans didn't mind
much.

"Papyrus," Sans whispered, "How ya holdin' up?"

"I'm hungry…” was all the great Papyrus could think to say. His mind swam with pasta. "And I can't
feel anything anymore."

Sans huffed an exhausted sigh. "I get'cha, bro… I can't feel my appendix."

"Sans, I…” Papyrus realised what had been said. "You don't have an appendix."

Sans responded by fumbling into his jacket and pulling out a children's book. Upon opening it up,
the index page was revealed to be missing. A jagged edge hinted to where it should be. He chuckled
a broken chuckle before hitting a coughing fit.

Papyrus slapped his massive glove over his face. "What a pity. Your terrible sense of humour is still
alive…”

That emperor was getting closer to Frisk, ready to finish the job. The trident patted up and down in
his left hand.

"Papyrus," Sans said. "We gotta do somethin'?"

Papyrus nudged himself off Sans's head. "The great Papyrus is on it."

Hugging himself against the wall, he pressed down with his feet. His pelvis lifted one foot off the
ground before the strain set in; his broken, mashed bones croaking like damaged supports. He
pressed down harder and his right tibia disconnected from the kneecap, sending him tumbling to where he slumped before.

The two sat there, stunned silent as Papyrus's right leg, wearing the red boot, lay motionless in the dirt, pointing south.

"Curious… that hasn't happened in a while…" said Papyrus. Rather calm for someone who just lost a leg.

Sans dug his fingers into the earth. "Does… does it hurt?"

"No."

Papyrus leaned over to pick it up when he heard the rattle of loose stones from inside his glove. There was something in there. He pulled it off out fell two fingers which clanked limply off his femur and to the ground. A quick glance at the two gaps in his own hand revealed the fingers to be his own.

He picked up what he reckoned was his ring finger and groggily tried reconnecting it. It wouldn't. "What's happening to me, Sans?" Right after Papyrus finished that question, the whole of Sans's hand detached from his wrist. It lay still, with the fingers crumpled like the legs on a dead spider.

Sans hung his head at his separated appendage. "I think…” He looked at Papyrus with sad eyes and a grinning mouth. "I think we're dying, bro…” he confessed. "Either that or we're shedding out baby bones."

The still air was interjected with the tapping of phalange against metacarpal. "But I shed my baby bones when I was twelve," Papyrus said.

Sans chuckled low, beckoning another hacking fit. His brother was a late bloomer and a fast grower, not like that fun titbit of knowledge made any difference to their situation. The laugh ended quickly and a depressing tone took over. "Then that means…” He trailed off. There was no need to finish that sentence.

Papyrus grumbled, to Sans's surprise, in a tone that was less wretched and more disappointed. "Over already?" he asked. "But who's going to drive around the city when I'm gone? Who's going to make use of all that numbered spaghetti, without the threes?"

Sans laid his stump on his brother's cracked battle body. "Sorry, man. Guess some things aren't meant to last forever."

Those empty eye sockets of the Royal Guard hopeful gazed upon the lion adversary and his human friend.

"He…” Papyrus hesitated, then regained his composure. "He doesn't stand a chance, that guy," he bellowed, referring to Emperor Maxus.

Sans said nothing as he inspected the same sight himself. From his angle, one foot beside his bro, the battle looked one-sided, but not in the way Papyrus envisioned it.

Papyrus continued even as the pinkie dropped off, making it three fingers lost. "He can't defeat Frisk. Nobody can defeat Frisk, not even I, the great Papyrus." He clutched his annoying brother and pulled him closer. "Just watch. This battle will turn right around, just you wait."

Sans watched as the monster with the trident got closer to Frisk. If the kid died, what's gonna
happen? Back to the Underground? Back to his new home on the surface, without any memory of any of this? Perhaps this was not the first time he had done this. A thought occurred that maybe he and everyone else were reliving the same two days like an episode on television being rerun endlessly. The thought terrified him. All those months spent going around the circles below the Earth's surface, being made a plaything out of some twisted game of curiosity only to spend the rest after that in an endless loop was upsetting, yet ironically fitting. There was no point in fighting. All he could do was smile and crack a lame joke right in the funny bone.

For his sake, he hoped Papyrus was right.

The King held his Queen, having been able to escape the blast just in time, lay together nearby on the other side of the garden. Asgore held her close. Toriel was limp in his arms.

Toriel stirred and mumbled something under her breath.

"Tori?" Asgore leaned closer. "Speak to me."

He neared her as she muttered again. Asgore made it out.

"Frisk?"

The Queen's eyes opened. The next thing she saw – two things, actually – was that Emperor and her child.

"Frisk." A terrified feeling creeped into her soul. A spark of energy. "Frisk!"

The human, on their back, too weak to fight and too injured to move, looked to be already dead. The rising and falling of their chest, the only sign they still drew breath. Still, Maxus looked forward to making sure it was dead. His grip tightened with excitement as the royal weapon became lighter. Nothing would give him greater pleasure than to drive the stake into the beast's heart.

He was six steps away when, all of a sudden, as mass of grey swirled between him and his kill. A figure of dust formed two legs, two arms, a thick body and a head with hair just like his.

"Maxus, stop!" Maxus halted upon the appearance of such a wretched being, coupled with a voice he thought never to hear again. "It's me!" Juhi called out.

Maxus stood motionless at the sight of his father, his undead father – a shell of his former self. Juhi had his hands out, beckoning his son to stay where he was. Maxus had spent his entire life with his father, stuck in the same world as him, and yet not even death could keep him away.

Juhi appeared scared, betrayed by a softness in his stance. "What... happened to you?" he asked, barely recognising his only son, nor his armour, under the alterations. Juhi cranked his head to see Frisk and regretted it in an instant. Such a small creature, so healthy and full of life within their home at the bottom of the Forest, now resembling a corpse. "What have you done?"

"You're not supposed to be here," Maxus snapped, gesturing the weapon at him. "It's fitting, really. You can't even die right."

"Listen to me, my son. I understand how you feel, but this isn't the answer." He couldn't stop himself from taking glances back at Frisk. Each look shot pangs of guilt into his empty shell. The human whom he dragged into this mess, whom was on the brink of death, was in their sorry state because of him. He had done so much wrong. Now was his chance to do something right. "I can feel this world
dying; its people – your people – are fleeing for their lives. Their suffering is unimaginable, but it's
not too late. Nobody has died yet, we can solve the Obelisk's secret and save everyone here.
Everyone, including you and Frisk and all those people here."

Everyone else by now had dropped their arms and their grudges and reconnected burned bridges
upon seeing the dead return. The Emperor of the Outerworld remained as defiant as ever in the face
of his dead parent. "Now you want my help to discover the Obelisk's secret?" Maxus inquired,
annoyed. "The same secret you spent your entire life hiding from me?"

"Yes, because I feared what would become of it!" Juhi made clear that statement was aimed at
Maxus, or rather, what he had become. "Now I realise it was wrong of me to keep that secret from
you, and I'm sorry. I should've told you everything. We should've worked together, you and I. Now
look at what it's brought us. Look at yourself." He stepped closer. "This thing that's taken control of
your soul, it's destroying you! I don't even recognise you anymore."

Maxus replied with a scoff. "You don't recognise me? That's rich coming from you, Dad. Do you
know why you're a walking, talking pile of dust now?" He pointed to the child. "It's because of that
human's ancestors. They forced us to flee here, forced us to live here, forced you to die here. Look at
us. Look at what we've become. We exist because they made us this way!"

"The humans didn't do this to us, Maxus. We did this to ourselves," Juhi took one last look at Frisk
before he couldn't bear it anymore. He covered his eyes. "I was wrong. Wrong about Frisk, about
their Determination, about everything! I wanted a miracle. I was desperate when I spoke their name.
Frisk is an innocent victim in all this – they came here purely on their own volition, because they just
wanted to help everyone."

"It doesn't matter whether that thing is innocent or not. The damage has been done." Maxus went to
step around his father. "I'll be dead soon."

Juhi grabbed his son's arm. "They wanted to help you, Maxus, because they believe there's still good
within you. Don't let that hope be in vain." A pleading tone ran rife in his broken voice. "Let go of
this hatred. Let go before it's too late."

"If Frisk really wishes to help me, it can die quicker for all I care," remarked Maxus. He tugged
against his father's hold. "And I'll be the one to take its soul."

"Think about your mother. Your grandparents," Juhi beseeched. "They wouldn't want to see you
like this. They'd be horrified by what you've become. By all this." He gestured to his surroundings.
"By everyone you've hurt. These people. Rickard. Barb. A child."

"Don't you dare place their deaths on me…"

"I'm not blaming you for anything. Maxus, please. You made a promise."

"Yeah?" Maxus snapped around. "AND YOU'RE DEAD!" Then he did something which might've
well have killed Juhi outright.

He swung the trident, slashing his father in the chest. The three prongs made short work of Juhi's
dusty torso, slicing him in two. His legs crumbled. His body span and collapsed in a heap. A moment
of respite occurred as the former emperor resembled how he looked on his deathbed, then his pitiful
face took shape.

The father and son looked at each other. There was no emotion or apology in Maxus's dull glare
Juhi's bottom lip quivered. "…Son…"
"Spineless, that's what you are," hissed Maxus. "You'd rather lay down like a coward than take a stand. Mother is dead alright, they're all dead because of you, because you were too weak to help when they needed you the most! You keep thinking that if you do nothing, then something great will happen! That a solution will just magically appear from out of nowhere and make all these problems disappear. You did nothing back then, and our family died. You did nothing now, and now everyone is dying. Can you honestly look me in the eye and tell me you did the right thing?" Juhi glanced away, hesitating. "That's what I thought." Pitilessly, he stepped on the pile that was Juhi's legs. "Lie there and wallow in your self-righteousness. I'll be the one to make the change. The change you couldn't make."

Maxus stepped over what used to be his father and, in the one second, Juhi comprehended the soul-crushing truth.

He had lost his parents. He had lost his wife. He had lost his home. He had lost his life. And now…

"...I've lost him..." Juhi whispered. "...I've lost my boy... I've lost everything..."

His grief manifested into desperation.

"What have you done to Maxus?" Juhi curled up into a ball. "What have you done to my boy? What have you done?"

Slowly, savouring every moment, the Emperor stood over the critically injured child. Frisk had been reduced to a terrible mess: their skin blue, one slither of blood trickling from the mouth spelt internal damage, and the purple of broken bones.

Through bleary vision, those three dusty points hovered above Frisk's chest. The next blink returned the vision from their dream.

_Teir foe stood above... a trident in strong hands... Prongs aimed squarely at them..._

"Know this before you die," Maxus said, savouring the moment. "I will destroy everything you tried to protect." His words came out as black and as twisted as the power that encompassed his soul. "Everything you ever cared for. Everyone you ever loved. I will make humanity beg for death. I will terrrprise them in ways you could never imagine. They will know nothing but pain and despair for all eternity, and it will all be thanks to you."

Frisk knew the next part. In a few short moments, the trident would come down and put them out of their misery.

Just like in their dreams, the prongs rose in preparation for the final strike. Maxus, himself, struggled to contain the excitement on his face.

_It came down on—_

"NO!"

Toriel clambered over and collapsed beside Frisk, throwing her body over theirs. She wrapped her hands under their head and held them tight to her chest.

"I beg you, please do not take Frisk," she cried with deep remorse. "I have lost so much. I cannot lose another child..."

Asgore stumbled over and landed beside them both, adding his embrace to hers. "And... I cannot lose either of you..."
Toriel looked up at Maxus. The corners of her eyes glistened. "I beg you, Maxus, do not do this. Please, look deep within your soul, and understand this child did nothing to hurt you. Just let us go."

Maxus snarled, exposing fangs of white. He had resisted direct attempts to sway his soul. A few words from a fallen queen kneeling down in the mud would persuade him not.

"But… if I cannot convince you to stop… If you must take Frisk's life…" Her eyelids closed and two droplets streamed down her cheeks. "You must take mine as well."

Asgore pulled his wife and child close. "And mine, also," he said.

Maxus tightened his grip on the trident – Asgore's own weapon. "Fine," he said, then began to raise the weapon, ready to deal the final blow. With this strike, the war will end. In fact, all war will cease to exist. Humanity will pay for every sin in its worthless existence, and he will reshape the world in his image. The monsters will rule the Earth and the humans shall become their slaves until they died.

Toriel lowered her head. Somehow, through the pain, Frisk worked up the strength to smile. Knowing that as they faced the end, they were together once more.

"It is alright, Frisk…" she whispered, loud enough for Maxus to catch. "Everything is going to be alright. Just do not look…" She sniffed. The end drew near. "Just don't look…"

"Toriel… Frisk… I love you…" Two droplets ran down his beard as Asgore said his final words. "I love you both so much."

Toriel's eyelids were shut so tight, yet they could not stop the tears. "We love you too. I…" Her arm wrapped around King Fluffybun's unmistakable shoulders. "I love you too, Gorey." She stroked Frisk's hair. "Just don't look, my child…"

The weapon was poised. The target was clear. The kill would be quick and clean. The anticipation quelled the Emperor's heart. Victory would be his, and power thought unimaginable would be bestowed upon him.

"Just don't look…"

The Emperor will make humanity suffer, down to the last insignificant soul. He will make their very existence a nightmare. Just being human would be a sin within itself. They will beg for mercy, and he will give none. They will shed tears, and he will not shed a single one. They will cry. He will laugh. He will enjoy every second of it.

"Just don't look…"

He pulled the trident fully back. The muscles in his arms tensed, building up the killing blow.

*Just don't look…*

Maxus stopped.

*Just don't look…*

Those words. They were familiar. He was hearing them from across a million miles. Where had he heard them before?

The way the human lay on the ground, injured, close to death. He had seen it before, but where? Why did it tug on the corners of his forsaken soul? The creature's loved ones embracing it in their
final seconds. This was the beginning of a new era, yet it felt like the end of a previous age. He
could've sworn all of this had happened once before, but it lingered on the tip of his tongue. The way
the human lay there, the way they clung to it as the last precious grains of sand diminished in its
hourglass. Where had they seen that before?

*Just don't look…*

Maxus blinked. He was no longer there. He was a thousand years in the past. Not as emperor, but as
the scared, six year old cub, hidden amongst the trees, his hand buried in his father's. How afraid he
was.

Frisk wasn't resurfacing these memories. This all came from himself.

The war escalating beyond: weapons swinging; arrows flying; monsters falling; dust seeping. It was
not a war, it was a massacre.

In the centre of it all was his mother and his grandparents. His grandfather, on his back, his body
deep with gashes and his breath laboured. His mother, on her knees, with her father's head against
her chest. She stroked the last wisps of his white hair. His grandmother held them close.

Then… there was the man who killed them. Not a veteran warrior, but someone in a tattered robe
with long hair and brandishing a pitchfork. Throughout all those years, Maxus fantasised again and
again what he would have done given the chance. He would swoop in, kill that man, take his soul,
save his family, and kill every human there. He tortured that man in countless ways: a million
daggers; boiling oil; electricity through his bones; burning coals forced down his throat.

Maxus looked back at the human. For the first time, he did not see a human. It was as if he were
blind, finally seeing light for the first time. The flesh was stripped away, outward appearances gone.

He saw hate. He saw anger. He saw pain. He saw himself.

He blinked. Back to Frisk, Asgore, Toriel, and himself.

"*Just don't look…*" Toriel whispered.

He blinked. Back to Mother, Grandpa, Grandma, and the man who murdered them.

"*Just don't look…*" *Mother whispered.*

*Grandpa lay on the ground, close to death.*

Frisk lay on the ground, close to death.

*Mother held Grandpa close, tenderly stroking his hair.*

Toriel held Frisk close, tenderly stroking their hair.

*Mother whispered, "*Just don't look…*"

Toriel whispered, "*Just don't look…*"

*Grandma held Mother and Grandpa, saying how much she loved them.*

Asgore held Toriel and Frisk, saying how much he loved them.

*The man had an indescribable look in his eyes.*
Maxus had an indescribable look in his eyes.

*The tines of the dirty pitchfork were coated with dust.*

The tines of the dirty trident were coated with dust. His father's dust.

Blink. Maxus no longer held the weapon toward them, but toward his own family. The way he held the trident, it was exactly how that man held his pitchfork. His stance, the spacing between his feet, the straightness in the back, tension in the right arm, all of it was that man's.

To his right was a mirror. In the mirror, he saw his family reflected in the glass, but instead of himself, he was the ragged man in his place.

The man with the pitchfork turned to him with grey eyes which shimmered silver with tears. Maxus realised the emotion in that face which plagued him for a millennia. That man wasn't happy, wasn't laughing, wasn't enjoying anything he did.

His lips parted and spoke directly to six year old Maxus.

"*Do it. Be a man.*"

The trident trembled.

"*Do it.*"

It shivered.

"*Do it!*"

It shook.

"*DO IT!*"

*The human roared as he drove the pitchfork down.*

Maxus roared as he drove the trident down.

Asgore, Toriel, and Frisk clenched their eyes shut and held each other tight. The trident would strike them, and they would die together. As a family.

There was a shudder as the spikes sank into the harsh mud.

All went quiet. They opened their eyes. Were they dead? They turned to where the emperor stood and found him down on one knee. His head lowered. The trident stuck in the dying earth away from Frisk's feet.

What? Impossible. In every single route, Flowey always witnessed the killing blow. He had never seen this path before.

The Emperor trembled. He boiled with rage, buried deeper than anything imaginable. The evil continued to lash out, bark and yell out like rabid dogs, starving for pain, thirsty for blood. His teeth snarled. But behind those eyes and those teeth, behind all that anger, lay sadness, regret. Maxus still wanted to kill, but... he couldn't. Not anymore. He looked down and witnessed the horrific sight of a ghastly creature staring back from the rippling puddles.

His undead father went wide-eyed. Juhi saw him once more. "...Maxus..."
"I... I can't..." Sucking in a heavy breath, Maxus threw the trident aside and smashed his fists into the ground. The puddles rippled, his reflection distorted then returned unchanged. "I don't... I don't know who I am anymore." Maxus's mouth quivered. "I don't know... what... I am anymore. You were right. I've spent so long reliving the past that I've failed to see the pain I've caused moving forward, all the people I've hurt to get to this point. All this hate, all this anger, all this rage in my soul..." What he had become stared back from below. "It's turned me into the very thing I wanted dead."

The realisation made it hurt more for the crushed flower who watched from the comfort of his sobbing assistant's hands. What Maxus had done was thought impossible. His hatred so ingrained and his will as hard as iron it was never believed he had the strength within himself to stop from lashing out.

Frisk did not save Maxus. Maxus saved Maxus.

The surroundings occurred to the lion emperor. The muddy battlefield. A woman holding her dying girlfriend. Two brothers, side by side until the end. The advisor he crushed. The father he attacked. The family he nearly killed, gazes full of awe. Yet the tar surrounding his soul demanded vengeance.

Maxus covered his eyes, afraid for the first in a long time. Afraid of what he had done. Almost did. He felt like crying. But no tears came.

Asgore broke from his trance. "Toriel, can you heal Frisk?" he asked.

Toriel held her open hands to Frisk’s chest and focused as hard as she could, forcing her magic out in a warming orange glow. Her arms shook and a force like a vice crushed on her head. The magic shone for a couple of seconds before it flickered and died. She gasped, drained from the effort. "It is no good. Their wounds are too severe and I am too weak. We must get Frisk to a hospital."

But Frisk could feel it deep inside their bones. There was no time for the hospital...

They struggled to move, barely having enough strength needed to breathe. This was it...

Frisk gazed up at their foster parents and smiled through the pain. Tiny drops formed in the corners of their eyes as their breathing degraded into quiet, quivering rasps. Their chest rising and falling slowly. The grey light surrounding Asgore and Toriel began to fade; the couple losing focus.

Toriel held her child's head. "It is okay, my child," she whispered, continuing to stroke their hair. She looked around frantically as if the answer to all their problems was within arm's reach. "Everything is going to be okay. Just hang in there, we will get help."

Slowly, weakly, Frisk raised their tiny hands. The bruised, battered and burnt arms wavered as they rose, taking every last ounce of strength to lift. The soft palms reached out through the closing darkness and found Toriel's cheek and Asgore's beard, caressing them both gently.

Frisk thanked the king and queen for everything. Frisk thanked the couple for giving them a home. Frisk thank them for being their parents when they had none. As two streaks of silver fell from their eyes, Frisk thanked them for being there to say goodbye.

"Please... do not say that." Toriel said. "Save your strength..."

"We'll get you help..." Asgore said, visibly shaken yet acting as sure as possible. "We'll have you back home and jumping about before you know it. Back to butterscotch cinnamon pie, and playing catch in the garden, and... And..." His words faded in Frisk's ears. "And reading stories in the living room." They were nothing more than a whisper. "We'll be a family once more."
The couple faded out, consumed by darkness. His words were gone, muted, and silent. A single prominent sound beat at a rhythm.


A heartbeat. Their heartbeat.


White shapes materialised in the black screen, and Frisk saw it one final time.

**Home. Their home. The cosiest house on the friendly country street, with flowers at attention in front. Each of the four frontal windows glowed from within. Frisk approached and entered through the front door to the scrumptious aroma of pie, mixed with a hint of burnt pasta sauce. They could almost taste the butterscotch and cinnamon.**

*In the living room, Sans and Alphys had set up a videogame console to the television, playing the recently released Mew Mew Kissy Cutie Ultimate Edition, all while recording it to post online. The short skeleton and former royal scientist smiled and waved as Frisk passed.*

*Thump, thump. Thump, thump... Thump, thump... Thump, thump... Thump, thump...*

*In the kitchen, Papyrus and Undyne worked their magic around the stove, churning out spaghetti. They welcomed Frisk inside and offered them a plate which could not be refused. It tasted surprisingly good, and the slice of pie afterwards was the perfect dessert.*

*Thump, thump... Thump, thump... Thump, thump... Thump, thump...*

*The patio door opened and Asgore and Toriel entered from the most beautiful garden ever, fit for a king and queen. Toriel gave them a warm hug before Asgore picked them up and carried them upstairs, to their bedroom.*

**Now that they mention it, Frisk was feeling awfully tired.**

*Thump, thump... Thump... thump... Thump... thump...*

Asgore lay them into bed and pulled the sheets up to their chin. Frisk received a loving kiss from both parents. The others stood by the doorway, smiling. Smiling... even though Undyne was melting, and the brothers were falling apart at the seams, and tears streaked down Alphys's face.

*Thump... thump... Thump... thump...*

One by one, the lights went out. It started with every star and streetlight from outside... then from the hall... then from above. The single bedside lamp remained. Frisk got nice and comfy under the sheets. Their eyes became heavy. So heavy.

...Thump... thump...

Asgore and Toriel weren't smiling anymore.

"Frisk...?" Toriel said. Tears ran down her face.

...Thump... thump...
Toriel reached over and placed a finger on the switch.

"Frisk…?"

With a quiet click, the light went out. Darkness.

...Thump...

"F-F-Frisk…?"

...

...

...
The smile slowly fell from Frisk's face as they exhaled a slow, painful breath.

Toriel blinked. "Frisk…?"

The child's arms faltered, then fell limp at their sides. Another clap of thunder rumbled.

"Frisk…?" Toriel gently shook them.

No response. Frisk lay there, their head in her hands, perfectly still and perfectly silent.

"F-F-Frisk…?" She shook them harder. Yet Frisk remained unchanging, unmoving, unbreathing. "S-say something… Do not do this to me, not now."

"This… This is not funny, my child…!"

Asgore slowly pushed himself away, breathing odd, muscles trembling. "It can't be… It can't be…"

He covered his mouth and warmth streamed down his face. "No… No… Not again…"

He returned to the last place he wanted to be, at the bedside of the first child as they breathed their last breaths and the life faded from their rosy cheeks. "…Chara…"

Toriel shook her head. "S-stop it, Frisk… You're scaring me…!" she yelled. Her hands, trembling, rigorously shook the child, trying to coax them awake. "Do not leave me again, not like this… Wake up… Please…!"

Frisk's head slumped to the side. Toriel felt the child's ice cold cheek press against her fingers, sending a dead sensation seeking up her arms and into her soul.

Her voice became a whimper, coated in denial. "…Wake up… Say something…” Frisk's form began to blur in her watery vision. "…Frisk, please wake up… Do not leave me… please… Frisk, come back… Come back…”

The tears broke the moment Asgore's hand fell upon her shoulder. Her body went rigid, teeth clenched, throat hurt, eyes burned as she pulled them away from their child to him. There were no words at first, just his anguished, tear-streaked look as he turned to the ground, a shadow washing over his face.

"…Toriel…” he whispered. Two droplets fell. "…I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…”

She tried so hard to deny it, but could do so no longer. Toriel wrapped her arms around the child and pulled them into a hug. Her cheek, close to theirs, felt the last traces of warmth from Frisk's final tears. Their face lay immortalised in an emotionless median. No breathing. No heartbeat. No life.

No longer holding back, Toriel freed her sorrow.

The others – Empire, Rebellion, and Grey Ones alike – arrived too late to the sound of Toriel's scream. It cut through everyone like a knife, regardless of whether they possessed a soul or not. The proud queen of the Underground, reduced to a weeping wreck of a boss monster, slumped over the next in a long line of dead children.

"Oh, Frisk…” Toriel cried. Her breathing degraded into sharp gasps. "Why…? Why did this have to happen? You were just a child…” She sniffed, gently stroking the child's hair while rocking back and forth. "They were just a child…"
Asgore fingers clawed at his face in torment. He broke down against the pillar, using it for support, and wept. His fingers twitched. His mouth was dry. His throat sore. His eyes burned. A clenched fist slammed against the stone. Frisk was alive sheer moments ago, laughing and smiling as their arms were around his neck and his beard tickled them, now torn from between his fingers. He knew it was all too good to be true, to think he could finally be a father again, be part of a happy family, to live in a nice house with a beautiful garden with flowers and tea and happy stories and good times. It was all gone in an instant, and in its place a vast horizon of emptiness.

Another child dead. Another family destroyed. Asgore was alone. Toriel was alone.

Juhi felt it, as did the rest of his ashen comrades: the first life being extinguished, the moment Frisk left this world. Frisk's life, a most unusual pull, faded and drifted away like the final embers of flame, leaving a black hole of cold ash. To watch a moving, breathing person go still for all eternity was a harrowing experience, but to see the actual life-force diminish until nothing remained was a sight never to be seen through the lens of the living. Nobody should ever have to witness what Juhi or the Grey Ones had seen.

The once grand power radiating from the Obelisk was now no more than a flicker. Minutes remained. Once the final stream of magic faded, the Outerworld would be no more.

There had been time to discover the secret. But that time was up.

A walking stick landed within sickly mud and Professor Haze slowly sat himself on the ground. It was already over. The would-be champion, Frisk, had been slain. The Emperor had become something worse. The prophecy, the tiniest thread of hope he clung to, was a lie. There was no chosen one. No hope. No freedom. No future.

"Leigh," Haze said, the general close by, "you and I may not have been the closest bunch, but I invite you to sit with me. Just this once."

General Leigh did so without much hesitation for he knew not even the Monster Military could fix this mess. Nothing could fix this mess. "Invitation accepted," he replied. Next to Haze, the two shared their first buddy-buddy moment. "I would be honoured to spend my final moments… with a friend."

The professor simply grinned and patted his friend on the back. They both had a good run; himself as the scientist who served as a figurehead in the civil war, and Leigh as the man behind the armed force which upheld law and order within the land for two centuries. What a pair they made.

Their stories had their prologues, their chapters, their twists and turns, beginnings, middles, and now, as the world ripped itself asunder, the final chapter drew to a close.

Flowey watched, wild-eyed, speechless and unbelieving from the hands of his sobbing assistant as what he thought impossible became reality. Frisk was dead yet time continued onwards. No loading save points. No resets. No refusals to die. Frisk was dead, and there was no coming back from this, for all of them.

"It's over. Now it's over," he rasped in a grated voice. Even blinking was painful for the crushed flower. "I'm sorry, Frisk. I… I did it again… I… N-no, Flowey, you're different now."

He lay back, feeling the rain's full force pelt upon his face. Two different people with contrasting beliefs raged war inside his head: both Floweys from before and after they learned about love.
"You're not that person anymore. You're doing this for a good cause," he spoke not to himself, but to the opposing force deep down. "You're better – you'll do better next time. And if you fail again, then you'll try again. You'll do this a million times if you have to. You're... You're..."

His two minds reached a chilling consensus upon discovering who he was, what he had become, and what he tried to deny. After so many questions about his existence, who he was, and why he was here, he came to its conclusion which he could deny it no more.

"H-h-howdy! I'm Flowey! Flowey the flower!" he shouted to the pouring sky. "I'm Flowey the flower!" For this was the same flower who haunted the Underground. "I'm Flowey the flower!" This was his destiny. "I'm Flowey the flower!" This was his curse. "I'm Flowey the flower." This was who he was. "...I'm Flowey the flower..." And there was no escape.

He began to cry.

Sam an' Rita witnessed the grim scene – parents crying over their child – and so wished to turn away. The two could make out the kid's shirt – the same shirt they so courteously washed and dried – and locks of their chocolate hair, enough to confirm who that was.

"Ma? Pa?" Rita said in a small voice. "Is that...? Are they...?"

The final remains of her parents bowed their thin, grey heads. "Their soul... is in great agony... no more..." was her father's response. "We're sorry..."

Sam an' Rita held each other tightly, as a husband and wife should. They pushed the kid into this, into a dangerous situation which cost them their life, and now another married couple were left to pick up the pieces. Just as the big bad emperor robbed them of their family, Good ol' Sam an' Rita had robbed another of theirs, and they only had themselves to blame. What if that had been their kid?

"Sam," Rita whispered, "what have we done?"

"A terrible thing," Sam returned. There was no easy way around it, no glossing or sugar-coating; they were no better than Maxus. Were their tactics really so different? Was the outcome any better from what the ruler himself could surmise?

From afar rumbled the thunder, the earthquakes and the floods. Those terrible things grew louder as they drew closer, converging toward the core. At least this way, retribution for their actions would be swift. It was what they deserved.

They accepted their fate. They accepted it together, in each other's arms.

Alphys and Undyne witnessed their human friend leave this world and, at the same time, felt an empty space grow in their lives which could never be filled. Their passing caused pain, every detail painted a picture of pure misery. Tori held their lifeless body. Gorey's grief manifested into anger, which he exhibited again and again on the pillar, wearing his knuckles raw.

"T-Tori... Gorey..." Alphys whispered, Undyne still in her arms. "...Frisk..." Her glasses extenuated her pupils. Under her breath, she muttered, "...I let go..."

Undyne, caught up in her mentor's sorrow, had not heard her right. "What?"

Alphys said it again, louder: "I let go. This all happened because of me... because I let go. It's all my fault." Her hold loosened, those once caring arms lost the love they invoked. "We're all here because
of me. You're dying because of me. Frisk is dead… because of me." A numbness sank its way into her tone. "Everything is my fault."

Undyne slipped from the doctor's hold and slapped against the mud as an equally soggy mess. She choked a small gasp as she looked at Alphys, who stood staring straight ahead, her look impassive. An emptiness, a dullness, had manifested into those dark irises behind her damp glasses.

All of a sudden, Undyne felt an invisible, icy hand clutch her throat and knives jab at her soul. She had faced down fierce opposition, life and death scenarios, great challenges, but for the first time, truly for the first time, she was afraid. "A-Alphys, don't—"

"I never wanted to hurt anyone," the scientist droned on like a robot, "but why am I so good at it?"

Undyne began to shake. Something inside the royal scientist had broken, shattered to pieces at the sound of Toriel's scream, and nothing would ever be the same again. Seeing Alphys completely broken, destroyed, without anything resembling herself, filled Undyne with horror beyond measure. Alphys had always been strong, stronger than what she believed herself to be. Sometimes, Undyne wished she had some of Alphys's confidence. To see such a brave monster succumb to hopelessness was a shattering reality.

Alphys appeared as if she had gone blind. "All I do is hurt people. And when I try to do good, I only hurt more people."

The intrepid captain realised one terrible, heart-breaking fact that not even her own assurances could fix: Alphys had lost the will to live.

"A-Alphys!" Undyne cried. "Look at me…"

"I'm worthless. I'm a waste of space. I should never have been born—"

"LOOK AT ME!" Undyne willed her melting arms to grab Alphys, forcing their eyes to meet. "If I'm gonna die, my last moments will not be of you giving up like this! FIGHT IT! You're better than this, you're stronger than this! You are!"

The doctor slowly shook her head. Her empty gaze looked straight through her. "No… I'm not. I never was." She pushed Undyne's hands away. "You should never have met me. You'd be better off."

"That's not true!" Undyne tried to will her arms once more to rise, but her strength had left her. "Don't you dare say that!"

"I should've just jumped and gotten it over with."


The doctor sat down, hung her head low and stared at the ground.

Undyne's head trembled in denial. "What do you mean by 'jumped'?" she begged to know. "What do you mean by that?"

Alphys did not move. There was nothing more to say.

"Alphys, talk to me," Undyne pleaded. The puddles around her grew to Alphys's ignorance. "Alphys, please!" When Undyne wanted to shout her loudest, her ailing, oozing body failed to comply. The melting having reached her mind, she repeated the scientist's name as her own thoughts
A few hours back, Dom the train chef would have been distraught at losing a one million pay-out. Now he was distraught for another reason entirely.

Why was he a train chef? Why did he become one in the first place? As a fawn, he had a keen interest in cooking, coupled with a life of watching the trains go back, back and forth on the tracks. His interest, however, was born from his innate character and not from natural talent. He was no savant in the art of meal preparation; he trained for hours, days, weeks, months and years around a hot stove, failing time and time again until he got it right. He worked so hard to make his aspiration possible; so many burned fingers and wasted eggs and broken bowls to get to where he was now. When the time came to put his skills to actual, employed use, he could've either worked on the trains, in some stingy cafeteria, or – he shuddered at the thought – at Sweet and Sour's.

He asked himself again: why was he a train chef? The answer: because he wanted to be a train chef. He genuinely enjoyed his work. He liked it. In essence, one could argue he had never worked a day in his life. So why did he abandon it?

"Forget this job. I'm off to become a millionaire."

Those words bounced within the few cubic centimetres inside his head. How easy it was to make him lose track of what he loved, to make him wield his utensils like that of a soldier. Theoretical faces grew on his armament of tools outlaid in his apron, and they all laughed at him, at his shortsightedness, and thinking a child's death would be beneficial to him. A chef. A simple train chef, armed like a commando by the pull of quick buck. He unknotted the back and tossed it, along with his weapons, down.

He was not the only person stuck in a moment of clarity, for Lord Grill took a moment to take a real, good, hard look at himself. He contemplated his years of pigging out; his twenty wives of which neither he nor they found happiness; his days, months, and years of seclusion in Bjornliege Manor, rump budged between armrests, stuffing his face, thinking the Outerworld revolved around him.. It wasn't until the end of that long, uneventful road did he look back and realise how empty all of it sounded.

Lord Grill should have tried harder. He should have been better. He could've been strong and handsome and dedicated to one person who truly loved him. He had the capacity to be a great person, everyone does, and yet it was so easy to believe such things too little, too late. It shouldn't have took a lady with large teeth and a short temper to shatter his reality.

Grill and Dom glanced at each other, and their life stories were shared through the gleams in their eyes. A man who had everything he wanted, and abandoned it; and the man who saw what he needed, but refused to chase it. They had never met each other until now, but what a pair they made.

Sans went quiet. "Little buddy…"

He refrained from blinking, fearing the microsecond he did so would awaken him thousands of miles away, two storeys down and in a different world. His eye sockets twanged, wanting to close, not wishing to hear Tori's cry or see Frisk's gaunt frame. What should Sans do? Remain in the present to escape reliving the past, or relive the past to escape this horrid present? He simply could not win in any situation, could he?

He squinted his bony lids until they nearly touched. "Any day now, bud," Sans said quietly.
His sockets closed and a brief moment of darkness overcame him. Upon his return, Tori's cry remained and the rain rattled against his head and his left foot popped off at the ankle.

Sans drew in the slightest gasp. "Could it be?"

It dawned on him: that was it; the human was gone, and with them, the power to alter the course of time. Sans should be thankful that – even as he faced the end – he would not wake up in the Underground and do everything all over again; have memories rewritten or circumstances change.

"Ha ha ha ha..." he got out, loud enough for only himself to hear. I can't believe it. The kid is dead and we're still moving forward. That means...

"Ha ha ha..." That... that means it's over now. It's finally over. I'm free! This is what I wanted. I'm so happy!

"Ha... ha..." No more reloads! No more resets! No more deja vus! No more Underground!

"...Ha..." Hiccup. "...Ha..." No more... no more... no more Frisk.

"...Ha...?"

Sans sniffed. What he thought was laughter and the prickling sensation of joyful tears, weren't. No. Sans cast his eyes down. I'm not happy. This isn't what I wanted... I wanted it over, but I didn't want the kid dead. I didn't want to see King Asgore or Tori like this. I didn't... I didn't... I swear...

"Sans, look what you've done," Papyrus scolded, growing weaker as a rattle from inside his battle body suggested he was losing ribs. "Your lazy influence has rubbed off on Frisk! Now Asgore and Lady Asgore are upset that they've decided to take a nap!"

Sans teeth gritted with anger. He retorted, trying to get through that thick skull, "Papyrus, Frisk isn't sleeping, they're..." He stopped. The sorrow resurfaced, and he expelled his anger in one heavy sigh. "They're... they're dead, bro."

It was Papyrus's turn to go quiet. "...What? ...D-dead?" he whispered, struggling to understand. "But... no... they can't be dead, they haven't crumbled to dust yet."

"Humans don't do that when they die. They just... go all quiet and still... and cold..."

Papyrus felt it all sink in. "And... all the squishy things on the inside stop working...?" he asked. Sans could only nod. "Does this mean Frisk will never smile again? Never cry again...?" Another sad nod from his brother. Something was getting caught in his eyes now. "Never try any of my world famous spaghetti again? Never laugh at any of your terrible jokes again?"

"Stop..." Sans whispered. "You're gonna make me cry now..."

Papyrus sniffed. "I'm not crying. A cool skeleton such as I have no room for tears. I'm... I'm..." His eye sockets shut and out escaped his not tears. He held his brother tight and buried his head in Sans's chest. "My eyes are just raining!"

He cried like a child, sputtering and wailing and hiccupping in a most distressing manner. What was left of his fingers clutched at Sans's shirt. Somewhere, sometime, Sans felt he had seen his brother like this before in one of the many recurring memories from Underground.

"There, there, Papyrus," Sans said, patting his back. "They're in a better place now..."
"You mean human heaven?" Papyrus lifted his head a tiny bit. "Where they can eat all the ice cream and spaghetti they want?"

Sans risked a small chuckle as he imagined little buddy among the clouds behind those pearly gates. "And solve all the puzzles they want, and make all the bad jokes hilarious. I bet Frisk'll be getting their white, fluffy wings right about now. And a halo."

"I… I bet they'll make Frisk the best angel ever." He pressed his brow against Sans's jacket, and his entire right arm detached. "I, the dying Papyrus, don't want to live in a world without them. I want to go there too! I wanna see Frisk with their wings!"

Sans patted his brother on the back then pulled him in for a hug. "Hang tight. We'll see them again very soon, bro… Very soon…"

From within a hidden pocket, the ex-master scribe, Rickard, procured a notebook and pen. He found a clean page and began to jot in sophisticated handwriting. A couple centuries of experience taking notes made it impossible for him to write in chicken scratch. Rain dotted the paper, turning it translucent, as he wrote.

In this order: today's date.

Record of recent events. Air temperature. Humidity. Wind direction and chill factor.

Time of Frisk's demise.

Predicted time of Outerworld's demise.

Expected survivors… 0.

This was Former Master Scribe Rickard. End of logs.

Toriel gazed at the dead child. The next dead child from a long line. She tried so hard to keep them safe, protect them from harm, and she failed. Once again, she had failed. Nine children, all under her care, love and protection, dead.

Upon their face, she saw but a fleeting glimpse of the hope and determination they wore as they walked out the door. The same hope as they stood beside her on the dawn of their freedom, taking their hand as together they ventured out into the new world. She remembered the hug she gave them before letting them go.

Toriel planted a soft kiss on the child's forehead, letting them go one final time.

"Goodbye, my child."

Toriel lay Frisk's body down as gently as tucking them into bed. They looked so peaceful. She crossed the child's hands over their chest, keeping the shell dignified. Frisk did not deserve to be laid down in these dying lands of slurry, rain and thunder. They deserved a resting place back on Earth, a proper funeral with flowers and a gravestone.

"All I have ever wanted was to be a mother, to give a child the love they deserved. But no matter how hard I try, this always happens." Toriel stared into space, eyes wide and pouring with tears. "Why do I even bother? I could not protect Frisk. I could not protect Chara. I could not protect Asriel." She braced herself against the ground, eyes covered by the other hand. "I cannot protect
anyone!"

Her estranged husband reached for her, but she flinched from his touch.

"Stay away," she muttered. "I cannot do this anymore. I cannot keep pretending I can have a happy family. It is pointless. It is all pointless."

Maxus, the Emperor of Evil, still down on one knee, felt all his actions land on him like the crushing weight of the entire world. The human he hunted ruthlessly was dead, exactly what he wanted since his father relinquished their name. His mission had been accomplished, victory his, so why was he not happy? Because for the first time in his life he truly saw the pain he caused.

He wished to apologise, but it would not bring Frisk back. The cold, cramped air felt like the bars of his cage, contracting around him, trapping him in this unescapable quandary he had only himself to blame for being in.

Toriel's breathing became harsh and slow. "MmmMmm…" she mumbled, lifting her head. Red, bloodshot irises became visible between white fingers. "…Mm…Murderer…" All of a sudden, she rocketed to her feet. "MURDERER!" Furious tears streaked down her cheeks as fire flared around her. Maxus did not react; no flinching or blinking. He knelt there, accepting his fate.

Asgore reached out to her. "Toriel—stop!" He grabbed her wrists and held her back. "Don't."

"No!" Toriel suddenly screeched, trying to push him away. "Let go of me! Frisk would still be alive if not for him! He deserves death for what he did to our child!"

"Perhaps so," Asgore responded, "but this is not what Frisk would want." Even as the tears flowed and his soul, too, pounded for vengeance, he was determined to fight those urges, to never allow himself to tread down the path he followed so long ago.

"Oh, stop it, Dreemurr! You thought you ever knew Frisk? You think you know what they would have wanted?" Toriel's venomous glare, so full of the same anger and sadness, found Asgore, and out escaped a scream so loud the heavens heard her: "You wanted to kill them too! You wanted to murder them like all the rest!"

She lashed out. The fire intended for the Emperor grazed against Asgore, burning deep. His hold remained steadfast as he took the brunt of each burn.

"Toriel… stop it," he said in a collected voice. A voice contradicted by the fire burning his body and the water running down his face.

Toriel pushed and clawed at his arms in an attempt to pry him away. "Get away from me! Get your hands off me! I hate you, Asgore! I hate you so much!"

"Stop it." Asgore pulled her close, despite her protests, and wrapped his arms around her in a strong, firm, but loving manner. "Just stop it."

"Get off me!" Toriel pounded and scratched against whatever she could. "Get… off me…!" Her flailing fists slowed as she realised what she was doing. Her throat was red. Her vision flooded, everything a blur. She pressed her forehead against Asgore's chest and out escaped more streams of hot tears. "…Get off me…"

Sinking to their knees, the couple held each other tight, just like in a time long forgotten, and released their sadness onto each other's shoulder. Asgore's hold was so delicate and firm, like nothing could ever hurt them. Toriel and Asgore cried alongside each other. And there lay Frisk, dressed in their
adorable striped shirt. A trillion miles away. Away from the pain.

The truth span in Toriel's head, from which there was no respite: she was childless once more, a mother no longer. Every time, they wandered into her arms, and she let them slip. No matter how hard she tried to hold on, death left her with nothing, time and time again. Queen Toriel: queen to a world which ran empty, and parent only to the dead. She was alone within a world of shadows, emptyhanded as the ghostly children vanished into the darkness beyond her reach, waving their goodbyes. She saw their faces, Frisk was amongst them now, the last one to voyage into the dark. They left how the others left, and deserted her to an eternal curse. They died and she kept on living.

An onslaught of noise rattled Maxus's mind.

Undyne's pleas got smaller and weaker as Alphys awaiting the end. Sans and Papyrus, the younger of the two sobbed uncontrollably, falling apart piece by piece both physically and mentally. His Advisor, screamed his name into space. Frisk was not Asgore's or Toriel's real child, but the parents' emotions, their tears, their love for a child of another species, were all real. To them, Frisk was their child. Frisk was the reason they came here, and why they fought to defy him, the Emperor of the Outerworld.

So much pain. So much misery. So much sadness. The humans were not responsible for this – he was.

Maxus thought that the retribution of killing this one human would erase the pain of his past. Instead, it only brought more. He was the true boss monster. The one to rule over all of them. His power knew no limits; his rage knew no bounds; even there, it growled and boiled under the skin, begging to get out. He was the ultimate lifeform. The Emperor of Evil: the crusher of hopes, the destroyer of dreams. Monsterkind's beginning. Humankind's end. And yet, as he knelt there, witnessing the agony, sadness and death he had caused, he realised that he had not risen, but fallen. Fallen to the deepest, darkest pit from which there was no escape.

He was wretched. He was pitiful. He was pathetic. He was nothing.

His jaw hung open; there were a million things he could say – still say – but none of them would change what he had done, or justify his actions, or make anything better.

In every island besides his own, the islands tore themselves apart. The grounds trembled, rivers boiled, and the overcast sky rained down bolts to cleanse the land. The monsters – men, women, and children – ran for cover, climbed to safety, for their lives, but all their attempts to survive would prove to be in vain. Soon, these lands would be consumed in destruction. The Grey One's, having felt the first life fade, would soon feel the second life perish, then the count would decline until there was no one left.

There was no power stronger than Determination, or the evil in Maxus's soul, or the strength to resist his desires. The greatest strength did not exist. The only thing left to do now was to wait for it all to end.

"Maxus?" Barb said, stepping forward. The Emperor saw her injured wing, her soaking frame, and the face of the baby who said his name as her first word. Her green eyes glanced horrified at Frisk. The weeping goat monsters painted the picture. "What have you done?"

Maxus struggled to look at her. Struggled harder to control his breathing. "Barb. It's oka…" He tried and failed to look upon the face of the girl he hurt. A dejected sigh forced its way out. "It's not okay."
Upon hearing those words coming from that creature, Barb knew. She saw not the monster of grotesque features, but the person underneath the armour. He was there. She rushed forward and held Maxus, burying herself in his head of discoloured hair. She didn't care what he looked like. He was Maxus. Her Maxie. And she hated to see him like that.

Maxus stroked the back of her head. His hands, designed for bringing pain, offered what little comfort they could muster, caressing the sister he never had, never deserved to have.

The houses among the Plain-plain had been reduced to landfills of wreckage between broken shards of earth, which used to be one whole landmass; what little stood served as cover from the storm, but not for long.

The Mansions of the Oasis overflowed, as did those situated in the swamps of Bob. Furniture crashed against walls and windows, and washed out into the rising tides outside, never to be seen again. The lucky inhabitants had fled to the roofs. The unlucky ones clung on to tables drifting above the water and held on tight.

The statue of Bob, the great founder of Bob, capsized in the rising tide, casting a great spectacle for all those fellow Bobs who stayed behind to guard their embassy. They huddled upon their roofs, growing cold in the wind and rain. The gatekeeper mourned the loss of what he owned, ripped from its hinges and washed away.

The citizens in the Forest had run out of road as the final timbers threatened to collapse. The mines of Rocklyn had almost closed in on those trapped inside. The waters of Bob had appetized on the buildings and were ready to feast on the living.

The disease roamed, devoured, and spread to the outskirts of Highkeep Enclave. The Rebellion and Monster Military took refuge within the walls; the two sides tossing aside their differences and becoming one. Unfortunately, those same barriers which repelled numerous assaults, would not stand against this shattering force. Monsters fled as fissures erupted up and across the grey walls, tearing them like paper.

From Frisk's still, soundless chest, it began to glow red. The royal couple from under the mountain stopped their sorrow long enough to witness the growing illumination around where the heart no longer drummed. A soul, Frisk's, pushed its way out and rose three feet into the air, emitting a brilliant red aura. They watched as the human's soul, their Determination, left only the shell to mourn over. Toriel struggled to look as more tears prickled under her eyelids, as if she needed another reminder that her sweet child was gone forever. Asgore had beheld the sight of six human souls prior to this one, and knowing who this soul belonged to tore deeply at his own. He had wished to never see another human soul ever again.

Asgore felt his fingers grip, an urge to snatch the soul burned inside as passionately as the flame of vengeance which consumed him the day Asriel died. He should take it for himself – like he should have done to the first human soul years back – and finish what he started. Have it be his way of saying to the world that if he cannot have a family, if he was blighted to an immortal life of loneliness, then the entire world must also share his fate. How easy it would be.

His fingers went loose. That was not what his son would have wanted. That was not what Frisk would have wanted. He would never forgive himself.

"Maxus..." Asgore said quietly, his head down. Toriel against his shoulder. "This is it. You have won. Frisk's soul is yours." His words were empty, with no emotion – no spite or anger – except
submission. "Take it. Leave this place. Destroy humanity. And… may it bring you the peace you seek."

Maxus, alongside Barb, gazed at the soul an arm's length away. A thousand years of waiting, of dreaming, of scheming and plotting and toiling, all condensed into a single, pivotal moment. Godhood, and it was his. All his. He needed only to reach out and take it, and at last he could fulfil the desire that burned deep within. Barb turned from the soul to him, expecting him to snatch it, and she had good reason to suspect that from Maxie: the anger continued to fester away like a rabid, starving dog; a dark, sickly virus. It begged him to grab that soul. It wanted to harness the power to himself, throbbing its way through his limbs in an attempt to control him.

Yet he had no desire to take it. Maxus could not even will his arms to rise.

"I can't."

In light of this, there were no words from Asgore and no words from Toriel. The die had been cast and the decision had been made. The king and queen continued to hold each other. Fate had decided that everyone in the Outerworld were to die on this day.

The mountain king imagined his life would end like this. Together, he and his wife had remained locked below ground, immortalised from tragedy. Throughout all those years, they thought maybe, just maybe, they could actually reach the light at the end of that dark tunnel and find true happiness. A family. A future. A life worth living. They were wrong. He was wrong. All those years of existing, enduring the worst pain parents could suffer, fighting to find meaning, had been for nothing but more pain to their fragile souls. No family. No future. No happiness. Their lives would end enduring the same misery that shrouded them throughout.

There was nothing left for them to do but, as husband and wife, tighten their embrace. At least, this way, Asgore and Toriel would face no more pain. It will end and, together, be reunited with Frisk… and Asriel… and Chara… and the children. They were all going to be together again in a wonderful place where they would feel no more pain, and never again experience loneliness, and where nothing, not even death, would ever take it away from them.

Maxus said in a low voice full of regret, "Barb, I'm sorry. I'm sorry for what I did, and the things I said. I'm sorry for everything."

"It's okay, Maxie," Barb said. Regardless of its disgusting colour, his crown was just as fuzzy as a time forgotten. "You don't have to say anything. I already know."

The Emperor found it within himself to look at the couple, to gaze upon the pair whom he made childless.

"There's no excuse for what I've done," he said. "I took your child away, and all I have to say is that I'm sorry." His mouth was open; however, nothing else came out. There was nothing else to come out.

He had no right to say that, but it needed to be said. Toriel responded with a hateful stare before she turned away. Asgore just nodded once, small but noticeable.

The body of the human child awaited. The same child he looked down upon with undeserved hate, he continued to look down right there with the same hate directed upon himself. "Frisk… please forgive me…" he said.

He wondered where they – not 'it', to his eternal arrogance – had heard them. Would they even
bother listening to a creature such as him? He could not blame Frisk if they had given up on them in the afterlife. Maxus had let everybody down to such a degree that he now stood alone.


The malicious thing in his soul beseeched him to grab that red heart. It wanted the power, revenge, the world, the entire universe to beckon to his call.

Maxus raised his head suddenly, a steely look paved the way for his will.

"Look at me. Even as I ask for absolution for my actions, I continue to be selfish," he said before letting out a deep sigh. "How can I ask for forgiveness when I cannot even forgive myself? I've always blamed every bad decision I ever made on the man who killed my family. I continued to blame others for my wrongs, thinking they were justified. I allowed that hate to become a part of me, to turn me into its puppet. No more.

"Frisk, wherever you are now, I don't deserve your forgiveness, and you have in no way wronged me at all. But..." Maxus retreated to the darkness behind his eyelids. "Human, the one who killed Mother, Grandpa, Grandma, and so many others, wherever you are, know that... I can't hate you anymore. I've spent my entire life hating you, hating humanity. Now I only hate myself. I've spent all these years chasing endless corridors for vengeance, hoping it would lead me somewhere. I never guessed I was going in circles this whole time."

The battlefield. He saw it in his mind, had relived it daily for as long as he could remember. The massacre. He had revisited this scene endless times, doing the same things over and over. Maxus had destroyed those humans, tortured that man constantly in every form imaginable and in ways not even the sickest mind could conjure. This time, however, as the scrawny cub in the potato sack, he exited his hiding spot and approached the man. Such a simple act he never dreamt of considering until now.

"If this is my final moments," he, as the boy, spoke, "then I will die on my own terms. I will be the person I am, and not what the pain from my past made me. Not what I thought you made me."

Within that misty battleground, the human man and the monster child were its only soldiers. Next to the man lay one pile of ash in three equal mounds. The tips of his pitchfork carried a small portion of it, of Mother, Grandma and Grandpa. The weapon of their deaths lay limp at his side. It felt, truly felt, like his essence was listening to him. Whether it was true or not, Maxus did not care.

"I don't know who you are, why you did it, or what happened to you afterwards; these things I will never know. Perhaps you were proud, perhaps you didn't care, or perhaps you carried a heavy burden for the rest of your days. Perhaps you lived your life alone or raised a family." He shrugged. "For all I know, the monsters may've been the ones to wrong you first. None of it matters anymore. What matters is, you pained me in the worst way possible. You introduced me to this path. But it was not you who guided me, nor was it you who made me walk down it. I was the one who chose to follow it, and I have only myself to blame for the damage done along the way."

The Maxus from the past – the innocent boy – and the Maxus from the present – the creature of nightmares – became one.

"I don't deserve anything. I'm sorry for everything. I'm sorry for pushing away those who wanted to be my friend. I'm sorry for hurting the family I have left. I'm sorry for every bad thing I ever did in my life."

The man who killed his family listened. If nothing else, even as a figment – a shadow – of the real man who undoubtedly met his end long ago, he stood his ground and allowed the cub time. Even if
the man contained an inborn desire to smite the cub, he could do no harm within this memory.

"And to you," the young lion said, "I guess you could say I'm sorry things turned out this way, for both of us. And I just want you to know…"

The cub turned to the ruined earth, his family's deaths taunted him from out the edge of his vision with their dusty dreams. His words dammed his gullet, not wanting to come out. If this were really the turning point in his long life, and the moment that would shape his brief future, then such a statement needed to be made. On the surface, this one thing seemed small, trivial, heard so often on a regular basis, easy to serve and to receive; however, these three words went against everything he fought for, and everything he strived to achieve. He doubted himself, unsure if he could, if he was strong enough.

At last, he felt he could finally do it. He looked up to the man with the pitchfork, who had grey eyes and messy hair just like his, and he said the single thing he never dreamt of saying to a human his entire life.

"I forgive you."

Just like that, all the pain amassed, all the hate he held on to like a searing hot coal, hurting only himself, he let go.

The man gave the ground before him one last glance, then turned and walked. With his back turned to the cub, his ragged hair whipping in the cold snap, he disappeared into the mist, and Maxus knew he would never see him nor would he set foot in this place ever again. The being he trapped forever in his mind to mindless torment, he set free.

The pain remained. But he had let go. For the first time in his life, he moved on.

He opened his eyes to find his epiphany had changed nothing. Frisk was still dead, and the two boss monsters were scarred for life – what little they, and everyone else, had left. His pale hands were still those of a killer. Barb clung to him, the final remnant of family, the sister who deserved better – better than him.

The proud and secure structures of his fortress crumbled, mixed with many yells and screams for help. This infection ravaging the Outerworld had taken its sweet, valuable time to reach the one person who deserved it the most. The first cracks snaked inwards, tearing up sticky mud. The walls crackled as brittle as glass.

The goat couple's time had finally come; they clutched each other in their final moments. Death would be their escape from misery. What was left of the skeleton brothers were together as their pieces littered around them. The doctor was as still as a statue, her soulmate trying to keep her head above a puddle of herself. The mummy couple, the professor, the general, the chef, the lord, the fighters and the dead, all braced themselves for the end.

The Advisor, Flowey the flower, lay helplessly in his assistant's hands as the ending to this story neared. In short time, he will open his eyes and be back at the start of a new timeline, a new Outerworld, while this version of the Outerworld died. And until he got it right and granted this world the happy ending it deserved, he would have to relive this same exact moment for an untold number of times. He shuddered at the millions of instances he would stand in this garden with a dead human child present and his former parents grieving over them, just how they must have grieved over the remains of Asriel and Chara Dreemurr.

Ready or not, the Outerworld's death came for all of them.
"This is it, Maxie…" Barb whispered.

Maxus sighed. "Barb, I…" Then he hunched forward as a most bizarre feeling echoed inside his torso. He croaked a small pant as a second wave, stronger than the first, rippled out of him.

Barb staggered back a step. "Maxie? What's wrong?" she asked.

The Emperor clutched both hands over his chest as the sensation grew. Barb and himself watched as a black aura seeped through his fingers. His soul emerged, coated midnight black with the evil accumulated within one millennium.

The soul trembled, the substance swelled. It solidified then bubbled and cracked as a single ray of light shone out from beneath. One became two, two became three. Cracks spread across its surface. Light escaped from every angle. Then the dark substance shattered in a brilliant concentration of light which pierced through the rain and struck the centre of the Obelisk.

A power unlike any other blasted into the pillar and nobody could avert their gazes. From the focal point, a white sphere emerged and expanded in a rapid rate, spreading over everything and everyone; first Asgore and Toriel, then Frisk and their soul, then Barb and Maxus, Juhi, Alphys and Undyne, Flowey and Brute, Sans and Papyrus, then everyone else.

As this barrier washed over them, Asgore and Toriel felt an unidentifiable force pull him off the ground, alongside Frisk's body and their Determination.

"What's happening?" Asgore marvelled.

The former couple clung to each other as a current began to swirl them around the Obelisk. Both shot a glance at Frisk as their lifeless frame drifted beyond them. They reached out, calling their name, but Frisk floated out of reach.

Alphys and Undyne rose from the ground, caught in the field. Using her strength, Undyne wrapped what was left of her melting limbs around her comatose girlfriend.

"I'm here, Alphys…" Undyne whispered, close to her. "I'm here…"

The crushed flower floated out of Brute's hands, all while the assistant rooted himself the ground. The fragments of Flowey's pot, as well as the soil, took flight, following Flowey in a contrail of orange terracotta and silken earth.

Sans, Papyrus, and all their missing pieces, drifted away from the crumbling wall. The former, with his remaining hand, reached out and grabbed Papyrus by his.

"Bro, hold on!" Sans cried.

They had no control as they whirled around the glowing Obelisk. Former Emperor Juhi, untouched, unaffected, stood his ground, entranced in awe. This magic passed through his dusty body. It was… incredible.

Maxus remained solid on the ground, Barb clung to him, as his soul beamed light into the pillar of rock. His exaggerated frame shrank, and each piece of his father's armour dropped off his body, exposing his royal garment underneath. There went a wrist guard. Followed by a pauldron. Then a cuisse.

Asgore and Toriel, spinning within a shower of white, were not holding each other, but hugging each other. An aura most soothing, so delicate, poured around them, healing them. Their pains, both
within their souls and minds, diminished. The injuries on their bodies faded away.

Toriel whispered his name, Gorey, as he felt the arms of the man he loved, hands so soft against her back. It took her back, took them back, to the days where all was right in the world, especially when theirs was beneath the surface. She lost herself to those large, soft arms of his. She knew she always loved him. She never stopped loving him – a tiny glimmer in her soul never gave up of him, even as his downward spiral became complete. He was here, and she was there, and neither wished for it to end.

Undyne's sickly hold held Alphys, who, in her dull state, felt the arms of her dying lover grow stronger, and stronger around her body.

The royal scientist thought of why she was here, and all the steps needed to get to where she was. She recollected herself in the Underground: the moment where she found the courage to confess her wrongdoings, to the families and to Undyne herself. The magic cradled her like the first rays of sunlight.

Undyne heard the faintest whisper: "Un…Undyne…?"

Alphys lifted her hands and found the strong body of whom she loved the most. The two gazed at each other. Alphys saw her, her as she was meant to be. Undyne, the captain of the Royal Guard, strong and able, whole, no longer melting. Just as the doctor saw her alive, Undyne caught the spark of resolve reigniting within those wonderful dark eyes. They smiled, hugged, laughed, and neither wanted to let go.

The disassembled bones encircled their owners. Just like a jigsaw, the pieces snapped back into place. Fingers, arms, legs and ribs reconnected and broken bones healed instantly. Papyrus gawked as his missing arm popped back on his shoulder, and the fingers found their way to his hand. He moved it as if it were never lost. The same with his legs.

"Hey," Sans said, wiggling his fingers, laughing as vigour seeped into his voice, "I think I got one of yours by mistake." The feeling was euphoric. Feeling and colour and life was injected into everything.

Flowey the flower felt this magic fill and inflate him. His gasped the most nourishing breath he had ever taken, each of his golden petals reattached to his head. His pot pieced itself back together and the soil returned inside before his roots sank into it.

The bubble of glorious white grew beyond the garden, past the destroyed boundaries of Highkeep Enclave and encapsulated the entirety of Highkeep Enclave, and over all six crumbling, collapsing, and drowning islands.

The treacherous thunderclouds had gathered over the Plain-plain. Every monster had taken cover under and with what they could; the cracked earth meant there was nowhere left to run. Its citizens were stranded and absolutely to the mercy of the weather. The once-sparse serpents of lighting danced and slithered in the hundreds, hunters cornering their prey. The sky become a spectacle of crackling electricity, its noise so blaring. One had no time to think, let alone hear their own thoughts.

The thunder reached a destroying crescendo before and entire cascade flashed. The bubble of magic from the Obelisk, at the exact moment, spread over the lands.

And then… silence.

The citizens: the families: mothers, fathers, children; the shopkeepers: sole traders and Sweet and
Sour's employees; the travellers; the train conductors; everyone was quiet. After the longest time, they crept toward the edges of their hiding spots and peered outside and to the skies to the most bizarre scene.

Their world had stopped. There was no other way to phrase it. The Outerworld had stopped in time as if someone had pressed pause on the remote control. The raindrops were motionless, frozen in freefall. Touching them made them drift away. The streaks of lightning reaching down from above were perfectly still. Those great fingers of white whose existence lasted within blinks, numerous in the thousands – a rainforest of electricity – as far as the eye could see, had stopped metres from land. The fractured land in which they stood on, with floating debris and cracks half finished, as identical as the Shattered Zone.

Numb, the civilians gazed with baited breaths at the spectacle.

Geoffrey, the impressive Vail of Ice Island, gaze bewildered at such a strange turn of events. "What…?" he scarcely breathed.

The cave walls pressed in tight on his sides, building the coffin for which he house his remains. Just when he thought he end had arrived, those final boulders meant to seal him slowed and halted a breaths width away. All when eerily silent as the caves stopped collapsing. Geoffrey touched the nearest geode and it floated away like it was in a vacuum, bobbing against two others in its path.

The same phenomenon transpired to those trapped within the mines of Rocklyn as their death-traps ceased in on an unexpected, instantaneous note, and they were all left holding each other in anticipation for the demise which now won't arrive. Up above, the canyons and valleys went still, and the monsters – among them Bub, Peabody, and even the pepper, Fisk – continued sprinting and shouting for a few seconds before realising the change, whereupon they slowed to a confused stop.

The overturning Forest was no different as the wave rushed over them, and its capsizing trees and shattering walkways became stuck in perpetual limbo. All its civilians, every single one, remained on the last remaining segments of horizontal walkways. All around them, their apocalypse transformed into a freeze-frame.

The frog boatman opened his eyes having braced himself for the largest tidal wave he had never seen in his life – its maw large, with white choppers ready to devour him whole – and looked to find it still. He had no knowledge or past experience with waves, but he was quite confident they weren't supposed to do that.

From the safety of his banged up boat, he found the entire waters themselves halted like a painting; every individual ripple, tide, and tear identifiable. No longer was the air drowned with the slamming of waves against the wood, or the creaking of houses and the smashing of windows and the clatter of furnishings. It went quiet. The entirety of the witnesses huddled on roofs and treetops too bewildered to move and too befuddled to speak.

The same happened over in the Oasis. The deadly waters seeping within mansions stopped in an instant. Master Mind, Jim the doorman, guards and wives, trapped within the drowning halls of Mineyor Manors, adhered the furniture that floated, the tops of their heads coming close to the ceiling. In an instant, the rising level stopped and the water became as thick as custard, thick enough to make for comfortable sitting. At first, they were stunned. Then they laughed. Then they were stunned again.

Outside, the scene was identical to that of the island Bob. Water, its mighty, unstoppable nature, to chew and chew, devour until nothing remained, had its entire nature rewritten.
The Outerworld was in ruins, but they were alive. They were all alive.

In the centre of it all, around the Obelisk, Frisk drifted lifelessly with their soul, their Determination, nearby. They was almost horizontal, their chest raised, limbs hovering in the magic. The wounds on their body healed: the cuts sealed up, leaving no scars; the horrid burns on their arms scattered into the wind; the putrid discolouring on and under the skin regressed back into its original, healthy tone. Slowly, their soul neared, drawing closer to its owner as the others watched. The red soul touched their chest, then sank back to whence it came, reuniting itself with its host.

The light evaporated and Maxus's soul returned to him in a white aura. His father's armour lay in pieces at his feet. Barb, still holding on to him, found her footing.

Slowly, everyone hovered back onto the ground, landing in a wide circle. Frisk splayed out between them all, lying on their side in a cat-like pose, still and quiet. Everyone stood frozen, inspecting the child from afar for any signs of life.

Toriel and Asgore feared the worst. Frisk's back was to them, unmoving for so long.

"Frisk…?" Toriel said.

…

Nothing. No movement. No breathing. No…

Thump, thump.

A cough and a gasp jolted the child; Frisk lifted their head and inhaled strong and deep. Their chest rose and fell as their lungs restarted. They rolled onto their back and found the king and queen. Inappropriate how their first thought after returning from the great beyond was how much of an adorable couple those two made.

Frisk smiled sheepishly, carrying a message for Toriel: the children said 'hi'. They really miss her pies.

The stunned quiet in the air was shattered by the calling of Frisk's name by all their friends. It wasn't long until Frisk found themself off the ground and wedged between Mom and Dad in the biggest embrace loved ones could give, the three of them laughing and shedding tears of joy at the same time. In the heat of the moment, Toriel could not restrain herself. She needed to feel the human's warmth against her own, the sounds of their breathing, and the innocence of their voice to rekindle her shaken soul. The royal couple held on tight, as did Papyrus and Alphys. The last two, Sans and Undyne, figured themselves too cool to be seduced into such a sappy reunion, until they realised they too wanted in so badly. The six monsters huddled around their human, smiling and laughing and crying at their return.

"You're alive," sobbed Alphys. She removed her glasses and wiped at her leaking eyes. "We're all alive. I can't believe it!"

"We thought we'd lost you," Asgore added. "Come here." He extended his cuddle around both Undyne and Papyrus. "I thought we were all lost."

"I'm so glad they let you stay with us, Frisk," Papyrus said, then sniffed and flicked at the rain coming from his eye sockets. "It's a pity human heaven didn't let you keep those wings, or rent them on a monthly contract."
As the group celebrated their friend's return, Assistant Brute marched over on muddy shoes to where the revitalised Advisor in his reconstructed pot lay. "Advisor," he said in a glad manner.

Flowey was better now, but his jaw hung open at the dazzling spectacle above. Trillions of stars dancing in the air, close enough to touch.

What was going on? He wondered. How was this possible? A million ways this story could go, all converging to this one ultimatum of death and despair. He had never dreamt of this. None of it was meant to happen. Then how?

The crowds among the garden's outskirts, who spectated the scene, were filled with the most bizarre mix of relieve, happiness, and wonder. The mummies never broke their hug. Haze and Leigh were back up, disbelieving everything. Grill and Dom both wanted to collapse.

Barb the bounty hunter, with the gash in her wing stitched up, pulled away from her brother. The corners of her lips rose in a slow smile. "Maxie, you're…"

Maxus noticed his hands. They did not belong to the Emperor of evil, but to the Emperor of the Outerworld. A surviving puddle beside him reflected a lion with a mane of flowing, golden locks, and two eyes of precious silver, and a pelt of healthy fur, dignified in his royal red suit.

Barb finished, "You're you again." Then she hugged him once more. "I'm so glad you're back."

Maxus returned it with the hands he used to hold her as a baby. "So am I."

Juhi approached, speechless, attracted by the shining point on the Obelisk's face. As fresh as a flame burst alive. It encompassed the entire Outerworld.

"It's a miracle," he said as if this were all a dream. "You did it, my son. You did it just in time." He held his head. "They're alive. They're all alive, but… what was that just now?"

Maxus let out a single note of a chuckle. "You're asking me?"

From the focal point in the pillar, there was a flash which drew everyone's attention toward it, and from its pulse, a new figure took shape in stars of white. With two arms, two legs, a torso, and a head, the figure was distinguishable. Whatever he or she was, monster or human, they descended to the ground before Maxus and Barb.

The features took shape, with a lean figure of a woman wearing what could only be guessed as ragged garments. She had long, braided hair that reached her waist, two long, pointed ears, and large, animalistic eyes. Stars took the shape of symmetrical markings, tattoos maybe, which ran across her body.

This being of magic faced the Emperor. An angelic quality graced her expression. The living and the dead stayed noiseless in sight of this being.

"Maxus," she said. Maxus recognised her alluring voice immediately. She stretched out a hand, holding it with the deft weightlessness of a feather. "You have… Whoa!" The spectre of energy suddenly stared at her hand, then wiggled her feet. "I have arms! And legs! And…" She patted down her belly. "And I a size zero? Is this what a size zero looks like?"

The Emperor was too drawn by her voice to be distracted by her behaviour. "You. Your voice. It was what I heard before I found this," he said, glancing at the Obelisk behind her. "You're not what I expected from… whatever you are."
Maxus was as surprised as Flowey and Frisk, who had both heard her voice moments before being abducted. It would appear that the voice of this spectre had called out to these three people: the human, the monster, and the flower; and fate had transpired that all three were to stand here within these crumbling walls and muddy grounds.

"Oh, right, sorry about that," apologised the spectre. "This is all new to me, that's all."

"Who are you?" asked Barb, latched on to Maxus.

The spectre stopped staring at her body to contemplate that question. "Honestly, I have no idea myself. I've been somewhat asleep for a very long time."

Maxus rose, gently breaking his and Barb's hold. "Are you… Kanika?"

She heard that name, registered it, let it process, and replied, at first, with pause. "Kanika?" she repeated. "Now there's a name I haven't heard in a while. Too long, actually." She glanced away. "No. Kanika's been gone for a really long time. I'm just the essence she left behind in her final moments."

Kanika, or her essence at least, continued. "You don't want to know how long I've been lying dormant, watching the world go round and being unable to do anything. I've seen everything, learned so much: your language, emotions, needs, pain, happiness… love. For so long I lay still in the earth, feeling it turn, watching the best and worst of humans and monsters alike. I witnessed the same tragedies, the same grievances, and the same mistakes countless times both up here and down there. And then… I felt you, Maxus. I felt a wound within your soul, a wound I had never seen before. And for a reason I couldn't explain back then, I wanted to reach out to you. I called your name and you heard me. You found me. You unlocked the initial power within.

"I've watched you, Maxus. Watched you grow, learn, stumble and fall many times. I have awaited the greatest strength needed to unlock my true potential, and now I have found it."

"Found it?" Maxus whispered.

"It takes strength to cheat death and rewrite the past, as did it take strength to harness this world's elements as you did…" She stopped to smile at the fish warrior. "And, yes, that suplex was mighty impressive. But there was one strength greater than all of them combined. One true strength born from the soul."

"What?"

Kanika placed the gentlest hand on his chest. A wave of its enthralling power went through him.

"Forgiveness," she answered. "The pain from your loss ran deep, deeper than any wound. You held on to that pain, drawing strength from it, feeding it, allowing it to grow until it consumed you. The strength you needed to let go of the past, to rid yourself of the pain which plagued your life, to forgive, took a strength unlike any other. You have no idea how strong you were to do that, and this world has you to thank."

The revelation struck Flowey. Of course, he understood now; he never saw this route because it was inconceivable. The prospect of big bad Emperor Maxus, the main villain of this story, discovering what a miserable creature he had become, and tossing away his hate with one simple act, was unthinkable. His hatred was so ingrained into his being it was never predicted he had the strength needed to forgive, not when his soul was crammed with nothing but ire and revulsion.

"You are the one I've been waiting for, Maxus," said Kanika's final trace of herself. "I guess you
could say… you're the one I chose."

Maxus scoffed. "You're saying I'm the chosen one?" He shook his head. "No. I'm no chosen one. I'm just a dumb monster with too much anger."

Barb gave him a friendly punch on the arm. "Modesty was never your strong suit, big fella."

The Emperor gazed the broken surroundings. "The Outerworld. Our home. Can it be saved?"

"You don't need this world anymore," Kanika answered, shaking the sparks which made her head. "The Outerworld's time has come. Soon, you will all return home. The Earth is where you will be free, free to make your own paths, forge your own destinies. You, the future, will spread peace between humans and monsters for countless generations. But before you go… one last thing remains."

Kanika cupped her hands together and conjured a new star from nothing. This one was unlike any that made her. It glowed almost blue, and shined as crisp as light through a diamond.

Maxus heard his father gasp. He turned to find him, along with his grey brethren, trembling before the tiny speck of light. "Dad, what's wrong?"

Juhi stammered. "That power… I can feel it…" His head shook as if suffering the mother of all migraines. "The concentration. It's… unimaginable…! So much power, hidden within the Obelisk all along. I can't even begin to tell you how strong it is."

"What is this?" asked Maxus, absorbed, light catching his eyes.

"This is power untold," Kanika explained. "This is what the real Kanika glimpsed before my existence. In my hands, I hold the power to reshape the entire universe." A smile creased her dotted lips. "The desire has always been there, Maxus. You have always wished to change the world. I know, I can feel it. Even now, after you've conquered the evil inside yourself, there is still much you wish to change, yet have been powerless to do so. Now, I offer you an opportunity beyond your wildest dreams."

Maxus and Barb stared at the blue star. A great decision awaited the lion emperor.

"Maxus, great emperor of the Outerworld, I bestow upon you… one wish."
"One wish…?" Maxus murmured, light dazzling his eyes.

So, this was the true power all along? One wish. The power to reshape the entire universe. To change life, existence itself as they knew it with a few words. What else could the hidden power of been? Perhaps Maxus dreamt of instant godhood, or a massive, invincible army to smite his foes, or power beyond his wildest dreams.

The decision fell upon Maxus and Maxus alone. He was the chosen one, whether he liked it or not, and it was by his right, his power to destroy the evil in his heart, that he be granted this choice. He now held the entire universe by the throat, and it would adhere to whatever he desired. No matter how great or meagre, all life throughout the universe was about to change, and nothing was ever going to be the same again.

The witnesses fell silent, expecting the Emperor to make a decision right there. Toriel's fingers clutched Frisk with increased tightness. Papyrus's bones rattled to the tiniest apprehension; he hoped the Emperor didn't hate puzzles and japes enough to spirit them out of existence.

What to choose? What to wish for? Maxus thought he would know, right off the bat, what's he do upon locking the Obelisk's secret. As the once-in-a-lifetime opportunity rested before his eyes, presented to him, his thoughts ran dry.

"One wish," Kanika repeated, nodding.

"Anything?"

"Anything."

"Every wish granter in the stories I've heard always have a rule against wishing for more wishes." Maxus folded his arms. "What's yours?"

Kanika shrugged. "Nothing's stopping you, but" – she shot out the last syllable rapidly before he got any ideas – "I'd strongly advise against it. This concentration is so great that the universe is barely containing itself as it is. So a thousand more just like this might very well cause all life as we know it to fold in on itself."

Maxus nodded and swallowed. "So just the one… and there's so many things to change." He rubbed his forehead and flared his nostrils in deep inhalation. "Hundreds and thousands of things. How can I decide?" A few seconds later, Maxus lifted his head with a jerk. "Dad," he muttered, then swung around. "You know what this means?"

Juhi, initially still at the sight of this revelation, at the energy ebbing from such a tiny speck of light, snapped alert at the sudden sight of his son's silver irises. A small helping of dust rippled off his hair.

"I can wish you back," Maxus continued, speaking with an eager rapidness. He spread his arms upon the rest of the monsters made of dust. "I can wish you all back to life. We can all return to Earth, together."

"You could, my son…" Juhi smiled, bobbing his head, yet an earnest tone deceived him. He briefly looked away. "However… I don't think you should."

"What?" Maxus choked. His reaction rubbed off of Juhi: it was a rare moment to ever witness his
son in such a shocked manner; he figured nothing surprised him. The Emperor of a ruined world looked upon the dead, at their ashen affliction, the torment that has haunted them for every waking second since their deaths. "Why? Don't you see? This is the perfect solution. You can all live again, return to your families, make up for lost time. Don't you want to be alive again?"

Juhi took mushy steps on the mushy earth. "Of course I'd like to be alive again. All I've known throughout life is how to live. This form feels like I've lost part of myself." He halted before his child. "I can't make this choice for you, but before you decide," he said, "look at us. I mean, really look at us. Look at them."

Maxus, at first, failed to see his father's intent in those outlined eyes; he had to force himself to take another hard look at the Grey Ones, mingled amongst the living. The short ones twitched and uncovered their coatings, chortling and weeping and gnashing dusty teeth. He recognised old Rex, hunched over, scratching his ear off with his heel whilst mumbling away to himself. His floppy ear grew back and he scratched that one off, too. The stern Overseer Eden – he recognised the straw protruding from his folds – still had a head about him, although a strange tic crept into his stance. Danyell, even in death, still carried that limp. The parents to Lieutenant Rita appeared to act as if they were unaware that they were dead: nagging over a little mud on the floor. Maxus squinted as if trying to make out text scribbled between the lines.

"We're not built to last forever – nobody is," Juhi said. "Our kind are evidence to that. They've been gone for so long that their minds have faded, and many of us have passed away from natural causes, myself included." He presented empty palms to his only son. "If you bring us back, most of us won't last very long; and those who do, I'm afraid will remain lost to madness.

"So please, you've been given something truly extraordinary. No other person alive has ever been granted an opportunity such as yours. Don't waste it on us." Gentle hands of ash fell upon Maxus. "Our only wish is to be free…"

Despite his condition, those hands still retained the caring energy of his old man, and that energy seeped within himself without leaving a speck of dust on his coat. With another glance at the Grey Ones, understanding the insanity they were drowning in, Maxus slumped. The first thought to spring to mind seemed like the obvious choice, and the excitement it held evaporated into the same mists which consumed the man with the pitchfork.

"If not you," Maxus said, "then what should I wish for?"

Juhi smirked, and Maxus understood: he believed in him. "That's for you to decide," he answered, sounding confident. "I'm sure, though, you'll figure it out."

A thousand eyes drilled at him from all around, watching, waiting. The four broken walls felt to be watching, having stopped in the middle of their apocalyptic crumbling and curiously waited to see what would happen next. Silence took over despite the abundance of suggestions and ideas burning deep within bellies.

The crowd around Frisk stood united. The threat was over, but the monster who tried to destroy them and killed Frisk (for a short time) remained present. After everything that had happen, Toriel was unsure if she could ever let her child go again.

If Flowey the flower had one wish, he would wish he had that wish. This entire ordeal had been his chance to be the hero. Yet he dreaded the possibility that he had fashioned himself a villain different from the one who prowled the caves beneath Mount Ebott. This could have been the golden opportunity to prove to himself that he was capable of good deeds, or, at the very least, one very good one that would make the greatest change.
Maxus remembered his mother, his grandmother and grandfather, and all those lives lost during the war. His soul of light fluttered with the possibility that he could finally see them again. He could scarcely recall Mother's touch, her earthy scent, her voice, the lullabies which saw him to sleep lifetimes ago; nor did the fuzzy memories of knightly tales and traveller's rumours by his grandparents' fireplace linger. With one sentence, he could have them back. With his mouth open and lungs inhaling, he faced Kanika.

"I wish—" he started, the entire crowd held their collective breaths, then… nothing.

They waited. Imaginations swam with the many possibilities that could come through his teeth. The six monsters from the Underground and their determined human held each other tighter, bracing themselves for the uncertain future which would be their reality for the rest of their lives. That was if they were allowed to be part of it.

With a grumble, Maxus lowered his head.

"What happened?" Barb asked. She bent down to look him in his face. "You looked to be on to something there."

"I was gonna wish all those monsters who died during the war back," Maxus replied, sounding deflated, without looking up.

The outlines which comprised the dead emperor's features brightened at the thought of his wife. The wounds had healed, but the scars remained, and he missed her so. After his death bed, he had been denied the chance to reunite with her in the afterlife. What he wouldn't give to see her again, if even for one minute. "That… would be wonderful. I don't see why you can't bring them back. This affliction won't have affected them, so they'll—"

Maxus interrupted, "It's not that simple." He turned upwards to the pockmarked sky, thoughts drifting like those same stars with the little he remembered. "How long have they been gone? A thousand years, give or take, just like all the others. What kind of world would I be bringing them back to? Who would be there to greet their return?"

Silence. The delight on Juhi's features fell limp, as did his demeanour.

"I'll tell you right now: a world a millennia older than what they remember," Maxus went on. "A world where the ones they loved are no more, or in your sorry state, or, like me, haunted with a thousand terrible choices." He turned ninety degrees to the right, sinking deep and in need of somewhere to look which didn't include a staring face. The cloudy ceiling offered only so much sanctuary. "She remembers a quiet boy in a potato sack, with dirt on his fur, skinned knees, and a gleam in his eye.

For once, Juhi believed he was seeing the world through his son's eyes. "She remembers a loving husband," he said lowly, "who always put the needs of others first, and went out of his way to protect family."

The son faced the father. "Could she be proud of us, of what've we've become? Me, the monster who nearly became their killer."

"And me, the father who turned his only son into his worst enemy out of insecurity."

Together, they watched, in their imaginations, as three dusty ghosts bearing a resemblance followed the man with the pitchfork into the mist, never to been seen again.

"I'll make the best wish I can," Maxus whispered. "And I'll do it for them…"
To this, Juhi could only nod. "You will. I know it."

Their world within the garden continued to glow a faint shade of blue, it almost appeared purple in the grey hue of evening. This warming feeling like he was getting closer to the perfect wish grew, and yet the only progress he made consisted of shaking some leaves and counting the bad choices which fell out. Kanika's final essence waited patiently, star cupped in ghostly hands constructed of more stars. In fact, she was pleased that such a decision was not taken lightly; her creator, herself in a previous life, sacrificed herself for this. Her face, straight and content; her body, upright and symmetrical, gave the impression that she already knew what the wish would be.

All across what remained of the Outerworld, the residents stood, sat, muttered amongst themselves, and waited for something to happen. Thoughts ran across roaming minds that this was their home now, and they could only pick up the pieces, work around the cracks and rebuild their homes from the ground up. A colossal endeavour, especially given how little ground there was to build off of.

Their homes had been reduced to rubble, but many found some strange solace in reconnecting with their lost loved ones constructed from ash. They ran with words about how much they had been missed, or how things had never been the same since their departure. They talked about changes in their life and asked what was happening now. The Grey Ones could answer from their connection to the Outerworld that their Emperor held the future in their hands.

"Honestly, I can't decide..." Maxus admitted before the spectre, before everyone. He hated to say that, it made him sound weak. The ruler who picked his courses without delay, strode forward with every decision he made, good or bad, for once did not know how best to proceed. He stood within a forest thick with trees, a desert with no water for miles, floated on the open sea with no land on the horizon, and the first direction he took was where his course was bound. "Barb, I don't suppose there's anything you'd like?"

She flashed a grin. "Other than to be four inches taller and have my own pony?" She pressed her clasped hands to his cheek and fluttered her eyelashes.

"You're on your own there," responded Maxus, chuckling.

"Good, because I'm not fond of ponies," she replied, dropping her whimsical façade. Somewhere, upon the shards of the Outerworld, someone was offended. "I'll make a suggestion though. If this war has torn you up that badly, then why don't you change it? You could wish for the monsters to have won, or for both sides to have called a truce." She shrugged. "Or, heck, why not just wish for the war to have never happened in the first place?"

"That would spare all those monsters from being trapped underground... and all of us from living up here..." Maxus said, bobbing his head and rubbing his chin as he reflected upon that idea. "And all those who died. It would be like killing two birds with one stone."

"Yes," Juhi interjected, "but the past is a delicate matter; it's the reason why we're here right now, and it makes us who we are. If we were to alter it, who knows how much it could change today. If we changed the past, then it would mean the Outerworld was never founded, and none of this would have happened, and..."

Barb frowned. "And everyone today won't exist... including me." She closed her eyes, inhaled, swallowed, and then exhaled. "I'm okay with that if you are, Maxie..."

The two lions looked upon the bounty hunter. Already, so many lives had been lost along the way. The thought dawned that maybe, just maybe, a few more lives might need to be axed for the greater good; for dreams of a better world, a brighter future.
"If you have the chance to make the world a better place…" Barb crossed her arms. A tremble intruded on her tongue, a shudder made her head twitch and her breathing odd despite her best efforts to steel them. "Then it'll all be worth it, right? I mean, what's one life worth?"

Maxus thought it was quite ironic. The bounty hunter, who dealt with subjects of a deadly nature, possessed a fear of death. Frightened by the unknown. Such a primal fear did not weaken her; on the contrary, it made her more dangerous. It made her fight harder, stronger, think faster on her feet and wings.

Maxus went to her. "No, no, I can't do that," he fretted, taking her hands. It was written in his voice. "I won't. You deserve to live, Barb; you're more important that what could have been. There's a lot of things in my life I wish I could take back… you're not one of them. I'm happy we met. I want you – need you – in my life. Your parents need…" He suddenly remembered them. "Your parents!"

"It's okay." Juhi held his head and focused, feeling for the flow of magic around him. He found their sparks. "They are fine," he said with a smile. "Bruse and Terri are alive, like everyone else. Confused, but alive and well."

Both Maxus and Barb exhaled together.

"That wish is off the table," Maxus said. He didn't just say it, he confirmed it. "You're not going anywhere, Barb. I promise."

Barb showed her appreciation with white, fanged teeth and said, "Thank you, Maxie."

They could not wish the Grey Ones back, nor could they wish back the casualties of the past, nor could they change the war which started the chain of events which was their lives. These initial ideas were bust.

To this, Kanika's imitation spoke, "I can give you some ideas, if you'd like."

Without waiting for a response, a pair of stars fell from the pale sky and danced in circles in the still air before coming to a stop beside the spirit. From the pinpoints of light, many, many rays of light projected images and scenes around them.

"You may not be able to change the past, but you can change the future for the better," Kanika commented over the swirling visions of men and monsters painted black and gold.

"You could wish for peace." Men and monsters of light shook hands, declaring an end to all forms of hostility until the end of time. It spelt the end of prejudice, of discrimination, of war itself. A world where everyone respected one another, regardless of who they were. A world free of fear, injustice, hate, and anguish. The perfect world.

"You could wish for equality." The divide between humans and monsters shattered, and the two races became one in the same. To be a human was just the same as being a monster, and vice versa. Mankind became just as magical as monsters were physical. Humans were stronger no longer, and monsters could no longer absorb a human's soul to achieve godlike power. Compatibility. It would eventually be commonplace to see families comprised of both races, minus the disgust and discrimination of others. It would simply be normal.

"You could choose to end suffering." With one command, disease, hunger, thirst, poverty, pain and suffering ceased to exist, creating a universe where nobody went to bed hungry, where nobody spent their last minutes in agony from an incurable illness, where nobody froze in the winter or collapsed from heat exhaustion in the Sahara. Where nobody required clean water to drink and where quality
of life was not determined by wealth.

"You could choose to end death itself." Five words. That is all it would take to make dying non-existent. No longer would children need to mourn the loss of their parents, or would parents need to cry over those taken too soon. Nobody would need to fear growing old and dying. Where everyone could be with those they loved for all eternity.

All these choices. Only one could be made.

Kanika's spectre closed the recollection of her eyes and searched within Maxus's soul for his deepest desires. "Although you have conquered your hate," she explained, "the pain still lingers, along with a small desire for revenge…” The star shone brighter. "A better future is what you make of it. For good or bad…”

The opposite of peace flashed within the floating frames: a world where the monsters ruled, and the humans became their slaves, bowing to their every whim and need. Every monster would be their own master, and every human would have their dreams erased and replaced with only one desire: to serve monstergkind. No monster would ever need to work for a living, or fight for their existence, their slaves would do it for them.

Another flash: a world where the humans became the prisoners in a world of cages. Those animals forfeited their rights to freedom from the moment they took arms against another race. The monsters would roam the world as free people while all the others were locked where they belonged, forced to rot like how they forced the monsters to rot underground.

Flash: a world made fair by the exclusion of one race. Humanity, who looked down upon those different, now understood what it felt to be a monster… because they were. Mankind became no more as every man, woman, and child had their silky skin transformed, their limbs multiplied or divided, and their very DNA manipulated from a being of flesh, blood and bone to another of magic. Once upon a time, there existed two races. Now, only one.

A world where the very deed of being human was, in itself, a sin. The worst, most inconceivable forms of pain and misery flashed before them. With a few words, Emperor Maxus could repay the pain given to him a million times over, which he could be inflict upon humanity for every second of every day for the rest of their meaningless existence. No mercy. No forgiveness.

And in the centre of every vision, Maxus reigned as Emperor of the World, of the Universe, of everything; upon his golden throne, wearing his crown of diamonds. His cape around his body and a sceptre held toward the red sky as he roared toward the bronzed masses, all on their knees, bowing, and chanting his name over and over…

"Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all." Those emaciated humans swung their outstretched arms up, revealing ribcages through paper-thin skin, before swinging them back down to the floor. Rows of vertebrae along every sunburnt back. "Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all."

Barb pressed her weight against his. "Maxus, don't you dare!"

Juhi glimpsed at every possible tyrannical future in which his son stood the victor and found his own, in the present, stiff and open-mouthed, lulled by those swirling colours. "You're not… you're not actually considering it, aren't you?" he asked, unsure.

Emperor Maxus refused to budge, as if he didn't hear his father or feel the touch of his half-sister. Each vision of a better world, for himself, waved full of promise before him. So many possibilities of varying brutality, cruelty, and he was allowed only one.
"Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all."

"I can actually have that?" His tone was spellbound, hypnotised. "I can still have my revenge? Impose my will upon the world?"

Kanika nodded and lifted the azure star to him. Juhi and Barb, meanwhile, pulled away. Had they misjudged him? Was he still the same Maxus from earlier? Had every scrap of dark, gooey evil truly left his heart?

Flowey felt a strong impulse to ready his friendliness petals, as did Undyne want to charge her spears, and as Sans's eye began to twitch.

Toriel knelt down and wrapped one arm around her child. If Maxus was allowed to make any one of those wishes, then…

"You will not take my child away!" she screamed. "After everything we have been through… I would rather die than see anything happen to Frisk!"

Drawn to those images, Maxus remained still.

"Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all."

The possible futures tempted him, beckoned the scars in his soul. He had spent his life bowing to the will of others, men and monsters following their duty, believing their actions to be just, free of any guilt. It was his turn now. His turn to impose what he believed to be right and wrong in the world, and nobody had a chance to say otherwise. Whatever he desired, it was right. It would be granted by the immense power in the spirit's hands, thus making it so. Whatever anyone else said would not matter one bit for they would be powerless to change anything. In fact, they were powerless to change it now. That's just the way it is, they say; that's how the cookie crumbles, they muse; you can either wish for a better world or work to make this world a better one, they droned, unknown to the sudden reality that someone could actually wish for a world of his choosing.

"I wish…" Maxus began. The weightiness on his diamond encrusted crown pressed down.

"Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all."

"I wish…" A thick fur cape warmed his body.

"Hail, Lord Maxus: master of all."

"I wish…" His arm raised instinctively, baring his sceptre.

"Hail…"

"I wish…" He held his tongue a moment, then tossed down his sceptre, brushed off his cape and threw of his crown. "…I was worthy to make this wish."

The ghost got ahead of herself, raising the star above her head before stopping.

"You think you're not worthy?" Kanika repeated, sounding incredulous as she brought the star level with her sparkling navel. "This is your chance, Maxus, to correct what you believe to be wrong. You are the chosen one; this is your right. No one deserves this more than you."

"You're wrong. There is someone who deserves this more than me."

Everyone waited for him to continue.
"You're right about one thing: I had the strength inside me all along, but I didn't reach it on my own, because…” He turned around and, suddenly, Frisk felt Toriel's hands tighten as his silver eyes found them. "It was Frisk who helped me find it. It – no, they – returned here because they believed there was still good in me. When the entire world believed me irredeemable, when pure evil coursed through my veins, they were the only one who found that one candlelight within a sea of blackness."

He faced Kanika. This time, he would make his choice.

"Which is why for my wish…” He took a deep breath. "I want Frisk to have it."

Frisk, stunned by this, heard whispering remarks from their buddies: "...Get outta town..." "...No way, dude..." "...You gotta be kiddin'..." and "...Un-freaking-believable..."

Kanika looked puzzled. Odd. This was the crucial decision she had waited eons for and all she could be was puzzled. "Are you sure? Think about this. Once your decision's been made, there's no taking it back."

Maxus thought about it. He really put everything in consideration. A decision of a lifetime, and he was throwing it away to the very thing he hated his entire life. The ultimate power he had hunted and finally caught, he was letting go.

His voice grew solid with conviction. "Yes," he concluded. "I don't know what's best for the world. But Frisk does. They're the real chosen one here."

Kanika bowed her head once.

"Then let your wish be granted," she heeded before gesturing toward the human child wedged between their monster buddies. "Frisk, the wish now falls to you. Please come closer."

Now, all eyes were on Frisk as the blue aura was thrust upon them. All Frisk wanted to do from the very beginning was go home, not wish for it to change. Now they had a choice to make.

As they went to step forward, Toriel refused to loosen her hold.

"I do not," she muttered in a sour tone, "want you going anywhere near that man."

Frisk gave her a brave smile and kindly relaxed their fingers upon hers. Trust them, Frisk asked of their mom.

Toriel breathed hard, in and out, afraid of what would happen the second she released her child. Facing her fear, she let go. Frisk then thanked her and gave one quick hug. Frisk took a few steps from their friends; all them watching as their human was about to change their world a second time. Frisk had introduced them to the surface, now they were going to alter it permanently.

Before they went any further, Frisk asked their compadres for any suggestions floating around in their noggin. If anything, it served as a delay while they scoured their mind for the best possible wish idea.

"Choose something you'd love, Frisk," Asgore suggested, smiling in an encouraging way. "Even if it's as small as a pet, you've more than earned it."

Toriel, kneeling there, bowed to their child, self-assured in their choice. "Nothing bigger than a shoebox, though..."

"I-if I had o-one wish…" Alphys mused, jittering. Embarrassment held her back. "I'd totally love
to… speak Japanese. Then I could watch Mew Mew Kissy Cutie without subtitles!"

Undyne pumped a fist. "Demand your own private gym, so you can make yourself ripped!"

"W-why not just use the wish to be muscly r-right off the bat?" Alphys asked.

"Oh, please," countered Undyne. "Where's the reward in that if it's not earned through rivers of sweat?" Such a tasteful image that created.

Papyrus stroked his generous jawbone. "You could try to be as cool as yours truly, but alas, some wishes just aren't meant to be." Afterward, he found his trademark cackle.

Sans looked eager to get his suggestion across. "Wish for everyone to get an unlimited ketchup bottle. Yours truly would truly appreciate it." He winked. "Thanks."

Papyrus shook his skull in disapproval. "It's not always about you, Sans."

"Hey, look who's talking."

Regardless, their friends had the utmost faith in their human. That was all they needed… they hoped.

Watching the child step up, a hint of what could be described as jealousy crept up Flowey's stem. He had been the Empire's special guest for weeks, their voice from the shadows second. Maxus knew him, trusted him, more than he did of Frisk; if there was anyone more instilled with knowledge, more likely to make the best, most logically, morally correct choice to benefit the planet for generations, surely it would be him.

Near the foot of the Obelisk, five now stood. A galaxy-sized spotlight shone down upon the child.

"Frisk, you have now been granted this wish," said Kanika. "Anything you want, I can fulfil. I feel it in your soul: you are a merciful being, your hands clean of impurity. Perhaps you also wish for world peace? Just because Maxus didn't wish for it doesn't mean you can't. You can cease all war. All hatred. All acts of violence. Won't that be a grand gesture to your friends, to make them fully welcome back on Earth?"

She foreknew that Frisk understood the value of life. They could erase death itself and make all creatures eternal. Eradicate all known disease and illness. How about world hunger? No one need go without a meal. Maybe Maxus had the right idea all along and Frisk was the one to accomplish it.

"But you're still human," Kanika explained, digging deeper into Frisk's psyche. "And with it comes attached a certain stigma. Being human, it's called. Meaning to be imperfect, flawed, and prone to making mistakes. Perhaps you wish for something more material?"

The visions which tempted Maxus now did the same to Frisk.

Fame? Within the projections, Frisk saw themself a superstar. Whichever they sought after most. The most powerful singer, roses thrown at their feet. The most artful actor, every movie a five star wonder. The greatest soccer, football, basketball player to ever live, holding above their head a trophy bigger than they were. Not a single life in the world would be complete without an autograph from their idol.

Fortune? All the money in the world, enough to flood the tallest building. Unlimited bank accounts. Gold. Silver. Diamonds. Emeralds. Rubies. Sapphires. Their own luxury mansions, one in every county of every country, able to house a castle in the garage alone. A hot tub, eighty inch flat screen and minibar in every room. The most expensive, exquisite meals three times – hold on, four – no,
wait, five times a day! The fanciest clothes of silk, velvet, and cashmere. Speedboats and mega-yachts and parties in the Caribbean Sea. Asgore would have his own garden the size of Switzerland. Papyrus could drive a flashy, brand new sports car every day. Alphys could fund her own research indefinitely, buy all the components she needs and hire the greatest minds in the world. No longer would she need to scour shady sites. And Sans... well, he would no longer need to work, but other than that, he wouldn't change much.

Fun? A planet of entertainment, where nobody needed to waste their life on a boring job they hated, or dull accomplishments such as chores or homework. Where everything tiresome was done away with and where people lived for fun, joy, excitement, laughter, and everything in-between. Discos and cinemas and arcades all across the world. Where a guy could tell the lamest skeleton joke to his brother and receive a rousing response.

Fantasy? Frisk could become a superhero. Stronger than titanium. Faster than light. Smarter than Einstein. Able to fly, bend steel with their bare hands, shoot lasers out of their eyes, freeze crooks with their breath, and see through walls with x-ray vision. Crime would fear the days and the nights, and all wrongs in the world would be made right.

Adventure? This one wish could easily advance technology by ten-thousand years: televisions you could walk into; cars which required no wheels, inside or out; teleporters (with precise accuracy this time) would make a trip to the other side of the world an afternoon outing; rocket ships equipped to travel faster than the speed of light. Frisk would be on the first shuttle to go higher than the Outerworld and embark to the stars, exploring new worlds, colonising Saturn's moons, and meeting the weird and intriguing life to be found out there.

Frisk: Galaxy Defender sounded pretty awesome.

"Or perhaps it is immortality you desire. For you personally." Kanika mentioned the royal couple. "Your guardians are of eternal life, are they not? As time goes on, you will grow up, grow old and eventually die, leaving them without a child once more. Do you want to leave them in misery? The three of you can live together for all eternity."

As the years progressed, generations came and went, civilisations rose and fell, technology advances and expands, the family – Asgore, Toriel, and Frisk – remained its single constant. An exception from time. Immune to disease. Free from pain. A permanent solution for those who had witnessed too much agony in their lives. Eternal love.

"Or perhaps you wish for a family more… personal?"

She plucked two more stars from out the sky and span them in gracious circler before her. The light projected and two individuals materialised between the rays.

On the left, a man: his height, frame, his physique and his lack of slouch made him naturally adept to fit any suit and tie. He had hands which could seize control of any situation; point at any mouthy gob and watch them shut up and sink in their chair. His strong jaw and prominent cheekbones complimented his clear eyes, and his smile tugged on the corners of Frisk's lips. His pompadour, straight out of Fashion Weekly, held the same shade of brown as the hair on Frisk's head. A guy such as him looked out of place in this battlefield. His ideal environment on weekdays would be in the CEO's chair, pointing at a red outline zigzagging up a graph. Weekends, residing in his own luxury lodge, swimming in pools of dollar bills, a phone in one hand and champagne in the other.

To the right, a woman: her long, flowing, shimmering locks, the same colour as sunlight, made her appear ten years younger. Her thin lips, stub nose, eyes and brow were all beyond aging, she could be fifty and not look it. Frisk glanced at her arms and developed an urge to run into them, purely to
experience how tender they would feel around their body. The man beside her suited the oval office, she, in her jeans and knitted cardigan, would be content in a countryside cottage, surrounded by homemade baked goods and a hint of fairy dust.

Frisk forced their dry mouth to swallow, gulping cool air down past their racing heart and into their searing belly. They switched back and forth between the two, feeling the brims of their memories fill upon seeing their faces. They had never met, yet already Frisk knew…

Mommy… Daddy…

Kanika paced herself. "They will love you, cherish you, and look after you like real parents should. You can be with those who are truly your own. You can finally have a real family." She held the star out, reaching the ultimatum. "What do you say, Frisk?"

In their mind, in all the missing pieces, Frisk saw them both: the father who supplied for them, the mother who devoted all her love to them, the couple who tore themselves up when Frisk went missing. Trips to the park on warm, summer days, a cold ice-cream with a flake and sprinkles in one hand and their mother's hand in the other. Something was lost which had now been found. It made them lose focus on their breathing, hairs stand on end, and their nerves tingle.

Wish Mom and Wish Dad beckoned Frisk with smiles full of warmth. His blue eyes and hers green reached to that deep yearning in their soul.

Choose us, those eyes appeared to say. Make us real. Our hugs are waiting for you.

How badly Frisk wanted to run into their arms.

Then they heard Toriel's voice. "No… No…!"

Far behind them, Toriel reached out, her other hand clutched at the torso of her robe. Tears swelled up in begging eyes after thinking she could shed no more. Her mouth quivered and tiny peeps fought to escape through tight lips.

"Frisk…" Asgore, acting a double of his wife, spoke in a small, broken voice. "Don't go…"

The two glanced at each other for a fragment of a second before Asgore buried his head in his hands.

Toriel clasped hers together and worked up the inner strength to nod. "It is okay, my child." As two tears fell, she smiled. "We understand."

Asgore's paws fell. His gaze remained downcast with his blonde bangs casted a shadow.

"All we wish is for you to be happy…" He looked up at Frisk, forced his lips into a sad smile. "So… be happy, Frisk."

If any two people were going to hold each other, Asgore and Toriel seemed like the obvious choice. Not Papyrus to his brother. Sans remained motionless as lanky arms and oversized, red gloves grabbed at his torso.

"Does this mean," Papyrus said to Sans while retaining an attentive eye socket on Frisk, "they're still going away, and we'll never see them again?"

Sans, unable to respond, patted his brother and cooed softly.

Alphys battled an urge to run up to them. She already carried the guilt of letting go once. Could she
let them go again, this time with no requirement of a rescue mission?

Undyne gave her mentor one look. Her opinion was difficult to tell on her features. Frisk was his kid. Whatever he was fine with, she felt the same way in respect.

Frisk clenched their hands as their thoughts ran with newfound memories, every one cherishable. Bedtime stories and bring-your-kid-into-work day. Birthdays and Christmases. Holidays and parties. These recollections clashed with those of the Underground, with memories shared by a million alternate versions of themself, with the friends they fought to have and fought harder to keep.

Their one chance for a family. A family they never knew existed, but wanted. A family they could finally have, at the cost of another. A family.

Family.

Their gasping fingers loosened and the blood started flowing again. The blue star, and the power it held, awaited the ultimate choice.

Frisk raised their left hand and curled the index finger at Kanika.

"Huh? You want me to come closer?" Kanika, reluctant at first, did so, stepping with weightless steps.

She drew closer, still Frisk charmed with that alluring gesture. Closer still, Frisk's finger continued to bend then straighten. Bend then straighten. The two stood toe to toe. Frisk faced upwards to meet them, yet still desired Kanika to come closer. If she neared anymore, she'd walk straight through them.

She lowered her sparkly head until she had her pointy ear to the child.

It was time. Frisk leaned up onto their tiptoes, cupped their hands around their mouth, and spoke a few syllables in the gentlest whisper a human could make.

At first, Kanika's face was blank as she pulled away. "Are you sure?" she asked.

Frisk looked away and blinked. This was it. After they answered, there was no going back. A vice-like grip held them, questioning them at every turn. They gulped, feeling the entire galaxy and beyond staring at them.

They gritted their teeth out of determination, and bowed.

"If you insist." Kanika rose the star high. "Let the wish be fulfilled," she said out loud for all to hear. "And for this universe to be changed forever."

The star grew, pulsating. Its alluring colour, its deep shade of azure, brightened and brightened, absorbing reality. Everyone watched for as long as they could before it was too bright to do so.

The light reached it apex, whereupon it spread out in a fantastic field. It first consumed the Outerworld. Then the Earth. The moon. Mars. Jupiter. Mercury. The Sun. The Solar System. The Milky Way. It spread out until it covered all corners of the cosmos, unwinding the hidden calculations which held it together and altering them permanently. Pieces of a massive jigsaw puzzle pulled apart and rearranged in accordance to one wish made by one human on one small planet. Every factor of life was removed, adjusted, then put back into place, such was the power of the miniscule star.
It spread until it covered all.

And so… the Universe was forever changed.

Every eyelid was shut long after the magic had run its course. What did they expect to find upon casting open the curtains?

Toriel did not wish to know. She was the one who desired to know the least, King Asgore second. However, neither of them could hide from the truth for all eternity. They had no choice but to wake up to the reality their child had chosen. If their child could still be called their child.

Together, they faced the new world. The blinding white stung their retinas. There was Frisk, Kanika still before them, reaching for the stars, now empty-handed. That bully Maxus and his father to one side, with that leather-clad bat. And… And…

Toriel squinted. "Wait…" she murmured. "Where are Frisk's parents?"

Among the crowd at the Obelisk's foot, they counted one human, Frisk, and no one else of their kind. The businessman and county gal were nowhere to be seen. Asgore and Toriel expected their first vision in this altered reality to be of their child in another pair of humans' arms – the sweet cuddle of their biological parents – celebrating their long lost reunion with tears in the bucketsful, and for the monsters' love to be rendered obsolete.

"Shouldn't they be here? Are they somewhere else? Have they materialised at all?" Asgore asked question after question, trying to piece this little mystery together.

Maxus battled a tremendous sting in the back of his skull as he wanted to know right away the fate of his father. "Dad?"

Juhi, in view of the rest of his comrades, was as grey and crumbly as in the unaltered universe. He gazed at his hands, somehow finding consolation in the fact he was still dead, along with the rest of the Grey Ones.

"Well, they clearly didn't wish us back," Juhi said, sounding relieved. "Frankly, dying once was bad enough. None of us are in the mood for it a second time."

Undyne looked around. "What else could it be?" she asked before locating Lord Grill. "Oh, right."

Without any warning, she moved with quick steps toward the still dazed lord and snatched him by the collar. Grill's sight returned to that of his worst nightmare, baring vicious, yellow teeth and winding a closed fist.

"NOT THE FACE!" he cried before shielding his eyes. From through the black, the pain cut through in the form of a sharp flick to the tip of his snout. "Oww."

Undyne released him, much to Lord Grill's relief. "Could've knocked your lights out if I wanted to. The reason I didn't was because I held back." Her glare narrowed. "And trust me, that took a lot of holding back. Guess world peace is out of the question."

Professor Haze reached into his trouser pocket and flicked out his cell phone. No reason why not to keep up with the times. He checked its features, then browsed its apps.

"Yep," he said, sounding somewhat satisfied, "interface still as clunky as ever." He put it back in the pocket he got it from. "Nobody's going to the seventh planet from the Sun anytime soon."
General Leigh glanced over.

"You mean Uranu—"

Haze stopped him with, "The seventh. Planet. From. The Sun."

Sans cleared his non-existent throat. "Hey, Pap," he started, "you heard 'bout the skeleton who didn't dance at the Halloween party?"

Papyrus hummed in thought. "Poor guy. He wasn't invited?" he guessed.

His brother replied, winking. "He had no body to dance with!"

_Ba-dum pish!_

"Curses!" Papyrus's brow furrowed, yet still he was smiling. "Bring back the previous world, please. This one is just like the first!"

"That's my brother." Sans's cheery outlook shone bright. "Still as joke resilient as ever, an' I woundn't have ya any other way, man."

All went silent. Sweat tingled on foreheads, mingling with the fear prodding on their minds. The Grey Ones remained grey. Violence was still an available option to solve problems. Frisk's parents weren't there, holding their flesh and blood.

"Hey, kid," Sans began to ask, nervously shifting left to right, worried that whatever came of this opportunity would be worse than a thousand reruns under Mount Ebott. "I don't mean to be a buzzkill, but… what'd ya wish for exactly?"

Frisk didn't answer as the same dilemma repeated like a broken record inside their skull. Their heart drummed against their ribcage. An annoying itch on their elbow refused to go away no matter how much they scratched.

The awkwardness was peppered by the tiniest trace of a giggle, which grew louder as the seconds ticked by. This particular giggle originated from the Royal Advisor himself, Flowey the flower.

Toriel spotted the golden flower. "That flower…" she said as if spellbound. She recalled a blossom such as that in the barest scraps of her memory.

Flowey shook his head as his laughed matured. "Of course," he said aloud, "it was so obvious, wasn't it?"

Brute, who had yet to return the advisor to his place on the flat section of his head, was once more guided by the sway which ebbed off him, and gave him some space. Flowey, in his pot, stood alone an entire foot off the ground.

"You wished for nothing, didn't you? You wished to be with the ones you loved the most, and that was these guys right here." He swung toward the others, which included Asgore, Undyne, and Smiley Trashbag. "It's not like you could've saved the entire world or anything. I mean, you had the best chance for the greatest happy ending, and you wasted it." His lips distorted downwards into a snarl. "If that doesn't make you the biggest idiot ever, I don't know what does."

His golden face turned red as the anger reached its threshold. Dozens of friendliness petals appeared above him. "YOU WASTED IT!" he screeched. "You held it in your hands – you could've had everything you ever wanted and you threw it all away over some stupid sentimental victory!"
The glowing petals, aimed at Frisk, launched across the clearing. Both Maxus and Barb leapt in front of the human and batted them away; Maxus with his punches, Barb with her kicks.

"Advisor, stop! What's done is done," the Emperor said as Frisk's friends also came to their aid with fire magic, and spears, Asgore retrieving his trident, and that left eye flaring up.

Flowey gritted his teeth, glaring with pure rage. Despite his opposition, he was not intimidated. "Why can't I kill you…? Why won't you just stay dead…?" his voice came out dry and grated. He huffed cool air in the mouthfuls, yet it failed to quell his ire. It built up in his stem neck before it was unleashed. "YOU MAKE ME FEEL SO—"

He stopped, choking a gasp.

The anger in his eyes lifted a shade. His snarled lips fell. "You… you make me f-feel so…"

What was this? What was happening to him? "…You make me feel… so…"

He began to shake. "I-I-I feel… I feel…"

He began to cry. "I feel…?"

He smiled as the tears poured like waterfalls. "I feel." He began to shout, every time louder. "I feel! I feel! I can feel!"


Upon seeing such a sight, the fire dispersed. The trident dropped. One burning eye turned into two dots in eye sockets.

Flowey tasted his own tears. Sadness. "I'm so happy…" he said in a small, cracked voice. Happiness.

A warmth enveloped his thin body. As he looked down at himself, realising what he had allowed himself to become – shame – he began to glow.

"What… what's happening to me?" Flowey cried. Fear. He grew brighter until he was nothing but white light. "What's happening? I feel strange!"

Flowey cried as the light reached its brightest, encapsulating him all around. This was the end for him, he feared. He did not want it to end. He wanted time, just a little more time.

Terror eclipsed his mind, blocking all rational thought. "No, wait! I don't wanna die! I'm not ready to go yet! I'm not ready! I'M SORRY!"

As steady as it grew, the very thing that enshrouded him faded. Everyone, those alive and those dead, stood fixated. His unsteady breath and desperate thoughts drowned out their shocked gasps.

"I'm sorry…" Flowey sniffled, darting across the faces, one after the other. "I'm sorry…" His voice sounded different. "I'm sorry…"

Everyone stared at him. Him alone. The informant from the shadows, who worked behind the scenes without a single word of praise, became the most noticed.
"W-w-what are you doing?" Flowey stammered. How found Frisk, then Papyrus, Sans, Undyne, Alphys. But as he glanced at Toriel, she wore a face that would stick with him for the rest of his days. Eyes wide. Mouth covered. Trembling all over. He turned away to Asgore, and found him to be the same. "W-why are you looking at me like that?"

No one answered. Both Asgore and Toriel took the first step closer, unable to break away. As they neared, Flowey noticed the hot streams running down their cheeks, the quiver in their lower lips.

Flowey did not know which of them was more afraid. "S-stay back…"

The couple continued uninterrupted and stopped before him.

"Stay back…" He reached out with his hands.

Toriel struggled to speak. "…A-A-A…" A lump had lodged in her throat. "…A-A…"

Flowey did not know what to say or what to think. He stared down at his… hands? Two palms and fingers of white fur.

"What…?" he whispered.

Finally, Toriel spoke.

"…Asriel…?"

"…Son…? Is that you?" Asgore whispered. "Is that really you…?"

Flowey reached for his face. Instead of a flat, featureless face, he felt a snout and two big ears. Instead of petals, a tuff of hair. Instead of a stem, a torso, and legs. His striped shirt. His black jeans. Instead of emptiness, a soul resonated within.

Asriel's eyes went wide. "Mom…? Dad…? …Oh no…"

Asgore and Toriel fell to their knees. Arms ready to reach out and grab him.

Asgore muttered, "You were that…" After everything Asriel has done. The pain and suffering he caused as a flower…

"No," Asriel cried, trying to scramble away. "Please, don't! I…"

His parents reached out and gripped Asriel by the shoulders. Asriel gazed for a second into his parents' watery eyes before clenching his own tight, unable to read the emotions behind them in that short space of time. He prepared for pain, anger, anguish, or all three, and felt their bodies press against his and tender hands on his back and head. Then… a mumble of sniffs and sobs.

He opened his eyes to his parents holding him. The tears fell harder than the day he died.

"It's you… I can't believe it's you…" Asgore spoke between sobs.

"You have no idea… how much we have missed you, Asriel…" Toriel said between short breaths, Asriel lifted his arms and held them back, sniffling like a baby. A cry-baby. He could feel them again. He could love them again. "I'm sorry… I'm so sorry…"

Toriel quietly shushed him. "It is alright, Asriel…" she cooed. "Everything is going to be alright…"
The pain of their loss, with such a long time to wait, rushed back. As they caressed his youthful fur, smelled his scent, and heard his voice, a piece which the mother and father had lost so long ago, which they had come to accept, found its way back.

Everyone watched, speechless, especially Frisk. They could only watch the reunion in short bursts; one second of the family in view before facing the puddle-strewn surface under their feet. Their elbow got itchier. They sweltered under their shirt. Their mouth, which should be curved with accomplishment, drooped into a deep, depressed frown.

Fighting everything urging the moment to last forever, Asgore found Frisk. "Frisk… Did you…? Was this what you wished for?" he struggled to ask. He, his wife, and son eyed the human child, who responded with another downcast glance. "I… I don't know what to say…" He held his son tighter. "…Thank you…"

Slowly, regretfully, the encirclement had to come to an end. None of them couldn't believe this was real. Toriel stroked his cheeks and hair, fighting away the possibility that this was all but a loathsome dream. It reminded Asriel of how fussy his mother could be.

Asriel looked over to the human he had now tried to destroy twice. "Frisk?" He escaped from his parents' clutches and walked on shaking legs. For spending so long with roots for appendages, it surprised him how that pair still felt so natural. "Why?" he asked. His hands were out, gesturing to himself. "Why did you choose this?"

Frisk, who had been staring down since making their wish, still frowning, still rubbing away at their joint, took tiny steps forward.

"I don't deserve this," Asriel went on, wiping his cheeks every few seconds. "I tried to hurt you again. I left you for dead. You should've wished for world peace. You should've wished to end all hate; all misery; all death. You should've wished for your parents! You deserved them more than me – one measly, stupid thing. You should've—"

Frisk suddenly bounded over and shushed his words in an instant. A tight, loving hold, straight from the heart, made Asriel fall silent, still, dumbfounded, as Frisk held him for the second time. Then, lifting his arms around their neck, felt their warmth seep into his own.

"You don't even know me…" he whispered, smattered with uncontrollable snivelling. "Why didn't you stop caring?"

Frisk found themself gazing into Asriel's watery eyes as they said their next words.

It was because he was the one who deserved to be saved the most.

It dawned on Asriel. Frisk could have chosen anything they wanted. Absolutely anything. They didn't choose peace. They didn't choose immortality. They didn't choose godhood, or superpowers, knowledge, wealth, fun, adventure, or the entire world. They chose Asriel. They choose him over everything else.

Their foreheads met; their skin and his furry brow, touching, connecting, craving to share thoughts and feelings. Fingers intertwined while the most important question swam around in Frisk's mind… Did they do the right thing?

Asriel, through his heartache, forced a smile. "Heh heh, oh, Frisk…" he said in a small voice. "You really are an idiot."

Frisk returned the chuckle. The biggest idiot there ever was.
If dreams could come true, then the sight of those two children, one monster, the other human, was the seed for the future, a symbol of hope between both races. For centuries after the war ended, when its legacy lived on whilst the memories faded, the question as to whether the two sides could ever coexist like before was the burning question for the ages.

Could humans be trusted to act fair around a species whom were inherently inferior?

Could monsters be trusted around a species whose life-force could exalt them to godhood?

It was unthinkable to believe that such peace was obtainable. That hundreds and thousands of living, intelligent beings could act upon the same principles and not have a single one step out from that thin line. They speculated that their return would amount to nothing but more violence, to another life of running and hiding just like in the Dark Ages.

However, maybe now, as they watched Frisk and Asriel – fingers interlocked – the future wasn't as dark as they had thought. Flesh and blood next to fur and magic. It was not one human child and one monster child, but two children. Their differences were cast aside, and they became not two people of different species, but two people of the same planet.

Emperor Maxus gingerly stepped over, eyeing the boy who bore a remarkable resemblance to King Asgore and Queen Toriel. One eyebrow was raised so high it strained the muscles in his forehead. "...Advisor? Is that you?" he asked.

The soppy terrain muted Brute's hefty stomps as he closed the distance. His head cocked to one side, index finger scratching it. "Where Advisor gone?" he wondered. Asriel felt a flush, his cheeks swelled into a shade of pink as the hulking creature loomed over him; he wasn't the one atop his head no more. Those beady eyes begged the answer to many questions. "What this hairy thing?"

Asriel's parents marched over. "Excuse me," the mother, taking hold of her son, scolded the monster twice her size. "But this hairy thing is our son."

Her commanding attitude – aided by her lifelong vocation – made Brute flinch like one of the many unruly schoolkids in her class. While hard on the outside, her insides melted as those same hands which held her son when he was but a day old felt him once more. Just by having Mom and Dad around, Asriel, the little prince, never felt safer.

Juhi was beside Maxus, as amazed as he was. "The resemblance is remarkable," he commented.

A quiet giggle tickled Asriel's throat. "It's okay... Mom," he said. Jeez, to think he could call Toriel Mom again, not to mention King Asgore became Dad. "It's a long story, Brute, but... the advisor hasn't gone anywhere. I'm the advisor." Hesitation made his lips go numb. "I was that flower all along."

Everyone gazed, beset with baffled silence; most notably his parents. Frisk excluded.

"Then why didn't you tell us?" Asgore asked, lowering himself on one knee. Deep down, his wife and himself still believed their son the innocent, misunderstood youth who always kept to himself, hardly socialised with others much, and couldn't hurt a fly even if the world depended on it.

Asriel pondered. What was he to say? I did... once. The first time. But then you forgot after I went back and did everything all over again, and... did things...
"I guess..." King Asgore, noticing Asriel's hesitation, spoke softly. He rubbed his thumb against his son's cheek, and said, "I guess it's not important now. You're here and that's all that matters."

Asriel fought through his insecurities to look up at his father, nearly jumping out his skin upon noticing Papyrus's empty peepers peering over his broad shoulder. He resembled a child – the very one whom the boy had the most fun with during those dark days. Those ame eyes which heralded the Flowey Fan Club.

"Mini Asgore..." the skeleton whispered the same way a birdwatcher would upon sighting the rarest breed. He narrowed the breadth between his mouth and Asgore's ear. "You must've been a beautiful baby, Your Majesty."

As Undyne found her eyepatch and slung it over her bad eye, her other eyed the kid. Asriel Dreemurr was a tale shared to her on a handful of occasions, only after the most gruelling of training sessions and during the warmest heart-to-hearts at home, around the table, with cups of golden flower tea and a stray marshmallow caught in the King's facial fuzz. It was Asriel's demise which ignited the Underground's wrath and the founding of the Royal Guard, in turn fuelling her desire for vengeance upon humanity – a desire born from her king and instilled into her.

"This is your kid...? He looks just like you," she said, having only seem him in the fading gloss of old photographs. Had this kid never died, Undyne struggled to think where she'd be, or what kind of person she'd have developed into without her king's resolve. With such a soft semblance to his parents, she concluded right there that she already liked this boy. "A little scrawny, a few feet off, but I can already see you becoming your dad."

Throughout all his smattered life, the golden flower was the entity which haunted Sans the most. Vague images, made dull through time, stuck to the walls inside his skull, pestering him now as he prodded and poked, trying to get a clear memory out. He succeeded in rooting out more pictures; a thousand images which each told a single sentence of a thousand stories; too contrived to piece together. But in so many, he found the grinning, chortling flower. He was either catching a glimpse of petals darting into the soil, staring him down, or confronting him directly. Could it be true? Could this child be him, who made his life a misery for so long?

Asriel turned to and fro, encapsulated in the kind-hearted gazes and friendly remarks by his family and their friends. Then, from out the corner of his eye, he spotted San's dot pupils and toothy grin and turned away the next instant.

That was all the evidence Sans needed.

His bony hands, tucked inside pockets, clenched. A flicker warmed the back of his left socket. For all the thought of having faced the flower many times in the past, he had not a single memory to go by. Not a single victory or loss, draw or stalemate, surrender or – for the sake of wishful thinking – truce. He would've liked very much to have at least one memory, and he could have it right now. This kid didn't look tough. Sans was confident he could wipe that smirk of this flower's face in five seconds flat.

He looked at the flower from his memories and, instead, saw a boy who took after his king, and who the old lady leant down and kissed on the forehead.

His fingers loosened. Flame subsided.

_Get a grip, man_, Sans told himself, wanting to add a slap for good measure. _What ya thinkin'?_ He
couldn't do that to Tori and King Asgore, not after everything they'd been through. There was no way Sans would be held accountable for costing his best friend and best ruler another child. Not after how deeply distraught she was after almost losing Frisk. Not after… Snowdin… and that other kid. Guess it was too late to take it back now.

"Hey. I gotta say…" Sans said quietly. Before he could falter, he switched on his usual attitude, flicking two thumbs up. "It's good to have ya back, bud."

Alphys opened her mouth to say something, regarding how she might've a clue as to how this came to be, but slammed it shut. The idea that she might have had something to do with this was too farfetched, she couldn't convince herself to believe it if she tried. Yes, she had experimented on one flower in her life. And yes, that exact same flower disappeared later. But how for certain did she know this was that flower? How did it get all the way from the King's garden in the Underground to here, the cusp of the Earth's atmosphere?

She might state her speculations at a later date. But for now, she perked up a smile and let Gorey and Tori have their son back. Let them have this.

Brute hummed a sleepy murmur. So monotone it tempted yawns from those around him. "Flower, pretty but cold," he articulated the best he could muster, sounding a little less like Frankenstein's monster. "Goat, fuzzy and warm. And cute." The tip of his index tapped Asriel's belly, forcing the giggle out in its entirety. "Squishy like marshmallow. Brute like new advisor. I… like the new you."

The little prince of monsters twisted to the right, laughing and clutching his side as his assistant playfully poked him. His laughter, his smile, Asriel thought he would never do any of those things ever again, nor did the others dream of seeing him again. Asriel returned to a state long forgotten. He wasn't a soulless flower or the god of hyperdeath or a shady dispenser of half-truths. He was a youngster once more.

Brute stopped and gave Frisk a tired glance which imparted a smidgen of the same energy; Frisk wanted to fall asleep just by making eye contact with him.

Without pulling away, he asked Asriel, "Still advisor?"

The boy gained control over his delightful belly to form coherent words. "I guess?"

"Then… still crush hum—?"

"NO!" Asriel shot forward and screamed – so abrupt that it startled everyone - whilst waving his hands in front of Brute's face. His petrified stare was wide and narrow, with beads of sweat trickled down around and between them. The many looks in his direction made the air grow thick, his head spin, his breathing short and rapid.

Toriel asked, "Asriel, what did he mean by—?"

Asriel snapped around to face her. "Nothing, Mom!" he blurted. His innocent show of teeth was betrayed by the rivulets running down his face. "It's nothing. N-nothing really. He meant to say crush… er, crush hum… crush… huuuuuum… errr…" His stammering, peppered with ticks of nervous laughter, was shaky enough to register on the Richter scale. Fingers fidgeted, fiddling to undo the knots on his own sticky situation. "Crush… huuuum… errr…ssss?"

A hand slapped down on his shoulder and there was Frisk beside him, grinning profusely at Mom and Dad. Crush hum… mus! Frisk answered in Asriel's stead. This big guy was a waiter – a personal waiter. Yeah. His specialty was crushed hummus. Isn't that right, Asriel?
His mind blank; the Underground's prince went along anyway, nodding and confirming what they just said.

"Crushed hummus?" Toriel reiterated. After both children nodded so fast their heads were in danger of falling off, her arms went akimbo. "You are aware hummus is already crushed, right?"

Asriel's head went up and down while Frisk's went left and right. The two shared a glance, trying to reach the same step, and ended up swapping gestures. Asriel's ear slapped Frisk on the side of the head multiple times, ruffling their brown hair.

Toriel's face slackened. "My son, please do not tell me you attempted to hurt Frisk…"

Right there, little Dreemurr and little Frisk needed a hero, and it came in the form of large, stony paws upon their heads. Touching, the connection he and Flowey formed over many weeks reignited, and the two became one – the brain and the body.

"Crush…” Brute began, trying to read his advisor's motives. With a hand on the human, he could have sworn he felt them too. "Crush hum… mus." Honestly, he had no idea what hummus was, but he played along nonetheless. "Crush hummus."

Toriel's features remained scrunched in thought until, at last, she relaxed, slowly nodded and puckered her lips into an expression of acceptance. Asriel and Frisk sighed with smiles on their faces.

"Yes. Crush hummus." Brute shook his head. "No more crush human."

Asriel and Frisk were still smiling, but rigid, giggling like madmen and sweating up a tsunami.

Their hearts raced at the sight of Toriel's arms folding. "Asriel…” she said in a slow, stern manner. Honestly, Frisk had no idea why they were concerned.

The hero wasn't helping anymore. Time for the heroine!

"I wouldn't sweat about it too much," Undyne said, taking a spot beside them. She swirled a finger lazily around. "Pretty much everyone here's tried to kill Frisk at some point. Tried and failed." It fell in the direction of Emperor Maxus. "Except that guy, he sorta succeeded. Sorta. Tried, succeeded and failed, if that makes any sense."

"How can you say that?" Toriel made her question sharp, openly expressing her disdain. "That is not an excuse—"

Undyne interrupted with, "And it's still the best thing to ever happen to us."

She gestured to what their adventure had brought them – all of them. The Outerworld, a mirror of the Underground. Before the seventh human's fall, it had its own history, its stories, lives, loose ends, and Frisk landed in the middle of that world just how they rose to the quandaries which plagued this one. Two sides, separated, brought together. Whether or not the introduction of a certain human child had anything to do with breaking the formula it was up to debate. But it was like this now, and they were altogether once more.

"She has a point," Asgore said, softly nudging his wife in the back. The foster father, who once planned Frisk's end, taking Undyne's side in this argument.

Toriel looked at the faces around her and realised she was alone from her point of view. She went to argue, then remembered her own instance with Frisk back in the old New Home. Had she won, driven them away, and destroyed the door, would they be where they were now? Obviously not.
Then Frisk wouldn't have reached the castle, and the barrier would never have been destroyed, and none of them would've started their new lives under blue sky, sun, stars and clouds, or had this adventure.

Her arms went slack and she faced upwards in a show of forfeiture. Just as quickly, she regained her motherly doggedness. "This is the last time, though. After today, we are done," she announced as she looked to her associates, sharing her hard stare indiscriminately. "No more fighting, and no more of anyone trying to kill anyone anymore. Can we please agree on that?"

She received a unanimous agreement from the rest – with Frisk being the first to get behind it. Just as Sans nodded, Toriel grabbed his sleeve and yanked his hand out of his pocket, revealing two fingers crossed. He received an extra dose of her branding not-mad-just-disappointed stare until he uncrossed his fingers and proclaimed scout's honour.

Maxus, however – while everyone else had their fill of laughs – remained caught up on the first topic.

"You mean to tell me," Maxus began, "all this time we had a kid collecting our info, sharing our secrets and discussing our plans?" His confounded look switched from Ariel to Frisk. "And you knew all along…"

Frisk guessed there was no point in weaselling their way out. They answered with a sigh, a nod, and a shrug in that order.

"Frisk?" whispered Asgore. His entire perspective on everything turned upside-down. This reunion sprouted questions, and unearthing those unearthed more questions. Already the digging had made a rabbit hole. "You knew about…?"

Asriel spoke in their defence: "It's a longer story than I'd like."

The late Emperor Juhi stepped forth and inserted his own thesis into the conversation.

"It's difficult to describe. But it would appear that something inside our advisor that wasn't there before has returned."

Maxus asked, "What do you mean?"

"I always thought Advisor Flowey was a strange one, even before I died. It got stranger after I found nothing inside him. He was completely empty, without a soul. Now, I sense one pulsing inside him."

Juhi felt his son's intense gaze move off him for a brief reprieve to bore into the advisor. They were back on him in no time at all.

"Anyone with one eye intact can see that," Maxus replied, "but… that can't be it, can it?"

Juhi thought about it a little. His influence flowed through the nooks and cracks which comprised what was left of the Land between Heaven and Earth and identified nothing else altered. He gave the human a quick look and received averted eyes as an answer.

"I think it is," he concluded with a shrug. "I apologise if you expected more."

Maxus shook his golden crown. "I'm not upset. Just surprised." It sank in to the Emperor; he, a monster, gave up his wish to another, a human, so they could give it up to another monster. Whether it was ironic, befitting, or downright insulting, Maxus could not gauge. He trusted that Frisk would make the best wish, that they alone held its best usage, and this was the result.
"Are you seeing this?" he posed to Kanika's spirit. "How does this make you feel? You spent all that time trapped inside that rock, holding the greatest power known to the Universe, and it all came to this."

Her glossy lips curved upwards at the sound of it. "And yet," Kanika said, "I'm not mad at all. In fact, I'm rather content with that."

"How?" Maxus sounded incredulous.

"I don't know Kanika's intentions exactly..." the spectre placed a starry hand upon her starry chest. "But through her feelings, I think I now understand what I am. Before the first war ended, her last moments were spent beside the Obelisk." Eyes closed. "Her body is failing. Soul ready to shatter. Her dreams of peace between the two are tarnished. All hope faded... except for one tiny shred. One palm cold, pressed against flat stone; the other, running something against its surface..."

Opening them up, she drew them to the markings.

World forsaken

Hope remains

True power awaken

Upon greatest strength's dawn

"There's nothing else after that," she said. "That's where she died, and how the first Outerworld ended." The same hand, now clenched into a fist, fell to her side. "If this is true, then I am that shred of hope."

This would mean the spirit was not all of Kanika, but a small piece of her; a representation of a small aspect bestowed upon the Obelisk. Everything else – her memories, personality, drives, beliefs – perished with the real her. This was all that remained, a single entity which learned as she watched the world turn on its axis, clinging to the residual feelings left by her predecessor. She was Kanika's final trace, and yet she wasn't Kanika at all.

"One shred of hope, waiting for the greatest strength...?" Maxus asked. Pieces of a puzzle fitting together.

Kanika's one shred of hope scratched her lip. "I have this feeling... this whole thing was one huge test."

"A test?"

"To see if both humans and monsters were capable of... being better, I guess?" She pointed to the markings on the pillar's face. "World forsaken. She wasn't referring to this world, she was referring to Earth. Kanika felt much injustice during the war. Saw much hate, and no mercy. Thoughts all aimed inwards, focused on themselves instead of others. And she realised it would repeat itself on Earth just as it happened here..."

"Hope remains. Hope that, maybe, both sides were better than that. Hope that someday they could throw aside their differences and unite together as equals. And then there's the last line: true power awaken upon greatest strength's dawn."

Maxus responded, "I'm sure we're fully versed on that part."
To which Kanika's face lit aglow – more so than it already was. "A-ha! But you see, while forgiveness was the greatest strength,—" her marvel caught everyone off-guard "—the wish was never the true power."

Silence ensued. The obvious follow-ups would include "it isn't?" or "what then?" The not-so-obvious follow-up brewed within the complex intellect that was Papyrus: "If a train leaves a station carrying ninety-two passengers and travels north by north-west for three hours and twenty four minutes at one hundred and eighty one miles per hour...

Before any of those could come to fruition, Kanika answered everything except the train dilemma.

"The true power… it lies inside all of you." She gestured to everyone, young and old alike. "Don't you see? You didn't need the wish to make the world a better place, you all contain the power to make it better yourselves." She pointed randomly to the crowd. "You! You! You! Each and every one of you! You all can make the world wonderful. Beautiful. If you believe that you can, believe in yourselves, then you can achieve more than a better world – you can achieve anything! This is exactly what Kanika's been waiting for – I can feel it! She's proud. I think she's finally at peace."

Among those monsters were those who fought under the banner of the Empire, who donned argent armour and waved their flags, and those who sought to undermine them, those of the Rebellion. Together, they saw each other no longer as foes, but reflections of themselves; lives trying to live; people with loved ones, problems, and eases.

A series of events from the past week flicked through Maxus's memories. Something snagged. "You don't suppose everything leading up to this point was meant to happen, do you?" he asked.

"I don't know. All I do know for certain is that you three—" she pointed to Maxus, then Frisk, and then Asriel "—were the only people to hear my voice."

The only three. The monster who found the Outerworld, then found it in himself to forgive those who wronged him, ending a cycle of revenge which led nowhere. She called out to him, feeling the great loss which ruptured his soul, turned his entire life inside out.

The human who survived the Underground, then survived the Outerworld, and changed the Universe. Kanika, before Frisk was abducted, heard the echo in their soul. A grievance for the one they couldn't save.

The flower whom the wish was used on; the boy who strived to give every story its happy ending, at the cost of his own. She felt nothing at all, but a vast emptiness. A yearning for more. She spoke and filled that void with her echo.

That couldn't have been a coincidence.

"So now it's over," Maxus said. "Are we expected to get home by ourselves now? How are we going to manage that?"

Kanika responded confident with, "Like this."

The once invisible barrier surrounding the seven islands, reducing the sun into its pink shield, began to shimmer into crystal. The shine expanded out, flowing around the lands, the ruins, and the people itself. Family, friends and strangers expected the worse as the castle ruins faded and their homes evaporated, yet not a bump or an earthshattering rumble frightened them. Before they knew it, the ground had crumbled into a soft, grainy substance. The warm texture curved around soles and between toes.
Sand? Had they been whisked to the Oasis? To the paradise of its powder beach and clean water?
No. This sand was different. Harsher. Grittier. Warmer.

The barrier faded. The sands stretched far to the north and south as the eastern horizon lay level and
in a concoction of blue and gold. The surroundings had vanished along with the borders which
comprised the seven islands. There was no Highkeep Enclave, or Bob, or Oasis, or Rocklyn. The
one remaining thing which resembled home was the Obelisk, slanted slightly in the sand.

Juhi was stunned. "Wait… this beach. Do you recognise it?" he asked his son, tugging at his elbow.
"I swear we've been here once before."

Maxus gazed at the ocean, then swung to the land, to the cluster of trees not too far away. "Yes, I
do." He saw past to the shape of the horizon. The pattern within the terrain. The shade of green in
the grass. "I sat at the very edge of that forest over there when I was…"

Six years old.

"This is where it all began," Kanika explained. "Home. I feel… I feel Kanika wished to see this
place one last time before she died. Maybe I've been carrying that same dream ever since. If so, she
can rest easy now."

The barrier surrounding the thousands of monsters began to falter and dwindle, fading in an out of
reality, revealing brief glimpses of the skies true nature. Hundreds and thousands of living creatures
packed onto the large beach, disorientated and staring at the flickering around them, wondering what
was going to happen the second it ended.

Kanika went on. "It's nearly time." Her voice went to every ear. "In a few moments, the last traces of
magic will run dry and the Outerworld will be no more. Which means its power will no longer
sustain any of you. You'll all start aging normally again." She paused. "And the Grey Ones…
Well…"

Silent glances fell from Kanika to those ashen. Juhi, Danyell, Eden, Rex, Dunmore, Rita's parents,
and a ton more lives locked between life and death.

Danyell gazed up in awe. His arms slack in an expression many would call inappropriately calm for
a time like this. "Could it be…?" he said no louder than a breath. He had dreamed of this moment for
far too long. "Could it really be?"

Overseer Eden straightened his protruding straws, rubbing off excess ash in the process. This was
what death's door looked like, and he wanted to be as dignified as he could be in his undead
condition.

"This moment," he said, clairvoyant, "has been long overdue."

"It's about time…" Dunmore remarked after having said enough, seen enough, and done enough. As
a young cauldron, he was terrified at having his life cut short, having all his hopes dashed by the
whims of others. It took him a long time to realise the terrors which laid in the opposite, of not dying.
He had lived far beyond his boundaries, continued to walk and talk and think long after his body
rusted and his mind weakened little by little. Now, he wanted nothing more than to sleep forever.

Somewhere in his madness, Rex stumbled upon the last rational thought he had. His perpetual
aggressiveness drifted away, and he stood as calm as a stream.

"Rex… finally die…"
Rita turned to her parents. She had lost them so long ago for them to return in the worst possible fashion. She felt great pain; her parents felt it throbbing like a festering wound. The discomfort for the state they were in mingled with pain for losing them once, coupled with the sudden prospect of losing them a second time, was too much to bear.

"You're-you're goin' away now?" she dared to ask, afraid of the answer she knew was coming.

Her mother glanced down at her wrist, envisioning the silver watch she wore since her daughter was ten.

"It's awfully late… pet…" she said as tired as someone who had too much party wine, and eager to get home to bed.

"Yes, dear…" Rita's pa answered. "We should… be going now…"

Rita's head shook in denial. On one hand, she did not want them to leave her again; but, on the other, just seeing them like that was in itself torture. Her parents, caught in this cycle of undying, their minds weathered on whetstones. Rita wasn't even sure if they recognised her as the woman standing before them there or the child they cared for.

She pulled them together close; her parents were there, but not there at the same time. Alive but dead. Sane but insane. Aware of reality and stuck in a fantasy land all at the same time. The brief traces of which she could call Ma and Pa, she latched onto those, cherishing them as the minutes dwindled away.

Sam was at Rita's side, his hardened wrappings held her softly. He struggled to look, and struggled harder on what to say. "Rita… Honey…"

"I don't know what I want. I don't want you to leave me again…" Rita choked. "But… I can't stand to see you like this." She stammered. "I don't know."

Whether her parents held her now as she was, or as the toddler with the soiled pinafore and scraped knees, Rita would never know nor would she care. In some inane hope, she believed that she held the people who brought her into this world. The same way they held their daughter, Rita, one last time.

As his own doom closed in, it was not himself who Juhi was concerned about. "What about you?" he asked Kanika's missing link.

She answered on a sombre note. "I am one with its magic." She looked at her starry hands. "Once it goes… I go, too."

"Are you afraid of what will happen next?"

"Are you?" she threw right back.

Juhi gazed at the sun; the first time he had seen it like that in a while, destined to be his last. "I learned the hard way that some things are worse than death. I've lived far too long to be afraid. In some strange way, I think I've earned this. I think we all have. I can leave this world behind now, knowing it's in good hands."

"You and me both. Despite all I've seen, I do wonder what the next world holds."

"Then let's find out. Together."
One corner of Kanika's lips rose. She switched from the sun, to Juhi, then back, carrying some of that natural sunlight with her look at the previous emperor. She had spent far too long watching other people's adventures play out from start to finish. Now it was time for an adventure of her own, and it lay out there across the water.

The barrier crystallised its strongest – metaphorically breathing its dying breath – before the entire wall began to crack and shatter, starting from above and working its way down. The field keeping them in and the world out diminished, and crumbled into shards which fizzled into twinkling stars. Behind it, the diluted sky saturated, contrasting vibrant colours of orange to red, red to violet, violet to indigo, indigo to navy. When it was all gone, the full force of the real world slammed into those thousands of souls.

The Outerworld citizens gazed out across the ocean, from its blue roots to its golden petals on the horizon, made valuable by the setting sun, large and orange. The lapping of the ocean. The hint of salt in the humidity. For the first time, they saw the outside world without the looking glass, witnessing true colour, sight and smell.

It was like General Juhi was a young man again, back at the start. He stood there exactly how he stood in a time long forgotten, believing his life to be over. The rays on his body. Sand beneath his feet. Wind in his hair. Never before had he felt so alive.

They forgot about everything; every trace of evil in the world, for one moment, and basked in this dusk.

"It's beautiful…" Danyell said, giving the overseer a nudge on the arm. "Glad we got to see it again."

"Indeed…" Eden replied. "One last time."

Danyell, the proud scout – wounded during the war and lived long above the clouds – sighed with relief as a gentle breeze carried him away. His body flaked away molecule by molecule until he was but ashes in the wind. Overseer Eden remained distinguished, back straight, hands meeting behind back, as his dusty matter joined Danyell's, leaving a few straws where he last stood.

The strength of natural sunlight made Rex fell very sleepy. He hunched down onto all fours, crawled around in circles a few times, stretched his back straight from his neck to the tip of his tail, and then curled up on the warm sand.

Half asleep, the sun was the last thing he saw. He mumbled his farewell to the world: "Nighty… night…"

At last, he found sleep.

Dunmore sat down and rolled on the natural curve in his back. He had no last words, or regrets either. He gazed up at the multi-coloured sky, looking back on his life, remembering the good times before the wind carried him away.

Rita's dusty parents in the direct sunlight was the future they could have had. Sam held his wife just as how her parents held each other.

"Time… for us to go, dearie," Rita's father announced. "Take care of yourself…"

"And Sam, darling…" the mother said, gesturing her featureless head his way. "You take care of Ritie… you hear…?"

Sam nodded. "I will. I promise."
Rita wiped at her glowing eyes. "I'm gonna miss you…"

Even though she couldn't see it, Rita knew they were smiling.

"Knock 'em dead, Ritie," her mother said. "Love you. Always."

Together, in each other's arms, Rita's parents remained unified as their bodies crumbled, carted off into the air. She watched unblinking as those figures became unrecognisable above, becoming one with the mist.

Each and every member of the ash gave their final goodbyes to their loved ones as the last remnants of magic piecing them together ran out. Monsters crumbled after bidding their farewells, between embraces, and after sharing final words of wisdom:

'Follow your soul.' 'Wash behind your ears – all four of them.' 'Be in bed by eight.' 'Love means never having to say you're sorry, except when it isn't.' The usual riffraff.

Before their dust danced in the air, the looks on all those grey faces were not that of sadness, but of joy, happiness. It was written: this was not a moment of despairing, but of rejoicing. The tears which cried for their loss also cried for their freedom, and for the memories they shared.

Kanika felt it in her atoms. She was not constructed of dust, yet those gone beckoned her name; a space amongst them reserved just for her. An invitation to join them on their final journey. How could she refuse such an offer?

"The journey may be long, but I'm almost there, Kanika," the final shred of hope stated to herself, reaching out to the body she had been subjugated from. "I'll find you." One by one, her stars floated upwards, joining the twinkling ash in the wind. "I just know I'll find you."

As the magic ceased, so did she. Her stars dispersed and joined the swirling ash above.

The numbers dwindled one after the other until a single soulless figure of dust was left. Juhi. He watched as his comrades swerved around and around above, waving and flowing to no obvious pattern or any rhyme. An unpredictable flow of knots and diamonds, weaving in and out.

"They're waiting for me," he said. "I better not keep them any longer."

As he glanced back down, he discovered that not only was Maxus there to say goodbye, but also Barb, Haze, Rickard, and Leigh.

The bounty hunter was first up, hands clenched together as if in prayer. "Hey, Juhi," she said, sounding small for someone of her reputation. "I'm sorry I wasn't there to say goodbye the first time."

"That's quite alright," Juhi replied. "Be glad you're here to say it now. You've got a bright future ahead of you. Get out in the sunlight more. Meet new people. Wear something a little less… constrictive. You'll do fine out there." His outlined eyes scanned the features of those he called his allies, comrades, and aged friends – Haze a little older from the last time he saw him. "You'll all do."

Uncharacteristically, Professor Haze graced his old friend with a good-natured chuckle. "Knowing my future," he said, "I'll be seeing you again sooner than you think."

"I most likely won't be that far behind," Leigh, the tiger general, added before massaging his neck.

"Then I expect to hear some extraordinary stories from both of you later," Juhi said. He saw them not in the pink shade thanks to the protective field, but under pure light. He had never seen them in such
colour – such vibrancy. He scarcely recalled seeing such in the Dark Ages, back when he had real eyes. "Thank you both for everything. For your innovations, and your dedication to the military. I couldn't have asked for better allies."

Haze hobbled forward on his walking stick and shook hands with the man he knew from the start. "Until we meet again, your highness."

Juhi chuckled as he detected a hint of deadpan in that pronunciation of your highness.

"It's been a pleasure while it lasted," Leigh said, and shook the same hand which Haze shook.

Finally, it came time to Rickard to say his peace. However, on his cue, he refrained from speaking. He appeared empty without his trademark pad and pen, which should be taking notes on this momentous occasion: the day the Outerworld went free.

"You know, Rickard," Juhi said, "I think your talents were wasted on note duty."

Rickard, after hearing that, snapped his chin up. Whether he should he be humbled or insulted by that remark, he could not tell.

He continued. "You're better than you think. You're one of the bravest souls I've ever met in my life. But you don't believe it yourself." He pointed to him, almost tapping the tip of Rickard's nose. "I want you to start believing, Rickard. Get out there into the real world and make something of yourself. I know you can."

Rickard's mouth opened. The albino rat had something to say. "My Lord. Thank you. For everything."

It did not sound like much. However, to Juhi, it meant everything.

The dying lion said, "Make yourself proud."

Particles began to flake off Juhi's body, rising like embers in flame, the steam off of hot springs. His life fading away contained such an unusual, fascinating beauty.

"Dad, I…" Maxus was slouched, switching back and forth between the ground and him before settling on the ground. "I wish I could have saved you."

Juhi smiled. "You already have," he said before taking a few steps back. "Goodbye, everyone. Goodbye, my son."

As Juhi diminished, joining the rest of his kind, he couldn't take his eyes off his son.

"That's my boy…" He stretched his hand toward Maxus and said it proudly. His voice so cracked it belonged to a weeping man. "That's my boy, right there!"

In that moment, it struck the Emperor. He couldn't hold himself back any longer.

He rushed forward, reaching out. "Dad!"

Hand outstretched, he reached where his mighty father stood and grabbed empty air. The tall, imposing frame of the late Emperor Juhi faded away in the wind and became one with the storm which eclipsed the dying day.

Those particles sparkled in the sun's rays, coming alive in sparks of blue, red, green and yellow. They danced, having been freed from the shackles of their eternal torment. They span slow then fast;
faster and faster until they flew out across the ocean. This was not the end, but rather, a new beginning. Their journey upon this world came to its conclusion, and so began their new tale.

Paradise. The living held them in their prayers. Guide them to the light, to the world beyond worlds, where the traveller never grew wary, the found were never lost, and the few were never alone.

The departed left their own prayers to those they were leaving behind. All they asked was that they remembered them, and respected their passing with one little wish…

Live.

Maxus, surrounded by those he alienated, those he didn't deserve, watched as the deceased took to the world beyond the sunset. His father's words span in his head, destined to remain forever as the twinkling ashes became one with the horizon. His old man was proud to call him his son.

"Maxus… are you okay?" Rickard's voice was heard.

Maxus, the emperor of a world now gone, found his former scribe beside him. The urgency written upon his pale features was unwarranted given the shoddy send-off he received – a shame Maxus will carry until his ashes joined his father's.

"I'm… unharmed. Why do you ask?" Maxus asked.

Rickard pointed directly into his former ruler's face. "Your eye. It appears to be…" he twirled his hand as he searched for the right word. "Leaking?"

"Leaking?"

Maxus swiped his cheek, and in doing so, caught a single drop of gold as it sank into the fur of his index finger.

His first tear.
It was over.

A thousand years of history drew to a close, and the survivors would now continue their stories in the real world.

Try as they might, the living inhabitants of the Outerworld could not stand there looking out across the ocean forever, to where the ones they called friends and family drifted away. They awakened from their trances to their sudden change in environment.

"The air," someone said. "It's so clear." Followed by deep breaths and satisfied sighs. Oh, how the Outerworld air now felt stuffy in comparison.

"This sand," another with curious fingers said. "I've never felt anything like it." More fingers, claws and appendages of every shape combed the beach. Grains, soft sand like they had never experienced before.

"This grass. It's so green and prickly. And nice."

"Wow. This tree's super sturdy. And this one. This one too. Oh, I bet I could climb this one!"

"Eek! This water's so cold. Eww! And it tastes funny, too!"

"Look out there. It goes on forever. This place is huge! How is anyone expected to see it all in one lifetime?"

The collective gasps as these monsters born of the sky made contact with the surface world – a land thought forbidden to them – rang familiar to those chiselled by the Underground. They fondly recalled their first meeting with surface air and Mister Sun. Except now they were sharing their second return with more monsters, every soul experiencing real soil, sand and grass.

At first shocked, awed, the monsters drew in the sweet intoxication of clean, saline air; the alluring radiance of natural sunlight, washing over skin, fur, and scales; the hypnotising draw of waves washing against the shore. It invigorated them, pulling them out of their shells as it would to humble, budding flowers. It was like they were sick and just stumbled upon the remedy.

Of course, not everything was bound to be golden. A few glaring issues sprang to mind.

"My lor… Maxus," Rickard corrected. "As liberating as this is, I feel obliged to point out that with the Outerworld gone, so is everything we've built." He gestured white, spindly hands to the empty stretch of sand. "We've lost our homes, our food, our money, or tools. We've lost everything."

To this, Maxus, in the wake of no longer ruling the sky – his title dissolved, Empire forfeit – acted the surest he ever has in his whole life. He acted not as the Emperor, but as himself.

"Except our lives," he said. "I remember. When we found the Outerworld, we had already lost everything during the war. It was tough, but we worked together. We survived, and eventually relearned how to live." Off in the distance, he glimpsed the towers of human civilisation, so tall yet not enough to scrape their home. "We will do it again, even if we have to rely on others."

As expected, his minute speech was met with silence. Although there was much to argue against,
like whether the humans would welcome them or where were they going to go, he had made his point to a level where it was infallible on the surface. The Outerworld was not a place, but a people. They were the spirit which would keep the land between heaven and earth alive long after they were gone.

The former emperor and former scribe shared a brief glance. Maxus thought he would never see those eyes of his again. Too soon, he thought. In it, he saw the agony he caused earlier that day, in the garden.

"Rickard," Maxus began. His tone truly apologetic. "I'm sorry for how I treated you before. You were right, about everything. I let my anger get to me, and I did stupid things because of it. Can you ever forgive me?"

Rickard looked up at him. The anger behind them existed a moment before simmering down to a tepid temperature.

"I suppose forgiveness is the word of the day, isn't it?" he said. He winced as he pulled his shoulders back, feeling the worst of it in his midsection. "I'm not too sure if I can right now, it's still rather early. But I can try in the future."

Maxus nodded. "That's all I ask."

He reached down. Rickard initially flinched considering how rough those hands were the last time. When Maxus made contact, it came in the form of a pat on the back. A gesture that did not seem right coming from his ruthless Emperor. After it was over, it did not sit well with the scribe. He might need Maxus to give him another one just to appreciate how it felt.

Barb the bounty hunter saw the sky. Those clouds she looked down upon now did the same to her. Her massive influence on the previous world faded and, all of a sudden, she felt small – a speck on a large, porous wall. Her wings twitched with a desire to explore the sky for herself; it was an urge she could not ignore.

Her half-brother, Maxus, sensed her agitation. "Go." That was his seal of approval.

She lunged forward and took flight.

How fortunate that her injured wing had been healed prior, otherwise such a liberating experience would have ended on an abrupt note. She rocketed upwards by fifty feet before realising she could climb higher, so she did.

She guessed her altitude to be at a hundred feet, and was no closer to those orange clouds, so she kept climbing. Her wings slowed automatically as a defence mechanism to stop herself from crashing into the barrier – a lesson she learned the hard way and cost her three days of her life. Here, she pushed herself higher.

She gained distance on her batwings until she looked out and saw miles of land and water in every direction, with no broken borders to separate them, and no bridges to connect them. The civilians on the beach stretched half a mile long, crammed in every square metre. No longer shackled by the confines of her home, she danced and weaved in gracious circles, rolls and loops, free to fly the world.

On the ground, Maxus watched as she took her first flight on planet Earth. She moved so fast she was like a blur, and he struggled to keep track of her. On occasion, he would lose sight, then find her after a moment of scouring.
Her aerial acrobatics tugged another memory he thought lost. In the coming months after Barb's birth, her parents sent word to Maxus to make haste to their quarters. He rushed around corner after corner, knowing the fortress like the back of his paw, and pushed his way through their door to see what the commotion was about. He found baby Barb two inches off the ground, puffy cheeks scrunched and red with exertion as she held herself up on tiny wings. Mommy and Daddy bat showered their daughter with joy and praise as she took her first flight. It had only been a month since she had taken her first steps.

She spluttered down an inch before tiring out and landing on the padding of her diaper. Her innocent face lay blank for a second before she giggled and clapped her hands. Not only did her parents pick her up and tell her how good she was, but so did he.

The sounds of Barb's parents snapped Maxus out of his reminiscences. Among the crowd, they were there, staring to the heavens to watch her dance. Their baby was dancing. Their baby was free, because Maxus made it happen.

Too long had Professor Haze spent cooped up in his dingy dungeon of a laboratory, working day and night, harder than the entire population combined. Surprisingly, the realisation that all his years of hard work had been lost in the blink of an eye was not as shattering as he had imagined. If anything, it was a sign.

Time to put the past behind him and look to the horizon. He flexed his eyebrows until every lens was folded behind his ear and he saw the world through his own eyes. He wanted to see what lay beyond the ocean, across fields of green, mountains of grey and glaciers of white.

He wanted to spend what little time he had left basking in his victory. Their victory.

And when his time came, he was bound to have some stories to tell.

*Count on it, Juhi.*

Colonel Fischer pushed her way through the crowds, scanning civilian and soldiers alike. The presence and rank which offered her unimpeded passage through most roads and hallways ceased in the wake of their freedom. She, herself, did not feel important either as she mingled with the common folk, her being just as common as they were.

Her helmet felt hot, her armour stifling. She unclasped it all, down to her thin gambeson and the white skin on her forearms.

Sticking out like a sore thumb, she spotted Private Perro. Fischer was just in time to see him run forward – tongue out and tail wagging – as he pulled another husky – laughing and wearing a black dress vest – off the ground and into a manly hug. Colonel Fischer pushed her way forward until she almost witnessed in full clarity the brotherly reunion between Private Perro of the Monster Military, and Chien of the Sky Heights Hotel.

On the last step, her boot knocked against something, almost tripping her up. She glanced down and found a balding komodo dragon with his fingers and toes dug into the sand, shaking all over, refusing to look up or let go.

Fischer recognised him straight away. "Geoff?"

He turned his head, but not by much. Enough to see in the overall direction of his name being called. Not enough in the direction of the sky.
"Do… Do I know you?" he asked in a trembling voice.

"Geoff, it's me," the colonel said, standing over him. "Katherine."

Geoffrey stopped trembling. Now there was a name he hadn't heard in a lifetime. Gentle hands pulled his willing frame upright, yet he sank his heels deep all the way to the ankles. His first look at Colonel Katherine Fischer also glimpsed some of what lay above the horizon. He turned his chin down and dug himself deeper.

"What's wrong with you?" she asked, leaning down to meet him with her violet eyes.

"All that sky… and those clouds… above us…" Geoff said in a hushed tone, afraid that the very forces of physics themselves would overhear his scrutiny. He gripped her forearms. "Don't let me go. I swear I'm gonna fall into it."

Fischer smiled and shook her head. "And they said you were sheltered during school." With both hands, she took hold under his jaw, feeling the roughness of his unkempt facial hair. "There's nothing to be afraid of. Come on."

She lifted his head. His red and yellow eyes remained fixated downward and scrunched up upon levelling. Peep after reluctant peep, he opened them a shade them shut them. The next time lasted a full second. Then two. Three. Five seconds.

He saw Katherine Fischer. Those braces were gone; they made her look cute as a teen, but her teeth looked better with them off. That persistent, flaky rash between her eyebrows had cleared up. Hair still as frizzy as before. No more glasses; does she wear contacts?

Katherine Fischer. In all honesty, he preferred her nickname. "Hi… Kat."

Just as Kat went to open her mouth, she was interrupted by the gruff, doggie voice under her command.

"Hey, look. Is that…?"

Geoff and Kat found the two huskies, Perro and Chien, looking their way. Recognition flashed in their beady canine eyes.

"It is," Chien announced. "It's Geoffrey." They still knew him despite having most of the hair on his head gone, and with that sorry excuse of a beard, and without that 'This is what winning looks like' t-shirt which he wore every Monday and Tuesday and Wednesday, Thursday, Friday, Saturday, but not Sunday for some reason.

The two eagerly approached. Perro's steps large and heavy, his brother the opposite. The komodo dragon turn away in a shy manner, wishing to avoid his past, that he could go back to his sheltered life from before.

"Geoffrey, my man," Perro said. "I haven't seen him since… graduation."

"Where you been all this time?" Chien asked.

"U-u-under the radar, I guess," Geoffrey answered uneasy. He wished he could be standing there as tall, dark and handsome Vail instead of his imperfect, ugly self.

He knew these two, back when Perro was as skinny and tall as a lamppost and Chien wasted his afternoons beneath the yard benches around the time wafts of smoke were spotted rising between the
Chien's minimalist change in appearance was a far cry from the jackets, sunglasses, and abundance of studs he wore. The guy even had an afro. An afro!

Geoff tapped Perro's chest plate, nearly breaking his knuckles in the process. "So, uh, been working out? I mean, obviously you have."

"Oh, yeah. You better believe it." Perro flexed his bicep. It burst like a balloon and comically deflated until only a skinny arm remained. He quickly changed the subject. "Still can't beat your grounded hogs sandwich munching record, though."

Geoff hid his eyes. There was not a single thing he had done as Geoffrey which he could place his own stamp of approval on. How he wished he could go back to his life under Black Ice Mountain, strap on a virtual reality set and be somebody who was not him.

He could chomp down fifteen of them in a minute. The best anyone else ever achieved was seven.

"I still remember the victory call you made every time you won," Fischer chimed in with a snap of her fingers. "You remember, don't you?" She gave him a friendly tap on the elbow. "Of course you do."

Those three pairs of eyes waited with eager anticipation for their old colleague to perform his signature taunt. Oh, Geoff was getting caught up in his make-believe persona again. Vail had been his security blanket for too long, but not long enough in his mind. He had performed his call a good few thousand times after school, just not in the frame of himself. He went to raise his hand but some divine force held it down. It felt embarrassing, raising his own hand and not that of the illustrator of illusions.

Perro’s gauntlet eclipsed his own and yanked it over his shiny head, accompanied with more words of encouragement. Say those three words. Say it like old times.

Through quivering lips, out came one syllable: "…Ding…"

"You can do better than that," said Private Perro, tugging the arm higher. His socks and sandals erupted from the beach, coated in yellow grains.

Geoff said it louder. "Ding… ding…?"

Chien held his fists up. "Let's do it together."

The three surrounding him reeled their fists and voices for grand display. Geoff threw his hands up as they bellowed in unison.

"Ding, ding, ding!"

They laughed and cheered, and soon Geoffrey joined them as well. Alone, he sulked by himself. With them, he laughed alone with the crowd, and along with the world.

Geoff of Black Ice Mountain realised he wasn't alone.

So many people. Such a large crowd – dealing with them was not among Alphys's faculties. So long as Undyne had her hands around her, she was protected from any and all threats.

Except the one Undyne had in store.

"Alphys." The sound of Undyne's voice under the collective din brought her up to meet his single
"About what you said back there… About jumping…"

Just as Alphys felt so high one minute, she suddenly felt low the next. Those same outward sounds shut off and only hers remained. Two voices in a sea of noise.

"I heard what happened in your lab was pretty bad. But was it really that bad?"

That bad? Alphys could still hear their cries for help both when she was conscious and when she slept. She got chills whenever so much as mayonnaise leaked onto her claws.

Alphys spoke in a very quiet voice. "Y-yes. I thought what I did was unforgivable." She saw her toes crossed. One foot tapped in a nervous tick. "I thought my life was over. I thought there was nothing left for me anymore."

Undyne appeared quizzical. "What made you change your mind then? You found a reason to live?"

The sloshing water and the darkening sand placed the doctor on the spot, one foot away from oblivion. She wondered what the weightlessness of falling would have felt like; it made her more scared of what could have happened on that day.

"No. I didn't find a reason." Without looking up, shaking, her words came out meek. "…She found me."

Quiet in a world of a thousand voices. Undyne looked down at Alphys and Alphys looked down at her feet. She could feel her girlfriend judging her, contemplating how weak she was, how she fell for someone so insecure.

Undyne knelt down to make their eyes level. Her hands soft on her shoulders. For someone of short temperament and an aptitude to kick major hinny, she spoke with an unfound softness. "Look, let's never allow this to get between us ever again." She pressed a fingertip to her chest. "No more feeling sorry for yourself, and no more secrets between us. Okay?"

Alphys sniffed and grew a brave smile. "Okay." Her courage earned her a sweet grin from her girlfriend. "I guess I sh-should start by telling you about the cushion."

"Cushion?" Undyne blinked her only eye. "What's this about a cushion?"

"You see, I have this life-sized pillow with a picture of—" Alphys got that far in her thought before Undyne clamped her mouth shut.

"I said let's not keep anymore secrets between us, Alphys, not whatever the heck kind of freaky fantasies you got cookin' up in there."

"Excuse me," someone spoke with a voice which made Alphys snap her eyes aside and Undyne's skin crawl.

Impossible to miss, there was Lord Grill, in the most haggard state he'd been in since the all-nighter he held at Bjornliege Manor ten years ago, which he saw fit to stretch to four nights.

He made a meagre gesture toward the scientist. "This your girlfriend?" he asked. He wished not to provoke Undyne's ire, as hinted in his reluctance.

Undyne gave a blunt answer. "Yes." It came out slow and more like a hiss than a word.

Blankly, Grill examined the short, podgy, yellow-scaled dinosaur or lizard or whatever she was, then
compared her to the stuff of nightmares. Since yesterday, his mind ran with what kind of beast could
tame a heart such as hers; an abomination ten feet in height with skin like chiselled marble and a	temper which exploded when one so much as opened their mouth at the wrong time was a vision
he’d put money on. He looked at the hunched lady in the scientist's uniform, half his size in height
and bulk, most likely a bigger shut-in than he was with a diet also consisting of nothing healthy, and
couldn't believe how wrong he had hedged his bets.

He imagined Undyne as the ten foot tall, hulking abomination now. The next instant his teeth parted
could be his last, and he would die without having sampled the legendary delicacies as seen through
human television. The Bonus Mac. The Sloppy Whopper. The Big N’ Wink.

He opened his mouth anyway. "May I have a word with her in private?"

Undyne thought about it. Believe it when she really thought about it. He hit on anything that moved.
What was to say he wouldn't try on it Alphys. Before releasing Alphys, she pointed two fingers to
her eyes then pointed at Grill, repeating it twice for good measure.

As Alphys made her way across, Undyne did it a third time, then a fourth.

Lord Grill squatted down past the point where his knees could sustain his weight, resulting in him
rolling on his backside. His crash landing was thunderous, even on a surface as soft as theirs. At least
this way, the two were seeing each other face to face.

"So, Undyne's girlfriend, huh?" Grill reiterated just in case he imagined it the first time. Alphys –
abated by his meaty breath – answered with a timid nod. "Listen carefully. I want you to know one
thing about that woman over there. She's…"

Instinctively, Alphys's eyes rolled behind her glasses. Yeah, she could already guess what he was
about to say. She's a maniac. A lunatic. A whack job. Completely out of her tree. A deranged
psychopath and you should run away as fast as you can.

"One of a kind."

Alphys's eyes snapped to meet Lord Grill's. His bear face, which looked ready to chomp her snout
off, looked at her with a certain softness whom Undyne would have difficulty understanding.

"You have no idea how lucky you are, young lady. How great it must be to find one person to
complete you, when I couldn't find it in twenty." He clutched her wrists and brought them together.
"Promise me one thing. Don't let her go. Never, ever, ever let her go."

"Actually," Alphys said, "I'd say she's the one who won't let me go."

It was halfway between a joke and a fact, but Grill laughed anyway. He leaned back and his face
scrunched up. He shifted his wide rump around before reaching under it and yanking out the source
of his discomfort: it was about the size of a large coconut, with a weird choice of hair colour and two
blank, dead eyes which spooked him, nearly making him drop it.

Doctor Alphys drew a quick breath. "Mew Mew!" She snatched the head of her anime robot,
amazed to find it still intact. She turned Mew Mew around, pried open a hatch hidden beneath her
spiky locks, and rummaged around her cerebral circuitry. "It seems alright. N-nothing looks broken.
Please don't be corrupted. You've got so much to live for, my anime friend."

Anime? And Lord Grill thought he was the loser. He would make an 'L' with his finger and thumb
and press it against his forehead but Alphys's other half made that threatening gesture a fifth time. I'm
watching you, buster.
Instead, he opted to remain frank with Undyne's girl. "I hope she's okay," he said. "After all, I have been sitting on her fa…" He stopped and really thought about that phrase for a second. He retreated back to his first thought. "I hope she's okay."

Sans dug his hands deep into his pockets. From his height, he could scarcely make out the gathering in his vicinity, but he could heard their numbers. "Man. To think that we had our share of problems leavin' the Underground," he said. "At least we still have the Underground. These guys've got nothin'."

"So many more monster back on Earth…" Asgore murmured, stroking his bead. "Getting them food and shelter on such short notice is going to be a hassle."

"Without question," Toriel replied. "But if everyone pitches in, then we can make it work."

"I guess we've got some tough weeks ahead of us." He glanced down at his son. His pristine fur almost glowed in the dawn light. "However, let's enjoy this moment while we can. I still can't believe you're back, Asriel."

Asriel nervously dug his feet into the sand. "Me neither."

Asgore's limp hand, by his side, opened up, beckoning his son to take it. As Asriel took it, Asgore gave Toriel a knowing glance. She nodded and took hold on his other hand. Together, their grip was firm and locked solid.

"Ready?" Asgore asked, and Toriel nodded again. "One… two… three…"

The coupled lowered themselves before throwing their hands in the air, along with their child. Little Asriel rocketed five feet off the ground, laughing like old times. After landing, imprinting another pair of his paw prints over the existing ones, they counted to three again.

Papyrus brought his clasped, gloved hands up to his chin as to bared witness the wonder of the three Asgores: Original Asgore, Cloned Asgore, and Mini Asgore.

Undyne had seen her mentor happy on many occasions, but this was a different breed of happiness altogether, one never seen in all of her years. A special kind of joy, seen in the connection of others, just how she was connected to Doctor Alphys.

And Frisk…

They saw the Dreemurr family reunited at long last after countless years of separation. Frisk wanted to frown, but could not find it in themself to ruin the magic of the moment. Asgore and Toriel had their real son back. The human could see it in the family's eyes: happiness beyond measure. Everything they needed, releasing hollers of joy every time his feet left the ground.

The parents counted to three and pulled their child off his paws, him laughing like in a time forgotten. The King shared his joy with the warrior he mentored and the scientist he cared for. Alphys and Undyne made an adorable couple. A short, relaxed skeleton and his lanky counterpart were exact polar opposites, and they were brothers to the end.

Such wonderful people. The most interesting lives in the whole of Frisk's small world, the ones they struggled to live without… and yet they remembered their alternate self.

Toriel's last lyrics of laughter as she clutched the deep gash to her torso. Papyrus's promise as a skull lopsided in the snow. Undyne's undying resolve as she melted away. Mettaton's perpetual self-
absorption despite the hole through his sternum. Sans putting off his own death to ask his long gone
brother if he wanted any of Grillbys' finest, greasy grub. Asgore dying alone, as did his soulless son.

It still made Frisk sick to their stomach. To think something wearing their clothes and their skin could
slice out the most important aspects of their life. Not out of justice, but because they could – they as
the strong human and everyone else as weak, freak show monsters. That version of Frisk with the
dusty knife was still them, whether they liked it or not. The same size, build, strength, speed, and
empty past. The one difference was their morals.

There was only one way Frisk could protect them…

Frisk turned and made for a break between the scores of people. They stopped to take one look back
as the boy was pulled off the sands.

By the way… Asriel. Take care of your Mom and Dad, okay?

Alone, they dragged their feet past constellates of Outerworld inhabitants – excited, awed monsters,
experiencing the wonder of the real world while the magic existed; none of them heeded them as if
they were invisible. They snivelled in large gulps of air to stop themself from making a scene as they
moved further north at a snail's pace.

On their way, they passed Brute, whose size had made him a magnet for every bird within a five
mile radius. Seagulls, pigeons, sparrows, and a few uncommon breeds stood perched on his
shoulders and head. They took a liking to Brute so much that he could even stroke some of their
feathers. He liked them, although he wasn't too fond of the white stains they were leaving on his
expensive suit.

Sam an' Rita's white wrappings were visible atop a hill near the treeline further inland; the couple sat
in the one spot where no one else resided. Together, they gazed across the water as the sun
descended toward it. Their rustic, riverside home was gone along with her parents – all ashes strewn
to the wind. The same parents Frisk allowed to die – whom they nor anybody could save from the
inevitable clutches of death. A dumb thought suggested to ask if they were in the market of looking
after a human child, at least for a while. As quickly as it popped up, Frisk shot it down.

With each minute, the chorus died down an octave, along with the numbers surrounding them and a
widening berth of untrodden sand.

Eventually, Frisk found themself surrounded by open air and sky and the waters to the brim of the
Earth. Walking alone, the monsters behind them, nobody spoke their name or walked beside them.

Where would they go? Frisk wondered as they soldiered on. Who would want to look after someone
such as them? A child who dwelled better with members of a species not their own. Someone who
had no happy family of their own to even imagine what one was like.

On the horizon to the north, a blocky, mauve silhouette of skyscrapers clashed against cyanic sky.
One of those rectangles would be the orphanage, and one of those wine-coloured squares would be
the window where a spare bed overlooked the gasoline choked lanes. Frisk was a parentless child in
a world which didn't care for parentless children. In time, however, they would find others who'd be
their friend, and find a family of their own who would take care of them, and love them, and treat
them as one of their own.

Frisk stopped to take another look back – the final one, they swore it. The crowds swelled with the
lapping against the shore, but nobody – no goat, skeleton, fish or lizard – came diving out. Just as
Frisk suspected. Already, their existence had been erased, washed over by the miraculous return of
their little prince. There was no room for them, an outsider peering in from the cold and trying to be something they weren't. If they went back, no doubt they would stare blankly at them, and wonder who they were.

They chose that wish, knowing full well what it meant for them. Frisk had condemned themself to an eternal life of solitude, of never having a true family of their own. But they could at least keep some happiness in their heart knowing that they gave up their chance of a family to give another back his. The one who needed it more than them.

Wave after wave bit against the coast; each drop of water always at work and never alone. The shrieks of a few wayward gulls cackled elsewhere. At least the birds had someone beside them, someone to communicate with, even if said conversations consist of shrill crowing. So many clouds littered above; big ones, small ones, one in the shape of a cloud. Trillions of grains beneath their feet. Trillions of rays illuminating their path.

So many things united together. And yet, Frisk remained the one facet who stood alone.

The sun warmed their skin, and Frisk imagined it as a hug from dear Toriel, coupled with a pinch of Asgore's embarrassing, fatherly charm. Their belly grumbled with a strange craving for Papyrus's special brand of pasta, and a hearty glass Sans's puns to wash it down. Alphys's nerd outs and Undyne with her fearless determination quivered their knees. Such little things tore a gorge in Frisk's heart, and they knew full well they were never going to see any of them again.

During their second adventure, the thought of returning home to butterscotch-cinnamon pie and flowers in the garden, to Asgore and Toriel's relief were the forces which told them to push harder, run faster, think smarter, and never give up. Now all that was gone. The one thing they fought for was now gone forever, because they handed it to someone else.

Frisk counted their next steps as the first toward their new adventure, one which could last them right to the end: the quest to find a family of their own.

As for those they were leaving behind, Frisk was sure going to miss them.

They sniffed as they rubbed their cheeks with sleeves saturated with their tears.

*Goodbye… my friends.*

*Goodbye forever.*
Asgore and Toriel playfully lifted Asriel off the ground again, just the way they did years back; the tenth time was just as fun as the first. Goose bumps grew spread beneath their fur as they remembered the sound of Asriel's youthful laughter, and the touch of his fur against theirs. The scene of a family brought back together brought smiles to Alphys, Undyne, Papyrus, and – ironically – Sans. Still finding it hard to believe that the flower behind all his overlapping memories was the kid of his king and the old lady.

Still, he couldn't act like a downer about it. Toriel was smiling wider than he had ever seen, laughing stronger and longer than he had heard, and doing all this alongside the husband she used to disown.

Sans tilted his skull in the direction of his bros. "Ain't it sweet?" he asked.

"Rightfully so. As sweet as cinnamon and burning," Papyrus replied, although that concoction wasn't sweet at all. Smiling, he brushed a finger across his chin. "However, I believe this recipe will be made even sweeter with the inclusion of one small ingredient."

"One small ingredient?" Asgore repeated. "Wait a minute…" With his free hand, he pointed at himself, his son, and then his wife. That was three fingers extended, yet it wasn't enough. "Papyrus is correct. Something is amiss here."

Toriel covered her mouth to giggle. "You are right," she said, "We appear to be missing something."

Asriel slipped his fingers from out of her grasp.

"Or rather… someone," he finished before he turned to the right and reached out. "Hey, Fris—" His hand reached toward an empty space. Who he thought was there, wasn't. "Frisk?" His smile vanished. He looked left and right, perhaps having forgotten where they stood. Or maybe they moved while he wasn't looking. "Frisk?" he said louder. All around, he found no sign of them. "Frisk!"

It rubbed off on the rest. His parents and their four friends frantically scanned the area in search of their missing number.

"W-what? Where did they go?" Alphys asked. Mew Mew's head suddenly weighed a ton. Her guard had been down at the hope of returning to the Internet and getting her fix after a full two days apart. Imagine the tweets she could have sent. The posts she had been unable to thumbs up. The cat videos she couldn't grace with first in the comment section.

Their worst fears had come to pass, having been too caught up to consider that anyone could go missing again. Six-and-a-half pairs of eyes looked to their surroundings, to the monsters entranced by the glow across the ocean, or the blending colours above, or the richness in the ether. They desperately asked around, but no one else had any idea who they were talking about or where they went.

Sans bobbed and weaved around the citizens in a weak ploy to see farther out. "I can't see anything with all these people about," he said.

Before he knew it, Undyne's iron grasp was on his arms, pinning them at his sides.
"We need to get to higher ground," Undyne shouted in a manner which brought about a nasty case of déjà vu.

Sans tried to stop her. "No, Undyne, don't—"

Undyne picked up Sans, stepped over to Papyrus, and planted him atop his brother's shoulders. Then, she grabbed Papyrus by the legs and, in an impressive show of strength, lifted him up and placed him on her shoulders.

Sans got quite the surprise in both the view of the land and in the restrain in the commander. Forcing three people into a ladder might not seem like it, but next to burning down houses, suplexing boulders, and hooping scientists into trash cans, it was the most composed action she had done all week. From so high up, he could see for miles across the shimmering gold to where sea met sky. He scanned the heads down below, searching for any sign of certain shaggy haired kid.

"Found them yet?" Asgore shouted up.

Sans shook his head. "Uh uh," he replied. "A lil' to the left."

Undyne rotated in tiny shuffling steps while Papyrus made a dooting noise every two seconds. *Doot! Doot! Doot!*

"What're you doing?" Undyne asked. The grating in her voice was not due to the skeletons' meagre weight. Honestly, the two were as light as feathers.

"Acting as the sonar," Papyrus answered, then pulsed with another *Doot!* "This way." *Doot!" We'll locate Frisk." *Doot!" Faster." *Doot!"

"I'm pretty sure that's not how sonar works, but I'll take whatever I can get." 

Sans turned until he overlooked the stretch of seaside as it curved to the right, north by northeast. Far in the distance, one tiny speck blemished the umber sands. Scraping long footsteps down the beach. Head hung low. Clutching their elbow. The blue in their clothing gave them away.

"Found 'em!" Sans shouted down, pointing in the direction of the dot. "That 'a way!"

Asriel was the first to move, diving through the crowds of monsters in the direction Sans had laid out. He was followed closely by his parents, then Alphys, and finally Undyne at the back, still hiking the skeleton brothers over her head.

Moving apace, the boy slalomed through whatever gaps he could find, working his newly regained limbs which still felt natural like he had never lost them to begin with. He shoved his way through tight spaces and asked others to step aside.

He refused to stop until he escaped the crowds and witnessed the true expanse of the surface world. Across the vast beach, Frisk was a shrinking dot along the ways, walking alone.

"Frisk? Where're you going?" Asriel called out. Despite his voice reaching the top of his lungs, Frisk dragged their feet through those uneven sands.

Just as Mama and Papa Dreemurr escaped the mass of civilians, Dreemurr Junior burst into a sprint, kicking up a sandstorm in his wake.

"Frisk, wait!"
His quads burned as bare paws sank into soft ground, taking every ounce of effort out of him. Asriel ran until his legs were on fire. He started to make out their brown hair and striped shirt. Then he ran faster, charging through walls of blistering heat and painful fatigue.

The sand and sea waved in a watery haze. There was sand in Frisk's boots, but they were too depressed to stop and get it out. Frisk clamped their hands over their eyes in a vain attempt to stop the tears, but it was no use.

They had no family and no friends. Frisk was the loneliest child in the world.

They did not want to be alone. But they were alone.

They stopped, unable to take another step. Warm water ran through their fingers. A miserable fit of crying set their throat on fire. Their howls fell on silent ears; no one nearby to hear them, no one around to feel their pain.

They wiped them away for more to take their place in a never-ending cascade. What were they doing? Why were they stopping? The city was still a long walk away. If they kept going, they could find the orphanage just in time for bed.

"Frisk…! Frisk…!"

Frisk froze to the spot upon hearing their name, being spoken by… Asriel Dreemurr? They turned and there he was, rushing toward them, his parents not far behind, and Alphys holding what was left of Mew Mew, and an impressive show of strength, stamina and balance by Undyne, Papyrus and Sans.

"Wait up!" Asriel, painting and sweating, nearly collapsed to a stop a few feet away. "Frisk…" he gasped, bracing himself on his knees to get his breath back. Between deep breaths he muttered, "What's… this… all about?"

He lifted his head. "Why're you…?" What he was ready to say got lost in transit upon glimpsing their stained cheeks. "…crying?"

Asgore and Toriel reached them, stopping beside their kid. Toriel appeared worse off than Asriel, most likely for a reason other than fatigue. Asgore, on the other hand, hadn't a bead of sweat on him. Despite his roundness, he was still the king for a reason.

"There you are," Asgore said in a manner too controlled for someone of his size. "We thought we had lost you a third time this week."

"Frisk, why were you running off on us like that? You nearly gave me a soul-attack." Toriel said as Alphys reached them; along with Undyne who placed Papyrus down, who in turned placed Sans down. The former captain, thanks to a lifestyle such as hers, hadn't a single breath out of place. It was the two skeletons who appeared worn out.

And so, there stood one child born of mankind. Ten feet away, seven of the opposite race. Long, black shadows crept up the umber shore.

"What is wrong, my child?" Toriel asked. "Where were you going?"

Frisk, with the tears glistening down their face, looked at the ground and responded with a single word.
Away.

"Away?" Toriel repeated. "Away from who?"

Frisk remained silent, their head lowered. Hands clasped together, twiddling the thumbs.

Onward, Toriel pressed. "Away from the crowds? Away from the cramped air? Away from…?"

A mumble rattled Frisk's Adam's apple. The truth wanted to present itself, but the truth also hurt.

Asriel Dreemurr raised his eyebrows. "Us?" he dared to ask. All eyes swung to him. "Away from us?"

They turned back and Frisk responded seconds later with a slow, regretful nod.

Asriel rounded his back and opened his hands in a manner which begged for reason. "But… why?"

Still looking to the grains beneath their soles, Frisk, after a brief hesitation, said it was better this way.

The Dreemurrs wouldn't want them anymore, not after what happened last time, with Chara. How could another human child ever be trusted around their son? As long as they remained, they ran the risk of tearing their wonderful family apart. Because they were a human.

Frisk turned to continue walking.

It would be better for all of them, as a family, if Frisk just went away and never came back.

"Good heavens, my child," Toriel said, sounding mortified. "Whatever made you think of such tripe?"

Frisk stopped before the next step, and gradually looked back. Those tender eyes of those monsters fell upon them.

Asgore gently took Toriel and Asriel by the shoulders and pulled them closer together. "We were just saying that our family was missing something. Someone, actually. Someone very special. Someone who means the world to us. Can you guess who it is?"

Asriel extended out a hand and parted the fingers. "It's you, Frisk," he said. "It's missing you."

Toriel, alongside with her husband, reached out also. "Join us, Frisk."

"Join our family," Asgore said. "Your family."

Frisk clutched their chest, stifling their breath. The Dreemurr's were reaching out to them; wanting – no! – needing them. Them, a human. But… no. They can't. As much as they wanted to. Frisk was not like them; they weren't made of magic, or have white fur, or horns, scales, a tail, or bones not layered in skin. They were not a monster. They were not family.

"Do not say that, my child." Toriel's voice came out cracked, desperate. A sombre look intruded in her red eyes. "You are family!"

"Frisk, family isn't what's in your blood or what grows on your skin, it's those you hold dearest in your heart," Asgore said, hand against chest. "It's the people you care about more than anyone else in the world; the people who you need the most in your life, who you would sacrifice everything for. You could've wished for real parents, a real family, but you didn't need to because you had it right in front of you the whole time. Us, Frisk. You had us."
The King spoke with nothing but sincerity in his strong voice. "We love you, Frisk. We love you so very much, and we know you love us, too. You're crying because you don't want to leave. Well, we don't want you to leave either." Their hands were open; the father's, the mother's, and the son's. "We want you to stay. With us."

Frisk, with their mouth open and fingers clutched against torso, wanted to believe that was true. That their existed a future with all of them together. They desired to move forward, take those awaiting hands, if not for a feeling holding them back, denying them family.

"We're…" Asriel murmured. He perked up a small grin as he remembered something funny. "We're one great big butterscotch, cinnamon and snail pie, Frisk. We want you to be the final slice."

Frisk's featured shifted from sadness to befuddlement. That might go down in history as the dumbest metaphor ever conceived, and yet it resounded like a rallying cry.

Papyrus stepped forth, loud and proud. "You're one great big junior jumble puzzle," he added, extending his bony limbs. "We're one great big junior jumble puzzle. Be the surprise answer, Frisk."

Undyne followed Papyrus's lead. "We're one extra tough, extra private one-on-one training session," she said thick with her fiery demeanour. "Be the flame that cooks the meal to perfection!" Sweat broke on her brow as her roughness smoothed out. "Err… without burning the house down, though."

Sans swayed to his brother's side. "We're one overly long, lousy joke," he said, then pointed and winked coolly. "Deliver the punchline, kid."

Alphys, as timid as ever, crept beside her bae. "We're… we're one big…" She glanced down to Mew Mew's remains in her hands. "Dating simulation game!" Alphys said through sudden inspiration. "Be the last level! And the final boss! And the credits!"

"And the sequel hook!" Mew Mew, herself, said as she came alive.

The doctor gasped. "Mew Mew!" she cried as she looked at her, finding light in those pink eyes. That permanent smile made her smile as well.

"Boy, did we have a tough gym sessions," Mew Mew said with line three-zero-one from her directory. "I can't feel my legs."

"Don't worry about it." Alphys held the robot's head the same way one would hold a baby. "I'll make sure you get some new ones."

The revelation almost struck Asriel off his feet. He remembered facing Frisk back in the Underground, when the six human souls and every monster soul flowed through him, transforming him into a god beyond measure. Frisk reached deep into their soul and found the strength to save Asriel from his own undoing.

Now? Asriel reached deep inside his soul. It was time for him to save Frisk.

"Be all of those things. Be the finishing touch," Asriel's hand lifted slightly. "Be our finishing touch." His parents knelt down, both arms wide. "What do you say, Frisk?"

Frisk was stunned in place. The Dreemurr family were smiling. Alphys was smiling. Papyrus was smiling. Sans was smiling. Undyne was smiling. None of them wanted Frisk to go. All of their happy faces encouraging the human to embrace destiny.
They risked a step forward, sole printing into warm sand; afraid that this was all some dream, that they’d sink into the depths and awaken to a dark, soul-crushing reality. That Frisk had already completed their journey unimpeded to the nearest city and had been guided by the hard-hearted director with an ironic name to a squalor bed in the darkest corner of the topmost room.

Frisk wiped away the tears with their sleeve.

Could it really be? Could they truly be a family? Could they…?

Oh, who were they kidding?

They raced over and dove into those awaiting arms. Of course! Of course they wanted to be the final slice. The surprise answer. The punchline. The sequel hook. The everything!

Everyone cheered as Frisk wrapped their arms around their brother, Asriel, received a kiss from their mother, Toriel, and had the hairs on their head ruffled by their father, Asgore.

"That's better," Asgore applauded, then said those beautiful, magical words that he longed to say for as long as he could remember: "Now… we're a family."

Saying that, after so long, brought a tear to his eye. So many accomplishments and failings in his long life. He lost and gained so much, sought power and revenge at his lowest point. He never wanted power or vengeance or eternal life. All he ever wanted was a family.

Family. One big weird butterscotch-cinnamon-snail-junior-jumble-burning-funny bone-videogame pie of a family. An odd mix that probably didn't taste too good or be particularly healthy, but they wouldn't have it any other way.

This was where Frisk Dreemurr belonged.

Asriel took their sibling's hand. "I'm not letting go this time," he whispered.

Frisk whispered back to their brother…

Neither were they.

Undyne knelt down beside her girlfriend. "Hey, Alphys. You kicked major butt out there."

Alphys went red in the cheeks. Her first through was to be modest, to deny it; however, she had received so much praise today, and brushing it off was all she could do. She never felt like she deserved any of the praise she was given, now she felt good enough.

"Y-yeah. Yeah, I did! I did kick b-b-b-posterior today. And… and… and it felt good!"

Undyne leaned back, putting a little space between them. "Oooh. Someone's full of hot air today."

Alphys's high spirit deflated. Yeah… she guessed she got a little carried away. Oh, well, back to regular, timid Alphys, she supposed.

Her girlfriend leaned closed and wrapped both hands under her arms. "You know what happens to things full of hot air?" she asked with her toothy grin.

All of sudden, Alphys remembered too late something from back at Waterfall. The captain pulled her off the ground and threw her straight up into the air. Every loose part of her body, both inside and out, pulled down as she shot up into the sky. She glimpsed a beautiful view across the beach as she
lost speed, reached her apex, and then began her descent. Her mind was jumbled and yet blank as she fell – all those flabby parts now raced up to her neck. She expected to crash land on sand, or in the water, or in a convenient can full of garbage, but instead landed in powerful arms.

After having stopped and her squishy parts having stopped jiggling, she looked up into Undyne's face – caught in the light – and never before had she thought she could look any more beautiful. Those arms made her feel safe. That single eye she could get lost in for hours. Lips she could explore for longer.

Caught in the moment, the words slipped through her lips.

"I love you…"

Sans and Papyrus turned to each other after having watched the two lovers. Sans had that smile on his face, as always. "You wanna carry me on your shoulder like that, bro?"

Papyrus cringed. "Um… I would love to as part of a rigorous strength building exercise, but that would just be weird." He pointed back and forth between himself and Sans. "Considering how… You and me… We're… Y'know… You get the picture."

Sans giggled, nudged Papyrus in the elbow, and said, "I'm just tapping your funny bone, man." After his laugh died down, a feeling that something was amiss ran through his marrow. The two stood there, alive, looking out, together, brothers to the end, but this moment needed more. Right then, his shoulders felt itchy and cold. He went to rub it, but refrained. "So, uh, you wanna awkwardly put your hand on my shoulder at least?"

Papyrus sighed. "Fine." He awkwardly reached across and awkwardly placed the palm of his red glove on Sans's awkward jacket shoulder, awkwardly. "If anyone takes a picture of this, we'll never hear the end of it."

"Yeah, but I kinda like it," Sans replied, with a shrug, "to be honest."

Papyrus looked down at his brother and grinned. "Don't you mean… tibia honest?"

_Badum… pish?_

Sans gasped. His eye sockets widened. Did his boneless ears deceive him? "Papyrus… did you just make a pun?"

"Why, yes." Papyrus, looking out to the horizon, nodded. "Yes I did."

"And let me guess. You're smiling out of smug superiority? Righteous self-denial? Long overdue comeuppance?"

All of a sudden, Papyrus pulled Sans off the ground in bony bear hug. "I'm smiling because I'm happy, Sans!" he announced as he danced in circles, laughing his proud and happy laugh. "I'm so happy! Happy, happy, happy!"

Around and around he danced, making circles in the sand. He proclaimed his glee to the world, shouting with not a single tad of shame or embarrassment. He wanted everyone to know, and there was nothing anyone else could do to stop it.

As Sans span helplessly in his brother's iron grasp, the world a blur of green and blue, green and blue, he felt a strangeness within him. At first, he thought it was dizziness, or the urge to throw up his
condiments, but it was more than that. There was a part of himself that was not right. Something felt off. He felt wrong, different.

It was his mouth. His grinning mouth. Sans was smiling. He was always smiling. But... he grin felt altered somehow. He couldn't quite place it until he figured it out.

He was genuinely smiling. A true smile straight from the soul.

He was happy. So happy. Not ironic happy, or depressed happy, or happy for no other reason than to be happy. But happy happy. He wasn't afraid anymore: not of the resets, not of the future, not of what could or could have been. He smiled because he wanted to.

After all his joy died down, Papyrus placed his brother down and straightened himself. "Recommencing awkward shoulder hold."

Sans, still awestruck, brought his hand up to feel the intricacies of his brother's hand. "I wouldn't have it any other way, bro," he said.

"Alright, everyone," Asgore called out. With his soul full of joy and a lightness to his steps, he went to say the three magical words he wanted to say when the adventure was over. "Let's—"

"Wait!"

Behind them, a single monster had broken away from the exodus to find them. It was none other than the Emperor himself, Maxus. His crown held the same golden magnificence as the dawn. Toriel pulled both her children behind her, Frisk more so.

"King Asgore," he began. "My people. Night is closing in and they are without food or shelter. I know I have no right to ask you of anything, but I don't suppose you could be of some assistance, could you?"

"Of course." Asgore sounded his usual friendliest, like their battle moments before – and the sight of Frisk's lifeless body – never happened. "Tell your people to wait here. I've got plenty of friends who'll gladly help, and I'm sure the human towns nearby can offer some assistance."

"The humans will listen to you?"

The king patted Frisk on the head. "We got our own ambassador right here."

Maxus's mouth sagged into a frown. "You were a representative to us monsters all along?" Frisk nodded. "Why didn't you tell me…?"

Just the sight of Frisk's furrowed brow and jutted smirk answered that question right off the bat.

"Yeah…" Maxus gave the sand a light kick, toppling a small mound. "Like I'd have believed that…"

Asgore gestured to the mass of monsters huddled together. "Tell them to hang in there. Expect help very soon." He placed extra emphasis on the last two words, nodding in tandem.

Maxus took a step back; his hands were clasped together at his stomach. "I'm putting my trust in you. Don't let me down, your majesty."

Asgore let out a small chuckle; he still liked the sound of his forgotten title. "Don't worry. I won't," he ensured before turning around and taking his loved ones by the hands. He held Asriel, and Asriel held Frisk, and Frisk held Toriel. "Alright, everyone." Now was the time to say those words – the
ones he dearly, more than anything, wanted to speak since the start. He took a quiet, small breath and said, "Let's go home."

With that, they walked. Together, as a family, they walked. The footprints behind them either signified the ending of their story, or the beginning of a new one. They made their way across the beach as one. Alphys still cradled in Undyne's hold. The brothers locked in their awkward shoulder clutch. The Dreemurrs, holding hands, their differences in life cast aside.

Maxus watched, rooted in place, as they made their leave.

An odd bunch, to put it lightly: a goofy former king, a snooty former queen, a skeleton with the mentality of a five-year-old, a skeleton with the mentality of an a hundred year old, a fish with rage issues, a weeaboo, a boy who used to be a flower, and a human.

They were still close enough to hear Sans make a suggestion: "Hey, guys. I wanna keep this little reunion going for a bit longer. Mind if we crash at your place tonight?" he asked Asgore.

He returned a smile. "I don't see why not. I have a few hundred phone calls to make when we get home – having a few extra pairs of hands will help move things along quicker. Say, how about we order some pizza while we're at it?"

"That sounds like a good idea." Toriel said, sharing her husband's enthusiasm. "Are you hungry, my children?"

Frisk nodded rapidly in an eager fashion, their mouth was watering and their belly was groaning for some real, non-magical food.

Asriel gave his mother a puzzled look before turning it to his father. "Uh, Dad? What's a… pete-sa?"

he asked.

Asgore laughed and ruffled the hairs between his son's ears. "Oh, you'll love it. Just you wait…"

Alphys, cradled in Undyne's arms, her reward at the end of such a harrowing journey, chimed in, "I wouldn't mind some Chinese food right about now."

"Ah, yes. I've heard they're especially skilled at spaghetti," Papyrus added.

"They call them noodles, actually," Toriel replied, "but we can order you some, if you would like."

"A burger for me… with all the toppings…" Sans fantasised, rubbing his belly, which was really the empty space beneath his ribcage.

"That reminds me," Papyrus said, finger against chin "we haven't fed poor Dwayne in days. He must be starving—"

"Sushi!" Undyne butted in. "I could kill for some Rainbow Rolls right about now!"

"Sushi makes Mew Mew go mushi," the anime robot chanted.

Sans glanced at her, distrustfully as if waiting for an unmasking, then whispered to his brother, "She does know what sushi is, right?"

Papyrus seemed to hinder his speech a moment, the loudmouth of the team suddenly demonstrating a moment of unobtrusiveness. "Of course she does," he replied.

Sans waited for Papyrus to continue, which he did not. The pause went on until it became as
awkward as the hand on his shoulder.

"Well, what is it?" Sans pressed. His question was halfway between solemnity and sarcasm.

"It's sushi."

Sans practically lowered an eyebrow. "Papyrus, do you even know what sushi is?"

Papyrus paused, almost suspiciously. Then, he made his answer: "I may or may not be able or unable to confirm or deny you an answer to that question, one way or another."

Sans paused, dumbstruck, and then a small giggle wheezed its way out. That giggle evolved into a chuckle, then a fully formed laugh which carried itself across the land and across the ocean.

The eight of them – nine if you wished to include Mew Mew – all caught in the sandy hue of the low hanging sun, walking off into the apparent end; the closing on a dark, ill-fated chapter and toward the opening to a new one. A bright, inviting, and prosperous new beginning for everyone, humans and monsters alike.

Maxus did not know what the future held. However, as he stood there with his citizens behind him and the Obelisk pointing up to where the Outerworld used to reside, he knew only one thing for absolute certainty:

There goes the greatest family anyone could ever wish for.

Chapter End Notes

I could very well end this story here, but there's a tiny bit more to go before I can truly wrap this up.

I've been super busy to get these latest chapters up before taking a much needed break away from things. I just couldn't leave you all on the last chapter's cliffhanger. I just couldn't.

I'm sorry I've been unable to respond to your reviews, but I've read every single one and I thank you all for writing and for reading. You guys rock.

Take care of yourselves.
With the Outerworld gone, the Empire shattered, and the Monster Military disbanded, its citizens, with nowhere to go and no home to return to, made camp where they were, trusting the king of the Underground. Thankfully for them, Asgore was true to his word, and in short time, an army of both monsters and humans alike showed up to offer support in any way they could. Food and water. Tents and local venues converted into temporary shelters. Unused clothes. Medicine to help strengthen their immunity to Earth's bacteria and germs. Money to spare, with big names like Mettaton, Muffet, and the Nice Cream Guy donating large sums to help the citizens start a new life.

Many monsters found new homes to live, but with so many of them and so little places available for accommodation, the remaining citizens decided to start their new home where they first set foot on Earth. It took quite a bit of hoop jumping, but eventually, plans were set to construct a new town near the coastline.

In the months and years that would follow, the new town, Hope, would find its place on the map. The likes of Greater Dog, Knight Knight, Royal Guards 01 and 02 would help with manual labour, and the Dreemurr family would visit every now and then, each time more fascinating than the last.

It had a bit of everything: a school where Miss Spelling Bee stood as the Head Miss Stress – that was what her badge said; a nature reserve tended by Brute, who had found his true calling; a five-star restaurant ran by Dom, fashioned from a string of train cars; and stores and supermarkets ran by those who made a living with their own stores above the clouds.

In the town square, paved around it with ornate floor tiles and flower beds, stood the memorial – the Obelisk, its power depleted, now merely a monument – dedicated to all those lives lost, both before and during the Outerworld. It was there as a reminder to never forget their sacrifice and to ensure that history should never repeat itself. The words scratched into its face had changed. The four lines of ancient language were now one, and carved in English.

_You are the dawn now_

When the time came to elect the first mayor for the town, all eyes automatically turned to the only ruler they had: former Emperor Maxus. However, when presented with the opportunity, he quickly turned it down, having enough of being the leader.

So, naturally, they turned to the next person down in the chain of hierarchy.

Snug in his office, Mayor Rickard would take good care of the town, and prove himself to be quite popular among the citizens for the years to come.

Some of them thought, though, that a world of regularity and little magic would get super boring super-fast.

They were mighty wrong on that end…

The onlookers stopped and stared as Jim, the former doorman at Bjornliege Manor, jogged down the city street, dressed in a running top, headband, and shorts. Sweat glistened down his flat face, forming dark rings beneath his pits and on his chest.

"Knees high! Shoulders back! Chest out!" Jim turned back and blew sharply into a whistle. "I wanna see some sweat, mister!"
He had become a personal fitness trainer, and would eventually go on to coach entire sports teams and big-name celebrities. However, in order to reach the big league, he first had to start off small, which was ironic considering his first client.

Behind him, Grill – no longer Lord Grill, just regular, unimportant Grill – huffed and panted on a bicycle better suited for a child or someone not his weight range. Generously donated from a friend, the pink bicycle, with stabilisers, and a pair of tassels which fluttered in the breeze, warped under his colossal weight.

"You think this gives you authority over me?" he wheezed. "You're still nothing in my eyes but a doorstopper!" It was difficult to take him seriously with the protective gear which came with the package: a helmet and elbow pads adorned with pretty ponies.

"Then this doorstopper's going to keep every door open so you can run through them!" Jim retorted, clearly in better shape than he. He checked his watch then clapped his hands twice. "Two miles down, another fifty to go."

"Fifty miles?" Grill looked about ready to collapse over the handlebars. "I can't do that!"

"Not on your own you can't..." Jim had something sinister brewing, it could be detected in his tone. "That's why I called in some motivation."

Grill did not like the sound of that. "Motivation?"

He heard it before he saw it: a stampede advancing behind him. Daring a look over his shoulder, he found his former wives, all twenty of them, converging, armed with an assortment of meat products to nail him over the head with – all of them real this time. Grill screamed in terror, then found the energy to peddle like he had never peddled before, mainly because he had never peddled before.

Lord Grill would go on to lose over five-hundred pounds, crowning him the biggest monster success story in history.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen, it's Up Late with a Killer Robot! Here's your host, the one, the only, and except to substitute: Mettaton!"

The fabulous robot in pink high heels swaggered out from behind the curtain and across the stage like he owned the place – which he did – with his spectral cousin on his discs in the background and Burgerpants with his head in his hands somewhere.

Mettaton's seat had been replaced with a lounge chair that day, the same standard as seen in therapies. He slithered himself down on it and waited for the applause to end before he graced those ears with his sexy voice.

"Welcome one and all, plus a few more lovely people, to another hit episode!" He lay so seductive in the chair, laid on his side, head rested on hand. "I say it now with total confidence knowing all this can be cut from the special edition DVD release!"

The audience applauded again, although they had no idea why.

"Before we get another show on the road, let's give a huge, warm shout-out to some exceedingly beautiful, extra special guests in the audience tonight, and they're the biggest fans of Yours Truly. Give a huger, warmer welcome to our new friends from the Mile High Club!"

Sacrificing precious seconds of spotlight – time Mettaton would never get back – those cones of
white ran across the floor and homed in on the said extra special guests: the vegetable monsters from A. Town, Rocklyn. They raised their appendages (if they had any) and cheered upon seeing the cameras turned on them, while in the presence of their idol, in the flesh – or, in this case, metal and magic.

Bub could be spotted in the centre, with Peabody to his left and a small, yellow pepper monster to his right.

"You're number one, Mettaton!" Peabody shouted above the crowd.

"You the man!" Bub hollered at the top of his voice.

"My name is Fisk!" the pepper monster cheered, raising their tiny arms up.

Bub faced the little, yellow creature. "Is that all you gots to say?" His question was drowned in the erupting din of cheer. "Can't you say anything else?"

Fisk met Bub's beady gaze. "Why, as a matter of fact," they said, "I, Fisk, hold the capacity to engross audiences with a comprehensive vocabulary of adverbs, verbs and adjectives from either third person, second person, first person, or no person perspective, and in either past, present, future, back to the future, or days of future past tense."

Bub froze, cracked a grin, chuckled, and rubbed Fisk's puffy hair. "Ah, on second thought, I don't think I caught your name, kid."

The pepper returned a smile. "My name is Fisk. And I'm eighty-five years of age."

"Not the mention the fact you're also a pepper." Peabody said, glancing over. "It's funny, I always thought you were something else, like… a kiwi, or something or another."

And with that, they spent the rest of the night screaming and shouting before their beloved hero before they could do so no more. It would be the best day of their lives.

The Bobs and Temmie from the liquidated Embassy of Bob reunite with all the other Temmies and their Bob. And so began a long, lengthy, and heated discussion as to whether the two sides could co-exist.

Bob, the founder of Bob, stood on one side with his people behind him, as did Temmie, from the Temmie village, opposite. Two sides of equal numbers and strength, sizing the other up like two cats seeing who could make themselves the biggest.

There could be war. There could be dustshed. There could be anguish, pain and misery if so much as the wrong move was made or the wrong word was said. The board was open and the pieces were out, set along squares of black and white, either side ready to seize checkmate, securing victory.

Temmie and Bob eyed each other as if trying to force them into submission. Bob craned his neck and Temmie followed suit; it was like looking in a mirror.

Bob knew, he always knew, he was one of the white pieces – the pawn to take one step or two, or the knight to hurdle the row of disposable infantry –, meaning the first move was his. He breathed deep and attuned his mind, which struggled to harness his tongue. He lapped it around his mouth, warming it up. He needed both his brain and his mouth in tandem for such a talk that could set the future's course forever. In and out he breathed, pacing himself, thinking his words, then ditching them, then thinking them over again.
With one more breath, he acted.

"Hi," he said. "I'm Bob."

"Hi!" the other replied, "im Temmie!"

The two promptly laughed and shook hands, bringing their lengthy negotiations to an end. The two sides, all the Temmies and Bobs, rushed over to meet their long lost acquaintances, and peace became solidified as two became one.

The police dispatch crackled to life. "All units, we have a two-one-one in progress at the City Bank on thirty-six avenue. I repeat, major robbery in progress at City Bank on thirty-six avenue. Be advised that suspects are heavily armed and have taken hostages. SWAT is on route to that location. Over."

Outside the bank on thirty-six avenue, the police had already pulled up in mass, forming a barricade of cars around the building. The boys in blue hopped from their cars, took cover behind them and drew their guns. The megaphone was already out. The chief was harking on about surrendering, and throwing their guns down, and coming out with hands behind heads, yadda yadda yadda.

Inside, the employees and civilians unfortunate enough to have been inside were sitting in a row, their backs up against the cashier booths and hands by their sides. If any of them so much as think about making a move, then the bullets start flying.

This was more than just a spontaneous robbery, this was a full-blown heist with months of planning. Their strategy had been revised thoroughly, everything taken into account – from the opportune moment to strike to their escape. To hide their identities, they had given themselves code names after the first six letters of the Greek alphabet.

The robbers, six gruff men with balaclavas, ballistic vests, and high-powered machine guns had taken positions around the bank: two of them (Epsilon and Zeta) guarded the main entrance; one guy (Delta) watched the hostages; and the remaining three were already inside the vault. Two of the crooks (Beta and Gamma) shovelled as many notes they could into five black duffel bags while their leader (Alpha) carefully placed bars of gold into a sixth.

Epsilon kept his gaze locked outside, ready to open fire if anything remotely resembling a cop treads on the empty space of asphalt thirty feet between the bank and the cars. Honestly, there was no point in those pigs hiding; the rounds in his gun would take a mighty chunk out of the walls behind the cars they cowered behind. Zeta, on the other hand, had an itchy trigger finger and a psychotic urge to fire just for the heck of it.

Beta called out as he stuffed another thick wad of notes into an overstuffed bag. "It's awfully quiet over there," he said. "Those cops ain't given you a reason yet?"

Epsilon exhaled through his nostrils. "Not yet." He kept shooting looks at Zeta, expecting the first shot from him at any moment. Yet, given his aptitude, it might not be directed at the cops.

"And the hostages?" Gamma asked. He zipped up a duffle bag meant for Zeta before moving to the one for himself.

Delta swayed his gun across the line of twenty civilians, getting a cathartic kick from every flinch and whimper. He made sure they understood what awaited any would-be heroes. "All quiet over here," he responded loud enough for his associates in the vault to hear.
Alpha grabbed the last bar of gold with both gloved hands and eased it into the bag with all the rest. The fibres and straps were the strongest in the market; no way would this snap on him before his spine did. He eagerly zipped it closed, but was not too eager to brunt its weight in a few short moments. Regardless of the damage he could do to himself, the money would make it all worthwhile when he and his associates were floating in their luxury yacht in the Caribbean Sea.

"We haven't got long until SWAT arrive. Two more minutes, guys, tops," he announced. "Then we're outta here."

"Hey, Delta," Beta said, "looks like we'll be needin' some leverage after all. Got your eyes on any expensive looking folk?" He waited for a response as he stuffed the bags, but got no reply. "Delta? Didn't you hear me? You picked a few hostages to take with us?" A few more tight wads filled the bag. Nothing. "Delta, what game you playing at?" Still nothing. "Delta?"

Beta looked out the vault door. Delta was nowhere to be seen. "Hold up, fellas," he said. Leaving his bag and whipping out his rifle, he exited the vault and rounded the counter. The hostages were as still as statues, barely breathing, looking to the ceiling.

Lying in the middle of the floor was a rifle. Delta's rifle. But where was Delta?

"Eh?" Beta looked over at Epsilon and Zeta, who were several metres away and still focused on keeping the entrance secure. "Hey! Where'd Delta run off to?"

The two by the door glanced over and became just as surprised as he was.

Epsilon hesitated. "He was just there a second ago…” he muttered

Directly above the dropped weapon, the ceiling tile was missing, leaving a rectangular black hole to the forbidden zone of ventilated air and running wires. Beta approached, gun at the ready. In the name of being a professional criminal, he will investigate this matter by standing directly under it, taking care not to tread on Delta's gun.

"You up there, Delta? What you playing at, man?"

Both Zeta and Gamma looked just in time to witness a grapple hook launch from the hole and grab Beta. The wire retraced just as quickly, pulled him, screaming, into the ceiling. He dropped his gun in the process; it landing next to the other.

"What in the…? Beta!" Zeta stepped away from the door, frantically scanning the ceiling. "There's something up there! It's got Beta! It musta got Delta, too!"

Gamma rushed out and joined in, leaving Alpha alone in the vault and Epsilon guarding the entrance. All eyes were drawn upwards to the pattern of squares, broken up by lights and air-conditioning units.

"Is Beta okay?" Gamma inquired.

"How should I know?" Zeta spat. "I can't hear him… can't hear neither of them." He swung his gun around, acting more intimidating as usual. Even his hardened partners in crime were scared. "Whatever you are, get down here right now! Show yourself before I put you down like the roach you are!"

They paced slowly around, keeping their sights trained on the ceiling. Seconds passed but nothing moved. Nothing peeped. No trace of Delta, or Beta, or whatever was up there, picking them off like after-dinner mints.
Zeta could stand the silence no longer. He pulled the trigger, unleashing a wave of gunfire. He waved the weapon around as it roared, spreading the shots as much as he could, hoping a lucky round tagged whoever was up there. He'd probably feel a little bad if he hit his two comrades in the process, but hey, on the chance that he did, more money to go around. Tiles and light fixtures cracked, shredded, and exploded; the hostages curled up as tightly as they could as debris rained down on them.

From outside, the unmistakable sound of gunfire rattled. The police could make out that the shots were not directed at the hostages, but the intent to cause harm was there. Where was that blasted SWAT unit?

His gun clicked repeatedly a few seconds after the clip ran dry; the barrel smoked with grey. He had managed to hit every tile, light, and air vent up there. Fragments of glass and foam littered the ground, some of it on the carpet vacuumed no more than thirty minutes ago, the rest on those in the area, both the innocent and guilty.

However, for all that tumbled from above, nothing was bigger than crumbs.

They waited. And waited. And waited.

Zeta ejected the empty magazine and reached for another fixed to his belt.

"Did I get 'em?" he asked as he went to put the full clip in.

Gamma glared at him, lowering his gun doing so. "Way to jinx it, man."

Suddenly, from every fresh opening above, small pellets dropped down and landed amongst the debris. The goons had a second to react before each pellet exploded into plumes of thick smoke. The entire bank floor, except for the vault, became engulfed in grey, blinding everyone inside.

"I can't see," Epsilon cried, coughing. "I can't see!"

"What are you?" Zeta's panic-stricken shouts could only be heard from the others. More clicking sounded from his empty rifle. "Whatever you are, you're dea—" His warnings and clicks were cut off abruptly.

Gamma turned in the direction of where Zeta last was, seeing nothing but a colourless wall. "Zeta? T-Tommy?" His professional façade broke the moment he said Zeta's real name. "Where did you go? Where did—" Just like his partner, his words were cut short.

Within the vault, Alpha pressed himself further back on the metal table holding the bags. The screen of smoke obscured everything happening beyond, leaving the terrified voices of his colleagues to go on.

Epsilon was all who was left. "Tommy? Phil?" Alpha caught him gasp. "Wh-who's there? Stay back, I'm warning you! No, no! Get away! No! NO!"

With that scream, Epsilon went silent. The Alpha of the pack stood alone. His face boiled under the thick wool of his disguise, mating what little hair he had left to his scalp and stinging his eyes.

He forced his head to turn away, remembering that he had left his assault rifle on the counter. He reached for it. As his fingers neared the stock, the same hook which nabbed Beta pulled it through the vault door. Alpha's right hand instinctively pulled out the pistol strapped to his thigh. He fired repeatedly into the smokescreen, rippled the wisps with each bullet. Twelve shots later, his sidearm clicked dry, yet his index was not done. Alpha continued to pump the trigger, praying for another
bullet to magically fill the clip.

From the screen of grey, he saw it. A black silhouette, barely visible.

Two wings extended from its back, making Alpha drop his gun.

His plans were over before it hit the ground.

Outside, SWAT had finally arrived, screeching up to the scene. A squad of ten men funneled from the back of the large, black van. All dressed head to toe in their protective gear and visor helmets. Four men took position upfront, behind their bulletproof shields.

"Move up."

As the squad carefully approached the entrance from the side, the clouds of smoke dispersed. The SWAT forces peeked into the bank and did not expect to see what they saw.

Without breaking formation, they entered through the front, keeping all wits and weapons trained outwards. However, there was no need, as the extent of what had happened lay on the foyer floor. All the hostages were unharmed. A few feet away, all six bank robbers sat with their backs against each other; several coils of thick rope wrapped around their bodies. There was a piece of the bank's own branded note paper stuck to the Alpha's forehead, with sweat acting as the glue.

**Courtes of the Shadowy Saviour**

The Shadowy Saviour. Turned up a few weeks back, seemingly from out of nowhere, and has aided in thwarting some major crimes. While the police cannot condone the Shadowy Saviour's actions, they also could not argue with the results: the bad guys had been caught, the hostages were safe, not a single penny made it beyond the vault door, and nobody was hurt except for the criminals' mental wellbeing.

The leader had trauma written all over his face. "M-m-m-monster..." he faintly whispered. "... Monster... Monster..."

From what these crooks just witnessed, they were more than looking forward to seeing bars for the next thirty years. Do not pass *Go*. Do not collect two-hundred dollars.

Perched on the rooftop, one foot up on the ledge, the Shadowy Saviour gazed dramatically into the horizon. Long black hair waved in the wind. Her outfit, black and streamlined, was patched with visible bulletproof plating, and SS on her chest in deep crimson, solid lines. A mask covered the top half of his face, turning her eyes milky white.

Barb the Bounty Hunter was no more.

Enter Barb the Superhero!

"Man," she muttered to herself as she shielded her aching eyes against the sun, "I really wish more of these crooks would strike at night..."

"Happy birthday to you. Happy Birthday to you."

In the glorious, sunny day, the gathering sang around a row of tables draped in white, decorated sheets and lavished with paper plates, plastic cups, cutlery, a wide selection of party food, and a large, delectable birthday cake at one end with candles flickering off Mika's dark eyes.
"Happy Birthday, dear Mika."

The twang of strings drew everyone's attention to the acoustic guitar in the hands of a koala bear. Johnny's mellow melody came straight from the heart and was made especially for her. His soothing voice sang the final part.

"Happy birthday to you."

There was a round of applause, both for Johnny's performance, and to the birthday girl herself. Also situated around the table was Lena, Roy Giovanni Biv, Versa the Vice, Kenny the duck, and many others. A few seats lay bare, itching to be taken.

As excited as Mika was, she held a small sense of apprehension; everything had gone right so far, hopefully nothing bad can come along to ruin this moment.

Right on schedule, from the path which snaked from behind the nearby trees, a pair of youths around the age of twelve or thirteen appeared. Obviously the unsavoury sort, with short hair and crater faces, baggy sweatshirts, sweatpants, and sneakers which held sweaty socks.

"Hey, look, it's some of those freaks," one of the youths said. Upon parting his lips, his words hissed out from between two rows of yellow teeth. "And they're having themselves a little birthday party. Isn't that adorable?"

"They got hats and glitter and everything… for babies," the second struck with his snide remark, then drew attention to the vacant seats. "Looks like there's still room for newcomers. Don't mind if we do." The two approached. "We promise we won't—"

He had just pulled the chair out when another hand pushed it back. Looking up, he met the deadly glare of Lena the brown cow. She was four times bigger than both of them, dressed smarter too.

"Get lost," she said, glaring at one and then the other.

The two youths felt hesitant, a pang of uneasiness as Lena issued her warning. The first kid went to speak before she cut him off.

"I won't say it again." She drew her stare closer. "Get. Lost."

The two looked at each other, their veins pulsating up their necks, and slowly they backed up to the path and made their exit.

Seeing the backs of them made the brown cow feel a small sense of accomplishment. Before Earth, before the end of the Outerworld, or the madness under Black Ice Mountain, she hadn't the capacity to stand up for herself in the slightest, not even against kids. She had learned much since then, and had built her confidence up bit by bit. Those two didn't require any kind of trashing, just a stern talking to.

Right before the youths vanished, they moved to the side to make room for a few more of the so-called 'freaks', except these ones freaked them out more from the look of it. Treading up the path was the former colonel, Katherine Fischer, out of her armour and in fashionable jeans, shoes, and a cardigan. Behind her trailed Chien and Perro; all three of them had long since found new walks of life on the Earth's surface.

Mika's paws clapped in a rapid, giddy fashion. "You made it!" The excitement in their appearances and the presents they held made her chair squeak. Everything falling into place; the perfect day was upon her. One perfect day, that was all she desired.
"Hey, everyone," greeted Fischer. "I never got the chance to say this before, but thanks for inviting us." As Perro and Chien sank into their chairs, Fischer faced the row of nearby trees. "You can come out of there now," she said.

From within the entanglement of branches and leaves, someone rustled the workings but refrained from stepping out into the light. Those around the tables managed to catch a peak at the newcomer – a patch of a grey finger; the glint of yellow in the eyes – before that same person sank back.

Kat Fischer waved for them to come out. "Come on. Join the party."

The figure sighed, then bungled their mysterious reveal from out of the brush; it was much harder to accomplish when one wasn’t an artificial construct. The chubby komodo dragon, Geoffrey, brushed away the twigs which groped at his baggy hoodie, each finger probing him like they were trying to tear away his clothes. He held a present of his own – not an imaginary gift held upon perfectly snipped fingernails, but a real present in his actual hands, wrapped in a rather shoddy fashion; sections of the box could be seen under the paper.

Adjusting to the real world was no walk in the park for him, especially as his true form, and not behind the shield of his loveable persona. The weight of his actions now hung above his head as it did with everyone else, except it was only now that he noticed the strings bearing it weight, and that the cruel blades of consequence could snap those ropes holding it up and at given time. His actions had weight. He could no longer flip the switch and make people forget and revert to the way they were before. He had to think on his words, his actions, knowing what he did was now permanent.

"Umm… H-h-h-hi, everyone…"

The first of those consequences glared at him from around the party table.

"Hey," Kenny said, rising off his seat, almost toppling it, "what's he doing here?"

Roy, the rainbow, would have rose had he not been already hovering above his chair. "Who invited him?"

"I did," Mika answered.

Everyone looked at her, astonishment written on their faces by the casualness in which she spoke.

"You can't be serious…" Johnny said in a low voice. He contemplated reached over for his instrument.

"After everything he did?" Versa said.

"Guys, please, let's not fight," the birthday girl said. "This is a happy moment, and I think everyone here deserves a little happiness. Even you, Geoff."

Geoff moved around the table, giving a wide gap between himself and those sat there. He reached Mika, approaching slowly, knees wobbling and sweat streaming, afraid the nearest member would pounce when he got close.

He laid the gift beside her. "Ha-happy birthday, Mika." He stood back and fidgeted with his hands. "I hope you like it… Sorry, by the way…"

Mika parted her teeth and reached to open the present. Her front incisors barely touched the paper before the tape came loose and unravelled. Self-opening presents – now that was a genius invention for the new age. She pulled off the box lid and peered inside.
Her face lit aglow. "Oh, my goodness," she said. Geoffrey cringed at the sound, as if he expected an instant disapproval. He reached into the box and fished out a beautiful pendant. The chain was of a fine gold, more white than shiny yellow, and the pendant itself was shaped as a snowflake, sparkling with jewels the slightest shade of sapphire. "It's beautiful – just what I always wanted!" She slipped it over her neck, wearing it with pride. "Oh, I love it! Thank you so much, Geoff."

"You're... you're welcome."

Before Geoffrey could reach his seat between Kat and Perro, Mike bounded off hers and rushed toward him. "Come here and give me a hug, you!"

To two hugged the same way buddies for many years would. He couldn't understand; he tormented her throughout all those years, building up and breaking down party after party in whatever way creativity saw fit. Yet, she showed genuine joy in the gift, which she shared with him. Him.

The hard looks from the rest rested, and the consensus surrounding them was to give this man another chance. He wasn't Vail – he was Geoffrey.

Geoffrey shredded a small tear that he quickly hid. He was in reality. He was fat and bald and ugly. He didn't know a smooth comeback or witty one-liner to save his life. He was a creep, he was unlikeable, he was worthless, and most importantly, he had friends.

And Geoffrey was happy.

Rita stepped out onto the porch, to the sound of chirping birds and running water. City life was no place for through and through country bumpkins such as herself and her husband. Their new country home was perfect, everything they desired in the new world; real trees and real flowers and real grass and the faint flow of a nearby stream.

Over the hill to her right, she waved at what could pass as next door neighbours. Master and Mistress Mind in their new home. Their allegiances back in the Outerworld were no more, and the two couples now saw each other as hard-working, simple folk. They would get along nicely.

Over the hills before her, half a mile away, lay another cottage; a simple house upon the prairies. That house was where the Empire's general, Leigh, now resided, enjoying his retirement. No more hours around maps and war diagrams, and reading reports. His days were of the sunshine, and the sweet smells of nature.

The tranquillity was broken by a loud thud and a louder obscenity from the red-painted storehouse to Rita's left. She shook her head and sighed, smiling internally. She headed over, walking on soft, crunchy grass, and rolled open the sturdy door.

She found Sam cross-legged on the straw ground, nursing his head.

"How's the new hobby coming along?" Rita, folding her arms and leaning against the frame, asked her husband. Thanks to the wonders of an average lifespan, she wouldn't have to put up with many more for much longer.

Sam, keeping on hand on his head, gestured to the thing he was working on. "See for y'self."

In front of Sam, lying on its side, was what could only be described as the worst attempt at a baby's crib anyone could ever achieve with effort. More like a plank of wood with several other, smaller planks hacked into it. In its current state, it would be deemed a crime in child safety.
Rita scratched the back of her bandaged head. "Y'know, there's real fish in the water now. No bigger than tadpoles, but they're there. Maybe we should just order one off them internets."

Sam rose, expelling a proud chuckle. "I've still got nine months still," he said as he wrapped an arm around her waist. "Enough time to hone my craft."

His wife patted her belly. "Eight months, actually."

"Excited?"

Rita blinked. "Nervous."

Sam took her hand. "We're ready for this - more than ready. We got this, hun'."

"You really think so?"

"Without a doubt." He drew her close. "We'll be the best parents ever."

Those words made their imaginations swim. Just thinking about it, that this quiet place would soon have little feet walking about.

In eight months' time, Sam an' Rita would be gazing down at their newly-born bundles of joy and bandages as they see the world – the real world – for the first time, lying in a beautifully constructed crib. A boy and a girl. Twins.

They would be named Freya and Dominik.

Maxus drove the pick in then hoisted himself higher up the cliff face. Up and up he climbed against the rock, so grey it almost appeared purple, clashing against mounds of snow on every bit of gap.

His breath heavy, he took in mouthfuls of cold, thin air to restore his energy. He reached the summit before tending to the rope which trailed behind him. He yanked on it, expecting it to be taut, but it wasn't. He pulled a full six arm lengths of slack rope before he leaned over the end.

"I told you to wait," Maxus said down.

Latched against the side of the mountain, Professor Haze, laden in climbing gear, had his entire body pressed against it like he was glued to it. He whacked his cane, in one hand, against the wall upon hearing Maxus's voice. He and that were inseparable.

"I'm old," he retorted, "not senile!" His voice echoed.

The emperor without an empire grumbled before continuing to pull on the rope, hoisting up the professor bit by bit. Honestly, given his strength and the other's size, he would easily pull him up by himself, but Haze insisted that he make the climb also. Eventually, the two reunited at the top.

"Do you have to be so loud?" asked Maxus as he offered a hand. "You could start an avalanche with that voice."

Haze, ignoring the gesture, dug his walking stick down for leverage. "Don't you badmouth me, boy," he said. "Learn how to address your elders."

Maxus laughed. "Hey, I'm older than you."

With a sigh and a shake of the head, Haze sat down. Maxus sat beside him.
"Well, we made it. About time," Haze said.

From the top of the mountain, they could see for miles; the shards of charcoal with snowy peaks as far as they could see, surrounding a lake of silvery blue. Clouds hovered below, moving on their blissful ways.

Call it a hunch, but this was where Maxus preferred to be. In the sky, above the clouds. This way, he felt closer to home.

"Do you think it was all worth it?" Maxus asked.

"It took us three days to get here," Haze replied. Frost clung to his beard. "It better be."

"No, I mean… is all this worth it after everything that happened back home?" He traced the lines across the landscape, following it as it trailed across. "Do I deserve to enjoy this after what I did to the Outerworld? Knowing many others won't?"

Haze looked out to those same lines which made up the world. To be fair, he was no better. There were plenty of people who were affected by his actions. He was the second most prolific person in the civil war, after all.

"We lost some good people, definitely, but don't get caught up on the 'what ifs'. Think about all the others who made it," he said. "Let me tell you, a lesser person wouldn't have been able to save as many as you did."

Maxus slumped with a sigh, resting his chin on his hand. Still the arrogant boy as usual. It was in his soul, and it would remain there until his time came. Haze actually like this feature about Juhi's son.

"You are thinking about others, though. That's the first sign of a noble person." The professor traced a finger upwards and smiled. "There's someone up there smiling down on you right now. Don't you doubt that."

In a slow motion, Maxus looked up. Haze could tell he was contemplating what had been said, thinking about his father and those final words he uttered before his end. He nodded.

Maxus rose and slung his packs off. Inside one of them, he carried a special object all the way to the peak. It held no value – no nutritional or survival worth whatsoever – except that of the sentimental sort. He reached in and pulled out the handle to his father's prized weapon, Heaven's Shard, or what was left of it. The hilt was as shiny as the day it was forged, attached to a broken blade a couple of feet in length.

He walked a few feet across the plateau, ruined blade facing down, then stopped.

"This is for you, Dad," he said, then drove it into the peak, piercing it a foot down. No ordinary person would ever be able to remove it, it was stuck tight, and it would remain there until the end of time.

Heaven's Shard was where it was meant to be: a little closer to heaven. Back by his father's side.

"Aren't you full of surprises," Haze said, twisted all the way around in his spot. "I didn't know you could smile…"

The Emperor caught his likeness in the blade's sheen and witnessed the sight of his lips curled upwards. An image which reminded him of his father. It was as if he was with him right there, proud to call him his son.
"Neither did I," Maxus replied. "Neither did I."

As the monsters begin their new lives on the Earth, the legend of the Land between Heaven and Earth comes to a close. However, one last question remained.

What about Frisk and their family?
Mount Ebott shone like a giant emerald in the clear, blue sky. On the surface it looked peaceful, serene, but deep down there was both plenty of history and plenty of pain. It was a mountain, yet it was also the portal to another world. For years, people have looked up to the stars and wondered if they were alone in the universe.

Turned out, they were looking in both the right and wrong direction at the same time.

Frisk still remembered when they and their friends escaped the Underground, when all of them looked out on the day the barrier was broken and witnessed the sun for the first time, setting upon the horizon. Blissfully unaware of what the future held in store for them.

Out of every thought and dream they had of life after the Underground, Frisk could never have conceived it unravelling like this, especially as they looked at the faces around them.

The same picnic table was draped in the same red and white chequered sheet, and swamped with food and drink and disposable utensils. Sans supplied the condiments; Papyrus somehow interlinked the letter O from seventy three cans of alphabet spaghetti to form, what he called, a chain, because he couldn't think up a clever name besides spaghetto; Toriel reverted back to her traditional recipe of sweet substances baked between two linings of pastry.

Undyne, through nothing short of a miracle, had not only brought properly cooked pizzas, but also remembered to tip the chef. Asriel had a slice of Margherita, Hawaiian, and Vegetarian on his paper plate and a pepperoni slice stuffed in his gob, proving his father, who merrily sipped his tea, right when he told his son he'd love it.

As usual, Alphys took her selfies. For the outside viewer, watching her life unfold as she updated her status with a group shot, it was easy to believe that this short, scaly, yellow thing had a much more eventful life than they would ever dream of having. She had previously shared a picture of Mew Mew, showing her smiling and giving a brave thumbs up with the bare bones of a new body – including the pocky dispenser built into the belly. When everything was finished and all the quirks were ironed out, Mew Mew would be better than ever.

After their first picnic ended in disaster, this family decided to try again and finish it off on a cheerful note. After all, lightning couldn't strike twice, right? There couldn't be another unknown realm of monsters homing in on the sweet scent of the child involved in two monster kingdoms, could there? That would simply be ridiculous.

Frisk took a gulp of their lemonade before reaching down to adjust the harness strapped around their shorts. A sturdy length of rope (the kind strong enough to support a bus) wound its way off the bench, across the ground, and around a massive boulder four feet away. Papyrus's idea; he provided the safety harness and rope. Seconded by Undyne; she provided everything else. Try as they might to argue odds and semantics, it was the only way all of them could relax during this outdoor occasion. Sans didn't mind in the slightest since he got to revel in its shade.

Papyrus was just finishing a story. "And then, after I took the blindfold off, I realised," he concluded, "I was wearing the miniskirt around my neck the whole time."

His ending was met with dumbfounded silence and empty looks from the rest. The slice of pizza dangled limp and half-stuffed in Asriel's mouth.
"Well, what do you think?" Papyrus asked as he sat up straight, eager for the positive feedback he deserved. "Quite astonishing, if I do say so myself – and I just did, three seconds ago."

Toriel had a cupcake inches away from her mouth for the longest time until she pulled it away. "Papyrus, dear, that story began with you going to the store to get milk," she said. "To end there was a little absurd, was it not?"

Papyrus waggled his finger. "It's not absurd, and I'm not a deer."

Undyne had her elbows rested on the table. "Not even the whole part about figure skating with the stars?" she asked.

"Stars have plenty of time on their hands, apparently."

Alphys had her finger an inch away from her phone, paused mid-text for the last twenty minutes. Her phone having went to sleep long since then, and she was pointing at a black screen. "And the deeply descriptive interpretation of doing Sans's laundry?"

"I think I might've dreamt up that bit," Papyrus said as he scratched his noggin.

Sans chuckled in a low tone. *That's what you think, pal.* He reached under the table and pulled out a flying disk – the same one both Frisk and himself were passing back and forth moments before disaster struck.

"Say, we never finished our last game of ultimate disc, now did we?" Sans said as he held the plastic disc coolly between his thumb and index. "Any challengers wanna throw their hat into the ring?"

Frisk pounced up from their seat, eager, until the jangling of stainless steel reminded them of the harness attached around their pelvis. All the sprawling countryside awaited, all that room to run around and jump and roll for the Frisbee in Sans's skeletal grip, and they were restricted to the measly six feet perimeter around the rock.

They asked if they could take it off, promising they wouldn't fly away again. It had been the most part of an hour and nothing has happened in that time. So, could they?

"I don't know..." Undyne, weighing the options, scratched at her chin. "It was 'round about here where you flew off. How do we know that won't happen any second now?"

Fed-up and uninterested in talking this out, Frisk unbuckled the straps themself. The harness slipped around their ankles with the jangle and clang of metal. There! Frisk showed them the evidence by bounding around: they didn't need to be tethered to the ground, gravity was doing the work for them.

Papyrus bolted upright, head sandwiched between red gloves. "Oh no, Frisk! Without your harness, you are defenceless against invaders from another area of existence. Put it back on before—"

The next step made by the human failed to touch the ground. Frisk first thought they were falling, until they realised they were hovering. Looked like Papyrus had a point! They went grab something, anything, but their fingers fell short of the harness as they rose higher into the air.

Everyone jumped to their feet.

"Not this time!" Undyne went to grab Sans, who stayed laid back in his shaded spot, when she stopped. Her clawed fingers were close, but not touching his coat.

She saw that his eye was flared blue with flame. Turning to Frisk, who hovered eight feet above,
revealed that they were coated in an aura of the exact same shade of blue.

Undyne narrowed her singular eye, violent intent burned within. "One of these days, Sans," she hissed, "I'm gonna shove a spear right up there while you sleep."

Sans exploded with laughter as he slammed his fist against the table. "I'm sorry, I'm sorry," he apologised in rasping wheezes, almost choking. "I couldn't resist. It was too perfect to pass up."

Toriel's attempt at a frown came out wrong. "That… that was," she said, covering her mouth to suppress the tickling in her belly. Promptly, she snapped into full disapproval mode – hands on hips and eyebrows arched. "That was not funny, Sans!"

Sans wiped at one of his eye sockets as his laughter came to its conclusion. "It was a lil' funny. Admit it," he said. Seven feet off the ground, upside-down and arms folded, Frisk glowered at the skeleton; their frown, from that angle, kind of looked like a smile. They asked Papyrus to throw a sandwich at his brother, and he complied without hesitation. It bounced of Sans's shiny head, leaving dabs of ketchup and mayonnaise. "Alright, alright," he said, rubbing the stains off, "cool your jets, little dude." And with that, he brought them back to Earth, lowering them head-first before turning them around at the last second.

Asriel swallowed his food and pushed himself off the bench. "I think I'll go stretch my legs."

He stood up and rounded the table, catching Frisk as they bounded across the field. Before they neared the corner, they suddenly came face to face with Sans himself, almost bumping into him. The two made brief eye contact before turning away.

He knew what he did, and so did Sans. The two had avoided each other since their adventure in the Outerworld ended. At least Asriel had been the one doing the dodging, he wondered whether Sans was doing the same thing. Asriel lifted his chin, inhaled slowly, then exhaled. He wished to avoid the topic forever, but he knew he had to face the music sooner or later.

"Hey, uh, Sans…" Asriel murmured, struggling to face the skeleton.

"Hey, bud," Sans said in his usual manner. "What's shakin'?"

Asriel's frown deepened and back rounded as he detected the bitter reminder. Bud.

"N-not… much?" He glimpsed the light in his eyes, and they were expecting more to be said. "Look… I just want to say I'm sorry for all the times I… as Flowey…" He worked up the courage to make eye contact. "I understand if you can't forgive me. I can't take any of it back, no matter how much I want to… and…" Sweat trickled down his fur. "Oh boy," he said, rubbing the back of his neck, "I really, really wish I knew what to say…"

Sans was smiling, but his half-closed eye sockets suggested otherwise. After years of searching, of going around in circles, and clawing and screaming into the darkness, he was finally staring into the face of the source. This was the individual who toyed with his life, building him up and knocking him down again and again and again and again, and now he was living as family under the wings of Gorey and Tori. Apparently, this was his punishment; he gets his family back after everything he did.

Sans had every reason to hate Asriel, to reject his apology. He had imagined and rehearsed this moment for a while now. He wanted to look upon this flower who tormented his life, and the lives of those he loved, and laugh directly into the face which laughed at his pain, misery, and suffering. He took a breath, preparing a mocking hoot, and saw the goat child before him.

His attempt at laughter came out as a groan. Oh, shucks… he thought, running a hand down his skull.
Sans gave the boy a pat on the back. Another minute more of silence and little Asriel might have fainted from heatstroke. "Hey, don't worry about it, kid," he said gently. "It's all water under the bridge. You're here. I'm here. We're all here, and that's all that matters."

The boy perked up slightly, yet wary that a trap might be brewing. "Do you really think so?" he asked, testing the waters.

Sans led him a few steps away from the others.

"I'll be straight with ya," he began, "I wanna hate you, kid, I really do. I've tried so hard over these last weeks to build up anger towards you. I've tried everything. I've dreamed about you as a punching bag, bruised, battered and surrounded with stink lines. I've drawn pictures of you shot with arrows and set on fire and covered in stink lines. I've wrote stories about you in a shark tank inside a lion's den on an asteroid entering the Earth's atmosphere… and the asteroid itself is one big stink line. I've stayed up in bed all night, staring at a picture of you, and – actually, that last one doesn't sound too great comin' out of my mouth. Scratch that one, will ya?"

Asriel, wide-eyed and dumbfounded, nodded slowly. "Will do…?" he said no louder than a murmur. The last one he found offensive, but the first three were fine?

Sans cleared his throat and continued. "Anyway, I tried so hard to hate you, and I got nowhere. I thought maybe it was down to looks, but then I figured out the real reason why. It's because… for me to hate you would be to live in the Underground all over again, and I really don't wanna do that. I don't want to be stuck in the past anymore, chasin' my tail all the time, with everything changing around me.

"So how 'bout this? Whatever happened between Flowey you and past me, let's keep it in the Underground; and whatever happens as Asriel you and present me, right here, right now, let's start that on a clean slate. I'm ready to turn the page. The only question is: are you?"

Asriel heaved another laboured yawn. "You have no idea how badly I want to…" He looked Sans in the face, a yearning written all over him. "Yes. Yes. I wanna move on, too. I do."

"Then how about we act like the mature people we are," Sans said as he offered a bony hand, "and call it square?"

Asriel perked up, pulling a hopeful smile. "Okay. " He eagerly reached for it. "Square!"

Oldest trick in the book. Upon connecting palms, a loud crack of flatulence escaped, silencing all conversation and drawing all eyes from around the table. It lasted for seven seconds.

Sans burst out with more laughter revealing an empty whoopee cushion dangling from between his fingers. "That one never gets old!"

The Dreemurr kid grumbled. "Real mature…" he said sarcastically as he wiped the same hand against his jeans.

Sans's laughter ended naturally as he stuffed the cushion back into his pocket and gave Asriel another friendly pat on the back. "Now we're even," he said in jest. In his other hand, he still had the flying disk. "There's room for one more, if you're interested."

The little boy nodded and agreed to take part. Together, they hurried over to the field where Frisk stood alone, waiting.

Around the picnic table, the rest continued with their anecdotes, jokes, and facts on Japanese culture.
Undyne glanced to something bugging her for a while. Stationed at the leg of the table, nearest Asgore, was a white box. Every basket, cooler and bag had been opened, except that one. It was four times the size of a shoebox, and the lid was held tight with string wrapped around all four sides.

"What's that?" she asked.

Asgore followed her direction. He gave the box a gentle tap. "One last matter I need to attend to," he said. Undyne detected the gravity in his voice. "It's a private matter. I hope you understand."

Undyne thought of pushing further, but diminished the thought. Growing up, she had come to learn that Asgore had acquired many complicated facets as a result of his long life. There were some things best left undisturbed, and she decided to leave this one buried out of respect for him.

Frisk jumped and caught the disc before winding it up and hurling it at Asriel. He raced across as fast as he could and snatched it with a lunging dive. Grass clung to his clothes and fur as he got up and passed it to Sans.

It could not have been more perfect, thought Frisk. There was peace once more. No hate. No discrimination. Endless opportunities on the horizon. A future for the monsters. Everyone was happy. Everyone was free.

Everyone, except… Asriel kept glancing at Mount Ebott from time to time. Maybe not everyone was free after all…

After a while, a blanket of clouds had been cast across the sky, hiding the sun and dropping the temperature a shade. Better time than any to make a move. After packing away and cleaning the table, it was ready for the next picnic goer to use.

"You guys walking back to the lot with us?" Alphys asked, shouldering her bag.

Asgore picked up the coolers belonging to him. "I'll be heading back to the lot to put these in the car, but then I'm heading back here," he answered. "We have one thing we need to address, by ourselves."

"Here?" Papyrus asked.

"Not here," Toriel answered. She had the mystery box under her arm as she drew her finger to Mount Ebott. "There."

Alphys raised an eyebrow. "The Underground? Odd. I thought that was the last place you'd want to be."

"It still is," she said. "We have to go back down there one last time." Her voice had developed a serious quality to it, which spread into her look.

"T-then, I wish you all the best of luck."

The rest parted with their goodbyes. Asgore, Undyne, Alphys, and Papyrus took the path back, and Sans cut across to the nearest brush. He would reach the parking lot before any of them. Toriel waited at the spot with Frisk and Asriel. It wasn't long until Asgore returned empty-handed, the coolers and towels packed in the back of the SUV.
"Is everyone ready?" he asked. His wife and children gave their affirmatives. "Then let's go."

They took the path leading up to the Underground's entrance. The Dreemurr's had been locked in there for a long time, and the thought of returning to dirty air and rocky walls did not fill them with giddy thoughts.

In fact, the reason for their return was not happy at all.

None of them ever thought they would be returning to the Underground so soon. Traversing the world beneath the ground, with a ceiling and no sunlight other than what this world provided, was like returning to one's hometown.

The trek was longer than any of them would have liked. The cloaked monster and their boat now sailed the wide and wondrous Mississippi, meaning they had no other option but to go the whole way on foot.


After an hour's journey, the Ruins loomed as Asriel, Frisk, Asgore and Toriel descended down the steps. The pile of leaves accumulated in the recess was as red and as crinkly as the day Frisk saw it. Funny, this was where Frisk and Asriel first met, back when he was but a flower, and before Frisk knew anything, and before the two of them even dreamed that they would return here as siblings.

"Asriel," Toriel started, "we are nearing the site now. Are you certain you wish to do this?"

The little prince gazed up at the arches, feeling his nerves tingle with dread. This place was meant to be his home, his exile, and, eventually, his tomb. Now, it was the last place he wished to be at. His knees grew weak and his stomach shivered; he absolutely did not want to be here, that much he knew, but he needed to do this.

He nodded.

The Dreemurr family turned the corner to the very end of the Underground. A single, shrinking cave; drowned in darkness except for the single crack of light from high above, embellishing the bed of golden flowers below.

One human's beginning. Another human's end.

They approached. The bed lay six feet in diameter and shone as bright as the sun. Before Toriel could say anything, her husband had fallen to his knees.

"So, this is it," Asgore whispered to Toriel. He already knew. "This is where Chara rests."

"Yes, Asgore," Toriel said, caressing his shoulder. He reached up and placed his hand against hers, fingers touching and intertwining. "I miss them dearly, as well."

"I should've been here…" he mused, tone laced with sorrow. Regretting not her actions, but his own. "I never got the chance to say goodbye…"

Toriel gazed longingly into the flowers, feeling the anchor in her soul. She still loved Chara, missed them dearly; and yet, she still did not know to that day whether they loved her back. "And I should have told you so long ago," she said. "I am sorry."
Asgore motioned toward the children. "Take your time, children. We have all the time in the world."

Asriel stood at the edge, in the exact spot he stood while everyone, except himself, funneled out the exit, leaving him all alone. He forgot about his surrounding, and focused on collecting the memories swimming around inside his head. Happier times with the person buried down there; times when they smiled, laughed, cried. Moments he will never get back ever again.

Frisk stepped forward, beside their brother. This bed meant more to Frisk than just florae from the surface. This was where they were born, where they awoke to the beginning of their life. The pinprick of light above was the first thing they saw, the soft soil was the first thing they felt. Flowey was the first person they met.

Their thoughts turned to the person they never knew, had never met, and yet stood against this person like a reflection, a reincarnation. Without Chara's death, Frisk may never have been born.

Without pulling away, Frisk heard Asriel address them: "A part of me wishes you picked Chara instead of me…"

Frisk said nothing at first. Maybe they should have? Maybe Flowey would be happier had his best friend came back instead of his soul. Chara was the one person he clung to growing up; the one person who seemed to know him the best. The two were inseparable, bound by a rare kind of trust. A soulless flower would not have cared about himself as long as he had his buddy back.

Frisk shook their head.

They chose Asriel. They chose him because he deserved to be saved the most.

Asriel paused, remembering the good times, then reached into the pocket of his black jeans and touched the knotted links inside. Clutching it and pulling it out, a thin, silver chain unraveled and pointed straight down, swaying clockwise. At its lowest region dangled a ruby red heart. It was a locket – a memento from another life.

His eyes began to well up as he read the inscription… then clenched them shut, trying to fight back the prickling beneath his lids. No matter how tight he pressed, they forced their way out.

He couldn't cry, not here, not in front of them. He tried to remain strong even as the heat ran down his cheeks. He had to… He had to…

"Some things never change, huh?"

Asriel opened his eyes wide. Standing before him… He couldn't believe it. There was no way…

Chara.

Them but not them. There but at the same time not there, with their ash brown hair and dark eyes and rosy cheeks and friendly smile. It was Chara. They were there.

"Chara?" Asriel gasped.

"At least someone still remembers me," they said after a slight giggle. "Look at you, tearing up over me. All this time and I can't believe you're still the same Asriel I knew."

Asriel dabbed at his face and realised the rivers streaming down it. He smiled through the sadness. "I always was a cry-baby, wasn't I?"
Chara glanced away momentarily, their smile faltered. "I once thought there was no room in this world for tears," they said. "I probably didn't shed enough of them while I could." They caught sight of the heart-shaped locket and rekindled their beaming. "Remember when your parents gave us these?" Chara asked as they took it onto their palm, examining it on their pale skin.

"They were your parents too."

Chara dropped their hand and sighed, looking away again. "And yet, after they clothed me, fed me, and gave me a home, I didn't think about them when I needed to the most." They shook their head. "Our plan... My plan... was destined to fail from the start. I didn't know you as well as I thought. Had I did, I probably wouldn't have dragged you into it from the start. I died... but you suffered something much worse, because of me."

The boy reached out and seized his best friend by the arms. "But I don't regret helping you. I've done so many things wrong myself and yet I've never regretted that one bit. It was always our plan. You did know me. I believed in it too – I did!" Now it was his turn to look guilty. "I just wish I was braver in seeing it through."

"Watching you get hurt tore me apart, Asriel. I know you think I was telling you to defend yourself. But..." Chara rubbed their elbow. "Other people... haven't exactly treated me right, you know. I just wanted to get back at them so badly, and I thought the monsters would want to as well." They faced the light. "I put this need for revenge in front of everything else and, at first, I didn't understand why you wouldn't fight back. I couldn't." They gave him a pat on the arm. "But now... I think I do..."

"Those humans may have hurt me, but they weren't bad people. They were just scared, confused, trying to defend themselves. Those people who hurt you? They're weren't your friends. But I was, Chara. I was your best friend, and you were mine."

Chara nodded slowly. "At least you made it. That's all that matters."

"I'm sorry for what happened. I wish things could be different."

"Me too. Are we still friends?"

"You'll always be my best friend, Chara."

"And you'll always be my best friend too, Asriel." Chara hugged him. Their touch was delicate, warming him down to the core.

"I wish I could have you back," Asriel, his chin on their shoulder, stammered his words. Salty water leaked onto their shirt. "I miss you so much, Chara."

Chara gently shushed him as they rocked side to side. "Just stay with me a little while longer..." they cooed in a soft, delicate manner. "Just a little while longer..."

Asriel lost himself, forgot where he was, or who he was. He could have been holding the human with leafy appendages, but he didn't care, as long as he was with Chara, his best friend in the whole wide world. Being with Chara completed him; without them, he felt like a puzzle with a piece missing.

He never wanted this to end.

He didn't want to let go.

"It's time for me to go now," they whispered. "They're waiting for me."
"You're... you're leaving?" Asriel pulled back. "Who? Who's waiting for you?"

"The ones who fell after. They'll been wondering where I've been all this time." Chara faced the rays shining down. Their eyes glowed so bright. "I'll have one big story to tell when I get there..."

More tears pricked his eyes. "Will I ever see you again?"

"Someday... Someday you will..." They held him again, tighter. "Until then, don't let Mom and Dad cry ever again."

Asriel sniffed. "I won't. I'm gonna miss you."

"I miss you already." Chara whispered in his ear. "See you on the other side, Asriel."

The Dreemurr dug his fingers in tight, desperate to battle nature, to keep his friend with him for as long as he could.

"No... I don't wanna let you go! Stay with me, Chara! Please!" He waited for their soothing words, their voice, to which he heard nothing. "Chara... Please, don't go... Stay with me... It's me. Your best friend..."

The arms of the human held fast, but different, containing another level of warmth and love. These were not the arms or the hands of his cherished Chara, but of another. He opened his eyes and pulled softly away from Frisk, catching glimpses of Chara in them.

Frisk gave their deepest symphonies for his loss.

Asriel wiped his cheeks dry. "Th-thank you, Frisk."

Lying on the ground behind them, lay the box which they carried all the way from home. Still tied with string. Its purpose was ready to be unveiled. Young Asriel knelt down, undid the knot and removed the lid. Inside, lying on a bed of crumpled paper, was a cross. A crucifix. Two planks of wood pieced together to form a T, and painted white. Where the planks crossed, a simple epitaph had been engraved on a gold placard.

Picking it up, he almost toppled upon finding that the cross was heavier than it looked. He crept over the flowers, feeling the rays shine down on him and softness rise up, like Chara's influence had seeped into the soil. Asriel reached the other end of the bed and balanced the tip against the ground before pressing down. The cross sank one foot into the soft earth.

The young boy turned back to the locket. It was the last memoir he had of them; the last thing he could look at and be reminded of the human he called his best friend. To part from it would be to take his first steps without them – to end their relationship, permanently. He worked up all the willpower in his soul, then placed the chain over the cross's neck. The heart hung below the placard.

"Rest in peace, Chara." Asriel stepped backwards across the golden field, his eyes locked on the grave the whole way. "I will never forget you." He stopped beside his family. They all gave their silent prayers; their fleeting farewells for the missing member of their flock. Without saying another word, Asgore, Frisk, then Toriel slowly turned to leave.

Asriel remained in place.

"And..." he whispered to himself. Hand over heart, reaching for the keepsake no longer there.

Asriel looked back at the cross. The locket rested over its arms.
"And…"

His arm went loose. He was ready to shut a story from his life away for good. To put this tale under the ground and let it be finished once and for all.

He turned around. "Goodbye, Flowey. Goodbye forever."

The boy reunited with his family and, together, one last time, the Dreemurrs looked back. Asgore, Toriel, Asriel and Frisk faced Chara's final resting place.

The light shone down on the grave and the locket…

In loving memory of

Chara Dreemurr

Best Friends Forever
As we draw the curtain on this tale, one tale in a universe of millions, I would like to give my sincerest thanks all everyone who took the time to read and enjoy my story, and for sticking with it over these past couple of years.

I'd like to thank everyone who left kudos.

I'd like to thank everyone who left comments. I'd like to apologise to everyone I didn't reply to. I've read every comment I've got, and they're all meaningful, no matter how big or small they are. Trust me when I say that your compliments matter.

Special thanks to Zoic Alcelaphine for recommending this story on TV Tropes.

Extra special thanks to TC-96 for my first ever fan art.

Oh yes, and extra, extra special thanks to Toby Fox for, you know, actually making the game. Otherwise this story wouldn't exist in the first place.

And so, this tale comes to a close. But there will be many, many more stories involving these characters we have come to adore. Something tells me the characters in this story might have another adventure in store for them. I guess we'll just have to wait and see.

Until next time, this is Youwillneverseeeme bidding you all adieu, good day, and good night.

You've been a great audience!

Asgore slowly turned the handle and eased the door open as quietly as possible, paving the way for his wife to enter. Toriel snuck into the dark room, plush carpet masking her footsteps; the only audible noises came from chirping crickets and two soft, steady breaths. A streak of silver moonlight ran across the room, providing just enough illumination for the mother to make out her bearings.

Toriel was holding a plate in each hand, with a slice of pie of different flavouring on each one. She set them down on the bedside tables beside two separate beds before she stepped back and took a good look at them. Their children, Asriel and Frisk, fast asleep, cosy on their fluffy pillows and the covers pulled up to their chins. Watching them slumber made her smile.

Such a peaceful sight. Both parents wished it could last forever.

She snuck backwards over to the door, beside her husband who placed a gentle hand around her waist. The two looked at their children, then at each other, feeling an attachment that they had not felt in such a long time.

They leaned closer to each other.

Closer.
Then, in that one magical moment, their lips met. It lasted no more than a second, but the feelings behind it were undeniable.

They didn't need to say anything. No words needed to be exchanged or feelings revealed as they turned to their children once more and held each other close. They just knew, right there and then, that everything was going to be alright.

With a soft click, Asgore shut the door.

Outertale

The End

Please [drop by the archive and comment](#) to let the author know if you enjoyed their work!