Sans is conflicted by night terrors and vague memories from previous timelines gone wrong. They're starting to become more vivid and soon he starts to notice deviations from what he's grown accustomed to, and Papyrus does something unusual that changes everything.

With the River Person out of commission, Sans accompanies Grillby on a replenishment run through to New Home, all while wrestling with a feeling he just can't break about his long-time friend. While getting to know Grillby in a newer light along with some changes that have come up due to past medical abuse, it's becoming more and more apparent that something or someone is interfering...
(This fic is pre-canon which will eventually progress into gameplay plot with some embellishment. Originally rated Teen, but has since been upped to Explicit for references to bad physical and emotional trauma and Sansby exploration. Smut/sexual content will have warnings at the beginning of any chapters and a brief summary in the end notes.)

Notes

See the end of the work for notes.
The stool swayed dangerously as he leaned against the bar, swivelling it and daring it to tip over. He was hunched over the bar, lidless sockets blanked as he tilted his bottle of preferred beverage in much of the same manner. It made a hollow noise, a faint, depressing song of a ketchup bottle long since emptied. He gave another half-hearted sigh, the action meaningless to one without lungs, but it was something that monsters of all makeups would do, having picked it up from their time with humans long, long ago.

It had been the fourth such sigh that evening, and the bartender was not giving in. That had been perhaps his eighth bottle, and his reserves were already becoming lean. Don’t think that the fire monster had let the increase in condiment intake get past him - Grillby caught on to a lot more than his empirical demeanour let on.

He’d allowed the other to seat himself, however precariously, at the bar hours ago. While other monsters were seemingly oblivious to the small skeleton’s mood, the proprietor had known Sans far too long to know the silence was more than his usual quiet self. His visage was masked by flame, an ethereal crackle sparked in quiet reverence as the other stayed silent in turn. When Sans finally let the stool down with all four legs on the floor, his shoulders were hunched, the weight of the entire mountain on them.

And yet, the skeleton would not speak.

This was new. Usually after a few hours, drinks… there would be words. But now? Nothing.

Concerned, the bartender tapped the counter with one digit. Lazily, those lightless sockets would turn to him, a weary tug at the ever-present grin on the other’s face. When the skeleton shrugged, he seemed almost… listless. It was heart-wrenching to see such an old friend so down in spirits, but unless the other made the initiative, Grillby had thought it better not to pry, but to confirm he was there for him until Sans relented.

It was not as though he hadn’t tried before; it was just that Sans was a flight risk when confronted. He knew the other had inner demons more dangerous than any of the beings unknown lurking above the mountain. Pure conjecture, considering it had been centuries since any monster had seen it last. But Sans had a way with bending a conversation away from himself; however clumsy he appeared to be on the outside, his mind had showed the other how clever and adept he really was, over time.

While his posture was not receptive, Sans stayed, the other’s company - hell, everyone’s company gave his life meaning in what felt like a crushing darkness. And, if truth be told, he didn’t want to conjure up the memory of some of his more horrid night terrors of late. He was already avoiding his brother, shirking his duties more than usual… he was tired, and even his puns didn’t have the same appeal anymore. Sure, they were still bad, but they didn’t ring with his own personal brand of humour anymore. He’d slipped into the bad habit of leaving others out of the loop, and back into the cycle of misery he’d go.

Left behind, in more ways than one, the skeleton’s thoughts whirled in his skull for the fortieth time that evening. No one left. Following a small creature through the entire Underground. Everything becoming… empty… as he helplessly followed, scared for what was happening, and what was to come. And then, there would be… skips? He wrestled with this in his mind. He wasn’t sure about
them at first, but he knew that pieces of his memory were missing. There would be an instance or
two where he would attempt to remember everything in order, but it would all be flashes, nonlinear
pieces of a recollection of a dream he had once told someone, long ago.

Which is why… if he was honest with himself, he didn’t share it with anyone. His worries, his
nightmares, his hopes and dreams. Because somehow, in what amounted to another life, he already
had. And Sans was not a monster who easily revealed his worries, over and over…

Over and over…

Over and over and over…

He snapped out of his pitch-dark reverie when the stool next to him scuffed against the floorboards,
the noise loud and jarring enough to make the skeleton jump. The ketchup bottle lost its battle with
balance as his finger slipped against the anterior and it rolled away and stopped against a nearby salt
shaker.

“oh. heya, grillbz,” he muttered, his tone of voice oddly neutral as he settled his skull onto his
crossed arms on the countertop. The waft of heat from the other monster shone on his pale bones, the
patient virtue of his friend’s composure oddly comforting. Sans had joked, once upon a time, that he
was at least forty times more relaxing than a hearth. But now, the skeleton just watched the flames
lick languidly around his old friend’s hands, obscuring their true shape.

“welp. should get goin’.” The skeleton huffed one more sigh, leaning further down into his arms so
his face was out of view. He really didn’t want to. It was more and more difficult every day to even
leave the house; that is, if he even did go home in the first place. This was probably the third day
Grillby had graciously allowed him to stay, and the morose skeleton was starting to feel like he was
becoming a bit of a burden.

Another tap to the countertop from the other and Sans lifted his skull again, just peering out from the
corner of his socket to the other’s patient tapping. Yeah, he knew he had to talk, sooner or later. Half
of him wanted to, and half of him vehemently objected. What would be the point if this happened to
be another offshoot, and everyone one day decided to conveniently forget about what had happened?
He’d bare his soul for whatever temporary relief it offered, only for the action to be rendered
pointless.

Something akin to a cold tendril of guilt coiled in his figurative stomach with the other’s presence,
this time. His mind wandered once more to the ‘alternate’ route, bits of pieces flickering in his
memory like a deep chasm. Of Grillby’s entirely empty - Snowdin in a dark light, no life, no wind,
only a whisper of dust and deep, unsatiated hunger.

And that knife.

He winced inwardly, instinctively going for an old wound he felt he always had, yet wasn’t there at
all. No wound, no dust, no scar… Just a phantom pain that wrecked his soul from time to time,
causing him to crumple into weakness, especially on dark evenings like these.

The monster beside him pulsed, his flames crackling like kindling and with the faint hum of an ever-
lasting blaze. Cautiously, Grillby leaned against the bar too, closing the distance between them and
not wanting to spook the other. The skeleton had a habit of leaving and disappearing, after all.

“Talk to me, old friend,” was the ethereal, low gravel.
Sans moved his arm up slightly, cradling the back of his skull in something akin to self-comfort. The look on his face was almost pained, but familiar. Grillby had been seeing it a lot lately. Defeated, the skeleton raised his eye lights to the other’s visage, defaulting to his usual excuse in previous lives that would always more or less explain things, “just… bad nights. not so great dreams lately.”

Grillby knew that wasn’t all to it and patiently watched from behind glowing spectacles, waiting for more while keeping his silence.

“…they just seem so vivid,” Sans muttered into his sleeve as he turned his skull away. It was almost rehearsed, having said it so many times, and yet it carried a little weight behind it. Grillby knew about his issues - sleeping damn near anywhere, tormented by night terrors. It was something that Sans had grew to hate about himself; it was not the kind of joke he had wanted to be. Absently, he would scratch the back of his skull, unsure of how to proceed, but at the same time knowing full well what to say. Yet being forced to play along with fate’s plan for him always dulled his willingness to participate.

That, and he already knew what advice Grillby would offer. In different ways, but it was always the same. Take care of himself. Try something, every day, even if he didn’t feel like it. Take time for himself. Spend time with the people he loved. His advice, while seemingly simple, struck with deeper meaning, every time. He knew the other monster’s therapeutic touch on a more personal level than anyone else did. It was an endearing little quirk that causality kept in its reserves, as if just to placate him. Perhaps that is why the monster’s company was so soothing to his soul…

“…spoken to Papyrus about it?”

Sans’ eye lights flicked back into focus from his reverie, catching the tail end of the other’s soft spoken, carefully chosen words. He made a gesture of frustration; running bony fingers down his face and stopping over his sockets briefly, pinching the surface between them. So often, he just wanted to talk with his brother, to let him know everything that kept him uneasy. However, the other’s boisterous attitude and clamorous worry had always been a hurdle Sans just never had the energy for.

“i’ve tried. he worries. and i don't wanna make him worry…” the skeleton replied in hushed undertones. It was all very exhausting, actually. Sometimes, he wondered if his brother had gotten his share of energy by some cosmic mistake. A seemingly impermeable silence dropped over him, threatening to hitch his voice as he attempted to sort through the words. Every time was a mountain-be-damned train wreck. He realised his gaze had shifted back to the fire monster’s hands on the bar, clasped over themselves in a calm, respectful manner. It was just another one of Grillby’s refined stances that Sans had taken a liking to.

He realised he had been lost in thought again and Sans groaned inwardly. Grillby had just asked something more and he was debating in even replying, since he hadn’t heard the question. Like every time, he supposed he could have just guessed or shrugged indifferently, but the bartender’s expectant gaze shone through him, putting him on the spot.

“…didn’t get that, sorry.”

Grillby tentatively reached with his hand, settling a gentle pat on the other’s shoulder when he didn’t move. The gesture was kind and comfortable, and somehow made Sans feel… worse, and guilt bubbled inside of him.

“Go home tonight and rest, friend,” came the quiet crackle of fire once more.

“i know, i know,” the skeleton sighed; the fifth one. He made no effort to move, his eye lights
dimming until the hollows were bare. Rest meant sleep and sleep meant more trouble than it was inherently worth. He supposed he could always nap later in Waterfall, after he attempted to man one of his posts. If he actually got a full night’s rest, maybe he’d have more than one hope left to cling to.

It was all in wishful thinking, however.

Eventually he did exit the bar, if for nothing else than to stop making the fire monster worried about him. He played it off as though he’d had too much to drink, his weary grin tightening at either side as he stumbled out the door - a show for the other monsters. They all called after him, telling him to be careful on his way home, to have a good night… it was nice for them to treat him so kindly. But it was also another one of those things that made the skeleton feel so hopelessly guilty for.

Stubbornly, he dragged his slippered feet in the snow, preparing himself for that one spot of ice that always got him just before the library. He skidded to one side, lost balance, and unceremoniously landed on his back. He huffed indignantly, staring up at the vaulted cavernous ceiling looming above as though it was its fault. Why this time? Why in every single goddamn…

As the universe seemed to load unrelenting heaps of misfortune and reasons to despise himself, Sans simply lay there, not wanting to get up. It was partially the reason he didn’t want to fall in the first place. Moving was so much effort. Talking, keeping up the facade… after a while, hurting just felt like an annoying burden.

With a grunt of effort, he sat up, rubbing at the back of his spine in mild irritation, dusting off his shorts and jacket of snow and slush. He was absolutely drenched, and even if skeletons felt no cold, ice water between the joints was enough to impede movement and get painful if it happened to freeze. It was this that motivated him to get up, his pace a little quicker than usual, if only to get back home and maybe get changed.

When he arrived at the steps to his house, he stopped. An eerie feeling crept into his soul. Something was… different. So severely different that he was surprised he didn’t notice it when he had passed it. His magic coiled around his bones, making him shiver as he turned to face the street towards the library. Apart from his own, there were no footsteps, but… His eye lights settled on his stuffed mailbox. Or at least, it would be stuffed, had the junk mail, overdue bill notices and postcards been there.

The unsettling feeling returned as he walked up one step, his skull craned in that direction, his left eye socket starting to wisp and sear cyan with a touch of gold. There were no footprints in the snow at all, yet… he was sure his mail was there before he left, even if it had been days ago. It was always there, like his pet rock. It was a universal constant!

His soul was thrumming hard in his chest cavity, fear coiling in his being. With every cautious step he took towards the porch, something in him jumped and cried out that something was wrong. So, not as dead on the inside as he thought, but scared enough to not want to find out, he bitterly thought. He took a figurative gulp of air, his erratic and paranoid magic throwing a hue of bright colours and mayhem onto the front door. He was halfway to reaching for the doorknob when the wood nearly flew off the hinges, startling the skeleton so much he lost footing and twisted his ankle bone in the joint and fell.

“SANS! YOU HAD ME WORRIED SICK!” came the familiar tone, cadence, and impenetrable volume level. Sans clung up the rail with something of a grimace, gingerly stooping to pick up the slipper that had fell off in his rush to regain his balance.
Papyrus loomed over him, helping him to gain footing on their as-per-usual slippery steps. He’d always said his footwear needed more traction, would have loved to tell Sans off about it, but something in his brother’s stature just felt like it would be too much. His outings of late had been plenty and he only seemed to come home after many days. When he was home, it was to wash up, have some spaghetti, and somehow be very bad at sleeping.

“sorry, bro,” Sans replied, wagging his foot as he entered the house with a series of hops. He bent down, leaning against the door jamb for balance as he sorted things out, audible clicks of bones settling into place and he tossed his slipper onto the floor, returning it to his foot with a sloppy squish.

“WHERE WERE YOU?”

“grillby’s.” Sans shrugged as he unzipped his hoodie jacket, fighting with the toggle at the end where it was always impossible to unhook. Dejectedly, he just sighed and dropped it on the floor in a sopping pile, leaving it there. Without missing a beat, his brother picked it up and hung it on the coat rack where it could drip dry.

“FOR THREE DAYS?” the tone was lowered and highly suspicious as he rounded on Sans, ready to give him a proper scolding, but again, his brother seemed… smaller, his eye lights gone and hollowed. His own narrowed slightly, uneasy about the crackle of magic he’d sensed just outside the door. It had been… worrying - with his brother’s meandering around at all hours of the night, leaving without telling him, and just… not being around? Well! The Great Papyrus would certainly have to get Sans to tell him about all his brotherly troubles!

The grin at Sans’ mouth tightened artificially and he attempted a softer, more lazy demeanour. His little brother already looked like he was going to interrogate him, and he didn’t want to invoke any questions about his panic attack on their doorstep. Thinking on it, he sauntered into the living room, his one foot clicking due to his fall. It would sort itself out - always did.

He stopped in front of the television that was left on, eyeing the sizeable pile of letters, postcards and bills on the floor. It looked like Papyrus had been sorting them into smaller piles - more yellow sticky notes with his own spidery cursive written on them in big capital letters marked each pile: DUE, FOR SANS, FLYERS, ???. He had to let out a soft laugh at that. Trust his brother to be scrutinizing, even with this.

But this… this wasn’t right. He hummed softly, rubbing his jaw with his bony digits while Papyrus unsuccessfully tried to gain his attention by stepping in full view of him, puffing his chest out and crossing his arms impatiently. Sans gave him a feeble grin when he snapped out of his thoughts, hands going into his shorts’ pockets in lieu of his jacket.

“Oh, uh… you just… never have bothered with my mail before, paps,” he offered a little meekly, but still looked at the closest pile. Papyrus made a grandiose speech, whirling in place and gesturing to the huge pile of papers on the floor; about how if he ever did give in and did all the things Sans should be doing, he’d never have any time for himself or for training to get into the Royal Guard. The smaller skeleton nodded absently, still scratching. “no, i mean, you’ve… never done it.” Not ever, not in any memory he had…

Something in his expression must have betrayed him, since Papyrus was about a foot away from him again, eyeing him with suspicion. His brother always closed in on his personal space whenever he knew something was up, and today was no different. “THEY’RE PUTTING YOUR MAIL IN MY BOX NOW! IT WAS TIME!” it was the most cordial way for his brother to tell him.

With everything being the same to the point of predictability, for one or two things out of place in the loop just made him feel disquieted, as though something had to have gone wrong. Hell, maybe this
would be the offshoot where he’d pick up his sock next to the TV? Taking a quick glance to it, he scoffed. It wasn’t likely; in fact, there was a brand new yellow note attached to the one he’d left weeks ago. He’d have to see to his reply later.

The uneasiness in his soul made him quiet, and instead of walk away to his room like he’d normally do with a shrug, he side-stepped his brother and took a seat on the floor next to the heap of papers, his movements punctuated by the sound of popping bones. More worrisome fretting from his brother about sore bones and exercising more barely reached him as he picked up one of the postcards, flipping to the back of it to study the picture. Its glossy texture had been weathered from its life in his mailbox, the subjects a couple of impressively drawn echo flowers from Waterfall. It was addressed from Papyrus, on one of his first trips to Undyne’s cooking and training exercises.

Something of a nostalgic feeling passing through him, Sans felt his smile ease into something easier, something forgotten. Why had he never looked through these? If he had to be honest with himself again, it just never passed his mind. It always seemed like something that could be done later. Yet here he was - and it was kind of… nice.

Papyrus had seated himself across from his brother, making a show of sorting more bills and scoffing at how overdue they were. But on the inside, he knew something was eating away at Sans. The fact that this was their first actual conversation in what was probably a week both excited and worried him. His brother had always been the reclusive type, and he had wracked his memory if he had done anything to upset Sans in the past while. Nothing out of the ordinary - his nagging about his laziness (the usual), silly arguments about the best puzzles, his sock, his frequent trips to greasy food establishments… entirely acceptable, brotherly correspondence!

Which brought him to another thought; of his brother’s constant sleepiness. He looked worse for it. Even now, he saw Sans’ frame teetering, his eye lights faded in fatigue and as small as pinpoints. He watched him wrestle with the urge to sleep, his skull nodding slightly before he roused himself and reached for another postcard, blatantly ignoring the ever-increasing pile of overdue bills. It was a good thing the CORE’s power reached Snowdin, otherwise he could only imagine how astronomical the cost would be to light the town! Still though, the capital would wait only so long before sending another, politely worded letter requesting their owed forty gold payment for setting them up on power from Hotland… before they resent it. As they had, it looked to be… fourteen times, already.

Papyrus sighed exasperatedly, watching as Sans jerked his skull up once more at the noise. He was fighting sleep, which meant he hadn’t been resting for all of the time he had left. The living room was warm and quiet, save for a commercial that blared something MTT-Brand related, to which the taller skeleton promptly stood and turned off the TV in one fell motion. Then he unceremoniously reached under his brother’s shoulder joints and hoisted him up as though he were a child.

Sans buckled out of his dazy, sleepy spell and jerked against Papyrus’ arms, in time to fall directly on the couch. One of the springs in it dug against his femur and his spine spasmed where he’d landed on it earlier. Grumpily, he rubbed the spot, looking up to his younger brother with a hurt expression.

“NOW! ARE YOU GOING TO TELL YOUR ADORING AND PERHAPS A LITTLE DISTRESSED BROTHER YOUR TROUBLES? OR ARE YOU GOING TO NAP?”

If he had to pick, Sans wouldn’t. They were both choices he didn’t want to commit to. He shuffled back against the couch, at inner turmoil with Papyrus’ worry gnawing at his soul. It was like at the bar, but instead of warm, patient silence, his brother was quickly chipping away at his resolve.

“WAS IT… ME??? DID I DO SOMETHING, SANS?”

Sans dropped the postcard he’d been looking at, eye lights flicking up to his brother’s face. He noted
the unsure posture, the way his gaze shifted about but didn’t look at him directly. Papyrus’ hands tugged on his gloves, as though the fit wasn’t quite right. He was uneasy, but he had no reason to be. The smaller skeleton felt even smaller, so laden with guilt that he didn’t say anything for awhile, instead wanted to hide in his room. He lowered his eye lights to Papyrus’ red boots, searching for something he could say to make him not worry so much.

“I... SEE.” And there it was - decided for him. He couldn’t not say anything to that voice. His eye lights snapped up back to his brother’s face, horrified that Papyrus didn’t wait.

“paps… i’m just tired, i’m sorry,” he offered, giving a menial shrug. “it’s nothin’ you did, honest.” He felt trapped, his mind racing, trying to find that one sentence that wouldn’t plunge his brother into self doubt on his account. Nervously, he gripped the edge of the couch’s cushion, his fingertips digging into the worn corduroy for comfort.

Papyrus continued to stand in front of him as Sans struggled with his inner turmoil, before giving in. So, he was going to bare his soul once more. He gave an experimental breath, the sound almost hollow as he tried not to make it sound as pathetic as he felt inside.

“ok… just… bear with me.” He rubbed his hands over his face, the action only somewhat soothing. “mrs snowdrake is gone,” he started, his tone neutral. This was no different than any other offshoot, as she had Fallen Down a while ago, her body sent to Hotland Labs. It was no secret, since her son and husband were waiting hopefully for her promised return. “then… the canine squad… doggo, lesser, greater, dogamy and dogaressa… all of them.” His voice was even but slow, as though every name and word stung. Magic recoiled from the memories within his soul and he tensed just as Papyrus’ stance eased, then moved to drape his brother with the old blanket from over the back of the couch. Appreciatively, Sans held the worn fabric close to him, thumbing the folds anxiously.

“undyne, s-she’s next… shyren, mettaton, guards, citizens, monsters - just, everyone, they all just…” He gestured vaguely. The Underground goes empty. Sans cut himself off, realising he left out the most important loss. His finger bones gripped the blanket against his arm, breath hitching as what he had all pent up became too much. His sockets hollowed out again and he lowered his skull, trying to get his bearings. His whole frame was shaking, of guilt, anger and unfathomable helplessness.

“What about me?”

Oh god. Sans did not want to hear that. He tensed further, wanting to crumble into a ball or pile of dust. He nodded, the action painful as his arms flew up to his skull, interlocking behind his neck and pulling down so Papyrus could not jerk his skull up like so many times before. He couldn’t let him see the emptiness of his sockets. He knew it would only hurt him.

“y-you too, paps. you’re gone too.” His voice felt and sounded lifeless as it echoed out from his body, as though being repeated from a wistful echo flower planted behind his sternum. He shuddered at the silence, hating himself that he couldn’t keep it all inside. He regretted not going directly to Waterfall, or even Hotland, to one of his posts. But the kind suggestion from his old friend at the bar had warmed his soul like a haunting melody, wanting to soothe and stop its fearful grip inside him.

The couch dipped beside him and he let out something of a startled gasp when his brother’s arm encircled him. While tense, the hug was comforting in its own way; skeleton hugs were always more closer than any other monster’s, after all. For a moment, Papyrus didn’t say anything and just gently patted the other’s shoulder, glad to get at least something that was bothering Sans out of him.

“Gone, you say?” His brother’s register had lowered and tone softened. The taller skeleton gave the other another pat on the shoulder as Sans nodded morosely between his forearms. “Wowie… that is a lot! Whichever did you not say anything to me, Sans! You must be so confused!”
Sans’ soul lurched sickeningly behind his rib cage at those last words. He’d heard them before. A twisted, cynical, horrifyingly deep feeling shuddered his frame, the soft clatter of his bones jostling against Papyrus’ gloved hand. He pushed the thought away, echoing another useless, but calming breath.

“We’re not gone, Sans! We’re all here! Well, except Mrs Snowdrake, you know she’s in Hotland… But! Still!! The Great Papyrus will not tolerate any more slacking off!”

Horror eventually melded into confusion as his older brother loosened his grip at the back of his skull, turning to face him, the barest of pinpricks lighting his sockets and a twinge of a disdainful look crooked his grin. “wha…?”

“YOU HAVE BEEN NEGLECTING YOUR SLEEP… FOR ONCE,” Papyrus started again at full volume and nodded his skull as though in full agreement with himself, one of his hands cupping the square of his jawbone as if pensively. “YES… I THINK! THAT! A SLEEPOVER IS IN ORDER!!!”

Sans’ shoulders hunched in defeat, giving the other something of a skeptical look. “bro… it’s just nightmares. they’ll pass.” He said it in a convincing way, however he knew full well that it was damn near any time he closed his sockets. He didn’t see how waking up in a cold sweat in the middle of Papyrus’ room would help him any, really.

But Papyrus was already planning out the rest of their evening - listing off how he’d prepare his specialty signature dish, how Sans would take a bath and how he’d make sure everything was to his dear brother’s liking before heading to bed. After, of course, a bedtime story.

The smaller skeleton found no use in arguing with him. It did seem nice, and Sans knew it was his brother’s way at trying to calm him down. Guilt continued to swim in his soul, a dark pool of heavy emotion and that feeling of utter weakness that refused to dissipate.

He would play along, though. If anything, Papyrus was the kindest monster he knew and he didn’t deserve to be brushed aside as often as he was. Sans gave in to the other’s brotherly affectations, complimenting him on dinner with a lazy grin and thumbs up. He only protested when Papyrus forced him into the bathroom to strip his remaining clothes, still wet and cold from his earlier fall on the road. When the bath was run, he realised that his brother had successfully japed him, took his dirty clothes and replaced them with his own neglected pyjama set, neatly folded and on top of the sink’s counter.

He muttered a few thankful words as he slipped into the tub, allowing the hot water to pool into his nasal cavity and eye sockets, suspended in more comfort than he felt he really deserved. The water sloshed around the cavity of his skull, lulling him into a doze. It was part of the reason he visited Waterfall so much. While a marsh, it was beautiful scenery, with lights much like his own magic’s hue took on. It was peaceful, and when it wasn’t, it didn’t change much at all…

He dozed for a moment as he tuned out the world around him, languidly reclined with the hue of his magic whispering around the subtle disturbance his movements made in the water. So much like Waterfall. It was almost peaceful, he noted soundly. He raised himself up a little more and stared down at his wavering reflection as it rippled. As it settled, he got to see his face - a half-cocked grin with hollowed eyes. There were dark circles more pronounced than usually, bare signs of stress for a skeleton and his grin dropped a little more, not liking how he was looking just then.

He rotated his clicking foot in the joint, every movement a twinge of pain plucked at his soul like a
taut string. He gave a soft sigh as he tilted his skull to one side to drain the water from it and leaned forward to remove his leg at the knee cap to inspect the hurt. There was a miniscule fracture line at the head of the talus and he rubbed angrily at the spot. He’d be quicker if he had the energy, but if anything did happen this sure wasn’t going to help…

He heard his brother call him from down the hall and shifted to reattach his leg, the joint connecting underwater with a faint clack. He moved his foot again, experimentally, before calling his brother’s name back in turn. He chuckled softly at Papyrus’ pause, then flinched when the door burst open in his orange and femur printed pyjamas, the monster’s primary form of entrance. It was a good thing skeletons had no reason to be shy when it came down to their bodies.

“I WAS MERELY WONDERING, DEAR BROTHER, IF YOU HAD A STORY IN MIND FOR THIS EVENING?” his brother charmingly suggested, holding up a handful of worn and well-loved books in both hands. Sans idly rubbed his elbow, forcing a grin as he itched between his joints, finding a rock of all things. He studied it for a moment before giving an answer, flicking the pebble outside of the tub where it skittered across the checkerboard tiles towards Papyrus.

“you pick one, paps. you know i like `em all.”

His brother gave him a rather flat expression at his noncommittal answer - well, as much as he could. Sans was well-versed in the way he expressed his irritation, being the subject of his nerves so often. At Papyrus’ exasperated sigh, he chuckled lightly to himself, scratching at his jawbone absentmindedly as he gave a halfhearted shrug. “fluffy bunny. yeah, why not.”

His brother stood there for a moment in silence before Sans made the motion to get out of the tub. His baths never did last that long, enough to soak some dirt off, much to Papyrus’ chagrin. He handed the other a towel and turned to leave the bathroom, cradling his books in his arms and allowing his expression to drop into one of worry. Sans was… not ok. He sure played along with him, acted like things were fine, but the presence of the other’s magic, all the time, while he was home… it didn’t feel right. A monster’s home was where one could relax and not be on guard. If Sans was really fine, he wouldn’t be on the defensive, even while in the bath - even around him, his own brother!

But the nightmares of everyone leaving had no doubt left his brother rather jumpy. He couldn’t understand why, not entirely. Was it not to be a good thing if everyone left the Underground?? Not unless… Sans was afraid of being left behind! Papyrus was astonished he didn’t think of it before. What a careless blunder on his part! He would have to admonish his dear brother for ever thinking he’d leave his own family behind, to return to the surface without dragging or carrying him there, post-haste!

It was then that the other left the bathroom, fully clothed in his blue pinstripe pyjamas, buttons done up but askew. The legs and arms were admittedly still too long, even after Papyrus’ valiant effort to hem them. He doubted Sans took much time to dry himself off properly, his skull still glistening with water and dripping down his vertebrae. With a sigh, Papyrus shuffled his books into the crook of his arm and went back into the bathroom to grab Sans’ towel off the floor and bring it back out.

“HERE-” He all but shoved the collection into Sans’ arms as he stared at him, dumbfounded, as he proceeded to rub the towel onto his brother’s thick skull. “THERE, MUCH BETTER, DON’T YOU SEE?” He looked at his work with scrutiny with Sans staring at him in silence, not entirely sure how to take his brother’s admittedly, more thorough-than-usual pampering.

“sure is, bro,” was all he could respond before attempting a forced grin.

Without further ado, and only pausing long enough to hang the damp towel on the back of the door
where it belonged, Papyrus led him to his room. He gestured placidly towards the interior as Sans gave a light chuckle, heel clicking as he walked up to the bed. He took his usual seat beside the bed on the floor, allowing the collection of books to tumble out of his arms and onto the neatly made comforter. His brother closed the door and all but rushed up to the bed, giving pause for a moment before hitching his older brother up under his arms again and depositing him on the mattress, where he sat next.

Sans gave him a more genuine grin, although it looked more like a grimace as a snicker escaped him.

“jeez, paps,” he mumbled, scooting back a touch as Papyrus collected the other books and pulled back the covers and looked at him expectantly, the childlike whimsy of his demeanour oddly infectious. Well, it had been quite awhile since he’d been home, and his brother really enjoyed his reading. He scooted out of the way of the comforter so Papyrus could arrange it to his liking, and soon they were huddled close together. Sans sat cross-legged, leaned over the large paperback laid out in front of them both while Papyrus sat next to him, the comforter draped across both of their shoulders and around them in a kind of blanket-fort.

As Sans read the story for what had to be the eighteenth time that month, he really did feel a small stirring of peace at Papyrus’ company. He relaxed, shoulders hunched and his tone even and warm as the glow of the nightstand’s lamp bathed them both in orange. Not as pretty a sight as his brother’s magic, but the resemblance was there and for the first time in weeks, Sans felt just a little more at ease.

During the course of the story he had paused only for a moment to get more comfortable, laying down with his arms propping him up beside his brother, who followed suit. It wasn’t long before the warm glow and comfort of his brother’s presence had lulled him into such a relaxed state that his words were getting slower, more hushed. Sometimes he’d read the same sentence twice or even three times, before his skull nodded, losing his battle against sleep. As his sockets drifted closed, he very nearly dropped onto the last few pages with a tired grunt of surrender.

His brother thought it best to leave the story unfinished, for once. Poor Sans was, unfortunately, too tired to even protest when he slid the book out from his lazy grasp and closed it, returning it to the nightstand with the others and to where he carefully inched up to turn out the light. The hue of Sans’ magic was more subdued as he gave in to sleep, curled next to his younger brother and using his forearm as a pillow.

“Lazybones,” Papyrus whispered at a fraction of his normal volume as he pulled the covers up to their skulls, and then patted his hand gently. “Like I could ever leave you in the Underground on your own.”

Chapter End Notes

ReineofAberrants drew a short based on the closing scene of this chapter! Click here to see! ;U; *OMEGAFLAILING*
It was difficult to place the feeling. An enveloping comfort wrapped his soul as he slipped into that in-between world where monsters went whilst they dreamed. It was something he didn't feel often lately. It was like being suspended in cloudy, marshy water, but brighter. Was it the sun? Had it always been this bright, this concentrated on him?

At the corner of his subconscious, he was aware that something was shielding him, handling him with so much care that he drifted by whatever that was below him, elevated in safety. Some bricks from a wall that had long since tumbled down, stresses in the granite and in the distance, the long thin noise of metal on rock…

Did the sun always look that way? Pictures from magazines that landed in the Underground from the surface showed a speck of incandescent light, flooding the ceiling of the world with all manner of orange, pink, red, and gold. Maybe, Sans thought, this was the same place the sun went to sleep too, if he was seeing it.

Even if he hadn’t ever seen it personally, he was sure this wasn’t exactly how it worked. More lucid, he turned slightly to look above him, the flood of light bathing him in that sweet, healing glow. He could detect faint traces of magic so familiar to him. His grin tugged a little in embarrassment as affection flooded his soul. Man, Papyrus was really coddling him.

It was with good reason - there was a shifting mass of pitch in the same area he was suspended, kept at bay by the shower of brilliant orange magic. Sans’ grin fell as a tightening fear coiled around his soul, more than a few familiar and distant unpleasant memories threatening him.

The sound from the bottom of the chasm was long and raspy - he would have pardoned it any other night, if it had not become one of his recurring weaknesses over time. It started out low, then heightened, the slick scraping sound of metal on stone.

No.

Metal on bone.

His breath quickened as he scrambled in place to escape it as the noise was getting closer. The knife he was far too familiar with whet itself on his crumbling resolve as more wisps of darkness coiled around him, pulling at his bones to drag him further in. The noises shifted, ebbed and slashed, filling the skeleton’s skull with the errant whisper and rushing air of sharp steel. He managed to jerk to the side, unable to see the enemy in the darkness. His brother’s magic had faded all into a tiny constellation far above him, leaving Sans to wrestle the demon on his own.

He huffed, the only way to pinpoint the demon’s attack was the flicker of his brother’s light on that dusty blade as he ducked again, using the stresses in reality to sidestep another swing. His injured talus cracked as he settled on it, enough to force him to wince as another flurry of slashes flew at him. He put his forearms in front of him to block, knowing full well he didn’t have nearly enough defense or stamina to stand up to it should any hit find its mark. The air around their struggle grew thicker and denser and for a wild moment, Sans thought he was being subjected to Blue magic.

But that was impossible - in fact, the idea brought to mind some choice attacks he’d normally keep in reserves. He was getting better at throwing them off, attempting to break the sick and twisted grin off their pale, red-eyed face in the shadows. His bones were trembling in both effort and fatigue as he summoned a symphony of glowing bones, the hollow and cavernous space around them filling with
a literal graveyard of his attacks. He had to get rid of it - if he could stop them now, then Papyrus wouldn’t have to…

Wouldn’t have to…?

Sans gave his skull a shake, pushing the thought away. He considered looking up to gain more strength and courage from his brother’s magic. He couldn’t see it out of his peripheral vision, not as he danced around the wildly swinging demon. They were getting faster. Their swings were more precise, as if through practise. His eye lights faded to hollow shells as he realised… this thing was already dead.

Then that was it - he tried to escape, seeing the futility of fighting. The terror in his soul had built up to that moment, stacking on multitudes of timelines of different reasons, reactions and guides. Imploringly, he raised his bony hands upwards, his soul shuddering when he realised that Papyrus’ magic was gone.

And there was nothing.

Nothing; only darkness - and it wouldn’t leave. It wouldn’t stop from swallowing him whole. The soulless, chilly laughter of a being with a child’s face and voice echoed through him as his fear paralysed him, toying with him with gnarled, spidery fingers. Then at long last, there was the gouge of the knife, the reflection of his magic flooding his left eye in its blade the only betrayal of its mark.

Sans felt himself lurch backwards, clutching at his sternum and the gash that erupted into a flare of red light. His magic was flailing wildly as he attempted to save himself - any part of him to persist beyond just a memory. But he was falling, barely believing his vision as his fingertips chipped and started to crumble away.

He agonised the thought of leaving Papyrus alone, feeling himself twist and his body lurch down into the limitless depths…

**Thud.**

…but, Wait, what?

**“SANS!”**

The smaller skeleton’s eye lights returned to their sockets, jerking himself upright with a panicked sound of fright and confusion. His left eye was still blazing with magic, restless and wild and he covered it in distress with one hand while the other clasped at his sternum beneath his shirt. He eventually realised that they had landed on the floor next to Papyrus’ bed. The taller skeleton was under him, half tangled in the puffy comforter they were wrapped in and giving him a rather exhausted and sour look.

The darkness was gone, holed up inside of his soul and only the magical rays of an enchanted moon shone through Papyrus’ window to light them.

Heh, figures his brother’s love would get him only so far into sleep before his mind would warp it. Sans looked down at Papyrus and huffed softly, his breaths still hitched and panicked from his nightmare.

“welp… that was… probably the least bad one this week, bro.” He gave the other a shaky and crooked smile, moving to get off his brother and help him up. His bones were rattling, his figurative
nerves shot. “I appreciate you lookin’ out for me.”

“Of course, Sans! What kind of brother would I be if I did not?” was the drowsy reply from the taller skeleton as he followed Sans back onto the bed, effectively wrapping them both in a bundle of bones and blankets. “Even in your sleep, you shirk your duties,” he added wryly. “Night time is for sleeping! Not kickboxing your brother off his bed! Or I will hold you all night like babybones! I swear… I don’t know what’s gotten you all riled up!” It was a subtle jab at Sans’ earlier secrecy, and Sans knew it, felt the twinge of regret.

“Sorry, bro. Nightmares, right?” Sans exhaled softly against the thick blanket as he attempted to calm down.

“Oh, put that away!” Papyrus replied sourly, and tapped his skull above his left eye socket. “If anyone is going to be using magic tonight? It will be me, Papyrus - and only to shield you. Since obviously, my dear brother, you’ve been so out of practise that you cannot even nap without putting some… backbone to it.”

Sans shrunk under the blanket in embarrassment, dispensing his glowing sclera in the process. “You don’t gotta do that. M’not babybones.” He heard the other sigh exasperatedly in response, then Papyrus’ arms found their way around him and pulled him close.

“Nonsense, Sans. I do wish you would accept my aid. After all! What would you do without such a caring and cool brother such as myself?”

The smaller skeleton poked his skull out from the blankets, almost squinting in the darkness. While his own magic had subdued itself from his fright, he saw the medial glow of Papyrus’, soothing and mellow. His grin tugged slightly, nodding his head in agreement. “So cool.”

It was Papyrus’ turn to nod, albeit thoughtfully this time. “I will give you a nice dream,” he proposed, the glow of his magic drifting from him and encircling them both. Sans tensed briefly as another rush of embarrassment flooded him. He really was treating him like babybones; coddling him, wrapping him in his soothing aura to lull him to sleep. Like a little kid with bad dreams, he thought bitterly. “It will have bunnies! Meadows! All the spaghetti the world can offer! And you! You will be happy! And not try to sabotage… understood?” His eye sockets narrowed daringly as his brother squirmed at his tone.

“M’not babybones,” Sans objected again, halfheartedly. He was feeling the lulling sensation again from before; exactly like in the world between, before things turned so very wrong. His soul fluttered restlessly at the memory and his hand went instinctively towards the imaginary wound at his chest.

“I know! You are a perfectly healthy, well-adjusted adult.” Papyrus’ tone could have been taken as sarcastic, if the monster was capable of it. “However… adults need reprieve too. I believe in you!”

“…I know y’do,” the smaller skeleton murmured, allowing the steady and even pulses of magic to flood his bones and soul and lull him back to sleep. Soon, Sans was wrapped in a warm cocoon of light, sheltered from the terrors of his psyche as Papyrus did as promised.

And he actually slept.

He didn’t know for how long, but when he next regained consciousness, it wasn’t abruptly nor in a panic. It was peaceful, sublimely lazy, and as gentle as the manufactured daylight filtered through the window. His brother still held him loosely in his arms and he noted in surprise that the other wasn’t
Sans’ smile tugged downward slightly as he looked to Papyrus’ face, that twinge of guilt already knocking at his soul. Had he really stayed up all night just to make sure he slept…?

“Don’t you dare,” came his brother’s voice in a hushed and warning tone. Sans nearly exhaled in relief, then had to laugh, the sound oddly distant and jovial. The thought that Papyrus had kept still enough to make him think he was sleeping was somehow very humourous suddenly.

“What happened, paps? you not used to sleepin’ in?”

It was as though jinxed, his younger brother got up like a shot as if he only just then realised it. He nearly threw him from the bed in his haste to get ready. Papyrus danced around the room, gesticulating at his alarm clock in frustration, which admittedly he didn’t need. He hopped on one foot as he got changed into his battle body and dialed on out on his cellphone, balancing the device between his jaw and shoulder bones.

“UNDYNE - YES. NOT TO WORRY! THE GREAT PAPYRUS WAS MERELY… DELAYED! - YES…” His eye sockets narrowed as he paused, noticing Sans’ inquisitive expression. “YES - I WILL PASS ON THE MESSAGE.”

Sans sat cross-legged on the bed amongst the bunched covers, leaning against one of his hands propped on his kneecap as he watched the entertaining display of Papyrus panicking because he was ‘late’. He let out a snicker, then a laugh when the other rounded on him, picked him up and held him under his one arm while adjusting his bed covers.

“UNDYNE SAYS YOU ARE TO PATROL BY THE RUINS TODAY!”

“ok.”

“REMEMBER; NO LOLLYGAGGING.”

“ok.”

“NO MORE THAN EXACTLY THREE BREAKS, SANS!”

“ok.”

“AND PLEASE. RECALIBRATE. YOUR. PUZZLES!”

“ok.”

He huffed slightly when Papyrus dropped him back onto the bed, giving the other a sheepish grin. He sure seemed to be picked up a lot lately. He actually felt a little better with a night of sleep under his belt. He supposed he would have to do something nice for his brother, with all that trouble he went through…

“And!” his brother continued as he strapped his boots on, “TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF.”

“Sure thing, paps.” The smaller skeleton suppressed an audible yawn and stretched, bones popping in their sockets. He waited for another lecture from Papyrus but it didn’t happen. He blinked in confusion when the other one waved goodbye to him and ran out of the room. The thunder of footfalls down the stairs, then another, audible slam of the door when his brother left the house.

“Jeez,” he muttered to himself and scratched his jaw, twisting his skull from left to right to sort out awake.
several kinks in his vertebrae.

Never thought I’d see the day Papyrus would lie in bed all morning, he thought, Clearly I’m a bad influence. Then he moved to go to his own room. It was as he’d left it - socks, towels, tornado… everything where it should be. He strolled along to his dresser where he’d left his cellphone and lamp on. It seemed like Papyrus hadn’t touched it, even if his clothes from the previous night had been cleaned and folded crisply atop of it. Wait, when did he have the time to do that…? He gave his ankle an experimental rotation, noting the click with a sigh. Apparently, it was just going to be one of those days.

After getting changed, he pocketed a few items from his dresser; phone, keys, and some random sample packages of ketchup Grillby had given him. He took his time, checking his phone’s messages as he strolled along the hallway. Seems like Undyne had tried calling a few times, then settled for texts, since Sans’ voicemail was always full.

Undyne (Last message received last Thursday: 4:06pm);
- Your brother is worried! You better get home, punk!
- This sucks! Why aren’t you answering!
- YOU BETTER BE AT YOUR POST!!!
- Hey, Paps said he hasn’t seen you for a few days… you ok? YOU BETTER NOT BE SLACKING OFF!!!
- DON’T MAKE ME COME OVER THERE!!!
- Seriously, what the HELL, Sans!!

He scratched at his jaw as he shuffled downstairs to grab his hoodie, tapping the keys in to submit a little play on words and assure the rambunctious fish lady that he was fine. Thankfully, the hoodie was dry as he slipped it on and huffed out a grunt. Snowdin Forest, eh? Well, ok then.

His phone beeped, signalling a new incoming message.

Papyrus (Last message received: 12:01pm);
- SANS! THERE IS LEFTOVER SPAGHETTI IN THE MICROWAVE. PLEASE ENJOY MY HEARTFELT CREATION! I LEFT SOMETHING FOR YOU AT THE DOOR. DON’T! NOT! WEAR THEM!!!

Inquisitively, the skeleton glanced down to his feet. In place of his well-loved slippers were a pair of black and white runners, looking quite well-off for being a used pair. It wasn’t often that ‘new’ things fell into the Underground, and usually they’d end up in New Home where the majority of monsters lived. Snowdin was so far out in the sticks that they made do with what they had, most of the time. He pushed out something of a low whistle from his teeth, stooping down to inspect them. This was… different, too.

“what’re you doin’, universe?” he muttered suspiciously. Was this another thing that deviated from the timeline? He had to admit things were really bleary, even for his memory. He decided to go with it, slipping on the worn shoes and bunching the laces behind the tongue. They seemed to fit alright and as he walked around, it seemed to keep his ankle from clicking. A decent deviation, he supposed.

After having his breakfast pasta, he meandered around doing what was required of him. He read the last yellow note on his abandoned sock in the living room and snickered while scrawling ‘ok’ just under Papyrus’ writing, then ever-so-slightly moved the sock a few inches from the television. Then he turned to the pile of letters and junk mail on the floor to grab the remainder of the postcards before
heading out, flipping through each one.

He had to admit, it was unsettling when he saw his empty mailbox again. He couldn’t help that internal struggle that wanted him to push all the letters back inside of it - hell, even put the fallen letter back on the snow just below it. But, seeing as the universe had other plans, he just rolled with the punches and decided to take his time and check up on his little side project.

The back of the house was always slippery, and even with new footwear, he was leery about having another fall again. He carefully manoeuvred the ice around the side and down the steps to his basement, producing the key and walking inside.

The hum of electronics reached his skull as he kicked the snow off his shoes and leaned against the door to poke through the postcards. It still felt like something so foreign, to look back on simple events that he should have known, but yet… due to laziness or apathy, just didn’t care to do before now. Most were from Papyrus, from several dates spanning over the few years since they’d settled in Snowdin. All were excitedly written notes from different stations around the Underground, of his brother’s hopes and dreams, thoughts and wishes. His smile tugged, the simple gesture that his brother was thinking of him lightened his mood.

He decided to write it down in an old and worn journal he kept at his workstation that had definitely seen better days. Spilled ketchup, grease and coffee stained its cover, but the inside was far worse, nearly all of its pages covered in small, bubbly letters, equations and diagrams, it was almost unintelligible. He took up a pen, tapping it between his bony fingers while in thought, and then ultimately decided to make a list.

Different things…
- slipped and fell by library. no injury or affliction to health.
- mailbox emptied. paps did it. never done that before. postcards from bro from all over.
- slipped on porch, hairline fracture in right talus head: -.02
- mild paranoia, triggered panic attack from previous offshoot? - “you must be so confused”. sorry, paps.
- slept with paps in his room. health restored, might have a buffer, can’t be sure; ankle still clicking from porch fall.
- paps late to his post. never happened before.
- paps gave me shoes. never happened bef...

He tapped the pen against his teeth as though the clicking noise was supposed to help him think.

“…i think that’s all,” he said to himself, then shoved the journal and pen back into the drawer, eye lights settling on the postcards. “hopefully, that’s all.” Worried, he rubbed at his sternum, the echo of the wound still bothering him.

It would be better not to dwell on it, he supposed. He cast a reproachful glance at his covered and abandoned project and shrugged; it couldn’t be fixed anyway, and Papyrus was expecting him to eventually be at his post. All things considered, life in Snowdin was pretty much uneventful compared to the capital. He wondered why he had brought that machine with him at all.

For now he ignored it, as he always did. It was time for him to get going. After he stuffed the postcards into his pocket, he locked up and left, making his way around the house and down the street. The shoes offered far more traction than his slippers ever could, and he was relieved he didn’t slip again in front of the library. The ice patch seemed to be gone though, with everyone’s footprints.
As he passed Grillby’s, he stopped and looked up at the dimmed sign. Sans felt he should at least apologise for the previous evening, tell the fire monster he was ok. It was then that his phone beeped again, signalling another message. He pulled it out of his pocket to view it, slowly wandering off to the side of the building.

Papyrus (Last message received: 12:32pm);
- SO! HOW ARE THE NEW KICKS?

His grin tugged lightly as he punched in his response; *p cool bro can rly sneak around in em

Heh, classic.

It wasn’t long before his brother sent another one;
- THAT ONE WAS BAD AND YOU KNOW IT!

He snickered to himself, just hearing the other’s irritation in his mind, and he paced around to walk back out front. As he rounded the corner, preoccupied with his phone, he didn’t see the fire monster loading a rather heavy-looking crate out of the bar, bottles clinking, then ultimately rattling loudly when the other bumped into him.

It was quick thinking on Sans’ part. He dropped his phone in the process but reached out to grab the other side of the crate so it wouldn’t fall.

“heya, grillbz,” he offered lamely, “didn’t mean to…” He trailed off when he noted the other crates, stacked outside the front door. He raised an non-existent eyebrow at the fire monster, helping him to shuffle over to set the crate they held down with the others. With a grimace, he stooped down to grab his phone, covered in slush. Well, damn. He rubbed it against his hoodie to try to dry it off.

“…Sans. You’re looking lively,” the fire monster offered, patting down the front of his vest.

The skeleton scuffed his shoe against the back of his leg absentmindedly and shrugged it off. “had a talk. had a nap. i wanted to tell you… m’sorry about last night.” Grillby merely shook his head as if dismissing the apology, flames crackling in the subtle breeze. “so, uh… what’s all this?”

The bartender absently rubbed a forearm, looking at his handiwork. “…Supplies running thin. Travelling to New Home soon. Thought it best to prepare,” his ethereal voice crackled. “Are you on break?”

“nah,” the skeleton replied, scratching at his jaw, “actually… just settin’ out for the ruins.” His grin fell slightly as the thought occurred to him. “how you gettin’ all this to new home? river person?”

“Ferry has been booked for weeks. Likely will have to make use of the boxes while I make the journey.” The bartender didn’t seem satisfied with his own plans, deliberating them even then.

“walkin’ it? what, through waterfall and hotland and the core…?” Sans was shocked. He knew the initial move for Grillby had been a hardship - Waterfall especially, which wasn’t too far away. It was such an expansive marsh, after all, and the water flows always moved the bridges and pathways that traversing it would be just a little daunting for the fire monster.

“Suppose I have no choice. Have not heard back from any couriers, either.” He seemed rather put out at that as he shook his head and raised his arms slightly. Sans let out something of a sympathetic
sigh, unsure what to say.

“i guess… maybe i can help you out. y’know, for all the trouble i’ve caused you.” The fire monster seemed taken aback. His ember eyes were bright behind his spectacles as he stared at the other. Sans shifted in the snow, unsure of the look. “i mean, i gotta patrol today, but… at least you’ll have help, right? n’fuku is too young to make the trip to help either.”

“…Would not want to put you out, friend.” Grillby’s tone was gentle and grateful though. Sans could tell he was worried about the trek through the marsh.

“can’t put out what you don’t put in, big g.” Sans joked and snickered, then quickly sobered up when he realised the horrible thing he said. The other chuckled heartily as he covered his eye sockets in embarrassment, feeling an odd pulling twinge behind his rib cage. “n-nevermind that. a-anyways, grillbz, i gotta… gotta get goin’…”

With that, he was off before witnessing more of the other’s mirth at his expense. Man, why’d he have to go and say something provocative like that? If skeletons could blush, he’d be blue in the face. Instead, he rubbed absently at his temple as he strolled away towards the outskirts of town.

Normally he would have taken a shortcut, but he felt he should conserve energy so early in the day. And by ‘so early in the day’, he supposed early afternoon was as early as he’d be able to wake up without Papyrus hounding him. So instead, he actually did as he was told: looking over both his brother’s and his own puzzles to make sure they were still set as he travelled past them.

It was a long walk, and he was still lamenting his blunder when he arrived at his station, leaning against the shelter and peering into the tall birches and spruces. Nothing would happen… nothing really ever did happen. It would be a long day with no one to talk to.

Idly, he drummed his fingertips against the solid wood as he sat perched upon the stool behind his station. His other hand propped his skull up as he hunched over the desk. White, white, white. More snow. He threw his hood up to keep the snowflakes from settling into his sockets, exhaling long and loudly.

Hours passed and he still fretted over his bad joke. He couldn’t even call Grillby’s to apologise to him thanks to the dunk in the slush. Was he overreacting? He seemed like he’d enjoyed the laugh. Sans felt a nervous chuckle rise in him, fidgeting with his phone, trying to make the buttons work.

“oh boy,” he muttered, running his hand over his face, attempting to keep awake. It would have been prime shut-eye time if he’d allow himself to drift off. It had been awhile, right? No one would notice if he took a walk. He could even play it off as actual patrolling - and when was the last time a human emerged from the Ruins? Centuries? Decades? Why only in that area?

A wisp of steam left his teeth as he exhaled in frustration and left his phone on the wood stool; it was useless carrying it around with him if it was fried anyway. He shuffled through the snow and old worn pathways he took while looking around and eventually made it to the entrance to the Ruins. The large, looming door was locked, as it always was, a great obsidian gate that reflected the snow and took on an almost purple hue. It raised up several feet beyond Sans’ stature, the vaulted walls melding into the rockface to prevent exploration to any local kids in the area.

His eye lights scanned the area, listening for any telltale signs that the universe was plotting something.
But nobody came.

Sans trudged further, pressing his phalanges against the heavy gate, its doors looking as though they were sealed shut, as they always did. Experimentally, he gave it a knock, his digits ringing a rapping echo throughout the surrounding trees and valley and up into the caverns above. No answer, of course. In the back of his mind, something told him it was probably too early for a voice to come forward… whatever that meant. Bits and pieces of memories fluttered to him as quickly as they disappeared again. One time, he thought he would have liked to pry the door open and see what was beyond.

But, he was lazy, and whatever curiosity he had was abruptly shrugged off as undesirable to take any effort in. He decided to sit, leaning his back against the heavy gate and he pulled his head down further. His hands found their way back into his pockets and he pulled out a few postcards. Waterfall… Hotlands… MTT Resort. He studied them, trying to find a hidden meaning behind each one. But they were from Papyrus, and the monster was so straightforward that nothing could very well be hidden, even in his texts.

It was soon that Sans stretched out his legs, severe boredom lulling him into a relaxed state. Maybe he should try to get a little z’s in, as long as he kept it short. After all, this counted as break number one, right? He let out a soft chuckle at the memory of his brother’s message and eventually dozed off.

For once, a nap was nice to have. He didn’t have any dreams, bad or otherwise; when he eventually woke up, Sans jostled the pile of snow that had settled on his hoodie and legs in a quiet daze. He just shrugged, figuring it was the remnants of his brother’s magic that allowed him to rest so peacefully this time.

After wandering back to his post, he sat down and decided to wait out the rest of his shift, taking another handful of breaks at his discretion. At least only one had been directly in front of Alphys’ many cameras.

In the distance, Sans heard the familiar sound of crunching snow and the even tempo of steps. Lazily, he opened an eye socket and watched his younger brother approach with something of a smirk on his face.

“SANS!! YOU’D BETTER NOT BE NAPPING!” came the boisterous yell from across the field. His voice echoed shrilly around the area and Sans couldn’t help but snicker the closer Papyrus came into view.

“haven’t napped for at least twenty minutes. sup?” The smaller skeleton lounged and stretched over the counter of his post, bones popping and he grinned up at his brother as he approached. He knew the sound irritated him and he was feeling more like his old self, for once.

“YOUR PHONE…?”

“oh. yeah, it got dunked on.” Lamely, Sans pulled it out of his pocket and attempted pushing buttons, feebly trying to get it to turn on again. “stopped workin’… i dunno. maybe five hours ago?”

Papyrus grabbed the phone out of Sans’ grasp and meticulously went over it in his hands, as if surveying an inscrutable puzzle. Then he eyed the smaller skeleton, looking up at him in his slouched position with a slight droop to his ever-present grin.
“YOU RECALIBRATED YOUR PUZZLES.” It was more of a statement than a question and Sans shrugged, using one digit to scratch the inside of his nasal cavity with disinterest. “YOU ALSO ADJUSTED MY ORB PUZZLE.”

“mhm.”

“AND THERE ARE… FOOTPRINTS EVERYWHERE???”

Sans soon realised where this was going, hearing both the concerned and excited tone in Papyrus’ voice. He sheepishly looked to his brother’s face, embarrassed. He wasn’t quite sure what to say, or how to explain himself. Normally he wasn’t so productive. He tore his gaze away from his brother long enough to look at his tracks through the shadowy snow with veiled surprise. Man, he had wandered around quite a bit…

“…figured i’d do my job, for once,” was all he cared to admit with a shrug. He gave the other something of a wink, watching Papyrus’ posture stiffen and his expression radiate into something of intense and unquestionable pride.

Papyrus knew there had to be something more to Sans’ behaviour than that. He was acting very peculiar, but at the same time… not. It was an unsettling feeling that his ego just wasn’t accustomed to, and he tossed Sans’ broken phone into the air before snatching it mid-fall.

“THAT IS… FINE,” he finally said with a nod of approval. “I THINK THAT! ALL THINGS CONSIDERING… YOU DID YOUR BEST. WHICH IS MORE THAN I COULD EVER HOPE FOR! I AM PROUD OF YOU!” He gave the other a flashy smile and Sans pulled the strings on his hoodie to hide his face in embarrassment. “OH, STOP THAT! A JOB WELL DONE! I KNOW YOU’VE BEEN FEELING UNDER THE WEATHER LATELY…”

The reaffirmation of his brother’s encouragement bolstered him and Sans couldn’t help but let out a puff of cold air, moving to get up in a long and exaggerated movement.

“y’could say i’ve been… snowdin?” the joker drawled, and heard his phone crunch quietly in Papyrus’ grasp. He grimaced; well, if it hadn’t worked then, it sure wouldn’t now. But, Papyrus was right, and far be it from him to overlook his moodiness lately. “sorry.”

Papyrus, for once, let it slide, returned his phone and then turned away from him. “DON’T DAWDLE ON YOUR WAY HOME!” he added as he stomped off.

“sure thing, paps.”

Once out of view, Sans huffed out another sigh, deciding he didn’t really want to trudge back through all the freshly fallen snow. His left eye socket flared as he gathered his energy, walking out of habit into the opposite direction to take advantage of the stressed atmosphere nearby. Then he warped with a quiet shift just outside the bridge leading into Snowdin, by the colourfully decorated sign.

His feet landed with a soft crunch and he continued walking, the strain of fast-travel always a bit much for him, even if he never truly expressed it. He idly wondered if his brother realised he had this kind of power, or any other power. Experimentally, he summoned a small bone the shape of his ulna, twirling it between his phalanges as he strolled past the shop and inn, humming a quiet tune.

He noticed Grillby was still loading crates outside of the establishment, shutters drawn and lights off. Sans guessed he’d stayed closed for that day, much to his disappointment. He had been looking
forward to an order of burg after such a long shift. Maybe partake in some choice condiments. The crates scattered in a haphazard manner in front of Grillby’s and he could see the fire monster resting against the barrel outside the front door.

Wait… was he smoking?

Sans would have made a joke about it, being a fire elemental and all, but as he approached, he noted the exhausted posture the other held himself in, however refined it was. He looked just tired.

“didn’t know you smoked,” the skeleton murmured as he stepped into the other’s view. Grillby ran a hand over his face and over the top of his flames on his head in a gesture that was both captivating and weary.

“…Burning things soothes me,” was all he said in reply, even the crackle of his voice thin. Sans definitely picked up on the tone, his grin shifting downwards as he leaned against the building beside the fire monster.

“somethin’ puttin’ you out?” Ahh, good old fire puns. His specialty. He always liked them, much like the bartender.

Grillby turned to face him, his expression blankly inscrutable as Sans lifted his grin, just for him. A thin waft of smoke left his face, embers glowing between his fingers from the twig he held.

“Not looking forward to this trip, I suppose.”

“i don’t doubt it. waterfall is huge and it’s always changin’…” Sans tapped the conjured bone idly against his shoes to remove the built up snow and slush. “when’re you headin’ out?”

“No later than tomorrow morning,” the fire elemental replied dryly, bitterness in his tone.

“tried callin’ the river person again?” Grillby’s demeanour popped in irritation, giving Sans a reason to watch his visage, “I’ve already put this off for too long.” There was a hint of resignation.

“never thought you’d be one for procrastination!” the skeleton gently prodded the other, amusement in his voice. He elbowed Grillby, grinning from side to side. “clearly m’rubbin’ off on you.”

Something at the back of his skull nagged at him but he kept the flustered thought away.

His grin was a little nervous now and Grillby saw it, the flames arranging on his visage in a less irritated way and he kindled gently, unable to hide a subtle smirk. He appreciated it when the other went out of his way to talk to him. No other monster really bothered him while he worked, unless he was behind the bar. If he had to be honest, he still felt out of place in Snowdin - most fire monsters would, he supposed.

But Sans was different, so easy to get along with. His humour, while normally bad, took on a different endearing charm when around him. Grillby had learned to enjoy the subtle wordplay Sans would sneak into their conversations, even if they were blunderous half the time, lately. The puns now eased the fire monster’s worry about his friend, who had been less and less like himself lately. It was a start, at least.

It gave him an idea.

“Why not join me?” the fire monster asked suddenly, gesturing with his hands in a way that Sans had not anticipated, as though he were to come closer. The only thing to reveal his surprise was the
sudden dispelling of his conjured bone, which disappeared mid-tap on his shoe with a wisp of cyan mist.

“huh?”

“*Come with me. You know Waterfall, correct? Admittedly…”* The fire monster rolled his shoulder, the gesture precise and elegant without much thought put into it. “*I don’t much care for strolls through humid places. Takes a lot out of me,*” he revealed after a pause, his voice a quiet hum of blaze that Sans only just made out. “*You’d be doing me a grand favour.*”

“*oh.*”

Sans blinked, straightening his spine against the building in thought. His soul trembled slightly beneath his hoodie and he had to push the feeling down again. He felt the other’s gaze on him, the heat from his flames flickering onto his skull as he paused to give it some thought - or at least, made the effort to *look like* he was. Of course, he’d do anything for such a long-time friend and he found himself nodding slightly in agreement.

Besides, it could be interesting.

“*yeah. sure, why not.*” He turned his eye lights towards the fire monster in time to see a grateful flicker pass through the other’s form, making that tying, knotting sensation creep back into his soul. He genuinely looked *relieved,* and Sans felt a little silly that an escort through Waterfall would elicit such an endearing response.

“*d.. don’t mention it, grillbz.*”
It had admittedly taken longer to convince Papyrus to be at ease with his absence than he thought. It took the better part of dinner prep, all of dinner, and half-way through MTT Celebration Hour Extravaganza for his brother to stop laying it on so thick.

“YOUR HEALTH IS NOT GOOD ENOUGH FOR SUCH A JOURNEY!” he kept repeating at almost every commercial break. “BESIDES! WHO WOULD TAKE OVER FOR YOU? WHEN WILL THIS BE? WHEN WILL YOU GET BACK?”

“paps, i already told ya. i’ll be fine, grillby’s a strong monster and i got a buffer.” Sans slumped back into the couch cushions, his frame sinking lower and lower with every protest his brother accentuated. He knew he was worried, but he shrugged lamely. “sides. i already promised.”

Wait, that might have not been the correct word to use. He saw Papyrus’ skull whirl around and fix him with an astonished look, and Sans couldn’t hide the flinch and discomfort on his face. He slunk lower, holding out his hands in an effort to placate him.

“please don’t.”

“PROMISED??? YOU DON’T PROMISE! IT’S THE ONE SINGLE THING YOU EVER DO. WITHOUT FAIL.” His sockets narrowed in suspicion. “WHY?”

For once, Sans didn’t shrug. He faltered, not really knowing what to say, but at least had the sense to appear to be searching for words. But they didn’t form as quickly as he wanted to - wanted to say he liked him, wanted to do the fire monster a favour for a favour’s sake. He felt a tensile shortness creep into his soul, that oddly gushy and warm feeling, and he actually thought he would say he liked him.

Papyrus’ gaze drilled into him expectantly, then he threw his hands up, throwing his back against the couch almost theatrically. “WELL… I SUPPOSE! IF YOU’VE ALREADY PROMISED…”

The smaller skeleton’s soul felt like it was flip-flopping around erratically with the little white lie. Papyrus did have a point - he’d said time and time again he hated making promises. But the thing was, while he hadn’t actually promised Grillby, he was still wanting to help him out. Looked forward to the morning, even. It was an almost exhilarating feeling when he realised it, having never looked forward to mornings or doing things. He chalked it up to another deviation and just rolled with things as they came by.

“You’ll have to send my regards to Undyne when you pass through,” Papyrus added thoughtfully, then asked, “And just how are you carrying all that junk across Waterfall, anyway? You had better not be planning to use magic the entire time!”

“think grillbz mentioned somethin’ about item boxes,” the smaller skeleton said quietly, attempting to calm his excited soul’s pulse as he fidgeted.

“Oh.” Papyrus paused, eye sockets narrowing at his brother’s more-than-usual silence. “You know how I feel about those. They make things entirely too easy! I don’t like them!”

“Yeah, not a lotta monsters do. it comes in handy, though. `specially now.” Sans shrugged. “Just call me another box lover.”
Papyrus sighed with that, and they spent the rest of the evening in more or less comfortable silence until it was time for bed. The older of the two had a difficult time convincing his brother he would be fine to sleep on his own. He was, after all, a ‘well-adjusted adult’, and he still felt a little chagrined after Papyrus’ concern. Still, he had managed to let the other think he was fine to rest on his own, not bothering to change out of his clothes as he dropped onto the old mattress in his room.

*Ok, brain*, he thought bitterly, the term held loosely in this respect. *No horror-terror things tonight*, he silently pleaded. Admittedly, he was restless for the better half of the evening, but eventually fell asleep.

His dreams weren’t anything special - the familiar scenes of darkness were there, but he resisted it. The shallow echo of wind through an endless expanse was deafening as his soul shivered, ready to flee at any hint of a downturn. Yet the endless night eventually eased, allowing him some semblance of restful sleep as his innermost demons kept their distance. Perhaps it was the excitement for something better that was keeping it bay? Sans couldn’t overthink it, only groggily pulling himself from slumber with the faintest of noises crackling outside of his consciousness.

Was that fire?

He pushed a hand over his face, eye lights scanning the room as his window pooled with the first magical lights of morning. It was way too early; his mind was playing tricks on him. He would have loved nothing better than to lay in bed for a few more hours, but... he had promised. Not Grillby, but himself. He pushed himself up with some reluctance, joints popping as he swung his legs over the side of the bed and barely stifled a yawn.

He sat for minutes longer, pensively looking inward as he scratched the crest of his pelvis under his shirt. He was rested - heck, the buffer he wasn’t sure about yesterday was *definitely* there today. Huh. Guess the bunny kid at the inn was right about a good night’s sleep. He could probably fall four or eight times that day and not have to worry about Falling Down. He made a sound similar to a snort of derision at his own joke of a mortality and shifted to get up and go downstairs. Today would be a big day.

Of course, Papyrus was already up; the monster felt sleeping any longer than three or four hours to be a massive waste of time. Yet he was always energetic, milling around the house to clean or to prepare breakfast as his brother would normally sleep until roused. Sans gave a low yawn again as he made his way into the kitchen, where his brother was fixing their usual food and he slumped into his chair, propping himself on the table while still in a doze.

If Papyrus was shocked with his brother’s early rising, he hid it well. “HAD A GOOD NIGHT?”

Sans nodded subtly, eye sockets still closed but smiling just for his brother. Papyrus wasted no time in giving him a lecture while dishing out a plateful each of spaghetti for breakfast. For some reason Sans felt that it was a little peculiar, but couldn’t put his finger on *why*. At least, not until much later, when he realised that Papyrus only made his spaghetti for *others*, never trying it for himself.

After a listful of warnings, precautions and reminders, he was finally allowed to leave. He’d left his phone in his room; the screen was cracked and it refused to turn on no matter the charge. He’d also left his postcards on his dresser, not wanting to lose them.
He shuffled out the door, plodding down the street towards Grillby’s, crates still everywhere but in
neater stacks - some even missing. The skeleton tilted his skull at the fresh puddles of melted snow
and slush around the entrance and around the piles as he came to the conclusion that Grillby had
probably already gotten started.

As if by summons, the fire monster trudged through the snow behind him, beaming with a short
gesture as salutation. Sans found himself grinning despite himself and their precarious journey ahead.
Grillby was dressed in more clothing than he did in day-to-day life and was looking quite sharp; a
jacket, sleek black trousers, high boots, and gloves for his hands.

“you ready for this?” It was more to himself than the other, but the bartender nodded gently in
response.

“The path is wetter than usual,” the fire monster reported in distaste.

“it’s waterfall,” the skeleton reminded gingerly. “i’ll keep ya safe. don’t even worry `bout it.” And
with that, they began the trek through the streets, crates in hand to offload into the first box in
Waterfall - since the box by the shop was constantly being utilised by the shopkeeper and her kids.

Grillby had been right about the humidity, but Sans felt he liked Waterfall just a little more than
Snowdin. It was his favourite place, after all. Snowdin had the potential for ice, whereas Waterfall
was easy walking the whole way through. Well, provided he didn’t cheat.

It was hours before the two of them had finished unloading the crates into the box, watching each
one disappear to its destination in the void. Sans laughed softly as a thought came to him, his
chuckles bouncing in an echo off the glittering caves and stalactites above.

“it’s a good thing we have more sense than to hop in, eh?” He jabbed a thumb over his shoulder at
the box as Grillby closed it, missing the sputter of flames as the fire monster chuckled as though
wistfully.

“…Would certainly make things easier,” he agreed as he followed the skeleton a short distance
away to the first bridge, then stopped short. “…Oh.”

“oh… yeah, this’s a problem…” The skeleton scratched the back of his skull, his grin tugging
nervously. The path was out just after his second sentry station and occasionally large rocks fell into
the water from above, creating huge splashes. He inspected the flow, the cool water lapping at the
sides of the pool as it threatened to breach the soft ground. “yeah… stay here a sec, grillbz.”

The fire monster did not argue as Sans strolled around the pool to the sequence of bridges, old wood
and metal creaking softly as the roar of rushing water filled his skull. It was a little slippery, the area
being so close to the cold, but it was manageable with his shoes, at least. He inspected the falling
water, poked around the pathway before returning to where Grillby was standing, waiting for him.

“bridge’s out,” he reported with a shrug and an audible sigh. Behind his ribs something twinged as
the fire monster’s demeanour shrunk visibly. “i mean…” Sans deliberated, scratching his skull, “i
could still get us across, though.”

At the other’s inquisitive look, Sans hunched his shoulders, then jerked his skull to the direction of
his abandoned post. At least no one but Grillby was around to see. It was a lot easier to explain one-
on-one.

“…Apologies, friend. I don’t think I can allow you to carry me across. I have my reputation to
consider, after all.”
Sans started at that, then laughed, the sound louder than before. “wha…? no, i mean i know a shortcut.” At the other’s admittedly confused glance, Sans beckoned him over, eye lights searching out for that telltale whisper in the air that revealed the points he could exploit. He’d done it before, multiple times, but… never with a passenger, and never with witnesses. He was actually feeling something akin to stage-fright with Grillby looking at him expectantly and with curiosity.

He fidgeted nervously as he saw a pathway crease and open up, strolling towards the wall where the telltale waver shifted in place. “don’t tell paps, eh? he thinks i’m lazy enough as it is.” Without looking to the other monster, he held out his hand in a beckoning gesture, his soul thumping harder with every approaching footstep.

The other didn’t seem to fully comprehend; at least, not entirely. A shortcut to other monsters meant an alternate path, not a skip through reality. Becoming increasingly flustered, the skeleton turned to grab the other’s gloved hand, before pulling him along with him through the slip.

*Thump, thump, thump-thump.*

What the heck even *was* that noise? On the other side of the water-filled gully, Sans unhanded Grillby, shoving his hands so far into his pockets his hoodie threatened to take his skull clean off at the neck. He watched as the other’s flames whipped around, unsure of what exactly had happened. But they were on the other side, and he wasn’t extinguished. It was starting off alright, and Grillby had to admit for a moment that he was excited.

His bright eyes landed on the skeleton, who appeared to be cowering. “Sans! That was amazing! And extremely useful. Why such a short distance…?”

Sans shuffled in place, still avoiding the other’s striking eyes. “d-don’t got much stamina for longer stints, heh,” he apologised quietly and his magic restlessly coiled around his soul at the compliment. “i’ve never had to take anyone else with me, either.”

Grillby adjusted his jacket, then tightened the fit of his gloves. “Then I am your first.” He noted the way Sans tensed at his choice of words, couldn’t help the almost delighted way he felt at the idea of a bashful skeletal monster. It seemed that Sans was not confident, did not receive compliments much, or both. “…I believe I think I made a correct choice by asking you to join me. Thank you.”

“sure thing,” the skeleton replied dumbly, his fingertips edging against themselves in his pockets. He followed behind the flame monster, watching the crystals and moisture glisten as they passed. A rich, warm light bathed the two through the tight corridor into the next cavern, where Sans strolled up to the small packages in a row while Grillby contemplated the knocked out bridge impeding their progress once more.

“comin’ through,” he grunted with all four pods in tow, tossing each one with practised ease into the water, where they drifted to the other side and blossomed into a viney pathway. The fire monster hummed in concentration as he cautiously stepped across the exact middle of the bridge, flames flickering erratically with the unsure surface. When he was safely on the other side, Sans followed into the larger room.

“…These weren’t here last I came through,” the fire monster observed while stooping to inspect the bridge seeds.

“yeah, they were pap’s idea. likes his puzzles.”

“Do you not?”
Sans shrugged slightly, the gesture noncommittal. “too much effort. but i did add to this one.” He grinned, jabbing his thumb to the corner of the room to their right where stood a lonely little isle in the marsh surrounded by murky water. At the centre of the isle was a small sign, haphazardly put together and askew and looking very much like something he’d create.

“congratulations. you failed the puzzle.”

Grillby gave Sans a withering look at the burst of laughter. “…Seems like a waste of time.” His voice was crackling in irritation.

“relax, the puzzles reset every so often, and no one can really get trapped…” Sans regardless, felt reprimanded by the other’s tone. Even his stance was rigid, hands holding his arms as though the threatening moisture was something unfathomably dire. Grillby’s flames lowered, then pulsed and his look was… unreadable, as always. The skeleton walked forward to inspect the other’s visage, concerned. “how y’holdin’ up, big g?” His eye lights settled on the lightly flickering flames wafting from the other’s head. “you don’t look so hot.”

He watched as the bartender’s fire flickered lower, then pulsed again, as though in a shudder. “It is wetter than I anticipated.” There was the low hiss of steam through his voice and the smaller monster’s sockets hollowed, eye lights small pinpricks as realisation dawned on him.

“jeez, grillbz. don’t force yourself! c’mon. i know a dry place where you can rest.”

It took only a few moments, but Sans’ mind was racing as he fumbled through the other puzzle with Grillby keeping a steady lean against the cave wall. He knew that the journey would be difficult for the fire monster by himself, but he hadn’t realised to what extent Waterfall had affected his friend. The moisture crackled against his heat and evaporated, releasing wisps and columns of steam where he stood, watching as Sans released the last seed into the water, forming a bridge around a sharp corner and out of view.

“steady-” The skeleton moved forward first, his phalanges itched with magic as he prepared himself in case Grillby slipped or worse. His soul was doing that strange noise again, clamouring in his rib cage; the other didn’t appear to notice it, or he was too polite to acknowledge the disturbance as he safely crossed. Sans led the fire monster to sit at his favourite spot, helping him down beside the lone echo flower. He clicked his fingers with a snap near the flower’s head, erasing its previous message. No one needed to hear that, after all.

“You know all manner of hiding spots,” the fire monster observed dryly as another pulse flared, easier now without being so close to pools of water.

“and you hate gettin’ wet,” Sans shrugged, leaning forward against the back of the bench beside the bartender.

Grillby’s ember eyes narrowed slightly, turning his head to glower at the skeleton.

“sorry. thought we were pointin’ out the obvious,” the smaller monster elaborated with a soft chuckle, scratching his skull in thought as the other hummed disapprovingly in response. “i thought you were ok with water? i mean… y’say fire elemental, but that’s not really what you are?”

Grillby’s gloved hand passed through the flames on his head again, then waved the offending steam away with a grimace. “…Would be fine,” he agreed after a pause, as though in thought. “If I fell into it, the water would turn to vapour instantly and aggressively. Call it more of a… constant worry for
Sans nodded slowly, understanding. His deal was physics, not so much xeno-biology though. “you’re worried you’d hurt someone. i getcha.” He rounded the bench and sat down beside the other, ignoring the echo from the flower next to them. “welp, y’don’t gotta worry with me around. if you need a shortcut, i’m your guy. we can stay here as long as you need to coo-”

“Please, Sans.”

“…ool… down,” the skeleton finished, his tone dropping and his words stuttering to a halt. Had he gone too far? His soul lurched uncomfortably behind his ribs and he shrunk into his hoodie. His eye lights picked out every spot of quartz and ore in the carved walls and floor of the room for a distraction.

He stayed quiet, allowing the fire monster to calm down enough that his flames returned to their normal splendour. The heat from him filled the room, drying out the bench they sat on, along with dispelling any steam that had accumulated. The other’s presence was admittedly relaxing and the warmth was enough to send Sans into a light doze as he waited for Grillby.

It was only until he felt the easement of the bench unbuckle that he stirred, cracking open an eye socket and looking at the other. Seemed like the fire monster had gotten his bearings, and was adjusting his jacket with something akin to an apologetic look on his visage. Sans took the cue to get up, and soon they found themselves back in the adjacent room, solving more puzzles to continue their journey.

As they walked, Sans’ tenseness eventually melted away, falling in step behind the taller monster without a worry in the world, now that he knew the other couldn’t really get hurt. He likened it to something of paranoia or a panic attack; something he was familiar with.

The next room after the ‘star’-viewing room was another that Grillby had anticipated the least. He scowled at the tangled shadows of typha reeds sticking out from the marshy expanse, his footsteps slowing to a stop. Sans hadn’t noticed, drowsing while he aimlessly walked along, and bumped into him.

He blinked up at the other, looking around to get his bearings. The other’s flames were jutting around again, and he reassuringly patted Grillby’s arm. “c’mon, boss. this path’s easy-peasy.” The skeleton kept his voice calm and even as he stepped out in front of the fire monster, giving him a flashy smile.

Steam was rising from Grillby’s heat as he continued, following Sans this time. He kept his bright eyes trained on the sleek wooden path, the platforms swaying with their combined weights as the water lapped around the murky depths around them. His breaths released in puffs of smoke, the crack and simmer of the air drying around him as they progressed down the long winding docks.

For a time, Sans turned and walked backwards, hands folded and resting behind his skull; having taken the route so often, he knew precisely where to step and he told the other simple stories to keep his attention on him instead of the wide open lake around them.

It would have been all good. His slippers would have been sufficient, but he didn’t notice his shoe’s laces had wriggled loose from where he’d lazily tucked them in, nor the ropes of vegetation that had grown over the boards. He was mid-sentence before he realised what had happened, lost footing, and lurched backwards with a strangled noise.
He saw the other’s startled reaction before a curse left his teeth as he hit the dark waters, soaking him to the bone. The fire monster scrambled to the side of the dock, his arm thrust into the water to grab ahold of the front of his hoodie as Sans started to sink. Upon contact, steam rose from his touch in copious quantities, forming a dense fog around them both as the fire monster pulled Sans onto the dock and away from the edge.

Not that he could see anything, but there had been no high-density vapour explosion; likely due to Grillby’s protective clothes. Sans realised his skull had filled with marshy water and he groaned in disgust, tilting it to one side to drain it.

“Are you alright?”

One of Sans’ eye lights focused and settled on the fire monster, whose demeanour was all fired up. He was held, each gloved hand on both of his upper arms. Flames licked around his visage in concern, and admittedly the other’s voice drawn in such panic for him was oddly endearing… but he was also rather close. If skeletons could blush, he idly thought, and gave the other an awkward thumbs-up before leaning to the other side and giving his skull a tap to drain the rest of the water.

“i owe you one,” the skeleton murmured, the water not quite gone and adding an echo to his voice. He drew up a leg to get up before he paused, looking between them as his eye lights faded in slow realisation. “shit. h-hold on.” He tore himself from Grillby’s grasp, lunging over the side of the dock with a grunt while the other exclaimed loudly and moved to grab him again beneath his ribs.

“i-said-hold-on-my-leg’s-” Sans grunted between huffs as he reached out his hand towards the reeds, giving the water a helpless paddle to get his detached limb to bob over. ‘How embarrassing’ was the thought of the day as he strained in effort, Grillby still holding onto him in case he fell in again. The steam was making it really difficult to see, and if Sans didn’t get his leg back, well… suffice to say, they’d have to go looking for it.

It was drifting out of reach and the fog was a nightmare. He couldn’t even grab the appendage with his magic before it slipped between the reeds and out of view.

“no-” The skeleton hung there for a moment, paralysed with horror and abject mortification. He couldn’t possibly have let that happen. He let Grillby pull him up again and he hung back in his arms, a low groan of despair echoing from his chest. “damn it!”

“Where does it lead? Will you be alright?”

Sans gingerly eased back on his remaining leg, glaring at the empty right kneecap in distaste. This happened way too often for him to admit, but never had he actually lost an appendage, and never his leg.

“i’ll be fine,” he answered finally in a frustrated huff, knocking his skull again to drain the last dregs of the water. “it’ll turn up at the dump… prob’ly.” Irritation settled into him when Grillby moved to stand, holding out his hand for Sans to take. The skeleton realised just how big a problem this was going to be as he pulled himself up with effort, teetering like a goddamn fool on one leg and soaked to the bone.

“Sans, please don’t make a joke of this,” the fire monster pleaded, his tone actually concerned. The skeleton stared at him, having fleetingly considered it, then redoubled his grasp on the other’s arms as a pathetic laugh escaped him and he nearly lost balance as a result.

“actually… i was gonna say i’m not gonna be able to walk `til we find it.” It was a defeatist way of acknowledging he needed help. Sans was one not easily swayed into asking, and the thought of
doing so now… he wasn’t really up for it. It was entirely humiliating. He avoided the other’s look, his own gaze turned downcast at the still-rippling waters in disgust.

It was then that the fire monster gently removed one of Sans’ hands, turning in place to hunch over, beckoning him to hop up. The skeleton’s soul trembled as the realisation came to be that Grillby offering to carry him weighed heavily on his psyche. It seemed like he really would be useless the rest of the way - or until they found his missing appendage.

Cautiously, since his hoodie and clothes were dripping wet, Sans wrapped his arms around the other’s neck, bones rattling uneasily as the other secured his hold under his femurs. The contact with the other’s flames steamed the remaining marshy water in his skull cavity as the other started to walk, his body oddly tense.

“Sorry, boss,” the skeleton said quietly.

“There is nothing to apologise for,” the other replied, his tone gentle as he shifted the other more comfortably against his back. “Relax. Direct me where to go from here.”

“East after the thicket,” the skeleton supplied, his voice sounding a little nervous as he felt the other’s perpetual warmth seeping into his clothes and bones. “There’s another dry room up ahead.”
Chapter Summary

Grillby carries Sans through the underground. A skeleton ignores his feelings and instead blathers about quantum access points, like a champ. Slight drama intensifies.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Sans preferred not to talk anymore than he had to, brooding over the loss of his leg. It was a worming, unwholesome feeling when his soul responded to each phantom movement, knowing the appendage was floating along murky currents, knocking against unmentionables in the marsh along its way.

He ignored the questioning glances the few local monsters threw at them on their way, echo flowers up ahead sniggering and whispering as Grillby silently passed. An hour or two, perhaps longer had already passed since the start of their journey, longer still since Grillby had started carrying him. He noted the calm yet careful stride, how he stepped around puddles despite wearing boots, and walking around streams of water that fell in piddling currents from the stalactites above.

He shuddered a time or two despite the other’s heat, which caressed the side of his skull as he hunched over the fire monster’s shoulder. He gave directions and pointed to pathways until Grillby approached the room Sans had previously indicated.

While the dry room was empty, it looked like some other monster was starting to set something up. They weren’t there now, which was all Sans wanted as Grillby set him down by the eastern wall, seating himself beside him.

“You rattle, friend.”

Sans gave a dismissive grin, rubbing the dry socket of his kneecap with a huff. It had started to ache, but that wasn’t necessarily the only reason his bones were jittery. “you wouldn’t get it,” he murmured, almost flinching as something in his soul felt like a lurching drop, much like vertigo. “it’s not a fun experience, to say the least.”

“…No, I imagine not,” the fire monster replied thoughtfully. “Can you tell when it’s nearby?”

“it just fell a long way down,” the skeleton explained sourly, anxiety twisting his grin into more of a grimace. “can’t pinpoint it exactly, no.” He huffed out a sigh and listened to the crackle of the other’s flames, shutting his sockets for a moment of peace. Eventually, the ebb and flow settled inside of him, whispers and coercion for him to go find his missing piece tugging at him to leave. In a minute, he irritably thought, although didn’t exactly enjoy the experience of Grillby carrying him.

After all, it was all too often lately that monsters were picking him up like it was a thing to do.

“Is the junkyard easy to get to?” the other asked, having watched Sans for a time. As with most monsters, he didn’t know much about a skeleton’s make-up, with there only being two in the entire Underground, and Papyrus and Sans never really got hurt, to his knowledge.
“we can take another shortcut once we’re ready.” Sans shrugged, but deep inside he knew he was pushing it. While the dump wasn’t too much of a distance away from their current position, the shoals - if they walked them - were filled with falling and even greater glowing pools of water. He didn’t want to subject the other to that kind of panic again. His soul still felt all twisted up inside of him because of it.

While Grillby didn’t say anything to that, he still worried. So he waited while Sans slumped against the wall, looking, for a lack of a better term, worse for wear. He was certain that the other might have been putting on a strong front for him, to keep him distracted and optimistic. With the constant rattling, however, Grillby acknowledged the skeleton was having a bad time.

The silence stretched on as the two remained quiet during their stop.

When Grillby next stood up, Sans opened his eye sockets again to watch him, a fleeting look of self-consciousness passing over his face as he was hoisted up again.

“sure you don’t need more time?”

“What?”

“nah, you’re the only one movin’ at this point…” The skeleton’s frame tensed as Grillby shifted his hands under his femurs again, the heat and a prickling sensation spreading through his bones and upward. Shaking just a little more, Sans tightened his hold on his whole side and grabbed the other’s hand from it, guiding it in front of him.

“o-ok. so again, keep it to yourself-”

He reached over the fire monster’s shoulder, avoiding the sidelong glance Grillby gave him in askance as he grasped the other’s hand, this time forcing a vortex to reveal itself to him. He knew the gesture wasn’t entirely necessary, but it bolstered him to have the actual physicality pulling at him. It took a lot more effort than simply looking for a rift. “walk ‘up’,” he ordered, his voice strained and taut.

And he did. They were in another place, the two looking around. If Grillby had noticed the rip in reality, he didn’t say anything, only tapped the toe of his boot against the very real platform under him while taking in the scenery around them. It was likely that he did not, Sans observed, maybe it was something only he could see or knew what to look for.

There were piles of garbage, more or less sorted into smaller organised plots by whichever monsters lived there. They were littered around in a shallow river, where plastic bags and pieces of old newspapers bobbed and swam with the currents. The vapour started to wisp around them and Sans lowered his arm over Grillby’s shoulder again, holding back a wheeze of utter exhaustion.

That had taken a lot out of him and it had only been two hundred yards or so more than the first gap. It was the depth that was the breaking point, the hesitating slowness in which Grillby passed through his magic and the effort of hauling them both through to their current placement without leaving either of them behind.

He lowered his jaw against the other’s shoulder, his bones drinking in the heat as the other adjusted his hold on him.

“Are you alright, Sans?”

His soul pulsed gently at the sound of his name before realising he had fallen silent, ready to doze on the fire monster. “all good,” he lied, his voice almost threadbare. “we’ll - you’ll have to walk
Grillby turned his head slightly as if wanting to scrutinise the other’s face, but thought better of it and started to walk to the edge of the platform. He stared down at his reflection and the shallow water. It reached only up to his boots’ ankles, if he was sure of his estimate. In trepidation, he settled his right foot into the rippling pool, cool air matching his body’s heat in long arching tendrils along the surface. His body’s pulse flared again as he worried for his friend’s safety, each step through the water calculated and agonised.

“you’re doin’ great,” Sans murmured, his hands barely holding onto his jacket. “nothin’ bad’ll happen. don’t worry.”

“…Cannot help but feel you’re falling asleep on me,” the fire monster said mildly in an effort to make light of their situation. He had an exceptional read on Sans and knew the other didn’t respond well to being fretted over, after all.

“would i do that?” The skeleton’s grin was sardonic, amused despite his disposition. He heard the soft hiss of the other’s unsure chuckle and made an effort to lift his skull off the other’s shoulder. “i think it’s down there.” He gestured vaguely down the path where more lumbering piles of trash were scattered about, and Grillby continued at a slow pace, careful not to kick up any water while lighting their way.

He felt the way Grillby tensed, holding onto his femurs as they passed through the murky glade, the misting of falling water on either side of the fire monster’s composition quickly evaporating and masking the area. While Sans was trying his best to keep awake, the other’s pace was precise like a pendulum as he searched their surroundings for any sign of his missing leg. Even if he felt any semblance of ease on the inside, his bones were still trembling with strain as he kept his hold around Grillby’s neck, fighting sleep.

Man, he could really do with a nap at the next resting point.

He mused the search would have been difficult without Grillby, as the monster very much functioned like a living light source. The fire reflected off the moist walls and rippled over the water’s surface, throwing tranquil reflections all around them in wavy flickers. Sans found it hypnotic in a way, his head lolling to one side as he briefly dozed, arms hanging limply over Grillby’s shoulders.

Grillby cast another sidelong glance to Sans’ face, pausing to fix his glasses and scan the area. They were approaching a bend in the corridor and the footing was becoming less sure, the piles of refuse hard to look through at a single glance.

When he continued, he noted the peculiar shudder that wracked the skeletal frame against him and the shift of movement. The gentle tug at his jacket’s right lapel was the indication to look over, Sans’ grip slipping but gesturing towards the corner. The subtle hollow knocking and gurgle of a bony leg stuck in an eddy struck out over the fluid echos of the cavern. Grillby puffed out a breath of steam and smoke in relief.

As he walked towards it, the slippery rocks underfoot suddenly steepened and his leg plunged into a deeper pool. He started, flames bouncing off his body in great licks as he backed away in panic.

He felt Sans stir against him, leaning forward slightly with his phalanges outreached towards his missing leg. It was a feeble movement, one accentuated by an unfathomable fatigue as tiny coils of magic looped around his fingers. Grillby felt the other shift again, holding onto his left side as Sans
panted with effort by his face.

The stream of magic missed.

He hadn’t expected that. “Perhaps you shouldn’t,” he told the other, craning his head to view the other’s face locked in concentration. “It appears you’ve expended a fair amount of magical energy throughout all this.”

“i… really haven’t.” The skeleton’s tone was almost accusing as he tried once more. He swore as he demonstrated such a miraculous blunder for the second time in a row, berating his own weakness. “dammit. lemme down, i’ll just get it the old fashioned way.”

“I don’t believe that’s-” Grillby grunted in surprise as Sans’ grip tugged him backward, his lightweight frame threatening to off-balance him in the slippery footing. But he yielded, hunching down carefully to give the skeleton what he wanted.

It was a valiant effort on Sans’ part. He lasted all but five seconds upright before falling straight onto his tailbone. He grimaced as the other offered a hand, his pride as a monster wounded as he accepted the gesture to stabilise himself and reach for his leg.

Reunited at last, he huffed in exertion as he was pulled back by his companion, sitting in the water while holding his leg and inspecting it for damage. The shoe was still on the foot and the laces a tangled mess from their journey into the junkyard. He glowered at the stupid thing, finding no scrapes or nicks but a tangle of old fishing line wrapped all around and in between the parallel bones.

“thanks for helpin’ put me back together,” he finally said, inspecting the head of the limb before attempting to detangle the mess. His movements were slow however, and it was difficult to keep upright with the current. Something of a piteous look flashed over Grillby’s face as he watched him struggle with the line before he held out his hand again beside Sans’ skull. As the other looked up, his eye lights flickered; he truly did look exhausted.

Wounded pride or no, Grillby gestured for the other to climb back up, noting the way the other’s bones rattled softer now, as if movement was taking up precious energy reserves. “…At least, until we reach another spot to rest.” he offered kindly with something of a worried smile on his visage.

Quietly, as he had no other choice, the skeleton nodded, the endeavour unmatched as he resumed his place on Grillby’s back. Sans draped his arms over the other's shoulders as he fidgeted with the fishing wire in jerky, frustrated movements.

He was tired. He was humiliated. And he needed food to keep his energy levels up. He didn’t have the foresight to bring any food with them, nor did the suggestion pass through his mind. He idly wondered if the ketchup packets in his pockets had survived his plunge into the lake and if they would be enough, but somehow doubted it.

The corridor was long, thinning out to a single part where the garbage everywhere seemed to pile up into a huge mass atop of what could have been seen as the only stairway leading up, clogging the end of their path. Sans lifted his skull when Grillby stopped suddenly, a quiet rasp of puzzlement drawing his gaze to their current predicament.

Something inside of him lurched uncomfortably and vertigo made his skull throb as two and two were put together. “oh fuckin’ hell.”

“Language, Sans,” the fire monster chided softly, although seemed distracted as he carefully
manoeuvred around a large orange chest freezer that had overgrown with glowing mushrooms.

Sans slumped against him, letting the detached leg hang in front of Grillby like a grotesque marionette. He waited, just knowing and preparing his magic for what he’d have to do to get them untrapped. His left eye socket wisped with a cyan flare as he accumulated it within him, magic coursing through his bones when Grillby’s head turned towards him, the lash of his fire sudden enough for the skeleton to flinch.

“Don’t!”

“what?” The question could have been construed as innocent, but his glowing eye light dispelled at the other’s warning regardless.

Grillby’s fire flickered in a peculiar way before he seemed to calm down, his gaze leaving the other’s face as he searched for some way to traverse the pile. Sans didn’t know what to think about the other’s outburst, but decided to carefully disperse the energy he had stored up back to his soul, idly wiggling his phalanges in a mock leg-puppet show.

“…Instruct me how to do it.”

Sans arched his brow bone at that, his fingers stopping abruptly. He lifted his jaw from the other’s shoulder, mind searching for an excuse - and the answer was; “no?”

Grillby fixed him with another withering look and dead silence.

“not that i think y’can’t, just…” Sans shrugged minutely, the effort enormous. Ah, the sacrifices he made to keep up the facade that he was stronger than he really was. “just think it’s a bit convoluted to explain, is all.” And highly dangerous, his thoughts added bitterly.

“Says the physics major.”

“i resent that statement,” the skeleton responded archly, “sides, too much can go wrong if you don’t got starts and stops.”

“Then how does one start and stop?” the fire monster drilled, still watching the other.

Sans picked at the fishing wire thoughtfully, deliberately belabouring it in his head. “stress points, cracks, rifts, warps… in my old line of work, we studied ‘access lattice balance’. the world’s flow is basically a giant grid, ‘specially in the underground, and rifts pop up from time to time.”

“I believe I recall a condiment-fuelled tirade about quantum vortex exploits,” the fire monster mused, his tone hinting at humour to diffuse the other’s frustrated demeanour.

Sans couldn’t help but turn a grin at the other. “yeah? well, it was some… secret somethin’-er-other that we were doin’ at the core before the project was shut down. i’m sure i’ve told you that much before. tied in with a certain kinda magnetism with magic, one can exploit the gridline, for lack of a better term, to travel long distances in short periods. these kinds of magnetotransport experiments were carried out by myself and some colleagues.”

He paused as though still debating it in his mind, but continued;

“first of all, while you have to be able to see these stress points, you also must be able to interact with them on a quantum scale, bendin’ the shape of the vortices’ lattice between the array points, which can get… tricky, since there’s so much you gotta keep track of on both sides, plus you or whoever else you want to tag along. normally, the magnetic permeability is a bit convoluted, but competin’ the
unstable vortex configurations that appear lead to a more divergent shift, as they preclude transition. This behavior emerges as the dynamics’ molecular structure shifts to accommodate a monster’s energy flux and physicality, pushin’ ‘em through, uh, in a… i dunno.” The skeleton paused his tangent again, this time as though searching for the correct term. “blink.”

“…Blink?”

“yeah. you’ve been… starin’ at me this whole time, grillbz.” His soul made that odd pulse, as though it had second wind enough to taunt him. Again, Sans couldn’t quite fathom the expression the other had, but his flames appeared paler and felt just a little warmer.

That was new.

There was something akin to hesitation in Grillby’s composure before he carefully answered; “I don’t think I can muster the clarity to follow your explanation this time, professor.”

Smugness passed Sans’ features and he hunched his spine, picking at the tangles in the fishing line again and looping the tight knots over themselves to get rid of a larger chunk.

“sorry ‘bout the word boner,” the skeleton snickered through a scowl, quickly becoming more exhausted and irritated with the line. He debated just reattaching it and having Alphys fix it up on their way through Hotland, but that was at least another few hours away, if he didn’t cheat.

Which, he realised, he had to. He had no other choice, unless they found another monster lurking around that could help clear the debris - which was less than likely. He felt Grillby shift him uneasily as he was forced to watch the lithe bony digits move in front of him, then they gestured vaguely to their right. He puffed out another jet of smoke as if in resignation.

“Can I do nothing to change your mind?”

Sans ignored the other’s question, but he didn’t quite feel like he had anything left to give after this last shortcut. Desperate, he pulled his right hand up and behind Grillby to search his hoodie’s pocket, but as he’d suspected, he only pulled out withered typha leaves and small squiggly pieces of vine. No ketchup packets, nothing to top him off. He glowered and dropped the vegetation in distaste, hoping he wouldn’t find any surprises in his skull later.

He decided he would at least have to make it count. His soul’s flux was already drawn quite thin as he allowed his magic to manifest again. The shift in the world appeared like an awning gate to him. Grillby didn’t detect it. Otherwise, he would probably have more questions, or at least turn his head to its direction.

“Sans..?”

Ignoring the inquiry, Sans reached over the other’s shoulder and grabbed the other’s gloved hand once more, putting every bit of his soul and magic he could muster into one last skip. “be quick through this one, boss,” his voice was more strained than before, barely a harsh whisper against the flames as his magic wreathed around both of them. Grillby tensed under him, ready to sprint at his command. “gonna be a doozy.”

His left eye socket flared with the thrush of magic, sending wisps of cyan and yellow in a cascade of colour as he barked out; “go!”

He hadn’t jumped that far before.
It was almost at the end of the biome, he figured maybe... a few kilometres or so. Yeah, that sounded right. The field of echo flowers was a hum of passing conversations from days past surrounding them. They’d jumped straight past where Undyne’s house was, Blook Estates, the ferry stop, the hidden village of Tem. The mushroom caverns were behind them, the crystal marshes, even the twin waterfalls leading up to where they were now, sheltered in a small grassy bank.

His frame didn’t even have the energy to rattle anymore, slumped against Grillby’s back as his eye’s magic faded and ceased. Both sockets were hollow as he dragged in shallow breaths, flames catching in the subtle shift and his arms hung uselessly over the other’s shoulders.

Yeah, he’d definitely overdone it.

As if from far away, he heard a panicked voice, felt how his body shifted, feeling oddly detached from the world. He would have been amused if he wasn’t so damned tired, the way the fishing line actually prevented him from dropping his leg. He was fading in and out of consciousness; it looked like he’d get his wish for a nap, at least.

From the way flames entered his left socket, he made a fleeting educated guess as to how his friend was carrying him with a bite at his pride, in a hurry, towards the end of Waterfall before everything went black.

Chapter End Notes

It's my birthday tomorrow so enjoy this chapter in celebration! :'D
I enjoyed braining up Sans' idiocratic science lecture. It's not supposed to make sense to anyone else but him (and possibly others who worked in his field). ¯\_(ツ)_/¯
(should I tag this as dismemberment...? does that even count for skeles if they can put them back on??)
One

Chapter Summary

Grillby braves the rest of the walk to MTT Resort, and it's slowly dawning on Sans that he might have certain feelings. Secret stats tend to alarm.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

If anyone asked, Grillby would always be referred to as a pretty chill monster despite being entirely consisting of flame. He never lost his temper, was respectful and polite. He had an aura around him that was strong, collected and accommodating. He could quell a worry with a whisper, stop self-consciousness in its tracks and leave one feeling like the world cared about them, even in their darkest moments. He was a difficult monster to uproot.

But now? He was explosive.

He had allowed panic to strike his soul like a shot when the small skeleton against his back didn’t answer him. He had been barely holding on before, forcing himself as Grillby felt the pulse of magical energy of the other’s soul weakly resonate against him. The fire monster had shifted the other and nearly dropped him as there was not even the barest form of grip on his jacket anymore.

His own soul had shuddered in fright as he stooped and carefully pulled Sans off his back and in front of him, holding the small skeleton’s shoulders to look at his face. His sockets were hollow, dark and empty, not even a pinprick of light to signal consciousness. He was entirely unresponsive.

You fool, Grillby thought angrily, both at Sans and himself. His gloved hand brushed at the other’s temple, tracing a gentle curve around the right socket, his own flux attempting to kindle the eye, to wake him - anything.

He had to hold on.

He had to find something to help Sans regain strength.

He had to continue on his own.

He shifted the skeleton into his arms, cradling him against his chest as his flames whispered and whipped in barely suppressed trepidation. Fog was raising up from the wet grassy area as he stooped to make sure the other’s leg was still with them, still in a tangled mess and wrapped around the fingers of Sans’ left hand.

The bartender couldn’t help but feel that snakelike guilt that coiled in the centre of his being; it had been at his invitation that Sans agreed to come along, after all - even if the other had previously offered. He struggled as his blaze darkened in self-criticism and anger, and he stalked through the environment to make his way through the rest of the wetlands.

There were a number of deep pools with no bridges from the grassy fields between them and the exit. Grillby hesitated, unable to gauge the depth nor reach of the pond ahead. He should have done it before, he agonised internally. As he lowered his core temperature to something that wouldn’t
cause an instant-deadly underground vapour explosion, the flicker of his flames lowered to a dull, red

glow and haze. The very core of his being shuddered at the suppression as the nuclear heart swelled

with heat, writhing with building nuclear fission.

He knew he wouldn’t be able to hold it for long as he shifted unnervingly through the waist-high

waters, waves and bubbles forming while the heat boiled it as he moved. Overstrung, the fire

monster pressedSans against him while attempting not to tremble with effort through to the other

side.

It was the most undesirable sensation and left him feeling vulnerable and wholly unstable. Not only

had he relied on the other monster emotionally through Waterfall, Grillby now felt responsible for

what had happened. The thoughts rushed through his head as he lifted the other from his arms and

onto the rock embankment, following quickly with an audible groan of relief when his core’s

temperature spiked then regulated as he hit the shale surface. The water shed from his efforts sizzled

on the precipice, droplets dancing as if on a hot pan before shivering away from him.

He drew a few breaths to calm himself, hands passing through his head’s flames in an attempt to

soothe his soul before pulling the other monster back into his arms to continue down the last corridor

and over the weather-worn bridges.

He really detested going through Waterfall.

The next time Sans awoke, it was definitely Hotland. As he came back to consciousness, he heard a

voice. Someone was having a one-sided argument, chastising words crackling and snapping in rasps

of agitation that were only getting worse. He couldn’t make out the words through the blaze and

gurgle of magma nearby. His spine creaked as he made an effort to lift his skull before he stopped, a

plunge of vertigo hitting him like a landslide.

His eye lights gradually focused on the ceiling far head that stretched up for miles, the red heat of the

lava below throwing long shadows along the cave walls. Sans recognised the area eventually,
picking out one of his Hotland sentry stations close by. His grin tugged wearily as he attempted to sit

up again.

The roar of the kindling voice stopped abruptly and he heard a shuffle come closer.

“cool it,” he mumbled irritably as he tried to slap the hands away. The gesture was useless as he did

not have much strength in him to begin with, all his energy reserved to keeping himself in a half-

upright position. “just… missed nap time.” He tried to push himself up further, arms trembling with

the strain.

“Sans.” Oh, there he was. Grillby’s tone was sharp in warning and the skeleton noted the peculiar

way his flames were arranged and coloured, albeit blearily. It was difficult to focus and Sans decided

it was better to close one socket in a makeshift wink; focusing one instead of both was much easier,
even if it made him dizzy.

“h-heya.” Sans looked inward, noting that the buffer he’d gained the previous night was entirely
gone and then some. His magic felt thin and raw, as though torn at the edges. He let out a soft

wheezy chuckle despite his disposition as something was offered to his mouth.

“Drink!”

“wha…?”
Then he was being supported by something, or Grillby, his phalanges being wrapped around a container that smelled vaguely familiar and pleasing. Not his absolute favourite, but the skeleton cautiously ingested the sea tea in that peculiar way monsters without mouths could absorb sustenance, with a little help from whom he realised was his travelling companion.

Half the tea finished and Sans’ skull nodded forward, then he leaned against the hand that supported his spine. The energy converted quickly enough to magic, which circulated throughout him and into his bones, slowly replenishing him. He let out a quiet hum of appreciation. That was better. Not great, but better.

Wearily, Sans looked to the other’s face. He was very close, so much the flames from his body closed the gap between them and flooded him with a comfortable heat. They were so unlike Hotland’s scorched climate. When he had found the energy to, he clutched the tea with both hands and consumed the rest, his soul reverberating in his bones with that peculiar lurch and inaudible sound.

Grillby seemed to relax a little more with the other’s voluntary action and breathed out a plume of smoke in relief. He then bent down to sit on the rock face in front of Sans, whose bones were jitering. It was concerning, but at the same time he preferred it to the stark silence from before.

“You’re rattling again.”

“y… yeah, we tend to do that.” It looked as though he made a conscious effort to stop, however futile that it was. “sorry.”

He tried to suppress the surprised jolt that thundered through his soul as the other’s hand slipped from his spine, only to stop at his shoulder. It was a comforting gesture, but at the same time it felt intense as the other’s face flickered, flames arranged into an expression of distress.

The two sat in silence as Grillby fixed him with that gaze, bright eyes burning behind his glasses as he appeared to be mulling something over. As the quiet extended, Sans observed the other’s tense posture, his flames paler and hotter than he’d ever seen. The demeanour was actually so foreign to him that he didn’t know what to say or even if he should attempt to make a joke to ease the tension.

“Don’t,” the other finally said, his voice low and resonating. It was as though he was expecting the skeleton to make light of the situation. His grasp squeezed Sans’ shoulder; not enough to worry, but to portray the emphatic regret he felt. “Don’t ever do that again.”

The smaller monster stared at him, the thread of guilt hooking into him as realisation dawned upon him. “…i’m fine, grillby,” he muttered after a pause, finding he couldn’t meet the other’s burning eyes. It was probably the second time since he and his brother had moved to Snowdin that he’d ever used the fire monster’s actual name, a subtle hinting at his resolve to placate the other.

Still, something else inside of him twisted at the other’s concern; that fluttering little feeling that both grabbed at his soul with possibility and also with blame. He supposed he hadn’t taken into consideration what Grillby felt, having passed out like that. Should’ve brought food or snacks, the skeleton lamented internally as his phalanges idly stroked the now emptied container of sea tea. At least his sentry station had this left over from his last shift.

“You’re impossible,” Grillby finally said after a prolonged silence.

Sans wasn’t quite sure how to respond to that, so he let it slide. A phantom ache tugged at him when Grillby released his shoulder and took the empty container to hide around the back of the station, while Sans decided to concentrate on his tangled bones. He remarked how the other didn’t say
anything more; he dwelled on it as his movements with the line clattered his bones together noisily. He was becoming agitated, tugging irritably at the wire and hissing softly as the loops tightened around his fibula when he pulled too much.

If he could open his mouth he could at least attempt to gnaw it off with his teeth, the bitter thought came to mind. “remind me never to go swimmin’ with the fishes again,” even his tone showed signs of annoyance. Sans paused when he heard the other hum in sombre agreement, the sound of movement coming from the other side of his station. “don’t remember if i got any tools here-”

Sans listened as the other listed a few objects as he rummaged through his stash: various empty condiment bottles, typha pods, a little bit of pocket change, and a bent fork. Sans gave up his struggle, leaning against the front panel of the station with a defeated sigh. “hate to ask, but can you just… burn it away?”

Grillby peered over the top of the station, leaning over the edge. Sans looked up at the movement, and his smile wavered at the other’s pensive stature as the familiar sound echoed in his soul again. Sans found that he rather enjoyed the view, the way Grillby hung over the ledge with one gloved hand cupping his face as if in consideration. The skeleton let out a nervous laugh, the sound cut short as he raised the tangled mess hanging from his trembling fingers almost imploringly.

“i’d hate to string you along, but i’m kinda tied up at the moment.” He watched as his joke made the other chuckle in amusement, even if it was bad. However threadbare his magic was, it tickled against his ribs as the bartender averted his gaze, not sure why he reacted that way. He quickly forced the feeling down again, his rib cage shaking with barely suppressed mirth.

“…Would not want to cause you further harm, Sans,” Grillby replied as he moved from around the station and knelt in front of the other.

“wh… no, you didn’t” the skeleton all but stammered back, agitated again as Grillby ungloved a hand. The fire against his form crackled free and sent glowing embers into the hot air. Had Sans possessed a stomach, it would be doing nervous little flip flops as the bartender took his tangled hand by the carpals with his gloved one while searing away the synthetic wire with his other as if it was made of wax. It was as though each touch was deliberately slow and careful as the small lines melted under his ministrations and licked his bony digits.

It was captivating.

Sans found himself staring, unable to shake whatever feelings were coming over him. His soul was thrumming hard at the tender display.

He had to make a joke.

He had to be quick.

He couldn’t entertain thoughts like these, he…

“d-doubt you’d hurt me.” Wrong thing, Sans! his mind vaulted the message almost at full volume within his skull, horrified at the near-flirt, “er, muster the intent to harm, anyway.” One of his phalanges twitched at the way the bartender released his hand and he quickly disguised the reaction by rubbing both together clumsily, finally free. That was when the other pointed the heel of his footwear towards him.

Those shoes. A rotten thought formed in Sans’ head and he almost scowled at the proffered limb. While he would never blame his brother, Papyrus’ gift had over-complicated things. Much like his
brother would do, upon hearing the news of what had happened in Waterfall. He would have to make sure he tuned the story a bit if it was ever brought up - to spare him feeling fault.

“Very true. Could you remove this? Would be a shame if it burned up.” The fire monster watched the other’s movements with curiosity in his gaze. Perhaps he would chalk it up to being utterly spent, Sans hoped as he did as requested.

It certainly felt odd for the other to be handling his bones in that way. Even though the fire monster’s actions were reserved and quite professional, Sans couldn’t help the hot sensation that crept through his frame at the sight of the other holding his leg while he removed the offending shoe and sock. He didn’t know what to make of the ridiculous thoughts that were assailing him, how desperate he felt. He felt stupid for considering it, to ruin a great friendship in that way…

That sound his soul was echoing through him was almost deafening as Grillby carefully turned the limb in his grasp, scrutinising a few old marks in the ivory surface as the fishing line was burned away. Sans was concentrating very hard at not jumping at every brush, feeling extremely embarrassed as the other’s fingertips brushed against the cracked talus. A shuddered exhale escaped him with the heat and his opposite leg hiked up slightly, shoe dragging in the red earth.

Grillby noted it, concern on his face as he also realised that Sans’ eye lights were avoiding him directly. “Pain?” Another twist of guilt came over the fire monster as he laid his palm over the injured bone.

Sans stammered to deny it, unable to find words for what seemed like an eternity. No, it wasn’t because of pain that he’d reacted that way, he realised. He sat tensely, before clumsily muttering, “i… i just slipped. couple days ago.”

The other leaned forward, catching Sans off guard. He was much closer now and Sans panicked slightly, his eye lights flicking to the other’s visage. It allowed Grillby to see the unsure look betrayed in his sockets and he knew something wasn’t right. “You never slip, Sans.”

“s-sur i do, it’s not a big deal. it always hap-” It was that strange universal constant, Sans realised too late - now he’d made the other worried. Dread clung to the inside of his ribs and he had to prevent himself from clutching at his chest to hang the feeling.

Grillby watched the other stubbornly excuse the injury, believing it to be false. Time and time again, no matter the other’s sobriety, whenever Sans left his bar he would watch him leave until out of view, which happened to be only just down the street. He had never seen him slip, fall or trip before; Grillby couldn’t help but wonder why the skeleton was hiding the true reason behind the injury. But then, he had neglected to watch after him after his previous melancholy visit. It gave him a nagging feeling and he decided rather pointedly that he would heal the crack.

“grillbz, y’don’t gotta do tha-” The skeleton’s shoulders raised as he felt the particular tingle ebb from the other’s hands and into his bone, the hairline of exposed marrow sending pricks up his leg and jumping across the phantom connection to his body. While it wasn’t necessarily an unwelcome gesture, Sans had been caught off guard again and he found himself pressing his spine against the front of the station with stuttered gasp.

It was a small worry, but it was healed in no time. The gentle ebb of the other’s magic welled in the scarred bone like a glowing white cast, making the marrow just underneath throb. Sans sucked in a slow breath to calm himself, finding that his own magic had curled up defensively. The other’s eyes settled on him in suspicion, holding his limb out for him to take.

Dumbly, the skeleton outreached his trembling hand, meaning to introduce the head of the bone to
his vacant knee’s socket. He knew he was weak, but he thought he would have at least *something* to spare to affix himself. Sans’ eye lights flicked down as he attempted the connection again, his magic feeling both frayed and paper-thin as it uselessly coiled at the joint.

It didn’t work.

His soul sunk with that fact.

He chalked it up to being stretched thin enough already. He would have loved to walk on his own, had he the energy. Stubbornly, Sans tried a third time, this time flinching when something inside of him sputtered painfully in protest. A dizzy spell came over him and he hunched his shoulders with a quiet hum.

“*We can rest at the resort,*” the other monster decided, having watched this with growing bemusement. “*Don’t force yourself.*”

That only made the skeleton feel worse as he tugged the sock and shoe back onto his foot in silence. Being useless wasn’t something he was unaccustomed to, but having to be a burden when he was supposed to be *helping* was another thing altogether.

Without another word, Grillby stood and patted the red dirt from his pants. He helped Sans onto his back again and the smaller monster kept his limb in hand, his thin finger bones just small enough to fit through the void between the parallel bones. He found that he was still struggling to keep focus, but noticed the way the other monster’s pace seemed hurried now as they made their way north to the elevator.

As Grillby waited for the long elevator ride to ascend to the second level, the skeleton’s tensility on his back had eased somewhat. He turned his head and listened. The only noise breaking the silence was the soft crackling of his flames and the small breaths taken by his companion. His eye sockets were closed and he seemed almost… peaceful.

He was nonetheless concerned. It was still a long walk between the quarry pits, and that was in hopes that no one had activated any puzzles along the way. As a fire monster, Grillby knew shortcuts of his own through them, but they were nowhere near as drastic as Sans’. Essentially, he knew which maintenance levers to trip and would use that to his advantage throughout the next area.

Grillby kept to himself but nodded formally to other monsters as he passed through, not one normally for passing chitchat. That is, unless it was Sans, who could carry a conversation for the both of them more than half the time. It struck him that he’d been more open with the skeleton lately, barely gesturing vaguely or using body language to aid their talks. Perhaps because he had charged himself with the responsibility to carry him more than half the way? Or simply, maybe it was that the other made him more comfortable…?

It was a lengthy walk to the other side of the quarry, it taking the better part of two hours to reach the easternmost elevator tower through the winding conveyor platforms. The hike had been long, and he was desperate for a moment of reprieve. Grillby stopped to rest at another empty sentry station and sat down with Sans in his lap, who remained in deep slumber. He checked briefly before doing so; this station didn’t have anything to consume, either. It appeared he would have to wait until they arrived at the resort to get some proper food for the both of them.

The fact that Sans wasn’t disturbed as the fire monster carried him all this way was worrying, to say the least. Grillby paused for a moment and while normally courteous to others’ boundaries, wanted to ensure the skeleton was actually alright. It was a horrible breach of privacy… but he had to make sure. He wouldn’t be able to live with himself if Sans was on the verge of Falling Down.
Grillby sighed in near-exasperation at the internal joke and lowered his head to probe further.

The fire monster’s head snapped up; suddenly his soul was thrumming hard in alarm. It was worse than what he’d thought. Grillby’s body tensed, his flames plumed pale with dread as he pushed Sans against his chest to brace himself and lurched to his feet.

He didn’t have time to rest. He had to continue - had to find help, food, shelter - anyone!

The fire monster darted towards the elevator shaft, his breaths rasping and loud. His finger jabbed at the button mercilessly as though the action made the elevator descend faster. His thoughts screamed ‘hold on!’ as the doors stuttered open and he dashed inside, pushing the button to go up to the third level of the quarry with more force than was probably necessary.

The fire monster’s mind was a blur throughout the ride upward until the elevator stopped. He rounded the corner without acknowledging the Royal Guards posted within stone’s throw of the resort.

He had to get him safe-

He had to tell Papyrus. To ask what he could do-

The bartender repeated the train of thought over and over as a mantra. It was the only thing that was preventing him from falling into an outright inconsolable state when he entered the double glass doors. He stalked to the front desk as if on automatic, shifted Sans in his arms to remove some coins from his pockets and slid them across the counter to the receptionist without a word. He didn’t trust himself to say anything.

Wordlessly, he took the key that was provided in exchange and left the desk after reading the number on it - past the fountain and down the hall. Others around him had stopped their amicable chatter to watch, but he tuned it out as he went to the room, entered, and locked it behind him with some difficulty.

Inside of him, his soul was shrouding with guilt and responsibility, so much for a moment he could barely move. With Sans’ body pressed against him, he leaned against the door to gather his bearings before his bright eyes flicked about the room studiously. He took an inventory; a large bed, a table, some lights and a chair beside the desk with a phone on it.

He exhaled, smoke trailing behind him in a wisp as he carried forward to carefully rest Sans on the bed’s plush surface. He checked over him once more, to make sure there was no damage to his handling; checked his severed limb to ensure there were no cracks or breakage before placing it next to him. Suddenly his jovial friend seemed much more fragile than he’d ever seen him before.

It took him several moments before Grillby was calm enough to pull the chair away from the desk and sit down, staring at his friend. He… looked peaceful enough. Was he really just sleeping? It was a deep sleep, one that Grillby wasn’t sure about. On edge and barely keeping himself together, he pulled the chair closer so he was right against the mattress.
He would have to give another attempt at healing him - if he couldn’t, he would call for someone else to. As his magic flowed through him and gathered in his hands, he pulled off his gloves again and tossed them to the side without care. He scanned the other once more, his hands hovering just above the other’s breastbone in hesitation before resting both palm-down. The soothing flux flowed downward into Sans’ bones and intermingled with his own magic, which Grillby now recognised as a decent level lower than his own. It appeared to accept his readily enough, as though painfully yearning.

Minutes passed in effort and Grillby was beginning to feel like it was taking too long. He attempted another precursory scan.

[ * 0.8 HP ]

Even though he was trying his best, it appeared his own magic was struggling to help Sans, having only healed a bare fraction. It wasn’t right, though - it shouldn’t have been this difficult. He was nowhere near his maximum limit. Grillby estimated Sans should’ve had much more hope than this. But the struggle to direct the other back into the positives was great, almost draining him to the point he thought perhaps Sans had Fallen Down - that it was perhaps too late and attempting to pull him Up again was a wasteful effort.

Grillby’s soul wrenched at the thought. No, he had to continue. His brow furrowed in concentration, chest rising and falling in quiet but deep rhythm as he forced his flux to heal. Twenty minutes passed. The time spent healing Sans was taking its toll when it shouldn’t have.

Yet, he persisted.

[ * 1 HP ]

He forced himself, but he couldn’t do it anymore. Whether he was worn out from the travel or wasn’t strong enough to pull Sans Up, he just stopped. His shoulders drooped noticeably and he hung his head in his hands, silently lamenting his ineptitude. His body was beginning to shake as a thought came crashing down on him.

Sans had Fallen Down because of him.

The fire monster turned towards the desk to dial out, the large receiver feeling like lead in his grasp. He dialled the same sequence he would punch in night after night to tell Papyrus to get his brother from the bar when it had gotten too late, the rotary clicking with each dreaded number. He paused at the last digit, realising his hands were trembling uncontrollably.

What would he say…?

Driving ahead, he punched in the last number, his breath shuddering with a sufferance he’d never felt in his entire existence.

It only took a couple of rings for the other skeleton to pick up, and for a moment Grillby froze, the words stuck in his throat. “Papyrus…?”

The other’s jovial greeting blared through the phone and the bartender reached over to turn down the volume, giving him a few precious moments to go over his thoughts. He was having a difficult time with them.

“WOWIE! IS THAT YOU, MISTER GRILLBY? I HOPE MY LAZYBONES OF A BROTHER ISN’T HOLDING YOU UP!”
Grillby’s gaze lifted from the phone to Sans on the bed, who hadn’t moved an inch from where he put him. His soul twisted painfully again, searching for the right words to delicately break the news to Papyrus.

“……No, he’s resting. We’re at MTT Resort, for the moment, er…”

“THAT-! I SWEAR HE’LL FALL ASLEEP ANYWHERE!”

Grillby idly rubbed the side of his face, recalling what Sans had warned him of when they began their journey.

’don’t tell paps, eh?’

“…He won’t wake up,” Grillby offered carefully, nervously tapping the edge of his chair as his flames flickered in the same manner, listening to the other side and staring at his boots.

“OH! WELL. SANS IS A DEEP SLEEPER. IT’S ABOUT THE ONLY THING HE’S COMMITTED TO, REALLY…”

The way Papyrus replied made the guilt broil inside and Grillby was beginning to know less on how to broach the subject. He stayed quiet, the dead air a painful experience to listen to and participate in.

“IS… IS EVERYTHING ALRIGHT? YOU’VE BEEN QUIET - EVEN FOR YOU!”

“We were… trapped in the depths of Waterfall, and he used a fair amount of magic,” he explained carefully; vague enough to not reveal particulars, but enough that he wasn’t lying. “I can’t heal him, Papyrus.”

“Oh my god!!” the other skeleton’s voice boomed from the receiver and Grillby nearly jerked it away from his face; “I SPECIFICALLY INSTRUCTED HIM NOT TO! HOW LOW IS HE??”

Grillby drew in a shuddering breath and lifted his gaze to the other, scanning Sans again; there was still no change. “One.”

A pause.

Then a quiet laugh. He could detect a tone of… relief?

Anger and confusion suddenly ebbed within his core and Grillby leaned forward, trying to figure out the joke as he heard Papyrus’ mirth.

“Oh! No… don’t worry about that.”

“…Seem to misunderstand.” the fire monster’s voice hissed through the line, his free hand forming a fist. “He’s… only at ‘one’! Other monsters would have Fallen at this point, I… I can’t heal him, I-”

Papyrus’ good-natured chuckle cut him off and he seemed unworried, throwing confusion Grillby’s way. His tone was softer when he next spoke, as though the jig was finally up; “You won’t be able to heal him past that. One’s all he’s got. It’s been-… He’s a bit of a weirdo that way.” There was something in his response that indicated that wasn’t all there was to it, though.

Stunned, Grillby remained silent. He stared at the smaller monster on the bed, at how peaceful he looked. Had he… really panicked that much? Had he known him all this time and not had the slightest clue of his friend’s limits?
“HE’S NAPPING NOW, ISN’T HE,” Papyrus asked primly, as though displeased at the notion. “ARE HIS ORBITS CLOSED, OR OPEN?”

“…Orbits?”

“HIS EYE SOCKETS.”

Grillby noted the other’s face with something of gentle recognition. “…Closed,” he finally reported, and heard the insurmountable sound of a sigh of relief from the other end of the line.

“OH GOOD! HE’S JUST BEING LAZY THEN. IF HIS ORBITS WERE OPEN BUT HOLLOW, THEN WE’D HAVE CAUSE FOR WORRYING!” The younger brother chuckled again, wholeheartedly. Grillby realised this had happened earlier and felt himself shrink down. “BEST TO LET HIM REST, I SUPPOSE. HE WON’T OBJECT TO ANY FOOD YOU BRING HIM WHEN HE WAKES UP!! THE SOONER, THE BETTER!”

Grillby smiled softly despite his lingering worry, rubbing at the side of his face. “I overreacted,” he murmured, his tone soft and apologetic.

“NYEH! BETTER TO ASK THAN NOT AT ALL. JUST, ER… don’t tell Sans I told you about his, err…”

This was beginning to sound familiar, the fire monster realised. He nodded shortly before flitting his gaze back to Sans’ face. “…Naturally.” After a pause, he exhaled a low sigh, “How do I wake him?”

“EASY!” Grillby grimaced and pulled the receiver away from his face, then a little closer with caution as Papyrus lowered his voice again. “PUT YOUR HAND ON HIS CERVICAL VERTEBRAE-”

Grillby paused, eyeing the skeleton on the bed. He was unsure, not parsed in the literal terms for skeletal anatomy, also that touching any unknown part of Sans, well… His flames kindled a little brighter at the thought.

“NOT THE LUMBAR DISCS - THOSE WILL MAKE HIM JUMP. THORACIC… WELL, HE TENDS TO NAP EVEN MORE!” There was an irritating bite to Papyrus’ tone and Grillby was admittedly getting bewildered with all the terms being thrown around.

“Cervical is… lower spine?” He had his hand poised for a long time, it seemed, and was beginning to feel self-conscious for it. Even if Sans was in a deep sleep, he wasn’t quite sure how he would be able to explain this if he chose that moment to wake up.

“NO! THE ONES UNDER HIS SKULL!!” Papyrus seemed irritated by the blunder and Grillby felt a rush of embarrassment creep up to his face with his tone.

Another long silence drew on and Grillby relaxed a little before Papyrus added in a hushed voice; “Thank you for taking care of him. He hasn’t really… been himself, lately. But! I really do believe he enjoys being with you!”

The fire monster couldn’t help but smile at that sentiment, since Sans’ visits to his establishment had been far more frequent than before. A warm feeling concentrated at the centre of his being and Grillby turned his head towards the other on the bed, still snoozing.

“……I enjoy his company as well.”
“YOU SOUND UTTERLY EXHAUSTED! SO! I DO BELIEVE OUR CONVERSATION HAS REACHED ITS CLOSURE,” Papyrus boomed suddenly, and Grillby released a soft laugh. “GOODBYE!”

Ever-enthusiastic, Papyrus hung up first and the fire monster gently settled the phone back on the hook, getting up to remove his boots and jacket and turn the chair around. He sat on it again, using the back of the chair as a rest to put his arms and head up onto for support. That way, he would be able to watch for any adverse signs of recovery. Regardless of what Papyrus had said, he was still worried.

Eventually, since he had expended a lot of energy, he would fall asleep like that.

Chapter End Notes

Heeeeeeey friends, lengthy chapter but I didn't quite have the heart to split it into two so... have an extra long one on me???? Can you tell I like writing the caretaker pieces? Yes? Not sorry. Hope you all enjoy this installment :DD I took inspiration for Sans' flavour text from a fan art I can't locate anymore of lil man sleeping that said "not dead, just tired and ugly".

thefloatingstone on tumblr has made some FABULOUS art for this chapter here! Click here for the panicky Grillby!!! It's AMAZING!!!!!
Unstable

Chapter Summary

Nightmare sequences. Sans is finally whole. The two of them finally are able to walk on their own to New Home. An uneasy encounter in the CORE leaves Sans with a lingering malaise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grillby found he didn’t sleep for very long. His dreams had coalesced into some form of horrifying amalgamate that he would wake to find his dear friend a pile of clothes and dust. That Papyrus’ gentle reassurance would turn into unfathomable grief and withdrawal from his usual peppy self. That every monster in Snowdin would look to him for answers as to why the shining beacon of their town was now gone forever.

But most importantly, that every night normally spent in Sans’ company would be a distant memory. He wouldn’t hear his voice, wouldn’t be able to chide his jokes, listen to his laughter… The one monster he looked forward to visiting him day in and day out would vanish. It would be an extreme loss of light in his life and leave an immeasurable black hole in its wake.

His dreams focused on that torment, shifting his perceptive reality into a twisted nightmare through different scenarios and different times. Yet, every end action was the same, and every action led to the dusting of his dear friend in wholly new and horrendous ways.

The very core of his being shuddered when he opened his eyes, and for a startling moment Grillby thought he had. It was before he realised that his glasses had merely fallen off his face and onto the floor in front of him - that Sans was still sleeping, although had turned at some point so he faced Grillby.

He stooped over to retrieve his glasses and wiped them on his sleeve before restoring them to their former glory, taking a moment to look at the skeleton sleeping somewhat fretfully on the bed. His brow arched slightly as he watched. Sans’ phalanges had curled under him and he was bunched inwards and on his side, as though doubled in pain. His entire frame was tensed and trembling, the soft noise of bones scraping against each other as his arms shifted in his troubled rest, moving to encircle himself.

Small, barely audible and unintelligible noises passed his teeth alongside shallow and quick breaths. His magic curled defensively and erratically, streaming from one of his sockets. The fire monster leaned forward to touch the other’s shoulder for comfort, knowing this was likely one of Sans’ ‘bad nights’. He hated to see him like this, so he attempted a light shake to snap him out of it.

It didn’t do much good; it only pressed the other into making a heart-wrenching noise, a soft sob that threaded Grillby’s soul with distress and made it resound with pity.

“Sans,” he called and got off the chair to kneel next to the bed as the skeleton whimpered, trapped
in his nightmare, “Wake up - you’re alright.” The fire monster attempted to shake the other again, only to be met with a pathetic cry. He noticed the way Sans clutched at his breastbone, a desperate action that clawed and shook him where he lay.

“P..papyrus, no-” the skeleton pleaded, helpless. His voice sounded strangled as he suddenly jerked, his fingers searching for something in front of him in anguish. “no… no, don’t… don’t go, don’t…”

Grillby attempted another shake to rouse his friend.

“Sans!”

“don’t leave - don’t… no--you can’t.” Half-formed bone constructs were starting to splinter into existence around him, forming a clumsy makeshift cage and Grillby started, eyeing each one warily.

“Sans, wake up!” the fire monster’s voice rose, flames crackling noisily at the other’s distress. He reached his hand to the other’s vertebrae at his neck, attempting what Papyrus had advised in hopes of waking Sans. His heat fluttered at the joints and Sans’ frame tensed in response. The conjured bones evaporated into the air as his sockets snapped open, eye lights small pinpricks highlighted in fear with one burning alive with a wisp of cyan.

Sans held his breath for a moment before covering his skull with his arms, exhaling harshly as his frame trembled and he let out a soft curse. For once, the fire monster didn’t admonish him for it, only rested his hand against the other’s nape and waited for him to calm down.

“Relax, friend. You're safe,” the bartender offered gently, watching as Sans attempted deep breaths, each one punctuated with a shudder.

For once, the silence between them was uneasy. As Sans eventually calmed down, Grillby speculated the other was worried over his brother’s wellbeing. He supposed it was only natural after all; the two were nigh inseparable in all the time he’d known them. He moved his fingers against the other’s cervical vertebrae in an attempt to soothe the smaller monster, until the other unbundled himself to look at him, albeit sheepishly.

“paps does that,” he mumbled, dropping his gaze and sounding rueful, “since we were small.”

“He’s safe, too,” Grillby consoled, removing his hand but letting it linger at the other’s shoulder, where he patted it softly. “One of your terrors, I assume?”

Sans rolled onto his back away from the gesture and inhaled deeply, idly rubbing at his sternum through his shirt. “…a recurring one, yeah,” he murmured in agreement after a moment of reflection.

Grillby didn’t verbally offer to listen; his demeanour did for him. Sans cast a sidelong glance to him, an awkward tightness behind his ribcage as his mind replayed the nightmare like a skipping disc.

“I don’t… really wanna talk about it.”

“…Perhaps another time, then,” the fire monster replied, retaking his seat and putting his arms up on the back of the chair. “How are you feeling?”

Sans looked inward, an obscured yet bemused expression on his face as though the result surprised him. Was he healed? He had to admit, the first bit of sleep had been rough, but he wasn’t expecting such results from just a nap. Yet there he was with his last vestige, which was more than he could ever hope for. Inquisitively, he looked at the other’s face.

Grillby looked rather worse for wear; his flames were low, auburn and languidly wisped more into a
wave of heat than actual flame. The innermost core of his visage was deeper orange and subdued, his normally bright eyes looked somewhat dimly cast, allowing the other to pinpoint the fine line between his sclera and face.

“how are you feelin’?” the skeleton shot back, propping himself up on his elbows and finding he actually had much more strength than before.

Grillby gave him a weary smirk. “Been better.”

“you look like shit, is what,” Sans muttered with a frown, unable to quell the feeling of guilt in him. He ignored the way the fire monster bristled defensively and narrowed his eyes at him. “did you heal me?” When Grillby didn’t answer, he exhaled a deep sigh through his nasal cavity and stared up at the ceiling. “how embarrassing.” Something inside of him fluttered with the notion however, and he knocked against his sternum in irritation. Stop that, his thoughts chided.

“…Was worried,” the other objected cautiously, resting his head on his arms with the barest of shrugs.

It was a nice feeling, coupled with astonishment. Sans turned his skull to face Grillby again, unable to place the look on the other’s visage. He idly wondered if the fire monster did that intentionally, to mask what he was thinking. He hadn’t felt that others had worried too much about him - only his brother, who fretted over his health to the point of aggravation. He wasn’t sure if the gratitude he felt was for the other’s concern or simply because it felt like… Grillby actually cared.

Sans couldn’t help but smile a little easier at that. It was endearing, somehow. His soul took that feeling as a sign to surge inside of him, filling his bones with a familiar warmth. Distractedly, Sans pushed his phalanges against the spot on his spine that Grillby had touched, bones clattering together as he rubbed it idly, before deciding to push himself upright.

It took him a moment, but he finally got his bearings enough to shuffle to the side of the bed, looking around for his leg. It had fallen off the side in his troubled sleep and Sans awkwardly reached for it, hoping he had replenished enough energy to at least affix it properly. If the ticking clock on the wall was correct, it had been a solid ten hours since they’d left Snowdin.

“we’re not late to get your order, are we?” the skeleton inquired, pulling himself back up to sit on the edge while inspecting the limb. “didn’t mean to delay you, grillbz.”

Grillby only hummed softly, exhaustion in his voice. Then offered with a soft chuckle, “De-leg?” He was surprised Sans hadn’t paid attention to his attempt at a joke, but he seemed distracted with the limb. “We aren’t, and you didn’t, friend. I would have stopped here regardless. Your shortcuts have actually put us here a little earlier than scheduled.”

The skeleton stopped fumbling with his leg for a moment and glanced at the other. It looked as though he was going to say something but then thought better of it, returning his focus to reattaching his limb. Grillby watched in relieved silence as the other’s joint latched and snapped back into place; Sans gave the knee a few testing bends before he shuffled off the side of the bed.

“why don’t you take the bed, big g. i’ll grab us some grub,” the skeleton offered, still looking distracted as he shifted his leg in place and the clicking noises of the joint settling filled the air. While his flux hadn’t entirely recovered, the sea tea from before and the short rest had done a little good, nightmare aside. The joint’s magic was holding and his weight was being supported. That’s all he could have asked for, really.

He intended to leave to get some burgers or whatever food the resort offered. He had turned from
Grillby before being stopped, the other’s hand grasping the sleeve of his jacket to prevent him from going further. Inquisitively, the skeleton turned back to the fire monster, his soul thumping hard.

The skeleton watched in dumb silence as the other took his phalanges with one hand and pulled him closer for a moment. Fire licked through his carpels as his other hand folded something onto them. The bare scrape of heated metal brushed against him and Sans felt a particular welling inside coupled with dawning embarrassment; he realised he hadn’t brought any money with him.

“My treat, Sans. A Starfait for me, if they have any left.”

Sans echoed a sound similar to a gulp, pulling his hand away from Grillby and clutching the glinting pieces. He stood in a moment of barely suppressed unease before murmuring, “oh. yeah. sure thing, boss.”

It was awkward leaving the room. His kneecap clicked faintly as he strolled down the hall, looking inwardly at his single vestige of life and the deep-rooted fear that hid there. He’d been healed - so did that mean Grillby had learned of it? He didn’t indicate that he did, yet… Sans was bothered by it. It was one of his attributes that he would have rather kept to himself and his brother - no one else.

The thought of his brother halted him in his tracks, not too far from the fountain. His shoes skidded on the clean linoleum tiles and his grin dropped. That nightmare had been intense, to say the least. Hell, he had conjured attacks in his sleep it had been so bad. But… it was a recurring terror that insisted on pursuing his sleeping consciousness. Of Papyrus, confronting the creature that came from the Ruins while Sans warned everyone in Snowdin to flee. And when he had come back, realising that Papyrus hadn’t escaped, he found what was left was…

In thought, the skeleton rubbed at his cervical vertebrae, faint clicking echoing in his skull and the light warmth that lingered after his friend’s touch. He had to call his brother, time of night be damned.

He went to the front desk to the handy receptionist there, flashing a grin at it. “mind if i make a short call?” he drawled as he leaned against the counter. Courteously, the hand monster pulled a phone from under the counter and set it beside its reservation book with a silent, accommodating gesture. “thanks.”

A little quicker than he intended to, the skeleton punched in his brother’s cell phone number and waited, idly tapping his foot. When the other line picked up, his soul did a relieved flip and he sighed with his brother’s groggy but loud greeting.

“heya, pap,” he mumbled into the phone and at the same time attempted to sound cheery, “guess where i am.”

His brother groaned. “ALLOW ME TO GUESS… IS IT A DIMENSION WHEREIN IT’S NOT AN UNACCEPTABLE HOUR TO BE MAKING PHONE CALLS?”

Sans shifted in place, glancing at the time on the ticking clock on the wall. 11:54pm. “oh. well… no, i, uh. just… um, wanted to see how you were,” he offered warily and cringed at the not-so-subtle way his voice betrayed his unease. However, it was good to hear his brother’s voice, especially after such a soul-shattering nightmare.

There was silence on the other end, then a soft sigh of realisation. “Your nightmares are becoming all too frequent lately, brother.” Papyrus’ tone softened but was not admonishing, luckily. Sans absently nodded in agreement, even if the other couldn’t see it.
“just needed to hear your voice. sorry i called so late, pap.”

“Sans, really… I’m worried - are you alright? Grillby called earlier!”

Sans’ sockets widened slightly and his grip on the receiver tightened. “he…?” He stopped, feeling a pang of regret. “oh. yeah, i’m good. don’t worry. just was tired, you know me… heh.”

There was a scrutinising pause and Sans shuffled in place restlessly, eye lights settling on the hand monster before turning away from it in embarrassment. He knew his brother was likely glaring at the phone, waiting for an explanation. “eh, we just got stuck. and i unstuck us. so, it’s good. i’m good. just gettin’ some grub, so i better get goin’. can’t dela-” He stopped dead and his reflexes smacked his brow with one hand, sending a loud clack through the receiver. He’d just registered the pun and he was shaking, holding back a sudden explosion of laughter.

“SANS? WHAT WAS THAT!” was Papyrus’ stricken demand.

“grillbz made a pun and i just now got it.”

An exasperated sigh echoed through the receiver alongside the prolonged fuzz of static, resulting in a doubling of Sans’ wheezing laughter.

“GOODNIGHT, BROTHER.”

“g’night, broski.” He let his chuckles die off as he returned the receiver to the hook and shrugged to the receptionist before turning away. Oddly enough, he couldn’t help but feel somewhat betrayed by his brother; although if not betrayal, then perhaps a needling paranoia. What had he said to Grillby, and what had his friend called for? On the other hand, if Grillby had worried about him that much…

He turned on his heel towards the food stand at the other side of the lobby, noticing it was still open. Well, that was good for them, at least. The clerk inside was a harrowed, world-weary feline that all but slumped over the polished yellow countertop. His cat-like eyes slid in a sidelong glance as a stream of smoke pushed out of his nose and he butted out his cigarette into a crushed soda can. It was as though the entire day had been long enough without the addition of Sans’ visit.

The cat seemed on the verge of both attempting and avoiding conversation, so barely made eye contact with the skeleton, took his order and went about preparing it. Soon after he’d paid, he took the burger and starfait back to his room with a small wave. Poor kid, so overworked. Sans knew exactly how he felt, holding down four jobs himself. Four jobs that he realised with a pang of guilt, Papyrus was covering for.

When he got back to the room, he hadn’t expected to see Grillby asleep. Sans’ grin dropped slightly as he returned the receiver to the hook and shrugged to the receptionist before turning away. Oddly enough, he couldn’t help but feel somewhat betrayed by his brother; although if not betrayal, then perhaps a needling paranoia. What had he said to Grillby, and what had his friend called for? On the other hand, if Grillby had worried about him that much…

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When he got back to the room, he hadn’t expected to see Grillby asleep. Sans’ grin dropped slightly as he approached, the noise of him entering not even rousing the other. In the time he’d been gone, his friend had unslung his suspenders and hung his arms over the back of the chair while he rested. Maybe he hadn’t intended to sleep that way? His glasses were set on the desk beside him, so it was possible the other decided to ignore his friend’s advice altogether.

The skeleton gently nudged his shoulder with a bony finger, watching the languid motion of flames from his head.

“grillbz,” Sans called quietly, then tossed his wrapped burger onto the mattress without much care. He tapped the other’s shoulder before settling his hand onto his back, as though the action would rouse him. All it did was make that nervous titillating feeling return. Luckily his friend was a lighter sleeper than Sans was and he turned his head to face him. “c’mon, man. eat somethin’ first, then take the bed. don’t want you to go out on me,” the skeleton offered quietly, withdrawing his hand as the
other sat up with a quiet sigh and held out the starfait.

When the other took it, Sans couldn’t help the thought that his friend could still look so refined in addition to fatigued. Grillby did as he was requested, though - after all, he was very cooperative. The skeleton very obviously kept his eye lights to himself as he took a seat beside the bed to eat his burger.

If he hadn’t known better, he could have sworn that he tasted something, but he knew that was just impossible. Skeletons did not have tongues, taste buds, stomachs or anything to taste food with; he’d never heard such a thing. Obviously, Sans knew the reason his brother’s reportedly inedible cooking was because of this. So… maybe it was just the texture of the glitter? He shrugged off the curiosity as he finished it, feeling much better for it as he slouched against the bed’s side and balled up the foil wrapping.

His eye lights searched out Grillby’s face, who looked as though he was about to fall asleep again. His grasp on his half-consumed starfait was tilted and his posture was slumped against the back of the chair once more. Exhaling through his nasal cavity, Sans pulled himself up off the floor and took the glass mug to set it aside.

“c’mon, sleepyhead. i’ll tuck ya in.”

Sans was sure he hadn’t seen the fire monster look so exhausted before. A handful of times he’d been tired after a week-long holiday rush that flooded into Snowdin for Gyftmas a couple years ago, but nothing quite so serious. So Sans helped him stand, led him to the bed where he could rest and promptly took the chair for himself. He turned it so it could easily be tilted against the wall and leaned back on it, skull nestled into the fur lining of his jacket. Sans decided to keep watch over his friend until sleep claimed him too.

They were far better off after some rest. As usual, Sans rose late, although earlier than most days as the bartender had woken him with some rather unpleasant news. The elevator leading to the capital was out of order and apart from main security features, electric magic to the generators was delayed. They would have to make the walk through the CORE.

Sans sighed, groggily following the fire monster through to the lobby and aimlessly paced around while the other purchased breakfast for the road. His thoughts that morning were all erratic and relayed his pensive nature since Grillby had informed him of the easier route’s closure.

Suffice to say, he did not like the CORE. The air always gave him the feeling that he was missing something important in his life, and the area was a little too sterile and mechanical for his liking. He preferred his sleepy little town of Snowdin, off in the sticks in the middle of the forest a long ways from the capital. It was always difficult to be reminded of his old job, and passing through the area when he could have avoided it altogether didn’t sit well with him.

Still, he promised himself. And in a way, he’d done the same with Grillby. Sans was beginning to promise more and more, he realised bitterly.

He was pulled from his pensive mood when the other stood in front of him, having not known how long the fire monster had been waiting for him to snap out of it. The skeleton was slipping and he knew it. He tugged his grin albeit apologetically and stuck his hands in his pockets as he regarded his friend. He looked a lot better from the previous night - flames all aglow in their regular splendor, eyes bright and full of energy. He found himself grinning more and winked at Grillby’s expectant pose.
“sorry, spaced out.”

“...We’ll have to walk there, I was saying. Are you fit to...? We can stay here awhile longer if you require more time to rest.”

Sans pulled a hand out of his jacket to scratch at his jawbone before giving a half shrug. “nah. we gotta get goin’ and i’m feelin’ ok.”

The other seemed to regard the skeleton for a moment, his posture betraying his uncertainty before strolling away from the crowded lobby and towards the alternate path. Having caught that, Sans hummed to himself and blindly followed Grillby through the heavy steel doors north of the resort.

As they walked across the bridge, the skeleton allowed himself to go through his thoughts, mentally preparing himself for the next part of their journey.

He could just barely detect the crisp smell of ozone, metal and fibreglass from beyond the corridor when Grillby stopped him. Inquiringly, the skeleton looked at him then down to the other’s hand against his sternum. He ignored the fluttering feeling that had jump-started in that moment and tilted his skull. The other’s heat was permeative but not at all unwelcome, he realised.

“Your shoes, Sans.” A leisurely smirk tugged Sans’ permanent grin and he shuffled them a little, the sound of scuffed wood underfoot echoing off the cavern walls.

“ok.” the other murmured automatically and stooped down to stuff the laces back behind the tongues of his shoes again. He glanced up with the other’s patient sigh and jumped slightly when Grillby knelt down on one knee to fix the laces himself, looping each one in a perfect, tight bow.

Sans wasn’t quite sure how to process that, so kept quiet, his soul trembling as the other helped him to rise. He had to get ahold of himself - he chastised himself internally at the simple little joy he felt with the other’s attention. Grillby didn’t comment on his pause, only led the way to the next area.

The mix of odours hit Sans’ senses and he grimaced, hunching his skull further into his hoodie while his eye lights darted around the walls and floors. The smooth surfaces of cobaltite and polished steel threw the incandescent light from his travelling companion around them. It intermingled and shrouded its normally azure glow from the many wires and fixtures in neat coils and tubes along the walls. It littered the floor, faint refractions of light illuminating the pathways like flecks of chipped opal.

It wasn’t just the atmosphere that unnerved Sans about this place, nor the missing part of his past either. It was, if he probed deep enough, a stifling and sickening feeling that tugged at him, of something that had gone so wrong there. He had been employed during its development, yet pieces were missing as to who was involved. That he and a handful of other scientists didn’t recollect what had transpired, but felt the same malaise. Yet there were no records of any accidents or disappearances. It was eventually dismissed as a magic hiccup - a setback that affected those close to the CORE’s development and architecture at the time.

It was unnerving. It wasn’t like the invasion of strange memories from past or future timelines; it was as though something was just gone, and everything related to it was missing too. This bothered Sans as he walked behind Grillby, attempting to focus on the other’s light and not the azure glow around them that brought up this encompassing dread. The intensity of this particular shade of blue made his bones quiver and his soul lurch uncomfortably where it hid.

“You’ve been rather quiet,” Grillby suddenly interrupted the silence after the next room. He turned his head to look at Sans over his shoulder.
The skeleton stopped, eye lights focusing on his friend’s face but not quite knowing what to say. He shrugged evasively, dragging his gaze away to the tubes of fuschia wires poking out from the walls and leading down the corridor. Far away, he could see a couple of maintenance workers fixing a dimly lit passage over a gaping black chasm.

“Anything on your mind, friend?” the other spoke kindly, fully turning to regard him.

Sans was avoiding looking directly at him now, something hidden in his features. After a moment, he finally spoke, the following words sounding hollow yet somehow lighthearted at the same time; “nah. used to work here for a bit, just… don’t like the vibe.”

Grillby released a quiet hum as Sans stepped forward to continue walking with him, side by side. Occasionally, he would steal glances at the skeleton as they walked down the metal grate floors, how Sans had shouldered into his jacket with his eye lights shrunken down to pinpoints. At distant noises, the bartender would notice the way the other would flinch and look away from the path and around erratically as though spooked.

“…Hold any superstitions of this place?”

Sans was caught off guard by the question and turned his skull to look at Grillby. “huh?”

The taller monster shrugged, the rolling of his shoulders discreet and relaxed; it was obvious he didn’t share the skeleton’s ominous discomfort. “I only ask because you’ve become quite sombre and agitated,” he added in hesitation. “Perhaps we could chat along the way.”

Sans chuckled half-heartedly, digging his hands further into his pockets and picking at the lint and typha matter crumbled in the corners in thought. “yea… i dunno `bout that, but the place definitely gives me the creeps.”

“…Anything happened that would result in such an ominous impression?”

They continued into the next corridor, the blast of iron white energy from the CORE’s mechanics far below flooding the area with a dense and blinding light; at least, blinding to any monster unaccustomed to such intensity.

“nothin’ really comes to mind. there wasn’t really any accidents or trip-ups durin’ development, but…” He knew that wasn't right. Sans stopped and idly scratched at his breastbone in thought, watching the flicker of viridian light settle in an arch of electricity over one of the paths to their immediate right. It was too high to jump and too low to stoop under. He sighed in defeat as the other approached the beam to inspect it. “don’t get too close, g.”

“…Have traversed this road before, yet this was never an issue...” the fire monster supplied candidly as he gestured to the blockade.

Sans watched him, his form highlighted by the fierce light source from below the platforms and casting him in a spectacular aura as his flames flickered with his movements. He shuffled in his shoes before deciding on his own that he’d deal with it. Magic coursed through his bones from his reserves, still feeling frayed and overused, but he was committed. Sans saw the stressed expression spoil the other’s face and gave the other a small wave with a grin. As his body phased through the fissure in reality, his voice echoed, “one sec, buddo,” before he disappeared from view.

“Sans, don’t-!” Grillby was already too late.
It was much easier to travel via shortcut by himself. Sans huffed a small breath of relief when he appeared a few feet away from the maintenance panel switch on the wall, several rooms and hallways away. He shrugged as he walked along, murmuring a quiet apology to his friend in his absence and hummed nonsensically as he approached the panel. He thought he’d heard a creak in the distance but put the distressed thought away, focused on the current task - and that was deactivating the security beam so they could get the hell out of this damned place.

He pulled his left hand from the safety of his pocket and he raised it to meet the panel; it registered with a dull mechanical whirring and a few computerised blips and static. Sans gestured in front of it, his old code still working even after all these years. He was a little rusty, but he got used to the small flicks and signals, yet something tugged at the back of his mind that he felt didn’t seem right.

At the end of the last gesture, something dark flashed at the back of his metacarpals and he quickly withdrew his hand as though burned. He snapped his skull around and whirled backwards as his magic sparked defensively while his breath hitched. It added an eerie cast and shadow to the surroundings as cyan and deep blue coiled restlessly around the room.

No one there.

“heh… heheh,” was the nervous and breathy laughter as his eye lights warily scanned the area for anything out of place, “very funny, grillbz.” But he didn’t see anyone - none of his friend’s flame, workers, nor sentries. No one. His bones clattered slightly as he gave the area another precursory glance as he rubbed his hand and attempted to steel his figurative nerves.

Sans tried again, his breath shuddering as he attempted the same sequence, this time ending with a punctuated flick of the wrist for good measure. The panel clicked along with a soft grating as the metal covering slid to the side to reveal the PIN pad in a sequence of four rows and three columns. The shiny buttons were scratched from years of daily use, enameled numbers all worn except for the upper middle, second left and second right row - 2, 6, & 4. The skeleton pointedly ignored those digits, focusing on his own: 017

The glow of the cerulean lights fluttered overhead shortly before he heard another thrum of mechanics and magic, then sighed in relief once more before readying himself to zip back to his friend. As he drew in from his reserves again, the flux hiccupped and hitched. Something caught inside of him and his magic’s flow abruptly seized, sending him down to one knee with a grunt.

Usually he was able to use his shortcuts in quick succession, however the area’s magic seemed off, almost unstable - and it affected him. Sans chalked it up to being exhausted, as he always did, but he just couldn’t shake the feeling of… someone else in the room.

Nervously, he looked around but still saw no one there. No shadows apart from his own, no magic apart from the CORE and his in the immediate area. Only a small register of Grillby’s and other maintenance crews further inside. It was an uneasy feeling and he lurched to a standing position again to pull the panel closed and lock it.

Maybe… maybe he would walk instead, he thought. It wasn’t far but he hurried nonetheless, keeping an anxious glance over his shoulder as his shoes fell heavily against the ore’s surface. He trudged down to the opposite side of where Grillby was waiting, trying to shake the feeling of being followed. At the other’s pointed glare, Sans shrunk down into his hoodie, offering him a carefree smile and wink despite how difficult it was to keep himself loose and easy.

“had to trip the panel.”

“I told you-” the other started, before letting the sentence hang when he saw the other was acting
somewhat skittishly. "Did something happen?"

“nah, everything’s cool. let’s just get goin’,” Sans shrugged and turned on his heel to lead the way down the last few corridors. Grillby noticed the tenseness in the skeleton’s shoulders and quickly followed, but did not press the issue - even if Sans threw troubled glances behind them occasionally. He assumed it had something to do with Sans’ old line of work and the uneasiness he felt at the CORE. Perhaps he would be told later, if the skeleton felt the need to explain. He certainly would not press the matter.

As they approached the last corridor leading towards the outskirts of New Home, Grillby could tell that Sans was a lot more relaxed than before. He had fallen back in stride beside the fire monster and his skull was gently nodding as he walked.

They had made good time; they exited the CORE, blue lights and cold steel transformed to beautifully warm and intricately carved spires, steeples and high rising houses, shops and restaurants. The air was different here, filled with the warm thrum of colour and monster life as they went about their daily routines. Smaller monsters in striped shirts ran and flew through the streets and around vendor stalls with laughter in the air above the din of chatter, as hundreds more wove through in simple day to day life.

In the centuries that followed their banishment to the Underground, the caverns were carved deeper to accommodate the ever-increasing monster population. The cave system sprawled throughout Mount Ebott, down as far as the barrier would reach. Monsterkind would have continued digging, had the barrier not held them back. This had been before the skeleton brothers had came to be, so all they had to go on were history texts and stories from a certain old turtle in Waterfall.

It had been years since Sans had visited New Home. The air was the same, but this time that dark terror tugged at his soul when his thoughts wandered. Of following that morally-destitute creature through the Underground to this place, and every face of every monster that he looked at now, he saw their counterpart in fear and horror and the grave of dust they left behind.

And he would be too weak to stop it.

He shivered and hunched into his hood, avoiding Grillby’s troubled look as they continued forward. He provided no inclination to his discomfort, but his soul gave a nervous flutter when the other rested his hand upon his back in gentle reassurance. It was as though Grillby knew what he was feeling; but that was impossible, wasn’t it?

He had to keep himself in check.

Chapter End Notes

I really liked writing this one! Again, a longer chapter but I don't think that they'll continue to be this long in the future. Finally Sans can freakin' walk, lol. I couldn't help but make a spoopy moment. I wonder what it is?

This story is basically writing itself at the moment. I have quite a few chapters finished, so I'm thinking a weekly posting schedule. (~‿~) Enjoy! ♥
Grillby is starting to get touchy-feely, and Sans is still tormented about his feelings, but at least he's joking again. Which means, little by little, he's coming to terms with things. Things are getting better, that is, until Sans makes an ass out of himself on more than one occasion.

Weaving throughout the crowds into the centre downtown core of New Home had been a challenge, even with Grillby's keen sense of direction. Sans had to admit, he'd never once thought he would return to it, and the capital had changed so much since he and his brother had lived there. There were old familiar places, buildings that were once cafes or shops he used to frequent that took on new names and appearances.

It made him homesick in a way.

Still, there wasn't much time to be wandering aimlessly around the streets in the early afternoon. Grillby led him through the crowds straight to the warehousing district. Admittedly, Sans was curious about the contents of the item box and watched the other retrieve his stacks of crates one by one from the dimensional tool. He never had to think about it after development, and after testing stages were complete and it was ready for the public's use, he just simply forgot about it. Quantum engineering just had too many projects on the go to keep track of after completion, after all. It was one of those small things in his old line of work that actually helped monsters' quality of living, opposed to the rest of it...

He was snapped out of his reverie when Grillby asked for help to carry the crates into the warehouse next to them. He grinned despite himself; if Papyrus learned of his new helpful nature, he'd never hear the end of it. And working on his day off? Well, he'd question as to what happened to his real brother then.

The interior was a noisy hub of various monsters of all kinds and their respective patrons. Grillby's distributor was the stout Diamond Head wearing a worn pair of green overalls and holding a clipboard with a mess of papers attached to it. Its face blinked and shifted different hues of blue and grey as opposed to using a voice - not anything unusual, as most monsters did not have any conventional mouths with which to communicate, the trio being amongst them.

Regardless, Sans didn't pay much attention to the conversation, just lazily leaned against a stack of crates with his sockets closed and his hands buried in his pockets until Grillby approached him again. The two of them started on the trade, the haul of exchanged stock much heavier than their counterparts as they hoisted the load outside to the dimensional box. Some boxes were so heavy the three of them had to carry them out, and even then it was a challenge. Sans wasn't looking forward to unloading them on the other end.

"I must remember to compensate you for aiding me with all this," the fire monster was saying as Sans watched the last box slip out of view into the box's domain. He made an interrogative grunt as he turned, realising the fire monster had been talking to him.

"wha? no way. m'not doin' this for any kind of reward-" Sans was shaking his hands and grinning
despite himself, “sides, i like hangin’ with ya.” He watched the other chuckle heartily as he dusted wood chips and dirt from his jacket and straightened his clothes.

“I’m rather fond of your company as well, my friend,” the other replied jovially, the flames of his visage arranged into something of a smile in turn. Sans had to hold back the thought - to dismiss it altogether before he read too much into it, but his grin broadened at the other’s tone regardless.

“i’d appreciate it, y’know… if we didn’t tell paps what happened,” he said after a moment’s pause as he shuffled his shoes against the gravel and shale road. “he knows i have my shortcuts, but i don’t think he knows what’s involved. i’d like to keep things pretty much… simple, y’know? he’s already got enough on his plate with the whole undyne and royal guard thing.”

Sans watched as the other leaned against the closed dimensional box beside him and regarded him studiously. He shrunk down with the look, giving another half-hearted shrug in preparation of the untold advice. He’d heard it many times before; that his brother cared about him and anything he felt should be shared with him. They were family, but somehow Sans felt that it was more of a closed boundary - especially considering what had led to what was definitely not regular skeletal powers…

“You should not hide from him, especially the things that affect your health,” his friend chided, although his tone was quiet and gentle.

Sans scanned Grillby’s face, wishing the thread of guilt wasn’t so easily woven into his soul like that. He laughed, the sound forced and aching in his ribs. “nah, i’m fine. always have been. never better.”

“…You continue to say that as though you’re attempting to convince yourself, not me,” the other pointedly stated as his flames flickered in mild agitation. “If you think this is the best you can be, your brother and I will continue to worry.”

The skeleton was put on the spot, absently scratching his jawbone with a digit as he looked around them to avoid the look he was being given. His soul shuddered in his chest at those two simple words ‘and I’, and the compassion in which his friend spoke. He knew his desperate little heart was grasping at straws, for anything to cling to in a hope for affection. He stayed quiet for a time, unsure of what to say, before he muttered something under his breath, feeling flushed behind the ribs.

The other hummed softly, the noise a questioned punctuation to Sans’ thoughts and he embarrassedly rose his voice, “didn’t know you cared so much.” His laugh had a bitter quaver and he hated the sound of it immediately.

Grillby sighed, the sound kindly yet admonishing at the same time. “…Would make a poor excuse for both a monster and companion if I did not,” was his careful reply before exhaling deeply, smoke pluming from his visage in a steady stream. It was as though the action soothed him and he crossed his arms over his chest. “I suppose that is why I… got angry.”

The skeleton blinked and looked back to his friend, suddenly not liking where the conversation was headed. “what, you?”

It was the fire monster’s turn to shuffle uneasily, the movement so distinct yet uncommon, Sans couldn’t help but stare. “I… thought you had Fallen.”

The lights of Sans’ sockets shrunk noticeably and his frame tensed, shoes scuffing the road as he adjusted his posture immediately into something that didn’t betray his shock. The rise of shame and alarm swirled inside of his soul tumultuously. He forced his bones to still from their subtle clattering, obsessed with how he appeared that he didn’t register that the other moved until he was quite literally inches away from him. His eye sockets had hollowed and the bones of his arms were rigid with
Sans stole a glance through dark orbits, grin artificially tugged high as he attempted to keep himself reserved. So that was it, then. Grillby knew about his vastly underwhelming health. He would tiptoe around him from now on, pity him, treat him like glass like others did when he used to live at the capital. He wouldn’t be invited anywhere, would be treated as an invalid, like a sick entity so close to Falling Down that he’d eventually be forgotten about.

The last thought punctuated his fears like a knife in the chest. He gripped each of his sleeves, still grinning wide and his breath slightly hitched as he finally spoke, lower than before, “th.. that’s dumb. i’m perfectly ok. absolutely. just tired, heh… just…” Could he not keep himself together, even for one day? He couldn’t help but grimace, but kept rooted in place.

Grillby had stayed quiet through the skeleton’s mental anguish, concern upon his visage as clear as crystal. For once, he had said the wrong thing and he wasn’t sure how to fix it. Sans was so tense, his dismay was that the skeleton would flee his company rather than talk about it.

So even though he had his reservations, the bartender gave him a way out; “You’ve been more tired lately than I’ve ever seen you before. You’ve been working hard,” his voice was an emphatic and resounding lull of fire, “I’m sure your bad nights haven’t made things any easier, either. Why don’t we stay here for the day?”

“can’t stay. gotta go.” Sans’ voice was stilted and quick, his mind running a mile a minute. “your stock-”

Grillby’s stature straightened and he set both of his hands on Sans’ shoulders, pouring every essence of his being into a soothing presence. “-can wait. Please, I insist.” He noticed the way Sans flinched and he looked down at his skull, his blaze highlighting smooth bone and small hairline cracks. After a moment, the skeleton shifted his weight onto one side and sighed, shoulders slumping in resignation before he gave a short nod of submission.

It was foolish for him to rely on Grillby for comfort the way he did, and Sans knew he was setting himself up for only disappointment. His soul was stressed with such restraint and shame that he had nearly pushed the other away. Instead, he stayed silent as the other kept his hands upon his shoulders, spreading that smooth, comforting warmth through his clothes and settling straight into his bones’ marrow.

“if you’re insistin’… then ok.”

“I am.”

Sans’ eye lights flickered back into their sockets but he didn’t look up, his soul heavy with a weight he’d never quite experienced before. He stared at the neatly tied black bow tie, avoiding his friend’s face. “i owe ya one, for luggin’ my sleepin’ corpse from waterfall to kingdom come,” he offered as a joke to dispel the tension, but there was truth to it too. The other’s look was withering but gentle at Sans’ self-deprecating tone and the skeleton winced. “dunno if i’ve said it yet, but… thanks.”

Grillby chuckled softly as his hands left Sans’ shoulders and he turned towards the street. The skeleton found that he’d grown accustomed to the other’s warmth, having it radiate through him all the way from Waterfall to the hotel in Hotland. It elicited conflicted emotions and pulled him tautly into two separate directions. So when the other’s arm encircled his shoulders to guide him along, Sans froze, his soul’s pulse thundering through his skull and taunting him. As the other walked, he
found himself automatically moving, so close to the other’s body it was nightmarish to keep from trembling.

Maybe he could indulge himself. Just a little. Just enough so every bedamned touch wasn’t such a shock to his starved system. Distracted, he kept his hands buried in his pockets as Grillby led him around, their conversation quiet and eventually becoming more relaxed as time passed. They wandered down the streets and through side alleys where various vendor stalls were sprawled out with trinkets, treats and souvenirs for sale or trade. The bustle of city life had its appeal, but it wasn’t the same as home, ironically enough.

As they made their way closer to where the skeleton brothers used to live, Sans would point out a few areas of interest. Gardens and stone gullies full of yellow flowers in bloom, statues they’d played on in their striped shirt days, little hiding spots that still had a few scratches from their fun there, long ago. As he showed Grillby around, Sans became more relaxed and his smile was easier and more tender as such an ordinary place brought up pleasant memories of his childhood with Papyrus.

“-and this is the infamous stump that defeated the great papyrus,” he was saying, gesturing languidly with both hands to a half-dead tree in the middle of a courtyard and turning on his heel. “broke his radius on that one.”

Grillby had been watching with glittering eyes as the other strolled around, the skeleton’s body language revealing the simple reverie of the place as he chuckled amongst his memories. The area they were in was sparse of other monsters so it was just the two of them, with Sans’ carefree drawl echoing against the edifices that were carved into shapes of ancient fallen war heroes.

“But not you, right?”

Sans stopped and rubbed at his jaw in thought, eye lights searching out the ceiling high above where small shafts of light broke through the natural crevices in the mountain’s heights. Maybe he had. It was difficult to remember, at times. “i think… i probably did. don’t really remember, tibia honest, but i’m always crackin’ up in a few places,” he chuckled, shrugging his shoulders with a grin.

Grillby’s visage twisted in a wry smile as he walked closer to Sans. “Don’t think I didn’t notice that,” he retorted, his tone teasing.

“notice what?”

“You’re joking again,” the other gestured towards him and Sans dumbly stared before his expression softened somewhat bashfully. “No… it’s good. I rather enjoy your puns.”

Sans hunched into his hood again, unable to conceal the reaction as well as he would have liked. “…n’me yours.” At the other’s inquisitive stance, Sans straightened his spine and patte his hands in his hoodie’s pockets nervously, idly scratching the back of his leg with a shoe. “de-leg? really, grillbz?” His tone was humoured regardless and he laughed at the other’s pained expression.

“I thought it was… humerus?”

Sans burst into cackles in response.

“i got one more!”

“Sans, please, it’s been two hours-”
Both of them had been wandering around the downtown core as Sans assaulted the other with a series of bad jokes he insisted he’d found in a book that had fallen in Waterfall. It impressed Grillby that Sans had committed said book to memory, but then there was rarely anything he wasn’t impressed by the skeleton. He rolled his eyes in response to the other’s skip in front, but much preferred this to the tense, practically morose state he had been in hours before.

“What’s it called when a skeleton has trouble with his house?” Sans’ grin stretched as he waited for Grillby’s answer, and fire monster couldn’t help but cover his face with a hand and sigh theatrically. The other’s smile was infectious, after all. “A grave problem.”

“That’s morbid,” the other chuckled despite himself and Sans joined in on the mirth. “Where did you say you acquired this piece of literature?”

“The trash,” the other shrugged as though it was a perfectly acceptable answer, and was still recovering from his laughing fit. “Can’t imagine why; it’s all grade-a material! Covered end to end with pictures of little pumpkins with faces and all about skeletons and ghosts and stuff. Pretty spiffy.”

“It appears to be a peculiar topic. Did a skeleton write it?”

“I’m pretty sure it’s just me an’ paps, unless the book is super-ancient,” Sans remarked thoughtfully, “At least, I don’t recall any more skeles..?”

“Perhaps it’s something to ask Old Gerson about, the next time you find yourself that way,” the fire monster suggested, then hummed quietly. “I think I have one.”

“Oh?” the skeleton braced himself, eyeing the other’s visage with a grin ready.

“A skeleton walks into a bar and asks the bartender for a shot and a mop.”

“I don’t think I’ve heard this one.”

Grillby’s smirk widened slightly at the other’s anticipation. “He was a responsible drinker, after all.”

The peals of laughter from the shorter monster echoed through the street, causing a few in the crowd to look after them as they passed. Grillby chuckled at the reaction until Sans finally recovered from his boisterous and wheezing laugh.

“Jokes about skeletons and bars? You’re an ace, a guy after my own heart!” the words passed the other’s teeth before he even had time to think about it and his soul did another nervous flip with his friend’s gentle hum of agreement. It would probably be the closest Sans would ever get to a confession, he realised - so he played it off as a joke. After all, it really was. No one else would know and the sad gag was a conspiracy between his heart and soul.

Grillby noticed his friend’s subtle shift in attitude and although he suspected something, it was a vague estimate as to what the other’s feelings were. Sans was obviously wrestling with many things in his mind, and he took it as his duty to keep him from dwelling too much on them. In consideration, he distracted the other, gesturing to a line of shop fronts down another street.

Sans took the distraction readily, his soul quivering behind his ribs as he looked up to the old sign above - cobwebs were scattered in the windows, although much more than simple desertion would merit. It was as though the intricate signs were woven and spun into the shop’s name, which had deteriorated with age. He recognised the violet sign and sighed quietly, jabbing a thumb at the door.

“Muffet’s used to be here. Was my old stompin’ ground,” he offered quietly, “Kinda miss the spider
cider.” He laughed, the sound hollow as he gestured with both hands to describe what he was thinking of, “for awhile she had these… ringy-orange things - sprinkled with i guess sweets and some other sticky stuff in a batter over it. ringed pumpkins, i think? if y’think pap doesn’t like grease, you shoulda seen him with the sticky stuff.” The skeleton gave an honest laugh then. “i guess she doesn’t make ‘em anymore, though. wonder where she went?”

Grillby regarded the door, leaning close to make out the makeshift note spun on the other side of the glass pane. “‘Family emergency’, it says,” he read aloud, “……Do you think it’s serious?”

“Well, it’s vague. and her family’s kinda huge,” Sans shrugged, “she’d put on there if it was bad. she was the eccentric type.”

It was getting later in the afternoon and the small shafts of light overhead of the city were dimming, a signal to the fall of evening over the large capital. The streets were beginning to clear as they decided to turn back, lanterns and lights flickering on as the nightlife started.

Grillby had insisted upon getting a bite to eat from a street vendor on their way, before ultimately deciding it would be best to spend the night at the capital. When Sans gave him an incredulous look from the middle of enjoying his stuffed dinner roll (which he could have sworn he could taste something of…) the fire monster offered a nonchalant shrug, citing that it was “too late to be wandering the CORE and Hotland, anyway.”

The skeleton was unsure of his friend’s pocketbook being spent so frivolously during their trip, but at least had the sense to talk Grillby into getting only one room. “i can fall asleep anywhere. i don’t need no fancy bed,” he said as the other got the key to their room and started down the hall, where he followed side by side. “sides, i’m easy. if anything, you wouldn’t mind me in bed.”

Sans realised what he’d said the moment the words were spoken and he caught the surprised look on his friend’s visage before the flames obscured it, paler yellow as though flustered. He groaned inwardly and covered his face. “word boner - er, b-blunder,” he quickly excused, trying to laugh it off.

Fuck.

Grillby, polite as he was, gave in to an embarrassed chuckle, his own hands running through the flames on his head in a captivating motion. “Your remarks lately have been rather… incendiary,” his voice was a quiet murmur as they walked to their room. Sans shrank into his hoodie, feeling like in that very moment, he couldn’t feel any more bothered than he did in his entire existence.

“f-fire jokes, grillbz? really?” He tried laughing again as the other unlocked the door and held it open for him. He hesitated for a moment before turning into the room, feeling hot under the collar. “Thought you’d appreciate the effort.”

“I.. i do, and… y’know - i should call papyrus,” Sans said dumbly, trying to save face and scanning the room for the complementary phone. Once his eye lights found the old rotary phone on the wall, he all but darted to it while the bartender removed his shoes and jacket and moved to sit at the one of the plush and comfortable chairs by the inlay hearth. “tell him i’ll be longer than i thought-”

His bony digits trembled slightly as he dialled in his brother’s phone number, looking directly at the receiver hook and absolutely not at his friend. It took a couple rings longer than usual before Papyrus
answered, his soul thrumming hard behind his ribs, trying to recover from his horrifying slip-up. “heyyyy!!” he all but yelled into the phone and his voice sounded raw and nervous, “baby bro! we made it to new home and i’m gonna be later than i thought… wha? no, i’m great! awesome. perfect. fantastic. cool as a cucumber. pick a synonym. so…”

Grillby watched quietly and listened to the call, how Sans was so obviously agitated during his conversation with his brother. Papyrus’ voice from the receiver was crystal clear at times, others not so much. He idly wondered if this was the longest the two had been separate, and if Sans’ discomfort through their travels had anything to do with it - or at least, contributed to his unease.

Sans had said some intriguing things, whether he had intended to or not. Though he didn't address it, this didn't mean Grillby wasn’t developing an insight as to the other’s thoughts. The nervous behaviour, the conversational slips, the awkward and almost bashful demeanour - the fire monster had thought as much. He couldn’t help but smile inwardly at the fragile tenderness that had been developing during their time together. But, in case he misread the other, he didn’t want to assume. It would hurt him far too much, would wound the other’s pride. It was something the skeleton was taking care to hide. It wasn’t often that he misread monsters, but he didn’t want to risk it. Not with Sans.

His flames fluttered at the sensation in his soul and he looked away as Sans tied off his chat with his brother. He knew how to make this a little easier, Grillby realised. When the other was asleep, he would make a call of his own.
"What's a star?"

Self-care and awkward flirts. Everyone has a good laugh.

It had been awhile since Sans had slept without interruption - that blissful state of unawareness that lulled him into a sense of security and peace. It was a deep sleep too, one that lingered and even seemed lighter than his usual dreams. Not even Papyrus was able to push away the darkness as it had been banished that night.

So when Sans woke on his own volition the following morning, he felt that the war within himself was finally at rest. He had more than one vestige to cling to, the buffer full and stronger than it had ever been by a sizeable fourteen points. It was almost as though he was a kid again and he rolled over, then blinked in confusion at the give in the carpet.

No…

No, not carpet.

**Bed.**

His sockets snapped open as he identified the unmistakable feel of heavy cloth over his frame and the sink of the mattress under him. His mind fluctuated between groggy confusion and embarrassment. No, he *had* been sleeping on the floor… of that he was certain. So did that mean Grillby..?

His eye lights scanned the bed as he pushed himself up. Grillby wasn’t in the bed with him and he exhaled loudly in relief. In fact, his friend wasn’t even in the room. Puzzled as he sat up, he discovered his hoodie was missing and a precursory glance around the room told him that it was gone, too.

But, he had worn his jacket when he fell asleep. He rarely took it off; felt naked without it. Sans hunched in thought, idly scratching at his lower spine through his plain white shirt as he attempted to figure it out and replay the previous night in his mind.

Apart from his idiotic slip-up, the evening had been fairly pleasant and without much drama. Grillby was reserved after his pale flames died down - whatever *that* meant. They played a few games with a pen and paper to pass the time before Sans had ultimately gotten tired enough to doze on the spot.

Oh, so he *had* removed his jacket voluntarily. Sans tapped his jaw bone, the soft clacking noise a soothing sound that punctuated his pensive mood. So where had it gone? Where had Grillby gone?

What was the reason he took it off again?

He grated his knuckles against his sternum, agitation rising in him as he had no *idea* what possessed
the bartender to leave with his hoodie. Papyrus had given it to him in their youth, assuring him he’d
grow into it - Sans never did, but that’s what he loved about it. It was big and cosy and had just the
right amount of fur in the hood, the pockets were deep and comforting. He’d had it for ages, damn it,
and he was rather fond of it.

Flustered, he rubbed his bony fingers over his face and groaned softly after looking at the desk and
night table for a note.

Nothing.

He groaned again, louder. How long had his friend been gone? The skeleton glanced at the old
fashioned clock on the wall next to the rotary phone and rose a figurative brow at the time. 9:23AM.

*AM? He didn’t wake up in the morning by himself.*

This was turning out to be a weird day, he thoughtfully noted, and he swung his legs over the side of
the bed. It took him a moment to register why it looked so off - probably because he’d been wearing
the sneakers Papyrus had given him for the past three days but had removed them the night before.
He wriggled his hallux before curling the phalanges of that same foot, then pulled up his leg to
inspect the talus.

There was a noticeable mark where it had healed, lighter than the rest of the bone, but secure and
welded shut. His fingertips grazed over the slightly raised surface and he gave the foot a careful
rotation. It didn’t even hurt anymore, he realised, grin tugging into something of a grateful smile.

He got out of bed and went through a few drawers for some utensils before finding a fork and
making his way to the bathroom where Sans hoped to find a mirror. There was one lit with a row of
white bulbs, unfortunately a bit higher than he was used to and he pulled a stool from the wall to get
a better look at himself.

Huh, not bad. Sans surveyed his reflection in the mirror, noting the stress marks below his sockets
had diminished somewhat, but he was definitely more scruffed up than when he’d left Snowdin. He
grimaced as he leaned in close to the mirror, hollowing an eye and looking to the reflection to peer
into his skull with the aid of the vanity lights.

He shuddered, finding small bits of garbage and vegetation in the cavity and huffed an aggravated
sigh in preparation. If he’d been home, Papyrus would have given him a stern lecture about taking
better care of himself while helping him with such a task.

Instead, he removed most of the debris himself, the grating of the utensil in his right socket jarring his
senses as he dislodged some dried grass. It would have definitely been easier if his mandible wasn’t
fused, Sans groused internally yet in full concentration. He left the dislodged pieces fall into the sink
after appraising them with a glare.

He was so wrapped up in the chore that Sans didn’t hear the door close in the other room. Soon, he
was caught with a fork in his socket and feeling like kind of an idiot. He gave the bemused bartender
an rationalised gesture to his skull before leaning forward again determinedly to pick at a stubborn
piece of… what *was* that? More typha pods?

He made a disgruntled noise when he realised a tangle further wrapped around said pod was more
fishing line. He glanced at Grillby through the mirror, leaning against the frame of the door in
stunned silence.

“guess there was a reason i felt like garbage yesterday, heh,” the skeleton joked, dropping the fork
into the sink with a clatter as he dug around his orbit for the end of the line and tugged mercilessly. He saw Grillby’s flames shudder in a cringe. “don’t worry, buddy, it doesn’t hurt.”

“…Was not my concern,” the fire monster countered hotly, his stature stiffened as he pushed himself off the doorjamb. He made a sound of disgust when Sans finally freed the line with a couple of crumbling typha pods in a spray of dried clay and leaves all over the bathroom sink and counter.

“y’know, your heat dried it up real good,” Sans commented as he continued his work, glaring into his skull cavity again and tilting his head from side to side to make sure he’d gotten at least most of it out. The last thing he needed was anything sprouting in there. “made it easier to get out.”

Grillby had turned his face away from the gruesome sight and idly adjusted his glasses, “…Glad to be of assistance.”

Sans sent him a mirrored grin as he collected the debris from the sink and halfheartedly chucked it into the wastebasket before running the tap so he could scrub some of the more dirtier marks off his jawbone and around his brow.

“You didn’t wake me?”

The fire monster shifted in place as he watched the other wash up with something of curiosity in his blaze. “You looked peaceful. Besides, I wanted to do you a favour.”

Sans stopped and turned his skull to fully regard the other, feeling that inching warmth swirling beneath his ribs. Water droplets ran down his jaw and he awkwardly wiped them away with his wrist, looking at his friend inquisitively.

Grillby was giving him a secretive smirk and he nodded out of the room as he turned. “After you’ve finished, come see.”

Well, who the hell could argue with that?

The skeleton’s thoughts raced as he scrubbed a little harder at some more stubborn marks on his skull and digits before turning off the water and haphazardly towelling himself off to meet his friend in the other room.

Not a lot had changed, in fact, he had to stand still in order to figure out what Grillby had done. His eye lights automatically searched out the familiar cornflower blue of his jacket and he couldn’t help but grin in relief at the way the bartender gestured towards the bed where it lay neatly folded over the covers.

“What’s this…” the skeleton murmured, anticipation and disbelief in his tone as he cautiously stepped towards the bed. No, it… was his hoodie. Same, yet different, and clean. Old ketchup and grease stains had been plucked from the fabric despite Papyrus’ best efforts to get them out. Sans held it up by the top of the shoulders, taking in each detail. The lining had been brushed out, the thick mats at the nape gone and the fur puffed up so much it looked newer than when he’d first gotten it. His grin tugged a little more as he pulled it over his head immediately, exhaling in appreciation. Even some of the more prominent rips at the seams had been repaired, too.

It was still warm from the other’s handling and his bones tingled at the touch. He hunched into it and let himself fall back onto the bed with a satisfied sigh, his digits finding the pockets and how soft and puffy they were, no trace of dried vegetation or lint to be felt. It was like being wrapped in sunlight - or at least, how he would imagine such a sensation would feel like.

“papyrus is gonna be furious,” he chuckled after a few blissful minutes.
“You may inform him that nobody out-cleans a city-dwelling Woshua,” Grillby replied with a smile and busied himself with the breakfast he’d brought. “Are you content?”

Grinning, Sans sat up slowly to regard the other. Now he adored his jacket, a collaborative gift from the two monsters he cared about most. The skeleton nodded truthfully, his heart quite at peace for once. He liked the smile the other offered him, how it warmed his soul even from the distance between them.

Grillby looked content himself, voicing his appreciation audibly; “Then I am glad.” Sans’ soul flooded with warmth at his tone and buried his skull into the fuzzy lining of his hood, grin unbearably awkward and flustered at such a kind response.

The morning was leisurely; they ate breakfast and checked out of the hotel before setting off again, this time back to Snowdin. Sans’ elated mood didn’t show on his face, but he felt lighter, better than he had in weeks. If anything, he would have guessed it had something to do with both the other’s kindness and his generous buffer.

The CORE’s system was back online, overhead lights operational and their path unbarred. The strange sensation the skeleton had felt throughout had disappeared into a small worry, but he still idly wondered if the CORE had become unstable during their previous way through. It had been a concern, but he tried not to think about it.

Their conversations were easier through Hotland, insofar as Sans’ previous contributions had been absent. He huffed through the area behind Grillby, who took smaller steps, basking in the heat like it was a walk in the park. It never really registered with the skeleton how huge Hotland was, when he hadn’t ever needed to traverse the entirety of the quarry himself. He always preferred his shortcuts, but he’d be damned if he took one now with how his friend reacted when he had zipped away before. He still felt guilty for making the other worry, after all.

Grillby had started walking even slower as they approached the caverns leading into Waterfall. Assuredly, the skeleton walked ahead of him by a couple steps before checking his shoelaces. It would be pretty horrible to be carried all the way to Snowdin this time and would make for a peculiar scene to explain to his brother.

“How’re you holdin’ up?” Sans inquired after they had travelled through to the large pools blocking their way. Someone had erected a makeshift bridge of floating boxes and vines to cross and left the mess behind for someone else. The skeleton was testing it carefully before he turned to the fire monster, who gave him an uneasy grimace.

“…Bringing up panic, I’ll admit,” was the careful reply, his stature all but relaxed and Sans shrugged in a way that told the other everything would be alright. “You?”

“weirdly gung-ho,” the skeleton mused thoughtfully as he scratched the side of his skull. “gonna throw paps for a loop, for sure.” He started across the bridge, finding it more secure than it looked. He hopped on it a couple times for good measure before turning to the other and gave the all-clear with a thumbs up.

The walk was long, if only because Grillby’s pace had slowed considerably. Sans knew it was because of his fear of falling into the waters; he sympathised for him, offering a helping hand or arm when the ground underfoot was unsure. He gave the other assuring grins, made jokes with him and overall, tried to make the experience at least a little better than the previous one.
When they’d finally reached the ‘star’-gazing cavern, they stopped to sit and rest against the walls, legs drawn up and arms hanging over their knees in tandem. They both were taking a moment to look up at the glittering crystals high above, since for once, no one else was around and they could do so in silence.

Sans, having lived underground his entire life, had never seen any constellations apart from charts and old magazines. He was one of the many that looked up to see if there were any he could pick out, for the crystals to line up in such a way he could convince himself they were on the surface. There had even been a deep-seated obsession for awhile where he couldn’t get enough of anything remotely ‘spacey’, as Papyrus so appropriately called it.

After a silent reprieve, he finally spoke; “hey, boss?” Grillby looked over from looking ceiling-ward to the skeleton’s face. “what do you think stars are made of, anyway, if not wishes?”

Out of the corner of his vision, Sans saw the paling of flames again and turned his head in time to witness Grillby’s pause, his jagged mouth then parting in a burst of laughter. Sans grinned, although he wasn’t sure if he’d made a joke or not to elicit such a reaction. He watched as the other removed his glasses with one hand and covered his eyes, shoulders shaking with mirth that would not pass. Amused at the outburst, Sans joined in, although didn’t get it when the other gestured vaguely and pointed to his face.

“you’re gonna have to be more specific than that, friend,” he teased as he leaned forward to get a better look at his friend’s visage. “don’t think i like ya cracklin’ up at my super-serious question like that…” Sans found that he did though; he’d never seen the other so enraptured in laughter like this before and his soul was dancing merrily in response.

Grillby’s laughter subsided into a hearty chuckle as he turned his head in his hands, resting the brunt of his chin in his palm before replacing his glasses. “You’re not serious…” he rebuked kindly, still fighting small interruptions of laughter.

“i was being dead serious,” Sans objected, watching every movement the other made. “now i’m just confused.” Regardless, he shifted so he could rest his skull into his hands, supported by his knees.

“Oh. I suppose I had thought you’d already been informed at some point.”

Sans gave the other a questioning look. “…well, they exist, don’t they?”

This only redoubled the other’s laughter, a sound so clear and resonant that it echoed down the corridor and was picked up by the bright blue flowers at the end of the room. It took Grillby a few moments to recover, removing his glasses again to rub at an eye, a grin plastered on his face as the skeleton openly stared at him with a bemused, half-cocked smirk in turn. He had never seen Grillby cut loose and really crack up about something. It was certainly a refreshing outlook to the calm demeanour he’d grown accustomed to; Sans found he appreciated the levity to his question if this was the result.

“I’m not making fun, honestly-” Grillby finally said apologetically, replacing his glasses once more and giving in to an amused hum, “It’s just… charming.”

The skeleton huffed softly, turning his skull away and flipping up his hood so it obscured his face. “heh. jeez.” His soul was doing that peculiar hammering behind his ribs again and he felt warmer than before. He hoped it was just embarrassment or the other’s residual heat, not an addition to the punchline for his heart’s ever-increasing prank.

Grillby settled his face on his palm again, watching the skeleton shrink into his jacket, all flustered.
He smiled and leaned a little closer, the movement catching Sans so off-guard that the skeleton threatened to topple over in surprise.

“Can you keep a secret?” was the gentle whisper of fire.

Sans flipped down his hood quickly, taking mental purchase of the other’s demeanour, the impish and wildly inappropriate way Grillby’s heat seemed to pervade the space between them. His bones had begun to rattle softly and he tensed in apprehension, suddenly unsure about everything he knew about the other monster.

Grillby leaned against the wall out of Sans’ personal space and tilted his head up, flames licking the moisture from the wall and air above him with pops and snaps. “You’ve made me self-conscious, friend. Should like to think that you’d be familiar with a star’s incandescence by now.”

Sans dwelled on it for longer than he maybe should have before it finally clicked. The other’s flames were arranged peculiarly again, paler and a gentle flutter of yellow and orange, but very bright. The skeleton watched them before Grillby moved as if discomforted, a small yet uneasy smile on his face. Sans caught the way the other chanced a sidelong glance at him before looking back to the glowing crystals above.

“heh. always knew i took a shinin’ to you for a reason, grillbz,” the skeleton finally murmured, his whole being meaning it, even if he turned his face away in a gamble. The flames burned a little brighter, more golden with a touch of white, and he curiously looked back, drawn to the colours since it was something he hadn’t really seen before. Grillby was half-covering his face, the crack of a smile barely hidden by his hand and he chuckled despite himself.

Sans stared, curious of the arrangement of flame and the other’s charming nature. The smaller monster let out a quiet chuckle then, hiding his skull against the fuzzy lining of his jacket and sighing softly. He wasn’t sure what to make of the other’s shift in colour; it was not as it was when Grillby was exhausted, but bright and almost erratic where Sans thought maybe it was an appearance he took up when embarrassed, or flustered.

It was definitely something he’d never seen the fire monster do.

Ultimately, it was time to continue once more. While the bridge seeds were reset on the way back, the gap was small enough for the two to hop over near the southernmost tip of the landmass. They took their time, somehow words just failing as Sans’ last comment resonated in his mind.

He really had taken to the bartender, if truth be told. It was no doubt a deep-rooted affection for the other, although he wasn’t sure just when it had started. He supposed that he’d always liked him in one way or another. And with that, Sans realised he was silently admitting to himself there was no getting away from this feeling. It was both heart-wrenching and glorious in a way.

Chapter End Notes

I had these four songs on loop for most of the writing time of this chapter. Enjoy fluff.

:D
The path back to Snowdin led them up to his sentry station, where Papyrus was covering for Sans. The older of the two brothers caught him drumming his gloved fingertips against the desk of the station, poured over a thick book while hunched in barely pent-up, agitated boredom. He all but jumped off the stool he was sitting on when the pair got close enough to the glade separating the path back to Snowdin.

Sans knew damn well he couldn’t use a shortcut with Papyrus right there, and there were no more bridge seeds to form a crossing. At least there were no boulders falling that afternoon, but the area was slick with black ice and Sans could feel the stark chill from the other side of the cavern in his bones. Perhaps he had gotten too used to Hotland, or a certain heat in general…

“hey, bro, look lively!” he called across the gap to where the taller skeleton met up with him, crossing his arms in defiant posture.

“SANS! THANK GOD YOU’RE BACK!” Papyrus belted over the clamour of rushing water. Sans grinned over at him, giving a relaxed shrug and wink.

“looks like we’re stuck again,” he murmured to Grillby, who was eyeing the deep rushing waters carefully. Sans lowered the register of his voice, “you distract him. tell him to go to storage and get a toboggan or somethin’. then when he’s gone, i’ll just… zoop us over there.”

“…Zoop?” Well, by the look the other was giving Sans, he got the idea at least.

Grillby fixed him with a disapproving glare and Sans just shrugged passively, watching his brother prowl around the other side of the bank, puzzling out a solution. Steam wisped off the fire monster as he rigidly called out to Papyrus to offer Sans’ idea. Pumped for direction, Sans’ brother whirled on the spot and trotted off in a hurry.

Once out of view, Sans focused his magic’s flux throughout his body. It no longer felt raw and frayed and he felt like a new monster, even with the long walk from New Home. He gave an innocent smile to his friend as he held out his hand, waiting for a fissure to open nearby. The skeleton’s soul did a happy little skip when the other took his hand and he led Grillby backward into the crack in reality.

It wasn’t as much of a drain on Sans as it first was. It still expended a decent amount of energy as opposed to just taking a shortcut alone, but he felt ok. Perhaps it was the buffer, or the generous amount of rest he had. Regardless, when they stepped off in front of Sans’ sentry post, he was able to mute the soft breath of exertion when Grillby turned to look at him, still gripping his hand.

He looked down to their joined hands for a moment. Grillby seemed to realise the same, letting go
with a flicker of paler flames again. The skeleton tilted his skull a bit at the peculiarity, wondering this time if it was an uncomfortable reflex the bartender had. He’d have to remember that for the future.

Sans meandered around to the back of the station, taking his brother’s seat and flipping through a few pages in the manual as they waited for Papyrus to return. It was an advanced puzzle and entrapment catalogue, and his brother had been marking up the pages ruthlessly with his own ideas and equations. He hummed quietly, not even lifting his gaze when he heard the rush of wood sliding on hard earth and his brother’s thundering footfalls.

A sudden skid to a halt a few feet away from them marked Papyrus’ arrival and Sans lifted his skull to regard his brother. Now upon closer inspection, Sans felt a twinge of guilt for making him run all the way; not like he had any choice in the matter, since his brother always had been active enough for the both of them.

However, over seventy-two hours’ worth of four-shift days and his brother looked… well, ragged. He didn’t have the luxury of his shortcuts after all, and Sans couldn’t help but envision his brother sprinting full force across the Underground to make his three o’clock shift in Hotland after finishing in Waterfall at the same time. He grinned up at him guiltily as Papyrus let the toboggan fall beside the booth and sat down against the wall to catch his breath.

“thanks, bro. that’ll help loads with the crates,” the smaller monster said appreciatively as he started to rummage through his station.

“WHAT WAS-” he stopped. “DID YOU USE MAGIC?”

“how else could we cross?” Sans responded to his brother’s suspicious tone with a noncommittal shrug, still searching. “what, no snacks? don’t tell me the great and mighty papyrus deserted his station for even one moment to take a lunch break?” He was teasing, inching under his brother’s metaphorical skin to create a rise out of him; it had been quite a while, after all. He would be one to talk, having been so ill-prepared for the journey to New Home, he hoped his brother wouldn’t put two and two together - at least, not immediately.

True to form, Papyrus bristled defensively, vaulting himself to his feet and stomping over to berate him while Grillby smirked at the brotherly quarrel and started towards the dimensional box.

The taller skeleton regarded his brother for a moment. Everything about how Sans carried himself to even his clothes seemed off. Sans grinned up at him from his station, pausing to look down and turn a page in the book he’d previously been engrossed in.

“You really are… ok?” Papyrus said quietly as he leaned over the station, both gloved hands bracing against the edge of the desktop. He saw the pleasant look vanish from his brother’s sockets and his eye lights nervously flick towards Grillby’s direction, who had started unloading stock without him.

His own gaze never left his brother. The other’s eye movements had been so subtle, yet so clear to him, when Sans was normally much more careful not to give away something he was hiding. His jacket was spotless, far cleaner than he’d ever gotten it, the other’s skull and phalanges scrubbed white as though Sans had bothered to take care of himself. His sockets were less hollowed and distressed, his posture more relaxed than he’d been in weeks. He was rested, and if he had peeked then, he would have seen the solid twelve points his older brother sported and a subtle cyan glow around his soul.

So everything boiled down in his mind that something had happened, and Sans had taken steps to hide it from him. Papyrus’ sockets narrowed in suspicion and he patiently drummed his fingers on
the wood of the counter as Sans calmly looked back.

“never better, bro,” came the predictable reply. Papyrus leaned forward, his glare scrutinising and he saw again, the faint flick of Sans avoiding his look in favour of the fire monster’s direction. Yes, something had definitely happened, and that something had to do with that grease-peddling bartender!

“Are you going to tell me what happened, Sans?” the younger’s voice dropped, keeping his tone even and mellow yet with a hint of concern.

Sans shifted on the stool uncomfortably, moving only to scratch at his jawbone. Papyrus knew the tic. He knew how his brother was going to be evasive now and would more than likely try to change the subject.

“not now, pap.” There it was! He could always detect it.

“Yes, now, brother.”

“i’m fine.”

“You always say that! You’re being needlessly stubborn,” Papyrus interjected, keeping his voice down. “I don’t see you for days with only a handful of calls - the first one rather worrying, by the way - it brings up a lot of questions! These are not the kinds of puzzles I like partaking in, Sans!”

Sans’ eye lights darted towards the bartender again, this time his grin dropping slightly in response to his brother’s words before he brought his attention back to Papyrus.

“i know you told me to take it easy.”

“-and you didn’t! Used so much magic you passed out that he called me in a panic-”

Sans froze, eye lights seized to the size of pinpricks and staring at his brother. His body automatically moved on its own and vaulted upright off the stool. Yet he forced himself to stay still, no matter how badly his bones wanted to shake, no matter how much he wanted to flee to escape further scrutiny.

Papyrus had stopped talking, but was still leaning over the counter to look him in the face, expression a melange of austerity and concern.

Sans remained stock-still, unable to think for a moment. This wasn’t the best time to have this kind of heart-to-heart chat, even if his brother was worried. Grillby was right there. He couldn’t chance even the slightest possibility that he didn’t know about his low health. So he whispered, his voice almost strained with the two insistent words; “i’m. fine.”

It looked like Papyrus wasn’t about to drop it, so Sans flung out his arms in frustration, every inch of him burning defensively. “just check, then.”

Grillby stopped what he was doing to look over to the two, their harsh whispers grating and echoing until he very clearly heard an upset tone. Like magnetism, he knew it was Sans, saw in time for the other to jump up and assume an aggraved countenance for his brother to see for himself.

‘One’s all he’s got’, he recalled the younger brother’s words as Papyrus obviously checked. Shamefully, the fire monster turned his head from them when the younger of the two skeletons gasped as though in astonishment.

There was no internal joke for once, but Papyrus’ internal view caught a surprising number.
Elated, Papyrus let out a triumphant laugh as though he were expecting otherwise. It had been a tense few moments for Sans as he was checked over, never quite at ease with the intrusion. He was grateful there was no indication of his most recent use of magic on his soul; with any other monster, it would have registered negatively by three points. Sans’ shoulders slumped with his brother’s reaction, was about to sit back down when Papyrus rounded the station and threw his arms around his skull and into a rough embrace.

Sans chuckled despite himself, awkwardly attempting to outmanoeuvre the display of affection before an audience and discreetly pointed to Grillby, who was loading the toboggan with heavy crates. He hoped the fire monster hadn’t taken his invitation as well, but it appeared the other had busied himself with his stock and wasn’t paying attention to their display.

“now that’s over, mind givin’ us a hand?”

With his brother’s enthusiastic assistance, Sans and Grillby were able to load more than half the freight onto the toboggan to pull into the fresh powdery snow of their hometown. The sharp scent of winter and home reached Sans and he sighed appreciatively, giving his friend a bashfully tugged smile when the other looked over.

At the end of their first trip, Sans went back alone with the sled to load up the rest; Grillby stayed behind to unload into his storage shed behind the bar. Papyrus had already gone back to his post, citing that he needed to be on alert in case the captain of the Royal Guard stopped by. He didn’t want to be mistaken for Sans, after all.

“It occurs to me that you haven’t at all explained what happened in Waterfall yet, brother,” Papyrus murmured with a hint of disapproval. He said this without looking up from his book as Sans passed him on his way to the item box. The smaller monster looked over his shoulder, his grin drooping just a bit as he hoisted the lid of the box open to pull out more waiting crates.

“went fishin’.” There. It wasn’t a lie, and it wasn’t not the truth either. He grinned despite himself, grunting with effort as a rather noisy box was up next, filled with clinking bottles. Out of the corner of his vision, he saw Papyrus lean over the front of the station to watch him.

“That seems… innocuous enough. But! It’s you. I know you’re downplaying what really happened!”

Sans rolled his eye lights before turning to face his brother with a crate in both hands and set it down on the wooden toboggan with a bit more force than what was perhaps necessary. Then he realised his reaction and corrected himself, uncomfortably gesturing to beckon his brother over. In a rush of footsteps, Papyrus sprinted up to him expectantly, chest puffed out and body drawn up straight like a bowstring.

“ok, well you can’t be lookin’ like that,” Sans groused, shifting his hands into his pockets. Papyrus relaxed himself somewhat - a feat, considering his confident and overzealous nature. It took every bit of him not to launch a volley of questions at his brother, demanding who, what, when, how, and why.

“So, yeah… i messed up.” Papyrus’ shoulders hunched disappointingly at his brother’s lacklustre beginning. Sans chuckled softly and hopped onto a crate to sit down. “ok, but don’t freak out. if i hear any echo flowers harpin’ on ‘cause you repeat everything i say…”

“OH, OUT WITH IT!”
“heh…” Sans hunched his skull into the fur of his hood’s lining, taking comfort in the feel of it. “i kinda… tripped. lost my leg… and it kinda wound up at the dump.”

He shifted his glance to look at his brother, who was staring him down incredulously. In addition, he could have been attempting to figure out which leg, as well. Sans commended him; generally there would have been an outburst of some kind, but Papyrus was keeping quiet, as though puzzling something out. Hopefully, he wasn’t drawing a connection between the laces and him tripping, though.

“used magic to avoid water,” Sans evasively added, dancing around the subject of what kind of magic.

“YOU’RE RATHER PROFICIENT AT BLUE…” Papyrus interjected at his brother’s pause, then visibly grimaced at Sans’ warning look. “I mean…” There, he was being quieter now.

“waterfall’s a big place, `lil bro,” Sans muttered, “lots of water, and i dunno if you’ve noticed, but grillbz is made of fire.” He grinned at the other’s scathing look and waved his hand at him dismissively.

“So you floated around on one leg, and-”

Sans felt the warmth return to the spot beneath his ribs and he hunched further into his jacket, staying quiet and rather pointedly ignored the other’s look. It took Papyrus only a moment to realise his brother’s discomfort was for an entirely different reason - and that he could very clearly see a subtle glow under his jacket.

Oh. Well, that was different. Much different than that night with the sleepover.

“I SEE! So he carried you.” The glow brightened considerably and Papyrus cocked his skull to one side with interest. “And you used magic up to the point that you ignored your body’s signals? Pushed yourself beyond your limits, did you? I wouldn’t have thought you’d neglect to bring any emergency provisions, nor forget your wallet at home either…” He sighed in exasperation and shook his skull disparagingly, hand finding its usual place at his pelvis.

He decided that, for once… to maybe not cut into his brother quite so much about this. After all, he was a great brother, as was Sans - aggravating as he was. And for whatever reason, he was hiding something that was a lot more personal than what he’d originally thought. While Papyrus may come off as a bonehead, he knew quite a bit about the world around him. But then at the same time, there were still things he had to rush to the old turtle about.

This would probably be one of those times, he gathered.

He watched as Sans dumbly nodded and reach for his sternum, clutching the cornflower blue hoodie reflexively.

“But... really, Sans! I pick you up all the time. It’s hardly worth mentioning at this point.” He saw the exaggerated pained expression Sans gave him and frowned. “Oh, knock that out! - He… wasn’t rude about it, was he?” If he had to be honest, Papyrus didn’t know a whole lot about the bartender either, now that he thought about it… He’d mainly just interacted with him when he fetched Sans during his prolonged breaks.

Sans seemed to consider it for a moment before shrugging in that irritatively noncommittal way of his. “didn’t complain once,” he admitted as though the thought was a revelation. He sighed, the action small yet heavy. “i checked out just before the end of waterfall. he carried me the rest of the
The taller of the two stood quiet for a moment, as though in consideration. One of his gloved hands were stroking at his jawbone in thought and he was nodding to himself.

“so what did you tell him, papyrus?”

“Nyeh-?” The younger turned to regard his brother, who looked much more… defeated than usual. His mind was racing, recollecting the phone conversation with the fire monster before he answered candidly; “Well of course he was worried so I, Papyrus, had to console him!”

“does he know?”

“KNOW WHAT?”

Sans seemed to shrink down even more and Papyrus understood immediately. He fidgeted, gloved fingers plucking at the sleeves. While technically he lied quite a bit to Sans, they were all silly and insignificant. It would be a rotten thing to do so now, especially to his brother, whom he cared about very much. But it always struck him that Sans was being overly self-conscious about other monsters finding out about something as silly as the culmination of his being.

“No,” he said firmly, then watched as Sans relaxed visibly with a relieved huff. This was too difficult. No, he supposed he could, just this one time, come clean, “but, maybe… kind of? Now, hold on-” He saw the flare of panic and distress in his brother’s sockets and gently waved at him to stay seated. “Allow me to explain!”

Sans’ voice was quiet, wavering in disbelief; “you told-”

“SANS - I said kind of! He knew at the time, you had ‘one’. He told me, because naturally he felt so guilty that he thought you had Fallen Down!” Papyrus spoke quickly and soothingly, leaning over his brother with a pleasant, if not careful smile. “He probably thought it was his fault! He was so distressed - and that I told him, yes. But! That you would be better after some rest. So, how he interpreted that is up to him!”

Somehow Papyrus’ explanation made fear build up in Sans’ soul and the older of the two cowered as he sat, hands buried in his pockets and restlessly pulling at the seams. He stayed quiet as guilt joined in on the action too, his heart aching and skimming through memories of the journey. What if all those moments had been out of pity? What if the other’s kindness wasn’t really kindness at all? What if-

He let out a bitter laugh, cut off as soon as it was released and moved to stand. “that’s what you told him?” His mind was racing and he knew deep down that he couldn’t yell at Papyrus; Grillby had been that concerned for him…

…that he checked him, maybe?

Something twinged inside and he laughed again, a defensive reflex of sorts. He slid off the crate and started to unload the dimensional box again, slower this time. He paused when he realised Papyrus was staring at him, his face twisted in guilt and looking like a kicked puppy.

“i’m not mad, bro,” he murmured after a pause as he shifted the crate in his grasp. “he was that worried, huh?”

His brother took the crate from him and loaded it onto the toboggan. “Well… He is the quiet type, right? It was so bizarre! To hear him so panicked, that I… I felt bad for him? Imagine if our roles
were reversed, dear brother. And you had to console someone who cared for me, that I wasn’t dying? When they thought I was?”

Sans considered it for awhile in silence, still moving to unload the boxes. He didn’t like the casual way that his brother brought up his own demise, even if it was hypothetical. At least in this timeline, so far.

“And he… just maybe, felt responsible?”

“i messed up,” the older sighed softly and turned to regard his brother, who offered him uneasy smile. “i know you meant well. just… i panicked, y’know?”

“Well! Has he treated you any differently since then?”

Sans shifted on the spot, his dampened mood trying to find some glimmer of hope throughout what it had already twisted. He ran through all what had transpired between the two of them once more and then ultimately decided, “yeah… no, he hasn’t.”

Papyrus smiled a little easier then, grabbing the next crate from his brother. “Then! I submit to you, that you’re worrying over absolutely nothing! Like usual.”

Chapter End Notes

There needed to be a limiter of some kind. 3HP per Sans + passenger seems like a fit, considering…

Poor Pap is just trying to help :(  
(I'm trying to make him as aggravating as my own brother, haha.)
The days following his return were uneventful. His dreams were the same, insofar as they were nonexistent. Sans made up the time spent away from the Ruins outpost by visiting daily, along with working double shifts at Waterfall. It was like any other day before the journey, with one major difference.

He hadn’t been to Grillby’s since he’d helped him unload the stock.

Not like he didn’t want to go; he just feared what the other would say to him. He would have questions and Sans knew he couldn’t dodge them forever. So he stayed away, opting for Papyrus’ home cooked meals instead; even though, if he was honest with himself, they seemed worse than usual. He even went around the establishment entirely, using the igloo to bypass the cosy atmosphere or even just taking one of his shortcuts on his better days.

Eight days since Sans last saw his friend, more since his last ketchup fix, and he was beginning to feel bitter about it. He busied himself around the gate to the Ruins, knocking against the looming doors and sizing up the rock face that blocked off the area to the locals.

A thick heap of fresh snow had fallen overnight, covering his and Papyrus’ earlier footprints that week. It still fell from the ceiling of the mountain far above, littering the town and surrounding forest in a haze of mist and white.

He knocked again before deciding to go back to his post. Before everything shook down… he actually enjoyed his time with Grillby. Not only did he miss his company, but everything seemed chillier. Not like a skeleton could ever feel the capacity for either heat or cold, though. Admittedly, this confounded Sans. At his post, he actually shivered, bones rattling in a subtle way that he just couldn’t shake. It was beyond bizarre. Not even rubbing his phalanges together as he’d witnessed fleshy monsters do or shrinking his skull into his jacket did any good to stave off the deep freeze he felt.

Thinking about Grillby just made him hurt. He’d long since come to terms that his little infatuation with the fire monster was silly and would likely not work out. Especially since denying himself that bit of happiness was appropriate as far as the timelines were concerned. That, and ruining a perfectly good friendship over such baseless and selfish desires was just tawdry at best. He groaned awkwardly into his arms, hunched over the counter of the station and flipped his hood over his skull.

Maybe he should just take a nap.

However cold he ‘felt’, ultimately Sans ended up falling asleep. The nap was eventually cut short with the sound of unfamiliar footsteps approaching and he opened his sockets, moving to lift his skull. He was trembling more than before, the subtle clatter of bones together unmistakable as the
snow fell thickly around him, insulating the sound.

He was dusting snow off his jacket and counter when his visitor finally came into view from between the dense thicket. Sans felt the instant urge to teleport away, yet restrained himself. He sat upright on his stool as a small flicker of warmth kindled inside of him at Grillby’s arrival. It wasn’t like the fire monster to go into the forest at all.

Dressed in a long sharp overcoat and scarf, Sans couldn’t tell if it was because of the weather or simply because the other was a stylish monster. As he approached, the skeleton agitatedly tapped his fingertips against the desktop, realising Grillby was carrying something behind his back and he offered him a nervous smile as a greeting.

“Oh. heya, stranger.”

The fire monster strolled up to the station, his visage a mask of flame and none of the peculiar lightness that he’d shown that day in Waterfall’s caverns. For some reason Sans felt his heart sink, not really knowing the reason why it did.

“If I didn’t know any better… I’d say you were taking steps to avoid me, friend.” The other’s voice was measured and collected, but Sans saw the offered smile. Gentle and reassuring, just like its owner. The smaller monster couldn’t help but indulge returning one of his own, a little uneasily.

“Nah, just been workin’ overtime.” His bones still clattered as he lied through his teeth. “You came out all this way just to say that?”

The bartender’s stature shifted slightly, betraying his own restlessness. “I wanted to give you something earlier, to show my appreciation. However, you were never around.”

“Aw grillbz, I told ya. You don’t gotta do that-“

“Nevertheless,” the fire monster interrupted, one hand raised to prove a point. He set a small green bag on top of the desk and gestured to it in a fluid motion. “I would like to express my deepest gratitude.”

The skeleton stared at Grillby for awhile, then his eye lights shifted down to the bag. The other’s voice made that tensile little warmth inside of him bloom with affection and his grin tugged. Sans was at a loss for words when he carefully pulled the gift from it, a stout but heavy lavender decanter bottle with chiselled sides to make it look like an intricate web. Sans knew the design immediately and looked up sharply, dumbfounded and put on the spot.

“Spider Cider, correct? …Did I misremember?”

Sans’ grin tugged a little more genuinely. It actually made a small glimmer of happiness stir in his soul that Grillby had remembered the passing thought during their time in New Home. But seeing as Muffet had moved elsewhere, he couldn’t see how the fire monster had obtained such an elusive liquor. Sans had attempted to find it shortly after moving to Snowdin and after years of fruitless searching, had simply given up.

“How?”

Grillby motioned a single finger to his face, as though sharing a secret between just the two of them. No gloves, the skeleton noted internally, the thought oddly disruptive. “A bartender always saves his private reserves for someone special.”

Sans shrank down modestly. While his soul had stayed relatively sombre the week over since he’d
been absent from his friend’s company, it resounded with a clear thrum behind his ribs at the words echoing in his skull.

Unable to form a cohesive train of thought, Sans carefully tucked the glass bottle back into the bag, grinning like a damned fool. “that’s, uh… very thoughtful of you,” he finally said, unable to properly express his gratitude.

Grillby had been watching his reaction, knowing full well how much he liked it. The slit of his mouth was curled into a smile of his own, just visible through the mask of fire. He leaned forward as he noted the subtle clattering the skeleton continued to make, his head’s flames just barely caressing the shelter’s rooftop.

“Still rattling, I see.” His voice was a soft tease.

Sans gave in to an embarrassed laugh, drumming his fingertips against the desk again before abruptly stopping them. “yeah… maybe i got too used to your company. er, or hotland, i guess…”

Grillby tilted his head slightly in askance, curiosity burning in his eyes. “Do skeletons normally feel the cold?”

Sans shrugged slightly, unsure how to parse the question. “sure as hell can feel heat lately, though,” he muttered more to himself, just barely above a whisper. At Grillby’s questioning hum, Sans snickered at the private joke, fingertips itching to drum nervously again. But he didn’t, instead tried to quell the shivering feeling that was set in his bones.

He was so caught up with trying to repress himself that he was caught off guard by Grillby’s movement. Both of his hands grasped his own bony digits and he stared down at them, dumbfounded. The small gentle wisps of flame started to spread a flooding heat throughout his bones and into his marrow. Before he could get a handle on himself, he exhaled a sharp and startled breath, the heat inching up his metacarpals, his wrist bones and arms. It seeped throughout his frame, encircling him like a comforting embrace.

He melted as the feeling passed into him, sinking against the countertop with an appreciative groan as the heat lingered, even after Grillby released his hands. Small wafts of steam trailed off his exposed bones and skull in the chilly air; experimentally, Sans exhaled. A pronounced jet escaped his teeth and nasal cavity at the temperature change and he chuckled despite himself.

Seemingly pleased with his work, the fire monster leaned over the counter once more. His smile had changed into something of an alluring smirk. “Better?”

Sans’ frame slouched more as the heat still traveled through his bones and all the way down his spine, filling every vertebrae with warmth. He had to fight what would have been an embarrassing noise and his toes curled in his shoes as the heat found its way further south.

“got me all hot… hot under the collar, here.” The will to fight was sapped from the skeleton if this was the reward for indulging his desires. Something at the back of his mind nagged at him but he pushed the thought away, for once wanting to enjoy the moment without guilt.

“…Should make the remainder of your shift a little more pleasant, at least,” the other remarked carefully, enjoying the way Sans looked so contented by the touch of his flames.

As the skeleton wasn’t much for conversation nor intelligible words after that, Grillby left him there after a short yet amiable goodbye.
Sans found he stayed like that for quite awhile; hours passed in silence as he relished the feeling that eventually started to fade. His bones had cooled in the winter air but snowflakes that drifted down melted before they could land on him. He hummed appreciatively, the unmistakable feeling of warm marrow giving him such a throbbing and comfortable ache that he didn’t care to move from.

He had barely budged since Grillby parted, almost drunk on the immeasurably befuddling heat that lingered around his soul. Papyrus had approached him like clockwork, brandishing a small purse with the monster kingdom’s insignia.

“SANS, YOU LAZY BONES! YOU MISSED UNDYNE AND - OH,” his brother stopped and looked at him. Sans didn’t get up, wasn’t sleeping, and had a peculiar expression on his face. His arms were stretching out in front of him on the desk and his skull was settled upon them, and the taller of the two brothers could very distinctly see the pulsing glow of his soul through his jacket.

Papyrus was perplexed. He’d never seen Sans like this before. He strolled over, settling his brother’s payroll next to his arm and leaning over him, watching as his brother’s eye lights slowly dragged up from staring off into the trees.

“WHATEVER IS THE MATTER, BROTHER?” the younger inquired, moving to look Sans directly in the face. “YOU’RE ACTING RATHER… WEIRD LATELY??”

“weird?”

“OK, FINE. WEIRDER. ARE YOU ILL? …INJURED?”

Sans shrugged slightly and felt the wave of heat subside in his ribs with the motion. He sighed softly, shaking his skull in the negative. He supposed he had been acting strangely, outright refusing Papyrus’ routine checkups on him the past week.

“THEN WHAT IS IT, SANS? YOU’VE BEEN QUIET… HIDING MORE THAN USUAL.” Papyrus waited patiently for an answer, watching his brother’s face for any hint as to what might be bothering him. “DID YOU SEE THE BARTENDER?” Sans shrunk down but didn’t look at him. “I SENT HIM OVER… DID YOU TWO TALK?”

“a bit.”

“A BIT? SANS, PLEASE. YOU’VE BEEN ACTING STRANGELY EVER SINCE YOU RETURNED. NAPPING ALL NIGHT. RISING EARLY. WORKING… AVOIDING THAT GREASE-TRAP?”

“i’m not avoidin’ it. i don’t know what you’re talkin’ about.”

“OH, COME OFF IT! YOU PRACTICALLY LIVE THERE! DON’T TRY TO TELL ME OTHERWISE. NOT TO MENTION, SOMETHING ELSE THAT THE GREAT PAPYRUS HAS NOTICED LATELY-”

Sans moved his skull to the side so he could better look up at his brother. He couldn’t quite decipher the look he was getting from him, so waited. The echoing pulse behind his ribs thumped at the eventual loss of heat as it grew chiller, as though in mourning.

“How do I say this…” his brother deliberated, moving to itch his jawbone. Sans pulled himself off the desk and crossed his arms over the wood to guard himself from the building cold.

“BROTHER, I COULD NOT HELP BUT NOTICE YOUR SOUL-”

Sans could not hide the flinch.
“-AND, WHILE I MIGHT NOT BE VERSED IN SUCH EMOTION, AS GREAT AS I AM, IT OCCURS TO ME THAT YOU MIGHT HAVE WAXED SACCHARINE FOR A CERTAIN… SPECIAL SOMEONE?” Papyrus’ sockets narrowed in suspicion as he saw his brother’s digits grasp over his jacket where his soul hid underneath, as though he hadn’t considered it could be seen. “ROMANTICALLY, I MEAN.”

“i.. i know what you mean, pap-” his brother interrupted indignantly. His voice was low and his eye lights were scanning the thicket leading to his post from town. Boy, he sure seemed antsy!

“HONESTLY, SANS! YOU’RE BLUSHING LIKE THE #1 NOSE-NUZZLE CHAMPS OF ALL TIME!”

“c-c’mon, keep your voice down.”

Papyrus seemed to consider it for a moment before he conceded, then knelt in front of the station so he was more or less eye to eye with his older brother. “So… If you want me to be quieter, this must surely mean that they live in Snowdin!” He watched Sans shift on the stool, still avoiding his gaze. The blue pulse under his shirt grew a little more and nervously, Sans picked at his zipper toggle. “Sans, you must confide in me, as your brother. Tell me the name of the monster that stole your affection!!”

“you’re bad at keepin’ secrets, papyrus,” Sans groused in embarrassment, shrinking into his hoodie as a means of escape. “sides, it’s, uh… kinda one-sided, i guess.”

Papyrus’ shoulders slumped in disappointment, not at all liking the explanation, but at the same time he felt relieved his brother was actually talking and admitting that something was bothering him. Perhaps he was finally getting through to him?

His grin was mischievous as Papyrus realised that he could very well be a matchmaker in all of this! He could find out his brother’s secret love! He was very good at puzzles; this would be the greatest one yet! After all, what kind of brother would he be if he allowed Sans’ soul to wilt away inside, coughing up petals and flowers just like Undyne had told him about unrequited love!

He had to take measures to ensure this didn’t happen to his brother!

“So, what did you two talk about then?”

Sans’ gaze returned to Papyrus with a hint of wariness in his sockets and stayed quiet for a moment. He then gestured lamely at the green bag on the desk next to him. His brother took a peek inside and sighed in exasperation.

“I THOUGHT YOU QUIT DRINKING!”

“i quit drinkin’ that,” Sans offered a little tersely, “he gave it to me for helpin’ him out.”

“IT OCCURS TO ME, BROTHER, THAT YOU WERE LESS OF A HELP ON THE WAY THERE THAN THE WAY BACK,” Papyrus replied mildly, giving the other another grin.

Something in his sockets were flashing knowingly and Sans didn’t like it. He shrugged and rubbed idly at his sternum before grabbing his pay, fishing around in the little sack to figure out the coin amount. He watched as his brother vaulted up to his feet with a cry of eureka, slamming his hands on the desktop hard enough to make Sans jump in his seat. It wasn’t often he could give him a start like that.

“WHAT IF…” he started to say, then lowered his volume considerably, “…that grease-peddl
likes you?” He surveyed the reaction before laughing comically and grabbing the bag of liquor, turning on his boot’s heel to leave. “WHY DON’T YOU PAY HIM A VISIT, DEAR BROTHER? AFTER ALL, IT’S PAYDAY! AND YOU NEED TO SETTLE YOUR TAB… I CAN THINK OF NO BETTER OPPORTUNITY!” And with that, he left, feeling rather accomplished and leaving Sans flustered at the station.

Sans stared after his brother. His soul had lurched with those words. Once again, Papyrus had caught him off guard with something so deviant from his usual cadence that it rooted him in place. Had that conversation really happened? Was this really real? Self-conscious, he unzipped his hoodie to look down at his soul, a nimbus of cyan encircled around it like a hearth.

If Papyrus saw it when he felt like this, did Grillby...?

He cut off his thoughts there, his bones starting to clatter again. Fear and excitement rose in him with the mere mention of the bartender’s name in his thoughts. Papyrus was right, he did have to settle his tab, but at the same time, Sans didn’t know if he had the courage to go to Grillby’s just then.

But, his shift was over.

Pocketing his money, the skeleton exhaled a shuddering sigh, hoping to find bravery within as he started the long walk back to town.

Even as he entered Snowdin, he wasn’t feeling up to visiting Grillby. He was cowering as he walked, hunched against the cold snow falling ceaselessly upon the little hamlet. As Sans passed the inn, he took faster steps, his bones shaking as he continued walking directly past the warm entrance of Grillby’s. The skeleton could hear the happy tone of chatter, clinking of silverware on plates, of smooth yet fun music inside.

He did miss it, he knew that much. He stopped a short distance away, as though he changed his mind, then just continued. He needed to clear his head first.

Since Papyrus would be home before him, he opted to use a shortcut to bypass their house altogether. He reappeared at the cave entrance to Waterfall. A subtle shiver passed through Sans’ bones as he shrugged off the snow and he continued walking, not skipping a beat as his shoes met with the gravelly path and into the warmer environment.

The humidity had always agreed with the skeletons. Upon their arrival, Papyrus had taken a scholarly interest in the marsh, while Sans’ was purely cathartic. The area was peaceful, the subtle shift of blue hues as mushroom gnats carried echo flower seeds from cavern to cavern. The way the typha pods blossomed when the waters receded and ebbed, leaving thick trails of mossy coverings against the swaying rafts secured amongst their roots.

It was peaceful and allowed Sans the perfect scenery with which to lose himself in thoughts. He went to his favoured spot, where he and Grillby had first rested a little more than a week prior. To his knowledge, it was rarely used, so was a prime area for letting loose and relaxing.

Chapter End Notes

I’ve recently found out about the phenomenon of `hanahaki` and it’s so ridiculous I had to have Papyrus think it’s a real thing, since Undyne obviously gets her facts from Reliable Sources™. ™
Papyrus continues to belabor the 'hanahaki' thing - and also visits Grillby's sans Sans. It does not go well. No one is comfortable with this.

See the end of the chapter for notes

“watch it!”

“HOLD STILL-”

“i am, just-” Sans winced noticeably and restrained himself from smacking Papyrus’ digits away from his skull.

He was sitting on the edge of the tub in nothing but his shorts, feeling quite bare and exposed as his brother went through every hairline scrape and scar on his bones, tutting in that peculiar way skeletons made with their teeth. Or at least, what he imagined would be a normal thing for skeletons, if there had been more than just the two of them.

“YOU’VE CHIPPED YOUR SPHENOID, SANS! HOW ON EARTH?”

Sans grimaced as the prodding fingertips grazed around his right orbit, regretting his decision to give in and relent to Papyrus’ checkup. It had been two weeks now, and his brother’s analytical observances about his health had been so aggravating that it was easier to just let him check. As often as the checkups were, he could never get used to the invasion of his skull and sat quite tensely with his own phalanges gripping the towel he was sitting on.

“fork.”

“FORK!?”

“yes, papyrus. _fork._” He was getting testy.

“WHY. A FORK.”

“y’know, the more ya say ‘fork’, the more it sounds like a made-up word,” Sans interjected, his willingness to cooperate quickly dwindling.

“EXPLAIN THE FOLIAGE, SANS.”

“used a fork to get _most_ of it out…” Sans revealed rather unremarkably, his hand inching up with a grimace as his brother’s fingers probed further into his skull. “you can’t understand how this feel- _hey!_”

Papyrus stopped and examined the short tangle of fishing line he just pulled from Sans’ skull cavity with something of disgust on his face. It was twisted and a hard, tangled mess that had plant matter and small seeds _sprouting_ in it.
It was just as he feared!

“SANS!” he bellowed, each of his hands gripping the other’s skeletons shoulders, “IT’S NOT TOO LATE! YOU CAN STILL CONFESS!”

Sans gave him a blank look, agitation moulding into confusion with his brother’s more than usual peculiarity as Papyrus gave him a shake. He sure was excitable lately.

“What.”

“CONFESS! IT’S NOT TOO LATE. SEE? THEY HAVEN’T BLOOMED YET-”

“Pap, you’re my brother and you know I love ya. But what the hell are you talkin’ about?”

Papyrus almost growled at him in frustration. How could he be any more clear than that!? Even with his sleuthing over the past few days, Sans was unrelenting to his interrogations as to who his secret love could be.

“A BLOOM THAT SPROUTS FROM THE HEART WILL MOST CERTAINLY TURN TO SICKNESS. UNLESS YOU CONFESS,” the younger skeleton paused when Sans started erupting into pure, unadulterated laughter. “SANS! THIS IS SERIOUS!”

“No it’s not! It’s anime, dude, you’ve been japed,” Sans couldn’t help but continue laughing, the wheezing noise escaping his teeth as he hunched and ducked away from his brother’s reach.

“But! Undyne said…”

Papyrus stopped as Sans’ howls became louder and he folded his arms over his chest, waiting for his brother’s fit to subside. Sans felt like he had little control over himself, the notion just so hilarious that the other’s skeleton’s glare just kindled more mirth. He doubled over, his arms encircling under his ribs and his bones clattered merrily with the movement of his chuckles.

“I’m sorry. I’m… I’m sorry, stop skull-king, pap-” he wheezed, moving to straighten himself after the more violent of his guffaws had finished.

“If you’ve just about finished…” Papyrus’ voice had a warning tone and his sockets had narrowed daringly. His older brother finally let up, interrupted only a couple more times by a laugh that just couldn’t be held back as the other continued to check him over.

Sans had been in worse shape. The only thing Papyrus could really find wrong with him was one of his kneecaps, which had a small scuff. It took several painstakingly slow hours for Papyrus to get the last of the marshy vegetative matter remaining in his skull, after a bit more explaining from Sans. He’d relented and admitted he’d fallen into the water, and Papyrus finally got the ‘fishing’ joke with an irritated groan.

He hadn’t given into Papyrus’ demands to tell him about his crush though, as adamant and insistent as he was about paying off his tab. The younger of the two hinted things of different monsters around Snowdin, pointing out their day to day lives as though attempting to get a reaction from his older brother.

There was one more option he supposed he could try. Sans wasn’t home, after all, so he wouldn’t be suspicious of his actions if he went out. He knew exactly where his brooding brother was, and it was not at the location he’d intended to go. He stomped down the porch with gusto, adamant he would
continue the sleuthing as he rounded to his right and past the library.

As peculiar as it was to enter Grillby’s, Papyrus didn’t allow the confused atmosphere to deter him when he opened the door. He strolled right up to the bar, noting that Sans wasn’t there. Of course he wouldn’t be. He was in Waterfall to ‘think’; about what, Papyrus had a sure guess. He was very observant, after all.

He avoided sitting down, and apart from the door, opted not to touch any of the surfaces in the establishment. The grease in the air clung to his bones in the worst possible way, but he had to speak with someone. Perhaps Grillby would know, since the two had spent a considerable amount of time there? He had been mostly teasing Sans about the bartender liking him, after all. There couldn’t be a connection.

The bar was busy, with the fire monster serving all manner of fast foods to the crowd. As he waited for Grillby to become available, Papyrus surveyed the extensive wall of alcohol behind the bar with something of distaste, when one of the two monsters by the counter addressed him.

“Your brother’s not here, 'Pyrus,” they said in a rasp, throaty kind of drawl from its duck-like bill. The skeleton politely nodded, attempting to conceal his revulsion for the lingering scent of smoke and frying oil. The bartender moved from the other side of the bar and Papyrus gave him a determined smile, watching as the other gestured to the bird for silence.

“……How is he?” came the concerned crackle of fire. Papyrus never understood how to fathom the other’s words as clearly as Sans made him out to be, but he supposed it was due to his brother’s overly familiar terms with the establishment.

“I THOUGHT YOU COULD TELL ME,” the skeleton quipped, eyeing a sticky spill on the countertop directly in front of him. “IF YOU HAVE A MOMENT TO SPARE, I’D LIKE TO SPEAK WITH YOU.” The fire monster gestured to one of the empty seats at the end of the bar, which the skeleton approached regretfully. Ah, the things he did for his brother!

It took the bartender a couple minutes more to join him and Papyrus had used a couple of strategically placed coasters to rest his elbows on, not entirely comfortable yet more so than if he’d opted to touch the countertop. The other came forward, bar rag and a thick glass tumbler in hand as he polished it with an inquisitive stature.

“I’ll be direct,” Papyrus spoke, lowering his voice. While he was breaking code for offering Sans’ privacy to Grillby, he didn’t exactly want the whole bar to hear. “He’s been moping around the forest and Waterfall since you two came back!”

Grillby shifted a little, the flames arranged in a way that gave the skeleton the impression he was concerned. “…Has not been around lately.” He paused, as though wrestling with an unpleasant thought. “Mentioned he was working overtime.”

Papyrus’ sockets narrowed considerably at that. He’d told Sans to pay his tab six days ago! So what was his problem? His sockets scanned the bar as he scrutinised the monsters there: a couple of canine guards, a hapless blob of a bunny in the corner well into their drinks, another large monster with grotesque mammoth teeth that had baskets of fries littered all over the table in their booth. Somehow, he didn’t quite believe he’d find Sans’ crush here - but then again, he didn't know his brother's tastes, only that they appeared to be bad.

“He told me something peculiar the other day,” the skeleton continued, tenting his gloved fingers in thought as he turned to face the bartender again. “And I don’t want you to tell him I repeated this to you.”
Grillby gave him a nod of agreement in silence, having stayed quiet apart from his piece. He was unaccustomed with prolonged conversations with his regular customer’s brother, after all.

Papyrus drummed his fingertips together shortly before seeming to struggle with the notion, a few beads of sweat glistening on his skull. “Wowie, is it hot in here, or..?” He caught the look from Grillby and tensed defensively at his unintended joke. “Don’t answer that. Anyway, the secret! Is! - Oh, someone needs you over there-”

Grillby turned his head to the direction Papyrus had vaguely gestured in to someone who was waving him down, menu in hand. He sighed, the crinkle of his flames fluttering as he quickly stalked away to help his customers.

When he got back to Papyrus, he pulled the backless chair he kept behind the bar directly in front of him and folded his arms over the countertop expectantly, patiently waiting for the continuation of their conversation.

“This is. A difficult subject to broach,” the other began almost stutteringly, his fingertips idly tapping against each other. “But, I believe Sans might have a ‘thing’ for someone in Snowdin.”

He noted the way the other’s posture straightened slightly, as though he hadn’t been expecting that. His flames sparked briefly before returning to normal and the skeleton’s eyes narrowed at the reaction. Maybe the fire monster knew something, after all.

“Do you happen to know or notice any love-buggery going on with him and some other? Has he confided in you?”

Papyrus noted the golden flames start to flicker, then subtly shift back to red and orange as his questions remained unanswered. Interestingly enough, the skeleton hadn’t factored this into his quest to find Sans’ crush and play matchmaker.

He continued; “His reactions to my interrogations remain unchanged. He refuses to speak candidly about his feelings and he’s acting rather… strange,” he considered the choice of words before offering, “stranger? For instance, his soul - I’m not sure if you’ve noticed it or not… or if it’s a skeleton thing and only I can, but it’s always shrouded in his magic. Regardless, his habits lately are so different I thought I would seek you out for advice.”

Grillby remained silent, unable to parse exactly what Papyrus was getting at, although something inside of him was wary about how to reply. He was right to stay quiet. He heard the door chime and the gust of cold wind enter with another customer, a chorus of “hi Sans!” and the like echoing from the other patrons like a sudden jolt through the Underground.

Sans stood, sockets hollowed to pitch as he regarded the familiar sight of the bar. It had taken everything in him to push the door open, to walk up the steps to the warm glow of heat and comfort, even to stop himself outside of the establishment altogether.

He had the courage before then. But now all he felt was horror beyond any measure of a doubt when he saw his brother and Grillby, at one side of the bar speaking in hushed tones. There was absolutely no reason for Papyrus to come here; he’d told him where he was going. Immediately, Sans came to the conclusion that their conversation was likely about him, seeing as they had stopped when they had noticed him.

He drew every little scrap of bravery he had left, shifting on the spot before moving in that casual gait towards the bar. He summoned his eye lights again, assuming the laid back countenance of his previous self, before all this love-struck stuff had come and made a mess of things.
The smaller skeleton hopped onto his usual seat, giving an absent yet jovial wave to the bird at the other end with an artificially tugged grin.

“heya, grillbz,” he greeted the fire monster, feeling the tightness under his ribs like a knife as he leaned against the counter in a slouch. “long time. guess i got a tab to settle, huh?”

Papyrus on the other hand, sat frozen in place when Grillby moved to stand and address his brother. He was paying attention with such concentration that if he hadn’t looked at just the right moment, he would have missed it.

There, just under Sans’ jacket. He could see it, could sense the magic of such incredible pain and longing that he couldn’t address. Not directly. Sans was giving it his all to seem perfectly ok with things as they were, cracking a joke at the bartender’s expense, chuckling at his response and giving that same noncommittal shrug as if the world was fine to pass him by, and he didn’t care.

But Papyrus knew the sad answer to the puzzle he’d involved himself in. He knew that his brother cared more than he would ever admit. He was being ignored at the end of the bar by Sans, but Papyrus could still see the veiled, yet hurt expression in his eyes and his tense posture. Years of living with that silly pile of bones had afforded Papyrus his every tell and mannerism, after all.

It broke his heart that Sans would deny himself this happiness. And yet, dare he think it, Papyrus could see a spark between the two of them.

Chapter End Notes

Ugh, PAPYRUS. His contradictory character makes my writing feel flip-floppy. I am so upset with him!! For more than one reason!! WHY WOULD YOU DO THIS!!?
Chapter Summary

Papyrus drags Sans out to Waterfall for a much needed heart-to-heart, where he finally gives in and admits his feelings. But for whom? With an echo in his soul and determined for a drink, Sans later winds up at Grillby's, which is uncommonly empty for the time of day. Something bright is burning that afternoon.

Sans finally makes a move.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

As much as it pained him, Sans had asked Grillby if he could spend the night in one of his booths like he had a few weeks earlier. This time, the excuse was not bad nights, but that he needed time alone to think, and he felt like sleeping in Waterfall was a bad idea. Papyrus had overstepped the line and Sans couldn’t help the leaden panic he felt in what he thought might have been discussed between the two monsters before he entered.

But, he knew Papyrus had good intentions. He always did. It was just so damned frustrating that he’d go so far as to talk behind his back - and to the one place and one person he thought he’d never go. Papyrus always had been full of surprises, but lately Sans was unsure what to expect from him.

So when his younger brother came to get him the following morning, Sans saw no other alternative but to go along with things as they were. He thought it odd that Papyrus would shirk his morning rituals to pull him along, though. But, he’d continue his day as though what Papyrus had done didn’t feel like such a massive betrayal.

Papyrus had alternative plans, he was sure, when he cited that they needed to go to Waterfall; not had to, but needed. It was an ultimatum that he couldn’t argue with. When Sans only grunted in acceptance, his brother didn’t attempt further conversation. The smaller skeleton eyed him warily, drawing in his brother’s posture, walking speed, and the manner in which he solved the puzzles along the way. He was taking careful consideration into holding himself in his usual manner; boisterous, floundering at all the right moments…

But Sans could tell it was a farce. One badly hidden, at that. He followed his brother through the marsh a little uneasily, walking quickly to keep up with him. The deviances in this timeline were so strikingly different than what he felt he was used to, and even though Papyrus was still Papyrus, he just wasn’t comfortable with what felt like contradiction; starkly different from the usual.

Their footsteps echoed in the moist grassy knolls and some pathways had shifted from when he’d last been there. The laughter the echo flowers had held onto from his time with Grillby in the ‘star’-gazing room had long since been spoken over, the reminder gone and leaving Sans with a despondent feeling as they passed by.

There were no mishaps to their walk, and finally he and Papyrus stopped at the whispering corridor hours later. Hundreds of subtly shifting, glowing blue flowers pickled the water; some fully
submerged and others growing tall and broad over the surface. They whispered back and forth, the mingling of anonymous and clear voices sending an eerie message to anyone who would listen, yet making no sense at all.

He witnessed the subtle shiver that passed through his brother. Sans knew Papyrus disliked this part of Waterfall and he actually wondered if it was his intention to go through or just simply stand there in silence. Sans himself was fine with the place. The whispers blocked out a lot of his own dark thoughts and he felt it soothing that the cavern was filled with enough chatter to simulate the lively Underground. In his nightmares they would be chilly and silent, unmoving.

No, he definitely liked the chattier ones better.

“everything ok, pap?”

“EVERYTHING-” The echo of the flowers picked up his brother’s boisterous voice immediately and Papyrus clapped his hand over his teeth to stop himself. Sans had to chuckle at that, despite his mood. He waited for the echos to die down before he tried again; “Everything is fine, Sans.”

“you sure? it’s not like you to stay quiet on the way. got somethin’ on your mind, buddy?”

Papyrus turned to regard his brother with a thoughtful look, his gloved hand still covering his toothed mouth as though the interruption from the echo fields would cut him off again.

“Actually… yes.”

Sans leaned against the carved tableted dais erected along the path and exhaled softly, bracing himself for another heart-to-heart with the only subject his brother was fixated on as of late. “welp. y’got me out here. what’s the deal?”

“Well…” his brother deliberated, shuffling to the side of the path to where the dark waters lapped with the whispers of his first word hovering over the surface. He seemed to be sizing up the pond before gesturing for Sans to come over, crouching down.

Hesitant, the smaller skeleton strolled over, his footsteps careful as he wasn’t quite sure what his brother was up to. Still, he stooped next to him, hands on his knees to brace himself as he looked at the faintly luminous sprouts floating in the pond.

“I have an idea, if you’ll indulge me.” Papyrus looked to his brother with a soft smile, and Sans couldn’t help but warily tug his smile back in return. It must have looked more like a grimace, since his brother’s smile fell shortly after. “Don’t give me that look! I’m not up to anything. Just… I’ve been thinking. If you won’t confess, and you won’t tell then it is up to me, your brother, to at least help in some small way. To, at least, help you admit it to yourself. So pick one of these thingies up.”

“thingies?”

“One of the sprouts. Not too big. Not too small…”

“…just the size of judgement hall?” Sans couldn’t resist, and laughed quietly at his brother’s withering look. “ok, ok. dunno what’s gotten into you lately… you at least gimme a bit of a smile.”

“I’m merely… smiling on the inside!” Papyrus interjected, sounding appalled at the other’s rebuke. He watched as his brother did as he requested, plucking with disinterest one of the sprouts that had a small bud growing from a thick stalk and giving it a precursory glance. “That one will do. Now, don’t say anything just yet. Otherwise, it’ll be spoiled.”
Sans kept quiet but his smile tugged down in suspicion.

“Remember when we first came here?” Papyrus started, nostalgia in his voice, “I really liked these flowers. We didn’t have them back home! I learned a lot about them. Everything I could! And a lot from them, and from Mister Gerson-turtle.”

Sans waited patiently, giving the dripping, wilted-looking echo bud in his grasp another once-over.

“I learned,” Papyrus continued excitedly, “that you can give one a secret and it will hold onto it if it’s young enough.” He saw that Sans was about to object and quickly put up both his hands to stop him. “I know what you must be thinking. But Papyrus! What would I do with such an auspicious flower??”

The smaller skeleton stared at him flatly but kept silent, definitely not trusting himself to speak now.

“So, I think… that, dear brother… You should take advantage of this opportunity. The young flowers don’t hold onto tone or cadence of their secret-givers. So! You won’t have to fear anyone else finding out.”

Only you, Sans thought bitterly, staring at the flower while turning it between his bony fingers idly.

“I have an idea… and don’t be angry if my guess is incorrect, but…” Papyrus hesitated, wringing his gloves hands, then he moved to sit on the ground. “I can’t help but feel that you’re… tearing yourself up inside over this. When you really shouldn’t be! You should treat yourself better. Even if you think, for whatever reason, that you shouldn’t. Because you should, and you matter!”

Sans drew in a deep breath, the action cathartic as he twirled the stem again in hesitation. Papyrus had a point; he was beating himself up about this. He’d heard something of what he was explaining, but it had been an age and a half ago. It felt like several lifetimes, spanning centuries…

But, the echo flowers… what if it was just a fable? Another universal joke?

“I believe in you, after all.”

Ultimately, he decided that Papyrus wouldn’t play around about this kind of thing. Sans’ grin tugged genuinely at that and he looked to his brother’s face, seeing the heartfelt admiration there for him to see. While normally displaying irritation at his listless manner throughout life, Papyrus really did have his interests at heart, didn’t he? He had been wrong to doubt him, to be angry, when all his little brother wanted to do was to help him, to help him stop from hurting.

A short exhale left him, caught in a chuckle and a pained scoff. I’m nervous, Sans admitted in his thoughts, stuck in between being too scared to admit it out loud, and to say the wrong thing entirely and have it trapped in the flower forever, like a regrettable mistake.

With the pep talk, Sans’ soul fluttered a little. He thought about his friend; caring, gentle and welcoming. Unafraid to ask after him, to accommodate and listen to him in his darkest moments. Grillby’s voice had become something of a prized treasure to him. He stayed late to keep in him company even after the bar was closed. He saved his best jokes for him, ordered the worst things on the menu because he knew the guy got tired of serving the same popular items every day. He was his light in the darkness, and every time he thought of him was both with affection and love; with hesitation and shame.

If he could move on in his life after this, Sans guessed it was worth a shot. He inhaled again, realising he had started to tremble and was staring at the small, faintly glowing blossom in his hand in trepidation.
“i’ve…” he started in a bare whisper, stagefright creeping up on him. He glanced at Papyrus quickly, feeling his soul thunder excitedly in his chest. At his brother’s urging nod, he gave in to a nervous shiver, bones clattering softly. “i… i’ve fallen for my best friend.”

There.

He’d done it.

He was shaking so badly, staring at the flower with everything he had as though waiting for something to happen. The silence between them both was long and suddenly Sans let out a strained hoot of laughter at the tight yet liberating feeling at the centre of his being.

Meanwhile, Papyrus groaned, straightening his spine and gesturing to the fields in disapproval. “Brother! You could have phrased that much better! It sounds like someone made you fall in the other way,” he was grinning though, now able to see the weight quite literally lifted from his brother’s shoulders. “But! I bet I know who that special someone might be…” His tone was teasing and he leaned closer to Sans, who pushed his skull away in exaggerated irritation.

Sans huffed and sat down, flinging himself backward onto the path with both arms stretched out. That had taken all that he was and more to go through with, but the grin persisted.

“so, pap. what do i do with this thing now?”

Papyrus hummed in thought, looking over his shoulder at his brother’s face, then to the delicate echo sprout in his left hand. Cautiously, he got up and rounded his brother to inspect it, staying quiet to listen. When Sans looked like he was about to speak, he quickly rose his hand to silence him.

‘I've fallen for my best friend.’

Sans’ soul fluttered again and he instinctively grasped the front of his hoodie with another short laugh. The voice from the flower was a soft, almost infantile whisper that thankfully didn’t sound like him at all. It affected him just the same, a thumping behind his ribs making his bones quiver nervously at the twinkling sound.

“I think it sounds rather adorable coming from it!” Papyrus offered kindly as Sans carefully pocketed the flower. “You keep it. You seem a lot happier now!”

The smaller of the two grunted as he sat up again. He did feel better, as though his soul was made of air instead of lead. “thanks, bro. i think i do, too.”

The walk back to Snowdin was slower, but more comfortable than their walk to the whispering corridor. Sans was more relaxed, walked with his sockets closed and behind his brother, trusting him beyond a shadow of a doubt. His footsteps were light. His soul was soaring. It was simply amazing. Papyrus had been right to bring him there, and now echo flowers held much more meaning to him than ever before.

They went their separate ways when arriving at Snowdin. Papyrus continued down the main drive to the other side of town and towards the forest to check on his puzzles, and Sans found himself outside of Grillby’s. It felt chillier that afternoon, so after a few calming breaths, he pushed the door open, yearning for the warm interior that he was so fond of.

It was a lot sparser than what he was usually used to. The only monster that greeted him was on the way out with a drunk swagger. Perplexed by the empty eatery, Sans stood in the doorway, watching
the fire monster who was at the bar and putting away glasses under the countertop until he was noticed.

He gave the other a sheepish grin before strolling towards his usual seat, the nervous yet light thrum of his soul beating behind his ribs. As he mounted the stool, he pressed the pocket the echo bud hid in as a kind of comfort, to bolster him.

“everyone’s home early today, eh?” Grillby seemed to regard him for a moment, giving him a careful yet welcome smile. Sans decided to take that as permission to continue, leaning over the bartop and cradling his skull in the cups of his hands. “well, i was gonna go to the moon for supper. the food’s good, but there’s just no atmosphere.”

The fire monster offered a soft crackling chuckle in response and Sans joined him, before he asked, “Must I endure such jokes now?”

“i thought you’d have space in your heart for it, but i guess i gotta planet better,” Sans shrugged with a widened grin, then he threw a sidelong glance to the left side of the bar and tables. It was where most of the canine squadron would have been grouped at this time of day, begging him for bones and attention. “you’re not closin’ early today, are you?”

The bartender shook his head, flames wisping with an amused yet inquiring look.

“stellar,” the skeleton grinned, unable to stop himself, “kinda feel like a drink.” Wordlessly, the fire monster took a glass bottle from under the counter, filled with the good red stuff. Sans put up his hand to stop him from opening it and Grillby paused. “actually, make that a whiskey.”

“Oh unlike you to indulge lately,” Grillby murmured as he put away the ketchup and turned towards the shelves of tall bottles behind him. He carefully selected one of his better liquors and a sparkling clean glass. “Neat?”

The bartender shook his head, flames wisping with an amused yet inquiring look.

“The corners of the bartender’s mouth curled with a smirk and he set the glass and bottle to the side, leaning over the bar himself. “Really?” he breath, flames subtly popping with interest. Sans closed his sockets and his grin tugged, bathed in the heat from the other monster. Grillby noticed the other’s composure; still oddly titillating, yet none of the nervousness and previous avoidance. He actually seemed calmer and more like his old self. Grillby couldn’t help but smile warmly at that. It had been awhile since he’d seen such a sight.

Sans hummed in the affirmative.

“Then… how would you suggest I make it ‘dirty’?” That was when the fire monster saw the flush of magic, that subtle hint of cyan blue. Ever since Papyrus had revealed the nature of his brother’s soul, Sans had been avoiding him; his departure in the morning was so quick, they didn’t even get a chance to discuss what they’d been talking about - nor to apologise. Sans had looked upset upon entering the bar the previous night, but now he seemed… content, which was all Grillby ever hoped for.

He’d noted the pulse several occasions before as well, and it made his core’s temperature rise in response, as though echoing the untold sentiment.

“caramel… maybe. yeah. sounds good,” the skeleton decided quietly, his voice a lulling and smooth tone. He realised he could have said ‘sugar’, but he wanted to hint at something that would add the
other’s personal touch. He never once moved while Grillby was in front of him, content to bathe in that soothing glow. He did shift slightly and opened a socket when the fire monster regrettably moved away to start his drink by pulling out a couple of tall silver mugs from under the counter.

He thought he’d seen a flicker of yellow, but Sans was unsure. He’d definitely seen it the previous night, when his brother was at the bar. It occurred to him they never really spoke about it, having sorted out his tab instead, and he watched the bartender in silence. A glove was removed to ignite the liquor and sugar mixture, rendering the dancing flames a bright blue between the two mugs as the drink was poured from each one expertly with flair.

The skeleton sat, transfixed, watching the arches of blue travel from each cup with something of a knot in his nonexistent throat. As the bartender pulled the glass in front of him, the drink was poured with ease, not spilling a single drop. The alcohol simmered gently as the bare-blue flames licked around the inside of the glass, still burning.

Sans smiled and sat up a little, stuffing his right hand into his pocket and against the flower. “still somethin’ to see, even after all this time,” he murmured appreciatively. The bartender gave him another easy smile at the compliment and he set about pulling the mugs away, moving to the other end of the bar to rinse them out.

Having no real breath meant Sans couldn’t extinguish the flames himself, or at least as forcefully as he would have liked. So he lifted the glass with his free hand, the heat from it melting into his bony digits with the warmth he craved.

It wasn’t the real way a Blazing Blue was supposed to be consumed, however. That, and he felt a little sheepish for the thought that came to mind of ingesting Grillby’s fire. Sans set the glass down again, attempting to wave at it to extinguish the flame. Unfortunately in his eagerness, his phalanges hit the glass, tipping it towards him and he jolted backward with a quiet exclamation. At the same time, he misjudged his balance and the stool swivelled out from under him and he fell to the floor just as Grillby gave a warning shout.

It would have been better if that had been it. Sans was patting the flames from his jacket with a swear before he heard a short roll on the countertop, then a loud crack as the glass crashed on top of him. He winced, both hands moving to cradle and rub at the top of his skull as the shower of glass fragments rained down on his shoulders.

Legs stretched out and all akimbo, Sans felt that he could have handled that better. He grunted as he saw Grillby round the bar with a towel and a fierce blaze, dropping down in front of him to help him clean up the burning alcohol. Sans grimaced apologetically, shifting to sit up more so he could shake the shards of glass out of his hood.

“Are you alright?” his friend inquired, his tone stricken.

“heh. welp, not exactly the fire i was gunnin’ for,” the skeleton replied automatically, gingerly rubbing at his skull as he took the towel from Grillby to clean off. It wouldn’t do to reek of alcohol when he got home, after all. He thought he saw the pale flicker on his friend’s visage and he paused as his soul seemed to sigh, it dawning on him what he’d just said.

And there was silence. Painful silence.

He laughed shortly, flicking shards of glass off his jacket and pushing himself up to a sitting position with his back against the bar. He kept the towel against the side of his skull as he quickly tried to search for excuses to change the subject.
“s-say, grillbz,” he started desperately, “you’ve been, uh… kindlin’ bright lately.” There, that would have to do. It was an interesting reaction to behold; Grillby’s blaze flickered that same pale yellow before an almost embarrassed smile fell across his vague features. The bartender moved to pick up some of the larger shards out of the fur lining of Sans’ jacket, staying quiet.

Sans pressed on, curious. “never saw you glint like gold before,” he murmured a little quieter, his voice just a little teasing.

“It’s… due to a strong emotional response,” the other supplied, his tone faltering and quieter than before. Sans shrunk down, looking away from the fire monster as his hands continued to rub the drink from his skull almost absent-mindedly.

“oh. didn’t mean to make you upset, boss. just put the drink and glass on my tab,” Sans spoke quickly, his thoughts racing in an internal struggle to keep calm, “the stool too.”

Grillby shook his head. “I don’t care about those. I’m not angry; not to worry.” Hesitantly, both of his hands went for Sans’ skull, cradling each side as the skeleton sat stunned, thoughts coming to a standstill. His breath came in a shudder as heat flooded down the vertebrae under his jawbone and his hand lost its grip on the towel. He stared at Grillby’s face, the silence stretching on before his mind finally kicked into a panicked overdrive, as though he didn’t trust himself.

“oh. well. ok, then.” Damn it, he was fine. He knew he’d be fine, but his soul was telling him otherwise now. It was painful the way his heart twisted Grillby’s words into things he wanted to hear.

“Quite the opposite, actually...”

The joke wasn’t funny, but Sans found himself snickering quietly, the welling of desperation and vulnerability inside high enough to tinge the laughter with a bittersweet ache. Yet he didn’t flinch from Grillby’s touch, which remained on either side of his skull, sending that fiery heat through him and giving him conflicting feelings again. Amongst them, a hope, a kindling of care and tenderness that he wanted to feel lost in.

Sans noted the golden flicker again and the unsure look Grillby displayed. The subtle shift of fire against his skull was like a hesitant caress. He was close enough that he could see the glowing sclerae clearly behind the frames of his glasses, how the innermost irises dragged to the side as though in consideration. Then they narrowed slightly, as though twinged with pain and the skeleton paused, suddenly unsure of himself as he picked up on the other’s silent worry.

“You laugh defensively, Sans,” the fire monster breathed, the words carefully selected throughout the skeleton’s stunned silence, crisp and clear. “Or... perhaps I was too forward.” There was a hint of… disappointment? Of an untold ache that pulled at his soul.

Sans’ grin tugged downward and he straightened his spine, shifting as his soul fluttered nervously and sending waves of excitement and trepidation through his bones. His eye lights remained fixed on the fire monster, afraid if he glanced away for even one moment that it would be a desperate dream of a fool in love.

“y’know nothin’ can get through this thick skull o’ mine,” the skeleton offered, his voice dropping in register. He wanted to urge Grillby on, to have him continue talking as his bones trembled with the filling heat. He wanted to hear something to latch onto, to keep in his heart so he could save it for himself in his most loathing moments of self-defeat.

But it was hard, so difficult to think through the fog of flame from the other’s touch. With the other’s
deliberative silence, Sans was slowly gathering courage inside to speak next.

"i… i can tell you a secret. if you tell me one first."

The bartender considered it, watching the bashful countenance of his long-time friend. Flames crackled between them, the arched tips billowing a subtle shade of yellow and gold before fluttering back to their normal shade and splendor. In response, he noticed how the skeleton shifted again, subtly; as though he was attempting to hide, to conceal the gentle clatter of shaking bones.

Grillby’s mouth parted slightly as his mind again, carefully chose the best words to say. “Burning pale…” he trailed off, his flames reacting to the words in kind, “means a hotter flame.”

There was something to his cadence that told Sans there was more to it than that. Absently, his hand found the front of his hoodie with his soul’s desire for closeness, clearly reacting to Grillby’s proximity.

“i like your heat,” he admitted, the confession startling even to him. He watched the other pulse and withdraw his hands. Sans couldn’t help but grin at the reaction despite the lost touch. “and… i think that means you’re blushin’.” At the other’s bashful but agreeing hum, Sans sat up a little more, an outrageous idea forming. If he was wrong, well… maybe he could hope for a retry?

“don’t worry.”

His soul was thundering as he boldly moved, taking one of Grillby’s hands and pulling it towards the front of his hoodie. His eye lights never left the other’s visage as he pressed the warm heat against his ribs, palm flat against his sternum and flooding his core with more pleasurable warmth.

Sans sighed with the tangled, pillowy feeling behind his ribs, feeling his soul pulse with an echo and with the clarity of emotions hidden inside. “me too.” He held the other’s hand to his chest, grasp gentle yet firm as he inhaled deeply. It felt so right, and he wasn’t moving away. He stole a minute to close his sockets, to just drown in the moment. Even if the other didn’t reciprocate, he felt comfort in the touch.

Heat reached all the way to the tips of his finger bones before Sans realised that his arm had been pulled up. Opening his sockets again, Sans watched as Grillby lifted his other hand in the same manner, placing it at the centre of his torso and against his vest, mirroring the gesture in silent admiration as though it was treasured.

A comfortable silence passed between the two and in that singular moment, Sans felt his fears melt away. His smile was genuine as his eye lights finally pulled down from the other’s face to his own hand, witnessing another pulse. This time it was white yet clear, thrumming behind his phalanges like a soaring song. The feeling reverberated through his bones, travelled up his arm and glowed around his own soul, amplifying every blessed emotion tenderly.

It was beautiful. It was perfection. Sans gave in to a laugh; this time not defensively, but because he truly felt happy for the first time in what felt like years. It was clear and held no bittersweet undertones, no fear or worry. He felt light, and bolstered with new courage he let go of Grillby’s hand at his chest. He didn’t want to, but at the same time he didn’t want to remove his other hand from over Grillby’s soul. He wanted to remain linked for that moment and gave the other a genuine smile, slowly searching in his pocket for something.

“it’s a little shy,” he quietly mumbled as he pulled out the small blossom. It looked rumpled from being in there, having maybe been bruised from his fall, but it still glowed with the luminescent telltale blue from the marsh. “like me,” he added, feeling flush with the gesture as the fire monster
took it from him with his free hand.

Gently and gingerly, as though afraid to burn it should he get too close, Grillby held it between the two of them, waiting as their pulses gradually synced. The flower was beat up, lopsided and heavy on one end. It was quiet, but the words were there, tiny and anonymous, yet he knew whose words they belonged to immediately.

‘I’ve fallen for my best friend.’

An excited flush filled Sans again at hearing the words, coupled with a measured beat he was positive was resonating from Grillby. He found that he just couldn’t meet his eyes now, but continued smiling, hunched into his jacket and coveting that heated touch against his sternum. He wanted to keep it there.

Grillby stayed silent, his smile broader and more tender as he watched the other’s reaction to the words. A pure confession, one he had been wrestling with for some time, he bet. He met with Sans’ affections, yet the words were easy to come to mind, having already been said.

“Don’t worry,” came the echoed whisper of Sans’ own reassurance as he carefully set the echo blossom beside them. He saw the fleeting glance and flushed cyan pulse behind his hand as he leaned forward, closing the gap between them, “me too.”

Sans’ soul was hammering behind his ribs excitedly, mind blocking out everything apart from the shrinking distance between them and the subtle rush of the other’s fire. He moved in turn, pushing his spine off the back of the bar and shifted closer to Grillby’s body. His own magic pulsed as he felt the other’s soul thrum warmly against his carpels, an intimate feeling that matched his own and tickled pleasantly between his joints.

He was no longer afraid of the answer his heart had questioned and agonised over all this time. He hadn’t meant to confess this way nor so quickly, but was silently glad that he had. The affection he craved was matched as their bodies inched closer, their faces bare movements away from a shared moment that soon felt electrifying and right in all the best possible ways.

Flames licked at his teeth with an age old yearning and he drew them in a breath, the other’s scent crisp yet sharp and addictive. The heat flooded his bones and between his teeth, mingling with his magic and sparkling along his jaw, pressing against him in a blissful slowness to echo his deepest sentiments. In turn, Grillby’s fingers against his chest bunched slightly through the kiss as though it had been an ache that was finally satiated. Sans’ body shuddered pleasantly with the heated sigh that escaped the other and he automatically moved one of his arms over the other’s shoulder.

Sans felt Grillby’s arms encircle him, warm and tenderly, pulling him against the other’s body. He sighed contentedly against the chaste end of the kiss, both of his hands slipping over the other’s shoulders to hold him like he’d always wanted to. The quiet was soothing in its own regard as their souls danced in such intimate proximity, and at long last everything felt right in the world.

Chapter End Notes

They did it. Sans did it, and I’m so proud! You guys reading really helped encourage me, thank you so much for your kudos, your comments and subscriptions, from the bottom of my heart!!
FYI: "Trick or treat. Smell my feet. Give me something good to eat. Not too big, not too small, just the size of Montreal" is the silly little rhyme Sans is playing off Papyrus.
Chapter Summary

Sans learns about skeletal biology in the most embarrassing way possible. Undyne relays a message for him to visit Alphys.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

At the sound of approaching dogs, they bashfully separated, and for a moment Sans couldn’t keep his gaze from Grillby’s visage. He couldn’t stop smiling, couldn’t help the bright hopefulness that ebbed his soul and how his friend’s did in turn. So it was with great reluctance that he parted and stood, just as the door chimed and the dogs entered for their nightly gathering, a little behind schedule. He stayed by the door to watch Grillby before giving a slight wave goodbye and turning to leave.

Sans felt as though his entire soul was filled to bursting. On the outside he seemed his usual self to anyone that knew him, but on the inside he was a punch-drunk, his soul swimming with mushy feelings and a new appreciation for life, one full of promise. He would have liked to stay longer with Grillby, but the canine squad’s excited barks for bones and attention made the skeleton feel flustered enough to excuse himself, promising to come back later.

Promising him. It had been easy to do and with very little reluctance on Sans’ part.

The fire monster hadn’t said much after that, only gave him a glowing smile as the dogs began listing off their favourite foods to order while he started on the mess of shattered glass.

He didn’t ask for how long, so Sans wondered if he’d known. Maybe he had all this time, and he’d been a damned fool for trying to hide it. Sans grinned to himself as he walked down the street back to his house, going over the confession in his mind over and over, his soul thrumming behind his ribcage as though he could scarcely believe it was real. He would realise that he left the flower behind in the bar much later.

And that colour - Grillby’s fire. Its blaze had started out yellow and gold, but then was so white with small embers of gold and even tiny flecks of violet and blue. He hadn’t stuck around long when the dogs came around to see how the bartender would have pardoned them. Unable to help it, the skeleton laughed to himself. He didn’t care how he looked to anyone else; he was drenched in alcohol with smears of soot and burns on his jacket and probably smelled like a drunk, but he was happy and he loved it.

Before entering the house, Sans took off his hoodie to shake out the remaining glass shards around the side with a brisk chill. He held his jacket close to him in a pause. It was still warm with the fire monster’s heat that permeated it and he let out another soft laugh. It smelled like him too, the soft dust of charcoal and spice of fire, of hearth and home. He felt his soul flush at that and he rounded the side of the house to go inside, resisting the urge to outright hug the garment to press the feeling into his bones.

It occurred to him that he hadn’t eaten for most of the day; excited jubilation of his revealed feelings
aside, Sans felt hungry. So after depositing his hoodie on the counter, he dug around the food museum, as Papyrus had so aptly named their fridge, to grab some leftovers. His grin dropped slightly when he realised it was the previous night’s spaghetti, but that was really all that was left in the house. The taste had been… indescribable, with his limited knowledge of the phenomenon, but he knew it wasn’t at all pleasant. He was still getting used to tasting things, after all.

Hesitant, but given very little choice in options, Sans grabbed a fork from the drawer and leaned against the counter to eat, as usual.

That’s when he realised something peculiar. A click, followed by a grind and he dropped his fork to the dish with a clatter and ran his digits around his teeth. He didn’t feel any cracks, and yet… he could have sworn…

Suspicion coupled with a nagging worry bothered him enough to walk to the living room with his plate, then upstairs to the washroom. He would just check. It certainly wasn’t anything to panic about. It was probably just a loose tooth from when he fell off the stool at Grillby’s. He’d get his brother to inspect and heal it when he got back.

But still… he had to check.

Concern gripping him, he balanced the plate with one hand as he scrutinised himself in the bathroom mirror. A scuff on the top of his skull where the glass had landed, but other than that, things looked fine. Maybe a smudge of ash from Grillby’s proximity, but nothing too out of the ordinary. Puzzled, he brought another forkful of noodles to his mouth, eyeing his reflection warily as though expecting something.

The plate slipped from his hand and landed in the sink with a loud shatter. His mandible had opened. The forkful of food followed the rest of it in the sink with the screech of metal on porcelain and he hiked onto his tiptoes, sockets hollowed and wide as he desperately patted his face, his mouth, his teeth, trying to find a crack, an injury, anything.

He didn’t find anything except a small sliver from one end to the other, parted. The bone was smooth as he traced his digit along the bottom of where his teeth should’ve been fused. But they weren’t. They had always been together, so unlike his brother’s, whose teeth could chew, clatter and move as he spoke. They just weren’t, and he was beginning to panic, digits deftly prying in their search for any kind of hint as to why.

A passing thought jolted through his mind - had Grillby’s heat done this? No, that was asinine to think. He always wondered about his brother’s odd saying: that skeletons were soft and cuddly. He’d always chalked it up to Papyrus’ weird speech habits. The part of his teeth revealed a second row and he slapped at his cheekbones, his breathing coming in hitched and panicked.

What the hell was happening to him!?

Sans took a moment to recover, turning his face away from the mirror. Another thought came to mind that this was another dream, and with a twist in his soul he realised that would have meant that he hadn’t confessed his feelings to the bartender after all. That everything leading up to that moment would be false and had never happened. He clutched at his shirt and shrunk down to the floor, squatting down with a hurt exhale.

He didn’t want to think that.

No, something else had to have happened. Besides, his face was a little smudged with ash.
He doubted Papyrus would know; he couldn’t ask him now even if he wanted, not with his cell phone broken. But leaving the house now was impossible with how he looked, and using a shortcut when he didn’t know his brother’s exact location was risky.

Cautiously, the skeleton stood up slowly, eyeing his reflection in the mirror before leaning forward again. Experimentally, he tugged his mandible down with one of his bony fingers, another unnerving, grinding in his skull sounding as the two rows of teeth slid over themselves in an overbite. Then he pushed his chin bone up to close it again, his eye lights the size of pinpricks at how wrong it seemed.

Sans attempted to clench his jaw together as he’d seen Papyrus do so many times before and grimaced at the subtle noise it produced. He certainly hoped it wasn’t anything he’d have to get used to anytime soon. He stood in front of the mirror and thought about it before working up the courage to open his mouth without any aid from his fingers. It took awhile, the movement unpractised and foreign as he did so. The row of bottom teeth curved inward out of view, unlike his brother’s, his cheekbones a flat mass on either side to hide them.

“so weird…” Sans muttered absently, then clapped his hands over his mouth in surprise at the movement. No, maybe this happened to skeletons, he wondered? And perhaps it was something that happened with him so late since his development, at least physically, was stunted in comparison to his younger brother? He sighed in exasperation, his mandible parting with the action and a shudder racked his frame at the sensation.

No, this was definitely weird.

The skeleton decided he didn’t have time to wait around for Papyrus to get home and he left the broken dish and spaghetti in the sink as he rounded the corner of the hall and thundered downstairs. It was perhaps the fastest he’d ever moved outside of nightmares; he darted to the kitchen to grab his jacket and throw it on, then simply teleported out of the house, not caring that he left all the lights on and the bathroom a more unusual mess.

Sans reappeared seconds later at the entrance to Waterfall, still running before he made another shortcut deeper into the caves.

Bridge seed room - off he went.

Then again - wishing room.

Once more - the glowing river en route to Undyne’s house.

And one more time, landing with a huff outside the river person’s ferry stop.

He bent over to calm down, his soul shuddering behind his ribs as he took a few moments for the wave of dizziness to pass. Usually he was more concentrated when he took successive shortcuts, but this time his mind was all over the place, much like his aim.

As casually as he could, he strolled down the corridor and up to the old turtle’s shop in the hole carved out like a door, knocking against the old rock surface in place of a bell. The skeleton had one hand covering his teeth as his eye lights darted around the shop, picking up a few items here and there before settling on the ancient and thick-skinned turtle.

Old Gerson was the oldest monster in their neck of the Underground, old enough to have lived and fought in the war against humans it was said, centuries past. He had been the legendary Hammer of Justice, a nomenclature Undyne had been inspired to take up to honour his bravery. Now he was a
shopkeeper and excavator of sorts, shuffling through letters he would forward to Snowdin and selling ‘neat junk’ to the locals that he found on his strolls through Waterfall.

So when Sans turned up without his brother, the old turtle guffawed, never serious when speaking to the skeletons.

“y’know, i, uh-” Sans had to stop himself, his mandible biting on every word. He would have to keep himself in check until this was sorted out, he realised in a dim panic.

“Whoa there!” Gerson greeted, his old feet shuffling against the ground below in a spunky swagger. “Been awhile, wahah! Papyrus’ brother, right?”

Dumbly, the skeleton nodded, still covering his teeth.

“i, uh, i got questions? about… skeletons. if you’re not busy? heh,” Sans tried speaking calmly, but his soul was thrumming in dread and terror and his voice sounded strained.

“C’mon in, kiddo, take up a chair. We’ll have ourselves a chat,” Gerson replied, his voice croaky yet loud and gritty. He fixed his good eye on Sans’ skull as the skeleton passed inside to sit on one of a few old lawn chairs that had been fixed with a bent coat hanger. “Questions about skeletons, eh? Been awhile, yes, a long time since then, I suppose. Anything you wanna know in particular?”

“uhh,” the smaller monster started, not really knowing what to say, “i guess… you tell me, pops?” Sans removed his hand from his face and gave his teeth a few clacks as his mandible moved up and down. Then he gave a halfhearted and embarrassed shrug.

“Eh? Isn’t this something you should be asking your parents about?” The turtle took a seat across from him on a sturdy-looking bench that supported his weight and thick shell. His single yellow eye kept fixed on the skeleton and he leaned closer, head cocked to one side as though it made it easier to listen.

Sans took a breath as though to answer that, but found he really didn’t have an excuse. To his recollection, it had always just been him and Papyrus. In fact, he couldn’t really remember if they were raised with guardians or not, come to think of it. “no parents. no other skeletons in the capital either, so uh… i gotta go off your memory, if that’s ok.”

The other monster’s good-natured laugh made him smile a little uneasily. Normally Sans wasn’t the one to ask him questions; it had always been Papyrus’ blistering curiosity that allowed him to drill questions to the old turtle with reckless abandon. Sans was the reserved one of the two, after all.

“It really should’ve been something you’d been taught in your stripes,” the old monster responded, but in his voice there was a subtle jab at him. “Unless you’re just wearing big boy clothes to hide you’re still a kid yourself! Wah ha ha!”

Sans felt himself frown defensively at that, the feeling of the downward tug strange, but definitely recognisable. He was definitely not a kid anymore, even if half the offspring in Snowdin outgrew him on a yearly basis.

“Well, maybe not so much anymore! Hah!”

Sans bristled at that, regretting coming here in a panic. But he huffed out a patient sigh and decided he might as well, since he was already here.
The conversation had been long - too long, Sans feared that Papyrus would be calling the entire Underground looking for him. He had learned much; mainly, that the old turtle was ancient, and that he didn’t remember a lot from his time with skeletons. But the information he was rewarded with his patience was enough to go on, for now.

Skeletons, from what the old monster recalled, could have 'frozen' expressions, pliable, or a mix of the two. Papyrus being an example of pliable, and Sans being a mix - apparently. It would change dynamics as a skeleton approached maturation, of when either stripes were shed or when the skeleton was ready for more intimate relationships with a mate.

Tastes were a way of signalling a skeleton's body that these changes were taking place, since there was little else to change with bone structure. There were other signals, but Old Gerson seemed to have conveniently forgotten them.

The way the other explained what he could was scholarly and condescending, but at the same time Sans couldn't help but be starkly embarrassed by the entire conversation, cowering with his face beaming in his hands throughout.

Sans had always been smaller than most, maybe a head or two shorter than most adults of similar makeup to him. But to think he was so late in maturing that Gerson made cracks at his expense. He felt embarrassed and flushed, but it would explain so much, especially since the experimental treatment in his youth. While he knew about all manners of other things, biology was admittedly not his strong suit. It would be something to talk with Alphys about.

Sans decided to walk the way back. The ferry wasn’t idling where it normally was and he felt exhausted from the emotions of the day; so much, he didn’t realise that someone had been calling after him until they caught and pulled on his hood.

Jerked back, Sans whirled on the spot, nearly losing his balance. His magic flared in a defensive spurt and he caught himself as he was met eye to eye with the resident fish lady. Her sharp teeth gleamed with the glow of illuminated water around them in something that could only be described as a snarl.

Sans withdrew his magic and huffed, offering a mild greeting but was cut off by Undyne’s raucous voice.

“Sans! I’ve been trying to contact you for DAYS!!! What gives!”

“my phone’s no longer of this world,” he drawled, feigning utmost sorrow almost theatrically. “no longer do i hear its sweet cries durin’ the night-”

“Cut the crap, bony boy! You missed-” Undyne counted off on her scarred, webbed fingers, “four shifts in Hotland since Papyrus told me about that!”

“hotland bites,” he retorted lamely, citing the other’s sentiments for the sweltering quarry perfectly.

“It SUCKS!!”

“i had an… escort mission, kinda. had to, uh, get cover on short-notice,” the skeleton replied lamely, avoiding the other’s look as thoughts of his time with Grillby snuck up on him. It had been an unofficial leave, after all.

She was staring at him plainly, then just shook her head with a frustrated snarl, “You could have
stopped by on the way!” Her tone was accusatory and biting with concern. “What if something happened? What if a HUMAN showed up?”

“don’t think they’d make it that far past the canine unit. pap can hold his own, too, at least until you showed up. ‘sides, we kinda sidestepped this area goin’ through,” the skeleton offered carefully, knowing he was treading on thin ice with Undyne enough as it was. “anyway, what’s up? can it wait until mornin’? i’m kinda tired and have a long walk still.”

She leaned in close to him suspiciously and sniffed, the slits in her face flaring in disgust. “Have you been DRINKING!?”

“nah. long story. still reelin’ from it.”

She leaned in close to him suspiciously and sniffed, the slits in her face flaring in disgust. “Have you been DRINKING!?”

Her eye flattened at the poor joke and he shrugged. “Fine! I got a few messages from Alphys in the lab and she wants to talk to you,” she grumbled, but her glance softened and skewed to one side as she mentioned her name, “said to come as soon as you got the message. Something about ‘weird readings’.”

Sans shuffled his shoes on the ground, tapping the toe idly with a distasteful grunt, “what, now?”

“Or tomorrow! Whatever. She said she’s been digging into it for the last couple weeks and wants your opinion on something. Maybe bring your phone so she can fix it. She’s AWESOME at that!” Her eye narrowed as she regarded his face with scrutiny, noticing the shift in expression.

“since you’re so concerned about missed shifts,” he drawled, scratching at his nasal cavity with feigned disinterest and pointedly ignoring her look, “why not ask my bro?”

She paused, eye widened at the prospect, then her expression shifted into a bizarre mix of uneasiness and gutsy bravado. “You know I can’t do that…”

“n’ why not? s’all he ever talks about. royal guard this, training that…” Sans huffed and gave her a wink, “ok well, maybe not officially. maybe like a temp? just until i get back. he’ll be good. scout’s honour.”

Undyne growled lowly as if the decision being made then was a bad idea. “I guess as long as it’s temporary-”

“sure.”

“I just don’t want him to get hurt, y’know? Guy’s got spunk, but… I dunno,” she snarled indecisively again and shrugged, her gills flaring at her neck. “I guess! Temporary shifts, just this one time - seeing as he’s already done it FOR you. As a favour to Alphys, since you bein’ there would help her out.”

“ok,” he automatically replied with a sigh. Admittedly, he was grateful the renowned Spear of Justice didn’t press her curiosity of his new ‘look’. He watched as she stalked off in the direction of her house, before she rounded to face him again, pointing at him with a flair.

“Oh yeah!! She said bring your old notes!”

Sans paused before realising that other than Alphys, no one else really knew the details of his assistant work at the lab. The tenseness left his body and he let out an inaudible sigh of relief with that, then he shrugged and added, “ok.”
Hey uh…… accidental plot happened. Don't you hate it when old people lord over information you need and basically make you a frustrated, embarrassed mess? Sans too. EXCUSE ME, Gerson! I need specifics on uh, general skeletal anatomy… *coughs*
**Negatives**

**Chapter Summary**

Sans gets so wound up after trying to ask Grillby out that he shortcuts into uncharted territory, skipping his cardinal rule wholly. Alphys is puzzled over the negative photon readings her radar is spewing out, and discovers Sans’ maturation, much to his discomfort.

**Chapter Notes**

mild panic attack warning

He didn’t want to, but he forced himself. In fact, in order to make sure he was well-rested, he retired as soon as he got home before mumbling to Papyrus to wake him a little earlier than usual. This was after his brother’s predictable overreaction to his mandible and the stench of whiskey that permeated his hoodie.

He made a big show about the state of his jacket - soot and burned patches along with some singed fur. Then he gave something of a suspicious glance Sans’ way, ending up looking fairly smug about something. Sans decided to ignore the look, feeling his soul flood with the memory of what happened at the bar.

Reluctantly and not without an argument, he surrendered his jacket so it could be laundered, something inside of him twinging as he realised a little too late that the scent from Grillby’s would be lost in the wash.

The brief checkup Papyrus had subjected him to was painful, to say the least. The barrage of questions and banter back and forth about the mess in the washroom, along with the discovery of his unfused mandible was admittedly a weary interaction. It took far longer for his brother to be satisfied that he hadn’t injured himself, but had a bunch of questions that Sans felt he couldn’t answer. At least, not immediately; he felt far too embarrassed and ashamed for even the most cursory of explanations.

So after he evaded the questions about his evening, Sans retired to his bedroom and quietly closed the door. It felt like ages since he’d been there last; every dirty sock was in its same place, the whirling dervish was as whimsically pointless as ever… The only difference was that Papyrus had put his slippers in his room, just next to his dresser.

It felt so long since he’d slept in his own bed. The day had been long and tiring and he’d gotten back late. The interrogation had eaten up a few hours as well. He barely had the energy to kick off the shoes, but managed to before sinking back against the mattress. Without his hoodie, he definitely could see the glow under his shirt, subtle yet there.

Sans’ grin tugged slightly at the memory of the lulling heat against his soul and sat up to summon it. It was small, more fragile and paler than it used to be. As always, there were small, barely visible
stress marks, like scars. It wasn’t what he was focused on, as much as it discomforted him to have it out in the first place. It was the soothing glow it produced every time he thought of his friend. It pulsed radiantly with his sentiments and Sans pressed it back to his breastbone, returning it home where it could rest safely.

He would have to remember to visit the bar in the morning before he left. With pleasant feelings nestled inside, the skeleton actually slept deeply and well.

True to form, his brother would wake him with the first light, brandishing his freshly laundered hoodie. Sans groaned sleepily as the jacket was flung on top of him and absently pawed at the air as Papyrus opened the window to let the first beams of magical dawn hit over Sans’ skull.

“five-mur-mins…”

“SANS, YOU LAZYBONES!! GET UP.”

“dun wanna go to school…”

“OH, FOR THE LOVE OF—... SANS, PLEASE. YOU’VE BEEN OUT OF SCHOOL FOR 97 YEARS. YOU TOLD ME TO WAKE YOU. SO THAT IS WHAT I, YOUR BROTHER, AM GOING TO DO!”

The smaller skeleton groaned as though in pain, knowing it to be true. Why did he do this to himself? He leaned up off the mattress, his clothes rumpled and mind barely registering as awake.

“m’up.”

“YOU KNOW…” Papyrus moved to sit beside his brother on the bed and patted his shoulder. Perhaps a little rougher than warranted, but he wanted to ensure Sans would stay awake. “THIS HAS PROBABLY BEEN THE LONGEST YOU’VE EVER WENT WITHOUT BAD DREAMS?”

Sans dozed on the spot before tilting his skull back to rouse himself. His posture remained slouched with his hoodie hanging off one of his arms. He cradled his chin in one hand as he hummed softly, “that so..?”

“Yes. Rightly so! And it’s great to hear! I could not be more relieved! I have breakfast on downstairs. So hurry up and get ready.”

“ok.”

Zzz…

“SANS! I SAID WAKE UP!!”

The smaller of the two finally pulled himself out of bed. Automatically, he shifted his feet into the slippers and pulled on the hoodie, leaving it open for once. It slouched off his shoulders as Sans dragged himself downstairs, bones creaking and popping with every step. Once he reached the kitchen, Sans was pulled from the doorway to his usual seat and forcibly sat down, still half-asleep.

Although Papyrus was always an early riser, he had more energy than usual. Sans regarded him in his drowsy stupor before finally yawning, his jawbone doing that odd little click with the unpractised movement and he arched his spine with a series of pops and satisfying snaps.
“sup, bro.”

It took all of three seconds for his younger brother to exclaim excitedly, slamming his fists down on the kitchen table and making the silverware rattle in the bowls. Sans didn’t jump, but opened a socket with the reaction.

“UNDYNE! SHE CALLED ME!! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, AM NOW AN UNOFFICIAL, TEMPORARY, HONORARY SENTRY… OFFICIALLY!!”

Sans grinned, slumping onto the table. Go figure that Papyrus would get so excited over something as trivial as a cover shift; one orchestrated by Sans, since Undyne hadn’t exactly granted him leave. Still, it wasn’t as though anything would happen; he didn’t have the same eerie premonitions lately that he had weeks ago. He supposed it had been his depressive mood that affected him. Sans made an effort to grin sleepily at his brother in support.

“congrats, bro. where’s your station?”

“SNOWDIN FOREST! NATURALLY.”

“of course. s’nowhere better suited for you. you’re the best for the job,” Sans agreed candidly as he pushed himself from off the tabletop. “my cool bro, you’ve done it. i’m super proud o’ you.”

“FINALLY, SOME RECOGNITION…” His brother theatrically imposed a fist to the ceiling, cackling with glee. “PERHAPS - DARE I SAY IT - IT WILL BE THE DAY A HUMAN ARRIVES!”

“that’d be right up your alley,” Sans replied with another yawn, then looked down to the noodly breakfast his brother had lovingly concocted with a bit of an internal struggle.

Papyrus made subtle jabs at his eating habits throughout breakfast, urging him along and giving humorous demonstrations with his oatmeal on how to properly chew with teeth. Sans still felt injured at the infantile way his brother was treating him, but soon left the house with a rucksack of his old notes from the basement, snacks, and his broken cell phone.

Admittedly, he was hesitant to go to Grillby’s in the morning. Usually the bar was closed so early, but he had a feeling that he couldn’t just leave for a few days without trying to say something. So anxiously, he walked up to the door, which was locked, and paused before rapping his fist on the frame.

He noticed how stupidly nervous he’d become during the wait and shuffled on the spot. Sans had opted to keep to his slippers from now on - the shoes were nice, but he preferred to be comfortable. The slippers provided that satisfying squish in the snow as he stood. He waited longer before realising that there would be no answer to the door. He turned, his soul thudding harshly behind his ribs when he figured it was just as well, since he didn’t quite know what to say to his friend.

It was then that he heard the door open, the subtle jingle of chimes sounding as the fire monster came into view. He regarded Sans for a moment before his flames arranged into something of a warm greeting, mouth parted in a glowing smile that reached his bright eyes. He didn’t say anything, but watched as Sans stared, then stumble over the beginning of several sentences like a fool.

“i’m, uh,” the skeleton started, digging into one pocket with one hand while shouldering his bag in the other. He was careful to keep his mandible somewhat closed as he spoke, so much that he was distracted, “i’m… i’m gonna be gone for a few days. i just wanna… wanted to say. i mean,” he faltered, eye lights settling on the other’s visage, then down to Grillby’s mouth before he tore away.
his gaze, remembering the intimate moment they’d shared the previous evening.

“…Didn’t realise you were so articulate in the morning,” the other breathed, a hint of teasing in his voice as he pulled the door open wider to lean against the frame.

Sans felt embarrassment flood through his bones at that and pulled the hood of his jacket over his orbits a little, grinning from one side to the other. “maybe, when i get back… me n’you-” he mumbled the trail end of his thoughts into something hopelessly inaudible.

Grillby stayed silent, although his demeanour shifted in subtle surprise at the implication. Sans peeked from under the hood and caught the way the flames at the other’s face fluttered gold. He felt a little more nervous, if that was even possible.

“when i get back…” the skeleton started again, his courage tentatively building, “we… i mean.” He stopped, realising how flushed he felt and how Grillby’s smile had spread the more he spoke. “…maybe…” He let the sentence hang; he couldn’t do it.

Grillby couldn’t help but grin more, watching the way the other shuffled from one foot to the other. He liked the way Sans was flustered, how he hid and grinned in such a bashful way. That is perhaps the reason why he leaned forward, boldly grabbing each of the drawstrings of Sans’ jacket with one hand and pulling him closer so he could whisper against the side of his skull.

Before he did so, he paused, his smile curling in delight as he began to hear the subtle clatter of bones and a startled inhale as his flames fluttered against him. The fire monster’s soul trembled softly in response, then he murmured a breath’s sigh away from Sans’ face; “Take your time.”

It was about as much as Sans could handle. Before he could get another stuttered word out and only after Grillby had let go of the drawstrings, he fled. He didn’t even know exactly why, apart from being so hopelessly worked up by the gesture that his magic immediately pooled inside of his rib cage and itched to break out. He teleported away, leaving the fire monster to laugh quietly in triumph. He rather liked that reaction, although speculated he would likely have to coax the other into staying next time.

It took Sans several moments to calm down enough before he attempted to figure out where he was. Although starts and stops were important, he had broken his own rule - acted out of impulse and now he wasn’t quite sure where he ended up. There was a bare knoll that stretched on for several yards, the caves’ glistening walls faintly illuminated by small glowing mushroom caps and gnats, but significantly darker than what was normal.

Apart from that, the clearing beyond was a little out of place. He groped around in the darkness until he was able to find his bearings, the cool humidity of the corridor conflicting with the gentle ache of warmth against his face. Sans looked around, his soul still thundering wildly with Grillby’s tease, yet with trepidation as well.

He didn’t know where this was. The cave system looked like Waterfall. The plants were the same; the echoing sighs of water sloshing in the distance familiar enough. Yet something gave him the impression that he wasn’t supposed to be here.

The skeleton shouldered his bag uncomfortably, eye lights searching the corridor as the flustered feeling in his soul melted away into a lingering, familiar malaise. He attempted to collect himself, to gather magic throughout his bones to attempt another shortcut. The same creeping sensation ebbed into him as he’d felt at the CORE and his flux faltered again, fizzing and sputtering out like a flame
in a gust of wind.

He shuddered and suddenly felt cold. Or at least, the exact polar opposite to heat, he figured. His legs felt weakened as though strained, but he pushed himself to walk down the corridor. Unless he could figure out where he was, Sans doubted he’d be able to continue. It made a twisted and horrible thread of dread curl throughout his being, extinguishing any lingering heat and happiness he felt earlier.

Where exactly was this place?

He had to be walking for what felt like hours. He was shaking. His breaths were hitched and starting to get panicked. His footsteps were uneven as his hand brushed against the corridor’s walls, feeling the glide and jutt of ore and crystals as he passed. The sound of water in the distance was becoming quieter, signalling that he was wandering further away.

Waterfall always had water - it was its namesake. Sans eventually stopped, his bones having rattled the entire way and he felt exhausted. He sat against the wall, drawing his knees against his chest and bowed his skull into his arms with a strangled swear.

“just… just a bad dream,” he breathed softly, trying to fill himself with confidence and not the overwhelming anxiety pressing inward from all around him. “c’mon, sans. pull yourself together.” He hated the way he was becoming unraveled over a bit of darkness and unfamiliarity, but this was nothing like his normal Waterfall. In all the time he’d spent here, he hadn’t heard even a whisper of any other soul. There weren’t any echoes from flowers that normally littered Waterfall.

After a few moments, Sans picked through his rucksack in the dark. Papyrus had packed him some snacks, wrapped in kerchiefs and napkins with a pattern he couldn’t quite make out even in the glow of his magic. Although his brother seemed to enjoy giving him nothing but pasta lately, Sans was relieved to find some kind of granola slab. It wasn’t unpleasant, but he couldn’t understand the taste with what limited experience he had with the new sensation. He just hoped it was enough to get him through this.

After his admittedly nerve wracking meal, Sans pushed himself up and turned around. He couldn’t shake the feeling of something close by, of the clear-cut dread that persisted him as he walked. His steps became faster as the feeling pressed against him from all sides and he clenched his teeth to keep them from chattering, his soul’s magic twisting and flicking subtle shades of cyan around him in his agitated state.

If anything, it helped to illuminate the path. The corridor was familiar and yet not, but he saw something in the distance. He grew hesitant the closer he got to it, realising what it was.

A door.

A simple, granite door that looked molded shut. Old dead moss covered the seams and everything in his being screamed at him to run away. Yet at the same time as he approached it, Sans couldn’t help the overpowering urge to go for the doorknob.

He resisted, the feeling conflicting with his desires. But he should open it. Had to, even. He had to run. Whatever was beyond pulled at his existence like something lost, wanting to be found.

He didn’t want to. He wanted to run.

But… he had to open the door.

“stars help me,” his voice shakily whispered. His eye lights shrunk to small specks in his sockets
and he tensed; he felt like he couldn’t control himself. His phalanges trembled as they reached for the knob. The old worn metal was again, oddly familiar as his bones grazed against its surface.

A warbling noise was echoing from beyond the door and Sans felt an immediate sickness as something akin to static electricity filled the air, heavy and hard. His magic continued to arc and bubble around him erratically, throwing gold and cyan against the grey door in a flicker of terrified, uncontrolled surges. He stared in horror as his fingers clasped over the door knob and when his wrist turned slowly.

He shook, every bone in his body trembling as the door swung inward without a sound. The disgusting noise of what he could only imagine had to be thousands of warped, twisted and imploring voices continued, sending another chill through him.

Finally, he was able to withdraw his hand. Immediately it went to his chest, shoulders hunched up in fear as his widened sockets sought out anything in the darkness. The glow from his magic was engulfed by whatever was behind the door, as though an insatiable thirst longed to pluck every speck of light from the area and drain it away.

The feeling that something or someone was watching him persisted, and Sans took a fearful step backward away from the door. His magic twisted painfully along his spine and he couldn’t help the strangled gasp that escaped him as he took another step backward.

Cautiously, he allowed himself a step forward. The pain subsided. He chanced a glance behind him but saw nothing. It seemed like going forward was the only option.

Inhaling another shuddering breath, Sans stepped forward once more. His arm stretched in front of him to brace against the open door. As soon as his fingers brushed the old granite surface, he felt his soul lurch sickeningly again and he hunched over, dizziness flooding his senses. It brought him down to his knees and he panted, bracing himself against the frame of the door as it swung open without a single creak to break the silence.

Sans stared widely into the darkness, the cut of voices sudden and shrill with no sound of echo. His magic’s light had been snuffed out and he couldn’t see a thing, but the sudden scrape of static filled the inside of his skull.

His hands automatically flew to each side of it as the long tendrils of sound etched into the innermost sides of his mind and he bit back a scream.

*Fall. Lost. Found.*

*Bid. Curl. Meld.*

Sans inhaled sharply, willing everything in him to move. It took everything he had to vault to his feet again, blindly turning to the direction of the door. The overwhelming ache his soul was subjected to pinched at him, making him shudder with a pained sigh. As fast as his legs could carry him, he passed the doorway and dropped out of the dark room that threatened to swallow him whole.

In an instant, he landed in a heap; every fibre of him felt suffocated. At some point, he must have covered his sockets with his hands, the haunting burn of a scored white face in the shrouds of his orbits along with a haunting key of static. He trembled, bones clattering together in a twisted, ugly symphony of terror and utmost revulsion. He couldn’t help it, just sank lower to the cold ground with a shuddered cough, his breaths catching on every exhale.

Thankfully, the infinite darkness stayed behind the door.

Eventually it became easier to breathe. His magic manifested in a rush like a bursting dam and he clutched at his bag in a deathlike grip before very clearly envisioning where he wanted to go. If he could, Sans didn’t want to appear anywhere in Waterfall anymore.

No, he’d had enough.

It took awhile to look for a fissure in reality, so much that he had begun to doubt if this really was reality. In fact, he had to drag himself to the opposite side of the corridor to calm down, furthest from the door. As it became easier to get a hold of himself, Sans finally found a crack to exploit and stumbled through, his slippers landing clumsily in the red, dusty earth next to a gurgling ravine.

Uneasily, he waited. Opening one socket hesitantly before opening both, Sans recognised the area of the ferry stop with a loud huff of relief, leaning back against the quarry wall and shrinking down against it to sit. Suddenly every particle that composed him felt weakened, the compilation of magical adrenaline finally running dry.

He would rest there. Get his bearings again. He pulled his knees towards his chest and buried his skull in his arms, drinking in the light of the floes and the heavy sounds of magma and chatter in the distance from passersby.

What the hell was that?

At some point, Sans had fallen to exhaustion. He woke some time later disorientated and sore, but at least it was still in Hotland. The rolling heat from being so close to the earth’s core made him feel a little better. It reminded him of his friend, and he was loathe to leave it as he headed towards the lab, where it would be air conditioned.

It appeared it was either too early for him to be expected, or the royal scientist was enraptured in cartoons. Sans stood outside the large building expectantly, staring up at one of the cameras posted on the building that was aimed down at him. He realised the little red light that normally indicated it was on was not lit, and he sighed heavily, rapping his bony digits against the metal door.

Several moments passed before he began to grow restless, but he didn’t want to attempt using a shortcut again. He was still rattled from the earlier encounter, not fully understanding it. Maybe it was something that Alphys could help him figure out?

Even more time passed and while Sans found he now liked the heat, he disliked standing for very long. Even though he had napped, he didn’t feel truly rested and still felt on edge. The words in his
skull didn’t make sense, so he went over them in his mind, repeating them like some odd jumble. *Fall. Lost. Found…*

A thought came to mind; that cracked face. He thought he’d seen it before, but it was as mysterious as the area he’d been trapped in. He could affix no memory as to *why* it was familiar, though.

Sans didn’t like the implication his mind had that he knew it, or once knew it. It was both familiar, yet hauntingly foreign. He parsed his memory for the vague, disturbing smile, coming up blank as he waited. The skeleton soon was agitated enough to rap his fingers against the solid steel door again, this time hearing the flurry of footsteps approaching and a voice echo from just behind it.

With the hiss of mechanics and the door finally opened, Sans stepped inside, giving the other an uneasy grin. “heya, alph. long time.”

“Sure… has,” the other replied, matching the discomfort more readily than Sans ever could. “Made the trip ok?”

“piece ‘o cake,” Sans lied automatically as he followed his former colleague through the hall to the computer area. It was just as he remembered… well, maybe not. It was a hell of a lot messier than he last recalled, not that he minded. “so what’s the hubbub, bub?”

Alphys started speaking before the sentence was aborted, then she tried again, her claws dancing over each other in a nervous gesture. Sans didn’t point it out, but she seemed more agitated than what was normal. He moved over to the other side of the workspace and set his bag down with his notes and sat on the floor next to it, content to rest for awhile in the safe area.

“must’ve been important, to get fishie to order me here.”

“Undyne,” Alphys corrected, then took the chair next to him in front of the large computer screen. Papers were everywhere; maps, blueprints and graphs made a haphazard blanket across the floor in seemingly unorganised piles. “And… and yes, there might have been a, uh. An… eensie tiny little problem?”

“like what.”

“Your… your security code, a couple weeks ago,” she replied, flipping through a few stray papers that had red circles drawn over it, “h-here-“ She handed them over for Sans to parse through with a frown. “I mean, you worked there! At the Central Origins Resource-“

“just say the core, alph, no one calls it that anymore,” Sans interrupted, pouring over the graphs. She stopped, avoided saying anything more, but openly stared. The skeleton felt the look and tried to ignore it, realising that the girl was partially the reason for his late maturation - and the reason he still existed, for that matter. “what’s up.”

“When… when did you-?” She gasped, as though the very notion was a breakthrough of some kind. Sans felt himself shrink down, dismissing the reaction and tapping on the graph with a single digit. It was a grid line layout of Waterfall, and on another larger paper, the CORE. Certain areas were circled in red marker and he figured out what they were immediately. The Waterfall ones, anyway.

“had to move around a bit. had a tag-along,” he evasively explained, taking a moment to scratch at his skull. Then he felt the curious, prying poke of magic against his soul and whirled his skull to glare pointedly at Alphys, who looked at him sheepishly. “do you *mind*?”

Her laugh was excusing, yet still nervous. She was the only one who he’d allowed to check him, having known about the circumstances of his soul since it took a nosedive ages ago. Sans sighed,
burying his chin in one hand in resignation.

“so… everything in order?”

“You’re… h-healthy!” Alphys reported a little too eagerly. Something in her eyes just didn’t match up, though. Sans looked inward at the singular digit and hid a grimace. It was lower than before; that… thing, whatever it was, had lowered his resistance to its original singularity. “No, I mean… after you quit, you stop… stopped coming around, so I, uh,” she stopped, tapping her claws together, “I never really knew if you were… you know. Ok?”

“only reason i’m here is ‘cause of you,” the skeleton shrugged, sore from the memory - or what remained of it. “don’t think too much about it, alph. i don’t. i just hate travellin’. - so about this stuff…”

He pointed to the graphs and grids, and started explaining what had led to the analmolic reports, without mentioning who had tagged along. He was more than aware of her staring whenever he spoke, the way her eyes would catch his movements with curiosity and scientific excitement. The skeleton realised as he reasoned through it, that every circle corresponded with every time he had to warp with Grillby. Every time, except at the CORE, where he’d first felt something he could only describe as a hiccup.

He decided to leave that bit out; additionally, the strange area in Waterfall. At least, for now. He needed to figure it out for himself before worrying the other. After awhile, they poured over the combined research papers and over the hours Sans had introduced his old notes too.

“O-oh!” Alphys exclaimed as she picked up a paper that, admittedly, looked like it had been balled up and smoothed out about forty times or more. “Wow, that’s… it’s been awhile since I’ve had to read cipher!”

“lemme see,” Sans gestured for the paper and squinted at it. “oh. wow, me too. what is this, college stuff?” He was scratching his jaw again in bemusement as he read over the paper and the odd symbols that were scrawled across it. Alphys was staring at him again. He caught the look and sighed in resignation. “well, ya might as well go ahead and ask, girl.”

A rush of crimson spread across Alphys’ face and she awkwardly gestured to… well, all of him. Sans lofted a brow bone, then realised the movement and clapped a hand over his face in exasperation.

“seems when you said the, uh, ‘treatment’… delayed some stuff. maybe it wasn’t as permanent as we thought. and maybe that stuff is comin’ up now.”

“I knew that!” she huffed and rocked back on the chair, her tail flicking in thought. “I could have… told you that.”

“if i had come back’, yeah, i know.” Sans idly tapped a pen against his teeth, then opened the part to test the lid between them. It was still weird.

“From… from a purely scientific standpoint-”

Sans paused and his eye lights dragged over to Alphys as she spoke.

“-do you think… do you think maybe..?” She grinned and spread her claws out questionably to the area where all monsters housed their souls, his chest.

“oh.” Sans let the pen drop from his mouth and he sighed. She was right; he had avoided this. But, if
there was anyone he could trust most, it was definitely Alphys. As uncomfortable as it was for him to
be so open with his fragile soul, Sans pulled down the toggle of his jacket and coaxed it out of
hiding. “didn’t change much since the last you’ve seen it, I guess.”

Alphys’ eyes were glinting and she straightened in her chair, her glasses nearly tumbling from her
snout and her toothy grin wide with a nasally cackle.

“Are… are you kidding!! Look at it! It’s…” she trailed off, but couldn’t repress the reverence and
excitement in her voice even as Sans gave her an inquisitive look. “I-I mean, look at it!”

Sans did. Apart from the cyan nimbus that had to have been there for the past few weeks (or had it
been months..?) everything looked the same…

“Oh… oh boy! Sans, you lucky guy!”

The cyan flush pulsed brighter as realisation dawned on him and he faltered, covering the
culmination of his being and pressing it back behind his ribs. He was embarrassed at the attention
and at a complete loss for words when the other slapped both of his shoulders excitedly, unable to
hide her obvious glee as she hopped off her chair and danced around him.

“You HAVE to tell me, Sans! How long has it..? Oh gosh… This is… this is so exciting. I’m so
happy for you!!”

He attempted to dodge peculiarities, but found since Old Gerson’s limited memory on skeletons had
dark pockets, he relented somewhat. Alphys was the brains behind monster physicality, biology and
the soul, after all.

He didn’t name Grillby, but every time he said ‘someone’, he felt the bashful flush amplify
considerably. Alphys’ reactions to his observances of his body made him feel anxious, but she
reassured him it was purely from a friendly biological standpoint. She explained different things to
him with patience and a little jittery, considering it was all pretty mundane things.

“This… this is great news, I… I didn’t think that, I mean-” She couldn’t resist a series of pleased
claps when Sans had relented and given her an encouraging grin. He was well past embarrassment at
this point and seeing the lizard lady so excited for things other than anime was a pleasant change.

That’s when he decided to bring up another thing; “so, I guess I’ve developed a sense for taste with
this whole-” he stopped, gesturing to his mouth with an almost florid motion, “-i mean, I’m not used
to the whole ‘chewin’ thing, either.”

“That’s incredibly interesting!” the other agreed, her eyes piercing as she studied his skull. “Usually
monsters don’t bother with that, since we just turn what we eat into, um, energy. Wait… one, one
second! I’ll try to find something.”

Sans was left alone with the mess of reports while she hobbled away to her fridge, pulling select
items from it before rushing back. There were a few things he recognised. Instant noodles, pre-made
in a styrofoam cup, sliced veggies, some individually wrapped bonbons and a squishy-looking…

Curious, the skeleton watched as she prepared the items over the reports, not caring that crumbs
scattered everywhere. They were mostly read over, would be stored later and never looked at again
until monster kind started to eat garbage. The two were in their element, after all.
“Try this,” Alphys unwrapped one of the treats and offered it to her guest with a giddy grin, “That is, tastes are different. Chewing might be a reflex of some sort, since it’s so… so late? But if you’re only just starting, then… then maybe you’re still? Learning? Maybe? It should stop once you get used to things.”

“‘maybe’ is definitely the most scientific word you could’ve used there, alph.” Sans tested the hard candy on his teeth before grimacing with an audible grunt, pulling it away. He didn’t like the hard things, he realised, but didn’t taste anything from it.

“Oh, hush,” she replied, sounding almost confident as she waved at him to stop, and for her to continue; “How… how about this, then?” She stuck out her tongue, the appendage thin and long and pink with a fork at the end. Sans stared at her, perplexed at the display. “Try it!”

“don’t got one.”

Alphys rolled her eyes and sucked her tongue back into her mouth, “*Make* one then, mister ‘anything is possible’ physics guy!”

Sans hunched into his hood with a sigh, not really knowing where to start. He supposed it was kind of like his bone attacks; summoning one, he watched the process as his magic coiled into small particles of matter, calcium and structure. Alphys stayed quiet, but kept a watchful eye as he experimented with his magic, only to dispel the bone again.

Then he focused his magic again, unsure, expression fixed on the floor between them as the flux flooded the empty space of his mouth. It was a peculiar feeling; a soft, thicker substance than what his body was made of. It swirled behind his teeth as he didn’t really know how to handle it or where to place it so that it lay comfortably in his mouth. With Alphys’ expectant look, he yielded the tongue forward; the same cyan of his magic, warm, and a little wet.

It was definitely a new sensation, he noted. As the royal scientist gave him an anxious thumbs up of approval, he prodded the tongue between his teeth with his fingers, like a child just discovering their hands. He then recognised the action and flushed in embarrassment, the other giving in to a giggle.

“this is weird.”

“You… you’ve never even tried before??” Alphys was aghast.

Sans pulled his tongue back into his mouth, his fingertips catching the tip with a tug and he hummed slightly in concentration. “nah. when you said my health would be affected due to the, uh… ‘treatment’,” he hated saying the word, but it was easier than saying ‘DETERMINATION’, like it was a boil ready to burst, “i kinda put it aside and focused on other things, y’know? so what if i wouldn’t be able to breed later. always seemed like too much work. `sides, i had other projects to keep busy with.”

He saw the register of guilt on Alphys’ face as the magnitude settled over them. It remained unspoken between them that she felt like a lot of things went wrong back then, and when it was speculated that his soul was too unstable to mate, Sans at the time had merely shrugged. With a soft sigh, Sans reached over to pat her scaly hands, which wrung in front of her. He knew she hid a lot of the grief the whole mess that started after the initial injection took place, which was why he imagined it was why she holed herself up in Hotland since. The girl really needed a confidence boost, or at least some comfort.

“hey. i mean it. if not for you, i wouldn’t even be alive,” Sans gave her an assuring smile with a gentle shrug, “so… whatever this is that’s happenin’ now? just means it’s progress, and there’s still
hope. i’m… just gonna need help studyin’ up, since i skipped those courses.” He grimaced awkwardly. “y’got somethin’ that doesn’t make me feel like i’m sportin’ stripes? or do i gotta run to the library on the way home and hope no one notices i’m checkin’ out books for toddlers?”

She seemed to cheer up with that, at least.
Echoes

Chapter Summary

After a memory resurfaces of when he worked at the CORE, Sans goes around fixing Alphys' cameras in Waterfall and Snowdin after getting his cell phone fixed. Alphys proves to be a great confidant and he finally talks a little. On break, he goes to Grillby's and the fire monster proves to be a little more forward, much to the excitement of the other patrons. Seems like a bet was made.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Different ways of viewing his body were making him less comfortable with the idea it was changing. Alphys had explained some notions of ectobiology and how non-fleshy monsters conjured necessary parts, and given him a few satisfactory college-level books on monster biology. Since he’d been unable to for the longest time, and simply absorbed food as a means of replenishment, food now, admittedly, was like a whole new daunting experience.

He tried a few things, since he wasn’t necessarily hungry, but he knew right away he didn’t like particularly crunchy or hard things. As it was regarded as juvenile, he stopped himself from chewing outright, as difficult as it was. He seemed to enjoy sweet things, even something called a ‘chili bun’, described as ‘spicy’. Alphys had explained the terms to him in relation to his reactions to the different tastes, much to her excitement.

He’d gone down to the basement for the chips in the vending machine, just to try ‘salty’. It was darker than he remembered, but Alphys sadly assured him that it resulted from a CORE surge earlier that month. With a twinge, Sans realised it was likely around the time he and Grillby passed through.

Deeper into the lab, he consoled her about her failures after The Dogs made an appearance, the long haunting drone of at least six canines echoing through the dripping mass as it eventually retreated. Even with how hesitant she was for him to go down there, Sans already knew about the experiments. Her Determination notes were everywhere, her research into making an artificial soul, even a few things he’d left in the lab after his treatment still hung around.

The place gave him an unsettling feeling, as it reminded him of his own weakness, and no doubt Alphys hers. The place hadn’t changed at all since the visit after his accident; he could even pick out the equipment used and bed he rested in during the lizard’s frantic search to stop his health from rolling down. It was an uncomfortable assessment, confronting his past.

“i kinda need a minute, alph,” the skeleton revealed after wandering further into the lab with Alphys on his heels, much more sombre than before.

“I… I understand. If anyone else visits… don’t be afraid of them. They… they won’t hurt you.”

“i know.”

She lingered for a moment longer, watching as he shuffled further into the lab, towards the area the DT extraction machine was housed. Sans felt smaller the further into the lab he went. He just needed
a moment to think, to go over what had happened to him since it had been so long since he’d allowed himself to.

It turned out being in the basement was more emotionally draining than he had expected it to be. It wasn’t long before he gave up the idea of inward reflection in such a place before he started back, every bit of him shaking.

That was when he saw it. A small pocket book, green in colour and worn from over the years. It had gathered the grit and grime of the lab’s basement and he shook it off, the cover and contents full of more cipher code. He frowned at it, flipped through a few pages before he realised it was filled with old notes, but in a hand he didn’t recognise. Did Alphys avoid coming down here so often that she wouldn’t have realised this was here? That couldn’t be right…

He pocketed it and went back upstairs, hunched into his jacket. He guessed he’d have to figure it out later.

When he arrived sooner than she expected, Alphys gave him a worried smile, looking like she was on the verge of posing a question. She didn’t though, much to Sans’ relief. Instead, he went to his bag and pulled out his broken phone for her to fix, while he went over the reports.

“I have a, a request, since you’re here,” Alphys said after a couple hours of silence between them both. Sans’ movements had slowed and he was looking groggier the longer he tried to puzzle things together in his mind, and had started to fall asleep as a result. “Some of my cam… cameras aren’t working. There are a few I can’t get to easily to repair.”

Sans opened a socket and shifted his jaw in his hand to glance at her, not looking very awake.

“When I’m, um, done fixing your phone, maybe you could… do your engineering magic on them?” She gave a toothy, anxious grin at him. “I can’t monitor the Ruins’ doors, Snowdin, or most of Waterfall now. If a human came, they’d… they’d catch us all off guard. That surge really did a number on, um, my equipment. But I have all the coordinates.”

“Sure. Can check it out,” the skeleton replied after a stifled yawn.

“You look… tired.”

“It’s just my face, alph.”

“It’s also getting late,” she replied quietly, eyes dropping to the disassembled phone on the desk in front of her. “I’ll bring up a futon for you to, um, sleep on.”

“It’s ok. Can sleep here just fine.”

“At… at least a pillow then?”

Sans only hummed indifferently. Both sockets were closed now and his breathing had regulated. That told the other he was falling asleep, and any noises he made from then on were mindless and not to be taken seriously.

He slept somewhat restlessly throughout the night. Not because of the amalgamates he knew were in the basement under them; the area brought to surface memories he’d long since put away. It interrupted his sleep like a drop of water echoing in a large empty room, the creep of memory seeping into his subconscious via dream-lengths.
Sans was being carried, jostled against a stronger, taller body. His own was sapped of strength and pressed so tightly against the other’s torso that he felt as though his ribs would snap under the pressure. A high pitched whine echoed throughout his bones and into his skull, and most of his right arm felt as though the magic inside had deadened when it made contact with the magic-matrix of the CORE.

[* 0.9/758 HP *]

It felt like he was sinking.

*Hold on, brother!* He heard Papyrus’ desperate voice above his skull, lingering between the edge of consciousness and crackling of magical interference.

*We’re almost there! Just stay awake, Sans, you can do it. You’re doing great—*

[* 0.8/576 HP *]

He had been folding in and out of awareness since being pulled onto the scaffolding by his fellow coworkers. He barely recalled a hasty phone call being made on his behalf to his brother in New Home. He didn’t remember what had struck him to lean forward and attempt to retrieve what had fallen. All he knew was the emotion of panic, of impenetrable loss and fright as he lurched forward into the glowing mass below.

He had reached his arm into the volatile energy, to attempt to bring something back.

[* 0.7/439 HP *]

(It *must* have been important…)

Something in him fuzzed over again like static, muffling Papyrus’ shuddering, panicked breaths and the swelter of Hotland’s climate around them. He could still feel it, but it was fleeting and corroded. All he could really focus on was whatever jostling his younger brother subjected him to as his heavy footsteps kicked up red dirt behind him.

[* 0.6/369 HP *]

(…important enough for him to care about losing it, whatever it was.)

He came back to consciousness after a brief lull. He was someplace definitely cooler. The arm in which the CORE’s flux stripped away his magic felt heavy and every part of him felt loose, as though the energy keeping him together was crumbling apart. His breaths came in soft, jerking gasps as he heard Papyrus snivelling over him.

He had always been a bit of a crybaby growing up. He only wished he had the strength enough to push words past his teeth instead of each laboured breath that threatened to consume his life. He felt so heavy, knew that whatever it was, got him good. And he couldn’t even tell his brother that he loved him and that he should stay strong for him, one last time.

[* 0.5/242 HP *]

(He wondered why he couldn’t remember what fell…)

He felt Papyrus trembling, bones clattering through his lab coat as he tipped his skull against his own. The sounds he was making broke his heart. He wanted to tell him to be strong, that… he would be ok without him. He would learn to. He had to.
He didn’t want to think these things, but he knew he was Falling Down. Dying. It was a far more laborious process than what he could have ever imagined. It took all his effort to remain conscious, focusing on his brother’s orange hue flooding into him and his words pleading him to stay with them.

[ * 0.4/199 HP ]

(It… had to be something he cared about… right?)

Them? Who was ‘them’? Where had Papyrus taken him? It took everything in him to summon sight, knowing the fading flicker in his sockets would only hurt his brother further. The room around them was cool but brightly lit, blurred with his failing magic.

[ * 0.3/148 HP ]

(Something had grabbed him… maybe. Something so hungry that it burned through his magic and still consumed him, even now.)

The colours were familiar. Teal on cream. Perhaps he had been brought to Alphys. He could hear Papyrus’ teeth chattering and his entire frame shaking with sobs and pleas for him not to give up, for a ‘doctor’ to save his brother. To save him.

papyrus.

The whisper left him, feeling hollow and sounding more distant than how he meant it to come out. But he tried, attempted to draw strength from the way his brother squeezed him tightly against his body, fighting back sobs.

He was a good brother. A kind brother. His best friend, through thick and thin. His… only family.

(That didn’t seem right… wasn’t there another..?)

Something twisted inside of him painfully and he gasped, the action sapping him of precious reserves.

i’m sorry, pap…

[ * 0.14/103 HP ]

The sinking, heavy feeling continued.

You’re going to be ok! was his brother’s response. You’re going to get through this! And we’re going to go home! Both of us, Sans… He remembered the shaky words; how they sounded so sure, like their bond could never be broken. But he also sounded scared, his voice strained into a rough hiccup when someone else gave him instructions in a hasty tone.

Papyrus’ magic had enveloped his soul as his vision swam, teetering on the brink. It was like his brother’s flux was attempting to hold him together to prevent him from crumbling into dust. To hold him in a tight embrace full of hope and love.

[ * 0.09/39 HP ]

(Someone… fell? Was that it?)

He was lying down on something flat. Papyrus was still near, but not holding him as tightly; or if he was, he didn’t feel it as keenly as before. He heard clicks of equipment being plugged in. Squeaky
wheels on a tiled floor. Monitors ran with a mechanical hum. His felt the magic in his sockets crumble away as he dipped into unconsciousness for what he thought would be the last time. It would be to the tune of beeps and circuitry laced with magic, with his brother’s despairing sobs and telling him he could do it. That he couldn’t give up yet. He was the strongest monster he knew.

(…It was a ‘someone’, wasn’t it..?)

He believed in him. He could do it. He just had to try to hold on. Even if he didn’t think he could. He heard Papyrus telling him he could do his best and he was so, so proud of him.

[ * 0.04/8 HP ]

(Now that someone was… gone.)

His soul was pierced with something. Papyrus’ voice reeled against his blurry thoughts, repeating that he believed in him. He could do it. He was going to be fine. He just had to hold on.

[ * 0.01/1 HP ]

He came back to as his whole body lurched with the sensation, accompanied by the rush of Papyrus’ soothing magic around his bones. A filling spike of energy flooded him and a whip-like crack resounded through the large room. Then everything went dark.

Sans huffed shortly as he bolted upright, his breaths coming in shallow, frantic gasps. It took him several minutes before he calmed down enough to realise he was still at the lab.

Of course he was. He wasn’t Falling Down; it had been a horribly vivid dream. A dream that… regrettably, had happened. He cupped his hands over his sockets and lay down on his back, realising that at some point while he was asleep Alphys had draped a fluffy yellow blanket over him and provided a pillow.

His gaze dropped to it, then he shifted off the covers; after such a reminder of his accident it had been a nice gesture, as strange as it was for one of his makeup. But Alphys was a lizard monster and he knew regulating body heat was important for her kind, so he didn’t belabour it too much.

Sans looked internally.

[ * 5 HP ]

He sighed softly, giving in to a bitter laugh as he rubbed at his breastbone in thought. It had been awhile since he allowed himself to remember any of that. The accident, coupled with the state he was in when he returned, and the fact that he had to come to terms with new limitations…

His whole body was a mess the months following the near-miss with death. It took him even longer to feel comfortable in his own body again. No one at the CORE site remembered if anyone had fallen into the magic-matrix apart from himself.

People treated him differently. Papyrus became protective of him. It was the reason he hadn’t wanted to live in New Home anymore, where everyone knew it would take only one hit and he’d be dust. So after a decade or two of working with the teams to finish up a few projects, Papyrus and he left New Home for a quieter life.

He groaned to himself, the itch behind his ribs worrying enough for him to pull his soul out of
hiding. Nothing had changed since the previous night, apart from the small buffer. The simple fact was Determination did not leave any visible traits on the soul. It anchored him to the world at the point when it was injected into him, and since his physicality was comprised in his bones’ fibre, he would be the only success in Alphys’ experiments. Everyone else was a different story.

The clock showed that it was still incredibly early, but he could hear faint rustling upstairs. Deciding that it was probably best for him not to fall asleep again, Sans pushed himself up and headed to the kitchenette for coffee. The assessment: sour and bitter. Alphys gave him sugar for ‘sweet’. Much better; it was quickly becoming one of his favourites.

He didn’t speak about his dream to Alphys, but got the first coordinates and tools required for fixing the camera that had glitched out in Waterfall. Alphys had returned his phone with some ‘minor upgrades’, which included video feed and better waterproofing, since he lived in a snowy climate.

Alphys was used to his shortcuts, but every time she would marvel at it. The two kept tabs on the phone while Sans appeared in Waterfall, exhaling a sigh of relief when he didn’t arrive in that corridor again. Instead, his slippers hit the familiar wet surface of the docks beneath the first waterfall, where he had first revealed to Grillby the nature of his shortcuts.

Sans couldn’t help but smile at the reminder and the broad flush that his friend’s amazement had given him. He continued on, peering behind the rushing water until he found the camera, just out of view. Cautiously, he took off his jacket and dropped it onto the bridge before crossing the narrow gap. He sputtered briefly before ducking out of the fall, inched up between the space beside the fried camera with his toolbag.

It didn’t take long for Alphys to call him; it had been their plan. She would give instructions on where to go and help him troubleshoot, then give the ok when she had the video feed back on her end. When his phone rang, he opened his mouth, relieved he could do so now and let the marsh water out of his skull. That was a plus, at least.

“yo,” he answered, suspending the phone midair with his magic as he worked.

“I just… wanted to say, how very thankful I am that you’re helping me! And also, I have another negative report from yesterday—”

Sans shifted a screwdriver out of the bag and shimmied to the side, the narrow ledge not quite wide enough for him to turn comfortably despite his size. He could only imagine how difficult it would’ve been for Alphys to get here, let alone repair this.

“really. where `bouts?”

“From, actually, uh, just inside Snowdin? Looks like it’s pretty close to one of your boxes.”

“Oh,” Sans murmured, using his teeth to hold a small pair of pliers. He felt himself flush at the memory of Grillby’s tease and how close he’d gotten, and also how desperately nervous he’d become over the prospect of asking him out. That had been an embarrassing scenario… “yeah, uh… that was me.”

“The thing is? Where did you go? I… I mean, usually there isn’t much time in between jumps? But… the corresponding end-gap by the ferry stop didn’t appear until… almost three hours later?”

Sans paused, recognizing the worried tone in her voice. Her sentences always aborted prematurely or restarted as though her thoughts tumbled in her mind faster than she could process.

“uh…” It was Sans’ turn to struggle, but found it easier knowing she couldn’t see his uneasiness, at
least. “i might’ve gotten stuck.”

“Stuck!? Oh… oh my god???”

“alph. hey, i’m ok. i got unstuck. lemme explain. well… startin’ out, i had a buffer. nine points, maybe. don’t remember. anyway, i found a door.”

“I… I, I don’t, uh, have coordinates for-”

“it’s cool, alph, i don’t ever want to go back there,” Sans replied dryly, the revulsion of the place echoing in his memory.

“Why? Why didn’t you tell me when you got here!! I… I asked, and… When I checked, you… you didn’t have nine points, Sans!”

“i know,” Sans repeated, beginning to sound a little testy. He adjusted himself and sighed, flipping the side panel of the camera open to inspect it. “whatever it was… i couldn’t not open that door. like some weird compulsion that i couldn’t shake. have you ever heard anything like that?”

“No… no, I don’t think so…”

“then,” Sans hesitated, thinking quickly, “what about monsters that feed off magic?” He paused, then added with a grimace, “other monster’s magic.”

There was silence on the other end, coupled with Alphys’ stuttered breathing. He let her think it over while he worked, prying wires free and lighting the area with his magic to better see.

“I… I don’t think I’ve ever, ever heard of that?”

Sans hummed thoughtfully, flicking a digit against the panel inside the camera irritably. It sparked before producing a quiet blip. “ok, well, how about this. any monsters you know of that feed on light?”

“On… on light?”

“yeah, like… when i opened the door, i thought i saw someone. not like any monster i’ve ever seen, not out where i live now nor at the capital,” he shrugged, as though the action emphasised his internal malaise. “and… i guess i could feel it. like, they were trapped, and whatever magic i could muster, just kinda…” Fizzed out? Dropped?

Consumed.

Sans stopped with the invasive thought. He recalled the disquieting mantra that had been repeating in his skull in the room beyond the door.

“That… that sounds worrying. I’ll… I’ll have to run some scans. But… why talk about it now? Why not when I asked? Or? May… Maybe, I-”

“eh, alphys. it’s not you, i just… can’t really talk to people face t’face with this kinda stuff, ok?” Sans’ tone had softened, mind whirling in two different directions: one of his scare in the place that looked like Waterfall, and the other of the connection he was drawing from his accident, “and i kinda needed to think it over. it doesn’t make a lot of sense, now that i’m talkin’ it out.”

“I… I understand. I’m sorry.”

“it’s ok. you don’t gotta be.” He decided to come clean, “truth is, uh… i had a dream last night.”
“Oh..?”

got me thinkin’, it felt really familiar, being behind that door with some unknown monster absorbing
my magic like it’s friday night wings,” he groused, attempting to make light of the feeling when
really, it felt dark and cold and foreboding.

She ignored the joke. “Familiar? How?”

Sans stopped adjusting the camera, taking a precursory glance to the hovering cellphone by the cave
wall. “uh… when papyrus brought me by.” Silence from the other end. He took a calming breath,
trying to sound as though it didn’t bother him at all. “when i was falling down.”

“Sans…”

“i know i’ve never talked about it. i’m kinda garbage that way. it’s just easier this way. when i got
eyes on me, i freeze up, right? you know me. i’d rather hide and joke until shit like this blows over,
but, turns out that i, uh…” He paused, shrinking against the rock face as he watched the water rush
from overhead. “…i can’t talk to pap about this kinda stuff. i’ve tried. he assures me i’m ok and
everything is the same as it was before, but i know he worries. so i end up not talkin’, and i really
hate lumpin’ this crap on you-”

“Y-you can always talk to me, Sans! Even… even if you just need to sort out your thoughts, or get
something off your chest, or vent… anything!”

“do you got the feed?”

“Huh?” There was a pause and then a shuffle from the other end of the line. “Oh yeah, yes we do!
Thank you so, so much!”

He stayed quiet as he manoeuvred over the gap with his bag of tools, then picked up his hoodie.
Even though the crossing had been brief, he was soaked right to the bone.

“ok, next coordinates.”

“We… we can still talk? That is? If you need to… there isn’t any rush, Sans.”

“one sec, alph.”

The skeleton shouldered his bag as he looked around, relieved there was no one nearby to
eavesdrop. In fact, he hadn’t considered the echo flower that was at the opposite side of the bridge
and if his voice could’ve been picked up by it. So carefully, he walked over to listen.

‘I swore I saw something… Behind that rushing water…’

He was safe, at least. He didn’t need a repeat of the morose realisation monsters had at New Home
when he came back from Falling Down, after all. Quickly, he walked up the bridge to the side of the
eddying pool and took the phone in hand, preparing for another warp when he saw no one else was
nearby.

“coords, alph?”

“Wha--oh, right.”

Tactfully, he glossed over the reason why he shouldn’t go to the Snowdin sentry station right away,
where another camera was broken. He didn’t need a run-in with his brother right then. Instead, he
was provided the coordinates for the one by the Ruins’ door, hidden out of sight in a withered and
snow-covered bush. This would certainly be easier than the waterfall-hidden device.

“Did… did you still want to talk?” Alphys’ voice through the speaker inquired quietly as he got to
work, dumping his bag onto a snow pile at his feet and inspecting the camera through the brambles.

“kinda chilly,” he remarked, voice muffled by the end of a screwdriver.

“I guess this whole…” Alphys faltered for the word, before settling on, “puberty thing must be
throwing you for a… for a loop, huh?”

“was really hopin’ you wouldn’t say that word.”


Sans sputtered, dropping the screwdriver and the pliers into the snow. “alphys!”

Sans heard her giggle incessantly through the crackle of the phone line, long enough for his thoughts
to wander to warmer things. Warmer things being a certain fire monster and the heat he brought.
Sans’ mind then went to the memory of him at his station, feeling cold under snow before Grillby
filled his bones with fire. It moved on to the kiss, of the fire monster’s hand against the bones at his
chest as he touched him in kind. He felt flush, then he made a sound of a cough, to indicate his
discomfort at Alphys’ laughter.

“Eh, I’m… I’m sorry, Sans. I know I shouldn’t be laughing…”

“y’know, after paps finished puberty, i thought we weren’t gonna have to deal with this again.” Sans
rubbed idly at the side of his skull, thoughts still wandering off the project at hand. “i, uh, might…
take a break after this one. i’m kinda soaked, and m’freezin’ up here.”

“Of course! Managing your temperature is extremely important!”

He stooped over to retrieve the fallen tools, feeling his wet clothes start to harden and the water in his
joints start to ache as it froze. Carefully, he bent his knees to keep them from locking up with ice. It
seemed colder than usual today.

“Hey… wait? Skeletons don’t have skin!”

“nope.”

“Then..?”

“got waterlogged. and it’s colder than usual.”

“How can you, um, even tell?”

“my joints hurt when water freezes in ‘em,” Sans shrugged to himself as he pulled the mechanics
from the camera. Then he thought better of it and tugged the whole housing out of the bushes. It got
catch and he forced another pull, this time sending him onto his back in a heap of snow with a
surprised grunt. The heavy camera landed on his rib cage and he hissed softly, pulling it away from
him and rubbing at the spot through his jacket.

“Sans!? Are you, are you ok??”

“not gonna lie this time, think i lost a point and my carpals an’ tarsals are freezin’ up,” he shuddered
as he brushed snow off the device and gathered his tools. It took him awhile to find the screwdriver, the cold settling into his joints and making him still. He rattled to shake out the ice that had formed.

“m’gonna head off to get dried out.”

“But?”

“off. i meant off.” he chattered in embarrassment over the blunder, “i’m goin’ to grillby’s. takin’ the cam, so i’ll text you when i’m done.” He hung up without further explanation and stuffed the phone into his pocket, then trudged a few agonising steps towards the nearest rift before reappearing around the corner from the bar in Snowdin. His bones continued to shiver once he climbed up the stoop, his soul thundering behind his ribs when he pushed the door open.

He knew he had told Grillby he’d be gone for a few days, and it had only been one. It was around lunch time, so the bar wasn’t filled to capacity, but a few regulars were there. Red Bird, Ugly Fish, Doggo, the two crooning dog sentries, and the tipsy bunny. Sans waved with a grin as a couple greeted him, but he stayed near the door when his gaze found the owner behind the bar.

It took him a few moments before his footing felt sure enough to walk to the counter without feeling like a fool. Sans was keeping the rattling to a minimum, but he couldn’t help the way his hands shook as he climbed onto his usual seat, although the stool had been replaced. He swung his bag and the camera onto the bar top to the side and leaned over the counter, his bones tingling as heat made contact with them.

Grillby put a towel to the side before leaning over the bar himself, the curl of his mouth forming a pleased smile. “Didn’t scare you away?” His tone was softer with an audience around them.

Sans hummed quietly, tilting his stool forward to get closer. One would think he would have learned after his fall, but old habits die hard. “couldn’t keep away,” his reply was a murmur as he folded his arms over the counter, but remained upright. Sans’ gaze lingered on the other’s face and he grinned. Then something caught his attention behind the other, at the row of glasses and under all the bottles of liquor. His soul began to thump anxiously behind his ribs.

His eye lights then darted back when Grillby’s hands inched towards his own, a repeat of the memory at his sentry station playing through his skull. Sants felt himself flush at the reminder and shivered slightly, bowing his skull as one of Grillby’s hands brushed against the side of his face and traced a warm line down his jawline.

“You look absolutely chilled,” the other’s tone sounded amused as Sans leaned against the warm gloved hand. He delighted in the skeleton’s reaction. He was vaguely aware of a few other patrons watching and smirked to himself, his other hand against Sans’ fingers itching to encircle them.

The skeleton hummed softly as the heat flooded into his skull, enraptured by the affectionate gesture. In turn, his own fingers clasped against Grillby’s automatically, the sensation of holding hands oddly titillating. Sans realised, beyond the confession, he didn’t really know how to progress into the next stage of their relationship, whatever that meant.

The skeleton’s gaze found a small blue vase behind the bar and under the rows upon rows of alcohol, filled to the rim with water. Something inside of him sighed when he recognised the small, beaten up little echo blossom suspended within it. Sans had forgotten about it and left it behind. It looked like the fire monster had taken it upon himself to preserve it. Grillby took notice of Sans’ stunned silence and looked over his shoulder to where he was staring, hands withdrawing as he
“you kept it.”

“Naturally. It’s one of the most beautiful things I’ve ever received,” the bartender replied, his expression beaming. Every word was accentuated calmly and every hidden detail crisp as he leaned forward to close the distance between them. When the other drew nearer, Sans felt his warm breath against the side of his face, words lowering in register so only he could hear. “To serve as a reminder for… when I get to hear it directly from you.”

The smooth tone coupled with just the right amount of tease had Sans disarmed and leaning forward to get closer. His mind was focused solely on him so much that it barely registered that the stool was at jeopardy of swivelling out from under him again. Grillby laughed softly in his throat as he caught him, each hand grasping his upper arms and allowing him to settle once the stool stopped skidding against the floor.

“Why don’t you take a booth, Sans.”

It was then that the sounds of the restaurant came flooding back to the skeleton, reminding him they were very much not alone. He felt a peculiar kind of apprehensiveness then when he heard the soft gasps and croons at their little display from the dog couple, enough to make him turn his head.

“I’ll have what he’s havin’, Grills,” the red bird drawled as he spread his wings over the bar top and gestured plainly to the skeleton.

With an insurmountable ebb of mortification, Sans shrunk down away from Grillby’s touch, eye lights resolutely fixed on the marble bar top.

’Sloppy joe, was it?’ the fire monster gestured without skipping a beat, but threw the bird a knowing glance with a wink as he moved away from behind the bar.

Bravely, Sans looked around them, bearing witness to the doting and encouraging way Dogamy and Dogaressa applauded them, even as Doggo bumped elbows with Red Bird. The buff canine puffed a long breath from the lit treat before giving the bird a smug grin, elbowing again. Red Bird did not look too upset at the implication, but it left Sans feeling a little disconcerted.

That is, until Grillby rounded the bar and gestured him towards the closest empty booth. Sans couldn’t help but grin awkwardly, still feeling bashful at the other’s rather public display of affection.

“is it, uh… ok if i tinker here a bit?”

Grillby rolled his shoulder as he stood beside the booth once Sans had slid his bag and the broken camera across the tabletop and sat down. “Would not bother me in the slightest.” He tilted his head then as Sans reached for the menu. With how often the skeleton came for meals and drinks, he found it peculiar how the other went for a menu now of all times.

“thanks, g. funny how, uh…” Sans faltered, not really knowing what to say, or where that sentence was leading to. He used the tall menu to cover his face and hide from Grillby’s perplexed look, making a show of perusing the drink section. “what, uh. what drinks do you recommend to a guy who’s… taken a likin’ to sweet things?”

The fire monster didn’t reply, but when Sans had the audacity to look up at him, he was smiling pleasantly. In turn, he couldn’t help but return it. The skeleton watched as he left, lowering the menu to follow his body back to the bar. As Grillby passed the two suspicious monsters, Sans could have sworn he heard the subtle rasp of coins sliding across the marble top of the counter. Doggo’s grin
became more smug as he tossed and caught the moving gold mid air, much to the red bird’s apparent chagrin.

Chapter End Notes

Because of the nature of the writing and Alphys' assessment, I gotta come clean and say that YES Sans is an adult in this fic. I hope that came across because I got a message on tumblr that it seems… skeevy. Papyrus definitely passed puberty, Sans didn't, due to his accident & recovery process and other factors. Because of limited info on skeletons in the Underground, the whole thing is a mess, hence Sans' confusion. Sans is 120y and Papyrus is 112y, monster age approximate to mid 30s/late 20s.
Chapter Summary

……..A skeleton walks into a bar. It appears that he is different, yet he is not. A certain fire monster can't help but interrupt while Sans attempts to tinker.

Grillby POV. Teasing & flirts. ♥

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

True to his request, Sans worked throughout the afternoon at Grillby’s. The other had brought him something called ‘crackle soda’ and waited on him to try it. The skeleton did, holding the drink in his mouth while the drink fizzed, before his magic absorbed it.

“How do you find it?” the fire monster inquired, having watched curiously. He had gathered rather quickly that something about Sans had changed, and not necessarily for the worse, either. The part of his teeth was new, and it took every particle of his reserves not to outright drop what he was holding in shock when he first noticed upon his entry earlier on.

“sweet,” Sans reported, then attempted another sip from the straw, his brow scrunched in thought as he felt the fizz of bubbles against his tongue. When it was absorbed into his body, he added, “i like sweet.”

It was a particular assessment to observe, Grillby thought as he continued to watch. It was interesting to view Sans in such a light; subtleties that by all means should have been normal, yet it had been so long that it simply didn’t seem out of the ordinary, until now. The skeleton remarked on tastes in almost a childlike wonder, even asked for recommendations as though every meal he’d ever consumed had been forgotten. Grillby was hesitant at first, but became encouraging when he sensed Sans’ unease and self-consciousness.

“Perhaps try an old favourite?” he offered, leaning against the side of the booth to reach over the skeleton’s shoulder. He then turned a page of the menu and pointed down the row of selections. What could only be described as a nervous chuckle escaped his friend, caught at the end. He shifted on the cushioned bench and Grillby caught the fleeting glance up at him before Sans’ eye lights shot right back down again.

“maybe… pick somethin’ you think i’d like,” the skeleton replied hesitantly, his tone quiet.

Grillby’s mouth curled into a soft smile as he leaned down. “Indecisive,” he whispered against the side of the other’s skull, a hint of mirth to his voice echoing in the air between them, “That’s not like you.”

He regarded him as a subtle shudder passed through Sans’ shoulders and Grillby could feel his temperature rise at the reaction. His smile broadened slightly, but he remained courteous and awaited his response.

“still kinda new to all… this,” the other finally murmured, his bony digits tugging at one side of his
hood as if to hide. Grillby caught the way his glance darted up to him again and he gave the other a more gentle smile of reassurance. “maybe stick with the sloppy joe.”

“Honestly…” the fire monster breathed as he leaned upward away from Sans. It was as though he was going out of his way to be noncommittal and hesitant about every choice. “You speak as though you’ve never eaten here before.”

A creep of cyan flush settled over the skeleton’s face with that, and although he liked the reaction, Grillby couldn’t help but feel a twinge of regret for making him uncomfortable.

“i, um,” Sans mumbled, then his voice dipped in register as the words tumbled out inaudibly. Grillby blinked and leaned down again, his face closer to the skeleton’s skull so he could hear him. “your food’s always been great, grillbz, just… just came about actually, y’know… tastin’ stuff lately.”

The bartender tilted his head; he hadn’t expected for Sans to be so forthright with the information, but it certainly explained a lot. “In general, or..?”

“yeah. better late than never, eh?”

“You’ve never tasted before,” Grillby repeated quietly. Although his tone was mildly amused, he felt an odd pity for Sans. He knew the other’s age and all, so it was surprising to know how such a thing other monsters took for granted, Sans was missing out on all this time. “How did you ever reach the conclusion that my food is good then?”

He watched as Sans shifted on the bench again; this time not looking up at him but towards the long-broken jukebox at the other side of the room. “guess… absorbin’ it always went down easy, so in some way i always knew. and every smell is great, i never really questioned it. just figured it had to match. you put so much effort into how stuff looks on a plate, how everything is arranged perfectly. i can honestly tell you love doin’ what you do. and everyone looks so happy eatin’ it.” Sans gave a slight shrug at the revelation, then slowly turned his skull to look up at him. “guess i’m just… kinda intimidated now. heh.”

Grillby couldn’t help but chuckle at that, even moved to pull his hand over the flames atop his head in a fluid motion, settling at the base of his neck. It was encouraging and flattering, hearing the other’s praise of him. “…Surprised you hadn’t considered ketchup, to be honest,” he teased through a laugh. He met with Sans’ gaze, whose sockets had widened slightly as though, no, he hadn’t considered it.

“i’ve been drinkin’ it this whole time ‘cause people’s reactions are hilarious,” he replied candidly, although he seemed to be in a mild state of shock, “what if it’s… not actually that great?”

“Would not be missing out on much, my friend,” the bartender responded through another ethereal chuckle. Not missing a beat, he leaned over the skeleton again to fold up the menu and return it to the side of the booth, since it was no longer needed. He had the perfect surprise in mind now.

At Sans’ questioning glance, Grillby gave him a wink. “In any regard, forget about the least popular menu item. I will make something more palatable, just for you.”

Before Sans could object the fire monster turned and left, his shoes clacking on the hardwood floors. He noticed how his patrons had fallen silent throughout their exchange, how one or two pairs of eyes followed him, and that there were new customers waiting to flag him down. Quickly, he took orders, sending a quick glance to the skeleton off in the corner of the bar. He caught the look he was given and smirked to himself when Sans turned his skull away, more of that delightful cyan flushing his friend’s face until it was out of view.
Grillby couldn’t help but dare to think the other was charming.

“(He’s obviously sweet on you, Grillby-darling,)” Dogaressa said as he passed, causing him to stop at the couple’s table. The attention brought his temperature up a couple degrees with the startling realisation that all his patrons by now likely knew of his and Sans’ tender little moment. The Dogi had walked in on them that evening after all, and Snowdin was a small community with little else to talk about. They had probably mentioned something. Grillby was nothing if not forward with his affections when Sans was at the bar earlier, as well…

He didn’t give response to such an observation; like much of his exchanges with his patrons, they tended to be one-sided. There just didn’t seem like any addition he could muster for their consideration. Instead, he beamed brightly at them both before taking Dogamy’s order, then set about in the back kitchen to put his culinary arts to the test.

With so many orders on the go, Grillby rushed to get the other patron’s food out first. He wanted to savour Sans’ reaction once more, this time to a hearty bowl of cinnamon-spiced squash soup. He liked sweets, he recalled, and while it wasn’t necessarily Grillby’s own favourite, he wanted Sans’ first experience to be special. He put extra care into it, the bouillon lightly caramelised with his fire magic and seasoned just right. Adding a sprig of clove and rosemary to garnish and a milk bun with melted butter, he scrutinized over the dish until he was sure it was perfect.

Admittedly, he was concerned about what Sans’ reaction would be. He’d said all his food was good, but Grillby now felt the need to make a great first impression. It was as though the King of Monsters himself was coming to visit, but somehow, this seemed like a greater deal to him. He loved him, after all. If his affections were enough to make Sans tremble and shy away, perhaps this would ease his worries? Grillby knew fire monsters in general were regarded as bold, so he secretly hoped not to scare him off again.

There was a lull in customers by the time he exited the kitchen to serve his dish; Grillby almost breathed a sigh of relief. He could feel every eye on him as he calmly walked from behind the bar with the tray of food and towards Sans’ booth.

The other had absorbed himself in his work with a disassembled device that once looked like it had been a camera. His brow was scrunched up in concentration, a small screwdriver held between his teeth as he attempted to fiddle with the innards behind a panel. Grillby saw a spark and a muffled cuss escaped Sans, bony digits flicking as though to shake away the pain of a shock.

The bartender lingered a little distance away to watch, as it didn’t appear that Sans had noticed him - a feat, considering Grillby’s natural light source. He merely stood by, gradually inching forward step by quiet step until he was next to Sans, curiously following his movements.

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It would be the first time he’d ever really seen Sans concentrated at work. While he knew he was a sentry in Snowdin and areas nearby, the other had alluded to his past work at the CORE with infuriating vagueness. An engineer of sorts, Grillby recalled. It was just so perfectly endearing to see the skeleton wrapped up in his own little world, pausing only momentarily to check his cell phone that buzzed with a notification once or twice.

Then Sans looked up, having noticed him. Ah, that was short-lived. Quickly, the screwdriver was taken out of his mouth and Sans gave an excusing grin to the mess on the tabletop. He rushed to pluck away bits of wire, screws and film over to one side so there was a place for him to eat.

“didn’t see you,” he pardoned himself a little hastily, then looked at his phone again. He looked distracted and he turned off the screen, shoving it into his jacket’s pocket.
“Wasn’t sure if I should interrupt.” Grillby replied, setting the bowl in front of Sans along with the small plated bun. He watched as the smaller monster looked at it, unsure, then up to him, as though asking permission. “…Go on.”

Sans grinned and in turn Grillby couldn’t help himself from returning it, even if Sans had turned his gaze away to the meal. He just appeared to stare at it, both of his hands on either side of the bowl in silent appreciation.

Carefully, Grillby sat at the opposite side of the table, his flames flickering in a peculiar fashion. The skeleton seemed to be mulling something over, but quickly recovered when he saw his movements. Maybe he didn’t like what he saw, Grillby agonised internally. It wasn’t his… usual method of cooking, after all.

“Sans?”

Sans couldn’t help a snicker, then a full out laugh. “i’ve been stewing on it, but i can’t come up with any soupreme puns,” he chortled, and Grillby exhaled hotly, visibly relaxing on the bench. He couldn’t help the chuckle, and with Sans looking rather pleased with himself, he grabbed a spoon and dug in.

It was interesting to behold; Grillby was 100-percent certain that a tongue was definitely something he would’ve noticed before. Considering that it was the first time he’d seen Sans even open his mouth, Grillby corrected his thoughts on that. No, he wouldn’t have noticed; it simply wasn’t logical for him to know. His flames danced around his face with the first mouthful of the soup, the heat of his core heightening with the other’s quiet hum after a moment to savour it.

He waited while Sans had a bit more, every time the tip of a magic, cyan-coloured tongue inching from his mouth to meet with the spoon. Grillby couldn’t help the searing heat that passed through the flames of his face and neck at another of Sans’ appreciative hums, pleased with his reaction.

“…How do you like it?” It took everything in him not to demand an answer immediately to calm his excited fire. His grip of the tray on his lap tightened as he waited with bated breath and felt his soul pounding anxiously for a response.

The skeleton smiled after another mouthful with an amused chuckle. Once his magic had absorbed it, his smile tugged into a wider grin and his posture relaxed. “s’really good,” he admitted, “sweet… kinda spicy. feels warm, too, right here.” He patted his chest, the cyan flush returning.

Grillby leaned onto the table with one arm, a content smile curling at his mouth. He was glad to hear it. Intent was everything to monsters; he’d put a lot of care into his cooking, as it was made especially for Sans. So if he could feel it in his soul, it kindled a tenderness in the bartender in response, pleased his efforts could affect the monster he cared so much about.

A buzz from Sans’ pocket interrupted him and the skeleton sighed softly, putting another spoonful into his mouth. He left it there as he took the cell phone from his pocket with something akin to a glare, tapping out a response.

“Is it Papyrus?” Grillby couldn’t help but wonder.

Sans pulled the spoon from his teeth, absentmindedly licking the remnants as he read the reply that was received seconds later. Grillby felt another hotter flush pass through him and his eyes darted to the side while the other set the utensil away without a second thought. His own had been less than innocent.
“nah. alphys - the royal scientist. i’m helpin’ her with some repairs. she’s gettin’ antsy. should probably call her in a bit…” the skeleton replied, then his gaze found Grillby and his paler flames. The bartender sensed his curiosity and shifted his gaze back, offering him a pardoning smile.

“Have you spoken with him, though?” Grillby was legitimately curious now. At the other’s inquisitive look, which then shifted to sudden realisation, the fire monster couldn’t help but laugh softly.

“uh… no,” the other replied, his voice dropping in volume, “i think he suspects something happened though.”

“Between us?”

Sans’ flush broadened deeply, as though he was remembering it. Grillby took a moment to reflect on it as well, curling his fingers under his chin as yellow flames peaked subtly along his face.

“Bashful skeleton,” Grillby murmured after the moment passed, delighting in the way Sans shrunk down, every inch of him displaying the manner the other had perfectly described. “You really haven’t breathed a word?”

Sans drummed his fingers on the tabletop before stopping abruptly, looking down at his phone. Then he shrugged. “i dunno how, to be honest. he kinda helped,” he stopped as though to consider his words, then seemed to come to a realisation. “he doesn’t know it, but he, uh… it was his idea. the, um, the flower.” His eye lights flicked to the bar’s direction, where the suspended echo flower was safe behind the counter.

“Matchmaker Papyrus,” the fire monster breathed, feeling a blossoming appreciation for the brother’s interference, “Long is the list of titles bestowed upon him as of late.”

Sans had to chuckle at that. “he’d strut around and gloat to know he had a hand in it,” he agreed. “i can’t let him have that satisfaction after all the badgering.”

“Satisfaction?”

The skeleton shrugged somewhat bashfully, raising his hand to scratch at his jawbone. “told ya, i’m new to this. he just… convinced me i had to say it, for myself. then it went from there.”

“Found the courage.” The bartender hummed then, feeling his soul fluttering at the thought. “I’m so very glad you fell off that stool.”

Sans held back an embarrassed laugh that ended up sounding more like a giggle and cradled his skull in one hand, his gaze drifting to the bar again in a sidelong glance.

“me too.”

With the extended lull in activity in the restaurant, Grillby came up with an idea on how to tell Papyrus. “Could always subject him to a prank,” he suggested with a shrug as Sans polished off the rest of the soup and bun.

Sans sighed and leaned back against the polished wood of the booth, seemingly sated from his meal and having a dozy smile on his face. He closed his sockets and relaxed, his voice dipping in register, “a prank, huh? been awhile since i’ve done that.”
Grillby noted the subtle glow poking from the top of Sans’ jacket and leaned forward, examining him as he considered it. The other had recovered from his anxious state earlier, and seemed much more like his regular self. The conversation was no longer quite so hesitant or quiet.

“whaddaya got in mind?”

Grillby tapped a single digit against the table top in thought. “Pretend to have lost the flower. Pretend that you’re worried who might find it, tear up the house looking for it.”

Sans opened a socket to regard the other, who was giving him a devious smile. “that’s layin’ it on kinda thick,” the skeleton snickered, “you’re such a devil.”

Grillby offered a shrug, “Fire monsters are known to be hellish.”

“an’ here i thought you fell from heaven,” Sans automatically drawled, tapping his fingertips against the top of the table again. Then his grin dropped briefly as another flush flooded his face, realising what he said.

The other kindled noticeably paler; had Sans really meant to say that? It was flattering and ridiculous and… so Sans.

“Well… stars produce fire, so not far from the mark, I suppose,” Grillby murmured through a crackle in his voice, his flames returning to their normal shades.

“i keep forgettin’ to freak out about that. is that a thing i can do now, or would that be weird?”

Grillby was at a loss for words, but covered it well. Instead, his eyes flitted briefly to the other end of the bar and he couldn’t resist a shy smile. This is when he became quiet, although not for the reason he thought Sans would assume. Speaking of stars in the Underground always made him feel a little uneasy, even if he hid it well. Apart from a select few, he’d kept the nature of his exact existence a secret since he moved to Snowdin.

“i um, i didn’t mean to make you uncomfortable,” the skeleton murmured as he rose his hand to his skull, scratching his temple.

“As long as it doesn’t reach Waterfall,” the bartender admitted with a slow nod, although he concealed the threatening grimace. Sans must have recognised it, as his expression softened, somehow. With a moment’s pause, Grillby added, “Monsters there get, ah…”

“worshippy. i getcha. not my first stroll through the place.” Sans gave him a knowing grin as he settled both of his elbows on the table. He seemed to be ignoring his phone, which buzzed intermittently throughout their conversation.

It was Grillby’s turn to tap his fingers against the tabletop, however light it was. He saw Sans follow his movements and he gestured in a way to shrug it off. “Before you ask - the wish thing is a fable.”

“not interested in that,” the skeleton immediately replied. Grillby couldn’t help his reaction; a startled jerk as his back straightened where he sat, openly staring at the monster across the table.

Well, that was a first. He certainly hadn’t expected that; but then, Sans was opening up to him in new and interesting ways lately. Indeed, even now, the conversation was much along the same vein as before. Easy words exchanged, poking fun at each other. Only now it was more fun and flirtatious, and the fleeting touches shy and unsure. Their friendship was becoming something more meaningful and deep with every interaction.
“i’m more interested in…” Sans trailed off and seemed to carefully consider his next words, “are you technically a fire monster?”

Grillby was amused and gestured to, well, all of him. It wasn’t a question he had prepared himself for, so far.

“ok, fair point.”

Another flush across the other’s face marked his embarrassment and Grillby smirked in silent victory. He felt the melodic ebb of the other’s soul, achingly distant through the short space between them. It reminded the bartender of their shared moment and he relaxed, head held on one hand again as he propped his elbow on the table, awaiting Sans’ next question.

“ok… what does a star eat?”

Grillby hummed softly, “Asking in such a way…” he paused, giving in to a slight shrug, “Suppose, hydrogen for most. However, I enjoy curries and sours personally.”

Sans’ eye lights grew brighter in interest and he leaned over the table top, blatantly ignoring another phone buzz from his pocket. “whaddabout composition?”

The bartender gave him a quizzical look and didn’t answer.

“i mean - magic an’ fire, sure, but you got a little physicality like the rest of us, so? with me, a bit o’ bone, a bit o’ dust, maybe some pebbles…” Sans was grinning openly, making the other’s flames pique and tinge a shade or two of gold.

“…Sans.”

The skeleton made a questioning grunt, still grinning wide. He looked so pleased with his inquiry that Grillby almost regretted the words that came out of his mouth next;

“That’s… such a… personal thing to ask. We haven’t even had our first date.”

He couldn’t resist. He couldn’t even stop the words from coming out, but there they were, lingering in the air like the heat coming in waves off his body. Grillby paused as he saw a subtle shift in the other’s body language. Sans’ confidence seemed to peel away and he grew tense.

He’d embarrassed Sans, and now his friend was avoiding his look. Grillby sighed softly, wondering if an apology would make the other more uncomfortable or just make things awkward. He offered an apologetic smile regardless, and patted the other’s hand before he got up to clear the table of dishes.

While he was certain he’d embarrassed the other to the point the skeleton remained in awkward silence, Grillby was caught somewhat off guard when he felt a tug on his apron just as he intended to leave. Inquiringly, he looked over his shoulder to see Sans grinning up at him nervously.

“sh-should… probably fix that, huh?”

The bartender returned the grin as he reached to pat the other’s shoulder in agreement, leaving the other in a silent yet playful manner as his hand trailed down his arm.

Over the course of the afternoon, Sans eventually pulled all the components and tools back in front of him again. It didn’t take long for him to become immersed in the repairs, making a small mess of
crumpled napkins as he wiped each piece of water before inspection.

Grillby caught brief glances as the afternoon steadily got busier. The skeleton soon stopped looking out of his booth and remained concentrated on his work, taking breaks only to message on his phone. At some point, the fire monster noticed the cell phone hovering in air near his skull as an assortment of delicate-looking tools poked out from the other’s teeth while his hands were busy fiddling with the mess of wires.

The regulars that were there earlier eventually paid and left, more soon followed inside. Sans stayed for the entire afternoon. Intermittently, Grillby wandered from the other booths after taking away payment and dirty dishes, taking the route past Sans’ table.

Deliberating on it after only a few passes, the fire monster quickly stooped and deposited a soft kiss against the preoccupied monster’s skull. He could not resist; he was surprised he had for this long. Grillby didn’t even turn to see the wreckage when he heard the other drop something and it roll off the table when he continued towards the kitchen. If the other patrons’ expressions were anything to go on, the kiss had its intended effect on the skeleton and Grillby had a difficult time repressing his grin until out of sight.

If truth be told, the bartender wanted to do a little more every time. The second pass, he found Sans hunched into his hood so far he was sure he would suffocate, had he any lungs. So, instead of a kiss, Grillby tugged off his right glove and flicked his index finger over the topmost vertebra peaking out, moving away just as he witnessed a surprised jolt wrack Sans’ shoulders and his skull whirl around, flooded with the hue of his magic. It caused a select few tools and screws to roll off the table and Grillby heard a soft gasp of protest as he walked away.

It was a satisfying exchange, if only a bit one-sided. The fire monster relished in the teases and every time he stole a glance the skeleton’s way, he was more or less avoiding his look, but his soul was glowing so brightly he was sure to draw attention to himself if he kept this up.

Soon, it appeared that Sans was finished with his repairs. He was carefully packing away his tools and Grillby found an excuse to meet up by him again, his mouth forming a pleasant smile as though he hadn’t spent the entire afternoon ambushing the poor skeleton with fleeting touches and stolen kisses.

The subtle clatter of bones were muffled under Sans’ jacket as he approached, the other much more aware as the minutes stretched on from the last sneak-attack. If Grillby had to guess, his actions left the other more flustered than he thought. He carefully suppressed the grin, presenting a slight smirk as a peace-offering instead.

“g-gotta-” the skeleton started, then ended what he was going to say immediately. He swung his legs out from under the table, turning on the bench and shouldering his bag. It appeared that he was trying not to look like he was avoiding Grillby’s face.

The fire monster couldn’t help the tug at the side of his mouth; this was beyond adorable. One last time, then he’d stop.

“Leaving so early?”

Dumbly, the skeleton nodded, his eye lights focused at the other end of the bar. He then seemed to realise something and the hue of magic in his face grew bolder, his gaze dropping to his knees.

“And without paying.”
Grillby noted the grimace attempting to be forced into a grin and Sans’ hand automatically went to his pocket, looking for coins. When he predictably came up with nothing, the bartender closed the distance between them. Sans had no choice but to look up from his seat apologetically.

“wow, um. may… maybe put it on-”

Grillby carefully rested a gloved hand on both the table and the top of the booth’s bench, effectively trapping Sans where he sat with his body. His gaze flicked down to where Sans’ phalanges tugged at the drawstring of his jacket, plucking at the eyelets as he continued to grin uneasily.

“grillb..?”

“I’m afraid payment is required upon service this time.” Grillby’s voice came out with a faint snap at the end like dry kindling popping, every word measured and slow, almost sensually.

“i’m good for it, g.” the skeleton countered, looking far more frazzled for the implication. “if you lemme go home, i can raid the couch-“

Grillby’s movement cut him off and he sat stark still. The fire monster leaned down, his own face bare inches away and giving off even more heat as Sans attempted to continue;

“-and… come… back…” The last words died off rather shortly, his voice soft and confused.

Another buzz from Sans’ pocket, but the both of them ignored it. Sans wasn’t moving, but his nervous trembling made it so holding back a grin was impossible for Grillby anymore. Seeing it, the skeleton seemed to relax somewhat and even allowed himself to quietly laugh.

Bzz-bzzt!

“you’re teasin’ me.”

“…Perhaps not.”

A shaky breath escaped Sans but he still wasn’t moving away. This was proving to be a little too much fun for the fire monster.

Bzz-bzzt!

“you’re really close, g.” Sans murmured, his voice lower.

Grillby moved his hands from the table and bench top to cup the other’s jaw on each side, flooding the other with warmth. He relished the way the other sighed in appreciation and his sockets seemed to automatically close in submission. Grillby was sure any lingering cold that clung to the other from when he came in evaporated on contact, alongside his proximity.

Bzz-bzzt! Bzz-bzzt!

“Worried others will stare?” He lightly caressed the other’s cheekbone on his right side, smirking a little more. There were a couple of giggles from the other side of the room and happy yet subdued yipping from the canines before they stopped, having been hushed by a regular. They probably wanted to see where this was going.

Bzz-bzzt! Bzz-bzzt!

“th-they’ve been starin’ all day, boss, c’mon. you’ve been givin’ em a free show,” the other retorted, attempting humour. His voice sounded shakier the longer Grillby stayed near and he kept his sockets closed. The fire monster idly wondered how long it would take for the other to give up and zip away
again, rewarding him with another victory.

*Bzz-bzzt!*

He appeared to be holding his own, however. Not like that infernal phone, which kept buzzing in Sans’ pocket like a wind up toy. Grillby ignored it, since the other seemed content to do the same.

“If I could let you go. However, not before I collect what’s due,” the bartender murmured as he leaned forward a little more, his mouth brushing against the bridge between his sockets. The bone heated under his breath and furrowed slightly until Grillby left a kiss, feeling the oddly malleable bone relax under his mouth. The other had instinctively sucked in a surprised breath and both of his hands lay uselessly in his lap, but Sans’ mouth fell open with the lingering touch.

Then two more, one after the other, on each cheekbone, lingering long enough to feel a subtle quiver through the smaller monster.

Regrettably, Grillby let him go, leaving Sans looking rather intoxicated and smiling from one end of his face to the other. He thought that would be the end of anything else, but he heard a content mumble from the other.

“…should really pay all my meals that way.”

When Sans left Grillby’s, his footsteps were sure, light and springy. His face was burning with a flustered glow after the hoots, good-natured laughter and teasing from the regulars at the bar on his way out the door. He’d even pulled his hood up to hide his furiously blushing face, it now just dawning on him that it was apparently a thing that maturing skeletons could do. After all, Papyrus had displayed the phenomenon a time or two before.

He checked over his phone; three missed phone calls from Alphys. That was weird; normally she didn’t call.

…

And… thirty waiting text messages.

Alphys (Last message received: 1:09pm);
- Oh! We got the feed!! Nice job! (☆´・ω・`)b
- I was a little worried since you were taking so long
- Not to say that I’m impatient! Just remember to keep warm. Snowdin’s cold, right? I don’t work well in the cold (╯︵╰

- Thanks again for helping me. It really means a lot! orz
- Um…Σ(∩^-^)
- (*○□○)……!
- Hey, that fire monster?
- He’s pretty close
- I think he might,
- Σ(⫉⫈)ＳＡＮＳ
- SANS
- SANS THE FEED
- OMG I CAN’T WATCH THIS?? \(\ast \>\n\)’’
- SANS THAT FIRE MONSTER MIGHT *LIKE* YOU
- WHOA HOLD ON BACK UP
- WAIT IS ~*~*THIS*~*~ THE ‘SOMEONE’?????? (///°OMP///)
- SANS, YOU OMG I DON’t know what to say!!
- THIS is the guy!??! WHAT A CHOICE FOR A FIRST CRUSH LOLL
- A fire monster! OMG. SANS. I’M SORRY BUT THIS IS TOO CUTE!! ♥
- HE REALLY LIKES YOU
- ~*~*REALLY*~*~ LIKES!!!!!!
- OH WOW OH GEE OH BOY (ゝ° Starter) ♥ ~
- Hey, quick note Hotland monsters are VERY bold
- Like, incredibly. He is going to be M E R C I L E S S once he finds out you like him omg
- But I um… guess you know this by now???? HAHA oh man… AND I got a front row seat to you two dorks flirting!! XD
- I ship it!! Sans!!! I’m not going to lie!! This is too perfect and cute and SAJKHDFG!!!!!
- AAAAAAA MY HEARRRRRT THIS IS SO SWEET
- HE KISSED YOUUUU
- OMGGGG~ ·*:*( n Yu # U)%; ·
- SANS!!!! You’re such a dork lmao I’m sorry (⋆°_(´*))° answer your phone~~~

Sans stood as still as a rock as he looked down to the camera under his arm. The little red light, indicating it was live, was shining brightly and he felt his magic spike and flood throughout his bones in complete abject mortification.

Without thinking twice, he quickly found a rift and put the peak in energy to good use, made a shortcut to the bush outside of the Ruins’ door and stuffed the camera inside. All the while he was glaring into the lens and hoping he didn’t look as embarrassed as he felt.

Chapter End Notes

This chapter headed into an entirely different direction than the outline I had planned. But I’m SO GLAD because it gives everyone an idea as to what Grillby is like, what he thinks about Sans, and how he acts as a star/fire monster and what that entails. For continuity's sake, I’ll keep referring to Grillby as a fire monster… cuz… yeah. "(ツ)_/"

PS: Alphys' texts were literally me this entire chapter. Girl, stop making friend fics of people you know!!!!
The Gnats & The Seeds

Chapter Summary

It appears that Sans makes a whole slew of mistakes today.
Midnight texting.
Biology lessons.
Wrestling.

Alphys (Last message received: 1:23pm);
- SPILL THE BEANS \( ^{^(^□^*)}\)

*no way aint a thing gimme the coords

- Sans, this is kind of a big deal!! I’m sorry!

*nah how bout we get 2 work like what u asked bc this convo is suddenly terrible

- WHO IS HE o(>*ω<*)o

*how bout we talk bout literally anythin else
  *im kinda bushed tbh
  *heh

- I NEED DETAILS ( # งฟ` )

*dont
  *gdi alph u dont gotta make this a huge deal
  *sides im not givin u the deets 4 ur shippin charts
  *ys that even a thing
  *nvm dont ansr that dont wanna know

- YOU DON’T UNDERSTAND
- THIS IS A ~*~*VERY~*~* BIG DEAL!!!? ■ メ ■

*ok
  *well sure but lets get n ur thing then

- My thing? o_o

*sure
  *u know
  *ur big obvs af n love w/
  *u know

- 49°21'12.2"N 2°11'26.5"E

He couldn’t help it. He laughed outright. Sans went over the coordinates for the next stop in his head. Sentry station in the forest: Lesser Dog’s. Since Papyrus was patrolling the area, Sans came to the conclusion that he’d have to warp to the other end of the forest in order to not get caught. If only
his brother could see the amount of effort he put into this, then he wouldn’t harp on him for taking as many breaks as he did. It was a pretty decent job.

He trudged along, finding a rift point that brought him directly into the thicket just before his brother’s tile and ice puzzle. He hummed nonsensically as he slid safely across, then went over to the station. It took him a few moments to realise it was hidden under the roof, just out of sight. He also noticed that Lesser Dog was nowhere to be seen, but saw a mess of scampering footsteps in the snow leading into a nearby field. It must’ve been break time.

A few minutes after he had pulled the camera down and set about repairing it on the sentry’s desk, his phone rang. Suspiciously, Sans pulled it out of his pocket and glowered at the screen. It was Alphys. He ignored it, knowing it would probably be more needling questions, and continued his work.

His phone buzzed a few times with some text messages and he waited until he was finished his repairs before taking a look. Four different messages, all with some variation of a smarmy text emoji with raised eyebrows. No further questions about his crush, though.

He messaged her back, asking for the next coordinates. It looked like that was the last of the cameras that needed repairs, apart from the one outside of the lab in Hotland. The mortification he’d felt earlier had died down to just plain embarrassment by the time he resituated the camera back in its proper place.

“BROTHER!”

Sans nearly dropped his bag in surprise. He turned his skull to see his brother darting up to him from up the field, in the exact location he’d come from.

Crap.

He hoped Papyrus wouldn’t have noticed where his footsteps suddenly started in the trees, but by the time his younger brother marched up to him, he looked far too elated to have noticed. Sans silently wished he didn’t, in any case.

“What are you doing out here? This is definitely not Hotland.”

“ice to see you too,” Sans drawled, giving his brother a big grin. “alph said it was snow problem if i took a few to see my best bro.”

Papyrus’ expression shifted to one of mild surprise - that is, until the puns dropped. Then he scowled, his teeth grating together. Sans grimaced at the sensation it likely made and unconsciously took a step back when his brother stomped closer.

“LOOK AT YOU! WHAT HAP-“ he stopped, then glowered when he caught the unmistakable scent of grease and fast food, “I SHOULD HAVE KNOWN! GRILLBY’S. ALTHOUGH I DON’T KNOW WHY YOU THOUGHT A UNIBROW WOULD SUIT YOU. IT OBVIOUSLY DOESN’T.”

Admittedly, it took a moment for Sans to put two and two together before a fresh wave of embarrassment shot through him and he used his sleeve to wipe at his face. The fabric came back with soot on it and he felt flush at the reminder of the kisses.

It would appear to be the wrong thing to do, but he wasn’t thinking clearly. Papyrus was even more interested by the fact his assumption was different to what Sans thought, apparently.
“just went for lunch.”

“OH?” His younger brother’s sockets narrowed daringly, looking smug. Sans didn’t like it. “AND HOW WAS IT.”

“it tasted-” He should have known it was a trap, since Papyrus’ disdain for the dive was well-known; why would he ask how it was? His sentence came to a full stop; “it tasted. paps, did y’know we can make tongues?”

“WHAT AN UNUSUAL OBSERVANCE TO MAKE, SANS.”

“i’m not hearin’ a ‘no’.”

“AND YOU WON’T HEAR ONE! OF COURSE WE CAN, WE-” Papyrus stopped again, then grabbed his brother’s shoulders and pulled him forward to look at him clear in the face. Sans attempted to give him an innocent look but his reaction was delayed and he looked somewhat pained instead. A dawning realisation came over the taller monster’s face and Sans sucked in a breath to mentally prepare himself for the next outburst. “OH. MY. GOD!!”

“pap, no.”

“NYEH HEH HEH! ‘PAP’, YES! COULD IT BE??” Papyrus gave him a knowing grin and Sans squirmed out of his grasp, hands going straight for his pockets.

“cool it.”

Papyrus continued laughing, the noise bouncing around the area as his volume heightened. Sans shrunk away, attempting to find an escape from the already fully humiliating day; he did not need an addition to it. Papyrus caught his hood as he made to slink off with his bag before he could get anywhere near a couple of feet away, however.

“MY DEAR BROTHER. IT SEEMS YOU ARE LACKING IN SOME EXTREMELY IMPORTANT LIFE LESSONS. ALLOW ME, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, TO SOOTHE YOUR WOEFUL CONUNDRUMS!”

“we can literally do this anytime but now, bro,” Sans immediately retorted, feeling his magic tinge his face in horror, “i dunno why you’re makin’ out like it’s a big deal.” It really wasn’t a big deal - not anyone else’s, anyway.

“OF COURSE. BUT INSTEAD OF YOU HIDING AND DANCING AROUND THE SUBJECT AT HAND-” Papyrus tugged him so Sans stepped beside him, before letting go of him once he was sure he wasn’t going to leave. “TELL ME.”

“tell you what?” the older of the two countered, genuinely confused now. What subject? He really hoped Papyrus wasn’t going to badger him now of all times about confessing. Because that had already happened, it was just a matter of time before he got the nerves, so to speak, to bring it up on his own. When he was ready.

“WHAT’S SO INTERESTING ABOUT THAT GREASE HOLE?”

Ah. Yeah, that. Sans groaned inwardly as he realised that Papyrus must have also seen him go the complete opposite way of Waterfall the previous morning. He coughed awkwardly.

“i, uh,” he looked everywhere but his brother’s face. “c-can’t find, um…” His glance flicked upward, still grimacing. Even though Grillby had suggested the prank and this was the perfect
opportunity to carry it out, he was tired, and at least Alphys would let up on the questions if he was falling asleep. He had to get away, as ridiculous as it sounded. “c-can’t find my whoopee cushion, y’know? thought i might’ve left it there.”

Papyrus’ expression went flat and he sighed loudly. “I KNEW THERE WAS A LACK OF FLATULENT NOISES LATELY!” He pressed a gloved hand against his face and shook his skull. He really thought he was on to something then!

Sans allowed himself to relax a little. “uh, alph’s waitin’, so…” Idly he made a check for his phone, which had a few messages waiting. That was lucky - or was it predictable? “still got another day with her, i think. she’s gonna check over some stats and we still got some variables to look through.”

Papyrus was still shaking his head as Sans made another attempt to leave. He was again, jerked back by his hood and he had to restrain himself from swearing in frustration.

“WHERE IS…” Sans hunched down into his hood, knowing what was coming, “…the echo blossom?”

“dunno,” the older said, tugging at his jacket with one hand while avoiding Papyrus’ look.

“YOU DIDN’T THROW IT AWAY, DID YOU!?” Papyrus sounded aghast and Sans looked at him helplessly. Then he simply shrugged.

“maybe left it somewhere.”

“SANS!! THAT WAS… SUCH A CARELESS THING TO DO!” His brother sounded extremely disappointed and Sans couldn’t help but flinch at his tone.

“yeah, my bad,” he played along, his eye lights shrinking in his sockets and settling to the snow at his brother’s boots. “listen… text me later? i, uh… i gotta go. keep a lookout for humans, ok baby bro? keep safe. love ya.”

Whether it was because his brother was stunned over his little white lie or because he’d been quick, Sans was able to get away. He made his way back through the field to the tile and ice puzzle and rounded the corner, readying his magic for a shortcut. Slipping through a rift, he twirled on one foot to regain his balance on the other end, nearly tripping over a large red rock along the path to Alphys’ lab. Either his emotional state was unstable, or he had simply used too much magic in one day; he was beginning to feel it.

His phalanges barely rapped against the metal door of the building when the hiss of mechanics stopped him and the royal scientist reached past the door and pulled him inside. For a moment, the glare of Hotland’s climate had made the reflection off her glasses a bright orange and if Sans didn’t know her any better, he would have pegged the expression as devious.

“i need a nap. i’m exhausted,” the skeleton muttered, sounding genuinely fatigued. He’d done more in a day physically than he had all last week, and he was mentally drained as well. He sighed and let Alphys drag him by the arm further into the lab, where she had set up a sleeping area for him out of the blanket and pillow he’d used before.

Gratefully, he sunk down on the sleeping pile, ignoring her excited and bouncy stance as though he would open up to her. Instead, he dropped back against the pillow, intent to sleep.

“Um… th-thanks again, for helping me with the… the cameras, Sans,” she said after a long moment
of hesitation. It seemed like she’d lost her nerve, or it was reserved for online social interactions only. When the other only replied with the quiet drone of snores, she sighed and went through the bag to put her tools away.

For the majority of the evening, Sans slept dreamlessly. He woke briefly when the air conditioning turned off and the place heated up fairly quickly. His mind roamed to earlier that afternoon and Sans couldn’t help but grin to himself, curled up under the blanket in the warmth of pleasant and awkward memories. He felt his phone buzz in his pocket and pulled it out to look at it. The current time was 11:46pm.

A few from Alphys, from a couple hours ago. Two from an unknown number, and several worrying messages from his brother.

Papyrus (Last message received: 7:34pm);
- IT OCCURS TO ME THAT I MAY HAVE UPSET YOU.
- WHILE IT IS NOT MY INTENTION, MY DEAR BROTHER, YOU HAVE TO USE THAT ROBUST BACKBONE OF YOURS AND CONFRONT YOUR FEELINGS.
- FEELINGS THAT, I ADMIT, ARE A LITTLE CONFUSING. AND POSSIBLY TO YOU, TOO.
- SO I HAVE TAKEN SOME LIBERTIES.
- YOU MAY FIND SOON, A CERTAIN SOMEONE MAY BE CONTACTING YOU.
- YOU ARE WELCOME.
- (LEGIBLE WINK)

Alphys (Last message received: 9:58pm);
- Hey there, not sure how long you’re going to be sleeping! So! I just wanted to say if you’re hungry you can have whatever garbage that’s in the fridge (≥uously≥)^
- ? Not saying it’s GARBAGE but um? Maybe you’d want something
- There’s still some cookies and some monster candy. You know where the chip machine is too…
- Oh! The code for it is 4827 if you want. I forgot to mention it before (*｀∀´*)ノ'
- The variables came back negative again. If what you’re saying is true, your ‘shortcuts’ tend to dip the grid line inward and shift things around until you get on the other end
- I still don’t know what the 3 hour break was… or how you got stuck ♒((↼‸↼)♒)
- I’m glad you’re ok though! ♥
- Hope these don’t wake you… anyway, it’s late and I’ll probably be passed out at my computer upstairs by the time you read these ♡(¬‿¬)♫ lmao

Unknown (Last message received: 11:42pm);
- Hello. I’m unsure if I should be messaging so late. Is this Sans?
- Perhaps it is one of Papyrus’ pranks. I do apologise if you are an unintended participant in this joke. Good night.

Sending the phone a confused look and scrolling back to his brother’s messages, Sans felt unsure about the unknown sender. After a few minutes, he exhaled softly against the quiet hum of the lab.

*this is a sans whats shakin

The skeleton waited a few minutes until the backlight dimmed on his phone, then eventually turned
off. He wondered what the heck that was all about. He came to the conclusion that Papyrus had probably come up with his own ideas as to what had happened at the bar, and secretly hoped said bar’s top gossips wouldn’t reach his non-existent ears.

He sighed again, deeply, and rolled onto his back, pulling the blanket up to his face and stared up at the high ceiling. The fans in the tiles moved slowly, pulling him back to sleep. He felt his phone slip from his fingers and rest against his chest as he dozed. The sudden vibration against his sternum rattled him enough to jolt him awake, however.

He brought the phone up to his face, cracking one socket open as he flipped it on.

Unknown (Last message received: 12:04am);
- If this is a Sans I know, that is definitely the exact response I’d expect to receive. One can practically hear your mumble through the words.

  *ur slow @ typin u know that
  *sides im a v busy skele if u knew me like ur insinuatin ud know this by now
  *how many sansses u know bucko
  *whos the imposter
  *i gotta know whos tarnishin my good name

- Now I know for certain this is Sans.

  *ay cheers u done good next round @grillbz on me
  *yknow if i ever run in2 u

- I’m certain we’ll see each other again. Especially if you come to Grillby’s.

Sans’ sockets narrowed at that and he shifted a little to get more comfortable, scowling at the messages as he held the phone over his face. He scrolled up to read them once more before he received another.

- Let’s play a game to see how long it takes for you to decipher who I am.

  *ur layin it on thick bud thats the thing w/ txts u cant know unless they say
  *this telecom sys is gr8 n all but its got drawbacks

- You haven’t made a joke once and seem very agitated. I wonder if I’m the one being pranked?

  *idk bro kinda sounds like u werent even sure who u were msgin
  *sides i just woke up
  *gimme a break the ol engines still turnin over

- You use a lot of shorthand in your messages. I admit, I’m having a difficult time deciphering it.

  *ya i get that
  *so who r u
  *are+you^ just fyi
  *ugh

- I live in Snowdin.

  *ok not the ansr 2 my q but
  *me 2
- You are not here, however.

        *nah
*hotland
*all hot n toasty @ lab

- Careful.

        *nah its cool
*n by cool i mean hot af i love it
*its basically the best temp not gonna lie

There wasn’t any immediate reply to that, so Sans snickered to himself and got up. He stretched until
his spine popped and all the worst kinks were out, then got up to visit the fridge. He squinted inside,
reading over a few containers; plum halves, ichi… something, some kind of candy he didn’t like, and
some more puffy-looking buns. He grabbed one and read over the cooking instructions before just
unwrapping it and taking off half of it in a large bite.

Spicy. Then unbearably spicy and even hot. His magic absorbed it before he could spit it out, and he
covered his mouth with a soft hiss. Once the initial burn was gone and he could detect the lingering
taste, he shrugged and took another bite, this time smaller. It was a bit better to manage.

He checked his phone and another message had come in;

Unknown (Last message received: 12:24am);
- You have my envy.

        *u like hot so much y dont u come here
*you+why^    
*u know what ur gonna have 2 learn the lingo
*esp if ur wantin 2 msg me in the wee hrs

- Suppose I should, but I have ties here.
- And an intriguing arrangement.

        *well that doesnt sound suspicious @ all

- Would you like a hint as to my identity?

        *idk how coy u bein w/ me
*wait is this red
*cuz i told u b4 sorry bout the wing
*was accident

- This only brings more questions. No, this isn’t Red.

        *……………doggo?

- Sans, please.

        *well ok u got me hint pls

- HIP 24436.
Sans blinked at the screen. In whatever context this was, he had to admit… he had no clue what it meant. It wasn’t an engineering term or anything he normally came across. Nor did he think it was a Boss Monster, as being so forthright about HP levels was deemed unclassy in monster culture. He must have taken a while to think about it, since the person on the other end deaned to clarify;

Unknown (Last message received: 12:46am);
- I apologise. It’s difficult to parse the language through the phone. Is this better?
- β
- If you need further clarification, I may be suitably obliged to offer further hints.

*wh thats not even a hint thats a gd fancy b
*wait thats beta gdi
*its like u like 2 see me squirm
*reminds me of a guy i know

- Ori.

*beta ori?
*that an anime?
*wait is this alphys
*thought u were sleepin i can hear u down here girl
*w/ ur betta ori himes

- Sans. This is not Alphys. Should I offer another hint?

*aw she woulda liked that
*2 jokes n 1
*ok ya gimme another im just warmin up

- Possibly the most flirtatious thing you’ve said so far.

Sans nearly dropped his phone but managed to catch it in time, yet lost the bun in the process. He realised with that last message who the unknown number was and felt a whole new jumble of emotions flood over him. First was the strain of nervousness. Then horror, as he had said quite a few callous and even compromising things about heat. Thirdly, irritation that Papyrus had gotten the right guess as to whom his crush was, when he’d meant to keep it from him.

*u srs
*pap took this 2 far
*ur not jokin

Help, Sans’ thoughts internally screamed.

- I can say I’m honestly flattered.
- Not everyday someone tells you they love an aspect of yourself when everyone else shies away from being burned.

He stood stock still, staring at his phone. If he had flesh, the blood it would be draining from his face. Instead, staying quiet, he shook his phone and grunted, pretending with all his might to fling it across the lab. Of course he didn’t, but it relieved some pent up tension.

It was Grillby. Papyrus had given Grillby his goddamn cell phone number!
Unknown (Last message received: 1:14am);
- I didn’t mean to be so forward. I’m unable to help myself at times.
- If you were serious this afternoon, I would be inclined to take you up on your offer.
- To fix our issue of not having gone out.
- If your reaction right now is anything like the other day, well…
- Do make sure to take care of yourself.
- After all, it would be a shame for you to come back to Snowdin not the least bit worked up.
- I’m at dangerous risk of jealousy.
- Heat is the best temperature, by far.
- Sans, did I scare you off again?
- Another point for me. Have a pleasant evening.

Sans found himself flustered, just imagining the other’s tone and the accompanying smirk. He scrolled up through the past messages, internally lamenting the things he’d sent. He should have known. Perhaps texting an unknown number in the middle of the night wasn’t exactly the best idea, in hindsight. Irritably, he brought up his brother’s contact information and typed out a response before deleting it immediately.

No, he couldn’t do it, namely because Papyrus would know Grillby did message him, and that his anger would only confirm his brother’s suspicions. Sans wandered back over to the sleeping area and flopped down again, wondering if he could settle down enough to try another extended nap.

Eventually he did.

The following pre-noon ambling by both Alphys and himself was mostly quiet, if not a little awkward. Sans made no mention of Grillby’s messages over sweetened coffee and jam toast. He was very proud of himself in that he managed to kick the chewing habit early enough. So far, two hours into the day, it was going well.

Alphys eventually brought out the books she had promised him, along with gathering his old notes together. They hadn’t helped much, being in a cipher neither of them remembered, and her cursory scan of his soul still felt intrusive, despite his efforts to remain calm. She noted how his bones seemed thin, but it was only natural. Determination made monster physicality dodgy, at best.

The hours that passed was spent repairing the camera stationed outside of Alphys’ lab. If the one by the Ruins had been bad, Sans cursed the one now. It would’ve been easier to construct a whole new one, but Alphys was adamant that she couldn’t find the necessary parts on such short notice. It took the better half of the afternoon to finally get it working again.

Soon enough, it was time for him to go. She thanked him and told him to keep better care of his phone and that she wanted updates as soon as anything else happened. He didn’t quite know how to address that, so shrugged indifferently and waved goodbye on his way out.

Although travel was quick via his shortcuts, Sans felt apprehensive about Waterfall. The malaise he felt as he bypassed the entire area almost seemed to tug at him when his slippers met with the icy patch on the outskirts of Snowdin. He set his jaw as he peered down the cavern, but just shrugged it off, burying his worry until he got back to his house.

By the lights’ glow inside, Sans figured his brother was home. He inhaled sharply, allowing the crisp cold air to whirl about his bones before he crept up the step to the door. His bag slipped from his shoulder as he was yanked inside with a startled grunt, pulled into an energetic and tight hug.
“missed you too,” he said, muffled against the other’s clothes. He gave a couple of awkward pats to his brother’s back, then was released, almost shook as Papyrus took him by the shoulders and looked at him up and down.

“WELL?” His tone was expectant and Sans could only stare up at him with thinly veiled confusion. When he didn’t reply, Papyrus sighed quietly. “OH SANS, WHAT AM I GOING TO DO WITH YOU?”

Sans shrugged noncommittally and dumped his bag onto the floor by the coat rack and wandered inside. “dunno what you mean, bro.”

Irritation momentarily flicked over his brother’s face with the desertion of the rucksack and its partially spilled contents. Papyrus bent to retrieve the items and stopped shortly, eyeing the titles of some very peculiar books.

Books that admittedly Papyrus hadn’t read himself, but he could guess the content to:

- Fathomable Resonances - An Inward Reflection to Maturation & Genesis by E. S. MadHob
- Biology of Magic by E. Creeper
- Magical Bodies & The Housed Soul by Mathers
- E/M FLUX BIOLOGY - New Home Collegiate 19xx Comprehensive Edition

He shot a sidelong glance to his diminutive brother and shouldered the bag as Sans got comfortable on the couch to watch some television. He followed suit and sat down, dropping the bag in between them.

“I’M AFRAID I MIGHT HAVE…” Papyrus grimaced, not caring to admit his mistakes to the point this would likely be regarded as suspicious behaviour, but he soldiered on, “…NOT CLEARLY UNDERSTOOD YOUR PREDICAMENT, LATELY.”

Sans turned his skull the barest fraction to indicate he was listening, but his eye lights never left the TV screen. He was bunched up on his end of the couch with his hands firmly resting in each pocket.

“So… What I would like to offer is-” Papyrus grimaced again, straightening his spine. “-An apology. For I was incredibly rude.”

That got Sans’ full attention. He turned on the spot, perplexed as Papyrus stared him down. Then he considered it, looking conflicted as he rolled a shoulder uneasily.

“nah. i was. sorry, guess i just got excited.”

“You should be!! Excited, that is, not sorry.” Sans gave him a pained expression and the younger brother groused at him further, “Do you know what this means??”

Sans had a feeling he knew what Papyrus was getting at, but it didn’t make him any more prepared for the contents of his bag to be completely upturned on the couch between them.

Sans watched all this relatively calmly, biting any gnawing suspicions away as the other read the books’ titles aloud.

“Really, Sans. These are too… Wordy,” his brother squinted through a bit of the text of E/M FLUX BIOLOGY before setting it aside, “I know what you have been going through! It is something that your great brother is no stranger to.”

“Pap, no.”
“AGAIN, TO THAT I SAY YES! ALLOW ME TO INSTRUCT YOU ON THE FINER POINTS OF MONSTER BIOLOGY AND INTIMACY.”

The older of the two was mortified and his face was frozen in a state of shock.

“AFTER ALL, I AM VERY GREAT. AND A SUBJECT LIKE THIS MUST BE BROACHED CAREFULLY TO AVOID EMBARRASSMENT!”

Oh no. This was not happening.

“IF YOU PREFER, I CAN INTRODUCE YOU TO A FEW BOOKS AT THE LIBRARY. I HAVE A GREAT DEAL OF THEM MEMORISED. I ALSO REMEMBER THAT SONG ABOUT THE GNATS AND THE SEEDS THAT YOU PICKED UP!”

Sans sputtered incoherently, his confusion and horror only building to a full crescendo at a rapid rate. It left him repeating what Papyrus said like a half-brained idiot. “gnats… and seeds?” He probably shouldn’t have repeated that - in fact, it came to him quickly enough where this terrible conversation was headed. “no—”

“YES!! AFTER ALL. I HAVE A VERY GREAT MEMORY. AHEM—”

Sans got up as quickly as he could and tackled his brother off the couch, interrupting the first word of the lyric with a startled exclamation. The song was along the lines of maturation and mating, drawing parallels between mushroom gnats bringing echo flower seeds to different areas of Waterfall to propagate. Only it was meant for children, which Sans definitely was not.

“SANS!! THAT WAS ENTIRELY UNNECESSARY!!”

“don’t you dare sing that—” his older brother huffed indignantly, letting the rest of the sentence hang. Papyrus gave him a playful shove and pushed him to the floor, as payback for upturning them both from the couch. Sans attempted to crawl to his feet, but the other kept him arrested.

“WHAT? ARE YOU HAVING A ‘BAD TIME’, BROTHER? THINK YOU ARE TOO ‘COOL’ TO BE SUBJECT TO ONE OF THE GREAT PAPYRUS’ MASTERFUL LECTURES ON MONSTER BIOLOGY? JUST BECAUSE YOU’VE IGNORED YOUR BODY FOR YEARS, AND IT’S FINALLY HAPPENED—”

Sans groaned as though in pain and struggled to get out of Papyrus’ grasp. He laughed defensively and tried elbowing him in the ribs to let him go, desperate.

“get the hell offa me, pap, i swear—”

“YOU SWEAR ENTIRELY TOO MUCH!” Papyrus thundered, unable to suppress his grin. “BUT NO, YOU’RE NOT GOING ANYWHERE! YOU’RE NOT HIDING IN YOUR ROOM! YOU’RE NOT GOING TO GRILLBY’S! YOU’RE GOING TO SIT HERE MANO-A-MANO WITH ME AND HAVE A MEANINGFUL, SCHOLARLY CONVERSATION ABOUT FEELINGS—”

“oh my god, pap! no!”

“-AND CANOODLING—”

“argh!” Sans attempted another kick to crawl out of his brother’s grasp, desperate to get away from the conversation.
Papyrus strengthened his grasp around his brother and pulled him close, wrapping his arms around his rib cage and straining as Sans forcibly pushed his skull away with both of his hands. “-AND COITUS! AND COPULATING! AND COURTSHIP!! NYEH HEH!!”

“stop saying those words!” Sans had started making strangulated noises.

“WHY? THEY AREN’T BAD. JUST LIKE THE WORDS ‘MATING’ AND ‘BREEDING’! UNLESS YOU’RE THINKING OF THEM IN RELATION TO THE WOOING OF A CERTAIN—OOF!”

Sans had successfully managed to shove his brother onto his back and wriggle free of the torturous word attacks. His face was flushed a bold cyan hue at the implications. It was just so awkward, so increasingly embarrassing that he just had to escape. He only realised it then that the words made him uncomfortable because it was likely that he was associating it with a certain other monster.

Shit!

“‘FORNICATE’ IS NOT A BAD WORD EITHER, BROTHER!” Papyrus called up from the carpet with a laugh.

Sans pulled on his drawstrings of his hood to hide his face with another pained groan, as though every embarrassing word was chiseling away at his health. He got up and huffed through the exertion of the struggle, flopping down onto the couch next to all of his books. Even though he had wanted to escape, he didn’t want Papyrus to think this kind of jape was funny.

“fine,” Sans huffed, adjusting his hoodie and glowering at his younger brother. “but only `cause you’re right.”

“NYEH HEH HEH!! OF COURSE I AM! THERE WAS REALLY NO DOUBTING THAT.”

His younger brother beamed and scrambled off the floor so he could instruct with a little more care and a little less volume. All the while, Sans was curled up with his face covered by his hands on the other end of the couch and regretting his only chance to escape.

It was his own fault, he supposed. All those years - hell, even during the time teaching Papyrus about what he didn’t quite know or care about, would have been easier than this.

This was just humiliating. Papyrus’ lesson admittedly was only a couple of hours long and very limited, but the whole thing felt like he had reverted to his stripe-wearing days. Lamentably, he could only slowly shake his skull in his hands after a brief explanation of his brother’s take on how monster babies were formed. It made him utterly speechless.

There were just no words.
Sans was staring into the fridge.

His gaze was hard, grin set rigidly and going over one or two things in his mind. One; his brother’s obsession with spaghetti was getting out of hand, and two; it was becoming increasingly difficult since his development to hold off on eating any of it. It was a good thing Papyrus wasn’t home while he agonised over the decision to even try.

Those long noodles. The thin sauce. The peppering of oregano that smelled good at first, but then just simply overpowered anything it touched. Sans had a feeling Papyrus would one day accomplish something edible, but that time clearly wasn’t now. He drew himself up and closed the fridge door with a little too much force and perused the cupboards instead. Noodles of every variety, glass jars of sauce, dried herbs and spices that his brother just didn’t know how to use. Idly, he wondered if Papyrus’ taste was just shot. It was a mean thought, one he felt guilty for immediately.

He had been avoiding Grillby’s - not that his food didn’t taste good; it tasted amazing. But he was overly petrified after his friend’s first covert messages. A time or two, his phone buzzed in his pocket and Sans had to correct himself whenever he jolted in surprise.

He found the messages were a little strange; it appeared like a kind of way to keep a running tally. 1/0. 2/0. 2/1. 3/1. The question mark he sent back wasn’t met with any clarification. Somehow, it made him a little uneasy. The unknown always did that to him, although this was for an entirely different reason altogether. He had quickly added the number to his contacts so it said ‘Grillby’ instead.

The second reason why he avoided the bar and its owner was because he was feeling irritated lately. It spurred an impromptu sparring session with Papyrus that left him more exhausted than he’d ever felt before. His magic was going haywire and after his nap, it felt like he needed to burn the extra accumulation off. Yet after he did, he regretted it.

Today was one such day. He left his house into the snowy street and bypassed the restaurant once more, making that a total of 4 days since Grillby’s last personal encounter. He beelined straight to the cosy little shop beyond the trees and his neighbours, taken to the sweet little thing waiting for him inside.

The door chimed as he pushed it open, grinning so wide it looked almost painful. The shopkeeper was behind the desk in a large blue corduroy chair while knitting and simply waved to Sans when he stamped off his feet on the mat.

“hey, sweetbuns.” The skeleton produced an odd little sound similar to a whistle as he shuffled over
to the display counter. “missed ya.”

The shopkeeper’s brow arched sardonically at the greeting and simply held out her furry hand expectantly over the counter. Sans tisked quietly, rummaging in one pocket for the required denomination before carefully dropping two larger coins and a smaller one onto her palm.

“You two, some days, I do swear,” the lady sighed as she put her knitting to the side and got up. “Startled me half to Home with that ruckus the other day!”

“my bad,” Sans replied automatically, his grin tightening and his tone not at all apologetic. His gaze settled on the bunny as she pulled out a cinnamon confection from behind the case, still oozing with warm icing and the complete embodiment of indulgence. With practised ease, she slid it onto a plate, as Sans never strayed far enough to merit wrapping it up. He always ate it on the spot.

“I’m still wedging bones out of the roof tiles,” she revealed, her voice prim as she slid the plate over the counter and sunk back into her chair. “Completely decimated the dimensional box out front! Whose are they?”

Sans gave a halfhearted shrug as he took a big bite of the gooey bun, instantly gratified for coming here. “probably mine.”

“Reminds me of my oldest. They can’t manage their magic yet either. I’m still finding pine nuts and swathes of half-constructed fluffs ‘round the woods out back,” she sighed, the sound a heavy tone of motherhood with children-in-training.

Sans stopped mid-bite to regard her and analyse the sentence. Her assumption was.. he was still learning to control his magic? He wasn’t sure how to respond to that, but caught her curious look regardless. He kept his expression as neutral as he could, even though something twisted inside of him at the notion.

“It’s good of your brother to help you, at any rate.” Her tone was not judgmental, a saving grace considering how uncomfortable Sans suddenly became during the small talk.

A thought came to him as the conversation came to a close and he left the shop, looking at the evidence of their mini-quarrel a couple days past.

He thought back to their little skirmish in the street, of Papyrus laughing triumphantly while showing off a bullet pattern he had been practising. Sans was actually making an effort to dodge, regardless of how precise and careful his brother’s attacks were when it came to him. His magic was restless and unheeding lately and the movements felt like it helped somewhat. It wanted to branch out and he could see the wisp of cyan and yellow streaming from the left side of his vision as he moved.

“SANS! YOU’RE GETTING SLOPPY!!” It was meant more as encouragement than criticism, but during the strife parallels between certain dream sequences were becoming distracting and the ice was doing its fair share of fighting, too. “THIS IS WHY NO ONE BELIEVES YOU’RE THE OLDER BROTHER! NYEH HEH HEH!!”

“think fast, babybones!” Sans hollered over the thrum of crackling magic, conjured bones spiralling around his fist in unison. He rose his left hand above his skull, his eye flickering briefly as he sent out two bones in a boomerang arc into Papyrus’ path. In retaliation, the other swung a femur-shaped mace, the crack of bones echoing through the street. Sans’ attack lurched off course and wedged itself into the side of the shop’s roof with a loud thunk, snow sliding off in a miniature avalanche.
Sans had been pretty impressed by the deflection.

A small crowd was forming. As normal as it was to have sparring between kids, the two skeleton brothers were anything but children. Sans was panting as his slippers skid to one side, knowing he dodged Papyrus’ attack only because of the other’s restraint. He was focused on his brother’s turn, his grin tight and sweat beading off his skull. Papyrus was cool, showing all the bravado of a confident sparring partner as he conjured another set of bones, this time tinted cyan.

Dramatically, the taller brother aimed one at Sans. The older skidded as he felt the sudden familiar weight of Blue magic pull him downward with a grunt of resistance. He landed in the snow and a couple of kids laughed and cheered his brother on.

“cheater!” he huffed over the whooping of the crowd.

“NYEH HEH!! YOU’RE BLUE NOW!” his brother revealed, his fingers twitching in a waved arc that closed in a fist. Some kids in striped shirts were looking up at him star-struck while he summoned more bones.

Pulling through with more effort, now that a small crowd was egging them on, Sans grinned tightly through the pressure around his soul. It had done a little to soothe his recoiling magic, but the lashing and flares were still present, wanting to kick back. He was tired, but he knew he needed to expend a little more energy. Just a few more moments of Papyrus’ choreographed attacks and he could take it easy.

Keeping traction in the snow was the difficult part. Papyrus’ attacks burst out of the icy street in two jagged lines towards him. Sans grabbed a hold of a pair closest to him and they immediately stopped. He pushed his weight against the bones and lurched upward; an easement was there, just lingering enough for him to clear the manifests. He knew that was Papyrus’ doing but it still felt good to clear it.

He twisted his body in the air, his gaze flicking around him to make sure no one would get hurt through the steady crackle of energy when he dropped to his feet. The landing had hurt him a little more than he thought it would. He grimaced as he was sent to one knee, but no points had inched downward. That was another plus to sparring with his brother; he was always extremely careful. He was just that cool.

“POOR LANDING, SANS!” his brother taunted loudly, twirling a long bone in each gloved hand for show. Sans slipped and had landed on his back with a pained swear. He was huffing in short gasps, his flux heated around him enough to produce steam like true breaths. “GET UP. LET’S TRY IT ONE MORE TIME!!”

The other grunted as he did what he was told. He slid again as he attempted traction through the Blue hold on his soul. He gathered and controlled the outpour of his wild energy, the slick cyan hue dripping from his bony digits as he gestured in front of him. For a moment, everything seemed to still.

He only used his left hand for attacks, pouring everything he had outwards. His right hand did nothing and hadn’t for the longest time, so he kept it stuffed into his jacket’s pocket. It was at least easier this way.

Every pinpoint of magic that fell to the ground erupted into a wall of bone, calcium towers of varying heights and distances heading his brother’s way. It closed in on him in a singular path, like a tight maze that Papyrus would have to dance through in order not to be pummelled. His attacks never could hurt him. Papyrus was strong and sturdy, and Sans’ damage output was extremely weak, not
like he would ever muster any intent to harm him, anyway.

After the snow stopped flying, the smaller of the two skeletons panted against his sleeve, feeling the heavy density around his soul ease once more. It was thrumming hard, excited and active with the strain of magical adrenaline. He heard Papyrus make a soft coughing noise and Sans trudged over to help pull him out of the snowbank he was buried in. All the other monsters had backed off during Sans’ attack, but were now looking at each other and discussing techniques. A couple others were inspecting what was left of the dimensional box between the shop and inn, reduced to an empty vessel of splintered wood and broken hinges.

It was only when Sans collapsed in the snow with a tired laugh that they decided to disperse and his brother tugged at his arm. It had gone well, apart from some building damage, and Sans looked and felt a lot less agitated. Brushing the snow off himself, Papyrus pulled his brother up and over his back to carry him home. Overall, he had lasted 9 turns. Not great, but he’d beaten his previous record.

A pinpoint of light had brought Sans out of his brief doze. Upon closer inspection, he realised half the bar had emptied out into the street to watch from a distance, and that Grillby was amongst them. The flicker of his flames seemed curious but it obscured his expression. There was something else there, but Sans found he couldn’t quite look at him for too long. It made his magic spur up again and there was absolutely no chance that Papyrus would drop him off.

Much later, he received a text from Grillby: 3/2.

Now, after having settled down and had a good cinnamon bunny, Sans felt the need to not draw attention to himself in the streets and wandered off towards the forest. He was still feeling peevish and the further out he went, he could see the reflection of his hue bouncing off the snow and ice.

As he walked, he reigned in the near-chaotic flow of energy, focused on the task as he maneuvered around his brother’s puzzles. He heard said monster in the distance, giving a full-on speech about puzzle etiquette to some passerby he didn’t quite recognise. Since he was distracted, Sans decided to take a shortcut directly past them and further into the woods.

He found that using his shortcuts eased him a little more. His magic coiled restlessly around his bones as he found rifts and exploited his travels to get far away. He was probably miles out of town, far from the entrance to the Ruins, and out in the dense thicket. It would be the perfect area to let off some steam.

He heard his phone buzz in his pocket and quickly checked it. A message from Alphys;
- Jumping around? ( " — " )

*ya been antsy lately need 2 burn off a few
*this is rly weird not gonna lie

- That’s ok!! I thought maybe something happened and wanted to make sure you were fine~
- You’re out pretty far ( J’Д ^ )

*thx 4 lookin out 4 me just got some buildup
*so weird

- You haven’t read any of those textbooks I lent you yet??

*im a p busy guy
The better half of the afternoon was spent summoning every attack he could muster. The bone constructs were denser than what he normally formed against Papyrus, but his damage output was so low the snow merely nudged off the inner side of the mountain into heaps in front of him. It made a lot of noise, echoing around until he was sure his eventual harsh breathing would give him away more than his actual barrage.

Sans later found a shallow field of snow to lie down on, shrugged up into his hoodie. It was cold, but it was a dry cold, one that didn’t stick to his bones or attempt to hide in his joints. For a while he napped, unable to help it. Napping had become such a quintessential part of his life that he barely had to think about it anymore. At least there were no dreams lately.

The way back through the forest was longer, using shortcuts to only keep himself alert until he reached his sentry station by the Ruins’ entrance. He wandered over, his own footprints the only pair...
leading up to the massive doors since his last visit. He knocked. There was no answer, naturally, but it didn’t hurt to check periodically. It just felt like something he had to do.

Eventually he found his way back to Snowdin. It had looked like the mail had been delivered, and the red flag on his mailbox was standing tall. He stared at it for a moment before peeking inside, feeling oddly apprehensive. Checking the mail wasn’t something he normally did, after all.

A postcard. Its front was an old glossy polaroid with creases throughout. The image was blurred with water damage and faded to the point where only a few vague orange lines were visible. Curiously, Sans turned it over, only to have his grin drop.

More cipher. He was running across it more and more lately. He didn’t really remember the symbols, and quite a few of his notes were in the same script. Nothing came to mind looking at it apart from an unsettling feeling. Was this even meant for him..?

Regardless, he took out his phone to message Alphys if she could help him decipher it. They had gotten nowhere with his old notes and attempting transliteration made his skull ache.

*hey alph need u 2 translate
      
- I’m not seeing anything? ( )

   
- You’re not sending anything!! 겁수양 }&GT GT)\%

   *its a gd postcard

   - What does it say?

   *idk its in dings
   *wait i mean cipher idk y i typed dings

   - It’s honestly not showing up for me (T◇T:)

She sent a screenshot of his messages and there were blank spaces where the photo should have been. Sans scowled at his phone, then to the postcard, then held it in front of his face for a ridiculous selfie and sent it her way.

*whaddabout now

- That is…. probably a photo!! (-、-)

   *gdi maybe the camera fried
   *thought u fixed it

- I only added video feed?? The camera worked fine when I checked!!

   *lemme try somethin hold on
Unsure why he thought it would help, Sans snapped a photo of his front door and sent it away.

- Nice wreath LOL
- Guess your camera works?? ???

*ok now lemme try again

This time he lined up the shot with only half of the postcard in view.

- Uhhhhhhhhhhhhhh

*ok hows it look

- Uhhhhhh….γ(´︶`)

*brilliant dr alphys great deduction knew i could count on u

- It’s… glitchy? Like some broken VHS tracking bleed? I can’t make anything out though (´ж`) :

*ok well thx 4 the help

- Sorry ( ;̀inx̀)

Sans huffed a frustrated sigh and shoved his phone back into his pocket before heading back inside. He briefly went to his room to grab his key so he could go behind the house and downstairs where he kept most of his college and CORE notes. He rifled through the drawers and cupboards for a few bursting binders and spread the information on the floor to study.

It occupied him enough that he lost track of time. It had to be hours before he got another message from Alphys, just reminding him to read over his biology books. Sans didn’t answer, but rubbed at his face. His skull felt as though someone was scratching at a chalkboard inside of it and he couldn’t focus anymore. He didn’t get any headway into understanding the cipher, either.

Dings.

Why did that come to mind? He tapped his pen between his teeth in thought, sockets closed as he went over it for the thousandth time. There was a piece of his memory missing, although when he looked deep enough, he could see holes everywhere. Why he went to college. Why he understood Hands. Who had raised him from infancy. What had happened to their parents. Why was he alone to raise Papyrus, although his soul felt a little heavy at that last one.

The silence of Sans’ lab was getting to him and it was freezing, having no heat. It was an uncomfortable notion to be able to distinguish between temperatures now, to say the least. He gathered up what he could along with a notebook that had more than half the pages blank, and left for Grillby’s. That should clear his head. Besides, after his outlet in the woods he was feeling a little better.

Unfortunately, when he got there Sans found Grillby’s filled to capacity. He glanced around the bar; his usual seat was occupied, all the canine unit’s tables filled and only one booth left in the very corner of the bar looked recently vacated, near the jukebox. The whole place was loud with chatter and filled with a comfortable heat from all the monsters inside.

He sighed softly and moved past all the bodies and toward the only space left. His notepad, the
postcard and the small green pocketbook were dumped atop of the table as Sans took a seat.

The skeleton stole a glance at Grillby. He looked busy and had his back turned to him; it was possible he didn’t see him come in. So Sans shrugged to himself and pulled open his notes, working his mind and sketchy memory over to figure things out. The other monster’s voices were a constant hum, punctuated by silverware, barking and laughter. The atmosphere was soothing and Sans was able to focus better than in his basement.

It had been quite a while. Maybe a couple of hours since he sat down, and Sans had tried copying a few of the symbols down. He was glaring at the postcard, studying the worn glossy front, before sighing heavily and examining the back of it.

“Here,” a familiar voice whispered from over his shoulder. Sans nearly jumped on the bench and turned his skull, realising he had tuned everything out. The fire monster was smirking at him and Sans felt an aching throb in his soul when he looked down to the other’s hand. He was pointing to one of the symbols in the green notebook. “This one looks like-” He made a sound that Sans didn’t quite understand; a hum with an ethereal snap that echoed like a musical note, but not quite.

“uh,” he started quietly, staring at the other’s hand quite close to his own. “didn’t catch that, boss.”

A quiet chuckle came from the other and Grillby leaned down so his body was hanging over him. He gently took the pen from Sans’ grasp then pulled a paper from Sans’ other side and carefully drew out a symbol. “It looks like this?”

Sans leaned forward to peer at it. It looked like a small circle with three rods sticking out of one side, all angled perfectly: ☄ It actually looked quite similar to one of the symbols he was studying, only the one in the pocketbook had 8 lines around the entire circle equally spaced apart.

“you know dings?” There was another odd familiarity when Sans spoke the word, something he couldn’t put his finger on. He looked up at his friend, a little confused.

Grillby’s head tilted and his fire crackled along his brow as though in curiosity. “...Who is dings?”

Something twinged inside of Sans’ soul at the inquiry and he grow silent as he mulled it over. “Yeah… who..?” the skeleton muttered, not really sure what to ask. Was it a ‘who’, and why did Sans feel like that might be it? It was peculiar and a little distressing.

“Someone you know?” Grillby drew back and watched the other. He appeared extremely distracted.

“is it a someone..?” Sans stopped when he realised he was echoing like a flower and rubbed over his face with both of his hands.

“...Only assumed. You don’t appear to be sure.”

“memory’s not so great,” the skeleton replied quietly after a pause.

Grillby shifted where he stood, recognising the other’s discomfort. There was something else hidden there, but he wasn’t sure as to what. “...Known you far too long to think that true, Sans,” he offered quietly. Sans only nodded slightly, not looking at him. He wondered if his absence had anything to do with the skeleton’s current mood.

Grillby was unable to probe further before he noticed a few patrons were looking at him, even more gesturing for him to come over. With a quiet sigh, he patted Sans’ shoulder with a murmur that he
would return after the dinner rush.

Sans was still poured over his work when Grillby came back. He had an exhausted look on his face that made his soul twinge with pity. Sans had copied a few more symbols down and drew out some diagrams that involved a lot of straight angles and calculations. The margins were covered in quite a few frustrated scribbles as well.

“....No luck?” Grillby inquired, taking a seat directly beside Sans this time. The skeleton shifted so the bench could accommodate the both of them and the fire monster could see a subtle flutter of the other’s magic. It was a little more energetic, despite how tired Sans looked.

“dunno where to start with this, but that letter you wrote does look familiar.”

“Is it helpful?” Grillby couldn’t help but be pleased at that. He leaned an arm over the tabletop and propped his hand against his face as he watched the other turn to him.

Sans looked thoughtful, then he seemed to relax a little. “yeah, actually,” he revealed. He gave the other a slight grin. “what are they?”

Grillby leaned in a little closer, unable to help himself. His fire fluttered briefly as Sans seemed to just then come to notice his proximity and he was able to witness the subtle bloom of cyan under the other’s hoodie. As if Sans realised it, the bloom faded as he pulled his magic together, resulting in an awkward grin.

The other smirked silently in triumph as his arm brushed against the other’s left, using the pen to draw a few other symbols in a horizontal line. He heard the subtle sound of bones rattling.

“Star signs.”

Sans was staring at the paper. Then he gave Grillby a pointed look, his grin widening. “say that again?”

Grillby’s mouth twitched but was nonetheless amused. He was writing a few more symbols down, playing with the idea while Sans watched him. He repeated the two words, this time quieter.

The skeleton watched him with interest; the way the other had revealed it was so mesmerising, a soft “wow” escaped him in a bare whisper. He recognised the numerous symbols Grillby drew were from astronomy texts, others were foreign-looking and looked nothing like the script he was attempting to decipher. He looked back to Grillby, up to his face, his left hand moving to reach to him.

The other’s fire flickered briefly, the subtle hue of orange and red light changing into an almost opalescent amber. Enthralled by the shift in Grillby’s colouring, Sans twisted so he faced him and carefully rested a two digits on either side of the fire monster’s face, one on each frame of his glasses.

“What are you planning?” the other murmured, the corner of his mouth twitching again into a wry smile.

Sans felt himself flush but didn’t move his hands away, instead tipped the other’s glasses down, his gaze never leaving the other’s. The flames’ colours lightened again into paler yellows and he could see a wisp of white before they quickly rolled away.

“just want a better view,” the skeleton replied, grinning. He kind of appreciated the way he was able to get Grillby all fired up, when it had been almost completely one-sided lately. Slowly, he took the glasses away and the other squinted noticeably.
“...Cannot see you like this, friend.” Grillby leaned a little towards him and Sans felt his soul shudder in excitement. There was a peculiar little spike in energy as their faces drew nearer, but Sans somehow kept himself together. The other seemed content to let him do what he wanted, so far.

“That’s cool,” he replied indifferently as he put the glasses onto the table and brought his hands back to the other’s face, mirroring all the times Grillby had held his own. His fire rolled down his carpals and heated the joints. It was a pleasant warmth that had him sighing.

He was close enough to see directly into the other’s eyes. He didn’t know what sprung it, but knew he had to see for himself. Sans had taken in the other’s stature the night he confessed, but the dark-framed glasses muted the true reflection of Grillby’s gaze. Wisps appeared to attempt to hide Grillby’s expression, but Sans was too close for them to do any good. He knew his staring was having an affect on him and he couldn’t help but grin.

With that, Grillby’s flames kindled a little higher and flecked with white embers. “What are-”

Sans shook his skull, something he didn’t know if Grillby could recognise without his glasses, but the other stopped talking regardless. “Just wanna see.” His soul was hammering hard behind his rib cage, but he was keeping calm for once. Sans couldn’t help the snicker that escaped him when he saw the bright irises dart to the side and the heat of the other kick up a little hotter.

It felt kind of nice to be able to do this back - to have the fire monster feel the same as he did days ago and get him flustered. While the feeling was still there, Sans was becoming increasingly bold the more he thought about it. He brushed his bony fingers against the other’s face and watched as small pinpoints of light and colour filled the other’s eyes, cascading around fiery clouds of cobalt, magenta and green. The points of light were white, small specks of red and blue. Reminded him of the pictures of galaxies from when he was younger, or the fiery opals embedded in the cave walls between Waterfall and Hotland.

Grillby flushed again, brighter, small embers drifting around them in different colours of white and blue. Sans couldn’t help but grin more as the bright flames obscured his eyes.

“...I think you’re enjoying this.” The other finally murmured, his voice quiet. There was almost a waver to it that made Sans’ soul thunder loudly in his skull. Sans noticed his gloved hands had grasped the edge of the table and on the cushion by his leg.

“Course i am. Just doin’ a little star-gazin’...” Sans teased, feeling himself flush when he heard the words out loud. He witnessed another bright reaction and chuckled. Grillby had shrunk down despite himself and laughed quietly. “How... how else am i gonna get up close an’ personal with the universe like this?”

It must have been something that Grillby hadn’t expected, since his flames seemed to entirely immolate his face explosively. Instinctively, Sans pulled his hands away, searching for any hint that he should apologise for what he said. Maybe he’d gone too far? He felt a twist inside of him when Grillby covered his face, the pale yellow and white flames thrumming around his head as he kept quiet.

Sans leaned back and scratched at his jawbone, unsure if he embarrassed the other or not. He had a feeling he messed something up. When the other seemed to calm down, his fire returning to a softer shade of orange, Grillby fumbled for his glasses. Sans held them out for him to take, his own magic’s flush apparent on his face.

“Sorry,” he muttered with a shrug when the other finally looked at him. The glasses obscured his view of the opaline gaze and made it look fiery again.
The silence stretched on and Sans’ figurative nerves finally gave out. He began to fidget and drum his fingertips on the tabletop, picking up his pen and setting it down, then picking it back up again to scribble in the margin of his notes.

He figured Grillby must have been uncomfortable enough to want to leave, since he had slid out from beside him once he had calmed down. Disappointed in himself, the skeleton turned his skull to watch the bartender go back to work, just as he heard something under the other’s breath.

“Point for you.”

Sans only stared in stunned silence as Grillby went back to work. He would stay away, but smirk when he caught the skeleton watching him, causing Sans to turn his skull back to his own project.

Sans hesitated for the longest time before sending Alphys a few texts; namely along the lines of;

*whats it mean when a guys keepin score
*n by keepin score i mean hes givin out points
*is this normally how datin works??

- One sec! I’ll ask Undyne! Σ d (′ ∀′)

Around twenty minutes later, his phone rang. The call was from Undyne, so Sans ignored it, feeling a fresh wave of embarrassment pour over him as though he was standing under a waterfall.

His phone rang again.

Then again.

Alphys texted him asking why he wasn’t answering and that apparently Undyne had some very good advice. He ignored those too and covered his face with both hands, rubbing at his sockets with his palms until his phone stopped buzzing. When he checked it, he had over 40 messages from Alphys, 12 from Undyne.

And one from Grillby: 3/3.

Sans guessed it was the other’s way of keeping score, although he wasn’t sure why it was necessary. He sure as hell knew he didn’t want to be badgered by prying questions though. He shot the other a shy grin from across the bar and turned off his phone so he could concentrate without further interruptions. Eventually, Sans ended up resting his skull in his arms and took a nap.

It was a lot quieter when next he woke up, but it was to a light thunk of knocking on the table. Grillby sat across from him as he sat up only a bare fraction, turning his skull to regard the other. His
flames were back to normal and Grillby’s expression was neutral.

“pap didn’t come by yet, did he?” Sans yawned, his jaw clicking. Several of his vertebrae popped when he stretched.

“...Closed. Should not be long now.”

Sans rubbed at one of his sockets before looking around the bar; it was definitely empty, no one else there and the lamps on the walls were turned down low so Grillby remained the primary light source.

Knowing that Sans would ask why he wasn’t kicked out, Grillby added; “You seemed.. tired, today.”

“day off’s allowed to be tired.” Sans rolled his shoulder before resting his skull back down into his arms. “can’t remember cipher, so i guess the dimensional box is gonna stay broken for a bit.”

Grillby’s back straightened slightly at that and he looked inquiringly at Sans until the skeleton looked over at him, his expression exhausted and indifferent.

“what.”

The other pulled the notebook with the diagrams drawn out in it towards him. There were many calculations added to it than previously, and even a detailed schematic. It looked extremely convoluted and didn’t make a great deal of sense.

Grillby stayed silent for a while, until he finally decided on; “...Can repair them?”

“make `em,” Sans revealed with a vague shrug, closing his eye sockets. He hoped it would be a little longer before Papyrus arrived. “been a few years since the last one, though.”

“......Make them?” The startling disbelief in Grillby’s tone was enough to pull Sans from another impromptu nap and he cracked a socket open. “You make them?”

“simmer down, grillbz. it’s no biggie.”

“You fail to acknowledge the magnitude of this,” the other retorted, his flames hiking up and dancing. He spoke quickly and with a hard edge, something that Sans thought a little peculiar.

“you’re gettin’ too excited over somethin’ like this.”

“They are used all over the Underground, Sans. They are the reason I was able to leave Hotland, I-”

Sans pushed himself off the tabletop, feeling like he was being given too much attention and as a result, was a little sheepish. “oh.” He scratched the back of his skull awkwardly. “and here pap tells me it’s the laziest thing i’ve done, makin’ everyone reliant on `em.”

“...Must confront him about this. It is truly a revolutionary and indispensable part of our lives now. However did you think of it?”

Sans flushed at the attention and quietly drummed his fingertips on the tabletop. His glance settled to his right arm briefly, remembering his recovery time in New Home after his fall at the CORE. The boxes made it easier for him to move things around then. He realised he was frowning and adjusted himself, tightening his grin before looking back up to Grillby’s face. “oh.. y’know. core stuff.”

Grillby had caught the expression and looked suspicious, but concealed it when Sans looked back at
“CORE ‘stuff’? More infuriating vagueness about past works.”

“infuriatin’...?” Sans shrugged, toeing the line between leaving and flipping the subject around. Somehow, he didn’t think Grillby would drop it so easily. “nah. i mean, i already said i worked there. this was just a side project while my group was...” He paused and shifted slightly while the little white lie formed, “fixin’ things. it was a part of the research i helped develop, so it, uh...” He let the rest of it hang. Suddenly he felt extremely awkward.

Grillby relaxed a little, but Sans could still notice his excitement. His flames flickered and even looped around the surface of his exposed neck, kindling brightly. He scratched the side of his skull absently.

“Interesting.”

Sans flushed at that, trying to find an excuse to drop the subject. “i mean.. it ties in with my shortcuts, so...”

“No need to be modest. It’s very impressive.” Grillby smirked at the other’s reaction, “Is it something your brother can achieve as well?”

The skeleton shrugged evasively, “he can’t, no...” There were other weird things Papyrus could do, but his shortcuts were his alone. “i’d make one from scratch, but all i remember is it takes a lot outta me.”

“Did something happen?”

Sans fell silent, then quietly sighed. “it’s just been a while. i gotta remember how to stabilise the grid line and affix it to a vessel. all my notes as you can see are in cipher, so it’s gonna take a bit. maybe you can help me.”

Grillby’s curiosity was piqued. “...I can?”

Sans shrugged and spread out his hands to the notes. “you said a few ciphers looked like star signs?” he paused, then got an idea. “you use hands too.” Except with me, he added internally.

The other nodded in the affirmative and watched as Sans turned to a page in his notes that had swathes of symbols, drawn in thick black ink. A lot of them appeared to be legible representation of gestures, and the pages were stained and looked old and crisp.

Sans turned the notebook around so Grillby could easily read it and watched as the other gestured with each symbol. Every time, Sans paused and something clicked into place. It was peculiar and arose in him a confused sense of nostalgia. Grillby rarely used signs to communicate with him; to his knowledge, Sans was the only monster Grillby took the effort to actually talk to - it was endearing in its own little way.

Yet, they weren’t words as regular signs were. ☽ was ‘R’, ☀ was ‘A’, and so on. Sans frowned in concentration as he drew out a glossary for future reference. A lot of the gestures he recognised using himself to access the panel at the CORE on their way through. So why didn’t any of this make sense when he viewed them on his own?

He sighed, doodling a few of them out. He was tired, but he wanted to try one more thing. Sans felt another peculiar spike in his energy as his soul trembled. When he finished the sentence in Hands, he flipped and pushed it across the table for Grillby to translate.

He kept his eye lights fixed on the fire monster’s face, his grin twitching shyly as each symbol was
flicked by the other’s hand. He flushed as realisation dawned on the other and his hand suddenly stilled at the last notation, seeing Grillby’s gaze settle on him in mild surprise.

“‘Go on a date with me,’” the other recited Sans’ note. He grinned, then laughed good-naturedly at the proposal, which had the other monster blushing furiously. Grillby was himself, but waved at Sans to gain his attention. When the skeleton turned his skull to face him again, he gestured, every notation precise so it was unmistakable.

‘Pick a time and place. I would not miss it for the world.’

Chapter End Notes

I should really type out what I want to say when I finish these chapters, because now I forget. Guess I’ll ramble!! See, it's not one-sided. Sans can definitely make Grillby flustered!!

blackberryvenom on tumblr drew some AWESOME fan art of Sans and Alphys from this chapter!! **YOU SHOULD CHECK IT OUT!!!!**
Chapter Summary

Papyrus knows. Undyne knows about the date. It's only a matter of time before the whole Underground knows. Sans decides to study at Grillby's. There is a heated moment during breakfast.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Alphys (Last message sent: 07:06am):

*omg u told her
*can't believe it
*the whole ugs gonna know now
*between undyne n pap
*omg papyrus
*what if she told pap
*alph what have u done

- Okay so maybe don't panic!! (¬□¬)

*how
*u basically went from bff 2 foe in 1 fell swoop

- You're being overly dramatic!! (￣^￣)

*no u dont understand pap has been hintin
*ugh he already knows
*ugh he just said audible wink he definitely knows
*fuck

- Stop freaking out LOL you're going to be fiiiiine (∀｀;)

*omg hes givin me tips bout datin
*how dare u

- And by fine I mean take some time off!!! Undyne’s already approved it ☆=(ゝω・)/
- I don’t know why the heck you’re not studying up on the bio textbooks you asked for?
- YOU ASKED FOR THEM
- READ THEM, SANS!!

*alph u know ur my bff n all but i could literally blast a hole in the barrier rn

- Trust me, if that's all it took I would have pissed you off YEARS AGO
- Hahaha…. Just kidding (╚﹏╛) That wasn’t funny

*im goin @grillbz pap is bein distractin so ttyl
Undyne (Last message received: 07:43am):
- YOU!! HEARD THE BIG NEWS YA GOOBER!! Can’t say I’m surprised! You’ve been spacy for WEEKS!
- So who’s the flame? Papyrus doesn’t know ANYTHING. I can’t get ANY DETAILS!
- IS THIS SOMETHING YOU’VE BEEN HIDING FROM HIM??
- Maybe not… y’know, do that anymore? Kid worries enough as it is about ya.
- PS: In case Alphys hasn’t told you yet you’re TOTALLY FIRED.

*what

- HAHA gotcha! I’m only joking, of course. You got the next couple of days OFF!
- I’M GOING TO QUIZ YOU SO YOU BETTER STUDY HARD LIKE THE HUGE NERD YOU ARE.

He was irritable, aggravated, and a little pissed off. Sans shoved as many textbooks as he could into his bag, ignoring Papyrus’ continuous knocking on his bedroom door. His voice had reached its ultimate crescendo on dating, a lot of it not making sense or making Sans so flustered he just didn’t have the words to tell his brother to shut up any longer.

“i’m leavin’!” he hollered over the informative lecture from beyond the door. Then with a burst of over-accumulated energy from overnight, Sans simply teleported out of his room, reappearing behind Grillby’s. It would be less of a distraction than at home. As he rounded the corner, he heard his phone buzz in his pocket and weighed the pros and cons of throwing it onto the roof.

He didn’t end up doing it, but a series of vibrations told him he received quite a few texts in quick succession. Wordlessly, he pushed the door open and chose a booth nearer to the door. With all his books laid out, Sans went about reading E/M FLUX BIOLOGY first. It was hundreds of pages long and had an informative introduction with an index so he could flip through different parts at his leisure.

Since it was early, Grillby was still setting up. The soft scuffs of chairs on the hardwood floors and the gentle clinks of glasses knocking together filled the quiet air. Generally, Sans didn’t come in until after noon, but his lack of greeting to the other wasn’t abnormal. The seat towards the front of the bar was, however.

Idly, as Grillby moved about the floorspace to set up, Sans moved and took out his phone, looking far more irritable than he’d ever felt before. He ignored more messages from Alphys about him studying and went to Papyrus’.

Papyrus (Last message received 08:23am):
- OH MY GOD!
- DID YOU JUST USE THE WINDOW TO ESCAPE?
- HOW INCREDIBLY IMMATURE AND WILY OF YOU, SANS.
- BUT NO MATTER, THE GREAT PAPYRUS WILL ‘SCHOOL’ YOU WITH YET MORE BROTHERLY UNDERSTANDING.
- WHILE I KNOW YOU HAVE BEEN NEGLLECTING PROPER EATING HABITS LATELY, I DON’T BELIEVE YOU ARE GOING HUNGRY.
- QUITE THE CONTRARY!! AFTER ALL, YOU HAVE A HOT NEW BOYFRIEND WHO COOKS. OF COURSE YOU WOULD FEEL OBLIGATED TO EAT HIS DISGUSTING GREASE-LADEN FOOD!
- WHAT KIND OF BROTHER WOULD I BE TO STAND IN THE WAY OF TRUE LOVE? NOT THE KIND OF BROTHER I AM WELL-KNOWN FOR BEING!
- THE GREAT PAPYRUS WILLINGLY ACKNOWLEDGES THIS TURN OF EVENTS. BUT! IF YOU ARE EVER IN NEED OF SOMETHING TO REFRESH YOUR PALATE, THERE WILL ALWAYS BE A DELICIOUS MEAL WAITING FOR YOU AT HOME!
- HAVE FUN STUDYING!!

News got around in his circle of friends fast, Sans groused internally. He glared at the phone, tapping out a response, but then ended up deleting it. Replying would only invite more messages, so he pocketed the phone and dropped his skull against the open tome with an audible thunk.

“...Roused early this morning,” Grillby’s voice called to him gently from above. Sans moved his skull to the side and flicked his eye lights upward to regard him, his mood instantly easing a little at the quiet hum and crackle of fire. He saw the peculiar way the other examined his books and pushed himself off the table.

“studyin’.”
“...Had breakfast?”

Sans shook his head slowly, rubbing at a socket with one hand. He didn’t say anything, but Grillby had already left before he had a chance to think about what he wanted. Sans forced himself to read a little more until the other returned with a plate, almost a full hour later. He supposed the time taken was simply because Grillby didn’t normally offer breakfast foods.

The dish was deep-fried, a waffle of fluffy yet crisp consistency with a thin red peppered sauce in a square ramekin. He grinned down at it in anticipation before sectioning off a portion and dipping it into the sauce.

“s’not ketchup, is it?” he muttered, suddenly hesitant. Grillby laughed quietly and patted his shoulder empathically. Sans grinned a little more nervously. “this isn’t on the menu either, huh.”

“...Have not recreated it for years. It’s never been on the menu here.”

Sans shrugged, the niggling feeling was not lost on him that Grillby was going out of his way to give him dishes he normally didn’t serve to his other patrons. He took a bite from the piece to taste. It was sticky, sharp, peppery and ungodly spicy. Reflectively, he covered his mouth to mute the soft hiss he couldn’t repress. It had the same effect as the curry bun from Alphys’, but had a more energetic kick to it.

“Hotland speciality,” the fire monster chuckled wryly, giving Sans’ shoulder another pat. “How does it find you?”

Sans made a soft coughing sound before his magic absorbed it. It tingled a little, branching throughout his bones and settling in his chest. He couldn’t help but take another bite though, still grinning. “think you’re tryin’ to burn my tongue.”

Grillby stayed quiet as he watched, his expression unreadable as though he was taking great pains to hide it. “...Perhaps.” There was a playfulness to his voice that made Sans pause mid-lick to his sticky fingers. Quizzically, he looked to Grillby’s face, searching for any hints, but the other didn’t give him anything.

Suspicious of the other’s reply, Sans popped the rest of the piece into his mouth, exhaling hotly as
the spicy sauce kicked around his tongue. It was almost too much. The stickiness made it a little sweet after a while, which he could appreciate. Since the other hadn’t said anything further, Sans turned the page of the open book with his other hand while his tongue curled against his index finger, lapping up the mess.

It occurred to him that he maybe should’ve used a fork. That is, he would have if Grillby hadn’t taken his left hand, catching his attention. Sans’ gaze flicked to the other’s face, still obscured, but he could see the glowing crack of his smile. He grinned despite himself, apologetically.

“sorry, i’ll use a nap-” he was cut off as the other slowly drew closer, resounding an audible thump in his rib cage when the other’s mouth touched his own. His soul shuddered with it as flames danced over his teeth, automatically parting ever so slightly to drink in the heat. Grillby’s proximity had him reeling as the other sunk down beside him, his grip on his hand more gentle.

He sighed against the kiss, pushing forward slightly and closing his sockets. He felt the unmistakable warmth, of something like spice trace against the part of his mouth. His bones shuddered and experimentally Sans pushed his tongue forward to meet with it. There was a gentle hiss as the wetness touched the intense heat that sent a pulse throughout him. A surprised jolt settled down his spine when Grillby’s hand braced against his back and for a moment, Sans thought he could see a brief flash of light behind his sockets that accompanied the spread of flames.

A noise escaped him before he even realised what was happening, only that it felt amazing. His moan punctuated his pleasure and he attempted to lean forward, hesitantly. Heat and spice entered his mouth and mingled with his tongue, slow and gentle. Sans settled his right hand between them, not really knowing what else to do with it, but knowing he definitely wanted more of this.

He kissed back, his soul feeling like it was doing small flips as he attempted to mimic Grillby’s tongue. Slow curling movements that left him aching, small circles that had his toes raising in his slippers. Grillby’s hand found the back of his neck and was leading him, the flood of fire both soothing and passionate. His fingers interlaced Sans’ own and lightly tugged him forward with a soft hum. Sans instantly melted into it and he felt his magic swell with need when the other pulled away much too soon for his liking.

It had left him gasping for air, even for a monster that didn’t really need to breathe. Sans panted and leaned his skull against Grillby’s forehead, unable to hold back the soft moan of protest that passed between them. Grillby was of a similar composure but he was grinning, tracing a line of heat against the bones of the other’s neck and around to his jaw with his finger.

“Been wanting to do that.. for a while.”

The skeleton huffed, unable to contain a quiet laugh. If there was any doubt that their friendship had changed, it was long gone now.

“...spicy,” he murmured, still half stunned as he looked at Grillby. He wanted to continue and felt his face flush at the thought. He twisted his body so that he was more comfortable and inched his right arm up and around Grillby’s shoulder to pull himself closer. “wanna do that again..?”

Sans dipped his skull a little so their mouths were barely apart and he witnessed the flames flicker gold. He wanted to try putting his tongue on the fire to see what would happen, but the thought was extinguished when Grillby chuckled softly and regretfully pulled away. Sans felt the loss immediately.

“Someone is waiting.”
For the first time in a long time, the skeleton felt his soul drop and he became deathly silent. Cautiously, he peered over the other’s shoulder and saw Doggo, surveying the restaurant which likely appeared open to him, but empty. Sans breathed a quiet sigh of relief and slowly sat back. It was then that Grillby brought his left hand up to his mouth and left a kiss, giving him a knowing wink.

The skeleton was attempting not to scowl at the intruder when Grillby moved away from him. He felt more irritated than when he left his house and impatiently waited while the fire monster addressed the canine with a series of lively gestures. An order to go. *Good,* Sans thought a little bitterly. There wasn’t exactly any animosity between him and Doggo, but the bet he found out about earlier along with *this* now made him a little peeved.

When Grillby went back to the kitchen, Sans conjured a small bone the length of his hand and produced a low whistle, beckoning the unwelcome guest’s attention. Doggo’s ears cocked at the noise and the skeleton grinned impishly.

“*think fast,*” he called out, flicking the bone towards the other’s muzzle with magic. It would’ve connected had he not said anything, but it was also moving. Doggo caught it after looking to his direction, eyes shifting suspiciously. His fangs sunk into the bone with a veiled snarl and Sans sunk back onto the bench, keeping still as he read over the next page.

The glow of his magic was more of an aggravated flicker now and he tried desperately to hold it at bay when the bartender came back into view. Sans watched out of the corner of his vision, making a mental note to pull a prank or two on the guard dog later on when Doggo finally left.

His magic flickered a little more. It felt like an itch that needed to be scratched and Sans absently rubbed at his sternum as he read, trying to keep calm. He spent hours poured over the textbook and Grillby offered him a drink a time or two, but Sans quietly refused. It was as though the interruption had soured his whole mood.

After a while, he took a break. Monsters were starting to trickle in as the day progressed and the skeleton was ready to leave to blow off some excess energy. Alphys had warned him against doing so, and the textbook informed him of the reason why.

Chapter 14: ‘Magical Fluctuations & Aggression’. Marked with skirmishes, spikes in energy flux and irritability, Sans was a prime example and he hated it. His digits tapped against the page as his gaze wandered over the restaurant, eye lights dimmed until they found the owner at the other side of the bar, watching.

He flushed; it was another thing that marked development but was unique usually to certain species. Chapter 18 dealt with more literal ways to contend with amassing magic levels and in relation to HP. Sans glared at the acronym and shifted his hoodie so it covered the sides of his skull. There was another passage that pretty much told him he was screwed; that parental figures could calm an adolescent’s magic if they were irritated or out of control. He was feeling a little bitter about it lately, he realised. It was the reason why he felt so tired, yet had so much built-up energy.

He vaguely remembered a few puzzles that Papyrus had come up with during his days experimenting with magic. Sans recalled it was the only time his brother actually slept more than a few hours each night. He’d have to speak with him about it later. He really wasn’t looking forward to it.

Reading the textbook made Sans bewildered. There was so much information that he passed on just
because his body was in permanent stasis and he’d been given a great excuse to ignore it. But as for Papyrus, Sans felt a little ashamed and even angry at himself. He should have known all this for Papyrus’ sake. It was a horrible negligence; as his older brother he should have at least tried a little better. He should have been the one to teach him about these kinds of things...

Sans mentally berated himself for it as he continued reading. At least there was a saving grace with Papyrus’ unquenchable thirst for knowledge; the kid had pestered every adult he could find for the information he needed. He idly wondered if Papyrus got any relevant information from Old Gerson about skeletons, before his memory got too bad.

Three more chapters that covered attraction and mating rituals by different monster cultures had him briefly skimming the topic, his soul thundering inside of him. He took frequent glances to Grillby, who was kept busy by his customers and never appeared to be looking when he chose to spy on him.

It occurred to Sans that he hadn’t chosen a day or place for their first date. His magic pulsed again and he grabbed the front of his hoodie, trying not to attract too much attention and cursing the damned light show. It was a good thing he was more or less out of direct sight. If he was at his usual seat or by the back of the bar, no doubt others would try to talk to him about it.

He turned a page. Something was stuck to it on the back: old, creased and severely water-damaged. It took a moment for Sans to recognise what he was looking at before his eye sockets widened in shock.

It was… a skeleton. Not him, nor was it Papyrus. It wasn’t anyone he would have known, but he quickly decided it couldn’t be. It was drawn out with thin lines with lettered print so ruined it was impossible to make out. He squinted at the picture, confusion overcoming him as he traced over the image, picking out flecks of red and faded orange stuck to its bones.

It really did look like some kind of skeleton.. but it was too old to really tell. Sans stared at it for what seemed like an eternity. Femur, radius, skull, pelvis and ribs… a strong spine, resembling his brother’s, but oddly different. The swatches of faded colour made it look kind of lumpy, which only added to Sans’ puzzlement.

“the hell’s this…” he muttered to himself quietly. He carefully peeled the stuck paper from the page and turned it over. More diagrams showing metacarpals and phalanges, seemingly labeled and coloured to show the different bone segments, but the print was still illegible. He compared his own hand to that on the back of the loose page, his brow bone furrowing in thought. For a moment he wondered how old it was. It had to be older than he was, as he’d never seen another skeleton monster besides his own brother.

Something twinged in his skull that sounded like a rush of static and he put his hand on his face to soothe the ache. He had tried to think of what his parents were like, but grasping for memories that were just not there caused him pain lately. It was as though it was a punishment, almost.

If anything, it was just a drawn monster. Sans wondered why Alphys would have included it in the textbook and quickly shot off a few messages inquiring about it. She answered back soon enough, only mentioning that she had found it earlier that year during one of her searches through the dump. She thought it would have been helpful to him. She also apologised, like she always did.

That explained it then. It wasn’t helpful, as it was just a naked skeleton with what looked like either meaty bits or clothes, possibly ecto-parts. It didn’t have any information that he needed, and Gerson had very limited knowledge that he could recall. He sighed and texted her back his thanks anyway.
For a while, he had tunnel vision only for the drawing. It was weird. They were naked. Their sockets looked distressed and a cursory glance told Sans they weren’t at all like him and Papyrus. They were drawn so stiff-looking that Sans wondered if the reference was someone who was on the verge of Falling Down, and that it possibly was meant as some kind of memorial. It was just so unearthly and creepy. As opposed to other drawings of monsters, there was no representation of the soul either. They were just… empty.

It took him several moments before he noticed that Grillby had snuck up on him. Sans flicked his eye lights forward and up, realising that the fire monster seemed very interested in his reading material. He also appeared to be waiting for an answer, the question Sans hadn’t even heard during his confusion at the weird skeleton-like monster… thing.

He grinned apologetically and set the page down, shrugging in the way he always did when he didn’t catch whatever the bartender said.

It took Grillby a moment longer to repeat himself, shifting in place with his head tilted slightly. He seemed a little brighter than that morning, Sans noted.

“...Working hard?” he attempted, and for some reason Sans felt like it wasn’t his initial question.

“Sure. Learnin’ some stuff not in my field.” The skeleton leaned back against the booth and sighed while he arched his spine. “Kinda outta my element.”

“...And what is?” Grillby inquired. Something about him seemed preoccupied. “...Your element?”

The other regarded the bartender for a moment, unsure if he should be literal and say ‘physics’ or not. Then he grinned, leaning forward. “Calcium.” Pretty clever, he thought.

The fire monster repeated the word, not fully understanding if there was a joke, but then went quiet.

“I’d put it on the table but it’s not somethin’ I’d fire up periodically,” the skeleton sniggered to himself. It was a bad joke. The worse they were, the better the reactions.

Grillby remained silent a while longer until he finally exhaled a small plume of smoke, rubbing a hand over his flames. “That was a stretch.”

“M’feelin’ burnt out.” It was true, but the joke also had a double meaning, thanks to the kiss. Sans winked a socket at Grillby, who only shook his head in response. “Sup, grillbz?” He looked around; the bar was still full of customers and he soon began to notice the fire monster often took breaks while he was around. And others watched, curious. He flushed a little, reigning in his magic so the flicker under his hoodie was subdued.

“...Seem agitated.”

“Me?” Sans scratched the side of his skull, looking down to the textbook and drumming his fingertips on the table in idle thought.

“Perhaps I was too forward this morning.”

The other could detect a trace of regret in Grillby’s tone and quickly looked up. His flames were a little lower and he wasn’t looking at him. His gaze remained transfixed on Sans’ reading material.

Sans thought back to the toe-curling kiss and leaned forward, unable to keep himself from grinning. “Nah.” In fact, now that the fire monster had time to visit, he wanted another. But… there were people around, and suddenly Sans felt very conscious of the fact that every eye was watching them.
And those who didn’t have eyes were keeping tabs, too.

Grillby nodded, but it looked like it was more to himself than to what Sans had said. Carefully, he leaned against the table, picking up the old page to examine it. Unsure why, Sans felt his magic pulse at the peculiar way the other seemed interested in it.

“Your magic...” he started quietly. Sans saw his eyes move and settle on him before he dropped his own to his hoodie. He grabbed the front of it, muting another annoyingly bright flicker.

“...resembled lightning, just now.”

“just a, uh… skeleton thing,” Sans excused it, chancing another glance to the other’s face, “no need to grill me on it.”

That earned him a small smile, at least. Sans sighed quietly in relief; for a moment, he thought something had gone wrong without even realising he was feeling it in the first place.

“Why are you studying such.. provocative material at my restaurant, Sans..?”

It was the longest three seconds Sans had ever had to suffer through. He felt another spike of energy and he darted his hand out to grab the page from Grillby’s grasp, nearly tearing it in the process. He realised what it must’ve looked like only after the other had taken a rather studious glance over the table, then at the page. Sans covered his face with both hands after cramming the loose diagram of the not-skeleton into a different textbook, his face feeling hot without any flames touching it.

“re.. research,” was all he could offer as an excuse. His reaction had been incriminating though.

He only heard a soft hum from the other, but knew the tone immediately; it was playful and amused and Sans knew he had only given Grillby ammunition for his next attack. He froze when the other leaned in closer and Sans could hear every flutter of flame and his soul shudder in his rib cage. He lowered his hands to the tabletop.

“...Could instruct you,” Grillby breathed below the hum of his fire. His mouth was a jagged line of light, curved into a teasing smile as he snuck his fingers over to touch Sans’ hand. Sans didn’t know why, but he jerked at the reaction when his soul did an excited little flip. “Why look at a stranger’s anatomy when yours is bound to be much more interesting..?”

The skeleton continued to be frozen in place, but a subtle anticipated shiver snuck down his shoulders and through his spine with those final words. His face honestly couldn’t feel any hotter, even if he dunked his skull into the lava in Hotland.

It was an… interesting proposal, if Grillby was serious. Something akin to shell-shock settled over the skeleton as the thought entered his skull, of the section he’d skimmed over and its related subjects… Of the other’s interest in touching him, hot hands running over his bones and kissing him. So many kisses. So many touches… His mind fuzzed into a muted sound of static and silence, effectively blanking whatever thoughts that sprung up.

He attempted to stammer something out, but the barely-formed sentences dropped like flies. Jokes failed him when he tried to be clever and dispel his flustered state. Grillby only grinned at him teasingly and gently patted the side of his skull as if to say ‘there, there’, but he lingered.

“You know…” Grillby paused as though in consideration and withdrew his hand from the other’s. His fingers echoed the warm line over Sans’ jawbone as the other stared at him, agog. “…Cannot decide if this counts as one point for me, or two.”

Sans closed his mouth and opened it again as though to respond, but no noise came forward.
Grillby smirked triumphantly. “*Two it is, then.*”

It was harder to concentrate after that. Even if the patrons didn’t know what had transpired between the two new lovebirds, Sans’ reactions were proving to be priceless. He had put up his hood during the rest of his studies, keeping his replies brief whenever others passed by on their way out. Occasionally he would see others still looking at him when he peeked across the bar to see where the bartender was, much to his embarrassment.

The next time Grillby looked over to his booth, Sans’ books remained, but the monster was absent. He grinned in silent victory.

It seemed like Sans’ break was enough to calm him down. He re-entered through the door instead of warping in, as he’d done on his way out. The last couple of hours were spent agonising over intrusive thoughts and attempting to blast a hole in the side of the mountain at the usual spot. On the way back, he prank ed Doggo a few times as a little harmless payback for the earlier interruption. He felt a little fried, but at least the irritation had simmered down and he felt composed enough to answer a few text messages from Undyne.

Her messages skipped from topic to topic in quick succession, but one in particular he was interested in was Grillby’s score keeping. Since Undyne was a monster that lived in Waterfall, Sans wasn’t sure why *she* would know as opposed to Alphys. She figured it was a competition of sorts, and told Sans he had to win at all costs. He couldn’t help but scowl at that, scrolling through the fire monster’s score updates.

They were up to 5/3, with Grillby in the lead.

Was it a game? He wasn’t quite sure if his own points were given through merit or not, but he looked back to the previous evening when he’d gone ‘stargazing’ and grinned to himself. Ok, then. He had a plan. He’ll try some tactics, to see what it was all about.

He walked to the bar where the bartender was listening to Red Bird talk about his day. The other paused when he took his regular seat, but Red continued talking. Sans grinned and swivelled on the stool.

“hey, grillbz,” he said lowly. He had the other’s full attention, but the fire monster didn’t speak. “got one for ya.” The other regarded him with something of suspicion in his gaze, his fire wisping languidly as he waited patiently. “you must be the north star, since your light guided me here.”

Sans watched as his flames kindled briefly and Grillby smirked, but said nothing. Ok, maybe not his best, but Red had at least stopped talking to watch the free entertainment.

“How `bout this then. two stars walk into a bar,” the fire monster was already covering his face, hiding a smile as though he knew what was coming. Sans grinned fully and continued, “one star bragged that they’re the brightest in the sky. the other asked, ‘are you sirius?”

Red didn’t seem to get it, but it earned a chuckle from Grillby. It was encouraging. He continued a few more jokes, many bad, but that was the point. He was testing the waters, as it were, and the more he joked around, the easier Sans felt about it. Red finally grew disinterested enough to turn and have a deep, meaningful conversation about fishing to the monster next to him.

Sans struggled with it for a moment before muttering once Grillby drew nearer, “the rumble rows in hotland. this saturday… afternoon ok?” *For a date*, he wanted to add, but wasn’t sure if Red was still
listening or not. Grillby appeared to understand what he was saying if the smile was anything to go by. The skeleton grinned shyly, bolstered in confidence when the other nodded in silent agreement.

He decided to skip towards some more jokes before he got too embarrassed and stopped talking altogether. Grillby appeared to be the sort to take advantage if he seemed too flustered, after all.

“ok, so i gotta ask,” Sans said finally, still chuckling after another planetary pun involving posteriors and a certain gas giant. The bartender was watching him with a small smirk, but stayed quiet as he wiped down the counter. “did you add extra spice to the food today? `cause you’re makin’ my hearburn!”

*That* did something; Grillby’s flames paled and throttled against his face, catching everyone’s attention. Sans stopped swivelling and marvelled at the sight. Grillby had stilled as a few snappy embers flew around him, glowing amber. The skeleton made a soft noise of appreciation, his brow bone lofting in a suggestive way.

“That was bright,” Sans commented, leaning against the bartop. “you must be from heaven, `cause you’re outta this world-”

“Actually, Orion.” It was the first time Grillby had spoken since Sans came back.

Sans tilted his stool, mindful of its sway. “so you’re not sirius,” he teased, leaning over the bartop. Grillby’s flames eventually returned to their regular shades during his silence. He knew he’d used something like that before and felt a little awkward for it. “uh, gimme a break. i’m wingin’ these. not used to interstellar flight.”

The bartender set aside the cloth he was using to wipe the counter and leaned forward so their conversation couldn’t be overheard. “Perhaps I could assist you with piloting,” he replied quietly, a hint of playfulness coming back to him after Sans had carried their conversation.

The skeleton grinned in response, folding his arms over each other and slouching. “you sayin’ i don’t know the controls?” He couldn’t help but feel a little awkward at the other’s offer.

“...Handle the joystick?”

Sans felt himself flush, although wasn’t quite sure why. “throttle the engine,” he shot back with a wink and a little too much enthusiasm.

The resulting reaction was captivating, although he couldn’t really understand why, unless it was a euphemism for something else. Grillby covered his face as his flames flickered white before they rolled away into yellow and amber. Even when his colouring went to normal, he kept his hand on his face. Sans couldn’t help the hot feeling that flooded his bones. He was trying to stay bold, but Grillby’s reaction made him almost wilt.

During the pause, Sans realised they had an audience again. “...tie?” he offered, unsure.

“Tie,” the bartender agreed quietly.
They're tied: 5/5.

The way Grillby speaks is a bit literal, although he tends to drop the subject sometimes, hence the '...' sometimes at the beginning. If you imagine him with a smarmy British accent, you can see how it works out. ‘D

If anyone would like to view the page Sans is looking at, it's a mix of both the leftmost and 2nd drawings on this page.

Thank you again Nanenna who gave me some awesome one-liners, mainly Grillby's innuendo about studying Sans' anatomy & Papyrus' obligatory jab of "you have a hot new bf so you have to eat his gross food". UR DA BEST ♥

Also: I've changed the rating from T to M. Since this chapter is a little dicey, and the next one is questionable (k well not really but it's ~steamy~), I'll stick with the M rating. I am undecided if it'll become E but knowing how I write it probably will at some point. XD;;

HolloweenTwinkie on tumblr did art of Grillby's HQ flirt (commission) and it's greaaaaaat aaaaaaaa!!!! Click here to see!! (SFW)
Wandering Flame

Chapter Summary

[ DATING START !! ]

Chapter Notes

I drew a picture of the opening scene here if anyone would like to see.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

‘WE HAVE NOT FINISHED OUR CONVERSATION’

If Sans was made awkward and unsure by the looming date that afternoon, it was additionally made worse when he decoded the cipher on the back of the old postcard he’d received nearly a week prior. Apprehension built up, discomfort and obscurity, mingling with his excitement. The words were familiar again and the cipher made sense now. All of it.

On top of everything else, Sans had made yet another mistake and was subject to the aftermath. He stood awkwardly in his sneakers, a ribbed cream turtleneck pullover and dark red trousers pilfered from the depths of his brother’s wardrobe. It had been after a drawn out argument and was the last resort after Papyrus had insisted on ‘secret clothes’. All of his brother’s clothes chosen for dating were… a little more ridiculous. But not by much.

He would’ve worn the trousers without a fight, but he felt naked without his hoodie, which Papyrus had stolen and hidden from him. Apart from the slip up that he had a date, Sans wasn’t able to get a word in edgewise when his brother took over his preparations that Saturday afternoon.

At least the trousers had been modified to fit him and had pockets, he reasoned. Each hand was firmly thrust into them. He’d taken care to bring money and a small snack, along with this cell phone. His magic had spiked again in the morning, which his brother had instructed him to do something ‘constructive’ with; he was subjected to intricate little puzzles that gradually filtered out the overflow, but not by much. He also learned it was a better way to outlet, as expending everything at once was not only dangerous, but could be damaging and lead to bad habits. He didn’t like it, preferred to get it all over with so he could be on his way. He had enough bad habits, what was the harm in adding one more to the pile?

Sans shuffled in the snow near the ferry stop north of town, waiting for Grillby. He was agitated - god, he was nervous. The looks he received when he left his house and went down the street did not go unnoticed. He was glad Papyrus had something other than his own personal ‘secret clothes’, but this somehow seemed like overkill. He didn’t feel comfortable. They weren’t his clothes and he had no idea what Grillby was wearing, or if he would be dressing up either.

Should he have dressed up? It was the Rumble Rows - a racing arena in Hotland. It wasn’t exactly
the classiest of places to go on a first date, and he wondered if Grillby would even have a good time. God, he hoped so. Was it an appropriate place for a date? Was it a little... much? Maybe they should have just gone for a walk through the forest, watched TV, or literally anything else. It all suddenly seemed like too much, and Sans was drawing close to a panic.

His face flushed at that and he covered it with his hand, turning his back on the path leading from Snowdin. He felt so incredibly awkward and embarrassed. Papyrus knew this and had been teasing him 'boyfriend' this, and 'boyfriend' that. He had learned from Undyne, who had learned from Alphys. Briefly, he'd wondered if he should out those two, but they were a different story altogether. They'd get together eventually. Someone else would bring them together, maybe.

He heard crunches in the snow and inhaled sharply, freezing in place. He scratched the back of his skull and slowly turned when he heard the unmistakable fiery aura of his date. His soul was thundering in his chest again, doing that peculiar little flicker that the textbooks he read had no information on. At least the turtleneck hid the majority of the light, he groused internally.

Grillby was dressed casually yet snappy, but instead of the vest, his sharp-looking jacket took its place. Instead of the white button down chemise, it was dark crimson and he wore a matching black tie with a clip. Sans admittedly felt a little better for dressing up, as uncomfortable as he was. He reasoned that he would've been even more awkward if he had to quickly warp home to change.

He'd paid the river person in advance and they were waiting. Sans plucked the collar of his sweater and nodded towards the ferry, unable to speak. He couldn't stop staring.

"Looking sharp," the fire monster complimented him, stepping to his side. The other felt a tremor go through him and concentrated instead on crossing the small gap between the ferry and the mainland.

The silence made Grillby smirk, but there was an air of nervousness to him as well. Whether or not it was due to either the date or the river, Sans couldn't say for sure. Courteously, once the skeleton had mounted the craft, he held out his hand for Grillby to take and offered him a shy grin in return.

"No gloves," Sans noted in mild surprise.

Grillby huddled on the bench near the exact centre of the vessel and Sans sat next to him. Soon after, they were on their way. The river person whistled lowly as the ferry picked up speed towards Waterfall, singing a little tune with various lyrics that were whimsical and nonsensical at the same time.

Since his pockets were too high for him to comfortably sit with his hands inside, Sans sat hunched with his hands resting on either side of him on the bench. He was concentrating very hard on not panicking, glancing at Grillby frequently to show his support. The other's flames were lowered as the craft carried them into the marsh, the distant glow of mushroom gnats and their larvae on the far ceiling sending the telltale blue glow around them.

"Nervous?" It seemed more like a statement than a question and Sans turned to face Grillby, still grinning.

Steam began to rise from the other's fluttering fire and Sans felt the other's hand brush against his. Looking down, the other had just barely grazed his pinky against the skeleton's, sending a gentle waft of warmth up Sans' left arm.

"kinda," Sans fibbed quietly, nudging his pinky towards the other in return. It was silly how such a small movement shot excitement throughout him. He couldn’t help but laugh against the rush of
water around them as the ferry whisked through to the next stop.

Thankfully, no one boarded at the Waterfall stop and their privacy continued. For a moment, Sans thought he could see a blur and a red glow in the wall as the craft started again.

“Tra la la~ Beware of the man who came from the other world.”

Sans snapped his gaze to the hooded figure in front of them warily. His brow creased slightly, thinking the comment strange, even from the river person - who was commonly known to be strange in the first place. He decided not to overthink it for once and gave Grillby’s inquiring look a slight smile.

“Tre le le~ The water is very wet today.”

Sans noticed the subtle flutter of flames next to him become a little more anxious. Encouragingly, he nudged the other’s shoulder with his arm and Grillby turned his head to look at him.

“think we’re ‘bout halfway there,” Sans reported, taking a moment to look around. The other’s heat was rolling off him and creating a dense fog. “maybe next time.. we’ll just take a quicker route.”

The fire monster seemed to scowl at him and Sans remembered the other being upset over his shortcuts. At least, he figured, he only meant with a carry-on, which was likely less than rarely. Considering he had a buffer, Sans figured he would be fine, but gave Grillby a slight dismissive shrug. He reasoned it was perhaps that his friend felt uncomfortable travelling such a distance in such a short amount of time.

“suit yourself.” He inched his pinky a little closer though, to show his support. He could tell Grillby relaxed at that, if only by a little bit.

While it was a fair distance away, it didn’t take long to reach Hotland. Gratefully, Grillby left the craft first, anxious to get away from the canal and stepping out into the dry heat. His fire seemed to crackle and spread out evenly as he waited for Sans to come ashore, embers igniting in its more natural environment. The constant movement made him look well-groomed and filled out. For a moment, Sans appreciated the sight. He whistled lowly before he realised he was staring again.

He dropped his gaze just as Grillby grinned. It was different, dating a friend. They already knew each other, and yet they were still learning things. For one, Grillby noticed that since the shift in their dynamics, Sans was easy to get worked up and flustered. And for Sans, Grillby was a little more interesting and flirtatious. Not mutually exclusive, but endearing all the same. Sans couldn’t help but smirk to himself with that thought.

The walk to the Rumble Rows was a little out of the way, but worth it. It hid in an extended quarry past the elevators and deep into the pits where the city was. Fire elementals, rock-types, some ghosts and their ilk clogged the streets. The stadium was loud and could be heard clear across the lake of lava separating it from the CORE.

Once paid for and inside, the skeleton shrugged, not really having planned all that much ahead of time. He settled for a joke as an excuse, trying to shake off his nerves.

“guess i kinda just wanted to see ya gussied up.” His voice was low enough for Grillby to hear, but no one else. The arena was packed and the announcer blared a never-ceasing roll of play-by-plays overhead for whichever race was going on further inside.
Grillby rolled his shoulder and took control over their date at that point. While he considered himself shy, it was by Hotland monsters’ standards. Most others would be forward even amongst strangers, whereas he preferred areas where he could be alone with the one he liked. His restaurant admittedly didn’t count, as it was his home. He wrapped an arm around the other’s shoulders and led them further inside towards the bleachers.

“Shy guy,” Grillby teased despite himself. He couldn’t hear the sound of bones clattering together, but the fire monster could certainly feel them. Sans looked extremely nervous, almost petrified. “Play it cool?”

Sans couldn’t help but laugh at that. “I’ve honestly never done this before.” Grillby saved this interesting piece of information for later consideration.

They both went up the stairs onto the metal platforms, pushing past other monsters who didn’t care about the couple from out of town. Sans was flustered, as Grillby had moved his arm from around his shoulders and taken him by the hand. His fire looked as though it was trying to sneak up his arm under his long sleeves.

“...Should just continue counting up to twenty and beyond. I will get all the points anyway.”

The skeleton hoped that was a joke. It didn’t really feel all too serious, and the other’s composure in such a place made his expression difficult to see through the blaze. His nervousness did dissipate somewhat when they found a secluded little area towards the middle and top. A great view to the arena below, not that they would watch much of what was going on.

“and what happens when I get more points than you?”

Grillby sat, gently pulling the skeleton down with him. He nearly landed on his thigh and Sans made sure to scoot over, lest his magic boil over in total mortification of overstepping any boundaries. He regarded that an odd thought, considering what they had done at the bar earlier that week.

The other seemed to take the question seriously, “Perhaps... fill you with fire.”

The heat around them made the air hazy and move, pushed by so many fire monsters in one place. Sans realised he was perspiring a little and absentmindedly wiped the side of his skull - another peculiarity for skeletons, he noted.

“and what if you win?”

Grillby’s composure seemed to stiffen slightly, then there was a lull in his flames as though something else passed through his mind. Curiously, the skeleton stared at him.

“What would you say,” he started, voice smooth, “if I won, and wanted that anyway?”

“That you were blowin’ a lotta hot air, probably.”

“And... what would you do?”

“If you did...? Burn.”

The fire monster hunched slightly as though he was unsatisfied with the answer, but didn’t make it immediately apparent. Sans was avoiding his look now, his grin sheepish. When the other looked to his hands, they were shaking slightly, clasped over themselves.

Going over something in his mind, the fire monster leaned forward a little, turning his head so his
was closer to Sans’. “No need to be so nervous.”

“m’not.”

“...Can tell you’re lying, when you’re anxious. It is obvious. You’re supposed to have fun.”

Sans exhaled sharply, his eye lights flicking to the side to watch Grillby’s obscured expression. “ok?” he automatically replied, then inhaled slowly to calm himself.

“Perhaps if you made a bad joke.”

The skeleton grinned awkwardly, rubbing the side of his skull and hunched over, unable to repress his laughter. “no fair, tryin’ to light a match under me like that. my jokes are great.”

“I wonder,” the other mused, shifting slightly as something in the arena caught his attention. Sans looked up, curious when he saw the other move. He saw the way Grillby’s smile spread a little more. “Where did your bravado go off to?”

The skeleton flushed a little more at that. “no need to gimme the third degree.”

“I also wonder how many fire jokes you’ll go through until you resort to space ones.”

“wow. careful, grillbz, someone might hear you an’ arrest you.” Grillby gave him a perplexed look at the warning tone, and suddenly Sans felt his confidence bolster. “cause you’re a shooting star.”

Grillby’s flames burst shortly at that and he gave in to a laugh. That was better, Sans thought. Nothing like a little playfulness to ease the tension. He shot the other finger-guns and winked.

The duration of their time spent together was much of the same. Quiet banter back and forth, with the fire monster’s curiosity burning over Sans’ reactions to his own teases and Sans making a few relentless jokes. The race below was a wild ride of wheels and commotion with little direction, but it was fun to watch for a time. Sans still felt uncomfortable in the clothes, more so that it seemed to make it hotter compared to his regular outfit. A time or two he felt his phone go off in his pocket, but instead of checking it, he simply turned it off.

“I believe I know what the issue is,” Grillby offered after a time. He had snuck his hand around one of the skeleton’s and was tracing small circles down one of his phalanges. His expression was muted but studious as he went over the fine segments of bone. Sans was trying very hard not to rattle in response, but looked at him questioningly. “We’re both shy.”

Sans chuckled lowly, nodding in agreement. “yeah, too many people.” He still when Grillby leaned forward, his flames languidly hopping the distance between them as though attempting to land on his bones. He sucked in a startled breath with the accompanying heat, much different than the climate.

“Entirely right. We should walk around,” the fire monster agreed, then stood, still holding the other’s hand. Sans’ breath hitched when a small flame licked up his carpals and slipped under his sleeve. Questioningly, he stared at Grillby’s face as the heat went up, curling along his bones and filling him with a comfortable warmth.

He sighed at it, rubbing his sternum distractedly when Grillby tugged his arm to have him stand. He did with little difficulty, the small wisp of fire moving along one of his clavicles. It made him rattle, unsure what its purpose was. Blindly, he was led back down the stairs off the bleachers, his mind a
little confused and distracted.

A pause near the end of the stairs had stolen a breath and he nearly stumbled, but he caught himself in time. Whatever the flame was doing had him so preoccupied that he didn’t even mind a few monsters they passed making kissy noises or whistling, muted by the loud crowd.

Grillby led him down towards the streets between venues, holding his hand the entire way. Their talks were idle, Sans replying only a few times, concentrated on the flame that decided to move into his rib cage. His breaths had started to come in short huffs as the warmth flitted from side to side, jumping over his ribs and slipping between them.

Out of the way, he finally had to stop; Sans was becoming increasingly sensitive and confused because of it. His magic at that point had started to react with the flame’s exploration and he felt hotter than he’d ever been before. In blurred thoughts, the skeleton silently admitted that he liked the heat and didn’t mind this at all. Grillby looked at him, smirking to himself, but led him over to a uncrowded area out of view.

“i, uh...” the skeleton started haltingly. He closed his orbits and tightened his hold on the other’s hand. His mind blanked when the flame fluttered up his spine and he nearly let out an embarrassing noise. He caught it, but his back went rigid. “grillbz, the, uh...” Sans trailed off, not exactly knowing what he wanted to say as the flame slowly started downward in a spiral around every vertebrae.

“They’ve been wanting to get acquainted with you,” the fire monster said plainly, feigning disinterest with a mild shrug. It was almost convincing. He kept his hand grasping Sans’, but was watching intently. The way the other was hunched and shuddered as the small flame grazed his bones was very enthralling. He could see the telltale light of the other’s soul flicker like lightning when the smaller yellow one moved. It was such an impish little hellion and had pestered him to visit ever since the ferry ride.

“They aren’t causing you distress, are they?” The other’s tone was both concerned with a hint of a tease. It appeared Sans still had the capacity to move, since he pulled Grillby around the corner and leaned against the wall, shaking his skull.

“nnh... hah, nope-” he replied breathily, but had hunched over, still clutching at the other’s hand that tightened every time the flame slipped lower. In fact, it was the polar opposite of pain, he thought blearily. “act... active `lil bugger, isn’t it?”

Grillby couldn’t hide his grin when Sans made an effort to look to his face. The skeleton grimaced inwardly, unsure of himself when the other spoke next, “Fira has always been curious.”

“They have names,” Grillby corrected as a matter of fact, his flames fluttering as though they were separate entities from him and were excited for the attention. They rolled around his visage, pluming different paler shades of orange and amber.

“...Think you’re being over-dramatic,” the fire monster almost purred. Sans huffed again with a soft laugh; the flame slipped lower and seated itself into the space between the next disc in his spine,
towards the middle. It was all he could do not to cling to the other to hide. Everything felt hot in the best way, but his vision was also clouding, which made him a little worried.

He trembled as ‘Fira’ stayed still, the licking of heat inside his spine making him almost whine and pant with effort.

“i. think they’re d. done.”

His soul was trembling, flickering like a storm, and he could barely repress any noises that threatened to leave him, let alone the peculiar way his magic was amassing inside of him. Sans remained hunched as Grillby drew closer and he unconsciously grasped at the other’s jacket. A hand on his hip had him biting back sounds yet his entire frame was craving something… anything, any touch.

“Pardon my reach,” Grillby murmured, having leaned in close to whisper against the side of his skull. Sans absently nodded, his body tensing when the other pushed past the sweater and into the free space between his ribs and pelvic area.

It wasn’t invasive as he thought it might be, but the light touch against his spine had made Sans jolt in surprise with an accompanying gasp.

“They have names t-too,” he said suddenly, just above a whisper. He felt like he needed to say something or tell a joke before things got too handsy in the public place. Not that anyone else really appeared to pay attention or seemed bothered by it - they were in the mouth of an alley on a side street that saw very little traffic. Sans hummed lowly when he felt the unmistakable touch from the other, flooding his bones with more fire. “my, uh.. my bones, i mean.”

The other pulled away gently, appearing interested. Sans gave him a slight grin, still clutching at Grillby’s jacket lapel.

“Really,” the other seemed to chuckle at that, “mind introducing us..?”

Another strange craving for touch accompanied Sans’ next inhale, his body shuddering as he felt the solitary flame slip from between his discs and he all but melted from the sensation.

“god, yeah,” he muttered, feeling the other’s hand brush against one of his bottom most ribs. His rib cage was heaving with each gasp at the touch and his legs felt as though he were at risk of melting, “jeez, louise-”

“Peculiar names,” the other noted, amused. Regrettably, he pulled his hand away from under the others’ sweater but stayed close.

Sans nodded almost absently, grinning as he pulled the other close to him. Grillby obliged him, dipping his head to caress his jaw with his mouth with a low chuckle.

“wow,” the skeleton shuddered, his phalanges tugging the other’s jacket a little more when Grillby’s hot mouth found the crook of his neck and settled against the third vertebra. The accompanying warmth made his mind swim and he sucked in a sharp breath with the tingling sear of fire against bone. The heat seeped down to the marrow, making his soul thunder and his phalanges push up to hang around the back of Grillby’s neck. “wow, martha-”

He felt the other’s mouth curl into a smile against his neck and he tilted his skull, inviting more dizzying touches. Grillby finally let go of his other hand and it crept up Sans’ side, leaving tingling pulses that had his mouth hanging open and gasping. Grillby pulled one side of his collar down for better access and turned his head to press against him.
The skeleton leaned forward, unable to mute an appreciative moan as he felt the other’s hot tongue evaporate any lingering moisture in that spot and flood into the cracks. It ignited him and he traced his fingers experimentally along the other’s neck, eliciting a subtle shiver through Grillby’s body as a reward.

“holy mary-”

It appeared that Grillby favoured the spot and Sans leaned towards him, his teeth pressing together with another sharp inhale. “jehoshaphat-”

Sans felt Grillby grin against his neck again and laugh awkwardly, his mouth moving back up an inch, sighing against the singed bone.

“...Think I like ‘Mary’ best,” he breathed, feeling another anticipated shudder run through Sans’ bones as his mouth moved against him.

“thought you liked me,” the skeleton joked, his breathing more hitched and still fighting back a moan that he couldn’t quite mask.

Cupping one side of his skull in his hand and gently butting him with his face, Grillby smirked, silently notching another point in his favour. “I think I can tolerate you,” he agreed a little playfully, and witnessed the other’s grin tighten with a laugh. “Besides… those aren’t even real names.”

Sans’ vision was still cloudy but he was grinning at the other. That’s when he realised a little dimly that it was smoke, and it was coming from his left side where Grillby had kissed his neck. He blinked at the other, then locked his arms around his shoulders so he couldn’t escape.

“who says,” he asked daringly.

“Perhaps we can ask that picture of a skeleton that you were so invested in days ago.” With that, Sans flushed at the memory. Grillby appeared even more amused. “What? That’s what makes you blush?”

“if we kiss-” Sans’ mind almost flat-lined at the proposition, but he managed to continue, “-can you drop it..?”

Grillby looked like he was weighing his options but his mouth was curled into a sly smirk.

“...Believe there are some labels absent that require clarification.”

Sans’ skull fell forward in resignation against Grillby’s chest while the other took advantage and dropped a gentle kiss atop of it.

Chapter End Notes

Hey look, they finally have a date! Please note that Postcards is now rated “M”...
Chapter Summary

Tremors rumble through the caverns in Waterfall. The ferry ride is dangerous for once, and Sans once again fails to warp them away. Grillby ends up getting injured, and Sans reaches his limits.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

They ended up wandering around the venues for a while before running out of things to do that didn’t involve finding a secluded area out of sight again. There were booths that they could play games, some small shops to poke through and a live performance featuring some Waterfall monsters doing an interpretive dance. After it got late and the races had ended, they decided to head back.

On the ferry, Sans had eventually calmed down and was recounting what had happened in his mind. The date had gone well; Grillby seemed to enjoy the area and himself, and Sans had too. His thoughts wandered a little, the rush of water around them making the fire monster inch his hand towards his own again. Less hesitant than before, Sans rested his hand over the other’s with a tired smile. The day had been long but fun.

Sans had been stealing glances at Grillby the entire time. Through the winding river from Hotland to Waterfall, he tensed and seemed to be scanning the ceiling far above. His fire was shuddering and close to his body, making him appear dimmer.

“somethin’ on your mind, g?” the skeleton eventually inquired, watching the space above them. He didn’t see anything, but it was likely the other just felt nervous. The ferry ride was slower than their previous trip.

The fire monster’s flames plumed suddenly, then dimmed again. Sans knew it was a nervous tic of sorts, so gently patted his hand.

“...Something is moving.”

“tremors?”

Grillby stayed silent and adjusted his glasses, his expression unreadable. It was several moments since he remained quiet that Sans thought he simply didn’t want to talk about it. Small pebbles were falling from above, along with a faint dribble of dust and water.

Frowning, the skeleton looked up again, trying to see. There was nothing, but there was a faint rumble in the distance.

“...Not tremors,” the fire monster finally said. His voice had a raspy note as though he was on edge. Small flecks of red embers popped away from his body and floated away before extinguishing in the humidity.

“can’t see through this. you gonna be ok?”
‘Tra la la~ The waters are wild today. That's bad luck…’

Sans shot the river person a dirty look, but the figure remained turned away from them, blocking the immediate view of their destination. A few more pebbles fell from the ceiling, accompanying a low rumble that made the waters shudder around the craft. It was moving slower.

“hey, uh, can we go faster?” he called to them, trying not to feel nervous. With Waterfall recently notching last on his most favourite places in the Underground and with Grillby’s added apprehension about falling into the water, he really didn’t want to linger any longer than they had to.

‘Tra la la. Tri li li. Tre le le.’ The ferry’s speed remained the same.

The skeleton groaned softly, hooking his arm over Grillby’s shoulders. He was very tense, but appreciated the effort. Sans looked inward. His buffer was there, however small that it was, but he would only be able to warp them once and not for that big a distance. Sans looked down the canal, shifting slightly so he didn’t pull Grillby towards the side of the boat.

He still didn’t see anything, but the other’s mild panic was enough for him to decide that warping them was the best option. Surrupetitously, he gathered his magic and slipped his hand into Grillby’s, hoping he wouldn’t get suspicious. As luck would have it he wasn’t, and Sans was able to reign in a lot more energy than he had their previous trip through. His eye lights scanned ahead of them; there were no familiar outcrops to land on, so he figured the wishing room had to be the safest and driest area as a landing point.

The wisp of cyan and gold flickered in his left eye, betraying his intent. Grillby’s entire body stiffened, a protest forming when he felt the surge of wild energy next to him flare up. Then it suddenly sputtered out, punctuated with a shaky breath from Sans. He felt his soul clench in fear. They hadn’t gone anywhere and now Sans leaned against him, his breathing harsh as though the effort had been painful.

“Why did you..?” There was an added panic to Grillby’s voice along with anger. Sans huffed shortly, not immediately answering but managed to shakily push himself upright. Why hadn’t it worked? The buffer was almost gone, with four points remaining. His magic felt torn again, but they hadn’t budged an inch. It had been a gamble and he lost.

‘Tra la la~ Refrain from spatial and temporal manipulation during the ride.’

Sans paused with the river person’s words, staring at their back as they continued armlessly steering through the pitch darkness of the canals. He was purposefully avoiding Grillby’s face, knowing if he saw the oblique concern there that he’d push him away. It would be a horrible end to the day after all.

He settled a little more next to Grillby, keeping his arm around his shoulders and his other hand clasping the other’s. He heard the puzzled repetition of “temporal..?” but didn’t give it an answer, only concentrated on regulating his breathing so it he didn’t look as bad as he felt.

The waterways were beginning to become a little wilder. First the craft bobbed as though something had disturbed the river’s flow further ahead, then it cut up into choppy waves. The river person remained as nonchalant as ever, humming an eerie tune while Sans went to stand up, keeping a hand on Grillby’s shoulder to steady himself.

‘Dancing on a boat is dangerous. But good exercise…’

Sans took that as a warning to sit down again and did, offering the fire monster a reassuring smile. It
must have looked more like a grimace, since the other returned something of an agitated scowl, obscured by his low flames.

“can’t fault me for tryin’,” the skeleton shrugged, digging into his pocket for the piece of jerky, hoping it would ease his exhaustion. He tore off a piece and offered it to Grillby, who slowly shook his head in silence.

The sinking awkwardness came back with full force, although for different reasons. Sans held his skull in one hand after finishing his jerky and glared off into the distance where larger, choppier waves were forming. He could feel his soul sink with building worry.

He paid attention to the river person a little more now, as their singing usually picked up with a particularly nasty set of waves. Grillby kept a hand on his and with every rock of the craft, his grip tightened noticeably.

A few larger rocks fell from the ceiling and landed in the water next to him, splashing him. The fire monster grew considerably agitated by that, even if he assured Sans he was unharmed, it still threw a spray of evaporation as steam filled the tunnel. He only let go of the skeleton’s hand to rub his own together with a hiss, his left having been briefly extinguished until the small flames from his other hand jumped over to rekindle it. The flames remained low, however.

The next wave was considerably taller. It crashed against the side of the ferry and Sans swore loudly. Even if he was a head shorter than Grillby, he made a valiant effort to block the other from the crashing wave. In a sense it worked, with Sans taking the full brunt of the splash and Grillby lowering his temperature quickly enough.

“that’s it-” the skeleton sputtered angrily as the river person hummed idly through another wave. Marsh water had filled his skull and he parted his teeth to allow it to drain with a disgusted shudder. He witnessed a few sparks come off Grillby, then a high red plume jettison around him, scorching the ferry’s floor and brightening the area considerably. The temperature hiked up noticeably around them and soon the entire craft was covered in a dense fog that slowly passed over them as it moved ahead.

‘Tra la la~ Another waterfall. Be careful.’

Sans’ sockets hollowed out when he saw the deluge arcing before them. He had little time to think as he automatically drew up his magic, gripping Grillby’s hand tightly to keep him close. In a roar like thunder, more rocks fell from the ceiling and onto the ferry and around it, kicking up more water as the wave crashed closer.

Grillby was breathing quickly, his eyes bright and wide and his fire whipping around him, claustrophobic in the small area. Both of his hands seized the skeleton when he saw the wave crash over them and he was able to see the crackle of the other’s hue whip into place just in time.

It would have been close. Sans was panting harshly with his left arm raised above his skull, but he’d managed to conjure a huge cage of bones in quick succession to block most of the water from hitting them. It wrapped around them, leaving little space between the craft and their bodies. The calcium-based constructs were woven so tightly that barely any water seeped through.

“shoulda. saved that jerky, heh,” Sans gasped. His bones were rattling and he settled back down to the bench, his hands just as shaky as the rest of him, if not more. He took a few more calming breaths before he added, “what a way to end a day.”
The rest of the ride was nerve-wracking, but once they made it past Waterfall, it appeared all was clear. They couldn’t have left the ferry faster even if Sans warped them off of it. Grillby kept quiet and Sans bit his figurative tongue in order not to cuss out the river person entirely. It could have been worse; it could have been much worse. But still, Sans watched as the craft drifted away, leaving them in the snowbank north of Snowdin.

Grillby was still holding onto his left arm, but it looked like his colouring and flames were back to normal. Sans watched them for a moment before he realised he was staring and gave an apologetic smile.

“…Look tired,” the fire monster finally said.

Sans noted the concern and rolled his shoulder nonchalantly. “m’always tired,” he paused, then glanced at Grillby’s left side, “how’s the hand?”

The fire monster rose his hand to inspect it; the fire was low, to a mere shimmer close to his form. He was grimacing slightly, at least Sans thought it was one. Sometimes it was difficult to tell. The skeleton gestured for him to hold it out. Hesitant, Grillby did and Sans held it in both of his hands.

The embers were low and fluttered slowly like a waning fire. It was spotted with the colour of dying coals and Sans couldn’t help the ebb of regret that hung in his soul as he held the hand.

“It will rekindle,” Grillby reassured him quietly, sensing the other’s distress. “It only looks bad.”

Sans turned over his hand in his grasp and noted the pained twitch the other couldn’t repress when he brushed his fingers against what was apparently water-burns, as odd of a thought that was. The injured hand wasn’t as warm as he remembered, either.

“looks painful though,” he muttered, clasping both of his hands over it. Even though it wasn’t one of his strengths, he intended to alleviate the pain and heal it as best as he could. He stepped closer to the other so Grillby would relax. Sans felt his gaze on him and smirked apologetically in return. “i’m kinda bad at this. but i’ll try. in the meantime, you tell me what you saw.”

Grillby shifted in place, then turned his head towards the river in thought. It was a prolonged period of time before he said anything, until he felt the gentle tingle of Sans’ magic flow through into his fingers and palm with its healing touch.

“Thought I saw… roots.”

Sans frowned, his orbits closed in concentration as he willed more of his magic to manifest. It was a good thing his flux levels were all over the place lately, but drawing on it now felt like it was unravelling something deep inside of him.

“Could be… tremors. And in my panic, perhaps I imagined it.” Grillby sighed, bringing his other hand to cover the lower half of his face. For a fire monster, Sans’ way of healing was peculiar, tingling and soft. It was gentle and slow and while not painful, reminded him of being doused. For some reason ‘cold’ came to mind, even if the chilly climate around them had little effect on him and he never really could associate it with the word.

Sans nodded in understanding, knowing it was his job as a sentry to report any suspicious activity to Undyne - even if it was likely she already knew. Now there was a conversation he didn’t want to have; it would likely turn into a whole different one, knowing her. He exhaled softly as his magic regrettably began to wane.

“guess that’s it,” he muttered in agreement, cracking an eye socket open to look at his attempt. His
vision was blurry for a moment, but he powered through, “looks like my handiwork really got through here.” He smirked when he heard the other sigh in resignation and carefully unclasped his hands from around the other’s. It looked a little brighter at least, although he wasn’t sure it that was a good thing or not. Grillby didn’t appear to be in any pain, unless the guy had a high tolerance for it.

He watched as Grillby flexed his fingers, his hand shaking slightly. Sans let his own drop to his sides, his arms feeling weak after putting forth so much effort. It almost felt as though his legs were making him lean too much to one side, too. He gave the fire monster another apologetic grin with a shrug. With the date at its close, he wasn’t quite sure how to say goodbye.

“...One for the road?” the other suggested after a pause, having watched Sans shuffle where he stood. His grin twisted into a slight flustered grimace and his magic gave off that delightful subtle glow again when Grillby stepped closer, closing the distance between them.

Sans was sure whatever strength he had left was bolstered by the soft kiss against his mouth. He closed his orbits and leaned forward, his soul starting to flip nervously. It was much too short, but it was sweet and he hummed softly, unable to help the pleasant feeling that crept back into his rib cage with the gesture. Sans fought back a protest when the kiss ended, opening his sockets again.

Grillby’s visage cleared somewhat so he could see a vague smirk while the other patted the side of his skull with his good hand. Then he sighed softly, a light trail of steam catching in the air with his heat, “...Here I thought I was winning.” He seemed almost disappointed and Sans shot him a perplexed look. Grillby’s smile broadened a little more, “7 to 6, Sans. You’re in the lead.”

Sans made a sound as though he was clearing his nonexistent throat and scratched the side of his jaw absently. “mind.. runnin’ the rules by me again?”

Grillby didn’t hold back his chuckle. “To what advantage would that be?” The other’s bemused expression was adorable, so he left it at that, giving the other’s face another gentle pat of reassurance. “...Had a good time.”

Sans’ blush broadened despite himself, his voice dying when he wanted to say ‘me too’. He watched as Grillby left with a slight wave, sticking his hands in his pockets until the fire monster was well on his way. He then slouched his shoulders with a deep exhale, wanting nothing more to lie down and possibly nap for a few days.

He pulled out his phone to check his messages. With the device being left off the entire time, Sans had actually forgotten he had brought it with him. It was a good thing Alphys had waterproofed it; no doubt it wouldn’t have survived the torrent of water. It booted up and several more messages popped up, along with five missed calls from different people.

He sighed again and pulled up the messages from Papyrus.

Papyrus (Last message received 3:52pm):

- OH MY GOD
- APPARENTLY I MERIT A PAYCHEQUE?
- ALSO, APPARENTLY WHETHER OR NOT WE CATCH A HUMAN DOES NOT AFFECT OUR PAYROLL. WOWIE!!
- AND... FOR SOME REASON, UNDYNE’S HERE?? WHEN YOU GET BACK, COME HOME RIGHT AWAY!
- SHE MENTIONED THERE HAS BEEN EARTHQUAKES LATELY IN WATERFALL. BE CAREFUL ON THE FERRY!
Sans scratched his skull in thought. The last two messages had been sent a few hours ago and he groaned softly, wishing he didn’t have to socialise after such a full day.

Without thinking, he pulled together his magic to warp home. It was an odd sensation to miss the landing, as though there was a shock to the end. He ended up grasping the air for a moment and lunging to the nearest building to stabilize himself as something inside of him twisted painfully.

Ok... maybe he’d used up more magic than he thought. Sans looked around his current location hazily, taking in the familiar setting. He’d missed his landing by a few feet and was right by the shed Papyrus kept locked up in case he caught a human. He weighed the pros and cons of going inside it to nap instead, but ended up dragging his feet through the freshly fallen snow to the doorstep.

For a moment, it felt as though he couldn’t manifest breaths and the resulting confusion made his mind swim dizzily. Sans grasped at the porch column, nearly taking off half of the faerie lights in the process. Papyrus was going to get mad, he thought dimly as he tried to keep himself upright. He didn’t even realise that he had sunk to the ground and the door had opened explosively.

For the most part, he was able to clarify things eventually. He recognised his brother by the colours he commonly wore, but little else. It would have surprised him to see him out of his battle body, had he considered thinking about anything else besides wanting to sleep.

Yeah, he definitely pushed himself to the limit.

“OH MY GOD! SANS!” his brother boomed and stooped low to pull him off the porch. He slung an arm around his shoulders to keep himself upright, but thought better of it and pulled him close to carry him through the front door instead. “YOU’RE SOAKED! WHAT HAPPENED?”

Sans muttered something inaudible against his shoulder, barely aware of the question.

“CLEAR THE COUCH, UNDYNE,” Papyrus called inside, his footfalls quick after he slammed the door shut. It roused Sans, but not by much.

Undyne stayed sitting but scooted over, a bowl of chips in her lap and covered with blankets. Her good eye widened slightly when Papyrus carried his brother into the living room and sat him down next to her, then peeled off upstairs.

“Geez, you’re looking lively,” Undyne muttered to Sans, who was unresponsive, sockets half-closed. “You didn’t get into any trouble, didja?”

The smaller skeleton shifted slightly when he heard the familiar voice and his eye lights faded out shortly. Undyne drew herself up with a grimace and gave his shoulder a shake.

“HEY!! Sans, keep awake for a sec, Pap’s comin’ back.”

“I’M HERE!!” the younger brother barrelled down the stairs with an assortment of towels and blankets folded in his arms. Sans shifted a little more when Papyrus moved him to wrap towels around and underneath him, essentially transforming him into a bony cocoon. “I WARNED YOU, BROTHER. I TOLD YOU.”

“HEY!! What the HELL is going on?” Undyne demanded, eye flicking between the two brothers in confusion.

“m’tired,” Sans muttered, closing his sockets.

“YOU BURNED OUT,” Papyrus scolded him, his voice raising half an octave higher than usual
and in a matter-of-fact tone, “COMPLETELY FRIED!”

Sans couldn’t help but laugh softly at that, cracking an eye socket open to look blearily at his brother. “heh, good one.”

Papyrus twitched at what he thought was his brother’s evasive behaviour, then he realised the other was struggling to keep awake. “Oh. Oh dear.”

Undyne shot her glance to the taller skeleton, still not comprehending the situation. Papyrus sighed and knelt in front of Sans, resting each of his bony fingers on his blanketed shoulders. “Tell me everything, brother,” he said, his voice softer. Undyne’s brow arched skeptically with the platitude in which he spoke, “every instance where you expended magic.”

Sans shifted again, uneasy. His eye lights dimmed as he raised his skull to look at his brother’s face. If he were of half a mind to bother, he wouldn’t have said half the things he did. “…mornin’.. shortcut.”

Papyrus frowned, not fully understanding. But then again, Sans never alluded to how he managed his ‘shortcuts’, only that it took a bit of magic to do. It had been so long since Sans was able to do it that he had stopped asking about them, even forgot they were a thing until recently.

It took Sans several moments before he spoke again, his voice dropping. “date stuff. tossin’ game. lost a bunch. it was.. fun.” He paused again, his skull nodding forward. “sleep now..?”

Papyrus shook him slightly and Sans exhaled as though in pain. His brow furrowed. “Tell me what else!” the younger brother demanded, his voice earnest. “That cannot be all!”

The older brother attempted to look at him dead on, but he realised he had little energy for anything else. “..back home.”

“Yes?”

“shortcut,” Sans mumbled thickly, his words feeling difficult as though he was attempting to remember how to speak in an entirely separate language, “..tried takin’ g with.”

“G?” Undyne inquired, hanging on to every word.

“He means Grillby,” Papyrus said absently, ignoring her surprised look.

“THAT’S the date??” she said suddenly, grinning wide and showing off her fangs. “Wait.. that flame guy??” She had been told about the date, but not whom it was with.

“..didn’t work,” the smaller skeleton finally finished. He felt the peculiar probe of magic against his soul and instinctively tried to push out against Papyrus, but his arms were buried in the blankets. “don’t.”

“You seem ok, at any rate,” his younger brother muttered, then sighed heavily and pinched the bridge of bone between his sockets in thought. Sans’ HP rested at 3, much lower than that afternoon. Had it been 8, or maybe 6? After the commotion with Undyne coming to Snowdin and her barraging him with questions, Papyrus found he couldn’t remember. “Is that all?” He gently nudged Sans’ shoulder, whose skull had fallen forward, sockets closed.

He didn’t reply for another few minutes, to which Papyrus exhaled in trepidation. Undyne looked as though she was going to ask something, but stopped when Sans spoke up;
“earthquake, i think..? g said.. he saw roots moving. tell undyne, ok, bro..”

“I’m right HERE, Sans?” The fish lady nudged his shoulder from his other side, her eye narrowing suspiciously. She watched Papyrus, who looked concerned before he gently tapped the side of Sans’ skull to rouse him again.

“Is that all, brother?” Papyrus asked again, watching the subtle movements of his brother’s rib cage moving against the fabric.

Sans couldn’t help a small smirk at the memory, although it was difficult to keep awake now. “saved `im.”

“How?”

“bone zone.”

Undyne pressed her hand against her face with an audible smack. Even exhausted to the point of falling asleep, the guy could still make jokes. She held her tongue for once, since Papyrus looked worried for him.

Sans seemed to notice it. A little, at least. “lotta bones,” he clarified dimly. “lotta, lotta bones.” Papyrus waited, as he seemed to know Sans still had more to say. He wasn’t disappointed. “g got hurt… healed `im.” He paused again, his face contorting into a vague grimace of self-criticism. “suck at healin’.”

“You definitely need more stamina for it,” Papyrus chided him softly. “Is he ok? Should I go over and check on him?”

“e’s fine,” his brother whispered. “...one more.. shortcut.. missed.” He inhaled sharply, fighting a wave of dizziness. “...feelin’ it.”

“As you would! I don’t know the circumstances or even the wherewithal to pay for all that magical expenditure today, but confound it, Sans! I warned you this morning and I’ll warn you again. Especially with all this-” Papyrus stopped and gestured pointedly and vaguely around his brother, his movements agitated. “...going on, I expected you to take care of yourself! I expected you to heed my advice! Recklessly blowing through your reserves like you’re a Boss Monster! HONESTLY! You’re not going to learn your limits if you barrel through it like nobody’s business! IT’S FOR YOUR OWN DAMN GOOD, SANS, IT’S-”

Papyrus stopped when he realised that Sans had given up on staying awake. His skull was tilted offside and his teeth were parted and orbits closed. The bone around his sockets looked stressed again and even a little darkened, and Papyrus knew Sans probably felt worse than he appeared. He always put up a strong front, even when he didn’t need to.

It was several moments before Undyne thought to speak, her head reeling. “You got backbone!”

The younger brother straightened his spine, pulled from inward thoughts when he heard the other’s voice. He stammered apologetically while Undyne laughed at his reaction, harsh and raucous. Papyrus made excuses but she shook her head with a shrug. “Far be it from me to lecture ya, Papyrus. Is this doofus gonna be ok, or should I call Alphys, or a healer, or..?”

Papyrus sat on the floor next to the couch and stared at Sans, then gave her an upbeat smile. It was difficult to do, but he somehow even managed to give her a thumbs up. “HE’LL BE JUST FINE! MY SWEATER, HOWEVER...” his sockets narrowed with exasperation, as he’d noticed a few burned areas around the collar and back panel. “...WILL NOT BE. I EXPECT THE DATE
ITSELF WENT WELL! VERY WELL."

Chapter End Notes

Sans is winning: 7/6.
The basis for practising magic is so that this kind of thing doesn’t happen, Sans. A steady lead-up to the limit would have allowed him to know his max magic output better. Doing this so often can be debilitating and even dangerous, which is why Papyrus was upset. C’mon, Sans!
Strict Orders

Chapter Summary

Sans remembers an authoritative figure in his dreams. Papyrus learns of his bad habits. Meanwhile, Undyne is stuck babysitting, and as a result pays Grillby’s a visit. It does not go as planned.

Chapter Notes

Content warning: puke mention

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He would’ve been more concerned if he had been dreaming lately, but Sans wasn’t entirely sure if this was a dream or not. It wasn’t a nightmare. This situation didn’t seem very dreamlike, but he was sure it hadn’t happened before. It was perfectly mundane while being completely baffling at the same time.

He was back home; at a university, to be more accurate. Papyrus wasn’t with him, he was too young to go to school just yet. Sans was following someone - an older, taller monster whose head was obscured simply by shadow or because he couldn't care to look.

His voice was familiar as he talked, and when he did it was quickly and precisely. He was curt and to the point, didn’t pull his punches. There was also an accent that was opposite his own, and had a particular drag between words and a lilt against the hard vowels. It almost sounded stilted - that is, if the monster wasn’t so self-assured and pragmatic. It was as though multiple tones were housed in his voice.

Sans only knew he hated him beyond any measure of a doubt.

“We have not finished our conversation,” the other had been saying. Sans kept quiet but fell into step behind him, knowing he had to follow closely, otherwise be subject to some kind of reprimand.

“You recall.”

“sure,” he automatically replied. Something twisted in his ribcage and he idly rubbed the spot, dimly recognising a thin horizontal pinstripe across his shirt under his lab coat, just in view.

“Stop your fidgeting.”

“m’not.” He scratched again.

“And stand upright.”

“ok.” He made sure to slouch his shoulders a little more.

“It’s either ‘yes’ or ‘alright’,” the older monster chastised him. He stopped and whirled around, but something prevented Sans from viewing his face. He felt as though he already knew it, though. “If
you are going to intrude yourself onto my work this way, I expect you to conduct yourself in a less shameful manner.”

Sans felt the twist of pain again, coupled with disappointment and anger. The only reason he was doing this was for Papyrus, whom he had to leave at home with a neighbour. He forcibly corrected his posture, although he was sure the other would subject him to more criticisms as soon as he saw something out of place. He always did that.

At the back of his mind he was a little confused. It had been a passing thought, but it was correct nonetheless. The adult monster approached him and he automatically took a step back as though expecting to be struck.

Instead, the other fixed his coat and shirt with firm and harsh movements, while Sans scowled at him and tried not to jerk forward with the tugging. A set of hands rested on his shoulders, the gesture oddly gentle. Another pair adjusted the safety pins keeping his rolled up sleeves in place with an equally baffling amount of care.

“Don’t give me that look.”

“can’t say i got any choice, pops.”

“`Have’. And no, I suppose not.” The adult paused, and for that moment Sans knew he was being glared at. “Additionally, you will not address me as such any longer. It’s either ‘Sir’, or Doctor while you study here. You should consider yourself privileged.”

Sans’ permanent grin tugged slightly in a sneer as he looked up at the other’s obscured visage towering above him. The bright lights above the corridor shrouded his face in shadow, making him appear almost menacing. “oh, do i ever.”

“We can do without the sarcasm for at least one day, boy.” There was the hint of warning that Sans knew all too well and he couldn’t help but shrink down at the tone. He felt another set of hands gently push at his back when the other turned to continue down the corridor. “Now come with me. I expect you to heed my warnings. Today the King will be gracing us with his presence. I expect you to behave favourably; which means no swearing—

“well, fuck.”

“-or fidgeting, or staring, and certainly none of your obstinate pranks. He is an incredibly powerful Boss Monster whom I hold in high regard and I will not tolerate you embarrassing me in front of him. We will be discussing the CORE’s development and your integral role in it.”

It was the only amount of praise he received from him; veiled through disappointment and condescension. At least Sans knew he was smart enough for the other to tolerate him.

The ticking of a familiar clock pulled him back to consciousness, coupled with the static of an untuned television. Sans blearily looked around, confused for a moment as to where he was, only that he was using the couch’s arm as a pillow and he was wrapped comfortably in a mountain of blankets.

It was late at night, and alongside Undyne’s snoring from the other side of the couch there was a little noise from the direction of the kitchen. A soft glow of light was pouring into the dark living room from it. It took quite a bit of effort to untangle himself from the blankets Papyrus had heaped upon him while he slept.
Inside he still felt raw and unstable, but at least he could string together coherent thoughts and shuffle his way to the kitchen without wobbling too much. His brother was busy dishing out containers of dinner for the next few days, his expression grave as he worked. He looked so out of place without his battle body, Sans thought, although he supposed they were now a matching set. He looked up when he saw Sans enter the doorway and lean against the entrance wordlessly.

“You’re awake,” Papyrus said lowly. He had long since learned to keep his voice quiet whenever Undyne came and ended up spending the night. “I expected you to sleep clear through to morning.” Sans’ nonexistent gut twisted when the other dropped a ladleful of sauce over each portion with a little more force than what was perhaps necessary. Bits of sauce splattered everywhere.

Sans could tell his brother was attempting to hide that he was upset. With the dreamlike memory still in his mind, he watched his brother move around to the sink to rinse off the ladle and put it neatly in the drying rack. “you sound like him.”

Papyrus paused, then sent Sans an odd look. “I don’t think I sound anything like Grillby.”

“not him,” the other clarified, then decided it was probably best if he didn’t bring ‘him’ up. Even if ‘him’ referred to a collection of vague, unpleasant memories that made him feel small and worthless.

It was too late, since his brother appeared interested in what he had to say. Calmly, he manoeuvred around the counter and pulled out a chair, beckoning him over. His gestures seemed a little calmer as Sans shuffled over, still in the process of both waking up and recovering. He slouched over the table, waiting for the inevitable scolding he would receive.

Instead, the taller skeleton moved back to the counter, grabbed a notebook and pushed it in front of Sans on the table. He opened it to a page where he had made a list, and Sans’ felt the ebb of guilt when he realised it was a list of magical expenditures from the previous day. Papyrus left it there for him and went to the cupboard and poured a bowl of cereal and set it in front of him, without milk. Sans winced as he grabbed a small handful and popped it into his mouth. Crunchy, but it was better than being offered spaghetti, he reasoned.

“I want you to list out, on a scale from one to ten,” his younger brother gestured to the page and took a pen from the counter, “of how much magic each action took. With ten being the highest expenditure, and one being the lowest.”

Sans stayed quiet, eyeing each item in the list with a growing discomfort. The way Papyrus phrased his request made him feel bitter and smaller than before. But he complied, knowing his brother was only concerned. He started with the ones he knew, scrawling his unkempt, bulbous handwriting next to his brother’s righteous, spidery script.

He didn’t immediately address the shortcuts, but figured… maybe eighty bones to the cage? He was terrible at healing and rarely did it, since Papyrus never got injured. He tapped the pen against his teeth in thought, staring at the remaining choices after writing ‘negligible’ next to the tossing game at the arena’s arcade.

Shortcuts.

He rubbed at his skull, drawing a blank on how to quantify the expenditure. It wasn’t quite magic, but at the same time, it wasn’t not magic. He hummed softly and stopped the tapping when Papyrus looked over his shoulder. It reminded him of a much taller monster looking over his work when he was a lot younger, only with less hands.

Less hands. Well, that was a strange thought.
“whatcha think, teach?”

Papyrus ignored the nickname and frowned as best as he could. Sans offered him a coy smile in return. Maybe he wouldn’t ask too much about the shortcuts after all.

“What kind of construct did you make?” His brother pointed to his not-so-serious answer of ‘80 boners on a boat’ with a single digit, ignoring the childish joke. “And what was it for?”

“g-man was gonna get splashed big time, so…” Sans shrugged, scratching the back of his neck under his sweater collar. With a frown, he pulled out a leaf that had stuck to his spine, then let it drop to the floor unceremoniously. “…cage-bundle?”

“You could have set it up more like this and wasted less energy-” Papyrus took the pen from him and sketched out a ring of twelve bones with arrows indicating motion in a rotation. It appeared to be a kind of shield. Leave it to his brother to come up with something so ostentatious. “It would’ve been more efficient!”

“I literally had no time to think,” Sans replied lamely.

“You didn’t answer the shortcut levels.”

“nope.” Sans was avoiding his look and decided to grab another handful of cereal. He chewed them deliberately, making crunchy noises just to mess with him. Papyrus knew what he was doing and glowered down at him, fighting every urge to take the cereal away.

“ok, fine. say… one shortcut, just me, is… usually a ‘one’, lowest. easy-peasy,” Sans shrugged, still avoiding his brother’s look. “and takin’ someone with… maybe thirteen?” He chewed more cereal, crumbs dropping onto the page.

Papyrus’ sockets narrowed in suspicion, while Sans ignored the look. “Thirteen.” There was a challenge to it.

“sure.”

“I only made the scale out of ten, Sans,” the taller of the two indicated irritably, but he drew out a new graph for the overestimation anyway. He was suddenly more serious than before and paused, watching his brother eat. “how many times did you do that today?”

“once,” the other replied with another shrug.

While Papyrus stayed quiet, he quickly realised the three point discrepancy between what he was sure his brother’s health was compared to when he got back. If pressed on it, Sans would simply stop talking. But the nature of the shortcuts worried him - if it took HP away with Sans’ poor health, how long would he push himself until he came back to him as a dust-covered jacket?

Papyrus didn’t want to think of that. He had to broach the subject another time. It had been the most information he’d gotten out of him about his shortcuts and Papyrus knew his brother was still exhausted. He was surprised when Sans made it to the kitchen, after all.

Meanwhile, Sans was fine with him not asking. Eventually he started to doze again, still tired from the day. He leaned against the table with his arms folded and his skull buried in them before Papyrus urged him to get to bed. He groaned in protest, but eventually dragged himself back to the couch amongst the pile of blankets and Undyne, who remained a loud, snoring pile of limbs.
It was morning when he woke again, bleary-eyed and feeling hazy. He didn’t dream again and vaguely remembered what he and Papyrus had discussed in the middle of the night. Undyne was awake and had even managed to make a pot of coffee without starting any fires. That was awfully kind of her.

She leaned against the wall next to the television, watching him as he pushed himself up and looked around, trying to locate his brother. Papyrus would have prevented him from oversleeping.

“Pap’s on patrol. Just you and me, so,” she started, her tone peppy and with an accompanying smarmy grin as she swirled the contents of her mug. “Grillby, huh? How’d the date go?”

Sans at least was awake enough to conceal the irritation he felt at the inquiry, but not enough to stifle the flush that it brought to his face. “fine,” he answered simply.

“Aww, C’MON! A date that’s ‘fine’ is a failed date!”

The skeleton shrunk back against the back of the couch and grimaced when an errant spring nicked at his spine. He jerked and rubbed at the spot, then stretched a little to sort out the various kinks in his joints.

“hey, i finished those books alph lent me, so-”

“DAMN IT,” the other sighed exasperatedly, then lurched herself off the wall and chugged back the rest of her coffee before landing besides Sans. She pointed a finger directly in his face, still holding the empty mug. “I’m IGNORING the subject change! It’s time for YOU to come clean, bony boy!”

Sans made a grab for some more blankets to wrap himself in - and over his skull. Undyne backed off a bit and lounged at the opposite side of the couch from him. “the date went good.” he said quietly, “just really… really great.” His grin tugged a little sheepishly with the words and he was unable to suppress a laugh. “just thought it gotta bit.. hot to handle.”

“Ohhhhh?” Ok, that might have been the wrong thing to say considering who he was talking to. He pulled the blanket over his orbits so he couldn’t see the ludicrous toothy grin leering at him from the other side of the couch. “Why are you being such a shy DORK about this!? Did you two even KISS yet?”

Sans whipped the blankets off his skull and regarded the other with a bit of a glare, a spike of energy bringing up his agitated state.

“If you ask ME, I say you go over to Grillby’s right now and suplex him onto a table!” Her voluminous voice boomed so loudly, Sans was concerned the occupants of the library down the street would hear. He also grew deathly silent over the implications, but she continued, “Give him a big ol’ smoocheroo! Tackle him to the floor and make your feelings abundantly clear! Straight on through to MAKE OUT CITY!! - At least, that’s what I’d say if Papyrus didn’t ask me to watch over ya today.”

“oh, is that all that’s keepin’ ya,” the skeleton groused, rubbing at his skull irritably. He was still reeling from the mental imagery conjured by such a proposition and made a conscious effort not to react immediately to Undyne’s words. So far, it was working.

“It’s going to be BORING.” The fish lady drawled while stretching her back against the couch cushion. “Sans needs a bath, Sans needs to do this, Sans needs to do that, make sure he does this…” She groaned, the noise loud enough to carry throughout the house.

Irritably, Sans flinched at the words. She backed off a little when she recognised his agitation, her
single eye flicking to his sweater then back to his face. It appeared she noticed something, but Sans was more than willing to pretend it didn’t happen.

Bathtime then, he lamented internally. He pushed himself off the couch, lurched to his feet and kicked away his shoes on the way upstairs. Socks came off next and he left them where they dropped down the hall to the bathroom. He let the tub fill before he closed the door and got undressed, yawning the entire time.

It was far too early to be awake just yet. The thought lingered as he sank into the tub reluctantly until he was submerged clear to his jaw. Maybe he could stay in here to escape Undyne and just think about the date. Or maybe the next one.

It turns out that the resident fish lady had other plans. Her knock was as loud as her voice and very nearly jolted the skeleton clear out of the tub. His irritability kicked in again with her proclamation: “QUIZ TIME!”

does it really have to be now?”

Undyne ignored his protest, “OK! First things first - name the three constituents of the soul!”

Sans groaned, sinking further into the tub. His voice reverberated over the water, adding an echo to it, “love, compassion, hope.”

“Well that one was so easy a BABY could answer it!” She made a drawled out noise as though she were thinking. Sans speculated she was less prepared for the quiz than Papyrus would have been. “Ok, speakin’ of babies, how ‘bout this then? Practical HP values for an infant are in what range?”

Sans scowled at the door. “usually, between 10 an’ 20.” His was lower; much lower. He was getting agitated again. Idly, he rubbed at his right arm. “higher if they’re Boss lineage.”

“Two points!” Sans groused at that. Just great - another score to keep track of. “On cyclical nature: aggression in monsters starts at what stage?”

“which species.”

“Ohhhh. Tough guy. Alright, alright… uh, let’s say,” she paused to think about it, “Hotland crowd.”

Sans narrowed his sockets in suspicion at that. He wasn’t sure if it would be obvious of him to point out what she was doing, or to pretend it didn’t happen. As usual.

“pinstripe.” It didn’t vary too much between areas, but each culture had its differences.

“Uh-huh. Uh-huh. And what does that mean?”

goddammit,” he whispered, his voice echoing in the water. He slid down a little more. “last stripe before adulthood,” he called out louder, just a little warbling.

It went back and forth like that for some time longer, trapping Sans in the bathroom until he realised he hadn’t brought any other clothes with him. He certainly didn’t want to wear his brother’s clothing again, so sat up in the tub. His magic was arcing around him, made irritable by the pop quiz and the skeleton had been battling the overwhelming need to vent out the excess energy.

He didn’t want a repeat of the previous day, so decided against shortcuts. He coughed quietly to
catch Undyne’s attention on the other side of the door. She laughed when he asked for clothes, then simply walked off. Hopefully she wouldn’t go into Papyrus’ room. He’d have a fit.

With water all over the floor and towelling off, Sans hid behind the door when it opened a crack. “Don’t worry. I don’t WANT to see your bony ass!” she called in, waving clothes that looked like his own. He grabbed them from her flailing grip and promptly closed the door to change.

She had selected a dark blue tee that had the elements ‘barium’, ‘cobalt’, and ‘nitrogen’ on the front in shorthand and a pair of black snap-side track pants. Apparently Undyne didn’t get the memo that he didn’t have skin and was a great deal younger when he last wore the pants in particular. He shrugged and ditched his towel in the sink and opened the door.

“HA! Much better!”

Sans shrugged and plucked at the shirt. “how far into my drawers did ya have to dig to unearth this thing?”

“Dunno, I just grabbed whatever,” she shook her head with a grin, then seemed to notice something again. Sans avoided her look and attempted to walk past her.

Instead of successfully managing that, she grabbed the front of his shirt and dragged him back to study him. He lifted his hands in a placating gesture, unsure of her intentions. Her eye wasn’t focused on his face, but a little lower.

“Oh. My. GOD!” She let go and the other frowned in confusion. She giggled quietly at first, then broke out into a fit of laughter.

“jeez. rude.”

It was several moments before she could recover enough to point to him, slapping her leg with her other hand and shaking her head. “He MARKED you?”

Sans clapped a hand over the spot but it was already too late. He hadn’t checked the mirror - in fact, it didn’t occur to him that the affection Grillby gave his neck would’ve left any marks. He remained quiet and glowered at her.

“Oh my god, that is… too cute! FIRE HICKIES!! Date number one and he’s all OVER you?” Sans swatted her hand away when she reached to see better, his magic flicking aggressively. “Did I piss you off? Shit, I’m sorry-” She stopped laughing and blinked at the agitated stance; it was much different than being embarrassed over a little friendly teasing. “Hey, you ok?”

“could say i’m twenty points into needin’ an outlet,” the skeleton grumbled, referencing one of her quiz questions about monster aggression. He sighed quietly and attempted to calm down, pushing a hand against his face and pinching the bone between his orbits in frustration.

“Great! Let’s SPAR!”

Sans shifted uncomfortably, but his magic flicked around him like a nervous cat’s tail. He swore softly; sparring with Undyne would likely dust him. She was hyperactive and pushed Papyrus, but his brother had a great deal more stamina than he did. Everyone did. He stayed quiet, but grew angry the more he thought about it and he knew Undyne was waiting for an answer.

“can’t,” he lied, ‘pap said ‘no’.”

She nodded her head suspiciously and folded her arms over her chest. “Well, in any case… What if I
block, and just you attack?” She appeared to be pretending she hadn’t heard him.

“What?”

“I won’t attack.”

“That doesn’t seem like a thing i’ve ever heard ya say. `sides-”

Her eye and grin grew wider; “Hey! I’m trying to HELP!”

He grimaced and shrugged apologetically just as Undyne grabbed him by the arm to lead him downstairs and out the front door.

Sans was kept on the defensive, a little ways between Waterfall and Snowdin. It was strange to be outside without footwear or his hoodie, but for once the chill didn’t phase him. Undyne, meanwhile, had ran back inside for her coat, scarf and boots, but she still remained shivering in front of him, breaths huffing in the wintry air.

“cold goes right through me,” he said, offering her a grin while selectively hiding a few stats. It was a little trick he’d learned on his and Papyrus’ first days in Snowdin, when some of the older kids were curious about the skeleton brothers. She snorted in response and held out her arms. A line of blue-tinged magic sliced through the air as she summoned a spear and held it out in front of her challengingly.

“Ok, lay it on me! Hit me with all ya got!” She pounded her chest with a fist.

She seemed pumped to help, at least. Sans humoured her, conjuring a small bone and flicking at her as a test. It was quick and bounced off her head faster than she could move. She looked pretty upset about it, but looked at the attack in the snow where it clattered to the ground.

“What the HELL was THAT?” She checked and her HP hadn’t even nudged.

“ya got a bone to pick with me?”

“That was HORRIBLE! A WHIMSUN can hit harder than that??”

Sans shrugged evasively, knowing it to be true - if said monster could even muster the courage around others. With his stats taking a plunge after the accident, even toddlers seemed powerful in comparison. He’d learned not to care too much. It would be enough to drive him nuts, otherwise.

He sighed in resignation, raising his left hand and summoning more attacks. Sans saw the way his partner grinned, anticipating a good exercise. It was a shame, considering he still felt so exhausted.

It had been probably not longer than a half hour or more before Undyne finally called for quits. She had drilled him to make smaller attacks, which peppered the snow around them like bony icicles before slowly dematerialising in their idle state. Sans was breathing hard, but not with as much difficulty as the night before, nor after his and Papyrus’ skirmish earlier that week.

He felt oddly better for it, if a little wobbly. She had taunted him about his damage output but he ended up chipping away five points from her by the end. After the first test attack, she was quicker to block.
“I’m FREEZING,” she announced, dispelling her spear with a flash and rubbing at her arms against the chill. She hopped in place a couple of times before she stalked over to Sans in the snow, still catching his breath. “Ok, we need something to stuff our faces. Pap’s got food ready, right?”

Sans couldn’t help the shudder that passed through him at the mention of food. Undyne unceremoniously tugged at his arm to pull him up from the snow and led him back to his house. She helped him brush the snow off his clothes and shoved him into the kitchen for food. He reluctantly sat while she went about heating up two containers worth of spaghetti while humming.

Then it was the moment of truth: Sans stared at the steaming container in front of him while Undyne waited for her own to heat up. If he didn’t eat it… Undyne would tell his brother. And if he didn’t eat it, Papyrus would become upset. His nonexistent gut twisted when he twirled a small portion onto his fork and brought it to his mouth.

For the most part it was sweet, but in a separate and completely unappetising way. Then salty, way too salty, enough to make him choke. The oregano was overpowering and bitter to all his senses to the point where the noodles would have been a blessing if they hadn’t been drenched in garlic paste. In a word, it was disgusting.

Wrestling with it to try and absorb it, Sans stayed quiet but let his fork drop into the container. He didn’t feel well, before or after this. He couldn’t help it - his magic was rejecting it. He’d never thought it would be something that anyone without a stomach could do, but he made a retching noise and attempted to cover his mouth and turn from the table.

What little pasta Sans had absorbed came back up as tainted magic, effluvial cyan hue masking what the food once was over his hand. Undyne was at his side within seconds, ignoring the microwave chimes as she settled her hands on his trembling shoulders.

“Jeez! Maybe that sparring session was a bad idea,” she offered guiltily, her voice a register lower in worry. “Clearly you’re really not feeling well.”

Once sure he wasn’t going to fall off the chair, she went to find a towel for him to clean up. Sans swore softly while he did, feeling the twist of disgust against his magic’s flux and he half-leaned over the side of the chair, just in case.

“You should take it easy today,” Undyne suggested, her expression unsure, “You overexerted yourself yesterday and you’re still weak! Park your ass in front of the TV and watch it with me!”

Not sure of the exact reason why his body rejected the food but knowing the taste had likely contributed, Sans only nodded, feeling worse than before. After a couple of reality shows with Undyne bravely attempting Papyrus’ spaghetti, he was in and out of sleep, thanks to the comfortable pile of blankets and pillows they had surrounded themselves with. His body rejecting sustenance had taken a toll on him and he felt more worn out than before.

Undyne had waited until he was in a deep sleep before looking him over; he was in rough shape and if she had known how exhausted Sans was, she wouldn’t have insisted on the sparring session. She felt guilty for that, but at the same time the guy always seemed to be hiding how he truly was feeling. While Papyrus’ cooking wasn’t… great, it certainly wasn’t poison, so she attuned Sans’ reaction to overexertion.

For the most part, she updated his brother on how he was doing through texts and a quiet phone call in the kitchen. Papyrus was fretting on the other line so badly that she had to toy with him a bit - that
Sans wouldn’t feel right if the Great Papyrus missed even one day of patrol on account of him. It seemed to do the trick, however temporary a fix it was. She sighed after ending the call.

After another hour of mindless variety prime time television, Undyne slipped off the edge of the couch and towards the door. As much as she hated MTT-TV, she left it on to keep her eye on Sans, who likely chose the channel to bug her. He hadn’t moved apart from a slight restlessness as he fell sleep, but he’d quickly settled soon after.

He would be ok, she thought, if she just left for a few minutes to get something she’d been aching to have since she got to Snowdin.

For someone so rambunctious, she could also be deadly silent. She pulled her boots on while making sure Sans kept sleeping, pulled on her warm jacket and scarf before leaving on tiptoes. It was a good thing the skeleton brothers both harped on about not feeling the cold, otherwise she would have been worried about the draft waking Sans when she left.

She ended up at Grillby’s, grinning up at the warm neon sign of the restaurant and pushing the door. It looked like it was only half full with some chairs still turned over tables, but that was fine with her; her plan had been to grab something to go from the start.

The heat was incredible compared to outside. It was cozy, warm, and the closer she got to the bar, the better it was. Red Bird turned from his story to the bartender as she approached, giving them her most winning smile.

“PLEASE tell me you have cheese fries!”

The bartender carefully rolled his shoulder, his fire looking a little dimmer than when she had seen him last. Maybe he wasn’t feeling well? It seemed like a lot of that was going around lately, she thought.

He remained quiet as he always did, but gestured to a menu board behind the bar next to the shelves of liquor: ‘Limited service. Sorry for any inconvenience.’

“Oh wow,” Undyne remarked after reading the orange chalk scrawl. “You not feeling well either?”

The other gestured in response - or would have, but his left arm jerked slightly and he stopped short. He released a soft rasp of a noise and rubbed the arm as though in pain.

“Grills’ fishin’ with the other hand today,” Red Bird supplied easily. Grillby turned his head to the other and seemed to glower as though irritated by his translation, flames flickering hotter and even crackling loudly. Red sighed in resignation and leaned one wing over the bar. “Fine. He said ‘either?’”

“What?” It occurred to Undyne a little too late that Grillby had been the date, and what she said would have worried the mass of living fire. “Don’t worry about it! Sans is just cranky and overworked, hah!”

Grillby attempted to sign again, but couldn’t form half the words with only one hand; ‘....my fault… he… out… protect me.’

“I’d say if he heard you were thinking that way, it would kind of upset him, y’know? Guy’s got pride and obviously cares about you. If he overtired himself, it’s because HE wanted YOU to be safe!” Undyne shrugged uncomfortably. “I think he’d be MORE upset if he found out you’re trying to work through the pain instead of taking it easy!”
The fire monster seemed to consider it for a moment before signing again; ‘... arm... fire. Nothing to-’ He flinched when he automatically attempted to use his left hand and sighed in frustration. ‘.........worry about.’ His voice was quiet, barely a whisper and a crackling hum of fire so rarely heard by the patrons that Undyne had to lean forward to hear him.

She grinned knowingly at him. “Especially if you can’t communicate as well as you’d like, you shouldn’t force yourself.” Undyne sighed and idly scratched above the gills under her scarf, leaning back. It would smell less like sushi and more like shioyaki if she stayed any closer. “Take the day off, Grillby!”

The bartender gestured towards the floor with his good hand; many people were still eating and another monster had just entered. Her gills flared as Grillby made to move to take their order, but she slammed her fists down on the marble countertop, threatening to make it crack. He stopped, watching her warily in silence.

Undyne turned, still grinning; the entire patronage was staring at her in abrupt shock. “Listen up, guys! Shop’s closed! Pack up and go! Get the HELL OUTTA HERE!!” Red Bird slunk away from her craziness, sending an apologetic look to the bartender. “CAPTAIN’S ORDERS!”

‘.........Not necessary,’ Grillby protested, stock still and sounding aghast.

“I’m MAKING it my business that you recover in good health, which means NO WORK, PUNK!” Undyne ordered, shoving a finger in the fire monster’s direction. Then she whirled around with a battle cry and set about telling what little clientele there was left to hit the road while carrying a stool over her head threateningly. The restaurant cleared out pretty quickly through the confused commotion.

Chapter End Notes

Sans is around the equivalent of ~15 years in the flashback dream, still a kid. Meanwhile, Undyne is having major regrets about pushing Sans into that little sparring session.
Outlet

Chapter Summary

Sans is instructed on how to access his reserves by Undyne, and breaks into Grillby’s when his friend doesn’t answer his phone.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Undyne returned, Sans was sleeping at the opposite side of the couch, but had acquired a bowl of cereal that had spilled onto the floor. She inspected the area and didn’t find any evidence of him being ill again, so cleaned it up and went about passing the time on the UnderNet on her phone until Papyrus came home.

He made sure to stay quiet, but frowned in concern when he saw his brother balled up in the same area as the previous evening. Undyne nodded at him, half in greeting and in reassurance. At least he had changed, which meant his brother felt well enough to get up and do something.

Undyne took him into the kitchen and kept her voice low. “It’s like he doesn’t know what to DO?” she started, sounding appalled. “Don’t freak out - we sparred a little. HEY! I’m being HONEST here with you. Don’t worry, it was just a little test.”

Papyrus had been hushed by her hand; she had quite literally grabbed his mandible to stop him from talking. He shot her a distressed look and she made a shushing noise.

“I dunno what’s going on with him, but it looks like he has all this pent up energy and he… doesn’t know how to FOCUS it?” Papyrus gave her a hesitant nod, still quiet as she figured out things as she spoke. “It’s like he’s a kid, but… that’s just WEIRD.”

She unhooked her fingers from Papyrus’ jaw and hummed to herself in thought, leaning against the kitchen table.

“At any rate,” she continued, keeping her voice down to a harsh whisper, “I got some kids I help in Waterfall with this kind of thing? It’s actually pretty common. I’ll take a day tomorrow and help him through it. Gah, it’s like he WANTS to make us worry.”

“WILL… Will he be alright?” Papyrus adjusted himself, fidgeting worryingly.

She shot him a big grin and he tried his best to return a smile. He looked even more concerned so she threw her arm around his shoulders and gave him a noogie. “Your weenie brother’s gonna be just FINE, Papyrus!”

She spent the night again and woke shortly after Papyrus, who had taken it upon himself to catch up on some housework while she set about making another pot of coffee. The vacuum cleaner blared noisily and she glared at it as she yawned, mug in hand. Sans didn’t budge from his side of the couch at the noise, but grunted in protest when Undyne gave him a kick - as gently as she could.
Groggily, Sans rubbed at an eye socket. He felt... marginally better. Not great, but it was a start. With his brother sucking up the crumbs from when he attempted food the previous evening, he yawned and pushed himself up to a sitting position.

“TODAY, LAZYBONES, UNDYNE IS GOING TO BE YOUR MENTOR.”

Sans laughed quietly at that. “what.”

Papyrus finished vacuuming around the couch before continuing, all the while Sans giving him the most perplexed look as Undyne patiently sipped her coffee. He realised this was going to be a real thing; she was dressed warmly and already had her boots on. She was also holding his hoodie in her free arm, waiting for him to get up.

“I HAVE UTMOST FAITH IN YOU THAT YOU WILL HAVE A SUCCESS!” Papyrus proclaimed, strutting away to the door to pull on his boots. Sans made a move to spring up from the couch, but Undyne kicked up her foot on him and it kept him down. “I’M GOING ON PATROL, SANS! I HAVE NO DOUBT THAT UNDYNE IS BEST SUITED FOR YOUR TUTELAGE. HAVE FUN!”

The smaller skeleton flinched when the door slammed, confused to the point of feeling mildly upset. It was entirely too early for this. “are you serious??”

“Boy, is he EVER!” Undyne laughed, her teeth showing off in a grin to the point of lunacy. “He was VERY adamant!”

Sans groaned and pressed his face into his hands. “he’s gettin’ back at me.” He shook his skull and exhaled in resignation. “fine. whatever. whaddaya got planned..?”

Undyne took another sip of coffee, then paused, looking down at him. Her brow arched sardonically and she leaned down, barely putting any weight behind her foot but it still pinned him in place. “Get your jacket on, bony boy,” she leered ominously, holding out his hoodie, “We’re takin’ a walk!”

When he grumbled about breakfast, Undyne fixed him a bowl of colourful cereal and impatiently waited for him to eat it. It was easier than the previous day, but Sans still felt cautious enough that he ended up not eating very much of it. At least it was sweet, so it went down easy. He tried to take his time to wake up as he ate, but she wasn’t having it. He wanted to wear his slippers and grew quite agitated when she insisted on his sneakers. If there was any need for an outlet, now was the time.

Instead, she led him a little away from Grillby’s, just in front of the crossroads where there was a lot of room, but they were out of the way. Sans became distracted, eyeing a white sign on the door of the bar from a distance, noticing the bar’s shutters were closed. His brow furrowed slightly as he pushed past Undyne, ignoring her preamble about her plans for him alongside her sudden protest.

“HEY! Hold up!” she called after him, indignant.

Sans scowled at the sign on the door; ‘Closed by local authority until further notice.’ He sent an accusing look Undyne’s way, expecting an answer.

Undyne provided no explanation, but grabbed his shoulder and moved him back to her selected area, the opposite side of Grillby’s. She then rather forcibly pushed him down so his knees buckled and he ended up on his back in the snow with a sharp curse and a scowl up at her.

“mind explainin’ what the hell you’re doin’??”
She said nothing, but to her credit she looked as though she was holding something back rather fiercely. She flopped down in front of him, long limbs akimbo before drawing herself up while clearing her throat.

“You fucked up.”

Sans pushed himself onto his elbows and glared at her. “what?”

She leaned forward, “YOU SCREWED UP, FUNNY MAN!!” Sans nearly barreled over and noticed how the kids running around nearby veered off-course into the exact opposite direction of them. He shrunk down into his hood and stayed quiet. She watched him, her yellow eye gleaming as every single faux pas of his posture was taken in. Then she exhaled long and hard, as though coming to terms with something.

She pulled him forward by one arm and the skeleton grimaced, on guard now. If she was anything like she was with Papyrus, he was willing to bet she’d be yelling ‘snow-wrestling’ at any moment and would have to get his spine readjusted as a result.

But it didn’t happen, which made it all the more peculiar. She sighed again, leaning an elbow against one crossed knee and stared at him. “Let’s skip the lecture, ok? I know what’s up.”

Sans stayed quiet, but he remained in the fight-or-flight mentality, his magic arcing in defensive waves throughout his body.

“We don’t have to put a name to it. Just know I’m here to help, ok? I deal with this kind of stuff… pretty consistently. And you’re being a huge baby about it.”

“i don’t-” Sans stopped himself short, his mind racing to and fro. Did Undyne know about the whole delayed puberty ordeal, or was she merely concerned for him? It was admittedly difficult to tell.

To her credit, she waited a few moments for him to continue before pressing on. “I’m not insinuating anything. Hell, I don’t even WANT to know? I just know that your brother worried about you all last night and the night before. You HAVE to start taking better care of yourself!”

“So that’s why you dragged me out into the snow for. thanks, chief. it’s really liftin’ my spirits.”

“Don’t be cute,” she grabbed a fistful of snow; light, powdery and barely packing at all. In fact, it would be perfect for her exercise. “As a sentry, you’re smart and can get around quickly, but you’re USELESS when it comes to actual fighting. I figured it out during our sparring session yesterday. Instead of using your reserves like any regular person would, you’ve gotten into the habit of pushing yourself. It’s stupid and DANGEROUS!”

The skeleton remained silent, but slouched in feigned disinterest, idly drawing a line in the snow with a bony digit. His magic was coursing harsher in anger at the truth, however.

“And as a result, you’re cranky like a teenager and have SCORES to blow through, but you’re not.” Her gills flared with his noncommittal shrug. “Ok, so to my point-” she continued almost sweetly, her wide grin betraying her tone, “is that-you need-to ACCESS it. Which is why we’re sitting in the goddamn freezing snow. So I would APPRECIATE IT, if you at least TRIED?”

Sans sighed, one socket open while the other remained closed in disinterest. She had a point, but the more she pressed it, the more hassle he felt it would be. Undyne scooped up a pile of snow in front of them and gestured to it. Her explanation dealt with how she used seeds or spores in Waterfall, but snowflakes would work just the same. He would filter his energy to move the tiny flecks with his magic to create a separate pile.
It was infantile and degrading and Sans wanted nothing more than to walk away at that moment. She was trying to help, but he wanted to escape. When Sans moved in a way to suggest he was intending to get up, she reached over the small pile between him, her expression pleading as her hand rested on his shoulder. It threw the smaller monster off, sockets widened slightly and not knowing what to expect next.

“Please. For Papyrus and everyone you care about - AND yourself.” He flinched. It was several moments before he resettled and nodded his head slowly.

Most of the morning was spent in practise, with Undyne giving instructions and Sans making attempts. He earned a few light smacks that thankfully didn’t hurt when he automatically drew from his stamina. Switching between the two forces was something he had to get used to, now that he’d learned there was a difference. There seemed to be an unlimited font stored, replenished while he slept, itching to get loose - yet he had the habit of drawing from his stamina first.

So however mundane and trivial it seemed, flake by tiny snowflake, Sans moved snow from one side between them to the other. It was admittedly more difficult than he initially thought and just as tedious.

Pretty soon it was easier to adjust to, but the effort of switching last moment to his reserves was making him tired. A time or two, he simply let his skull rest atop of his right hand while his other was raised between them, poised with a larger clump of snowflakes surrounded in his cyan hue. He ended up nearly falling asleep that way, his flux holding onto it midair.

“Hey, blue boy!” Undyne snapped, then clapped her hands in front of his skull to wake him. When Sans opened his sockets again, it was to Undyne shivering violently in front of him. The pile was larger on the right than on the left. He’d made progress. “I th-think y-you got it-t!!”

“oh. huh.” The skeleton looked at his left hand, then to Undyne, trying her damnedest to keep warm. “you’re kinda…”

“D-DON’T?”

“...flash-frozen, heh.”

“M-makin’ him close up really b-bit me in the ass,” she sighed and got up, her body trembling, “C-could REALLY use the heat! Y-your stupid house isn’t c-cold, but it’s n-not warm EITHER!”

Sans got up and brushed himself off, not entirely bothered by the cold, but looked up to the second floor of Grillby’s building. “ok… but why did you?”

“F-freakin’.. he was t-trying to wo-work with a b-bum hand!” Undyne shot back irritably, then abruptly sneezed. Sans stared at her as she encircled her arms around herself to try and keep warm. “I-I told him, h-he better get b-better soon! H-he couldn’t eve… even S-SIGN, it was so b-bad!!”

Sans looked up and walked around to the front of the establishment to where he could see a dim light upstairs. After watching the muted glow, he went into his pocket and fished out his phone, quickly scrolling down his contacts list.

“What are you d-doing?”

The skeleton raised a single digit to his teeth while he was on the phone, waiting for the other end to pick up. His soul was hammering hard behind his ribs with worry and he paced around outside of the
bar, waiting impatiently.

Then a click as the call disconnected. Grillby didn’t answer, nor did he have voicemail. Confused and mildly alarmed, Sans stared at his phone, then went up to the door and started beating on it with his fist.

“WHOA! E-easy, Sans! He’s f-fine, he-”

He tried the door, but it was locked. Sans clenched his teeth to bite back the worry, stopping his knocking and stepping backwards into the street so he could look up at the window again. He could still see the fire monster’s glow upstairs, but it hadn’t moved.

He quickly started tapping out a message and immediately sent it;

*im comin up

“go back to our place an’ get warm,” he told Undyne, stalking away towards the opposite side of the bar and towards the rear. Sans heard her footsteps behind him and a protest, but he was already drawing on his reserves to make a quick shortcut. He was several feet away from her by the time she thought to follow. When he rounded the corner, he immediately warped inside the dark bar.

He heard a startled exclamation from outside, coupled with a few choice swears and his name amongst them. He waited for Undyne to give up her search as he kept quiet, his breath shaking as he tried to remain calm. While he had stayed behind at Grillby’s quite a few times overnight in the past, he’d never been upstairs, but knew that’s where the fire monster’s suite was.

The large room was cooler, with no trace of the resident fire monster’s pervasive heat. He slowly walked towards the back of the bar, the light of his magic’s hue guiding the way. He was trying to keep calm, checking his phone as he rounded the corner of the kitchen to explore.

“hey, grillbz..?” Sans cautiously called out. His voice sounded oddly thick with trepidation with no one else to hear it but himself. The fire monster didn’t respond from the darkness, so he pressed onwards. He tried to phone again but the call disconnected once more.

Grillby’s seemed like an entirely different place when it was empty now. It brought up a sick, lonely and fearful feeling in his soul while he carefully walked through the pitch. He grasped the fabric in his pocket and checked his phone again, in case he missed a message.

He hadn’t.

“this isn’t funny, man…”

The stone oven in the kitchen hadn’t even been lit that day and remained cool. Everything looked in disarray - dirty pans, pots and dishes stacked in one area of the counterspace, half-dished plates of food left out to dematerialise with age. Sans sucked in a calming breath, his entire being feeling the chill of dread of “what if?’.

“....grillbz?” he called out again, a little louder.

Eventually Sans found a flight of stone stairs leading up and he drew in shuddering breath to calm himself. At the top he could see light, however dim it was. His bony fingers trailed up the iron bannister, lightly grating as he crept over the worn steps.

At the top of the stairs, it opened into a wide corridor with the walls covered in shelves holding books and odd peripherals he didn’t care to look at just then. Light from the room beyond was
spilling into the hall and Sans suddenly felt his soul shudder apprehensively. What if Grillby was more seriously injured than he’d let on..? 

He pushed the intrusive thought away and started towards the end of the hall, his teeth grinding in his panic. The door was ajar only a little bit and carefully, he knocked twice, hoping for an answer.

There was none.

The skeleton drew in another breath, trying to calm his anxiety before he gently pushed the door further inwards. It creaked softly in the silence of the room. He was shocked not to hear any crackle of flame, but there was still light coming from the other’s bed.

“...grillby?” Sans’ voice was hushed now, unsure.

The other’s form lay on the bed, flames so low he could make out every detail of the other’s body. He wore a plain, loose button down grey shirt that was open and black shorts, sprawled on his bed with very little blankets. His entire form was glowing, but there was only a wisp or two of fire that Sans could see. His left arm was bare and was blemished up to the elbow, embers quietly floating off his hand.

God, Sans hoped he was only sleeping.

The skeleton suddenly felt extremely doubtful of what he could do to help, but walked closer still, taking care to be quiet in case he would startle the other. He heard a soft jingling tone from the desk to his right, where he could see Grillby’s phone light up with a reminder. When he peeked, it was his own message, labelled ‘Funny Bone’.

Sans exhaled through his nasal cavity, unable to help the soft laugh at the bad nickname. He heard the other shift on the bed with a soft raspy noise and the room got a touch brighter. When Sans turned back to check, Grillby had hung his right forearm over his eyes with a deep sigh, then seemed to settle again.

Sans drew nearer, his fingers fidgeting in his hoodie’s pockets, eye lights searching for any betrayal of pain. The embers floating off the other’s left hand and arm extinguished after drifting a ways and the limb was hanging off the side of the bed. Grillby didn’t appear to be in pain, but the boards beneath were scorched as fire trickled down like liquid and dripped to the floor.

As he was able to get closer without disturbing the other, Sans knelt beside the bed, taking in the sight with growing concern. Even when he recalled Grillby sleeping at the resort on their way through to New Home, he hadn’t ever seen the other’s flames so low.

The other’s torso was exposed and Sans couldn’t help the pang of guilt he felt with what looked like burns similar to Grillby’s injured arm, faded but still there, from when he supposed he was carried through the rest of Waterfall. They had to be deep pools in order to reach the heights on Grillby’s body and Sans felt a twist of anger at himself for being so weak.

He would make it up to him this time, at least. There was little sense Grillby suffering if he could kind of manage his reserves to heal him more. He drew in a soft breath, the gentle warmth from the other catching over his teeth as he cautiously reached to cradle his left hand in both of his own.

Grillby’s fingers twitched slightly and Sans stayed completely still, watching the other’s form as he drew in his reserves and set about healing. The cyan from his own digits mingled with the dark orange of the other’s form and presented it an icy green before it brightened a little more.

Grillby shifted, another sleepy sigh escaping him. “...Sans?”
The skeleton offered him a grin - until he realised the fire monster likely couldn’t see it without his
glasses. Since the other was waking up, it didn’t seem as important to be quiet or as careful, so
pulsed more magic to heal with a soft chuckle.

“how’d you figure?”

Grillby turned his head slightly, rubbing over his visage with his free hand and shifting on the bed.
His fire and heat kicked up a little, like a small campfire starting up. Sans watched in curiosity as
flames kindled anew, obscuring the mystery of the other’s body and the vague little fissures, barbs
and crags that covered it.

“...Heat sink. And who else would have the audacity to break into my restaurant..?"

The skeleton adjusted his grip on the bartender, moving his left hand to place over the water burn on
Grillby’s forearm to heal it next. The odd weeping flames had disappeared over time, but there were
still small hairline cracks that glowed brightly against orange and red.

“heard you were ordered to keep your hands to yourself. aren’t you supposed to tell your neighbours
about that kinda thing?”

The fire monster had uncovered his face to turn and look at the window by the bed, then turned to
face where he heard Sans’ voice. “What time is it..?” His voice crackled thickly with sleep; Sans
told him and he seemed to groan in protest. “...Too early...”

“i think i’m rubbin’ off on ya, grillbz,” the skeleton couldn’t help but chuckle. The other must have
been thinking of something else, since another fiery flare-up caught his attention. It looked like
Grillby was attempting not to smirk. “what’s the joke?”

The other merely shook his head dismissively and pushed himself up a little to grab his glasses from
the nearby nightstand. He fiddled with them for a moment before he put them on and drew in a deep
breath, eyeing Sans wearily.

“Don’t feel obligated,” he said after a few moments, watching the coil of magic wafting from the
other’s bony fingers. It mingled with his fire and sunk into his arm with a subtle ache, interfering
with his natural temperature. His own fingers twitched again at the gentlest of touches, healing the
searing injury to a dull throb. Grillby couldn’t contain a grimace as the tingling and heat-void became
too much and he gingerly pulled his hand away.

“i want to.”

Yet with that, Sans stopped and rested back on his legs with a soft huff. Papyrus had been right;
healing took a lot of stamina, but he was sure he could do more. With Grillby watching him, he felt
like maybe he shouldn’t push it though.

The bright crack of the other’s smile widened slightly and he gestured for Sans to come closer. Once
he approached the side of the bed, Grillby put his arm over Sans’ shoulder and pulled him even
nearer, his hand settling at the back of Sans’ neck.

“...Look exhausted.”

Sans leaned forward a little more, urged by the gentle caressing below the back of his skull. “i could
nap,” he murmured with a soft sigh. He would’ve shrugged but Grillby’s hand slipped below his
hoodie and shirt, lightly rubbing at his spine. He melted into the tender touch, folding both of his
arms over the side of the mattress and laying his skull down on top of it, his sockets half-closed
through the attention.
Grillby leaned forward and kissed his brow, the warmth meeting from the back of his skull to the front, completely flooding him in pillow-y-soft comfort. Sans hummed contentedly as Grillby’s hand stilled, then slid back up to his shoulder.

“There’s room for one more.” The invitation was bold, so much that Grillby thought with Sans’ pause that it had been too brazen. He relished the thought of being close, especially so if the skeleton was so willing.

Sans laughed, feeling his soul flutter nervously. He didn’t mind the offer, even bravely moved to pull off his shoes at the invitation. Soon his hoodie was left on the floor and Grillby had his arms wrapped around him, as close and as comfortable as Sans had felt in his entire existence. The fire monster sighed contentedly as he shifted closer, his flames moving languidly in a restrained effort to not fully explore now that their point of interest was so close.

It was safe, it was warm, and Sans felt more cherished than he could ever remember being. His left arm was curled between them while his other hooked under and around Grillby’s right arm, pulling him close. He inched his face towards the other’s, taking a moment to just look into the other’s eyes and he couldn’t help a bashful laugh, rubbing his hand along the back of the fire monster’s shoulder. Grillby couldn’t help the drowsy smile, curling against the other’s touch.

“i’ll keep goin’ after the nap,” Sans decided as the other rested his chin against the top of his skull. He felt Grillby’s hand rub against his bones through his clothes and sighed contentedly, his fingers idly grabbing the other’s shirt. He then jerked suddenly with a startled yelp when the other’s hand found his lower spine and gently flicked it.

“When you learn to stop being so jumpy...” Grillby chuckled, giving the column of bone a soft pat. Sans resettled, but was unable to still the trembling to his satisfaction, as Grillby left his hand there and in direct contact with bone. There was a lighter pique to his flames then, as the skeleton’s reaction had been more intense than he anticipated. “...Perhaps.”

Sans was paying only half attention to the words, focused on the gradual heat that flooded his spine in both directions. He moved slightly, tilting his head up as he moved his free hand to clear the other’s throat of fabric and replace it with his mouth. He felt Grillby shift in turn, then heard a low chuckle when he conjured his tongue and pushed the appendage against the heat.

“What are you up to?”

Sans huffed against his neck, the soft sizzling sound oddly ridiculous in the quiet room, but he was determined. “gotta mark you back,” he replied simply after pushing himself upwards, inspecting the spot. There wasn’t anything there, and somehow he thought it unfair as the flames flickered at him tauntingly.

Grillby laughed in his throat at the prospect. “One can certainly try.”

“thanks,” the skeleton replied dryly, holding back a shudder in response to another wave of heat up his spine when he inched closer. He thought about it for a moment and reasoned that maybe a wet tongue wouldn’t work after all. Sans almost seemed to glare at the idea, then another thought came to mind. He hid his grin at the base of the other’s throat and tried something a little different, replacing the wetness for something else.

A startled jolt passed through the fire monster’s body along with a shudder and a surprised gasp. Sans’ soul flickered in response, raising himself to look at the other’s visage in case he’d done harm instead of... well, whatever he was aiming to do. Grillby took care to hide his surprise behind his fire, but the brightness of his eyes betrayed him. Sans offered him a wide grin then, watching as Grillby’s
torso heaved and his fire danced in paler colours, embers popping around them excitedly.

“that fire up anythin’?” the skeleton teased, unsure, then jolted again when Grillby gently tugged at his spine. He huffed softly when the warmth kicked up a little hotter.

“...What was that?”

Sans gave in to a vague shrug. “…cold?” It had been experimental, pulling his magic to mimic the other’s heat, then sent it into the complete opposite direction. He watched as the other’s breathing eventually calmed down. The reaction filled his body with something, and all Sans knew was that he wanted to try again.

Hesitantly he leaned down again to the other’s throat, Grillby stilling for a moment in quiet anticipation. There hadn’t been a mark left behind yet, and when his conjured tongue touched his fire, Grillby’s body arched slightly against him. Grillby’s right hand travelled up with a low noise in his throat, plucking every segment of bone until it hooked between Sans’ lowermost ribs. The skeleton stopped abruptly with a sharp inhale, his body shaking as the invasion felt like the rib would snap with the heated pressure.

“e-easy,” Sans murmured nervously, pushing his hand between them to create a slight distance. The skeleton carefully plied the other’s fingers from his rib cage and regrettably out from underneath his shirt. With the other’s concerned look, Sans ignored it, instead held onto the hand and inspected his handiwork at the base of Grillby’s throat. Meanwhile the other put that reaction to his touch away for future consideration.

“y’know… this isn’t fair,” he complained, tracing one digit against the area while flames licked at his fingers. It appeared that ‘cold’ didn’t do anything to mark Grillby’s body either, but it gave a rather pleasing reaction instead.

Grillby watched him, staying still, but closed his hand around Sans’ fingers and pulled him close. “That’s fine,” he shrugged slightly, still guiding him down. The skeleton recognised the way he was being careful and leaned down to their previous position, curling up beside Grillby again. “Far too early, anyway…” Hopefully, they would have plenty of time in the future for exploration.

Sans assumed it was because he had woken Grillby up and he still needed rest, so merely nodded, huddling close. The other’s arms encircled him again after returning his glasses to the nightstand. Sans inched as close as he could possibly get, listening to the flutter of flames peter lower as Grillby eventually fell back to sleep.

It wasn’t long before the skeleton joined him, tuning out the faint hum of his phone buried in his jacket on the floor.

Chapter End Notes

In canon, monsters are made of ‘mostly magic’, which I figure is like humans being made of ‘mostly water’. Because of this whole monster genesis thing going on with Sans, he was unable to differentiate between stamina (bodily magic, we'll say) and reserves (actual magic). Sans sucks at healing because his stamina is so low, and because it's been so long, he automatically draws from what he's been using this whole time. Hence the sickness.
Hunger also plays a kind of vital part in Postcards throughout; when Sans has a buffer, he can go longer without food. But... the only good way to heal up after exhausting yourself is sleep, not eating when you don't have to. :( Poor Sans!

I think Undyne was very helpful in this chapter, and Sans breaking in is just... who does that?

...hey look, they got a room. (*ω*)
Studying with your boyfriend really never stays as innocent as you intend it to be. Grillby gets a demonstration on how different the skeleton diagram differs from Sans.

It was a few hours before Sans reawoke. It felt unreal, curled up to his friend like this, bathed in a gentle glow of warmth and wrapped loosely in his arms. The skeleton didn’t move immediately, still in that blissful in between world of waking and blearily looking around as his consciousness gradually returned.

Grillby was still sleeping deeply, the subtle shift of low flames curling against his form. He was more or less solid, and without those bright eyes on him nor a worry in his mind, Sans was able to peek at every detail.

There were small glowing fissures along the surface of his body where the tiniest of crag-like formations trailed in subtle changes of colour. In a sense, they looked like the brilliant geodes embedded in secluded areas of Waterfall close to Hotland’s quarries. They shifted and seemed to disappear with every breath Grillby took and the quiet flames circled around his body and under his clothes.

Sans absently wondered how the place never caught fire and burned to the ground, but it had to be a fire monster thing. As if beckoned by the thought, a few flames stuttered around Grillby’s shoulder and down to his bony hand, moving across it. He watched it all rather calmly, the gentle heat soothing while giving him very little excuse to move on his own.

Still, he shifted slightly, moving just enough to gently glide his hand from the other’s shoulder to the small space between their chests. Grillby leaned closer in his sleep with a quiet sigh, but didn’t wake. Sans couldn’t help the twitch of a smile that crossed his face with the impish thought that came to mind.

Lightly, he pressed his palm against the other’s chest, watching the flames run around his hand as he gathered more of his magic there. He heard a startled gasp from Grillby and a puff of warm air graze his temple as he gave Grillby a mild but chilly pulse of harmless magic. The other jumped back and out of sleep, blinking around in confusion as fire harried his visage. At the same time, Sans flinched, but it wasn’t because of the resulting movement.

“mornin’,” the skeleton drawled sleepily, hiding a grimace the magic usage brought on. It took a moment for the fire monster to gather his bearings, then lean closer. “never took you for a late riser, g.”

The start of Grillby’s reply resembled the rasp of popping kindling before forming coherent words; “....arely have so many mandatory days off.” He was rubbing at his face with one hand and reaching to the nightstand for his glasses with a soft grunt.
Soon he was able to see the smaller monster curled beside him on the bed, but a frown touched his bright eyes. Sans appeared somehow more exhausted after the nap, he noted in concern.

“What’s that look for.”

Grillby made sure to conceal his expression carefully as not to raise further suspicion. Thanks to the small jolt of ‘cold’, his flames were kicking up and lively as the sensation had been confusing and foreign. “Eaten yet today?”

Sans didn’t answer, nor did he even shrug. Grillby pushed himself up to a sitting position, giving the skeleton’s shoulder a soft pat as he found little reason to withhold the ways he showed his affection anymore. The sigh the fire monster exhaled was hot and harsh as he carefully manoeuvred around Sans, then snaked his arm under his own to pull him to a sitting position.

“Aww, grillbz... can’t i stay in bed?” He was joking, but Sans honestly felt like he could sleep for at least a couple hours more. He looked inwardly and couldn’t hide the grimace this time. He was down to two points - wait, no, it rolled over to his last singularity, all buffer gone despite all the rest he had. The skeleton sighed in resignation; he didn’t have all that much food lately, he realised.

“Guess i should eat, then.”

It took him a couple moments to get up; feeling just as weak as he was, Sans made a show of stretching as not to worry Grillby. The fire monster was looking through his phone by his desk, flames obscuring his reactions but he gave in to a pensive hum once or twice with the messages. Sans watched him for a moment as the last couple of clicks popped from his joints and the other tapped out a quick reply to whomever was on the other end. When he appeared finished, Sans pushed himself up and followed Grillby into the next room.

It was a little odd to see Grillby’s apartment. Unlike down in the restaurant, it seemed more like a place to house his belongings and to rest. The shelves he didn’t care to look at on the way up were littered with a thin layer of ash and old books, small metal instruments and even a small globe that rotated on an axis when he gave it a test spin. For a monster composed of fire, Grillby certainly kept a lot of things that burned in his suite.

The next room was a kitchen smaller than the one downstairs, but it was just as messy. Sans had something of impressionistic whiplash as he leaned against the counter with several days’ worth of dishes, which Grillby didn’t even bother to excuse. The skeleton witnessed a flare of fire magic when the other held up a few dishes, both hands engulfed in flames and incinerating any leftovers until the plates were clean before dusting off the ashes. Sans made an impressed whistling noise and the other only shook his head.

“...Don’t normally entertain.” It was a rather poor excuse for being messy, Grillby thought, but there was only so much one could do about where ash fell as a fire monster. Wiping down the areas upstairs seemed pointless after hours of keeping his restaurant adequately clean.

Sans only laughed. “Wow, if you saw my room...” His sock collection and dirty laundry would be enough to chase the fire monster away. He saw the smirk that passed over the other’s features at that, no matter how Grillby tried to hide it.

He was made to sit on a high back chair wrought with sturdy metal while Grillby fired up something to eat. Sans watched him, slouched in place and looking around, finding the most mundane items in the kitchen a little interesting.

“Hey-” he started after a moment of watching the fire monster pull bins and a frying pan from overhead. The skeleton noted how the other seemed to be using his left hand just fine, even if it still
looked blighted and sore. He offered a tired grin when Grillby turned to him expectantly. “...how’s the, uh...” He gestured with his own arm.

“...Would have rekindled,” the fire monster replied simply, continuing to bring out ingredients. “It wasn’t required.” Certainly not if it exhausted the skeleton to his current state; he felt guilty, but managed to hide it. Perhaps a little too well.

For some reason it stung, but Sans shrugged it off as though it didn’t bother him and didn’t press it. Perhaps it was premature, as Grillby turned again once the counter was loaded up with what he wanted and leaned over the small island separating the two of them.

“...It is very much appreciated, however.” Grillby watched the subtle bloom of cyan peek out from the collar of the other’s dark shirt and gave him a reassuring smile. He liked the way the other literally glowed with appreciation. Hanging onto the thought, he then turned away to start cooking.

Sans watched as he did, his sockets half-closed through a hunger daze, silently hoping he wouldn’t make a fool of himself again. He managed to keep the cereal down, and bearing witness to how Grillby cooked was a treat in itself. He heated the frying pan with his magic, whipped eggs, milk, flour and sugar into a bowl before ladling it out into the sizzling pan.

The skeleton had folded his arms over the counter with his skull resting in them as he watched, enthralled, until the very last moments. It smelled heavenly as Grillby put the last finishing touches in front of him, two plates stacked with thick, fluffy, golden pancakes drenched with butter and syrup. There was a dusting of white sugar on top, just for good measure.

Sans was impressed and all too eager to dig in. Grillby waited until the skeleton bit into his first helping, who then visibly relaxed in apparent bliss.

“why the hell you don’t do breakfast, i’ll never know.”

The fire monster rolled his shoulder as he leaned against the counter, still standing. “No one comes in the morning.”

“i did,” Sans protested, sticking another bite of pancake into his mouth, “fftwice.”

Grillby was able to catch his smirk in time for Sans to only just see it, his brow bone raising comically.

“no seriously, grillbz, if you’re holdin’ out on some good jokes, you gotta share.”

The fire monster only grinned to himself, not giving the other satisfaction to the innermost workings of his mind just yet. He ate a little more of the brunch as Sans watched him warily - he could literally see the cogs of his mind moving.

“throw me a bone, here.”

“You recall,” Grillby relented, his grin showing a bit more, “When you suggested at the capital, that: I wouldn’t mind you in bed?” He delighted in the way the other snapped to attention, sockets blown wide with his magic’s hue saturating his bones in vibrant intensities. The grip on his fork stayed still, midair between his plate and his mouth, while Sans stared at Grillby. His posture tensed and he slid down, unable to meet his gaze.

Such a bashful skeleton.

“...Might have mentioned something along those words even earlier than that,” Grillby couldn’t
resist the tease, watching the skeleton shift his other hand over his shoulder - likely trying to find his hood, which was in a crumpled heap on the bedroom floor. Instead, Sans leaned against his hand, elbow on the counter, and portioned off another piece of pancake.

“Point being,” the fire monster continued, waiting for the other to finish his mouthful, “Such a predicted event did not disappoint.”

“o-ok.” It was the skeleton’s go-to word when he didn’t know what else to say, the other found.

Grillby realised it was likely an obtuse way of saying he enjoyed the added body next to him, even wanted it to happen again. Perhaps quoting the other’s embarrassing word slip-up had been inconsiderate, but the reaction was rewarding in its own way. It was also amusing, considering the skeleton’s earlier boldness in wanting to mark him. The skeleton was becoming contradictory in his inexperience. Grillby couldn’t help his grin with the thought throughout the rest of their meal.

Hunger satiated, Sans went back with Grillby to the bedroom, beelining to his hoodie to grab his phone. It had been buzzing while they made their way from the kitchen and he was apprehensive about the flurry of messages that awaited him.

Several missed calls and over fifty messages from Undyne, Alphys and a couple from Papyrus. Undyne was unhappy he’d given her the slip, but she figured out where Sans had went pretty quickly, then told him to take it easy as she had to go back to Waterfall. Alphys was simply trying to get a hold of him for Undyne’s sake, and Papyrus was checking up on him, as usual.

He decided to only text back his brother for the moment.

The fire monster seated himself on the bed after checking his own phone. Sans looked up and said nothing, then heard the other sigh, “The authorities mandate another sick day.”

Sans glowered, it directed at his phone more than to what the other said. Undyne had mentioned that in a text, coupled with how he’d failed miserably on his quiz and needed to study more. Sans hadn’t thought he did - sure, a few questions he answered rhetorically and some with jokes, but he didn’t think he failed. He idly wondered if he could get away with getting the reading material again and coming back...

“why don’t I keep you company today? maybe you could help me study...”

The offer surprised even himself, but Sans waited for the other’s reaction. He only nodded, something about his fire made him looked pleased.

Feeling better for the amazing food coupled with the rest for the majority of the morning, Sans pulled on his hoodie and shoes while the fire monster moved to tidy a few wayward dishes from his bedroom. He followed Grillby downstairs and made to go to the main entrance, when the other caught his arm.

“...Fire exit,” his friend suggested, looking to the direction of the back of the bar. Sans gave him a crooked grin, a joke forming in his mind as he allowed the other to tug him closer. “...not made of fire, I know.”

Sans blinked at Grillby; that had been exactly the joke, but he’d been beaten to the punch. Maybe he was getting used to his puns already? Sans decided to let the odd familiarity slide and chuckled lowly
when Grillby opened the door for him.

He passed a few neighbours on the way; a couple asked how the date had gone, another told him it was about time the two of them hooked up. Sans was flushed by the time he made it to the house, unable to think much apart from what went on during the date.

Distracted, he grabbed a few textbooks from his room and pushed them into his bag before strolling across the living room, tracking snow everywhere. Then he paused beside the sock, grinning as he moved it a little, his brother’s fresh note telling him to bring it back to his room. He found a marker and wrote “ok” on it before he left again.

He returned, using the fire exit again to gain entry to Grillby’s. He met with him upstairs again, the fire monster having only moved to put on a pair of dark plaid pyjama bottoms. He looked far more awake than previously and his light was an ambient glow around him as he leaned over his desk, reading a ledger.

If Sans didn’t know better, he could have sworn Grillby looked perplexed about something - or at least, if he was sure in deciphering the other’s expressions. Even if he was curious, it wasn’t his business. Yet the other seemed to realise Sans had returned and turned to face him, closing the ledger as he did so.

“All set?”

Sans shrugged as he went back to the bed, discarding his hoodie next to it in an unceremonious heap along with his shoes once more. Apart from the desk that only had one chair, Grillby didn’t really have any other space to sit. It was cosy and did the job, at least. He upended the bag on the mattress and sat next to the pile, glaring at it while Grillby sat across from him.

“Why the need for…” Grillby paused, taking Magical Bodies & The Housed Soul from the top of the pile. Sans saw the way his flames lowered significantly around the other’s hand, careful not to burn it. “...such interesting subjects?” It had been a point of curiosity ever since Sans had first brought the reading material to the restaurant.

The skeleton shrugged again, this time evasively. “uh… alphys wants me to look into a couple things,” he mumbled, taking another book and opening it towards the middle with a furrow in his brow.

If he had been paying attention, he would have recognised which book Grillby had picked up - but he didn’t. So while the fire monster curiously flipped through a few pages, Sans didn’t understand the question Grillby asked, already fixated on the heaps of text.

“...skeleton monster?” It was the tail-end of the question again, and Sans only stared at him in response. Grillby made a point to hide his smirk with fire as not to embarrass the other. He was actually very curious.

“what about-?” Sans let the rest of it hang, unsure. Then his sockets blanked when the other held up the loose page Alphys had included with the reading material. The fire monster was too quick for him to reach over and grab it from him - with Grillby holding it away from him while inspecting it, smirking a little. Sans felt the ebb of embarrassment build inside of him but held his own, waiting for the impending tease.

“I said,” the other repeated carefully, “is this... one of you?”

There was a way to save this, Sans supposed. As awkward as he felt, he gave a soft sigh as he
thought it through.

“nah.”

Grillby was still examining it but no longer held it out of reach. Sans thought he looked almost studious - if not for the obstructing flames, he would have seen Grillby’s gaze switch between the drawing and himself, as if comparing.

“It… looks the same.”

Sans tensed a little more, unsure why he felt defensive, perhaps even insulted. “it’s different,” he replied, quieter this time. Grillby was watching him now, page in hand, the hum of his blaze the only sound between them.

Sans had admittedly studied the page again by himself; mainly the hand on the reverse, but there were actual differences between his body and the one on the paper. Conversely, he had tried to find similarities, but they were just as elusive. The common factor just seemed that it shared the overall general shape and appeared to be comprised of bones.

He must have stayed silent for a bit longer than he thought, as Grillby had taken to looking at the page again, this time on the reverse.

“...Hand is different, perhaps?” It seemed like an innocent enough question.

Sans nodded carefully, unballing his left hand and holding it in the space between them. It was innocent, he kept telling himself. Apart from Papyrus, he supposed Grillby couldn’t have met any other skeletons. Additionally, he had to admit he was curious about the fire monster as well.

He bent his phalanges, each bone clicking faintly as his magic manipulated everything. The movement was so conscious that Sans felt a bit foolish for it, but Grillby was watching patiently and didn’t make fun of him for it. He wouldn’t, Sans knew. He would maybe tease, but that was all.

The other had reached over to put his own hand under Sans’ and he stopped moving his fingers, waiting for more questions. Then Grillby turned the page over, studying it carefully while he lightly moved his own hand up Sans’ radius. It seemed deliberately slow, like a caress. Sans wasn’t used to such a gesture, even with the bartender’s forward nature. Especially not on his arms, for that matter.

He couldn’t repress the subtle shudder that trickled down his spine as Grillby’s hand moved up to his elbow, giving it a light squeeze.

“...This is different,” the fire monster added after the brief silence. Without saying much but feeling his soul tremor behind his ribs at the flood of warmth there, Sans only nodded. As though it had never occurred to either party, simply because the thought was so bizarre, they continued to explore.

Grillby finally set the page down on the mattress and took Sans’ hand with his own and turned it over, watching as the bones shifted to accommodate the movement.

“...am i really that interestin’?” the skeleton couldn’t help but joke, still feeling a little awkward. It wasn’t quite the same, but the inspection made him think of his recovery time after the CORE accident, when Alphys and Papyrus would make sure there was no speck of dust to be found. But the other’s touch was more tender and didn’t remind him too much of the trauma.

“Very,” Grillby replied without hesitation.

Sans laughed shortly, then gestured to the paper with his other hand vaguely. “i mean… i guess i could show you,” he offered, feeling oddly braver for it, “collar’s different. ribs. spine.” The skeleton waited a moment before boldly hooking his fingers behind his neck and pulling his shirt over his
There really was nothing to it. It was innocent, he told himself. He didn’t feel necessarily bashful, but at the same time he was sure Grillby hadn’t been expecting him to half undress himself… that is, until he noticed the vague, orange hue tinging his fire. Sans’ grin became a little impish then.

“What?”

The other only shook his head, the attention giving rise to paler flames. Sans was grinning openly now, excited that he could fluster Grillby again - and to think it only took the sacrifice of his shirt. Sans’ shoulders were shaking with the chuckles he was trying to suppress.

“Okay then. See here?” He made sure Grillby was watching as he gestured to his left side, the elbow bending and the bones in his shoulder moving to glide into the new position. He then pointed to the stiff-looking creature depicted on the page, around the same area. “This thing can’t move like this.”

The fire monster seemed to consider it, even glanced up to compare Sans to the drawing again. He remained a shade or two paler than usual, but stayed calm and quiet as the skeleton continued.

“Spine’s different,” Sans continued, sliding his arm out of the other’s grasp and turning slightly to show him. Every vertebrae was hooked and spread and moved as he did, whereas the drawing looked immobile, with clearly not so many bones. His ribs were wider and fewer, his sternum narrower with a few more pieces. Every bone was paler than the old, yellowed drawn figure, even looked softer.

Sans turned back to a more comfortable sitting position, watching Grillby as he seemed to take in the sight. “Whaddabout you now?” he suddenly asked, his own curiosity getting to the better of him. “Feels like… I dunno. Up ‘til recently I thought you were an elemental, kinda.”

Grillby shifted to face the other. One leg was crossed underneath him and he was slouched, but he reached for Sans’ hand again. Automatically, the skeleton offered his left, but the other took his right instead. He watched the small flames roll around the bartender’s grasp, encircling his bones.

“Close,” Grillby agreed, his voice quiet, “…Can shift.” He turned his hand, the form enveloped by fire subtly roiling, fingers melding together before returning to Grillby’s preferred shape after his ‘wrist’ had turned completely around. Sans was so captivated that he didn’t realise he had leaned forward for a better view.

“Cool.” Sans saw the way the other reacted to his comment and splayed the fingers of his right hand against the other’s forearm, gently pushing as if to test it. It yielded a little, as Grillby’s body was semi-permeable and sank into the spaces between his bones. The flames sputtered around his digits as though they were hesitant to be close, but curious in their exploration. “Is.. this ok?”

The fire monster was watching all this very closely, the flames’ reaction could have been called something along the lines of a shiver. Whatever variation of magic the skeleton was made of set off subtle little notes of nothingness, an absence of heat he’d learned from being around Sans. With closer contact still, Grillby nodded his consent and saw Sans visibly relax.

He grew a little bolder, passing his hand up the same arm to Grillby’s shoulder, just over the fabric of his shirt. Sans shoved aside the pile of books with his other hand so he could kneel in front of the other, giving him something of a sheepish grin with the other’s questioning aura.

“Humour me, g.”

“Likewise.”
The tone made the skeleton flush, the bloom of his magic plain as day behind his exposed ribs. Curiously, the fire monster reached and gently brushed his sternum with his fingertips, rewarding him with a shift in the glow. Sans’ eye lights darted down with the touch and couldn’t help but lean forward, just a little. The warmth flooded his rib cage but the flames kept their respective distance to the source of the light. It felt like a soothing, fluttering ache, concentrated in his bones.

“warm,” he automatically murmured, recognising the quiet rasp from Grillby as a laugh when he moved his own hand to press over the fire monster’s torso. “really warm.”

“You’re not,” Grillby commented, his touches gentle as they curled against the other’s bones, careful not to handle him too roughly. Sans’ poor health was always at the back of his mind ever since Papyrus had informed him of it, but if he was alive for this long, it was certain that Sans was stronger than he appeared. He didn’t have to worry too much, he figured.

“must be weird for you,” there was a calming sigh to Sans’ voice that tugged at him, coupled with his touch that went back up to his shoulder.

“It is.” Grillby inhaled sharply with the flutter of cold against the ridges around his shoulder.

“wonder if all skeletons are like this,” was the question that passed Sans’ teeth, “or, uh, were.”

“...Do not appear to be sure.”

“still learnin’.” He sighed again, appreciation behind the breath as Grillby moved his hand upwards and lightly traced the pad of his thumb along his clavicle. “lotta ch-changes lately.”

“...Fangs,” the fire monster listed, interest in his voice. “A tongue.” The other’s soul flickered lightly, drawing Grillby’s gaze down again.

“...And a blushing skeleton.”

“no.. no makin’ fun, grillbz. i’m just as puzzled as you.” Sans’ tone sounded distracted however, with the fire monster’s flames slowly creeping up his right arm. The spread of fire sent a hot tingling up through to his shoulders and he shuddered briefly while the heat glowed against his arm. He couldn’t believe how Grillby could remain so calm when it was taking everything he could muster to not flat-line mentally at the exploration.

“Gave me a start,” Grillby admitted quietly, then exhaled audibly while Sans’ explorative hand found the side of his neck. His fire crackled in mild protest before resettling, while Sans’ look was suddenly unsure.

“...Thought maybe I’d broken your face by accident.”

It was a funny way to phrase it, but Sans forced a grin with a joke that came to mind. “you thawed me with that hot smooch,” he murmured, then felt a little more foolish for it when he saw the crack of the other’s smile curl into a knowing smirk. That expression, coupled with the increasing butterfly feeling in the centre of his rib cage made him feel all the more nervous. “c-could give it another shot.”

Grillby’s hand curled against the base of his skull, flooding him with more fire and eliciting such a tremble from him that Sans couldn’t suppress the clatter of bones. He hummed softly, leaning into the touch.

“...Thought you were supposed to be studying?” There was that playful teasing tone again.

“i am.” He was not. “i’m doin’ research on that.” With Grillby’s inquisitive look, Sans shifted a little closer, grazing his fingertips against the other’s back experimentally for any reaction. “gotta prove my, uh... hypothesis.”
Sans witnessed a subtle flutter pass through the fire monster’s form, shifting from orange and red, to a flare of amber and back again. Maybe Grillby took his hint, as the fire slipped from his right arm and the other’s arms encircled him. He gasped as heat flooded up and down his spine once more, giving in to a slight jerk when the fire monster’s hand found the lower vertebrae.

“...You jump,” the other observed. His tone made it sound as though he already knew his touch would do that, even before his tease earlier that day. Sans’ mind clouded with the thought of where Grillby’s hands were, giving in to a soft huff in acknowledgment.

“y… y’know, that’s not part of the problem statement,” the skeleton stammered to continue, ignoring the observation as he ghosted his hands down the length of Grillby’s arms, stopping at his wrists.

The movement brought on another hue shift from the fire monster and Sans couldn’t help but grin in thinly veiled triumph.

“What do I need to do in order to provide assistance?”

Sans exhaled again, feeling the bubble of nervousness creep through his bones along with excitement. “uh, gatherin’... empirical data.” With the other’s look, Sans felt hot - and not just because he was in the warm embrace of a fire monster, either.

Grillby seemed to either understand or feel the need to be closer. Soon their faces were only a hair’s breadth away, the only thing keeping them from continuing was Sans’ clattering. Grillby took it as a bout of nervousness, but found the rattling wasn’t precisely exclusive to that lately.

“You’re the scientist... you’ll have to be the one to experiment.” Another tease, Sans inwardly groaned, shifting so he could bring his arms up to encircle around the other’s shoulders.

“heh… jeez.”

“Sorry,” Grillby pulled away slightly, “Like to make you squirm.”

“stop quotin’ my embarrassin’ texts, grillbz.” To prevent himself from getting side-tracked, Sans settled down so they were at equal heights. His soul was pounding with nervousness, since it had been Grillby who introduced him to the concept of a kiss in the first place. He drew in a soft huff, the flames catching with the breath and he pressed their mouths together.

If he could compare the two, nothing was like the first kiss in the bar, but this one was so much more. It sparked in pillowing magic, less hesitant than the first, more exciting than the others that followed. His arms moved to bring them closer, delved under Grillby’s shirt and down the middle of his back. The fire monster inhaled against the kiss with surprise to the touch and Sans felt something there. The other’s form trembled as though the fire monster was resisting something, while being tender and gentle with the slow kiss.

Grillby kept his own hands unusually still, had even closed his eyes as Sans kissed him, the curl of his smile still apparent as he tried his damnest to behave. His hands twitched to return the touches, but instead curled his fingers at his ankle between them, leaning forward into the kiss. The skeleton’s magic was so absent of heat that when their bodies pressed together, it caught his flames off guard and sent them scattering around his body, excited and quick.

It had filled the two with cushiony sighs, with Sans pressed against the fire monster so closely their souls felt like they were thrumming in tandem. Both of their breaths were deep and sharing the air between them, their brows touching. Sans offered Grillby something of a charming smile, looking somewhat drunk.
“you didn’t touch back.” His tone was almost disappointed.

It took Grillby a moment to recompose himself, but opened his eyes, smirking playfully. “...Was not sure if I was permitted to interfere with very serious results.”

Sans inhaled softly, faltering against his plans. “i mean-

“Comparative testing?” Grillby murmured, moving to caress the other’s jaw with his mouth. “Such a fancy term for kissing.”

The skeleton leaned into it, his mouth hanging open slightly as Grillby’s trail of kisses moved down. The nip he was given sent a jolt through his spine like electricity and Sans couldn’t help the weighted gasp that escaped him.

“e-easy,” he murmured, the word both breathless and hazy. His phalanges slipped up the other’s back, gently raking through the flames that heated them. His mind was starting to blank out at the attention to his bones; he could barely form coherent thought let alone continue with whatever his original plan was.

“...Another one is mine,” the fire monster laughed against his neck.

Sans dimly saw a small wisp of steam from the corner of his vision and tilted his skull towards Grillby in a halfhearted attempt to get him to stop, “c’mon man, i already dunno how i’m gonna explain this to my bro…”

“He’s a clever boy... he’ll know what hijinx you’ve been indulging in.”

Sans could have sworn he felt the entirety of his body flush with the thought - and with the impending teasing he’d be subjected to as a result. He bit back a moan as Grillby went lower, his hot mouth closing over his clavicle with an accompanying hiss as the moisture in the bone steamed off.

Grillby leaned back to inspect the small singe, his smirk apparent and flames flickering between amber and orange as Sans recovered and moved his bony fingers to each side of the fire monster’s neck.

“one more,” the skeleton sighed, already leaning forward again with the need for another kiss. He caught the hitch of breath that came from Grillby’s mouth with the hesitant introduction of tongue and soon Sans’ mind was reeling with heat and passion. To his credit, the fire monster played along, allowing him to explore the hot recesses of his mouth with muffled moans of pleasure.

It did something to him, to his magic, pinging off in different directions all throughout his body. Sans couldn’t keep his fingers from sliding down from the other’s neck, aching for a little more touch that Grillby just wasn’t providing. When the kiss broke off he was panting softly, eyeing the other’s hands clamped dutifully around Grillby’s ankle.

“y... y’really.. didn’t wanna mess with my results, huh,” he couldn’t keep the bitter tone out of his voice and he grimaced awkwardly. He saw the fire monster grin wryly, then sneak a gentle caress against his knee, the circular movement slow and deliberate. “w.. what if i-” Sans decided against further explanation and pushed forward again, having gained a second wind.

Grillby was kissing back this time. Where Sans’ tongue was both hesitant and his movements excited far too quickly, the fire monster was firm and bold while still remaining gentle. Sans felt the ache build up in him, moaning softly against the kiss as he pressed forward again with Grillby’s hands finding the bends of his knees, guiding him.
Along with the spicy heat, Grillby was doing the small circular movements against his tongue again and Sans couldn’t suppress the needy whimper and the tingling shudder that accompanied it.

He dug his fingertips against the other’s form as Grillby’s palms moved up from his knees, circling to the back of his femurs with a light press that had him gasping with another successful conclusion to the ‘test’. Sans’ rib cage was heaving and he couldn’t help the soft noises he was making as he exhaled, looking dazed.

Grillby’s own breaths were just as urgent. He gave the skeleton an appreciative look, caressing his mouth with his own as he murmured; “…Test results say?”

“um. in.. inconclusive,” was all Sans could breathe out, still panting but grinning deviously all the same. He was mildly surprised when Grillby pulled his body towards him and in the same movement leaned back a little, stealing another softer kiss as trails of flames danced around his arms.

It really was a great way to gather data, Sans hazily thought through the next kiss. He didn’t jerk in shock nearly so badly as before when Grillby’s hand settled at his spine, far too gone to actually care about where anything went, as long as they could continue like this. He gave in to another moan and pushed forward again, shifting to adjust his legs to either side of Grillby’s waist.

He really wanted to continue - was desperate to, even. It should have clicked somewhere in his mind that Grillby’s fire didn’t make the noises he vaguely heard from the floor. It had been such a constant that he’d just tuned it out, hungry for more affection.

So the hair-splitting sound of glass breaking and shattering across the room effectively startled him, enough to inhale sharply and with it a few errant flames as he darted up like a shot. Sans pushed himself up, legs straddling Grillby’s hips as he stared at the mess on the floor of snow and shards of glass in mortified silence and with blanked sockets.

Then, of course, there was his brother’s voice; “WHOOPSY DOOPSY!! MISTER GRILLBY! I HEARD YOU WERE INJURED! ARE YOU ALRIGHT? IS SANS IS UP THERE?? OF COURSE HE IS. WHY AM I EVEN ASKING?? TELL HIM TO COME DOWN!!”

Sans shrank down; whatever the mood had been, it had been extinguished entirely and abruptly. Grillby’s fire had tinged paler with his own surprise, but sparks and embers were coming off of him as he tried not to laugh too loudly. Meanwhile, the skeleton wanted to hide, feeling like his soul was going to burst it was pounding so fast. If there were a few left in Snowdin that didn’t know they were together they were sure to know now with Papyrus’ explosive announcement.

Chapter End Notes

Happy Valentine's Day :'D I think this chapter is rather sweet... and of course Sans is starting to get a little more confident with touches and kisses. Grillby is equally curious about Sans too - a monster that doesn't burn near him? That's pretty interesting, if you think about it.

Initially I had other plans for Sans but then uh... he hijacked and does his own thing. Papyrus wasn't meant to be a cockblock (he was actually contacting Sans throughout his stay. And also Grillby!) He's a very caring brother.

Shame 'bout that window, though. I'm sure Grillby gets a deal on windows for the
frequency in which they're broken. XD

Next chapter: Papyrus gives Sans 'The Talk'. ■ _ ■
Knock Knock

Chapter Summary

Papyrus attempts to give "The Talk" to Sans. Someone finally answers from behind a door in Snowdin Forest.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

The never-ceasing banging on the front door echoed through the building as they redressed and gathered Sans’ things. Grillby led the way downstairs, Sans following closely and made sure not to trip over his shoelaces. His soul was pummelling in his ribcage when Grillby suddenly turned back to steal another kiss, knowing it would likely be their last until their next meeting. Sans tried his best to stifle the desperate moan and clutched at the other’s shirt.

Boy, if it wouldn’t spring more embarrassing arguments between him and his brother, Sans would really chastise Papyrus about his interruption.

“SANS!! I KNOW YOU’RE IN THERE!” The banging knocks continued without a hitch.

Sans tugged at Grillby’s shirt while standing on the last stair, a perfect height for another quick kiss. “take care of yourself,” he said under his breath, panting softly.

“Rest easy.” There was an amused tone to the other’s voice and Sans swore he felt heat flood up and down his back, even with the absence of the bartender’s touch.

“ok.” Who was he to argue with such an enticing direction?

“SANS, CONFOUND IT. OPEN. THIS. DOOR!!”

Sans managed to drag himself away from his new boyfriend, taking care that he didn’t trip as he made his way over to the front door. He had his hoodie slung under one arm with his bag of textbooks and rather casually opened the door.

The knocking stopped as soon as he peeked out the crack, clearing his nonexistent throat. “excuse me, sir. but we’re closed today,” he said very seriously.

“BROTHER!!” Papyrus glared at him through the crack of the door and his brother gave him an impish grin. “SO, IT’S ‘WE’ NOW, IS IT? YOU DON’T WORK HERE. YOU BARELY WORK ELSEWHERE!!”

Sans couldn’t help the flood of heat that spread over his face and he groaned awkwardly, pulling the door open to step outside. Meanwhile, Grillby had drawn in a little closer to see him off and leaned against the open door.

“MISTER GRILLBY, IF YOU TRULY ARE SERIOUS IN HIRING MY BROTHER, I’LL HAVE YOU KNOW YOU WILL PROBABLY NEED TO EMPLOY DISCIPLINE TO GET HIM MOTIVATED.”
Sans threw a mortified look over his shoulder to the fire monster, mouth agape helplessly while Grillby adjusted his glasses. He looked like he was trying very hard not to laugh.

Papyrus appeared to miss the exchange, as when Sans turned his skull and without wearing his hoodie, it made the marks on his body very apparent. The taller of the two skeletons gasped and suddenly grabbed at his brother’s shoulder, enough to make Sans flinch and turn back, wondering what was wrong.

“whoa, what’s up?” he asked quickly, not entirely sure what the theatrics were about - at least not yet. His eye lights were darting from his brother’s arm up to his face, where he was glaring at him studiously.

“WOWIE… ARE THOSE?? COULD IT BE??” Papyrus let go of his brother, positively beaming with what could only be described as glowing pride. “MISTER GRILLBY, I ONLY ASK YOU BE CAREFUL WITH MY BROTHER!”

Confused, the smaller of the two monsters stumbled out of the way to witness Grillby’s reaction, whom to his credit looked as though he was keeping his composure well enough not to embarrass either of them.

“………Will ensure handling him will be with velvet gloves,” he promised, his fire obscuring most of his words, but Sans could make it out. Papyrus looked a little perplexed but shook it off almost immediately.

“SANS, I DO BELIEVE WE NEED TO HAVE ONE OF OUR HEART-TO-HEARTS ONCE MORE!” he declared as Sans clapped a hand over the scorch marks on his neck in a delayed reaction. “FOR YOU SEE, WHEN MONSTERS LOVE EACH OTHER-”

“o-ok pap! - great seein’ ya, grillby - g-gotta jet-” Sans forcibly started moving his brother away from the entrance to Grillby’s with a series of pushes, his entire body shaking with embarrassment, “let’s go, bro - keep walkin’ - hup-two-”

Papyrus continued talking as he shoved him down the street, "I DON'T KNOW WHY YOU'RE SO EMBARRASSED? IT'S HIGH TIME WE TALKED ABOUT THIS, ESPECIALLY IF YOU'RE, AHEM... ‘CANOODLING’ WITH YOUR NEW BOYFRIEND?? NYEH HEH HEH!!"

“oh my god, papyrus.”

“IT JUST SO HAPPENS THAT I AM AN EXTREME MASTER OF THE DATING SCIENCES, WHEREAS YOU ARE A SCIENTIST OF SLIGHTLY LOWER CALIBER. BUT NEVER FEAR! YOUR ‘DATING MASTER’ BROTHER WILL GIVE YOU ALL THE TIPS AND TRICKS TO EMPLOY TO MAXIMISE YOUR FULL DATING POTENTIAL!”

“oh my god, shut up - not here-” Sans heaved as he shoved his brother more forcefully down the street.

Papyrus turned when he heard the very clear, horrified tone in his brother’s voice. He saw the blanked sockets and the very peculiar dusting of cyan magic suffusing Sans’ bones. He didn’t think anything was wrong with what he had said; it’s not like there were any children present. He’d said nothing wrong! Everything was natural and very frank and he didn’t even use baby words. He was being professional, as always! He should be commended for what an informative cool brother he was being!
Still, Sans shoved at him to continue walking, never once saying a word but making a very distressed hollow sound with the edge of his voice. Maybe he was still tired? His brother was always tired, Papyrus reasoned. He sighed heavily and did not put up any resistance, only took Sans’ arm when they got to their house.

Papyrus waited as Sans followed him inside, his sockets still blanked in abject mortification from his brother’s middle-of-the-town speech for all the Underground to hear.

“NOW,” Papyrus continued in the safety of their own home. Sans was quickly becoming increasingly aware of the walls closing in on him. “CONGRATULATIONS ARE IN ORDER!”

“Oh.. y-yeah?” Sans replied warily. He was on the defensive and felt backed into a corner.

“Yes, congratulations!! I always hoped this day would come - and it did! I ALWAYS HAVE BELIEVED IN YOU AND YOU PROVED ME RIGHT!” Sans gave him the most perplexed expression his bones could muster. “Skeleton puberty - the soaring song of our species, stems from millennia of careful aspect breeding and consideration!! Skeletons with skeletons, I mean! Of course with us being the only two left..? It stands to reason that we must copulate with other monsters to maintain our integral role in modern culture!”

Sans slid down the length of the door, arrested on the spot and dumbstruck. His coccyx hit the floor and he stared at his brother, mouth agape.

“My friend tells me this! Since you neglected to tell me in our youth - honestly, if you put more effort into your duties as the older sibling as you did sticking your face in grease fires, we wouldn’t have such need for lengthy discussions - allow me to… ahem… explain, ‘the talk’-“

“p-pap… you’re my bro… how could you do this to me?”

“-When two or three or more monsters love each other very, very much-”

“augh!” Sans clapped his hands over his aural canals to dim out his brother’s voice with very little success.

“And desire to further their intimacy with touch-“

He could literally feel his soul shuddering and leaving his rib cage.

“-Well, I wonder, can you even touch fire? Or does fire only touch you?”

Regardless, while copulation is most couples’ and triples’ goal alongside compassion and love in relationships, I do not want you to feel any pressure for coition from mister grillby!”

That was it.

He was dying.
“BUT… MUTUAL EXPLORATION IS HEALTHY IN NEW RELATIONSHIPS, SANS! SO HAVE AT IT!! BUT AS FAR AS PROCREATION GOES? MAYBE… WAIT ON THAT? A LITTLE? AS MUCH AS I WOULD MAKE A GREAT UNCLE, I DO BELIEVE CHILDREN IS FAR TOO EARLY FOR THIS SWEET NEW STAGE OF YOUR RELATIONSHIP!”

Have at it?? If he was dying, why wasn’t his brother stopping his damned speech? Why was he instead, giving him his blessing??

“...oh...... o-ok, pap...”

Papyrus was still standing in front of him and Sans had dropped his bag and pulled his hoodie over him like a protective blanket. His younger brother sighed, knowing all too well Sans didn’t bother with the whole intimacy aspect of monsters due to his condition and dysphoria of his body.

He pulled the hoodie off from over the other’s skull with only a little bit of difficulty, giving Sans his biggest winning smile when those embarrassed cyan bones came into view again. “I THINK IT’S PRETTY NEAT, DON’T YOU?”

“....” Sans literally had no words to that. His body vaulted to one side a little with Papyrus’ enthusiastic slap on his shoulder, but other than that, he didn’t move. It was as though every word chiseled in the inside of his skull.


Those words were enough to thoroughly flat-line whatever thought processes he might’ve had about Papyrus’ lecture just then.

“I’M JUST… SO INCREDIBLY PROUD OF YOU, BROTHER!” Papyrus continued, grinning cheerfully, “MY NORMALLY DISINTERESTED BROTHER IS FINALLY BECOMING… INTERESTED IN SOMEONE, NOW.”

Sans visibly relaxed, but attempted to pull the hoodie back over his skull. He still wanted to hide.

“IF YOU EVER NEED A ‘BREAKDOWN’ OF HOW ECTOBIOLOGY WORKS—”

“p-please, for the love of asgore’s curly beard, papyrus, i’m goin’ to die if you keep this up!” came the strangled plea from under the jacket.

Papyrus sighed all too knowingly and patted his brother’s skull. “YOU MUST BE EXHAUSTED FROM…” He paused, eyeing the bag of textbooks sitting next to Sans. “…RESEARCH?”

The older brother gave in to an uncomfortable laugh. “y-yup.”

“IN ANY CASE,” Papyrus sighed and snatched Sans’ jacket away from him, rewarded with a startled flinch, “I WORRIED AFTER YOU. YOU NEVER ANSWER YOUR PHONE ANYMORE! WHAT IF YOU PASSED OUT AGAIN AND I HAD TO FIND YOU??”

Sans sighed as his brother pulled him to his feet, getting payback for pushing him down the street by poking him in the spine towards the kitchen.

“sorry.”

“I DON’T EVEN KNOW WHY YOU HAVE THAT THING! HONESTLY…” Sans sank into his usual chair and leaned onto the table, watching as Papyrus dug around in the fridge. “AT LEAST GRILLBY ANSWERS HIS TEXTS… I DON’T UNDERSTAND HIS ACCENT TOO WELL,
Sans stopped himself from flinching but sunk down to lay over the table with a frown. It wasn’t lost on him now what Papyrus was saying, as he recalled Grillby checking his phone periodically during his visit.

“AND UNDYNE—” Papyrus sighed loudly, “—WELL. YOU KNOW HER… BUT SHE TOLD ME SHE TRAINED YOU THIS MORNING AND THAT YOU’VE MADE PROGRESS!”

“mhm.”

“THAT’S GREAT NEWS! I’M SO PROUD!”

“thanks.”

His brother stopped and looked at him, a container of spaghetti held in his hands. Sans looked at it with a bit of apprehension and waited for him to continue.

“SHE… ALSO TOLD ME YOU WEREN’T FEELING WELL.” He idly drummed his fingertips on the top of the container, his gaze shifting to the side in concern.

“i’m ok now,” Sans assured him. “honest. and i, uh… already ate at grillby’s, so…”

“OH!” Papyrus looked down at the container in his hands, considering it, then reopened the fridge to put it away. Sans could have sighed with relief, but didn’t. “IF YOU FEEL WELL ENOUGH TO WORK, UNDYNE SAID SHE WOULD LIKE FOR YOU TO PATROL THE RUINS TOMORROW.”

“sounds good.”

The rest of the day was spent lazily; the two of them crashed on the couch and watched television until late, with Papyrus taking advantage of the commercial breaks to do housework. Sans was chastised again by the errant sock, but once it got quiet enough he was soon fast asleep.

“He’s alright,” Papyrus whispered into his phone later on in the evening. Undyne had called to check up on him and the taller skeleton moved upstairs and watched Sans sleep from the railing. “He’s just tired.”

“Funny how YOU’RE the one to say that instead of him this time, eh?” Undyne sounded concerned, “I wouldn’t have let him have all these patrols if I knew how bad it was.”

“It’s not bad! I just feel like he’s overexerting himself more than usual lately. He still doesn’t tell me anything, even when he has bad dreams, but… anyway. Do we need to worry about that earthquake? No one was injured, were they?”

“Everyone’s fine, Pap. Just a bit shaken up.”

Papyrus chuckled quietly at that. Coming from Undyne, puns didn’t seem so bad.

“At any rate,” she continued, “we’re going to up patrol in the area. Something’s off and no one else seemed to notice what caused it. Your brother mentioned Grillby saw roots and there is quite a bit of foreign vegetation found in the area, but nothing else left behind. No reports of teens making a ruckus either. I’ll report it to the King, but in the meantime I need you two to really hunker down and
keep your eyes peeled for any funny business around Snowdin.”

“I’m sure Sans would have a few things to say about that. Especially since we don’t have eyeballs!”

“Man, don’t EVEN with the jokes! Just keep me posted - oh, speaking of… Old Gerson has mail for Snowdin. You’re out that way tomorrow, so on your way home you can pick it up.”

Sans had slept all night on the couch and hated himself for it. It was unusual, since Papyrus would normally carry him upstairs and he’d wake up in bed in his room, but not this time. His spine ached as he’d slept at an odd angle and going upstairs to change made every one of his bones click.

Papyrus had left a note on the television, then the railing leading upstairs, and finally on both the doors to his room and the washroom.

DEAR BROTHER;
UNDYNE SAYS YOU ARE TO PATROL THE RUINS. I’VE CHECKED THE PUZZLES BUT YOURS WILL NEED RECALIBRATING AGAIN. I’LL BE AT WATERFALL TODAY. KEEP YOUR PHONE ON YOU. I’LL SEE YOU LATER TODAY!
- WITH LOVE,
THE GREAT PAPYRUS

He snorted softly, as his brother had taken pains to write exactly the same thing on all of the notes. It was way earlier than when he usually got up, but went about getting ready for his patrol anyway. He changed clothes into a less singed wardrobe of a green shirt and black cargo shorts, and made his way downstairs to grab his hoodie on the way out.

Once he’d gotten past the sliding tile puzzle, Sans yawned, looking around the area. The path was beaten up with small tracks and some snow had been knocked off the trees along the path. None of them looked like footprints or any kind of trails a local monster would make, so he continued towards his post and beyond.

He stared at the door to the Ruins, that telltale little familiarity tugging at his subconscious to knock again. His slippered feet crunched in the snow and if he didn’t know better, he thought he heard… crying?

Sans frowned and trudged up to the door. It sounded like it was coming from the other side. It was odd, considering almost every monster had left the Ruins and settled along the way from New Home.

The sound was heart-wrenching and mournful. A woman’s voice. Cautiously, Sans approached the door, giving it two knocks. The sobbing stopped abruptly; normally he wouldn’t care but he wasn’t heartless. Besides, if this monster was stuck behind the gate, he wanted to make sure she was ok.

“W-who is there?” was the muffled, stricken voice from beyond the door.

Her tone plucked at his emotions and he sat by the door in the snow. “banana.”

It took several moments for a reply. “...Banana who?” Then a sniff.

Sans smirked to himself and knocked on the door again, not completing the joke as he tapped out a message to Undyne about the strange tracks in the snow.

“Who is there?” Came the voice again, a little calmed down.
“banana.”

“I do not believe I understand…”

“aw c’mon, doll,” Sans insisted gently, “banana.”

“Very well. Banana who?”

Knock-knock. Then there came a sigh, loud enough to hear through the thick door.

“Who is there…”

“orange.”

“Oh,” the other voice said in surprise, “Orange who?”

“orange ya glad i didn’t say banana?”

The joke seemed to distract the person on the other side of the door if the hesitant laughter was anything to go by. The skeleton shuffled a little closer to it and spoke into the gapless seam where the two doors joined.

“you seem pretty broken up. are you stuck over there?”

There was no immediate response, but he heard her start to sob again. He frowned a little more, unsure how to offer his sympathies.

“No, I am not trapped,” she replied, her tone sullen. “I… I simply fear that… I may lose a child.” Sans felt his soul twinge in pity and rested his back against the door, not really knowing what to say. “They fell not too long ago and will not awaken. I believe that… they do not have much time left.”

A heavy subject, one Sans was uncomfortable with. He didn’t realise that there was a family just beyond the door, nor did he know how to console this poor grieving mother.

“if we can get this door open, we can find a healer?” he suggested, shuffling his slippers in the snow in front of him and making a small trench.

“I am afraid even my own expertise has its limits… Any other monster would be of little help, kind one.” He stayed quiet but sighed softly, bowing his skull in sympathy. It didn’t happen often, but when a child Fell and died in the Underground, it was mourned by everyone. “I must return to them. Perhaps later, if you are here, you can tell me more jokes..?”

“sure.” Sans answered soberly, but tried to sound a little upbeat just for her. He turned his skull to look at the doors again. “snow problem, lady.”

“I thank you, friend.” He heard her sniffle and there was a shuffle of steps. The sounds continued until he didn’t hear them anymore.

Chapter End Notes

Early chapter because um... no particular reason and I have a lot of chapters done. Also
threw out my back on some ice because my city is terrible with clearing roads.

\( (∤’ ▼ <)\)

Well, Papyrus tried... It's not as in depth as he would have been, but it's only because Sans was embarrassed. ’D We'll get Round 2 in the future!
An Insult

Chapter Summary

A few more memories unlock. Sometimes, Sans finds the key doesn't have to be big to make a difference. Papyrus is a good brother.

Chapter Notes

content warnings for: panic attack, reference to past medical abuse

He shifted at his station. It had been almost a week after Sans had heard from the other side of the door. Occasionally, he would knock at the door to the Ruins during his patrols and hope the woman on the other side would respond, but there was nothing. He hoped no tragedy had reared its ugly head and that her kid would be ok…

Eventually the need for a break arose. Instead of walking back, Sans teleported to just outside of Snowdin, humming as he walked, a little unsteady but still ok. Thanks to Undyne’s training lesson, it was much easier to move around. Almost negligible, in fact. Thanks, Undyne.

He beelined to Grillby’s, finding it open, loud with excited dogs and peppered with smells from their meals. He saw the fire monster look to him when he stepped through the door and gave him a knowing smile as the patrons called out to him.

“Hi, Sans~”

“Heya, Sansy boy!”

“(It's Sans!)”

“Sans is here!”

The usual greeting for some reason made him feel a little better, keeping at bay his morose mood thanks to the unknown situation in the Ruins. Since it had been awhile, he conjured up a few bones and settled them on the table for the canine squad. Their yips and happy panting were thanks enough and their tails wagged excitedly as he gave each dog a pat.

“Nothing to report!”

“(No signs of humans today.)”

“hope not, or i’d be at risk of feelin’ embarrassed,” Sans commented - his sentry station being among the first out of the Ruins, where humans were rumoured to come from. The King had collected six human souls and the last human had passed through even before he and Papyrus had even known the existence of the weird beings from above.

He sidled up to the bar and took his regular place, shooting Grillby a grin. His hand looked as though
it was well enough to be working, but the usual gloves hid the marr from view. Sans leaned forward, tilting his stool as always when Grillby came to greet him.

“how’s lefty?” he inquired.

Grillby took a moment to gesture, the movement smooth but slow. Then he spoke, “...Much better.” He paused and watched Sans for a moment, making the skeleton flush slightly at the memory of all the heated kisses they shared upstairs. “....Looking better, yourself.”

“heh. i’m ok i guess,” Sans admitted truthfully, averting his gaze down to the counter. “back to work… but i’m on break now. got a hankerin’ for fries.”

Grillby didn’t say anything more, but gave the other a knowing grin. Sans swivelled on his seat to watch as the fire monster retreated towards the kitchen, catching Red Bird watching him closely.

“Did you hear `bout Waterfall?” the bird squawked, several feathers bristling as he lounged against the counter. “Weird going-ons happenin’ there! First the dump, now this…”

“the what-now?” Sans tore his eyes away from the kitchen door where Grillby had disappeared into, catching the tail end of the sentence. The wording got his attention.

Red shuffled his wings in an approximation of a shrug. “The dump’s been blocked off for awhile - either garbage or an earth slide, the Guard isn’t sayin’ much. Do you know what’s happenin’? You work there sometimes, right?”

“nah, not lately. pap usually gets those shifts now, but he’s in hotland today. i know `bout the blockade though.”

“There’re rumours `bout something crawling along the topside of the Underground!” the bird crowed, ‘Makin’ big waves! Earthquakes! In Hotland the steam vents are goin’ crazy! The capital is floodin’ out, all these city folk lookin’ for a better place to live!”

“What, they lookin’ to come here?” Sans didn’t know about either the vents nor the floods and his mood grew dark. He didn’t want to speculate and be wrong, so indulged Red’s gossip. He’d have to chat with Undyne about it later.

“Man, P. Bear is just beside hisself. Can’t talk one thing or another. He’s lookin’ forward to `em catchin’ off guard ‘bout the weather though!” a tweet of a whistle clipped the end of Red’s words, announcing his excitement.

“yeah, guess he’s always like that…” Sans mused quietly, but his mind was going over what he’d been told. If things were amiss in the Underground, he wondered why he hadn’t been briefed about it? He pulled out his phone and scrolled through Undyne and Alphys’ texts from earlier that week, but there had been nothing.

Nothing, really, except for interest in his love life.

He flushed at the thought of his friends being so interested in the outcome of events that they were willing to keep him out of the loop with something like this. He sighed and put his phone away, realising Grillby had come back with a large basket of fries that steamed and sizzled with hot oil.

As Sans appreciated the sight, Grillby took it upon himself to take a bottle of ketchup and preemptively squirt a portion onto the fries. It was high time the skeleton knew about the taste - he’d been dodging it ever since he came in with the broken camera, after all. Sans stared at the basket then up at Grillby, who gave him a kind smile. The fire monster then left him when he realised he was
beckoned to another table.

Sans stared at it for what seemed like too long. Then he looked back to the bartender, whose back was turned to him. Now or never, he supposed, bringing a fry to his mouth with a great glob of ketchup on the end. Hesitantly, he put it in his mouth, hoping it wasn’t too bad.

It was actually fine. Sans didn’t realise how much he’d tensed up with the mere thought that ketchup would be disgusting until he relaxed with a soft sigh, then ate another. He watched as the fire monster made his rounds around the floor to various tables, before he allowed his thoughts to wander as he ate.

He didn’t even realise he had zoned out so much until he heard commentary.

“-and there he goes, off into space. His head is scrapin’ the mountain top, higher than the steams of Hotland! Maybe he’s thinking mushy thoughts, enough to make the snails in Waterfall blush? Half his fries gone, and the rest are frozen-”

He flushed and sent Red a pointed look, tearing his gaze away from the bartender for one moment. Sans idly wondered how long it had been, but it wasn’t long before he heard the door burst open along with his brother’s voice.

“SANS!! JUST WHAT ARE YOU DOING??”

The taller skeleton strut right through the restaurant, swiping snow from his shoulders as he did and approached him. Sans swivelled in his seat and gave his brother a full grin with a shrug.

“havin’ lunch.”

“IT’S ONLY 11!”

“brunch, then.”

“I SWEAR, IF NOT FOR YOUR COOL AND EVER-PATIENT BROTHER, YOU WOULD NEVER BE WHERE YOU’RE SUPPOSED TO!” Papyrus groused and folded his arms over his chest. Today he had opted for his battle body again, much to Sans’ relief. Seeing him without it for so long just felt… odd.

“aw, y’know i can’t stay away from all this steamy gossip,” Sans drawled, picking at another fry and popping it into his mouth. The ketchup taste had actually grown on him, but he didn’t think he’d want to drink it straight from the bottle again. He appreciated everyone’s hilarious reactions all the more now.

“THAT DOESN’T EVEN MAKE ANY SENSE!!”

“He’s been making dodo eyes at Grills for the past two hours,” Red reported with a crowing laugh while Sans shrunk into his hoodie. Damn it, Red.

“IS THAT SO.” Papyrus’ tone levelled out, but Sans immediately picked up on the suspicion. He just waved a hand at him.

“come for the food, stay for the hot bartender,” he joked quietly, “nothin’ new `bout that.”

At the opposite side of the bar, Grillby heard and couldn’t repress the flush at the compliment, sending a look over his shoulder to the pair of skeletons. His colouring suddenly changing drew the two’s attention to him and Grillby immediately turned, however useless it was to hide the reaction.
“HOW INCREDIibly Adorable! however, my dear brother, it appears i must play heartbreaker and be a total Coccyx-block and separate you two love birds!” papyrus then grabbed a hold of sans’ hoodie and pulled him off the stool with barely any effort. “Why is it Always me that is forced to get you to be motivated?”

“i dunno, maybe `cause you love me.”

“THat was meant only as a rhetorical question and you know it!” the younger brother bellowed on the way out.

“doesn’t change the truth, bro.”

papyrus sighed harshly but his tone softened, “no, i suppose it does not.”

“Hey, grillby!” the smaller skeleton called out as papyrus made his way to the door, “put it on my tab!”

Grillby had started at that; he could count on one hand how many times sans had called him by his actual name. It was subtle, but another flush of gold passed through his flames at the implication. Their friendship really had truly changed.

The entire bar laughed at the rather normal display, glad that sans appeared to be more or less back to normal. It had been a different few months with sans so broody, after all.

Sans hung under papyrus’ arm as he was carried like luggage back out of Snowdin, watching his brother’s footprints behind them with a yawn. It was the same as any old time, but that is perhaps why it stood out to him.

“i don’t think i was there for two hours,” he cajoled as papyrus skidded easily across a puzzle with him in tow.

“no, it was more like three, but your ultimately cool and also extremely helpful brother is willing to overlook it. just this once.” he set sans down and the other stuck his hands in his pockets, eyeing him warily.

“…who are you?”

“sans, please.”

“no seriously… what’s up? i know you’ve been studyin’ me somethin’ careful lately, so… what’s with keepin’ tabs on me so much?” sans shrugged, looking around the snowscape. “…what’s eatin’ at you, i mean?”

papyrus considered the question for a moment, his arms folded over the breast of his battle body, trying very hard not to fidget. It was interesting for sans to tell him to speak up, when it was nothing but his own demands for the other to open up to him. It was… different.

“I am merely…” he started hesitantly. “…worried? it might be the incorrect term. Considering everything, i am more… concerned.” the words were the same, yet sans knew what he was saying.

“Ok,” sans replied cautiously. “go on.”
Papyrus gave in to the need to fidget, grabbing at the edge of his red cape and twisting it in his grasp. “YOU SAID SOMETHING VERY STRANGE THE OTHER NIGHT THAT I CANNOT SEEM TO DISMISS.”

Sans waited, frowning.

“THAT IS… AND YOU KNOW THE GREAT PAPYRUS TRIES TO FIND OPTIMISM WHEREVER HE CAN, EVEN WHEN PEOPLE ARE DOWN!” he continued as Sans watched him wring the fabric between his hands, “YOU SAID THAT… I REMINDED YOU OF… OF SOMEONE?”

“oh.” Sans suddenly didn’t like where this conversation was headed.

“I CANNOT FATHOM WHY, BUT FOR SOME REASON, I FEEL LIKE IT WAS… VERY INSULTING.”

Awkwardly, Sans shifted where he stood, unable to look at Papyrus. If he had, he would’ve noticed the injured look on his brother’s face.

“i didn’t realise. and i sure as hell didn’t mean to be. i really am sorry i made you feel like that, pap.”

“NO, I KNOW… YOU WERE ‘TIRED’-” He made the quotation gesture with his fingers, “-WHICH BRINGS ME TO MY NEXT POINT.” Papyrus paused and made a throat-clearing noise, catching Sans’ attention. “WHO IS ‘HIM’? DO I KNOW HIM? YOU SAID IT WASN’T GRILLBY, BUT THERE ARE MANY WHO IDENTIFY AS MASCULINE IN THE UNDERGROUND, SO IT’S POSSIBLE THAT I, HOWEVER GREAT THAT I AM, MAY NEED, A… GUIDANCE, OF SORTS.”

“um,” the smaller skeleton started, searching his thoughts. His mood went from good to worse suddenly, and digging at memories better left alone brought it down faster. Something inside of him was cracking, memories that were buried chipping away at his normally indifferent demeanour. “...i, uh...”

“WAS IT PERHAPS SOMETHING TO DO WITH YOUR, UH…” Papyrus stopped mid-sentence and stepped closer, then his voice dropped, “....CORE work?”

“um,” Sans said again, this time his voice was shaky. Papyrus noticed immediately and gently set his gloved hands on either side of his shoulders, looking at his face. It was bringing up horrible feelings - feelings he thought he’d long since shoved away into a small corner in his heart several years ago. For a moment, Papyrus’ face didn’t look like his brother’s anymore and he jerked reflexively.

“i-.. pap… maybe. i dunno. a lotta things from then are hazy. some days i wake up and it feels like i’m still falling.” He drew in a deep breath and inclined his skull. Maybe if he said it fast enough, it wouldn’t hurt so bad? “some… sometimes i think i remember our dad.”

Papyrus drew himself up, admittedly not expecting such a thing. In fact, there was a tugging memory that beyond childhood, there hadn’t really been anyone that cared for them, apart from a close neighbour at the capital. But even then, that was hazy at best, but a lingering fear remained.

Sans mistook Papyrus’ silence as anger and felt his heart wrench pitifully. “…how old was i when i fell?” he asked quietly, voice sounding weak. It was a long time ago, but he couldn’t recall an exact age. He always had the suspicion why he didn’t remember their father and him Falling were connected in some way, apart from the trauma.

“I believe… well, I was 23? So that would make you…” Papyrus trailed off, as if stuck on the
Sans gave him a quick glance before hunching his shoulders into his brother’s hands. “...31, at the time.”

“So, uh… speculating now,” Sans continued, sounding at odds with himself, “but, i get the feelin’ our pops was not the greatest of parents. actually, he might’ve been the, uh.. worst.”

“Whyever would you say such a thing, brother?”

“cause, uh…” How could he say it? Even with the textbooks’ information on monster puberty, things were still different in his own case. Little by little, things were coming together, especially now that he and his brother were finally talking about it. “…don’t… monsters generally reach maturation between 18 and 25?” The silence was damning and it was everything Sans could do not to flinch away from his brother’s touch to escape what had to be undeniably strong scrutiny. “not 120. not, uh, by a long shot.”

“I don’t understand. Are you saying something happened to you even before the CORE?”

Sans flinched, but the odd chipping and tugging at his memory persisted. As he spoke, it was almost automatic, drawing up information and memories from a bottomless well while at the same time was flooding the ground around him. “i’m just sayin’... kids are known to bounce back. now thanks to all this, i’m not… it’s takin’ longer to recover. i think he might’ve done somethin’. or let somethin’ be.. done.”

He hesitated, knowing it to be true suddenly, and he felt sick. Sicker than previously, as a chorus of bad memories slammed into the side of his skull with more force than he’d ever felt before. It was different than his body rejecting food, more horrible than when he’d exhausted his stamina protecting Grillby. The Underground spun around him and he suddenly felt Papyrus’ hands cling to him to steady him.

Had he stumbled? Or had he been pushed? Something grabbed him, but at the same time he felt pulled in several directions. He froze in terror. Too many things were lining up and the sound of static was deafening.

“i.. i didn’t. mean it,” Sans continued haltingly.

His eye lights had blanked out of his sockets and his bones were trembling as new horror washed over him. Of suddenly a bright room with vials and instruments too grotesque to name, with words that didn’t make sense yet he knew the meaning to them all the same. He felt disgusted with the figure from his dreams and had the overwhelming urge to protect Papyrus, to make sure the same didn’t happen to him.

“y-you’re not like him. you could… you could never be like him, i’m… i’m sorry, pa-papyrus, i’m-” The stuttering breaths battled with Sans’ need to explain himself, aching and harsh and building erratically.

“Everything is fine, Sans! You’re fine, he’s not here-” Papyrus said quickly and pulled his brother into a tight embrace. It had been awhile since Sans’ last panic attack - over several years in fact.

“i’m sorry-” the smaller monster breathed imploringly. He felt trapped, drawn up against his will and shuddering. Everything in his mind was screaming at him in several voices, blaming him, degrading him, tying him down. “i’m sorry. i-i’m sorry, please-”

Papyrus stroked his skull as he felt Sans shake uncontrollably in his arms, bones rattling beneath his clothes as he clutched back. “You’re safe! I am Papyrus, and you are Sans. Whatever he did, you are
recovering! And I couldn’t be more proud of you!”

That seemed to help, if only a little. Sans’ apologies eventually stopped and he drew in a breath as though he had been suffocating.

“he… he… he’s not… he’s not he-here-” Sans repeated, knowing he had to repeat it in order to get himself to believe. His breaths were hitched and he felt the bitter ache of shame as Papyrus pushed his body against him.

He felt pathetic and small again, much smaller than before. Parallels were drawn between his recovery time and now and he couldn’t stop himself from comparing. It mixed into some horrible amalgamate of a shrinking mortality and horrific infusions made to keep him ‘powerful’. So he wouldn’t be a disappointment. So he’d still be useful.

He felt sick.

“You’re alright,” his brother said, his voice soothing. His hand rubbed his back, to which Sans jolted slightly. Something in the touch made his mind blank with another horror and he couldn’t repress the choked sob. “It’s ok. I’m here.”

He was embarrassed for crying. He didn’t often, and he knew he’d worried his brother with the sudden breakdown. Sans huffed softly to calm himself, inhaling the crisp wintry air as Papyrus kept close but was fixing a tile that had frozen over. Sans had opted to sit in the snow with his legs drawn to his chest, watching with hollowed sockets, but nodded once or twice to Papyrus’ questions if he was ok.

He admired Papyrus’ strength. He could keep going, even when he was worried. He really was the best brother a guy could ever hope for. Papyrus didn’t have the same wild darkness haunting him that Sans did, which seemed to be bursting at the seams lately. He felt pathetic and ashamed like never before, and he was certain it had been the first time he’d even mentioned their father.

Sans thought about it; sometimes it would help to know what the causation was. Perhaps it had been a trigger of sorts to visit the Hotland lab’s basement. That’s when he truly felt it. Faced with his own mortality, at the time Sans didn’t know how to go on. He tried thinking of the bar, of his friend, of Alphys and all her hard work to get him to where he was now. He drew his arms around himself a little tighter with the thought of Grillby, hoping his thoughts wouldn’t poison what he held dear to him.

Papyrus kept speaking to Sans throughout his puzzle recalibrations, although if he was honest with himself, he was doing it to keep up the facade of normalcy. Sans didn’t respond well to sudden changes, and the thought of being treated differently, especially after a panic attack, always made him bitter. It would be a while until he shook it off, Papyrus anticipated. He would have to ease into the suggestion of going back, which meant that Papyrus would have to eke out another hour or two at best of busy work before suggesting he was ready to go.

With everything that was happening with Sans lately, he was more than worried. He was, if he was honest with himself yet again, a little scared of what might happen to Sans. He had wanted to ask about his shortcuts and its relation to his brother’s stamina, but it would be for a different time. Sans just wasn’t in the right mindset for much drilling. It would be unconscionable to do so after such a sad state.

Sans had only nodded to his question if he was ready to leave. It had been a long day after all, but
Papyrus continued to show his support for his brother in the best way that he could. He knew Sans was only humouring him when he allowed him to carry him home, this time on his back where it was infinitely more comfortable than under an arm. At least his eye lights were back. It was difficult to gauge his true emotions when Sans let them fade out.

Back home, Papyrus carried him to the couch and set him down. He could still see that his brother still felt emotionally drained so quietly set about making him comfortable. Sans appreciated it in some way, curling into the comforter on the couch as Papyrus turned on the television and handed him the remote.

Even if he had eaten not that long ago, Sans was brought food. This time, Papyrus opted for dinosaur egg oatmeal and he knew that his little brother must be worried for him then. Sans sighed at the bowl in his lap and ate a few bites to appease him, the rest of the afternoon set in bleary reverie and discomfort of his past.
Pylons

Chapter Summary

Sans is made to stay at home and works on the new dimensional box, but finds he can't concentrate. That evening, a night terror visits that brings up old memories and fresh panic. Papyrus is a good brother.

Chapter Notes

After the line break is a disturbing dream referring to a bizarre form of body intrusion, followed by a panic attack, in case this is a trigger for anyone. I'll have a summary at the bottom author's note, just in case.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He tried to throw the bad memories away. But they came back. Sans started from another repeat of his old panic, this time with a rush of grinding noises and a flicker of lights. It eventually faded into reality as he saw the light of the television flickering in kind with some bright commercials. He reasoned that must have been his mind playing tricks on him and he exhaled the breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding.

Sans knew he was worrying his brother. Papyrus had stayed with him and ultimately crashed on the couch next to him overnight. He also woke him up to make sure Sans was alright before he left for Hotland. In turn, Sans told him to be careful on his way, assuring him he’d be fine.

Slowly, he unwrapped himself from the comforter and climbed the stairs up to his room to find his phone.

As usual, there were a few from Papyrus and others, even a couple from Grillby. It seemed like the score had been updated, but Sans couldn’t figure out why. It wasn’t as though anything stood out that day to merit a point in his favour. He wondered if the fire monster was just playing around with the points system in order to further confuse him about this whole ‘dating your friend’ thing.

Sans made his way over to the bed after closing the door, scrolling through messages in case it hadn’t been a blunder that he was left out of the sentry loop. But there was nothing.

For some reason, it gripped his heart in an awful way. It took several idle moments before he resorted to renaming his contacts yet again; ‘fishbones’ for Undyne, then ‘hotstuff’ for Grillby. It was a much better nickname, until he thought of something better. Or until Papyrus changed the names all back again.

Undyne didn’t respond to his messages immediately - she wasn’t glued to her phone like Papyrus or Alphys was. Idly, he scratched at his sternum through his shirt and pocketed his phone, returning downstairs.

He was restless with his forced day off, but it wasn’t the usual agitation or irritability he’d been
feeling lately. Quietly, Sans shuffled into his slippers and made his way outside and around the back to the basement lab. Since he decoded the strange encrypted postcard, he had completely neglected the reason why the key had been important in the first place - apart from a sly way of asking Grillby out on their first date…

The dimensional box that the skeleton brothers destroyed had been brought to his house along with an encouraging letter from the bunnies from the shop. Its splinters and hingeware were included in the rubble, but the magitech holding it together had been completely decimated. The skeleton sighed and set about pulling out his old notes to decode them, writing the instructions out on a fresh, not-so-stained page from the back of a seldom-used but older notebook.

As much as the cipher had tugged at his bitter memories, the work was actually therapeutic in its own way. He spent countless hours in the lab until he started to grow weary, staring off into space once or twice when his phone went off.

Grunting to himself, Sans looked at his phone. It was Papyrus calling and he sighed softly, rubbing at the bridge of bone between his sockets as he tapped the answer button.

“hey.”

“SANS!! IT IS I, YOUR MOST COOL AND TOTALLY INSPIRING BROTHER, PAPYRUS!”

Sans had to laugh at that, although it was inaudible. “yeah, how’s it goin’?”

“THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS ALWAYS GREAT AND HAS NOTHING IN PARTICULAR TO COMPLAIN ABOUT! I ACTUALLY HAVE CALLED TO REMIND YOU TO EAT SOMETHING.”

“oh.”

“SANS… I WANT YOU TO TAKE BETTER CARE OF YOURSELF.” Papyrus’ tone was imploring and Sans looked up from his notes, now covered in a mix of cipher and his bulbous handwriting. “JUST A... BROTHERLY SUGGESTION!”

“preciate it, pap,” Sans replied quietly, shuffling papers around. “i’ll get somethin’ in a bit. i’m just sortin’ through some stuff…”

“What are you doing?”

“got some notes together to fix that item box we busted.”

“OH… I SEE.” Papyrus didn’t sound as thrilled now. It always worried his brother when Sans had to deal with CORE mechanics.

“anyway, snowdin’s fresh out of synth materials since the last box,” Sans said as he stood up with his binders and notebooks haphazardly balanced in one arm. He deposited them onto the desk area in a mess, but at least they were all together, “m’wonderin’ if on the way back from hotland you could pick some up from alphys. enough for, uh…” He gave Papyrus the measurements, but then ended up having to text them instead.

It was important that he had enough. If he was going to make another Box after so long, he’d need all the rest and energy he could muster, so he needed the right amount so his efforts wouldn’t go to waste. That meant he should lay off the shortcuts and travelling for as long as possible until he was sure he was ready. It had been well before they’d even moved to Snowdin that he had last made one from scratch. Repairs were easier, but this one was completely toast.
This also meant he’d need food. Not just snacks. “thanks for the reminder, bro,” he said after realising he was still on the call.

“SANS, ARE YOU REALLY ALRIGHT TO DO THIS?”

“sure. it’ll be like ridin’ a bike.” A very flimsy, rusted bike with deflated tires and perhaps a sad horn, but technically it was still a bike, right? He remembered how, at least.

Papyrus sighed into the receiver with his pause. “AT LEAST WAIT A FEW DAYS. MAYBE… GET SOMETHING FROM GRILLBY’S.”

Sans could say he was honestly shocked. He stared at his phone and said nothing.

“SANS?”

“...who are you and what have you done with my brother,” Sans joked, half-serious.

Papyrus sighed again, this time in exasperation. “BELIEVE IT OR NOT, BROTHER, MY REPUGNANCY FOR THAT PARTICULAR ESTABLISHMENT IS WELL-FOUNDED. HOWEVER, IF IT MAKES YOU HAPPY, AND YOU DON’T FIND YOURSELF ILL AFTERWARDS…” he stopped himself short.

Sans grimaced, finding it hard to address the situation delicately. It was likely that his brother thought he hated his cooking. It wasn’t entirely true… he wondered if Undyne had told him. He recalled it being mentioned. “papy-”

“YOUR HORRIBLE TASTE IN FOOD ASIDE, I TRULY MEAN IT! TAKE IT EASY. ALTHOUGH TELLING YOU TO TAKE IT EASY IS LIKE SAYING IT’S WET IN WATERFALL. OR THAT IT’S HOT IN HOTLAND. OR SNOWY IN SNOWDIN!”

“...i gotcha.”

After the call, Sans went back to his notes. While it certainly had been a long time, he was remembering more easily thanks to the ‘dings’-key he’d made with Grillby’s help. He’d have to think of some way to repay the fire monster, since without him Sans wouldn’t have been able to decipher any of his notes. Alphys didn’t even recall, even though the two of them had definitely used it in college.

He didn’t know how long he’d been absorbed in his work again until Papyrus texted him. He looked at the message, this time his brother telling him that if he wanted, he’d get Grillby to come by with some takeout. Sans flushed at that and immediately replied “don’t”.

Before the fire monster actually did show up, Sans pulled all of his things together with him and left the lab to go back into the house. He unceremoniously dumped his armload of books onto the kitchen table and opened the fridge, his teeth clenching with the memory of being sick.

Maybe it was just because he felt exhausted and ill already, back then.

It wouldn’t do to keep Papyrus worried about his own cooking. Admittedly, Sans supposed he could’ve fixed himself with whatever was left in the fridge, but opted for a container of spaghetti instead.

As it was heating up in the microwave, he finally received a few texts from Undyne. He texted her
about having studied a little more, only to find out it had been a ruse between her and Papyrus. He
glared at the phone, feeling irritated at the deception. She then explained that there was no known
correlations between the river flooding in the capital and Waterfall, nor the steam vent issues in
Hotland. When he shot back that he hadn’t been briefed, she then - probably evasively, Sans thought -
explained that he was a sentry of Snowdin from now on.

Now on.

Sans grimaced and jerked the door to the microwave open a little harder than he’d meant to. It set off
a flare of anger in him. Undyne had seen that he was weak and cut him off. It was likely the correct
assumption. He grabbed the container from the microwave and slammed the door of it, then sat down
to eat.

It was horrible and he was angry, but at least he wasn’t sick again. It made him shudder and Sans got
up to run the noodles under some running water in the sink. Maybe rinsing off the garlic paste would
save the dish.

It didn’t. Now it was just limp watery noodles in a plastic container that were just as unappealing as
before. Reluctantly, Sans ate them as fast as he was able, feeling horrible for his disgust.

True to form, when Papyrus returned later that evening, he brought back the materials Sans had
requested from Alphys. She had included a note and a few snacks that she had gotten in from New
Home that weren’t available out in Snowdin or Waterfall and Papyrus corralled them into the kitchen
cupboards.

As Sans was laying out the materials in the middle of the living room floor, Papyrus was doing his
weekly check up on him.

“You’re still low…” he commented warily, and Sans shot him a distracted glance from over
the stack of panels and panes with a pencil and several measuring gadgets from his lab. “Did you
rest at all today?”

“Had a nap earlier, sure,” Sans fibbed as he flipped through to his schematics, concentrating on the
diagrams.

“You are still only at your base stat,” Papyrus sighed quietly and sat across from
his brother on the floor.

“Takin’ longer.” Sans agreed quietly. “M’not a kid anymore, heh,” he half-joked, but then saw his
brother’s worried look and felt chagrined, “should get a buffer tonight.”

“I will never get used to that!” Papyrus commented as he looked over the notes
curiously. “You never had a buffer before. Why now?”

“I dunno.”

“Perhaps it comes with maturation,” was the speculation and Sans just shrugged,
then scored a line in the fibreglass pane with another tool. He was following a pattern that followed
straight lines on the schematic that ultimately started to look more rounded without using any curved
lines. It smelled of ozone, both acrid and clear, and reminded him heavily of the CORE. At least he
had success in edging memories away thanks to the distraction.

When Sans didn’t respond, Papyrus watched as he worked. The panes were marked with scores and
with every piece that was set aside, Sans continued to look back and forth through his notebook while making adjustments. Eventually, the younger of the two got up to prepare something to eat and give his brother some peace. He was working very hard, after all!

By the time he was done, Sans was in the middle of dozing where he sat, his grip on the rotary tool slipping from his grasp. Quietly, Papyrus took it away from him and Sans stirred, looking around in confusion until his gaze settled on his brother. Then he inhaled deeply, as though attempted to ward off sleep.

“DEAR BROTHER, I DO NOT THINK YOU HAVE BEEN ENTIRELY FORTHRIGHT WITH ME TODAY.”

Sans grunted quietly in admission when Papyrus handed him a plate of toast loaded with butter and jam with a few steamed carrots he got a few times a year from the shop bunnies. It was his effort of imposing healthier eating habits on Sans between all his meals at Grillby’s and his own masterful spaghetti dishes.

He waited until Sans had a few bites of toast before continuing; “IN FACT, YOUR VERY COOL AND POSSIBLY DISTRESSED BROTHER IS ENTERTAINING THE THOUGHT THAT, PERHAPS, YOU HAVE NOT SLEPT A WINK SINCE THIS MORNING.”

Sans straightened up a little, sliding the chopped carrots on his plate idly with the tip of his fingerbone. “oh?”

“INDEED! WHILE I ENCOURAGE YOUR WAKING ENDEAVOURS, I STILL MUST REQUEST THAT YOU TAKE SOME R AND R! THAT IS, REST AND RECUPERATION!”

“aren’t you always sayin’ i need to nap less and work more though?” the older shot back quietly, reaching over his plate after popping a piece of carrot into his mouth, “sides, if i get all the prep done now, i’ll be able to ignite it when i’m ready.”

He flinched at the word ‘ignite’ as though it meant something else entirely and Sans’ hand automatically went to his sternum, giving it a rub as though to push the memory of pain away. Papyrus saw the tic and frowned in concern, fully aware of what it meant. Igniting the CORE’s constructs had left marks of its own.

Once their light supper had finished, Papyrus left Sans to continue his work in silence. He knew that while he was concerned over his brother’s exhaustion, he couldn’t baby him. With the panic attack and Sans’ sombre mood, it was admittedly becoming difficult to retain his cheerful demeanour.

When the younger of the two came back from washing the dishes, he found Sans slumped over the pile of planks, sound asleep. This time instead of putting him on the couch, Papyrus took up his brother in his arms and carried him upstairs to his room. At least there he’d be able to get some good rest, he hoped.

“Ignite this.”

“uh…” He started to shake. It hurt when he did it, but his fath- the royal scientist would not take ‘no’ for an answer.
Sans drew in a shuddering breath, the starting ebb of magical energy enough to placate the tall
monster beside him. His hands were shaking and he knew he’d be chastised for showing weakness
in front of others later if he didn’t stop himself.

There was a crowd around them. Sans had been brought to one of the eighteen podiums that would
serve as the starting points to fuel the base of the CORE. Four had already been lit and the heavy
shafts of blue light shot from their locations like a sickening beacon up towards the ceiling of the
mountain.

Sans’ eye lights were drawn to them, remembering the lurching horror of his stamina being split off
and sacrificed in order for the royal scientist’s most ingenious invention to come to fruition.

His fathe- the royal scientist prattled on beside him, making a speech of how the industry would
work. No longer would monsterkind stumble through the dark and be forced to live in squalor.
Technology would thrive and through the use of the CORE, soon the Barrier would shatter before
them! A whole new network of information would be available to them, the possibilities endless! A
dawning age rife with benefits to monsters everywhere in the Underground was about to begin.

Sans just stood where he was, numb to the words as he stared at the gleaming quartz panel on the
dias. His hands were still shaking, his whole being trembling with the magic constructs hidden under
his clothes, ready to prop him up like some wilted tree on the verge of falling over.

He drew in another breath, the sound shuddering when he felt the scientist’s magic hand constructs
flick at his spine in irritation. The doctor was becoming impatient the longer Sans took to ready
himself.

“He seems nervous-” one of the other scientists noted from in the crowd, causing Sans’ superior to
chuckle lightly, brushing off the concern with a wave of his cored hand.

“It is merely a case of stage-fright, my esteemed colleagues!”

He spoke with such candour and assuredness that Sans had to prevent himself from giving the other
a sidelong glare. Another calming breath; inhale, hold, exhale. Monsters needed to breathe, after all.
It’s how they drew in magic from their environments to sustain themselves. No matter how much
Sans’ body attempted to shut down to prevent this, he took a step forward to the dias with another
urging flick then squeeze to his spine beneath his shirt.

He flinched inwardly, desperately hoping no one saw the tic, and laid both of his hands on the
smooth panel. The skeleton felt his soul twist in protest as he gathered the required amount; with 920
points he was considered strong for someone still in their stripes. There were calculations he needed
to follow with exact precision. Perhaps the doctor was right; with so many people watching him,
Sans felt a horror that with any slip-up everything would be lost.

Thankfully, he was able to shove aside his worry. The grey panel lit up with his magic’s flux,
peppered the large area in a glow of cyan as he pushed outwards. The panel glowed as though
heated by an impossible warmth and Sans felt his legs start to wobble, feeding the machine as four
hands firmly grabbed at his spine to reinforce the column and keep him upright.

He felt disgusted with the intrusion and shut his eye sockets, cyan hue wisping from them as he
poured out the required amount.

[ * 683/920 HP ]

Sans grunted against the heavy weighing feeling that crashed over him, pushing more. His hue
flooded the area and concentrated into a pinpoint of concentrated light on the dias, too bright to look
directly. Several in the crowd that had eyes shielded themselves but continued to watch, while
others took down notes on clipboards.

Another flood of energy left him and Sans felt another pair of constructed hands reinforce his stance.

[ * 490/920 HP ]

“Keep your output constant,” the doctor instructed sharply, suddenly at his side.

Sans was shaking, his eye sockets wrenched shut as he pushed to manage the output at a more even
rate. His breaths were becoming ragged, but he was almost done. Almost done, and he could be sick
like he always was, be brought home and discarded until he was well enough to ignite the next
pylon.

[ * 284/920 HP ]

*It hurts,* Sans’ thoughts burned, reopening his sockets to stare ahead. Around him the light had
grown into a large singularity and he was sure the cameras going off wouldn’t pick up anything of
note. His shoulders were taut like a bow string as one more magically constructed hand found space
low enough to complete the pillar of support keeping him up. Two others locked his knees to prevent
him from toppling.

It was invasive. It was disgusting. Everything hurt and the magic holding him together burned.

He felt sick. He wanted to go home.

[ * 75/920 HP ]

Suddenly, everything released. As always, things were a bleary mess when the energy flew up
towards the linking mechanism and connected with it. It channeled through the large tubes hung
between the ignition points and fed them into the main generators. The technology within hummed to
life briefly, several whines and blips and the grating of steel and machinery filled the echoing cavern.
Several test lights flickered around them as the CORE drew energy from the earth’s mantle,
sowering everything in a deep unsettling red.

Sans drew in a shuddering breath, his phalanges sliding against the smooth lit panel as he was
smoothly puppeteered away. He felt so weak. He wished he could use magic instead, but maturation
just wasn’t happening for him. He’d blocked out the reason why; something about.. tubes, potions,
wires and...

Sans jerked upwards in his bed, his breaths ragged, shallow and quick. Magic was flooding his room
in distressed arcs while his left eye blazed cyan and yellow. A soft keening noise escaped him,
starting low before reaching a pitch that soon turned into a terrified scream.

Not long after and Papyrus barged in, thinking something horrible had happened. Rightly so, he
found his brother so upset his magic was billowing around him in coloured turmoil, disrupting
everything in the room from the lamp to the floor to completely undoing the self-sustaining tornado
in the corner. Papers were flying everywhere, magic was hot and wild, and the very air was alive and
reeked of burning ozone.

“SANS!” Papyrus hurried to his brother’s hunched form on the bed. Sans had both of his arms
wrapped around himself and he was rocking, his movements jerking and creating such a rattle that
Papyrus had never heard before.

“SANS, IT’S ALRIGHT - I’M HERE! PAPYRUS IS HERE!” He sat on the edge of the bed, flinching as Sans’ magic output sliced against one of his hands. His damage output was weak, but the fact that Sans felt under threat enough to cause harm meant it was more than just one of his usual ‘bad nights’.

It took awhile to reach his brother. Papyrus continued to call his name, to attempt to soothe the vicious whirlwind of emotion and energy until Sans tired himself out. By the end of it, Papyrus’ arms were notched with small nicks and even on the side of his skull. Sans’ radical eye halted its flickering, trapped in a state of opaline blue and yellow, tears pricking at his sockets while he slowly realised where he was.

He was safe.

He was alright.

Papyrus was there, holding him in his arms, stroking his back and rocking them both slowly, assuring him that everything was ok.

Feeling raw and emotionally drained, Sans sunk into Papyrus’ arms, clutching at him. “thank you,” he whispered, his voice shaking, “i’m sorry. th-thank you, pap, i’m sorry… i’m sorry…”

“It’s alright, Sans, you’re safe. Don’t apologise... I’m glad you’re back,” his brother murmured, holding him tighter to press away the distressing rattles. “You’re home,” he said, his tone soft and soothing, “You’re safe.”

Chapter End Notes

Sans’ memory of igniting the transmitter pylons for the CORE to function plays out in his nightmare. His father is a horrible person, using magically constructed hands to puppeteer Sans while he is weak. He wakes up in a panic, enough to harm Papyrus (a little) while his brother attempts to calm him down.

Poor Sans :( The next chapter is better! Papyrus and Grillby work together for a little surprise.

Thank you to 30 subs!! And all the kudos and comments!! You guys are lovely, thank you so much for taking the time to read this fic. <3 Again thank you to Nanenna who ALSO has written a cute babybones fic and it’s so cute and sweet and big brother Papyrus!!

GO READ IT HERE :D
The Ruse

Chapter Summary

Papyrus gives a good pep talk, and subjects Sans to a ruse. Grillby is in a bright mood.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

When Sans had calmed down, Papyrus was able to extricate himself from his brother’s arms long enough to fix them a tea. He assured Sans he’d be up right away, to remain calm and take deep breaths. Sans had only nodded with a thin apology, his sockets blank. At least he wasn’t burning through his magic anymore.

Papyrus stood in the kitchen for awhile as the water boiled, two mismatched mugs loaded with tea bags and milk in preparation on the counter. He could then pour the water and immediately carry them upstairs, hopefully quick enough so Sans wouldn’t be alone for too long.

He went over it in his mind. His memories of Sans’ work at the CORE were dodgy at best, but he recognised the panic attacks for what they were. The bad dream Sans had had was more likely than not a repressed memory. He wondered what had triggered it? He stared at the ridges in his bones where Sans’ magic had cut him, for once feeling a little lost.

Papyrus stewed on it, waiting for the kettle to boil. If these were the kinds of dreams Sans was having over the past few months, little wonder he didn’t want to talk about it! He recalled days when Sans would suddenly just appear at home, when they were living at the capital, weak and shaky. It tore him apart trying to learn what had happened, he was so worried.

Sans never told him. Not until much later, nearer to the end of the project. It came to the point where Papyrus was asking him not to go to work and Sans would give him a sad look and tell him to be good and he’d see him later that day.

He eventually would, but only after a distressing phone call.

Papyrus sighed, rubbing the heels of his palms over his eye sockets at the memory. It had been awhile since he’d thought of it. There was… admittedly, a lot of things he was remembering lately. The CORE accident, Sans’ behavioural inconsistencies, his maturation… everything was making his skull ache. He was starting to understand why Sans never spoke of their father before.

He would pull through, though! He had to! He was, after all, a very great and loving brother and would support Sans no matter the hardship. It’s just the way things were and how they’ve always been. He would listen to his troubles and be there even when Sans didn’t want to talk, but wanted someone around.

Finally the water boiled. He quickly poured the tea into the two mugs and brought them upstairs to Sans’ room, only to find his brother had gone missing.

Only one other place, if his memory served him correctly, would be where he’d find Sans. With a soft sigh, Papyrus drew himself up and returned to his own room, finding his door ajar to confirm his
beliefs.

Of course Sans was not in view, but he knew where he’d find him. He closed the door once inside and turned on the nightstand lamp, then walked to the door to his closet. Papyrus waited for a moment, listening to the subtle clatter of bones from behind the door.

“Sans?” He didn’t get an answer immediately. Or at all, for that matter. He gently kicked the door with his foot in lieu of knocking. “Brother…?”

He waited a couple minutes before he heard a shuddering inhale from his brother behind the door, then it opened slowly. He greeted Sans with his best smile, full of love and caring and holding out their mugs in an offer of comfort. Sans’ sockets were still devoid of light and he seemed small again. No doubt he felt burned out, resorting to his old tactic of hiding in closets after an especially bad episode.

“I made… tea?” Papyrus offered, holding out a green and orange mug with polka dots stamped on it. His brother stayed still, holding onto the other side of the door knob in silence while looking dead ahead.

“m’sorry,” he finally mumbled after a time. His voice sounded harsh and it was quiet. His whole body was still trembling.

“You’ve done absolutely nothing wrong! There’s no need to hide, brother, come on out,” Papyrus said, attempting to sound optimistic. Sans only nodded dumbly, but he didn’t move. His brother glanced over Sans; it hurt to see him like this, but he supposed just this once he’d indulge in some therapeutic confinement. “Is it alright if I come in, too?”

Sans stood still, but after a moment he exhaled the breath he’d been holding. Then, as though suddenly given the energy to move, he took the proffered tea and turned back into Papyrus’ walk-in closet and sat on the floor underneath a few hanging clothes.

Papyrus left the closet door open a little for a sliver of light to shine in and took a seat across from Sans so he was able to survey him closely without crowding him.

“Did you want to-”

“no,” Sans cut him off, his tone quiet. Then after a moment he added, “i’m sorry.”

“Sans, you really don’t need to keep apologising.”

“sorry.”

“And you need to stop hiding whatever’s bothering you!”

“old habit.”

“One you need to break! You’re just feeding your anxiety at this rate!” Papyrus sighed after he said his piece and plucked the string out of his tea so he could steep it properly. He flicked his gaze to his brother, whose eye lights still hadn’t returned. He was bottling things up again. “What made it-? I mean… Do you know?”

Sans tilted his skull forward, regarding his mug and its milky contents. It was a moment or two before he inhaled softly, the breath catching a little. “i got angry.”

Papyrus waited for him to continue, and when he didn’t, he gave his brother’s toe a gentle nudge
with his own.

“undyne thinks i’m weak.”

“What!” Papyrus had never heard anything more… more WRONG in his life! “WHO WOULD TELL YOU THAT? THAT’S UTTERLY AND COMPLETELY PREPOSTEROUS!!”

Sans flinched and drew his legs close to him, still seemingly staring at the tea. It was a few more agonising moments when Papyrus sighed again before attempting to speak.

Sans did first this time; “she said in more or less ways. i’m just a snowdin sentry now.” He felt bitter about it; a demotion for a job he didn’t really care about. Yet at the same time, he did care. It was… weird.

“SNOWDIN IS AN IMPOSSIBLY LARGE AREA TO GUARD! I HAVE EVERY CONFIDENCE SHE KNOWS YOU ARE ABLE TO COVER GROUND WITH THE ATTENTION TO DETAIL AND DILIGENCE THAT EVEN I DO!” Papyrus stopped and took a sip from his mug.

Sans took it as a hint to start his own, bringing the steaming mug to his face. He took the smallest sip he could, but his body was needing the sustenance after his panic and drew in half of its contents. He sighed in resignation.

Papyrus knew better than to ask ‘that’s all’, but he knew that Sans was holding something back. Gently, he reached his arm out and patted his brother’s knee in reassurance.

“PERHAPS SHE WANTS YOU TO STAY NEARBY, BECAUSE YOU FINALLY HAVE SOMEONE.”

That got Sans’ attention. His eye lights flickered back to life and he stared at Papyrus, then snorted in derision.

“OH, COME OFF IT! YOU KNOW SHE’S A HOPELESS ROMANTIC!! SHE’D NEVER ADMIT IT, OF COURSE, BUT…” Papyrus took another sip, then shrugged. “SHE DOES HONESTLY CARE ABOUT YOU AND YOUR WELL, LOVE LIFE. IT’S QUITE EXCITING!”

“does it really need to be anyone else’s business?” Sans slouched his shoulders a little more than they already were. He decided to change the subject back. “bro, i gotta tell ya. missin’ out on briefings is one thing… you know i’ve never really paid attention to that kinda stuff. but now, it’s buggin’ me for some reason. like she’s deliberately keepin’ me out of the loop. ever since…” He struggled with the wording. He wasn’t sure if Papyrus would bring his worries to Undyne, after all. He was terrible at keeping secrets.

“YOUR FEARS ARE UNFOUNDED. I, TOO, HAVE NO IDEA WHAT’S GOING ON!” his brother assured him a little too enthusiastically, “SHE’S WAITING FOR MORE INFORMATION! HIRING MORE RECRUITS! EVERYONE’S SAFETY IS ASSURED WITH THE GREAT PAPYRUS AND HIS SLIGHTLY LESS COOL BROTHER IN TOWN. WINK!” He leaned forward for the action as he spoke the word, earning him one of Sans’ halfhearted chuckles. That was better; when Sans laughed, even if it was half-wrought, it was still something! As great as he was, Papyrus knew he could cheer him up after a bad time.

“IF FOR WHATEVER REASON, BROTHER, YOU FIND YOURSELF DOUBTING YOUR CAPABILITIES, YOU NEED TO SPEAK TO ME IMMEDIATELY! I WILL HAVE NOT
ONE PERSON, NOT EVEN YOURSELF, TELL YOU THAT YOU ARE UNFIT FOR ANYTHING!”

Sans laughed again, not knowing why.

“AFTER ALL! WHAT KIND OF COOL BROTHER WOULD I BE IF I DID NOT INSTILL CONFIDENCE IN THOSE WHO NEED IT THE MOST! AND AFTER EVERYTHING YOU HAVE ACCOMPLISHED TOO!” Papyrus gave him a huge grin and Sans found himself returning it. “I’M VERY PROUD OF YOU. YOU’VE DONE SO MUCH! I WISH I COULD TELL YOU EVERY DAY!”

“m’pretty sure you do already,” Sans snickered, bringing his mug back up to drink. “thanks for the pep talk, bro.”

“YOU’LL TRY NOT TO LINGER ON IT, WON’T YOU?”

The older brother shrugged slightly, polishing off the rest of his tea. He did feel a little better. “i’ll give it the ol’ college try.”

“AND BY THAT YOU MEAN YOU’LL GRADUATE AND GET A MASTER’S IN ATTEMPTERY! I WILL HOLD YOUR DIPLOMA FOR YOU, AND TEARS WILL BE IN MY SOCKETS FOR ALL TO SEE HOW PROUD I AM!”

Sans covered his face with one hand and started to laugh, his shoulders shaking as Papyrus got up and shuffled over to sit beside him. Those same shoulders were wrapped with his brother’s arm and Sans put his own around Papyrus’ back and let his skull drop against his shoulder.

“you’re the best, bro.”

“OF COURSE I AM! AND BY PROXY, I SUPPOSE YOU ARE TOO.” Thanks to the light through the crack of the door, Sans was able to see another one of Papyrus’ inaudible winks and laughed again.

Thanks to the brotherly chat and the tea, Sans was able to settle down enough to venture out of the closet. Papyrus insisted upon another sleepover and Sans humoured him, this time not bothering with the story and instead huddling under the covers like they were kids again. He felt the ebbing tingle of his brother’s magic cocoon him and he playfully jabbed Papyrus in the ribs with his elbow to get him to stop.

“m’not babybones,” he grumbled through Papyrus’ protests. He sounded sleepy enough, so his brother let him be for once.

Papyrus’ alarm woke them both up. Sans was reluctant to leave the safe confines of the bed. He was pulled up, a low groan with a yawn escaping him as he blearily looked around. Papyrus was already getting changed and was talking to him, explaining the day. Didn’t his brother know by now he needed to wake up before thinking about doing anything?

He dozed while Papyrus got ready, only to be roused by him minutes later. Sans grunted in protest, then dimly realised his brother was waiting for him.

“wha, m’up.”
“SANS, LET’S GET GOING!”

“muh? are you in the forest today?” He wasn’t even insisting on breakfast?

“NO, LAZYBONES, WE’RE GOING OUT FOR SOME… ‘SOUL’ FOOD!”

Sans stared at him blearily, not quite awake and understanding Papyrus’ intentions until he had been forced to change, get his shoes and hoodie on, and they were out the door. It was later than usual, but not by too much. Papyrus didn’t seem too affected that he was late for anything, so Sans just followed in step behind him.

The walk was short, and if Sans hadn’t been snapped awake at that moment, he could’ve sworn Papyrus was holding the door open for him to Grillby’s.

“ok, what’s this?” the older brother inquired lowly.

Papyrus had a suspicious grin on his face, if Sans had to peg him as the sort. While not entirely double-crossing, Papyrus whistled innocently as he gestured for Sans to enter.

It was warmer inside than usual but nothing too far from what was to be expected from the fire monster’s abode. Sans shot the bartender a shy grin from across the floor, recognising the surprised way Grillby’s flames sparked. Papyrus at the restaurant was peculiar, at best.

“GOOD MORNING, MISTER GRILLBY!” said brother announced. There was no one else at the bar and Sans shuffled a little at the doorway. “SANS, PLEASE. THE DOOR. YOU’RE GOING TO LET OUT ALL THE HEAT!”

Sans immediately closed the door behind him, unsure what the hell was going on.

Grillby kept his usual quiet demeanour as the two skeleton brothers walked up to the counter. Sans was unsure if he should take his usual seat or not so remained standing, eyeing the glance the other two seemed to exchange with increasing suspicion.

“MISTER GRILLBY, IT APPEARS THAT YOU’VE HEALED WELL!” Papyrus was saying, quite obviously making small talk with his tone. He gestured around the bar to the empty seats and continued, “MY DEAR BROTHER REQUIRES SOME ‘SOUL FOOD’-” he gestured the air quotes with his fingers, “AND I SUPPOSE THE GREAT PAPYRUS WILL HAVE A… A MILKSHAKE.” His sockets narrowed at his decision and Sans was giving him the most confused look he could muster.

Grillby appeared to be amused but at the same time he didn’t object. Customers were customers, even if it was early. He nodded and gestured for Papyrus to have a seat, sending Sans a slight smirk over his shoulder as he retreated to the kitchen.

Sans hopped up onto his regular stool, still staring at him, his sockets very slightly narrowed. “what did you do.” It was more of a challenge than a question.

“WOWIE! WOULD YOU LOOK AT THE TIME!” Papyrus looked at the back of his wrist in a show of looking at his watch - at least, he would have if he had opted to wear one. “IT’S ALREADY SO LATE! GIVE MISTER GRILLBY MY APOLOGIES! I’LL COME BACK AFTER WORK FOR THE SHAKE! TOODLES!”

Subtle. The thought was tinged with sarcasm and Sans stared at his brother as he flounced out the door. Only then did he realise that the open sign read ‘OPEN’ inwards and the shutters were closed.
“oh, you sneaky little…” the skeleton muttered, unable to hide his grin when Grillby returned from the back. It was only then that Grillby’s flames crackled and his face broke out in a grin of his own, laughter erupting. “what just happened?”

Grillby rounded the bar, effortlessly sliding onto the stool next to him. It dawned on Sans just then that the fire monster wasn’t even dressed for work. “…Matchmaking, evidently.” He continued to laugh, the noise a happy crispness.

Sans at least felt awake enough now to flush at his brother’s grand deception. “i’ve been duped.”

“Did you think you worked today?” Grillby was still chuckling, unable to stop himself.

“what day is it..?” Sans shook his skull, taking a moment to yawn and lean over the counter.

“Sunday. Bar’s closed.”

time is flyin’ by,” the skeleton murmured, surprised, “the least he could’ve done was warn me.”

“…Warn you of time travel?”

Sans snorted softly. It sounded more like a snore.

“…Want to sleep?” Grillby’s laughter had subsided, but he still sounded amused. His eyes were brighter today, Sans noticed.

“didn’t get the solid 12 hours last night.”

“Here I thought you’d want date number two.”

Sans felt his face flush with the invitation and sat upright. “aww, you know you always brighten my day, grillbz,” he grinned outright, unable to help himself, “sides, who could say no to you?”

It was Grillby’s turn to grin, although there was something sneaky to it.

“ok, now i know you’re hidin’ jokes from me,” Sans muttered, settling down onto the counter again, skull on his arms in a mock pout, closing his sockets. “i’m offended.”

Grillby leaned in closer and Sans could feel his heat creep towards him.

“Are you?”

“yep.” He wasn’t, but he managed to hide his grin in his arms. “totally heartbroken.”

“My! And how would I be able to correct such a gross overstep of boundaries?” Grillby teased. Sans cracked open an eye socket with the sound of the stool creaking and the hum of fire directly beside him.

The fire monster had folded his arms over the bar, mimicking Sans’ posture. His grin was apparent and he looked so bright and happy to see him. The skeleton’s soul felt as though it was spinning nervously in his rib cage. The other’s good mood was infectious.

He mumbled something into his arms.

The bartender moved a little closer with a soft hum. “…Didn’t catch that?”

Sans’ face felt hotter and he watched as the other shifted his arm down to rest on his shoulder. “maybe a kiss,” he repeated a little louder.
Grillby hummed again, this time amused. “....*What if no?*”

“I’ll go without, and I’ll probably feel like somethin’ the whole date.”

“So you want to, then?”

“Didn’t even get one yesterday, or the day before, even before that. Technically I should get at least four,” Sans found himself saying, as though bartering. At Grillby’s surprised flare, the skeleton continued, “actually, we might need to double down on that.”

The fire monster started laughing again, but moved closer and Sans sat up expectantly. “...*May be obliged to take you up on that offer,*” he breathed as he leaned down to steal a few kisses.

Sans felt a shiver go through him as he pressed forward, swivelling the stool so he could snake his hands around Grillby’s shoulders and neck, linking his fingers together. While he had been mostly joking about the amount of affection due, he wasn’t about to stop if Grillby wanted to feed him tongue instead of breakfast.

The skeleton couldn’t stop the soft whimper that left him, unhooking his hands to grasp at the other’s shoulder. He decided rather quickly that if the second date was just this, he’d let go of the lost joke. He’d pester Grillby about it some other time.

He nearly swallowed his tongue when he heard the door open alongside the chime and whirled his skull around to see Papyrus come back into the restaurant. He had one of his gloved hands over his sockets and was holding out something in his other, blindly flailing around until he found a table.

“DON’T MIND ME! THE GREAT PAPYRUS HAS BORNE WITNESS TO ABSOLUTELY ZERO SLOPPY MAKEOUTS. I MERELY CAME BACK TO BRING MY BROTHER’S PHONE. I DON’T KNOW WHY, HE NEVER ANS-”

“*leave!*” Sans shouted shrilly, his voice a little higher through embarrassment. Grillby’s fire had sparked at the interruption and he was trying not to laugh again, especially at Sans’ reaction. He actually found it rather endearing how Papyrus was looking out for his brother. Sans didn’t.

Grillby watched as Papyrus dropped the cell phone onto one of the nearby booth tables and stumbled out of the door before cracking up again, unable to help himself. Meanwhile, Sans had turned a concerning shade of blue and hid his face in his hands.

“He’s tryin’ to kill me, I swear,” he whispered exasperatedly. Comfortingly, the fire monster patted his shoulder and kissed the top of his skull.

“...*With soul food?*”

“An’ now you’re using his words against me. I can already feel the pull of the void.”

“Such cruelty,” Grillby agreed soberly, “*Need breakfast, at any rate. Come upstairs.*” Sans uncovered his face in time to see Grillby slide off his stool. The fire monster gently gave his arm a small tug in invitation before leaving him to lock the front door and retrieve Sans’ phone.

Chapter End Notes

Papyrus really does know more than he lets on...
Grillby takes Sans on a second date, keeping everything a surprise.

Grillby had been similarly duplicitous in the plan of getting Sans out of the house, but hadn’t expected them quite so early, hence his surprise. Papyrus had proved easy enough to get along with in that regard. The shorter skeleton remained entirely baffled by the exchange, but seemed even more confused when Grillby led him upstairs.

If he didn’t know better… he was experiencing a secondary impressionistic whiplash. Grillby had cleaned, or at least he thought he had. Sans sighed when they got to the kitchen, leaning against the now cleared and wiped down island and looking around.

“welp. i dunno what to think anymore.”

Grillby gave him something of an inquiring flicker and paused before continuing to pull things off shelves again. Pots and pans were stacked neatly by size in iron wrought shelving bolted to the walls and he grabbed one, setting it down on the counter.

“if you’re gonna be complacent in my bro’s japes, i’m gonna be needin’ a warning ahead of time.”

A grin flashed across the bartender’s face and he tossed Sans’ cell phone at him. The skeleton only just barely caught it, shrugging off the lingering dregs of sleep. With his touch the screen lit up with several notifications. Several were from Grillby.

“Oh.”

“...Wouldn’t dream of betraying you,” the fire monster said, his tone still amused as he worked. Sans watched with exhausted interest and sunk down into one of the chairs to flip through his phone. “You are really bad at answering your phone.”

“So it is known,” Sans agreed, half-joking. Several texts were also from Alphys with attachments that were taking forever to download. A couple that loaded early showed that it was some new device she was working on. He shut off the screen and twirled the phone on the counter. “date number two,” he continued, changing the subject, “whaddaya got planned?”

“....Surprise,” the other revealed, his fire positively pluming with his good mood.

Sans gave him a grin. “you’re really, uh… glowing today.” He was also half-asleep. The cogs of his mind were still grinding to start up. “never seen you in such a good mood.”

The bartender appeared pleased that he’d noticed, at least. He looked up from slicing up a myriad of vegetables with practised ease and Sans could have sworn the fire monster grew a foot taller.

He was positively radiant.
“...ylight.” Grillby’s blaze buried all but the last part of his sentence, but he sounded happy. When Sans only grinned at him in response, the fire monster tried again, “...Feel the sun, above.”

“oh. wow, really?” Sans’ eye lights dragged upward, as though the ceiling of Grillby’s kitchen would afford him proof. “like, on the surface?”

The fire monster made a pleased rasping noise. Sans figured it was a ‘yes’.

“that’s pretty cool, g. not gonna lie.”

Grillby’s good mood brought the temperature in the kitchen up just a little more and Sans basked in it, watching him.

“...ike an old friend paying a visit,” the other said through another flash of fire. Sans felt his soul soaring with the other’s apparent happiness, blinding out the cold dread of his nightmare from his thoughts. He cradled his skull in both of his hands, his smile tender.

“now i’m gettin’ jealous,” Sans sighed, leaning forward to inspect the bowl of vegetables Grillby was preparing. “how’re you able to know?” He snuck a slice of something red and stuck it into his mouth, Grillby not appearing to mind. It was mildly peppery.

“High noon,” the fire monster supplied, pointing up. Sans’ brow raised incredulously and he looked at his phone. It was a little after seven in the morning.

“think that might not be right.”

The bartender collected a few other supplies from cupboards, his ambient light flickering around the glassware and throwing reflections around the kitchen in distorted rainbows. “The Underground’s sense of time has become... inaccurate,” he shrugged dismissively and heated a pan with some oil, making cooking look effortless.

“huh. don’t tell the chick at hotland lab that. she’d freak if she found out there was any discrepancies.”

“Doesn’t matter much, really. Just something I’ve had to endure on a personal level.”

Sans sat up a little more, curious. “oh?”

“Makes my days feel longer.”

“how so?”

Grillby seemed to pause before turning to regard the skeleton. He supposed he had never really had to explain it, since no one had thought to ask. How could they? Not many others knew his composition since he kept it secret. “It’s my midnight right now.”

Sans straightened a little more, “aren’t you tired?”

“...Always. Another reason why I don’t do breakfast.”

“hell, after you’re done not doin’ breakfast, we should go have a nap,” the skeleton murmured, barely stifling a yawn. “beginnin’ to like this date already.”

Grillby couldn’t help but laugh at that, but ultimately decided it would be for the best. Sans didn’t look like he’d had much sleep lately and his brother had cautioned him against letting Sans push himself. Seemed like Papyrus thought he was ill. He did seem more run-down than usual, so he
agreed.

Sans had devoured his omelette with thickly-sliced buttered toast in a matter of seconds, now resting over the island countertop. He looked at peace, which was a good thing since Grillby took special care and poured love into everything he made for him. The fire monster watched him as he finished his own breakfast, how his sockets shifted and moved as Sans eventually fell asleep where he sat.

He woke a few hours later in Grillby’s bed, tucked and warm against the other’s chest. The faint sizzle of the other’s low flames echoed in his skull as his mind gradually came back to consciousness with a soft inhale. The constant heat below him had lulled him into a sense of security, feeling the tenderness of the love he felt in his soul.

He basked in it. It felt right. Grillby felt right. Sans curled against him, wrapping his arms over his shoulders and settling again. Their chests pushed against one another with each breath, souls singing in such perfected harmony that Sans was sure the dizzy feeling stemmed from its closeness.

Happiness, eh?

It had a good ring to it.

Seemed like his movement had roused the fire monster if his little flames had anything to go by. Sans watched them, half-asleep, before resting again and drowsing. If they spent all day like this, he’d call the date a success.

Grillby had other ideas. As little as Sans weighed, the fire monster was able to wrap an arm around him, pressing him close to his body as he slowly sat up. The skeleton only made a soft grunt but his sockets were closed and his breathing had evened out again. Grillby couldn’t help the soft laugh and the way his fire tingled with Sans so close.

With Sans comfortably sleeping like he didn’t have a worry in the world, the bartender was able to carefully move to the edge of the bed, his pace slower than usual to make sure he didn’t wake him. He twisted himself around so he could allow Sans to sink back against the mattress, taking a moment to appreciate the sight of him and leave a soft kiss on his forehead.

It seemed like Sans needed the sleep anyway, so he quietly got changed and pulled on his boots, his jacket and gloves. Then Grillby set about carefully pulling on the skeleton’s shoes, making sure to lace them in a way that they wouldn’t come undone before pulling on his hoodie and zipping it up.

He was out like a light.

Grillby couldn’t help the smile that crossed his vague features at that. He looked so peaceful. He hoped in a way he could surprise Sans by bringing him out to the spot he had selected for their date. Perhaps him napping the whole time would gain him that advantage.

Carefully slipping the other’s phone into Sans’ shorts pocket, he manoeuvred the skeleton onto his back, his arms lithely hanging over his shoulders and carrying him downstairs as he had all those weeks ago. The fire monster felt the gentle thrum of the other’s soul against his back, how his magic amassed in coiling comfort as Sans didn’t stir as he was shifted about.

It was easy enough to traverse down the stairs and out the fire exit. Easier still to walk out of town, nodding his head in greeting to the monsters he passed along the way. Seeing Sans being carried was such a regular thing that no one chose to address it. He didn’t venture towards Sans’ house, but west of town, passing the bridge and a few puzzles along the way.
Sans’ breathing was deep and soft, tickling the flames at his neck as he walked. At some point the skeleton shifted slightly against his back, his arms tightening ever so slightly before he settled again with a soft sigh.

It was sweet.

As he often did, Grillby completely circumvented most of the skeleton brothers’ puzzles. Growing up in Hotland instilled in him enough knowledge to figure them out easily the first few times he’d stumbled across them. With Papyrus’ earlier complaining that someone was tripping them up, Grillby had taken care to dodge them entirely. He knew a few shortcuts of his own, even with how snowy and icy the area was.

It was a long walk along the plateaus and through the trees. At one point Grillby left the trail entirely, following one set of icy footprints, just visible in the deep snow since his last visit a few days prior. It had been the start of his good mood and was happy to find such a place all those years ago.

Even with all the snow technically being water, he was happy to walk through it all. Soft wisps of steam were a constant presence around his boots and the snow that lightly drifted down melted before having the chance to approach him.

He actually liked Snowdin. It was peaceful and quiet, a stark contrast to the tiresome heat and clockwork of his old home. And now, skeleton in tow, he had more of a reason to be in love with the place.

“muh.”

Seemed like his date was finally coming around. Grillby turned his head slightly to regard the other’s face, half-drowsy with sleep.

“...Out like a light,” the fire monster supplied quietly.

“s’ok. you make enough to fire up the underground,” Sans murmured drowsily and nestled his face against Grillby’s neck while hooking his hands together for a better grip. He looked around, a little puzzled. “...where are we?”

“...Surprise,” Grillby reminded him.

The skeleton snorted softly, “you’re carryin’ me.”

The fire monster only smiled, adjusting his grip on the other’s femurs as he sidestepped a patch of ice through a few densely growing birches.

“it’s not like i lost my leg again,” Sans protested half-heartedly, but turned his head to look down at his shoes to make sure. Yep, both legs were still there. When Grillby didn’t answer him, he added, “i suppose i could just detach one. for ol’ time’s sake.”

Grillby was unable to hold back a laugh at that, “Please don’t.”

Sans chuckled and sighed softly, watching the other’s flames move. “i don’t recognise this place.”

“It is a secret.”

“y’still seem pretty stoked about the sun, huh?”
A slight kindling of fire answered his question and Sans closed one socket to prevent the fire from entering his skull. "where's my phone?"

"...Your trousers’ pocket."

Sans snorted again, this time a little louder. "wow, coulda warned me if you were gonna be stickin’ your hands down my drawers, grillbz."

Grillby had to turn his head to conceal the sudden grin that spread across his features, but his chuckles betrayed him by jostling the skeleton on his back. ".....Dirty jokes."

"i like ‘em. makes you turn pretty colours."

Grillby did at that, the complement bringing forth a dash of gold and amber along with a surprised look.

“What,” Sans muttered incredulously, his eye lights flicking to Grillby’s visage, then back to the quiet rocky field around them. It was a moment before he added a little more insistently, “you are.”

The fire monster was unsure how to handle such a prospect, certainly not knowing how to handle a compliment either. He only let out an amused hum while Sans shifted in his grasp to peer over his shoulder at him.

“you don’t believe me? ok, how ‘bout this then,” Sans gestured with his hands, spreading his phalanges in front of the other’s face in mock amazement, “you light up my life.”

Grillby turned his head, resisting the betraying chuckles.

“nothin’? ok, well, i have a feelin’ your eyes are the event horizon.. `cause they keep drawin’ me in.”

Grillby stumbled, unable to contain his laughter but he managed not to fall. Meanwhile, Sans had something of a deathgrip on him with the startling lurch.

“look at you, trippin’ all over. you need me to tie your laces, grillbz?” Sans was chuckling too, “wouldn’t want you to fall for anyone else.”

“Sans, you don’t even tie your own shoelaces.” The fire monster made a peculiar motion, something like an eye roll with a sidelong glance over his shoulder. Sans was grinning at him. He honestly looked happy, happier than he’d ever seen him before. His grin, however permanent that it was, reached his eye sockets and he seemed more energetic, despite resting against his back.

“aww, c’mon, buddy. you stumbled right into that one.”

“I’ll drop you.” He was still laughing.

Sans’ grip got tighter as he crooned, “so hot-headed.”

“...Will make you walk,” Grillby considered it. Laughing and walking just weren’t working out for him. He slid a little in the slush gathered at his feet, since he had stopped during their exchange and the snow had melted.

“and miss this wild bangin’ ride?” Sans sighed against Grillby’s neck, drawing in just a little bit of magic to force a chill to it. The fire monster’s shoulders hunched upward with a shiver and he grinned deviously. “now i know how you felt, teasin’ me.”

Grillby started to walk, but made a show of releasing Sans’ femurs. The skeleton locked his arms
around his shoulders with a startled yelp when gravity plunged him downward.

“hey, don’t play the game if you can’t take the heat, grillbz~” Sans was wriggling, trying to regain purchase as Grillby moved a few feet away from the slush with his arms folded over his chest.

Grillby wasn’t really upset, but seeing as the skeleton was awake enough to walk on his own, Sans finally agreed to let go. His hands immediately went into his pockets but he showed the bartender a big grin, knowing he’d won.

The fire monster shook his head, hiding his own smile as he led the other further out into the rocky field. Large stalactites peppered the ceiling like icicles the closer they got to the large hill, far away from Snowdin. Grillby had been walking for a couple of hours before Sans woke up, and it would take them another hour of steady travel and idle chat before they arrived.

Whatever Sans had expected, this… wasn’t it. A hole in the mountain that surrounded a huge outcropping cliff, grey and mottled with dark patches of black ice and crunchy snow. Old dry vines twisted against the rockface, bordering the outcropping and obscuring it from direct view.

He didn’t know how Grillby could be so excited about such a place but followed him, resisting the urge to complain about such a long walk. He almost considered warping them to their destination, but wasn’t sure about his buffer. It seemed stronger today, but not by much.

Grillby led him up to the outlying cliffside, a few scraggly looking pines with twisted roots clinging to the rocks. The path was littered with old pinecones, one of which the fire monster picked up and tossed at Sans. He caught it, but looked even more confused. He’d never been here even in his patrols, and wondered how Grillby came to find such a place.

“....Inside,” the fire monster finally said, excitement in his crackling flames. Everything about his demeanour seemed to be dancing, embers popping off in multitudes of warm colours and vibrant intensities.

Sans indulged him while pocketing the pinecone, taking care to follow the other’s steps as Grillby led him up to the space. It was not very big; Sans figured Papyrus wouldn’t be able to fit, but Grillby and Sans could pass through the narrow crevice with a bit of effort. Inside, shards of ice gleamed against Grillby’s ambient glow and shattered amongst hundreds of splintered growths of quartz and snowy, shimmering gypsum.

Sans whistled lowly, captivated. For the most part, he stayed silent as Grillby had reached out to take his arm. Automatically, the smaller monster let himself be pulled along, the mouth of the crack in the mountain’s wall widening enough to accomodate them side-by-side. There were jagged pieces of rock that had broken off into slabs of shale and obsidian, different colours of teal, jade, cyan and gold. Every surface reflected Grillby’s fire and Sans almost had to shield his face before adjusting to the sight. It was as bright as the light below the CORE, but warmer.

“wow.” The word was small, but he was actually amazed.

Grillby was beaming, insistently tugging at Sans’ arm for him to follow. “It gets better!”

Intrigued yet feeling a little cautious, the skeleton continued behind the other. The path twisted in spaces and eventually Grillby let go of him to climb over some unsteady-looking formations that Sans scrutinised before clambering over as well. Every step of the way, Grillby made sure he was within arms’ reach, eventually settling to keep his hand locked in Sans’, fingers laced together in a
Every part of Sans’ being was thrumming excitedly. Grillby’s mood was infectious, filling him with curiosity as the fire monster hid the ‘ultimate surprise’. As opposed to outside, the cavern was small and dry, the only moisture around bowing to the bartender’s heat as gentle coils of mist drifted away.

The ceiling continued to plunge lower the deeper they ventured into the cavern. Eventually the gypsum took over the ceiling, hailing down like a frozen waterfall and shimmering with Grillby’s glow. They had to separate briefly to climb a rockface that led up. Sans was starting to tire and his breaths were becoming a little laboured. It was certainly a workout, whatever the other had planned. He was getting good at not complaining, at least for today.

It took longer to reach the uppermost caverns, as Sans had begun to move slower. His breathing was ragged from the climb, pushing himself when Grillby insisted it was worth it. He had to trust him, right? The best thing he could hope for was that by some miracle there was a flat enough slab at the top so he could get some shuteye.

But no, there wasn’t. In fact, the only outlying flat stretch of flooring was littered with stalagmites. Sans sent the cold, bruised-coloured spikes something of a reproachful look as he was tugged through them, until the fire monster finally stopped.

Sans looked around. Apart from the fire monster’s aura throwing light all around, it was pretty lacklustre. He didn’t understand the other’s apparent excitement but stayed quiet. The other took his arm, pulling him closer until he was nearly pressed against him. Then he was turned and before Sans knew it, his eye sockets were covered by Grillby’s gloved hands.

He inhaled sharply. “ok. this is weird. don’t freak out, grillbz, but i think i just went blind.”

Grillby made a shushing sound, clipped by a snap of embers, and carefully manoeuvred the nervously grinning skeleton around a large and jagged formation, hiding the true surprise. His flames were flickering wildly and the crack of his mouth opened in a reverent smile, soul beating fiercely at his core as he looked over the skeleton’s shoulder.

“...Are you ready?”

Sans swallowed, his hands poised at either side of him, not knowing exactly what to do with them. With Grillby covering his eyes, it was more than a little difficult to gauge depth or any looming threat that might be hiding.

But the other’s mood was infectious, no matter how cautious he felt.

He sighed, the breath stuttering as the fire monster waited.

“ok.”

Don't worry, chapter 30 will be uploaded on Thursday. But in the meantime, why don't you tell me what you think the surprise is? :D
**Skybreak**

Chapter Summary

Grillby reveals a secret. Sans has an unguarded moment.

Chapter Notes

I'm so salty you guys guessed right. >;(

See the end of the chapter for more notes

He didn’t know what Grillby was waiting for.

He was ready.

He gave the go-ahead.

Sans was holding his breath, not knowing why he felt so apprehensive. He felt the heat of the other’s hand leave his right socket. He didn’t see anything, but a flood of blinding light entered his skull when his left socket was uncovered.

It took several moments to adjust to it, but as though struck by an invisible blow Sans jerked backward, bumping into the other’s body with disbelief.

“wh-what-?” It was all he could stammer out after a few moments. Sans stood stock-still, staring ahead with his gaze wide and clear.

“...Only wanted to share it with someone special,” the fire monster explained, his voice quiet as he watched the other.

It took too long to process. Something that was a shared, deep ache within every soul in the Underground had been revealed to him. A jagged exit high above, inaccessible yet so close.

The thrumming black and white tones of runic glyphs littered the seal, ancient and powerful, decorating the area alongside the broken geode rockface leading up to it. The crystals were glittering brightly in a waning glow never before seen in the Underground. Sans certainly never had, even with the beams above New Home breaking through every so often during his childhood. They had always been so out of reach.

But now... they were. Tendrils and smears of exhaustive burning colours beyond the opening, bright reds, yellows, oranges and violets streaking across a golden ceiling. No, a sky. The sky, Sans was seeing the sky!

The wisps of thick mist far above must have been clouds, so ethereal in their splendour that anything magic could produce just wouldn’t possibly compare. The mist in Waterfall was nothing like it, the steam that came from the vents in Hotland not even holding a candle to the sight.
As though every little bitterness inside of him broke at once, the skeleton jerked forward with the overwhelming thrill to get closer, only for Grillby to grab his arm and keep him back.

“The Barrier,” he warned firmly.

Sans didn’t look at him, fully captivated by the sight. Grillby had mentioned feeling the sun, but he didn’t see it. Just a wash of brilliant colours, like burning etched crystal or slick oil across a canvas. There was a gentle breeze and even the sound of moving air.

It was indescribable. He’d never seen it before, born long after the war with humans. Sans inhaled sharply, not realising he’d been holding his breath. The sudden influx of magic in the air made him dizzy and he stumbled backwards, still staring.

“How do you find it?”

Sans was only aware of the other’s voice by the tone. He wasn’t paying attention. If he blinked or if he turned, it could be gone in an instant. He wanted to keep his sight on it. He felt everything monsterkind hoped and dreamed for throughout the ages echo in his rib cage, tugging at him to go forward and make contact with whatever was beyond.

He’d never felt such want for freedom in his entire existence.

Sans didn’t even realise he was trembling until Grillby wrapped his arms around his waist from behind, so overcome with emotions he didn’t know he had until he was experiencing them in that very moment. His breaths shuddered in his rib cage and Sans couldn’t tear his gaze away from it, excitement and wonder building up inside of him to the point where he thought he’d explode into a myriad of tiny fragments.

“that’s...”

He had absolutely no words.

Grillby watched him, keeping his flames low for the sheer thrill Sans no doubt was feeling. He was to the point of silent exaltation, watching the enraptured skeleton. Carefully, he removed his arms from around his date and stepped back, his movements silent in the small glittering cavern. It was just him, Sans, and the sunset.

“Sans?”

The skeleton didn’t move, seemingly frozen in place. Grillby chuckled to himself and pulled out his cell phone, lining up the shot.

“Sans!” he suddenly shouted, the echo of his embers crackling at the edge of his voice and in the cave. He made ready when Sans flinched slightly, whirling his skull around as he was jerked out of his daze. In at just the right moment, the fire monster lowered his flames enough to provide only a warm glow and clicked a button.

Ka-chk!

Dumbfounded, the skeleton stared at Grillby and the plume of reignited fire around him, seeing him grin happily. He found his own grin tugging warmly, feeling a lightness in his heart and soul as though every bit of him didn’t feel quite as heavy as before. Not with his sickness, his frailty nor his self-consciousness. His smile was real and he couldn’t help but laugh when Grillby took another picture of him.
“how the hell did you find this?” It seemed like hours since Sans had last uttered a word. As if suddenly aware of his body again, the skeleton wiped a hand over his face after realising tears had been pricking at his eye sockets. He had been that moved.

Grillby merely shrugged, something evasive and shy in the gesture as he looked to the photo in his phone. The first one encapsulated the moment perfectly, even if it looked like the skeleton was about to break down. It was a little blurry, but he wouldn’t change it for the world.

“grillby~” There it was again. The fire monster couldn’t help the peculiar tingle through his body with the skeleton’s voice, so imploring and with a rush of feeling, he didn’t quite know how to react. As Sans had demonstrated so many times before, Grillby placed a hand over his chest and looked up with a gentle smile.

“...Permitted myself to vent my frustrations outside of Snowdin’s general vicinity,” he muttered, turning off the screen of his phone and rotating it in his hands, “...Integration was not as smooth as I had hoped when I moved here. With no place of my own, I...” He let the rest go with another vague shrug. “...Thought it cruel if anyone would find out my... hiding spot was so near.”

Sans approached him, eye lights searching the other’s visage to find any hint of a ruse or trick. Grillby wasn’t the sort, though. A tease, but certainly not a liar.

The skeleton exhaled, the breath long. Then he stuck his hands into his pockets, finding the pinecone the fire monster had tossed to him hours ago outside the cavern. “guess i can understand that,” he mumbled quietly, bringing out the seed and rolling it between his bony digits, “i hide too. sometimes. we all get that way, i think.”

“You hide in plain view,” the bartender reminded him, “You are.. stronger than I.”

Sans smiled a little sadly, but he shrugged. “so i guess... you want this a secret.”

“Between you and I,” the fire monster clarified, suddenly self-conscious. He was watching Sans fidget with the pinecone and avoiding the other’s look. “...Is it selfish?”

The skeleton considered it for a moment. He didn’t trust himself to look back ‘outside’, afraid he wouldn’t be able to tear himself away again. Then he just shrugged again, the gesture noncommittal. “askin’ the wrong guy. i’m a pretty selfish guy, after all.” It might have been the wrong thing to say, since Grillby didn’t have anything to add to that. Carefully, Sans murmured, “i don’t think it is, anyway. it.. it is special.”

The fire monster sighed quietly, a plume of smoke drifting away from him as he reached for Sans’ hands.

“So, uh... i guess you win,” the skeleton continued hesitantly while the other clasped his hands. “i, um... wasn’t expectin’ this.”

“Win?”

“yeah, why not. this has gotta amount to, what? fifty points?” Grillby couldn’t help but laugh at that. “seriously, if fi.. fillin’ me with fire was the goal here, uh-”

The fire monster started laughing harder, his flames spiking in different shades of orange and gold. As Sans felt heat flood his face, he removed his hands from the other’s grasp and covered it, embarrassed.

“I think it just clicked what that means,” he said weakly, a subtle shudder creeping through his bones.
“I’ll allow you your fantasies,” the fire monster said, winking, “Just this once.”

“sorry, i’m gonna go throw myself off that rockface.” Sans made a motion as though he intended to do so, but Grillby threw an arm around him, catching him off balance. At the same time Sans grabbed ahold of the other’s jacket in surprise when Grillby lifted him fully off his feet.

“We should go,” Grillby said between chuckles.

“we just got here,” Sans protested, the elation turning to dread with the realisation the long climb down was a very real thing. The fire monster turned his body towards the portal to outside and Sans quickly turned his face away, his grip becoming death-like. “no, no, no, i uh, i don’t think i can look at it anymore, grillbz-”

“It’s intense.” Grillby agreed.

“like a circus fire.”

The other quietly scoffed and turned around, very easily carrying the skeleton in his arms and around the large rock formation. When ‘outside’ was out of view, Sans visibly relaxed, his hands unbunching the fabric of Grillby’s jacket. For once, he didn’t feel too horrible for being carried, watching the other’s visage and his flames scurry around before fishing into his pocket for his phone, intent on taking a photo for himself.

“i mean it, y’know.”

“The circus fire?”

Sans chuckled, unable to help himself, “no, that it’s, um. special.” He hesitated, “i’m ok with keepin’ this a secret.”

As Grillby looked down to him, Sans got an idea. Carefully, he pulled his arm over the other’s shoulder and hitched himself up to give the other a kiss. At the back of his mind he realised he was becoming more bold with touch, when before he was hesitant and even a little scared. He hummed softly when Grillby brought him up closer, the kiss ending chaste yet sweet and leaving him grinning.

It was then that he decided to take the photo. Sans was bad with photos, although that was usually intentionally done to make Papyrus frustrated with the subject matter. This time, it appeared that his photography skills were just good enough to get half of Grillby’s visage in the shot. It was a bright point of light. Coupled with his horrible shooting job and Grillby being naturally unphotogenic, the picture was bad. Sans liked it anyway.

Unable to contain himself, the skeleton ducked his skull and snorted, “can’t believe that bonehead set me up.”

“...Proving himself to be a rather adept matchmaker, after all.”

“don’t let him find out,” Sans sighed softly, resettling in Grillby’s arms, “but he’s really cool.” Grillby merely hummed in agreement, his eyes dancing.

Eventually Grillby had to put Sans down in order to scale the rocks back down. It proved more difficult than before and the skeleton, already exhausted by the climb up, decided to cheat a little bit. They were small jumps and Grillby vehemently denied being taken with, so Sans ended up not using
too many shortcuts and waited below while the fire monster cautiously jumped down the last few outcrops.

At one point, Sans’ metaphorical heart dropped to the bottom of his rib cage when Grillby slipped. He moved faster than he cared to think about, throwing out his left arm with a shot of magic to catch the fire monster from falling from below.

“you ok?”

Grillby was huffing, brighter than before with his eyes wide in surprise as he was suspended in blue magic. Sans lowered him to the ground next to him and the fire monster leaned over with a deep breath, taking time to calm himself.

“I'm fine.”

Sans awkwardly patted him on the back, giving him a reassuring grin, “i know you said 'me too' when i said i fell for you, but you don’t gotta be literal about it.”

Grillby had something of a wry smirk and leaned up and kissed him. “Smart aleck.”

“no need to be so tripped up about it. it’s a slippery slope and i’d hate for you to be weighed dow-”

Another kiss ended the trail of puns and Sans mumbled something about his sediments not being taken seriously.

The rest of the trek through the cavern was less eventful, although Sans had to rest just before the clearing. His breaths were ragged and his bones felt sore with the shock of adjusting his shortcuts to different levels. On the plus side, he’d managed not to draw from his stamina and didn’t feel worse for wear in that sense. He just felt bone-tired.

He must have looked it, since Grillby was hovering nearby him. Sans had sat down on one of the rocky crags just outside the mouth of the cavern. He had his skull leaning on one of his hands and his sockets were closed.

“...Look exhausted.” Grillby commented, stooping to kneel next to him. Gently, he nudged the other’s shoulder and Sans only grunted softly in response. “...Could carry you again, if you prefer.”

Sans grunted again, this time in protest, but didn’t struggle when Grillby wrapped his arms around him. Instead he leaned into the touch, the warmth from the other’s body inviting with the bitter chill around him now that they were out in the open.

“...Stay awhile longer,” the fire monster breathed, resting his head against Sans’ skull, “I need to rest anyway.” The skeleton merely nodded, giving it his all not to fall asleep on the spot.

He did try.

It had been an eventful day, both physically and emotionally.

Grillby had won. He had lost, but he didn’t feel as though he’d actually lost anything. Grillby winning was just a silly thing to him. Meanwhile with the skeleton’s forfeit, the fire monster seemed a little relieved. Everything was more comfortable and normal. With their friendship growing to what it was now, he appreciated every moment Sans spent with him, his jokes, his laughter. The peculiar way his smile seemed to change into something more wonderful as a result.
With the snow and water evaporated from the fire monster’s extended rest, they were able to stay out a little longer. Sans did eventually fall asleep, cradled in Grillby’s lap as he himself dozed. Coming all the way out here had been an endeavour for both of them and Grillby was thankful for a reprieve.

Soon he was on the move again. He carried Sans in his arms, since he was a deep sleeper and didn’t want to wake up when jostled. The walk was quiet and the artificial light cast on the Underground to simulate daylight was eventually fading, settling on the snow around him as he walked. Once in sight, Grillby dodged the skeleton brothers’ puzzles once again, yawning occasionally until Snowdin came into view in the distance.

Home sweet home.

It had been a long walk and the fire monster wanted nothing but to eat something quick and curl up in bed again. He’d done none of the things he should’ve done for the restaurant, but he wouldn’t have changed the day for all the time in the world. It had been a good date; he’d gotten a couple great photos and Sans’ reaction to the hole in the mountain would be emblazoned in his mind forever.

Sans grumbled in his sleep when Grillby nudged him to wake upstairs in his suite. He gave him a kiss, hoping it would rouse him, but when Sans resettled without opening his eye sockets, the fire monster insisted.

“...Need to eat, after all that,” he reprimanded the skeleton quietly. Sans only grunted, obviously awake but having no desire to move on his own while in Grillby’s comfortable hold. “You give me no choice. Officially, I am withholding firing privileges until you get up.”

“no fair,” the skeleton muttered thickly, but made a halfhearted attempt to stand when Grillby tilted his body to the floor. Sans adjusted his hoodie over his hips and looked around, clearly not awake, “what time’s it..?”

“We were out all day. It’s just before 8 o’clock.”

Sans slumped and leaned against the island, recognising the table in Grillby’s kitchen. “think i should call it a night.”

The fire monster guided him out of the way and patted his shoulder on his way to the cupboards, “You’ve slept all this time.”

“m’always tired,” Sans said, as though it explained everything. “sorry.”

“Are you ill.?”

That got Sans’ attention, a few more cogs turning as his mind jerked into focus. “nah,” he replied, perhaps a bit too quickly, “my bro’s just tellin’ me to take it easy lately. it’s no biggie, honest.”

Grillby stood by the cupboard for a moment before pulling the door open and taking a small tin out, his expression unreadable. For a moment, he considered asking Sans to stay, but knew it was for the best if he relaxed at home after such an eventful day. Quiet in his own thoughts about what Papyrus had told him, the fire monster opened another cupboard where sealed metal canisters containing water were kept.

Sans watched him carefully, not expecting such a silent response. He shrugged and pushed himself off the island. If he got any more comfortable he’d start to drowse again. Grillby had heated the container after removing his gloves, the metal glowing a soft shade of dark red with his magic and the opening steamed after removing it.
“thought you hated water.”

“I do enjoy tea,” the other explained, as though the sight wasn’t peculiar. He added a few spoonfuls of something powdery into the hot water and set it down, taking half a step back until the water was no longer water but a pleasant, washed out orange liquid.

The process of turning water into something the fire monster could manage and consume was interesting, to say the least. Quietly and with curiosity, Sans watched as Grillby poured the contents into two thick metal mugs and slid one across the island to him with an accommodating gesture. Sans picked it up, feeling the soothing heat from the drink seep into his bones as the fire monster took a sip.

“......You are staring.”

Sans brought the mug to his teeth, hoping the embarrassed heat in his face would be hidden behind the wafts of steam from the tea. It smelled sweet, but it was a little bitter with hints of peppery spice and sour. He didn’t like it much, but the added sustenance was a blessing after all the activity and his magic drew in most of it in an instant.

“just.. wanted to say thanks… and maybe ask if i can stay here tonight.” Sans didn’t look up as the words left him, but he saw the bright light of the other’s flames kindle on the countertop surface. He wondered if it was too bold and idly turned the mug in his hands, preparing for another sip. “s’ok if not, just-” he realised he was backpedaling and stopped, feeling awkward. Now that he had a clearer mind, the worry of night-terrors was ever present.

Grillby meanwhile was watching him, several things going through his mind at once. It wasn’t the first time Sans had asked to spend the night, but that was before they had acknowledged their feelings for each other, and Sans had spent the nights alone downstairs in a booth. Often, Grillby would find the skeleton balled up so tightly and trembling that it hurt his soul, feeling as though he was unable to provide comfort.

At the same time… he didn’t know if it was wise for this to continue when their relationship was so new.

“yeah, um. i had a great time, grillby. and a great view. i, uh... i don’t think i’ll ever be able to forget what i saw. the world’s widened up for me, that’s for sure. i never really thought about anything beyond the underground, y’know? i’d catch the morose way monsters older than me’d harp on about the surface, but...” He realised he was rambling and stiffened slightly. “sorry. i should lea-”

“You can stay,” Grillby said quickly, not wanting Sans to feel rejected. He wanted him to stay, after all, but didn’t want to pressure him. He saw the way the tension eased from the skeleton’s shoulders and the way he exhaled, his breath sounding a little nervous.

After their tea, Grillby led him back towards the bedroom. With both of them feeling the exhaustion of the day, Sans slipped out of his shoes and hoodie and left them on the floor, retreating to sit on the bed. He watched as the fire monster placed his shoes out of the way and even picked up his hoodie to deposit it onto the chair by the desk. When he approached Sans, he held out his cell phone to the skeleton.

“good idea,” Sans mumbled, taking it and scrolling through his messages. He quickly sent off a few texts to his brother so he wouldn’t worry.
Papyrus (Last message sent: 8:48pm);

*dont come lookin 4 me
*spendin the night
*pls dont wink

- TOO LATE! MY WINK IS AS AUDIBLE AS THE TOWN BELL AND YOU WILL HEAR IT SHORTLY!
- THE WINK, I MEAN. NOT THE BELL. THAT WOULD BE AN UNGODLY NOISE AT THIS HOUR!
- I AM SENDING IT OFF VIA BROTHERLY CATAPULT DOWN THE STREET! WINK!!!!

*wow thx bro gnite

Then he simply put his phone away by tossing it beside the bed, shifting to accommodate Grillby who had slipped beside him. They stayed sitting for awhile in pleasant silence, with Sans recalling the magnificent sight he had seen in the cavern and the sunset, while Grillby hung his arms around him and pulled him close. A soft kiss was dropped onto the side of his skull and Sans smiled to himself, moving his own arm to grasp the other’s against his chest.

His dreams were soft and hazy once he’d fallen asleep, wrapped in the fire monster’s warm embrace. He dreamed of one day leaving the Underground, hand in hand with the one he loved. It didn’t matter how they got out, only that the sky stretched on forever and there were endless possibilities waiting for them. There was a small fear, but it was nothing compared to the sense of elation he felt at that moment.

Chapter End Notes

I think met with that kind of surprise, anyone would be caught off guard, even Sans. ;)

I live in a mountainous region, mountains are huuuuge so I think the Underground is similarly huge. Playing through the game you only see a tiny bit of it (hey, btw, what's that cabin on the outskirts of Snowdin? Think about it. We never go there!). This can be one of the various places outside of the 'main game'. Just some sparkle. Some razzle dazzle. <3

The next couple of chapters are um. Slightly spicy. And by spicy I mean I will have skip points in the author's notes for those of you who don't want to read intimate types of things. :3c

Thank you again for reading... your comments make my day/week!! <3<3<3
Grillby woke before Sans this time, thanks to his alarm. There had been a slight movement against his chest and he opened his eyes, rubbed his face and reached for his glasses. He felt it again when he was able to see clearly: Sans sprawled over his torso in a deep slumber, brow knitted with what looked like concern.

The skeleton twitched again and Grillby shifted slightly, moving his hand up to place at the base of the other’s skull, gently moving his fingers down the notches of bone in a soothing gesture. Sans jerked slightly, then resettled with a soft hum against him. The fire monster wondered if it was a peculiar dream the other was having, since his arms were wrapped around him tightly.

“Sans,” he called softly. With his voice, the other’s brow eased slightly. It always baffled Grillby how expressive the skeleton’s face was, even if he didn’t mean to be. He gently stroked the other’s spine, giving him a soft pat. “Sans, we need to get up.”

Sans made a noise between a groan and vehement rejection, burying his face against Grillby’s chest. He didn’t move after that.

The fire monster sighed quietly, trapped under the skeleton. If he didn’t have to open the restaurant, he would’ve been content to lie in bed all day. Gently, he pulled Sans up with him, his arms and legs moving automatically to encircle him.

“You need to wake up…” Grillby grumbled, rubbing over his face again with one hand. The other clapped against the other’s back and Sans just grunted softly in response. He gave him a few more minutes before giving the other’s lower spine a light flick.

As though given an electric shock, Sans jerked violently and his sockets flew open, pupils the size of pinpricks. All in one movement, he managed to shove at the fire monster while vaulting back, landing with a pained cry on the floor beside the bed. Grillby had landed on his back but quickly got up to witness Sans hunched over on the floor, every part of him trembling.

“Sans!”
“i’m ok,” the skeleton whispered after a moment, forcing away the disgusted feeling that had welled up in him immediately with the recalled memory. “i’m sorry, i’m.. i’m ok.”

Grillby pushed himself off the bed and settled on his knees beside him, unsure what to do to console him. “Sans, I didn’t… hurt you, did I?” There was fear in his voice and his flames reddened in worry. Cautiously, he placed a hand on Sans’ shoulder, feeling a shudder pass through his frame.

The other shook his head, unwrapping his arms from around himself with a deep breath. “nope. i’m good. you didn’t know.”

“…What happ-”

“bad memory came back, is all,” Sans murmured hastily, allowing himself to sit upright again. He eyed the darkened flames around the other’s visage, realising he’d never seen that colour before. It provided the perfect distraction. “what’s with the, uh…”

They went back to normal, if only slightly darker. Grillby didn’t say anything, but something in his eyes looked worried.

“honest, i’m alright,” Sans insisted, raising his hands in a placating gesture, “just… gave me a start. guess that’s one way to wake up, heh. i, uh.. don’t recommend doin’ it in the future though. if you don’t mind.”

Slowly, Grillby nodded, still staying quiet. In his mind he recalled Papyrus telling him Sans’ lower spine would cause him to jump, but he didn’t realise to what extent. He felt guilty for doing it previously, even a little chagrined he would push the skeleton like that. He didn’t know the reasoning behind it, but decided it was certainly a barrier best not broken.

Meanwhile, Sans grew uncomfortable with the silence and became self-conscious, idly rubbing at his right arm in thought. The tenderness they shared seemed to be shattered in his mind as he went over it. One day, he would have to come clean. A magically dead arm. Blind in one eye. A revulsion to touch to his spine. Cripplingly low health. He bowed his head as Grillby drew near and took his hands, gently pressing his mouth against his skull and leaving a lingering kiss.

“I’m sorry.”

“me too.”

“…No. If I have overstepped any boundaries, you must let me know. We’ve known each other for far too long to be keeping secrets now,” the other explained quietly, watching as Sans dipped his head a little lower.

Sans felt something inside of him wrench painfully at the thought, feeling guilty even if it hadn’t been the other’s intention. Oh, if Grillby only knew. His grin tugged artificially and leaned into another kiss, already missing the heat.

“i will.” Maybe eventually, but not then. He sighed softly, willing himself to calm down as he felt Grillby’s arms wrap around him and pull him close. “thanks.”

Breakfast was simple but hearty. Fried hash browns and tomato, eggs and a few water sausages with spice. To go with it, Sans was given freshly brewed coffee while Grillby merely popped a few beans into his mouth. The smell wasn’t unpleasant; Sans found that he didn’t mind it too much. He was far too preoccupied focusing on the previous day, feeling stiff and sore from the climbs and sleeping on
what felt like warm coals all night.

Apart from the lingering self-pity, he felt remarkably ok surprisingly enough. He even had a little bit of a buffer, 12 points strong. He sighed and rubbed over his face as Grillby got things ready upstairs before following the fire monster down to the restaurant.

“hey, i had a good time,” Sans started truthfully. With the other’s vague expression, he thought he saw the worry linger, but he shrugged it away. “i mean it. it was… probably somethin’ i’ll never be able to top, heh. fifty points an’ all..”

Grillby nodded again, remaining quiet as he pulled out a few things from the bar to clear up before opening, still stuck in his self-chastising thoughts.

Sans lingered, feeling a little insecure suddenly. Grillby hadn’t talked much during breakfast and now seemed distracted. It was becoming increasingly difficult to voice his appreciation, no matter how great the date and night had been. The skeleton idly scratched at his jaw, eye lights settling on the floorboards before giving a short sigh with a forced grin.

“welp. gotta head off to work. see ya later, grillby-”

The fire monster looked up sharply but when his eyes settled on the space where Sans was, the skeleton was gone. Trapped in his thoughts, a certain kind of self-depreciation filled him with his error and he spent most of the morning in a chilly mood.

Sans reappeared not too far from his own house. Outside was infinitely colder than what he’d been used to and he gave in to a shiver, strolling up to the door. Thanks to the dust in the caves, he needed something of a change of clothes. That and dodge Papyrus’ no doubt excited questions about his date.

Papyrus wasn’t home, though. A few sticky notes in the usual places revealed his brother would be in Hotland for patrol today. Sans breathed a sigh of relief and went about going upstairs to change. Once done, he realised he still had the pinecone in his pocket and turned it over in his hands, then put it in his drawer where he left his keys for safekeeping.

He patted his pockets, realising he left his phone at Grillby’s. It was probably still by the bed. Or under it. Sans sighed heavily, not wanting to go back just yet. It felt like Grillby was upset about something - no doubt he was to blame. Maybe he’d apologise at lunch break.

He kept his shortcuts to a minimum, only using them to bypass the puzzles so he wouldn’t have to recalibrate them after. As he had done so many times before, Sans found himself wandering the path to the Ruins’ doors and looked up at the tall gate with another thread of trepidation in his soul.

He wondered how the lady behind it was doing lately? Awkwardly, he knocked on the door, half-hoping for a response.

“Who is there?”

Something inside of him jumped at the reply. The voice was stronger, not quite as heart-wrenching. It was nice to hear. Admittedly, he had begun to worry the mother’s absence meant her child had dusted.

He wasn’t ready with a joke, so defaulted to one he knew off hand; “lettuce.”
“Lettuce who?”

“Lettuce in, it’s cold out here!” Sans had to grin a bit at the snorting, snuffling laughter from the other side. “how’ve you been, doll? everythin’ ok over there?”

There was hesitation from the other side of the door, then a lower tone, filled with relief, “My child woke yesterday… I am so grateful. I was beginning to worry they would not-” She stopped short when her voice cracked with fresh emotion.

“that’s good news,” the skeleton said expansively, leaning against the door. It wouldn’t do to have this poor mother piling on the ‘what ifs’ while their kid suddenly got better. “such a tough `lil monster, i bet. bouncin’ back like that. you must be so proud.” Laying it on thick, he thought a little bitterly, but the woman didn’t know him, and he really had no idea how to deal with this kind of thing.

“Perhaps bouncing would be the apt term… they are disoriented and mute. Admittedly, I am unsure how to proceed…”

“this your first kid?” Sans questioned curiously.

There was a pause, then a soft sob. “...There have been others.”

The skeleton wasn’t sure how to take that. A lot of emotion and sadness was behind those few words that he came to the conclusion that the monster behind the door had lost other children. Perhaps it was a weak monster line? Or bad luck?

“I’m sorry to hear that. didn’t mean to dig up bad memories.”

The silence stretched on for awhile, but there wasn’t any movement from the other side. Softly, Sans sighed and raised his hand to knock once more on the gate.

“...Who is there?”

“dishes.”

The rest of the day was spent much the same, the lady behind the door telling bad jokes about snails and trees while Sans did his best to tell jokes with the worst punchlines to keep things lighthearted. Once in awhile the lady said she had to leave and check on her charge, but she returned not ten minutes later, mostly in a better mood.

After awhile, Sans decided it was best for him to actually do some work. When he told the other this, her voice picked up and seemed sharper, as though excited.

“You… are a sentry, are you not?”

“sure, if you wanna call it that.” He spent more time sleeping at his station than actually doing his job, after all.

“I have a request.”

He barely knew her, yet she was asking something like this? Sans stared at the door with a lofted brow, unsure. He would have sent for a healer, but the monster beyond alluded to the fact she was at least powerful enough to manage her own. He offered to bring medicine, but she had rejected that
too, saying that it wouldn’t work on her child. It was all very puzzling.

And now she was asking for a favour?

“It is… actually a little silly,” she started, sounding shy, “but if you are out by these doors so often, perhaps we could speak again.”

Oh.

So the woman was lonely?

He got it. Grinning a little, he nodded, then mentally chastised himself for the action and spoke up, “sure thing, old lady.” For some reason, agreeing seemed to be the right thing to do, even without the stranger’s grateful laughter from beyond the door.

Eventually he had to leave. Sans bade his goodbyes and left the doors to wander around on his route. With the other’s news, it made him feel a little better. Not necessarily that he had been dwelling on it, but because there was another kid out there that had Fallen Down but got back Up again. Suddenly things didn’t seem so lonely for him either. It was a little peculiar though.

The forest surrounding Snowdin was colder that day, magic winds kicking up a storm and blowing snow through the air like a true winter. Sans couldn’t help but fall back on the memory of the subtle breeze from the surface as he pushed onwards. It had been real, the soft wind a whisper through his bones. He found himself wanting to feel it again.

Man, he hoped he didn’t mess things up with Grillby. As though summoned by the thought, Sans reached into his pocket, thinking his phone was there. He sighed in aggravation when he remembered that he forgot it again. He guessed he would have to go to Grillby’s in person to apologise for leaving so abruptly that morning.

Few things in the forest stood out that day. There were still odd little tracks in the snow, like someone had been dragging a stick, but other than that there didn’t seem to be anything out of the ordinary. Sans walked back, still sticking with his original plan of keeping his magic usage to a minimum until he rebuilt the item box. It took a lot more effort than he was willing to put up with in the end, and after Papyrus’ sliding ice puzzle he warped the rest of the way, reappearing behind the restaurant.

It was later than his usual time. Grillby’s was packed, save for his usual seat, and the fire monster was flitting around, rushing to fulfil orders. Sans grinned at the chorused greeting from the regulars and gave a nod to Grillby once seated, although he was sure he was too busy to notice.

Half of Snowdin must have decided to have supper at Grillby’s. Normally he wasn’t so busy that he couldn’t drop by to say hello, but the fire monster seemed to be entirely occupied enough to merit a second waiter at least, Sans thought. The skeleton swivelled on his stool and waited for a free moment, going over his apology in his mind so things wouldn’t feel so awkward.

It took awhile, but Grillby was finally able to come to his side. Sans gave him something of an awkward grin.

“heya.”

“Good evening,” the fire monster sounded almost out of breath, “I apologise, Sans... Are you ordering anything?”

“oh.” Sans kicked up a shoe onto one of the legs on his stool and shrugged. “whaddabout another
one of those fiery whiskeys? didn’t get to try mine last time.”

“Whiskey, dirty, caramel-” Sans heard the words listed off and chanced a look to the sealed echo blossom hidden behind the bar as Grillby went back to work. He tried to keep himself from getting nervous, especially with so many people around. Maybe he should’ve just left, seeing it this busy.

Others in the bar watched as Grillby made the drink, his flames redder than usual and flaring up as the alcohol turned it the brilliant blue. He poured it and slid it across the bar to Sans’ hand, caught effortlessly. He then noticed a pair of arms in the air from the Dogi and glanced apologetically at the skeleton, who was staring down at his drink.

The entire bar was its usual hum of conversations and clinking of dishes, something Sans could get lost in when he allowed himself to. He looked at the blue flame in the glass and swirled its contents, not wanting a repeat of nearly setting himself on fire - especially not with an audience.

He tried once or twice to get Grillby’s attention, but the bartender was too busy or simply walked by too quickly for Sans to flag him down. Irritably, once he managed to lock eyes with the fire monster, he took a large swig of his still-burning drink.

The other’s fire suddenly brightened, pluming higher with sparks firing off in a myriad of bright tonal shifts. Several of the patrons laughed as Grillby covered his face in apparent embarrassment and Sans grinned impishly. He idly wondered if there was even a merit to giving himself a point in his favour anymore, but that seemed worth it.

The whiskey had been strong, slightly sweet with a nutty taste that went down smooth. It had just a hint of smokiness, which he could appreciate. It was nearly comparable to a kiss that filled his chest cavity with warmth and he sighed, pushing a gentle plume of smoke out of his teeth and into the air.

Red had been interested with the other’s silent exchange and speculated something about Grillby’s behaviour. “Grill’s been chilly, er.. all day,” he told Sans, who managed to cough at the afterburn and pounded his sternum to clear up his agitated magic. “Thought maybe somethin’ happened ’tween you two?”

“nope, not a goddamn thing,” the skeleton murmured thickly, swirling his glass again. The flame was out at least, allowing him to sip a little more carefully on the drink. “just been busy today.”

“Funny, you bein’ busy must’ve really put a damper on the ol’ rocket’s mood.”

“aw, c’mon, red. you tryin’ to steal my jokes now?” Sans couldn’t help but wink at the bird, but his gaze was seeking out Grillby, who was trying to not make eye contact. His fire was brighter and he appeared to be busy with the canine guard, excusing himself by gesturing apologetically for his actions. Sans had to laugh at that; or at least try to. He was starting to feel… weird.

“Not at all!” the bird squawked with a slight ruffle to his feathers. “Just somethin’ I’ve noticed about him. Was quiet, like usual, but I could tell somethin’ was buggin’ im. Thought you’d know?”

Sans made an inquisitive noise from behind his glass mid-sip as he forcibly drew his attention back to Red Bird. The drink was making him warm and he stared at it, perplexed. “nah, i don’t know, um…” He shifted in his seat, feeling a dip of heat in his spine with a soft inhale. “don’t know, um, what’s up with.. with him,” he finished, his mind running over itself a few times. Why did he feel so warm?

Over Red’s speculation, the feeling eventually became worse - or was it better? He shuddered, shifting on his chair again as the heat plunged lower. Unable to peek or move too obviously to shake
out what had to be a little visitor in his rib cage, Sans huffed softly over his whiskey.

“-and that’s when I decided, y’know what? Why should she get all the seed when I’m out all day, scrapin’ at trees to get the really good nu-” Red stopped, eyeing the skeleton with his droopy eyes and leaning forward over the bar to see better, “-you ok, Sans?”

Sans was clutching at his hoodie, trying very hard not to breathe too harshly nor betray the fact that anything was happening beneath his clothes. “yup. um. can’t seem to hold, um.. my liquor, heh. it’s, um…” He turned his head away from Red, consciously scratching at his skull to hide the fact he was grimacing with effort. “cause i’m a skele.. ton.. goes right-” he stopped, forcing himself to inhale slowly as the heat plummeted lower and settled into his hip box, “-right through me, hah.”

Red seemed convinced enough that he didn’t press it, at least. “Well, yeah! It’s been what? Decades since you’ve tied one on?” the bird squawked, a trill marking the end of his words. “And goin’ straight for the whiskey like an ol’ boozehound.” A woof from the other end of the bar caught his attention and Red turned abruptly. “Not you, Doggo!”

While Red was preoccupied, Sans gingerly lifted a leg to rest his foot on one of the supports keeping the stool balanced. It didn’t seem to help much, only invited the flame to move. If he had lips, he’d be biting them but since he didn’t have any, he pressed his teeth together. As he pushed himself against the countertop, Sans curled tensely as the heat teased him and made his bones increasingly sensitive.

Damn, why did he have to do that? For what - a prank? And now he was paying the ultimate price. What was worse is that every time he moved the flame got bolder, travelling in slow, arching coils against his ichiums, coaxing him to move his hips ever so slightly to accommodate the movement. It felt... really nice, he realised. His soul was trembling with silent excitement and horror that someone would find out, though.

As Grillby passed by, Sans tried to get his attention again, but the fire monster darted past him, beelining for the kitchen. Sans made a dejected sound, biting back a threatening moan when the flame snaked up and licked at his coccyx. It caused him to flinch, his magic coiling restlessly in his chest where he held it at bay. He snuck his other foot up on the support to join his other, pressing his patellae together to force the feeling to disperse enough so he’d be ready to ask Grillby to get rid of it when he next passed.

It felt amazingly good though. He hummed, the sound soft and only audible to himself yet it felt like it was at full volume. Sans took another precautionary sip of his drink, pressing his other hand onto the cushion between his femurs to resituate himself. Maybe if he drank a lot, if any of the sounds he was holding back came out, he could blame being drunk. It had admittedly been a long time since he’d gotten shitfaced.

He saw the bartender’s glow from the corner of his periphery vision and leaned back, only to choke another appreciative noise back when the flame curled upwards along his ilium. He covered his mouth and coughed loudly while Red tutted him and patted his back, thinking the alcohol was to blame.
Grillby was gone again Sans realised hotly, too busy to gain his attention when he needed it the most. He swatted away Red’s wing irritably and muttered something about having another drink, sounding much too breathy for his liking.

Yeah, he definitely needed another drink.

Thankfully, Red slid his own over. “Grills always pours me two, but you can have one on me!”

“wow, uh, th.. thanks,” the skeleton repressed another shudder of warmth as he reached over and grabbed the glass. It was much stronger than whiskey and he coughed again. Maybe mixing drinks wasn’t the best idea, but it was better than voluntarily ingesting fire to gain Grillby’s attention.

He leaned over the counter again and cradled his skull in his arms, looking dead ahead to the rows and rows of liquor behind the bar. Eventually, Grillby would have to come check on him, right? Sans squirmed a little as he sat, huffing deeply in the corner of his jacket’s elbow and closing his eye sockets. It was becoming increasingly difficult not to move his hips with the flame’s explorations and gasp with every surge of heat around his bones.

Everything felt hot and wonderful, reminding him of several moments shared between him and fire monster; most of all the intimate, racy, fleeting little touches on their date. Sans shifted again as he heard the firm clicks of Grillby’s footwear approach, ready to be given the cold shoulder once more.

His legs were shaking and Sans had one arm curled against his chest, lightly tugging at the fabric, wanting something to hold onto. His hips wanted to move, he wanted to feel more, aching for touch despite being nervous and hesitant and in full view of everyone.

He didn’t even look up when the bartender stopped and stood beside him, seemingly waiting. He heard a brief exchange of how he appeared to be acting oddly, as Red explained it, and Grillby gently put a hand on his shoulder as though to console him.

God, he wanted more. Sans couldn’t help the soft, needy whine that passed his teeth when the warmth circled inside of his pelvis, making his posture jump slightly and his breath hitch. He immediately felt embarrassed for the noise and swallowed the knot in his nonexistent throat, unable to meet Grillby’s gaze.

Grillby felt the jolt, something of a concerned expression passing through the fires of his visage when he suddenly realised what was happening. His soul gave a lurch and as though magnesium caught fire in the restaurant, his flames shot up and brightened enough to light the Underground.

Grillby felt such embarrassment and horror that he actually yelled at the flame hidden under Sans’ clothes;

“MANNERS!!”

The entire restaurant went still, watching the pair. Sans flinched and whirled around, causing the other to remove his hand from his shoulder. His sockets were devoid of light as his gaze settled on the bartender. The heat and flame had left his pelvis abruptly and he was suddenly very unsure about everything - the only thing he knew was that every eye was on him.

Was he not supposed to have liked it as much as he did? Was it wrong? Did… he maybe offend
Grillby in some way? He would have told him if he’d crossed a line, drinking his fire, right? That’s why the fire monster had taken the flame away?

Shakily, Sans grinned slightly, now convinced he’d made things worse. “s.. sorry, grillbz,” he muttered, his voice sounding very small yet clear in the silence of the restaurant. Everyone was staring at them. “i, uh… p-put it on my tab.”

Grillby was about to say something more, but Sans was too mortified to stay and listen. Without thinking it through, he warped on the spot and landed a few feet behind his own house and kicked at the wooden shingles in frustration.

Chapter End Notes

Nothing TOO spicy happened during the skipped scene, just a bit of playing fire exploration that got Sans hot ’n bothered. ;33 But I know there is very possibly at least a few readers that don’t feel comfortable with um... intimate stuff, but want to continue reading. That's fine with me!!

Grillby!!! I'M PRETTY SURE YOU SCARED SANS HALF TO DEATH, OMG.

For the record, Grillby's fire is very much a part of him and he can control it as long as it's within reach... but if it's not? 8D;;; Golly!

The next chapter is by far the spiciest. I give it a rating of 4/5 jalapeños but if you go by ghost peppers, it's 1/30. _(´ ﾋ´`)∠_
Sans convinces Grillby to fill him with fire. Some words might have been mixed together and someone over-reacts.

Chapter Notes

Chapter is... spicy. If you don't want to read it, you can stop reading at [He wanted to feel it again.] line break and continue reading after the second line break at [The fire monster couldn’t help but smirk at that].

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Sans would have gone inside, but he felt too warm, too worked up to sit around. He regretted warping away, realising that half the residents of Snowdin would be asking where he went. It was likely Papyrus would know what his shortcuts meant soon enough.

Increasingly aggravated, he kicked the house again then settled to sit in the snow. The outside chill should be enough to calm him down. His breathing was still stuttered, his body still warm with the flush of want as his mind went over and over on repeat of what had happened. All the textbooks he read pinpointed to one little word.

Intimacy.

Sans covered his face, feeling both the burn of embarrassment and desire. God damn it.

He had to make things right, but he had to wait until Grillby’s was closing.

The wait until the eleventh hour was maddening. Sans got up, paced, sat back down. He fidgeted with his zipper toggle, tugged on his clothes. He went inside and ate something, a few snacks that Papyrus had hidden away in the cupboards that Alphys had sent along with the synth materials.

He tried working on the item box, but he couldn’t focus. He managed to score a few more details into a couple of planks before abandoning them in a mess in the living room. He kicked the sock and it landed several feet away from the TV. The hours were spent in silent, irritable impatience.

He was aware of the irony.

Papyrus wasn’t back yet, but by the time he got home Sans had already retreated to the back of the house again, smoothing out the snow with his foot by pressing zigzag lines through. When he heard the door open and close followed by his name being called, Sans warped behind Grillby’s to avoid him. He’d catch up some other time.

It had been a long wait. If his experience was anything to go by, Sans thought it was close to closing
time. There were only a few people left in the bar, having checked the window briefly. Red Bird and Greater Dog were having a friendly chat, all the rest were gone for the day. Sans could have sighed in relief and retreated to the shadows to wait for the last couple patrons to leave.

His soul fluttered in apprehension when he heard the door chimes clink and two pairs of footsteps leave the wooden floors and out into the snowy street. Sans waited until they were down the road before turning the corner and pushing the door open, catching the fire monster by surprise.

It seemed like his flames were lower for that brief moment, but picked up instantly when their gaze met. Sans blundered forward and past Grillby, feeling a hot rush through his body as he quickly uttered, “we need to talk.”

Whatever Grillby had thought, it hadn’t been that. He had spent the majority of the day silently chastising the errant flame - and his work had suffered for it. Orders were messed up. Dishes were served too hot or singed. Drinks were wrong or off. He spent most of the time apologising and giving away food for his mistakes rather than simply redoing them all.

He was tired and above all else, he felt as though he had overstepped more than one boundary. The errant flame had been revealing all of Sans’ most intimate secrets to him, making his exterior hotter than usual, paler than anyone had ever seen him. A few nicknames of 'goldy' had passed between customers and he felt ashamed as every little salacious detail was revealed to him about Sans’ body.

He pressed his back up against the door. Sans hadn’t gone far, but he was rigid and standoffish, yet something about him was agitated. He wasn’t meeting his eyes and his gaze was fixated on the floor.

“I’m sorry,” both of them said at once. Sans perked up slightly, the first to break as he shot his glance from the floor to the bartender.

“wait… why’re you sorry? i’m the one that screwed up,” the skeleton said plaintively, looking a little confused.

Grillby looked equally concerned, if not more, “I… You.. did?”

Sans shuffled where he stood, not knowing what to make of Grillby’s question. Normally he was so careful and considerate, catching him off guard was something Sans wasn’t used to at all. All this time spent pacing and waiting, yet he hadn’t figured out what exactly he wanted to say.

So he blurted the first thing that came to mind, “yeah, i mean, that’s why you were quiet, right? mad at me? i totally get it. i, uh…”

“Sans,” the other spoke quickly, “I wasn’t mad, not at you. I was.. at myself, for pushing. Your brother had warned me, yet I did not know to what extent.”

“heh, what a blab,” Sans muttered wryly, shifting uncomfortably on the spot, “what’d he say?”

“….Mentioned against touching your lower back. He did not give a reason, however.”

The skeleton sighed harshly, burying his hands in his pockets. “total blabbermouth,” he groused, picking at the fabric, “not exactly true, but not wrong either.”

“Oh..?”

“you’ve touched there before,” Sans shrugged evasively at the memory, “a, uh, flick… that kinda is a no-go for me.”
“...Bad times.” Grillby guessed, his voice soft and understanding. “I’m sorry.”

“it’s fine, like i said, you didn’t know.” Sans shrugged again, then inhaled, “as for me… i got the impression you were mad ‘cause, um…”

Grillby watched as the skeleton fidgeted, unable to meet his gaze. Sans felt like if he stared for long enough, he’d be able to glare a hole into the floorboards at his feet. The heat he felt spread throughout his bones at the lingering memory.

“um… ‘manners’, grillbz? did i, uh… do somethin’ wrong?” It was very much a concern of his. The thought of Grillby being upset with him was crushing Sans.

The silence passed between them and he saw Grillby move out of the corner of his eye socket. When he had the courage to look at him directly, the fire monster was covering his face, flames flickering in pale golds and whitish embers and whipping in subtle, nervous arcs.

“...My fire, and by extension me,” his voice was very low, almost a kind of hiss, “I... I would not have permitted, not without your consent. It was so grossly out of line. I panicked. Never have I dreamed that-”

“kinda liked it,” the skeleton murmured, the memory spreading more warmth throughout his bones. Grillby stopped his sentence dead on, but his fire plumed higher around his hands. This time, Sans was able to gauge the reaction with accuracy. “...cover your face all you want, grillbz. i can still see you’re blushin’. ” He couldn’t help the grin, teasing the other.

The fire monster pushed his face into his hands further, doubling down. “...So embarrassed, Sans...”

The skeleton moved closer towards Grillby until they were only a step apart. Carefully, he pulled the other’s hands away from his face and replaced them with his own. Grillby allowed him to, but his fire was skittering around, excited and nervous, shame plainly etched against the creases of his closed eyes. He pushed his back against the door, almost shrinking away as Sans drew closer and lifted his glasses off his face.

“you’re pretty shy for a fire monster,” the skeleton murmured, “here i was ready to believe ‘em, all my friends tellin’ me to watch out… when i can make you just as flustered as you make me.”

Hesitantly, Grillby nodded, unsure why his glasses were taken from him. Automatically, his flames stuttered when Sans’ hands drifted from the sides of his face and down his neck in a shiver.

“gotta admit, i kinda like that,” Sans grinned, watching the other’s face as he looped a finger under the other’s bow tie and gave it a light tug. “i wouldn’t’ve minded some privacy if.. your fire wanted to explore.”

There was the reaction he was craving. The bartender lit up in brilliant colours, golds and ambers racing across his body, even hiking up from his shoulders in small sparks of white and blue. Sans gave him a grin and pulled him down by his bow tie, itching for a kiss. Grillby seemed almost hesitant but he allowed it, his hands finding the other’s shoulders.

Sans whimpered into the kiss as the bartender deepened it, feeling a rush of heat curl up inside of him. It was different than Grillby’s own, building up a pushing ache as his magic coiled restlessly in his body. His phalanges twirled the silken fabric of the bow tie and gently tugged at one side, loosening it.

“did you.. wanna try?” Sans was sure he’d never heard his own voice at that level. Low and husky, sending a shudder through the other’s body. Grillby didn’t say a word, but leaned in closer to capture
another kiss, this time with more feeling while keeping it slow. Sans’ ache continued as he pushed
against the fire monster, needing to invite more touch as though to prove he wasn’t upset.

He hummed against the kiss, fingers bunching at Grillby’s collar and fighting with one of the buttons
while the other’s hand slipped between them to pull down the zipper of his jacket. He pushed one
panel of the fabric aside and grazed his fingers along the left side of Sans’ ribs through his shirt,
eliciting a sharp inhale from the skeleton.

“takin’ that as a ‘yes’, huh,” he breathed harshly, the touch through even his clothes sending
pinpricks of something wonderful throughout his bones. He laughed softly, sliding his own hand
down the front of Grillby’s vest and around his waist, connecting with the deadbolt to lock the door.
He didn’t want another untimely interruption.

Grillby had buried his face in his neck, peppering the bones of his vertebrae with soft kisses that
made him tingle. The sensation was different than before, every light touch pinpointing to a growing
heat inside of him. It made him feel needed, wanted, sending a shivering shock up his spine when
Grillby’s hand snaked between his hoodie and his shirt to push him closer.

“...Upstairs?” the bartender suggested, his mouth caressing the side of Sans’ neck. Feeling the knot
of excitement in his rib cage, the skeleton nodded with a sharp inhale. He slid his phalanges back up
the front of the other’s vest, plucking a few buttons free on the way before giving the unravelling
bow tie another encouraging tug.

Grillby was going slowly, wanting Sans to feel the best he could, while at the same time still hesitant
on overstepping any bounds. His core was alight and burning hotter with every urging pull against
his clothes. Sans had tilted his head up, hungry for another kiss; as he did, the world dipped for a
moment and they both stumbled.

They clung to each other and Grillby gently twisted his face away, squinting around the room. The
door behind him was gone and it didn’t smell as much as fast food and booze. Sans was panting
softly, eagerly pulling him backwards. The skeleton had just used one of his shortcuts, not wanting to
part for even a moment; they were up at the top of the stairs, a few feet into Grillby’s suite.

Sans hummed into another kiss, shrugging his jacket down so it hung at his elbows. His fingertips
raked against the other’s shoulder, his right hand holding onto his glasses to keep them safe.

The fire monster twisted his face again, his breathing picked up and hot. “Hasty,” he observed, then
gasped softly when the skeleton pulled up a little, burying his face against his exposed neck. He felt
the chilly tongue against his form and bunched his fingers into the fabric of Sans’ shirt, giving in to a
soft moan. “...Trying again?”

Sans hummed in the affirmative against the other’s neck, feeling his breaths get more ragged and
quick. Another idea formed and he closed his mouth over the side of Grillby’s neck and drew in the
flames, at the same time pushing his magic out. He felt a peculiar little jerk and Grillby’s hold on him
tightened with a rasping grunt.

Hazily, he pulled away slightly to inspect the place. There was a little mark, sizzling and dark red
against the other’s neck as Grillby’s fire attempted to cover over it. Sans laughed softly, his breath
catching as he blew on the small fire to push it aside.

“bingo,” he murmured in satisfaction as he drew up closer to the fire monster. He allowed the other
to slip his jacket’s sleeve from his arm, curling against him to drink in the steadily building heat and
mark him again. Then again, until Grillby’s breaths were ragged like his own. His chest was heaving
as Sans fumbled with more buttons, wanting more surface to cover.
Sans attempted a few more half-steps towards the bedroom, pulling Grillby with him while shedding his jacket and leaving it on the floor. He sighed as the other’s arms encircled him fully, the deft rubs of his palms on his back flooding him with even more heat, more care. He was able to pull the bow tie loose, letting it slide from around the fire monster’s neck and fall to the floor.

“i want-” he murmured before the words were consumed by another kiss, making him arch into Grillby’s touch. Sans moaned softly, using the next pause to try again, “i need-”

A few more paces, kisses and fervent touches passed between them as they moved closer to the bed. Sans’ legs were starting to feel as though they were made of gelatin, the feeling made all too real when the other’s hand briefly passed over the crest of his hip bone, causing his legs to shake. He allowed himself to exhale a shuddering breath in anticipation, once more feeling the brief heat and hesitation.

Grillby was patient; he would understand if Sans wanted to stop at any time. He had a feeling he would push himself, so the fire monster led him to the bed, sending love and tenderness through every kiss and lingering touch. The skeleton was a breathy mess, grasping at him and plucking free the buttons of his shirt. Gently, the bartender retrieved his glasses from the other, replacing them on his face with the brief pause. He wanted to see him, after all.

“We can stop anytime you wish,” the fire monster breathed. Sans had taken another half-step backward, pulling him with him. The backs of his knees bumped against the side of the bed and buckled beneath him, so distracted in wonderful touches and new sensations that he barely knew which way was up when his tailbone met with the mattress.

“i want to-” Sans gasped, but found he couldn’t make contact with the fire monster’s bright eyes now that he could see him. “i really want this,” he added, leaning up to bury his face against the other’s neck again.

Grillby inhaled sharply with the presence of tongue, the shooting pinpoints of chill as before soon threatening to rob him of breath. He knew Sans had figured out how to mark him but he wasn’t sure how. Sans was tugging at his clothes, trying in a not-so-indiscreet way to unbutton the remaining fastenings of his shirt and push it open. He wanted to explore as much as Grillby did. The fire monster’s torso was his canvas and Sans found he wanted to mark every inch of him, craving intimate touches and sounds.

The fire monster slipped onto the mattress beside him, taking a moment to remove his gloves and discard them to the side. Where they landed didn’t matter as he heard another soft hiss from the skeleton, echoing Grillby’s touch by gliding his hand down to the fire monster’s waist. The heat in the room was rising with every movement and soon Sans was panting despite his efforts to keep calm.

“Need a break..?” the fire monster murmured, his turn to return the little marks as his hands pushed under Sans’ shirt. He felt the ribs tremble, each and every bone heavy with anticipated and nervous breaths. “...Perhaps we should slow down, Sans.”

The skeleton couldn’t help the shudder that went through him of warm hands against his bare bones. God, Grillby was touching him and he couldn’t get enough, even with the brief pass over his ribs. He whimpered softly, loving the feel of the other’s hands on him and wanted more, only for Grillby to withdraw them just as quickly.

“n.. no way,” he protested, fumbling for the other’s hands with his own, “do that again-”

Grillby noticed the way the skeleton’s hands were shaking and carefully lifted them up to his mouth,
kissing each bony finger slowly and tenderly while Sans watched with a more flustered looking expression.

“There’s no rush... we have all the time in the world.” The fire monster couldn’t help the tease, coaxing a nervous laugh from Sans. He was avoiding his look again and Grillby laced their fingers together, holding their hands between them. “If you feel even the slightest bit uncomfortable... I want you to tell me.”

“ok,” the skeleton whispered, inhaling a little deeply to calm himself. He chanced a look to Grillby’s face, his own face feeling warmer, “kinda hard, though.”

He saw the veiled smirk and chuckled, giving the other a slight push against his hands. “not everything is innuendo, y’know-” The laughter seemed to ease some of the tension and Grillby smiled a little more, leaning in for a sweet kiss. Sans pushed forward with a soft sigh, a fluttering feeling nestling itself in his rib cage as he parted his mouth, deepening the kiss.

Through the intimacy, Sans felt another subtle shock through his system when their tongues touched. He craved more but allowed Grillby to set the pace, agonisingly slow yet sweet. However it was, it had him aching in the best way, feeling so cared for, so loved. It brought back the pillowy cushion of comfort to his heart and soul, making him sigh again when the kiss ended.

“i mean it, y’know,” he continued, hesitantly pushing against Grillby again. The fire monster had shifted so they were more comfortable on the bed and those bright eyes were watching him, half-closed and every breath deep and audible. “’bout you.. explorin’.”

Grillby hummed, releasing one of Sans’ hands to trace an aching line of heat across the skeleton’s clavicle through his shirt. It then moved up, curling around the base of his jaw with a flood of heat that sent another anticipated shudder through Sans’ shoulders.

“...Fill you with fire.” It was barely a hint of a whisper, flames crackling with each syllable. Sans nodded against his hand gently, his teeth parting when Grillby’s thumb moved over the bone of his chin. The reaction brought up the fire monster’s temperature a little more, making the air around them a little hazy with the heat.

“Are you certain?”

Sans had closed his eye sockets, unable to meet Grillby’s adoring gaze. He was trembling, wishing the other wouldn’t tease him this way. “please,” he whispered back. He wanted to feel it again.

He was expecting it to be instantaneous, like a flame creeping up his arm or through his ribs just like before. Instead, the other kissed him, his tongue sending a live pulse of fire through his mouth. He inhaled sharply with the heat as it encompassed him, drawing more fire inward. It caused Sans to grasp the other’s shirt to gain purchase, to hold onto something tightly to keep himself upright.

The spice of the kiss continued as he felt the warming sensation move to the back of his mouth and slip into his rib cage, agitating the magic he had been dutifully restricting since warping them upstairs. It clung to where it could like molten rock before tracing every notch of bone in his spine.
His body jolted in surprise, unable to stop the quick succession of gasps against the kiss as everything lit up around him. His grip tightened as every bit of bone in him submitted to the wondrous enveloping sensation of being held in an embrace, making hot little stings of pleasure shoot down his spine. The feeling chased down to his pelvis quicker than before and it was all he could do not to cry out with the overwhelming feeling when the fiery kiss ended.

Grillby held him close and watched, entranced with the sight. Sans handled his fire well, even if every movement was jerky and he was holding back the harsh gasps that threatened to turn into more vocal iterations of pleasure. The fire monster could see the buildup of magic in the other’s torso, only marginally hidden by his shirt that he’d left hitched up above a few ribs. His spine was exposed, giving Grillby a view that reminded him of a fiery blossom.

Sans clenched his teeth together, the searing heat coupled with the flames’ exploration driving his breaths deep and urgent. He had to keep quiet, he thought, otherwise Grillby might take them away. It felt too good to care, unable to help the soft whine as a small trail of fire circled against his coccyx.

“...Is it...too intense?” he heard Grillby ask, his own breaths just as deep as he was getting excited about seeing him this way. Sans shook his head slightly, his hips moving forward of their own accord. He wondered if it was the same flame as before, teasing his most sensitive areas but now given the go-ahead to explore on their own. It was maddening.

Sans found he couldn’t do much more than grip at Grillby’s clothes, breaths so urgent that his magic was spiking again and coiling to the point where he was unable to resist where it went. An ethereal push against his pubis was enough to wrench a desperate groan from him and Sans finally opened his sockets and looked between them to see what exactly was happening.

The entirety of his rib cage was engulfed in magical fire but there were only a few small flames settled into his hip box, flitting around as every caress undid him just a little more. His breaths became more ragged and his hips jerked when one of the bolder flames inched between the holes of his sacrum.

“g-grillby-” he moaned, his voice shaking and he slumped backward and threw his hands beside him to steady himself. His legs were spread apart and bent at the knees, pelvis twitching as his spine arched due to the increasing buildup of pleasure. He didn’t know how such a small place could feel so good. “oh... oh god! hnn!”

Sans looked absolutely beautiful this way. The fire monster leaned over him and Sans automatically clung to him as the flame licked lower, coaxing his magic to condense. The skeleton was starting to swear, short, breathy, unintelligible little pleas cracking from his voice as his bones started to glow with heat.

“Too much?” the fire monster inquired, making sure his lover was alright. Sans only answered with a series of breathless gasps, squeezing his eye sockets shut as both of his hands found the back of Grillby’s shirt. As much as it disappointed him to do so, he only wanted Sans to be comfortable with their growing intimacy. Burn too fast and things would be finished too soon, he found.

Grillby recalled a few of the flames that had made a home of the skeleton’s pelvis and Sans whined softly in protest at the loss.

“no, c.. c’mon, grillbz,” he panted, shifting under the fire monster. The movements seemed so needy that Grillby found the look erotic. “d-don’t light me up an’ le.. leave me hah.. hangin’-” A flame chased out the last word from Sans’ teeth, mingling his desperate tone with the rush of fire.

Sans sounded so good this way, Grillby was unable to help himself as he guided the other down,
straddling his hips. He withdrew a few more flames as the skeleton bucked his hips again, missing the movement that felt so good up until it had left. It had literally ignited a passion in him, impatient for more as he pulled Grillby down with both hands firmly grasping his collar. He crushed their mouths together and the fire monster moved against him, causing him to gasp again as another sensation built up against his sensitive bones.

Was this the intimacy he’d been depriving himself of all this time? If he had any thought processes free besides literal disbelief and ecstasy, Sans would have mentally chastised himself over it.

Sans’ grip was loosened slightly as Grillby moved down and inched up his shirt, which had started to smoke with his fire’s excitement. Sans helped to remove it and it was flung away, leaving his glowing bones open and heaving while his magic sparked under his ribs.

“Are you alright?” Grillby asked again; he still wasn’t sure how his composition could affect anyone other than fire monsters. If he had been honest with himself, half his embarrassed and mortified state had been because of the non consensual nature his fire had coerced the skeleton to submit. But now… Sans had asked for this specifically.

“hot-” the skeleton gasped, unable to express any level of coherency besides that. He was sweltering, beads of sweat slipping down the sides of his skull. He groaned again in protest when the fires died down, vehemently shaking his head. “no, no, no, keep… keep goin’, grillbz-”

The fire monster couldn’t help but smirk at that, glad that he hadn’t been harming the other. Instead he slipped one arm between the skeleton’s lower back and the mattress to lift him up and adjust their position so Sans was on top. Sans was attempting to keep himself together, blearily going along with what the fire monster had planned as every part of him was increasing in sensitivity. Every breath burned in just the right way and his body was trembling so much that he thought he was going to fall apart.

‘I love this’ he wanted to say, ‘I want you’. His breaths harsh and his mind fuddled, Sans let Grillby pull him into his lap as the last embers clung to the inside of his ribs, sensitive and hot. He exhaled, a dazed and absolutely enamoured grin on his face as he leaned forward to steal another kiss, “i love you-”

Both of them froze. Gears grinding back into place, it only clicked what he’d said when Sans heard Grillby very softly whisper back, “...You do?”

The inferno died out.

All this time and they hadn’t even said it out loud. Sans felt a warmer blossom kindle in his chest and he buried his face against the other’s shoulder to hide, clinging to him. He didn’t mean to. He really didn’t mean to, but it was too late. He’d slipped up and now he felt embarrassed and self-conscious again.

“...heat of the moment,” he murmured quietly, hoping the other would accept the excuse. He pushed himself to rest on the backs of his legs, still trembling. “i, uh, i meant to s-say, ‘i love this’ and.. and ‘i want y-you’.” If he said it quickly enough, maybe Grillby would overlook it?
The fire monster was bright though, brighter than before. Obviously, Sans thought he’d ruined things. Grillby’s mind was racing a mile a minute, flames whipping around his visage to hide his expression of surprise. The silence was going on for too long and the fire monster grew increasingly and painfully aware of it the longer Sans remained quiet.

“i’m sorry,” the skeleton said, hesitation in his voice, “i mashed those two things up good. made things, um, awkward, and i, uh-” The rest of his sentence was cut off by the other gently pushing him away to see his face and his heart sunk in fear and dread. The kiss that followed felt even more painful, if it were possible.

Arms wrapped around him and pulled him close in a comforting embrace, one he found himself trembling in. Grillby’s hands ran soothing circles against his back and Sans inhaled a shuddering breath, hiding his face again. Why did it hurt? Grillby’s hand stroked his spine and his other pulled him closer until they were curled up against each other.

“I understand,” the fire monster murmured against his skull, his tone soothing. He continued to move his hand in calming, circling motions until Sans’s body eventually stopped trembling so much. “It’s alright.”

Chapter End Notes

cazdata drew a bit of the makeouts in comic form which you can see here u///u (SFW)
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Exhibit B of characters doing what they want without the author's permission:
SANSSSSSSSSSSS............ *hides face in hands* I am just as shocked. The thing is, those two phrases are so easy to mash together. I've done it with "How are you!" and "Nice to see you" to form "Nice are you!" amongst other embarrassing blunders. They both kind of freaked out and I don't blame them, though.

But hey, at least Sans figured out how to give Grillby hickies? :3c
ETA: Grillby isn't wanting to force Sans into anything because 1) he knows it's Sans' first ~relationship~ and 2) Sans only asked for fire ;3c

Next couple chapters is Grillby POV.

ETA: I commissioned Elegantfolly on tumblr to draw the (skipped) scene from this WHICH YOU CAN SEE HERE (18+)
Chapter Summary

When you need to think on things, you tend to stay away. Sans said he’d come back. When he doesn't, Grillby gets worried. Days later, Papyrus comes to order take-out.

Chapter Notes

content warnings for this chapter: medical emergency

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

Sans had been quiet the whole night through. Grillby kept him in his arms, firm enough to show he cared, loose enough to say ‘I’ll let you leave if you need to’. Grillby didn’t sleep much, being woke with every intrusive thought and shiver against his form. Sans didn’t sleep much either but at least he didn’t pull away.

The skeleton was quieter when they both rose. The embers from the previous night had died down and Grillby looked up from the bed to Sans pulling his shirt back over his skull. Of what he could see, the fire’s marks on his bones were subtle and had only left a gentle dusting of soot where it had touched him.

It could have been handled a bit more delicately, the fire monster chastised himself. It was a simple slip up, but at the same time his mind was going over those three words over and over. Sans had said he messed up, even looked mildly horrified at his own words.

Things had been going well. Maybe they should have continued, to leave the little blunder for what it was. Little.

He wasn’t sure what to think anymore, but Sans didn’t shy away from his embrace like he thought he would. He still leaned into the kiss against his brow and whispered his thanks for letting him spend the night. That he’d come back later, after he had cleared his head.

Grillby had a lot to think about when the skeleton left that morning and he spent the entire time before opening catching up on chores. He set down chairs, wiped down the tables and got rid of the dishware that had been left over from the night before, all while his heart was beating a mile a minute. He was unable to think of much else besides the skeleton’s excuse and those three little words.

The day went as poorly as the previous, this time his patronage was worried for him. Grillby excused himself in the usual way, gesturing that he was just having an off day. Red Bird inquired about the incident, to which he didn’t bother with an answer. He was still so embarrassed for his outburst and Red assured him Sans was a funny guy, and he probably forgave him. After all, he was a very likeable person!

It did little to lift his mood. By the end of the day, Grillby had resorted to burning things on purpose.
He kept a barrel of twigs and logs, pinecones and the like for one such occasion. When he felt as though his day was too stressful, he’d pull a few pieces from the barrel and burn them to a crisp.

This time, the barrel itself fully immolated and Grillby huffed, pressing his hands to his face.

He didn’t know what to make of Sans’ absence throughout the day. He wasn’t answering his texts and the one time Grillby had a moment to call him, it went to the other’s voicemail. It was full. He hoped he was just overthinking things.

The fire monster sighed and finished his day, completely spent, both emotionally and physically. Maybe he would take a day off tomorrow, but he didn’t want to appear as though he was upset enough to close if the skeleton chanced a visit.

His thoughts at night taunted him. ‘He loves you’. ‘It was a mistake’. ‘He was joking’. ‘But he seemed upset’. ‘Why didn’t you say anything more?’ ‘It’s too early’. ‘It’s too late to fix it’.

Grillby turned in his restless sleep and finally awoke, earlier than his usual time, to scroll through his phone to see if Sans had messaged back. He hadn’t, which made his heart sink. Maybe he should apologise first? It could be something they were both overthinking, just as before.

He went through the two pictures he took during their date to the secret caverns. The first one pinched at his heartstrings, how captivated and moved Sans looked when he’d first called out to him to snap the photo. Then the other - a warm, true smile on his face instead of his permanent grin.

He had to talk to him.

Seeing as Sans had answered his texts at midnight before, Grillby keyed in the question ‘Are you awake?’ and sent it off. Not long after, something buzzed against the floor. It dawned on him with a strangled, frustrated sigh that Sans had left his phone behind again and he lurched over the side of the mattress to check under the bed.

He was quick enough to see his message fade away on the screen’s light. ‘Hotsuff’. Of course. He grabbed the phone from the floor and brought it up, looking at each device in his hands.

Well, Sans would need his phone back, wouldn’t he?

…

He tapped the screwdriver against the side of his face, concentrating on the echo bouncing around inside of his skull cavity. His soul was heavy, his mind full of ‘what if’s and doubts. He fixated on the three little words he had mistakenly uttered and the fallout afterwards on repeat like a scratched disc.

God, was he an idiot. He swore he had been thinking that same sentence a thousand times over the past day. Sans pushed his hand to his face and inhaled deeply, taking in the musty smell of the lab in the basement as his eye lights wandered over his notebooks strewn around the floor in front of him. He wasn’t sure what was more horrifying; garbling what he had said, or the fact that somewhere deep inside, he had meant it. Not to say that he hadn’t thought about it, but his mind hung up every time he entertained that line of thinking and how Grillby would - or had - react to those words.

He sighed again, shuffling the nearly-completed box closer to him to assure its panelling was secure. Nothing fancy, he just had to screw on the hinges for the lid and line it up and the ‘vessel’ would be completed. No fancy carving was needed apart from the matrix converter, which he had completed
Caught up in his self-deprecating thoughts, Sans absently tore into a package of granola and bit into it. He was starting to get a little nervous. It had been enough time for him to brood and Sans honestly missed the bar’s atmosphere. He decided that he would just go over after this - give Grillby a real apology and… admit his feelings. Maybe a little.

He heard a crunch from outside and exhaled a long breath, knowing that Papyrus was likely by earlier than expected to check on him and make sure that he was doing alright - eating and resting as he should be.

Holding the granola bar between his teeth as he worked, Sans screwed in the hinges and oiled the joints so it silently opened and closed, appraising the seams until he was sure it was decent. It wouldn’t be a big deal for him to ignite the box first. He’d be a little tired, but nothing like after his first date and certainly not enough to raise concern. If he could hide it, that would be fine. Sans huffed out another breath after finishing his meagre meal and stood, flexing the fingers of his left hand while his other bunched uselessly at his side.

He glanced down to his notebook and frowned slightly when he heard another crunch of snow. Best get on with it. If he started now, Papyrus knew better than to interrupt if he was in the middle of it. Then at least he wouldn’t argue - not until afterward. Sans grinned to himself a little. What a great brother; he was always making sure he was ok.

The smile fell from his face as he eyed the box, then stopped to open the lid. The draw on his reserves bit and he released a soft hiss, an echo of pain tightening around his soul before he thought to consciously draw from his magic instead. Cyan and gold wisped around his left socket and trailed down his arm in a thrush of energy, forming a nimbus around his finger bones as he held it out.

The gnawing feeling came back and he flinched when he heard a scratch at the door, it nearly tearing his concentration away. The skeleton forced himself to stare down at the open box, more energy and magic licking around his phalanges as he fed it into a concentrated form.

He hadn’t expected the noise behind him and Sans jolted, a spray of magic spilling from his left socket as he twisted his body to see the door as the blinding whiteness in front of him flooded the room. Then there was a flash.

…

The next day was much of the same, but Grillby’s temper had evened out. The bartender set up as he usually did, opening right on time. Not once during the day did he see the skeleton, nor did his brother come looking for him, as though Sans was intentionally keeping away. It caught a thread of worry in his heart and soul with the other’s absence.

As the day progressed, he was starting to get nervous. In fact, Red Bird commented on it, despite not being given any information to the fact. The bird was oddly adept at reading him when so few monsters could. Grillby only nodded shortly, not explaining himself. He doubted that he would be able to. It was just too private.

Sans’ phone had notifications once in awhile, but Grillby knew better than to spy on him. It wasn’t his place. It wasn’t the first time Sans had been absent from the restaurant, nor would it be the last - he hoped. But this time it felt personal, the days too long and the nights even longer. It was affecting his mood and thus, his work.
During the afternoon, there had to be a surge from the CORE, as there had been a power outage that lasted for a couple of hours. It delayed things only a little, making use of his fire in small braziers on the tables instead of the magi-electric energy that powered the lamps.


Grillby was worried.

Three days had passed. Grillby had kept an eye out in case either one of the skeleton brothers walked by. He saw Papyrus earlier on in the day, but he had darted down the road so quickly that the fire monster was barely out of the door when the younger of the skeleton brothers disappeared into the wintry mist.

The fact that both brothers were avoiding him now made him hurt. Perhaps it was time to close up the restaurant early; no one save for Red Bird was there, and with his contemplative mood, the patronage were content to leave him be until things cooled down. The restaurant had become stifling lately.

Red Bird understood. He paid for his drinks and left without argument and gave the bartender’s arm a brave pat.

Grillby slunk down behind the bar and over the counter, head in his hands. Should he bring Papyrus into this? If Sans was avoiding him, his brother would know, wouldn’t he?

As though it was by summons, someone entered the restaurant. Grillby didn’t even look up and a gentle plume of smoke wafted from his mouth with his sigh. The footsteps were quick and Grillby decided one more customer wouldn’t hurt.

“GOOD AFTERNOON, MISTER GRILLBY!” Sharply, the fire monster looked up to the owner of such a blaring output and straightened himself. The younger of the skeleton brothers stood before him, appearing rigid and out of breath. “IS… THE GRILL STILL HOT? - WAIT NO, DON’T ANSWER THAT.” He rubbed his skull and shook it as if in self-reprimand. Each of his thumbs hooked into his long sleeves and he began twisting the material. “WHAT I MEAN, IS… I REQUIRE A… TAKE OUT, MISTER GRILLBY.”

This was unusual. Grillby stared at Papyrus for a time, studying his posture: the tilt of the other’s head, how his shoulders hunched ever so slightly. He was dressed unusually - which is to say, unusual for Papyrus: a thick grey sweatshirt and trousers that accentuated his bone form, and bright neon green sneakers.

Grillby leaned up off the bar to gesture, but Papyrus took a half-step forward. “AND MAKE IT QUICK, PLEASE,” the skeleton pleaded. His glance darted briefly towards the door, which he had neglected to close in his hurry.

Everything about Papyrus screamed ‘off’ to Grillby. His fires arranged themselves in a frown, attempting to gesture again, ‘What's wrong?’

“EVERYTHING IS COMPLETELY…” The sentence stopped. It was unlike Papyrus. Again, the other’s gaze veered off to the side, as though he wasn’t supposed to be there.

“....Papyrus?”
“STEAK-CUT FRIES, MISTER GRILLBY. IT’S A RUSH ORDER, PLEASE?”

Grillby stood for a moment, then nodded, pushing himself away from the bar and towards the kitchen. He heard something of a relieved sigh from the skeleton and went to work, quickly chopping up a few potatoes to fry and taking care not to daze out for too long so they wouldn’t be overdone like all the other orders in the days past.

Papyrus was acting strangely. Or was it simply because he was trying to hide something? Or perhaps it was Papyrus, acting like his usual self. He wasn’t really sure, but the more Grillby thought about it, the less it made sense. Sans wasn’t even here… why would Papyrus come to get his food when he expressed distaste for his cooking so much?

Grillby stared at the potatoes as they fried, going over it in his mind. What if it was serious, and that was the reason he hadn’t seen Sans lately?

Now he was working himself up for no reason, he chastised himself, blowing off another wisp of smoke in a sigh. The fries were nearly finished and he jostled the basket, his thoughts repeating. Maybe he should ask after Sans?

When the fries were done and seasoned, he put them in a basket and into a paper bag, his footsteps quick as he rounded the corner out of the kitchen. Papyrus was already counting out pieces from a little coin purse, trying his best to wedge his bony digits between the clasp’s small opening.

“.....Papyrus?” the fire monster tried again. “How is he?”

“WHO?” was the reply, as though Papyrus really had no idea whom Grillby was talking about. He was making a show of collecting the correct amount of coins and something of an irritated flicker passed over the fire monster’s vague features as he was made to wait.

“Papyrus-” he hissed insistently.

“WOW… WOWIE, I JUST CAN’T… SEEM TO-” the skeleton muttered, then fished out the last coin and all but slammed the four coins onto the counter. There wasn’t nearly enough, but Grillby let it slide. Papyrus was clearly in a hurry and he looked more agitated the longer he was made to wait.

“Did something happen?” He needed to know. Far be it him to ignore both the skeleton brothers completely when they had done the same to him. This was becoming unnecessarily complicated.

Papyrus snapped his coin purse shut and held onto it with both hands, his long fingers twitching at the edges of his sleeves. He was smiling but perspiring, something the fire monster had picked up on as a kind of nervous trait.

Grillby swallowed the knot he felt in his throat. “Something… happened,” he insisted softly, and when the other didn’t audibly respond or move, the bartender felt his temperature plummet in dread. “.....To Sans?”

It was quiet for a moment and Papyrus was wringing at one side of his sleeve, looking like he was about to grab the bag and dart off. Then he nodded hesitantly, otherwise remaining stock still.

The silence was the confirmation he needed and Grillby huffed out a rasping, agitated sigh. Half was of relief that his avoidance hadn’t been intentional, but the fire monster felt so utterly upset with himself for not checking up on the brothers sooner.
“HE JUST… FELL,” the skeleton supplied, a little lower than usual. He attempted to sound optimistic, which threw Grillby for a loop as his fire plumed a dangerously deep shade of red in shock.

“He FELL!??” Several emotions were catching up with the fire monster as his blaze darkened, the same way a fleshy monster would turn pale with fright. Grillby felt his heart seize and drop, his bright eyes widened in shock as every single hurt accumulated in his being all at once.

“What! Oh… No, I mean-” Papyrus waved his hands suddenly in a placating gesture, denying the horrible words he had just uttered. “No, I mean, he FELL AS IN FAINTED! I’m so sorry, I didn’t mean to make it sound like he was-!”

“…ong with you,” the fire monster interjected as he rounded the bar to grab his coat, every bit of his fire sputtering and reeling in barely contained panic.

“MISTER GRILLBY, I DO NOT BELIEVE HE’D-” Papyrus stopped again, as though he was making sure to say the correct thing this time.

Grillby had already assessed that Sans was in poor health lately. He wanted to make sure Papyrus felt as though he could be trusted with anything, even if Sans insisted he was fine and lied to everyone’s face about it. He took a moment to compose himself, the rattling of his breath echoing ethereally in the empty bar.

“Nonsense,” he chided softly, trying his utmost best to remain clear and in control of his fire so the other would understand him. “...If he is unwell, I should pay him a visit.”

Papyrus had little to argue with about that, but remained hesitant throughout the quick walk back to the skeleton brothers’ house. Grillby willed himself to stay calm as Papyrus pulled open the door, food in tow, and beelined to the couch.

The sofa had been transformed into a cot of some sort. A large and long pillow cradled the small skeletal form on it and a thick comforter was pulled up to Sans’ chest. Several different bowls of untouched food were on the coffee table alongside Papyrus’ phone, which was chiming with a jaunty tune. The younger brother hissed at it and paced in front of his brother as he answered it.

“Oh doctor Alphys, thank you for returning my call…” The rest of the skeleton’s words were lost as Grillby quickly approached the couch and the skeleton prone amongst its cushions.

Well, he didn’t look Fallen, but Sans definitely had seen better days. He was sleeping, both of his arms tucked under the comforter and the creases of his eye sockets were worn and shadowed with signs of stress. Short, rattling breaths passed his teeth that caught occasionally, as though each inhalation was painful. Grillby stooped next to the couch, his eyes searching in barely contained shock.

“No, he still hasn’t woken up…” Papyrus muttered, still pacing. Grillby looked up to see the taller skeleton rubbing at his skull, sockets closed as though in deep thought. “What!?” The volume of his voice jumped to a painful intensity and the fire monster flinched. If he listened carefully, he could hear a small voice through the call speaking very quickly.

“Well, if you insist… bundle up!” With that, the call ended and Papyrus dropped his phone on the table again, leaning down to inspect his brother.
“....*What happened?*” Grillby finally asked, his fire just barely eking out the words through his shock. He was hesitant to touch Sans. He looked so weak that any movement would cause him to fracture. His flames were shuddering along his hands, trying to keep composed despite how horrified he was, as though his entire core was shaking.

Papyrus took a seat on the floor next to the couch so he could squint at the other’s visage as though scrutinising something, long and hard. Then he exhaled quietly and jabbed a thumb over his shoulder, to next to the TV, dropping his skull into his other hand.

“I WARNED HIM TO WAIT—” he began, exasperation in his tone, “-HE’S IMPATIENT AND WANTED IT DONE ASAP! AND HE GETS IRRITABLE WHEN I TELL HIM TO TAKE IT EASY.”

“...*You do?*” Grillby murmured without thinking, grateful for the other’s distraction. This had not been his experience; Papyrus was always on Sans’ case for one thing or another. Regardless, he looked to the direction the skeleton had indicated, to a cubic foot square box with a hinged lid. It was oaken and a little shiny like new, every seam looked freshly cut.

It certainly didn’t look like anything Sans would have made, if the small poorly made sign in Waterfall was anything to go by. That recollection seemed bittersweet now and Grillby tensed when he looked back to Sans, his soul feeling tight.

“Naturally,” came a quieter retort. Papyrus very gently patted over his brother’s right arm. Sans did not stir, but his breathing shuddered briefly. “I want him to be healthy. What brother wouldn’t? But he can’t be healthy with such poor eating habits, or pushing himself, or—” He stopped again and shook his skull in his hand.

Grillby looked back between the brothers, every part of his mind sputtering in protest of how wrong this all seemed. His body shouted at him that he needed to do something, force Sans to eat to replenish his energy, to call for a healer, or to do something. Instead, his body refused to move, barely registering the shaky, weak breaths the skeleton in front of him laboured.

He should have returned his phone to him. He should have gone over and not taken a step back. Grillby’s flames pulsed wildly for a moment as these thoughts passed through his head, his soul twisting everything in the image before him that… maybe this wouldn’t have happened if Sans didn’t keep away. That his careful nature had made the other reckless and Sans was in such a state because… what, exactly?

He was going in circles. He had forgotten where he was until Grillby heard a subtle noise next to him, drawing him back to the present. In the time it took for the fire monster to calm his tumultuous thoughts, the skeleton next to him had composed himself as well, drawing in a great big breath, then he exhaled. Grillby felt the subtle gust against his flames and watched quietly, keeping his flames lowered as he gave the other a reassuring pat on the shoulder.

“If… If I am entirely honest, Mister Grillby,” Papyrus murmured after a moment, still wringing the sleeves of his sweater around his thumbs, “When you called me before, from the hotel in Hotland, I was worried.”

Grillby nodded, watching Sans in stunned silence. The sleeping skeleton’s breath caught again and Papyrus leaned forward to check, and it was all Grillby could do to keep himself from doing the same. Whatever he did with the small pass against Sans’ skull seemed to soothe him, and Papyrus rested back on the floor. The fire monster remained fixed on the spot, staring. He couldn’t do anything… He was sure if he tried something, he’d be asked to leave. He wanted to be here. Of that, he was certain.
“I know my brother tries his best. He really does. Ever since—” Grillby’s gaze flicked to the other when Papyrus stopped himself short, as though he wasn’t supposed to be talking about something. The fire monster got the feeling that Papyrus needed someone to talk to, but keeping secrets was difficult for him.

“....Ever since?” Finally finding the words to speak, he nudged carefully to get Papyrus to continue.

“Sans’ health… has always been rather poor,” the taller skeleton finally admitted, seemingly hiding something again. “It’s not a big secret. Not really, with the way he’s always sleeping. He likes to pretend he’s ok. It’s actually quite selfish, now that I think about it!”

Grillby’s mouth cracked in an awkward smile. Wasn’t it just the other week when he asked Sans the same thing? He nodded gently, since Papyrus didn’t appear to understand his expressions all too well.

“I’m glad you treat him the same as before you knew,” the skeleton continued, even more quiet. “I know it really gives him a reason to stay.”

The bartender’s smile dropped but he took care to hide it behind his blaze. He stood restlessly by the couch, not knowing what to do until Papyrus started to pull out the fries from the takeout bag. However disgusted he looked with the prospect, the younger brother picked up one of the less greasy fries and held it to his brother’s mouth. Grillby was surprised with how calmly Papyrus was keeping himself together and drew strength from that. Well, if he could get himself together with Sans in such a state, was it really that bad…?

He had to chastise himself for those kinds of thoughts. He had panicked at the resort after discovering Sans’ abysmal health levels, how the skeleton had been unresponsive. How he felt the crush of danger, the fear of death, and not knowing how to process it all, he had shut down. Become stoic. He was a lot more invested now - and it hurt more than anything to see Sans in such a state.

“Sometimes you just have to have patience,” Papyrus sighed in resignation. “He won’t eat any of my masterful dishes. His taste is always so horrible, especially lately! Evidently, his bad taste spills over to when he’s unconscious, too.” In the usual, peculiar way Sans ate before his mandible unfused, a portion of the fry was absorbed, but a lot of the piece remained. His brother seemed to be extremely relieved with that.

The untouched food on the table must have been for Sans, Grillby realised, pulling himself out of his cyclical panic. His temperature spiked just a little with the thought; how long had it been since this had happened? His core twisted with the new worry. No, Papyrus had to have found Sans right away… right?

Papyrus didn’t say much after that, but gently chastised his sleeping brother as he attempted to get his magic to absorb more food. Grillby found himself more quiet than before when the skeleton revealed his efforts to feed Sans after finding him had been without success. A few fries took almost an hour to disappear but Sans’ breathing still remained strained and soft.

Papyrus urged him to touch him. “HE’S NOT GOING TO BREAK, AFTER ALL!” he reasoned, more of that convincing bravado the fire monster couldn’t connect with. The warmth of Grillby’s hand seeped through his glove as he gingerly reached out to stroke the side of Sans’ skull, fire licking out longingly from under his cuffs to gauge the other’s state and his heart heavy with concern. It was
a soothing gesture but it was complicated. His flames betrayed him in that respect. It was hard not to care so much when he saw Sans like this.

“I THINK - NO! I KNOW MY BROTHER WOULD APPRECIATE YOUR PRESENCE. HE WOULD NEVER ADMIT-” Papyrus was cut off by his phone and dove over to answer it, something of a mix of excitement and irritation bristling off him. “WOWIE, TWO PHONE CALLS IN ONE DAY! LOOK OUT, WORLD! HELLO, THIS IS THE GREAT PAPYRUS SPEAK-... OH GOLLY! ALREADY!?"

Grillby had seated himself next to the couch to keep an eye on Sans while Papyrus hopped to his feet, looking suddenly more excited. As he listened to the small, quick little voice on the other end of the line, the fire monster gave him an enquiring look. Hopefully Papyrus had sense enough to call for a healer or a doctor - of course he did, what was he thinking? He had clearly overheard him speaking with a doctor over the phone earlier.

“OH, THAT’S INCREDIBLE! AN ABSOLUTE INGENIOUS PLAN! THANK YOU! I’LL MAKE SURE THE HEAT IS CRANKED FOR WHEN YOU GET HERE-” He faltered and looked to the fire monster, as though realising something, “OH... YES, OF COURSE.” His voice was lower and sounded more apprehensive. The fidgeting started up again, then rather abruptly Papyrus turned and went to the kitchen.

Grillby resorted to watching Sans and even attempted to bring food to his mouth. It wasn’t unusual for monsters to do this, but it seemed oddly intimidating at the same time. A little more time passed and the fry was absorbed, and only when it was fully gone did Grillby feel the tightness of fear in his chest ease.

He knew Papyrus was trying to assure himself with the small talk, but it only made Grillby feel ill. Of course he was concerned, and the way the other left for privacy made him think he probably shouldn’t be there. It was a family matter. Whomever was on their way - the doctor, Grillby corrected himself - would likely feel awkward with him lurking about, even if he wanted to stay to make sure Sans was alright. It was the very least he could do; Sans had snuck into his own home to make sure he was alright after all.

Chapter End Notes

thefloatingstone/c-puff has drawn art here (sfw!) for this chapter!! Go check it out! It's hella amazing!!!!!! :DDD
---
Sans did have every intention of coming back!

Umm, I really forget what to write here other than this twist was unexpected. You know something’s wrong when Papyrus of all people shows up to ask for greasy food to GO? Of course Grillby would insist on going to check!

And then there's a reason beyond "they're lazy" for why Papyrus dislikes the item boxes!

Good thing help is on the way. :3c
Edited 08/16/18: I've received some very helpful concrit from C-Puff/thefloatingstone (which she's GREAT at analysing all the nuance and interactions in the fic sdklhgh 8D) concerning chapters 33 & 34 (the events leading up to Sans' box ignition and how Grillby reacts to seeing him this way). I've rewritten a portion of it and also added in actual Grillby POV and how he deals with it internally, as opposed to him just... being there while things happen around him. It flows much better now and I am pleased with the result. <3 Thank you, C-Puff!!

I'm sorry this chapter blindsided everyone. To be honest, ME TOO orz;;;;
Stabilise

Chapter Summary

Alphys arrives to stabilise Sans, while Grillby stays to assist. Working with Papyrus and Alphys offers little answers as to what happened, nor to why Sans is blocking out anyone.

Chapter Notes

Content warning(s) for this chapter: medical, mild soul surgery, panic attack during surgery, medical drug usage, injured/ill character(s)

See the end of the chapter for more notes

More time passed in silence while Papyrus was on the call in the kitchen. With the other’s boisterous volume, Grillby was able to hear his side of the conversation with astounding clarity: Sans would be nervous. He would ‘react’. They had to be careful. No, ‘he’ already knows and that was fine. ‘He’ could help.

Grillby was pretty sure ‘he’ was the ambiguous entity being talked about and he wasn’t sure how to take that. He picked up on a lot of things, being a bartender in a gossiping small town, but he felt out of the loop on this one. It was clear that he was the subject but he couldn’t dismiss the ominous feeling at the pit of his core.

Nervously and attempting to keep his body’s flames under control, he stroked over the side of Sans’ skull, thumb moving in gentle circles just above his temple. His soul hurt, quietly whispering with his fire for the other to wake up, that he would be alright… It wasn’t long before his internal malaise rose and his flames popped in a start when he heard a quick succession of knocks at the door. Carefully, he slid his hand away from Sans and folded both of them over his lap just as Papyrus passed and swung open the door.

A stout yellow lizard monster stood completely enveloped in layers and layers of clothes but still managed to look cold. Her large round glasses immediately fogged up when she was welcomed inside and she scurried over to the couch with an armful of binders and a cell phone that had several charms hanging from it that it was a wonder it could be used at all.

“O-oh, hello!”

Grillby, caught off-guard and unsure of the stranger, moved to gesture; ‘Good evening.’

“MISTER GRILLBY, THIS IS DOCTOR ALPHYS. SHE IS… SOMETHING OF A PERSONAL DOCTOR, EVEN THOUGH THAT IS NOT HER ACTUAL PROFESSION. BUT SHE IS ALSO A VERY GREAT FRIEND!” Papyrus introduced candidly, gesturing to the visitor. He dropped his cell phone on the tabletop again and looked at her expectantly.

She seemed nervous. Extremely so. Grillby hadn’t met a monster so skittish before in his life. He
attempted to smile a little to alleviate her apparent discomfort, but the action felt hollow. At least he knew who she was by name; she was the royal scientist.

“We… we um, we’ll need some room,” she began, her voice small after she took a precursory glance over Sans on the couch. Grillby got to his feet and stepped away from the couch, remaining silent as Papyrus complained loudly about the doctor not bringing any supplies. His movements were automatic but his body felt stiff as every part of him felt like it was hopeless, frightened. Scared of what might happen.

He couldn’t think this way; Sans was strong. Looking back to him, it didn’t look that way unfortunately.

“I.. I did!” She dropped a few binders on the floor next to the couch as Papyrus moved the coffee table at a right angle at her request, then she started punching things into her phone. “I, I was actually… going to tell Sans earlier, but he, um, he didn’t been answering his texts, and-” She pulled out an antenna from the device and it unfolded into a square wire and the space inside of it shifted. “P-pretty neat, huh?”

“IT LOOKS INELEGANT AND FRAGILE! I’M EXTREMELY DISAPPOINTED??”

“It, it’s a prototype!” the girl shot back, her face turning pink in embarrassment. She reached into the space and her claw disappeared from view, then it pulled up something that looked like a long pole with looped hooks at the top and wheels on its base. While Grillby had his reservations about the jittery visitor, her supplies looked medical, at least.

Papyrus’ reaction was immediate; “WOWIE!! YOU’VE GONE AND MADE MY BROTHER’S LAZY INVENTION INEXHAUSTIBLY PORTABLE!!”

The little doctor was preoccupied, having set her phone on the coffee table and she reached inside for more supplies.

“L-let’s see… magi-aethers 28, 47 and 114, corticosteroid flux, couplers, CORE-ion suppressants, magi-alkaline dehydranoxoline…” She listed them off, more to herself than to the others, who shared a concerned look. Alphys paused when she had all the items out on the table: some were bags of variously coloured liquids, one was a thin applicator, some coils of tube structures, tape, and something that looked like a stacked roll of pastille candies.

She was in her own little world for a moment and looked less nervous than previously, until she realised Grillby was watching intently, trying his best to keep sentry while at the same time keeping himself pulled together. Alphys paused after pulling the comforter off of Sans and she gasped, her claws covering her mouth.

“Pa.. Papyrus?”

“YES! I AM READY TO BE OF ASSISTANCE, DOCTOR ALPHYS!” He was immediately at her side. He easily peered over the smaller monster’s shoulder and couldn’t hide a grimace at the sight. “OH… YES, THAT HAPPENS ONCE IN AWHILE. IT’LL ATTACH ITSELF ONCE HE RECOVERS! IT’S NOTHING TO WORRY ABOUT!!”

Grillby had seen what she was referring to and sputtered inaudibly; Sans’ right arm was detached at the shoulder but was laid beside him on the couch. The magic at his socket was coiling and flickering restlessly and if he hadn’t witnessed Sans’ leg detached at Waterfall, it would’ve made for a horrifying sight. It still made him uneasy and another shudder went through his flames akin to a shiver, their hues darkening briefly.
The doctor inhaled deeply to recollect herself, then turned back to her supplies and instruments. She fixed the assembly and hoisted a clear bag with cloudy cyan fluid inside and fixed tubes to it, every movement deliberately careful.

“Some.. someone’s gotta hold him down,” she said quietly after a moment of hesitation. Papyrus moved to Grillby’s side to volunteer and offered him a reassuring but nervous smile. Grillby didn’t know what to make of it - whether or not Papyrus was being strong for him despite how frightened the two of them were, the brother was obviously keeping himself together far better than Grillby thought he was doing.

“Oh, Grillby, right? When he wakes up, you try to calm him. He… He’s very nervous with medical procedures b-but, this is necessary to.. to ensure he doesn’t—I, I mean, if you want to help, that is. If you want to… If you’d rather not, I com.. completely understand!”

The fire monster swallowed the knot in his throat, realising he hadn’t spoken a word since insisting that he would stay. It took awhile for him to sort out his words, fire crashing around his mouth as he tried to quell his worry. “........I’ll do my best to assist,” he breathed through another nervous pulse of flames. Gesturing under these circumstances seemed highly inappropriate.

“Please, um, if you can, stay clear of the tubing,” she added, eyeing the flaring blaze, to which the bartender nodded shortly and adjusted himself. He crouched beside the sofa out of the way of the equipment as she wheeled it closer to her, the dip in temperature only just bearible.

He was attentive, not knowing what kind of procedure would be taking place. Papyrus seemed equally nervous now and had each of his hands firmly grasping at his brother’s shoulders. Alphys had fixed a tube leading from the hung bag and was in the middle of disrobing a few layers of sweaters so she could roll up her sleeves and adjust her glasses. She looked the most anxious out of all of them and if Grillby was battling with his emotions, he could only wonder how this poor woman was faring on the inside as well.

Grillby expected it to be a rude awakening of sorts, but nothing had prepared him for the invasive procedure Alphys preformed. She hiked Sans’ shirt up over his ribs and accessed the space underneath with her claws, needle-sharp pin in one hand and a fastener in the other. It had been quick and Papyrus held Sans down with the resulting jolt when a fettered weak light sputtered from the connection under his ribs.

A sharp breath came from the prone skeleton coupled with a strangled, weak cry. Alphys worked quickly but she was visibly shaking the faster Sans’ breaths became. Once fixed, she held down the skeleton’s rib cage to prevent him from moving and notched a dial on the tubing near the top. The swirling thin liquid then traveled down the tube and disappeared into the low light of the other’s chest cavity.

Alphys exhaled deeply as though she had been holding her breath. She chanced a look to Papyrus, who was no longer smiling but hanging over his brother’s body to hold him down. Sans had tensed up, his left arm taut and his phalanges gripping at the bunched comforter at his side.

“.....Will he be alright?” the fire monster hesitated to ask, just as a pathetic cry escaped the smaller skeleton. It tore at his heart when Sans thrashed his skull to one side, face contorted in pain. Under the covers over his lower half, he saw Sans kick feebly and he desperately wanted to reach out and heal him, despite how his efforts in Hotland had failed before.

“Initial insertion to the soul complete,” the doctor reported, “Papyrus, you’re doing an.. an excellent job, th-thank you.” She turned to face the fire monster, something sad in her eyes, “He’s, um… He’s going to be ok!” She didn’t sound entirely convinced and the fire monster felt his temperature dip at
her tone in veiled panic - but she continued with her work, strapping up another bag of liquid that had a darker indigo fluid in it. When his fire’s light caught it, the colour shifted from blue to violet and red. “We’re, um, we’re stabilising him, until he’s ok to eat on his own. He expended a lot of um, magic… and for someone like him, it’s incredibly dangerous!”

“I HATE THOSE BOXES!” Papyrus boomed vehemently, “THEY’RE NOT WORTH IT! I DON’T CARE WHAT HE THINKS. CORE MAGIC ISN’T HELPFUL!! IT’S DANGEROUS!”

“It, it has its merits. But, um… No, he shouldn’t be… I-I mean,” Alphys tittered nervously, her hands shaking more. “He messaged me on UnderNet before, just in case. But I didn’t realise it would be this.. this bad! He’s a stubborn guy, but-” She shook her head and grabbed the third bag from the coffee table and linked it with the first with another tubing.

Sans’ breaths had hitched up and tears were pricking at his closed sockets. A soft, continuous whine came from him that wrenched at Grillby’s heart and he reached over and soothingly stroked the other’s skull with a gentle reassuring hum of fire. The prone skeleton stopped, then whimpered lowly, magic sparking under his ribs where the tubing must’ve been connected with his soul.

Alphys seemed to glare down at Sans for a moment, her brow ridge knitting in concentration. “Papyrus, he’s, um… he’s blocking me out. Can you Check him?”

Papyrus sounded aghast; “I CAN’T EITHER! THAT’S THE FIRST THING I TRIED WHEN I FOUND HIM! HENCE WHY I OPTED TO CONTACT YOU!” He seemed genuinely distressed as he struggled to keep Sans down, the sound of bones jostling filling the air.

Grillby leaned closer to Sans, cupping one side of his face with a hand as he whispered softly, “Sans… Please cooperate. Your brother and the doctor want to help you.”

“no-” was the weak reply, just barely audible as an ever increasing rush of panicked breathing came over the older brother, “no, no… no, please. no doctors… i’ll be good - i’m good. i’m ok, i pr.. promise… don’t… don’t hurt me… i’ll be good… don’t… don’t-”

Grillby looked to Papyrus’ face for help, but the other brother just shook his head, not knowing what to do. He was at a loss himself, unable to disconnect his friend in such a state and the continuous stream of disbelief that this had happened - or even how it had happened. And now the panicked little mutters ignited bursts of fear and sympathy inside of him, threatening to overcome him. He looked back to Sans, who turned his skull again, trying to wrench himself free.

“it.. it hurts, please.. please, i don’t.. i don’t want to.. do it anymore, please.. i’m tired.. i’m s.. so tired…”

“Grillby-” Alphys’ voice caught the fire monster’s attention through its firmness and he looked at her sharply, eyes bright as thought fighting through invisible tears, “Can you.. Can you try to Check him?”

It was generally frowned upon to do so, especially out of fights, but this was a serious situation. Grillby wasn’t sure if he could handle the feeling of knowing that the other’s health had quite possibly plummeted into the Fallen decimals - again, he realised with a silent gulp. With a shudder in his flames, he nodded somberly and cupped the other’s face in his hands, trying to keep himself from trembling.

Sans flinched visibly with the hesitant inquiry to his soul. Grillby made it more of a request, not wanting to force the other’s soul into anything it didn’t truly want. What hit back at him was a pitiful fear coupled with an insurmountable devastation that everyone would think lowly of him if word got
out - that, and a terror beyond all measure of anything medical.

Grateful for Sans’ cooperation with him, the fire monster patted his skull, smoothing his fingertips over the stressed ridge of bone under Sans’ eye sockets to wipe at the tears that had fallen.

“....Four points,” he reported hoarsely, a little surprised considering how Sans looked.

“it hurts,” Sans insisted softly, his voice rasping and raw as he tried again to turn away from his brother’s hold on him, “it hurts… please, let me go… i want my bro… i want… to s-see him-!” His voice escalated in volume and Papyrus leaned over him, just in time for Sans’ eye sockets to open.

This time he was staring up at his brother, breaths rising in speed but he had stopped struggling. His eye lights were hazy and unfocused, but once they settled on Papyrus, Sans froze as though in fear.

“no-”

Papyrus grinned down at him, relieved that his brother had regained consciousness, “I’M HERE, SANS! YOU’RE ALRIGHT. NO ONE IS HURTING YOU!”

With Sans’ pause, Alphys continued her work and dialled another knob between the indigo bag and the last one, filled with a bright fuschia that glittered with flashes of chrome. The liquids pooled together down the tube and once out of sight, Sans’ breath shuddered as it was absorbed into his body.

“feel hot…” He sounded delirious, clearly not understanding what was going on.

“Sans… it’s, um, the CORE-ion suppressants,” the doctor informed him, unsure if giving the information would help.

“...You're doing very well,” the fire monster congratulated him, his own soul thrumming hard after the most horrifying and heartbreaking thing he’d ever witnessed. With his voice sounding tight however, Sans’ face twisted in agony and fresh tears slipped down the sides of his cheek bones.

“no-” His voice was a whimper, “no, what...? why’s… why..?”

Grillby wasn’t sure how to take the rejection; it almost felt like a spray of water, stinging him down to the core. “You are,” he insisted emphatically, distantly surprised at the strength of his tone. “Your brother is taking good care of you.” Sans nodded at that, as though wanting to believe it. The fire monster was unsure if Sans was truly cognizant at that moment. “...I’ll take care of you, too.”

“Well, he’s absorbing the aethers without a hitch, so...” Alphys trailed off and exhaled sharply, taking a moment to wipe her brow on her sleeve and check the connections. “He should stabilise overnight. I h-have something for him to regulate his magic output,” she added, looking to Papyrus. He looked worn out and defeated, but he was still smiling down at Sans in relief. “Once he isn’t at risk of another, um… I’ll affix it after he lets me Check him.”

Sans sunk in and out of consciousness but for the most part he was in a state of delirium. He continued to whimper for them to stop, but Papyrus and Grillby both took turns to soothe him and make sure he was comfortable. Alphys took a moment to sit and write things down in one of the binders that she’d brought, staying quiet for the most part. Grillby found her silence while she did so unsettling, at best.

When prompted, Papyrus showed her the dimensional box Sans had ignited not too far away.
“It’s… It’s bigger than the others,” she noted, frowning as she opened the hinged lid. She peered into the vortex and reached inside, taking out what had to be someone’s discarded shoe. “Looks like he was… successful, at least.”

“I HATE IT,” Papyrus insisted emphatically.

Alphys didn’t have anything to say to that, but jotted down more notes in her binder after putting the shoe back inside and closing the lid.

Grillby stayed by Sans’ side to ensure that he didn’t thrash about when the others went a little ways away. He didn’t know what to make of all this. Sans’ poor health aside, he understood why the skeleton was so jumpy when they both traveled through the CORE. If CORE magic was dangerous and this was the result… he didn’t know what to make of it.

If it was connected in any way with the other’s shortcuts, no wonder Sans had a difficult time. It hurt that Sans had forced himself throughout Waterfall. It hurt that he was alone through his struggles - especially with how things turned out, with Papyrus revealing that he had been found this way…

The doctor and Papyrus had resorted to chatting amongst themselves, trusting Grillby to watch over Sans as they quietly argued about something. It didn’t seem to be in correlation to Sans and it was none of his business, but he heard a few things.

“...and in regards to the, um… the vents… they seemed to have cleared up, my cameras, though…”

“CAN WE NOT JUST..? PERHAPS IF I TOOK A LOOK AT THAT-”

“N-no, that’s ok! Y-you need to.. to stay here, and look after… but if you can show me the, um, the workshop-”

“IT’S NOT FAR, JUST AROUND BACK IN THE BASEMENT-”

Grillby stopped listening when he heard Sans stir again. He remained sitting on the floor so he could listen to the other’s breathing; it was better than before, but it sounded harsher.

Sans was attempting to move, his skull tilting to one side with the effort and a grimace on his face. When Sans opened his eye sockets, he appeared to be looking right through Grillby. The fire monster felt his heart drop for the umpteenth time that evening and gently rested his hand against Sans’ sternum in case he felt the urge to rise.

“fire,” came the confused mumble. Sans’s eye lights guttered out briefly and Grillby shot a worried look over his shoulder to Papyrus before whirling his attention back. “um, can i… go home now..?”

“You are home,” the fire monster reminded him gently. “Rest easy.”

Sans nodded shortly, the movement looking weary. For a time his eye lights returned, but he was staring ahead as his breath rattled.

“don’t.. don’t tell on me…”

“I won’t, Sans. You’ve done well,” the fire monster consoled him, and moved so he could reach over and take the skeleton’s left hand. He then looked up to the liquid dangling from the medical pole behind the couch out of view and his eyes followed the thin tubing that went under the other’s shirt.

His eyes were drawn back to Sans’ face when the skeleton whimpered again, as though in fear.
“there’s… five more.”

“Five more..?” Grillby knew it was likely a bad idea to converse with Sans this way, but he had a feeling silence would make things worse - that and talking with him after such an extended period of worried silence brought him comfort.

“my…” It sounded as though the skeleton was going to say more, but was overcome with confusion. “...no more doctors.”

“No more doctors,” Grillby assured him kindly, giving his hand a light squeeze, “....Only friends.” Sans didn’t say anything more to that and eventually fell back asleep. The fire monster sighed softly and resettled next to the couch, the tenseness easing out of his body as he drew relief from the exchange. Sans had been well enough to wake up, if only briefly. If he had been so close to Falling Down…

Grillby stopped his thoughts there and swallowed hard to calm himself, watching his friend’s febrile breathing.

Another half an hour passed, maybe more when Papyrus came back to sit next to the bartender. He looked as tired as Grillby himself felt and didn’t say much about what had happened.

“HAS HE SAID ANYTHING?” the younger skeleton inquired. He dropped his gaze to his lap, his phalanges wrestling with his sleeves again.

Grillby gave him a reassuring pat on the back. “...Nothing that makes sense, sadly.”

Papyrus nodded, more to himself than at what Grillby said, and plucked at his fingers. The fire monster could see the small nicks in his bones, not quite sure if they were always there and he never saw them - simply for the fact this had been the closest he’d ever been to the brother without a countertop to separate them.

“I… understand if you need to leave, Grillby,” he said then, his voice quiet. “You had a long day. All of us have, really! You have no idea how much I appreciate your help… And you have your restaurant to run, too…”

Grillby couldn’t believe what he was hearing. He was sure now that Papyrus had been the sole caregiver to Sans throughout their lives, but it looked as though now was when he needed the most help. He gathered the courage inside and pushed away his own fears, then gently shook his head when Papyrus chanced to glance at him and the fire monster even attempted a smile.

“....Do not have to do this alone, friend,” he interjected quietly, “The residents of Snowdin can go a day or two without grease. If you will permit me to stay.”

“I COULDN’T ASK YOU TO DO THAT!” Papyrus almost hissed, trying very hard to keep everything together.

Grillby watched him and noted the body language; the younger brother was tense and his back rigidly straight, to the point that he looked as though he was forcing himself to appear as optimistic as always. What he didn’t realise is that Grillby noticed the trembling with his touch and the little giveaways the brothers had when they were exhausted were all too apparent.

No matter how much they differed, Papyrus was still Sans’ brother. It was clear he couldn’t do this on his own, even with the royal scientist there, too; she looked in need of a good sleep as well.
“...Need to take care of yourself as well, Papyrus,” the fire monster urged him, speaking quickly, “...Can...atch over him...ave to sleep, at some...int?”

“I’M SORRY?”

Grillby reigned in his fire a little and spoke slowly so he was more coherent, “...I will stay while you rest. You need your strength as much as he does.”

“I CAN’T LET YOU DO THAT! YOU’VE ALREADY DONE SO MUCH!”

“I am afraid,” Grillby’s fire sputtered and snapped firmly, giving Papyrus a start, “that I must insist.” The younger brother stared at him for a moment, then the tension eased out of his shoulders and he hung his skull in resignation with a slight nod. Good, at least one of them would be rested for now, Grillby thought.

However worried the other two appeared, it was undisputed that they would take shifts watching over Sans as he recovered. Papyrus went upstairs after a great deal of hesitation and coercion while Alphys made a cosy nest of her sweaters for herself near the baseboard heater beside the couch, leaving Grillby with Sans. He would look after him, just as Sans had made sure he was alright, too.

Chapter End Notes

*repeats "poor Sans" ad infinitum*

You thought Papyrus hates the item boxes because they’re lazy? Welp. You wouldn’t be wrong, but there is so much more to it than that. We get an insight to how badly Sans reacts to medical procedures in this chapter. He is (for the most part) extremely delirious and doesn’t recognise those around him. He’s so scared. He needs all the hugs! ;n;

This is by far the heaviest bit of h/c in Postcards. It'll... work out. I swear. Updates will continue Mondays/Thursdays until chapter 37 is posted. ≪(.Diagnostics)≫

Edited 08/16/18: I've received some very helpful concrit from C-Puff/thefloatingstone (which she's GREAT at anylysing all the nuance and interactions in the fic sdklgh8D) concerning chapters 33 & 34 (the events leading up to Sans' box ignition and how Grillby reacts to seeing him this way). I've rewritten a portion of it and also added in actual Grillby POV and how he deals with it internally, as opposed to him just... being there while things happen around him. It flows much better now and I am pleased with the result. <3 Thank you, C-Puff!!
Fear of Pity

Chapter Summary

Sans regains consciousness - and discovers that Grillby knows about his HP. He isn't prepared for the knowledge.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

His mind was a constant blur of pain and fear. Occasionally he would wake and he couldn’t see, not having the strength to open his eye sockets, nor the capacity to summon the lights of his eyes to take in his surroundings. He wasn’t sure if he wanted to, so fearful for where he was that it crippled him in a constant state of terror.

He was sure he felt the lines of tubes against his bones. He heard the hum of electricity or something like it. Every once in awhile, he’d whimper for the restraints to be loosened, but the voices that responded were muffled and confusing. The warmth that was being pumped into his soul was too hot and he felt the urge to back away against the uncomfortable surface he was laid supine on.

What had he done to deserve this? Why was this being done to him? Multitudes of memories and reasons swam dizzyingly in his skull, not knowing for sure which way was forward or backward, or what the concept of time was.

Another pathetic whimper to be freed and the warmth returned. His soul wanted to find comfort in it, but instead he felt smaller and smaller and he couldn’t help the tears.

It continued on like this. Sans had no indication of where he was or what had happened. All he could do was wait until his strength returned. Unwillingly, his magic was being restored at an alarmingly fast rate and every bone in his body was burning in protest.

Why wasn’t he being allowed to go home?

He tried to voice his concerns, but the bribe of seeing his brother again was never offered. The voices he heard were soft and echoed, so different from before. Then there was a god-awful pain under his ribs and he hissed in agony, trying to twist and wrench himself free of his restraints again.

He wanted to forget that this ever happened. He wanted to be free and to stop hearing the awful beeps of the monitoring system.

They’d done it so many times before, but this time... this time they had said it would be longer lasting.

Just once more, then he could forget. He could be with his brother. He could hug him tightly and apologise for being away for so long. The doctors would never touch him for as long as Sans cooperated.

He felt sick. These ‘sessions’ always made him feel horribly dizzy and ill. He hated it. He hated him.
Soon Sans couldn’t hate anyone as he slipped back into blissful unawareness and sleep.

He awoke later and with more clarity than before, but he knew he was still hooked up with an assembly that was feeding him some kind of potion. He had the strength when he attempted to move, however feeble it was. A hand was pressed against his sternum, light and soft, not anything he was expecting. The hum of electricity was still around him… but that didn’t seem like the right word for it. Maybe it was something else?

It took too long for him to gather the courage to open his eye sockets or to acknowledge what had happened. The real world mingled with memories and for a cruel moment of soul-shattering disbelief, he thought he saw his father above him, visage obscured by a spray of fire.

Wait... no, his father wasn’t fire. In fact, Sans was pretty certain his father wasn’t anything anymore. Hesitantly, he turned his skull just a little. He found it was getting easier to attempt to open his eye sockets, the weakest of lights summoned so he could at least look around.

What hit Sans was a wash of confusing colour, magentas, blues, reds and golds. Some places were dark, others lighter as he tried to get a clearer view. He grunted softly when he attempted to move his stiff body, the surface he was lying on so uncomfortable that he’d rather fall onto the floor than be stuck there for any longer.

A voice called out to him along with the peculiar sound of humming. He forced himself to look up, not seeing anything but a bright light that made tears collect from the intensity. He turned his skull to the right, shifting slightly to escape the glare.

“....on’t seek it out....... nly distress yourself.”

The tone sounded familiar, even the burn of medicine made him feel comfort in that moment. Whoever it was, they were probably right. He didn’t need to see the tubes. The fact they were still attached to him was enough to strain his breathing with barely contained panic.

“Easy,” the voice said again as Sans tried to shift again.

He was just so damned uncomfortable. The warm pressure on his sternum persisted and he let out a grunt of effort, trying his best to move so his spine didn’t feel so compressed.

“urts,” he muttered thickly, still trying to look around him with no avail, “spine hurts…”

Relief heavily exuded from each word when the stranger spoke next; “Once you're fine to move yourself-”

“move me… have t.. to get papy…” Sans tried to explain, realising his baby brother must still be with the neighbour at home.

“Your brother is sleeping.”

“gotta get `im,” Sans tried again, then wrenched his eye sockets closed briefly, as though the action would clear his vision, “he’s scared.” He was always scared, being left behind with the tall feline monster.

“We were all worried, Sans.”

For some reason that plucked at his addled mind. Sans felt a peculiarly painful throb in his heart and
he opened his eye sockets, his vision still a messy streak of dizzying colours. For a moment he thought he heard a fireplace, but he shook his skull to clear the ethereal noise. It persisted.

“no more medicine,” he bartered softly. He attempted to move his arms, but only his left obeyed him. It was shaky as it passed down the expanse of his ribs, wanting to tug on the leads attached to his soul to pull them out. Something caught his hand instead, preventing him from moving further. It was warm. “no.. no more tubes… please?” Had he really resorted to begging now?

“Do you think you can try to eat?” came the careful inquiry instead. Sans thought about it in a moment of bemusement. That was new; normally he wasn’t offered food after the sessions. In fact, he was never usually called by name, either. “...Or drink? ....Have some tea here.”

Dumbly, Sans tried nodding. It was an effort, but his skull tilted forward once or twice before he gave up the exhausting movement. “ok.”

After a pause, Sans felt a warmth like none he had ever felt before flood behind his neck and behind his skull. He gasped softly and attempted to move away from it, his right side still not heeding his magic to move. Panic rising up in him again, Sans couldn’t help the increasing breaths and whimpers.

“You’re alright,” the calming voice murmured to him and Sans forced himself to relax, no matter how tense he felt. He was trembling, shaking so hard he could hear his bones knocking together. “Easy, Sans, I have you... Try to drink.”

A mug was offered to his teeth, a waft of steam flushing the bone of his chin and sending a gentle scent through his nasal cavity. Everything seemed like too much, but whomever it was that had decided to help instead of harm, confused him further.

What if it was more medicine?

Sans whimpered at the thought, but his starved magic drew upon the vessel no matter how much he attempted to hold back. A feeling of familiarity passed through him as things clicked into place, recognising the drink as tea, the temperature of heat and also the tiniest hint of taste.

Sea tea.

It tugged at a memory and Sans relaxed a little more once he finished the drink. The sea tea and heat pulled him closer to reality and out of his bemused state. He opened his eye sockets again; once his eye lights settled on the caregiver, a spark of recognition came over him.

Then immediate, instantaneous dread.

“you-” It left his mouth before he could stop himself. A new drive of panic came over Sans as he shrank back, recognising where he was - and who was there. Regardless of the relief that passed over the other’s face and how their body slackened, Sans could swear he could see it shift into something more. “no… no! you’re not.. you’re not.. not supposed to-”

It was Grillby. Oh god, it's Grillby, his thoughts screamed. Sans tensed and threw his hand over his face, hiding from the fire monster’s now perplexed flames. Sans knew it without seeing it; Grillby pitied him. He worried. A sinking feeling coupled with a depthless chill gripped his soul.

He didn’t want to be seen like this.

“pap!” he tried to yell, however his voice felt raw and cracked in panic. “papyrus!” Sans thrashed against the bartender, still covering his face. He started to kick his legs with what little strength the
tea offered him and Grillby attempted to hold him down.

“Sans! You’re alright - you’re safe, everything is fine-” Sans interrupted him by giving in to a pathetic heart wrenching sob, still trying to twist away from the fire monster. “Your brother is sleeping and safe.”

“i don’t.. i don’t want you to.. to see-” the skeleton sobbed, trying to push himself up against his right side. His body lurched downward suddenly and he couldn’t help the frightened yelp when he felt arms securely around him. “grill.. by… let go. let go, please, please-”

Grillby’s voice sounded distressed, yet soft, “...You’ll fall off.”

Sans tensed, figuring the meaning in the other’s tone to mean Fall. Fall Down. Because he knew he was weak, he already changed his mind about him, he-

Oh god.

NO!

He felt the warmth of the other’s magic plead with his soul, a silent inquiry into his mind and state that he couldn’t deny no matter how much he wanted to reject it. Sans both froze and bristled in shock, every part of his body feeling invaded as he was Checked.

“Please, Sans,” the snap of fire was a form of gentle chastisement and the skeleton flinched, jerking out of his horror. “Look at me.”

“i.. i can’t…” His voice sounded so small and frail, Sans hated the sound of it so much. He drew in a few harsh breaths, unable to think clearly. Grillby had just Checked him.

He knew.

He couldn’t dodge it anymore.

He would be treated differently.

Shunned.

Pitied.

Ignored.

Deserted.

Unloved.

He’d be scared of getting close-

“Sans-”

“why..? why would you..?” That was it, Sans thought. There was no way he could stay in Snowdin. It had been a good run, one of the best places they’d lived in. So full of happy, friendly people. No bustle, no worry. No overly prying neighbours. Now it was all gone. They had to move. Behind his hand, tears were collecting again. Betraying him. Making him feel smaller than before.

He didn’t want to…
“Why would I..?” The worry in the other’s voice physically hurt. “Please, try to calm yourself… Take deep breaths. No one is going to harm you.”

Feeling lost but still having a sliver of hope left in him to believe Grillby’s words, Sans paused and inhaled slowly, still hiding his face. He attempted to lift his right arm but couldn’t, something inside of him didn’t want to know the reason why.

He exhaled. The breath was long. Grillby urged him to do so again and Sans repeated the action, breaths shuddering, broken and weary. When he had calmed down enough, the fire monster carefully lifted him so he was sitting upright against the back of the couch. Sans still kept his hand over his face, not wanting to see the other’s no doubt disappointed expression. He was still trembling.

“m’not dyin’,” Sans insisted emphatically, his voice on the edge of tears. If he could save their friendship at least, maybe Grillby wouldn’t ignore him? Maybe he could lie and say… say the Check was wrong. That by some cosmic error, whatever Grillby saw was a mistake. “i’m not.”

Instead, Grillby sounded surprised, “...Of course you aren’t!”

Somehow, the other agreeing made him feel more shocked but it still felt embittering and unreal. Sans inhaled again, the intake sharp and pained as his magic coiled restlessly and unevenly throughout his body. He wanted to escape, but drawing upon his magic resulted in a harsh sensation that made him dizzy again.

“Look at me,” the fire monster implored. He had his hands on Sans’ shoulders to keep him upright, searching the skeleton’s reactions. His bones trembled under his hands and Sans was trying very hard not to give in to the shamed sobs that shook him.

One of the fire monster’s hands went to his forearm, a gentle tug insisting for it to be pulled away, but Grillby didn’t force him. Sans hung his skull, pressing his phalanges against his face to hide more.

“i can’t-” the skeleton couldn’t help the sob that broke through at the end. “i can’t - i just can’t…”

He felt another gentle touch upon his soul and he flinched, every part of Sans was drawn up tightly with persistent agitation. He resisted the urge to lash out at Grillby to push him away alongside the anger and terror that suddenly swelled inside with the invasion.

“s-stop checking!”

Three points. Not one. Not nine either, where it had been before he ignited the box. Sans doubled over and shuddered when Grillby took his hand in both of his own, unable to meet his gaze.

“Sans...” the tone was disappointed and soft, flames crackling in immediate comfort. Grillby’s voice was soothing but Sans felt what had to be pity behind every word. “Look at me. Please.”

Sans’ breaths quickened and Grillby got up to sit next to him on the couch, staying close. The skeleton shuddered, feeling his heat so nearby that he tried to escape again through a shortcut. His magic fizzled pathetically and he shook his skull in disbelief.

“i don’t.. i don’t want to see it-”

Grillby drew up closer so he was right in view when or if Sans would open his sockets. Carefully, he slipped one of his hands to cup the other’s face, pushing away the tears.
Sans attempted to breathe deeply, but it caught several times. Soon, every breath was laborious and quickened as panic gripped him again. He was trying - but Grillby had Checked him. Sans tried again, unable to calm himself until Grillby spoke next.

“Please, look at me.”

“y-you checked-” the skeleton accused again indignantly, his body shaking in distress, “you’re not sup… supposed to-”

“Alphys instructed me to,” the fire monster explained carefully, still rubbing a gentle warmth into the side of Sans’ face. “...To ensure you recovered as expected.”

Sans swore softly, inching his face away from the soothing motions of the other’s hand. He tried to argue more, feeling so vulnerable now that his most hated secret was out. And Alphys… he didn’t know what to think about her just then.

“where. where is she..? an’ papyrus?”

“Alphys had to return to retrieve some supplies. Papyrus is resting in his room.” There was a pause, then he added quietly, “...Will you not look at me?”

Sans shook his head, then attempted to pull his hand away from Grillby’s. It hurt to know that he knew, but why was he pretending that it didn’t matter? Of course it mattered, but… a small deranged hope inside of him prayed that it wouldn’t.

“...Will you not tell me the reason, then?”

Goddamn his comforting voice, he thought. Sans inhaled deeply, breath shuddering. Then he tried again. As he calmed himself, Sans felt the tension ease from the other’s body. He supposed… if he was going to be let go of, he could at least tell Grillby why.

The thought made it hurt even more. He ducked his skull away from the other’s hand with a soft keening noise, unable to help himself as pain gripped at his heart and soul.

“i don’t want to see it,” Sans said quietly, but every word was clear. No drawl, no slur of his words. “i.. don’t want to see pity. not from you.”

There was silence and Sans froze, unable to stop himself. Grillby continued to caress his face, the soft gesture more soothing than Sans felt he deserved.

“m’not dying,” Sans repeated, voice breaking.

“I know.”

“m’not falling.”

“Of course you aren’t, Sans,” Grillby repeated back emphatically. “No one thinks you are!”

“oh god-”

“You fainted. That’s all. You expended a lot of magic, but you’re recovering well,” the fire monster added.

“you checked me-”
“...ad to!” It came out sharper than the fire monster wanted to and he felt guilty when Sans flinched. “...You were blocking Alphys.”

“fine.” There was a bitter note to Sans’ reply alongside a weak flare of anger.

“...and your brother,” there was a concerned note to Grillby’s tone and Sans shrank against the back of the couch. “...You were out of it.”

“blocked pap out? what..?” Sans never recalled doing that. Hesitantly, he opened his left socket, the pitch behind it unsettling the fire monster before he saw the haze of magic bring the other’s eye light back into existence.

From spending so much time in the darkness of his own mind, Sans squinted a little at Grillby’s ambient glow. He couldn’t make out his expression, but he didn’t want to see it either, afraid of what was hiding there.

“Alphys travelled from Hotland to help.”

“...she did?”

“Of course, Sans. Your brother didn’t know what to do. Please don’t be cross with him.”

“i’m...” Admittedly, it took a bit longer for Sans to process it all. His gaze was downcast, avoiding Grillby’s visage, but at least now both his eye sockets were open.

“...Were not absorbing the food he offered you either. I suppose that is... perhaps why he thought my cooking would help you.”

Sans stayed quiet, his mind tumbling over several things at once.

“Don’t be cross with him,” Grillby repeated, much quieter now that Sans had calmed down a little. “.....Convinced him to allow me to stay.”

“m’not mad.”

Grillby stroked the side of the other’s face again, this time the skeleton leaned in to the touch. It was something, at least. “How do you feel?” he chanced at asking.

Sans inhaled a calming breath, his panic now subsiding enough for him to think a little more clearly. “burnt out,” he muttered. Then he decided to be a little more truthful, “...a little scared.”

“...Think we all were.”

“about what you think, i mean,” Sans elaborated, then went tense again. “i.. i don’t want you to think.. less of me-”

A flare of fire caught his attention and he automatically looked up, surprised at the reaction. He saw it - the twinge of shock amongst the flames coupled with… confusion?

No.

That couldn’t be right.

“...The hell would I think LESS of you?” the fire monster’s voice snapped. Sans shrunk back more, not wanting to hear any of it as his eye lights faded in his sockets. “I don’t understand!”
Sans remained quiet, clenching his teeth together. He wanted to hide so badly, but his magic wasn’t heeding him. He tried for a shortcut once more but winced with the effort. Everything was painfully raw and he felt another dizzy spell.

“Stop trying to use magic,” the other pleaded, his kinder voice returning, “...you’re on suppressants. It will not work.”

The skeleton swore softly, trying to move his hand out of Grillby’s so he could yank on the tubes coming out of the bottom of his shirt. The thrum of the fire monster’s flames built up in agitation and he sighed, giving up the movement.

“Tell me why. Why would you think something like that..?”

Sans faltered, opening his mouth once before closing it. Then he tried again, “my…” He stopped yet again, a shudder passing through his frame as Grillby’s hand moved against his skull in a soothing manner. His voice was a lot smaller with the next attempt, “…my hp.”

Where the other didn’t say anything, his fire kindled a little brighter than usual. The snapping embers came off of him as he considered what to say to have its full effect. Of course, he had been worried when he first found out, however… It had been awhile since then.

He understood everything now. The shadowed way Sans evaded his health when they were at New Home. The barely restrained panic and extreme silence that startled him. The way that Sans pushed himself, as though nothing was wrong with him at all. Having a fear that people would think less of him for having such dangerously low health was ever-present, a sickening, lurching dread that one day things would be out in the open.

Grillby speculated it was likely due to the fact it must’ve happened before. New Home, as ironically as it was named, was not without its flaws and did, unfortunately, have a way with secluding Fallen monsters from view. It was not a home. It was not accommodating. If it had anything to do with why the skeleton brothers moved out to the furthest outreaches of the Underground, Grillby thought that was the reason.

The silence appeared too much for Sans. He had started to twist away from him and grabbed at his hand in order to push. He was still so terribly weak that it took little effort for Grillby to hold his ground.

“Sans,” he murmured, drawing close. He would have to apologise to the doctor if her equipment was damaged - at least the bag on the pole that had been feeding into Sans’ soul for the past evening was now empty. “...It does not define you. You are so much more than a number on a counter. Don’t let it consume you.”

Sans had heard it so many times from Papyrus. ‘Don’t let it define you’. Without the intent to harm, monsters couldn’t hurt him but the pervasive thought of ‘what if’ always haunted him. For the most part, his brother had been correct. It was a matter of acceptance and peace with himself that as long as it wasn’t known, Sans could live with his horrible self-loathing and poor health. It was the reason that he told Papyrus he was lazy, and that ‘tired’ eventually became to mean that between them instead.

Not being defined by the singularity of his life felt as though he’d been hiding unnecessarily. But Grillby was right with his words, ‘don’t let it consume’. That’s precisely what his fear had done to him. He wanted more. He wanted to believe him. That’s why when he heard Grillby say it Sans could only shake his head, unable to say anything at all in disbelief.
“It’s true,” the other continued, finally letting go of Sans’ hand. Grillby’s other hand cupped the other side of Sans’ face, flooding him with a gentle heat and the skeleton couldn’t help the shuddering gasp. “…You mean so much to me.”

Sans could only nod slightly, unable to speak. A whirlwind of emotions came over him, threatening to make him tremble more. He was so scared, so ashamed that the other knew. But Grillby was being careful to say just the right things, filling him with the desire to just let himself believe them.

“ok.” It was his default response. It was so hushed it could barely be heard over the ambient sound of flames. He drew in another shuddering breath and settled his left hand on the other’s forearm. Sans hadn’t anticipated the warmth that flooded the bone of his forehead, nor the bursting comfort that kindled in him at the gesture.

It relaxed him, if only barely. But in its bareness it felt too much like something overpowering him and Sans gripped at the other’s sleeve that much harder.

“thank you-” he muttered, his voice sounding strained. He inhaled sharply with another kiss to his brow, unable to keep himself from trembling any longer, “thank you…”

Eventually the silence fell over them again, but it was less tense than Grillby felt previously. He had seated himself next to Sans on the couch and pulled him into his lap to hold him, willing his fire to behave itself and keep away from the delicate equipment. Exhausted, Sans allowed him to do it as he straddled his lap, his chest and skull flush with Grillby’s body.

The fire monster had taken to rubbing his back, slowly and soothingly, until Sans found himself falling asleep. Occasionally the fire monster felt a subtle tremor go through the other’s form and he would stroke down the middle of his spine, pressing gentle heat into his bones as though to say ‘don’t worry, I’m here’.

Sans had displayed more distress and emotion than Grillby had ever seen from him before. Alphys had warned him of a few things, mainly that the sight of the medical equipment would make him panic. But nothing had prepared the fire monster for the tumultuous distress and sadness of a tortured soul.

Worn out from staying up all day and now night and landlocked with his own and now Sans’ emotions, the bartender was exhausted. Grillby would soon join him in slumber, holding the skeleton against his body to ensure Sans felt as comforted as he possibly could.

Chapter End Notes

Raw freakin’ emotions here. Coupled with Sans' PSTD concerning medical stuff AND finding out that Grillby knows about his HP (and Checked him, omg), he's... not in the best place, mentally. :( But... at least there is reassurance. And kissies. And hugs. Sans needs so many hugs!

Thank you to all you readers who take time to write such sweet comments lately. I really enjoy reading them and seeing what people's thoughts are on each chapter. I know I upload frequently and I kind of worry it's too frequent but I get excited and, and..... orz;;;;;; I wanted to say, thank you anyway!!!
（）
Soul Burn

Chapter Summary

Alphys returns with some more supplies. Papyrus gets a hug. Sans apologises.

Chapter Notes

FYI there is a pretty heckin’ neat chart in this chapter that looks ok in landscape mode on mobile or best in browser. :D
If you can decipher some of the nerdspeak in it, you get a Stale Cookie! (recovers 9 HP, but you feel sluggish)

It was some time before Alphys returned with more supplies. She entered the house as quickly as she could, delicate scanner in hand alongside a bursting inventory thanks to the prototype item box in her phone. She immediately sighed in relief when the rush of warmth hit her inside the skeleton brothers’ house. If anything, the fire monster’s gentle soul really helped in more ways than one.

When she approached, she settled her phone on the coffee table, taking a moment to look over the two monsters nestled on the couch. It looked like at some point Sans had regained consciousness, and Grillby had tired out so much that he had fallen asleep.

The little doctor hated to disturb either of them, but she had to get more medicine administered. Gently and quickly, she tapped the fire monster’s hand, feeling the waft of heat through his glove. No wonder Sans looked so comfortable - Grillby was a living space heater!

It was also a very good thing that the fire monster was a lighter sleeper than Sans. One of his bright eyes cracked open and his flames plumed briefly as he woke up. Alphys immediately felt guilty for doing so, but she raised a claw to her mouth with a soft shushing sound. Then she pointed at Sans, then the medical pole, and started to pull out more supplies.

More aethers, coils of tubes and a new device she had tried sending photos of to Sans, but he never ended up receiving them. She sighed softly once she was heated up a little more and pulled off three sweaters so she could move a little easier. Grillby remained quiet and watchful as she inspected the leads and even helped to move the skeleton so she could adjust the lines going under Sans’ shirt so they wouldn’t get caught.

“He, um… he seems to have stabilised,” she said softly, her claws attaching a brighter cyan aether to the pole, then removing the empty bags and putting them away. “Has he… eaten anything?”

Grillby told her about the tea, his voice a soft rasp of fire and sounding exhausted. She attempted to do a Check on Sans but was blocked again. It hadn’t been the first time, but it had been so many years since Sans had rejected her requests to do so that she felt a little lost.

She tried not to let it get to her. Sans, Papyrus and now Grillby were depending on her to work her magic. If anything, she was a brilliant scientist when it came to the workings of souls, although up
until Sans’ recovery after his accident, she had been fairly... inept. At times, she still felt that way. A lot of it just appeared to be dumb luck.

Once the tube leading from Sans’ soul to the fresh bag was secured, she notched the dial so the aether fluid trickled down. The skeleton twitched in his sleep but otherwise didn’t wake. She was grateful he was such a deep sleeper. And she couldn’t help but find the two just simply adorable, however sad it was at the same time.

That would be a thought to entertain for another time, she mentally chastised herself. She had more questions for Grillby.

“Has he, um, talked at all?” Alphys made sure to keep her voice down, just in case. Grillby looked down to the skeleton resting against his body, his hand idly rubbing at his back. He seemed a little stressed, if her guess was correct. Monsters comprised of the elements were difficult to decipher sometimes. At least she understood his accent, having lived in Hotland for most of her life.

“...Did, a little. He was.. very frightened,” the fire monster revealed, pulling the skeleton a little closer to his body. Alphys was just able to stop the soft ‘aww’ that almost passed her lips. “He is. It took some time.. to ensure him I did not think ill of his.. condition. I do not believe he is entirely convinced.”

Alphys nodded a little sadly in understanding.

Grillby stayed quiet for a moment as he watched her attach another bag to a hook and link it to the first. Then he continued hesitantly, “...I’ve been aware of it for some time.”

“O-oh,” the little doctor said, surprised, “I was, um… I was wondering why… I mean- why you didn’t.. didn’t seem too shocked?”

“...Don’t believe I can.. call it ‘shock’. For awhile, I was concerned. But then soon came to realise that was unfair.. to him. When he has been this way... Papyrus said he was ‘weird’, that way. As though to say, ‘always’. I thought it a ruse. However... it would be disingenuous of me to view him any differently than I had before. And Sans... he would feel that I would be treating him as such. Our relationship... our friendship would have become strained. Hence why I kept it.. secret.”

“Y-you certainly have, um... have put a lot of thought behind your reasoning!” Alphys said, amazed at the heartfelt notion - and the fact it was the most she’d heard the fire monster speak. “I’m, I’m sure Sans would appreciate that. Besides his brother, myself and.. and some people at the university in New Home, no one else knows.”

Grillby nodded gently, then ran his hand over Sans’ spine when he felt him shudder against his body. The skeleton’s hand inched around his waist in his sleep and grabbed a fistful of the other’s shirt with a soft whimper.

“...Mentioned wanting to go home,” the fire monster added quietly, “A lot of things he said sounded.. confused. Frightened.. of leaving his brother behind.”

Alphys remained quiet, all too aware of what Sans had likely said in his delirious state. She had heard it often enough, remembering the trauma and the panic when Sans woke after being injected with Determination to stop him from Falling. It afforded her an insight into the medical abuse the poor monster had suffered through in his childhood and burgeoning stripe years. She knew only knew bits and pieces. Sans never wanted to talk about it.

“I, um.. don’t know anything about that,” she admitted with a soft sigh as she tapped her claws
together with the little lie. “I’m.. I’m going to check up on Papyrus. Can you... I mean, are you able

“*I’ll stay with him. Go ahead.*”

Alphys turned back at the top of the stairs, just in time to see the fire monster lean down and drop a
light kiss on the top of Sans’ skull. She knew the signs of exhaustion all too well. Grillby shouldn’t
have stayed, but it wasn’t her place to tell him to leave. He looked stressed, his fire leaping in small
chaotic arcs, just barely contained to keep away from the medical equipment.

She turned and lightly knocked on Papyrus’ door, ignoring all the usual caution tape and signage to
keep out. When she didn’t hear anything, she slowly opened the door to the dark room.

“Pa.. Papyrus?”

The younger sibling wasn’t sleeping, but was sitting on his bed, hugging a pillow over his chest
tightly. All the lights were off and Alphys could hear the undeniable sound of bones rattling. It was a
denser sound than what she was used to with Sans. After all, Papyrus’ bone density was thicker than
his brother’s.

“How is he?” The other’s tone was so quiet, Alphys’ heart sank at the despondency.

“He’s.. He’s ok!” she assured him, making her way into the room to approach him. He didn’t turn,
but the tension in his shoulders eased somewhat in relief. “Sans has stabilised. He’ll be just fine, o- ok? We.. We just have to wait a bit more. He’s on the second round of aethers and the suppressants
are working, so he’ll recover in no time!”

Silently, the skeleton nodded his skull, but the arms around the pillow grew visibly tighter.

“Are.. A-are you ok, Papyrus?”

“I.. am alright. Just-” He stopped, a shaky breath escaping him. “…Just never thought I’d hear him
cry like that again.”

Hesitantly, Alphys laid her hand on the other’s back and Papyrus lowered his skull to bury his face
into the pillow. These poor boys had been through so much in their lives and their past would never
stop haunting them. She hoped the gesture would comfort Papyrus, but then she was caught off
guard when the skeleton suddenly turned and grabbed her in a tight hug.

Surprised, she stood stock still, then eased into it and brought her arms up to rub the other’s back.
Poor Papyrus, she lamented internally.

After awhile, she had told him to actually sleep - to turn off his thoughts and go to bed. She felt
guilty for mentioning Sans would be upset with him for neglecting to take care of himself, but
ultimately it was the only thing that worked with the younger brother.

Eventually, Papyrus let her out of the hug and rubbed over his orbits, concealing what had to be
tears. Then he silently laid down and curled inward away from her, wrapping his arms around
himself in a gesture of self-comfort.

When Alphys went downstairs again, Sans was awake, but Grillby had fallen asleep again. She saw
the lights of the skeleton’s eyes flick to her direction and she offered him something of a nervous smile as she approached with a hesitant wave.

“H-hey, Sans…”

Sans’ glance turned downcast, not willing to move from Grillby’s embrace, or even move at all.

“How are you, um.. feeling?”

Sans looked back up at her, still quiet. Something in his gaze was hurt, aimed directly at her. Alphys felt it and was anxious as a result.

“Oh..! O-ok, fair enough!” She sidestepped the glare, moving out of his line of vision to check on the equipment again. “You’re.. um, still blocking me.”

He didn’t reply. Alphys grew a little more anxious, knowing he was likely upset with her. Of course he was - surgery when she knew he would hate her for it.. And with his boyfriend there, to see him in such a sorry state… she felt worse.

“you told him to check me.”

There it was. The accusing, devastated tone. Alphys’s jaw tensed as her claws moved over the lines and adjusted the flow rate with another knob, flinching at the soft gasp the sudden flood into Sans’ soul brought on as a result.

“he knows, alphys.”

“I.. I know,” she muttered apologetically, unable to face him. Alphys heard his breath shudder a little and a slight shift of fabric moving. When she had the courage to turn her head, Sans had leaned back from Grillby’s hold to keep himself upright, visibly shaking.

His sockets were open but his eye lights were gone, making his expression cold and unsettling.

Nervously, Alphys tried to Check him again, only to have no information brought back. “You’re, um… you’re still b-blocking me?”

Sans didn’t entertain her with a reply, still staring at Alphys. It took everything in him not to lash out, feeling both betrayed by her and disgusted with himself. He was blocking subconsciously and didn’t know how to let go to allow her to, even if he did want her to check.

The thing was, he knew she had to make sure he was alright. She was doing her best, which made him feel all the worse for it. Sans was doing his best to remain calm as not to rouse the fire monster. Guilt flooded into him when he saw how disoriented the flames were and how exhausted Grillby looked.

“I… It’s ok! I-I-I b-brought a.. a scanner,” Alphys tittered softly, almost as if to herself. Sans watched from empty sockets, still trembling from the effort of keeping himself upright with only one arm to steady him. It hurt that she was ignoring his concerns, when it had been her fault.

God, Grillby knew. He couldn’t believe it. His heart sank as Alphys carefully manoeuvred him away from the sleeping fire monster to his side. The cushions were stacked against the right side of his rib cage to make sure he stayed upright, then Alphys turned and laid a blanket over his lap to hide the tubes coming out from his shirt. He hadn’t even noticed them, staring at her in disbelief.

Then she brought out the scanner, making him flinch. It looked older now, but it was the same
scanner used on him after his fall into the CORE. Sans couldn’t help the way he shrank back, gripping a fistful of the blanket as he attempted to draw in his reserves to escape.

It sputtered out and it only made him feel ill, the dizzying spell enough to make him almost gag.

Alphys recognised the action with the brief flicker under his shirt and immediately flew in front of him, gesturing quickly for him to stop.

“Wha-! D-don’t do that, Sans,” she pleaded quickly, her voice a soft hiss, “He.. Here, why don’t I, um... I show you. I promise you, it.. it won’t hurt. R-remember?”

He bowed his skull a little more when she held out the scanner, his body a mix of being tense and shaking in fear. She lined it up in front of him, the device looking something like a grey camera mixed with a tiny flat screen television. She flicked a few switches on the front of it. The screen popped to life with a green and yellow glow, something she was dissatisfied with, but it worked just the same.

The image on the screen was pixelated, a small representation of Sans’ soul along with an information list of his extended stats. Carefully, she moved around to sit next to Sans, her claws gripping the scanner tightly.

“don’t wanna see it.” Sans murmured, sounding numb.

Alphys felt the sting of the other’s mood and shrunk down a little, knowing she had to continue. “O-ok, but I know y-you’ll feel better, um… um, kn-knowing what happened, exactly.”

“i don’t want to.”

“Sans…” The little doctor pressed a claw to her face and shook her head, then adjusted her glasses to scroll down the screen. As much as Sans didn’t want to deal with her at that moment, Alphys knew he would come around. He had before. If she left, he would become despondent and dissociative. Interaction was key here.

It took her a moment to scroll through the information to assess what had happened. Sans’ magical levels were pitifully low, his stamina had taken a hit, and something looked to have left a burn on him. Not from the fire monster, that was certain. The CORE-ion suppressants were doing their job preventing Sans from using his shortcuts, but they were a temporary measure at best.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>[ SANS (120.8Y) ]</th>
<th>3/1 STA/HP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>MGK [64%]</td>
<td>1 ATK</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ca [22%]</td>
<td>1 DPF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C [4%]</td>
<td>1 DEF</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Pb [.385%]</td>
<td>0 EXP</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>K [.9%]</td>
<td>1 LV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Na [4.115%]</td>
<td>1 INV</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Fe [4.6%]</td>
<td>1 SPD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CONDITION: STABLE</td>
<td>HEALTH: [ !! CRITICAL !! ]</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------</td>
<td>-----------------------------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>HUNGER: YES</td>
<td>DT LV: YEL-10Y34EX^349ppu*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>CLASS: STANDARD</td>
<td>MAT. RATE: 74.39%/C^r34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MGK. STATE: [ 0/0 ]</td>
<td>PHYS. RATE: 34.26%/Ap^r26.4</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

84501-7bHY^*.3495GHU.9// (MAKTF/^43858.35)
8515-3bCQ^267.4682// (MAKDS/^419.888856)
000000000.01% ^920(BASE)// (1/1*pMMPn) [!!] cD: MGK WARNING
//CLEAR

FALLSTATE: YES //OVERRIDE: NONCRITICAL e://DISMISS WARNING ]

Alphys read over the numbers and extended statistics while Sans stared at the screen in silence. Apart from the statuses pinging off that his magic had been inhibited and his health resting at 3 marked it as dangerously low, Alphys saw nothing else wrong with Sans. It just appeared that he merited some extended rest. Nothing about the strange burn on his soul was hidden in the lines of code.

“i don’t want to see this, alph,” Sans finally said after a long moment of silence.

“It’s.. It’s actually ok! L-look, it even shows your growth rate, a-and, uh, class aspect and age - oh, b-but, ignore the.. the, uh…”

“please,” the skeleton’s voice was so small, the doctor felt another pang of guilt.

“You, um... Y-you need to eat something,” she finished, turning the screen towards herself. Sans visibly relaxed, no longer able to see his pitiful stats, thus could put them out of his mind. Dejectedly, he simply nodded. “Any… anything you want in particular?”

He only answered with a vague, half-hearted shrug. Apathy, she knew it well. She knew how to handle Sans when he was like this, at least. Alphys left the scanner by her binders on the coffee table and quickly left for the kitchen to get something.

She was relieved to find most of the snacks she had sent along with Papyrus when he came through the previous week. The fridge only contained spaghetti and after opening a container, it seemed like some kind of volatile substance instead of something edible. Alphys quickly put the container away and brought out an armload of snacks, only to find Sans had slumped against Grillby, staring at the scanner on the table.

“alphys,” he muttered quietly, “can you take off his glasses?” His paranoia had set in about the fire monster seeing the scanner and he wanted to make sure that Grillby didn’t know too much.

He watched as she dumped a few ready-to-eat packages of food onto the table and approached the fire monster, looking even more nervous. Sans turned just a little to watch at the way her claw would
slowly approach the sleeping monster’s visage before drawing back sharply a couple of times. He wondered what it felt like to be burned.

She appeared to have success. Carefully, Alphys folded the glasses and set them to the side and went about unwrapping a few snacks for Sans to eat.

After he had and the scanner said ‘could eat’ instead of ‘yes’ for hunger, Alphys took to fiddling with the bags on the medical pole. Sans continued to shiver once he realised what she was doing - hooking up more aether fluids.

He hated this but he had to deal with it. He didn’t want to but he had no choice.

“where.. where’s pap?”

“T-told him to.. sleep. He looked shaken up.”

“poor guy.”

“Do you… do you remember what happened when you lit the box?”

Sans inhaled deeply, the sensation of the world tilting around him as he felt something different get introduced into his body from the lead. “not really. thought i ha.. had everything figured to a ‘t’.” He welcomed the change in subject. It was something to keep his mind off of the infusions in the meantime. “to, uh, be honest? this didn’t happen last time.”

“I know! Th-that’s why I was... I was shocked!”

“must’ve messed up my notes somethin’ awful... y’know i got that cipher-” Sans stopped and pressed his hand against his sternum with a sickened grunt, the dizzy feeling strengthening. “god, this sucks…”

“I know, Sans. Please be patient. This is the last r-round, and then I’ll disconnect everything. The, um, cipher?”

Sans squeezed his eye sockets closed briefly with another shudder, “um.. yeah. so i got a key worked out. after that, it was just a matter of.. of direct trans.. literation.” His breaths had picked up and he shook his skull, unable to keep his mind focused on the current conversation. The shift in vertigo was making him anxious again. “this... alph, alphys, this one.. feels worse.”

“H-hang in there, Sans. The flow has to… has to stay constant, otherwise, it’ll just take longer!”

The skeleton nodded hesitantly, feeling beads of sweat trickle down his skull. “...what is..?”

“Magi-alkaline dehydranoxoline.”

“....oxoline..?”

“It’s going to actually help y-you manage your reserves! M-more efficiently!”

Sans grimaced, feeling extremely ill. “ok... it’s still.. makin’ me feel like utter shit, though. can i lie.. down yet?”

“O-oh! Sure! Yes, no p-problem!” Alphys turned to arrange the cushions in a more comfortable spot and ease him back down onto the couch.

“i meant on the floor.”
“Sans...”

“already feel like garbage,” he muttered thickly, raising his arm to wipe at his face. “where’s m.. my goddamn arm?”

“It’s safe! After the corticosteroid flux is done too, it should reattach. Papyrus let me know, um... that happens....... frequently??”

“blab,” Sans grunted sourly and draped his arm over his eye sockets. “...one more.”

“S-sure?”

“when he gets.. ngh... when grillbz wakes up,” the skeleton continued, trying to shake away the dizziness, “tell him.. thanks.”

“Oh! S-sure, ok... I can, I can definitely do that!”

“an’ m’sorry.”

“No way!”

“fine. then get `im to... to go home.”

Alphys shook her head, “No way, he wants to stay!”

“stop rhyhmin’, girl... y’soun.. sound ridic.. ulous.”

Grateful for the shift in the skeleton’s mood, Alphys finally allowed herself to smile, as uneasy as it was. Then she pulled the blanket over Sans and adjusted his legs at a less awkward angle. Then she leaned down, “O-ok... but I’m sure your boyfriend won’t be convinced to leave you.”

Sans had to grunt at that and half-heartedly swatted at her face. His hand ended up connecting with her shoulder instead and he automatically grabbed at the knitted fabric of her pink sweater.

“he’s a stubborn.. ol’ flame,” he mumbled thickly, “m’worried.”

Alphys gently patted his skull and pulled the blanket up higher. “I... I really don’t think you have to worry about him, Sans. Now, try to rest... longer than a coup.. couple hours, ok?”

Sans exhaled softly as she gently detached his bony fingers from her sweater and gave his hand a reassuring pat. “ok.”

“When your brother wakes up, I’ll let you know, ok?”

“ok.”

“And I’ll see about.. about checking your workshop. To see what happened. Is that ok?”

“sure,” the skeleton replied sleepily, his eye sockets already closed, “key’s in.. my room. in dresser.”

When she rested his arm down, he shuddered again. “one more-”

“Y-yes, Sans?”

“m’sorry. for makin’ you.. feel shitty.”
The rest of the early morning dragged on. Once Sans’ treatments were over, Alphys was able to reattach his right arm without disturbing him, but less so when she had to remove the applicator from his soul. He shifted with the movement and whimpered in his sleep, but otherwise settled peacefully.

After putting things back into the cell box, Alphys crept up the stairs to Sans’ room, exhausted from all the running around. Naturally, the door handle was stuck, but she was able to get it open with a few simple tools from her pocket.

She covered her mouth with both of her hands when she saw the sight. Wallpaper torn, socks and papers everywhere, everything looked like more of a mess than she knew Sans normally had the energy for. She figured Papyrus had given up on cleaning it at some point, but the smell was unimaginable yet familiar.

She suddenly understood what the burn was. CORE magic, and a lot of it. Alphys chewed on her claws as she beelined for the dresser, quickly found the silver key inside and retreated again. Being in Sans’ room was unsettling at best, but nothing filled her with the unfathomable malaise before as it did then.

The workshop behind the house was what she was expecting from Sans after she unlocked it with the key. Papers were strewn about in seemingly disorganised piles, snack wrappers that had to be decades old and a desk covered in binders, notebooks and half-used pens.

Here too, smelled of CORE magic. It reeked like burning chemicals and was acrid, clinging to her nostrils wherever she went. Some strange marks were on the walls leading to the door and she touched them to see if they grooved the plaster, but no, they hadn’t. So what happened? It looked almost like a lime-green smudge.

Alphys took her time in looking around and through the notebooks left on the desktop. Adjusting her glasses, she fitted the key into the first drawer and found a few more dozen pens and pencils, a whoopie cushion and a coffee stained notepad.

Inside were the notes she was anxious to see; diagrams and formulas as well as a cute little message for a date written in Hands. Well, that was easy to find.

The formulas were all correct, except for one thing, and it seemed changed as an afterthought. Chewing on her claw again, her eyes settled on one of the more important places, something not quite making sense.

Why would he have a formula for a large box instead of the usual size? Usually the boxes were a cubic foot in volume. The one in the living room, freshly ignited, was larger. Not that anyone could see at a glance, but the specifics were so slight that the formula shouldn’t have worked.

It would explain the rebound on Sans, but she’d never known him to be sloppy with math? Did something happen? Alphys quickly snapped the notebook closed and scurried out of the workshop so she could think a little more clearly. The scent of the CORE was too overpowering and it was starting to give her a migraine.
Assurance

Chapter Summary

Grillby left, leaving Sans to his thoughts. They devolve to the point where he locks himself in his room. Papyrus brings Grillby back. Sometimes the only way to convey your feelings is by kissing them away. Sans comes to a life-changing realisation.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“SANS DID WHAT!?!?”

That was enough to wake the older brother from his nap. Groggy and sore from temple to talus, Sans opened his eye sockets with a soft groan of protest. Somehow, he’d shifted onto his chest and his left arm was cramp underneath him on the couch. Every part of him was aching, especially his spine.

The first thing that Sans noticed was that Grillby was not on the couch. In fact, he was sure he didn’t hear his ambient hum of fire anywhere, unless he was outside. Or maybe he had just left. He wasn’t sure how to feel about that, but with the fire monster gone, Sans couldn’t help but feel burned, as bad a joke as that was. His mind was in various states of self-deprecation. Maybe he hoped that Grillby hadn’t left, but at the same time… his mind was twisting things again.

The past day or two had been a blur. Looking around, there was evidence to the truth; Alphys’ cell phone and binders, paperwork everywhere alongside a multitude of snack wrappers and awkwardly placed cushions. Amongst the mess was his missing cell phone, which he left on the coffee table. There wasn’t any need for it just then.

The first thing Sans did was check the bottom of his shirt before looking beside him. No tubes. Every part of him relaxed and he flopped back onto the couch with a pained sigh. He was sure he’d never felt so starved before, but at least he had energy enough to lift himself off the couch.

His legs were unsteady but he could stand. Sans’ right shoulder ached and every movement sent an throb up his spine. His pace was unsteady, but he knew he had to eat something. He vaguely remembered being at 3 points, but was now at 2. It really must’ve been awhile since he was out, he figured.

Rubbing at his face, Sans stumbled into the kitchen and caught himself on the door frame to keep himself from losing balance. What he recognised as Alphys’ lengthy diatribe about something math-related stopped abruptly with a gasp and suddenly there was a pair of strong bony arms encircling him.

“hey, paps,” he muttered, his voice sounding strained with exhaustion.

“SANS! YOU SHOULDN’T BE UP! YOU HAVEN’T REGAINED ALL YOUR STRENGTH YET!” Papyrus’ voice was a touch higher with worry and Sans could feel his embrace tighten.

“i know. m’sorry, i’m just.. really hungry.” Regardless, Sans couldn’t help the way the journey from the couch to the kitchen made him shake with effort and he almost sighed in relief when Papyrus
brought him over to the kitchen table to sit down.

“We were.. we were just discussing your formulae for the dimensional box,” Alphys said, taking a seat beside him.

Sans grunted softly in disinterest and leaned over the table, giving her a sidelong glance. He was still upset with her, but would try to bury it for the moment.

“A-actually, here, let me, um-” She quickly got up and ran to the living room and came back seconds later with a familiar notebook. “Here, you check it?”

Sans really wasn’t in the mood to have his formulae criticised and grew more irritable when he glanced at it quickly. His mind still felt hazy from all the infusions and part of him still felt disconnected from the world, so he just pushed the notebook off the side of the table.

“SANS!”

“Sans, please - it’s.. it’s important!”

“y’know, i just wanna have somethin’ to eat and just.. go back to bed,” Sans muttered under his breath. “m’not up for thinkin’ right now, guys.”

The two of them stayed quiet and stole a glance between them while Sans buried his skull in his arms. Alphys felt the sting of guilt, while Papyrus continued to worry for his older brother.

“OF COURSE… YOU DO NEED YOUR REST. MISTER GRILLBY BROUGHT YOU SOMETHING EARLIER BEFORE HE LEFT,” Papyrus offered, going to the microwave to heat up the fries. He saw the flinch at the fire monster’s name and came back to Sans while the food was heating up. “HE SAYS THAT HE WISHES YOU A SOUND RECOVERY!”

The way it was phrased hurt Sans more. There was a finality to it, as though Grillby didn’t expect to see him again.

It stung, filling Sans with discomfort, even when the fire monster had told him that he meant so much to him. He was too tired to think, emotionally and physically exhausted from the previous night. Not to mention the past few days were a massive blur.

“...thanks, bro,” he finally said once the fries were set in front of him. Even though he knew he was hungry, Sans forced himself to eat despite the loss of appetite. “alph.. you’ve done a lot. you should probably go.”

“SANS-” Papyrus objected, but knew how Sans was feeling. No doubt he would need time to recover from the many things that had happened. But at the same time, he felt like making the lizard monster go home was premature. “SENDING HER AWAY IS UNHELPFUL.”

“i really don’t wanna talk about this right now.”

“It. It’s fine, Papyrus. I’ll just head over to the... the inn.” Alphys had collected the notebook from the floor and was watching Sans, who had made a point not to face her as he ate. Papyrus gave her an apologetic look, but she waved it away. She knew he would go straight to consoling his brother once she left, and that would be for the best. Sans shouldn’t be left alone with his thoughts, after all.

Papyrus had briefly left the kitchen with her, pushing coins into her hands for the inn stay. Apart from the couch, there really wasn’t any place for her to properly rest at the brothers’ house, so the inn was the only alternative. She tried to refuse, but Papyrus was adamant.
“If… If you can get him to talk later, about the formula—” she started in a whisper. Papyrus nodded his skull as he was given the stained notebook, but otherwise stayed quiet. “Message me in case anything h-happens, ok? And.. and don’t forget to take care of yourself, too!”

She had then collected her things and was gone. Sans remained quiet throughout his meal, contemplative and with a sullen air about him. Papyrus joined him at the table and rubbed his back, then settled for a hug.

“i.. just wanna forget it happened,” the smaller skeleton murmured quietly, a hollowness to his voice. “but.. he knows.”

“\textbf{I KNOW, BROTHER…}”

Sans was more emphatic the next he spoke, starting to tremble as heartache welled up inside of him. \textit{“everything’s gonna be different-“}

\textbf{“YOU DON’T KNOW THAT!! DON’T WORK YOURSELF UP, SANS. PLEASE!”}

“we... we gotta move again,” came the dejected realisation and Papyrus held his brother tightly, shaking his skull against Sans’ shoulder in vehement denial.

He grasped at his brother’s clothes and shrank against Papyrus, every part of him trembling in fear. Everything felt like too much, emotions running high and heavy, Sans’ wants fighting with what he felt he had to do wrestling in his mind.

He didn’t want to move. He liked Snowdin. He… \textit{really} liked Grillby, but he wouldn’t be able to view him the same after this. He knew in his mind everything would be scrutinised or double-checked. Eventually he’d be gently pushed away and he’d be left heartbroken.

“\textbf{DON’T THINK ABOUT IT RIGHT NOW.}” Papyrus pleaded with him, his voice quiet as he continued to rub his brother’s back, \textit{“I JUST WANT YOU TO RELAX… SLEEP SOME MORE. WE CAN TALK ABOUT IT IN THE MORNING. ALRIGHT?”}

Sans knew he didn’t want to talk about it and sleeping on the corrupted thoughts would only amplify them. He drew in a shuddering breath and gave in to a slight nod so his brother wouldn’t worry too much about him.

He wasn’t made to sleep on the uncomfortable couch that night, nor in his destroyed bedroom. Sans faced away from his brother in Papyrus’ bed, staring off into the darkness as he went over things in his mind for the thousandth time.

The ache built up in his rib cage but he didn’t move. He truly felt as though everything had been ruined. He’d been able to dodge Grillby finding out for so long that… he had become complacent.

He had opened up so much to the fire monster that even if Papyrus managed to convince him to stay, everything would be strained.

\textit{Broken.}

Both friendship and… whatever they had before, lost.

The realisation hurt. No wonder Papyrus told him not to think about it. It was just too painful.
His brother must’ve realised that he was still awake and pulled him close. Sans shuddered against the warmth of Papyrus’ soothing magic, coaxing him to sleep. He did eventually, although it was restless.

The following morning both of them woke late. Papyrus didn’t panic as he normally would have, instead simply reached for his cell phone and texted Undyne that they needed a couple of days off with no further explanation. Sans appreciated that, at least.

He felt marginally better in body but his mind still stayed dark. He followed Papyrus around like a walking corpse, only half-listening to what his brother had to say. Somehow, Sans had stopped blocking and Papyrus was able to inform him that he recovered fairly quickly thanks to Alphys’ infusions. Sans only shuddered at the reminder. His health remained at 2 points, despite his rest.

While Papyrus handled phone calls from Alphys and Undyne, Sans slipped away to his room with his phone. There were a lot of messages and missed calls, mostly from Papyrus, trying to figure out where his phone went when Sans had unwittingly left it at the fire monster’s place.

Quite a few were from Grillby. Asking him where he was, when he was coming back. If he was upset with him. If he was awake. It had been three days ago, and things had become a lot more complicated than him accidentally saying ‘I love you’ and being too embarrassed to see Grillby again.

Sans rubbed at his face and put his phone down when he heard a knock at the door. Knowing it to be Papyrus, he ignored it and pushed his back against the wall at the end of the mattress in an agitated state.

“SANS? TIME TO GET OUT OF YOUR ASTUTE CONTEMPLATION ON LIFE AND COME OUTSIDE TO TALK!!”

“i really don’t wanna,” Sans muttered under his breath, drawing his legs up close to his body. Another knock and Sans bristled in irritation, then threw his phone at the door. “go away, papyrus!!!”

He didn’t care that his phone was now in pieces, nor that the door sported a large splintered chunk out of it. Sans grabbed a pillow and gripped it tightly, his whole body tensing in aggravation. With no outlet and his magic being locked away, he felt at a loss.

“BROTHER! THAT HAD BETTER NOT BEEN ANYTHING IMPORTANT! I’m so…” the rest of his sentence was muted, as though talking with someone else.

Sans swore under his breath and eyed everything in the room, wanting to throw more things to get his point across. He settled for the lamp and rose his left arm to move it with magic, but short of a dull throb in his soul and a vague shimmer around the object, nothing happened.

The door knob was tried. It clattered uselessly, as Sans had locked it. Good, that meant Papyrus and Alphys wouldn’t be able to get in. He tried drawing up his magic again for a shortcut, feeling the burn of the suppressant still coursing through his body in resistance. After a moment of trying with no success, he gasped breathlessly.

“fuck off!” he yelled after another knock, scrambling off his mattress to grab the lamp on his dresser, tearing it from the outlet on the wall.

“SANS, YOU KNOW I DON’T ABIDE BY SUCH LANGUAGE. THAT’S 4G YOU OWE TO
“for fuck’s sake, papyrus, i just wanna be left alone.” With all he could muster, Sans threw the lamp at the door. It shattered and sent ceramic pieces and dust, glass and the shade bouncing away with a satisfyingly loud crash. There was a pair of surprised voices from the other side of the door, only one sounded more like… a crispy snap?

Sans’ heart sunk as realisation came over him in a crushing wave of emotion.

Oh no.

“THAT'S 6G NOW, SANS! AND STOP THROWING THINGS AROUND LIKE A PETULANT CHILD!”

A different knock than before sounded and Sans retreated to the back of his room, furthest from the door. He looked around in a panic, his breaths picking up. No, Papyrus couldn’t have… not when he knew. Not when he said he didn’t want to see anyone!

“Sans… Please open the door.”

Just as he thought, Sans lamented internally. His hand automatically went to his sternum and he clenched hard, trying to squeeze away the heartache. In a moment of desperation, he went to his window to escape, then stopped. He decided that since his magic wasn’t heeding him, that the fall would likely break more bones than it was inherently worth.

“no,” Sans whimpered in despair, sinking against the wall and covering his skull with his hands. “no, pap, what the hell..?”

What was wrong with him! Why didn’t Papyrus get it? He wanted to be left alone. He didn’t want to see Grillby, nor did he want to see his fears come into resounding soul-crushing reality. He couldn’t bear the confrontation in such a weak state.

Everything had changed, but a part of Sans desperately wished that it wouldn’t matter.

“ALRIGHT, SANS, YOU’VE LEFT ME WITH NO OTHER ALTERNATIVE-!”

Sans shrank against the wall to hide further, whispering to himself to please, please let him be able to escape. The suppressants were still affecting him though and his magic crackled pitifully, resulting in a rush of dizziness.

The door knob clattered again, then it simply came off when something struck it from the other side. When the door opened, Sans saw Papyrus’ body come into view, moving his hand in a way to shake away pain.

The bright light that flooded the room came from Grillby, who stepped in front of Papyrus with a vague nod of thanks. Sans stared past him to his brother, feeling again the sense of betrayal as Papyrus stayed behind.

Grillby walked into the room, every footstep sending a shock of terror through Sans’ body. With every step the fire monster took forward, the skeleton felt the walls closing in all around him and hid his face in his hands. He tried to take calming breaths. The least he could do was not have a breakdown while Grillby told him that he didn’t want to be with him anymore.

But that didn’t make sense. His mind was warping things again. Did he not say that he meant ‘so much’ to Grillby? Did ‘so much’ equal to something else, or to his pitiful form?
Sans was quiet but shaking when Grillby knelt in front of him. The sound of rattling bones was crystal clear when the fire monster reached out and settled his warm hands onto each of his shoulders. He felt the jolt of shock and heard the harsh intake of breath.

“I knew I shouldn’t have left,” the fire monster began softly, his tone remorseful. As if the words themselves burned him, Sans lowered his skull a little more and drew his legs closer to himself. “Sans, will you allow me to speak without interruption..?”

Sans’ breaths had become stuttered, but he nodded sadly. This was it, his mind told him. He was saying goodbye.

It was Grillby’s turn to inhale in preparation, the breath slow and deep while his ambient heat flooded the small room. It blanketed everything in a warm dancing glow.

“Do you remember… what I told you before?” With the skeleton’s hesitant nod, Grillby continued, “But.. you do not believe me.” Sans shrank down even more, the action like a recoil. “Or perhaps… it is because you have convinced yourself that things will change.”

It hurt that the other was spelling his very fears out for him. His tone smooth, his voice soft and warm… it all hurt.

“….Personally think it preposterous, to be honest,” there was a twinge of rebuke, but Grillby’s tone remained even. He rubbed his palms along Sans’ tensed shoulders for comfort. “All things considered… I believed you knew me better.”

Confused, Sans couldn’t help but glance to the other’s face. There was a moment of silence before Grillby tore his eyes away, as though ashamed, “...Not going to make me repeat it.. are you?” His hands gently squeezed at Sans’ shoulders, sending a comforting heat through him. It felt like so long since he’d felt the other’s warmth that Sans stayed quiet, not knowing what to say.

“Perhaps… I will anyway, so that there remains no confusion,” Grillby added softly, leaning forward and Sans couldn’t help the sharp intake of breath with the other’s close whisper, “…I am a star, remember?”

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“...Not going to make me repeat it.. are you?”
cradled his jaw, forcing him to look at his face. Then the fire monster smiled and Sans could see the bright crack of the other’s mouth, the jagged curvature he’d lost himself in so many times. His eyes were bright and kind, blazing behind his glasses with a kindling of care and concern.

If he wasn’t so sure he was being dumped, Sans would have leaned in for a kiss.

Grillby seemed to be struggling, if the skeleton could call it that. He was close enough to see the bright sclera of his eyes move slightly as he was watched and he shrank down again, preparing himself for the finishing blow.

“...Have known all this time, Sans,” was the soft whisper, hanging in the air between them. It took Sans several moments to process what had been said that he wasn’t entirely sure he could trust his mind just then.

Grillby had known?

About what... he...

“you...” Sans’ words died, caught in the middle of a surprised gasp and being so thunderstruck that he couldn’t form words.

“I’ve known,” Grillby murmured quietly, a secret shared between just the two of them as he drew himself up closer. His face was a hair’s breadth away from Sans’, who remained stock still after lowering his arms and staring at the other. “I’ve known for awhile.”

“how...” It seemed pointless to ask, but the skeleton had to know. When did he mess up? Where had it happened? A flurry of memories of their time spent together came back to him, but... nothing popped up of Grillby treating him any differently. “when?” he tried again, his voice catching.

Grillby was smiling in that teasing little way he did and all Sans could do was stare at him in shock. Apprehensively, the skeleton rose his hands in a pleading gesture, fingers hooking into the fabric of Grillby’s shirt.

“Awhile ago,” the fire monster murmured evasively.

Sans’ mind was running a mile a minute, searching Grillby’s visage for any hint of deception. The fear still roiled inside of him, coupled with utmost bafflement.

He really thought he had been so careful.

“since.. since the.. caves?”

Grillby’s smile remained the same, but there was something playful in his eyes that challenged him. “...Try again.”

Sans exhaled again, trying to calm himself. He thought back to all the little moments they shared, nothing standing out apart from when he was sleeping with Grillby nearby. “before?” The fire monster nodded and Sans felt another shock go through his system, still searching. “the ferry?”

Grillby chuckled softly, not meaning to poke fun, “Earlier than that.”

“you... gotta be kiddin’ me. the, um.. date?”

The fire monster clicked his tongue in lighthearted admonishment, “Not even close.”

“first date..?” Sans’ voice was becoming more stricken the farther back he thought about their time
together, not finding any pockets of opportunity that Grillby could’ve found out. When the other
merely shook his head in denial, the skeleton’s trembling died down a little.

“firs.. first k-kiss?”

“...Are you honestly going back chronologically to pinpoint when I found out?” Grillby chuckled
and rubbed the ridges of Sans’ cheekbones with the pads of his thumbs. He was aching to kiss him,
especially with the other’s eye lights staring at him in such disbelief. He just wanted to comfort him,
convince him everything was fine, and hold him in his arms.

“when.. when i…” Sans started, having leaned forward a little. His grip tightened a bit more on the
other’s shirt, then he smoothed out his phalanges and pressed his palm against Grillby’s chest with
the next memory. “...the echo-”

Grillby couldn’t help but smooth down one hand from Sans’ jaw and meet it with his sternum,
pressing his mouth against the other’s in a brief but passionate kiss. The skeleton looked a mixture of
dazed and surprised, still searching Grillby’s visage through the kiss and gasping softly once it was
broken. “then?”

The fire monster laughed softly, “Wrong.”

“i.. i don’t get it,” Sans whispered desperately. “i don’t get it-” he repeated, louder.

He was cut off by another kiss, gentler than before but sending heated pinpricks through his bones.
Still confused once it ended, he tried again, “the, the shortcuts..?”

Grillby was kissing him again, every warm touch blinking out his doubts one by one. His
cheekbone, his temple, down to his chin, all the while he could feel a lingering burst of comfort
behind each one. He was so confused at how Grillby knew before he Checked that Sans’ mind
blanked out for a moment, allowing himself to be covered in kisses.

“Ice cold,” the fire monster murmured against his neck with a breathy chuckle, “Regardless... you
cannot figure it out?”

Hesitantly, Sans shook his skull, the other’s fire tickling at his bones enough to make his breaths
pant.

“...And.. what does that tell you?”

“you’re good at keepin’ secrets,” the skeleton gasped through another barrage of kisses against the
vertebrae at his neck, arching slightly despite the throb of pain in his spine. Sans honestly didn’t
know where or how Grillby found out, nor why he was so insistent on showing him affection.

“Perhaps that... Or perhaps, viewing you any differently just didn’t occur to me.”

Sans’ gaze flicked down to the soft glow behind his hand at Grillby’s chest, unable to say anything
for the moment. Despite his mind attempting to warp the words into something more sinister, he had
a feeling Grillby was being honest with him. That those words were comforting and warm, just like
him, and the skeleton began trembling for a whole new reason.

It would take awhile, but he didn’t want to put the word ‘acceptance’ to the feeling. Comfort was
definitely there, reassurance was all the fire monster had been to him. The kisses were gentle and
Sans allowed the affection, unable to draw a connection between the pity he suspected and the
insurmountable longing he felt.
He couldn’t help the distressed noise that left him when Grillby pulled back from the kiss, feeling the heated glow spark at his jawline with each gasp for breath.

“i, i can’t-” Grillby cut off the rest of his sentence with another kiss. Then another, and another, until Sans didn’t know what his original thought was.

“You can,” the fire monster breathed between gentle gasps, hoping the kisses would convince the other how much he meant to him, “You always can.”

“i mean,” Sans cut himself off, breaths becoming more ragged the more Grillby showered him in affection, “i.. i can’t kiss back-”

Grillby heard the half-distressed, half-chuckle from the skeleton and stopped, allowing the other a break. His fingers had twisted themselves into the fabric of his shirt and Sans was leaning forward, every bit of him trembling as he willed himself to calm down.

“what i mean is… y’know alph gave me suppressants. i, um… can’t use magic to-” Sans shifted slightly, then covered the hand pressed against his sternum with his own, his wry grin turning into a grimace. “oh god… i’ve made a wreck of things for sure now.”

“Never,” the fire monster assured him. His next kiss was more tender, placed against the other’s brow. With it, he pushed a comforting heat into the bone, hearing a soft, shuddering sigh escape Sans in response. “...Could’ve chosen an easier way for me to see your room, though.”

As if several things inside of him cracked at once, Sans slumped against the wall and covered his face with one hand. His shoulders shook and for a moment Grillby was concerned his friend had broken down into tears. Laughter is what greeted him, hesitant, almost rueful, but it was laughter - and he never felt such relief at hearing the thing he’d gotten so accustomed to in his life.

Sans appreciated the attempt at a joke, he really did. He was still dazed and shocked with the revelation of the other’s knowledge. He was even more shocked when Grillby pulled him away from the wall, gently, encircling his arms around him and holding him flush to his own body. Both the other’s palms smoothed over his back, echoing heat and comfort as his embrace tightened without hesitance.

He honestly knew.

It sounded like... he really didn’t judge him for it.

No pity.

Treated him the same.

Didn’t treat him like glass.

Stuck with him, whenever it was that he’d discovered it.

Sans knew it would bother him for a time and he’d linger on ‘what ifs’, but - he would try. If Grillby honestly went out of his way to confront him, to console him and make him feel better...

...well then, Sans would give it the ol’ college try. He was, after all, being held to very high standards.

Chapter End Notes
Grillby is so persistent and gentle and loving, I love himmm ;u; This chapter is one of my faves.
Papyrus has definitely learned that throwing Grillby at Sans works when he's in one of his 'moods'.

I'm not sure if it was the frequency or the subject matter that didn't jive with people... but these were amongst my favourite chapters to write. :'D

The angst arc is done. Time for fluffies and possibly softcore smut on the horizon.

Postcards is 5 months old and breached 4k hits! Thank you to everyone for reading. I didn't think it would get such a following. <3
Delayed

Chapter Summary

Sans doesn't remember the moments leading up to the box ignition, but his notes were changed, leading to the rebound. Papyrus is called off for duty while Sans and Alphys go to Grillby's. Sans displays unintentional hostility, markers of his maturation, while he and Alphys talk. Sans has a private chat with Grillby about what happened the evening they were intimate.

Sans insisted he would be alright. He would be ok. Dazed through kisses and feeling a little more alright with himself, the skeleton held the memory of the subtle glow at the other's chest after Grillby had left. He didn’t feel bitter for him leaving anymore. He had a job to take care of.

Speaking of being cared for, Papyrus had come in to check up on him. He tutted with the shattered lamp and the smashed phone, to which Sans shrugged off.

“WELL, YOU CERTAINLY LOOK IN BETTER SPIRITS!” his brother told him, and quite literally pulled him off the floor and pushed him towards the bathroom to bathe. He was, after all, worn out, sore, tired, and needed to relax.

A couple of times Papyrus had to check on him, as Sans had opted for an uncommonly long soak. The water just didn’t seem hot enough and he kept draining the tub and refilling it with what he assumed was scalding hot water, if the steam was anything to go by. It allowed him to relax and eventually his spine didn’t feel so tense.

After he was out and changed into the awaiting pyjamas, his brother ushered him back to his own room for some much needed rest while Papyrus set about trying to clean up Sans’ room for the rest of the evening. Sans, thankfully, did not wake during the whole night.

The next day was when Alphys turned up, around noon. Unfortunately, with the fire monster’s presence gone the skeleton brothers’ household was a bit chillier than usual, even with the heat cranked as Papyrus had promised. She had several layers on and her tail was kept close to her body.

They tried the notebook again in the kitchen, where Papyrus made use of the stove in order to bring up the temperature for their guest. Both Sans and Alphys were hanging over the coffee-stained notebook with a furrow in their brows, as though something didn’t make sense.

Alphys pointed with her claw to a few diagrams that were smudged, her whole arm shivering. “S-see?”

“yeah. what... that doesn’t make any sense. and i sure as hell wouldn’t’ve...” Sans trailed off, giving his jaw a scratch with a bony digit.

“Papyrus, do... do you remember if Sans was, um..?”

“OH YES. VERY PECULIAR. I TRIED ASKING HIM MULTIPLE TIMES IF ANYTHING WAS THE MATTER, BUT OF COURSE HE WOULDN’T TELL ME! I JUST ASSUMED
"The date went poorly!" the younger brother explained as he stirred the noodles in a large pot.

Sans sent him something of a reproachful glare over his shoulder and shook his skull in exasperation. "The date was fine."

"Naturally you were just skulking!"

"Nice."

"NYEH HEH!! Thank you, brother. At any rate, the little exchange was brought to the great papyrus’ attention by one of grillby’s regulars. I merely chalked it up to any myriad of relationship strifes!"

"Um, little exchange?" Alphys interjected curiously, while Sans covered his face with his hand in embarrassment and groaned under his breath.

"Apparently, Sans was being extremely rude and Grillby chastised him in front of everyone? It’s all very well and good to test the waters, Sans, but maybe not with a fire elemental?"

Sans sunk into the chair and buried his skull in his hands with an incoherent grumble.

"I-it’s ok, Sans! He doesn’t seem upset with you anymore, so… so let’s get back to this. I mean, I think I understand! When you’re upset you tend to make mistakes! I do it.. all the time,“ Alphys consoled the smaller skeleton, her giggle a little nervous towards the end.

"I don’t make mistakes like this,” came the irritated, buried retort from Sans’ arms.

"Wellll, you… you made one, so? I don’t? Understand? How this could have happened otherwise? Why would you make the matrix larger than the vessel? Why, u-um, especially when it seems like you ch-changed it.. it as an afterthought?"

Sans turned his skull out of his arms with a frown and picked up the notebook. All his letters were the same, varying notes in the margins with precise calculations and measurements. He had been careful, everything was immaculate.

His eye lights shrunk with sudden realisation: a few of the letters seemed a bit lighter than how Sans would have written down. Not noticeable at a glance, but he held the notes closer under scrutiny.

Something had been changed.

"Hey, papybro,” he started nonchalantly, trying to quell the suspicion in his voice, “I lit the box wednesday when you were on patrol, right?"

"YES, IT WAS SUCH A COMPLETE AND UTTERLY IRRESPONSIBLE THING TO DO! YOU’RE LUCKY YOU HAD THE FORESIGHT TO MESSAGE ALPHYS THROUGH UNDERNET SO SHE COULD TELL ME IF SOMETHING WENT AWRY!"

Sans frowned at that. “…i did that?” Admittedly, his memories were hazy two days since, but he was sure he would have recalled something like that.

"You.. you don’t remember?"
“uh,” Sans went over it in his mind. He knew he was out of sorts, similarly to when he had regained consciousness after his Fall. He rubbed over his orbits with the heels of his palms and sighed quietly. “no. not really.” At all, in fact.

“MAYBE WE SHOULD GIVE IT A FEW DAYS?” Papyrus cut in, sounding worried again.

“That… I suppose that would, um, be ok,” the little doctor conceded, watching Sans as he frowned at the paper again. “The rebound, I-I guess we’ll call it? It might’ve.. knocked around a couple of memories.”

“my favourite,” the smaller skeleton remarked dryly, “it’s like the core stuff all over.”

Alphys and Papyrus both shared a worried glance between them, but otherwise didn’t say anything. Sans picked up the notebook again and glared at it, ignoring the exchange. Memories were missing.

The handwriting.. was not his, either. Until he was sure, he didn’t want to bring it up. If he ended up being wrong, he would worry Papyrus over nothing. Best get his thoughts in order before jumping to conclusions.

He was aware of the hypocrisy.

The jaunty ringtone of Papyrus’ cell phone came from the other room and he quickly scrambled out of the kitchen to answer it. While he did so, Sans exhaled softly, finally able to meet Alphys’ gaze.

“listen.. alph, i’m sorry for the crap i put you through-”

She shook her hands in front of her and shook her head as though to deny the apology.

“no, i mean it,” the skeleton said quietly, speaking truthfully now that he wouldn’t have interjections from his brother to deal with. “i know i resented you at the time, but i’m.. glad you came and helped. and.. i owe you, yeah?”

“Y-y-you don’t owe m-me anything!” she replied, almost shrilly.

“Well,” he grinned a little bitterly, “at any rate, it’s been awhile since i’ve been to grillby’s. was it open when you passed by?”

“S-sure looked like it…”

“how ’bout this, then,” the skeleton continued and folded the notepad’s cover over to hide the messed up notes. “let’s grab a burg, or whatever. and maybe we can talk about how i want to punch things for no reason lately.”

Alphys seemed hesitant, more so than usual. She made an effort to steer the conversation away, “O-oh! W-well, you read the biology textbooks, right?”

Sans was watching her carefully, keeping his expression neutral. “sure did. i just want to be sure this stuff is actually… accurate?”

“I-I mean, puberty has hit you like a freight train! I was, um, surprised to see the growth rate-”

“can we not call it that?” Sans pleaded, then shifted in his chair as he saw Papyrus wander over while on his cell phone, conversing loudly with the person on the other end. He was pacing around in zigzagged circles. Sans had seen it before and had to laugh softly. “check it out. bro’s got an
“excitin’ shift and he’s torn about leavin’ me to do it.”

Alphys’ brow raised as she turned to watch. Papyrus looped around the couch once. Then again, swaying as he attempted to convince the other side he needed the day off. But no, no, he wasn’t ill… no, his brother was fine too. Something had just ‘come up’.

Another lap around the couch. Then Papyrus stayed still, shoulders slumped with his back turned to them.

Sans sighed and put on an encouraging grin. “bro,” he called and his brother whirled around. He gave him a thumbs-up and Sans could practically see his brother light up in barely contained excitement.

He then rushed over, “ONE MOMENT, PLEASE,” then Papyrus covered the receiver ineffectively with his hands, “Are you sure, brother? Are you really alright?”

“alph an’ me’re goin’ to grillby’s. i’ll be ok,” his older brother assured him with a dismissive wave and an easy smile.

“You’ll take it easy, right?” Papyrus fretted, “No magic!”

“no magic, even if i wanted to,” Sans agreed placidly, still grinning.

“Promise?”

Sans’ grin dropped slightly with the demand, “uh.. i mean, sure? i’m still medicated and alph here’ll nanny me the whole time if i even try-”

“-I, I won’t nanny!” Alphys interrupted defensively.

Papyrus was staring at his brother expectantly though, and Sans sighed in resignation. “i’ll try, paps. still got that diploma for you to cry over, remember?”

Papyrus gave him a wink and a grin before turning around to continue his conversation; “YES! I’M STILL HERE. IT APPEARS MY PRIOR ARRANGEMENT HAS UNARRANGED ITSELF-”

“an’ there ya go,” Sans murmured quietly, relieved that had panned out smoothly, “he’ll be good with a distraction instead of worryin’.”

They waited until Papyrus had left before leaving for Grillby’s. Even if it had been a few days since he was there last, Sans found the trip over a little unsteady. Alphys helped him in the sense that she hovered nearby to make sure he didn’t slip and held open the door for him. Sans hated that he was still so wobbly even after a good night’s rest, but he would put up with it in silence in order to avoid more medication.

The usual happy welcome greeting was a little startling. The back of his mind coiled the restless thoughts that Grillby knew his secret. But at the same time, it was mutual. It seemed that Grillby didn’t want it getting out he was a star, after all. He relaxed a little.

Alphys was just as startled with the attention and quickly ducked to the booth closest to the bar at the back of the restaurant. It provided for a good proximity to the source of heat behind the counter and it was away from the drafts of the windows and the entrance. No one else was around that particular booth, providing them with privacy.
She sighed appreciatively as she slid onto the bench and Sans joined her across on the opposite side. He was preoccupied by the binders that Alphys had deemed important enough to take along with her and snuck a phalange under the cover to peek at its contents. She was busy making use of the menus by folding them upright so they blocked her from view.

Alphys went ahead and opened the binder up and Sans bristled defensively when his stats came into view. “Oh, re-relax! I blocked everything out except for the juvenescent particulars-”

“oh fuck off, don’t say that,” Sans almost hissed.

“Say what?”

“juv-” he caught himself just in time and grumbled lowly, taking a moment to rub over his face in frustration. “we gotta codeword it.”

“I think… you’re being unnecessarily silly about this!” Alphys exclaimed, her own voice muted, “A-and, quite frankly, l-like an adoles-”

“don’t.”

Alphys sighed and turned around the binder so he could read the uncovered stats. Everything had been printed out from the scanner except his parameters and Determination levels and he glared down at the blocky text.

“G… Genesis?”

Sans didn’t answer.

“H-how about ‘awakening’?”

Sans threw her an injured look from over the binder.

“O-oh, fine. How about G&S?”

“sounds too much like genesis.”

“Y-you’re being difficult,” she reminded him quietly. “H-how about ‘delayed event’?”

Sans grumbled and laid his skull on the tabletop, facing the wall. “Sorry. feelin’, um… antsy. ‘delayed’ works, i guess.”

“When was your last.. outlet?”

Sans thought about it, going over the weeks in his head since this all started. “Intentional, or..?”

“Sans,” the doctor quietly reprimanded him.

The skeleton figured it was probably just after his and Grillby’s first date, when Undyne had helped him manage his magic output. She wrote it down in the other binder for future reference, then frowned.

“Looks like… like almost two weeks ago?”

“wow, already?” Time was just flying by. “Anyway, how long’s this suppressant supposed to last?”

“A few more days,” she replied hesitantly. She jumped when Sans sat upright quickly and pushed
his hands atop of the table to vault himself to his feet, his sockets void of light for a moment in shock. “D-d-don’t panic! It’s until the regulator f-f-ixes, I-I mean, until it, uh-”

Sans forced himself to relax and sit again, hunching down. “sorry,” he said again, rubbing over his skull. As he did so, Alphys pulled something out of one of her pockets and offered it to him. “what.”

“F-for now, it’ll help with the aggression,” she supplied as she handed over the roll of stacked pastilles. “Once a day, with food or… or whatever you can manage. I… I didn’t know how bad you were-”

“pills,” Sans groused sourly. He would have stuck out his tongue in disgust had he the capability to do it. Instead, his magic just fizzed uselessly along his mandible and Alphys covered her snout to stifle her snorty giggle.

“I could… offer another method, but seeing how you faired with the, um…”

“bad joke and you know it, alph. and i know bad jokes.”

Alphys giggled nervously when he shot her a reassuring grin, “S-sorry…”

They sat quietly chatting amongst themselves for awhile. Alphys had seemed nervous when a new customer walked by and she ducked under the small wall of menus. Sans gave her a scrutinising look, then looked around the bar. Snowdrake, the Dogi, Lesser Dog and Big Mouth…

He understood. She was concerned over what would happen if someone saw her and what that meant for Alphys. He didn’t realise to what extent the risk she took in coming to Snowdin to help him meant, until now.

“hey,” he muttered, getting her attention. “guess you haven’t figured out a way to…” He left the sentence open ended. She looked at him in a moment of confusion, then once around the floor to the other patrons. Then her gaze turned downcast and she remained silent. “sorry.”

As though fate would have it, someone approached. Sans’ grin tugged artificially as he turned his skull to the visitor, Lesser Dog. Their tail was wagging and their nose was snuffling as it caught Alphys’ scent, barrelling over the propped menus so she came into view.

Lesser Dog barked expectantly, the happy yet inquiring yip seeming all too foreboding. The skeleton immediately felt the other’s panic and he saw her shrink down, her pupils constricting to thin lines in terror.

“Doctor?”

“Doctor? The Royal Scientist?”

“(From Hotland? Bringing us good news, we hope?)”

Soon a flurry of white fur, dogs and excited panting and questions surrounded the two. Alphys grabbed one of the menus and drew herself together, her hands shaking as she hid from view. Meanwhile Sans felt a flare of agitation and stood up again, everything in his stance screaming ‘back off’.

He knew he shouldn’t have; they were merely concerned for their Fallen family members. Alphys had been entrusted with them and had promised their dust soon. She tittered nervously as Sans’
magic fettered pathetically, the sound akin to electricity clicking echoing in his skull with the failed draw on flux.

“I’m.. I’m still working on it, guys. I need… I n-n-need more time, just a little. I, I promise. S-so-soon!” the little doctor said from behind the menu.

“Thank you! Good doctor!”

“You give us hope, thank you~”

“(Please keep in touch!”)

With Sans standing rigidly and grasping the side of the booth’s table in a clawed grip, the canine unit turned to him, mistaking his agitation for something else.

“Play?”

“Sans, bones? We love bones!”

“(It’s been so long, deary!”)

The dogs approached and Sans suddenly understood the aggravated way Papyrus called them out on their behaviour during patrols. He drew back, eye lights shrinking to pinpricks as he attempted to conjure a bone to toss away. That same failed click in his bones rattled along his arms and he unsteadily sat back down again, trying not to look as ill as he felt.

The sound of metal clanging from the bar’s counter drew everyone’s attention. Sans was relieved to see Grillby banging a spoon against one of his metal mugs, sending their corner of the restaurant something of an irritated flicker in his fire. It coiled up and flattened in a whip-like motion and the bartender snapped his fingers and pointed back to the dogs’ tables.

Sans’ gaze briefly met the fire monster’s in a silent exchange of gratitude and the skeleton sunk back onto the bench when the canines obeyed and left them alone.

“You… y-you didn’t have to do that,” Alphys whimpered from behind the menu she was holding.

“I… I completely understand their, um, their impatience.”

Sans rubbed over his skull with his hands again and laid his arms over the table. “just… tell me what you want to eat so we can order. and i can take that anti-aggro pill.”

It took a moment for Sans to convince Alphys that he was ok. He already felt worn out and it coupled with the strange irritability and flare of restricted magic aching to be used. He was well aware of how he looked, lying all over the table and his sockets looking bruised and stressed, but thankfully the Dogs hadn’t commented on it.

Grillby eventually came around when Sans was in the middle of looking through the lines of extended stats. He was so concentrated that the fire monster’s gentle inquiry as to what they would like to eat made him react almost viciously.

Grillby lifted his hands in a placating gesture as Sans acted peculiarly with the surprise. It was almost defensive, but at the same time he was on the offensive. It was concerning, but true to form, Grillby decided not to give it any acknowledgement when Sans gave a feeble apology and covered the binder’s notes.
“...Apologise for the disturbance,” the fire monster offered, leaning his hands over the end of the table. Sans covered the binder a little more and eyed him warily, in between looking tense and forcing himself to relax. He must be still recovering, Grillby thought. “...How are you?”

It might’ve been the wrong thing to ask, as Sans bristled. It was subtle, but at the same time the skeleton appeared to be reigning in on his emotions. He stayed quiet for a moment, then a forced grin spread across his face.

“just a bit tired,” was the response, a little strained. “guess that’s what to expect when your magic rebounds.”

Grillby nodded slightly but didn’t understand. Sans waved dismissively and looked away, his shoulders slumping to their usual slackness. “...What can I get for you?” he decided to say a little more casually. He was watching Sans intently, an ache in his heart and a concern that maybe Sans had gone back to convincing himself things would change.

“U-um,” Alphys interjected nervously, then peeked from under the menu. When the two monsters turned their heads to face her, her face reddened. “T.. two butter barrel burgers?”

Grillby paused and looked to Sans again, who just nodded quietly, unable to meet his gaze. Gently, the fire monster ran his hand over the other’s arm and leaned in close to the side of Sans’ skull to whisper. There was that peculiar jolt of barely restrained anger and Grillby pulled away in confusion, not saying what he had intended to.

Sans rubbed at his face again, trying to make himself calm down. He inhaled a shuddering breath and exhaled hotly, still not turning to look at the fire monster. “sorry, grillbz, i… yeah, that sounds like a good idea.”

Grillby lingered a moment as if to say something more, then turned away with an affirming nod. Before he took a step, Sans grabbed at his sleeve, drawing his attention back again. The skeleton wanted to say something else, but his eye lights flicked to Alphys briefly and he let go of Grillby’s sleeve without a word.

Concerned, Grillby turned again and went to the kitchen to prepare their orders.

“If you needed to tell him something, m-maybe you should… follow him?” the doctor suggested softly, watching as Sans’ eye lights followed the bartender toward the back of the bar. With her suggestion, he looked back to her, seemingly indecisive.

“that’d look weird.”

“I’m.. I’m not an expert,” she started quietly, “but… talking things out tends to lead to.. a better trust bond, right?” Sans stared at her as though puzzled with the advice, then she continued, “I-in theory, at least!”

“y’got some kind of romcom goin’ in your head right now, don’t you,” he grumbled, half-amused.

Her expression picked up a little and her face reddened. “M.. Maybe I picked up something that could be… comparable?”

Sans rested his skull in his arms with a quiet mutter, “god dammit.”

“He.. looks worried?”

“of course he is,” Sans shot back, glaring at her from his arms. She tensed at the unspoken accusation
and hunched into her jacket, drawing her tail close to her. Something in Sans’ eye sockets softened with realisation and he sighed. “damn it, i’m sorry. you’re right. you’re.. totally right.”

Alphys tapped a claw against the binders in front of her and drew them closer to her, “Go… Go talk. I mean, when he c-comes back, after you’ve eaten, and-”

Sans sighed harshly, “nah, i gotta do it now.” Otherwise, the fire monster would think he was at fault for something. That was the last thing he wanted.

Alphys watched him shift on the spot with concern in her eyes, “Maybe… try to get a grip on your, um… Then, we’ll eat something af.. after, ok?” With his hesitancy, she attempted to grin, her expression pained looking. “I’m ok! Honest! I’ll wait h-here.”

Drawing in another long breath, Sans reached over and patted her hand before sliding out of the booth. Uneasy would be an understatement as to how sure he felt on his feet, but it was a good thing he wasn’t particularly known for moving quickly. It still felt as though every eye was trained on him as he casually strolled past the bar and around the dogs’ tables.

He pointedly ignored the curious looks from a few of the patrons as he moved behind the bar towards the kitchen. If he had the magic to spare, Sans would’ve been blushing through the bold behaviour he was displaying.

It seemed as though Grillby hadn’t been expecting it either. Sans caught the peculiar way his flames crackled and spiked in surprise when his gaze settled on him as he worked a few patties on the grill. Sans offered him something of an excusing grin and leaned against the door jamb to steady himself. As funny as the joke would’ve been, Sans was getting cold feet, “i, uh… wanted to talk to you.”

Grillby remained silent but nodded, at the same time slicing open a couple of buns to butter and place on the grill. Sans shuffled, feeling hesitant, then pushed himself away from the doorway and further into the kitchen. He made sure to keep his distance, though. Just in case.

“Speak your mind,” the fire monster told him easily, to which Sans nodded. He paused his prep to grab a stool from the corner of the kitchen and brought it over for Sans to sit on. The skeleton would no doubt read into that, but he was actually relieved to be seated again. He watched the other cook and stay attentive to him at the same time, as though to make sure neither got burned.

“i got a feelin’ that… i might’ve messed things up, earlier,” Sans started, watching the other carefully. He saw Grillby’s head turn to him and had a feeling there would be some form of denial, so raised a bony hand to stop him, “i didn’t mean to keep away.”

Something about the fire monster eased somewhat, as though he’d been tense this entire time and Sans hadn’t noticed.

“didn’t… mean to stop. or royally screw up what a great night that would’ve been,” the skeleton found himself saying with a vague shrug. “maybe i should’ve just said, ‘hey grillbz, what you’re doin’ is hot as fuck and it caused a serious meltdown in the ol’ skull space’, but instead i panicked.”

He paused and pushed his hands into his hoodie’s pockets, wringing at the material inside between his digits. He couldn’t meet the other’s gaze now, feeling a subtle tremor go through his frame.

“i, uh… don’t wanna say it was a mistake to say though,” he admitted quietly, feeling his soul shudder nervously in his rib cage with the thoughts and emotions he knew he dwelt on the days after he left Grillby’s. “i freaked out. i went over it in my head, maybe i freaked you out too? man, i dunno. i feel like i’ve been chasin’ my own shadow tryin’ to figure this out in a way that doesn’t
make me sound like either i’m an idiot, or sayin’ the wrong thing again and unintentionally cuttin’ things off.”

Grillby remained quiet but he lowered the heat of the grill and turned to face Sans. The skeleton swallowed the lump in his nonexistent throat, hunching his shoulders up in another shrug.

“i might be overthinkin’ it. but... i wanted to clear the air, since you were honest with me.” The odd little aggravation sparked inside of him when Grillby decided to draw nearer to him but Sans forced himself to appear relaxed. “i, um… do really like you, though,” he said quieter now, for once thankful for the disparity in his magic since his bones couldn’t flush and betray him. He laughed softly, “i mean, you are a pretty cool guy. fire notwithstandin’.”

Sans dropped his gaze to the floor with the silence that followed, every part of him trembling. He drew in a long breath and held it, waiting for the fire monster to add his piece. Then he exhaled when the silence extended.

“ok. i got one more secret i can share,” he offered quieter still. Grillby stood in front of him but Sans refused to look at him, fixated on his kneecaps instead of anything else, “i’m bad at, uh.. talkin’ about this kinda stuff.”

“...I know.” Sans felt the tension ease out of him when Grillby put his hands on his shoulders. He still didn’t look up.

“and, uh. i’m not used to… since no one else has really cared for me, apart from papyrus~” He struggled with the words, not really knowing where to go from there. “i guess what i’m tryin’ to say is… i’m gonna be sayin’ some incredibly stupid things on account of me not bein’... not havin’ been taught… or havin’ no interest, really… i mean…” God, how stupid could he sound in one day?

“New to relationships,” the fire monster had already guessed awhile ago. He felt Sans’ shoulders tense under his hands and he leaned forward to wrap his arms around him. “I understand completely, Sans.”

There was that little flutter of anxiousness again and Sans sunk against Grillby’s embrace, allowing his heat to seep into his bones.

“...Takes time to become comfortable, so don’t allow yourself to fret too much about it. Even if we know each other, the shift in dynamic can be a little… frightening?”

Confused, Sans drew back, having now gathered courage enough to look at the other’s visage. He saw the jagged line of the other’s smile, gentle yet hesitant, and he hunched slightly when Grillby’s hands moved to cup his jaw, tilting his skull up like so many times before.

His eye lights were searching for the continuation of that thought, a fear starting to crawl up inside of him. Frightening was the apt descriptor but his mind had started to twist it in a completely different direction again.

“Frightening… because everything is new,” Grillby added carefully, recognising the silence for what it was, “scared… because it is exciting. It is strong. The emotions you feel… that i feel, as well - words are hopeless before them. So we fail to either acknowledge them, or overthink them. It’s alright. I understand this… anxiousness.”

Sans exhaled the breath he had been holding. That wasn’t at all where his mind had gone, but it encapsulated a different fear altogether. He grinned awkwardly, giving the grill a sidelong glance.

“i still don’t get it.”
“...One day,” the fire monster offered and gave the skeleton’s cheek bone a light pat, “Now... we’ll take things day by day. It is a... learning experience.”

Sans huffed out a wry laugh in agreement, “boy, is it ever.” He closed his eye sockets briefly with another pat to his face and grinned awkwardly when the bartender dropped a kiss on his forehead. “got funny looks, sneakin’ back here.”

“...Clientele may very well think you’ve gone for a dalliance,” was the teasing response.

Sans reopened his sockets to settle them on the fire monster, who was smirking as though he was pleased with himself. “gonna pretend that was only innuendo, are you?”

Grillby’s flames stuttered briefly, shifting in lighter hues. He was caught off guard, especially since it hadn’t really been innuendo at all. Bolstered by the reaction, Sans grinned a little more, somehow looking more tired for it. He flinched when Grillby patted his face again, this time a little more firmly.

“....You should return to your booth,” Grillby murmured, sounding amused regardless. His flames remained a touch paler than normal when Sans eased himself off the stool, looking smug. The fire monster paled again when Sans looked at him expectantly, then shrugged nonchalantly, looking more at ease with the regular playful banter. When he didn’t move, Grillby gave him a nudge towards the door, looking flustered for the implication.

Sans could get the hint. For the moment, his fears were buried and he actually looked quite pleased with himself for making Grillby worked up and he grinned openly with a wink. “aww ok, fine, you tease. i’m goin’, i’m goin’.”
Chapter Summary

Alphys and Sans talk about CORE magic. Grillby gets Sans to take his medicine.

When Sans returned to the booth, Alphys had transformed it into a makeshift workstation. Pieces of what he recognised was his phone littered the tabletop and she had a few tools around alongside her own phone. There appeared to be a vortex in a small square above it in the table’s surface and Sans leaned forward once he sat down to inspect it. Several of Alphys’ cell phone charms dangled into the vortex, making it appear rippled with the disturbance.

“oh wow. you cheater, that looks way better than a box,” he muttered, his irritation returning, but he forced a grin with her distracted smile. “looks kinda flimsy, though.”

“The talk go well?” she responded absently, focused on the tiniest circuitry in the case on her palm.

Sans leaned over the table with a vague shrug, “sure.” It had gone well, yes, but he’d left a few things out, as usual. She glanced up at him briefly, then back to her work. Then as though she hadn’t registered something and needed to verify, she looked back up again.

A big grin spread across her scaly face and she stopped. “Oh? You could say… r-really well?”

Sans drummed his fingertips on the tabletop, half leaning on his other hand. “what?”

As though she were his mother, Alphys reached over after taking a napkin from the side and rubbed a spot on Sans’ forehead. He swatted at her to stop and she held out the soot-smudged napkin, much to his embarrassment. In retaliation, he grabbed the napkin and stuffed it into his pocket to hide the evidence of affection and watched for their food to arrive.

Alphys gave him a smug look but continued to work on his phone with a grin. “He’s… very affectionate,” she said after a moment.

Sans’ eye lights went back to her, his sockets narrowing in suspicion, “astute observation, doctor alphys.” His tone had a warning edge to it and she grinned at him excusingly.

“As though she were his mother, Alphys reached over after taking a napkin from the side and rubbed a spot on Sans’ forehead. He swatted at her to stop and she held out the soot-smudged napkin, much to his embarrassment. In retaliation, he grabbed the napkin and stuffed it into his pocket to hide the evidence of affection and watched for their food to arrive.

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“Do you think he, um, noticed?” She made a vague gesture with one of her hands and Sans looked at her, puzzled. “Well, your physical density is up to thir.. thirty-four percent! That’s quite a d-difference from before. My last reading was just after…” Mercifully, she trailed off that thought, ‘after your CORE accident’.

Sans drummed his fingertips again with a low grunt of acknowledgement. It didn’t slip past him what she was insinuating, after all.

“It was… only at seventeen percent, then.” The skeleton stayed quiet, as though pensive. She continued, “Your brother’s density is seventy-six percent, if that gives you anything to go by. Your matur--your, um… the ‘delay’ has… has progressed up to about seventy-four percent. So? As far as growing up goes? You’re almost done?”

“hooray,” Sans mumbled, another flicker of annoyance coming over him. He was holding on tight,
trying not to snap at what he knew were only little teases - but it was getting difficult. As far as he was willing to admit, he was anxious to take that little pastille pill to take the edge off. Something in his mind told him how horrible that sounded and he waved the thought away. “Sorry,” he apologised again. “You’re gonna be hearin’ ‘sorry’ a lot, by the way.”

Alphys giggled quietly, “L-look who you’re talking to?”

Sans couldn’t help but smirk in agreement. “Again, I appreciate you comin’ out here.”

“Y-you don’t have to keep saying it! You’re starting to… to weird me out!”

The skeleton snickered to himself, glancing away to the other people in the bar as Alphys continued to tinker with his phone. Idly, he was sizing up different monsters, what their weaknesses might be, how they would fight, what their bullet patterns might be… before he realised what he was doing and forcibly turned his skull away from the floor with a shake.

The magic suppressants were doing him no favours and he was getting impatient for his food.

“This’s weird. I need assurance I’m not goin’ crazy,” he admitted quietly, leaning over the tabletop to better show the other how secret he wanted this kept. When Alphys paused and leaned forward, they looked like they were in the middle of a covert discussion. “I gotta move. I can feel, inside… y’know? Everything’s just… scatterin’ off in different directions an’ making me feel like I have to do somethin’ with it all.” Sans spoke harsh yet quietly, his brow drawn together in concern.

“I warned you! I totally warned you, Sans. Blowing off steam like you did until you get t-tired, it… it’s not healthy, and now your b-body thinks you expend way more energy than y-you actually do!”

“Well, shit,” Sans grumbled, leaning back, “Feels like I gotta spar.” He held up his hands to cut Alphys’ exasperated, shocked gasp. “Settle down, girl, y’know I ain’t gonna,” he added quickly, then started listing off the reasons, “Don’t got the stamina, for one. Two, magic is blocked until… whatever it was you said moseys on outta the ol’ flux system—”

“Magi-alkaline dehydranoxoline?”

“Yeah, that stuff. And thirdly, pap is outta town. So I got one more question.”

“Sure?”

“Core-ion suppressants’ you called it, right?”

“Um… yeah?”

Sans scratched at the side of his skull in thought, “But you said my aspect was ‘standard’?” He moved to grab one of the binders and flipped through to the page with his blocked out stats. “So why can’t I use any magic if it’s just blockin’ core magic?”

“Your magic and the CORE magic must coincide. Think of it as a… kind of magnetism that took place when you, um…” She trailed off again, but looked as though she was excited to explain something, for once. “Well, when that happened, I theorise that your innate defenses drew upon the, uh, core mechanics, since you said you were, um, you um, ignited the CORE constructs—”

“You’re gummin’ up again, alphy,” Sans winced, rubbing over his sternum with a vague wink.

“S-sorry. It’s just… you never wanted to talk about this before, so it’s, um… kind of exciting! And a relief!”
“yeah, i know. just tell me your nerdy theory, bio-teach.”

“Ok, so!! The CORE’s constructs draw energy from the planet’s mantle and convert it to magical energy for us to use,” Alphys started, speaking as though Sans himself wasn’t aware of it. He grew a little impatient with the preamble, but allowed her to continue, “If I’m hypothesising correctly, when… you hit the CORE’s matrix, you became what the CORE is to the Earth-”

“gross.” Sans felt a little queasy as several things came to mind. Mostly of a parasite, which made him uncomfortable but he pushed forward. “and now..?”

“N-now! Um, I-I’m not sure, but bear with me, like I’ve said, this is… still kind of fresh and I might be b-babbling, oh god I am babbling-“

“deep breaths, alph.”

Alphys drew back and inhaled deeply, shrinking back against the booth’s back cushion. Then she exhaled, “I really believe that with your teleportations and seeing what you call the ‘gridline’, you’re actually using CORE magic! I-I mean, like you’re already compatible with the CORE?”

“what, like always?”

“Y-yes! And no. M-maybe… maybe when you, um, fell in, it was a defensive measure, one last hurrah, since you were, um..?" Dying, Sans thought with another irritable spike, “it explains the blackouts and the CORE’s instability, in theory.”

“hold on, whaddaya mean blackouts?”

“W-well, you know how I can kind of… t-track you, when you use your shortcuts?” Sans gave a suspicious nod, but stayed silent. “It further proves my theory, since when you expend a huge amount of energy, the CORE flares are more abrupt and, uh… and intense? There.. There was one a few weeks ago, a-and, again I assume, when, um… you protected Grillby? A-and, also, with the box igniting…”

She stopped and hummed thoughtfully, causing a bit of irritable guilt to bubble up inside of the skeleton with her words. “I, um… c-can’t help but wonder, if you’re experiencing puberty now…” She trailed off and Sans winced at the word. “…How did you ignite the CORE constructs before?”

The skeleton shuddered and his hand went for his sternum, agitation building with the awful memory. His soul twinged with the echo of the months of pain he’d endured and avoided Alphys’ look. “….stamina.”

“I… don’t understand?”

“i dunno,” Sans muttered, rubbing over his face. “seems like… and i don’t want this repeated. ever.”

“Oh… ok?” She seemed a little nervous then.

“my memory’s pretty sparse when it comes to that period,” he admitted quietly, “my hp levels were a lot higher before, uh… you helped.”

“They had to have been… I assumed they were, otherwise I’m sure your brother wouldn’t have… Wh-what I mean, is that…”

“i wouldn’t’ve survived the trip from the core to your lab. so, uh… pap doesn’t know this, but… you know there’re these pylons around the core’s area. eighteen total. my fa-” Sans stopped himself, a
feeling inside him almost like a slap of punishment, “-the royal scientist at the time, uh…”

“Sans…” came the nervous, worried whisper.

“it’s not your fault i’m as messed up as i am about medical stuff, let’s just say that,” the skeleton admitted tersely. There was a finality to his tone that Alphys couldn’t argue with. Coupled with the blank sockets and his tense posture, she decided not to press the issue anymore. “i shouldn’t’ve brought it up.”

“It. It’s ok, Sans. Really! I’ll… keep it in mind. For the future.” Alphys flinched when he tensed a little more and she reached over the table to pat his hand.

Eventually the food arrived; stacked thick patties on a toasted buttered bun, gravy drenched with melted cheese enough to clog any orifice it was introduced to dripping onto the plate. With a side of fries, crisp and golden with a dash of seasoning, Sans sighed in appreciation at the sight before he went straight for the burger.

“thanks, big g,” he grinned up at the fire monster, still feeling both standoffish and tense, but his mood brightened considerably since their little talk. Grillby stayed for a moment while Sans took a bite of the greasy, sloppy burger and also eyed the bits and pieces of tiny machinery all over the tabletop. He decided not to question it and gave the two a wave before leaving to serve his other patrons.

“why wiff food?” Sans suddenly asked between a mouthful of fries once Grillby was far enough away. “why not just pop it in my mouth? or put it in a drink?” He paused as something odd suddenly registered and looked at the burger as though it had been a handful of worms instead.

“Doesn’t work that way, especially when you’re on, um, suppressants,” was the reply as Alphys cleared a small area of cell phone pieces and started on a bite of her own meal. “The inhibitors restrain your magic output, so apart from absorbing food, you can’t do much else.”

“would explain why this smells great, but doesn’t taste like anything,” the skeleton groused under his breath darkly, halfheartedly letting the burger drop back onto the plate. He really wanted to taste this, too. “so basically it’s trickin’ me into thinkin’ it’s food.”

“Yep.”

“but… it’s medicine,” he added, vehemence to his tone. She looked up with a grimace and pushed the roll of pastilles over to him, which he didn’t take. In fact, when he reached towards it, his whole body tensed again and Alphys saw the internal struggle as his hand began to shake. “maybe after,” he decided, a little ashamed and angry with himself for delaying it.

Sans took his time eating. Since he couldn’t taste anything, he felt like his mood had soured a little more as a result. Grillby looked over a few times, likely to silently inquire as to how it was but Sans only turned his skull away sheepishly. How could he tell him he couldn’t taste his cooking anymore, even if it was temporary?

Sans groaned under his breath as the fire monster came near. He was down to his last handful of fries and he still hadn’t attempted to pick up the pill. Alphys had unwrapped it and set it on a napkin across from him so he could glare at it throughout his meal, but he shook a little when she offered to crush it into his burger. He even felt a little sick.
When Grillby stopped next to their booth, Sans’ aggravation piqued again and he felt a surge and shock throughout his bones with the flare of magic and the constriction of suppressants. To hide the pill from view, Sans covered it with his hand but just as quickly withdrew it as though burned. His aversion to medicine, even those good for him, was taking a toll on him.

He tried again, this time was able to pick up the chalky pink pastille and bring it to his mouth. His hand was trembling and he remained silent as Alphys watched, then looked to Grillby. He looked concerned as Sans inhaled a shaky breath, taking the pill away from his mouth.

“i know i gotta do it,” he said quietly, chagrined. Urged by Grillby’s nod after briefly looking to Alphys, Sans attempted to bring it back to his mouth again along with a fry, “i can… i can do this.” And again, he pulled it away, this time with a frustrated, strangled noise, “it’s a good thing-”

Since the skeleton was preoccupied with his inner demons, Grillby gestured something discrete to the little doctor; ‘Medicine? How many?’

She flicked her claws nervously just under the table to hide her response from Sans, ‘Just one. What is your plan?’

The fire monster seemed to smile a little, concealing his nature the best he could as he watched Sans glare at the pill after stuffing another fry into his mouth. He was taking deep breaths as though psyching himself up to doing it and rolled the pill between his thumb and forefinger in front of him.

As though spurred by the thought of sudden affection, the fire monster leaned over the table towards Sans. Another spike of aggression surged through the skeleton’s bones and he sized up the fire monster, defensive despite Grillby’s history with entering his private space. He could tell he was concerned, although the kiss had surprised him. Several more frustratingly aggravating feelings overcame him and Sans fought the urge to both shove him away and pull him closer.

It appeared like the fire monster was either used to such displays or he didn’t mind. It was a peculiar feeling and Sans’ soul thrummed harshly in his rib cage when he realised Alphys had squeaked in surprise and partially covered her face with her hands. Embarrassed, Sans discarded the pastille and gave Grillby a halfhearted push, his breath hitching as the kiss suddenly deepened and he felt a tremor echo in his soul.

Even with the onslaught of sudden affection and his rising irritation, Sans couldn’t help but become overwhelmed by the subtle little pricking sensations along his jawline and throughout his mouth. The feeling fluttered down to his shoulder blades, wrenching a soft grunt from him. The hand that had attempted to push at Grillby grabbed onto the fabric of his vest instead, pulling him lower with the promise of more heated kisses.

Grillby indulged him, smirking in triumph with the skeleton’s submission to his tongue. Carefully, he went for a small piece of food, then the pill, discreetly mingling the two before bringing the concealed medicine to the other’s jaw with a sudden flare of passion poured into the kiss.

Sans hummed against him in surprise and even tensed when he heard playful whooping and wolf whistles around them, but he’d long since closed his eye sockets to block them out. Soon he was left gasping for air, his quelled magic automatically attempting to form a tongue to feel more sensations through his blanked thoughts, dazed and confused.

In between pants for breath, Grillby snuck the piece of food that concealed the pill between the part in Sans’ teeth and withdrew just a little, giving the skeleton a self-satisfied smirk and a pat on the cheekbone. As though coming down from an unfathomable storm, Sans’ shoulders relaxed, knowing full well what had happened when he finally registered the indescribable calming sensation flood his
“wow. that happened.”

“That it did.” Grillby was still smirking and gave Sans’ cheekbone another fond pat. Even though he didn’t quite want to leave him that way, the bartender did.

Sans stared after him, sinking back against the booth and slumping down in embarrassment once the din of the restaurant was brought back to focus. The hood came up and he threatened to pull the drawstrings to hide his face as laughter echoed around their booth and Alphys quietly consoled him through a giggle. At least she had taken a picture this time.
Papyrus meets up with a friend. Sans' aggression peaks due to the suppressants and with no way to outlet the excess energy, he turns to Alphys for help. Alphys makes a few jokes at Sans' expense.

It had certainly been awhile since he had gone behind his brother’s back, telling half-truths and even… misdirecting. Only slightly. For whatever reason, Papyrus knew his brother’s suspicion would be aimed at his longtime friend if he told him about them, but there were a few things that he had to confront said friend about!

Namely… the workshop. They had been around shortly after he had checked up on Sans. He found the visit extremely peculiar, since his friend had expressed a certain tension whenever he brought up his older brother. Not that they had said explicitly that they disliked Sans… that was preposterous! It was just something that made Papyrus feel wary about lately.

The phone call had been a ruse. In fact, Papyrus felt his nonexistent guts twisting at the lie, but he had to make absolutely, positively sure! If his brother was injured on their account… no, that too was a silly thought. They had no reason to harm him.

Still, he had suspicions.

The skeleton slowed his jog to a walk as he neared a secluded little glittery cave in Waterfall. Echo flowers were ever-present and a body-wide shudder passed through his bones as they uttered forgotten phrases. They would whisper, back and forth, endlessly mixing together until they were a jumble of voices - but occasionally, Papyrus could pick out words, hums, hymns and wishes.

Sometimes threats, other times nightmarish wails.

It was all very unnerving - especially to a monster without nerves to speak of. He rubbed at his red gloves, having opted for his battle body once again. Said friend complimented him up and down on it and since then, Papyrus made a point of wearing it every day they met.

He was made to wait, but that was alright. Papyrus could be patient, but he couldn’t remain idle - he fixed things along the way, cleared up the marshy residue along the embankments and even found a couple of old fishing bobbins to hook onto the cave wall nearby for decoration.

Eventually his friend made their appearance, literally popping out of nowhere with a bright, sweet giggle. Immediately Papyrus dropped down and sat in front of them, excited he wasn’t stood up.

“I HAVE GOOD NEWS, FRIEND!” he proudly announced, “IT APPEARS MY BROTHER IS SAFE AND IS BOUND TO MAKE A GRAND RECOVERY!”

The little monster bobbed on the spot, its smile small yet expressively bright. “Wowie, Papyrus! I just knew you could do it!” Sugary sweet like nectar, they always knew what to say to quell Papyrus’ worries. “I’m glad ya found him in time.”

“OF COURSE! IF NOT FOR YOU, I’M CERTAIN THERE WOULD HAVE BEEN VERY
“LITTLE LEFT OF SANS TO FIND…” Papyrus admitted, his sockets narrowing slightly with the painful thought. “HOWEVER, I COULDN’T… HELP BUT NOTICE?”

“Why, whatever could be troubling you, my dear friend?”

“When I went… to check on him. Before we met up later that day. I am not saying this to be accusatory!”

“Of course!”

“And I’m not one to assume anything either! That would be unconscionable and I would not want to spoil our friendship with such shameful accusations!”

“Papyrus, you silly!”

“You’re right. I am babbling! You know how I told you about the, ugh, interdimensional boxes and how my brother makes them-”

“Heehee~ Of course I remember!” Their tone was singsongy and placid, dispelling Papyrus’ suspicions if only a little bit.

Papyrus tugged a little on his scarf as he leaned towards the tiny monster, every bit of him shaking in anticipation, “While I know my brother has been… distressed lately, it is unlike him to make such a blunder. He is meticulous and holds no scruples when he is in his element-” The skeleton paused his tangent and wrung his scarf in his hands nervously, “There was an error. His… notes were changed. It… it very nearly killed him!”

If the little monster was acting, it was very well played. They covered their mouth and their small black eyes grew wide in shock, “Golly!! That’s terrible news, Papyrus! I am so very glad I was around to help!”

“You…” Papyrus trailed off, halting his wringing for a moment, “You didn’t… touch anything in his lab, did you?”

His friend bounced around again in that peculiar way, the shifting noise of foliage a spring amongst the sound of bulrushes and water. “Papyrus, I’m surprised!! How can I touch anything without any hands!” If Papyrus hadn’t known any better, the tone could have been construed as condescending - but! His friend wasn’t like that at all! That’s what he liked about them!

“Very true. Although it calls into question of how his formulas were changed…? He has bulbous little squiggly handwriting. Very hard to imitate, I imagine. Not that I would try! Thinking about it makes my finger bones twitch in agony!”

“Maybe he was just upset? Things weren’t goin’ well with his mate, I hear?” A leaf extended to their face as though in thought, “Who would do such a thing!”

“That very answer eludes even I!! Oh, but I very much doubt that he was… and yet, perhaps? They at least appear to have reconciled!” Papyrus almost seemed proud, as though he had a hand in it. One could argue that he did, bringing Grillby to Sans to confront his woes. “It was all rather emotional.”

“I gotcha! Papyrus, you’re such a great brother!” The little friend resumed bouncing on the spot and...
even winked, their whole body going into the motion.

The skeleton took that for one of the other’s ways of letting him know they were on their way, and hastily added; “ONE OTHER THING!! YOU AREN’T… INJURED, ARE YOU?”

“Don’t be silly! Why would I be?”

Papyrus fretted, wringing his scarf in agitation and worry, “IT’S JUST… THERE IS A MARK ON THE WALL IN SANS’ WORKSHOP THAT… LOOKS LIKE YOUR GREENERY? IF YOU ARE HARMED, THE GREAT PAPYRUS IS MORE THAN WILLING TO LAY WAYWARD ASSISTANCE AND HEAL YOU!! IF YOU REQUIRE IT!!”

The plant monster’s eyes flattened slightly, their smile twitching almost sardonically. They stopped their bobbing and made a show of looking all around them, surveying bright green leaves and vines in thought. “Hmmmm… Nope!” The matter of a shrug rustled with their vines as their petallike head shook from side to side. “It was great catchin’ up, best friend!”

“NATURALLY! THANK YOU FOR INDULGING ME ALS-” The skeleton stopped, as the small monster popped out of view. “OH! GOODBYE, FLOWERY!”

The following day had Sans scrutinising his notes with little effort as to where exactly the formulae had been changed. He had attempted to copy it down but found his hands were still so shaky that his handwriting matched the altered calculations with very little variances. Maybe his suspicions had been false after all and he’d just been a low state of mind?

Sans groaned after the third hour of studying them, irritation flicking inside of him like a barely contained beast. He had been putting off round two of the anti-aggravation medicine, simply because he couldn’t allow himself to take them. He tried - god, he tried, but the abuse he’d suffered through as a child screamed at him to resist. And so, he had.

Sans had gone through the motions of his day before Papyrus left again for his patrol. A lazy grin for his brother before he left when he asked how he was, however exhausted that he felt, and a good brotherly hug when Papyrus told him how proud he was that he’d made such a fine recovery.

Sure.

The skeleton rubbed over his face with his hands for the umpteenth time that hour. Everything just didn’t make sense, and the things that did were aggravating at best. After sitting awhile on reeling thoughts such as those for the next hour, Sans finally decided to put away his notes and begin the task of staring down the little pink pill that would make him less intolerable.

Eventually he was able to, but only after burying it in one of his half-eaten pastries the shop bunnies had brought by as thanks for fixing the dimensional box. The entire encounter had been awkward with the little kid even wrapping their arms around his leg in a hug and smiling up at him with a buck-toothed grin.

It seemed that Papyrus, Alphys and Grillby had been very careful about not letting it get out that he had been injured, which he appreciated more than he could ever admit. His usual walks around town were forced but he had to keep up the charade that nothing was wrong with him. He stopped for a break at Grillby’s, slipping into the routine of ordering the worst burger on the menu and napping at the bar counter until his brother came to pick him up.
As long as he took that little pink pill, things were alright. But around the forth day was when Sans was really starting to feel that it wasn’t working anymore. Thankfully, with his phone repaired with some technical enhancements that prevented it from being crushed or smashed, he was able to text Alphys about his struggles.

Alphys (Last message sent 3:12pm);

* u there
* i got
* wow how 2 even say this

- Hello~ YES I am awake and ready to COACH what did you find out! (☉‿☉)

* 0 nuthin not a gd thing
* im still blocked
* pills arent workin ne more
* or @ least not as effective

- Oh no!!!!! Σ(°Д°υ)
- Shoot that’s NOT good
- OK maaaaaaybe I can find something via MTT that will help!

* dont even know what 2 say 2 that but thx i guess
* what if i go @ barrier n try to punch a hole in it

- OK not a good idea and here’s why:
- 1: The force of the Barrier would repel your tiny little body clear across the Underground once you make contact AND

* im not tiny

- 2: I’m pretty sure King Asgore would see you in such a rough shape and invite you for tea???
(■ ■ ■)
- (You are SO TNIY SANS!!! ♥)

* ok fair just thought id just
* gdi alph
* idk
* im so gd restless
* everythin ppl say is makin me so edgy
* like everythin is a personal insult
* or im rdy 2 b jumped @ ne moment
* i know thats not the case but idk
* can ur scanner tell how far along i am @ kickin the sups

- Oh, you’re willing????

* i mean
* think its fair 2 say how much in dire str8s im in if im askin 4 medical help here alph
* just puttin that on the table where we can both c it

- I’m looking at the table and I know what you mean!! OK! See you in a bit!!
- ✧・゚:*✧・゚:*((Spinner)*):*・゚✧・*・✧
The trek from his house to the inn gave him more anxiety than perhaps was warranted. The streets were full of kids and he couldn’t even consciously block his stats so it was overwhelmingly difficult for him to keep his calm. A pair of older children were play fighting not too far away from the inn’s entrance. A barrage of glowing snowballs pelted at each of them as they imitated brave war cries and grunts of effort alongside laughter when they were too slow to dodge.

One nearly hit Sans, connecting to the side of the door of the inn with a loud thump that made his restricted magic spike dangerously, only to fizzle out again. He grunted at the shouted apology and headed inside, where Alphys was waiting in the reception area for him with a nervous smile.

He followed her up to her room in silence, feeling the complete and utter tenseness in his shoulders with the pique in energy just bursting to come forth. It licked along his bones in agonising fluidity, itching, raging to be set free. Alphys stared at him for a moment in shock once she closed the door - the very fact his magic was manifesting into view despite being blocked was something else entirely.

“Y-you…” The sentenced aborted before Alphys could really decide what to say. She gestured to a chair by the desk with her things littered all over it and the skeleton wordlessly sat down, every bit of him tense, riled up and shaking.

“How long have you been like th-this!?”

“Yesterday kinda was like this, but-” He shrugged and watched with narrowed sockets as she took up the familiar scanner, “-today’s worse. obviously.”

“O-obviously…” she repeated with a sage nod. She quickly held the scanner up as she’d done before, angling it akin to a camera before pressing a button on the side and flipping a couple of the switches. Sans glowered at her and bristled defensively, hearing something of a muffled hum of electricity when she did so.

“Verdict is?”

“W.. wow,” was the response, somewhat dumbfounded. “Your m-magic levels are off the charts! Well… not literally - but it.. it’s not like anything I’ve ever seen??”

“Well you did give me that thing,” Sans interjected, “what was it. to help regulate my reserves or somethin’.”

“Y-yes, but… it’s-” She stopped and studied the scanner while she brought a claw to her mouth to teeth it. Several moments went by as Sans sat impatiently, then she whistled lowly, “A-are you sure you’re not a Boss Monster?”

The skeleton gaped at her and she excusingly threw up a hand to pacify him, “I.. I’m only saying that, either there’s literally no limit to your output, or… or it’s obscenely high!”

“‘obscenely’,” he scoffed, “that’s a joke, right?”

She trotted forward and turned the scanner around so he could view the screen. Everything was more or less the same as when he’d last seen it, apart from a few lines of texts that were missing and some that were even higher.

“Sorry, you care to explain?”

“Magic state is your innate reserves. Before… It’s, u-um-”

Sans’ brow bone rose comically and he brought the scanner closer. The number was higher; way
higher, “well hot damn.”

“S-six-hundred is quite a build up over the past few days!” she congratulated him with an excited little clap.

“What was it before?” the skeleton hesitated to ask, dragging his bony fingertip up the length of the screen in an attempt to scroll down. It afforded him a look into the previous Check and he grimaced, as though seeing it again was physically painful. “oh. ouch.” Zero. Well, he didn’t know what he was expecting.

Alphys was tapping into her phone while he studied the nonsensical numbers in silence, glaring at the screen. Then he looked over with her triumphant little jump and gesture to her phone.

“O-ok! Mettaton says he found the sample I was working on before!”

“Sample,” he repeated lowly, his soul giving a pitiful lurch as she pulled the antenna from her phone and laid out the grid to reach inside.

“Yes! It will bind the excess energy you’re accumulating until the suppressant wears off!” she explained as she dug around in the vortex. “A-and, with that, no more outbursts of silly teenaged rage!”

Sans growled lowly and she seemed to jerk back at the sound. He pressed a hand to his face and apologised thinly, giving the scanner a toss onto the desk with the rest of her things.

“It’s not medicine, if… if that’s what you’re worried about?”

Sans watched in silence as she pulled a small handheld device from the cell-turned-dimensional box and gave her an inquisitive look.

Alphys demonstrated as she turned it over in her hands. It was small enough to fit in the palm of her hand and had peculiar little clips on two of its sides. It was slim but the ridges in its design looked as though it would still be bulky if he had to wear it. “It’s a regulator that we just kind of, p-pinch on-”

“If what you’re sayin’ is that it’s gonna be attached to my soul, you can forget it,” he flared, then winced with the restriction again. He huffed out a series of breaths to calm himself, pressing his hand to his sternum as though to push away the overwhelming ebbing feeling inside of him.

“O-of course not! We can clip it anywhere, on whichever limb you feel most comfortable with. M-mostly, I think it’ll fit on your, um… your wrist, or possibly…?” She gestured to his clavicle, “Th-that might be a better area, since it’s closest to the source.”

Sans debated it for a moment, but the more he thought about it, the less excuses he could think of to deny her help. Agitated, he let his hands drop into his lap and nodded quietly, not looking very pleased about the decision.

“Ok, so! Unzip!”

The skeleton grumbled sourly and did as she asked and shrugged off the left side of his hoodie, avoiding eye contact. By some cosmic stroke of luck, he’d opted for a lower cut grey t-shirt that allowed her access to his clavicle that made attachment easy. Sans’ breaths had started to pick up when Alphys got close enough with the regulator and he unintentionally pushed his back against the chair.

“Sans? What did I t-tell you?”
“it’s not medicine,” he shuddered, then closed his sockets with a quick exhale. “ok. whatever. just get it over with. sorry.”

He felt the metal grate against his bone and tensed fiercely, every bit of him wanting to lash out and push her away. Sans restrained himself, gripping the sides of the seat so tightly his phalanges left scrapes in the wood.

“Y-you’re ok!” she told him encouragingly, although Sans had started to tremble. It made the collaborative effort between her shaky hands and his rattling difficult. “T-try to stay still, please.”

“sorry.”

“And… and stop apologising!”

“o-ok.” He released a shaky breath and a startled grunt when he felt the device latch tightly against his left clavicle. Opening one eye socket, then the other, he looked at her for reassurance but only found her concentrated face. He supposed that was reassuring it its own way. Small computerised blips signalled that the device was activated but he didn’t feel anything. Quizzically, Sans stared at her.

“It’ll take a few minutes to adapt to your flux system,” she informed him, giving his shoulder a gentle pat, “G-good news is you won’t have to… to take the pills anymore?”

“great,” he muttered, a hitch to his voice when she went back to adjust the alignment on the regulator. “thanks, alph.”

She grinned at him when she was finished. Sans knew she did well with a little praise and it honestly seemed like her current inventions were doing a lot for her self-esteem lately. A little more at peace thanks to the regulator which he could now feel a slight tugging sensation and dispersity on his excess magic, he reached for the scanner again while she went back to fiddling with her phone.

The numbers never made sense to him, but he knew what ‘fallstate’ was and he glowered at the word. It also appeared to have been overridden so that it didn’t ping off as a warning every time he was scanned. Sans sighed softly and attempted to look down at the regulator but couldn’t see it from the angle. He tried touching it, it feeling moderately warm against his bone.

“T-try not to fiddle with it too much,” Alphys advised him quietly. “And… and try not to sleep on it. For once, I’d like to have my p-prototype intact when you return it!”

Sans grinned at her apologetically with a wink, “maybe if you used tantalum or titanium slate alloys instead of tin or tungsten, your designs would last longer.”

Alphys gave him an even wider grin, “T-that might be so, but in order to provide accurate results and stand up to the test of magic in over-fluctuating sources, you have to admit the elements I choose are r-robust!”

The skeleton gave something of a snort of derision. “i’m so outta practice.”

“You could… always go back to it?”

Sans shrugged slightly, resisting another urge to grab at the regulator as their conversation progressed. It felt like it was pinching now but the draw on his reserves was a negligible trickle. It sure as hell made him feel more relaxed and not as jumpy, so Sans decided to leave it alone.
“nah. i think i got a good thing goin’ here,” he admitted quietly, dropping his gaze to the floor. “hey.”

Alphys moved to the bed to sit and he toyed with his zipper before pulling his left sleeve back on, then he exhaled quietly. “grillby… he’s gonna find out one day.”

“O-oh,” the little doctor wasn’t expecting that, certainly not so soon either. She swung her legs back and forth over the side of the mattress and idly played on her phone while they chatted. “How… how so?”

Sans gave a halfhearted shrug. “guess i gotta tell `im eventually. for whatever we got, if it’s gonna last, i should… probably be a little more open with him than i am right now.”

“He seems very understanding, at l-least? Did you speak with him about what happened with the rebound, or no?”

Sans turned away from her to lean on the desk and hide from her inquiring look. “nah.”

“Y-you don’t think that… that maybe that’s important?”

“it is,” he muttered quietly, his voice muted by his arms after he buried his skull into them, “just don’t know how i can bring it up without it bein’ this huge big thing.”

“It is… I g-guess it would be, um, hard to bring up unsolicited like that,” she agreed, frowning, “I can’t think of… of any way you’d do it.”

Sans nodded into his arms, “can’t just say, `hey, dude. did you know i fell down once and the only reason i’m alive right now is `cause of determination?’. y’know, i don’t think he’d go for that. plus, i’d have to explain determination to him, which is a whole other ballgame.”

“Y-yeah…”

“maybe still say i fell down,” the skeleton continued, almost talking to himself. He laid the side of his skull flat on the desk and could hear the muted murmuring from the monsters on the first floor. “say that.. the treatment i was given put me in stasis.”

“It’s… not untrue, at least?”

“tell `im about my dead eye and arm. he’s gonna find out next time we-” He cut himself off and covered his face with a grumble, “...anyway.”

“N-next time?”

“anyway,” he repeated, his voice tense and embarrassed. He heard the lizard monster hop off the bed and skitter over next to him and didn’t bother looking up. “don’t, alphys. please.”

“A long groan of aggravation left the skeleton and he swatted the air next to him to shoo her away, “i said anyway, alph! m’not goin’ into the details with you-”

“Oh! I, I can’t believe it? You two are getting… getting physical!?" she all but squealed, hands going to the sides of her face, “Oh! That would explain those kissies!! You haven’t, um, haven’t told him about your… delayed event, right?”

A long groan of aggravation left the skeleton and he swatted the air next to him to shoo her away, “i said anyway, alph! m’not goin’ into the details with you-”

Her gasp sounded as near to a shriek and he flinched in response, giving her his best glare; “Sans! No, that’s… that’s really cute!! Wow, no wonder you’re so aggravated lately! You just want to p-
play around with your hot boyfriend!!"

“please, please stop talking,” Sans implored emphatically, ducking his skull under both of his arms now. His face felt warm even without the presence of magic and just as she mentioned it, the little bonfire in his chest cavity was brought back to memory.

Alphys took the scanner and turned it back on to view, then giggled quietly to herself, “B-blossoming puberty maturation rate is… is at 74.97%! Look at that, pretty soon you’ll be on your way to… sex land!” Her voice squeaked with those last two words.

Sans made a strangled noise from under his arms and his shoulders tensed as though struck by a blow.

“Oh wow?? Maybe? He will - oh! Oh, oh! Sans! This means he can t-teach you in the… the ways of loooove!!” she continued through another fit of giggles, her face flushing more, “Oh m-my!! The s.. scandal! T-two lovers held in p-passion! Kisses! Hushed voices! H-hot bodies! Mu-mutual exploration! Oh la la~” She stopped when a choked noise escaped Sans, sounding like it was caught between a hiss and a soft sob. She saw the failed crackle of energy and realised Sans had just tried to use his magic to escape. “Oh… oh fine. Big baby.”

“you’re a terrible person,” he groaned into his arms, to which Alphys laughed nervously, “why are you torturin’ me this way?”

“You remember… f-finals week, in college!”

“oh c’mon! that was hilarious and didn’t bring you severe stomach pains.”

“Y-you don’t even have a stomach, you can’t say that! You kn-know how I feel about time management!” Sans only scoffed, but the tension eased out of his shoulders and back. Slyly, she crept up next to him and whispered above his skull; “Besides, this… is also harmless. Just imagine all the naughty little things he’ll… he’ll do to you!”

She only just barely sidestepped another sudden swing, but the second connected with her upper arm and she stumbled away laughing loudly.
The F Word

Chapter Summary

The regulating device that Alphys installed on Sans only works for some time before it fails completely. Sans has trouble speaking with Grillby, then manages to trust him a little more with some conversations about Falling Down.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

To his credit, Sans had been careful the following days since the regulator had been attached to him. It worked fairly well, even if it was a little clunky. It was an ever-increasing drain as it detected excess energy levels and even made him a little sleepy at times, especially towards the end of the day. That was usually when he found himself at Grillby’s for idle chats while the fire monster worked, until he eventually passed out in the evening.

Undyne had allowed him sick leave. It appeared that Papyrus could hold it in that he wasn’t feeling well for only so long, although at least Sans wasn’t irritated to the point where it got on his figurative nerves. He still couldn’t use magic, even a few days after receiving the regulator.

Even with his little chat with Alphys, Sans couldn’t find a way to bring up the subject of his arm or eye to Grillby. If he practically poured out his heart to the fire monster with his troubles before, what would this entail? Sans wasn’t sure, so every time he attempted something, it only made Grillby feel discomfited, like he was hiding something. He tried, at least.

Day five was when Sans felt as though the regulating device must be malfunctioning in some way. It still looked the same when he inspected it in the bathroom mirror and he didn’t find any damage. He felt a steady build-up inside of him, coiling through his bones. The itching feeling was starting to come back.

He shot off a few more texts to Alphys for answers.

Alphys (Last message sent 1:19pm);

*hey
*so dont get mad
*this gadget aint workin ne more
*dunno if its cuz the buildup is 2 much 4 it or if its bc
*idk maybe u used aluminium foil or smth
*gdi sry this is so frustratin
*kinda wish u didnt have 2 leave so soon but i guess i gotta deal w/ it
*i swear i didnt futz w/ it

Sans attempted to test if his magic was unblocked periodically throughout the day. Occasionally it popped and he could surround something in Blue magic but it would fizzle out and scatter, as he found that he couldn’t hold it longer than a few seconds. It was still taking a toll on him, so he spent
his time mainly at Grillby’s to wait it out until his brother came home.

Later on that evening, Sans finally heard back from Alphys.

Alphys (Last message received 5:56pm);
- Oh gosh I’m so sorry!! Had to manage some
- Uhh
- Reckless deviants (¬з¬)

*well thats ominous

- Ok maybe MAYBe not deviants but you know I can’t talk about them here!!
- ANYWAY I’m extremely upset with you Sans!! (´ ◡´)/ That device should have worked and not failed at all!

*well wow ok 4 1 chill
*n 2 i didnt touch it not even a lil
*i swear i wanted this 2 work
*not up 2 takin meds in case u hadnt noticed

- I certainly didn’t hadn’t noticed!!
- UgGGGH and by that I mean yes (；长度）I’m sorry! It really should have worked! What happened!? (¬з¬)

*it just stopped workin idk what 2 tell u
*noticed it this am but i thought it was just cuz i was tired
*then nope
*absolute failure is what its rackin up 2 b rn
*im crushed
*collared w/o a zap this is real peachy

- Is it loose at all? Did it come undone?

*man u know this things clamped on me
*stapled right in 2 the marrow

- Yessssss well leave it to you to destroy yet ANOTHER one of my poor inventions! „■ (◡‿◡～)
- Don’t think I didn’t see the ex-kit machine in your workshop Sans!!

*ok well u know what
*i
*can explain that

- None of your excuses will bring back dear sweet precious ex-kit… °.(º̫º)°.

Sans ignored her texts from thereon in, since she wasn’t offering any advice as to how to remove the regulator. So in the end, he decided not to try to pry it off; there really wasn’t any rush and he was hoping it would just… kind of start working again.

He went home from Grillby’s after another aborted start at talking with the fire monster about his
condition and how it had happened. It was... probably the hardest thing he was going to have to do. He valued their friendship and relationship a lot - building on a lie, even if it was a lie through omission, was a bad idea. Even through his inexperience he could see that.

The night was spent staring up at the ceiling in his room just like every other night: going over what he’d been doing and the events leading up to the box ignition. It still didn’t make sense. Nothing did, really, apart that the dimensional box was working without any issues. At least, that’s what the shop bunnies had reported.

If Sans was completely honest with himself, he hadn’t thought it would be a huge issue to ignite the box and go over to Grillby’s to talk things out afterwards. The last one hadn’t been that bad - a day in bed, his magic a little frayed, but either way he was fine and hadn’t needed resuscitation. He reasoned that could’ve been a factor - if he rushed, there was at least a chance he didn’t triple check his work...

He sighed into his pillow with a grunt of admission. Maybe he just screwed up and that was it. No big mystery. He just literally nearly killed himself for a box. No wonder Papyrus was adamant on arguing with him over the damn things.

MY DEAR BROTHER;
DESPERATE TIMES CALL FOR DESPERATE MEASURES!! AND SINCE IT IS NEITHER DESPERATE OR ANY VARIETY OF UNIT-SEQUENCING TO CALL UPON THE GREAT PAPYRUS TO FIX SOME CORE PUZZLES, THAT IS WHERE I, YOUR BROTHER, AM! AT THIS VERY MOMENT!! IN THE FUTURE! FIXING... LASERS. AND... CONVEYOR BELTS.
I'LL BE AT THE CORE, FOR UP TO A WEEK OR SO! I'M NOT HAPPY ABOUT THIS BUT I WILL REMAIN IN GOOD SPIRITS SO YOU CAN SEE MY SMILING FACE WHEN I AM HOME!
JOCULAR HUGS AND KISSES,
- THE GREAT PAPYRUS

Sans woke later in the morning than usual, it being very clear that the regulator had failed. Papyrus left several copies of the above note in the usual places.

Something about them irritated Sans but he chalked it up to the spike in energy that the device was no longer able to suppress. He decided it was probably for the best to stay at home and made a padded blanket fort on the couch to spend the afternoon lazing around.

After the fifth episode of MTT-Brand Overt Opulence Travesty Youth Squad had ended, Sans finally turned off the television and dragged his gaze up to the clock. He hadn’t eaten anything since he woke up and visiting Grillby’s had become a daily ritual again. Maybe he would try once more to engage conversation with the fire monster. He owed it to him, after all.

He left everything in a mess for his brother to clean up to show he was thinking of him, scribbled a little note of his own under the one on the television screen, then pulled on his jacket and slippers to get some food.

Mercifully, it was one of Grillby’s slower days. Sans watched as the fire monster casually walked around the floor once he’d taken his usual seat, itching at the metal device latched onto his clavicle under his shirt. No matter how he picked at it, it didn’t seem to budge and regardless how he
attempted to try and pull at it, it was a little more resilient than Alphys’ other inventions.

Yet… it wasn’t working. He could feel the difference from the day before and Sans knew he was becoming irate due to the steady incline and buildup of magical flux. He tried, discreetly, to move a salt shaker around in front of him with magic but it was useless. He was still blocked - it was beyond frustrating.

Well, since it wasn’t working anymore why bother to wear it? To his credit, Sans tried to be careful in removing it but he wasn’t quite sure how it clasped onto his clavicle in the first place. He attempted to twist it to pry off one side of the clamps, a low frustration building up when he struggled with it. Fine prickles edged along the covered bone and the grating noise was starting to get on his figurative nerves.

With little patience left, he simply snapped off one of the clasps and regretted it instantly. The pressure from the break cracked the bone underneath, shooting a nauseating pain through to his soul. Both of his hands went to the bone with the surge of pain and he hissed audibly, enough to draw the fire monster’s attention from the other side of the bar. With a wince, Sans rubbed at the spot of bone where it had been attached as the pieces tumbled out of the bottom of his shirt and onto the floor.

He hadn’t even heard Grillby speak, stuck in self-deprecating thoughts as he attempted to look through his collar at his bone to inspect it. He huffed a couple times to calm the queasy feeling, finding that moving his left arm now shot a sharp throb of pain throughout the top of his rib cage.

Grillby tapped the counter top to gain his attention and Sans looked up through gritted teeth.

“heya.”

“... Hey’, yourself,” the fire monster’s voice crackled with something of concern, “You appear to be…”

Sans looked around them. Besides Dizzy sleeping towards the front of the restaurant and Greater Dog in the corner playing cards, no one else was there.

“...think i broke it,” the skeleton quietly admitted through a soft hiss.

Grillby’s flames kindled briefly around his shoulders in shock and his gaze settled on Sans’ hands pressed against himself under his hoodie’s collar, just under his skull.

“Injured?”

Sans’ grin tugged a little awkwardly at the inquiry and he gingerly rubbed at the spot as his eye lights trained on Greater Dog, who had gotten up to leave. That left Dizzy snoozing at the other end of the restaurant, and she was always out like a light until one of the shop or inn bunnies would come to retrieve her.

“maybe,” Sans replied evasively after the dog had gone, then turned back to watch Grillby wipe down the bar’s countertop. He flinched slightly at the look he received, the lightly admonishing yet fluttering way the other’s flames leapt around his visage. The skeleton set his gaze downcast, wincing when his usual shrug shot pain throughout him.

“ok, maybe it cracked. a little.”

“...Quite relieved with how honest you’ve decided to be with me lately,” Grillby noted quietly as he set aside his cloth and turned around to walk out from behind the bar, adjusting a stray chair as he went.
Sans only nodded slightly. He had, one or two times over the past few days, allowed a glimpse into how he was treated in New Home, but never the events that led up to it. It had been mostly frustrating, mainly to Grillby, that he would start up conversations occasionally - only to abort the idea entirely and steer things away with a few feeble jokes.

Even though Grillby had convinced him that nothing had changed between them, that it was all in his head, Sans knew somewhere in his mind that the fire monster would keep closer tabs on him. At least, that’s what was happening now, wasn’t it? It showed him in a logical sense that Grillby cared, but at the same time… something inside of him was twisting it into a dark place.

When Grillby sat on the stool next to him, Sans only grunted. “might as well check.” He made no offer to move, however.

“...Know something has been troubling you lately,” the fire monster admitted, placing his hand on the stool’s seat and swivelling the smaller monster around to face him. He gave him an encouraging smile, “Show me where to heal… and I will listen.”

Sans held back the scoff that threatened to pass his teeth but used his right hand to pull the zipper toggle of his hoodie down and gesture to the space above his shirt where he’d hurt himself like an idiot. Without hesitation, the fire monster hooked one of his thumbs into his glove to remove it and set his flaming hand beneath Sans’ shirt collar.

He noted the odd tenseness but remained silent as Sans demonstrated, again, the peculiar hesitant behaviour - as though he was battling with something inside.

Finally, as he drew his own magic to heal a fracture along the other’s bone, Grillby heard it. A sigh of resignation that Sans uttered a little too often lately. His skull was dipped away from him slightly, sockets vacant and breaths oddly deep.

“i don’t want you to freak out,” the skeleton said quietly, “since… you’ve healed me before, right? in hotland.”

Easily, Grillby gave him a nod, a paler flicker to his flames as he concentrated on the task.

“Well… thanks for that, for one,” Sans started. He looped his hand over Grillby’s wrist with a shuddering hiss as the fire monster’s magic seeped into the crack of his clavicle and mingled with the marrow hidden inside, knitting the bone together. “y’know, normally pap would do this.”

“I don’t mind,” Grillby shrugged slightly, pushing forward a little more in concentration, “...So long as you don’t make this a habit.” He offered Sans a playful wink through a grimace that he was attempting to hide by fire.

“papyrus… he’s a pretty cool bro,” the other murmured, evasion in his tone as he struggled with something else, “when i fell… he did his best to heal me.”

Not entirely sure of the meaning behind what Sans was saying, Grillby brushed the pad of his thumb over the glowing crack in the healed bone in comfort.

“capital ‘f’, by the way,” Sans added quietly, a hard edge to his voice - then Grillby’s hand suddenly stilled. Sans decided to push on, lest his courage fail him, “i was thirty-one and workin’ at the core. i, uh… was the one responsible for igniting the core’s constructs.”

“...Igniting.” The fire monster felt a hollow pit form in the very core of his being with the other’s words.
“normally’s not that bad, y’know. a day in bed, a good nap an’ m’back on my feet in no time. i, uh…
didn’t mean to make you worry.” Sans shrugged slightly, keeping his hand on Grillby’s wrist to keep
him near. “the core though… oddly enough? igniting its pylons… that’s not what did it. the details
are, uh… kinda fuzzy. and light trauma notwithstanding’, it’s kinda a win-win situation thing with the
core bein’ operational now. i can’t really put two an’ two together, though. fallin’ in.”

Grillby saw it now, the vague inclination of Sans’ skull when he paused during his confession. The
whole thing was… bizarre and unheard of. Monsters that Fell Down did not get back Up again, as
much as everyone hoped and dreamed and wished. A subtle tremor went through the skeleton’s
frame and Grillby could feel it, small shakes that threatened to become something much more.

“been tryin’ to tell you since this whole rebound mess,” Sans continued, his voice unnaturally calm,
“i mean… it’s pretty heavy stuff, right? it’s hard. but i don’t want somethin’ like this hangin’ over
what we got if it’s gonna work. i… at least know that much.”

A silence stretched on between the two of them - mercifully someone had come in to get Dizzy with
a wave in its duration. Sans turned his skull away from the door, eye lights returning and settling on
the counter top in lethargic obscurity. The quiet extended when Dizzy and her relative made it out of
the door, leaving the two of them alone.

When he was sure they wouldn’t return, Sans muttered softly, “s.. say somethin’, boss.”

Grillby caught the vulnerable plea and snaked his arm over the other’s shoulders to bring him close.
It must’ve been extremely difficult to tell him this; no wonder Sans had looked so distraught lately.
He now understood the failed attempts at conversation, the hesitancy and the brushed off manner that
the skeleton would adhere to when he inquired if anything was bothering Sans. A part of him would
have likely come to the conclusion that Sans was lying, but at the same time he knew there was truth
to the other’s words.

It didn’t make sense, and yet it did. It was a culpable feeling that mixed with horror beyond any
measure, of an uncertainty behind the workings of Sans’ life and how he’d come this far. He decided
not to delve too deep, having already seen the insecurity in Sans’ expression, but he didn’t want to
guide towards the end of the conversation in case the other would feel pushed away.

“May I ask… only a couple of questions?” Grillby chanced at asking, watching the skeleton’s
expression darken slightly. “…Aren’t required to answer them, if they make you uncomfortable.”

Sans inhaled deeply and nodded his skull in silent agreement, then sunk against the counter top when
Grillby’s healing magic finally stopped. The bartender shuffled the stool he was sitting on closer and
pulled Sans’ left hand into his own, lacing their fingers together. He noted how the skeleton stared at
their entwined digits in abrupt silence, as though the gesture was foreign. Yet it hadn’t been their
first.

“Not much for brevity,” the fire monster started, relatively calm, “However… I can assume I am the
first of many things for you?” With Sans’ hesitant nod, Grillby continued, “Most of all… and most
difficult of all, discussing that.”

“course,” Sans mumbled softly.

“May I ask… how?”

As Sans’ eye lights veered off to the side, his phalanges unconsciously tightened against the fire
monster’s fingers. “i don’t really remember. just bits an’ pieces.” He paused, and in the silence there
was the undeniable feeling that Sans was struggling with something inside. Grillby gave his hand an
Sans seemed to appreciate the gesture, although he still looked a little lost. He sighed, then decided to continue, his voice low and indecisive. “there’s big spaces missin’, like before i fell into the core, what i was doin’, who i was with. then something… i dunno. goin’ missin’, like when you go into a room for a specific reason and somewhere along the way, you forgot. and now you’re just standin’ there in the room with a dumb look on your face. but y’know you went there for a reason. an’ maybe the reason was important, i dunno.”

Grillby nodded to show that he understood, rubbing his hand over the other’s back while Sans wrestled with his thoughts.

“It probably was. but then i just.. remember papyrus. an’ he’s carryin’ me to the lab. and i’m.. i’m falling, but i’m not gone. and it’s the scariest, most twisted thing you can imagine. ‘cause when someone dies, they just turn to dust, right? but no one really mentions how your memory persists after. because how would they, right? n-no one’s come back from that, apart from…” He let the thought hang and Grillby hummed softly in acknowledgement.

“I really hope i made the right choice in tellin’ you.”

“Do you not… feel relieved, in some way?”

Sans grunted softly, shifting himself on the stool to get a little closer to Grillby. The fact he wasn’t pushing away as he’d done to Papyrus all these years was not lost on him and he mentally berated himself for that. “dunno. but i guess you’re makin’ me feel better by not freakin’ out about it. maybe.”

“...Do not feel overreacting would be the best course, considering the seriousness of the subject,” the fire monster considered thoughtfully.

“I appreciate it. honest.”

“And I appreciate the honesty.”

Sans drew upon himself inwards, searching for more. God, there was so much more he had to tell Grillby, and he hadn’t even broached on the subject of his arm or eye. Maybe he’d tell him later but now he felt kind of… lost.

“....Something else on your mind?” Grillby carefully probed. Sans sighed when his hand rubbed against his back and leaned further onto the counter. “Don’t belabour it if you are forcing yourself.”

“I owe you, though-”

“You don’t owe me anything, Sans,” the fire monster quickly interrupted, giving Sans a start.

Grillby pulled him closer to ease the other’s discomfort, resting his head against the skeleton’s skull with a soft sigh. Sans was staring at him, stunned. “...Have already shared so much and that must have been very difficult. I am not owed any compensatory secret, nor do I want you to feel like you must force everything out into the open before you are ready. And even if you feel you won’t be ready, that is entirely alright.”

With his words, Sans’ body untensed, echoing another sigh. This time it was relieved and the skeleton couldn’t help but bury his face into the crook of the other’s shoulder and neck for comfort. An echo of a bitter laugh came from in his chest and he hunched inward more, trying to bury the sound.
It felt fragile, unstable like him, but they were building something. Slowly, surely, every week since that tumble from the barstool, they had been making something of their tentative relationship. Conversations were becoming easier as Sans realised how much he was trusting Grillby with every secret about himself. That he was amongst two primary people in his life that he told said secrets to - and Papyrus was the only other.

Grillby was the only outsider; except ‘outsider’ never really applied to the fire monster, not really. Not in the very core of his being.

“how’re you so good at this?” came the quiet inquiry buried in his collar, and for a fluttering moment, Grillby felt his heart lift at the other’s appreciative tone. It had been a trying week where he felt he had to be treading on eggshells; with Sans’ sudden aggression and veiled anger, Grillby thought that he had done something wrong. Now that was gone for the moment and he held Sans closer, warmth flowing over to the other’s body in a gesture of comfort.

“It comes with the job description, I suppose,” he chanced a joke. His soul did a relieved skip when the skeleton gave in to a stifled laugh and leaned against him a little more.

“guess so, huh.” There was a relaxed gratefulness to Sans’ voice and Grillby even felt the other’s phalanges rub against the back of his head, agitating his flames. Then his neck was given a pat, appreciation behind Sans’ words, “thanks, bud.”

“I am here for you,” Grillby promised, the whisper of fire caressing the other’s skull. Sans inhaled slowly and gently pried himself away to look at him, then his eye lights went downcast again almost immediately. “...Want to stay tonight?”

“maybe.”

“You’re allowed to say ‘no’ if you don’t want to,” the other admonished softly, following the other’s line of vision to the little metal glints on the floor. Something of a frown passed through his flames and the fire monster dismounted the stool to pick up the pieces, going over them in his hands. “...What you meant by broken?”

Sans looked briefly chagrined and he shrugged into the fur of his hoodie with a soft laugh, the tone almost apologetic. “it didn’t work in the end.”

“What was its function?” Grillby took his seat next to the skeleton again and deposited the broken device onto the counter top.

Sans seemed to fidget then, hooking one of his slippered feet around one of the stool’s legs and swivelling a little. “flux regulator.” It was brief and wasn’t a lie, at least. He decided to explain a little further with the other’s perplexed look, “helped me manage excess energy levels until the suppressants wear off. but it stopped workin’ yesterday.”

“Do these types of medicines typically last this long..?” Grillby inquired quietly.

“nah. alph’s stumped. might have somethin’ to do with my, um…” Sans shrugged away the end of the thought a bit sheepishly, still uneasy about the other knowing about his pitiful health. “anyway, she estimates a few more days. i can ride it out, but it’s makin’ me peevish.”

“No more medication?” Grillby knew it had been the wrong thing to ask when the skeleton’s look darkened and he tensed visibly. “I apologise.”

“she took `em with her, since we were actually… really both thinkin’ this would work out,” Sans explained, rolling away the apology with another halfhearted shrug. “hated takin’ `em anyway.”
“At any rate,” the fire monster said, giving the other’s shoulder a reassuring pat, “you look stronger every day that passes.”

Sans tried to find comfort in that at least. He gave in to a slight smile and rose his hand to scratch at the side of his skull. “thanks, man,” he murmured softly, still not looking to the other’s face. He pondered it for a moment before adding quietly, “it’s really ok if i stay?”

“And why should today be any different than any other?” Grillby’s tone was lightly admonishing, but there was a hint of humour in his voice as though Sans’ inquiry was utterly ridiculous.

Sans nodded slowly, still blown away by how… unnatural this all felt. He was expecting something a lot harder to take. A lot more emotional, raw and morose - soul-shattering, even. But Grillby was treating him the same. The same as always.

How did he get so lucky?

“Suppose you are.”

The skeleton’s skull suddenly jerked up in surprise to see the bartender’s visage. Had he just said that out loud? Embarrassed, Sans covered his face. Then his voice broke into uneasy, embarrassed laughter, shaking down to his shoulders as it grew in intensity and volume.

It was a relief. Such a relief that it pinched at his soul, echoing his emotions under his ribs. The fluttering feeling persisted and he closed his sockets as another round of explosive mirth cut off what he attempted to say, breaths wheezing as he shook his skull in disbelief.

He couldn’t believe it. How was this guy so understanding? How, when anyone else that found out about him immediately blanched in horror and pulled away? Told him he needed to be locked away, to die in peace, they were sorry he was so young… But, no, not with this guy.

It was Grillby. He’d always been that way, hadn’t he? Firm yet assuring. A pillar to lean against in his weakest moments of self-defeat. A beacon of light against the darkness of his mind. He would be there and ask after him, when no one else thought to. He genuinely cared.

Sans wiped at the side of his face and brought the other into a fierce embrace, the other’s warm clothes muffling his heartfelt thanks. He felt and heard the subtle rumble in the other’s chest of Grillby’s soft chuckle, then heat as a kiss was deposited onto his skull.

“Let me cook something for you.”

Sans scoffed and leaned upward, “i dunno, man. you’re kinda twistin’ my arm, here.”

“The least I can offer, until I close?”

The skeleton grinned up at Grillby a little sheepishly with the tone. God, he did love the way Grillby indulged his jokes. Feeling another flutter in his soul with the silent confession, Sans shrugged slightly.

“Well, ok. but don’t go overboard, yeah? can’t, uh…” He struggled with the words as a little thread of guilt built up inside of him alongside his appreciation. “can’t taste.”

It appeared to catch the fire monster off guard. Sans watched the startled way his flames snapped off and crackled, and how Grillby’s bright eyes widened slightly behind his glasses.

“tem… temporarily, i mean,” Sans added hastily, his soul thrumming hard in his rib cage at the
other’s reaction, “so. i dunno. whatever you want, i’m not fussy.”

Grillby smirked a little to himself as he patted the side of Sans’ face with a quiet hum, as though considering it. “…Miss your tongue,” he admitted a little teasingly and leaned forward to steal a quick kiss.

A sudden pinpoint of heat shot down Sans’ spine with those words, his soul pounding a little harder and faster. Now that everything had come back to a sense of normalcy, the intrusive thoughts from their fiery evening together sprung to mind and Sans could’ve sworn he felt his magic react with the memory of several hot touches.

Grillby’s kiss had been quick and chaste but it left the skeleton feeling much more flustered than he’d ever felt before. He stayed quiet, grinning foolishly to himself as Grillby gave him a wink before leaving for the kitchen.

Maybe things hadn’t changed, after all?

Chapter End Notes

Special thank yous to ElegantFolly (18+ blog), blackberryvenom (SFW blog) & nsfwingdata (18+ blog) for artist renditions of moments in a few chapters!
blackberryvenom ch 18 art here (Alphys & Sans chatting <3)
ElegantFolly ch 32 art here (actual bonefire moment NSFW)
nsfwingdata ch 12 (confession scene comic) here!

Next time on 'Sans Makes Bad Decisions'... A proposition is made out of desperation.
Sans’ Proposition

Chapter Summary

Sans’ aggression becomes too much while under the suppressants’ influence. After an unusual attack in the forest, Sans goes to Grillby’s for help.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

He spent the night after Grillby closed the restaurant. It was the epitome of pure comfort, arms wrapped around each other, pulled close in an embrace that left little space between them for even air. Their talks had been idle and quiet, without direction or importance. They wouldn’t have changed it for any other thing. Sans felt he couldn’t get enough of the scent, the subtle smell of fire, spice and charcoal that lingered on him every time he had to part from the fire monster’s presence.

Eventually the calming aura of Grillby’s could do only so much for him during the day, and Sans found himself wandering out into the forest to try and draw upon his reserves. Peevish, irritated with himself and the drugs that were stopping his magic from manifesting in the most paltry forms possible, the skeleton was desperate for some form of release.

He resorted to giving a few choice trees a swift kick, his magic crackling around him dangerously. The fact it had manifested into view for others to see after he left Grillby’s was beyond embarrassing and it was actually starting to worry him. If what Alphys had said was true about his flux inclining to Boss Monster levels, he had to outlet it somehow.

Unfortunately his kick sent the snow from the upper branches of the tree thundering down. It sent such an angry flare up of hate for the stuff that Sans cursed at it, shaking the cold from his jacket and whirling around to stalk off deeper into the forest. He stomped, trying to exert as much benign energy as he could - however, the snappy little echoes of snow crunching under his feet was starting to irritate him more.

He had to outlet - somehow, at any cost.

Out of the corner of his vision, Sans saw the wisp of cyan and gold from his flaring left socket and covered it briefly, both of a mind to calm down and also hide it from view. His steps grew quicker, his magic coiling restlessly around his bones.

It hadn’t been this bad yesterday.

The previous day had been relatively good. A few outbursts, his soul thrumming harder and harder with impatience and anxiety, but nothing compared to how he was now. In fact, it only occurred to Sans now that he might have worried Grillby when he left so suddenly.

That had been thoughtless of him. The skeleton huffed into his hand and pushed his back against the nearest tree trunk to stabilise himself and pulled out his phone.

As was expected, there were a couple of texts from the fire monster.

hotstuff (Last message received 8:42am);
- I perhaps may be a little perplexed about what might have transpired this morning.
- Are you feeling unwell?

  *sry no thats not it
  *well ok maybe
  *idk how 2 explain
  *or even if i can

- Gave me a start. I am glad you are at least alright.

Sans tried not to look too deeply into the other’s meaning and briefly grew distracted by the cyan pulse around his left hand. He drew in a shuddering breath and gripped his phone all the more tightly as he punched in his response.

hotstuff (Last message received 8:49am);

  *sry 2 worry u
  *just needed a min

- I understand. You know where to find me should you need to get anything off your chest. ♡
- Or should I say breastbone? Ah well. I’m certain you’ll educate me in the proper terms for bones some other time.

Sans stared at the screen of his phone for ages. He wasn’t sure why, but the notion of using smileys or emoticons and the like never occurred to him. And yet… there was one. Right there. A soul, although it was upside down. It was silly that he was staring at it for so long. And why did Grillby’s nature suddenly quell the insurmountable rage inside of him?

The skeleton pressed his hand against his sternum, feeling his soul flutter as it had the previous night, akin to provocation. And the notion of teaching Grillby about the literal terms for his bones felt very intimate, rising the flare of magic around him enough to rustle the pine needle hewn boughs above him.

And then, that soul icon.

Sans stuffed his phone into his pocket again and pressed his hands against his face. Suddenly he felt a little too warm for having spent the better part of two hours in Snowdin’s chill and decided to walk off further into the forest to try something.

The further out that he walked, the worse his agitation returned. Sans tried to linger on the fluttery hope in his rib cage, but his aggression was becoming too much to handle. Finally, he found the clearing by the mountainside where he had outlet before and drew everything he had inside of him, desperate to notch something in his favour to tip his reserves into a form that he could mold and shape.

It had been awhile since he attempted to use one of his shortcuts, even the fleeting tears in the fabric of space were becoming scarce to him. Sans glared around him, his breaths coming in deep and ragged with the effort. His magic bound endlessly, twisting in flickering arcs around him, but it refused to leave him.
With a strangled cry he threw out his left arm and forced himself. He had to do this - it was ridiculous that he could not. Everything bubbled in him, riling up an unsatisfied need to move, to conjure and expel. His bones twitched with the effort, his arm shaking in strain as he tried again.

“c’mon!” he barked irritably. He flung out his arm again, then to the side, trying to grasp anything in view with Blue magic and hold it, to fling it around. It woke something inside of him, a primal urge rising from the pit of his soul. He growled low, his breaths pushing past his teeth in absolute frustration.

“c’mon, god dammit!” he spat. He clenched his fist, his cyan hue surrounding his body like steam, wafting high above and tinting the air and snow around him in his colours. The air crackled with an ethereal whispering noise as he unclenched his fist and drew everything he had inwards. With no way to focus it nor to affix it on anything, it accumulated restlessly, arcs of magic snapping around like a cracking whip. A burn in his soul was pleading for him to stop but Sans ignored it, too far gone to give in to his body’s needs.

All he knew was irritation and undeniable rage. Destruction painted his thoughts as he flung everything he had at the mountain’s side, deeming it to be the object of all his fears and nightmares.

A deep rumbling sounded from overhead coupled with a rising high pitched whine. It was small at first, then grew to an incredible decibel as the noise echoed around the deep caverns. Sans was breathing harshly, his vision turning white as every part of him shuddered with effort.

Then as though something had snapped, a loud crash boomed overhead and he could see again to witness a huge yet brief blast of blindingly white magic crash into the side of the mountain. The trails of dispersed magic glittered and dusted into the air after its wake like tiny little diamonds before disappearing from sight.

A little relieved but stunned, Sans fell onto his backside and stared at the low rumbling of the thick snow on the mountain’s precipice slowly shift down and start to gain momentum. He was panting harshly as he looked around, his eye lights shrinking down to mere shadows of light, wondering what the hell that was.

That… wasn’t any kind of attack he had before.

That was new.

Was it because of the maturation process?

Blindly, the skeleton looked up above him to where he could’ve sworn the attack came from, but it appeared whatever had projected it had dispelled during his confusion. All he could detect was the subtle burn of CORE magic in the air - that and the thunderous, rumbling echo of the amassing avalanche.

In a halfhearted attempt, Sans tried to use one of his shortcuts, but his magic fizzled uselessly. Grunting as he got to his feet, he eyed the large chunks of falling snow and debris before turning back towards the forest to flee.

God, he hoped no one saw that.

He was pretty sure he hadn’t run like that before in his life. Once out of the area, Sans looked over his shoulder as he drew in ragged breaths. In the distance he could see a fine mist alongside the
buildup of loud, muffled thunder. It even shook the ground, however minute that it was. He could feel it reverberating through his feet and up his legs.

There was no one around. It must’ve been break time for the canine squad. He inhaled deeply to calm his furiously drumming soul and continued to walk at a more leisurely pace back to town.

Back in Snowdin, there was a little bit of a humdrum going on outside in the streets. Sans heard speculations about what had caused the rumble in the distance and sheepishly bypassed the townsfolk on the way through. His magic was flickering again, agitated, raw and unstable. Maybe he would feel more at ease at Grillby’s, he hoped.

Pushing the door open, the skeleton couldn’t help the start that shocked his body when the others called out to him in greeting. A precursory glance over the floor told him Grillby would be busy; seemed like all the regulars were there alongside a few infrequent faces. Sans sauntered up to the bar, trying to reign in his restless magic, or at least mute it somewhat.

His efforts were sadly failing. Red eyed him at his stool from behind his drink and Sans only gave him a curt nod of acknowledgment. Automatically, it seemed he was sizing up the others. Bullet patterns. Weak. Quick. A lot of them weren’t the type to fight.

Grillby gave him a smile from across the bar and Sans returned it with a little bit of an apologetic grimace. Then he remembered the little soul icon at the end of Grillby’s texts and turned away bashfully.

He knew what it meant. It made his heart and soul skip with tentative adoration. His eye lights drifted around the bar; Dizzy, high defense but slow. Lesser Dog, loves pets, only wants to please. The Dogi, never separated, perfect team players. Red Bird, only wants to chat, doesn’t want to fight and would likely flee. And finally, Fisher, desperate for a date, would make for a terrible partner in a fight.

Shit.

Was he Checking people now?? Sans stared at his hands, his bony fingers drumming on the countertop anxiously. God, he hoped no one noticed that. He hoped no one noticed him in his barely-contained state. As though by summons he saw the cyan hue of his magic wisp off his fingers and he clenched his fists, then covered his left eye.

He was slipping. Maybe it was a bad idea to come here after all.

Grillby was watching, something of concern hidden in his flames. Red had gestured for him to come over and silently pointed a pinion in the skeleton’s direction in confusion. He was acting peculiar. The two of them worried, but Red was the first to say something - as usual.

“Somethin’ botherin’ `im?”

Grillby rolled his shoulder once in a smooth shrug, then put his glass down to gesture, ‘He’s not told me a thing.’

“Wonder if he’s still miffed,” Red observed before taking a deep sip from his drink, “He stayed away for awhile. It’s good to see ‘im back, but…”

‘It’s-’ Grillby wasn’t sure how to explain that. The fact the town didn’t know of Sans’ injury was a miracle in and of itself. With Red’s inquiring look, the fire monster composed himself and continued his thought, ‘Best not to mention it.’
Sans had caught the gesture from out of the corner of his eye socket. He’d spent the better part of the few minutes’ pause staring at the echo blossom behind the bar, trying to focus on better things to alleviate his mood. With the one-sided conversation between the bartender and his self-proclaimed interpreter however, he began to grow more agitated and even suspicious.

Grillby - high attack. Low defense. Low speed. Cares for those close to him-

Sans gave his skull a shake, chagrined for looking at the fire monster in such a way. His magic spiked again when the other drew nearer to him and he drummed his fingertips on the counter again, his left leg bobbing restlessly on the stool’s leg.

“....Get anything for you, Sans?” the fire monster inquired placidly, giving the countertop a quick wipe down. “Burger? Fries? A drink?”

Sans’ jittering continued as he mulled over his options. When the other drew closer again his magic snapped in the air, the sound akin to the fire monster’s crackling demeanour. Grillby flinched and stepped back, watching as Sans’ bony hands flexed nervously.

“say, grillbz…” the skeleton found himself saying, his tone casual yet with a hint of strain. He flexed his fingers again, each one pronouncing a subtle click as the bones moved in their joints. His voice dipped in register as Grillby chanced to come closer, “ever… feel like sparrin’?”

The notion certainly hadn’t passed through the other’s mind - at least, not since he was much younger and very reckless growing up in Hotland. The bartender studied Sans in silence until the skeleton laughed nervously, wringing his hands together. He wasn’t looking at him.

Hold on. Was he… serious?

“....Would not provide much fun to spar with,” the bartender finally murmured, hints of amber flickering through his flames as he moved to the other side of the skeleton to wipe down the crumbs and spills from the spot’s usual visitor. “Why do you ask?”

“no reason.” Grillby could tell that there was certainly a reason to the other’s inquiry. Sans’ questions, especially of this nature, were seldom jokes. And that gave it away with the absence of jokes or puns altogether. In fact, he knew that the skeleton was being serious for that reason entirely - he had barely heard so much as an adlib from Sans in the past week.

“I’m sure that’s not entirely true,” the fire monster tried to reason while he pulled a chair to the opposite side of Sans. He tapped the space of the counter between the two of them, witnessing another peculiar flare up of barely restrained aggression. “...Never observed this behaviour from you previously. ”

Sans chuckled quietly, nervously drumming his fingers. His knees jittered restlessly, trying to outlet any kind of magic that he could before it built up too quickly again. He chanced another brief look at the bartender and immediately regretted it, witnessing the concern so plain against the other’s vague features. Sans supposed it was getting easier to decipher Grillby’s expressions now, with how much time they were spending together.

Grillby: Rolling H-

Sans shook his skull and rose his arms to hold his face in his hands. He had to stop this.

“order of burg. worst one. just slather the thing in sauerkraut an’ horseradish, ok. please?”

“Sans.” The other’s tone was a little impatient, causing Sans to flinch. “You are... dodging.”
“Are you… irritated by me?”

“wha - no way, buddy. no way in hell. delta’s oath,” Sans breathed, his whole body screaming at him to fight. “just…”

“....Agitated. And extremely so,” Grillby supplied, his tone concerned. He recalled the brief stint between the skeleton brothers weeks before and how Sans’ demeanour had shifted into a more relaxed state afterwards. Perhaps that is why the skeleton was so… what was the word? Almost… childlike in his restlessness. “How long until your brother returns..?”

Sans buried his skull into his arms and groaned into his sleeves. “said a few more days…” he revealed dejectedly, his voice muffled. “hey, big g?”

“Yes?”

“maybe put anchovies in the burg, too. just make it as gross as possible.”

Grillby smirked and flicked his cloth against the side of Sans’ skull with a quiet chuckle. “Even if you cannot taste… that would be foul.”

The skeleton snickered from under his arms, then let out a long sigh. “m’not jokin’ about sparrin’, by the way.”

“I figured,” the bartender retorted with a bit of a veiled grimace. “You seem… out of sorts?”

“a bit.”

Grillby leaned in closer, his flames hopping the short distance between them as he watched the other monster tremble as though under strain. “Are you still… restricted?” He made sure that his voice was low enough for Red not to overhear.

Silently, Sans nodded, then sighed again - this time in frustration as he pulled out his phone. Then he set about punching a few things into it, glaring at the device and shoving it back into his pocket with more force than he could control.

Moments later, Grillby’s phone sounded and he understood. He pulled out his phone from his back pocket to check the message and was surprised to find quite a few. Sans was a quick typer at least, with all the shorthand.

The fire monster was able to decipher them relatively easily;

‘Don’t want anyone to find out’. ‘Magic hasn’t fully unblocked yet’. ‘I’m kind of freaking out’. ‘I’m bursting at the seams’. ‘I’m sorry to ask this of you’.

As Grillby read them, he saw Sans move and another one came in. ‘You’re the only one I can trust’. He looked up to find Sans pointedly avoiding his gaze, his grip tight on his cell phone. Grillby swallowed the knot in his throat and nodded to himself, then keyed in his own response.

‘I’ll assist you. After the last customer leaves, I’ll close up early and we’ll head out’.

The skeleton all but flinched when his phone vibrated in his hand and he looked at the screen briefly, every bit of him tense. He looked back to Grillby, then back to his phone as though he didn’t believe what he read. Relief seemed to pour off of him in waves and he sprawled over the counter top with
another deep sigh. His magic flickered over him almost like a flame.

“jeez. can’t say i’ve ever had to wait so long for a burg,” he joked, stretching out. When Grillby gave him a veiled smirk and stood, Sans caught at his wrist to stop him from leaving. “thanks, man.”

Despite Sans not being able to form a tongue nor even taste for the longest time, Grillby kept his request and gave him the worst possible burger that had ever left his kitchen. He would’ve supposed it was some kind of joke, but Sans was adamant about it. Red had scooted to the other side of the bar and sat at Fisher’s opposite side, occasionally throwing the skeleton wary looks.

It seemed like a perimeter had formed around Sans. Red had muttered how ‘miffed’ Sans appeared, even commented on the aggregate of his magic, as though Sans was not in full control of his faculties.

Grillby supposed he was right, but he didn’t acknowledge the fact with a response. Instead, he watched with veiled horror as Sans took a large bite out of the most grotesque burger Grillby had ever made, looking sullen after his magic had absorbed it. Ah, his taste had truly gone then, Grillby thought pityingly. That was a shame. He was almost curious to see the other’s reaction.

Eventually, a few more customers paid and left, sending the skeleton worried glances on their way out. The Dogi seemed especially distraught as it had been ages since they had received any bones from him.

Grillby watched him carefully throughout the rest of the afternoon and into the evening, how Sans coped with others entering his space, or what Grillby assumed was what the skeleton deemed as ‘his’ space. He bristled defensively. The pulse of his magic blazed behind his hoodie and his left eye had never ceased shifting from cyan to gold and back again, erratically changing between the hues. Even around the joints of his exposed bones glowed unnaturally, every lick of magic curling along Sans’ form as he attempted to keep composed.

His demeanour did very little for Grillby’s business that day, which in its own way helped out. By the time 6 o’clock rolled around, the bar was uncommonly empty and the fire monster strolled up to the door to lock the deadbolt and swing the sign around after the last customer left.

“Long day?” he couldn’t help but inquire. Grillby watched as Sans pushed himself off the bar’s counter top and swivel his stool around to face him, his sockets devoid of light apart from a wisp of magic that threatened to engulf his left socket. The bartender grimaced slightly and approached to pat the other’s shoulder, only for the skeleton to suddenly snap at him.

Then as though waking from a trance, Sans’ eye lights blinked back into focus, horror etched in his expression for what he’d done.

“Must have been…” Grillby answered his own question, concern very plain on his vague features. He didn’t dare touch Sans now if the skeleton was having a difficult time reigning everything in.

“Come along. Don’t dally.”

Sans was staring at his trembling hands while Grillby unslung his apron from his waist, went to fetch his coat and strolled towards the back of the restaurant, dimming the lights as he went. When the fire monster realised he wasn’t being followed, he went back to Sans and grabbed his arm firmly, much to Sans’ surprise. If Sans’ focus was vacillating, there was little time to waste and Grillby had to be more urging with his suggestions.
“I know a place,” was all he said to the skeleton’s unspoken question as he pulled him towards the back of the bar and out of the fire exit.

Chapter End Notes

Next chapter: Fighting... START!!

PS: Thank you everyone for 50 subs/over 4,8k hits and ALL the comments, I'm floored... I will do my best. <3
**Skirmish**

Chapter Summary

Sans and Grillby [FIGHT]. After a slip-up, Grillby decides on a pet name for Sans.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grillby was walking at a less leisurely pace than what Sans was used to, causing him to walk a little faster to catch up. His magic popped off around him, imitating the languid flames of the bartender’s composure in excited little snaps. They headed west of town and across the bridge, then immediately down to the valley of sparse trees and rolling hills.

Soon enough, the fire monster was a lit beacon in the dim valley alongside Sans’ hued magic, bouncing around and arcing, shifting on the spot as he restlessly stalked in place.

“It has… admittedly been awhile for me,” Grillby started, adjusting his coat by undoing a few of the buttons. He slung the coat over a nearby tree branch and unbuttoned his cuffs to roll up his sleeves, fixing them to the arm garters at each of his biceps. “Something tells me… how New Home monsters spar and Hotland monsters tussle are vastly different.”

Sans stood silent, his hands flexing, bones popping in their joints as he attempted to keep a reign in on his magic. Grillby observed his rigid stance and drew himself upright, the plume of flames around his head and forearms bursting as a chill wind surrounded both of them.

“been only… me n’paps,” Sans fought out the words through harsh breaths. “kinda got… our own thing goin’.”

Grillby hid his smirk as he pulled his shirt tails from his waistband for easier movement and unfurled the bow tie, rolling it and putting it into his back pocket. He must look like an outright fool, but it was a good thing they were in outside territory. He gave the other an encouraging grin but inside he felt a little nervous. He was unsure of Sans’ damage output, after all.

“What say you to this-” he suggested, unbuttoning the first fastening of his chemise as to not be smothered by his own clothes, “-Check me.”

The invitation seemed to stun the skeleton. Even his magic had paused in his shock and Grillby couldn’t help the quiet laugh that escaped his jagged mouth. Checking didn’t use any magic and if what Sans said was true, then they would be more likely wrestling than actually outputting any magic or bullet patterns.

He was hesitant to do so, if only because Checking usually invited others to do the same. Even if he had asked… Sans felt suddenly hesitant.

“It’s fine,” Grillby assured him, taking a few steps forward. Sans’ magic whipped in response and the skeleton couldn’t help the awkward grin.

“welp. ok then, boss.”
Sans couldn’t help but snicker at the flavour text and he hunched into his hoodie uncomfortably. He wasn’t sure why such a high attack rating had surprised him, considering the other’s composition.

He hesitated as Grillby waited for him to look further and flexed his phalanges again nervously. Well… this was it, wasn’t it?

Sans made a low whistling noise, causing the other to flush. He… wasn’t expecting such high values. He supposed it made sense, but it left him feeling a little incompetent.

Grillby watched him as Sans shuffled in place then stuffed his hands into his pockets, every part of him seeping off waves of insecurity.

“Check again.”

The skeleton gave him an awkward look before pointedly staring at the snow between them. It had started to melt with the fire monster’s presence and the longer they stood there, the worse it would become.

“uh-”

“Check again,” Grillby repeated, causing Sans to chuckle uncomfortably. He shifted from one foot to the other, wresting the fabric in his pockets.

“welp, if you insist.” It took Sans another moment to calm himself enough to perform another Check, this time moving to take a stroll around the other in order to burn off some excess energy.

Wait… that couldn’t be right. Sans’ eye sockets narrowed in suspicion and he stared at Grillby, whom by all accounts looked alright. He was fine, right?

Why had he lost 1 HP?

“Values tend to… dip ever-so-slightly while I am outdoors,” the fire monster revealed with a vague shrug. Sans watched the movement in silence, somewhat stunned.

Then he realised how truly perilous the journey through Waterfall had been with the telltale pulse of flames branching out from Grillby’s forearms and head. Sans opened his mouth as though to say something, a cold pit of dread forming at the centre of his being as his mind automatically went through several stages of ‘what if’. The cold feeling persisted as Grillby passed a hand through the flames of his head as though he wasn’t expecting such a reaction.

“Well… at any rate,” he continued, heat rolling off his body in waves and melting the snow around him, “Suppose we should construct some sort of arena..? How… feisty are you?”

Wait… why was Grillby acting like this wasn’t a big deal? Grin tightening artificially, Sans cleared his nonexistent throat and paced around idly.
“just.. gonna gloss over that, are we?”

“Naturally.”

“you aren’t gonna.. explain it.”

Grillby rolled his shoulder, the movement bringing on a large flicker of flames that cascaded down one side of his body and crawled along where he stood, connecting with the snow and water at his feet with a hiss.

“...Don't believe it's anything to worry about, all things considered. Most fire monsters are this way.”

“ah.” Sans wasn’t sure what to think, but he knew he was being hypocritical in relation to how he had reacted. Something in him twisted and he pushed the feeling away, pulling his left hand out of his pocket in preparation. “was just makin’ sure you aren't gettin' cold feet.”

Grillby’s mouth formed a hard line, then eased into a grin. The perimeter around them sizzled with the sound of melting snow and ice and the ground underneath was starting to get muddy. Sans lifted one of his slippers, the faded pink had turned a grey-black with the mud. Well, he could always apologise to Papyrus later.

Anxious, Sans looked back to Grillby, who was making some finer adjustments as his fire settled around his feet in a low lying circle, building up momentum as it found small weeds and twigs to burn under the snow. He looked very nonchalant about the whole thing, yet Sans could detect something of nervousness in the way the bartender’s fire moved.

Maybe if he just…

[ * 947 HP ]

Yeah, that’s what he thought. Sans clenched his teeth as the other made eye contact, his magic flickering restlessly around him with different levels of heat waves travelling between them. Grillby’s eyes had narrowed slightly but he was still grinning, standing in place. It was as though he was waiting for something.

Sans shrugged with a soft sigh, knowing protocol. It was something of a formality so he turned his skull away from Grillby’s expectant gaze and gestured as if to say ‘go on’.

Unable to help himself, Sans bristled at the silent inquiry to his soul, especially when he heard the rasping chuckle escape his new sparring partner.

“....‘Smells like bones’?” Grillby said incredulously. Sans’ discomfort eased somewhat and he shrugged with a laugh of his own, chancing a look to the fire monster. “Well... can certainly admit I’ve grown fond of it.”

If Sans was able to he would’ve felt flush, but instead his magic crackled with impatience. He grabbed a fistful of the fabric of his hoodie and grinned awkwardly, forcing out a laugh.

“perv.” He winked anyway when he saw the flustered arrangement of Grillby’s visage tinge back to amber. “ok. let’s stop pussyfootin’ around.”

Grillby’s eyes narrowed slightly, his grin reaching higher with an ethereal singe. He was brighter than previously, burning a little hotter than how he did ambiently. Every footstep brought up steam from the wet ground as he began to walk, matching Sans’ pacing.
Sans’ grin tugged a little more as he followed suit, stalking the other while reigning in his magic to a containable field. It was getting a little easier to do, now that they were finally going to do this. His soul was thrumming in excitement.

“dilly-dallyin’,”

The circled each other like prowling cats, Sans feeling too aggressive to notice how poor his form was nor how out of practise Grillby appeared in his stance. The fire monster’s pulse shined again, making him look bigger as the last dredges of moisture were sucked from the air and they had a large scorched arena to spar in.

“Haven’t done this in awhile,” the fire monster said apologetically. “I’m… a little rusty.”

“good,” Sans muttered, his voice tight with the strain of holding himself back before he flung himself towards the other, “cause i suck at fightin’!”

Sans wasn’t sure how he connected with the other so easily, not with how light Grillby actually was. He supposed he reasoned, somewhere at the back of his irrational mind, that Grillby was fire. Fire essentially weighed nothing. He wasn’t prepared for literally hoisting the other off his feet, so when the other gave him a shove, it threw him off balance.

The skeleton laughed in surprise and pushed himself off the dusty ground, his magic growing higher around his shoulders and his left eye blazing. He pushed the heel of his palm against the ground in front of him and forced his magic to manifest with an impish grin. Several feet away a paltry cage of bones thrust upwards from the earth, only to shatter on themselves and burst into decomposed magic.

He huffed. Well, that was good at least. He was finally breaking through the suppressants.

Grillby watched it with a bit of concern. Sans could tell he wasn’t a fighter - he dropped his guard too much, or rather, unless Sans gave him an inclination that he was about to attack, Grillby didn’t have much defensive positions at all.

He wondered if it was a fire monster thing.

Maybe he just sucked at fighting, too.

It was certainly different than fighting his brother. Where his brother would goad him into attacks for his turns, Grillby stayed silent for the better part, anticipating any barrage of attacks. He wondered if the fire monster was holding back.

The thought burned into his mind and he suddenly got angry. Why the hell was he holding back!? His emotions overriding reason, the skeleton lunged at Grillby again, only to misstep and guard against him instead. Then his fiery hands grabbed a hold of his hoodie and twisted him around. Suddenly Sans found himself driven into the dusty earth with a loud grunt of surprise.

Holy shit.

The grounding gave Sans a reason to get up again. He had to prove himself. He had to show Grillby. Maybe that would force him to take this seriously. Sans flexed his fingers as he stumbled back, his grin wide. Cyan light flickered behind his hoodie and he focused his magic down the length of his left arm to collect in his hand like an unstable orb.
Grillby was anticipating it. With their brief skirmish he was already breathing a little harder. It felt more like a dance to dodge Sans’ attacks. If he was really this wound up, the more he attacked, the better he would feel in the end. At least, that was his reasoning.

He braced himself for Sans’ next turn. Whatever it was, it was bright. Sans’ attacks had little substance behind them, but they were picking up in speed. A barrage of conjured bones thrust up from the earth from his feet and he sidestepped hastily to avoid them. They were also sporadic and off-track.

Sans wasn’t in full control of his magic, after all.

“you’re quiet, buddy,” Sans suddenly called out to him. Grillby’s eyes locked with the other’s gaze, his right eye socket entirely pitch while his left oozed with excess magic, flickering dangerously in the low light at his side of the ring.

“...Concentrating,” he said apologetically. Sans’ permanent grin tugged a little more as he shrugged, then flicked his fingers from his right side. Several cyan-tinted bones slammed down from the cavernous walls around them. They shifted in size and density, splintering against themselves and pushing up the earth as they moved.

Grillby soon came to realise the bone constructs weren’t disappearing as they had in the beginning. And that they were starting to accumulate. Any more and the fire monster would be using them as leverage to get over to Sans, who had stood still since he put up a defensive strike.

Maybe that was Sans’ plan: to keep him at bay. Grillby adjusted his glasses and stood his ground with another barrage of heavy constructs that slammed into the ground beside him, nearly as tall as he was. His flames whipped through the intense movement, slicing off and flowing with the air’s circulation.

With the attack, Sans looked as though he was losing control. He was shaking and even through the sounds of his magic, Grillby could hear him rattling through his strain. His magic was pouring over him in waves, rising like steam.

It was only getting worse.

The fire monster’s aura thundered closer, fire encasing the skeleton as he rushed over. The two of them went down in the tackle and Grillby’s voice was matched with his fire, unable to separate it for the other to hear. Sans grunted with effort and flailed against him. He rolled over him to pin him down, his own breaths harsh and wild.

Grillby kicked up, connecting his knee with the other’s torso to knock him back. His own aggression sparked as Sans coughed and made another lunge for him. It caused him to brace himself and hook his hands against the skeleton’s wrist and twist him around.

When the dust settled, the two of them were breathing harshly and Sans was pinned under him. Grillby pushed his knee against the centre of the other’s back and had twisted his arm around him. Sans pounded the ground with his free hand in a plea of mercy as the dust settled in clouds around them. Both of them were covered with dusty earth, especially Sans.

“Forfeit?” the fire monster panted harshly, his blaze still whipping around him.

Sans grunted against the ground, his rib cage heaving with exertion. He twisted his arm in the socket and pushed against Grillby, who leaned against him to keep him pinned. He growled lowly, then with force as he struggled.
“Or are you… still fired up?”

Sans came to some clarity enough to appreciate the joke and even managed to laugh. As soon as he felt the other’s hold on him wane, he gave the other a hearty push and scrambled to his feet, dusty, dishevelled and gasping.

“dirty trick.”

“Prefer to grapple,” the fire monster retorted from the dirt. He took a moment to nonchalantly dust off his shoulder as Sans stewed on it, fixated on the action as though it were the most insulting thing he’d ever witnessed.

“you’n your fancy words,” the skeleton seethed as he watched the other get back to his feet. He gave his shoulder a roll to ease the tightness in the socket from the other’s pin and couldn’t help the warning growl when Grillby approached him.

“So feisty!” Grillby chastised him playfully, grabbing a hold of the skeleton’s shoulders in an attempt to wrestle him down again.

In retort, Sans wrapped his arms around Grillby’s torso and shuffled his feet into place to balance him out. He lifted him, causing the other to cry out sharply.

“What-” Confusion tinged the bartender’s voice and he twisted in Sans’ grip. The other just laughed, thinking he’d gotten the upper hand as he slung the fire monster over one of his shoulders.

Grillby snarled low in his throat and grabbed at the bottom hem of Sans’ hoodie and flung himself backward, taking the jacket with him and pulling it over the skeleton’s skull, his embers popping excitedly. Then he gave him a good push, sending Sans to his backside with an indignant grunt.

Panting, the fire monster laughed at the sight. Sans wrestled himself out of the hoodie and flung it off to the side, his magic amassing in reckless coils beneath his rib cage under his shirt. Grillby gave him a grin and adjusted his glasses again, glad they hadn’t been damaged in the scuffle.

He was ready when Sans went after him again. No longer impeded by his jacket, Sans was able to move at a more comfortable pace. At one point he’d lost a slipper, but he didn’t care. He grunted with the effort of knocking Grillby down again, wrestling his arms and trying to gain purchase to come out on top. His breaths were coming in laboured. The fight was exhilarating and dare he even think it - fun.

He grinned down at Grillby, then yelped when the other kicked up, pushing him over and onto his back. The sound of bones scraping against the hardened ground coupled with Grillby’s fiery snaps filled the air, alongside their struggles.

“...ink you’d rather be on top?” Grillby gasped against the other’s struggles, amused. He grabbed Sans by the front of his shirt and pulled him down, lacing his jaw bone with a peppery kiss before flinging him back.

“cheat-” Sans gasped, his mind reeling between confusion and the fight. His eye sockets narrowed as the bartender got up to his feet.

“....Dropped your defenses,” the fire monster goaded him, his grin apparent. He made a point of taking his time adjusting his collar and his sleeves as the skeleton’s breaths hitched. “...Appear to be in better spirits, at any rate.”

“s’helpin’,” Sans responded as nonchalantly as he could, even attempted to dust off his shoulder.
Grillby gave a hearty laugh, embers popping off of him and buzzing around his arms as they moved like fireflies. “Well, then..?”

The invitation to continue was too much to resist. His grin ever-persistent, Sans pushed himself off the ground and they briefly circled each other again before connecting with a clash. At the back of Sans’ mind came a flurry of thoughts.

He’s not worried. He’s actually fighting. He’s not holding back.

Holy shit.

Grillby wasn’t holding back?

He lost his footing as his remaining slipper snagged on the other’s shoe. His phalanges gripped at Grillby’s vest, wrenching buttons free and pulling the other on top of him as he collapsed. His knee buckled and ached in the joint, but he was laughing as the other’s weight fell on top of him.

God, this was great.

“...Very serious wrestling match we have here,” Grillby baited him, then grunted when the other’s foot connected with his chest. He straddled Sans’ hips and grabbed at his other leg to make sure it didn’t join its mate. “You fight dirty.”

“man, you’re the one who made a literal fifty-foot desert in snowdin,” Sans shot back, unable to stop his chuckles as Grillby bent over him. His fiery hands pinned his arms down over his skull and the skeleton pushed back at him. There was only so much he could do with his foot against the other’s torso and his other trapped under his arm, though.

His eye lights were fixated on the bartender’s chest. Pristine chemise now chalked with charcoal grey mud, his vest torn in one place, collar askew… Ok, maybe his thoughts were wandering, but damn if it didn’t make for a good sight. Sans felt oddly proud of himself for ruffling up Grillby’s otherwise pristine appearance.

“...Feeling better?” Grillby couldn’t help the tease as the other’s eye lights found their way back to his visage.

Sans felt heat flood his face and he untensed, allowing the fire monster to keep him pinned. He hadn’t even realised how much magic he had expended in the fight’s duration and he felt worn out. Amazing, but worn out. And that was great. Grinning easily, the skeleton nodded with a quiet laugh, aiming to get up with a soft grunt of effort.

His smile slightly askew, Sans avoided the fire monster’s gaze. “think m’done, grillbz,” he breathed and tried again, “puttin’ me in an awkward position here.”

Something of a scoff passed the other’s mouth as he was made to keep still. Awkwardly, Sans attempted to arch his spine and even groaned softly in protest, “m’serious, babe, bones aren’t that flex-”

He stopped. Grillby stopped. The two stared at each other and Sans tensed under him, his magic assuming a long-missed flush of cyan over his face.

“god dammit.”

“....Are we using terms of endearment now?” Grillby chuckled, the first to overcome his momentary surprise.
“oh my god.” Sans attempted to twist away, embarrassed.

“...Find I don’t mind it, actually.” Grillby hummed as though considering it, his grin curling a little deviously, “And... what about you?”

“what?” Sans’ response was almost a squeak.

“Well. It’s only fair, isn’t it?” the fire monster countered as he unpinned one of Sans’ arms to gingerly remove his foot from his chest. Then he moved closer, bracketing the other’s skull with his forearms. “You’re not the only one who can call names.”

“help-” Sans murmured, his free hand going to the other’s bicep.

“`Funny bone` is too obvious,” Grillby decided, his grin broadening with Sans’ flustered reaction. “Perhaps... something with a bone in it?”

“i’ll put a bone in you.” the skeleton grunted, attempting to escape. He then threw his free hand over his face with a horrified, strangled noise. He was still able to see Grillby’s bright plumage spark so yellow it was almost white.

“Well who’s the pervert?” the fire monster chuckled deviously, fully enjoying himself over Sans’ distress. “Leaning toward... something sweet.”

Sans eyed him warily, searching the other’s expression with something of dread. His soul was pounding fast, quicker than even during their sparring session.

He was very close.

“Perhaps... sweet tooth?” Sans grunted in effort, magical adrenaline low enough after the fight that he couldn’t push Grillby off. “Not that? ...All right. What do you think, sweetheart?” The bartender relished the way the skeleton flushed, teeth parting to retort, but ended up not being able to speak at all. “...No?” He rolled his shoulder in thought, his breaths finally coming in deep and easy since calming down.

“Then... something sweet, since that is your preference, isn’t it?” he whispered against the other’s temple, pushing heat into the bone. “Sugar skull.”

He heard a restrained gasp from the skeleton under him and paused to look down. Sans’ soul was flickering brightly under his dirty grey t-shirt despite his grimace. “Well then-”

“i’m bein’ accosted.” the skeleton moaned, his voice breaking. Suddenly his slip-up felt more intimate than he ever could imagine and his thoughts were wandering a little more. “mercy, grillbz, please. i know y’like to see me squirm, but please-” He gave the other a halfhearted shove, mostly since his spine was starting to ache at this angle.

Grillby hummed in disappointment but let go of Sans’ arm and shifted over the skeleton to lay down in the dirt next to him.

Sans let his legs fall and his spine straighten with a relieved sigh, staring up at the deep pitch overhead of them. The silence was long and finally he was starting to get a little tired. Fleeting thoughts fought with his fears, battling inside for dominion. “Well then-”

Grillby had sparred with him and he hadn’t been afraid. He hadn’t shown that he was hesitant to fight him, at any rate. They both sucked at it, but it was fine. Maybe he would dwell on some things, but Grillby helping him out in such a way was something he’d desperately needed.
Unsure why, Sans laughed quietly, allowing himself to close his eye sockets.

“Bonehead.”

“ok,” he muttered, his soul doing a fluttering little dance in his rib cage, “maybe that one’s good.”

Chapter End Notes

You know, I have this silly little idea that couples sparring would be like… the Ultimate Affectation. Like… sparring, practising together, or even just teasing each other is a way to get closer, and is viewed as very intimate in monster culture. Just thought it was something I could build on. Sans certainly has a lot of trust to ask this of Grillby, and certainly Grillby the same for Sans, considering the environmental risks he took in helping him.

For anyone who was worried about how bad it is for Grillby: the guy likely had around 350HP when they got to the crystal caverns (2nd date), although it regenerates quickly in closed environments/out of snow/rain. Fire pulsing is a way to regulate heat or to ‘fend off’ weather effects, even though Grillby doesn’t actually feel cold, he feels an absence of heat. Private headcanon for Grillby after sparring is probably only around ~770HP. Not too bad!

Also gentle reminder that chapter 44 contains a NSFW scene. Spicier than chapter 32, we’ll say. There is cute exposition before/after, so there will be skip points if any of you don’t wanna read the horizontal monster mash. But hey… we know who we are here. (≈ ≃ ≈)
The better part of an hour was spent covering the evidence of their little sparring match. Grillby couldn’t help much more than stand idly by as Sans demonstrated his powers, levitating snow from a few overpiled places to sprinkle over the large arena. By the end of it, Sans sighed heavily and retrieved his discarded hoodie and slipper while Grillby shrugged back into his jacket.

It was dark by the time they got back to the restaurant. Sans automatically followed Grillby through the fire exit, his magic levels a little calmer since their match. He was grinning to himself, his soul fluttering with the silly little euphoria he felt at having done that with his friend. It was silly, but it was turning into something he would treasure all for himself.

It didn’t occur to him how filthy the two of them had gotten until he stopped at the sink in the kitchen. Having spent the better part of some nights with Grillby offered him a little insight as to the other’s dwelling. And its lack of bathroom facilities. He stared at the sink as he passed it, then promptly bumped into Grillby’s body, not realising he had stopped.

“...Afraid my abode does not offer much in the way of, erm…” he seemed hesitant to say it.

“water. nah, i gotcha. it’s cool, g. m’not one for takin’ long soaks.” Lately, at least, Sans added in his thoughts. “the sink’s kinda small anyways.”

“One could always give it an attempt.” Grillby was grinning but threw a large cloth Sans’ way from a clean pile on a shelf near some pans.

“you’d love to see that, wouldn’t you?” the skeleton replied challengingly. Then he noted the other’s distance as he reached over to turn on the faucet and shrugged out of his hoodie while the water heated up. “not some kinda health code violation, is it?”

“...Only cook with oils.”

“cept that soup,” Sans mumbled, his soul kindling at the memory and the flavours he missed. He soaked the cloth and scrubbed at his forearms and face, charcoal grey powdery dirt lifting off him easily.
“Would you like it again?” Grillby’s tone was curious and his grin broadened with the skeleton’s subtle flush. Oh, how he’d missed that.

He watched the other with astute curiosity. Being a fire monster, water had always been perilous and stung when it touched him, yet Sans didn’t appear to be in distress, nor did his fire burn him. His flames hissed when droplets fell from the cloth to the floor from Sans’ phalanges. Then they sputtered briefly when the other rinsed out the cloth and re-wet it to start on his exposed legs.

Enamoured, his eyes followed the subtle shift of the water following the other’s bones, leaving them slick and shiny. It traced over every curve and seeped into Sans’ joints as his fire had done, sending his core into a heated state bordering on… envy? That was peculiar. Was he honestly becoming jealous of water?

He was staring. The other’s quiet scoff pulled him out of his daze.

“i’m ok, grillbz,” Sans muttered nonchalantly as he leaned against the sink’s counter to better balance himself. “s’just some wet bone action.”

“It’s…” Why would Sans say that as though it was nothing special, when that was precisely the opposite of what Grillby thought? The skeleton briefly glanced over, more of that cyan hue flushing his face, then he looked back down to his task with a bashful grin.

“They’re just bones.”

Grillby hoped his flames weren’t as bright as he felt they were. When he dared to bring his gaze back, Sans was watching him with something of a suspicious grin on his face. Noticeably flustered, the bartender turned around to fetch a towel. He had to extinguish those kinds of thoughts for now. He knew precisely why he had that kind of reasoning and he had to calm himself.

Assertion and dominance were key signals that a fire monster’s relationship was deepening. With the sparring session fresh on his mind, Grillby couldn’t help but fixate on the other as he towelled off. A lot of the moisture remained, much to his disappointment.

As though dissatisfied with the skeleton’s work, the bartender approached him once Sans had turned off the tap. Sans was still grinning, his smile tugged at the sides of his mouth as though entertaining some private idea. Grillby carefully took the other’s hand, his flames connecting with the moist bones to create a soft hiss.

“figured you’d do that,” Sans murmured quietly with a pleased sigh. Grillby smirked with the other’s reaction to his flames as they ventured up his wrist to evaporate the remaining water. It elicited a sharp inhale from the skeleton as the warmth spread throughout his frame, dregs of remaining water wafting off him in a hot mist.

“Steamy.”

The fire monster couldn’t help but grin at the other’s tone. It was a quiet murmur as Sans’ breath hitched ever so slightly. It reminded him of the very first time he’d thought to use his magic in such a way, after the skeleton had stopped coming to his restaurant after they returned from Waterfall.

Experimentally, he pushed a little more heat through the other’s hand, eliciting a harsher gasp from Sans as his magic enveloped his rib cage. There was a faint flicker under his shirt as his eye lights settled on the fire monster, a suspicious grin replacing the previous shy one.

“Can’t stand to see me wet, eh?” he teased, his voice amused.
“Perish the thought,” the other agreed, watching the last wafts of steam lift from the other’s bones in satisfaction.

“gotta clean?”

“It can wait until morning,” Grillby murmured dismissively, leaning in closer now that the threat of water was obliterated. Sans chuckled quietly and pushed forward, wrapping his free arm around the other’s waist to pull him closer.

“us, i mean.”

A brightness touched the bartender’s flames as realisation dawned on him. The fact was that it was very possible that both of them assumed that Sans would stay the night. Without asking, without even a second thought, and Grillby was fine with that. His own mouth curled into a low smile as the skeleton hitched up on his tiptoes for a kiss.

His magic sputtered briefly when he attempted to form a tongue, then sighed in disappointment when it flickered out of existence after a moment. He supposed he wasn’t at 100-percent, after all.

He allowed Grillby to pull him towards the upstairs suite. It became more apparent as he passed a few reflective surfaces how truly muddy they’d gotten during their match and Sans plucked at his t-shirt, then simply hooked his fingers behind his neck and pulled it off once inside the other’s bedroom.

With Grillby’s crackled reaction, Sans eyed him, then gave him a mischievous grin.

“What’s the matter, grillby?” he murmured teasingly, making a show of stretching yet throwing an innocent air at the same time. The other’s demeanour popped at his full name and Sans couldn’t help but flush a little, realisation dawning on him. He filed away the information for later, under the growing list of things he knew would fluster the bartender.

“........Not a thing.” It was a lie, and Sans knew it. He watched as the other went to his closet, unbuttoning his vest as he went. It shot a pinpoint of heat down his spinal column and Sans had to swallow the knot in his nonexistent throat. Several more memories and thoughts of their time together before he messed things up bubbled to the surface of his mind.

He wished that he hadn’t panicked so much and that they had continued. With his limited knowledge, intimacy was both a frightening and promising thing. There was only so much he could glean from textbooks, after all. Maybe, he thought, Grillby could teach him…

Suddenly, Sans was very quiet and nearly flinched when Grillby tossed an article of clothing at him. Eyeing it skeptically, the skeleton held it out with one hand, toying with the waistband of his shorts.

It was not any bigger than his own t-shirts, a little oversized like his hoodie, but it would fit… It was a dark grey button-down chemise that was crisp and pressed. It even had a breast pocket.

It smelled of Grillby; that hidden, subtle scent of charcoal and spice of warmth. Suddenly the flare of heat pitted further down and Sans was wrestling with his thoughts again.

Wearing Grillby’s clothes… The thought ended there when Grillby’s movements drew his attention and he looked over in time to witness the other removing his soiled shirt. Flames obscured his form but occasionally the skeleton could see the subtle shift of curve and crags, notably around the other’s shoulders and along his back, similar to how his own scapulae were.
His hand dropped to his side and his back tensed at the sight, drinking up every detail. The way his flames ethereally licked over his body, the curve down his back and into his waistband. His fire shifted and pulsed, fluttering multiple shades of red, orange and gold as Grillby threw a look over his shoulder.

“...Something catch your eye?” Sans swallowed again, unable to speak, but his face felt hotter than before. “...It’s only fire, Sans.”

Soul thrumming excitedly, the skeleton tore his gaze away from the sight and roughly pulled the grey shirt over his skull. It was like a dare, who could out-fluster the other. Sans boldly hooked a thumb into the side of his shorts and yanked down, pelvis barely hidden by the oversized shirt as the muddy article hit the floor.

He was grinning a little nervously when he caught the way embers crackled through the other’s form, as though a campfire’s fuel had shifted and sent sparks flying. Grillby’s colours were so yellow they were almost white and he went stark quiet, flames buzzing around his shoulders and up to join the ones of his head in a rolling arc.

Sans grinned from side to side, watching as Grillby attempted to keep perfect composure with little success. He was pointedly avoiding the other’s look, so Sans brazenly stepped out to the bartender’s left side, his eye sockets narrowing mischievously.

“this another game?” he joked. Idly, he rocked on his heels, then entertained another thought. Bones were just bones to him - there was nothing to show, yet Grillby was becoming brighter and brighter the more he showed off. A brief devious smirk passed over the skeleton’s face before he yawned, stretching his arms out and hands balling against the fabric that just passed the tips of his phalanges.

Another crisp snap came from Grillby, along with a subtle, sharp inhalation. With the other’s stretch, the fabric had teased up the other’s hip box, showing a tantalising view of the bones Grillby had no names for. Trying to distract himself, the fire monster fussed with his belt, the jangling overly noisy against the sound of his ambient flames.

“maybe i won,” Sans snickered quietly, using his feet to slip out of his dirty slippers and socks. “i swear, grillbz. you must have some really, really dirty thoughts running through that pretty head o’ yours.”

Another flicker shuddered through Grillby’s flames, tinging them a bright white with the skeleton’s compliment. He hadn’t got much further than unbuckling his belt with the other watching him. Somehow it felt surreal. Sans’ boldness was obviously some kind of tactic to get a rise out of him. Normally it wouldn’t affect him so, and yet... he couldn’t banish the thoughts, now with the impish little skeleton wearing his shirt and nothing else.

“....Attempting to behave,” he barely rasped out, still uncommonly bright.

Sans regarded him and even leaned against the closet door next to him. “why?” Now he was genuinely curious. His brow bone rose with incredulity, considering all the innuendo passed between them lately. A niggling worry tried to gain his attention at the back of his mind, but Sans pushed it away.

When the other didn’t reply, Sans pressed his teeth together as insecurity started to settle on him again. He gave a halfhearted shrug, shifting the fabric of the shirt over one shoulder that had started to slip. “guess i don’t mind,” he offered a little quietly as he picked at one of the sleeve’s buttons, his grin half-cocked.
With the other’s silence, the skeleton felt at odds with himself. For one, he was sure the colours of Grillby’s flames meant that he was blushing, as the fire monster had indicated this several times. Secondly, he was a little worried about what Grillby might be thinking at that moment. That perhaps he’d gone too far?

He was getting cold feet again and veered towards backpedaling to offset the precarious situation. “mayb-”

“It’s you,” Grillby suddenly interrupted, causing Sans to flinch slightly. “I… don’t want to misstep.”

Sans felt himself tense, his mind going through several stages of doubt, of how Grillby slipped up somehow, and this was one of the small ways something had changed. When the other finally turned to him, the skeleton was trembling and he didn’t know why.

“Not what you’re thinking,” the other added hastily, pulling him close.

“And how do y’know what i’m thinkin’?” Sans mumbled uneasily.

“Because…” Grillby leaned in closer and tilted up his skull to kiss him, that fluttering feeling returning to Sans’ soul as the other’s hands settled upon his shoulders. “It’s you. You overthink things.”

“ok.”

“It’s not,” Grillby sighed between them. A subtle tremor went through Sans’ frame as the fire monster’s hands moved up from his shoulders to his neck, then down again. The skeleton sighed softly with the light squeeze and nodded silently. “I want you to… try to stop.”

“ok,” Sans breathed, “gonna be hard.” Grillby’s chuckle was a soft exhale and Sans gently shoved at him in response. “perv.”

“I said nothing. You’re the one with questionable thoughts.”

“s’t that why you’re eyeballin’ my pelvic girdle?” Sans snickered as his worries dispelled and his arms wrapped around the other’s neck. “you dog. always hungry for a bone.”

Grillby’s flames tinged hotter and the skeleton watched them curiously as he felt the fire monster’s hands delve lower against the sides of his ribs.

“Is that what you call it?” the other replied with genuine curiosity. There was a hint of amusement in his tone as his touch went a little lower, fingertips tracing over the fabric covering the crests of Sans’ hips.

Sans laughed, the sound a little surprised as he leaned forward into the touches, “what, seriously?”

“Ribs, skull, teeth, tibia… other than that, you haven’t revealed any other names to me,” Grillby explained, his voice keeping low and a little husky. Sans felt another tremor pass through him at the tone, how it ignited something inside of him and prickled at his body wherever the fire monster touched. “Apart from… Mary… and Louise, was it?”

The skeleton laughed again, drawing in a startled breath when the other’s hold on his hips squeezed gently, pressing a soft yet persistent heat against his magic. “maybe.”

“Maybe?”
“m.. maybe i can teach you, after all,” Sans considered, then dropped his gaze as Grillby’s hands smoothed back up over the sides of his ribs. The heat he was being bathed in felt nice and he hummed softly in appreciation. “maybe… start at the top. and, uh… work down.” His face felt flush with the addition but he felt his cares melt away when Grillby kissed him, giving in to a soft, needy moan.

He barely had the time to gasp out “m-mandible” when Grillby’s mouth found the crook of his neck, skull cradled gently to the side as Sans’ breaths hitched slightly with the presence of his hot tongue. Maybe this would be a fun way for Grillby to learn, Sans thought hazily as he slid his phalanges down the other’s torso. They met with a brief shudder and he laughed softly at the sound of a faint growl at the pit of the fire monster’s throat.

“ok. i gotch-hhah-” he murmured quickly, craning his skull as another wave of heat filled his spine. He arched into the other’s touch, fingertips raking through the other’s fire before settling at his waistband to hold onto. “h.. hickies, eh?”

A low hum of affirmation escaped the fire monster alongside the soft singe of bone, leaving Sans gasping. “...Need to mark which bones we’ve visited,” Grillby reasoned, his tone almost playful as his words sent Sans’ magic to wildly course through his marrow at the thought. “Like a… checklist.”

“p-pah-”

“Pa..?” Grillby repeated, the pronounced pop of the word against Sans’ neck sending a fluttering excitement through his flames as the skeleton arched again.

“pants,” Sans barely gasped out, swallowing hard when Grillby pulled away enough to lock his gaze. “it’s, uh… not fair, after all.”

Grillby considered it for a moment, his eyes veering off to the side to inspect the trail of singes left behind from his efforts. He dragged his thumb over the interesting little notches of bones, his core heating up with every excited breath Sans drew.

“Not fair, you say?”

“heh. yup.”

“Thought I was being courteous. As you appear to be… awestruck.”

“h-happens when you stare at the sun,” the skeleton stammered, eye lights drawn to the other’s torso, “or damn near close, i, uh, guess. i’ve seen you in your ginchies before, man.”

The other hummed and one hand passed between them, connecting with Sans’ at his waist as though hesitant. “...Wonder how long you’ve stared as I slept.”

Sans’ grin tightened and his magic coalesced into a bashful flush, unable to maintain the other’s stare. “not long enough, b’lieve me.”

With such a bold statement, Grillby was unable to keep back a soft laugh of surprise. Sans’ fingers were teasing the fire by his waistband, hesitant and trembling. He pressed their mouths together with an urging hum, then murmured, “Go on, then.”

Sans’ breaths were stuttered yet excited as he brought his other hand forward to join its twin. He toyed with the front of Grillby’s fly, the heat of his body becoming a little more intense with Grillby watching him. He felt the other’s breath on him, sending a spiraling heat to his pelvis and throughout his limbs with the intrusive thought.
They were going to be exploring.

He laughed breathily as he unfastened the button above the zipper, unable to contain the nervous tone.

“you’re starin’.” He just knew it, felt the fire monster’s eyes on him without even looking.

“Am I not permitted to enjoy the view..?” Grillby teased, his hands moving back to the lower portion of Sans’ ribs. He thumbed one of them over the shirt, drawing a soft gasp from the skeleton.

“with, uh, with gusto. i guess,” Sans muttered, hesitating before taking the zipper toggle and sliding it down. He gulped silently; even though their bodies obscured the view, Sans’ soul was thrumming fiercely with every shift of fabric as he pushed the sides of Grillby’s trousers past his slim hips.

The belt buckle hitting the floor punctuated the reality of the situation and Sans found himself grinning foolishly. He supposed this was how Grillby felt, when Sans had discarded his own shorts. Bold yet trembling, he smoothed the heels of his hands back up to Grillby’s sides, feeling every cranny and divot his form hid from view.

“b-better?” he asked, attempting to keep his tone even.

“Much.”

Sans laughed again and nudged the other into the direction of the bed, leaving their discarded clothes behind. It was just Grillby in his shorts and Sans in his borrowed shirt. The few steps felt like they took an eternity, interrupted by soft kisses that eventually had Sans panting again.

Soon Sans found himself against a pile of pillows at one end of the bed, leg hooked under him as his other hung over the side of the mattress while Grillby’s shirt hid his pelvis from view. He hummed into another kiss, its fluttering passion settling a subtle ache in his rib cage while his bones tingled. Sans pressed forward a little more in urgency, trying once more to summon his tongue to deepen the addictive kisses.

Its brief presence sent a surprised shiver through Grillby’s body. It caused him to press forward with more passion, though Sans found he couldn’t hold it for longer than a minute or so. Panting as he watched Grillby’s puzzled expression, Sans grinned awkwardly.

“so m’not at 100-percent. it’s cool,” he murmured, lying back against the pillows. “uh. so you said you liked mary, eh?”

Silent, the other watched as Sans stretched a little more, the fabric pulling upward and the sight sending a hot pulse through his flames. Sans caught the reaction and grinned to himself, hooking his dead arm behind his skull.

“i guess… that’s actually one of the cervical vertebrae.” He was willing to teach Grillby about bone names, sure, if it continued this way. The skeleton was still blushing when the other situated himself in front of him, nestling the crook between his bent leg and the one hanging off the ledge of the mattress.

“Vertebrae..?”

“s-sure,” Sans continued, “segments of the-” He stopped when Grillby reached out and his eye lights followed his hand, settling under his jaw to touch one of the indicated bones. The skeleton shuddered with the reintroduction of heat, his soul flooding with affection for the gesture alongside the fire monster.
Two digits traced the one directly under his skull, slipping down the length of one vertebra before connecting with the next. His bones tingled with the gentle pulse alongside an unfamiliar ache, threatening to make him gasp.

“...And this as well?” Grillby’s tone was a little playful but Sans resisted the urge to lean up to meet more of his touches. Instead, the skeleton nodded, attempting to keep collected as Grillby’s fingertips traced further down to the vertebra just below his breastbone. The closer the other’s touch got to his soul, the more pronounced the fluttering feeling became. Sans’ figurative nerves got to the better of him.

“m-maybe, uh-” Sans stopped, trying to calm his breathing as Grillby’s hands smoothed over the front of his shirt, stroking firmly over his clavicles and ribs. God, his touch was amazing and he definitely wanted more of this - just not under the ribs.

Grillby was attentive; he was fully aware that he needed to cede their pace to Sans if the skeleton was ever going to be comfortable with himself. His own breaths were deep as his hands passed over hidden bones, relishing in the way Sans’ chest rose and fell in thinly veiled excitement.

It was exciting. Being with no one apart from other fire monsters, Grillby was curious how Sans seemed to like his touch, even seemed to crave it. He kept a watchful eye on the other, sprawled out in front of him, one arm over his skull while his other gripped at the sheet on the mattress, biting back appreciative noises.

“Tell me,” he urged softly, pulling his hands away. He saw the veiled way Sans hid the distraught look on his face, but the skeleton nodded anyway and pulled his left leg from over the edge of the bed. The fire monster blinked at the offered appendage and uprighted himself so he could look it over.

Several scratches and lines littered the bone, old dents and injuries that had healed years ago. Grillby took the proffered limb as Sans hitched himself up onto his elbows to watch, his sockets half-closed and his breaths deep in anticipation.

“Doing alright..?” Grillby murmured, hooking the other’s foot onto his shoulder and turning his head to place a kiss on one of the twin bones of Sans’ lower leg.

A shuddering gasp escaped Sans before he could stop himself and he froze, gripping the sheets at his sides. “o-oh, nope,” he whispered, taking a moment to calm down, “nope, that was not great. z-zero outta ten, y’missed the foot.”

Grillby scoffed quietly and smirked to himself, recognising the joke for what it was; Sans was nervous and attempting to hide it with humour. He’d done it so many times in the past, he didn’t know why he thought this time would be any different.

“If you insist,” he replied softly, cradling the other’s foot and pressing a heated kiss against the ankle. He watched as Sans hunched inwards, a shuddered sigh escaping him. “…This one?”

“t-ta-” Sans stammered as Grillby mouthed it, pressing another kiss to the bone. Sans couldn’t help the soft sigh that passed his teeth and the way his toes curled slightly.

“Ta..?”

“talus,” Sans finished, his bones flushing as he realised what would happen the further up the leg Grillby got. He tried not to linger on it but shifted slightly when Grillby moved up his leg again,
cradling the knee with one hand while supporting his leg with his other.

“*Talus,*” the fire monster repeated, sending a hungry surge through Sans’ body as he gave an affirmative nod. “*Interesting name.*”

Sans chuckled, his phalanges curling into the sheets again. “yep.”

“*No fictional ones this time?*”

Sans’ breath hitched again when Grillby pressed another kiss to his lower leg, unable to mute the bright flicker of magic collecting in his rib cage. “n-not unless pap was lyin’. he… he doesn’t lie ‘bout that kinda stuff.”

“That’s a relief.”

“uh, that’s… that’s the tibia.”

“*Better names, anyway. They sound… very sublime.*”

Sans flushed at the compliment and closed his eye sockets to hide from the other’s watchful gaze. It only amplified Grillby’s next kiss on the next bone up, sending him such a concentrated point of heat that he gasped loudly.

“fff-” he tried, torn between swearing and actually giving the bone’s name.

“You’re sensitive,” Grillby observed teasingly through a breathy chuckle. “*Beautiful.*”

“wh-” Sans certainly hadn’t been expecting *that.* He opened his good eye, his rib cage rising and falling just a little faster with how close Grillby had gotten in that brief time. His leg was hooked over the other’s flaming shoulder, fire licking between the bones of his lower leg that it almost tickled.

“don’t say that.”

“Gorgeous.” The fire monster’s mouth passed further up, peppering the thicker bone with sweet kisses that had magic coiling restlessly in Sans’ rib cage. His spine arched off the mattress with a kiss lingering by his hip box, every breath becoming more urgent and ragged.

“fee…” the skeleton tried again, cut off by a whimper. One of his hands unballed from the sheets and covered his mouth, attempting to halt a stuttered gasp. “…femur?”

Grillby’s chuckle ghosted against his iliac crest and Sans shifted where he lay, feeling the other’s heat permeate into the spot.

“You sound so unsure,” the fire monster said lowly from behind a smirk.

“no, yep. tha… that’s f’sure a femur,” Sans muttered from behind his hand, his other pulling at the sheet. “s.. same as the other.”

“They’re both called femur. That’s very informative.”

Sans laughed breathily, shifting his hips and the fabric skirted upwards a little with his movement. “got pairs, man.”

“So I see,” the fire monster chuckled, raising his head and gliding his fingertips up the length of Sans’ femurs. He watched as Sans bucked against his touch, his breaths quickening the closer they rose to his pelvis. “*Makes for a delightful view.*”
“stop bein’ cheesy,” the skeleton grumbled, his face turning away from the praise. “so embarrassing.”

“I’m enjoying this. Are you not?”

Sans blinked and cautiously looked to the other for the first time in what felt like forever. He shifted again as the fire monster’s hands rested against his femurs in pause, silently hoping that Grillby would continue.

“...kinda am, yeah.”

“Sans...”

“ok. ma.. maybe i am. a lot,” the skeleton conceded, his flush broadening. “maybe... keep goin’?”

“...Very educational,” Grillby murmured, sending the other an encouraging grin. “‘Maybe.’” He winked.

Sans was able to witness the way the other’s flames shifted about his body in an elliptical arc before settling on his opposite side and how they tinged with flickers of amber and hints of violet. The glowing shift of his form ebbed and waned as he moved, sending varying levels of heat into the room. It sent him such comfort and reassurance that Sans relaxed in mind but he was unable to keep himself from trembling.

Grillby’s hands skirted below the crisp fabric of the grey chemise as Sans’ eye lights stared at them, his jaw hanging open in anticipation. Once the heated tips of Grillby’s fingers met with his ischium, a long soft sigh escaped Sans.

“ish...” he trailed off, his eye lights blown out as the fire monster’s warmth flooded into his pelvic area. His voice was small and broke on a whisper that could’ve been Grillby’s name if he really tried. He hitched his other leg up to brace himself, humming blissfully as he closed his eye sockets. A soft grin spread across his face with a quiet laugh, feeling self-conscious through the noises he was making.

“Peculiar name,” Grillby noted with just a bit of smugness, “...Is this alright?”

“mnnfh... yeah...” Sans stretched out languidly in a silent plea for more, not trusting himself to say much else. His hand covered his teeth again and his brow drew together as the fire monster’s fingers traced feather-light touches under the fabric, outlining a slow curvature along his ischiums towards the middle.

He lifted his hips, teething against his phalanges in an attempt to keep quiet. Half of him knew Grillby was only exploring, but damn if it didn’t feel like the best thing that ever happened to him. Sans knew that he had to keep quiet in order for Grillby to continue, but at the same time he also thought that the other would stop if he didn’t give up any precious information.

As though his silence had been affirmation enough, Grillby’s next touch followed the curves of the inlets towards the join in the middle of his pelvis. Sans was unable to hold back a moan of appreciation as pleasure built up inside of him, causing his toes to curl and his skull to fall back with a deep inhale.
Vaguely, he heard Grillby’s flames crackle the way they did when he was surprised, but the attention to his bones was becoming a little too much. Trying again, Sans mumbled through his arousal, “ish... ischium.”

Another snowball could crash through the window and Sans wouldn’t care, as long as Grillby continued. He did, sending another heated pulse through the skeleton’s body as his thumbs hooked into the wide voids, tracing the interiors as the skeleton’s vocalisations grew more urgent.

“h... how d’you...” Sans attempted suddenly, voice cracking with his uneven breaths, “how...” Grillby was flushed through Sans’ feedback, every little hitched breath and lithe movement enough to encourage him to keep going. The names of the bones didn’t really matter anymore, but the way Sans attempted to keep up with the game was more than a little endearing in its own way. The fire monster leaned forward over the skeleton with one hand between them so he could capture another kiss.

The other moaned against him and suddenly tensed when Grillby hooked his forefinger between the pair of holes, using his thumb to gently tease the bridge in between them. The small flame that had gone against his wishes had whispered to him about Sans’ secret little areas, giving him ideas and fantasies of how to drive him absolutely wild with pleasure.

Sans’ hands had flown to Grillby, legs taut as the pressure stimulated the sensitive bones. The skeleton pushed breaths past the flames of Grillby’s neck as he leaned up, pulling him closer, clinging to him as the other’s thumb rocked against him.

“Oh my god,” he harshly whispered against the other’s neck, breathing in Grillby’s flames as he tried so hard to keep calm. “Oh.. oh my god, grillby...” He whimpered as the other’s flames increased in intensity as though fuelled by his gusty breaths, every part of him drinking in the heat as though he’d never felt it before in his life.

A building pressure of magic was coiling inside of him, coalescing thickly in the pit of his hip box while travelling up his spine. He groaned hungrily against the ministrations and bent up his other leg to straddle Grillby’s form, every touch pulling harsher gasps and needy moans from him.

“How.. grillb, how-” he pleaded desperately, unsure just how the other knew where to touch, “i didn’t ev... i can’t... it’s... it’s really, really good, oh-” Sans’ voice broke when Grillby moved to kiss him, his hot tongue enveloping his mouth and filling him with tingling pulses. At the same time, the skeleton could feel the other’s finger unhook from his pelvic inlet and immediately felt the loss with a shudder of panic.

Self-conscious, Sans whimpered desperately against the end of the kiss, his mind tumbling over itself as his hands trembled against Grillby’s shoulders. “Keep going,” he whispered frantically, his breaths catching over themselves as Sans attempted to keep calm. “I’ll shut up, I promise. M’sorry, pl-” Grillby silenced him with another kiss, but had grown a little worried about what the other had been thinking. He drew the connection with the other’s fear and felt a need to extinguish it, administrating affection and love into every movement.

Sans was needy, clinging to him as though he never wanted to let go. The fire monster pressed his mouth against the opposite side of Sans’ neck, the vertebrae, mouthing three little words silently against the bones alongside his own deep breaths. There was a burst of emotion when he did so, wishing he had the courage to say it out loud.

His hand pushed further into the void of Sans’ pelvis, digits gently caressing the formless magic that
had pooled into it as the skeleton groaned against his shoulder. His grip tightened as Grillby reached further, the tips of his fingers brushing against the set of inlets towards the back that the little flame had noted - that and how grand a reaction his fire had extracted from Sans on their heated night together.

“god,” Sans’ voice cracked, the word was drawn out and harsh as his magic pooled a little more, heating the insides of his bones with an unsatiated longing. His left hand clawed against the fire monster’s shoulder, raking down his torso as the other’s touch connected with his sacrum. He whimpered, his body squirming ever so slightly, not entirely sure if he wanted more of the touch or to escape it entirely.

“it’s… so good-”

Grillby hummed against his neck in affirmation, grimacing as he attempted to quell the insurmountable heat that was threatening to take over the room. He wanted to hold back just a little, to focus on bringing Sans as much pleasure as he could. He was fuelled by the other’s moans, of his babbling pleas and harsh gasps of surprise - and he loved every moment of it.

“...Always want for you to feel this way,” he moaned against Sans’ skull, the tips of his fingers smoothing out to caress over the plains of Sans’ sacrum, eliciting a shudder from him. He gasped when the skeleton’s fingers delved deeper on his own body, every pinpoint of heat stuttering to a halt wherever the bones of his fingers moved.

“fuck-” Sans grunted, his spine hunching inward from the pressure applied to the inlets. Dimly, he realised that he had begun to sweat and drool and his sockets shut tightly in embarrassment. In the corner of his mind, he knew this was all very one-sided. He had made an attempt to slide his hand between them to find Grillby’s own pelvis before realising the fire monster likely didn’t have one.

That made him laugh suddenly, out of shame before anything else.

“oh man.”

Grillby stopped, his flames stuttering briefly in confusion as Sans peeked at him, his rib cage rising and falling with his deep uneven breaths. His hazy eye lights, the way his mouth hung open with every lusty breath, Grillby could barely keep himself from pushing him against the mattress and making him grunt and moan throughout the night.

“le.. leave it to you t’fire up the pilot light and… hah… leave yourself off,” the skeleton panted, watching him as a flush deepened between his joints, casting a cyan glow against Grillby’s natural firelight.

The fire monster remained curious yet perplexed. His expression must have betrayed him in some way, since Sans shifted his hand between them another inch and he laughed to himself more than anything else.

“can’t do that to you. don’t got that spot on you.” Sans’ grin was almost sheepish as he realised what he was implying, but slid his hand further down Grillby’s abdomen, stopping at the waistband of his shorts. He wouldn’t venture further without a clear indication that Grillby wanted to be touched back, as much as he hungered for it.

“Oh,” the fire monster breathed, relief coming off him in waves. He thought somehow that he’d overstepped a boundary, but flushed when it suddenly struck him.

Sans wanted to reciprocate..?
That was not unheard of, but he wasn’t expecting it since it was Sans’ first relationship and being intimate was such a recent event. Grillby couldn’t help the sly little smirk that passed through his flames with Sans’ hesitancy, a low rumble echoing the chuckle in his chest.

“Really…”

Sans grinned a little more, urged by Grillby’s interest. He moved down and under the fire monster a little more for easier access, his phalanges bypassing the fabric to connect with something else entirely.

No, that certainly wasn’t a pelvic girdle, he realised dimly.

“Something troubling you?” Grillby murmured, sending another heated kiss against the other’s jaw.

“wasn’t, uh…” Sans replied a little dimly, hoping he didn’t sound as confused as he did just then. Too late, he sounded exactly that, and the fire monster chuckled against him. “didn’t… didn’t think ahead.”

“That’s entirely alright,” the other assured him, his hands finding the flares of Sans’ hip bones again with another gentle squeeze. His own breaths were hitched as he felt Sans’ fingers probe further, connecting with the hard heat in his shorts. He gasped softly at the touch, sending pinpoints of heat into the other’s bones once more. “Go on.”

“uh…” Sans thought about it for a moment before pushing himself up on one elbow, shyly looking up at Grillby’s visage before looking between them again. No, this… was not a pelvis. That was clear. Of course it wasn’t, he mentally chastised himself. He went over the rather vague information he’d gleaned from his textbooks before realising he’d rather pointedly skimmed the section and grew frustrated with his past blunder.

Then he just decided to be bold. His body tensed in shock when his grip caused Grillby to grunt above him and lean towards him. Although he had a vague idea, whatever it was felt hard in his hand, hot to the touch. He flushed deeply as he brought his other hand down to tug at Grillby’s shorts to free it from its confines.

Well, it certainly was different. Grillby had leaned back to allow the other a look; after all, it was a learning experience. He was flushed himself, his flames dancing in a peculiar way as waves of heat came off him in varying intensities. As he sat back on his legs, Sans followed to sit in kind in front of him, something of a perplexed look on his face.

“i can, uh…” probably do that, he wanted to say, the mere thought sending the condensed mass of magic in his hip box to roiling. He inhaled deeply as Grillby’s hands followed the curves of his hips and down his femurs, pressing heat into every crack and joint it found to leave them glowing and tingling.

“...Need instruction?” the other offered kindly, causing Sans to grin a bit in embarrassment. “It’s alright.”

“no, yeah, maybe-” the skeleton replied haltingly, withdrawing one of his hands to hike up the end of the shirt he wore. He saw the subtle glow of his magic nestled in his pelvis and laughed to himself. “this is kinda fucked.”

“Perhaps later,” Grillby’s reply had a hint of a snicker, something Sans had rarely heard from him before. His tone strengthened the light of Sans’ magic and the skeleton found his soul thrumming hard at the prospect. Before that day, intimacy seemed so far away, and yet now…
He allowed the thought to peter off there. Taking a few calming breaths, Sans’ eye lights flicked up to see Grillby’s visage, still brighter than their normal splendour. He liked the look, even wanted to see how bright he could make Grillby. Maybe… some other time, he reasoned.

“You should… learn.”

“y-yeah. sure, uh-” Still self-conscious, Sans attempted to mimic the other’s piece, his magic coiling languidly with small tendrils of cyan light with his efforts. Realising he was a little nervous with Grillby’s gaze on him, the skeleton turned his skull to the side with a sheepish grin. “…you’re starin’ again, grillbz.”

A gentle smile passing through his flames, the bartender pulled a little closer to Sans, encircling his arms around the other’s shoulders to hold him close. His hands rubbed soothing circles around Sans’ shoulders and flooded into his back, making him sigh with the comfort it brought.

“i’m ok,” Sans murmured with a deep inhale. “just… never-”

“Never done this before. I understand,” Grillby finished for him, pulling away only enough to press a kiss against the other’s cheekbone. “Remember… don’t overthink it.”

“ok.” Sans’ breaths had become stuttered again as he forced himself to concentrate.

“Allow your magic to collect, but do not force it.” the fire monster murmured against his skull gently. His tone was even and caring, tugging at Sans’ affections as the skeleton leaned further into the other’s embrace. One of his hands smoothed down the expanse of his back to curl around to his front and the skeleton inhaled sharply with the direct connection with his magic. “It helps to aim for something.”

“aim for you-” Sans joked, his grin tugging in embarrassment. Then he gasped again with an accompanying moan, closing his eye sockets when Grillby’s fingers touched the connecting coils of his magic. “ok, i was jokin’ but i-it’s actually…” The end of his sentence ended abruptly as his hips bucked forward to the fire monster’s heat and a startled gasp escaped him. He kept his eye sockets closed but wrapped one arm around the other with a quiet grunt of effort.

“Don’t overthink,” Grillby reminded him, every bit of him glowing hotly as he felt the other’s magic bend towards his hand, coaxing it to form. Despite Sans’ efforts to form a tongue being unsuccessful, he was managing just fine in regards to this. “You’re doing very well.”

Sans couldn’t help but laugh again, squeezing the other against him as more of his magic poured towards Grillby’s hand. “sex-ed grillby. kinda… hard.”

“That is essentially the goal, yes,” the fire monster laughed, pressing another kiss to Sans’ skull affectionately. “It’s very pretty.”

“psh. you’re just sayin’ that `cause i got my hand on your di-”

“You’re also quite the romantic,” Grillby scoffed, amused nonetheless. Sans entertained him with another low laugh, looking between them to see his work. It was admittedly different than Grillby’s, but it wasn’t… what? Ugly, like maybe he thought it would be? The other was right in a way. It was his own magic, cyan and unstable, so new that he wasn’t quite sure how to comment.

He said the first thing that came to mind; “welp. that’s a dong, i guess.”

“Classy, Sans. I’m unsure why I figured you’d be mature about this,” Grillby was still laughing, regardless. It helped ease some of the tension Sans felt as he realised his body had gone rigid in his
concentration. Flushed, the skeleton passed his hand between them to study it, taking his member in hand.

It was smaller than Grillby’s for sure, not by much, but it also appeared smoother, although traces of unstable magic coiled up occasionally from its sides. A low chuckle escaped him as the other shifted a little closer to him so their bodies were flush together.

“wanna try again?” Sans murmured under his breath at the other’s unspoken invitation to continue.

“...Suppose I comprehend your very important studies at my restaurant, now,” the fire monster couldn’t help but chuckle at the weeks’ prior incident as he gently guided the other back down onto the mattress.

“shut up, don’t say that,” Sans groused at the memory, although he automatically parted his legs to accommodate Grillby’s body as he moved above him.

A surprised, muffled grunt passed his teeth at the shift between them, Grillby’s hard cock pressed against his own in a rolling thrust. It shot a hot pulse of pleasure up his spine from his front and he locked his arms around Grillby’s neck with a sudden, loud groan.

“wow how, what the fu-” He was cut off by another thrust and burst of pleasure, spasming up his spine and fluttering towards his soul. Grillby was going slow, his strides pulling gasps from Sans with every movement. The skeleton’s grip on him turned vice-like as he rocked against him, his very core alight as Grillby repressed his need to overtake his lover.

“Alright?” Grillby whispered softly with pause, his eyes searching out Sans’ face for any hint that he might be uncomfortable.

“yeah, wow-” Sans’ voice cracked, sounding dazed as he lifted his hips up. They met with the fire monster’s own as he ground down and he couldn’t help the broken whimper that left him when he tried to stifle his moan.

A fluttering pulse shot through his flux system when he heard his name groaned brokenly into the crook of his neck, settling around his soul and amplifying every blessed desire Sans could ever dream of and more. He bucked, tried to get into the movement, attempting to mimic the fire monster’s rocking to bring more pleasure for them both.

Grillby’s body was sparking, fire rolling off him with every thrust and Sans could feel his heat seep into his rib cage. Sans’ name was called again, flooding him with a desire to move and call back, though every breath was getting too hot, his voice burning and panting through the building sensitivity and pleasure took over any thoughts he would’ve had.

Being edged for so long had built up an increasing pressure inside of him that longed to release. Sans moved along with Grillby’s body, trying desperately to gain more from the thrusts as everything he was burned, a primal urge rising to switch their positions and take over. Unconsciously, he growled lowly, easing his grip on the other as another set of maddening thrusts against his cock made his breaths more urgent and ragged.

He probably should’ve thought things out better, but being in the state that he was, Sans hoisted Grillby’s light form and rolled their bodies so the fire monster was under him. At least that had been the plan, had the mattress been a little wider. The other’s grunt was startled when they suddenly plunged off the side of the bed and onto the floor below.

“What.” Grillby’s breaths were frantic as he recovered, his soul both hammering and fluttering in
his chest at the bold display of assertiveness Sans had suddenly demonstrated. The skeleton grinned above him, his eye lights hazy with lust and that impish deviance that the fire monster couldn’t help but allow his core to flare up a little more, smothering the room with a deadly heat and blaze.

“wanted to give it a shot,” Sans said excusingly as he readjusted their position, hips flush together as he rested his hands at either side of Grillby’s head. The fire monster grinned as Sans gave an experimental push against the other’s cock and let out a low groan as he continued at his own pace, hips rolling into a quicker rhythm.

The other’s dominant display had been a little surprising, but certainly not unwarranted - although he was certain that Sans would’ve been more passive in the bedroom. He was bold and curious though, every bit receptive to the promises the fire monster’s touch gave him.

Grillby watched from his back with hooded eyes, his mouth agape on crackling breaths that shot more heat into the room. Sans certainly looked like he was enjoying himself, growling, groaning and his breaths breaking with every thrust. He couldn’t help but watch as his expression melted into one of blissed-out agony, as every movement twisted the pleasure he received into an ever-increasing inferno.

He wanted to touch him yet hold himself back to watch Sans’ debauched state, wanted to dominate as his nature dictated him, to remain passive yet aggressive as the skeleton had proven himself to be. Grillby’s moans caught in his throat as he rolled his hips in time with Sans’, having found a delirious rhythm that he’d gotten himself lost in.

The fire monster’s hand slid around from his side and inched up Sans’ borrowed shirt, ghosting over the crest of his hip and up further. His fingertips brushed against the column of bone, taking care not to delve too deep or cause any sudden movements against his spine that may cut things off prematurely.

Sans’ grunts of effort redoubled as Grillby’s other hand grasped at the fabric of his shirt and pulled him down by the collar, causing the skeleton to collapse onto one forearm as his fire licked into his skull with their next kiss. His hand bunched beside Grillby’s head and Sans whimpered in surprise at the other’s hand caressing his spine, tracing every notch as it delved higher and higher. It drew more desperate, softer gasps from him as he curled against the touch, sending his mind and soul into a shudder of absolute bliss.

The heat added to the intensity and Sans felt the other’s body wrench to the side as their positions were reversed once more. He was grinning up at Grillby and attempted to regain his bearings just as the fire monster pinned him down. Flames trickled off his shoulders and landed on him, but he didn’t care.

“now who’s feisty,” the skeleton gasped as Grillby’s hips bore down on him again. Another pleased moan left him with the fire monster’s next kiss, filling him with passion and ambient flames.

He realised that the fire monster’s form had begun to shift throughout their tussle. A little more undefined, more fire than the semi-solid state he assumed naturally. Flames licked out in chaotic, erratic arcs from his shoulders and arms as Grillby thrust against him, every one of his moans and grunts feeding Sans’ desire for further intimacy.

“more—” he groaned, arching his back off the floor. Sans clawed at Grillby’s biceps, meeting the thrusts with his own needy and inexperienced movements. It was becoming more and more difficult to stifle the lewd noises he was making and soon Sans couldn’t hold back anymore.

Something was building up inside of him, the pleasurable ache fighting with his magic to release. It
reminded him of his energy spiking, of a restless need to lash out and yet keep close. His mouth hung open in a silent scream as his body couldn’t handle it anymore, magic coiling and pulsing inside of him against the ministrations that were overwhelming him. He grasped at Grillby’s body, toes curling and voice rawly echoing Grillby’s pleased appreciation at his neck.

“I-I’m close-” Grillby stammered against him, breaths too hot to stand as Sans’ legs quivered against the building sensitivity.

“close, hah…” the skeleton echoed deliriously, something of a whimper escaping him once more. “g-grillby, mmmmgh-” He didn’t know how long he was going to last, feeling so hot, so out of control that he was sure he was going to fall apart. His grip on the other’s arms grew tighter, bony fingers threatening to cut against the flames and the semi-permeable form hidden beneath them. He repeated the other’s name as he arched until his voice cracked higher, every sensation proving too much for him to handle, until words failed him completely.

A piercing white hotness filled his soul with the sudden flood of release, every part of him rattling against Grillby. He soared as his release overcame him, sweat both glistening and rolling down his bones as he felt his new appendage twitch between them. Grillby rode against him, shedding more flames as his voice verged on the edge of incoherency, buried by desire and fire.

Sans’ voice cracked in a desperate moan as Grillby’s hips snapped forward and paused, his body trembling with his own orgasm. It spattered against his pelvis in hot, thick coats, singeing bones and fabric alike, both burning and slickening the surface. The skeleton moved under him with the lingering presence of a heat like none other, still coming down from his high as his breaths burned through his soul.

The only sound as Grillby’s body untensed was the sound of their laboured breathing and the fire monster’s flames as they gradually calmed. Every part of Sans felt as heavy as lead, the last dredges of strength sapped from an already eventful evening. His voice cracked again, this time with a hoarse laugh as Grillby bracketed his skull with his forearms and mouthed the side of his neck affectionately.

“holy shit..!” He really had no other words, his mind swimming in the literal afterglow of his orgasm. With little clarity, the skeleton shifted again, feeling his lover’s and his own release trickle down and follow the curves of his ischiums before coming to an albeit slow realisation.

Sans patted the other’s chest insistently as the thought pestered him, then urgently pushed at him. Concerned, Grillby stared at him as his movements became more frantic. Sans’ breaths were still deep and fast as Grillby pulled away with a sting of regret, his eyes searching for any hint that… what? Perhaps he had injured Sans?

That wasn’t it; Sans didn’t appear to be in pain. Nothing was cracked, as far as he could tell. Sans’ rib cage rose and fell akin to panic as his hazy eye lights poured over the fire monster’s body, seemingly searching for something. When his gaze went lower, settling on the fire monster’s lower abdomen and fiery thighs, he seemed to relax.

“Oh thank god,” the skeleton muttered as relief flooded over him. Having little strength left, he flopped back against the floorboards with an embarrassed chuckle. “thought it might’ve, uh…”

Grillby’s grin tugged, perplexed, as he looked between them. His own cum leaked down the other’s pelvic girdle, still glowing white-hot and deepening in colour as it cooled.
“...You seemed frightened.”

“s’wet,” Sans muttered, then threw his forearm over his eye sockets with a deep, satiated sigh. “holy shit,” he repeated with another laugh, his voice raw.

“It’s… only magic, Sans,” Grillby lightly admonished him, moving to hover over Sans’ relaxed form. “I’m fine.”

“glad t’hear it,” the skeleton sighed again. He shifted slightly as Grillby’s release flowed against his bones, the feeling mildly strange yet warming the surface it passed. “m’burnt out.”

“Did you honestly think…” Grillby trailed off, then quietly laughed when he saw Sans’ grin tug in embarrassment and his cyan magic tinge his cheekbones. “Well, isn’t that the sweetest, most adorable thing I think I have ever heard!”

Sans rolled to the side, still covering his sockets, silent chuckles shaking his frame, “shut up.”

“So endearing…” the fire monster cooed, moving to pull his shorts back up. He tugged on Sans’ free arm and was met with the least amount of resistance.

“my spine…” Sans complained halfheartedly through a slight grimace.

“Could give it another rub over, if you like,” the other offered as Sans settled into a sitting position a little gingerly.

“oh, no y’don’t, ya horndog,” the skeleton rebuked, his grin still tugging in amusement as he tested getting up. He grimaced a little more but managed to hook his arm around Grillby’s neck to pull himself upright with effort. “uh.”

“Need assistance?” Grillby paused to give him another kiss, his core pulsing with adoration.

Sans hummed against him, his soul imitating the glow in measured, tantric beats. “maybe.”

“...Need to purge that word from your vocabulary.”

The skeleton scoffed quietly, grunting as Grillby carefully got back onto his feet, still trembling from their exertion, and pulled Sans into bed with him.

“Better?” Grillby murmured as Sans situated himself, lying against the fire monster’s chest. He simply allowed himself just to exist as the other’s flames languidly travelled over his bony fingers, every breath a deep, grateful sigh.

“sure.”

“At least it’s not ‘maybe’,” Grillby considered a little in playful scorn, then smirked as Sans gave him a light shove in retaliation.

“think you’ll remember the names of the bone zone now?” Sans murmured against his torso, curling inwards as Grillby’s hands rubbed a gentle heat into his scapulae and spine.

The fire monster considered it for a moment before encircling the other in his arms to hold him close.

“...Suppose we can always have a pop quiz, next time.”

Sans snorted at that, although it sounded threateningly close to a snore. Nuzzling the perfect warmth
he’d fallen in love with, Sans left it at that and curled his arms at either side of Grillby’s chest, easily falling asleep.

Chapter End Notes

**Brief summary:** After covering up the evidence of their sparring session, they go back to Grillby’s. Grillby gets jealous of water as Sans wipes off the mud. They have a mental showdown, who can out-fluster the other. Sans ends up only in one of Grillby’s shirts and Grillby in his underwear. A seemingly innocent bone-naming lesson gets handsy and Sans is really ok with that. Sans tries to reciprocate but since Grillby doesn’t have a pelvis, they settle for something else, some grinding happens after Grillby gives Sans some sex ed (hah!). The aftermath leaves Sans a little burnt out in the ol’ pelvic region. Sans thinks he might have hurt Grillby with certain fluids, which Grillby finds hilarious because it’s just magic. Then they sleep, because it was a Big Day.

Kiss Marks

Chapter Summary

Grillby goes about his regular schedule while Sans stays upstairs. Working without making a scene would've been a great plan, if Sans had been cooperating and not sending innocently-taken pictures to fluster the bartender in front of everyone. Sans has back issues.

Grillby shifted slightly when his alarm went off. Having such a horrible sleeping schedule afforded him no real rest, but this time was different. His mind felt satiated, calm, every part of him flickering back to life as the dregs of sleep were slowly burned away.

The alarm continued to beep at him until he realised that Sans was still sleeping atop of him, arms lightly encircling his shoulders and up around the flames of his head. He looked peaceful, resting like that. His weight was negligible as always, yet he seemed… a little heavier, which he noted was strange.

Grillby chalked it up to still being under sleep’s sweet spell and rubbed at the other’s back to try and wake him.

“...ans,” he mumbled, his other hand going to his nightstand to stop the incessant beeping. He wasn’t met with a reply so he grabbed his glasses as well. Once they were upon his face, the fire monster shifted so he could look down with more clarity.

He was being drooled on; not a lot, but enough to make his flames hike up slightly in rebuke. How dare such a magic twist them away while they slept? Smirking to himself, the fire monster caressed the side of Sans’ cervical vertebrae along the singe marks there.

The other shifted a little against him with a deep sigh and turned his face inwards against his body, as though he couldn’t possibly get warm. Grillby knew that couldn’t be the case, but it warmed his soul that even in his sleep Sans wanted to be close to him.

“...Need to clean the restaurant...” he tried again, his voice gentle. He really didn’t want to wake Sans, his core fluttering with adoration of the skeleton’s sleeping state. “Rise... and shine.”

A groan of protest came from Sans, but he shifted only the bare minimum required to allow Grillby to get up. Sans still had half his leg straddling Grillby’s and slumped back over with a subtle shiver.

“...cold,” came the muted mumble into the mattress.

“You can stay in bed.” Grillby passed his hand down Sans’ spine from the back of his neck and bent down to give him a kiss. “Sleep in. Lucky.”

“mm,” the skeleton groggily agreed, automatically leaning towards Grillby’s heat. The fire monster smiled tenderly and deposited another kiss against the other’s brow and got out of bed to change into some fresh clothes.

When he was finished buttoning his cuffs and adjusting his bow tie in the mirror, Grillby looked back to see Sans curled inwards on himself. There was a subtle rattle, yet he didn’t look distressed.
Curious, the fire monster made his way back to the bed and sat on its side to pass his hand back over the other’s neck.

The rattling stopped and Sans’ grin tugged a little in his slumber. He nodded off again with a soft sigh and Grillby understood. Perhaps with his constant heat, Sans was getting used to him?

He brightened considerably at that. The better part of nine hours was a long time for any monster to lay huddled up next to him, let alone directly on top of him. The shift in temperature, even if he didn’t understand it, must be different.

Having little use for them yet going along with the ‘aesthetics’ like his mother had lectured him on growing up, Grillby kept suitable bed dressings stashed away even though he didn’t use any apart from a flat sheet. They were from Hotland so they stood up to the test of time and flame, very easily trapping heat into the fibres and keeping it there without burning to a crisp.

He heated the cloth against his body for a moment, watching his flames dutifully race down around the gaudy paisley pattern his mother chose before recalling his fire. He didn’t want another unintended misstep with an errant flame. Once everyone had returned to his body, Grillby draped the sheet over Sans, whose bones had begun rattling again.

“toasty…” the skeleton sighed contentedly, sending a pulse of gratitude through every flame of Grillby’s body. His soul did a happy little jump in his chest as he couldn’t help but bend over again to give one more kiss.

It was going to be a long day.

He gathered their soiled clothes and decided that while Sans slept, it would be best to have them cleaned while he worked. Grillby had an arrangement with the shop bunnies just down the way. For a few family meals a week, Bonnie would launder his clothes and any barcloths, towels and the like that he needed cleaned. It was all very civil and benefited both parties greatly. Plus, Grillby didn’t have to fight his phobia with water; it was bad enough he had to stand the snow.

He had a feeling that Sans would likely sleep in until late, so Grillby made his way downstairs with the bundle of dirty clothes and donned his gloves so he wouldn’t harm his neighbour. Thankfully Bonnie was awake and still setting up, her door unlocked to allow anyone to enter.

“Oh! Well hello there, dear! Good morning,” she greeted as she moved a tray of fresh cinnabuns into the glass display case.

“....Morning.” It had taken a while for Grillby to get over his shyness for speaking with others in town. Normally one-on-one was fine, although it was with very few. Sans was the only one he felt comfortable enough to break out of using sign language to communicate without hesitancy.

“Laundry?” she croaked out through a yawn, gesturing for him to come near.

“....Apologies. There is more than usual. And a… great deal more filthy.”

“Really, dear! That’s more than fine!” she replied candidly, gesturing more insistently for the clothes to be handed over. The bunny stopped when she was given the pile. Grillby had attempted a little sheepishly to cover Sans’ iconic hoodie with his own clothes and felt a race of heat flood his face when her buck-toothed smile broadened suddenly. “My! He got you too, eh? I swear, that boy’s gettin’ more rambunctious every day that passes.”

Grillby tried to settle his flames and keep his hands at his sides in order to not betray his confusion. Bonnie took that as permission to continue as she habitually searched the pockets for anything that
would be lost in the wash.

"‘Tween those wacky brothers launching constructs into random buildings durin’ their little skirmishes, I was wonderin’ when he’d start trolling people to tussle!"

If Grillby wasn’t sure what she had been hinting at before, it was a lot clearer now. He felt a peculiar shudder through his body as she continued the conversation.

“Kale is like that too! Even arguin’ with me `bout wearin’ stripes anymore,” she took that moment to sigh, “Wearin’ me out.”

“Sorry… to hear that. You may misunderstand. Sans… is not a child?” Grillby felt himself bristle at the implication, but he knew it in his entire being that was true, at least.

She paused while fishing something out of Sans’ hoodie: a couple packets of ketchup, a wadded up napkin and a cell phone. She set it all on the countertop for the fire monster to retrieve.

She scoffed kindly at his tone, “Seems unlikely. When they just showed up, the older one… Papyrus? He’s quite overbearin’. I just assumed,” she shrugged as though it didn’t matter much to her and Grillby felt a flare up of his own in irritation. “With how he’s actin’ nowadays… runnin’ around, causin’ a ruckus. Making messes! …Well, more than usual. Wonder if that avalanche the other day had anything to do with `im?”

Grillby stayed quiet to quell the unsettling feeling in the pit of his fiery core, unable to meet her gaze.

“Well, it’s pure conjecture. With very little supporting evidence.” His tone was a lot more scathing than he’d intended it to be. He decided to calm himself a little more and exhaled hotly, sending a plume of smoke into the air. “My… apologies. I’m unsure why I felt offense.”

“Probably because he’s your little boyfriend,” she teased with a wink, checking the last pair of pockets on his trousers. She giggled to herself and pulled out a few coins and slid them across the counter. “How many dates, so far?”

Grillby flushed in surprise, silently faltering for a reply. His flames took care to make him appear relaxed and unmoved. Why was everything this lady said riling him up to be so defensive?

Oh… yes. It was because he was becoming possessive of Sans, wasn’t it? Drawing in a deep breath, the fire monster gestured a little awkwardly, ‘Three dates.’

She whistled lowly. “Three dates in one month is not a lot!” she warned, but her posture eased somewhat. “And I’ve gone and made you uncomfortable again, haven’t I?”

He shook his head and crossed his hands automatically as if to say ‘not at all’.

“Look at you! You sweet thing, I’m so terribly sorry. Here, I know you’re not one for sweets, but bring this to that silly pile of bones. He’s grown attached to them,” Bonnie added apologetically as she bagged up a couple of cinnabuns to go. “Don’t tell `im I said such a thing. I shouldn’t’a said that, before. I’m sorry!”

Grillby carefully took the bag and left her to it, feeling his core flare up with confusion and mild anger at her assumption. He decided it was for the best that he go, so he waved farewell and left to go back to his restaurant.

After he had gone back upstairs to put Sans’ cell phone and the treats on the nightstand by the bed, the fire monster went back down to clean the restaurant. The morning was spent recovering dirty
dishes and glasses and putting them in the kitchen to be cleaned later, then wiping down all the surfaces and adjusting the chairs. He did so mindlessly as the shop bunny’s words repeated in his mind like a scratched record.

She thought Sans was younger than Papyrus, and evidently that he was a child?

Why?

Sans was obviously the older one of the brothers. It was very clear to him that while Bonnie had a knack for gossiping, this was somewhat out of line. To infer that… He shook his head. No, he couldn’t allow it to bother him.

It’s simply not how things were at all!

He had finished setting up when the regulars started to trickle in. It had to have been colder outside than usual, if the cloud of mist wafting from the door was anything to go by. Grillby smiled warmly at Red Bird and Fisher who took their usual places and made small talk with him until they were ready to order.

The late morning dragged on into the afternoon. That was when Grillby heard his cell phone ding from behind the bar. He waited until he had a free moment, the floor now ahum with the sounds of at least twelve conversations. He peeked at the message briefly, his flames kindling a little brightly with affection. The messages were from Sans.

Funny Bone (Last message received 1:12pm);
- hey so quick q
- u didnt steal my clothes did u
- i mean
- who else coulda but u never know
- guess im stuck up here
- u dog

* My apologies. They were quite soiled so I took them with my own to the shopkeep to be laundered.

* You are permitted to ransack my wardrobe if you’d like to come down for something to eat.

…

- o no
- o no all u got is all this fancy garb
- i cant wear this stuff
- 2 fancy 4 me

* I think you’d look quite charming!

- i cant believe u stole my clothes
- all under pretence of """"dirty"""
- ur mind is dirty i cant believe u
- speakin of

Grillby smirked at himself at Sans’ perceived chagrin. It was true, he really did think Sans would
look… handsome in formal attire. Briefly, he scanned the floor to make sure no one was flagging him down and leaned against the back counter by the register while he awaited Sans’ continuation.

It took a great deal longer than he thought. He heard a loud scuff from upstairs and his blaze brightened a little at Red’s suspicious glance ceilingward. Grillby didn’t address the look his way with a response. He set his cell phone down once more when he saw a pair of hands fly up from the Dogi’s table, who had just seated and let their weapons clang to the floor in an unceremonious heap.

Grillby heard his phone chime a couple more times while he was serving customers and nearly forgot about the messages when he was bringing an order out for Fisher. Red appeared preoccupied by the noises above and the bartender attempted to hide his embarrassment as discreetly as he could.

“Someone upstairs, Grills?” the bird inquired finally as the fire monster passed him, causing a few of the bartender’s flames to hike up suddenly. “Very interesin’.”

Grillby threw a look over his shoulder, then merely shrugged. It was none of their business, but that didn’t keep him from grinning like a teenager with the other’s good-natured laugh. The bartender wheeled towards the kitchen, blushing furiously as he got the next order started, all the while smirking to himself.

Damn Red, he was always so perceptive. Hopefully he wasn’t insinuating more… salacious activities had taken place the previous night. Grillby found himself blushing a little more, the heat pouring off him in waves as he lingered on that thought… of Sans gasping under his touch, soft moans that grew more urgent and louder, accompanying his curious, luscious gaze… Maybe he’d show him the ways of making love, sharing hot kisses between them, their bodies rocking against each other, magic mingling…

Grillby started with the scent of something burning and quickly rushed to the fryer to lift the ruined potatoes out of the oil with a grimace. He had allowed his heat to amass so much it had affected his precise cooking.

Perhaps Sans was right, calling him a pervert, even if he had been joking at the time. Tossing the fries into the trash, the bartender smoothed his hand through the flames of his head with a harsh exhale. He tutted to himself in disappointment.

He had to calm down.

Thankfully, staring down the frying oil as the next batch of fries cooked grounded him from conjuring up any more debauched imagery. Once they were done, Grillby basketed them and brought them out for their intended customer and apologised for the delay with a few flustered gestures. He grimaced again and returned to the back of the bar to check his cell phone once more.

There was a photo attached to this text. Briefly rolling his eyes, Grillby opened it, only for his flames to spark wildly at the image. A loud spray of crackling embers poured off of him in a spiralled curve like fireworks, the reflections off the backsplash of the bar echoing how bright he’d turned.

Funny Bone (Last message received 1:42pm);
- ok this might b the reason y it took me so long 2 get outta bed
- also y im makin noise
- blamin u 4 this k
[2395.jpg]
God damn you, Sans! was all Grillby could think with the loud echo of laughter around him. His face was burning several degrees hotter as he stared down at his phone and the innocently sent yet provocative photo attached.

Of… Sans’ hip box.

His pelvic girdle.

Ischium.

Just… covered in his burn marks.

His bony hand had lifted the tail ends of his borrowed shirt, teasing the view for more. Evidence of their intimacy had long dispelled but the burn marks remained. Grillby’s heat shot up higher to the point where one of the bottles next to him shattered from the pressure and he flinched, dodging the spray of alcohol that would have made a larger fire than he was - and put his guests in danger.

Said patronage were staring at him akin to awe and even amusement. Red Bird was doubled over the counter and laughing like it was the most hilarious sight in the world and soon several others joined in. Grillby reigned in his fire sheepishly, whispering to his flames to stop acting out.

They were… They were only bones, he tried to convince himself.

But… they were also Sans.

His phone chimed again and he was hesitant to check, but another set of chimes joined them and Grillby tried not to look as embarrassed as he felt.

Funny Bone (Last message received 1:47pm);

- aw man
- did i miss a funny joke
- that was a great lol ngl

* Sans.

(He didn’t know why he sent that.)

Funny Bone (Last message received 1:51pm);

- oh wait u know im ok
- just bones remember
- i mean im just stiff from
- well
- heh

Grillby covered his face with one hand, unsuccessfully attempting to cover the ethereal glow his body was giving off, betraying his embarrassment.

“Hey, Grills? Gettin’ kinda… toasty in `ere,” Red commented after recovering from his laughing fit. Fisher was still giggling to himself but had backed off a little from Grillby’s heated perimeter. “Y’might wanna calm down.”
Grillby nodded hesitantly and scanned over the bar, his posture stiffening noticeably when he saw everyone’s heads turned his way. His hands shook but he pocketed his phone and gestured a little nervously.

‘Breaktime.’

A few snickers chased him back into the kitchen and Grillby glared up at the ceiling once he closed the door behind him. He drew in a few calming breaths and took his phone back out to text Sans.

Funny Bone (Last message received 2:02pm);

* Sans, you may not realise this but that was a rather compromising photo you just sent me.
- oh man
- u sure
- they literally just bones gb
- i mean look
[2396.jpg]

A twitch passed through Grillby’s flames at the photo of Sans’ rib cage, eliciting more unwarranted thoughts.

Funny Bone (Last message received 2:06pm);

- @ these prime ribs
[2397.jpg]

* Sans.

(Again, why did he send that?? He was just feeding the impish little skeleton at this rate!)

Grillby bit the side of his mouth with his fangs, feeling unnaturally hot. The next photo showed a clear view of Sans’ cervical vertebrae, just cutting off the other’s permanent grin out of view. The bones were littered with fiery kiss marks and soot, clear indicators of Grillby’s affections. He flushed and pushed his back against the door.

Calm down, he thought, sending the plea through to his flames. They stuttered briefly in their excitement and even started chattering amongst themselves.


Trying not to let the chorus get to him, the bartender inhaled a few more deep breaths. Generally it was enough for his heat to subside, as long as he didn’t give in to their reasoning. He grinned a little to himself as a mischievous thought entered his mind and Grillby tugged off his apron, unbuttoned his vest and tugged up his shirt tails from his trousers.

It was very much like he was a teenager again, but the skeleton had to learn how this went, didn’t he? He was smirking to himself as he forced his flames to calm from their exuberant cheering and he lowered his light enough to focus the camera on his phone. Hooking his thumb into his trousers to pull them down a little for a teasing view of his abdomen, he quickly snapped a photo and sent it to Sans - then immediately put himself right again.

He only regretted not being able to see Sans’ reaction. A few minutes passed when he thought he was safe enough to check himself over and once everything was in its usual place, Grillby grabbed a
few rags to clean up the mess behind the bar when his phone finally chimed.

It was almost difficult to gather the courage to look again.

Alright.

Perhaps once more before he took food up, since Sans was unwilling to come downstairs.

Perhaps this was for the best after all.

Funny Bone (Last message received 2:16pm);

- o
- o damn
- what
- im confused

* I thought I was clear.
* Do you understand now?

- uh

* What’s the matter, Sans? It’s only fire.

- jeez
- wow
- hi new phone bg

* Don’t you dare!
* At any rate, “only bones”?

- ok maybe i understand
- uh
- wow wow
- u
- how r u so fkin hot

* What happened here? I thought you were aware, with my being fire and all.

- im experiencin meltdown sry
- yowza

* Careful. My boyfriend is a very aggressive fellow and won’t tolerate any highfalutin flattery.

- heh
- u mean bonefriend
- wait no that means ur the boyflame
- or uh
- hm sry
- im still processin that pic

* You mean downloading it, not processing it, don’t you?

- maybe

* Perhaps you’ll save it for a private moment of enjoyment?
- phew
- u said it
- guess u can keep the pix 2

* You “guess”?*

- u keep askin shit idk man
- u tell me
- its my 1st time b gentle ok

* Now it’s my turn to say “phew”!*

- heh perv
- but i guess where i was goin w/ this was
- ur slacks wont fit me
- u got legs 4 days
- id prolly break my leg fallin down the stairs
- also m feelin tender atm

* Don’t you mean well-done?*

- man i just woke up i cant believe u
- steal my clothes
- sent me this hq porn
- steal my jokes

* Clearly we’re a bad influence on each other.*

- srsly

When Grillby exited the kitchen, the patronage were still snickering to themselves. His grin was a little sheepish as he stooped to clean up the spilled alcohol and glass, while Red swivelled on his stool, watching and making sneaky comments. Grillby ignored him.

The rest of the day was filled with subtle and unsubtle teases about his earlier flare-up, but it was all in good jest. Grillby didn’t comment on it but received a few congratulatory ‘air’ handshakes, as no one dared to touch him even with his gloves on. Soon there was a bit of a reprieve, so the bartender set about bringing up a burger and fries up to Sans. The skeleton was still wearing the borrowed shirt from the previous night, curled up in bed and scrolling on his phone.

When the scent of food entered the room, the skeleton sat upright with a grin. Grillby dismissed the few debauched thoughts that entered his head from the previous night as Sans suddenly stopped and gingerly held the back of his lower spine with a grimace.

“...Better?”

Sans gave him a suspicious grin as the bartender pulled the chair out from his desk and gestured for him to sit. It seemed like a laborious process, although Grillby wasn’t sure if the skeleton was simply hamming it up, or if he really was in pain.

He decided to ask, just to be sure.
“oh,” Sans said softly, then flushed. Grillby smiled tenderly at the display as the other sunk onto the chair. “a disc must’ve slipped.”

“We... You were very active yesterday,” the fire monster deduced softly as he placed the plate of food down on the desk. His flames jumped excitedly at the memory and with how smug Sans looked. “Will you be alright?”

“Yeah. it’ll settle itself. or when pap gets back, i’ll have `im pop it back in.”

“Could give it a go,” the bartender offered kindly.

“wha-”

“...Wouldn’t mind assisting you,” Grillby found himself saying. When Sans’ magic flooded his face and he couldn’t look up again, suddenly the bartender grew unsure. “That is... if you would accept.”

“maybe, uh...” Sans didn’t seem like he was certain, himself. “after.”

“It’s fine.” Grillby dropped a kiss against the other’s skull and felt Sans relax. “Do you need anything...?” Anything at all, the fire monster added in his thoughts.

“nah.” Sans was smiling absently as he brought a couple of fries up to his mouth and chomped down while his other played with one of the shirt tails on his lap. “tastes good,” he mumbled softly.

A relieved grin spread across the fire monster’s vague features. Finally, nearly two weeks after the dreaded rebound, Sans had recovered enough to be considered ‘normal’. Grillby laughed quietly and pressed another kiss to his skull, leaving a slight smudge on the bone.

“.........Good job.”

Sans chuckled to himself as he eagerly stuffed more fries into his mouth as though he hadn’t eaten in weeks. Grillby took a glance to the nightstand to see that one of the cinnabuns were gone - perhaps it was enough to give the skeleton the strength he needed?

His core warmed considerably at that and he gave his boyfriend a pat on the shoulder before heading back downstairs. The silent gratitude in Sans’ gaze was enough to carry him throughout the rest of the working day.

He hadn’t received anymore texts from Sans until closer to the end of his shift, asking where his clothes were. They had interrupted some very peculiar thoughts - Grillby drawing connections between his aggression and magical buildup during his recovery period and what the shopkeeper bunny had told him.

Grillby leaned against the bar to wait for Punk’s story to end - it was always a little long-winded, but he made a show of listening even though he’d heard the story several times over the years. He was only half-paying attention as he wiped down the counters and even thought back to when Sans first confessed his feelings. He went as far as to turn his back to the customer as they prattled on and stared at the echo blossom suspended in water under the rows of bottled spirits.

The fluttering feeling returned to his soul despite going over all the hardships he and Sans had endured in such a short amount of time. They’d grown very close. Even dated, something he didn’t suspect the skeleton had any interest in before. He supposed everything was a little intimidating previously.
And then, last night…

Grillby snapped back to the present when Punk knocked on the countertop to gain his attention; several other customers that lingered were watching the exchange. Composing himself, the fire monster turned and realised that Bonnie had come back with their freshly laundered clothes and was grinning at him expectantly. Everyone else had stayed behind to see when, or if, Sans would come downstairs from hiding. Grillby could’ve sworn he felt everyone lean closer in anticipation.

Smiling back shyly, the fire monster took her order and went back to cook it to go. It was a lot of food for such a trade, but he was grateful for the favour. He doubted Sans’ favourite hoodie would survive his usual cleaning methods, after all.

Soon after he’d packed up three bags of freshly grilled battered mushrooms and waffle-cut fries, the fire monster exchanged them for the clothes and wordlessly nodded his head in thanks.

His cell phone had chimed a few times during the exchange, but now it was ringing. Frowning behind his fire, Grillby pardoned himself to answer it. Out of habit, he crackled into the phone line in Hotland dialect, thinking it would be family.

He wasn’t sure why he’d done that, when Sans’ puzzled voice answered, “uh… grillbz?”

The fire monster stiffened slightly but had to smile. Of course. Why had he thought otherwise? Likely because every time he had attempted to call the skeleton, it was met with an infuriatingly full voicemail.

“…Good timing,” he muttered quietly into the phone. “Your vestments have arrived.”

“vestments. psh.” There was a pause as though Sans was hesitating. Grillby patiently waited while Bonnie gave him a curious look from across the counter, one of her long ears dropping off to the side as though attempting to eavesdrop. “hey, uh… `bout that offer. are you… busy?”

“Not… busy, no,” Grillby awkwardly replied.

“sup?”

“…Being watched.”

“come up. i think the disc really, uh… slipped.” Sans laughed wryly. “i tried the first stair and have instant regrets.”

“…Didn’t fall, did you?” Silence from the other line, but then a chuckle. Grillby relaxed a little when the other laughed outright. “You know what I mean.”

“man. whatever. nah, i didn’t trip, or slip, or take a hilarious tumble down the stairs. this’s kinda embarrassin’ though.”

“I understand.”

“i mean… is red there? can he watch the bar while you’re up here? i swear. like… not even ten minutes.”

Grillby considered it, even gave said bird a nudge with a coaster to rouse him. Of course, no one would actually help themselves to the alcohol, but it would be nice to have customers on their way if they wanted to pay, instead of having them wait. Red threw up a pinion in agreement with his silent request and the fire monster kept Sans on the line while he rounded the bar with their laundered
He felt every gaze on him.

“you seemed kinda curt on the phone,” Sans said from the top of the stairs as Grillby entered the kitchen. The fire monster ventured through and looked up the stairs; Sans had resorted to sitting on the floor, phone raised to the side of his skull. His voice carried through the line enough for him to hear clearly and Grillby’s demeanour crackled briefly. “you ok?”

“Quite. You missed a brief stint of japery at my expense,” Grillby replied as he mounted the staircase. His tone had a bit of chagrin to it, but he was grinning nonetheless. “Our neighbours appear anxious to see you.”

The bartender saw Sans grimace as he drew nearer and he flipped his phone shut to end the call.

“wow. hangin’ up without sayin’ bye’s real rude of you, g,” Sans teased, grinning up at him as he ended his own connection. “i’m crushed.”

“Very amusing. I know you’re… stalling.”

Sans shrugged, rolling his shoulder while hiding a grimace. He tugged one side of the shirt he wore over his arm, the sleeves too large even though he had attempted to push them up to his elbows. “just gimme my shorts, ya dingus. i’m sans underwear, y’know.”

Grinning, the fire monster tossed his shorts at him and watched as Sans tugged them on, using the first step as leverage. His hand had been swatted away when Grillby offered to help him up, yet he knew not to take offense to it.

Instead, he watched in veiled confusion when Sans lay down on the floor, stretching out his back with his arms above his head as though to straighten his spine. Grillby paused, unsure what to make of the clicking noises.

“mind outta the gutter,” the skeleton muttered under his breath. He had closed his eye sockets and scooted up away from the ledge of the staircase and gestured to his shorts. “you’re gonna have to pin me down.”

Grillby sputtered through fire, his words inaudible as it mingled with his element. He didn’t move.

“ok, sure. y’say that, but if you don’t, i’m gonna end up kickin’ you like a donkey,” the skeleton grumbled as he moved a hand down and lifted up the shirt, exposing his spine for the bartender to see. Grillby felt the air around him sizzle through his flustered demeanour, hoping Sans wouldn’t take offense. “you should be able to see it, actually. i’d do it myself but, uh… it kinda hurts.”

“Hurts..?” Grillby was growing less sure of this idea for every moment that passed. And it was his own damn fault that he had offered, too.

“yeah,” Sans’ tone was a little remorseful, “saddle up, firecracker.” He patted the crest of his hip box with a mildly embarrassed chuckle.

Grillby was unsure why he didn’t put up a better argument - or one at all, in fact. His flames still cheered at him to make Sans pay for his earlier prank, but this was neither the time nor the place. He was flushed as he peered down his glasses at the skeleton below him, his knees touching the floorboards at either side of his hips as he kept the other pinned down.
He stayed quiet when Sans moved his shoulder a little, as though trying to shrug off the uncomfortable situation. “you should, uh… see a bone jutting out, near the bottom of the column.”

The fire monster did, keeping one of his hands poised near his vest and the other outreached in hesitancy. He drew in a deep breath, looking to the other’s face for further instruction. Sans’ sockets remained closed and his breaths were a little quick.

“You appear… nervous.”

“shut up. m’not thinkin’ like that.”

“Neither am I,” the fire monster’s voice snapped subtly, while Sans peeked from his left socket with a crooked grin. Grillby’s gaze settled on a ridge that seemed out of place amongst the rest. It was difficult to describe, its appearance not unlike a stack of malaligned pancakes. “I see it.”

Sans inhaled sharply when the fire monster leaned forward to touch the offending bone and Grillby stopped, eyes searching the other’s face warily.

“m’fine. just startled me.”

“I will… attempt to be careful.”

“you won’t break it, if that’s what’s goin’ through that pretty head of yours,” Sans muttered uneasily. His gaze veered off to the side with Grillby’s attempt at a chuckle and he hissed softly when the fire monster laid both hands on him, thumbs bracing the jutted bone in preparation. “just… push it in hard.”

The skeleton scoffed and even laughed with Grillby’s sudden flush and shook his skull. “naw, grillbz. c’mon, i mean it. just give it a good pop. it’ll click, but y’gotta be quic-AAGH!!!”

Grillby had leaned forward to put what little weight he had behind the push, taking care not to misalign anything as he felt and heard a sickening clack. Sans’ body had hunched up slightly and he kicked behind him hard with a strangled curse. His phalanges scored the floorboards at his side and tears pricked at his sockets as a low keening noise left him, stifled between clenched teeth.

And it had been quick. Sans lay gasping on the floor as Grillby gave the spot a gentle pat and hummed quietly, feeling something akin to regret.

“that fuckin’ hurt,” the skeleton groaned, force behind his words, “god, thanks.” His rib cage rose and fell unevenly and the fire monster pulled the shirt back over the view a little shyly.

“Perhaps… your brother should have done that.”

“m’pretty sure i’d have to explain a lot more than just a slipped disc to him if he did,” Sans reasoned a little wryly, his brow arching sardonically. Grillby gave him a playful shove as he got back up to his feet. “gimme the shirt now.”

“Please,” the fire monster added for him with a wink. “You should keep it.”

Sans stared up at the fire monster, astonished. Grillby’s grin grew a little more and he giggled quietly to himself. “oh man.” His face flushed, although
Grillby wasn’t entirely sure why; this is what monsters did to show affection, of sorts. He enjoyed the reaction he received and could barely hold his composure.

“Keep it. I stole your jokes, after all.”

Sans was grinning to himself yet managed to stay quiet as he got to his feet. Once his old grey t-shirt exchanged hands, he pulled it over his skull and Grillby couldn’t hold back a laugh at the ludicrous display.

“Looks... interesting.”

Sans scoffed, “you know you love it.”

A stutter of amber fluttered through the fire monster’s body at the four-letter word as he held out the other’s hoodie for him. He merely hummed in agreement, when suddenly Sans appeared to realise what he had said. Grinning shyly, the skeleton wrestled the jacket over his shoulders, his magic flickering in a bright pulse under his clothes.

“flirt,” he murmured more to himself than to the fire monster, who kept silent but whose demeanour brightened a little more. “maybe i’ll dig through my collection for somethin’,” he decided a little indecisively as he struggled with his zipper.

Sans’ hands were shaking, so Grillby took it upon himself to take hold of each one in his own and lean in close. Waves of nervousness poured off the skeleton but seemed to cede with the brief pass of Grillby’s hand over his sternum, his soul giving forth the subtle flicker again as he grinned wider.

“ok. maybe i’ll make an effort. just for you.”

“Looking forward to it,” the fire monster said softly as he traced over the hidden bone beneath his hand, then helped Sans to zip up his hoodie. It left the other considerably more flustered than before and the bartender couldn’t help but lean in closer to steal a kiss.

Grillby was the first to exit when they finally went downstairs. He gathered a broom and dustpan so his extended absence wouldn’t be noted too much, while Sans lingered near the door.

It seemed as though everyone was expecting him to go do the walk of shame - shame being only that hoots and laughter would accompany his nonchalant walk from Grillby’s private apartment. Looking into the reflective surface of a rather large pot, Sans rubbed the smudges from his face and around his jawline, flushing as he realised just how much Grillby had marked him that previous evening.

When the evidence was more or less cleared away, Sans took a deep breath, exhaled, then exited. Every head turned towards him and the skeleton felt his face flush with magic as he attempted to remain collected and act as though nothing worth noting had gone on upstairs.

Grillby was sweeping up some glass from behind the counter, his flames hiked up a little more than usual to hide his grin when Sans took a brief glance over to check. A few of the monsters Sans had been sizing up the previous day looked at him warily but Sans shrugged their looks away, whistling as he sauntered across the floor.

“jeez, it’s like it’s some kinda crime to spend time with the boyflame,” he feigned resignation, much to a few patron’s urging snickers. Feeling a little bolder as he turned to face them all, his eye lights settled on the bartender, still sweeping and minding his own business. “hey, grillby!”
The bartender’s posture shot up straight with a sudden plume of flames and Sans couldn’t help but laugh at the reaction - it looked like saying his full name had some kind of effect on the fire monster. It was funny, endearing, and Sans planned to use it to his advantage. The bartender was flushed, his flames rolling off him in a stuttering surge as flecks of amber and white rolled through his body expectantly.

“thanks for the date,” the skeleton finished off with a wink. Grillby remained silent but his grip tightened against the broom handle so much it creaked in his grasp, flustered and grinning despite himself as Sans turned away to leave.

The resulting mirth was infectious and the skeleton chuckled to himself as he heard it down the street.
Phone Calls

Chapter Summary

Papyrus, lonely and worrying after the disappearance of his friend, calls Sans from the CORE. Sans journeys through Waterfall solo, reminiscing on his and Grillby’s time through it. Some flowers make him uneasy.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings; panic attack

See the end of the chapter for more notes

“heya. you’ve reached a skeleman’s voicemail. if you need to ring, you know to do the thing.”

“ARGH!!! SANS, YOU AND I BOTH VERY WELL KNOW THAT IS NOT YOUR USUAL VOICEMAIL MESSAGE AND YOU’RE TOO LAZY TO CHANGE IT!”

Sans slid down the expanse of the couch, barely containing his snicker.

“beep.”

“AND DON’T JUST SAY ‘BEEP’ LIKE YOU’RE ACTUALLY AN AUTOMATON RECORDING! THAT’S JUST SILLY - AND CRUEL TO ALL FABULOUS ROBOTS EVERYWHERE!”

Sans’ chuckles breached on the threat of being heard and he covered the mouthpiece of his phone as he hiked his legs over the back of the couch. It wasn’t exactly comfortable, but he found he couldn’t nap as much as he used to now that his energy levels were bolstered. Any kind of movement helped relieve him of excess energy, so flipping around on the couch it was. He was in a particular mood - free, easy, not burdened by anxiety… it was a nice change of pace.

Happy, even.

“we’re sorry. please try again-”

“SANS, YOU’RE NOT EVEN BOTHERING TO CHANGE YOUR VOICE PITCH? HOW DID YOU THINK THIS WAS A GOOD PRANK??”

“aww. i knew you’d be too cool to fall for that one.”

“YES, SEVENTEEN TIMES IN THE PAST WEEK HARDLY HAD ANYTHING TO DO WITH IT. IT WAS ALL MY GRAND COOLNESS, MY GREAT APTITUDE THAT ALLOWED YOU TO JAPE ME ALL THESE TIMES!”
“it was a prank, but whatever. sup, bro?” Sans chuckled to himself as he eased into the crease of the couch cushions and tilted his skull back to view the television - albeit at an upside down angle. “how’s hotland?”

“You KNOW VERY WELL HOW I TAKE TO WARMER CLIMATES!! ALSO I TOLD YOU, I’M AT THE CORE!!”

“never heard of it.”

Papyrus sounded like he was trying very hard not to break his own phone in half and held back a yell of frustration with very little success. “WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS!?”

Sans idly picked at his nasal cavity, his grin broadening, “like what? what’s gotten under your skin lately?”

“WE. DON’T. HAVE. SKIN.”

“pity.”

“I KNOW!! AND NOTHING HAS, NOR EVER WILL BE THERE!!”

“ok. i know you’re tryin’ to get to the leather of me here, but i’m kinda busy.”

“LEATHER?” Papyrus echoed, then his voice went shrill, “LEATHER!?”

Sans’ chuckles became wheezy and he covered his teeth, unable to hold back a full-out guffaw.

“WAIT! HOW ARE YOU BUSY? YOU HAVE TIME OFF! ARE YOU FINALLY FIXING YOUR BEDROOM? CLEANING UP YOUR LAB? SHOVELLING THE PATH TO THE PORCH? RECALIBRATING YOUR PUZZLES??”

“all very valid points there, pap. but naw, i’ve been-” Sans stopped and realised what his brother had done a little late. “wow. sneaky.”

“You’VE BEEN SNEAKY? HOW IS THIS NEW?”

“you totally dodged my question,” the older brother grumbled in feigned agitation, “how’re you?”

“Oh.” A pause. “GREAT..? I SUPPOSE? IT’S HOT.”

“yeah, i got that. what else.”

“I AM..?” Sans waited; he could always wait. “PROMISE YOU WON’T BE MAD?”

“papyrus…” Sans muttered a little quietly in warning, “what’s up.”

“I JUST… HAVEN’T HEARD FROM MY FRIEND, ALRIGHT? I’M STARTING TO WORRY!”

“i got that-” He stopped. What friend?

“They usually pop up and surprise me sometimes. I suppose I’m… just feeling a little… lonely? Perhaps?”

Sans smiled a little sadly, a needling feeling starting to dig at him, “what, a cool guy like you?”
“I KNOW! I’M JUST AS PERPLEXED!” Papyrus didn’t sound entirely convinced, so Sans just sighed. “I KNOW I GET TO GO SOON, BUT…”

“i gotcha, pap. i’ll stop by for a noogie. we can come back together. i miss ya.”

“WELL. THAT… IS UNEXPECTED. I MEAN, HOW ARE YOU FEELING? SURELY-”

“bro, relax. i’m at a hundo-percent,” Sans interjected a little painfully at his brother’s concern. “wouldn’t offer if i knew i couldn’t.”

“WHO ARE YOU AND WHAT HAVE YOU DONE WITH SANS!!”

“har har. i’ll see you soon, bro. love ya.”

After the call ended, Sans wondered how to get to Hotland without having to use the ferry, nor trudge through Waterfall. Admittedly, he’d been avoiding the area altogether, and he no longer trusted the ferry thanks to the mishap on his and Grillby’s first date. He didn’t feel a shortcut would be a good idea, either, considering how it backfired the last time.

He had the energy to spare. He’d go through the marsh. It would give him time to think about this absent friend of Papyrus’. Besides, he had to give Alphys back her broken invention.

After Sans had gotten changed and pulled on his shoes, he made sure to take a few snacks with him and knot his laces extra tight. Going through alone would be a little quiet, but he wanted to make sure, in case if anything happened to him, that he would be intact.

That was a peculiar thought.

Huffing out a breath at the cavern leading into Waterfall, he made a quick pass over his pockets. Snacks, check. Phone, check. Money, yep. Broken regulator, got it. He exhaled.

Hopefully whatever that hallway was, he wouldn’t be drawn to it again.

The first hour through was silent, but there were more monsters around than on his way through with Grillby. Sans’ pace was leisurely yet cautious, his eye lights trained on the path ahead. Several vines choked the bridgeways and gaps between the glittering caverns and marshy pathways, barely in view for the muted light the area cast around him.

It was no wonder he had tripped. The skeleton reached the bridge where he’d made his embarrassing stumble and looked over the planks of slippery wood, everything gleaming with unnatural blackness. It barely stood out now without the fire monster’s ambient glow and Sans could feel a pinch in his rib cage at the absence.

He understood how difficult it was for Grillby now. With his health dipping, he knew the fiery pulses that made him suspicious were with good reason. Waterfall took a lot out of the bartender, it was a wonder how the fire monster didn’t just delay further and wait for the ferry. Sans was pretty sure the townsfolk wouldn’t have minded waiting if they knew how dangerous the journey had been.

Sans continued on his way, solitude and an ethereal coil of unease settling over him. Many times he looked up to the hidden expanse above as though expecting for something to be crawling up ahead. He heard nothing though, so he continued on his way, placidly solving his brother’s puzzles as he
went. It was more than likely that Papyrus had recalibrated them on his way through, if he didn’t take the ferry.

So who was this friend he was worrying about? Why was this the first time Sans was hearing about it? - No, that wasn’t quite right. Sans recalled an instance or two where Papyrus would refer to a friend for advice and guidance. Was this the same friend that taught Papyrus about skeletons?

Sans found himself going over that a few times; that was peculiar. Maybe he would ask about them.

He made faster progress than the trip through with Grillby - even at his slow pace, he was starting to rush a little. Waterfall had absorbed the feeling of dread and malaise the closer he got to the glowing reeds area. He could feel it twisting around his soul and tugging him closer, a peculiar sensation that bit at every fibre in his bones.

Sans resisted the urge to shudder through the dense thicket of tall grasses leading from the bridge to the main path, remembering the way the vegetation wilted when Grillby pushed through it. He grinned a little awkwardly at the whole embarrassing wilted; losing his leg was a pain to get back, but it led to him trusting Grillby a little more than he usually would have.

That was the first time he recognised ‘heat,’ he suddenly realised. Grinning a little more foolishly, Sans buried his hands into his pockets and hunched his shoulders against the humidity of the marsh with the thought. He couldn’t believe it took him so long to come to terms with his feelings; no wonder Papyrus had been so frustratingly adamant.

The walk past the point where a new shop had set up was a little more relaxing as Sans lingered on those thoughts. Of nostalgia, even if it had been only a little under two months since their trip through together. His easy stroll returned as a few monsters came out to greet him from the shadows and make small talk along the way before wishing him safe travels.

Then he was alone again. Occasionally Sans would look at his phone. A little over an hour had passed since he started his walk through the familiar marshland. It glowed as it always did, the dripping of water and the ponds sloshing against the pathways and bridges a constant reminder to its namesake.

It felt peaceful as it did all that time ago. He silently reprimanded himself for being so paranoid. Perhaps the grey door had been a fluke, a rift in the gridline that he had failed to connect to before. It had been his mental state, after all. With Grillby…

He flushed at the memory. That teasing bastard, Sans thought with a grin. He wasn’t blaming the fire monster for his own mistakes. Alphys warned him of how forward fire monsters tended to be - that is, much later.

Thoughts such as these were fleeting and he basked in them, a lightness to his soul as he followed the glowing marshes and familiar bright toadstools, echoing his magic’s flux. Everything was calm. Everything was peaceful. He had nothing to worry about.

Everything was fine - up until he reached the point where he and Papyrus had stopped to confess to echo flowers. Flushing at the thought and how silly it had all been, Sans stopped to listen.

‘Ans(ages?)er, and (much apprecia(ten thousand gold!!)ted, thank yo(you’re so much)u), ate three wh(swear upon the Delta Rune!)ole steaks, it wa(looking forward to it)s a great end(echo flowers(owers), so wide(and up), called (the ceiling), stars live(more than life?) each others (ers)
The corridor’s voices were clearer than usual, pieces of long-forgotten conversations echoing highly in the singsong whisper, back and forth. The passing conversation must’ve been fairly recent if it was this decipherable and nothing stood out as suspicious, so the skeleton continued on.

‘With(action, despite reference)er, aside fro(other than carelessness, skeletal (for which I deeply apologise) structure reinhibit)m the particulates and ignito(or, to preclude)n of the first py(grass is so unnatural? Why is it her(e on a magical level, the sun’s rays)e)lon in seismic activity, prolonged exposure to the magifield (something about existential crisis (we all know how that is, hahaha!) you’re late) as one precludes staminal usage apart from flux deposit, incite excess(though for some reasons(quarter of a hand of salt, and then what (at?))’

The reference to skeletons caught his attention and immediately Sans came to a halt. He froze as the coil of dread returned and he stared, sockets blown wide at the tall flowers shifting against the currents. The whispers back and forth made the sentences melt together like mud, only growing more and more incoherent the longer he stayed and listened.

Several of those strings sounded familiar, tugging at darker thoughts. He balled his hands in his pockets and stared between the flowers, his feet rooted to the spot as an old fear started to well up in him again.

‘Aging (though perfectly honest, what else(amazing, just absolutely) could there be accounted for) through the times, as long as it stilts in pla(exactly as planned, drawing upon reserves won’t be(although it could cause) a simple task (doubt he would live long anyway) such a trifling youth) all well(ells? Anchor infusion(ageless))-’

Much how one little phrase sent him reeling when uttered by his brother, Sans shrank back away from the echo flower pool. The words stung like electricity, repeating in his skull and amplifying every fear he had with little reason. His breaths stuttered as he fumbled away to escape, his body frozen and locking up at the joints.

He was directionless as he tried to flee, trapped in his reeling thoughts that both plagued and assaulted him. Sans tried to push away the bad memory, but it hit back harder; this time with more clarity, making him tremble as he stumbled over his feet to flee.

He was stuck in place, rooted by fear, his eye lights hollow in his sockets as his breaths echoed around him, being picked up by the field of flowers to be vaulted back at him. His voice was stuck on a silent scream with no anchor to ground him other than unfathomable panic.

"KISS MISS issho ni ai karade? Kon po WA daru anima shou--" The sudden jaunty tune of Alphys’ favourite cartoon was enough to shatter the altered reality that Sans’ panic had drawn him into. He reeled away from the echo flower pools as he stuffed his hand into his pocket to pull out his phone while the song continued to play jarringly against his senses.

He connected the call but found he couldn’t speak. His breaths came in shallow frightened pants with every footfall, aiming to put as much distance between himself that the terrible flowers that echoed the medical torture he endured as a child.

He didn’t want to remember. It was unimportant to, but it kept wheedling its way back to the forefront of his consciousness, tugging at old wounds and shame as though it was freshly sliced open.
“...ans? Is that you?” The voice grounded him and Sans focused on it, concentrated on the dulcet, low graveling tone of the bartender through the echoes around him. “Sans?”

Having calmed down a little more, the skeleton shook his skull and sighed, the breath gusting over the mouthpiece so much that it muffled his voice. “hey..?”

“Are you alright?” It was Grillby. What a time for a phone call. It’s like the guy knew Sans needed calming down. “You sound...” the bartender sounded concerned and insistent, something the skeleton appreciated at the back of his frazzled mind.

Sans inhaled, his breaths rattling alongside his bones. “i’m, uh...”

“...Can hear you rattling.”

“i just.. got a little startled. alphys changed my, uh… ringtone.”

“I know that isn’t true.”

“no, h-honest,” damn it, he mentally chastised himself for stammering, “it’s the opening theme to a show she likes and it’s, uh...”

“You’re either nervous or afraid. Where are you?”

“...really loud,” Sans finished pointlessly, ignoring the other’s concern for the moment as he looked around, every fibre of his being raising in unease with the echoes of his haggard breathing at the edge of the flowers’ petals.

Sans took another calming breath and shook his skull, forcing himself to look ahead as he walked a little more quickly away from the corridor. “waterfall.”

A sound of disgust from the other end of the call made Sans’ grin twitch slightly. “Dreadful.” There was a hint of remorse to the other’s tone alongside a sigh of resignation, as though Grillby knew Sans would dodge him despite his efforts. “Why make the journey, when the ferry is available?”

Sans shrugged to himself as he passed the pathway into the murk of the muddier part of the marsh, eye lights trained on the benign glow from afar of bioluminescent fungus and gnats along the more solid parts of the ground. He hummed to himself as though in consideration.

“m’kinda feelin’ frustrated, i guess,” he muttered a little truthfully, “thought the walk would clear my head, but...”

“Care for company..?” the fire monster offered.

“you got customers,” Sans replied evasively, his right hand wringing at the fabric in his pocket and around a few coins. “guess i gotta remember to come by to settle the ol’ tab, huh?”

There was a kind note to Grillby’s hum of agreement that made Sans flush, although he wasn’t sure why. The grounding of the other’s call had been a saving grace and the skeleton couldn’t help but grin to himself, the tension easing from his shoulders as he gradually stopped rattling.

“So why’d you call?”

Grillby didn’t reply right away but Sans could hear his ambient flames crackle through the receiver. “Felt like... the right moment to do so.”

“spooky.”
“I didn’t think it that…” the fire monster replied; Sans could just picture the accompanying rolled shrug and grinned despite himself. “Perhaps, I… only wanted to hear your voice.”

“aww, what a sap,” the skeleton drawled goodnaturedly as he kicked a twig away from the main path. It splashed away somewhere insignificant as his soul gave a little flutter with the other’s quiet chuckle.

“if you were lookin’ for a meaningful conversation here, grillbz, i’ll have you know you’d be barkin’ up the wrong tree.”

“How so?”

“dunno. you kinda got me bouighs to the wall,” Sans chuckled quietly as he turned away from an eddying pool and gently rapped against a mushroom to light the area.

“That has never been my intention. Although you should know I am here for any sorts of mental disencumbrance, should you need t-” Grillby stopped, then very abruptly sighed. “Tree jokes.”

Sans snickered to himself, appreciative for the reason; for a moment there he thought that the fire monster hadn’t caught on. “ok, you’ve needled me. i guess i can go out on a limb and get a few things off my trunk-”

“The most invalid sentence, one has never before spoke!”

“I thought you liked my jokes,” the skeleton teased before scanning the area for the next path. It had been so long since he’d gone through this particular area that he had forgotten most of it - that and he was still working through a bit of his panic. “uh.”

“I will always listen if you are in need to… pine?”

Sans’ snickers broke into genuine laughter as Grillby’s fire popped through the phone line in a start. “oh man! i needed that.”

“Did you?”

Sans hummed after a calming moment, his voice laced with faint chuckles as he made it through the quiet trickling waterscape. “can i tell you somethin’?”

He expected Grillby to say yes as he always did, but Sans supposed there was still something in his soul that was apprehensive about being rejected even after he’d been proven otherwise. That’s why when Grillby agreed, Sans hesitated.

“a bit back… you could say i was in rough shape,” he started a little quietly, just a breath above a whisper as he passed a few mutedly glowing crystals. “uh, mentally, i guess. it kinda felt like things that were happenin’ weren’t supposed to, so i thought something was goin’ wrong.”

The skeleton wound around a corner of the maze with something of a frustrated sigh. “the more time that passed, the more i was convinced that… me bein’ happy wasn’t supposed to happen - and i get how that makes me sound, but honestly, it felt like every moment was a joke. that somethin’ else entirely was… i dunno. i even had a list, of sorts.”

“I do recall,” the fire monster replied somberly after a moment’s pause, “You’re… better now. Though I don’t know exactly how you mean things that may or may not be ’supposed’ to happen, it certainly was more than apparent that you were... down in spirits.”
“yeah,” Sans mumbled quietly, “things turned around. and, uh… what i guess i’m tryin’ to say is that… i don’t really feel like that anymore.”

“Taking what life gives you, instead of being spiteful?”

Sans laughed, surprised. “man, is that what it was?”

“I may have misphrased that-”

“nah, i think you nailed it,” Sans interrupted suddenly, an easy grin tugging at his teeth, “it’s `cause of you, i think.”

Grillby was silent in response, but the skeleton recognised the sound of the crisp crackle of fire in the background of the call as surprise. Sans grinned a little more, kicking another twig away as he strolled along.

“i mean it, firefly.”

There was something about the extended silence that made Sans feel a little bashful, although it was a particular twinge in his soul that made him laugh, as though the whole thing had been silly. Perhaps the pet name hadn’t been merited, but he had wanted to try.

“Not fair… disarming me with terrible puns, and then saying something so incredibly heartfelt.”

“you can’t see it now, but if i had ears, i’d be grinnin’ from one to the other,” Sans snickered again. “i do mean it.”

“I know you do,” Grillby’s reply was warm and Sans was sure he could feel the heat through the cell phone and how it made his soul thump with feeling, “I’m… glad.”

Grillby refused to hang up despite the natural end to the conversation, which Sans appreciated to an extent. He was able to focus on the fry of oil in the background when the fire monster had orders to fulfill and occasionally Grillby would ask if the call was still connected. The gesture was meaningless yet appreciated - anything to keep Sans from falling victim to his own thoughts again.

For the moment, Sans had been able to dodge why he had been nervous or even frightened. Grillby hadn’t pressed it, but he knew the general inquiry would come along eventually.

As he approached the end of the crystal maze, Sans sighed against the mouthpiece of his phone as his shoes hit the rockier groundcover.

“think i’m `bout done with all this wet stuff,” he grumbled as he shuffled in place. His shoes made loud squishy, squeaking noises thanks to the marshy water. He sighed again as he approached the deep pools leading up towards the exit to Hotland with a stiff grimace and drew upon his reserves to manage an outflow of magic, bone constructs forming a floating bridge across the pond.

Testing its strength, Sans hesitantly settled one shoe atop of the first thick bone and when it didn’t sink or move, he continued onward, a little slowly. The echo flowers around him whispered nonsensically as he passed and Sans shivered a little, attempting to draw upon the fire monster’s company for comfort.

“this place’s soakin’ me to the bone! remind me to come by and give you a hug later.”
“What makes you believe I’d accommodate a sopping skeleton? Perhaps I’ll be requiring a tab for hugs soo-”

’SANS!!)ans(ans(nss)!!)s!! Wak(wake)e up(up)!!’

The skeleton nearly dropped his phone as his entire body jolted with the shriek through the air from his blind side. It crackled, rasped and echoed along the water, sending a violent shudder through his bones as he stumbled from his upturned constructs. The volume wasn’t something that was normally heard in Waterfall and had hit him with such a start that he yelped in surprise and slipped off his makeshift bridge.

He ended up head-first into the water but it at least wasn’t too deep and his feet easily found the bottom of the pool. Unfortunately, his skull had flooded with revolting murky water and he sputtered as another shrill cry echoed from the flower nearby. Angrily, he swiped at it with a quickly manifested bone attack, cutting the flower in twain to silence it. The water reached up to the middle of his spine and he shuddered with a groan as the slick, wet marsh flooded his clothes.

“...Are you there! Ans..er!”

The skeleton coughed and opened his mouth to let the water drain from his skull with a shudder. “oly shit. that was… unpleasant, t’say the least-”

“...hat happ…ed? ……you alrigh..?” Grillby sounded distressed enough that his voice was partially consumed by his element.

“no need to get so fired up. flowers are just givin’ me a bad time today.” Sans coughed to expel the remainder of the water from his skull, raising his elbows above the pool’s level with a grimace. “super soaked. add another hug to the tab, ok?”

“You-!” Now Grillby just sounded irritated. Better to tell him before he got hot-headed.

“think i found the place we landed, is all,” Sans shrugged to himself as he waded through the pool, his breaths chill and the sludge at the bottom of the pool was making his footsteps unsure, “when i, uh… last shortcut on our way through.”

There was silence for a whole lot longer than Sans had anticipated and he forced a laugh, suddenly self-conscious.

“...see.”

“guess the echo flower caught your voice. you were really worried, huh?”

“Of course, how could I not-”

“enough to check, right?”

“I didn-” Grillby stopped. Sans could hear the way his flames bristled as though suddenly caught off-guard.

“busted.” The skeleton sighed, although his voice still shared the same old drawl. Somehow knowing when Grillby had Checked brought an odd peacefulness to his soul, despite how panicked he’d been when Sans first found out about it. “and now i know your dirty little secret.”

“As much as I would enjoy having to endure your self-assertion for a more lengthy duration, I’ll have you know this was not when that particular event occured-”
“gettin’ fired up again. y’sure, or do you not want me to be right?” Sans teased, wading to the end of the pond with a flinch of the lingering echo behind him. He heard Grillby groan quietly in exasperation.

“...Is not.”

“don’t think i’ve ever heard your voice like that,” the skeleton continued a little guiltily as he hoisted himself up over the edge of the embankment. “apart from ‘manners’, i guess.”

It was Grillby’s turn to sound a little embarrassed, “Must we really bring that up again?”

Sans laughed, “i dunno. it’s kinda funny now that i think about it.”

“And… do you?”

“do i what?”

“Think about it.”

“uh…” Sans grunted, allowing himself to flop down onto the shale rockface with a huff. He spotted scorch marks in a circumference around him and his eye lights drifted back to the deep expanse behind him. His soul suddenly sunk with what that meant - of Grillby carrying him, unconscious, through the rest of Waterfall. “oh… oh man, grillby.”

“...Didn’t mean it quite like that, sweet,” the fire monster laughed quietly as though to himself. “...Was only teasing. No need to get excitable.”

Sans would’ve caught the term of endearment, had he not felt such insurmountable guilt that plunged his thoughts deeper than the pool of water he was staring at. He opened his mouth a few times but words failed him, strangled by the memory and the ‘what ifs’ that had happened while Grillby carried his unconscious body the rest of the way through Waterfall. And of when he saw the old discoloured scarring on the other’s body…

“i’m sorry, grillby,” he said softly, his voice feeling hollow as it hit him harder than anything how much Grillby had risked himself to get them both to safety. “i fucked up. god, i really fucked up-”

“How many times must we be over this-” Grillby sounded a little exasperated again, but Sans cut him off.

“no, you don’t get it. i didn’t get it. it just.. clicked how bad it was for you. and on top of it all, you had to carry me the rest of the way, and through this pond? holy shit, man. i feel like the worst kinda garbage, and i’m really sorry. really-”

“Enough,” the fire monster chastised quietly. “Really… saying such things as though you hadn’t put yourself at risk.”

“What a fuckin’ day.”

“My sentiments exactly,” Grillby breathed quietly. “You don’t need to worry about ’little ol’ me’. It’s in the past, and done with. I don’t regret it, and even if I did, my conflict or blame would not be with you. I was… ill-prepared.”

“i honestly thought it’d be easier than it was,” Sans grumbled from the ground. He traced his phalange against the scorched surface of the rockface and sighed heavily.
"I don’t want you to linger on it."

"psh. no promises."

"You have promised before."

Sans gave a sidelong glance to the typha plants and tall grasses around him a little uneasily, then managed to laugh. "yeah." He wasn’t about to say the reason, though.

"...And why is that? I recall your adamancy on not making promises one of your core constitutions."

Sans stayed quiet but was able to ease out of his guilty thoughts as he pushed himself upright, water dripping from his soaked clothes.

"...Can make an assumption," the fire monster added softly, "Maybe."

"now you’re just being coy with me," the skeleton muttered with a grunt of effort as he got to his feet and patted down his pockets. The few coins he had brought along were all there, his snacks definitely less edible than before, and the broken regulator was… well, not any less broken than it had started out before his trip.

"Maybe."

Sans’ grin tugged a little more as he set off again down the expansive cave and bridges leading towards Hotland, noting how the temperature gradually shifted from lukewarm to even hotter. He listened as the other chuckled, filling his soul with a dancing light before he quelled it to hide it from anyone who might be watching, hand automatically going for his hoodie’s front.

"should probably let you go," he finally said after a while, “you’re talkin’ my ear off, here.”

"A feat, considering you do not have ears."

"m’pretty sure you might have customers who wanna chat with you."

"At me."

“still think it’s pretty sweet you only ever really chat with me,” Sans noted even more quietly. He lingered just outside the cave awning in Hotland, the thick heat filling his bones with comfortable warmth as the moisture steamed away from him. When Grillby only hummed in amusement on the other end, the skeleton grinned to himself. “ok, well. guess i’ll get goin’, then. love ya.”

And with that, he ended the call.

Then stared at his phone as though it morphed into something horrifying. To his credit, it did, into a device that made him say stupid things because he was so used to ending calls with his brother that way, and now-

Now it was ringing - and the call display indicated that it was Grillby again. Sans felt the heat of his magic flood his skull and shoulders as he pocketed the phone and turned on his heel towards Alphys’ lab, every part of him screaming.

What did you do!??!

Ducking his skull into the hood of his jacket, Sans relented and looked at his phone again when it finally stopped ringing.
Two missed phone calls and one text message just came in.

hotstuff (Last message received 2:13pm);

- You shy thing! Answer your phone, please.

[ Incoming Call: hotstuff ]

Sans swallowed and drew in a deep breath to calm down, automatically tapping to accept the call; “h-heya.”

There was the predictable faint hum of fire from the other line as he heard, very lowly, “Love ya too,” before the call abruptly ended.

The words sent a dense shock through his soul and Sans stared at his phone, dumbfounded. A steady incline of elation built up inside of him and the world passed him by for quite awhile as he lingered on it. Grillby hadn’t freaked out as he did.

He... said it back.

Just like when he admitted his feelings to him after tumbling from the bar.

Just like now, whenever he admitted something to the fire monster, Grillby would echo it back.

Me too. It just worked with them.

Sans kept the feeling all to himself when he finally was able to move, soul fluttering both heavy and light as he trudged his way toward the Hotland Lab.

Chapter End Notes

Headcanon for the echo flower corridor where Papyrus is nervous about hearing them (at least on your ingame phone call with him), they are only moderately coherent for a short amount of time before becoming unintelligible and creepy. That and the echo flower that housed Grillby’s frightened and panicked yell probably scared more than half a dozen monsters going through to Hotland. XDDD;;;;;;
Bad Memory

Chapter Summary

Sans returns the broken regulator to Alphys, and is followed through the CORE by a malevolent presence. Papyrus and Sans have a long overdue talk.

Chapter Notes

Content warnings; panic attack, mentions of past child abuse (non-sexual), mentions of past medical abuse

See the end of the chapter for more notes

Alphys regarded the skeleton after welcoming him into her lab. His ever-present grin appeared to be a little too easy than what was normal and his eye sockets were half lidded as though he didn’t have a care in the world. In fact, his entire posture was slack and relaxed, with his hands buried in his pockets despite how damp his clothing was.

He just grinned at her, not saying anything. For a moment, Alphys thought she could see a pulse of subtle light under his hoodie before it was muted, then it disappeared.

It was like he was in a good mood!

“S-so? It… It looks as though you’ve… calmed down?”

He gave in to a snicker and shrugged. “guess so.”

Alphys was immediately bubbling with excitement; seeing Sans as he was meant that the regulator had worked and she was very pleased about that! She tugged him further into the lab so he could be seated and she could remove it. Once upon the computer chair, Sans pulled something out of his pocket and held it concealed in his hand for her to take.

Curious, Alphys pushed her glasses back and held her hand out in silence. Then when the familiar metal pieces hit her extended claw, she felt an ebb of disappointment crush her body and she couldn’t help the strangled noises that escaped her in lieu of words.

“uh, it didn’t hold up.”

Alphys turned abruptly and grabbed the nearest thing on the desk with a quick roll. She whacked him with it over the skull, the magazine making hilarious fluttering noises as well as cutting off Sans’ protests.

“jeez, hey-”

“How! Th-th-that-!” she tried, upset. She gave him another smack with the magazine for good measure. “How? *how*!? How d-do you manage to break *every* invention I g-g-give to you!!”
“hey, hold up-” Sans grimaced and covered his skull to ward off the attack, “-it wasn’t workin’ so i just…” His excuses petered out. “ok, well to be fair, it lasted for awhile.”

“I, I can’t b-b-b-believe you!!” Alphys wailed and Sans shrunk down a little guiltily as she went over the broken, mud-covered pieces in her hands, “I, I could’ve repaired it if it was j-just broken - which I don’t even know how the heck you managed that - but… but water damage too!? You c-completely fried the circuitry, Sans! Do you know how difficult it is to synthesise the required materials for even a cell phone!”

Sans shrank down, his grin uneasy; of course he knew. “alph, c’mon-”

She reached over and swatted him with the magazine once more for good measure. With a flare of annoyance, he grabbed it from her and she flinched visibly, but instead of retaliating he tossed it over his shoulder.

“m’sorry, ok?” There was something to his apology, but Alphys wasn’t about to let up. “i’ll make it up to you.”

Alphys snorted quietly in derision and leaned against the desk, a tower of instant noodle bowls threatening to topple when she did so. “Anything?”

Sans’ eye sockets narrowed uneasily. “within reason.”

“Yes, yes, I know-” she sighed and grabbed her scanner from behind a mountain of paperwork and rubbed the screen on her sleeve. “Here, l-line up?”

Sans bristled as she held out the device to scan him, his eye lights flicking from the scanner to Alphys’ face in muted shock. Whatever reverie he was enveloped in before suddenly melted away in a throb of barely contained panic. “you serious?”

“N-no, but we have to continue until y-you’re at least done the aggression stage,” she muttered as the skeleton backed up against the chair uncomfortably.

“m’not blockin’ you, so hold off on that,” he protested uneasily.

“I, I know that! But I n-need the extended printout.”

“I-how about just usin’ the last scan,” he muttered, staring at the scanner. “i hope you’re destroyin’ all the evidence after this, girl.”

Alphys sighed heavily in irritation and snapped at him, “Stop it!”

Sans stiffened against the back of the chair and glowered at the scanner until she pulled it away and she studied it for a moment. There was a long awkward silence before he allowed himself to relax enough to idly swivel the chair.

“so… we good?”

“Mew Mew Kissie Cutie the Musical!” she suddenly said without looking up. “On Ice!”

Sans snerked quietly, then realised she wasn’t kidding. “oh. c’mon, that’s not fair.”

“A-and you’re not allowed to grump the whole way through!” Actually, it was more likely that he would snooze all the way through, if she didn’t excitedly prod him the entire time.

“i refuse.”
"Y-you won’t!" Alphys suddenly seemed very sure of herself as she glossed over the screen, her toothy grin almost sinister. Then she set down the scanner and picked up her phone, tapped a few buttons, and turned it around to show him.

Sans tried his very best not to look like he was affected. He was being shown of a slightly filtered, over exposed photo of himself and Grillby, faces locked together in a deep kiss. The skeleton realised that it had likely been taken by her at the restaurant. He tried to restrict his inappropriately reacting magic and leaned against the arm of the chair in a show of indifference.

"so..? i got one of `im too."

His objection had its intended effect on the royal scientist and she huffed softly. "G-guess it doesn’t matter if I… I upload it to the UnderNet’s ‘Cutest Couples’ group then?" She made a show of raising a single claw up and then back down, hovering over the ‘send’ button.

Sans couldn’t help but tense visibly at the threat, eye lights fixated on the phone. “you wouldn’t…”

“I mean, it’s not as though you’ve never seen Mew Mew b-before? One eentsie little evening with your b-best gal pal?”

Sans winced. “ok, fine, you extortionist. but… season two’s still got my heartstrings all a pitter-patter.”

Alphys threw down her fist, “Se-season two is an abomination and we’ve been o-o-o-over this!”

Being coerced and exploited into agreeing to a view-in left a sour taste in his mouth, but soon Sans was on his way through Hotland to the resort after a short briefing from Alphys about his ‘progress’. It appeared that his magic had stabilised to her satisfaction and his maturation rate was just over 90-percent, so he could worry less about potential outbursts of aggression and focus more on other things. Namely more studying, as Alphys was disappointed with his biological ignorance.

She touched briefly upon the rumour of the avalanche in Snowdin Forest and how there didn’t seem to be any seismic activity to its cause, so Sans had to confess, albeit dodgingly. While she had been upset enough to whack him with the magazine for breaking her regulator, she was just… stunned when he accepted the blame for it.

She told him he was growing up - but the fact he had caused environmental damage had to be reported to Undyne, since she had been the one to ask Alphys to look into it in the first place. Sans wasn’t looking forward to that, so left in a somewhat soured mood.

Hotland was definitely more comfortable than Waterfall, despite all of its puzzles. Regardless, he wandered through after reflecting on some of Grillby’s bypasses and easily glided by on conveyors. It was all rather uneventful. No shrieking echo flowers could ever survive in the stifling thick heat.

He was moderately sweating by the time he reached the resort. Wiping over his skull with his sleeve, Sans paused to grab a burger at the concession and was disappointed at the flavour. It seemed that all the MTT hype was just that, and the food was just as dodgy as its customer service. For this instance only, he wished he didn’t have the capability to taste but choked down the sequin-laden burger before leaving.

Huffing a breath in preparation, Sans regarded the steel-clad portal leading to the CORE. A shudder passed through his body as several memories bubbled to the surface, bones pricking with defensive magic as his feet protested with every step he took. He would be fine, he thought chastisingly.
Papyrus was inside. He would be waiting for him and they would go home together.

The acrid yet clear smell of ozone hit his senses and he recoiled at the entrance to the area, hesitating. It had been awhile since he had come here all alone, preferring to take his shortcuts to bypass the area altogether or simply use the elevator, which he had tried, but it still seemed out of order. The fact he had held together so well the previous pass through was only because of Grillby, and even then he was still jumpy. Something had been tracking his every move.

Begrudgingly, Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets and wrung the fleecy lining in between his digits with every moment that passed. He needed to go inside, that he knew. He had to force himself. The memory was still clear of the malaise that overcame him at the security panel and how something had flickered over his hand.

And those haunting gestures.

Exhaling in preparation, Sans’ shoes passed the threshold and his entire body tensed.

Nothing happened, but it didn’t stop the weary tug at his soul and every fibre of his bones from screeching in fear. He felt the old panic, the old fright that recalled old memories. Old breaths that laboured as Papyrus attempted to heal him after his fall into the magic matrix of the CORE, of him saying soothing and reassuring lies to him that they would go home together.

Sans’ breaths shuddered as he took the first step forward. The area was subtly cool yet humid, warm yet chilly. He knew he was panicking already and had to draw strength from inside himself until he found his brother.

He wasn’t a child. He would deal with it.

His other foot took a step.

He was shaking.

“damn it,” he grunted, his eye lights searching the expanse in front of him. The cobalt and indigo hues bounced off the polished crystalline floors and onto him from the lights above, tinting everything an unnerving blue. Red would have been more relaxing. Orange, yellow, gold. Sans felt himself calm down considerably, the back of his mind taunting him that the colours matched what he thought ‘love’ would look like.

He was well aware of what those colours actually were.

His pace was slow - a lot slower than his and Grillby’s way through. Whereas he had the pleasure of feigning bravery for the bartender’s sake, Sans now felt alone, isolated, almost forgotten amongst the hum of electronics in the tight echoing space.

What had he told Grillby before? He didn’t like the vibe. That was an understatement, considering the memories were lapsing and hazy, their subject matter akin to a traumatic constraint. It made him feel as though it was something Papyrus had told him long ago, to make him feel as though his memories hadn’t scattered into the CORE. He suspected, in private moments of desperation to figure things out, that when he was Falling Down, his memories had been shattering, the first things to crumble as his brother carried him through.

On more than one occasion, he had believed his favourite thing was Papyrus, so dying in his brother’s arms wouldn’t have been so bad-

Except that was a horribly selfish thought. The CORE took him back to those days. Where every
step of life was invalid. He had to learn to move, how to breathe again. He had to relearn how to write with his remaining arm, to train what little magic remained to hold himself together. To force limbs that were dead to mimic life. Several months passed before he was dragged out of the lab and into the Hotland heat despite his protests to stay.

Being knocked down from 920 points to a singularity had been the biggest hurdle to overcome. Papyrus and Alphys had been patient with him to help him learn his limitations, but the number of medical procedures and Alphys’ Determination theories had become a wash of terror through his medical trauma - something he’d suffered through even before his Fall.

The skeleton hunched inwards on himself, his sockets hollowing in his dark thoughts. He felt as though everything was closing in on him. Bad thoughts, bad times.

Bad memories - ones he tried to discard, no matter how many times he attempted to push them away, they always came back with a vengeance. It was those, alongside the persistent feeling that something or someone had gone missing at the same time, that made it all feel extremely unwholesome.

Sans’ feet led him up the tight corridor and into the next area where the flood of blinding white light shot up from below the catwalks. His magic was condensing around his bones in an effort to remain calm, to remain on the defensive as he crept his way through. To mimic his brother’s magic in a soothing way.

It took a lot longer than he would’ve liked to make his way through. The place screamed silently at him in uneasy, creeping malaise, as though the few who dropped below were never seen again. Because they left no dust behind, their memory didn’t persist either.

A shiver etched into his very being, threatening to keep him frozen on the spot as he neared a resting area. The walls shimmered with the pulse of magi-electric energy and the thrum of it all set his bones in an agitated state. His breathing had gone deep and stuttered as he attempted to keep calm.

He hadn’t passed anyone on the way through - he was hoping that there would be someone to chat with as he passed, but Sans was left alone with more thoughts of something, someone, missing.

Sans decided he couldn’t do it. He pulled out his phone to dial Papyrus and raised it to the side of his skull, his other hand covering his face as he pushed away his panic.

It rung twice before the other end picked up as usual, but without his brother’s careening, boisterous voice, the line buzzed with an echo of static and jarring tones. Blinking at his phone, he ended the call and tried again.

This time it sounded like an old modem, one of Alphys’ old inventions before she perfected the intranet for the Underground to use. It was buried in a harsh static and Sans attempted to push several buttons before finally pushing his voice out; “uh.. hello?”

The reply was an old crackle of static that set his teeth on edge. Sans recognised the tone and words, however they weren’t anything he had heard before. The phrases set him on edge, whispering, rattling, a thousand voices to one garbled mess.
Staring at his phone, Sans realised how badly he was shaking. It… It was just interference, since he was so close to the magic matrix, right? The geothermal energy was likely mixing up the phone signals. The magi-electric dissonance was at most, a hindrance to deal with while he was working through his own projects…

At any rate, he was in no proper mental state to continue through the CORE on his own and abruptly ended the call when the voices repeated themselves, stuffing his phone into his pocket with a deep, unnerved inhale. Rattling now, he turned on his heel to go back to the resort and froze in his tracks.

Something had been there, watching from behind him, only to flutter away in a wisp of a thick, gushing mass. Frozen, Sans stared at the area, his grin tightening as every fear welled up inside. Something was watching him here, stalking him as he walked with such unfathomable intent. It tugged at every horror in his mind, focusing on them, every nightmare and trauma melding into a horrible entity that he couldn’t shake, as though those very thoughts were feeding the… being, or whatever it was.

It was not like the amalgamates beneath the Lab. They were curious, blended together to feel and need as the monsters that it comprised of. This was… different. Disgusting. Twisted. Repellent of any wayward happiness he felt earlier that day. It erased it and pawed at his fears, a low drop high in the ceilings punctuating every shock.

He was stuck. Frozen. He couldn’t be saved, couldn’t save others. Papyrus was gone. He was gone. A figure with a pale face. Multiple figures with murderous smiles, unnerving, untouchable, tangling within his bones, pulling apart his soul, breaking his bones, his smile, ending whatever furtive happiness he still clung to. Echo flowers that would snigger and shuffle behind him as he tried to live his life until they all suddenly went mute.

He was caught in an endless loop, a silent scream halted before it could escape. He was shaking as he recalled words that had been whispered to him before.

*Fall. Lost. Found.*

*Bid. Curl.*


*Consume.*

They echoed on in a loop, carved into the innermost side of his skull. The scraping, *god, the scraping.* Chiseling the words into his skull to leave a mark forever, his breathing escalated to the point where his magic took over automatically, drawing in energy from the dense air around him. In an attempt to abate the whittling noise from the inside of his skull, he grasped at the sides of his face, willing his feet to *move.*

He had to escape. He had to flee. He drew everything inward, subconsciously pushing against hands that found him, cored, faded, bloodied and marred. Sans knew who they belonged to and he struggled to escape - he had to find the ground, to use a shortcut, *anything.* His magic echoed the bright white and azure around him, *melding* into him, making him absorb everything regardless of ill intent.

His flux constricted inside of his bones, every physical remainder of his body cracking, splintering off into shards. He was *breaking,* unable to resist the dense pressure around him, threatening to turn him into dust. Voices that were far away screamed at him, yelled at him, taunting him and breaking him down.
It hurt. It hurt so fucking much. Sans cried against the terror and the pain, white needles of agony lighting inside of him as the accumulated energy surged outwards and he was finally able to flee.

When he landed, Sans collapsed to his knees, his phalanges screeching against the glass tile of the CORE’s crystalline floors, as though gauging the depth of reality. His sockets remained hollowed out, his entire body trembling violently as he dared to raise his skull. There was a deep echoing pain that drummed inside, making his vision blurred and uneven, but he could make out the figure in the distance.

There were several in fact, all dressed in long lab coats, a blur of white in the haunting azure landscape around him. Several voices echoed along the corridor he was in as they quickly approached and Sans tensed.

No. No!

One he recognised - beyond a shadow of a doubt. He didn’t want to see again, not in nightmares, not in painful recollections of his childhood, not anytime. Another scream stuck in his rib cage as the figure drew near, visage cracked in several places, teeth bared, skull narrow and eye sockets hollowed in disdain and utter contempt.

Sans drew in his magic again and warped away to escape, every fibre of his being protesting against the heat of quickly expended energy. At the tail end of his warp he could hear a familiar voice sharply call out, broken off as reality closed around him with a wrenching, tearing sound.

The next room had him stumbling, it a little lower than his previous location. Sans’ steps were unsure in his panic as the trashcan next to him upended and he careened into the wall, thankful for something solid to hold him steady. He was shaking, rattling so loudly. He had to stop, he had to stop, otherwise the royal scientist would find him, and-

He heard many pairs of footsteps clanging against the grate of the floors outside the room he was in.

Oh god. They were searching for him-

“There!”

Sans shuddered down into his hood, his hands flying up to his skull to shield himself from another flurry of disembodied hands. His breaths were so fast and shallow in panic that they did little to draw in magic from his surroundings to replenish his flux and his magic petered out against the next draw to warp away again.

Futilely, he gasped and flailed against the pair of skeletal hands on him, how they forced him forward, drawing him towards the other. Sans gritted his teeth through a low whimper, his hollowed sockets shutting tightly against the sight, pretending he was somewhere else, anywhere but there-

“Sans!”

The skeleton shook his skull, a choked noise coming from him as he attempted to warp away again. It chipped at his health and he winced, doubling over to the side as his unintended carry-on prevented an even flow to exploit the gridline. Sans hissed in pain and in his panic, shoved away at the hands, clutching at his sternum to ease away the angry throb in his soul.

“Sans!” The voice tried again, this time sounding more distressed. That couldn’t be right though - the voice was almost always stern, disgusted, condemning-

“Brother!”
As though it was a beacon of hope itself, Sans stopped, although his breaths still stuttered to contain his panic. His rib cage rose and fell with painful gasps, his bones weary from their constant struggle and rattling. He was afraid to open his eye sockets, gritting his teeth so tightly that he was sure they’d splinter under the pressure.

“...brother?” his voice was tight and shaky, a whisper amongst the fears Sans felt.

“Yes, brother! It’s me, Papyrus!” the familiar voice said again, then the tug towards him started again, making Sans tense. “It’s alright! I’ve got you! You’re safe! So stop… stop trying to… to use ‘shortcuts’?”

Sans inhaled a shuddering breath before opening his left eye socket, then his other. His sockets remained hollow and his permanent grin tight, every bone feeling dislodged as tremors shook him.

“i-i saw-” he whispered, his voice strained, “i… i saw th-the doctor, p-pap, i saw, please-”

“Calm down!” his brother said loudly, his voice cutting through him like a knife. Sans tensed as the other’s hands settled on his shoulders. For one horrifying moment, the younger brother’s sockets split into two different directions, a loud crack as the chips taken out of his face grew towards his mandible and temple.

Sans shrank back, his own sockets wide in fright, his voice stuck on the first syllable of an unknown monster’s name. “g-gast-”

That was it, wasn’t it? The reason he pushed Papyrus away during these moments. He had grown to look like him, the difference between the two monsters in his life so similar that it was difficult to crush memories of their father altogether. Gritting his teeth again, Sans let out a horrified noise.

“Sans, please listen to me,” Papyrus pleaded, his own sockets searching the hollow vacancies of his brother’s. “Who did you see? Who’s Gast? Why are you so-” As though it suddenly dawned on him, the younger brother plucked at his lab coat and unbuttoned it with one hand to pull it off, then flung it to the side out of sight.

He understood. He remembered the way Sans panicked after his Fall although he didn’t know why it set him off. He had a feeling the traumatic reaction had something to do with all the times Sans would come home in their youth exhausted and trembling, so kept a sturdy hand on his brother, who was still rattling loudly.

After a moment, Sans’ body untensed enough that his hands found Papyrus’ forearm and sternum, clinging to the bright orange shirt as he hunched inwards with a shuddering breath. He clenched his grip so hard Papyrus grimaced and had to untangle his brother’s phalanges from his rib cage and pull him close, burying his skull against his clavicle.

“You’re safe, Sans! Tell me what happened, please!”

“i,” the other tried, still jittery, “i saw him. i know i did, pap, i’m sorry-”

“YOU SAW ME!” Papyrus grunted, pushing his brother against him in a crushing hug, “I WAS TRYING TO GET YOUR ATTENTION! BUT YOU RAN! AND THEN YOU… DISAPPEARED.”

“dis-” Right. His shortcuts, he realised with a little more clarity.

“YOU SHOULD HAVE CALLED ME!”
“i tried-” Sans hissed against his brother’s shoulder, “i fuckin’ tried, the call didn’t… it didn’t go through, and i…” He whimpered against his brother’s body as Papyrus patted his back. “i freaked out.”

“I KNOW,” Papyrus’ tone was admonishing. “YOU DID ME A BIG FRIGHT, BROTHER!” His sockets narrowed at Sans’ soft scoff from buried between them. “I’M BEING UTTERLY SERIOUS, SANS! WHY DIDN’T YOU JUST WAIT AT THE HOTEL? YOU COULD HAVE JUST DROPPED THE NAME OF THE GREAT PAPYRUS AND THE RECEPTIONIST WOULD HAVE GIVEN YOU A KEY. OR YOU SHOULD’VE JUST… STAYED.”

“m’sorry-”

“DON’T YOU DARE!” Papyrus retorted hotly, his embrace tightening so suddenly that Sans yelped in surprise. “I DIDN’T EXPECT YOU TO MEET ME IN THE CORE, YOU SILLY PILE OF BONES! WHY YOU WOULD THINK THAT IS NECESSARY, I’LL NEVER KNOW.”

“You needed me. as the big bro, i had a familial duty,” Sans offered a little tightly. Papyrus relaxed his hold on him, glad his brother’s panic had subsided enough for him to make sarcastic jokes, at least.

Papyrus sighed in exasperation and pulled away to look Sans in the face. His eye lights were still gone, as though shame shook him down to his core and he didn’t want to look at him. Now that he was able to take in Sans’ appearance, Papyrus couldn’t believe how filthy he looked. Mud stained his jacket and dirt fell off of him whenever he moved. With a halfhearted grumble, the younger brother gave Sans a light rap on the skull.

“YOU WORRY ME.”

Sans hung his skull, silent for a moment. “i know.”

“AND… I HAVE A QUESTION,” Papyrus added quietly. “MORE THAN MANY QUESTIONS. THAT YOU’LL ANSWER, BECAUSE IT IS HIGH TIME YOU COME CLEAN ABOUT SOME THINGS!”

His brother shrunk down a little more, as though he was being scolded. “thought i was the big brother,” he muttered wryly, his teeth tugging in a false grin.

“YOU ARE MOST CERTAINLY THE BIG BROTHER! IT JUST GOES TO SHOW THAT I MUST BE THE MOM, OBVIOUSLY, SINCE I CAN’T TRUST YOU TO TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. LOOK AT YOU!”

Sans flinched, but he knew what Papyrus was doing. He was shifting his panic away with menial conversation. To an extent, it was working, and Sans appreciated it. But at the same time, the older brother knew that something was off about the exchange.

It took them a great deal longer to reach the resort again, due to Sans’ agitation. Although he had apparently expended a good deal of magic in his panicked state, Sans did not appear exhausted in the slightest. It was a different kind of fatigue; along the way Papyrus had Checked him and found him to be at 15 points - a shock, but lately it was more and more evident Sans’ maturation was progressing to the point where holding a healthy level of HP was getting easier, even if his base stat did not change. Papyrus and Alphys had chatted briefly about it after he popped by for a visit.

Papyrus sighed as he carefully unlocked the door to his hotel room back at MTT Resort. Sans hung
close to him, acting aloof, yet Papyrus knew he was still on edge. It was only when his brother strolled up to the bed and collapsed onto it that a sharp bark of protest passed his teeth. Sans was, after all, extremely dirty, and him rolling all over the nice clean sheets Papyrus had insisted upon during his stay made a strangled noise erupt from him.

“YOUR JACKET-” he quipped agitatedly when Sans gave him a concerned look. Then his brother sighed and got up, unzipped his hoodie and tossed it on the ground in an unceremonious mess. Papyrus groaned and covered his face. “I CAN ONLY IMAGINE WHAT THE HOUSE LOOKS LIKE IN MY ABSENCE.”

“your mind’s not that filthy,” Sans drawled nonchalantly, stretching out so his mud-caked shoes hung over the side of the mattress. Papyrus flinched at the insinuation that the house was indeed that bad, or his brother thought him a saint of some sort, and also as several pops and snaps filled the air. “so, ‘bout this missin’ friend o’ yours-”

“WE AREN’T TALKING ABOUT THAT NOW AND I AM VERY DISTRESSED YOU WOULD-” Papyrus stopped his tangent short when he drew nearer to wipe the dregs of sand off the sheet and caught the sight of his brother’s neck bones, just peeking out into view from his collar. Dark, etched little marks covered most of his cervical vertebrae that were likely to fade with time, but if the high collared shirt his brother wore was anything to go by, Sans likely had those on purpose. Due to… his boyfriend, quite possibly. Very possibly.

Sans was watching him intently and merely shrugged at his brother’s silence. It had been awhile since they’d seen each other, possibly the longest duration ever. Papyrus seemed to reel himself in from staring at him and continued where he left off a little awkwardly.

“-I’M VERY UPSET THAT YOU WOULD TURN THE CONVERSATION AWAY FROM YOURSELF YET AGAIN! YOU ALWAYS DO THIS, HIDING, AND RUNNING FROM ME? I DON’T UNDERSTAND!”

Something in Sans’ sockets seemed hurt and he avoided Papyrus’ look.

“And it’s very clear to me now what your ‘shortcuts’ have meant this entire time! Really, Sans! I’m shocked!”

Said monster shrugged again, halfheartedly.

“-have so many questions, i don’t know where to begin? how do you do it? how long have you been doing it? why did you keep what it was a secret from me, your brother, your family! - and why you go into the core on a whim because your phone didn’t work? did alphys not fix it? i thought she fixed it!”

He fixated on Sans’ phone while the older brother closed his eye sockets with a dejected sigh. It was just as he’d feared - Papyrus was riling himself up worrying about imaginary complications, what would happen if he went too far, if he appeared near the Barrier, if he hit the Barrier.

A loud thumping knock pounded from the other side of the wall and Papyrus ended his loud diatribe of worried hypotheticals with a hand slapped over his teeth.

Sans inhaled slowly, the constant nagging of guilt built up inside of him, but it felt normal. Reassuring, as strange as that sounded. “fine. whatever. i guess a little before we left new home,” he relented quietly. “before i made the boxes.”
“INV-” Papyrus checked his volume with the muffled groan of irritation from next door. “Invented, or created?”

“either one,” Sans replied dismissively, barely moving his legs when his brother sauntered over and perched himself at the other side of the bed.

“Alright... That is! Still! Suspicious! But I’ll allow you this silly secret, even though it’s beyond trite at this conjuncture.” Sans breathed a sigh of relief, but it was cut off when Papyrus asked next, “Who did you see at the CORE?”

It was awhile before he replied, so long that Papyrus was growing irritable and dismayed that he wasn’t being given an answer. Sans huffed out a breath, mingling with a pathetic laugh, “someone i thought was long gone.”

“A good someone… or a bad someone?”

Sans turned his head away from Papyrus and plucked at the sheet at his side, a cold feeling welling up in his soul at the memory.

“I didn’t see anyone, Sans. I think you… just had a panic attack-” Papyrus offered kindly, “I don’t know who this ‘Gast’ is-”

“gaster,” Sans whispered, his voice hollow. Memories disappeared as quickly as they were brought up; the pylons, the infusions, multiple hands, a cracked face that glared down at him throughout every milestone in his youth. Suddenly the feeling of seeing his own dust on his hands came to Sans’ mind and he flinched visibly. “do you honestly think i wanna talk about this?”

“Well… to be honest? No! But you… so rarely talk to me about your problems. Conjecture being what it is, I don’t very well wish to assume and there are only so many conclusions I can come up with by myself.”

That stung. Sans tilted his skull to the other side so he could regard his brother, creases of concern marring his younger brother’s face and his phalanges tugging at themselves in their usual, fidgety way. He took it in for a moment as he realised just what he’d done - blocked out his brother this entire time, when Papyrus had no one else to talk to. He was in the dark as much asSans put him through, and he felt so hopelessly guilty over it.

It loomed over him, decision after bad decision cloaking him in self-loathing that he pushed himself up, hanging his hands in his lap as his legs drew inwards. Papyrus didn’t even say anything about his mud-caked shoes on the bed - that’s how much this all bothered him, Sans realised.

“you, uh… really know how to put things into startlin’ reality, paps,” he offered apologetically. “ok. where to even start…”

Papyrus grinned at him encouragingly but Sans knew it was forced. He saw the glimmer of hope in his brother’s sockets, a silent little twinkle he could spot from a mile away, that now he realised it had been absent for quite some time.

“Generally… the beginning is best, isn’t it, brother?”

It took a lot of coaxing for his body to cooperate with Papyrus’ questions. Every word seemed to be like a trigger, threatening to undo what grip on the world that Sans had remaining. Papyrus held him fast as he spoke, brokenly, about what he saw in the CORE and how it correlated with things from
his past, their past, things that were hidden yet out in the open. Of things they hid to themselves if only to protect one another.

“Medical… experiments,” Papyrus’ voice was tight with anger - Sans knew it wasn’t directed at him, but he couldn’t help but shrink into himself. As he felt Sans’ unease, Papyrus sighed and softened his tone, “I knew something wasn’t right…”

“you were young, papyrus, you couldn’t’ve done anything,” the other tried to protest.

Papyrus shook his skull and leaned against Sans, drawing his arm around his shoulders to keep him close and keep him calm. “Wowie… Suddenly a lot makes sense.” Sans flinched, feeling more than a little self-conscious at the attention. “Allow me to go over this linearly-”

Sans grimaced and bowed his skull even more. He had honestly thought that Papyrus wouldn’t try to puzzle everything out immediately. He was in dire need of sleep, his figurative nerves fried.

“Starting during early youth and into teen years, he gave you ‘medicine’-” Papyrus saw the flinch and patted his brother’s skull in reassurance, “-because your HP was… too high?”

“yep.”

“That makes very little sense to me, I’m afraid.”

“ties into other stuff i, uh… can’t quite talk about yet.”

“He had many hands… this… ‘Gaster,’” Papyrus continued thoughtfully, his brow bone knitted in concern, “You know, I think I recall something like this? But then… maybe not. It sounds familiar, but I am certain I’ve never heard of him before?”

“he’s gone,” Sans echoed for the umpteenth time that hour. “he isn’t remembered.” He just knew it, a private theory he couldn’t describe in his mind.

“He passed,” his younger brother repeated, and for a startling moment Sans felt guilt and horror grip him, “Where is his dust? Did he have proper funerary arrangements? Does his family know?”

“bro… we are his family.”

“Are? Didn’t you say he passed? I don’t remember any fam…” Papyrus trailed off when he saw his brother’s look, feeling confused himself. It was a peculiar sensation when his memory was very diligent, and he could recall nothing like this mystery family member they allegedly had? At some point? Whom was now… not in their lives at all?

Sans… wasn’t pranking him right now, was he? He seemed entirely too serious. It was too serious to joke about!

Sans felt the grip over his soul tighten and his eye lights faded from his sockets. He remembered reaching into the CORE in a panic, the magic matrix or something like it pulling him in… and then nothing.

Maybe the doctor had been important in their lives, which is why he felt so… conflicted about everything suddenly. Important didn’t necessarily mean good, and Sans found himself going over the events piece by piece to his best recollection. All he knew was that same malaise when he put the pieces together between the missing doctor and the old royal scientist.

And they were related - a father. He felt the flux in his bones seize with the connection.
“...yeah, papyrus. he’s gone.” At least there was that, he hoped silently. “like you said. he’s not here. he can’t hurt anyone anymore.”

Eventually they relaxed enough to lie down. Sans kicked off his shoes while Papyrus silently shook the sand from the sheets and laid down beside him. They stared up at the ceiling, the quiet extending between them. The older brother dozing lightly, finally, before Papyrus decided to speak, his voice soft.

“Why don’t I remember him..?”

Sans tilted his skull towards Papyrus’ with a soft click when he stretched out, his hand connecting with the other’s arm. “you were too young, papybro.”

Papyrus was still a little confused, considering how everything lined up… it was as though he was trying to puzzle something out that had no tangible material to work with, and he had heard the rules in a dream. “Why don’t you remember?”

Sans sighed softly, moving his hand again and letting it drop against Papyrus’ ribs. “i don’t wanna remember, maybe.”

“Was he that bad?”

“worse, maybe.”

“Worse than bad…” Papyrus sighed in defeat. “I can’t imagine it.”

“hey, cool guys like you don’t gotta imagine the bad stuff. just focus on the future, on the great things. like my best bro.”

“You’re dodging again, brother,” Papyrus grumbled sourly.

Sans laughed, the sound strained. “yeah, i am.” After a few moments of uneasy silence, he turned his skull away so he couldn’t see his brother and closed his eye sockets, his voice dipping in register. “it’s hard to talk about.”

“At least tell me?”

He had a point, Sans thought. If no one else, if no therapists, no close friends to divulge this information to… then who else was left? There was no way in hell that he’d reveal this kind of thing to Grillby, after all. Shifting against the warm covers on the bed, the older brother huffed out a drawn out sigh.

“he didn’t give me a choice. and he-” No. Wait, Sans’ thoughts cut him off prematurely. He couldn’t tell Papyrus that his own little brother was used as collateral against him. “he wasn’t a good dad. good dads don’t hurt their kids.”

Several moments passed and Sans kept his eye sockets closed, but relaxed a little against the covers. For awhile, all he heard was his and Papyrus’ breathing and the tick of the clock on the small desk nearby.

He was about to fall asleep when he heard the unmistakable noise - a wet sounding inhale that sounded muted and strained. Cracking open his left eye socket, Sans turned his head to regard his brother as he nearly felt his soul crack with guilt.
“I’M NOT CRYING-” Papyrus said emphatically, covering his eye sockets with his forearm in a vain attempt to cover up his lie. “I’M NOT!”

“pap…” Sans rolled up onto his side, feeling the twinge of guilt coil like a snake around his soul alongside the chill. “see, this’s why i never wanted to talk about it,” he mumbled halfheartedly and scratched at the side of his brother’s skull in a gesture of comfort.

“I HATE HIM! I DON’T REMEMBER HIM BUT I KNOW THAT’S WHAT I FEEL!”

“volume, bro - and no you don’t. you ain’t got it in ya to hate,” the older brother grunted and flopped overtop of Papyrus’ ribs to pin him down. “your heart’s too great.”

Papyrus whined through clenched teeth.

“it’s just fate,” Sans tried again, attempting to joke to alleviate the mood. “with you balancin’ plates, and your brother the… reprobate?”

“UGH.” Papyrus shoved at him, then immediately slung an arm around Sans and brought him into a crushing hug. “YOU ARE BY FAR THE WORST.” His tone held no venom and his brother grinned at him awkwardly.

“hey, that didn’t rhyme. you lose,” Sans mumbled against his brother’s shirt, the tension easing out of his body with his brother’s usual reprimand over his jokes. “love ya too.”

“I missed you,” Papyrus agreed quietly as Sans patted his back, “I might… apologise for frightening you.”

“might?”

“You know what I mean!”

“ok.”

“And don’t you even start with the ‘ok’s!” Papyrus snapped, wiping at his sockets with his fingers as best as he could manage.

“ok-” Sans yelped as he was shoved off the side of the bed in a heap and laughed out loud. “that was the last one, so technically i ended with them, right?”

A pillow was thrust at his skull from above and he smirked to himself in triumph. It was easy to lift his brother’s spirits, at least. When he pulled the pillow away from his face, Papyrus was leaning over the side of the bed and eyeing him suspiciously.

“Did you copulate?”

Sans sputtered and threw the pillow up, connecting with Papyrus’ skull as he felt his magic spike in embarrassment.

“no!” Papyrus tossed the pillow down again and this time Sans caught it. He turned it over in his hands before he got up and shrugged, a small grin tugging at his teeth. “just… struck some matches.”

“I don’t even know what that means!”

Grinning a little more, Sans parked the pillow behind his skull and laid back on the floor, using the side of the bed to keep his feet airborne. “good.”
I gave myself the creeps writing this chapter. But I'm glad my boys finally talked :'(

Plot is happening. There is a lot of foreshadowing up to these chapters since chapter 14!

I drew a pic for the end of chapter 12 which you can either see at my tumblr or on deviantArt :D

nsfwingdata posted page 2 of the confession scene on their tumblr too! (here)
kaysins drew chapter 3 art of Sans and Grillby!! (here)
golsaileach drew a flustered Sans! (here)
zadiej coloured the chapter 44 art I drew and did an AMAZING JOB OMG (NSFW here)
The brothers go back through Waterfall, yet Sans can’t shake the feeling of being followed and watched. Undyne gives the two a lecture and Papyrus loses his chance.

The brothers stayed at the resort, Sans resting uneasily while Papyrus flicked through his phone for most of the night. When the light of the screen pulled him from sleep for the seventh time, Sans covered his brother’s phone in objection before resettling. Papyrus decided to halt his texting spree after one last message to Alphys, then decided it was better for him to rest as well.

Sans was easier to rouse in the morning than what was usual. With the promise of food, his older brother begrudgingly got out of bed and shuffled behind him to get a meager breakfast from the concession.

After breakfast and listening to Papyrus lament over the poor selection of healthy options on the menu, much to the fast food worker’s withering patience, they were soon on their way back through Hotland. Sans felt better than the previous day, although he was mostly quiet as Papyrus told him about the various shifting puzzles and conveyor belts he had to repair, thanks to an interference in the CORE.

He thought about the name and the figure, and the vitriolic black mass that he’d caught following him through the area before being scared out of his wits. Now all he felt was disgust, yet hid it from his brother as they trudged through the red dirt of Hotland towards the caves leading to Waterfall.

Grimacing awkwardly, Sans stopped when he realised Papyrus had turned to face him.

“WELL?”

Sans shifted uncomfortably. He had been lost in thoughts again and missed out on his brother’s question. Out of habit, he shrugged indifferently.

Papyrus made a noise of exasperation and turned again to continue walking, “WELL! AT ANY RATE, YOU WOULD NOT HAVE COME SO FAR IF NOT TO CHEER UP YOUR GREATEST OF BROTHERS-”

Oh. “‘course, pap,” Sans replied easily; his eye lights scanned the area and he realised a little dimly that the echo flower he had struck down was bobbing pitifully in the water. He followed behind Papyrus as his brother easily constructed a bridge of bones similar to those he had conjured.

“AND FOR ALL HE IS, HE REALLY GOES OUT OF HIS WAY TO CHEER ME UP! I DON’T EVER WONDER WHAT HAVING LOTS OF FRIENDS IS LIKE, BUT YOU KNOW HOW THERE IS… AHEM, QUALITY OVER QUANTITY!”

Now Sans was just confused. Maybe he should just confess and say he hadn’t been paying attention. It was clear his brother was talking about this unknown friend of his.
“how long’ve you two known each other?” he innocently asked as his shoes clopped against the constructs below his feet. “and why’ve i never heard of ’em?”

“YOU KNOW… I SIMPLY CANNOT SAY FOR SURE? I MET HIM SO LONG AGO, BUT EVEN THEN IT FELT LIKE WE WERE FRIENDS SINCE EVEN BEFORE WE MET! IT IS QUITE STRANGE, BUT I WELCOME HIS COMPANY! YOU SHOULD MEET HIM!”

Sans shrugged into his hoodie a little uneasily. That seemed reasonable, although he couldn’t shake why it felt like there was some kind of discord in the Underground due to that. Of something a little more than what Papyrus was letting on taking place, unbeknownst to him.

Suffice to say, Sans didn’t like it.

He realised he hadn’t replied as he usually would have so shrugged again when Papyrus turned to him expectantly, looking so genuinely happy at the prospect. “sounds like a plan. you got his number?”

Why couldn’t he shake this weird feeling…?

“Oh, of course not! He doesn’t have a cell phone but he’s usually not far away!” Papyrus beamed excitedly and pounded his chest with his fist to drive the point home. Sans’ grin tugged artificially as he looked around him. Suddenly the caverns seemed to be closing in on them.

“uh… that’s ominous,” he muttered more to himself than to the other.

“HARDLY SO! YOU’RE JUST STILL WOUND UP ABOUT THE CORE!” Papyrus retorted dismissively.

“yeah. that must be it…” Sans wasn’t entirely convinced as he followed his brother past all the whispering echo flowers, the repeat of his startled yelp amongst some snickering someone had left behind on their own way through. “can’t wait to see my best bro’s newest chum.”

Papyrus looked over his shoulder for a brief moment and Sans relaxed his shoulders despite feeling so tense. It was an unearthly feeling, forcing himself to remain calm when every fibre of his being shouted at him to stay alert. He had to trust Papyrus, right? Obviously he wouldn’t befriend anyone terrible; it was not like such a monster existed in the Underground anyway.

Anymore, that is.

Or at least, he hoped not. He worried it might’ve been a prank, but Papyrus looked genuinely happy to prove to him said friend was not a figment of his imagination. So much that his younger brother was calling out into the darkness.

“Oh, best friend!! I know you’re out there-”

“y’said they haven’t been around for awhile, right? maybe he’s not in?” Sans could only hope as he attempted to keep his tone even and neutral. Somehow he didn’t feel ready. He hoped it was just residual malaise from the previous day and not his paranoia telling him otherwise.

“I saw him, sans! He’s not far off. usually when i stop by mister gerson’s for the mail, that’s when he decides to ‘pop’ in! nyeh heh heh!”

Sans exhaled a long sigh, careful to keep it quiet as to not tip off the other about his discomfort.
Walking through Waterfall only amplified the sensation of being watched, although it was different than the eerie feeling at the CORE. It was difficult to understand, much more different than just walking by others passing through the area or going on with their day to day lives.

When he and Papyrus reached the corridor leading to Undyne’s neighbourhood, Sans yawned loudly, idly conjuring a bone to drag against the moist walls. Drawn to the sound, his brother turned to regard him and nearly jumped back in surprise.

“OH MY GOD!”

“what.”

“SANS, YOU’RE BETTER! I CAN’T BELIEVE IT! BUT I WILL! BECAUSE IT IS HAPPENING BEFORE MY VERY EYES!”

Sans looked at the bone in his grasp and shrugged nonchalantly. “oh. yeah. when was it… couple, maybe a few days ago?” He struggled a little, suddenly feeling scrutinised under his brother’s watch. “cut it out, pap,” he chuckled quietly, then grunted in surprise when his brother threw his arms around him and hugged him. “jeez.”

“I’M JUST SO HAPPY! WERE YOU PRACTISING? IT WAS BECAUSE YOU WERE PRACTISING, WASN’T IT!!”

Sans couldn’t shrug in the other’s embrace, so merely grinned at him. “nope.”

Papyrus groaned in dismay, “YOU’RE TERRIBLE.”

“heh. yup.”

“What did you do, then? What was the - ahem - tipping point?"

“spared-” Sans knew it had been the wrong thing to say immediately once the words passed his teeth. He felt Papyrus’ arms tense and his skull snapped down. He felt the unbearable excitement bear down on him from his brother’s sockets and hunched his shoulders slightly.

“WITH WHOM??”

Well, how could he hide it when Papyrus looked so happy? He wasn’t worried either, as much as the thought pestered him. Residual embarrassment nagged at Sans and he shrugged out of his brother’s arms, grinning sheepishly to himself.

“oh. y’know…”

“NO, I DO NOT!” Papyrus quipped back, then something seemed to dawn on him quite suddenly. Grabbing Sans by the shoulders, he hopped giddily in place. “OH!! OH, YOU MEAN-” Sans grinned at him a little more before glancing away again. “OH BOY!! I DON’T BELIEVE IT! NO, I DO, BECAUSE IT IS WITHIN MY CAPACITY TO BELIEVE AND HOPE AND THIS IS SO VERY EXCITING! I’M EXCITED FOR YOU, SANS!”

Flinching at the overbearing volume struck right near his face, Sans grimaced as his brother’s voice echoed off the cave walls around them. “it’s just a little sparrin’, bro.”

“NO! BUT THE IMPLICATIONS, MY DEAR BROTHER! SPARRING! WITH YOUR
BOYFRIEND! HOW VERY IMPETUOUS! MY DATING MANUAL REFERS TO NEW COUPLES ‘GETTING PHYSICAL’, BUT NEVER HAVE I THOUGHT IT WOULD BE THIS SOON!” Papyrus boomed proudly.

Sans quite literally felt heat flare up in his body at his brother’s tone; clearly both of them were thinking about starkly different things when talking about ‘getting physical’.

“`PHYSICAL` AS IN EXERCISING! WHICH SPARRING IS!” his brother continued excitedly. He had let go of Sans and was now dancing on the spot. “OH SANS! I’M SO PROUD OF YOU!”

“uh… thanks?” He wasn’t going to correct Papyrus. There really wasn’t any need to.

Papyrus suddenly clapped a hand over his teeth in realisation; “THAT CONCLUDES THAT MISTER GRILLBY HAS COERCED YOU INTO EXERTING ENERGY AND WORKING UP A SWEAT!”

Sans felt the heat of embarrassment flood his face at the memory: the sparring, the adrenaline, the teasing and the… following evening. He coughed a little awkwardly; Papyrus definitely didn’t need to know about that. “hey, bro. can you lay off the innuendo?”

The taller skeleton stopped and turned to Sans mid-exultation; “WHAT INNUENDO?”

“What?”

“WHAT?”

Shrugging as though he didn’t understand, Sans veered around his brother, hiding the grin that wouldn’t stop tugging at his teeth with one hand. “well, in any case…” he muttered, “yeah. we tussled a bit. was kinda fun.”


Sans chuckled to himself. “nice one, bro,” he sighed, allowing himself to relax after the brief teasing, “i dunno.”

“SANS!” Papyrus’ tone was exasperated again. “THIS IS A ‘BIG DEAL’!”

“ok. sure. guess i’ll let you in on a little secret. but y’gotta lean in real close for it,” Sans replied quietly, an idea forming as he winked innocently. “i don’t want any echo flowers pickin’ it up.”

Intrigued, his younger brother stopped and stooped down with his skull inclined to hear said secret and Sans leaned in and belched loudly. The resulting shove sent him careening into the wall a foot away and Sans couldn’t help but laugh loudly at the prank. Man, it had been too long since he earned anything but an exasperated sigh or flatlined glower from his brother that his reaction was priceless.

“guess m’just growin’ up,” the shorter skeleton chuckled.

“AT THIS RATE? I DOUBT THAT, ESPECIALLY IF I HAVE MORE PRANKS OF THAT CALIBER TO LOOK FORWARD TO!” Papyrus shot back irritably, making a show of rubbing over the side of his skull as though to wipe the offending burp away. Then it seemed to dawn on him just what his brother meant. “OH!”

“bro, seriously. the meds alph gave me kinda… made me skittish an’ built up magic reserves beyond my control. y’know… the ‘aggression’ stage of it all. but i’m better now,” Sans rocked on his heels
once with an easy shrug, “honest.”

“TRULY!?”

“blood oath.”

“We don’t have blood!” Papyrus groaned, covering his face. “At any rate, Undyne will be most pleased that you have recovered. You can have your post back and I can tend…” He trailed off, then buried his face further into his hands with a sound of dismay.

Sans eyed him warily. “what?”

“It occurs to me that… with you out of commission, our puzzles have likely fallen into disrepair.”

“aw.” Sans kicked at the wall with a wink. “shame.”

“Your lack of intuitiveness regarding puzzle recalibration is abhorrent and I am expressing such a deep disappointment in you for neglecting them!” Papyrus barked as he strode down the corridor towards Gerson’s. “If you haven’t been doing at least that after amusing yourself with your boyfriend, I cannot fathom how long it will take for us to unfreeze and recalibrate the ice puzzle alone!”

Sans huffed out a sigh of resignation, following behind his brother as Papyrus’ voice escalated into a diatribe of irritation over him not being able to fix anything. Or even try to come out to visit Undyne, or to report anything to him, or… anything, really. But then Papyrus also yo-yoed on what he said, venturing a guess that it was fine if he needed time to himself to recover, since he had been extremely worried and being pulled away by duty had left him in two places at once mentally.

It was more of the same, really. A relatively comfortable normalcy that threatened absolutely nothing but the regular brotherly bickering Sans was used to. When he would say his short piece and allow Papyrus to work himself into a conniption before he would apologise, albeit halfheartedly, and hint at getting better. Not really promise, but tried to, at least.

Old Gerson had mail for them when Papyrus went in to visit; Sans waited outside the shop to keep his eye sockets peeled for the strange watcher in the distance, but so far they hadn’t revealed themselves to him. His brother had alluded to him seeing his unknown friend earlier, which… didn’t make sense, considering that had been Papyrus’ worry this whole time, right?

Was Papyrus lying to him? Sans frowned to himself, leaning against the moist cave wall and sinking his skull into the fur-lined hood of his jacket. Apart from the distant drizzle of water far away and above, he couldn’t hear anything that was out of the ordinary. Perhaps he was just being paranoid, like Papyrus said. Maybe he had only seen his friend from afar and was genuinely worried.

Snapped out of his thoughts, Sans looked to his brother when he’d returned with a pair of sea teas. Sans took one and went over the postcards he was given to hang onto. A flyer of some sort for a bakesale beyond Hotland and another postcard whose ink was all but washed away, with a large tear down the middle of it, making the faded writing illegible in the low light. Frowning at it, Sans drank a bit more of the tea as he flipped it over. A picture of an echo flower, bisected by the tear.

Humming to himself in thought, he shoved both into his pocket and followed Papyrus down to the end of the corridor to Undyne’s.
Either Papyrus had texted her beforehand or she was normally at home at this hour, Undyne greeted them outside of her house, arms crossed over her chest and glaring the two of them down. Her shark-like mouth was set into a hard frown, single yellow eye piercing their direction akin to one of her spears. Her entire stance was rigid and tense, as though their wandering into her neighbourhood was some kind of unforgivable trespass.

“SO!!”

“UNDYNE!! LOOK WHO IS BETTER!” Papyrus stomped forward and gesticulated wildly at Sans, who remained a little tense in his thoughts. He was pulled from his train of thought when he heard his brother, who had clapped a hand onto his shoulder, making him jolt.

“I. Am. Aware.” Her voice was set on edge as she tapped a foot, the moisture of the ground sending soft squelching noises with every fall.

Sans shrugged Papyrus’ hand off his shoulder and watched her carefully, knowing precisely why she was so pent up with anger; she must’ve gotten her phone call or text from Alphys, so Sans strolled idly around in place.

“sorry.”

“SORRY?” Papyrus balked in alarm.

“You’re SORRY? After what YOU DID?” The fish lady’s tone grew louder and Sans could’ve sworn he saw pebbles fall from the ceiling above. “Do you realise how DANGEROUS that could have been!? How IRRESPONSIBLE? If someone had GOTTEN HURT? And you TOLD NO ONE!”

The older brother hunched into his hoodie for the scolding, feeling the pinch of remorse. He was fairly certain no one had been around. And in the days since, no one had been reported missing, so he had quietly stood by while the rumours of the avalanche cause quietly died off. It had been extremely irresponsible of him, she was right.

“And YOU!” Undyne rounded on Papyrus next, who looked confused as Sans hadn’t even spoke up to defend himself. She set her teeth hard, her grip on her biceps clenching as she tried to keep composed. “I don’t even know what to say! I’m EXTREMELY disappointed in you!”

Papyrus stared at her as Sans chanced a look between them. Disappointment was certainly not the expression Undyne was wearing and Papyrus was sweating nervously, keeping his spine straight despite how his body quivered. It was as though he was attempting to keep calm despite knowing he’d disappointed the person he looked up to and wanted to impress.

“what happened…?” Sans said quietly, staring at his brother.

Undyne growled and threw down her fists, every part of her steeping with muted anger. “THIS ONE!” she barked, “Listen, I understand your brother has been ill, Papyrus-”

“m’literally right here,” Sans groused, his eye sockets narrowing challengingly.

“-and I understand you both have… some issues, yeah? It’s fine. Whatever. I trusted you to patrol - not go gallivanting off whenever somethin’ else catches your fancy!”

“wait, what?”

“Papyrus, you haven’t been reporting EVERYTHING you see! Not the alien vegetation, not the
tremors, the climate hikes in Hotland, NOTHING! You move FAST, but if all you are doing is talking to flowers and tending to puzzles—"

“UNDYNE, PLEASE! PUZZLES ARE THE VERY BACKBONE OF OUR SOCIETY! OUR CULTURE DEPENDS ON IT! AND IF A HUMAN—” Papyrus tried to protest.

“Alphys’ cameras are set up by the Ruins’ doors so we have a jump on anything that sneaks out! I can’t believe I’m SAYING this. Sans, I need YOU, but I can’t keep worryin’ about your brother like this!”

Sans’ skull snapped between the two of them. Papyrus was very still and he was staring ahead, every part of him crying out that something was very wrong.

“hold on—” he tried to bargain. Expelling Papyrus from his position, even if it had been a temporary measure, would shatter his confidence. He wasn’t about to stand idly by while Undyne crushed that hope.

“YOU—” Undyne suddenly boomed, taking a threatening step towards Sans with her finger pointed at him. Sans’ magic automatically flickered defensively when she did so, but he managed to keep a reign in on it. “—are on thin ice as it is!”

Considering where the skeleton brothers lived, Sans had to repress a snerk. It wouldn’t have been appreciated despite his amusement at the pun.

“I need RESULTS from you, bony boy! None of this half-assed, dozing SCHTICK!”

“don’t got an ass.”

“I will PERSONALLY find an ass for you!” Undyne snarled. Suddenly Sans felt like the situation could be a lot less funny. In fact, he was certain that the fish lady wasn’t all that serious about him; he knew he did the bare minimum to get by, and his medical emergency didn’t really count against him.

It was more Papyrus he was worried about. Sans could tell she wasn’t truly angry at his little brother; on more than one occasion she had divulged to him that she was actually worried for Papyrus. But the fact remained… Papyrus hadn’t reported to her? That was peculiar to say at the very least. He would try to get some information out of him later, after they rested up at home.

“How you two UNDERSTAND how important this is?? Communication isn’t something you can withhold from me like you do to EACH OTHER!! It’s IMPORTANT! Even if it’s NOT a human, ALL of our lives are at RISK!”

The two brothers nodded, feeling all too much like scolded children instead of reprimanded sentries. Drawing a deep breath as though all the emotion had flooded out of her, Undyne turned and stalked back towards her door. “DISMISSED!”

Sans flinched when the door opened and slammed shut, sending an echoing bang throughout the caverns enough to jolt even Papyrus. He turned to his younger brother in concern, not knowing what to say. The lack of reports was so out of character, but now with this setback of Papyrus’ dream… of getting into the Royal Guard being delayed…

Well, it hurt. And Sans could see that it hurt his brother, despite how much Papyrus drew in on himself to appear like it was something to shrug off. There were the telltale signs that he was crushed, how his fingers flexed at his sides, how his skull was bowed, inclined slightly as opposed to high and proud. They were brief but they were there, just before Papyrus corrected himself.
“hey,” Sans said suddenly, strolling back to him. He set his hand on Papyrus’ shoulder and his brother seemed to snap out of it and fix him with a perplexed look, then grinned. Just like he always did. Sans stared at him, suddenly unnerved.

Papyrus pretended that a lot of things were alright. Just like then.

“A… minor setback,” his younger brother said more to himself than to him, then nodded as though agreeing with the sentiment. His back straightened and he clapped Sans on the shoulder, his grin dazzling so much Sans had a hard time convincing himself that it wasn’t real. “A minor delay that in which Undyne has deemed fit to test The Great Papyrus! Nyeh heh heh!”

Sans stared at him. It was heartbreaking.

Chapter End Notes

Hey look, canon territory.
Well, Undyne did tell them both Papyrus' station was only temporary, but... damn.

Sans' belch is something my brother used to do to me all the time, heh.

I ACCIDENTALLY HIT POST INSTEAD OF SAVE WITHOUT PUBLISH so have an early chapter hahahahaaaaaa
Sans meets Papyrus’ best friend. It goes as well as you think. Sans discovers who interfered with him in the lab before his accident.

Sans watched as Papyrus flitted around the house. He had taken to cleaning what mess Sans had left behind: the piled cushions on the couch, the blankets, the spilled cereal, and multiple take-out bags from Grillby’s that had piled up on the kitchen table. It was as though Sans had gone out of his way to pretend that it was Papyrus’ job, which the younger brother both lamented and appreciated. He needed the distraction.

Once the couch was cleared and adjusted to his brother’s liking, Sans took a seat in his usual spot, mostly to get out of the way than anything else as the vacuum cleaner was brought out. The loud whirring cut into his thoughts; Sans suspected it was doing the same to Papyrus.

Thinking on it, every little thing stood out now, how his brother would keep to himself, his hurts, his doubts… Sans was frowning at him as Papyrus passed the head of the vacuum under his dangling feet with not so much as a glance to him.

“bro,” Sans tried, only for his brother to avoid the attempt at conversation by rounding the couch. Flipping around to hang off the back of it, Sans stared at him. “paps…”

Still, nothing. He knew this was eating at him but Papyrus was refusing to talk.

“papyrus!” Sans suddenly shouted over the drone of the suction. Papyrus flinched and eyed him in surprise, then stooped to turn off the appliance with an innocent, puzzled look. “man. dude. bro. c’mon.”

“What?” Evasive. Sans’ eye sockets narrowed challengingly. “YOU’VE MADE AN OUTRIGHT MESS WHILE I WAS GONE, SANS. I NEED TO CLEA-”

“We need to talk about what just happened, papyrus,” the older skeleton said very abruptly. Papyrus handled the vacuum’s pole like a polearm, shouldering it uneasily. “and don’t pull the ‘i don’t wanna’ schtick - that’s my line. i know how much this’s botherin’ you.”

Papyrus shuffled a little before glancing away, his phalanges nervously tapping on the pole.

“You’re overthinkin’ this,” Sans continued; at the back of his mind he realised how hypocritical he was being. “you’re the great papyrus, after all. you just gotta prove yourself. tell me what happened? y’know i don’t snitch.”

His brother remained quiet for awhile as Sans stared him down. Then the older brother sighed and hung over the back of the couch. “it’s not like you.” Papyrus snapped his skull back to regard the other, whom had his eye lights downcast. “when did we get to be like this, man? have we always been this way…? is undyne right?”

“MY ERRORS-” Papyrus said haltingly. He stopped, then sighed heavily, shuffling the vacuum’s pole in his grasp. “-I… DIDN’T MEAN…”
It was difficult for him to speak about mistakes and slip-ups. It was part of his glowing charisma, his confidence that Sans admired. He was stubborn in his own way, much like Sans himself. The older skeleton’s grin tugged awkwardly and he gave the side of his jaw a brief scratch.

“How’s it you can get me to talk, but when I try…” He let the thought end there and saw Papyrus’ shoulders slump in guilt. It hurt him to needle his brother like this, when all he wanted was Papyrus to be happy. To be safe. To have all his dreams realised so everyone would see how great a person he really was.

“Maybe I haven’t been the best role model, heh.”

“Brother,” Papyrus’ voice was low and he pushed aside the vacuum to join Sans on the couch. “You didn’t do anything—”

“I know.”

“You know that’s not what I mean!” the younger of the two shot back immediately. He bent his legs close to him and held his arms around his knees, glaring at the television set. “What I did? I did of my own volition! And if that… contributed to a risk in the Underground… then Undyne is right. Perhaps I’m not yet cut out for the Royal Guard. It means I have… time to improve! Time to grow as a person! People will see!”

Sans slid back down and leaned against his brother. “You’re dodging.”

“A BAD HABIT I MOST LIKELY PICKED UP FROM YOU,” Papyrus retorted, recovering from his sombre tone.

Sans snickered quietly. “Not gonna tell me, are ya?”

Papyrus tilted his skull so it fell against Sans’ with a soft clack. “Promise not to be angry?”

“Have you honestly ever seen me angry?”

“Honestly and truly? There have been moments. A long, long time ago.” Sans knew to what Papyrus was referencing and nodded slightly; angry with his recovery after the CORE accident. Angry with the people in New Home who found out - Sans shook those thoughts from his head. This was about Papyrus.

“We gotta talk about this. No holdin’ out secrets anymore, pap.”

“That street goes both ways, dear brother,” Papyrus lightly admonished, then sighed. “Well… alright.” He was fidgeting, his phalanges clacking together as he picked between the joints. It was several moments before he sighed again and muttered quietly, almost under his breath, “Perhaps in my hubris, I lost sight of my true goal. To keep the Underground safe.”

“Uh. Y’might wanna rewind a bit.”

“My friend… he is a very insightful fellow! Full of grand advisories and precautions. Several times, he’s been able to tell me things as though he is able to see the future. I feel like I can trust him with my whole heart and all of my prized secrets!”

Sans remained quiet as he listened, his grin tugging down in an uneasy frown. Surely that couldn’t be true…?

“His predictions as of late have been… rather rudimentary. Trite. Vague! Before, they had been
extremely detailed, as though he knew things explicitly! With you, with the earthquakes, the floods… Even when you ignited your bedamned box!”

That gave Sans a start. He suddenly felt very cold as his mind drifted to his half-aware state in his workshop. He had all but forgotten it, apart from the rebound itself. He stayed silent as Papyrus continued, feeling a flare of trepidation building up inside of him.

“Lately it seems that he doesn’t know what will happen next… as though things are either not going to a ‘script’, as he called it. Or, somehow? I thought? Perhaps… he had something to do with the strange goings-on lately.” Papyrus paused again, his fidgeting increasing so much that Sans reached over and grabbed his forearm to stop him. “He was very adamant he had nothing to do with your rebound. So much that I feared he had… something to do with it. So I confronted him.”

Sans unconsciously clenched his grip on his brother’s forearm, so tightly that Papyrus hissed in pain. Jolted out of the sudden flare of anger, the older brother quickly withdrew his hand away, stuffing both into his hoodie’s pockets as he slouched further against the cushions.

“i’m listening.”

“He is adamant that he had nothing to do with it. He merely detected concentrated levels of magic and went to investigate! He found you! If not for him, you would have… I would not have…” Papyrus said quickly, sensing his brother’s tense mood. “I believe I may have offended him! Which is why he stayed away! I was merely crossing every possibility off the list! Of course there was no way he could have, and yet-”

“you got your suspicions. i understand,” Sans replied tersely; normally Papyrus’ exposition wouldn’t have bothered him, but he was getting impatient, all things considered. “then what?”

“I went looking for him. You know, he is very dear to me-” Dear enough not to mention to me, Sans thought suspiciously, but remained quiet, “-so I… I might have taken… a few breaks. A few… indiscretions. I had to apologise! I don’t very well wish to have such a grand friendship shattered over my miscalculations! So… perhaps… the Great Papyrus has been… less than mediocre lately. Because of… a great worry instead.”

Sans watched Papyrus’ hands fidget against themselves again and drew in a slow breath. It was a lot to take in. Papyrus wasn’t one to admit his mistakes; but on the other hand, it was clear that this had been eating at him. With a grunt, Sans knocked their skulls together with a bit of force, enough for tears to prick at Papyrus’ sockets in pain with a startled exclamation.

“we’re such boneheads,” Sans groused quietly. “can’t even talk to each other like a normal family.”

Papyrus wasn’t sure how to take that but understood Sans’ irritation. Of course it didn’t help that Sans was growing out of the aggression stage of puberty, as Alphys had advised him, but he understood. He released a sigh of his own and knocked his skull against Sans’, a little more gently.

“Are we really that terrible?”

“undyne seems to think so.” Sans gave a halfhearted shrug as thoughts tumbled around in his head, focusing on the minute pain the headbutt had caused him. “y’know, i still can’t really remember the immediate events leadin’ up to the ignition.”

“Alphys has told me as much,” Papyrus agreed quietly.

“core magic has a stringent flow of its own,” Sans muttered as though trying to piece it together himself. “hard and fast.”
“I know what ‘stringent’ means, brother,” the other replied witheringly.

“think i remember somethin’.” Sans rubbed at his skull and thought about it. The events leading up to the ignition were hazy, almost forgotten. Almost buried, as though it was something to be hidden away.

CORE magic was a muted hue, nearly matching his own, yet more violet than cyan. It was almost periwinkle in cast. When it flowed through his body, it converted through his flux and left him with his own signature. And it burned through every channel of his body.

But periwinkle or cyan weren’t the colours that he remembered dealing with. Sans remembered a burn of white and a flash of bright chartreuse, akin to the foliage in New Home, where thousands of golden flowers popped out of the ground in large clumps. He rubbed at the bridge of bone between his sockets with a quiet sigh of frustration. It still didn’t make sense and nothing new was coming to light.

“actually, maybe i don’t,” he finally said. “just a flash and gettin’ knocked out, i guess.” Did he remember anything? No, not really. Did he remember a visitor of some kind?

Sans thought hard on that, letting his eye sockets drift shut. Perhaps there had been someone there. Someone that caught him off guard. Or maybe it was because he had no logical answer other than ‘I messed up on my formula’ that Sans wasn’t willing to accept, that he was so drawn to the prospect of another lead.

He sighed and rubbed his brother’s skull against his own with a dejected sigh. “i guess i owe your friend some kinda thanks,” he murmured quietly, while his thoughts added: even if it feels suspicious. Maybe if he met this elusive friend, he would remember. Especially if said friend was there when the rebound happened. And especially if Papyrus had gone out of his way to apologise on his own, as well.

Papyrus hummed quietly in agreement but didn’t reply.

“you’ll be ok, `lil bro,” Sans nudged him with his skull again. “i dunno if you’ve noticed, but you’re a good kid. you’ll get another chance. undyne might be pissed, but it’s only `cause she really cares. you know that.”

Papyrus nodded silently and curled his arm around his brother’s shoulders to hold him close. Sans patted his skull for comfort and exhaled, his mind going over what he’d been told. So, Papyrus had been worried after his friend, worried after him, which is why he dropped everything… for closure? No, more like he was doing an investigation of his own, because his brother didn’t believe it was a mere accident. He supposed in a way that it made sense, but things still didn’t add up.

After awhile of silently consoling each other, Papyrus eventually got back up to resume cleaning. Sans watched him go around, finish up vacuuming, wiped down the television, the bannister, gathered trash and put it out back to be collected later. After awhile, Sans resorted to going over things in his mind, slouched on the couch in a more or less comfortable position with his sockets closed. He drifted between the world of sleep and contemplation, until a nagging thought came to him.

His notebook. With his schematics.

They had been locked up.
But he had been referencing them while he worked. He was sure of it!

Sockets snapping open, Sans felt a cold unease settle over him.

Someone had interfered. Someone had *directly* interfered with him and he couldn’t recollect why. Bunching his hands in his pockets, he didn’t even wait to see what Papyrus wanted to ask him before he quickly warped away from the living room and into the basement.

It still reeked of CORE magic. Normally he wasn’t affected by it, but Sans covered his nasal cavity and mouth as he felt the residual burn of memory echo in his soul. Intent to sabotage left its mark here, smudged against the walls and tiles in unseen traces.

Sans suddenly felt ill. Did someone hate him so much to do this? No monsters stood out as to who would have any qualms with him - a few irritations for harmless jokes, pranks… they had never gone wrong.

But now?

He felt under threat.

Something in his bones was prickling with panic. Someone had wanted to harm him, but not enough to simply lash out themselves. This was calculated. Opportunistic. Made to look like an accident. A shudder went through his body as he picked up subtle hints of *malintent*. It matched the creeping, unfriendly feeling that lingered in Waterfall, looming in the distance.

He should meet this *friend* of Papyrus’.

It didn’t add up.

Why else would said friend be there?

Papyrus had been perplexed over Sans’ gradual dip in mood. He could tell that there was something different; perhaps his brother didn’t believe him after all about his motivations. Or maybe the gravity of his expulsion as unofficial honorary sentry had hit Sans more than he initially thought? He barely went out apart from his sentry duties. No reports of humans. Despite their efforts to recalibrate their puzzles going over swimmingly, no one had seen anything out of the ordinary.

But Sans was keeping near to him, not even going to his favourite restaurant. Keeping from his boyfriend. As though he didn’t trust him, suddenly.

Sans had asked to meet his friend. He had asked several times over the next few days. Papyrus thought it odd, but with Sans’ insistence came the overbearing feeling of… protection. Of Sans’ judgmental nature eking something out, as though suspicious of what he had told him.

It took some coercion for Sans to finally be at ease. It appeared that an accumulation of energy had built up in his brother over the past few days. It had been there before, something Papyrus had missed the first time through. He supposed that was why Sans had resorted to sparring with the bartender while he was away. He, of course, offered to help Sans expend the build-up but was met with rejection.

Sans assured him that he was fine. They were hiding from each other again, of this Papyrus knew for certain. He huffed a courage-gathering breath as he travelled through Waterfall, his brother on his heels. He was walking with purpose. Sans was ready, protective and alert, despite every effort he
took to hide it from his brother.

“HELLO!” Papyrus called into the darkness for the fifth time. He knew that his voice carried well and long into the marsh, and knew that his friend would be lingering nearby, even if he had offended him in some way. He had to apologise when he introduced Sans to him. It was only right, fair and polite! “COME OUT, OH FRIEND OF MINE?”

“say,” his brother suddenly spoke up, his voice assuming that New Home drawl he insisted upon when he was trying to act carefree. “what’s this guy’s name anyway?”

Papyrus stopped when he caught a flash of gold out of the corner of his socket. Turning on a sharp corner, he darted out between bulrushes and high grasses, waving his arms enthusiastically. “THERE! THERE!”

Sans swore in surprise and was following him shortly after. Papyrus never had to worry that he would stray far; as in their youth, Sans always kept close to him even if Papyrus was sure he was somewhere else. Which was why when Sans suddenly left him alone for some time periods, he met up with his friend. He supposed that was, in a way, how he came to be such close friends and now lovers with the bartender?

Then - he was in view! He could see him! Papyrus laughed in triumph and sprinted forward, not even short of breath by the time he caught up to the gold glint now within his sight.

Sans was huffing behind him. Really, if the lazybones did more to exercise, then Papyrus felt he wouldn’t have to scold him so much. But there they were, Papyrus grinning down at the little golden flower with a peculiar look on his face.

He seemed… startled?

Why?

“HELLO! BEFORE YOU RUN AWAY, PLEASE, FLOWERY-” Papyrus started, just as the little golden flower bobbed in place and stretched out on his stem, small eyes now widened at the extra visitor. “PLEASE, I WOULD LIKE TO... APOLOGISE-”

Papyrus felt something prick up his spine. There was a high pitched noise suddenly, and his brother was struggling to catch his breath. He turned to reprimand Sans and flinched back, suddenly face-to-face with something he’d never seen before.

Of Sans, sockets pitch save for the live magic flickering in his left eye, of it spilling forth and restlessly bounding around him. The loudest whine barely above register rumbled overhead of him as clear and bright energy built up, gathering from all around him as the smaller skeleton gasped under the effort.

“SANS?” Oh dear. This wasn’t good. This wasn’t how things were supposed to go at all!

Flowery had been right!

Sans didn’t like him, after all!

“back. away. pap..yrus-” Sans huffed as sweat trickled down the sides of his skull. He appeared to be fighting something inside and his mouth no longer hid any pretend smile. He was all seriousness now, his magic feeding the intent to protect, to expel a threat away.

“YOU’RE BEING INCREDIBLY RUDE! STOP THA-” Papyrus trailed off when the energy
above his brother accumulated into a dense white figure, a looming, powerful construct. It was unstable yet veered, hovering in place as energy and magic fed into its sharp gaping maw, a singularity of blinding light building and humming with hot crackling magic.

It reeked. He knew the smell well. Papyrus stiffened and stepped in front of Sans with his arms outreached, watching how Sans’ rib cage rose and fell with the effort of conjuring the massive attack. His eye lights had faded from his sockets and he had his good arm thrust out, phalanges trembling under heavy strain.

“move, papyrus-” Sans growled lowly, a hiss to his words as they filled the crackling air around him like static. “you’re… in danger-

“I’M NOT! WE’RE NOT! IT’S FINE, SEE?? THIS IS THE FRIEND I WAS TELLING YOU ABOUT! CALM DOWN! WHY ARE YOU SO-”

“move!” Sans seethed, his flux whipping around him enough to cut the tall grass and typha reeds around him. There was a building pressure in the air as he stepped forward once, his unseen gaze trained behind Papyrus. The shoe falling to the ground drew dirt up around his foot, as though an earth-sundering weight had dropped and threatened to crack a chasm below.

Before he had a chance to try and placate his brother, Papyrus felt the sudden eddy of bone constructs rise up from the marsh’s ground, tearing upwards in a havoc of white and blue. They flew by him at an alarming rate, grazing him just barely and he flinched as the bones connected with the plant matter behind him with a sickening crunch.

Frustrated, Sans yelled, his tone hollow and panicked as he rose his left arm into the air. The mass of energy in the large hovering attack’s fanged mouth strengthened when he clenched his fist, then flung it towards him.

Papyrus ducked out of the way in time, his soul throttling in his rib cage. He’d never seen Sans in such a state, he was stunned at the very notion of his brother having such power, when all this time they both had thought his damage output to be negligible. Panicked himself, the taller skeleton threw a look over his shoulder, his eye sockets wide with fright that the unknown attack had connected with his friend-

Only for the area that Flowery had been in to be completely empty, save for a torn petal and a few sparse leaves. The ground was scorched in a large tunnel of burning magic and Papyrus felt his soul plummet in dread, his breath caught in terror.

“WHAT…”

Sans was suddenly gasping as the high pitched whine cut off and when his brother turned back to him, Papyrus’ eye sockets were brimming with tears.

“How could you!!” he said shrilly, in complete utter disbelief. “How could you - he was… he was my friend!”

Sans’ eye sockets were still devoid of light and he was panting heavily, sweat streaking down his skull and neck as his breaths shook him. There was the burn of CORE magic in the air and his grin was tight as Papyrus shakily approached on his knees to the spot where his friend had been.

Confused, scared… And it was all his fault. Papyrus felt the sting of responsibility more then than he had ever felt in his entire life and he pressed his hands into the dirt, gathering up what was left of the golden flower before turning abruptly to regard his brother.
It did little to alleviate his worry, but if Flowery hadn’t been dusted then, that was something at least. Especially if Sans hadn’t earned any EXecution Points. He noted the peculiar shudder that passed through his brother’s body as the construct above him finally dispelled, motes of burnt magic wafting closer to him with every step Sans took towards him.

“papyrus.” The low growl caught him off guard. Why was Sans so angry? Why did he attack? Any questions that he had wilted when his brother shakily stooped to pick something up, his expression dark. Then he took something out of his pocket and held it out for Papyrus to take.

A leaf. Wilted, shredded and crisp, but Papyrus knew it immediately. He opened his mouth as though to say something but Sans’ movement interrupted him, thrusting out his left hand that concealed that which he had picked up.

Hastily, he held out his own hand expectantly and something dropped. Sans didn’t even seem to care. All he felt was unfathomable rage alongside the sting of malintent that ebbed off his brother like waves of heat.

When another leaf hit his gloved hand, Sans exhaled hotly. “thought you were on my side,” he muttered quietly, his voice sounding raw.

Papyrus only registered what he meant with the identical leaves in his hands before his skull snapped up in shock, the urge to explain himself finally too powerful to resist.

But Sans was gone.
Weeds & Wells

Chapter Summary

After his brother disappears, Papyrus tears through Waterfall searching for him, meeting up with Flowey who warns him about where Sans has been. Sans lands in a familiar place, disorientated and exhausted.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

“PLEASE!” Papyrus’ voice echoed down the caves as his feet carried him through the marsh. He knew that Sans likely wouldn’t have gone far, although to be honest, he wasn’t sure about his brother’s intent anymore. There had been real fear behind the other’s demeanour, true Fight or Flight responses kicking in when he’d never seen it displayed before.

Or rather, at least not before the incident at the CORE, when Sans chose to Flee instead of Fight.

Papyrus huffed harsh breaths as he called his brother’s name again and again, the echoes from the flowers in Waterfall battling the silence in mocking repeat.

’Sa(S(ans)an(ns)s!! Br(broth(brother(ther(her(er)er)er)er)er)er!’

“PLEASE TELL ME YOU’VE SEEN HIM,” the skeleton gasped in front of a small tear-shaped monster near the corridor. They looked at him with glossy eyes and shifted their body to the side, akin to a head tilt. “THANK YOU ANYWAY--SANS!? COME BACK!!”

Papyrus could say that he didn’t think he’d been so confused in his life. He felt the hurt in Sans’ voice when he was accused of not being on his side; had those two met before? Was that why Sans was so distrustful of Flowery right from the start? Were they enemies?

That couldn’t be right.

Not unless his friend was saying any mistruths.

But Sans… and his formula…

Papyrus growled in frustration. These weren’t the kinds of thoughts he should be entertaining right now! He had to make things right, by all costs! He clenched the two leaves in his hand, his soul sinking with the thought that… it was very possible that Flowery had something to do with it after all. Being lied to… It was nothing new, but the tiny golden flower had no reason to, he thought. He really believed them to be good; they had so many good times together, shared secrets, he was urged by him, his positivity had been a grounding and cementing point in their good relationship.

Even if Flowery wasn’t; there was time to apologise, to explain his actions and to atone for his misbehaviour. Papyrus always thought that he was so lucky to have such a friend, but now grew to worry. The notch in his arm stung only a little from Sans’ haphazard attacks, but he was worried for Flowery as well. After all, he wasn’t sure of how much health the small flower had, despite the foliage left behind when he ran away.
Groaning in exhaustion, Papyrus stopped to catch his breath. He had been running for what seemed like hours without stopping, combing over Waterfall for any sign of his brother. He even went to the hidden out-of-reach area with a bench and an echo flower that he’d caught Sans in several times before.

But Sans was not there.

He was fairly worn out; perhaps if he just went straight back home, he’d run into Sans and explain everything from the start. This time no holding back anything, and-

“Papyrus!”

The skeleton was jolted out of his thoughts at the familiar voice and he let out a gasp of surprise at the sight of his friend. A petal torn and a small cut against his stem, but otherwise he looked relatively unharmed! Papyrus let out a sigh of relief and slunk down to the ground so he was at better eye level with the flower.

“Flowery - oh look at you!” Papyrus’ voice broke despite himself and he reached out, magic humming through his bones in preparation to heal. “I… I’m so sorry, please. Sans is… he is very aggressive and excitable lately, and I haven’t been around, and-”

The flower bobbed once on his stem before peering up at the skeleton with large eyes. “He’s… in the aggression stage! That’s no worry - ow - wowie, Papyrus. I don’t even know what to say!” His voice was small, lingering on a whisper as - for once - Papyrus was allowed to heal him. Not very many points were lost, but since the skeleton was unable to Check him, he couldn’t say for sure how hurt he was in the first place.

“You… Friend, I must ask again. Please don’t be angry with me! I am merely… scratching things off the list, as a precaution! You understand, correct?”

“Of course!”

“You… really had nothing to do with my brother’s accident?” Papyrus’ voice felt tight in his nonexistent throat as he pushed the healing magic out, filling the gashed stem and missing petal with warm green flux that healed almost instantly. “He… I believe he thinks that he saw you. Which is… which is why he felt threatened, you see-”

“Papyrus, I’m not lyin’!” the flower sighed softly. His little beady eyes wavered slightly as though tears were threatening to fall. “I found him after the rebound and told you as soon as I could!”

“Yes, but, I don’t understand - why were you there in the first place?”

“Advice!” Flowery piped up suddenly. He looked a lot better when Papyrus finally withdrew his hand, the very image of a pristine flower in its full glory. “I noticed something very interesting and I wanted to ask him if he was ok!”

“Ah!” Papyrus was caught off guard and drew himself upwards, unable to help himself. “What do you mean!? What happened!?”

Flowery bobbed on his stem again, leafy arms extended up in a pleading gesture. “He was close to the Barrier! I was checking up on him! It’s very serious!”

Papyrus clapped both of his hands over his teeth in shock. “THE BARRIER!?!?”
When Sans used a shortcut, he didn’t have a stopping point in mind until he stumbled into a wall covered in pots and pans. Startled, he immediately warped away again, aiming for outside. No one needed to see him like this, he thought blearily. As soon as his feet fell into crunchy snow, Sans knew he had landed somewhere in town. His soul burned as he stumbled into the wall of the nearest building and slid down its surface, his breaths harsh.

His soul hurt, yet it wasn’t only due to the burn. Several thoughts and self-deprecating chastisements coursed through his mind. How stupid he was, what he perceived Papyrus to have done…

He felt so lost, so betrayed that every part of him hurt. It was coupled with the growing panic inside, of the pale face that haunted his dreams, that caused him to scream for months on end, Sans covered his skull with his shaky hands, trying to come to grips with reality.

That… couldn’t have been it.

It was a goddamn flower!

But he remembered it; a telltale voice, lingering at the edge of his subconscious, the tone, cadence and singsongy way it would test him. Try to get a rise out of him. Then beckon him when everyone was gone-

Sans huffed out a few breaths, trying to calm himself. This was insane. He had never met that flower… monster? before. Yet he couldn’t shake the feeling of it being a very serious threat. And Papyrus-

Papyrus.

God, what a fool. He knew his brother better than that, didn’t he? He didn’t understand, and yet couldn’t help the stabbing pain that filtered through his worries, punctuating every fear he had. That someone had manipulated his brother, led him astray, coerced him to harm-

He knew it. Sans just knew it. From the moment he found the leaf discarded in the trash behind the house, to the same small coloured mark on the wall in the basement workshop. The presence of vines that had tried to harm them during Sans and Grillby’s ferry through Waterfall suddenly felt suffocating. His notes being trifled with, being threatened, and-

“...Sans?”

The skeleton started at the familiar tone. Instead of looking up, he squeezed his eye sockets closed and drew on his reserves to shortcut away again.

No one could see him like this. He had to calm down.

He whimpered when the shortcut failed, his magic fettering uselessly. Right. The burn. The skeleton hunched over himself and clutched at his sternum to rub away the ache and he immediately felt warm hands on him.

“...What’s happened to you?”

Sans couldn’t tell them. Not yet. “need a drink,” he admitted a little quietly, the fray of his magic sending hot pinpricks of pain throughout his body.

“You require food and not alcohol,” the other reprimanded him quietly. He took Sans’ hand in his own and the skeleton hissed softly with the introduction of healing magic. Had he… hurt himself? When he crashed into the wall of crockery… that must have been in a kitchen.
Admittedly things were a little hazy and Sans gradually came to recognise who the other was with better clarity than before. The fact that Grillby’s face was normally obscured did little to help his bearings when Sans finally looked at him. His vision was askew and trying to focus on the fire monster only made the vertigo worse. He groaned softly and lifted a shaky hand to his face to try and settle his vision. He knew he shouldn’t have, since Grillby was now tugging at his shoulders insistently, likely with worry.

Where had he even landed..?

Blearily he looked around, realising he was near the back exit of Grillby’s restaurant. Right. That must’ve been all the pots and pans. He laughed a little bitterly with another shake and laid his hand on the other’s forearm.

“easy there, firecracker.” The fire monster’s aura snapped and Sans squinted ahead of him. “ok, i can eat.”

“Can you stand? What happened?”

“fried-day,” Sans chuckled lightly to himself. After the initial shock, he felt exhausted. Light. Heavy. Drawn thin. He just wanted to lie down. Maybe it was a good thing Grillby found him; at least he wouldn’t be found passed out in the snow.

Grillby hummed softly in concern and stooped to hoist Sans with an arm over his shoulders so he could walk. The other swayed as he was made to move and stumbled a little.

“careful, righty’s comin’ loose,” the skeleton muttered softly and leaned against Grillby. The other ignored the comment, but now was worried for an entirely different reason.

“...Not allowing you to leave until I get something into you,” the fire monster admonished as they passed the threshold of the fire exit. Sans scoffed quietly at what he perceived to be innuendo and Grillby ignored the mumbled dirty joke, concerned with how dazed he had found Sans.

With a little trouble, Grillby managed to get Sans into the relatively empty bar. Dizzy was at her seat passed out and Punk was engaged in conversation with Red, paying the couple little mind as Grillby led the unsteady skeleton into the kitchen.

“What happened?” he tried again, giving Sans another light shake. The skeleton groaned in protest and slid down the wall he was next to, trying to get his bearings.


“Your… brother attacked you?” Grillby repeated, aghast.

Sans drew himself up, grabbing at the fire monster’s arm to help balance himself. “what? no. no way, man. dude. friend, buddy. no. i did.” Grillby watched as Sans looked around him a little in confusion. “goddamn blasted the little shit, but…”

“You aren’t making a great deal of sense, Sans. Please. Start from the beginning!” Grillby crackled nervously. He led the other to a stool and thought better of it. Since Sans was having difficulty to stand, it was easier to just help him sit on the floor. “You attacked Papyrus?”

“What? no,” Sans groaned, slowly shaking his head. “you’re not listenin’.”
Grillby’s flames plumed in agitation before he calmed himself, the reddening colour of his fire shifting back to normal hues. “I’m listening.”

It was a while longer before Sans finally spoke up, first grumbling sourly to himself until Grillby could make out his words. “Y’know… my bad nights… that unknown monster attackin’ me. attackin’ the bro. just… fuckin’ everything up. i saw it. him. whatever. thing is, i saw it, you know… when i lit the box. freaked me out. they distracted me. all this time, i thought i messed up my schematic, my form.. formula,” Sans paused with a heavy sigh and tilted his skull back so it hit the wall with an audible thunk. “that lil’ shit changed it after, i think. i’m sure.”

Grillby watched the other’s breathing; at least that was fine. It wasn’t the shallowed, harsh breathing he had witnessed after the rebound, so he gently gave Sans’ shoulder a reassuring pat and got up to fetch something quick for the other to eat. When he came back to him, eyes glancing over the skeleton’s body slumped against the wall, Grillby snapped his fingers to rouse him.

“thought pap was hidin’ him `cause he knew. he knew i’d be mad, `cause that’s his buddy. his only buddy, man,” the skeleton continued bitterly as though there had not been a few minutes’ pause. There was heartbreak in his tone and he stared listlessly at the proffered bun the fire monster held out to him. “didja know, after all this time, the kid’s still got no friends here?”

Grillby didn’t reply, but he felt his soul sink a little in guilt. He supposed he had noticed the way Papyrus went out of his way to invite others along to join him, yet no one took him up on his offers. There was just something that pushed everyone away from Papyrus.

“m’a bad parent,” Sans added softly, eyeing the bread. He reached for it and missed, then he laughed at himself, the sound broken. Grillby helped tear off a piece of it and offered it to Sans’ mouth, distraught with the lack of motor control. “maybe i shoulda listened.”

“It’s not up to you to be the parent, just because you are the eldest,” Grillby said thoughtfully. “Although I cannot attest to Papyrus’ feelings on this, since I imagine… after attacking, you… used a shortcut?” With Sans’ limpid nod, Grillby sighed. “Why did you not speak with him?”

“was piiissed,” the skeleton replied after another long pause. He had resorted to chewing, something Grillby found peculiar, since he hadn’t witnessed it before. It reminded him of something the shop bunny said and he felt unease with the notion he was building in his mind.

“And now that you have… expended a lot of energy..?”

“was kinda hopin’ for a nap, to be honest.”

“Does Papyrus know where you are?” Grillby asked suddenly and Sans gave him a blank look. Well, as blank as a skeleton with a permanent grin could achieve. “Of course not,” he sighed in resignation. “You should have stayed by him. He is likely searching for you, worried sick.”

“y’sound like `im,” Sans sighed softly. The fire monster hummed discontentedly and gave the other another slight shake. “m’up, yo.”

“Eat more.”

“yessir.” Even if it was said facetiously, Grillby’s face burned several degrees hotter. He watched intently as Sans ate another piece, then another, until the entire bun was consumed.

“Do you have your cell phone..?” the fire monster asked quickly. With the other’s perplexed look, Grillby sighed harshly and repeated himself.
The skeleton slipped his hands into his pockets and outturned them. A few crunched up leaves and a bursted ketchup packet came out, but no cell phone. Grillby’s shoulders slouched when he realised this was one of the many times when no, Sans did not think to have his cell phone on him. He must really try and drill the importance into that bony head of his.

“Do you… honestly believe that your brother would do something like that intentionally?” Grillby suddenly asked, standing up again so he could fetch something else for Sans to eat. The skeleton was starting to doze, but jolted out of it with his tone of voice.

“he… knows a lot more than he lets on, actually,” Sans muttered. “it’s hard to say, `specially when he’s so… so stubborn all the time.”

“Says the kettle,” Grillby added, unable to hide his smirk. When Sans chuckled, the fire monster looked over to him in concern. “You should speak with him.”

“i know. i need a min, though.”

“You need to eat more. Until you are more lucid and can collect your thoughts. Then you will call Papyrus, as I will do now, to advise him that you are safe-”

“man, y’don’t gotta…”

“Sans, I do believe he has every right to know that you are safe and not… unconscious in the snow, someplace,” Grillby crackled irritably.

Sans shifted where he sat, avoiding the other’s look. When the fire monster knelt down again to give him an assortment of nuts and crackers on a plate and even a small bowl of cheese, the skeleton was able to more easily feed himself.

“i gotcha,” he muttered quietly. “thanks, g.”

Grillby watched as the skeleton dozed between bites. He restlessly roasted a few of the remaining chestnuts between his fingers and stroked over the other’s skull, fighting with himself internally that he had to leave this bonehead in order to call Papyrus.

“m’ok,” Sans murmured quietly, unable to keep his sockets open any longer. Grillby bit the side of his mouth with his fangs in worry, pushing another healing pulse through to the skeleton, who gasped softly in surprise. “m’not gonna fall apart, i swear.”

The fire monster sighed and settled his hand over the other’s chest, flattening out his palm against his sternum to concentrate his healing there. Now closer, he caught the scent on Sans immediately, of something charred. A reckless edge of worry swarmed through him at what that meant. He felt Sans’ rib cage heave gently under his touch and the other eyed him from one socket, his smile more of a grimace as a light flickered under his hand.

“Stubborn,” Grillby muttered accusingly.

“and i thought you weren’t interested in compositions for awhile,” the skeleton retorted. Grillby repressed the urge to roll his eyes at the veiled joke referencing the traits of the soul that individuals were comprised of. Then Sans sighed, then let out another soft gasp with the subtle nudge against his soul. “what’re you doin’?..?”

Grillby pushed his hand a little more firmly against his rib cage, feeding magic through bones and directly to the light hidden behind his clothes. “…Constructing a Well.” He said it so plainly that Sans gave him an odd look, as though the notion was so foreign to him that he didn’t understand.
“You are... burned.”

“burned.” No, Sans didn’t understand after all.

“...Know something of them,” Grillby replied quietly, watching as Sans’ breaths pushed against his palm, drinking in the offered magic like a small trickling stream. “...It’s happened before.”

“you’re jus’ healin’ me,” the skeleton murmured, then inhaled deeply with another thrum of magic. “feels nice though.”

“You... said you would take care of yourself,” Grillby reminded him quietly, feeling the sting of worry when Sans slumped further against the wall. “...Promised, even.”

Sans nodded slightly, both sockets closed now. “i panicked.” His voice was bare and a little strained. “m’sorry.”

The fire monster sighed softly and leaned forward to wrap his free arm around the other, pressing the skeleton’s body against him in a tight hug. “Bonehead,” he whispered softly, and Sans couldn’t help the tired laugh that escaped him. “I’m calling your brother after this, and you will speak to each other like civilised adults.”

The other scoffed and rose one hand to grasp at Grillby’s shirt, a quiet hum leaving him as the pulse of warm magic flooded into his soul. “ok.”

Chapter End Notes

Hmm... The Barrier...

Grillby certainly has his hands full with Sans lately. :| With Flowey settling more into the plot, I want to remind everyone a good ending is the goal here. q_q I’m so nervous. lol.

I know things seem to be all over in this chapter, I kind of struggled with it. I also struggled heavily for the next one (you'll know why next week dkdsjfhkg...) and it took me 3-4 weeks to write :V but I'm miraculously past it. There are a few plot points being touched on here.
Escalation

Chapter Summary

Grillby gets the brothers together for a discussion.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Grillby was uneasy when he had to leave Sans behind in the kitchen to utilise the phone behind the bar. While Dizzy appeared to have left, there was a pile of coins that signified her sister had come by. A little weakened by healing Sans, he rested by the register to compose himself, passing his hand through his flames in a self-soothing gesture.

Directly healing the soul took a lot out of a monster, especially one that wasn’t mastered in the art. It was a more concentrated form of healing, affected the souls of both monsters and was amplified by emotion - namely love. He had poured everything into it, enough for Sans to recover and regain clarity before he had drifted off to sleep.

Grillby felt worn out but took up his phone and dialled Papyrus’ number, rubbing under his glasses until the other side picked up. “...Pa-”

“HELLO, THIS IS - HAH - THE GREAT PAPYRUS - HAH - SORRY, I CAN’T… I CAN’T TALK NOW, I'M LOOKING FOR MY BROT… BROTHER!” Click.

Caught off guard, Grillby’s flames crackled in bemusement as he glanced to the receiver. With a sigh, he dialled the skeleton again.

Two rings. “Hello, Papyrus… Grillby spe-”

“-P… PAPYRUS, HERE! I MUST APO… APOLOGISE - HAH - I REALLY DON’T HAVE - HAH - TIME TO CHAT! I'M ACTUALLY - HAH - QUITE BUSY.” Click.

A snap popped off the fire monster so abruptly that Red Bird turned from his conversation with Punk to see the bartender clutching the receiver rather tightly in his hand. Every swing of the numbers on the old rotary phone was a punctuated and precise notation of his impatience. He waited for the other end to pick up once more.

Three rings this time, and Grillby fought the urge to slap his forehead. “Papyrus, Sans is with me!” he all but snapped into the receiver.

Papyrus’ breaths were haggard and there was a long silence before anything was said, so long that Grillby was concerned that the skeleton had hung up on him again.

“Oh.”

“He’s safe,” the fire monster added kindly. “Worn out… but got some food into him… Are you… alright?”

A few more pants from the other end and Papyrus’ voice broke, a sad yet relieved laugh escaping
him. “OH GOD. I’M… I’M SO RELIEVED!”

“No rush,” the fire monster commented quietly. “Take care of yourself. Come by… when you are able.”

“IS HE… INJURED?”

Grillby flinched away from the receiver at the other’s volume and delicately cleared his throat. “Not quite…… Have filled his soul with a healing well, just to be sure.”

“I DIDN’T REALISE THAT YOU WERE SO FORMIDABLE AND COMPASSIONATE A PERSON, MISTER GRILLBY!” Papyrus thundered, but his tone still sounded relieved. “YOU ARE REMARKABLE. IT IS NO WONDER SANS HAS TAKEN TO YOU AS MUCH AS HE HAS!”

Grillby flushed, flutters of gold flames dancing briefly around his visage. He remained quiet, so sure that if he replied he would either say something incriminating, or his fire would mute whatever he had to say. Regardless, Papyrus took that moment to calm down a little and sighed heavily against his end of the receiver.


“….Are you alright?”

“JUST… need to catch my breath. Never. Better.” Grillby frowned as he recognised the despondent tone. “I’ll be over in a jiffy!”

“Take care, Papyrus,” Grillby murmured before he hung up. With a silent sigh, the bartender turned to the floor and gestured apologetically to Punk and Red. ‘I’m closing early.’

When Papyrus finally arrived at the restaurant, Grillby let him in to see Sans, who was still sleeping. At least he had moved, uneasily shuffling to the nearest booth to curl up on the cushioned bench to catch some shuteye.

Instead of displaying his regular disdain for the state of the restaurant, Papyrus bee-lined to where his brother lay and hovered over him hesitantly. His brother looked worse for wear - looking as bad as he was after getting back from his and the fire monster’s first date.

“m’up,” came the quiet rumble from the bench, then a breathless sigh as Sans pushed himself up. He leaned over the tabletop, the spaces under his sockets looking a little bruised with exhaustion. When he caught his brother’s expression, Sans grimaced and averted his eye lights.

Grillby gestured for Papyrus to sit at the opposite side, patient as the younger brother seemed to recognise the way the fire monster was guiding him. It was very likely Grillby was taking it upon himself to mediate between the two skeletons.

“I… understand there has been some sort of strife between you two as of late,” the bartender started. “There needs to be… proper communication.”

He noted how the brothers were avoiding each other’s gaze and he sighed quietly. A wisp of smoke escaped him as he leaned against the side of the booth nearest to Sans.
“You need to... talk.”

The two remained quiet as the fire monster looked between them; Sans was hunched into his arms on the table and Papyrus’ back was fully upright and tense.

“Sans... begins first.”

Said skeleton’s grin tightened artificially and he pulled his arms closer to him. Whatever was going on in his mind, Grillby wouldn’t have guessed it was worry by the way he spoke.

“knock, knock.”

Papyrus almost flinched. It seemed as though this was a common tactic. With his brother’s reaction, Grillby threw a warning look Sans’ way.

“...Cannot begin a serious conversation with a joke.”

“sure i can,” came the muffled, indifferent reply. Grillby knew that Sans was restless, however, still hunched into his arms as though this was the most difficult thing he had to do. The fire monster still had no idea exactly what had happened, only that someone was attacked.

Papyrus inhaled sharply in preparation; “Who’s there?”

Grillby settled his gaze upon the upright skeleton, not fully understanding.

“traitor.”

There it was; the younger of the two tensed and Grillby could very well see the hurt and confusion in Papyrus’ body language. There was a long pause before Papyrus said very quietly; “That is not a joke, brother.”

“it sure as hell doesn’t feel like it, yeah.”

Grillby covered his face with one hand with a silent sigh, but his fire flickered a deep shade of auburn. This conversation had turned for the worse, and Sans’ accusatory tone wasn’t making it any better. He was on the defensive while Papyrus was allowing blows to fall. Were they always like this? Was this how the brothers acted towards each other in private when things were rocky?

“ok… let’s say it was a bad joke. it’s not my first. prob’ly won’t be my last,” Sans shrugged halfheartedly, still not looking across the booth’s table. “not unless your buddy’s got any more wise ideas. and it doesn’t help my best ’lil bro is, well…”

“I’M NOT A TRAITOR!”

“Well, maybe not. but it doesn’t help me feelin’ like i’ve been betrayed.”

Grillby’s flames sputtered during the banter and he leaned onto the table, eyeing the two. “This discourse... is unhelpful,” his voice rasped suddenly.

“HE ATTACKED MY FRIEND!” Papyrus blurted, then slapped his hands over his teeth as though he hadn’t anticipated the outburst, himself.

“ok. i did, but only `cause he attacked me first.” Sans’ tone was even yet hid a tinge of remorse. “what’s more, i’ve never heard of this ‘friend’, and i pick up on intent pretty well, i’d like to think. that… thing was there, in my lab. my own bro doesn’t believe me.”
“I’VE NEVER SAID THAT!”

Grillby sighed harshly into his hand. “You both… are dodging.”

“i’d like to think that i’m keepin’ it pretty cool, grillbz,” Sans muttered in warning, his register low. “all things considered.”

“An admirable feat,” Grillby humoured him, but did not sound amused this time. “Papyrus…?”

The younger brother kept his hands at either side of his legs, his back ramrod straight as he stared at the tabletop as though he could bore a hole into the very centre of it.

“Sans… believes that my friend had something to do with his rebound,” he said very carefully, then stopped. His sockets were trained down so hard that Grillby was certain that if he tried any harder, his brow bone would crack from the expressiveness of his bemusement. “I was looking into it! But I… also have that suspicion.”

It was Sans’ turn to become tense; it was subtle but it was there, the way his bones seized up and his eye lights constricted in realisation. He was no longer quite as much on the defensive, although he was staring at Papyrus now. Expectantly. Waiting.

“I… don’t want to believe it,” Papyrus continued quietly, still staring at the tabletop and avoiding his brother’s scrutinising gaze. “I wanted to get his side of the story.”

Grillby felt the heaviness in the air lighten somewhat with those words, yet Sans had not moved. He sat still and the bartender found it was likely due to the fact that his presence was to blame. To shift things into an easier gear, he gave Sans’ shoulder a brief reassuring pat as he moved away from the booth. As though naturally, he went around the restaurant’s floor to pick up discarded cutlery and dishes before wandering away out of earshot.

“I may very well have, brother,” Papyrus continued once the fire monster was further away, keeping his voice low. His gaze flicked up to see Sans’ eye lights settled on him, hard, hurt and waiting. “He told me you had… ventured near the Barrier.”

Sans’ eye lights constricted again, this time noticeably. He shrunk further into his arms and cast his gaze to the side, suddenly unsure why he couldn’t look at his brother. That, and the sneaky little flower had followed him and Grillby to his hiding spot felt like such a breach of privacy that he felt the need to be on the defensive again. He halted whatever words that he wanted to bark back in irritation, how it all didn’t make sense, but he knew he had to cooperate.

Papyrus had to explain this… friend.

Flower.

Thing.

That apparently stalked him - perhaps it wasn’t even the first time.

That was the malaise he felt throughout Waterfall, but Sans held those thoughts at bay. He had to listen. He was aware that he wasn’t good at listening when he felt this way.

“He was worried. He told me that monsters that ventured near the Barrier aren’t generally heard from again! Something about how our magical structure weakens due to the humans’ seal? And the dust binding us together filters away, and—” Papyrus’ voice sounded stricken and Sans huffed an irritated sigh into his arms. “—I was worried too. However, nothing that he explains sounds like truths lately.”
“so you’ve said before. that and it sounds like he’s stalkin’ me,” the older brother muttered coldly. “how else would he know?”

“So you don’t deny it.”

Sans scoffed derisively. “do i look like i’m fallin’ apart to you?” Papyrus gave him a rather pained look and Sans happened to glance over just in time to see it. It hurt that his brother was being so secretive and defensive of this monster that was so clearly a threat. “don’t answer then. i don’t care. have this mysterious brilliant ‘friend’ that tells the future. believe him. it’s not like i’m your brother or anything.”

Papyrus shrunk down as though each word was a painful blow. “Sans…”

Silence stretched on between the brothers for some time, the only sounds in the restaurant the faint clinks of glass and dishes as they were cleaned from beyond the kitchen door. Eventually Grillby returned to find the two in a stalemate of silence, the brooding of each brother cloaking the room in a thick discomfort.

He felt it between them; they were stuck. Both of them were being stubborn. Grillby certainly didn’t think it would be difficult; to one that didn’t talk very often, it appeared that way. Yet, Sans was unable to compromise while Papyrus was prideful, yet wounded. A gentle nudging to get them to continue talking would benefit both parties greatly.

As though it had been his plan all along, the bartender brought out a small snack plate. The sliced crab apples had tried to pinch his fingers before Grillby arranged them on the plate alongside some crackers and small cubes of hard cheese.

The plate wasn’t looked at, but Sans took a piece of cheese and squashed it between his phalanges. He was still slumped over the table and looked quite down. Papyrus looked even more desolate if that were even possible; Grillby had never seen the younger brother so despondent, even during Sans’ emergency weeks earlier.

“You two…” the fire monster began after a hesitant moment. “Both… prideful.” When the others didn’t react, Grillby continued. “Tenacious.”

Sans scoffed under his arms and flicked the cube of cheese at his brother. It bounced off Papyrus’ hand and skittered away; even though he flinched, he remained quiet.

“Stubborn…” the bartender added, glaring down at the two; they were very much acting like children. “…Does not appear to be much in the way of… progress.”

Sans gave in to a frigid half shrug while Papyrus bowed his skull and sighed.

The bartender looked between them for a moment before folding his arms over his chest. His posture made him look all the more authoritative and Sans gave him a quizzical look.

“Brothers… family. With each, you need to realise where you are. Where… you have come from, because of the other. Put aside feelings of… resentment. And spite… We are not humans. We do not tarnish our souls nor our relationships this way,” he chastised quietly. The younger brother was staring at him, attention rapt, while Sans’ grin was tugged downward and he looked confused; but he had their attention.

Pulled from what had to be disparaging thoughts, they were watching him. It was clear that they
needed help. Too long have these two held secrets from each other. It was beyond frustrating, that while very few outside knew of the brother’s strifes, Grillby could read them both clearly, and yet not at the same time.

“...Am glad you two care enough to wish to protect each other,” Grillby continued, his thoughts whirling as he had little time to collect just the right words as to not give offense. “...However, there is a difference between withholding things out of… sadness. Out of care, if you do not wish to harm the other. Speak… Do not wait until there are regrets. If there are doubts, you must confront them. In a… non-confrontational manner.”

The two were staring at him openly, causing Grillby to roll his shoulder a little awkwardly at their combined attention.

“Some… advice,” he offered a little softly, then picked up the discarded cube of cheese and turned away.

Papyrus stayed silent while Sans rumerated his thoughts, waiting until Grillby disappeared into the kitchen. He didn’t want to be mad at Papyrus, but at the same time his brother had to stop keeping secrets; he was aware of the hypocrisy. Sans huffed out another sigh for what had to be the eighth time since Papyrus sat down, then finally drew himself up.

He was well aware of the other’s attention on him but tried to keep himself civil. “do you believe him?”

Papyrus’ shoulders remained slumped and his gaze veered off to the side.

“sorry,” the smaller skeleton muttered, reaching for a cracker. “what i said was outta line.”

“He’s right,” Papyrus said finally. He appeared to be ignoring the apology, as much as he yearned for some kind of reassurance what he had done wasn’t his fault. “Mister Grillby, I mean. He has a cool head for a… er-”

Sans offered a crooked smile but still managed to look sour about it. “ok. how about this, then. why didn’t you tell me?”

“If… I am perfectly honest.” Papyrus hesitated and fixated his stare on Sans’ hands. “I… had wanted to get all my facts straight. While now it seems so perfectly clear, back then I only had suspicions. I needed answers! I needed proof! And you… you get vindictive if you feel under threat.”

“justice’ sounds a lot cooler than vengeance, just fyi.” Sans leaned back against the booth’s seat and watched his brother, feeling the ebb of anger melt away to be replaced with pity and guilt. He shrugged and grabbed another cracker, tapping it on the table. “i guess i get it.”

Papyrus looked concerned, yet hopeful. That was good at least, Sans reasoned. He waited a moment to see if his little brother would say anything before continuing.

“suppose you’re right. suppose if you told me before i recovered that some freaky flower was tryin’ to ice me. when honestly? you were givin’ me a fightin’ chance. i probably would’ve gone and looked for ’im. but what i don’t get is why the thing has such a bone of contention with me.”

He heard Papyrus’ teeth grind and looked up, perplexed.

“I don’t understand it either.”
More silence.

"Suppose it was an accident-" Papyrus tried in earnest. Sans grew irritable almost instantaneously and tossed the crackers back onto the plate with a growl. "Why? Why can’t it be?"

"do you honestly hear the words you’re sayin’ right now, papyrus?" the older brother shot back. "he was there, in my lab! i had my notes out, but when you found me they were locked up. i didn’t fuck up my formula, pap, he changed it. why else, when i lit the box-"

"Which I told you NOT to do!” Papyrus interrupted. His hands had clenched into fists in his lap and his shoulders were shaking under strain. "I told you, Sans. I hate those boxes. What they do to you - what the CORE magic does to you, I’ve never felt such disgust for a magic in my life!"

Sans tensed and his eye lights faded from his sockets. His grin tugged down and he pushed himself up to his feet, steadying himself on the table. "you keep flip-floppin’, brother of mine,” his voice sounded tight and pinched as he tried with every fibre of his being to keep calm. "so it’s my fault, huh? course it is. this ol’ buddy of yours must be a real treasure, if you’re yoyo-ing on how he treats others. havin’ suspicions and then contradictin’ yourself. see things for what the are, pap, otherwise things are gonna fall apart - and quick.”

Papyrus stood up so he was staring at Sans head-on, the two of them scowling, yet Papyrus looking moderately horrified as his brother continued.

"core magic is what i am, little brother. core magic is what’s kept me together all these years,” the other growled, his shoulders starting to shake under his anger. He flung out his right arm and Papyrus’ body jerked in a flinch, but Sans didn’t strike. “my dead arm an’ leg? core magic. my blind side? still held together by core magic! so if anyone’s got any clue how the core works, how its magic is flowin’, that’s me. trust me when i say i don’t make errors like that, papyrus. and you stickin’ up for a monster that clearly tried to harm me really fuckin’ hurts.”

Sans was growling lowly, his breaths a little quicker as he waited for Papyrus to say anything. He dared him. He dared him to say anything. He glared at him through void sockets, the phalanges of his left hand scoring the wooden tabletop in a vain attempt to contain himself.

The snap of embers cut through the silence suddenly and Sans felt himself start at the sound. He didn’t need to turn to know that Grillby had come back and likely heard everything. He gritted his teeth and bowed his head, arms shaking with the effort of keeping himself from toppling over the table.

He heard familiar, quick footsteps before he could gather his bearings and drew inwards, plunging into the deep well of magic that had accumulated over the past few days. He gritted his teeth and in an instant let a tear in reality pass over him, almost spitting out the words.

“gimme space.”

Chapter End Notes

A big thank you to: Nanenna, bishie & zay for this chapter. Without their help, it would have taken longer than 3-4 weeks to write it.

Writing confrontation and choreographing an argument and keeping it realistic (abrupt
subject changes, meanings getting lost, high tension, etc) really got to me this chapter, but I hope it came off ok :O (I know I worry and y'all assure me it's fine but salkdfhlgfk)

Both have valid points in this argument but no one seems to want to fixate on a single thing, which is making Sans frustrated and angry.

Poor Grillby just wanted to help. :( 
The Promise

Chapter Summary

Papyrus confides in Grillby. Sans sorts out his issues with a friend and makes a Promise.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Papyrus had sunk back onto the bench, his brother’s words and actions like a blow that caught him so off guard that he had to sit and just process it all. He barely heard Grillby’s words when he assumed he spoke, not filtering the sound of fire as though it was merely ambient noise.

He was just so… pulled into two directions over everything. For one, he would truly hurt Sans if he continued as he was, while he would lose the only friend he felt he had if he entertained Sans’ reasoning.

There was no way that Flowery’s motives were to hurt his brother, Papyrus thought, conflicted. He wished it weren’t true, yet he still had that thin cold feeling that pricked at his soul, telling him otherwise. It nudged at his insecurities, his worries and fears. It thundered through his confidence and threatened to shatter it as it shook him down to his core.

The conversation had taken a darker turn and now Sans was angry with him, but at least he understood the core of the problem now. Sans didn’t get angry at him for no reason; Papyrus shouldn’t have zeroed in on his insecurities like that. He didn’t get angry often, yet Papyrus knew that his brother needed space; he would have known even without being told. He also knew that he was weak, and the quiet worry in his soul grew until Papyrus was sitting frozen in place, staring at the spot where Sans had been minutes earlier in dumb silence.

‘Gimme space.’

Papyrus hadn’t heard that in so long. It hurt and he regretted what he’d said and done instantly, his proud shoulders slouching even more under the weight of guilt. He understood what he had to do but it still pained him that his friend, his only friend, was lying to him… or at least, it felt that way.

He couldn’t choose between a friend and his brother, could he.

After a long silence, Papyrus cupped his skull in his hands and leaned over the tabletop. His elbows skidded a bare fraction of an inch with what had to be years of grease and his bones pricked with disgust. But he didn’t move. Instead, he pressed his face into his hands and slowly shook his head.

Perhaps… having friends wasn’t the best course, if it was so risky. He still couldn’t understand his thoughts on this, how Flowery had stalked his brother, knew about his visit to the Barrier, the CORE magic ignition rebound…

He no longer knew if he could trust Flowery as blindingly as he had been this whole time.

I don’t know what to do, he lamented pitifully. With Sans spending time with his new boyfriend and with him away in Hotland, Papyrus was finding it difficult to keep optimistic. He was happy - no, ecstatic for his brother that he was getting along so well with the bartender.
And yet… he couldn’t help but feel alone.

He shouldn’t feel this way. It wasn’t proper. It wasn’t the greatness that he strived for. He should be relieved that Sans was finally caring about others.

But it was difficult.

The sudden snap of embers nearby jerked Papyrus from his thoughts. Cautiously, he wiped at his face and looked over, a sheepish grin spreading over his features.

“OH. I APOLOGISE. I SHOULD… LEAVE. AND… SEE TO WHERE SANS HAS GONE.”

For an instant, Grillby’s features seemed to melt into a frown before his flames kicked up a little, shifting from auburn to a ruddy red. He hesitated before raising his hands to gesture, but then slowly let them fall to his sides.

“Did… you need someone to speak to?” came the low gravelly voice.

Papyrus squinted at the other. If he hadn’t known any better, he was under the impression that Grillby was offering a shoulder to cry on. An ear to lend. Even if the former seemed a little too uncomfortable, while the latter was highly unlikely due to the fire monster’s distinct lack of ears.

The skeleton huffed softly and tapped his phalanges against his temple in thought. Did he honestly need someone to talk to…?

The short answer was yes.

But could he really admit that?

How kosher was it to confide in his brother’s lover? Would what he said make its way back to Sans?

Suddenly Papyrus felt very uncomfortable with that prospect.

“......Am here,” the fire monster added quietly, his head tilting slightly to the side. “To listen.”

Papyrus remained silent.

“I swear… confidence.”

The skeleton pushed out the breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding, some tension leaving him as he did so. “He does this… a lot, you know,” he started, bringing his hands down to tap idly on the tabletop. “First he’ll hide things and brush them off like it isn’t a big deal. But it is! A very big deal! Especially when he gets it into that thick skull of his that something is ‘off’. Yet it isn’t! But it IS! And… ARGH!”

Grillby slipped into the seat Sans had been occupying and folded his hands over the table, nodding to show he was listening.

“When all this started happening, it was great. He was learning, he was caring… And now it… just doesn’t seem like he cares, again? Or perhaps he does, but too much. And on things that don’t matter. And on his own, but I… really shouldn’t be thinking such things, should I? I shouldn’t, shouldn’t I. It’s not… great.”

“Yoyo-ing,” the fire monster added, sounding perplexed. “....Can see why he is frustrated.”

“Can you??” The skeleton across from him hung his skull in his hands and growled as though in
“Perhaps… I can see both sides, because I am an outsider.”

“Oh.”

“Also… because I care.”

“…Oh.” Papyrus seemed less sure, suddenly.

“You are… frustrated, yourself. Are you not.?”

“I am!” the skeleton agreed emphatically. “It bothers me that he doesn’t stay and talk! When he gets mad he just… leaves, and it… it makes me so frustrated, because the next time I see him, he’s either brooding or pretending or he’s just a complete mess!”

The bartender nodded in understanding, although seemed disquieted for the admission. Papyrus took that as a sign to continue.

“Lately… he’s keeping more from me, but he’s… also opening up a little more? He’s doing poorly, but he should know that I am here for him. I always am! It’s not like in his nightmares. I’m not going anywhere, so I don’t understand. And with this… whole mess about the attack…” Papyrus trailed off, suddenly unsure. “I’m not defending what my friend did. I care about my brother very much…”

“He… was upset. Your talk does not seem to have… gone well?” The other groaned into his hands while Grillby appeared to grimace. “...Did not imagine putting you two together would… result in such a direct increase in hostilities.”

Papyrus shook his head but otherwise didn’t respond.

The fire monster hesitated and tapped his index finger against the table’s surface out of habit. “Perhaps…”

“I will go look for him,” the skeleton said suddenly. “Make sure he’s… alright.”

“You… have been running around for hours,” Grillby interjected kindly, his voice full of concern. “....Appear worn out.”

Papyrus didn’t reply to that.

“....Need to take care of yourself,” the other continued carefully, then leaned over the table as though to convey how much he meant it. “Rest yourself. I will look for him.”

It took Sans a moment to regain his bearings when he landed: outside of Snowdin, where it was cold and he could focus on his thoughts. He had blown up. He had spitefully thrown words of hate at his brother and he felt disgusted with himself.

Sliding down the length of the door to the Ruins, he huffed out the last breath of warm air from the restaurant as the dense cold filled the spaces between his bones. He was still feeling ragged, the nap having done nothing for him at Grillby’s, but there was a gentle kindling in his soul from the well of
healing magic that had been imparted to him.

Sans drew upon it as he slumped into the snow, using the heavy doors behind his back for support. He had to think properly. Clearly. He was too wound up, too drawn to the emotional dangers of speaking before thinking things through.

It wasn’t like Papyrus had been intentionally doing this to make him angry. He had been concerned himself and every fibre of Sans’ being screeched with the echo of all the horrible decisions he had been making lately. Blowing up at his brother had been one of the worst, but it certainly was only a strikethrough in a long list of things he’d done wrong by him.

He knew Papyrus didn’t like the dimensional boxes.

He knew Papyrus had a point when he used the word ‘hate’.

He knew how horrible it made him feel when Papyrus couldn’t help him; when his brother could only stand by and wait when he burned himself out.

He knew that Papyrus had his reasons for keeping quiet… He had been trying to puzzle things out before coming to him.

So, who was he really upset with here? He couldn’t fault his brother for that. The fault was with the ‘friend’, of whom Sans was sure attacked him in the basement, with such full clarity that any margin for error was negligible.

Or was it Papyrus, going back and forth on what he said? Contradicting himself? Being so nervous to overstep some hidden friendship with a small golden flower in Waterfall, but at the same time afraid to clash with his brother?

If Sans was honest with himself, he was certain that Papyrus would never harm him - at least, not on purpose. It had happened a few times in the past, accidents, but they had gotten through it together. Grillby was right in that regard. They both were stubborn. Undyne was right, as well; keeping information from each other was just damaging their bond further.

So what had happened, exactly?

Sans sighed and knocked his head back on the door to the Ruins. The noise echoed in his skull cavity and he closed his eye sockets, the bitter cold starting to seep into his bones now that he had been there for awhile. The echo of warm healing magic flowed out from his soul and travelled through his body, soothing an ache and the feeling of being frayed in a gentle pulsing thrum.

“knock, knock,” he muttered softly with a deep inhale. “bad bro,” he answered himself. “bad bro who…? funny you should ask…” Sans huffed quietly, a faint mist escaping his teeth as the last dregs of warmth left him. “bad bro me.”

A bitter laugh escaped him, despite the joke not making a lick of sense, and he curled up into his hoodie as he listened to the motes of snow falling around him. Despite the turmoil in his thoughts, the skeleton could hear faint tinkling bells in the distance that soothed him and soft shakes of snow-heavy branches shifting in the wind. They creaked and they groaned in the false wind supplied by the magic in the Underground.

_Knock, knock._

_Now that’s just mean_, Sans thought in a doze. He wrapped his arms around himself and shrugged a
little more into his hoodie as though to stay warm, even though he knew it was pointless. He was quite a distance from anything even remotely warm.

*Knock, knock.*

Sans cracked open an eye socket and glanced around him before realising the sound was coming from the door at his back. Giving in to a shiver, the skeleton pressed the side of his skull against the cold doors and spoke towards the sealed gap.

“who’s there…”

*Knock, knock.* “Banana?”

Sans grinned sadly, sinking against the door. “i’m the one that told ya that one, doll,” he murmured carefully.

“I will pretend that you have said ‘who is there’, and continue with another, then. Shall I?” the familiar woman’s voice cajoled from her side of the portal. “Butter.”

Sans sighed softly, resigned, “butter who.”

“I butter tell you more knock-knock jokes!”

He offered a chuckle but he wasn’t feeling it, for once.

The woman hummed as though considering her next joke, while Sans grinned lazily to himself. Then she started another one. “Knock, knock.”

“mhm.”

“Are you not well, friend?”

Sans grimaced. “sorry. who’s there.”

There was a pause before the woman spoke again. “Disguise.”

“`sguise who?” the skeleton muttered, exhaustion settling over him.

“Disguise seeming a little down…” the other replied, although seemed unsure. “Are you… unimpressed?”

“oh,” Sans hesitated, “nah, you were great. guess m’off my game today.”

“Perhaps you could whisper through the door what is the matter,” she said amicably. “This old woman so rarely gets company and I would like to help. What ails you, friend?”

Sans thought on it. It was certainly a loaded question. “what makes y’think i’m sick?”

“I apologise… Being a sentry as you’ve said before, I had been expecting you to be around this way more often, yet you seem to have been absent. This is the case, is it not?”

Sans slumped further against the door with a soft sigh. Had it really been so long since his last visit here..? That couldn’t be right; he supposed with his medical emergency and travelling to Hotland, time seemed to blur together. It had been a couple of weeks at the very least.

“nah. well, yeah. y’kinda hit the nail on the head, there. wasn’t feelin’ great a bit back.”
“If you will permit my prying… you still are not well, is that correct?”

Sans hesitated, opening his eye sockets. He remained silent, his careful grin dropping.

“It is only that… Soul Wells leave a distinct signature. If you are relying on one now, then it is best for you to recover at home with family before heading out to work. As diligent as you are… you must be good, alright? You must take care of yourself, friend.”

Sans snickered at that, the noise muted by the fur lining of his jacket as he buried his face downward. She had a point; ‘Soul Wells’ were typically a last-ditch effort by healers and used in emergencies. If Grillby had been that worried… Sans shook his head and huffed softly as his body drew from the healing font. Grillby wasn’t any kind of healer; he just cared a lot.

Enough to bring the brothers together to talk, despite his efforts. Sans realised he owed the fire monster an apology for involving him.

“such a mom. just like my bro.” He felt sullen, a pinprick of guilt echoing within him at the reminder. It was very likely that Papyrus was out looking for him. Possibly Grillby, too - he just felt too fatigued to move. He regretted running away. He regretted a lot of things right then. “thanks for the concern. i’m ok, though.”

Her tone was very matronly when she spoke next. “Far be it from me to chastise from behind a door.” She paused. “It sounds like there rests a great deal on your shoulders, is that right?”

“how’dya figure.”

“When you get to be my age, a great many things become remarkably apparent despite others’ reservations. Did you have an argument with your brother? Was that why you were chatting to yourself..?”

Sans danced around the subject before ashamedly admitting it, first in his thoughts, then to the woman. He felt small, as though he would be scolded, but that was not the case. The other kept an air of concern about her and listened patiently when he spoke his mind and eventually Sans cooled down. He had calmed to the point where her questions no longer made him bristle, but helped in clearing his mind.

“And why do you think that he would do such a thing, if I may ask?”

Sans faltered, at a loss for words.

“It certainly sounds very complicated, does it not?” He honestly didn’t know what to say to that, so remained silent as she continued. “From what you are saying, it does not appear that you are truly mad at him.”

He had admittedly come to that conclusion on his own, yet was a little chagrined that it was apparent to anyone else. He buried his face against the lining of his hood again, giving in to a shiver that rattled audibly.

“That is an unfortunate thing. Do not feel like you are responsible, friend. That is not the case.”

It plucked at his soul that this woman was doing what she could to console him, when he had been
sparse on the finer details. He had made an effort to be truthful and unbiased, explaining his reasoning behind his attitude and his brother’s personality-

“A true heart-to-heart with no blame being cast, is what I prescribe. It sounds as though you did attempt conversation before it was derailed.”

That halted the appreciative nature for a moment and Sans groused, sinking against the door in abrupt, curt silence. They had tried that already. That’s what Grillby had told him, before he had screwed everything up by giving in to his temper and then running off.

“There is no need to be defensive, friend. Perhaps it is easier for me to see it from a neutral standpoint. Emotions run high during arguments; I have had many, so I know it is difficult. Sometimes time apart, yet not too much time, is required. I am sure your brother is worried for you, and cares for you despite what you may think. It is likely he feels as much regret as you do, friend.”

Sans had sat silent for the most part of the conversation, idly nodding at the woman’s advice through the door as it gradually soothed him. Like a mother he had never known, like some kind of parental concern that actually made him feel cared for, starkly different than Papyrus or Grillby’s care. It was foreign, yet wholesome.

He interjected occasionally to supply answers to her questions. After all, what harm was there in bearing himself to a monster he would likely never meet face-to-face?

Their conversation had been long. So long that Sans felt frozen, huddled up beside the door as he listened to the other’s muffled, calm voice, staring at the patch of disturbed snow in front of him.

“How are you faring, my friend..?” she inquired after a long moment of them just sitting at either side. “You have been quiet for some time.”

“just thinkin’ about what you said,” the skeleton mumbled, barely pushing the words past his teeth with a soft exhale. He had been dozing with the methodical clicks from her side; knitting needles, probably. It conjured up vague imagery from his early childhood and it was starting to lull him to sleep. “i think you’re right.”

“I knew you would see it my way. Are you keeping warm?”

Sans gave in to a halfhearted laugh. “the cold goes right through me.”

“Dreadful!”

“hey. knock, knock.”

“Oh! Who is there?”

“snow.”

“Snow who?”

Sans smiled a little to himself, a tug at his eye sockets as he fought off sleep. “snow nice to have someone to joke with.” An appreciative hum sounded through the door and Sans gave another soft laugh.
Hours seemed to pass with the nameless woman, who had briefly touched upon Sans’ state from time to time as she grew concerned about him and the chillier weather outside of the Ruins. Sans knew he was pushing it; if he wasn’t careful, snow would lock in his joints and soon he wouldn’t be able to move. Flexing his phalanges brought on a slight twinge and irritated his joints when he tried. His slippers were soaked with wet slush and he was lightly dusted with a thin layer of powdery snow.

“hey.”

“Hello!” she answered back after a moment. Sans wondered if she had been dozing as well.

“i never did ask how your kid was. what was it… they’re awake now?”

“They are… and they are doing quite well. Thank you, friend. Additionally, they are able to walk again. I am very pleased with their recovery.”

Sans smiled to himself at the news. “a kid that got ‘up’ again, huh.”

“They are very determined.”

Something about the way the woman said it made the skeleton feel a little unsettled, but he shrugged the sensation away. The movement was more of a twitch, though.

“May I ask you something, friend?”

Sans grunted softly before shivering out a cold breath. “i mean, if you really wanted to. now’s your chance, i guess.”

“Just… simply out of curiosity, you understand,” she began kindly, yet the woman sounded unsure at the same time. “It has been an age and a half since the last human has… left these doors, has it not?”

Sans thought on that; trying to remember a sombre yet tentative hope in his youth about hearing that a human had fallen into the Underground. He hadn’t seen anything back then, but knew they had been transported through New Home to the King.

“hmm,” he tallied it in his mind. “eighty years, maybe?”

“Eighty-seven.”

“man, no wonder i don’t remember. i was just a babybones back then, heh.”

“I suppose then you did not get a chance to see them, then?”

Sans hesitated. While this was true, he wasn’t sure what the other was getting at. Especially with how the woman had only fleetingly revealed how her child was doing. As though changing the subject. He was suspicious, but decided to continue the conversation; it was the least he could offer with her help.

“nah. i lived at the capital but i was mostly preoccupied with… my education.” Vague enough, he supposed.

“For some reason, and I do not mean for you to take offense… However, you remind me of them. From what you have divulged about yourself. Very impetuous. Have a keen heart for right and wrong. Very… judicious.”
Sans shifted slightly, suddenly uncomfortable. A flash of gold briefly spilled from his good eye and he laughed wryly, winking to diffuse the called-out magic.

“you got that from a handful of conversations, hey?”

She chortled kindly. “It is in my nature. Like I have said, I meant no offense. Tell me. What is your opinion of humans?”

“uh…” Sans lifted his arm with a little difficulty and grimaced. He was locking up from the cold.

“honestly? don’t have one.”

“I understand. It is… difficult to judge something you have never encountered before. Much like the night sky if you have never seen it.”

Sans felt the kindle of warmth at the memory of seeing Grillby’s sunset and grinned to himself. He was able to forget his worries for a moment, as silly as it was.

“She…” The woman stopped and the skeleton leaned against the door a little more, his spine aching. “She was extremely determined. They all… were. She, however, despite my protests, wanted to do good by us. She was friendly and played nice with our kind within these ruins. She understood and even grew angry over our imprisonment and vowed to make amends. To ‘do the right thing’. Although she was not at fault, she claimed responsibility for her kind and their past transgressions.”

“wow. how old was this thing? doesn’t sound like any human the guard talks about,” Sans muttered quietly, attempting to shuffle his legs.

“She was seventeen. Barely an adult in her own world, and already felt such responsibility. I admired her greatly, for one so young.” There was another pause. “I suppose that… it is very likely that she no longer lives.”

The skeleton hummed in thought. “humans don’t live long, right?”

“Comparatively to our kind, no they do not. While I had wished that she grew into old age peaceably alongside our kind, I fear her… encounter with the King. With Asgore. Put to her a… premature end.”

The silence between the two became long and heavy. Sans was of course aware of the charge the King had borne for their kind, how much he shouldered under the rule as the King Under the Mountain. Yet, something else was there. As though there was a private agony being shared with him.

Sans didn’t know how to console this woman. The truth was that the King took the soul of any human that entered their realm. As a sentry, it was his duty to report to the Guard any human activity in the Underground. The fact it had been so long was merely a trifle. In the beginning he had been a little nervous, sure, but after decades passed, Sans was less and less sure of another falling down and passing through. And so he grew complacent, thinking the day would never come.

“I have an odd request to make,” the woman finally spoke up. “I know it would go against the very nature of your station, however… Please. If a human ever comes through this door… could you please promise something?”

Sans waited as he heard a sombre sigh from the other side. His bones itched with every word, reaching inside of him and setting off that feeling that maybe that was what he was drawn to all this time. Drawn to the doors. Drawn to the knocks.
To a promise.

What a strange thought.

“Watch over them, and protect them, will you not?”

The skeleton whistled lowly after a moment. What a loaded request. In his shape, and with what Undyne had lectured him on… and the strange things going on in the Underground, Sans wasn’t sure. He didn’t promise. It was something he felt uneasy about.

But the woman was genuine. Sombre and collected, with an air that he just couldn’t refuse. Had he known, he would have pegged her as a quiet homely lady that had grown too attached to the last human that passed through.

Not thinking a human would fall into the Underground at any point in his lifetime yet unable to shake the vague familiarity, Sans resigned himself.

“sounds like sayin’ ‘no’ isn’t an option. an’ after all that, welp…” He shuffled again, uneasy with the feeling of being cornered, yet being led down a path he felt was supposed to happen and not at the same time. “i mean…”

“It would… mean very much to me. If they had at least one person out there watching their back. Inside of the Ruins I am able to control a great deal, however, since the others have left, the Underground has increased in aggression with our collective restlessness. It would give me… peace of mind.”

Sans shifted uncomfortably, a nagging feeling twinging at his soul.

“just gotta look out for `em, huh? i mean… sure. why not.”

“Please…”

“ok.” The skeleton grimaced at her pleading tone, feeling such sympathy for the poor woman that his heart throbbed with empathy. “i promise.”

Chapter End Notes

Hey look. Canon stuff. 8D

* Just note, while the fic tags say it's pre-canon, it's ultimately going to go through gameplay aspects so there will be spoilers if you have not done an Undertale playthrough. Just forewarning that it's in the distance, not yet written, but it will be addressed in the fic.

As of next week's upload, there is no more buffer. From April-September is my busy time at work so updates will no longer be weekly unless a miracle happens. I didn't realise how much I wrote at work during 'downtime'. 8D;;;
If you want tumblr updates you can follow me if you're 18+ right here or hit the subscribe button up top :D Additionally if you want to support me I have a kofi but I can't link it here so you'll have to find it elsewhere;;;

Thank you again to everyone who is reading, your comments and speculation really are fabulous and I love you lots for joining me in this journey ;u; We're not even halfway done lmao this is going to be a monster-sized fic (wait that was a pun [dammit])
Papyrus and Grillby search all over hell's half-acre for the missing skeleton. Grillby comes to a rather worrisome realisation when Papyrus asks him something. Alphys aids with the use of her cameras. Sans doesn't look too good.

Grillby exhaled a hot breath as he followed apprehensively behind the other skeleton. Papyrus had been adamant on leading their search for Sans. They found themselves in Waterfall and the fire monster’s blaze peaked every so often, brightening the path and sending mist this way and that. “He always comes out here,” Papyrus was saying, stalking ahead as he stepped over small piles of slashed typha reeds and grasses. He paid no mind as Grillby’s agitated state seemed to make things wilt in his presence. “When he needs to think on his own, nyeh heh…”

The fire monster remained quiet as Papyrus rounded a corner, using the ledge as leverage as he peered around an awkward bend where the bench area was just out of reach. The skeleton seemed to hover over the water for a moment before Grillby balked crisply and grabbed the other’s arm to pull him away from the water’s perilous edge.

Papyrus just stared at him before both of them realised what had happened and the skeleton laughed awkwardly when Grillby quickly withdrew his gloved hand. “…Apologies,” he crackled, embarrassment and concern evident in his tone.

Papyrus looked as though he was about to comment, but instead left it alone. He was fully aware how peculiarly Grillby was acting and it was likely that the marsh was to blame. He witnessed another brief flare-up of fire before the other monster wrapped his arms around himself, looking around precariously.

“I believe that perhaps you should stay behind-” the tall skeleton repeated for what had to be the seventh time in the few hours they’d spent looking around Waterfall. “It’s dangerous here for you, isn’t it!”

Grillby rolled his shoulder uncomfortably, his body tensing defensively at the other’s words. “Nonsense.”

Even though the other was stubborn and seemed paranoid, Papyrus didn’t object. In fact, he was relieved in a way; having someone else to focus on prevented his thoughts from wandering on his brother’s state. The more time that passed and Sans wasn’t found, the more the feeling seemed to crawl over him like insects. After awhile, he sighed heavily into his hands and stalked past Grillby,
whom had shrunk into his jacket, flames keeping low to his body.

Even though Grillby had thoughts on Sans’ state, he couldn’t help but recall the words the other brother had said before departing. That he needed space. And yet… he was weakened by whatever attack he had used before turning up at his restaurant.

Everything was unclear, and Papyrus wasn’t offering up any information. He seemed to sense the fire monster’s discomfort at least, and promptly decided to return to Snowdin.

“I have to do the right thing. Even if Sans said…” He seemed to hesitate for an instant, then drew himself up in an act of self-assurance almost immediately. “I have to. Even if it is difficult! I have to persevere!”

That was admirable, at least. Grillby followed behind him as Papyrus stalked through the slushy streets, beelining right past his restaurant. It was getting late, the light of the Underground settling into calm twilight, leaving the fire monster as the only point of light.

“...Papyrus,” he called out, his voice crackling wearily. Waterfall had taken a lot out of him, exhausting him both mentally and metaphysically. His flames were still low despite getting away from the damp environment and he lingered near the window to his home, unable to decide if he should stay and let Papyrus continue on his own, or simply call for a rest.

He decided with a soft huff, drawing the tall skeleton’s attention, “...require a moment.”

Papyrus had turned to regard him, evidently confused. He eyed the fire monster before his features softened in that peculiar way the brothers did, solid bone shifting to accommodate expressions as easily as other monsters did.

“Mister Grillby…. Why are you dim!?”

Grillby shifted towards the door, rubbing his arm but volunteering no recourse as to how horrible he felt. He simply watched as Papyrus tittered apologetically, and shook his head dismissively as he opened the door.

“...Should rest. Give him… a moment.”

“He’s had several… but….” The skeleton’s sockets narrowed at him and for a moment Grillby and he were staring at each other expectantly. Then the fire monster sighed, unable to keep up the charade for much longer and his grip tightened against the door’s handle.

“....Come inside,” he offered haltingly, still trying to keep up the pretense of being unaffected by the search in such wet climes. “A milkshake, correct?”

Papyrus hesitated before getting the hint and followed the fire monster inside, who retreated to the kitchen to prepare some food.

It was very apparent that Papyrus was pushing himself. He had heard it from Sans often enough, how he had rattled when exhausted or frightened. While Papyrus rattled, it sounded a little different, as though it was a lower note. It was a peculiar detail but Grillby chalked it up to one of their many differences.

It took a little over an hour for him to feel strong enough to continue, his health steadily inclining as he lit the stove and fryer in the kitchen to add to the heat of the restaurant. He brought out Papyrus’
milkshake first, insisting it was complimentary, before roasting food for himself in the back.

Grillby was exhausted. Confused. Concerned, above all else, of how Sans reacted to everything. How he had pushed himself. How he had pushed Papyrus away, before… using a shortcut. *Fleeing.*

Grillby pressed his hands to his face and inhaled deeply to calm down before heading out of the kitchen, a great deal brighter than previously.

“**BETTER?**” the skeleton chirped as the fire monster pulled on his jacket again, taking care to wrap a scarf around his neck. If their efforts in Waterfall were anything to go by, they would be searching for awhile. But then, he hoped not. When he gave Papyrus a short nod, the other brightened as though eager to continue. **“GREAT! THEN! WITHOUT FURTHER ADO!”**

First they went north past the bridge leading into Snowdin, towards Ridge where a slightly larger town lay nestled in the deep forest. The sleepy streets were already quiet, and any amount of knocking on doors was only met with irritation and their disappointment. Papyrus didn’t appear to let it affect him, but every time Grillby was met with a thoughtful look and shake of the head, he could feel his heart sink with growing apprehension.

Next was due west, bypassing the skeleton brothers’ puzzles like so many times before. Grillby was hesitant to travel so far to his secret place in the crystalline caves, so thought he would save the suggestion for last, if they had no other alternatives. It seemed unlikely that Sans would turn up there, since Sans had slept for the majority of the travel time there and back. It was unlikely Sans knew its exact location, Grillby thought.

Papyrus asked the Dogi who were late in their shifts, but they both tilted their heads, sniffing the air. One of Dogaressa’s ears cocked to the side briefly before she shook her head in apology. If the skeleton was worried about this turn of events, he did not show it. Yet Grillby knew that the fact the Dogi couldn’t smell Sans nearby was a point against them.

They attempted another route: south. The cottage in the middle of the forest clearing that remained lit housed a family of snowy monsters, who eyed Grillby warily as he kept a respectful distance. When Papyrus described Sans, they appeared unimpressed, but they hadn’t seen him either.

The fire monster pulled his jacket’s collar closer to him, his flames starting to protest again. While he didn’t feel the cold, the constant flicker of snow falling from above made him increasingly irritable and restless, and he could feel a dip in the temperature he was producing.

“I know that it is unlikely-” Papyrus was saying quietly as he trudged along through the crunchy snow. The fact he had kept his voice down surely meant that he thought Sans would be alerted by his normally boisterous tone and they would fail their search. “-but we should… ugh, try his station, perhaps? Do you have any ideas, Mister Grillby?”

The fire monster huddled against himself, eyes searching the dark landscapes as his flames crackled diminutively. “*******Avalanche site?****” he suggested uneasily. He was very aware that much sudden snowfall would be enough to snuff him out.
“We’ll head there after his station, I suppose,” the skeleton muttered more to himself as he paced on the spot.

Grillby followed automatically. The only things that they found at Sans’ sentry station were empty condiment bottles, several that Grillby noted were from his restaurant, much to his brief amusement. While the other sighed in exasperation, the fire monster scanned the thicket of trees around the outpost and the ground.

No footsteps in the snow.

No sign of Sans.

They headed north-west through the thicket, Grillby relishing the lack of snow as his heat steadily inclined again. He muted it against the dry tinder around him, carefully keeping his flames under control as to not spark out unexpectedly.

Papyrus was still rattling. He was clutching his phone in his hand, shaking more and more the longer they searched with no sign of his brother in sight. Grillby was teething the corner of his mouth, fangs nervously pressed against the plasma that his body produced. They couldn’t even trace him with his cell phone; Sans didn’t have it on him.

What did cold do to a skeleton, Grillby wondered? He wasn’t entirely sure what ‘cold’ felt like, and it wasn’t as though he could compare Sans’ reactions to those of fleshy monsters. He had witnessed a few subtle shivers, but Sans hadn’t complained. Only murmured his appreciation for his warmth and the comfort it brought.

A few embers popped off from Grillby unexpectedly. Why was he thinking of that..?

His wandering thoughts were halted when suddenly Papyrus turned to him, his demeanour very much hesitant and looking like something was bothering him. Of course something was bothering him, Grillby chastised himself. The fact that Sans had run away after their argument would be enough to worry anyone.

Tilting his head to the side in askance, Grillby waited until Papyrus appeared ready to say something, his chest heaving with a deep intake of breath.

“Mister Grillby, I… I have a somewhat unsettling inquiry. While normally I, as Sans’ brother, should know this, it strikes me that this could very well be something he’s taken to hiding from me.”

Oh. Grillby felt his core twist a little in unease, although he wasn’t sure why. To show he was being attentive, the fire monster nodded for the other to continue.

“W-wowie, just…” It was apparent that the other monster was backpedalling in his mind, so Grillby nodded again urgently. “It’s just, I’ve heard that… Sans was near the Barrier.”

Oh. The fire monster didn’t immediately reply, but it sure felt as though his temperature plummeted. What had been a happy memory of their time together was now tainted with uncertainty.

It hadn’t been dangerous, more out of the way and cumbersome to get to, but Sans nor he had been in any sort of peril. Neither of them had approached the Barrier or even touched it, which-

Grillby’s flames sputtered briefly. He recalled when Sans had been so moved that he had to be pulled back, that he had nearly darted towards the humans’ magic seal. They had been far enough away for
the other not to make contact, however… now he just wasn’t sure. Had it been enough? Had he contributed to some unknown condition?

“I just… heard that the Barrier can destabilise the magic we are composed of, a.. and, I would hate for… for Sans to become ill,” Papyrus was saying quietly. “I know he might not be a reliable source of information anymore, however… my friend told me….”

Grillby barely heard the rest of the skeleton’s sentence. His silence continued, his heart and soul twisting with uncertainty. This wasn’t anything he had heard of before, but since their time underground had been so long, it was very possible that information relating to human magic was lost over the centuries.

“He… He seems fine,” Papyrus ended up finishing. “I’m certain… that information is outdated. Or wrong. It wouldn’t be the first time I’ve… misconstrued what someone has told me!”

Grillby found that the words just wouldn’t form. His flames were balking and shrinking around his body in agitation and worry, the colour of his element shifting to rusty colours to reflect his discomfort.

...Was he responsible for Sans’ agitation and aggression? The reason he was acting like a child, so much that others in town were noticing? His temperature sunk again so much that he felt a sting when a large clump of snow melted on his gloved hand and he jerked with a startled hiss.

This wasn’t good. If Sans was affected by the Barrier and was weakened as a result, they had to find him quickly!

Just as he was about to come clean to the other, a sudden loud and jaunty tune echoed through the trees, making him crackle with a start and a yelp came from Papyrus.

“H-hello! This is the Great Papyr-” He stopped his phone greeting, looking less concerned than he had been previously. Grillby could hear the faint chatter of someone speaking very quickly through the receiver, but it wasn’t loud enough to make out. Inquiringly, the fire monster stared at Papyrus, hoping and pleading with the universe for some good news.

Or any news, really.

Papyrus seemed to see whatever passed for anxiety in the other’s visage as his expression softened and he told the other to stop talking. Grillby remained quiet and confused as Papyrus tapped a couple of keys on his phone and suddenly the other end was on the speaker.

“H-hello? Wh… why did you tell me to, um. To stop?” Oh. Grillby recognised this voice; it was the Royal Scientist, Alphys. He was suddenly unsure why he felt like this might be bad news. “P… Papyrus?”

“Hello! Yes! I am here! And very much anxious to hear what you have to say!” the skeleton said apprehensively. “You said something about my brother!”

“Hello! Yes! I am here! And very much anxious to hear what you have to say!” the skeleton said apprehensively. “You said something about my brother!”

“Well… well, yes, um. I was… I was just concerned. I mean, he hasn’t moved for a bit, and it’s dark, and he looked, well-”

“HE LOOKS LIKE GARBAGE, DARLING,” came a robotic yet nonchalantly indifferent tone in the background of the call.

Alphys coughed excusingly. “Is… there a reason Sans is by the Ruins? I, I tried calling but he, uh… looks like he fell asleep.”
Papyrus slapped a hand to his brow bone and groaned in exasperation. “ARE YOU SERIOUS? ARE YOU SERIOUSLY BEING SERIOUS RIGHT NOW, DOCTOR ALPHYS?? WE’VE BEEN SEARCHING THIS ENTIRE TIME FOR HIM AND HE’S NAPPING??”

“I… I mean, h-he doesn’t look well, like M-Mettaton said. I mean, he doesn’t look like… like garbage, but… he’s, um. He’s. He’s seen better days.”

“You MEAN TO TELL ME,” Papyrus huffed into the phone, “YOU SAW HIM ON ONE OF YOUR CAMERAS.”

“Y… yes?”

“AUGH.”

“Is… he ok?”

The skeleton paused and suddenly smiled brightly, something Grillby grew deeply concerned about.

“Oh yes. Entirely fine. No need to concern yourself, Doctor!”

“It’s just that he, um… well, I was first able to track him… Hm, maybe I actually can’t tell you that?” Alphys tittered nervously, more to herself than to Papyrus.

“The ruins, I can’t believe it. But I will! For your aide has saved us many more hours of searching!”

“G-gosh, wow, a-are you… are you serious? Hours??”

“Yes, you were incredible! You have the gratitude of the great Papyrus. I will call you later when Sans is back home.” And with that Papyrus ended the call, abruptly ending the start of Alphys’ response.

Then he sighed, all energy seeming to leave him at once.

“….Hours,” Grillby repeated, concerned. “Why the misdirection?”

“I can’t believe that bonehead,” the other grumbled a little sourly, ignoring Grillby’s question. “He’s likely to be frozen by now.”

The fire monster tilted his head, the image of Sans in a cube of ice like what he had seen one of the wolves in Snowdin tossing into the river time and time again. As a fire monster, he didn’t really understand what the other meant. That couldn’t be what Papyrus meant, but couldn’t ask for clarification. Papyrus had already gathered his bearings and darted off south-west, back towards the path to Sans’ sentry station, leaving Grillby to hurry along after him.

Grillby didn’t think he would have it in him to follow behind Papyrus for as fast as he was going. He leapt over embankments in a flurry of limbs and kicked the snow behind him. It was strange. It was as though his jumps took him farther, his strides short but carrying him a further distance. The fire monster merely huffed and ran behind him, trying his best to keep up and keep his flames contained.

Papyrus didn’t even appear to recognise that he was having issues keeping his speed. He was quick, but thanks to the bright red scarf, Grillby could keep him in his sight.

As bad as the snowfall was, it was at least lightening up. If Sans had been outside the entire time,
however…

A tremor went through his flames with the thought.

What would happen? He hoped that Sans was alright. The fact the doctor had said he didn’t look good was prying into Grillby’s thoughts, wheedling him into a state of contrition.

Eventually he caught up with the taller skeleton outside of an unkempt sentry station, which he recognised as Sans’ from before. Grillby leaned against it for balance as he caught his breath while Papyrus idled by restlessly. It was though he was trying very hard not to just bolt off ahead again, but Grillby knew better than to keep him waiting.

“Go on ahead,” he urged between breaths.

Papyrus looked as though he was fighting with himself to leave Grillby behind. He eyed him, then the path forward, then back to the fire monster. It seemed to be enough to toil his thoughts, as the skeleton finally relented after a brief hesitation and sprinted off into the thicket of trees.

If worse came to worst, Grillby could pluck out the spot of red in the trees after he had caught his breath.

He must have taken longer than he thought. His chest twinged with an ache that his mother would have likely chastised him for being out of proper temperature range, and this is what he got for keeping to such unnatural climates for so long. His health had taken to gradually petering downward and now rested just over half of their usual number. Grillby passed a hand over the flames of his head and adjusted his scarf to better ward against the humidity of snow assaulting him.

“MISTER GRILLBY!”

The fire monster gave pause and wandered a little ways into the thicket, careful to keep his flames away from the vegetation again. Concerned, he saw Papyrus sprinting towards him once more, feeling his heart plummet when he saw the distraught look on Papyrus’ features.

And the fact that Sans was not with him.

“QUICKLY! PLEASE-” the skeleton chattered loudly. Grillby was surprised when the other took him by the arm and jerked him into the direction from which he’d already came, making him stumble clumsily.

“How is..?” he started, only to be interrupted.

“WE’RE TOO LATE! OH GOD!”

With energy renewed by sudden abject distress, Grillby wrestled his arm from Papyrus’ grasp and ran forward ahead of him. If truth be told, his fires burned a little lower than usual and tried to lick out at the branches to strengthen themselves as he darted past.

He almost didn’t recognise him. Slumped against the door to the Ruins was a skeleton, a layer of snow resting atop of him. Grillby stopped several yards away, breathing harshly in surprise, steam wafting from his open mouth. Papyrus’ boot prints only went ahead so much before he had darted back and now the other was finally approaching Sans.
Sans… who was, no, not encased in an ice block as he’d foolishly assumed, but was covered with snow and looked quite stiff. If monsters didn’t shift into a heap of ashen dust when they died, Grillby would have jumped to a rather desolate conclusion.

Instead, he carefully made his way over while Papyrus brushed the snow off from Sans’ clothes and the small pile from atop of his skull, but he didn’t move him. In fact, Papyrus was very careful not to move any part of Sans at all.

Grillby watched for a moment before settling beside the younger brother in front of the sleeping monster, hearing the low-toned rattle coming from Papyrus once again.

“Sans… don’t try to move, you silly.” Papyrus gestured for the fire monster to lean in closer and cautiously Grillby looked up, eyeing the shift of snow above the portal and higher. He couldn’t stay long. His presence would warm the icy walls and the snow would fall. He shuddered uneasily.

“Mister Grillby, your hand.”

Grillby eyed the other’s shaky hand hesitantly. While it had been proven that he didn’t harm Sans with his own body, he was still unsure about his brother, and definitely knew better than to touch any of the other monsters in town.

Impatient, Papyrus grabbed his arm and pulled him forward, then carefully settled Grillby’s hand over Sans’ hoodie, barely applying any pressure.

“Warm him up, please,” Papyrus said abruptly, his teeth chattering nervously. “Don’t…. Don’t try to move him, or push against him. Something might… break.”

The fire monster flared a ruddy shade of auburn and pulled away from Sans. Papyrus grew distraught but the fire monster shook his head and quickly uncovered one of his gloved hands. The temperature dipped and Grillby rasped softly, pushing a few flames between his fingertips to venture towards Sans again.

A soft huff came from the prone skeleton when flames travelled from Grillby’s hand and beneath his clothes, the gust a mist that denoted how cold it had become. The fire monster’s thoughts raced, tumbling over and over.

“Don’t move,” Papyrus was saying, his whispers shrill as he gently wiped the melting snow from his brother’s skull. “Don’t move, don’t move. We’ll warm you—”

Feeling worn from their search along with the building distress from finally finding Sans in such a state, Grillby lowered his head in exhaustion.

“Move him,” he muttered, his flames flickering lower as he repressed his temperature to prevent the ice melt. “…Cannot stay here long.”

“WHY!?” Papyrus boomed suddenly and Grillby stopped dead, his eyes flitting upwards towards the snow looming overhead.

He guided a few more flames out of his hand and coaxed them beneath Sans’ hoodie and shirt, wafts of steam trailing behind like small clouds. He hushed the taller skeleton softly, indicating the threat above them. Papyrus’ sockets narrowed in suspicion, but he was mercifully quiet.

“...nnh…”

Both of their gazes trained on the smaller monster and Grillby’s flames pulsed with relief. It appeared that Sans was waking and even tried to shift, much to Papyrus’ avid concern.
“Don’t, don’t—” he continually pleaded with him, “- don’t, brother. Not yet.”

“Let me know when it’s enough. I will carry him back,” the fire monster offered under a veiled grimace. When Sans’ eye lights guttered into existence, Grillby gave him a relieved smile. “There you are.”

He silently told his flames to behave themselves, only touching upon Sans’ joints enough to warm him and melt away the ice that had locked him up. With the faint creak and groan from high above, Grillby stopped and drew back his hands in concern, his bright eyes wide at the threat.

“warm,” came the groggy tone of Sans’ voice, bare and thin with a hint of confusion.

“Yes, Sans! Warm! You’ll keep getting warm until you’re good to move. We’ll take you home, and… and get you something to eat. That would be fine, yes? It’ll be fine!” Papyrus was jittery, something that Grillby focused on when he leaned in a little more to listen to the fire within Sans’ body.

They told him of the other’s state, how non-warm he was, how stiff and how things hurt. They whispered of burning, of his soul aching, they wanted to help. The Well was secure and Sans was still drawing upon it. Grillby knew that was a contributing factor as to why he felt weakened - yet he carried on, sparing his own internal temperature to heat the other so that he could be moved without something… breaking.

A shudder passed through his flames with the thought of what Papyrus’ warning had conjured. Of a crack that would spread, like along glass if it got hot too quickly after being outside all night. Of china splitting after years of abuse. Grillby swallowed the worry and huffed out a soft breath of effort as his thoughts pestered him.

He had taken Sans to the Barrier… to visit the sky. A glimpse of the Surface, to renew and share a hope with the one he loved that maybe they might live to see it together. But instead, his good intentions had likely withered his lover and made him unstable.

Jerked from self-admonishing thoughts, Grillby felt a skeletal hand rest over his own, a subtle rustle as startled gasps shook Sans. He flicked his gaze forward and up again to the threat of snow, then back down to the skeleton in front of him, who was grinning a little sheepishly, his eye lights faded in his sockets.

He didn’t say anything apart from what he had before, but soon Sans was shaking with strain to push himself up to his feet. The snow stuck to him along the backs of his track shorts and his hoodie, falling from him in crisp sloughs.

Papyrus hung back, unsure what to do now that Sans was able to move. Grillby pulled him into his arms, his flames ruddy and dark, heat throwing off of him with such uneven intensity.

Even if he didn’t think it explicitly, Papyrus felt in his heart and soul… that his brother more than likely didn’t need him anymore. Watching the two in an embrace that made him feel like he was intruding, the younger skeleton simply averted his gaze, his smile stiff, his entire being seized and numb.

He needed to apologise… in private. And then Sans could-

“bro.”

Papyrus froze in place, his gaze trained on the melting snow at the fire monster’s feet. He stiffened when he drew up, arms hanging at his sides when he heard his brother’s voice. The clicks from his
brother’s shivering movements crossed between the two monsters and Sans huffed quietly with the effort.

He knew Sans was putting on a front in the company of his lover. Papyrus was strained to keep composed, heart heavy as Sans settled his hands on his shoulders to steady himself.

The fire monster watched for a moment before ducking away from the sealed entrance to the Ruins and towards the thicket they had come from, to give the brothers privacy. Sans had noticed he was looking unnaturally dim and threw him a worried look before turning back to regard his brother.

He was holding up. Despite the cruel things he’d said to him, Papyrus looked like a beacon of strength. Sans felt guilt for it all the more, pinching along his ribs and coiling around his soul as he drew his arms around his brother’s shoulders.

“m’sorry, papyrus,” he muttered between them, “m’awful and i said a lot of crap i shouldn’t’ve. i didn’t… i wasn’t thinkin’ clearly. i know you’re not against me.”

Papyrus balked at Sans; with how angry he had been, he was… really apologising so soon? He had been ready to be avoided, for everything to be unclear and just meld back into broad obscurity, the way things had always been.

Perhaps it was that Sans felt guilt for erupting with such anger, as it were. Perhaps he finally understood Papyrus’ reasoning behind why he had held back.

Legs weak, Sans grabbed onto his brother’s shirt with a muffled, bitter chuckle. “i’m fine,” he offered offhandedly.

Papyrus stayed quiet, wondering if that were truly the case. He worried despite everything. Things had been going well; maybe the quick succession of bad things had just overwhelmed Sans… as they had overwhelmed himself.

He brushed the more stubborn clumps of snow that had frozen to Sans’ hoodie and held onto him tightly. They couldn’t stay angry with each other. Each other was all they had.

Except…

Papyrus’ gaze found the fire monster, out of the way, whom had stooped low to the ground away from the threatening mountainside, a small perimeter of slush gathered around his feet. He realised he had been unfair to Grillby, hauling him to Waterfall, then out to the woods to search for and thaw his brother.

He knew he was being selfish. He had to stop those thoughts, Papyrus mentally berated himself. Stroking over the top of Sans’ skull and realising he’d been silent this entire time, the younger of the two skeletons sighed almost theatrically.

“I’M GLAD,” he replied after too long of a pause. He saw the hurt in Sans’ expression before it disappeared, wondering what it meant. “WE’RE GOING HOME.”

Sans nodded, feeling chagrined. It felt as though their roles were reversed once again, and that Papyrus was the older brother. Maybe he’d stop correcting people when they erroneously assumed that was the case.

He grunted in surprise when Papyrus hauled him up and wrapped his arms around him, supporting him under the femurs and his back. Sans sunk against him in embarrassment, soul trembling in self-loathing.
It felt like Papyrus didn’t forgive him.

It honestly felt like he was just going through the motions.

With that, Sans felt a heavy revelation. He had clearly messed up.

Chapter End Notes

One step forward, one step back.

Just a note that this is the last completed chapter that I have written up.. I'm in the process of writing chapter 54 but I don't have a release date, sorry 8D

ETA: I may put the "creator chose not to use archive warnings" back on the fic since while there will be absolutely no underage/sexual abuse, I was debating some key points in the future, and since they are related to the Genocide Route it's probably best if that is on. For spoiler reasons, I won't indicate, in case the plot doesn't go in that direction, but I'd like for readers to be prepared just in case. ;n;

If you want updates/emails when this fic updates, you can hit the subscribe button at the top. I also announce new chapter uploads on my 18+ tumblr (here)
Reconcile

Chapter Summary

Grillby sleeps over at the brothers’ house to keep an eye on Sans. Papyrus keeps an eye on them both, as Grillby appears to be weakened. The Barrier rumour gets debunked by Alphys. The brothers have a true heart-to-heart.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

Grillby looked at his restaurant longingly as Papyrus urged him forward, Sans in his arms. “Come on, Mister Grillby. I will not have you alone during all this, I’m so very terribly sorry that I’ve dragged you this way and that… Please, allow me to repay you-”

The fire monster couldn’t very well turn down Sans’ brother even if he had wanted to. While Sans had hummed appreciatively in his arms after being thawed, he now looked dejected and distracted in his brother’s, avoiding his gaze every time their eyes met. So Grillby opted to allow his flames to branch upwards a little to stretch out, trying to regain temperature control while Sans snuck concerned looks his way.

Perhaps he looked in worse shape than he originally thought. Grillby’s flames bunched out and pulsed before fettering back against his form, strained and thin and not at all robust. Sans lifted his skull from Papyrus’ shoulder to see clearly, feeling a pinch of nervousness the other’s actions brought.

So what was going on? What had happened to affect Grillby in such a way? Discreetly, Sans pushed himself to Check, but caught the warning look the bartender shot him when he felt the ethereal touch.

“sorry.” Just worried. Sans lowered his gaze to Papyrus’ footprints as he was carried towards their house.

He still felt exhausted and as stubborn as he was, appreciated the fact that his brother was still carrying him. After they had entered the house, Papyrus kicked off his boots and allowed Sans to slide down to his own feet, unsteady where he stood. Leaning against the door, the older of the two watched as Grillby was led over by the arm and forcefully made to sit on the couch. A few dim embers popped off the fire monster when Papyrus turned and rounded on Sans, who threw up his hands in a placating gesture.

“ALRIGHT,” Papyrus started, all business now that any threat of others overhearing was gone. Instead of the continuation to his thought however, Papyrus grabbed Sans and brought him over to the couch and pushed him to sit beside the fire monster. “YOU NEVER ANSWERED ME,” he continued shortly, all premise of insecurity gone.

Sans stared at him in confusion and Grillby hunched his shoulders, feeling a well of guilt build up inside of him. While inside was definitely preferable to the outdoors, Grillby still felt under the weather. Now put on the spot, his regular silence got to the better of him. He stayed quiet when Sans looked at him, confused and exhausted.
“THE BARRIER,” Papyrus sighed. “IT’S NO USE HIDING IT, SANS. I KNOW WHAT IT DOES!”

Sans sputtered indignantly as the cogs began to turn in his head. He realised that no, he hadn’t addressed this, although he was keenly aware of Grillby’s sudden discomfort. He didn’t know what to think of it, so naturally assumed the fire monster was merely being polite after being forced to come over for Papyrus’ interrogation.

“bro, in all honesty. kinda?”

“KIND OF??”

Sans shrugged and leaned against Grillby, his warmth seeping through his clothes, although not as pronounced as what was usual. It wasn’t even drying the moisture. “well, i didn’t touch it.”

Grillby coughed quietly, clearly uncomfortable under scrutiny. “We were… near it. Did not make contact, however,” he agreed a little lamely, rubbing his arms with his hands in order to spark his heat to a more comfortable level.

“BUT-” Papyrus stopped himself short and paced in front of the pair, back and forth, back and forth, until his brother finally spoke up.

“honest. even if your…” he bit back an insult and muttered quietly, “little friend told you otherwise, i’m fine. we didn’t touch it. m’not lyin’.”

Papyrus regarded the two as though his direct glare would evaporate any ruse. Then he sighed, internal conflict rearing its ugly head.

“we didn’t touch it, pap,” Sans said again insistently.

“Delta’s Oath…” There was a hint of regret in Grillby’s tone that made the shorter skeleton pause, but he made a mental note to ask later. “Promise.”

The younger brother glared at them both, arms crossed in front of him as though he was having trouble gauging something in his mind. For all intents and purposes, Sans supposed he had every right to be suspicious, but not with this. It was common enough knowledge not to touch areas the Barrier covered, but nothing inherently bad happened to anyone if they were close. If that had been the case, hundreds of monsters would’ve lost their lives during the Underground’s expansion stages.

“ok. you don’t believe us. call alphys, then. she’s got extensive knowledge of souls and the barrier at her disposal,” Sans relented quietly, shifting on the couch so he could get more comfortable. He tugged at Grillby’s arm briefly, a little shyly, until the other leaned back against the couch with a quiet crackle of relief.

Papyrus seemed to linger on the suggestion for longer than what was perhaps necessary. Then he simply whirled in place and stalked to the kitchen, but at least he was preparing to use his phone.

When he disappeared from view, Sans sighed softly, giving Grillby’s jacket sleeve another tug. “sorry to pull you into this,” he muttered quietly.

Grillby didn’t say anything to that, but wrapped an arm around the other, his fire humming like a fizz.

“you seem kinda, uh…”
“Just tired,” Grillby hushed quietly. “May very well take a page out from your book and have a nap when this discussion has come to a conclusion.”

Sans breathed a sigh of relief, yet knew Grillby was pulling the same thing he was prone to doing - likely to keep him from worrying. The fact that he had been dragged along when he clearly wanted to go home wasn’t lost on Sans.

“Want me to whisk you home?” he offered lamely.

“Do, and I will be cross.” Sans had to laugh lightly at that and drew his arms around Grillby, pulling him closer. “...Mean it. I know it harms you to do so.”

“M’fine,” Sans repeated for what felt like the eightieth time. “Maybe a nap would be nice.”

“Maybe.”

“You’re gonna keep mockin’ the maybes, eh?”

“Probably.”

Eventually they huddled on the couch, the loose coil in the back cushion digging against Grillby’s elbow as he wrapped his arms around the other, keeping him warm, nurturing the healing font within him. He listened to Papyrus’ exasperated, harsh whispers from the kitchen in what had to be a lengthy yet informative conversation with the Royal Scientist while his soul clenched with apprehension.

He really hoped it didn’t mean what he thought it meant. Being close to the Barrier had been a shortsighted gamble and if Sans was how he was because of him... Well, Grillby didn’t know if he could forgive himself.

He listened to the soft song that reverberated from Sans’ rib cage, muffled by his clothes. It was subtle, yet it was there, a quiet unknown hum of a soul being healed, of it entertaining Hope and Future. Grillby tried to relax against him as his flames kindled a little brighter, his health strengthening and warming up the skeleton.

Sans had taken to stroking over Grillby’s back, a worry of his own in his heart. While he was concerned with the fire monster’s current state, he was also afraid of what his brother might be doing now that his so-called ‘friend’ had been exposed. His mind twisted and recoiled with the memory of what he realised wasn’t a knife, but had been thorns, slashing at him, ruining his home, his friends—

And Papyrus. Poor Papyrus, he could just feel for the guy. Sans closed his sockets when he heard his brother’s footsteps pacing in the kitchen, still at a loss as to what to say.

His only friend... and they had betrayed him. Led him astray, lied to him. Manipulated him. And tried to harm his family. Sans didn’t know what he could say to make things right, or even if he could make things right. Or if it was even up to him to do so.

Lightly grazing his phalanges over the folds of Grillby’s jacket and listening to the steady hum and crisp crackles of the other’s fire, Sans closed his eye sockets.

Eventually Papyrus came back from his conversation with Alphys, a little calmer than before. Almost
sheepish, with an air of regret for his misinformed assumption. He tapped his phone between his hands and turned over the device in his grasp, unable to meet with the sight of the two and his very wrong and very embarrassing accusation.

Grillby had fallen asleep on top of Sans, whose eye sockets were half open and whose arms were wrapped around the other, watching his flames lick lazily around the other’s vague features. When Papyrus drew near, his brother looked over to him, hiding his concern.

“IT…” Papyrus stopped when he realised his full volume would likely not be appreciated. “It appears that… I….” He struggled with the sentence before walking over to whisper to his brother and stooped next to the couch. “I… may have been misled.”

Sans winked his dead eye, his grin stiffening sardonically. “maybe.” When the other didn’t answer, he exhaled slowly as to not agitate the sleeping monster on top of him. “that sucks, bud. I know, I’m sorry. it’s hard.”

“I…” Feel like a fool. Papyrus couldn’t push away the feeling, having spent so much time with the encouraging flower that it bolstered his confidence and allowed him to be such a pillar of strength - and now it felt as though the floor had been pulled out from under him. All that remained was a massive hole, and while the hole was frightening, it was a better alternative than being led astray again.

Realising that he hadn’t said anything for quite some time and Sans was watching him, worried, Papyrus forced himself to smile. His brother had to rest. His boyfriend was exhausted. Heck, even he was entertaining holing up in his room and permitting himself a few wasted hours of recuperation.

As Papyrus was stuck in his thoughts, Sans’ frown dropped a little more and he reached out to grab his brother’s sleeve, making an effort to give him an apologetic smile.

“don’t beat yourself up. it’s ok, it’s not your fault. it happens.” Sans hated the way he sounded so exhausted and even grew a little irritable when Papyrus patted his hand with a short nod. He looked distracted and absorbed in his thoughts, so Sans sighed softly and gave his hand a squeeze. “bro. I mean it, ok? we can talk. sure, we’re crap at it, but… we need to, y’know, sort through this. there’s been a lot of misinformation tossed around lately. we gotta try, at least.”

Papyrus grinned a little awkwardly at that. “Perhaps… it would be best if you weren’t under fire.”

Sans looked down at Grillby, snoozing over him like a blanket of literal flame, then grinned awkwardly. “no kiddin’, heh.” He attempted to shift, but the fire monster remained asleep and immovable. “guess it’s best if we took a raincheck on that. you look like you…” Sans stopped and his teeth tugged down in a more pronounced frown. “you need to rest, papyrus.”

The taller skeleton nodded in dumb silence, the air thick with concern. He took his hand away from Sans’ and wrung his fingers together. “Do you… need anything? Blankets? Something to drink? Food..?” Between the suggestions, Papyrus could barely contain himself from blurting out what he wanted to ask instead.

Me?

Sans’ look was veiled but he felt the needling guilt inside of him again. He also wanted Papyrus to be close by, but he looked plain exhausted. “i’d tell you to stay down here with us, but there’s not a lotta room on the couch anymore, heh.” More awkward silence, and Sans sighed once more, still dozy, still feeling rejected. “promise we’ll talk tomorrow. ok, bro?”
The other nodded, unable to hide the sullen look when he felt the pang of denial. Without being asked, Papyrus left to fetch some snacks to put on the coffee table and took a thick comforter from the hall closet to drape over the two. Within minutes of being covered by both the bartender and the blanket, Sans had slipped into sleep, his brow creased with residual worry.

As awkward as the position was, the two of them remained asleep on the couch throughout the night. Sans dreamt, but the imagery was abstract and foreign, confusing and peculiar.

Several scenes played out in obscure motion, being cared for and protected, even when he was small. Someone being angry with him nearby, but it wasn’t directed at him. Instead, the rage he felt from someplace else seemed like it was for someone he didn’t know. It didn’t make sense, but dreams rarely did. Sans thought for a moment the feelings bled out into his waking consciousness, but when he opened his eye sockets, it honestly felt as though someone had been hovering over him protectively.

But no, it had been just Grillby. His warmth had strengthened somewhat and he had wormed his way to the other’s side, curled against each other with Grillby’s arm hanging over Sans’ left side. The blanket had twisted around them and his clothes were now dry, Sans realised a little blearily as he looked around.

The first thing that he recognised was that the clock was ticking and piercing the silence of the morning with each note. There were no familiar sounds coming from the kitchen as what was usual, so he figured it still had to be quite early. Secondly, he felt a little dizzy, likely due to the fact that the healing well had ceased sometime during the night and Sans had yet to fully recover. That, and he was hungry.

Muting an audible yawn, Sans curled against the fire monster’s body, pulling his arms up to bring the blanket around him a little more. It felt like he couldn’t get warm. But that was impossible. He was being held close by a literal space heater.

It took him awhile to wake up, his mind creaking like rusty cogs. He fell in and out of sleep before the need for food finally roused him and he gently patted the fire monster’s face to get him to unwrap his arms, the skeleton’s eye lights seeking out the crooked way his glasses hung off on one side. At first, Grillby’s flames kindled subtly in a fluttering arc around the surface of his exposed body, the hues intensifying and brightening when the fire monster finally opened one eye with a puzzled grunt.

“rise an’ shine, morning star,” Sans grinned a little wanly.

Grillby crackled something in response, clearly not in the mood to be awake just then, and he moved to put his hand over the skeleton’s face in protest. Grunting himself, Sans pulled the other’s hand away and rolled up to a sitting position, taking a moment to look down at him. The fires dimmed after a brief stirring and kept low to the other’s form, as though settling back down to rest and conserve energy. Just to make sure they weren’t crushed in Grillby’s sleep, Sans removed his glasses and set them on the coffee table close by.

His back ached when he stood, but Sans was grateful for being able to stand on his own. He grabbed a couple pieces of granola slabs from the table and some juice before turning to the kitchen to check, just in case. Papyrus wasn’t in there, so he figured he must’ve gone upstairs.

‘Upstairs’ seemed like such a daunting task, Sans realised. When he looked up the flight leading to
the second floor, vertigo made him sway with a dizzy spell and he had to rest his hand on the
bannister to steady himself.

Each step felt as though the world was swinging forwards and backwards like a pendulum and Sans
clung to the rail, disoriented. He had managed eight steps by himself and had a few more to go to
reach the landing. Then he’d be in the clear - Papyrus’ bedroom door was right there.

Sans pushed himself further, even when it felt like at one point he was being pulled backwards. But
he had made it and was huffing uneasily outside of his brother’s room, trying to get a grip on himself
before knocking on Papyrus’ door.

*Knock, knock.* No answer.

Sans frowned and leaned against the door. Coming forward first to admit he was wrong about things
was a foot in the right direction, but he felt out of sorts. Out of bounds. He swayed despite the hard
surface keeping him upright and knocked again.

“papyrus… you awake?”

There was a brief pause before Sans sighed, ready to call out again, just in case. “OH THANK
GOD. I DON’T KNOW IF I COULD HANDLE A KNOCK-KNOCK JOKE RIGHT NOW!”

Sans grinned wryly. “i’ll spare you today. wanna talk?”

He must’ve been holding back, as the door suddenly opened inwards and Sans lost balance.
Mercifully, his brother caught under his arms and Sans grinned at him apologetically. Then his smile
fell at Papyrus’ expression and he grew quite sombre as a result, shifting in his brother’s hold until he
could walk to the bed on his own.

Perhaps he was reading into it too much, but Sans lingered on the fact that Papyrus hadn’t helped
him to the bed. Maybe it was due to every other time he had tried on his own, or merely due to the
fact that perhaps now Papyrus still didn’t forgive him. Residual guilt from the day before came
trickling back as Sans pulled his arms around himself, watching the other as he drew close.

“ALRIGHT,” Papyrus started with a harsh exhale; it had startled Sans out of his thoughts and forced
him down, unable to meet his gaze. “THEN WHY NOT YOU BEGIN FIRST?”

Sans shrugged uncomfortably. “why me?”

“BECAUSE” the other retorted in exasperation, then he corrected himself when he saw Sans flinch.
“WHAT I SAY DOESN’T MATTER UNLESS I HAVE A CLEAR AND CONCISE
BREAKDOWN OF WHAT HAPPENED IN YOUR LAB.”

Sans bit back the groan of frustration that threatened to pass his teeth. He rubbed at his upper arms
but forced himself to relax, every part of him wanting to bark out accusations again. He kept a reign
in on those emotions and exhaled a deep breath, recounting over and over what had happened.

“ok. gotcha.” He took a moment to scratch at his skull, searching for words that weren’t accusatory
and wouldn’t push Papyrus away. He had to remain neutral, like the woman on the other side of the
door had advised him to be. Another breath, this time shorter, then a long exhale. He got this. He
could do it. He didn’t want to constantly be at odds with his brother. “you might wanna sit for this,
’cause here’s what i remember-”

Papyrus sat on the end of the bed, but Sans still refused to look at him, to witness the hurt and
judgment. “…me in the lab, gearing up to ignite the box. i know you hate ’em, but we broke that one.
so i dunno, i felt responsible. i had my notebook out with my formulas, schematics. everything in place. i drew up my magic to initiate the sequence and i heard a voice behind me.”

To his credit, Sans was speaking evenly and quietly, every word clear and precise so he wouldn’t have to repeat himself. His brother stayed quiet, brow ridge drawn up in concern, his hands trembling, anxious.

“i thought it was nothing, so i continued. then they say-” And here is where Sans stopped, his voice registering in a pitch that wasn’t at all how his usual tone was. “[ b e h i n d   y o u ] . and it felt like something being called back from… i dunno when. i swore it happened, and suddenly i just felt my ribs crack under pressure, but they’re still whole. maybe i just imagined it. panicked.”

With the memory, Sans pulled the fabric of his shirt over his sternum and gave it a light squeeze, as though testing his bones’ limits. His grin remained stiff and unsure, his sockets voided with his recollection. “it’s… kinda hazy, but i remember a chill goin’ through me. but i’m distracted, `cause of the box. and by then, i’m still trying to keep myself together `cause if i mess up the sequence, well, that’s bad news for me, right?”

Sans gave in to a bitter laugh. “maybe i should’ve said somethin’ sooner. maybe what happened before skewed my perception. i shouldn’t’ve… i should’ve waited to do it. but, well… i saw a shot of green. i can’t really remember much beyond that.” Sans hesitated. While that wasn’t exactly true, he knew in his heart that he couldn’t tell Papyrus about the months of nightmares coming to a head at the sight of his friend, a flower. “-apart from [ y o u   s h o u l d n ’ t   h a v e   b e e n ]. thought he meant, i dunno. ‘alive’ in general, so i rushed the box `cause i felt threatened. once it was ignited, i turned to see who it was, and, well…”

Sans defaulted to a shrug. His body had started to tremble, under strain as multiple instances of the same voice called out to him from his night terrors. A shrill laugh, the smell of dust, of chalk and earth.

Papyrus stayed where he was, but he seemed to have relaxed a little. He was drawn up higher from what Sans could see, eyeing him from the corner of his vision. “You were… entirely right about the formula?” he chanced to ask, voice quiet.

“papyrus, i told you. i don’t mess around when it comes to that kinda stuff. but to what happened, i saw his face and it was like… i dunno. seeing an old nightmare that’s been chasing me come to life. he looked different than how i saw him the other day, screwed up, pale face, eyes…” Sans stopped and repressed a shudder, but it only seemed to amplify the sensation. “the laugh… i could’ve done without.”

“that’s… when i attacked him. i’ve done that kinda attack before. mostly in dreams, but most recently during this whole, uh… ‘delayed’ stuff. it’s itchin’ to come out more. but it drains me. that was the first time i’ve ever done it. i know i should’ve gone to you, but me being older, i dunno…” Sans squeezed his arms with another feeble shrug. “felt ashamed, i guess.”

That was when he realised that Papyrus had inched closer. Not a lot, but enough for the distance between them to close and for his brother to reach out with ease and touch his shoulder. Sans didn’t realise how much he had tensed until he felt himself jerk, then relax with his brother’s words.

“IT’S NOT YOUR FAULT.”

“And… then you sneakin’ around, and defending him-” Sans stopped when Papyrus made to pull his hand away as though burned, but he snatched his wrist and kept his hand there. “-which i get, honestly, i do! it just made it feel like what happened to me didn’t matter, but i know that’s not how
you feel. It just felt like you chose this violent little…” Was the flower really even a monster? He shook his head to clear his thoughts. “Anyway, I guess sayin’ it out loud makes it sound stupid as all hell. and I overreacted. and I’m honestly sorry.”

When Papyrus didn’t reply, Sans tried again, not wanting silence to fall between them. “I’m… I am sorry, Papyrus.” He gave the hand on his shoulder an encouraging and comforting squeeze when his brother inhaled as though to calm himself.

There wasn’t anger. No accusations. If anything, he felt numb recalling everything that he had. It had been like their evening chatting at the resort in Hotland, yet different. Heavier.

Now done with his piece, Sans felt lost, especially with no verbal acceptance to his apology. He shifted the conversation in an easier direction, defaulting to Papyrus’ need to talk. “Uh. your turn.”

“OH.” Papyrus briefly shifted where he sat before forcibly relaxing his shoulders and stared ahead at Sans, who was avoiding his gaze. “I… HADN’T REALISED UNTIL IT WAS TOO LATE. I WASN’T TAKING SIDES.”

“i know, i’m sorry i said that—”

“-AND I DON’T WANT YOU TO FEEL LIKE YOU’RE NOT IMPORTANT TO ME! YOU’RE MY BROTHER! YOUR WELLBEING AND HAPPINESS HAS ALWAYS BEEN MY NUMBER-ONE PRIORITY!”

He settled his other hand on Sans’ opposite shoulder, to show he cared. To show he meant it. Meanwhile Sans’ expression shifted subtly, as though realisation had come over him with startling reality that Papyrus sacrificed everything in order to assure his happiness.

Papyrus doubled down when he saw it, giving his brother’s shoulders an emphatic squeeze, “DON’T LET YOUR MIND TWIST THAT! BUT IT CERTAINLY DOESN’T HELP WHEN BOTH OF US ARE JUMPING TO CONCLUSIONS. WHICH IS WHY I… I’M GLAD. THAT YOU WANT TO. TALK, THAT IS.”

Sans’ mind, however, was twisting things in a different way. The canditity, the ease in which Papyrus coached him, it wasn’t as though he was admitting fault. He wanted to bite back the bitter words, but they left him anyway, “Are you admitting that you were wrong, then?”

Papyrus’ hold on him slackened somewhat, but he didn’t pull away. He felt the pinch of rebuke and slumped, realising that yes, Sans would fixate on that, no matter how much he was trying. Stars, he was trying, but Sans was also stubborn and old habits die hard.

“nevermind. it’s not important,” Sans muttered with a sting of regret, especially when Papyrus’ briefly excited demeanour melted away to something crestfallen.

“I MISJUDGED SOMEONE,” he admitted softly. “IT HAPPENS.”

Sans remained silent in response, yet managed to look to his brother’s face. He certainly did look put down, dragged through the dirt and put away wet. For all that he was, his brother was still trying to hold up strong, just for him. The thing that was off was that Papyrus always believed in the best of people. To be proven wrong, Sans couldn’t even begin to fathom the amount of distress his brother was under. He’d been fired from the Guard; however much it wounded him on a personal level, Papyrus had kept strong and tall, confident that he would get a second chance. It also appeared that he was perhaps entertaining the thought to cut ties with his friend - his only friend outside of their immediate circle.
It hurt Sans to think this way, but Papyrus had loaded up on stress and he hadn’t realised it. He was a fool to think Papyrus was anything but ok with his expulsion from what would be his dream job. His ticket to fame, to friends. If anyone could do it, Papyrus could. Sure, it was a grandiose dream, but it would open doors for his brother in ways being stuck in a hick town wouldn’t.

And he of course, was the reason they were even there in the first place.

He couldn’t be selfish.

“IT HAPPENS,” Papyrus repeated a little louder, his voice wavering in a clear indication that this was very hard for him to say, “I WAS… WRONG. AND I’VE SAID THINGS THAT I SHOULDN’T HAVE, AND-”

Sans tried to interrupt; “pap-”

“NO, I MEAN IT! THE CORE’S MAGIC IS DIFFERENT. IT’S UPSETTING. BUT IT’S… ALSO A BYPRODUCT OF YOU. AND WITH YOU BEING TIED INTO IT AS ALPHYS HAS INFORMED ME, I SHOULD’VE KNOWN BETTER. I SHOULD NOT HAVE LASHED OUT IN FRUSTRATION LIKE I DID! IT’S NOT GREAT. I DIDN’T MEAN TO… AND, WELL, EVEN THOUGH YOU’RE ANGRY WITH ME, YOU HAVE EVERY RIGHT TO BE. I UNDERSTAND THAT. THAT WAS A HIT BELOW THE BELT.”

The other shrugged his shoulders a little, the pricks of guilt welling up inside. “pap, i’m not angry. it was all in the moment. i was just…” he shifted uneasily with a sigh, “scared, mostly.”

Papyrus drummed his fingers against Sans’ shoulders, looking hesitant. “REGARDLESS. WHILE I HONESTLY ALLOWED MYSELF TO BELIEVE THERE WAS A VALID REASON TO HIS… MACHINATIONS? THERE IS NO EXCUSE FOR IT. I WILL ACCEPT YOUR PUNISHMENT.”

Sans started at that. His mind raced, eye lights flickering back into existence to properly gauge his brother’s expression. He wasn’t… serious, was he!? “what-”

“FOR ALL YOUR NIGHTMARES, THE ONE WITH THE ‘PALE FACE’ APPEARS TO BE RATHER PREMONITORY LATELY… AND WITH ASTUTE RESOLUTION, IT SEEMS!”

Sans felt his soul plummet with something he hadn’t considered before. All this time, Papyrus had been lamenting a decision and he was only just then realising what that meant. That Papyrus was and had been considering severing ties with the flower, as conflicting a feeling as that was.

“pap-”

“So IT’S VERY LIKELY THAT… KEEPING A DISTANCE FROM HIM. FROM… WELL, FRIENDS DON’T TREAT EACH OTHER THAT WAY, RIGHT?” Papyrus sounded like he was shrugging something off, very obviously playing it off as a joke. “HE’S HAD MANY CHANCES TO RIGHT THE WRONGS THAT HE’S DONE,” the other continued sombly, still tapping his phalanges against Sans’ shoulders. His gaze went downcast, every part of him slumped in humility.

Sans resisted the urge to shake his head, thinking throughout Papyrus’ sobre commiseration how wrong this felt, how this wasn’t within his brother’s traits at all.

He was sacrificing again.
He was letting go of something he cared about.

Sans flinched and tried to lift his arms, feeling them as heavy as lead. He trembled with the realisation that Papyrus was actually going to do it. He couldn’t speak, he was so torn. That his brother losing a friend meant peace of mind, but at the same time it wounded him so badly that the other would be alone.

Again.

He swallowed thickly, words fighting him with his wants and what his brother needed to hear. “papyrus…”

“I DO BELIEVE THAT! AND YOU… WON’T HAVE TO WORRY ANYMORE,” more hesitant finger drumming, “I WILL STRIVE FOR EXCELLENCE! I WILL DOUBLE DOWN HARD ON THINGS THAT I MUST BE! CARING! COMPASSIONATE! ADMIRABLE! I WILL CATCH A HUMAN, SANS, THEN THERE WILL BE NO WAY PEOPLE MIGHT TAKE ADVANTAGE AGAIN - NO LONGER WILL I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, BE THE LAUGHINGSTOCK OF THE WEST!”

Sans stared at him before it finally clicked - like a knife twisted between his ribs, his body shocked with the other’s words. “pap, i don’t want to encourage you to do something you don’t wanna. especially if it means… disconnecting from a friend-” His voice grew more desperate and strained towards the end, but he was cut off again by his brother’s hands, gently squeezing in an attempt to soothe him.

Papyrus sighed harshly, “AND YOU ACCUSE ME OF BEING CONTRADICTORY! NO, MY DEAR BROTHER. THIS IS OF MY OWN VOLITION! I NEED TO MAKE AN EXAMPLE FOR THE SWATHES OF FRIENDS I’LL HAVE IN THE FUTURE. TO GAIN RESPECT IS THE BEST WAY TO GAIN POPULARITY, AFTER ALL-” His grin was a little uneasy and Sans saw through the wavering expression, if only a little. “-JUST LOOK AT UNDYNE!”

They didn’t really speak about that after the day they got back. It just melded into the background of their thoughts and Sans shifted uncomfortably, feeling another pinch of guilt and concern. “how are you feeling about that, by the way?”

The other tensed and Sans managed to lift his hand, gently patting his brother’s forearm encouragingly. “ACTUALLY, WHILE IT HAD… ROCKED ME - IF ONLY A LITTLE! - I DID FIND HER REASONING SOUND. I… MADE ERRORS,” here his brother paused, clearly at odds over divulging his insecurities and he was covering them up as best as he could. “SO I MUST BETTER MYSELF SO THAT SHE CAN SEE HOW GREAT I TRULY AM!”

Sans didn’t feel convinced, but his grin tightened. “i’m glad.” It looked as though his brother wanted to say more, but he pushed on. “papyrus. i’m sorry i blew up.”

“I KNOW.”

“i mean it. it wasn’t fair,” Sans continued, frustrated.

Papyrus still wasn’t looking at him, but he grinned a little awkwardly with an accompanying shrug. “IT’S… ALLRIGHT. YOU’VE BEEN THROUGH A LOT LATELY.”

Through another pinch of guilt, Sans pulled the other’s shirt and brought him into a hug, both arms encircling his brother’s chest. “and you too, you doof. you’re stronger than you think,” he whispered against his shoulder, holding him tightly. He felt the way Papyrus’ body had eased in tension,
something of a silent rack that shook his brother’s frame in a way he desperately hoped wasn’t a silent sob.

“WHAT ARE YOU TALKING ABOUT! I’M-”

“-puttin’ on a farce, but i admire your strength and your optimism through your struggles,” Sans muttered and gave a tighter squeeze to show he meant it, wanting Papyrus to relax and believe him that he wasn’t angry anymore. “it really makes me think about bein’ better, too.”

The other scoffed quietly but it didn’t bite. Instead, Papyrus’ arms enfolded over him in kind, pressing his shoulder blades firmly and scooting closer. “MAKING A PROMISE?” he teased wryly.

Sans could feel the grin against the side of his skull and snorted in jest, “what, and break my streak?” When Papyrus didn’t answer, he sighed and patted his brother’s skull comfortably. “i’m tryin’. honest. it’s what i can promise. that i’ll try.” If he said it that way, if he didn’t follow through, it would feel less like a personal failure.

Papyrus sank against him and grumbled sourly to himself. “HE’S RIGHT TO CALL YOU STUBBORN!!”

Suddenly Sans laughed, not expecting the accusatory tone. “yeah. got me there.”

When Grillby woke hours later, a little confused at the unfamiliar surroundings, it took him awhile to figure out where his glasses had gone before fumbling on the coffee table for them. He was sluggish, not at all a morning person, but it was barely morning. He was still wearing his jacket and scarf and he was a rumpled mess. It was likely more towards noon and he sighed at what he assumed would be confusion when he would make it back to the restaurant.

Instead of going back however, he pushed himself up off the couch and stared at the heap of snacks on the table with the clarity of fogged crystals. He helped himself to a few, and wandered around the skeleton brothers’ house to see where things were. He didn’t hear anything but the ticking of the clock on the wall as he poked his head into the empty kitchen and under the stairs, not knowing why he had looked there.

He didn’t quite recall Sans slipping out of his arms earlier, but figured he had to be upstairs. The fire monster dragged himself up, concerned and hoping to see that his friend had recuperated enough to reconcile with his brother. It had been a trying couple of days and while he was still exhausted, Grillby pulled himself up the flight of stairs.

Was it alright if he checked up on them? Papyrus hadn’t been in the living room, nor in the kitchen. Neither was Sans. Grillby moved towards Sans’ room and peeked inside, only to find it empty. The mess and destruction still shocked him but he left it alone since Sans wasn’t there.

He supposed that left Papyrus’ room. He regarded the yellow tape and ‘KEEP OUT’ signage, but saw that the door was ajar. He knew he probably shouldn’t have, but he gently pushed it inwards to have a better look.

Both brothers were asleep on a red racecar bed, Papyrus curled up with his arms wrapped around Sans’ middle, whom was snoozing upright in the most uncomfortable position possible. It certainly
wasn’t the worst position Grillby had found the other in, but it appeared the two had mended things at the very least. Of that, he could only hope.

When he moved to turn away, something caught his eye and he turned again to see Sans lift his head slightly. He didn’t know Sans to be a light sleeper, so this concerned him. Unable to explain his actions, the bartender muted his flames and gestured instead of spoke, as not to rouse the sleeping brother; ‘Everything alright?’

It took a moment for the other to register, his eye sockets void of light and his grin tugged wearily. Then he simply nodded. Grillby breathed out a sigh of relief and offered a kind smile, ‘Make sure you and he rest.’

Sans still remained quiet but nodded again, idly giving Papyrus’ shoulder a gentle pat. Grillby lingered for a moment more before turning again to leave, only to hear a whisper, very faint.

“grillby.”

He stopped. His heart thumped heavily in surprise at the barely uttered name and he looked in to see Sans’ gaze, eye lights soft but settled on him. He waited with the countenance of patience even though he felt suddenly scrutinised, obliquely under pressure.

Sans shifted slightly, tilting his skull to the side that resulted in an audible click that sounded uncomfortable, to say the least. “we’ll talk too, ok?”

Grillby felt relief flood his core at that. It sounded like a promise; although for what beyond the talk, he wasn’t sure. He offered the other a visible smile and nodded - and when he did so, the tension eased from Sans’ shoulders.

“thanks. and i’m sorry.”

Giving in to a softer sigh, Grillby shook his head and gestured again, making sure that his movements were calm, steady, and concise. He rarely used Hands to converse with the skeleton, so didn’t want anything to be misconstrued.

‘Thank you for allowing me to help. Don’t worry too much. Rest.’ With Sans’ wry smirk, Grillby offered him a reassuring one of his own and shrugged to himself, rolling his shoulder. ‘You know where to find me. Don’t be a stranger.’

Sans nodded again and Grillby honestly hoped that the other wouldn’t keep away. As easy as the unspoken promise seemed to be, it was a step in the direction of progression and he knew Sans would be hesitant.

The fire monster still felt at odds with himself over the Barrier crisis, uncertain of how he should act or even if it should be looked into further. But for now, he would take the fragile calm the brothers’ reunion brought and slipped away to the comfort of his own dwelling.

He could take a day off, as much as it pained him to think about. He was just so tired.

Chapter End Notes

A Miracle!!!  ◐нос ◐ノ>ʃ<实战攻 So it is finally revealed what Flowey did in the lab. :3c
At least, Sans' recollection of it...
nsfwingdata finished the final page of chapter 12’s confession comic and it's so beautiful ;U; see here (op is nsfw but page is safe <3)
Sans goes to Grillby’s to apologise and make sure he’s ok. Grillby appears to be out of it. Sans comes to a gut wrenching realisation.

Things had settled; Papyrus had been agitated over wasting an ‘entire day’ to napping, to which Sans only shrugged. He felt weary, his magic still protesting and burning out in a radius from his soul, but otherwise ok. He figured this was just how it was going to be if he pushed himself. As long as he didn’t require medical attention, he assumed it would be alright.

He was remiss to leave Papyrus to himself, but the talk they had ironed out any peculiarities his brother had about going out. Sans seemed hesitant if only because he was still so exhausted. But he could move and he could eat on his own, so Papyrus didn’t belabour it as much.

Grillby’s was closed by the time Sans made his way over; he was sure he was expecting it, but it didn’t stop him from being disappointed over the fact. The heat-discoloured note tacked to the door fluttered in the breeze, familiar orange coal scrawled across its surface.

_Closed until further notice._

It was likely Grillby didn’t want to offend or alert anyone that he hadn’t been feeling well, so Sans sighed. He couldn’t just exploit the gridline to warp inside again due to still feeling unwell himself, so he texted the bartender instead.

hot stuff (Last message sent: 2:39pm):

*hey u in
*says ur closed
*u up 2 chat?
…
*maybe ur sleepin ill catch u later if u wanna

Sans really wasn’t sure what to do with himself after that. Undyne had again been advised that he hadn’t been feeling well, and while he appreciated the time off, he was starting to get restless. His last pay had been rather small and he’d been shirking attending to bills and such lately. He had a comfortable sum in reserves just in case, but he didn’t want Papyrus to find out. He’d have to travel to the Capital again to manage some financial things, which he wasn’t looking forward to.

He sighed heavily and leaned against the door to Grillby’s. Maybe he should do a split shift and call
Undyne to tell her it wasn’t that bad. Or perhaps text Alphys; it seemed like he owed her for her help more than ever lately.

He wandered around town aimlessly, settling into a kind of half-doze as the sounds of the townsfolk washed over him. A part of his mind remained alert for the duration of his stroll, keenly zeroing in on the feeling of being watched from afar. He built his magic around his bones to make them denser, just waiting for something to lash out at him.

But nobody came. Just the odd feeling that someone was watching - which honestly a fair few were, but only in passing and only within the friendly camaraderie that came with such a sleepy town.

Eventually Sans found himself wandering out into the forest, then across the puzzles. While it was cold, it didn’t bring its usual chill. He made his way down the path leading to the Ruins. He wondered if the woman was there and leaned against the heavy doors, giving it a sharp rap with his fingers.

No answer.

He figured not, considering how sporadic their chats had been. He’d actually wanted to let her know how it all panned out and maybe even thank her, but he supposed that it would have to wait until some other time. He kept his eye lights trained on the doors for a moment, a quiet concern growing.

Their child had gotten Up again. It was strange, yet he couldn’t very well say it was impossible. Unheard of, perhaps - maybe there were others and the concept was so foreign that people just didn’t talk about it? Nah, that didn’t seem right. He would’ve definitely heard something like that. Sans hummed to himself and tried knocking again. Still no answer. He decided to leave it at that and slowly retraced his steps.

The rest of the day was spent puttering around, checking on beaten-down paths for anything strange. Nothing stood out, apart that Grillby’s was still closed by the time he decided to head back for the rest of the day.

The next day, Sans attempted to text the fire monster again to see if he was awake and about. It was mid-afternoon and still his favourite hangout and the home to one of his favourite people was closed. It seemed pretty late for the bartender to still be sleeping. Maybe he was just busy with clerical stuff, cleaning up since he’d dropped everything to come search for him? Maybe assessing inventory?

Sans felt a little guilty for that. And he’d been dragged all over with Papyrus, his brother had sheepily revealed that little detail at breakfast. Of course he’d been bushed from searching through Waterfall and then all over Snowdin Forest; it was no wonder the guy had passed out right on top of him.

Sans slouched at his station, having opted for a split shift despite Papyrus’ protests. He still felt weary but had made a half-hearted attempt to remain awake throughout the duration of his shift. It was a six hour stint today and only two of those hours had been forfeited to a nap. The odd sensation of being watched gradually dissipated over the course of the previous day and while he was on the defensive still, he wasn’t as wound up.

Slipping into another half-doze, the skeleton jerked from his pensive mood when his phone buzzed in his pocket, revealing a few delayed messages.
hot stuff (Last message sent: 4:58pm);

- I apologise.
- I would have seen these earlier, but I was sleeping.

- I’m relieved to find you’ve been taking it easy as well. I needed an extended rest but I do believe that I’ve managed to recuperate at least somewhat.

- I decided to keep closed for another day. Some things need attending to.
- If you want to visit and chat, I won’t deny you. I’m a tad sluggish, however.

- That certainly makes for delightful imagery… slimy bones? Well. You may use the Fire Exit and come up when you are finished. You have some residual fire, correct?

- Glad to hear it! I still don’t understand cold but I suppose you’ll teach me.

Smirking to himself, after his shift Sans wandered back to Snowdin. It took a little less time to get back than coming out, and he soon found himself very inconspicuously rounding Grillby’s restaurant to use the back entrance. He took great care to make sure no one saw him and grinned to himself as he made his way inside through the fire exit, the bones of his fingers tingling when they met with the door handle. He certainly felt at ease within the toasty walls.

At least, he would be, if the toastiness had been there. He thought it odd, a coiling of uncertainty twisting around his soul as he slunk through behind the bar counter. Sans’ grin dropped a little as he tried not to think much of it as he had during his previous break-in and headed through the kitchen, well familiarised with the layout as though it was his own home. Dare he say it, he close to lived
there entirely now.

At the top of the stairs, it was easy to see which room the fire monster was in due to the ambient flicker, however faint that it was. Instead of in the bedroom like he suspected, the bartender was in a room down the hall that branched off to the right into an open living area. Shelves cradled one side covered in soot-lined rows, thick tomes, metal hinged boxes and utensils, glassware and shakers. They were piled in one area and a few boxes were on the floor that appeared to be in the middle of being unpacked.

The area was sparse yet there was a homey aura, everything touched by the fire monster was lightly charred or was wrought with old iron for protection. Colours didn’t pop out that weren’t red or orange, as dyes made with roots or lichens simply burned away in the other’s presence. Had he a mind for it, Sans would have assumed that was the case on his visit to check on Grillby when he had been recuperating after their first date.

After lingering in the doorway and staring at the lit fireplace for a moment, his eye lights settled on Grillby. He was lounging in a worn brown chair, feet propped on an equally worn ottoman in a lacklustre slouch, still in his pyjamas. He appeared to be bathing in the warmth the magical fire in the hearth provided, although the reason why escaped the skeleton. When Sans approached him, he made a low whistling noise and a few crisp embers popped from Grillby’s head with a start.

“heya,” the skeleton murmured as he leaned against the cushioned chair. “how’re you feelin’?”

“If I may be entirely truthful, I don’t think I’ve actually fully recovered,” the fire monster replied as he removed his glasses and rubbed over his face.

Sans’ grin fell as he pushed himself away from the chair and moved to view the monster directly. His flames still appeared as dim as two evenings ago and Grillby looked for lack of a better term, exhausted.

“buddy…” Sans could barely repress his disappointment. “you sick?”

Grillby replaced his glasses and appeared to squint at him in confusion. “What?”

“You’re sick,” the skeleton grimaced guiltily. “how the hell does a fire monster get sick?”

“You appear to favour that word,” Grillby muttered, letting one of his feet drop from the stool to the floor.

“maybe.”

Grillby smirked to himself and rolled his head to the side to regard the skeleton, who wasn’t much more than a nervous grey and blue blur. Sans sighed and leaned in as though to gauge how dire the supposed illness was. A twist was caught in his magic, but otherwise Grillby stared at him with a bit of confusion at his sudden closeness.

“How do i help? what happened?” The fact that Grillby might’ve fallen ill due to his search wasn’t lost on Sans and he felt apprehensive alongside the needling guilt. There appeared to be a lot of that lately.

The fire monster laughed quietly. “It’ll pass. I am... flattered you care enough to demand as though it was someone else’s fault, however,” he reminded the other kindly with a shrug. “You wanted to talk?”
“man, are you ok to?” the skeleton couldn’t shake the apprehension, not even a little bit. He was still hovering close, trying to pick out ways that his friend was out of sorts. His fire appeared to cut off into strange twists, subtly changing the wisps of flames that rolled off from his body. The flames were low, their intensity faint. Sans felt afraid, nervously squeezing the armrest at the other’s left side as he tried to hide how he truly felt. “not gonna lie, i’m kinda worried.”

Grillby scoffed playfully, reaching over to briefly pat Sans’ hand. “Shows you care. That you lov-”

Sans’ eye lights flicked in a sidelong glance and his grin widened bashfully, even the hint at the word ‘love’ sending his soul to pulsing warmly in excitement. He grinned a little more when he saw Grillby’s flames peak higher and flush gold, however brief that it was.

The skeleton shrugged his opposing shoulder, unable to keep himself from zeroing in on the word. It stole into his thoughts, making him go back to the quaint slip up and the resulting call the fire monster had made.

And the spoken reciprocation.

He felt flush and pulled at one side of his hoodie, trapped in place. His soul flickered and he rubbed over his sternum distractedly, attempting to hide what was blatantly obvious.

“heh… guess so,” he offered lamely, trying to keep himself from grinning like a fool with the admission.

The fire monster breathed a long sizzling sigh as he watched, unable to keep his eyes off the interesting display. He let his fingers trail over the other’s lower arm to his hand. Despite how out of sorts he was, Grillby still appreciated the flustered way Sans reacted to his teases.

The skeleton tugged at his hood again, unable to meet the other’s eyes. “man.” He chuckled to himself.

“I meant it,” the fire monster said quietly, his grin broadening when the other flushed with a start, then shifted his weight from one foot to the other self-consciously.

“me too, heh.”

“Shy.” Grillby laughed softly, curling his fingers around the skeleton’s briefly before reaching to cup the other’s skull.

Sans sighed with the introduction of soft heat against his face, subtly leaning against the hand on his right side with a soft, embarrassed hum. When the other’s thumb grazed the expanse of his cheekbone, Sans closed his eye sockets at the tender touch, feeling warm, cherished.

He basked in it, his soul tittering in nervous little flips in his rib cage.

“…I...”

Sans opened his sockets again to regard the other; Grillby’s tone was hesitant and shifting towards sounding remorseful. Concerned, Sans clasped his hand over the one on his face and watched intensely. The other really didn’t look like he was feeling well and Sans felt his soul clench despite knowing that illnesses were generally very brief.

Still, he wasn’t sure. The elation he felt at the other’s admission abruptly changed to apprehension, a clingy, spiralling feeling that opened up a storm of worry in his thoughts.
“if you need anything from hotland, i’m goin’ that way later,” he offered lamely, his grin tugging artificially with the little lie. He could make the trip. He’d find a way, and Sans was willing to put up the extra effort to get whatever medicine or foods the fire monster needed to feel better. Since his magic was low and his healing capabilities were extremely limited, it was the least that Sans could offer.

Instead, the fire monster gently shook his head, his thumb still stroking over the ridge of his cheekbone. The barest touch turned a little firmer and Sans felt the heat seep into his skull with a soft sigh, eye lights still searching for any hints as to the other’s thoughts.

But Grillby hid them well. While he was worried about Sans’ instability, he couldn’t just go on and say it, could he? He couldn’t treat him any differently, but there was a stark contrast between when they had visited the sunset and now. Things that had changed subtly and drastically at the same time. Sans’ health turning for the worst, his magic becoming both chaotic and fettered, strong yet uncertain.

His soul seized with the thought; Sans was likely pretending. As always. Playing a stronger game to spare him. Grillby’s flames went low and shifted darkly, causing Sans to grab his arm in alarm.

“hey, you ok?”

Grillby remained quiet, his soul shuddering at his core, but he nodded. “…I… compromised you.”

Sans’ body relaxed a little and the fire monster couldn’t help but be endeared by that, how the skeleton was holding onto his arm, how the magic in his sockets kindled brighter, trained on him expectantly. Grillby offered a pitiful smile, idly stroking at the other’s cheekbone.

“I hadn’t even realised…”

The skeleton stared at him, confused, then laughed suddenly when he realised what Grillby had likely meant. “me an’ papyrus get like that sometimes. it’s cool, man,” he shifted a bit awkwardly as he spoke, eye lights still settled on him as though to pick out any tiny detail.

Grillby swallowed hard, attempting to push down what he felt was a pile of snakes twisting in his stomach. “The… Barrier effects, I meant,” he admitted softly.

It seemed to dawn on Sans what was bothering him, at least. The skeleton inhaled sharply, then he grinned and gave the other’s arm a light smack in mock admonishment.

“you were sleepin’ when that was debunked, but ok,” Sans snickered, giving him a wink despite the brief worry in his heart. He watched as Grillby’s flames rosened and then rolled off of his visage in paler flecks, obviously perplexed. “you passed out the night we got back. my bro was, eh,” here the skeleton shrugged a little mildly for emphasis, “alphys assured him that the barrier doesn’t work that way, and it doesn’t, trust me.”

Grillby stared at him for a time, his internal temperature plummeting slightly in shock. He couldn’t keep his eyes off him as he drank in the other’s body language, how his shoulders were slack, how his hands were steady and holding onto his hand and arm. He swayed from time to time, nothing new, but he was certain that the skeleton was still fatigued. Still pushing himself.

“honest,” Sans said after a moment, his grin wry. “nothin’ you did or where i went with you is what’s wrong with me.”

That should have been something to consider, yet Grillby couldn’t help but think there was more to it. Frustrated, the fire monster leaned up with a lot of effort and pulled Sans down. The other grunted
in surprise and was unbalanced by the tug, half-landing in the other’s lap. He soon found himself in the other’s arms, pressed against the constant heat of his body as the fire monster exhaled a shuddering breath.

“jeez,” he muttered against the side of Grillby’s head and the other dipped his face into his shoulder with a vague crackle. Sans moved his arms to better enfold around the other monster and straddled his lap so he wouldn’t slip. It was easier but not really comfortable, although Sans conceded that the other likely needed reassurance. He decided not to move as he breathed out a quiet sigh. “you weren’t lettin’ that eat away at you, were ya?”

Grillby tilted his head against the other’s skull, his embrace becoming a little closer and tight. He didn’t reply; he didn’t think he needed to. Sans had hit the nail on the head with that one.

The skeleton sank into the hug, giving the other’s shoulder a consoling pat. “at least you’re up-front about it,” he muttered carefully. “honest, i’m ok.”

“…Still don’t know why you’ve-” Grillby immediately reconsidered what he was going to say. Sans merely grunted against the side of his head, precariously perched on his lap in the comfortable chair.

“out with it, bud.”

The fire monster took a moment to consider his words very carefully. If he said the wrong thing, Sans would be offended, or shrink back to insecurity over his perceived reaction to his base stats. Grillby felt the flutter of nervousness Sans’ soul sang out within such proximity and idly rubbed his back, his muted heat barely sinking into his hoodie.

It was difficult to get it out. No matter how he thought on it, bringing it up would sound so… unnecessary. Accusatory. Brash, disgusting. Still, the needling feeling persisted and Sans was starting to feel it. He breathed in deep, the warm air igniting within him and travelling around his body, the oxygen and magic fuelling his perpetual flames before he exhaled the smoky breath.

“With… your aggression. Your magic spikes. Your… moods, changes,” the other started minutely, his words barely riding out on the wisps of his fire, “I had no idea. Yet… when your brother inquired, I thought the place special to me had caused you harm. I felt… responsible. Since it all pieced together.”

Sans shifted in his hold a little, suddenly more uncomfortable. He kept his eye lights trained on the other’s grey shirt, concentrating on the different wafts of heat that pulsed from Grillby’s chest. “imaginin’ things,” he muttered offhandedly. He didn’t need Grillby feeling guilty over the changes he was undergoing, and it certainly had nothing to do with being close to the Barrier.

He was pulled from his thoughts when Grillby pressed him firmly against himself, the sensation sending a reverberating echo of uncertainty yet closeness, seeking out comfort yet wanting to extend a hand to help in turn. The skeleton sighed once more and shifted his gaze up to Grillby’s face, whose eyes were closed, but flames arranged peculiarly, as though expression was too difficult to properly array.

Sans frowned and carefully touched the side of Grillby’s neck, watching the way the flames darted to one side almost lethargically, not displaying any of their previous erratic and excited movements. Concerned, his eye lights followed the small fires as they gently yet timidly seeped back into place along his fingers, ready to scatter again if he moved.

“i think…” he began softly, glancing to the other’s face to make sure that he was paying attention. When Grillby opened his eyes again, Sans continued, “i should probably tell you a few things.
mostly about,” Sans shrugged again, his eye lights darting to his right side, “the part where, uh. i had…” He trailed off, and while Grillby looked patient, he still looked concerned and confused. “maybe this isn’t the right moment for a lotta exposition. but, uh. you remember when i told you ‘bout when i fell, yeah?”

Here was when Grillby nodded, although he remained quiet and something in his eyes shone with a strong worry.

Sans wasn’t about to let him interrupt, nor have him say that he wasn’t owed any information. This was important, especially since it had affected the other’s actions and made him, well, sick. The skeleton leaned off the fire monster, who allowed his arms to drape from his back in a loose hold, staring at him inquisitively.

“When that happened, and i was brought to alphys… eh, don’t read into it too much, ok? i was put into stasis which affected my flux and output,” Sans shrugged noncommittally, the action so second-nature by now that he wasn’t even aware that he did it half the time. “since i was told that it affected, uh… certain features that correlate to various behavioural inclinations.”

Grillby tilted his head, a few dim embers popping off from his exposed form that could’ve been construed as a question. For a moment, Sans thought he heard something buried within the fire, a deep tone that was burnt off, like words but yet not. It whispered for a fraction of a second before he pulled himself from the trance-like state and tore his eye lights away from the centre of Grillby’s chest.

Was that due to all the biology studies before?

He was sure he’d heard it, yet not. It was safe to assume that’s what the other was thinking, but it was a strange sensation. Sans chalked it up to the odd kind of familiarity he had around the bartender and shrugged again, idly rubbing a stray flame that had curled against his primary digit on his left hand.

“I didn’t really pay attention to… magi-physiology-type stuff back then,” he admitted quietly. “it kinda gave me an excuse to remain ignorant on the whole, uh… thing. i mean, why bother gettin’ into it when it wouldn’t happen to me, right?” Sans laughed a little more bitterly than he’d intended, “well, turns out my stasis had nothin’ to do with that, and it’s kinda a… an ongoing transition thing.” He hoped it was vague enough that Grillby wouldn’t directly assume what was actually happening and embarrass him by putting words to it. He was loathe to explain the finer details, after all. “an’ it’s sortin’ itself out, kinda. the barrier had nothin’ to do with it. it’s nothin’ to worry about, and you didn’t do anything wrong.”

He saw a flood of relief pour out from the other as though pressure had been building up inside of him. For a moment, Grillby’s flames twisted against his visage and shifted in colour and density, his shoulders went taut and he inclined his head as though in defeat. Sans watched as calmly as he could - yet his soul was doing an acrobatic circus of nervousness and panic at the failure of emotions the fire monster was attempting to express.

“The timing is just a dumb coincidence,” the skeleton added, surprised at the confidence in his tone despite how both numb and electric he felt at Grillby’s relief.

Not really knowing if it was ok or even how the fire monster wanted to be consoled, the skeleton pushed his brow against the other’s head in the same proximity, foreheads touching. As he gently laid his hands over the fire monster’s chest, he felt a gentle pulse through every bone in his fingers and how it lit something inside of him, following every invisible line that connected to his soul, urging him to stay close.
“it’s ok,” he found himself murmuring, from somewhere inside of him Sans felt bolstered, new, despite his exhaustion. He pulled Grillby’s right arm and his hand, laying it against the front of his hoodie. The pulse deepened like an echoing beat and Sans grinned, keeping his sockets closed. He didn’t even remember closing them, but he knew this was ok. He could feel it. “we’re ok.”

Grillby nodded against him, the dull roar of his flames a constant thrum against Sans’ hearing. He huffed, more smoke filling the air and Sans gently patted the other’s shoulder in assurance. When the other’s hand slipped from his sternum, the skeleton watched the other’s visage for a moment before resituating himself a little more comfortably on the other’s lap and encircling his arms around him.

“you ok?” he inquired, voice barely above a whisper.

The fire monster took a moment to register the question before giving in to a clumsy shrug. Sans concentrated on the flames’ odd tingling vibrations, how they stuttered around the words, “Been better.”

Sans sunk against him, the parts of his body that touched the fire monster registering it as something a little duller than what he was used to. He thought it peculiar, but if Grillby really was sick, he wasn’t sure how he could help. He also didn’t want verification that his selfishness had caused his friend misery.

And then, due to everything else, Sans knew that he couldn’t stay overnight - tempting as it was.

Sensing the other’s inner turmoil, Grillby pulled his hand from between them and settled it on Sans’ back, giving it a light rub. “I’ll be alright.” as he spoke, a tendril of smoke left the crack of his mouth out of Sans’ sight. “As much as you are looking out for me… you should rest at home. Your brother is likely to worry after you.”

The skeleton tensed at that, a brittle laugh escaping him after a moment’s pause and hesitation. “we’re ok. we talked everything out.” After a few minutes of worried silence, Sans placed his hand over Grillby’s chest again, towards the vague colourless glow under his shirt. It flickered briefly as the fire monster released a quiet chuckle. “can get a healer to pop by, if you want,” Sans offered, unsure about the dip in magic.

Grillby shrugged again, gently jostling the other. “Waterfall… Snowdin… have no healers for me.”

“haven’t seen you literally this burnt out since…” Sans let the sentence hang when he lifted his head in time to see a dark plume of smoke escape the fire monster. “hey. tell me. is it like a fever or somethin’?”

Grillby’s flames arranged themselves in an utterly confused manner, the brightness of his eyes flickering worryingly. “...What?”

Sans thought about that for a moment. Maybe that wasn’t the correct term at all. Fire monsters loved the heat - in fact, he could recall an instance or two during a gig where some Hotland dwellers had broken the central cooling system at MTT Resort. That was long before he had started feeling temperatures, though.

He sighed. “ok. i guess it would be like… too much heat.” He saw the way Grillby’s visage shifted quizzically, as though his brow lofted in skepticism. “bizarre, i know. but i think i get it, at least. usually i can feel the heat off ya pretty intensely, but i can barely feel it through my clothes.” Sans hummed then as though displeased with something, then leaned back and turned his head to regard the fireplace. “i might be puttin’ two and two together.”
Grillby laughed shortly, “What do you figure, mister science man?”

Sans turned back in time to see another leak of black smoke, the start of a grin withering almost instantly. “you’re not hot enough. that’s why y’got the fireplace goin’,” he guessed, unsure.

Grillby sighed and rolled his shoulder evasively. “I tend to forget how perceptive you are. You’re not far from the mark, I suppose,” he muttered, every word seething with exhaustion as he shifted in place as though to get more comfortable.

“has it ever been this bad before?” Sans asked, keeping the concern from his voice with a bit of force, “you not producing enough heat, i mean?”

Grillby grunted quietly in affirmation. “Got caught in a snowstorm, once,” he breathed with a subtle shudder at the memory. “Far worse, that.”

“oh.” Sans swallowed thickly, the admission not doing much to quell his worry. He looked around the room for a moment, wondering what he could do to… what, exactly? Insulate the fire monster? Wouldn’t that smother him instead?

“uh,” he tried again, unsure what to do. He detangled himself from Grillby’s arms and slid off his lap, taking a moment to look him over. It was only then that Sans realised that the room had filled with a thin layer of smoke and the fire monster had his arms loosely hanging around his middle, as though to conserve heat.

“jeez, man.” Sans huffed out a sigh, the breath almost stung with the smoke as he rubbed at his sternum in thought. “tell me what i can do.”

Grillby shook his head.

Sans grew exasperated but hid it, instead rounding the chair and lifting the other’s legs up. He prayed he had enough strength for this, but he nearly toppled onto the fire monster. The lack of weight threw him off when he attempted to wrap his other arm under Grillby’s shoulders and hoist him up.

“…Fine here,” Grillby mumbled, although he didn’t move to protest. Vague, golden hues fluttered through the flames of his face and hands from the attention, though.

The skeleton wasn’t sure how to take that, so opted to pat the side of his head, then unzipped his hoodie. The fire in the hearth was doing enough to warm him and he didn’t particularly need it, so he draped it over Grillby’s chest and tucked in the sleeves into the corners of the cushions.

With the other’s quiet chuckle, Sans gave him an awkward grin. “so,” he started, attempting to sound nonchalant and in control, “what do i gotta do to keep a fire goin’?” The yellow tinges of gold and orange appeared briefly alongside Grillby’s wan smirk. “really, man?” Sans sighed incredulously, although his tone held no reproach. “this kinda comes as a shock, by the way. you were fine when you left our house, right?”

The fire monster tilted his head against the back of the chair, eyes looking distant as he idly stroked the fur on Sans’ hoodie. “…Combustion pressure.”

Sans stared at him. It hit him. It hit him harder than he thought he had - that Grillby had been pushing his limits during the search. From Papyrus’ explanation, hours in Waterfall. Hours in the outskirts of the forests and the sleepy hamlets far from Snowdin. Hours with a rolling HP counter that started damn near the thousands and declined by the minute. Sans ground his teeth over the building worry and the absolute disgust his actions had wrought.
He had to calm down. This wasn’t what he came here for. Sans ran a hand over his face and exhaled into it to calm his figurative nerves, pinching the space of bone between his eye sockets. The other had done exactly as he was prone to doing, although now he supposed Grillby was paying a steeper price for it.

He leaned over the fire monster and stared into his eyes, sending a silent inquiry into the other’s flames to Check. Grillby’s vision sharpened with the probe, body going tense at the invasion since he hadn’t been expecting it.

[ * GRILLBY 44 ATK 3 DEF
  * Turn up the heat!
  * Smoke means a dampened flame. ]

Sans sucked in a breath, his soul constricting with trepidation as he probed deeper.

[ * 287 HP ]

“delta’s flying fuckin’ sentries, grillby!” he gasped, seizing the other by his shoulders, “what the hell! what the hell!!”

“Overreacting,” the fire monster groused with a wince, “…Been on the incline since I left-”

“it was lower!?” Sans felt his soul plummet as though it had dropped clear out of the bottom of his rib cage. He didn’t mean to sound so shrill, but everything about this was wrong. God, he had screwed up more than he’d thought. And Papyrus - he hadn’t even known? Or was Grillby that good at hiding? Sans’ phalanges dug into the other’s shoulders as he gripped him tightly, pulling him forward with renewed energy.

“Overreact-” Grillby tried again, but Sans covered his mouth, expression stern with blank sockets. The fire monster stopped when he realised why Sans was upset and avoided his gaze, sinking back into the chair.

There was no excuse for why he hid how bad it was. He really didn’t feel like it would be such a bother. Grillby’s flames dimmed a little more with the chagrin he felt, which only fuelled Sans to become more agitated.

“stay here-” the skeleton said hastily, as though Grillby had the energy to get up and walk around on his own. “i’m gonna… i’m gonna look into some stuff, i-i’ll-”

Grillby seized his arm so Sans couldn’t storm away as he had intended, eyes piercing with unbridled intensity as he pulled the skeletal hand away from his face. He was challenging Sans’ panic, holding him fast despite how exhausted he felt. Sans was staring at him, eye lights returned and searching as Grillby felt him tremble.

The poor skeleton.

It really was nothing.

“Am not fond of misdirection. I’ve rested. I’ve eaten. It merely… takes awhile,” Grillby sternly revealed after Sans had calmed down a little. He felt the hesitant ethereal probes against his soul every other minute, as his poor friend tried to gain any recourse as to how to help. It was sweet. He really did care, there was no margin of a doubt. “…Really am alright.”
Sans was trembling and he hated it. He hated being the one that caused this to happen, even if the other’s health had inclined by four points since the initial Check. He shuffled, bent over the fire monster and his low flames, pinpoints of miserably feeble heat crawling away from his touch. Before he had been curious, but now he felt as though his magic was somehow making things worse in this state.

Grillby tried again, slinging his arm over Sans’ skull and cupping the back of his neck, touching their foreheads together. “Believe me?”

Sans swallowed thickly, eye lights still searching, but he gave in to a minute nod. “Ok, bu-”

“No buts,” the fire monster sighed, filling the space between them with more black smoke. “…Perhaps one of my blankets. And… you should rest.”

Sans stayed where he stood, his eye lights darting around the fires and Grillby’s eyes, as though he couldn’t believe it. His body stayed calm but his mind was a torrent of confusion and hurt at being essentially dismissed.

“Honestly,” the fire monster chuckled wryly, patting the other’s face, “how am I going to rest with you flitting about like a worried chicken?”

Sans felt his soul drop a little more, hesitation welling up inside of him. He Checked once more and Grillby’s health was just under three-hundred, at least it was on the rise. Considering how it was recovering, the skeleton could only guess that it had been much lower the previous day.

His teeth clenched as that thought came to mind. He nodded at Grillby’s silent inquiry and was rewarded with another affectionate pat to the face. If this was a ruse, the guy could act, Sans thought, trying to keep his bearings.

Before he left, Sans made sure the other was tucked in. He had located a deep burgundy fleece blanket that he covered the fire monster in - figuring it had to be from Hotland, otherwise it would have burned up long ago. Sans decided to leave his hoodie under it, taking a moment to adjust his sleeves so the oversized shirt didn’t hang off of him too much.

Then unceremoniously, Sans hiked Grillby’s legs up onto the arm of the chair and shoved the heavy piece of furniture towards the fireplace so the fire monster was in its direct heat.

“…Really going the extra mile,” the other observed with a light cough, this time Sans saw the smoke again and paused. As though made awkward by the look, Grillby pulled the hoodie and blanket combination up to his chin with a subtle smirk. “Thank you.”

Sans left after watching over him for awhile, his soul thrumming nervously, hanging onto each inhale and exhale as Grillby’s breathing slowed as he approached slumber. He decided to leave, but made sure every window and door was closed before he did so - with such an assault to the fire monster’s health levels, he didn’t want to gamble.

And he realised how hypocritical he was being, feeling his soul lurch when he remembered Grillby treating him the same as always. Concerned, yet kind. He should really take a page out of Grillby’s book, Sans thought.
In case it is unclear, 2 days have passed since the search and find for Sans. And in this whole time Grillby has been blaming himself for bringing Sans to the Barrier, since he was asleep when Papyrus was convinced that he was misled. >w>

Consider how low Grillby's HP would've gotten 2 days ago and tell me Sans shouldn't be worried. ( ´◉‿◉`) (I like Sans' curse hahaha)
Sans goes back to check on Grillby despite little pinpoints of dread assaulting him throughout the day. Caretaking happens, feelings intensify. Kisses, cuddles... and a mistake.

hot stuff (Last message sent: 11:04am);

*hey g
*how u feelin 2day
*
*guess ur still sleepin
*lemme know if u need sumthin

Sans sighed as he sat at his sentry station, restless and worried over the radio silence from Grillby after their parting the previous evening. The fire monster had assured him that he was fine and just needed extended rest, as he recalled. It was all he could do just to sit and wait. In a last ditch effort to ensure that the other was comfortable, Sans had ran back to his house to grab a few snacks and returned, piling them onto a telephone stand that he dragged over beside Grillby’s chair.

But that had been the extent of what he could do. He had been urged to leave. So Sans sat with what felt like a pit in his heart and nervous worried tinglings in his soul. He could barely concentrate. He had to prevent himself from texting his boyfriend over and over despite how it gnawed at him as time dragged on.

He rubbed over his face with one hand as he pulled his sweater closer around him. He’d left his hoodie. Papyrus had balked at that but Sans merely brushed it off as though it was nothing. Things resumed as they had been normally before the entire flower mess had sprung up. The only difference was Papyrus’ adamant daily exuberance of how he was going to be made popular after finding a human.

Not if.

When.

He was still waiting for Papyrus to swallow his pride and own up to his mistakes. He wouldn’t hold his breath, though. Perhaps it had shown a little at breakfast - Papyrus had still seemed a little hesitant and sheepish, but Sans merely shrugged it off. As he always did.

Sans shook his head and tapped his fingertips on the desk of his station, his legs jittering in the cold. He felt better despite his concern over the fire monster. He would be patient. He wouldn’t go out of his way for any overt gestures of consolation when Grillby had told him he was alright.
Yeah.

That wasn’t him.

Growling lowly in frustration, Sans looked at the time again. 11:14am. It was barely into his shift and he still had four hours and forty-six minutes to go.

He turned his screen on and checked to make sure if maybe he missed Grillby’s reply.

He was probably still sleeping.

Sans tried to not let it get to him.

Hours passed in agonising silence. Technically, he was owed a break - at least two, if he was being his usual generous self. At any other time, he would just walk away from his post and say “i’m goin’ to grillby’s” to no one in particular or to Papyrus if he was around - and he’d be on his way. But the knowledge that Grillby’s was closed was wide-spread news in Snowdin and so walking past the other sentries’ stations was somewhat… peculiar.

That was why he chanced to use a shortcut despite how exhausted they ended up making him feel lately. He bypassed the canine unit and made it across the creaking bridge to Snowdin, huffing the entire way. He had to stop pushing himself - yet he didn’t like walking everywhere, either.

Sans looked down at his cell phone again and then stared up at Grillby’s suite above the restaurant like he had so many times before - on evening walks when he couldn’t sleep, or just when he couldn’t stop in.

Wait, when had he not ever made time for Grillby? Sans paused with the thought and the odd pulling sensation it brought on. Something was missing, or perhaps it hadn’t even happened and he was imagining things again. Then, as though blinking out of reverie, he shook his head. That was… weird.

2:34pm. It was quite possibly the longest he’d gone without a break if he didn’t include any naps, and he had saved it to clock out early. That had to be pretty admirable of him, right? He thought so, at least.

The skeleton lingered around the front where the recent weather had torn Grillby’s note on the front door. He attempted to fix the tape so it wouldn’t fly away and noticed another thing that stood out.

He would’ve thought that years of stumbling in and out of the old wooden door would’ve emblazoned every crease and score into his memory, but Sans definitely didn’t remember this particular scent. It was like an old campfire, not the smell of cooking oil, burgers, fries, chili or drinks. Sans felt his soul clench despite him forcefully attempting to remain calm.

Soot shouldn’t have concerned him, but in the restaurant - where Grillby kept things pretty much immaculate - it wasn’t something he’d ever seen before. Forcing his hand to the door latch, he flicked his wrist with a subtle nudge with his magic, hearing a faint click from the lock.

Ok, now he was definitely breaking in. As though it hadn’t just happened, Sans pushed his way inside and covered his nasal cavity through the assault of dense smoke. Despite how it clung to the floors, it made everything hazy and difficult to see. Coughing while he breathed in the mix of decay and spent magic, Sans covered half his face with his sleeve and after re-locking the door, walked at a brisk pace towards the kitchen.
Smoke curled in thick tendrils down from the upstairs suite and Sans waved at the air to disperse it. In fact, he grabbed a handheld fan from beside the oven and gave it a few swings to clear the air so he could see. His soul was thudding harsher and faster with every step up towards the fire monster’s suite.

He heard strained coughing and Sans muffled his mouth further into his sleeve, using his other arm to wave more smoke away.

“...grillbz?” He coughed again.

He heard a groaned answer from down the hall and felt his soul twist in dismay. Shit.

“hey,” he called out as he rounded the bend in the hall and into the living room. He stopped dead in his tracks and nearly dropped the fan when he saw that Grillby didn’t appear to have moved at all since his previous visit. In fact, he appeared a little dimmer, although whether or not that was due to the lingering smoke was just as unclear as the room. “jeez. what the hell, man,” Sans restrained a cough and tossed the fan as he crossed the room.

Grillby was actually brighter than he’d been the day before, but his flames were shifting and unformed, looking more like globs of dark orange and maroon mist than actual flames. His expression must’ve betrayed him, as the fire monster was glaring at him suddenly.

“Don’t tell me…” he muttered, sounding sour as he shifted a little under the fleece blanket, “that I… look quite that bad.”

Sans gave in to a wry laugh and leaned over the side of the armchair cradling the fire monster’s shoulders. “i was gonna tell you how smoking is bad for your health,” he joked, trying to reign in his emotions when Grillby gave a light chuckle. “what’s goin’ on, g?”

The other shifted as though he was going to try getting up, but Sans quickly settled his hands on his chest to prevent him. Sans flinched when he realised his hands had sunk into the blanket a bit too much and he withdrew, eye lights constricting in thinly-veiled concern.

“You’re so kind to visit,” the other said nonchalantly, as though his demeanour was perfectly normal and that Sans really had nothing to worry about. He eyed the skeleton a little wearily as he was balked at, staring at the misshapen blanket covering Grillby’s torso.

“wh-” Sans shook his skull to gather his bearings, moving to grab the blanket and hoodie underneath to check. “what just happened?”

Grillby sighed, more black smoke leaking out. “Burning off moisture.” At Sans’ horrified look, the fire monster crackled a little as though to chuckle, attempting to shrug. “It happens. I… do apologise for the fumes… and lack of light.”

Sans was trying to speak again, finding Grillby’s torso had leached into a vague shape, half-contained within his nightshirt. His hands were shaking, eye lights tightening with panic that Grillby had witnessed a few times before. He could practically hear the string of questions whirling through Sans’ skull as the other stood stock still with the blanket gripped tightly in his hands.

He sighed again, wishing the smoke wasn’t so worrying. “Listen very carefully, Sans,” the fire monster started. His tone was so matter-a-fact that the skeleton’s eye lights snapped to attention immediately, focusing on Grillby’s visage. “It doesn’t matter what you believe. It is not your fault. This… tends to happen. On occasion. It is fine. You are aware of how combustion works, correct?”

Wordlessly, Sans nodded, his eye lights constricting and wavering as he searched over the other’s
torso in muted horror, trying to find the correlation between stars and the combustion engines he used to tinker with. Maybe Grillby’s fire acted as the burning residual occupancy and he’d eaten something that made him this way? Or perhaps that meant nothing at all, and the spark just meant that the moisture he had withstood was making it difficult to burn.

He wasn’t sure which theory was more upsetting, if he was honest.

“The fire… is a byproduct. It is my body, but they are themselves as much as I am myself. They react with how I am feeling, but they tend to overreact at times,” here Grillby shrugged again, this time seemingly with more strength. “Presented with too much moisture and they… overcompensate. And for whatever that I consume next, the reaction for the fuel is stronger, yet I tend to draw in more moisture from the air. Resulting in… well.” Here he offered a bit of a grimace and coughed again. “Insufficient burning.”

Sans’ expression shifted and he hung over the other, still hesitant to touch, but gently tapping at the flames that were sputtering on the fire monster’s chest. “How long are you gonna be like this?” he asked quietly, trying to swallow the sound of concern.

“Generally, not any more than a few days,” the other replied, his tone sour. “Hate to have the restaurant closed for so long, however… I recall yet another instance when a certain skeleton has broke into my home when I was like this.”

Sans grunted in agreement, then realised what that meant. He couldn’t help but recall how overboard the two of them had gone and flushed slightly, although he was distinctly aware of the lack of smoke.

He decided to question it, “I know you’re exhausted, but what about the smoke, man.” He shrugged, as though the movement would dissipate the winding unease in the pit of his rib cage.

Grillby’s eyes seemed to dodge the question more than when he’d actually had answered. “…Had already ceased by the time you arrived,” he muttered truthfully.

The skeleton felt his soul do a nervous flip before he carefully allowed the blanket and his hoodie to fall back, unable to stop himself from drinking in whichever peculiarities the fire monster displayed until Grillby sighed in exasperation. He tensed when he saw a reddened hue flutter down the expanse of flames and hide beneath the fur of his hoodie, brightening when the other inhaled. It returned at a stronger intensity, giving Sans a small relief.

“They’re excited to see you,” the fire monster breathed in amusement, smoke leaking from his mouth on his next exhale. “Missed you.”

“Well…” Sans scratched at the side of his skull, trying not to stare and so desperately trying not to make the other feel self-conscious about his state. He huffed a quiet sigh, coughing on the end slightly. “I didn’t know, bud. Anything I can do, or… I dunno, maybe get for you?” His offer softened the longer he spoke and he grinned awkwardly with Grillby’s vague smirk.

Sans felt a tightness in his soul again when Grillby reached out from the blanket and touched his arm, flames falling from him in languid, lazy drops, as though they weighed a great deal more than lead. He grimaced at the sight while Grillby laughed, giving the skeleton’s arm a reassuring pat. “Some company would be nice. Heard the phone go off… was that you? It fell sometime during the night and I couldn’t reach,” he said lowly as some small flickerings of gold passed against his neck and face. “I’d… like some parscsoal. From the pantry. If it’s not too much trouble.”

Hesitant to move from Grillby, the skeleton nodded almost absently, a tightness cumulatively
building behind his ribs. He was glad for the direction, not knowing what to do otherwise. His first instinct had been to call Alphys, although he wasn’t sure if that was a great idea now or not.

He didn’t know what to do about the smoke. It was like wet fuel had been added to a fire - he knew Grillby hadn’t eaten anything strange while he stayed with them, right? Was it overexposure to the humidity of Waterfall? The snowdrifts in Snowdin forest? All of the above?

Sans clutched at his sternum with renewed determination. He would try. He wouldn’t run away when he was that bad anymore. It wouldn’t make up for how things turned out this time, but he would try, damn it.

He wandered out of the living room, a little lost.

Parscoal…

Where were they… Sans felt a jittery nervousness settle through him as he entered the kitchen. It was not his and Papyrus’ kitchen. Everything had its own space that was starkly different than their own. There was no sink, so no water, which he understood why - but it still threw him off. Pots and pans hung off the wall in neat rows on wire racks and hooks, spices, sacks of vegetables and various wine bottles lined the room. The counters were lined with black granite and there were tins of various Hotland and New Home spices inside of them when he checked.

And the soot. Sans could’ve sworn there was more of it now than the previous time he had stopped in. The smoke that the fire monster was emitting was something else entirely, that perhaps was the reason for the dark film on everything.

Still, the other had said he’d missed it the previous time… He had to put it out of his head.

Parscoal…?

What the hell was he even looking for? Sans groaned to himself and covered his sockets with one hand. He had to calm down. His soul was performing an acrobatic trainwreck along his ribs and he rubbed at his sternum through his shirt to settle his restlessness. Parscoals had to be a fire monster food, he figured. That seemed like the correct assumption. It’s not like Grillby ate pine cones or anything, right? He had to chuckle at the thought of it, though.

He managed to find an oil lamp that blazed feebly in the kitchen. Eventually after a few failed attempts at opening some cupboards and finding nothing, Sans found a bag of charcoal that resembled a root vegetable at the bottom of the pantry - if he squinted hard enough. Curious, he broke a piece in half and its woody interior released a vague scent of carrot and yams.

Satisfied, he took down a metal bowl from the overhead cupboards and put the halves to the side and searched for something to chop them up into more manageable pieces.

His hand stopped at one of the drawers when he pulled it open. The gleaming edges made a shock of memory pass through his ribs and he reflexively pulled his hand away to cover his chest.

What was that feeling? Sans couldn’t be sure but he stared at the contents of the drawer and the neat row of sharp knives in the dim light. He knew it had to be due to his bad nights. He tried to convince himself that those had been thorns, not knives that had slashed through him.

That conviction wasn’t any better and Sans still felt unsettled.
It had been awhile since he’d helped Papyrus prepare any meals together. In fact, since Undyne had been coaching him, Papyrus rarely used utensils apart from a long wooden spoon and a colander. He fondly recalled a surprisingly easy-to-absorb lasagna that his brother had concocted, but hadn’t gotten more than one helping since a little white dog had intercepted the leftovers. The dog hadn’t been around since then, but occasionally he would recall Papyrus’ exuberant dissatisfaction of said animal ruining his dish and stealing his attacks.

His hand trembled over the expanse of sharpened steel, several emotions battling within him. Every time he attempted to make a selection, something pinched across his rib cage and for a moment, Sans thought he felt a warm trickle down his front. Swallowing apprehensively, he looked to his chest and patted down the shirt, the sensation so real that it was worrying. There was no leakage of magic, no stain of red. No cause for concern.

He inhaled a shuddering breath, pushing the knife drawer closed. He managed to conjure a sharpened bone instead, the smallest he could handle without things being overly cumbersome. It didn’t bite at his reserves too harshly, so he left it at that. The parscoals were fragrant and the interior dry when he clumsily chopped into them, so no moisture would threaten the ill monster in the next room. Thankfully, the scent helped to stave off the sensation of being attacked and soothed him.

As though the thought pestered him, Sans dispelled the bone and brought a piece out for Grillby, who was dozing where he’d left him. As he approached, Sans tossed the piece in the air and caught it, something to do to hopefully calm his figurative nerves.

“So… do I gotta cook these, or…?” He left the sentence hanging as Grillby stirred and blinked wearily at him. He didn’t look like he was focused. “Didn’t mean to wake you.”

Grillby reached up and rubbed over the bridge between his eyes, jostling his glasses with a sleepy inhale.

“It’s fine as is.”

Sans watched the fire monster for a moment before strolling over, the piece of food in hand. Grillby tilted his head up, either attempting to hide his confusion or just feeling so worse for wear that he was unable to hide it behind his usual flames.

“Here,” the skeleton offered, leaning in close with the piece to the crack of Grillby’s mouth. “Lemme know if it’s ok.”

Sans wasn’t sure how to gauge the other’s reaction; of what he perceived to be a kind of fever, yet not. Grillby’s flames grew a little brighter as the piece of parscoal slipped into his mouth with a fiery crackle. What he saw the plasmic confines of the fire monster’s mouth was pliable, white-hot as his core, magma hidden inside. He couldn’t help but lose his train of thought when he realised just how hot the kisses they shared had been and he felt his face burning at the reminder, embarrassed that he was thinking this way.

A loud pop came from somewhere within the fire monster’s form that startled Sans enough to flinch out of his thoughts, finding the other was sending him a grin.

“…what,” the skeleton muttered, trying to remain neutral in his tone and sounding innocent. It only just registered that he was cupping the side of the other’s face and drew his hand away sheepishly.

Grillby watched him as more paler flames danced about his visage before they fluttered away; in that instant he seemed revitalised. “Not a thing,” he voiced innocently, grinning a little wider as Sans scratched the back of his leg with his foot. “You’ve found one that… tastes perfect.”
Sans wasn’t sure how to take the compliment, so let his eye lights follow the flicker of flames in the hearth, still staying close. He couldn’t move Grillby away from it, but maybe he could push the chair closer or something? He’d have to try after regaining a bit more strength. It was possible the fire monster had something hanging around that wasn’t licorice-flavoured or overtly spicy.

Slipping away, Sans mumbled, “i’ll get the rest, then,” wondering just why that little interaction sent his soul to beating furiously. Was it the sensation from before? Thinking about kissing? Or just Grillby, and making sure he was ok, and how he could make him feel better…

The skeleton covered his face again once he re-entered the kitchen, taking a moment to breathe. It was silly to be this way, with how vulnerable Grillby was. It was cheeky and felt a little sour, especially when the other was still weary, yet flirtatious. Sans rubbed his hand over his temple and took in a shuddering breath, then coughed. The smoke wasn’t helping to clear his thoughts.

Quickly, he grabbed the portions of cut food and threw them into the metal bowl, soul hammering hard as he whirled around and re-entered the living room. Grillby had taken to propping himself up and shifting back on the chair so he would be upright for the food. He leaned back with his legs dangling over the opposite armrest, fleece blanket covering him from his chest down to his feet. The skeleton made his way over with a tight grin when he offered the bowl.

“...Appreciate this,” the fire monster muttered as the other set the bowl in front of him. He was then helped to sit up and the food brought closer while Sans lingered nearby as though he didn’t know what to do with himself. “I apologise for the trouble.”

“no trouble,” the skeleton replied automatically, still preoccupied in his wandering thoughts as the fire monster popped a couple of pieces into his maw. Embers popped off of his body more readily with the added fuel, his exposed chest brightening with every bite. “how’re you feelin’ now?”

It seemed like Sans didn’t know what to say after all that, and Grillby regarded him thoughtfully as his magic absorbed the pieces. “Just fine, as I’ve assured you.”

The other watched him, seemingly unconvinced. His grin was tight and his whole body tensed, hands stuffed into the silly orange hoodie he had opted for in lieu of his usual one. If Grillby remained quiet, he could hear the subtle pass of trembles that passed through Sans’ body and the low note of rattling. Then it would stop. Then it would start again.

With another sigh, Grillby held out his arm, strengthened by the food. While he wasn’t sure how much of a proficient cook the skeleton was, it was clear that the other was worried. The pieces had been haphazardly chopped and uneven, but intent to help was all there - which was all the fire monster needed to see to strengthening his core and feeling more at ease.

Sans hesitated at the proffered hand, watching as the flames along Grillby’s arm clung to his form, threatening to drop. He inhaled a shuddered breath and extended his own, a startled gasp escaping him when the other jerked him forward with surprising strength.

“I… assure you,” the fire monster breathed, tone rich and smoother with a hint of a dampened hiss as he pulled Sans towards him, “I am fine.”

Sans was searching the other’s face, soul thudding sharply with the strong hold on his arm. His body tensed, spine aching with the odd angle he was bent over the other’s form and he leaned his right hand on the chair’s arm for support.
Not seeing any sense of ruse or selfish dismissal, the skeleton relaxed a little with a soft exhale. “fine an’ dandy?”

Grillby grinned at him, unable to help but chuckle. “Like periwinkle candy.”

Sans made a face - or at least, attempted to, his permanent grin shifting into a grimace while his brow quirked at the rhyme. He offered a laugh, then grunted when Grillby pulled him closer.

“uh-” His soul was hammering hard again, this time due to the other’s cocky grin. “ kinda… close.”

“Of course, it’s no plush mattress,” the other laughed quietly, flames dancing a little more with the other’s proximity, “although you are… more than welcome to stay to nap.”

“oh.” Calm down, Sans, the skeleton’s thoughts chastised as he attempted to settle his widened grin. Grillby gave his arm a beckoning tug and the sensation sent a familiar thrill through his body. “welp. can’t argue with a free lay-in.”

Grillby appeared to have recovered quickly enough, the density of his body more sturdy than when Sans had pushed him down. Sans awkwardly manoeuvred away to bring the other chair to the one occupied by Grillby, pushing them together alongside the ottoman to create a makeshift bed. He moved to the other side and Grillby watched, eyes bright, as he shifted shyly about. He was so restless, but the other was patient long enough to move up so Sans could join him. Settled with his head in the skeleton’s lap while his own legs dangled off the sides of the opposite chair, Grillby breathed out a sigh of relief after the clumsy shuffle, sapped of strength.

Sans was snickering, unable to keep himself from jostling the fire monster’s head in his lap. Every snicker brought on more movement and made him chuckle more, until he was laughing quietly, unable to help himself. Grillby gave him a peculiar look but seemed amused himself, reaching for Sans’ hands to bring them down past his shoulders.

“Not as worried?”

Sans continued laughing, trying to restrain the reaction as he watched Grillby tilt his head back, almost caving into the space between his pelvis and ribs. “nah,” he said after a while, his soul hammering with the subtle heat seeping into his clothes to creep along his ribs. “you seem ok, grillbz.”

“I have no inclination of misleading you, you know,” the fire monster muttered, gently toying with the phalanges in his hands. “If I am unwell, I will tell you.”

Sans knew that was a subtle jab at his own secrecy but he was concerned with the way the other’s heat was seeping into his pelvis. If he shifted, the movement would be noted and he would be teased - and be more than a little mortified.

Giving an honest shrug, the skeleton fed his magic around his bones as something he’d never really tried before… just a small barrier, a subtle sling to keep the intrusive heat and thoughts away.

“`preciate it,” the skeleton mumbled, fingers idly stroking along with Grillby’s as they were held, feeling his soul flutter nervously at the gentle touches. The barrier of magic between his spine and the freespace under his ribs strengthened easily, subtly cradling Grillby’s head. God, he hoped the other didn’t notice. Maybe it was more acceptable to stuff a cushion there instead. Sans glared at the small decorative pillow on the opposite chair as though entertaining the idea.
The other was watching him intently, eyes softening when he felt the peculiar rush of magic start to cushion behind him, but he didn’t point it out. Instead, he rubbed soft circles around the other’s metacarpals, drawing out an appreciative hum from the monster behind him. He felt Sans relax, his body sink against the back of the chair and watched as the other’s eye sockets slowly closed.

Here, Grillby debated saying it. It seemed like the perfect moment to give in - to throw caution to the wind and say his ‘I love you’s. His soul would sing if he could see the skeleton’s reaction, feeling the snap and crackle of magic between them to shift into a mutual overture of giddy happiness.

Grillby felt the words catch in his throat, his heart and soul pinching when he saw Sans reopen his eye sockets to look at him again, then glance away just as quickly. He must’ve known, Grillby thought, perhaps he was hanging onto their conversation from the previous day. From the quaint little slip-up in Waterfall to when Grillby felt his heart and soul hammering like an anvil, ready to burst to all but yell it back in turn.

It had taken everything he was made of to call Sans, over and over, until the skeleton finally relented and the words caught in Grillby’s throat. While his tone had been teasing, the echo of the other’s salutation was enough to spark through his being like an ignited gas line, peppering the countertop with live embers and startling a few patrons after he had very abruptly hung up.

His soul was hammering so hard, Grillby was sure the other could feel it bouncing through his form. Instead, the other merely shifted down a little, letting one of his bony legs dangle off the side of the makeshift furniture bed with a laugh.

“you look cosy, at least.” Behind the words, Sans felt his own feelings seep through, unable to stop fixating on his little blunder from before. He hadn’t really been able to put it out of his head and idly wondered if the other had been thinking along the same lines.

Sans smirked to himself, recollecting the other’s admission.

*Love ya, too.*

He felt flush, his soul beating harder as the sweet quiet was interrupted by the gentle pops of fire in the hearth.

“*I am,*” the fire monster murmured softly. “*...Have it on good authority that skeletons are very cuddly. Besides, we have that hug tab to take care of.*”

Sans felt heat rise into his face again and stared anywhere but the heatsource huddled against him. “mhm.” After a moment he looked back, grinning.

Gently, he pulled his arm up, watching as Grillby’s eyes followed his hand. Tremors started in his chest as he chanced it. One digit left a wake of shivers through the other’s flames as Sans traced a line from where his hand was and up the other’s throat, following the curve of Grillby’s jaw.

He saw the way the other’s chest rose and fell with Grillby’s shaky breaths. Whether or not it was due to excitement or the release of dwindling smoke, Sans wasn’t sure. He was able to draw on his reserves however, shyly bending forward as his other hand smoothed up the other side of Grillby’s neck and held him, pressing his teeth against the fire monster’s brow.

A contented hum broke from the other’s chest and Sans felt his soul flutter at the reaction, his grin spreading and feeling a little foolish for the tender display. Grillby slid his hands up to meet with his own and clasped them, tilting his head back as though to reach for a kiss himself.
Sans indulged him, unable to help himself as he leaned forward to capture the other’s mouth. He felt the subtle shocks and trembles pass through his body with the soft flow of affection, how the other’s gentle movements caused him to seek out more touch than before. He hummed into the sweet kiss, flush and panting while Grillby reached up and brought his skull closer, his own hands itching to move of their own accord.

Sans pushed them down to Grillby’s chest, his phalanges bunching in the fabric of his nightshirt as the other arched up with a muffled grunt. All Sans could taste was spice and smoke, an intoxicating flavour that had him craving more. He pressed forward, his fingertips grazing between the folds of the other’s shirt, flames hiking up in excitement wherever they moved.

Sans was sure he could hear something amongst the flames, telltale whispers for touch, for more, urging him to dig the tips of his fingers in and bring out more throaty noises from his lover. He hummed and gasped while the other’s fingers traced dizzying sensations against his neck and it sent heated pinpricks down every vertebrae.

Why was touch so easy? Why was saying what he wanted to say so difficult? It was beyond frustrating, feeling as he did yet having no outlet to express himself in the simplest ways. Sans shifted his leg to allow Grillby to push himself up higher, more into his arms, breathless gasps and laughs between them through multiple kisses. The other’s flames were strengthened as though the kisses shared between them were nourishing and Sans couldn’t help but laugh at the thought, humming as he pushed a hand inside of Grillby’s shirt to lay against his chest.

It was warm, god, it was a thrumming heat. He swore he could feel the vibrant pulse of the other’s soul, how his core flared under his fingers, how everything seemed beautiful and as bright as a thousand sunsets.

He felt the other’s breath catch against him and Sans grinned, pushing his hands down more, exploring the expanse of craggs and cracks under his fire. There was a divot that caught his interest, spurred by a breathy gasp that had Grillby arching again with a strangled groan into his mouth.

Sans’ body went tense as he realised what he must’ve grazed over, withdrawing to look to his hands with hazy recognition. His soul was thrumming wildly in his chest with the white glow beneath his fingers, how it yielded to him and throbbed against his bones with ethereal heat and plush firmness.

He swallowed in shock, the glow unmistakable.

Grillby’s soul.

He… he almost just - and when he was vulnerable, sick, and…

“uh, w-whoops,” he said breathlessly, withdrawing his hands. Grillby’s eyes were searching his face but now the skeleton was looking away from him, flushing and tense again. His hands curled away from the fire monster’s torso and lingered at his shoulders, trembling.

Shit. That was such a gross overstep of boundaries, he thought in reprimand. Sans’ breaths were still hard from their kissing and Grillby’s were too, although he looked a little bewildered at what had just happened.

“It’s fine,” he offered kindly. Swirls of gold touched with white flecked from his flames as he touched the centre of his chest, an unsure smirk hidden on his face.

Progressing so quickly.
Well, wasn’t that fanciful?

A few more embers popped off of him, flushing so pronounced that he lit up the room even brighter than before, embers buzzing around like fireflies.

“...That's one way to kindle an ailing blaze,” Grillby teased to lighten the mood but saw the way Sans’ eye lights flickered nervously, as though he believed some threshold had been irreparably crossed. Grillby sighed and pushed himself up a little to twist around, circling one arm around the other’s middle to huddle close. “...Felt nice.”

“no, uh… weirdness?” the other asked stiffly. Grillby could feel that Sans’ body had tensed and even his hands hovered, unsure, just over his shoulders. “no pain?”

“Don’t be silly.” Grillby pulled Sans’ right arm down and around to encircle himself, then did the same with the fleece blanket so they were both covered, insulated and kept warm by his inclining heat.

Sans couldn’t help but feel out of place with the improper touch. Of course, he’d felt a strong connection, but now his own soul was thundering in his rib cage, giving off a light cast under his clothes. He felt Grillby sigh against him and he moved up, feeling an echo pulse through the other’s body.

The fire monster’s face was level with his own and Sans couldn’t help but try to avoid the subtle flecks of amber, magenta and fiery opalescence staring back at him from behind the other’s frames.

“You’re being silly.”

Sans’ mouth felt dry, an odd feeling that hadn’t registered earlier until he’d caught a peek at the other’s. Cautiously, he shrugged, unable to shake off the feeling that he had made a grave mistake.

“Forward… but silly,” the other chuckled quietly, the crack of his mouth upturning into a devilish grin. “Should I offer an explanation...?”

The skeleton’s face flushed in embarrassment, grin tightening as he turned his skull away to stare at the fireplace. “teasin’ me again, huh,” he muttered dryly.

The fire monster scoffed playfully, his strength renewed as though fuelled by the skeleton’s bashful behaviour. Gently, he traced a soothing line under the other’s right eye, not drawing attention to it, yet curious about what he had overheard Sans say about being blind in one side… and about a dead arm. He put the thought from his head and nestled his face next to Sans’ skull, allowing what little weight he had to seep against him, burdened by retaining his form.

“I apologise for… making you uncomfortable,” he muttered gently. He felt the skeletal hand rub at his back briefly before it stopped, but it wasn’t pulled away. He wanted to ask if Sans intended to stay - honestly, he would be a little disappointed, but he wouldn’t coerce the other into staying for him if he didn’t want to. “If the smoke bothers you… you may leave. I’ll be alright.”

Grillby grimaced inwardly when Sans suddenly barked with laughter, jostling the both of them. “man, nah. m’good,” the skeleton’s voice rumbled from somewhere deep in his rib cage, muffled against the fire monster’s head.

“...Have you eaten?”

Sans hesitated before mumbling truthfully, “had somethin’ this morning.”
“Get something.”

“m’cosy,” Sans shot back with a shrug, pulling the other against him as he sunk more naturally into the chair’s cushions. “after.”

Grillby huffed out an exasperated sigh tinged with a coil of grey smoke. “...You’ve told your brother where you are?”

“uh…”

“I can’t afford to lose heat right now if he decides to throw another snowball,” Grillby gently reminded him, grinning with the memory.

Sans flushed and awkwardly moved his other arm from his side to grab his phone, tapping out a few quick messages to his brother in succession. After a moment’s hesitation, the skeleton shoved his phone back into his pocket without waiting for the reply, his soul full of trepidation over his little faux pas.

He decided to see how Grillby’s health was faring, sending a discreet probe to the other’s soul. The fire monster merely scoffed, but didn’t move.

[ * 492 HP ]

Well. That was better, at least.
Chapter Summary

With Grillby out of sorts, Sans gets the idea to spark some fire, leading to a reveal that Grillby has suspected for some time. Grillby comes to a realisation that Sans has not reported the attack. Sans vents his emotions.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes.

It was several hours into the following morning that Sans reawoke, ribs aching from the dull throbbing heat laying against him. He shifted slightly until he recognised Grillby’s body was still sprawled across him. The blanket had dropped from their shoulders at some point and Sans could see how the fire monster’s form was still not as bright as previously. If he remembered correctly, it wasn’t necessarily anything to worry about, since the fire monster slept like that all the time. Maybe it was to conserve energy…?

With a stifled cough, he gently nudged Grillby. “hey. ready for more parcel-coal?” he muttered groggily, one hand idly stroking the other’s back. The flames wilted away from view after briefly kindling, sharp snaps akin to sparks coming off the bartender’s body in rebuke.

“Hm…”

Sans felt a blossom of warmth as the other stirred against him. For a moment it felt as intense as when Grillby was well, but it soon petered out once more. Instead, Grillby sunk further against him and the skeleton had to stop himself from gasping out when the heat permeated through his clothes. That was a good sign, at least.

“guess i can wrap it to go,” Sans grunted, moving again. Grillby merely hummed in reply, keeping still as the monster beneath him was starting to feel as though he was projecting varying intensities of heat. “make a special delivery for you, heh.”

“.....oo e..r..ly…” The bartender rasped sleepily under his breath, giving in to a weak cough.

Sans saw the drift of faint smoke, his soul doing a nervous little skip when he recognised that Grillby was still unwell. Of course he was, he thought in self-reprimand. “nother coupla days?”

Grillby grunted sourly, either not bothering or not having the strength to move.

The skeleton drew in a long breath, idly stroking over the other’s back as he moved to push himself up to a sitting position - or at least to a more comfortable one. His eye lights settled on the brief little sputters of flame crawling over the other’s form, dwindling points of weak light that flared up and resettled. It was obvious that the fire monster wasn’t fully awake, merely reacting to movement and sounds while he drifted off to sleep again.

Sans found it a struggle to get up, despite Grillby’s body having no tangible weight. It was more
awkward with his limbs wrapped around him and his shoulder was nestled into the freespace under his ribs. Sans was only able to tilt his body to the side so the sick monster could do the same, checking over the other’s face in case he could see the weary signs of poor health.

Gently, he Checked - so obsessive over Grillby’s recovery that he was willing to do it so many times. The other had refused his offer to fetch a healer, after all. It was all he really felt he could do.

[ * 699HP ]

A sharp, boiling hiss that ended on a crackle echoed from the depths of Grillby’s chest and Sans quickly ended the inquiry, his magic suffusing his face in admonishment. He wasn’t sure of the maximum value of Grillby’s health, since he had only Checked when he and Grillby were about to spar, and even then the bartender had been outside for quite some time. He wasn’t about to ask, either; if he recalled, it had been somewhere in the high 900’s.

The skeleton’s eye sockets darkened as he trailed a few fingers over the other’s head, watching as the sleeping flames jumped and popped in startled little movements. From somewhere inside, he was sure that he could hear the telltale whisper, an ethereal noise that bit at his subconscious and prodded at a notion that Sans wasn’t sure if it was right or not.


“aw, bud,” Sans mumbled tightly, his grin teetering on the edge of worry. It was strange how the words brought up distress in him, as though its meaning was hidden. “gonna go out on a limb and say you need to eat somethin’, if you’re that low on magic.” He huffed a sigh and reached over the other’s form to grab a wrapped pack of crackers and cubed cheese from the stand. “c’mon, star power. crack open them peepers for me an’ i can see about gettin’ some food into ya,” he offered quietly as he tore open the packaging.

Even though Sans was trying with all of his might not to allow his concern to filter through, Grillby could detect the way his voice sounded strained when he opened his eyes, weary from burning so ineffectively. He glanced around, his glasses askew, before he was helped to sit up, cradled by the chair’s arms again. A familiar yet disgusted shudder went through his flames with the sudden dip in temperature and Grillby muffled a grunt, attempting to keep himself steady. It appeared that Sans was doing his best to keep him from toppling over.

He appreciated all that the other was doing, in fact. The days felt like they were blending together, but Sans being there really put the uncomfortable process of literally burning away the moisture in a better light. The fire monster grinned feebly when he felt a skeletal hand cup under his jaw to keep him from slumping and something was offered to his mouth.

“here.” The food was insistently pushed against his maw and Grillby instinctively opened his mouth. While the flavour was bland, the hot confines of his mouth singed it upon contact, adding fuel to a desperate blaze. After a moment he hummed quietly, eyes blearily focusing on the other monster.

Sans looked worried, his eye lights void in the pitch of his sockets and his grin had fallen flat. In fact, Grillby was sure he could hear grinding, a nervous little tic that he’d picked up from Papyrus at some point. The fire monster drew in a deep breath, his flames circling over his form with renewed energy before plummeting again, his light ebbing and waning. Then it pulsed, then dimmed - similar to how he managed his temperature in Waterfall on their way through.

“…Thank you,” he said softly, meaning it with all his heart. He saw the way Sans flushed a little and felt the minute way his magic spiked when he spoke. Why he was like this when he expressed his gratitude, Grillby didn’t know. Or perhaps he knew why. He smiled all the same, leaning forward a
little when another cracker was given to him.

“just… get better. ok?” the skeleton mumbled lowly. Grillby nodded, slowly consuming the pieces he was offered until the pouch was empty.

After awhile, Sans sat on the ottoman in front of him, eye lights returned and searching. The fire monster watched him, a question in his heart, but the other inhaled sharply, cutting away the urge to speak.

“cyclical energy?”

Grillby tilted his head, a few embers sparking off of him akin to a silent question. Sans’ grin rose a little and the skeleton shrugged the tension from his shoulders. “had a feelin’ that… i dunno. you need help gettin’ things goin’?”

It was Grillby’s turn to flush, the reaction so abrupt that Sans flinched. Instead, the fire monster laughed softly, his voice tired when he spoke; “However did you come to that conclusion…?”

Sans shifted uncomfortably. “lucky guess,” he said covertly with a wink. “can i help?”

Grillby cast his gaze to the side to the warm hearth still crackling merrily nearby, then back to his friend. His core was skittering, beating like an uneven drum while he thought about it.

A dead arm. He wondered if Sans could really help. He wondered if maybe this skeleton was strong enough now to exert the amount of energy needed to strengthen his blaze. Although, Sans wouldn’t have offered if he thought he couldn’t help, would he? Grillby almost scoffed; of course, Sans would. He was stubborn and pretended that a lot of things were fine, even when this was not the case.

After hesitating, watching as Sans grew increasingly uncomfortable with the silence, Grillby exhaled a warm breath, a thin coil of smoke floating in the air between them.

“Suppose you could,” the fire monster finally answered, hiding his resignation. He lifted one of his hands to graze over the other’s, feeling how the digits’ energy created the peculiar tugging sensation as they always did. Grillby had to smile with the thought, curling his hand into Sans’ loose fist to weave their fingers together.

He felt a pulse again and Grillby couldn’t help the grin that snuck up on him with Sans’ reaction, how his magic jumped and skittered around his bones with a soulful light. He felt the other’s eye lights on him and the fire monster sighed, taking the other’s right hand as well.

Sans felt his soul tremble as the other did so, his thoughts teeming with memories that were resurfaces in short little bewildered bursts. Of clasping hands with another - and his brother. Of trying it with Alphys once his arm was secured after his recovery. A monster with a winking eye… but he barely remembered anything else, apart from an accompanying warm comfort.

It blended into an awkward flutter when Sans recalled the brief touch upon the other’s soul and his eye lights were drawn to the centre of Grillby’s chest. He remembered the way it had shuddered against his fingertips and thumped straight through his body, echoing a longing he’d never felt before.
Sans exhaled the breath he didn’t realise he’d been holding and watched as Grillby straightened. He’d drawn a leg under himself so they could more comfortably sit across from one another, hands clasped, palms flush and hovering at each other’s sides. Sans was trying to focus on anything but the other’s face, attempting to calm his nervous soul as his thoughts needled at him, goading him to look back at the other’s torso.

He had to focus. Sans knew he couldn’t do it before. He felt the penetrating weight of Grillby’s expectant gaze and knew that the other likely wanted him to help. And Sans found that he did want to help. It was less an excuse that he was responsible, and more like he just genuinely wanted the other to feel well again.

“Do you know how to do it?”

Anxious, Sans’ eye lights flicked up to Grillby’s visage, then immediately down to the first button on his shirt. With Grillby’s dimly-cast demeanour, Sans could see the faint glow of the other’s soul, just behind his clothes, hidden away by the other’s body. His voice felt tight and he was trying very hard for his hands not to clench reflexively.

“Yeah.” Good, he didn’t sound shaky at all. That helped to ground him as he automatically tried to pull from his stamina to filter through and flinched in pain, halting the process. Shit, he’d done it wrong already.

Grillby had picked up on that and tensed, unfortunately.

“What was that?”

The skeleton grinned a bit sheepishly, giving his shoulder a roll as his mind darted from one explanation to another. “Uh... remember that thing I said?” With the other’s weary head tilt, Sans continued a little uncomfortably, “Well, I don’t really know how else to put it apart from... that’s how I’ve been managing to get by until recently. ‘Bout my body sortin’ out some stuff,” he mumbled sourly.

Grillby remained quiet yet Sans knew he was trying to look into it, to read between the lines. But apart from ‘recently’ there wasn’t anything the fire monster had to go on, and he certainly couldn’t connect the dots between the delay in his maturation and now.

Embarrassed, the skeleton coughed and pushed his hands further into Grillby’s, his flux circulating feebly at his right side before it dissipated just above his shoulder. His left side spilled out to compensate for the irregular flow while his right felt heavy, almost competing with the natural flow that snaked down his joints to keep everything moving.

He supposed this was the way he was going to push out his magic - a newer feeling considering what he had tried with the unknown person in his memory, Papyrus and even Alphys had failed so many times before. He knew it was due to utilising his stamina instead, his magic reserves locked away. Or rather, they had never really manifested as an adult.

He found that was the reason why he was even attempting to help circulate magic in the first place; now that he’d unlocked it, in a way, he felt like he could try. He would try.

Sans gritted his teeth as he fed the magic into Grillby’s right hand, the wellspring of magic quickly roaring through the other’s blaze in a mix of pulsing, reddening flames. The fire monster’s grip tightened against his left hand and Sans shot him a sheepish grin, his soul thrumming nervously as the magic flooded up the fire monster’s arm, crackling like a hearty blaze as it went, cresting with softer arcs around his limbs.

A few slow courses around the other’s body and the circle would need to be completed - and would
have to be returned back to him. Sans wasn’t looking forward to what would happen if that wasn’t the case. It would just be awkward.

Instead, he focused on Grillby, on feeding him subtle little shocks of his magic while his flames built up and brightened. The bartender’s smile was infectious as Sans watched with curiosity, how his demeanour changed in colour, brightened with varying intensities and pulsing with echoing heat.

“Better…” the other sighed, relief evident in his voice as he hunched his shoulders. If he didn’t know any better, the skeleton was sure that Grillby was enjoying this. A crisp snap popped off the other’s left hand and Sans eyed it warily, not at all looking forward to the circulation’s completion.

glad to get your mojo goin’,” the skeleton snickered and leaned forward to the other’s heat, much more intense than before. He missed it. “you look like a million bucks already.”

Amber sparks ignited through the air with the compliment and Grillby laughed, hanging his head. The flames on his head had gradually broadened back to their previous lustre, swirling around as Sans could detect the smallest fraction of a hum. It sounded like jubilance, of the tiniest flames giddily rushing around Grillby’s form.

Grillby’s grin was strengthened and he pushed against Sans’ hands, giving each one a squeeze. “Embarrassing…” he chuckled, relief evident in his tone, “yet… very much appreciated.”

Sans couldn’t help but return the grin, his soul still flipping anxiously in his rib cage. Experimentally, he squeezed his hands in return, unable to keep them from shaking.

“...Are you alright?”

The other blinked at him as his magic tapered off - perhaps a bit sooner than what was anticipated. Sans didn’t want to overload him, especially if he couldn’t accept the returning inward bound of magic when things were better. Thickly, Sans grunted and squirmed where he sat, a small trickle of sweat following his jaw and down the vertebrae of his neck.

“y-yeah. why wouldn’t i be?” His voice broke as he stopped the flow, anxious for what would happen next. With Papyrus, the last person he had attempted this decades earlier with, there wasn’t any rebound, but he’d simply lost the energy and Papyrus remained as exuberant as before.

He could feel it even now, how Sans rocked forward a little when Grillby pushed his hands against him, as though to get him to stop. And in turn, Sans could make out the perplexed look that passed through Grillby’s flames and he huffed a soft breath in resignation.

Grillby didn’t say anything, merely watched as Sans attempted to keep himself upright. Instead, he clasped his hands with a bit more force, giving the skeleton a start. “Perhaps we should end this,” he finally said after surveying his friend’s teetering stance.

Sans tensed, his soul jumping when his phalanges felt the prickling heat of the other’s magic push into his right hand. “uh-” He grimaced, grin tightening with effort and his face contorted with the building needle-like throb against the bones of his arm. The energy was battling with the downward spiral of crafted magic, simulating life, and it had been awhile since Sans even had to think about it. It had been so long that filtering his flux to mimic natural movement was second-nature now.

Grillby leaned forward, strengthened by the other’s energy with the curious way his flames were both bolstered and sent fleeing with the other’s magic. His eyes followed the way Sans’ rib cage had jumped, how his left hand tightened against his right, how every little nudge against his opposite side made a startled and almost panicked gasp escape Sans.
Sans swallowed, not daring to reopen his eye sockets. In fact, he wasn’t sure when he had closed them in the first place, but both of his hands were squeezing Grillby’s tightly. It was ridiculous to pretend, even if it wasn’t serious, but he didn’t want to be exhausted when he only just got better again.

The more history he offered up, the less of a burden Sans felt he had to shoulder alone. Wincing as he attempted to draw the heated magic up his right arm - and failing - he gave in to a defensive laugh.

“man. i dunno what you overheard when me an’ pap had words… but m’not in the best shape lately,” Sans admitted, clenching his teeth together as his magic twisted in his right arm in protest. It spiralled and contracted, in conflict with the energy that was attempting to re-enter his body and he gave in to a hiss. “actually i’ve never really been in any shape, but…”

Grillby’s flames arranged themselves into a frown but he didn’t interrupt, keeping his hands steady despite Sans’ trembling. The skeleton glanced to his right side and the wisps of cyan hues pouring off his hand like steam, filtering away into the air the longer Grillby tried to give it back.

“let’s try the secret thing again… although i kinda figured you’d already heard.”

Grillby remained patient and Sans hesitated, parting his teeth to allow words to come out, yet getting stuck; “i’m-” It was different than when he had admitted to having Fallen Down. Or how piteously low his health was. It was more secrets being exposed, things that Grillby had to know if everything was going to work out. No secrets. No lies. No more surprises. He didn’t want things to be so messed up between them and Sans certainly didn’t want to leave Grillby out of the loop.

Not after everything he’d done for him.

So, he swallowed again, the action so peculiar that he fixated on it, before quickly muttering, “my whole right side doesn’t work-”

The fire’s movements flickered calmly, in fact calmer than Sans had been anticipating. Was this guy really serious? Was Grillby for real? The skeleton was avoiding his gaze, his soul thrumming in near-panic and anticipation. He wasn’t sure how to handle the silence. He didn’t want to be rejected.

Stuttering and hating every word, Sans tried again, “b-blind in my right eye. it’s, uh, also why my leg detached… and my ar-arm-”

“Calm,” the fire monster breathed, leaning forward. “I’m aware.”

“you’re not gonna tell me you’ve known the entire t-time, are you?” Sans fumbled for a joke but ended up feeling partially horrified and embarrassed instead.

The bartender shrugged, jostling Sans’ arms as he did so and sending him a knowing, roguish grin.

Sans gaped at him in silence. Every word and thought that started in his head tumbled over themselves, unable to process. He knew he shouldn’t be shocked when Grillby was so accepting, yet Sans still believed somewhere inside of him that he would be pushed away the more he revealed.

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“Really… How long has it been since we’ve known each other? However, I must be truthful. Although I had my suspicions, until I had overheard you confirming them… well,” Grillby sighed quietly. “I suppose it had still caught me off-guard to find that they were true.”
Sans wasn’t able to reply, his eye lights settled on the other’s visage in stunned silence, his mind a whirlwind of disbelief.

“...When you stare in such a way...” Grillby said under his breath, trying to nudge the magic along the right arm again experimentally, “Should I make a ‘big deal’ about it...? You appear to have reservations on how others should react. Although you are... surprised when the results are contrary to your beliefs.”

Sans continued to be silent but he nodded anyway. There didn’t appear to be anything he could say to that. Feebly, he attempted to draw his magic down his right arm to recollect the offered energy, flinching again when it predictably failed and cut off just past the joint connecting to his humerus. There was nothing to bridge with from the shoulder down and the phantom sensation sent his magic lurching instead.

“Would it be prying of me to ask what it means to be ‘CORE magic’...?” the other continued softly, his thumbs rubbing soothing circles against the other’s fingerbones. “Apart from... being dangerous in nature.”

The skeleton finally found it in himself to move, shifting uncomfortably. He had to laugh to jerk himself out of his thoughts. “dangerous, eh.”

“From... what I have witnessed, it does appear so, yes. Your brother has expressed concern about it, at the very least,” the other said, suddenly very careful. “Although I am not entirely sure why. Apart from... your accident. No one had thought to explain anything during that time.”

Sans watched as the magic pressed against his right hand fettered around his digits uselessly, then he huffed a deep breath. “guess so.”

“Hmph?”

“i guess i’ve never really thought about it,” Sans shrugged again, “an’ it’s been awhile, i dunno, since i’ve put conscious thought to it. sometimes i got moments of goin’ back, other times i just think, ‘hey, y’know, it’d be nice to not have to worry about everything and just go for it’.”

Grillby’s mouth hardened into a thin glowing line in a vague frown. “Was not... my meaning to make you uncomfortable,” he said crisply. “I apologise for upsetting you.”

“You’re ok. You didn’t.” There wasn’t a lot Sans could do with his hands trapped, so he looked back to the other’s torso, then up to Grillby’s face. “We’re cool. Thanks for bein’ patient with me.”

Grillby gave him an awkward smile, one of the rare few Sans had ever seen. Grinning to himself a little foolishly and still feeling like he was treading around a rather large secret, the skeleton sighed.

“When I, uh... had my accident. Before. When I fell into the core-” Something seized in his memory and Sans blinked as though to correct his vision. He felt dizzy for a moment but then it passed, leaving Grillby staring at him, dumbfounded. “I was pulled up, obviously. What hit-” He stopped again, his eye lights searching in front of him, unseeing. “-no, I reached in... and I slipped? I, uh, don’t really remember why I...”

Grillby watched in concern as Sans trailed off again, looking lost. His shoulders had tensed and Grillby felt the other’s left hand squeezing his own with force, his arms trembling. Although they couldn’t break the connection without repercussions, the fire monster leaned forward, pulling the other’s hands down and towards himself in an approximate embrace.

“Sorry, m’ok,” the skeleton murmured after a moment. His voice had been soft and a little confused,
having spent the short period of time scanning over the voids in his memory. “i haven’t ever really… uh, talked about this. kinda.”

“Kind of..?” Grillby repeated as Sans leaned back with a distracted, haunted expression. “You’ve never spoken with… the authorities to report the accident, or therapists, nor…”

Sans’ silence spoke volumes and Grillby only sighed, although it held no bitterness. He had a feeling that was the case. Although it brought more concern, Grillby figured that the other’s low health was a factor. With how the other had hinted at how he was treated in New Home, the fire monster had to wonder if that was cause for his secrecy. And also, if Sans had reported the incident concerning the attack - that made him stop.

With how he felt now, he was in no state to question the skeleton about that but it would eventually need to be addressed. Inside of him crawled with the need to investigate, himself, despite how powerless he was and with no lead, Grillby was at a loss. He just breathed, the energy in his left arm sapping parts of his blaze the longer it collected.

“...Forget what I sai-”

“i was tryin’ to get someone that fell in,” Sans interrupted, his voice sounding bare. “maybe i should’ve talked about this kinda thing with… i dunno, alph or… or papyrus,” here the skeleton shrugged, “don’t really remember. but then again, the others that saw me go down don’t recall anyone else that fell in either, so i dunno. maybe i was overstressed, and…” His sentence petered off again, but it seemed more natural this time instead of confused.

A few more moments of silence passed between them before the skeleton drew in a shaky breath, finally able to meet the other’s eyes, anxiety twisting at his soul.

“guess i can say with confidence that you’ve heard everything, eh?” he said dryly, then inhaled sharply with another nudge to his right hand. “Alright, i’ll… explain the best that i can: core energy is an artificial magic generated by the earth’s mantle. it’s drawn up from the pylons situated around hotland that… were ignited when i was young. with… my magic, although,” Sans stopped again, looking increasingly perplexed, “hm. when i stop to think about it, the feelin’ passes.”

Grillby was watching the shift of expressions as Sans spoke, his own soul trembling as each secret passed the other’s teeth. “…Which feeling?”

“dunno. the feelin’ you get when you know you’ve missed something important, i guess.”

The fire monster tilted his head, not really understanding, “Like an… appointment?” When the other shook his skull, he frowned. “Post-trauma memory loss..?”

Sans remained quiet and shrugged, jostling Grillby.

“Don’t force it, if that is the case,” the other urged softly. “Oftimes forcing yourself leads to stress.”

Sans nodded thoughtfully, still watching as Grillby’s eyes remained transfixed on him. It was as though he was attempting to judge something about the fire monster’s demeanour.

Grillby swallowed the knot in his throat and gently squeezed the other’s hands in reassurance. “...The entire right side?”

“yep.”

“You had… used the word ‘dead’,” the fire monster phrased it delicately, still not understanding. If
the other’s limbs were ‘dead’, how did the skeleton still have them? How did they move? For awhile, older monsters - the very old - that had been around since the Barrier had been cast sported missing limbs, but over time their bodies had adjusted to it.

He wondered how Sans was doing this. Was it an illusion…? No, he had held the other’s detached leg, healed the crack at his ankle - and had even caressed Sans’ right arm in more tender moments.

“`cept for the magic in my right orbit, i guess you can kinda call it `puppetry`,” Sans shrugged again.
“after i woke up… well, actually. after i had recovered enough energy after i fell, i was feelin’ pretty sorry for myself,” here Sans laughed as though it was to ease away his anxiousness, his eye lights flitting to the side. “it sounds kinda dumb, actually. but it’s pretty neat as far as alph’s theories go. since it’s conducive to the way core magic is drawn up from the mantle in a helix-based draw, using my soul as an anchor mimics my physicality in the same way. only when things are unstable, the connection weakens, and…” The skeleton grinned awkwardly and made a popping noise with his tongue, “things get disjointed.”

Grillby blinked at him in surprise, his blaze popping in a start when he registered the joke. “How… macabre of you to joke about that,” he chastised quietly, not really knowing what else to say.

“helps to not think of it so seriously,” Sans mumbled, drawing a deep breath. “sides, it’s kinda interestin’ at the same time. i wouldn’t’ve known i had any connection to the core if not for some extensive research. the dimensional boxes, the shortcut-”

“The teleportation,” Grillby interrupted, unable to keep the grin from appearing. “Do not sugarcoat it.”

“you…” Sans felt himself flush through the attention, unsure why he was flattered at all through the fantastical term. “it’s… really not the same.”

“Depart from one area… and turn up in another,” Grillby leaned forward, his soul giving a little thrill with Sans’ flustered behaviour, glad he could distract him from his sombre mood. “Teleporting. Magnificent. Amazing!”

“no fair, i can’t run off this way,” Sans groused softly, giving in to an awkward laugh.

“Point for me, then.”

The skeleton felt heat flush his face and he quickly glanced at the other, his grin broadening in embarrassment. “guess so.” The intrusive thoughts of their intimate time together sent his soul to thrumming in his rib cage and he tried to quell it; it was neither the time nor the place. But considering how their earlier points system had ended up, Sans couldn’t help but be oddly excited by the reward at the end of the ‘game’.

Oddly enough, drawing upon the bartender’s soul and the appreciative noises he had extracted from the other, no matter how horrified Sans was at the time, had been a constant reminder. Of a promise, of something a little scary, opening up for Grillby in the same way, Sans knew it would be a challenge, considering his past with his own soul. But the reaction had been electric and now he was curious.

He supposed his studying wasn’t over, after all.

Sans’ eye lights lingered at the other’s chest and the soft muted glow there, a faint white mote behind the other’s nightshirt that tantalised his thoughts from between languid flames. He hesitated as he forcibly followed the other’s shoulder with his gaze, down to where their hands were connected on
Sans’ right side.

“how’s the buildup treatin’ ya?”

Grillby hummed in consideration, his own gaze finding their connection; Sans’ staring did not go unnoticed and he had been entertaining a tease, but ultimately decided it would be in their best interest if he did not. “Somewhat… uncomfortable. However, I am unsure of the proper way to dispel it, if we cannot complete the rotation.”

Sans grunted in agreement, sounding somewhat distracted. “guess we just let it erode.”

“Hmm.”

There was a brief but relaxed silence between them before the fire monster shifted a little where he sat, gently squeezing the skeleton’s hands again. “If I may pose a theory.”

“mmh?”

Grillby hesitated, unsure of how to phrase it. It was so unlike him to just blurt things out, but withholding from Sans did the opposite of what he wanted, and being careful tended to enable him to keep things hidden.

“Power surges,” the fire monster said haltingly. “We’ve… experienced many lately. And I know that look, Sans-” He caught the way the skeleton hunched and avoided his gaze, briefly winking as though it was a joke. With his accusation however, Sans grimaced with the rebuke. “It… is further proof that you have been pushing yourself. The CORE, and with what you’ve said. It makes sense, even though I cannot deduce why. I see a connection with several states.”

Awkwardly, Sans couldn’t look him in the eye. He chose to stare at the first button again, then lower, then to the side. He didn’t know how to explain that, although he had given the other more information than what he had given Papyrus in the past few years. He felt the pinch of guilt and exhaled a deep breath, trying to calm his agitation.

Grillby watched with a sadness hanging inside of him. He knew what it meant now; with Sans pushing himself to his limits in Waterfall and why there was a sudden power surge from the CORE, and then the resulting electrical issues that followed. He picked up on the day before Papyrus came to him for take-out and how the power had failed then, too, and he sighed, his heart heavy.

The intrusive thought passed through his head; if something should happen to Sans, would the CORE fail, or--

He didn’t want to finish that hypothetical and swallowed thickly, his soul hammering in his chest as he attempted to keep his emotions in check.

“We’ll… leave it be, for now. You said earlier that… you had wanted to talk.”

As though it offered an escape, the skeleton’s shoulders slumped with relief. Sans’ grin fell and his eye lights flitted up, seeing the other’s neutral features carefully masked. He coughed quietly and automatically returned the squeeze, unsure where to begin.

“i, uh-” To say the very least, Sans felt caught off guard and put on the spot, even with the change in subject. He would have loved to scratch at his skull, to shove his hands in balled fists into his hoodie, but he was kept still. He wanted to release his agitation in some way, to take the edge off being put on the spot. He lowered his eye lights to the centre of Grillby’s chest before quickly looking elsewhere, admonished for the intrusive thought.

“i… had wanted to say,” he began a little shortly, “that m’sorry for draggin’ you into this whole mess
with, uh… with me an’ the bro.”

Grillby remained silent but he had released a long breath. From what Sans could see, there was only a faint coil of smoke as opposed to before. He gave him an awkward grin when the fire monster didn’t interject and continued.

“and y’know… ‘cause even though it was rocky there for a bit, i, uh… i don’t think i would’ve been able to talk to him without your help. at least, not in such a short period of time,” Sans sighed and his posture slumped in humility. “so… thanks is what i’m gettin’ at, here. even if i haven’t really been the most cooperative lately.”

Grillby’s mouth curled into a kind smile and Sans lowered his gaze to the first button on his shirt again, a little embarrassed with the silence. He would’ve loved to move or for the conversation to switch to an easier topic.

Yet talking it out with the other chipped at his resolve and at the barrier inside, keeping his feelings at bay.

“actually… knowin’ me, i probably would’ve eventually let it slide. let it gnaw at me forever until i forgot about it. he… he doesn’t seem to be sorry. and when i think that, it pisses me off.” Sans stopped, his chest feeling tight when all of his emotions bubbled to the surface. “i shouldn’t be thinkin’ about him this way. he’s my brother; of course he’s sorry! i shouldn’t’ve said that. i gotta stop fixating on this.”

Grillby remained quiet, knowing that this was just a vent that the other desperately needed. It felt like Sans needed to say more but he was keeping it inside, only releasing it in little frustrated bursts when he exhaled.

“i’m ok,” the skeleton groused more to himself than the other, and Grillby could feel his hands squeeze his own, though he wasn’t sure if it was on purpose or not.

What he was sure of, however, was that Sans was not ok. The fact was evident when the other couldn’t meet his eyes, and had given up the ghost entirely by allowing his eye lights to fade out. He had seen the same darkened expression upon his leave after the search and could only imagine what kinds of self-deprecating thoughts the skeleton had in his head.

As though to burn away any doubt, Grillby leaned forward and rested his forehead against the other’s brow, gently turning his hands in Sans’ to pull the other closer. His soul was thrumming with sympathy when he heard a soft scoff pass the other’s teeth.

“It’s… alright to not be alright with things,” when not met with a reply, the fire monster allowed the magic in his left arm to fetter off in a mist of cyan-tinged flame. “I know you’re… frustrated. Give it time. You know him better than anyone. I have seen you two at odds before, though it strengthens your bond, it does not make it any easier.”

Sans dipped his skull with a shuddering inhale, shaking it from side to side in rejection. “i hate it. what if-”

“If you continue to belabour any variance of hypotheticals, I will have to prescribe exercise to vent off any more aggression.” Grillby interrupted, his voice stern. He felt Sans inwardly flinch and curl, as though the idea was so aberrant that his body rejected it entirely.

“not you too,” the skeleton muttered, sounding both dejected and amused.

“I only know what I’ve seen. And what I see is a certain monster in particular, of whom looks up to
his brother and cares for him so much that he could not possibly find fault with him—” Grillby hesitated when Sans froze, eye sockets wide and dark. He felt a spark of magic twinge at his right hand this time, then ease when Sans relaxed, his eye lights returning. “It’s... why it hurts so badly?”

If he didn’t know any better, he could’ve sworn he felt the exact moment when Sans broke. The slight twitch of his hands, the tenseness of his back. The faint sound of teeth grinding together - and a catch in the other’s breathing. He was sure he felt the emotions flooding through the other. Although it wasn’t anger, Sans was upset enough to break the connection.

He did it automatically and without thinking, not minding the subtle way their magic crackled together at his hand in protest. Sans slung his arm around the other’s neck and pulled him close, the other side of the connection lost thanks to his dead arm as he buried his face into the other’s neck.

Meanwhile Grillby’s arm had flared up with the surge in energy, lighting his core so suddenly that his colours mixed in a confused array of oranges, balmy yellows and confused maroons. Sparks of white and azure floated in the air, giving breath to sharper contrasts of gold and silver in their wake as they blinked off in decay.

Severing the connection before the magic had been returned wasn’t harmful, but it left Grillby bewildered and confused for a short while until it was sorted out. In the meantime, it left Sans in a peculiar lightshow, pushing himself against the other in the tightest embrace he’d ever given someone outside of his own family.

As he finally calmed down and his fire was bickering softly for the inconsiderate gesture, Grillby blinked a few times to recollect himself as the world stopped shifting in bright colours and chaos. His glasses were askew and Sans was holding onto him tightly, one hand clutching at the back of his shirt while the other kept his left in a vice-like grip.

Sans was trembling and Grillby could feel the stuttered breaths ghosting against his neck, realising what was happening. The fire monster exhaled softly, untinged by smoke, and wrapped his free arm around the skeleton that clung so desperately against him, shaking as he tried to keep it all inside.

Although he didn’t know Papyrus as well as he did Sans, Grillby was sure that in the end it would work out. His soul strummed with empathy when the other sunk in and he found himself held closer. He rubbed the other’s back, leaning his head against the other’s to hold him as close as he was able to for support.

“Give it time,” he said softly, only to feel Sans’ body jerk as though it had been a threat instead of reassurance. Grillby knew his words held weight when he felt a silent sob against his shoulder and how Sans held him even tighter, burying his face against his shoulder. He knew how much his brother meant to him, after all, and his opinion and happiness was almost all the other spoke about. “It’s alright. Let it out.”

Chapter End Notes

Long chapter because the point would not come and then oh god, Sans............
He’s fixated on quite a few things lately; the attack, the fallout with Papyrus, Grillby
being ill (because of him), overstepping a personal barrier with the bf -- everything is just coming to a head and would be too much for anyone... :

Casual reminder that ch 33-34 have been updated in case you didn't see the news last upload 8D (thanks again, c-puff for your great critique!)

Some art I got for Postcards ;o; Thank you everyone! I cry every damn time. *weeping* thefloatingstone (c-puff) on tumblr has made some FABULOUS art for ch 5 here! Click here for the panicky Grillby!!! It's AMAZING!!!!! (I forgot to link it last time;;; also shut up I know it's a commission BUT STILL) SnoweySoft drew a rendition of the bbq ribs scene in ch 32 (nsfw-ish? ... kinda. I guess not really blol;;;) which you can see hereeeeere!!!! moonshadow drew the Great Reveal in ch 30 (the cave date!) which you can see here!!!!!! 5h4d0w2 (aka reineofaberrants on dA) drew some Sansby because of me e///U///e hehehehee check it out here!!

I am blessed with so much fan art, you guys are amazing. ;U;;;; If you wanna @skerbaderbadoo on tumblr if you've drawn something, I totally wanna see 9u9 hehehe!

Thank you again to everyone who reads this..!! I know I say it every update but I really do mean it... X))

Hopefully after the September long weekend I will have more time to write as it is k i l l i n g me to have to wait until my days off and constantly jotting notes just breaks the flow a bit and I end up editing way too much....oops.

Anyway, enjoy... X'D
Awkward

Chapter Summary

After coming back and getting texts from Alphys, Sans decides to visit her. Not before an awkward encounter with his brother, which leaves him bitter and restless. Sans reveals his discovery about his rebound to Alphys - and about his new attack.

Sans was embarrassed for succumbing to his emotions. He hated that his defenses had crumbled so easily and that Grillby was subjected to the broken connection as a result. He seemed alright, at least - or had no inclination of giving away that he'd been affected at all. The fire monster had held him, rubbing soothing circles into his back and shoulder as his emotions ripped through him. His frustrations and loathing from the whole situation had really taken a toll on his mind.

Eventually, Sans calmed down. He couldn’t look at Grillby, although he knew that the other was worried. He flinched when he received a kiss to the skull, then sunk down, wanting nothing but to forget that his breakdown had even happened. The tears would evaporate soon enough, but he hated the fact they had left him at all.

The silver lining was that the fire monster now looked a great deal better, even with the failed circulation. He was a little brighter, and although his flames were tinged with the odd tingle of Sans’ residual magic, he looked more awake and alert. If he concentrated hard enough, Sans could hear the usual brilliance of flame lick up and travel around his body before swooping over crests and craggs as a normal fire would. Once a blaze got going, the more powerful it was, after all.

The same could be said for Grillby. Held and consoled quietly by him and being told that things would turn out for the better made Sans reflect on a few things that needed addressing. That was: he had been inadvertently avoiding his brother since the whole mess started apart from his apology, and when he recollected it, it made him feel bitter. Not once had he stopped to check his phone, so it was likely he had missed out on Papyrus’ messages.

His soul feeling heavy with the thought, the skeleton pulled his phone from his pocket to check, nestled against the now resting fire monster’s form. He felt a twinge of guilt when he saw the eight messages and read through them, every line driving the metaphorical knife deeper and deeper.

Papyrus (Last message received yesterday: 11:42pm);

- THANK YOU FOR TELLING ME WHERE YOU ARE! THE HOUSE FEELS EMPTY WITH ONLY MYSELF, HOWEVER GREAT I AM, MY OWN COMPANY IS NEVER LACKING! BUT I NOTICE YOU’RE NOT HERE! AGAIN!
- THAT IS TO SAY, I’M NOT ENTIRELY LONELY OR ANYTHING! A CERTAIN QUADRUPEDAL NUISANCE WHICH SHALL REMAIN ANONYMOUS HAS DECIDED TO RAID OUR FOOD MUSEUM AND DESTROY YOUR ROOM FURTHER.
- IT'S A GOOD THING YOU AREN'T HERE. OTHERWISE YOU'D BE SUBJECTED TO THE HORROR OF VACUUMING LITTLE WHITE HAIRS FROM THE CRACKS OF DESPAIR AS WELL.
- I CERTAINLY HOPE YOU ARE DOING ALRIGHT, BROTHER. PLEASE ENSURE YOU ARE KEEPING WELL AND EATING RIGHT.
- WHILE I UNDERSTAND MISTER GRILLBY IS A PURVEYOR OF ALL THINGS
SLIPPERY AND DISGUSTING AS FAR AS NUTRITION IS CONCERNED, YOU HAD PROMISED!
- TO TRY!
- AND I'M GLAD YOU'RE TRYING!
- PERHAPS MY MESSAGES ARE A BIT TOO LENGTHY AT THIS PARTICULAR CONJUNCTURE. I'LL ALLOW YOU YOUR ‘SPACE’.

Sans glared at his phone as the horrible feeling curled around his soul, pushing at his guilt. He gently nudged at Grillby, whose arms lay wrapped around him loosely as he slept on his side on the makeshift furniture-bed. He was met with no resistance as he shuffled off the edge of it and bent over to give the fire monster an appreciative hug.

“thanks, man,” he murmured softly. His soul heaved anxiously when Grillby moved in his sleep with a sigh, tiny flickers of flame briefly peeking up from his form before they settled again. Grinning awkwardly, Sans gave the other’s face a gentle pat and added, “you’re a huge help. i mean it. get better.”

As he regrettably drew away, Sans was sure that he saw Grillby gently nod, but decided not to linger. Instead, he picked up his discarded hoodie from the floor and made sure to bring out another bowl of chopped parscoals before he snuck downstairs. The bar’s smoke had cleared up somewhat, but ash littered the floor and surfaces around and Sans’ footsteps left a trail to the front door.

Leaving without using the fire exit was something peculiar and he was only glad his comings and goings didn’t seem to be as noteworthy lately. Dutifully, he zipped up his hoodie and pushed his hands into the familiar plush pockets, inhaling the crisp cold air outside after locking the door.

Despite the feelings he harboured for the fire monster, he couldn’t help but feel down. He knew he was being childish about it, but bringing up his concerns with his brother would only cheapen things; Papyrus would apologise because even if he thought it was merited, he would think it was something he ‘had’ to do, not something he felt. His pride wouldn’t allow him to do otherwise, despite the well-meaning gesture. So Sans decided it was probably for the best to give his brother space in that regard. Especially if he was made irritable with the little dog that passed through, if his hunch was correct.

Having not eaten and feeling worse for it, Sans stopped by the shop before heading home, treating himself to a cinnamon bunny for a pick-me-up. Oddly enough, he didn’t have much of an appetite, so after eating only half, the shop bunny offered to bag it for him. He read too much into that and groused internally, his thoughts souring. He wished he could stop thinking this way.

Eventually he made his way back to the porch of their house, staring at the door as though he was expecting it to fly off its hinges. Sans waited for what seemed like an eternity and then just exhaled, steam wafting into the air from his breath. He had to go inside. Even if his mind was telling him that he was avoiding his brother, he was sure it wasn’t a conscious effort. Sans still hated himself for it. Papyrus needed support, damn it.

Opening the door and finding no one inside, the skeleton huffed out a weary sigh, beelining straight for the couch. He noticed a new reply on the discarded sock but ignored it, his eye lights drawn to the television and the several notes that were mere copies of the texts he had just read on his phone.
Every one ignited an agitation within him and even pronounced the feeling that he was at fault. That Papyrus was still frustrated with him. That he wasn’t sorry. His thoughts muddled into darkness as he began to think about what his life would be like if they couldn’t make amends, or if Papyrus blamed him, or…

No. He was being irrational. Papyrus wasn’t like that. Breathing out a sigh against his hand, Sans slumped onto the couch and kicked off his shoes. He had to think about this logically.

After a pause, he groaned audibly, sure that Papyrus wasn’t home. He’d likely be out patrolling the forest or around town and wouldn’t be in for another hour if his sense of time was correct.

Just another hour.

Alone.

With his thoughts.

Suddenly the whole idea of this seemed like too much. He decided to turn on the television and watch around the notes instead of removing them, too exhausted by the days past to make any effort into getting up. Something loud and jarring was the perfect thing to cut through his thoughts until Papyrus came home, anyway.

Sans jolted from his place in front of the television, eye lights faded as the third or tenth episode of some MTT-branded show replayed on air. He wasn’t sure what had woken him or even when he had drifted off to sleep, yet knew the brief dream he had hadn’t been pleasant. Reaching beside him, Sans stretched as he felt the faint buzz from his pocket, signalling text messages.

He let them be for now, lurching off the side of the couch to beeline for the kitchen. Some chips and a spicy bun that Alphys had sent him were dinner enough as he scrolled through his phone to check on whomever was contacting him. It had been definitely longer than an hour and with the hunger pains gone, Sans just felt lethargic and gross.

Alphys (Last message received: 6:39pm);

- Hey!!!!! How is our illustrious escape artist?!?! (・ω・´)
- I hope it was ok that I told your brother about the barrier thing… Not figuring why you were over there or how I knew you were, I think you already know!! (ω°°ω)
- He really did sound shaken up about the whole thing…(。﹏。) I don’t know how he got it into his head that it was dangerous…?
- In fact, I’m pretty sure he knows about your ♥*♡:+:_o:~ delayed event--:_o:~:+*♡ so he should know the signs by now? (ゝωゝ)
- Ohh!!! OH OH SANS ARE YOU MAKING SURE TO OUTLET
- THIS MIGHT BE OLD NEWS BUT CYCLING YOUR ENERGY ACTUALLY HELPS WITH THE AGGRESSION
- THAAAAAT IS if you are still experiencing it (。﹏。) it’s been awhile since I’ve had a scan, but I realise you might not actually want another one done for…. …. …. a long time, at least! ( *・ω・:* ) which I understand!

*hey
*that might not b a bad idea
Sans huffed. Well, that went easier than expected. Deciding it was easier to talk with Alphys directly than hint as to what had happened at Grillby’s with his brother when he got back, he shuffled into his shoes, tying them tightly, then grabbed his rucksack to carry said book home again.

He could speak with Alphys about the things that had happened between him and Grillby, maybe even the stuff with Papyrus… and the incident in Waterfall, and who was responsible for his rebound. Suddenly he wasn’t sure if he should or not. Not without asking Papyrus about it anyway.

Regardless, the needling ache in his soul told him that he’d have to, at the very least, ask for ‘that’ book. About souls. About bonding. He gulped, suddenly unsure. That, and she wanted another scan.

Well, best to get all the unpleasantness done with in one shot…

As he made to leave, the door’s handle jolted and Sans froze when he saw his brother on the other side when it opened. He had opted for his battle body by the looks of it and looked quite shocked at seeing him. Sans tried to grin as convincingly as he possibly could, but he saw the distracted look in the other’s sockets despite his brother’s upturned grin.
“hey, bro,” he said automatically as he side-stepped to allow Papyrus inside. When the other gave him a penetrating look, Sans shuffled on the spot, suddenly uncomfortable. Why, when he looked that way, did he remind him of someone else entirely…?

You’re avoiding him again, his thoughts chastised him, even if it was purely coincidental. He couldn’t cancel on Alphys, since she likely had cleared her schedule for him. She would take it too hard. Sans flinched when Papyrus coughed as though to clear the tension.

“YOU’RE LEAVING!!?” he said finally, sounding aghast.

Sans stuffed his hands into his hoodie’s pockets and shrugged with a weary grin. “alph has somethin’ for me. i shouldn’t be gone long, eh… maybe overnight. can’t say. doin’ a scan,” he found himself offering up any multitudes of excuses so that Papyrus wouldn’t feel bad, but he saw the way his brother was hurt.

“BUT IT’S TOO LATE!!”

Sans forced himself not to react with the words; although not accusatory in the least, they felt like a punch to the chest. He grinned awkwardly and shrugged. “it’s kinda a last-minute thing.”

“OH… WELL, I SUPPOSE THAT IS PERMISSIBLE,” Papyrus said while rubbing a smudge from his glove almost distractedly. Sans tried to not allow it to affect him so much and merely shrugged, easing his posture into his usual slump. “I SUPPOSE IF YOU WANT TO CATCH THE FERRY, YOU’D BEST BE ON YOUR WAY!”

Sans continued to force his grin, his hand creeping out to tighten against his rucksack as he bit back a flare-up of anger. God, why was he being like this? Was it actually the aggression, or was it because he was just feeling bitter?

He pushed the anger down and exhaled a breath to calm himself. Then he threw an arm around Papyrus’ shoulder and yanked him into an abrupt hug.

“love ya, bro. i won’t be long. sorry i didn’t reply to your texts. you’re the best.” Sans meant it, burying the ugly feeling in his soul as Papyrus stood still. His arms didn’t reach up to envelop Sans like he always did, not until when he drew away, hurt but smiling. “i mean it,” he added more emphatically, giving the other’s skull a brisk pat of reassurance.

Papyrus grinned at him and affectionately bopped his skull in return, inwardly delighted with his brother’s laugh despite the feeling that something just wasn’t right. When Sans left, he stood alone in the house for the third day in a row, unsure of what to do.

“SEE YOU LATER…” he sighed at the door.

Sans sat on the ferry, clutching his bag with phalanges so tight that he was at risk of tearing the fabric in half. He glared at the river person's back, their body poised at the fore of the craft as it darted across the waters in unmoving silence.

Sans’ eye lights drifted up to the expansive caverns above, recalling the memory of how the end of his and Grillby’s first date had gone. The fire monster had sensed something in the cave ceiling and
was agitated on the way back… Surely the events couldn’t be connected in any way?

He had mentioned vines.

As though the thought brought on a familiar sensation, Sans flinched when he felt something snap under his clothes. He doubled over where he sat and clutched at his sternum with a wheeze, feeling the bones under his fingers clench and the unmistakable twist of pain lurch within his soul.

The ferry didn’t stop and the pain eventually subsided. Shaking and breathing harshly, Sans slowly released his grasp from his sternum and pulled his hoodie’s collar away from his chest to inspect below his clothes. Apart from the subtle glow of his soul pulsing rapidly in panic, his ribs showed no signs of injury nor the phantom pain brought on by the recollection.

He exhaled a slow breath to calm down and looked up to his travel companion, who did not utter a word, nor even acknowledged anything had been out of place. They merely stared out into the abyss as the craft plunged through Waterfall, then into the familiar smell and heat of Hotland.

Sans was only too ready to disembark the craft when it stopped, thankful at least for no surprises. No vines or sudden shifts in the water. He honestly wondered if there was a connection or not.

The Underground was shrinking around him. So much in fact that he felt smaller than before, longing for more space. He lifted his face, looking into the high hazy caverns of Hotland, how the stalactites far above only whispered into the heat as it wafted up. The colour that mirrored off the rusty red earth around him clung to the dry heat, obscuring things above.

Maybe one day, he thought. One day they’d get out, but it was unlikely it would be in his lifetime. There was a kind of hopelessness in that passing thought and the skeleton huffed a sigh, pushing the yearning away. He honestly had enough on his plate without adding claustrophobia to the mix.

Trudging through the dirt path to the lab, Sans shouldered his bag uneasily as he approached the heavyset doors. It felt like a lifetime since he’d last been here to return Alphys’ device and then pass through the CORE to fetch Papyrus.

He shuddered at the thought and immediately rapped at the door in order to force some interaction. He couldn’t dwell on that. That hadn’t been Papyrus’ fault at all. Too many things were on his mind lately, and with his brother’s expulsion from the Guard, losing a friend, the fight, the argument…

He was on the verge of a dejected sigh when a familiar face greeted him. He gave in to his usual smile, hunching his shoulders when Alphys ushered him into the lab. She was all questions, of course, yet Sans was stuck in his head, a pinwheel of worry and theories whirling about until she rather abruptly snapped her fingers in front of his face.

“what? sorry,” he automatically said, realising he had been standing in the doorway for longer than what was probably acceptable in the heat.

Alphys gave him a nervous look and took him by the arm, pulling him inside so the sweltering heat of the outdoors didn’t leech into the cool lab.

He followed as if on automatic, letting his bag drop by her desk, allowing her to shove him into the familiar computer chair.

“S-so…?”

He blinked at her in confusion, then hunched his shoulders again, easing back onto the chair and idly swivelling.
“...so.”

Alphys gaped at him. “W-what’s going on?? You’re a… a total spacecase!”

Sans grinned and pulled his hand up to scratch at his sternum thoughtfully, the memory of the fleeting pain still fresh on his mind. “aw. you know how the stars light up my life;” he retorted, grinning at his own joke. “sorry. was just kinda… puttin’ things together in the ol’ skull space.”

The doctor sighed, the tension not leaving her shoulders for even one moment. “I… guess you’ve had a rough time?” she asked tentatively, to which Sans infuriatingly shrugged at. “What happened? Why, when… they were, um, searching for you?”

The skeleton grimaced, preventing himself from shrugging if only because he became aware of the gesture the more that he thought about it. With a deep inhale, he scanned the possible reasons as to why Alphys had known - but came to the conclusion that she had likely seen him in front of the Ruins door’s herself with her cameras. It didn’t fit into how she knew ‘they’ were searching for him for whatever reason, but he could put two and two together.

He explained it as delicately as he could, mentioning having an argument with Papyrus, but not the specifics. He wanted to get all his facts straight, and he definitely wanted to take a look at her recordings of Snowdin if she still had them.

She leaned back on a chair pulled from the monitoring system and sighed heavily, giving him an examining look. Her eyes squinted at him from behind her glasses and Sans merely shrugged again, knowing that his explanation was full of holes. She didn’t need to know the specifics, nor that Papyrus’ friend was involved.

“H-how’s your aggression?” she inquired suddenly, shuffling a few loose papers on a pile at her desk when she came over. “Any… any sudden weaknesses, spikes in flux-matrix reserves? No fevers, chills, burns?”

Sans grinned a little sourly. “nothin’ like that. haven’t had any real…” he trailed off, “well, actually… a bit this afternoon. after i got back from g’s, when papyrus got back, it just spiked, but i dunno if that’s `cause i’m upset or `cause of the whole…” He gestured vaguely, still sore about the subject. “delay.”

“I, I can’t believe you two fought like you did. It doesn’t make any sense,” she mumbled as she sorted through more papers. Sans watched her but said nothing in reply as she flipped over stacks of binders and rummaged through drawers.

“i’m keepin’ things on the dl,” the skeleton finally muttered. “kinda glad that i found out what happened when you had to come down, but it played out kinda… bad.”

“Bad?? H-how so?”

Sans mentally smacked himself and hesitated. He guessed he wasn’t keeping this under wraps, after all. But if there was anyone he trusted more in the entire Underground than his own brother, Alphys was the monster to speak to about this kind of thing.

“uh,” he started quietly, “the rebound was actually spurred by an interference.”

She stopped and looked at him, fear flashing in her eyes. When she didn’t say anything in response, Sans noticed the way her hands were shaking.
“yeah. uh, you remember what it felt like in the lab? it’s kinda still there. the malintent. memory’s still spotty as hell, but i clearly remember someone comin’ in, me panickin’, and—” He stopped; now that he thought about it, he didn’t tell Alphys about the new attack. “-i blasted `em durin’ the ignition sequence.”

“B.. blasted?”

Sans grinned, suddenly feeling a little excited. In fact, it was the most excited he’d felt in a long while. He was sure his maturation had something to do with how his emotions were all over the place lately, but he waved a hand at her a little dismissively.

“ok. well, this’s gonna sound dumb, but… i kinda figured out a new attack? it manifested that afternoon, and that’s the reason for the avalanche when i tried to output that day, and…” He struggled with how to phrase it, raising a hand to scratch at the side of his skull. “it’s kinda huge. an’ couplin’ that with the box ignition, that’s what fried me, i guess.”

Alphys lowered the binder she had been holding, attention rapt. Her glasses seemed to gleam with interest. He laughed shortly, hunching into his hoodie with an uncomfortable grin as he swivelled his chair again.

“c’mon, alph. didn’t your `rents ever tell ya starin’s rude?”

“I-I-I’m lookin’ for my scanner with renewed curiosity!! I h-have to see what’s going on!” She suddenly tittered, barrelling over a few stray piles as she rounded the corner of the desk and upturned everything in sight. “I have to! This is… gosh, this is so exciting, Sans-”

“glad to hold your interest.”

“D-don’t be cheeky! Was tha… actually no, you said you’d done it before, let’s see… fif-fifteen days ag-”

“focus, alph,” he reminded her quietly, wanting to get the scan over and done with as soon as possible, “maybe we can get to that a different time-”

“Wh… right!! Who was it that interrupted you!?” She suddenly rounded on him, too close for comfort that Sans tensed and pressed his back against the chair.

His eye lights remained steady but inside he felt out of control. His soul was trembling and for a moment he wanted to pour everything out - but he knew she would overreact, report it to the Guard, to the King, and he didn’t need the authorities involved. Not when Papyrus was in the thick of it by association.

“i don’t know `em,” he replied carefully, staring at her intensely. “even if they did or didn’t hurt me-”

“B-but they did, Sans! This is an ex.. extremely huge deal! We need to report any instance of that sort of intent. Especially since you-”

“got only one hp, alph. you know the deal. m’not riskin’ mine or pap’s way of life again for any reason. i told you because i trust you,” he said firmly, each word careful and precise. There was an intensity in his gaze that Alphys faltered under and he slouched his shoulders, realising the veiled threat that passed his teeth. Sombrely, he watched as she lowered her binder to the desktop. “sorry. can’t risk it.”

“B.. but, Sans!” she said helplessly, wringing her claws together. The movement gripped at him guiltily, regretting saying anything at all. “What if they t-target others? Wh-who could, um, could do
“i mean it, alphys. an investigation like this would… get out what i am. if the guard’s involved, i’d be under scrutiny. we’re finally in a place where we can be chill and have a good life, i can work. we can leave all that behind. i don’t wanna have to move again. the first time was hard enough on papyrus. it’s bad enough i can’t go to the capital without feelin’ everyone’s eyes on me.”

If Alphys was convinced, she hid it well. Her claws were shaking and she was picking at her nails, her eyes searching mindlessly in front of her as she mentally weighed the pros and cons.

“I… I need to know who then. A n-name.”

“don’t got a name,” Sans replied stubbornly; at least, with his brother’s penchant for giving cute nicknames when he didn’t recall introductions aside, he really doubted the golden plant’s name was Flowery. It seemed a little too on the nose. “but, even if i hit ‘im, he’s either injured or keepin’ away, just how i want. i don’t want to live under threat, alph. not from people blowin’ whistles about falling down and not whisperin’ behind my back. i didn’t get any exp, so you don’t have to report any love-gain to the higher-ups. let’s just… leave it how it is for now.”

Her silence spoke volumes instead and even in the thick of it, Sans felt guilty. He knew what this would do to her, but he had still acted to tell her. He didn’t imply Papyrus’ involvement in his explanation, at least.

As though breaking through a sudden rush of nerves, the doctor sighed heavily, removing her glasses to rub at her eyes. “F-fine. I… I won’t. But! If, if it happens again-” Sans looked up with her warbling tone and saw the glimmer of tears in her eyes. “I won’t hesitate!”

The skeleton shrugged uncomfortably, looking down to his hands. “keep track on your cameras for any activity around snowdin an’ waterfall then, if it makes you happy,” he said quietly, knowing he was being unreasonable.

Alphys sighed, her breath sharp as though she was mentally preparing herself for the next round of conversation. “Now… I want to see this ‘special attack’!!” she sniffled, a nervous yet curious glint in her eyes when she replaced her glasses. “But not until a-after I get that scan!!”

Sans grimaced, sinking against the chair like a scolded child. Experiments and demonstrations meant going below.

Into the True Laboratory.

The set up for the scan mercifully didn’t take long - in fact, Alphys cleared off a long table in her search for the tablet and had Sans sit at the chair at its side. She hooked a few things into the device, cords that led from the scanner to a printer, and she fiddled with a few settings and switches on it. Being made to wait for the examination made Sans feel restless, swivelling his chair and rubbing at his legs to filter through his unease.

Then she simply held it up. It was just long enough to snap the register of his soul and he felt the manufactured Check and shrunk against the back of the chair. It took only a few seconds for the printer to start up, with whirring and cracking whines of the ribbon printing and paper being fed through the machine in a racket.

Sans glared at the device and idly rubbed at his chest, wondering if he should ask if phantom pains were a sign of something going wrong, or if it was part of the process of him simply maturing. He
decided that thought was ridiculous and pushed it away, focusing on the now: Alphys humming to herself while she was pouring over the reports.

“how’s it lookin’, doc?” the skeleton mumbled, smirking to himself. “am i gonna live?”

Alphys jerked with a start at his bad joke and whirled to face him, her yellow scales definitely paler. “Wh-wh… what do you-!”

“easy. was just a bad joke,” Sans sighed, raising his hands in a placating gesture. She settled somewhat, but her grip was unnaturally fast on the stack of paper she held. “sorry.”

The other gave him a worried look, which didn’t make Sans feel any better about the scan. He craned his skull to get a look over her shoulder and she held it at an angle so he could see, too.

“Flux levels positive, base HP is static,” she murmured, likely more to herself than actually to him. Sans’ grin tilted down in a frown as his eye lights moved over the page, the readings making very little sense. It looked more like coding than anything else and he sighed, pushing back against the chair as she listed more things off.

“MAT… There it is, maturation rate is at 96.39 percent!” she said, a lilt to her voice that betrayed her glee. “W-wow! Such a jump from last time! And… and no sign of the burn, the suppressants have decayed, a-and…? Um? Well, hold on…?”

Sans tensed visibly, craning over Alphys’ shoulder so he could see. “what?” He put a hand on her shoulder to steady himself at the angle and she jumped.

“Sans…?” her voice seemed almost reproachful and he grinned awkwardly, his soul thrumming in trepidation. “There… s-seems to be corruption in y-your, um… right arm?”

He grimaced excusingly. “tried helpin’ g with, uh… cyclical energy. he hasn’t really been feelin’ too hot, so, uh…” He slid his hand from her shoulder and shrugged, leaning back again. “course, we couldn’t finish the rotation, and it broke off. is it bad?”

“W-well, no…” She tittered nervously, helping in no such way to ease Sans’ discomfort. “There is a buildup of m-magic a-at, well? Here-” She paused to tap his right shoulder and he veiled his flinch with a short laugh. “It.. It’ll dissipate in time, but otherwise the scan is normal!! Which is, um? Very good news??”

The skeleton eased back once Alphys withdrew her hand, resuming his swivelling. He could’ve sighed in relief, if not for the looming threat of going below. And below meant a few unpleasant interactions; firstly, it was where the bulk of his recovery had taken place after his fall into the CORE. Secondly, since his recovery had spurred a few theories for the young and newly instated royal scientist, her… patients were still left downstairs.

It wasn’t lost on Sans how close he’d come to sharing their fate and every time he came into contact with them, he couldn’t help but feel he was to blame for their condition. He could still hear Alphys’ rattling, frantic sobs in his memory from when he’d stumbled across a few stray documents on her desk after coming by to get a few things that he and Papyrus had left behind. It hadn’t been long after he was ousted from his bed, so he was still unstable and limping from his right leg’s fresh attachment.

He very clearly remembered the limbs tingling unpleasantly whenever he applied weight to them. The elevator ride was a godsend - but that was the end of the universe’s graces. What met him below was a horror beyond any measure he’d ever witnessed before. The sound, the dense, congealing mass of rambling monster forms with their combined wails-
As it was now, Alphys led him to the long elevator ride to the lower levels, the soft hum of the elevator drowning out the low drone of the amalgamates below.

Sans drew in a shuddering breath as the lab’s air cooled around them, pinching at the residual memories from long ago.

He could do this.
He definitely remembered the elevator trip being a lot shorter, or at the very least, it had been faster. The low drone echoed in the shaft they descended through with Alphys tapping things out on her phone while Sans bunched his hands in his pockets.

“didn’t, uh… didn’t remember the ride down bein’ so long.”

Alphys looked up from the light of her screen for a moment and shrugged to herself. “Um, past CORE flare ups have made the… the circuitry dodgy at best. S-sorry. It’s, um, not much further.”

“oh. o-ok, gotcha.”

His breath was starting to pick up. It was silly how unravelled he felt despite it being a regular test. It wasn’t as though he was going to endure surgery or anything - that was ridiculous. But it reminded him in many ways of the handful of occasions when Papyrus had been pulled away by other things during his recovery, and Alphys had urged him to cooperate despite him being distressed. Apart from one time before, when he went below on his own.

His breath caught again and he squared his shoulders, attempting to remain calm when the elevator lurched at each passing floor. Some levels had gone into disrepair, but the basement level had the highest ceiling and a lot of storage. Enough to muffle sound. Perfect for practising attacks.

Sans gulped, shifting as he leaned against one side of the tiny room that made him feel light-headed and queasy. His soul’s thrumming was resonating quicker and quicker, until he felt a hand touch his arm.

He jumped, magic coalescing at his left eye socket when he snapped his skull to the other’s direction.

“E-easy, Sans,” Alphys said reassuringly, offering a kind and hopeful smile. Sans could see how disheartened she looked at the same time and let his shoulders slump, forcing out a shuddering sigh. “Don’t, um, let yourself go back to then. O-ok?”

Sans nodded in silence, twisting the fabric in his pockets. If truth be told, he was starting to have second thoughts about going downstairs. But then it was too late, wasn’t it? He had already told Alphys that he had a new attack, and as someone whose magic reserves manifested so late in life and even if he was considered ‘fragile’, it wasn’t as though he could put it off. It was important. He had promised that he would try to take better care of himself. He would’ve preferred to have more time to warm up to the idea, at least.

But, no. He had to go through with it.

Alphys was sombre as the elevator finally stopped with a sickening lurch, sending Sans’ breath to
stuttering as his poor nerves could barely take being confined for so long. He nearly barrelled out of
the doors when they opened, his arms so taut and his body so rigid that Alphys seemed like the
perfect picture of composure by comparison.

How he had managed to come down here on his own the evening his jaw unfused was beyond him.
Perhaps it was because he was now dealing with everything at once, he figured. The doctor lingered
while he took a moment to compose himself, the gritty tiles leading into the overcast, dully lit room
ahead sending a shock of memory through his body.

The lack of light really wasn’t helping.

“h-hey, alpha-” He immediately stopped, shocked at how choked his voice sounded. “uh, sorry, uh,
is… is there a light we can turn on, or…”

For a moment he saw a shambling mass in the corner of his vision and froze, then stared at the spot
until it backed away. He knew this was the place where many of the monsters that had Fallen Down
were kept, but he hadn’t seen anyone apart from the dogs before…

His soul twisted in a sympathetic way and his eye lights faded out, despite Alphys’ phone giving off
a bright enough light to chase off the shadows.

He drew in an apprehensive breath, his voice stiff when he spoke; “preciate it.”

Alphys huddled close to him as they walked, past the beds that once held unresponsive patients, now
empty and dusty with age. Sans felt tremors passing through him with every step, and although
Alphys tried to calm him by distracting him with idle chatter, he felt he couldn’t focus.

“...and, it’s not as though the Merceroy Plains didn’t exist in the first place, it’s just that I don’t, um,
have any records based off excavation into the xenolithic formations. Th.. they’re dodgy when
centred around Hotland-”

She was talking passionately about something; something he couldn’t focus on. Sans shook his head
and came to a stop near the bend in the hallway past the beds, stuck in repeating thoughts. He didn’t
want to be here. He wanted to get away, but his feet were planted to the floor. He could hear
scratching far off like tools on a metal table and his limbs twitched to escape their threat.

His breath hitched again when he heard a voice almost flood him entirely, soon drowned out into the
familiar female tone in front of him.

“S-Sans!” She was holding his hand and arm tightly. He fixated on it, realising he had been holding
his breath. That, and tears were collected in his sockets and he was rocked with fear.

“Co.. come on, follow me,” the little doctor urged gently, her hold releasing from his arm. Yet she
kept his hand in her claw for reassurance. “We’ll go relax in a calm place! Play music! H-have some
chips! M-make fun of cheesy movies!!”

Sans tried to take comfort in the fact she had essentially stopped his panic in its tracks as she led him
down the eastern wing, walking with purpose despite how his fears tried to creep up inside of him
anew.

When had be become such a coward, Sans wondered. Gingerly, he rubbed his hand over his face
and inhaled sharply when Alphys suddenly stopped in front of him.

“sorry, heh. guess i’m a little… rattled,” he offered lamely. Alphys shot him a grimace that looked as
though she was having trouble deciding whether or not she should laugh. She gave his skeletal hand
a friendly squeeze instead and he sighed, comforted by the action.

“It’s ok! I.. I get like that too, sometimes. I know how it is! You… you can’t just bottle things up forever and think it, um… it’ll turn out ok. B-because! It’ll just…?” She let go of his hand and splayed out hers in an animated shrug. “I, um… I don’t know what I’m saying, obviously. Ch-chips?”

“gimme.”

She chuckled at that, at least. While Sans was standoffish, Alphys watched the subtle hints of his unease. She had opted for the eastern wing instead of the west, where he had recovered and where the majority of the amalgamated monsters aggregated. It would be easier on him, and he wouldn’t feel… what was the word? Put out on display? Exposed? Even if the process couldn’t be reversed, they were still monsters. Sans would still feel uncomfortable performing experimental attacks in front of them, to be sure.

She tossed a bag of salty chips his way and he gave her his usual grin in silent thanks. While they snacked, Alphys searched through the UnderNet for more posts about the upcoming movie she was interested in and even showed Sans the few trailers floating around.

Eventually, he calmed down. Having something to focus on really helped and despite his innermost thoughts working against him, Sans found Alphys’ company comforting. After they had finished their chips, she led Sans down another corridor, one he recognised that he had visited often. Back then, Sans had been in a wheelchair or on his brother’s back for the most part - until he could walk on his own again.

He froze when he saw the familiar set up: a long desk with a padded chair rolled up to it and some rows of filing cabinets that had seen better days. Next to the cabinets and on the opposite side of the desk were some wide wardrobes whose interiors housed medical equipment, and next to those were a couple of refrigerators, of which he knew contained aether fluids.

“Easy,” she said gently.

“n.. no doctors,” he whispered, his trembling starting up anew.

“I, I only need a sensor hooked up, Sans! Easy-peasy,” she said, dismissing his plea and giving him her best convincing smile, even though it wavered. “Why don’t you, um… sit?”

She gestured to the chair and even spun it around for him when it took all of his courage to approach it. Once upon the less than comfortable cushion, Sans drew in a shuddering breath and squeezed his eye sockets closed, willing himself to be strong enough for it.

When he reopened them, he saw Alphys unwinding a simple wire attached to a round thin pad without apparent care. She had learned to handle such things in a rough manner around him - at least, while he was conscious. It was as though her lack of care for the objects made him feel better for it. It was like she detested them as much as he did, even though he knew that it wasn’t the case.

Sans exhaled a harsh breath, then immediately unzipped his hoodie. “i hate this, y’know that, right?” he muttered sourly.

“If a simple Checkscan could show me all the data I needed, I… we wouldn’t need to do this,” she said, matter-of-fact. “Are you going to be ok?”
“i’m gonna need a few more letters than just those two,” Sans countered, eyeing up the wire in her grasp. “preferably enough to spell out a few of my favourite swears.”

“It’s just a sensor!”

“i know that,” he hissed, letting the hoodie drop to the floor. Then he hooked his thumb behind his shirt collar and flipped it over his skull so his rib cage was completely bare. Remembering how other sensory tests went, he clasped his hands behind his head, glaring at the equipment around him with his arms raised. It prevented him from lashing out if things felt like they were proving to be too difficult to handle in his panic.

Additionally, it provided an adequate reach to his sternum. Due to the exercises he was going to be doing, he couldn’t just leave his soul in her grasp in case of an emergency. So as a result, the wires were several feet long and plenty flexible to remain intact while he moved.

He felt a trickle of fear crawl up his spine when Alphys approached with it and she gave his sternum a hard knock, giving him a jolt.

“ok, i need to buy a vowel.”

Alphys giggled, “J-just one?”

“maybe fffive-- fuck!”

Although Alphys had been swift due to her experience, Sans had not properly prepared himself. In fact, the jokes were a way of deflecting just how uncomfortable he was and his eye lights darted around his sockets, taking in every detail of her face.

He felt her claws touch the underside of his ribs and he jerked in response, his breath catching in panic.

“That, um, only leaves you with four letters,” she replied, trying to distract him.

He flinched and clenched his teeth in preparation, his hands tightening behind his skull. “g-glad you’re k.. keepin’ track, alph. you’re a, aah… great fffriend-”

“You’re doing great!” she congratulated and offered him a toothy grin. When he dragged in a few panicked breaths, pausing between each one, she felt her own soul twist in sympathy. “C-count back from ten for me?”

Sans closed his eye sockets and straightened his spine in preparation, the sound of bones rattling between them jarring on his senses. He held his breath and then released it, trying to calm down, trying not to freak out any more than he already was.

“ten,” he gasped out, then added quickly, “i hate this.”

“I know, I’m sorry,” Alphys sympathised.

“nine - y.. you know what would be great?” Sans’s voice shivered despite his efforts to remain calm. “Wh.. what’s that?”

“ei.. eight… if, y’know… m-maybe you could, make a thing,” the skeleton bartered, “s-seven - you’re good makin’ th-things-”

Alphys hummed to herself as she reached further into Sans’ rib cage. Now that he had calmed down
enough to bargain, she felt the rapid pulse of his magic radiate out from his soul as her hand approached.

“may.. maybe we c-could, uh-” The stammering was becoming almost unintelligible and Alphys tried to giggle again to soothe his worries, but it felt a little forced.

“You missed, um, count… i mean, a number,” she said distractedly, eyeing the glowing organ behind his ribs with a look of concentration.

“s, six-” He shivered and grinded his teeth together when he felt the unmistakable pressure on his soul, of someone touching it, panic spiking beyond what he could bear. His breaths started to come in stuttered and short, and despite how quickly Alphys’ hands had secured the pad to his soul for her readings, it still felt like some kind of horrible violation.

“Sans, I… I’m finished,” she tried softly, showing her hands in front of his face in a gesture of peace. His rib cage continued to rise and fall, jumping slightly when he hiccupped in between, the low light of his soul flickering with his panic. “Sans!”

The skeleton nodded meekly, keeping his eye sockets clenched. His hands had clasped over his wrists and were locked into place while his spine trembled under stress.

“Easy, you’re o-ok!” Alphys had already regretted placing the monitoring sensor on him, but it was crucial to the readings she required. She rubbed the bones of his shoulders, taking care to carefully unwrap his phalanges from around his wrists and bring his arms down. “See, you’re fine! F-fit as a-

“god.. god damn it,” he winced as he hung his head in his hands.

Alphys allowed him to recover while she rubbed along his back, her claws making soft clicking noises against his vertebrae and shoulder blades. Gradually his breaths deepened, until he was able to lift his skull, sheepishly wiping at his sockets with one hand.

“m’ok,” he offered lamely, turning his head when Alphys offered his hoodie. “thanks.”

Donning his hoodie, even with the sensor attached to him, was more soothing than it should’ve been. He watched and even scooted closer when Alphys inputted the other end of the wire into the receiver and started flipping on a few settings from her phone. A soft computerised hum sounded from the machine and although Sans didn’t feel a thing, he felt on edge.

“Ok to go ahead now?” Alphys asked, letting Sans get familiarised with the equipment again. She tapped through a few screens that showed his current emotional levels, his magic stability, and a projected image of his soul. As though doing so automatically, the skeleton rubbed over his sternum, the itch under his rib cage a little distracting.

“sure.”

“A, a new attack!” she tried again, pumping herself up. “This is really ex.. exciting! Go, now - off of the chair - and go stand by that end, and? Face the room, y-you should have loads of space.”

Sans walked the ten or so feet away from her, glowering at the tether to his soul. Since it wasn’t necessarily medical equipment, he could more easily ignore it now. It was difficult to get used to the weight of it, but Alphys’ distraction was making it tolerable. He gave her a grin as he stuffed his right hand into his pocket to pluck at the lining.
“So! W-what does it look like?”

“uh…” Sans had to think on that. In fact, out of the three times he had performed the attack, not once had he looked at the construct above him. In fact, was he even certain that it had been a construct? Sheepishly, he scratched at the side of his jaw and grinned excusingly. “no idea.”

“You don’t-?” Alphys stopped, deadpan. Her shoulders hunched and she had a finger poised over her phone’s touchscreen. “HOW!?”

He grimaced and laughed, “i dunno, man! i just kind of…” Sans gestured a bit vaguely with his free hand and shrugged. “it, uh… wasn’t really a conscious thing.” She face-palmed and shook her head at his feeble excuse. “hey, now. i recall, uh…”

Experimentally, he focused on the air above him, yet it felt claustrophobic. Too constraining. He hummed to himself and adjusted his stance, feeling a little too put on the spot. He paced, mindful of the wire, and drew in a few deep breaths to calm down.

His left arm was tingling, collecting magic all the way down so it gathered around his metacarpals. With it brought on a mild flicker in the lights and he looked up, the dim buzz above them as the tube bulbs fizzed with the surge in energy.

“whoa.”

“H, how do you, um… feel?” Alphys asked from her end of the table. “Any nausea, burning, chills…?”

Sans considered it for a moment as the magic continued to collect. “hm. nothin’ like that,” he said with a shrug. “i’ve kinda always been… i dunno, frustrated when it happened? or at the very least, desperate.”

“Desperate…” came the echo from his friend. “How so?”

Sans flicked his hand, the cyan wisps of magic curling around his digits and drifting into the air around him. The hues bounced off the gritty floor and into the high ceiling, elongating their shadows into the corners of the room. He inhaled a deep breath in preparation and rose his hand, things catching his attention as he did so.

The chair trembled with what felt like a disturbance in the air. There was a particular drain in the atmosphere like a deep-seated thrum, like the echo of the world’s heartbeat all around them. Despite his efforts, he was losing the grip on the collected magic and in his haste, threw his fist into the air to expel it from his body.

The blaze of magic from his left socket spilled out, colouring his vision with his hues. A low rumbling droned over him along with a crushing weight he’d never noticed before. Prickles danced over his shoulders as he turned his attention to his companion, who remained frozen in place.

“Wh…”

A low pitched, guttural growl lingered above him along with a heat that emanated from what he had conjured. Sans carefully adjusted his position and looked up, his soul thundering at the massive construct.

“N-n-no w-wonder you burned out!” was Alphy’s tiny gasp. She remained frozen in place.

Sans whistled lowly, stepping out from its shadow and backing off a bit to get a closer look. He was
shaking a little from the exertion of keeping it manifested. It was less of a drain than actual… activity, he would say, but it still tugged on his reserves. He heaved a deep breath to replenish the odd little giddiness of seeing the attack for the first time.

All the while, he couldn’t help but feel that he’d seen its appearance somewhere before, despite having never looked at it.

While skeletal in nature, just as his bone constructs were, it also appeared unstable. Magic dripped from its maw, seething with a white-hot glow that was gradually collecting as it loomed in the air. It appeared to be a skull of some sort of monster Sans had never seen before, its large orbits filled with mist-like lights that hazed around as it watched, unblinking. It was cracked, showing it was much older than it should’ve looked, deep gouges scoring the bone in uniform marks with protruding horns at either side of its body.

Then the teeth. Sans was sure they were teeth, although they weren’t fangs or anything like his own. They were uneven, pointed and deadly, jagging up and down from its open maw like so many needles, collected into groups to merely look like animalistic fangs.

Sans remained quiet as he looked over every detail. He… had made this? Weren’t bullets and attacks supposed to reflect the innate state of a monster’s soul?

He wasn’t sure how to process that. He wasn’t expecting something he made to look so… powerful and fierce.

From behind him, he heard Alphys’ soft “wow” of astonishment, just barely above a whisper.

Carefully, he turned, unsure if the construct was sentient or not. While it didn’t look like it, wherever Sans paced, he felt as though the eye lights were following him despite never moving. But that was impossible.

“this’s cool as hell,” he breathed, taking a few steps to the left and right as though to judge the attack’s perception.

“I-is… is this all it does?” Alphys stuttered. When Sans looked back to her, she was hiding behind her phone, although she was holding it up as though to take a picture.

“uh, no…” Sans replied, very sure of that suddenly. He stepped off to the left again, then circled the beast to inspect it at a closer angle. As long as it didn’t do anything, it didn’t seem to be that much of a drain on him. It just hovered and watched, ready for instruction with silent intensity. That was interesting, to say the least. “i think it fires some kinda bullet…?”

The other scoffed softly and Sans turned to regard her, seeing the most excited grin on her face.

“I, I want to see!!”

The skeleton grinned at her in turn, surveying the area to make sure nothing was around to destroy that was of any value.

“ok,” he gave in as he readied himself. As he did so, he felt a pull against his soul and a rumbling growl from the construct. He flinched when something inside of him tugged a little more as his soul produced magic to feed into the attack. Oddly enough it didn’t hurt, but he noticed Alphys’ face blanch when she looked at her phone.

“Wh… W-wait, Sans!” she shouted and took a few steps forward.
A high pitch whine drowned out her cry and the only reason Sans heeded her was from her movement. Watching her, puzzled and restraining the odd throb in his rib cage, his attack stopped.

What little lights in the basement flickered and he exhaled deeply, suddenly feeling like sitting down would probably be a better idea. Could monsters attack while sitting? Was that in the rules? Maybe he’d be the first to try.

“What’s up,” he mumbled after the tinny noise had dropped from the air, rubbing at his sternum again.

“Don’t power up! Just fire!”

“Oh.” Well, that made sense. If he didn’t power up, it would be less of a drain on his reserves. He looked up to the construct again, feeling uneasy since he wasn’t quite sure how to tell it to fire. It had always just… happened. “…what, just fire?”

“Yeah!” Alphys was hopping excitedly in one place and he grinned, suddenly feeling foolish for the attention. “Oh! Oh, oh!”

“Use your words, alph.”

“I, I am!! B-but, you know, I wanted to let you know, that! Um? Your magic levels inc.. increased a lot just now!”

Sans scoffed, rubbing at his chest again. “You’re not serious.”

“N-not a Boss Monster, my big fat tail!!!”

The skeleton flushed, not knowing how to counter that. So instead he deflected, shrugging and turning away to regard the attack again. For some reason, the more he looked at it, the more familiar it seemed.

“Just fire?”

He heard Alphys sigh in impatient exasperation, “Yes, Sans, just fire!”

“Ok. Say bye to that gross broken fridge, I guess…”

When Alphys laughed and clapped excitedly, Sans threw his left arm into the air, the construct jumping to life as magic crackled around like static electricity. The doctor gasped when the whine started up, faster this time, and Sans felt another tug against his soul when a wash of light filled the room. He grunted and felt sweat start to bead on his skull and slide down his neck when the magic slipped past his fingers, the attack following his lead.

The sad little mini-fridge at the opposite side of the room never saw it coming - and that being a pitiful chip off the top as its lid blew off one side and ricocheted off the wall and sailed high into the shadows of the ceiling. The snap was louder than the damage it received and even though it left Sans panting, Alphys had succumbed to a fit of giggles and excited jubilation at the display.

Grinning despite himself and ignoring the odd little pips of light that dotted his vision, Sans turned around to see as her laughter picked up and echoed in the large space. The bright light that enveloped the room decayed into motes of spent magic that drifted down from the ceiling, and with every wasted bit of magic, Sans felt a little detached. At least he felt happy that Alphys seemed amused.

Would that it had lasted. The lid of the decimated fridge came careening back into view from its
journey through the air and was flying towards the giggling monster. In a moment of panic, Sans’
eye sockets voided and he let loose a warning shout and darted towards her, his arm reaching out.

Then everything stopped: the lid, the echo of Alphys’ laughter, even the motes of spent magic that
hung in the air after the construct had fired. His feet stopped as though he had suddenly stepped in
thick webbing. Nothing fell, no dust kicked up from the floor. Even the air seemed stale as
everything was frozen in place.

Startled, Sans pulled his arm back and glanced around, a chill crawling up his spine. What had just
happened? Did… something break? His mind should have told him that the construct of continuity
had been altered, but he was too stunned to properly think of anything besides ‘my friend nearly got
beaned by a goddamn fridge’.

He huffed, the tight feeling behind his ribs increasing by the second. Whatever it was, it didn’t hurt,
but he knew he couldn’t keep it up for long. Rubbing the dull throb in his ribs, Sans took a step
forward. Or at least tried. He was planted on the spot as well.

It was eerie to see everything frozen in place. The path following the lid in mid air made it appear
like it was dripping in space, the sound barrier waving around as it cut through. He turned his skull
when he thought he saw something move, watching from behind the shadows. But no one appeared
to have been there, so Sans turned back to face Alphys, frozen in a state of cheering without realising
how close she was to getting a faceful of metal.

He tried once more to move, grunting a little in effort. Fine. Concentrating hard on the lid, he reached
out to it, limbs trembling as he felt a pinch. Alphys would be seriously hurt if he didn’t at least try
something, but the edged throb was enough to make him double over with a gasp.

Sans didn’t know what he was doing, just that he knew he had to use his Blue magic to move the
trajectory of the lid.

Wafts of his hues ebbed off his arm in effort, the entire process making him feel so heavy and light at
the same time. His magic clung to his bones with so much effort, taking so long to travel down his
arm to collect in his hand.

Being nearly blinded by his own hue in his left eye, Sans gritted his teeth and flung the Blue magic at
the lid, encasing it and changing its position in the air as sweat continued to bead up on his body.

“hang tight…” his voice rasped, goading himself to continue. A few black spots cropped up in his
line of vision and he shook his head to clear it with a huff.

When he was sure the little doctor was safe from the lid’s path, Sans felt something bottom out of his
rib cage and things seemed to speed up again. He wobbled in place and sucked in a breath as though
he’d been holding it the entire time. Alphys’ giggles continued as though they had never stopped in
the first place.

Grinning despite himself, the construct disappeared overhead and Sans could feel an odd shift
throughout his body. The lights in the basement flickered with growing intensity as his body twisted.
He felt faint. With the fires of the CORE surging within walking distance, the last senses he could
detect was of something burning and the peculiar bitter smell that came along with it. Loud warning
beeps sounded through the intercom system with the rumble far below and Alphys’ laughter cut off
with the sound of rushed footsteps when she saw him fall.

“S-SANS!!”
It took a few moments for him to shake off the dizzy spell, and when he came to, a drink was forced to his teeth. He groaned when sound, light and touch all hit him at once and he lurched to the side to escape it all.

“Wait-” was a hushed whisper, “-wait, please, I’m sorry. Please, I’m sorry!! Oh, oh god, I didn’t want this, I, I, I-”

“alphys…” he groaned softly, lifting his arm to accept the drink while he squinted at her. It took him several moments to realise that he was half supported by her on the ground and she had her phone gripped tightly in one hand. “calm down.”

“I, I - and I should’ve been watching the… the r-readings - a-a-and, I wasn’t, b-because I was e.. excited for you, b-because this is a huge d-deal, a-a-and-”

Ignoring the drink for now, Sans sighed and threw his other arm around her shoulders to give her a reassuring hug. For good measure, he stuck the straw of the drink in between his teeth, his magic accepting the replenishment with an odd kind of hiccough. Her claws dug into his hoodie and she was crying and shaking her head. He felt bad for worrying her, but he would’ve felt even worse if she had been injured.

“A-and your, your levels, they were g-going up, and I.. I didn’t realise how much, a-and… with that attack, it was… it was big, but with so little damage o-output, I, I didn’t realise h-how much it, it, um, it drained you, I-”

“alphys. breathe. c’mon. i’m ok,” he assured her, just as her breathing had started to pick up and hitch on every other word. She buried her face against his shoulder and he patted her back, his vision still swimming. “i’m ok. really.”

“Y-y-you-” she gulped against her tears, her voice almost wailing, “y-your le-levels j.. just t-tanked, and… you p-p-p-passed out!”

“like. it wasn’t bad, alph. i swear,” he said again, more convincingly, “i’m alright. are you ok?”

She snorted and sniffed, keeping her head bowed as she leaned away and covered her face, nodding pitifully as though guilted by his concern. Her glasses were askew and she was a mess. As he came to look around the room they were in, several things were strewn about - likely in Alphys’ search to bring him something to replenish his spent reserves.

Awkwardly, Sans pushed himself up with his free hand and sat on the floor, still drinking what he now recognised was a soda and he sighed, giving her shoulder a brief pat. He had a feeling that the only reason it had gone so badly this time was due to the fact he was still recovering from the previous blast days before.

That and… whatever that freeze-frame kind of thing was.

Even though she was still sniffling and had tears running down her scaly face, Sans gave her a wink and grinned, pushing the thoughts away for now. “so, uh… i guess that’s my blaster?” Yeah, that seemed right. She offered him a frumpy, unsure smile and smacked his arm, nearly jostling the drink from his hand.

“Y-you’re sick!”

“m’always sick,” he retorted offhandedly. “didja get the readings?”
Wiping over her face with her lab coat sleeve, she exhaled a deep breath. “Yes.”

“And?”

“I need to… go over them?”

“Sounds fair to me,” Sans paused to suck noisily at the straw, emphasising since he didn’t want the other to worry too much. “It’s ok if I stay overnight, right? Kinda late.”

Alphys nodded her head and adjusted her glasses, then drew her arms close to herself. Sans noted that her tail did the same as a sort of self-comforting tic. He gave her a lazy grin and rolled up to his feet, flinching when the sensor wire tugged at the connection to his soul. With one hand secured around the drink container and the other free, he reached down to help her up with renewed strength.

“C’mon. Maybe we can do that mew mew fruity ice skate party.”

That earned him a startled laugh, at least.

Chapter End Notes

This is one of the ideas I’ve had for the story that have been with me for a very long time, since the beginning!

Every time I write a chapter without the Warm Boy, I miss him ;n;

Even though it’s a commission, I want everyone to see the ch 19 art that HolloweenTwinkie on tumblr did and it’s greaaaat aaaaaaa!!!! Click here to see!! (SFW)
**Footage**

Chapter Summary

Spending the night at Alphys’ lab, Sans reads up on Soul Reactions and doesn’t sleep for long thanks to a dream about a parent long gone. In the middle of the night, he decides to search through the footage of the afternoon he was attacked. He discovers a very informative letter from Papyrus regarding interspecies hanky panky.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans brought his drink with him when Alphys urged him towards the elevator. Distracted, he followed her, eyeing the hand cautiously held out to aid him should he stumble. She had left the sensor tethered to him, so worried over his blackout that Sans couldn’t convince her to remove it until he could prove to her that he actually felt fine.

And he did feel fine. Oddly enough, despite his blackout, the drink that he’d been given had strengthened him quickly, so much that he was suspicious of its contents. Alphys merely mentioned that it was a fortified drink made special in Hotland. He could believe it; the drink was warm and spicy, yet had a bite of bitterness that gradually melded into something sweet. It wasn’t a bad taste, if he was entirely honest.

Once situated upstairs again, Alphys handed over her phone so she could arrange some cushions, pillows, blankets and snacks on the floor in front of the television. He lingered while she did so and felt his pocket buzz.

Then again.

And again.

Sans pulled his phone out from his pocket.

[Incoming call: hot stuff]

He stared at it for a moment before he wandered down the room a little ways, scuffing his slippers on the tiles in idle thought. “heya,” he answered softly.

“Sans,” the fire monster seemed to exude relief. Even though he wasn’t sure why, Sans felt his soul skip and he grinned awkwardly to Alphys. She had looked up when she heard him speak.

“in the flesh.” There was silence from the other end, but he could hear the fuzzy crackle of fire fizz and pop as though in rebuke. “how’re you feelin’?” the skeleton mumbled into the receiver, trying to keep his voice low so Alphys couldn’t overhear. “no more smoke?”

Grillby didn’t reply immediately, although it wasn’t for lack of trying. His voice was crisp but buried by his flames, roasting on each syllable when he finally made out a few partial words; “...Power... went... black.... ..ans?”
Sans felt his soul lurch uncomfortably, knowing the worried tone. Of course the other would have noticed, especially when he had divulged his theory as to how Sans’ connection with the CORE worked - that and Sans’ affirmation. He sighed softly, wishing he could give the old flame a reassuring pat.

“y’know, not every blackout is `cause of me,” he replied in a standoffish way as he toyed with the wire in between his digits in thought. He heard a soft sigh from the other end and his soul jumped again, this time more like a flutter.

Grillby was clearly worried; he could tell.

“`course, uh… i might’ve overdone it a bit,” he relented sheepishly. Sans heard a stuttering flutter and he gave in to a chuckle. “relax. m’ok-”

“Are you, though…?” Grillby almost hissed back. His words cracked, clearly agitated by the news. Sans felt horrible, but he didn’t allow it to tinge his words.

“yeah.”

“Ok’ is not a feeling I will accept this time,” the fire monster tried insistently, his tone almost popping and seething.

Sans almost didn’t know what to say. He had told the truth - that he felt fine, even though he had pushed it. He mentally smacked himself and twisted the wire as he spoke, eye lights darting around the tiles at his feet. As he went over it in his head, he tried to find words that would calm the other down.

“uh… ok, then,” he offered a little lamely and gave in to a shrug. He caught the way Alphys glanced at him again and flushed in embarrassment. “guess i can say in all honesty, i don’t feel half-bad? i, uh… i mean, i have some equipment hooked up to measure my magic output, but nothin’ like, you know… before.” He listened to Grillby’s ambient flames and how they must be closer to the receiver, just barely projecting a staticky noise into the line. “alphys is just keepin’ tabs for a bit. it’s honestly nothin’ to worry about.”

“Poor excuse for a deflection…” Grillby sighed and Sans had to chuckle at that.

“yeah. guess so. sorry to worry ya.”

A bit of silence followed, occasionally broken by the subtle snaps and pops of the fire monster’s aura. Sans hummed to himself and wandered back to the makeshift bed of blankets and cushions on the floor.

“alright. you’ve twisted my ulna,” he relented, “tibia honest? i tried somethin’ and maybe it affected the core. but it was a fluke, uh…” He eyed Alphys, who was looking at him with worry. “i couldn’t let it happen.”

“Words that are… concerning,” the other remarked warily. “And you continue to deflect.”

“my bad.” Sans’ grin tugged down in a frown. “i really do feel ok. which is kinda weird, but… i’m ok with that. i’m not exhausted, i don’t feel sick…”

“...Truly?”

Sans chuckled. “am i really that untrustworthy?” When the fire monster hummed in amused agreement, Sans grimaced. “i’m in good hands, grillby.”
A sharp crackle popped from the line and Sans grinned a little more when he remembered using the other’s full name had a startled effect.

“speakin’ of deflection…”

It was Grillby’s turn to laugh, “Me…? Still… somewhat low on magic. Rivalling you in naps, lately. At this rate, I will transform into something of a lazy homebody.”

Sans snickered, “careful, that’s a title m’not willin’ to give up to you.” His soul did a happy flip when Grillby laughed a little louder at his joke, emotions swirling around his rib cage as light flickered between the gaps. He flushed when he heard a gasp from Alphys and turned so he couldn’t see her, resuming his pacing.

“If I may be… entirely honest,” the fire monster continued once he had calmed down a little, “…been somewhat lethargic lately. To be expected, naturally. However…”

“want me to pick you up somethin’?” Sans offered automatically and rubbed at his sternum, willing the flickering of his soul to calm down. “i am in hotland, after all.”

“Rub it in.”

Sans grinned to himself. “dirty request,” he murmured just under his breath, enough for the other to hear, but just low enough that Alphys couldn’t. He snickered at what had to be a bursting flush, as the static and thrum of fire became a little louder.

It took the fire monster awhile to collect himself, but in the end he mentioned something about a few items the skeleton could get for him if he really felt obliged. Soon the conversation had concluded and with hushed goodbyes, Sans hung up and stared at his phone.

When the skeleton turned back to Alphys, grinning excusingly for the extended call, she had a knowing smirk on her face.

“what.” Sans rubbed over his chest again, the light still flickering with the warm thoughts the conversation left him with.

“You… really haven’t read chapters twenty to thirty-five relating to soul reactions, h-have you?” she said, suddenly suspicious. She was sitting in the middle of the cushioned blanket pile with her arms crossed while the VCR was paused just after all the preview commercials and before the actual movie.

Sans pulled one side of his hoodie to cover his bare rib cage, muting the glow in embarrassment.

“You’re really smitten, Sans! I think it’s cute! But, um, it’s not natural to hide your love. If you truly have feelings enough to merit those kinds of reactions, w-well-” Alphys’ words deteriorated into more flustered stammers, but Sans very clearly heard the squeaks and giggles of “love” and “passion”, amongst other things. His face felt hot and he idly rubbed at his neck, gradually moving to pull one side of his hood against his face when he sat down.

“Why? Wh-why are you embarrassed!”

“alph…” he groaned, almost pained.

“Oh!” She stared at him for awhile, tail flicking nervously as her gaze settled below his skull. A little self-conscious now for some reason, Sans twisted his body in a way as if to hide. “You haven’t even…”
“please-”
“...you haven’t even said it!?”
“said what!”

A low squeal escaped her and Alphys’ face turned a brilliant pink, coupled with excited hand movements that turned into almost congratulatory shoulder pats. “S-Sans! You haven’t said ‘I lo’-” She snorted and covered her snout to stifle herself. “Oh... how... I-I mean, to not say, after all this time... your ‘I-love-you’s!!!”

Magic flushed his skull clear down to his collarbones, he was sure of it. Sans tilted his head, feeling heat linger in his face, not wanting to give any clues, but damn Alphys was being nosy. Especially for a monster who had yet to confess her own crush to a certain fishy captain...

“maybe we did,” he mumbled truthfully, his grin broadening despite himself. Her excitement and giddiness was infectious, although he was able to hide it better. She waffled on about the nature of monster souls and how they reacted to each other’s when a pair or more shared their emotions.

That’s when he realised how often he had seen the subtle glow at Grillby’s chest where he had suspected the fire monster’s soul to be, up until recently. It was paler than his ambient firelight, thus it appeared more subtle than Sans’ own. With how brightly the other shone in his life, Sans had no doubt the other’s soul glow matched his own.

Unable to speak past the mumbled reveal that it had been on accident, yet reciprocated, Sans clammed up, flustered when Alphys suddenly got up to retrieve something from the bookcase at the other side of the room. When she returned, she all but slammed the thick textbook in front of him; Magical Bodies & The Housed Soul.

“Y-you’re reading this - and before you leave, too!!” she insisted, still giggling.

While it didn’t put a damper on their movie night, Sans found he was more absorbed in the text than the Mew Mew Musical (or whatever it was called). Alphys did not pay him any heed as she was distracted by the movie.

Inside was a plethora of knowledge that he had skimmed over. The mere mention of sexual urges, intimacy and mating at the beginning of the textbook had been enough for him to skip over before, not really thinking he would be indulging in those so soon. But as it came to be, he had experienced at least one such thing with Grillby, and thus he had to study a little more than what he had previously glossed over.

Of course, the chapters delved deeper into the modern concept of a monster’s soul. It also explained what monsters called the Heart, which amplified emotions based on their Hope and Compassionate nature. That a monster’s Hope (HP) enables a higher range of emotion depending on how stable it was. The details were still not widely known or in too descriptive detail, but when it was lower, disparity and depression sunk in. When monsters were considered Fallen, it was difficult to hold onto Hope and any emotion past acceptance. And that’s when a Fallen monster would lose its ability to hold life when Love and Hope were gone, and Compassion crumbled - leaving behind Dust, the sole remainder of a monster’s body.

Then again, that’s how his mind processed the information. If it had gone into more in depth detail, Sans would have understood it a little better.
That being said, Sans read over the chapters relating to this, finding a new angle to muse deeper into his own feelings. Naturally, he felt his best when his health was higher and felt low when it plunged to his base stats.

The light of his soul was something called Resonance, and was shared between pairs or more. The flicker meant hesitancy, a solid brightness was absolute love with no doubt, while a more subdued glow was still a blossoming, young love a monster felt.

Sans rubbed over his sternum in thought as he flicked his eye lights to the television screen. While the movie was in full swing, he found he couldn’t hold interest in it for long. Sans stopped paying attention and went back to his reading when he was sure Alphys was glued to the television and not him.

Was he hesitant? He knew with all his being that he really cared for Grillby. Hell, that was true even before he confessed, even before he thought to use the L-word even in private thoughts.

He knew he did, although he was unsure why divulging in actual words was so difficult for him. For their kind, it was natural, from platonical to familial love, to romanticism. Saying ‘I love you’ shouldn’t be such a hard thing to do, yet here he was, unsure.

He had tried, privately while he read, to push the words through his thoughts to his soul - just as an experiment. As a result, the soul glow behind his ribs flickered and beat strongly, casting a soft light onto the textbook’s pages. Awkwardly, he hunkered down and lay prone on the cushions to shield it and also to get more comfortable.

The movie continued to be nothing but background noise; he couldn’t understand much of the language if he didn’t read the subtitles anyway, no matter how many of these shows he watched with his friend.

Soon enough, it became harder to focus, despite his interest. The movie was the extended version and it had been late in the evening in the first place, so Sans figured it was an OVA with several parts. He caught himself dozing on more than one occasion, using the textbook as a makeshift pillow or nodding off so abruptly a deep snore rudely awoke him. It took him a moment before Sans realised he was the one that had made the noise.

Eventually, Alphys would lower the volume on the television just a little and trade out the textbook for a proper pillow the next time he dozed. He was out like a light, and caring for others in her clumsy yet good-hearted way, Alphys draped a fleece-lined blanket over him as she watched him rest for a moment.

She didn’t really understand why Sans and his brother had been arguing - enough for him to flee, but also that talking about it was difficult. She understood in a way; she wouldn’t want to step on any toes if she had fought with any friends… well, if she felt that she had any. She tried to power through it, but nothing really came to mind that the two brothers could be cross about with each other.

That is, Sans didn’t seem angry, so was it Papyrus? Even when they had all been together, the younger brother had always kept off to the side, keeping his worry and distress to himself. Maybe that had something to do with it, she speculated. Or, she could be entirely wrong! It wouldn’t be the first time she had assumed something and had been completely off base.

Of course, she had worries about the other’s condition, but as her phone hadn’t beeped with any warning signals during the past three hours, she was able to relax a little when Sans finally dozed off. She allowed herself to lie down, blankets tucked around her like a nest, allowing her eyes to droop as she read over the bright pink lines of text that flashed at the bottom of the screen. Soon enough, she
was on her way to dreamland, too.

For whatever reason, he woke up in a clear room, but it wasn’t clinical. Not like a hospital, but it had tools and posters around. Some looked familiar, others not. A great deal of them didn’t make any sense, or perhaps it was just because he was too young to understand.

Still, he sat beside his parent, swinging his legs over the end of the chair that was too large for him; his shoes didn’t even touch the ground. He squeezed at the sides of his chair, looking around, craning his skull to look up over his shoulder to meet with a familiar form of a slouched figure dressed in black. Their face was pale, features nondescript yet kind, seemingly to absorb light and radiate so they didn’t show a face.

[-and did you have a good day?] Their hand flicked out, drawing symbols in the air with simple words and phrases so Sans could understand. Eagerly, he nodded, excited to be conversing when the wait had been so long. And he didn’t even know why they were waiting!

[That’s good. I am very proud, of course. Are you ready to meet your brother?]

Sans’ legs kicked a little more in excitement and he leaned over the side of the chair, giggles filling the space between he and the familiar monster. His voice was a lot softer even though he was pent up with so much glee over the prospect of having a sibling - a brother - and finally being able to meet him after a whole week!! When he had already been here!

But… his parent had been sick. He wasn’t sure why. His father said they had wanted another child, so why? Why sick? The details were spared on him, of course, but Sans figured as young as he was, that it was very hard to do something that two or more monsters had to do together. It was apparently what his other parent had to do themself. He was only allowed to know the bare minimum at his age.

Instead, his eye lights quietly took in the creased and drained appearance of the monster in front of him. They were doubled over, their single arm holding themself steady. Long etches of bone were scored and one half of them appeared missing, but they had always been like that. It wasn’t because they were injured in any way. Some monsters just were different and that was ok! And he liked that he looked more like this parent than his other, if he was honest. Daddy just looked scary sometimes… but it didn’t mean that he was a bad person.

His father wasn’t there this time, but he was keeping quiet just in case he was around. Sans looked around him, to the tiles on the floor to the green bedspread and the cute little stuffed monsters in varied sizes near the foot of the bed… His eye lights followed up his parent’s covered legs and up to where their rib cage lay open as usual, then up to their face, where he saw - nothing.

But it wasn’t as though they didn’t have a face. At the back of his mind, far away, Sans knew that they did have a face. It was just that he just couldn’t remember it.

Another monster came in but Sans didn’t pay them any mind. The familiar monster had leaned back but gestured for him to come closer, so he did. He crawled up onto the bed and curled against their body, feeling the soothing, nurturing magic feed into him as he was held and cherished.

The other monster and his parent started to converse as he dozed, listening to the gentle hum of a soul nearby. As he breathed, Sans caught the gentle scent of porcelain and bone from his parent. With it brought the gentle shield of safety and he sighed long into the other’s clothes, perfectly content while snuggling against them.
Soon, he awoke to a noise. Sans looked up, rubbing at his face as he collected where he was. He was still lying against his parent, but they were holding something now, something that had such a soft rustling noise that it could barely count as a rattle at all. Curious, he leaned in close to view the tiniest skull he had ever seen swathed in bright orange blankets. Awe overcoming him, he gasped loudly, reaching out to touch the worming blanket making such a funny noise.

\[\text{This is your brother-}\]

His parent pushed their warbling, multifaceted voice gently between the three of them while Sans crawled up, using the other’s rib to steady himself as he peered closely.

\[\text{Name is Papyrus-}\]

He didn’t react to the sound of static. Distantly, Sans knew the holes in his memory were to blame and that his parent had Fallen Down long ago. His gaze was fixated on his little brother as he became overwhelmed, scared to touch in case the little one would break.

He was so new, but instantly Sans knew that he loved Papyrus and that he would be the best big brother the world could ever hope for. He grinned down at the small baby bones, feeling the emotion build up in his chest as tears started to well up in his sockets. His whole body was trembling with how much excitement and love he felt for his brother just then. He would protect him. They would be happy, and even if they weren’t, they would work together because that’s what brothers did! They would play and learn and care for each other and their parents would be there for them too-

The sound of static was filtering through like an old television set but Sans wanted to continue the dream. It had been so long that he felt he was truly at peace and absolutely happy being with family. It made an ache surface in his chest as the dream shifted abruptly, blending into cacophonous sounds, colours and light.

He held Papyrus in his arms, although they were a little older then - time shifted to another vague memory. His brother was perhaps two years old, Sans ten. That seemed right. They had been waiting in the same place and lived almost entirely in the room with the green bed, seeing the familiar monster every day. It seemed like they only went home to sleep when Daddy came back to spend time with them or when Sans had to go to school.

Sans would carry conversations about his brother’s very quick learning and praised him while the three hugged on the bed. While he knew their parent was sick, he didn’t think there was ever going to be a time when he wouldn’t be able to see them again.

Until one day, they were gone.

Awoken by the thought and a click, Sans opened his eye sockets. The crushing sound of static playing on the television after the VCR tape stopped had filtered through his dream and he felt disoriented. He heard Alphys’ loud snorts and snores from beside him and blearily looked around as he pushed himself up. Caught on the last rib, the wire severed and he grunted in surprise at the tug on his soul, giving his chest a rub in disdain for the device.

Moving downstairs was an ordeal of itself. He grabbed the textbook and his phone, using its light to manoeuvre around stacks of books and papers, but he had managed to bump into desks along the way. He grunted in a half-stupor, sinking into the desk chair in front of the surveillance system and the many displays Alphys had for all her cameras around the Underground.

The high pitch whine of the electronics made the inside of his skull itch but Sans soldiered through it, holding on to the tight feeling behind his rib cage. It had only been hours, but it honestly felt like months since he’d last spoken with Papyrus.
He couldn’t believe how he had been acting. Was it important anymore that he needed an apology? That he was right? Why had he felt that way? All he wanted was for some consideration, for his brother’s usual tight embrace with the reassurance it brought. It was selfish and he knew he hadn’t been the most understanding, especially with how his brother was acting lately…

When he set the textbook down on the desk in front of the display monitors, Sans saw a loose sheet poking through, further into the book than what he’d read. He stared at it for a moment before he flipped through the pages, well beyond the ‘Culmination of Your Being’ chapters and straight through to… he guessed it.

Intimacy and the sharing of souls.

Sombre, he tugged loose the folded paper, lined and creased into the shape of a soul. He already knew it had been meant for him, but nothing could have prepared himself for the content of the letter.

DEAR BROTHER,

HELLO AND WELCOME TO ADULT MAGISTRY!! WHILE IT COMES TO NO SURPRISE THAT YOU (NOR I) WILL FIND ANY INFORMATION ABOUT SKELETONS IN THIS TEXT, THERE IS UNDOUBTEDLY CONTEXT OF A NATURE YOU WILL IN NO UNCERTAIN TERMS, BE ‘INTERESTED’ IN. SINCE YOU HAVE A BOYFRIEND NOW. WHICH APPEARS TO BE GOING QUITE WELL!! I AM EXCITED FOR YOU!!

AND NOW ON THIS NEW AND EXCITING JOURNEY THROUGH ADOLESCENCE AND INTO ADULTHOOD DOPTH THE GREAT PAPYRUS INSTRUCT YOU ON SOME KEY POINTS - INVALUABLE INTIMACY AND RULES AS OUTLINED IN THE DATING BOOK FROM THE LIBRARY! WHICH I HAVE FOUND!! FOR EDUCATIONAL PURPOSES ONLY!!

I AM BEING SERIOUS!! I WAS EXTREMELY SHOCKED WHEN YOU DISMISSED MY VERY IMPORTANT AND IN-DEPTH EXPLANATION, ALRIGHT!!

FIRST STEP: DATES! YOU HAVE HAD THEM! THAT’S REALLY… COOL!! YES, YOU!! EVEN THOUGH YOU HAVE MET YOUR MATCH WELL IN ADVANCE, IT IS STILL SOCIALLY REQUIRED TO ‘MEET’ AND ‘GREET’ YOUR FAVOURED OTHER (OR MORE!!) TO SEE IF THERE IS REALLY A CONNECTION PAST YOUR REQUITED CONFESSION!

SECOND STEP: MUTUAL EXPLORATION! DON’T THINK THAT YOUR COOL AND EVER-OBSERVANT BROTHER HASN’T NOTICED THE MARKS LEFT BEHIND FROM WHAT HAS TO BE RATHER SPICY AFFAIRS FROM (HOPEFULLY) BEHIND CLOSED DOORS!! THAT MEANS THERE IS DEFINITE INTEREST IN EXPLORING EACH OTHER………. LEGIBLE WINK!!

WHAT I MEAN IS THAT. WHILE. I MAY BE. ONLY SLIGHTLY EMBARRASSED THAT MY BROTHER IS ENGAGING IN AMOROUS ACTIVITIES, I AM… ALSO SOMewhat PROUD? VERY PROUD!! YES, A VERY EXCITED, VERY NATURALLY PROUD PERSON. THAT ISN’T WEIRD AT ALL. TO BE PROUD OF YOUR FAMILY. FOR… GROWING. AND DOING FUN THINGS.

WHICH I IMAGINE… GRILLBY MIGHT BE? DON’T READ INTO THAT. IF YOU SAY ANYTHING ABOUT THAT I WILL HAVE WORDS, SANS!

THE POINT BEING THAT, THESE CHAPTERS ARE IMPORTANT. WHILE I PRETEND NO KNOWLEDGE AS TO WHICH SPECIFICITY ANY GENDERED OR NON-GENDERED PIECES EITHER OF YOU WILL CONJURE IN YOUR SPARE TIME-
IT IS OF UTMOST IMPORTANCE THAT YOU KNOW IT DOESN’T MATTER WHICH YOU CHOOSE. OR HOW MANY YOU CHOOSE. OR IF YOU CHOOSE ANYTHING AT ALL! THAT, LET US SAY, IF YOU CHOOSE A QUICHE AND GRILLY ALSO Chooses A QUICHE, THAT JUST MEANS THE TWO OF YOU WILL NEED TO FIGURE OUT THE PUZZLE OF ENJOYING TWO QUICHES!! OR IF YOU OR HE DECIDE UPON SAUSAGE. THEN YOU CAN ENJOY A QUICHE AND A SAUSAGE AT ONCE! AND VERY LIKELY PERHAPS FITTING THOSE TWO PIECES TOGETHER! LIKE A JIGSAW!! ONLY WITH… MINIMAL SERRATED BLADES. HOPEFULLY.

I AM GETTING AWAY FROM MY TRUE OBJECTIVE HERE. THE POINT OF THIS LETTER WASN’T TO EMBARRASS YOU WITH POORLY CONSTRUCTED ALLEGORIES, SINCE YOU OBVIOUSLY DON’T WANT TO HEAR THIS FROM YOUR BROTHER AND CERTAINLY WON’T SEEK OUT MISTER GERSON’S ADVICE ON THE MATTER... IT WAS A GOOD THING YOU BROUGHT ALL THESE TEXTBOOKS HOME. ALTHOUGH, YOU HAVE YET TO STUDY AT HOME, AT ALL.

I KNOW THAT IT IS NO ‘HUGE DEAL’ TO SHARE FIRST EXPERIENCES WITH YOUR BOYFRIEND. IN FACT, I AM GLAD YOU FINALLY SEEM HAPPIER. IT DOES MY HEART AND SOUL GOOD TO SEE YOU SMILING SO MUCH AND LAUGHING... AND EVEN LOOKING FORWARD TO THINGS! AND IT ISN’T A RUSE!! THAT GIVES ME SUCH RELIEF!!

THANK YOU FOR TRUSTING ME WITH THE KNOWLEDGE THAT YOU WILL BE RESPONSIBLE AND TAKE CARE OF YOURSELF. YOU ARE MY DEAR BROTHER AFTER ALL, AND I CAN’T WAIT FOR WHAT THE FUTURE HOLDS FOR ALL OF US - IN THE FUTURE!!

YOUR ADORING BROTHER AND EXPERT IN THE LOVE-SCIENCES,

PAPYRUS

PS: TELL HIM YOU LOVE HIM, YOU EMBARRASSINGLY SHY BRICK OF CALCIUM!!!!

The skeleton sat in the chair in shock. He gaped at the paper, disbelieving as to its subject contents. Then he rather abruptly turned over the paper and looked at the writing side again, his magic flickering in restless coils, embarrassed. Well, it came to no shock how his brother felt - that Sans had all but resigned himself to being alone, it had really been hard on Papyrus to see him that way. It was no wonder he involved himself in this aspect of his life like he did.

Papyrus believed in him, just like he believed in others. He always had. It was a universal constant, never changing, and it hurt to know that all this time, Papyrus had only Sans’ best interests at heart. He folded the paper over and put it into his pocket, flipping through a few more pages of the textbook just in case there were more letters, but that appeared to be the only one.

He had been a bad brother and friend, and he knew he had to do right by his family. It no longer mattered who was right and who was wrong anymore. He had to see things from Papyrus’ side. How the events folded out for him.

Sans fiddled with a few displays with the keyboard after putting the textbook down, his eye lights misting ever so slightly with the feeling of regret. He hadn’t considered how all that happened had affected his brother. Hell, now that he thought about it, Papyrus had been oddly distant since his accident…
He tapped the Enter key and the screen in front of him jumped to life. Swallowing a dejected sigh, Sans scooted the rolling chair closer so he could type at a better angle.

```
//WELCOME
//
//SUBMIT QUERY
//@admin snowdin.cam4 backup search
//
//CHOOSE DATE (MM/DD/YYYY)
//@info calen.start 02/15/201X
//
//CHOOSE TIME (HH:MM:SS)
//@info rec.start 12:30:00
//
//PLAY RECORDING (Y / N)
```  

Sans’ finger hovered above the Y key. He was moving as though on autopilot, his body protesting even when he knew the answer. He had to know if anything had happened prior to when he had ignited the dimensional box, or even if anything was recorded after.

As predicted, the area around his house and the library didn’t reveal anything out of place, no matter how much he tried to zoom in or pan to either side of where the camera was situated in the trees. He saw their neighbours going about their day and idle chats that weren’t picked up by the camera due to its distance.

He leaned his skull on one hand as he used the arrow keys to pan around, eye lights searching for anything, when things suddenly cut out. Sans flinched and tried backing out of the program; ctrl+alt+del, alt+f4, command+#. But the screen appeared frozen at 13:14:33.

Shit.

He leaned back onto the chair and idly swivelled. He supposed he should’ve asked Alphys before snooping through her footage, although he was still tapping the right arrow key, hoping something would turn up.

But nothing did. Just blank footage, likely from a power outage. There was no snow of static and all the other displays had blipped out, too. The sound dithered out and left him feeling hollow. Empty. Just like how he’d felt just before things went black, back then.

Tap. Tap. Tap.

Right arrow. Right arrow. Right arrow.

He leaned in and pushed the key down as hard as he could, his frustration building. Eventually it would have to boot back up again, right? Sans glanced at the textbook and kept his bony finger on the arrow key as he picked it up, ready to resume reading.

The skeleton would only get a few paragraphs in when something white flashed on the screen and he jerked his hand away in surprise with a muffled shout. While the feed still didn’t have sound, he could’ve sworn he heard a high-pitch whine through the right stereo coupled with a low crackle of electricity. The screen’s picture jumped, the tracking bleed making the picture almost unrecognisable when he tried panning the camera again.
The screen displayed the timestamp as it did so: 17:57:23

Many hours later… That was how long the power outage had been? Sans suddenly felt very ill, as though his soul was sinking with the thought.

White and black filtered against the camera’s feed as he tried, cursing under his breath for it to clear enough to see. He just needed to see, damn it! He thought he did, but it had run by so quickly.

It had been Papyrus. He could spot that scarf from miles away. By the way he held himself, he was in a panic, nearly slipping on the ice around the side of the house as he disappeared from view.

Sans felt a knot curl up in his magic, trying to strangle him. He knew exactly what Papyrus would find and how he would react, if history was anything to go by. His body began to tremble as he leaned forward a little more, eye lights fixed to the screen as he waited with bated breath for anything to happen.

He felt his soul lurch when he saw the bleed of orange magic pour out from the back door, just barely visible with the camera’s poor capture. The track bleed suddenly made the tape unviewable and Sans stood, chair falling behind him in a clatter as he shook the monitor with both hands.

“c’mon-” he hissed, giving the electronics a thudding smack as though it would help. His soul was shaking in distress, every panic he felt then starting to congeal around himself like a sick, angry mass. He froze when the monitor’s picture faded back to black again and he took a step away, anger giving way to desperation.

“please, don’t,” he tried bargaining with the surveillance system, giving it another thump with a balled fist so hard it actually hurt. He winced and rubbed his hand, stepping back to see if it had worked - or it was merely when the footage resumed. Either way, he was more or less satisfied with the result.

The thin staticky picture was of his brother, tall and proud and strong in the distance, not all at like him… lying weak in his arms, protected by a blanketed aura of healing magic. Sans’ own magic was so weak it barely registered on the monitor and he saw the trembling, haunted look Papyrus wore.

He tried panning despite how stunned he felt. His phalanges shook, every miskey logged with an error beep that punctuated how rattled he had become. He trembled and swore to himself when Papyrus came back into view, cradling Sans’ unconscious body against himself as he carefully manoeuvred around the ice and snow and up into the house.

He cared.

Of course he cared. He felt stupid to feel that it was any different than before. Papyrus had cared for him, had ran home to discover him that way… How did he feel throughout everything? When Papyrus’ friend had tried to hurt him, maybe even kill him, what was going through his brother’s thoughts?

It hit him. It hit him and hurt him hard. Papyrus naturally didn’t have anything to do with it. He was just as much in the dark about everything as Sans was. And the fact they had fought so soon afterwards could very well mean that Papyrus thought Sans was angry with him, despite having apologised and told him to the contrary.

That was it, wasn’t it? Papyrus was giving him space like he wanted. But at the same time, Papyrus had no one to consider how he felt, despite knowing how his thoughts would go, Sans had taken the time to go over things in his mind. His brother wouldn’t place blame with anyone. Everyone was
good, or they could change. No one was inherently ‘bad’, and everyone deserved a second, third, or fourth chance at redemption. They could change into a good person with just a little guidance and a patient hand.

Even though the little golden flower truly had attempted something… it wasn’t Papyrus’ fault. And Sans had to convince him of that.

Exhausted by the torrential emotions that whirled around his skull and too little sleep, Sans bent to right the chair and saw Alphys at the end of the room, watching quietly. The skeleton shuffled in silence, resuming his place on the chair and panning the footage to something a bit less innocuous without a word. But his eye sockets were hollow and he could very distinctly feel something slide down his cheekbone before roughly brushing it away with a dry chuckle.

“sorry, alph. couldn’t sleep.”

He heard shuffling from behind him, the footsteps of clawed feet clicking against the tile and almost choked breathing from her. He tried to keep himself from reacting to her empathy but he couldn’t. Frustrated, he wiped at a few more tears that had defied his inner struggle of restraint. Of course, the date on the monitor would tip Alphys off about what he had been searching for and she gently rested her hand on his shoulder.

He couldn’t disguise the strangled way the laugh escaped him when he ducked his skull in shame.

Chapter End Notes

Sans has finally come to the conclusion that he hasn't been considerate of how Papyrus must be feeling throughout this. Sure, he apologised before, but his behaviour has made it seem as though he's avoiding his brother. Because it has only been him and Papyrus for so long, now with Grillby in his life more and more, his attention is a bit divided at the moment. With this comes the resolution to see things from Papyrus’ view. Hopefully. :V

I hope you like Papyrus' very informative letter - there's the sex talk. X'DDDD The only reason why they didn't have it face to face is because Papyrus is very keen on Sans not running away out of sheer embarrassment... which he has tried to do several times.

Thank you for reading. 80+ subs and over 8.5k hits is very humbling. I never would've imagined people liked my fic so much ;u;

PS: C-Puff has a fic they have just started called Remedy!! check it out here! It has cute sansby and breath-taking writing ;U; I'm so excited for this fic~~
Alphys and Sans discover an anomaly in the Ruins. Papyrus visits Undyne and gets some good advice. Some brothers hug it out.

“i can do that.”

Alphys stared at him, her attention pulled from the television and the seventh episode of the Mew Mew Kissy Cutie extended OVA. Sans had been silent for the most part when she had convinced him to come back upstairs to the sleepover pile and she had popped in another tape.

This was her favourite episode and while Sans normally made subtle jabs at the clichés and tropes found in the media, her eyes went flat when he outright lied about certain techniques the magical girl would do.

Sans was sitting up and had pulled his shirt back over his skull, a little more comfortable now that his soul’s glow was hidden from view. The main heroine had just stopped time to prevent a star bomb from exploding near some kind of important structure and Sans grinned a little uncomfortably under Alphys’ scrutinous gaze.

“Sans…”

The skeleton shrugged defensively. “i figured i should say somethin’ before i forget,” he muttered a little sheepishly.

“When!” she all but demanded, pausing the episode. She turned so they were directly facing each other and Sans was watching her, somewhat astonished.

“whaddaya mean? it was…” Sans tried to think on that. How could he explain this? He couldn’t move, nothing else could move, not even the shadows. Apart from a very strenuous display of magic, he hadn’t been able to do anything. And in fact, how could he prove that something had happened at all if he couldn’t do it again?

He grumbled a little to himself. “…tapes?” he offered lamely, suddenly feeling insecure. It was much different than when he was showing off his new attack. The known laws of physics just didn’t account for any freezes in the continuum. The gridline was a whole different story - it was merely displacing one entrypoint and walking into it, and turning up in another place altogether on the other side. He had become rather adept at it, he realised. He could even do it on the spot instead of looking for a rift.

Alphys looked skeptical and even less convinced when he tried to explain his theory - which admittedly, had a lot of holes apart from, “it just happened. the lid of the fridge was gonna smack you in the face and i just… panicked?”

Her skepticism only grew from there, but the more Sans tried to explain, the worse it became. He
didn’t understand why she wouldn’t believe him, or at the very least why she wouldn’t humour him. Perhaps it was because he had woken her up so late in the night and she was on her fourth cup of coffee.

“If… If something like that happened, Sans, um… I have no record of it,” she simply said, pointing to the large ribbon printer on the desk down the hall.

He shambled over with his own cup of coffee, dark circles from lack of sleep under his eye sockets as he glared at the machine. Frowning, he took a sip, then turned suddenly. “like when i utilise the gridline?”

“Y-yes!” Alphys at least seemed more willing to cooperate with him now. She followed him down the hall and while she looked just as exhausted as he felt, she began loading up the monitor next to it, revealing a rather large map of Hotland.

“O-ok! So I, um, I don’t think that I’ve ever explained this before, but this traces little, um… we’ll say ‘glitches’, for now? It’s tied in with your… your magical signature, but it can be attuned to anything; from Mettaton, t-to the King, even if it’s kind of… buggy?”

“what, like a migosp?” Sans joked, leaning against the table. Then he was prompted to move away, which he begrudgingly obliged. Alphys fiddled with the mouse until it registered and she clicked a few things.

“H-here,” she indicated on the screen after a large gulp of coffee. “I h-haven’t really considered it fully, but things are… um, really screwy? Here-” she said again, tapping the screen.

Sans leaned in close to get a good look at it, the dark screen lighting up like an old stand-up video recorder with limited colours. The lines were pale but stark red x’s littered the screen when she browsed back between biomes. The further she went back to the Ruins, the more frequently the red indicators showed up.

“hm. an’ that’s all me?”

“I, I know what you’re probably thinking-” she said nervously, tapping her claws against her mug as she quickly looked to him, then back to the screen. “I-it, it seems really noisy, right? I, I mean, with, um, with everything that’s been happening, I, um… I just wanted to make sure!”

“gotcha. so, uh… this mark. it has a date next to it.”

“Those are, well… confirmed by you.”

“oh.” He paused when he traced his finger tip towards one red x near the mountainside a few miles from the Ruins’ door. “‘jumpin’ around’. i get it now.”

His eye lights followed a few more scattered around, ones he knew he’d either turned up or departed from. There was one he didn’t recognise just inside of the doors to the Ruins, in Snowdin Forest. He hummed softly in thought and tapped the screen.

“this isn’t me.”

She gawked at him for a moment and then giggled nervously as though he had said a joke. “W, well… naturally, unless the door’s been unlocked. A-and it’s been sealed shut for… ages!”

He was serious. He’d never been within the walls of the Ruins, nor was he even sure he would turn up in a safe space or not if he used a shortcut there. But Sans wasn’t sure if this was something to be
alarmed over or not. But then, what if it was? Or perhaps it was a glitch, like she said.

“so we got either a bug or an anomaly cruisin’ around behind closed doors. seems like somethin’ to keep an eye on.”

“I, um, I’m pretty sure it’s just a glitch, n-nothing to worry about! I haven’t been able to replicate it, though, so it’s this garbage program.”

Sans sighed quietly and stared at the screen until she panned it back to Hotland, then over the lab. With a double click, she brought up the overview of their current location and he had to snicker smugly when he saw a little red indicator over the elevator.

“Wh… why didn’t that print…” It seemed more of an astonished phrase than a query, so Sans let it be. He sipped at his coffee again, welcome for the hot sweet comfort the drink brought him.

Alphys began frantically tapping out on the keyboard, eventually draining the last of her mug while she muttered to herself. Information brought up on the screen was garbled and soon Sans was slowly inched out of the way as she worked, pushed away from the computer so she could focus. He saw her label it ‘timestamp?’ and then run down the hall to grab a chair, seemingly excited.

While he would’ve been more curious about it, Sans felt the need to go home, but at the same time he had things to get further into Hotland. Which he now realised with a veiled grimace that he would need to go to the Capital for some funds, first.

“hey, alph,” he called out nonchalantly. Sans watched as her claws danced over the keyboard and she appeared absorbed in her work, barely registering his voice. “welp, you have fun. thanks for the meowvie night,” he chuckled and strolled away to grab his things for his trip to New Home.

Papyrus wasn’t sure what to do with himself, but heck if he wasn’t going to try! It had been, if he was honest with himself, a trying few days since he and Sans had essentially made amends. It was a different story how it all played out however, that his brother was avoiding him in favour of his boyfriend. Not to get him wrong, Papyrus was happy Sans had found someone to entertain--no, to make him happy, but everything still felt off. Disconnected. Wrong.

Point in case: the morning when Sans had come back, smelling like smoke and charcoal. He merely grunted when Papyrus had greeted him with one of his best smiles and after grabbing a few things from the cupboards, Sans had left again. As difficult as it had been, Papyrus was trying, and although Sans had mentioned that he was merely tired because he had been staying up late to watch over the bartender’s recovery, he knew his brother was distracted.

So it left Papyrus feeling as though he was brushed aside and unneeded. Their relationship still seemed rocky, even though he had hashed everything out. Even though Sans had apologised, he had also accused him of being wrong.

Which was preposterous! Erroneously forward and unsubjected to such claims the Great Papyrus has never yet before been! He practically prided himself on being a hallmark of sequestered pragmatism, never before being accused of… of lying when he was speaking truths, and…

The thought ended. Everything had crashed down. No, he was being foolish. He had admitted to being wrong, so why was Sans still upset with him? Perhaps he was not considering how Sans felt about everything with a clarity he was used to. Or perhaps Sans didn’t actually forgive him and until he thought things through, Papyrus was sure that his brother was keeping some form of distance.
Hence the excuse that his boyfriend was ‘ill’. Whoever heard of a sick fire monster?? It was practically unheard of!

Racing along his thoughts was another handful of worries; of Undyne, her disappointment of his supposed crushing failure. Of Flowery’s disappearance, as much as it hurt losing a close friend, he wasn’t sure if he felt safe. At the same time, he felt suffocatingly lonely.

Ashamed. Conflicted.

He wasn’t wrong, and he hadn’t been defending his now not-so-best-friend’s actions. In fact, he wasn’t sure what the true reason was that said friend had visited Sans in his workshop in the first place. Considering the Barrier myth had been explained away by the brilliant Doctor Alphys, things no longer added up perfectly.

He wasn’t used to the puzzle pieces not lining up just so.

He considered calling and asking her if in fact what she’d said had been true. If it was perhaps some ruse made to placate him and to ensure he wouldn’t ‘freak out’ about his brother’s instability. But Sans’ instability had been an underlying condition far earlier than he could remember. Spanning back into their childhood, if he remembered correctly. Everything was dim and folded together, and the memories often didn’t make sense. Those times could hardly be used as a point of reference with confidence.

He brushed it under the proverbial rug for now. It wasn’t his brother’s instability he should be worried about - at least, not then. It should be that his brother had been seriously injured over a mistake. Or worse… if perhaps the mistake hadn’t been a mistake at all…

He paced. He searched, his mind wandered over things to occupy himself with until he would just find himself staring off into the kitchen. Then he would dart out into the street, then back inside. Tugging on his scarf and strutting out of the house once more, Papyrus hadn’t been able to settle since his brother had left. Finally frustrated, he left the town entirely, at absolute wits’ end over his own circular thoughts.

Papyrus busied himself with calibrating puzzles in the forest for hours until his finger bones felt stiffened by the cold. Unfortunately, his mind had wandered to the point where he yelled into the treetops in frustration, sending those nearby to scattering. It was cathartic and Papyrus was able to let loose a great deal of stress from it, but he knew he had to return.

Things would not be the same until he and Sans got better about communicating. Slapping his face with both hands with a tight grin, he took several deep breaths as he marched down the street with purpose. Things would heal! A little bit at a time. They would be sneaky and in the end, things would be alright again and neither he nor Sans would know at which point things had begun to be ok again! But he would try!

He had to - because Sans had promised to try, too!

While Waterfall still held the same wonder for him after all these years, it seemed more… creepy lately. The tall skeleton strode by puddles and pools glowing with ancient hues, bypassing several switches and puzzles by hopping over them in large strides. His rib cage housed a worrisome fear that perhaps Undyne wouldn’t hear of it, or would slam the door in his face again and he’d be forced to wait for some other time. Just on her doorstep.
She was in. In fact, she seemed in a cooler mood than before, her fiery gusto replaced with remorse as she puffed out her chest and folded her arms in front of her, waiting for him to bellow out any excuses for his hideously misguided behaviour.

She instead huffed out a loud sigh, allowing her arms to drop when she saw the broken and dejected look hidden against the skeleton’s features. She waved at him to come inside and when he didn’t, she grabbed him by the fabric draped around his neck and tugged him towards the door. She all but flung him inside.

“I ONLY NEED… IF YOU WOULD INDULGE ME… I DON’T KNOW WHERE ELSE TO GO. NOR TO SPEAK TO. A FRIEND. OR PEOPLE, I MEAN. I MEAN-”

Undyne’s posture tensed as she was affronted with the deluge of desperation in Papyrus’ tone. It looked like she was approaching one of her shouty moods, the skeleton thought, and he visibly flinched in preparation. Instead, her grip slackened as she pulled him at a gentler pace towards the kitchen table where he was made to sit.

A confused inquiry hanging from his mandible, Papyrus was cut off from breathing a word when she pointed at her mouth and gestured a zip, inferring that he keep quiet. Aghast and puzzled, he watched as she idly hummed, running the tap and filling a kettle.

“Listen, Papyrus,” she started quietly, “I lashed out the last we spoke. I was just so… SO-” She stopped, unable to put her finger on the right word. Instead, she slammed down the kettle on the stovetop, making Papyrus jump in his seat with the resounding bang. “I WAS SO DISAPPOINTED!!”

Papyrus flinched but kept the nervous grin on his face. If he said nothing at all, Undyne would cool down, right? Then he would surely have a moment to say what he had wanted, and to apologise for his lacklustre reporting duties. Perhaps she would even offer a hearty training session?? That wouldn’t be against any regulatory trusts, right?

“I just couldn’t BELIEVE that you, of all people…” She trailed off again, quiet. Her shoulders had hunched up and her grip was vice-like on the oven’s towel rack, betraying her tone. Papyrus could hear it creak as she flexed her fingers, the gills on her neck flaring with raw emotion. “Y’know what!? I believe in you, Papyrus! Y’got MOXIE! When the time comes, you DEFINITELY will show what you got! COMPASSION and CHARISMA!! Strength that’s leaps and bounds over anyone I’ve EVER seen!!”

The skeleton could feel his soul flutter with the recognition. He could just taste it! Perhaps he hadn’t tarnished his name as he’d thought and Undyne was considering letting him back into the Royal Guard (even if it had been a temporary position)!! He puffed out his chest, his arms straight and his grin wide and expectant.

Undyne whirled around to face him as the kettle began to steam behind her. “I just think… right now is maybe not the best time. There’s still a LOT of training I gotta put you through! SO much training, you don’t even know-” She winked, her shark-like grin full and wide. At least, Papyrus thought she winked; it seemed too long to be a regular blink but it didn’t make any noise like his own.

“DOES THIS MEAN-”

Undyne suddenly threw up a hand, using her other arm to cross over her chest. “A second chance for a… second chance?” Her grin widened even more if it were possible. “I can’t stay mad at you, ya dork! Besides, I need all the help I can get.” She sighed as she leaned against the counter, pausing to size him up. “What I’m sayin’ is that… I’m sorry for losing my cool. I stand by my decision, but I
don’t want to discourage you. Not EVER! I know how you feel about the Guard, Papyrus - hell, EVERYONE knows! You got passion for DAYS—"

“WEEKS! MONTHS! YEARS!” Papyrus all but shouted back excitedly, her words rekindling the desire for his dream. “ALL DECADES. CENTENNIAL AND MILLENNIAL PASSIONS WILL BE MINE FOR THE TAKING!”

Undyne barked out a laugh, slapping her knee. “That’s the SPIRIT! Like I said, y’got time. Just… not RIGHT now, ok? Too many things happening all at once. That being said… if you happened to see anything outta place, you let me know, ok? But in the meantime, I gotta be able to focus on ya! Which’s why, I was going to offer you a weekly regimen.” Papyrus covered his teeth with a barely-contained gasp. Undyne could practically see the sparkle in his eye sockets. “It’s gonna focus on DISCIPLINE, so you better be ready, punk!”

Papyrus nodded so vigorously that Undyne wasn’t sure just how the other’s skull remained fixed on his shoulders, but shrugged the thought away when the kettle behind her began to screech. She knew that this was only a placating gesture of sorts. She couldn’t really allow him into the Guard… not a gentle soul like him. She fixed a cup of tea for them both, knowing that Papyrus’ visit had more to it than what she had to get off her chest.

In fact, Sans’ sick days were worrying her. He barely eked by with the shifts she did give him, but when he had started ignoring his phone or when Papyrus had called her saying that he suddenly wasn’t feeling well, Undyne’s first suspicions had been that he was playing hookey. Trudging by, bundled in her warmest clothes weeks earlier, Undyne had scouted Snowdin and the surrounding forest to find that Sans had actually looked far worse than she had ever seen him. First depleted of magic, then stressed, agitated and restless.

Then the avalanche… She remained in her thoughts and even then, seemed angry about it. Her grin twitched and she brought the tea up for a sip as she sat down, sliding Papyrus’ drink over to him with a loud sigh.

“Alright… out with it.”

Papyrus was watching her, attention rapt. It was always curious to see the broad spectrum of emotions the captain could switch through in a matter of seconds to minutes. She was always passionate and caring, excited like he was. On a brighter note, she shared his raucous laugh and even egged him on to tasks most would scoff at. She even pushed him past his limits!!

So when she was this quiet, it was something to consider. He tapped his fingertips against the old blue porcelain mug, the soft tink piercing the tense silence.

“MY BROTHER AND I HAVE HAD A SORT OF… ARGUMENT. OVER… HIS HEALTH LATELY—” he fibbed, feeling how sweat was collecting under his scarf. He pulled at it and readjusted the drape to cover his vertebrae more easily. “WHILE HE HAS FORGIVEN ME AND… THINGS ARE OK NOW, I’M ALRIGHT! I JUST… FEEL VERY TENSE LATELY? AND WITH HIM THE WAY HE IS, AND HIS BOYFRIEND, AND…” More tapping.

Undyne waited for him to continue, looking up from her own mug as she twirled the contents and blew on the tea to help it cool. “I’ve never known you two to fight. Gotta tussle?” she suggested, pointing to the other with a smug grin. “He’s been in a mood lately. I didn’t think it had anything to do with being sick, y’know?”

Papyrus nodded absently. “YES… AND NOW, ALTHOUGH IT IS NOT WITHOUT QUANDARY, I FEEL LIKE… I DON’T KNOW? IN THE WAY? IT’S NOT AS THOUGH
I’m feeling replaced or anything—” He rushed through his words and then hesitated, the look on his face almost horrified for the pause. “I don’t! That’s a horrible thing to suggest. It’s just that… He’s not ever at home. And since the whole…” He gestured vaguely, posture slumping, “accident weeks ago, I feel like he’s avoiding me.”

Undyne leaned her head on a fist and exhaled hotly. Well, that wouldn’t do. “I sincerely doubt that, Papyrus,” she muttered as she played with the tea bag’s string in her mug. “Your brother adores you. I doubt anyone could replace you, regardless of how smitten he is with that cook. You mentioned you had a fight? How’d it shake down? Did you actually talk about it, or were you rambling?”

“I think you will find that under most circumstances, I most certainly do not have a penchant for rambling—”

“Point in case, ya goof!” Undyne flared, her grin twitching as she pounded the table with a closed fist. It nearly cracked from the force and she gave in to a guttural laugh. “Whatever the argument was—” she waved her hand dismissively, “—and I don’t need the director’s cut, that’s not important. What’s important is how you two idiots feel about the aftershock!”

“AFTER—”

“I got advice, so listen up!” she crowed, pointing a finger at him with her mug, “Remember what I said?? About communication? Chances are you’re missing something that’s right in front of your nose!”

“We don’t have nos—”

She cut him off again, “—semantics! At any rate, you two dorks apologised right? Regardless who was wrong and who was right, that’s somethin’ you both gotta do!”

Papyrus stared at her, his body tense. He hadn’t even taken one sip from his tea during their discussion. “He did—”

“Meaning,” Undyne figured, shrugging as tea spilled from one side of her mug with the movement, “if you say that, it means that he probably feels a little dejected.”


Undyne sighed, resisting the urge to full on yell at the guy again. Instead, she fussed with her hair briefly before snorting derisively. “I mean, you did apologise, right?”

The skeleton sat upright, teeth clamped shut. He seemed to be searching for something in front of him, bewildered of how he could have missed it. Of course! How was he so blind - and with his own brother, too! He downed half of the tea in one gulp, pushing himself up as though to stand. Undyne, however, had other ideas and tugged him down by his scarf, spilling the tea as the weight of her fist and Papyrus crashing into the table sent splinters flying.

“That’s what I thought!” she growled lowly, then laughed, flinging the skeleton back. He landed in his seat again, watching her in confusion. “Ok, so how about this, then. He’s been mopey—”

“He doesn’t—"
“-and running around, well… not running, but goin’ around acting like things are ok, because let’s face it, the guy holds a lot of shit inside for a monster that doesn’t need a toilet.”

“UNDYNE!!”

“Yeah, whatever - ANYWAY, it’s less like how you think he doesn’t need you, and more like he’s waiting for you to admit you’re OWNING responsibility, or acknowledging your fault in the argument. It takes two to tango like that, so both sides have to own up. Like I said, I don’t need details. I’m just picking up what you’re putting down, here.”

Papyrus stared at the tea collected on the table, very aware of what he needed to do next. Of course. He hadn’t apologised - it wasn’t as though he had been doing it on purpose. It just… no, he couldn’t say that it hadn’t come up. His pride had halted him from commiserating with Sans’ feelings and in the end, made him feel poisoned with remorse.

And the look that Sans gave him when he left earlier only hurt more when he now realised that his brother was waiting this whole time for him to say something to that effect. That Sans likely felt as though Papyrus was angry with him, still. Or even worse, that he didn’t care that his friend had likely tried to harm him.

Rubbing his hand over his face, Papyrus leaned over the table, not caring that his elbows prickled with splintered wood. Undyne merely continued her tea, pleased with herself at least that she was able to help in this instance. It was the least she could do for shattering this poor goof’s heart weeks before.

“I’m sorry you feel cast off. Really, it’s like the Underground’s worst kept secret Sans stays at Grillby’s more than he stays at home!” She gave in to another shrug and downed the rest of her tea. Then she rolled the rim between her thumb and forefinger in thought. “Y’know I don’t mean to brush off your feelings, right?”

“I HADN’T CONSIDERED IT IN THE SLIGHTEST!!” Papyrus boomed.

“Tea.”

“Oh! Yes, of course—"

“Now, what I MEAN, is your brother’s into some pretty new stuff. New to him, when it’s always been you two together, right?” She rubbed over her arm and sighed loudly. “I get what you’re thinking! You’re not being brushed aside, Sans wouldn’t DREAM of doing that. His attention might be split, sure, but that happens when you’re…” She glanced to the side and Papyrus wondered at the very subtle way her gills and complexion reddened. “Well. I’m SURE I don’t need to spell it out for such a great guy like you!”

The skeleton straightened himself and very nearly toppled over his own mug, nodding vigorously. He had a lot to think about!

Leave it to Undyne to settle his worries! While not altogether, no, but all drawn up in a bow, it gave Papyrus further insight as to how his brother might be feeling. Under threat, yes. Also, his attention is not always in the present! Alright! He understood. Also, that new and interesting things were happening, and not always bad! There was good in there!

And he was learning. Papyrus couldn’t help but beam as he exited the captain’s house in a far better mood than he’d been all week. While he knew in his heart and soul that he owed Sans an apology, he also hoped that in the future he could retain the knowledge to better understand others’ emotions.
He flew home, his boots kicking up wet mulchy soil and sending blue petals to drifting as he darted past. The whisper of hope rang in his head and Papyrus felt elevated enough to start a clear top to bottom clean of the entire house for when Sans got home.

It was hours before his brother returned. Much later, in fact, that Papyrus had settled down into a more mellow mood. He had attempted something a little different for dinner and was preoccupied in the kitchen when he heard the front door open, then close.

This was it. What he had been waiting the entire day for!

Instead of feeling excitement, however, the silence from the other room made him feel wary and unsure. Papyrus leaned ever-so-slightly away from the stove to peer out of the kitchen, a thunder of trepidation falling over him when he saw his brother.

Head to toe. Drenched. Eye sockets void of light, looking like he was carrying the world’s heaviest weight. As though it had tipped the scales just enough, his rucksack slipped from his arm and landed with a slushy plonk on the floor.

Papyrus’ immediate reaction had to been to run over and grab his brother in a tight hug and apologise right away. Instead, his teeth parted and he automatically belted across the room; “SANS!!! MY CARPET!!”

As though it jolted the other out of his thoughts, Sans sprung to life and grabbed the bag off the floor, eye lights alert and looking around before they settled on Papyrus. Then his expression softened as he trudged across the living room, leaving wet footprints in his wake.

“YOU’RE SOAKING WET!” Papyrus lamented as Sans planted himself into a chair at the kitchen table. He let the bag drop to the floor, but stooped to rifle through it. “WHAT HAPPENED!!”

Sans began unloading his bag, his face fixed in a grimace. “uh. kinda misjudged a puddle,” he muttered excusingly, piling what appeared to be plastic bags of something chipped and brown. He inspected each one before setting the bags on the table, then threw Papyrus a concerned look. “…you ok?”

Papyrus caught himself thumbing at his sleeves and abruptly stopped to help his brother unburden his bag. Once everything was inspected for water damage (which one book had not survived, sadly), Sans leaned back in his chair and sighed to himself. He hadn’t gotten an answer from Papyrus and he was exhausted from the day. The other had stared at him before going back to check the pot, which smelled different than their usual supper.

In fact, he knew something was up when Papyrus didn’t say anything about the bags of chipped wood and spices that he’d put on the table. Nor anything about one wrapped in a black garbage bag for protection; it was a shame he didn’t have the foresight with Alphys’ textbook. Grimacing to himself as he peeled his drenched hoodie from his shoulders, Sans watched as Papyrus tended to the stove. Already there was a column of smoke starting from whatever was burning.

That was peculiar. Things didn’t normally burn. Papyrus was always attentive to his cooking excursions. He now shuffled from one foot to the other, fussing over the fiercely bubbling pot. With his brother preoccupied, Sans slipped off his chair and kicked off his slippers under the table, hanging around his brother as he watched him.

“papyrus.”
It was as though Sans had been waiting for him to turn, to say something to excuse himself. Papyrus was wrought with every emotion fathomable, from an unsatiated need to explain himself, to belting out his apologies, to pleading with him that he had never meant to cause Sans mental anguish. That he was on his side, through thick and thin-

Sans must’ve seen it on his face, as the shorter skeleton threw his arms around him tightly. His clothing was still wet and cold from his journey through Waterfall, but the embrace was warm and accepting all the same. It didn’t quell the need to apologise, but it calmed Papyrus on such a level that any and all words stopped before they erupted from his mouth.

His arms encircled Sans’ shoulders in turn, the tension releasing from his body as he heard his brother laugh quietly. He squeezed, and Sans held him tightly in response. It was comfortable and heartwarming that his brother still wanted contact, still wanted to be close to him even if he had someone else in his life.

The hug extinguished those thoughts, and Papyrus held onto Undyne’s advice earlier that day just as tightly as he was hugging Sans. When more chuckles escaped his brother, he squeezed tighter still, until Sans was cracking up.

“i really missed you,” he mumbled between them, still giggling.

“I’M SO SORRY, BROTHER,” Papyrus was having a difficult time reining in his emotions, trying to stifle the amount in which he began to shake. “I WASN’T THINKING, AND YOU HAD EVERY RIGHT TO-”

Meanwhile Sans, composed now, glad to be home and ready to forgive, quietly hushed him. His hold was still tight but gentle as the two of them ignored their quickly burning supper. “it’s ok, bro. we’re good. everything’s good.”

Chapter End Notes

Funny how the Papyrus part of this chapter was written as chapter 58, but it kept being pushed as other things played out. I think that it flows better in this chapter, and WHOO!! Finally the bros make up in actuality. TTtTT
Chapter Summary

Things seem normal, until Sans finds Grillby's completely empty. The shopkeeper arrives to dispel any worries before they become too much and leads him to the Snowed Inn, where Grillby is staying, albeit worse for wear. Sans helps to care for the ailing flame and ends up highly flustered.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Although he wasn’t sure what had spurred Papyrus into apologising, Sans wasn’t about to look too deeply into it. His brother looked absolutely worn out, dark circles under his eye sockets, his body wrung tight and nervous. Yet at the same time, relief flooded off from him in waves and Sans smiled at him when they parted. Papyrus had attempted more of his apology but Sans just grinned to himself and helped him to clear off the table for dinner.

It was easy to fall into routine again. Although the two of them were tentatively nervous, it was good to be back in better spirits. Sans laboriously ate a bowl of half-burned cheese tortellini with a generous garnishment of sliced eggplant which Papyrus insisted was edible. Sans thought otherwise but piled it into his mouth until he couldn’t bear it anymore.

Eventually Papyrus made him go upstairs afterwards, suggesting a bath after gathering his things off the counter while he cleaned up. Even though he felt sheepish in doing so, Sans lingered by the door, on the edge of thanking the other. Instead, when Papyrus looked over, Sans gave him an easy smile and trotted away upstairs to bathe, leaving his treasures in his room. He’d have to go check on Grillby later, he figured.

His bath was a little longer than usual, but much hotter. Wafts of steam drifted up from the water as he sunk back and under the surface. The day had been long and while not too many people in the capital paid him any mind, his nerves were frayed from being on edge the entire time. The trip through Waterfall hadn’t been difficult, but he had been in a bad headspace the journey through so much, that echo flowers belting out their secrets along the way rattled him.

He was not looking forward to engaging in any more talking flowers, to say the very least.

Trapped in his reverie, he didn’t notice when his brother had opened the door briefly to set out a clean set of pyjamas until he was finished and staring at the mirror. He had changed a lot from when he looked into it last. Sure, he was tired. He was always tired. But there were key differences he saw in himself then that he didn’t see before. He figured it was likely due to his willingness to reach out, however small bit at a time, to let people get closer to him.

And dare he entertain the thought, to love.

His brow quirked with that and he held back a chuckle, although he could feel it threatening to break the silence. Everything had changed, yet nothing at all - it was merely revealed a little to him, bit by bit, like a fortune puzzle whose flaps could be pulled back after each selection. It was a little frightening, but he would just have to deal with it. His attention was drawn to the flicker behind his
ribs and the telltale glow of his soul and how it was different. Not much more than before, but there
was an extended beat that pulsed brighter just when it faded with his circulation.

Hesitation made sense. Letting people get close was difficult after what he’d been through.

Wrapping up the thought, Sans threw his towel over his skull to quickly dry off before his brother
came pounding on the door. He then got dressed in the pyjamas laid out for him and retreated to his
room.

Papyrus had cleaned. He half-expected him to have done so, but was a little relieved that some things
remained untouched. The broken lamp had been pieced together and righted on his dresser, as silly
as that was. The floor had been vacuumed. The wallpaper was in less shambles, but Papyrus had
painted the pattern to match on the wall where he couldn’t replace. And as much as he’d expressed
verbal disgust at Sans’ sheets, his bed had been made.

Sans couldn’t help but grin, the weight of everything swelling in his chest again.

Nothing had changed. Papyrus was the same as he’d always been. Looking out for him, treasuring
his family. The greatest brother and the sweetest person he’d ever had the pleasure of knowing. Not
without his faults, but Sans wouldn’t trade him for anything.

Was it possible to feel both good and horrible at the same time? At fault for how he acted, yet feeling
so blessed he had such a person to look after him? While at the same time, frustrated over the
complications of what had happened.

Even when he had went to sit down on his bed, it felt wrong. Instead, Sans exited his room to go
downstairs and join his brother on the couch to watch whatever was on. It was more to be in his
company than anything else. While the show played, Papyrus had shifted ever so slightly to be closer
and Sans rested his skull against the other’s shoulder. The two didn’t speak a word until Papyrus
spoke up, quieter than usual.

“I’M SORRY FOR NOT CONSIDERING YOUR FEELINGS IN ALL THIS-”

“it’s ok, paps.”

“IT’S NOT OK!! IT’S ACTUALLY THE EXACT OPPOSITE OF OK??”

“you know what i mean.” Sans grimaced despite himself.

“YOU HAD SAID YOU WERE SCARED-” Papyrus hesitated, “I UNDERSTAND NOW. I’M
SORRY, HONESTLY-”

Sans sighed softly and leaned up to survey the other. The blanket from the back of the couch had
made its way around their shoulders and Papyrus was fidgeting with the loose threads. He knew
what Papyrus meant when he brought it up.

“pap, i know you’re worried. i love ya, but you know we can’t report it. you know what could
happen if we do. what would happen.”

The silence that followed spoke volumes instead. Papyrus nodded to himself over the memory of the
treatment Sans was subjected to when the news of his low health got out in New Home. That, and
his panic when Grillby had found out, the conclusion of what that meant… It was very likely Sans
still harboured panic inside should the bartender slip up and anyone else found out, but he wasn’t
going to be the one to put thoughts to words.
It stood out in his mind so clearly. It started with someone who had seen him trip; Sans had really slammed his shoulder into the ground, and hard. A hairline fracture in his clavicle, but otherwise Sans was fine, laughing it off despite the awkward grimace that tugged at his eye sockets. But the monster that had seen him stumble had done what anyone would’ve done and checked him as he was extended a hand. Sans froze. Papyrus had helped him up. The monster stared, but showed signs that they were suddenly very uncomfortable.

Then they spoke; ‘Don’t you think it’s cruel to be parading him around like that, when he could turn to dust at any moment?? Have you no shame? He should be at rest, not lingering on because you can’t let go! Go, take him home! People don’t want to see him dying in the streets when he can barely walk-’

The recollection ended there, but Papyrus still felt the hurt all this time later. Instinctively, he grabbed Sans in the present moment and hugged him, causing his brother to grunt in surprise.

“we’re ok, bro,” he mumbled quietly. “it’s been one helluva week, though.”

Although the couch was its usual level of uncomfortable, Sans leaned against his brother as he did the same. He reassured him that everything would be fine, that things would blow over and that he forgave him even though he didn’t blame him at all. Papyrus whispered apologies intermittently until his voice eventually grew thick and they both fell asleep.

The morning after crept up on Sans but it shook him when he fell from the side of the couch with a pained grunt. He groaned in protest with the day’s light and the sounds of Papyrus flurrying about, bickering to himself like nothing would stop him.

Sans crawled up and sat in front of the coffee table as sleep continued to lull him with its sweet spell. Despite how awkward things had been, Sans felt like it was before, dozing as Papyrus thundered around in his boots while doing something noisy in the kitchen. Sans nodded off, slumped over the coffee table with his skull cradled in the crook of his arm.

When he woke again, it was to the subtle yet sweet scent of oatmeal in front of him. Pulled closer to consciousness, Sans turned his head, noticing a paper stuck to his skull when he opened one eye socket. Waking up was always an ordeal but it felt easier to do this time, like he was unburdened and fully rested. Hell, he didn’t even recall dreaming. He was just relaxed. A rarity, but he’d take it.

Peeling off the sticky note from his brow, he rubbed at one eye socket as he read it. Papyrus was out training with Undyne today. Have oatmeal for breakfast. Have a good day, and do his best. He grinned and despite the bowl of oatmeal being somewhat cement-like in texture, he scarfed it down so he could be on his way.

Sans got dressed into fresh clothes, since his favourites were still damp from the night before: full track pants and a shirt that had the beautifully sarcastic ‘beauty is skin-deep’ screen printed onto it in ugly yellow on grey jersey. Since it was the day he didn’t usually patrol, Sans took his time getting ready to check in on Grillby. He really hoped that the poor guy was doing alright. He checked his phone and noted how there hadn’t been a reply to his message from the previous afternoon, nor had it been read. Sighing to himself, Sans donned his slippers and shuffled down the hall with his bags in a different rucksack to transport to his ill boyfriend.

He figured Grillby’s was closed that day, but every time he approached the building when it was supposed to be open made his soul shrink against itself. It didn’t make him feel any better when he heard the whines of kids nearby expressing their desire for tasty food or a hot room. Nor did the
discomfort he felt at visiting the capital by himself lighten his internal struggle to jump to a more positive conclusion as to why Grillby hadn’t answered.

The skeleton looked up with a soft sigh. Although there should have been a pinprick of light upstairs, like when he had left, today there was none.

His entire body went ice cold.

Even though the restaurant was closed and did have a note on the door before, it wasn’t there now. Testing the handle gave way too easily when Sans pushed the door to go inside. He was breaking in again, although he was certain… when he had left, he’d locked the door, right? To make sure that the neighbourhood kids didn’t open it or leave it adjar to let the precious warmth outside?

It was a lot chillier inside than he remembered it being the first time through. In fact, despite his ever-increasing worry that something bad must’ve happened, Sans remained relatively calm. On the inside, his soul was beating harshly, every footfall in the dark parlour kicking up soot and panic. His soul trembled when he remembered Grillby telling him he wouldn’t be able to spare the warmth if his window was shattered. Had something happened?

He’d just go upstairs to make sure the fire monster was alright. Check up on him, maybe he’d try circulating their magic again to get his temperature up. Breathing shallowly, Sans made his way past the deserted kitchen and upstairs. The second floor showed signs of movement, mainly along the floorboards where a scorched trail led to the stairs. It was as though dragged, but… had it always been there?

It was cold upstairs too.

Sans put the thought from his head as he followed from where the marks came from, his soul giving in to quiet little shocks of fear when he didn’t hear any hearty crackle of fire. He couldn’t see any flicker of light. There was absolute silence and void of heat.

Sans heard a subtle noise that made him jump before he realised that he was rattling in fright. He tried to send a message to Grillby’s phone once more, his magic welling up in his soul.

He was probably fine. Just out.

Doing what?

Doing… something. And he was alright. He was perfectly fine. Grillby himself had assured him that he only needed a few days to recuperate, after all-

“Oh!”

Sans almost dropped his phone at the intruding voice with a startled grunt. But instead of reacting, he froze on the spot. He knew very well he had been caught red-handed in Grillby’s suite and he slowly turned, his left eye socket flaring briefly until he recognised just who had stumbled onto him unawares.

It was Bonnie, the shop bunny from down the road. She was bundled in a thickly padded blue overcoat with flocked mittens. In her arms she held a big stack of fabric.

Sans stood dumbly, waiting for an answer. Then his gaze settled on what he recognised as the fire monster’s blankets, his expression shifting to mild confusion.

“Pity you missed him! Poor dove. He really was out of sorts when we came to check,” Bonnie
offered as she approached him. “Didn’t fancy you pokin’ in while he was out. Did ya forget somethin’, hun?”

Sans was still eyeing the bundle of blankets in the other’s arms with something of a reproachful look. Grillby had gone? Really? Of course. Why was this a difficult situation for him to handle? The questions rolling around in his head must’ve been clear as day for her to see, since she tutted with pity and jerked her head to the side, towards the hall.

“Why not come with? He mentioned not feelin’ too well and that he was, hm. Heatsunk?” She laughed softly with a shrug, “’Fraid I don’t know too much about Hotland monsters to figure what he means, but he’s written some things down for me. Ingrid has him housed in one of her rooms for the time being.”

“is he really, uh…” that bad? he wanted to ask, but stopped himself short. Bonnie’s eyes softened and her smile seemed almost sad. His soul did a sickening lurch. Had he misjudged? Had Grillby really been so bad that he needed a constant vigil to make sure he was recovering? Sans didn’t get it; the fire monster had been healing. His health had been on the incline. So what was with the need for intervention now?

“Oh, hun! I didn’t mean to make you worry! Here - help me with these ol’ blankets. Take care not to drag them or we won’t be able to use ’em. Ya don’t happen to know what-” she wriggled her nose in thought, “’pascols’ are, do you?”

Sans snapped to attention when she held out the pile of blankets for him to take and he nodded dumbly, leading the way to the kitchen to rifle through the pantry and select a few woody parscoals to bring.

Perhaps it was due to the fact that he couldn’t slip, but Sans felt as though every tiny patch of ice was out to get him between Grillby’s restaurant and the Snowed Inn. He followed Bonnie to the hotel without slipping, its brightly lit windows on the first floor glaring out onto the snowy street.

The difference between the interior and outside was subtle, and not because it was warmer inside. Sans detected an almost sour note in the air but couldn’t put his finger on why that was. He wasn’t able to focus on the feeling but instead followed Bonnie upstairs with his cargo, each step creaking alongside the homey sounds of snoozing above.

The room he was led to was on the second floor of three, in reach of the bunnies’ quarters and in the middle so there was no threat of windows or heat loss. Sans lingered outside of the door when Bonnie cracked it open to check, then sighed almost in exasperation when she pushed it all the way open.

Even though he was trying very desperately not to panic or worry, Sans craned his head around briefly to check inside. He saw a wavering glow of a fireplace on one end of the room and a pile of bunnies huddled on the bed not too far from it, but nothing out of the ordinary. In fact, he wasn’t sure if it was all the heat sources in the room confusing him. The shop bunny was making soft disparaging noises to what he believed to be either her or her sister’s children. The tension broke as Sans felt comfortable enough to enter.

He assumed that he was allowed, at least. Her gesture for him to come forward was met with very business-like organisation as he was relieved of the blankets. As he approached, he realised what the unassuming lump on the bed was.

Grillby, although not quite in the shape that Sans last recalled him being, swathed in heat-discoloured blankets with his shape shifting ever so subtly as he breathed. Four young bunnies huddled close to
Sans remained quiet, although a thousand questions slammed around in his skull as he took in how low Grillby’s flames were. He had to remind himself that the fire monster’s composure lessened while he was sleeping, but he didn’t recall his body ever being smaller. In fact, it appeared the poor monster was having a difficult time retaining his usual form. Sans realised that the sour smell, almost akin to Hotland’s limestone caverns, lingered in the air more heavily here.

“how long’s he been like this?” he finally found the voice to ask. He kept his tone neutral despite how the worry gnawed at him inside.

“Coupla days, maybe more. When was last y’saw ‘im?” Bonnie asked kindly as she unfolded one of the sick monster’s blankets and threw it into the fireplace without a care.

Sans stared at Grillby, his feet unable to move an inch from where he stood. “bout three days ago?” he replied numbly, his voice sounding a little strained.

Two of the children slid from the side of the bed while yawning while the other two gently patted the resting monster’s blanketed back before retreating out of the room. It took a little more coaxing for the last of Bonnie’s children to leave before she approached the bed, ushering him over.

“He’s been sleepin’ a lot, but I think he’s doing just fine. A Hotland monster ain’t supposed to be out here in the cold and wet, after all. He mentioned insulation an’ kindling - suppose that’s what his blankets and parsicles are for?”

“parscoal. an’ yeah,” Sans agreed numbly, finally finding his feet enough to get nearer. Grillby was sleeping, although he looked in far worse shape than he’d previously seen him. His fire was more of a wisp now and occasionally little embers popped off from him like glowing gnats.

Quietly, Sans sat on the edge of the mattress and laid his hand on the other’s covered back, sending out a silent inquiry, just to make sure.

[ * GRILLBY  26 ATK 3 DEF

  * A little under the weather. ]

[ * 942HP ]

“Poor guy,” Bonnie murmured as she took off her coat, fanning herself as though the heat was too much. She was standing closest to the fireplace, whose blaze envied the fire monster’s sleeping form. No doubt she felt the brunt of it and she sighed heavily, redonning her thick mittens as she turned towards the hearth. “Clear the way, hun.”

Sans watched as she quickly reached into the blaze to a handled cast-iron skillet that smoked and glowed a dull red. She was grimacing, but she managed to grab the blanket from inside as well, its Hotland properties allowing it to absorb the fire’s heat instead of being consumed by it. She gestured for Sans to move the quilt covering the fire monster as she huffed under the heat.

Sans wordlessly obeyed, working quickly as he pulled the quilt from Grillby’s body. He forced himself to the side when the other’s body came into view, how smaller he looked and how even his hands had no real shape to them anymore. They were akin to molten glass and steamed where they lay. Sans stayed petrified to the spot.

“Move `im! C’mon, my fur’s gonna burn at this rate!” she hissed, yet still tried to sound accommodating.
Sans wasn’t quite sure how to handle Grillby in this state, but automatically went for the other’s arm to lift him off the bed. A subtle flicker went through his form as his blaze awoke and the other sighed softly, it sounding more like a boiling hiss. Bonnie quickly lay the blanket down when Sans pulled Grillby up, holding him against him. She then adjusted it so the skillet of coals were approximately where the fire monster’s torso would be when he lay back down.

“hang in there, grillbz,” Sans mumbled when he felt the fire monster move against him a little, his flames hiking up sleepily at being disturbed.

“Lay him down here an’ make sure his core is over the pan,” the shopkeeper instructed gently but firmly, and gestured for him to do so. She dare not touch Grillby; it was a wonder how the fire monster had made it over in the first place, Sans thought.

Grillby’s voice wheezed as though in pain when he was shifted and Sans clenched his teeth together in concern. He wasn’t sure what the proper thing to do was, so just had to follow what instructions he was given to ensure Grillby could be treated. It must’ve been the right thing to do, as when the other lay down, Bonnie quickly took one side of the steaming-hot blanket and threw it over the bartender, his body kindling a lot brighter with the touch.

“There we are!” she said excitedly, plucking the overly toasty mittens from her paws once more and drawing her arm across her muzzle.

A low, sleepy noise of protest came from the prone monster and Sans grinned down at him, his nerves swallowing up any questions he had. He was only glad that Grillby’s flames seemed to be building up. They were deep red in colour until he breathed in, then they would flutter to deep orange and back again.

“Will have to change that in about an hour. I’ll try to find more coal and another pot. I gotta see to the kids’ lunch, but you try to feed him somethin’ when he wakes up, yeah?” Bonnie suggested as she gathered up her coat and mittens. “Thanks for helpin’!”

“yeah,” Sans replied automatically, his gaze not leaving the ill fire monster. Then she was gone.

He wasn’t quite sure what to do. Although Grillby definitely had more health than when he had checked earlier, his constitution was still lacking. It made Sans uneasy despite the other’s reassurances that he would be fine after a few days’ rest.

He allowed his bag to fall to his side as he tucked the other monster in further, feeling just how warm the blanket had gotten in the few minutes it had spent in the fireplace. It dawned on Sans that it was an elemental fire, not a magical one. No wonder Bonnie had been in a hurry.

As the hour passed, Sans kept a vigil watch over Grillby, filling the empty room with gentle reassurances that he was doing well and that he was glad he was ok. He rubbed at his back although
he felt peculiar for it, all of him feeling helpless yet hopeful as Grillby’s flames kindled lighter as time went on.

Bonnie briefly returned to put another pot of coals into the fireplace, asking him a few questions as she did so. How Grillby had gotten sick in the first place, why Sans hadn’t bothered to tell anyone or fetch a healer. Each question panged at his soul and he grew silent, knowing the reasons why, but not wanting any more of the blame out in the open. It was bad enough he felt at fault for the bartender’s ill health. Why give anyone else a reason to blame him too?

It was a selfish thought, but his nonetheless. Sans stayed quiet up until she left, having swapped out the skillet the fire monster had been laying on with the freshly heated one.

This time when the shopkeeper left, Grillby sighed long, his body fanning out and filling the bed as though every bit of him was flooded with relief. Even though Sans couldn’t be sure, he thought he heard the fire monster speak within his flames.

‘……………Gone……… yet………?’

It was vastly different than an audible voice, much akin to how the skeleton figured it out when he needed to cycle his magic. Sans leaned forward, wrapping his arm around the other’s back and scooting closer without encroaching upon the bed. He noted how the other’s mouth was a low glowing crack and his eyes were softly casted. He was absolutely *not* well and Sans felt again the pang of guilt for not going to get a healer when he first saw him like this.

“yeah, she’s headed out. gotta keep watch on her shop. how’re you holdin’ up?” Sans asked quietly, his phalanges rubbing gentle strokes up and down the other’s back.

Grillby’s flames kindled a little higher and with them came a brightness Sans found he’d missed. The crack of his mouth parted in a sharp rasp but no words came forth, only another garbled hiss of steam.

Then something else whispered from him; ‘………Hotter.’

Sans grinned, his hand itching to go further up to caress through the flames on Grillby’s head. His fingers lingered at his nape as he drew idly, breathing a sigh of relief. “m’glad.” After a moment’s pause, the skeleton continued, “i got the goods, by the way.”

Grillby’s mouth quirked up in a soft smile, his body jerking in the way Sans found he did when he suppressed a laugh. It made him feel a little comforted to have Grillby interacting, when the first hour ‘alone’ seemed irreparably dire.

Sans’ hand lingered over the other’s while his other slid away from Grillby’s neck to grab his bag and bring it into his lap. “kinda took the extra precaution not to get `em wet. i would’ve been over yesterday, but, uh. i kinda puddled myself and didn’t think you’d appreciate it.”

Grillby moved slightly, drawing his hand away from Sans’. The other caught the movement just in time to see the fire monster gesture, a weary smile tugging the corners of his mouth; ‘Thank you-’ then a couple of abridged signs that were peculiar.

Sans stared at him for a moment before it dawned on him very suddenly what Grillby meant by them. Of course, since his voice was plagued by exhaustion and excess moisture, he had resorted to using Hands. It had been awhile, but Sans felt his face flood with embarrassment of what he realised was a new pet name for him.

As his face burned bashfully, Sans saw the other’s grin strengthen. The fire monster held up one
finger as his blaze kindled a little more as though pleased, then he pointed to himself.

“no, that doesn’t count,” Sans muttered, still flustered as the sign-name ‘love bone’ repeated in his skull. Stubbornly, he turned to face the smirking fire monster, his soul hammering like a drum. Then, because to be honest he wasn’t quite good with Hands himself, he gestured clumsily; ‘sky fire.’

Sans saw the way the creeping colours of gold and yellow flitted briefly through Grillby’s flames and he grinned in triumph, despite still feeling flush. Sans rifled through his bag as he took out the parscoal and plastic baggies of wood chips, dried plant matter, spices and medicine.

“kinda took me awhile to find the, uh,” Sans squinted at one bag in particular, eyeing the red powdery contents with a frown, “redsel? everything else was pretty much easy to get ahold of.”

He turned back to Grillby with a sheepish grin, unable to meet the other’s eyes. There was that feeling of being happy yet guilty again, he thought awkwardly.

“listen, g,” he started softly, his tone a lot more serious than his nonchalant drawl before, “m’sorry ’bout my, uh… gettin’ you sick.” He paused to bring his other hand down and started to untie the plastic bag at the top. “i wasn’t thinkin’ straight and i hate that i-”

He stopped when he felt something warm touch his arm with a squeeze. When he looked up, Grillby was giving it his all to shake his head; as exhausted as he looked, there was a fierceness in his eyes that spoke volumes. Then, of course, those tiny little notes when his fire bristled that almost, but not quite, imitated speech…

Sans found himself staring.

‘Not of fault. No sacrifice. All well.’ They were more like suggestions and the longer he just listened to Grillby’s ambient flames, the more they made sense.

‘Imagine… Accustomed to fire.’

Flushed again, Sans turned his head away and paid attention to the array of chips and herbs in the pile in front of him. No, that was definitely real. And it had, without a doubt, happened before. He grinned to himself despite feeling awkward and shrugged to nothing in particular, struggling with the bag’s knot.

“kinda had the wind blown outta my sails to find you weren’t home,” he mumbled truthfully. He didn’t look up, but Grillby’s hand gently slid from his arm and rested just hanging over the side of the bed.

Then came the little whispers of heat; ‘……….Gave tell……. Message.’

Sans turned his skull to regard the other and the curious look Grillby had on his vague features. He appeared perplexed, the tiny flames dancing around his exposed body almost languidly whipping in irritation.

“i didn’t get any message,” the skeleton shrugged, suddenly feeling under scrutiny. His soul trembled as he fished into his pocket and brought up the their text messaging history. The last one was Sans asking if Grillby where he was, sent only hours earlier.

A waft of dense steam escaped the fire monster when he sighed. It was harsh and full of effort as he pushed his hand up to retrieve his phone from the nightstand, small flames dropping from his arm as he stretched. Sans could definitely see that Grillby’s form was smaller than before but tried to avoid staring when the other laid back down to check his phone.
A few crackles and a sharp scoffing noise echoed from the other when he let his head drop onto the pillow. A second later, Sans’ phone buzzed.

hot stuff (Last message sent: just now);
- A forewarning: Ingrid and Bonnie were concerned and decided to check in. Should you decide to visit after your trip back, I’ll be in room 5F at the Snowed Inn. When I am well, I’ll need to see about checking my window seals. Can’t retain heat for the life of me. Had to scale down to conserve energy. I am in these ladies’ good capable hands. Speak with you soon. ♡

Sans couldn’t help the barking laugh but covered his teeth to stop himself a little too late. Grillby’s flames fizzed and brightened briefly as he covered his face, obviously embarrassed. In his haste to give Sans a heads-up, he had neglected to hit the ‘send’ key.

Despite how Grillby’s embarrassment was endearing, Sans tried to console him as he managed to open a bag of birch chips. “it’s ok, man. i was just wonderin’, is all.” Another shrug, but he saw the way Grillby watched him, his eyes softening at his tone.

‘…………Distress?’

The skeleton shrugged again, mostly to himself. He didn’t want to prod the guilt but nor did he want to convey that he wasn’t concerned. Inspecting a larger chip between his bony fingers, he held it out for Grillby.

‘…………Hide.’

“it’s all good, bud. a simple mistake.” Sans winked to hint that everything was alright; in several ways, it now was. Sans felt silly for having jumped to such a desolate conclusion, but that was in the past. Grillby was speaking to a degree, he was insulated, heated up, and now it was time for something to eat. “c’mon. think of this as a light lunch.”

Grillby crackled, his smirk widening at the joke. Sans felt his soul flutter again and leaned in closer with the bark chip to offer it to the other’s mouth. He tried not to fixate on how intimate it felt, how his fingertip lightly brushed against Grillby’s chin when the chip was burned away and consumed.

“easy to eat?”

Grillby was watching him, his heat rising as his core flared with the added fuel. His eyes seemed to glow a little brighter and they narrowed when his smile touched them. He gave a gentle nod as his eyes followed the blurred shape in front of him, not seeing much else without his glasses. When Sans’ body moved, his soul fluttered at the loss, only to be given another wood piece.

Every time he was rewarded with care and attention while the skeleton tried to keep his cool, but Grillby felt how the touches lingered even when he was sure the other hadn’t planned on it. He could see the subtle colour of the other’s magic, longed to reach out and feel it rush through his body just as his own had experienced before.

Grillby’s breathing evened out, the added fuel to his fire kicking in hotter as Sans offered him a variety of other pieces. The skeleton kept quietly talking even though he couldn’t hold a conversation no matter how hard he tried. Only vague suggestions were what he could spare, and only when his flames were being cooperative - which was rarely the case, especially when he was ill.

It wouldn’t be long until a couple of the bags were down to mere shreds and Sans got up to check the hearth. He took out the skillet and brought it over, and with Grillby’s added strength, the two of
them managed to aid one another to replace the one in the bed.

The flood of heat directly against his core made Grillby sigh in relief as it sizzled away the slag residue of the accumulated moisture his magic had absorbed, sending him to coughing to expel the steam that built up. At least there was no more smoke, and Sans didn’t appear bothered to help him out. In fact, the skeleton seemed as though he was ready to care for him, going even as far to snap and haphazardly chop bits of parscoal for him to eat.

How to build a fire in every literal sense was to feed it. Although Grillby was embarrassed by his state, he lacked the strength to care for himself when he was like this. So when Sans replaced the skillet of glowing coals one more time and covered him in his blanket, his fires licked up higher enough that he couldn’t contain them. They fanned out as his body surged and he exhaled a hot breath all at once, no doubt giving the poor skeleton a start.

“and that..?” Sans inquired carefully.

Grillby shifted, the warmth under him a deep comfort as he released a muted cough of steam. “……..Better.” he croaked, voice still hissing noisily.

Sans couldn’t help but grin at that, the tension in his shoulders relaxing as he stooped to crouch beside the bed. “hey, grillbz.”

The fire monster sighed, straining as he turned his head to regard the other. Although he didn’t see the other’s notorious grin, he could hear it in his voice. “Mhm..?”

Whatever anxieties Sans had, he managed to hide them well - for lack of a better term, he was warily optimistic when he next spoke. “you an’ me.” It seemed to linger in the air, all too real now that it had been said out loud. “it’s not weird, right?”

Grillby moved so that he was more comfortably laying down, his arm curled up under the hot blanket to wrap up near his chin. His fire was stabilising yet intensifying, despite him feeling groggy and weak. “Do you… feel it weird?”

He saw something shuffle and assumed that it was one of Sans’ noncommittal shrugs.

“it’s not really somethin’ we’ve talked about. oddly enough… nah, it doesn’t feel weird. i was just curious how you felt about everything, is all,” the skeleton replied after a moment’s pause.

Grillby understood even in his compromised state. With how everything had happened so suddenly, the escalation between them only seemed too natural. In the easy way they got along and questioned nothing, it should’ve felt strange. Yet it didn’t, and Grillby was pleased with the other’s thoughts that he felt the same way.

“Concerned… that it’s a little ‘fucked’?” he teased, covering up a fizzing cough. He saw the vague blur of cyan bloom ever-so-slightly from the other’s chest and felt a fluttering heat at the reaction.

“What did you say?” It almost sounded disbelieving and Grillby’s soul seemed to sigh when Sans propped his arms over the edge of the mattress to look him in the face. This way, Grillby was able to see the amused creases at the corners of his eye sockets and the way his smile seemed to bring genuine joy. “say it again, grillbz.”

The fire monster turned his head, knowing full well what was expected of him and why. He muffled a cough into the pillow and hid his grin, delighted to hear such excitement after so long.

“What?”
“c’mon,” the skeleton prodded. Very literally so, Grillby could feel his bony fingertip nudging at his shoulder and neck. A shudder passed through his flames for every deliberate touch. “don’t make me beg.”

Grillby’s body trembled as he restrained his laughter, intent to not give in to the other’s demands. In the end, he chuckled, the sound punctuated by hissing coughs and sputters as a fine steam drifted up from the exposed parts of his body.

“Not swearing for your benefit,” he managed to gasp, the effort of laughing with Sans’ relentless poking and prodding having quickly sapped him of what little strength he had.

Sans feigned a crushing loss, turning so his back was pressed against the side of the bed. He leaned his skull back and Grillby let out a crackling chuckle occasionally, until he settled.

“really, though?” The seriousness in Sans’ voice was back and Grillby attempted to move again. This time he slung his arm around the other’s shoulder, flooding Sans’ vertebrae with varying pinpricks of heat. He felt the subtle shudder against his arm and cradled his skull with his hand, fingers tracing soothing circles against his cheekbone and jaw.

Although he likely couldn’t see the gesture, Grillby nodded with a soft hum of affirmation, his hold gentle in its embrace. He could distinctly pinpoint the moment when the tension released from Sans’ shoulders and he leaned back, his hands raising to touch Grillby’s arm.

A relieved laugh came from the skeleton then as he took note of the shifting heat that spread into his rib cage.

“still kinda sad you won’t swear for me.”

Grillby scoffed, his embrace suddenly strengthening with a brief flare up. With it came a mischievous grin, not that Sans could see it. The skeleton clung to the other’s arm with a startled exclamation as Grillby wormed his head closer, taking care to keep situated on the coals.

“Perhaps… leave it to your expertise,” he breathed as he caressed his mouth against the side of Sans’ skull. His hand assumed its natural state as a couple of fingers traced down the other’s jaw, connecting with the first two vertebrae. He relished the way his touch made Sans’ breath hitch and his magic rush against his fingertips. “You can introduce such colourful poetry to me… for I am sorely lacking. And repeat your favourites to me. Over and over… and over again.”

Although Sans’ flush didn’t register as heat, he could’ve sworn his face felt hotter than anything he had ever experienced before. He couldn’t help but connect the sultry way that the other spoke so concisely, blatantly hinting at more private and intimate moments when his voice had lowered to that register.

It sent a shiver through him, sparking up his spine with the promise Grillby’s tone had for him. Why did it fire him up so much? Why did his soul respond with such a resounding thump and shiver of anticipation every damn time?

As his phalanges flexed against the other’s arm. His eye lights flicked around the room, to the hearth, his breaths just a little quicker for the intrusive thoughts that passed through his head. A nervous tremble went through him as his grin tightened when Grillby kissed the side of his skull. Then the fire monster gave in and showed mercy with a quiet chuckle, sinking down again to rest.

Even while he was sick, Grillby still had his playful side. And boy, did he know how to turn the tables on him,Sans thought as he rested a hand over his furiously blushing face.
“well, fuck.”

“Not now,” Grillby returned without missing a beat. Sans was sure he could sense the devilish ideas the other had in store. Even though Grillby was no longer touching him, he swore he could feel lingering caresses against his ribs and femurs from weeks prior. “A bit put out at the moment…”

Sans definitely knew there was exhaustion in the other’s voice but couldn’t help himself when he idly stroked the other’s arm, watching as the tiny flames skipped over his fingers and nestled around his carpels.

“raincheck?” He couldn’t help himself, even if it was a joke, it was incredibly forward. But that appeared to be just Grillby’s sort of humour. Sans had to grit his teeth in order to not give in to his laugh, but soon became overwhelmed when the other pulled his arm away and gave his back a surprisingly strong push.

“You're horrible..!”

Sans grinned as he righted himself on the floor, erupting into genuine laughter.

Chapter End Notes

It the boy!!!! Time for more fluff and innuendo. Can Grillby ever turn it off? I guess maybe find out next episode chapter! 8D

thefloatingstone/c-puff has done it again, this time with chapter 33 art here (sfw!)!! Go check it out! It’s hella amazing!!!!! :DDD

Chapter is longer than usual because I didn't hit a natural end until later. 8D;;;; But then I think most of my chapters are around the 4-6k mark?;;;;;

Happy 1st birthday to this fic on the 26th! I can't believe it's been a year already and you have all been so kind to express such interest in my story ;U;;; It makes me happy to see every kudos, comment and fan art. Even to those that don't comment, thank you! I love you too! ♥ Almost 10k views in one year is nothing to scoff at and I get so emotional for all the support everyone has given me. TTuTT!!!! I am a blessed skerb! Many more chapters are to come. This is probably psychotic of me to say but the story as it is (roughly outlined in my mind), not even 1/3 way done. (I don't know whether that will scare people off or not. Oh well 8D;;;;)
Sans watches over Grillby while Grillby has a bath. A second attempt at cyclical magic sharing is more successful, thanks to a dream.

Grillby POV.

Briefly, Sans had to leave in order to get food. The inn only had a few spare snacks for that time of day, and Grillby had urged him to get something ‘substantial’ to eat and not subside solely off pre-packaged crackers and fruit. It was only after Sans helped him replace the coals and ensured that he was tucked in and comfortable, that the skeleton felt he could allow himself to leave. Grillby just gave him a reassuring wave from the bed when he hesitated, and Sans finally did go.

Ingrid had promised to check in on the fire monster while Sans was out and did what she could in order to make him comfortable while keeping a dutiful distance from his strengthening flames. It really seemed like insulation was key to him getting better, even though the entire second floor was sweltering with his presence alongside the fireplace going all throughout the day. Grillby had scaled his body down to conserve energy, no more than a head smaller than usual, but he found that was enough.

Sans returned with some reading material and a few more things to snack on, keeping Grillby company while he napped. Eventually, the fire monster would wake up to find that Sans had fallen asleep hunched over the side of the mattress, his hand resting against Grillby’s arm. It was as though the other had to ensure he was there and wouldn’t disappear even as he was sleeping. Grillby found it touching, in a way.

Yet no matter how much he wanted to get out of bed and get to cleaning his restaurant, Grillby lacked the strength to do so. In fact, the bout of activity and his teasing had exhausted him, coupled with the time of day. He realised that his internal clock would be off-kilter and that it would likely take a week to set right. He wasn’t looking forward to the amount of cleaning the restaurant needed with all the soot and smoke he had expelled during his self-imposed confinement.

As though unable to suppress it, Grillby groaned to himself. It had been nearly a week since he’d fallen ill and it had been his own fault. His mother would chide him constantly if she were to find out. He supposed it was a good thing that she had sent off the specialty blankets Hotland manufactured for its denizens living in remote places, but telling her would only make her infernally smug. His move to Snowdin had been met with resounding disapproval, after all.

He leaned down as he cracked open his eyes to look around. The problem with being bedridden was that boredom was its only reward. And being stuck over a plate of glowing coals really was the pits. Not only did it provide only temporary relief, the heat lingered for at most an hour before it had to be rekindled.
Sans had helped, bless him, but Grillby tired of being bedridden. It would be much simpler to curl up in the fireplace within its flames, until the moisture burned away naturally. That way, it wouldn’t affect his health, his recovery time would be expedited, and he wouldn’t feel the prickling pain of water boiling inside of him, however much was left. The only other thing that would help was to cycle his magic, but no one else apart from Sans was able to touch him for as long as he needed, and the previous attempt had failed so miserably…

He was lucky that Sans was such a deep sleeper; no doubt this would have been difficult to explain. At best, he’d make a joke, but Grillby knew his weakened state worried the skeleton, no matter how much he tried to hide it. He attempted to shift off the skillet under him, his core igniting in protest as the metal lost temperature. While the room was not as hot as he wanted it, Grillby knew where he had to go to relieve the stress on his body without making the others in the inn uncomfortable.

When Sans didn’t move, Grillby tried a little more. The bed barely gave as he put a hand beside him to push, flames falling from his arms and his chest as he sat upright. Grillby took a moment to sense where the most heat was in the room and moved his legs over the side of the bed, taking care not to disturb the blurry shape next to him.

Desperate for heat and seeing the hot glow only a short distance away, the fire monster held back a cough of steam and concentrated his form to solidify at his feet. It had been a few days since he had attempted walking and he felt out of sorts, but this was the only recourse to his situation.

He gravitated towards the fireplace, his footsteps uneven and stumbling. He made no noise apart from the crackle of protest that fluttered through his form. With a relieved sigh, Grillby approached the healthy fire kept as a pet in the hearth, feeling how it bathed him in its glow like a gentle embrace. It livened his own flames, the heat seeping into his tired body like a mother’s loving touch.

It would be rude not to greet it nor even gain permission, so he stared into the glowing fire, a soft hiss coming off from him in waves as he introduced himself and asked for help. Just a little, and it wouldn’t take too much of its resources. He didn’t want to be dependant on it, but he could really use the assistance.

He hummed in gratitude and sat next to it to rest, finding himself uncomfortable with only one side of him being nourished by the foreign blaze. The pet fire was kind and agreed to share its strength and Grillby sighed in relief, sinking against the brick opening. As though testing the fluttering elements, the fire monster then passed his arm into the opening, the soft sizzle of steam erupting from him as what he had absorbed was evaporated away.

It travelled up his arm and around him like a gentle wave, holding him like a fervent yet soft embrace. A smile touched his mouth as he brought his kindled arm across his chest and touched his neck, a satisfaction like no other passing through him when he could hear the water fizz and pop away from him. It lifted in thin auburn masses from the fire monster’s body, filling the room with a dense haze and mist that lingered.

Grillby repeated the process, bringing the foreign flame to his body to heat himself in quiet relief. After, he held a few red-hot coals against his chest until they cooled, then he’d exchange them for more. When he felt strong enough, Grillby shifted closer to the opening to prepare himself to curl into the bed of kindling and coals as though it was the fluffiest, most comfortable place a person could be. He was all too relieved for the blaze to welcome him and help soothe his weary soul as he tucked his legs into the fireplace’s opening.

“uh… i don’t mean to interrupt,” came a voice from a few feet away and Grillby started with the familiar tone. He flushed and turned his head towards where it had come from, a few dampened embers popping off his head as he sat in a half prone position, just ready to lie down on the bed of
He wasn’t quite sure why he didn’t want to be caught, but the fact was that he supposed Sans could sleep for only so long. Strange, when at times the bartender would be open all day and night, and Sans could sleep the entire time. Grillby swallowed, his colouring changing to a flummoxed yellow and orange before he sunk down, abashed. It really made him feel better and he could already feel the way the fire surrounded him in its hot and thick blanket.

Grillby attempted to speak, but only a few crackles and fizzed snaps emerged from the fireplace. He camouflaged with the interior and despite how his colouring was not quite as vibrant as the blaze surrounding him, he doubted Sans could see him even with his clothes.

“ kinda neat to see a fire monster takin’ a bath,” Sans observed through thinly veiled curiosity.

Grillby felt his core temperature spike in rebuke. Was he really being compared to the uncomfortable notion that other monsters would willingly sink their person into a vessel of water? He made a face - rather, he attempted to, his flames flickering about in a way that called out on their own.

‘………Disgust…… Horrible. Fail comprehension.’

Sans chuckled to himself in the way Grillby knew that he had likely misunderstood. He saw his shape get up from the side of the bed, and wished that he had the foresight to grab his glasses when he passed. But instead, he sunk down, inwardly cringing when Sans leaned beside the fireplace with an amused chuckle.

“sorry. you ok?”

Grillby’s soul twinged at the question. While seemingly nonchalant, he’d grown accustomed to how the skeleton would show his concern. Subtle, yet there. Like a gentle breath between them. The fire monster flushed again, but for another reason entirely.

“aw.” Sans snickered, clearly misunderstanding his reaction once again. Grillby sighed as the haze around him worsened his eyesight and he sunk down to curl up in the fireplace. “poor guy.”

Grillby wasn’t sure how to feel about that, but took solace in the knowledge that someone was looking out for him. He lay down, his form spreading unseen as the foreign blaze broiled out what moisture he had accumulated. The stranger definitely helped in healing his ailing flames.

The fire monster breathed in deeply, the air crackling around him like sparks. ‘…….Thank you.’

Sans seemed to perk up with that. It was subtle but it was there, and Grillby had to smile to himself as the other shuffled a little closer. He would keep an eye on him, or at the very least, an eye socket. The silence between them was soothing and the fire monster found himself dozing within the comforts of the blaze, his arm curled around his head as a makeshift pillow. Grillby swallowed what dignity he had left as he resigned himself to sleeping in the fireplace, as he had as a child.

He wasn’t sure for how long he had been sleeping, but Grillby knew immediately when he awoke that he was feeling much better. There was no more prickling pain of water, no absence of heat. In fact, the fire that surrounded him questioned his presence and he bashfully pushed himself upright. He heard the unmistakable sound of paper shifting, like a book, its pages feeling coarse and loud even through the hum of fire around him.

Sans was still by his side and even stayed awake for him. That was endearing. Grillby rubbed at his
face, noting how his body was more stable, but his magic had soured so much that he could detect
the limestone scent himself. It would pass, but it would take time until his magic was properly
circulating again.

Another page turn. Grillby poked his head out from the fireplace and gradually exited it, sitting on
the hearth as he hunched over.

“mornin’. or should i say ‘evenin’?” the skeleton greeted casually.

Grillby rubbed over his face, glad the other didn’t mention anything too embarrassing. “...Time is
it?” he murmured, his usual crackle masking the start of his sentence. He glowed, feeling weary
despite his rest, but turned to regard the other - or at least the best that he was able.

“‘bout suppertime.”

“I see.” the fire monster sighed, exhaling one last breath of steam. He felt much better and even
straightened his back, hoping the movement would ease the cramped coils within his flames. “Could
do with something to eat. Did you notify your brother as to where you are...?”

“I called ’im earlier. he’s sendin’ positive vibes your way. are you feelin’ alright?” Not ‘ok’, but
alright. That was different. Grillby squinted at the other, an amused smirk touching the corners of his
mouth.

“Better.”

He saw Sans raise his hand to his skull briefly, but he couldn’t make sense of the movement. He
really wished that he had his glasses suddenly. He was missing out on all the nuanced body language
and Grillby found that he missed it.

“had a thought earlier,” the skeleton suddenly said. “well, a dream.”

Grillby hummed in interest and blindly set out for the bed in the direction he remembered it being in,
clumsily bumping into the side of the frame with a muffled snap of irritation. He could feel Sans’ eye
lights on him as he moved, but Grillby forced himself to walk on his own and he appreciated the fact
that the other didn’t immediately coddle him.

Instead, the skeleton followed him to his bedside and held something out to him while Grillby pawed
around the nightstand for his glasses. “and then i got to thinkin’, ‘cause of soul stuff, uh...” Grillby
could detect the hesitation in his voice and he stopped to turn back to Sans, his body flaring up in
muted surprise while at the same time, keeping relatively calm.

His thoughts had been chasing around in circles ever since Sans’ fingertips had grazed over the
surface of his soul. His core had been in a weakened state and Grillby had to keep from outright
pushing his soul out of hiding and into the other’s hands at the time, it had felt so right. The
temperature rose in the room when he recalled the intimate touch, yet he kept quiet as though every
word Sans spoke next was of extreme importance. And to him, it was.

“What’s, uh... still learin’ things,” the skeleton continued, waving the thing he was holding out to the
fire monster. Grillby swallowed and took it, recognising its shape for his glasses. He immediately
settled, placing them on his face to regard the other.

That was much better. He could see the serious yet nonplussed way Sans shrugged into his sweater,
the silly phrase on his shirt, the crooked way his grin cocked when his eye lights averted to the side.
Grillby sat on the bed and leaned forward, a gentle smile of encouragement touching his eyes.
“I’m aware.”

A flush coloured Sans’ face and his grin widened, something that made Grillby extremely pleased by. He remained patient until the other inhaled deeply, as though preparing himself for what was next.

“i dunno if i can. but i kinda wanna try again anyways? some… things got sorted out, at any rate,” the skeleton spoke quickly and idly rubbed at his arm.

Was he really hearing things correctly? Grillby stared at him, his soul pounding furiously at the implications - hell, the forwardness. He anticipated that Sans would start to be a little more confident when they started dating, but this? It wasn’t anything he had imagined.

“i mean,” Sans floundered, suddenly sounding unsure of himself. “not that i’d expect you to wanna submit yourself to another rebound. i just-” He shrugged, chancing a glance to the fire monster, then he laughed to himself. “i got excess magic. and you need to cycle yours, right? i figured it’d be a more or less mutual thing, i guess.”

Oh.

Grillby swallowed again, trying very hard not to betray the sudden flare of embarrassment that passed through his flames. They had been thinking on entirely separate things. Of course, he thought, unable to dim the subtle yet excited popping of embers off his body with the mere notion.

He thought on it once he’d calmed down a little, passing a hand through the flames on his head to help soothe them. Then he looked back to the skeleton and how he appeared a little curious, yet nervous. Perhaps he was thinking the same thing, and hiding it?

Grillby mentally chastised himself; there was no sense on lingering on such a thing if they were at two different stages in their relationship. Realising that he hadn’t said anything to Sans’ proposition, the fire monster nodded in acceptance. He saw Sans visibly relax, as though being rejected was a much bigger deal than it was at first glance.

When the other joined him on the bed, Grillby realised that was precisely it. He figured that on some level, Sans was likely to suspect that he would be treated differently, no matter how many times Grillby had assured him that was not the case. It was an unspoken fear, but Grillby would be patient with him. It would only put Sans on the defensive if he brought it up then.

The other’s left hand found his right, a dusting of beautiful cyan flushing Sans’ face when the fire monster couldn’t help but give him a cheeky grin while their fingers entwined. He could see the subtle way the skeleton’s chest heaved with each magical pulse, the subtle light within his rib cage evident now that they were closer together. It flickered at first, then settled into a deep glow.

Grillby’s smile widened when Sans awkwardly laughed to himself. He was always on the defensive, but occasionally he would relax just enough to realise it himself. Then, Sans would snicker as if it were an unspoken joke. It was sweet, in a way.

Grillby held up his left hand to grasp the other’s right - the ‘dead’ side, he noted. If he was entirely honest with himself, the fire monster still wasn’t sure how to process the way the connection had abruptly severed before. It had left him confused and disoriented and when he had come to, Sans was clinging tightly to him in such an emotionally raw state.

And now, Sans folded the book behind him with his free hand, looking nervous as he shrugged out of the right side of his hoodie. He then took Grillby’s offered hand, but not in the way they had held
them before. Instead, he pulled the arm towards himself and cupped his fingers over Grillby’s hand, firmly pressed against his right shoulder and poking beneath the sleeve of his t-shirt.

Grillby gave him a puzzled look and with it, Sans seemed to exude insecurity. It took him a great deal longer to finally mumble, as though in shame, ‘my `rent used to do this.” The fire monster could see the way the other’s eye lights faded briefly before coming back into focus, and then Sans squeezed his hand. It was subtle, but Grillby figured the connection meant a lot more to Sans than he ever would admit. It was also likely that his parent was no longer around, sadly, and the memory made the other sore.

“i’ll start the rotation. when it’s your turn, push your side of the connection-” Sans adjusted his grip so that Grillby’s fingers grazed over the surface beneath his shirt, a tight collection of pebbly-feeling bones marking his shoulder’s socket. “-here. hopefully it’ll work.” His grin tightened as his eye lights settled on him, then they drifted down to Grillby’s chest. Then just as quickly, they veered off to the side.

Aha. So he was thinking about it.

Deciding it was a little too intimate to tease about, Grillby leaned forward to get closer. Sans immediately tensed, his eye lights searching out what had sprung this on, just as Grillby pressed a kiss against his skull.

“man. what the heck.”

“You care for me,” Grillby couldn’t help the tease. “…Appreciate all your efforts. Truly.”

Sans gave him a half-cocked grin with an accompanying wink. Grillby could feel the way the hand in his own squeezed reflexively. “yeah, you’re feelin’ better…” he muttered shyly, brushing off the gratitude.

“…Makes all the difference in the world,” Grillby noted gently as he felt the peculiar tingling ebb into his hand from Sans, “when one has someone that wants you to be well.”

Sans remained quiet but his grin was genuine. “the restaurant’s closed but you’re still servin’ up grilled cheese,” he joked quietly.

Grillby couldn’t help but roll his eyes, amused. He felt the other’s magic seep into his flames and travel up his right arm, it creating little shocks much differently than before. Sans definitely had more to spare this time, but it was unpractised and uneven, like pouring the contents of a heavy jug into a small cup. A lot of it spilled off Grillby’s arm and he grunted in surprise, causing the other to glance to his face in concern.

“A… bit too much. Steadier.”

Sans gritted his teeth and settled his gaze just below Grillby’s face, his brow bone furrowing a little in concentration. The flames coiled and fluttered as the foreign magic entered Grillby’s body, confused at first but then firing up hotter as it pulsed unseen up and down the surface of his form. It made Grillby’s breath catch as another spur of magic gushed along his arm, causing a sudden spike in fuel as his body flared in shock.

“E… Easy.”

“m’tryin’,” the skeleton muttered apologetically. His hand flexed against Grillby’s fingers and his breath picked up a little.
Soon the magic Sans gave him flooded Grillby’s entire being, igniting his core and stoking his fire. The room became a little hotter as he hummed contentedly, the fluttering of his flames glowing against the shimmery wallpaper in the room.

He allowed it to linger within him for a moment longer before he hesitated, his thumb idly stroking Sans’ shoulder in preparation. The other’s right arm lay idle by his side, his phalanges playing with the toggle of his hoodie’s zipper. His eye lights were averted but he appeared absorbed in concentration as his magic bursted after flowing leniently for a little while.

It tugged at a suspicion that Grillby had for awhile, but it was too far fetched to even entertain. There were a great many things Sans admitted to not having done, citing neglect or disinterest. It wasn’t because of Bonnie’s suspicions that he was younger than he really let on.

Grillby put the thought from his head and collected the accumulated magic within him, ready to return it. With the other feeding him a constant yet unstable source, in theory they should be able to cycle through a few times. That is… if Sans’ idea was sound.

He had no reason to doubt him, so the fire monster gently pushed his magic to the socket of the other’s arm, causing Sans to jerk his skull up sharply in surprise. Grillby gave him an excusing look but watched carefully, his magic pouring out at an even rate as he’d learned years ago. He felt the way Sans melted with the sensation it brought on, how his body leaned towards the touch.

“neat,” the other observed, his breaths deep. His excitement shone through, perhaps Grillby even detected a hint of relief?

The fire monster had to smile at that, leaning forward as Sans did as the hue of his magic shone a soft amber along the other’s collar bones and vertebrae to mix with his own magic. Perhaps there was doubt behind the other’s hesitancy, but Sans seemed to exude an acceptance beyond any measure that Grillby had ever seen in him before. The fire monster’s eyes followed the reactions as his magic slipped into places unseen, how Sans’ body gently jolted with the sensations and his breaths caught.

“Be sure to maintain the connection,” Grillby reminded him kindly when he realised that the skeleton’s magical feed was beginning to wane.

As though snapped out of a momentary daze, Sans straightened. With the motion, there was another overcompensating spurt of energy. Grillby instinctively squeezed the other’s hand with a startled gasp, his vision dotting with tiny pinpoints of white with the surge.

“woops. sorry.”

The flow of energy lessened a little, soft flecks of gold and white embers falling between them with brief flashes of fuschia and cyan. Grillby steadied his breathing, realising that his core was hotter than it had been before, generating heat from the constant torrent of magic between them. His soul was fluttering but he silently pled for it to calm down, his eyes settling on their clasped hands and noting how his flames were paler than his previous sickly hues.

As the connection stabilised, so too did Grillby’s vision. He watched the other’s dreamy look and how a silent chuckle shook the skeleton’s frame from time to time. He fed his share of magic back to Sans, the light between them a beautiful symphony of cycling magic, like the essence of a whirling pool of energy.

He couldn’t believe anyone would have the intent to harm such a person. Someone that had kept relatively to himself, who wanted no more than to have a pleasant afternoon to himself with no hullabaloo to fret over. Who kept his own demons, but sincerely tried to keep up others’ spirits with
bad jokes and silly pranks.

Grillby dwelled on how frantic the other had been, how angry and scared. There had been true fear and coupled with the lingering aura of malintent on the other, Grillby had come to the conclusion that he had to investigate on his own time. Since Sans had told him not to report anything (which coincidentally meant telling a certain skeleton whom would then tell a fish lady), it left the bartender at relative unease with the whole proposition.

Was Sans so sure that he was the only target, that he would allow the incident to be glossed over and forgotten? Was Papyrus really alright with such an outcome? It was a tentative fear, but one the fire monster had to put away for the moment, despite how the worry lingered in his chest.

He had to focus on the little tells Sans would show when he was hiding something. Perhaps Grillby could glean some sort of information from him. If it had been Papyrus’ friend, as was mentioned, perhaps Grillby could persuade them into some form of camaraderie? Gain the true insight as to why he had interfered with Sans’ work?

Grillby’s thoughts wandered to the present. He thought he could feel the beat of the other’s soul through the connection, but Grillby had never heard of it happening before, so he dismissed the notion. Instead, he focused on the subtle hum of energy shared, just before Sans spoke.

“uh, you doin’ ok there, chief?”

Grillby watched the other and noted how he now appeared to have shifted slightly, as though agitated. Carefully, he nodded, burying his true expression under fire now that he was able to. Sans shot him an awkward grin and looked away. Then his discomfort seemed to increase when his eye lights settled on the door.

It was then that Grillby recognised the shift in the air. It was an unwelcome dip in temperature, but one that happened every time the door was opened. He was a guest at the inn, after all, and it was only to be expected when Bonnie or Ingrid had charged themselves with his care.

Gradually, he felt Sans’ magical feed into his hand and down his arm stutter to a dull throb with the intrusive, “Oh, `lo there! Everyone’s lookin’ lively now!”

Grillby made sure to hold onto the other’s shoulder tightly when Sans tried to jerk away, but their hands nearly parted with the start. He could see the veiled panic in Sans’ expression as Ingrid’s voice singsonged gentle teases. With her presence was the sweet smell of freshly baked bread, butter and yams, sweet corn and pepper - dinner. Grillby wasn’t feeling the most robust, but he would certainly do with something a bit more substantial than wood pieces and coal.

His flames crackled in protest as Sans attempted to withdraw his hand again, clearly agitated. Grillby was still feeding his share of magic back to the other, and until it was completed, they risked another disruption if the connection was severed too soon.

‘……Patience,’ came the whisper of fire. It licked off from his forearms and through his fingers to flood against the other’s bones, sinking in with a comfortable and familiar heat. Grillby sighed when Sans relaxed a little, staying quiet. It was peculiar, but he didn’t appear distressed.

He wondered why that was? Had it been due to Ingrid walking in on them like this? It wasn’t something to be ashamed of. Monsters well-known to each other did it. It was done familially. There wasn’t anything inherently scandalous about it…

Unless Sans thought it this way. The fire monster knew Sans was something of a private person, but
he wasn’t quite sure how to soothe the ache in this regard.

Grillby’s eyes settled upon Sans’ right hand on the bed, holding the corner of his hoodie, scrunching it in his fist. His body had begun to tremble and his eye lights faded out after averting them from their visitor. His grin was tight and fixed like a grimace, and magic that had been throbbing from his arm made Grillby feel anxious in turn.

He understood. This was about being ‘discovered’, so Grillby carefully ended the cyclical nurturing in favour of food. Sans’ eye lights reappeared as he watched him let go of his shoulder and the fire monster brought Sans’ hand towards him, settling it over Grillby’s chest to the intense heat with a silent ‘thank you’ just for him.

Whether Sans had been speechless because of it or not, Grillby didn’t receive a reply. They only shuffled so there was a bit of space between them on the bed and Ingrid approached them with loaded trays of food. Grillby swapped the soup for Sans’ bread as he didn’t have the energy enough to burn through any more liquid, but he earned a knowing wink from the skeleton.

Really, he had to figure out just what had happened for Sans to be attacked when he ignited the dimensional box. It was too important to let slide, even if Sans seemed to be doing just that. He ruminated over it as the skeleton stole a couple of bread slices from the tray and held them on each side of his face. He started as his heat crisped the bread, halting the worried thoughts as Sans laughed.

“thanks, man. been cravin’ something with your personal touch.”

Grillby held back the resounding flush and spike of heat at that. Really, did Sans not realise what he was saying half the time? The fire monster watched as Sans turned away to bite one of the pieces of toast. He was blushing. No, it was obvious that he knew.

Somehow, that flustered Grillby more.

Chapter End Notes

It my birthday tomorrow (Nov 3), so have a chapter!

Gotta remember that even though this is a more... realistic(?) take on the UT classic universe, everyone still has their silly little goofy things that they do.

Grillby is wanting to search for his own answers...
Fraternal Bonds

Chapter Summary

The brothers spend the day bonding over poorly-constructed cardboard sentry stations. Grillby is back at home with a huge mess to deal with. Papyrus is disgusted with the state of things and takes things into his own hands.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

It was once more, with great reluctance, that Sans left the inn. Grillby was not without his gratitude, citing that it was unfair to keep him all this time to himself when he had his brother to look after too. Sans nearly interjected that Papyrus was an adult and could take care of himself, but the words fell short as soon as they came to mind.

Papyrus was an adult, yes, but the both of them were still healing. Still not used to shuffling his time between friends and his family, Sans conceded that Grillby had a good point. Not before he pushed the fire monster into bed and covered him in heated blankets a little playfully, if only to ensure the other wouldn’t worry for him. Grillby rewarded him with a warm embrace and a lingering kiss pushed firmly against the side of his skull, making him feel dizzy and flustered all at once.

Snowdin felt far too chilly after spending the majority of the day at the overheated inn and Sans shivered into his hoodie as he trudged down the street. No longer did he feel quite as on edge, and even if there was the lingering guilt that Grillby had fallen ill because of him, he was willing to actually allow himself to relax. It was likely due to Alphys’ analysis that he was nearly finished with his whole ‘delayed event’, and for a smug little moment he was relieved he had managed to sidestep explaining the entire ordeal to Grillby. No doubt the fire monster would have slammed on the brakes hard if he’d caught wind of it.

Sans sighed harshly, his entire body gently misting as it lost its accrued heat in the Snowdin chill. Snowflakes fell in large airy clumps and by the end of his walk home, he had to shake the snow from his hoodie and skull. The cold was simply something that would stick to him now, he found. He sure missed the days when he couldn’t feel it, but on the other hand, he wouldn’t be able to feel the heat either. He’d grown very fond of it.

With that thought leaving a rather shameful grin on his face, Sans started when the door suddenly opened as he made to reach for the handle. He wasn’t normally jumpy at such simple things, but the unknown monster lingering in dark places made a part of his mind on alert ever since the brothers had run into it.

But no, it was just Papyrus. Sans relaxed when he was pulled inside and his brother began to tell him about his day; how he had concocted a deviously tricky puzzle in order to stop any humans that might come across it, and how Papyrus wanted to show him sometime. The other seemed naturally uneasy at first, but soon fell into relaxed and amicable routine, right down to voicing his concerns over his freshly vacuumed carpets and how Sans’ wet clothes should be nowhere near it!!
Supper was leftovers from the previous evening with a new sauce that made it slightly less appetising than before, but Sans was too hungry to care beyond the initial full body shudder.

“i was thinkin’,” Sans mumbled around a mouthful of slightly burned tortellini and orange mushroom sauce, “you an’ me, tomorrow mornin’. we go out and fix you up a proper station.”

Papyrus’ reaction was instantaneously explosive, “REALLY?!?”

Sans grinned, sinking back onto his chair as his brother did the exact opposite, his fork clattering onto the table as Papyrus bolted upright. The table rattled with the sudden movement and Sans carefully lifted his glass of milk so it wouldn’t tip over.

“THIS IS MARVELOUS!! EXCELLENT!! ONE STEP CLOSER. WE WILL BUILD A FINE STATION! WHY, I HAVE JUST THE PROVISIONS!! IT WILL REFLECT MY PERSONNAGE AS A MASTER OF THE CULINARY ARTS AS WELL AS A ROBUST MEMBER OF THE ROYAL GUARD!”

Sans grinned up at him after chugging back half of his milk. In turn, Papyrus was beaming down at him, then suddenly clapped his hands together as though he’d just remembered something.

“SANS!!”

“yeah, broski.”

Papyrus’ feet shuffled giddily, before he made himself calm down (just a little) and reseated himself. “SANS, I HAVE BEEN THINKING! ABOUT YOUR… WELL, YOUR ATTACK! ALTHOUGH IT WAS STRENUOUS IN NATURE AND I, NOT AT ALL HAVING THE WHEREWITHAL TO ASK ON THE SPOT AT THE TIME, HOWEVER, HAVE NOTICED THAT YOU HAVE NOT ONCE BROUGHT IT UP SINCE ITS FIRST CONJURING!!”

Sans tapped his fingertip against the glass, the ringing sound oddly soothing under the sudden excited scrutiny. He averted his eye lights and shrugged to himself, raising his glass to take another drink.

“THIS IS IMPORTANT!! WHY DIDN’T YOU TELL ME YOU HAD A SPECIAL ATTACK!! OR PERHAPS YOU WERE SAVING IT FOR A SURPRISE!! THAT’S LIKELY IT, ISN’T IT? FAR BE IT TO KEEP FROM HAVING SOME WILY TRICK UP YOUR SLEEVE TO GAIN THE UPPER HAND IN OUR NEXT DUEL, METHINKS!!” Papyrus didn’t bother to contain the excitement in his tone. His sockets positively radiated as he stared his brother down while Sans tried not to squirm on the spot.

“well, it certainly was a surprise, huh,” the shorter of the two mumbled.

“AREN’T YOU EXCITED?”

“if it didn’t wear me out like it did, i would be,” Sans shot back, a little embarrassed. “though-” He eyed Papyrus as he clung to every uttered word, then he grinned to himself. “nah, it’s not important.”

He saw the energy immediately drain from Papyrus’ shoulders in dismay, then Sans’ grin widened, a little bit of an idea forming in his head. When had been the last time he had successfully japed his brother? Longer than he cared to admit, although things had been rocky since then. Sans hummed in consideration, watching as his milk rocked from side to side in his glass as he idly tilted it.

“SANS, YOU ARE SCHEMING.”
Sans winked. “who, little ol’ me?”

“YOU ARE SCHEMING AND I WILL NOT TOLERATE IT!! THIS IS AN EXTREMELY HUGE DEAL!! IT MEANS YOU’VE FINALLY AMASSED ENOUGH ENERGY ON YOUR OWN TO COUNT FOR AN ‘EXCESS’. A GRANDER MACHINATION MY BROTHER HAS NEVER BEFORE JAPED!! I, THE GREAT PAPYRUS, H-” He stopped as though he realised something, finger in the air as his sockets blinked comically.

Sans inclined his head in curiosity. “…go on?”

Papyrus lowered his finger, looking quite sour by his revelation. “NO. IT’S RUINED.”

The older of the two started to chuckle when he realised what was going on, then he started laughing. “oh man! c’mon, tell me what you thought i did!”

His brother sat back down and crossed his arms over his chest, then leaned back in the chair, chin held high. “I REFUSE!! IF YOU DON’T KNOW, THEN I WILL NOT TELL YOU AS TO GAIN THE UPPER HAND!!”

Sans shrugged, his smirk widening. “ah.”

“AH? YOU MUST BE MORE SPECIFIC THAN THAT!”

“nah.”

“YOU CAN’T JUST ADD AN ‘N’ TO YOUR REPLY FOR A QUIP!! THAT’S JUST LAZY INFLECTION.”

“ok.”

Papyrus made an irritated, frustrated groan that heightened in pitch even though he attempted to stop it. “WHY ARE YOU LIKE THIS!”

“it’s the big bro’s job to be frustratin’.”

“YOU SAY THAT SO MATTER-OF-FACTUALLY THAT IT ACTUALLY PAINS ME, DEAR BROTHER!”

Sans tilted his chair and shuffled down to sprawl his arms over the table. “you’re just pouting `caus-”

“WHAT GAME! WE WERE PLAYING ABSOLUTELY NO GAME. NOR PUZZLE, NOR JAPE, NO INDUSTRIOUS REVOLUTION OF SKILL!!”

“you’re just mad, `caus-”

“NO.”

“cause i wasn’t actually-”

“SANS, PLEASE!!”

“i didn’t actually prank-”

“NYOO HOO HOO-”
Sans erupted into pure laughter as Papyrus finally caved, covering his face theatrically with the back of his hand. It was fun to tease, fun to let Papyrus think he was being pranked when he really wasn’t. It was the best way to jape him, as he always fell for it. And somehow, Sans thought Papyrus let him work himself up for that sweet, crushing downfall anyway, just for him. It was the best!

Papyrus had addressed it - yes, it was more or less that he had more energy than before, but Sans was still unpractised with the conjured attack than he really wanted to demonstrate. The last thing he wanted was for Papyrus to ultimately decide that it was too unwieldy for him to use.

Or worse, that he needed to practise with it.

On the other hand, maybe it was impractical. Papyrus was always for practicality when it came to his attacks. Even though there was utter madness behind his skill, his brother always had a pattern, always made it just hard enough to clear the constructs if you chose to dodge them. He always tried to make it fun.

With Sans’ construct, however? It was unparalleled power behind a glass cannon, and Sans knew it. He didn’t want to prove it to his brother until he got in more personal training time. After all, he wasn’t certain if his blackout had been fully due to the attack itself, or the fact that… everything had stopped.

Sans stared at the ceiling in his room from his bed with a frown, still at a loss on how to process what had happened. The more he deliberated on it, the more he found that it hadn’t been the construct, but something else that had clicked into place.

Was it more gridline nonsense? Or was he just crazy and overspent in every sense of the word? Did he imagine it in some weird lucid dream as he passed out? That made sense, as Alphys didn’t appear affected by it. But then, her tracking system had logged something… He just had to figure out what exactly ‘it’ was.

He sighed to himself and rolled over, hoping for dreamless sleep. He had enough to think about without regular nightmares plaguing his psyche.

The following morning had Sans bright and early, despite his groans of protest and one very adamant younger brother. He was pulled off the side of the bed, but when he landed in a clunky, tangled heap on the floor amongst his socks and sheets, Papyrus just sighed in exasperation.

“COME ON, YOU LAZY SACK OF BONES!! YOU PROMISED!!”

“don’tcha swear at me,” came the muffled reply from the sheets with an accompanying and rather audible yawn, “didn’ promise nothin’.”

“YOU SAID MORNING!! AND THAT IT IS!! IT’S IS PRECISELY-.” There was a pause for effect as Papyrus must have checked the time, “-6:52!! THAT IS MORNING!!”

“so’s 11:52,” Sans groaned, curling up in the still rather soft and warm pile of sheets now beside his mattress. He only allowed Papyrus to grab both of his arms to drag him away from his bed as he felt the lulling feeling of sleep fall over him despite his brother’s efforts to prod him awake.
The next time he woke he was shuffled into a chair in the kitchen, spiced oatmeal set in front of him alongside a mug of coffee. He absently scratched at the crest of his hip and yawned, stretched, then blearily blinked up at Papyrus.

“oh. `lo, pap,” he murmured dreamily as he hunched over the side of the table. He nearly took a face plant into his breakfast, had Papyrus not been quick enough. Papyrus’ hand caught his forehead until Sans shifted himself to sit upright, still fighting off the last dregs of sleep. “thanks.”

“YOU’RE WELCOME!! NYEH HEH HEH! I DON’T UNDERSTAND HOW IT’S SO DIFFICULT FOR YOU TO DRAG YOURSELF OUT OF BED.”

Sans stifled a yawn and propped his skull on his hand when Papyrus moved his own away. “prob’ly ’cause you’re so skilled at it, i don’t really gotta worry about it.” Another yawn, this time less animated, “it still mornin’?”

“BARELY. WE HAVE FOUR MINUTES TO SPARE.”

“marvellous,” Sans grinned and peeked at his brother from one socket, his right winked. “technically i didn’t break my promise, then.” He had to laugh when Papyrus grimaced, although he could see the mirth shining through in turn.

Breakfast turned into brunch, although lunch was added when Papyrus spread oatmeal between two slices of bread citing “ONE SHOULD NEVER SKIP ANY MEALS” before they were finally on their way. The toboggan Papyrus dragged behind him was loaded up with sheets of warped cardboard, some planks of wood, rope, a hammer, a blow torch and small spikes in lieu of nails - and of course, Sans.

The day was crisp and even though it had taken him awhile to wake up, Sans found himself alert enough to survey their surroundings. The Dogi were yapping in the distance away from their twin posts, a few monsters approached to say hello to him but avoided staying too long when Papyrus joined in the conversation. Sans tried not to let it get to him, but his smile fell a little when Papyrus shrugged off their shun and pulled the rope to the sled over his shoulder with not so much as a batted eye.

There was a small clearing a little ways from one of the dogs’ stations that Papyrus scoped out before dropping the rope to stamp around in the crunchy snow. He did so wildly, until his boot prints cleared a relative path from the main trail, while Sans rolled off the toboggan, and a little further so his body weight flattened what he could. He ended up with a skull full of snow for his efforts and even though the chill stung in his sockets, Sans grinned cheekily up at his brother when Papyrus moved to brush the snow off from him.

“aw, c’mon. there’s snow way we gotta stamp all this down,” he snickered, then jolted when his brother clapped him heartilly on the back. The packed snow tumbled from his eye sockets and Sans ended up grimacing, then blew the remainder out from his nasal cavity. “icy what you’re up to.”

Papyrus levelled him with a scowl, which quickly turned into a motivated and even challenging, proudful grin. “NOT EVEN ONE OF YOUR TERRIBLE COLD-ASSOCIATED PUNS WILL RUIN THIS DAY!! AND OF COURSE YOU DO, WE MUST BUILD FROM THE FOUNDATION, UP! THAT IS WHY I EXPECT YOU TO BE ON MY-”

Sans’ eye lights lit up when he saw the playful yet horrified look on his brother’s face. He waited while his brother squirmed and finally grinned so wide he was bound to look utterly insane. “…
Obviously that had been the word and Papyrus cringed, bowling past Sans in order to wrestle with a couple of boards while trying very hard not to outwardly affirm to the accidental pun. Sans knew him better than that, so idly walked around to help him.

…

“i got another one.”

“Oh. My God.” Papyrus looked around the misshapen cardboard wall he’d been hiding behind while Sans kept the other side in place. “Please, Sans. I am trying to focus.”

“You’re doin’ a great job. I just thought sharin’ some of my buildin’ jokes.” Despite the way he winked, Sans’ smile was infectious. It was a nice change, how he genuinely seemed happier, Papyrus thought.

The younger of the two sighed as though he knew what was coming, but indulged Sans anyway. “Out with it.”

Sans chuckled to himself, his hold on the warped cardboard jostling somewhat during his delivery, “why did the construction worker dip his hand in blue paint?”

Papyrus groaned pre-emptively. “I already know how bad this is going to be and you haven’t even said the punchline!!”

Sans erupted into another short burst of giggles. “He needed a blueprint.”

“You’re grounded!”

“Yes, mom. Hey, did you hear the one about how riveting construction work is?”

Papyrus scowled at him once more from around the piece of cardboard, using his boot as emphasis to knock it into place. Sans knew he was overreacting for his benefit, but man, was it ever funny.

“Oh my god,” Sans suddenly gasped, “I was thinkin’ usin’ them for a snack, but I got a fusilli idea-”

“Oh no-”

“Pap, broski, dude-” the other continued between gasping hoot of laughter, “we gotta use the pasta as screws. They’re the perfect shape!”

“Oh my god!! You are entirely right… for once.” Sans could’ve sworn he heard a comical ding from behind the piece his brother was behind and laughed harder, if that were possible.

Despite how much Sans’ laughter rocked the wall he was propped up against, Papyrus steadied his side before making a mad dash towards the toboggan to search for the box of fusilli pasta. Meanwhile, Sans wiped at his face as he eventually calmed down to a snicker here and there, when Papyrus returned, brandishing the found box like a gloating trophy-winner. Sans ended up crumpling into a heap of laughter again while his brother posed with it, making his side of the cardboard shelter tilt at a lop-sided angle.

“SANS, STOP YOUR INFERNAL TITTERING AND HELP ME.”

Sans wiped at his face again, his eye lights twinkling as his grin widened even more. Readily, he
pushed himself up and helped to steady his side of the makeshift station and even though they used an old crank-operated drill to core into the support beams, the fusilli screwed into place and were surprisingly strong. Even though they would probably absorb the moisture and grow soggy, Sans was willing for the bout of silliness to extend for however long the station lasted. And if that made Papyrus happy then he would reinforce it later, to prolong the joke.

It was later in the day that they were finally finished. Their feet had padded down a lumpy path from the trail to the station and Papyrus had painstakingly written a sign in his scrawling, spidery script to any human that would dare pass. It hung a little crookedly, the roof was a bit uneven and even caved on one side if you looked at it head-on, but the two were extremely proud of their work. It had been awhile since Sans had so much fun, and Papyrus was willing to accept that not all of his brother’s jokes were horrible.

They were cold and their clothes were soaking wet. Being exhausted by having fun all day and pretending the world wasn’t as cruel as Sans thought it was, he flopped down into a snowdrift with a slight grimace. Papyrus collapsed beside him and covered his face with a handful of snow, much to Sans’ muffled protests. He squirmed away from his brother’s glove and gathered a few handfuls of snow to pelt at him in revenge.

“How is he, by the way?” Papyrus asked as Sans dodged a few well-aimed clumps of snow and stooped to scoop some up to return.

“Who?” Sans stopped almost immediately and regretted it. Papyrus’ snowballs hit him square in the chest and he stumbled backwards and landed on his rear. “Oh, Grillby? He’s doin’ ok now. You don’t gotta worry ‘bout him.”

Papyrus turned the remaining snowball in his hand, not keeping eye-contact as he deliberately stepped into the snow to make it look a little neater. “I was… concerned that perhaps it was because he was with me that this… all happened,” he paused and gave Sans his best smile, “I’m glad that is not the case!”

Sans saw the ruse well enough but rested his skull on his hand with a restrained shiver. “Nah, I think he would’ve done it regardless if he was with you or not. ‘Sides, it’s good to have a buddy system, I guess,” he gave in to a mild shrug and started picking ice from the insides of his pockets. “He doesn’t think I should blame myself. But, uh… too late, I guess.”

Papyrus was still turning the snowball in his hands but approached him. “I do not believe that you believe that in all honesty, Sans! If you say that I am not at fault, it does not mean that you are either. Of course there stands to reason that you shouldn’t have run away in the first place, but… it’s easy to say that, after the fact.”

Sans hummed in agreement, his smile easing somewhat. “I know. M’sorry, bro.”

“It’s… water under the bridge, Sans. I just don’t want you blaming yourself after everything. Believing in yourself is the hardest thing to do after making mistakes, but I know you can do it! The believing, I mean!! And if you cannot, I will be beside you, rooting for you!”

Sans sat back and looked up to his brother, who was giving him an encouraging smile. It felt healing. Even though he knew Papyrus was trying to be observant and his words stung a little, Sans knew he
was right. They could work through this. They could grow and learn from their mistakes. He smiled a little more and shrugged to himself with a quiet laugh of admission.

“thanks, bro. you’re the best.”

Returning to town felt the same. Sans bundled along with the sled of tools and remnants of their project while Papyrus valiantly pull them all along. He dozed, but grew more alert the closer to Snowdin they got, when he could see Grillby’s alight from the street. As they approached, he realised that the door was ajar, and Papyrus stopped to survey it.

There was no usual clamour from inside as what was normal at this time of day. In fact, apart from a couple of sparse lights shining from the doorway, there seemed to be very little noise at all. When Sans got up, he was able to look inside to see the fire monster hard at work with a broom, his flames a little low, but lively. He wasn’t sure if that meant Grillby was in distress or not, so he hopped off the toboggan and proceeded forward until Papyrus’ voice stopped him.

“WHAT ABSOLUTE FILTH!! I SWEAR, IT’S AS THOUGH THE GREASE IS LADED WITH SOOT AND ASH NOW. HOW ANYONE CAN DINE HERE IS BEYOND ME, SANS!”

Sans levelled him with an embarrassed look but quickly recovered. “maybe we should leave him to it,” he mumbled quietly, flushing when the fire monster looked up at his brother’s choice of words.

Papyrus clapped his shoulder heartily and gestured wildly. “NONSENSE!! OBVIOUSLY THE POOR MAN NEEDS OUR HELP, SANS!” he retorted exuberantly, then gave Sans a sidelong glance and a wink. The smaller skeleton felt a little peculiar at the suggestion but followed his brother inside, leaving their sled out in the snow.

Grillby had stopped and was watching them both, his grip on the broom a little tight. Sans kicked the snow off from his shoes at the entrance and sighed knowingly when the air from outside hit the room.

It was either due to the fact that Grillby’s heat wasn’t enough to warm the building just yet, or the fire monster had just gotten back from the inn. A cursory glance over the state of the restaurant showed a few cleaning supplies, gloves, a spray bottle and some already filthy rags on the counter. There was also Grillby’s blanket brought over, and the bartender was wearing what he had been in the day before, only with a scarf and heavy jacket over him. His flames were flickering between muddy orange and red, and although they were lively, he seemed agitated.

“PITIFUL, REALLY. ONE WOULD THINK YOU’D BE RESTING NOW AND NOT…” Papyrus sighed to himself and Sans looked at him sharply. While he had been thinking Grillby had definitely seen better days, he was taken aback when his brother chose to bluntly state it outright. He adjusted himself and made his way into the restaurant after closing the door.

Grillby’s grip on his broom tightened a little more, but he didn’t reply or make any excuse. In fact, his flames ruddyed a little more in embarrassment.

Papyrus then clapped his hands together with a sound of eureka. “I HAVE JUST THE THOUGHT. ALTHOUGH IT WILL TAKE SOME-” he paused and nodded to himself, his mind going into a whirlwind as he thought it over, “YES!! THAT’S RIGHT! SANS, I DON’T MEAN TO ALARM YOU BUT I AM GOING TO THE BATHROOM.”
Sans blinked at him in surprise. “wha?”

“TOOLES!”

Then he was gone - or rather, he was gone and then immediately returned to apologise for leaving the door open, then promptly slammed it shut, leaving the two alone.

Peculiar, but nothing out of the ordinary for his brother. Sans sighed and turned to face the fire monster. “how’re you feelin’?”

The fire monster approached, his body easing into the movement in a fluidity Sans hadn’t seen for some time. The distance closed between them and Grillby wrapped an arm around his shoulders. Immediately, the skeleton could feel the gentle warmth flow from the other and spark something inside of his soul, and he just knew Grillby had recovered. Still a little dimmer than usual, but he was better.

It seemed that Grillby knew he didn’t have to say anything, so he just held Sans in a tender embrace. Sans laughed a little when he felt the other’s face seek out the crook of his neck and he inhaled a little sharply with the soft kiss that was left there.

“glad you’re feelin’ ok,” he murmured between them. “dunno what that was about, though.”

Grillby withdrew a little and gave him a knowing smile with a pat on the cheek. “Date number four.”

Sans looked around the dim restaurant with a mock frown. “no offense, but if this dating thing is a scam to get me to do the dishes, it might not work out.”

Grillby scoffed, rolled his eyes with a grin and gave Sans a playful shove. “Should I feel threatened? For what your brother has in store, I mean,” he tentatively pondered.

Sans scratched at his skull and shrugged to the best of his ability. “he sprung that on his own. i have no idea what he’s schemin’,” he admitted under his breath.

“Then, we both have cause for concern.”

Sans snorted in amusement. “sayin’ that as though you didn’t have a hand in his machinations before,” he said with a sly wink. “or were those surprised fireworks genuine?”

Grillby’s colour lightened at that and he attempted to twist his body away, despite the smirk on his face. His eyes lingered a little lower than Sans’ jawline before they darted away again, seemingly interested in the bricklay at the opposite side of the restaurant.

“aw. and here i thought you’d planned that big sappy date in cahoots with him,” Sans teased, grinning. Then he paused and looked once to the door, then back to Grillby, who seemed a little uncomfortable. “date number four already, huh.”

The fire monster nodded after a brief moment of hesitation. He took the moment to move his broom a little idly, tufts of soot and ash kicking into the air as the stiff bristles moved. “…After.”

Sans levelled him with an inquiring look, but since Grillby didn’t look up from the floor, there was no tell. Just that the fire monster seemed shy about something… which was unusual for him. Had Sans done something to fluster him? Did he unwittingly gain a point?

“‘After’ will take some time, I’m afraid,” Grillby continued a little haltingly. “…Did not anticipate
being closed for so long.”

Oh. So that was it. Sans figured this might happen to some degree - very rarely did Grillby ‘give’ himself days off. The outings that he did had were planned around his days off, which he even sparingly took. Only Sundays appeared to be the fire monster’s true day to relax but if Sans had any say, he would’ve liked to convince him to take several more. It was a little strange to be in a relationship with someone so productive and with such a high-ranking work ethic.

Sans’ mind stopped at that. He knew essentially what the bartender was lamenting and that it had been hinted at before. Cleaning the restaurant, which had definitely seen better days. It appeared that the smoke had settled and taken form as soot and ash, discolouring all of the fire monster’s glassware and tabletops. The floor likely had to be swept and mopped, and the tabletops washed and oiled. And that was just the presentable space where customers would be. There was still the kitchen, the cellars, and Grillby’s suite to consider, too.

The skeleton held back a grimace when he heard his brother’s voice outside and likely down the street. He could barely hear what was being said, but he had a sudden feeling now. Papyrus would probably never admit it, but even though he detested the restaurant and bar’s choices in food, he would be over the moon to help with any organisational and cleaning that needed to be done.

And two; Sans was sure his brother was feeling guilty to some degree, even though Papyrus had denied it. It would be a way to make it up to Grillby for inadvertently getting him sick.

Grillby shifted on the spot, seemingly restless. The movement caught Sans’ attention and he looked back to him. As though unsure of what to say next, the fire monster continued to sweep and left a little distance between them. The skeleton thought about it - should he offer to help? That would be… something else entirely, he figured. It would mar his otherwise pristine track record of being lazy, although it had been less like that lately and more that he’d been unwell.

Without offering, he took the spray bottle that was already filled with bubbly cleaning solution and a rag and decided to help on his own. While it probably wasn’t up to the bartender’s standards, Sans cleaned the counter top where he’d spent so much time, the smoke residue lifting from the marble surface easily enough.

When he looked back, he realised that Grillby was watching him and he had to grin to himself. No doubt this would be cause for concern if Papyrus found out, but it was one of the few times that Sans felt he had the energy to do so. The gentle sounds of bristles rustling against the floorboards and the small squeaks of the bottle trigger were a soothing accompaniment to their time together.

Sans found that the quiet was a little too much, so he started to tell Grillby about his day and what he and Papyrus had done together. He was amused when the other laughed when he recalled his jokes and how Papyrus had reacted, and even better still how his flames kindled warmly when the seemingly mundane things were talked about with such glowing affection.

In a word, it was nice to have the two brothers on better terms again.

After awhile, Grillby set about to lighting the oil lamps that had gone out around the restaurant and while it was dim, it cast a soothing light into the atmosphere. Although the open space no longer held the smell of alcohol or fried foods, it was beginning to feel a lot more like ‘home’.

Sans grinned to himself as he moved from one booth to another, the one where Grillby had demonstrated their first deep kiss. He recalled it as he wiped over the tabletop, faced flushed, then
looked back to Grillby, who was finished with sweeping and had moved to pull on his gloves while staring down a water bucket. His flames flickered in rebuke for a moment before the fire monster bent to grasp the pail with both hands, a waft of steam billowing up from the water as the vessel was heated. Then with just as much distaste, Grillby took the nearby mop and plunged it inside.

Sans thought he could hear the whisper of fire from across the room, but it remained unintelligible. For all intents and purposes, it could very well just be swearing. The room warmed up a little more with Grillby’s fiery activity and the skeleton looked away just as he saw the other look up to peek at him. He minded his own business with the booth’s table but heard the disgusted noise of fire from the other side of the room when the soaked mop head hit the floor with a comical slap. 

With the shutters drawn and no way to look outside, Sans had no way of knowing just what was happening in the street. The crunching of snow threw him on guard so fast that his magic flickered wildly, suddenly on edge. Carefully, he put the rag and spray bottle down and stared at the door when he heard a giggle from outside, then a couple more alongside a faint rattle.

Shushing noises. Another giggle. His eye lights zeroed in on the closed door when a slithering scuff hit the front stoop. Grillby looked up from where he was mopping and watched the cautious energy waft from the skeleton’s body, then it dissipated just as quickly.

Did something happen? He was far too accustomed to the scuffles and voices in the streets from the decades of living in town to notice if anything was out of the ordinary. But just as he thought to disregard what was happening and get back to work, Sans’ posture tensed. Grillby had heard the noise this time, something scraping and unclear - perhaps wood and steel being knocked together? An applause?

Curious himself, Grillby approached the door, glancing at Sans briefly. He did look rather on edge, so he gently touched his shoulder in reassurance as he passed. From the brief caress, Grillby could feel the way Sans had gathered himself and he heard a soft sigh from him, as though it was just what he needed.

Perhaps it was his own naivety, but Grillby didn’t think that anyone threatening was outside. Sure, with the events that came to light those past few weeks, months… everything was uncertain. But there was no malicious aura from beyond the door.

Another giggle and warmth touched his soul. Everything seemed to make sense suddenly when he pulled the latch and was greeted by nearly half of the town. They beamed at him, the local kids, the bunny sisters, the wolves, dogs, and even some of the more mild-mannered teens had shown up, brandishing brooms, mops, buckets of cloths and blankets.

Sans stood stunned, although not as stunned as Grillby was in front of him. Despite the bite of chill wafting in from the open door, he could distinctly feel the pulse of warm intent and love for their neighbour come from the group. They yelled, “SURPRISE!!” and cheered that the only thing that stood between their favourite place being open was a little tidying up.

Although Grillby was shocked, he had the decency to allow them inside. His colouring was all over the place, properly flustered to the point where his fire danced and pulsed in various pigments and light. He didn’t speak that much with the residents at all, couldn’t touch or even physically console them, but he honestly felt he could hug each and every one of them for being so kind.

It was overwhelming. He knew they were all good people, but Grillby had to step away. It was a good thing Ingrid had taken charge on what needed attention to, while Bonnie automatically beelined to the glassware to clean. The fire monster grasped at his scarf and pulled it up a little, his eyes unnaturally bright when his gaze met with Sans’.
The skeleton was fully relaxed now and even seemed amused that this had happened. There was no sign of his brother, but no doubt he’d come by later; it was likely what his impromptu ‘bathroom urgency’ was. Grillby shot the other a smile full of gratitude, his eyes brimming, only to sear off into a soft mist.

He was so touched.

Chapter End Notes

cazdata drew a bit of the makeouts in chapter 32 in comic form which you can see here u//u (SFW)
popato-chisps drew Grillby from chapter 2 for my bday ;w; click here to see (sfw)
hj-skb drew chapter 36 art for my bday ;w; (ty Soul!) SFW clicky

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I had no idea what to call this chapter. The brotherly bonding was definitely a thing that needed to happen, though! And fluff. It made me really happy to write after so long ♥
A Moment in the Cellar

Chapter Summary

Things get steamy in the kitchen, then Grillby and Sans get teased by the town. Sounds from the pipes lead to fluttering feelings shared in the basement. Sans entertains an idea.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans was shocked to see Grillby’s colours so wild and flustered, but it was a good surprise. He watched as Grillby covered his face with his hands, the way he blushed tainting his head a stark white in contrast to his normal hues. Grillby remained quiet, although if it was due to Ingrid’s instructions nearby to others on how to restock, organise and clean, Sans could only shrug.

It honestly felt as though Grillby needed to take a moment for himself, so Ingrid approached him, one of her ears flopped as she tilted her head curiously with the fire monster’s reaction. “Aw, hun! We didn’ mean t’make you feel put out! Here, Sans - why not take him into the back for a few minutes?”

The skeleton didn’t know how to feel about the knowing smirk the inn bunny gave him, but he was able to pry the mop from the crook of Grillby’s arm and replace it with his hand. He could’ve sworn he saw a faint glimmer of magenta and orange flock up from the space between Grillby’s gloves and his coat, although he didn’t feel the need to point it out. The fire monster remained quiet and flustered, although he did peek out from between his hands when Sans ushered him towards the back of the bar.

He was all too aware of people watching, causing a flush of his own to tint his cheekbones.

“wow, people sure are nice here,” he murmured just out of earshot.

Grillby laughed into his hands, a crisp crackle spreading out between them, only to be reigned in again.

“you ok, man?”

The fire monster peeked out from his hands again and slid his fingers down his face, ending with him hanging his arms around Sans’ shoulders. “Perfect,” he replied lowly.

Sans felt his soul tremble with the overwhelming amount of happiness he felt emanating from Grillby and relaxed. It was a far cry beyond how he had felt not even ten minutes earlier. His hand reached up to grasp at Grillby’s sleeve as the other cupped one side of his face, the familiar warmth flooding into him as he contentedly allowed the moment to carry on.

“Your brother... He is something else.”

Sans laughed at that.

“Wild machinations. And yet, always with the best intent. What a good lad,” Grillby beamed.

Sans leaned into the caress against his face. “yeah. he’s cool like that,” he murmured, every word
sending a tremble through him. It was nice to know that even though he had expected it to some extent, Papyrus had surprised them both in the best way.

“...Will have to show my gratitude later,” the other continued thoughtfully, his eyes still bright behind his glasses as a cheeky smile crept onto his face. “For you, especially.”

Sans laughed lowly, his soul thrumming hard with the tease. “man, y’don’t gotta do anything, honest,” he mumbled awkwardly and idly thumbed the other’s sleeve to distract himself from the fire monster’s penetrating gaze. “it’s not like i really did anything anyway.”

Grillby hummed in consideration, all while keeping his tone quiet in case anyone was to overhear. “Does that mean that you’re rejecting any reward?” he teased and leaned down to claim the opposite side of Sans’ neck from where he had visited earlier.

Sans inhaled another sharp breath with the presence of heat, the sensation travelling down his spine in a shockwave of miniature spasms and tingles. “you’re in a good mood,” he huffed, taking Grillby’s cue to keep his voice low. His soul trembled with the idea that someone could walk in and catch them in such a compromising position, even if it was a lot tamer than their previous exploits.

His breath caught when his back connected with the countertop behind him, realising that Grillby had been gently guiding him backwards with every kiss to his vertebrae. So, the fire monster had recovered from his momentary lapse in composure and was now turning the tables on him. Almost literally. Sans had to chuckle at the internal joke, but his next inhale caught again when he felt a soft nip under his jaw, causing his bony digits to flex into the fabric of Grillby’s jacket in thrilled surprise.

“in a, uh, really good mood-” he murmured again, just before Grillby leaned forward to push their mouths together. He sighed against the kiss as spice entered his mouth, heat enveloping him and taking residence in his soul as he felt the other’s hand travel up between them and brush against his ribs. Sans couldn’t help the shudder that travelled through his body with the caress, how it threatened to conjure up imagery of their intimate time together.

Grillby’s hands travelled down further. Even with his gloves, the warmth that seeped into the fabric was enough to make Sans feel the need to squirm. He took initiative and hooked his arms around the other’s shoulders to bring him closer, wanting to feel more of those little addictive kisses that made him feel as though he was on fire.

Mid-kiss and Sans had to stop himself from making any sound when the fire monster’s hands found the flares of his hip bones, giving each an encouraging squeeze. He inhaled sharply, feeling the singe of fire on his tongue, how it lit him from the inside and mingled with his magic.

“What you want this?” Grillby asked softly, excitement in his tone even as he resisted the urge to capture Sans’ mouth again to swallow any answer that he would be given. He saw the hesitancy and felt the way Sans’ arms subtly tightened around his shoulders. They were locked behind his neck as though it was the only thing keeping him from being shoved onto the counter and being ravaged.

“i mean,” Sans panted, his grin already intoxicated as his eye lights averted shyly. “what, you’re gonna ask now?”

“I mean,” Grillby echoed, his soul beating furiously in excitement, “you could barely keep your voice down before-”

Sans’ skull flushed suddenly and he laughed, his body hunching between them. “wow, you said it.”

The fire monster couldn’t help but chuckle in response, “Could very well try, I suppose.” With that,
he gave the other’s hips another squeeze.

The skeleton clenched his teeth together with a low noise of appreciation, attempting to bury it within Grillby’s collar. “no fair.”

“…Appear much more frustrated than I,” Grillby observed with a knowing smirk. “Perhaps this is… not the best time to tease.”

Sans gave him a perplexed look, immediately feeling the loss when the other gently pulled away. He still felt flustered and riled up now, like he suddenly didn’t know what to do with himself. Of course, in his efforts to remain cool and collected, he hadn’t given Grillby the go ahead, which he figured was a way for the other to concede that he was actually comfortable with this.

On the other hand, how comfortable was Sans in that situation with others in the next room, ready to barge into the kitchen to clean it, only to find them violating several health codes? Sans willed himself to calm down, inhaling through his nasal cavity and exhaling out of his mouth.

“i, uh… haven’t really got that.”

Grillby was busy adjusting his hoodie, his fingers gliding along the hood strings in contemplation as the other leaned back against the counter, elbows propped up. He waited for the other to continue, his bright eyes watching intently and curiously while the thrum of fire crackled patiently.

Sans averted his eye lights as Grillby toyed with the strings. “bein’ frustrated, i mean. i’m pretty sure you know what i mean by that. i’m not sure if it’s… it’s somethin’ to do with things when i was a kid, or maybe i just don’t normally think that way.”

He shrugged for emphasis while a few things clicked into place for Grillby - mainly that the regular admission ‘when he was a kid’ cemented how foolish the thought that Sans was immature really was, and that was all. Secondly, if he was deciphering what the skeleton was admitting, exploring with the fire monster had certainly been amongst his first sexual experiences. Did that also mean that Sans did not indulge in… solo endeavours?

Sans sighed again, causing Grillby’s wandering thoughts to go back to their present situation. “i kinda only feel like this with you,” he admitted softly, still keeping his eye lights downcast. A moment of silence passed between them as Grillby absorbed the quiet admission, and Sans grew restless. “welp. now that i’ve made things awkward, i’m gonna head back ou-”

“You haven’t,” Grillby interrupted carefully. “You never have. Not with anything.” He extended his hand to caress Sans’ skull and gave him a gentle smile, his eyes softening when Sans looked up to his face again, abashed. “…Believe me?”

Sans sighed, the strength to resist with pessimism waning. “ok,” he relented with a little bit of a laugh. “at this point i really should. you’re either right, or really persistent.”

“Absolutely.”

The skeleton couldn’t help the grin that came next. “reward, huh?” He couldn’t help the flinch when Grillby patted the side of his skull in mock admonishment.

“Perhaps… later,” the bartender grinned slyly. “Give you a `walkthrough`.”

“m’ suddenly not interested if there’s any walkin’, grillbz,” Sans countered with a cheeky wink.

Grillby clicked his tongue and rolled his eyes, finally leaning away from the other to give back his
personal space. “Alright… then I will guide your hand,” he conceded with a wink of his own.

While it was a little tamer than his other flirts, he hadn’t seen Sans so flustered in quite some time. Grillby allowed it to sink in before giving a brief pass over the skeleton’s shoulder with the palm of his hand. He saw the way Sans’ eye sockets had widened moments after and the way his magic flushed his bones, just knowing that he’d won a point in his favour.

Sans murmured something under his breath as he turned, a fistful of his hoodie in his hand and his skull ducked. Something along the lines of “still counts as a tutorial, y’know,” came from the smaller monster, then Sans left the kitchen cleaning to Grillby, while the fire monster chuckled to himself and shook his head at the silliness of it all.

It didn’t dismiss all of his current worries, but the fact was that those two brothers accounted for much of the happiness in his life. Grillby appreciated them both, despite the nagging worry over many things. Mainly; how much he had remaining of his stock until his next supply run. It had been nearly three months, after all, and the Underground seemed a lot more uncertain just then.

It was as though there was a feeling that a storm or a blizzard was brewing in the upper caverns, and the air was thick with chill and apprehension. He couldn’t risk another trip on the ferry so soon after having recovered, so he conceded that he would have to make some rather expensive arrangements to get his next supply run sorted out.

There were so many things to keep in mind and at least one of them he had to handle with kid gloves. He didn’t even know how to begin his investigation over the disruption that led to a serious threat to his best friend’s life.

Just when his thoughts had become serious, Grillby heard a burst of laughter from the crowd of volunteers and Sans returned in somewhat of a hurry, his magic so flushed that it threatened to spark off of him in waves. He had a hand clasped against his neck, specifically the side where Grillby favoured, and he had taken to digging around under the shelves for something.

“What happened…?” the fire monster inquired with a tilt of his head. He was a little more than smug to figure that the laughter had been because of the marks left behind from their brief kisses, and Grillby could hear a sing-songy voice just outside of the kitchen that belonged to Ingrid.

Sans cursed when he got up too quickly and knocked into the cupboard with a rag in one hand, his other clutching at his skull. A tear pricked at one socket, still flustered and now in pain from his fumble, he scuffed the clean rag around his face to clear the small smudges while his face burned with embarrassment.

Grillby held a hand over his mouth and doubled up his flames to ensure Sans couldn’t see his smile and how wide it had gotten with how agitated the skeleton was. He merely allowed the other to stand in place as he huffed into the white cloth to calm down, the entire piece covering his face. Then Grillby gently gave the other’s shoulder a reassuring pat and squeeze for emphasis before exiting the kitchen.

The cheering was uproarious and caused him to colour paler than what he’d originally thought it would do, so Grillby did a complete 180-turn back into the kitchen, promptly colliding with another body in his blind embarrassment.

He lost his footing with a startled crackle, attempting to hold onto the other monster as they went down. Unfortunately the two monsters landed in a heap and he was seeing stars, glasses askew with Sans’ bony body under him.
Very close.

He was so close. Improperly displayed before the door, what weight of him fully against the other and pinning him down. He felt the thrumming pulse of the other’s soul fluttering against his chest, how every inhale pushed up against him. Grillby must have startled Sans as much as the collision did him, as Sans was eyeing him in surprise.

“uh… h-hey.”

Embers fell down and Sans squinted, his body tensing when he heard more laughter from the open doorway. His magic flooded his face and in his haste to get up and away, he ended up shoving Grillby so hard he tumbled off, his colours swirling about in erratic and flustered hues. His glasses skittered away while the giggles and teases about them not being able to keep their hands to themselves grew in volume.

It was one thing to be in control during private moments, but such a blunder with an audience… Grillby cut the thought off there, his temperature and flames rising in shame as he pawed around for his glasses.

“hey, you ok, grillbz?” Sans mumbled. Or at least that was what Grillby thought he meant, as it came out stuttered, every other word a hum or restrained giggle. Grillby didn’t trust himself not to slip up again, so instead he pushed himself off the floor and clung to the countertop as if it were the only thing grounding him.

He was amazed considering how flustered Sans had been any other time, that he appeared so calm now. At least, he thought so. Sans’ shape stooped an retrieved something on the floor and approached him, holding it out to his face. The fire monster just couldn’t get his temperature under control and his voice had a difficult time pushing through his flames.

“aw. there’s them surprised fireworks again,” Sans chuckled to himself after righting the other’s glasses on his face. Grillby didn’t reply, but they both heard a metallic groan from the pipes under the floor.

Puzzled, the skeleton looked down, giving the floor a tap with his shoe. There was another groan, low at first, but not anything a monster would have made.

“welp. that… doesn’t sound good at all.”

Grillby composed himself enough to send a chagrined flare to the horde of gigglers outside of the door and closed it, then folded his arms in thought.

“…The pipes.” He grimaced, then his fire shifted to muted tones. “Oh no.”

“oh no`, what?” Sans echoed sobrely.

Grillby cursed after a long clunking noise pinged from downstairs, his flames reddening as his soul gave a sickening lurch. No, not now. He had definitely stayed away too long. As quickly as he could, the fire monster barrelled past Sans and threw open the door opposite the staircase leading up to his suite.

Sans followed behind him as he manoeuvred the stairs, becoming more cautious the closer he got to the cellar’s landing. More ticks and another groan.

“oh. i get it now. frozen pipes,” the skeleton muttered from behind him.
Grillby restrained his aura and drew back, his hands scorching the walls as he switched places with Sans. The other gave him an enquiring look, however brief, and shuffled down to check further in.

As Sans meandered inside, he threw a glance over his shoulder to the fire monster, reddened in hue and appearing very wary. The skeleton shrugged the feeling off and ventured further, having never been in the cellar of Grillby’s before. Crates and boxes were stacked neatly in organised piles, shelves of bars held small canisters of product as well as heavy sacks on the floor. There were barrels all in a row.

As Sans drew closer, it became apparent that most of the crates and boxes were empty. Pipes leading up to the ceiling groaned again and he heard a scuffle from the other monster, but Sans decided to ignore it for now. While he and Papyrus didn’t have to worry about frozen pipes at their own residence, this situation was a little more dire than a simple flood. Grillby just couldn’t risk it. Sans knew that he’d been away for far too long and if Grillby’s heat warmed them too quickly, the water inside would expand and burst the pipes.

That would be a whole different problem to deal with, and this was easier to handle than finding the fire monster another place to stay if his cellars flooded.

The skeleton approached the pipes cautiously, listening to the subtle, echoing tinks. He realised that Grillby’s ambient presence must have ensured that they’d never be cold, otherwise he thought that the fire monster would do away with plumbing entirely. But his restaurant, sadly, needed water despite the fire monster’s aversion to it.

He appraised the cold steel and how it had begun to condensate with his friend’s heat and he reached out to touch it. He felt Grillby’s apprehension as he gave the pipe a gentle knock, then closed his phalanges around one of the joints. Inside, Sans felt a prickle of pity coil in his soul over the other monster’s agitation.

His bones were still warm from Grillby’s body, so his touch created a gentle steam. The pipe thundered in protest, making the skeleton tense in response.

“…Careful,” he heard the bartender warn, although he sounded further now. When Sans turned his head, the fire monster had retreated a couple of steps higher onto the staircase, as though he didn’t trust the noises coming from it. Sans couldn’t blame him. After being ill for so long, Grillby was being more cautious than he’d ever seen him before, even in comparison to their trip through Waterfall.

“aw, don’t worry,” Sans assured him with a placid wave. He started when another long whine came from his side and he turned to regard the pipes once again.

He wrapped his hands around the main valve, an idea forming in his head. It was a simple plan, but even simple ideas tended to be complicated when it came to him, lately. He drew in his magic with a veiled grimace, collecting the residual heat in his bones and allowing it collect in the phalanges of his left hand. His other remained cut off from the flow, but he paid it no mind, having been used to it for so long.

After awhile, he heard trickling noises running, coupled with the anxious flutter of flames. Sans realised that he’d been holding his breath in anticipation, relieved that his notion had been correct. It just needed to thaw slowly, and using the bartender’s concentrated heat would have been too much
too quickly, resulting in damages that would’ve likely taken weeks, if not more, to repair.

It seemed to slow. Sans’ grin tugged down into a frown and he took his hands off the pipe, his bones freezing now. He shivered, trying to rub the sleeves of his hoodie to warm up as he’d seen fleshy monsters do, but he settled on looking back to the fire monster.

Well, duh, he thought, his face lightening. He stepped away from the wall where the lengths of steel lay glistening with the muted light from his friend, and he approached Grillby with a grin.

“hey, g,” the skeleton mumbled, a slight blush touching his cheekbones as he shrugged with the idea. “uh… it’s been awhile. how’s `bout we hug it out?”

Grillby would have given him a perplexed look, but his flames hid his expression. It appeared that the fire monster was trying to remain calm despite the looming threat of water explosion, but when Sans outstretched his arms, he stopped cowering on the fifth step. Admittedly, the request was a little silly, but Sans relaxed when Grillby humoured him and wrapped his arms around his torso and drew him close.

The skeleton chuckled to himself as his friend’s heat seeped into his bones. He curled his hands inwards and pushed past the fire monster’s jacket to gain further contact and lay his cold bony fingers against Grillby’s back.

The fire monster jumped with a shrill noise, disarming himself from Sans while the skeleton guffawed, raising his hands in a placating gesture.

Fire curled off of the bartender’s head in rebuke, his embers snapping in both confusion and veiled irritation.

“Sans! …Was that entirely necessary!?”

Sans looked at his palms slowly, his grin still wide. “i had cold hands. and you’re the perfect space heater-” he snickered, and Grillby rolled his eyes with a shudder.

Then the fire monster glanced back after a moment, as though privately scrutinising him. “…Is that what it feels like?” he enquired warily.

“What?”

“Cold.” Grillby seemed uncomfortable.

Sans slowly lowered his hands, then gave in to a slight shrug. “you gonna ask that every time?”

The fire monster didn’t speak, but his flames languidly rolled around his visage, masking how he truly felt about the enquiry. Sans wondered if perhaps he had toed the line a little too much and shrugged again to himself, making to turn away from the fire monster, when Grillby gently stopped him with a hand to his shoulder.

 “…You’re cold,” he said, tone quiet as though it was a revelation. Sans gave him an awkward grin. “What I mean… is that right now. You are… cold. Whereas before, there was no register of heat whatsoever.”

The skeleton grimaced awkwardly. “seems like a weird thing to get hung up on, grillbz.”

The fire monster tilted his head in consideration. “Is it..? I am forever inclined to believe that excess of temperature is not something to scoff at here. Yet, I must be mindful, else control slip from me.
Furthermore, a lack of heat signals to me as... a cause for concern.” He paused, going over what he said in his head as Sans stared at him. “What... I mean is, I do not understand ‘cold’. You will have to teach me, I suppose.”

Realising what Grillby meant, Sans gave him a wide grin and wiggled his phalanges towards his face.

“ok. but these ivories got a tune to play.”

Grillby’s colours flushed paler and Sans felt his soul burst excitedly. “…Are you offering me innuendo?”

It was Sans’ turn to flush. With that, he quickly looked away and stuffed his hands into his pockets. Before he could bury them fully, Grillby smiled down at him and pulled his arms up, taking each of his hands in his own, then he brought them up to each side of his face. Sans’ soul continued its erratic beat as each bony palm was made to cup the undefined jawline of Grillby’s face.

When his bones touched the bartender’s body, the flames skipped around excitedly after a brief shock, while Grillby hunched his shoulders. He chuckled lowly as Sans felt the small passage of heat curl around his fingers and in between his joints, warming him. He swore he could feel it in his face, but Sans refused to allow it to get to him. It was just one of those things that made having Grillby around so confusing, yet delightful.

“…Am not hearing any objection,” Grillby urged in amusement, and Sans flexed his fingers automatically with a start, gently grazing the hidden form beneath his fire.

Sans restrained himself from reacting too obviously, but he could swear his soul was clamouring like a bell. Surely, Grillby had to see it, right? They were so close now, arguably a couple, some might say. Of course they’d be able to detect each other’s souls…

His thoughts wandered and he found himself idly stroking the fine line of the other’s jaw with his thumbs. Even though Grillby was well, Sans could see the subtle paler glow emanating from the centre of the fire monster’s chest.

What would happen if he kissed the spot? Would it open his core, bring pleasure to him? Would it feel ok to kiss?

Sans muted a cough and tore his gaze away from Grillby’s torso, his face feeling immeasurably warm. Perhaps it had been because the flames that loved him had trickled down his forearms and tried to nudge under his sleeves. He jerked slightly and carefully pulled his hands away from Grillby’s face, flustered.

“m.. maybe later,” he echoed his boyfriend’s earlier tease, only more seriously. He detected the way Grillby’s fire pulsed ever so slightly, even if it hadn’t paled in colour, he could definitely feel the change in heat. He flushed a little more when the bartender leaned down to press a kiss to his temple. It was inaudible, but he felt the familiar way his soul thumped ecstatically when Grillby’s mouth formed three distinct words against his bones.

He didn’t know if he wanted to acknowledge it again, despite how much he knew. There was a reason why the fire monster wasn’t saying it, after all, and it was nothing short of his own feelings. Even for monsters, whose beings comprised of love as the majority of their make-up, saying it out loud still felt tender, whole, a blessing.
He still had hangups about saying it ‘on accident’. Saying it *on purpose* felt too new, and too sudden. He wanted to say it. His heart and soul were bursting with it, especially when Grillby drew back a little and he had taken to cupping his skull in his hands. Their bodies swayed together, the gentle crackle of fire between them, their souls beating as one.

At least, Sans hoped he’d be ready to say it. He should be, when his confession had all but the word ‘love’ in it. It certainly implied it enough.

‘*I’ve fallen for my best friend.*’

Sans’ eye lights averted to the far wall, soul trembling the more the silence extended. He definitely wasn’t ready. He had to divert the situation somehow, change the topic, or just downright pull away. His magic felt trapped in his chest and he attempted to quell it. Mercifully, whether Grillby felt that he was uncomfortable or just plain anxious, the fire monster gently pulled away. His hand slipped from the side of Sans’ face, lingering just long enough to make him ache with longing. But there it was, Grillby’s gentle and encouraging smile, and him knowing exactly when to end a moment.

“uh…” Sans coughed again, as though to clear his throat after they had parted. He was *definitely* warm now. He rubbed absently at his jaw with the heel of his bony palm, awkwardly shifting in place. “i… i noticed you’re kinda low on stock.”

As though the other hadn’t been anticipating such an abrupt change of subject, his fire flickered, perplexed.

Sans shrugged to himself, defensive as he kept his eye lights trained on the stack of crates and boxes on the opposite side of the room. How long had it been since the last supply replenishment? He fought with his memory. So much had happened between then and now that the days just melted together… it had to be at least a few months. He realised that was a problem, and even though the ferry was operational again, Sans found that he was hesitant to allow Grillby to go on his own again.

“Ah…” Grillby seemed to hesitate with the implications. Despite wanting to stay entirely unaffected by the observation, his flames shrunk with the unspoken worry. “*I’ll… need to put in an order for delivery. I have been… delaying it.*”

Sans returned his gaze to the fire monster questioningly. Grillby seemed uneasy.

“…*Am not looking forward to another journey,*” he added, his voice more quiet than usual. “*Despite the events that… may have led to our coming together, I am hesitant to… I will just… order for delivery, I suppose.***”

Far be it from Grillby to be hesitant when it came to his business, Sans knew. The skeleton surveyed the bartender thoughtfully, then relaxed.

“aw, man. y’know i’ll help out if i can,” he offered. With that, Grillby’s mouth broke out in a heartwarming smile.

“…*Do not believe that isn’t the case. However, I’m remiss to leave Snowdin. So much has to be done. It is… not a good idea to leave, I think.***”

Sans felt his soul shiver with that. The cold feeling settled into his bones, despite being so near to the fire monster.
“gotcha.”

Grillby’s smile became persistent and he added with a chuckle, “Do not misconstrue my meaning, Sans. Your offer to help means more to me than anything anyone else could ever promise. While it may be some time until the delivery is sorted, the bar will run just fine in the meantime. So… do not fret. I will still be able to construct the most vile burger ever imagined, just for you.” Then he gave a wink, which made Sans laugh.

“right. that’s ok… i think i enjoy your personal flavour,’’ the skeleton managed with a wink of his own, but he was thinking of something else entirely.

Mainly of how exactly a delivery to Snowdin from New Home would cost, and if it was worth it. He would have to look into it. If Grillby was hesitant on it, it surely meant that it was expensive. Delivery across the Underground had to pack a punch, and while most monsters were tight with their hard-earned cash, he didn’t necessarily think Grillby was the sort. He had been given quite a few things on the house, and been granted a tab. The bartender didn’t do that with just anyone.

Rolling his shoulder, Sans stayed behind when Grillby eventually moved to go back upstairs to the kitchen. When he was called up, he merely called back that he would be a few more minutes to check on the pipes. Grillby didn’t argue, thankfully.

Sans did check the main valves and the other steel pipes, drawing upon the heat that the fire monster left on him to warm the ice within them. As he worked, he formulated a plan, however carefully in his head, to try and ease the bartender’s worries.

He had the supplies, after all. As long as he went over the formulae in his notebook and worked out the changed schematics and theories, Sans wouldn’t have a rebound.

He couldn’t very well let himself travel by ferry again. Shortcutting with massive amounts of physical matter would be too draining, and the Underground still had that vile little flower hiding in its depths. He had to think on it hard and long. Maybe he would set it up as a gift…

Sans hesitated. Was this too much of a logical leap for him? He didn’t want Grillby to get hurt anymore than he had. Nor did he want him to fret over him. The rebound was still fresh on his mind, and yet Grillby had accepted him. He wondered if he would be able to do it again, or if he would clam up.

The skeleton sighed as he pushed the remainder of the heat in his hand, listening to the trickle of water in the pipes running freely now.

It was a difficult decision. Papyrus definitely wouldn’t like it.

Chapter End Notes

Hellllooo!!! Long time no see! I'm sorry this was terribly delayed but life got in the way X'DDD I had trade shows at the end of November and mid-December, and then I've been working on Secret Santa fics. But I promised myself I wanted to post at least one chapter for Christmas - even if you don't celebrate, here is a rando present anyway!!!
For anyone wondering - tumblr's policy changes means that skerbb@tumblr is hidden because it's technically nsfw. I'm mostly on Twitter nowadays and once Pillowfort.io changes domains (to comply with nsfw ToS for their hosting), I will be posting there too!

Thank you to everyone who has dropped a comment or binged this in a few days. That really is awesome and I love hearing about it. ;w;!!! As you can see, Sans hints that he doesn't normally feel impulses when it comes to sex... I'll let you depict that as you will (I don't want any debates in the comment section as I am a nervous skerb)

Anyway thank you for reading!! Hopefully after the New Year I will get some semblance of normalcy when it comes to posting again. XD
Sans dithers over his plans to create another dimensional box. Grillby starts his investigation.

It seemed that everyone had really pulled through to make the bartender’s restaurant glow with how clean it was. The bar rags and towels were laundered by Ingrid, while her sister Bonnie had directed areas to concentrate cleaning. Most of the people who had volunteered stayed throughout the entire evening to help, but the teenagers trickled away after the first few hours.

Sans had kept mostly to himself, thinking on how exactly to rationalise his plans with igniting yet another dimensional box. He had thought about it long and hard. On the one hand, Papyrus would be extremely upset with him over risking his health over another box, which technically wasn’t needed - although arguably, Bonnie and her family hogged the damned thing all of the time, so it might as well be theirs. On the other hand, it would definitely be a personalised one; one that would be exclusive to Grillby’s.

He rather liked that idea. He could sync it up to the warehouse district in New Home with a few tweaks, perhaps even harmonise it with the bartender’s personal magical signature so that the box couldn’t be used for anyone else? He could make it like that, with a few alterations to the algorithm, and it sounded simple enough.

He had the gridline to work with, after all.

The more he debated it, the more Sans veered towards actually planning on carrying out with his idea. The box would be Grillby’s. Maybe he could construct it in a way that matched the decor. Maybe he would etch something into the sides, or… maybe on the bottom of the lid, to remind the fire monster of how much he meant to him?

His soul thudded in excitement at that. Was it too forward? That was probably too much, he decided, unable to keep himself from being flustered on the spot. He realised that others had started to snicker before he noticed that he’d been wiping down the same booth for about twenty minutes, lost in thoughts. Embarrassed, he lugged the pail of sudsy, brackish water away with him to another booth to clean it.

Sans had stayed at Grillby’s until late with everyone else. While he was excited in a way to start his secret project, there was still a lot of hangups concerning Papyrus’ chagrin about him starting up another item box.

He supposed he could… always work on it in secret.

No.
That was wrong.

That is exactly the worst thing he could possibly think at that time. He and Papyrus had finally gotten better at communicating again. Why would he think that keeping something like that from his brother would be anything but helpful?

He slumped at the booth, having taken a seat for a respite after cleaning at least eighteen separate places. He checked his phone earlier and Papyrus had sent him a text stating that he’d be busy with something else. It was just after midnight, and all of the volunteers had left earlier, except for Bonnie.

She slowly crossed the room while Sans dozed on the spot, then rested her hand on his back, jerking him out of the lull. “Y’gonna be alright, hun? How’s about you go home an’ rest, eh? Y’look plum tired!” she observed kindly.

“m’always tired,” Sans automatically mumbled into his arms. “i’ll go home inna bit. thanks for stayin’.”

“You too, dear,” she replied with a covered yawn and gently patted his back before turning towards the door. “It’s warmed up quite a bit in here. No doubtin’ your honey is feelin’ much better. Take care a’him,” she added on her way out, her voice singsongy.

Sans laughed against the crook of his arm in embarrassment, but nodded to himself anyway. It had warmed up considerably, cementing the idea in his head that he had to make sure Grillby’s never went cold in the future ever again. It seemed extreme in some way, but Sans shrugged off the mental insecurity as best as he could.

Meanwhile, Grillby had taken to inspecting the glassware and folding towels, pressing heat into the cloths to ensure there were no wrinkles. He had been watching Sans mill around the restaurant’s booths, and even if the job wasn’t perfect, Grillby noted how unusually quiet Sans was. Normally there would be a quip or a few jokes, but the other instead was pensive and kept out of the passing conversations.

He wondered what he was thinking about?

Regardless, it was far too late to make the call to New Home, but he did enquire as to any disruptions or little peculiar events that might have transpired around the time Sans had his rebound. Unfortunately, none of the bunnies were aware of anything, and while Fisher and Red had lingered around to gossip and speculate, not one person let on that they were aware that anything wrong had transpired around that time period.

It was a little frustrating, but if it had been easy, Grillby would be a lot more worried. But in that sense, he was also concerned that whatever monster that had tried to harm Sans was keeping things low and quiet. He would have to be careful though, so he didn’t press the matter while the skeleton was so nearby. He’d have to reach out and listen carefully to the rumour mill and glean what information that he could from conversations held in his bar.

After Bonnie had left, Grillby kept to his counter to arrange things to his liking, until he heard the soft sound of snoring further into the bar. Of a little skeleton curled up into his arms, leaned over the table with his phone held loosely in one hand. As the fire monster approached, he saw that Sans’ phone was ringing, although it was on vibrate.
Carefully, he tapped the screen to accept the call and Papyrus’ voice boomed out loud and clear; “OH MY GOD. SANS!! THIS IS THE FOURTH TIME I’VE CALLED. WHERE ARE YOU??”

Sans didn’t wake, only snorted in his sleep. Grillby smirked to himself; the poor fellow must have been utterly exhausted.

As Sans’ brother voiced his “HELLO?? HELLO!! SANS!!!” through the receiver, the fire monster carefully extracted the cell phone from Sans’ limp hold.

“…Hello, Papyrus,” he greeted kindly as he raised the phone to the side of his face. It had been too long since he’d last been on the phone with the taller skeleton, as clearly he hadn’t learned not to do that.

When Papyrus spoke next, Grillby grimaced and held the phone out at arm’s length. “HELLO, MISTER GRILLBY!!! SO NICE TO HEAR FROM YOU! BUT THIS IS MY BROTHER’S CELL PHONE. DO YOU KNOW WHERE HE IS??”

Grillby muffled a chuckle and returned the phone back to speak into it; “He is… sleeping.”

“OH.” There was a pause, and then, “YOU SOUND UTTERLY EXHAUSTED. YOU SHOULD SLEEP TOGETHER!”

Grillby’s body flared up at that, golden flecks of embers falling onto the table in embarrassment at the implication. Of course, Papyrus had a way of saying things that wasn’t as he’d intended, but… His core temperature spiked at the very idea and his fire was quick to obscure his expression when Sans roused at the sudden flare of light.

Sans looked up at him through his bleary vision but recognised the perplexed way Grillby’s flames whipped about. He saw the phone in the other’s hand and it slowly registered just who might be calling so late at night. He gestured to take the call, groggily mumbling into the phone.

“’lo.”

“HELLO, SANS!! I WAS JUST ASKING GRILLBY IF YOU WERE SPENDING THE NIGHT, BUT HE DIDN’T ANSWER ME. I WONDER IF HE’S GETTING READY TO TAKE YOU HOME??”

Sans rubbed at his eye socket and inhaled deeply, ready to fall asleep again. “i dunno, he seems worked up ’bout somethin’. what’d you say?”

“I DON’T THINK THAT I SAID ANYTHING I SHOULDN’T HAVE?? I WAS MERELY ENQUIRING AS TO IF YOU WERE STAYING THERE.”

“paps, he’s blushing like fireworks over here. c’mon, out with it.”

Papyrus hesitated, “I SAID THAT HE SOUNDED EXHAUSTED AND THAT YOU AND HE SHOULD SLEEP!!”

“oh.”

“TOGETHER!!”

Sans didn’t know what the sound he made was, but it could only be described as something between
a snort and a choking noise. Magic flooded his face as he looked up to see the fire monster’s visage
burning several shades hotter, just barely obscured by one hand when he turned away.

Oh god.

Sans took a few spare seconds to calm down and very casually drummed his fingertips on the
tabletop. “papyrus. m’comin’ home, don’t worry,” he muttered into the phone, unable to keep the
sour tone out of his voice. “m’actually on my way.”

He buried the phone against his hoodie and leaned over to grab at Grillby’s jacket and pull him over.
“hey, g’night.”

Grillby was still beaming brightly, but he nodded without a word, a silly smile on his face.

With that, Sans drew his magic inwards and disappeared on the spot.

Over the following days, Sans brought his work with him to Grillby’s. The first afternoon had been
so busy that the fire monster barely had time to chat - which was perfectly fine, considering how
absorbed in his work Sans had been. He wrote out his formulae in longform, scrutinising every letter
and equation to a T.

The only thing he had to worry was getting enough stamina to pour into the vessel, and to make sure
his equations were perfect. He didn’t want another mishap. He could shrug off being tired like any
other day. But he couldn’t afford an interruption.

Sans debated it. Telling Papyrus meant that his brother would be upset - but it would also mean that
he’d be safe, since Papyrus was generally there to help him when he was low on energy. He also
wondered - since he was fully capable of using magic now, could he divert his stamina cost to that,
instead?

He scratched at his skull and flipped the notebook over to start from the other end so he could figure
out another way of doing it without the health risk.

Aggravated by the way he continually jumped back and forth between decisions, Sans released an
audible groan and slumped down over the booth’s table, letting his skull hit the open notebook with a
thunk. Why could this ever be easy, he thought in frustration. He wanted it to be over with, with no
repercussions, no adverse effect to his health… and not have Grillby nor his brother worry over him.

His aggravation must’ve caught the other monster’s attention, as the bar went quiet for a moment
before he turned his head to see what was going on. Everything was fine - they were all just staring.
Embarrassed, Sans flushed and shielded his face with his arm and took up his pen again, ready to
write out the next formula in hopes he could work out the kinks.

Later on in the day, Grillby was finally able to approach him. It seemed that the skeleton had opted
for one of his impromptu naps and was conked out over his work. The fire monster wondered if
perhaps there was a reason to Sans’ silent treatment, and had internally debated if he had overstepped
any bounds.

The tease in the kitchen, alongside the quiet, tender moment shared in the cellar… Grillby just wasn’t
sure. There were no leads to his private investigation, and while he was sure there was something
more to the skeleton’s mood, the bartender just didn’t know how to broach the subject without
appearing suspicious. He had to keep things hidden - if Sans found out he was searching out his would-be killer’s whereabouts, no doubt he’d be more than a little perturbed…

In order to justify his visit, and to ensure the skeleton ate something while he was there, Grillby brought out a grilled cheese sandwich (courtesy of Sans’ prior joke) and set it on the table next to Sans’ skull. It took a couple of moments for the skeleton to stir, gradually moving just enough to peek to the source of light crackling beside him.

“Good morning,” Grillby greeted him casually with a gentle wave, then considered what he was about to say next. “…Appear to be distracted, lately.”

Sans drew himself up, but kept his arms covering his open notebook in an effort to hide his work. His gaze was unfocused, though he was staring at the offered food hungrily.

With the extended silence, Grillby pressed on, gently; “…Very much appreciate your aid in thawing the pipes.” He paused, not knowing how to get Sans to chat when it appeared he was so worn out. “Have you been sleeping well?”

Sans gave a noncommittal shrug and grabbed a half of the sandwich, taking a large bite of it. “kinda.”

“Kind of,” the bartender echoed, leaning down. “Better than lately?”

Sans surveyed him, but didn’t reply.

Grillby felt a little awkward with the look but decided to press on. “And yet here I thought that I was the one who generally gives the silent treatment.” He had tried to joke, but the words felt flat and he, for once, regretted not thinking over the repercussions of his chosen words. When Sans grimaced, Grillby’s soul came dangerously close to plummeting in mild terror.

“Sorry, bud. I guess I just got a lot on my mind lately,” the skeleton offered quietly, drawing himself over his notebook more as though to hide it. Grillby watched, keeping his expression neutral enough – but he had caught the way Sans’ gaze flitted down and then to him, as though nervous.

Something was wrong. And Sans was keeping secrets.

Should he bother him? Grillby couldn’t say. With how close they had gotten, it still felt as though it was a boundary, to constantly attempt to chip at the skeleton’s resolve to steel himself to any questions that he’d be posed. But that was Sans, and he’d always been that way. So why did it feel like an overstep now, when things were more or less the same as before? And why did he remember all those weeks before, when Grillby was sure that he’d done the wrong thing, and Sans was avoiding him?

His soul did seem to drop with the thought, although he wasn’t sure why.

As though his own silence beckoned his boyfriend’s attention far more than usual, Sans squirmed on the spot. “Sorry. Didn’t mean to give you the cold shoulder.”

Grillby offered him an amused smirk, but didn’t reply. Instead, he slowly reached out to touch Sans’ skull, hesitating just a moment before his gloved hand met with the smooth bone. He must’ve been reading into it too much, as Sans exhaled a soft pleased sigh, rewarding the touch with a smile.

“Didn’t feel it,” Grillby assured him with a wink, his heart and soul giving a little skip when the skeleton leaned against his touch in appreciation.
He stayed like that for a moment, idly caressing Sans’ face before the skeleton gave in to a happy little laugh, then patted Grillby’s hand. He took that as a signal to part, but when Grillby attempted to pull his hand away, Sans kept it in place with his own.

“you on break yet?”

Grillby couldn’t help but smile at that and gently thumbed the skeleton’s cheekbone. “…Could do that. I won’t be interrupting your… studies?” he enquired quietly.

Sans looked to his notebook and gave in to a sigh. “i think i hit a wall, to be honest,” he admitted a little sourly.

“What has been keeping your attention from me?” Grillby teased, the crack of his smile evident when Sans looked at him sharply, a blush tinting his face a brilliant blue. The fire monster glanced away briefly, as though reconsidering his wording. “…I do hope that my teasing is not… making you uncomfortable.”

Sans gave Grillby’s hand a pat and slid down with an embarrassed chuckle. “it just keeps catchin’ me off guard.” When Grillby pulled his hand away, the skeleton shrugged. “makes me think about stuff, at any rate.”

The fire monster tilted his head, flames licking up his face in askance. Sans caught the look and flushed again, his eye lights falling downcast.

“just… stuff. nothin’ important.”

Although Grillby could recall Sans’ admittance that he didn’t normally entertain more tender thoughts unless he was around him, the bartender couldn’t help the grin that cracked his face.

“Well then… I shall leave you to your entertaining internal reflection.”

Sans grimaced as though pained. “don’t say it like that…”

The fire monster only chuckled and gave Sans’ skull another brief pass before he moved away with a knowing hum.

The more he thought about it, the more Sans began to hesitate.

It had been hours since he’d come back from Grillby’s, since their awkward conversation. There was something wrong, that Grillby definitely knew something was bothering him, and with that, crumbled any amount of resolve that Sans had tentatively built up.

What would Grillby do if he found out what he was planning? How would he feel? Would he reject him? The idea altogether?

The very notion that the fire monster would refuse his proposition made his soul clench and twist as though he was being consumed. Sans ended up throwing his notebook into his desk after staring it down, frustrated with himself.

If not a dimensional box as he’d initially planned, what could he do? How could he help?

Taking Grillby across the Underground again wasn’t an option. The dangers the ferry posed made it too risky. But he couldn’t very well keep Grillby locked up out of fear for him, right? He was an
adult and could take care of himself. The expensive option was that his freight couriered clear across the Underground made a daunting bill upon delivery. And with Grillby’s being closed for close to a week, he doubted Grillby had the funds to manage, despite how well-off he appeared…

But that left the skeleton with the apprehension that somewhere, someone had their eyes on him. And that someone had made an attempt on his life.

Sans stood alone in his room, his eye lights searching around the scuffed, worn-down carpet as though it held answers for him.

It didn’t, but that isn’t what frustrated Sans. What frustrated him was that he was trying to find a proper solution that made everyone happy. His own self-preservation being as it was, he conceded that he couldn’t… no, wouldn’t ignite another box. Despite said box being the only logical way for Grillby’s life to be much easier… Sans couldn’t hold the weight of the decision.

Or could he?

Groaning in aggravation, the skeleton pulled open the desk drawer once more, his expression set in a frown.

No.

He couldn’t.

He didn’t want to.

But what other choice did he have?

It seemed as though he had agonised the decision for days instead of hours. And all because Grillby noted something ‘off’ about him. Sans knew he couldn’t keep secrets from the fire monster - the guy was far too versed in picking up body language to rely solely on what was said. It was the unspoken, needling feeling Sans got whenever he knew Grillby was waiting for him to open up.

It was difficult, but Sans forced himself to close the drawer again, this time with the notebook in hand.

Maybe…. He would go to Hotland. Clear his head. Get a second pair of eyes to look things over.

If worse came to worst, at least Alphys could help him.

Chapter End Notes

Way back, a loooong time ago, a commentor said that Papyrus should have told Sans that he looked tired... and so did Grillby, and that they should 'sleep together'. I thought the idea was cute so here it is, hehe. They really should ome.

I'm still alive! Starting to roll things in Postcards again after a brief, unplanned break. UwU Sorry for the wait! It's such a weird thing to post so late after having a weekly schedule for so long. Enjoy! :D

Art made for me since the last update ;w;

kay drew the magic-cycling scene from chapter 63 which you can view here!
sfwrecyclingpile made ch 3(-4) art which you can [view here](#)
popato-chisps did an amazing animation for a secret santa we were in which you can [view here](#)
thesfloatingstone/C-Puff has done AMAZING work on the ch 21 art which you can [view here](#)
What About Gold?

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

For whatever reason, Grillby just wasn’t good at the whole ‘inquisition’ method when it came to obtaining information. Relying heavily on things that were just said in passing at the restaurant, it was difficult to keep a figurative ear open for leads while also being attentive during working hours.

Sans had told him that he was going away during a brief text message exchange late in the evening, on the day that he and the skeleton had their last encounter. At the time it hadn’t felt awkward, but now looking back Grillby wasn’t quite sure.

It had not been apparent what Sans was up to during his studies, but Grillby conceded that the skeleton’s sombre mood held more secrets than he would let on. He tried not to feel as though it was the same weighty silence that stretched between them before the other’s rebound, but the worry intruded upon his thoughts like wildfire.

He tried to dismiss the train of thought, but every time Grillby looked back to his last interaction with Sans, all he could do was wonder. Why had Sans hid the notebook? Why was he distracted? Had he been around when Sans shifted into a reclusive state, closed his mind off, and..?

Grillby couldn’t help but ponder over the specifics, but it wasn’t long before the main line of the bar’s old rotary phone jangled in the din of the dinner rush. He’d been expecting a call back from his contact in the warehousing district of New Home, to schedule an order for delivery. The fire monster had to use every thread of his reserves not to balk at the estimate, but the Diamond Head monster assured him of payment plans that seemed reasonable.

Seemed, but Grillby knew otherwise. Still, it wasn’t as though a full cart across the Underground was the most reasonable of requests. And thus, the cost. He restrained the urge to sigh as he answered the call, a little more crisply than normally.

“oh. heya. bad time?”

Grillby uprighted himself as his eyes flitted across the restaurant floor, as though those in the bar could hear the phone call as well. A kindled flood of warmth passed through his flames at Sans’ candid tone, tinny and far-off but as jovial as ever. Interesting, when he had been distant before.

“Not at all,” Grillby finally murmured, a vague smile touching the corners of his mouth, and his tone was pleasant with the way that it hummed and crackled. Speaking with Sans always did that.

“How is Hotland?”

“hot. quick q, but what’s your favourite colour?” Sans demanded.

Grillby tried not to belabour it too long, but he had the feeling that once Sans got his answer, he’d hang up. “What is this?”

“What’s what?”

The fire monster gestured a bit vaguely to no one in particular, toying with the coiled cord in one hand as he turned in place. He hesitated when he caught a look from Red and turned his back to him, unable to hide the muted flush that passed through his flames when he had caught the knowing brow waggle.
“Why the… secrecy?” Grillby managed to mumble. Unlike him, but he felt suddenly self-conscious. It seemed to catch the skeleton off-guard, as Sans suddenly grunted, then chuckled. “oh. what, i can’t plan somethin’ special?”

The fire monster’s flames reddened akin to being chagrined. He kept perfectly still, save for the movement of his ambient firelight. Should he call Sans out on his lie, or was he actually planning something..? It didn’t feel the same as before. Sans was hiding something, and it had nothing to do with his proposed date. Yet at the same time, he was hiding his investigation from Sans…

“Really,” Grillby breathed, trying to sound like his usual interested self.

Another pause came from the other end. “yeah. i mean…” Grillby heard a jittered voice from the background of the call and realised Sans likely had company. They were giving their input. Sans suddenly became agitated, “what? no way, jus.. just go over there. lemme handle this. - uh, grillby..?”

The fire monster’s soul fluttered when he heard his name, although the reason why, he couldn’t say. He opened his mouth to reply but stopped, not really knowing how to react.

“uh… big g?” Sans tried again.

Grillby swallowed his nerves. “I’m here.”

Sans laughed as though to himself, “m’glad. so…”

Silence passed between them so clearly that Grillby was sure he could hear the hum of a microwave in the background, and when it shut off too.

“So..?”

“your fave colour, grillby.”

There it was again…

It was harder to restrain this time. Grillby felt as though he was surged with gasoline, or like a lightning bolt went through him. But a good one. He tried speaking again, yet was effectively muzzled by the other’s innocently uttered words.

“grillby?”

No, Grillby thought, his face burning brighter. He knew saying it was doing this to him.

“Yes,” it sounded a lot drier than he’d meant it to and the bartender’s aura flared up hotter. “I’m still here.”

“the colour?” There was definitely a teasing lilt, as though Sans was amused by the delay.

“B-” Grillby beamed in embarrassment, finally hissing out; “Blues, violets, reds…”

The skeleton was chuckling again and Grillby had to shove down the embarrassment he felt at Red’s snickering from across the counter. It was to the point that small embers were popping off from him, and his flames were whispering for him to say something spicy in retaliation.

“pretty ones, eh. ok, grillby, i’ll make sure i got that. blues an’ hues. nice an’ light, right?” Sans hummed in consideration until Grillby made a noise in the affirmative. “ok. gotcha. thanks, grillby.
lov…” Sans stopped, his breath turning into a bit of a shudder while Grillby’s heart and soul thrummed with excitement. “…well. you know.”

The fire monster idly twisted the cord in his hand, worries swallowed up by the genuine way Sans teased him and even came so close as to say it… once more. He would’ve loved to tease Sans in turn, but ended up only giving in to a quiet chuckle.

“i can’t say it ’cause i got the world’s hugest multishipper breathin’ down my neck and she’s gonna fog up the phone line if it’s even mentioned. so, uh…”

“You know,” Grillby considered suddenly, “can’t very well fathom why you’d refrain from saying so, when you’re just aching for it.”

He could hear a strangled noise come from Sans, and Grillby just knew that he was missing out on some rather dear reactions.

Did he also have any hang-ups on saying it? Or would the fire monster rather Sans be in front of him so that he could witness the favourite shade of blue? The one that Grillby always felt a longing for ever since he’d first seen it?

Parting his mouth so that he could get a rolling start on it, his fire mingled in the tone to hide it from any eavesdroppers. Fire guiding the path through the air, he whispered in a way that he knew Sans would figure out. It didn’t hold words, but his fire held deeper meaning, subtleties and feeling beyond sound. It was there, as he heard another startled noise come from the skeleton, barely restrained but fully shocked. Grillby could only imagine how full-blown the other had flushed once his fire’s intent was made known to him.

It was made even more evident when Sans’ company was suddenly heard with a veiled attempt at muting their shriek, but it was covered by Sans’ endearing half-attempts at words.

“y.. you’re a… i mean, cheatin’, ’c-cause…”

Grillby composed himself enough to give in to a mock disapproving tone, “Sans, honestly. Whatever am I going to do with you?”

He was sure the resulting whimper was supposed to be a retort or even something coherent, but it was neither and this pleased Grillby more than it probably should have.

“One point or two?”

Sans seemed to break out of his momentary shock, “none, y’cheater.”

Grillby clicked his tongue again. “Pity.”

“o-ok. blues, r-reds. that’s all i, uh… i needed… th-thanks-”

“Hold on,” the fire monster interrupted, “what’s the cause for all this secrecy?”

“it’s a secret.”

Grillby prevented himself from outright sighing in exasperation but collected himself nonetheless. “A good secret, or a… not good secret?”

“grillby, c’mon. i said it was a surprise?”

“It’s just…” Grillby floundered in an effort not to get too worked up about it. But a day
overthinking things while also becoming frustrated that his investigation was turning up with no leads, made him stressed and feeling as though there was something intentionally being kept from him. “…Nerve-wracking.”

“does fire even got nerves?”

Grillby pinched the bridge between his eyes, unable to repress the soft sigh.

“sorry. promise, i’m ok and i’m doin’ just fine, if you’re that worried.”

“It’s… just that, the last time things were… quiet……” Grillby stopped, guilt twisting around in his chest so much that it was sure to be visibly evident that he was uncomfortable.

After a moment, Sans let out a nearly endless “ohhhhhh” in response. As though he got it, which Grillby wasn’t sure how. “you’re worried i’m gonna dust myself doin’ somethin’ stupid.”

“What-”

“ok, well, for starters, m’not,” Sans all but drawled, but Grillby detected the bite of irritation in his tone. “and kinda annoyed ‘bout that, but… heh.”

“Trust me when I say that hadn’t passed my mind!”

“oh. well, ok then.” Sans paused as though considering it. “i dunno what to tell you, then.”

Grillby’s eyes flickered and glanced around the bar once more, noting that several patrons had been trying to flag him down. He gestured a little distractedly that he’d be there in one moment, then carefully cleared his throat.

“Perhaps… been overthinking it. And unused to such… lengthy periods of silence as of late?”

“it’s nothin’ sinister, grillbz.” Grillby could practically hear the nonchalant shrug from the other side of the call. “i just wanna keep it a surprise.”

“So it’s… nothing out of the ordinary.”

“nope.”

Grillby wrapped the cord around his finger, then uncoiled it, unable to keep the worry from swelling inside of him. “Suppose I will just… have to wait,” he muttered carefully.

“aw. careful, man. i already got one bag of bones worryin’ for me. i’m trustin’ you to be a little more down to earth.”

“Do not have a single bone in me,” Grillby chided him with a gentle chuckle. “Bagged or otherwise.”

“well. not yet, anyway-” Then Sans made a strangled sound as Grillby felt his temperature rise, unable to stop the sudden gust of laughter that escaped him. “god damn it, i’m hangin’ up!” And then he did.

The interaction left him feeling a little better, as Sans seemed less distracted and more like his usual self. It was easier to focus on the restaurant after the call, when all he could think about was Sans and the flirty little slip-up - and what it entailed. It gave him a more pronounced flush throughout the rest of the evening, to say the least. Grillby was glad the malaise that he’d felt had been apparently his own worries getting to the best of him.
Regardless of how long the day felt without Sans there, the evening was more pleasant and had slowed to its usual pace. It was so quiet that Grillby was able to concentrate on the meticulous cleaning he'd subjected the bar to ever since Bonnie and everyone else had helped out. It was the only problem with having such attention to detail, but it kept his hands busy when they wanted to text the skeleton at the opposite end of the Underground instead.

He wondered what kind of surprise Sans had in store for him. He seemed jovial enough and even carefree. Grillby had already decided that he had no grounds for worry and that he wasn’t just becoming paranoid. It happened every so often, and with the peculiar things that happened lately, it was just adding to the thundering heap of stress in his head.

So Grillby continued, rag in hand, polishing and wiping down the countertop in an aim to distract himself. He really had no idea what Sans was planning. Something to do with his favoured hues… and that it was a secret.

He didn’t know how to take that. Perhaps Sans was taking initiative when it came to their fourth date? If he was planning a gift, Grillby had to think that he didn’t expect Sans to be the sort. To him, showing affection in the form of gifts seemed too over the top or unnecessary, but Grillby had followed the custom to show his appreciation for the skeleton who had escorted him across the Underground and back.

Yet, he had to wonder at which point would he stop numbering their dates and from there, when would they stop planning them altogether? Would they just go someplace, stay in, all in the spur of the moment? Perhaps tucked in bed where it was warm, where Sans would huddle close to him as though he couldn’t get enough of him… Grillby smiled to himself. He did rather like that feeling.

So when the gust of air came in from the door, the fire monster was pulled from his thoughts and out of habit, he glanced at the clock. It was almost 11:00pm, perhaps a few minutes to spare before closing.

It hadn’t happened for the longest time, but an old visitor came to the bar. They were soft spoken and they used words in a way that addled the mind. Of course, they would wait until everyone was safely at home to come for a drink, and with Grillby’s only recently reopened, the fire monster had forgotten their visits entirely until he saw the dark cloak and the smooth shifting movement from the door.

He’d never had the chance to figure out the river person's name or assumed pronouns, but the way they moved in ethereal fluidity made his flames stutter out in protest every time. He gestured accommodatingly to one of the seats at the counter, readying himself for any myriad of riddles the river person would speak to him in lieu of actual conversation.

Out of habit, Grillby fetched a highball glass and stepped to the side to allow the stranger a view of the wall of alcohol. He watched as the river person moved in a way that confused the mind, slipping over the closest stool and hunching over the counter as though they were resting arms they didn’t have upon it.

Silence stretched on and Grillby knew that he was likely going to be the one doing all the talking. He was a little perturbed at the way his visitor had behaved on the way back from his and Sans’ first date. And if he were more proactive in offending others, Grillby would have liked to call them out on it.

But yet he didn’t, and the countertop got shinier the longer the river person stayed quiet and Grillby
defaulted to wiping it down as he waited.

“Anything I can get for you, friend…?” the fire monster enquired, more brusquely than he’d intended. He stared into the hood where the monster’s face would’ve been. Should have been. Any other monster’s would be revealed by his ambient glow, but the mass of pitch behind the hood’s shadow was as though it swallowed in the light and cut it away, hiding it from view.

‘A milk, a rat, a cage and a bat.’

Grillby felt the tension in his shoulders but he moved fluidly, reaching up to grab an oblong amber bottle from the top shelf. Of course it would be their usual, but he never wanted to assume with them.

“Been awhile since you have graced my establishment,” the fire monster attempted small talk. “You must forgive me. I… had not been feeling well. Things are going well for you?”

They inclined their head - that is, the shadows that filled the hood did so. Grillby somehow resisted the overpowering urge to shudder.

Why was small talk so difficult with others? Grillby lamented his shy nature, while seemingly bold around Sans and those he knew, strangers made him feel ill at ease. It was amongst one of the many reasons why he moved from the busy city life in Hotland to the small sleepy town of Snowdin, where everyone knew everyone else. The river person was amongst those who made him perpetually uneasy, despite them coming around at odd nights. Usually twice a week. Grillby still couldn’t shake the malaise.

So as he mixed the other’s drink, the bartender went over it in his mind. The river person had made no warning as to the dangers that posed on that day. Or rather, they were vague, infuriatingly so, but… was that not always the case? The bartender resisted the urge to give in to a shrug, as though to himself, stirring the candy-red liquor and a muddled mixture of nuts and fragrant herbs, alongside a shot of milk. The Rat’s Nest was a drink he kept on the menu only for this patron. No one else ordered it.

“Interesting things happening lately,” he attempted again, despite how awkward he suddenly felt with the clichéd way to break the ice. “How have the floods and earthquakes treated you lately?”

The hooded figure stayed sitting, unmoving, yet staring at him. Grillby allowed the silence to pass for a few more moments, mentally congratulating himself for keeping his flames under control.

“Suppose it has always been dangerous work. Civilians such as we need to keep our sights in all directions, lest we find our defenses… compromised.” He surveyed his guest once more and since there weren’t any tells as to if he had overstepped any social line, Grillby continued. “Know it is only hearsay and rumours… however, there had been word earlier of someone attacking monsters. Seemingly random, others hint otherwise,” he lied, not feeling particularly fond of it. “Figure, on your dailies, would one happen across any information as to the truth upon such… unfathomable worries?”

The stranger leaned forward again and their robe moved, as though to suggest that they actually did have limbs - the naked eye just wasn’t able to perceive them. They still appeared fixed on their drink and although Grillby couldn’t see it, there was a chill when the river person sucked in an audible breath.

‘An untended garden becomes overgrown.’

Then, with whatever invisible appendage that they may or may not own, they brought their drink up
to the opening of their hood. The contents of the glass slowly drained away into the pitch blackness.

Grillby hummed and shifted his weight, considering the riddle. It was always a riddle. Monsters from all walks of life appreciated a good puzzle, but Grillby’s patience was wearing thin after so long of quizzing people if they had seen or heard anything suspicious. So he had resorted to being bold with his questioning, and the river person was his first victim, in that regard.

Little did he know that it would be so effective. And that the river person would be willing to speak, however awkward as it was. Now to decipher the meaning of it. Gardens were generally used when communities were involved, but beyond the riddle, Grillby couldn’t fathom anyone who would have intent to harm Sans in their town - nor even in the whole of the Underground. Another meaning could be more literal; that it was literally a garden, or a plot of land, or foliage-

Grillby started with that as a memory clicked into place. Of course, he’d been so concerned over the water that he’d nearly forgotten it at the time.

Vines.

Was the river person actually being forward? Was it a literal hint? Grillby had remembered the way his flames had echoed delight in wanting to bloom up into the cavern, to latch on and consume the source of vegetation with reckless abandon.

Perhaps he was stretching things in his head, but Grillby felt unsettled.

“Ferry,” he addressed them, no longer knowing what to call them after so long. The river person inclined their head to show that they were listening and the glass lowered just under the bottom of their hood, its contents down to half-full. “…Do not suppose you would be able to entertain me a few more riddles? More… of an agricultural nature?”

Flames sputtered from his neck with another rattled breath, almost as though the river person’s voice was clamouring up the walls in the caverns they stayed in. Grillby realised that he was staring, and that they were likely staring back. Awkwardly, the fire monster adjusted his glasses and made to busy his hands, collecting the mortar and pestle he’d used to muddle the herbs together.

That’s when he paused - or rather, he was made to pause. His right hand had been covered by something unseen, draped in an invisible cloth, lightweight in touch yet firm. The cloak of the other monster’s side was hitched up a little as though the arm was outreached, and the river person was leaning forward in earnest.

‘Forward… back. Forward, forward. Back,’ they murmured, voice a soft lilting song while the unseen hand was pulled away. They reclined a little past the stool’s centre of gravity, onto an invisible back of a chair that wasn’t there and for a moment, Grillby thought he saw a grin that envied Sans’. It wasn’t there when he blinked. ‘Tre le le~ It’s Friday today. It was Thursday before. It will be Wednesday again.’

Grillby really detested working out ciphered language.

The conversation was slow-going. Grillby plucked at the remnants of herbs in the mortar bowl, long-discarding his gloves in favour of engulfing the small twigs and seeds to vent his frustrations.

Taking what the other had meant about ‘Wednesday’, he’d worked it out. The river person had noted Sans’ disappearance during those days, Grillby figured. Tuesday was when Sans had kept away after their misunderstanding. Thanks to Papyrus’ quizzing the royal scientist, they were able to find out
that Sans had ignited the box on Wednesday, early in the morning. It wasn’t until Thursday that Papyrus had found him.

Grillby felt ill, but at least he knew that the other monster was on the same subject as him.

“*Yes… that is my enquiry,*” he murmured, hesitating as he perched himself on the stool behind the counter across from them. Grillby couldn’t swallow the knot that formed in his throat. It refused to burn away, to dispel, to give him any relief. He knew he was putting all his eggs in one basket. He was being impatient with someone who not only was his patron, but also spoke in an entirely different language.

Still, the lumpy tightness did not wane and Grillby felt frozen on the spot, unable to move as he hesitated and delayed his last question.

“So… *someone had actually made an attempt on Sans’ life?*” Grillby felt shame and anger surge inside of him when his voice cracked and snapped, betraying his emotions. “*Who would do such a thing?!*”

The river person was studying him again and the fire monster was trying not to erupt on the spot. His fire curled along his frame, busting from the open ends of his clothing and scorching the bowl and its contents. It shifted in hues, writhing on the edge of white and gold, light blues and an unnatural brightness that Grillby found that he couldn’t smother.

He was ripping apart at the very idea of someone hurting Sans. It welled up inside of him, trying to thrash out despite every wisp of him attempting to keep himself under control. It flared up from his neck and shoulders, from in between his gloves and shirt cuffs. It was dangerous to lose himself. Yet all Grillby wanted to do was immolate entirely, for all his stress to filter out in hot waves until it was gone and he felt both relieved and empty inside.

Several glass bottles, including the amber liquor on the counter, cracked and leaked their contents, until Grillby forced himself to pull his heat inwards again. After such an explosive reaction, the bartender felt tired and ragged, and looked just as bad.

It was awhile before the bartender could relax, to the point where most of the oxygen had burnt out of the air and his guest had calmly finished their drink. Grillby came down from the frenetic heat, inhaling shortly, drawing out the breath before releasing it and leaning back on his stool. He was more muted than before, but anything that shone after a magnesium flare would look dull by comparison.

“…*Forgive me.*”

‘The Sun is far away today, tri li li~’

*You’re off the mark,* Grillby internally figured, his soul twisting with disappointment as his emotions fizzled out, frayed and exhausted. He had felt too much in the span of time that the river person had allowed him to simmer, and now everything felt raw and unstable, yet far-off and detached.

‘*Tomorrow will be Wednesday.*’

*This makes no sense,* the fire monster lamented with frustration. *It’s Thursday.* Why was he getting so worked up over the other hinting at days of the week? Perhaps in his mind, Grillby was worried that it would happen again. That Sans would be attacked again, and that *choke*d him.
‘Soul shrinks. Hearts sink. Fears stink.’

Grillby glowered at the patron, while the river person swivelled on their stool, seemingly pleased with themself.

‘Sometimes, vines need pruning when the roots are rotted.’

Grillby sighed, no longer understanding the line of thought. “…You always get so chatty after.”

‘Tre li la, tra li lu~’ The mass inside of their hood shifted, making Grillby’s soul squirm in revulsion.

‘They say yellow is for friendship, but what about gold?’

Grillby just shook his head. “Gold has always been auspicious amongst monsters.”

‘When a stone falls at the edge of the world, does it make a sound when it lands?’

“It seems far-fetched, I know.” the fire monster sighed, defeated. “…Was sincerely hoping for some light on the subject.” A light pun. Sans would have liked that. That revelation only made Grillby’s soul sink.

A roll in the other’s shoulder was akin to a shrug of indifference. ‘Tomorrow is Friday. A perfect day to do some gardening.’

Grillby didn’t feel like gardening, but nodded anyway. The motion was more automatic than he cared for. If anything, he felt like burning every twig and blade of grass he could come into contact with, to make use of the pent-up aggression and frustration that he felt at being so helpless. After his outburst of emotion, everything was flat, hazy and strange. Like it was a step too far into what he was prepared to look into.

And yet…

He just wanted answers. Perhaps it was his naïvete, but he was hoping that his search would have come up that it was all a mistake. That no one wanted to harm one of the best people in his life.

When his last patron left and he locked up for the night, his bed didn’t feel as warm as Grillby remembered it being. Nor did his eyes feel as heavy as they used to be. His arms felt immeasurably empty and his chest felt tight with a certain spike of fear.

*They say yellow is for friendship, but what about gold?*

Grillby searched the bleary expanse in front of him, focusing on nothing yet everything, his mind skirting on a dense hopelessness that only grew the longer he lay there by himself.

What did the meaning of coloured flowers have to do with anything…?

He couldn’t say. He slept fitfully.

Chapter End Notes

polygonHexagon drew ch 53 art here!!!! ;w;
Just.... fyi..... next chapter is gonna have some smut........................
Chapter Notes

If you want to skip the nsfw-ish scenes:
#1: stop reading at the line break, and resume reading at "A little prick at the back of his mind"
#2: the 2nd line break, resume reading at: "He would have liked the dream better"

And so Sans went back. He’d felt the aching in his chest the entire time after the phone call. The ache turned to longing, longing to fretting. He would never admit it, as stubborn as he was, but he could always go back and spend the night with Grillby. He was sure Alphys would understand. There was just that calming feeling that came over him whenever he slept in Grillby’s arms, and he felt as though he’d fuss all night if he didn’t leave just then.

He didn’t remember much of the journey, only that he had walked instead of opting for a shortcut. The details were a little hazy, stretched out and unimportant. Did he get dressed? Creep out of the lab? Had he texted Alphys to let her know he’d be back later? He must’ve.

He should’ve thought that something was amiss when he didn’t run into anyone else along the way. Nor did he recall which door he’d opened to Grillby’s restaurant, or how many steps up to his suite.

Oddly enough, his soul was pounding again. In his mind, Sans felt the strongest pull towards the fire monster and sought to be near him, ignoring everything else. He heard the crackle of fire further into the suite, felt its radiant light permeate his bones as though it were a beam of sunlight. The hallway to the living room was dully lit, but it didn’t feel like Grillby’s heat was missing altogether.

Again, Sans felt somehow detached from it all until he peered around the open door, eye lights seeking out the one he had referred to as ‘him’ with reverence in the quiet of his heart.

Sans’ soul quivered when he saw the fire monster curled in the lit fireplace, huddled close to one side of the wall. An arm was loosely draped around his torso and Grillby had a gentle look about him. At first, Sans felt the well of panic surge up inside of him and he parted his teeth to ask if he wasn’t feeling well after all. Or perhaps something else had happened, and Grillby was forced to keep the restaurant closed even longer to recuperate.

Still, Sans hesitated in coming forward, even when Grillby beckoned him closer. The skeleton shivered as the worry persisted, the dark thought worming its way to smother the warm glow that had overcome him.

As fine as Grillby appeared, Sans couldn’t let his gaze linger on him for too long. He shifted where he stood, not knowing what to say this time. Instead, his eye lights lingered on the smooth stone and shine of quartz along the hearth and how it enveloped Grillby’s form. He thought it looked much larger than the one at the inn, but he couldn’t be sure. Sans tried to see where Grillby’s body began and the true fire ended, to no avail. It was so perfectly matched that, had he the mind for it, Sans would’ve thought Grillby was blanketed in it, an extension of himself.

Grillby outreached his hand, barely past the opening of the hearth and the crack of his mouth widened with invitation. Sans’ soul felt as though it was reverberating, resonating with everything
inside to take that hand and just let things be as they were.

But even if Grillby was composed of magical fire, the element in the fireplace was hot. Sans had tested candles and lighters enough to know pain when he was burned, so he hesitated. Not just with the thought of self-preservation, but something else too. Something hidden deep inside that was frightened for what Grillby’s unspoken invitation meant.

His mouth feeling drier than it had ever felt before, Sans pushed out a soft breath, his sight still trained on the fire monster’s waiting hand.

“i can’t.”

Grillby gave him a look. He knew the look. It was a look that said “Oh really?” in a dare to challenge him otherwise. His eyes danced behind familiar glasses, bright and alive as the flames continued to lick over his form.

“You can.” There was gentle understanding under each word that Sans had to repress the urge to grimace under how foolish he suddenly felt.

Although, unless he said so, Grillby wouldn’t know his worries.

“i’ll burn,” he protested. Again, the strange depth of what he said tugged at his soul and Sans itched at his sternum to rub away the longing ache. It was as though his soul was anchored in place by a block of wood, and if he got too close… Well, he didn’t need to entertain the thought of what would happen if he did.

Instead, the fire monster smiled at him, likely thinking that Sans had said the most endearing thing in the world. Sans flushed in shame with the other’s hand expectantly waiting for him. He wanted to reach out and touch it. He wanted so desperately to believe he wouldn’t burn and twist in agony.

“No, you won’t.”

Well, there was hardly any logic as to why Grillby would believe such a thing apart from being intimately tied with fire, but who was Sans to deny him? He had to, though… even if it felt otherwise. His soul believed him, hanging on a thread of worry that maybe he was wrong. Perhaps he was clinging desperately to pessimism to protect himself just in case he was wrong. But Grillby’s smile was infectious, kindled Sans’ sentiments and pulled at his heartstrings, snapping the thread of negativity.

Man, how could he say no to that?

Beyond that quiet rebuttal, Grillby waited in silence as Sans internally struggled. Once the skeleton had the courage to step forward, the fire monster’s tender smile broadened in silent victory. Nothing malicious lit up in his eyes, no tricks or riddles, only a tender warmth that flooded him. Sans started to very easily relax, to the point where taking the other’s hand was even considered an option.

Although the fire monster’s body hid craggs and cracks from view, Grillby’s hands were smooth in that they were constantly worked. Fingers glided over Sans’ metacarpals, sliding up his bones and pressing heat into them, distant and distracting.

Sans couldn’t help but release a quiet chuckle, soul fluttering just a little more when he took another step forward with the accompanying tug. He approached the hearth, discarding his slippers with each step. In his rib cage blossomed even more warmth as Grillby leaned forward to pull him inside to join him. Flames, harmless and soft, brushed up his ulna and past his clothes, filling him with heat and a tender attentiveness that he only expected from Grillby.
He started slow, none-too-carefully pulling Sans into the heat with him, as though Grillby was anxious to be near. It was cosier on the inside, larger, sparks flying around them like fireflies from their movements. Sans buried the worry of being burned and instead allowed Grillby to cup his face, guiding him forward so he was close enough to kiss while Sans’ hands settled on each of Grillby’s shoulders.

Sweet kisses turned hot, melting on his tongue, pulling that familiar dull ache in his chest to move down, flowing past his arms to the sides of his ribs. They ignited the excited little gasps that caught in Sans’ conjured throat as his magic bloomed down. He couldn’t help the appreciative, low gravelly noise that escaped him when Grillby’s hands thumbed through the sides of his iliac crest.

“Liked that?” Grillby nipped at his neck and Sans inhaled a shuddering breath, only too eager to nod as the fire monster’s hands ventured further. He clenched his teeth, unbalanced and twitching on his knees while straddling Grillby’s lap so he’d have better access.

He didn’t even have the mind to joke about anything, nor even tease about Grillby being handsy. Sans just gave in, aching to be touched, craving the flares of heat that sunk into his body to make it throb with want. It appeared that the fire monster craved the same, peppering his neck with sweet, firm kisses that lingered, driving Sans absolutely breathless as he clung to him.

In a haze, Sans let Grillby pull off his shirt (where had his hoodie gone?), hot fingers tracing along the curve of his ribs. The heat was so much that he thought that the fire was residing next to his soul, making it bubble and flicker. He whimpered with the overstimulation, choking on a sudden movement under his shorts where Grillby had taken to investigating in earnest.

It was still distant, in a way. Sans felt as though he couldn’t get enough and he pressed against the fire monster, attempting to whisper something through the light around them. It buzzed and crackled, every word burned away when he tried again. The tips of Grillby’s fingers found the holes in his sacrum and Sans’ spine arched with a sharp cry when the other’s fingers dug into the sensitive bone.

“grillby…” he panted, hooking an arm over the fire monster’s shoulder. Soft, nonsensical noises were drawn from him as one of Grillby’s warm hands went a little higher, tracing aching circles up his spinal column, every bone lighting up and glowing in his touch’s wake.

Sans bent, unable to keep himself from teetering with the stimulation. While their first encounter had been exploratory, Grillby was now using that information to undo him, and quickly. Sans attempted to keep himself upright as Grillby’s hand trailed down the front of his spinal column again, his flaming wrist laying over his pubic symphysis. With the steady heat there, the skeleton couldn’t help the low moan that crept out of him despite how much he wanted to hold back, punctuated by the flirty fingertips that trickled down the plain of his sacrum.

Still, it didn’t feel like it was real. Unable to help another whimper, Sans trusted that Grillby would be good to him. His soul was thrumming hard behind his ribs within the heat, a continuous pitter that echoed every want and desire Sans had.

Sans jerked, realising just what he was holding back; his magic. It suffused his bones everywhere Grillby touched, making the joints between his bones glow with his hues. He hummed as the fire monster grabbed at him, hungry for more kisses, wanting to taste and give in to all the needy touches.

His mouth was flooded with fire as hands eased down past the waistband of his shorts and down further, sending sparks of delight up his spine at the same time. Sans huffed, finally remembering how to use his own hands as he pawed at the fire monster for more, a laugh caught at the end of every excited breath. He was being humoured, a hand balancing his spine as Grillby lowered him,
sinking down with him.

He felt loved. He felt excited. Everything burned but it wasn’t painful, only an ethereal brush against Sans’ bones that sunk down to his core. He arched his spine into Grillby’s touch, a shameful noise escaping him that made his face burn when the other’s hand dipped into the cradle of his pelvis, fire mingling with magic. Grillby only grinned at him in response, leaning down and peppering kisses over the expanse of his sternum. They drew breathless sounds from Sans as he squirmed with the pleasure it brought.

His soul was full of love, that little unbidden word that stopped at the tip of Sans’ tongue whenever he tried to say it out loud. It pulsed through him. Even though Sans had no idea what he was doing, his body seemed to. He arched again as a particularly deft rub sank against the bottom of his spine, forcing magic to collect around his pelvis in delicious agony.

“f.. feels good,” Sans urged Grillby on. A higher yelp escaped him when those warm hands found the middle bridge of his spine and sacrum, thumbs resting and bracing the area to permeate it with heat. Blearily, the skeleton looked up to Grillby’s face, nodding his consent as his phalanges dug needily into the mattress under him.

(There was a mattress in the fireplace?)

A little detached again, Sans sighed long, allowing the pleasure of Grillby’s hands to ripple through him. He straddled the other’s lap, warmth nudged against his naked pelvis where magic collected, ready to be put to use.

He flushed at the mental observation, embarrassed for where his mind had gone. That he was prepared for anything Grillby would give or share with him. Now having a better inkling as to what he’d have to do, Sans felt nervousness crawl over him, melanging with the licks of flame that cascaded down and into the space between his ribs and hips. He squirmed a little with the ethereal touch while Grillby pulled him up so his pelvis lay perfectly in the fire monster’s lap.

It was still difficult to see where Grillby began and the fire ended, but it didn’t matter. Sans grinned up at him, the smile soft and accepting, thinking that maybe Grillby was so excited to touch him that his body was out of control. Just like before.

Sans closed his eye sockets as Grillby’s hand moved further, feeling his way up into his rib cage, only to turn in the empty space and trace his hot fingertips over his ribs from the inside. It prodded at a darker memory but the skeleton trembled under the touch as it lit him from the inside, sensitive and tingling through every fibre of his being. The dark feeling vanished, burned away by Grillby’s attention. The thought that the fire monster was testing boundaries by reaching so far into his rib cage made Sans’ breath hitch nervously.

He moaned softly, hands moving down to flex onto the other’s thighs as his magic coiled in the space of his hipbox with reckless abandon. He wouldn’t allow it to form, as that would mean it would be over soon, and Sans was very sure he wanted the gratuitous touching to continue.

A little prick at the back of his mind forced him to open his eye sockets again, first one before the other, to settle his gaze on the fire monster. Grillby still grinned at him, but something in his eyes showed sadness. His fire was sputtering too, deepening in hue, shifting the longer Sans watched him. There was such a contrast that it was easier to see where Grillby’s body and the fire ended.

But that wasn’t the only thing that grabbed Sans’ attention. Something in him panicked when he saw his right leg held in Grillby’s grasp as the fire monster leaned back, apparently distraught at what he had done. Sans swallowed thickly, that distant fear coiling up inside of him when he saw the hairline
fracture chip up into his patella, only to continue up his femur with a series of chipping sounds.

He grabbed at the travelling crack, his soul suddenly feeling tight as he pressed around his leg to stop the break. Sans’ eye sockets widened when he looked up, just catching what Grillby had said.

“I just want you to be safe.”

Him grabbing onto the break didn’t help, but the fright built up faster than what he was prepared for. Sans’ breaths picked up, his hands shaking, causing dust to fall between his phalanges and onto the bed. He whimpered when his leg shivered and went lax as the magic connected to it suddenly seized and gave up. Cloying, powdery grey ashes stuck to his hands as it crumbled. It felt as though he’d forgotten how to keep himself together and how to puppeteer everything smoothly.

He panicked.

“n... no, no no, please-” Sans begged himself, now feeling the twinge of loss when the hearth-turned-room suddenly went dark, cold and empty. He looked around the darkness, unable to keep himself from shaking and his breaths from stuttering in fright.

He was vulnerable and alone with no sign of the fire monster anywhere. He choked on a wet sob, not realising that tears had collected in his sockets and he was alone and bare on the cold earth.

Sans’ body jolted when he reopened his eye sockets, shivering, cold and gasping. The slow-running fans above him circled like hawks and it took several moments before Sans realised where he was. He held a breath, releasing it in fragile little bursts as he leaned back into the blanket that cocooned him.

What the hell was that dream? He’d had weird dreams before, but that one was definitely up there. It was... certainly the first. As it turned out, having increasingly bold flirting sessions with Grillby had sparked up some peculiar ideas in his subconscious. Sans rubbed at his face, trying to bury the embarrassed heat.

His mind was still racing and distant, trapped between the dreaming world and being awake. He pulled the thick yellow blanket off his legs, visibly relieved when his right one was still attached and unharmed. Of course it was. Why would it be any different than when he’d gone to sleep?

The clock on his phone showed 3:24am. Too late for a midnight snack, too early for breakfast. Still, after a dream like that, which also had devolved into a general freakout over his own mortality, well... Sans didn’t feel like going back to sleep just then.

He was used to nightmares about his own mortality. He could deal with those. Having racy dreams about his boyfriend, however... that was new and he wasn’t quite sure on how to process it.

So he shuffled into his slippers and made his way down the hall to the washroom, thinking a shower would clear his head and settle his all too present nerves. A foreign feeling was concentrated on his spine, but he decided to pointedly ignore the way it whispered a trail down his vertebrae in uncomfortable fluidity.

He’d have a better look at it behind closed doors, not out in the open with all the cameras, and... visitors. He hadn’t detected any, but Sans trusted the lab as much as he remembered about the place. Which wasn’t too much, considering all the malaise that hung thickly in the air lately.

The cooling system was generating a gentle chill as Hotland’s climate permeated the building,
something Sans had grown fond of now. He locked the door after going into the washroom, flicking on the light and squinting around to find his bearings. There was a stand-up shower enclosed in glass panes on the other side of the room, a couple of folded towels and one large mirror that had old stickers of various cartoon characters plastered on it.

Sans very quickly snapped out of his half-stupor when he caught his reflection in the mirror. Admittedly, it had been awhile since he’d looked into one, as he never cared to and Papyrus always checked up on him anyway. He had no real reason to. Yet Sans was certain that something had changed about himself since he last checked.

He turned the lock on the door knob and sighed.

He approached the mirror, his teeth closed in a hard neutral line, barely tugged at each side. The light that shone on him from the vanity above the sink in yellow, contrasting his magic to make it take on a mildewy green. He tilted his head as he got a better look, eye lights fixed on his reflection while he hooked his finger behind his neck and pulled his shirt over his head.

The same familiar glow presented itself again and Sans still felt that peculiar, warm little trickle down his spine. Since his shirt had been lowered in front of him, it took him a moment before Sans realised that he was… leaking.

Emitting… something.

Sans looked down, a flash of words and chapters and, god, all the texts that he’d read. ‘Surprise’ should not be his initial reaction when that dream had been everything he wanted and more - save for the end, really. Sans caught his reflection in the mirror again when he saw his face flushed, then he rather pointedly avoided his own look, abashed.

Normally he wouldn’t touch his soul. Normally reaching into the cavern between his ribs and his spine was an extreme trespass, but he reached up, touching the space nestled deep in his rib cage where the slick fluid slipped down. He gave in to a shudder, squeezing his eye sockets closed with a quiet huff when he touched upon the wet vertebrae, then drew his hand away. It came back with something silvery, fluid and… slimey.

Gross. But he knew what it was.

More embarrassment. He tested it, rubbing his phalanges together. It was very viscous and clung to his bones, difficult to rub away. He swallowed thickly, tossed his shirt into the sink and shoved his shorts down. He discarded those too, and made a quick stride to the shower. He blatantly ignored the way his pelvis was still filled with magic, confused and ready.

Sans buried the thought, but even when he pulled the levers in the shower to turn on, the falling water didn’t cleanse them away. Instead, the water pressure drummed against his body, pinpointing every inch of him that was aflame and aroused. He tried to ignore it by washing the slick from his hand, then attempted to rub the rest from his body.

It only ended up making the situation a little worse. Rubbing at his spine, trying to soothe the ache… it made his thoughts wander and his breaths pick up.

Grillby came to mind. Of course he would, Sans internally grimaced, although it wasn’t with venom. It wasn’t as though Grillby could get into the shower with him, but he recalled the way the fire monster had acted when water was left behind on him. He had wanted to evaporate it entirely and Sans couldn’t help but grin contentedly with the funny thought that Grillby disliked water that much.
He reached for the hot water tap and tugged it up a little more, wanting to see how hot it would go. Sans figured pretty hot, but he had to hiss and clamp down on his tongue in order to silence a startled yelp with the sudden change in temperature. He’d never get used to the sensation, but he found it pleasant after awhile.

Funny thought, when he had literally housed fire in his rib cage before.

Sans let it wash over him, nudging the water a little warmer, bit by bit instead of all at once. It made him think if Grillby slowly turned up the heat; the fire monster had such perfect control over his flames… He grinned to himself, allowing the hot water to pummel him and trickle down his frame. He relished the way it flowed around his ribs and down his spine.

He still couldn’t get Grillby out of his thoughts. Sans waited for the feeling to go away, and every time he attempted to diffuse the magic collected in his pelvis, a shot of desire sparked through him instead.

As much as the Undernet had its trolls about sexual deviances, ‘heat’ just wasn’t a thing, no matter the amount of fanfiction Alphys hid from him tried to prove otherwise. He was just reacting to a certain chain of events that were… very pleasant, no matter how different it was to when he was actually with his boyfriend. He thought of Grillby holding him, knowing how to handle his body, showing him how much care and consideration he put into how he felt and how comfortable he was…

Fuck. He was just riling himself up more. He found himself leaning closer to the shower’s stream, achingly hot water falling down on him as his arms hung uselessly at his sides.

What if he just…

Sans couldn’t believe he was even entertaining the thought, but the shameless part of his mind was egging him on, needling and chipping away at his resolve not to cross that line. With the thought of ‘fuck it’ ringing in his skull, Sans snatched a look behind him and out of the foggy glass doors, just to make sure no one was watching.

Why did he have stage fright when he was alone?

He swallowed, allowing his magic to gather, but it was formless. He didn’t look at it, only leaned against the tiled wall as he trailed his fingertips in phantom movements against his pubic symphysis. The touches sent a thrilled spark up his spine, hooking into every crook of magic keeping him together. Sans dithered on the decision one last time, just to make sure that he was a good person, and with that final thought, he allowed fleeting memories to guide him.

He was unsure. Grillby was right when he had inferred that he was inexperienced. That bell was rung loud and clear. He huffed against his forearm, muffling strained whimpers, frustrated and ashamed. He hunched, trying to match the movements he thought about in fleeting moments, flush against Grillby’s body and grinding together with such passion that he was sure the fire monster still had scratches on his arms.

Thinking about Grillby helped. The hot water aided the feeling of staying warm, enveloped in powerful waves. Sans choked back a noise as he turned his hand into the void of his pelvis, gliding fingers down his sacrum, cupping his tailbone, trying to imitate how Grillby’s touch unravelled him in his dream.

This was one of his worst ideas yet. His hand grew bold in its explorations, the bone underneath his
fingers left sensitive and warm to the touch. His legs were quivering, but Sans couldn’t push himself past the knot into completion.

Why was he even seeking out relief like this? Because it hadn’t occurred to him to just shower, towel off and go back to sleep? Maybe he just wanted to forget the other half of the dream, the one that turned nightmare-ish, and tire himself out so he could curl up, warm and snug.

He bit down on his carpals to muffle the startled grunt that passed his teeth when he finally found a rhythm that worked out more favourably than before. Sans’ spine arched into it as he grinded against his hand, every spark of pleasure bursting a little prematurely. He wasn’t skilled like Grillby was - he supposed that was why the fire monster had offered to teach him.

He flushed when he thought of that, the comfortable promise that had been uttered even while Grillby was recovering, how it made his soul flutter in excitement. He couldn’t help but envision it: being in Grillby’s warm bed, the two of them grinning at each other like love-struck fools, unable to keep their hands to themselves. Of the fire monster pulling him down with him, kissing him, igniting bursts of pleasure that travelled all around his body, not just in his pelvis.

Sans felt it swell in his soul when he thought of it that way, his magic struggling, chopping like a wave as he was brought close. At the same time, he hesitated, shame biting at him as it denied him relief. The pleasure ebbed into a dull subdued throb, drifting away as his frustrated magic stayed even when he stopped, too bothered to continue and his hand too cramped and tired.

At least the slick that travelled down his spine from his soul had been washed away. Sans slid to the floor, turning the water down much cooler as he sat and waited it out.

He would have liked the dream better if it could provide some relief, but it just ended up making him frustrated instead.

Sans carefully inspected himself once he got the courage to get out of the shower. There were no telltale signs that his magic had riled up, nor was his soul secreting anything slippery. Sans kept an eye on himself as he toweled off, not trusting the mirror for fear something would suddenly laugh at him for his incompetence, or just tease him outright.

Frustrated, he pulled on his shorts and shirt, glad that the evidence was gone, at least. When he stepped out of the washroom, the lights were on and dread crept into his soul.

But it was just Alphys. She was just tired, a long ways off into the kitchenette, grabbing something quick from the fridge to munch on before she went back to bed. Since he had come to her for help, she appeared to be in a better mood, though marginally he could catch glimpses of something dark. She had previously been brooding, vaguing on social media, her posts hinting at negative thoughts. Sans decided to reach out and try to get her to talk.

She gave him a meek smile when he approached, one that shivered unnaturally, distracted and far-off. He gave Alphys a reassuring grin and a shrug; “couldn’t sleep?”

She nodded and leaned against the counter, holding a mug of tea. Sans made to make his own, noting that the time on the microwave indicated his aborted shower mission had lasted nearly an hour.

Distractedly, she handed him a mug with a tea bag already in it when Sans started looking around for a clean cup.
“bad dreams?”

Alphys shook her head. “N-nothing like that…”

“somethin’s gotta be on your mind,” Sans urged gently. Sans noted with an internal grimace that while it was ‘natural’ for her to be down in spirits. He wanted to comfort her. Get her to talk. “why don’t we make a garbage pile?”

She offered him a crooked grin with that, at least.

They worked upstairs in her living quarters while the television blared Mettaton’s show, Alphys working on a chassis while Sans tinkered around with thin wires and quartz so fine it chipped in his hands.

Frustrated grunts escaped Sans after he’d clumsily tried to fit refined obsidian and quartz together to create a base frame to work with. It was more fiddly than simply scorching the metrics of the box into the synth materials, and it was completely constructed backwards to how he was normally used to creating boxes. The fact that Alphys had successfully made a portable prototype had escaped Sans’ memory altogether until she had offered it as an alternative to frying his already highwire reserves.

Exhausted, Sans let himself fall back, not caring anymore if the small fiddly pieces scattered in front of him. His fall was cushioned by the swathes of blankets and pillows from an upturned couch and Alphys looked at him. She had been quiet for the better half of an hour.

“do you think,” Sans muttered, pausing to rub over his face, “d’you think that dreams actually mean something?” It was posed with more clarity than how he normally spoke, and it caught Alphys’ attention.

“How do you mean?”

He gestured around vaguely. “besides… the literal effect, i mean. gettin’ cut to pieces doesn’t mean gettin’ cut to pieces, for instance.”

“No, it, um… it doesn’t.”

“so,” Sans continued, noting the detached tone in the little doctor’s voice, “broken bones… mean what, really. being chased? i dunno. maybe i’m exhausted. maybe i’m scared. are you?” Opening up generally made Alphys do the same in turn. It was their odd little reciprocal pow-wow routine.

Alphys started at that, and when Sans looked over to watch her from the floor, she shot her eyes downcast to the chrome breastplate she was enraptured with. “Sharing feelings?”

The skeleton grimaced awkwardly, looking almost pained. “i’ve been bad at that. and i know you try to help me out, but at the same time… how’ve you been? i haven’t seen anything on your profile lately. nothin’ like the usual stuff, i mean. you doin’ ok?”

She was no longer quite as enamoured with the chassis, but her eyes remained fixed on it. Sans noted how her hands shook a little more and he sat up, listening to the jittering of claws on steel.

“It’s dumb,” Alphys muttered, the statement so practised that it bordered on normalcy.

Sans sat up a little more, a frown creasing his brow. “can’t be that dumb if you’re teeterin’ on the
edge of melancholy like this,” he murmured, then sat up fully with a deep sigh. “wanna vent?”

She grimaced, chancing a look to his direction before her eyes flicked down to the shiny metal under her still-shaking hands.

“I, I don’t even know,” she said softly. Her voice bit at desperation, but Sans let her speak. She sounded so close to choking; why hadn’t he noticed that she was so pent up and miserable sooner? “I don’t know why, I… I should just stop, right? M.. make everyone’s lives so much happier. I.. I couldn’t do anything then, I-”

Sans shuffled closer, reaching over to settle a hand on her trembling shoulder. Pieces of quartz had been sacrificed and broken in the name of friendship.

“I,” she started, her eyes watering and already red from holding back her emotions, “I got a call.”

Oh.

Oh no. Sans knew exactly what that meant. Occasionally it would happen; the King would take a moment or two out of his busy schedule to call Alphys and check on her progress. Her progress had admittedly stagnated decades ago, but when the pressure was on him to provide answers to the waiting families in Snowdin, Alphys would crumble under the weight and get reclusive.

Such as she was doing now. Of course. Sans pulled her close and gave her a hug, firm and tight, but not too much. He always gave bony hugs, but she didn’t push him away. Instead, she hunched into his arms, claws catching into his shirt desperately.

Time after time, all he could do was console her that it wasn’t her fault. What obviously had worked for him was not a constant as to what would help others. Even with her muffled sobs and wails against his shoulder, Sans’ voice was held tight. She teetered between helplessly sobbing “what do I do??” and demanding that he promise not to tell a soul, even when she knew he wouldn’t breathe a word.

There wasn’t anything Sans could say or do to ease her down from her panic apart from what he’d already told her. So he continued to just cement the belief that she had tried her best because she believed she was doing the right thing at the time.

He supposed it was his turn to play Papyrus. Sans didn’t know how his brother could do it even half the time.

Calls from Asgore always sent her into a spiral of self-doubt and loathing, despite the King only checking in on her well-being. Sans had heard the messages often enough to know what the tone was; a gentle and concerned rumble that also hid how weary he was over holding the mountain on his shoulders.

Soon they were laying down on the pile of blankets and pillows, staring up to the ceiling on their backs. Sans was idly counting the fans clicking above as Alphys eventually calmed down, still wiping over her face with her glasses in one hand.

“Sometimes I think about, um… parallel universes,” she mumbled after a long bout of silence. Sans craned his neck to look at her inquisitively. She had replaced her glasses and was now wringing her claws together nervously. “I-in my dreams, I mean. Some.. sometimes, I probably dream about… I don’t know, um. Probably, just… going to another world. Where this didn’t happen? Where.. Where there isn’t a scoff after someone said my name in passing.”
Sans continued to watch the way she moved, and reached out, giving the spines on her head a reassuring pat.

“O-of course they’re…. all just dreams, I mean. Fantastical, w-with magic instead of being explained by neutrinos and quark relays… It’s neat to think about… s-simplistically!!”

Sans exhaled slowly. He knew what her troubles were but digging into that wound would only make her even more reclusive. “i think it means you’re antsy about that last human.”

“Er…”

Sans shrugged. “i’ve been thinkin’ `bout it too. what would happen if one last human made it down here. came outta the ruins and scare the hell outta us. what if one more’s all it took to get free?” He let the silence stretch on for awhile, listening to the gentle clicking from the ceiling fans to fill the gaps between. “kinda neat to think of it that way.”

Alphys just laughed, the sound a little lighter than before. “Y-yeah…”

More silence. They both knew in their hearts that it would probably be awhile before the last needed human would fall and Asgore would make good on his promise to monsterkind. Whether or not that occurred during their lifespans was a whole different story - one they each decided not to dwell on.

It was neat to speculate on what would happen, but why be morose about it if it was out of their control?

“Hey,” she said, her tone still exhausted, “you said, um… broken bones.”

“i did.”

“I… I’ve found a book at the dump before,” she admitted covertly, “s-several books, I mean… Some are pretty weird but humans sure do have interesting ideas behind dream theory…”

Sans chuckled goodnaturedly. “your exposition is top-notch as usual, alph.”

Alphys waved in a way that Sans didn’t quite see, but she seemed to relax a little more. “Maybe… humans and skeletons are related.”

“bite your tongue,” Sans mock-chastised with a laugh.

“What, um, I mean is that… their dreams talk of bones?”

“skeletons aren’t the only ones with bones, alph.”

Alphys flushed in embarrassment. “I mean… I know that! But hear me out!” There was a small awkward pause and she suddenly giggled. “A-actually, no, tell me your dreams.”

“aw. i didn’t know you were usin’ your friendfics as reference material now,” Sans crooned with a teasing wink and he didn’t bother dodging the pillow that was half-heartedly flung over her shoulder. It landed him square in the face.

So he told her, conveniently leaving out a few moments that he recalled, glad that they were staring at the ceiling instead of facing each other. Otherwise, Sans had the feeling that she’d be giving him the smarmiest knowing look and he’d be blushing like the awkward pile of calcium that he was lately.

She whistled lowly once he ended it with; “and then my leg just kinda… crumbled in my hands.”
She hummed in consideration and moved to pull one of the blankets up and over her shoulders. “Broken leg,” she started so matter-of-factly that Sans turned his skull again to eye her. “Hmm.”

“it’s bad, right?” he murmured, plucking at his shirt with the memory of the dream. “kinda figured, since most of my dreams are pretty screwed up.”

“W-well! No! Actually, I was, um… thinking how it wasn’t actually a break. Sure, you say it cracked, but it’s just gone! That… has to account for something, right? I mean… a loss of a leg is not about the body part itself so much as it represents you not really… having control in your life. Or, you’re putting your feelings aside for something, o-or! You’re not standing up for yourself!!”

“kinda hard to stand up for myself when i’m peg-legged in dreamland,” Sans groused and gave a frown. He knew what she meant, but he wasn’t about to tell Alphys her readings made sense when she could barely apply logic to her own problems.

Best to let her focus on this than other ideas.

“what about…?” Sans mumbled, idly scratching at the phantom prickle across his chest. He belaboured the thought, exhaling long and deeply as though resigning himself to more questions. “what about ribs?”

Alphys craned her head to regard him, but he didn’t meet her inquiring stare.

“W-wow, you’re just… just opening up, lately…”

Sans grimaced. “alph…” Admittedly, he wasn’t used to laying his cards out like this. He didn’t like being vulnerable, so he often pretended he didn’t bring his deck or plain refused to play the game. “ok, psycho-analyse me.”

“Well,” she began, adjusting herself so she wasn’t looking at him at an awkward angle. “Ribs breaking, or just ribs? B-because if it’s just the idea of them, then it’s like… keeping secrets. Or acting on your own, um… your own terms.”

“man, it’s a good thing the royal guard is so puffed up that it doesn’t have the time to look into people’s net history, huh?” Sans chuckled mildly, his grin a little crooked with the tease. Alphys made an indignant noise at his jab at her crush’s occupation and the skeleton sighed. “a knife.”

Alphys snorted loudly. “Th-that one is so obvious.”

“ok. work with me, ace detective.”

She sighed, rubbing over her face. The caffeine was wearing off. “You either should, um… cut out a bad habit, or a bad influence from your life.”

Sans thought on that for a few moments, then laughed quietly to cover up how he really felt. “man, i guess that means no more anime.”

Alphys laughed, surprised. “M-m-m-me!??”

Sans grinned with a wink. “the worst influence.” Her giggles continued, hesitant. “nah, i kid. you’re one of the best.”

The little doctor leaned over and grabbed her phone, taking the time for it to fill the space around them with bright white light as she loaded up one of the apps on her phone. Her claws jittered on the screen and Sans yawned, his jaw clicking while he also grabbed the pillow next to his head and
forced it under his skull.

“M-March twelfth, two-thousand-and-—” Alphys began, her speech interrupted by errant giggles. “Tagged, at fun2boned, genuine compliment from Captain Shy And Embarrassed About His Feelings, Mister Skeleton. RIP.”

Sans snorted and made a lunge for her phone. “don’t put that.”

“H-he tried to stop me!” she guffawed at no one in particular, rolling away from him with little success. “Help!”

Sans huffed, rubbing at one socket, a wry grin on his face as he pulled a blanket over his head. “i can’t believe you’re outin’ me like this.”

“Y-you’re the one who’s interrupting my sleep like th-this,” she snorted again.

Sans let her have that one. He sighed and closed his eye sockets, finally eased enough to try sleeping again.

“hey, alph?”

“Um, yeah..?”

“in the mornin’,” he started after a pause, taking a moment to yawn again, “y’gotta help me think of somethin’ to do for, uh…”

“Uhh????” Alphys continued, jostling him a little as she arranged the pillows and cushions around to make a sort of nest to hunker down in.

“kinda asked the boy out without havin’ anything in mind,” Sans admitted a little bashfully. “he’s… kinda the mushy sort. but then he seemed to like my idea last time?” He paused. “wonder if that even counts? he counted it as a date, anyway. the sparring, i mean.”

He wasn’t prepared for the stark silence that followed until he opened an eye socket and looked at Alphys, who had her chin resting in her hands and her eyes were bright and dancing in excitement.

“T-t-t-tell me!! I, I want to hear everything!! Oh my god!!”

Sans realised what that entailed and tried very hard not to react, despite the flush that touched his face betraying him liberally. He mumbled to himself, “c’mon, alph. it’s embarrassin’. you’re like my really weird sister, or somethin’.”

Another pause. Then is crashed all around him.

“Embarrassed? Oh… oh my god???” Her gasp was overtheatric and Sans grimaced inwardly. “Oh my god, if… if you can’t tell me, your BFF, and it’s probably maybe something that… you can tell your brother about either, oh my g-god. Oh wow!! You t-two, you fucked!?”

Sans instantly felt mortified and retorted faster than he should have; “what? no!”

Alphys continued on, her grin reaching diabolical measures to extract all the juicy details from him. He still grimaced, now his face feeling hot from embarrassment.

“i’m not tellin’ you a goddamn thing,” he muttered very matter-of-factly, craning his attention back to counting ceiling tiles far ahead. “nothin’ about any hypothetical funny business. trust me.”
Her giggles won out in the end and Sans ended up hiding his face with another pillow while she drilled questions as though she had a checklist ready.

He didn’t get much further than, “i kinda… really like him” before Alphys collapsed beside him, every other word out of her mouth some variation of congratulations and pleading for the ‘scoop’. Sans decided to ignore her until morning the best way he knew how, and he turned and fell asleep, memories of Grillby on his mind.
The Rule of Three (NSFW)

Chapter Summary

Good things come in 3.

Chapter Notes

Chapter is primarily NSFW/smut. You can stop at [His breath caught when he remembered the admission.] if you don't want to read the explicit sexytimes.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

This was starting to get a little ridiculous. He would’ve been fine with just the one time, but Sans let the cold water pummel over him to extinguish the warmth seeping from his soul. He had dreamt of Grillby again - another dream that was pleasant and not at the same time. While he didn’t remember specific details, Sans still recalled the phantom sensation of the fire monster’s hands on him, in him, claiming him-

Sans squeezed his eye sockets closed and ducked his head into the chilly water. Warm hands came to mind, searching, pushing up and under his ribs…

Don’t think about it. And definitely don’t do anything about it.

He tried to think about talking to Grillby instead, how it made him feel, how Sans’ soul gave a thundering jolt and flutter every time he saw Grillby. Lovestruck wasn’t even the term. He was downright in love.

Sans decided the shower had gone on long enough and turned off the tap, just praying that he wasn’t behaving peculiarly. If Alphys had caught wind of anything the last time, she pretended nothing was up. Or perhaps she was just caught up in their work. He honestly hoped it was the former.

As Sans got dressed for the day, he thought about what Alphys had said about the meaning behind his dreams. Of how he needed to stand up for himself, or at least what his subconsciousness was telling him. The thoughts connected as he dwelt on the dreams.

Afraid of opening up was a given; there was no need to dissect it. Standing up for himself, however? He could guess as to what that meant. Especially if it was on ‘his terms’.

Why was everything taunting him lately? How the hell could he bring that up in casual conversation? Reporting it would just take a lot of paperwork and make it entirely too serious. But that was it, wasn’t it? Grillby and Alphys and especially his brother knew it was serious. Sans did too.

He’d put it off, but nothing could shove him into the next stage of actually confronting Undyne to report the attack.

He made his way out of the washroom after toweling off and getting dressed again. Perhaps today
would be the day that he got his issues figured out. Alphys would help him like she always did.

Unfortunately it took a great deal longer than that to figure out what to do with the project. His impatience lately was causing problems and Sans was growing frustrated with the dreams plaguing him on a nearly-nightly basis. During the whole week, there had been only a couple of days where he didn’t wake up, magic hot and on the verge of coalescing because his stupid head was lingering on his boyfriend too much.

Perhaps it was mainly because he hadn’t seen Grillby in close to a week, bouncing between work in Hotland and his project. Perhaps it was due to the fact that Sans honestly wanted to do good by him. Sans faltered when his thoughts came to a screeching halt, eyeing his project critically. He hoped that it would be good enough.

Despite the serious advancements in technology in the Underground, quality paints were either too expensive to get on a whim or were plain difficult to come by. Papyrus was always resourceful, but Sans opted for stains, which he ventured into the Hotland markets to obtain. They didn’t have much in the way of blues, but Sans found a variety of pigments that could be easily applied to the materials he was using. When innocently enquired on the subject, the skeleton shrugged and merely replied, “new hobby.”

And it was, in a sense. Sans had let the obsession over creating a box that would be worthy of Grillby consume him. Sure, the skeleton had always been utilitarian in his works before, bordering on downright ugly, but something about the bartender just made him feel like he had to try. Which was why when he got back to the lab with his purchases, he set about his project again, from noon until whenever he passed out.

Hyperfocus was not usually his game. Usually Sans would be able to detach himself whenever he felt hungry or tired, but not this time. While he didn’t feel pressured, he felt excited, wanting to see the fire monster’s reaction.

Sans hoped that he loved it.

He really hoped.

He focused on his work. Alphys was a background noise after awhile. Occasionally food would appear next to him when his focus broke and he would eat. Sans meticulously scored inside the panels into stylised ripples, slowly honing down the hard wood into softer shapes that mimicked that which was forever emblazoned in his memory. He smiled fondly to himself as he did so, pouring his affection into each stroke, every rounded curve. The stains were later painstakingly applied, in layers, drying between each set. Naps were caught in between coats and Sans later woke up in the middle of the night, once more afflicted with his little ‘problem’.

The thing was that he was anxious to see Grillby again, but it wasn’t as though he was giving the bartender the cold shoulder. Sans would routinely pester his boyfriend over the course of the week with silly little enquiries - for no reason in particular - to make the box as great as how he had envisioned it. Grillby remained wary, or perhaps Sans was reading between the lines a little too deeply. Sans didn’t think much on it, having tunnel-vision for his project and not what his extended absence might mean to Grillby.
It was a couple of days later when Sans finally made the trip from the Hotland Labs back home to Snowdin. Admittedly, the distance between coupled with the interrupted sleep lately had made him mentally weary at the prospect of dragging the box back. His soul pattered and thumped excitedly when he imagined how Grillby would react when he received the gift and proposition.

Sans dragged the sled he was using to carry the gift into the entrance to the tunnel, crisp snow scuffing the wood and making it sound louder than it actually was. He peered around at the empty expanse, taking in the surroundings. The boughs above were kept trimmed high to prevent snow from falling between the trees and there were grooves in the ice below his feet that were formed so people wouldn’t slip and fall.

If he remembered correctly, Grillby generally avoided the place. It wasn’t primarily his concern to go gallivanting around Snowdin Forest, apart from the first time the fire monster had come to confront Sans about staying away. It really seemed so long ago when Grillby had sent a pulse of warmth through his body, and the skeleton had to grin bashfully at his own memory.

The further one travelled inward, the more it appeared to be a strip mall packed into a ruin, glittering snow shining between the stalls like frozen spiderwebs. It was a sight that was pretty, but it paled in comparison to what Grillby’s hidden spot looked like. That, and almost everyone that could walk could pass by.

It was technically the laziest thing he’d ever done. He set the gift down on the ground, shoveling snow around it with his shoe to make it appear that the box had been there the entire time. He tested the lid a few more times, satisfied with the silent hinges and the flash of colour inside. He still found the interior so strange, being used to the telltale glow of the CORE lighting box interiors. He’d have to learn to get used to it for this one, at least.

Sans checked his phone again. 10:34pm. Was it too late in the night to go to Grillby’s? There was no doubt that the fire monster would welcome him, and Sans didn’t want to just text the invitation to meet up in the morning. It was strange to spend so long on one thing and then to leave the box alone to be interacted with the locals. It would be fine.

The amount of pride he felt at creating such a thing was immensely confusing. He didn’t feel that way when he’d created the other item boxes - why was this one so different? Perhaps it was the fact that Sans had been so mentally and physically exhausted that he was unable to take pride in his work before. Or perhaps it was the fact that it was the same amount of pride someone would have over lighting a match and watching it fall into a tar pit. Bright and amazing one moment, until the consequences sunk in and regret reared its ugly head.

But this time, it was different. Sans was ok. And it was weird.

Another weird point being that the flower or whatever malintended being that was dogging him at the CORE and in Waterfall almost completely faded from his mind. They didn’t pop out of nowhere, and Sans didn’t feel apprehensive about travelling. Again - another odd peculiarity, but it hadn’t been sudden. It faded over time, melding into the background as though it hadn’t happened at all. Sans had pushed it until it fit neatly into a dark pocket of his mind where the worry wouldn’t bother him.

Right now, all Sans had were thoughts of Grillby as he walked back to town, darkness settling around him like a security blanket. He looked down to his phone and the last message sent from Grillby. ‘Miss you.’ He grinned absently to himself and noted the current time; just after 11:00pm, right when Grillby would be locking up for the night and likely be either cleaning up or going to bed.

His grin tugging a little mischievously, the skeleton rounded the restaurant and hid the sled away from view. He entered via the fire exit, residual heat in his phalanges making the door’s lock unlatch
with a subtle, satisfying *click*. Surprising the fire monster was always satisfying on a molecular level, but it made his soul jump with every careful step he took towards the bartender’s glow, hidden away in the back.

Sans leaned against the door frame for a moment, watching the bartender move about the kitchen. Grillby didn’t appear to notice him, incinerating the food left behind on plates and rubbing away the ashes with a dry towel to clean them. The clinks of the plates and the jostle of cutlery that glowed with his heat were pleasant and comforting sounds, ones Sans found he missed during his absence.

He knew it would’ve been sooner or later, but it didn’t stop Sans from shooting him a wink when the other’s mouth quirked in amusement after being caught.

“There you are…” Grillby didn’t stop his chores, but he slowed down enough when he moved near.

“missed me, huh?” Sans idly scuffed a shoe before pushing himself away from the doorway, taking his time in approaching. “could say the same.”

Grillby grimaced but it wasn’t in rebuke. “Really…” he murmured as he pushed a pile of gleaming plates closer towards the wall. He took a glance over his shoulder as he worked, noting how relaxed Sans looked, how one side of his hoodie slumped carelessly down his shoulder and how his hands were gloved and fingering his sleeves. “And… what have you been up to, then? Have any more grand schemes planned for me?”

Sans shrugged a shoulder. The dreams were a surprise, but Sans definitely knew that wasn’t pertinent information that Grillby should know. He couldn’t help the subtle flush that rose high on his cheekbones at the memory and carefully rubbed at his sternum.

Instead, Sans approached, his arms pushing past each of Grillby’s sides, cradling the crook of the other’s neck with his jaw enough to startle a few errant flames. He snorted in amusement, giving the exposed spot on the fire monster’s neck a soft blow. It made a subtle shiver travel up Grillby’s back that Sans swore he felt reverberate in his sternum.

“hey,” he muttered quietly, “just the one.”

“This is certainly a surprise,” Grillby chuckled to himself. He craned his head to view the other’s face, his eyes dancing with silent interest. “What’s gotten into you..?”

“nothin’,” yet, Sans barely managed not to say. He felt the subtle way Grillby’s stomach tensed under his hands with his laughter, though it was inaudible. Sans smoothed his fingers down, tracing a button on Grillby’s vest before sinking against the fire monster’s warm back. God, he had missed that.

The other’s hands rose to clasp over his, warmth cocooning his gloved hands and travelling in an aching arc up his wrists. It plumed down his ulnae so tender and sweet that Sans felt as though he was going to melt. Instead, he brought Grillby closer, barely allowing the bartender enough room to turn in place.

“Were you just burning for me this entire time that you’ve come to accost me in my own home?”

“kitchen. and naw.” Sans’ grin tugged a little more and he glanced away almost sheepishly. “pretty sure that’d merit more than a wipedown.”

Grillby’s fire burned a little hotter at that, clearly caught off guard. He settled for draping his arms around Sans’ shoulders, since the skeleton’s arms were around his waist.
“you get your delivery yet?” Sans asked, his voice soft as his eye lights settled back on the other’s chest.

“No,” Grillby answered, a little perplexed by the question. He also attempted to look down to the other’s hands, the gloves a little peculiarity that drew his attention just enough to be distracting. “My… own fault for ordering so late.”

“my surprise’ll come in handy, then.” Sans looked up, shooting Grillby another wink. “c’mon. time for a walk.”

The fires around him seemed to yawn in protest but Grillby didn’t make a sound when Sans pulled away, though his arms lingered on Sans’ shoulders.

“Now?”

“heh. no time like the `present`,” the skeleton snickered. “wouldja rather i carry you?”

Grillby brought a hand up to his chest in mock surprise. “And… sully my good reputation?” he teased incredulously. After a moment, he relaxed and tugged at one side of his bow tie, unravelling the small cloth. “Why, it’s so late…!”

Sans watched as the tie slid from around Grillby’s neck, the movement calling upon more intrusive thoughts that shot straight to the base of his spine. He swallowed, his grin almost rueful.

“right.”

Grillby couldn’t help the teasing smile as he looped the small length of cloth behind Sans’ skull, pulling him closer with another chuckle. “Is… it alright to save until morning?”

Sans’ soul skipped a beat at the lingering proximity, each of his hands finding the counter’s ledge behind Grillby, firmly pressed against him and now staring up at the fire monster’s face. He had felt confident before, but as with the change of the tide, it ebbed away when he remembered all the subtle teases, bold and chaste, that the other monster had subjected him to in the past.

“is what,” he mumbled quietly, holding fast to the counter’s ledge. He stared at the other’s mouth, how it quirked a little, amused. He saw the glow inside, how it made him feel and how Sans just wanted to lean forward and steal a taste.

“…Your surprise?” Grillby enquired thoughtfully. “Or… is this what you’ve been planning?”

“god, if i could plan this well, i wouldn’t be makin’ a damn fool of myself half the time.”

Grillby watched him carefully, noting the tremor in Sans’ voice. It wasn’t as though he was afraid, but it just sung of nervousness and want. Then again, it could be his imagination. Yet the fun part about being in a relationship with an emotionally inexperienced skeleton was that Grillby was very much in tune with how Sans responded to things.

And, god, he wanted Sans to respond to more.

“Perhaps,” Grillby breathed as he leaned in closer, every following word whispered and sultry, “you’ve kept yourself scarce… to make me long for you all the more.”

Sans was sure that his face was burning but he couldn’t help but laugh awkwardly at the admission. If the guy only knew, Sans thought, a subtle shudder passing through his frame as Grillby’s fingertips idly traced against the back of his neck. He thought he saw something in the fire monster’s
expression, a twinge that hurt although Sans didn’t know why. He decided to ignore it, returning idle touches to match Grillby’s caressing.

“Nothing to say..?”

Sans’ face flushed as he turned away from Grillby, more delightful sensations travelling up and down his spine. He knew the longer he hesitated, the more incriminating it was, yet he couldn’t help himself. He pushed up to his toes, a rush of want spiking when all he wanted to do was kiss Grillby breathless.

The bartender allowed him to advance and set their pace, an amused quirk to the corner of his mouth every time they parted. Sans, however clumsy that he was, felt oddly out of practise. Every time their mouths connected, there was a subtle burst of energy, barely restrained and shared at the same time. His hands lingered at Grillby’s sides, hesitant but yearning to untie the apron strings.

It would convey the feelings he was currently swimming in, his mind a hazy mess as he panted from his efforts. Sans gave the side of the fabric a brief tug as Grillby leaned down to kiss him again, the sensation filling him with the thoughts that the fire monster had sent through the phone.

_Miss you. Want you. Kiss you all over. Make me feel lucky._

_Love you._

His breath caught when he remembered the admission. It was a direct kick-start to his soul, fuelling every flustered thought whenever Sans recalled it. He parted his teeth to let Grillby in, allowing himself to be manoeuvred back so his spine was pushed firmly against the counter’s ledge. Another shudder fluttered down his back as Grillby pressed himself further, his hands roaming down to Sans’ sides to inch past his clothes.

Sans’ next intake was startled, drawing in Grillby’s flames, with the gentle heat that threatened to lick up against his spinal column. His hands found the other’s forearm, fingers digging in with a warning hum when the touches started to move up. Grillby seemed to understand, the brief touch to his spinal column as though in reassurance. Sans, however, melted against him, pulling the fire monster against his body with renewed fervor.

He missed kissing. He missed the way Grillby’s touch literally lit a fire inside of him. Sans would never forgive himself for depriving them both of stolen moments, breathless kisses and soft words of encouragement. It was a good thing Grillby seemed to have it in his head to make up for lost time.

With another hitched gasp, Sans was bodily lifted from his feet and onto the counter. He had to laugh, the tightness in his soul lifting for a moment when Grillby moved to close the distance between them.

“really? that much?” Sans’ pants were turning hot and ragged. His hands found the bartender’s shoulders, one hand sliding down to his bicep and grabbing onto the garter to keep himself tethered.

“Much more,” the fire monster purred against the bones of his neck, sending another thrill through Sans.

“wow,” Sans whispered, a rush of heat flooding his face when he felt the other’s hips occupy the space between his legs. He swallowed with difficulty, more intrusive thoughts drawing parallels between his racy dreams and the present.

He shifted on his tailbone, one leg hiking up to pull Grillby against him, like he could never be close
enough. Meanwhile the bartender held him up, suspended between the counter top and his own body. Sans curved his back to move forward and capture another kiss, a muffled groan coaxed from him as Grillby’s other hand travelled down his back, supporting him just under his hips.

“keep-” The skeleton’s next sentence was swallowed up, consent devoured all too eagerly as Grillby’s mouth claimed him. He tugged at the sleeve garter, another shameful noise escaping him as Grillby’s hand ventured lower, tracing down Sans’ spine in slow circles that made the skeleton ache. “fuck.”

The statement was watery and thick, only encouraging his partner to continue his explorations. The glove sent a thrill of delicious friction against every bone’s surface, tracing each edge and curve with such adoring affection that Sans’ legs were starting to tremble.

“Like that?”

Sans restrained another moan into the cuff of Grillby’s collar, nodding all the while. His fingers flexed and tugged at the other’s shirt, hot breaths ghosting against Grillby’s neck in his eagerness for more.

His magic was gathering helplessly, rocking in the void of his pelvis. Sans huffed again, attempting to quell the urge to just let it surround Grillby’s hand as his touch delved further down the base of his spine. It was as though Grillby’s movements were pulling the sounds out of him, soft, increasing moans catching the further south he ventured.

Sans bucked in desperation, his rib cage heaving as he felt the tug of his pants slip down, just a fraction of an inch. It wasn’t enough. Any more and he felt as though he was going to start demanding Grillby to continue.

_God damn it_, his mind blearily went over the thought, focusing on it and touching upon the shift of movement underneath his clothes. Grillby continued to pepper his face with hot kisses that lingered, travelling down to his jaw and neck. Eagerly, Sans lifted his other leg to hook around Grillby’s waist, trapping him in place with a breathless laugh.

Grillby grinned down at him, his form a little loose and hazy, but it was quite obvious that he was enjoying himself by making Sans feel good. He cradled the back of Sans’ skull, laying him flat against the counter as his other hand continued.

“And this..?”

Sans stiffened with the firm pass over his sacral plain, huffing out a breath that startled the fire monster more than he thought it would. Sans gave in to an awkward laugh, his hands starting to tremble as he eased his body to relax.

“you serious?”

Grillby nipped playfully at his jawline. “Very much so. I intend to become so intimately familiar with you.”

Sans’ soul jumped, warmth flooding his face. He couldn’t help but laugh again, just trying not to squirm. “that’s my naughty spot,” he snickered, unable to help himself. “Mature,” Grillby observed dryly, his smirk betraying his tone. He thumbed his way down, brushing against the uniform spaces that pulled such delightful noises from his lover.

“It is, yeah,” Sans exhaled deeply between strokes, betraying his excitement. “wasn’t, uh… expectin’
such an explicit welcome.” That certainly didn’t mean he hadn’t hoped for one, though.

“It’s almost as though you don’t believe me,” the bartender pressed on. Sans bit back a groan of protest, on the edge of whining for more. Grillby could feel the magic around his hand, hot and heavy, bones rattling softly under his body. He adored the way he could elicit such a response. “Do you want me to stop?”

Sans arched under him, his fingers plying their hold imploringly, silently begging for more. “ff.. fuck, no, m’not complaining-” he gasped, holding his hips higher the more the stroking continued. His grip tightening with each weighted breath, heightening to a fault, he blurted, “g-grillby, fuck, lay off a sec-!”

Startled, the fire monster removed his hand, watching with bright eyes as Sans’ panting evened out. There had been the distinct crackle of energy, of a subtle shift in the air. The way Sans was searching the middle-distance, something must’ve happened out of his control.

Either that, or Grillby figured that he had…

He burned rather brightly at the thought and settled for affectionately rubbing at Sans’ spine, watching as the flushed skeleton warmed up to his touch once more.

Sans’ eye lights flicked down, to the very distinct and foreign feeling in his pelvis. It was stronger than before, and Grillby was attempting to avoid it now. The skeleton grimaced at the feather-light touches that made him sensitive but he was more focused with the way his boyfriend’s heat permeated his clothing, making the space between his legs sensually warm.

He unhooked his fingers from the garter, propping his elbow beside him as though Sans could judge the angle. His grin was tight as he tried, sight-unseen, to figure out what exactly had happened to what he assumed had been his preferred piece.

It was different, though. A barrier was constructed, put up similar to when the two of them had cuddled while Grillby was ill, and the barrier filled between his hips and ribs. It was lower, teased with the flitting heat emanating from the fire monster’s gloved hand.

He hadn’t meant to do it. It turned out that he could focus easier now that he’d formed magic there before. Sans laughed sharply, giving Grillby another start.

“didn’t mean to do that,” he admitted as he shifted his hips to better accommodate Grillby’s body. The bare shift from his clothes made a sliver of friction and he hummed. Sans’ attention was rapt with the way Grillby’s hand pulled from the space under his ribs, moving to his iliac crest. Sans squirmed as the heat flooded the bone, sinking down to his core. “this ok?”

“It is if you want it,” Grillby responded, his mouth moving against Sans’ neck. He could feel the vulnerable way Sans shivered and moved to meet with his touch and how the skeleton nodded against him once more. His own soul was thrumming hard with every sound that escaped the body beneath him, fuelling his need to touch and show affection and love.

Sans didn’t know what the deal was with the other extracting permission from him time and time again. Mostly since he thought the whole thing was pretty obvious that he wanted to be touched, right down to his body acting of its own accord. Sans flushed when he realised what that meant and huffed excitedly, his soul thundering quicker as Grillby claimed his mouth in another kiss.

The skeleton moaned softly, fighting his own coordination to pluck at Grillby’s vest. He had a feeling the other’s clothes just weren’t made to be groped at when two buttons popped free and
clattered onto the counter and floor. Grillby huffed a breathless sort of laugh that made Sans’ soul flutter with excitement.

“Sans,” Grillby’s voice spread warmth throughout Sans’ body and the skeleton trembled, pulling the other closer to his body with his legs. “If I hadn’t known any better... I’d say you were in a hurry.”

Sans grinned despite himself, hunching his shoulders in a way that made it appear as though he was smaller. “got excited,” he pardoned with a quiet cough, his eye lights averting. “y’made the main event kinda fun last time.”

Grillby watched him, his look tender with all the subtleties of an enthralled fire monster. He pulled his free hand up, bracketing Sans’ head on the counter with a smirk on his own. The hovering would have been smothering, had Sans not wanted him close and closer still.

“Really..?”

Sans felt another excited tremor go through him as he traced over the waist of Grillby’s apron, then moved his hands up his sides. He watched as the fires around the other’s face brightened in intensity, tinged gold that blended into white and orange again.

Grinning, Sans nodded in affirmation, moving his hips a little more. It produced a small pop of friction, just tantalising enough for him to tighten his hold on Grillby’s arms.

“Only ‘kind of’, though,” Grillby teased good-naturedly, an echo of enrapture in his voice. “… Admit I’ve never been so inclined to sully my kitchen before.”

Sans put on his best poker face, only the flood of warmth betraying him with the slight catch to his speech. “you wanna go upstairs?” His voice had only reached that lower register before, feeling both smooth and tight as it left him. He was sure that his soul was jack-hammering behind his ribs.

Grillby seemed to purr, a rolling, deep rumble that echoed fire and a promise for more. More comfortable heat pushed between his femurs, heightening his need.

“That would require letting you go.”

Sans couldn’t help the small noise that escaped him as Grillby pinned him further against the counter top, nor the way his soul’s beat fired up anew. He felt the tingle under his ribs as he closed an eye socket, grinning, idly playing with the bartender’s sleeve garters in an attempt to distract him.

“oh, really?” the skeleton dared as he looped his arms around the other’s torso, allowing his legs to hang open instead. Gathering magic in a great burst now that he was used to it, he reversed their positions, pulling them both through a tear in the gridline. With how exhilarated he felt, Sans didn’t even notice that the sharp pang he felt was due to their landing on the bed upstairs, not because his health had ticked down.

It caught Grillby off-guard though, which gained him the upper-hand. Sans straddled his lap from above, looking quite pleased with himself as he bracketed Grillby’s head with his forearms. The fire monster’s aura reddened, his expression quite literally darkening.

“Reckless,” the fire monster hissed quietly, that pained look returning to his eyes.

Sans hesitated for a moment before he realised what Grillby meant by that, then sat back a little more to give Grillby some space. His breathing was starting to even out, just on the verge of settling down; his magic, however, was not.
“nah,” he breathed, though he drew his hands up away from Grillby’s reach. They settled on his zipper, pulling down, as Sans watched Grillby’s eyes follow with blazing interest. “remember when i said my body was sortin’ things out…?” The fire monster’s eyes flitted up, his glow brightening yet remaining dubious. Sans grinned a little shyly, shifting to unhook the zipper toggle and shrug out of his hoodie. When he didn’t get a response, only warm hands bracing his knees, the skeleton laughed, suddenly unsure. “what, y’don’t believe me…?”

Sans shifted his weight as he twisted to one side to fully remove his hoodie, confident in the fact that Grillby wouldn’t kick him off since the fire monster’s hands found each of his femurs and he was holding fast. Grillby also looked conflicted. Sans frowned slightly, moving down to place both of his hands beside the fire monster’s head.

“ok. how about this, then,” Sans breathed, his nervousness quickly bubbling up inside of him. He leaned down, his back a tantalising curve that had Grillby flexing his fingers slightly, thumbs grazing up to where Sans’ legs met his hips. “we ignore this little bout of magic for now… and pay attention to somethin’ else.”

Grillby knew he shouldn’t have, knew he should have been more outraged that Sans had risked his health yet again for the sake of convenience, but he couldn’t get himself to stay upset for long. Not with the soft, hesitant touches to his abdomen and the firm, needy push of Sans’ tongue against his mouth.

He nodded in silent agreement, pushing his hips up to meet with the skeleton’s while he moved his hands, spreading heat into Sans’ clothes before he pulled them down the lengths of his femurs. Sans trembled above him, a soft noise of appreciation grunted between them when Grillby slid his hands up again.

Bones quivering, Sans couldn’t find thoughts to give words to. He just wanted to undo every button on Grillby’s vest and shirt and cover him with kiss marks. He aimed to do just that, trying not to focus on the way Grillby’s hand paused their explorations to shift in the space between their bodies.

Sans ground down again, the cushion of his pubic arch building up sensitivity due to the friction. He made a mess of Grillby’s collar, restraining himself from just tearing the clothes off from the bartender. His face flooded with the heat of shame, hiding the fact that he would love to see Grillby all rumpled and breathless again. Sans settled for unbuttoning it down the rest of the way, burying his face against the bartender’s neck to draw in the flames and replace it with magic.

Grillby sucked in a sudden breath when he did so, and Sans felt the warmth in his body tingle again. It was a different warmth than what the fire monster provided, one powered by a need for touch and affection. He grinned between soft nips and ran his tongue over a fissure in Grillby’s chest that resembled his own clavicle.

The sound Grillby made was downright filthy. It was enough to fuel Sans to do more, urged with the firm squeeze to his femurs. Grillby’s gloves had been rough, but now his hands were smooth, impossibly warm and inching higher, and higher.

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It was enough to wrench a startled moan from Sans, his hips jerking back as Grillby’s fiery hands met with the sensitive magic form hidden behind his shorts.

“Easy,” Grillby hummed, all satisfaction as Sans supported himself with both arms, his expression a mix of veiled surprise and lust.

Sans swallowed thickly, the pleasure tingling as one of Grillby’s thumbs traced up his slit, barely applying pressure at all. He attempted to keep under control, grabbing at the waist of Grillby’s pants
as heat surged up between his legs.

“oh…” It was soft and involuntary like a sigh, his body tightening as Grillby’s thumb moved, coaxing Sans to gyrate his hips to accommodate more. “you can’t just… go for gold, y’know,” he muttered thickly, barely resisting to rock with the pleasing tease. “that and, uh… i didn’t mean to do that. you can just… ignore…” He wasn’t sure where he was going with this anymore.

Grillby’s hand wasn’t stopping though; he curled his fingers to catch the wet magic and drag it up and down. Sans’ breaths were starting to waver, his thoughts preventing himself from outright telling Grillby to stop, because ‘wet’ wouldn’t be good for him. But then he recalled the educational experience that it was ‘just magic’…

He whined softly, fingers clutching and grasping at Grillby’s clothes. It wasn’t nearly enough but Sans bit back another impatient moan, his face burning from shame when he glanced down to Grillby’s face.

He was smiling, smug and tender all at once. When their eyes met, Sans sank back, his mouth agape when he felt the lightest pressure glide over his clit. He clung to the feeling, his back curving and tensing at once, until the fire monster moved his hand away the lingering pressure, ending on a bright white-hot tap.

It earned Grillby a started yelp from Sans, barely able to keep himself upright through the sensations. They were entirely too new, too mixed with the pulsing heat that he craved.

“Ignore you? No… not while I’m so dearly invested now,” the fire monster teased, his bright eyes watching intently at the brilliant cyan-white lightshow flickering wildly from within Sans’ shirt. It was a dark shade of green, but he could read the text ‘good things come in 3’. Grillby made a mental note. At least there was a goal now. He slid his free hand out from Sans’ pant leg to gain better access to his spine, softly caressing in a way that mimicked many lonely nights. “And this…?”

Sans’ eye sockets were hooded, his eye lights hazy and full with the flush that spread across his cheekbones. Grillby felt is own body grow warmer as a result, his hand cupping around the curve of Sans’ spinal column, then gently gliding his grip up and down. His thumb braced the fore of the column, every ridge and curve of bone jolting as pleasure rippled through Sans.

“Oh…” Sans said again, this time more roughly. He turned his head away from Grillby’s face to hide, leaning down to welcome more. His phalanges gripped at the sheets next to the fire monster’s head, a weak desperation to hold back despite how riled up he’d gotten.

He pushed his hips down again, yearning for more of that sweet, agonising pleasure. His next gasp was breathless and thick as Grillby’s fingers went down again to circle his wet sex, bringing his touch upward again, slickened and easier to move.

There had always been free space within his body, but now with the bartender’s explorations, Sans felt the barrier swell to accommodate him. It was so different, yearning to have the spaces filled up, warmed by fire, by Grillby’s touch. Sans muffled himself again, pushing himself further into Grillby’s hold, his hands flexing needily. He ground down once more, his hips seeking out the teasing heat that slickened fingers would never be enough for, friction just barely enough to get him going.

At this rate, it wouldn’t be long before it was over. That was the last thing Sans wanted, not when he craved Grillby’s touch as much as he did. Sans suppressed a surprised “ah!”, moving one hand between them to pull Grillby’s shirt from his waistband with a shaky grip.
He was determined. It was probably the most perverted thing he’d ever been determined for, but Sans was willing to ignore that for the moment. Grillby moved to accommodate him, his warm fingers withdrawing from his spine to settle next to him.

“…Seems that you have an idea,” the fire monster said with interest. He’d relinquish the reins for now. He allowed himself to sink back on the mattress to rest on his elbows while Sans gave him a heady look.

His stomach jumped a little with the difference in temperature, even through Sans’ gloves. Grillby was still of a mind to ask what the deal was with them, but grew distracted with the way the skeleton’s hands deftly unbuttoned his slacks. Sans was shy yet bold, grinning absently to himself as he moved closer, concealing his hand between their bodies.

“Why not remove them,” Grillby suggested, his breath catching with anticipation. Sans laughed lowly, sending a thrill throughout Grillby’s flames so suddenly that the added tongue to his chest made him breathless. His temperature was rising, thick flames reaching out to touch Sans no matter how much he wanted to hold back.

“I intend to.” It took all Grillby was not to reverse their positions and push Sans into the mattress at that moment. He was sure Sans was talking about his trousers, which made him feel a little unleashed, excited and nervous.

It wasn’t in his nature. He resisted a groan, if only because Grillby wasn’t used to making noise any louder than the low register he was known for. He noted the way Sans’ soul glowed more steadily, the soft sound of satisfaction that came from Sans’ mouth when his tongue moved against his form. Grillby knew that he was going to sport more than his fair share of kiss marks by the end of the night.

He also knew that Sans could turn things over on him in the blink of an eye. He just needed a little guidance in this instance, which is why Grillby inhaled sharply, hips jutting up to meet with the hand pulling at his waistband. It was enough for Sans to pause, his eye lights bright and steady on him. God, of all the times Grillby wanted to reclaim dominance, Sans had to lower his face down to his chest again.

He had noted the glow before and the sensual way Sans’ tongue felt for a level surface or an edge to trace. Grillby moved his hand up to cup over his mouth, stifling the throaty moan that was coaxed out of him.

“Oh, no y’don’t,” the skeleton grinned up at him, the fingers under Grillby’s waistband wriggling slightly, as though testing. The fire monster grabbed at the sheets in order to restrain himself as Sans drew up, hand gliding up his abdomen and his other carefully pulling Grillby’s hand from his face. “I wanna hear.”

He knew that Sans was just testing, but it felt so gratifying to be needed for feedback. Grillby inhaled sharply, moving to lace their fingers together when Sans pushed his hand back down. He hadn’t formed anything, not since Sans had told him that his own formation had been accidental. He found it rather charming in its own way, how the skeleton was holding back, wanting to explore, to extract sounds from him and mark him.

Grillby’s next groan was low, his hips sinking back to allow more space for Sans’ reach. His flames were leading the other’s hand, deteriorating the glove’s integrity out of view. Grillby’s hips thrust up once more with a sharp cry, just on the verge of giving in to his senses.

But Sans was new to all of this. He didn’t know that there had to be a slow build up, so his touches
were more agonising and teasing than helpful. Grillby was of a mind to shove him back and take control, but no, he stayed back. He couldn’t overwhelm him.

His fires flickering wildly, he murmured, “N.. need instruction…?”

Sans shot him a grin, nerves and a silent question burning between them. Yet he didn’t say a word. Instead, he wriggled his phalanges between Grillby’s clothes and his body, then Sans laughed quietly, as though suddenly bashful.

“mmh. i can probably finger it out.”

Grillby’s mouth quirked in a grin of his own, paler flames dancing around his visage and flooding down his shoulders. Well, he supposed he could accommodate that line of thinking, even though it wasn’t his usual preference. Still, he was nothing if not adaptable when it came to the one he loved.

Grillby sunk back further into the bedding, one hand slipping down to push at his waistband. Sans got the hint, eyeing the space between them, the glow under his shirt looking much like flashing disco lights in his excitement. The fire monster grinned at that, sliding up to help with the removal of his trousers. He grabbed a fistful of Sans’ shirt and pulled him up to claim his mouth, the sound of the clothing shifting off the bed a signal to continue.

Sans’ hands remained idle at his hips, shocked shy. Grillby decided to take action and bend his knee, drawing up his leg between Sans’ femurs so he could rock against it.

“Do you… prefer direct instruction? Or… to feel things out,” Grillby asked breathlessly, his soul beating in tune with Sans’.

The skeleton’s breaths were shaky with his nervousness, coupled with the light pressure of Grillby’s knee through his shorts. Every bit of friction to his clit was a tease, and he didn’t mean to roll his hips forward to catch more. He hummed quietly, his soul feeling near to bursting behind Grillby’s grasp of his shirt.

“dunno,” he replied shakily. He settled for another kiss, melting in the moment when Grillby’s leg rocked against him again. He just barely held back, but realised that would likely make him a hypocrite as well. He whispered a little hastily, “kinda learn by demonstration… if that’s ok.”

Grillby made a noise low in his throat, pleased. Sans felt the sound travel down his spine and nestle between his legs, hot and ready.

“That’s entirely fine by me.”

Sans allowed the admission to fuel him and he pushed himself against Grillby’s knee again, his hand delving lower, mapping out the hidden form beneath his boyfriend’s fires. He was caught on a chuckle, too bashful to meet Grillby’s eyes, and entirely too nervous to watch where he was groping.

He felt Grillby’s body subtly change. There was no crackle or snap of energy, just a roll of flames that moved a bare fraction of an inch from where his hand’s path lay. It had caught him a little off guard that Grillby would opt for a receptive role. Sans was pretty sure this wasn’t how puzzle-working went.

He deadpanned at that; he should not be thinking of Papyrus’ advice just then.

They could do whatever they wanted. It didn’t matter, as long as they were together.

Soul feeling tight and heavy yet impossibly light, Sans’ hand made a hasty retreat. He caught the
glint in Grillby’s eye, one of veiled disappointment, though it vanished in an instant. Sans grinned uneasily, bringing his hand to his teeth to pull off the glove.

Well, he had tried to hide it. It turned out that bones were porous, less than wood, but enough to leave traces when he had used the stains on his project. Grillby’s mouth quirked down in a confused and enquiring way, reaching to grab Sans’ hands to inspect his phalanges.

“What… happened to your poor hands?”

Sans grimaced, giving in to a half-chuckle. “’s’just wood stain.”

The fire monster’s hand was warm on his, soothing out the chill and deteriorating the pigments left in his pores. The mixed hues of green, gold, violet and red darkened with the presence of heat, and Sans sighed reluctantly.

“honest, m’ok. see? you’re burnin’ off the colour. it’s all good.” Even though Grillby still appeared worried, Sans gave him a wink. “that’s still a surprise.”

“Staining…?” Grillby murmured quizzically. He flushed a little when Sans wriggled his fingers at him. Then Grillby rose a figurative brow incredulously; “Wood?”

“no guessin’,” the smaller monster chastised, drawing back a little more. Grillby moved his leg down to accommodate Sans’ height and a delighted shiver went down his spine. “that’d be… mmh, cheatin’…”

Sans slid his hand down Grillby’s abdomen once more, averting his eyes at least, to his intended path. He saw the way the flames skittered away from his hands and the jolting way the fire monster’s form moved as though startled. He followed the curve down, past the jut of Grillby’s hip, following the natural line as he dipped his head down again. Sans pushed a kiss against the fire monster’s stomach, relishing the heat.

“Does it count as cheating if I’m already w-”

Grillby made an involuntary little noise when Sans pushed his tongue out to give an experimental lick. It felt as though the fire monster was going to lift himself up, but Sans kept a steady hold on him. The heat of Grillby’s body flowed into his mouth and the skeleton couldn’t help the desperate little tremor that shot through him.

“sorry,” he murmured, shooting an impish glance to Grillby’s face. He looked just ravished, and Sans wanted to hear more of those little restrained noises. “didn’t catch that.”

“You scoundrel,” the fire monster chuckled, his flames whipping about excitedly. Sans moved in a way to unhook Grillby’s leg from in between his own; it was proving to be a little more than distracting. He wanted to gain the upper hand. He wanted to pull more throaty, pleading noises from Grillby.

Not only that, but he yearned to show he could be on level playing field as the fire monster, and that Sans could prove what he felt he couldn’t say out loud.

Another stuttered breath from Grillby when he kissed lower and Sans relished in the reactions, the small little jumps under his fingers and teeth. They fuelled him as he kissed lower and lower, marking what was his; after all, if Grillby claimed him, why couldn’t Sans do the same?

Sans hesitated as his hand slipped between the other’s thighs, shame burning, yet Grillby didn’t speak out against it. All the skeleton could hear was his excited breathing as he kissed lower,
bringing his land low to skim the slit of Grillby’s chosen sex. He echoed the same touches that the fire monster had administered to him, listening intently to his lover as a hot huff sounded.

Having rocked against Grillby’s knee gave Sans some insight as to how this part worked. Although he was extremely unused to being so intimate, he stopped shy of dipping in with his fingers, the fire monster’s voice on the edge of a plea. Sans’ soul hammered hard at what that meant and angled his thumb, sliding up the lips with a heat so impossibly inviting clinging to his fingers.

Sans cradled the bundle of magic at the top, his face flushed when he heard a muted protest tumble out of Grillby’s mouth. He pushed himself up, applying barely any pressure there as he sheepishly made eye contact. Grillby had propped himself up on his elbows, his shirt splayed open to reveal his chest, covered in small little red marks from Sans’ kissing. His breaths were so hot that the air shimmered between them and his flames were erratic and pale.

Sans shifted so that he was straddling one of Grillby’s legs, holding his thigh firmly with a questioning glance. Grillby nodded slightly, fires spreading out low and hot, simmering just under control.

“…Doing well,” Grillby murmured, an unsteady thickness to his voice. Sans took the encouragement eagerly. The fire monster’s stomach tensed as the skeleton’s thumb tested him, rocking up and down his clit, experimentally shifting from side to side. The tips of his fingers slid against his entrance so Sans curled them away, much to Grillby’s next protest. “Thought you were to…”

The thought dropped and Sans shot him a confused look, then his expression softened. He could get the hint. Playing off his earlier joke, the skeleton skimmed the other’s entrance, impossibly warm slick touching upon his fingers as he dragged it up again. Grillby’s eyes were fixed where Sans had him in place, watching as his forearm moved and his fingers dipping inside once more, barely penetrating.

He huffed as a faint tingle of pleasure surged through him. “Just like that.”

The flush on Sans’ face broadened bashfully but the skeleton continued, his touch hesitant and chaste as though he was afraid to harm him. Grillby only nodded, his breathing sharpening as Sans stole glances at his face, taking clues if he should venture closer or not.

“U.. up,” Grillby murmured, a shudder passing through his flames.

Sans felt the burn of desire in him but stopped anyway, his body obeying to hover over Grillby. He assumed it meant the other wanted a kiss, but instead Grillby laughed, breathless.

“Why did you stop?”

Sans swallowed hard, his soul drumming harshly behind his ribs. He dipped his arm back down again to trace the lips of Grillby’s pussy once more, pushing his mouth against his for a deep kiss. The bartender’s arm encircled his back, his warm hand pushing heat through his shirt as he tasted him.

“I meant… `up` as in… `in`.”

Sans swallowed up another kiss, the gentle request something he had no problem in indulging in now that it was made clear what Grillby wanted. He adjusted the angle of his hand, thumb resting and rubbing slow circles against the fire monster’s clit, and pushed a finger inside.

“feels warm,” the skeleton observed shyly, giving his finger a test curl inside. He felt a vague
He realised that the other had very nearly done that to him, and Sans averted his eye lights again, grinning suddenly. “guess we’ll finger this out together.”

Grillby nodded with a bit of a wry smile on his face. “Repeating jokes,” he laughed, moving his hips down to gain more of Sans’ finger. He sighed. “Feels nice.”

Sans felt the movement shoot straight to his neglected pelvis and he laughed, his face breaking out in a less-nervous grin. “really?”

Grillby nodded, lifting his hips again, and Sans got the jist of it. The skeleton continued to circle his clit, messily thrusting his finger into the fire monster’s pussy. He sought out a little deeper, watching how Grillby’s chest rose and fell with his heavy breaths as Sans felt his inner walls, hot with fluid magic.

He clung to the harshly uttered praise, nervously accommodating when Grillby huffed out, “A-

Always articulate, and yet Grillby stumbling over his words had Sans trembling to hear it more and more. It didn’t take him long to figure what Grillby meant by his demand, sliding his middle finger in with his index to stroke the hot and soft entrance. He couldn’t really figure why it felt slippery and wet if Grillby was a fire monster, but with magic being the operative term, Sans really didn’t think about it too much.

He shifted his body to move at a better angle and with it, another weighted gasp left Grillby, coupled with a thrust from his hips.

“The, mmh... goal is to s.. stay consistent,” the fire monster sighed, one of his hands seeking out Sans’ rib cage as though to anchor himself. Sans nodded subtly, measuring out a soothing strum with his thumb to match Grillby’s breathing. It seemed like the best recourse. “Apply p.. pressure, and…”

Sans couldn’t help how the feedback made him feel and delighted in the subtle little aftershocks of Grillby clinging to him. Their positions had been reversed, with Grillby always the experienced one, taking his hand and teaching him. Now the fire monster was still technically teaching him, but Sans had the upper hand.

He snickered at the internal joke, angling his elbow for a test, aiming a little higher. Grillby made a noise, louder this time, his grip on Sans’ rib where he was clinging to tightening. His moan had been startled but audible like a sucker-punch, something Sans immediately wanted to try for again.

Sans kept him from moving in place, his right hand pinning his thigh while his left continued the movements. His face burned at the sound, how it felt on his fingers and how it echoed, tingly, in his own cunt. Grillby’s voice was low like distant thunder, gradually catching between explanations and rising in urgency. Feverishly, he started grabbing at Sans.

Grillby seemed unable to control himself. Sans caught the lustful gaze and hitched himself up again to kiss him, keeping his rocking hand steady. He felt twitches around his fingers, having gone from slow circles on Grillby’s clit to faster up and down motions, using the length of his thumb. He moaned into Grillby’s mouth as his legs were pulled closer and he had to lower his shoulder to maintain his reach.

Grillby’s grip slipped from his ribs to his hips, giving him a squeeze that conveyed all the want and desire in the fire monster’s hold. Sans fleeted a third finger inside, slipping past Grillby’s wet lips like it was through warm water. The skeleton could feel it, rubbing and keeping even tempo as sweat
began to bead on him and trail down his neck and ribs.

It made his shirt stick to him, clinging. He had thought that Grillby was helping to remove the encumbersome clothes, but found the fire monster’s hand reached under to stroke at his spine again. He matched the strokes to his thrusting, getting them both off, every movement dragging out desperate moans from him. Sans angled his thrusts a little more, bracketing Grillby’s shoulder with his forearm so he could kiss him over and over until one or both of them couldn’t stand it anymore.

Grillby was the first to come, the clawing that accompanied it under Sans’ shirt was enough for the skeleton monster to cry out too, sensitive and loud. He felt the gush around his fingers and how Grillby’s body clamped down on him, twinging and throbbing with a beat that mimicked their souls. Sans’ moans were swallowed up, driven over the edge as Grillby lifted his knee once more to rub against his sensitive pussy.

The aftershocks wracked his body and his arm was tight and heavy from hanging at such a level. It made the strength seep from him, lulling him into tender affection that he could give to his lover. Sans allowed himself to ride out the pleasure, pausing once Grillby stopped to catch his breath.

Grillby gave him a devilish kind of look and tugged down his shorts and with it, shame burned on Sans’ face when Grillby propped himself up to close their gap. Sans was starting to feel weighty with exhaustion but grinned nervously, returning kisses that were short and affectionate as Grillby’s hands roamed his body.

He was hot. He was burning. He loved it, every moment of it. Sans couldn’t help the needy moan that left him as his lover’s hands encircled his hips, bringing him close.

“was it, uh…” Sans wasn’t quite sure how to ask, if it was something someone should normally ask, or even what he was asking. He hummed as Grillby pulled him closer still, lowering a hand between them as he kissed Sans, long and firm. By the end of it, Sans felt the familiar probe against his neglected pussy, throbbing just enough to crave something.

Grillby continued to give him small kisses, one for each beat of his soul. If kissing meant you loved someone, Grillby was starting to convince Sans that he was idolised and worshipped.

“Very good,” the fire monster complimented, pushing heat into Sans’ iliac crest with one hand while his other traced a hot line from his ischium down to the mouth of his pussy. “Especially for a first…”

Sans would’ve preened a little with the praise, had he not been so deliciously distracted. His hips jerked a little with the sensation of Grillby’s fingers parting him, and his arms moved to encircle Grillby’s shoulders.

“wow, thanks,” he huffed, “g.. gonna give me a hand?”

Grillby grinned, unable to stop himself from administering affection. “Perhaps... give you a few pointers?” he chuckled, and sunk a finger inside, slow and with a gently throbbing heat.

Sans made a low sound as though it was being forced out of him, closing his eye sockets so he wouldn’t see Grillby watching him. He so dearly missed the friction and his body had been winding down, but now seemed to rev up to eighty and fast. Sans did notice one thing; he was a lot wetter than Grillby had been starting out. It seemed that slime had a purpose, after all.

He hummed against Grillby’s shoulder, inching himself closer, his hips rocking lightly for the finger to push into him. It was different, intrusive and burning in just the right way. Grillby’s fingers were
thicker than his own, warmer and steadier, and Sans relaxed around him with an encouraging hum of delight.

The fire monster took that as permission to continue, kissing Sans soft and slow as he fucked him just as tenderly. The skeleton took to grasping at his sleeves, unable to stop the flow of filthy gasps and moans when Grillby slipped another long finger into him, making Sans quiver with the delicious pressure and pleasure it brought on. Even though it was only two fingers, Sans felt full inside. He had never felt full before, not when he was mostly empty, and he was so distracted by the feeling of magic clinging to Grillby’s pumping fingers that he didn’t realise he was making such wet sounds.

“oh… my god,” Sans whispered, then started with a desperate grunt when Grillby resumed the measured rubbing on his clit in combination to his thrusts. Grillby angled it just so, nudging at a softness inside of him that made spots appear in front of his sight. He was warming up further now, his breaths catching in a symphony that made it feel all the better, coaxing soft moans and pleas of Grillby’s name.

If he hadn’t known any better, this was cheating and Grillby was going to make him cry from overstimulation. He felt his cunt start to clench with every thrust upwards, to keep Grillby inside of him while trying to hop away from the incessant rubbing. Sans whimpered, almost pushing the fire monster away as Grillby pulled him up.

Soon Sans was hunched over Grillby’s head, his lover’s hand smoothing up between his shirt to kiss down his sternum. Sans stayed on his hands and knees, his head hung to watch as much as he could while Grillby shifted lower and lower, until the other coaxed him to lift one knee to remove his shorts.

Then there was nothing but heat. Sans had a feeling he would be afraid of what would happen if Grillby got too close to his ischium, but nothing had prepared him for the thick heat that enveloped his clit at that moment. He crumpled, barely able to keep his ass lifted in the air as Grillby’s tongue dipped lower, hotness and wetness clinging together to create a sudden blinding pleasure that Sans couldn’t even imagine.

Sans groaned into the deserted pillow, unashamedly vocal while attempting to regain his thoughts. But there were none, just Grillby’s hot mouth and tongue as it delved between the folds of his cunt, spread by Grillby’s fingers, rubbing him in just the right way. Sans panted raggedly, pulling at the sheets as he attempted to push himself nearer, to gain more of the wet, hot heat of Grillby’s mouth.

The fire monster’s tongue was exploratory and gentle, firmly curling into the clenching heat of Sans’ pussy. Small movements made the skeleton above him hunch and helplessly fist at the sheets, wet gasps shaking from Sans’ mouth as he hung his head down to peer down past his ribs to Grillby’s head. He hummed at the blissful pressure, of how Grillby nudged at it to make him clench down on his fingers and tongue.

His magic was acting of its own accord, just allowing Grillby to manoeuvre him, the squeezing of his cunt easing with every fluttering little feeling that crept up on him. Sans felt it every time Grillby’s fingers entered him, nudging him towards another bright-hot climax in the slowest, most indulgent way. He attempted to move his hips back, testing for an unseen limit he didn’t know. But the hand Grillby rested on his femur held him in place, smoothing over the bone with affection as the fire monster’s mouth moved up.

Sans felt the throb of his clit swell with each flicking lick, tender and hot. He gasped, the sound watery as Grillby moved his hips down and enveloped his clit, running firm strokes over it with his tongue, making his hips jerk in order to get free.
That's when Sans shuddered on the feeling, of Grillby humming against him, reverberating against the soft conjured flesh and drawing his mouth around him. Grillby gave an experimental suck and Sans clung to the sensation, unable to speak. It took him several moments to mentally gear down on whatever he wanted to say, whether it be Grillby’s name, startled groans and huffs, or just incoherent babbling. Whatever shame that burned his face was seared away, locked somewhere between Sans’ ribs and mouth. His hand clutched at the sheets to the point where he could literally do nothing else.

It felt agonising, pleasure bubbling up in Sans’ body, coursing through his bones - to the point where it had started to become unbearable. He thrust an arm below him, trying to grab for Grillby’s head as he gave in, voicing his pleasure with a series of heightening groans and pleas of, "yes, grillby, fuck!!". He clenched his eye sockets so tightly that tears started to sting them, his voice cracking in warning.

Grillby lay off for a moment, little playful flicks of his tongue giving Sans small jolts of pleasure while his fingers slid into him again, parting Sans with a quieter, hasty mewl of protest. He felt so exhausted, his body wound tight at being brought close to the edge, just to be teased again. Grillby’s fingers toyed with him, scissoring open and curling in long, measured strokes. He was soft on the inside, wet magic easing Grillby’s fingers to push against Sans’ labia on the way out. Grillby tested him again, sinking his fingers deep inside, relishing in the taste of the twitching skeleton above him.

He gave the other another firm lap with the tip of his tongue, loving the taste of Sans' magic and relishing how sweet he sounded, begging for him and shouting his name over and over. Sans’ legs pounded the mattress as Grillby removed and reinserted his long fingers again, angling for Sans’ g-spot. Sans’ toes curled, his legs taut with an accompanying cry as he came.

Grillby grinned, pressing the skeleton’s pussy to his face as Sans made meaningless noises above him, overwhelmed, overstimulated and begging as he pulled helplessly at the sheets.

He couldn't get enough.

The room was bright.

Sans didn't remember closing his eye sockets, but his vision definitely seemed blurry. His head was turned on the pillow, laying prone as his entire body burned with a satisfying ache. Grillby was next to him, a subtle weight and dip in the mattress as hot fingertips danced around his vertebrae like ice skaters.

Sans hummed, his voice oddly worn thin. It crackled. It was oddly satisfying to hear, like sleeping in on a Saturday after studying all night. Only instead of science or math or something equally tedious, Sans had learned something else entirely.

And that was that Grillby showed no mercy when it came to administering orgasms.

He heard Grillby chuckle low in this throat and curled up as best as he could, seeking warmth. His whole body ached. Maybe a disk had slipped again, but it took every ounce of Sans’ strength to huddle up to his boyfriend. It took even more out of him to raspily ask, “did i pass out…?”

Grillby laughed again, rubbing soothing circles around the back of Sans' rib cage. "What a blow to my ego… if I cannot even keep you awake during," he teased lightly. "Suppose that ‘three’ was a bit of a stretch."
Sans let his skull loll to the side, his breaths immeasurably deep. It took him a great deal longer to piece together what Grillby meant by that. Admittedly, he fell short.

"three what..?"

He saw the peek of the fire monster's smile and how Grillby’s face flushed brighter.

"You're my ‘good thing’, Sans,” he purred, satisfaction and affection all at once.

Sans' soul did a kick-start, his magic coalescing enough to flush his face. He turned his body inwards and Grillby slipped his arms around him, pulling him close.

“this wasn’t the surprise, y’know,” came Sans’ voice, muffled at his chest.

“No,” the fire monster agreed tenderly, allowing himself to push a soft kiss to Sans’ brow, “yet it was pleasant all the same.”

“did you… honestly use my joke shirt against me?” the skeleton all but croaked with foggy realisation.

He felt Grillby shrug, his breaths ghosting against his neck. Every part of him felt sensitive, winding down after… everything.

“Seemed like a promising goal.”

“mercy,” Sans snickered to himself, forcing his arms to half drape around Grillby’s chest, allowing them both to just lay there, tangled amongst their limbs, and doze peacefully. Grillby hummed in agreement, unable to keep himself from pressing another soft kiss against Sans’ skull.

Sans honestly felt like the box could wait another day.

Chapter End Notes

Synopsis after cut for those of you who don't wanna read the sexytimes but wanna know the small interactions:
Grillby and Sans make out a lot. Sans warps them upstairs and Grillby gets briefly upset at Sans sacrificing his health for the sake of convenience. Neither of them notice Sans didn't lose HP with the shortcut. They make out more because Sans is good with convincing Grillby it's ok. Sans also reveals that he's stained his fingers with arts and crafts things, which he refuses to elaborate on. Grillby ends up being very good with his hands and teaches Sans how to pet cats. It turns out that the shirt Sans is wearing says "good things come in 3" so Grillby takes that as a personal goal. They switch and Sans has a fun time with Grillby and then Grillby is very good with his mouth. Sans ends up crying and overstimulated from multiple orgasms because skerb is a thirsty ho. Ok bye.

Ilu all, and thanks again for the words of encouragement. ;;;w;;; Life has left me sideways lately but I'm glad I could get this out because it... just never left my thoughts. I hope you enjoy it!

Edited 05/19/19: I was a little unhappy with the cunnilingus scene so I made some edits and expanded that section! I also fixed some grammatical errors and wonky words.
3ouncesofstress on twitter drew ch 39 art! (sfw)
C-puff on twitter drew ch 24 art! (sfw)
Kaybedon on twitter drew Grillby having a good meal from this chapter!! (NSFW)
zay on pillowfort drew Sans figuring things out with Grillby from this chapter!! (NSFW)
In Good Hands (NSFW)

Chapter Summary

Morning sex, mostly fluff and horny boys.

Chapter Notes

Chapter is skippable up until [Again, there was that peculiar look of searching] for those who do not want to read NSFW.

See the end of the chapter for more notes.

‘Tangled’ was a good word.

All Sans could think of was how impossibly warm and comfortable he was. A dull ache had settled into his body, long and deep. He had awoken to the rumble of his snores reverberating in his chest and the vague kind of hum that emitted from Grillby’s low flames. He knew they had explored while he was dreaming, like invisible fingers that liked to roam and read every line, and his limbs and ribs were like pages in a book.

Sans knew it was a hopelessly cheesy and romantic thought, but he couldn’t help but feel it suited Grillby. His fires hummed, low and shifting against his glowing form without a care in the world. Sans didn’t have it in his heart to budge one iota. Instead, he basked in Grillby’s light, shifting lazily against him.

It was one thing to be pinned down, but another altogether when his friend weighed less than a feather. Sans didn’t feel trapped in the least, bathed in what felt like a very warm blanket. He realised that Grillby had lost a little of his defined form as he’d sprawled over him, one arm not quite hanging off Sans’ ribs onto the other side, while his other bracketed the skeleton’s head.

Cocooned in warmth, their legs entangled, Sans drew one arm up to circle around Grillby’s back to pull him closer. The fact they had both fallen asleep in near-nakedness never crossed his mind. He was a little sure that he had kicked his shorts off his leg in the middle of the night, as thought to make sure.

God, he was comfortable.

While Sans lingered around the fuzzy-soft glow of early morning, it didn’t occur to him just how much Grillby had relaxed against him until he felt the soft caress of flames between his ribs. He smiled lazily to himself, his thoughts drifting a little more as he settled into a half-doze, sleepy and content.

The flames persisted, so gentle in their exploration that Sans’ sudden huff of surprise gave Grillby a start. His glasses askew, eyes blinking comically as he gathered where he was, the fire monster didn’t move any more than an inch to gauge the skeleton’s face.
“hi,” Sans muttered, finding his voice satisfyingly croaky. He didn’t budge an inch, just watched Grillby from his good eye.

A smile tugged at Grillby’s mouth, warm thoughts of their tender time together coming back to him. He resettled, too comfortable to move when he saw that Sans was alright.

“…Morning.”

With the greeting, Sans felt the blossom of affection in his soul resonate so close to Grillby. He drew his arms around the other monster just a little more, his fingers idly playing through Grillby’s sleepy flames. He felt a tug at his shirt’s collar, then a little burst of heat on his clavicle where Grillby’s mouth connected to bone, and Sans couldn’t help but wriggle in mock-protest, a grin touching his face.

“don’t know how to turn it off, eh?” It was peculiar the way his body warmed up to the affection as Grillby’s mouth pressed lower, leaving behind more kisses.

“…Don’t know what you’re going on about,” the fire monster said innocently, carefully moving one arm so he could move down. A satisfied noise escaped him as Sans’ chest swelled and bony digits flexed on his back in surprise, when he pushed a lingering kiss to his sternum.

“i think you know exactly what yo-” Sans stopped, interrupted by another tingling kiss left behind at the aft of his breastbone. Sans sounded breathier now that Grillby’s arm moved further, mapping out a trail of caresses that had him squirming. Sans flushed when Grillby rooted his shirt away from his ribs, carefully gliding the fabric up for easier access. “kinda early for this, isn’t it?”

Grillby’s mouth quirked at the feigned protest, unphased since Sans dug his heels into the mattress to meet his touch. It was subtle, but with such an invitation, who was he to deny? The fire monster delved lower with his mouth, exhaling hotly against bone as Sans’ rib cage heaved with increasing excitement.

“Unless, of course, you’d rather I stop?” Grillby dared to turn his head to access Sans’ spine, the skeleton under him gently writhing as he tested one of the bone segments.

Sans’ eye lights were sleepy, hazy with a dovey kind of grin on his face. Grillby read no real rejection in his eyes when he rose his head to survey the reaction, but nevertheless, he waited until Sans said something.

He was shy, as though voicing his pleasure was something he was ashamed of. Of course, Sans had no problem expressing himself the previous night, but Grillby wasn’t about to push him. Instead, the fire monster traced the curve of Sans’ ribs, watching as Sans’ breaths, shaky with excitement, took in magic to make his joints glow.

The fire monster’s attention was drawn to another glow altogether that matched his own, although Grillby wasn’t sure if Sans noticed it yet. He knew it would likely be difficult with his naturally bright aura, so he didn’t point it out. The light from below his boyfriend’s ribs created small shafts of cyan and white light, soft and warm. Grillby tilted his head in askance, flames crackling merrily.

“you’re so insatiable,” Sans chuckled to himself. He lay back against the mattress, taking up as much room as physically possible. He wrapped his arms around the pillow behind his skull, a delighted shiver running down his spine and igniting where Grillby turned, pleased, to deposit another kiss.

The flames licked at the spot between his bones, tongue pressed hotly against the magic holding them together. Sans sucked in a surprised breath, pulling at the pillow just a little bit to keep his
hands from flying down to Grillby’s head. It felt like he had to hold on, otherwise he might just float away.

“h.. how’d you get cheat codes, eh?” the skeleton huffed, his voice jumping when he felt Grillby’s mouth map over the next bone. He felt every little caress, every nudge of flame against his bones as Grillby continued to explore. “mm…”

“Good?”

Sans blearily stared at the ceiling, his magic slowly building up inside of him. It took him a little longer to process what Grillby meant, before he ultimately decided on an answer.

“yeah.”

“Sure?”

“positive, ah-”

“Still have a goal,” Grillby’s said, mouth moving up another segment as he spoke. Sans gave in to a repressed shiver, bones clattering subtly while Grillby’s hand traced the flare of his hip. “Out of three, if I recall correctly…?”

Sans huffed, the sound amused as well as caught off guard. “you’re takin’ this wh.. whole `getting intimately familiar with me` thing a bit… mmm…” There wasn’t any pressure this time, just Grillby’s kisses in the middle of his spine and fiery fingers tracing soft circles against Sans’ hip bones.

“Have you ever… indulged before?”

Sans hummed, flush tinting his face as he inched one leg up to brace himself. He thought about it, about his hasty little misfire in Hotland and how unsatisfied it had left him in the end. Helplessly, he nodded, his voice catching; “y.. yeah, hmm…”

He felt the flare of Grillby’s body hike up in temperature and grinned to himself, fingers flexing absentely at the pillow as he wondered what exactly Grillby was thinking.

Whatever demon possessing him to speak added haltingly; “you’re better at it.”

In the same movement, Sans pulled the pillow out from behind his head and over his face, muffling his gradually increasing breaths and any other admissions he might volunteer.

Bereft of feedback, Grillby stopped and leaned up to remove the pillow, revealing Sans’ flushed face and the sleepy shyness behind his grin. He pushed the pillow further, curling his fingers into Sans’, pushing his hand back beside the skeleton’s head.

“…Rather think you’d benefit from some practise, then,” the fire monster teased knowingly. Sans shifted under him as Grillby resituated himself, positioning his free hand to glide his fingertips in soft, small circles just above Sans’ sacrum.

He saw the flare of surprise and want flash over Sans’ face before his head turned away, exhaling a shaky breath of anticipation.

“beelining straight for the sacrum, huh…” There was no complaint in Sans’ tone, just breathless contentment.

Finally armed with the name of the spot, Grillby hummed in amused agreement, taking that as
permission to get closer. He kissed Sans long and sweet while his hand worked in gentle strokes between them, peppering the joins between Sans’ vertebrae, lingering after each one.

Grillby experimentally tested the bone at his fingertips, keeping his touch soft. Though before he had been hasty to get a rise out of Sans, it appeared that going in impatiently was too much for the poor skeleton. No matter how he moved, Grillby wanted nothing more than to mark him as his, to hold Sans in his arms and fill him with as much fire as he could handle.

He kindled brightly with the thought and huffed against Sans’ neck, the excited breaths feeding his passion as they tumbled out of the skeleton’s mouth. An almost agonised noise left Sans and his body cinched up to grasp at the back of Grillby’s chemise, legs trembling with the restraint to keep from thrashing. He hadn’t formed anything, either too exhausted from the previous night, or Sans just couldn’t be bothered.

Grillby just revelled in the sweet sounds extracted from Sans as he circled his fingertips fleetingly against the lowermost sacral holes, feeling the throb of magic tingle against his form. Grillby buried his face against Sans’ neck, his favourite spot, once more fighting the urge to mark him. Instead, he left more kisses behind, each one punctuated by Sans’ increasing moans.

“How… does it feel?”

Sans’ face burned at the question, clinging to the pleasure at the base of his spine. He hummed lowly, just barely whispering, “good.” The word was forced as the tempo evened out, a slow grind against Grillby’s hand starting anew as the fire monster’s fore and middle fingers bracketed the nub of his tailbone, hot and throbbing. “s.. sensitive.”

Grillby made a low growl from the pit of his soul, delighting in the shudder that passed through Sans’ body.

“I like that.”

Sans nodded slowly, toes curling as his body reacted to Grillby’s touches. His limbs stretched out, testing the hold on his hand, flexing his fingers on Grillby’s. A shy smile crept onto his face and Sans closed his eye sockets when he turned away, flushed.

“warm,” was all he managed to say, his voice sounding tight. “y.. your heat…”

Sans moved against him. The rocking to meet with his hand made Grillby flush, loving to be needed, to be wanted and to be held so closely like this. He felt the thrum of the other monster’s magic beat against his torso, so close yet so far, he could just taste it. He wanted to share all that he was, ever since Sans’ mistaken touch against his own soul.

His hand fit so neatly into Sans’ pelvis that Grillby could use his thumb, strumming down the length of his sacrum as Sans gave a feeble thrust against him, increasingly frustrated.

“i can’t.” Sans gasped. His eye sockets were closed tightly, mouth hung open as barely restrained groans left him with every tease of Grillby’s hand, “i, i haven’t… haven’t made a-anything.. thing, grillby, ahn, i dunno if.. if i can, nhm-”

A moan interrupted Sans, restrained so forcibly that it sounded high. His legs drew up to hang at Grillby’s waist, tangling with his calves as they relentlessly struggled. It was hard for Sans to articulate, though Grillby could figure what he was attempting to say anyway.

He was close.
He wanted to see what would happen, though. He wanted to see the light of Sans’ soul shine brightly, vignetted by flames and love and passion. Grillby groaned, satisfaction fuelled by Sans’ jerking movements as he attempted to draw himself up to see. Sans’ voice cracked, his hips bucking helplessly as a heightening series of gasps and moans erupted, just barely held at bay.

The light from his rib cage grew stronger in that moment and Grillby felt Sans squeeze his legs around him, both pulling him closer and trying to push away. It was certainly an effective way to make himself frustrated, though the afterglow of Sans wearily watching him as he came down from his high was rewarding enough.

Again, there was that peculiar look of searching something hidden between them, like Sans was attempting to figure something out that had briefly been explained to him in a fugue. Grillby only smirked to himself, winding down but still brightly lit as he kissed Sans deeply, his hand travelling back up Sans’ sacrum towards his backbone.

When his fingertips reached the middle of Sans’ spine, Grillby paused. He felt something, something soft, thin, viscous and warm, very different from his own heat. A scalding feeling raced across his flames with Sans’ expression, all open and inviting despite the fluster Grillby had just stumbled into. The fire monster leaned down, kissing him slow, letting Sans wind down enough that hopefully, the slick that trailed down his spine to meet with Grillby’s hand would dissipate.

“m’throwin’ away this shirt,” Sans muttered hoarsely, letting his legs drop open from around Grillby’s waist. “i don’t think i got another one in me, g.” He stopped as though in consideration, still flushed, and dopily chuckled to himself. “dirty jokes.”

“You do appear to enjoy those,” Grillby murmured, mentally backing away from the very real and intimate thing that had happened, that… Sans was paying no attention to, not really. Grillby veiled his confusion and instead lay down beside Sans, pulling him close so the skeleton could bathe in his warmth.

“heh. in more ways than one, i guess,” Sans replied simply. “honestly, though, you are ruthless.”

“Will accept the shirt as trophy, since I’ve clearly won this round.”

Sans made a sound in between a scoff and a raspberry. “as if,” he laughed, “you haven’t even seen my surprise. this round ain’t over.”

Grillby regarded him for a moment, propping his head on one hand while his other skirted around Sans’ exposed ribs. He made a point not to look at the glistening substance on the skeleton’s spine, just out of view.

“Really?”

Sans gave him a crooked grin. If Grillby could deduct anything from that look, he would’ve said that Sans looked excited. It was a good feeling to entertain, like a blossom of fresh warmth kindling inside of him. He loved it when Sans was genuinely happy.

“you’re gonna forfeit this time,” Sans said assuredly, crossing one leg up over his propped knee. Then his expression shifted. It was minute, the peculiar searching look returning, before he pushed himself up, hastily pulling down his shirt. There was an awkward beat as Sans looked over his shoulder to the fire monster. “uh, can i borrow a shirt? this one kinda…” Should he explain it? He wasn’t sure if he could - not entirely.

Without studying the look too deeply, Grillby rolled off the bed to approach his closet, trying to
dismiss the thought that Sans’ shirt was no longer wearable… He searched for one that wasn’t too long, but since coming to Snowdin and wetter climes, he wasn’t able to find much apart from an undershirt he seldom wore.

Grillby turned to regard Sans, who had just finished locating his shorts from beside the bed. He had barely managed to fling an arm over the side of the mattress and if Grillby wasn’t mistaken, the glow from his soul was a lot steadier now. As though Sans wasn’t holding any feelings back.

It made Grillby’s temperature raise a little, happiness spreading through his body like wildfire. When Sans caught his eye, the skeleton grinned to himself, shyly, before averting his gaze and pulling up his shorts. Grillby realised that he was bare-assed the entire time and brightened a little more as he threw the shirt at Sans and moved to find something to cover up in his overloaded closet.

Sans hadn’t missed that. In fact, he had been wondering just how long it would click for the other to get dressed, himself. He’d rarely seen Grillby so flustered, so dishevelled. He loved the idea of it, and the whispered little way his boyfriend’s aura seemed to panic was rewarding in its own way.

Once he was sure that Grillby wouldn’t be watching, Sans tugged his shirt from his back, the clloying, sticky feeling just uncomfortable enough to merit a wipe-down. He grimaced while his joints popped, achy and right, as he reached into the space between his hips and lower ribs. Grillby didn’t exactly have a shower he could use and he didn’t want to call attention to it. Even if he was sure Grillby backed off prematurely because of it.

The textbooks mentioned that it was natural. Natural with monsters that couldn’t form any variety of genitalia or just didn’t bother due to corporeal restrictions.

Regardless, slime was part of the process and Sans realised a little belatedly how his brother had been teasing him all these years. Still flushed and noodly-limbed, Sans pulled the black tank over his skull, finding that however the fire monster filled out his clothes, this shirt appeared to fit him nicely.

It naturally smelled of Grillby, every inch of it filling his soul with familiar comforts. He couldn’t help but pay attention to it, even as he heard Grillby changing in the closet. He detected notes of clove, of cinnamon and nutmeg. He was no chef, but maybe pepper? Cardamom? Lit pine, crisp mesquite. Caramelised sugar, the rich notes of barbeque and good smoke…

It reminded him of… home.

And he was home. Between his visits to the bar before and naturally spending the night quite a few times now, Sans all but formally lived at Grillby’s now. He took in a few of the objects lying around the fire monster’s desk, his gaze naturally progressing a little higher when he caught a familiar colour just out of view.

Muted in the jar, filled with water and looking very meticulously taken care of while on the top shelf of Grillby’s desk, sat the echo blossom that Sans had gifted him. Though he was initially touched that the fire monster had taken the trouble to preserve it, the meaning behind it and what it stood for made an affectionate warmth kindle in the centre of his being. Sans couldn’t help but smile to himself, standing and staring, until Grillby emerged from the closet.

Averting his gaze from the blossom, Sans saw an open ledger, the scrawled ‘4,800g’ next to the word ‘freight’. It took everything he was to carefully school his expression to not betray the shock that went through his system.

*That was a lot of money for a courier.*
Grillby was astute, however. His gaze followed Sans’ body language and his direction, then to the open ledger. He didn’t say any accusing word, knowing Sans had expressed curiosity over his delivery date before. He’d found it odd, but he didn’t press the matter.

“Breakfast?”

Sans grinned absently, his emotions cracking through to genuine laughter. Grillby waited, as no doubt Sans likely had a horrible joke. Grillby mentally prepared himself as Sans shot him a wink, approaching the door. It was always about delivery with him.

“considering you ate your fill and didn’t offer me anything last night, i’d say i’m owed a pretty stellar breakfast.”

Not even three seconds passed in that Grillby couldn’t repress his reaction. His flames hiked up, wafting and fluttering hues of rose-gold, yellow and white. The air in the room gradually grew hotter and within a beat of Grillby’s flush, Sans realised what he’d said was likely a double-entendre. He turned on the spot, face flooded with magic, intending to get something to eat.

Grillby followed Sans to the kitchen, unable to keep his thoughts from racing towards that, silently chastising his flames for their spicy interpretation of Sans’ joke. He had to restart breakfast twice, burning the first batch of toast and grilled mushrooms so badly that the skeleton couldn’t help but laugh at how distracted he was.

It was easier to cover up the fact that Sans was thinking along the same lines as Grillby, more out of idle curiosity than genuinely entertaining the notion. It wasn’t put past him that Grillby had denied himself pleasure over making him feel good, after all.

Then again, maybe it was good to get a little practise in the meantime. With that awkward thought, Sans watched as Grillby charred another set of toast, small embers flying around him like magenta and yellow fireflies.

Chapter End Notes

I’m mostly anxious because this has been a lot of horny content all at once, but I’m glad you’re all liking it I hope X’D But regardless I am self-conscious because my updates aren’t as quick anymore but I’m trying not to beat myself up over that lol. I APPRECIATE YOU ALL FOR INTERACTING WITH ME TTuTT I love to hear what your thoughts are and kudos and whatnot~ Thank you thank you ;;;w;;;

farmgirl2012 on deviantArt made some chapter 8 art! (SFW)
enneadodeca on twitter drew art for this chapter!!!!! (SFW)
A Grand Gesture

Chapter Summary

With a helping hand, Sans manages to say something he's been meaning to say for a long time. Grillby is offered a gift.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Sans was more than a little jitter-legged throughout breakfast, or at least up until Grillby ultimately gave up, flustered and unable to control his temperature enough to even make toast. Sans didn’t mind, too preoccupied over salvaging the loafy remains with butter and fried mushrooms to really worry about it. Grillby was clearly overreacting and it was charming. He could only hope Grillby retained his visible reactions for when he presented the box to him.

Grillby would ultimately apologise for the lacklustre breakfast, promising to make it up to him later with a not too char-broiled lunch. Sans just shrugged, a contented warmth spreading inside of him as he tried different combinations of jams and jellies with the mushrooms, while Grillby made repulsed faces.

When Grillby calmed down to his usual colours and they had eaten what they could, Sans shuffled back to the bedroom to retrieve his hoodie, giving Grillby a bit of a wink over his shoulder as he shrugged it on.

“ok. y’ready to go outside?”

Grillby’s demeanour tended to wane when the subject of ‘outside’ came up, but he resisted. Not enough that it wasn’t apparent that he disliked the notion, but he gave Sans a wistful smile anyway.

“Don’t likely have any choice now, do I?”

Sans grinned a little more as he sunk down to his knees beside the bed and fished blindly under it for an errant sock. His joints ached, sockets popping a little noisily when he stretched, revealing that he’d been successful in his hunt.

“i mean, can you tell me `no`?”

Grillby crossed his arms over his chest and leaned against the door jamb, looking thoughtful.

“Suppose not.”

Sans turned and grinned at him; he really did feel better overall. Nervousness and excitement roiled around in his bones like tiny bursts of energy, just waiting to pop free. The corner of his mouth quirked when he looked up to glance at Grillby, whom had pushed himself away from the door’s opening to approach.

But damn if he didn’t feel good all at once after everything that had happened. Sans stood poised,
half dressed in his hoodie with one sock pulled on. Grillby helped him, his touch lingering, smoothing out the fabric in a way that mimicked an iron, pushing heat into his hoodie.

Sans sighed deeply when Grillby cupped his jaw, a flutter in his soul with the fire monster’s touch, just waiting for whatever it was that Grillby would say. Maybe he would lean in closer for a kiss, maybe send a pulse of warmth throughout his body, or… Grillby had his dramatic moments, as though the silence between them was a resounding affection for Sans.

Heat touched Sans’ cheekbones when he thought about it. Appreciated, cherished, wanted, loved…

He recalled the unspoken way Grillby’s fire had suggested it, tender and sweet, conveying his emotions without words. Somehow Sans just understood, but he didn’t have any meaningful way to admit his feelings, even though he was sure Grillby understood.

Still, there was a need to say it out loud. Just in case.

But… could he say it?

“hey, grillby,” he started tentatively. Nervousness bubbled inside of him alongside the aching need to voice himself. Words evaporated and sense deserted him, instead baring himself down to the most basic notion in Sans’ head. There was a need to be frank, to be truthful and without ruse. “you make my soul feel good.”

Amazing. How eloquent. Barring any other emotion he felt at that moment, Sans was also mildly ashamed that he couldn’t voice the poetic justice in his heart. That it came down to a barbaric expression of ‘derr, you make me feel good’ instead of any kind of romantic thing Grillby might’ve said instead. Not that he thought it would be good to try romanticism after everything between them, but it was a reach all the same.

He flushed, embarrassed, turning his face away from Grillby’s warm hand. He felt his heat rise a little, Grillby’s colours paling to that sweet gold to accompany the stunned look.

Whatever Grillby thought in return, Sans couldn’t say, but Grillby was good at examining every word as though it held secrets. Other times, the bartender slipped up. It appeared as though he was stuck on something, and as the words whirled in his head, Grillby looked more and more surprised like a slow detonation.

Either Sans had meant it affectionately, or Grillby was thinking he meant something else; the sharing of their souls, the very literal mingling of their essences.

Whatever the reason, Grillby was shocked into silence, and Sans was getting cold feet as a result. It would’ve been more direct to say ‘I love you’, even after all that had happened, but Sans was still caught up on it, trapped in his nonexistent throat like a buzzing fly. He turned the fly into an awkward, bashful chuckle and patted Grillby’s arm still hanging close to his chest.

“c’mon, man. y’know what i mean,” he muttered sheepishly.

Grillby’s expression softened, his surprise flitting away as flames languidly stretched out between them, bridging the gap as though to read Sans’ thoughts. Sans continued to blush, the silence trapping him. But he refused to allow it to for long.

“You know that i, uh…” he tried again, the sentence aborting prematurely. Sans scuffed his foot on the floor, swallowing the tight knot he felt settle behind his jaw. “i got, uh… emotions…” There was more of that genuine brain-jamming sentiment. Sans could almost feel himself recoil into his marrow.
Grillby’s mouth quirked in fond amusement, though it didn’t convey condescension as Sans was expecting. He was charmed while Sans barrelled through the thoughts constantly hanging up and redialing in his head.

Sans tried again. “lots of `em.” The knot tightened, his soul was trembling with how light it felt, as though it would burst at any moment. “lots of… various emotions.”

Well. That was one way to say it, Sans thought. Hidden in the words, just as Grillby would eventually figure out. The fire monster waited a moment longer, as though he was expecting more from Sans. When the skeleton didn’t offer anything else, he leaned forward and gave Sans a kiss, hands sliding down Sans’ chest and smoothing down the fabric.

A tingle caught in Sans’ rib cage, fuzzy and light. Fire slinked out from Grillby’s cuff as he brought his hand up again, whispering against Sans’ jawline, creeping down his neck.

‘Treasured.’

It was tender and sweet. Sans felt Grillby linger closer, depositing a kiss against his cheek, a gentle gift that made him want to express more. He pushed his hand out, tentatively laying it flat against Grillby’s chest. His fingers spread to cover more of the light echoing from behind Grillby’s clothes, a muted glow that was only just hidden by the light of his flames.

Sans pushed him forward, just a little, so there was enough space between them to sign. Practised but nervous, Sans’ hands shook as he signed out the first thing. Alphabetically instead of the meanings. It was everything he could not to falter, his voice pinching as he struggled to say the word at the same time.

As Sans signed the first letter ‘L’, he spoke, his soul trembling, “lots-” followed by the next, ‘O’, his breath catching when Grillby’s flames stuttered with anticipation, “-of-” then another, the ‘V’ clumsy and half-formed, “-various-” He clenched his fist, thumb crooked under his clasped fingers. ‘E’ trembled from his fist and Sans hesitated; finality was a rooted fear inside of him and suddenly he was afraid of what that meant to Grillby.

It wasn’t fair to the other monster, who was a beacon of kindness and patience far better suited to Sans’ trait than Sans could ever be. The skeleton shifted, worried, before just allowing himself to say it, a disconnect happening when he did so.

“emotions. for you.”

Sans’ mouth felt dry. He was scared, immediately nervous and running over what he’d confessed in his mind. But at the same time, he felt the genuine happiness break through from the fear when he saw a few buzzing embers from Grillby’s exposed flames, seemingly shell-shocked. His face felt awash with heat, and even if Grillby didn’t say anything, at least he had said it. And meant it. But god, why wasn’t he saying anything??

“uh, did-” he tried again, a leaden heaviness settling into his feet to root him in place. “…didn’t know i had to spell it out for you, grillby.” He tried to brush off his uneasiness and worry as a joke. He dropped his hand’s sign and playfully swatted Grillby in the chest with a wink.

The fire monster watched him, his mouth curling into a warm smile when he recovered. He could feel the nervousness pouring off from Sans in waves, how the skeleton had to feel tense and afraid to stay. It was a bold confession, even if he’d said it before, beating around the bush instead of saying it directly.
But “I have love for you” in Sans’ own voice, not made in error, made Grillby’s heart and soul thunder. He was caught in a maelstrom of affection so suddenly that he was reliving it, finally able to hear in no uncertain terms what Sans put to words. He just wanted to blurt out the same, to give in to all the mushy, pent up feelings that raced throughout his body. He leaned forward, his eyes lowering to the cyan bloom beneath Sans’ borrowed shirt, how it wavered a little in hesitance. He knew the longer he stayed quiet, relishing the moment, the more it would feed the other monster’s anxiety.

So even in the short moment that passed, Grillby pushed himself past the flutter of nerves to reciprocate, Sans’ voice repeating the words in his head like something he wanted to hold onto forever. Grillby allowed his flames to reach out and pool around Sans’ face, drawing him near, letting the flickers of light echo his heart’s deepest desire. The sentiment really did make him feel euphoric, so much that he could barely hold his excitement at bay. The flames tickled Sans, enough to draw out an odd-sounding laugh, all tight and nervous.

It hadn’t been the first time they’d said it, but it was the first time neither of them bolted. Grillby breathed in deep, because on some level he was afraid to scare Sans away. Very softly, he breathed out, pretending calm when his heart felt anything but.

“...And I love you.” Adored him. Cherished him. Wanted for Sans to be happy, always, would make it true and devote himself to the little impish skeleton regardless of anything and everything the world held for them. Even if they’d never see the moon in the sky or the coloured clouds that followed a setting sun, Grillby would still be content.

He could see the bashful way Sans rolled a shoulder, as though to shrug off his nerves. He could feel the flutter of magic expressed by the skeleton, happy and endearing, just allowing himself to feel what he felt. Cyan hues wafted from the other’s bones, mimicking flames, tangling between the fires that lingered close. Grillby wondered if Sans knew what that meant, or if the dopey, part dumbstruck, part lovestruck look on Sans’ face had anything to do with it.

“...Alright?” Grillby enquired, hushed, as he watched the magic move around Sans’ rib cage like a chasing daydream.

Half a beat later, the skeleton seemed to remember himself, recovering and grinning like an idiot. “gimme a sec. just processing it.”

“Should take two. Going to check my phone line. Believe I hear dial-up noises.”

That seemed to reboot whatever was happening in Sans’ skull. He gave a cheeky grin, still flushed, and laughed to himself, the sound a whole world lighter. “ok. we should go, then. before i run off or you start to take over valuable oxygen reserves.”

Grillby smirked and patted Sans’ cheek knowingly. It seemed like Sans was reaching his limit on being teased, but his soul was glowing in full force. His smile was genuine, reaching his eye sockets and he was relaxed and happy and enjoying himself.

The fire monster thought it a good look on him, so he complied. They took their time in getting ready, unable to truly part for long. Grillby helped Sans zip up his hoodie, pressing out the creases with his warm hands while Sans did his honest best in tying his tie, all the while commenting how they were just tired bowties. Grillby pulled on his shoes, tying up his laces while Sans shuffled around the room, as ready as he ever would be.

He wasn’t sure if Grillby could detect how nervous and excited he was, but the closer they got to
being ready to leave, the more Sans felt his bones jitter at the sockets in anticipation. When had been the last time that he truly felt like this?

Maybe when he and Papyrus had moved from the Capital, although he didn’t really remember much from that time, and perhaps Sans recalled being a little subdued. He kept to the present, snickering when Grillby held out his arm for him to take. Just like a true gentleman.

“c’mon, man.” Sans stuffed his hands into his pockets, shrugging into the direction of the stairs leading down. “got your ride waitin’.”

The flames from Grillby’s body leaned towards Sans, who led the way. He felt it was interesting in a way that the fire monster’s aura shifted to be closer to him, to hang tight and not let go. It was reassuring, even when it mingled with his own magic, touching him with warmth and comfort.

Sans led Grillby out of the fire exit, taking note of the extremely pleased expression that passed over the fire monster’s face. The skeleton then gestured vaguely towards the toboggan, shrugging into his hoodie in a familiar slouch.

He ended up dragging it alongside Grillby, whose flames lowered while in the chilly wind. Snowflakes descended, quiet and muting the noise around them. Sundays were quiet in Snowdin, and the surrounding snowy fields, frozen tundras and sleepy villages made it feel like they had the day to themselves.

While Sans knew this was a bit of a gamble, knowing Grillby’s handicap while outdoors, he couldn’t help but notice when the fire monster hesitated on the ice bridge leading into the large thicket where the box lay hidden. Sans could see the relief on Grillby’s face when he pieced together that they would be sheltered from the cold, but also nervous from all the flammable trees nearby.

“It’s ok, grillbz,” Sans offered, taking the fire monster’s hand. He gave it a light tug, his grip reassuring as Grillby drew his flames close to his body, reddening in concern. It was likely that he didn’t trust anywhere that could hide potential threats.

Further into the thicket, they heard the sounds of children playing. Excited screams and whoops along with the pummel of footsteps echoed loudly around the two. Occasionally Sans heard something that made his grin crack suddenly, and Grillby would be left wondering what was so funny. He’d been long used to the sounds of kids in the street that any noises just seemed commonplace and unimportant.

Another sharper sound travelled through the air along with a peal of laughter. Sans hooked his arm into Grillby’s to keep him close, just trying to restrain his laughter.

Grillby’s eyes narrowed in amused suspicion. “Don’t tell me…”

The sounds of whoopie cushions echoed in the thicket and Sans was trying very desperately not to laugh out loud. He closed one eye socket, gritting his teeth to not give in.

Grillby sighed, the mirth in the long clearing forcing him to relax. His flames plumed a little, experimentally shifting outwards as though to stretch in the tight spot.

Sans tugged him by the arm, snickering under his breath as he led Grillby further in. The floor was icy and shone with a multitude of footsteps. Breaking the trails were tiny little balloons in various colours and sizes, mostly enough to fit into the size of one’s palm. Grillby had caught enough of these whoopie cushions to know this was one of Sans’ ultimate pranks.

“Sans… really.”
Sans shot him an innocent look, “g, trust me, i know we were havin’ a fart to fart earlier, but no need to blow me off here.”

Grillby covered his mouth in order to hide his grin. The last thing he needed was to encourage more fart jokes.

“that and, uh, i don’t see why this would be an issue. i just know you’ll have a gas.”

Grillby turned around, covering his face so Sans couldn’t see he was definitely laughing now. It would have been a good distinction to carry on, but his boot landed on an errant cushion, its resounding noise causing Sans to bellow hysterically.

“Is this your grand surprise,” Grillby flushed between words, “or are you just full of hot air?”

Sans’ grin lit up like fireworks and while Grillby regretted it, he found he couldn’t linger away for long.

“y’got me, g. i can’t fully contain myself. it just breaks outta me.”

“You’re horrible.”

“It’s the silent ones you really gotta watch out for,” Sans nodded sagely, still grinning like a man possessed. When Grillby just groaned in agony, Sans knew he’d won and laughed out loud.

The kids that were playing around seemed to mercifully not have heard their conversation, otherwise Grillby was sure they’d contribute in some way. Sans was generally good with kids, if not a little awkward. Sans continued to lead him further into the thicket, the toboggan trailing behind them like a noisy third wheel.

That’s when Sans stopped in a clearing where the trees opened up a little more. They had passed a few little ones playing and making mounds of snow igloos and poffs, but they had dispersed. What Grillby saw made a rush of heat escape him, flooding his very core with something he hadn’t felt in a long time.

Seemingly inordinate, but very likely something that Sans had crafted, sat a chest on the ground, cocooned by a snow drift. It was darker than most, far more larger than any of the dimensional boxes normally left around, and its hinges were bronzed and frosted over. The wood had been stained a deep colour that shifted with the hues reflecting off the snow; one moment it was a rich, distressed taupe, while it shifted into an ombre violet. As they approached, the shifting light from Grillby’s fires made the box come to life, warm oranges and golds flickering on its surface.

It was as though the scene was framed around the chest. Sans’ eye lights were settled on it when Grillby looked to him to attempt to see what could be going on. What was the surprise? There had to be more to it; Sans had a look about him that exuded a tentative pride, fragile happiness that shone through his smile.

So Grillby approached the mass of whoopie cushions littered around, carefully making sure to step onto each one he passed. It caused restrained laughter to wheeze from the skeleton, so the fire monster made the special effort to crush one under his foot for maximum effect, just for him.

Grillby reached out with his hand to run his fingers down part of the metal bracing from the curved lid, unsure just why he was inspecting it.

“Sans…?”
The skeleton sidled up next to him. Sans looked absolutely dwarfed next to such a chest, and Grillby could very distinctly make the connection between the size of it and the toboggan his boyfriend had insisted upon bringing. Right now, it lay a small distance away, waiting to be put to use.

“yeah, babe.”

It was an easy enough pet name, one he’d been called before, but Grillby couldn’t help but flush anyway. He watched Sans until the skeleton peeked at him from his good eye, smiling shyly to himself.

Grillby struggled with how he was to approach this. The sled meant that the chest was to be taken with them. Sans had an extensive background in creating boxes, but this looked a bit too refined for anything the skeleton bothered to make, as much as he was ashamed to admit. Grillby minded where he stood, realising his heat was creating a slush puddle around them, and he moved a little cautiously to circle it.

“…This?” He gestured down at it. God, he was being precarious. He didn’t know what it meant, despite being so moved that Sans would… what, exactly? Make something like this? Purchase it? What would he use something so fancy for…?

“i know you don’t wanna fart around outside for too long, so why don’t you take a peek?” Sans suggested with a nervous shrug.

Grillby read into it. Uneasiness - did Sans do something to it? Why was he being cagey? At the same time, Grillby disliked the way that he immediately grew suspicious over seeing a box. And it was a fancy box. It looked like a boss chest, something that could contain any multitude of items for anyone to keepsake.

A niggling worry at the back of his mind whispered to him that Sans had been gone for awhile. Had been secretive. He had been worried but was assured by Sans himself that he was fine. Grillby felt his soul shudder at the parallel, not helping but draw the connection between Sans’ sudden disappearance and when he had severely hurt himself when he had ignited the dimensional box.

How long had it taken for him to recover…? Grillby mentally counted the days; while Sans grew increasingly concerned, yet he tried to keep optimistic.

He’d never put this much effort into anything. Everything else had been forced and half-assed, but god, he really did want to spoil Grillby, right out of diverting a few things for a demonstration. He’d never sanded the edges of other item boxes, but he’d honed down and curved the lid of this one so it felt smooth and as soft as silk. He’d made it bigger. Sans had even perfected the formula Alphys had given him for her prototype, adjusted the materials needed so they were fireproof within throwing distance of Hotland’s lava pits, just so Grillby could use it without worry.

It was a gift he had put thought into; to be useful as well as to echo the feelings he felt inside. To mirror the breathless, unmatched freedom he had felt when Grillby showed him the sunset, and to paint it inside so every time Grillby opened the lid, he’d be reminded of him.

Sans felt his soul bloom with the sudden fear that it might’ve been too much, but at the same time, he hoped Grillby would accept it. Because it was him. He’d put everything into it. Right down to the quartz relays and the inlay opals that were carved into tiny stylised points to mimic the stars in Waterfall’s ceiling.
As he silently fretted, Grillby stooped low to push open the lid. There was no clasp, having no need of locks since no one really borrowed anything that wasn’t theirs. The hinges were well-oiled so it opened silently. Sans followed suit, resting his elbows on his knees so he could see Grillby react, for better or for worse.

God, he really felt nervous.

A simple shimmer was the telltale whisper of the gridline unlocking, honed in on Grillby’s magical signature. It snapped for a moment, clumsily, until it aligned unseen between its intended user and the code in the box. Sans couldn’t help but grin when it had worked after all, some of his worries fading from his heart.

Grillby appeared to be stunned. His expression was a mask of fire, subdued but hot, melting the snow and ice around him. He appeared to be taking in all the details, his flames gently wafting as sparse snowflakes drifted down from the boughs above, only to melt just outside his aura. His fingers traced the slow curve of the wood, his breathing catching when his eyes settled on the glimmer of opalline flames inlayed in the innermost sides, reflecting the shimmer of the box’s mechanics within.

Sans shifted, his soul flipping with anticipation for anything Grillby would say or do to show how he felt. And since he was nervous, he began to speak, his voice feeling unnaturally tight and self-conscious; “it’s, uh… it’s the inside that counts. mostly.”

Grillby didn’t appear to register that he’d said anything, so Sans cleared his false throat, his soul thrumming fast. He leaned a little closer to gauge Grillby’s expression, still shrouded by flames.

“What is it?”

Sans brought a hand up to brace himself on Grillby’s shoulder, huddling near. The neutral way fire spoke was still so strange, it took him a moment to piece it together.

“This can’t be…”

“it’s, uh. a box. why don’t you give it a go,” the skeleton offered a little coyly, giving Grillby a smile and a wink. “no more whoopie cushions! promise.”

That seemed to snap Grillby out of whatever reverie he was trapped in. He reached in, hesitance building before he pulled out a sealed cylinder of spice, one he recognised as being from his order that was delayed. His eyes widened, a flicker of dark orange passing through his flames as Grillby leaned forward to peer further into the chest. It was as though he didn’t believe his eyes.

Sans’ soul was beating in a rush of excitement, a warm smile on his face when Grillby looked back to him, his aura growing dimmer. That’s when Sans felt less and less sure, but tried to keep optimistic. Grillby just had to be awe-struck, right?

“No.”

Sans flinched at the pinch behind his ribs. It threatened to plummet his soul, jolting it in place, only to bruise and run cold down his spine.

“I don’t want this.”

Chapter End Notes
I really loved writing this chapter, just gimme Sans actually happy and laughing and fart jokes always, ok. And Grillby being soft. And then of course things go to shit.

((:u I am so sorry for the cliffhanger but I'm trying to avoid 10k word chapters since they're taxing to read.))

kaythegoodbean drew the reveal scene from this chapter and did an AMAZING job ;;w;;; Thank you, Kay!! You can see the art [here (sfw)](sfw). (posted with permission ♥, but also go look at their art, Kay's SO GOOD HHHHHH)

End Notes

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